Family Activity: Royal Workshop
Provided by the Art Institute of Chicago Department of Museum Education

Introduction

The *Akbarnama* (Ak-bar-NAH-mah) (History of Akbar) was commissioned by Emperor Akbar in the 16th century and is considered his official biography. It was written by his close friend and biographer Abu Fazl (AH-boo FAH-zul), and was designed and painted by masters of the royal workshop.

The composition spirals upward and draws the eye to the young emperor (age 13) sitting on a throne. He exercises his first act of authority by ordering the arrest of an unruly courtier (royal attendant).

Akbar (1556–1605) was one of the most influential Mughal (Moo-gul) emperors of India. He was a great supporter of poetry, painting, and music. Though he could not read, he learned about the arts from experts who were invited to speak or perform before him.

Discussion Questions

- Follow the spiral composition from bottom to top and describe everything you see. What else is happening around the young Akbar?
- What colors do you see in the image?
- A high horizon line is a common feature of Mughal illustrations. How would lowering the horizon change the composition?
- Akbar had a painting workshop in which artists worked on manuscript illustrations in teams. One artist drew the composition, and others painted in the background, animals, or faces depending on their special skills. Have you ever worked together with others on a work of art?

Activity

Create your own royal workshop. Gather some fellow artists and design and draw a Mughal manuscript illustration.

Materials Needed:

- Printout of an illustration from the Akbarnama
- Pencils
- Markers
- Gold pens
- Hole punch
• String or yarn
• Scissors

Steps:
1. Ask a group of friends or family members to be your fellow artists in creating a Mughal illustration.
2. Using the printout as a guide, draw a scene depicting an important ruler. What is in the setting? What will your ruler be doing? Who will be watching? Invite your fellow artists to give ideas about composition.
3. Have your fellow artists decide on their "specialties"—coloring faces, clothing, animals, landscape details, border design—and have them contribute their talents to the drawing with markers and gold pens.
4. Change tasks with your friends and create a series of images that tells more about the life of your ruler. Put the pages together, punch three holes in the left edge, and use yarn to bind your Mughal manuscript.

Glossary:
biography (n)
account, usually written, of a person's life; one who creates such an account

composition (n)
in art, the arrangement of formal elements, such as space, shape, and color

horizon line (n)
in art, the horizontal line that forms the apparent boundary between earth and sky

manuscript illustration (n)
image made for a book, document, or letter that is drawn or painted by hand

Mughal (adj)
of the dynasty of Islamic emperors who reigned in India from A.D. 1526 to 1858