

# TEXT AND IMAGE IN MEDIEVAL PERSIAN ART

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# Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	vii
<i>Series Editor's Foreword</i>	xiii
<i>Preface</i>	xiv
<b>CHAPTER 1</b> Introduction	1
<b>CHAPTER 2</b> The Art of Writing: A Bowl from Samarqand	11
Provenance	17
The ceramic setting	23
Inscriptions	30
Script	35
Clientele	38
Wider horizons	41
Afterlife	48
<b>CHAPTER 3</b> Perfuming the Air: A Rosewater Sprinkler from Herat	57
Provenance	61
The geographical and historical setting	67
Metalwares from Herat	78
Patronage	84
Function	87
Decoration	93
Afterlife	97
<b>CHAPTER 4</b> Monumentality under the Mongols: The Tomb of Uljaytu at Sultaniyya	112
Construction and redecoration	117
Reasons for redecoration	122
The pious foundation	128
The architectural setting	136
The tomb as inspiration for later Mongol rulers	146
The tomb as inspiration for the Ilkhanids' rivals	153
Afterlife	159

<b>CHAPTER 5</b>	<b>A Romantic Interlude: The Wedding Celebrations from a Manuscript with Three Poems by Khwaju Kirmani</b>	172
	The text and its calligrapher	175
	The illustrated folios	183
	Adding the paintings	193
	The royal setting	196
	The role of women	203
	Afterlife	210
<b>CHAPTER 6</b>	<b>Proclaiming Sovereignty: The Ardabil Carpets</b>	228
	Provenance	233
	The inscription	234
	Gifts to shrines	242
	Why Ardabil in the 1540s?	249
	The repurposed Jannat Saray	257
	Afterlife at the shrine	263
	Afterlife in the west	266
<b>CHAPTER 7</b>	<b>Conclusion</b>	284
	<i>List of Abbreviations</i>	292
	<i>Bibliography</i>	293
	<i>Illustration Acknowledgments</i>	319
	<i>Index</i>	322

## Preface

A single author typically gets credit for a book, but it is really the work of many. In writing this monograph numerous colleagues have assisted me, patiently answering queries, providing references, offering critiques. I have tried to credit them individually for the help they so generously offered, and if I have overlooked some names, I apologize for any inadvertent omissions. Here, I should like to acknowledge those who offered broader, if sometimes unrecognized, assistance. I was touched by the generous hospitality offered by the people of Iran. When I was preparing for the lectures on which this book is based, I was able to take a fleeting trip to Azerbaijan in May 2009, and everywhere I traveled, the local residents greeted me enthusiastically. I wanted to return in 2011 to travel through Khurasan, but was unable to obtain a visa, a sad commentary on how politics affects art.

On the academic level, I thank all the students in my classes at Boston College, who have provided feedback on lectures about these very kinds of objects. Their input has been invaluable in showing me what can work and what flops. I am grateful also for the superb research facilities provided by Boston College and its libraries, especially the interlibrary loan department which never flinched at my many, sometimes strange, requests.

Many collaborators at Edinburgh University Press helped me navigate the sometimes winding path to publication. Nicola Ramsey willingly took on the project and encouraged me along the way. Eddie Clark cheerfully oversaw production, never blanching at the snags and delays. Ellie Bush ably acquired many of the photographs and the permissions to use them, sometimes from most obscure places. Anna Stevenson smoothed inconsistencies of text and infelicities of style. I thank them all and trust that I was not too snarky in replying to their well-intentioned comments and queries.

Several colleagues also deserve special mention here. Wheeler Thackston was ready at every moment to read, reread, and explicate Persian and Arabic texts. Linda Komaroff and Robert Hillenbrand both read the entire manuscript and saved me from several mistakes and oversights.

But the most credit goes to my family, who support me in all my scholarly endeavors: our children Felicity and Oliver, who are amused by their mother's passion for a country that is typically reviled in their homeland; our dog Sheba, who affords comfort when things look gloomy; and most of all my husband Jonathan Bloom, who not only provides unstinting academic support, including many of the architectural photographs published here, but also offers genial company and inspirational cooking that have sustained me throughout. I thank them, and all the others, warmly.

*Richmond, NH,  
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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

بشنو از نی چون حکایت می کند  
از جدائیها شکایت می کند  
کز نیستان تا مرا بیریده اند  
از نغیرم مرد و زن نالیده اند

Listen to the reed, how it tells its tales,  
Bemoaning its bitter exile, it wails:  
Ever since I was torn from the reed beds,  
My cries tear men's and women's hearts to shreds.<sup>1</sup>

MANY READERS FAMILIAR with Persian literature will recognize these verses from the *Mathnavi-yi ma'navi* (The Mathnavi of Intrinsic Meaning) by Mawlavi (1207–73), often known as Jalal al-Din Rumi and since the late twentieth century the best-selling poet in the United States.<sup>2</sup> Sometimes dubbed “the Qur’an in Persian,” his 27,000-couplet encyclopedia of Sufism opens with one of the most stunning images in Persian poetry. The verses relate the reed’s anguish in being separated from its reed bed. They work metaphorically on several levels. Through the act of lamenting, the reed is personified and thus stands for the poet, who—like the reed—was torn from his native region of Balkh and forced by the Mongol invasions to flee some 3,000 km/2,000 miles westward to Konya.<sup>3</sup> The reed’s song, then, is the poem. And by analogy, the reed, which is also the material for the pen (*qalam*), becomes not just the spoken but also the written word of the poet. Rumi here alludes as well to the duality of the Qur’an, first an oral revelation, but soon and more often seen as a written codex.

But why, readers may ask, did I choose to begin a book on the visual arts in medieval Persia by analyzing the complex metaphors of a poem? First, the reference is a tribute to Ehsan Yarshater, the renowned scholar honored in the series of lectures from which this book derives,<sup>4</sup> for he was one of the first scholars to raise the connection between Persian poetry and the visual arts produced in the region. In a paper delivered to the IV International Congress of Iranian Art and Archeology in New York more than half a century



**Figure 1.1** Silver-gilt dish with relief decoration showing a banquet in Sasanian style. Diameter 19.7 cm. London, British Museum.

This dish, probably made in Tabaristan in the seventh or eighth century before the advent of Islam there, continues a type known from Sasanian times, showing a ruler banqueting at a wine feast (*bazm*).

ago in 1960, he analyzed such common themes as abstraction, sensuality, and harmony.<sup>5</sup> Prof. Yarshater raised an important topic, and the connection between the visual and the verbal arts is one of increasing interest to historians of medieval art, whether working on Europe, Byzantium, or the Islamic lands.<sup>6</sup>

Prof. Yarshater's groundbreaking essay drew from the classical period of Persian poetry, ranging from works by Rudaki (858–c. 941) to those by Jami (1414–92),<sup>7</sup> and thus his time frame—the tenth century to the turn of the sixteenth—is basically the same as the one covered in this book. Like Prof. Yarshater, I chose to begin with the period of Samanid rule, when Persia regained its political autonomy and its cultural identity.<sup>8</sup> In artistic terms, this is the time when one can draw a break in the visual arts from Sasanian or post-Sasanian styles (Figure 1.1) to a new “Islamic” style, one of whose characteristics is writing in Arabic script (Figure 1.2).<sup>9</sup> The relationship between the verbal and the visual and the kinds of puns that run through both are themes that are central to this book.

I end with the rise of Safavid rule in the early sixteenth century.



**Figure 1.2** *Small silver dish with harpy and inscription around the rim. Diameter 14.2 cm. Los Angeles County Museum of Art.*

This small silver dish, attributed to Gurgan in the second quarter of the eleventh century, illustrates the use of writing in Arabic script that became a hallmark of the new "Islamic" style.

The turn of the sixteenth century was a major watershed not only in the history of Iran but also in world history, as the crossing of the Atlantic and the rounding of Africa dramatically shifted the global situation, ushering in the so-called pre-modern era characterized in the Islamic lands by the establishment of "gunpowder" empires.<sup>10</sup> The Shi'ite Safavids in Iran, sandwiched between the Sunni Mughals and Ottomans, were emblematic of this period in which the pre-eminence of Iranian ideas was challenged by rival powers to the east and west. Within Persia, this change in global geography is reflected in the shift of capital and economic focus to the city of Isfahan, set in the middle of the plateau and within striking distance of the Persian Gulf, a response in part to the increased role of maritime trade with Europe and beyond.<sup>11</sup> This period also marks a time by which Persia had developed a tradition of looking back at itself, particularly through the arts, as shown in Chapter 6.

This book then covers what is often called Persian art in "middle Islamic period."<sup>12</sup> And, like Prof. Yarshater, I take Persia to mean the lands where Persian was the main language of culture, thus including





Figure 1.3 Map of the greater Iranian lands showing the sites mentioned in this book, with modern political boundaries indicated in red.

