

Spring In Persian Manuscripts

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Abstract

The present article is based on published examples of the most famous illustrations of Persian manuscripts. Among these, nearly 140 illustrations from more than 70 manuscripts depict one or more aspects of spring and their origins range from the last decade of the 14th century to the third decade of the 17th. Iranian collective memory traces back the distinct particularities of spring to the era of Kaykavos, and Ferdowsi has recorded them in his hymn of the Musician Div of Mazandaran:

Ke Māzandarān shahr-e mā yād bād
Hamisheh bar o boomash ābād bād
Ke dar boostānash hamisheh gol ast
Be kooh andaroon lāleh o sonbol ast
Havā khoshgovār o zamin por negār
Na garm o na sard o hamisheh bahār

Some of these particularities can be depicted and some others are to be felt. Such pictorial particularities as flower-filled gardens and mountain tulips and hyacinths have been directly depicted in Persian manuscripts and remained unchanged within them. By the very existence of flowers in gardens, tulips and hyacinths on mountainsides and patterns on the ground, one can feel that the air is pleasant, neither hot nor cold, and that the season is spring.

The Iranian painter who, around the year 1430, illustrated Ferdowsi's Shahnameh in the Baysonqori library in Herat has relocated the eternal spring of Mazandaran, which the Musician Div praises in his hymn, to the feast of Kaykavos in the short-lived spring of southeastern Iran. In this picture, Kaykavos' throne is set in an ivory-colored plain ending in smooth rocks standing against a golden sky. The entire plain is covered with fine bushes freshly grown out of the earth. Here and there, up to the top of the rocks, such cultivated garden flowers as roses, narcissuses and white mallows are depicted amid violets, field poppies and other spring wildflowers.

On either side in the background of Kaykavoo's throne two evergreen trees extend unequally beyond the edge of the painting. In the distance between these two trees, along the vertical axis of the throne, an almond tree with white blossoms is visible. At a similar distance, a peach tree with pink blossoms stands beyond the plane tree, and beside it several branches of a tree whose clusters of fresh leaves are topped by diadems of tiny white flowers have entered into the frame of the image. In the space between the trees, on the golden background of the sky, birds of different colors are flying.

As this page of the *Shahnameh* constitutes a representation of spring in poetry and painting, it may be considered a turning point in the conventions of the image of spring in the Iranian collective memory, and it allows a search to be initiated before and after it for some or all of these particularities.

The Chronological Sequence of the Representation Of Spring in Manuscripts

Among the published illustrations of Persian manuscripts studied for this review, seven manuscripts dating back to the end of the 14th century (1360 to 1398) deal with the particularities of spring. One of these manuscripts was illustrated in Tabriz, another in Baghdad, and the five others in Shiraz or other cities of Fars province. In the manuscript of Tabriz, i.e., the *Kalileh va Demneh* created between 1360 and 1374 — now preserved in the library of the University of Istanbul —, two paintings, namely the *Unsuccessful Murder Attempt in the Bedroom* and the *Thief Caught in the Bedroom*, in which flowering trees are depicted in an aivan on the right hand side of the picture, follow the 14th century style of Tabriz and are deeply influenced by Chinese painting, whereas the manuscript of Baghdad and the five others bear typically Iranian features. Although all these six manuscripts were illustrated at the close of the 14th century, they have particularities which indicate that their illustrators abided strictly by the long-lasting conventions of southwestern Iranian painting.

Khaju-ye Kermani's *Khamseh* preserved in the British Museum was illustrated by Jonaid as-Soltani in Baghdad in 1396. Jonaid was a painter in the court of Soltan Ahmad Jalayer and his works denote his maturity and particular artistic skill. Although Jonaid's compositions are filled with innovations, such details as the blooming spring wildflowers in the plains of his *Arrival of Prince Hoday to the Palace of Princess Hodayun*, *The Fight Between Hoday and Hodayun*, and *The Episode of the Old Woman's Plea with Soltan Malekshah*, and the cultivated flowers and spring wildflowers in the garden where Hoday, Hodayun and their

attendants are gathered, are the same as those one sees in the paintings of the School of Shiraz.

One of the most amazing and beautiful images of spring in Persian painting, executed in Behbahan in 1398, is found in a poetic anthology preserved in the Museum of Turkish and Islamic Arts in Istanbul. The artist's boldness, refinement and skill in the composition and coloring of this work, with its tree trunks resembling flower stems and executed in red hues on the dark blue background of the sky and the yellow, violet and ochre hills, and its crowd of magpies with masterfully depicted long wagging tails sitting as an umbrella on the treetops, constitute an exceptional work in which every detail attests to the painter's vivid imagination.

Yet, on closer examination, we find many of these details in earlier works of southwestern Iran, including the tree trunks resembling flower stems, as exemplified in the Samak-e 'Ayyar manuscript preserved in Oxford, which dates back to 1330-1340 and was created in Fars, or the minister Qavam-ed-Din's Shahnameh preserved in Baltimore, which belongs to 1341. In view of these two manuscripts' painting style, one can guess that their illustrators were influenced by the mural paintings of Fars province, whose origins date back to pre-Islamic times. Another example of the magpies, sitting in an almost similar manner on treetops, occurs in the scene of The Mouse Saving the Cat in a Kalileh va Demneh manuscript painted in 1390, probably in Shiraz, now preserved in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris (Fig. 3). The feather-like leaves of the tree on the right hand side in the foreground of the spring scene in the Anthology of Behbahan are again visible in another illustration of the same Kalileh va Demneh manuscript (Belad and Irandokht Reaching the Palace), with the difference that the tree trunk in this scene is gnarled instead of smooth. A striking particularity of the illustrations of this Kalileh va Demneh manuscript is that one half of each image within a frame is accompanied by text, while the rest protrudes considerably into the wide margin of the page. For example, in the scene of Belad and Irandokht Reaching the Palace, the upper part of the palace is depicted above the first two lines of the text, in the top margin. The main part of the painting, after the first two lines, is laid out above fourteen other lines and occupies an area equivalent to that of five lines. The plain flanking of the palace protrudes by one third of the frame's width into the right hand side margin of the page, and the trees depicted in this area join the right hand side and top margins. In this plain, an

almond tree and a peach tree are shown blossoming, in a conventional representation of spring.

Three texts — the *Garshasbnameh* of Asadi Toosi, the *Shahanshahnameh*, i.e., the description of Timur's conquests, and the *Bahmannameh* of Iranshah — , all dated 799 AH and probably illustrated in Shiraz, are gathered in a single manuscript preserved in the British Museum in London. This manuscript, which contains images of spring, is said to have been among the presents prepared by the population of Shiraz to dissuade Timur from attacking their city.

From the period between the beginning of the 15th century and the time when spring was depicted in the *Baysonqori Shahnameh*, seven other valuable manuscripts have remained, each of which illustrates the conventions of spring depiction in the painting of this period. These are two literary anthologies, two copies of the *Kalileh va Demneh*, two copies of the poem *Homay va Hodayun* from the *Divan* of Khaju-ye Kermani, and a copy of the poem *Khosrow va Shirin* from Nezami's *Khamseh*.

A superb literary anthology compiled in Shiraz for Eskandar-Mirza, the grandson of Timur and governor of Fars in 1410, which is now preserved in the Gulbenkian Foundation in Lisbon, includes an interesting innovation in the representation of a plain in spring: In a two-page scene of *Prisoners Brought in Presence of Khosrow*, the ground is golden and the sun lapis lazuli. Spring flowers are brilliantly depicted on the golden ground and spring blossoms shine against the lapis lazuli sky.

Another literary anthology from the same period, also probably executed in Shiraz and now preserved in the British Museum in London, thus depicts spring in the scene of *Alexander Visiting the Cave-dwelling Saintly Man*: the text is laid out obliquely in the broad upper margin and the left half of the page. The dark sky forms a large triangle between the text and the curved upper edge of the hills. The central rock is topped by a fruit tree the twisting branches of which cover the entire triangular area of the sky and its blossoms appear as rain falling on a mountain.

A copy of the *Kalileh va Demneh* illustrated between 1410 and 1420, which belongs to the library of the Golestan Palace in Tehran, is considered worldwide as the most beautiful page in Iranian painting. The scene of *The Cow Shanzabeh in the Meadow*, depicted with a golden sky, a turquoise-colored plain speckled with freshly grown bushes, clusters of spring flowers,

and a silvery river bordered with grass covered with tiny white and violet flowers, exudes a magical purity.

On the right hand side, a reed clump and a tree with light and dark green leaves, both executed in the manner of the 14th century, are bent by the spring breeze toward the center of the image, attracting the viewer's eye towards the large floral cluster amid the plain, thereof to the beautiful bush at the top left corner at the boundary between the ground and the sky, and next to the large white mallow bunch at the bottom right of the picture, offering it a sweeping sight of the beautiful pleasures of spring. In the scene of *The Old Lion, the Fox and the Donkey*, the same golden sky is visible above an ivory-colored plain in which the lion is attacking the donkey. The main subject is framed by a silvery river at the bottom and the blossoming branches of two fruit trees on either side of the picture. Some of the flowers and plants of the previous picture are also present here, masterfully scattered in the empty spaces and indicating the presence of spring.

In another copy of the *Kalileh va Demneh*, produced in 1430 and preserved in the Topkapi Saray in Istanbul, the scene of *The Lion Tearing the Cow Apart* is inspired from the manuscripts in Paris and Tehran and the same conventions for the representation of spring are utilized. The innovation of the artists responsible for this copy lies in his coloring of the sky and rocks: here, the ivory-colored plain ends in turquoise-colored rocks of the same hue as that of the sky, with only a narrow greenish turquoise-colored strip separating them. The painter has used the same bluish turquoise he has used for the sky to show the relief of the plain.

A beautiful page from a copy of Khaju-ye Kermani's *Divan* produced in the first half of the 15th century in an unknown place is preserved in the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris. In this work, in the scene of *Homay and Homayun in a Garden*, one of the most important conventions of the period's painting, i.e., the representation of every element at its best, is clearly visible.

In the conventions of 15th century Persian painting, spring is considered the most beautiful season. Thus, whenever the painter has to depict an indoor scene, although his efforts are mainly aimed at recreating the interior scene, blossoming trees and flower bunches remind the viewer that the events are occurring in spring. An example of this arrangement is visible in two manuscripts from the first half of this century:

In the scene of Shapur Bringing Farhad to Shirin's Palace, in a copy of Nezami's Khamseh produced around 1420 in Tabriz and now preserved in the Freer Art Gallery in Washington, through the open window behind Shirin, located on the vertical axis of the picture, a blossoming tree is seen standing in the green grass of the garden. From each of the latticed windows on the right and left sides of the palace hall, a woman is looking inside and behind her a blossoming tree is visible.

In a scene of Khaju-ye Kermani's Homa va Hodayun created in the painting workshops of Baysonqor's library in Herat in 1427 and now preserved in the Staatsbibliothek in Vienna, spring is depicted outside the windows of the palace hall: in the scene of Homa Contemplating Princess Hodayun's Portrait Hanging on a Wall, three trees are visible outside three of the hall's windows. One of the trees has white blossoms, another pink ones, and the third has green leaves and branches of a rosebush beside it again evoke spring.

At the end of the 14th century, a current convention in Iranian painting is the representation of every element of a picture at its best: the sky is either golden or lapis lazuli, with a golden moon and stars, this being considered ideally beautiful. The ground is always depicted in daylight and in springtime, allowing flowers and plants to display their full beauty. The period in which almond, peach and other fruit trees are blossoming is short, but beautiful, so this beauty must be recorded. Fruit trees better display the beauty of their trunks and branches, and white and pink blossoms are particularly resplendent on golden and lapis lazuli backgrounds. These conventions are gradually completed and established in the works of Persian painters by the third decade of the 15th century, continuing until the mid-16th century, when a new trend emerges in book illustration.

This new trend can perhaps be termed a "display of skill". The compositions become elaborate and crowded, the number of characters depicted increases, the coloring acquires greater diversity and brightness, the painter begins depicting spring, summer and autumn elements together, and skillful execution of details becomes more important than the visual unity of the work. In other words, the illustration of Persian manuscripts begins to decline. •

In Basil Gray's Persian Painting, one reads: "[During Timur's campaigns] Many craftsmen were transplanted hither [to Samarqand] from the captured cities of Persia, including Shiraz and Baghdad in the same year 1393." (p. 65).

“For most of the rest of his [Shahrokh’s] life he lived at Herat when not campaigning, another centre where he had been governor since 1397, and to which he may have led back some of the artists and craftsmen removed to Samarqand by Timur.” (p. 80) “The reputed date of the foundation of Baysongor’s library is 1420, when he was sent as commander of a force to recover Tabriz from the Turkmans, and returned bringing with him the master Ja’far, a pupil, either direct or at one remove, of the inventor of nasta’liq writing, who became the head of the most famous scriptorium of the day.

In all probability, the master Ja’far summoned skilled artists from Tabriz to join him in Herat. Hence, the Timurid School of painting is an amalgam of the achievements of the late 14th and early 15th century schools of Baghdad, Shiraz and Tabriz.