Shiraz and the Iranian Tradition in the Fourteenth Century

The story of the fourteenth century which we have followed so far is that of the impact of the Chinese style and its gradual absorption into the main stream of Persian painting, which was possible because the Il-Khans built on the older culture of the country. But away from the court and its immediate environment in Azerbaijan, things worked out rather differently. Chinese influence was clearly less strong, and probably only second-hand, through the industrial arts, especially the costume of the invaders. The older traditions of Persian painting could persist more vigorously under these conditions; a main centre seems to have been Shiraz, capital of the southern province of Fars which had been the heart of the Achaemenid empire.

Shiraz itself was a creation of the Saffarid (867-900) and Buwayhid (933-1055) dynasties, and under the Mongols was a prosperous city with a great cultural tradition, having been the home of the poet Sa’di, who died there in 1294, and then of Hafiz, who survived to see the conquest of Timur and died in 1389. But in politics it suffered many violent changes during the century. The house of Inju, descended from the last governor under the Il-Khans, who became independent after the death of Abu Sa’id in 1335, ruled Fars from that date until 1353, when they were ousted by the house of Muzaffar, who had been the rulers of Yazd meanwhile. They had a greater dominion over all south-west Persia until they were finally extirpated by Timur in 1393. Both Abu Ishaq the Inju and Shah Shuja’ the Muzaffarids were patrons of Hafiz and might have been expected to have employed skilled artists of the book. In fact the volumes which can with certainty be assigned to Shiraz at this period all fall within the Inju domination. It is not until the eve of the fall of the city to Timur that there is a book which can be given without doubt to the Muzaffarids; but we shall try to bridge this gap. For there appears to have been a continuous tradition of book illustration at Shiraz, which is important just because of that continuity.

Four dated manuscripts of the Shah-nama (two of them are now dispersed) form a fairly close group, ranging in date between 1330 and 1352, and located at Shiraz by the dedication of one of them to the wazir Qawam al-Din Hasan, the patron of Hafiz, who died in April 1353, twelve years after its completion. Others are scattered in American and European collections. The majority of the miniatures have all-over coloured
backgrounds, in red, yellow-ochre or gold; but a few are plain without colour. It has been authoritatively suggested that these backgrounds derive from a tradition of wall-paintings, going back to Sassanian times. The existence of the tradition is now seen to be well-founded, but it must be admitted that there is a long gap in the tradition which is not at present covered in any way. However it can be seen that these miniatures reflect a style which was current in Iran before the Mongol invasions, exemplified in the lustre-painted pottery, tiles, and vessels, dated examples of which go back to the second half of the twelfth century. They have in common especially the heavy outline to the features and the filling of the background with trees or foliage, even in cases where it does not well suit the subject represented. The conventional types of trees also tend to be similar, with feathery foliage and large blossoms on thin and sinuous trunks. But there are equally new features in these miniatures and those in the other manuscripts of this Shiraz school; some, like the lotus dress-patterns and large peony flowers, importations of the Mongols from China; others like the strange coloured conical mountains in conventional colours, red, blue, purple and yellow, can be paralleled in much earlier paintings on walls in the Buddhist shrines of Central Asia, but may be of quite independent origin. For there are, on Sassanian silver vessels and dishes, indications of conventional landscape which show clusters of cones as symbols of mountain, and it seems quite possible that this convention, like the coloured background, may have survived as a living tradition in Iran down to the fourteenth century. The outstanding element in these miniatures is the animal drawing, firm, lively and sympathetic; such as might be expected of an old Iranian tradition.
The large peony flowers used as space-fillers in a *Kalila wa Dimna* of 1333 remind one of the common background to Sultanabad pottery. Another manuscript in which these flowers are found is the unique text of the Persian novel by Sadaqa b. Abú'l Qasim of Shiraz entitled *Kitab i Samah 'Ayyar*, now in the Bodleian library (Osney 373-381). The numerous miniatures in these three volumes are nearly all on a yellow or red ground, but are the roughest of all the work of the Shiraz school at this time. Movement is stiff and architecture and landscape extremely summary, but the conventions employed are the same as those in the *Shah-nama* manuscripts especially the two dated 1330 and 1333 in the libraries of Topkapu at Istanbul and the State Library at Leningrad. The colour range also is similar, with the stress on purple, blue (or the two combined in a peculiar violet), and yellow. Every scene in this whole Shiraz group is dominated by figures and always the other elements in the composition are subordinated and used mainly as decoration, to fill completely the rest of the picture-space. This is rectangular and generally occupies from a third to a half of the page within the margination, which it very seldom passes by a lance point or a banner. A special feature of the manuscripts of 1330 and 1341 is the stepped miniatures, rising in the centre like a pyramid, a device which emphasizes the symmetry of the compositions and so the traditional Iranian qualities of frontality and hierarchy. Possibly the steps derive from architectural murals. The “rouged” cheeks of the men and their strongly marked beards and eyebrows are also old Iranian characteristics reflected in the post-Sassanian painting of Central Asia.
A different type of illustrated manuscript which must be attributed to Shiraz is represented by a scientific anthology or dictionary entitled \textit{Mu'\'nis al-Ahrar}, preserved in the autograph of the author, Muhammad b. Badr Jajarni, dated 1341. This manuscript, formerly in the Kevorkian Collection, is now divided and pages from it are in the Museums at Princeton, Cleveland, the Metropolitan and the Freer Gallery. The illustrations are in three or four panels, the full width of the page, generally on a red ground but occasionally plain, with floral decorations and consist of separate images as in the well-known Larousse dictionary. They are of much finer draughtsmanship than anything which we have so far considered from this Shiraz school, and the rapidly drawn foliage sometimes recalls that in the Morgan Library \textit{Manafi} manuscript. Generally however it is only used as a decorative space-filler, as on the page at Cleveland, and on a larger scale on the fine drawing of the Planets in the Metropolitan; and the figure drawing is also nearer to the Shiraz group. By 1341 presumably many of the court artists from Tabriz may have sought employment elsewhere, and this may account for the superior execution of these pages. It is possible however that there was a closely allied school of book illustrators working at Isfahan, whose political fate followed that of Shiraz. The greater elegance of these drawings and the finer quality of line in the animal subjects serve to connect them with a group of \textit{Shah-nama} illustrations on a much smaller scale than those which we have been considering, but which are universally attributed to the first half of the fourteenth century, but have been diversely given to the schools of Tabriz and Shiraz. Two at least of these small manuscripts have been broken up and divided among many western collections, and a slightly larger volume is preserved in the Freer Gallery, but none is apparently dated. An attribution to Isfahan of this last has been suggested to the author by Dr Ettinghausen and is acceptable for the whole group. The other manuscripts are of a smaller format and may be slightly earlier in date. Whereas they include only a minimum of landscape, generally no more than a strip of grass and some straggling trees, the Freer book shows on several pages contoured peaks not unlike those in the Shiraz miniatures, but in a different colour range, in which slate-grey, blue and silver take the place of the cruder red and yellow of Shiraz. In fact the rich use of silver and of gold is one of the features of this book. But the smaller pages are only slightly less rich and many are painted on a gold ground. In fact stylistically they must stand together, and form a single group. They are remarkable for the fine and sensitive draughtsmanship, and the admirable movement of the animals especially of the horses. Clothes and armour are completely Mongol, but in spirit as far as can be from the Il-Khanid miniatures of the Demotte \textit{Shah-nama}, being as gay and narrative as these are pathetic or heroic. In fact they seem to reflect the older national tradition but with a greater debt to the refined mastery of Chinese brushwork than is ever seen in the Shiraz manuscripts. The pages from the \textit{Mu'\'nis al-Ahrar} manuscript of 1341 seem to form a link between the two, especially in the animal drawing. Their very economy allows of a concentration on the dramatic moment of gesture; and they are therefore well suited to accompany the text which is written in an old-fashioned hand. These simple compositions recall those on the pre-Mongol pottery of the twelfth century.
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With the Shah-nama of 1370 (Sarayi Library, Hazine 1511) we have completely left behind the natural landscape of the first half of the century and entered a conceptual world in which Persian painting was to excel during the next two hundred and fifty years. A few naturalistic trees survive, incongruously beside the formal tufts and stumps, but the imaginative concept holds the whole in a closed picture. The elements are to be seen as symbols rather than decoration; three men represent an army, two rounded peaks a range of hills, and a round circle the mouth of a well. It is important to consider this...
development in sequence of the whole history of the school, as a step towards the search for a satisfactory relation of miniature and text. Hitherto the conventions had been too much under the influence of the archetypes in Chinese scroll-painting or in large scale wall-painting to fit easily into the pages of a book. Consequently there had been too great a tension between the action and the landscape setting, each claiming more than its due; and often requiring to be viewed from a greater distance than is convenient with a book. This situation is clearly shown by the background treatment, which had hitherto been used to suggest infinite recession through the plane of the page unless this was directly negated by a curtain or wall. Now such a visual approach is abandoned in favour of an illusionary world in which the spectator participates as he does in a stage production. In this book of 1379, for instance, the wild country in which Bizhan has been imprisoned is represented by a series of blue segments arranged in a scale pattern and enhanced with gold sprays to indicate vegetation. The dragon which Bahram is attacking is no longer the loathly bleeding monster of the Demotte Shah-nama but a cerulean apparition formidable because unearthly, as dynamic as a coiled spring; and still sinister with its black mane. Colour is now used for its formal qualities rather than representationally. So, by different routes the miniature art at Tabriz and Shiraz had arrived at solutions of the problem of the book painting.