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THE SPLENDID LEGACY OF TABRIZI MASTERS

EL ESPLÉNDIDO LEGADO DE TABRIZI MASTERS

Murad Allahverdiyev
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Abstract

This article tells about the surprisingly bright phenomenon in the world of art – the Islamic medieval miniature which has been represented for centuries by many schools and talented artists. It should be noted that by choosing this topic we wanted to review the Azerbaijani miniature not in the traditional terms of art criticism, but rather by adopting it as a document that illustrates, albeit in a system of special characters and images, many of the important events of the past, gives an idea of how the Azerbaijani masters who lived in the formidable medieval times, what they believed in and how they saw the world at the time of creation and destruction of the most powerful empires of the East.

Keywords

Art of fine manuscripts – Azerbaijani miniature – Tabriz miniatures

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Introduction

The legacy bequeathed by them is enormous in size, diverse in topics and styles. But all of these works which are now united by a single concept of "Azerbaijani medieval miniatures" are distinguished not only by a high artistic skill, but also by the highest humanism, interest in man, the possibilities of his improvement and the assertion of the value of human life.

We are separated from the period when these works were created by many years pressed into centuries and millennia. And under the pressure from huge bulks of time the fates of people, histories of families and lives of once thriving cities and countries eventually thinned into invisible dust, sometimes leaving in the memories of descendants only the dates of battles and invasions and the names of kings and generals. But no matter how great the extent of their deeds and misdeeds might have been, it was not them but the creators who were the main participants in the building of civilization, the authors of cultural and material assets that determined the course of history and progress. And we hope that this book about medieval Azerbaijani miniature will help our readers see that distant life and understand those bygone people. Ultimately, it will become another stone of the road to linking civilizations of the world.

On 11 April 2011, an event occurred at Christie's auction in London that caused complete consternation among the general public and an understanding exchange of glances among experts present in the hall. Put up for auction was the miniature "Feridun testing his sons" from the "Shahnama" series made for Shah Tahmasp I. The relatively small drawing was sold within a few minutes to an anonymous buyer for 7.4 million pounds. The secret admirer of Tabriz miniatures did not overpay. Moreover, he was exceptionally lucky: the prices on medieval Islamic miniature in international auctions have long exceeded all conceivable limits and continue to grow by the year. In 1990, English billionaire of Iranian descent Nasser D. Khalili, the owner of one of the world's largest collections of Islamic art, bought a fragment of the historical work "Jami al-Tawarikh" ("Compendium of Chronicles") decorated with miniatures of Tabriz masters from the Royal Asiatic Society for 19 million pounds. Now a fragment of this manuscript, which experts describe as "London" (there is also "Edinburgh"), is valued approximately 20 times than what was originally paid for it. But experts believe that this is not the final price and expect it to grow substantially in the near future. It should be noted at once that these astronomical figures may seem fantastic only to those unfamiliar with the history of oriental miniature, with its technology and ultimately with the uniqueness of this phenomenon in the world of painting. Though miniatures, which appeared in the Middle Ages as illustrations to the handful of very expensive manuscripts, subsequently evolved into an independent art form quite common in the world, it was at an early stage of their existence in the East that authors demonstrated remarkable achievements which by and large have never been surpassed.

This striking phenomenon is explained by a rare coincidence of many geopolitical, economic, social and cultural factors which paved the way for an unprecedented rise of the Eastern and rather Azerbaijani miniatures, which later became known as "the school of Tabriz". Unfortunately, only a few works of the already small collection have survived to our time. The brittle material was inevitably affected by the vicissitudes of wars, invasions and fires, and more commonly the exorbitant greed of European collectors. For the convenience of sale, they divided the book into separate fragments, which led to the fact that many man-made books decorated with breathtakingly beautiful miniatures now exist

only in the form of separate pages. But even in this condition they are of great value. The ciphers of these manuscripts at the Topkapi Palace Museum in Istanbul are marked with the word "Khazina", or the "Treasury".

Method

Today, the works of Azerbaijani artists who worked in the medieval Tabriz are available in just a handful of museums, the most important of which include the Metropolitan in New York, the Freer Gallery in Washington, the Topkapi Museum in Istanbul, the Dublin Chester Beatty Library, the Tehran Gulistan Palace, the British Museum and the British library, the Library of the University of Edinburgh, the Russian National Library, as well as the Louvre Museum and the National Library in Paris. A lot of the precious miniatures of Tabriz masters remain inaccessible to researchers as they are stored in private collections that are closed to the public and scientists.

It is believed that the art of fine manuscripts, in which the text is written by the calligrapher and the pages are decorated with drawings, designs and patterns, became widespread in the capital of the Abbasid Caliphate, Baghdad, at the end of the 12th century. But the oldest manuscript containing miniatures dates back to the beginning of the 11th century. It was called "The Book of images of fixed stars" and was dedicated to astronomical observations. By the way, originally miniaturists worked mainly on the translations of Greek scientific works. In 1237, however, artist Yahya ibn Mahmud from Wasit made illustrations for a very popular and picaresque novel of the time, "Maqamat", penned by writer al-Hariri. Only a few decades passed, and miniaturists began working in the capital of South Azerbaijan Tabriz. They supplied illustrations not only for the treatises of ancient scientists but also for the lyrical Arabic, Azerbaijani and Persian poems filled with images and metaphors. The artists were patronized by the rulers of the Ilkhans dynasty (1256-1353) who very much appreciated those hand-made books, manuscripts.

Results and discussion

The development of miniature art continued in the 14th and 15th centuries despite the endless dynastic wars and invasions. The final period marked by creative quests and surprising finds was the beginning of the Safavid reign. Following the example of his predecessors, Shah Ismail I (1501-1524), a military leader and a talented poet who is considered the classicist of Azerbaijani literature, also opened a kitab-khane (Library) at his court. It was a workshop making books on various subjects ranging from history to theology, medicine to natural history. And, of course, the manuscripts included the most famous literary works by oriental authors of poems of the time. It should be said at once that it was an extremely expensive undertaking which not a single of the then European kings or emperors could afford no matter how rich and powerful they considered themselves to be. It required the presence of truly bottomless coffers to finance this venture. Many paints were made of semi-precious stones, sheet and liquid gold was generously applied, paper was painted with saffron and safflower, and musk and rose water were added to ink. Not less attention was paid to painters and calligraphers and their numerous assistants and servants. They were treated well, cherished and, of course, carefully guarded. It is known for fact that the working day of a master lasted for not more than two hours, so as not to tire the eyes and keep the hardness of the hand. The same holds true for the books that were produced in the Tabriz kitab-khane. Each letter in them was a masterpiece of calligraphy and each illustration was a finished work of art with an intrinsic value.

The treasury-keeper immediately placed the book made in a single copy into the Shah's treasury where it was allowed a place among the most exquisite jewelry. But it was valued well above any items of gold, diamonds, rubies and emeralds. The books were the main ornament of the countless treasures owned by the Ilkhanids, Timurids and Safavids.

In order to understand the attitude towards artists and calligraphers, we can recall the ruler of a vast state – Shah Tahmasp I (1524-1574). This ruler, who inherited the throne from his father Ismail I, was a highly educated man and a generous benefactor. In addition, he was an amazing artist and brilliantly mastered calligraphy, which, however, did not prevent him from being proud that his teacher was great Azerbaijani miniaturist Sultan Muhammad. Under Tahmasp's rule, Tabriz turned into an art center of the entire Islamic world where great books were created and other forms of art flourished.

The middle of the 16th century, the reign Tahmasp I, is described by experts as a period of final development of Tabriz miniatures. It was at this time that artists, showered with the favors on the Shah's court, achieved remarkable success. They won more space in books from calligraphers and created large sheet-size compositions reminiscent of reduced murals. They also developed new genres such as portraits and scenes of court life, refined the genres of lyrics, epic and animals. Free paintings executed for the albums of connoisseurs and miniature collectors began to develop in parallel.

Following the model of the Tabriz kitab-khane, workshops were also created in other courts in the East. Humayun, the son of the founder of the Mughal Babur dynasty, invited two artists Mir Sayid Ali and Abd al-Samad from Tabriz to India. Azerbaijani masters educated a large group of Indian miniature painters whose works are still considered classical today. Therefore, many researchers are convinced that it was Tabriz artists who laid the foundation of the Mughal school of painting.

The Tabriz school also had a major impact on Turkish miniature. Its representatives Velijan Tabrizi, Shahkuli Tabrizi and Kamal Tabrizi, working in the capital of the Ottoman Empire, held high positions of court artists. The workshop of Shahkuli Tabrizi, according to a contemporary, was frequented even by Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent (1520-1566).

The features characteristic of the Tabriz school can be traced in Iranian Shirazi and Herati and also Central Asian miniature, in the different domain of the fine arts of Azerbaijan of course and the works of art of many other countries. It would be no exaggeration to say that the influence of the ideas born in the Tabriz kitab-khane on the East was probably commensurate with the power of the impact made by Renaissance painters in Europe.

It is generally recognized that the legacy left behind by Tabriz masters is colossal and their contribution to world culture is immeasurable. And it will take scientists a lot of time and energy to study it. This book is just an introduction to the great and amazingly beautiful world created by Azerbaijani miniaturists. Its language is complex and diverse, while the images are so multifaceted that if you venture to take this journey, you risk falling under its charm and getting lost forever. The magical world of Oriental miniature, multi-colored, elegant and subtle, was created with the help of kalam – a thin stalk of cane the tip of which was cut diagonally or broomed (cracked). Sometimes a cluster of squirrel tail hairs was added to the cane. The result was a brush which was also called kalam. It was with the help of these simple tools that the calligraphers and artists of the Tabriz school created their immortal masterpieces.

The Tabriz kitab-khane can be safely described a unique phenomenon of its time. It was some kind of a publishing studio which produced extremely expensive and beautifully decorated books only in one copy. The exclusive nature of a product was ensured not so much by the quality of the material used as much by the talent of the creative team. Perhaps for the first time in the history of book miniatures such a large group of highly talented people was brought together. Almost every single person could be talked about as a wonderful master.

Kitab-khane also had a senior master. Acting as the editor-in-chief and the chief artist, he decided what text should be illustrated, the way the pages should look and what style the calligrapher should follow. But the theme of a book was, of course, determined by the customer. It was the head of the state – the Shah, while his vizier watched the progress of work and expenditure. After all, only the bottomless coffers of the Shah could afford the associated costs of such a publication.

The manufacturing process began with the selection of paper. For a long time in the Arab East, Central Asia and Asia Minor, papyrus was mainly used for records, while parchment was used for books and important documents. But at the end of the 8th century, paper started to be produced first in Samarkand and then in Baghdad on the basis Chinese technology.

The best quality and beautiful paper was chosen from the selection offered by merchants. It was mostly white but sometimes it was tinted as well. Then, apprentices carefully ironed each sheet with a plaque made of polished ivory, agate or even a crystal sphere.

After marking up space for text and illustrations, the sheet was passed on to the gilder who covered the pages with a gold or silver spray. Then it was the turn of the master of ornamental design or illumination who painted the frames or an intricate floral design. The calligrapher filled the allotted space with text, anticipating it with delicate frontispieces and headpieces. Only then was it the turn of an artist.

Figures on the painting were originally designated with a red or black outline, then a ground level was laid, all the elements of the composition were applied with a thick paint and finally all the shades of colors were added.

The finished sheets were passed on to the bookbinders who bound them together and supplied the cover. Made of embossed or patent leather, it was also a work of art and a sign of the high cost of the book.

Usually, work on a manuscript in kitab-khane took years. It is difficult to say what was better in the book – the calligraphic text, the ornamental design, the miniatures or the cover. The Shah would receive a finished masterpiece in which all of the components formed a unity and everything was subordinated to the goal of revealing the content of a book as much a possible making the best use of the resources available to the masters.

It is probably worth explaining at this point that what made Tabriz manuscripts special was the primacy of the word and thought contained in them. The miniature performed a subordinate role. It was an illustration to the text, but even when describing historical events the artists did not seek to make their characters and the setting of a certain situation look exactly like the original people and landscape.

As many art critics believe, it was a consequence of the ban on the depiction of live models in countries professing Islam. However, according to jurist Ibn Daqiq al-Eid, who lived in the 13th century, over the course of seven centuries that passed since the proclamation by the founder of Islam of the canons of faith, the words of Prophet Muhammad regarding the struggle against idolatry began to be interpreted more flexibly and were no longer attributed to mosaics, frescoes and miniatures depicting both people and animals. However, this liberal progress could not radically change the philosophy of Islamic art. Its creators, moving away from the specifics of real life, attempted to provide an idealistic and often fantastic idea of it. They did not copy nature, as European painters did. Neither did they paint real people or real objects, focusing instead on an exclusively ideal image and symbol.

It is due to this that miniature is largely conditional. Artists did not draw a specific lion but their idea of him as a terrible and ferocious predator; not a particular palace, although being familiar with the laws of architecture of the time, they were perfectly able to imagine what it could look like, but an imaginary castle with proportions broken for the sake of the beauty of miniature; not a commander an artist may personally know, but a knight with a wasp waist and broad shoulders. Pictures of nature were some kind of a formula in which two or three trees symbolized a forest, a hill on the horizon stood for a mountainous landscape, while a flower bush epitomized a fragrant garden. This technique was also used when the image of several horsemen was intended to mean a fight between armies, while bent figures around the throne stood for a crowd of courtiers.

The fantastic world of the Oriental miniature was expressed through the absence of a perspective so common to Western painting. Its space, which was often filled with people and objects, was characterized by a very shallow depth. Objects near and distant from the viewer were arranged in tiers up the sheet, piling on top of each other. It is quite possible that this is how the artists tried to emphasize the conditional nature of the world being depicted. But this conditionality also contained a unique feature of the miniature genre.

The departure from real life where people's relations always have different feelings is manifested in the absence of any emotion on the faces of miniature characters. They are immobile and impassive even in a mortal combat or passionate embraces. But this does not mean that the Islamic and especially Tabriz miniature did not reflect the mood and the inner world as was the case, for example, in medieval European and Russian miniature. Artists from kitab-khane communicated it by other means – posture and gesture, state of nature, a joyful or disturbing accompaniment of the landscape, predominant tones in the palette, a special arrangement of figures on the sheet, etc.

Thus, in the "Rustam kills Isfandiyar" miniature from the Great Tabriz "Shahnama", the artist decrypts the suffering of Isfandiyar, who has been blinded by a double-pointed arrow, by placing a broken and withering tree in the center of the picture. In the miniature "Death of Rustam", all characters seem to be captured by a terrible whirlwind of death. Its rings also encompass the horse Rakhsh, who is pierced with spears and swords, and the dying killer of Rustam, Shagad, whose agonizing body is curved just like the tree behind him. And in the center of the deadly circle is Rustam, who is living his last minutes and whose pain spills out of the picture.

The understandable postures and plasticity of the bodies, as well as a conventional gesture, a piece of clothing or decoration of the room, were the language in which the

artist talked about his heroes. A veil on the face or the golden flame behind the head was indicative of holiness. A turban with a magnificent plumage and egret of ostrich feathers was evidence of royal descent. Embroidery in the form of a dried branch of the robe was a sign of detachment from the world. A set of patches and wooden sandals meant contempt for life benefits. A penholder near a boy's figure hinted at his education, while a bowl and pears symbolized modesty. A cypress in miniature was a symbol of God, while a weeping willow talked about pangs of love.

It is important to note that despite all the pictorial conventions, miniatures possessed an immense artistic expression and revealed their content in poetic images. The intensity of color spots, lines and motions showed a real and even sensual feeling of life. The world in miniature is a fabulous garden – sometimes a delicate pink and white foam of blossoming almonds, sometimes dressed in a crimson and yellow attire of autumn leaves. It represents pink, blue, purple and gold carpets of lawns, rough rocks, silvery streams, a bright blue dome of the sky with intricate clouds and golden stars. People in bright clothes, mighty beasts and beautiful birds, elegant buildings with delicate arches, utensils marked with a delicate taste – all this linked together with a color and compositional rhythm created a holistic image imbued with love of life.

The conventionality and decorative nature of miniatures was determined by its stylistic unity with the other elements of the manuscript – ornaments and calligraphy. However, miniature never dissolved in them and remained, despite its subordinate role, a complete work of art. Addressed to contemporaries and perhaps even more so to descendants, it has brought to our days the image of a magical world created by the imagination of Tabriz masters.

The court of Uzun Hasan, founder of the White-sheep dynasty at Tabriz in XV c. was noted for pomp and splendor that was created by the numerous invited poets, philosophers and painters. His sons Khalil and Yagub were genuine fans of art. Some scientists believe that it was under Khalil, who inherited the throne, that work at the Tabriz kitab-khane was resumed. In any case, masters of that period are credited with "Divan" by Hidayat, which contains text in the Azerbaijani language. Four miniatures depict Khalil in different situations: in the garden with his entourage, giving an audience from the palace balcony, during falconry and in a pavilion entwined with vinery. Their execution is wonderful.

White-sheep Yagub's reign lasted 13 years and is considered one of the most brilliant in the history of Ak-Koyunlu. In 1490, he was poisoned, and power passed to Baysangur Khan, then to Rustam Khan and the dynastic list was concluded by Sultan Ahmed in 1500. But the star of the Safavids was already rising in the north. In 1501, near the village of Sharur in Nakhchivan, the troops of Ak-Koyunlu were defeated by the young Shah Ismayil, and his coronation took place in Tabriz soon.

The next 20 years of the reign of Iran's Shahinshah Ismayil I, a military commander and poet, were a time of special upsurge for Azerbaijan. The Azerbaijani became the language of the court, army and courts. Shah himself wrote his poems and ghazals in Azerbaijani, signing them as "Khatai". And, of course, kitab-khane worked at full capacity, combining Azerbaijani and Persian traditions. The highest point of this activity was the works by the leading artist of the school, Sultan Muhammad. Just as the creativity of Khatai became a poetic expression of the aesthetic ideals of the time, the miniatures of Sultan Muhammad became its illustration.

In 1524, Shah Ismayil, aged 37, died unexpectedly. The next Safavid ruler was Shah Tahmasp I. From a young age he showed a craving for art. He was not even 11 when he inscribed the manuscript of the poem "Gui-e chovgan" ("Ball and stick"), for which illustrations were made by kitab-khaneh artists, including, apparently, Sultan Mohammed and Behzad. Tahmasp was also a great drawer. Sadek Afshar, known for his independent judgment, wrote: "His knowledge in the field of painting was such that none of the leading masters of his kitab-khane could put finishing touches to the work without hearing his comments or approval."

The manuscript of "Shahnama" ("Shahnama-i Shahi" - "Shah's book of Shahs") was created in the reign of Tahmasp I. It is rightfully considered the highest achievement of Safavid miniatures. The most prominent calligrapher of the time Dust Muhammad used to say about it: "First comes master Nizamaddin Sultan Muhammad, who was the only one of his era. Among his works in "Shahnama" for His Majesty the Shah there is a miniature in which people in leopard skins were painted so that the hearts of the most daring artists fell and they bowed their heads in shame." It was the miniature "Reign of Keyumars."

Conclusion

The duo of the customer and the artist took centuries to take shape. Many of the Ilkhans, shahs, sultans and their nobles were educated and even talented people. Although their efforts in painting or calligraphy often looked amateurish and they were rather weak as creators, it was because of their sincere passion for art and generosity that many brilliant artists emerged. And it is no coincidence that as long as both components of this union were present, the Tabriz school gave the world one revelation after another.

Art historians are still trying to unravel the secrets of Tabriz masters who managed to achieve the level of visual expression of feelings and emotion that none of the subsequent masters could repeat. As if by fate itself they were destined to bring together all the achievements of previous years and finish the story of Tabriz miniatures with such a powerful chord.

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