A "SHAH-NAMA" OF 1482

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The great Iranian national epic poem, the Shah-nama, or "History of the Kings of Iran," was completed by Firdausi in A.D. 1010. This immense poem is a compilation of the mythological and legendary history of Iran from the remotest ages down to the Muhammadan conquest of the Sasanians in the seventh century A.D. In the later sections historical personages such as Cyrus and Alexander and the Sasanian kings do appear, but most of the tales grouped around their names are legends.

The Shah-nama, full of accounts of supernatural marvels, of romantic adventure, and of the deeds of national heroes, has been a fount of inspiration for the painters of Persia. During the thousand years since Firdausi brought to a conclusion his forty years of work on its composition, this chef d’oeuvre has been copied countless times and has been the source of hundreds of miniature paintings illustrating its various episodes. The Metropolitan Museum counts in its collection five complete manuscripts of the Shah-nama and about thirty-five miniatures from other manuscripts, dating from the early fourteenth to the late seventeenth century.

Two miniatures purchased by the Museum in 1940 are particularly interesting because they are from a dated fifteenth-century manuscript. There are miniatures from this manuscript in other museums and in a private collection. We are fortunate in having access, through the kindness of Nasli Heeramanek, to the colophon giving the month and year when the copying was completed, Shawwal, A.H. 887 (October, A.D. 1482), and the name of the calligrapher, Murshid, son of Izz ad Din Wazân. The manuscript is written on a creamy glazed paper in four columns of Nasta’lik script ruled with black, gold, and gray lines. The illuminated headings are in the beautiful style characteristic of the fifteenth century: gold cartouches ornamented with pastel flow-
ers against a deep blue ground with arabesques of gold having jewel-like details in black, turquoise, vermilion, and white. Other chapter headings are written in gold Nasta’lik against a spiral scroll of fine black lines with gold arabesque leaves. In the triangular spaces between the verses written horizontally and those written diagonally are delicate floral sprays in gold and black with vermilion or turquoise blossoms or small gold and black roundels.

The miniatures measure the width and less than half the height of a page. The figures are painted in bright, clear colors against a light ground rising to a gold sky in which float white clouds. One of the miniatures shows us the dying hero Rustam shooting his brother Shaghad through a plane tree, an incident illustrated in almost every copy of the Shah-nama. The theme of the jealous, inferior man plotting the end of his popular, successful brother is one of the commonest tales of intrigue in the history of the East. In this case, Shaghad conspires with his father-in-law, the King of Kabul, to trap Rustam through his well-known love of the chase. Pits are dug in the hunting grounds, planted with upright spears, scimitars, and daggers, and covered over. Rustam is enticed by tales of herds of gazelle and onager and dashes forth to the plains, impatient for the hunt and heedless of the hesitation of his wise horse Rakhsh, which scents the freshly turned earth. He falls into one of the pits and Shaghad comes to gloat over the plight of his brother and the brave horse fatally impaled on the weapons. Rustam, recognizing too late the treachery of his brother, asks only that he may have his bow strung and be given two arrows, so that he may not be devoured by lions.

Shaghad drew near, uncased the bow, and strung it. He drew it once, then laid it down by Rustam. And laughed exulting at his brother’s death. The matchless hero clutched it lustily,
Though tortured by the anguish of his wounds,
And while Shaghad in terror at those arrows
Made haste to shield himself behind a tree—
An ancient plane still boughed and leaved but hollow;
And there behind it skulked the miscreant.
When Rustam saw this he put forth his hands,
Sore wounded as he was, and loosed a shaft.
He pinned his brother and the tree together,
And gladdened in the article of death.
Then Rustam died.¹

The second miniature depicts a scene not often illustrated, that of the vengeance of Alexander the Great on the traitor slayers of his foe, Darius. In the last great battle between Alexander and Darius, the latter is defeated and flees with a group of his nobles. Mahiyar and Janusiyar, his minister and his treasurer, seeing that the wheel of fortune has turned against him, conspire together and stab their leader. They hasten to Alexander with the news that his enemy is dying, sure that out of gratitude he will reward each of them with a province. But Alexander, the truly great, hastens to Darius, and he and his followers mourn and weep “tears of blood” at the death of so great a man.

¹ The translations on this page were taken from *The Shah-name of Firdausi* (London, 1905-1925), by Arthur George Warner and Edmond Warner.
Alexander executing the slayers of Darius. From a "Shah-nama" dated 1482.
Miniature in the Metropolitan Museum

while the Timurids retained in Persia only Khurasan and the provinces around the Caspian Sea.

Shah Rukh's reign was one of the most prosperous in Persian history. He was a wise and just ruler from all accounts, warring only to keep his own territory and interested in a peaceful realm, the good will of other monarchs, and the furtherance of art and learning. The name of his son, Baisunkur Mirza, is even more celebrated than his own in connection with the world of literature and beautiful books. In 1420 he established in the capital city, Herat, a library with the famous Ja'far at Tabrizi at its head, under whom there were gathered together forty calligraphers. In 1426 Baisunkur had made a new edition of the Shah-nama, for which he wrote a preface which has been generally used since that date.

Although a time of "wars and rumors of war," court life of the second half of the century was more splendid than that of the first. It was one of those Golden Ages that illumine at intervals some part of the world and that spread their fame to far distant lands. The peak was reached under Sultan Husain Mirza, who reigned between 1468 and 1506. The court of Herat acted as a magnet for great artists from all over the country. The shining lights of the age circled not only around the monarch, but even more around his great minister, Mir 'Ali Shir Nawai, himself a musician, poet, and painter. In Herat were to be found the historians Mirkwand and Khwandamir, the poet Jami, Sultan 'Ali, the greatest calligrapher of his time, the painters Bihzad and Kasim 'Ali, and Mirak the illuminator, and others whose work has vanished and whose
names have come down to us only as rumors. Turkish histories and state papers and the reports of Venetian ambassadors attest that the court at Tabriz also attracted men of letters and science, artists and architects, during the reign (1466 to 1478) of Usun Hasan, the Turkoman, over western Persia. This interest was continued under his sons, who ruled until the beginning of the sixteenth century.

The Timurid style of Herat has its roots in the work of the Shiraz school of the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. Although Shiraz was under the political domination either of the Timurids or of the "White Sheep" Turkomans, it continued to be an artistic center throughout the fifteenth century and exchanged artists with Herat and Tabriz.

This century saw the culmination of the development of the art of miniature painting in Persia. It is true that the miniatures of the sixteenth century are brilliant in their richness of color and beauty of design and execution, but these qualities are rather an intensification of those of the fifteenth century than an advance in growth.

For the appreciation of the art of Persian miniature painting we must clear our minds and eyes of our foreign prejudices and regard its little scenes from the point of view of their creators and those for whom they were created.

Kai Khusrau in pursuit of Afrasiyab. From a "Shah-nama" dated 1486. In the British Museum
Their color harmony, their beauty of composition and drawing, and their decorative quality enchant us immediately, despite the fact that the artists were free from certain of our conventions, such as the necessity for representing shadows or perspective or changes caused by atmosphere and distance. Moreover, they felt no realistic compulsion to hide from the spectator what was going on behind a closed door or a fence, in a pit in the ground, or under water. Their object was to convey the impression of the dramatic moment of an episode, as though the action were performed on a stage with a background of stage scenery. The observer views the plays from, let us say, about the height of the first balcony, so that the actors do not hide each other and so that the horizon line is high above them.

The characteristics of painting of the Timurid period are easy to recognize. In outdoor scenes the generally rounded contour of the horizon line, edged with rocks, lies against a sky of vibrant blue or of gold in which float scrolled white clouds of obviously Chinese origin. Decorative trees and bushes of all kinds and curiously shaped and colored fungus- or coral-like rocks break this horizon line. The ground is usually a pastel shade of blue, pink, green, violet, or orange, strewn with little tufts of grass and decorated like a spring dress pattern with a great variety of enchanting little plants. Some scenes take place in a darker green meadow, others combine the dark and light grounds. Sometimes the green is confined to the borders of silver brooks and pools (now, alas, oxidized to black). The various and richly hued palaces and pavilions present an infinite variety of geometric, arabesque, and floral patterns, which we are privileged to examine as the tiled floors and tiled or painted walls are laid out flat like a folding cardboard doll’s house not yet set up. Against these landscapes and buildings the actors take their places in brightly painted garments of charming all-over patterns or of plain colors embroidered in gold with lobed collars, squares, bands, and sleeve motifs of Chinese bird and flower designs.

The allocation of manuscripts and miniatures of the fifteenth century to the different schools in Herat, Shiraz, and Tabriz is an extremely interesting problem and one which has not yet been wholly solved. The several exhibitions of Persian art which have been held in important cities of Europe and of the United States during the last forty years have furnished opportunities for the examination and comparison of miniatures from many collections, some of them making their first appearance in the public eye in the West. In consequence light has been shed on many problems, among them this one of distinguish-
ing the fifteenth-century schools of painting.

The outlines of the style of the Herat school of the second half of the fifteenth century are clear, thanks to contemporary accounts of the court life under Husain Baikara and to signed miniatures and the information given in the colophons of manuscripts.

When we come to the miniature painting of western Persia and the distinction between the schools of Tabriz and Shiraz, we find some difficulty because there is less documentary evidence and because of the interchange of artists between the two cities and even with Herat. Attributions to one or the other of these two localities must therefore be made with some reservations.

Our two miniatures from the Shah-nama of 1482 belong to a group which is closely affiliated and which may be assigned to the school of Tabriz. The simple style of the miniatures of this group shows clearly their descent from the fourteenth-century school of Tabriz in its conservative clinging to the traditions of that school, whereas the Herat painters, Bihzad and his contemporaries, were producing at this time much more sophisticated and more individualized works of art.

The figures in our miniatures are few and large in comparison with the size of the illustrations, and their rather big round heads give them the appearance of being short. Their faces, still of the Mongol type, show little expression, and their gestures are adequate to convey meaning but are not very vigorous. The rocks in the background have a somewhat soft appearance, and their edges along the horizon have been reduced to mere frills. The drawing of the plants and leafage is not very definite. It is interesting, however, to compare the gnarled tree trunk, with its prominent knots, with prototypes in the early fourteenth-century miniatures of the Tabriz school, such as that in the illustration of the episode of the death of Rustam in Rashid ad Din's "Universal History" of 1306-1314. The interest of the artist is in the human action of the scenes rather than in the details of the drawing. He has used his color and his composition to focus our attention on the hero

**The combat between Rustam and Afrasiyab. From a "Shah-nama" of the second half of the XV century in the Bibliothèque Nationale**

Rustam and on Alexander. Rustam is dramatically framed in the blackness of the pit, against a background of a soft greenish tone rising against a gold sky. The sky of the other miniature is also gold, but the background is a pale lavender pink, giving the whole a warm effect.

There is a manuscript in the Cochran collection in the Metropolitan Museum, a Diwan of Jami, written some time between 1463 and 1479 by Ḥab al Karim of Khwarazm, which is another example of this school. Ḥab al Karim was one of the sons of the noted calligrapher Ḥab ar Rahman of Khwarazm, who was the originator of a new style of Nastaʿliq writing which he and his sons practiced at the court of Tabriz and also at Shiraz under both the "Black" and the "White Sheep" Turkmans. This manuscript was probably copied and illustrated in Tabriz. In general the miniatures are larger and show more careful drawing, and some of them have dark green grounds covered with plants, but the simplicity of composition, the human figures, and the rocks and plants are the same, and the rough type of bark on the trees is common to all.

The miniatures in the Shah-nama dated 1486, which is in the British Museum, show such similarities in types of human and animal
figures and of landscape and building details that they might almost be by the same artist as those of the Diwan in the Metropolitan Museum. The British Museum has reproduced several of these miniatures on colored post cards. They illustrate the combat of Gushtasp with the dragon, the combat of Suhrab and Rustam, Bahram Gur hunting, King Anushirwan with his councillors, and King Hormuzd reproving his son.

The Shah-nama of 1486 carries with it the one copied by Muhammad Bakkal in 1480, which is in the Chester Beatty collection. The miniatures represent Jamshid teaching the crafts, and Siyawush playing polo. Here we see the same bright, clear colors, the rather short people with round heads, the softly frilled horizon line, and the flowers and rough-barked trees which characterize the group.

In the Bibliothèque Nationale there is a manuscript of the Shah-nama which Blochet has attributed to the Herat school of about 1430. The beauty and elegance of the manuscript led him to believe that it was produced in Herat, and his dating is based on the fact that it has Baisunkur Mirza's preface of 1426. But as this preface is found in many dated manuscripts of the late fifteenth and the sixteenth century, its presence here does not prove this early date. The style of the miniatures places them with this group from Tabriz of the second half of the fifteenth century. They are particularly like the two miniatures from the Shah-nama of 1482, and it is surprising to see how details check in a close comparison. Blochet himself emphasizes that they are "exactly in the style and manner, diminished and stylized," of the miniatures of the fourteenth-century Tabriz school.

The Mourning for Iskandar, a miniature in the Fogg Museum, from a Shah-nama manuscript, is another example of this group of late fifteenth-century work. It shows many resemblances to the other miniatures of this Tabriz type, such as blue on white wall painting on a lobed panel framed in gold, which occurs in one of the miniatures of the Shah-nama of 1486 in the British Museum and also on smaller panels in a miniature of the Diwan of Jami in the Metropolitan Museum.

In the collection of A. Chester Beatty there is a Khamsa of Nizami, which is dated 1481 and which was copied by a calligrapher named Murshid. This may be the Murshid ibn 'Izz ad Din Wazân who copied our Shah-nama of 1482. Basil Gray and J. V. S. Wilkinson attribute the manuscript to "Western Persia or perhaps Shiraz." The only miniature of this manuscript which I have found published, in the Illustrated London News for January 3, 1931, is quite different in style from the ones in the group under discussion.

An illustrated dated manuscript giving the name of its copyist is another thread to be woven into the tapestry which should eventually present to us as a whole the harmonious picture of the art of its time and place. If as many beautiful works of Persian book art of the fifteenth century appear in the next forty years as have come to light since the beginning of the century, we shall no longer have to explain in words why this Timurid period was the greatest in the history of Persian painting.

The illustrations on pages 129 and 131 have been reproduced from A Survey of Persian Art, published by the Iranian Institute, and from Edgard Blochet's Enluminures des manuscrits orientaux.