43. The Celebration of 'Id

From the collected works of Hafiz, folio 86 recto
Inscribed: "done by Sultan-Muhammad of 'Iraq"

Ca. 1526/27
248 x 147 mm. (miniature only)
Private Collector

Hafiz’s Ode describes the feast, ending the fast of Ramadan, which begins with the sighting of the new moon. We quote the couplets inscribed along the balustrade of the roof:

It’s the 'Id and a time for roses — and a goodly company await.
Sage: See the moon in the face of the Shah — and bring the wine.
How grand is his future, how benignly grant a King!
God grant his time immunity from the blight of the evil-eye!

Although the name of Shah Tahmasp’s brother Sam Mirza is written over the doorway, Martin Bernard Dickson has pointed out that the accompanying titles are the Shah’s. Inasmuch as the inscription, unlike the immaculately designed signature on the throne, seems to have been tampered with, the manuscript probably was presented by the Shah, for whom it was made, to Prince Sam. The choice of the Ode, with its allusion to a king, further supports this belief. For whichever patron it was painted, this miniature is vital to the understanding of Sultan-Muhammad. His favorite compositional device, here a flickering oval of white turbans, brings to mind the flame-like arrangement of courtiers in the Court of Gauamars, in the left foreground of which we find one of the artist’s recurring personalities—a handsome Caucasian, shown in profile, who also occupies the center foreground of this signed miniature. The artist’s penchant for sharply witty anecdote is exemplified by the row of moon-watchers atop the pavilion, whose attitudes vary from grimly serious piety to utter boredom, hypocrisy, and devil-may-care amorosity. Side glances and cunningly observed gestures churn ripples of fun and innuendo through the picture.

Inscribed over doorway

The Fighter for the Faith, Abul Ma'qaffar [The Ever-victorious] Prince Sam

1. 'Iraq — i.e., Western Iran


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44. Allegory of Drunkenness

From the collected works of Hafiz, folio 135 recto
Signed: Sultan-Muhammad
Ca. 1526/7
215 x 150 mm. (minature only)
Private Collection

An exploration of worldly and other-worldly drunkenness, this miniature, like Hafiz’s poetry, is both profoundly serious and mordantly comical. A portrayal of Hafiz himself, pop-eyed with drink, in an upper window, sets the mood. To his right, in another window, an evil worldling tempts an innocent and worried child with his first quaff of wine, while below a tippy reveler lurches testily through the tavern door. His swollen head and dizzyly shaped body, recalling Rustam Asleep (no. 2), exemplify Sultan-Muhammad’s genius for conveying sensation by transforming what he had seen or imagined into abstraction. At the left, three fur-clad qalandars, the most extreme of Sufi mystics, scream and bang, animal-men who amuse and unsettle us. Like the earth spirits surrounding Gayumars, they are grotesque and at the same time provide visual delight. In painting his human, sub-human and supra-human comedies, Sultan-Muhammad, the Sufi story-teller, was one with the artist. Unlike his followers, such as Qadim, whose style was based on this phase of Sultan-Muhammad’s work, he could integrate all facets of his personality, from the sublime to the outrageous.

Inscribed
at top, lines from an Ode of Hafiz
The angel of mercy took the reveling cup and tossed it down,
As rose-water, on the cheeks of hearts and angels

1. For color reproductions, see Binyon, Wilkinson and Gray, Persian Miniature Painting, pl. LXXV. Also, see Welch, Persian Painting, pl. 18; and Basil W. Robinson, Persian Drawings from the 14th Through the 19th Century (Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown and Co., 1966) pl. 34.
45. Leopards and Bears in a Wood

From a rose garden of Sa'di
Border drawing attributable to Sultan-Muhammad
Ca. 1525–30
301 x 189 mm. (folio size); 150 x 87 mm. (text area)
Lent by the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Francis Bartlett Donation of 1912 and Picture Fund (14,680)

46. A Fantastic Forest

From a rose garden of Sa'di
Border drawing attributable to Sultan-Muhammad
Ca. 1535–40
301 x 189 mm. (folio size); 150 x 87 mm. (text area)
Private Collection

Calligraphers, artists, illuminators, and paper-makers collaborated in Iran to create books as delightful to view and touch as to read. In this instance, a superbly calligraphed manuscript, with borders tinted in varied, marvelous hues, was further enriched by Shah Tahmāsp's painters, who improvised border drawings in two tones of gold and silver. Many of its scattered folios were adorned by Sultan-Muhammad himself, with figures, angels, birds, and animals, including such fanciful ones as dragons, simurghs, and ch'i-lins. Stylistically, they are akin to many slightly earlier passages for the Shāh nāma (see color detail of flapping cranes, p. 6), and like them, they were influenced by the fifteenth-century Turkman designs that formed part of Shah Ismā'īl's booty at the fall of Tabriz in 1502. Sultan-Muhammad's spirited and dashing brushwork and inventive compositions, often with superbly interrelated diagonals are, however, markedly personal, and make this series of borders one of the most appealing in a long tradition.

According to F. R. Martin, the manuscript from which these borders were removed was acquired by the German art historian Philipp Walter Schulz in Iran early in this century. Although a considerable literature has grown up about them, most of its facts are wrong.1 The volume was misidentified as a Bustān of Sa'di rather than his Gulistan, and the superb calligraphy has been cited as by Sultan 'Alī of Mashhad, apparently on hearsay alone, as no one has recorded the existence a colophon. The fact remains, nonetheless, that these enchanting folios are among the highwater marks of Safavid book production, and their border drawings are even livelier than those of the later Quintet (see no. 53).2

1. For the literature on this so-called Bustan, see Robinson, et. al., The Keir Collection, pp. 181–182.
Qazi Ahmad described Mir Musavir as "a portraitist whose work was flawless, ... who produced paintings of the utmost charm and elegance." On seeing this signed example, one fully agrees with the late sixteenth-century opinion. Although, sadly, and literally, de-faced, the portly but graceful figure bears out the Qazi’s words. His powerful, massive proportions combine happily, incongruously, with delicately flower-like hands in a gracefully turning pose of astonishing lightness. It was on the basis of this signed picture that we first identified the Mir’s miniatures for the Shahnama, such as The Nightmare of Zuhak (no. 11), which contains stylistically identical personages.

Although Dust-Muhammad linked Mir Musavir with Sultan-Muhammad and Aqa-Mir as collaborators on the Quisit as well as the Book of Kings, his paintings for it are unknown, perhaps because they were separated when the volume was refurnished in the seventeenth century, or because they were never bound into it. Prior to the discovery of his miniatures for the Shahnama, the Mir was almost forgotten, despite his major reputation at Shah Tahmasp’s court. Now, his major role as artist and teacher has become apparent. Artists of the second Safavid generation learned much from him. Mirza-Ali’s pictorial elegance, from the immaculate tailoring of his figures down to the graceful curves of fingertips, follows the Mir’s example; and if there are hints of tension between Mir Musavir and his son, Mir Sayyid-Ali, the latter’s hyper aesthmeticism in abstracting the visible world into sinuous patterns, as well as his inventive concern for ornament stem from paternal example.

The artist’s tendency to isolate a single area for intensively detailed finish is apparent in Sarkhan Bek’s turban, which brings to mind Mir-Sayyid-Ali’s accuracy of observation and effective use of stripes. Despite the partial obliteration of the baton, it appears to be long and narrow, in the fashion of the later 1530s rather than earlier. Such hints are especially useful for dating Mir Musavir’s miniatures for due to his extreme subtlety, stylistic changes over the years are scarcely discernible.

The Khamsa of Nizami

The Khamsa ("Quintet") written by Nizam ad-Din Ilyas ibn Yusuf called Nizami (born ca. 1141-42, died March 12, 1209) was copied by the renowned scribe Shah Mahmud of Nishapur "at Tabriz" from 1530-1543 A.D. for Shah Tahmasp, whose name appears on an architectural frieze in one of the miniatures (folio 60 verso, no. 57). Now in the collection of the British Library (Or. 2265), the Quintet contains 396 folios measuring 360 by 290 mm. Eleven of the fourteen contemporary miniatures remaining in the manuscript are inscribed, probably in the later hand of a well-informed librarian, with artists' names: Sultan-Muhammad, Aqa-Mirak, Mirza-Alli, Mr Sayyid-Alli, and Muzaflar-All.

The manuscript was refurbished in the late seventeenth century, at which time many borders were replaced, several miniatures apparently were removed (see numbers 66 to 68), others were retouched, and three, not shown here, were added by Muhammad Zaman, who dated each of them a.h. 1086 (a.d. 1675).

48. Rosette

From Shah Tahmasp's Quintet of Nizami, folio 1 verso

Ca. 1540
360 x 290 mm. (folio size)
Lent by the British Library (Or. 2265)

Unlike the opening rosette to the Book of Kings (no. 5), this superb passage of illumination does not contain the patron's titles and name. It also differs in style and mood from the earlier example, which seems more highly charged and vigorous, if less fine. Ornament, like painting, had become more restrained and elegant by the 1540s, closer to the classical style of late Timurid Herat than to the dynamic idiom of Turkman Tabriz.

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49. Double Page Frontispiece

From Shah Tahmasp's Quintet of Nizami, folios 2 verso and 3 recto

Ca. 1540
360 x 250 mm. (each folio)
Lent by the British Library (Or. 2265)

Noble in proportion, sumptuous in its golds, lapis lazuli, and accents of richly colored pigment, this double page combines the large-scale power of Safavid architectural ornament with the minute perfection of jewelry. If less bold and dignified than its predecessor in the Book of Kings (no. 3), it nonetheless invites more sustained viewing. The arabesques are more complex, finely scaled, and playfully inventive—perfectly matched to the border drawings of birds, animals, trees, and flowers. These can be attributed to Aqa-Mirak, Shah Tahmasp's closest friend among the artists, who specialized in such brilliantly improvised illumination. For another example of his work in this vein see number 32, folios 19 verso and 20 recto.
50. Nushirvan Listening to the Owls in the Ruined Palace
From the Treasury of Mysteries of Shah Tahmasp’s Quintet of Nizami, folio 15 verso
Attributable to Aqa-Mirak, assisted by Mir Sayyid-‘Ali
Ca. 1540
304 x 194 mm. (miniature only)
Lent by the British Library (Or. 2265).

The first of Nizami’s Five Poems, "The Treasury of Mysteries," consists of twenty discourses on theological and ethical topics, each followed by an illustrative apologue. In one such moralistic tale the Satavahan king Nushirvan and his vizier happened upon a ruined, deserted village in which two owls were nesting quietly. Disturbed by the sound, Nushirvan asked his vizier what secrets the owls were telling each other. "Forgive me for repeating what they say," he replied. "One of those birds is giving his daughter as a mate to the other, and demands from him a suitable marriage portion. 'Give her,' he says, 'this ruined village and one or two others thrown in.' By all means," replies the other. "If our worthy sovereign persists in his present course, and leaves his people to perish in misery and neglect, I will gladly give not two nor three, but a hundred thousand ruined villages." S.R.C.

Aqa-Mirak’s first painting for the Quintet scarcely differs stylistically from his most progressive miniature for the Book of Kings, Faridun Tests His Sons (no. 14). In both, cascading water, ursine cliffs abounding in psychologically intriguing grotesques, entwined flowering trees, and delightful animals are almost interchangeable. Nushirvan and the Owls, however, differs in finish and mood. The former can be ascribed to long hours of work by Mir Sayyid-‘Ali, whose father Mir Musavvir inscribed the wall of the ruined palace with lines interpretable as in his praise; the latter results from the unusual mood of Nizami’s story—nostalgia. This inspired the artist to ponder life’s ironies, and to devise cumulative symbols expressing their poignancy: a snake that slithers through the walls, already stained and weakened by water and lichens; a soulful, wraith of a puppy; and cracked ceramic tiles, their once proud design now comparable to a crone’s smile, saddened by missing teeth. Atop the ruin, however, life goes on—represented by a family of cranes, one of which approaches the nest, bearing a delicious snake.

By intention, no doubt, both Shah Tahmasp’s Book of Kings and Quintet open with pictures by Aqa-Mirak, his closest friend among the artists. Although outshone by Sultan-Muhammad’s combination of the transcendental and the cornical, Aqa-Mirak’s soulful concern with imponderables stirs us as deeply, and induces serious speculation. Perhaps he was sensitively prophetic in the choice of a morality tale concerned with bad government as the opening miniature for the Quintet was Shah Tahmasp’s last great illustrated manuscript. According to Quazi Ahmad, in about 1544/45 Shah Tahmasp "wearied of the field of calligraphy and painting [and] occupied himself with important affairs of state, with the well being of the country and the tranquility of his subjects . . . "

Inscribed on wallBuild up the desert heart of those deprived of bliss; there is no better building in this ruined world than this. Mir . . . the Painter [Musavvir] 946 a.m. [1539/40 a.d.]

FOllowing pages: Complete miniature, left, and detail, right.

1. For color reproductions, see Binyon, The Poems of Nizami, pl. III. Also, see Welch, Persian Painting, pls. 19, 20.

51. Sultan Sanjar and the Old Woman

From the Treasury of Mysteries of Shah Tahmasp’s quintet of Nizami, folio 18 recto (and facing page of text)
Attributable to Sultan-Muhammad
Ca. 1540
265 x 205 mm. (miniature only)
Lent by the British Library (Or. 2269)

When an old woman complained to Sultan Sanjar, the Seljuk ruler from 1119 to 1256, that she had been robbed by one of his soldiers, he coldly rebuffed her, claiming that the old woman’s grievances were trivial in comparison to his latest military campaign. To this she replied, “What is the use of conquering foreign armies when you are unable to make your own behave?”  s. r. c.

Always innovative, Sultan-Muhammad envisioned the old lady as an individual, whose bent, humble, but sturdy silhouette is a type still encountered in Iran. He contrasts her immovable strength not only with the proud Sanjar, but also with the foppish pageboy, who turns his unformed face towards hers, aghast at her presumptuousness. Vying with the central players in liveliness are the rock-spirits, such as the profile set against the tree trunk, who is at least as outspoken as the old woman, although he reprimands a mere lion. Once again, the artist has employed his favorite compositional scheme, an all-encompassing oval, suggestive of the flame of a candle. Like Aqa-Mirak’s miniatures for the Quintet, this picture marks the trend at Shah Tahmasp’s court towards an increasingly refined and naturalistic style, as was apparent already in the later miniatures for the Shahnama.¹

1. For color reproductions, see Pope, Survey of Persian Art, vol. V, pl. 499. Also, see Binyon, The Poems of Nizami, pl. IV, and Welch, Persian Painting, pl. 31.