Pl. 2 Introduction to the Revelation

Preface (dekhaeh) and first aya (chapter) of the Koran

C. 1590 [Iran]


Smithsonian Institution, S. 1906.07.1 ab–z ad, Fol. E x–3

The two medallions at the center contain the text of the first aya of the Koran, the jinshah, which every Muslim knows by heart and which is often recited on great public occasions or as a private prayer. The cartouches above and below the medallions contain a type of preface (dekhaeh in Persian), which proclaims that the whole of mankind and all the jinns would never be able to create such a fine volume of the divine word. These two texts form part of the opening pages of the book, which have been transformed into a carpet of color and design.
The double spread is trickier to interpret than the preceding illustration. At the center, inside the twelve small disks contained within two larger circles, are the titles of the poems in the collection, set out in the form of a contents page. Eight angels hover around the circles, each carrying an object such as a wine bottle or a jewerly box. It is difficult to be certain exactly what these symbols are. They may be linked to the content of the poems or may simply be a more general expression of the desire for a life of pleasure. Curiously, the two seraphim on the extreme right are turning their heads in the opposite direction of the other angels. The direction of their heads and their expressions seem to suggest another, invisible circle off to the right. Analysis of these iconographic programs is still at a preliminary stage and any interpretation should be treated with caution.
Iškandar Sultan, grandson of Timur, reigned from 1429 to 1444 in western Iran and became famous for his love of the arts. The manuscript from which this horoscope comes was composed by Muhammad ibn Tahá al-Kazí, who belonged to a renowned family of mathematicians and astronomers. The first, rather short section recounts the prince's genealogy and his birth in Uşgand in Central Asia, along with the mathematical principles of horoscopes. The second, longer part recounts the prince's life, lists his qualities and foretells his success. In fact, Iškandar Sultan was taken prisoner and executed in 1434 or 1435 on the order of his uncle Shah Rukh.

The horoscope is laid out as a large tablet framed by long, rectangular cartouches containing a poem celebrating the prince's glory, comparing him to a planet and to constellations.
In the center is a celestial sphere divided into twelve sections by the signs of the zodiac against a starry background. The circle is complemented by a list of the properties of each sign. The four signs of Gemini, Aries, Pisces and Scorpio, which at the time of the prince's birth protected the visible planets, extend the stars as far as the circumference of the circle and contain symbols of the planets and representations of scholars of astronomy. The rest of the circle is covered in gold enamelled on a blue background. In the four corners are angels bearing offerings for the prince, notably a crown.

What makes this image so appealing is not so much its content, which could be of interest with the death of the prince, but the elegance, the suppleness and richness of the design and its colors. The angels appear to be turning the celestial sphere and the tiny figures seem like pawns on a game board. This image appears to symbolize the vastness, the eternity of such mar's destiny, whether he be a prince or a simple subject. Also admirable is the way in which the motifs have been ornamentally transformed, their sole purpose being to enhance the viewer's pleasure, even though the viewer may be unable to grasp the actual meaning of the image. (Details pp. 52 and 216).