A fine example of Mamluk leather filigree work. It consists of brown goatskin over green silk on a base made of thick sheets of paper glued together. The central medallion with pointed finials is formed by 8 palmettes around a flower head, cut from a large sheet of leather. The area around the cut-out is covered with blind-tooled interlace, all within a rectangle. In the corners are quarter-circles with engraved finials and filigree centres. There is an inner border of blind-tooled rope work, and an outer one of blind-tooled knots around squares with 5 gold points. The flap is even more elaborate, with arabesque scroll-work around a central palmette. The cover is a single piece of leather and was probably matched with a leather doublure, now removed. Leather filigree was used extensively throughout the eastern Islamic world, mainly in doublures. Only Mamluk binders used it on a large scale for covers. There is another binding from the same 30 part Qur’an in the Chester Beatty Library (Ms. 1473). (See also Sarre, 1923, pls. VII, VIII; Hussein, 1970, no. 104; and Wiet, 100.) Cincinnati Art Museum has another section (już) of the manuscript, giving the name of the scribe — Muhammad bin ‘Ali al-Imam — but no date (see Oriental Art, 1978, p. 97). There are 3 aiza from this manuscript in the Bibliothèque Nationale, one of which (Arabe S845) has an identical binding.

Exhibited: Metropolitan, 1933, pl.39. Published: James, 1980, no. 104.

**5 Binding of Qur’an section (Już’), 10th of 30**

*Egypt, 15th century*  
*Ms. 1474; 36.5 x 26.6 cm*

Cover. Within the main rectangle is a complex piece of geometric pattern comprising a number of evenly distributed star-polygons within a double octagon border. All of these shapes are linked by a gold-tooled frame or trellis made up of overlapping geometric figures. The overlapping portions are filled with gold points or a combination of blind tooling and blind or gold points. The borders are made up of blind-tooled panels and gold rope work.

Doubtful. The centre is cut away in a fine example of leather filigree and this is repeated in the corners. Underneath is pink and cream silk. Around the central medallion is an unusual scale pattern. Above and below are gold-tooled finials which swell out before tapering to a point. Although this binding is said by Van Regemorter to come from Ms. 1507, dated 1444, it is too small for that manuscript. Most probably it came from Ms. 1508 made for Sultan Qa’id Bay (Qaytbay) 1468-95.

Exhibited: Metropolitan, 1933. Published: Van Regemorter, pl. 22; James, 1980, no. 106.

**6 Single cover and doublure of a Qur’an binding**

*Egypt, late 15th century*  
*Ms. additional; 60 x 39.5 cm*
Iran: The Ilkhanids

In the second decade of the 13th century the Mongols invaded Iran. In 1258 Hulagu, a grandson of Jengiz Khan, captured Baghdad and put to death the last ‘Abbasid caliph. The Mongol Ilkhanid dynasty controlled Iraq and Iran until 1349. Although the Mongols came as ferocious and devastating conquerors the later members of the Ilkhanid dynasty were able, even exemplary, rulers. After accepting the Islamic faith and adopting the Persian language the Mongols showed themselves to be major patrons of art and literature. It was for them and their officials that some of the earliest and finest copies of the Iranian national epic, the Shah-Nama, were illustrated. Splendid copies of the Qur’an were also produced, especially for Öljaytu (1304-16), which were of a large size and written in 30 separate parts. Most of these Qur’ans were for endowment to the libraries of mosques or mausolea.

7 Faridun causes Zahhak to be fettered to a rock on Mt Damavand
Shah-Nama
Iran, c. 1300
Ms. 104; fol. 3; 16 x 12.5 cm

Prince Faridun defeats Zahhak the demon king, whose cruelty has caused the people to revolt. He is fettered to a rock and abandoned (Warner, 1, 166). Here Faridun carrying an ox-headed mace looks on as Zahhak is nailed to a rock in a cavern. This delicately-painted miniature forms a contrast to the much larger and bolder ‘Demotte’ paintings of a few decades later (nos. 8 a & b). But here, as there, strong echoes of earlier Mesopotamian painting survive. The figures and animals are expertly drawn though the manner of presenting them on a strip of grass and plants with a blank background (gold, in other pictures) is quite archaic. Other elements, such as the clouds and the costumes, are Mongol-Chinese. Notice the figure in blue on horseback who wears a Chinese mandarin square on his coat. The broad-brimmed Mongol hat which he wears was officiously and ceremoniously replaced by the turban in 1297 during the reign of Ghazan. The painting comes in one of four small copies of the Shah-Nama all produced around the same time. The Chester Beatty Library has the bulk of the second of these (79 folios). The manuscripts have been ascribed to Shiraz, Tabriz, Baghdad, and even as far away as India. The fullest and most recent study attributes them to Baghdad in the time of the Ilkhanid ruler Ghazan (1295-1304).

Exhibited: Burlington House, 1931, 39, pl. XIV; Cairo, 1933, p. 177, Baroda House, 1939, 33. Published: Simpson, 1979, pl. 48.
8(a) Zal before Minuchihr

‘Demotte’ Shah-Nama

Iran, 2nd quarter of the 14th century
Ms. 111; fol. 4; 60 x 45 cm

Eager to gain the hand of Rudabah, Zal presents himself before the throne of Shah Minuchihr with a letter from his father (Warner, 1, 306). Zal bows before the monarch and his courtiers: ‘My Lord... since I have kissed the foot of thy throne of ivory, thy grace and crown illumine my heart.’ Outside the audience hall sits the chamberlain with his staff and from a window above a young woman looks down on the scene. There is a complex variety of styles and influences in the ‘Demotte’ compositions — Western, Chinese and ‘Arab’ Mesopotamian. Curtained interiors combined with a narrow brick façade or doorway are extensively used in 13th century Mesopotamian Maqamat manuscripts and appear in manuscripts produced between then and the ‘Demotte’ Shah-Nama. The compositional device of an enthroned figure in the foreground partially encircled by figures and objects (as here) is very common in one of the Maqamat manuscripts but rarely occurs again before the ‘Demotte’ Shah-Nama.

The date, location and patron of the manuscript have been the subject of countless speculations. The most recent attributes it to Ghiyath al-Din (d. 1336), son of the famous Rashid al-Din (d. 1318) and vizier of the Ilkhani rulers Abu Sa’id and Arpa from 1327 until his death.

Exhibited: New York, 1930, no. 5; Burlington House, 1931, no. 29; New York, 1934; Michigan, 1959, 138; V. & A., 1967, 4 (a), pl. 4; Edinburgh, 1977, 193 (pl). Published: Brian, no. 11, fig. 8; C. B. Persian Cat. 1, 111, pl. 22.

8(b) Mihran foretells the coming of Alexander

‘Demotte’ Shah-Nama

Iran, 2nd quarter of the 14th century
Ms. 111; fol. 5; 60 x 45 cm

In this scene King Kayd of Hind (India) goes to visit the sage Mihran’s mountain abode for his 10 mysterious dreams to be interpreted. The ancient sage explains that the King’s dreams foretell the arrival of Sikanlar (Alexander) (Warner, VI, 91-7). This painting, being almost entirely devoted to landscape, is unique among the 58 surviving illustrations from this most important manuscript. Although there are some connections with Chinese painting, the closest parallels to the scene are found in so-called ‘Arab’ painting, especially in the Maqamat manuscripts from 13th century Baghdad. There, as here, landscapes are made by bands of vegetation one above the other. ‘Arab’ painting was an important inspiration for a number of Demotte compositions. Unlike the Baghdad paintings, however, figures here move directly from one band or ‘terrace’ to another, e.g. the groom holding the horse.

This composition foreshadows the typical ‘high-horizon’ format of Islamic painting introduced at the end of this century and developed under the Timurids.

Exhibited: Baroda House, 1939, 35(b); V. & A., 1967, 4 (c); Edinburgh, 1977, 193 (q). Published: Stcbou- kine, 1936, pl. XV (a); Brian, no. 29, fig. 117; James, 1976, pl. 17; Titeley, 1976, pl. 7.
9 Page of illumination from a Qur'an
Baghdad, 1302-3—1306-7
Ms. 1614 (i); 50 x 35 cm

This is half a double frontispiece from a section (juz') of a 30 part Qur'an and is the work of an early 14th century master-illustrator, Muhammad bin Aybak bin 'Abdallah. The centre of the design is a star-polygon whose arms are distorted to form superimposed squares. The outer border is unusual, consisting of a gold arabesque scroll on blue with a secondary pattern running through it painted in a rare chocolate-brown. The completed manuscript — several sections (arza) of which survive — was one of the finest Qur'ans ever made. It was copied in superb Muhaqqaq script by Ahmad bin al-Suhrawardi, the outstanding pupil of Yaqut (d. 1298), and is one of the few genuine examples of his hand. Two of the surviving 6 sections are in Topkapi and the remainder, apart from a fragment in the Chester Beatty Library (1614, ii), are in the Iran-Bastan Museum, Tehran. Strangely, none of these portions has the name of the commissioner. The fact that it is on a large Baghdad paper reserved for the Ilkhanid court manuscripts and is by the greatest calligrapher of the time may mean that it was commissioned by Ghazan (1295-1304), perhaps for his mausoleum in Tabriz, begun in 1302. If so it must have been completed by order of his successor, Öljaytū. In several of the colophons written by the illuminator, Baghdad is mentioned as the place in which the manuscript was completed. Although Baghdad was not the Ilkhanid capital, Ghazan did pass several winters there.

Published: Arberry, no. 92, pl. 40; James, 1980, no. 43.

10 Fragment of a Qur'an section (Juz')
6th of 30
Mosul, Iraq, 1306-7—1311
Ms. 1613 (i); 44 x 30 cm

A superb gold Muhaqqaq script, being v. 5-6 from Sura V (Al-Ma' ida, The Table). Ayas are indicated by a medallion divided into segments and containing the word aya in Kufic script. The calligrapher 'Ali bin Muhammad al-Husayni was a descendant of the caliph 'Ali bin Abi Talib (d. 661); in one of the surviving sections in Istanbul his full genealogy showing his descent from the 4th caliph is given. The manuscript was commissioned by Öljaytū (1304-16), Ilkhanid successor to Ghazan, probably for his mausoleum in Sul taniya, though there is no endowment certificate (waqfiyya) to that effect. The calligrapher was almost certainly the illuminator as a gap of several years between the completion of the first and second 15 sections implies that the first half of the Qur'an was illuminated before work was resumed on copying out the remainder of the text. The best known portion of this Qur'an is in the British Library (Or. 4945). Other parts are in collections in Istanbul, Amasya and Tehran. The Chester Beatty Library has one other page (1613, ii).

Published: James, 1980, no. 44.
Iran: The Timurids

Following the death of Abu Sa'id, Mongol rule in Iraq and Iran was plunged into chaos. Numerous local dynasties arose in its aftermath, the most important of which was the Jala'ird dynasty which ruled in Baghdad and Tabriz from 1336 to 1411.

At the end of the 14th century, however, the armies of the Central Asian warlord Timur (Tamerlane) poured into Iran, destroying all before them. Timur's descendants continued to rule all or part of Iran for the next century. Although the invasion was as least as destructive as that of the Mongols, the Timurid princelings who succeeded the conqueror were among the greatest patrons of art, literature, music and poetry that Iran has known. The stimulation and encouragement given to the arts by the Timurids inevitably invite comparison with their contemporaries, the Renaissance princes of the Italian Quattrocento. Prominent among these Timurid princes were Baysunqur (d. 1433) and Sultan Husayn Bayqara (d. 1506), both of whom resided in Herat (now in Afghanistan). During this century Herat became the most important centre of Islamic culture in Iran, particularly as far as the visual arts are concerned.

The power of the Timurids was steadily eroded by rival groups. In the west two Turkish-speaking dynasties established control: the Qara Quyunlu (Black Sheep) Turkomans (1378-1469) and the Aq Quyunlu (White Sheep) Turkomans (1378-1502). The Turkomans controlled both Tabriz and Shiraz and in those cities a substantial number of manuscripts were illustrated for local patrons. Many of these were produced rapidly in large quantities and accordingly the style in which they are painted is often rather mundane. Nevertheless, there are some outstanding examples in so-called 'royal' Turkoman style.

11 The defeat of the Iranians at the Battle of Ladan

Shah-Nama of Firdawsi

Scribe: Muhammad bin Sa'id bin Sa'd al-Hafiz al-Qari' (i.e. the Qur'an reciter)

Iran, 800/1397-8

Ms. 114; fol. 38r; 25 x 16 cm

To avenge the death of Siyawush, Khay Khosrow sends the Iranian army to invade Turan. Led by Fanburz, the army is defeated and forced to retreat. In the foreground we see the battle, with Turanian archers firing from the mountainside. Hero of the occasion is Bishan, who cuts down the Iranian standard which Fanburz, skulking behind the mountain, refuses to give up, and carries it back to rally the main body of the army. The event is depicted on the top right (Warner, III, 92-3). This is one of the most striking of the 5 miniatures in the manuscript. The horizontal axis of the composition is swept along by the action to culminate in the tree pushing its way up into the margin. This is the first manuscript known to have been illustrated after the arrival of Timur in Iran (d. 1405); it is part of an anthology (the remainder being in the British Library, Or. 2780). The style is derived from the slightly earlier Jala'ird court style, though the gold background and large figures are entirely characteristic of early 15th century painting produced in Shiraz for Timur's grandson, Iskandar Sultan. Although it has been pointed out that Shiraz lacked a suitable patron, most scholars attribute the manuscript to that city. The binding, perhaps contemporary, has a central quatrefoil medallion and four corner pieces. These are outlined in gold and have floral decoration. The doublure is similar, but the designs are in filigree.

Exhibited: Burlington House, 1931, 33, pl. XXXI A; Metropolitan, 1933, pl. 15; V. & A., 1967, 10; Edinburgh, 1977, 124. Published: Schoukine, 1954, XIII.
The poet Sa'di is refreshed by a drink handed to him by a beautiful maiden Gulistan (Rose Garden) of Sa'di (d. 1292)
Scribe: Ja'far al-Baysunquri
Herat, Iran, 830/1426-7
Ms. 119, fol. 36v, 24.8 x 15.4 cm

On a burning day in July, Sa'di, weak from the intense heat, pauses by a wall along a narrow street. As he does so, a beautiful girl emerges unexpectedly from a doorway and presents him with a refreshing drink. The poet is moved to compose some Arabic and Persian verses to the effect that the thirst of the heart cannot be quenched so easily. This is a superb example of the work produced in Herat for Baysunqur-Mirza (d. 1433), which dominated metropolitan painting for the remainder of the 15th century. Here, as in several of the other 7 miniatures, the artist cleverly uses colour to reinforce the point of the story. The entire scene is dominated by a sun-baked brick-red orange while the drink is handed to Sa'di in a vessel painted in the coolest and most restful of colours, jade-green. The picture comes at the very end of the story, in the 6th chapter ‘On Love and Youth’, the final lines of which may be seen. These were written by Ja'far, the famous calligrapher and librarian of Baysunqur-Mirza. The Chester Beatty Library has two other complete manuscripts copied by Ja'far in 1425 (Ms. 4183) and 1432 (Ms. 122), no doubt for Baysunqur, though his name does not appear in either.

Exhibited: Burlington House, 1931, 48 (h), pl. XLI B; Cairo, 1935, p. 144; Baroda House, 1939, 36 (c); V. & A., 1967, 37 (e). Published: Stchkoukine, 1954, XXX; James, 1980 (ii), Abb. 2.

Iskandar's battle with the Rus Khamsa (Quintet) of Nizami (d. 1203)
Iran, 838-40/1435-6
Ms. 124, vol. 1, fols. 248v-249r;
27.5 x 17.2 cm

This scene comes from the Sharaf-Nama, i.e. the first part of the Iskandar-Nama, Nizami's exotic panorama of the life of Alexander the Great. For the poet, Iskandar was no mere conqueror but a God-sent warrior-prophet and epitome of the perfect knight, whose adventures are recalled in the Qur'an (XVII: Al-Kahf, The Cave, 83-101). Alexander is shown defeating Quntal, King of the Rus, i.e. the Russians, who has carried off Alexander's ally, Queen Nushaba. This is one of three double-page compositions in the manuscript. The earliest Islamic double-page compositions occur in the Schefer Maqamat illustrated by Al-Wasiti in Baghdad in 1237. However, apart from frontispieces, double-page compositions are rare in Iranian painting proper. The exception is the early Timurid period where they are relatively frequent. The paintings in this manuscript are an example of a provincial style attributed to a studio in Isfahan. Two artists produced the miniatures. It would be tempting to identify them with the two scribes. Neither painter appears to be responsible for the illumination throughout, which is much more adroitly executed than the paintings. One half of the original frontispiece remains, showing 4 angels around the now obliterated name of the patron. The manuscript was once in the possession of the ruler of Bijapur in India, Sultan Isma'il (1511-34). This lends some weight to the theory, as yet unsubstantiated, that the miniatures were done in India and are a rare example of pre-Mughal painting.
This is one of the finest bindings of the 15th century in the world of Qur’anic art. The binding was made in Cairo, and it has been estimated that the total cost of the leather and gold leaf used in its construction was approximately 5000 gold dinars. The leather used is said to have come from the skin of a bull, and the gold leaf is of the finest quality. The front and rear covers are made of leather, and the spine is made of leather with gold leaf and illuminated floral designs. The binding is in excellent condition, and the leather is still supple. The gold leaf is still intact, and the designs are still clearly visible. The binding is a fine example of Islamic bookbinding art, and it is a valuable addition to any collection of Islamic manuscripts.
16(a) The young man and the dervish
Khamsa (Quintet) of Amir-i Khusraw
(1253-1325)
Scribe: Muhammad bin Azhar
Iran, 890/1485.
Ms. 163; fol. 38r; 25.3 x 16.7 cm

Amir-i Khusrav, fondly known as the ‘Parrot of India’, wrote his ‘Quintet’ in emulation of Nizami. This scene is found in the first of the five poems, the Matla‘ al-Anwar. Early one morning a young man walking through a garden meets an old dervish who offers him some philosophical advice. Martin, who originally owned the manuscript, attributed all of the 13 exquisite miniatures to Bihzad. Although the paintings are all in the style of Herat, Robinson states that several painters worked on the manuscript; this miniature and no. 16(b) are closest to the hand of the great master. There is a very similar painting by Bihzad in the Freer Gallery (B.W.G., p. 130). Gray, however, believes that all the paintings may be by Mirak (d. 1507), the teacher of Bihzad and court librarian of Sultan Husayn. This is one of the most beautiful paintings in the manuscript. The multicoloured early morning sky is virtually unique in Iranian painting. The manuscript is finely illuminated; it has a magnificent binding with animals and birds in a gilt meadow and a centre sunk medallion painted in lapis lazuli (not shown).

Exhibited: Burlington House, 1931, no. 78(1); Cairo, 1935, p. 162; Baroda House, 1939, no. 48(c); V. & A., 1967, no. 28 (b). Published: Martin, 1912, pl. 9; Martin, 1912 (ii), p. 44-5; pl. 75; Stchoukine, 1954, LXXI; James, 1974, no. 44.

16(b) The harlot and the banker
Khamsa (Quintet) of Amir-i Khusrav
See previous entry, fol. 209v

This amusing anecdote is found in the Hsah Bihsht, the last in Amir-i Khusrav’s ‘Quintet’, written after the style of Nizami’s Haft Paykar. A banker who has enjoyed the favours of a harlot in a dream is brought before the king by the lady in pursuit of her fee. The monarch, who has been changed into the parrot in the foreground, orders the money to be counted in front of a mirror: the point being that as a dream is but a reflection of reality, payment should be similarly made. The figures are most naturalistically composed. All eyes are directed to the young man counting out the 1,000 dinars; all, that is except the lady, who turns her head away in chagrin. The colour, composition and characterisation found in this charming miniature led Robinson at one point to attribute it to Bihzad himself. The name of the patron is no longer visible on the opening page. The calligrapher, Muhammad bin Azhar, was the son and pupil of a famous master of the pen, Azhar, himself a pupil of the great Ja‘far al-Baysunghi and teacher of the equally famous Sultan ‘Ali Mashhadi.

Exhibited: Burlington House, 1931, 78 (m); Cairo, 1935, p. 170, pl. 65; Baroda House, 1939, no. 48(i); V. & A., 1967, no. 28 (f); Edinburgh, 1977, no. 126. Published: Martin, 1912, pl. 21; Martin, 1912 (ii), pl. 75; Robinson, 1965, p. 133; pl. 24; Robinson, 1963 (ii), pl. 19.
17 Qur’an
Iran, 2nd half of the 15th century
Ms. 1500; fols. 1v-2r; 25.8 x 19 cm

The opening folios of illumination from a Qur’an with a colophon in the name of Yaqut al-Musta’simi. Many Qur’ans were copied in the 15th and 16th centuries with colophons attributing them to Yaqut (d. 1298), the third great classical master of Arabic calligraphy. Although some were straightforward forgeries, others were certainly ‘fascimiles’ copied from authentic — or presumed authentic — Yaqut Qur’ans. Usually the style of illumination indicates whether the manuscript dates from the 13th century or not. In the case of this manuscript a conscious attempt has been made to reproduce the geometric Ilkhanid style of the 13th-14th centuries. The centrifugal composition is like those found in Mosul and Baghdad Qur’ans c. 1300-11, but the delicate tracery and palmettes in the geometric interstices and the Chinese-type ‘jui’ shapes in the border indicate that this is a Timurid manuscript. Very similar decoration occurs in a Khamsa of Nizami in the British Library, dated 846/1442-3 (Add. 25,900). This manuscript was evidently greatly prized in the past and had many owners, most of whose names have been pasted over. The gold brush strokes in the margin are late additions.

Published: S.P.A., 1961, pl. 947b; James, 1980, no. 54.

18 Sultan Khalil out hunting
Diwan of Hidayat
Iran, Tabriz, c. 1478
Ms. 401; fols. 19v-20r; 11 x 6.8 cm

This little volume in Azerbayani Turkish contains the collected poems of Hidayatollah Beg, an amir at the court of the Aq Quyunlu Turko-man ruler of Tabriz, Sultan Khalil bin Uzun Hasan. The text of this royal manuscript appears unfinished, though miniatures and decorations are complete and the pages exquisitely bound. Perhaps the amir was composing a final eulogy for last-minute inclusion when the death of the prince in 1478, in battle with his brother Ya’qub, overtook him. In all four miniatures the prince’s features are identical: a rare 13th century example of portraiture, though both Baysunqur and Sultan Husayn appear in their manuscripts. Accompanied by a guide the prince crosses a meadow with his men, one of whom carries his hawk. This is Turkoman painting at its most delicate and accomplished. There is another manuscript in Cairo with similar format and decoration, copied for Khalil in 1471, perhaps in the same studio (see Stchoukine, Gazette, XXXV, fig. 8). The binding has sunken medallions and corner pieces decorated with fine scrolls, palmettes and lotuses. The doublures and flap have delicate filigree over gold and lapis lazuli (see Van Regemorter, pl. 41).

Exhibited: V. & A., 1967, no. 126, pl. 41. Published: C. B. Turkish Cat., 401, pl. 41; Robinson, 1965, pl. 80; James, 1980 (ii), cover.
At the end of the 15th century a powerful new grouping of tribes arose supporting the Safavids, a dynasty which claimed descent from the Imam Musa. The Imams, who number twelve in all, were the lineal descendants of 'Ali, the Prophet Muhammad’s son-in-law and also the first Imam (d. 661); and in that capacity revered by Shi‘ite Islam. By 1502 Shah Isma‘il, the Safavid leader, had defeated the Turkomans and was well on his way to seizing power throughout Iran. Although he received a severe defeat at the hands of the Ottoman Turks in the battle of Chaldiran in 1514, his successors controlled the country for the next 230 years or more, during which time Shi‘ite Islam became the official doctrine of Iran. The capital of Iran was moved from Tabriz to Qazvin in 1548 and from Qazvin to Isfahan in 1598. With each capital a new style of painting is associated. The Safavids inherited the artists and craftsmen of late Timurid times and consequently painting initially continued the tradition of 15th century Herat. Gradually this began to change and with the final move to Isfahan the transformation of painting became quite dramatic. A new style, entirely different to what had gone before, arose. This is usually associated with the work of the artist Riza ‘Abbasi. In the 17th century artists became increasingly aware of European techniques and displayed a strong desire to imitate them, not always successfully.

The Safavid period, like the Timurid, saw many fine calligraphers. The Nasta‘liq script — almost the national hand of Iran — was developed under the Timurids and perfected by the Safavids. Perhaps the finest Nasta‘liq calligraphy was produced in 16th century Safavid Iran by Sultan ‘Ali Mashhadi and Mir ‘Ali Harawi. For the transcription of the Qur’an, however, the traditional Naskh, Thuluth and Rayhani scripts continued to be used. These were often employed in combination on the same page or together with Tawqi‘ and Riqa‘.
20. Majnun in the desert
Khamsa (Quintet) of Nizami (d. 1203)
Scribe: ... 'Ali Katib
Iran, 915/1509
Ms. 182; fol. 134v-135r; 34.4 x 21 cm

A well-known scene in the most famous of Nizami's Quintet, 'Majnun and Layla'. Majnun retires to the wilderness with only the birds and animals for company. Here we see him seated on a rock staring absentmly into space, watched by the animals. The fawn which looks up pityingly in front of him is probably the one Nizami tells us reminds Majnun of his beloved and never leaves him. This is a good example of the early Safavid style of Tabriz. Two painters worked on the manuscript, plus an illuminator, a little of whose work can be seen on fol. 134v. There is a particularly fine lacquer binding, somewhat later than the text but still 16th century. On the front and rear are elaborate hunting scenes including figures armed with matchlocks. On the flap, shown here, are two huntsmen hawking, one on horseback, the other kneeling to retrieve the prey from his hawk. In addition to the illuminated opening pages, which are particularly accomplished and resemble those of the famous British Library Khamsa of 1599-1610 (Or. 22,65), there is a double frontispiece showing chess-players and a figure (perhaps the patron) reading by a stream, accompanied by his groom.

21 Qur'an
Calligrapher and illuminator: Ruzbihan Muhammad al-Tabri al-Shirazi
Iran, c. 1520
Ms. 1558; fols. 2v-3r; 42.7 x 29 cm

These are the opening pages of text to a truly sumptuous manuscript, showing the height which illuminators could reach in pursuit of total perfection. The opening sura, Al-Fatiha, is written over two pages in white Rayhan script within oval medallions. Above and below are cartouches containing the title and verse-count and Sura LVI (Al-Waq'a, The Terror), 77-80, in blue Riq'a. These are set into a pattern of superimposed cloud-scrolls and arabesque floral scrolls, multi-coloured, on a deep-blue ground. Delicate spiral forms with their myriad blossoms had by now entirely superseded the old geometric style of the 14th century, which lingered into the 15th. The independent frontispiece had also by now been absorbed into the illuminated opening pages, though Qur'ans often began, as this one does, with imposing medallions. Most other pages are illuminated in a restrained manner contrasting with the richness of the initial folios and the 29 openings marking the division of the text. Concerning the master Ruzbihan, who copied and illuminated the Qur'an (tashrara' bi-tahrirrih wa taqaddama bi-tarqimihi), we know only that he worked in Shiraz (see Minorsky, 29, 67), illuminated a manuscript in the Bodleian (Ms. Fraser, 73) and perhaps one of identical composition formerly in the Vever collection (see Vever, 1912, pl. XXII). The simple, virtually undecorated, binding is somewhat later in date.

Published: Arberry, no. 156 (frontispiece); James, 1980, no. 59.
22 The Caliph of Baghdad at the baths
Khamisa (Quintet) of Nizami
Scribe: Murshid (Kātib) called ‘Attar
(lit. the druggist) al-Shirazi
Iran, 936/1529-30.
Ms. 195; fol. 33v-34r; 28.3 x 19.5 cm

The first part of Nizami’s Quintet was the Makhzan al-Asar, 20 discourses on pious and moral themes, each illustrated by an anecdote. In this one the Caliph of Baghdad, Al-Ma’mun, is shocked by the request of a barber, shown shaving his head, for his daughter’s hand in marriage. His wise Wazir explains that the foolish barber must be standing on buried treasure, and this has given him the audacity to make the request. The artist has taken the story as an excuse to depict the full panorama of the hamam (Turkish baths). Apart from the usual activities taking place in the different chambers, we see a labourer stoking the furnace and an ox-powered shower. The scene has been depicted many times, the most famous being the painting by Behzad in the 1494 Khamsa in the British Library (Or. 6810). This composition, which was painted in Shiraz, differs in so many respects from Behzad’s that it or a copy can hardly have been its direct inspiration.


23 Tahmuras defeats the demons
Shah-Nama of Firdawsi
Iran, c. 1576-7
Ms. 256; 3; 44.5 x 31 cm

Tahmuras, one of the founders of civilisation, defeats the demons led by the monstrous Black Div. ‘He quelled the others with his massive mace. The captives, bound and stricken, begged their lives’ (Warner 1, 127). The battle with the demons — the triumph of the super-hero over the satanic hordes of Hell — was one of the most popular incidents with painters. This painting is the work of Murad Daylam, an accomplished artist of the late 16th century and responsible for at least 5 miniatures in this manuscript. Welch suggests that he was the pupil of Mirza ‘Ali who worked on two of the most famous 16th century Safavid manuscripts: the Houghton Shah-Nama and the British Library Khamsa. This painting is one of 52 from an unfinished manuscript commissioned by Shah Isma’il II (1576-7), attempting to revive royal patronage of painting after it had declined under Shah Tahmasp (1524-76). In pursuit of this aim he brought artists from all over Iran to the capital Qazvin. The hands of nine painters can be traced in this Shah-Nama, the greatest of whom was Siyavush the Georgian. The painting has the name ‘Murad’ written to the right of the horseman under the tree. This is most likely an attribution not a signature.

24 The Simurgh rescues the infant Zal
Shah-Nama of Firdawsi
Iran, last quarter of the 16th century
Ms. 277; fol. 12r; 45 x 26 cm

The infant Zal was unfortunately born with
white hair, to the embarrassment and shame of
his father Sam who ordered him to be left
out on the mountain to die. The mighty
Simurgh passing overhead rescued him and
gave him refuge in its nest. This miniature is a
particularly spectacular rendition of that
scene and one of the most powerful images in
Iranian painting. The bird holds the infant
tenderly, as a mother would her child, and trans-
ports him to the summit of the towering crag,
which bursts forth from the frame of the
miniature to mingle with the border. Only 21
pages with 14 original pictures remain from
this wonderful manuscript that Robinson
(1967, p. 65) declares 'ranks with the Demotte
Shah-Nama'. Like the latter, this manuscript
holds tenaciously to its secrets. Three artists
worked on it: the early Riza-i Abbey, a pupil
of his, and a third man who produced this
painting, identified by Robinson as Sadiqi.
The whereabouts of the missing pages (if they
exist) are unknown. If the manuscript really
was commissioned by Shah Abbas (1587-
1629), as is usually asserted, why was it left
unfinished? The text was completed, some (at
least) of the illumination by Mir Zayn al-
Abidin Tabrizi, but the paintings, despite
Robinson's speculations, were not. Even some
of the apparently 'finished' miniatures, (e.g. C.
B. Persian cat., pl. 42) have details missing. It
seems as if a grandiose project was aban-
donated half-way through.

Exhibited: Burlington House, 1931, 384 (b); V. & A.,
1967 (d), pl. frontispiece. Published: C. B. Persian
Cat, vol. III, pl. 41, Robinson, 1965, 12; Apollo, 1963
p. 384, fig. 7; Welch, 1976, pl. 11; James 1980, Abb. 6.

25 Odalisque
Iran, 1st half of the 17th century
Ms. 246; 5; 34 x 24 cm

In the 17th century pictures of young women
and decorous young men became very popu-
lar. Their purpose is not entirely clear: they
were probably not portraits, though some may
have been. A number of the female versions
are semi-clothed, even nude. This painting is
unusual in that the girl is obviously perform-
ing the act of du'a (personal prayer of request)
on her own or someone else's behalf. Perhaps
the appeal is for the return of her beloved to
whom the Persian verses in large Nasta'liq
may be addressed:

Many times have I made the Hajj,
For your sake I would follow anyone.
Whomever your love has inflamed,
has certainly done that to me.

Alternatively, these verses may be directed to
her. So often with these 17th century Safavid
figure-and-calligraphy compositions, the rela-
tionship between picture and surrounding
verses remains obscure. The wind tugs the
girl's hair, bends the trees in the background
and blows the clouds across the face of the
sun. Drawing and colour scheme are of a rich,
sensuous kind often associated with Riza-i
Abbasi, probably the artist of this work,
though it may be by one of his pupils, Muham-
mad Qasim Tabrizi. As the painting seems to
show a specific incident, it could originally
have been a manuscript illustration.
26 The Simurgh flies down to assist at the birth of Rustam
Shah-Nama of Firdawsi
Iran, 1086/1675-6
Ms. 277; fol. 3v; 45 x 26 cm

Anxious about the fair Rudabah in the throes of a difficult childbirth, Zal summonsthe Simurgh by burning a feather given to him by the bird for use in just such emergencies. Immediately, 'the air grew dark and that imperious bird swept down' (Warner, 1, 320-2). It recommends a caesarean section which is performed and thus the hero Rustam is born. The miniature is the work of Muhammad Zaman, who employed a heavily Europeanised style, well described as 'exquisitely unsettling' (Sims, 1976). His fascinating style used to be accounted for by a stay in Rome where he was said to have studied Italian painting. Although doubt has been cast on this, the artist clearly had some instruction in the European techniques of mathematical perspective, chiaroscuro, etc. This could, of course, have been given by one of the Western painters working in Iran. The paper and text date from the late 16th century, since this painting was added to a manuscript (see no. 24) to cover an apparently unfinished miniature. Under the charming pseudo-Flemish landscape are the remains of a quite different 16th century one showing cypresses and plum blossom. Under the figures, however, no trace of earlier work occurs. This would seem to support the probability that work on the 'Shah 'Abbas manuscript came to an abrupt halt in Qazwin around 1597. It was resumed in Isfahan by Muhammad Zaman 70 years later though whether he completed the task is unknown. Exhibited: Burlington House, 1931, 384 (a); Baroda House, 1939, 71 (a). Published: S.P.A., pl. 925 (A); C. B. Persian Cat., vol. III, pl. 38.

27 The Cathedral of Mexico City
Tarikh-i Yeni Dunya (History of the New World) of 'Ali Chelebi, called 'Akhizade
Iran, 2nd half of the 17th century
Ms. Additional; fol. 79v; 23 x 14 cm

A piece of geographical exotica. The History of the New World is a late addition to the large corpus of Islamic geographical writings, being a Persian account of Mexico and South America in the 16th century. This scene comes from the section dealing with Mexico City (Balda-i Mishiq) and describes a tree with refreshing white and red fruit which tastes like a pear — presumably a guava tree. On the left of the tree is a church with a roof shaped like an Aztec step-pyramid. Inside sits a venerable greybeard who supports himself by means of an Indian (sub-continental?) meditation band. Outside two figures dressed in Mughal costume carry a man who kneels in prayer. The origins of this strange image are the wooden statues of Catholic saints borne in religious processions. Above is a group of figures in partial European costume intended to be conquisadores. The entire scene is a bizarre mixture of East and West. The ultimate sources of most pictorial details — like the text itself — are Spanish books on Columbus and his successors. The work is a Persian translation and abridgement of the Turkish Tarikh al-Hind al-Gharbi (History of the West Indies), comprising the 3rd section of the book (minus the part on astronomy), though this is not stated by the anonymous translator. There are several good illustrated copies of the Turkish original, the best being Topkapi R. 1644 and Bayazit 4969, though the 12 Chester Beatty paintings are undoubtedly the most accomplished. The translation begins with a pious benediction for the 12 Imams, indicating an Iranian rather than Turkish or Mughal origin. The illumination is Iranian 17th century. The style of the paintings defies identification but is probably related to those of Europeanising Iranian artists of the 2nd half of the 17th century. Indeed, one of the bird scenes resembles those painted by Shafi' Abbasi c. 1630-50. The strange division of the foreground is also found in European oil paintings done in Iran (see Colnaghi, 1976, lots 140-1).