THE DAWN OF TIMURID ART

The second half of the fourteenth century was a time of political confusion. Several dynasties, Turkish and Mongol, shared power centered around three main areas: Azerbaijan and Tabriz, western Iran and Iraq with Shiraz and Baghdad, and the Khorassan and central Asia with Herat and Samarqand. Numerous, often richly illustrated, manuscripts date from this period. The aesthetic quality of their images is often secondary (fig. 17) but they remain important for the history of this art because they demonstrate an increase in popularity among the public and consequently a much greater and more varied access to and pleasure in the visual arts.

It was this fragmented world of small, feudal dynasties that between 1395 and 1400 was conquered by Timur (Timurlenk), the last of the great Turkish-Mongol conquerors. Timurlenk died in 1405 but up to the start of the following century, his successors continued to dominate culturally, if not politically, a world that stretched from Anatolia to India and up to China. The Timurid monarchs, their ministers and the princes of these more or less vassal dynasties were great patrons of the arts. Taking up the practice adopted by the Ilkhanids, every high-ranking royal made a point of establishing at his court a khan-non, a library-museum-studio where books and images were preserved and created. The names of the century’s great painters and calligraphers are recorded and their biographies reproduced in specialized volumes. Some princes themselves became painters and practiced calligraphy.

From the late fourteenth century, painting embraced two new elements. First, lyrical poetry was added to the epic and chronicles as a subject for illustration. The Khamsa of Nizami (see pp. 98–110), the great lyric poet of the twelfth to thirteenth centuries, became one of the favorite subjects of painters, but they also took inspiration from such celebrated poets as Attar (see pp. 88–91), Saadi (see pp. 86–87), Khwaja Kirmani (see pp. 94–96), Hafez (see pp. 92–93) and Jami (see pp. 112–121). The other change was the transformation of the illustrated page (fig. 16). The image now occupied almost the entire page, a few lines of text often forming part of the composition of an image rather than being a source of inspiration. On occasion, the image even broke free of its frame and occupied part of the margins by extending the landscapes or characters featured in the story. One might almost say that this was a period of emancipation...
for painting. One of the signs of this emancipation was the appearance of albums in which calligraphic texts and images were collected, and of anthologies where texts were chosen to create a unique work of art reflecting personal taste.

The principal centers for painting were Tabriz, Shiraz, and especially Herat (now in Afghanistan), the cultural capital of the Timurid world, even though at the start of the century the political capital was Samarkand. It was in Herat, particularly after the second half of the century, that the most refined models, so widely copied and imitated, were first created and it was Herat that was home to Behzad (1460–1545), the most celebrated painter in the history of Iranian painting. It is not easy to define exactly where his genius lay (see pp. 88–89), but what is certain is that painting in the second half of the century was characterized among other things by new features such as a naturalism in the detailed depiction of objects and in the way people were portrayed. Perhaps these new aspects can be attributed to the great master of the period, although there is little written evidence to show what qualities he was known for at the time.

The significance of Timurid painting cannot simply be measured by the yardstick of the activities of the painters who produced it and the richness of their creations; it must also be judged by the fact that in later centuries Iran, and indeed the Ottoman and Mughal worlds, were influenced by the fifteenth-century Persian art—and this was a radical turning point just as the contemporaneous Italian Renaissance was for Western art. Many aspects of the fifteenth century still remain mysterious to us or poorly understood. The most remarkable is no doubt the existence of dozens of paintings in a rather wild and brutal style in total contrast with the refinement of illuminated books, yet of incomparable visual power. This style was attributed much later to a mythical character, Siyab Qalam, the Black Pen, (figs. 18 and 19, see also pp. 124–125 and 126–129). We know that the work of more than one painter has been attributed to this striking genius, but the origins of these masterpieces, as well as the identity of their creators, have scarcely been explored.

All in all, this is a difficult period to definitively and define concisely but it was most certainly an era of experimentation in terms of style and in the subjects represented.
In 1501, Ismail ben Hardar, the leader of a devout Shiite organization in northern Iran took power, and during the years that followed extended his power to western and central Iran. In 1507, a Shaybanid dynasty of Sunni Uzbeks rose to power and occupied the region, which would often change hands during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. First installed in Qorin in the north, then Isfahan in central Iran, two great kings, Shah Tahmasp (1524–1576), then Shah Abbas (1587–1629) brought power and the glory to the Safavid dynasty. It was under Shah Tahmasp that the great masterpieces of Persian painting were created, in particular a celebrated Shahnama containing 256 miniatures now dispersed among several public and private collections (see pp. 72–83); several versions of the Khamsa of Nizami (see pp. 196–111), and an illustrated manuscript of poems by Jami (see pp. 112–121). The images in our album demonstrate the variety and quality of illustrations at the time of Shah Tahmasp. They reveal a kind of explosion of the miniature, as if the images were trying to escape the constraints of the book.

Alongside these manuscripts produced in the imperial court, dozens of other books were illustrated in provincial towns and in centers beyond the court. This diversification of patronage continued under Shah Abbas and throughout the entire seventeenth century. The new images produced were not automatically associated with books or even with albums; they acquired their own independent identity, linked to the life of the artists and their needs. This is true of the offer's simple drawings and portraits created by Reza Abbasi, Maimun Miravi, and Muhammad Zaman. At the same time as the Safavid capital, another centre grew up at Isfahan (fig. 20) under the aegis of the now elderly Behzad, while various Safavid princes and emirs, Shiraz, especially, became home to workshops often devoted to the creation of illustrated manuscripts for the art market.