Research

Aesthetic Analysis of a Selected Edition of the Shahnameh "Preserved in the Library of Congress"

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Abstract

As one of the ancient and valuable texts of Persian literature, Ferdowsi's Shahnameh contains epic and historical concepts. Ferdowsi's Shahnameh is an unparalleled work that has been highly regarded by painters in the field of Iranian painting, and the art of painting is a factor in the permanence of meaning through its aesthetic manifestations. The Shahnameh under study is called "Muntakhab-i Shāh'nāmah-i Ḥakīm Abū al-Qāsim Firdawsī, ʿalayhi al-raḥmah va al-maghfirah." or "Selected Shahnameh of Hakim Abu Qasim Firdawsī, ʿalayhi al-rahma va al-maghfirah" and was painted in Jumada al-Awwal, 1027 AH. This manuscript is now kept in the digital section of the Library of Congress in the United States. This incomplete manuscript is illustrated on ninety-two "double-leaf" leaves and includes 3 miniatures. The research method is based on the descriptive-analytical research approach and the method of collecting information through library and documentary data. The results of the research, based on the examination of the characteristics of the manuscript, show that it was an adaptation of the methods and patterns common in drawing the Shahnameh in royal workshops, and consequently, it does not have the elegance of royal manuscripts to the highest degree.

Keywords: Shahnameh of Ferdowsi, Selected Shahnamehs, Library of Congress, Painting.

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1. Introduction

The *Shahnameh* (Book of Kings) by Abolqasem Ferdowsi stands as one of the most ancient and invaluable texts of Persian literature, encapsulating epic and historical narratives that have profoundly influenced Iranian cultural identity. Ferdowsi's masterpiece is unparalleled in its literary grandeur, and it has consistently served as a primary source of inspiration for Persian miniature painters throughout the Islamic era. The art of Persian painting, or *negargari*, has played a crucial role in perpetuating the meaning and cultural significance of these epic tales through its aesthetic qualities. This study focuses on a specific, previously unexamined manuscript of the *Shahnameh*, preserved in the digital collection of the Library of Congress in the United States, under the title *Muntakhab-i Shahnamah-i Hakim Abu al-Qasim Firdawsi* (Selected Shahnameh). This incomplete manuscript, dated to Jumada al-Awwal, 1027 AH (1618 AD), consists of ninety-two folios (184 pages) and contains three half-page miniature paintings. The investigation adopts a descriptive-analytical research approach, utilizing library and documentary data to analyze the manuscript's structural and decorative features.

The aesthetic understanding of any artwork is a subjective process, yet it is governed by principles that allow for logical interpretation. Familiarity with artistic techniques and a perceptive eye enable a deeper appreciation of an artwork's layers of meaning. Recognizing the contexts surrounding an artwork's creation deepens our comprehension of its themes. An artist's choice of subject matter reveals their engagement with the world around them. Ultimately, the formal qualities of a painting, composed of visual elements and composition, construct its overall form. The manuscript under study provides a unique opportunity to explore these elements within the context of Safavid-era book arts. While the Safavid period is renowned for producing some of the finest illustrated manuscripts in Islamic art, where calligraphy, illumination, and painting coalesced into harmonious masterpieces, this particular copy was produced outside the main political and cultural centers of Iran, offering a distinct lens through which to view the diffusion and adaptation of established artistic conventions. The Library of Congress itself, one of the world's largest libraries, houses a vast collection of global materials, including significant Persian manuscripts, making its collection a critical resource for such research.

2. Research Methodology

The methodology of this research is based on a qualitative descriptive-analytical approach. Data were primarily gathered from library and documentary sources, as well as the virtual library databases of the Library of Congress. The statistical population of the study consists of the three miniature paintings contained within the manuscript. The analysis was conducted in two main phases. The first phase involved a comprehensive structural examination of the manuscript, covering its physical attributes such as calligraphy, paper, binding, and general decorative elements. The second phase focused on a detailed analysis of the visual and decorative features of each miniature individually. This analysis considered elements such as composition, color palette, figure drawing, landscape elements, and their relationship to the accompanying text. Furthermore, to contextualize the findings and assess the manuscript's stylistic affinities, the visual characteristics of these miniatures were compared with analogous scenes from other well-known Safavid and Timurid manuscripts, including the *Khamsa* of Nizami and the *Shahnameh* of Mohammad Juki. This comparative approach aimed to identify the sources, influences, and departures in the artistic language of the selected manuscript.

3. Discussion

3.1. General Structure and Physical Attributes of the Manuscript

The manuscript is a significant example of a Safavid-era codex, even in its incomplete state. It is written in a beautiful, elegant *Nastaliq* script, a calligraphic style that evolved from a combination of *Ta'liq* and *Naskh* and became highly favored for Persian literary works from the early 9th century AH onwards. The scribe, as identified in the colophon, is Seyyed Ali, son of Seyyed Hashem. The manuscript's final page contains the completion statement: "Tammat al-kitab bi-'awn al-malik al-wahhab... was completed on Thursday, the 14th of Jumada al-Awwal, in the year 1027, at the hand of the humble and poor Seyyed Ali, son of Seyyed Hashem." This explicit colophon provides a precise date for the manuscript's creation. The paper is described as cream-colored, with an approximate size of 17.5 x 30.7 cm (small folio size). The manuscript employs page numbering through a traditional Persian method known as *pa-pageyi* or *radeh*, where the first word of the recto (right side) of the next folio is written in a smaller

script at the bottom left of the even-numbered page. This technique was used to maintain the proper sequence of pages.

3.2. General Decorative Elements

The manuscript exhibits a range of decorative elements intended to enhance its visual appeal. Each page of text is framed within a ruled border, a practice that became increasingly common after the Timurid period. In this manuscript, the margins are defined by three consecutive color bands, arranged from the inner to the outer: blue, gold, and gold, with a final black ink outline. The illumination of the manuscript includes an elaborate *sarloh* (headpiece) at the beginning of the text, a common feature in Persian manuscripts. The *sarloh* is decorated with gilded arabesque designs, incorporating elements like medallions, star-shaped motifs (*shamsa*), and intricate interlocking geometric and floral patterns in triangles, squares, and rectangles. The use of fine detailing and the application of rich, solid colors such as gold, lapis lazuli, red, and black are characteristic of the Safavid illumination style. A colored title piece often accompanies the *sarloh*. The binding, which is original to the manuscript, is made of olive-green leather with decorative embossed patterns, including two designs in dark red and three in gold. It features a red leather doublure and is ornamented with a central medallion (*tranj*) and corner pieces (*sartranj*), decorated with floral motifs.

3.3. Analysis of the Three Miniatures

3.3.1. Miniature 1: Kasra's Expedition to Rome to Battle the Caesar

This painting depicts a scene of conflict between the Sasanian king Kasra and the Roman Caesar. The composition is characterized by a tripartite division of the page, with rectangular text panels at the top and bottom, and the main illustration occupying the central, larger panel. The scene is crowded with numerous figures engaged in battle, resulting in a composition that is described as somewhat chaotic. The background for the text is a light cream color, while the painting's backdrop features a blue sky with knotted clouds, outlined in red, and a yellow and brown landscape. A vibrant palette of bright blues, reds, greens, yellows, and browns is used for the clothing of the warriors and the horses, effectively focusing the viewer's attention on the action. Notably, the landscape is not rendered realistically, but features stylized rock formations with considerable detail, particularly in the layering and shading of the rocks. The horses are depicted with a degree of naturalism and anatomical precision. The artist has paid significant attention to details such as weapons, armor, and other military accoutrements. The lack of depth perspective, the use of stylized plant motifs, and the overall decorative quality are characteristic of Persian miniature painting. The painting shows a strong stylistic resemblance to a miniature from a *Khamsa* of Nizami, dated around 1540 AD and housed in the Royal Scottish Museum in Edinburgh, which depicts the battle between Bahram Chobineh and Khosrow Parviz. The similarities in the rendering of clouds, the pose of the figures, and the overall design suggest a common artistic template or workshop tradition. However, the *Shahnameh* miniature demonstrates less refinement than the known royal workshop examples.

3.3.2. Miniature 2: The Combat of Nushrad and the Fall of Nushzad

The second miniature illustrates a story of hand-to-hand combat from Ferdowsi's epic. Unlike the first, this painting focuses on a limited number of figures, allowing the natural environment to play a more prominent role in the visual narrative. The composition follows the same layout as the first, with horizontal text panels above and below the central illustration. The background of the illustration features a blue sky and a brown, earthy landscape. The main combatants wear battle attire, and their clothing, along with that of their horses, features reds and greens, drawing the eye to the central conflict. The artist has again shown care in the rendering of the rocks, using a stylized greenish hue that imparts an unnatural, yet decorative, quality to the landscape. The figures and their horses are rendered with a certain level of precision, but the smaller details of the story are less dominant. The surrounding plant and floral motifs are more summarily depicted, lacking the detailed attention seen in the first miniature. This scene is remarkably similar in composition and overall appearance to a painting from a *Shahnameh* manuscript attributed to Mohammad Juki, held at the Royal Asiatic Society in London, and dated to around 1440 AD. The Juki *Shahnameh* is renowned for its exceptional refinement and luminous colors. While the Library of Congress miniature uses a comparable composition, particularly in the depiction of the landscape as a dramatic, stylized backdrop with spongy, unnaturalistic rock formations, it falls short of the technical brilliance and visual clarity of the Herat school exemplar.

3.3.3. Miniature 3: The Battle of Talhand and Gau, Princes of Hind

The third painting depicts the battle between the half-brothers Talhand and Gau, who fought for the throne of India. The main scene shows the two princes engaged in combat, with their armies organized in orderly ranks behind them. The composition is highly theatrical, with the soldiers rendered in a somewhat stiff and lifeless manner. The scene is more static, with the landscape being subdued. The predominant colors used are matte green and a pale, violet-like purple, which dominate the visual impression of the painting. The warriors' helmets are also painted green. The artist has not used shading or modeling, resulting in flat, opaque colors. The forms are outlined with curved lines. The composition resembles the famous scene of the great battle between the armies of Keykhosrow and Afrasiyab, as depicted in the renowned Baysunghur *Shahnameh* (Herat school). The Baysunghur manuscript is known for its meticulous detail and vibrant, luminous colors, representing the pinnacle of Timurid book painting. In contrast, the Library of Congress miniature is a more simplified and less elegant adaptation of a similar battle scene. It lacks the dynamism and narrative richness of its counterpart, with a more limited palette and less sophisticated figure drawing. In the Baysunghur version, the natural elements, such as plants and trees, often break the frame of the image, adding to the dynamism, while this manuscript shows a more contained approach.

4. Conclusion

The manuscript of the *Muntakhab-i Shahnamah* housed at the Library of Congress is a significant, though incomplete, example of Persian book production from the Safavid era, dated to 1027 AH (1618 AD). The structural and decorative features of the manuscript, including its *Nastaliq* script, detailed colophon, traditional page-numbering method, gold-ruled margins, illuminated headpiece, and embossed leather binding, provide valuable insights into the material culture of the period. The analysis of its three miniature paintings reveals a clear attempt by the artist to emulate the established compositional models and artistic conventions prevalent in the royal workshops of the time. The narratives chosen for illustration, such as the wars of Kasra and the battles of Talhand and Gau, are typical of the epic subjects favored for luxury editions. However, a key finding of this study is that this particular copy does not possess the supreme refinement, exquisite detail, and vibrant color sophistication that characterizes the finest royal manuscripts. While the artist demonstrates competence in figure composition and landscape design, drawing upon established motifs, the execution is often less polished, the colors are flatter, and the overall complexity is reduced. The visual comparisons made in this paper strongly suggest that the artist was working from or inspired by the same visual traditions that produced masterpieces like the Baysunghur *Shahnameh* and the *Khamsa* of Nizami, but at a lower level of artistic accomplishment. The presence of such a manuscript outside the main cultural centers of Iran underscores the dissemination and adaptation of Persian courtly artistic models across a wider geographical area. The study confirms that the 'Selected Shahnameh' is a valuable document for understanding the diffusion of royal artistic standards and the varying degrees of their realization in provincial or less affluent workshop contexts.