Jewel-like colors, rich patterns, precise execution and virtuoso draughtsmanship characterize the best of Persian miniature painting: the perfect realization of an ideal world.

This fully illustrated book provides a concise account of Persian painting from about 1300 to 1900. Beginning with the materials and tools which enabled the artists to achieve their remarkable effects, Sheila Canby goes on to survey the stylistic development of Persian painting and the influences upon it of over six centuries of Iran’s turbulent history.

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Note Because of the general nature of this book, diacritical marks have been omitted from Persian words.

Unless otherwise stated, works illustrated are from the British Museum collections, and measurements include their marginal rulings but not their borders.

INTRODUCTION

Like a tiny world of eternally blooming flowers, sweet-smelling zephyrs, gentle people and effulgent light, Persian miniature paintings invite one to linger and delight in every detail. At their best, they do not just illustrate a story. Rather, they breathe life into the hills and animals, clouds and trees that populate the scene of the narrative. Later, in the seventeenth century, portraiture took precedence over book illustration and man came to dominate Persian painting. Yet Persian artists of every generation and every style retained their innate Persian understanding of design. By favouring two-dimensionality and compositional harmony, they presented things as they should be, not necessarily as they are. Within these parameters Persian artists over six centuries produced paintings unrivalled in their perfect realisation of an ideal world.

This book briefly documents the history of Persian painting from about 1300 to 1900. While texts mention wall-paintings that predated 1300, and Persian books were probably illustrated well before that time, the bulk of material available for study dates from the fourteenth century and later. The majority of works considered and reproduced here come from manuscripts and albums and are small in scale. However, in the nineteenth-century artists who in an earlier era might have illustrated manuscripts turned to painting lacquer objects and large works in oil. Even so, the same questions and criteria concerning style apply, especially since nineteenth-century artists often worked simultaneously in several media.

In order to appreciate a particular art form, one must try to understand how and why it was created. To answer the first question, Chapter 1 is devoted to the materials and methods of
Persian book illustration. Why such paintings were produced is more difficult to pinpoint. Following the birth of the modern Persian language in the ninth century and the versification of its most famous early example, the Shahnameh (Book of Kings), by the poet Ferdowsi in 1010, one must assume there would have been an increase in the number of Persian books written. The educated classes in Iran would of course have been literate in the Arabic script because it was the language of their religion, Islam. The Persian language uses the same script as Arabic with a slightly modified alphabet. Although people who wanted to read works such as the Shahnameh, the Persian national epic, would naturally have wished to obtain written copies, a different set of circumstances must have led to the manuscripts being illustrated.

First, seventh- to ninth-century frescoes found at Pianikent in Transoxiana reveal a tradition of wall painting, already established in the Sasanian period (third to seventh century). The frescoes included episodes from well-known narratives which were probably recited in the very rooms in which they appeared. Thus, the paintings would have served as a visual reference. This type of arrangement could have accustomed people to viewing pictures while hearing, or later reading, a story. Moreover, texts allude to the existence of illustrated manuscripts in Sasanian times. Secondly, a tradition of illustrated manuscripts had existed in the Arab world long before 1300. While many of these were books of a scientific nature, books of fables, histories and other fictional tales were also illustrated.

Although we shall probably never know who first decided to illustrate Persian manuscripts, we can be certain that the idea had taken hold by 1300. Most likely in the beginning illustrations simply supported the narrative and did not include many extraneous details. However, even in the only illustrated Persian manuscript from before the Mongol invasion, a Varqa and Gulshah, the decorative possibilities of plants and animals are explored. By the fourteenth century Persian artists were not only embellishing their paintings with extra figures and non-essential accoutrements, but were also, according to recent scholarship, depicting in royal manuscripts episodes that mirrored contemporary situations. Thus, the motivation for illustrating manuscripts quickly advanced beyond producing a simple analogue to the text. The patrons must soon have discovered what the artists already knew: that the experience and enjoyment of looking at a painting, even if it illustrates the written word on the page facing it, stand quite apart from the activity of reading the book. Unlike looking at wall-paintings or large-scale backdrops while someone recites a story,
the experience of perusing an illustrated Persian manuscript is an intimate one. Only one or maybe two people can comfortably read the pages and look at the pictures at once. When single-page paintings and drawings began to take precedence over manuscript illustrations, the artists preserved the small size so that they could be included in albums. That small-format paintings should have continued to be produced well into the twentieth century testifies to the success of Persian artists in establishing and maintaining an aesthetic that appealed so profoundly to their patrons.

To a Persian who owned an illustrated Shabnameh or an album of paintings and calligraphy, each picture would reverberate with meaning. The story depicted might be so familiar, so well-loved, that looking at it would resemble encountering an old friend. A portrait in an album might not only depict someone known to the owner, but also spark memories of times past, the day and circumstances in which the portrait was painted or drawn. Personal significance such as this can hardly be shared by non-Persian viewers in the twentieth century. Yet one can chart the stylistic development of Persian paintings and place them in their historical context. In so doing, one may perhaps approach an understanding of what Persian artists were seeking to communicate.

The study of Persian painting has been handicapped by a dearth of written sources of the type found in both China and Europe. Scholars strain to identify manuscripts mentioned by the few writers who wrote biographies of painters of their own and earlier eras. Until the late fifteenth century most miniatures were unsigned and unattributed, and after that time the identities of artists became public knowledge only gradually through the use of signatures. With the decline of the court patronage system and the growth of commerce in art, the names of artists functioned increasingly like brand names. This phenomenon led to a number of false signatures being placed on works in the style of well-known artists. Nonetheless, the great respect accorded to older masters also resulted in emulators copying or adapting their works. This repetition or adaptation of compositions is one of the many threads that connect early Persian painting with its later manifestations.

No matter what its period, a great Persian painting will exhibit a distinct sense of design and an understanding of how to arrange colours and forms on a flat surface to form a rhythmic whole. Despite the influence of European art from the seventeenth century onwards, Persian painters do not appear to have been convinced of the desirability of the illusionism that transforms two dimensions into three. Perhaps such visual tricks seemed innately dishonest. Finally, this art of highly developed surface values draws the viewer
in, but does not trespass into his world. Before the nineteenth century the figures in Persian painting almost never look directly at the viewer. Later, when they do, they keep their emotions to themselves. Yet, the most gifted Persian artists could capture their sitters’ characters without invading their wall of reserve.

The survey of Persian painting which follows focuses on works from various regions of Iran and outlines the historical events that led to changes in artistic style. Considering the number of times Iran was invaded, and the ethnic and linguistic diversity of the country, one should not be surprised to learn that influences from abroad often played an important role in stylistic development. Nonetheless, most Persian paintings retain distinctive qualities that set them apart from other styles: intense hues, hard and radiant as jewels, precise execution and virtuoso draughtsmanship, akin to the finest Arabic calligraphy. Yet, at the outset Persian painting did not possess these virtues fully formed. Only over time and through the mysterious alchemy of artists, their patrons, foreign influences and the migration of peoples did Persian painting achieve the glories for which it is known and cherished.

The strength of Persian culture and of the distinctive series of tastes that inform its arts shines through Persian painting of all periods. Whether or not one knows every story and the identity of every sitter depicted matters less than the realisation that Persian paintings, though small in size, express in visual form the ethos of their makers and their patrons.

— 1 —

MATERIALS AND TOOLS OF THE PERSIAN ARTIST

Before a Persian painter could begin to work, he needed certain basic materials – paper, paint and brushes. Depending on whether he operated independently or in a royal atelier (kitab khanah), the artist would have to buy his supplies himself or at least make his own brushes and mix his own paint. Each of his materials played an important role in the appearance and durability of the final product, a miniature painting intended for a manuscript or album (munaqqa). Fortunately, Arabic and Persian texts and modern scientific analysis enable us to determine how paper was produced, the sources of Persian painters’ brilliant pigments, and what type of hairs were preferred for their brushes.

Legend has it that paper was invented in China in 105 BC. Made of fibres of the mulberry tree, young bamboo shoots and rags, Chinese paper was produced and sold as far west as Turkestan. Nevertheless, the Persians and Arabs do not seem to have been aware of paper until after the Arab victory at Kangli, between Samarkand and Tashkent, in AD 751. As a result of instruction by a Chinese papermaker from Kangli, the first paper factory in the Islamic world was opened at Samarkand, followed by another in Baghdad in 794. The advantages of paper were not lost on the Abbasid caliph, Harun al-Rashid (r. 786–809) and his ministers. Previously, Arabs and Persians had used papyrus, produced exclusively in Egypt, and parchment for books and documents.
Although paper was not immediately adopted everywhere, its use increased steadily during the ninth and tenth centuries. By the year 1000 it was being produced in all the major Islamic cities from Samarkand in the east to Fez (Fas) and Valencia in the west. Samarkand maintained its reputation as the source of the finest paper long after the technology was available elsewhere.

Unlike Chinese paper, Persian paper was invariably made from fibres of flax in the form of linen rags, with hemp fibres added on occasion. After sorting and unravelling the rags and softening them by combing, the papermaker would steep them in lime water, knead the pulp, and bleach it in the sun. Having repeated the process several times, he would wash the pulp in clean water. Next he would pound it in a mortar or grind it between millstones until it was smooth. To form the pulp into paper, the craftsman would dip a mould, consisting of a wooden frame encasing a flexible cover, into a vat of liquid and fibres. As the mould was removed from the container the water would escape, leaving the fibres massed together like felt. In the commonly used laid mould, the cover was made of reeds or, later, grass strips woven together with horsehair. Faintly visible ‘laid lines’ left on the paper by the reed or grass strips, and ‘chain lines’ made by the horsehair stitching typify such hand-made paper. Once the paper was dry, it was sized by soaking it in albumen or a starchy solution to fill in and even out the surface.
Sarkhan Beg, the Chamberlain (detail of fig. 52), signed by Mīr Muḥammad, Sefīdān, Tabrīz, 1530-40. The facial features and turban, or barān, around which this figure’s turban is wrapped have been effaced, revealing the underpainting. Young men such as Sarkhan Beg, who served in the royal household, were chosen for their physical beauty and grace and were favourite subjects of court artists.

6 Case with brushes and palette. Painted and lacquered papier mâché, 17th century. This box follows the standard form of pincers in use in Iran from the 17th century onward. However, the inclusion of a separate layer containing artist’s pigments is highly unusual. Note the individual compartments of red, yellow, blue, black and green paints. Bahari Collection.

7 ‘Woman counting on her fingers’. Style of Ma’in Musavi, dated Wednesday 3rd of Ramazan 1084 AH/12 December 1674. 19 x 10.3 cm. Portraits of single figures eating, drinking or performing simple tasks in a landscape setting abounded in 17th-century Persian painting. The composition of this idealised portrait derives from a work by the master Riza-yi ‘Abbasi, completed in the 1620s.
After this, the papermaker or the calligrapher or artist would burnish individual sheets with a hard stone, glass or a shell, to strengthen the paper and prepare it for use.

Before applying paint to paper, the miniature painter would have made a preliminary sketch with a fine brush. For details or whole sections of a composition he might borrow from existing works with the help of a pounce. To obtain a pounce he would lay a thin sheet of paper or transparent deer skin over the subject to be copied and prick the outline with a needle. Then, having filled a cloth bag with charcoal powder, he would dust over the pounce, now positioned above his clean sheet of paper. The outline of the original detail was thus transferred to a new page. The artist would proceed with his preliminary drawing, filling in details of costume, physiognomy and landscape. Evidently, he did not paint directly onto the drawn surface. Rather, he lightly coated the surface of the page with sizing, through which his drawing was faintly visible. At this point he was ready to paint.

Persian paintings are rightly admired for the brilliance of their colours, precisely applied to even the most minute details. From a fairly small number of sources Persian painters mixed a dazzling range of hues. The pigments derive from three categories: minerals, inorganic or artificial materials, and organic, that is plant and animal sources. Among the minerals were gold, silver and lapis lazuli, the basis of ultramarine blue, which was pulverised from chunks of stone and washed repeatedly. Likewise, artists could achieve a bright vermillion from ground cinnabar, yellow from orpiment, and green from malachite. Expense and availability of materials and the cost of labour dictated the choice of pigment types, so that substitutes for lapis lazuli, malachite and cinnabar were not uncommon. Instead of lapis lazuli, indigo, a plant derivative, was used for dark blue, and azurite, a copper carbonate destructive to paper, produced a lighter blue. Far more common than malachite was verdigris, a highly corrosive green pigment obtained by dipping copper plates in vinegar and burying them in a pit for a month. Many alternatives to cinnabar red existed. Mercury and sulphur ground and heated together resulted in vermillion, and the bright orange-red of many Persian paintings came from red lead. Despite the dangers of lead-poisoning, red lead and its cousin white lead, made by treating lead with vinegar, enjoyed continuous use from classical times until at least the seventeenth century. Other reds include red-brown iron oxide, carmine from the kermes insect, and some unidentified plant dyes. The universal source of black was carbon, boiled with gall nuts to produce ink.

Unfortunately, some Persian pigments were destructive, and others tended to change colour or invade their neighbours. Silver, used to depict water, armour and highlights, often tarnishes and turns black. Verdigris eats away not only the paper on which it is painted but also the surrounding pages. White lead and red lead blacken when on their own and turn yellow orpiment to black when they touch it. Azurite also has a corrosive effect. With such dangers it is remarkable that so many Persian miniatures remain intact. Possibly the binding medium for Persian pigments contributed to their durability. Sixteenth-century textual sources seem to indicate that until the 1500s Persian artists used albumen, then glue to bind the particles of pigment. Certainly these binding media contributed to the hard sheen that characterises the surface of early Persian miniatures. Perhaps as the result of European influence, in the late sixteenth century Persian painters adopted gum arabic as a binding medium. While it had a longer shelf life than albumen, gum arabic resulted in thinner, less brilliant surfaces than those found in fourteenth-, fifteenth- and sixteenth-century paintings.

Once the Persian painter had prepared pigments and paper, his final task was to make his brushes. According to Sadiqi Beg, author of a late sixteenth-century treatise entitled The Canons of Painting, hairs from a squirrel’s tail were the most desirable for painters’ brushes. The long hairs of Persian cats also enjoyed favour with artists. Having separated the hairs according to size, the artist would choose only those of exactly the same length. He would tie them together and thread them through a quill, pulling them out at the narrow end. The brushes ranged from extremely fine to thick, enabling the artist to achieve seamless precision in his paintings and a calligraphic, virtuoso line in his drawings.

While individual artists, occasionally with the help of an assistant, designed and executed the actual illustrations in Persian manuscripts, the complete production of an illustrated book could involve many people, all of whom would be employed within the library or book-making atelier of a major, often royal patron. The director of the project would decide which episodes of the narrative should be illustrated. If the borders were to be flecked with gold, specialist gold-sprinklers would perform their task while the paper was still wet. Then, once the sheets were burnished, the scribe would copy the text, leaving space for paintings and illuminations as instructed by the director. The painter or painters would then proceed, followed by the illuminators and gilders, whose intricate decoration adorned the frontispiece, end-page and chapter-headings. These artists were also responsible for ruling and framing the lines that demarcated text from paintings and separated lines of poetry.
8 Bookbinding. Safavid, Tabriz, c. 1540. Lacquer on leather, inner sides, each 40 x 35 cm. Unrestrained by the need to illustrate a narrative, the artist of this princely hunt has depicted hunters armed with bows and arrows, swords, falcons and shotguns successfully felling a smorgasbord of prey—lions, bears, cheetahs, deer, rabbits and birds. See also fig. 7 for one of the outer sides.
Once every aspect of the book was complete, it was sewn into a binding. The earliest Islamic bindings consisted of leather covers with stamped and tooled geometric and vegetal ornament and a triangular flap attached to the end cover. In the early fifteenth century Persian bookbinders adopted a new design featuring an oval central medallion with pendants and corner pieces. During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries the decorative techniques of bookbinders became increasingly complex. Blind tooling on the exterior and a sumptuous combination of cut-out leather, coloured paper and gilding on the interior covers, or doublures, combined to produce highly ornate bookcovers, worthy of the richly coloured, intricately composed miniatures and illuminations to be found within. In the sixteenth century bookbinders added folio-sized scenes of animals and occasionally people in landscape settings to the existing repertoire of vegetal and geometric designs. Moreover, the use of lacquered bindings, which originated in fifteenth-century Herat, increased markedly in the sixteenth century. Safavid lacquer bindings in some cases usurp the imagery of double-page frontispieces by presenting a prince and his entourage feasting or enjoying entertainments. Both lacquer and leather bindings continued to be made in the ensuing centuries. However, by the nineteenth century lacquer bindings had won the day. The decorative repertoire now included birds and flowers, scenes borrowed from European paintings, and portraits of historical personages such as the Qajar ruler Fath 'Ali Shah hunting. As in previous eras, the finest bindings accompanied the most expensively produced manuscripts, which were mainly royal commissions.

Although many of the finest Persian miniatures sprang from the hands and minds of artists working for royal patrons, provincial centres, such as Shiraz, were responsible for large numbers of commercially produced illustrated manuscripts. The range in quality of such non-royal works underscores the importance of the materials, especially pigments, used to produce them. Technically, the best Shiraz paintings meet the standards of Persian court art,
but most often the surfaces of provincial paintings lack its resonance and richness. When the kings and princes of Iran wished to patronise the visual arts, they could and did command the most talented artists and craftsmen, who in turn were provisioned with the finest paper, most brilliant pigments and subtlest brushes imaginable.

The Ilkhanids

The Mongol invasions in the thirteenth century changed life in Iran radically and permanently. Of the two waves of invasions, the first, led by Chinghiz Khan (Genghiz Khan) in the 1220s, destroyed lives and property in north-eastern Iran on a grand scale. The second, under Hulegu Khan in the 1250s, completed the conquest of Iran and advanced as far as Palestine, where the Mongols were finally defeated by the Mamluks of Egypt at 'Ayn Jalut in 1260. Having sacked Baghdad and executed the 'Abbasid caliph, Hulegu consolidated his control over Iraq, Iran and much of Anatolia. With his capital at Maragha in north-western Iran, he founded the Ilkhanid kingdom, nominally subject to the Great Khan, Qubilai, ruler of China and Mongolia.

Curiously, despite the extensive physical destruction wrought by the invasions and despite the succession of non-Muslim Mongol rulers, the administrative structure of Iran remained largely unchanged. Ministers and clerics continued to be drawn from the native population. However, their job security (and lives) depended on their willingness to carry out the policies of the Mongols, including several excessively burdensome forms of taxation. By 1295, when Ghazan Khan became Ilkhan, the Iranian economy was in a state of collapse.

Having converted to Islam before becoming Ilkhan, Ghazan