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- 1 There is no mistaking that the superlative copy of the *Šāh-nāma*, commissioned by Šāh Ismā'īl and finished early in the reign of Šāh Ṭahmāsp, has dominated the scholarly study of 16th century Safavid aesthetics. The overwhelming emphasis on the 'art of the book' at the expense of other artistic traditions is reinforced by the architectural magnitude and artistic innovation which later emerged in the reign of Šāh 'Abbās. However, with the publication of *Hunt for Paradise*, the scholarly companion piece for the monumental exhibition of the same name that appeared in New York and Milan, we are given excellent cause to reconsider the scope and impact of courtly art and architecture during the period of 1501-1576. Many of the cultural artifacts that were originally exhibited in *Hunt for Paradise* – housed in a wide array of libraries, museums, and institutes across the world – have yet to be introduced in any comprehensive manner to both academia and the public. Readers will undoubtedly be impressed by the breathtaking quality and detail of the colour plates which are reproduced here, so much so that for one fleeting moment we come close to sharing that same sense of awe and wonderment that was meant to be instilled among the Safavid court and public at large some 500 years ago. Sheila Canby and Jon Thompson have sought out the most renowned international scholars to contribute articles to accompany the present catalogue, and it is more than likely that many of these articles will soon assume an authoritative status in the historiography of Safavid art and architecture history.

- 2 The first chapter by Sheila Canby – an overview of the respective courts and reigns of Ismā‘īl and Ṭahmāsp – serves as an excellent introduction, and Canby is correct to note the later shift in aesthetic style as Ṭahmāsp shifted away from a peripatetic court culture in the 1550s and permanently rooted his workshops and library-atelier in the city of Qazvīn. Sussan Babaie in turn examines the various architectural initiatives that took place between 1501 and 1576, and in addition to the intriguing suggestion that the Vilāyat-i Harun might be linked to the proximity of Isfahan’s old Jewish quarter, she concretely links the absence of a royally-sponsored congregational mosque for this period to the intense debates among court-sponsored Shi‘i theologians regarding the legality of Friday prayer in Twelver Shi‘ism. Like the piece on architecture, the subsequent chapter on calligraphy by Priscilla Soucek characterizes this period as one of transition, whereby the workshops and ateliers of Ismā‘īl and Ṭahmāsp appropriated and morphed circulating Turkmen and Timurid styles. Soucek gives an admirable overview of pre-Safavid calligraphic styles and techniques, and observes how the work of Sulṭān ‘Alī Mašhadī (d. 1520) and Mīr ‘Alī Haravī (d. 1556) dictated the dominance of the *ta‘līq* and *nasta‘līq* methods in Iran and Central Asia. Safavid miniature painting is addressed, not surprisingly, by the exhibition’s curator and well-noted art historian, Sheila Canby. In addition to the aforementioned *Šāh-nāma* and other well-known illustrated manuscripts (such as Āqā Mīrak’s copy of Niẓāmī’s *Ḥamsa*) which appeared in this period, she also notes and discusses two manuscripts which have hitherto not garnered serious attention – the incomplete yet impressive *Aḥsan al-Kibar* (a hagiographical text on the twelve Imams) and Ja‘far al-Šadiq’s *Fāl-nāma*, the latter having some fantastic illustrations of antediluvian lore and Alexandrian romances. Canby continues with another chapter on Safavid illumination – indeed, illuminators of religious and poetic texts were considered their own class of artists according to Qāḍī Aḥmad al-Qummī and other contemporary sources – and the reproductions here are dazzling, most notably the anonymous frontispiece of the *Šāh-nāma-yi Šāh Ṭahmāsp*. The art of bookbinding is treated in two different articles by Zeren Tanindi (“Safavid Bookbinding”) and Tim Stanley (“The Rise of Lacquer Binding”), and once again we find the issue of transition between the merger of the Turkmen style of Tabrīz with the Timurid style of Herat and the later dominance of Isfahani aesthetics under Šāh ‘Abbās coming to the interpretive forefront when discussing the period of 1501-1576. For those who are not familiar with the technicalities of leather and lacquer bookbinding (such as this reviewer), these articles are highly informative and would serve well those who would like to know more about this process. James Allan examines the different instances of metalwork – belts, vessels, bowls, weapons, armour – where 16th century Safavid artisans demonstrated some of their best craftsmanship, and readers will undoubtedly note the highly ornate Safavid standards (*a‘lam*) so often referred to in the Persian sources. Acknowledging Robert Hillenbrand’s recent work, it would appear that Šāh Ismā‘īl’s cenotaph has sparked both interest and debate since Allan also chooses to focus on the inscriptions and its marquetry mosaic. Emily Savage-Smith analyzes the phenomenon of magic-medicinal bowls in Safavid Iran and their occasional incorporation of astrological divining designs, but it should be noted that many of the pieces discussed fall outside of the temporal parameters of this study.
- 3 Yolande Crowe and Reginald Krahl treat both the Safavid indigenous production of ceramics and the import of Chinese ceramics, the latter being highlighted by Šāh ‘Abbās’s adding the *čīnī-ḥāna* (“house of porcelain”) to the Ardabīl shrine. Interestingly, Krahl identifies one of the standard Ming porcelain designs – a round flask with a bird

on a branch – in one of the elaborate court scenes painted by the great Timurid master Behzād in the 15th century. The co-editor Jon Thompson discusses exhaustively both the courtly and popular interest in carpets and textiles in 16th century Safavid Iran, and – once again – we have here an article that elucidates many of the basic terms and concepts associated with textile studies, while at the same time addressing some of the complex historical issues associated with reconstructing the manufacturing and design of Safavid carpets. He also appends some short discussion on the import of ceremonial felts (*namad-i takiyya*) and the oft-debated headgear (*tāj-i ḥaydarī*) of the Safavids. Jennifer Scarce briefly examines Safavid fashions in the 16th century, while Sergei Tourkin provides one of the first systematic presentations of the personal horoscope (*ṭālīʿ-nāma*) of Šāh Ṭahmāsp kept in the Library of the State University of St. Petersburg. These fourteen articles are followed by two appendices: a translation of the Portuguese viceroy Alfonso d'Albuquerque's impressions of Šāh Ismāʿīl, and a Muslim-Christian calendrical chart.

- 4 In addition to the scholarly contribution of these articles to their respective fields, readers will also be impressed by the scope and detail of the footnotes that appear next to the different items featured in plates and photographs. Students and scholars alike will benefit greatly from having access to this ornate and scholarly presentation of Safavid aesthetics in the 16th century.

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Thèmes : 5.1. Monde iranophone

nomsmotscles Nezāmī, Nizāmī

AUTEURS

COLIN MITCHELL

Dalhousie University – Halifax