THE BÜSTÂN OF SA'DĪ: AN ILLUSTRATED PERSIAN MANUSCRIPT DATED 850/1446

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INTRODUCTION

Among the notable items acquired in recent years by the Department of Oriental Manuscripts and Printed Books is a finely calligraphed and illuminated mid-fifteenth-century poetical manuscript in Persian (Or. 14237), containing three miniature paintings. Despite their slightly damaged condition these miniatures are of particular significance for the study of what is an interesting phase in the stylistic development of Persian painting. They belong to a very small group, dating from the 1440s, in which elements associated with the style prevalent at Shiraz (in southern Persia) are intermingled with certain features characteristic of the work produced at Herat and Samarkand (in the north-east, and beyond the borders of modern Iran). Although in recent years several distinguished scholars have written on the Persian painting of this period, certain aspects of the subject merit further study; the style represented in Or. 14237 is one of them. Miss Titley’s presentation and analysis of the miniatures in this manuscript, which follows, is a significant contribution towards this end.

The text contained in the newly acquired manuscript is one of the best-known classics of Persian literature: the Büstân (meaning ‘Herb Garden’ or ‘Orchard’) of Sa’dî of Shiraz (c.1200?–c.1292). The Büstân is a poem comprising some 4,000 couplets in which Sa’dî skilfully and elegantly illustrates numerous maxims and ethical principles, using stories and anecdotes. Here, as also in Sa’dî’s equally celebrated Gulistân—a rather similar work, this time in prose interspersed with verses—it is sometimes difficult to distinguish fact from fiction. So entertaining, however, is the content of the work and so brilliant its diction (albeit much of the latter is inevitably lost in translation) that this is unlikely to detract from the enjoyment of anyone reading the Büstân, which is arguably one of the more ‘accessible’ works of all classical Islamic literature for the Western reader. At least five complete and seven partial English translations of the Büstân have been published; their style and accuracy vary enormously. The best overall, and also the most recent, is that by G. M. Wickens, which contains a valuable introduction and notes. Inscriptions contained in manuscripts, if correctly interpreted, can often provide valuable evidence to the art historian. In the case of our new Büstân manuscript, however, there is relatively little to go on. The colophon on fol. 138r (fig. 1) gives the date of copying as ghurra (first day) of the month of Jumâdâ ɹ-sânî 850, equivalent to 29 March 1446. The
remainder of the inscription is in Arabic rhymed prose and can be rendered thus: ‘I have copied some homilies from Shaykh Sa’dî; when you read them after I am gone, pray for me.’ Beneath the colophon is another pious inscription in Arabic, added later in an unrefined ta’liq hand. A further inscription, in the top right-hand corner of fol. 1r, records the acquisition of the manuscript by an individual of whose name only the last three letters are discernible; various other inscriptions and seal impressions on fols. 1r and 1v have been deliberately obscured at some point in time, as is so often the case. All of these inscriptions and impressions have an Ottoman Turkish appearance. Finally, the foliate Kufic writing in the illuminated headpiece (sarlawh) on folio 1v reads: Allāh wa r-Rasūl (‘God and the Envoy [of God]’). Although these pious formulae are less informative than scholars might wish, the style and format of the manuscript’s ornamentation enable it to be assigned with confidence to southern Iran, and with near certainty to Shiraz.
Besides the miniatures and illumination, which constitute the manuscript’s main interest, there are one or two additional features worth mentioning. The calligraphy of the text is executed in an excellent nastā’liq hand, fifteen lines per page (plus catchwords), within text frames and columns in gold, black, and blue. The 138 folios, measuring 192 × 117 mm. (text area 130 × 65 mm.), are of polished laid paper of good quality; the upper margins are faintly damp-stained, with a few small repairs. Each episode heading is contained in a panel which is decorated with cross-hatching and roundels. Distinctively Ottoman Turkish are the mauve-pink endpapers, gold-sprinkled and with gold border lines, and the brownish maroon binding and flap decorated with chain-link borders and gilt stamped medallions.

NOTES ON THE MINIATURES

The three miniatures in this manuscript of the Būstān of Sa’dī belong to a rare group, all dating from the 1440s, which combine the delicacy of the work of Herat artists of the 1420s and 1430s with the somewhat more rugged and earthy style of Shiraz miniatures of the same period. The acquisition of this copy of the Būstān is in line with the policy of the Department of Oriental Manuscripts and Printed Books of filling gaps in the collection of illustrated Persian manuscripts of periods and styles that are either unrepresented or which form links that tie one period or style in with another. Although a certain amount of damage has been inflicted on the Būstān miniatures at some time, chiefly by the deliberate erasing of facial features, this does not detract from their art-historical importance, particularly as the manuscript has a colophon (fol. 138v) bearing a date equivalent to AD 1446.

The fifteenth century was one of the most brilliant periods of Persian painting, during which descendants of Tīmūr (Tamerlane) were noted patrons. They included his son Shāhrukh (d. 1447) and grandsons Iskandar Sultan (d. 1414), Bāysunghur (d. 1433), and Ibrāhīm Sultan (d. 1435). Both Iskandar Sultan and Ibrāhīm Sultan were patrons of academies at Shiraz, Shāhrukh and his son Bāysunghur (until his early death in 1433) at Herat. During the period of Ibrāhīm Sultan’s patronage at Shiraz, and for some years beyond his death in 1435, the styles of Shiraz and Herat were separate and distinguishable. By 1440, when some artists had moved from Shiraz to work at Herat, Shiraz elements began to be apparent in Herat miniatures; early examples can be discerned on a small scale in some miniatures in the Royal Asiatic Society’s magnificent Shāhnāma (MS. 239) of c.1440. Artists were continuing to work at Shiraz in the 1440s and the Topkapi Sarayi Museum Library at Istanbul has an interesting group of illustrated manuscripts of this period, some of which were copied and illustrated at Shiraz and some at Herat.4

In the recently acquired Būstān, the characteristics of the two styles are interwoven. One interesting decorative feature (fol. 67v) is the use of small illuminated triangles, a Shiraz characteristic seen in the exquisite Iskandar Sultan miscellany (BL Add. 27261).
This manuscript has decorated triangular ‘thumb-pieces’ on every folio. The same kind of decoration was used in manuscripts copied and illustrated for Ibrāhīm Sultan (d. 1435) at Shiraz and became generally adopted and extensively used for verse divisions by artists working in the Herat and later styles. The illumination in the Būstān, of the shamsa (fol. 1v) (fig. 2) and the ‘unvān, or heading (fol. 1v) (fig. 3), is particularly fine and a forerunner of late fifteenth-century Herat illumination in which black, as well as blue, was used to such effect as a background to arabesque designs.

As far as the styles of painting are concerned, the miniature on fol. 60v (fig. 5) has the strongest Shiraz elements, including the high horizon, circular plants, distinctive red parasol, and, in particular, the type of horse. Horses such as this, with large limbs and hoofs, broad chests and ears laid back, appear consistently in Shiraz-style miniatures from the time of Ibrāhīm Sultan until the late 1440s, and are quite different in conformation.
from the elegant horses seen in Herat miniatures. Some of the plants have earlier Herat characteristics such as the rounded tree from which spiky branches stand out (fol. 29v) (fig. 4) and the introduction of day-lilies into the somewhat barren landscape.

The British Library collection of illustrated Persian manuscripts provides a very interesting overall representation of the styles of the fifteenth century, particularly those of Shiraz and Herat and their provincial offshoots. Ranging from the beautiful miscellany or ‘pocket encyclopedia’ (Add. 27261) produced for Iskandar Sultan in 1410-11, right through the century to the superb work of the later Herat period of Sultan Ḥusayn (d. 1506), it includes both ‘court’ and provincial work. Some of the manuscripts, although not in the same de luxe category as those copied and illustrated at the more famous and wealthy academies, are nevertheless very important links in the Shiraz/Herat chain.
Fig. 4. Qızıl Arslan and the sage. Or. 14237, fol. 29r
stretching across the sixteenth century. For instance, an illustrated copy of the *Khamsa* of Nizāmī (Or. 13802) dated Herat, 1421, is one of the earliest known manuscripts produced for Bāysunghur, who, at this date, was setting up his academy at Herat, while another manuscript of the same work (Or. 12856) is illustrated in the distinctive Shiraz style associated with the patronage of Bāysunghur's brother, Ibrāhīm Sultan. The latest acquisition, Or. 14237, the *Būstān* of Sa'dī, is very important not only because it demonstrates the confluence of the two styles but also because it points the way to the development of Persian miniature painting in the second half of the fifteenth century. Manuscripts of the latter period in the British Library are as interesting as those of the first half of the century. They represent the brilliant but all too brief period of patronage by Pir Būdāq (d. 1465) at Shiraz and Baghdad and the styles of the early Turkman patrons in the 1460s, as well as the splendid Court Turkman manuscripts and the somewhat pedestrian commercial Turkman manuscripts of the 1480s and 1490s. At the same time, from 1469 to his death in 1506, Sultan Husayn was a renowned patron of literature and the arts at Herat, a period represented in the British Library by a magnificent copy of the *Khamsa* of Nizāmī (Or. 6810) dated 1494. Early in the sixteenth century the Court Turkman and the Herat styles merged when artists and craftsmen moved to Tabriz to work for Shah Ismā'īl, and manuscripts such as the ‘Houghton’ *Shāhnāma*, and the British Library's equally renowned *Khamsa* of Nizāmī (Or. 2265) of 1539-43, remain as supreme examples of their work.

All three miniatures in the *Būstān* illustrate unusual subjects. They appear on fols. 29r, 60v, and 68r, whilst fol. 132v, which has been left blank, was probably intended for an illustration to an incident from the story of Yusuf and Zulaykha (Joseph and Potiphar's wife) which occurs in the text.

Folio 29r (fig. 4), miniature within gold-ruled borders, 14.2 x 8.8 cm. The story of Qizil Arslān, who was proud of his fortress and sought praise for it from a visiting sage. The sage did not consider it a matter for pride and told Qizil Arslān that the building would fall into other hands as others had owned it before him. In the miniature Qizil Arslān is looking down on the sage from an upper room in the finely decorated building. The landscape includes a typical Herat-style tree, with a day-lily at its foot, set against the hilly background associated with Shiraz painting.

Folio 60v (fig. 5), lacking gold-ruled lines, 12.8 x 9.2 cm. A king and his bodyguard passed a village headman and his son. In the face of such splendour, the father became overcome with fear and his son asked him why he, a headman, should tremble before a king. The father replied that he was a great man only in his own village. This miniature includes the distinctive Shiraz features of large horses, red parasol held over the king, and the circular plants in the landscape.

Folio 68r (fig. 6), 13.0 x 7.5 cm. The story of Jesus (‘Īsā), the self-righteous man, and the sinner. The artist has placed the latter out in the margin on the left-hand side and the pages have probably been cut as the man's back and right arm are not on the page. This convention of placing a figure, often a servant, in the border outside the body of the
Fig. 5. The king and the village headman. Or. 14237, fol. 60v
Fig. 6. Jesus, the sinner and the self-righteous man. Or. 14237, fol. 68v
painting is a Shiraz feature, although comparatively rare. Here, again, the landscape combines Herat and Shiraz characteristics, the tree on the left and the day-lily of the former style, the high horizon and the interwoven cypress and flowering trees of the latter. The story concerns a sinner who asked pardon of his sins from Jesus. The self-righteous man held himself aloof from the sinner and Jesus told him that a sinner who repented before God was better than a pious man making a display of devotion.

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1 Sotheby’s sale catalogue, Fine Oriental Manuscripts and Miniatures, 15 October 1984 (lot 301); fol. 1v is reproduced in colour.


3 Morals Pointed and Tales Adorned: the Bûstân of Sa’dî (Leiden, 1974).


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