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## fallen stars

### Daswanth

Raymond Cavanaugh Jr

Daswanth was born in India in 1560. He was the son of a palanquin bearer who transported people belonging to social classes many levels higher than his own. Despite this humble background, Daswanth's gifts were discovered by the Mughal emperor Akbar, a connoisseur of art, who would often canvass his domain looking for potential talent to beautify his courthouses and other public buildings. Emperor Akbar had noticed Daswanth's talent and sent him to the local painting master for a period of intensive training.

Rumours circulated about a disquieting side to the young painter. His behaviour was thought to be impulsive, even irrational at times. Images arise of a wildly eccentric artist depicting his foreboding visions with ominous intensity. Among the most vivid of Daswanth's surviving works is 'A Night Assault on the Pandava Camp'. This morbid masterpiece depicts a mythical spirit feasting on the blood of battle victims. In the bloody scene, a sultry female demon delights in her necklace of decapitated heads and garments consisting of the skins of slaughtered animals. Adding to the chaos is a certain stylistic distortion, in which lines overlap and lead to spatial ambivalence.

The irrational and alarming qualities of Daswanth's work began to surface more often in his behaviour. Whatever could be done for him in this era, one can only conjecture. What is certain is that the era in which he lived far pre-dated the advent of modern psychiatry, and there was therefore nothing to prevent his fall into a maelstrom of self-destruction.

Daswanth's demise would only serve to reinforce his 'madman' image, as at the mere age of 24 he fatally stabbed himself. At present, few paintings can be confidently attributed to Daswanth. Of these, most are found in a richly illustrated Indian manuscript produced during the late 16th century.

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