This image is original for two very different reasons. Firstly, there is the way in which it illustrates a complicated story. Princess Masumah, daughter of the great Persian king Afrasiyab, went to a meadow surrounded by woods to celebrate the great Persian festival of Norouz or Nowruz. Prince Bithen meanwhile, persuaded by a treacherous friend that he would find a beautiful young woman in this parkland, donned his headdress crown for the occasion. Masumeh spots the handsome young man from afar and sends her nurse to take a closer look. Once the nurse confirms his good looks, Masumeh persuades him to come to her tent where they spend three days feasting. She then gives him drink and takes him to her palace where he is held prisoner and a sad story ensues.

The episode shown here is when the nurse approaches the attractive prince who is seated rather awkwardly on the grass with his bow, his father's crown and his horse in harness. The artist shows the princess veiled on a carpet under a parasol being served refreshments. Three attendants form a loving group on the right while a guard or major-domo vaguely watches over the scene. In other words, we have before us the protagonists of the story during the minor episode of the meeting between the two lovers.

The other original quality of this image is its display of plant and yellow, the colors of spring. They fill the borders, adorn the trunks, and are even found on the carpets and pavilions. These colors create a magical vision of a landscape ripe for an amorous adventure that will end badly.
M. 18 The shrine of Guyumarth
Page from the Shahnameh of Shah Tahmasb
C. 1520 (Tehran, Iran)
Painting attributed to Sultan Muhammad (? post 1550)
Geneva, Aga Khan Trust for Culture, N 200, fol. 20 v

This is one of the masterpieces of Iranian painting. The theme is subjunctive. "When the sun entered the sign of Aries, the world was filled with splendor, order, and light; the sun shone [...] so that the world was completely rejuvenated. Guyumarth then became master of the world...."

This image shows that unique time when Guyumarth reigned over the universe, with his son [later slain by the devil] seated at his right hand and his grandson Rustam standing at his left. Men and animals form a whirlwind around the three royal figures while others are concealed among the rocks and are only visible after long and careful study. In fact, the rocks themselves are brought to life by the heads and bodies of humans and animals. A total pantheism reigns in which all creation is brought to life and stretches out beyond the borders of the page. This vision of a unified world is also proclaimed by an astonishing use of color in which the blues, whites, violets and mauves appear in different, interpenetrating tonalities to give this image a purity of meaning rarely achieved by other paintings in Iran or elsewhere.

It is an image that requires extended contemplation. One must lose oneself in order to appreciate it fully. The experience may perhaps be purely aesthetic—the contemplation of the beautiful—or indeed the mystic—an entering into a world other than our own. (details: fig. 45 p. 246; fig. 49 p. 152; fig. 51 p. 159; fig. 59 p. 193)
This scene takes its inspiration from a complex story. A poor man named Hafez had a very beautiful daughter. One day, sitting in a meadow spinning flax with her companions, she ate an apple and discovered a worm in it. She knew that it would bring her luck and indeed, the rate at which she worked increased to such an extent that she made her family rich. Her father took care of the worm that grew to monstrous size.

He took over the town and built a handsome castle there. Even King Ardashir, founder of the Sassanid dynasty, was defeated on his first attempt to capture the town. He then disguised himself as a beggar and entered the town on the pretext of wanting to pay homage to the worm so that he could gain access to the garden where it lived and poison it. The entire system Hafez had built then fell apart.

We can see clearly the young girl busy spinning in the meadow and perhaps an apple in the hand of the girl in the red dress. It would seem that the figure on horseback at the city gate is Ardshir. Elsewhere, the artist has depicted a busy shopping street, two wise men reading on the roof of a house, the mosque preparing to call the people to prayer, presents of work and a typical tree with its bird nest. Some of the rocks are animated, but others not. Far from illustrating the text, here the artist uses a large number of the figurative and other elements that made up his stock in trade as a painter.
Two serpents had grown from the shoulders of the tyrant Zahhak. They demanded to be fed every day on young, living humans and the need to produce these had plunged the kingdom into a state of terror. One night, Zahhak, lying in the arms of one of his concubines, dreamed that these serpents were going to attack him and that one of them would kill him. And this was indeed what happened. Meanwhile, awaken by the nightmarish noise, he let out such a roar that everyone in the palace woke up including, according to the text, the woman in the harem, and the entire palace trembled.

In this image, the king himself appears to be little affected by his dream, but the artist has used the story to paint a rich palace in all its detail, incorporating all kinds of vignettes of men and women looking astonished and frightened, exchanging impressions. Once again, and sometimes with humor, the painter has exploited a story that in itself can only be understood by reading the text.