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The 'Arts of the Book' and the Diffusion of Persian Culture

'LOVE AND DEVOTION' can have many objects and be expressed in many forms. Most obvious are physical and spiritual love, whose expression may be ambiguous but the depiction of which is usually not. While the poetic vocabulary of earthly and divine love became progressively intertwined, miniature painters in the Muslim world tended to focus on the human dimensions of passion, reserving the illustration of holy ecstasy to a very limited number of texts (in this respect, dissimilar to the Christian artistic tradition). In addition to the celebration of 'love' of this sort, whether allegorical or realistic, Persian authors also wrote of a love of duty, of honour and of country, perhaps best expressed in the accounts of heroes in the service of their kings – who might also be lovers and the objects of devotion. It is no accident that the word *Shah* ('King') is applied not only to the sovereign but also to a spiritual master. We might also read of the love of knowledge, or the love of life. In short, love and devotion are universal and bind together not only individuals, but societies and even countries.

These emotions have all been conveyed in the rich literary output of Persian poets and writers and the often exquisitely produced manuscripts created to reach their audiences. Some of the epics, histories and romances achieved enormous popularity, not only within Iran, but in the neighbouring lands of Central Asia, the Indian subcontinent and Ottoman Turkey. In these regions, as well as illustrating their own indigenous literature and legends, artists were commissioned not only to illustrate the Persian texts, but works written in emulation of them. This article concentrates on some of the themes of love found in Persian literature and how they travelled to neighbouring lands – the afterlife of the texts themselves and the arts of the physical books in which they lived.¹ We will not carry on to discuss the 'second afterlife' of these works once they were discovered by Europeans, from roughly the 16th to the 19th centuries, acquired by gift, purchase or as booty and subsequently studied and admired, treasured by museums and libraries and valued by individual collectors. Other contributions to this volume tell parts of that story.

What do we mean by 'Persian culture' and why is it at a 'crossroads'? The production of manuscript books was one of the main vehicles for the expression of Persian high culture and its transmission to western, southern and central Asia. The books' content can range from the natural to the religious sciences, from history to poetic literature. It is particularly the last two that contain illustrations (miniature paintings) and I will focus here on illustrated and richly illuminated manuscripts that address the themes of love and devotion. I will concentrate on the period from around 1400 to 1700 of the common era, but it is first necessary to make a few general observations about 'Persian culture'

and the historical contexts in which these manuscripts were created. Essentially, then, we will consider the elements of my title in reverse order – starting with Persian culture and aspects of its diffusion, before regarding the arts of the books themselves.

Persian Culture in Context

My aim is to introduce Persian culture to those who may not be wholly familiar with the subject, in such a way as to help contextualise the magnificent exhibition organised by the State Library of Victoria in Melbourne and the Bodleian Library in Oxford,² and presented in the beautiful book produced to accompany the exhibition, which reproduces many exquisite examples of Persian art.³ My purpose is not simply to discuss these works individually, or even as a whole, let alone the stories they tell, but rather to try to identify some of the main themes and recurring patterns that can be found in these fine masterpieces of medieval book painting. Of course, the main theme is 'love and devotion'; but this subject is set in the context of Persian culture as a whole, and with a view to identifying how influential Persian culture has been on the literary and artistic life of its neighbours. Indeed, the diffusion of Persian culture is not only something of regional significance in south-west Asia, but thanks to the presence of Europeans in Ottoman Turkey, Iran, Central Asia and India particularly in the 18th and 19th centuries, an appreciation of Persian art and literature became more generally widespread. It was nourished by the opportunities provided by European colonial and imperial ambitions in the region to purchase or otherwise acquire many manuscripts and other precious artefacts.

Unsurprisingly, the focus of the exhibition is on the 15th to 17th centuries, which in many ways was the peak in the production and diffusion of Persian manuscripts, and I too will concentrate on this period. However, it would be wrong to suppose that this cultural florescence was something unique to that age, either in terms of the sophistication of the work produced, or in terms of its influence over a wider region. In fact, Iran has been the scene of a long and ancient civilisation. So, before beginning to investigate some of the recurring features to be found in the manuscripts in question, it might be appropriate to glance quickly at a few of the major phases of Persian history, because culture cannot be dissociated from the historical context in which it thrives and which contributes, indeed, to the 'idea of Iran'. I do not want to enter into the long debate that is still being pursued concerning what constitutes the identity of Iran over its whole history,⁴ but suffice it to say that such identities are generally artificial constructs that impose the modern (western) concepts of nationalism on the historical past.

To reduce the question to its essentials, we must at least start somewhere near the beginning, with the career of Cyrus the Great and his establishment of the Achaemenid Empire in around 557 BCE. He and his successor Darius presided over a territory and a multitude of subject peoples from the Aegean in the west to the borders of Central Asia and India in the east. This empire was destroyed by the invasion of Alexander the Great, who burnt Persepolis in 330 BCE and whose men looted the tomb of Cyrus at



Iskandar comforts the dying Dara.
From a manuscript of Nava 'i, *Sadd-i Iskandar*, dated 960 (1553), Bukhara.
Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, MS. Elliott 340, fol. 32r.

Pasargadae. Despite this, Alexander was incorporated among the lists of kings of the Iranians (in which he was known as Iskandar) and depicted as a God King in the Persian tradition in the early-14th century manuscripts.⁵ One scene that is very popular with artists illustrating a variety of texts, is that of Alexander cradling the dying Darius (Dara) in his lap (see above) and thus paving the way for his 'legitimate' succession to the throne.

Although several other important turning points and changes of dynasty can be identified in later Persian history, most particularly of course the Arab invasions that brought Islam to the region in the 7th century, with a new holy book and the Arabic language as the vehicle for scientific, scholarly and poetic literature, for our purposes it was the Mongol invasions (1221, 1258) that opened a new creative era. In view of the destruction and trauma inflicted by the Mongols on both the urban and rural fabric of the Iranian plateau, this might seem a paradoxical statement; but in detaching the Persian from the Arab world, which regrouped round the new Mamluk regime based in Cairo, the Mongols re-orientated Iran towards the east. In coming to terms with the



Bagh-i Eram ('Garden of Paradise'), Shiraz.
Author's photo.

need to rule Iran in the post-conquest period, the Mongols were urged by their Persian administrators to embrace Iranian royal traditions, part of which involved patronage of the arts. In the first place, there was a heavy emphasis on the *Shahnama*, the Persian book of kings, illustrated manuscripts of which started to appear from the early-14th century.⁶ Another consequence of this assertion of Iran's cultural values in the face of the threat of Turko-Mongol domination was a strong growth of historical writing in Persian (whereas previous chroniclers mostly wrote in Arabic). The tensions between a political and military ruling elite of nomadic steppe origin and their urbane Persian administrators, essentially over the centralisation of government, survived the fragmentation of the Mongol Empire in Iran and its reconstitution in the empire established by Timur, or Tamerlane (ruled 1370–1405). The uneasy Perso-Turkic symbiosis continued to mature under his successors, the Timurids, for the duration of the 15th century. Timur's empire stretched over much the same area as that of the Achaemenids and of Alexander. Timur's capital was in Samarqand, and from this base he attacked the Ottomans in Anatolia and the Sultanate dynasties in North India.

By the beginning of the 16th century, we enter a period that historians often associate with the three great Islamic ‘gunpowder empires’, namely, from west to east, the Ottomans (1300–1922), the Safavids in Iran (1501–1722) and the Mughals in India (1526–1857).⁷ It is important that we also take into account the Uzbek dynasties in Central Asia. They were heirs of the Timurids in the east and maintained capitals in Bukhara and Samarqand, noted as cultural centres in the 16th and 17th centuries, as well as close commercial and intellectual links with Iran and India.

Thus, we can see that Iran was associated with many imperial regimes of either local or alien origin for 2,000 years before the coming of the Safavids and their Ottoman, Mughal and Uzbek contemporaries, and furthermore that these regimes encompassed not only Iran but great parts of Anatolia, Central Asia and northern India. Many of those regimes were not actually centred in modern day Iran at all, but in capital cities located to the west and particularly to the east.

In other words, there is a long history of the diffusion of Persian civilisation across this wide region. Alexander the Great, Mahmud of Ghazna (based in modern day Afghanistan), Timur, Babur and later Nadir Shah invaded India and penetrated Central Asia. Merchants, scholars, poets and artists followed in their wake and stimulated a two-way flow of migration and cultural exchange.

The Land of Iran

Another element that must be taken into account is the physical geography of the Iranian plateau itself. The land is essentially mountainous and dry, rainfall diminishing from the north-west to the south-east with very few rivers containing water all year round. This makes rainfall and snow melt a precious commodity, and great pains were taken to store and channel water for productive use.⁸ Hence the great significance of gardens in Persian literature and the prevalence of symbolism surrounding natural forms, trees, streams, meadows and above all flowers (see p. 9), and the well-known metaphor of the Rose, perfect in her beauty, for whom the love-struck Nightingale sings his hopeless romance.

Many if not all of the miniature paintings displayed in the Melbourne and Oxford exhibition contain trees, flowers and gardens, together with birds and other creatures – either in the main body of the painting or in the marginal decorations. Most action is also set against the background of a bare mountain side; as often as not there is a stream running across the foreground, fringed by colourful plants and stones, and sporting some ducks or other wildfowl. Even the indoor scenes often contain an opening onto a garden, or a wall decorated with animals and plants like the margins of a page.

In short, the strength and vitality of Persian culture is due partly to its long association with a succession of great imperial regimes that dominated not only the Iranian plateau but also neighbouring territories. From this perspective, Iran is at the centre or crossroads of a cultural ecumene embracing many different peoples. Many of its most common features reflect the physical characteristics of the region and the Persians’ deep engagement with nature.



The tomb of Jamshid Quli Qutbshah (ruled 1543–50), Golconda. Author's photo.



The shrine of Baha al-Din Naqshband, (1318–89) Bukhara. Author's photo.

Kingship, Religion and Poetry

I would now like to turn to three other ingredients that I think have a long-term significance and that have provided the subject matter for most works of creative writing, and the adornment of manuscripts in which these texts were transcribed and preserved. The first is kingship and the exploits of successive shahs from legendary to contemporary times. The chronicles of their deeds (fighting and feasting, hunting and administering justice) can indeed generally be described as 'creative' rather than scientific writing, especially because one of the principal characteristics of these works is their didactic message, to propound ethical values and mirrors of princely conduct.⁹

Secondly, religion has also provided a great source of inspiration as well as intellectual argument, whether Zoroastrianism in the pre-Islamic period or one of the many different movements within Islam in later times. I do not intend to discuss orthodox Islam in this paper, nor the magnificent efforts directed towards producing beautiful manuscripts of the Qur'an, the first 'book' par excellence for Muslims and the first text to be lavishly and lovingly adorned – but not illustrated. 'Islamic art' is not like 'Christian art' in this respect. It is the *word* that is celebrated and illuminated, as witnessed by the emphasis on calligraphy in 'Islamic' art.¹⁰ There is no equivalent to Bible illustrations for the Qur'an: some stories, like that of Yusuf (Joseph), are transferred to Sufi texts, as in the transformations of the story of Yusuf and Zulaykha.¹¹



The dervish and the king.
Leaf from a disbound manuscript of Jami,
Baharistan, copied for Mughal Emperor Akbar,
dated year 39, Ilahi era, reign of Akbar (1595),
Lahore, painted by La 'l.
Bodleian Library, University of Oxford,
MS. Elliott 254, fol. 17v.



Rumi at the smith's shop.
From a manuscript of a work attributed to
Gazurgahi, *Majalis al- 'Ushshaq*, dated 959 (1552).
Bodleian Library, University of Oxford,
MS. Ouseley Add. 24, fol. 78v.

Rather, then, we may focus on Sufism (Islamic mysticism), in which love is a key ingredient and which indeed has sometimes been seen as having attained such popularity precisely because it catered for the emotional and spiritual needs of those wishing to understand and reach their God in a more personal way.¹² Within Iran, however, due to the transformation of the country into a Shi 'i state on the rise to power of the Safavids in 1501, one very important development took place, namely that in the course of the 17th century, Sufi shaykhs tended to lose their aura and to be replaced in popular devotion by the Shi 'ite Imams (descendants of the Prophet Muhammad through his daughter Fatima and cousin 'Ali). This trend can be traced back some way in literary works, and occasionally in their illustration,¹³ but the cult of the Imams became dominant as the Shi 'i religious scholars of the late Safavid period were increasingly successful in undermining the authority of the guides on the mystical path to God.¹⁴



The ghost of Nizami welcomes Nava'i, introduced to him by Jami in the dream garden of the great Persian poets of the past. From a manuscript of Nava'i, *Sadd-i Iskandar*, one volume of a *Khamsa*, dated 890 (1485). Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, MS. Elliott 339, fol. 95v.

While heroic deeds of princes and the devotion of both high and low for Sufi teachers and men of God provide the subject matter for many illustrated works, it was poets and poetry that really attracted the genius of the Persian miniature painters and their patrons. The interdependence of poets and their royal patrons was well understood – in the words of the 14th-century historian, Rashid al-Din, the 'good name and renown [of Mahmud of Ghazna] remain solely because of the poetry of Unsuri and Firdausi and the writings of Utbi'.¹⁵ Indeed, if some genuine continuity of Persian culture can be associated with Iran and Iranians over the last millennium, it is in the field of high literature and the use of literary Persian over a wide area, and particularly the reverence for the great classical poets such as Firdausi (d. circa 1020), Nizami (d. 1209), 'Attar (d. 1221), Sa'adi (d. 1292), Hafiz (d. 1390), Jami (d. 1492) and a handful of others. It is mainly the work of these poets that is repeatedly illustrated in the manuscripts that we particularly associate with Persian miniature painting.

The reverence for these three groups, kings, saints and poets, can be shown by the fact that all three were honoured (or in the case of kings, glorified themselves) by the construction of tombs and shrines, a few of which might be mentioned here by way of example. Thus a series of royal tombs, starting with those of the Samanid Isma‘il I (d. 907 CE) in Bukhara; the Seljuq Sultan Sanjar (d. 1157) in Merv; the Ilkhan Sultan Öljeitü (d. 1316) in Sultaniyya and Amir Timur (d. 1405) in Samarqand are echoed in tombs of the Mughals in India and regional dynasties with strong connections to Iran, such as the Qutbshahs in the Deccan (see p. 11).

Among the far more numerous tombs of saints can be mentioned those of Qutham ibn ‘Abbas (the *Shah-i Zinda*, ‘Living king’, 7th century) in Samarqand; Bayazid (d. circa 877 CE) in Bistam; ‘Abd-Allah al-Ansari (d. 1089) in Herat; Shaykh Ahmad (d. 1141) in Turbat-i Shaykh Jam; Ahmad Yasavi (d. 1167) in Turkestan; ‘Abd al-Samad (d. 1299) in Natanz; Shaykh Safi al-Din (d. 1334) in Ardabil, buried at the Safavid dynastic shrine, with the tomb of Shah Isma‘il I (d. 1524) adjoining his;¹⁶ Baha’ al-Din Naqshband (d. 1389) in Bukhara (see p. 11); Shah Ni‘mat-Allah Vali (d. 1431) in Mahan and Khwaja Ahrar (d. 1490) in Samarqand.

It is conspicuous that many of these shrines are outside modern-day Iran and that they were transformed into major complexes by the rulers of the Turko-Mongol period, a pattern of patronage that continues into the contemporary world. One way and another, they continue to be venerated and frequented by pilgrims and visitors, but not to the same extent, at least in Iran, as those of the Imams: most obviously, the tombs of Imam Riza (d. 818 CE) in Mashhad, his sister Fatima in Qum and his brothers, Ahmad and Muhammad, at the tomb known as Shah-i Chiragh (‘King of lights’) in Shiraz; and most recently, ‘Imam’ Khomeini in the desert between Tehran and Qum.¹⁷

It is noticeable that the tombs of poets attract a similar level of devotion in Iran, especially those of Firdausi in Tus, and Sa‘di and Hafiz in Shiraz. The former is an avowedly nationalistic edifice dating from the 1930s, and the latter a softer, open-air construction under a shallow dome intended to recall a Sufi’s cap. All three are surrounded by flowers, in gardens or parks that distinguish them most obviously from the more ancient and architecturally significant shrines of rulers and holy men.

From this rapid survey, we can conclude that veneration for kings, saints and poets are the main engines driving Persian cultural expression in art and literature. Furthermore, these are not distinct ‘units’, but closely intertwined in a sort of ‘love triangle’. Love and devotion on the part of – or directed towards – kings is rather different from that of shaykhs and poets, who seem increasingly to inhabit the same world.¹⁸ The poets are close to the Sufis and indeed often *are* Sufis: the most obvious examples being Farid al-Din ‘Attar, author among other things of the *Mantiq al-tayr* (‘Logic of the birds’), Jalal al-Din Rumi, author of the famous *Masnavi-yi ma‘navi* (‘Poetic couplets of spiritual meaning’) and Shaykh Sa‘di of Shiraz, whose work is suffused with sympathy for the Sufi path, while yet still exploring practical wisdom and the art of living in this world, rather than esoteric themes. The first two chapters of his *Gulistan* (‘Flower

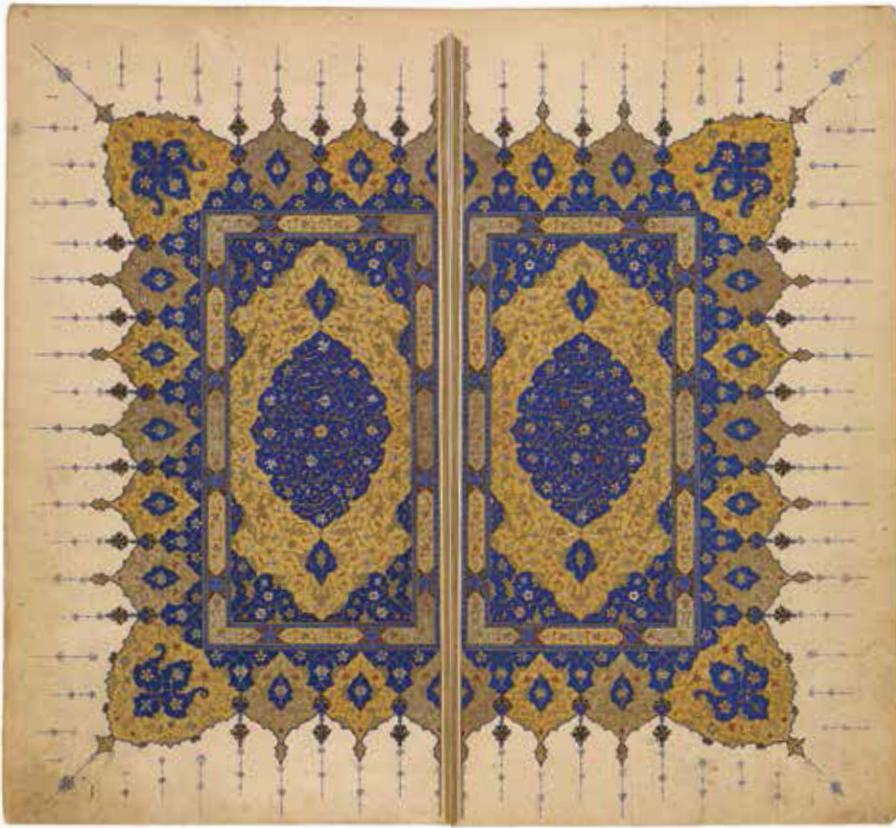
garden') concern the 'way of kings' and the 'way of dervishes', reflecting the importance of the bi-polar relationship between 'monarchs' and 'mystics' – as can be seen in the regular portrayal of princes visiting dervishes in the wilderness (see p. 12) – embracing the ever popular coupling of two forms of authority, the temporal and spiritual.

This becomes a topos in both historical and hagiographical literature. Among innumerable examples, we might recall for the period of our main concern the encounters between Ghazan Khan and Shaykh Zahid,¹⁹ the Ilkhan Abu Sa'id and Shaykh Safi al-Din of Ardabil, or Amir Timur and Shah Ni'mat-Allah Vali,²⁰ not to mention the visits of rulers to the shrines of deceased holy men, such as Shahrukh's patronage of the shrine of 'Abd-Allah al-Ansari in Herat, or Shah 'Abbas' pilgrimages to Mashhad.²¹ Both parties gain from these encounters, the rulers acquiring vicarious prestige by contact with the charisma of the saint (as well as some implied spiritual sanction for their mundane actions), while the saint also gained in authority and reputation, especially if fearlessly rebuking a tyrannical ruler and mediating between the prince and the people.²² Completing the triangle, king–mystic, mystic–poet, poet–king are the close links between princes and poets, also mentioned earlier, based on their mutual dependence, the one on praise and the reputation spread by the dissemination of panegyrics and the dedication of lyrics, the other on patronage for his livelihood.²³ Thus rulers competed for poets at their courts along with religious scholars, scientists and chroniclers.

One unusual text that neatly encapsulates the interrelationship between these three iconic elements – kings, saints and poets – is Kamal al-Din Husayn Gazurgahi's *Majalis al-'Ushshaq* ('Meetings of lovers'), completed in 1502, with the subtitle *Tadhkirat al-'Urafa* ('Memorial of the gnostics'). Gazurgahi was in the circle of the Sufi statesman and litterateur, 'Ali Shir Nava'i, in Herat and a pupil of the Naqshbandi Sufi poet, Jami. This attractive book narrates the largely fabricated loves of shahs, saints and poets. Its thesis in a nutshell is: how can one attain true love of the creator and realise the full dimensions of love and devotion, if one has not previously experienced earthly love? The text contains 75 short chapters, each of which is devoted to a well-known figure, usually a saint or poet. These are not erotic tales, nor even particularly scurrilous, although they do almost invariably involve the hero falling in love with, or being infatuated by, the beauty of a young man. The narrative of the love affair is generally rather brief and punctuated by passages of poetry.

For instance, to mention a few personalities whose names come up repeatedly in the context of our topic, Jalal al-Din Rumi one day entered a goldsmith's district and became intoxicated by the sound of their instruments working and began to dance. A young man called Shaykh Salah al-Din came out of the shop and fell at Rumi's feet (see p. 12); Rumi at once fell in love with his beauty and continued to write poetry in his honour for ten years.²⁴

Shaykh Ahmad-i Jam in a state of drunkenness fell in love with the son of the Amir who was governor of Nishapur, in such a way that he became hidden from his disciples.²⁵ 'Attar is said to have become infatuated with the son the mayor of his native village,



Double illuminated title-page.

From a manuscript of Sa'idi, *Kulliyat*, copied c. 1515.

Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, MS. Fraser 73, vol. I, fols. 2v–3r.

who continued to inspire his mystical verses;²⁶ while Amir Khusrau is supposed to have 'fallen into the trap of the beauty of Hasan', one of the attendants of the Delhi Sultan, Firuz Shah.²⁷ Ibrahim-Sultan, patron of a magnificent copy of the *Shahnama* is supposed to have fallen in love with the tutor of his son, Isma'il, even though he was quarrelsome and sharp tempered. His infatuation was such that he lost all control of affairs, until he had a dream in which he saw a black cloud approach with thunder and lightning and a voice telling him to flee from danger to the royal tent. This he did, in fear and trembling, and when he woke in the morning the infatuation was reversed.²⁸ The *Majalis al-'Ushshaq* ends with a section on Sultan-Husayn Bayqara (ruled 1469–1506), the last Timurid Prince, who used to be considered the author of the work. His long reign is truly a golden age, in which both Jami and Nava'i flourished. He was also author of his own *Divan* of poetry.²⁹ It is notable that there are no copies of the *Shahnama* commissioned by Sultan-Husayn Bayqara; it was an era in which lyricism and mysticism prevailed, and

one that consolidated the view of the value of the great classical poets – indeed, Jami was soon considered to be the last of these.

Clearly these stories and the paintings associated with them,³⁰ correspond most fully to the theme of love and devotion, and are closely associated with the diffusion of Persian culture. As we have seen, one of the most consistent and highly developed outlets and forms for the expression of these relationships is the book, by which we understand both the *literary text* and the *physical shape* and design in which the text is disseminated and received. In the final section of this article we will look in a little more detail at some of these literary texts, starting with the world of kings and heroes, before considering the physical appearance of the books that their readers enjoyed.

The Dissemination of Persian Literary Culture

As noted earlier, Iran is at a cultural crossroad, not only due to political and imperial history – of Iran's own empires, or incorporation into those of others – and geographical position, but also as the homeland of Persian language and literature. 'New' Persian, written in the Arabic script after the Muslim Arab invasions, by the 10th century was already reasserting itself as a literary and not simply a vernacular language. One of the first monuments of this is the *Shahnama* ('Book of Kings') of Firdausi completed in 1010 CE, which articulated a deep love of country and proclaimed an 'Iranian' moral-chivalrous code. 'Love' stories are generally rather brief interludes and the word '*ishq*' ('love') is mentioned only a handful of times.³¹

In the preface to the *Shahnama*, Firdausi praises the moon and refers to the rising of the new moon as 'appearing thin and pale, [bent] like the back of one suffering the pains of love'.³²

The first time Firdausi mentions love in a romantic context is in the love story of Zal and Rudaba. When Zal first saw Rudaba, the poet says: 'the heart of resolve at once went mad; wisdom disappeared and love became happy'.³³ Firdausi also notes the destructive side of love when, after the tragedy of the death of Siyavush, Rostam upbraids Shah Kay Kavus by saying 'through your love for Sudaba and her evil nature the royal crown has been snatched from your head'.³⁴ Finally, while describing the effects of rainfall and an overnight storm on refreshing the Earth, Firdausi writes, 'O pleasing to my eyes, I am weeping through love of you not pain or anger'.³⁵

It is hardly necessary to emphasise the importance of the *Shahnama*, both for the development of later Persian literature, and in the evolution of the illustration of Persian manuscripts. In Iran itself, the *Shahnama* continued to be one of the most illustrated texts and, not unnaturally, regularly commissioned by royal patrons, such as Ibrahim-Sultan already mentioned, grandson of Timur and prince-governor of Shiraz (c. 1425). His artists established an iconography for the depiction of many scenes that was followed in the remainder of the 15th century.³⁶ Many emulations of the *Shahnama* follow, including interpolated episodes from the 'Sistan cycle' of stories concerning members of Rostam's family, omitted by Firdausi.³⁷

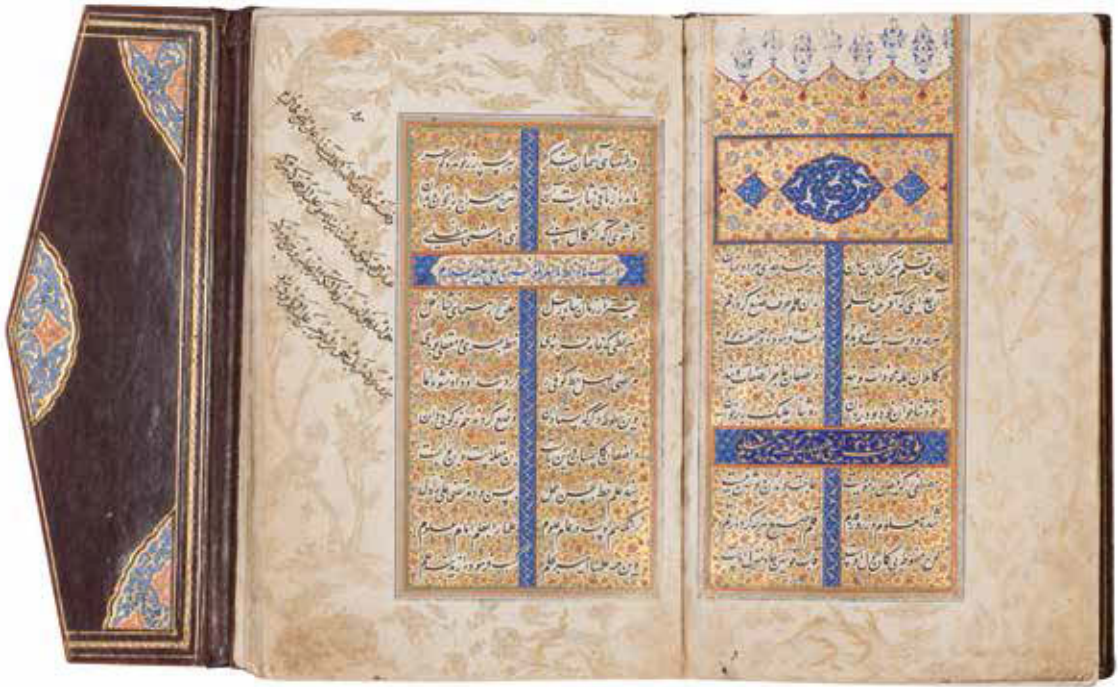
The *Shahnama* as a 'royal' epic poem was also adopted as a model in Ottoman Turkey, especially during the 16th century, where the post of official 'Shahnama-writer' – *Şehnameci* – was established to document the exploits of the Ottoman sultans in Persian, in emulation of Firdausi's work. This borrowing embraced both imagery for scenes that had nothing to do with the *Shahnama* narrative,³⁸ and a straightforward copying of the *Shahnama* story in Turkish translations.³⁹

In Central Asia too, though to a lesser extent, the *Shahnama* enjoyed some popularity, particularly at the turn of the 17th century, when there was an active atelier in the city of Samarqand.⁴⁰ On the whole there was more interest in illustrating historical chronicles, as in Ottoman Turkey.

In India, the *Shahnama* was also very well received although here, apart from copies brought from Iran, there was also a prose epitome made of the poem with substantial excerpts in poetry – the *Tarikh-i Dilgushay Shamshirkhani* – commissioned in 1653 by the governor of Kabul, who was too busy to read the whole poem.⁴¹ Indian painting is rather distinctive and often disparaged by 'Persian' art historians, feeding the notion of Iranian 'superiority', although the significant point for us is the persistence of the attachment to the epic and the widespread desire for illustrated copies, well into the 19th century and particularly in Kashmir – a phenomenon still awaiting adequate investigation. As in Iran, other epics – notably the *Hamzanama* – enjoyed a parallel or possibly greater popularity, the secular epic being turned to serve the purpose of glorifying religious characters.

Despite the evidence of the continuing popularity of the *Shahnama* in Ottoman Turkey, Uzbek Central Asia and Muslim North India, it seems clear that the texts most frequently chosen for illustration remained the works of the classical poets such as Sa 'di, Rumi, Hafiz, Amir Khusrau and Jami. In the Ottoman Empire, indeed, unlike Central Asia and more particularly India, no Persian copies of the *Shahnama* itself were actually produced, as opposed to imported. The exception was a number of examples apparently copied in Ottoman Baghdad, of a version that ended with the story of Alexander; a variation that was quite appropriate for the heirs of the Byzantine Empire.⁴²

The popularity of poets other than Firdausi, and a preference for romantic and lyrical verse, is shown by the large number of manuscripts and illuminated copies made of the work of the Persian classical poets. For example, we see a copy of Sa 'di's *Bustan* made in Central Asia, with a double frontispiece showing pairs of lovers that has nothing to do with the text itself,⁴³ and illuminated Central Asian copies of the works of the poet Hafiz.⁴⁴ In the course of the 16th and 17th centuries there are many examples of the work of the Indian Persian poet Amir Khusrau illustrated in Central Asia and also Nizami's ever-popular *Khamsa* produced in India or modern-day Afghanistan.⁴⁵ These are not necessarily the most beautiful copies available – what is important is that they were made at all. Another author whose works were widely appreciated is the poet and statesman Nava 'i, whose *Divan* of poetry written in Chaghatay Turkish emulated Persian models and was popular across the Persian-speaking world.⁴⁶ These continuities and the sense of a poetic tradition extending across continental Asia are exemplified by the painting



Sultan 'Ali Mashhadi, *Treatise on Calligraphy*, with the endowment inscription of the Safavid Shah 'Abbas I, c. 1514–20. National Library of Russia, Saint Petersburg, Dorn 454.

of Jami introducing his 15th-century contemporary Nava'i to the 12th-century master Nizami in the 'dream garden' of the poets (see p. 13).

These few examples do little more than scratch the surface of the range and depth of the diffusion of Persian book culture across the region over several centuries. I would like to conclude by looking briefly at the actual books in which these texts were disseminated.

The Arts of the Book

What I would particularly like to emphasise in this very brief survey is the unity of the design of the books themselves. In looking at the bindings and the inside covers as well as the illuminations and adornments of the text, we see many similarities and recurring motifs, both geometrical and figurative.⁴⁷

Bindings can naturally take many forms, but among the most standard ornamental composition used is a central medallion, with pendants and corner pieces, generally enclosed within a framed margin. The design may be enhanced with a stamped and gilded decoration, but others already from the 16th century have a painted lacquered binding. The inside covers (*doublures*) often contain the same essential composition, with the central medallion consisting of a beautiful delicate filigree pattern, a particular

feature that echoes other elements of the book and also artwork in other media.⁴⁸ The overall impression, however complex the design, is the same as in the so-called ‘carpet pages’ that frequently adorn the opening passage of a manuscript (see p. 16).⁴⁹ It is not for nothing that they are called ‘carpet pages’, when one considers the design of Persian carpets, such as the famous ‘Ardabil’ carpet of 1537 in the Victoria & Albert Museum, from the shrine of Shaykh Safi al-Din, mentioned earlier.⁵⁰

The central medallion that is found on both outer and inner covers is also reminiscent of other examples of Persian art, for example in jewellery,⁵¹ and indeed in the decoration of architecture, as inside the dome on buildings such as the Shaykh Lutf-Allah mosque in Isfahan. This ‘sun-burst’ motif, or *shamsa*, apart from being a highly decorative element at the outset of a manuscript (whether within the ‘carpet page’ or free-standing), very often contains the names of the sponsors, patrons or dedicatees of the manuscripts in which they occur, especially the case, of course, with a princely patron.⁵² A particularly fine example is found in the *Shahnama* of Ibrahim-Sultan the grandson of Timur. In the bottom left-hand corner of the *shamsa* there appears the librarian’s note confirming the copy was inspected in the Royal Library.⁵³ Ibrahim-Sultan’s older brother, Baysunghur Mirza, also commissioned a manuscript of the *Shahnama*, which was completed in 1430. The illumination of this manuscript is particularly fine, as seen in the opening pages, where there appears a design incorporating the names of the Shahs in a series of cartouches, which once more recall elements of a Persian carpet.⁵⁴

Ownership and Afterlife

These *shamsas* or illuminated rosettes, where they contain the name of a patron, are clearly the best indications of the original ownership of the manuscript. Nevertheless, many of these works and especially the more precious ones, changed hands quite frequently. One of the best indications of this is the seals or inscriptions that are often found on the fly-leaves or at the beginning or end of the text. One superb example is in the *Shahnama* manuscript made c. 1440 for another grandson of Timur, Muhammad Juki, brother of Ibrahim-Sultan and Baysunghur Mirza. The seals here reveal the presence of the manuscript in the Royal Library throughout the reigns of several of the Mughal rulers, and its subsequent journey in and out of different hands.⁵⁵ Many other manuscripts contain such seals, particularly copies originating from India, which was the main source of supply for the later European collections. Two more examples are found in the Free Library of Philadelphia: one a late-16th century manuscript with 18th-century seals and inscriptions, some of which have been erased; the other an 18th-century manuscript from the Royal Library of the Mughal ruler Muhammad Shah (d. 1749), with seals ranging from 1727 to 1872.⁵⁶

Books as Gifts and Books as Diplomacy

These precious books could change hands in many ways of course, for instance as the spoils of war, in which artists and artisans could also be taken captive and transferred to another court. Reflecting their value as sought after and expensive items, manuscripts could also be presented as gifts.⁵⁷ One of the most famous of such transactions was the diplomatic gifts sent by Shah Tahmasp to congratulate the new Ottoman sultan Selim II on his accession in 1566. Among the precious gifts was the spectacular copy of the *Shahnama* completed in around 1540, which by general consent is considered the most beautiful and sophisticated of all *Shahnama* manuscripts. Persian manuscripts were very much in demand at the Ottoman court and subsequent diplomatic missions from Iran invariably brought precious books as gifts, as in 1582 in the reign of the Ottoman sultan Murad III.⁵⁸

Manuscript books were also frequently given as pious donations to religious establishments. One prominent example of this is the benefactions made by the Safavid ruler Shah 'Abbas I (ruled 1587–1629). He presented many Qur'ans and works on the Islamic sciences, mainly written in Arabic, to the shrine of Imam Riza at Mashhad and works in Persian, mainly historical texts and poetry, to the ancestral shrine of Shaykh Safi al-Din at Ardabil. These volumes are inscribed with the text of 'Abbas' benefaction, which also contains a curse on those who remove the books from the library. One example of this inscription reads:

The dog of the threshold of 'Ali ibn Abi Talib, 'Abbas the Safavi, gave this *Risala* ('treatise') to the shrine of Shah Safi, mercy be upon him, so that whoever wishes to may read it on condition that he does not take it out from here. Whoever takes it out is complicit in the blood [i.e. shares responsibility for the death] of Imam Husain, mercy upon him.⁵⁹

In fact, 166 manuscripts were taken by the Russian general Pavel Petrovich Suchtelen, son of a famous bibliophile, in the final stages of the second Perso-Russian war in 1828, although he paid a generous price in gold roubles. These are now held by the National Library of Russia in St Petersburg (see p. 19). A further set of manuscripts found their way to St Petersburg shortly afterwards, when the Persian ruler Fath-'Ali Shah sent the young Prince Khusrau Mirza to the Russian capital on a peace mission following the murder in Tehran of the Russian envoy Griboedov in 1829.⁶⁰ Among the manuscripts sent to Tsar Nicholas I on this occasion was the *Divan* of the poetry of the Shah himself. Fath-'Ali Shah also commissioned illustrated copies of a work called the *Shahanshah-nama* ('Book of the King of Kings') by the court poet Saba, extolling the deeds of the ruler in a verse epic emulating the work of Firdausi in its style, metre and metaphor. These copies were presented to several of the ruling monarchs of Europe.⁶¹

It is with such transactions, and the acquisition of manuscripts by purchase or as gifts by Europeans such as Sir Gore Ouseley (1770–1844) in the course of their diplomatic missions in India and Iran, that the next phase of the diffusion of Persian culture began, and indeed opened up a fascinating new chapter in the reception and perception of the works of Persian literature in the West.