A Glorious Synthesis

1500–1576

Early Safavid Rulers

As the thirty-six-year reign of Sultan Husayn came to an end upon his death in 1506, new forces were on the rise to the east and to the west of the Timurid domain in Khurasan. From beyond the river Jaxartes the Uzbeks, led by Muhammad Shaybani Khan, advanced steadily toward Herat, taking it in 1507, within months of Sultan Husayn’s demise. Meanwhile, in Gilan, Isma’il, the barely adolescent grandson of the Aqquyunlu Uzun Hasan, had rallied a following of Qizilbash (literally “red-head”), so-called for their distinctive red țaj or turban and baton headgear. Their first mission was to avenge the murder of Isma’il’s father at the hands of an Aqquyunlu-Shirvanshah alliance. Reared by a Shi’ite prince in the Gilan region, Isma’il also traced his ancestry to Shaykh Safi al-Din, the founder of a Sufi order at Ardabil which had become wealthy and powerful by the mid-fifteenth century. Thus, Isma’il had a ready following in the adherents to Shaykh Safi’s sect, the Safavids. His charismatic personality and ecstatic Shi’ite religious beliefs, in which he enjoyed semi-divine status, appear to have provided the messianic edge necessary for him and his Qizilbash followers to defeat the Aqquyunlu in 1502 at Sharur in Azarbaijan. Seemingly intent on controlling all the former Turkman lands, Isma’il had taken Western Persia and Eastern Anatolia by 1508, the year in which he added Baghdad and Khuzistan to his conquests.

Fearing the vigour of the Uzbek advance on Khurasan, Isma’il next turned his attentions eastward. In 1510 he defeated and killed Muhammad Shaybani Khan in a battle near Merv. Rather than continue into Transoxiana, Isma’il’s forces stopped at the river Oxus, and the Safavids became masters and heirs of the former Timurid domain of Khurasan. Despite a defeat at the hands of the Uzbeks in 1512, the Safavids maintained fairly stable control of Khurasan for the rest of Shah Isma’il’s reign. The same could not be said of his western borders.

In 1512 the Qizilbash of Ottoman Anatolia revolted against the Turkish Sultan Bayezid with help from the Safavids. The Sultan’s son and successor, Selim, decided both to suppress the revolt and to deal with the Safavids. With a large, well-equipped army he marched across Anatolia and into Azarbaijan, where he finally confronted Isma’il in battle at Chaldiran near Tabriz in 1514. Not only did the Ottomans outnumber the Safavids, but they enjoyed the decisive advantage of technological superiority: they had guns. The implications of the ensuing rout were far-reaching for the Safavids. Eastern Anatolia passed permanently into Ottoman hands, causing an eastward shift of the Safavid realm. The once invincible Isma’il never again fought in battle, though he still maintained his support amongst the Qizilbash. Even for the arts of the book, Chaldiran and the ensuing sack of Tabriz had serious results, for the Ottomans carried off all kinds of loot including manuscripts and artists.

From the Safavid point of view, at least one positive event occurred in 1514: the birth of Isma’il’s son and heir, the future Shah Tahmasp. Sent at the age of two as nominal governor of Herat, Tahmasp was brought up there in the refined, intellectual environment established under Sultan Husayn Bayqara. The artist Bihzad was still working there, and may himself have been responsible for the young prince’s artistic training. Certainly from an early age Tahmasp showed an intense interest in painting and calligraphy, predilections which led to the next efflorescence of Persian painting.

As one would expect, Shah Isma’il’s taste in painting ran to the Turkman idiom prevalent at the court of Ya’qub Beg and represented by the illustrations to the Khamsa of Nizami owned by successive fifteenth-century rulers. Isma’il himself had eleven miniatures added to the manuscript. These are differentiated from the late Turkman paintings in the manuscript only by the presence of the high Safavid țaj. The vibrancy of pose, colour and composition continued in the Safavid period, and, if anything, became more visionary, as if to mirror the highly energised spirituality of Shah Isma’il’s politico-religious beliefs.
In 1522 Tahmasp moved from Herat to Tabriz, and it was most likely before this date that Shah Isma‘il commissioned an illustrated \textit{Shahnameh} to be produced in his atelier. Although the chain of events is uncertain, it seems that some of the miniatures were complete by 1522. However, the project was unfinished at the time of Shah Isma‘il’s death in 1527 and was subsequently transferred to the patronage of Shah Tahmasp. Since Tahmasp was only 10 years old at the time of his accession, the political affairs of the Safavid state were controlled by various Qizilbash atabegs and amirs, leaving the young Shah plenty of time to pursue his aesthetic interests. During the twenty-odd years from 1525 until the late 1550s in which the royal \textit{Shahnameh} was produced, early Safavid painting was born and reached maturity.

A painting of ‘Rustam sleeping while Rakhsh fights the lion’ was probably intended for Shah Isma‘il’s unfinished \textit{Shahnameh}. The phantasmagoric vegetation and rocks, all intensely coloured, and the rhythmic, energetic complexity of the composition characterise the metropolitan Turkman style at its best. In contrast to the somnolent Rustam, the rocky outcrops teem with simian, human and feline faces. A snake feeds upon a bird’s young, his sinuous form echoed by writhing branches and the lion’s switching tail. As in earlier Turkman painting, spatial relationships matter far less than the expression of emotion. In this painting, with the good horse Rakhsh overcoming the evil lion, the forces of nature rule supreme. Man, in the person of the hero Rustam on his carpet, all angles and straight lines, is in marked contrast to the swaying, vibrating flora and fauna.

To the young Tahmasp, schooled in the sober, rational milieu of Herat, the painting of Turkman Tabriz must have seemed wild and perhaps discomforting. Assuming that Bihzad and other younger artists accompanied Tahmasp from Herat to Tabriz, one would necessarily expect a change of direction in the style of Safavid painting. The fact that ‘Rustam sleeping’, which has been attributed to Sultan Muhammad, one of the leading court painters of Shahs Isma‘il and Tahmasp, was not eventually included in Shah Tahmasp’s \textit{Shahnameh} must indicate that it did not suit the young Shah’s taste. Yet, with consummate skill Sultan Muhammad adapted his style to the Bihzadian mode. His early illustrations to the \textit{Shahnameh} combine the joyous palette, humour and animism of Turkman painting with the structure and finesse of the Herat style. By about 1530 the two strains were fully synthesised in his work. Man and nature were now in balance, though more than his contemporaries Sultan Muhammad reflected the mood and meaning of the narrative in rocks, plants and skies.
49 'Rustam sleeping while Raksh fights the lion', a style of Sultan Muhammad, from a Shahnameh of Ferdowsi. Safavid, Tabriz, c.1522-23. 31.6 x 20.8 cm. To rescue Shah Kay Kavus from captivity, Rustam and his horse Raksh chose a direct but perilous route. Overcome by fatigue, Rustam lay down in a pasture that was actually a lion's lair. As the hero slept, the lion returned and attacked Raksh, who ultimately trampled him to death.

50 Opposite: 'Sultan Sanjar and the old woman', from a Khamsah of Nizami. attributed to Sultan Muhammad. Safavid, Tabriz, 1539-43. Page 36.5 x 25.7 cm. An old woman complained to the Seljuk ruler Sultan Sanjar (r. 1179-1192) that she had been robbed by one of his soldiers. The sultan replied that her grievance was trivial compared with the problems of his latest military campaign. She responded, 'What use is the conquest of foreign armies when you cannot make your own behave?'. British Library.
An undertaking as ambitious as Shah Tahmasp’s *Shahnameh* with its 258 illustrations and 380 folios required a sizeable staff of painters, illuminators, calligraphers, gilders, binders and helpers. All the leading artists of the day were involved in the manuscript, and in some cases two generations from one family contributed paintings to it. When the project was complete some of the artists were engaged to work on other royal commissions, whereas others were employed by members of the royal family other than the Shah himself.

By 1539, the date of the Shah’s next major manuscript, much had changed in Iran. Tahmasp had come of age, repelling five Uzbek invasions between 1524 and 1553. Qizilbash factionalism also added to the general instability of the Shah’s regime until 1533, when he overthrew his Qizilbash regent and had him executed. A greater threat to the Safavids, an Ottoman invasion, materialised in 1555 and resulted in the loss of Mesopotamia and Baghdad. Fortunately, Tahmasp devised a strategy which would serve him well in future Ottoman invasions. Rather than engage the Ottomans in battle, as his father had done with such disastrous results, he followed a scorched earth policy with the aim of overstretching the Ottoman lines of supply so that they would eventually be forced to retreat, allowing the Iranians to reclaim their territory.

In keeping with the new maturity of the Shah, the illustrations to his 1539–43 *Khamsah* of Nizami exhibit a uniformity of style and unity of vision that define the classical moment of this school. Sultan Muhammad’s paintings in this manuscript exhibit subtle modifications of the style of his *Shahnameh* illustrations. While continuing to render rocks, trees and sky in a dramatic fashion, he slightly enlarged the scale and reduced the number of his figures. Their poses are more self-contained, though no less expressive than those of their predecessors. In keeping with the style of the day, the horses and figures – with the exception of the old woman – in the example illustrated are tall and slender but not mannered.

Although Shah Tahmasp’s artists were primarily involved with his grand manuscript projects in the 1530s and early 1540s, they also painted single-page works on occasion. One such painting, a portrait of Sarkhan Beg Safrachi (the table-layer), is signed by or ascribed to Mir Musavvir, mentioned in the historical sources as one of the directors of Shah Tahmasp’s *kitab khaneh*. Despite the paint loss on the figure’s face, Mir Musavvir’s meticulous attention to detail is amply evident in the rendering of the striped turban and filigree belt ornaments. In keeping with the Persian canon for portraiture, the artist has made no attempt to define the form of Sarkhan Beg’s features through modelling. Instead the physique, clothes, pose and facial expression must have served to identify him. The inscription, perhaps a later addition, would have been superfluous at the time the portrait was painted.

Another portrait, ‘A prince and a page’, provides an interesting point of comparison with that of Sarkhan Beg. Attributed to Mir Sayyid ‘Ali, son of Mir Musavvir, this painting was executed about 1540, a decade later than ‘Sarkhan Beg’. Like his father, Mir Sayyid ‘Ali was a master of intricate detail, lovingly depicting every fold and stripe of the prince’s turban. Moreover, the prince’s pose is identical to that of Sarkhan Beg. Only the subtext of details differentiate the later from the earlier work. In Mir Sayyid ‘Ali’s painting the figure of the prince is slender than that of Sarkhan Beg, though originally his physique was stockier and the artist repainted it. The prince’s robe is adorned with large gold lotuses instead of small repeated circles. The treatment of rocks in Mir Sayyid ‘Ali’s painting also resembles that in one of the illustrations he contributed to Shah Tahmasp’s *Shahnameh*. Even if they were not abraded, the faces would appear idealised to modern eyes, but, like that in the earlier work, they must have been recognisable to contemporaries.

One historical event bears out the supposition that the work of both Mir Musavvir and Mir Sayyid ‘Ali was prized above all for its faithfulness to material reality. In 1544 the Mughal emperor Humayun sought refuge at the Safavid court at Tabriz. When it came time for him to return to India, he invited Mir Musavvir to join his entourage. Before Mir Musavvir could depart, Mir Sayyid ‘Ali had also taken advantage of the offer, leaving his father to follow. When these two artists and several others from Shah Tahmasp’s atelier ultimately reached Delhi, their accurate, careful mode of painting contributed enormously to the new school of Mughal painting, a more naturalistic mode in which Safavid, Bukharian, Hindu and Muslim Indian styles were synthesised.

Had Humayun arrived in Iran ten years earlier, Shah Tahmasp would probably not so willingly have released two of his best artists. However, by the mid-1540s his interest in painting had waned, and he had become an increasingly devout Muslim. Having sworn off intoxicants in the mid-1530s, the Shah had also become disenchanted with painting and calligraphy by the mid-1540s. Tahmasp’s distaste had turned to disgust by 1556, the year of his Edict of Sincere Repentance, in which he outlawed the secular arts throughout his lands. Since the Shah had repulsed yet another Ottoman assault in 1534 and had signed the Treaty of Amasya with the Ottomans in 1555, his edict may also represent a form of pious thanks for the safety of his realm. However, in spite of the edict,
'A prince visiting a holy man', from a *Matla‘ al-Amur* of Amir Khusraw Dihlavi. Safavid, Qazvin, c. 1580–70. Page 22.5 × 16.4 cm. The *Matla‘ al-Amur* of Amir Khusraw was modelled on Nizami’s *Makhzan al-Amur* and forms the first book in his *Khamseh*. Although the episode illustrated here does not depict Iskandar, the imagery is certainly borrowed from earlier depictions of the king and a sage.

artists continued to illustrate manuscripts. Many of the court artists who did not emigrate to India went instead to the court of Tahmasp’s nephew, Sultan Ibrahim Mirza, at Mashhad. Ibrahim Mirza served as governor of Mashhad until 1564, during most of which time his artists worked on an illustrated *Haft Aurang* of Jami. Even after he was demoted and transferred to the minor city of Sabzavar, Sultan Ibrahim continued to patronise the arts. Certain mannerist tendencies characterise the paintings of his court artists and of lesser hands working in the same style. The size of heads has now decreased in proportion to bodies, and cheeks are less ovoid and more pouch-like than those in paintings of the 1540s. By the late 1560s the distinctive Safavid *taj* and high turban were no longer the only choice of headgear. Fashionable youths also donned low turbans or fur caps wrapped with a bit of cloth. Rocks and trees ceased to contain hidden grotesques but appeared slippery and somewhat insubstantial.

Toward the end of his life Shah Tahmasp retreated somewhat from his radical anti-painting stance. In the 1530s he had transferred his capital from Tabriz to Qazvin, and there a school of painting developed which followed a similar course to that of Mashhad and Sabzavar. While eschewing the mannerist excesses of
Sultan Ibrahim’s artists, the Illustrators of the *Garshasbnameh* of Asadi of 1573 nonetheless maintained the facial types of the 1560s, especially youths with incipient double chins. Compositions lost some of the complexity of the 1560s, and figures were rendered larger in scale and closer to the picture plane. Bright, saturated colours prevailed.

By contrast, Shiraz painting of the 1560s and 1570s exhibits an aesthetic distinct from that of the Safavid court. A city of enduring artistic vitality, Shiraz had held its position as the centre of commercial manuscript production throughout the sixteenth century, and its artists painted in a range of styles from conservative Turkman to more up-to-date reflections of Safavid court painting. In the 1560s and 1570s progressive Shiraz artists adopted the elongated forms of Qazvin painting, but stressed two-dimensional and decorative values rather than space and volume. They also preferred mauve, pink, yellow and other pastel colours to the richly modulated hues of Safavid court art. Although some Shiraz paintings depict highly complex, large-scale scenes, the figures are often small in scale and portrayed in agitated poses. The great majority of paintings surviving from the late sixteenth century are from Shiraz.

One other regional school worth noting thrived in the sixteenth century: that of Bukhara. Having fallen to the Uzbekans in 1500, Bukhara remained in their hands until 1530, when Shah Isma‘il killed their leader Shaybani Khan. By 1522, however, ‘Ubayd Allah Khan had regained the city for the Uzbekns, who controlled it more or less continuously until the twentieth century. Although illustrated manuscripts produced for Shaybani Khan reveal Turkman influence, presumably introduced through the medium of commercial Shiraz manuscripts, by the 1520s the influence of the Bidzhanid style of Herat had prevailed. In a miniature from a *Khamsah* of Amir Khusrau Dihlavi the contribution of Herat painting to the Bukhara school is amply evident. The figures and landscape have been rendered with extreme care. The regularly placed tufts of grass and minimal rocky outcrops contrast notably with the ebullience of Safavid landscapes, and the figurative types adhere to the Bidzhanid mode, solidly built with varied facial expressions. Yet, the roundfaced, small-mouthed boy in the centre foreground is a type that comes to embody the youthful Bukharan norm in the middle of the century. Compositions based on horizontal bands of land and rows of figures also become increasingly common in Bukhara painting.
In addition to manuscript illumination, Bukharan painters adorned pages of poetry with figures of young men or women, or loving couples. Although the painting of a couple shown here is probably a commercial version of such works, several characteristically Bukharan features are present. Many paintings of this type depict the figures within an ogival arch and surrounded by illuminated borders. A bright palette was common, and Bukharan illuminators frequently used a black ground as a foil for extremely fine arabesque designs.

Other Bukharan paintings of the third quarter of the sixteenth century reveal a broader, more painterly style. As in the painting of the lovers, the artist of a seated angel has used red to outline the figure and to depict folds of cloth. Yet the angel’s face and the arabesque which swirls around her exhibit greater freedom of brushwork and conception. Recently, scholars have remarked on the importance of Bukharan painting for early Mughal painting. Possibly the ‘Angel’ and the other paintings in the album from which it was removed were painted for Mughal patrons by Bukharan artists or by Mughal artists working in the Bukharan style.