from the King of Hind, his most progressive painting for the Shahnama and a precursor of the present painting, also carries us into those closed precincts. 2

Inscribed

over pavilion

May this festive assembly be as rain to the garden and may the light of the countenance of the Shah be bright. From the dome of the heavens, as long as the sun and moon exist, may the assembly be adorned with the person of the Shah.

around the carpet

With the furnishing of your two eyes you make a bridal chamber of that dwelling. In every place you travel you wish to make the dust into a road there. How pleasant... with one another.

1. For other color plates, see Binyon, The Poems of Nizami, pl. XI; and Welch, Persian Painting, pls. 26, 27.
2. See Welch, A King's Book of Kings, pp. 180-183.

160 - Quintet of Nizami
60. Peony Arabesque

From Shah Tahmasp's QUINTET of Nizami, folio 128 recto

Ca. 1540

360 x 250 mm. (folio size)

Lent by the British Library (Or. 2265)

This seeming trifle is one of the unique small delights of the Quintet—indeed, of all Safavid ornament. Like a few of Chopin's bagatelles, it soars beyond the limitations of "minor" art, and in the Quintet, provides a seductive change of pace. Through the scrolling graces of flowering vines, we sense one of art's rarest and most appealing moods, bittersweet poignancy. Its deceptively easy, tripping line, Turkman-inspired blossoms, and broken stems suggest the hand of a major artist at work, one to whom this illumination provided a stimulatingly fresh challenge. The border typifies those added when the manuscript was refurnished during the late seventeenth century.
61. Majnun Brought in Chains by the Old Woman to Layla's Tent

From Layla and Majnun of Shah Tahmasp's quintet of Nizami, folio 137 verso
(and facing page of text)
Correctly ascribed to Mir Sayyid-‘Ali
Ca. 1540
320 x 182 mm. (miniature only).
Lent by the British Library (Or. 2265)

Set in Arabia, the story of Layla and Majnun began when two children, Qays and Layla, met in school and fell in love. Soon their schoolmates taunted the beshtruch Qays with the name "Majnun," or "madman," and when Layla's father heard of Majnun's love for Layla he became so incensed that he withdrew her from school. Distracted by her absence, Majnun fled to the desert where he repeatedly murmured Layla's name and composed love songs for her which came to be sung throughout Arabia. Despite Majnun's father's efforts to ease his sorrow, Majnun remained in the desert obsessed with Layla.

One day an old woman dragging a man in chains approached Majnun, who asked why he was so treated. The old woman explained that he was a dervish who travelled with her through the desert to help beg for food. Majnun persuaded the old woman to free the dervish and chain him instead, in exchange for all the food they would receive. Henceforth, the old woman and Majnun wandered through the desert from village to village. One day they came to a familiar camp. Majnun recognized Layla's tent and was seized with a fit of madness. He cried out her name, broke his chains, and fled back to the desert. 1 s. a. c.

Less concerned with formal court subjects than Mirza-‘Ali, Mir Sayyid-‘Ali was particularly fond of rustic scenes, which he translated into appropriately royal terms. This strong composition, probably inspired by Sultan-Muhammad's Tur Beheads Iraq (no. 15), is an arrangement of maids at work, shepherds with their flocks, unruly ragamuffins, and assorted domestic scenes, as well as the portrayal of an incident in Majnun's tragedy. One suspects that Mir Sayyid-‘Ali preferred such company to the denizens of court and the accuracy with which he rendered them argues that he spent many hours sketching in the field. The humbler the station of his subject, the livelier and more intimate his depiction. Although he painted great courtiers with every bauble or hair defined, his shepherds are more convincing, and he was still more successful when drawing animals.

Sadly, his marvelous compositions are inhabited by a strangely silent race, who rarely, if ever, communicate with one another, either through words or eyes. Most of his figures gaze ahead, their eyes unfocused. Despite this revealing limitation, which tends to reduce humanity to still life, Mir Sayyid-‘Ali must be ranked with the major Safavid artists. Only Bihzad himself, at the peak of his career, painted more meticulously or lovingly.

1. For color reproductions, see Pope, Survey of Persian Art, vol. V, pl. 91a. Also, see Binyon, The Poems of Nizami, pl. XII and Welds, Persian Painting, pls. 28, 39.
62. Majnum with the Animals in the Desert

From Layla and Majnum of Shah Tahmasp’s quintet of Nizami, folio 166 recto (and facing page of text)

Correctly ascribed to Aqa-Mirak

Ca. 1540
300 x 207 mm. (miniature only)

Lent by the British Library (Or. 2265)

When Majnum returned to the desert all the wild animals flocked to him. Every day Majnum and his animals scoured the desert for roots and herbs, and every evening they gathered around Majnum to hear his love songs for Layla, their heads bowed. Majnum was particularly fond of one fawn, whose dark eyes reminded him of Layla. In the painting he fondles and kisses this gentle substitute for his beloved. s.n.c.

Of all the episodes in the tale of Layla and Majnum, this is probably the most picturesque, and among the hundreds of painted versions, Aqa-Mirak’s is outstanding for sheer beauty and pathetic sweetness. The tender sympathy between Majnum and the animals, his emaciated but sensitive body, and the suitably pale colors of the landscape, flowing like honey-thick lava, compose an unforgettable image. Always keen on animal painting, Aqa-Mirak has gathered an engaging zoological garden containing the sausage-like ibex also seen in Rustam Finds Kay Qubad (no. 19). Both pictures likewise include the only instances known to us in Safavid painting of the Chinese symbol for Yin and Yang, found as whorls of hair on Rustam’s tiger-skin and on the living animal that turns away goggle-eyed from Majnum’s temptingly delicious deer.

1. For color reproductions, see Binyon, The Poems of Nizami, pl. XIII; and Welch, Persian Painting, plbs. 30, 31.
63. The Ascent of the Prophet to Heaven
From the Seven Portraits of Shah Tahmasp’s Quintet of Nizami, folio 195 recto (and facing page of text)
Attributable to Sultan-Muhammad
Ca. 1540
287 x 186 mm. (miniature only)
Lent by the British Library (Or. 2365)

Traditionally Persian poets dedicated their works not only to actual patrons but also to God, to whom they directed prayers for inspiration. Often these prayers were accompanied by a description of the Miraj, or the nocturnal ascent of the Prophet Muhammad astride the half-human horse Buraj, to the Seventh Heaven. Nizami’s lines conjure up the speed of the journey into the heavens and the brilliant light of the sky before Muhammad enters into the presence of God:

“And from his moon-light brilliancy he drew a veil of mercury o’er Venus fair. Ascending to the throne-room of the sky, he crowned the sun’s head with a golden crown.”
S. B. C.
Ultimately, it is not skill, or talent, or virtuosity that identifies a great artist, but profundity of spirit; and the rarest, most elevating works of art are visionary. In Persianate painting, Sultan-Muhammad's pictures, whether of sapphires, demons, or Shahs, invariably reach beyond their subject matter. His Rustam Sleeping (no. 2), Allegory of Drunkenness (no. 44), and Court of Gawaynars (no. 8) transcend earthly experience. The Ascent of the Prophet, probably his final masterpiece, unites the artist's personal, spiritual vision with a profound religious theme. The vibrant oval seen in all his most serious pictures is now composed of ecstatic angels, heavenly clouds, and stars; and in its eye, the Prophet soars heavenward, radiant within a flaming aura.

This majestic picture is scarcely marred by the "European" faces of angels, upper left, presumably repainted by Muhammad Zaman. Like a shaft of light, the miniature illuminates, and one must stand back from its spiritual heat to observe art historical evidence: the familiar "Caucasian" profile of the angel bearing an offering of flame, whom we have encountered before in the Celebration of 'Id (no. 45) and in The Court of Gawaynars (no. 8), and the lingering appearance in another angel's hat, center foreground, of Turkman foliage. Inasmuch as Sultan-Muhammad must have been born in the later 1470s or early 1480s, and died in about 1510, this picture, as one would expect from its combination of technical perfection and wisdom, was his penultimate flowering.

OPPOSITE PAGE: Detail of no. 63.

1. For color reproductions, see Pope, Survey of Persian Art, vol. V, pl. 897. Also see, Binyon, The Poems of Nizami, pl. XIV, and Welch, Persian Painting, pls. 32, 33.
According to the Persian court astrologers, Prince Bahram would have a happy life if he were brought up in Yemen and he was sent there. As he matured, Bahram gained a reputation throughout Arabia as a hunter of enormous skill. One day Bahram happened upon a lion tearing the back off a wild ass. Drawing his bow, he released the arrow and skewered both animals through their shoulders into the ground. This feat so astonished Bahram's companions that they nicknamed him "Bahram Gur"—or Bahram of the wild ass. At the behest of the king of Yemen the episode was painted on the walls of Bahram's house. The work was so successful that viewers believed the lion and ass were not mere pictures but actually living animals. 8. n.c.

Sultan-Muhammad's characterizations, including earth-beings, storm our senses and feelings. This picture compels us to hear the growls and cries of animals, to sense as the arrows strike home, and to share the huntsmen's excitement when bowstrings swang. Even oft-repeated motifs, such as the Turkmun bear hurling a rock at a confidently indestructible lion-spirit, were lent breath by the artist, whose miniatures invariably stem from direct responses to nature as well as from earlier art. This insistent combination is especially apparent in the Stubbs-like lion and ass, an ancient motif given new impact by the artist's grasp of anatomy. Although the lion's mask is formulaic, the texture of fur and musculature of the hunches seem drawn from life.¹

¹. For a color reproduction, see Binyen, The Poems of Nizami, pl. XV.

172 - Quintet of Nizami
65. Bahram Gur Pinning an Ass’s Hoof to its Ear with One Arrow to Prove his Prowess to Fitna

From the Seven Portraits of Shah Tahmasp’s Quintet of Nizami, folio 211 recto
Correctly ascribed to Muzaffar’-Ali

Ca. 1540
303 x 182 mm. (miniature only)
Lent by the British Library (Or. 2365)

After the death of his father, Bahram returned to Persia to claim the throne. As in Yemen he rode to the hunt, frequently accompanied by Fitna, a beautiful female musician. While Bahram pursued game, Fitna played her harp. One day Fitna piqued Bahram by failing to praise his hunting prowess. When Bahram asked Fitna how she thought he should kill a wild ass, she challenged him to pin its hoof to its ear. Without hesitation Bahram sighted an ass, grazed its ear with an arrow, and when the animal lifted its hoof to scratch he shot an arrow through both ear and hoof. Even this feat was met with a taunting remark. Enraged at Fitna’s response, Bahram ordered her put to death. S.R.C.

Only an Iranian artist could make bloodshed lyrical; and this transmutation was a specialty of Muzaffar’-Ali. The depiction of bounding, seemingly dancing animals was second nature to him (see no. 26). His thinly pigmented, swift brushwork lent buoyancy to everything it touched. Like the two asses here, Muzaffar’-Ali’s flowers, foliage, and people are light to the point of evanescence. At first sight baffling and difficult to appreciate, his earlier paintings, including this one, lack the technical brilliance associated with Shah Tahmasp’s court painters. His compositions seem loosely organized, their workmanship is skimpy, and figures are ungainly, with oddly tilted necks and spaghetti-thin fingers. Even the animals, his strong point, defy close inspection, but his miniatures rise above their deficiencies, powered by spirit alone. They spur our imaginations and invite poetic speculation. In this example, for instance, we see the rivulet beneath the tree as a symbol of the ass’s mortal wound, and the blossoms it nourishes allay the animal’s death agony.1

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

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