The Satravān Shah Khusraw-Paavīq gathered his armies near the Nahrawān Canal to quell the rebel Bahram Chubinā. Unfortunately for the Shah, Bahram Chubinā's agents had infiltrated the royal camp so totally that the enemy was apprised of the Shah's most secret strategies. Upon learning that his troops had sworn their allegiance to Bahram Chubinā, Khusraw and his closest advisors withdrew from the army to observe from nearby heights the happenings of the night. Soon the inevitable attack began, led by three bloodthirsty Turks. Khusraw watched the slaughter of his men, distraught and grieving until he could stand the sight no more. He then plunged into the fray and took on all three Turks. As one of the Turks charged, Khusraw thrust his sword and felled him. Despite this triumph the Shah's troops abandoned him. His only alternative was to flee the battlefield and return to his palace at Ctesiphon. With Bahram Chubinā nearing the capital, Khusraw escaped, slipping across the Euphrates into Rum. - S.R.C.

One of the challenges braved by Aqa-Mirak was carrying out his extensive series of boldly simplified compositions for the vast Shāhnāma, a task that few artists could have completed without resorting to dreary formulae, or allowing sloppy workmanship. If self-discipline contributed to their success, so did the fact that each miniature posed new compositional problems, the solution to which can be compared to a musician scoring variations on a theme. Here we share the artist's pleasure in the placement of the two shields of Khusraw-Paavīq and his tumbling opponent. Like two nailheads, they sustain a design that would otherwise fall flat. But this brightly ornamental painting depends upon perfectly postioned accents: the sinuous form of the rivulet above the hero echoes and reinforces his horse's lounge; and the bringly sharp diagonals of spears and swordblades establish an exciting counterpoint. As usual in this series, the impassivity of the warriors is foiled by the grotesques in the rocks, in this case particularly by a camel's head, far left, protesting the trumpet's blare.
37. Bahram Chubina Slays Kappi the Lion-Ape

From Shah Tahmasp's Book of Kings, folio 715 verso
By Mir Musavvir, assisted by Qasim Son of 'Ali (?)

Ca. 1538
214 x 188 mm. (miniature only)

Defeated at the hands of Khusrav-Parviz, Bahram Chubina fled to the lands of Turk and Chin, where he resolved in gratitude to rid the Khaqan's realm of an overly powerful paladin and a fierce lion-ape. After making short work of the paladin, Bahram turned to the lion-ape, Kappi, who lived in a grotto where he had devoured the Khagan's daughter. On Bahram's approach, Kappi submerged himself in a spring. Gnashing teeth and breathing fire, Kappi sprang from the water and tried to suck Bahram into his fiendish jaws. With arrow and mace Bahram slew the beast, hacked it in two, and tossed aside its severed head.

The Khagan and his subjects rejoiced at the news of Bahram's success, which, however, alarmed the Iranian Shah, Khusrav-Parviz. After infiltrating the Khaqan's palace, one of the Shah's agents found Bahram and stabbed him to death. S.R.C.

Mir Musavvir ended his sequence of miniatures with a dying monster which he transformed into a beguiling delight. As interpreted by the Mir, the rosy-rumped, polka-dotted lion-ape seems far less deserving of slaughter than the dog and squat Bahram Chubina. It may even be that Mir Musavvir sided with Kappi (whom he himself painted) against his killer (who was left to the mercy of his assistant). Also worthy of attention are Mir Musavvir's earth-spirits which turn away in horror, glower disapprovingly, or giggle smugly. One wonders if anyone, including Shah Tahmasp, ever devoted sufficient time to the enjoyment of such passages.

Opposite page: Detail of no. 37.
Complete miniature at right.
38. Barbad the Concealed Musician

From Shah Tahmāsp’s Book of Kings, folio 731 recto
Attributable to Mirza-ʿAli

Ca. 1535
516 x 268 mm. (miniature only)
Lent by Arthur A. Houghton, Jr.

The glorious court of Khusrav-Parvīz encouraged a flowering of the arts; and musicians such as the royal favorite Sarkash, enjoyed high standing. Thus, when the minstrel Barbad, an “unknown,” sought recognition at court, Sarkash, fearing his eclipse by this brilliant rival, bribed the royal chamberlain to keep Barbad out of Khusrav’s presence. Best on playing for the Shah, Barbad befriended the royal gardener who tended the private garden in which the Shah celebrated Novruz. He allowed Barbad to climb a cypress tree from which he overlooked Khusrav’s dais.

As evening set in Barbad began to play his lute. Khusrav and his courtiers listened, absorbed in the lovely strains issuing from the hidden lute. Each song delighted the Shah more than the last. Although he ordered a search, the minstrel could not be found. Finally, when Khusrav exclaimed that he would stuff the musician’s mouth with pearls and precious stones if he were discovered, Barbad tumbled out of the tree and prostrated himself at Khusrav’s feet. Upon hearing Barbad’s tale, Khusrav appointed him court musician and banished the evil Sarkash. S. R. C.

Eager to please, the youthful Mirza-ʿAli packed every inch of this miniature with his personal interpretations of Safavid pictorial clichés: richly dressed courtiers (far as pouter pigeons as in all his youthful work); orientalized dragonish clouds (with the Mirza’s added smokiness); and tapestry-like verdure (designed by him in pinwheel clusters). Touches of naturalism abound, as in the cook, foreground, fanning the flames with his skirt. Like the rest of the picture, rocks and cliffs are in Mirza-ʿAli’s early style, spongy—with a cast of pleasant, smiling ghouls.1

1. For a color reproduction, see Welch, Persian Painting, pl. 10.

Book of Kings of Firdawsi · 115
39. The Assassination of Khusraw Parviq

From Shah Tahmasp’s Book of Kings, folio 742 verso
Attributable to ‘Abd us-Samad
Ca. 1535
271 x 257 mm. (miniature only)

Iran waged war against the Qaysar for twenty-five years, after which Khusraw’s injustices alienated his subjects. To restore the crown to glory, the Shah’s confidant and an important general plotted his overthrow. After one of their agents had freed Prince Shiruya from prison, the conspirators hired an assassin—a filthy-footed, foul-smelling vagrant named Mîhr-Hashâfî. When the assassin entered Khusraw’s antechamber, the terrified Shah sent his page for water, a golden ever, and fresh garments in the hope that the boy would bring help. But the naive youth returned alone. Mîhr-Hashâfî belted the door and stabbed the praying Shah to death. S.R.G.

‘Abd us-Samad’s career at the Safavid court lasted only until he joined the Mughals in 1549 and is largely undocumented in Salavid sources. The Mughal historian Abu’l Fazl says the artist was from Shiraz; we suspect he came to the royal workshop in the early 1530s. The present picture we attribute to him by comparison with signed works.1 Painted shortly before the end of the Shahnama project, it probably marks his acceptance as a young master in the Shah’s atelier, and is his only work in the manuscript. Nearly if not innovatively designed, it contains figures ‘Abd us-Samad employed elsewhere—the bald-headed sleeping man and the slightly rodent-like youth.2 None of his work appears in the Shah’s Quintet, and according to Abu’l Fazl he sought service with the Mughal emperor Humayun during his Tabriz visit. Summoned to the Mughal court with Mir Sayyid ‘Ali in 1540, he and his companions reached Kabul in 1549 and in 1554 departed with Humayun for India. There he underwent a crucial change of style under Humayun’s son Akbar’s patronage and, says Abu’l Fazl, “he was stirred to new heights by the alchemy of Akbar’s vision, and he turned from outer forms to inner meaning.” Successful as a courtier and government official, he held a number of significant posts. As an artist, he was far more important in India than in Iran, and can be considered with Mir Sayyid ‘Ali as co-founder of the Mughal school.

1. For color reproductions, see Welch, A King’s Book of Kings, pp. 185, 187.

116 - Book of Kings of Ferdowsi
Divan of Hafiz

This manuscript of the Divan ("Collected Works") of Shams ud-Din Muhammad Hafiz (born ca. 1325, died 1389) was copied and illustrated for—or given to—Shah Tahmasp’s brother, Sam Mirza, whose name appears on folio 86 verso, The Celebration of ‘Id (no. 43). There is no colophon; scribe unknown; and the manuscript is not dated. But the style of the miniatures argues for a date of ca. 1526/27, on the basis of close links to the Paris Nava’I (Bibliothèque Nationale supp. turc 316, 317). There were once five miniatures, one of which is lost (see Stuart Cary Welch, Persian Painting: Five Royal Safavid Manuscripts of the Sixteenth Century (New York: Braziller, 1976) fig. C); for the others, including Sultan-Muhammad’s only two signed works, and one signed by Shaykh-Zadeh, see below (nos. 42, 43, 44). The manuscript contains 176 folios and a double page with (no. 40). Folios measure 260 by 182 mm.

This manuscript was formerly in the collection of Louis J. Carrier and is now on deposit at the Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University.

OPPOSITE PAGE: Detail of no. 41.

Collected Works of Hafiz • 119
40. Double Page Frontispiece

From the collected works of Hafiz

Ca. 1536/37
200 x 182 mm. (each folio)
Private Collection

Just as the styles of painting during the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries differed between Eastern and Western Iran, so did the styles of ornament. Western ornament, centered at Tabriz, was usually more dynamic rhythmically, and richer in color, even to the point of excess. Eastern, centered at Herat, tended to be more restrained, with subtler rhythms and color harmonies, and often was finer in scale. This frontispiece, dating from a period of fusion between Eastern and Western elements, nonetheless retains an Eastern flavor—presumably because its artist was trained at Herat, if indeed the manuscript itself was not made there.
41. Royal Lovers Picnicking in a Garden

From the collected works of Hafiz, folio 67 verso
Attributable to Sultan-Muhammad
Ca. 1526/27
190 x 124 mm. (miniature only)
Private Collection

Hafiz’ lines inscribed at the top of this miniature evoke romance—

“A rose without the glow of a lover bears no joy;
Without wine to drink the spring brings no joy.”

Idealized, moon-faced young lovers, a saji (page boy) offering wine, dancing girls, and musicians, all set within a flowery garden at dusk—an Iranian’s heaven-on-earth. The ensemble borders on sentimental triteness yet avoids it. For the lovers’ faces are genuinely tender; their canopy, with its stunning, lashing arabesques, evokes raw passion; and the oranges and blues of robe and coat, hardly soothing, burn and freeze our eyes. Like love itself, the effect of the painting is wondrous, ecstasy’s sweet sting!

Unlike Sultan-Muhammad’s two other miniatures for this manuscript, this one is unsigned—perhaps because there was no convenient place to inscribe. The style, however, is of a piece with the others, which, as his only signed works, are the touchstones of his artistic personality. All three miniatures conform to the style of The Court of Gayumars (no. 5), which was still in progress at this date, and likewise shows the impact of Bihzad’s finesse and psychological concern on Sultan-Muhammad’s earlier, visionary manner. The radiant prince here, with his rounded lap and wave-like skirt edges, might be a youthful portrayal of Gayumars himself, while the “Chinese” trees, with their nervous curves, seem small-scaled versions of those growing near his mountainous throne.2

1. The new translations for the Hafiz miniatures are by Martin Bernard Dickson.
2. For color reproductions, see Basil Gray, Persian Painting (Lausanne: Skira, 1961) p. 137; and Welch, Persian Painting, p. 137.

122 - Collected Works of Hafiz
42. Episode in a Mosque

From the collected works of Hafiz, folio 77 recto
Inscribed: “done by Shaykh-Zadeh”

Ca. 1536/37
250 x 144 mm. (miniature only)
Private Collection

Professor Martin Bernard Dickson’s delightful translations of the lines from Hafiz inscribed on this painting are as follows:

in upper left corner

Preachers prerning on the pulpit praying loudly for us all,
Take their vows and on the quiet answer to a different call.1

over the main porico

Mind your own business, preacher man, what are you yawning for?
I’ve lost my heart in love and you—what are you yawning for?2

on balustrade of roof on far left

There’s a ready site where you may nest in the recess of my eyes.3

The mid 1520s were crucial years in the formation of the Safavid style, the moment when Eastern and Western ideologies met and merged. In the royal workshop it must have been a time of strain and tension and such moods are reflected in the miniatures. Even mighty Sultan-Muhammad, whose artistic powers can be likened to a great river forced by a change of terrain to alter its course, can be seen from his pictures to have been shaken. But these critical years seem to have been yet harder for Shaykh-Zadeh, whose masterpiece this is. For he not only had been trained at Herat under Bihzad, but due to the latter’s virtual retirement from active painting upon moving to Tabriz (because of failing eyesight!), he became the leading practitioner of Bihzad’s art. Many Bihzadian pictures attributable on stylistic grounds to him and to his apprentices, among whom we include Mirza ‘Ali, are found in the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Khamsa of Nizami4 of 1524/25 and the Paris Nava’il of 1526/27. In the present picture, however, he seems to have been put on his mettle, and to have verged from the Herat idiom. Although the ravishing intricacy and variety of ornament proclaim his creative determination and desire to please the patron, they conform to the tradition of Herat. The figures, however, were interpreted with urgency and drama unprecedented in his illustrations to the Nizami and Nava’il’s qualities associated with Sultan-Muhammad. Significantly, Shaykh-Zadeh, who had been so influential and active in the Safavid school of the mid 1520s did not contribute either to the Shahnameh (in which his influence is apparent, as in no. 7) or to the Quintet. His future lay at the Uzbek court of Bukhara, where he became the primary artistic force.5–6

1. In nasta’liq, the opening couplet of Hafiz’ Ode No. 390. See: Hafiz, Divan-i Khwajeh Shams ad-Din Muhammad Hafiz-i Shirazi, Muhammad Qazvini and Qasim Ghami, eds. (Tehran: Kitabkhane-ye Zavvar, 1320/1941)

2. In naskh, the opening couplet of Hafiz’ Ode No. 35. See: Hafiz, Divan.

3. In naskh, first half of opening couplet of Hafiz’ Ode No. 34. See: Hafiz, Divan.


5. For a signed double-page miniature in a Haft Mangar of Hafiz, copied at Bukhara for Sultan ‘Abd al-Aziz in 1537; see Dickson and Welch, The Houghton Shahnameh, figs. 41 and 42.

6. For a color reproduction, see Welch, Persian Painting, pl. 16.