

*Book Arts of*  
**ISFAHAN**

**Diversity and Identity in Seventeenth-Century Persia**



**Alice Taylor**

# BOOK ARTS OF ISFAHAN

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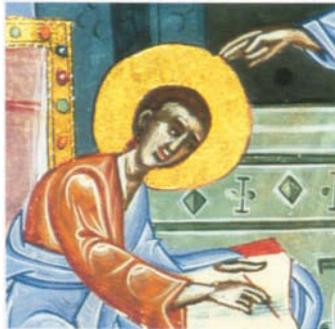
## Diversity and Identity in Seventeenth-Century Persia



*Book Arts of*

H A N

Alice Taylor



The J. Paul Getty Museum

Malibu, California

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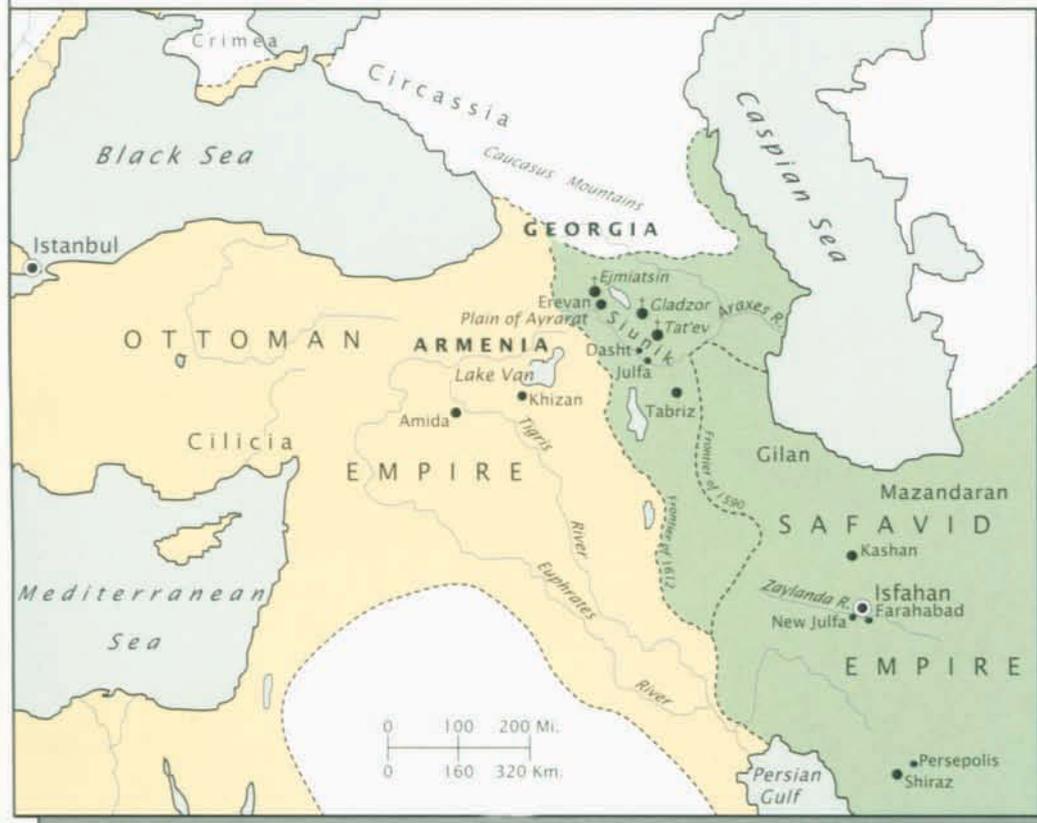
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His Gospel to Prochoros* (pl. 22); and *Shiru  
and Queen Mahzad in Her Gardens* (pl. 9).

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CENTRAL ASIA

UZBEKISTAN

AFGHANISTAN

SAFAVID  
EMPIRE

MUGHAL  
EMPIRE

Arabian Sea

THE WORLD OF ISFAHAN  
IN THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

## Foreword

**E**XHIBITIONS OF the art of any given time and place have tended to look for unity rather than variety and to favor the beautiful. As a result, the clashes, puzzles, and paradoxes that typify complex cultures—their very lack of unity—have been less evident to museum visitors, though these phenomena have had a powerful attraction for historians in recent years.

This exhibition examines a single art form in a great artistic center during a glorious era: the book in Isfahan during its time as the Safavid capital. Rather than searching for overall stylistic or visual unity, we observe instead the ways in which history and cultural traditions have caused artistic styles to diverge and contrast and how these styles have functioned as expressions of different communal identities. The differences are at least as striking as the similarities. The complexities of Isfahan are especially useful to consider in Los Angeles, another major city whose subcultures give it a distinctive place in the world.

This exhibition is one of a series organized by the Department of Manuscripts that explores the art of the book in Southern California collections. We want to cast a fresh eye on these collections and make their surprising wealth better known. For this show we have drawn as well on several other American institutions for loans. We are especially grateful to Stephanie Barron, Acting Director, and Nancy Thomas, Curator of Islamic Art, at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Gloria Werner, Director, University Research Library, and David Zeidberg, Head, Special Collections, at the University of California at Los Angeles; and Stephen L. Brezzo, Director, and Ellen Smart, Curator of Southeast Asian Art, at the San Diego Museum of Art. Dr. Milo C. Beach, Director, and Kelly Welch, Registrar, at the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery of the Smithsonian Institution, were generous in their cooperation; we would also like to thank the Sackler's Art and History Trust Collection. For the loan of exceptionally rare Judeo-Persian material, the Museum is indebted to Dr. Mayer E. Rabinowitz, Librarian; Sharon Liberman Mintz, Curator of Jewish

Art; and Elka Deitsch, Assistant Curator of Jewish Art, at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America; and Joan Rosenbaum, Director, and Vivian Mann, Curator of Judaica, at The Jewish Museum, New York City.

I want to express my thanks to the members of the Getty Museum staff who brought this exhibition about. Deborah Gribbon, Associate Director and Chief Curator, gave her wise support to this project, as she does to many others. The exhibition was organized by Alice Taylor of West Los Angeles College and Thomas Kren, the Museum's Curator of Manuscripts. Dr. Taylor, whose idea was the basis of the show, has not only written a stimulating catalogue but also has worked closely with Dr. Kren in the development of the exhibition itself. Kurtis Barstow, Curatorial Assistant, has played an essential role in all practical aspects of the show and the catalogue. Irene Martín, Head of Exhibitions, coordinated the Museum's supporting activities; Diane Brigham and her education staff have devised public programs to engage the local community; Lori Starr and her Public Information staff worked with the Department of Education in developing community outreach, special events, and publicity; and Sally Hibbard and Cory Gooch in the Registrar's Office have managed the comings and goings of loans. For their work on this catalogue, I am grateful to the team that produced it: John Harris, the conscientious editor; Leslie Thomas Fitch, who made the handsome design; Stacy Miyagawa, who coordinated production; Charles Passela, who took the splendid color photographs of the Getty and UCLA pieces; and Christopher Hudson, Mark Greenberg, and Richard Kinney, who oversaw the publication.

*John Walsh*  
Director

## Preface and Acknowledgments

THE EXHIBITION *Book Arts of Isfahan: Diversity and Identity in Seventeenth-Century Persia* at the J. Paul Getty Museum (October 24, 1995–January 14, 1996) focuses on the role of images in articulating the identities of various groups of people in Isfahan while that city was the capital of Safavid Persia (1597–1722). Four types of objects provide examples. There are printed books, in Armenian; Armenian illuminated manuscripts; illustrations in Judeo-Persian manuscripts; and paintings from the circle of the court (both individual leaves and manuscript illustrations). The Armenian and Jewish materials allow us to see how two groups clearly divided from the majority of the city dealt with their own identities; images emanating from the court give some sense of how the ruling elites of Isfahan viewed the religious, linguistic, and ethnic variety of their city and the world beyond.

Among images of refined courtiers, certain subjects stand out as alien to the elite of Isfahan. Some are foreigners: people from Ottoman Turkey, from Central Asia, and from India. Others, like an Armenian clergyman, are residents of Isfahan marked off from the basic audience for these paintings as aliens or outsiders, and a yet a third group of images emanating from (or only emulating) the royal ateliers seem to take as their subject foreign styles and to hold those styles, their very “otherness,” up for observation. Aside from the beauty of many of the individual objects, a particular interest of this exhibition lies in the juxtaposition of rich and varied styles of representation valued by the distinct ethnic and religious groups that lived together in Isfahan. In contrast to most art exhibitions, which strive to clarify the underlying visual ethos of a particular period, this exhibition stresses the diversity of one era in one center. This book documents the exhibition (illustrating all the objects in it, with the single exception of the *ketubbah* from the Jewish Museum [F 3901]). It provides background information that the visitor may require and explores issues raised by the exhibition. I have focused particularly on the role of images in the process of defining both the self and the other that went on in the complex society that made up Safavid Isfahan.

*Imagined Communities* is the title of Benedict Anderson's well-known study on the origins of nationalism. While the groups under discussion here are not nations (they do not correspond to states), Anderson's phrase can usefully be applied. Like national labels, the labels we use to define ethnic or religious groups are fluid. To take the example of religious identification: although Muslims, Jews, and Christians all looked upon conversion from their faith as a catastrophe, conversion did occur, especially to Islam. With it often went a change in ethnic identity. One could scarcely be a Muslim Persian Jew, although in times of forced conversion Jews in Iran sometimes decided to be Muslims publicly while practicing their Judaism in secret. In the same way, Armenians considered fellow countrymen who accepted Islam as lost, while Muslims might think of those same people as Armenians for generations.

Similarly, the use of a distinct language, like Armenian, or a separate alphabet, as in the case of Judeo-Persian (which is Persian written in the Hebrew alphabet), could generally separate a people from its neighbors, enforcing a separate identity, but that barrier was porous in a multilingual society. Group identity could be shifted according to who was assigning it and could be strained by many objective factors, from the attraction of the neighbor's customs (or of the girl next door) to forced conversion. In Safavid Isfahan, religious, linguistic, and ethnic identity was almost always under some sort of stress and was continually being defined and redefined. This definition of one's own group necessarily involved the definition of others, of the groups to which one did *not* belong. It was a creative process, with its roots in the imagination, and it often expressed itself in images.

Objects these communities made can reveal how they imagined themselves. Manuscripts in Judeo-Persian stress the connection of Persian Jewry with specifically Persian literary and artistic traditions. Manuscripts and books in Armenian were directed exclusively at other Armenians, and this very fact lent them particular value in the eyes of the Armenians of Isfahan. In choices of style and iconography for illuminations, Armenians further asserted their connection to an Armenian past. At the same time, Armenians took comfort in imagining themselves part of the larger Christian world (although it often rejected them), and European images incorporated into Armenian books suggested a Christian unity transcending the political and ecclesiastical factors that isolated Armenians.

Images from the shah's court show not only the ideal courtier (perhaps suggesting an ideal identity for the person gazing at the image) but also hold up outsiders for observation (thus inviting the viewer to consider who he was not and whom he might compare himself to). As the Safavid Empire opened up to the rest of the world, especially through trade but also through warfare and the moving of subject populations, Safavid painting explored the differences between people. An interest in ethnicities, religions, and classes outside the

Persian court became an increasingly important component of Safavid paintings, particularly those on single leaves. There is in this phenomenon an element of control as well as of curiosity; individual images seem to offer the possibility of cataloguing, defining, and collecting the people observed through them, and indeed some images of non-Persians border on the ethnographic. Class lines are often easier to discern than ethnic divisions, but both are manifestations of the broadening of subject matter that distinguishes Persian painting in the seventeenth century.

A serious difficulty arises in referring to images from the Persian court. The court of Safavid Isfahan often defined itself as Persian, but people from other ethnic and linguistic groups played very important roles there. The largest non-Persian group, people of Turkman descent, included people as prominent as Aqa Riza, the artist who directed Shah 'Abbas I's library-atelier, and Muhammad Beg, Grand Vizier to Shah 'Abbas II. Furthermore, a Turkman ancestor, even a Turkish name, did not necessarily make one a Turkman. In the context of the court, it is very difficult to say who was a Persian, a Turkman, a Georgian. A Georgian Christian might well not view a convert to Islam, who happened to have been raised speaking Georgian, as a Georgian, while his Persian coreligionist would. Thus, we should avoid labeling our third group as Persian, except in the very broadest sense of pertaining to the court of Safavid Persia.

The connection to the court, while crucial, is often rather tenuous. Artists in the employ of the shahs formulated a style in the representation of the human figure that quickly spread beyond the court. They provided the shahs with images but also sold their work, and their drawings were bought, sold, and copied in the marketplaces. These are court images by origin, but often only distant origin.

It would also be misleading to label these court images as Islamic; they were primarily a secular art form. Most of the artists and patrons probably were Muslims, and some Isfahan leaves carry poetry that can be interpreted in terms of Sufi mysticism, but the Islamic art of Isfahan is much more easily seen in terms of calligraphy, especially in manuscripts of the Qur'an, and in the construction and decoration of mosques.



The arts of the Safavid court have been treated in several exhibitions and publications that we do not mean to duplicate. Many fine studies have been written on aspects of Isfahan's history and culture; without them, this one would hardly have been possible. I have depended quite heavily on Anthony Welch's exploration of the patronage of the later Safavid shahs, and I have made extensive use of Vera Moreen's scholarship on the Jews of Isfahan, Sirapie Der

Nersessian's and Thomas F. Mathew's work on Armenian manuscript illumination in Isfahan, and Raymond Kévorkian's research on Armenian printed books. Suggestions for further reading, at the end of each chapter, list the crucial publications of these authors, along with other works in English that I thought most useful to newcomers to each topic. These works, in turn, provide access to the extensive literature, in many languages, on Isfahan and its art. For the material in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, I have generally followed the attributions of Edwin Binney, 3rd, in *Islamic Art: The Nasli M. Heeramaneck Collection*, edited by Pratapaditya Pal (Los Angeles, 1977). On the whole, this book is not the fruit of my own research but rather a synthesis of a widely scattered scholarship.

On the specialized vocabulary of the book arts, I have followed Michelle P. Brown's *Understanding Illuminated Manuscripts: A Guide to Technical Terms* (Malibu, 1994), with one important exception. Her definition of illumination, which includes figural miniatures, is consonant with scholarship on Armenian manuscript illumination, where illustration is one element of illumination. Scholars of Persian painting, on the other hand, generally make the distinction between illumination, meaning nonfigural decoration, and illustration, meaning images that supplement the text by representing the events, persons, or even concepts of the text in images. In discussing Persian painting (including Judeo-Persian illustration), I have maintained this distinction.

To thank all the people who helped me write this book would be impossible, but many people have done extraordinary things. The J. Paul Getty Museum, and especially the staff of the Department of Manuscripts, made the project possible. Thomas Kren was as intelligent, persistent, supportive, and constructive a reader as any writer could ever hope for, and I am most grateful for his help. Kurtis Barstow, Adam S. Cohen, Dana Davey, and Elizabeth Teviotdale all provided great assistance in research, obtaining photographs, and in various logistical matters. Charles Passela made wonderful photographs of the Getty materials, as he always does.

I would also like to thank the staff of the Department of Publications at the Getty Museum and at the Getty Trust for their patience and professionalism. At the Museum, John Harris edited the manuscript. At the Getty Trust, Leslie Thomas Fitch provided the sensitive design for the book, while Stacy Miyagawa saw the book through production and kept it on schedule.

My husband, Marcus Levitt, diligently edited the manuscript several times, and our children, Jesse and Elizabeth, showed exemplary patience. Their love and support are a joy as well as a great help.

Two anonymous readers made many useful suggestions, and Linda Komaroff of the Metropolitan Museum of Art heroically read a draft of the entire manuscript on very short notice, clarifying many problems for me.

The staffs of the lending institutions have been extremely generous with their time and resources. David Zeidberg, Head of Special Collections at UCLA, and his staff surpassed their usual excellent level of service. Octavio Olvera and Lucinda Newsome in particular helped me make the best possible use of the UCLA collections. Nancy Thomas, Curator of Ancient and Islamic Art at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, stretched her one-curator department to the limits of human endurance to accommodate this project, and her assistant, Catherine Croall, went beyond those limits. In New York, Dr. Meyer Rabinowitz, Librarian of the Jewish Theological Seminary, made my too short visit very useful, Elka Deitsch most helpfully oversaw a complicated program of photography, and Vivian Mann at the Jewish Museum generously offered more resources than I was able to make use of. Ellen Smart, Curator of Southeast Asian Art at the San Diego Museum of Art, helped us round out the exhibition. All made the task of creating this exhibition a most enjoyable adventure.

*Alice Taylor*

**Suggestion for  
Further Reading**

Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London and New York, 1983).

## *Isfahan and Its Peoples, 1597–1722: An Historical Overview*

**I**N 1597, THE SAFAVID Shah ‘Abbas I (reigned 1587–1629) made Isfahan his capital. ‘Abbas defined his empire as Iran, the Persian homeland, and it is thus natural to think of Isfahan as a Persian capital. But to imagine a uniformly Islamic city with one language and a single culture is to neglect fascinating aspects of the legacy of seventeenth-century Isfahan. Posited by its Shi‘ite rulers as the center of the Islamic world, Isfahan was also a crossroads of international trade and diplomacy, of Christian missionary work, and of artistic exchange, a kaleidoscope of languages and religions. Not all the inhabitants of Iran were Persian. A large part of the population was non-Persian Muslims, especially Turkmen, who had been arriving (as slaves, migrants, and conquerors) since at least the tenth century. People speaking languages related to modern Turkish and Uzbek lived throughout Iran, as well as in neighboring Anatolia and Central Asia, and had ruled on the Iranian plateau for many centuries.

Persian and Turkish sources agree that along with the difference in language, the Turks and Persians differed profoundly in their ways of earning a livelihood, their relationship to property rights, and their ideas of political legitimacy; in short, in cultures and in values. More than one historian has called the Turks “lords of the sword” and the Persians “lords of the pen.” Turks were generally herdsmen, seminomadic, and highly militarized. Persians were city-dwellers, the traditional administrators of Iran, and saw themselves as the literary people (this despite the fact that Turkish literature was well developed and that writers of Turkman background, such as Iskandar Beg Turkman, also known as Iskandar Munshi, excelled in Persian literature). The most significant ethnic or linguistic division in Safavid Iran, then, was between Turkman and Persian. However, many individuals in Iran were multilingual.

Among the non-Muslims were people who considered themselves Persian, notably the Zoroastrians, who still followed the pre-Islamic religion of Iran, and the Jews, who traced their history in Persia back to the Babylonian

Exile of the sixth century B.C. Both groups spoke Persian; the Jews wrote Persian in the Hebrew alphabet, that is, in Judeo-Persian. Both Jews and Muslims used another language for their most sacred activities: Hebrew for the reading of the Torah and Arabic for the Qur'an. Other longtime residents included Armenians and Hindus, who generally earned their living in trade. As traders, they had to be able to function in Persian, but they often maintained their own languages in daily use. It is clear, then, that even though language was an important feature dividing the diverse populations of Isfahan, it was not an impermeable wall. Groups maintained their own distinct identities by other means, including books, manuscripts, and albums, and the images contained in them. Some of the images we consider here were in books addressed to a single group: manuscripts in Judeo-Persian clearly belonged to the Jews of Persia, just as manuscripts and books in Armenian were obviously directed at Armenians and in important senses are Jewish and Armenian art.

Images connected with the Safavid court should not be thought of as Persian in the same sense. The style of painting represented in album leaves from the court of Isfahan fits in any survey of Persian art, but only if it is understood as the product of a diverse society that—while led by people who generally identified themselves as Persian—was nonetheless open to contributions from the many other peoples of Isfahan. (For example, an artist as central as Aqa Riza was of Turkman descent.) Furthermore, enjoyment of the images popular at court was not restricted to the court, or even to Persia. Drawings by artists in the shah's employ were bought and sold in the marketplace, and many were exported. Patronage cannot identify them as Persian. Like the collecting of paintings in albums, the court fashions are probably best identified with class, not ethnicity. They interest us here because of the role ethnicities, religions, and classes outside the Persian court played in Isfahan paintings.



Before examining the groups of objects in this exhibition in detail, it may be helpful to understand how the events of the seventeenth century affected Isfahan and its populations.

Shah 'Abbas juggled three major international relationships and numerous smaller ones. In the period before 'Abbas ascended to the throne at the age of sixteen, the Ottoman Empire had taken over Safavid lands to the northwest. In 1590, 'Abbas consented to a peace treaty with Istanbul that ceded to the Ottoman Empire lands as far east as the original Safavid capital, Tabriz. The Ottoman Empire also required that 'Abbas modify his traditional Shi'ite stance by ceasing to declare that the early caliphs (whom the Ottomans, as Sunni Muslims, believed were the proper rulers of the Islamic world) had usurped

the Prophet Muhammad's rightful heirs. Not until 1603 was 'Abbas strong enough to confront the Ottoman Empire over lands he felt to be part of his proper dominion, Persia. In the meantime, 'Abbas focused on regaining lands lost to Uzbeks in the northeast, trying, with varying degrees of success, to enforce his belief that the proper boundary between the Turkman territory of Central Asia and the Persian homeland was the Oxus River. At the same time, he had to contend with the Mughal Empire in India. 'Abbas was unable to stop his Muslim neighbor there from taking the city of Qandahar in 1594.

'Abbas turned to confront the Ottomans in 1603 with a campaign for the marches between Persian and Ottoman domains. He retook the lands ceded in 1590 as far north as Erevan and by 1612 had convinced the Ottoman sultan to sign a treaty establishing the older frontier. Naturally enough, these campaigns had a profound effect on the Armenians who lived on what became the battleground. Until his death, 'Abbas continued to fight for control of Mesopotamia and the Caucasus, the lands bordering Persia to the west and northwest. Hostilities, whether open warfare or a quieter general mistrust, characterized Ottoman-Persian relations throughout this period.

Shah 'Abbas considered Iran a Persian realm, but this notion was itself Safavid in origin. Defining Iran as Persian involved disenfranchising Turkmen and, paradoxically, replacing them with other non-Persians. The first Safavid shah, Isma'il I (reigned 1501–24), traced his origins to Turkman as well as Persian noble families. He imposed his rule with an army composed overwhelmingly of Turkman tribal units, often defeating other Turkman powers, and he wrote poetry in a form of Turkish.

Like rulers of Iran before them, the Safavids depended heavily on a Persian-speaking civil administration. It was to the early Safavids' advantage to identify both with their Persian administrators and their predominantly Turkman soldiers. 'Abbas I changed the balance: in an effort to consolidate his authority, he replaced the earlier Safavid military power base of mainly Turkish-speaking army units, tied by tribal and religious oaths to their leader, with ethnically mixed legions, often led by non-Iranian people, especially Georgians and Circassians. He strengthened the system of crown lands, in which the income of large areas was set aside for the shah alone, reversing a trend toward the establishment of feudal lands for powerful Turkman families, and in this project, also, he made use of his non-Iranian subjects. For example, he employed Armenians to consolidate his control of the economically important silk industry. 'Abbas claimed the production areas of Gilan and Mazandaran as crown lands, displacing Turkman landlords, bringing in Armenian labor, and transplanting Armenian silk merchants to Isfahan to pursue international trade in silk.

One of ‘Abbas’s radical changes was his establishment of a new capital in Isfahan, in the geographical heart of Persia and far from the Turkman power bases of the north and west. He defined the city as a cosmopolitan capital where local loyalties could be completely overwhelmed by the shah’s own royal glory. ‘Abbas’s reign saw a sharp rise in the economic strength of Iran as he used his consolidated authority to establish trade and industry. He made his new capital a reflection of the strength of his entire realm.

‘Abbas is said to have loved the old town of Isfahan, which enjoyed a beautiful setting surrounded by mountains, plentiful water, and significant, if somewhat neglected, buildings, notably the Great (or Friday) Mosque. In an established Islamic tradition of town planning that articulated the major social forces in terms of buildings, ‘Abbas built the Royal Square (the Maydan) connecting his palace, the great public Royal Mosque, a smaller personal mosque (the Mosque of Shaikh Luft-Allah), and the Royal Bazaar. ‘Abbas placed his new town center outside the older Isfahan, simultaneously preserving the historic center and establishing his relation to it as one who renews and surpasses. The palace and the bazaar received merchants and ambassadors from all of Europe and Asia.

A center of diplomacy and, above all, trade, Isfahan was an international crossroads. ‘Abbas received missionaries as well as merchants; his court was the scene of rivalries between Augustinian, Carmelite, and Dominican Catholic missionaries, between the English, Dutch, and Portuguese merchants seeking trade to the east. Russians came to Isfahan to find alliances against their Ottoman nemesis, as well as to trade furs for silks. The trade with Europe in luxury goods featured not only textiles but also art objects; delicate Isfahan miniatures were collected in Europe, as were glorious “Shah ‘Abbas” carpets, while ‘Abbas and his court prized European prints and hired European artists to decorate their palaces.

Even in the relatively tolerant tradition of Islam, the position of non-Muslims in Isfahan was remarkable. From its earliest conquests, Islamic law had held that “People of the Book,” that is, Jews and Christians, should be accorded the protection of the Islamic state, which they in turn should support by paying tribute and a poll tax. This contrasts sharply with Europe’s attitude toward non-Christians: Islam was generally treated as a heresy, its adherents given the choice of death or conversion. While Judaism was allowed in much of Europe, expulsions, forced conversions to Christianity, and mass murder were constant features of Jewish life in premodern Europe. In Isfahan, Jews were one of the oldest communities, while Christian newcomers came to occupy economically privileged positions.

Jews had come to Iran in the Babylonian Exile described in the Old Testament. One local tradition held that Nebuchadnezzar himself had brought the

first Jews to Isfahan. Persian sources agree that Jewish villages were among those that amalgamated to form the town of Isfahan in the seventh century A.D. Jews in Isfahan seem to have lived as craftsmen and minor traders, as they did in many Islamic cities. The Jews of Isfahan had deep roots in the area, reflected in their literary tradition, which included Persian as well as Hebrew genres.

The large Armenian presence in Iran was far more recent, connected to Shah 'Abbas's wars with the Ottoman Empire. It was the Armenians' misfortune to live on the battlefield of those wars. In the fall of 1605, Shah 'Abbas instituted a scorched-earth policy to separate the territories of the Safavid and Ottoman Empires, deliberately depopulating the plain of Ayrarat along the length of the Araxes River. The Armenians compared their brutal forced marches into Iran to the trials of the Jews in Babylonian Exile.

'Abbas seems to have relocated Armenians to places roughly similar to those they had left. Farmers who were settled in the silk-growing marshes south of the Caspian Sea at Gilan and Mazandaran died of cholera, malaria, and starvation. Others fared much better, and chief among them was the population of the town of Julfa. When these merchants and craftsmen reached their new domicile in Isfahan, 'Abbas supplied them with houses, both within the city and in a new suburb south of the river Zaylanda that came to be known as New Julfa. Although Islamic authorities traditionally discouraged the outward display of Christianity among protected populations, 'Abbas supported the building of Armenian churches and even allowed the ringing of church bells. European travelers to Isfahan were impressed by the thriving Armenian Christian community, especially in New Julfa.

Even before being brought from Old to New Julfa, the merchants had dealt in the silk trade with Europe. As Armenians, they had the advantage of contacts in a diaspora community that spread north to the Crimea, Russia, and Poland, and west to Venice. As Christians (albeit heretical to Catholics and Orthodox), they had much freer access to European towns than did Muslims. The shah held a personal monopoly on Iranian silk; soon he granted (or sold) the Armenians of Isfahan the exclusive right to sell his silk abroad. Their trading networks stretched from Madras to Amsterdam.

Throughout Shah 'Abbas's reign and beyond, the Jews and Christians of Isfahan led a peculiarly mixed existence. The Armenians, in particular, received privileges and punishments with a bewildering randomness. Having settled the Julfan Armenians in Isfahan in 1605 and supplied them with homes and churches and very gainful employment, in October of 1613, 'Abbas suddenly demanded that they repay a huge, long-forgotten debt of four thousand tumans. He would not allow the Catholic Carmelite missionaries to help the Armenians and demanded the Armenians' children in place of funds not presented, at the distressing rate of three tumans per boy and two tumans

per girl. Many Armenians converted to Islam to save their children. Later, 'Abbas allowed them to return to Christianity, but in August 1621, he suddenly demanded the conversion of all members of the Armenian community, threatening to dissolve their marriages if they did not submit. This edict was withdrawn within two weeks; the shah had fallen ill, and Armenian merchants, abroad with much of his revenue in hand, refused to come home.

The Jews faced similar misfortunes, differentiated primarily by the twin facts that they had not such a height of prosperity from which to fall and that they received no support from European diplomats or missionaries. Judeo-Persian chroniclers view Shah 'Abbas as generally well disposed toward his Jewish subjects, despite the edict he allowed forcing Jews to "wear demeaning headgear" from 1616 to 1619. Even worse, in 1619–20, he charged the Jews of Isfahan with practicing magic and martyred several prominent men, destroyed sacred books, and forced many to convert. 'Abbas's successor, Shah Safi, restored the freedoms of Persian Jews.

From 1656 to 1662, Muhammad Beg, Grand Vizier to 'Abbas II (reigned 1642–66), oversaw a massive persecution of the Armenians, Jews, and Zoroastrians of Iran. In 1656, he expelled the non-Muslims from places where Muslims lived. In Isfahan, the Zoroastrians lived in a separate suburb, which seems to have spared them great hardship. The Armenians living in Isfahan proper had to relocate to the Armenian suburb of New Julfa. For the Jews of Isfahan, there was nowhere to go, and Armenian and Jewish sources tell of a desperate Jewish community, expelled from their homes in Isfahan, and repelled from the Zoroastrian settlement, taking refuge in the countryside around Isfahan and finally converting to Islam in great numbers as the only way to gain shelter. Forced conversions of Armenians followed. However, by 1661, the converts were allowed to resume the open practice of their former faiths.

The most uniformly persecuted religious groups in Isfahan were generally non-Shi'ite Muslims. The Safavids were Shi'ite, and their main rivals were the Ottomans, Sunni Muslims. Although the Safavid shahs were not consistent in their treatment of Sunni Muslims, they were often very harsh toward the large pockets of Sunni Muslims that remained in their realm. Their attitude to yet other Muslim sects was quite uniformly hostile; for example, 'Abbas I completely suppressed the Nuqtaviyan (or Pasikhaniyan) movement in Iran. Those who were not killed fled to Mughal India.

Shah 'Abbas I established a new kind of government in Iran, one which is often likened to the enlightened monarchies then existing in Europe. He consolidated political and economic power around himself, strengthening the central bureaucracy and the traditional Persian elites that mainly staffed it. He enforced the Safavid notion that the only orthodox form of Islam was Shi'ite, reinforcing the division between Iran and the Sunni Ottoman Empire. He instituted or strengthened his monopolies on trade goods, especially silk,

and he effectively excluded Europeans from the great profits to be made in that trade.

It is in great part because of these accomplishments that 'Abbas has often been viewed as the founder of the Persian state, or at least as the greatest of the modern shahs. He used the diversity of his subject populations to his advantage, wresting military power away from the tribal units on which his Safavid predecessors had relied by drawing officers as well as soldiers from among conquered populations. As we have seen, he found merchants among his new Armenian subjects in Isfahan. He established a system that consolidated power in the hands of the shah, but, despite its centralization and Shi'ite Islamic orthodoxy, this system made use of the many strands of language, religion, and tradition that had come together in his realm. At times, 'Abbas seemed quite tolerant, especially of Christians; he arranged philosophical and theological debates in which ideas were exchanged (as opposed to the tradition in both Christian and Islamic courts of setting up straw men to be vanquished by one's own clergy). He was a connoisseur of art, and his tastes in painting included styles well beyond traditional Persian manuscript illumination. He began an age of centralized government in Iran, more identified with a single Persian culture than any since the arrival of Islam, but at the same time he opened Iran to foreigners from Europe as well as Asia. Despite the persecutions of his reign, Armenian and Jewish chroniclers praised him.

'Abbas I's restructuring of Persian society was so extensive and successful that it is scarcely surprising that his successors are generally viewed as disappointments. 'Abbas had established the power of the Persian bureaucracy at the expense of the Turkman military. One result was that his successors were all raised in the harem rather than as military men. Safi I, 'Abbas's grandson, had no military or political experience when he came to the throne in 1629 at the age of seventeen, precisely because 'Abbas had feared rivals within his own family; indeed, he had killed or blinded all his sons. With the power of the state concentrated in the shah, an unprepared ruler was a serious liability for the Persian Empire, and at his death in 1642, Safi left a much smaller state than the one he had inherited. His son ruled as 'Abbas II from 1642 to 1666. Coming to the throne at age ten, 'Abbas II grew into a formidable ruler before his death at the age of thirty-three. He directed the affairs of state himself from quite an early age, following 'Abbas I's example in concentrating power in the person of the shah, particularly by increasing the extent of crown lands and intervening regularly in the administration of provincial governors. He maintained peaceful relations with the Ottoman Empire and, in general, with most of his neighbors, and saw trade, especially with Europe, increase.

'Abbas II's son Safi succeeded him; at the age of nineteen, when he ascended the throne, he apparently had never been out of the harem. His first years as shah were so disastrous that he had himself freshly crowned in 1668,

this time as Shah Sulaiman. He ruled until 1694, displaying a remarkable apathy for affairs of state. Europeans remarked on the continuing pomp of the Safavid court, as well as on the paralyzing effects some of Sulaiman's personal pursuits had on Isfahan.

Sultan Husain (reigned 1694–1722), Sulaiman's son, was a very pious man who followed the advice of theologians in attempting to convert the Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians of his realm to Islam. He also tried to force his remaining Sunni Muslim subjects to accept Shi'ite Islam. Such populations, when located on the borders, reacted by aligning themselves with the Ottomans, Afghans, or Mughals. Sultan Husain was unable or perhaps unwilling to impose his authority on a disintegrating realm. The final blow was the successful invasion of Iran by a relatively small Afghan army, which, on March 7, 1722, defeated a disorganized Persian army at least twice its size. Even though the Afghan army was not large enough to physically encircle the city of Isfahan, the Afghans cut off supplies and defeated the city by famine. Sultan Husain surrendered to the Afghans in October.

For the populace of Iran, the Afghan invasion was a disaster. Despite the shortcomings of so many Safavid rulers, a nostalgia for the dynasty fueled the aspirations of no fewer than eighteen pretenders in the eighteenth century.

**Suggestions for  
Further Reading**

Bier, Carol, ed. *Woven from the Soul, Spun from the Heart: Textile Arts of Safavid and Qajar Iran, Sixteenth–Nineteenth Centuries* (Washington, D.C., 1987), especially Linda K. Steinmann's "Sericulture and Silk: Production, Trade, and Export under Shah 'Abbas," pp. 12–19.

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Jackson, Peter, and Laurence Lockhart, eds. *The Cambridge History of Iran*, vol. 6 (Cambridge and New York, 1986), especially chapters 5 and 6.

Moreen, Vera B. *Iranian Jewry's Hour of Peril and Heroism: A Study of Babai Ibn Lutf's Chronicle (1617–1662)*. American Academy for Jewish Research, *Texts and Studies* 6 (New York and Jerusalem, 1987).

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## Contemplating the Other: “Isfahan Style” Miniatures

PAINTING IN MUSLIM realms has frequently reflected Islam’s historic role in uniting people of quite diverse origins. The Arab-led conquests of the seventh century initially united people from the Persian Gulf to Gibraltar under Islamic rule, and subsequent centuries saw people from further south in Africa, from Central Asia, and from the Indian subcontinent join the world of Islam. Artistic interchange covered even more territory; to take one example, after the Mongol conquests of the thirteenth century, interest in Chinese art can be seen in painting from Egypt to Mesopotamia, from Spain to Central Asia. In addition to motifs and techniques adapted from foreign styles, one also finds outsiders—foreigners, unbelievers, and newcomers—as the subjects of images.

Well before the coming of Islam, Iran had a strong tradition of incorporating foreign cultures into its own. Persian emperors have often taken proprietary pride in cataloguing the diversity of their subject peoples; the remains of Persepolis (ca. 500 B.C.) contain not only written lists of subject nations and their tributes but also images in which distinctive clothes, hair, and beards identify all the subject peoples. Of course, Persia not only conquered but was itself frequently conquered. Often its response was to make the conqueror its own; thus, Alexander the Great features in the *Shah-Nameh* (the tenth- or eleventh-century Persian historical epic) as a great Persian king. Alongside the tenacity of Persian culture, its ability to absorb foreign elements is one of its most important and characteristic traits.

The adaptation of the skills, interests, and values of many cultures was crucial to the success of the Safavid dynasty. The first Safavid shah, Isma‘il I, came to power with the support of a predominantly Turkish army, but he continually stressed his Persian heritage. As the Safavid state developed, other shahs had even more need to appeal to both their Persian legitimacy and to the support of non-Persians and non-Muslims. Shah ‘Abbas I used Georgian and Circassian soldiers to break the power of Turkman leaders in his army; he used

Armenian merchants to expand his trading empire from England to India; he used Europeans to enhance the prestige of his court in art and in arms; and all the while, he maintained his ties to local traditions. His successors at Isfahan continued in his path.

We must consider the place of the foreigner in the arts of Safavid Isfahan in this context. Interest in the particulars of the world outside the traditional, idealizing concerns of Persian art has long been remarked on in seventeenth-century Safavid court images. This broadening of artistic horizons surely is related to the outward expansion of the Safavid Empire, especially in trade. The elites now had to deal with a wider world; in the arts of the court, a variety of responses emerged.

The revival of fifteenth-century Timurid styles in architecture and manuscript illustration would seem to be a nostalgic, almost defensive attempt to preserve the lost world, while the exploration of new subject matter seems to have been a way of coming to grips with a new world, perhaps even of controlling it: an image that presents knowledge of a stranger's appearance, and even of his state of mind, offers some degree of authority over that newcomer. Similarly, the use of imported styles is a way of adopting their strengths to one's own purposes. These developments were especially strong in the book arts, and primarily in the individual leaves for which Isfahan is particularly known. In the discussion below, we will consider how images of foreigners and images in imported styles contributed to some of the main currents of Safavid painting in Isfahan.

Aqa Riza (who also signed himself as Riza-yi 'Abbasi) was a central figure in the development of a new kind of painting at the court of Shah 'Abbas I. He was the director of the royal library atelier (*kitab-khana*) in Isfahan from 1597 to 1635 and a master of the figure study on a single leaf. His successes in the medium must have contributed to its rise in popularity in the seventeenth century. Riza received a salary from the shah until his death in 1635, but he was criticized for spending long periods away from the royal atelier, associating with "low persons." He depicted the life of the streets and the lower classes, producing drawings of soldiers, peasants, beggars, travelers, and entertainers, as well as the more traditional drawings of refined courtiers. His clever evocation of the particulars of his subjects, and attention to local color (whether in the form of a courtier's exquisite clothing and languid posture or the exotic animals accompanying an entertainer) set the tone for many Isfahan images.

At previous Persian courts, the work of the *kitab-khana* had centered around the production of fine manuscripts, some of which would be illustrated. As director of 'Abbas's library atelier, Riza did provide illustrations for manuscripts, but only four manuscripts with his illustrations are known, a

strikingly small number compared to the hundreds of individual leaves bearing his signature. Even if we allow for the fact that Riza's signature was often forged, the preponderance of his surviving work is individual leaves. A look at Riza's illustrations may help explain why he turned to the independent leaf. In a copy of Sa'di's *Gulistan* (pl. 1), Riza depicted Sa'di coming to blows with a dervish. In many respects, Riza has followed the traditions of Persian manuscript illustration: the image interrupts the text, and it is assumed that the viewer is also a reader and aware of what is going on in the story (for example, of the fact that Sa'di and the dervish had been engaged in a formal debate). The event takes place in an ideal landscape: an expanse of rocky hillside in soothing lavender with aqua, dotted with tufts of grass and culminating in a scattering of gold foliage and lavender, aqua, and gold stones at the feet of the combatants. As in many earlier text illustrations, the beauty of the setting invites the reader to pause and reflect. The tree in the background even draws the reader out of the narrative to wander among the gold birds and foliage in the margin.

All this is often encountered in earlier Persian manuscript illustration. What distinguishes Riza's work are his vivid characterizations of the people he has placed in this idyll. Sa'di and the dervish seem to pause in their struggle, the dervish with his stick raised, tearing Sa'di's collar, and Sa'di grasping his adversary's beard, his fist raised to strike. They glare at each other in an oddly sad way, as if they already regret their violence. One companion seems ready to intervene, rescuing them from their predicament. Where earlier Persian illustration provided a counterpoint to the text, this image, like other illustrations by Riza, takes on a life independent of the text.

In contrast, Shah 'Abbas also patronized some very traditional manuscript illumination, depending on exquisite detail for its impact. Like royal Timurid manuscripts of the fifteenth century, these volumes of the epics and romances of classic Persian literature teem with detail: delicate sprays of leaves; tiny, lovely faces, each carrying the same features, defined with a few lines; intricately tiled walls and carpeted floors; meadows dotted with tufts of grass and flowers. Each book—text illumination and illustration—is a single work of art, meant to be experienced as a unit. In the finest of these books, text and image come together in such a way that the reading of the poetry and the perusal of the image become a single process. Text and image bear quite a different relationship in the work of Riza, whose innovations in characterization are more at home in the single leaf. His drawings have their own sense of humor, of the particularity of the subject, that makes a text superfluous.

Whether 'Abbas would have agreed with this assessment is impossible to establish, but we do know that Riza practiced his art for many people other than his royal patron. Artists of the royal ateliers made drawings for their own

PLATE 1

**Sa'di's Argument  
Comes to Blows**

by Aqa Riza.

Fol. 115v of a *Gulistan* of  
Sa'di. Isfahan, ca. 1615.

Washington, D.C., The Art  
and History Trust Collection.

Courtesy of the Arthur M.  
Sackler Gallery,

Smithsonian Institution,  
LTS1995.2.86.

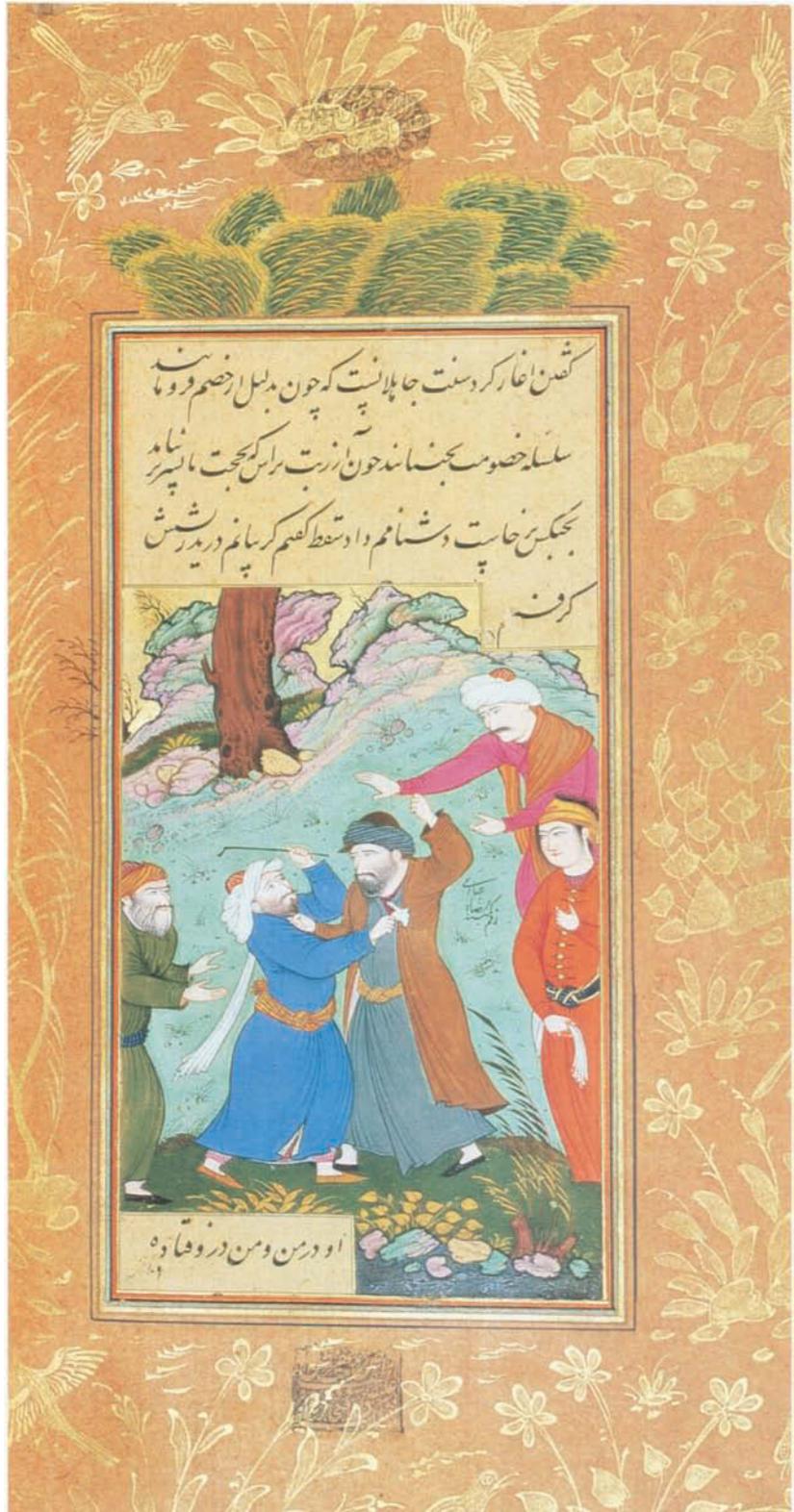




FIGURE 1  
**A Youth Reclining  
in a Landscape**  
Probably Isfahan, ca. 1620.  
Los Angeles County  
Museum of Art, The Nasli M.  
Heerama neck Collection, Gift  
of Joan Palevsky, M.73.5.470.

uses even while receiving salaries from the shah. The poet Mulla Ghururi relates that Sadiqi, Riza's predecessor as director of the *kitab-khana*, gave him two drawings and told him: "Merchants buy each page of my work for three tumans. . . . Don't sell them any cheaper!" Artists had outlets for their work beyond the court.

Individual leaves of painting functioned quite differently than the illustration in manuscripts; they were meant to be appreciated one at a time. Even when brought together in one album, the leaves still functioned as separate works. Although a few lines of poetry were often included in an image or its frame, the images were independent of a narrative. They required a different kind of attention than that demanded by an illustrated manuscript, for there was no story to carry one along. When the poetry and images were linked, the connection was often subtle, and the viewer's task included exploring its meaning. Isfahan artists usually presented a few figures on a single leaf, more often depending on nuanced characterization than luxuriant color. The precious, jewel-like details of earlier manuscript illustration are gone, and each image presents a restrained, economical array of lines defining a figure or two, a hint of landscape, an object evocative of the person and mood depicted.

A type out of Persian poetry, the beautiful, aristocratic youth was a popular subject well before Riza and one in constant use in later Safavid art. Riza's treatment of the subject was often emulated; a leaf in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (fig. 1) follows the kind of treatment Riza perfected in the early decades of his career. A young man, relaxed and pleasantly alert, leans back on his embroidered pillow. There is no story illustrated here; instead, the viewer



FIGURE 2  
**A Standing Lady  
 with a Bottle and Cup**  
 Probably Isfahan, ca. 1650.  
 Los Angeles County  
 Museum of Art, The Nasli M.  
 Heeramanek Collection, Gift  
 of Joan Palevsky, M.73.5.14.

has the opportunity to closely observe a beautiful young man at leisure in the countryside. As much as his elaborate turban, rich pillow, and exquisite refreshments, his demeanor identifies him as one of the elite. His delicate hands are so far from the world of work that his fingertips curl slightly backwards, and he is engaged in the same leisure activity as those who observe him: he is looking closely at something pleasantly engaging. We are also invited to consider the strokes of the pen that brought this image into being. There is a playful interchange between what is depicted and the lines that depict. With his left forefinger, the youth, in a kind of visual pun, seems to be in the act of drawing one of the very pillows beneath him; with the little finger of his right hand, he indicates the rocky ground behind him. But these rocks shift in meaning before our eyes, revealing a ram's head. Ultimately, we must recognize that we are interacting with the lines the artist placed on the paper, and the artist's playful mood blends with that of the young courtier. The artist has used his colors with subtle economy: limited red and gold enliven the black lines of the drawing.

On the basis of similarities with Riza's work, this leaf might be dated to the 1620s. It is one of a great many leaves aspiring to his style, reflecting his long career as a teacher who had his students copy his work and also reflecting the market, both in Riza's lifetime and later, for works in his style. The fashion for drawings of beautiful young people continued throughout the Safavid period; a *Standing Lady with a Bottle and Cup* (fig. 2) is in the style that Mu'in Musavvir (active ca. 1635–1709), one of Riza's students, was using in the 1650s. Her pose, bending to one side, gracefully extending a cup to her left, while looking to her right, is very frequently used for the ideal maid or youth.



FIGURE 3  
**Two Men  
 and an Attendant**  
 Probably Isfahan, 1638.  
 Los Angeles County  
 Museum of Art, The Nasli M.  
 Heeramanek Collection, Gift  
 of Joan Palevsky, M.73.5.469.

Another frequent type is the man of intellectual substance; as an example, we may consider a drawing of about 1625 (pl. 2) of a man with a soft, beautifully groomed beard, seated in a leafy suggestion of a landscape, reading. The drawing bears the inscription: *This was made on Thursday, the twenty-fifth of [the month of] Rajab*, but the year is not indicated. As we contemplate the delicate foliage, rocks, and wispy clouds behind him, the very lines that define the man assert their independence from him. The alternating gray and black lines of drapery flowing off his right arm take on a life of their own and play off the straight red line comprising the man's cane. The artist was more concerned to show the radiant intelligence and refinement of the subject's face than to establish the mechanics of his posture; the ephemeral line of his cane scarcely seems calculated to convince us that it supports his swelling torso.

An interest in particulars characterizes these miniatures. The subject's mood and status come into sharp focus in the near absence of setting, and each line emerges in the spare elegance of the image. Independent of narrative, these images appear to be observations of an ideal world. Yet even in these scenes, the concerns of the seventeenth century creep in: on the pages of the man's book, we read: "The old boss made me run fast barefoot in that lane like European slaves (*ghulaman-i-farangi*)."

The fashionable world of Isfahan seems to have been very much absorbed in people-watching. The observation of others as an important and accepted activity pervades Isfahan miniatures. On occasion, we sense the discomfort that a subject might feel under the weight of this scrutiny. An image dated 1638 (fig. 3) shows two aristocrats in quiet conversation. The man on the right (sometimes identified as Shah 'Abbas I), who wears a red turban with a feather,



PLATE 2

***A Bearded Man Reading  
in a Landscape***

Probably Isfahan, ca. 1625.

Los Angeles County  
Museum of Art, The Nasli M.  
Heeramaneck Collection, Gift  
of Joan Palevsky, M.73.5.26.

seems superior to his companion, whose back bends in a subtle bow and who does not quite return his gaze. The most interesting contrast, however, is between the second seated man and his standing attendant. They are dressed similarly, but the standing man does not seem to know quite what to do with himself; his shoulders are a bit tensed, his brow furrowed, his cheek darkened. All the tension of the meeting is concentrated in him, leaving the aristocrats to behave with utmost courtesy.

The difference in status between the observer and the observed is rarely made so overt. Still, a degree of authority over the subject inherent in the act of observation features in many Isfahan leaves. The collection of foreign “types” in images partakes of this power. A captive Uzbek (pl. 3) stands out among the foreigners depicted in Isfahan images. He belongs to a well-established genre of the vanquished enemy, asserting the nobility of warfare by emphasizing the worth of the prisoner. Here the artist seems to have looked deeply at the person before him. The captive seems very sad and immediately engages our sympathy; his brow is furrowed and his eyes deeply creased. He looks out to our left with an unfocused gaze, lost, perhaps, in the gravity of his predicament. He has clearly fallen from a high position. He has an aristocrat’s hand, with long tapering fingers that bend back at the tips like those of the reclining youth we saw earlier. His torso is large, his posture excellent. The soft, thick material of his clothes folds gently around his wrists, and he sports elaborately embroidered cuffs, hat, and quiver. The scene on the quiver shows a man, dressed much like this captive, subduing a captive of his own. The image of the present captive as a triumphant warrior contrasts poignantly with his new condition, and particularly with his yoke. The artist has made it stand out by giving it a warm brown wash and has carefully rendered its volume. He emphasizes the gnarled texture of the bark along with the strength and weight of the captive’s burden.

Archers in similar predicaments occur in images as early as the fifteenth century, and there is an element of nostalgia in this image. Shah ‘Abbas and his successors generally focused their military attention against the formidable Ottoman Empire, although the Mughal Empire posed equally serious challenges on occasion; Uzbek incursions from the northeast were a constant irritation through the seventeenth century. Under ‘Abbas I, the Persian military made the transition to firearms, after long resistance on the part of mostly Turkman regiments of archers. The noble bowman of the drawing was passing from the scene; if he existed at all by the time the image was made (no earlier than about 1600), he would probably be found among the Uzbek enemy.

The interest in depicting foreign types often makes attribution of miniatures to Isfahan difficult since we cannot use the ethnic origin of the subject as an indication of the source of the image. It is possible that the *Captive Uzbek* is a copy of an Isfahan drawing made for an Ottoman audience. The similarities

PLATE 3

**A Captive Uzbek**

Isfahan, ca. 1610, or a  
slightly later Turkish copy.  
Los Angeles County  
Museum of Art,  
The Edwin Binney, 3rd  
Collection of Turkish Art,  
M. 85.237.28.





FIGURE 4  
**A Turkish Lady**  
 Probably Isfahan,  
 early seventeenth century.  
 Los Angeles County  
 Museum of Art, The Nasli M.  
 Heeramanek Collection, Gift  
 of Joan Palevsky, M.73.5.477.

FIGURE 5  
**An Indian Maiden Standing  
 Under a Willow Tree**  
 by Shaikh ‘Abbasi.  
 Probably Isfahan, 1647.  
 Washington, D.C., The Art  
 and History Trust Collection.  
 Courtesy of the Arthur  
 M. Sackler Gallery,  
 Smithsonian Institution,  
 LTS 1995.2.117.

between Ottoman and Safavid painting in the seventeenth century cause further difficulties, but they also point to the strong interest the two courts had in each other. Isfahan techniques have been recognized in a lady playing a lute (pl. 4), but her typically Turkish dress might also suggest that the miniature was made in Istanbul. If a Persian artist did indeed produce it there, the image attests to the popularity of Isfahan’s art abroad. Alternately, it may have been made for the Isfahan audience that enjoyed looking at foreign types. The artist certainly devoted a great deal of attention to the lute player’s costume, noting the red lining of her blue dress and conveying the filmy fabric of her sleeve. A Turkish lady standing in the exaggerated sway popular in Isfahan images (fig. 4) creates the same problem: Was an artist in Turkey presenting a local beauty in the mode made popular in Isfahan, or is this another foreign type collected in the Safavid capital? *An Indian Maiden Standing Under a Willow Tree* (fig. 5), drawn in 1647 by Shaikh ‘Abbasi, an artist who worked for Shah ‘Abbas II, was clearly made for a Persian audience interested in her Indian dress.

This almost ethnographic interest in dress is common in Isfahan painting. A portrait of a Christian cleric (pl. 5) carefully records the appearance of an outsider at the Safavid court. This man wears clothes unlike the courtiers’,



PLATE 4

**A Turkish Lady Playing  
a Lute**

Isfahan or Turkey, ca. 1610.

Los Angeles County  
Museum of Art, The Nasli M.  
Heeramanek Collection, Gift  
of Joan Palevsky, M.73.5.457.



PLATE 5

**An Armenian Bishop**

Isfahan, ca. 1650.

Los Angeles County

Museum of Art, The Nasli M.

Heeramaneck Collection, Gift

of Joan Palevsky, M.73.5.456.

and the artist presents them to us in all their curious detail: the gold-brocaded, royal blue miter; the flowing, velvety-black cloak lined in yellow; the blue robe with gold floral pattern, falling in the open waves characteristic of fine silk. Images in Armenian manuscripts confirm that Armenian bishops sported this rich wardrobe in the seventeenth century. The man within the clothes is also presented: we can consider his full hips, his soft, frizzy hair and beard (rather unkempt, in comparison to those of the reading courtier in pl. 2), his full eyebrows, wrinkled cheeks, and small, pursed red lips. All of this is laid out for our perusal. Our potential discomfort in studying another human being so closely is ameliorated by several features: one is the way the figure acts like other people in Safavid images. The artist shows us a heavy man, moving slowly in the graceful, backwards-leaning gait conventional in Safavid images. He carries his processional cross in a hand as flaccid as those with which the beautiful people of the court hold fruit, bottles, and books. A background of swaying, leafy fronds and curls of clouds further connects this portrait to other Isfahan album leaves, signaling the man's status as yet another image to be quietly enjoyed. Like so many of the courtiers we contemplate in Isfahan miniatures, he is intent on something outside the frame: he points off to his right, in the direction of his piercing gaze. He may not know he is being observed; if he does, he certainly is not objecting.

This may be fortunate, because the attitude of Isfahan aristocracy toward local Christians was often intrusive. Various European travelers tell of Shahs 'Abbas I, 'Abbas II, Safi, and Sulaiman visiting New Julfa to observe Armenian celebrations of Easter, Ascension, and Christmas. Once 'Abbas I even waded into the Zayanda River to officiate at the baptism that forms part of the Armenian Christmas/Epiphany celebration. A visit from the shah was a great honor, and probably a reassuring one in an age when Armenians periodically faced forced conversion and other persecutions. Being observed, even as a courtly amusement, could have a positive value.



The Safavid shahs of Isfahan supported many forms of art and a diversity of styles in many media. Through an ambitious building program, 'Abbas I shifted the center of Isfahan to a new square, the Great Maydan, or Royal Square, which linked his palace, two mosques, and the Royal Bazaar. His successors continued to erect mosques, caravanserais, markets, palaces, gardens, and bridges. Sultan Husain was engaged in an expansion of his suburban palace at Farahabad, even as the Afghan army arrived at the gates of Isfahan in 1722. Buildings were decorated with tilework, mural paintings, and carpets. Miniatures, carpets, metalwork, and ceramics were traded abroad, like Isfahan silks, and enriched the coffers of the shah. Artists in these different media used widely varying styles. Metalwork and manuscripts look to older traditions.



FIGURE 6  
**Birds and Flowers  
in a Chinese Style**  
Probably Isfahan,  
seventeenth century.  
Los Angeles County  
Museum of Art, The Nasli M.  
Heeramanek Collection, Gift  
of Joan Palevsky, M.73.5.21.

Similarly, *cuerva seca* tiles were extensively used for mosques, approaching the effect of fifteenth-century Timurid tile mosaics, with much less outlay of time and money. The same technique was used to quite different effect, as in tiles (now in the Metropolitan Museum) from an Isfahan palace that depict Portuguese. Ceramics sometimes adapt motifs from contemporary painting and sometimes duplicate models from China. A drawing of birds and flowers in a Chinese style may have originally been a design for the silkworks (fig. 6); as an independent image, it oddly lacks a center and edges. It could easily be continued in all directions, and one mentally translates the soft peach ground into a satin surface against which a brocade carries the sharply defined branches and leaves, contrasting with the paler birds and broad blossoms.

An interest in the collecting of imported styles is clear in Isfahan leaves. Chinese painting had been valued in the Middle East for centuries before the reign of Shah ‘Abbas I. Chinese motifs—such as dragons, phoenixes, curlicue clouds, jagged rows of mountain peaks, and gnarled tree trunks—frequently occur in Persian painting after 1300. Occasionally, an artist working at the Il’khanid or Timurid court produced a painting using the subdued washes favored in Chinese painting, or even copied a Chinese work, but more



PLATE 6

***A Lion Attacking a Dragon  
That Has Wrapped Itself  
Around a Goat***

Isfahan 1691, inscribed as by  
Mu'in Musavvir.

Los Angeles County  
Museum of Art, The Nasli M.  
Heeramaneck Collection, Gift  
of Joan Palevsky, M.73.5.12.

commonly, the admiration for Chinese art was expressed in the appropriation of individual motifs that were subordinated to local artistic traditions.

Isfahan artists often seem intent on quoting imported images rather than adapting motifs. Thus, the *Lion Attacking a Dragon That Has Wrapped Itself Around a Goat* (pl. 6), which carries an inscription assigning it to Mu‘in Musavvir in 1691, adapts a Chinese model’s intricate interplay between the soft, gently arched lines comprising the lion and the frothy curls that make up the dragon, but it goes beyond mere appropriation. Mu‘in (if this is his work and not one of the many leaves with false signatures) experiments with the quality of his lines, so that they become less distinct as they move into the distance. He seems to strive for the atmospheric effects of Chinese landscape drawings. The illusion is challenged, however, by the head and shoulders of a man who almost seems to peer in at the struggle through a hole in the background. The lines that define him are very distinct, and a touch of red in his lips pulls him forward. He mirrors the viewer, entranced by the battle; his gesture, finger to his lips, is often seen in sympathetic observers in earlier Persian manuscript illuminations, where it signifies thought or emotion. Mu‘in Musavvir often used this sort of juxtaposition, as when a similarly frothy Chinese dragon—all light pen strokes—invades a drawing of 1676 (now in the British Museum, 1949-7-9-011) to attack one of Mu‘in’s rather staid men, defined in solid expanses of paint. The play with Chinese techniques suggests a desire to manipulate a foreign style, to hold it up for observation, just as Isfahan artists and patrons seem to have sought to capture the people around them, to observe them at leisure.

The attitude of Isfahan artists and patrons toward European art was similar. Painters came to Isfahan from Europe, and local mural painters sometimes emulated their works, even as others produced large-scale paintings very similar to Isfahan Style miniatures. In 1608, an embassy from Pope Paul V presented Shah ‘Abbas I with a set of thirteenth-century miniatures illustrating the Bible, a gift from the Cardinal of Cracow, Bernhard Maciejowski. These illustrations (now divided between the Bibliothèque Nationale, the Morgan Library, and the Getty Museum) are prized as among the very finest Gothic manuscript illuminations. Shah ‘Abbas seems to have appreciated them, perhaps because he was intrigued by their style. He received the gift enthusiastically, joking with the emissaries about the resemblance of Lucifer to his Ottoman enemy and ordering Persian summaries of the miniatures’ Latin inscriptions to be written in the margins (fig. 7).

‘Abbas and his successors employed Dutch artists and enjoyed modern imported European images, but they also supported local artists working in European styles. A little drawing of *The Prodigal Son* from the San Diego Museum of Art (pl. 7) represents a Persian artist’s response to a 1538 woodcut by the prolific German printmaker Hans Sebald Beham (fig. 8). The imported



PLATE 7

***The Prodigal Son***

Isfahan, early  
seventeenth century.

San Diego Museum of Art  
(Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Edwin  
Binney, 3rd), 1972:232.

FIGURE 7  
**The Story of David  
 and Absalom**  
 England or France,  
 ca. 1250. JPM, Ms. Ludwig  
 I 6, recto.

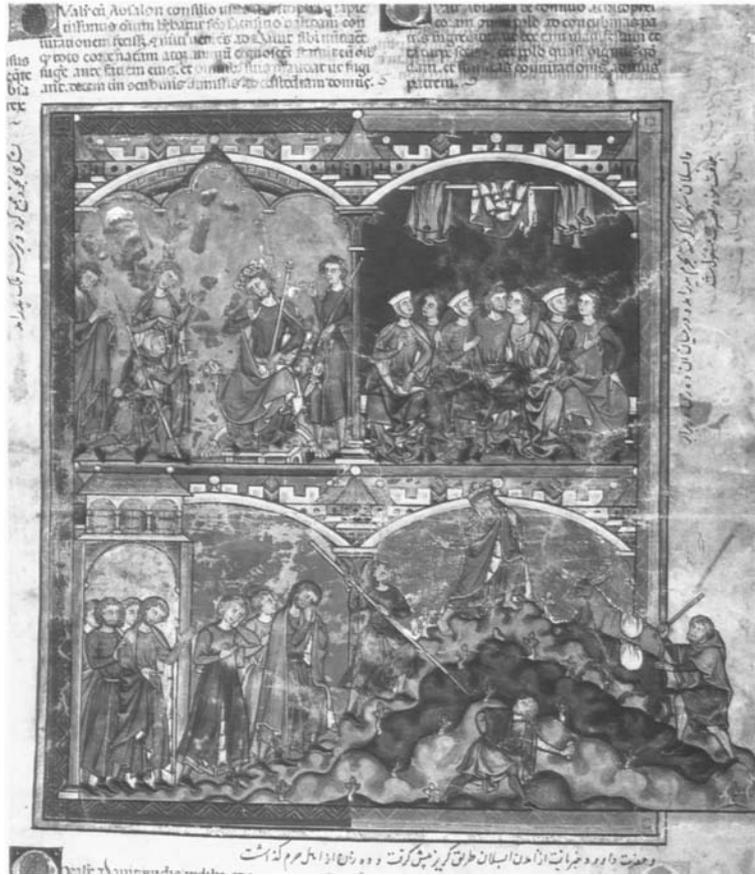


FIGURE 8  
**The Prodigal Son  
 Tends the Swine**  
 by Hans Sebald Beham, 1538.  
 London, The British Museum.



PLATE 8

***Majnun in the Wilderness***

by Muhammad Zaman.  
Ashraf, 1676.  
Washington, D.C., The Art  
and History Trust Collection.  
Courtesy of the Arthur M.  
Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian  
Institution, LTS 1995.2.120.

woodcut must have been admired in Isfahan, for the Persian artist copied it nearly line for line. The reversal of the image may indicate the use of a mechanical aid, such as pouncing.

Shah 'Abbas II himself studied drawing with Dutch painters, and his son, Shah Sulaiman, supported Muslim painters whose work features so many European elements that scholars once commonly assumed that they must have studied in Italy. Muhammad Zaman was one such artist. His *Majnun in the Wilderness* (pl. 8) shows both his admiration for European painting and the Persian concerns he explored in the new style. This miniature is one of several that Muhammad Zaman made in 1676, at the command of Sulaiman, for a refurbishment of the shah's sixteenth-century illustrated manuscript of the poet Nizami's works. It shows Majnun during his retreat in the wilderness, where he contemplated his ill-fated love for Laila, coming to understand the greater meaning of that love, and God's love for the world.

Muhammad Zaman's challenge here was to show the world in such a way as to communicate the logic of Majnun's renunciation of it. For the poet Nizami, love was a clear manifestation of God, and the obstacles in the way of love were signs from God of how human life should be conducted. Majnun is emaciated and somber, but he has attained the peace that comes from an acceptance of God: despite his sunken cheeks and skeletal torso, Majnun sits at ease and gestures gracefully. His head is erect and his gaze is steady. God's beneficence is worked out, much as it is in Nizami's poetry, through an enumeration of the beauties of his works: the clouds; trees; animals (each with shining eyes and soft fur); even the water and rocks are beautiful. At the same time, a ruined building in the distance, and lifeless trees before it, suggest the futility of human endeavor. Muhammad Zaman conveys these sentiments using European techniques. The fading of colors into the blue mountains in the distance, the convincing recession of the space around Majnun and his visitors, the careful observation of light and shadow, are all techniques imported to Persian painting. But the lesson of the painting remains indelibly Persian, because Muhammad Zaman has been able to make the European techniques his own and use them for his own purposes.

The history of Persian painting abounds in instances of such very different styles coexisting, and it is particularly clear in the album leaves made in Isfahan that stylistic variety was not an unfortunate accident but something positively valued by artists and patrons. It is not possible to ignore the fact that Isfahan artists and patrons were attracted by imported styles and subjects, especially those from Europe or China, and it would be a mistake to dismiss the variety in these images as merely "foreign influences," as if eclecticism were not an important, and valued, trait of the visual arts in Isfahan.

What unites the leaves that were produced and enjoyed in Isfahan in the



seventeenth century is their openness to new sights, that is, the broadening of their subject matter and stylistic repertoire. Earlier Persian painting succeeded in evoking the minute riches of the ideal world of Persian poetry. Images of the Isfahan court and its most beautiful inhabitants certainly partook of this tradition; court portraiture was still idealizing and depicted mannered people, following a ritualized way of life in which unhurried grace is highly valued.

But these images also suggest the possibility of seeing beyond that grace, sometimes to the personality of the sitter, sometimes to the playful process of the artist, sometimes to mystical enlightenment. Isfahan artists also created new images of exotic strangers, and it is clear that they and their patrons were intrigued by the distinctive traits of other people, be they Armenians, Europeans, Uzbeks, or Ottomans. As befits the rulers of a great trading empire, Safavid patrons were also interested in the specifics of other people's work, and their artists experimented with imported styles, trying on Chinese and European modes of representation, at times quoting them rather literally but also often turning them to new uses.

The openness of the rulers of Isfahan to the world and its variety may in part explain the wealth of the Safavid Empire. The success of Safavid Isfahan in trade depended in part upon its acceptance of strangers into the city. Similarly, its art was characterized by an inquisitive and acquisitive attitude toward foreign styles and was enriched by its contemplation of many ways of life. As we turn to the images made by Jews and Armenians in Isfahan, we must be aware that these people lived in a city in which identity—whether cultural, ethnic, religious, or personal—was an object of intense fascination.

**Suggestions for  
Further Reading**

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## Imagining a Persian Community: Judeo-Persian Illustrated Manuscripts

WE TURN FROM art made in the highest circles of Isfahan society to a set of manuscripts whose interest lies precisely in the fact that they came from the fringes of the capital. Judeo-Persian manuscript illustration provides a glimpse of the secular culture of Persian Jewry, showing a people who identified themselves as Jews but, in equal measure, as Persians.

“Judeo-Persian” refers to the Persian language written in Hebrew letters. Following the triumph of Islam in Iran, standard Persian came to be written in the Arabic alphabet. It has been remarked that by using the Hebrew alphabet, Persian-speaking Jews maintained a graphical barrier between themselves and other Persian speakers. If so, it was rather one-way; the barrier of the alphabet reserved Judeo-Persian texts for Jewish audiences, but the texts themselves were in (Judeo-) Persian, and the Judeo-Persian texts were strongly connected to the central traditions in Persian literature.

No Judeo-Persian manuscript illustration can be definitively traced to seventeenth-century Isfahan. An illuminated *ketubbah*, or marriage contract, of 1647 (now in the Jewish Museum, New York; F 3901) is a rare example of Judeo-Persian illumination securely attributed to Isfahan. A *ketubbah* (plural, *ketubbot*) lays out the obligation of a groom to his wife and is required by Talmudic law for Jewish marriages. *Ketubbot* were practical documents, intended to protect the legal rights of the bride. Therefore, they originally were written in the Aramaic vernacular, rather than in Hebrew, the liturgical and scholarly language. The Isfahan *ketubbah*, which is in Judeo-Persian, the vernacular of Persian Jews, consists of one large page of text, surrounded by modest decoration stamped in gold and silver paint. Only in relatively prosperous Jewish communities, such as those of medieval Spain and seventeenth-century Italy, did many *ketubbot* receive illumination. The *ketubbah* of 1647 is the earliest known decorated *ketubbah* from Persia; in technique, it resembles a 1781 *ketubbah* from Isfahan (now in the Klau Library of the Hebrew Union College, Cincinnati; no. 702), suggesting that it was part of an established local tradi-

tion. The difficulty with this interpretation lies in the scarcity of the evidence and the reasons for that scarcity. As we have noted in the first chapter, the Jews of Isfahan underwent very severe persecutions in the seventeenth century, in which many books were destroyed. In the periods in which Jews were forced to accept Islam, Jewish marriage documents would probably have been dangerous to the many Jews who outwardly professed Islam while continuing to practice their Judaism secretly. It is scarcely surprising, then, that so few *ketubbot* survive from Iran before the nineteenth century. The dearth of evidence poses difficulties of interpretation. For example, we cannot know whether the 1647 *ketubbah* is modest or grand by the standards of Isfahan Jewry. We can posit a lost tradition, but we cannot say much about it.

The loss of books, because of persecutions as well as the effects of time, also presents difficulties for the interpretation of Judeo-Persian manuscript illustration. Without colophons stating the place of production, and without comparative Jewish material, it is very difficult to evaluate the paintings that do survive. We consider them in the context of the book arts of Isfahan because these rare survivals present a tantalizing suggestion of some aspects of the culture of Persian Jewry that can be applied to Isfahan.

Two Judeo-Persian illustrated manuscripts have colophons that date them to the Safavid period: Shahin's *Musa-Nama* in the Israel Museum (180/54), which was copied in 1686 by Nehemiah ben Amshal of Tabriz; and Imrani's *Fath-Nama* in the British Library (Or. 13704), which must date to before 1739, the date of a note of a later owner. Both show the impact of Mu'in Musavvir on manuscript illustration; his large figures, in lively, often somewhat humorous poses, with broad faces, spiky beards and moustaches, and quick, darting eyes, dominate their illustrations. This impact is distant, however. Mu'in illustrated deluxe manuscripts, often for royal patrons; these Judeo-Persian manuscripts are much more modest. The palette is much more limited than Mu'in's, depending heavily on a few vivid colors, and no gold is used. Rarely do the Judeo-Persian illustrations approach the sensitivity or humor of Mu'in's. It is possible that these are provincial echoes of the court art of Isfahan or that they were made in modest Isfahan workshops.

The undated *Ardashir-Nama* and *Khosrou and Shirin* manuscripts from the Jewish Theological Seminary Library share these traits, and it seems reasonable to date them to the last quarter of the seventeenth century, or perhaps to early in the eighteenth century, before the Afghan conquest of 1722. In the *Ardashir-Nama*, the image of *Shiru and Queen Mahzad in Her Gardens* (pl. 9) seems a rather naive version of the kind of courtiers pictured in leaves from the court of Isfahan. They sway like their courtly counterparts, and they wear elegant clothes, but they do not convey the sense of refined grace that the fashionable album leaves do. Similarly, *Shirin* and her attendants, discovering the



PLATE 9  
*Shiru and Queen Mahzad  
 in Her Gardens*  
 Iran, seventeenth or  
 early eighteenth century.  
 Fol. 111v of an

*Ardashir-Nama* of Shahin.  
 New York, Courtesy of the  
 Library of the Jewish  
 Theological Seminary of  
 America, Ms. 8270.

portrait of Khosrou (pl. 10), wear elegant clothing and assume fashionable poses, but they do not convince us of their perfect poise.

We should be cautious in viewing the Jews of Isfahan through too limited a frame. These images may well come from Isfahan, but certainly not from the most prestigious workshops. We must also bear in mind the secular nature of the Judeo-Persian manuscripts. When the Judeo-Persian historian Babai ibn Lutf described the horrors of Shah ‘Abbas I’s anti-Jewish rage of 1620, along with accounts of holy men thrown to the dogs because they would not renounce Judaism, he included an account of the desecration of all the Jewish holy writings in Isfahan, which he listed by type of manuscript: “the Pentateuch and the Prophets, all prayer books, the Mishnah and Gemara, Psalms, the Shulan and Ezra.” This tragedy caused the world to turn “into a dark night.” The martyrdoms, though described in anguished detail, are not credited with such terrible consequences. It is the holy Hebrew writings, not illustrated Judeo-Persian manuscripts, that seemed so important to Babai.

The Jews of Isfahan followed Jewish laws that set them apart from their neighbors. The community’s *shohet* (kosher butcher) was a man of great power, since keeping kosher was an unquestioned part of every Jew’s life. The power of dietary laws in defining the Jew was recognized by their Muslim neighbors; when Jews were forced to convert to Islam, they had to demonstrate their break with their former identity by eating meat boiled in milk. The sanctity of the Sabbath was so strong that Jews who had ostensibly converted to Islam still refused to transact business on Saturday. In this context, it is crucial to note that Judeo-Persian illustrated manuscripts were *not* central to Jewish religious life. Judeo-Persian illustration was basically a secular pursuit, like most Persian manuscript illustration, and it reveals how a strongly Jewish community could also conceive of itself as Persian.

Judeo-Persian illustrated books include copies of Persian classics in Hebrew script, as well as original creations. Although most of the illustrated stories center on Jewish characters, they often come directly out of the main Persian literary tradition. *Yusuf and Zulaikha*, Jami’s fifteenth-century Persian romance, was transliterated into Hebrew script. Yusuf is the Joseph of Genesis, and Jews may have particularly enjoyed *Yusuf and Zulaikha* because they identified with its hero (an absolute paragon of beauty and virtue in the Persian retelling), but the romance is one of the key works of the Persian literary tradition, one that their Muslim neighbors (who knew Yusuf from the Qur’an) also loved and illustrated. Like Muslim Persians, Jewish Persians took pride in the epics of Persian heroes. *Khosrou and Shirin*, Nizami’s twelfth-century historical epic, was also transliterated and illustrated. The great Judeo-Persian poets Shahin and ‘Imrani based their works on biblical stories but recast them in the genres of Persian literature. In his *Ardashir-Nama* of about 1330, Shahin used



PLATE 10  
**Shirin Discovering  
 the Portrait of Khosrou**  
 Iran, seventeenth or  
 early eighteenth century.  
 Fol. 106v of a Judeo-Persian

*Khosrou and Shirin* of  
 Nizami. New York, Courtesy  
 of the Library of the Jewish  
 Theological Seminary of  
 America, Ms. 1398.



FIGURE 9  
**Khosrou Spies on Shirin  
 as She Bathes**  
 Iran, seventeenth or  
 early eighteenth century.  
 Fol. 133v of a Judeo-Persian  
*Khosrou and Shirin* of  
 Nizami. New York, Courtesy  
 of the Library of the Jewish  
 Theological Seminary of  
 America, Ms. 1398.

the Persian epic form to retell the story of Esther, the Jewish queen of Persia who saved her people in exile. He focused his version of the biblical story on the kingship of Esther's Persian husband, King Ardashir, and on her place in his dynasty. In Shahin's version, Esther becomes the mother of Cyrus the Great. His *Musa-Nama* (ca. 1337) casts Moses as a great leader in the Persian tradition, and 'Imrani continued Shahin's program, retelling stories of Joshua, Ruth, and Samuel in his *Fath-Nama* of about 1474.

The illustrations to these texts are also traditional. Paintings interrupt the texts they illustrate, often expanding slightly into the margins or into the text column. The text conveys the action of the story, and the illustrative figures are often formulaic and rather laconic. The single painting in the Jewish Theological Seminary Library's *Yusuf and Zulaikha* shows, in the upper left, Joseph/Yusuf, imprisoned on the strength of Zulaikha's false accusations (pl. 11). Zulaikha and her nurse appear in the upper right, as, according to the text, they often stood on the roof of her palace contemplating the roof of Yusuf's prison. To judge only from the image, one might think that they could see Yusuf, or at least the glow of his fiery halo, by peeking over a little parapet, but one was expected to read the text that the image interrupts. This image



FIGURE 10  
**Shirin Visits Farhad**  
 Iran, seventeenth or  
 early eighteenth century.  
 Fol. 89 of a Judeo-Persian  
*Khosrou and Shirin* of  
 Nizami. New York, Courtesy  
 of the Library of the Jewish  
 Theological Seminary of  
 America, Ms. 1398.

requires the text; one must know that Yusuf's beauty and piety transformed his prison into a garden of prayer and that Zulaikha, unable to persuade him to become her lover, pined for him. The image does correspond to the story, including precise details like the pleasant meals Zulaikha provided for Yusuf, and Yusuf's prayer rug, but it does not, on its own, convey Zulaikha's dilemma: she suffers for having caused Yusuf to be imprisoned, but she still does not understand why he spurns her amorous advances. Even the identity of the man on the lower right is unclear: is it Jacob mourning his lost son, or Zulaikha's husband, or one of the prisoners whose life was transformed by Yusuf's presence? Since we cannot place him definitively on the basis of Jami's narrative, his identity is lost.

In the illuminations to *Khosrou and Shirin* now in the Jewish Theological Seminary Library, Shirin maintains the same calm composure when she falls in love with a portrait of Khosrou (pl. 10) as when she pauses, exhausted, to bathe during her impetuous journey to meet him (fig. 9), or when she visits her ardent admirer, Farhad, as he proves his love by carving a tunnel through a mountain (fig. 10). Shirin's gaze is always serene, her posture gracefully erect, even while seated on the horse that Farhad carries back to her palace (pl. 12).



PLATE 11  
**Yusuf in Prison**  
 Iran, seventeenth century.  
 Fol. 8 of a Judeo-Persian  
*Yusuf and Zulaikha* of Jami.

New York, Courtesy of  
 the Library of the Jewish  
 Theological Seminary  
 of America, Ms. 1496.

PLATE 12

**Farhad Carrying Shirin on Her Horse**

Iran, seventeenth or early eighteenth century.  
Fol. 92v of a Judeo-Persian *Khosrou and Shirin* of Nizami. New York, Courtesy of the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, Ms. 1398.



The images match Nizami's narration in this regard, for, in the text, Shirin's beauty never changes, no matter what happens to her; it is a reflection of God's love. Hence Nizami can continually compare her face to the moon or the stars.

The illustrations in the Judeo-Persian manuscripts are part of the long Persian tradition of manuscript illustration. Placing them within that tradition involves a consideration of the ways they resemble—and differ from—their predecessors in sixteenth-century illustration, as well as the ways they resemble and differ from royal Safavid manuscript illustration in the late-seventeenth-century style of Isfahan. A sixteenth-century manuscript of Nizami from Shiraz in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art includes several scenes paralleled in the Judeo-Persian *Khosrou and Shirin*. Seated on top of the horse that Farhad carries, Shirin maintains the same remarkable composure we noted in the Judeo-Persian illustration (pl. 13).

Despite the similarities, there are crucial differences between these two images. The earlier illustration draws much of its interest from its wonderful detail. Lovely little multicolored flowers, rocks, and tiny grasses dot the landscape through which the hero moves. All the people have beautiful, calm faces, their features picked out in sure strokes of black against radiant peach skin. Their clothing is also exquisitely detailed. It scarcely matters that all the women have the same face; their formulaic composure accords well with their aristocratic character, and the reader has the text to supply any missing drama. The restrained gestures and expressions of the figures are quite adequate to their tasks, and the delicate detail, which might distract from a dramatic narrative, invites the viewer to spend more time contemplating the image and its deeper meaning.

Comparing this image with the later Judeo-Persian illumination reveals that the detail that lends earlier Persian illumination much of its charm has grown in scale, and figures, too, are larger, overshadowing the landscapes they inhabit. Royal Safavid manuscript illumination of the later seventeenth century generally shares these traits, but with significant differences in effect. The Judeo-Persian illustrations do not convey the nuances of individual psychology that so distinguish the illustrations of Mu'in. They cannot be properly appreciated purely in the context of either late Safavid illustration or earlier Persian illustration alone, even though they are closely tied to each.

The Judeo-Persian illuminations seem to take a rather moderate approach to the major differences between sixteenth-century illustration and illustration from the royal atelier of the later seventeenth century. They follow the traditional method of depending on the text to bring formulaic figures to life, but they draw those figures from the realm of late Safavid painting, where the older system had largely been abandoned. One might see a compromise in the use of larger figures, newly fashionable at court, along with the lively backgrounds popular in earlier manuscripts.

PLATE 13

**Farhad Carrying Shirin  
on Her Horse**

Shiraz, ca. 1550.

Fol. 74 of a *Khamsa* of  
Nizami. Los Angeles County  
Museum of Art, The Nasli M.  
Heeramaneck Collection, Gift  
of Joan Palevsky, M. 73.5.603.





FIGURE 11  
**Haman as Vizier**  
 Iran, seventeenth or  
 early eighteenth century.  
 Fol. 36 of an *Ardashir-Nama*  
 of Shahin. New York,  
 Courtesy of the Library of the  
 Jewish Theological Seminary  
 of America, Ms. 8270.



FIGURE 12  
**Esther Giving Birth  
 to Cyrus**  
 Iran, seventeenth or  
 early eighteenth century.  
 Fol. 154 of an *Ardashir-Nama*  
 of Shahin. New York,  
 Courtesy of the Library of the  
 Jewish Theological Seminary  
 of America, Ms. 8270.

The patrons of these manuscripts were adopting the distinct styles of two Safavid elites: the sixteenth-century manuscript tradition and the seventeenth-century fashion for larger figure studies. The effect of the resulting manuscripts is unlike either of the models. The way the figures dominate their surroundings is foreign to the earlier manuscript tradition, while the ties to the text are far more direct than in most Isfahan miniatures. Marketplace artists might naively mix current fashions with older tradition, but here something more of a synthesis is achieved. So, as they meet in a garden, Shiru and Queen Mahzad (pl. 9) sway lightly, like the idealized courtiers in Isfahan Style images. The garden itself is emphasized in a way rare in album leaves, appropriately, since in Shahin's *Ardashir-Nama* the beauties of nature feature as prominently as they do in most Persian poetry. The Jewish community was not ready to give up the older tradition as thoroughly as the court had. Ties to the Persian past were too valuable to Jews whose very existence in Persia was periodically challenged.

In a manuscript with a subject as charged as the story of Esther, it is hard to ignore the way the illustrations elaborate on the themes of power in the text. The *Ardashir-Nama* tells the story of Esther's triumph over the wicked Haman, who used his high position to try to destroy the Jews of Persia. The story found an unfortunate parallel in the persecutions of 1656, when Shah 'Abbas II, at the urging of his own vizier, Muhammad Beg, forced the Jews of

Isfahan to convert to Islam. The late-seventeenth-century illustrations often cast the power of the Jews' enemy in contemporary terms, making his ultimate downfall all the more comforting.

An image of *Haman as Vizier* (fig. 11) shows his power in terms contemporary Safavid grandees might have used. Haman is visiting his palace under construction. Domes and arches rise above a high podium. A niche bears images of courtly power: a mural showing a rider, accompanied by a youth and a dog, passing a worker. Haman and his entourage mirror the image on the wall of his new palace. Numerous scenes of Ardashir in his palace (e.g., pl. 14) show other trappings of power that Jews would have known in Isfahan. The king sits on a raised platform, while his astrologers kneel on the rug before him. Floral patterns decorate the wall behind them. The Jews lived in a Persian world, as did their ancestors in the story of Esther. In choosing these images, they stressed their identity as *Persian Jews*.

Identification between the Jews of Safavid Persia and those ruled by Ardashir is nowhere clearer than in the image of Haman's death. The figure of Haman has been rubbed out, just as Haman's name was, and is, drowned out by jeers every year during the reading of the Book of Esther on the feast of Purim. Ardashir himself watches as archers shoot the hanged villain; the ruler, personally, is the source of justice. Persian ideals of kingship inform the illumination of this manuscript, just as they dominate Shahin's retelling of the story. Esther's fame rests on her marriage to Ardashir and, in Shahin's version, on her place in the genealogy of Persian kings. Shahin enhances her importance in both Persian and Jewish history by making her the mother of Cyrus, the great Persian king who restored Solomon's Temple. She gives birth to Cyrus in a room fit for the birth of a king (fig. 12), a room very like the one where the great king Khosrou meets his death in the arms of Shirin (pl. 15).

Judeo-Persian manuscript illumination, then, reflects the degree to which the self-image of the Jews of Persia was Persian. Marketplace productions with pretensions to ancient glory, these books gave visible expression to Jewish feelings of belonging in Iran, feelings severely challenged by the events of the seventeenth century. At the same time, however, it would be a mistake to think of Judeo-Persian illuminated manuscripts as the main manifestation of Jewish cultural life in seventeenth-century Isfahan. Judeo-Persian was used in a variety of settings, including secular literature, and in contracts like the *ketubbah*. Many such contexts are probably lost to us. A single tantalizing hint of the artistic contacts Persian Jews had lies in the same fragments of biblical illustration that Shah 'Abbas I received from papal emissaries in 1608. At some point, probably in the seventeenth century, several leaves were removed from the set. (These are now in the Bibliothèque Nationale and the Getty Museum [fig. 7].) The rest of the manuscript (now in the Pierpont Morgan Library) carries, in



PLATE 14  
**Ardashir Consults  
 His Astrologers**  
 Iran, seventeenth or  
 early eighteenth century.  
 Fol. 95v of an

*Ardashir-Nama* of Shahin.  
 New York, Courtesy of  
 the Library of the Jewish  
 Theological Seminary  
 of America, Ms. 8270.



PLATE 15  
**The Murder of Khosrou**  
 Iran, seventeenth or  
 early eighteenth century.  
 Fol. 15 of a Judeo-Persian

*Khosrou and Shirin* of  
 Nizami. New York, Courtesy  
 of the Library of the Jewish  
 Theological Seminary of  
 America, Ms. 1398.

addition to the Persian inscriptions added at the command of ‘Abbas, another set of inscriptions in Judeo-Persian. The implication is that a Jew had access to materials from the Royal Library. This would seem to be a person of considerably more means than the patrons of the Judeo-Persian illustrations we have been considering. Persian Jews reserved another language, Hebrew, for religious texts. Jews in Persia, like Jews in most places, maintained Hebrew as their liturgical language, used in prayer and in reciting the Torah. The Torah scroll was the focus of the synagogue, cared for with reverence and read throughout the year as a central part of Jewish religious observance. Just as their Persian-speaking neighbors had a separate language for their religion (the Arabic of the Qur‘an), Persian Jews used Hebrew in their religious practices and undoubtedly had a calligraphic tradition to support it.

**Suggestions for  
Further Reading**

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## *The Place of Memory: Armenian Manuscript Illumination*

WHEN SHAH 'ABBAS I transplanted whole communities of Armenians to Iran, those communities brought with them what they could of their homeland. In Isfahan, Armenians prospered; they were able to build fine homes, churches, schools, and monasteries. Wall paintings, tilework, fine fabrics, rugs, and metalwork all contributed to the rich material culture of Isfahan's leading Armenian merchants. But among all the objects that marked a successful community, the illuminated manuscript took precedence. For Armenians, an illuminated book was more than a prestigious luxury object; it also met a merchant's spiritual needs, offering him a way to publicly demonstrate his piety, to bind him to the other members of the Armenian Christian community, and even to take that community along with him on long trade missions. Great merchants decorated their houses in the latest styles of the court, and even Armenian churches in Isfahan made use of local traditions in vaulting and tilework. Still, for the illumination of religious texts, the old Armenian tradition, visible in manuscripts treasured in Isfahan, held the greatest value.

The illuminated manuscript has traditionally been the Armenian religious object par excellence. Like the reliquary in the Catholic West and the icon in the Orthodox East, the Armenian manuscript was the locus of faith, to be treasured and guarded. Like the Catholic relic or the Orthodox icon, the Armenian book could protect the believer. Much as Catholics fought over relics, and icons led Orthodox Christian armies into battle, so Armenian manuscripts became prisoners of war, repeatedly ransomed from the enemy. The new Armenian residents of Isfahan may have been forced from their homes with only what they could carry, but they certainly brought their manuscripts with them, and once settled immediately began collecting more. The Getty exhibition includes manuscripts that were preserved in seventeenth-century Isfahan (chief among them the fourteenth-century Gladzor Gospel Book now at UCLA), as well as manuscripts made there.

Armenians in New Julfa repaired and rebound earlier manuscripts and supplied them with new illuminations. The merchants who paid for the work had traditional formulae copied into them. For example:

I have had this precious garden, this fragrant orchard, this pure and shining book restored in memory of myself and of my parents, my wife, and my children. Blessed is he with a child in Zion.

The “child in Zion” is the manuscript itself; through its colophon—called *yishatakaran*, literally, “place of memory”—it carries on the name and the memory of its owner, tying him to the saving powers of the Armenian Church.

In obtaining and restoring old manuscripts, the merchants of Isfahan asserted a connection to Armenian communities of the past, many of them, significantly enough for the community in diaspora, communities that no longer existed in the seventeenth century, except in the memories of the Armenians who still treasured their works. By copying the manuscripts and their illuminations, the Armenians of Isfahan renewed their connection to a collective past. One way to maintain the connection was to preserve the variety of styles Armenians had used. Another was to choose carefully the images to appropriate. Those associated with Christian Europe were much more acceptable than those connected with Islamic Iran. On the other hand, Armenian illumination often sought to maintain the differences between Europeans and Armenians, especially in matters of Christian dogma.

The Armenian Church was and is autocephalous, separate and independent from other Christian churches, having parted ways in the fifth century with what came to be the Catholic and Orthodox Churches over differing views of how the divine and the human coexist in the person of Christ. This difference may seem mystifying, or at least insignificant, from the perspective of the twentieth century, but it mattered deeply to Christians of earlier centuries. Perhaps one of the values the Armenians defended in their Christological stance was their sense of being a distinct community. Manuscript illumination was enlisted in defense of this difference.

When the Armenian merchants of Isfahan left Julfa, Dasht, or Erevan, along with them came skilled craftsmen. Among them, the makers of books took pride of place. Unlike other craftsmen, the scribes, illuminators, binders, and even paper-polishers were very often members of the clergy. Traditions in manuscript illumination seem to have continued almost uninterrupted despite the forced exodus, which is less surprising when one considers that manuscript illumination had continued amid constant war and pillage for centuries before the deportations.

Despite their relatively small population, the Armenians had sustained a wide variety of styles in manuscript illumination over the ten centuries from

which examples survive. In particular, styles developed by Armenians in Cilicia in the twelfth through fourteenth centuries, in fifteenth-century Khizan, and in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Siunik<sup>6</sup> proved very appealing to the merchants of New Julfa.

The cosmopolitan elite of the Armenian kingdom of Cilicia had maintained strong political and cultural ties with their neighbors, including the Byzantine Empire, the Latin Crusader states, and the Mongol Empire. Princes, both secular and ecclesiastic, supported the production of exquisite manuscripts incorporating elements from all of these cultures into the already centuries-old Armenian framework. Cilician painters often used gold and ground lapis lazuli, among other precious materials, to produce subtle miniatures reflecting the interests and tastes of their patrons. Bright but subtle colors, psychologically convincing human figures, and iconographically inventive subjects characterize Armenian Cilician painting. Like seventeenth-century Armenians in most cities, the New Julfa merchants treasured Cilician illuminations; more than the Armenians of many other communities, they had the means to acquire these precious works of art. They brought manuscripts to New Julfa and had them restored, rebound, and supplied with new colophons expressing their admiration for the beauty of these books and their faith in their salvational powers.

A Gospel book at UCLA strongly recalls Cilician work. This manuscript, only three inches tall, contains the entire text of the Gospels, with almost every word abbreviated. There is no colophon to tell us when or where it was made, but it was clearly made for a traveler. A prayer in the manuscript asks that the Gospel book protect its unnamed owner at home and on the road. By carrying a book in the unique Armenian alphabet, the traveler reminded himself who he was. In this way, illuminated manuscripts played an important role in the development and preservation of a distinct Armenian identity. Carrying this tiny manuscript, the traveler, far from home for extended periods, had a tangible link to his church and to his people. In the late seventeenth century, this owner was probably a New Julfa merchant, for the exact tools used in its rebinding are known to have been used in Isfahan in 1700.

The illumination of this miniature Gospel book certainly has ties with the seventeenth century. In their portraits (e.g., pl. 16), the evangelists have dark faces with broad highlighting, and their architectural settings feature dizzying recession into space, dark shadows, and Byzantinizing furniture, all typical of seventeenth-century Greek painting. The rest of the illumination more resembles Cilician painting, and, although the pages on which these portraits occur are integral to the manuscript (that is, the pages were not sewn into a pre-existing book), it is possible that they were painted onto pages previously left blank. The extremely small size of the manuscript makes it difficult to evaluate



PLATE 16

**Saint Mark and the first  
page of his Gospel**

Probably seventeenth century.

Fols. 62v-63 of a Gospel  
book, rebound in Isfahan,  
ca. 1700. Los Angeles, UCLA  
Department of Special  
Collections, Arm. Ms. 3  
(2089/3).

these paintings. If the remaining illumination was done in fourteenth-century Cilicia, it is not of the highest quality. Instead of trying to reduce the delicate floral patterns favored by Cilician artists on such a small scale, the illuminator used a few Cilician motifs to fill his tiny pages. So canon tables are topped by two leafy circles instead of a carpet of them (pl. 17). If this is a Cilician manuscript, the seventeenth-century patron had evangelist portraits added to it, taking care to have them mesh with the style of the older illuminations. More likely, this is a retrospective seventeenth-century creation in its entirety. In either case, the patron was interested in maintaining the effect of a Cilician manuscript, and at least by the time of its rebinding, the manuscript was treasured in Isfahan.

The Armenian patrons of Isfahan valued styles in Armenian manuscript illumination other than Cilician ones. Some styles reached Isfahan with their living practitioners. Indeed, Isfahan sheltered artists from all over historical Armenia, from centers with quite distinct traditions. One such center was Khizan, located on the trade routes south of Lake Van, now in eastern Turkey. The town had supported several Armenian scriptoria since the last decades of the fourteenth century and developed a distinctive style of illumination in the fifteenth century. Mesrop of Khizan was one of several artists who worked primarily in Isfahan but who consistently called themselves *Khizants'i*, or “from Khizan.” Mesrop had learned illumination, copying, and binding in the scriptoria of Khizan. In 1606, he was helping a priest, Khach'atur, there with the illumination of a Gospel. Shah 'Abbas's western wars had reduced the Armenians to desperate straits, as Khach'atur wrote in his colophon:

From Amida to Tabriz, more than 100,000 souls died of the cold, and many a father ate his son, and a mother her daughter, brother his brother, and the strong the weak. And in much of the land everyone ate the dead and did not leave the graves [untouched], and other hardships came to the Armenian people, of which it is not proper to write in a holy book. And I tell of this because I was copying this little Gospel in that bitter time of agony.

A member of a large merchant family in Isfahan sponsored the completion of the Gospel. It seems that because of his skills as a copyist, illuminator, and binder, Mesrop was able to escape the horrors of the Ottoman-Safavid battlefield and to find a niche in the prosperous Armenian community of Isfahan. He worked there for over four decades, until 1652.

A Gospel of 1615, which Mesrop illuminated with the help of Hayrapet, is an excellent example of his work. Sixteen narrative miniatures once began the Gospel; they were removed sometime after 1913. Getty Ms. Ludwig II 7 is the rest of the manuscript: a glorious set of canon tables and the texts of the



PLATE 17

**Canon tables**

Fols. 7v–8 of a Gospel book,  
rebound in Isfahan, ca 1700.

Los Angeles, UCLA

Department of Special  
Collections, Arm. Ms. 3

(2089/3).

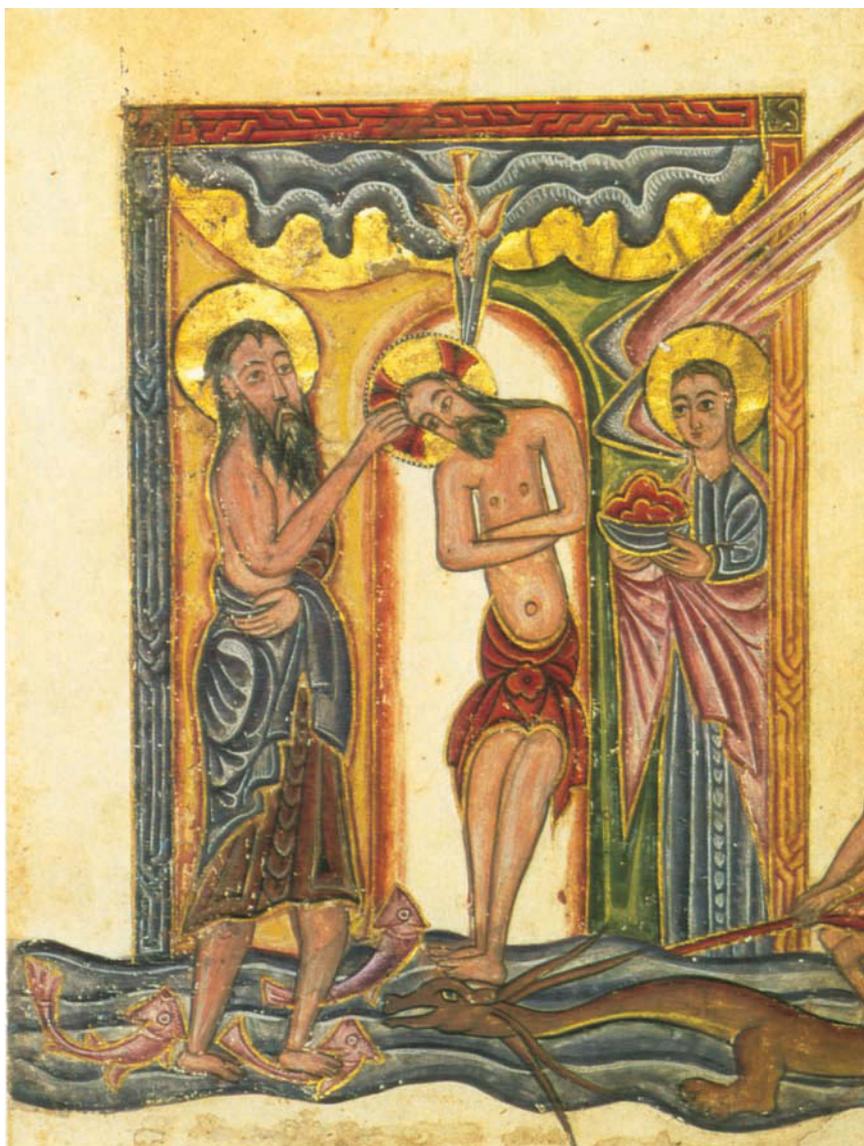


PLATE 18

**The Baptism**

by Mesrop of Khizan and  
Hayrapet. Isfahan, 1615.

From a Gospel book. JPM,  
Ms. Ludwig II 7A.



FIGURE 13  
**The Transfiguration**  
 by Mesrop of Khizan  
 and Hayrapet.  
 Isfahan, 1615. Removed from  
 a Gospel book (now in the  
 Getty Museum; Ms. Ludwig  
 II 7) sometime after 1913;  
 present location unknown.  
 (After Frédéric Macler,  
*Miniatures arméniennes: Vies  
 du Christ*, Paris, 1913.)

four Gospels with their evangelist portraits and decorated first pages. In 1985, the Museum was able to purchase one of the sixteen prefatory miniatures, *The Baptism* (pl. 18). One thing is immediately obvious: Mesrop was a successful artist whose work his contemporaries prized. His illuminations gleam with expensive materials; he was particularly fond of gold leaf and the vivid blue made of ground lapis lazuli. His patrons supplied him with the best materials, and plenty of them; he could liberally enliven the text with initials and marginal markers in gold and polychrome. Mesrop's personal fame is perhaps best indicated in a canon table (pl. 19), which he turned into an elaborate frame for his signature: the white letters gleaming against the blue ground in the center of the headpiece read: "Mesrop the Illuminator."

In many respects, Mesrop's Gospel is a traditional work. Like its predecessors in Khizan, it is done on fine paper. The bulk of the illumination appears at the very beginning of the text, which, before its dismemberment, began with sixteen illustrations of Gospel events followed by five pairs of canon tables and then the portrait and illuminated first page of Matthew. The set of preface scenes can be found in many Khizan Gospel books, as can such features as the consistent use of full-page illuminations with captions identify-

ing the scenes, the use of large figures placed on the bottom frame of the image, and the imaginative use of blank paper as a ground. But Mesrop transformed what generally had been an art of straightforward narrative. His figures are considerably less lively than some of their Khizan predecessors, but Mesrop's settings are charged with life and energy. The Baptism, typically enough, shows the moment when Christ conquered sin, the Holy Spirit descended in the form of a dove, and the voice of God the Father acknowledged him as his Son. Mesrop's quiet figures—John, Christ, and an angel—concentrate on the sacred moment, the institution of the saving ritual of baptism. All around them the world seems to react violently. The river Jordan has burst out of the frame; it wriggles like the fish and dragon swimming in it. John the Baptist stands on the water, calmly oblivious of the fish arching up under his foot. The dragon would have been immediately identified with the Armenian *vishap*, a malicious, snakelike water demon, and with the serpent (sin) crushed under Christ's heel in the saving moment of the Baptism. The dragon seems resigned to his position, lifting Christ out of the water, pushing him against his own aureole. Above, the sky seems to be melting, pouring down onto Christ's head. Mesrop expresses the meaning of the Baptism by the contrast between the quiet, even flaccid figures and the turmoil of their environment.

Mesrop uses these devices in other preface miniatures as well. In a now-lost *Transfiguration* (fig. 13), the ground line quakes under the startled disciples, while the sky above Christ and the prophets pulsates with energy, melting into the large round aureole they share. Luke sits quietly writing, his body almost locked into the pattern of his chair and footstool, but his head is caught up in the energetic waves behind it (pl. 20). Even the canon tables share some of the same power (pl. 19).

Other illuminators were quite as successful as Mesrop in fairly similar styles. Painters from Old Julfa, like Yakob, produced illumination in which contemplative, almost static figures also inhabit landscapes alive with the significance of the holy events depicted. But at the same time, and for the same patrons, and sometimes even in the same manuscripts, other styles also found support. One of Mesrop's specialties was the restoration of older manuscripts; so, he incorporated his surreal evangelist portraits—in which line is ceaselessly active while the evangelist himself sits transfixed by his text—into a Cilician manuscript of 1280 of the New Testament, in which flowers and birds form themselves into delicate arabesques (British Library Ms. Add. 18549). The contrast intrigues and surprises us now; equally curious is that the New Julfa merchant Khoja Nazar paid to have two such different styles brought together in the same book. It is conceivable that he did not notice the contrast, but scarcely likely in the case of a man whose fortunes depended on the exchange of luxury silks between Iran and Europe. Indeed, sometimes New



PLATE 19  
**Canon table**  
 by Mesrop of Khizan and  
 Hayrapet. Isfahan, 1615. Fol. 8  
 of a Gospel book. JPM,  
 Ms. Ludwig II 7.



PLATE 20

**Saint Luke**

by Mesrop of Khizan and  
Hayrapet. Isfahan, 1615.

Fol. 122v of a Gospel book.

JPGM, Ms. Ludwig II 7.



FIGURE 14  
**Christ Walking  
 on the Sea of Galilee**  
 by T<sup>c</sup>oros of Taron.  
 Gladzor, ca. 1307.  
 P. 277 of a Gospel book.  
 Los Angeles, UCLA  
 Department of Special  
 Collections, Arm. Ms. 1  
 (170/466).

Julfa patrons demanded, and received, accurate copies of older illumination, and Khoja Nazar could have done the same had he wished.

Our best evidence of this is the copies of illumination in the Gladzor Gospel Book (UCLA 1), perhaps the most impressive manuscript that came to rest in New Julfa. This ambitious Gospel book, finished in the monastery of Gladzor at the beginning of the fourteenth century, had come to New Julfa by 1628, when its image of John dictating his Gospel to Prochoros was copied into a new Gospel. In fifty-five narrative illustrations, plus evangelist portraits and canon tables, the Gladzor Gospel Book presents a sophisticated Gospel exegesis, which had been developed by artists working under the supervision of theologians from two important monasteries and making use of a similarly sophisticated illuminated Gospel of the eleventh century. New Julfans, like many viewers since, were clearly impressed by the high artistic level of the Gladzor illuminations (and sometimes demonstrated that the fierce devotion to the traditions of the Armenian Church characterized by the Gladzor Gospel Book had value in the seventeenth century).

The Gladzor Gospel Book contains miniatures formulated in response and opposition to moves by the Cilicians toward ecclesiastical union with the Roman Catholic Church. Among the key notions that separate the Armenians from the Catholics (as well as the Orthodox) is their insistence that the two



FIGURE 15  
**The Crucifixion**  
 Siunik<sup>5</sup>, ca. 1300.  
 P. 561 of a Gospel book.  
 Los Angeles, UCLA  
 Department of Special  
 Collections, Arm. Ms. 1  
 (170/466).

natures—that is, the human and the divine—are mixed in Christ, as opposed to the Orthodox and Catholic teaching that the two natures remain unmixed in him. The image of Christ walking on the Sea of Galilee (fig. 14), signed by T<sup>5</sup>oros of Taron, for example, supports the Armenian insistence that Christ was fully a man. An explanation of the event written at Gladzor tells us what Peter understood when he saw Christ walking on the water. At first, the apostles in the boat had taken Christ for a ghost, but Peter understood that this was God in human flesh and demonstrated his faith in Christ’s humanity by trying to join him on the water. When the insistence on the coexistence of human and divine in Christ occurs in more universally used images, the doctrinal issues are more strongly emphasized. Christ’s divinity is stressed in the Crucifixion image (fig. 15), in which he is shown dead but also quite upright and the expected grief on the part of the witnesses is replaced by gestures of awe. The Armenian Church, true to its view of Christ’s inseparable humanity and divinity, insisted that God was crucified; Catholics, on the other hand, forbade this way of speaking of the Crucifixion.

In other Gospels, T<sup>5</sup>oros of Taron used an image that made the mixture of Christ’s natures quite explicit. He often showed the Annunciation taking place in front of a well, from which two spigots pour into one basin. In the context of the long, rancorous Christological debates between the Armenian





PLATE 21

**The Transfiguration**

Tat'ev(?), 1643.  
P. 15 of a Gospel book.  
Los Angeles, UCLA  
Department of Special  
Collections, Arm. Ms. 4  
(2089/4).

FIGURE 16

**The Annunciation**

T'atev(?), 1643.  
P. 10 of a Gospel book.  
Los Angeles, UCLA  
Department of Special  
Collections, Arm. Ms. 4  
(2089/4).

Church and her Christian neighbors, the mixing of waters at the moment of the Incarnation must be taken as an Armenian assertion of the mixing of natures. In 1643, T'oros's image was copied in a Gospel book (UCLA, Arm. Ms. 4; fig. 16). The manuscript does not carry an indication of where it was made, but it was owned by a New Julfa merchant. The interest in Christ's duality seems to extend to other images in this Gospel book as well. In *The Transfiguration* (pl. 21), Moses and Elijah each have one shoe on and one foot bare. Since removing one's shoes is proper in the presence of the divine, as Moses' encounter with the burning bush makes clear, the Old Testament figures seem to acknowledge both the divine and the human in Christ. Although the miniature of the Presentation is badly rubbed, one can still just make out that Simeon, who recognizes Christ's identity, also has on only one shoe.

The 1643 Gospel book may also stand as an example of the eclecticism of Armenian manuscript illumination appreciated in Isfahan. The manuscript may have been made in Isfahan or it may have been brought to the city from another center. The biting, acid colors used in the Gospel book of 1643—orange and yellow set vibrating by juxtapositions of green and blue—are very similar to those favored by painters at the monastery of Tat'ev in the fifteenth century. The once powerful Tat'ev, reduced to a mountain stronghold in southeast Armenia in the seventeenth century, still produced some

manuscripts. Tat'ev manuscripts also feature the boldly angular patterns that the seventeenth-century artist applied to areas as natural as the ground under the evangelists' feet (where we may take them for rugs) and as unexpected as the wings and drapery of angels. The painter of 1643 carried the almost violent patterns even further, using the white dots that earlier Armenian artists often placed around a halo to outline entire figures. The contrast with the elegantly controlled, heavily gilded images in Getty Ms. Ludwig I 14, a Bible made in Isfahan in 1637 or 1638, could not be stronger.

In 1607, a New Julfa merchant ordered a complete Bible from an Armenian scriptorium in Istanbul. Armenians had rarely copied the whole Bible before the seventeenth century, when Armenian merchants could afford to have such a large work copied and illuminated. Although Gospel books had been made in Isfahan scriptoria, the copying and illumination of an entire Bible seem to have been beyond the capabilities of the city in the first decades of the seventeenth century. Even the more established scriptorium in Istanbul took eighteen years to complete the 1607 order. (A second, less elaborate Bible for a New Julfa merchant was completed by the same scribe in 1620.) By 1637, however, the Bibles from Istanbul were serving as models for the scriptoria of Isfahan. These manuscripts and their copies are confusingly called the Isfahan Bible recension. Bibles of this type are distinguished by the use of full-page illuminations and incipits as preface pages to individual books. Some of the illuminations follow Armenian models several centuries old; others adopt images from European woodcuts, and a great many pages draw from several traditions at once.

Bibles were made in Isfahan along the lines of the two commissioned earlier in Istanbul. As with those Bibles, the production of such volumes was a massive undertaking, possible only with the support of a powerful merchant family. Khoja Abdule appears in the colophons as the main donor, anxious to have his extended family remembered along with him, just as he had been recalled in a Gospel restored by his father in 1607. The family's connection with the Bible was more than financial; a note in the Bible records that Abdule's brother, Bagher, proofread the text as it was copied, up to 1636, when he died at age forty. His last words are cited as:

I am going; you will stay with the living;  
I die; my book will remain in memory.

In another part of the Bible, Bagher's twelve-year-old son, Yakob, claimed to have copied part of the text himself. The principal scribe, Bargham, also places his hopes for remembrance in the manuscript, as does the priest, Karapet, who bound it, and two brothers, Malnazar and Aghap'ir, who illuminated it. The Bible was only finished in 1637 or 1638, the combined effort of the family of the merchant Abdule and the church of St. Stephen in New Julfa.



FIGURE 17  
**Preface illustration  
 for Genesis**  
 by Malnazar and Aghap'ir.  
 Isfahan, 1637 or 1638.  
 Fol. 2v of a Bible.  
 JPGM, Ms. Ludwig I 14.

It is an impressive book, consisting of 610 pages of fine parchment, with full-page preface illuminations and incipits in brilliant colors on gold leaf grounds. The stylistic variety is remarkable, as are the effects achieved by bold adjustments to received styles. The preface to Genesis (fig. 17) relies on an almost diagrammatic arrangement of medallions and narrative friezes to show the Six Days of Creation and the Expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden. The medallions, in particular, recall thirteenth-century French moralized Bibles, which were known at the Cilician court. If the image somehow connects to lost Cilician models, Malnazar and Aghap'ir did not adopt those models mechanically; like some of the other Bibles in this seventeenth-century recension, their image of God refers to the vision in Revelation, in which he sits on a throne surrounded by a lion, an eagle, a calf, and a man, receiving the worship of the Twenty-four Elders. In the Getty Bible, the four creatures (who had long been associated with the evangelists) surround the throne of God. In the Istanbul Bible of 1620, the elders had appeared as rows of heads in the carpet headpiece to Genesis on the facing page, but Malnazar and Aghap'ir left them out. They did include a row of heads under Adam and Eve's feet, but this is not an appropriate place for the elders, and there are far more than twenty-four of them. Perhaps these heads refer to the generations to come from Adam and Eve. In

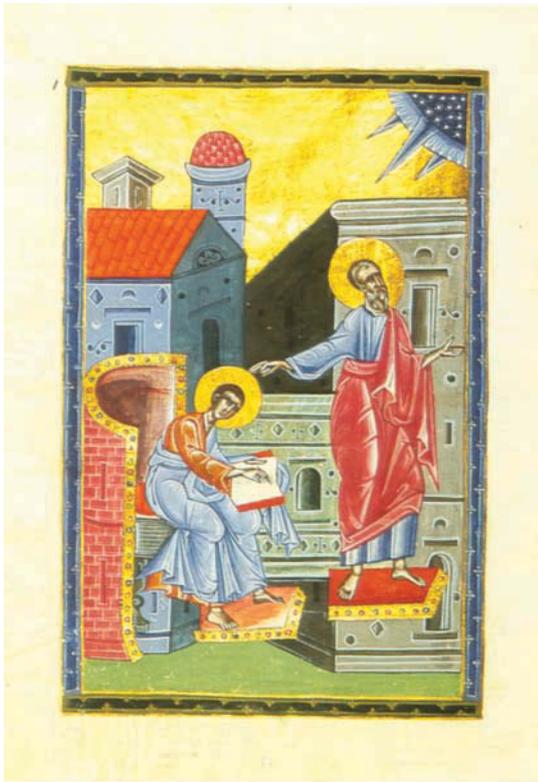


PLATE 22  
**Saint John Dictating  
 His Gospel to Prochoros**  
 by Malnazar and Aghap'ir.  
 Isfahan, 1637 or 1638.  
 Fol. 537v of a Bible.  
 JPGM, Ms. Ludwig I 14.



PLATE 23  
**First page  
 of the Gospel of John**  
 by Malnazar and Aghap'ir.  
 Isfahan, 1637 or 1638.  
 Fol. 538 of a Bible.  
 JPGM, Ms. Ludwig I 14.



FIGURE 18  
**The Penitent David**  
 by Malnazar and Aghap'ir.  
 Isfahan, 1637 or 1638.  
 Fol. 320v of a Bible.  
 JPGM, Ms. Ludwig I 14.



FIGURE 19  
**Solomon**  
 by Malnazar and Aghap'ir.  
 Isfahan, 1637 or 1638.  
 Fol. 358v of a Bible.  
 JPGM, Ms. Ludwig I 14.

any case, the new meaning given to the row of heads shows an active artistic tradition, not one that merely copied whatever models might be available.

The image of John dictating his Gospel to Prochoros in the Getty Bible (pl. 22) also shows a creative use of the models. The architectural setting here stems from a Byzantine tradition that lived on among the Greek Christians of the Ottoman Empire. The figures, too, have ties to post-Byzantine art. Their dark faces with swelling foreheads and their inflated thighs are also found in seventeenth-century Greek painting. In using this model (which presumably came through an Armenian intermediary in Isfahan), Malnazar and Aghap'ir transformed it. They kept a subdued gray and blue palette for much of the image but created startling effects by juxtaposing it to a vibrant red. John's footstool not only glows; it levitates, lifting John up toward the heavens that are his inspiration and bringing him into position to act as a conduit for revelation between God and the text that his young secretary is recording. The author portraits contrast effectively with the incipits they face. On the opposite page (pl. 23), in the Armenian tradition of grand carpet headpieces, a polished gold surface embedded with brightly colored leaves emphasizes the solidity of the surface of the page.

Similarly effective shifts in color, scale, and perspective invigorate other Byzantinizing author portraits in the Bible: the penitent David (fig. 18) is much too big for his room, alarmingly suggesting the nature of his encounter with God; Solomon (fig. 19) is a disconcertingly unstable set of curves, refusing to fit into the palace architecture as he writes his proverbs.

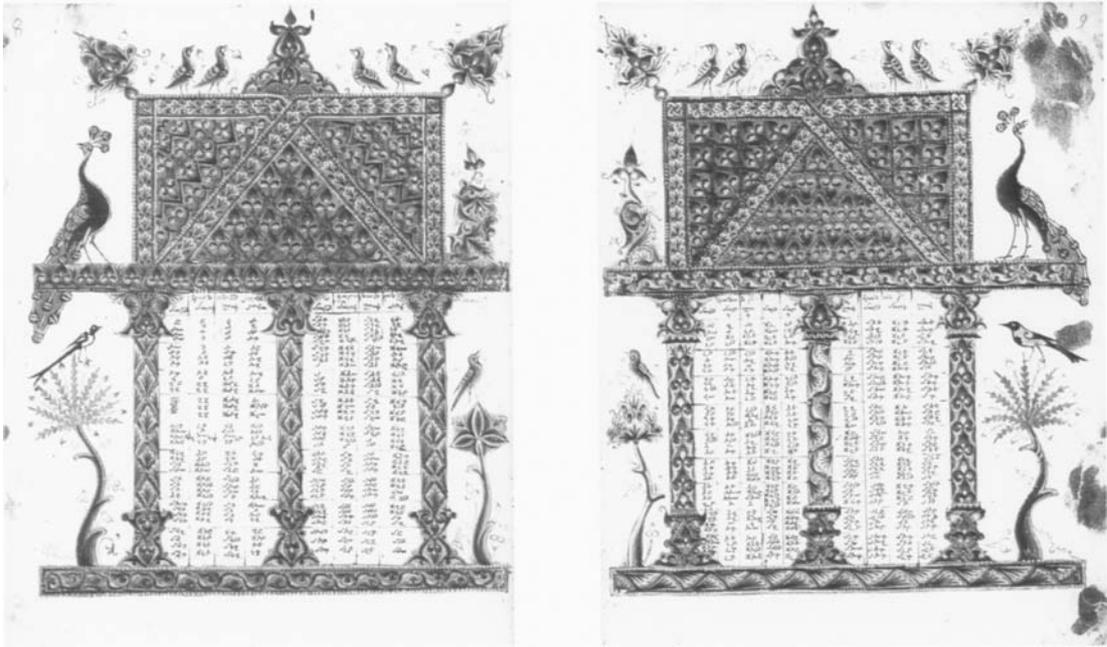


FIGURE 20  
**Canon table**  
 Siunik<sup>1</sup>, ca. 1300.  
 P. 8 of a Gospel book.  
 Los Angeles, UCLA  
 Department of Special  
 Collections, Arm. Ms. 1  
 (170/466).

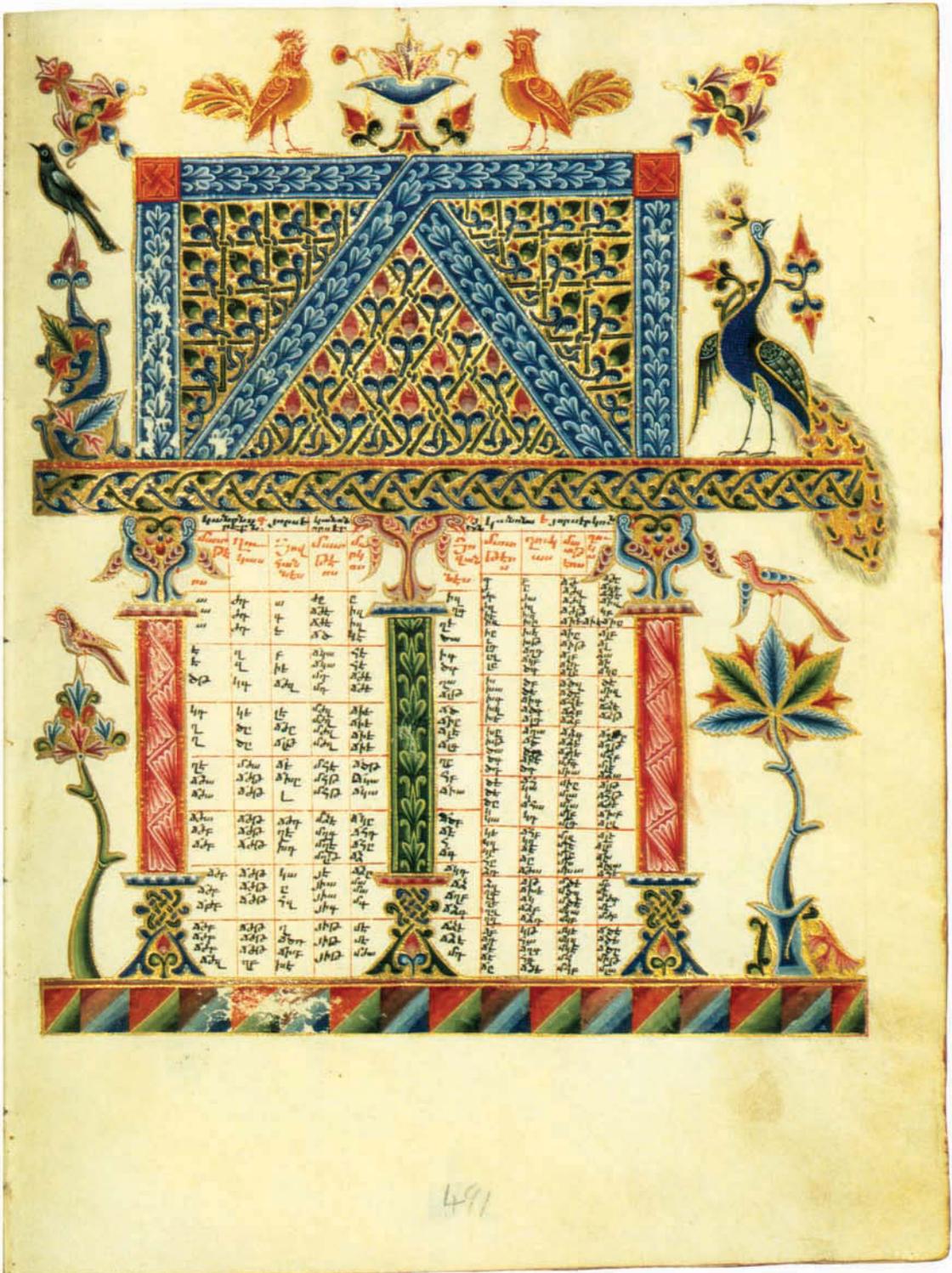
FIGURE 21  
**Canon table**  
 Siunik<sup>1</sup>, ca. 1300.  
 P. 9 of a Gospel book.  
 Los Angeles, UCLA  
 Department of Special  
 Collections, Arm. Ms. 1  
 (170/466).

PLATE 24 (OPPOSITE)  
**Canon table**  
 by Malnazar and Aghap<sup>1</sup>ir.  
 Isfahan, 1637 or 1638.  
 Fol. 491 of a Bible.  
 JPGM, Ms. Ludwig I 14.

In comparison to their willingness to adjust the imagery of the Isfahan Bible recension, Malnazar and Aghap<sup>1</sup>ir copied their canon tables from the Gladzor Gospel Book with near reverence. They reduced the number of pages from ten to six but expertly reproduced three pairs of pages (e.g., fols. 490v–491 [fig. 22 and pl. 24] compared to pp. 8 and 9 of the Gladzor Gospel Book [figs. 20–21]). The effect of the pages has changed little in the seventeenth-century adaptation; Malnazar and Aghap<sup>1</sup>ir inserted a third column on each page but eliminated some of the fourteenth-century model's decorative detail (such as the red tendrils among the marginal birds and trees) to keep their pages from being too crowded.

It is in such a face-to-face comparison of the Getty Bible and one of its models that we can best see the skill and sensitivity the two brothers brought to their work. We can also get a sense of the meaning these illuminated manuscripts had for their owners. The merchant family that put so much money and personal effort into having the Getty Bible made sought to have their memories preserved among the later users of the manuscript (that is, among the Armenian faithful).

Among all the cultural affinities evoked in the Bible's illumination, there is a decided lack of connection to the secular arts then current in Isfahan. In planning this Bible, Christian images, especially Armenian ones, were sought out and adapted. Khoja Abdule and his family spoke Persian, as is clear from



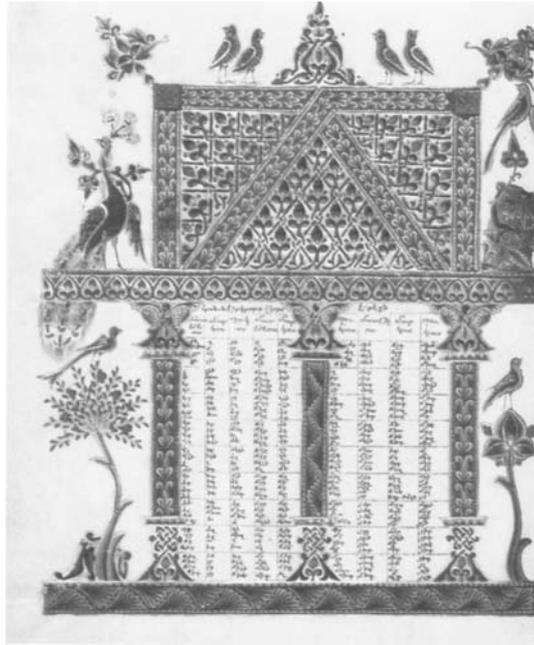


FIGURE 22  
**Canon table**  
 by Malanzar and Aghap'ir.  
 Isfahan, 1637 or 1638.  
 Fol. 490v of a Bible.  
 JPGM, Ms. Ludwig I 14.

the notes they placed in the manuscript in Persian, written in Armenian characters. Abdule's name is Arabic, which has suggested to some scholars that he was a convert to Armenian Christianity. This is not the case, since his father and mother donated a Gospel book in 1607, but Abdule's name does indicate the degree to which Armenians might adopt Persian fashions while still excluding Persian styles from their sacred texts.

The merchants of Isfahan valued Armenia's diverse traditions in manuscript illumination, preserving a variety of styles. By paying for the production or restoration of luxury manuscripts and attaching to them hopes of being remembered, the merchant families tied themselves to the Armenian community, to the only people who would read the book. The sense of the manuscript as a mechanism for defining and maintaining a community extended beyond the particular language used.

**Suggestions for  
 Further Reading**

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Mathews, Thomas F., and Roger S. Wieck, eds. *Treasures in Heaven: Armenian Illuminated Manuscripts* (New York and Princeton, 1994).

## *Importing Europe: Armenian Printed Books*

**I**N THE EFFORTS of Isfahan Armenians to maintain a spiritual connection with their Armenian past, and with their brethren scattered throughout the world, printed books played a role second, perhaps, only to illuminated manuscripts. The monks in New Julfa set up the first printing press in Iran, and pioneering presses as far away as Amsterdam were sponsored by New Julfa merchant families. Although early Armenian printed books included practical handbooks, works of entertainment, and histories, the great majority of them were designed to guide the Armenian people in matters of faith. Prayer books of various types, books for church use, and educational publications make up three-quarters of the early Armenian printed books.

The printing of books was above all a European art, and European powers tried to limit Armenian access to it. As early as 1511, a rather secretive printer in Venice (who identified himself only as Yakob the Sinner) was publishing Armenian books. He printed modest works of popular religion, mixtures of prayer and charms, astronomy and medicine, offering information on the Armenian Church calendar alongside advice on the interpretation of signs. These books would seem to have appealed particularly to Armenian merchants, away from home and church for long periods. The press had to avoid the Catholic Church's censors; this would seem to explain the lack of surviving information about Yakob.

Europe developed and controlled the technology of printing, and the Catholic Church vigilantly limited printing to what it considered orthodox works, thus curtailing most Armenian religious printing. Furthermore, the Armenian clerics who had converted to Catholicism and guided the Inquisition in judging Armenian texts were extremely sensitive to the areas of contention between the two churches. They fostered an atmosphere of suspicion in which the Catholic Church came to view most Armenian activities as heretical. Most early Armenian printing was done by Armenians with Catholic sympathies, who were able to gain papal permission for their projects. Exceptions



FIGURE 23  
**Headpiece**  
 P. 13 of a  
*Lives of the Fathers*  
 printed at the Monastery  
 of the Holy Savior,  
 New Julfa, 1641.  
 Los Angeles, UCLA  
 Department of Special  
 Collections, Minassian  
 no. 312.

appeared in places beyond the control of the pope, especially in the Muslim world. Armenians established the first printing presses in any language in Ottoman Turkey and in the Holy Land, as well as in Iran.

The Ottoman sultan Bayazid forbade printing in his realm in 1483, and, except for a few clandestine Armenian publications of the late sixteenth century, the ban lasted until an Armenian press gained a foothold (also, initially, clandestine) in Istanbul in 1695. It fell to the Armenians of Isfahan to develop printing for Armenians. When the Armenian bishop Khachatur of Caesarea established a school at the monastery of the Holy Savior in New Julfa in about 1630, he began negotiations to establish an Armenian press in Rome. The substantial accommodations he was able to make to papal views were not sufficient, however, and the negotiations failed. In 1636, therefore, Khachatur started his own press at his monastery.

The press of the monastery of the Holy Savior was the first printing press in Iran in any language. This was a remarkable endeavor, for the monks virtually had to reinvent the whole printing process. None of them had ever seen a printing press; they depended on what information they could gather from travelers who had. The monks made their own ink and paper and employed

Armenian goldsmiths of Isfahan to make type. They concentrated on essential devotional books, beginning with a psalter that they completed in 1638. Unhappy with the result, Khachatur dispatched a learned and energetic member of the monastic community to Europe to learn printing. Yovhannes of [New] Julfa managed to set up a press in Livorno, where he published a psalter in 1644 before returning home to share his skills. In the meantime, his brethren in New Julfa continued their efforts. The *Lives of the Fathers* that they published in 1641 gives poignant testimony to the difficulties they (barely) overcame (fig. 23).

The paper has a very soft surface, quite unlike the polished paper used in manuscripts, which is often strikingly similar to parchment. The marks of the screen on which it was made are quite evident. The typefaces are all based on manuscript hands; a very simple *bolorgir*, with compact letter forms, serves as the body of the text, and larger letters of *erkat'agir* are used both as uppercase letters and as rubrics. The bulk of the book is text, pages dense with these very simple letters. The print is flawed by the irregular wear of the letters, the result of uneven pressure on an amateur press, and by slightly uneven lines. Still, the *Lives of the Fathers* met the goals of the monks who made it, much as did the manuscripts the monastery produced. It preserved the text, and with the text, the names of those who had made the book. Indeed, the volume's colophon takes exactly the same form as a manuscript colophon, asking those who might read or copy the text to remember all the monks who had worked on it.

Closed, the New Julfa *Lives of the Fathers* looks like a manuscript, for it was bound in the Armenian tradition by one of the monks who was a master in this art. In its simple decoration, it also follows the traditions of manuscript illumination. The headpiece could have been copied from a Gospel book, or constructed out of the elements earlier Armenian illuminators had used to make their own decorative pages. Bands of leaves and buds form the carpet and its arched opening; sprays of leaves spring neatly from the upper corners; birds intertwine their necks on top and arch to form the first letter of the text. All are part of the language of Armenian manuscript illumination, translated into black and white in a sensitive woodcut.

The monks used only a few such woodcuts for ornament. In addition to the large headpiece, the monks had a simpler rectangular headpiece that they used to mark major divisions within the text, as well as a set of bird-shaped initials. They used the same blocks over and over. The headpiece used in the *Lives of the Fathers* appears in other books, such as the 1642 breviary. UCLA's copy of the *Lives of the Fathers* has a preface page in which the block was used twice (once upside-down) to form a medallion framing a colophon.

Yovhannes returned to Isfahan in 1646, bringing with him engravings and other equipment, only to find that Khachatur had died in his absence.

Yovhannes's ambitions for the press, including the publication of a Bible, were not realized, and he printed nothing after 1650. Other monks at the monastery of the Holy Savior preferred to concentrate on the production of manuscripts, and printing returned only in 1687, as an emergency response to the success of Catholic missionaries among the Armenians.

The Armenian merchants of Isfahan did not wait as long as the monks. Their support allowed the Armenian mother church in Ejmiatsin to sidestep the opposition of Rome and establish an Armenian press in Amsterdam. The effort took years. It began in 1656, when the head of the Armenian Church, the Catholicos Yakob of Julfa, sent a clerk, Matt'eos Tsarets'i, west to establish a press. He began in Venice, where (as he wrote in the colophon to the book he finally published in 1661) "there were no craftsmen prepared for this work." In Rome, he faced an order of the Inquisition barring any printers from helping Armenians. Only upon reaching Holland in 1658 was he able to begin. His first publication, "as an example," was a long hymn, which he began printing in 1660. Matt'eos died in 1661, without having finished the publication. A merchant from New Julfa, Avetis Ghlijets' Erevants'i, completed it and went on to publish a breviary.

The Catholicos in Ejmiatsin then sent out a bishop, Oskan Erevants'i, who was Avetis's brother, to continue the work. Oskan was a good choice. Trained in theology at Ejmiatsin, he had also studied with a Dominican missionary. His first charge was to try to get papal support, or at least permission, for his project, the publication of the Armenian Bible. In Rome, he received a less than satisfactory response from the Catholic authorities. He would be permitted to publish only an Armenian translation of the Latin Vulgate, and this only if he submitted the text to papal censorship. Like his predecessors, he had to relocate to Holland. On the way, he met three New Julfa merchants in Marseilles who agreed to pay his expenses in printing the Bible and to divide any profits from the sale of the book among three Armenian monasteries. The merchants, it would seem, undertook to distribute the Bible as well as to underwrite its publication. In Amsterdam, Oskan took over the press his brother had been running; in 1666, he printed the first Armenian Bible.

Oskan was only barely free of Catholic censorship even in Holland. The Inquisition assigned a Dutch priest to report on any heretical activities, and Catholic ambassadors tried, unsuccessfully, to pressure the Dutch authorities to keep the Bible from leaving Holland. Oskan's attitude was far from confrontational, however. He carefully compared his copy of the Armenian Bible to the Vulgate, and when he found his version to lack verses included in the Vulgate, he translated them into Armenian and inserted them into his text. He maintained the Vulgate system of numbering chapter and verse, although when there was a difference in the order of verses, he followed the Armenian version.

The result is a text in which it is easy to see the differences between the Armenian Bible and the Vulgate, and Oskan's Bible was almost immediately used by European scholars to make textual comparisons.

Oskan's reasons for publishing this semicritical edition seem to have been ecumenical. He wrote in his colophon to the Bible that where he found differences in the two versions, "in those cases we kept silence, and did not presume to add or to subtract"; he respected both texts. However, the Inquisition was not impressed and rejected the Bible as heretical when Oskan made application to move his press to a Catholic country, where, according to him, it would benefit from the supervision of the papal authorities. The Catholic Church remained adamant that the only Armenian materials it would allow would be translations from Latin. Oskan continued to publish in Amsterdam, printing secular works as well as catechisms, a breviary, a ritual, prayer books, a calendar, and the New Testament, until 1669, when he finally received permission to move his press to a Catholic country. The permission came not from the pope but from Louis XIV of France, who allowed Oskan to print in Marseilles, as long as he published nothing anti-Catholic.

Oskan's motives for moving his press are not entirely clear. Marseilles was much closer to the Armenian populations in the Ottoman and Safavid Empires, but ease of transport does not seem to have been Oskan's primary motivation, since he had earlier entered into unsuccessful negotiations to move his press to Lvov. He seems still to have been seeking reconciliation with the Catholic Church. After Oskan's death, the press continued sporadically at Marseilles until 1695, when it moved to Istanbul, publishing under the false imprint of Livorno.

Oskan's masterwork, his Bible, shows his mixed sympathies. He did not abandon the Armenian text of the Bible in the face of Rome's demands, but at the same time he presented the Armenian reader with the contents of the Vulgate. Circumstances necessitated that he work in Europe, but his affinity for European culture is also obvious. In addition to presenting a careful comparison of the Armenian and Vulgate Bibles, he used woodcuts in his publications that brought Northern European book illustrations to his people. His press already owned a set of woodcuts by Christophel von Sichem when Oskan arrived in Amsterdam. Oskan used them in his Bible, starting with a Baroque title page sporting allegorical figures of the Church and Faith amidst lush floral rinceaux. He used eighty-nine small narrative woodcuts by von Sichem, placing some of them in the columns of the text, grouping four as a frontispiece, and using two as a headpiece. The prestige of European art could hardly have been more strongly signaled.

In producing this Bible, the Armenian Church was asserting its membership in European civilization. What was an Armenian in Iran to make of the



FIGURE 24  
**Joseph Sold into Slavery  
 by His Brothers**  
 by Christophel von Sichem.  
 P. 40 of a Bible  
 printed in Amsterdam  
 by Oskan of Erevan, 1666.  
 Los Angeles, UCLA  
 Department of Special  
 Collections, Minassian no. 2.

image of *Joseph Sold into Slavery by His Brothers* (fig. 24)? For von Sichem, the camel raising its head above the crowd of men must have been quite exotic. For the merchants returning to New Julfa with this Bible, the porkpie hats on both Joseph's brothers and his purchasers must have been equally strange. To judge from the subsequent course of Armenian art, the Armenians found the use of light and shadow to model the muscular figures even more interesting.

The images Oskan used as a headpiece to the Book of Esther (fig. 25) presented a particular challenge to the Armenians in Isfahan, for to the Armenians, Isfahan was Susa, Esther's home. In von Sichem's prints, they saw it transformed into a European court: Ahasuerus's throne draped in fleur-de-lis fabric, his advisers wearing hose and short, full jackets with sleeves widening at the shoulders. The European image remakes Isfahan, proclaiming Europe as the norm. So, too, does its pendant, showing Haman's downfall in a fanciful palace with a mansard roof and classicizing pilasters and pediments. The contrasting treatment of the same setting in the Judeo-Persian *Ardashir-Nama* (e.g., pl. 14) reminds us how distant the self-image of the Jews was from that of the Armenians. The Armenians could look west for models of power, identifying with the Christians of Europe, while the Jews lived in a Persian world, as did their ancestors in the story of Esther; they stressed their identity as *Persian* Jews. The Armenian identification with the West extended to the style of the



FIGURE 25  
**Esther Before Ahasuerus  
 and Haman Hanged**  
 by Christophel von Sichem.  
 P. 540 of a Bible  
 printed in Amsterdam  
 by Oskan of Erevan, 1666.  
 Los Angeles, UCLA  
 Department of Special  
 Collections, Minassian no. 2.

images; black-and-white tile floors establish a rapidly receding perspective, and the figures seem to move in space. It is hard to say which would have impressed the Armenians of New Julfa more: the Europeanizing of their city or the way von Sichem’s representation of three dimensions opened little windows in their previously solid books.

Oskan’s Bible is a large book, suitable for study at home or in a church. It met one of the needs he had responded to in his work abroad, that is, it made the Bible more widely available to Armenians at home. It was part of a larger plan to raise the educational level of Armenians and their church with the help of European technology, which is evident in the Amsterdam press’s production of primers, grammars, and liturgical books. Oskan and his press also sought to serve the large numbers of Armenians who spent most of their lives away from home, on the trading missions that supported New Julfa and other Armenian communities. These men needed literature in Armenian to drive away loneliness, and the Amsterdam press produced books of history, fables, and geography. For the spiritual needs of men separated from home, whom the Catholic Church forbade from worshiping in their own tradition, the Amsterdam press also produced portable religious texts. Avetis Ghlijets<sup>6</sup> Erevants<sup>7</sup>i, Oskan’s brother, had described the prayer book he published in 1662–63 as “very cheap and handy, and within the [financial] reach of everyone.” Making



FIGURE 26  
**Saint John**  
 by Christophel von Sichem,  
 and the first page of  
 the Gospel of John.  
 Pp. 314–15 of a New  
 Testament printed in  
 Amsterdam by Oskan of  
 Erevan, 1668. Los Angeles,  
 UCLA Department of Special  
 Collections, Minassian  
 no. 40.



FIGURE 27  
**The Heavenly Jerusalem**  
 by Christophel von Sichem.  
 P. 899 of a New Testament  
 printed in Amsterdam  
 by Oskan of Erevan, 1668.  
 Los Angeles, UCLA  
 Department of Special  
 Collections, Minassian  
 no. 40.

the prayers of the Armenian Church available to travelers was crucial to the Armenian printers.

Oskan produced a New Testament in 1668 that is very similar to his Bible, only on a reduced scale. It is about the size of a modern paperback Bible, not small enough to fit in the pocket but certainly convenient for traveling. Oskan illustrated it with selected von Sichem woodcuts. The four evangelist portraits are the same woodcuts he had combined to make a frontispiece for the Gospels in the Bible. Here each appears at the start of the appropriate Gospel, opposite an incipit page done in traditional Armenian fashion (fig. 26). The contrast is striking. For example, von Sichem’s John is a dramatic figure, lit by a flood of light from our left, his inspiration conveyed by an expectant pose. Tension makes the tendons stand out from his right hand, which holds a quill, ready to record the divine words. The other hand splays out to support the writing surface. Opposite, the words themselves proceed quietly under a restrained, absolutely flat carpet of elegant buds and leaves, modeled on Armenian manuscript illumination. The effect is to set the Armenian text off from what must have seemed a strikingly modern and lively image.

Oskan did not repeat any of the thirty-some narrative Gospel images he used in his Bible, illustrating instead only the Book of Revelation. Here the

break with Armenian tradition is evident, not only in the style of von Sicheim's woodcut illustrations to Revelation, many of which are adaptations of Albrecht Dürer, but also in their content. Revelation joined the Armenian canon late, but Cilician illuminators, who had contact with Catholic manuscripts, had introduced eschatological scenes into their Gospel books, and in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, artists in Armenia proper developed a set of Last Judgment scenes to end their Gospel preface cycles. These scenes generally expanded imaginatively on the references to last days in the Gospels, only obliquely making use of the imagery of Revelation. In Oskan's New Testament, however, it was Revelation itself that was illustrated; the text and illustrations come together. Baroque illustration often makes the otherworldly palpable to the viewer. Here, in twenty scenes, Armenian viewers saw the events of John's vision in concrete form. In the final image (fig. 27), the Heavenly Jerusalem, God the Father, the Holy Ghost, and an angel revealing all to the author are made to inhabit a rational space. The angel and the writer dominate the foreground from a high promontory, beyond which the city recedes in proper perspective.

Oskan's success transformed the world of Armenian books. His press moved to Istanbul in 1695, initiating a virtual explosion in Armenian printing. The printed book replaced the manuscript as the battleground for the souls and identities of Armenians. Although they had to go to Europe to do so, the merchants of Isfahan brought about this change, not only in their financial backing of the press but also in their ability to get the printed books into the hands of distant Armenians, a task that only internationally connected merchants could have accomplished.

**Suggestion for  
Further Reading**

Kévorkian, Raymond H. *Catalogue des "Incunables" Arméniens (1511/1695) ou Chronique de l'Imprimerie Arménienne. Cahiers d'Orientalisme* 9 (Geneva, 1986). [The preface by Jean-Pierre Mahé also appears in English and provides an informative overview of early Armenian printing.]

## Conclusions

UPON ENTERING the small gallery in which *Book Arts of Isfahan* is displayed, the visitor may feel disoriented, wondering what the objects there could have to do with one another. There are elegant pen drawings in the styles of the artists of the court of Isfahan; opulent, very medieval-looking Christian manuscripts; early European printed books (in an unfamiliar alphabet); and a group of rather modest manuscripts that look Persian, except that they are not written in the Persian alphabet. With some notable exceptions—like the exploration of the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim arts of medieval Spain in *Convivencia* (New York, The Jewish Museum, 1992)—art exhibitions are organized around a common visual thread, undertaking to describe a particular tradition, an artist's career, or the shared visual ethos of a particular period. Unlike such exhibitions, this one is about art produced in a single era, in one center, and is about several artistic identities that sometimes converged and sometimes merely coexisted there. The uniting theme can be presented in a few words: the objects represent the cultural diversity of the population of Isfahan during the period it was the capital of Safavid Persia. Still, the question remains: What do these objects have to do with one another? What can be learned by considering them together?

The exhibition, and this book, raise a question in the study of Islamic art that often seems so thorny that it cannot be resolved or so obvious that it does not merit raising: What is Islamic art? It might seem unreasonably literal to refuse to call the art of the court of Isfahan Islamic, since, in scholarship, Islamic art is defined as much by a shared culture as a religion, and the visual components of that culture are not limited to religious art. The occasional Islamic art historian (as opposed to the historian of Islamic art) makes religious objections, asking that we cease calling figural images (banned by the Qur'an) Islamic. That is not my prime objection. We use the term *Islamic* to group together very different things: secular arts, such as secular manuscript illustration, palace architecture, town planning, and textile design; religious arts, such

as construction and decoration of mosques and the copying of the Qur'an; and many arts that are neither fully secular nor strictly religious, such as the architecture of charitable institutions. I cannot suggest a better label under which to group things as diverse as the Alhambra, the Sultan Ahmet mosque, the Taj Mahal, prayer rugs, and illustrated Persian romances, but the label does have its problems, and this exhibition underlines them. Judeo-Persian manuscript illumination certainly comes under the rubric of Persian painting, but this highlights the problem of calling Persian painting Islamic. The Islamic label assumes a unity in Persian visual culture; this exhibition seeks to document and explore diversity in that very culture.

Recognizing that the culture of Safavid Isfahan was not exclusively Islamic should not blind us to the very important role of Islam in some aspects of its art. In concentrating on images and not on texts, we may well have inverted the order of importance of text and image in the Persian tradition and neglected some important evidence about the function of the outsider in this society. Certainly among the texts that might quite fruitfully be brought to bear on any examination of the way outsiders and strangers were viewed in Isfahan is the Sufi literature treating the theme of the encounter with an unknown stranger. Sufi mysticism suggests that the stranger may have much to teach but that he may also present a danger. The impossibility of quite knowing the stranger is a theme of both poetry and of painting and may have much to add to our interpretations. It is one of many threads that could be followed in exploring the rich tapestry of Safavid Isfahan.

As in numerous other settings, the Jewish art of seventeenth-century Persia presents problems for traditional art history. In an art history concerned with large stylistic categories, Jewish art has tended to become invisible, emerging occasionally to stand in for some lost object from a more central tradition. This has been the role of much synagogue decoration; for example, the Dura Europos Synagogue murals have been treated as evidence for Early Christian Bible illustration. Such interpretations may lead to interesting discoveries, and Vera Moreen's suggestion that Judeo-Persian illumination offers valuable evidence about the development of "popular Iranian miniature painting" seems quite reasonable. At the same time, however, it must be possible to break out of the unifying categories and consider artistic activity in more complex ways, including the ways groups of people use art to fashion distinct cultural identities for themselves and to assign other groups to specific places within their field of vision.

Scholarship on Armenian art has amply demonstrated the possibility of treating the traditions of a small group of people, generally living under Muslim rule, independently of the history of Islamic art. If anything, the scholarship has gone too far in the direction of dealing with the Armenian tradition

in isolation. The fact that Armenian tradition itself seems concerned to enforce ethnic and religious boundaries partially excuses this approach, but Priscilla Soucek, dealing with fourteenth-century Seljuk and Armenian painting, has demonstrated that this approach overlooked important connections. Isfahan is one center where we can place Armenian manuscript illumination in the context of Armenians living under Muslim rule. The exhibition and this book, then, are attempts at a history of art that allows notice to be taken of important countercurrents, things like the presence in an Islamic society of non-Islamic peoples.

Some basic value judgments have informed the kind of art history that could not notice these outsiders. The Orientalist notion of an isolated, timeless, and inalterably foreign Islamic world is only one such construct. Deeply embedded in the art-historical traditions of Europe is the sense that art has always progressed through a series of original creative acts. The quality of objects has often been judged in terms of how well they contribute to this process, so that “advanced” styles are more highly valued than conservative ones. These evaluations depend on a narrative in which one style follows another; eclecticism is the mark of an unworthy, unoriginal artistic system. This has important implications for the evaluation of much of the material we have been discussing. If the linear model is accepted, Jewish and Christian art in Isfahan, almost by definition, becomes simply bad Safavid art; Safavid curiosity about foreign styles becomes a sign of decline and decay. I reject this system of values and apply a different model, assuming that complexity is in itself valuable and that by attending to several different artistic systems at once, we can more fully appreciate the character of a multifaceted (indeed, multicultural) city.

The exhibition began with the notion that it might be interesting to gather together the Armenian books and manuscripts from Isfahan at UCLA and the Getty Museum and to juxtapose them to other objects from seventeenth-century Isfahan that are available in Southern California. The need to display more of the complexity of the art of the Safavid court led us to borrow from the Art History Trust collection in Washington, D.C. The initial Armenian/Safavid comparison drew us to broaden our view, and the Judeo-Persian material in New York presented the opportunity to consider how another non-Muslim group responded to its own unique situation.

It may appear that some of the materials juxtaposed in this exhibition are not properly comparable. The Judeo-Persian illustrated manuscripts may well be marketplace productions; they are not deluxe objects like the Armenian books and manuscripts or the individual drawings and manuscript illustrations of the court. It is not certain they are from Isfahan, and if they are, they must come from a lower economic stratum than the other objects in the exhi-

bition. They present a rather narrow view of the culture of Jewish Isfahan. We know from Judeo-Persian historians and European travelers that Jews in Isfahan supported synagogues, schools, and scriptoria in which the sacred texts would have been copied in quite another spirit than Judeo-Persian poetry. The fact is that this small exhibition presents only a partial view of a rich and complex city.

In considering courtly art, we concentrated on themes of cultural diversity in the court, the city, and the country. Isfahan and late Safavid Persia welcomed an unusually wide variety of people, including even Catholic missionaries (although they were enjoined from trying to convert Muslims), and the shahs' interest in European art suggests that such openness was more than a matter of political expediency. We have suggested that stylistic heterodoxy in Safavid painting offers a parallel expression of the court's fascination with foreign cultures. We have tried to give some sense of the main themes that occupied Safavid artists but have concentrated on their representation of individuals with separate cultural identities. In focusing on this theme, we have neglected a subject that Isfahan artists and patrons found quite compelling, namely, the artists who created the images. In seventeenth-century Isfahan, artists took a marked interest in documenting their own careers; manuscripts and, particularly, independent leaves often carry notes about when they were made, by whom, for whom, and in what circumstances. The art-historical consciousness implied in this documentation is important for our view of the artistic climate of Isfahan, for the same patrons who valued individual artistic personalities also valued artistic variety.

It is often noted that Safavid painting in Isfahan shifted away from the traditional Persian interest in the ideal and toward the depiction of singularity. The distinct qualities of various artists, various ethnic groups, and various styles clearly concerned the elite patrons of Isfahan. We might now ask to what extent this concern was exclusively a court interest. We know that paintings by Isfahan court artists were sold in the marketplaces and that less well-connected artists aspired to their styles. There is little reason to think that the interest in variety present at the court did not extend well beyond it. It is certainly attested to in some of the arts patronized by Armenians in Isfahan. The same European artists provided both Armenian and Muslim homes with monumental painting, and Armenian patrons, like their Muslim neighbors, chose between European and local styles in mural decoration. Armenian churches often featured the same *cuerda seca* tilework favored for Safavid mosques. Like their contemporaries at the court, the Armenians appear to have accepted stylistic variety.

Armenians seem to have felt it proper to use styles shared with other communities for their homes and even for their churches. The line was drawn when it came to manuscript illumination; the exclusion of local styles from

Armenian manuscript illumination can be interpreted as part of a growing art-historical awareness, shared with their neighbors in Isfahan. Armenian manuscript illuminators in earlier centuries had maintained ties with their past, drawing inspiration from earlier manuscripts. Beginning in at least the tenth century, Armenians went to great lengths to preserve old manuscripts and their illuminations; they often based new programs of illumination on venerable models, and they occasionally added new illuminations to older manuscripts.

In the seventeenth century, however, Armenian artists and patrons began to display a heightened sensitivity to the stylistic differences they encountered in the older material. When they copied an older image, they did so with new precision and sensitivity to style, as we can see in Malnazar and Aghap<sup>ir</sup>'s copies of the Gladzor Gospel Book's canon tables in their Isfahan Bible. Seventeenth-century illuminators copied earlier manuscripts in ways that can look rather like forgery to viewers who accept originality as a test of artistic merit, but the seventeenth-century illuminators took credit for their work; there was no intent to deceive but, rather, to emulate. This awareness of style as a difference that separates art of one period from that of another is profoundly nostalgic, a way for Armenians in the diaspora to assert their connection with a lost past. At the same time, communities like Isfahan supported several quite different styles, so that an artist like Mesrop flourished alongside the Bible illuminators. This new sensitivity to, and tolerance of, stylistic differences can be connected to the rising art-historical awareness of the entire Middle East in this period. Safavid writings about art and artists show the increased interest in artistic personalities and in the fact that styles change over time and distance.

In manuscript illumination and the printing of illustrated books, Armenians explored their identity as Christians. Looking at this evidence alone, we were struck by the way the Armenians of Isfahan seemed to ignore the art of their Islamic neighbors. The struggle to distinguish their book arts as particularly Christian indicates the central place that books held for Armenians, and the stylistic restriction of the book arts suggests their awareness of style. Armenian manuscripts and books would have only Armenian audiences. Monumental art, which would address a larger audience, took into account the tastes and sensitivities of other peoples and so developed a distinct artistic vocabulary.

The case of Judeo-Persian manuscript illustration presents interesting parallels and differences. The Jews used manuscript illustration to assert their place in the Persian tradition, much as monumental painting provided a way for Armenians to share in local artistic developments. But where the Armenians participated in the latest court fashions in wall painting, the Jews seem to have been attracted to retrospective forms. Like many other comparisons sug-

gested by this exhibition, this one contrasts phenomena that are not quite parallel. Do we see here merely the effects of the economic distance between prosperous Armenian merchant houses and the marginalized Jews, or of the political distance between the Armenians, with their access to the shah, and the Jews? Differences in quality are particularly difficult to judge, involving imponderables such as taste, tradition, and expense.

The two communities' differing uses of illumination also reflect the deep difference in the meaning of the illuminated or illustrated book for the Armenians and for Persian Jews. Both groups prized their religions, as their reactions to persecution demonstrate. Manuscript illumination was an assimilationist venue for the Jews precisely because it was not central to their religious practices. For Armenians, the book served to preserve religious identity, freeing up the realm of domestic (and to a lesser extent, even ecclesiastic) architecture and decoration for the experience of being part of the city and its fashions. The lost calligraphic work of Jewish scriptoria in Isfahan would no doubt provide a closer parallel to the work of Armenian manuscript illuminators, in terms of the importance of the products for their respective communities.

Some of the differences we have seen between the book art of the Jews, the Armenians, and the Safavid court may actually be illusions, the effect of accidents of documentation and preservation. The development of painting at the Safavid court of Isfahan is amply documented in signed paintings, but to the body of images with inscriptions indicating they belong to the court and its artistic circle have been added scores of images in similar styles, treating similar themes. Many of these undocumented images must have belonged to individuals far from the court. It is reasonable to suppose that the same Armenian who paid for a traditional Armenian Gospel book, an Armenian Bible printed in Europe, and a program of wall paintings for his home in the styles fashionable at court might also have enjoyed these "court" paintings. Although we have less evidence of Jewish artistic patronage, Jews may also have appreciated the court images. The fact that Judeo-Persian inscriptions were added to the Shah 'Abbas Bible shows that Jews had access to some highly valued art works. If they had collected album leaves, would they have also inscribed them, or might the Jewish interest in them have passed without leaving evidence for us?

This leads us to larger questions: To what extent should we conceive of Isfahan as a unified city and to what extent should we think of the Armenians, Jews, and other non-Muslim or non-Persian groups as somehow living separate lives within the city? Clearly, both the Armenians and the Jews saw themselves as simultaneously part of and apart from their neighbors. Travelers give ample evidence of the position of the Armenians within Isfahan society, at times favored with visits from the shah, certainly economically important, yet

sometimes subject to harsh repressions. For Jews, the picture is similar. Both Jews and Muslims had strong traditions, such as dietary laws, that tended to physically separate them. Yet Armenian and Jewish sources report that intermarriage was common and that the general confusion over who was an Armenian, who a Jew, and who a Muslim was a contributing factor in the outbursts of intolerance among Muslim authorities. Christians, Jews, and Muslims were aware that they shared some religious traditions, and their arts show that they shared tastes and interests.

Finally, it is worth considering the extent to which the place we are looking from determines what we see. My Los Angeles includes classrooms where English is the minority language, a synagogue whose racial composition nearly mirrors that of the United States, and a grocery store where the prices are given in Armenian but where the current Armenian term for salad greens is “letus” (lettuce). This is a city that knows only too well the destructive power of group identity, but one in which cultural differences (especially in music, food, and clothing) are often sources of great pleasure and pride. In art history, it is traditional to view cultural unity as positive. I very much want to believe that differences between peoples can have positive value. This belief has helped shape my account of seventeenth-century Isfahan.

**Suggestions for  
Further Reading**

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# BOOK ARTS OF ISFAHAN

Diversity and Identity in Seventeenth-Century Persia

Alice Taylor



IN THE seventeenth century, the Persian city of Isfahan was a crossroads of international trade and diplomacy. Manuscript paintings produced within the city's various cultural, religious, and ethnic groups reveal the vibrant artistic legacy of the Safavid Empire.

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