PERSIAN PAINTING
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by James Cahill

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by Richard Ettinghausen

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by Basil Gray

80 REPRODUCTIONS IN FULL COLOR

Running parallel to the evolution of Christian art in the West, the art of book illumination in Iran took its rise under the Sassanian rule in the 4th century of our era and developed uninteruptedly until the 13th century. Boil illumination reached an acme only to architecture, while wall painting, metalwork, ceramic, and textiles fulfilled a decorative function. The painting was unknown in the East, and sculpture was confined to funerary monuments. Under the circumstances, illuminated manuscripts, miniature painting and calligraphically-ornamented pages were the most characteristic forms of the miniature painting and calligraphically-ornamented pages were the most characteristic forms of Persian art.

After an introductory survey of the earliest surviving examples of Persian painting, Basil Gray describes and illustrates the periodical style of the Mongol invasions of the 13th century, while devastating the leading centers of Persian civilization, opened the country to artistic influences from Central Asia and China which stimulated the rise of a new art. Thereafter the arts of the book gradually evolved towards the perfection attained in the 15th century. Combining dramatic interest with sensitively waning and vivid color, the Persian miniature of that age achieves a faultless harmony and balance between the written text and the painted page. Here is a school of painting, wholly imbued with poetry and beauty, unique in conception, European in its sense of form and color. The early 16th century marked the transition towards a new style, with scenes containing many figures, increasingly elaborate and ambitious, resulting finally in full-page compositions and separate drawings forming independent pictures in their own right.

Essentially an art of manuscript illumination, Persian painting is seldom to be seen in the original, the faithful works are widely scattered in museums and libraries all over the world, and only in the 20th century has it begun to arouse the interest its unique quality demands. In the past twenty years or so the field of art-historical research has been greatly broadened, yet this book is the first general study illustrated in full color to be made of Persian Painting of masterpieces whose exquisite design and imaginative coloring give them a place apart in the Orient.

Color plates on the cover:

Illustration (Mandar) : Heydari of Ibn Bathtahu (two leaves), illuminated, Masqta, 1798; M. 5.04, Nisat 1 recto.

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ALBERT SKIRA
TREASURES OF ASIA

PERSIAN PAINTING

TEXT BY BASIL GRAY
Former Keeper of Oriental Antiquities at the British Museum

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This book could not have achieved its representative character without the generous help of those who have the charge of the masterpieces of Persian painting now scattered throughout the world. We are especially indebted to Dr Mehdi Bayani, Director of the Gulistan Palace Library, Tehran, for access to the manuscripts under his charge and for obtaining the Royal permission to reproduce the miniatures selected. We are also grateful to Mr Haluk Bey, Director of the Topkapa Sarayi Library, and to Mr Kemal Çığ, Director of the Museum of Turkish and Islamic Art, in Istanbul, for permission to reproduce works in their keeping. It is a special privilege to be allowed to include unpublished material from the Gulbenkian Foundation, Lisbon; from the Topkapa Sarayi Library and the University Library, Istanbul; and from the Berenson Collection at Settignano.

I wish to acknowledge the help of all my colleagues in different countries, especially Dr Richard Ettinghausen, Freer Gallery, Washington; Dr Maurice Dimand, Metropolitan Museum, New York; Dr Karl Kup, New York Public Library; Miss Dorothy Shepherd, Cleveland Museum of Art; Dr Dorothy Miner, Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore; Messrs Eric Schroeder and Gary Welch of the Fogg Art Museum, Harvard; and in the British Museum my friends Mr Kenneth Gardner, Keeper of Oriental Manuscripts, and his assistant Mr Glyn Meredith-Owens; Mr N.C. Sainsbury, Keeper of Oriental Manuscripts at the Bodleian Library, Oxford; Dr R. J. Hayes, Chester Beatty Library, Dublin; Professor David Talbot Rice, University of Edinburgh; and M. Jean Porcher, Conservateur des Manuscrits, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris. I owe a special debt to Mr Ralph Pinder-Wilson for having read through the complete text and for giving me frequent help in my work. Finally my greatest debt is to my wife, Nicolet, who has supported me throughout the preparation of the book by her encouragement and an appreciation of its subject as keen as my own.

I dedicate this volume to the Persian people and to all those, living or dead, who have helped to reveal to the world the beauties of Persian painting.

Basil Gray

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Introduction

Persia has a tradition which has been tenaciously held throughout the catastrophic course of a history imposed on her by her geographical situation. The heart of Persia is the Iranian plateau which has nourished her tough resistance in a land dependent for water on the trapping of the streams from the snow mountains which surround it. But this plateau is also a bridge over which many waves of invasion have passed since prehistoric times. When the plateau has been in the hands of a strong ruler, it has been the centre of an empire covering the better watered plains and valleys which lie to the south-west in Mesopotamia and to the north-east in the lands of the Oxus and the Jaxartes. The greatest of these empires was that of the Achaemenids, a succession of energetic and able rulers who in the sixth century B.C. established a provincial administration held together by its famous system of communications that has been substantially maintained throughout the succeeding centuries. The central administration has changed often enough from one foreign power to another since Alexander the Great destroyed the original empire; and at times the provinces have been virtually independent, or divided between other empires, but the memory has never been lost of the Achaemenid achievement; and it is this, with the language, which has given Persia her sense of national continuity. While inflicting immense damage the invasions have also brought many fructifying influences to Persia. The Macedonian conquest opened a long period of intense commercial relations with the Mediterranean world, already adumbrated by the dominance of the Persian coinage in the ancient world. The command of the overland route to China enriched her merchants materially while giving her access to the products of the greatest civilization in Asia in the first millennium of our era. Persia under her Parthian and Sasanian rulers long appeared as the protagonist of Asia against the power of the Roman and Byzantine empires, but her historic role is rather of a middle kingdom in which many traditions have fructified. The main route across the north formed part of the long trade route which brought Chinese silk to Rome or Byzantium. From Farghana, famed for its superior horses, the route passed by way of Samarkand and Bukhara across the Oxus into Khurasan, through Merv and Nishapur, or further to the east through Balkh and Herat, and then over the desert by Damghan to Ray, near the modern capital Tehran. The route then turns north-west through Sultanieh.
and Tabriz to the pass into Armenia and the Black Sea. On the western edge of the desert there is another great road from Ray south to Qum, Isfahan and Shiraz, the capital of the southern province of Fars, which has given its name to the whole of Persia and to her language, Farsi.

The language, as has been remarked already, has been the sign of Persian continuity through her history, and yet there was a time when it seemed that it might be superseded for ever, at least as a literary and administrative tongue, by Arabic. The most profound and persistent change in Persia's history followed from the Arab conquest, so rapidly accomplished between 633 and 632, when not only the monarchy collapsed but also Arab governors replaced the native aristocracy. Even more fundamental perhaps was the wholesale conversion of the people to the religion of the conquerors, centred on the sacred book in the Arab tongue which thus became the language not only of government but also of all religious instruction and discussion. It was thus the only language of the learned and all history and science also were greatly enriched by its international use throughout the Moslem world. In these circumstances it is remarkable that the Persian people preserved their language, so that, as the power of the Caliphate began to decline in the ninth century, the native language revived with native rule. All the more was this remarkable because under the Sassanian rule literature had been practically equivalent to the religious texts of the national and royal religion of Zoroastrianism. A small minority had indeed clung to the old religion, but they were not an important element in the revived nationalism, and the Arabic script remained the universal medium for Persian as well as Arabic; and indeed this new Persian was permanently enriched with many Arabic words and forms of speech. The new language however was rooted in the popular oral tradition which had preserved the memories of the historic past and the native mythology, which has been shown to go back to the days when the Iranian ancestors were still living nomadic lives in the Central Asian steppe. These old traditions had been assimilated by the Zoroastrian priesthood to the official religion of dualism, and remained among the hymns incorporated into the Avesta. Now this rich national heritage could be written down in the new script, in the verse forms which developed directly from ballads sung by itinerant minstrels. It is by such oral descent that the stories which now make up the Shah-nama, or Book of the Kings, were preserved during the three hundred years which separated the fall of the Sassanian monarchy from the composition of the Shah-nama in the tenth century at the courts of the Samanid Nuh b. Manzar (976-997) and the Ghaznavid Mahmud (998-1030). Rudagi, the earliest Persian-writing poet whose work has survived, although very incompletely, was in fact a blind minstrel at the court of an earlier Samanid; and Daqiqi, who was commissioned by Nuh II to compose a Shah-nama in verse, seems at least to have had Zoroastrian sympathies. These early poets were expected to turn out a regular stream of panegyrics (qasidas), and must have attained a ready virtuosity in composition, which stood them in good stead when required to compose a poem of the length of the national epic of the Shah-nama. This was the work of Firdawsi of Tus who composed, during a period of thirty-five years, a poem in about fifty thousand verses including the thousand couplets
and Tabriz to the pass into Armenia and the Black Sea. On the western edge of the desert there is another great road from Ray south to Qum, Isfahan and Shiraz, the capital of the southern province of Fars, which has given its name to the whole of Persia and to her language, Farsi.

The language, as has been remarked already, has been the sign of Persian continuity through her history, and yet there was a time when it seemed that it might be superseded for ever, at least as a literary and administrative tongue, by Arabic. The most profound and persistent change in Persia's history followed from the Arab conquest, so rapidly accomplished between 635 and 652, when not only the monarchy collapsed but also Arab governors replaced the native aristocracy. Even more fundamental perhaps was the wholesale conversion of the people to the religion of the conquerors, centred on the sacred book in the Arabic tongue which thus became the language not only of government but also of all religious instruction and discussion. It was thus the only language of the learned and all history and science also were greatly enriched by its international use throughout the Moslem world. In these circumstances it is remarkable that the Persian people preserved their language, so that, as the power of the Caliphate began to decline in the ninth century, the native language revived with native rule. All the more was this remarkable because under the Sassanian rule literature had been practically equivalent to the religious texts of the national and royal religion of Zoroastrianism. A small minority had indeed clung to the old religion, but they were not an important element in the revived nationalism, and the Arabic script remained the universal medium for Persian as well as Arabic; and indeed this new Persian was permanently enriched with many Arabic words and forms of speech. The new language however was rooted in the popular oral tradition which had preserved the memories of the historic past and the native mythology, which has been shown to go back to the days when the Iranian ancestors were still living nomadic lives in the Central Asian steppes. These old traditions had been assimilated by the Zoroastrian priesthood to the official religion of dualism, and remained among the hymns incorporated into the rich national heritage could be written down in the new script, in the verse forms which developed directly from ballads sung by itinerant minstrels. It is by such oral descent that the stories which now make up the Shah-name, or Book of the Kings, were preserved during the three hundred years which separated the fall of the Sassanian monarchy from the composition of the Shah-name in the tenth century at the courts of the Samanid Nuh b. Mansur (976-997) and the Ghaznavid Mahmud (998-1030). Rudagi, the earliest Persian-writing poet whose work has survived, although very incompletely, was in fact a blind minstrel at the court of an earlier Samanid; and Daqiqi, who was commissioned by Nuh II to compose a Shah-name in verse, seems at least to have had Zoroastrian sympathies. These early poets were expected to turn out a regular stream of panegyrics (qasidas), and must have attained a ready virtuosity in composition, which stood them in good stead when required to compose a poem of the length of the national epic of the Shah-name. This was the work of Firdawsi or Tus who composed, during a period of thirty-five years, a poem in about fifty thousand verses including the thousand couplets which was all that Daqiqi had completed at the time of his death. This is the form of the national epic which is familiar to every Persian today, and it is this which is referred to in this book as the Shah-name.

There is no doubt that Firdawsi was following closely accounts of the national story which were composed, in part at least, as early as the later part of the Sassanian period; and it is an interesting speculation whether there was an equally old tradition of painted illustrations of the main subjects which it treats. It has been pointed out that Firdawsi describes the ancient ceremonies of the Sassanian kings, which he cannot of course have seen, vividly and even pictorially; such for instance as the throne of Khosrau with the crown suspended over it by a gold chain to which it was attached whenever the king was about to take his seat. There seems to be a very ancient tradition of depicting such scenes from national history on palace walls in Persia. On the other hand it has been shown that Firdawsi was using written records, so closely does his version follow such earlier sources as are available to us for comparison. It therefore becomes a question whether any of these may have been illustrated books. In default of any surviving manuscripts, we can only remind ourselves that paper was introduced into Persia from China in 753 A.D. Sassanian painting survives only in fragmentary remains of wall-painting, mostly outside the present frontiers of Iran: the history of Persian painting before 1200 A.D. has to be pieced together from scraps of evidence, supported by literary references.

The view has been expressed by Dr R. Ghirshman, who is the best qualified to judge, that under the Sassanians the decoration of palace walls with figure subjects became usual from the middle of the fourth century, at first in a thoroughly Hellenized style as under the Parthians; but already by this date the superciliously East Roman subjects, as in the floor-mosaics at Bishapur, have been given an oriental character.

This is not immediately apparent, he points out, because in the banquet scene, here symbolically depicted, the types of the nude dancing girls are those of Greek mythology. Moreover the small landscape elements are mere space-fillers, just as they were much later in the Islamic art of the ninth century throughout the Abbasid empire. So that we may see here at Bishapur already that revolt against naturalism and in favour of the conceptual which is significant for the future. At Bishapur no wall-paintings survive, but at a site in Afghanistan, in the valley of the Khulm river, at Duikhtar i-Nushirwan, there are the remains of a very large Sassanian painting on the rock-face, which seems to represent a governor seated on an official throne and under a white-winged crown with a pearl border and surmounted by a lion's head. The colouring is rich, lapis lazuli, yellow ochre and white, against a dull brown background. The throne and pose of the figure resemble a famous carved rock-crystal cup from the treasure of Saint-Denis, now in the Cabinet des Médailles in Paris, said to represent the Sassanian king Kavad I (488-532), seated on a similar throne with legs in the shape of winged horses. This same period may be given to the fragmentary wall-painting. Similar colouring is found in the late sixth century Buddhist wall-paintings of the Sui dynasty at Tun-huang, in the western edge of China, where Sassanian influence was especially marked at that time; standing as it does on the principal route by which this influence entered China.
The red background is found at Tun-huang in wall-paintings as early as the late fifth century, and in Persia itself at least as early as the fourth century, if the remains of a wall-painting discovered at Susa are to be given to the period of Shapur II (309-379), as its discoverer Dr Ghishman believes from archaeological evidence. Although this picture had fallen from the wall soon after it was painted, the remains show a red or blue ground and one or more horsemen heavily outlined in dark brown and coloured in flat washes. The only indication of landscape is a pattern of small crescents, perhaps representing plants.

At Pjandjikent in Soviet Khwarazmia, a site within the cultural orbit of Sassanian Persia, a Russian expedition has recently uncovered an extensive series of wall-paintings, part of which has been identified as illustrations to a cycle of exploits of the Persian hero Rustam. The best preserved part is a composition about fifteen metres long painted on a blue ground, against which a group of horsemen ride off to war, while the hero is engaged in combat with a monstrous snake. In another part his helpers are fighting against semi-human demons. The evidence of coins and remains of manuscripts from the site make it necessary to attribute these paintings to the early seventh century. Pjandjikent, situated in Transoxiana, not very far from Samarrqand, was one of the cities of Soghdiana, at this time inhabited by people of Aryan stock, mainly Zoroastrian in religion, under a dynasty of Ilkhanid rulers. Before the end of the century they had been driven out by the Arabs, but not finally excluded until 728, by which date the Turks had spread all over the open country. Such a history gives a good idea of the variety of races and the transitoriness of political power in these lands; and on the other hand of the permanence and pervasiveness of Persian artistic and literary influence. Throughout the story which we shall be following these facts remain true, and it must be realized that many races contributed to the population of Iran, and many foreign dynasties commissioned the poems and their illustrations in manuscript or wall-painting.

The story of Rustam, so leading a theme in the *Shah-nama*, was not a part of the national legend as it was originally shaped; but the cycle of his exploits seems to belong to the mythology of Sistan, now in South Afghanistan, and outside the central Iranian area. It was only later incorporated into the main tradition of the Persian epic, which remained remarkably free from Moslem influence, and still imbued with ideas of the royal monarchy and the power of the great nobles much as they had been under the Sassanians. A national legend of the heroic wars between the Iranians and the Turanians was composed at a time when the Persians were actually under Turkish rule and it retained its great popularity throughout the centuries of Mongol and Timurid domination. Though full of vivid touches the *Shah-nama* is a cycle of romantic adventures in the struggle of the good heroes against the forces of darkness, which yet often appear to follow the same code of knightly conduct.

The central position of this cycle in the history of Persian painting follows from the aniconic character of the Islamic religion, which provided no opening for figural subjects. It is clear however that from the beginning secular painting was employed by the early Caliphs to decorate their palaces and bath-houses. In Syria and Mesopotamia
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The central position of this cycle in the history of Persian painting follows from the aniconic character of the Islamic religion, which provided no opening for figural subjects. It is clear however that from the beginning secular painting was employed by the early Caliphs to decorate their palaces and bath-houses. In Syria and Mesopotamia these followed the style of the Mediterranean, while in Persia the Sassanian tradition was continued. In the other arts the Arab conquest brought no stylistic break, but the painting of the eighth century can only be guessed at from the few literary references. An important text for the purpose occurs in the _Tanbih or Compendium of Mas’udi_, who in his eighth book recounts how, in the year 915, he saw in the house of one of the nobles of Fars a thick volume of Persian lore and traditions, in which were represented all the kings of Persia of the Sassanian line, each one portrayed on the day of his death. They were painted in the richest colouring, including gold and silver, and showed each king in some everyday action or attended by his courtiers. This book was copied, according to Mas’udi, from an earlier version, dated 781. Even from the ninth and tenth centuries there are no surviving book illustrations in Persia nor wall-paintings except the meagre remains, but the Abbassid Caliphate, from its beginning in 750, was strongly Persian in character, both politically and in the arts. The seat of the Caliph at Baghdad was within the old frontiers of the former Sassanian empire and it is therefore not surprising that, in the words of Dr Ettinghausen, “the Persian character of Iranian painting at the court of the Abbasids is beyond question.”

This judgment rests on the evidence of the remains recovered from the site of the palace-city on the Tigris, Samarra, built by the Caliph Mu’tasim, and occupied only during the years 833 to 838. It was excavated by a German expedition in 1910-1914, and the finds published in a series of volumes, of which one by Ernst Herzfeld is devoted to wall-paintings. That they are formal figure paintings is not surprising in such a descendant from Sassanian court art; dancers and guards, huntsmen and attendants, they are rigidly presented in frontal and symmetrical poses within frame borders, generally pearled. The heads are large and the features heavily outlined, but the colouring was sumptuous with free use of gold. Generally there is little movement, but where there is, as in a well-known pair of dancers, the drapery forms a pattern of complicated folds. That this represents the old Sassanian style of flying draperies and pleated skirts as seen on some of the silver dishes and vessels decorated with hunting and feasting scenes, has been shown by Emmy Wellesz, in connection with the illustrations of the constellations in astronomical texts like the work of as-Sufi on the fixed stars, which are bound to be highly conservative. Though these are diagrams rather than miniatures, they do help to give an idea of the rather solemn but highly decorative repertory of the Abbasid period. It might be thought that the Persian tradition of this style was evident, but as a matter of fact attempts have been made to attribute the Samarra painting style to two other sources.

It has long been observed that the decorative wood and stucco at Samarra show the influence of the nomadic art of Central Asia, whose grammar is dominated by the play of light obtained by oblique cutting away of the surface. Such an art based on wood cutting is thought to have been introduced to Samarra by the Turkish guards who were so conspicuous in the court life of the Abbasids. If this is admitted it is further suggested that the painting style too may have been under similar Turkish influence, and this allegation is supported by a comparison with rather earlier wall-paintings of heavily
contoured, richly clad and frontally drawn friezes of knights discovered by a German archaeological expedition at Kutch in Turkestan. The point is supposed to be clinched by pointing to similarities of ethnic type and costume or accoutrements, and of the sad-looking heavy faces. But all these points can be otherwise accounted for; this Central Asian school had long been, as has been pointed out already, under strong Sassanian influence; both it and the Abbasid school were thus descendants of the same Persian tradition. The most important wall-paintings at Samarra are not the figure paintings but the splendid frieze of floral scrolls enclosing animals and human figures, which was based on the Eastern Persian version of a late Roman theme. Like some of the Samarra stucco patterns this is developed from the Sassanian palmette.

On the other hand the Samarra painting style has been given a Syrian origin for its figure subjects by Herzfeld, who fancied that he had found Aramaean signatures of painters on a set of large decorative painted storage vessels, three feet tall, which were discovered in the palace. It has been proved by Dr. D. S. Rice that these pretended signatures are wine labels, and the figures are in fact bordered by characteristic Sassanian pearl frames, while one is surmounted by that most typical design the ribboned duck. The Persian character of the Samarra painting is established beyond a doubt. But no book-paintings were found at Samarra and it is necessary to look to Turfan, on the northern trade route through Central Asia, where Le Coq’s expedition discovered some precious remains of illuminated manuscripts of scriptures of a Manichaean community. They are assigned to the early ninth century, when this area was under the control of the Uighur Turks, who ruled from about 750 to 850. The Manichaens were however refugees from the Arab invasion of Persia, and they had an ancient tradition of book-painting. For the founder of the Manichaean religion or heresy, Mani (d. 274), was always remembered in Persia as a painter of surpassing skill, even among those who persecuted his followers for their faith. There is evidence of the rich illumination of their books in a famous passage of St Augustine who writes of their fine manuscripts and exquisite bindings, if only as a fit for the burning. Indeed their esoteric and anti-social teaching with their successful proselytizing in many lands led to their constant persecution. To this fact we owe another reference in which it is recorded that in 943 at Baghdad, when sackloads of Manichaean books were being burnt by order of the Caliph Muqtadir, streams of molten gold and silver ran out of the bonfire. The fragments of the few pages found by Le Coq are all that now remain of all the richly decorated Manichaean scriptures. They are unmistakably Iranian; the miniatures are closely associated with the text, either beside or above it, and with a solid blue background rectangular in shape. Other pigments employed are red, purple, white and gold, with two greens, one dark and the other pale. The figures are drawn in outline and coloured with flat washes on which simple dress-patterns of rosettes are added. The only landscape elements are stylized trees, but there are space-filling floral scrolls. The pages are painted on both sides, but are now extremely fragmentary after further adventures during the last war. But their importance is great for they are by far the oldest surviving Persian book-paintings, and all that we have to represent the style of the first millennium.
contoured, richly clad and frontally drawn friezes of knights discovered by a German archaeological expedition at Kutcha in Turkestan. The point is supposed to be clinched by pointing to similarities of ethnic type and costume or accoutrements, and of the sad-looking heavy faces. But all these points can be otherwise accounted for; this Central Asian school had long been, as has been pointed out already, under strong Sassanian influence; both it and the Abbasid school were thus descendants of the same Persian tradition. The most important wall-paintings at Samarra are not the figure paintings but the splendid frieze of floral scrolls enclosing animals and human figures, which was based on the Eastern Persian version of a late Roman theme. Like some of the Samarra stucco patterns this is developed from the Sassanian palmette.

On the other hand the Samarra painting style has been a Syrian origin for its figure subjects by Herzfeld, who fancied that he had found Aramaean signatures of painters on a set of large decorative painted storage vessels, three feet tall, which were discovered in the palace. It has been proved by Dr. D. S. Rice that these pretended signatures are only labels, and the figures are in fact bordered by characteristic Sassanian pearl frames, while one is surrounded by that most typical design the ribboned duck. The Persian character of the Samarra painting is established beyond a doubt. But no book-paintings were found at Samarra and it is necessary to look to Turfan, on the northern trade route through Central Asia, where Le Coq’s expedition discovered some precious remains of illuminated manuscripts of scriptures of a Manichaean community. They are assigned to the early ninth century, when this area was under the control of the Uighur Turks, who ruled from about 750 to 850. The Manichaens were however refugees from the Arab invasion of Persia, and they had an ancient tradition of book-painting. For the founder of the Manichaean religion or heresy, Mani (d. 274), was always remembered in Persia as a painter of surpassing skill, even among those who persecuted his followers for their faith. There is evidence of the rich illumination of their books in a famous passage of St Augustine who writes of their fine manuscripts and exquisite bindings, if only to prove the burning. Indeed their esoteric and anti-social teaching with their successful proselytizing in many lands led to their constant persecution. To this fact we owe another reference in which it is recorded that in 923 at Baghdad, when sacksloads of Manichaean books were being burnt by order of the Caliph Muqtadir, streams of molten gold and silver ran out of the bonfire. The fragments of the few pages found by Le Coq are all that now remain of all the richly decorated Manichaean scriptures. They are unmistakably Iranian; the miniatures are closely associated with the text, either beside or above it, and with a solid blue background rectangular in shape. Other pigments employed are red, purple, white and gold, with two greens, one dark and the other pale. The figures are drawn in outline and coloured with flat washes on which simple dress-patterns of rosettes are added. The only landscape elements are stylized trees, but there are space-filling floral scrolls. The pages are painted on both sides, but are not extremely fragmentary after further adventures during the last war. But their importance is great for they are by far the oldest surviving Persian book-paintings, and all that we have to represent the style of the first millennium.

The metropolitan Abbasid style which can be studied at Samarra was widely influential throughout the empire, and even reached lands beyond it, such as Norman Sicily and Moslem Spain in the first half of the twelfth century, to which it was transmitted by the Fatimids of Egypt, who were more conservative in taste than the Arabs of Mesopotamia (Iraq). The fascinating series of panel paintings on the ceiling of the Cappella Palatina at Palermo belong however rather to the history of Arab than of Persian painting. But in East Persia also this tradition of palace wall-painting persisted, as can be seen from the scanty remains from Nishapur in Khurasan and among them the life-size figure of a horseman painted on the uncoloured wall, and other fragments showing that the heads were once emphasized by coloured haloes, just as in the contemporary ninth century Buddhist painting in the cave temples at Tun-huang. Although this was painted under a native Persian dynasty the Samanids, the costume of the rider is that of the steppes, long boots decorated with a flower pattern, and a leopard skin saddle-cloth; and he uses stirrups, a Central Asian invention. Three raps hang from the leather waist-belt, which is a Turkish dress fashion found again in the costume of the most important composition surviving from the mediaeval wall-painting of the Eastern Caliphate. This is the frieze of knights which once surrounded the audience chamber of the palace of the Ghaznavids at Lashkar-i-Bazaar, on the Helmand river in Afghanistan. Here again we see the persistence of this old tradition of palace decoration with rows of impressive guards, each shown in the same military stance corresponding to the guard mounted for public audiences outside. Daniel Schlumberger who discovered and published this important frieze has correctly attributed the costume of these knights to a Sassanian fashion preserved in Turkestan, and has recalled the old Persian tradition going back to the Achaemenids of such a scheme of palace decoration, still kept alive by these Turkish invaders who burst in from Central Asia and established a transitory empire (995-1380) which covered the Punjab, Afghanistan, Sistan, Khurasan and much of Central Persia. As in the Abbasid paintings of Samarra, the free space between the figures are filled with flowers or fruits. In fact the style seems more old-fashioned and monumental, and less free than the horseman from Nishapur painted more than a hundred years earlier.

Such was the state of wall-painting in the time of Firdawsi, and such would have been the wall-paintings mentioned in the Shah-nama; where otherwise only portraits are mentioned, portable and therefore on panel presumably. There is no mention of the practice of book-painting in the epic, although we know from Istakhri and Hamza Isfahani that Pre-Islamic illuminated books were still treasured in old feudal families in the tenth century. On the other hand the Samanid ruler Nasr II (913-942) is said to have invited painters from China to illustrate the new translation of the Arabic story of Kalila and Dimna into Persian which he commissioned from the poet Rudagi; certainly a tribute to the reputation in Persia of Chinese art at this time. Not a trace of the translation nor of this alleged innovation now remains. So far as can be seen today no Chinese influence can be detected in Persian painting before the Mongol invasions of the early thirteenth century.
Until then Persia was ruled by another wave of Turkish conquerors from Central Asia, the Seljuq Turks, under the great Sultans from 1038 until 1137, and thereafter by atabogs who shared the empire between them. It was a period of great accomplishment in Persian poetry and letters, in which the greatest star was Nizami, whose Khamsa or Five Poems were to be so frequently illustrated by the illuminators of the subsequent centuries, but we know of no manuscript illustrated in Persia at this time. The only light which we have on figure drawing at this time is from decorated Persian pottery, particularly the two kinds, mina'i associated with Ray, and golden lustre associated with Kashan and Saveh. Both types were being produced in the last quarter of the twelfth century, and on both subjects have been identified from the Shah-nama, while poems round the rims serve also to connect these wares with literature. But the drawing hardly ever rises above artisan level in the figure subjects, in spite of the mastery of design applied to the traditional shaped vessels. In some rare instances however the vessel is treated as a vehicle for illustration, and the field divided into registers as on a page. A well-known example is the cup in the Freer Gallery on which the Shah-nama story of Bizhan and Manizha is shown in a succession of scenes in strip sequence divided between three registers. There is an extreme economy of representing the subject with the minimum of detail, but the interest is purely illustrative. Gone is the impressive art of the Sassanians and not yet arrived the romantic or lyrical art of the best miniature paintings of the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries. It is true that, throughout, innumerable illuminated manuscripts were produced, whose miniatures have interest solely as illustrations; but the qualities that render Persian miniature painting one of the great arts of the world and a unique expression of her genius do not lie in these. There is reason to suppose that Seljuq painting had not yet freed itself from this dependence on the subject, and that if we did have one of the first illustrated Shah-nama manuscripts, it would have the pedestrian character of these little scenes. Only when combined with the abstract art of arabesque or of inscriptions, as it often was at that time on pottery or inlaid metalwork, such figure subjects have themselves a formal beauty, transcending the accident of representation, by means of the very restrictions necessary to these media.

In Iraq under these Seljuq dynasties Persian influence diminished, and the democratic spirit of Islam prevailed so as to allow of the development of a humorous penmanship, while its scientific heritage from Hellenism appeared in economical illustrations more closely united to the text, as in the illustrations to the Arabic versions of Dioscorides or Galen. It is only in certain of the frontispieces to these volumes that the tradition of Sassanian Persia showed itself still powerful. Of this kind is a medical work ascribed to Galen and copied in 1199, probably in Mosul, the centre of a school under the atabeg of the Zengid house, one of whom, Nur ad-Din Arslanshah (1153-1210) just at this time was making his capital a famous centre for the production of engraved and inlaid metalwork. In 1210 Badr ad-Din Lu’lu’, an Armenian slave captured in battle, became regent and from 1233 was recognized as a ruler in his own right, and so continued until his death in 1259. For him there was copied in twenty volumes the great Anthology of Arabic poetry known as Kitab al-Aghani, between 1217 and 1219, of which half is now preserved.
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There is one manuscript which connects the school of Iraq of the early thirteenth century with that of the Persian Seljuqs, a romantic poem in Persian entitled _Varha va Gulshah_, now preserved in the Sarayi Library under the number Hazine 841. Many of the seventy small miniatures have coloured grounds, red, green, gold or blue, and all fill the intervals in the compositions with floral scrolls, stylized trees or birds in flight. The figure drawing resembles that on the Seljuq pottery of Persia, but the drapery folds are in the more naturalistic tradition of the Iraq school, rather than the flat arabesques of the pottery. Nearly all the heads of the human figures have round haloes, as on the Syrian enameled glass vessels of the period. The horses which occur in many of the pictures are particularly vigorous and well drawn. This unique book is obviously of the Seljuq period and it seems to fit best into an Iraqi milieu, but the poem is in Persian and copied by a scribe of Persian origin. In its illustrations one may see a reflection of the lost miniature art of Persia under the Seljuqs.

The paradox, which results from this survey of the history of painting in Persia before the Mongol invasions, is that it had not yet achieved the expressive and imaginative force, which was to give it its special and unique quality only after it had come in contact with Chinese drawing. This is the agent which seems to have freed the Persian genius from its subordination to the other arts of the book by a mysterious catalysis.