The Demon Akhwan preparing to cast the hero Rustam into a dragon-killed sea
Page from the Shohname, known as the Jaki Shohname,
by Ferdowsi (940–1000/25)
c. 1444 (Iran)
London, Royal Asiatic Society, Ms. 239, fol. 165r

There is a striking contrast between the stately pink of the land, planted with flowering shrubs and the dark green trees, the body of water from which emerge all manner of dangers, and the vertical composition of rocks arranged like huge crystals fused into solid masses. The hero, Rustam, who had fallen peacefully asleep on his traditional tiger skin, appears to be unaware of the demon carrying him off. This extraordinary figure with his red tuta appears almost to dance as he carries away his heavy load. The sea, dragon seems about to fenocous as a puppet, while a curious figure appears on the left, preceded by a tongue of fire or a pool of blood. The expanses of golden sky is broken only by a single cloud.

This is a rarely illustrated episode. Prince Kay Khsrow, weary at the end of his long life, retires to the mountains with eight of his paladins. At a certain moment, feeling the end is nigh, he recites his prayers and takes a ritual bath in a nearby stream. He orders his paladins to return here as it will soon snow but they remain with their sovereign and all fall asleep. At dawn, Kay Khsrow has disappeared. His kinsmen search for him in vain then gather to celebrate his memory. After the meal, the snow starts falling. The valiant heroes were unable to protect themselves and became completely covered in snow. For a time they walked about in the snow and dug a hole, but they became exhausted and in the end they left them. It is said that this is shown here eight elegantly attired figures, seated on splendid carpets; they are accompanied by four horses who, curiously, are dressed eating.

PL. 12 Paladins in the snow
Page from the Shohname, known as the Jaki Shohname,
by Ferdowsi (940–1000/25)
c. 1444 (Iran)
London, Royal Asiatic Society, Ms. 239, fol. 253

Everything is covered in snow: the sky, the earth, even the water are all white with snow. The paladins' despair can be read on their faces, though they try to keep warm with their arms. The artist has managed to show the contrast between the waists of the heroes and the inevitable death that awaits them and for which they now prepare.
This extraordinary image is inspired by an episode in the life of the hero Isfandiyar who set out to free his sisters imprisoned by a man named Arjap. Arjap lived in a remote fortress in the mountains encircled by an iron wall. Isfandiyar disguises himself as a merchant to gain access to the fortress. There he makes the garrison drunk and attacks Arjap and kills him. This is the event illustrated in the empty space in the center right of the image. However, it is clear that the artist is little more than a pretext for showing a large, fortified town. The artist is keen to provide detail on the buildings, domes and pergolas, the walls covered in earth-tone tiles and many other details that merit a more thorough analysis as they are rare in paintings of the period. The town appears deserted apart from a few inhabitants facing the scene of the fighting and some women (perhaps Isfandiyar’s sisters) who are watching the scene. Several soldiers are posted on the walls—are they there to defend the town or simply as decoration?
A. Le. Zal returned to his father Sam

Page from the Shahnama, known as the Juki Shahnama,
by Firdawsi (940–1020/25)

c. 1444 [Iran]

London, Royal Asiatic Society, Ms. 230, fol. 15 v

The main event—the infant Zal being returned to his father Sam by the alinagh, a fabulous flying creature who had rescued the child—occupies the lower right quarter of the image. The father is shown kneeling and consoled, ready to receive his son, an albinos child with white hair carried by a splendid creature whose tail fans out across a blue sky dotted with small, white, wispy clouds. A pair of fabulously birds occupy the summit of a mountain (on the left) forming a pendant to the servant and his two horses (on the right). The power of this image resides in the striking contrast between, on the one hand, the peaceful, orderly land covered in flowers dominated by a tree whose foliage is framed by a constellation of flowers and, on the other, a fearsome composition of multicolored rooks arranged in a steep and inaccessible pyramid.

This confrontation between the mortals world of the fantastical and the obvious reveries of the man in further accentuated by two months that to some extent echo the principal scene: the limpid blue of the sky tinted by two large, menacing clouds and the cloud branches emerging from the tree in full leaf, symbols of the outcome of all life, which is death.