



'Plato charming the wild beasts'. In manuscript of Nizami, *Khamsa*, dated AH 915–16 (1509–10 CE), Astarabad, Iran. Rare Books Collection, RARESF 091 N65K, fol. 345r

The *Khamsa* of Nizami

Rare Books Collection RARESF 091 N65K

Acquired 2012

One of the highlights of State Library Victoria's Rare Books Collection is a beautiful copy of the *Khamsa*, or 'Quintet', of classic Persian stories written by the great 12th-century Persian poet Nizami of Ganja. The *Khamsa* manuscript is the finest example of a Persian-language manuscript held in an Australian institution.

Dated 915–16 in the Islamic calendar (1509–10 CE) and attributed to the noted scribe al-Abd Ibrahim, the manuscript was produced at Astarabad in north-east Persia (Gorgan in modern-day Iran) in the early years of the Safavid Dynasty (1501–1736), under the patronage of which luxuriously illustrated manuscripts became a central part of courtly life. There are 387 leaves, with elegant calligraphy in *nasta'liq* script on polished paper. The original leather binding is decoratively embossed and gilded. Fifteen folios are painted by an unknown artist identified by scholars as 'Artist B' and are considered a high point of the Shiraz style. The work of the same artist has been identified in other fine manuscripts of the period held in other major collecting institutions.

The painted pages illustrate scenes from Nizami's allegorical romances, which became models for successive generations of writers and artists throughout the Persianate world. These include the legendary love stories of Khusrau and Shirin, Layla and Majnun, and the romantic and spiritual adventures of the Sasanian king Bahram Gur in the cycle of the seven princesses in *Haft Paykar* ('Seven Portraits'). In the latter story, the king built seven pavilions in his palace garden in which to enjoy the company of the seven beauties from different parts of the world with whom he had fallen in love. He visited them in turn on each of the seven days of the week, and each princess entertained him with such enlightening stories that he eventually became an ideal ruler.

The manuscript was purchased with funds raised by the 2012 State Library Victoria Foundation Appeal. The appeal accompanied the landmark exhibition *Love and Devotion: From Persia and Beyond*, which brought to Melbourne more than 60 Persian-language manuscripts from the Bodleian Libraries at the University of Oxford. They were exhibited alongside a selection of the State Library's early European printed books to show parallels and intersections between Persian poetry and the work of authors such as Dante, Shakespeare and Goethe. The exhibition attracted more than 100,000 visitors.