Pl. 15 Three demons or three vagrants
Page from the Sarai Album
Fifteenth century [Istanbul, Turkey]
Painting attributed to Siyah Dalan (the Black Pen)
Istanbul, Topkapi Sarayi Muzesi, hazire 2153, fol. 90b

An old woman leaning on a stick, dressed in a large cloak and sanaets, is approaching two figures who are entirely naked save for their bands. One of them, the black one, is swallowing something. The other, who is red, is stroking his chin. He has a goblet in his left hand. The three figures are shown in a monumental, wizened style with deformed faces.

This treatment is characteristic of the artist later known by the name of the Black Pen. However, the fact that there is an entire series of images in the same style does little to explain the meaning of this image or its origins. In fact it remains impossible to tell whether these are representations of demons, monsters or just deformed vagrants on the margins of society. These are extraordinary representations of an ugly, brutal world, of a reality imagined and transformed by the artist and collected by the public, yet in stark contrast with the refined images of court life.

(detail, p. 18, p. 27)

Pl. 17 Demons in conversation
Page from the Sarai Album
Late fifteenth century [Istanbul, Turkey]
Painting attributed to Siyah Dalan (the Black Pen)
Istanbul, Topkapi Sarayi Muzesi, hazire 2153, fol. 34 v

Two impressively named demons sit facing each other. The one on the right is holding a golden goblet and recounting something, while the other listens and shows his enjoyment by holding a finger to his mouth—a traditional gesture in Iranian painting to signify emotion. The club in front of them and the curtain above their heads may form part of the story, or may symbolize their status in the world of devils or demons (followers from the tribe of Central Asia). However, none of this is apparent and we can only wonder at the brutal mastery of the draughtsmanship displayed by the Black Pen whose signature, added later, can be seen on the image.
Portraits

From the sixteenth century onwards, and especially in the seventeenth century, a new genre emerged: the autonomous depiction of men and women, sometimes of couples, who are no longer presented simply as participants in some particular activity. To use the term 'portrait' to describe these images would be only partly accurate as only some of these figures can actually be identified. Most often, they reflect some of the fancy protagonists of the society of the period, sometimes in a satirical fashion; these figures often radiate a joyous sensuality.
of the princess
yet is somewhat
to each detail,
the richness of
oral talent.