The Mongols and the New Iranian Painting Under the Ilkhanids (1290–1336)

Between 1220 and 1260, Muslim central Asia, Iran, Iraq and eastern Anatolia were first ravaged by Genghis Khan’s Mongol invasion, then reconstructed by his descendants, who were installed as ilkhans or “ruling princes” but who were more or less vassals of the Great Khan in Mongolia. Around 1295, the Ilkhans’ ruler Ghazan Khan converted to Islam; he and his successors governed a world populated by Arabs, Iranians, Turks and Mongols up to 1336, when a crisis followed the death of Abu Sa’id, the last direct descendant of Ghazan Khan. The Ilkhans established their capital in Tabriz, today in Iranian Azerbaijan. With the help of remarkable ministers such as Rashid al-Din, they created an iranocentric world composed of a population originating from every country of Europe and Asia. Tabriz was transformed by the construction of palaces and mosques, the majority of which have since been lost.

A celebrated sixteenth-century text, to which we shall return more than once, expresses the judgment of Iranian historiography on this period very well. The painter and calligrapher Dost Muhammad (active 1531–1569) prepared a fine album of paintings and scripts for the great Safavid dynasty patron of the arts Shah Tahmasp (1524–1576). This album, which has survived, can be seen in Istanbul (Topkapı Saray Muğâsî, hazine 2154) and contains a preface written in the Kufic style of the period with a brief account of the history of painting in Iran. The caption attributes the first paintings to Mani, who in the third century AD founded the intellectual and religious movement known as Manichaeism. Mani was followed by Ali, the first Shi’ite imam and son-in-law of the Prophet. But it was, according to Dost Muhammad, in the period of Abu Sa’id that a certain Ahmad Mossa "lifted the veil of ignorance from the face of representation." Dost Muhammad attributed to Ahmad Mossa a number of manuscripts that appear not to have survived, then presents a line of successors, a number of whom (Shams al-Din, Jana’id, ‘Abd al-Husayn) are indeed known by their works (see pp. 94–96). One particular manuscript dominates the Abu Sa’id period. This is what is now known as the Great Mongol Shahnama (fig. 34), the pages of which are now scattered among
ten in public and private collections. Although the miniatures of this manuscript have been badly damaged and often repainted, a dozen of them remain in relatively good condition (see p. 66) and show exceptional qualities of composition, color and interpretation of the epic text. It seems certain that contemporary events served as a model for the choice of subjects represented, and one can imagine that various historical figures are also represented. Their exact identification is still a matter of debate that will probably never be resolved but the important novelty of these manuscripts lies in their capacity to transform the mythical epic into an illustration of contemporary history.

The Great Shahnameh was, without doubt, a masterpiece executed at the Ilkhanid court at Tabriz and it is possible that it was never completed. Other more or less contemporary manuscripts or fragments of manuscripts preserved in albums that are comparable with it, including in terms of quality, also survive. In fact, the real first steps in the history of Iranian painting were taken a little earlier though unrecognized by Dost Muhammad. Around 1305, the great vizier Bashāl al-Dīn founded a composition and illustration studio for his great “Compendium of Chronicles” (Janī al-Tawārikh), several fragments of which have survived (fig. 15, see also p. 64). The illustrations of these manuscripts display an elegant simplicity and demonstrate the influence of Chinese painting in their economy of color and certainty of line, an influence that may be explained by the presence of Chinese artists brought to Tabriz by Bashāl al-Dīn. This contact with Chinese painting would remain a constant in Iranian painting. Together with the creative invention attributed to Ahmad Vasa, though not identified in detail, it serves to characterize fourteenth-century painting. A third new element is that the inspiration from Iranian literature lay mainly in the epic. Even poems of lesser quality were illustrated, sometimes in a rather mediocre manner. Two main cities dominated the art of this period: Tabriz, the center of the empire and of the new and Baghdad where the ancient tradition of the book was maintained and often revisited for manuscripts written in Persian.