66. The Battle Between Khusrav and Bahram Chubina

From Shah Tahmasp’s QUITET of Nizami, stray folio
Attributable to Mir Sayyid-‘Ali

C. 1540
380 x 250 mm. (folio size)
Lent by the Royal Scottish Museum, Edinburgh (1896-70)

Following the death of his father, Hurmaq, Khusrav returned to Iran and ascended the throne, while Shapar journeyed to Armenia with Shirin (see nos. 54-59). At this point, Bahram Chubina attacked the young Shah in full force, a disaster not without compensations. For Khusrav fled to Armenia, where he joined his beloved Shirin. Torn between love for her and pride, he soon accepted the responsibility of a second battle against Bahram, in which he was encouraged by both Shirin and the emperor of Rum (Byzantium), who outfitted a mighty army for him. In this picture, Khusrav, mounted on a war elephant, has just received word from Bagurjamid that the auspicious moment to attack Bahram Chubina has come. The fray has begun; corpses already litter the field. Fortunately, the veteran counselor had read his astrolabe correctly. Khusrav won the day. Bahram fled to China and was slain. Upon hearing the news of his arch-enemy’s death, Khusrav lamented the passing of a brave man.

The lessons of Qas-Mirak and Sultan-Muhammad largely had been absorbed by the time Mir Sayyid-‘Ali painted this battle scene, which owes so much to Quran Slaya Barman (no.18). Whole passages, showing cavaliers on horses, have been modified from the earlier minaure upon which Mir Sayyid-‘Ali seemed to have worked as a brilliant apprentice. Comparison of the two compositions, however, underscores the younger artist’s dependence upon archaisms. While Sultan-Muhammad’s design gains immediacy and unity by the deployment of figures and animals as though seen by a swooping bird, Mir Sayyid-‘Ali’s is old-fashioned, and less involving. Each element is flat as a paper cut-out, and spatial depth is unconvincently suggested by overlapping and placing more distant motifs higher on the picture plane.3

Mir Sayyid-‘Ali’s extraordinary capabilities are also apparent. His genius for two-dimensional design, for devising stunning arabesques, his sharp-eyed renderings of arms and armor, and his almost inconceivably fine craftsmanship are all displayed for our delight.4

2. B. W. Robinson first identified this miniature as a missing folio from the Quintet, and discussed it and related pages in Persian Miniature Painting from Collections in the British Isles (London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 1907) pp. 55-56.

3. For a color reproduction, see Gray, Persian Painting, p. 134.
67. Nomadic Encampment

From Shah Tahmasp’s quintet of Nizami, stray folio
Correctly ascribed to Mir Sayyid-
Ali
Ca. 1540
278 x 193 mm. (miniature only)
Lent by the Fogg Art Museum, Gift of John Goelet, formerly in the Collection of
Louis J. Carter (1958.75)

This is Mir Sayyid-
Ali’s most extraordinary painting, one which invites us to explore every
millimeter to relish the teeming microcosm of people, animals, flowers, and precisely
analyzed still-life.1 Nothing escaped his notice. The elegant laundress, upper right, rinses
the cloth wetted with silver flecks. The canteen suspended from a tent pole, right center, could
be duplicated, so accurately is it rendered. For the study of textiles there is no more explicit
contemporary source. But if Mir Sayyid-
Ali portrayed every texture and design of the
tribal carpets, the magnificent tent, center left, adorned with simurghs and arabesques,
must be an original design, and it would be very surprising if this great master of ornament
had not served the Shah by supplying patterns for weavers as well as by painting.

Informative as well as beautiful, this miniature reminds us that the Safavid court
lived in tents for long stretches of time. When not campaigning against Uzbeks or Ottomans,
or quelling their own troublesome factions, they took to the field for hunting. Artists
accompanied the royal party, and this portrayal of outdoor life is an accurate, if slightly
idealized, description of characteristic Safavid activities.2

1. B. W. Robinson has suggested that this “camp-scene with a family council in progress” illustrates
an episode in the story of Layla and Majmun. See Robinson, Persian Miniature Painting from Collections
in the British Isles, p. 55.

2. For a color reproduction, see Ernst J. Grube, The World of Islam (New York and Toronto: McGraw
Hill, 1966) p. 127. For a detail in color, see Stuart Cary Welch, The Art of Mughal India (New York: The
68. Night-time in a Palace
From Shah Tahmasp's quintsy of Nizami, stray folio
Attributable to Mir Sayyid-`Ali
Ca. 1540
283 x 200 mm. (miniature only)
Lent by the Pogg Art Museum, Gift of John Goelet, formerly in the Collection of Louis J. Carlier (1958.76)

Although Shah Tahmasp's artists rarely signed their work, they provided convenient clues for its identification. In the earliest picture we can assign to the Mir (no. 20), we noted the hook-nosed, usually open-mouthed personage, who appears very frequently in his work. Seemingly a portrait of someone close to the artist, he is shown in many roles, and at various ages, but his profile always is unmistakable. Here he is grandfatheryr, silhouetted against a doorway, conversing with a boy (upper right). In the Edinburgh battle scene (no. 66), we encounter him as a somewhat younger warrior, near the lower right margin, and in the Nomadic Encampment, he is a middle-aged man near the top of the miniature, talking animatedly with a youth.

As usual, Mir Sayyid-`Ali composed this miniature as a series of lovingly elaborated, flat sections, arranged in compartments as a meaningful whole. Like most artists, he repeated favorite passages, always with intriguing variations. Thus, the salivating, hennaed dog (top center) is also found in the foreground of Majnum Brought in Chains (no. 61). If, as we suspect, this charming pet was the artist's, the fact that he is seen as a puppy in the latter picture suggests that it was painted earlier, before the hound matured.1

Inscribed
in upper part of picture, over portal of mosque

"He who builds a mosque for God, God will build for him a dwelling in Paradise." This saying is an hadith; for citations of where it may be found in the various hadith collections, see A. J. Wensinck, Concordance et Indices de la Tradition Musulmane, 7 vols., (Leiden: Brill, 1930) vol. 1 p. 221. We are grateful to Peter Heath for this identification as well as for the translation.

in lower left of picture

"The pupil of my eye is your nesting place; be kind, alright, for it is your house." This is the first line of a poem from the Divan of Hafiz; for it and the rest of the poem, see: Hafiz, Divan-i-Khwaja Hafiz-i-Shirazi, ed. Abul-I-Qasim Anjavi (Tehran, 1967) pp. 28-30.

1. For a color reproduction of this painting, see Grube, The World of Islam, p. 126.
69. Bahram Gur and the Shepherd Who Hanged his Dog for Allowing a Wolf to Steal the Sheep

Perhaps a preparatory drawing for a copy of the Seven Portraits of the QUINTET of Nizami Attributable to Mirza-'Ali

Ca. 1540
450 x 365 mm. (with borders)
Lent by the Museums of Fine Arts, Boston, Income of Bartlett Fund and Special Contribution (14.589)

Nizami's Seven Portraits tells of Bahram Gur and the stories recounted by his seven princesses, each of whom occupied a separate, appropriately colored pavilion. At the time of his visit to the princesses of the Seventh Clone in her white pavilion he was troubled by a malevolent vizier, upon whose death the princess's tale shed light. She told of a king who sought relaxation by venturing alone into the countryside, where he chanced upon a disturbing sight, a sheep dog bound and hanging from a tree. The shepherd explained that the dog had seemed a loyal keeper of the flocks, until sheep mysteriously disappeared, one by one. Puzzled by these losses, he kept careful watch and learned that the once faithful dog was making love with a female wolf, whose nightly bride was a fine fat sheep! On hearing this rustic drama, Bahram Gur realized that his vizier and the sheep dog had much in common, and he meted out a comparable punishment to the human malefactor.

Few large working drawings have survived from Shah Tahmasp's ateliers. This one, as has been suggested by B. W. Robinson "may, perhaps, be a rejected design for Tahmasp's Nizami"—or, indeed, the actual under-drawing for an intended painting. On stylistic grounds, it can be assigned to Mirza-'Ali during the years of the QUINTET. The handling of space, figural and facial types, water, rocks, and the shape of the turban, as worn by Bahram Gur, all point to his hand.

Beginning with a brush and thinned black ink, the artist sketched in the composition, gradually refining its elements more decisively, in darker strokes. Errors were correctable by covering them with white pigment. Less proficient painters, ranked as colorers rather than designers, either worked over sketches provided by their superiors, or built up compositions by using tracings pricked in transparent goselle skin, through which powdered black pigment was rubbed. Major masters, such as Mirza-'Ali in his maturity, seldom, if ever, resorted to such technical crutches.

1. Robinson, Persian Miniature Painting from Collections in the British Isles, p. 59. A better, weaker drawing, partly copied or traced from this one is in the British Museum. See Ivan V. Souchkine, Les Peintures des manuscrits safavides de 1502 à 1587 (Paris: Institut Français d'archéologie de Beyrouth, 1959) pl. XXXIV.
70. **Seated Princess with a Spray of Flowers**

Attributable to Mirza-‘Ali

Ca. 1540

378 x 303 mm. (miniature only)

Lent by the Fogg Art Museum, Gift of John Goelet, formerly in the Collection of Louis J. Cartier (1958.80)

Few schools of painting in the world outshine the elegance of Safavid portraiture, and among Tabrīz examples, this aristocratic princess is unequalled. A larger, more elaborate version of Mirza-‘Ali’s Nushaba in the Quisert (no. 54), she is at once seductive and unapproachably royal, perfectly mannered, without stiffness, formally aloof, yet friendly. Her eyes are focused but avoid contact, and she smiles infectiously, as though genuinely amused by some courtly jest. Despite the idealization of her moon-faced beauty, we sense her humanity. She is breathtakingly alive. Among Safavid artists only Mirza-‘Ali could have conveyed the volume and weight of her body, and only he could have arranged her trunk and limbs so convincingly in three dimensions, with such suggestive implications to the undulating hem of her fur-lined robe with its tucks, and folds. In one of the most inspired passages of Safavid painting, flowers, curving fingers, and sinuous arabesques converge in a perfectly harmonious triad.†

† For a color reproduction, see Pope, *Survey of Persian Art*, vol. V, pl. 902.
71. Young Man Holding Flowers
Attributable to Muzaffar-‘Ali
Ca. 1540
384 x 254 mm. (with border)
Lent by the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Francis Bartlett Donation of 1912 and Picture Fund (14-590)

As in Muzaffar-‘Ali’s illustration to the Quiafer (no. 25), the spirit of this portrait makes up for its formal deficiencies. If the hands lack precision and seem too boneless to grasp a flower, and if the legs and trunk are anatomically and structurally unarticulated, these are small matters compared to the picture’s overall grace and dignity. Imposing in scale, springy in stance, and exuding happy innocence, the young man exemplifies Muzaffar-‘Ali’s ability to filter out all that is worldly, leaving behind only poetic essences. A counterpart to this engaging young man, with his metaphorically bow-shaped eyebrows, rides a dappled horse near the right edge of the artist’s hunting scene.

Muzaffar-‘Ali’s technical proficiency increased over the years, and miniatures we attribute to him in the Freer Gallery of Art’s Haft Awrang (Seven Thrones) of Jami of 1566-1566, while exhibiting all the characteristics apparent in earlier works, reveal increased mastery of brush handling and delineation.
72. Mirza-Muhammad Qabahat Offers a Letter

By 'Abd ul-Aziz

Ca. 1540
202 x 125 mm. (with border)
Private Collection

This decorous portrait of a youngish man holding a letter is inscribed (on the letter and above) with the names of both subject and artist, the two principals in a notorious court scandal. The subject, Mirza-Muhammad Qabahat, son of the royal surgeon, was a favorite pageboy of the Shah. The artist, 'Abd ul-'Aziz, the Shah's own master in painting, lured the youth away from court and stole the royal seal, with which he forged documents to smooth their escape southward. They were caught and returned to the Shah, who imprisoned Mirza-Qabahat, but soon ordered his release. The artist fared worse. He forfeited his nose and ears—and according to some, the enraged Shah himself performed the surgery. 'Abd ul-Aziz, now dubbed "Clipped-ears," whittled and polychromed a prosthetic nose said to have been an improvement upon nature's original.

The portrait was painted after the young man had outlived the first bloom of youth and passions had cooled. On grounds of costume, style, and border, it can be dated to about 1540.

For another miniature attributable to 'Abd ul-'Aziz, see no. 18.

Inscribed
on the letter

In the name of the Ruler of All Realms! Khwaja 'Abd ul-Aziz, whose mastery is the rarity of the ages, did this portrait of the boy, Mirza-Muhammad, son of Qabahat.
73. Camel and Groom

Attributable to Shaykh Muhammad

Ca. 1545

201 x 275 mm. (drawing only)

Lent by The Cleveland Museum of Art, Purchase from the Jeptha H. Wade Fund (44.489)

Line drawing in ink with brush or reed pen, was closely linked to calligraphy, an art admired by Iranians at least as much as painting. Sharp and curvilinear, with thickening and thinning forms, the strokes of this Camel and Groom resemble nasta’liq script, the style of writing favored in the sixteenth century. This boldly masterful picture can be assigned to Shaykh-Muhammad, a major draftsman and painter, who was also a notable calligrapher, as had been his father, Shaykh Kamal. Although line drawing was admired independently of painting at least as early as the fourteenth century, and artists such as Bihzad and Sultan-Muhammad were among its major exponents, Shaykh-Muhammad’s spirited drawings were eagerly sought after for inclusion in albums of calligraphies and miniatures. It could be argued that he was responsible for the surge of interest in drawing for its own sake, and that his example inspired the great Aqa-Riza (later known as Riza ‘Abassi) and Sadiki Bek, whose sketches are often more admired than their paintings.

Shaykh-Muhammad never surpassed this Camel and Groom in linear power and purity. Although unscribed, it can be assigned to him on many grounds, from its spirit to the appearance in its of one of the artist’s most personal and oft-repeated forms, a shape resembling twisted rosette. Here, it is seen in the camel’s tail; elsewhere, one finds it in sashes and turbans (see nos. 76 and 84). But there are also many other earmarks of his innovative style, ranging from the compacted proportions and overtly aggressive “military” mood, notable in the animal’s stride, to the organic treatment of folds in cloth.1

1. For a closely related drawing, perhaps of the same camel, attributable to Mir Sayyid ‘Ali, see: Dicolson and Welch, The Houghton Shahnameh, fig. 244.