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ISLAMIC MINIATURE PAINTING  
AND BOOK ILLUMINATION

A great attraction at the Museum this season is the loan exhibition of Islamic miniature painting and book illumination in Gallery D 6, which opened to the public October 10 and will continue through January 7, 1934. The exhibition, one of the most important of its kind ever held in America, was arranged with the idea of furthering the appreciation of Islamic painting, a particularly fascinating branch of Oriental

art. Splendid examples of Arabic, Persian, Turkish, and Indian book illumination and miniature painting from European and American collections are shown to the public through the generosity of institutions and collectors,<sup>1</sup> who realized the importance of the exhibition and its educational value. Among the exhibits are masterpieces which have been repeatedly reproduced in handbooks but never before seen in America. These are supplemented by miniatures less familiar. All the known schools of Islamic painting are represented, and the visitor is thus enabled to follow the changes of style due to various influences and to appreciate the highly decorative qualities developed by Arab and Persian painters and illuminators. Each period and each school has its own characteristics, which will be briefly discussed here.

The arts of the book were cultivated by the Arabs and Persians from the beginning of the Muhammadan era, which started in 622 with the flight of Muhammad from Mecca to Medina. The art of calligraphy was even more esteemed than that of painting or illuminating, and the decorative possibilities of Arabic writing in both the angular, or Kufic, style and the cursive, or Naskhi, style were utilized to a great extent in every Muhammadan country. Writing and abstract ornament were combined into intricate patterns on title-pages and in headings of Korans copied in Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Persia. The illumination of Korans dating from the eighth to the eleventh century was usually in gold and brown ink, while in later times, especially after the thirteenth century, polychromy was used exclusively. A brilliant lapis-lazuli blue was a preferred background for the ornament, which consists mostly of arabesque patterns. The illuminator's art reached its height in Persia in the school of Herat during the fifteenth century, when geometric and floral patterns on a rich blue background were executed with unbelievable intricacy and enhanced by the addition of the most delicate tints and of gold.

<sup>1</sup> To the list of lenders given in the September BULLETIN may now be added The New York Public Library, Mrs. Cora Timken Burnett, John M. Schiff, and David Eugene Smith.

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PORTRAIT OF A PRINCE, PERSIAN, FIRST HALF OF THE XVI CENTURY  
IN THE LOAN EXHIBITION OF ISLAMIC MINIATURE PAINTING



ZAL CLIMBING UP TO RUDABA'S WINDOW, FROM A MS. OF THE  
 SHAH-NAMA, PERSIAN, EARLY XIV CENTURY

The beginnings of pictorial art in Islamic countries are based on local traditions of East Christian art and Persian art of the Sasanian era (226-637). The earliest examples of miniature painting shown in the exhibition are those from a manuscript of the *Materia medica* copied in 1222/23, a product of the school of painting which flourished at the court of the Abbasid caliphs in Baghdad

dated A.H. 755 (A.D. 1354), done in a somewhat bolder style than those of the *Materia medica*.

Of great importance in the development of Islamic painting was the Mongol invasion of Persia and Mesopotamia, which culminated in 1258 with the conquest of Baghdad. The earliest known manuscript of the Mongol period is the precious *Manafi al-*



PHYSICIANS PREPARING MEDICINE, FROM A MS. OF THE MATERIA MEDICA, MESOPOTAMIAN, 1222/23

in Mesopotamia. Painted in vigorous colors, such as red, blue, green, yellow, and purple, these miniatures reveal an interesting mixture of realism and decorative tendencies. The realism of the figures and of the subject matter, taken from daily life, contrasts with the stylization of the garments and the conventional rendering of the plants. This Mesopotamian style of painting continued in the fourteenth century in Mesopotamia, Persia, and Egypt. The Egyptian school is represented by several paintings from a manuscript of the *Treatise on Automata*

Hayawan, or Bestiary, belonging to The Pierpont Morgan Library. The illustrations of this manuscript, which was copied at Maragha in northern Persia in the time of the Mongol ruler Ghazan Khan (1295-1304), consists of representations of various birds and animals, supplemented by several figure subjects, showing interesting changes of style resulting from the arrival of the Mongols in the Near East. The Mongol rulers of Persia, being great admirers of Chinese art, brought with them many Chinese books and imported from China paint-

ers and architects to work at their courts in Tabriz, Sultanieh, and Maragha. As a result the Persian painters not only developed a feeling for realistic landscape but began to copy the Chinese impressionistic style of Yüan ink paintings. In some of the miniatures of the Morgan Bestiary the landscapes are still in the traditional style of the Mesopotamian school, but in most cases

artists borrowed the landscape, which they treated in the Chinese manner; the figures, dressed in Mongol costumes and armor, the architecture, and the ornament are Persian. Likewise inspired by Chinese art are the battle scenes and funerals, which are full of action and dramatic expression. In the latter the faces of the mourning Mongols are splendid character studies, realistic to a



BULLOCK, FROM A MS. OF THE MANAFI AL-HAYAWAN, PERSIAN  
END OF THE XIII CENTURY

they reveal an impressionistic technique derived from Chinese paintings.

The Chinese influence is also evident in the magnificent paintings from a fourteenth-century copy of the *Shah-nama*, or *Book of Kings*, which was probably written and illustrated at Tabriz. The large paintings of this manuscript represent the monumental style of the Mongol school, in which Persian painters evolved a heroic style congruent with the life of the Mongol rulers. They reveal a successful alliance of Chinese, Mongol, and Persian elements. From China the

degree only occasionally encountered in Persian miniature paintings. Although the color schemes are generally rather subdued, there are already indications of the brilliance which was to characterize Persian painting of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

Besides the monumental style of painting of the Mongol period the visitor will find in the exhibition a group of miniatures from small manuscripts of the *Shah-nama* and other works. They are painted against a red, gold, or neutral ground in rather sub-

dued colors, in a style which shows almost no Chinese influence. This style is a continuation of the Seljuk school of painting, known to us only from Persian ceramics from Rhages (Rai) dating from the end of the twelfth and the thirteenth century.

Another great period of Persian painting began in the fifteenth century under the Timurids, the successors of Timur, or Tamerlane (1369-1404), a descendant of Chinghiz Khan. Shah Rukh (1404-1447) and his son, Baisunkur Mirza, were great patrons of the arts of the book. Baisunkur employed in his academy at Herat forty painters, illuminators, calligraphers, and binders, mostly from western Persia and Shiraz, which had at the end of the fourteenth century an important school of painting. To the latter school belongs a manuscript of the Shah-nama from the Beatty Collection, dated A.H. 800 (A.D. 1397) and showing many characteristics of the Timurid style, which was fully developed in the time of Shah Rukh. The subject matter of Timurid painting is derived not only from the Shah-nama but also from the romantic and mystical works of the celebrated Persian poets Nizami and Sa'di, which required a more subtle style than that of the Mongol period. Splendid examples of the new Timurid style are the miniatures in Louis Cartier's manuscript of Nizami's *Khamsa*, or *Five Poems*, copied for the library of Shah Rukh at Herat. These miniatures, painted in rich colors, combine many new features, which are to become characteristic of all the later schools of Persian painting. In the conventional landscapes with high horizons, spongy mountains, and stylized trees, the Chinese elements are entirely assimilated. The figures are smaller than those of the Mongol period and are harmoniously combined with the landscapes and interiors. The school of Herat, among the chief characteristics of which is a great love for detail and for surfaces of pure color, must be credited with the creation of a national Persian style.

A new and brilliant period of Persian painting was inaugurated in Herat under Sultan Husain Mirza (1468-1506), who was the patron of the celebrated painter Bihzad, called by contemporary historians "the

Marvel of the Age." This master is represented in our exhibition by several works either signed by or attributed to him. In the realistic rendering of trees and figures, in the greater individuality of faces and gestures, Bihzad reveals himself as a keen observer of nature. He also enriched the palette of Persian painters, creating effective new color combinations. The best known of his drawings, for which he was famous, is the portrait of Sultan Husain Mirza lent by Louis Cartier. The influence of Bihzad's style, disseminated by his pupils, Kasim Ali, Shaikh-Zada, and Mirak, was widespread.

The classical period of Persian painting was reached in the time of the Safavid ruler Shah Tahmasp (1524-1576), who was not only a patron of the arts but a skillful illuminator, having taken lessons from his court painter, Sultan Muhammad, one of the most celebrated painters of the sixteenth century. The miniatures of the court school of Shah Tahmasp are easily distinguished by their great brilliancy of color, which surpasses that of any other Oriental art. Great elegance and refinement are characteristic of the Safavid style. In the rendering of detail the artists showed an almost unbelievable technical proficiency. In miniatures illustrating various poetical works the painters not only depict the subject matter but create decorative patterns of great beauty and charm. Two of the Safavid miniatures in the exhibition are by Mir Sayyid Ali, a well-known artist at the court of Shah Tahmasp, who excelled in the representation of Persian country life. Many portraits, some of them more or less idealistic likenesses of princes and nobles, were painted by this school. Several very fine ones have been lent by Louis Cartier and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. A great painter of the second half of the sixteenth century was Ustad Muhammadi, a son and pupil of Sultan Muhammad. The most important example of his work is the tinted drawing of a rustic scene dated A.H. 986 (A.D. 1578), lent by the Louvre. The realistic scenes by Muhammadi shown in the exhibition are characteristic of his individual style.

Towards the end of the sixteenth century Persian miniature painting and drawing

continued in the tradition of the past, as may be seen in several of the miniatures in the exhibition. An interesting double painting of about 1580, belonging to the Louvre, is noteworthy because of its wide borders decorated with figure subjects in brilliant colors. Most common are portraits of elegantly dressed nobles and princes; several of these, lent by The Pierpont Morgan Library, are of the school of Bukhara, which, during the sixteenth century, continued the tradition of the Timurid style. The paintings are characterized by vivid colors.

Under Shah Abbas the Great (1587-1628) and his successor, Shah Sufi (1629-1647), Ispahan became another important center of Persian art. Here flourished the last great personality of Persian painting, Riza-i-Abbasi. His realistic portraits of young men and women are well represented in the exhibition. His drawings, often lightly tinted, show great skill in the delineation of character and the representation of scenes of daily life. Abbasi's technique of drawing in curves and short strokes was partly inspired by Chinese paintings. His style and manner of drawing were imitated by many Persian artists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when the gradual decline of Persian painting took place.

The conquest of India by the Persian prince Babur (1526-1530), a descendant of Timur and the founder of the Mughal dynasty, had a decisive influence on the formation of the Mughal school of Indian painting. The actual founder of this school was the Persian artist Mir Sayyid Ali, who was engaged by the Emperor Humayun to prepare illustrations on cloth for a large copy of the *Amir Hamza*, a Persian tale of adventure. Most of the existing paintings, three of which, lent by the Brooklyn Museum, are in the exhibition, belong to the period of the Emperor Akbar (1556-1605). The color scheme, the ornament, and the style of painting are Persian, but the landscapes and the facial types are Indian. A distinctively Mughal style was developed towards the end of the sixteenth century by Hindu painters who worked at Akbar's court. Akbar's admiration for European art had a great influence on the Mughal school, resulting in the introduction of landscapes

with atmospheric effects and of faces showing modeling, both unknown to Persian artists. Some of the most famous painters of Akbar's court, among them Lal, Shankar, Sanwlah, Nar Singh, and Govardhan, are well represented in miniatures from a manuscript of an Akbar-nama from the Beatty Collection.

Mughal painting under Jahangir (1605-1627) and Shah Jahan (1627-1658) was essentially a court art. The artists recorded great events and painted splendid portraits of the emperor and the nobles. Several of these are included in the exhibition. The animal pictures for which Jahangir had a great fondness are best exemplified by a manuscript of the *Criterion of Knowledge*, lent by A. Chester Beatty, in which no trace of Persian influence is discernible.

Turkish miniature painting was derived from Persia, but was also influenced by European art. Among the Persian painters working in Constantinople were Shah Kuli and Wali Jan. Turkish painting of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries followed Persian prototypes in the main, but the figures were dressed in Turkish costumes and certain vivid colors peculiar to Turkey were used with very decorative effect. An excellent example of Turkish portraiture is the painting of Sultan Sulaiman the Great on horseback, lent by the Bibliothèque nationale.

It is impossible in this short article to enumerate all the treasures assembled in the exhibition. The reader is referred to the guide, which gives a short history of Islamic miniature painting and book illumination, with special reference to the exhibits. As only a few of the illustrations have been published before, the guide will also be of great use to students and connoisseurs of Islamic painting.

M. S. DIMAND.

## A STUDY GALLERY OF CLASSICAL ART

The exhibition galleries of the Department of Classical Art were rearranged last spring, it will be remembered, on the modern principle of showing only the better pieces of the collection. Instead of confusing