B.W.11: Detail from C.P.52/53

B.W.12: Detail from C.P.38

B.W.13: Detail from C.P.49

B.W.14: Detail from the witchcraft scene.
THE ICONOGRAPHY OF SIYAH KALEM'S ART
( THE LIFE AND PEOPLES OF WESTERN TURKESTAN)

Ethnic and Class Distinctions

From some of Siyah Kalem's pictures we glean detailed information concerning life in Western Turkestan and its peoples. A frequently recurring figure is characterised by a round face, eyes set wide apart, small flat nose, protruding chin, and broad mouth, between fleshy lips two rows of healthy teeth can be seen. These figures display only minor variations from picture to picture (C.P.16,17,33,35). Their well fed faces, portly build, and dignified, self-confident demeanor tell us that these are members of the nobility (C.P.35). They hold staffs on which they often lean when standing up. They wear their turbans wound around a fur-lined, bell-shaped Turkestan cap. The ends of the turban are tied at one or both sides, and left hanging down. Although they do not have the slanting eyes and prominent cheek bones of the Mongol, there is an undeniable trace of Mongol ancestry. They must belong to the heterogeneous group of tribes known collectively as Manghol as far back as the time of Ghengiz Khan.

The common people are of plain appearance, their faces wrinkled and bearing the marks of their arduous lives. Some of them stand out with their scrawny bodies and beardless faces. Most of them go barefoot (C.P.6). Their conical felt hats come down to their eyes. Characters belonging to the middle class are distinguishable by their embroidered hats which symbolise their rank and profession.

In contrast to the diversity of headdress, the clothing displays little variety, and is much like those of nomads even today. There is no striking distinction between the dress of men and women. As in C.P.7, the women wear long robes falling to their feet in generous folds over long trousers. The lumpy awkward folds seen in some pictures indicate that clothes were lined with cotton batting in cold weather. The sleeves are excessively long and wide and can easily be flung over the shoulder to afford the wearer freedom of movement. The broad, open collars of the clothes are made up from a different fabric and when necessary can be lifted up.

Daily Life

Daily life on the steppes is largely spent outdoors; a nomad grazes his horse (C.P.9); another leads his horse by the reins (C.P.3); two men try to force a loaded donkey to walk (C.P.5); another hammers a stake into the ground while his companion scours the cooking pot clamped between
his legs (C.P.4); someone crouches down to blow the camp fire in order to
cook a meal; two people wash laundry while horses graze; hunting dogs romp
(C.P.2). These pictures are a source of detailed information about the
artefacts and weapons they used. In one, we see a nomad family in close-up
(C.P.7). The father is feeding the donkey at the left of the picture, while the
mother and three children stand to the right. Two of the children cling to the
mother while the third looks on curiously at the donkey being fed.
Among the pictures of this type is one showing a group of wandering
dervishes begging (C.P.6). The dervish sheikh who leads the group presents a
striking figure, mounted on a black donkey in the centre of the picture. The
sheikh and the two dervishes walking beside him to prop him up by the arms,
form a self-contained group. His importance is conveyed by his air of
detachment, the lines of his face, and his eyes which stare into emptiness.
The dervishes walking beside the sheikh and the dervish on the right who
precedes the group have suddenly turned their heads to look at an
approaching man who has appeared on the scene at the left. The man carries a
paralysed woman on his back whom he is taking to the sheikh to intercede for
her recovery. At that time Transoxania was the home of many dervish orders,
and it was widely believed that dervish sheikhs could perform miracle cures.
This picture is valuable documentary evidence of this belief.
Although Transoxania was Islamicised by the 15th century, life here was
isolated from the rest of the Islamic world. Customs and traditions dating
from pre-Islamic pagan faiths survived among the steppe people, particularly
the Ozbeks, and this hampered relations with all the other Islamic countries,
whether Sunni or Shiite. Religious education was in the hands of dervish
orders which did not adapt easily to the medrese culture officially upheld by
the state. Wielding considerable influence over the masses, these orders
became power centres. Some of them, such as the Nakshbendi, even exerted
influence over the ruling classes. The religious attitudes of these orders were
based on emotion rather than doctrine. The blind faith of the populace in
dervishes and sheikhs, and belief in their supernatural powers indicate that
they identified them with the Shamanist priests of an earlier era. The
dervish lodges (khandah) were usually located on the border of the steppe
close to the nomad pastures. The interminable demands of the orders often
placed an irksome burden on the urban communities, yet even the khans
themselves were afraid of arousing dervish hostility by rebuffing them.

Slaves and Dervish Orders

Some of the Siyah Kalem paintings introduce us to a very different group
of people who display no ethnic homogeneity. In C.P.22 a man with red
hair and blue eyes (perhaps a Kirgiz) is talking to a Sudanese. The
sharply defined facial features of the figures in the "Visiting Scene"(C.P.20),
those talking in C.P.27, and the dancers in C.P.30 indicate that they are
Indians, whereas the wrinkled faced old man crouched on the ground in
C.P.28 is black. We see these figures in various situations: washing laundry
(C.P.2), lost in contemplation (C.P.20), performing tricks (C.P.24), and often
engrossed in discussion (C.P.22) or playing music and dancing (C.P.30). Generally they are engaged in tasks requiring skill and attention. That they are all of the same class is evident from the two-piece costume consisting of short skirt and scarf which they all wear, to which is sometimes added a fur cape. They wrap the long scarf over their shoulders and around their necks. The fur capes may be bear or leopard skin (C.P.21,23). Some of them wear wrist or ankle bracelets, pendants or earrings (C.P.22). They go around barefoot, and only rarely put on hats (C.P.28).

What we see in these pictures is a minority group living among the local populace. These foreigners were slaves, captured in war or in raids, and brought to Transoxania from far and wide. Like Persia and China, Transoxania was a centre of the Asian slave trade. Slaves were used as labour among both city dwellers and nomads, doing all kinds of agricultural and domestic work. Islam accepted the condition of slavery, but insisted on the human treatment of slaves, who were generally regarded as members of the family. Many were owned by dervish lodges which provided them with food and clothing in return for blind obedience to the sheikh of the lodge. Life styles in the dervish orders took diverse forms, depending on the doctrines they upheld. While some were Orthodox Sufi orders complying with canonical Shari'a law, others followed a diversity of unorthodox doctrines. These independent, extremist movements were found mainly on the borders of the Islamic world in Transoxania. There is a large number of miniatures illustrating dervish life in the 15 and 16th centuries 19. In these pictures, the costumes of the dervishes are very similar to those of the slaves in the Siyah Kalem paintings. It is highly probable that these figures are members of a caste connected to the dervish orders of Turkestan.

Demons

A group of Siyah Kalem pictures give us an idea of the beliefs held by the nomad people of the steppe. Central to this system of belief are demons, with their horns, fearsome faces and animal skins (C.P.38-54). The tails of these semi-bestial creatures either resemble horse tails and hang down, or are similar to tiger tails with a dragon's head at the tip.

Looking at these pictures it might be inferred that the fearful monsters, giants and mythical creatures of Buddhist art have influenced Siyah Kalem. But in fact Siyah Kalem's demons are the creatures of an animistic world foreign to the moral systems of the major religions. Therefore they have nothing in common with the protective and destructive spirits of Buddhism, nor with the Satan and angels of Islam and Christianity. They are the product of a concept beyond good and evil, which does not recognise the duality of earth and heaven. These grotesque but powerful beings are creatures of imagination which demonise the mysterious natural forces of a world infested with spirits, and by this means attempt to exert control over them.

In the world of demons, metals and metal objects are imbued with special significance. The demons relish their attractive shine, and wear gold bangles
on their arms and legs, and gold rings around their necks (C.P.40,41). The objects they use include metal rods, chains and bells. Theirs must be a very noisy world. Looking at these pictures, we seem to hear the clang of striking metal and intermittently the crash of thunder, and roar of wild beasts. When they play their musical instruments, even the demons themselves cannot bear the ear-splitting clamour they make: the demon listening to music in C.P.46 can bear the din no longer and has blocked his ears.

In some of the pictures we see long strips of cloth, cords, pulleys, and animal feet attached to strings (B.W.13,14, C.P.38,44/45,47,51,54). These are instruments of witchcraft used to charm the spirits. C.P. 49 shows how a spell is cast: one demon ties another's hands behind him with a black cord, while a third, already bound, lies comatose on the ground. There is a close connection between the spell and the act of tying up. In most cases the spell is cast by tying, and can only be released by untying. Even today we still frequently use such expressions as "his fate was tied" or to be "spellbound".

To invoke spirits or exorcise them the witch doctor has to deceive them. That is why the shaman wears a mask and attempts to imitate them with savage motions and cries. Modern ethnological research indicates that the nomadic communities of Central Asia did not completely abandon the archaic and religious ceremonies of Shamanist times after their conversion to Islam. In these communities religious belief is fused with witchcraft. They look on dervishes and bhikshus as shamans, and believe that the dervish sheikhs have inherited the supernatural powers with which their ancestors invested the shamans.

Demons or Masked Shamans?

Are the demons in Siyah Kalem's pictures actually human beings participating in ceremonies and mystery plays in the guise of demons in order to communicate with the spirits? This question is begged by the close resemblance of the demons in some pictures to people, and the many instances in which it is difficult to distinguish between them. Siyah Kalem's demons behave like people: they wrestle and fight; they play musical instruments, dance, drink, cast spells, fell trees, spin thread, steal people and horses, and sacrifice horses to an unknown god (C.P.38-54). Their clothing resembles that of the slave figures discussed above: they wear short skirts and carry scarves, which they either wear over their shoulders or toss into the air as they dance. Their naked feet and legs are no different to those of human beings. In the case of the dancing demons this resemblance is not restricted to hands and feet, but extends to the entire body (C.P.44/45). In the scene depicting the sacrifice of a horse, which was a widespread Shamanist ceremony, the demon figures with their sharp beaked noses and blue eyes display human characteristics (C.P.52/53). Looking at these pictures we seem to see people in the guise of demons who have joined the ranks of djins, and having abandoned themselves to their instincts are transported by frenzy.

The distinction I have made here between demons and people dressed as
demons (between jinns and witch doctors) was of no moment for Siyah Kalem. There are no inanimate objects in the world of animism. Everything has a spirit, and these spirits make their presence felt everywhere, particularly in natural forces: in rain, in wind, in mountains, hills, plants, animals and people. The pagan desires to embody the sacred entity of the spirits in pictures and masks, so gaining control over them. Primitive people see the mask as a sanctuary for roaming spirits who wander the world unable to find peace. Invisible spirits find form in the mask, and so become visible. So the witch doctor who wears a mask concealing his own face becomes identified with the spirit. He no longer speaks like a human being but screams in the voice of the spirit. For Siyah Kalem there could be no categoric distinction between the spirit and the witch doctor who invokes the spirit, but only a transition. Just as spirits look and behave like people, so when Siyah Kalem's people appease the spirits they identify with them by dressing as demons.
SIYAH KALEM
IN AN HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"The voice which called Iran to be the power of the future was the voice of the North, the voice of the steppe, of the nomadic peoples."
(W. Woringer, Griechentum und Gotik, 1928, p.41)

The Culture of Central Asia

In order to understand the formation of Siyah Kalem’s art, it will help to take a brief look at the culture of Central Asia, scene of so many momentous historic events. Central Asian culture extended over an area from the Caspian Sea and Persia as far as the borders of China; northwards as far as Siberia, and southwards to the Himalayas (an area which today consists of Afghanistan, East and West Turkestan, Mongolia and Tibet). Across these lands passed the great trade road between the Far East and the Byzantine Empire, tracing its way along the green shores of the rivers which flowed amidst the deserts and steppe. Between the 6th and 10th centuries a series of states arose in these fertile lands, some of which became major cultural centres.

Since Central Asia was a region where many different cultures converged, Central Asian culture was eclectic in character, combining Persian-Sasanid, Indian and Chinese influences. While the Persian influence was naturally stronger westwards and the Chinese influence eastwards, no strict demarcations are possible. All the above mentioned cultural influences appear throughout the region to a greater or lesser degree, and while their preponderance might vary, the common ground far outweighed the discrepancies. The features which appear unique to the culture of a region are in fact variations on a shared cultural language, a language which allows us to speak today of a sui generis Central Asian culture.

Hellenism exerted a significant influence on Central Asian culture. Without erasing local cultural styles, Hellenism incorporated them into the great artistic traditions of Greco-Buddhist culture. The creative forces whose roots went back to Greece could not subdue local artistic traditions to their will but transformed them into Buddhist art. The encounter between Hellenism and Buddhism dates back to the time of the Macedonian kingdoms founded in India, but it took another five centuries after the death of Alexander the Great for Greco-Buddhist art to emerge and be disseminated in Central Asia.
Nomads on the Steppes of Central Asia

Nomad peoples lived in the northern regions of the steppes of Central Asia[^1]. The relationship between the states and the nomads who shared the land stretching from Persia to China was unchanging: the nomads obtained most of the goods they required from the settled communities by means of war, plunder, raiding or barter, whenever the interalliances between nomad communities became sufficiently strong they attacked the cities, establishing control over wide areas. The places where the nomad peoples wandered often passed through the rich nations which grew up along the Silk Road, via which Chinese silk, gold and other precious goods were carried to Byzantium. As a result, there was constant strife between the nomads and settled communities.

However, there were intermittent periods of peace secured by treaties, and in such times of tranquility good-neighbourly relations led to cultural interchange. The "barbaric" elements borrowed from the nomads and incorporated in the art of the settled peoples, such as those in Chinese theatre, would be a fascinating subject of study[^2]. Equally fascinating would be investigation of cultural borrowing in the opposite direction. The nomads not only adapted the customs of the settled communities to their own ways of life, but embraced many of their art forms. As far back in time as the Scythians, Hellenistic elements began to percolate into the world of the steppe peoples (B.W.5). The outstanding figurative art traditions of Central Asia enhanced this influence still further. Whereas Hellenistic forms encountered Buddhist humanism in the culture of the settled communities, among the nomads it confronted a primitive animism remote from the teachings of the major religions. Undoubtedly the nomadic tribes were not completely alienated from these religions, and among them were Buddhists, Christians, Manicheists and Muslims. But nomad society was predominantly Shamanist, and even when a tribe was converted to one of the major religions, Shamanism continued to preponderate in the faith of the common people, carried over in the form of diverse superstitions. Therefore in the steppe, Hellenistic forms fused with popular beliefs, giving birth to what art history terms "barbaric art".

Barbaric Art

Ethnological research has thrown considerable light on steppe art, and museums throughout the world contain a rich array of weapons, artifacts and decorative objects. These, above all the metalwork, are evidence of the mastery of the steppe people in imparting form to their media (B.W.5). On the other hand, we find no trace of any pictorial art of the steppe. Can it be that a people with such a mastery of form never tried their hand at pictorial art? Certainly the way of life of the nomads was not conducive to the development of pictorial art, unlike that of a settled community. Communities who spent their lives wandering from place to place had no

[^1]: For more details, refer to [source 1](#)
[^2]: For more details, refer to [source 2](#)
architecture, and consequently no buildings on whose walls to paint pictures. Similarly they knew nothing of tomb architecture or tomb painting. They were content to bury their dead with their personal possessions, their steed and their harnesses. On the other hand, the dance and music which were the principal elements of theatre played an important part in the lives of these communities. We might infer, therefore, that the nomads were not strangers to scroll painting. Scrolls, which were hung up to illustrate stories, could be easily put away and carried in the course of migration, but since they were made of fragile materials such as paper or silk, few have survived to the present day.

The first indirect documentary evidence of the existence of pictorial art among the steppe peoples are pictures painted in Persia in the first half of the 14th century. They were executed in Tabriz during the Ilkhanid period, in the wake of the massive migrations and political upheavals of the 13th century. Ghengiz Khan led the people of Central Asia westwards, where they encountered the cultural sphere of Islam. They occupied Transoxania in 1220 and Persia shortly afterwards, spreading further into the Middle East. It was the first time that a non-Islamic people had entered the lands ruled by the Abbasids. In 1258 the city of Baghdad fell, and the Islamic state became part of the Mongol Empire, which stretched from the Far East across most of Asia and northwards as far as Siberia. The Empire of Alexander the Great had broken up almost immediately after his death, yet the Mongol Empire, the largest in history had ever known, survived for a century after the death of Cengiz Khan thanks to its efficient organisational structure. By the mid-14th century, the Mongols were diminishing in power, but their empire was not finally extinguished until the early 15th century. This coincided with a new wave of occupation from Central Asia, as the armies of Timur swept down into the Near East.

Words and Pictures in Islam

As everyone knows, Islam forbids figurative art. God is manifested in the Word of the Koran, not in pictures, and those who depict human figures or have them in their homes are regarded by the faithful as idolators who, ignorant of the Koran, seek the Divine Truth in this world.

This belief prevented the development of pictorial art in the Islamic world, with the exception of book illustration, which emerged under the influence of the sufi teachings even during the lifetime of the Prophet. I will not diverge into the Islamic prohibition on figurative art and its consequences here, except to say that book illustration was always overshadowed by calligraphy. As the "Art of the Word", calligraphy ranked foremost among all the Islamic arts, and attained a superlative level of accomplishment in both the Arabic and Persian languages during the Late Abbasid period. The related art of illustration was initially restricted to scientific works and a few books written to amuse. Illustration of such masterpieces as the Sihehname of Firdevsi and the Hamse of Nizami did not become possible until the cultural
influences of the Far East and Central Asia reached Persia with the Mongols in the 14th and 15th centuries.

Mongol Style

Under Mongol supremacy the Islamic world was influenced by the cultures of the Far East and Central Asia in which figurative painting enjoyed a privileged status. The Mongols brought these two remote worlds into contact, but at first, Muslims saw this new culture through Mongol eyes. What art history refers to as Mongol style was that belonging to steppe art. The earliest examples of this style are to be seen in the Cami et-Tevarih of Reshid ed-Din. Reshid ed-Din, vizier to Gazar Mahmud (1295-1304) and his brother Olcaytu Hudabende (1304-1360), had a great library built in Rasidiye in the 13th century, and decided to commission an illustrated history of the world (Cami et-Tevarih) to be written here. Scholars and artists from all over the empire were summoned to Rasidiye. They included Mongols, Uighurs, Persians and Turks; and people of diverse faiths: Buddhists, Shamanists, Muslims, and Nestorians. Clearly there could be no question of any consistent style in such an undertaking, yet the Mongol style emerges distinctly in many of the illustrations. This style is characterised by a sense of volume foreign to Islamic art, as well as a use of line, shading and colour which went beyond the accustomed limitations of miniature painting. For the Baghdad School of illustration in the Late Abbasid period the line was a vehicle of abstraction, which by divesting objects of their volume transformed them into decorative motifs. In Mongol style, on the other hand, the line imparts substance to objects, producing tangible forms which seem to have been carved from a block (B.W.15,16). Shading is used extensively to assist the line in indicating volume. Both by varying the thickness of the line, and by use of shading from hard to soft and dark to light in the spaces between adjacent lines - particularly in the bulky and curving folds of the clothes - the sense of volume is increased. Colour, too, is employed to similar effect. The paint is transparent rather than being a masking layer concealing the forms, as in miniatures. The picture is drawn directly onto the paper with a brush, then coloured without hiding either the line or the shading. That is why it would not be misleading to speak of the Mongol style illustrations in the Cami et-Tevarih as coloured graphics.

Persian Art Under Mongol Rule

Very few pictures in Mongol style date from the Ilkhanid period in Persia. One of these is the manuscript known as the Demotte-Shehname after its former owner. The sixty large-scale paintings making up this monumental work are now scattered among numerous different museums and collections. The earliest Mit'racname paintings, which have been separated from the text they were meant to illustrate, are further examples of Mongol
style. These paintings, which are attributed to Ahmet Musa, are in Topkapı Palace Library (H. 2154).

Most of the book illustrations dating from the Ilkhanid period consist of isolated leaves torn out of the manuscripts to which they belonged. They may have been so torn out because they did not resemble miniatures painted in the flat superficial style. The known pieces from the Cami et-Tevarih are in Edinburg (U.B.N.20,1307), London (Royal Asiatic Society, Nr.59 Fol.1314).
and Istanbul (Topkapi Museum, 1314. This section is in Mecmua et-Tevarih compiled by Hafiz-i Ebru in 1425. H.1653 and 1654). There are a large number of lost or unidentified pieces, such as the many single leaves in the Palace Albums in Istanbul and Berlin. The latter are very similar to the Cami et-Tevarih illustrations in both style and iconography, depicting battles, sieges, pursuit of enemies, court ceremonies etc. (B.W.15).

Siyah Kalem Paintings and Ilkhanid Period Art

All the paintings in Mongol style bear an unmistakable stylistic resemblance to the Siyah Kalem pictures, which are also in Mongol style. Yet close examination reveals a considerable disparity between these and the pictures done in Persia in the Ilkhanid period. The Mongols brought scroll painting to the Near East. This was a form foreign to Islamic culture, and the Mongols’ cultural policy obliged them to put pictures into books in deference to local cultural tradition. Siyah Kalem’s pictures told a story, whereas Ilkhanid pictures were not stories in themselves but complements to the story. The enthralling effect of truth expressed in pictures was superseded in the Islamic world by a merely illustrative concept of art.

Siyah Kalem’s pictures are the sole documentary evidence of the existence of an art of painting in steppe societies. Looking at these we glean an idea of what steppe painting must have originally been like. In these pictures Mongol style appears as it was before encountering Islamic culture, in other words before it was adopted as conventional state art in Persia. The remote geographical location of Transoxania, the homeland of Siyah Kalem’s art, gave rise to this anachronism.

Transoxania was a region where Central Asian culture synthesised with Near Eastern Islamic culture. It was a place where people of many races, nations and religions mingled, forming richly diverse syntheses. In this cosmopolitan atmosphere local art forms embodying pagan beliefs were often able to survive out of reach of the influence of happenings in court circles. The Siyah Kalem pictures are the last products of a local art movement remote from court influences. In the 15th century, towards the end of the Mongol period, Persia was caught up in a fresh wave of Islamicism. The Islamic thought suppressed for so long under Mongol domination awakened once more to reassert its weight on cultural life. The pagan art of Siyah Kalem must at first have continued unaffected by this change, but once the Islamic revival reached as far as Transoxania local art movements were extinguished. Although Mongol style had not entirely fallen into oblivion in the 15th century, it survived as merely a pale reflection in the decorative art of the Timurid period.
NOTES


11. Mansi XIII, 24 D, 65 D.


14. The concept of essence plays an important part in the philosophical movements of the 20th century, particularly Phenomenology. The first modern art movement to adopt this concept was Early Cubism. Impressionism, which marks the final phase in the development of naturalistic art since the Renaissance, sought to capture the most fleeting visual impressions of the outer world in all their freshness. In contrast, the cubists sought the unchanging, permanent aspect of nature, attempting to grasp the essence of objects.

15. Guillaume Apollinaire first used the expression "conceptual art" to describe cubist painting in 1912.

16. The term "formative thought", coined by Paul Klee, has now entered the artist’s vocabulary. It expresses thought which forms instead of reflecting. Klee’s art wandered amongst “possible worlds”. In Klee’s view natural forms should be examined not anatomically, but physiologically, and objects are depicted in his paintings not in terms of form and appearance, but of function and essence. In his essay entitled "Creative Belief" he says: "Art does not reflect the visible, but makes the invisible visible," P. Klee, Das Bildnerische Denken, Basel 1976, p.76.


22. The only written source belonging to the steppe people themselves is the single surviving copy of “The Secret History of the Mongols” written in Mongolian in Chinese script in 1240. The book was first translated into German by E.Haenisch (E.Haenisch, Die Geheime Geschichte der Mongolen, aus einer mongolischen Niederschrift des Jahres 1240 von der Insel Kode’s im Kultur-Fluss 2nd edition, Leipzig 1948; Turkish translation by Ahmet Temir, Mogollanlari Giti Tarihi, T.T.K. Ankara 1948).

Like all the great empires in the history of Central Asia, the Mongol Empire was forged by diverse warring tribes, the most powerful being the Manghols, Tatars, Merkits, Kereyits, Naimans and Kara Kitais. The Kereyits and Naimans had a higher cultural level than the other tribes. The Naiman lands were between the Kanghia and Altai mountains, and this tribe was exposed to the culture of the Uighur Turks to the south. The Naimars were the first of the steppe peoples to use writing. The Kereyit lands were north of the Kanghia mountains, east of upper Selenga, between the Orhon and Tula rivers. Eastern Christianity infiltrated both communities, the Kereyits becoming Nestorians, although Shamanist traditions survived. The Kereyit prince Togrul Khan joined with Ghengiz Khan to attack the Tatars, for which he was rewarded by the Chinese emperor with the title of Wang-han or Ong-han. But before long rumours and treason set him at odds with Ghengiz Khan, and war broke out. The Kereyits were defeated and their lands divided up between the other tribes. Togrul escaped with his son but both were later killed. In contemporary Europe, Togrul Khan was celebrated as the hero Presier John, who was seen as the protector of Christianity against the Mongol threat and whose name played a symbolic role in the history of the Crusades.

When the Liao state founded in northern China by the Kara Kitais fell in the first half of the 12th century, the tribe migrated westwards to the Tarim basin and resumed their nomadic lifestyle. Although the Kara Kitais were largely Shamanists, they took a tolerant view of Christianity, Judaism and Islam. Waxing Chinese influence led to widespread conversion to Buddhism, and after their westward migration, Islam failed to make headway. They were not opposed to Islam, as such, but constant conflict with the Harezmshahs gave rise to anti-Islamic feeling.

Kurz, who lived north of the Naimans, are described in Chinese and Persian sources as being blue-eyed and fair-skinned. According to some historians there was a strong class distinction between the nobility (bej) and common people (kara budun). The Kiz g were of Altai-Turkish origin and their language was closely related to the Altai dialect. They too were nomads. In 925, when the Kitai Liao Dynasty won partial control of northern China, this tribe severed their relations with peoples to the south and entered a period of cultural and political isolationism. The Kirgiz were Shamanists who had not yet come into contact with Buddhism, Christianity or Islam. On the basis of funerary objects found in Kirgiz graves, archaeologists conclude that they were a matriarchal society.

The Uighur Turks came originally from the northern and southern regions of Tien-shan, and although they had not entirely abandoned the customs and traditions of the steppe, reciprocal cultural influence with the Chinese and the peoples of eastern Persia (the Sogdians) was strong. Their religious affiliations tended increasingly towards Buddhism, Eastern Christianity and Manichaeism. In time the Uighurs adapted to a settled lifestyle, and until the 13th century, the Turfan valley was a centre of Uighur culture.

The Tatars, whose grazing lands were to the east around Lake Buyur, make a prominent appearance in the mid-12th century. They were traditional enemies of the Mongols, and went to the aid of the Kereyits in their war with Ghengiz Khan, only to be destroyed in the battle which took place at Dalan-nemures in 1202. Although the Tatars themselves were wiped out, their name lived on and came to be used for the entire Mongol people, the Chinese referring to them as Da-da, Europeans as Tartar.

Power among the Mongols switched alternately between two dynasties, the first represented by Kabul, Bartan, Yesugai and Temucin and the second by Canakal-tingku, Senggum-bilge, Ambakai and Kutula. Despite efforts by the Tayci dynasty to prevent Temucin’s rise to power, Temucin gathered a large band of supporters who proclaimed him han or khan of an independent confederation. Following the unification of all the steppe peoples under Ghengiz Khan, this confederation was named after the Manghol (Mongol) tribe in 1206, and thus the name took on a far broader meaning.


26. The finest examples of this type of manuscript are "Kelile and Dimne" and "Makamat" of Hariri. The first of these consists of satirical fables said to have been written by a Brahman scholar named Bidpay. They relate the adventures of two jackals named Kelile and Dimne. Makamat by Hariri was extremely popular among the Arabs for the ingenuity of its language, with a witty use of simile, metaphor, allusion and other plays on words. The well loved hero Ebu Zeyd is a happy-go-lucky, self-willed character, whose jokes and escapades were widely related among the common people. According to R. Ettinghausen, he is the literary reflection of the mid-12th century bandits known as ayurar, who in the major cities of the Islamic world, particularly Baghdad, single-handedly flouted the law for the sake of righting social wrongs (R. Ettinghausen, Arabische Malerei, Gerf 1962, p. 82).

DAILY LIFE

1. Full page from the Palace Album (49.6 x 33.4), H. 2153, p.39b.

2. Nomad Camp (36.4 x 19), H. 2153, p.8b.
Daily life is depicted in detail in this composition of several scenes arranged in two rows. Two men, one white and one black, are seen as they wash laundry; food is cooking in a large pot next to them, while the cook crouches down blowering the fire, and there are dishes and utensils on the ground; the third scene consists of three spears leaning against one another, from which hang arrows, a bow, two waterbottles and a horse; below this is a scrappy half-naked man with his possessions in a heap in front of him, and next to him a uniformed man busy with his harness; in the centre are a pair of hunting dogs romping; and in the bottom left are grazing horses.

Siyah Kalem gives no indication of the location or surroundings. It shows human beings with blunt realism, but isolates them from their surroundings in the process.
The two grazing horses are a motif which deserves particular attention. The animals are side by side, but facing in opposite directions. Their limbs and joints are interwined in strangely distorted attitudes. Their bodies, rumps, heads and elongated necks form a conglomerate motif similar to the zoomorphic designs of Scythian metalwork. The two dogs playing together, and the figure blowing the flames are both motifs influenced by the traditions of steppe art.

3. A Nomad Leading his Horse by the Reins (25x13.6) H. 2153, p.118b.
Among the Siyah Kalem pictures is a whole series depicting scenes from steppe life in minute detail. The nomads' clothes, headgear, artifacts and weapons are drawn with convincing realism. Since they confirm the limited written sources of information about steppe life, it would not be presumptuous to view the drawings as first-hand documents. In C.P.3 the nomad has hung a nose bag over his arm, and is leading his horse by the reins. He has suddenly stopped to look back at the horse which seems reluctant to proceed. He is wearing the customary garb of the Central Asian nomads: baggy silviar trousers under an ankle-length robe. On his feet are carik, and on his head a loosely wound Turkistan turban.

Although the horse is depicted from the side, one of its feet is shown from the front and above, and another from behind and below; an abstract device representing the motion of walking. The animal's body, ribs and mane are emphasised by bands of shading following the contour lines.
The picture is badly worn, with patches of foxing. The face of the nomad has been effaced and there is a rectangular patch between the two figures where the leaf has been repaired.

This painting depicts nomads halting during migration. A black-bearded man seated on the ground is scouring a cooking pot held between his knees. He faces another man seated cross-legged who is hammering a stake into the ground, his body tense with the effort, his eyes staring from their sockets as he prepares to bring the mallet lifted in his right hand down on the stake held in his left hand. This scene merges with another above, most of which was lost when the scroll was cut; it is impossible to tell what it depicted. All that can be seen are two pots fitted one inside the other, a crater, a stick, two bare feet and a hand holding a large lid by the handle.

A donkey which is refusing to walk is being pulled by one man, who has tied a long sash around its neck, and pushed by another who has got a grip of its neck and tail.
The Siyah Kalem pictures were scroll paintings, illustrating stories told aloud at gatherings. The texts of these stories have not survived, but in the literature of later periods we frequently come across metaphors and proverbs, and it seems highly probable that this picture illustrates a proverb widely used among the people of Central Asia.

Among the scenes of daily life, we frequently see wandering dervishes begging for a living. Judging by their poor appearance the four figures standing side by side are clearly dervishes. The dervish sheikh is riding a donkey, while two dervishes support him by the arm on either side, forming a triple group in the centre. The sheikh seems oblivious of his surroundings, staring blankly into the distance. The others are looking back at a man carrying a paralysed woman on his back and trying to catch up with the dervishes so that the sheikh can speak an incantation for her recovery.
The voluminous folds of the clothes are distinctive, reminiscent of the graphic use of lines in clothing in western Gothic art. This resemblance should not be regarded as coincidental. The rapid rhythm of falling parallel lines seen in both Gothic art and Siyah Kalem pictures derives from Hellenistic art. However, this treatment of line became a vehicle of two very disparate concepts of form, with the result that it developed in different, even contradictory directions. In Gothic art, the flow of the folds of fabric paralleled the rising movement of cathedrals towards the sky, attempting to disperse the integrity of the mass, disguising its ponderous weight. Siyah Kalem, on the other hand, employed lines to emphasise the mass, forming benevolent spilling bulges and enfolding the body in swirling bulges.

Family life is also displayed in this series of pictures. Here the father is feeding the donkey. The children encircle
their mother, one watching the donkey, the others clinging to her asking for something. Rural life is not idealised in Siyah Kalem’s world. Even in this tranquil family scene, depicted with wry humour, Siyah Kalem retains a firmly realistic grip.

8. Nomads Leading an Ox (25.2 x 16.2). H. 2153, p.38a

Two people are dragging an ox along. One has tied a length of cloth around its neck and is pulling it, while the other has grasped its tail and is pushing it from behind. The man in the back wears a tall felt cap and has a beard. The face of the other figure is worn and cannot be seen, but from the head shawl it is evidently a woman. Otherwise the costumes of men and women are identical. As we see in Plate 7, the women wear a bulky ground-length robe with heavy folds over salwar trousers, and wrap a shawl generally of a contrasting colour over their heads and shoulders.

9. Nomad Grazing his Horse (25.5 x 16.3). H. 2153, p.84a.

In this scene of a nomad grazing his horse, the two figures are moving in contrary directions, the nomad with one foot in the air is turning anticlockwise using his staff as a pivot and pulling the horse towards him. The horse, meanwhile, is turning its head to the right. The horse’s head has not been drawn from a single angle: the mouth and nose are seen from the side, but the forehead, eyes and jaw are in three-quarter profile. The combination of different angles of vision to impart movement to the horse has all the abstraction of a Picasso. The animal’s feet, too, have been depicted from different angles, alternately above and below. Movement is not suspended momentarily, but shown at different stages of time.


The horse has got its nose to the ground seeking grass amongst the stones, while the nomads look on curiously. Here again the artist uses an abstract device to convey the act of walking, the hooves shown alternately from above and below.

11. Fragment from a Caravan Scene (15.6 x 19). H. 2153, p.54a.

The nomad riding a camel is seen from the rear. The rider has abruptly swivelled the top half of his body around, and is swinging a rope over his head. Only the head and one leg of a second harnessed camel can be seen entering the scene to the right. Does the second camel have a rider to whom the first man is signalling, or is he swinging the rope as a lasso to catch a riderless camel? Since the picture has been cut on all four sides, this is impossible to determine.


Siyah Kalem’s world is under threat from invisible natural forces which control the fate of human beings and expect sacrificial offerings. The scene is of two travellers in rocky terrain. A rock has fallen on the head of one, striking him to the ground, where he lies prostrate. His turban has fallen off, his face is drawn with agony. His companion stands aghast, a mental state which is expressed by Siyah Kalem with a gesture common in the East: he is bitten the finger of one hand, and clutching his head with the other.

13. Two People by Candlelight (24.5 x 15.7). H. 2153, p.65a.

In this night scene are two people, one carrying a large heavy box, and the other lighting his way with a candle. The second is holding the candle up high splaying the light beam on the first. The second man is in shadow behind the light. This masterful use of light and shade is astounding. The connection between light and shade explained in the 16th century by Leonardo da Vinci in his “Treatise on Painting” and applied in his works was being skilfully used by Chinese artists as early as the 13th century. We may therefore view the shading in Siyah Kalem as an extension of this tradition.


A composition of the two figures. The man on the left is pulling a rope through a ring fixed in the ground. The second man is holding the other end of the rope between his palms and has one foot pressed on the implement holding the ring. There is a weight hanging from the end of the rope. Between the two figures is a gnarled tree trunk with shoots sprouting from its base. When Siyah Kalem wishes to indicate the location of his figures, he incorporates some abstract naturalistic elements rather than illustrating a real setting.

15. Group of Three Figures (24.7 x 17.5). H. 2153, p.38b.

The central figure is a nobleman riding a donkey. A man who seems to be his servant is walking behind carrying a heavy rectangular object. It is not clear if the figure represents a man of the left belongs to the party or is just a passer-by. The distinctive headgear and footwear are similar to those in Plate 14. There are unusual patterns on the edges and summit of the headdresses, indicating the wearers’ profession and rank.


The idea of some connection with the theatre is suggested by Siyah Kalem’s pictures. The high proportion of scenes showing people in conversation or argument and the resemblance of the figures to masked players imply a connection with the theatre. The figures stand on the surface of the picture, in a scene without depth, one by one and side by side, linked by looks and gestures. Of the two figures at the side in this scene, one is short with a round smiling expression, the other tall, thin and vigorous, with a pointed nose and tall pointed hat. They bear a significant resemblance to Karagoz and Hacivat, heroes of the shadow play. The elderly black woman with the wrinkled face in the centre is similar to the Jacek we know from the Karagoz plays. The long soft spiralled object she holds is unidentifiable, perhaps laundry she has wrung out, or a large lump of dough.


This scene gives us insight into the class structure of Turkestan during the Timurid period. A clean shaven young man is respectfully holding out a potted plant to a person of importance. The young man is on his knees in an attitude of servility, as if ready to leap up. The other is sitting in a relaxed position, his arms grasping his knees and leaning back against a third man standing behind him. The headdresses of each indicate their status in society. The man presenting the plant is wearing a felt cap decorated
only by a metal finial. The seated tribal chieftain is wearing the Turkestani karak with a turban wound around it as worn by the upper classes in Transoxania. The gilding around the edge and at the crown of the hat worn by the standing man indicates that he is a high ranking official of the middle classes. The gilding on the plant and pot imply that rather than being a real plant, this may be an ornament made by a goldsmith.

18. Conversation (25.7 x 18). H. 2153, p.92b

Siyah Kalem’s pictures are not descriptive but explanatory. Without the narrative to which they belonged we can not understand their subject-matter. Here two people are approaching a man sprawled on the ground. The excessively long sleeves falling in ample folds are a striking feature of this picture. They hide the hands of all three figures, apart from the right arm of the figure on the left, who has pulled back his sleeve to grip the staff. The figures are linked by gestures, and especially by looks.

19. Group of Three Figures (27.5 x 16.7). H. 2153, p.57b

Again two people are approaching a third seated on the ground. Their cheerful expressions are the most arresting feature of this picture. Siyah Kalem’s subjects are rarely happy! The artist likes contrasting colours, and inserted one black-skinned figure between two white in Plate 18. Here, however, all three are not only black, but the two figures at the side are also dressed from top to toe in black. The contrast lies here in the red robe worn by the woman in the centre. The two contrasting colours most often chosen by Siyah Kalem are blue and brick red.

20. Visit (25.7 x 16.7). H. 2153, p.38a

Once again a visit is the subject, this time the visit of two people to a sage. All three are seated on the ground, one of the visitors facing the sage, the other behind the first. As the main figure, the sage is set slightly apart from the other two. Their dark skins and facial features suggest they might be Indians. The stage lighting illuminates the figures from below, and they stand out like sharply defined blocks from the picture’s surface. The elderly sage seems as if mysteriously illuminated by an inner light: his body becoming steadily lighter towards the head, which is semi-transparent.

21. Wandering Dervishes (23.5 x 20.4). H. 2153, p.129b

Two wandering dervishes, one crouched on the ground, the other standing with a bagging cap hanging from his wrist. Their facial expressions and gestures indicate that they are arguing. Instead of the long scarf or jacket usually worn by dervishes, they have long-haired fur capes over their naked shoulders. (For further information about dervish dress, see Saray-Alben, Steiner-Verlag 1964, p.94). Unfortunately, their faces are partially obscured by worn patches.

22. Discussion (25.6 x 17.7). H. 2153, p.128a

A man with blue eyes and red hair is in deep discussion with a black man. Both are dressed in nothing but short skirts and long scarves draped over their naked shoulders and arms. Both wear gold bracelets on their arms and gold chains around their ankles. The staffs in their hands are embellished with rings and bells, and they wear similar ornaments around their necks. In addition the black man has rings through his nose and ear.

23. Encounter (26.7 x 20). H. 2153, p.38b

Siyah Kalem attaches as much importance to hands and feet as to faces, as we see again in this picture. Under the rigorous conditions of steppe life, these limbs were a vital source of strength. One of the figures is depicted from the rear, the other faces us. They are walking in opposite directions, and seem to have met on the road. As with the horses, the fact that they are walking is represented by means of showing one foot from above, the other from below. They are dressed in animal furs, which clearly have a special meaning in Siyah Kalem’s work. While those in Plate 21 were long-haired (fox perhaps) and had been fashioned into waist-length cloaks, these still bear the head and claws and have been thrown over their shoulders. The valuable leopard and tiger skins are depicted in all their splendour. One of the men wears a cap of matching fur. The bag he carries is decorated with metal attachments and fringes, unlike the plain begging cup shown in Plate 21.

24. Performance (35.5 x 19.3). H. 2153, p.90a

This picture shows an entertainer performing. The black man in the centre of the group is biting on a hard object held between his teeth. The figure facing him is holding his knee with one hand and his beard with the other, as he stares in astonishment. The elderly woman to the left also looks astounded. Holding her stick with both hands, she is leaning forward avidly to watch the display of skill. The woman wears a robe of a single piece of fabric arranged in ample folds, whereas the two men crouched on the ground wear nothing but short skirts. The anatomy of the naked parts of their bodies, particularly the joints and muscles are drawn in detail. They sit in opposite directions, and we see both from different angles.

25. Performance (19.7 x 13.1). H. 2160, p.89a

Here is another scene from a performance. Two people are simultaneously displaying their skills to one another. The figure to the left is seated on the ground with his legs splayed apart, trying to pull his tongue as far out of his mouth as possible. The other is perched on a three-legged gilded table, lifting one leg in the air in an attempt to get his foot into his mouth. To keep his balance, he has entwined his left foot round the legs of the table. Particular attention has been paid to juxtaposing contrasting colours in this picture. One man is black, the other white, and the former is wearing a red robe with a bright blue lining, the latter a black robe with a red lining.

26. Balancing Act (10.2 x 18.5). H. 2153, p.23a

A man of almost gigantic stature has wound one leg tightly around a long pole, to which he is clinging with both hands. The toes of his other foot rest on the ground as if he is getting ready to spring up. His weight is dispersed all around his body, so there is hardly any load on his foot. Siyah Kalem’s pictures sometimes give the impression that the artist is playing with light as a means of arousing different responses from the audience. In this picture the light comes from behind, as in the shadow plays. The figure forms a dark patch on the surface of the picture, as if it had been cut out with scissors. Only the face and head are mysteriously transparent, like that of the sage in Plate 20.

27. Conversation (17.9 x 12). H. 2153, p.140a

Two dark-skinned figures, perhaps Indians, sit face to face engrossed in conversation. Again the lighting is
reminiscent of that of the shadow theatre. The light falls from behind so that the figures form dark shadows on the surface. The drawing's power of expression is therefore concentrated on the outline, to which the eye is initially drawn. But close examination shows that plays of light disperse the dark shadows here and there, revealing the anatomy of their bodies. These figures, too, are wearing short skirts and are naked above the waist apart from long narrow scarves wound about their necks and arms. They are wiry, agile figures with flexible limbs. One is shown in three-quarter, the other in quarter profile. The figure on the left is seated with his legs crossed; the other rests one knee on the ground and holds a long staff with both hands, the right hand towards the top, the left towards the bottom. The vigour of their movement suggests that they may be performing an act.

28. Crouching Giant (12.5 x 12.5). H. 2153, p.27a
An elderly black man with wrinkled face and white beard has collapsed heavily to the ground, where he sits hunched up. His hands and feet are thick and bulging. His claw-like feet and legs are splayed apart as if grasping the earth, which although it never appears in Siyah Kalem's pictures always makes its presence felt. Lost in thought, he rubs his foot with one hand and holds his long beard with the other. He wears a tiger-skin cap, a short skirt and long scarf.

29. Musicians, part of Plate 20 (26 x 15.7). H. 2153, p.37b
Two figures sit facing one another, playing a string instrument, the other clapping his hands. Their open mouths and the taut lines of their faces indicate that they may be singing. As in many Siyah Kalem pictures, the colour contrast is striking.

30. Dancing Shamans (24.8 x 18.5). H. 2153, p.34b
Two sturdy built, dark-skinned men are prancing with a vigour that seems instinctive. The movement begins with the figure on the left: the lower half of his body is shown in full back, while the upper part has suddenly swivelled around so that we see his head in profile. His arms are spread out and he is waving short scarves in the air. This rotating movement continues in the right-hand figure, who we see in full front, but he is balanced on the ball of one foot as if just about to swing around and turn his back on us. The revolving motion of the figures is echoed by the waving scarves. The distortion of the limbs - one foot is shown from above, the other from below, and the elbow and wrist of one arm are twisted backwards - underscore the gyrating motion of the bodies. Siyah Kalem does not depict momentarily suspended motion, but a series of instants in the course of motion.

31. A Lion Fight (28.5 x 15.8). H. 2153, p.29b
Displays of heroism occur twice in the Siyah Kalem pictures (Plates 31 and 32). In both cases, the hero is a young man of slim build, unlike the other figures we have seen. In this picture the hero is mounted on the back of a fire-breathing lion, struggling to vanquish it. The flames have set alight to the cape he is wearing. The other scenes in the picture are quite unconnected. There is a dancing figure, another drinking, another talking, and among them a robed woman crouching with a staff in her hand. They are arranged side by side as if they were draft sketches.

32. Battle with a Demon (26.5 x 17.9). H. 2153, p.64b
The hero has lifted the demon upside down and is violently banging his head on the ground. To the right is a naturalistic composition indicating that the scene is taking place in the open air: a tree sump showing the rings, entwined roots, docked branches, and gnarled bark.

33. Two Figures (12.6 x 17.2). H. 2153, p.29a
A man and a woman, both of the ruling class, are walking side by side. The man is wearing a Turkistan headdress and turban, whose ends hang down on either side. He leans on the staff which he clasps tightly. The woman also leans on a staff, but she holds it beneath her cloak so that we can only see the tip resting on the ground. This is an attitude which occurs frequently in the Siyah Kalem paintings, and imparts a credible weight to the figures.

34. Women in Conversation (12.7 x 12.1). H. 2153, p.52a
Two women are seated on the ground, busched up in the voluminous folds of their robes. Although the two figures have been drawn side by side on the two-dimensional plane of the paper, the fact that one is smaller than the other, as in Plate 33, indicates that perspective was not entirely foreign to Siyah Kalem.

35. Men in Conversation (15.7 x 25.4). H. 2153, p.38b
Two members of the upper class are engaged in conversation. Both are impressive figures of tall and sturdy stature, apparent even under the multiple folds of their robes. The hands of the man on the right are hidden under the long bulging sleeves. The cuffs and sleeves are so wide that when the man on the left lifts up his hand, his entire arm is revealed. The feet of the latter are conspicuous: grasping his staff tightly and leaning with all his weight on it, the soles of his feet can be seen. Siyah Kalem does not always restrict himself to a single viewpoint, but often depicts his subject from varying angles, as in Plates 3 and 9.

36. Priests in Argument (18.9 x 27.9). H. 2153, p.106b
When Siyah Kalem wants to show his figures at close quarters, he lines them up on the paper facing the audience. In these pictures, the surface of the paper forms the background (as in Plates 16 and 44/45).

37. Man Carrying a Chest (19.8 x 25.7). H. 2153, p.53a
A well built man is carrying a heavy chest (or possibly a slab) above his head. His legs are splayed apart, his muscles bulging, and his whole body tense with effort.
SIYAH KALEM'S SYSTEM OF BELIEF: DEMONS

Demons feature prominently in the system of belief depicted by Siyah Kalem. With their fearsome faces, protruding fangs, horns, animal skins, and long tails often with a monster’s head at the tip, these are creatures of imagination. They were undoubtedly conceived under the influence of the monster imagery originating in Indian Buddhism, but imaginary though they are, they are imbued with a realism unparalleled in Buddhism. Siyah Kalem’s demons are the product of an animist faith foreign to the ethics of the major religions. They have nothing in common with either the good and bad spirits of Buddhism, or the angels and devils of Christianity and Islam. These beings are beyond good and evil and cannot be comprehended by a system of belief which distinguishes between earth and heaven. These grotesque yet powerful beings are the product of a pagan imagination which both demonises and attempts to restrain the mysterious forces of nature in a world inhabited by spirits. We may assume that the system of belief which we encounter here is in close affinity to Shamanism, a religion widely practised by the peoples of Central Asia.

Siyah Kalem’s demons are tall and strong. They are ready at any moment to expend their accumulated energy. Their behaviour is very similar to that of human beings: they quarrel, play musical instruments and dance, drink, spin thread, fell trees, cast spells, steal horses, and perform sacrifices to an unknown god. Their clothes, too, are similar to those of people. They wear short skirts with scarves over their shoulders, and wear gold ornaments and bracelets on their arms and legs. When they dance, they wave short scarves in the air just like people. Their bare feet and legs differ in no respect from those of human beings.

This similarity extends to every part of their bodies and even their faces, suggesting the possibility that what we see are actually people disguised as demons for the purpose of controlling natural forces and curing sick people and animals.

There can be no doubt that Siyah Kalem learned his masterful brush drawing from the Chinese, but used it as the vehicle of a realism remote from the influence and aesthetic values of Buddhist humanism.

38. Tug of War between Demons (33 x 25). H. 2153, p.57a

Two demons are pulling with all their might for possession of a long twisted cloth, which is wound around the throat of one, and the arm of the other. Two people at the left of the picture look on with horror and apprehension. Siyah Kalem generally arranges his figures side by side, none obscuring another. This is the first time that we see two figures so close together, one behind the other and gripping his shoulders, so that the two form a single block. The rock at their feet seems as if broken off from the block.

39. Demon Carrying off a Man (15.5 x 27.6). H. 2153, p.101a

40. Threatening Demon (15.6 x 27.3). H. 2153, p.48b

41. Two Demons Taking a Sick Donkey (35.4 x 27). H. 2153, p.27b.

42. Demon Carrying off a Man (18.9 x 27.6). H. 2153, p.129b.

43. Demons Cutting Timber (34.5 x 25.7). H. 2153, p.141a

In the centre of the picture is a gnarled tree trunk with cracked bark. Two demons are sawing the trunk vertically in two. A half-seen figure at the top of the picture is crouched beside a cut log. As so often in Siyah Kalem’s pictures the two figures facing one another are depicted from front and rear respectively. One is down on one knee, the second has rested his foot against the tree for support. The picture has been cut down to frame the woodcutters, so that we only see the lower part of the third figure. Like Plates 4 and 44/45 this picture demonstrates that these were not individual pictures in their own right, but cut from a scroll.

44/45. Dance of Demons (49.5 x 22.2). H. 2153, p.64a

Two demons are prancing in the centre, while musicians keep rhythm with castanets and cymbals. We see one from behind the other from front. Both are pivoting on their own axis, that of the right-hand demon marked by the foot on which he raises on tip toe, and that of the left-hand demon by the end of the scarf waving above his head. Everything in this picture is in motion: the scarves tossing in the air, the flying skirts, the lines of the face and abdominal muscles, and the toes. The musicians crouched on the ground participate in this movement, which as usual Siyah Kalem expresses by means of distorting the limbs. In view of this distortion, which defies the rules of naturalistic art, Siyah Kalem’s art can be said to have its own unique system of composition.

This scene almost certainly depicts a religious ceremony to invoke or exorcise spirits. The participants are imitating the spirits and all wear demon masks, apart from one, who has removed the mask to reveal his breathing face. They dance until they fall into a trance.

An interesting feature of this picture is the twelve-pointed star in the centre of the picture between the two dancers. Although the lines are very faded, it can still be clearly discerned. There must be some mysterious significance in this geometric shape. When the lines are extended we get a composition linking the eyes, navels, feet and other parts of the body regarded as focal points of power in Shamanism to a knot motif (a magic sign among the Mongols) flying in the air between the two dancers. The way in which the artist has kept strictly to symmetric principles in a picture showing such vigorous motion is remarkable. To what degree the picture owes its symmetry to the star in the centre of the picture we have no way of knowing, because most of it has been cut away, as we can see from the half-visible figure in the top right-hand corner.

46. Demons at a Social Gathering (33.8 x 15.6). H. 2153, p.112a

Three demons are spaced across the paper, linked by glances and gestures. Two are seated on the ground, while the third stands to one side. The left-hand demon is playing a string instrument (a type of violin used in Indian music), while his companion has filled a cup with liquor from a jug and is handing it to him. The scornful demon at the far right holds his hands over his ears as if intimidated by the sound of the music. This third demon not only differs from the other two in scale and build, but is quite unlike any of
Siyah Kalem's other demon figures, suggesting that it might be a later addition to the picture.

47. *Two Demons and a Mongol Knot* (23.7 x 17.4). H. 2153, p.34b
At first glance the eye is drawn to the knotted cloth hanging in the air above the two seated demons, and to the metal instrument consisting of interlocking rods with a knob at one end and a chain at the other lying on the ground in front of them. Chains, metal rings, rods, animals' feet attached to rings and cords, ropes, long narrow strips of cloth... these are all instruments of witchcraft and frequently appear in Siyah Kalem's pictures. Animals are sometimes led by cloths tied round their necks instead of ropes. People and demons tie such cloths around their necks and arms, and wave them in the air as they dance. In some pictures they are tied together to form what art history terms the Mongol knot motif. In Plate 44/45 these knots toss in the air to the frenzied rhythm of the dance. Here, however, the knot is suspended motionless in space.

48. *Quarrelling Demons* (23.7 x 19.3). H. 2153, 37b

49. *Demons Being Bound* (26.1 x 18.7). H. 2153, p.31b
Two demons kneel at the right-hand side of the picture, one facing towards, one away from us. The demon facing us is tying the hands of the other with black cord. To their left another demon with his hands tied lies comatosely. We are seeing a spell being cast. Magic is closely related to the act of tying. The spell is frequently cast by tying a knot, and can only be reversed by untying it. The expressions "spellbinding" and to "undo a spell" are still common today.

50. *Demon Stealing a Horse* (15.3 x 19.6). H. 2153, p.38a

THE SCHOOL OF SIYAH KALEM

51. *Demons Spinning Thread* (20.8 x 19.4). H. 2153, p.29b
Two demons crouch on the ground. One is spinning thread, his left hand around which the thread is wound lifted into the air, his right hand turning the reel. The thread descending vertically through the centre point of his head emphasises the axis of his body. The other is holding a drinking goblet with a string attached to the lid. This picture is not by Siyah Kalem himself, but by an artist of his school. The ugly faces, hairy bodies, horns and tails which give them the appearance of half-human creatures do not have the convincing realism of Siyah Kalem's demons. They are reminiscent of Chinese painting, leaving an impression of decorative motifs drawn on silk, in a style which softens the harsh contrast of black and white.

52/53. *Sacrificial Scene* (49.6 x 20). H. 2153, p.40b
Again drawn on silk in a soft decorative style, the pale contours, and the way the figures fade into one another under the caressing light, indicates that the scene is taking place in twilight. This is a savage cult scene. A white horse has been sacrificed, the animal's head is on the ground, and the demons are fighting over the blood-stained limbs of the carcass. Pairs of demons are fighting in the centre of the picture and to the right. At the left a demon is holding a leg above his head and is about to bring it down on the head of a demon crouching beside him who is frozen in fear, and holding up his arms in an attempt to defend himself from the attack. Two people in the upper left of the picture are watching the scene from behind a hillock. Only the heads of these two shadowed figures can be seen. One of these has lifted his hand as if in exclamation.

Here again the demons are half-animal, half-human with horns, animals skins, tails like horsetails. Their hands, feet and above all their faces are their most human aspects. As in all the Siyah Kalem pictures of demons, they might be people dressed as demons. Faces with black eyebrows, blue eyes, long hair and beards stand out among the rest.

This picture in a subdued, decorative style is similar to Plate 46, with minor variations. Here the jug held by one of the demons is made of porcelain, and bears the dragon motif which helped to date the Siyah Kalem pictures. The demons' feet are tied to metal rods, and below them are some of the instruments of magic seen in Plate 54. The third figure which appears in Plate 46 is missing here.