Chapter XI

Toward an Aesthetic of Persian Painting*[1]

Nearly every student or layman with a modicum of visual culture keeps in his or her memory a picture of Persian painting (Fig. 1): colorful images, almost always miniatures in books, with many personages in fancy clothing fighting, feasting, frolicking, or hunting; flowers and shrubs perennially in bloom, even at night; two-dimensional men, women and animals cavorting in a setting of spacious meadows or gardens with a brook somewhere in a

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[1] This paper began as a lecture given at Pennsylvania State University and I am very grateful to Professor Anthony Cutler, who initiated the invitation, for this opportunity to express views and judgments on Persian painting. Various versions of this paper were given at UCLA on the wonderful occasion of the Levi della Vida Award being given to Professor Ehsan Yarshater; at Columbia University to a group of Iranian students; and at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton. Furthermore, the text of the lecture was sent to a few colleagues who were not able to attend the talks themselves. On each one of these occasions, and from nearly every reader, I received comments and criticisms which affected subsequent statements and some of which are incorporated into the published text. I am most thankful to all those who asked questions or otherwise commented and the only reasons for not mentioning them all are that I did not record all names and that the most significant comments were conceptual rather than specific.

It is rather curious altogether that so little has been written on the visual qualities and aesthetic values of Persian painting, as contrasted with attributions, with chronological development or geographical localization, with the ideas and expectations of patrons, and with the technical competencies of painters. Information on these last aspects of Persian painting is easily accessible through the bibliographies found in general books such as R. W. Ferrier, ed., *The Arts of Persia* (New Haven and London, 1989), pp. 324–6 and Nasrin Rohani, *A Bibliography of Persian Miniature Painting,* Aga Khan Program, Harvard and MIT (Cambridge, 1982; quite complete, but not a critical bibliography).

For aesthetic considerations, the most valuable essays have seemed to me to be the following:

a. Eric Schroeder, *Persian Miniatures in the Fogg Museum of Art* (Cambridge, 1942), with wonderful evaluations of paintings;

b. Ehsan Yarshater, "Some Common Characteristics of Persian Poetry and Art," *Studia Islamica*, 16 (1962), pp. 61–72;

c. Priscilla Soucek, "Nizami on Painters and Paintings," in R. Ettinghausen, ed., *Islamic Art in the Metropolitan Museum* (New York, 1972), pp. 9–21;

d. Lisa Golombek, "Toward a Classification of Islamic Painting," ibid., pp. 23–34;

e. Chahriyar Adle, "Recherche sur le module et le tracé correcteur dans la miniature orientale," *Le Monde Iranien et l'Islam*, 3 (1975), pp. 81–105;

corner (Figs 2 and 3) and contorted rocks at the edges, or else in, under, or around a theatrical, flattened architecture of arches and vaulted halls with elaborate walls. A few exceptions notwithstanding, it is a world without shades in which men and women without emotions enact events whose purpose or drama, if there was one, appear sublimated into repetitive poses and canonical masks (Fig. 4).

A general appreciation of this sort is valid for the core centuries of an idiosyncratic Persian art of painting, a period which began in the last decades of the fourteenth century and which ended – or at least diminished in intensity and in quality – two hundred and fifty years later, in the seventeenth century, when a different type of individualized single paintings came to dominate (Fig. 5). Persian painting existed also before 1370 and, even though, for the purposes of my argument, I will use one or two examples of early fourteenth-century paintings, most of them lack the stylistic originality of what has properly been called the "classical" tradition of Persian painting.[2] From the sixteenth century onward a Persianate painting also dominated the

f. Johann Christoph Bürgel, *The Feather of Simurgh* (New York, 1988), a very compelling and original exploration of what he calls the "Licit Magic" of the arts in medieval Islam and which contains many texts of great usefulness for the purposes I am exploring.

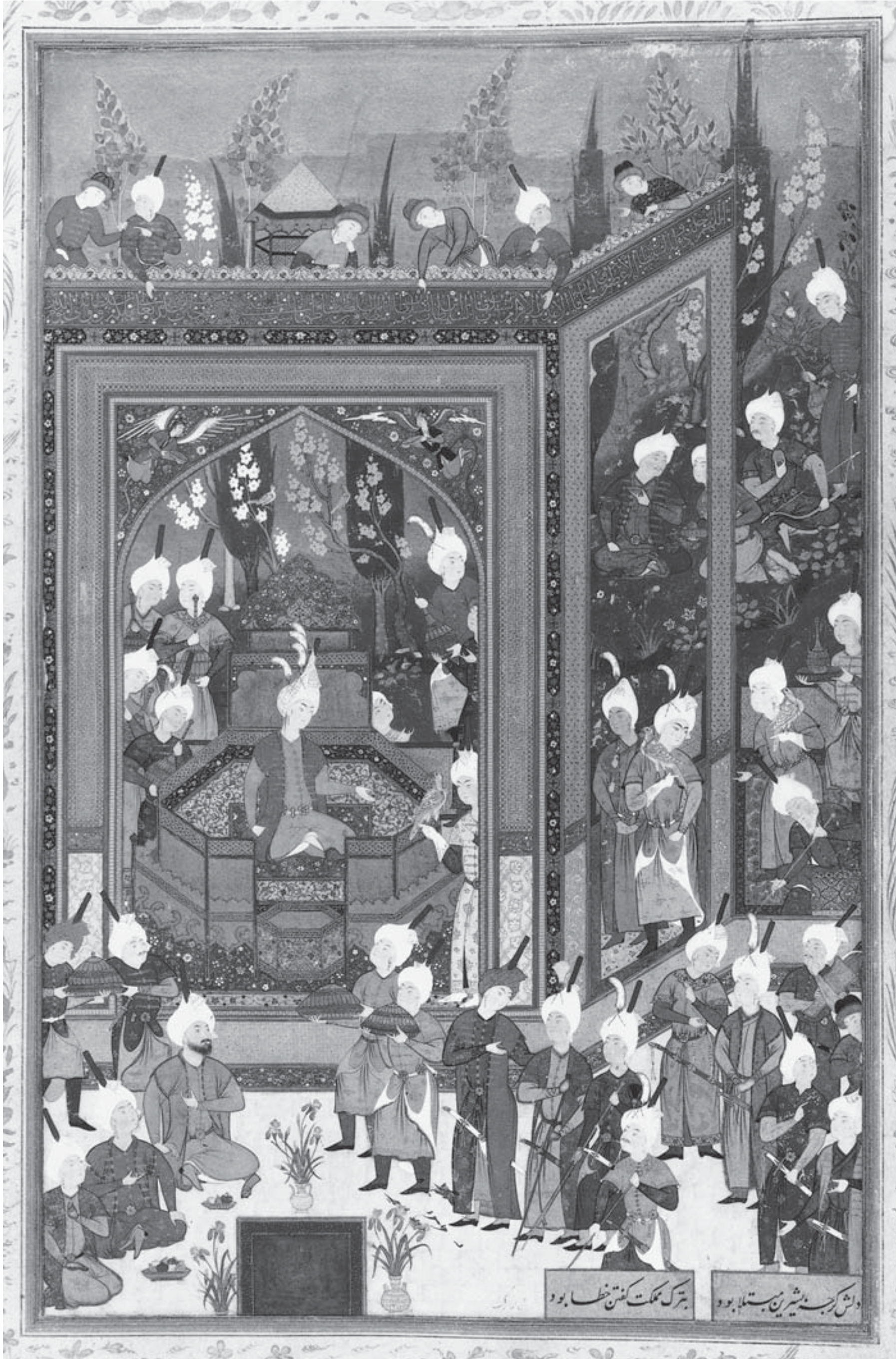
g. Special mention should be made of various writings by S. Cary Welch culminating in the monumental (with Martin B. Dickson) *The Houghton Shahnameh* (Cambridge, 1981); although focusing primarily on the whims of patrons and the works of artists, Cary Welch's writing breathes his pleasure at what he sees and an aesthetic theory is implied in much of his work.

h. The special issue of *Marg*, 41 3 (1991), edited by Sheila Canby and with important contributions by J. M. Rogers, Thomas W. Lenz, Priscilla Soucek, Sheila Canby and Basil Robinson.

There are, no doubt, other valuable and challenging statements about the aesthetic qualities of Persian painting, and it will some day be interesting to gather them in a more systematic way than I am doing here. For I must stress that, like the lecture on which it is based, this essay is a tentative attempt at raising issues rather than a way to provide solutions.

I should add that concerns for and questions about Persian painting after the end of the fourteenth century were kindled or rekindled in me by the Timurid exhibition organized by Thomas Lentz and Glen Lowry (on which more below) and by theses or studies dealing with Persian painting written by Sheila Canby, Marianna Shreve Simpson, Michael Brand, Julia Bailey, John Seyller and Massumeh Farhad. While none of those wonderful former students should bear any responsibility for this particular paper, they may regret having gotten me back into that field.

[2] Even though I will take issue later on with one of their methodological assumptions, the chapters by Ernst Grube, Eleanor Sims, Basil W. Robinson and Barbara Brend in Ferrier, *Arts of Persia*, pp. 200–241, are the most immediately accessible overview of Persian painting. The best older survey, partly outdated because of so many new discoveries, but still wonderful for its limpidity, is Ernst Kühnel, "History of Miniature Painting," in Arthur U. Pope and Phyllis Ackerman, eds, *A Survey of Persian Art* (Oxford, 1939), pp. 1829–97. The term "classical" has been used by Ernst Grube in the title of an exhibition catalog, *The Classical Style of Islamic Painting* (Lugano, 1968). Basil Robinson used "metropolitan" to deal with roughly the same grouping of works, although with different implications, in *Persian Miniature Painting from Collections in the British Isles* (London, 1967).



1 *Khosrow Enthroned*, from Nizami, *Khamseh*, British Library or. 2265, fol. 60v; ascribed to Aqa Mirak, *c*. 1540

2 *Court Scene*. Left side of a double-page frontispiece from a manuscript of the *Shahname* of Firdausi. Colors and gold on paper. Iran *c.* 1440

arts of the Ottomans in Istanbul and, in a far more spectacular and original fashion, the creativity of the Mughals in India and of several lesser centers in the Indian subcontinent. I shall not deal with these later works, partly because of my ignorance of their intricacies, but partly also because even a cursory look at Ottoman, Mughal, or other Indian miniatures and paintings reveals a host of features which identify a different visual language from the Persian one, even if a family resemblance is generally obvious.[3]

[3] The best introductions to Ottoman painting and to Islamic painting in India are: Esin Atil, "The Art of the Book," in Esin Atil, ed., *Turkish Art* (Washington, 1980), pp. 137–236; S. Cary Welch, *The Art of Mughal India* (New York, 1963) and *India, Art and Culture 1300–1900* (New York, 1985); Mark Zebrowski, *Deccani Painting* (London, 1983).

3 *Court Scene*. Right side of a double-page frontispiece from a manuscript of the *Shahname* of Firdausi.

4 *Humay and Humayun in a Garden*, from a lost Khwaju Kirmani, *Khamseh*, Paris, Musée des Arts Décoratifs, *c*. 1430

5 *Young Man Playing a Lute*, late sixteenth century.

I shall concentrate on a phenomenon restricted to a period of two or two and a half centuries. These are the centuries which created, honed and perfected a mode of expression significant enough in its effectiveness and/or in its meaning to serve as a model for the Ottoman Mediterranean and for the Indian peninsula and which was occasionally picked up by painters as early as Rembrandt and as recent as Matisse.[4] Within this long period over a vast land, many changes occurred and several, more or less identifiable, local or social variants can be detected. For the purposes of this paper, I shall discuss almost exclusively works from the fifteenth century or from the last decade of the fourteenth. It was the century known as the Timurid century, when, under the aegis of Mongol rulers, several spectacular centers of artistic production and architectural growth were developed in a wide land going roughly from Baghdad and present-day Iraq to Kashgar or Kashi, the westernmost city of Uighur China just a couple of hundred miles east of Samarkand. The centers themselves were generally the great cities of the Iranian plateau and of the Central Asian trade roads, like Shiraz, Yazd, Sabzevar, Tabriz, Meshed, Samarkand and especially Herat. But buildings of major importance were also built in smaller places hallowed by some holy men or proximate to the estates of rich patrons. Yasi (modern Turkestan in Kazakhstan), where still stands the shrine of Shaykh Ahmad Yasavi, is an example of the first type and Khargird in northeastern Iran near the present Afghan frontier is typical of the second. The patrons of these centers were, with notable exceptions, the Mongol descendants of Timur himself or else Mongol or Turkic feudal lords who had adopted Islam and a high Iranian culture as their mode of entry into legitimate power over ancient lands.[5] [132]

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4 For Rembrandt, the key study is still Friedrich Sarre, "Rembrandt's Zeichnungen nach indisch-islamischen Miniaturen," *Jahrbuch der königlich Preussischen Kunstsammlungen*, 25 (1904), pp. 143–58. See also Richard Ettinghausen, "The Decorative Arts and Painting," in Joseph Schacht and C. Edmund Bosworth, eds, *The Legacy of Islam* (Oxford, 1974), esp. pp. 311–12, translated in Hendrik Budde, ed., *Europa und der Orient, 800–1900* (Berlin, 1989), where there are many comparable examples, especially pp. 741–57. For Matisse, see Pierre Schneider, *Matisse* (Paris, 1984), *passim*; see Index under "Orient."

5 The architecture and, by extension, patronage of this period have been recently studied in two fundamental books: Bernard O'Kane, *Timurid Architecture in Khorasan* (Costa Mesa, 1987), and Lisa Golombek and Donald Wilber, *The Timurid Architecture of Iran and Turan* (Princeton, 1988). Much has also been recently written (or is being completed) on the history and culture of the Timurid people. For preliminary investigations involving the arts, see Thomas Lentz and Glen Lowry, *Timur and the Princely Vision* (Washington and Los Angeles, 1989), and the texts gathered by Wheeler M. Thackston, *A Century of Princes*, Aga Khan Program at Harvard University and MIT (Cambridge, 1989). A series of articles from a symposium held in Toronto in 1990 is found in Lisa Golombek and Maria Subtelny, *Timurid Art and Culture, Muqarnas*, Supplement VI (Leiden, 1992). Particularly notable in their concern for the evaluation of patronage are various works by Maria E. Subtelny, such as "Socioeconomic Bases of Cultural Patronage under the Later Timurids," *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 20 (1988), pp. 479–505.

In the last sentence of this paragraph I am adopting an argument developed at great length by Thomas Lentz in his thesis, *Painting at Herat under Baysunghar ibn Shahrukh*, Ph.D., Harvard University, 1985. It seems to me like a reasonable explanation, but it

6 Caricature (?) of holy people (?), Istanbul, Hazine 2153, fol. 46

The Iranian fifteenth century was remarkable in many more ways than the artistic. In itself, it is strikingly relatable to fifteenth-century Italy, Poland, Muscovy, Burgundy and India, but it is also comparable to the better-studied European lands in that so many of its institutions as well as of its patterns of thought, paradigms of knowledge, and creative myths and memories were fundamental to nearly all later Muslim dynasties and rulers except in the Arab world. Within the stunning creativity of that century in the lands of Iran and Turan, I shall deal with painting only, and with mainstream painting at that, but it must be recalled that there existed at that time, somewhere within the wider Iranian sphere, an art of painting attributed much later by Ottoman librarians to a fictional Black Pen. These paintings, preserved almost entirely in a group of albums in Istanbul, exhibit a voluminous ferocity and a powerfully distorted realism (Fig. 6) which are at odds with the main tradition.[6] At this stage, there is no consensus on the origins or the audience of these paintings.

assumes a solution to a complex problem raised by several listeners to the various versions of the lecture which preceded this paper. The problem is that of the intended and/or expected audiences for the illustrated manuscripts of the time. Did the princely patrons look at those images? Or do we simply have a system of peer competition between courtly librarians? To answer these questions, a more thorough study of the documents available is needed than I have been able to accomplish. See, however, the conclusion of this article.

6 Much has been written about these paintings, including some of the most exemplary research in the field; but they are still a mystery for the most part. The easiest access to the scholarship is through *Islamic Art*, 1 (1981), devoted entirely to paintings from the albums, while the most accessible color pictures are in M. S. Ipsiroglu, *Painting and Culture of the Mongols* (New York, 1966).

There are obviously dangers in drawing conclusions and even hypotheses about the whole of Persian painting, even the painting of two and a half centuries, when the examples on which the conclusions are based represent a fraction, albeit a dominant one, of a period's creativity. I feel justified in doing so for two reasons. The main one is that the painting mode with which I shall deal is not merely the dominant one, but the one which is most originally Persian and which demonstrably appears in the last quarter of the fourteenth century.[7] It is, therefore, reasonable to assume that it corresponded to some clear feature of Timurid taste and that whatever it accomplished remained meaningful to several generations of patrons, makers and users from the wide Iranian world. And the second reason for staying with only one tradition is the more prosaic one that I gave it more attention than the later ones.

My initial statement about this main tradition defined the image we have of Persian painting in visually formal ways, in terms of colors, patterns of composition, range of recognition of otherwise known features like men, women, flowers, or else of actions like hunting or playing a musical instrument. This is possible to do for images whose meanings we do not know and whose stories are not available to most of us because of a function of perception which, in a recent book, I have called "optisemic."[8] What I mean by this neologism is the ability to recognize a large number of represented items in generic terms, without being aware, or even needing to be aware, of their culturally directed references. One can recognize twelve lifesize standing men with or without beards at the entrance of a cathedral without knowing that they are Apostles and the carriers of Christ's message. A swastika can be seen without having a Nazi association and only Byzantinists see emperors whenever something is purple, while the redness of the enemy is no longer an operative slogan in our own society.

To recognize something optisemically may well be sufficient and satisfying. Thus, nearly sixty years ago, a great critic and historian of the arts East and West, Laurence Binyon, wrote the following:

> Persia lies between the Mediterranean and the Farther East. If we seek for an extreme appearance of the Western spirit in art, we shall find it in Michelangelo …

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7 The traditional date for the new mode is 1370, for a manuscript of the *Shahname* now in Istanbul (Hazine 1511, dated 1370), Basil Gray, *Persian Painting* (Geneva, 1961), p. 63, exhibits for the first time a large number of conventions which became part of the language of the new painting. Whether one should describe this collection of means of expression (high horizon line, monochrome gold or blue sky, small tufts of grass, flat personages, and so on) as a language – a consistent set of interchangeable units of composition – or as a mode – a pattern of expression which transforms the elements it uses into a coherent and meaningful whole – requires yet another kind of investigation.

8 Oleg Grabar, *The Mediation of Ornament* (Princeton, 1992), pp. 172–4.

The god-like presence of Man obliterates all other objects of vision … In absolute contrast are the Chinese landscapes … Man is but a traveler, small and insignificant beside the towering crags and cloudy peaks …. The Persian conception is between the two … Persian painting betrays no intellectual grasp of the structure of things. The Persian outlook is essentially and incurably romantic. It enjoys what is marvelous, it is quite ready to believe the incredible. The painter stages his own and the spectator's enjoyment, much as it might be arranged in a theater …"[9]

There is no point in discussing the social, historical and aesthetic prejudices exhibited by the author. For, once one has removed terms like "romantic," which are no longer very fashionable in critical discourse, or notions like topographical location on a continental scale, as reflected in the arts by equal shares from both ends of the scale, Binyon's statement interprets a set of reactions to visual impressions in ways which may well be sufficient and still perfectly valid. There is a wonderfully pleasing fantasy world in the images of Persian painting and we could all simply be satisfied with it, engage the images as inspirational exercises for our own fantasy, and perpetuate a poetical language which is different from the one we would employ for Michelangelo or Manet, but which always implies a creative contact between a consistent set of images and a personal or cultural aesthetic or emotional sensitivity. This kind of discourse will always remain and I would like to call it *libertarian.* For it is an attitude toward the arts in which each one is relatively free to find his or her own interpretation, his or her own pleasure. In popular terms this attitude is identified with a statement [133] such as "I know what I like." The expression usually has a defensive side to it, as it implies garrulous ignorance on the part of whoever says it, but it probably corresponds to the kind of judgment most of us make most of the time about most things. We constantly express opinions or act out satisfaction about everything from people to food without really knowing what they are about.

Libertarian attitudes are generally saved by the poetic language of those who express them and, while, to my knowledge, no writer on Persian painting has matched the quintessentially libertarian and hardly open-minded positions of Ruskin or of the Goncourt brothers, a libertarian streak permeates

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[9] Laurence Binyon, J. V. S. Wilkinson and Basil Gray, *Persian Miniature Painting* (London, 1933), pp. 3–5. This book is a landmark in the study of Persian painting and still bears reading with admiration for its authors. Much of the periodization of Persian painting is based on this book. The Introduction, from which I have taken the sentences in the text, is, I believe, the first intelligent attempt to see this artistic tradition as a visual experience rather than as a bundle of influences. But it is interesting to note how Binyon could see Persian painting only in relationship to Renaissance painting, north and south, or to Chinese Sung to Ming art. Hence so often Persian painting is defined by what it is not rather than through positive features. It is further important to note that, in the age of Picasso and Matisse, Binyon identifies Michelangelo as the quintessential Western artist.

much of the literature on that painting, especially from the English-speaking world.[10]

A second type of discourse about, and thus of attitude toward, Persian painting can be derived from the following, at first glance depressing, passage adapted from a recently published chapter on Persian painting admittedly seen in a wider chronological context than mine in this paper: "This chapter is hardly the forum in which to deal with the complex significance and purpose of Persian painting in Persian society over a period of more than 1400 years. [What it is] is a historical survey … intended to sketch the history of Persian painting by means of the slightly artificial framework of the schools that produced it."[11] The position slightly caricaturized by this excerpt can be called *taxonomic*, as its primary objective is to organize a large mass of data into coherent and cohesive groups; such groups have traditionally been called "schools" because of a classical art-historical model: there is a master, teacher–creator–innovator–employer, who radiates techniques of designing and of painting to students; the latter then continue these techniques, transfer them to new places, modify them, pass them on to others, and otherwise contribute to the relatively autonomous (that is to say from social, political and other non-artistic contingencies) evolution of an art of painting, or, for that matter, of any other technique. Within the framework of a taxonomic purpose and as a result of the methodological assumptions it makes, a given image is decomposed into a bundle of begetting influences and hopes for a place in the philological paradise of stemmata, that is to say of items, in this case miniatures or possibly motifs like landscapes or personages, related to each other by the lines with arrows of an organigram or of a flow chart.

It is easy to parody and to be impatient with an extremely inappropriate approach to Persian (or any other kind of) painting. But, in fact, much of what it has accomplished and still accomplishes now is not only true but necessary. I shall give only two instances of the truth and of the necessity of a primarily taxonomic approach, as well as of its limitations. One derives from literary sources and the other one from visual observation.

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[10] This point is a bit unfair, since, for reasons which are beyond my present concern, most of what has been written on Persian painting has been written in English. The major exceptions among the traditional masters of the field are Edgard Blochet who did not like that painting, and Ivan Stchoukin and Friedrich Sarre who loved it but preferred Morellian dissections of details and lengthy discussions of painters' hands to statements about values. Their works can be found in Rohani's bibliography quoted above in note 1.

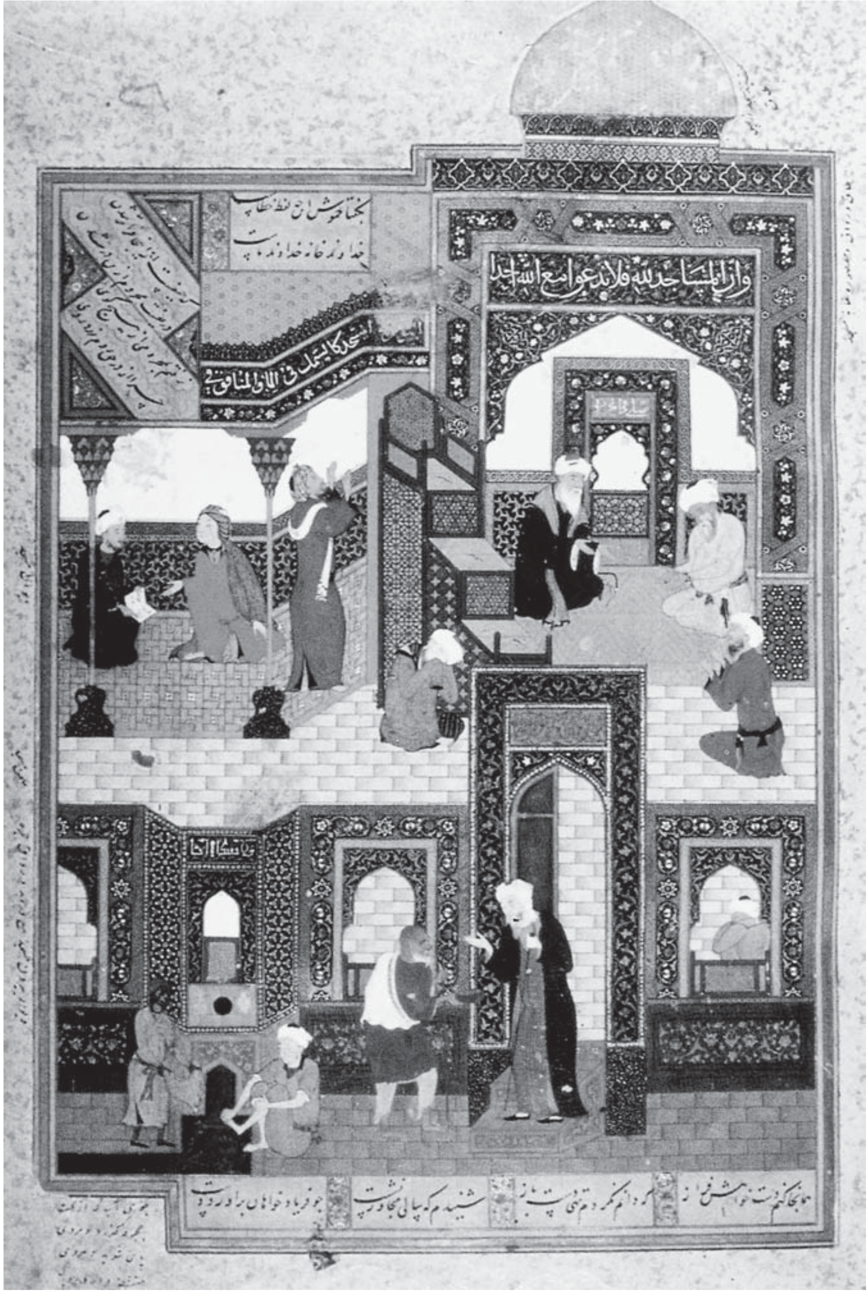
[11] Ernst Grube and Eleanor Sims in Ferrier, *The Arts of Persia*, p. 200. To be fair to the authors, they add that their chapter "is also intended to illustrate precisely where in the history of art are engendered fundamental issues that ought to animate the discussion of Persian painting in future years." I have singled out this passage as symptomatic of a certain type of scholarly endeavor and not as a criticism of a perfectly respectable position.

Several written sources from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries provide information about the lives of painters and of calligraphers; in nearly all cases these sources identify the artists through the masters from whom they learned and through the "workshops," almost always at or around the court of a prince, in which they worked. It is, therefore, reasonable to consider as valid the grouping of existing paintings into two sets of sequences: the filiation of masters to pupils and the mutual relationship of princely courts.[12]

My other example is that of a miniature taken from a celebrated manuscript, a copy of the *Bustan* by the great Persian writer and occasionally social critic Sa'adi dated in 1488 and illustrated by Behzad, the most renowned of all Persian painters.[13] At first glance a representation of a mosque (Fig. 7) has all the characteristics of my earlier libertarian analysis: brilliant colors, small personages in diverse and apparently unconnected activities, flattened out composition of two theatrical settings set above each other, almost maniacal precision in the depiction of parts, and so on. But fairly rapidly one notices that the building has been made functionally specific. It is a mosque with a courtyard, a portico around the court, a *minbar* or chair for the preacher, a *mihrab* indicating the direction of prayer. Some of the personages are involved in the precise actions required by prayer, even in the more mundane act of washing one's feet. Others are shown teaching or conversing around a book, both learning and discussing texts being activities associated with mosques. The specificity of these actions makes one concentrate on the three personages in front and to the right who are neither praying nor engaged in actions expected in a public sanctuary. All three of them have visual peculiarities which distinguish them from other figures: a tall man at the door with a big stick, an older man dressed in rags holding a bowl or a cup, someone in the window in the lower right corner whose face has sunk into his clothes, as though he were trying to hide his expression. It is these three personages who form the narrative illustrated by the miniature: in a snooty upper-class mosque,

[12] The most important of these texts is Dost Muhammad's Introduction to the Bahram Mirza album in Istanbul. Parts of that text are available in Binyon, Wilkinson and Gray, *Persian Painting*, pp. 183–6, among other places. The most complete translation is by Wheeler Thackston, *A Century of Princes*, pp. 335–60. Other texts are found scattered throughout the literature. Particularly important examples for the chronology of painting are: Qadi Ahmad, *Calligraphers and Painters*, tr. Vladimir Minorsky (Washington, 1959); Sadiqi Bek in Dickson and Welch, *Houghton Shah-nameh*, pp. 254–69. An easily available collection of such texts can be found in Wheeler M. Thackston, *Album Prefaces and Other Documents on the History of Calligraphers and Painters* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2001).

[13] Neither the manuscript nor the painter have received the attention they deserve. On Behzad, the most complete information is still the one gathered by Richard Ettinghausen in "Behzad," *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 2nd edn. The Cairo manuscript is mentioned in all surveys. Full description by Ivan Stchoukine, *Les Peintures des manuscrits Timurides* (Paris, 1954), pp. 74–6. For more recent appreciations, see Lentz and Lowry, *Timur*, pp. 285–299.



7 *Beggar at a Mosque*, from Saʿadi, *Bustan*, Cairo, National Library, *adab farsi* 908, dated 1488 in Herat, signed by Behzad

a doorman refuses entry to a poorly dressed beggar, while some obnoxious character laughs at the scene.[14]

The subtle transformation of the standard personages of fifteenth-century painting into actors within a specific story, the unheroic character of the story il-[134]lustrated, the concentration on architectural details with specified rather than generic functions, the manipulation of the representation of personages and of colors in order to create an additional effect of brilliant covering and puppet-like personages without emotions: all these features require, within classical art analysis,[15] a different setting in time, space, or patronage for this miniature than for many other ones, even though its colors, its layout, and its emphasis on small items make it part of a single overall tradition. The identification of the setting to which it belongs is not made by the image itself, but through associations between attributes or qualities of this miniature and similar components elsewhere. And it is a written source, usually an inscription at times hiding in the miniature itself (here in one of the books held by a pupil), which allows for the specific attribution to the painter Behzad and to the court of Herat in present-day Afghanistan. To say that this is a miniature attributable to Behzad and made in Herat in the latter years of the fifteenth century is, however, no more useful (although more attractive) than to conclude that the miniature belongs to group A which must be later than or different from group B. As in the establishment of any table of elements, such statements are true and necessary, but not exhaustive nor interesting. Most importantly, they hardly explain how and why the miniature attracts a viewer and provides him with some sort of information, intellectual challenge, or aesthetic satisfaction.

Taxonomy – the ordering of the hundreds of existing manuscripts, single pages, and fragments of all sorts into groups arranged according to space, time, and if possible attribution to individual painters – is the domain in which the study of Persian painting has made its most significant strides over the past three or four decades. Arguments will obviously remain on many specific items, but a basic structure exists for the straightforward labeling of Persian miniatures and for a sense of an evolution, of a process of change, which would have led from a dramatic imagery enacting epic battles and hunts or recording historical narratives so typical of the fourteenth century to the lyrical ways of early Timurid painting and eventually to the individualism of an approximate naturalism in the latter part of the fifteenth century. Quite naturally provincial and qualitative branches derived from the main line of this evolution, and the whole taxonomic construct does

[14] It is an illustration of Sa'adi, *Bustan,* tr. G. M. Wickens, *Morals Pointed and Tales Adorned,* Leiden, 1974, pp. 106–108.

[15] It is on purpose that I write "classical" for an analysis in the history of art which assumes chronological or topological incompatibility for significant differences in execution. The actual validity of this position may be open to question, but its discussion does not belong in this essay.

look like a tree-like body visible, among other places, in a catalog put together by one of the leading taxonomists of the twentieth century. More subtle but still initially taxonomic arguments have explored how individual painters, identified or anonymous, have woven their awareness of past traditions and their own idiosyncracies (or, at times, those of their patrons) into unique or differentiated visual statements.[16]

There is, of course, nothing wrong about this way of looking at Persian painting and, at one time or another and possibly with varying degrees of success, all students of Persian painting have practiced taxonomic activities. Something may be lost in poetic expression but the loss is more than made up for by accuracy and precision in analytical description and in the provision of correct information which brings joy to writers of museum labels and captions under illustrations: dates, places, attributions, provenance. The viewer of an exhibition or the reader of a book can look at the book's plates or at the pictures hanging on the wall and be a libertarian to his heart's content in the security of appropriate identification tags for the object of his study.

It is difficult to argue against taxonomies of any sort, but there are two lines of argument which suggest that this approach to Persian painting, without being wrong or incorrect, misses something essential about it, just as the libertarian approach may have put into that painting all sorts of features which were not there to begin with and whose presence is perhaps too closely tied to the peculiarities of the individual viewer.[17]

One line of argument is that an approach based on attribution to artists and on a hierarchy of classification transforms the work of art, Persian or not, into a commodity with a pedigree, a label of authentication and a price. Such transformations may well be justified by the collecting instinct of today, just as they existed at various moments of any artistic history, and

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16 The two most prolific and most successful taxonomists of Persian painting are Ivan Stchoukine and Basil W. Robinson. Their numerous books and articles can easily be found in the bibliographies and surveys listed above. The schematic chart of the evolution of Persian painting is found in Basil W. Robinson, *Persian Miniature Painting* (London, 1967), p. 32. More complex analyses, although also involving primarily taxonomic procedures and expectations like attributions and genealogies of paintings, are found in the numerous works by S. Cary Welch, especially the monumental publication of the Houghton *Shahname*, and in an equally sophisticated essay by S. Melikian-Chirvani, "Khwaje Mirak Naqqash," *Journal Asiatique*, 276 (1988), pp. 97–146, among several recent examples by younger scholars.

17 I am, of course, aware of the position developed by M. Bakhtin and his followers that any object always contains the sum of the views expressed about it and, therefore, that it is impossible in any discourse to avoid or suppress libertarian pronouncements already made. The field of criticism of Persian painting is much too young to deal with these subtleties, but it is to the credit of Welch's analyses that some of the paintings of Shah Tahmasp's reign are marked by his eloquent words about them. These examples are precisely the beginning of a critical discourse about the arts which has not been picked up by scholarship after the publication of Welch's and Dickson's *chef d'œuvre*.

certainly in medieval and early modern Islamic history.[18] The morality of this approach may be questioned by some, but the more important point is that, only too often, it reduces the painting almost exclusively to its statistical and pecuniary role alone.

The second line of argument stating the limitations of a taxonomic approach is of a very different kind. It takes issue with the very action of removing, virtually if not actually (although too many examples exist of the latter),[19] images from their setting. To treat Persian miniatures like Rembrandt drawings or like paintings by Western European or even Chinese masters, that is like independent works of art which can be discussed from the walls of museums, is, at the outset, intellectually slightly fraudulent, for it is to study something quite different from what it really is. A libertarian point of view makes it possible, if not always legitimate, to look at paintings separately from the books of which they are a part, since the user's or the looker's view is the dominant one. But it is absurd to do so even if one's aim is only a taxonomic one, for the label or labels provided by taxonomy are not an explanation or an interpretation of an image – they merely become one of its attributes. In other words, it is le-[135]gitimate and possibly necessary to seek other approaches to the understanding of Persian painting, ways which stand somewhere between the anarchic freedom of individual opinions and the non-negotiable rigor of factual definitions.

Context was fashionable a few years ago before deconstruction came in and is itself being replaced by cognition as the hot procedure of academic discourse, unless something new has sprung up since then. Yet I will stay with *contextual* as the general definition of my third approach to Persian painting, but I will try to fit into a definition of context something more than or different from what is usually assumed, for instance by codicologists who limit their concerns to the physical pages of a book, to the writing on it, and to all the activities and processes which went into the making of a

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18 There is as yet no history of collecting in the Muslim world. For a few examples within a much broader context, see Joseph Alsop, *The Rarer Traditions of Art* (New York, 1981), pp. 253–5. For partial and preliminary suggestions, see the essays by several authors in Esin Atil, ed., *Islamic Art and Patronage, Treasures from Kuwait* (New York, 1990).

19 The desecration of manuscripts or albums through the removal of miniatures from them has gone on for centuries but has become particularly destructive in the last decades of the nineteenth century and the early ones of the twentieth. The shameful break-up of the Houghton *Shahname* barely ten years ago shows that financial rewards at times still rule the fate of works of art. In reality, of course, the issue is not merely one of pitting virtuous scholars and lovers of art against dealers and investors in art, inasmuch as some of the latter are also lovers of art. The issue is that of preserving, as far as possible, the integrity and authenticity of individual works of art (which means keeping miniatures in the books for which they were made) versus the accessibility of these same works of art, often hidden in shamefully unavailable private collections.

book.[20] Nor shall I leap to social, economic and cultural problems of the time as the more progressive contemporary contextualism would expect one to do. One reason why I shall not do either one of these things is that information on both is sorely lacking and, since I did not engage myself in much pertinent basic research, I am limited by the paucity of available data and can propose only directions for work and hypotheses for confirmation, modification, or rejection. It is in fact extremely difficult to present Persian painting in its context in a public lecture or in an article because there is almost no way to provide the experience of holding and using a book and because the perception of images in any depth is almost impossible to compel in the absence of details. The data needed for any contextual definition of images require the initial "weighing in" and evaluation of every little detail, even if some of the details will end up with less significance than others.[21]

What I shall try to do, then, is to lead the reader into the images of a book through three examples. It will still be a somewhat superficial trip, a brushing acquaintance rather than a true relationship, but one which will, I hope, serve as an invitation to plunge into the works of Persian painting and to help define the operative hierarchies of meaning among the components of these works.

The first example is that of a manuscript in the Freer Gallery in Washington, the *Diwan* or collection of poems written by or attributed to a prince–patron, Sultan Ahmad Jalayir, who died in 1401. It is a volume of 377 pages probably completed in 1401 and it is possible that its text was copied by the most celebrated calligrapher of the time, Mir Ali Tabrizi.[22] On each

[20] Well established for Latin, Greek and Slavonic manuscripts, codicology is relatively new in dealing with manuscripts in Persian, Turkish, Syriac, Coptic, or Arabic. A first series of studies has appeared in François Déroche, ed., *Les Manuscrits du Moyen-Orient: essais de codicologie et de paléographie* (Istanbul and Paris, 1989). All the papers in this record of a colloquium are important and most apposite studies are quoted by the learned participants. Two works merit special attention because of their contribution to typical as well as extreme cases of manuscripts from the Islamic world and because of the range of codicological issues they affect: François Déroche, *Les Manuscrits du Coran* (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, 2 vols, 1983–8); M. S. Simpson, "The Production and Patronage of the *Haft Aurang* by Jami in the Freer Gallery of Art," *Ars Orientalis*, 13 (1982), pp. 93–119.

[21] There is nothing new nor particularly original about this procedure. The point is that it has not been followed systematically in dealing with Persian painting except for S. C. Welch and Thomas Lentz in his doctoral dissertation (above, note 5). But, even in these two instances, the necessary details are not easily available.

[22] The key study of the miniatures from this manuscript is by Deborah Klimburg-Salter, "A Sufi Theme in Persian Painting," *Kunst des Orients*, 11 (1976–7), pp. 43–84. I accept most of the main arguments of this article except perhaps the identification of the painter which remains, to my mind, uncertain. It should be noted that one major scholar, Stchoukine, dated the illustrations to the seventeenth century, *Manuscrits Timurides* (above, note 13), pp. 35–7. While I do not agree with such a late date, the point is not very important for my purposes.

page a careful frame is set for the poems and before each one there is a proclamation of praise for the prince–poet. Of the 377 pages, seven, all located fairly close to the beginning of the book, have been chosen for an extraordinary marginal decoration (Figs 8 to 12). In a drawing technique derived from Chinese sources but already considerably modified by Iranian practice, personages, animals, genre scenes, clouds, landscapes are drawn around the text as fancy additions to the frames of the poems. The topic of these marginal images has been identified with a celebrated Persian mystical text, Attar's *Mantiq al-Tayr*, "Dialogue of the Birds," written almost two hundred years earlier.[23] In it the birds, in search of a savior–leader, cross seven valleys corresponding to various steps of mystical knowledge (Love, Understanding, Detachment, etc.) until they finally reach the realization that salvation lies within themselves. The seven valleys are represented: Quest with a family of people and a flock of birds moving out of the page (Fig. 8), Love with a couple in a landscape, Understanding with a tree and a stepped platform, Astonishment with a brilliant gold cloud encircling the page (Fig. 9), Detachment with a series of vignettes of idyllic life on two pages facing each other (Figs 10 and 11), Unity with a single tree cutting across and underneath the page, and birds returning from the right (Fig. 12).

From the point of view of the object which one holds, a book of mystical verses by a minor but living prince–poet, we witness the transformation of the mystical inspiration of one text into the visual forms of literary images and themes from another mystical text, an otherwise well-known classic, instead of the text of the book. It is as though an edition of Walt Whitman's poems had been illustrated by images inspired by *Paradise Lost.* It is probably not the text that was meant to be enhanced by the images but the book. And this leads to the hypothetical conclusion that the images of this book were set within it as so many surprises comparable to the surprising adventures of the search for salvation in Attar's poetical account; the book becomes the search by being transfigured through the presence of images. Or the images dealing with an otherwise celebrated text enhance the mystical implication of the poetry without dealing with it.

There is, obviously, much more to say about these unusual and strikingly beautiful drawings; a whole libertarian discourse can be imagined about them. But, within the limited contextuality I am defining here, these [136] images have three separate lives: one in the book which they make exciting by including an unexpected treasure to be hunted, another one in connection with a text which they do not illustrate but illuminate, and a third one as illustrations of a text which is not there.

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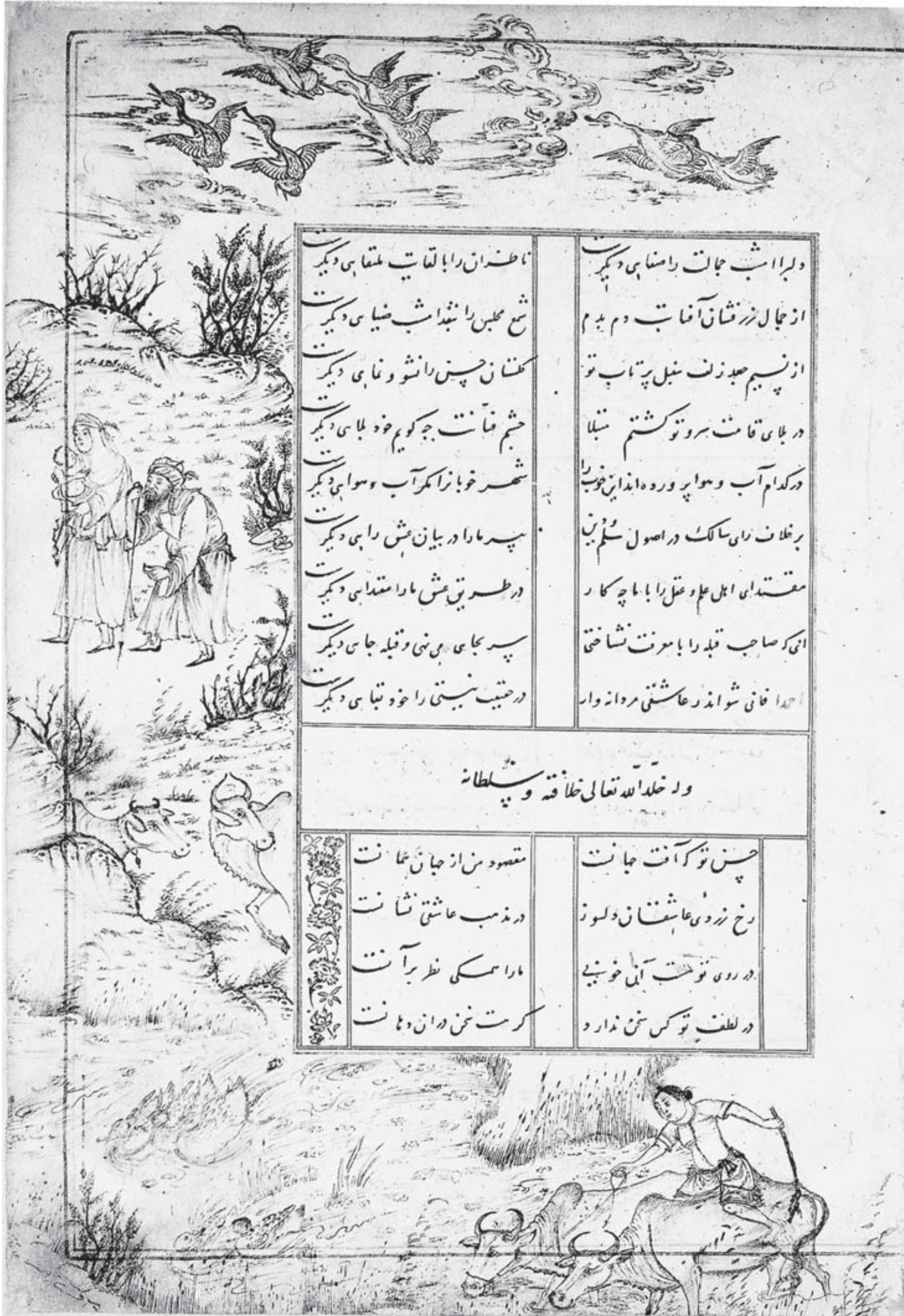
[23] Farid al-Din Attar, *The Conference of the Birds*, English version by C. S. Nott (London, 1954).



8 *Valley of Quest*, *Divan* of Sultan Ahmad Jalayir

9 *Valley of Astonishment*, *Divan* of Sultan Ahmad Jalayir

10 *Valley of Detachment*, *Divan* of Sultan Ahmad Jalayir

11 *Valley of Detachment*, *Divan* of Sultan Ahmad Jalayir

12 *Valley of Unity*, *Divan* of Sultan Ahmad Jalayir

My second example is also a *Diwan* or Collection of Poems, this time three poetical stories by Khwaju Kirmani, who died in 1352. The manuscript is in the British Library (Add. 18113) and it is dated in 1396. The writing is also by Mir Ali Tabrizi and the paintings by Junayd, one of the painters mentioned in the Iranian histories of painting and calligraphy. It is probably because all the information needed to make a label is present in the manuscript itself that its nine miniatures, often published, had never been studied in their entirety. A first, primarily literary, article dealing with the author rather than the manuscript appeared only in 1991.[24]

I shall deal only with the five miniatures which illustrate the first of the stories, the romance of the prince Humay, with a name with complex mythical connotations, and the princess Humayun, also provided with a metaphoric name with, this time, high royal connotations.

The first miniature (Fig. 13) shows a garden closed by a wall and fronted with a brook; the crescent moon and two birds are all that exists outside and there is a curious ambiguity as to whether night or day or both are being represented. In the garden with beautiful trees and flowers Humay on the left and Azar, a young woman, meet because they were looking for Azar's companion Behzad, who is dead drunk under a tree. They see each other through their looking at the drunk young man, and one of the points of this image is an evocation of one of the constant themes of Persian poetry, drunkenness as the equivalent of love, and love as well as drinking, together or separately, as metaphors and means for the mystical love of and union with God.

In the second illustration, Humay at the court of China sees Humayun peeking out of an upper window to the left (Fig. 14). It is a fascinating image corresponding to a type often found in Persian paintings. The main event, the narrative proper, is but a minuscule part of an image which in reality depicts a reception at a royal court. Almost everything here is "typical" in the sense that it corresponds to standard forms of composition, representation and coloring with almost nothing seeming untoward, unexpected, except that mysteriously half-opened window suggesting other worlds, things which the rest of the image barely implies and which cannot be understood correctly without the text or without some other key to visual impressions. I shall return later to what this key may be. What is important is that the structure

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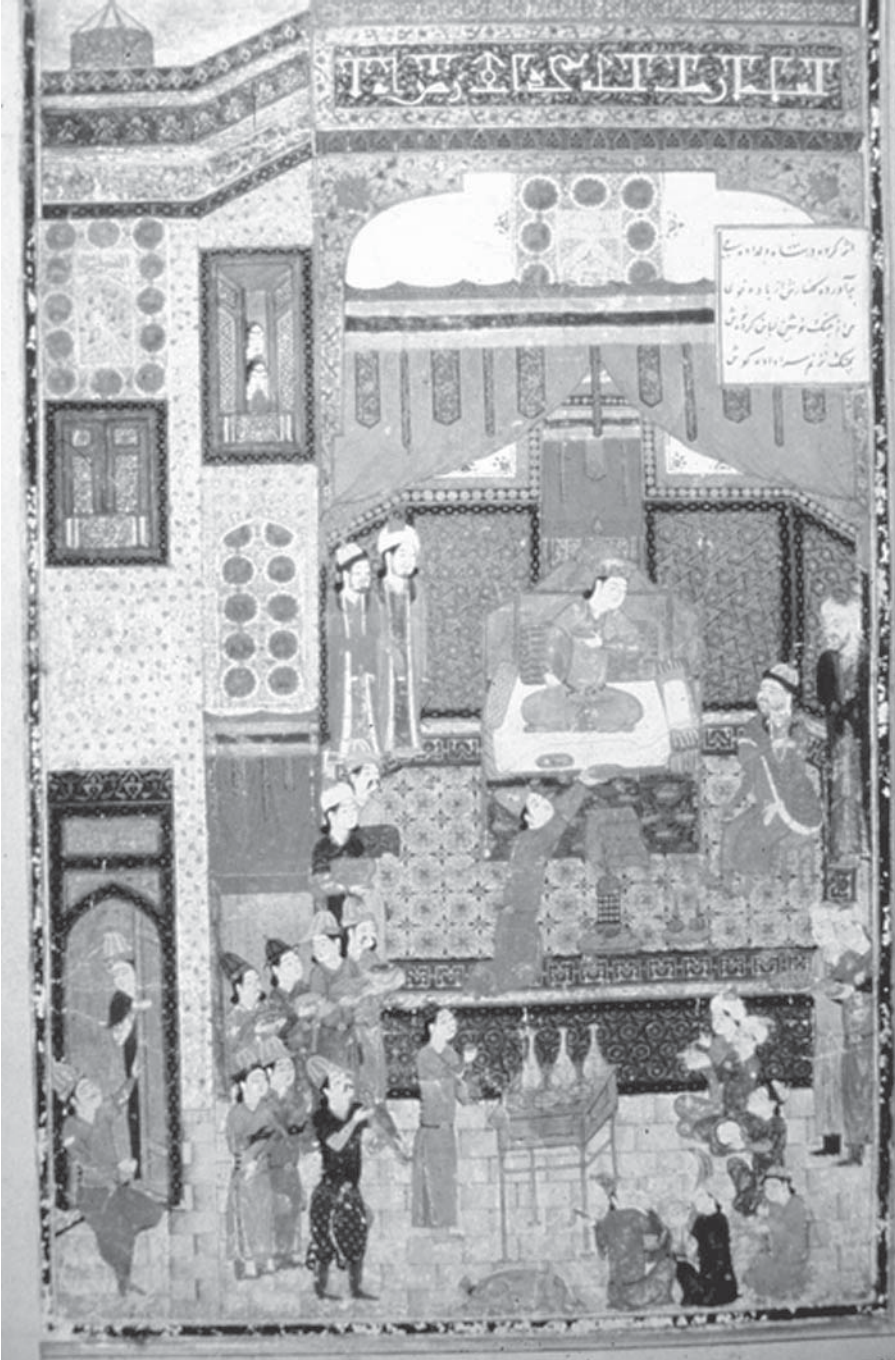
[24] Teresa Fitzherbert, "Khwaju Kirman (689–753/1290–1352): An Eminence Grise of Fourteenth Century Persian Painting," *Iran*, 29 (1991), pp. 137–51. The identification of the scribe with the celebrated inventor of the *nasta'liq* script is doubted by Basil Gray, "History of Miniature Painting," in Basil Gray, ed., *The Book in Central Asia, 14th–16th Centuries* (Unesco, 1979), p. 116, but he gives no reason for his doubts. See, however, Priscilla Soucek, "The Art of Calligraphy," p. 24 of the same volume. The Khwaju Kirmani manuscript is mentioned in every survey of Persian painting with a most complete description in Stchoukine, *Manuscrits Timurides*, pp. 33–5. But even the latter misidentifies the subject matter of folio 11.

13 *The Meeting of Humay and Azar*, *Divan* of Khwaju Kirmani



14 *Humay at the Court of China*, *Divan* of Khwaju Kirmani

and components of the image suggest a secret, a mystery, both mystery and the pursuit of secrets being constant themes of story-telling.[25]

The third and fourth illustrations are frequently reproduced because of the richness of their gray-green-and-yellow tonality in which nature, buildings and people have melted into physical sameness. But there is more to them than their coloristic brilliance. One image shows Humay arriving at the castle of Humayun (Fig. 15). There is a walled and locked building with a young woman on the top of the tower located on an island floating in thin air. From some other space a youthful princely rider has come to its gate with a finger to his mouth, the traditional Persian gesture to indicate any emotion a viewer may wish to provide, probably love in this particular case. The contact is between him and the building, as nothing in his or her gaze leads to each other. In fact it is only a rather peculiar flock of birds that is allowed to move in and out of the walled area. There is also the striking contrast between monochrome exteriors and multi-colored interiors or between blooming trees inside and mangy vegetation outside. Except for the birds, no one moves in this image. Nothing is happening, has happened, nor will happen. It is all a dream, a fantasy, and that fantasy without event, without story, has been expressed with a stunning visual clarity in which every part, every brick or tile, every bit of inscription has been defined with utmost precision.

The other image in the same pattern of color shows Humay engaging in battle with Humayun (who had disguised herself as a man) and discovering her gender (Fig. 16). A lot must be known before the story can be understood and it is clearly something other than a precise and rather silly event which is here represented through the excuse of a story. That something else may well be the overall domination of all reality by the one power and presence of the divine, symbolized by a single pattern of color, or else the demonstration that things are not what they seem to be and that Humayun, in spite of appearances, is not a man. As will be suggested shortly, another and more general explanatory theory may also be proposed.

The last two images from this manuscript also share domination by a single color, this time red and red-associated colors, and they too are remarkable for the differences between them in spite of the colorful sameness of tone. Humay and Humayun enthroned are celebrating their union. They are seated together on a high throne and all around them beautifully and expensively dressed men and women are going [137] through the ritual gestures of a feast: internal conversations in small groups, side-plays with flowers above the main scene, eating, drinking, music making. It is an image of orderly, organized, possibly slightly boring formality in an ideal world.

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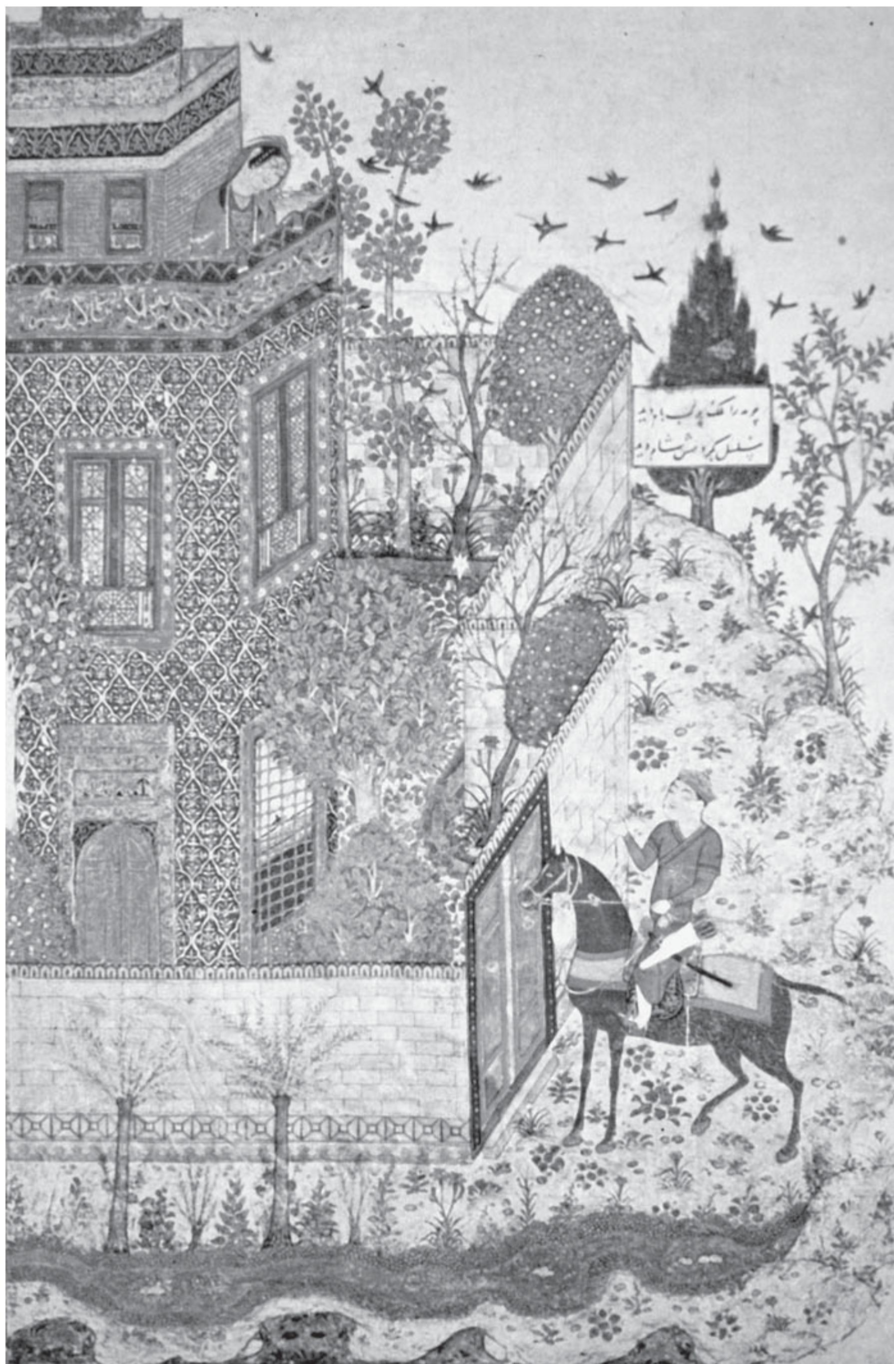
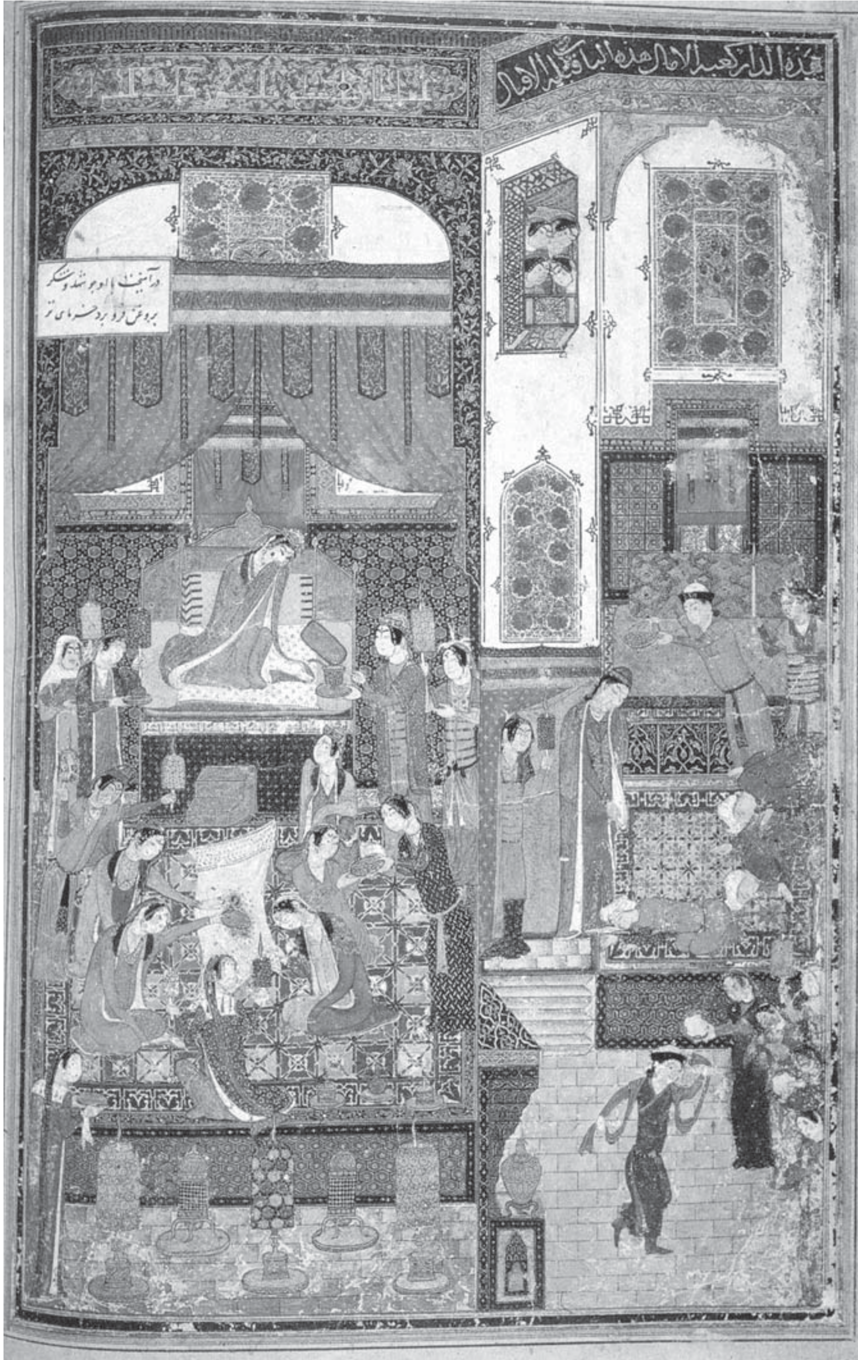
[25] It is a theme common to the many illustrations of a Nizami hero watching through a barely open window the erotic playfulness of young women bathing or of Alexander seeing sirens bathing from behind a rock.



15 *Humay in front of Humayun's Castle, Divan* of Khwaju Kirmani

16 *Combat of Humay with Humayun, Divan* of Khwaju Kirmani



17 *After the Consummation of the Wedding, Divan* of Khwaju Kirmani, British Library Add. 18113, dated 1396, painted by Junayd, fol. 45

The last image (Fig. 17), on the other hand, shows Humay leaving the bridal chamber after the consummation of his wedding and is of an astounding richness of activities. The blood-stained sheet is displayed in front of a coy Humayun seated on a rug. Gold coins are being showered on attendants. There is a wild and possibly drunken dancer. In fact, it would take a whole paper just to unravel and explain every detail of the architectural and human setting of this miniature. Its liveliness and variety are amazing once one gets inside it, and I even feel that the artist sought to fit into the limited size of a book page more than he was quite capable of composing in a single image. However, for my present purposes, the point of putting these two images together is a different one. It is that two totally different interpretations of a narrative suggested by the text could be expressed through the same basic patterns and designs.

But something else is even more important to the thread I am following. It is that once again the enhancement of the book is a more visible function of these few images than the illustration of a specific passage. For the illustrations are not a visual commentary on a narrative text, but an apparently random selection[26] of places to make a codex of relatively large size an attractive object to behold and to handle. At the same time and in addition, each image is composed in such a manner that it can be understood or even comprehended only by plunging into it, by seeking to explain every one of its details, in other words by a lengthy process of visual entanglement which removes the viewer from the book.

The paradox I am leading to can be further explored by my third and last manuscript, another example of the *Mantiq al-Tayr* already mentioned once before. This manuscript, a particularly splendid one, is in the Metropolitan Museum of Art and is dated in 1483.[27] Every one of its eight miniatures deserves discussion, but I shall limit myself to one, fol. 35 (Fig. 18), which shows a burial scene, with a casket arriving from the right, attendants greeting it at the door of the cemetery, the digging of the tomb, a representation of a more elaborate elevated burial place (a special kind of enclosed burial place known as a *hazirah*), and a tree escaping into the

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[26] The randomness is just a hypothesis, for there may well be a deeper iconographic unity to the choice of images, as there seems to have been for some of the illustrated epic manuscripts of the earlier half of the fourteenth century; Oleg Grabar and Sheila Blair, *Epic Images and Contemporary History* (Chicago, 1980). See also Jill S. Cowen, *Kalila wa Dimna: An Animal Allegory of the Mongol Court* (New York, 1989). The arguments of the latter are not always convincing, just as the date proposed by the author has been challenged. But then the first of these volumes may also be wrong in this sense.

[27] The manuscript has received an exemplary preliminary study by Marie Lukens Swietochouski, "The Historical Background and Illustrative Character of the Metropolitan Museum's Mantiq al-Tayr of 1483," Richard Ettinghausen, ed., *Islamic Art in the Metropolitan Museum of Art* (New York, 1972), pp. 39–72. A further and very perceptive discussion of its meaning is found in Melikian-Chirvani, "Khwaje Mirak Naqqash," pp. 117 ff.

18 *Funeral Procession, Mantiq al-Tayr* by Farid al-Din Attar, copied in Herat in 1483

margins. It is an illustration not of a story from the text but of a poem, parts of which surround the image. The poem goes as follows:

> The son approached the coffin of his father./ He shed copious tears and said, O Father/ Even though fortune has blighted my life/ Never for me may life itself be called ignoble./ A Sufi said, He who was to thee a father,/ He will never again this day call his son by name,/ It is not an event which only befell the son,/ An event as tragic has also befallen the father./ Oh, thou who entered the world without anything,/ Already the wind has stirred the dust on thy grave./ Even if thou will sit on the very throne of the king,/ Still thou will hold nothing except the wind in thy hand.[28]

The sentiments expressed by these verses about the impermanence of things are not original nor are they particularly beautiful, but they are also not really the subject of the painting. The latter's subject is the contradictions of the world, as the funeral procession marches on, preceded by a single mourner, to be greeted by a funeral attendant holding a banner and covering his nose to avoid the stench, and by a door-keeper hardly concerned with opening the gate. Then there is in great detail the digging of the new grave, not far from an older and more important grave, perhaps of a holy personage, with a black cat seated as a sort of protector.[29] Finally, there is a tree carrying life in the shape of birds and their nests full of eggs, but also with a snake winding its way up to destroy the eggs. Altogether we start with a death which occurred and end with several about to happen. Such, implies the poem and argues the image, is the message of life. This sinister, depressing statement is conveyed with the same brilliant colors and compositional patterns as in several of my earlier examples, but here more texture is given to the representation of space as well as to the personages, trees and other details. The changes in style and in the technique of representation do not alter the point that the image is not an illustration of a text, not a visual impulse that leads one back to a story or to an event, but the transmitter of a message vaguely intimated by the text but corresponding to some other purpose, some other input than that of elucidating a written passage.

What I have tried to show through these examples of specific manuscripts can be summarized in the following manner. During the fifteenth century there developed an art of painting whose aim was not to illustrate texts but to decorate books. A small number of pages are selected for miniatures which are almost always full-page images.[30] They are inspired, at times very generally and very approximately, by something in the text, but mostly they

[28] After Swietochowski, p. 56. The poem is not in Nott's version.

[29] The presence of cats in obvious or hidden parts of Persian miniatures is a curious feature which may deserve investigation.

[30] Actually, as has been shown in some detail by Adle (above, note 1) and by many other scholars in a more simple manner, passages of writing are often artfully fitted into miniatures. The full classification of the various patterns involved still requires study.

are affected by fads, references, needs and impulses other than those of the book itself. [138]

In order to discover what these sources of inspiration may have been, all that is required is to look into the miniatures themselves, for they are the answers we seek, in this gigantic game of *Jeopardy* that contextual history of the arts or of anything else has become. As in any iconographic study so fashionable for these very centuries in Western European art, the aim is to learn to distinguish that which is typical from whatever appears to bring an unexpected, at times a jarring, note. Such variants may be technically iconographic, but they can also involve formal decisions and unusual combinations of colors or of people. Here are a few, literally randomly chosen, examples of clues for possible contexts: the lively and imaginative fantasies of monstrous figures frolicking in nature from a great sixteenth-century manuscript;[31] the sudden introduction of a dramatic depiction of the attempted seduction of Joseph by Zulaykha;[32] the visionary conception of space implied by a visit of Alexander the Great to an Indian sage;[33] the depiction of a construction site with the potential for a highly comic disaster;[34] the personalized depiction of a court with portrait-like sages and the bizarre shadow of a devil over an otherwise pedestrian topic of a good king (Sultan Sanjar) meeting an old woman who criticizes his rule;[35] acrobatically impossible staging for a royal life beyond the wildest dreams of man;[36] and, finally, in a festival of colors, the dream of creation in which all is good and beautiful.[37]

I do not have an explanation for each one of these specific and for the most part unique details. Hardly any of them is explained directly by the text, but I can easily imagine the kind of research into visual vocabulary, text criticism and contemporary history which may elucidate many of them, while the rest will enter into the limbo of answers whose questions are lost forever. But, without denying the probable validity of *ad hoc* explanations of individual images, it is also necessary to provide a framework for the visual language that would have made individual answers possible and presumably understandable. This framework can be imagined with the help of aesthetic theories developed precisely in the early part of the fifteenth century around the major courts of Iran. These theories deal primarily with literature and probably with music, and to a smaller degree with architecture.[38] For the

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31 Dickson and Welch, *Houghton Shah-nameh*, fol. 21v.

32 Lentz and Lowry, *Timur*, p. 296.

33 Ibid., p. 250.

34 Ibid., p. 288.

35 Ibid., p. 283.

36 S. Cary Welch, *Wonders of the Age*, pp. 126, 155, 157.

37 Dickson and Welch, *Houghton Shah-nameh*, color pl. 8. This magnificent painting has been frequently reproduced, as in Welch, *Wonders*, opposite p. 18.

38 For architecture, what was known until *c.* 1985 is in Golombek and Wilber, *Timurid Architecture,* especially pp. 78 and ff. See also Renata Holod, "Text, Plan and Building," in M. Ševčenko, ed., *Theories and Principles of Design in the Architecture of Islamic*

purposes of this paper I shall use only one example, that of a treatise written in 1423 by one Sharaf al-Din Rami.[39] He defines the beauty of the human body in terms of nineteen parts of the body (all but six above the neck) and then lists and explains all the attributes and metaphors associated with each one of these parts. For instance there are thirty-three epithets to describe hair which are common and eleven which are rare and one hundred different qualities of hair. I will give only two examples of the ways in which poets used these linguistic possibilities: the hair curling down on the cheek is called *zolf* and is a snake rolled in a bed of flowers; and the sentence "on the part of your hair Moses has shown his white hand, so that you took one hundred out of nineteen" means that you are bald, because the white hand of Moses means blankness and hair is the one of the nineteen parts of the body that has one hundred attributes.

The point of these examples is that literary theory allows for the proposition that the detailed structure of the illustrations I have shown can be understood as a language of images with an almost infinite number of possible interpretations, because every part has so many meanings attached to it. How to disentangle these meanings remains a task for other times, but before concluding I should like to bring up a curious parallel to these miniatures which was brought to my attention when I gave an informal talk on Persian painting at Columbia University. It is that Persian miniatures are typologically relatable to contemporary comic strips (more intelligently known in French as *bandes dessinées*, as comedy is only occasionally their aim), in the senses that a first impression of forms is supposed to grab the viewer's interest, that general moods (violence, love, travel, exoticism, etc.) are immediately visible, but that the real point of the images comes through only by plunging into this sequence within books. The success of the books as visually perceptible narratives indicates something of the social depth of this sort of experience.[40]

Societies, Aga Khan Program (Cambridge, 1988), pp. 1–12. New and pertinent discoveries of drawings have been published by Gülrü Necipoglu, *The Topkapi Scroll: geometry and ornament in Islamic architecture* (Santa Monica, Calif.: Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1995). There is, to my knowledge, no systematic study of literary theories of the time. Preliminary discussions by Z. Safa and E. Yarshater in Peter Jackson, ed., *The Cambridge History of Iran* 6 (Cambridge, 1986), pp. 913–94.

39 Sharaf al-Din Rami, *Anis al-'Ushshaq*, tr. and notes by Clément Huart, *Traité des termes figurés relatifs à la description de la Beauté* (Paris, 1875). An important analysis based on Nizami is that by Priscilla Soucek, while many important texts and suggestive comments are found in Christopher Bürgel's book (all in note 1). But none of these studies and resources, which are not easily available anyway, can replace a true book of sources.

40 Contemporary criticism has rarely dealt with comic strips, but see the attempts by Alan Gowans on posters, *Images of an Era* (Washington, 1976), and David Kunzle, "Art of the new Chile," in Henry A. Millon and Linda Nochlin, eds, *Art and Architecture in the service of politics* (Cambridge, 1978). See also Michel Thiébout, "Approche du Monument," *Monuments Historiques de la France*, 132 (1984), pp. 18–27.

From these remarks which are but the beginning for an eventual construction of the aesthetic – or rather of the several aesthetics – of a Persian tradition of painting, I will derive two conclusions and one question.

The first conclusion is that what I have called the contextual approach has consisted primarily in seeking to understand the immensely complex details of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century miniatures. It is a context in which the book became the meeting place of five independent traditions and purposes: texts of all sorts which were part of a rich secular lyrical and epic literature developed in written form since the eleventh century; the need for images which roughly in the twelfth century became an important aspect of Iranian Islamic culture; the patronage of Turco-Mongol courts which saw in the making of books a way of legitimizing their rule and giving it an appearance of gentility and of civility; the growth of theories around the beautiful; and a host of concrete events, memories, references, expectations, desires, emotions, which can [139] be disentangled only by the human depth of observers poring over masses of details.[41]

The second conclusion is the sophistication of the process by which these images operated. Often hidden in heavy codices, they do not appear immediately, as do the illuminated front pages and the fancy designs around title pages and titles of chapters (Fig. 19). Once they do appear, they seek attention by brilliance of color, imagination of design on the page, or some other unexpected "come-on," like the transformation of margins in the manuscript from the Freer Gallery discussed earlier or the design like the geometry of tesselation with the holy name of Ali found in an Istanbul album.[42] And once a viewer is caught, he wanders within the miniature trying to understand how it works and what is in it, so as almost to forget that he is holding a book. Only after this immersion can one be deemed ready to handle something as automatic as the taxonomic issues of date and attribution and perhaps acquire the right to some libertarian comments of one's own. But, in the meantime, miniatures made to enhance a book rather than to illustrate a text become pictures in their own right not because of the ways artists operated (which is the current theory), but because of the ways in which the pictures engage the viewer into interpreting them.

And, finally, the question. What made this particular art possible? And, especially, what made it succeed? The real answer must await many analyses and discussions and studies of all sorts, but I can propose two directions for

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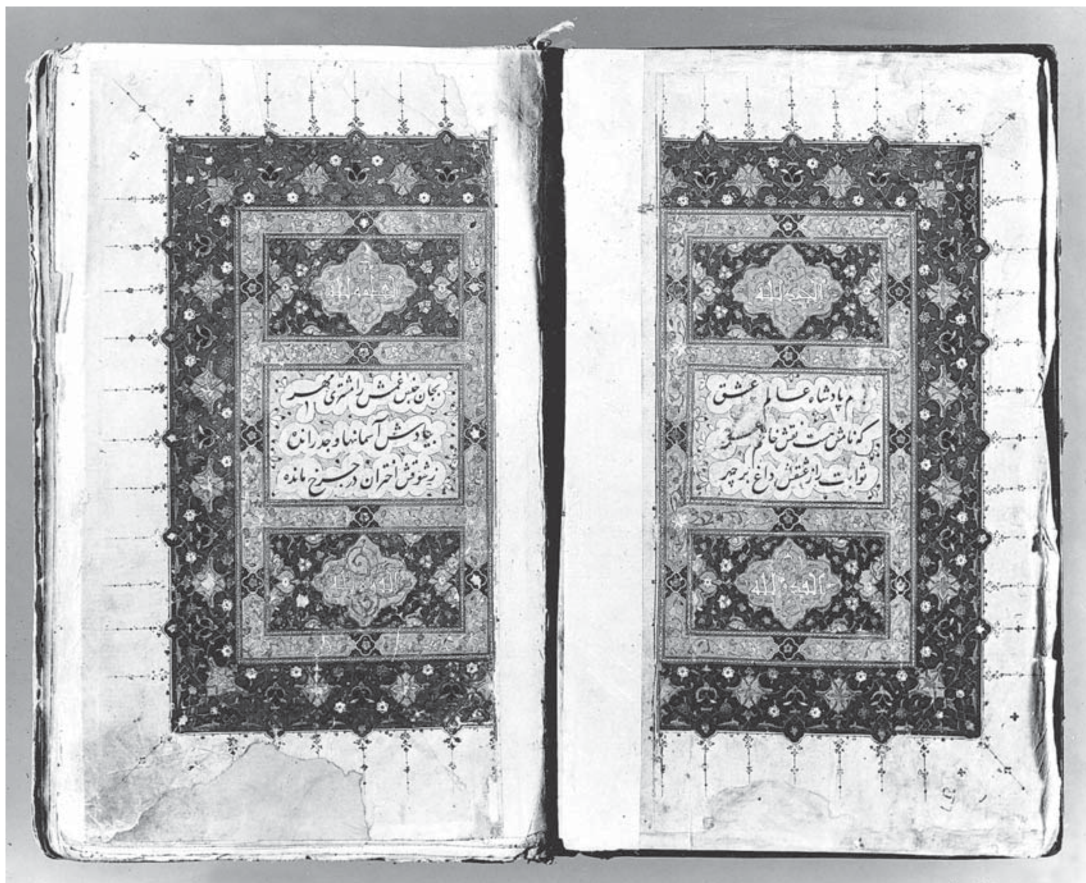
41 Every one of these five components, except the last one which is clearly restricted to *ad hoc* issues, deserves a more elaborate investigation than can be provided in the context of this essay. Most of them involve dealing with complex problems of social, political and cultural history. An initial introduction to most of these problems can be found in the several volumes of the *Cambridge History of Iran,* especially vols 3–6 (Cambridge, 1968–86), with the earlier one obviously more dated than the later ones.

42 It is a frequently illustrated image, as it found its way into the second edition of H. W. Janson, *A History of Art* (New York, 1978), color pl. 30.



19 *Assar, Mihr and Mushtari*, dated 1477, copied by Shaykh Murshid al-Katib

an answer. One, as has been suggested by the most recent investigators of these times, is the creation of a highly organized and highly specialized crew of craftsmen in the arts of the book who could do almost anything.[43] A lot is known about them and they would deserve a whole separate study as the providers of the technical competencies needed to formulate standards of visual behavior. The other one is the creation in the fourteenth century among the ruling classes in Iran of something that did not exist to the same extent in the Ottoman or Arab worlds to the west of them but which will be present in India and, in a much better studied way, in contemporary Italy, but even more so in Flanders. That "something" is that the world of visual literacy and of visual impacts is an essential part of whatever it is that holds society – or at least some levels of that society – together. How it worked and why this thought developed at that particular time are still partly speculative issues that will certainly be resolved with more work on the

[43] This is the hypothesis put forward by Thomas Lentz and developed in Lentz and Lowry, *Timur.*

thousands of monuments which have been preserved and on the specific contingencies of Iranian history of the fifteenth century.

But, in a deeper sense, the questions raised by these monuments of classical Persian painting can be extended even further, for they raise troubling questions about truth and beauty. For my argument has been in part that classical Persian painting willfully withdrew from the compulsory equation of representation with the represented or from a rational logic of space, time, or even actual meaning for forms. It did so because what it shows is not what you see, nor is it something else. It is what you wish to put into what you see and what you know can be put there. Every image, in other words, can justifiably be construed as a multiple answer to the physical need of ornamenting a book. There is no one truth, even though there are falsehoods. The logic of it all was expressed by the writers of the fifteenth century in their own ways, as in this quotation from Khwaju Kirmani, the illustrations of whose work I have referred to several times:

> We are all particles and who would give absolute knowledge to a particle? We are all particles and when will we reach totality? We have only just begun, so how can we achieve it? Wise men, although they are many, will achieve nothing singly. All should go forward together, and if not, each should pluck a flower from the garden. Whatever is in this world is neither completely good nor completely bad, and the one to step on the path of total knowledge has not yet been born. My wisdom has not seen anyone who knows everything …[44]

What the writer tells us and what the painter evokes is that Truth and Beauty are not enough without Wisdom and Goodness, but that Goodness may only be found through Truth and Beauty. Or is that what the painter or the writer really mean? After all, like any humanist scholar or any artist, the Persian writer of the fourteenth century ended his poem with the words with which I too shall end my essay:

> I have spent my life telling stories. Alas, I am but a teller of tales.[45]

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44 Fitzherbert, *Iran*, p. 147.
45 Ibid., p. 149.