FOUR FOLIOS FROM SHAH TAHRAS’S MONUMENTAL ILLUSTRATED MANUSCRIPT OF THE SHAHIAMA (KNOWN AS THE ‘HOUGHTON’ SHAHIAMA)

The Shahnama manuscript made for Shah Tahmasp of Persia (1514-1576, reigned 1524-1576) is universally acknowledged as one of the supreme illustrated manuscripts of any period or culture and among the greatest works of art in the world. The key to its brilliance lies in the 258 illustrations and illumination, all executed between about 1530 and 1540 at a time when the art of Persian painting had reached its absolute zenith. Probably no other Persian work of art, save architecture, has ever involved such enormous expense or taken so much artists’ time.

The eleventh century is noted for its for-sighted and grandiose rulers who cropped up in the countries of both west and east - Shah Jahan in India, Suleyman the Magnificent in Turkey, Elizabeth I in England and others. Persia was fortunate to have as her ruler Shah Tahmasp, whose enthusiasm for particularly painting, was boundless and all-consuming. As a painter and calligrapher himself he had a way of driving his artists to ever greater achievements. No expense was spared on paper, pigments, gold leaf or artists’ time, and for those twenty years it was Shahnama which primarily occupied the Shah’s entire atelier of master artists. The artistic goal of the Persian painter was book illustration. Anything of the nature of wall-decorations or panel painting took second place. For this reason it cannot be fair to make comparison between this great book and the illustrated manuscripts of the west. The equivalent Italian manuscript would probably have to be a national epic on a level with the Diverse Comedy of Dante and to include in one volume the masterpieces of Leonardo, Raphael, Botticelli, Bellini and Michelangelo, an indigestible concept, yet the inherent nature of this most glamorous of Persian manuscripts, is little surprise therefore that Shah Tahmasp’s Shahnama has enjoyed such an illustrious reputation and provenance since its creation.

The Shahnama or ‘Book of Kings’ is the Persian epic, telling the history and legends of Persia from prehistoric times down to the end of the Sassanian dynasty in the seventh century A.D. The author, Ferdowsi (c. A.D. 935-1020), took up the task of writing the history of the Persian kings in verse in A.D. 976 after particularly painting, was boundless and all-consuming. As a painter and calligrapher himself he had a way of driving his artists to ever greater achievements. No expense was spared on paper, pigments, gold leaf or artists’ time, and for those twenty years it was Shahnama which primarily occupied the Shah’s entire atelier of master artists. The artistic goal of the Persian painter was book illustration. Anything of the nature of wall-decorations or panel painting took second place. For this reason it cannot be fair to make comparison between this great book and the illustrated manuscripts of the west. The equivalent Italian manuscript would probably have to be a national epic on a level with the Diverse Comedy of Dante and to include in one volume the masterpieces of Leonardo, Raphael, Botticelli, Bellini and Michelangelo, an indigestible concept, yet the inherent nature of this most glamorous of Persian manuscripts, is little surprise therefore that Shah Tahmasp’s Shahnama has enjoyed such an illustrious reputation and provenance since its creation.

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Shah Tahmasp’s Shahnama is thought to have been begun by his father, Shah Ismail I (reigned 1502-1524), the first Safavid Shah of Iran. Shah Ismail I was a dynamic, charismatic, powerful character who conquered Arslan Turkan and Uzbek alike, carving out for himself an empire which took in Herat, Shiraz and all of Persia. It is therefore the probable date of commissioning of the manuscript, Shah Ismail I had done conquering and was devoting more of his time to the arts. Shah Tahmasp, as a boy only eight years of age, had just returned to his father’s capital from Herat where he had been child governor. Shah Ismail I died in 1524 and Tahmasp’s memory of his father must have been an almost god-like figure, respected and revered by the entire court.

The manuscript has no colophon, breaking off abruptly on folio 730, and the only date is inscribed on one of the miniatures - A.H.594 (A.D.1572-8), but the illuminated dedication on folio 16 states definitely that the manuscript was made for the library of Shah Tahmasp. One cannot help feeling that Shah Tahmasp’s devotion to the manuscript’s excellence was in part rendered in honour of his great father, who had done so much for Iran and for his own position.

Shah Ismail’s conquests of different regions had enabled him to gather artists of different training and experience. It was this composite nature of the atelier that led to a new hybrid style of Persian miniature painting, now known as the Tabriz style. In his researches, Welch has identified two main source styles: the Timurid tradition of Herat, and the Turkman tradition of Shiraz and other centres. Inasmuch as younger and older artists worked side by side over many years, the manuscript became a focus for relatively traditional works along with those of the resultant Tabriz style in various stages of its evolution. In this way the manuscript shows a remarkable range of Persian miniature painting of the period. A second manuscript prepared for Shah Tahmasp is the Khamsa of Nizami, now in the British Library, London; (Or.2262; Welch, 1979, 134-183), and published in most of the same reference works as the Shahnama. The Khamsa is of similar dimensions to the Shahnama and is usually regarded as its sister manuscript. In its present condition it contains fourteen contemporary illustrations, painted within a shorter period circa 1539-1543, thus representing the Tabriz style in its full maturity. With their early artist ascriptions, the miniatures of the Khamsa provide a basis for comparison and attribution of the Shahnama miniatures.

The first leading artist of the Shahnama, and the one to whom much of the initial stylistic innovation is credited, was Sultan Muhammad. It appears that for a middle period the leadership was taken over by Mir Musavir, and that towards the end it was Aqa Mirak who dominated the project. It is of note that all three of these leading artists of the Shahnama production are properly represented in the
attributed to the hand of one artist working alone, and among these are some of the finest miniatures of the manuscript (e.g. folio 110 of the present four).

For our knowledge of the artists of Shah Tahmâsp's atelier we are fortunate that near-contemporary Persian contemporaries inquired about the nature of their work. Dust Muhammad, himself an artist who worked on the Shahnama to a limited extent, was interviewed by Prince Bahram Mirza, brother of Shah Tahmâsp, to assemble an album of fine and representative paintings and calligraphy. In his prefatory the album he gives an informative account of the works of past and present painters. Those of Shah Tahmâsp's atelier were his contemporaries of his whom he would have worked with and known personally. The album, with Dust Muhammad's nineteen-page text, is in the Topkapi Library (H.1721, formerly 57088). For a translation of much of this text see Binyon, Wilkinson and Gray, 1933, 185-188. A later, more extensive treatise, is that written by Qadi Ahmad circa A.D.1606, of which several manuscript copies are extant (Minozky, 1939).

After about 1540 Shah Tahmâsp's attitude to painting changed. He became increasingly religious and was weighed down with political concerns and work on the Shahnama came to an end. The threat of invasion by the Turks from the west had been a recurrent problem, settled by treaty in 1555. When Suleyman the Magnificent died in Hungary in 1566, there were fears that the threat might not be upheld by his successor Sultan Selim II (1566-1574). In 1567 a Safavid embassy led by Shah Qoll left for Turkey and met with the Sultan at Edirne in February of 1568. The pom of the occasion was noted by the Hapsburg embassy, then also present at the Ottoman court. There were thirty-four camel bearmg the most magnificent gifts from Shah Tahmâsp to the new Sultan. Top of the list of gifts and thus rated the most valuable, were two manuscripts, one a copy of the Qur'an said to have been written by the Imam Ali himself, the other a Shahnama. Topkapi records show that this was indeed Shah Tahmâsp's great volume.

The Shahnama stayed with the Ottomans for over three centuries, preserved in almost miracoulous condition, suggesting that during its long stay it was, like so many manuscripts there, kept safe and seldom handled. Unlike the miniatures of so many Persian manuscripts, the compositions of the Shahnama illustrations were not generally used or echoed in subsequent manuscripts. This could be partly because of their size and complexity, but also suggests that, in addition to the fact that the volume left Persia so soon, other artists had little access to it. About the beginning of the nineteenth century the Sultan's Librarian, Muhammad Arifi, wrote extensive explanations of the stories on the coversheets of each miniature, a great task, indicating that the manuscript was then still being specially singled out.

The manuscript left Istanbul about the end of the nineteenth century and reached France, for by 1903 it was in the possession of Baron Edmond de Rothschild who lent it for exhibition at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris, where the catalogue description gave no hint of its magnificence. It was probably MS.17 in the Rothschild Library, which included such supreme western manuscripts as the Belles Heures of the Duc de Berry and the Hours of Catherine of Cleves. For a half a century the Shahnama was retired from public and scholarly gaze. It did not feature in any of the great exhibitions of Persian or Islamic art from time to time staged in Europe and America, nor was it published with an adequate passing mention. We know, however, that the volume made an extraordinary though unspecified detour after 1940. It is listed unmistakably among the works of art looted by the Nazis from France and sought by the Allied Command after the War (G.F.C.C. Rétrospéct des Bons Spoliés en France durant la Guerre 1939-45, VII, p.34, no.398). It was described as the property of Baron Maurice de Rothschild, son of Edmond, from whom he had inherited it in 1934. The Shahnama was recovered; and after Maurice de Rothschild's death in 1957 it was one of a number of outstanding Rothschild books offered for sale, principally in America.

The world was not ready for an oriental book of such quality. Institutions were unwilling to pay the price for something they had not assessed; so it was bought on advice by the collector and bibliophile Arthur A. Houghton Jr., benefactor of the Houghton Library at Harvard University. From this point the manuscript's history becomes more public. The volume was disbound so that separate pages could be exhibited - at the Geffrye Club, the Pierpont Morgan Library and elsewhere. In 1971, 76 folios with 78 of the 258 illustrations were transferred to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (Welch, 1971). Suffice to say that at this stage the way remained open for the rest of the manuscript to take the same route in good time, so keeping its integrity as a single work of art. But in 1976 sales were forwarded to Christie's in London for auction. Sale records were broken, and from that moment the temptation to make further separate sales became too great to resist. The four folios in the collection of the British Rail Planning Fund, for instance, were acquired in 1977 through Thos. Agnew and Son, the London Fine Art dealer. There have been frequently expressed opinions both for and against this irrevocable action with a manuscript of such importance.

The most recent and supposedly final major move took place in 1994. After an absence of over 400 years, the body of the manuscript - text, illumination, binding and miniatures - was finally returned to Iran and national ownership by exchange. As reported in the press at the time, the Shahnama and a William de Kooning painting were swapped, the final exchange taking place on the tarmac at Vienna airport.

In all, between 1976 and Arthur Houghton's death in 1990, 62 illustrated leaves were dispersed privately and at auction, finding permanent homes in public and private collections. In addition to those in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, there are leaves of Shah Tahmâsp's Shahnama in the David Collection, Copenhagen, the Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, Virginia, the Staatliche Museum Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin, and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

After the manuscript reached America in 1959 Stuart Cary Welch embarked on a long and thorough investigation and study of the manuscript, culminating in his great two-volume publication with Martin Bernard Dickson in 1981, The Houghton Shahnama. It can safely be said that nobody has devoted as much time to the manuscript since circa 1540, while it goes without saying that the bulk of the information given here is derived from the published fruits of that study.

The following works in the bibliography contain information on, or are devoted to Shah Tahmâsp's Shahnama: Welch, 1972; Welch, 1976; Christie, 1976 and 1987; Welch, 1979; Agnew, 1979; Dickson and Welch, 1981; Welch, 1985; Soudavar, 1992, 1998.
Faridun strikes Zahbak with the ox-head mace as the angel Surush appears, attributed to Sultan Mohammad. Folio 56 from Shah Tahmasp’s Shahnama, Tabriz, c.1525

Miniature in colours and gold, in good condition, inscriptions on architecture and throne (see below), slight oxidisation of background pigment of architecture in a few places, panels of Shahnameh text at top and bottom of miniature, within gold and coloured rules, broad gold-sprinkled margin with catchwords at bottom (retouched), the reverse with a full page of text in 4 columns with five lines written diagonally, numerous triangular cornerpieces illuminated in colours and gold, illumination between columns

Miniature and text area 27.2 by 17.3cm., page 47 by 31.8cm.

Published: S.C. Welch, A King’s Book of Kings. The Shah-namah of Shah Tahmasp, New York (Metropolitan Museum of Art), 1972, 112-115. A greatly enlarged detail of this miniature, featuring the angel Surush, is reproduced on the slip-case of the volume.


In the early part of the Shahnama Iran enjoys a golden age under Jamshid, but after his reign the throne is seized by the evil Zahbak and many years of misfortune ensue. For the crime of having killed his own father, Zahbak is cursed with two serpents which sprout from his shoulders. Worse, each serpent has a compulsive appetite for human brains. But Zahbak lived uneventfully, his fear kindled by a terrible nightmare: he dreamed he would be struck down by an ox-head mace, flayed alive and dragged off to Mount Damavand. A grudge is borne against him by Faridun, whose father he has murdered, and Faridun has managed to gain access to his palace and usurp his position. There Faridun is spending time with the ladies when Zahbak returns and sneaks in, with the intention of feeding his serpents, this time on female brains. He gains access through a window but Faridun surprises him: then the angel Surush appears and directs proceedings in the way they have foretold:

...As he (Zahbak) descended
He drew a keen-edged poniard from its sheath,
Told not his purpose or his name, but clutched
The steel-blue dagger in his hand, ahabst
For blood - the blood of those two beauteous dams.
His feet no sooner rested on the ground
Than Faridun rushed on him like the wind
And beat his helm with the ox-head mace.
"Strike not," cried blest Surush, who hurried thither,
"His time hath not yet come, but bind him vanquished
Firm as a rock and bear him to some gorge,
Where friends and kinsmen will not come to him."
(Warner, I, 167-168)
The moment is brilliantly caught in Sultan Muhammad’s picture. Faridun turns his head at the very moment he strikes Zahhak, his attention taken by the rush of the wings of Surush, who appears from the golden sky to deliver the message of fate.

Inscriptions incorporated in the picture translate:
(Top): As your heart would fain fancy, so may you fare!
(Over door): O opener of the gates!
(Throne): Faridun was wholly blessed. Yes!
But an Angel! Cast solely in abeoood and ambergeze! No!
(Translation: Dickson and Welch, 1981, vol.i, no.25)

Sultan Muhammad was the most influential of the artists who worked on Shah Tahmasp’s Shahname and the first director of the manuscript’s production. He was primarily responsible for bringing about a successful fusion of the previous Herat and Tabriz styles, so forming the new Safavid style of Tabriz which dominated Persian painting of the sixteenth century, and of which the Shahname is the apogees. Sultan Muhammad was greatly praised in his own lifetime, and his brilliance is confirmed to us today through his paintings. His works are copiously published in the works on the Shahname referred to above and elsewhere. The fullest analysis of his painting style and life is given by Dickson and Welch, 1981, vol.i, 54-96. Welch’s opening words there perhaps best summarize his special genius: ‘Sultan Muhammad’s vital expression of his vision of God and Man surpassed the usual limits of Persianate painting.’

Most of the illustrations in Shah Tahmasp’s Shahname are thought to be the work of more than one artist. In this case Sultan Muhammad was assisted by the hand originally designated by Welch as Painter D, identified as Khusra’ Abd-al-Aziz of Kashan. He was a close follower of Sultan Muhammad and a man of rich emotions. Welch describes his work as ‘usually very hot, occasionally very cold, rarely tepid’ and considers that he may even have been privileged to assist Sultan Muhammad on his masterpiece The Court of Ghasanas (folio 20), a picture which influenced the Khusra greatly. As regards his participation in this miniature Welch detects his hand in the animal ornament on the throne room wall and in a few of the figures; we also suspect he painted the brilliantly coloured tiles. Sultan Muhammad, however, maintained strict control over this work, and we feel no qualms in crediting it to him. Later, in about 1530, ‘Abd-al-Aziz was the subject of a court scandal when he absconded with the beautiful son of the Royal Sugeen to the Shah’s court. ‘Abd al-Aziz was recalled and, although the Shah spared him the death penalty, the event cost him his ears and nose. He then applied his artistry to the making of a new nose which by all accounts became him very well. For this and more about ‘Abd al-Aziz see Dickson and Welch, 1981, 216-228. £150,000-250,000
Rustam finds Kay Qubad, the youthful descendant of Faridun, enthroned on Mount Alburz, attributed to Aqa Mirak. Folio 110 from Shah Tahmasp's Shahnama, Tabriz, c.1525-30.

Miniature in colours and gold, in good condition. Panels of Shahnama text were left and at bottom of miniature, the miniature extending beyond the text area within gold and coloured rules. Broads gold-speckled margins with catchwords at bottom, the reverse with a full page of text in 4 columns with two lines written diagonally with triangular cornerpieces illustrated in colours and gold.

Miniature 35.8 by 21.9cm, text 26.7 by 21.9cm, page 47 by 31.3cm.


S.C. Welch, Wonders of the Age. Masterpieces of Early Safavid Painting, 1501-1576, Harvard University (Fogg Art Museum), 1979, no.10.

M.B. Dickson and S.C. Welch, The Houghton Shahnameh, Cambridge (Harvard University Press), 1981, vol I, 107 and figs. 148 and 150, and vol. II, no.83. (A colour plate of this folio is loosely inserted in each copy of the book with the note: 'Since owners may wish to display a colorplate without destroying the integrity of the work, this reproduction of one of the Houghton Shahnameh's finest miniatures has been placed unmounted in Volume One, suitable for framing.')

Following the death of Garshasp, the dominance of Iran by the Turanians under Afrasiyab led to years of strife and famine. Zal and his son Rustam, the great hero of the Shahnama, hear that Kay Qubad lives in the vicinity of Mount Alburz. As a descendant of Faridun, and blessed with graceful qualities, Kay Qubad is a rightfull heir to the Iranian throne. While Zal leads his armies towards the forces of Afrasiyab, Rustam journeys in haste to Mount Alburz where he finds and is welcomed by the youthful Kay Qubad.

…and when within a mile
Of Mount Alburz perceived a splendid seat
With running water and abundant trees
The home for youth. Upon a river's bank
Was set a throne besprinkled with rose-water
And purest musk. A young man like the moon
Was seated on the throne beneath the shade,
While many paladins with girdled loins
Stood ranked as is the custom of the great,
And formed a court well fitted for a Shah.
Like paradise in form and hue.

(Warner, L. 383)

Aqa Mirak was a man of diverse abilities who, in addition to his work as an illustrator of manuscripts, devoted time to the decoration of mosques and palaces. He was evidently an affable character, a boon companion of Shah Tahmasp and much liked at court. He is thought to have been the director of the atelier for the later years of production of the Shahnama, and many of the illustrations in his characteristic style, with clean clear palette and larger figures, are found among the illustrations of the later pages. He had special skills as a colourist and preparer of pigments, skills which can be seen to have contributed to the peculiar lightness and clarity of his miniatures. The present picture is one of his mature works, seen by Welch as 'the key transitional picture linking Aqa Mirak's powerful, richly coloured, broad style to his later, less vivid, subtler, more polished manner' (Welch, 1979, p-72). His composition, towering up into the top margin of the page, owes something to the towering compositions of Sultan Muhammad. In its maturity, and with its impressive stature, the picture relates closely to Aqa Mirak's miniatures painted for Shah Tahmasp's Khamoo (British Library, Or.2985).

Aqa Mirak's miniatures are to be found illustrated in the works on the Shah Tahmasp Shahnama quoted above and in many other reference books. A perceptive account of his work is given in Dickson and Welch, 1981, vol I, 95-117; see also Soudavar, 1992, 178-183.
Minuchihir enthroned at the beginning of his reign of one hundred and twenty years, signed by Mir Musavir. Folio 60 from Shah Tahmâsp's Shahnama, Tabriz, c.1525-30

miniatures in colours and gold, signed 'Mir Musavir' on coverer's hat, in good condition, panels of Shahnama text at top and bottom of miniature with illuminated heading above, the text on gold-sprinkled paper within gold and coloured rules, broad gold-sprinkled margins with catchword at bottom, light crosses at outer edges and light watermarks at top edge, the reverse with a full page of 22 lines of text in 4 columns on gold-sprinkled paper, an illuminated heading near the top.

miniature 20.9 by 17.2cm., text 27.1 by 17.2cm., page 47 by 31.4cm.


Following the death of Zâlub, Faridin ascends the Iranian throne and has three sons, Salon, Tur, and Iraj, to whom he later appoints his kingdom. The arrangement is a recipe for trouble, and inevitably the brothers squabble. Iraj, the youngest and Faridin's favourite, is murdered by the other two. To Faridin's delight, however, a son is soon born to Iraj's wife: he is named Minuchihir. When the child has grown up, he engages his uncles in battle and vanquishes them. The aged Faridin expires content, his last instruction to Minuchihir being to prepare to take over the throne:

They mourned for Faridin for seven days. Upon the eighth Shah Minuchihir came forth And set the royal cap upon his head; He countercharmed the spell of sorcerers And reigned twice sixty years. (Warner, I, 257)

This miniature is remarkable for the fact that, alone among all the illustrations of the Shahnama, it is signed on the painted surface. (One other painting in the manuscript, on folio 521 and added at the end of the project, bears the name of the artist Dust Muhammad in the lower margin; Welch, 1979, no.31.) The work of Mir Musavir, the second leader of the Shahnama project, was admired equally with Sultan Muhammad and Aqa Mirak. Qâdi Ahmad described him as 'a portraitist whose work was flawless...who produced paintings of the utmost charm and elegance' (Dickson and Welch, 1981, vol.I, 87). He was the father of the painter Mir Sayyid 'Ali and, as Qâdi Ahmad tells us, it was he who first caught the imagination of the Mughal emperor Humayun and was invited to India. But Mir Sayyid 'Ali was first to take up the challenge, becoming a founder of the Mughal school of painting, his father later following him there (Minorsky, 1959, 185).

Qâsim Son of 'Ali, identified by Welch as the artist originally designated by him as Painter B, was the painter who worked most closely with Mir Musavir on several miniatures including this one. When the two artists worked in conjunction, as here, they produced some of the most sweetly and quietly pleasing of miniatures. A parallel is the scene of Sam and Zal welcomed into Kabul, painted with the same level of collaboration (Folios 88v, 89v, 1979, no.5; Welch, 1985, no.49). Qâsim Son of 'Ali was adept at merging his style with that of his master's and Welch considers that it may have been because Mir Musavir was so pleased with the result that he placed his signature on this page. On folio 651 (lot 14) he worked with Aqa Mirak with equal success. For an account of Qâsim Son of 'Ali see Dickson and Welch, 1981, vol.I, 211-214.

£150,000-250,000
Rustam kicks aside the boulder rolled down the mountain by Bahman, attributed to Aqa Mirak.
Folio 451 from Shah Tahmasp’s Shahnama, Tabriz, c.1538

miniature in colours and gold, in good condition, panels of Shahnama text at top and bottom of miniature, the text within gold and colour rules, broad gold-speckled margin with slight curve at outer edge, the reverse with a full page of 22 lines of text in 4 columns with an illustrated heading at the bottom, catchword to bottom margin

miniature 20.8 by 21.2cm., text 27 by 17cm., page 47.2 by 32.1cm.


Isfandiyar, during the reign of his father Gushasp, whose abdication he eagerly awaits, is sent by his father in quest of Rustam whom he is instructed to bring back to court in chains. If he can achieve this he will be granted his father’s throne. Bearing in mind Rustam’s reputation for invincibility, Isfandiyar is understandably reluctant. As a compromise, he delegates the critical part of the mission to his son Bahman, who tracks down Rustam cooking up a meal of a whole roasted onager in the company of his brother Zawara. By Rustam’s very countenance, Bahman realises that Isfandiyar will lose any battle against such a hero, so he settles for a less confrontational method of attack:

He loosed a flinty boulder from the height,
And sent it downward from the lofty peak.
Zawara from the hunting-ground beheld it,
And heard the rumble that it made within.
He shouted: ‘Paladin and cavalier!
A stone is rolling from the mountain-top!’
But Rustam to Zawara’s wonderment
Ne’er moved nor laid aside the onager;
He waited till the stone was close to him,
While all the mountain darkened by its dust,
Then with a kick dispatched it far away,
Whereat Zawar praised him joyfully.
(Warner, V, 184-185)

Compared with Aqa Mirak’s painting of folio 110 this illustration offers a very complete and satisfying composition, with a wide range of subject elements and detail, all within a relatively contained area. Welch has detected the hands of both Aqa Mirak and Qasim Son of ‘Ali (painter B) working on the picture together, as they did also on folio 281 of the Shahnama. (For details of these artists see notes to lots 12 and 13 [II,10, 69]). Welch describes this illustration as ‘composed in Aqa Mirak’s crispily spare style, with such details as a splendid plane tree, one of his rivulets, and horses and figures that could not have been designed or executed by B without this master’s close supervision and help.’
£150,000-250,000