ASPECTS OF ART LECTURE

PERSIAN PAINTING AND THE NATIONAL EPIC

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For every thousand people in this country who have heard of the Iliad of Homer there is probably only one who has heard of the Shāhnāma of Firdawsī. Yet no work in the whole of the world's literature exists in so many finely written, illuminated, and illustrated manuscript copies as the Persian national epic, the Shāhnāma or Book of Kings. These copies were produced at every period throughout the history of Persian painting, from the early fourteenth century right down to the 1860s and later, and their illustrations provide examples of every style which requires consideration in the study of that history. Not only that, but they also provide specimens of painting varying from the elaborate and meticulous pictures executed under the patronage of wealthy ruling princes down to comparatively crude provincial work commissioned by minor rulers in outlying parts, or else destined for trade or export to Turkey, India, and Central Asia.

It is a great advantage in the study of Persian painting to have this diverse yet homogeneous mass of material. Some of the favourite episodes in the poem are illustrated in almost every copy, and it is useful and instructive to be able to see side-by-side miniature paintings of, say, the combat of Rustam and the White Demon executed at Shiraz in 1397 (fig. 9) and in the same city in 1862, more than four and a half centuries later, or, alternatively, two contemporary representations of the fire ordeal of Prince Siyāwush, one from the sophisticated school of Herat and the other from the remote Caspian province of Mazandaran, both dating from the 1440s. Such comparisons enable us not only to appreciate the different attitudes to the epic in different periods and places, but to form a coherent idea of the main historical trends and local idiosyncrasies of Persian painting as a whole. But before proceeding to a consideration of this material, let us glance at the poem itself.

The Shāhnāma\(^1\) was composed in some 50,000 or 60,000 couplets

\(^1\) For the Shāhnāma in general, see Th. Nöldeke, Das iranische Nationalepos, (in
by the poet Firdawṣī between about 975 and 1010, using earlier epic fragments and oral tradition. The poem has been known, quoted, and revered in Persia almost as much as King James’s Bible in this country, and has inspired both eastern and western scholars with equal enthusiasm. Typical of the latter was Professor E. B. Cowell, one of our most eminent orientalists of the nineteenth century, who wrote:

Augustus said that he found Rome of brick and left it marble; and Firdawṣī found his country almost without a literature, and has left her a poem that all succeeding poets could only imitate and never surpass, and which, indeed, can rival them all even in their peculiar styles, and perhaps stands as alone in Asia as Homer’s epics in Europe. His versification is exquisitely melodious, and never interrupted by harsh forms of construction; and the poem runs on from beginning to end, like a river, in an unbroken current of harmony.¹

On the other hand the late Professor E. G. Browne of Cambridge, perhaps the greatest Persian scholar this country has produced, was not quite so enthusiastic; he delivers himself as follows:

In their high estimate of the literary value of this gigantic poem Eastern and Western critics are almost unanimous, and I therefore feel great diffidence in confessing that I have never been able entirely to share this enthusiasm. The Shāhnāma cannot, in my opinion, . . . compare for beauty, feeling, and grace with the work of the best didactic, romantic, and lyric poetry of the Persians. It is, of course, almost impossible to argue about matters of taste, especially in literature; and my failure to appreciate the Shāhnāma very likely arises partly from a constitutional disability to appreciate epic poetry in general. . . . Yet, allowing for this, I cannot help feeling that the Shāhnāma has certain definite and positive defects. Its inordinate length is, of course, necessitated by the scope of its subject, which is nothing less than the legendary history of Persia from the beginning of time until the Arab conquest in the seventh century of our era; and the monotony of its metre it shares with most, if not all, other epics. But the similes employed are also, as it seems to me, unnecessarily monotonous . . . The Shāhnāma . . . defies satisfactory translation, for the sonorous majesty of the original [language] . . . is lost, and the nakedness of the underlying ideas stands revealed.²


² Browne, op. cit., vol. ii, p. 142. The only complete translation of the Shāhnāma in English is A. G. and E. Warner, The Shāhnāma of Firdausī (9 vols.,
There is, indeed, much to be said on both sides, but of the enormous popularity and high reputation of the Shāhnāma in the country of its origin there can be no doubt.

Till comparatively recent times the narrative of the Shāhnāma was unquestioningly accepted by all Persians as a historical and factual account of their early history. It begins with the first king, whose subjects were dressed in the skins of beasts, and proceeds to a succession of subsequent kings under whose guidance the arts of civilization were acquired and cultivated, and the aggression of the neighbouring demons was curbed (fig. 25). A grim interlude is provided by the reign of the Arabian usurper Zāhāḵ, whose shoulders had been kissed by Satan, causing snakes to grow from them, which had to be fed daily on human brains. The tyrant was eventually dislodged and disposed of by a national revival, and the dynasty thus founded, and the one that followed it, were largely occupied with a series of wars against Turan, the northern neighbour.

The central figure in this long episode is Rustam, the national hero, of gigantic size and strength (figs. 1, 11, 15, 19, 24). His career is a long succession of fights with demons (figs. 9, 13, 21), dragons (figs. 8, 22), and other monsters, and with various Turanian champions (figs. 12, 20), and he always arrives, like the United States Seventh Cavalry, in the nick of time to save his compatriots from disaster. His tragic killing of his son Suhrāb is well known from Matthew Arnold’s poem. His death was finally brought about by the treachery of a younger half-brother, the hero being at that time (if we accept Firdawsi’s chronology) well over six hundred years old.

After the death of Rustam a historical element becomes faintly discernible in the Shāhnāma. The kings Bahman, Dārāb, and Dārā have their historical counterparts in the Achaemenids Artaxerxes I (‘Longimanus’), Darius II (‘Nothus’), and Darius III (‘Codomanus’); Artaxerxes II and III are passed over, or rather replaced by a queen, Humây.

This brings us to Alexander the Great—Iskandar to the Persians (fig. 2). National pride was saved by making him the eldest son of Dārāb (Darius II) by the daughter of Philip of Macedon, or Failakûš as he appears in the epic. The Macedonian princess was sent home after only a few days of marriage, as she


suffered from a condition for which Listerine and Colgate’s toothpaste are the approved modern specifics. So Alexander was born in Macedon, and when he invaded Persia it was as the rightful heir to the throne, claiming his heritage from his younger half-brother Dārā, or Darius III. The latter was murdered after his defeat, but his dying moments were comforted by Alexander, who then ascended the throne. His subsequent travels and adventures are of the most fantastic kind, derived from the narrative of Pseudo-Callisthenes (fig. 26); amongst other things, he visits the Land of Darkness and views the Well of Life and the Talking Tree.  

The Parthians get very short shrift from Firdawsī, who writes them off as mere ‘Kings of the Tribes’ and dismisses their domination of five centuries in less than a hundred lines, but the Sasanians receive full and broadly historical treatment. In particular Bahrām Gūr, Varanes V to the Romans and ‘that great hunter’ of Omar Khayyām (figs. 3, 10, 14, 18), and Khusraw Parwīz, or Chosroes II, his wars with the usurper Bahrām Chūbina, and his love of the Armenian princess Shīrīn, occupy very long passages. The epic closes with the fall of the Sasanian dynasty before the Arab attack, and the miserable death of Yazdagird III, the last of his line, at the hands of a treacherous miller with whom he had sought shelter in his flight. This summary outline of the subject-matter of the Shāhnāma will, I hope, provide a broad framework into which can be fitted the subjects of the paintings we shall be considering.

Two centuries elapse between the completion of the epic and the earliest surviving manuscript copy, 2 and another century before we find one illustrated with miniatures. This brings us well into the period of Mongol rule in Persia, and we may be rather horrified to find that the earliest surviving paintings of the national hero Rustam depict him in Mongol dress and with features of unmistakably Mongol type. The earliest known to me are not in a Shāhnāma, but in the manuscript of Rashīd al-Dīn’s ‘Universal History’, dated to 1306, in the Library of Edinburgh University (fig. 1). 3

Not long after this (though the exact date is still a matter of controversy) comes the so-called Demotte manuscript of the

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2 Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, MS CI.III.24 (G.F.3), dated 614/1217.  
Shāhnāma (fig. 2). This takes its name from the dealer through whose agency, or on whose behalf, it was spirited out of the Persian royal library about the beginning of the present century. When the complete volume was turned down by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Demotte cut it up and found no difficulty in disposing of the miniatures separately to collectors and museums on both sides of the Atlantic. Some authorities have held that this monumental set of fifty-eight paintings, despite damage and, in some cases, nineteenth-century repainting, constitutes the high point of Persian book-illustration. That must remain a matter of opinion; we all have our individual preferences, and are justified in maintaining them. But considered as illustrations of the Persian national epic, despite their undeniable aesthetic impact and historical importance, they are seriously handicapped by their conspicuously Mongol, non-Iranian, character. Dūst Muḥammad, a court painter of the mid sixteenth century and our most trustworthy literary source, attributes the formation of the true Persian style of painting to Ahmad Mūsā, working during the reign of the Il-Khān Abū Saʿīd (1317–36); his best pupil was Shams al-Dīn, and there is good reason to believe that the Demotte Shāhnāma miniatures were the products of a group of painters of this school.

Next to be considered is a group of Shāhnāma manuscripts, all more or less dismembered, and of much smaller size than the Demotte manuscript but of much the same date, and hence often referred to as the ‘Small Shāhnāmas’. They are illustrated with a large number of small miniatures in which the figures wear Mongol armour, clothes, and crowns. They have long proved puzzling to scholars, and a number of conflicting suggestions have been made as to their place of origin—Tabriz, Shiraz, Isfahān—the latest, and perhaps the least likely of which, is Baghdad. Though probably of much the same date as the Demotte miniatures, they form a complete contrast: where the latter are

1 There is a vast literature on the Demotte Shāhnāma; the most important references will be found in B. W. Robinson, Persian Miniature Painting from Collections in the British Isles (Victoria and Albert Museum: London, 1967), pp. 37f.

2 The whole question is fully and admirably dealt with by Eric Schroeder, ‘Ahmad Mūsā and Shams al-Dīn’, Ars Islamica vi (1939), 113–142.

3 For a good account of the ‘Small Shāhnāmas’ see E. Grube, Muslim Miniature Paintings (Venice, 1962), pp. 21–35 (though he places them at Shiraz).

4 Marianna Shreve Simpson, The Illustration of an Epic: the Earliest Shāhnāma Manuscripts (New York and London 1979), ch. iv. But Miss Simpson has done a splendid work in collecting, arranging, and listing all the scattered miniatures of this interesting group.
monumental and majestic, the former are small and fussy; the
drawing of the latter is firm and assured, that of the former is
spindly and sometimes inept; in the latter the colour-scheme is
rich and variable, but in the former it is rather nondescript, with
a somewhat excessive use of gold. Leaving out of account the
Mongol clothes and faces, the Demotte miniatures are clearly of
Persian origin, but those in the ‘Small Shāhnāmas’ have an
unmistakably alien character. This comes out particularly in the
weak drawing, the cluttered surfaces almost amounting to a horror
vacui, and in certain recurring motifs, such as that of a vase of
flowers, which are not found in authenticated Persian painting of
the same period. But there is one of these miniatures that surely
gives the game away. The incident of the Sasanian king Bahram
Gūr winning the crown by ordeal from between two raging lions is
a very popular one in Persian painting, and appears in manu-
scripts of all periods. Persian painters invariably follow the poet’s
account: Bahram clubs the two lions and seizes the crown from
between them.1 But what do we find in the ‘Small Shāhnāma’
version? Not lions, but tigers (fig. 3). To my mind this is sufficient
to warrant the attribution of the whole group to India. The
tiger—symbol of India—only occurs very rarely in Persia, and
then only in the remote forests of the Caspian coast. I know of only
one instance, in the sixteenth century, of the occurrence of a tiger
in a Persian painting except where it is specifically demanded by
the text, as in the Kalīla wa Dimna, or Fables of Bidpai (a work of
Indian origin), and Qazwīnī’s ‘Marvels of Creation’. In this
‘Small Shāhnāma’ miniature, on the other hand, tigers are
introduced despite the specification of lions in the text.2 I cannot
believe that any Persian artist would have illustrated the incident
in this way.

This naturally leads us to a necessary, but necessarily brief,
glance at the more general problem of miniature painting in India
before the Mughals.3 As a sequel, then, to the ‘Small Shāhnāmas’ we

2 Kansas City (Mo.), William Rockhill Nelson Gallery of Art, No. 46–41.
R. Hillenbrand, Imperial Images in Persian Painting (Scottish Arts Council:
Edinburgh, 1977), No. 208, where it is placed at Tabriz. Since the lecture was
given, additional support for an Indian origin for this miniature has been
kindly brought to my notice. It hinges on the use of the word šīr. In Persia this
word invariably means ‘lion’, but in India, where lions were rare, it was used for
‘tiger’ (we may recall the terrible tiger Sher Khan in Kipling’s Jungle Book).
Thus šīr in Firdawsi’s text would convey ‘lion’ to a Persian painter, but ‘tiger’
to an Indian.
3 The pioneer work on this subject is I. Fraad and R. Ettinghausen,
find a body of manuscripts and detached miniatures, mostly Shāhnāma illustrations dating from the second quarter of the fifteenth century, which have long puzzled scholars because, like the ‘Small Shāhnāmas’, they do not fit in satisfactorily with any of the known styles of Persian painting of their time. They have been hopefully dubbed ‘provincial’, and a certain affinity with the Shiraz style has been occasionally noted; the problem they present is by no means solved as yet, but the grounds for placing them in western India seem fairly strong. Several distinct styles are noticeable among them (fig. 4).

During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries there were, of course, several Muslim sultanates in western India where Persian was the language of court and culture. We may therefore assume, firstly, that there was at these courts a demand for fine copies of the Persian classics, and, secondly, that as in Persia itself a number of these copies, or parts of them, have survived. The demand was partially met, it may be suggested, by the import of Persian manuscripts produced at Shiraz (and perhaps elsewhere) on a commercial scale, so that when native artists undertook the illustration of home-produced manuscripts it would inevitably be the Shiraz style of the time that would provide their models. This hypothesis is in accordance with the surviving material, and that from the Timurid period shares certain general characteristics with the ‘Small Shāhnāmas’ of the previous century, such as the sometimes weak and spindly drawing, the unorthodox colouring, and the crowded and cluttered compositions. Unfortunately none of these manuscripts, which we have tentatively placed in western India, contains a colophon that informs us of the place of completion.

Returning now to Persia in the fourteenth century, we find two groups of Shāhnāma manuscripts produced in Shiraz. The first was under the Injū rulers between about 1330 and 1353, and the miniatures are easily identifiable. The style is primitive and crude, but vigorous, with the figures and accessories usually deployed in a single line against backgrounds of plain red or yellow, a convention which has led some authorities to see in them a survival or recrudescence of the pre-Islamic tradition of mural painting.

The format is shallow and wide, the text being written in six columns. The clothes, armour, and accessories are naturally of Mongol type, but the human features are Aryan, as befits the capital of Fars, the Persian heartland. We know of no immediate predecessors of this highly individual style, and when the Injū were overthrown by the Muzaffarids in 1353 it vanished without trace.¹

Two Shāhnāma manuscripts have survived from the Muzaffarid dynasty (1353–93).² In their illustrations, as well as in those of one or two contemporary manuscripts of different texts, we find a style as easily recognizable as that of the Injū, but in every other respect diametrically different from it (fig. 7). Injū miniatures, as we have seen, are normally of fairly shallow horizontal format; under the Muzaffarids, the compositions expand upwards. Injū figures are squat and thickset; Muzaffarid ones are tall and slim. The primitive Injū arrangement of figures standing more or less on the base-line gives place under the Muzaffarids to the ‘high horizon’ convention, whereby the figures are disposed in several planes. In fact in the Muzaffarid style we can clearly see the beginnings of the classic Persian miniature of the three following centuries.

However, it is, on the face of it, unlikely that this radical change, by which Persian painting was set on its true course, originated under the Muzaffarids, who were, after all, a minor dynasty in a provincial city. The capital city of Persian painting at this time was unquestionably Baghdad under the Jalayirids, as attested by Dūst Muḥammad, but we have unfortunately no firmly documented material from there till the 1380s. On the other hand, mounted in the albums of the Topkapı Library at Istanbul is a whole series of large and impressive paintings, many of them illustrating the national epic, which must have been cut from Jalayrid manuscripts, and probably date from the third or early fourth quarter of the fourteenth century.³ In these we can see how

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¹ See I. Stchoukine, La Peinture iranienne (Bruges, 1936) pp. 93 ff. Stchoukine was the first to identify and place this style correctly. See also Robinson op. cit. (1967), p. 84 and the references there given.

² They are Istanbul, Topkapı Sarayı Library H. 1511, dated 772/1370, and Cairo, Bibliothèque Égyptienne, dated 796/1393. See for the former M. Aga-Oğlu, ‘Preliminary Notes on some Persian illustrated Manuscripts in the Topkapı Sarayı Müzesi’, Ars Islamica i (1934), 191; and for the latter L. Binyon, J. V. S. Wilkinson, and B. Gray, Persian Miniature Painting (London, 1933), No. 32.

classical Persian painting grew out of the majestic but still not fully developed style of the Demotte Shāhnāma, and it must be from these, or from others like them, that the far less skilled and ambitious painters of the Muzaffarids derived their inspiration (fig. 5).

Muzaffarid Shiraz fell to Timūr in 1393, Shāh Manṣūr, the last of his line, being killed in a gallant but vain attempt to reach and engage the great conqueror himself. The earliest epic illustrations that can be classed as Timurid occur in a pair of volumes of epics, including the Shāhnāma, dated to 1397, and undoubtedly executed at Shiraz, as shown by the characteristic style of the illuminations.¹ Their miniatures follow on naturally from those of the Jalayrid school of Baghdad, where the celebrated British Library manuscript of Khwājū Kirmānī’s poems, dated to 1396,² had recently been completed for the last Jalayrid prince Sūltān Ahmad, an enlightened patron and connoisseur. In these volumes of epics the brilliancy of colour and masterly drawing show an enormous advance on the rather provincial work executed under the Muzaffarids (fig. 9). They are indeed royal painting, and it seems reasonable to suggest that the patron for whom they were produced was Timūr’s young grandson Iskandar Sūltān, then in his early teens and nominal governor of Shiraz for his father ‘Umar Shaykh.³ Iskandar became a brilliant patron of painting during his short and stormy career, but apparently never commissioned another copy of the Shāhnāma. Selected passages from it, however, occur in two manuscripts of miscellaneous content executed to his order. These are the famous Miscellany of 1410–11 in the British Library,⁴ and a fragment of twenty-nine folios from a large encyclopaedic volume of 1413, dated ‘at Isfahan’ and bound up in one of the albums in the Topkapı Library.⁵ The miniatures in the former are fully coloured, but in the latter simple line-drawings appear. The Shāhnāma illustrations in these two manuscripts are of particular interest and importance, as they include the earliest representations of Rustam the national hero in his full traditional panoply (figs. 11, 12).

¹ Dublin, Chester Beatty Library, MS 114, and British Library Or. 2780. These volumes formerly belonged to the Comte de Gobineau. See Robinson, op. cit. (1967), Nos. 9 and 10.
² Add. 18113.
³ For an excellent account of Iskandar Sūltān and his career, see Eric Schroeder, Persian Miniatures in the Fogg Museum of Art (Cambridge (Mass.), 1942), pp. 57 ff.
We have seen that in the earliest surviving Shāhnāma illustrations he appears as a typical Mongol warrior. In the work of the fourteenth-century Shiraz schools of the Injū and the Muzaffārīds he wears a tiger-skin over his body-armour, but it is not till we come to these early fifteenth-century works of Iskandar Sūltān’s patronage that we find him with the addition of a leopard’s mask set on his helmet. In subsequent Shiraz miniatures this convention is usually followed, and in the Safavid period of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries it becomes universal; but in paintings of the Timurid Herat school, to which we shall come in a moment, he almost invariably retains a helmet of normal appearance, but still with the tiger-skin over his body-armour. Iskandar Sūltān certainly took a great interest in book-production and painting, and it seems not impossible that the idea of the leopard’s head on Rustam’s helmet originated from him. We know from the contents of the Topkapı albums that European works of art were by no means unknown in Persia during the Mongol and Timurid periods, and there are, of course, many classical and Hellenistic monuments in neighbouring Asia Minor. Perhaps Iskandar was shown, or heard about, some representation of Rustam’s Greek counterpart Heracles wearing the skin of the Nemean lion with its mask on his head, and felt that Rustam himself should be similarly distinguished? We shall never know, but such an idea would not be out of character in this brilliant but wayward young prince.

His unruly and irresponsible conduct finally so exasperated his uncle and overlord Shāh-Rukh that he was imprisoned and blinded—a particularly bitter punishment for such a lover of the visual arts—and we hear no more of him. But his cousin Bāysunghur Mīrzā, Shāh-Rukh’s fifth son, was by now ready to succeed him as the foremost bibliophile and patron of painting in the Islamic world. He was at this time (1415) appointed governor of Herat for his father. He seems to have had a special interest in the Shāhnāma, and authorized a complete recension of the text, together with a new preface which is included in most subsequent copies of the epic. This great task was completed in 1426, and the obvious sequel was to enshrine the revised text in a monumental

1 The only exception known to me occurs in the Royal Asiatic Society Shāhnāma of Muhammad Jūkī, f. 145b (Rustam and Ashkabūs); for a reproduction see B. W. Robinson, ‘The Shāhnāma of Muhammad Jūkī, RAS MS 239’, in The Royal Asiatic Society, its History and Treasures (Leiden and London, 1975) pl. III. But there are several instances of Shiraz influence in the miniatures of this manuscript.

volume in keeping with the literary and artistic pretensions of the young patron. The result was the magnificent copy still preserved (we may fervently hope) in the Gulistan Palace Library, Tehran.\(^1\) This manuscript is dated to 1431, and contains twenty-one miniatures, the finest work of the academy of book-production established by Bāyūnghur at Herat. Among his staff were no doubt some of the painters who had worked for Iskandar Sultān, and this superb set of miniatures combines the brilliant colours and meticulous execution associated with the patronage of that prince with the monumental quality of the Demotte Shāhnāma of the previous century. Though sometimes perhaps a trifle stiff and academic, the miniatures in Bāyūnghur’s Shāhnāma are uniformly impressive and almost breath-taking in their precision and brilliance of execution.

With this magnificent volume Bāyūnghur seems to have established a tradition, followed by numerous subsequent ruling princes, whereby a copy of the Shāhnāma was commissioned, usually at or near the beginning of the reign, as a sort of status-symbol or advertisement of regal power. It was natural that on the preparation of such volumes the very best talent available was employed, and no expense was spared to make the result as rich and splendid as the patron’s resources would allow. We find the practice even among minor provincial rulers, as in a Shāhnāma prepared in 1446 for an obscure Sayyid prince in the Caspian province of Mazandaran (fig. 6).\(^2\)

Bāyūnghur’s brother Ibrāhīm Sultān was made governor at Shiraz on his father’s behalf from 1414, and, obviously inspired by his brother’s example, commissioned a manuscript of the Shāhnāma as soon as he had received the text and preface of the new recension; this copy is now in the Bodleian Library.\(^3\) The painters at Ibrāhīm’s disposal in Shiraz were inferior to those

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1 Binyon, Wilkinson, and Gray, op. cit., No. 49. There are also coloured reproductions in Basil Gray, *Iran: Persian Miniatures in the Imperial Library, (UNESCO: Greenwich (Conn.), 1956)*, and the whole manuscript has been published in facsimile as *The Shāhnāma of Firdawsī: the Bāyūnghor Manuscript . . . in the Imperial Library, Tehran* (Tehran, 1971), but in both these publications the coloured reproductions leave much to be desired.

2 See B. W. Robinson, ‘The Dunimarle Shāhnāma: a Timurid Manuscript from Mazandaran’ in *Aus der Welt der islamischen Kunst: Festschrift für Ernst Kühnel* (Berlin, 1959). The manuscript, which is bound in two volumes, is now in the British Library, Or. 12688.

of Bāysunghur’s academy in precision and finish, but contrived to invest Rustam and the other heroes and demons with a vigour and ferocity which we do not find in contemporary Herat work (fig. 8). The figures are on a comparatively large scale and, in contrast to the often crowded scenes in Bāysunghur’s ‘great book’, as it was called, are generally confined to the minimum necessary to illustrate the incident in question. An almost equally impressive copy was commissioned by Ibrahīm’s successor ‘Abdallāh in 1444; it is now in the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris (fig. 13).¹ It is arguable that among these Shiraz manuscripts of the first half of the fifteenth century one finds some of the most truly epic illustrations of Firdawsi’s poem. The Shirazi painters seem to capture completely the timeless heroic spirit of the Shāhnāma and to transfer it to the page whole and untrammelled by extraneous detail or distracting elaboration.

But in Shiraz there was also a tradition which can be traced back to the Injū period of the early fourteenth century, of providing illustrated manuscripts of less than royal quality for commerce and export.² A large number of these has survived. They might be bought by Persian patrons of comparatively modest means, or else exported to India and Turkey; and it is noteworthy that Indian and Turkish miniatures of the Timurid period are closer in style to those of Shiraz than to any other school of Persian painting. The miniatures in these manuscripts follow the royal style, but are on a somewhat smaller scale and fail to achieve quite the same panache. Even so they are never less than satisfactory as epic illustrations.

Meanwhile at Herat another splendid copy of the poem was produced about 1440 for Shāh-Rukh’s seventh son Muḥammad Jākī, who seems not to have lived to see its completion.³ Its brilliant miniatures exhibit some interesting stylistic variations. One of the painters employed on it must have been a man of fairly mature years, trained perhaps twenty years previously in the academy of Bāysunghur. Another was clearly younger and more original; his work looks forward to Bīhzād, the greatest of all Persian painters, who flourished in the same city of Herat a generation later. A third betrays his Shirazi background by several

1. RUSTAM BEFORE KING MINUCHIHR. Tabriz (Rashidiyya), 1306.
Edinburgh University Library, MS Arab. 20, f. 6b.

2. MOURNING FOR ISKANDAR. Baghdad, mid 14th century.
Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, No. 38. 3.
3. BAHRĀM GUR AND THE 'LIONS'. Western India, mid 14th century.
William Rockhill Nelson Gallery of Art, Kansas City, No. 45-41.
5. ISFANDIYĀR AND THE LIONS. Baghdad, third quarter 14th century.
   Topkapı Sarayı Library, İstanbul, H. 2153, f. 16b.

6. SIYĀWUSH TEMPTED BY SUDĀBA. Mazandaran, 1446.
7. KAY KHUSRAW LEARNS OF THE DEATH OF FARUD. Shiraz, 1393.
Bibliothèque Égyptienne, Cairo.
8. RUSTAM, RAKHSH, AND THE DRAGON. Shiraz, c.1433.
Bodleian Library, Oxford, Ouseley Add. 176, f. 68b.
11. BIZHAN RESCUED BY RUSTAM. Shiraz, 1411.

12. COMBAT OF RUSTAM AND PULADEWAND. Isfahan, 1413.
PLATE IX

(Formerly) Hakim collection Shāhnāma, f. 405a.

(Formerly) Hakim collection Shāhnāma, f. 322a.
16. KAY KĀʿUS AND KAY KHUSRAW APPROACH THE SACRED FIRE.
Shiraz (Turkman), 1492.
Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, N. 40. 20.

17. KAY KHUSRAW LEADING HIS ARMY. Gilan,
1494.
18. BAHRAM GUR AND THE DRAGON. Shiraz, 1509.

19. ISFANDIYAR SLAIN BY RUSTAM. Astarabad, 1566.
Topkapı Sarayı Library, İstanbul, H. 1493.
(Formerly) Kunstgewerbemuseum, Leipzig.
21. RUSTAM AND THE WHITE DEMON. Shiraz, c.1580.
   India Office Library, London, Ekb 867, f. 94b.
HH Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan collection, Geneva, Ir. M. 69/A.
(Formerly) Kevorkian collection, Sotheby's 12.iv.1976, lot 185.
Chester Beatty Library, Dublin, MS 277, f. 17.
26. ISKANDAR'S PORTRAIT PREPARED FOR QUEEN QAYDĀFA, by Muhammad Qāsim. Mashhad, 1648.
Royal Library, Windsor Castle, Holmes 151, f. 49b.
27. MANIZHA LOWERS FOOD TO BIZHAN IN THE PIT, by Mu'in. Isfahan, c.1693.

Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, MS Cochran 4, f. 176b.
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, MS Cochran 4, f. 102a.
details of treatment, though in his paintings the bold and dashing Shiraz style has acquired a respectable Herati veneer.

But towards the middle of the fifteenth century another political power was coming on the scene, gradually pushing the Timurids from the west, and eventually taking over all their dominions except Khurasan, the large and fertile north-eastern province which then included much of what is now Afghanistan. The Turkman clans of the Black and White Sheep were on the march. At first they had no tradition of court painting of their own, and apparently gathered up what artists they could in the course of their conquests. Thus we find a number of manuscripts of mid-fifteenth-century date containing miniatures in three different styles: that of Herat, stemming from the academy of Bāyunghur; that of Shiraz, deriving from the court of Ibrāhīm Sultān; and a third, simpler, style of uncertain derivation, but which seems to have originated in the north-west. Good examples of this mixture of styles are to be found in two Shāhnāma manuscripts from the early years of Turkman domination. The first is a small, compact volume dating from the early 1450s (figs. 14, 15), and the other dated to 1457, larger and more pretentious, formerly in the library of Lord Teignmouth.¹

But the Turkman princes do not seem to have felt the same enthusiasm for the Shāhnāma as their Timurid predecessors. Apart from the Teignmouth manuscript I know of only one other copy, dated to 1494, that can be classed as a Turkman royal volume (fig. 17).² But the third style just referred to was apparently seized upon by the commercial establishments of Shiraz which, as we have seen, seem to have been turning out good illustrated manuscripts for both the home and export markets over the previous century and a half. From about 1475 till the early years of the next century we find innumerable copies of the Shāhnāma and other literary classics illustrated in this style, which we may term


² This is the so-called ‘Big Head’ Shāhnāma, for which see B. W. Robinson, ‘The Turkman School to 1503’ in The Arts of the Book in Central Asia, (UNESCO: London, 1979), p. 243. Another fine Turkman Shāhnāma of c.1460 is illustrated in E. Grube, The Classical Style in Islamic Painting (Venice(?), 1968), pls. 26–30; it is in the University of Michigan Museum of Art, Ann Arbor, No. 1963.1.52/69 (fig. 10).
Turkman Commercial (fig. 16). It was eminently suited to the purpose, being simple, straightforward, and perhaps a trifle stereotyped (fig. 10). To illustrate its prevalence we may note that during the last quarter of the fifteenth century the total of manuscripts containing Turkman Commercial miniatures is more than double that of all other styles put together; the Topkapı Library at Istanbul alone contains no less than twelve copies of the Shāhnāma illustrated in this style, and at least twenty-five have been noted elsewhere.

The chief glory of Persian painting in the latter part of the fifteenth century is to be found in the work of Bihzād and his school at Herat, under the patronage of Sulṭān Ḥusayn Mīrzā, the last great Timurid. But this does not concern us here, because, so far as I know, there is no copy of the Shāhnāma illustrated in this style. It was an elaborate, meticulous style, with a strong tendency to naturalism, and was therefore not well suited to illustrating the epic, copies of which required a large number of miniatures and therefore, usually, a simpler and less demanding style of painting.

The rise of the Safawid dynasty at the turn of the fifteenth/sixteenth centuries brought with it a mighty wave of fervent nationalism. After eight and a half centuries of domination by Arabs, Turks, Mongols, and Tartars, Persia was once more united under a Persian sovereign—one, moreover, who could trace his lineage to the Prophet on the one hand and to the pre-Islamic Sasanian dynasty on the other. To inspire and nurture this newly-awakened patriotism the Shāhnāma was ideally fitted, and many copies have survived from the early years of Safawid rule. Shah Isma‘īl himself, the founder of the dynasty, commissioned a magnificent copy which, however, was destined to remain incomplete. Nevertheless it provides us with two of the finest epic illustrations in the whole of Persian painting: the famous ‘Sleeping Rustam’ in the British Museum, and its companion, ‘Rustam and Kāmūs’, formerly in the Kunstgewerbemuseum, Leipzig, but, alas, destroyed during the war (fig. 20). These two superb paintings, which must date from the first decade of the sixteenth century, are probably early works of Sulṭān Muḥammad, the greatest Persian painter after Bihzād.²

¹ For the Turkman Commercial style see B. W. Robinson, ‘Origin and Date of Three Famous Shāh-nāmeh Illustrations’, Ars Orientalis (1954), 105-12; id., op. cit. (1979), pp. 243ff.
However at Tabriz, the first Safavid capital, Isma‘īl’s son and successor Țahmāsp carried on his father’s plan, and the next twenty years saw the production of what was till recently the most lavish and magnificent copy of the epic to come down to us in its complete and pristine state. Indeed, it would certainly rank among the half-dozen most splendid illuminated manuscripts in the world. It was presented by Țahmāsp in 1568 to the newly enthroned Ottoman Sultan Selim II, and passed the next three and a half centuries in the undisturbed peace of the Sultans’ library in the Topkapı palace. From thence it was lured, exactly how we do not know, into the collection of the Paris branch of the Rothschild family, where it was guarded as strictly as a Vestal Virgin, being firmly denied to the prying eyes of the next two generations of scholars. From this jealous confinement it was liberated just over twenty years ago by the wealth of Mr Arthur Houghton, Jr. and the diplomacy of Professor Cary Welch, and we all envisaged a secure and happy future for it in the Houghton Library at Harvard University. Alas, this was not to be. It is now notorious that nearly a hundred of its miniatures have been cut out, some to be sold privately, some to be dispersed on the open market, and some presented to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Not unnaturally these proceedings provoked loud cries of outrage—there were even letters to The Times—but the damage was done. Whether or not the process of dispersal will continue remains to be seen: I can only say that Agnew’s had a further fifteen of them on offer a couple of weeks ago.

In its complete state the manuscript contained 258 full-sized miniatures by the finest painters of the time—‘Wonders of the Age’ was the phrase used by Professor Welch. In fact it formed a sort of crucible in which were fused the various elements of Timurid and Turkman painting which went to make up the early Safavid court style. The earlier pages are dominated by the exuberant genius of Sultān Muḥammad, but as the volume proceeds this is replaced by a smoother and more courtly style evolved by his junior colleagues Āqā Mīrāk and Mīr Muşāwawir. Sultān Muḥammad had been trained in the brilliant and fantastic

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1 The monumental publication of Dickson and Welch (p. 286, n. 2 above) reproduces all the miniatures, many in colour, and provides not only a full description, analysis, and history of the manuscript itself, but also a comprehensive and closely reasoned account of early Safavid painting as a whole. S. C. Welch, A King’s Book of Kings (Metropolitan Museum of Art: New York, 1972), provides a very serviceable epitome.
style associated with the last great Turkman prince, Ya’qūb Beg, to which he added his own strong individuality and irrepressible sense of humour. Āqā Mīrak, on the other hand, seems to have been inspired by Bihzād and the more academic style over which he had presided at Herat, this style being expanded and elaborated by the painters of Shah Ṭahmāsp’s court.

Meanwhile Shiraz continued to produce numerous fine copies of the epic which, though of just less than royal quality, often display great vigour and originality (fig. 18). At first the style of their illustrations is a direct continuation of the Turkman Commercial style of the previous century, but later they are often of large size and great magnificence (fig. 21).

We must pause here to consider some manuscripts of the Shāhnāma produced in areas outside the main centres of Persian painting. The first of these is Transoxiana with its two great cities of Samarqand and Bukhara. Samarqand had been Timūr’s capital, and after his death it was ruled from 1410 till 1449 by his grandson, the astronomer-prince Ulugh Beg. We have no copy of the Shāhnāma known to have been executed under his patronage, but a detached double-page frontispiece, depicting his court, may well have formerly adorned such a manuscript, which may also have contained another remarkable detached miniature of cavalry in a rocky landscape. However, a small group of Shāhnāma manuscripts from the later fifteenth century may be tentatively placed at Samarqand. Their date can hardly be questioned, but in style, treatment, and choice of subject their miniatures differ markedly from contemporary work produced at Shiraz and elsewhere in Persia proper; and the faces in them are of a distinctly more Mongol cast than what we find in the latter. Throughout

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1 The Shiraz school of the Safavid period was first ‘isolated’ by Grace Dunham Guest, *Shiraz Painting in the Sixteenth Century* (Freer Gallery of Art: Washington, 1949), and all subsequent accounts of it rest on the foundation she laid.

2 Timurid painting at Samarqand is still *terra paene incognita*, but a preliminary approach to it will be found in B. W. Robinson (ed.), *The Keir Collection: Islamic Painting and the Arts of the Book* (London, 1976), pp. 139f.

3 Right-hand half, Freer Gallery of Art, No. 46.26; left-hand half, Keir Collection (see preceding note) No. III.76.

4 Keir Collection, No. III.77.

5 The most important of these are:

(i) Istanbul, Topkapi Sarayi Library H. 1509, undated, but probably third quarter fifteenth century. See Güner İnal, ‘Topkapi Müzesindeki Hazine’ 1509 numaralı Şehnaminin Minyatürleri’, *Sanat Tarihi Araştırmaları* iii (1970), Istanbul (with English summary, pp. 306–16). Dr İnal does not suggest a place of origin for the manuscript.
the following century Transoxiana was ruled by the Uzbek dynasty of the Shaybanids. Several of them, notably 'Abd al-'Azīz in the mid sixteenth century, were notable patrons of fine manuscripts, but their favourite authors were Sa’dī and Jāmī, and the few Bukhara Shāhnāma manuscripts known to us from this period are of rather second-rate quality.¹

The second provincial group we should consider flourished in Khurasan between about 1560 and 1630. At first it presents a much simplified form of the contemporary court style practised at Mashhad and Qazwin; it is found in a large number of manuscripts, suggesting that, as at Shiraz, such volumes were being produced in Khurasan on a commercial scale. But among them only one copy of the Shāhnāma has so far appeared.² The style is characterized by firm and highly competent drawing combined with an individual colour-scheme in which pale blue and olive green are often prominent, and a drastic simplification of landscape and architectural details, and of all forms of surface decoration. But in the early years of Shāh 'Abbās there was a break, and we find the Shāmlū governors of Herat patronizing a style of painting not far removed from the contemporary metropolitan style of Isfahan, though lighter in both colour and drawing. This can be seen in two or three fine copies of the Shāhnāma dating from the years about 1600.³

The third and last of these provincial groups was centred on Astarabad, now known as Gurgan, at the south-east corner of the Caspian Sea, where a highly individual style of painting was practised, again between about 1560 and 1630. Some half-dozen

(ii) Tehran, Malek Library MS 5986, undated, but probably late fifteenth century. The manuscript was described in a paper I read at the Ettinghausen Memorial Symposium, New York, 1980, but this has not yet been published.


¹ The best of these is probably H. 1488 in the Topkapı Sarayi Library, dated 972/1564, with a dedication to Sultan 'Abdallah the Shaybanid, who reigned at Bukhara from 1557 and took Samarqand in 1578. See Topkapı Sarayi Müzesindeki Şahname Tazamlarından Şegme Minyatürler (Istanbul, 1971), pl. 11, 12.

² Dublin, Chester Beatty Library MS 295; see Robinson, op. cit. (1967), No. 173, and pls. 50, 51.

³ Typical of these is a Shāhnāma in the Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore, dated 1020/1611; see W. Lillys, R. Reiff, and E. Esin, Oriental Miniatures (London, 1965), fig. 2 and pl. 3, 5. A fine Shāhnāma of the same group, dated 'at Herat' 1008/1599 was sold by Sotheby Parke Bernet Inc., New York, 2 May 1975, lot 392.
manuscripts, all copies of the *Shāhnāma*, have so far been identified as Astarabad work. Their miniatures are rough and provincial in appearance, often with a startling colour-scheme, but original in conception and of vigorous execution (fig. 19).1

Returning now to our ‘main line’, we find that the custom, which we have already noticed, of a prince signalizing his accession by commissioning a manuscript of the *Shāhnāma* was continued by the Safawid monarchs throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Tahmāsp’s later years (he died in 1576) were marked by religious bigotry and a turning away from his early enthusiasm for painting, which may explain why he gave away the great *Shāhnāma*, on which his artists and library staff had laboured for more than twenty years, so soon after its completion. However his short-lived successor, Isma‘īl II, began the production of a *Shāhnāma* on an ambitious scale, whose miniatures, notable for contemporary attributions to a gifted group of court painters, are now widely dispersed among public and private collections in both Europe and America.2 This manuscript was another of those brought out of Persia by Demotte as a complete volume, but he soon gave it the usual treatment. The most noteworthy of these painters were Şādiqi (fig. 22), whose best work was done under Shāh ‘Abbās, as we shall see, and Siyāwush the Georgian, formerly a slave, who evolved a simplified but effective version of the earlier court style, and was thus enabled to contribute nineteen miniatures to the manuscript in the short period of eighteen months between the accession of Isma‘īl II and his murder (fig. 23).

Shāh ‘Abbās the Great fought his way to the throne in 1587, and soon established his new capital at Isfahan. He too lost no time in commissioning a magnificent copy of the *Shāhnāma*, of which only twenty-one folios have survived, fortunately in excellent condition.3 The high standard of its illustrations and the scale of its production put it in the same class as the *Shāhnāmas* of

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1 See Robinson, op. cit. (1967), Nos. 182–4. To these should be added Topkapi Sarayi Library H. 1493 dated ‘at Astarabad’ 973/1566 (fig. 19), and India Office Library Ethé 874 of the early seventeenth century. See B. W. Robinson, *Persian Paintings in the India Office Library* (London, 1976), Nos. 1113–51. Yet another, very similar to Topkapi H. 1493 above, and dated ‘at Astarabad’ 971/1564, was published by its Persian owner at the time of the Cyrus Celebrations.


3 Dublin, Chester Beatty Library MS 277; see Robinson, op. cit. (1967), No. 60.
Bāysunghur and Shāh Tahmāsp, and the surviving miniatures are particularly interesting as reflecting the rivalry of two artists of genius, Șādiqī and Rizā (fig. 12). Both were of strong and independent character, somewhat difficult to get on with, and the atmosphere in the royal atelier at this time must have been positively explosive. Șādiqī was the senior. He had worked for Isma’il II, as we have seen, and was head of the new Shah’s library staff; he clung to the old style, which he brought to a very high pitch of perfection. Rizā, on the other hand, was at the beginning of his career, probably still in his twenties, but was nevertheless able to rival his senior colleague in painting ability. We can see in these Shāhnāma miniatures of his the first signs of the seventeenth-century style associated with his name after he had assumed, or been granted, the honorific sobriquet of ‘Abbāsī (fig. 25). The figures become fuller, the faces softer, the drawing freer and more calligraphic, and the colour-scheme was later modified by the introduction of prominent browns, yellows, and purples.

In 1614, when he had already been on the throne for over twenty-five years, ‘Abbās commissioned a freak copy of the epic, which is now in the Spencer Collection in the New York Public Library. In it his painters imitated very faithfully the style of Bāysunghur’s academy of two centuries earlier. So far as one can tell, many of these are original compositions, though others follow closely the compositions in Bāysunghur’s copy of 1431. Indeed, there seems to have been a short-lived wave of archaism in Persian painting at this time, of which the New York Shāhnāma is by far the most remarkable monument.

But in general the more languorous and, it must be admitted, decadent style initiated by Rizā held the field. It was by its very nature unsuited to epic illustration, but none the less some of the Shāhnāma manuscripts illustrated by Rizā’s followers are undeniably impressive. We may note in them that towards the end of his career Rustam is represented as an old man with a grey beard, a convention noticeable in the fourteenth-century Demotte Shāhnāma miniatures, but which is never found in the Timurid or earlier Safawid periods. There are two notable Shāhnāmas from the middle years of the seventeenth century. The first of these was

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1 This whole period is admirably dealt with by A. Welch, Artists for the Shah (Yale, 1976).

2 See Gray, op. cit. (1961) p. 164, and Grube, op. cit. (1968), pl. 82.1-4. Grube’s pls. 83-5 illustrate inferior (and perhaps later) examples of the same type. It is now thought in some quarters that this whole manuscript (which I have not seen) is a skilled archaistic pastiche of the nineteenth century.
executed in 1648 for Qarâjaghây Khân, a celebrated governor of Khurasan with his headquarters at Mashhad. It was presented to Queen Victoria in 1839 by Kamrân Shâh, Prince of Herat, and is now in the Royal Library at Windsor Castle.¹ The miniatures, of which there are 148, are mostly by two of Rîzâ’s best followers, Muḥammad Qâsim (fig. 26) and Muḥammad Yûsuf. Mr Arthur Houghton’s remark on being shown it by Her Majesty’s Librarian—that I’ve got far better one back home—may have been justified, but was, perhaps, a trifle tactless. Yet it contains some superb paintings. The other mid-seventeenth-century Shâhnâma, executed between 1642 and 1651 for Shâh ‘Abbâs II, is in the Leningrad Public Library, and is the largest copy of the epic that I have ever handled.² It comprises 875 folios with nearly 200 large miniatures, its bulk being swelled by the inclusion in the text of long passages from a number of apocryphal epics by later imitators of Firdawsi, relating to various heroes mentioned in the original. The best of the miniatures are by Afzal al-Ḥusaynî, another distinguished follower of Rîzâ, whose work usually takes the form of album-pictures of young men and women, often of a distinctly erotic character. Here, however, he rises splendidly to the occasion with a large number of broad and vigorous compositions. All the most prominent painters of the time contributed to this great manuscript—Muḥammad Qâsim, Muḥammad Yûsuf, and Rîzâ’s pupil Muʿîn being the most important.

Forty years later comes a lesser but still very splendid Shâhnâma in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, which may perhaps be associated with the accession of the last Safawid monarch, Shâh Sultan Ḥusayn, in 1694.³ In this manuscript we find towards the beginning a number of none too competent old-style miniatures, but the quality soon improves with a large number by Rîzâ’s long-lived pupil Muʿîn in his own fluent adaptation of his master’s style, and two or three in the westernizing style (fig. 23) associated with the painter Muḥammad Zamân, which was becoming very fashionable at the Safawid court in the later seventeenth century (fig. 28).

² Dorn 333. See L. Gyuzalian and M. Diakonov, Transkie miniatiyery (Moscow and Leningrad, 1935), pls. 35–45.
the hands of the invading Ghilzai Afghans, and I know of no Persian illustrated manuscript of the Shāhnāma that can be dated in the turbulent eighteenth century, though Indian examples, mostly from Kashmir, are by means uncommon. But as the century closed comparative tranquillity was restored under the Qājār dynasty, whose second monarch, the picturesque latter-day Solomon Fatḥ 'Alī Shāh, presided over a considerable revival in the arts, including that of book-illustration. But the superficially westernized style of painting that had evolved by this time, however successful in large and flattering oil-paintings of the monarch himself, cannot bear comparison with that of the classical periods as a medium for illustrating the national epic. Shāhnāma illustrations of the period of Fatḥ 'Alī Shāh are chiefly notable for investing the hero Rustam with the long black beard and elegant wasp waist of the King himself.¹

Towards the middle of the nineteenth century began the long reign of Naṣr al-Dīn Shāh, whose visit to Europe in 1873 made him the first Persian monarch to cross the Hellespont since Xerxes. His reign saw an even stronger infusion of western influence, which he himself encouraged, and by which the native traditions of Persian painting were well-nigh swamped. It was in his reign too that the Persian classics began to be printed by lithography. Two editions of the Shāhnāma, both containing numerous illustrations, were published at Tehran. The first appeared in 1850, illustrated by 'Alī Quli of Khuy, whose drawings are rather naive exercises in the earlier Qājār style. The second was published in 1890, and the illustrations are by Muṣṭafā, also known as a talented painter in lacquer. He has clearly become conscious of western advances in archaeology, and some of his illustrations are inspired by the Achaemenid bas-reliefs of Persepolis and by the sculptures and coins of the Sasanians.²

The last manuscript of the Shāhnāma which we need consider is one made in the 1860s for the family of the Shirazi poet Wişāl (d. 1846), with miniatures by the celebrated flower-painter Lutf 'Alī Khān, and by two of the poet’s sons, Farhang and Dāwarī. They are entertaining, and sometimes striking, but are devoid of true epic quality.³

¹ A very good example of a Shāhnāma with miniatures of the period of Fatḥ 'Alī Shāh was sold at Christie's on 21 July 1971, lot 121.
³ I saw this manuscript, an heirloom in the family of Dr Vesal of Shiraz
The Shāhnāma and Persian painting have always been mutually complementary. On the one hand, as we have seen, a survey of manuscript copies of the epic provides a panorama of Persian painting in all its aspects, and, on the other, it is through Persian painting that, even without a knowledge of the Persian language, we can gain a real insight into, and appreciation of, the spirit of the Shāhnāma itself. All the paintings we have been considering combine to show the Persian artist as an illustrator par excellence. A successful illustration must above all things be clear and straightforward, depicting the subject or incident selected in the most effective manner possible, and this is, throughout, the aim and object of the Persian painter. European critics often find this simple fact difficult to accept. They are not satisfied unless they can discover some abstruse symbolism or spiritual message, adducing as precedent the abundant symbolism, erotic and otherwise, that we are encouraged to detect in Indian painting. But in Persian painting my own feeling is that such a quest is vain. Persian painters were simply doing the job for which they were paid; they were not, consciously, expressing their own personalities or grinding some metaphysical axe. Their vocation was to give pleasure to their patrons and, incidentally, to us latter-day admirers of their work. Few would deny that in this unassuming and generous aim they succeeded, and continue to succeed, with consummate mastery.

To sum up: fourteenth-century Shāhnāma illustrations of the Mongol period are often magnificent, but most are marred by the alien physical characteristics of their patrons. In the Timurid period of the fifteenth century on the other hand, and especially in the school of Shiraz, we find works of timeless and truly epic quality. The miniatures in Safawid manuscripts of the poem, after a splendid start, tend to become over-courteously and elaborate, and in the seventeenth century partake of the elegant decadence inseparable from the style of Rizā-i ʿAbbāsī. The eighteenth century is a blank; and under the Qājārs in the nineteenth century the residual spark is quenched in ill-conceived efforts at westernization.

Let us conclude by looking once more at what have always seemed to me the most splendid representations of Rustam the national hero and his charger Rakhsh in the whole of Persian art (fig. 20). The hero, a magnificent figure in complete panoply of tiger-skin and leopard’s head, the latter here surmounted, uniquely (a descendant of the poet), at his house in 1964. It was subsequently acquired from him by the former Empress Farah, but its present whereabouts are unknown.
and most effectively, with a towering sevenfold plume, drags his opponent from the saddle; and Rakhsh, his mane bristling fiercely, tackles a marauding lion while his master sleeps. The painter was in all probability the great Sulțān Muḥammad in the flower of his youthful vigour, and his Rustam can match any Greek Heracles from the Aegina pediment or a black-figure vase by Exekias. The destruction of the Leipzig painting in the last war must rank in the minds of all lovers of the art as a tragedy on a par with the dismemberment of the Demotte and Houghton manuscripts.