These manuscripts are neither as large as those of the Keshidiya school nor as small as the small Shāhnāma (the written surface is typically about thirty centimeters high). The illustrations are vibrant, energetic, and even slapdash [13]. The paint is often unevenly applied and reveals the underdrawing. The palette is broad, but red and ochre backgrounds are common. The landscape is imaginatively depicted, but is strictly linear and uses a limited range of conventions, the most distinctive being pointed, cone-shaped hills. Like metalwork, this school seems to have flourished under Ijthad economic prosperity, but its origins can be traced as far back as 1300–10, the date of a tiny Kādī and Dīvān manuscript in the British Library, and beyond that to the older Mesopotamian style of the thirteenth century.

Shiraz continued to be the center of commercial manuscript production in the second half of the fourteenth century under the Muzaffarid dynasty, which controlled most of southwest Iran. The distinctive new style is first evident in a Shāhnāma copied there in 1321. The wasp-waisted figures with egg-shaped heads set on long necks are the most distinctive feature of the twelve illustrations in the manuscript. Men wear thin moustaches and fringed beards. Landscapes are uniformly simple, with high horizons, large rounded hills outlined with spongy rocks, and semicircles. An image such as Bahram Gur Killing the Dragon [44] shows how stylized paintings have become: the dragon no longer breathes fire and smoke, but is coiled in carefully arranged arabesque curls. Color, as in the blue dragon with gold scales, is used for its formal qualities rather than for representation. As with contemporary painting at the Jalayirid court, the interest in pictorial space has been abandoned, and the picture plane has become a flat backdrop against which dolls are posed. This style continued to the end of the century, to judge from another illustrated copy of the Shāhnāma dated 1350–51, and was the basis for illustrated manuscripts produced in Shiraz in the early fifteenth century.


42. Bahram Gur in the Peacock’s House from the Second Small Shāhnāma, south-west Iran, 1st half of the fourteenth century, Brooklyn Museum, 31.94.61.

43. Bahram Fighting a Dragon from Firdawsi, Shāhnāma, Shiraz, 1353, 29 × 18.2 cm, St. Petersburg, State Pushkin State Public Library, MS. Dyn. 539, f. 459.

mystic’s search for God, best exemplified in Farid al-Din ‘Attar’s poem Manāqī al-tayr (“Language of the birds”), in which thirty birds, symbolizing mankind, search for the Divine through seven valleys only to discover it in themselves.23 Timur reportedly dragged ‘Abd al-Hayy from Baghdad to his capital in Samarqand, and it is easy to see how this refined and lyrical style of the Jalayirids became the foundation for the classical style of Persian painting that developed under the Timurids (see Chapter 5).

The continuous tradition of court patronage of large-format luxury manuscripts for royal libraries was accompanied by commercial production for the marketplace. In general these manuscripts are smaller, less ambitious, and less polished in execution than the royal manuscripts. A group of three dispersed manuscripts of the Shāhnāma lack dedications, colophons, or dates, but can be grouped together on stylistic grounds. All are small in format (the written surface on the largest measures 24.5 by 17.5 cm), and each has approximately three hundred folios, with six columns of text and about thirty lines to the page. Each includes more than one hundred paintings carefully executed in bright, thickly applied colors and lavish amounts of gold for background and secondary motifs. Patterned designs crowd the compositions, and the small, vivacious figures seem to burst from the picture frame. A representation of Bahram Gur Kills the Dragon [41] shows the hero confronting his foe head-on, with none of the compositional complexity and sophisticated use of landscape found in the representation of the same subject from the Great Mongol Shāhnāma [36]. The figures in the depiction of Bahram Gur in the Peacock’s House [42] are arranged in a simple tripartite composition divided by pillars, an archaic arrangement reminiscent of the interior scenes of the Keshidiya school [33]. The small figures and low or non-existent horizons indicate a date in the first half of the fourteenth century, but the place of production is still a matter of lively debate, with attributions ranging from Baghdad to India. None of these attributions has been universally accepted, but the good quality of the pigments, extensive use of gold, meticulous painting, and awareness of such stylistic innovations of the court school as stepped compositions used to emphasize the action point to Tabriz in the 1330s and 1340s. The close similarity between two of the three manuscripts suggests that they were not individual commissions but commercial products made in expectation of sale to a rich merchant or minor couturier.

South-western Iran, particularly the city of Shiraz, was another center for illustrated manuscripts in a distinctive regional style. Production flourished in the 1320s and 1340s under the Muzaffarid governors, to judge from a group of manuscripts, including three dated copies of the Shāhnāma.35
CHAPTER 4

Architecture in Iran and Central Asia under the Timurids and their Contemporaries

By the 15th century, the last remnants of the Ilkhansid empire in Iran had disappeared, but a new power emerged in Central Asia which revitalized the power of the descendants of Chingiz Khan over much of Eurasia. Timur, known to the West as Tamerlane, was a nomadic chieftain who transformed his tribal organization into a world empire. The capital cities of the Timurid dynasty in Central Asia and Afghanistan – Shahr-i Sabz, Samarkand, Bukhara, and Herat – were centers of art and culture intended to display the greatness of Timurid power. The finest craftsmen of the day were recruited, often forcibly, from east and west to realize Timurid aspirations. Much of this splendor has not survived, as earthquakes, invasions, and neglect have all taken their toll. The architecture of this period falls neatly into four phases: building under Timur (r. 1370–1405); that of his son Shahrukh (r. 1405–47) and his wife Gauhar Shad; that of the sultan Husayn Bayqara (r. 1470–1506) and his confidant, the bureaucrat Al-Shir Shabani; and that of the Timurids’ Turkoman rivals in western Iran, the Qaraqoyunlu (Black Sheep; 1380–1468) and the Uygurs (White Sheep; 1378–1508).

Timur’s campaigns were decisive: he quickly conquered Iran, Anatolia, and Mesopotamia. His attack on Anatolia forced the Ottomans to postpone their conquest of Byzantium. Baghdad, which had remained the Mongols’ winter capital, received the coup de grace and never recovered its former glory. Timur moved east into India and saw the wonders of the Delhi sultanate, but just as he was about to set off again, he decided to complete his dream of restoring the empire of his predecessor Genghis Khan, and he died unexpectedly. His new capitals and commissions reflected his world-conquering aspirations, and the colossal scale and profusion of expensive materials, especially for decoration, attest to his unlimited access to resources which he marshaled to create an impression of dominance and wealth.

Timur’s first major architectural undertaking was to transform his birthplace, Kish, into his capital. He named it Shah-i Sabz (“the green city”) to celebrate the verdant meadows in the midst of the barren steppe south of Samarkand on the other side of the Zarafshan mountains. Only the shuttered portal remains from his palace, called Aqsaray (White Palace; 1379–95; 43). It consists of a mammoth twenty-two-meter-wide iwan flanked by bastions. Built of brick, it was embellished with the finest tile decoration: large surfaces are covered with brick mosaic, while smaller ones are jeweled with elaborate multicolored tile panels signed by Muhammad Yusuf from Tabriz. They are done in the cuerda seca technique, in which glazes of different colors were combined on a single tile within areas outlined by a greyish substance which prevented the liquid colors from running together during firing and then burned away.

Similarly, Timur used the prodigious booty he gained by defeating the Golden Horde to construct a massive tomb over the grave of the Sufi shaykh Ahmad Yasavi (d. 1166). Yasavi, now Turkistan City in Kazakhstan, was an oasis on the trade route north of Tashkent. A disciple of the great Bukhara shaykh Yusuf Hamadani, Ahmad founded the Yasavi order, and after his death his tomb became a focus of pilgrimage for the Turks of Central Asia and the Volga. From afar, the silhouette of the massive domes and vaults [46] surfaces above the flat steppe like a whale rising from the sea. A rectangular structure measuring 65.5 by 40.5 meters, its exterior walls are decorated with brick mosaics.

On the south a huge vaulted iwan soars some 37.5 meters and beckons the visitor to enter. Elaborately inlaid and carved wooden doors [72] lead into a square room covered by a muqarnas dome as high as the entrance iwan [47]. The room must have been for Sufi gatherings, because it contained an elephantine bronze basin [73], once used to serve porridge to pilgrims on Ashura, the commemoration of the martyrdom of Husayn. The central area leads towards the tomb itself, which projects from the building’s rear wall and is covered by a stunning muqarnas vault [48], protected by a blue-tiled onion-shaped dome. Subsidiary service and residential rooms, including a mosque, kitchen, bath, library, and meditation room, occupy the lateral spaces of the building. Often rectangular or irregular in plan, these rooms are covered by some of the most inventive vaults in early Timurid architecture. Several are especially noteworthy for their transverse arches that support stilted vaults, for transverse vaulting had been used earlier in buildings in Central Iran (see Chapter 2). The parapet at the shrine of Ahmad Yasavi is inscribed “the work of Haji Hasan… Shirazi,” and a tile on the drum of the tomb chamber is signed by Shams. [8] Abd al-Vahhab Shirazi, the builder. The references to Shiraz, a city in south-western Iran where few monuments from the period have survived, suggests that Shirazi architects abducted by Timur introduced advanced vaulting techniques to Central Asia. Once resident in Central Asia, these builders would have passed on their knowledge and techniques to others, and transverse vaulting became a standard feature in the repertoire of later Timurid architecture. Several other architects in the Timurid period bear the epithet Shirazi (see below), but it may have come to identify a group of master architects in Central Asia who traced their lineage back to émigrés from Shiraz rather than the émigrés themselves.

Another measure of the increased standardization and professionalism in Timurid architecture is the use of standard units to generate plans. Scholars have hypothesized that the shrine of Ahmad Yasavi was laid out on a grid using a cubit
(pair) of 66.6 centimeters. The first room to be designed must have been the central hall, and this thirty-by-square and its diagonal provided the scale for all the surrounding spaces. The standardization of measurements seems to have coincided with the development of systems of architectural notation, which facilitated the use of plans. The architect used muqarnas vaults to mark significant spaces in the complex: a multi-tiered muqarnas vault covers the central meeting space; even more elaborate ones cover the tomb and mosque. Muqarnas vaults had long been used to cover important spaces, such as the tomb of 'Abd al-Samad at Natanz [11], but the shrine of Ahmad Yasavi is one of the first examples on an enormous scale. Their use in early Timurid architecture represents the culmination of the Iranian tradition in which muqarnas elements are assembled to form a vault; later they would be used as subsidiary elements within squinch-net vaults, found on a smaller scale in the Turkestan shrine.

Shahr-i Sāhib soon became too remote a capital for the aspirations of the world-conquering Timur, and he decided to move to Samarkand. Rey Gonzales de Clavijo, ambassador from the court of Henry III of Castile and Leon, visited Timur's capital in 1404 and glowingly described its splendor. Huge tent pavilions made of bejeweled golden cloth and tiled multistoried kiosks stood amidst verdant gardens watered by rivulets. In 1399 Timur had ordered a new congregational mosque whose size and magnificence were appropriately immense for his capital [49]. Completed in 1404, the mosque, commonly called the Mosque of Bibi
'Abbas, a cousin of the Prophet Muhammad, who was purportedly martyred on the site in 677. Already by the eleventh century a sizable mausoleum and madrasa had marked an east-west axis, but the string of some thirty mausoleums running along a north-south street was substantially the work of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries [51]. The earliest mausoleums were built nearest Qutb’s tomb at the top of the hill, while later ones cascaded down it. Between 1370 and 1405 twenty mausoleums were erected, and in 1434–5 Ulughbeg connected the ensemble to the city with a monumental gateway. The typical building [52] is a small domed square. The side facing the street has an elaborate portal, but the other sides are left plain. Apart from the tiled cenotaph in the center, interiors were generally painted, although some had tile revetments. Elaborate inscription bands framing the portals give the names and dates of the deceased. The techniques of tile decoration reflect the latest fashions available to these wealthy patrons: the earliest ones were done in cuerda seca, but this technique eventually gave way to tile mosaic in an increased number of colors.

Timur himself was buried elsewhere. He had planned to be buried in his birthplace, Shahr-i Saba, but after his unexpected death in 1405, he was interred in the building now called the Gur-i Mir (Tomb of the Amir) within the city of Samarqand itself [53]. It was built before 1401 as a madrasa, and when Timur’s grandson and heir-presumptive Muhammad Sultan died in 1432, he was temporarily buried there. When Timur returned to Samarqand in 1424, he ordered the present tomb built. After his death his son Shahrubu had buried him there, and his grandson Ulughbeg made it the dynastic mausoleum of the Timurids. The plan of the original complex [54] has been reconstructed as a courtyard with a madrasa on the east and a khanqah on the west. The most significant remains, however, are the tomb and its adjacent structure on the south. On the exterior, the brilliantly blue, bulbous, and ribbed dome over the tomb glitters in the light and typifies the Timurid profile: the swelling silhouette is gathered into the wide band of the drum at the base by several courses of muqarnas. On the interior, however, a hemispheric dome springs from the base of the drum. The two shells are connected by invisible vertical flanges which rest on the inner dome and support the fantastic corbeled outer profile. This ingenious system satisfied the need for high visibility and exterior monumentality on the one hand and a harmonious interior space on the other. The fact that the dome has survived in a land of earthquakes testifies to the technical abilities of Timur’s architects.

A large madrasa stood opposite the entrance to the mosque, but all that remains of it is the domed tomb of Bibi Khanum. Most female members of Timur’s family, however, were buried in the necropolis on the hill outside the walls of Samarqand [55]. Known as the Shah-i-Zinda (The Living King), the cemetery arose around the grave of Qutb b.
53. Samarkand, Gur-i Mir, ca. 1400-4

54. Samarkand, Gur-i Mir, plan and section. A) Mausoleum; B) Karanagh; 
C) Entrance to court; D) Mausoleum; E) Gallery of Ulugh Beg; F) Later 
addition

55. Samarkand, Shah-i Zinda, tomb of Shams Baha. ca. 1385-6