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# THE MINIATURE ART OF THE TIMURID PERIOD: STAGES OF DEVELOPMENT AND ARTISTIC HERITAGE

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**Abstract.** This article studies the miniature painting of the Timurid period (1370-1507) as part of the Eastern art of the book and examines its stages of development and artistic heritage. Using a comparative and historical approach based on museum, encyclopaedic and academic publications, the article describes four stages: the gathering of craftsmen in Samarkand under Timur, the early princely workshops of Shiraz, the classical style of Prince Baysunghur’s library at Herat, and the school of Behzad under Sultan Husayn Bayqara. The results show that Timurid miniature painting was shaped by dynastic politics, princely patronage and the mobility of artists, and that its main artistic qualities are balanced composition, precise contour, saturated colour and close unity with the written text. After the fall of the dynasty the tradition continued in Bukhara, Tabriz and India, and today it is preserved in Uzbekistan through education, museum work and exhibitions. The article concludes that Timurid miniatures should be studied within the context of the art of the book and as a shared heritage.

**Keywords:** Timurids, miniature painting, art of the book, Herat school, Shiraz school, Behzad, Baysunghur, Husayn Bayqara, nasta‘liq, artistic heritage

## Introduction

The Timurid period (1370-1507) is one of the highest stages of the Eastern art of the book. Specialists of the Metropolitan Museum of Art note that, because of the flourishing of manuscript illumination and illustration, the Herat school is often regarded as the apogee of Persian painting. In the court libraries of Samarkand, Shiraz and Herat, poetry, calligraphy, illumination and painting were united in a single enterprise.[1]

Timurid miniatures are usually discussed as separate pictures and are often associated with the name of Behzad. This approach does not give the full picture, because the painting was part of a book page and its development was closely tied to the political history of the dynasty, the taste of the princes and the movement of artists from one court to another. The scholarly literature notes, for example, that Behzad was regarded in the fifteenth century as one of several skilled painters in Herat, and that his later fame was strengthened mainly by Safavid-period authors.[2]

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

[2]Encyclopaedia Iranica, Behzād, Kamāl-al-Dīn.

The aim of this article is to identify the stages of development of Timurid miniature painting, to show the artistic features of each stage, and to assess the heritage that the tradition left to later periods and to present-day Uzbekistan. The article is organised into methodology, results, discussion and conclusion sections.

## Methodology

The study uses a comparative and historical method. In the first part, the manuscripts of the Timurid period and the court workshops that produced them are described on the basis of museum records, encyclopaedic entries and monographs. In the second part, the period is divided into four stages: the time of Timur (1370-1405), the early princely workshops of Shiraz, the period of Baysunghur's library at Herat, and the reign of Husayn Bayqara (1470-1506). The patron, the centre of the library and the movement of artists were the main criteria for the division.[3]

The features compared are the texts and themes illustrated, the treatment of space and figure, the use of colour and line, the relation of painting to calligraphy and ornament, and the movement of artists and styles. The sources include materials of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Gulbenkian Museum, the Encyclopaedia Iranica and Britannica, and the works of Canby, Blair and Bloom, Lentz and Lowry, Roxburgh and Thackston.

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 debated in the literature and are reported here with the caution used by the sources. The article does not fully cover the period of 1450-1470, wall painting, book production in Samarkand under Ulugh Beg, or the manuscripts held in Uzbek archives, all of which require separate study.

## Results

In 1370 Timur became master of Transoxiana and made Samarkand his capital. According to the Metropolitan Museum, by bringing craftsmen from the lands he conquered to his capital, he began one of the most brilliant periods in Islamic art. The Institute of Ismaili Studies explains that these transfers created the workforce that embellished the court, and that the Spanish ambassador Clavijo, who visited Samarkand and the Aq Saray palace in 1404-1406, described its splendour.[4]

At the same time, the major commissions of Timur listed in the Metropolitan Museum's chronology are mainly architectural, including the Aq Saray, the Bibi Khanum mosque and the Gur-i Amir.[5] For this reason the time of Timur is best seen not as a stage of fully developed book painting but as a preparatory stage that gathered artists, skills and court culture for the following generations.

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

[4]Institute of Ismaili Studies, The Timurids (resource note).

[5]Komaroff & Yalman, The art of the Timurid period (ca. 1370-1507), Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History.

After the death of Timur the centres of book art moved to the provinces ruled by princes. One of the most important examples is the two-volume anthology commissioned by Timur's grandson Iskandar Sultan (1384-1415) when he was governor of Shiraz. According to the Gulbenkian Museum, the manuscript dates from 1411 (AH 813) and contains 32 miniatures, among them a scene from Nizami's poem of the Seven Portraits.[6]

Another anthology of 1411 in the Metropolitan Museum was copied in Shiraz, and its nasta'liq is attributed to a celebrated scribe who worked on Shiraz manuscripts between 1405 and 1429.[7] Spaces for some miniatures were left blank and were filled in later by Aq Quyunlu and Ottoman painters. This shows how a manuscript travelled between courts and how styles were layered on one another. The Metropolitan Museum essay also mentions a Qur'an associated with Ibrahim Sultan dated 830 AH (1427), which points to the high level of calligraphy and illumination under princely patronage.[8]

Under Shah Rukh (1405-1447) Herat became an important cultural centre. The library of his son Baysunghur is the best-known example of a Timurid book workshop. According to the sources, Baysunghur brought a group of artists from Tabriz to Herat in 1421, among them the painter Sidi Ahmad, the portraitist Khwaja Ali and the bookbinder Qiwam al-Din, and instructed them to work in the manner of the miscellany of Sultan Ahmad Jalayir.[9]

Baysunghur's copy of Firdawsi's Shahnama was commissioned in 1426 and completed at Herat in 1430.[10] At this stage the poetic text, the nasta'liq script, the ornament and the picture were executed within one project. A page from a Haft Paykar of a Nizami Khamsa, dated to about 1430 in the Metropolitan Museum, is cited as an example of the style of the time.[11] Through the combination of the Jalayirid tradition of Tabriz and the requirements of the Timurid court, the miniature acquired a classical, orderly and formal character.

The peak of the Herat school coincides with the reign of Sultan Husayn Bayqara (1470-1506). The Metropolitan Museum calls him the last effective Timurid ruler and states that the cultural flowering found its fullest expression at his court. The poet Jami, the calligrapher Sultan 'Ali al-Mashhadi and the painter Behzad were active in this period. Herat sources stress that Behzad was employed first by Mir Ali-Shir Navai and then by Husayn Bayqara. There is also information that he was raised by Mirak Naqqash, the director of the court library.[12]

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[6]Gulbenkian Museum, Anthology of Iskandar Sultan.

[7]Metropolitan Museum of Art, Anthology of Persian Poetry (collection record).

[8]Komaroff & Yalman, The art of the Timurid period (ca. 1370-1507), Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History.

[9]Thackston, A Century of Princes (1989).

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

[11]Komaroff & Yalman, The art of the Timurid period (ca. 1370-1507), Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History.

[12]Encyclopedia.com, Behzad.

The most important evidence for Behzad's work is the set of paintings made in 1488 (AH 893) for the library of Husayn Bayqara in a Bustan of Sa'di, which is now kept in the National Library of Egypt in Cairo. According to Britannica, five miniatures of this copy are regarded by many scholars as the best surviving examples of his work. The Iranica entry adds that the text panels in these paintings were carefully integrated into the design of the pages, which suggests that Behzad and the calligrapher Sultan 'Ali worked closely together.

Other manuscripts linked to Behzad include a Zafarnama of Yazdi dated 1468, a copy of Attar's Mantiq al-tayr of 1483, Navai's Khamsa of 1485 and the Nizami Khamsa manuscripts in the British Library.[13] At the same time, Iranica reports that in the fifteenth century Behzad was regarded in Herat as only one of several skilled painters. His work should therefore be assessed together with the collective work of the workshop and not only as individual fame.

The general features of Timurid miniature painting are as follows. First, the painting is planned as part of the book page and is coordinated with the text block, the nasta'liq script and the ornament. Second, space is built in layers, the horizon is high, and architectural forms are shown flat and with precise lines. Third, colour is saturated and pure, and the contour is exact.[14] Fourth, the subjects are usually chosen from a literary canon that includes Firdawsi, Nizami, Sa'di, Attar, Jami and Navai.

In the paintings of the Behzad period one more feature is visible: the figures have individual character, and scenes of everyday life are rendered with careful observation. Britannica notes that his works keep significant details and remove unimportant ones. This observation and balance of composition distinguish the Herat school from other court schools.

The end of the Timurid dynasty in 1507 did not end the tradition. The Metropolitan Museum chronology shows that the Shaybanids employed many Timurid artists and that the legacy of Herat lived on in the work of Bukharan painters.[15] The Institute of Ismaili Studies states that when Shah Ismail Safavi captured Herat in 1510 the artists of the royal ateliers were transported. A decree of 1522 appointing Behzad head of the royal workshop in Tabriz is known, but the date and circumstances of his move are uncertain. Britannica names Qasim Ali, Mir Sayyid Ali, Aqa Mirak and Muzaffar Ali among his students.[16] Masters trained in the Persian tradition, such as Mir Sayyid Ali and Abd al-Samad, later worked in the Mughal workshops of India.

Today this heritage is preserved in Uzbekistan through education and museum work. The Faculty of Fine Arts of the Kamoliddin Behzod National Institute of Painting and Design includes a department of Miniature and Book Graphics.[17] The exhibition "A legacy linking the centuries:

[13]Encyclopaedia Iranica, Behzād, Kamāl-al-Dīn.

[14]Canby, Persian Painting (1993).

[15]Komaroff & Yalman, The art of the Timurid period (ca. 1370-1507), Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History.

[16]Britannica, Behzad.

[17]Kamoliddin Behzod National Institute of Painting and Design, Faculty of Fine Arts.

Uzbek miniature art" in Berlin presented contemporary works created while preserving the traditions and refined techniques of the Timurid era.[18] In September 2026 an exhibition with 35 works opened in Riyadh. Research on Timurid manuscripts held in the fund of the Beruni Institute of Oriental Studies of the Academy of Sciences of Uzbekistan is also being carried out.[19]

## Discussion

The analysis shows that the development of Timurid miniature painting can be understood through the political history of the dynasty. First, the succession of stages corresponds to the succession of centres: artists were gathered in Samarkand, princely workshops formed in Shiraz, the classical style was consolidated at Herat, and observation and individuality grew stronger under Husayn Bayqara. Each time this happened through the movement of patrons and artists.[20]

Second, caution is needed in assessing Behzad. According to Iranica, his fame was increased by later authors, while in the fifteenth century he was seen as one of several skilled painters. It is therefore more accurate scientifically to study Timurid miniature painting not as the work of one master but as the product of a library workshop.[21]

Third, the Timurid heritage cannot be confined to a single state. Samarkand is in present-day Uzbekistan, Herat in western Afghanistan, Shiraz and Tabriz in Iran, and the Bukhara school continued in Uzbekistan. A heritage approach that recognises this shared origin fits the facts better than assigning each tradition to one state.

Several implications follow for preservation and teaching. Documentation should record the whole manuscript, including the script, the ornament 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 Timurid miniature is learned through the logic of the book. Finally, it is recommended to digitise the Timurid manuscripts in Uzbek collections and to study them comparatively with the Herat and Shiraz manuscripts held abroad.

## Conclusion

This article has examined the miniature art of the Timurid period in four stages: the preparatory stage under Timur, the early princely workshops of Shiraz, the classical style of Baysunghur's library at Herat, and the school of Behzad under Husayn Bayqara. The analysis has shown that each stage differed in its centre, its patron and its group of artists, but that all of them belonged to the system of the art of the book.

[18]ICCU, The exhibition "A legacy linking the centuries: Uzbek miniature art" was organized in Berlin.

[19]Khadjimetov & Madraimov, Examining the Timurid Manuscripts in the Treasury of Uzbekistan's Institute of Oriental Studies.

[20]Thackston, A Century of Princes (1989).

[21]Roxburgh, The Persian Album, 1400-1600 (2005).

The artistic heritage of Timurid miniature painting is expressed in balanced composition, precise contour, saturated colour, unity with the text and fidelity to literary themes. This heritage continued after the Timurids in Bukhara, Tabriz and India, and today it lives on in Uzbekistan through education, exhibitions and research.

The study of Timurid miniatures within the context of the art of the book and as a shared heritage is therefore the soundest basis for research, teaching and museum work. Further work should examine identified manuscripts directly, study pigments and techniques scientifically, and include the Uzbek- and Russian-language scholarship that could not be covered here.

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