The Haft Awrang
of Jami (1414–1492)

Jami, who was born in 1414 and died in 1492, was the last great poet of the classical period. He spent almost his entire life in Herat (Afghanistan). His long, didactic poems present a mystical vision of the world through the medium of short stories often inspired by history or literature.

The love of young Fays (also known as Majnun, the "possessed") for Layla causes him to lose his wits. The story of this unfortunate and tragic love exists in a number of forms in many poems and has been well illustrated. Here, our hero is shown as very small and on the left of the image. He appears to be grieving by an old man perched on a camel. Layla must be one of the young female figures in the large tent in the center of the composition, but these are suppositions only. It is possible that the painter intended this ambiguity to underline the drama of the story. It seems more reasonable to view this as a representation of various practical activities—meals being prepared, firewood being gathered—or symbolic scenes—four pairs of women in the upper left quadrant can be seen on a piece of land beyond the confines of the normal world. It is as if an ancient interpretation of the story had governed its transformation into image. But it is also possible to see it simply as the brilliant details of life in an encampment transformed into a traveling picture (see text fig. 2, pp. 11–12).
This miniature illustrates a passage of the text in which an old dentist is in love with a youth that he grooms up in his hair style that the latter has so cut. The young man never pays the old man any attention and he dies of his love. He then returns to haunt the beloved who pays for the cruelty by becoming a beggar.

It is difficult to recognize this tale in this extraordinary image of a hammam. A wealthy man is seen entering; he is shown the changing room and the many activities taking place in the establishment, including a touching detail of a father helping his son to the bath; and lastly we see the washing room where people also have their hair cut and are massaged. On the roof two figures can be seen drying their towels but what the third is doing remains a mystery. Though the text is moral in content, here it was mainly to show a series of different situations for which one could invent amusing, moving and sad tales, all set within a typical architectural two-story hammam. The array of actions and expressions, which we cannot entirely grasp today, transform these pages into mind games, visual puzzles that may be nothing more then entertainments but which may perhaps have more profound meaning within the world of mystical images and symbols.
Lesson in love

Page from the 'Hijr Amr' or 'The Seven Thrones' or "The Constitution of the Great East" by Shahriyar (1404–1482), 1555–1566 (Kashan region, north-west Iran)


This is a curious image. It tells the story of a father explaining to his son that true love is not born of what we know of natural forms of beauty, but of the innate qualities of the person. Divine love is eternal and flawless, but each one sees beauty in a different way.

How is this interpreted in the image? Seven or eight groups of men, connected by their gestures, can be seen positioned around a garden pavilion. They represent the various ways of attaining love (playing chess, watching girls, making music, reading), as the old man seated at the foot of the tree explains to the young man standing on his right. And then there is a solitary lover, dressed in yellow, and writing a poem on a wall about his unhappy experiences of love. The text of the poem can be seen above and below the image of the young man. "I have written on the door and on the walls of every house the maltration of my love for you. Perhaps one day you will pass by and will see this account of my condition. In my heart I had her face before me, I saw what there was in my heart." The poem remains unfinished.

By contrast, three youths are shown bustling outside eggs from a nest and a sultana fruit on the lower right appears to be working the land. These are birds all around, the garden is in bloom and the multicolored rocks form a counterbalance to the skillfully decorated building.

Is this image really a series of metaphors on love? Or is it perhaps simply an artificial composition depicting wealthy, idle young men?