



The Technique of “Image-Making” in the Book-Decoration of Manuscripts in the Malek National Library and Museum Institute



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Abstract

This study examines the art of “image-making” in Iranian manuscript decoration, with particular emphasis on the Timurid and Safavid periods. This book-ornamentation technique, which emerged within a relatively short historical span, is mainly observed in deluxe and high-value manuscripts. The present research, conducted with a descriptive–analytical approach, seeks to identify the structural styles of this technique, the artists involved, its strengths and weaknesses in different periods, and the trajectory of its development. The corpus under examination comprises six manuscripts housed at the Malek National Library and Museum Institute, complemented by a review of relevant library and museum collections as well as foreign auction catalogues. The findings indicate that the technique of image-making became common from the late Timurid era, reached its zenith in the early Safavid period, and gradually fell into oblivion during the Qajar era. Artists such as Mawlana Kopak and Sultan Ibrahim Mirza played a significant role in the development and dissemination of this technique. The execution of image-making was based on tracing, transferring designs, and creating positive and negative spaces in the margins of the folios. The motifs employed include trees, flowers, arabesques, and domestic, wild, and mythical animals.

Keywords: Image-making technique, Book illumination, Mawlana Kopak, Sultan Ibrahim Mirza, Shah Tahmasp Safavi.

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Introduction

The art of book-decoration occupies a central place in the visual culture of the Islamic world, and within it, Iranian manuscript production holds a particularly distinguished position. From the advent of Islam through subsequent dynastic periods, the ornamentation of books evolved from relatively modest embellishments into a sophisticated and highly specialized art form. Among these periods, the Timurid era marks a turning point, often regarded as the apex of Persian manuscript illumination and calligraphic arts. The courtly environment of Herat, under Timurid patronage, transformed into a vibrant artistic hub, where painters, illuminators, calligraphers, and binders collaborated in organized workshops and royal manufactories.

Within this flourishing context, numerous innovations emerged in the realm of book-art, including novel approaches to page layout, marginal decoration, and the integration of pictorial elements with calligraphy and illumination. One of the noteworthy yet relatively less-studied innovations is the technique referred to as “image-making”. This technique can be considered a specialized form of marginal decoration and visual play, wherein motifs are created through careful tracing, transfer of designs, and manipulation of positive and negative spaces around the text.

Despite its visual impact and technical sophistication, the historical and artistic literature on image-making remains sparse. Only fragmentary information exists about its practitioners—such as the enigmatic Mawlana Kopak of Herat—and about its chronological development, stylistic variations, and geographical spread. As a result, key questions remain unanswered: Which artists and workshops were active in this technique? How did its formal language evolve from the Timurid to the Safavid periods? What were its technical strengths and limitations in practice, and why did it eventually decline and fall into disuse by the Qajar era?

The present study addresses these questions by focusing on a group of six manuscripts from the Malek National Library and Museum Institute, situating them within a broader comparative framework that includes external library, museum, and auction materials. In doing so, it seeks to expand both the quantitative data and the qualitative understanding of this relatively overlooked chapter in the history of Iranian book art.

Methodology

This research is conducted using a descriptive–analytical method, combining library-based and field-based approaches.

1. Corpus and Sampling

- o The primary corpus consists of six illuminated manuscripts preserved in the Malek National Library and Museum Institute. These manuscripts were purposively selected because they contain clear and representative examples of the image-making technique in their margins or decorative panels.
- o In order to contextualize these examples chronologically and stylistically, the study also reviews comparable specimens documented in library and museum collections as well as foreign auction catalogues, where manuscripts with similar marginal techniques and attributions appear.

2. Data Collection

- o Field observation was carried out through direct examination of the six Malek manuscripts. High-resolution visual inspection focused on the margins, page layouts, decorative panels, and technical details such as line quality, pigment application, and evidence of tracing or transfer.
- o Documentary research included the consultation of catalogues, prior scholarly works on Iranian manuscript illumination, and published images of relevant manuscripts. Particular attention was given to mentions of Mawlana Kopak, Sultan Ibrahim Mirza, and other artists associated with Timurid and Safavid book-art workshops.

3. Analytical Approach

- o The analysis proceeded in three main steps:
 - a. Formal analysis of motifs, composition, and the use of positive/negative space in the margins.
 - b. Technical analysis of execution methods, including tracing lines, transfer marks, layering of pigments, and the relationship between the text block and marginal decoration.
 - c. Historical-contextual analysis, relating stylistic and technical features to specific periods (late Timurid, early Safavid, later Safavid, Qajar) and, where possible, to particular workshops or patrons.

4. Comparative Evaluation

- o The Malek manuscripts were compared with documented examples from other collections to trace continuities and shifts in the image-making technique over time.



- o Strengths and weaknesses of the technique in different periods were evaluated based on criteria such as technical finesse, visual integration with the main text, and innovation in motif design.

Discussion

1. Emergence of the Image-Making Technique in the Late Timurid Period

The available evidence suggests that the image-making technique emerged during the late Timurid period, particularly in the artistic milieu of Herat. This was a time when manuscript production reached an unprecedented level of sophistication. In the Timurid court ateliers, artists were encouraged to experiment with new compositional strategies and decorative solutions. The technique of image-making appears to be one such innovation, arising from a desire to enrich the visual experience of the manuscript without overcrowding the central text or miniature paintings.

In its earliest manifestations, image-making is characterized by relatively restrained and linear motifs placed in the margins of the page. The designs often feature slender trees, delicate floral scrolls, and simple animal silhouettes, carefully arranged so as not to disturb the readability of the text. The emphasis is on the play between positive and negative space: motifs may appear as dark shapes set against a light background or, conversely, as white silhouettes emerging from colored or patterned grounds. This visual duality lends a subtle dynamism to the page and reflects a sophisticated understanding of compositional balance.

2. Technical Foundations: Tracing, Transfer, and Spatial Design

The core of the image-making technique lies in its technical process. The study indicates that scribes and illuminators relied on tracing and transfer methods to reproduce motifs with precision across multiple folios. Preliminary drawings were likely made on separate sheets or templates, which could then be transferred to the manuscript margins using pouncing, light tracing, or direct graphite or ink transfer. Once the outlines were established, artists manipulated positive and negative spaces to enhance the visual effect. In some cases, figures and motifs were filled with solid color or intricate internal detailing; in others, they were left as unpainted silhouettes within a tinted field, allowing the color of the paper or underlying wash to define their shape. This interplay generates a distinctive aesthetic that differs from conventional illumination, where motifs are typically constructed through additive ornament rather than through subtraction or reserved space.

Spatially, the technique often respects the rectangular framework of the text block, placing motifs along the vertical margins or within narrow horizontal bands. However, in more ambitious examples, elements extend diagonally or curve around the corners, creating a sense of movement that subtly guides the reader's eye around the page.

3. Zenith in the Early Safavid Period: Patronage and Innovation

The early Safavid period marks the peak of the image-making technique. Under rulers such as Shah Tahmasp, royal patronage of the arts of the book intensified, culminating in celebrated projects like the illustrated Shahnamehs and richly illuminated Qur'ans and poetic anthologies. Within this flourishing environment, image-making evolved from a relatively modest marginal embellishment into a more elaborate and conceptually integrated decorative practice.

The role of artistic patrons such as Sultan Ibrahim Mirza, along with court-associated artists including Mawlana Kopak, appears critical in this developmental phase. These figures fostered highly specialized workshops where innovation in technique and style was actively encouraged. The manuscripts examined from the Malek collection show a marked increase in the complexity of image-making motifs during this period. Marginal designs now incorporate more intricate vegetal arabesques, composite floral scrolls, and a broader range of animal figures, including horses, deer, birds, and fantastical creatures drawn from the repertoire of Persian myth and literature.

Another notable development is the closer integration of image-making with the thematic content of the text. In some cases, marginal motifs echo the narrative or poetic imagery found in the main text—such as hunting scenes, garden settings, or mythological beasts—thus creating a subtle dialogue between text and ornament. This integration reinforces the narrative or symbolic content of the manuscript while preserving the autonomy of the marginal decoration as an artistic field.

4. Strengths and Limitations Across Periods

From a technical perspective, the image-making technique demonstrates several strengths. First, its reliance on tracing and transfer allows for high consistency and reproducibility of motifs, which is advantageous in



large, multi-folio manuscripts. Second, the emphasis on positive/negative space creates a distinct visual identity that differentiates these margins from standard gilding or painted borders. Third, the technique can be adapted to varying levels of complexity, from simple silhouettes to densely ornamented compositions, making it versatile for different types of manuscripts and budgetary constraints.

However, the technique also has limitations. The dependence on precise tracing and careful alignment means that any error in transfer or execution is readily visible, particularly where motifs intersect with the text frame. Additionally, because image-making often uses reserved or silhouetted forms, it requires paper and pigment of good quality to avoid visual dullness or uneven contrast. Over time, wear, discoloration, or damage to the margins can significantly diminish the legibility of the negative-space motifs. Moreover, the technique's highly specialized nature may have restricted its use predominantly to deluxe manuscripts and courtly commissions. This specialization, while enhancing prestige, likely limited its broader dissemination among more modest workshops and commercial scribes.

5. Gradual Decline and Disappearance in the Qajar Era

By the Qajar period, the image-making technique appears to have gradually fallen into relative obscurity. Several factors may explain this decline. The aesthetic preferences of Qajar patrons increasingly turned toward European-inspired realism, lithographic reproduction, and new forms of pictorial representation. Traditional illumination continued to flourish in certain contexts, but highly specialized techniques like image-making, which demanded intensive manual labor and a high degree of technical discipline, became less central to the visual language of manuscripts.

Furthermore, the changing economic and cultural landscape—shifts in patronage, the spread of printing technology, and the transformation of reading practices—reduced the demand for the kinds of luxury manuscripts that had previously provided a natural home for such refined decorative techniques. As a result, image-making survived mostly as an echo in a handful of late specimens, ultimately becoming one of the many “lost” or marginal practices within the broader history of Iranian book art.

Conclusion

The study of the six manuscripts from the Malek National Library and Museum Institute, supplemented by comparative examination of external collections and auction records, demonstrates that the image-making technique represents a distinct and historically significant chapter in the evolution of Iranian book decoration. Emerging in the late Timurid milieu of Herat and reaching full maturity in the early Safavid period under the patronage of figures such as Shah Tahmasp and Sultan Ibrahim Mirza, this technique combined technical ingenuity—through tracing, transfer, and the manipulation of positive and negative space—with a rich vocabulary of vegetal, animal, and mythical motifs.

Artists such as Mawlana Kopak played a key role in developing and disseminating this art, contributing to the visual identity of some of the most refined manuscripts of their time. Yet the very specialization and labor-intensiveness of image-making, together with broader cultural and technological changes, led to its gradual decline and eventual marginalization by the Qajar period.

By documenting and analyzing these surviving examples, the present research not only fills an important gap in the scholarship on Iranian illumination but also underscores the need for further systematic study of lesser-known techniques. Such investigations can deepen our understanding of workshop practices, patterns of patronage, and the complex interplay between text and image in the Islamic manuscript tradition.

