Khosrow listens to Barbad singing
Page from the Khamsa of Nizami (c. 1141–1207)
1539–1543 (Tehran, Iran)
Painting attributed to Mira Ali
London, British Library, Or. 2265, fol. 79v

Despite his love for Shirin, Khosrow is constrained for reasons of state to marry Mihrim, daughter of the Byzantine emperor. During the celebrations following the marriage, Khosrow becomes drunk and calls for Barbad, his favorite troubadour. The latter, rather undiplomatically, it would seem, sings 30 songs praising Khosrow’s love for Shirin. The king becomes emotional and goes so far as to ask Mihrim to take Shirin as her slave. She refuses and resolves to kill herself or have Shirin killed. A series of dramas then ensue, ending with the tragic death of the king.

None of this is apparent in the image, which, at first sight, is a barely modified version of the garden pavilion with lions and pool. The designs, which is very varied, includes a snow-covered mountain in the background, an unusual motif. The inscriptions on the facade and the carpet proclaiming the Shah’s glory include a reference to a marriage chamber to which all paths lead.

The originality of this painting lies in the representation of the members of the court. They all play a precise role in the king’s entourage, though certain details may not be clear to us. Each face is different, suggesting that they may be portraits. The group on the tower balcony—a young boy and a woman with an infant—are not part of the main scene. They are discussing something else which is not clear either in the image or the surrounding text.

The many varied gestures make one wonder who, apart from the young prince seated on a carpet, is in fact listening to the troubadour’s songs (detail 115 p. 156–157).
The young prince Bahram Gur was sent to the Yemen to complete his education. There he distinguished himself by becoming a skilful hunter known for one particular episode that was often painted on the walls of his palace. Seeing a lion attacking an elephant, he succeeded in killing it along with the wild donkey with a single arrow. This feat was witnessed by his concubine Fitrwa who had accompanied him, playing the harp. The episode is depicted in the triangle that occupies the center of the image. There are two further elements: on one side hunters attack a pantomime snow leopard already wounded by an arrow; and on the other, at the top of the image, an ibex and a bear are preparing to hurl an enormous rock on to the same leopard. The protagonist of this very lively image forms a striking contrast: the hunter prince, the bear, the three small hunters on the right, all very active; the ibex, detached by seeing the bear; Fitrwa and the horseman on the right; and the more or less hidden observer on the upper right who appears calm, not displaying the least interest in the main scene (detail fig. 54, p. 135).
Page from the Khurrami or "Qurum" of Nizamī (c. 1141–1175)
Painting attributed to Behzâd (1450–1535)
London, British Library, Or. 8031, fol. 135v

The funeral cortège is preparing to leave, along with a tech bearer and two beggars. The mourners and family members—women in the courtyard, men outside, two isolated figures standing on the roof and stairs, and an extraordinary couple embracing—demonstrate their sorrow through their actions, appearing face on and even (a rare occurrence in Islamic art) with their backs turned or in profile, in an array of well-studied poses. It seems likely that the woman dressed in a black robe leaving the house is Layla, but her identity is unimportant, just as there is nothing in the image to suggest who the bearded man—a totally secondary figure in this drama. This painting is a sober composition reflecting the pain caused by death and the gestures expressing the range of psychological reactions such circumstances provoke. None of this appears in the text. For reasons unknown to us, the painter, or perhaps his patron, has decided to express human feelings with power and fervor through the attitudes of the figures and their facial expressions.
The building of the castle of Khurramq

Page from the Khamsa or "Quintet" of Nizami (c. 1141-1207)

1444-1453 [Herat, Afghanistan]

Painting attributed to Sultan Muhammad [c. post 1550]

London, British Library, Or. 8610, fol. 154 r

Looking at this scene of activity showing figures engaged in building a wall, it is easy to discern the tasks each is performing: stone cutting, mixing mortar, carrying bricks and bricklaying. All this work is being carried out from some temporary scaffolding and a tall ladder providing access to it. Some twenty workman can be seen at ground level, almost all are small but depicted in a lively fashion. These realistic elements are treated with humor and comic sense of men and objects. For example, on the right there is a man climbing a ladder back to front while carrying a large block of stone that he looks as if he may drop, if he does, it will fall on the workman about to pass in front of the ladder. And if this workman stumbles, it will lead to a string of disasters ending with the little chap on the left bent over and seen face on, falling into the mortar. It is curious that unlike other representations of major building sites, this one does not show the foreman in charge of the work, is it satire or simply comedy?