30. Ardashir and the Slave Girl Guhhar

From Shah Tahmasp’s Book of Kings, folio 516 verso
Attributable to Mir Musavvir

Dated 1527/28
200 x 171 mm. (miniature only)
Lent by Arthur A. Houghton, Jr.

As a young man, Ardashir, founder of the Sassanian dynasty, forsook the palace of his grandfather Bahak at Istakh to serve at the court of Ardavan, the Parthian king. Ardavan had ordered a special turret constructed in his palace at Ray, in which he kept his beloved concubine, the slave-girl Guhhar. One day Guhhar spied Ardashir from her pavilion and instantly fell in love with him. Her heart aflutter, Guhhar waited until the middle of the night and then lowered herself by a rope from her tower. She went to the bedside of Ardashir who awoke and was thrilled by her beauty. The lovers repeated their clandestine meetings often until Ardashir learned that his grandfather Bahak had died, after appointing his son, not Ardashir, to succeed him. Compelled to return to Istakh to claim the governorship by force, Ardashir stole off with Guhhar at his side. Enraged at the loss of his favorite, Ardavan pursued the couple; but they escaped to Fars unscathed.  s.n.c.

The only date in Shah Tahmasp’s Shahnameh is in the architectural frieze of this particularly romantic miniature. Noting that the year corresponds to Shah Tahmasp’s coming of age, Martin Bernard Dickson has suggested that the subject might not only illustrate Ardashir and Guhhar, but might allude to the first comparable experience in the life of the Shah. Whether or not it was sparked by an actual event, Mir Musavvir’s picture is one of the most tender love scenes in Persianate painting.

Of the three senior masters responsible for the Houghton manuscript, Mir Musavvir is the gentlest and least assertive. To appreciate his art, one must contemplate the harmonies of his rounded arabesques, the doe-like beauty of his maidens, and his oddly personal colors—off greens, silvery-suffused pinks, and almost turquoises. Even Mani, renowned in Iranian legend as a great painter, “in disgust and dismay threw his brush away,” for he had been faced with the art of Mir Musavvir. “And artlessly he drew himself away.” Like his son Mir Sayyid-Ali, Mir Musavvir had a particular flair for transmuting everyday things into rapturously pleasing arrangements of pure color and form. 

1. For color reproductions, see Welch, A King’s Book of Kings, pp. 160, 171.
31. The Story of Hafsvad and the Worm

From Shah Tahmasp’s Book of Kings, folio 521 verso
Signed: “Dust-Muhammad painted this.”

Ca. 1540
406 x 287 mm. (miniature only)
Private Collection

Near an imperishable but hardworking village, the local girls met regularly on a hillside to spin. One day the daughter of Hafsvad bit into an apple and discovered a worm. Sparing it, she exclaimed to her friends: “I am now the worm’s lucky star. Just watch me outspin all of you today!” Her boast was justified; by the end of the day she had spun twice as much as usual. The girl spun such prodigious amounts that her father, Hafsvad, abandoned all other work and focused his total attention on nurturing the worm. Hafsvad and his town grew prosperous, while the worm became fat and sleek. Eventually Hafsvad constructed a fortress with a special tank for the giant creature.

When Shah Ardashir learned about the worm, he considered its power a threat and set out to destroy it. After a preliminary defeat at the hands of Hafsvad’s army, Ardashir devised a clever scheme. Disguised as a merchant he would visit Hafsvad and claim that he had so benefited from the worm’s magic that he wished to receive its blessing. Hafsvad fell victim to the deceit and a group of Ardashir’s men gained entry into the worm’s bustain. While the conspirators entertained the guards with food and wine, Ardashir fed the elephant-sized worm another kind of beverage—a potent of boiling lead. The death throes of the worm shook the whole fortress. Yet, before Hafsvad could rally his troops, Ardashir’s forces had stormed the stronghold and seized the town. Hafsvad and his seven sons were hung and slain with a shower of arrows. S.B.C.

Dust-Muhammad—whom we have met already as the author of the Preface to the album he assembled for Shah Tahmasp in 1544/45, with its invaluable eye-witness accounts of his fellow artists—was a pupil of Buzad. Possibly he went with his master from Herat to Tabriz in the company of Prince Tahmasp in 1521; or possibly he joined them slightly later. He worked on the Leningrad Ball and Mallet of 1524/25 (Fig. 8), and painted several miniatures for the Shahnama project (see no. 32). Perhaps as long as a decade later, at the same time that no. 27 was inserted, Dust-Muhammad added this ambitiously large picture to the already completed volume! Although his work is not found in Shah Tahmasp’s Quinet, other signed miniatures and calligraphic specimens by him are in the Bahram Mirza Album.

Hardly the outstanding artist of his generation, he was nonetheless one of its most intriguing minds; and his career could be the basis for a peripatetic novel. The strange distorsion of figures and trees, the saggingly diagonal composition, and the disturbing rock spirits of Hafsvad and the Worm offer true insight into Dust-Muhammad’s multi-faceted and unusual personality. Clearly proud of this painting, Dust-Muhammad designed it to illustrate several incidents simultaneously. Our interest, however, is caught by such personalities as the graybeards on the roof, with their elongated, mannered faces, and their hands
with the over-large, almost jointless thumbs characteristic of Dust-Muhammad's figures throughout his career. Like all of them, these peer blankly into space, further contributing to the 'Gothic' mood. It is hardly surprising that Dust-Muhammad signed his poetry as Malik, which means 'The Wandering' or 'The Straw-man.' Nor is it surprising that a contemporary Mughal source, Bayazid, tells us that Dust-Muhammad, although uninvited by Emperor Humayun, left Safavid Iran for the Mughal court because 'he could not get by without the wine the Shah had forbidden.' Bayazid also noted that Dust-Muhammad left on his own, unannounced, at the same time that a party of invited scholars and artists— notably Mir Sayyid 'Ali and 'Abd as-Samad—joined the emperor at Kabul on the first of November, 1540. He described Mulla Dust, as he called him, as 'the top painter of them all,' and said that he took up service with Prince Kamran, the rival and brother of Humayun in Afghanistan,²

². For color reproductions, see Welch, A King's Book of Kings, pp. 173, 174.
ómo a portrait of Humayun and his court of this period attributable to Dust-Muhammad, see Dickson and Welch, The Houghton Shahnameh, fig. 160. The portrait is in the so-called Jahangir Album, now in the Berlin State Library. The same album contains an early seventeenth-century Mughal version of Haftwād and the Worm, presumably based upon a drawing or tracing of the original brought to the Mughal court by the artist.
32. The Accession of Ardashir II

From Shah Tahmasp’s Book of Kings, folio 547 recto
Probably by ‘Abd ul'-Aziz, supervised by Aqa-Mirak

Ca. 1530-35
205 x 169 mm. (miniature only)
Lent by Arthur A. Houghton, Jr.

On the death of Shapur II, Ardashir II ascended the throne and summoned the notables of the realm to an audience with him. The Shah addressed the Iranians as follows: “It is our sincere desire that in our time the courting heavens will bring no man to grief. . . . Now, our late brother entrusted the realm to us specifically because his own son is still so young. (God rest the soul of one who purged the world of its malcontents!) When Shapur, son of Shapur (ultimately Shapur III) is of age to understand the meaning of throne and crown, we shall—as covenanted with his late majesty—surrender to him the state treasury and the military forces of the land. We act as caretaker to young Shapur’s throne, and serve him as a living reminder of his father . . .”

Known as “Ardashir the Good,” the Shah ruled with justice and without taxation for ten years. When Shapur III came of age, Ardashir II kept his word and transferred all the state treasury to his successor. 527 c.e.

In the later years of the Shahnama project, when there were wider gaps between illustrations, new combinations of talent worked in up-to-date idioms. At first, this throne scene seems unfamiliar in style; but close study discloses tell tale habits of hand that we associate with ‘Abd ul'-Aziz: his serpentine wiggles, slightly calmed, still permeate figures and flowers; and his unparalleled facial types, though painted more suavely, are still recognizable. Aqa-Mirak’s influence is also apparent here, although we find no traces of his brushwork, in the overall cleanliness of workmanship, in the “spotting” of the composition, poses stopped in mid-action, and in such minor details as turban types.
33. Bahram Gur Pins the Coupling Onagers

From Shah Tahmasp's Book of Kings, folio 568 recto
Attributable to Mir Sayyid-'Ali

Ca. 1533-35
207 x 172 mm. (miniature only)

Hunting on a spring day with a thousand horsemen, the Sasanian Shah, Bahram, and his minister, Ruqib, happened upon a plain overrun with wild asses, who had gathered to spar and mate. Bahram readied his bow and arrow as he watched two bucks butt and scuffle. When the victor mounted a jenet, Bahram let fly his arrow and pinned the two animals together. This episode earned the Shah the nickname Bahram Gur or "Onagers" Bahram. s. u. c.

More original and accomplished than Mir Sayyid-'Ali's Rustam and the "Seven" Champions Hunting in Turan (no. 20), this miniature dates from his early maturity and is his latest single-handed picture for the project. Proud of the accomplishment, he enhanced the page with unique ornamental flourishes of arabesque between the columns of text and surrounding the calligraphy. By now, the artist's painstakingly fine workmanship was being applied to his own pictures as well as to those he helped finish for the senior masters. Bahram Gur's turban and saddlecloth look forward promisingly to similarly detailed passages in his pictures for the Quintet (nos. 61, 66-68). Especially characteristic are the colorful skirmish on the saddlecloth, a motif the artist painted with particular flair, and the accurate articulation of the quiver, bow, and arrows.¹

Stylistically, this miniature seems of about the same date as A Privately Procession, also attributable to Mir Sayyid-'Ali, in a copy of Jamšid's Yasuf and Zulaikha, dated 1533/34, now in the National Library, Cairo.²

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¹ For color reproductions, see Welch, A King's Book of Kings, pp. 176, 177.
² See Stchoukine, Les Peintures des manuscrits safavides de 1502 à 1587, pl. 16.
34. Nashirvan Greets the Khwaja’s Daughter

From Shah Tahmasp’s Book of Kings, folio 633 verso
Attributable to Dust-Muhammad
Ca. 1530
185 x 110 mm. (miniature only)
Lent by The Metropolitan Museum of Art; Gift of Arthur A. Houghton, Jr., 1970
(1970.301.70)

The Khaqan of Chin and his army had conquered all of Transoxiana and were poised to invade Iran when the Khaqan’s magi advised him to sue for peace instead. An envoy journeyed to the Sassanian Shah and Nushirvan’s camp with the peace proposal. Following the Shah’s acceptance of the bid, the Khaqan dispatched a second embassy offering a Turanian princess in marriage to the Shah in order to cement the agreement. The Shah’s representative journeyed to the Turkish camp where he was given his choice of five princesses. He selected the only daughter of the Khaqan by his royal wife and queen, the others being daughters of concubines. Back across Turan along the highroad into Iran the splendid bridal caravan wended its way. In Gurgam myriad perfumes wafted through the air and trumpets blared out in anticipation of the arrival of Nashirvan’s bride. When at last her cavalcade reached the royal residence, the Shah was overcome by the beauty of her moon-like face and her scented, braided hair. Nashirvan whispered thanks to God again and again for this lovely new jewel in his crown. s.a.c.

Dust-Muhammad’s pictures for the Shahnama project, as compared to his added “masterpiece,” Haftvar and the Worm, are less ambitious and accomplished, clearly earlier and less consequential. They are, however, stylistic precursors to it and identical in style to signed works in the Bahram Mirza Album. Although the present miniature is outstanding in the series, the figures, with their “gracefully” arcing silhouettes, seem weak in the knees or jointless—a mannerism he passed on to his apprentice, Shaykh-Muhammad (see fig. 9). Other identifying quirks are also evident—ill-fitting turbans, stop faces that often appear disturbingly flat and hesitant, almost tremulous outline drawing. But Dust-Muhammad’s strengths are also apparent, in the illusive gentleness of characterizations, in his muted, very personal colors, and in the superbly designed and executed calligraphic inscriptions.

Inscribed
over portico at upper left, eighth couplet of Hafez’ Ode No. 179
Above this chrysotile arch they have inscribed in gold:
“Apart from the good of the pure in heart—nothing endures.”

Contents - Book of Kings of Firdawsi
35. Nushirvan Responds to the Questions of the Grand Magus

From Shah Tahmasp's Book of Kings, folio 655 verso
Attributable to Mir Musavvir, assisted by Qasim Son of 'Ali (?)
Ca. 1530-35
231 x 171 mm. (miniature only)
Lent by Arthur A. Houghton, Jr.

The Grand Magus asked Nushirvan the following question: "We see two men praying with equal faith and fervor for something each craves. The one gets his wish and is blessed with joy; the other receives nothing but tears for his face and furrows for his brow. How is it that God hears the prayers of one but not of another?" The Shah replied: "The mercy a man craves of God must be within measure. A desire for excess can only earn one a broken heart." The magus posed another question: "What man is properly called good and deserving of the name 'great'?" Nushirvan responded, "Certainly not a ruler who leaves the treasury wasted. Such a man, in effect, is wasting his time. For, sooner or later, his fortune will turn against him. To be called 'great' you must be known for your fortune, famed for your generosity; to be good, you cannot hold unceasingly to all you possess." In a similar fashion the magus proceeded with thirty-odd questions for which the Shah provided reasoned, ethical responses. S.R.C.

Chronologically and stylistically comparable to The Accession of Ardashir II (no. 32), this painting is by a different pair of artists. Mir Musavvir's restrained caricature of court attendants, often shown in open-mouthed profile, his rounded rock forms, resembling potatoes, and his harmoniously curving outlines attest to his close involvement, whereas many less authoritative passages, such as the face in the upper right and the somewhat insensitively regularized flowers and grass-tuffs, bear all the earmarks of his usual assistant (see also nos. 21, 37).