52. Two Folios of Calligraphy and Illumination
From Shah Tahmasp's QINNET of Nizami, folios 19 verso and 20 recto
Border drawings attributable to Aqa-Mirak

Ca. 1540
360 x 250 mm. (each folio); ca. 215 x 130 mm. (text areas)
Lent by the British Library (Or. 2365)

Unlike the Book of Kings, with its simpler gold-flecked borders, the Qinnet was enriched by border designs drawn in silver and several tones of gold. Reminiscent of the borders for the Gulistan of Sa'di (nos. 45, 46), these contain real and fabulous beasts set in fanciful landscapes as well as arabesques. The pair of borders included here can be ascribed to Aqa-Mirak on the basis of their animals, birds, flowers, trees, and rocks. Almost a signature is the sinuously flowing stream at the right, known from two of his outstanding miniatures (nos. 14 and 30). Noted for his ornamental drawings in gold, Aqa-Mirak was cited in Sadik-Bek's 7th Canon of Painting for his animal-designs (javar-i'ajq).

1. See Dickson and Welch, The Houghton Shahnameh, Appendix.
53. The Physicians’ Duel

From the Treasury of Mysteries of Shah Tahmasp’s quintet of Nizami, folio 26 verso (and facing page of text)
Attributable to Aqa-Mirak, assisted by Mir Sayyid-‘Ali
C. 1540
202 x 106 mm. (miniature only)
Lent by the British Library (Or. 2265)

At court two rival physicians contended in an odd medicinal duel. One offered the other a deadly pill.
He swallowed it, and immediately rendered it harmless by taking a powerful antidote. He then picked
a rose and, while his opponent watched apprehensively, he breathed a spell on it before handing it to
his rival to smell. The latter sniffed it and fell dead. Thus, the power of fear was proved more lethal
than actual poison.  S. R. C.

However intricate their elaboration, Aqa-Mirak’s illustrations tell their stories forcefully.
Every detail is subservient to the action, and the moment depicted is chosen for fullest
dramatic impact. Here, all lines converge at front stage center, where the triumphant
physician claps his hands with glee, and topples his rival—a graceful corpse whose fate is
symbolized by the undignified turban and the lethal rose, now fit for the dustbin.

Typical of Aqa-Mirak’s compositions is the sprouting of figures, still life, trees, and
architectural elements over the page in a seemingly carefree but in fact thoughtfully artful
arrangement. As so often in his pictures, several favored personages are among the players:
the lightly mustached young man, enthroned, and the well-trimmed black-bearded, who
played the lead as Rustam but is now demoted to minor roles. The toothy smile we first
admired in Faridun Tezs His Sons (no. 14) now adorns the victor.

Although this miniature was fully planned, designed, and mostly painted by Aqa-
Mirak, the almost compulsive fineness of detail, so gloriously successful in the treatment of
the entwined trees, should be credited to Mir Sayyid-‘Ali, who was unrivaled in the Safavid
workshops for jewel-like finishing, and who probably resented the portion of his time
spent working for others, particularly for Aqa-Mirak.¹

Inscribed
over door
May this court always be opened in prosperity

over the pavilion
Even though the dignity of our threshold does not become lofty, nevertheless the sun sets its feet
in our house. May Allah perpetuate his Kingship and the Sovereignty for ever.

¹ For color reproductions, see Binyon, The Poems of Nizami, pl. V. Also see Welch, Persian Painting,
pls. 22, 23.

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54. Shapur Showing the Portrait of Khusraw to Shirin
(in fact, Nushaba Recognizing Iskandar)

From Khusraw and Shirin of Shah Tahmasp’s quintet of Nizami, folio 48 verso
(and facing page of text)
Correctly ascribed to Mirza-‘Ali
Ca. 1540
286 x 182 mm. (miniature only)
Lent by the British Library (Or. 2259)

Although the lines of poetry on this page refer to an episode from the story of Khusraw and Shirin, the scene itself is an illustration to the last book of the Quintet, “The Iskandar Nama.” Iskandar, known to us as Alexander the Great, had heard stories praising Nushaba, the queen of the peaceful, prosperous land of Bursa. To test the truth of these tales, he decided to enter her court disguised as a messenger. Despite his ruse, Nushaba recognized him immediately. Iskandar protested, but the queen insisted that she had identified him correctly. To settle the matter, a servant brought Iskandar a piece of silk. He opened it, beheld his own portrait, and was speechless. Sensing Iskandar’s fear, graceful Queen Nushaba immediately made him welcome with compliments and conciliatory wishes.1 S.A.C.

How differently from his father Sultan-Muhammad, Mirza-‘Ali experienced life! Of the first Safavid generation, the father served Shah Isma‘il, a rugged, inspired, unorthodox soldier. He would have known battles, both won and lost, the hardy life of campaigns, and hot-blooded feelings. Mirza-‘Ali, on the other hand, grew up at the established Safavid court, in ateliers where the pointing of brushes and cutting of nibs mattered more than sharpening scimitars. Since his father’s flexible, pioneering spirit was no longer necessary, he settled into courtly ways, and explored the sophisticated, sociable milieu of Shah Tahmasp’s inner circle. Like the duc de Saint-Simon at the court of Louis XIV, he made a study of his king’s friends, attendants, and hangers-on, most of whom he depicted with a psychiatrist’s concern for human foibles. Characteristically, in this miniature he was at least as keen to record life at court as to illustrate the topic at hand—a point underscored by the fact that the miniature was incorrectly placed in the text some three hundred years ago, and few noted the error.2

1. When Prince Khusraw, son of Shah Hurmuzd, dreamed of a beautiful and talented girl named Shirin and learned from his artist-friend Shapur that a princess of that name was niece and heiress to the Queen of Armenia, he sent Shapur to Armenia to arrange for the betrothal. There, Shapur cunningly and diplomatically lured Shirin into viewing the portraits of Khusraw he had painted; and these were so compelling that she in turn fell in love with the Iranian prince.

2. For color reproductions, see Binyon, The Poems of Nizami, pl. VI. Also, see Welch, Persian Picturing, pl. 2a.

148 - Quintet of Nizami
55. Khusrav Watching Shirin Bathing

From Khusrav and Shirin of Shah Tahmasp’s Quinter of Nizami, folio 53 verso
Correctly ascribed to Sultan-Muhammad

Ca. 1540
287 x 180 mm. (miniature only)
Lent by the British Library (Or. 2265)

Khusrav, son of the Persian king Hormuzd, dreamed he would ride the world's fastest horse, Shabdek, and gain a sweet and beautiful wife named Shirin. Soon after, Khusrav's friend, Shapur, described his journey to Armenia where he saw the queen's ravishing niece, Shirin. Amaized, Khusrav pressed Shapur to bring Shirin to Persia. Returning to Armenia, Shapur sparked Shirin's interest by hanging portraits of Khusrav on trees and explained how she could join the prince in Persia. The next day, Shirin mounted Shabdek and rode towards Persia. After fourteen days and nights, exhausted and covered with dust, she came to a gentle pool and stopped to bathe.

Khusrav, meanwhile, had been forced to flee Persia. In his haste he had even outstripped his companions when he came upon a sparkling pool in which a lovely woman was bathing. Astounded by her beauty, Khusrav quietly drew closer. Startled, Shirin hid herself in her long tresses, dressed, and rode off. Although Khusrav desired the exquisite maiden for his own, he never guessed her identity. Nor did Shirin recognize Khusrav, though later she wondered if the handsome horseman was the prince.  S.R.C.

To please his patron's taste for detail, Sultan-Muhammad has colored each leaf, twist of hair, and stone in this scintillating scene with a jeweler's artifice. One suspects, however, that the artist was more happily matched to his earlier patron, Shah Ismail, than to the increasingly orthodox Tahmasp. Still, Sultan-Muhammad's sense of comedy and innate flexibility not only enabled him to survive but to continue growing artistically, as his earth-spirits show. In the Court of the Gahmurs (no. 6), these spirits almost leap from the page, suggesting Shah Ismail's state of mind rather than Tahmasp's. In the Death of Zahak (no. 13), they seem calmer, exchanging fewer cosmic jokes. Here they are yet more restrained and harder to find, but they can still be seen in the rocks around Shirin's pool, as evocative as ever. In the proportions of his figures, the artist still values expressiveness above naturalism. Khusrav, far more tightly and finely painted than Rustam (no. 2) or the lurching drunk (no. 44), is scarcely more formal in canon. Rising in the saddle like the sun at dawn, his shoulders loom vast and powerful, but his legs would serve a mudge.

1. For color reproductions, see Pope, Survey of Persian Art, vol. V, pl. 86b. Also, see Binyun, The Poems of Nizami, pl. VII, and Welch, Persian Painting, pl. 38.

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Shapur Returning to Khusraw

From Khusrwar and Shirin of Shah Tahmasp’s quintet of Nizami, folio 57 verso
Correctly ascribed to Aqa-Mirak
Ca. 1540
295 x 200 mm. (miniature only)
Lent by the British Library (Or. 2265)

Following their encounter at the pool, Shirin and Khusrwar proceeded in opposite directions, she to Persia, he to Armenia. After languishing in the Persian palace for weeks with no word from Khusrwar, Shirin requested that a palace be built for her in a mountain plain. But on their return, Khusrwar’s jealous servants built it in a sweltering site where Shirin sadly awaited Khusrwar’s return. In Armenia Shirin’s aunt, the queen, greeted Khusrwar and lavished food, drink, and entertainment upon him. One night in the midst of this revelry Shapur appeared at Khusrwar’s tent and recounted his discovery of Shirin, the showing of Khusrwar’s portrait to her, her departure for Persia, and his belief that by now she had reached Khusrwar’s palace. Joyfully, Khusrwar sent Shapur to bring her to him in Armenia. S.B.C.

Boldly designed, as one expects of a work of Aqa-Mirak, this picture is less finely finished than his first two miniatures for the Quinter. In every detail it bears his stamp, from the precariously massed whites of the tents, skillfully kept in balance, to the idealized portrayal of the Shah as Khusrwar, and the realistic catching of gestures in mid-motion, as though by a fast camera shutter. We miss, however, the minutiae of detail seen in Aqa-Mirak’s first two paintings for the Quintet; this superb finish we attribute to Mir Syyid-i-Ali. By now, it appears, he was released from such labors, undoubtedly to his great relief, and possibly to the distress of Aqa-Mirak (who may, on the other hand, have urged that he now be accepted as a full-fledged master).¹

¹. For a color reproduction, see Binyon, The Poems of Niöami, pl. VIII.

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57. Khusrav Enthroned

From Khusrav and Shirin of Shah Tahmasp's Quintet of Nizami, folio 60 verso
Correctly ascribed to Aqa-Mirak

Ca. 1540
200 x 182 mm. (miniature only)
Lent by the British Library (Or. 2265)

When Shapur reached Shirin in Persia, she was so overjoyed to see him and to learn that Khusrav was in Armenia that they set out immediately for the palace of Shirin's aunt. Before Shirin and Khusrav could be united, however, Khusrav heard that his father had died and rushed back to Persia to claim the throne. Once again he had missed his beloved Shirin. Dearly, but alone, Khusrav remained in Persia, a just sovereign to his contented subjects. S. R. C.

Aqa-Mirak's miniatures are predominantly two dimensional in their rendering of space. He usually avoided architecture, perhaps because he preferred sinuous or curving lines to straight ones. Characteristically, his facade here is as insubstantial as a house of cards, and the figures on the roof seem propped up, as though in a stage setting. Khusrav and his forty couriers and attendants are arranged according to the artist's favorite method, in a buoyantly staccato pattern that lends cheeriness to a festive occasion.  

If we missed the loving finish of Mir Sayyd-Ali in Shapur Returning to Khusrav (no. 56), its absence is now less disconcerting. Apparently, the master was happy again to depend upon his own resources.

1. For a color reproduction, see Binyon, The Poems of Nizami, pl. IX.

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58. Khusrav and Shirin Listening to Stories Told by Shirin’s Maids

From Khusrav and Shirin of Shah Tahmasp’s Quintet of Nizami, folio 66 verso
(and facing page of text)
Correctly ascribed to Aqa-Mirak
Ca. 1540
300 x 180 mm. (miniature only)
Lent by the British Library (Or. 3205)

Although Khusrav governed with justice, a treacherous general conspired against him and forced him to flee Persia. Again he saddled his horse and rode at top speed towards Armenia. Upon reaching the environs of the Armenian capital, he decided to relax and go hunting. By chance, Shirin and her companions had set out to hunt that same day. And at last, in a clearing, Khusrav and Shirin met. Each was struck dumb by the other’s beauty and magnificence. After retiring to the Armenian castle, the lovers spent their days and nights courting, feasting, and sitting side by side. To preserve Shirin’s virtue until she and Khusrav were married, the queen forbade the lovers to be left to themselves. Every evening musicians played and sang for them, unless, as in this painting, Shirin’s maidens recited love poetry and told stories. Despite the merry-making and Khusrav’s entreaties, Shirin guarded her chastity. Moreover, she urged Khusrav to regain his kingdom before making her his wife. In due course he left her in order to fight the usurper, Bahram Chubma, and win back his throne (see no. 66).

Aqa-Mirak usually avoided symmetry. In this miniature, he put himself to the task of making it interesting. Although Shirin and her maids are neatly arranged facing Khusrav and his couriers, with the throne, pool, and portico set on a rigid axis, a lantern-bearer in the foreground, like a rock tossed in a tranquil pond, upsets the cool balance. Further dissonant chords are struck by the figure in the garden, left rear, and a pair of ducks which overbalance the single one on the right. But all these weighty forms, like the white tents in Shapur Returning to Khusrav, have been balanced in Aqa-Mirak’s artistic juggling act. Khusrav’s plumed turban, his couriers standing in the right foreground, and a second torch-bearer, in front of the fence at the right, provide perfect compensation.

The artist’s notion of feminine beauty is evident here, despite the “improvement,” by Muhammad Zaman in the seventeenth century, of several of Shirin’s maids. Curiously, Shirin and the unretouched maids are upsettingly low of brow. Should we ascribe this to a Safavid vogue? To the artist’s preference for the bovine? Or to a somewhat misogynistic sense of humor?

Inscribed
over steps  O thou who art the one who controls the throne of Jamshid, may all the world be thine.
over throne  The pupil of my eye is thy dwelling. Show kindness and come down, for the house is thy house.
on back of throne  By happy omen . . . the disposition of Khusrav . . . the throne of Khusrav

1. For color reproductions, see Pope, Survey of Persian Art, vol. V, pl. 196. Also see Binion, The Poems of Nizami, pl. X.
59. Khusrav Listening to Barbad Playing the Lute

From Khusrav and Shirin of Shah Tahmasp’s Quintet of Nizami, folio 77 verso
Correctly ascribed to Mirza‘Ali

Ca. 1540
356 x 182 mm. (miniature only)
Lent by the British Library (Or. 2265)

To regain the Persian throne, Khusrav made a treaty with the Byzantine emperor; in exchange for the support of the Byzantine armies Khusrav agreed to marry Maryam, the emperor’s daughter. Khusrav’s coronation ceremonies were followed at once by wedding festivities. One fateful night after too much wine Khusrav summoned his favorite minstrel, Barbad, to entertain the revelers. The bard sang thirty songs about the love of Khusrav for Shirin—songs so moving that Khusrav lavished gifts on the singer, and in a fit of emotion told Maryam to take Shirin as her slave. Maryam refused, and swore to kill Shirin on sight.

In Mirza‘Ali’s painting of Barbad singing, the nurse with a child and the boy with an arrow may allude to Khusrav’s future death.1 For an evil male-child named Shiruyah was born to him and Maryam. Although Khusrav and Shirin eventually married, Khusrav’s life was cut short by the successful assassination plot of Shiruyah. Shirin stabbed herself and bled to death over her lover’s body, united with him at last. S.R.C.

Mirza‘Ali’s figures stand, sit, and move more articulately and convincingly than those by any other Safavid painter, a symptom of his intense concern for people. If his father explored earth and heaven, he, more narrowly, but fascinatingly, concentrated upon mankind. The same objective study of anatomy that enabled him to depict the man interwoven with gate and fences in the left foreground, made him an accurate observer of Safavid graces and disgraces. These he recorded with true to life textures and proportions until the 1550s and later, when even he—a classicist by nature—yielded to the taste for mannerism. But even then, his figures were drawn with understanding of volume, weight, and balance; and as before, their individuality was analyzed with sympathy and respect (see nos. 78, 82, 83 and 85).

Miniatures such as Khusrav Listening to Barbad are in fact group portraits, in which each figure seems to have been based upon someone at the Shah’s court. Invariably, his characterizations are enlivened by telling poses, often in chit-chatting pairs. Close study of gestures and faces exposes all manner of subplots, suggestive of political intrigue, or topics for a psychoanalyst’s case book, or a gossip column.

If Mirza‘Ali delved into the machinations of the Shah’s inner circle, he also felt warmly towards the harem, with its ladies, nurses, and children. Nushirvan Receives an Embassy

Opposite page: Detail of No. 59.

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