

CHAPTER TWO

COLOURING THE WORDS: REPRODUCTION OF PERSIAN LITERATURE THROUGH THE ART OF IRANIAN MINIATURE

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1. Introduction

The history of Iranian miniature has always been related to that of Iranian literature. Iranian miniature was born from book painting and explanatory illustrations to books around the 7th century developing to the visualisation of poetry, and went through different phases before finding its independent place as an outstanding art form. The evolutionary force in the field came around the 10th century by the emergence of the great works of literature and poetry starting with Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* and continuing with a flood of inspiring masterpieces like Nezami's *Khamseh* (12th c.), Sadi's *Boostan* and *Golestan* (13th c.), and Hafez's collection of poetry or *Divan* (14th c.). Although by the 13th century, under the Mongolian rulers, the art of miniature painting was technically affected by Chinese art, it still kept delivering diverse subjects from Persian literature through pictorial reproductions and very soon developed features which were very unique in essence. Features such as the use of vivid and subtle colours accompanied in times with gold and silver leaves, and the use of a "layering technique" in perspectives with elements and rich details overlaid on each other, enabling the viewer to experience a sense of three-dimensional space and giving him the ability to focus on certain aspects of the piece and excluding others simultaneously. It is indeed this last feature, reinforced of course by all the other characteristics, which gives Iranian miniature a certain type of capacity to mirror and reflect the multi-layered

signifying space of a literary work bringing out the “literariness” (with all the foregroundings and backgroundings) encoded in the written text. The aim of this paper is to revisit the history, the evolution and the progression of Iranian miniature art to illustrate the nature of its affinity through its diverse schools with the Persian literature, from classical times to our day.

Colours and Words

The word miniature is derived from the Latin *Minium*, meaning ‘red lead’ which was used for pigments in the production of artistic works of ancient Romans and Middle Ages’ artists who illustrated religious manuscripts. In its general modern usage the term refers to any small scaled and richly detailed painting. Apart from the Western and Byzantine traditions, there are also Asian traditions in this art form which are as ancient and diverse. Among Asian traditions like Mughal, Ottoman and Indian practices, Persian miniature is one of the earliest which is rooted in the usage of images on wall paintings and narrative scenes on the pottery in the Sassanid period as well as the book illustrations of the Manian era. Mani (c.216–276), the prophet who rebelled against Zoroastrianism, was a professional artist himself and declared the art of painting as one of his miracles. He even illustrated his own sacred book, *Arzhang* (fig. 1), in which the illustrations were as sacred as the text itself. It was, however, after the Arab conquest in 641 and the beginning of the Islamic period, that the art of miniature found its new image.

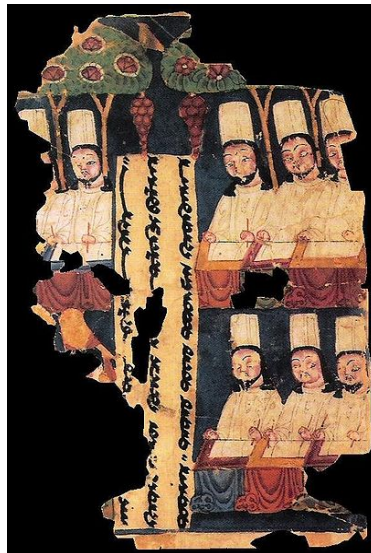


Fig.1. From Mani's *Arzhang*. Source=<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manichaeism>.

The new Islamic rulers had a dual policy towards the arts in the newly occupied territories. While on the one hand, they banned the art of painting, seeing it as blasphemous, on the other hand, they decorated their own palaces with the images and figures created by Iranian artists in Manian style of the pre-Islamic age. Only gradually, what the rulers wanted and allowed came to meet with what the artists practiced and desired. The Islamic rulers came to see and be influenced by the talents of the regional artists, and the masters of different art forms in Iran came to find Islam, specially the manners of the Shiites to be very attractive. This mutual understanding created a new space in which adoring religious books and the holy scripts became popular and paved the way for the illustration of scientific texts and literary volumes.

Under the impact of new religious learnings and the reminiscence of the beliefs from an ancient civilization, the artists launched a new era in Iranian miniature. In their small scaled illustrations, they aimed to create as much as they could to show the grandeur of what they felt and witnessed through the filter of their arts. For them it was the only way to reflect and preserve the history of a nation which was changing so rapidly due to countless attacks and invasions. Although the scale of historical events were grand, the size of the picture that recorded them were small. Indeed, the matter of size and scale of Iranian drawings, as one of its unique features, has always been a case of debate. While many see it as an aesthetic feature, some see it as a strategic technique. According to the latter, since after Islam the art of painting was banned throughout the country, one of the ways for the artists to practice their art was using their drawings as small illustration for the books. So they scattered their artworks within the texts and by doing so hid them from evil eyes. The size here was an important parameter, because the smaller the size the better the concealment, and so the art works were kept intact and far from intrusion. The texts and lines of the books were actually used as a safe haven for the colourful imaginations and dreams of a nation under invasion and book illustration became an inseparable part of Persian artistic history.

There is also another way of seeing this matter. Due to the religious and spiritual learnings, the way which the miniature artists saw and perceived reality through had totally altered. For the miniature artist, objective reality stood counter to the subjective reality and one way to show this was to minimize the size of the artwork. That is to say, the smaller the size the bigger the meaning, or the smaller the signifier the larger the signified. They believed that any alteration in size or distortion in dimension would change the way one looked at an object, and by changing the way one looked they could change the outlook. Knowing the dialect of dimension and perception and minimizing the size of the work they forced the

viewers to contemplate deeper, and the deeper they contemplated the more they understood.

It is due to the same outlook towards reality that miniature artists aimed to create a reflection of the world which they thought homed for the ideal truth. This world which they believed in and attempted to recreate was The Ideal world (or The One, in Plato's terminology), a third realm between The Material world and The Spiritual, where the true template of every image resided. In the Iranian miniature there is no one-to-one or referential connection between the concrete object and its image. The artist distances himself from the materiality of the object by dissolving the exterior and penetrating to the realm of the interior, thus creating a new space placed somewhere between the second and third dimensions. The space created in Iranian miniature represents the "celestial world of the ideal" (Nasr 171), a realm between The Material world where the matter resides and The Spiritual, where is the home for the spirit. This might well explain why the world of Iranian miniature is so ethereal, hallucinatory and haunting. It is in this third space that the artist's mind hosts the inspirations from the above and translates them into visual signs. It is only in this realm that conceptual elements are shaped and the artists feel no need to "copy the nature as it really is but rather to turn to the origin which has created that reality" (Pakbaz 91). To manifest such a world the artists used some strategies; colours didn't match the objects as were in nature, the size and forms were distorted, and the designs were defamiliarized. The nature of the materials was altered and reshaped according to the internal nature of the artist, his imagination and senses, as summoned in the moments of souring to the third realm of The Ideal. A world which its end products were totally provoking, internal, synchronized, overwhelmed by a harmonious radiation of light and spiral compositions.

With the emergence of Ferdowsi, Atar and Nezami's poetry from the 10th century, things grew more complicated. The contents of many of the poems produced by these masters were so elevated and transcendental that the artists thought they should keep up with this grandeur and sublimity by reflecting all this in their images. Symbolism and allegory were favoured by those who thought this was what the poets were trying to do through images created by words. The gardens described by the poet couldn't be the earthy patch of green areas and should stand for the Garden of Eden; the soldiers engaged in battlefields must have been engaged in the grand battle between good and evil and could not just fight for material reasons. And thus happened the marriage of the poetic and artistic imagination, the union of ecclesiastic images poured into words and that of vivid, lively colours and majestic lines and curves — the marriage of words and images.

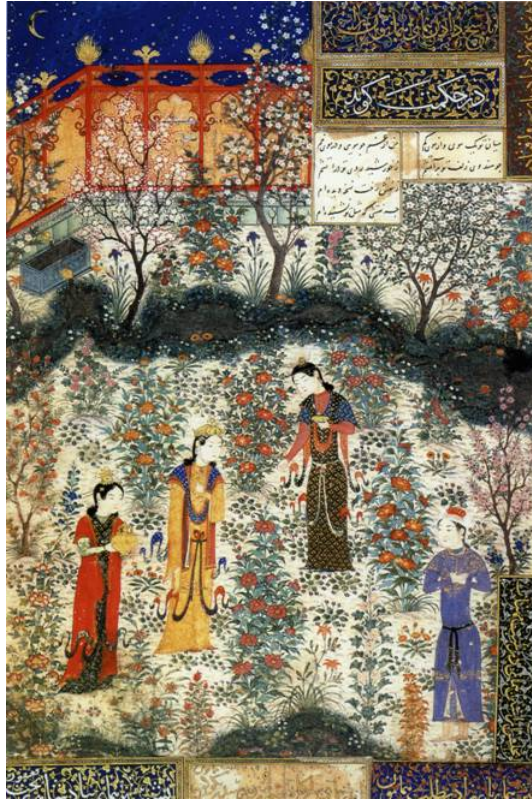


Fig.2. Homai meets Homayoon in a dream (Khaju-ye Kermani). Eduljee, K. E. Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*. Zoroastrian Heritage. 2007-11. Source=<http://www.heritageinstitute.com/zoroastrianism/>.

This way of conceiving the world was what made the Iranian miniature artist to be considered a kind of a wise sage with extraordinary powers. Many miniature artists of that period, as Dekhoda notes, “were either themselves Sufis and mystics or became one after getting to know the mystic literature and the wisdom embedded in ancient Persian poetry” (599). Many of these talented men practiced literature, calligraphy, and adorning books simultaneously, with the same degree of expertise. Thus, the lines produced by a poet were easily translated into images by the miniature artist because both of them shared a similar passion, inspiration and imagination. The images the artists created visually were exactly the images created verbally through concrete description by the poets. This unity was reflected in the balance, proportions, harmony, and affinity in the interplay between text and image, producing a magical aesthetic system unique to Persian miniature style. Both the poet and the illustrator, thought in same colours, shapes, forms, space, compositions, geometric dimensions, lights and shades to create a visual language enhanced by words.

Features and Convention

In spite of it being affected by Chinese and Eastern art at various stages, Persian miniature has managed to develop its own distinctive features. Apart from the small size, modest, subtle use of colours and emphasis on natural and realist motifs, as Mirrazavi notes, Persian miniatures “feature accents in gold and silver leaf, along with a very vivid array of colors”. Next is the intriguing nature of the perspective in a Persian miniature “with elements overlaid on each other in ways which sometimes feel awkward to people who are accustomed to the look and feel of Western art”. Used to create a sense of space, the Persian technique of layering perspectives is a unique feature which suits well with the multi-layered contents of the poems it represents. Mirrazavi explains this with an example of a miniature piece below (fig. 3) and notes that here “the variety of views is noticeable in the arrangement of objects: birds inhabit both the foreground and background of the piece, with the floral objects positioned in between. This gives the viewer a sense of three-dimensional space and the ability to focus on certain aspects of the piece to the exclusion of others”.



Fig.3. From *Iran Review*, ‘Persian Miniature’. Frouzeh Mirrazavi, August 18, 2009.
Source=<http://www.iranreview.org/index.aspx>.

According to Mostafa Fotowat, this kind of deviation from normal rules of perspective gives the miniature an unique quality because it is “like pieces of photography from different characters in layers (at distances) near and far from an origin (datum point), but after assembling them in a frame together, the distance of the objects vanishes and the observer finds a wider scope of vision”. Fotowat also believes that dots are usually the basic parts that form images of a subject in miniature painting. In other words, “by joining the dimensionless elements (dots), the layout and format of the figures are composed in two dimensions, that this peculiarity can be observed through a magnifying glass time-consuming the works are”. The use of natural materials also gives deeper appeal to miniature paintings.

For example, as Fotowat notes, the “body of a pen is made of porcupine lancet, head is made from fine cat hair, papers are made of rice bran, camel and cow bone, and in the superior samples, ivory is used along with natural dyes. The majority of dyes are herbal that enjoy a high degree of stability and long life upgrading designs to a high level”.

There are also conventions concerning the content of the paintings. Apparently, great attention is paid to the details of the background. Landscapes or buildings are dealt with in the smallest details, so are the plants and animals, the fabrics of tents, hangings or carpets, or tile patterns. Landscapes are very often mountainous, being indicated by a high undulating horizon. “Buildings are often shown in complex views, mixing interior views through windows or ‘cutaways’ with exterior views of other parts of a façade. Costumes and architecture are always those of the time” (Welch 35). Many viewers find the buildings in miniatures being hexagonal in plan; one reason for this is that the walls are depicted with a 45 degree angle. Horizontal depiction of miniatures across the page and in the middle of the text, was a common practice in early paintings, however, the vertical format was introduced by the 14th century under Chinese influence.

During different phases of its evolution Iranian miniature has shown different faces for human figures. Being a central element in almost all the illustrations of literary volumes, these figures have youthful faces and are seen in three-quarters view. The faces are detailed according to the influences from Arabic, Chinese or Byzantine traditions. Actually, there seems to be no prescribed or fixed manner for depicting the same details even in frequently illustrated works such as *Shahnameh*. Thus it is possible to see Rustam, the great Persian hero, in same episodes yet totally different looks in compositionally or iconographically uniform scenes. Natural proportions are not considered important and many figures are often depicted in the same size and dimensions. Sometimes the main figure, according to his position in the plot, might be centralized or shown larger than the others around him. The garments, hats and other attires are shown with great detail and care, even the patterns of the fabric count.

Animal figures were so prominent in Iranian miniature paintings because they appeared in different shapes and forms in literature. Mythical creatures like Divs, dragons, and giant snakes were popular images inspired by rich literary descriptions. Birds, lions, elephants populated the hunting scenes; deers and gazelles had their own charming roles. Apparently, horses had an unique place both in the narratives and the pictures. As Gray notes, “animals, especially the horses that very often appear, are mostly shown sideways on; even the love-stories that constitute much of the classic material illustrated are conducted largely in the saddle, as far as the prince-protagonist is concerned” (b 25).

The illustrated books that placed the miniatures were not always literary volumes. According to the text types the miniaturists used “panels of text or captions inside the picture area, which is enclosed in a frame, eventually of several ruled lines with a broader band of gold or colour”. Depending on the text type “the rest of the page is often decorated with dense designs of plants and animals, often gold and brown; text pages without miniatures often also have such borders. In later manuscripts, elements of the miniature begin to expand beyond the frame, which may disappear on one side of the image, or be omitted completely” (Sims *et al.*).

History, evolution and progression

The history of Iranian miniature is the Iranian history captured in pictures. The history of a nation with an ancient civilization which has always prided its mythological heroes, mighty kings, brave warriors, bold lovers, grand poets, and honest men and women. What happened to this eminent nation at the edge of history and just before the Arab conquest has rightly been the subject matter of endless disputes. After the Arab conquest Iran continued to be overrun by foreign powers for another thousand years. The Seljuk Turks arrived in the 11th century, followed by the Mongols in the 13th century and Tamerlane (Timur) in the 14th century. Another Turkish dynasty, the Safavids, took control in the 16th century, only to be ousted by yet another Turkish tribe, the Qajar, in the 18th century. With each new ruler, came new rules, and of course the shift of the capital city, and as the rules and the centers changed, so did everything. As mirrors held up to history, the art and literature of Persia are documents which enable generations to look forward and backward into their cultural heritage, social, economic and political conditions, and the facts and the fiction about their ancestors which in times seem inseparable.

As far as the documents show, the first miniature paintings in Iran belong to the beginning of the Islamic period. Between the 7th and 10th century, influenced by the Sassanid, Manian and Byzantine art, there appeared a mode in painting which was later called the Baghdad or Abbasi School. Here, simplicity was the key word. The paintings and illustrations produced by the artists of this school were primitive and innovative, painted in flat colours with strong dividing lines. Images were painted larger than normal without any proportion. They were limited to some human figures haloed around their heads, with patterned garments, and some unornamented tree branches symbolizing the natural world, drawn on plain backgrounds. The drawings were not separated from the written text and seemed to be a part of the whole texture. Apart from the literary works, mainly lyrics and fables, such as *Kalileh va Demneh* and *Maghlat-e-Harriri*, many scientific books

(*Physic-Aljazri*) were illustrated by the skilful artists of Baghdad School in this period.

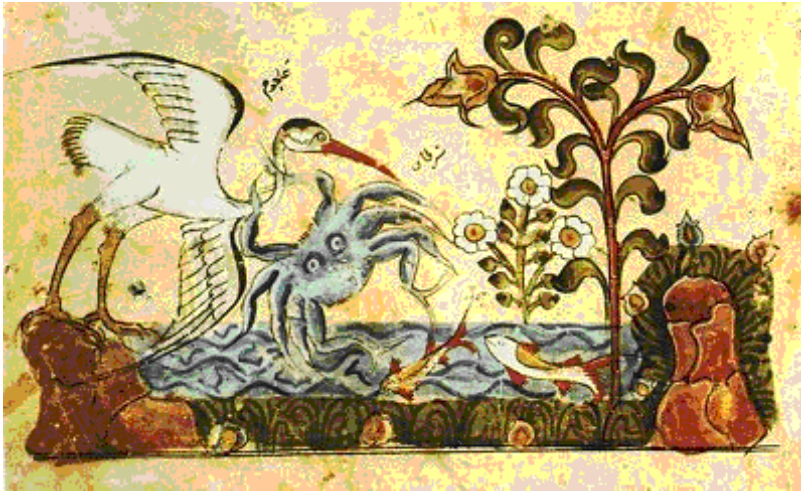


Fig.4. Illustration from *Kalileh va Demneh*, Baghdad, 1300. Baghdad School.
Source=http://www.superluminal.com/cookbook/gallery_fables.html.

The end of the 10th century gave rise to great literary masterpieces in Persian literature which in turn inspired the great artists, who understood the dialectic of text and image. Ferdowsi's grand national epic *Shahnameh* or *The Book of Kings* which contained 60,000 rhyming couplets and recounted the history of Iran, from Kayumars to the Arab conquest (covering The Mythical, The Heroic, and The Historical Ages) provided an endless treasure for those who aimed to tie their art and craftsmanship to mythology, legend and romanticized history. The fascination with *Shahnameh* was so immense that every historical period in Iran has created its own illustrated version of this masterpiece and one can easily trace the history of Iranian miniature by analyzing the copies produced throughout the centuries. To use this statement factually, the illustrations in this paper are mainly selected from different versions of *Shahnameh* in a chronological order to depict the evolutionary nature of the miniatures and provide a basis for their comparison.

The Fars & Khorasan School appeared between the 11th and 12th centuries during the reign of Seljuk. In this period, the Iranian art revived itself in the form of paintings on pottery and book adornments. The literary masterpiece of this period was *Khamseh* (*five epics*) by the grand poet Nezami, whom like *Shahnameh* inspired many artists. Nezami spent 30 years composing this work —best-known for the love story between the king of Persia Khosro and princess Shirin. The paintings of this school used red colour as their background together with a completely contoured style in representing bodies, plants, animals and natural

landscapes. The most important illustrated book of this school is *Varagheh and Golsha*, *Al-Aghani* and *Shahnameh-e-Kama*, which is known to be “the oldest illustrated version with 45 images” (Taslimi 151).



Fig.5. Illustration from *Kitab al-aghani (Book of Songs)*, 1216-20, by Abu al-Faraj al-Isfahani, a collection of songs by famous musicians and Arab poets.

Source=http://warfare.uphero.com/Turk/Kitab_al-Aghani-Vol_17.htm.

The devastating invasion by Mongols happened in the 13th century leaving many Persian cities in ruins and innumerable people dead. “In the course of these savage invasions, wall paintings inside palaces were destroyed and thousands of manuscripts both illustrated and non-illustrated were burned to ashes when libraries across the country were put to flame” (Fotowat). Only gradually, the Ilkhanate court started to respect and later promote the native traditional artistic and cultural practices. It was under these new rulers and foreign trades that Iranian artists became familiar with Chinese works and probably artists, with their long-established tradition of narrative painting. In the new capital city, Tabriz, a new School was born bearing the same name. The practitioners of this school had the advantage of borrowing the different modes of paintings from Baghdad, Chinese, Byzantine, and even Buddhist traditions all of which was reflected in their paintings. Their illustrations, which in times occupied a separate full page, are predominantly horizontal in format, framed and checked, with a simultaneous display of the external and internal spaces in the landscape, peopled by figures wearing Eastern armours and silk garments in Chinese style.

Apart from *Jame-o-Tavarikh*, a copy of Ferdowsi’s *Shahnameh*, known as the Demotte *Shahnameh*, after the French dealer Georges Demotte, who

dismembered it around 1910, was illustrated by the artists of this School. As Carboni notes, “the Ilkhanids enthusiastically sponsored its production, particularly because they could reinterpret it through its images in order to make a powerful statement of legitimacy”.



Fig.6. Bahram Gur is fighting a lion, Demotte *Shahnameh*, Scene from the Demotte or “Great Mongol *Shahnameh*”, a key Ilkhanid work, 1320s? Source=http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Persian_miniature.

At the same time that Tabriz School was flourishing in the west, miniature painting found another home in Shiraz at the south. Shiraz was of course the home of master poets such as Saadi, Khaju-ye Kermani, and later Hafez. The magical words in the air were from *Boostan* and *Golestan* and *Homai and Homayoon*, which inspired many miniature artists throughout the 13th and 14th centuries. Free from Mongol influence, the artists here revived the tradition of palette and simple composition and combined it with innovations in decorative features. One of the great works by the school of Shiraz is again a *Shahnameh* known as *Topkapi Saray Shahnameh*, after the Topkapi Saray Museum in Istanbul. The miniatures in this version feature the general characteristics of other works produced during this period in that they “display more precise symmetrical composition, more refined landscaping and better relationship between the text areas and pictorial elements a lighter palette, the use of decorative elements. More masterfully designed characters and refined silhouetting of rocks further add to their refinement” (Fotowat).



Fig.7. *Shahnameh*, Shiraz School. *Shahnameh*, Bahram Gur Kills the Dragon, in a *Shahnameh* of 1371, Shiraz, with a very Chinese dragon.

Source=http://www.iranchamber.com/art/articles/history_iranian_miniature.php.

Following the death of Abu Sa'ïd (1316–1335), the last Ilkhanid ruler, and for the rest of the 14th century, Iran was ruled by several local dynasties whose capitals developed highly distinctive provincial styles of painting: the Jalayerids (1340–1411) in Baghdad, the Chupanids (1337–1357) in Esfahan, and the Injuïds (1325–1353), followed by the Muzaffarids (1314–1393), in Shiraz. The style of painting in each city was different and every area came up with its own mode. However, one thing was for certain — in a span of time after the collapse of the Seljuks, and before Timur's invasion, miniature found a new vitality and flourished under many independent schools bringing ancient Iranian tales and poems into the center stage. The most important miniatures made in this period were from Khajuy-e Kermani's *Homai and Homayoon*. The pictures of the Jalayeri School depicted vast and infinite landscapes, the nature was fictional and poetic more than ever, the world seemed unrealistic and imaginary so as to go with the figures and scenery, the compositions were circular and spaces were so divided to represent only two dimensions.

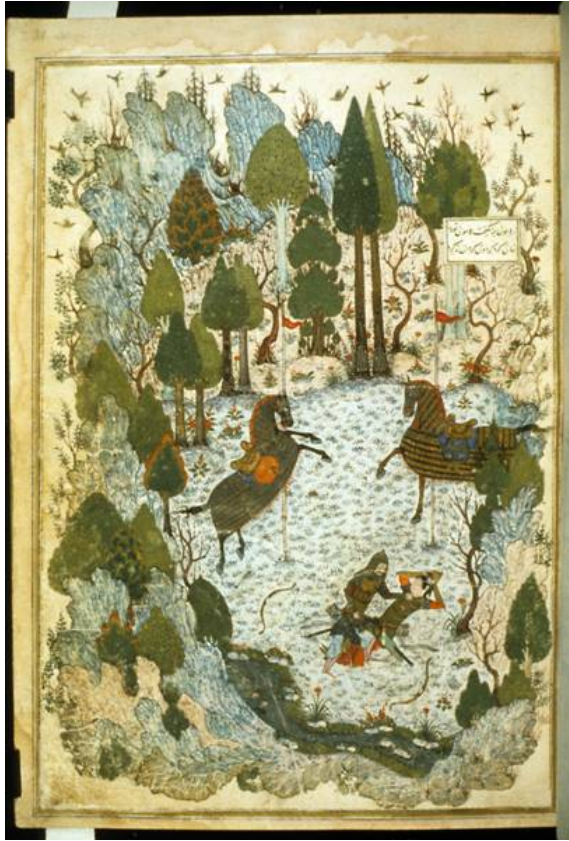


Fig.8. Homai and Homayoon dual, Three *masnavis* of Khwaju-yi Kirmani, text date Baghdad 798/1396, London, BL, Add.18,113, f.23a.

Source=<https://weblearn.ox.ac.uk/.../Painting.%20Jalayirid%20and%20Timurid%20Patronage.ppt>.

The Invasion of Timur in 1381 changed the political, and thus the cultural air in Iran. As a result, Samarqand became the capital of the new dynasty and attracted the artists as the new cultural hub. “One of the most distinguished styles triggered during that period was a combination of Jalayerian and Mozaffarian schools together with elements and details supposedly portraying traditions of the Middle Asia. So, the first classical or official style was formed in Iranian miniature” (Mehraby). Meanwhile at Shiraz the individual artists continued to create wonders. Free from the influences of the Chinese and Byzantine arts there appeared miniatures with lofty horizons, realistic details of nature and human figures, men sitting scantily on horsebacks. Mystical and Romantic themes were dominant and human behaviours were depicted to match the emotions running in the texts. The best examples of this School are Ebn Hesam’s *Khavaran Nameh* and *Shahnameh of Ibrahim Sultan*, with fifty two paintings.

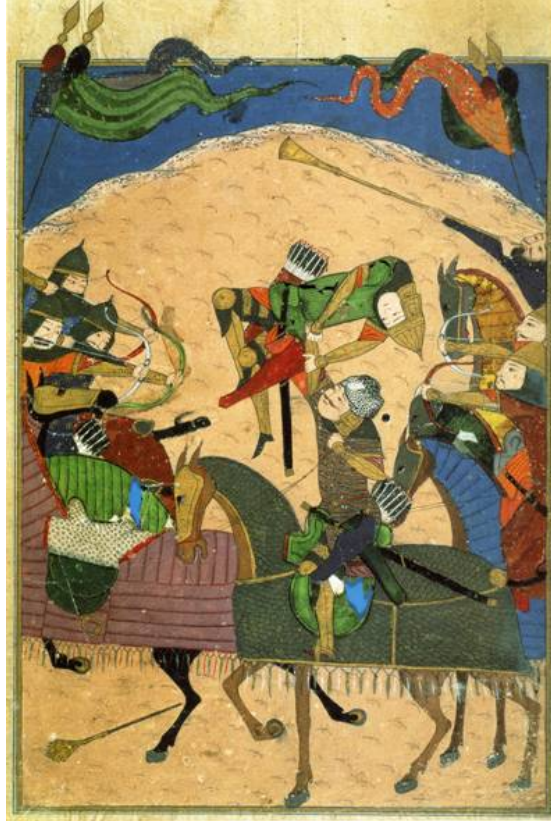


Fig.9. Rostam lifts Afrasiyab from his horse, *Shahnameh of Ibrahim Sultan*.

Source=<https://weblearn.ox.ac.uk/.../Painting.%20Jalayirid%20and%20Timurid%20Patronage.ppt>.

Herat became the capital city when Sharokh, Timur's son succeeded to court, and homed a new school in miniature by the same name for half a century. As the new cultural hub, Herat, now in Afghanistan, became a magnet for the talented miniature artists, calligraphers, goldsmiths, and bookmakers of Baysonqor's court. The miniature artists "created some of the most appreciable pictorial manuscripts in the history of eastern paintings. Those miniatures were created in absolute balance of scale, composition and color selection" (Mehraby). Baysonqory *Shahnameh* is an unique and unparalleled masterpiece created by Mulla Ali and Amir Kalil under the patronage of Baysonqor Mirza, the prince himself.



Fig.10. Baysunghur's *Shahnameh*, 1430, Herat school. He was a key patron of the Herat school.
Source=<http://heritageinstitute.com/zoroastrianism/shahnameh/manuscripts.htm>.

In the Herat miniature painting human figures became much more prominent. Realistic details of flowers and plants, accurate drawings of architectural landscapes, skillful and asymmetrical compositions, complicated and cross-sectional spacing, as well as the variety of colours are amongst the outstanding features of this school. The Herat artists were also exceptional at portraying people. One of the best known and most influential painters from the Herat school was Kamal-od-Din Behzad, whose paintings brought miniature to its genuine bloom, and was greatly influenced by the works of the Persian poets, especially Jami. Jami (1414–1492) who is commonly called the last great classical poet of Persia, saint and mystic, was the composer of *Haft Awrang*. Behzad followed Herat classical school to create his best works of art and along with his contemporary artists managed to refine and perfect the classical style of Timurids.

At the beginning of the 16th century the Safavid dynasty came to power, and Shah Esmail made Tabriz the capital city once again. In miniature art, the Second Tabriz School emerged by synthesis of diverse traditions from the Herat heritage and the first Tabriz School, developing a new path towards excellence in quality and quantity. The richness and variety of colours, compact, and in times spirals, compositions, and dynamic figures made the illustrations of this period very plausible. The use of golden colours, themes from court life and attire, dressing the

figures in genuine Safavid garments and hats, and depiction of hunting scenes with astounding mobility, are among the features of this period. *Khamseh* by Nezami and *Tahmasp's Shahnameh* are two magnificent examples of this period which once again embody the magical fusion of words and images.

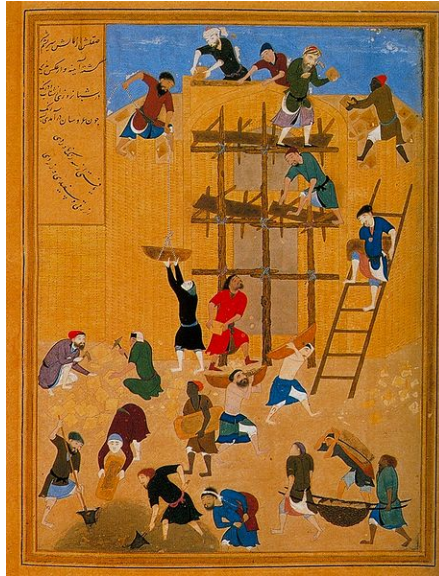


Fig.11. Kamal-od-Din Behzad of Herat School, "Khamse", Nezami.
Source=http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Persian_miniature.

Tahmasp's Shahnameh was commissioned by Esma'il's son and successor, Shah Tahmasp (1524–1576) and is known to be the most sumptuous manuscript in the history of Persian painting. Tahmasp invited Kamal al-Din Behzad, his art teacher from Herat, to Tabriz in 1522, where he became the head of the royal library and entrusted Soltan Mohammad, another talented miniaturist, with the illustration of *Tahmasp's Shahnameh*. Illuminated with 258 miniature paintings sprinkled with gold, this version was completed over a thirty-year period. This version is also known as Houghton *Shahnameh*, after Arthur Houghton, who bought it in 1959 and soon proceeded to take apart the folios with the intention of individually selling the pages containing the miniature paintings. Sadly, the history of *Shahnameh* is the epitome of the history of a nation. It was rediscovered by every invader, was commissioned to native artists by total aliens, used in times as diplomatic gifts, as was the case with *Tahmasp's Shahnameh* which was given to the Ottoman Sultan Selim II, dismembered and finally sold off or stolen. In a sense, the *Shahnameh* offers not only a panoramic view of the history of Iran through Persian painting for well over a thousand years but also depicts the dramatic and

painful history of rapid succession of alien dynasties which took to art patronage only as a reflection of their majesty and dominance.

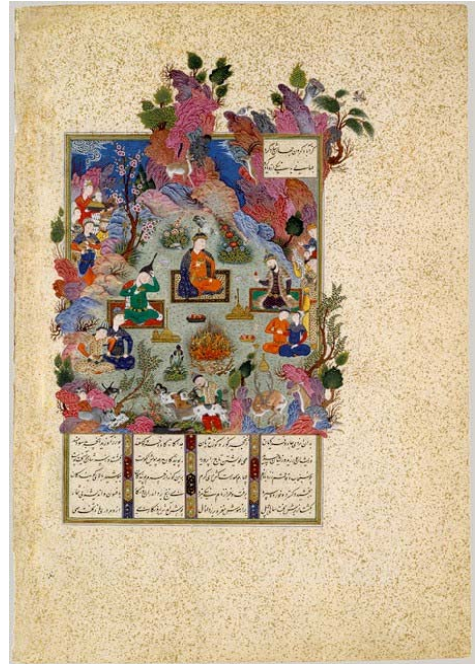


Fig.12. Tahmaspi or Houghton manuscript, artist Sultan Muhammad Tabriz, c.1530. Hushang, grandson of Gayumars. Feast of Sadeh. Source=<http://heritageinstitute.com/zoroastrianism/shahnameh/manuscripts.htm> & http://irandidar.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=55.

As depicted in the above sample, two distinctive features are visible in the text-picture relations which also characterize the second Tabriz School. Firstly, the scenes are continued and exceed the columns of text, and secondly there is a considerable extension of pictorial elements into the margins. These two features create a sense of freedom as if the ruling frame had been excluded to release the picture from its confines. This can stand as a metaphor which alludes to the profound desire in the mental framework of the artists who longed to break out. Under this altered vision the miniature artists of the second Tabriz School created magnificent worlds where

their lively landscapes [were] filled with lively flower bushes, tall cypresses and blossom-covered trees creat[ing] metaphoric images of paradise. Their works combine forceful character design, accomplished coloring and masterful composition with a meticulous decoration involving precise architectural elements and superb geometric and vegetal patterns. Their indigo-blue skies strewn with surreal clouds, colorful birds flying among their

foliages, and angels appearing on earth every now and then, adding a spiritual and poetic touch to their works, all seem to indicate that the artists of the school of Tabriz have come to perceive the spiritual and the physical worlds as inseparable. (Fotowat)

The next school which emerged in the art of miniature by synthesizing the Second Tabriz and regional elements was the Mashahd School. This school gains importance because in its miniatures the human figures and objects appear without any connection to the stories. Additive personages from everyday life are depicted as part of the scene, with tall human figures with round faces. Nature was featured with blocked rocks and old trees with bulky trunks and twisted branches. White was the dominant colour of the paintings. The most prominent illustrated work of this school is Jami's great poetic masterpiece the *Haft Awrang*. Jami's poetry inspired and enabled the artists to use the characters, themes and the motifs of the literary world in creating more lively figures within the compositions which were no longer constrained or static. The landscapes gave full illusion of the scenes from the poetic world, creating in a limited space an unlimited architectural possibility which included palaces, buildings, outer yards and inner gardens at the same time to enable the reader and the viewer to step inside the fictional worlds immediately.



Fig.13. Persian miniature from the Haft Awrang in the Freer Gallery of Art, 1556–65, commissioned by Ibrahim Mirza and made in Mashad. Source=http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ibrahim_Mirza.

During the same period when Qazvin became the capital city, the Qazvin School was born as the common precedent. The reason why this school is usually mentioned in the history line of Persian miniature is because it was with this school that individual miniature works were created detached from texts and books. Drawings and paintings were no longer bound to illustrations of texts or adorning literary volumes. Individual figures or young couples were painted and then the works were decorated with calligraphies. Wall paintings in the palaces and portraits became popular art forms. However, *Shahnameh* was an exception. The most well known illustrated copy of this period is *Shahnameh of Ghavam Ibn Mohammad Shirazi*, with 37 paintings and his own calligraphy.

Finally, Esfahan, the most famous Iranian city known for the Westerners, became the capital city of Shah Abbas I. Himself a painter, the Shah paid special attention to restorations of old works and patronage of the new. Miniatures became more and more sophisticated as more and more masters joined the practice. One such master was Reza Abbasi (1610–1640). The miniatures produced by the Esfahan School are visibly distanced from the art works produced for book illustrations. In an open effort for independence the themes of the new works centred around events in the royal court, the aristocratic class, magnificent palaces, and hunting scenes. The number of human figures in a single picture declined; instead the details in depicting the face, hair and beard, and even the pelts of the closing were put to centre stage through the use of subtle brush strokes. Influences of Indian and European art were welcomed causing a gradual change of taste in the new works. As Taslimi notes, European and Armenian artists present at Esfahan had their share in introducing oil colour painting to the Iranian artists and gradually changed the face of Iranian miniature art forever. The size of the human figures to natural proportions, the use of second and third dimensions and the foreign modes of perspective, were other new features practiced by artists in this period (163). One drastic change in this era was the separation of miniature and literature. A sad ending for the collaboration of two incredible art forms which had been fueling energy into the veins of one another for centuries. The new modes of painting stressed on verisimilitude and realism which was far from the spirit of the literature of the time. The third space of imagination was giving way to the natural surroundings, the every day figures mostly for decorative purposes. *Shahnameh* yet was still an exception and this time appeared under the name of *Shahname ye Abbasi*.



۳۹. جلوس لهراسپ در قصر خود، مکتب اصفهان، المتشالاً ۵۸۰-۵۹۰. آثار معین مصور، مجموعه روچینا، کتابخانه و موزه سوره تهرانی، دلبین این نگار مربوط به شاهنامه نوالقده ۵۸۰-۵۹۰. اقل استا

Fig.14. Lohrasp in court, *Shahnameh*, Esfahan School. Source= Kevorkian, M.A. Sicre, P.J. *Les Jardins du Desir, Phebus*. Trans. Parviz Marzban. Paris, 1983, p. 162.

After the Safavids, under the Afshar, Zand and Gajar dynasties right through the Pahlavi's and after the 1979 revolution, Iranian miniature witnessed drastic changes. Apparently, when Westernized styles started to flourish in the country, everything including Iranian painting entered a new era. Iranian miniature experienced Flower and Bird School of Shiraz, Academy of Iranian Arts was founded, and then came grand masters of painting such as Kamal-ol-Molk (1847–1940), Hossein Behzad (1894–1968), and others like Hadi Tajvidi and Mahmoud Farshchian, who introduced new methods of composition and perspective, and created unique masterpieces. However, the very names of the 'new' Schools, i.e. the Neo-Heart and Neo-Savavid, talk for themselves the tendency towards the revival of the old themes and techniques.



Fig.15. Saki, Reza Abbasi, from the Moraqqa' e Golshan, 1609, Golestan Palace.jpg. Source=
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Persian_miniature.

Words to conclude

Varied and rich in traditions, the art of Persian miniature is a mirror held up to the history of a nation. In its long and complicated path of development, this unique art form has been enriched by the charm of Persian literature which has truly magnified the pleasure and beauty it bestows to the viewer. Along with the creation of Iranian poetic masterpieces from the 10th century, which delivered subjects for miniature paintings, the talented miniaturists gave face to poetic characters, making them immortal in the every mind's eye. Under the incredible hands of master miniaturists, verses were burnt into the memories through striking pictures that summed up their entire plot. Iconic or visual signs accompanied the complex conventional representations to enable a whole to be assembled by the reader through an exploration of the verbal and visual details. Concentration and contemplation on details in setting, characterization, point of view, temporality and modality were made possible through complementary, symmetrical, and enhancing images created by the artists to activate the dynamics of text and image aiming to create a whole.

Apparently due to this balanced harmony, the illustrated poetry combines the verbal and visual levels of communication to produce a synthetic medium. Within this framework the representational signs, or icons, function at the visual level aiming to describe or represent, while the conventional signs, or words, act at the level of verbal, aiming primarily to narrate. The tension between the two levels

creates countless possibilities for the interaction between the word and the image which in turn engages the reader with a constant journey between the two — caught in times in a third space in between—, to expand and deepen his or her understanding. By creating expectations for each other within the provided space, the word and the image launch infinite possibilities for the reader to experience newer and richer connections between the signifier and the signified thus assembling a whole which becomes completed yet afresh in every reading. This whole process corresponds to the alternative world or the in-between space which the Iranian miniature artists aimed at creating by re-imagining or visualizing The Ideal of the poetic world.

Some believe that the magnificence and grandeur of Iranian miniature has faded after the Safavid period and in spite of the fact that it is still being painted, it has lost its popularity as the unique Iranian style. There might be some truth in such arguments; however, Iran has always been a country of poetry, the land of Sufis and mystics, the home of Hafez, Rumi, Sadi, Omar Khayyam, Nezami, and Jami. Persian poetry is still proud of its gem *The Shahnameh* of Ferdowsi. Grand masters miniaturists, Kamal al-Din Behzad, Reza Abbasi, and Kamal-ol-Molk, have eternally painted themselves on the body of this nation. So why one should doubt about the future of this art in a land where there has always been an alternative space —the third space of the in-between.



Fig.16. *Morning Blossom*, 1986, by Mahmoud Farschian, *The Exquisite Art of Persian Miniature*. Source=*Miniature_by Sherveen Ashtari* August 2, 2011. <http://www.capuleart.com/persian-miniature>.

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