

Lamia Balafrej. *The Making of the Artist in Late Timurid Painting*

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## REFERENCES

Lamia BALAFREJ. *The Making of the Artist in Late Timurid Painting*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019, 280 pp., 74 ill., ISBN: 9781474437431

- 1 How did Persian artists self-represent themselves within paintings in the absence of a tradition of self-portraiture? How did Persian beholders engage themselves with the style of painting in the past? By addressing these fundamental questions in the study of Persian painting, *The Making of the Artist in Late Timurid Painting* examines the performative and self-representational abilities of Persian artists through the detailed examination of the Cairo Bustan, the earliest surviving illustrated copy of the Bustan (“The Orchard”) of the thirteenth-century Shirazi poet Sa’di made around 1488 in Herat for the late Timurid Sultan Husayn Bayqara (r. ca. 1470-1506) and now kept in the National Library of Egypt (Dar al-kutub) in Cairo (Adab farisi 22). With the aim to provide the first comprehensive analysis of the Cairo Bustan that contains the only surviving genuine signatures of the celebrated Herati artist Kamal al-Din Bihzad (d. 1535), this book explores a series of hitherto underestimated aspects of Persian pictorial culture, not only colours, lines and compositions but also inscriptions and signatures as a symbolic means of the artists’ self-reflection.
- 2 This book consists of the following seven chapters: painting about painting (Introduction); pictorial preface (Chapter 1); writing on the image (Chapter 2); potential world (Chapter 3); calligraphic line (Chapter 4); wonderful signature (Chapter 5); and manuscripts in motion (Epilogue). Between the introductory chapter and Chapter 1, sixteen colour plates from the Cairo Bustan are inserted as full-sized illustrated or illuminated text pages, together with both sides of the book bindings in the beginning and colophon pages at the end.

- 3 The introductory chapter clearly outlines the aims and scopes of this study, while overviewing previous studies on Persian painting and their methodological limits. Influenced by the late Timurid culture of intricacy, the period between the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries became a turning point in the history of Persian painting. Despite its political decline, Timurid Herat enjoyed its cultural activities under the patronage of Sultan Husayn Bayqara. The majlis (“The Assembly”) played a key role as an institution where artists were able to transform their paintings into self-reflective objects, in exchange of ideas with Timurid Herat cultural elites. *The Making of the Artist in Late Timurid Painting*, thus, aims to demonstrate that this particular cultural setting encouraged artists to develop their distinctive, highly miniaturising pictorial style, as manifested in the illustrations of the Cairo Bustan.
- 4 Chapter 1 sets out to analyse the double-page frontispiece of the Cairo Bustan (folios 1b-2a). Although it looks as typical as courtly scenes found in other Persian manuscripts of the time, this frontispiece is unusual in multifaceted aspects. First, this is by no means a formulaic courtly scene. What is fundamentally lacking here is a sense of hierarchy. Unlike other surviving examples which place the ruler on the right, the frontispiece of the Cairo Bustan locates the ruler on the left. Given that the key image tends to occupy the right-hand side of double-page composition, following the right-to-left reading orientation of Persian manuscripts, the image of the ruler on the left serves to diminish his central role as the compositional focal point. Furthermore, none of the characters are depicted to pay attention to the ruler. To make sense of such a unique visual layout, the bulk of Chapter 1 is concerned with an analysis of mystical iconographical themes, such as transcendence and intoxication, as well as their twisted relations with contemporary Sufi literature, notably Hafez’s poetry.
- 5 Turning attention to the last illustrated page of the Cairo Bustan, “Yusuf and Zulaykha” (folio 52b), Chapter 2 opens with the reading of inscriptions within the painting, with special reference to the image of architectural epigraphy. Although this painting is famous for its Escher-like spatial labyrinth that can be interpreted as a metaphor of the mystic’s spiritual quest, the content of each inscription suggests its function as encomiums of the artist rather than as eulogies for the patron. Under the subheading “the art of Jawab (response)”, Chapter 2, then, readdresses the question as to why the narrative structure of this painting does not exactly correspond to Sa’di’s text but rather evokes another poem of Yusuf and Zulaykha written by the fifteenth-century Khorasani poet Jami. This may reflect a self-conscious choice of the artist as a visual response to the impact of Sa’di on late Timurid Herat intellectual culture. The rest of this chapter is devoted to the majlis, where illustrated poetry works, such as the Cairo Bustan, could have been publicly presented, orally recited and pictorially analysed.
- 6 After a brief recap of “Yusuf and Zulaykha”, Chapter 3 shifts attention to the first two text paintings (folios 10a and 26a). The fact that both paintings do not necessarily illustrate the text is yet another peculiar aspect of the Cairo Bustan. Instead of illustrating the subject matters as precisely and realistically as possible, several independent scenes, some of which bear no association with the story, as well as so-called “extra-textual figures” (i.e. figures that are not described in the text), are put together, like patchwork, so as to fill their pictorial fields. This chapter, thus, intends to offer a new approach to the relationship between text and image in Persian manuscript painting by bringing the concept of *taswir* (the process of image making) forward. After

all, the paintings of the Cairo Bustan are appropriated, not by the patron for his own ends, but by the artist for his self-display purposes.

- 7 Flipping through the third text painting (folio 30b) and illuminated frontispieces (folios 2b-4a), Chapter 4 focuses on the line as a mode of the artist's self-representation and pursues the concept of *tahrir* (the graphic quality of paintings). Fifteenth-century Persian paintings in general and those found in the Cairo Bustan stand out in terms of linear perfection. Thanks to advanced calligraphic techniques, some of the so-called Timurid school drawings go beyond training and preparatory works, while the metalwork of this time also shows a sophisticated linear aesthetic. Clearly, the line acquires its distinctive artistic identity across different media of Timurid visual culture.
- 8 Chapter 5 brings the signature of the artist into focus. Four out of the six illustrated pages from the Cairo Bustan (folios 10a, 26a, 30b and 52b) contain signatory inscriptions, including the name of Bihzad and in two cases the date of production, each of which is hidden in pictorial details and inserted in a different way. The signature of remarkable versatility serves to convey a variety of its roles and meanings, more than just as a declaration of authorship. This chapter also touches upon the existential question of Bihzad by overviewing his biographical references found in primary sources, while refraining from joining an unsettled debate as to the authenticity of his works and signatures.
- 9 The final chapter overviews a trans-regional journey of the Cairo Bustan from Herat, Tabriz and Isfahan over a period of one hundred years. By involving different patrons and artists, as well as by adding a text page with the seal of Shah 'Abbas II (r. 1642-1666) on the back side (folio 55), the making of the most celebrated Persian illustrated manuscript was finally completed.

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## AUTHORS

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