through the eyes of a prince

Europeans have always been allured and charmed with the East. Returning from durable wanderings, the travellers who had set off for the Orient for spicery, textiles or gems regarded not only sand-storms, the unbearably scorching Sun or nomads' raids but also the culture of every-day life amazing in its refinement. When at home already, they used to tell everyone enthusiastically about the fabulous riches and exquisite luxury they saw, about oriental viands and dark-eyed beauties, multi-coloured nature and musical tradition so much unusual for Europeans as everything else in the East. Legends were widely spread in Europe about the oriental art of making love aromas for rubbing in the hair, impregnating clothes and bedrooms. The fragrances changed from season to season following the change in humidity. The travellers were telling their folk exotically about wonderful parks with carpeted marble pavilions and murmuring fountains, where the flowers were selected and planted in such manner that at some places the most delicate flower aromas were stronger in the morning or by midday, while at the other places they were gorgeous in the evening or at night, by moonlight. The fantastic scents, music, poetry, refined women's beauty, delicious meals and drinks created the illusion of the Garden of Eden.

Among the most valuable gifts of the Orient as presented to Europe were bright fine textiles and Oriental miniatures which conveyed the echoes and aromas of the unknown mysterious world to the Europeans, as well as its music, poetry and dance. The whimsical decorative textiles ready to embrace the waxes of seductive beauties seemed to be telling love stories. The Oriental miniatures are also telling us the stories of love: joyous and doleful, mutual and off caste. This was the world-eternal sequence of happy encounters, striking and multi-coloured, along with the stories of inevitable parting punctuated with the colouring of expectation and grief. The colours that have lived to our days, their special melodies, rhythms and accents have conveyed the image of this love to us.

An intricate carved wooden window is splitting sunlight into fanchical arabesques. It is cool in the room in spite of the fierce heat outside, rare even for this place. A figure with pen in his hand bends over a sheet of white paper. He is a famous physician known as al-Shiri. Now he dips his qalam into the inkpot and quickly knits a line of Arabic running from the left to the right:

"Experts agree that the following should be loaded with regard to the face and body of a woman: four black things: the hair of the head, the eye-lashes, the eye-brows and the dark centre of the eyes; four white things: the tongue, the lips, the cheeks and the buttoks; four round things: the face, the hand, the ankles (which should not protrude) and the posterior; four long things: the neck, the figure, the eyebrows and the hair; four fragrant places: the nose, the mouth, the armpits and the vulva; four broad places: a high forehead, large eyes, a full upper part of the body and a smooth face; a single narrow place: the vulva; four small places: the mouth, the hands, the feet, and the breasts".

The notion of a beauty has continually changed through the ages and from one country to another. A top-model of today would certainly feel herself uncomfortable among the beauties of the caliph's court [1]. But now as never before we are beginning to understand that everything in our life, including the Western concept of women's beauty, has been formed by centuries of contact with other cultures and civilizations. Muslim culture, which played the unique role of a bridge between Classical Hellenism and the European Renaissance, is a major contributor to this joint treasury of ideas.

Outstanding examples of Central Asian book miniatures, provide us with a unique opportunity to see a woman through the eyes of a Middle Age Muslim painter and his customer — usually a rich nobleman, state officer or even a Muslim prince. Manuscripts decorated with exquisite miniature pictures demanded several years of diligent work of calligraphers, miniature painters and book binders. Only the most rich and noble people could afford buying so fabulously expensive masterpieces.

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1 This article was conceived in the context of the "Pages of Perfection. Islamic Paintings and Calligraphy from the Russian Academy of Sciences, St.-Petersburg" exhibition that was a great success in Paris, New York and Salzburg. Unfortunately the text written in cooperation with Irina Petrosyan was not published that time. Though the present article is based on new material and thus the parts we worked together on were excluded from the text, I still would like to thank Irina Petrosyan for her cooperation and fruitful work of years ago.
The miniatures could be a series of official ceremonial portraits of Chingizid Khans and their wives, as in the famous historical work by Rashid al-Din dating back to the 14th century (plate 1, fig. 1), or a gallant scene of Amir Timur and his wife in a luxurious pavilion surrounded by night garden (plate 2). They could also depict famous fictional characters: legendary ancient prince Bahram Gur, whose way was marked with meeting seven princesses (figs. 2—3), or beautiful Shakarpoisoned by a hired old woman (fig. 4).

Certainly both a court painter and his customer had their preferences. The mirror was “adjusted” to create “the Garden of Eden illusion.” But the same can be said about designers of modern glossy magazines.

So who were these “beautiful ladies,” living in the flourishing Central Asian cities along the Silk Road? What kind of women were these alluring Eastern beauties enlaced in finest silk and enveloped in sweet fragrances? Women played significant part at court. Elegant noblewomen were well educated and no political issue could be solved without their knowledge. Muslim girls were very often sent to primary school. Among the miniature representations of the famous pair Majnun and Layla we often find them depicted sharing a classroom (fig. 3).

Marriage and childbearing were treated in Islam as Godly deeds and the dawn was seen as a sign of Allah’s blessing. Wise elderly women were also traditionally treated with great respect. But indubitably neither European nor Muslim culture could pass over romantic image of a beautiful beloved.

Islam culture generally shows great chasteness when depicting love of a man and a woman in miniatures. In most cases they portray only a symbolic image created by a poet. For example, Mîr ‘Alî Shîr Naw’î’s poem “Agony of Love” compares agony of love with sufferings of a dove指导 in a gourd—traditional target in archery competition. The poet also compares a girl’s mole with a ball and her locks—withe pole matle. The miniature painter illustrates this image with a typical depiction of the play [2]. At the same time painters eagerly illustrate frivolous stories of love triangles, rivaling that of Boccaccio—trying to prove his wife’s infidelity to the carpenter hides under the bed, but the quick-witted woman manages to finesse her way out of the seemingly desperate situation [3].

However such plots are not very typical. Muslim authors created wonderful poems about love, praising the image of a beautiful beloved, elevated and sublime, earth-born and comprehensible at the same time. Miniatures illustrating well known poems about love consistently created visible image of these beautiful ladies.

Among the most famous works of the kind, one can mention the poems “Layla and Majnun”, “Khusrav and Shârîn” and also “Yusuf and Zulaikha” authored by such celebrated poets as Nizâmi, Hâfiz, Amîr Khusrav Dihlâwi, etc. Miniatures illustrating the poets’ works of art portray delicate and elegant images of women (fig. 6), demonstrating sincere admiration of Muslim painters towards a woman, her grace, her otherness, the particularity of her nature. This admiration distinguishable despite the conventionality of the subject, despite the etiquette rules and certain restrictions (miniatures illustrated the same recognizable episodes) shows the true attitude towards women, unaffected by any religious restraint.

The artist’s admiration for women cannot be veiled even by the peculiarities of the plot of the famous poem “Yusuf and Zulaikha” based on the Qur’anic narrative and rooted in the Biblical story of love of Potiphar’s (Qifîn’s) wife for Joseph. This poem portrays the woman who happens for a beautiful young slave with a longing which the Qur’ân condemned as sinful (fig. 7). The miniaturists had to show the trick she plays in her desire to seduce Joseph. This image had to be the quintessence of the men’s notions of the evil, danger and misfortune brought by woman, but this negative figure of a famous Egyptian, seducer and sinner, became one of the most vital characters in Muslim literature and miniature painting.

How different is the image of Shârîn in the famous poem “Khusrav and Shârîn”, the work of several hands in which the heroine is drawn in poetically soft and tender diction. Shârîn, the beloved of Persian ruler Khusrav Par-wîz, is the personification of the best of woman that can be as imagined by Muslim men. Her modesty and fidelity, reasonableness and patience, her beauty, gentleness and weakest man lack her image irresistibly attractive to man, and we can easily feel this when looking at the splendid miniatures in medieval manuscripts. She is indeed “La Belle Dame” of the Muslim East, and no painter could help expressing a truly male admiration of her female nature.

The episode of Shârîn’s bathing in the river when Khusrav occasionally sees (fig. 8) her half nude sitting at the bank and combing her long black hair became obligatory for every illustrator of the poem.

Another love story, the unfortunate passion of Majnun and Layla is frequently retold by Muslim poets and represents the absolute ideal of devotion and worship. Dating back to the pre-Muslim era, the story of Majnun and Layla, who have been in love with each other since their childhood, has a powerful emotional impact. Unable to ally himself with his beloved, Majnun loses his mind (hence the character “Majnun” that translates from Arabic as “insane”). One of the miniatures depicts the scantily clad miserable young man coming to his beloved who reaches her arms to him (fig. 9). Though the image of Layla in this case is subsidiary and subordinate to the main subject it is still dramatically expressive embodying gentle compassionate love.

These three images of women: the passionate sinner Zulaikha, the perfect Shârîn and the gentle Layla, are the three melodic themes in the symphony of love of Muslim medieval poetry and miniature painting. Many generations of men and women at Muslim East have been fostered admiring the images of Middle Age poetry. Though the images of the beauties from miniatures have as little in common with an average Eastern woman appearance as modern top-models have with an average European woman, the most important is the fact that modern men living in Saint-Petersburg, Taipike, London or Cairo keep dreaming of a passionate, faithful and gentle woman. And today as well as centuries ago one regards his beloved “through the eyes of a prince”, taking no notice of her lookalike appearance or wrinkles on the dear face, and sees his princess.

Western culture still has not completed its true discovery of the cultural accomplishments of Muslim civilization. These achievements will become even more attractive as it is realized that they compose one of the forgotten foundations of European culture. Fashion collections influenced
by traditional Muslim motives are already appearing on the walls of important European fashion houses and this is only one confirmation of the growing interest in the charming and delightful world of Muslim culture.

And again:

"Existence is only real when it appears in plastically expressive form, when it possesses style" [4].

wrote Boris Paramonov, discussing the views of Russian philosophers Konstantin Loontev and Alexei Losev. From this point of view, Muslim book miniatures are a triumph of style, expressing the very essence of being, the essence of an era when art in its highest manifestations was undoubtedly as elitist as the European knightly (courtly) romance.

The avant-garde is also a triumph of style, which postulates on the one hand the destruction of the foundations of the "old aesthetic", which perished in the fire of social explosions of the beginning of the 20th century, and on the other hand a return to archetypes, to folk culture. This last aspect was wonderfully demonstrated by the exhibition project "The Avant-garde and its Russian Sources" (State Russian Museum, 1993).

Traditional Central Asia silks, whose colours and patterns are as archetypical as myths themselves are archetypal", make up the basis of the style of Central Asia. They express the very essence of existence, create its visible image, and provide existence with a "plastically expressive form". The Russian artists who saw Central Asian silks both in Russia, and above all on the streets of Central Asian cities, could not help but feel this. The archetype which the avant-garde strives towards appeared here in its original, unclouded forms.

"I have studied everything that the West can give for now [...] Now I shake the dust from my feet and leave the West [...] My path is to the original source of all arts, to the East" [5].

wrote Natalya Gontcharova. In this way, Central Asian silks — "harmangi" — "seven coloured" were one of the sources of the Russian avant-garde.

Silk is inseparable form women, from the idea of exquisite womanly beauty, eastern luxury, and the aromas of love. In the exhibition project "Oriental Dreams: Russian Avant-Garde and Silks of Bakhara", the image of the woman dominates, the living image of the eastern woman and the seductive image of woman from "dreams of the East". Both these images, which are so different, are united by silk. Its colours and patterns refer to ancient mythological systems, to vitality and joy, to ideas of fertility and continuation of life, which are inseparable from women.

Women "are silver scarves on which we put golden apples" [6]. They are scarves of silk, silver silk.

Notes:

Illustrations:

Front cover:

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Inside the text:
Fig. 1. Ugenday-Ghitn and His Wife Tavake, miniature to "Jami' al-tawrith" ("The Collected Annals") by Fadl Allah Rajzil al-Din b. 'Isa-ai al-Dawla. Miniature size 5.4–9.8 cm. Sinarang paper, mid of

Fig. 2. Bahravi with a Tatar Beauty in the Pink Palace on Tuesday, miniature to “Khamseh” (“Quintet”) by Amir Khusraw Dihlawi. Miniature size 12x8 cm. Shiraz, mid of the 14th century. Taghkent Birlani Institute of Oriental Studies, shelf mark 3317, fol. 318 v. Courtesy of the Institute.

Fig. 3. Bahravi (?) with a Beauty, miniature to “Khamseh” (“Quintet”) by Nizami Ganjawi. Miniature size 18x12.5 cm. Dated by 1623—24. Taghkent Birlani Institute of Oriental Studies, shelf mark 3481, fol. 121 v. Courtesy of the Institute.

Fig. 4. Pictorial Skafeh and an Old Woman, miniature to “Khamseh” (“Quintet”) by Amir Khusraw Dihlawi. Miniature size 12x8 cm. Shiraz, mid of the 14th century. Taghkent Birlani Institute of Oriental Studies, shelf mark 3317, fol. 243 r. Courtesy of the Institute.

Fig. 5. Layli and Majnun at School, miniature to “Khamseh” (“Quintet”) by Amir Khusraw Dihlawi. Miniature size 8.5x13 cm. Shiraz, mid of the 14th century. Ibid., fol. 12 v. Courtesy of the Institute.

Fig. 6. Your Birthmark. Illustration to the verses “Your birthmark beautifies your face even more. Though in the word jhart (“birthmark”) only one dot is used”, miniature to “Nawzâr al-Nâbiyâ” (“The Rarity of Perfection”) by Amir Nizam al-Din’ All ‘Sâ’î Nawzât. Miniature size 10.5x12 cm. Harrân, last quarter of the 15th century. Taghkent Birlani Institute of Oriental Studies, shelf mark 1995, fol. 97 v. Courtesy of the Institute.


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