Literary texts

These illustrations are from relatively short manuscripts belonging to very different genres. The Maqamat are written in a scholarly, elegant Arabic prose. Composed by al-Hariri in the early twelfth century, they recount 50 adventures involving the picaresque hero Abu Zagd who charms and captivates all who listen to him. The Buston of Saadi (1193–1268) and the Diwan of Hafez (1320–1389) are collections of poems of great literary merit and anecdotes with underlying moral lessons, sometimes with a mystical quality, though more often containing social satire. The Montq al-Sayr ("Language of the Birds") is a tale by Atrax (1142 – 1222) in which a conference of birds meets in pursuit of perfection.
This image is an illumination of the 43rd Maqam of "Sawsan" of the book. The story's two heroes, Abu Zayd, an arrogant adventurer with an exceptional talent for telling tales, and al-Harith, his often unwilling companion, often acting as his witness, find themselves by chance at a desert stopping place. They travel along together while Abu Zayd recounts all sorts of stories. On the edge of the village they meet a young man. Abu Zayd asks if the villagers were likely to appreciate his literary talents. The young man replies in a witty address that the village comprises only ignorant, uneducated people who would understand nothing. Abu Zayd enters the village all the same and disappears there with al-Harith's sword, which he had "borrowed." Al-Harith is left on his own, betrayed by his companion but still filled with admiration for the latter's talent.

In the foreground, the image shows the two travelers meeting with the young man, a later had, has pointlessly added a beard. The gestures being made by the three figures—hands and fingers outstretched—are conventions signifying conversation and the two travelers' sparkling eyes signify their curiosity. The two camels, admirably depicted, suggest that the painter had a precise knowledge of the postures of these animals. However, what makes this image so original is its background. This shows a somewhat theatrical representation of a village, with its water point, its animals, its street dotted with stalls and a range of village activities such as fishing and spinning, a cattle wired, a shop or tavern, a peasant on his way to work and a mother and daughter on their way to market. The architectural framework—in stone not brick as in southern Iraq—includes a mosque, identifiable by its minaret and its blue dome, unusual at this period.

This miniature, like many other images in this manuscript, is a unique representation of the world of ordinary people. Numerous realistic details—the hands and arms, for example, or the differing proportions of the body parts—reveal the artist's lack of technical training, although he proves himself capable of rendering ordinary life in an often humorous way. There is no attempt here at pictorial realism in the handling of space, rather it is a question of presenting a collection of precise details that recall rather than represent familiar things and people. This image acts as a kind of aide-memoire making it possible to recreate a way of life.
The Bustan
Muslih al-Din Saadi [1193–c. 1290]

Muslih al-Din Saadi was born in Shiraz in 1193 and lived to be almost 100 years old. His two main works, the Diwan and the Bustan are anthologies of moral tales in which he preaches a moderate mysticism with a somewhat disillusioned subtext.

These curious facing pages appear to record a celebration at the court of the great Timurid patron Husayn Mirzâ Baybars. There are musicians, beverages, and food, along with the drunks-and-so characteristic of royal life at the period. The various figures of court life rub shoulders here: scholars and mystics, and even women. This composition could also be interpreted as an allegory of the life in which wine and music feature alongside leisurely activities [the prince offering a rose to a handsome young man], all of which take place on the periphery of real life, represented here by the unobstructed wetness being denied entry to the palace [lower right] and the peasant woman [upper right] listening to a simple flute. The image is typical of Behzad’s style and his method of representation: the figures are separate from each other; alone or in small groups; some details shown contain a humorous element. What are the two figures in the center left of the image thinking about? What is the young man on the left looking at—a devout text or an erotic poem? Why show the wine being prepared in such detail? Who is the young man alone on the left of the right-hand image? All these are questions for which each viewer is free to invent his own answers, as he immerses himself in the image.