Persian poetry in an illuminated border

Central Asia or India
About 1600-50

Persian manuscript on gold-sprinkled paper. Black nasta’liq running horizontally and diagonally across the page. Margins ruled in blue, green and gold. Framed in a blue-green border filled with scrolls of gold lotus flowers.

FOLIO 36 x 24 cm
TEXT AREA 23.7 x 13.9 cm

The intimacy of artistic relations between Central Asia and India reflected the origins of much of the northern Indian political elite in the eastern Islamic lands. The cultural integration of the two zones deepened with the consolidation of Mughal rule in the Subcontinent in the first half of the sixteenth century. 1

The solid illuminated border as well as the thickness of the nasta’liq script suggest a Central Asian or North Indian origin for this page of Persian poetry. The border, which was originally a darker hue, is of a type normally associated with Central Asia in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century, though also found in contemporary Mughal work as well as Central Asian manuscripts imported into the Mughal realms. 2

The leaf appears to have once formed part of a larger text. Though such leaves were frequently detached, remounted and included in albums, entire poetic works were occasionally copied and immediately remounted using such decorative borders. That this might have been the case is supported by the evident attention given to the illumination and decoration of the text block. The ground has been lightly sprinkled with gold swirls, giving the paper the impression of being marbled, and the text itself has been carefully arranged diagonally and vertically across the page.

1 For the interrelation of Central Asian and Mughal elites, see Polke 1998. For the relationship between Central Asian and Indian painting in the period, see Shelton 1995. The influence of Central Asian illumination and calligraphy on one another is a less explored topic.

2 For this type of border on Hozari and Bhukarhan work that later made its way to India, see a leaf in the Real Albums in the Pierpont Morgan Library, inv. no. M.458.56, illustrated and discussed in Schmitz 1997, p. 173 and fig. 239. For a Bukharan manuscript with illuminated borders of this type taken to India, see National Museum, New Delhi, inv. no. L 53-27, f. 38b, illustrated and discussed in Loosy 1982, no. 56, pp. 86-87 and pl. xii.
Two calligraphy leaves on marbled paper

India, Kashmir
End of Rabi‘ al-Awwal 1069 AH / December 1658 CE

Arabic manuscript on marbled paper. Eight and twelve lines of black nasta‘liq script. Mounted on cardboard.

POLIO 30 × 12.7 cm

These two leaves come from an album of calligraphy known to have been written in Kashmir in December 1658 by the calligrapher Muhammad Ashraf al-Razavi. Though al-Razavi is not mentioned in the standard sources on calligraphers, the flowing and firm nasta‘liq script indicates that he was a calligrapher of considerable accomplishment.

The opening line of the first of the leaves gives the title of the text as the ‘Munajat-i Hazrat ‘Ali’, which are prayers in honour of ‘Ali, the son-in-law and cousin of the Prophet Muhammad. The combination of a Shi‘i text in praise of ‘Ali and the use of marbled paper occurs in another album leaf, now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, attributed to Kashmir or the Deccan. The coincidence is probably not fortuitous, as both Kashmir and the Deccan were places of Iranian influence, which made itself felt both in artistic techniques and in the adoption of Twelve Shi‘ism by the ruling elite. The Chak dynasty, who ruled Kashmir from 1261 until the Mughal conquest under Akbar in 1586, had been converted to Shi‘ism by a Nurbakshia Sufi missionary from Iran at the end of the fifteenth century. The beginning of Iranian artistic influence in Kashmir is associated with the reign of Sultan Zayn al-Abidin (1420-70), who was said to have sent local craftsmen to Iran, initiating Kashmir’s long association with crafts such as paper-making, wood-carving and carpet-making.

Little is known about the production of marbled paper in the Islamic world. It has been suggested that the practice, called abri, from abr, cloud, in Persian, originated in Tabriz in the fifteenth century, though the earliest surviving example comes from eastern Persia around the turn of the sixteenth century. A group of drawings and calligraphy leaves on marbled paper attest that the practice became popular in India in the first half of the seventeenth century.
38 Zuhuri's Khwan-i Khalil

Deccan, probably Bijapur
1880 AH / 1669-70 CE

Persian manuscript on alternating yellow, mauve, cream and salmon paper, twenty-six folios. Ten lines of black naskh‘i ink written diagonally across the page, each line enclosed in a gold cartouche against a gold ground, margins ruled in gold. Dated 1880 AH (1669-70 CE) on final folio (f. 26v) with erased seal impression. Contemporary light brown morocco binding with stamped central medallions of leather inlay decorated with red and gold overleafing plants.
Folio 18 x 10 cm

Zuhuri’s Khwan-i Khalil, or ‘Table of the Friend of God’, constitutes the most revealing insight into life at the court of the greatest patron of the arts in the Deccan, and one of the few Islamic sources dealing with the life and work of artists. Under Ibrahim ‘Adil Shah II (1579-1621), the Deccani kingdom of Bijapur witnessed an extraordinary efflorescence in the arts, thanks in great part to the creative temperament of Ibrahim himself. Like his contemporary, the Mughal Emperor Akbar, Ibrahim was a religiously tolerant ruler with mystic inclinations and a strong interest in Hindu culture. The eclectic nature of his court reflected the cosmopolitan nature of his court and Deccani society at large, in which Persian, Turkish, Mughal and local traditions fused to produce some astonishingly vibrant results, particularly in the field of painting.

An important role in the cultural life of the period must be assigned to the waves of Iranian artists and writers that emigrated to the courts of the Deccan in search of new sources of patronage. The poet Zuhuri himself was one such emigre. Born in Tusnir in Khurasan, he left Iran for the Deccan in 1580, following disappointment at his failure to establish himself at the court of Shah ‘Abbas. Following a period of residency at the court of Shah Burhan Nizam at Ahmadnagar, for whom he composed a mahtabshi dealing with kingship, mysticism and music – the Saqi-nama, or ‘The Book of the Cup-Bearer’ – he succeeded in attracting the attention of Ibrahim II. For this ruler Zuhuri composed his Se Nafr, or ‘Three Essays’, all relating to the Ibrahim, his court, and the arts practised there. The Khwan-i Khalil is the last of these essays, and in addition to praising Ibrahim and his skill as a musician, calligrapher, painter and patron Zuhuri eulogizes the six outstanding members of his court. These were the vazir and mathematician Shah Nawaz Khan, the poet Malik Qummi, the calligrapher Shah Khalifullah, the painter Farrukh Hussain, the wit Malik Khuddam Mullah Haidar al-Zuhri and, finally, the author himself.

The title of the work serves to identify Ibrahim II with his namesake, the Prophet Abraham, who was also frequently called ‘Khalil’, meaning ‘friend of God’. In this way the reference to the khwan, or table, in the title refers both to Abraham’s position as an intimate of God and to the luminaries assembled at the court of Ibrahim II. This is in keeping with the title of the second essay, the Gulzar-i Ibrahim, or ‘Rose Garden of Ibrahim’, which alludes simultaneously to the garden Ibrahim created out of Nimrod’s fire and Ibrahim’s stellar court.

In keeping with the content that exalts the arts and artistic patronage as royal and almost religious virtues, the manuscript has a jewel-like quality and was clearly meant to be an object of aesthetic value in itself. The most striking aesthetic considerations are the folios of different colours – yellow, lilac, cream and salmon – and the arrangement of the text in cloud-shaped cartouches running diagonally across the page. The cloud cartouches separating the lines are frequently joined, either in the middle of the line or along the left margin, leading the eye down the page and imparting a sense of fluidity to the text. The ground of the entire text block has been illuminated with gold, which has the effect of making the text appear to float on the surface of the page. The flowering plants in the centre of the covers, made from red and gold leather inlay, relate to contemporary enamel and enhance the manuscript’s status as a luxury, physical object.

2 For the life and works of Zuhuri, see ibid., pp. 68-70.
The introduction to this extraordinary manuscript states that the work was composed at the behest of "Asaf al-Dawla Sayyid Muhammad Khan Bahadur Zafar Jang". This is none other than Salabat Jang, the Nizam of Hyderabad from 1752 from 1762, and the first Nizam to enter into a treaty with the British East India Company. Having been placed on the throne with the assistance of the French East India Company, Salabat Jang turned to the British, whose power and influence was on the rise. The alliance did not prove fruitful for Salabat Jang, however; after he was forced to cede territories to the Maharathas he lost the support of the nobility, and was deposed and imprisoned by his brother, Nizam 'Ali Khan, again with the assistance of the British.1

The introduction states that the manuscript is a collection of Sufi wisdom from the teachings of a certain Hafiz Shah Muhammad, compiled for Salabat Jang by Hassan b. Sayyid Muhhiy al-Din b. Sayyid 'Abdallah Shahid Bukhari. A colophon on the final page of the text states that work was completed in 1172 AH/1758-59 CE and copied by a certain Sayyid Muhammad Sharif. The dating of the manuscript to a year in the middle of the reign of Salabat Jang, as well as the highly unusual nature of the manuscript – making it unlikely that multiple copies of the work were produced – indicate that this was the copy of the Nizam himself.

The exact relevance of the title, Risala-ya Aynak-i Baglamun, or 'The Treatise on the Spectacles of the Chameleon', is not clear. It is likely, however, to be connected to the outstanding feature of the work – three anthropomorphic calligraphic designs made from the names of Muhammad, 'Ali, Hasan and Husayn. These are in the form of double-sided images, with the same diagram on both the recto and verso of the page. In one of these the letters are in gold, but in the other two they are made from translucent mica. Though calligraphic designs in the shape of lions, birds, or other non-human figures were not uncommon in the eastern Islamic lands in the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, such anthropomorphic designs were extremely rare and usually confined to the Shi'i tradition in places like Safavid and Qajar Iran, or the Deccan.2

2 For another such anthropomorphic design, also from the Deccan, see Sotheby's, London, 3 May 2003, lot 46.

Persian manuscript on cream paper, forty-eight folios. Eleven lines of black nasta'liq script. Qur'anic quotations in black and red naskh, headings and incidentals in red, marginal commentary in black nasta'liq. Text block ruled in red, gold and blue. Three double-sided calligraphic panels in black, gold, blue and mica with the names Muhammad, 'Ali, Hasan and Husayn arranged in human forms (ff. 11v-v, 13v-v, 15v-v), one further mystical diagram (ff. 23v). Later bifolium with diagrams of 'good' and 'evil' trees inserted where some text is missing (ff. 34-35). Later binding with purple velvet covers.

FOLIO 23 x 14.5 cm / 23.5 x 15.5 cm
Leaf from a ‘Polier’ Album

Delhi and Lucknow
1196 AH / 1781-82 CE

Four lines of Persian in black nasta’liq script in cloud cartouches on a ground of gold foliate scroll. Text block surrounded by large border of polychrome floral scrolls. Verso consists of a painting of lady reclining on a low seat with a maid in attendance, also surrounded by a border of large polychrome floral scrolls. Calligraphy signed “Muhammad ‘Ali 1196” (1781-82 CE).

FOLIO 39.6 x 28 cm
TEXT AREA 21.5 x 12 cm

The colourful floral borders on this album leaf immediately identify it as a leaf from one of the albums compiled by Antoine Polier, a Swiss military engineer who served in the British East India Company and in the courts of the Nawabs of ‘Awadh in the second half of the eighteenth century. Polier became immersed in the courtly culture of North India, using the fortune he amassed there to collect manuscripts and patronize Indo-Persian art forms such as calligraphy and painting.1

The bottom left corner of the calligraphy leaf is signed “Muhammad ‘Ali 1196” (1781-82 CE). Muhammad ‘Ali was a well-known calligrapher at the court of the Mughal Emperor Shah ‘Alam II (r. 1759-1806) and a tutor to the Emperor’s son.2 Polier may have met the calligrapher during his own period of service at the court of Shah ‘Alam II following his removal from office and dismissal from Faizabad in 1775 as a result of political intrigue in Calcutta. Polier was able to re-enter the East India Company with the rank of Lieutenant Colonel and return to ‘Awadh in 1782, first to Faizabad and then to Lucknow, where he stayed until his return to Europe in 1788.3

It was during this last period of residence in Lucknow that Polier commissioned a team of artists headed by the celebrated artist Mîhr Chand to assemble numerous colourful albums of paintings and calligraphy that included both antique leaves as well as work commissioned by Polier himself.4 On his return to Europe Polier sold the albums to the English collector William Beckford, from whose

1 See the biography of Polier by Muazzam Ali and Seema Alavi in the introduction to Polier’s collected correspondence, the Firdausi: Akbari, Alam and Alavi 2000, pp. 1-9. See also S.C. Welch 1978, p. 88.
3 Alam and Alavi 2000, p. 5.
4 ibid., pp. 5-6, 52-56. For Mîhr Chand’s work and his association with Polier, see Loosy 2002, pp. 44-49, Welch and Welch 1982, pp. 333-35; Canby 1998, pp. 180-81.
5 For details of the Polier Albums in Berlin, see Hickmann 1979, pp. 5-9.
This album represents the culmination of the long-lived tradition in the eastern Islamic lands of compiling volumes of new and antique paintings and calligraphic specimens. Like many of the artistic traditions that were popular in the Ottoman, Safavid and Mughal Empires, the practice seems to have evolved in the cultivated courts of fifteenth-century Iran and Central Asia. The popularity of albums was concomitant with changing attitudes towards book-making and authorship, also visible in the rise of other new textual forms such as the anthology. 

Albums also reflected a new interest in historicizing artists and their work, and the major albums commissioned by royal patrons such as the Timurid Baysunghur and the Safavid Bahram Mirza were visual histories of the traditions of calligraphy and painting. In the Mughal Empire, the didactic purpose of royal albums, especially those commissioned by Shah Jahan, seem to have been more dynastic than art historical.

The present album seems to have had the dual purpose of presenting the work of some of the major calligraphers from the sixteenth through the nineteenth century and of entertaining the reader with a narrative of contrasting colours, scripts and subjects. Attention has been paid to the layout of the album, so that the same scripts do not repeat themselves from one opening to another. The subject-matter is also consistently varied, so that a bifolium of Qur’anic text in firm nastā’iq is followed by a bifolium of poetry running diagonally across the page in a fluid nastā’iq.

A similar approach is evident in the pictorial cycle, where bearded mullahs alternate with Indian court ladies amusing themselves at social gatherings, amorous adventures and hunting scenes. The inclusion of paintings of European ladies being visited by cherubs, Hindu subjects such as Krishna and the cowherds, and scenes of Islamic instruction can also be construed as a deliberate attempt to entertain or surprise the reader through variety and contrast.

The majority of the album is made from calligraphic specimens, which include examples of nastā’iq, nastā’iq, shikasta and ta’liq. The earliest piece of calligraphy, and the only one in the album to stretch across a double page, is part of an early Safavid royal decree in a beautiful ta’liq hand. At
the bottom of the left page the document is dated "3 Dhu‘l-Hija 926" (6 December 1518 CE) and signed "Abu‘l-Ghazi Sultan Bahadur Mirza Surumiz", who by his titles would appear to be a Safavid prince. A grandson of Shah Isma‘il and son of Bahrām Mirzā was called Husayn, though this is not a possible identification as Bahrām Mirzā himself would have been aged only one at the time of the writing of this document. A Sultan Abu‘l-Ghazi Husayn is mentioned in a Safavid document dated 1553-54 with reference to a campaign in Georgia, though again this seems to be rather late to be referring to the scribe of the present document.

Three pieces of calligraphy in the album bear the signature of Mir ‘Ali, the famous calligrapher and follower of the style of Sultan ‘Ali Mashhadi, who was among the artists removed from Herat to Būkhara by the Uzbek ruler ‘Ubaydallah Khan. It was above all for individual album pages in nasta‘liq that Mir ‘Ali was famed, and were eagerly sought after in Iran, India and the Ottoman Empire. A high value seems to have been put on pages by Mir ‘Ali in the Mughal Empire in particular, where they constituted virtually the entire calligraphic component of famous imperial albums such as the ‘Berlin’ and ‘Kevorkian’ albums, compiled by Jahangir and Shah Jahan respectively.

Of the other calligraphers whose work appears in the album, mention should be made of ‘Abd al-Majīd Tāhqānī (d. 1771), whose signature appears on an album page of nasta‘liq calligraphy and another of shikasta. It is primarily for his work in shikasta that ‘Abd al-Majīd is remembered, with a general agreement among contemporary and later biographers that he was the pre-eminent exponent of that script. Shikasta, literally ‘broken’, was the last to develop and most ornamental of the scripts used by Iranian calligraphers. Shikasta grew out of nasta‘liq, and like that script is frequently written diagonally across the page. Shikasta is more fluid and pictographic than its forebear, however, and is characterized by extreme density and the exaggeratedly extended horizontal curves of certain letters.

The album also contains a single leaf in nasta‘liq by the peripatetic calligrapher Mir ‘Imad al-Hasani, who eventually settled in Isfahan, where he was engaged by Shah ‘Abbas. The most famous showcase for ‘Imad al-Hasani’s work is another Qajar period album also assembled from a mixture of Iranian and Indian contents, the ‘St Petersburg’ Murafaqī. The inclusion of a high number of Indian paintings in both albums attests India’s status as a centre of the arts in general and painting in particular under the Mughals and their satellite courts. Since the fifteenth century, new sources of patronage had been attracting a steady stream of scholars, painters, poets and calligraphers from Iran to the increasingly wealthy courts of India. The effect of this ‘brain drain’ on Iran and India is demonstrated by the dominance of the Sabk-i Hindī, the ‘Indian style’, an ornate style of Persian poetry developed in the courts of India, in Safavid Iran. However, the use of exclusively Iranian calligraphy in many seventeenth-century Mughal albums, as well as the St Petersburg Murafaqī and the present album, demonstrates Iran’s unrivalled reputation as the home of the calligrapher.

3 Ibid., Chapter 4; ‘Reinventions of the Book’; pp. 149-79.
5 Ibid., pp. 320-22.
6 Fekete 1977, no. 73, p. 474. I am grateful to Manjeh Bayani for drawing my attention to this reference.
10 See Akinashkin 1994.