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# THE EASTERN ART OF THE BOOK AND THE DISTINCTIVE ARTISTIC TRADITIONS OF MINIATURE PAINTING

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**Abstract.** This article studies the Eastern art of the book (kitobat) as an integrated system of crafts and examines the distinctive artistic traditions of miniature painting that developed within it. Using a comparative and historical approach based on museum, encyclopaedic and academic publications, the article describes the chain of production from paper and calligraphy to illumination, painting and binding, and then compares the Arab, Ilkhanid, Timurid, Bukhara, Safavid, Ottoman and Mughal traditions of painting. The results show that the miniature cannot be understood apart from the book: it was designed together with the text, the page layout and the ornament in royal workshops, and its conventions of space, colour, line and narrative were shaped by this setting. The comparison reveals that each tradition developed a characteristic emphasis, for example narrative clarity in the Arab school, Chinese-influenced landscape in the Ilkhanid school, balance and psychological economy in Herat, dense ornament in Bukhara, courtly refinement in the Safavid school, documentary vividness in the Ottoman school and naturalistic observation in the Mughal school. The article concludes that the art of the book is the proper framework for the study of the Eastern miniature and for the preservation of its heritage.
**Keywords:** Eastern art of the book, kitobat, miniature painting, calligraphy, illumination, royal workshop, Timurid school, Mughal painting, Ottoman painting

## Introduction

In the Islamic world and in the Persianate cultural area the book was one of the most prestigious works of art. A manuscript for a ruler brought together the work of papermakers, calligraphers, illuminators, painters, gilders and binders, and its value was measured not only by its text but by the beauty of its materials and execution. The Arabic and Persian tradition of this complex craft, known in Central Asian usage as kitobat, is the context in which the Eastern miniature must be understood.[1]

The miniature is usually discussed as painting, and it is often reproduced in books and exhibitions as a separate picture. This practice is convenient but misleading. The painted scene was planned for a specific place on a specific page, and its composition, its colours and even its frame were related to the script, the ruling of the text block and the illuminated headings. When the painting is separated from the page, part of its meaning is lost.[2]

At the same time, painting is the part of the art of the book in which regional and dynastic differences are most visible. The Arab, Ilkhanid, Timurid, Bukhara, Safavid, Ottoman and Mughal workshops all produced illustrated manuscripts, but they did so with different priorities and in dialogue with different neighbours, including China, Byzantium and Europe.[3] A comparative

[1]Gray (ed.), The Arts of the Book in Central Asia, 14th–16th Centuries (1979).

[2]Roxburgh, The Persian Album, 1400–1600 (2005).

[3]Blair & Bloom, The Art and Architecture of Islam 1250–1800 (1994).

description of these distinctive traditions, set within the framework of the art of the book, is the task of this article.

The aim of the article is to describe the Eastern art of the book as a system, to identify the specific artistic traditions of miniature painting in the main schools, and to show what they have in common. The article is organised into methodology, results, discussion and conclusion sections.

**Methodology**

The study uses a comparative and historical method. The first part describes the technical and organisational features of the production of a manuscript on the basis of specialised works on codicology, calligraphy and the history of the book. The second part compares the schools of painting on the basis of encyclopaedic entries, museum essays and monographs, paying attention to the dating of manuscripts, the patrons and the workshops.[4]

Seven traditions were selected because each of them is represented by dated and well-described manuscripts and because together they cover the main regions of the Eastern book from the thirteenth to the seventeenth century. The features compared are the themes and texts illustrated, the treatment of space and figure, the use of colour and line, the relation of painting to calligraphy and ornament, and the principal external contacts.

The study has limitations. It relies on published descriptions and reproductions and not on direct examination of manuscripts. Attributions to named painters and calligraphers are discussed in the literature and are reported here with the caution used by the sources. The article does not cover later regional centres, such as Khiva and Kokand, or the Indian Rajput traditions, which require separate treatment.

**Results**

The manuscript was produced in a chain of operations. The first was the preparation of the writing surface. Paper, which reached the Islamic lands from the East and was produced in Samarkand and other cities from the early Islamic centuries, replaced parchment as the main material of the book and made large-scale copying possible. Sheets were polished, sometimes coloured or sprinkled with gold, and prepared for writing. The second operation was calligraphy: the text was copied by a professional scribe in a script chosen for the genre, and spaces were left for headings, decorations and pictures.[5]

The third and fourth operations were illumination and painting. Illuminators decorated frontispieces, section headings and margins with gold and colour, and painters then executed the pictures in the spaces left for them. Colours were made of mineral and organic pigments prepared in the workshop, and gold was applied in leaf or in liquid form. The last operation was binding, in which leather covers were stamped, gilded or, later, decorated with lacquer. A single book could therefore need the work of several specialists over many months, and for the most ambitious projects, years.

This organisation explains the central institution of the Eastern book, the royal library-workshop, in Persian kitabkhana. Under the Ilkhanids rulers encouraged the production of illustrated histories and epics, in part because history writing supported their claim to rule, and the book workshop became a regular component of the court. In the Timurid period the library of Prince Baysunghur at Herat is the best-known example of a workshop in which all the arts of the book were united under a single direction.[6] The result was a high degree of standardisation of

[4]Déroche, Islamic Codicology (2005).

[5]Blair, Islamic Calligraphy (2006).

[6]Metropolitan Museum of Art, The art of the Timurid period.

quality and, at the same time, a close collaboration that makes it difficult to separate the hand of an individual master.

**3.2. Calligraphy and illumination as the framework of painting**

Calligraphy held the highest rank in the hierarchy of the arts of the book. The Arabic script was developed into a number of styles, and in the Persianate world the flowing nasta'liq became the preferred script for poetry, so that the visual character of the page was determined by the rhythm of its lines. Famous calligraphers were as renowned as painters. The copy of Sa'di's Bustan made in 1488 for the library of Sultan Husayn in Herat, with paintings associated with Behzad, was written by Sultan-Ali, one of the leading scribes of the city. In Bukhara the calligrapher Mir Ali of Herat copied manuscripts after moving there around 1528–29.[7]

Illumination provided the decorative frame. Gold and blue headings, carpet pages with geometric and vegetal patterns, and decorated margins created a setting in which the painted pages were experienced as parts of a sequence. The illuminator Mahmud Muzahhib of Bukhara, described in Ottoman sources as a better illuminator than calligrapher, illustrates the importance of this craft: the reputation of a workshop could rest on its ornament as much as on its pictures.[8]

For painting, this framework had practical consequences. The painter had to fit the composition into the text block, sometimes allowing the picture to break out of its frame into the margin, and had to take account of the lines of text above and below the scene. Inscriptions in the picture, written on walls, tiles and banners, linked the image with the written word. The miniature therefore developed a flat and layered spatial logic that is compatible with the page, as opposed to the window-like space of European easel painting.

**3.3. Distinctive traditions of painting**

The Arab school of the thirteenth century, associated with Baghdad and Syria, is best known for illustrated copies of the Maqamat of al-Hariri, a text of witty narratives. Painters such as al-Wasiti, who illustrated a copy in 1237, represented scenes of everyday life with clear narrative gestures, simple settings and a strong interest in character types.[9] The strength of this tradition lies in its direct observation of social life and in the legibility of the story.

The Ilkhanid school of Iran, which developed after the Mongol conquest, introduced new elements. Contact with China brought landscape motifs, such as rocks, clouds and flowering trees drawn with a flowing line, and the illustration of historical texts and of the Shahnama gave painting a monumental narrative scale.[10] The tradition shows how a foreign pictorial vocabulary could be absorbed and transformed in a book workshop.

The Timurid school, with centres at Shiraz, Samarkand and Herat, brought the tradition to a classical form. The Herat workshops of the late fifteenth century, associated with Sultan Husayn Bayqara and Mir Ali-Shir Navai, are known for balanced compositions, clear space and idealised yet individualised figures, and the painter Behzad became their emblem.[11] The tradition was supported by a close connection with the poetry of Nizami, Sa'di, Attar, Jami and Navai.

The Bukhara school, which produced illustrated manuscripts in the Shaybanid and Janid periods, began as a continuation of Herat and then developed its own manner, with flattened architectural space, dense ornament, broad female faces and, in the Janid period, a vigorous and

[7]Encyclopaedia Iranica, Bukhara VI: Bukharan school of painting.

[8]Encyclopaedia Iranica, Bukhara VI: Bukharan school of painting.

[9]Ettinghausen, Arab Painting (1962).

[10]Carboni & Adamjee, The art of the book in the Ilkhanid period.

[11]Encyclopaedia Iranica, Behzād, Kāmal-al-Dīn.

sometimes rough energy. Its distinctiveness lies in the combination of the Herat heritage with local types and architecture.

The Safavid school of Tabriz and later Isfahan inherited Timurid refinement and added a new courtly splendour. The Shahnama made for Shah Tahmasp, known as the Houghton Shahnama, is the most famous product of the Tabriz workshop and shows how a royal commission could draw together many artists over a long period. Contemporary art-historical writing in Safavid Iran also shaped the reputation of earlier masters, including Behzad.[12]

The Ottoman school differs from the Persian traditions in its subjects and in its approach to representation. The court workshop in Istanbul produced illustrated histories, portraits of sultans, depictions of campaigns, cities and festivals, and scientific and botanical works, and many of its pictures combine a precise record of events with a flat decorative surface. Its distinctive quality is a documentary vividness that is closely connected with the interests of the Ottoman court.

The Mughal school of India grew from the encounter of Persian-trained painters with Indian artists in the workshops of the emperors. Artists such as Mir Sayyid Ali and Abd al-Samad, who came from the Persian tradition, were involved in the early imperial projects, and the large illustrated Hamzanama of the time of Akbar shows how the style expanded in scale and energy.[13] Later Mughal painting developed naturalistic portraits, animals and plants, and absorbed European prints and paintings, which were studied in the workshops.

### 3.4. Common features and differences

Despite their differences, the traditions share a number of characteristics. Painting is planned as a part of the book and is related to the script and the ornament. Space is constructed in layers, usually with a high horizon, and the time of the story is condensed into a single scene. Colour is pure and saturated, and the contour is precise. Subjects are drawn from a literary canon, the Shahnama, the poems of Nizami, Sa‘di and Navai, or the royal chronicles, and the pictures are read through the text.[14]

The differences are determined by patrons, workshops and contacts. Where the patron demanded chronicle and portrait, as in the Ottoman and Mughal cases, painting moved towards documentation and observation. Where poetry and lyric imagery were prominent, as in Herat, the emphasis was on order, harmony and the psychological economy of the scene. Where workshop copying of earlier models was strong, as in the early Bukhara school, styles were archaising, and where artists moved between courts, new combinations of styles emerged.[15]

## Discussion

The comparison supports the claim that the Eastern art of the book is the correct framework for the study of the miniature. First, it explains the stability of the pictorial conventions: they were maintained by the workshop organisation and by the connection of painting with the page. Second, it explains the transmission of styles, because the movement of artists, calligraphers and manuscripts between courts is documented for nearly all the traditions discussed.[16] Third, it makes clear why attributions to individual masters are so difficult, since the book was a collective work.

The results also suggest a caution about the concept of national or regional schools. The labels Arab, Persian, Central Asian, Ottoman and Indian are useful for orientation, but the tradition was

[12]Roxburgh, Prefacing the Image (2001).

[13]Metropolitan Museum of Art, Folio from a Hamzanama (The Adventures of Hamza).

[14]Canby, Persian Painting (1993).

[15]Soucek, Persian artists in Mughal India: Influences and transformations (1987).

[16]Gray (ed.), The Arts of the Book in Central Asia, 14th–16th Centuries (1979).

shaped by courts and workshops that crossed present borders. The Herat style of Behzad, for example, was continued in Bukhara, Tabriz and India, and its heritage is today claimed by several countries.[17] A heritage approach that recognises this shared origin is better suited to the facts than one that assigns each tradition to a single state.

For the preservation and teaching of the heritage the article has several implications. Documentation should record the whole manuscript, including the script, the illumination and the binding, and not only the painted pages. Training in miniature painting should include elements of calligraphy, pigment preparation and page design, because the logic of the miniature is learned through the logic of the book. Finally, museum presentation should show the page as an object, with its text and ornament, and explain the collective work of the workshop.[18]

**Conclusion**

This article has described the Eastern art of the book as a system of crafts and has compared the distinctive traditions of miniature painting that developed within it, namely the Arab, Ilkhanid, Timurid, Bukhara, Safavid, Ottoman and Mughal schools. The analysis has shown that the miniature was conceived together with calligraphy, illumination and binding in royal workshops, and that this setting explains its layered space, its saturated colour and precise line and its close relation to literary texts.

Each school also developed its own emphasis: narrative clarity in the Arab school, a Chinese-influenced landscape vocabulary in the Ilkhanid school, balance and psychological economy in Herat, dense ornament in Bukhara, courtly splendour in the Safavid school, documentary vividness in the Ottoman school and naturalistic observation in the Mughal school. These differences result from patronage, workshop practice and cultural contacts and not from isolation.

The art of the book is thus the proper frame for research, teaching and conservation. Further work should compare identified manuscripts in detail, study materials and techniques scientifically, and include the regional centres and the Uzbek- and Russian-language scholarship that could not be covered here.

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