In Nizami’s story, Khosrow dreamed that he would meet a great beauty named Shirin. His friend Shapur tells him that he saw Shirin in Armenia and that she was one of the queen’s maids. Shapur returns to Armenia and covers Shirin’s garden with portraits of Khosrow (an often illustrated scene). Shirin is so impressed that she rides post haste for Iran to meet with Khosrow. After 14 days and 14 nights, she reaches the edge of a small pond [once silver] and decides to bathe. Khosrow has set out to find her and arrives at the pond. Smitten by Shirin’s beauty, he approaches when she sees him. Shirin covers her body with her long braids, dresses and disappears. Neither has recognized the other and it will take many more adventures before they are finally united.

The scene comprises three areas: the space in which Shirin sits, the space occupied by her jockey, and the space from which Khosrow looks on, his finger on his mouth in a sign of emotion. Shirin’s horse turns towards her and its whistling rings out over the entire image. Between these figures is a fine composition of rocks, often animated, particularly around Shirin, that stand out in their shimmering, artificial colors.

It is clear that the artist was unfamiliar with painting nude figures, and Khosrow, although elegant, almost stands in the saddle but appears to have the legs of a dwarf.
As in a theater, a two-dimensional, lavishly decorated torso with a long inscription celebrating the Safavid king Shah Tahmasp, the scene takes place on the edge of a flower-filled garden in front of a courtyard or paved esplanade with a pool surrounded by flowers. The young monarch is seated on a raised throne, surrounded by some 40 courtiers and servants bearing food and drink, along with hawks for hunting, weapons, and perfume burners. Some are enjoying a meal that has not yet captured Khoasrāv’s attention, while six pages are artificially placed standing on top of a wall that lacks any depth.

What dominates this image is the luxury and wealth of the royal entourage. The hands and eyes of all the figures suggest personal conversations and relationships. The throne seated on the left, and the two seated on the upper right are perhaps the only two well-known court figures or members of the royal family. But what really renders this painting fascinating is not so much its narrative character as the fact that the gestures and poses create an asymmetrical composition in which a number of movements emanating from different directions focus attention on the figure of Khoasrāv.
Khosrow and Shirin listen to the tales being told by Shirin’s maid
Page from the Khamsa or “Quintet” of Nizami (c. 1145–1207)
(1539–1543) [Tehran, Iran]
Painting attributed to Agha Mirak (sixteenth century).
London, British Library, Or. 22695, fol. 68 v°

Khosrow and his beloved Shirin are seated on a throne similar to that in the previous image. This time, however, the composition is symmetrically arranged around a central, vertical axis. It is the same garden, however, and the construction of the pavilion with a courtyard in front differs only in that there is a fence surrounding it. The men are on the right, the women on the left. This episode illustrates an important theme in Nizami’s poem, Khosrow’s and Shirin’s love can only be expressed by their union; this union must be preceded by all manner of celebrations at which there is eating, drinking and music, fabulous tales and adventure stories to listen to. The message is that, although under the influence of desire, one must learn to control oneself in order better to savour passion when it becomes licit. As the verses inscribed on the architecture point out, this is where the true glory of the king lies: “May the entire world be yours, you who control the throne of Jamiestâh [i.e., mythical king of Iran]” [...]. The scalp of my foe is your house. Be good, be proper, because this house is your house.” These verses, the interpretation of which is not always clear, appear to grant the prince possession of this place.

As in the preceding image, the men and women in this miniature are all connected by their hand movements and the direction of their gaze. Three figures play a particularly curious role. In the foreground, a servant with unusual headdress carries a torch and turns towards the viewer as if inviting him to the celebration. Two other torch carriers, on the right, appear not to belong to the scene or only to balance the construction of the image (details: fig. 56, p. 158; fig. 157, p. 209; fig. 114, pp. 222–23).