WONDERS OF THE AGE

Masterpieces of Early Safavid Painting, 1501 - 1576

STUART CARY WELCH
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with contributions by Sheila R. Canby & Nora Titley


FOGG ART MUSEUM, HARVARD UNIVERSITY
On the cover: Detail of Court of the Gayumars, no. 8

Frontispiece: Firdausi Encounters the Court Poets of Ghazna, no. 4.

The title of the exhibition is taken from Mirza Muhammad Haydar Dughlat’s treatise on the Herat school of painters. He spoke of the artist ‘Mawlana Mirak Naqsh’ as “One of the wonders [marvels] of the age.” See Binyon, Wilkinson, and Gray, Persian Miniature Painting, p. 150.

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Detail of no. 9.
Foreword

Increasing numbers of Western museum visitors are becoming aware of the splendors of non-Western art. Today, a moderately educated eye appreciates Chinese painting, recognizes the dignified power of African sculpture and the sensitive elegance of Eskimo ivories. Many, though still too few, realize that great artists were at work in Safavid Tabriz as well.

Wonders of the Age brings together a superb collection of exquisite miniatures, presenting a comprehensive view of painting in the years from the beginning of the sixteenth century until the death of Shah Tahmasp in 1576. The exhibition represents probably the greatest assemblage of sixteenth-century Iranian painting seen together in four hundred years and includes some of the finest Persian miniatures ever created.

This exhibition owes its existence to the cooperation of many individuals and institutions. Our warmest thanks go to Stuart Cary Welch, Curator of Muslim and Hindu Painting at the Fogg Art Museum, for his role in conceiving and selecting the exhibition and writing the catalogue. The generosity of the lenders also made this extraordinary event a reality.

We are extremely grateful to Arthur A. Houghton, Jr., who has agreed to lend miniatures from the beautiful book of kings, as well as to The Metropolitan Museum of Art, which has contributed several of its pictures from this same volume. Several private collectors who also acquired paintings from this manuscript have kindly allowed their treasures to be shown. In addition, one of our host institutions, the British Library, has graciously permitted us on this occasion to show the fourteen miniatures from its renowned quinter of Nizami as separate works.

Although the core of the exhibition consists of Shah Tahmasp's book of kings and quintet, miniatures and drawings from other sources have also been included to enrich and amplify our appreciation of Safavid court painting. For the earlier years, we are especially fortunate in having been allowed to borrow the manuscript of 'Asafi's Jamâl u fâdâl from the Uppsala University Library as well as a dazzling miniature from the British Museum attributable to Sultan-Muhammad. For loans of works from the later period, our special thanks must go to the Musée du Louvre, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and The Cleveland Museum of Art. We are also particularly grateful to the Musée Guimet, and to Edwin Binney, 3rd, for contributing works by Mir Sayyid 'Ali, one of the founders of the Mughal school, and to the Royal Scottish Museum for lending one of the miniatures separated from the British Library quintet. In addition we wish to acknowledge the generosity of several anonymous private lenders.

Recent scholarship has added greatly to our knowledge of this field. The study prepared by Mr. Welch and Professor Martin Bernard Dickson of Princeton University, The
Houghton Shahnameh, soon to be published by Harvard University Press, surveys the entire field of early Safavid court painting. For it, Professor Dickson re-examined and re-translated virtually all of the relevant literature, including many contemporary chronicles, memoirs, and diaries, excerpts of which he has generously allowed us to include here.

We would also like to thank all those devoted members of the staffs of the participating museums whose efforts in arranging for, mounting and exhibiting these treasures, and publishing this catalogue are deeply appreciated.

Those of us on the western side of the Atlantic would also like to extend our thanks for the financial support of the National Endowment for the Arts, Washington, D.C., a federal agency of the United States Government, and John Gochet. Their generous donations allowed us to uphold our end of this international collaboration.

J. Carter Brown, Director
National Gallery of Art
Sydney Freedberg, Acting Director
Fogg Art Museum
D. T. Richnell, Director General
British Library Reference Division

Dedication & Acknowledgements

Telephone calls at five in the morning, horribly demanding questions about the personal habits of sixteenth-century princes, requests for translations of discouragingly long and complicated inscriptions—all these and more have been suffered by my friend and colleague, Martin Bernard Dickson of Princeton University, to whom I wish to dedicate this partial result of our fifteen-year collaboration. To one who spends happy hours peering at exhilarating pictures, Martin Dickson’s literary and historical labors are as mysteriously awesome as they are impressive and essential. If I have twisted and garbled, or, more likely, misquoted, his important work, I accept the shame; for without his scholarship our investigation of Shah Tahmasp’s and his artists’ pictures would have been far less satisfying, enjoyable, and productive.

We are deeply grateful to Arthur A. Houghton, Jr. not only for having accepted our suggestion that he acquire Shah Tahmasp’s Book of Kings but also for allowing Professor Dickson and myself to publish it, a far lengthier effort than anticipated and one which must have sorely tested Mr. Houghton’s patience. During the period of study preceding the actual writing of The Houghton Shahnameh many colleagues were particularly helpful and generous. At the Fogg Eric Schroeder and John Rosenfield gave unstinting encouragement and advice. We are greatly indebted to B.W. Robinson, who was not only the first to accept our radical ideas that Safavid painting emerged from Turkman as well as Timurid sources and that Sultan-Muhammad was the painter of Atanam Sleeping (no. 2), but who previously had greatly contributed to our education in the field by lending us his copious and excellent notes to the major collections in the British Museum and Bibliothèque Nationale. We are also beholden, in London, to Basil Gray and Ralph Pinder-Wilson, in Leningrad, to Nataly Grek and Anatoli Ivanov, and in New York, to Maurice Dimand and Richard Ettinghausen.

In preparing for the exhibition, we are particularly indebted to Norah Titley for her initial encouragement and painstaking research, editorial work, and many other invaluable contributions in connection with the catalogue, to Jeremiah Losty and M.I. Waley for their devoted help on many levels. We are particularly thankful to Mr. D.T. Richnell for his constant and incisive support as Director General of the British Library Reference Division. From the first, Michael Rogers of the British Museum also lent his lively encouragement and excellent advice. Mlle. Jeannine Auboyer of the Musée Guimet, Norman Tebbit of the Royal Scottish Museum, and Thomas Totte of the Uppsala University Library were also thoughtfully and efficiently helpful, as was Marthe Bernus-Taylor of the Louvre, whose devotion to the cause deserves special recognition.

Among U.S. private collectors, we are beholden particularly to Arthur A. Houghton, Jr. and Edwin Binney, 3rd for their constant generous cooperation. We are also grateful to
Introduction

The merest glance at the paintings assembled here reveals several remarkable characteristics. Their jeweled richness of color evokes the radiance of nature, as in precious stones or the plumage of birds. Their fineness of scale defies our eyesight, and they illuminate an ideal world, shadowless and mostly flat, all elements of which are heightened to the level of fantasy. Many of the pictures seem at first glance, but they also invite close, lingering inspection of each tiny configuration, from the lively, often comical heroes, nobles, and demons, to the fabulous animals and birds, ornament, and landscapes.

These miniatures exemplify high court art. Their patrons and artists were supremely civilized. Most were poets, musicians, and calligraphers, as well as men of the world, who intrigued, fought, and loved. They were also devout Muslims and many were mystics. Sultan-Muhammad, who painted The Court of Gauynars (no. 8), Allegory of Drunkenness (no. 44), and The Ascent of the Prophet (no. 65), impresses us as a painter-saint. His somewhat younger colleague in the royal workshop, Asa-Mirak, a close companion of their patron, Shah Tahmasp, must also have been mystically oriented, as can be seen by his Faridun Treats His Sons (no. 14) and Nushirvan Listening to the Owls (no. 60), both redolent of Sufi inspiration. By exploring every nook and cranny of these infinitely complex little paintings, viewers will find what they seek, or desire, whether it be a superbly designed textile, an outrageously funny demon, or a vision of paradise.

All the pictures here share certain characteristics. All are of royal origin, from the courts of the Shahs and princes of the Safavid dynasty; all were painted by major court artists during the first three quarters of the sixteenth century. Technically, they were drawn on paper with reed pens or brushes, after which most were colored in opaque water-color (or gouache), using glues or gum arabic as binding media, a technique of deceptive simplicity that took years of apprenticeship to master. Pigments were varied, and their manufacture was part of each artist’s training, along with making brushes of squirrel or kitten hairs set in bird quills and perfectly fitted to the artist’s grip. Some pigments were made by “secret” chemical processes; a few were prepared from such natural ingredients as crushed insects; and others, including the precious mineral lapis lazuli, used to produce the costly and bluest of blues, had to be powdered and sorted grain by grain. Metals, too, were employed. Silver and gold were pounded between sheets of parchment into thin foils, before being worked in a mortar with rock salt, which was later washed out, leaving the pure metallic pigments. For a warm gold, copper was added; for a cooler one, silver. Copper also provided verdigris, a corrosive green that was often painted on over a protective coating lest it eat through the paper. Applied in large areas as skies, gold was also brushed on in decorative arabesques. Later, it could be tooled or pricked with a stylus for glittering.
highlights. Miniatures such as those shown here were traditionally included in books or albums, where they were protected from damp, insects, and prolonged exposure to light — their worst hazards. Traditional Iranian artists also executed wall paintings, but most of these have been lost due to the impermanence of the buildings they adorned.

Portraits of artists at work show them seated on the ground, with drawing boards propped on their knees, surrounded by little shells of pigments and binding medium, pens, brushes, and other tools of the trade. The miniature or drawing was fastened to the board for steadiness. Disciplined control not only of wrist and fingers but of the entire body must have been necessary to make the rhythmic, calligraphic strokes so essential to the art.

One wonders what occupational disorders resulted from the excessively long hours spent in such cramped and strenuous positions! For it is obvious that all of the paintings here required a great many hours of toil, if not months or years. We assume that The Court of Gayumars, Sultan-Muhammad's most sustained work, was sporadically in progress over a period of years; while his Hushang Slay the Black Div (no. 9), the very next folio in the Book of Kings, was joyously dashed off in a matter of a week or so. Evidence of the time required to paint a moderately complex Mughal historical picture in the late sixteenth century was found by Dr. Ellen Smart, who read the artist's inscription saying that it took fifty days to complete. 1

How did a miniature or drawing of the sort shown here come into being? Few, if any, were created purely for their artist's satisfaction. Rather, they represent the combined efforts and inspiration of patrons as well as painters, each of whom was passionately concerned with pictorial art. Illustrated books were traditional pleasures of royalty and of the few high officials who could afford to maintain ateliers, though, as in the West, a few patrons, including Shah Tahmasp and his father, were particularly concerned with this art. They chose the subjects to be illustrated and guided the artists, thus deserving considerable credit not only for the finished works but also for the development of painter's styles. When Shah Tahmasp commissioned a great manuscript, he set into motion a large corps of craftsmen — specialists in paper (which may have been imported), gilders, illuminators, calligraphers, and binders, as well as artists. All contributed to the project, which demanded lengthy and continuing discussions and preparation. The Shah and the director of the scheme, a major figure such as Sultan-Muhammad, played active roles in laying out the volume, page by page. Together they would have re-examined earlier manuscripts and albums from the Royal Library, searching for inspiring ideas, and with keen perceptiveness, they selected subjects for illustration, assigning them to appropriate artists. During our period, fantastic and demonic scenes often fell to Sultan-Muhammad himself, or to his immediate circle of assistants, whereas romantic or amorous ones were given to Mir Musavvir, another of the three senior masters of the Book of Kings. Aqa-Mirak, the third member of the trio, was likely to be held responsible for his specialties: animals, dragons, and court portraits, including those of his friend the Shah.

Like cream rising to the top of milk, artistic talent in Safavid Iran usually reached the Shah's court. Whatever an artist's place of origin, whether Shiraz, Isfahan, or some more provincial center, ability eased his way from a bazaar workshop to a governor's establishment, and thence (perhaps as a human offering from the favor-seeking official) to the summit of the Royal Workshop. Once there, he would have been further trained, in company with the aspiring apprentices already at the capital, such as Mirza-All, son of Sultan-Muhammad, or Mir Musavvir's son, Mir Sayyid-Ali. Painstakingly, he would have been taught the refinements of composition, the blending and matching of colors, drawing from nature, and copying or tracing from the assemblage of earlier miniatures and sketches in the Royal Library or studios. In all likelihood, his artistic personality was recognized and encouraged. If, like Muzaffar-All (nos. 55, 65), his horses were imbued with vital élan or, like Mir Sayyid-Ali (nos. 61, 67), he showed genius as a textile designer, these gifts were appreciated and put to use. With luck, his work caught the royal eye, and he was invited to collaborate in one of the Shah's current projects.

Usually, however, young painters were assigned to assist the senior masters before being commissioned to compose original designs. As colorers, they worked in close collaboration with the designers or outlineurs, at first tinting in backgrounds, and eventually painting more crucial areas. One such apprentice, Mir Sayyid-Ali, seems to have been so appreciated in this humble capacity that he suffered by being held in such servitude rather than encouraged to create original compositions.

On the whole, Safavid painters' lives must have been happy, tranquil, and secure. Their work was satisfyingly creative, and as members of the royal establishment they were privy to the fascinating activities of the Shah's glittering court. We suppose that they not only received ample salaries but also, for particularly admired work, were given bonuses, ranging from purses of gold to robes of honor, jeweled daggers, such trinkets as Chinese blue and white porcelain, or, on rare occasions, income-yielding villages. The rejection of an artist's work, or worse still the withdrawal of patronage, must have been upsetting, even withering experiences. Men of talent, however, were sure to be welcome at rival courts, such as those of the Ottomans, Uzbekis, or Mughals.

Historically, and artistically, the Safavid dynasty was rooted in earlier traditions. Their immediate predecessors, the Timurids and Turkmans, had replaced the Seljuk Turks and the Khans of the Mongol dynasty. The latter controlled Eastern and Western Iran from about 1200 through the period of weakening Mongol power in the fourteenth century. The Timurid dynasty was founded by Timur (Tamerlane), who traced his descent through a Mongol clan associated with the Jenghizkhanids. Timur's campaigns began in the name of the Mongol rulers and stretched from the Azeug to Moscow, Delhi, and the borders of China. Jenghiz Khan's descendants, though Turkified, took pride in their Mongol origins, as can be seen from the term "Mongol," which was applied to Timur's direct descendants, the Mughals, who ruled in India from 1526 until the last emperor was exiled to Burma by the British in 1858. In terms of painting, the Timurid dynasty produced many major patrons, mostly centered at Herat, such as Shah-Rukh (r. 1397-1447), his son Baysunghur ("The Falcon"), who was in Herat from 1421 to 1433, and Sultan-Husayn Bayqara ("The Eagle"), whose rule at Herat from 1469 to 1506 saw the culmination of Timurid literary and artistic creativity. His enlightened, imaginative patronage inspired one of Iran's greatest painters, the almost legendary Master Bihzad, whose illustrations to a Jutan of Sz'di, dated the equivalent of 1488, could be said to mark the classical peak of Iranian painting. 2 Less renowned, but characteristic of Bihzad's style is the Asnafi on a Cas-tle, a stray, unfinished

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1 Introduction - 15
A small, finely observed drawing of two men, the younger of whom teases the older by moving a wine flask just beyond his reach, can be assigned to Bihaq during the peak years of the Cairo School (fig. 2). Surgical in its incisiveness, this humorous little sketch anticipates the sparsely calligraphic drawings of such Safavid masters as Shāykh-Muhammad (no. 73) and Aqa-Riža.
While Eastern Iran was controlled by the Timurids prior to the rise of the Safavids, Western Iran was in the hands of the Turkmans, or “west Turks,” who established themselves in the central lands of Islam. With the decline of Mongol power in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the Turkmans regrouped into a variety of political formations. Of particular concern to us are the confederates of tribal clans, such as the rival Black Sheep (Qara Qoyunlu) and White Sheep (Aq Qoyunlu) in eastern Anatolia and Azerbaycan, and the uncompromising clans who were to join the Safavid brotherhood as the Qizilbash and bring Shah Isma‘il, the founder of the Safavid state, into power.

The arts of the Black Sheep (who ruled from Tabriz in 1408-1408) and the White Sheep Turkman (at Tabriz in 1409-1501) tend to be more vigorously youthful in spirit and less subtly refined than such Timurid masterpieces as Isfahān’s, although they could be described as representative of the Western wing of a single great tradition. Far and away the richest assemblage of Turkman drawing and painting is in the Topkapı Palace Museum of Istanbul. Using this material, it should be possible to trace in detail the development of this supremely vital style, which provided Safavid painting with its early might as compared to the Timurid elegance, subtle naturalism, and cerebralism. Animal-like in their energy, Turkman pictures abound in cavorting dragons, demons, birds, and beasts. A design for an embroidered collar in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts (fig. 3), one of the best examples outside of Turkey of Tabriz craftsmanship under the White Sheep dynasty, is boundingly rhythmic and dashing, in this battle scene, figures, vegetation, wrath-like dogs,
of Ardabil in Arazbayjan, whose saintliness attracted numerous followers. In about 1300 he founded a dervish order. Under Jamayd, a descendant, what had been a purely religious order adopted the militant, extremist forms of the Shi'ite sect, and with the grandfather of the first Safavid Shah, the order or brotherhood turned from mysticism to politics, which led to frequent clashes with the Aq Qoyunlu Turkmen rulers centered at Tabriz. In 1499, the twelve year old Isma'il began to organize tribes in Anatolia.

At first, Isma'il was only supported by a few Sufis, but these soon numbered 1500, and before long there were 7000. In 1501 he took Ardabil; then he killed the ruler of Shirvan, and in 1503 Isma'il, the Shaykh of the Sufis, crowned himself Shah, with Shi'ism as the state religion. A year later, he had taken Shiraz, which was rapidly followed by Hamadan, Dorbeka, and Bagdad. Soon the young Shah controlled all of Iran except for formerly Timurid Khurasan, which had been taken by his Uzbek rival, Shaybani Khan. In 1510/11, Shah Isma'il defeated him as well, in a major battle near Merv. The Uzbeks, however, continued to threaten the Safavids from the east, and to the west the Ottoman Turks were equally dangerous, although Sultan Bayazid II congratulated Shah Isma'il upon his early conquests. Later, Sultan Selim massacred Shi'ites in Anatolia, and in the fall of 1514 the Ottoman and Safavid armies fought at Chaldaran, near Tabriz. Victorious, Selim occupied the Safavid capital, Tabriz, where he remained for one week, after which he withdrew, taking with him considerable loot as well as a large number of artisans. Both the Uzbeks and the Ottomans continued to be dangerous neighbors.

Inasmuch as Shah Isma'il was related to the Turkman sultans and grew up within their cultural orbit, it is not surprising that his taste in painting seems to have been more Turkman than Timurid. Such a view is fully consistent with much of his verse, which is fervidly religious and ecstatic, comparable in mood to Turkman painting. Nonetheless, the earliest illustrated manuscript that can be associated with him is a copy of "Asafi's" little-known allegorical romance, Jalal al Jama'il ("Beauty and Glory," see no. 1 and fig. 6), which contains no miniatures in the Tabriz manner of Shaykhi and Dervish-Muhammad, but rather is painted in a variant of a sub-royal or commercial mode from such centers as Shiraz and Herat. Curiously, this manuscript was copied in Herat itself in the year 1501 by the scribe Sultan-'Ali, presumably Sultan-'Ali of Qazvin rather than his better-known namesake of Mashhad. The manuscript contains thirty-four miniatures, a few of which are dated between 1503/04 and 1504/05. Only one of the many illustrations lacks the characteristic Safavid headgear, the renowned tiq, or "crown," a single-piece skullcap topped with a batten shaped peak, round which the turban was tied. All others, therefore, must have been added for a Safavid patron, almost certainly Shah Isma'il himself.

But how was this possible, Inasmuch as the manuscript is from Herat, the Timurid capital until it fell in 1507? We are convinced that although the manuscript was commissioned at Herat for a local patron, and the first (tiq-less) miniature was painted there for him, the other miniatures (with tiq) were added after the volume had come into Safavid hands, presumably along with its artists, for the rest of the miniatures are almost identical in style and handling. A likely time and circumstance for its arrival was in May of 1504, when Muhammad-Husayn Bayqara, one of the rebellious sons of the Timurid Sultan-Husayn Bayqara, joined Shah Isma'il when the latter was campaigning in Mazendaran.

One of the outstanding Turkman miniatures in this manuscript, datable to about 1480, is Bahram Gur in the Yellow Pavilion (fig. 5), which marks the point of greatest refinement and subtlety in Turkman art, comparable to Bhizad's Bustan illustrations of 1488 in Timurid painting, or to the somewhat later Assadi on A Cattle in the Fogg Art Museum (fig. 3). A comparison of the two pictures brings out certain differences between the styles of Western (Turkman) and Eastern (Timurid) Iran during the late fifteenth century, a few decades before the two idioms merged under the Safavids.

Strikingly—almost vulgarly—rich and vibrant in color, rather than subtly harmonious, the Turkman Bahram Gur (fig. 5) is expressionistic rather than naturalistic. Proportion of people and vegetation are as illogical as the treatment of space. The building is flat as a playing card. Bahram Gur and his attendants, although probably intended as portraits of Sultan Ya'qub and his court, are far less individualized than Bhizad's figures. On the other hand, the Turkman mood is passionately lyrical; each tree, flower, bosom, or turban seems to come alive. The rocks and clouds carry us into a visionary world next to which Bhizad's seems almost prosaic. Close scrutiny reveals hidden nature-spirits, often grotesque, quite foreign to the orderly ambience of the late Timurid artist. Despite the absence here of the Feer diva (fig. 4), it is easy to imagine them in this fantastic Turkman setting, which fairly burgeons with the Chinese-inspired peonies and other blossoms found in the Boston collar design (fig. 3).

Fictively, the peripatetic Istanbul Quintet of 1481, with Sultan Ya'qub's marvelously visionary miniatures, fell into the hands of his sister's son, the first Safavid ruler, Shah Isma'il (born 1457, died 1524), whose background and temperament enabled him to appreciate it. This charismatic, inspired leader traced his ancestry to Sufi 'Ad-Din, a Sufi Shaykh...