

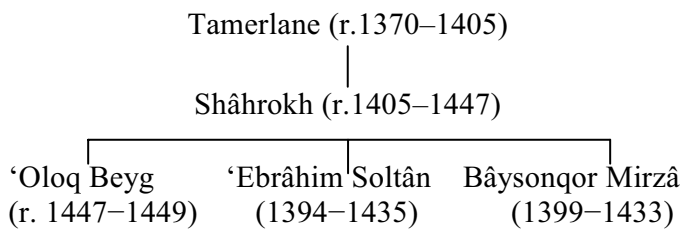
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Shâhnâme Bâysonqori and Its Later Influences

Shâhnâme Bâysonqori as a major pictorial manuscript had a continuous and diverse influence on subsequent schools and periods, up to present times.

The article, with a brief introduction of the *Shâhnâme* Bâysonqori, focuses on some very characteristic compositions of this exquisite and sumptuously illustrated manuscript and its effect on later periods such as later Herat and Isfahan Schools.

During the reign of Tamerlane and especially that of Shâhrokh and his sons —Bâysonqor Mirza (803H/1399–837H/1433), ‘Oloq Beyg (796H/1394–853H/1449), and ‘Ebrâhim Soltân (797H/1394–839H/1435) — one experiences an unprecedented cultural environment and elite atmosphere that is comparatively rare in the whole of Timurid period. Bâysonqor Mirzâ— a prolific calligrapher, connoisseur and the greatest of all Persian bibliophiles— was mainly stationed in Herat, and responsible for major artistic projects such as the greatest *Shâhnâme* of Ferdowsi (*Shâhnâme* Bâysonqori), *Kalileh va Demneh* Bâysonqori and



other divans and albums. There, he gathered from all parts of the vast Timurid territory, all the fine paper makers, gold beaters, bookbinders, illuminators, calligraphers, and illustrators. Ja‘far Tabrizi (later Ja‘far Bâysonqori) was the most prominent figure among them all. He was appointed as the head of library/ atelier and was ordered to produce the most sumptuous manuscripts ever compiled, including the incomparable *Shâhnâme* of Ferdowsi (830H/ 1430) known as *Shâhnâme Bâysonqori*, which is now being preserved in an excellent condition in the Golestân Palace Museum Library, Tehran, Iran.

According to daily reports of Ja‘far Tabrizi called *‘Arzeh-dâsht*, now in an album at Topkapi Saray Museum, in Istanbul,¹ painters such as ‘Amir Khalil and a large number of other painters, illuminators, calligraphers such as Mowlânâ ‘Ali, Mowlânâ Shams, Mowlânâ Qavâmeddin, Khâjeh Qiyâseddin, etc. were involved in producing this fine manuscript. ‘Amir Khalil is described at length in Doost-Mohammad’s introduction to the Bahrâm Mirzâ Album, as the “second Mâni” and one of the four “craftsmen at the Shahrûkhid capital who had no equal in their time in the inhabited quarter of the world”². This magnificent *Shâhnâme*, with calligraphy of Mowlânâ Ja‘far Bâysonqori in exquisite nasta’liq handwriting, contains no more than twenty-two miniatures. As far as composition and pictorial

1) no. H.2153, Folio 98a.

2) *Album Prefaces and Other Documents in the History of Calligraphers and Painters*, transl. W. M. Thackston, (Leiden, Boston, Köln, Brill, 2001), p. 44.

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Fig. 1. 'Esfandyâr slaying 'Arjâsp in the Brazen Hold. *Shâhnâmeh Bâysonqori*, 830H/ 1433, 220x 137mm , Golestân Palace Museum Library, Tehran. Photo: Ebadollah Bahari, *Bihzad: Master of Persian Painting*, (London/ New York, I. B. Tauris Publishers, 1997).



arrangement is concerned, these illustrations are not only at the height of Timurid school in the 9th/ 15th century, but a large number of them has inspired many other artists of Timurid and subsequent periods.

One of the most exquisite compositions in *Shâhnâmeh Bâysonqori* is the sixteenth illustration,

the episode of 'Esfandyâr slaying 'Arjâsp in the *Brazen Hold* (fig.1). The legend has it that the tyrant 'Arjâsp through machination and conspiracy captures two innocent sisters of 'Esfandyâr and holds them captive in his heavily guarded castle. 'Esfandyâr, who was raged by this act of tyranny, disguises himself as a merchant, proceeds through castle's gates and guards, passes the inner cells of the castle and enters the 'Arjâsp's private chamber. There, after a heroic combat, 'Esfandyâr slays the tyrant 'Arjâsp, rescues his sisters and leads them to freedom.

In this incredible illustration of the *Shâhnâmeh Bâysonqori*, the viewer experiences the outer, inner, and private chambers of the castle, as well as all the phases of 'Esfandyâr's endeavor in one single illustration. The illustrator, as in all Persian miniatures, has not chosen one single fixed point of view. Instead, relying on his creative imagination, the illustrator has moved, above, below and around the subject matter³ and has created a storyboard like illustration that introduces the whole episode on a single two-dimensional surface. Unlike many of the heroic episodes of the occidental cultures, the central theme (combat of 'Esfandyâr against 'Arjâsp) does not take place in the focal point of the painting, but rather, on the upper right corner of the illustration. In its place, two very delicate flash-like archways, close to the right margin of the illustration, lead the viewer's eye to the height of the event. 'Esfandyâr's two sisters, sit enclosed, in one of central chambers, and two fragile birds, on the outer corner of the castle's wall, symbolize the approaching freedom.

According to Ja'far Tabrizi's colophon for the *Shâhnâmeh*, the manuscript was completed and gilded in 830H/ 1430. Nearly sixty years later, also in Herat,

3) As the cubist painters did, 400 years later.



Fig. 2. *Yoosof and Zoleykhâ.*

Boostân of Sa'di, 893H/ 1488, 300x 210mm., General Egyptian Book Organization, Cairo. Photo: Ebadollah Bahari, *Bihzad: Master of Persian Painting*, (London/ New York, I. B. Tauris Publishers, 1997).

4) Adab Farsi 908.

5) *The Holy Qur'an*, (12): 3.

Yoosof and Zoleykhâ (Joseph and Potiphar's wife —fig.2). There are a number of stories in *Qur'an* relating to the mundane passions and heavenly love. However, it is the story of Yoosof and Zoleykhâ, which is called, "Ahsan -al-Qâsas" (The best of all stories).⁵

'Aboo-Bakr 'Atiq Neyshâboori, in his *Tafsir-e Soorâbâdi*, indicates such fame is the result of the story being based on righteousness and justice: Jacob is waiting a good long time to see his beloved son; and Joseph, which himself is presented as a handsome man, is expressing noble forgiveness to his brothers... The whole story is established on fine rhetoric, fine conduct, and fine outcome. That is why, in *Qur'an*, it

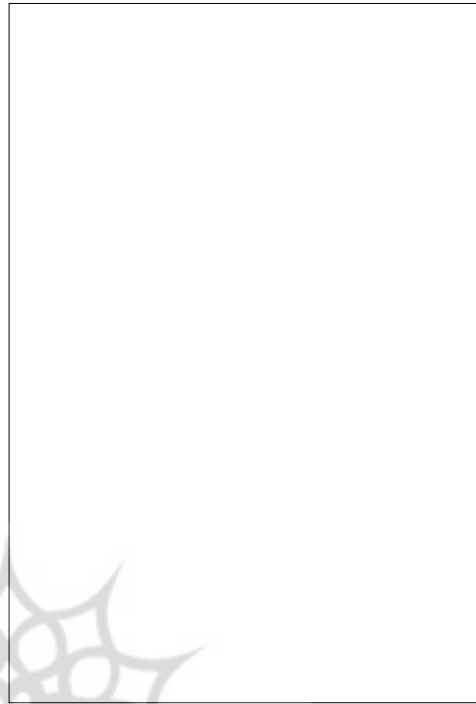
in the court of Soltân Hossein Mirzâ Bâýqarâ and under the supervision of his wise minister 'Amir 'Ali-Shir Navâyi, we experience another endeavor through the work of Kamâleddin Behzâd, for the *Boostân* of Sa'di, C.1488.

Boostân of Sa'di, now kept in General Egyptian Organization, Cairo,⁴ contains six miniatures, four of which are genuinely singed by Behzâd. The manuscript is written in a perfect nasta'liq style, by the renowned calligrapher, Soltân 'Ali Mashhadi, in Rajab 893H/ June 1488. Illuminations of this exquisite manuscript is prepared by the famous, Yâri Mozahheb, the greatest illuminator of that period. Subject of the last and final illustration of this sumptuous manuscript is the *Qur'anic* story of

has been referred to as the “Ahsan-al-Qâsas” (the best of all stories).⁶

In this illustration, we experience the same type of composition that we have just discussed in the sixteenth episode of the *Shâhnâmeh Bâysonqori*. In it, we observe the outer, inner and the private chamber of Zoleikhâ, as well as the complete royal court, on one single page. The focal point of the story does not take place in the center of the painting, but exactly on the upper right corner of the composition. Two very delicately executed flash-like archways that are leading the viewer’s eye to the height of the episode in *Shâhnâmeh Bâysonqori*, here too, lead the viewer eye to the height of the story, where Potiphar’s wife, in her private chamber discloses her love and affection to Joseph.

By deliberately ignoring all limitations, Kamâl-eddin Behzâd has removed and opened the margins of the manuscript up, mainly to separate the mundane world of Zoleykhâ from that heavenly atmosphere that is so prevalent elsewhere in the composition. In this illustration, with exception of Zoleykhâ’s garment that is painted in cadmium orange, the rest of the miniature—including Yoosof’s robe in low keyed green—are in subdued and muted colors of turquoise brown, yellow ochre, green blues and lapis-lazuli, typical of Timurid school. On one of the friezes of the illustration it can clearly be noticed the inscription,



6) ‘Abou-Bakr ‘Atiq Neyshâboori, *Tafsir-e Soorâbâdi* (Tafsir al-Tafâsir), ed. ‘Ali ‘Akbar Sa’idi Sirjâni, (Tehran, Nashr-e Now), 4 vols., vol. 2, pp. 1091-1092.

Fig. 3. *Mourning over the coffins of Rostam and Zavâreh.*

Shâhnâmeh Bâysonqori, 830H/ 1433, 353x 235mm
Photo: *Bihzad: Master of Persian Painting.*

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Fig. 4. Key-Khosrow
Offering the Crown to
Lohrâsp.
Shâhnâme of Shâh
'Abbas I,
1022H/ 1614,
370x 200mm.
New York Public Library.

7) Illustration no. XVIII.

“The work of the Slave Behzâd”
(‘amal -al-‘abd Behzâd).

It is noticeable that the composition, dynamism, location of Zoleykhâ’s chamber in the royal court and the flash-like archways leading to the height of the event in the upper right corner of the illustration, are all vividly reminiscent of the episode ‘Esfandyâr Slaying ‘Arjâsp...in Shâhnâme Bâysonqori (fig.1).

Another illustration of *Shâhnâme Bâysonqori*, is *Mourning over the coffins of Rostam and Zavâreh*⁷ (fig.3). Here one could also observe the same particularities that were pointed out earlier in illustration number sixteen (The episode of ‘Esfandyâr Slaying ‘Arjâsp on the Brazen Hold). In this illustration, Farâmarz mourns the death of his father Rostam, and his murdered brother Zavâreh. The illustration displays outer walls, inner royal court and private chambers, where the coffin of the two heroes lay at rest in a diagonal position.

In this illustration, we are confronted with the same characteristics of the episode of ‘Esfandyâr Slaying ‘Arjâsp. As far as structure, composition, and the overall style concerned, it is apparent to be painted by the same hand and imagination. The only difference is in the content of the two illustrations: The former refers to a heroic legendary act leading to

liberty and vivacity, and the latter is in relation to condolence, mourning and disloyal conspiracy.

In 1614, during the reign of Shâh 'Abbâs I of the Safavid dynasty, we are confronted with yet another sumptuously illustrated manuscript, *Shâhnâmeh of Shâh 'Abbas I*. With thirty-nine miniatures, twenty-two of which are close replica of *Shâhnâmeh Bâysonqori*, it is now preserved in the New York Public Library (Spencer Collection)⁸. *Key-Khosrow Offering the Crown to Lohrâsp* (fig.4), is a direct copy of the illustration of *Mourning over the coffins of Rostam and Zavâreh* (fig.3), now in the Golestân Palace Library, Tehran.

The festive atmosphere of coronation has replaced the melancholy mood of mourning of the latter illustration. Subdued and harmoniously planned colors of *Bâysonqori*'s illustration has changed to an outwardly and pretentious surroundings, with an overdrawn decoration and exaggerated illumination. However, in this illustration too, the viewer can still find traces of direct influence by *Bâysonqori*'s



Fig. 5. *Presentation of a robe of honor to Monzer. Shâhnâmeh Bâysonqori*, 830H/ 1433, 353x 235mm. Photo: Bihzad: Master of Persian Painting).

8) Folio 580.

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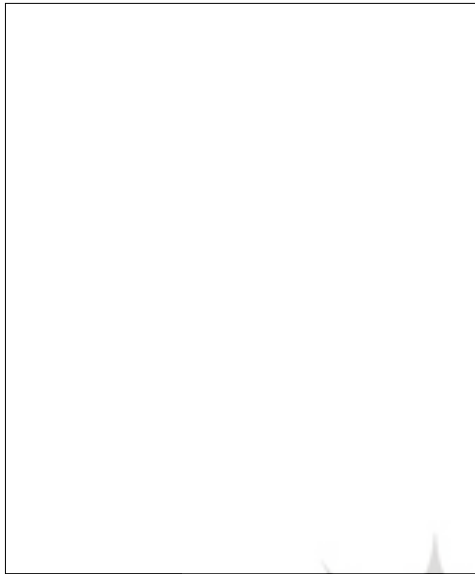


Fig. 6. 'Afrâsyâb trying to string a bow.
Shâhnâmeh of Ferdowsi,
ca. 843H/ 1440,
172mm.
S. C. Welch collection.

illustration.

Subject of illustration number XX is *presentation of a robe of honor to Monzer* (fig.5), who is prepared to take away and educate Bahrâm, son of Yazdgerd I (399H–420H). Yazdgerd seated on his throne, in an outer scene pointing to Monzer, the wise old educator, while, Bahrâm, as a young beardless personality is standing on the right side of the illustration along with courtiers. Two women on the foreground are presenting the robe of honor for Monzer. According to the records, the manuscript was completed by

the order of Bâysonqor “by the feeble hand of the weak Ja‘far Bâysonqori on the 5th of Jumada the first 833 {31 January 1430}”⁹.

In another *Shâhnâmeh* of Ferdowsi — probably ordered by, and prepared for ‘Oloq Beyg, in Samarqand, ca. 1440 — we have the episode, ‘Afrâsyâb trying to string a bow (fig.6). The outdoor setting, the arrangement, and rhythm of the background hills, the structure, and placement of the throne in the illustration, and finally, the movement and gestures of ‘Afrâsyâb, all in all are very much reminiscence of the illustration: *Presentation of the robe of honor* (fig.5). The figure on the lower right corner, its position, the way he is holding his waist sash and the upward right hand gesture is very much similar to the figure of Bahrâm. The only exception might be the absence of the highly sophisticated use of pictorial geometry, as compared to *Bâysonqori* illustration.

9) L. Gracy Binyon, B. Wilkinson, *Persian Miniatures Painting*, (New York, Dover, 1971), p. 71

As a whole, Timurid dynasty in Iran (771H/ 1369 – 911H/ 1500) with diverse cultural activities in the field of literature, sumptuously illustrated manuscripts, highly accomplished calligraphers and distinguished illuminators have had an unprecedented influence on the succeeding periods. This essay has focused on some very typical illustrations relating to this culturally active era, especially *Shâhnâme* *Bâysonqori*.

We saw how the brilliant works of Behzâd in *Shâhnâme* *Bâysonqori* played as models for later Persian painters. For example, we can clearly see such effects in a *Boostan* manuscript, illustrated by Behzâd himself many years later; moreover a Safavid manuscript of *Shahnameh*, which illustrated about 160 years later.¹⁰

10) Other references:
Basil Gray, *Persian Painting*, (London, Skira, 1961);
A. Soudavar, *Art of the Persian Courts*, (New York, Rizolli, 1992).

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