Figure 1. Humay at the gate of Humayun's castle. Manuscript painting from the Three Masnavis of Khvaju Kirmani, copied by Mir Ali b. Ilyas al-Tabrizi al-Bavarchi, 1396, Baghdad. Opaque pigment and gold on paper, 281 x 191 mm (painted surface). London, British Library, Add. 18113, fol. 18b. (Photo: By permission of The British Library.)
Micrographia

Toward a visual logic of Persianate painting

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Shifting patterns of thought about Persianate painting, a movement away from the taxonomic concerns that dominated early studies, have become current in recent years. New lines of investigation have responded—probably by osmosis—to historiographic concerns in the history of art and contextual modes of historical inquiry. The results include an increased awareness of intersections among scholars, collectors, the market, and museums; a revived interest in studies of word and image; and questions about the meanings, functions, and values of book painting produced in the milieus of the pre-modern courts of Iran and Central Asia.

Art historical narratives about Persianate painting generally hold that the tradition spanned three centuries (ca. 1300–1600) and its broad outlines are readily available in synthetic studies. Long recognized are momentous changes in book painting in western Iran in the 1390s. One manuscript in particular, Khvaju Kirmani’s Three Masnavis (dated 1396), heralds the arrival of what will become commonplace in Persianate painting. This future is manifest in vertically oriented compositions (fig. 1), a rich polychrome palette, and dense accumulations of minutely rendered details. By the mid-1390s—especially in books of poetry—the number of paintings in a book became fewer, often as few as eight; it is impossible not to notice the concentration of labor and resources that went into these richly worked images. Scholarship accords importance to such paintings precisely because of their intermediary status: more prospective in orientation, they mark the beginnings of “classical” Persianate painting.

The form of painting discernable from the 1390s was embraced and refined in the first decades of the fifteenth century, especially in Herat under the patronage of Timurid prince Baysunghur (d. 1433), a grandson of the dynastic founder Timur (i.e., Tamerlane).1 Baysunghur’s books embody an aesthetic framed entirely in response to the visual terms of the Jalayirid tradition.2 However, the materials are prepared fastidiously, execution becomes still more precise, and composition more rigorously controlled. By ca. 1430, Baysunghur’s books had set the standard and put painting on an irreversible course. Developments in Herat represented a definitive movement away from the pictorial experimentation characteristic of fourteenth-century painting, best exemplified through the Great Mongol copy of the Shahnama (Book of Kings), Firdawsi’s epic. Made in western Iran before 1336, paintings such as Bahram Gur fights the Karg (fig. 2) differ from the later Jalayirid and Timurid traditions by their larger painted surface area, combination of flat color with expansile areas of wash, and coding of spatial recession by overlapping planes and the bluish effect of atmospheric perspective. One can only assume that painters from the fifteenth century onward considered some aspects of the fourteenth-century pictorial language to be too indeterminate; from the last years of the fourteenth century onward, the formal aspects of painting become increasingly coherent and codified.

Although this narrative of a history of Persianate painting attends to broad changes in the formal aspects of painting, we are still left wondering, What is a Persianate painting? What are the salient visual features of Persianate paintings and how does one encounter these images? It is strange that such questions have not been pursued and that the problems they raise have been skipped over. In some respects, both painting and book—its object carrier—seem to have been taken for granted or at least to have acquired a certain measure of

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1. The Timurid dynasty controlled the lands of Iran, Central Asia, and Afghanistan between the period 1370 and 1506.
2. The Jalayirid dynasty (1336–1432) succeeded the Mongols to control the regions of Iraq and Azerbajan. The “Jalayir” tribe was probably Mongol in origin. A succession of patrons made their courts (Baghdad, Tabriz) centers of literary and artistic achievement, especially Uways (r. 1356–1374) and Sultan Ahmad (r. 1382–1410).
Figure 2. Bahram Gur fights the Karg. Manuscript painting from the Great Mongol Shahnama of Firdawsi, before ca. 1336, Tabriz. Opaque pigment, gold and silver on paper, 210 x 290 mm (painted surface); 415 x 300 mm (folio). Cambridge, Mass., Arthur M. Sackler Museum, Harvard University Art Museums, Bequest of Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, accession no. 1960.190.2. (Photo: Courtesy of the Arthur M. Sackler Museum, Harvard University Art Museums, Bequest of Abby Aldrich Rockefeller.)
familiarity. This familiarity is caused in part by relying on art historical paradigms developed for other artistic traditions as well as from the way that most people encounter Persianate paintings. In either publications or exhibitions, a longstanding practice—only recently challenged—was to conceal the text adjacent to paintings. Now exhibition spaces combine cases displaying open books and framed folios mounted on the walls. The compromise endeavors to remind us that a picture seen on a wall should be seen in a book, not that this fact of Persian painting has passed without comment. Scholars have yet to attend to the fact that although the Persianate painting is dense and complex, albeit in “miniature,” it cannot be understood as an autonomous object analogous to an easel picture of the western European tradition.

Focusing on the relationship between word and image—now emphasizing the painting’s position in a book—however, can result in the opposite extreme where painting is only accounted for by its text. This more recent approach of word and image studies dates to the 1970s. One tendency of these studies has been to “match” image to text, identifying linkages between pictorial content and textual content in often quite literal and descriptive ways. Indeed, some scholars think that every picture is inspired by a text, one of them proposing that Persianate paintings are “in nine cases out of ten . . . pictures with a story,”\(^3\) that their principal function—and meaning—is a story-telling one. On the question of meaning, the same author writes:

Indeed, it would be foolish, when looking at a Persian painting or drawing, to ask the sort of question that springs to mind when we contemplate Western pictorial art: “What is the artist’s message for us?” The Persian artist’s message is simple and invariable: “This is the most beautiful and effective illustration I can make to this story; I hope you will like it.” This humble desire to give pleasure to others comes as rather a surprise and a relief. . . . (ibid. p. 14).

This passage shows that some scholars recognize the inadequacy of Western paradigms for the analysis of Persianate painting, and that formerly assumed cultural homologies do not exist: Persianate painting is “foreign.” But the assessment raises other problems by its emphases; first, the issue of the painter’s volition, in an art form that was collaborative; and second, by defining the painting as essentially pleasurable and pragmatic. In the same essay, the author writes that the Persianate painting is a place to escape the “confusion, tension, and cruelty of the world around us,” and urges us to contemplate “these elaborate yet uncomplicated works with the simple eyes of children . . . , delighting in their beauty of line and richness of color, and enjoying the strange stories they tell. Their beauties are all on the surface; no spiritual message or Freudian symbolism lurks beneath their exquisite forms and colors.” For this scholar, Persianate painting is a curative, a palliative that can restore the child within us. The painting is an experience of wonder, of seeing things in a way that is familiar to the memory yet forgotten, foreign but somehow known.

Intriguing in most writing on Persianate painting is its amnesiac quality, an insensitivity to the problems inherent to any analysis that would claim to be

7. Robinson’s comments take off from remarks made by Eric Schroeder, who Robinson quotes in full: “There is, for instance, the loitering interest of narrative in childish form subtly organized in a very mature way, and a perfected draughtsmanship which has yet something in common with children’s drawings and reminds us of something we can no longer see ourselves.” After discussing terms used by Muhammad Haydar Dughlat, Schroeder remarks: “They praised the craftsman qualities in their men of genius . . . Accepting monotony and extravagance as canons, let us proceed to judge the tension, the all-over thoroughness, and the seductive human grace of the design, the cold fluency of the execution, the high polish of the finishing” (ibid., pp. 11 and 13).

It is difficult to know if Robinson and Schroeder refer to the “innocent eye,” the notion common in the early twentieth century that children’s art was a more objective, unfiltered vision with closer access to artistic inspiration (because children lacked the extensive social conditioning of adults). The ideas are summarized in Jonathan Fineberg, “The Innocent Eye,” Art News (April 1995): 118–125, esp. 119–120. Fineberg links the production of many vanguard artists to concepts of children’s art of the time (the subject of publications and exhibitions since the late nineteenth century), but missing is an appraisal of forces that shaped notions about what was exemplary in children’s art. See the review by Sue Malvern, “The Ends of Innocence: Modern Art and Modern Children,” Art History 23, no. 4 (November 2000): 627–631. In his reference to children, Robinson seems to intend an attitude to painting that does not question what come across as unintuitive properties.

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historical. Certain forces will always shape the way we write about history, and it is impossible to escape our presentist concerns. Of equal importance to paradigms that shape our perceptions about Persianate painting is the language used to describe it. Deriving from preconceptions about Persianate painting, defined as distinct from the visual modes of western visual traditions, the scholars’ language also shapes our perception of these images by establishing an ambience of association for them. Adjectives such as “exquisite,” “beautiful,” “romantic,” and “fantastic” put Persianate painting in the category of decoration and highlight the painting’s power to distract us or to transport our minds, effectively deterring us from pursuing other questions about pictures.\(^8\) Inadvertently, language can function as both symptom of and prescription for regression, reinforcing the image of the child-viewer, denying Persianate painting forms of complexity by prescribing only disinterested looking.

Contrasts remain in the study of Persianate painting: in the confounding choice of seeing painting at opposite ends of a spectrum (painting as subservient to text vs. painting as autonomous visual entity); or in uncertainties about the existence of pictorial complexity—and if it is thought to exist, then how do we define the nature of that visual intelligence? It is here that differences between the Persianate painting and immediately obvious comparative cultures of the book—western Medieval and Byzantine—become important. If part of an image’s function was to embody meanings that could be decoded by means parallel to the hermeneutic procedures applied to texts, then Persianate painting certainly could not be held equal to these antecedent and contemporary visual cultures. Cycles of paintings and individual images in Persian books focus intently on the development of increasingly complex and detailed environments for their subjects, combining non-optically naturalist depictive modes with abstracted surfaces for clothing or architecture (both are representational). Virtually absent from Persianate paintings found in works of literature, history, and biography is a developed and consistent iconographic system of signs, symbols, and attributes, or a spectrum of visual modalities that would match the range evidenced in a similarly restricted category of a comparative manuscript culture. The western Medieval manuscript tradition, for example, extends from the typological and diagrammatic modes of the mnemonic to figural narrative. Elements in this repertoire of meaning-producing systems appear to have been avoided in the pictures accompanying Persian books.\(^9\) Although no scholar has put it quite this way, I would argue that viewers of Persianate paintings are less than sure about what they are expected to do in seeing them and that a comparatist framework is one of the root causes of uncertainty about meaning.

Limitations prevent the full elaboration of these questions in this essay, especially as they obtain to the development of image and word interaction. As one step toward them, however, I will focus here on questions related to image and word interaction in the experience of using a book, the painting’s narrative structure, composition, and medium and materiality, as well as more specifically, how these aspects come together to forge a unique visual phenomenon. My emphasis on the painting in its material context responds to two facts. First of all, that the Persian art historiographic tradition does not discuss aspects of production or reception, though it does praise the painter’s skill among other practitioners. And secondly, that Persianate painting has been ignored for too long and its ontology—what it is—incompletely considered: evidence suggests that the “whats” of Persianate painting—material and pictorial effects and the practitioners’ skill—carried more than a share of cognitive value. It is also my hope that by examining elements of Persianate painting—recurring features that made it a unity over time—we will be more sensitive to the visual tradition’s historical and cultural particularities, freeing it up from the constraints of comparative perspectives.

**Image and word in comic books\(^{10}\)**

Other scholars have compared Persianate painting to the comic book, but I was initially suspicious of the comparison because their references to it were so

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8. Also noted by Lentz (see note 3), p. 13. The aesthetic features of Persianate painting were doubly decorative—abstracted surfaces of pattern making were used for architecture and even the figurative elements of the painting ran against the mimetic tradition of verisimilitude.

9. Persianate paintings that could be interpreted as allegories or possessing visual puns, both of which become increasingly apparent in the heightened self-referential painting of the sixteenth century, remain unstudied.

allusive as to make it difficult to understand what they really intended. In the end I decided to pursue the comparison to see if the comic book could function as a heuristic device for the Persianate painting. I use the comic book as experimental evidence with full recognition that it is a quintessentially modern medium of communication—indeed, this fact configures various utilities. It is also worth repeating the obvious—modern media, like the comic book, have habituated us to certain patterns and methods of making sense of images and words. It is for this reason that I have selected examples from the most recent comic books and have not attempted to match Persianate painting to what I or anyone else might perceive as its closest kin in the history of the comic book. The objective is to begin with a comparison that is historically anachronistic as a point of entry to the Persian painting, and then to articulate its particular features—as object and image.

The principal and most obvious value of the comic book for exposing the logic of Persianate painting lies in its combination of image and word, and in its size and format. Like the Persianate book, the comic book depends on a tightly integrated sequence of images and words that are viewed in a field that measures on average 260 x 180 mm per page. The physical space in which the reader finds himself or herself immersed is comparable. One reads, sees, and makes sense of a story in a circumscribed visual field that is encountered in the format of an object—a book—that is slightly tipped up before the eyes and held in one's hands or that lies on a flat surface. The story advances as the eye scans image and word on the page and as the hand turns successive pages. Tempo changes according to such variables as text type (e.g., the difference between endlessly rhyming poetry or non-rhyming prose), and the desire to linger on an image. It is also possible to use a Persianate book without reading, to leaf through its folios to find the paintings located at intervals between pages of text. And some paintings, such as the common double-page enthronement, had no immediate origin in a text. For both the Persianate book and the comic book the act of reading/seeing is an intimate, interiorizing experience that enlists the mind and body in a symbiotic engagement which cannot be compared to the act of viewing a painting on the vertical wall of a room.

One example can help to illustrate these various points. The next three illustrations show a sequence of six pages from Marvel Comics's Ultimate Marvel Team-Up issue involving Spider-Man and the Hulk. The first double-page layout (fig. 3) is in a canonical format. The first page shows a series of splintered frames—introduced by the word RUMMBLE—whose borders are demarcated by white margins; figures extend beyond these spatial boundaries in two places, augmenting by visual means the dialogue between staff members of the newsroom. Just when the chief reporter orders his staff onto the street to scoop the front page story (about which we are as yet unsure), we see the last two cells: at the left, figures run from the office, and at the right a trigonometry textbook lies closed on the table and papers fall over an empty stool. The swift departure of the figure causes the papers to fly into the air. All of a sudden we are on the next page and out on the window ledge of the newspaper office, many floors above ground, positioned before a running Spider-Man. A dramatic shift of perspective sets us beneath him as he fires his silky web, and a third shift takes us several floors below to see Spider-Man's descent (he is now a black silhouette). The second page is structured as three integrated bands that show different perspectives of the hero, a line of speech bubbles containing his thoughts, a mixture of duty, reflection, and anxiety. If we were in danger of being hypnotized by the medium's truth value, Spider-Man's final speech bubble snaps us out of it.

Turning this page does not provide answers (fig. 4). As yet, we are uncertain of what is causing fear and commotion on the streets below; why the citizens are running in terror; why the boss ordered his reporters to the street. Five panoramas, running across the next two pages, show the street and trace Spider-Man's descent. In the middle band, Spider-Man senses the possible cause of the commotion when he sees footprints hammered into the concrete sidewalk—"Oh boy, this isn't good"—"is that a footprint?" In the next panorama, a car is hurled through the air causing Spider-Man to fall backward. In the very last panorama Spider-Man regains his balance and leaps into the middle distance.
A tiny passage of green to the right—a flexing bicep—hints at what is to come.

The scene of discovery fills the third double-page as a single image—Spider-Man confronting the bellicose green Hulk amid a scene of urban destruction (fig. 5). By using the most direct compositional devices—the cartoon artist’s cheap shot—we are placed below the terrifying and angry Hulk, a position we come to hold with Spider-Man (with whom the preceding pages have already made us identify by image and word). This sequence of six pages underscores the temporal experience inherent in a process of reading integrated with seeing and shows us not only how the tale is told but also how it can be carried suspensefully to its conclusion.

Many other narrative structures are employed in the comic book. One is the presentation of successive images that stand alone—the images are not immediately connected to what comes before or after, neither spatially contiguous nor in temporal sequence (they might be simultaneous snapshots of different locations). When this visual structure is used—alogous to a machine-gun-fire of image after image brattatata—narrative coherence is jeopardized in favor of drama and the visual storytelling can become paratactical, akin to sentences without coordinating connectives (as in “he laughed”; “she cried”). In film it is described as “bad narrative breakdown” or “taking place off camera” where the gaps between cause and effect are too big and create the potential for ambiguity. To counter this undesirable effect, the accompanying text in the comic

12. On the variation of frame size and viewing angle, see Lacassin (see note 10), p. 15.

book becomes heavier to explain the interrelationship between successive visual cells.

**Word and image in the Persian book**

One of the crucial aspects of experiencing a Persianate painting is that it is seen in a book and is discovered by turning pages, most likely after reading. No illustrated Persian book matches the comic book for rate of illustration, even those literary genres (e.g., historical writing) that retained a higher rate of illustration throughout the fifteenth century and after. The comic book is a constant flow of images, a potential that the Persian book may indeed hold—after all, any number of its stories could be made into images—but never actualized. A small number of developed compositions tends to be the rule. But this distinction touches on only one aspect of difference. Another has to do with a reversal of balance between word and image. The comic book uses text to narrate dialogue or monologue (spoken out loud or said to oneself), conveying sounds by onomatopoeia and securing meaningful communication between what we see and what we understand. Image and word are completely interdependent in this communicative discourse and indeed the distinction between the two can be blurred.14 In the Persianate painting, however, image follows after word in a linear sequence; the text introduces and follows after the image, but it is not actually read when the image is being viewed. In other words, although the temporal experience of Persian book and comic book are similar, making sense of a comic book requires a constant shuttling between image and word. In the Persian book the act of seeing is initiated by a process of remembering the narrative just told. Moreover, that text does not prepare the viewer for what will be seen in the painting.

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14. This occurs through the manipulation of the letter’s allographic features (font, color, shape, size). The crumpled edges of “RUMMBLE” in fig. 3 serves as an example.
So how are subjects chosen for depiction in the Persian book integrated with text? As noted earlier, Khvaju Kirmani's *Three Masnavis* (dated 1396) is held to represent the beginnings of what would become common practice in the Persian book, especially the custom of granting the book a few developed compositions. It serves as a good example of image and word integration. The book comprises three of Khvaju Kirmani's *masnavi* (a poem composed of distichs corresponding in measure and containing a pair of rhymes), the *Humay u Humayun, Kamal-nama* (Book of Perfection), and *Rawzat al-anvar* (Garden of Lights). The texts are independent from each other. Of the three, the first *masnavi* is the most illustrated, having six paintings in all (the entire book contains nine). Two paintings from the first *masnavi* (fig. 1 and fig. 6) show this technique of bracketing, of how text precedes the image and then follows after it. Although the surface area of the painting expands so considerably that the relevant text can be imperiled, the text is rarely banished from the page. We might sometimes have to hunt to find it, as in these two paintings, but it is almost always there. In both examples, the text is reduced to one couplet of poetry. In the painting of Humayun revealing her female gender to Humay by removing her helmet, after their combat, the text reads “The plain-faring horse kicked up the level ground/And the turning heavens were hidden by dust.”

Other paintings in the *Three Masnavis*, for example Malikshah accosted by the old woman in the *Rawzat al-anvar*, have more text embedded in them than the

15. London, British Library, Add. 18113, 93 fols., 320 x 235 mm (folio), 181 x 127 mm approx. (text pages). *Nasta’liq* script in four columns, twenty-five lines to the page. *Humay u Humayun*, fols. 1b-49a; *Kamal-nama*, fols. 50b-78b; *Rawzat al-anvar*, fols. 79b-93a.

Figure 6. Humay recognizing Humayun as she removes her helmet after their fight. Manuscript painting from the Three Masnavis of Khvaju Kirmani, copied by Mir Ali b. Ilyas al-Tabrizi al-Bavarchi, 1396, Baghdad. Opaque pigment and gold on paper, 294 × 202 mm (painted surface). London, British Library, Add. 18113, fol. 23a. (Photo: By permission of The British Library.)
previous two examples—in fact, both paintings in this *masnavi* contain much more text than the paintings in *Humay u Humayun*. In the painting of Malikshah and the old woman, a broad swath of text appears to float over the pictorial space which continues behind to culminate in leafy trees and a golden sky. The five couplets immediately preceding the image describe Malikshah’s desire to go hunting, and how on the edge of the Zandarud river an old woman “leapt up and took his rein,” saying “O! You world-conquering king!”

The text quite literally brings us into the here and now of the narrative moment, a threshold that we cross over into the visual realm of the painting. On the next page, the text continues with the old woman’s complaint about the king’s tyranny and injustice. The *masnavi* section (hikayat) treating Malikshah and the old woman is flagged by a block of colored and larger scaled writing, a rubric summarizing the text. Immediately before it come twelve couplets that conclude the preliminary discourse on the “justice of the great” (mazammat-i *kubar*). An identical arrangement is found in the second painting in the *Rawzat al-anvar*, Nushirvan and Buzurgmihr in conversation.

The paintings in the *Three Masnavis* can be divided into two types, but both involve a literal integration between text and image, a staging of the image in which pictorial content is keyed to relevant text. First, there are those with as little as a single couplet carefully selected to serve as a transitional point leading the reader into the painting—these are often the most metaphorical or drama-laden, as in Humay and Humayun in combat.

The second type uses comparatively more text and a textual passage that is a transition between structural elements of the text (moving from a discourse to its example), as in Malikshah accosted by the old woman. The integration of image with text evidences different kinds of thought and often required significant planning. To introduce a painting with one couplet required the manipulation of the text. The text had to be slowed down to allow for a break at the right moment so that the painting could be allotted a whole page. Slowing the text down required either the addition of couplets or a reduction in the number of couplets that could be copied on a single page. To achieve the desired reduction—for example, eight couplets—some hemistics were written on a diagonal, filling a space with half as much as it could be made to contain, and the leftover spaces illuminated. Such a manipulation of tempo had the desired result of maximizing the surface area of the painting and of using the text to bring the reader into the painting.

While many Persian books show the close “keying” of image to text, equally numerous are those examples where the painting follows after the folios of text to which it is most directly connected. The danger of the contextual disconnect to the painting’s legibility were averted most often than not by an introductory caption, a rubric that encapsulated the proper narrative content of the painting. Such captions appear in manuscripts of the *Shahnama*, such as the Great Mongol copy of the *Shahnama* (fig. 2), and continued to be used in books of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The captions offered another means of bringing the reader into the painting, but what they also did was to enable a sequential viewing of images, or visual study of a single image, without requiring that the text be read. And given that many of these stories and their texts were already

17. *Humay u Humayun*, ed. Ayni: fol. 3b, Bihzad found by Humay and Azar Afroz drunk, p. 51, lines 15–18, p. 52, lines 1–4 (seven couplets); fol. 12a, Humay at the court of the faghfur of Chin, p. 94, lines 11–12 (two couplets); fol. 40b, Humay and Humayun in a garden feasting and listening to music, p. 203, lines 17–18, and p. 204, lines 1, 5–7, and 13 (seven couplets); fol. 45b, Humay, on day after the wedding, has gold coins poured over him as he leaves Humayun’s room, p. 217, line 3 (one couplet). *Kamal-nama*: fol. 64b, Ali threatening an infidel with his sword (11 couplets). *Rawzat al-anvar* (Khwaju Kirmani. *Rawzat al-anvar*, ed. H. Kuhir Kirmani [Teheran: Majlis, 1306/1927]): fol. 85a, Malikshah accosted by an old woman, p. 66, lines 9–20, p. 67, lines 1–5 (seventeen couplets); fol. 91a, Nushirvan and Buzurgmihr in conversation, p. 92, lines 5–17, p. 92, lines 18–20, and p. 93, lines 1–5 (nineteen couplets).


19. Comparing the 1396 manuscript (London) to the earliest dated manuscript of 1349–1350 (Teheran), Fitzherbert shows that the five couplets before the painting of Humay and Humayun in combat do not appear in the Tehran recension. She suggests that this resulted in the separation from the painting of the couplet most literally connected to it (Fitzherbert [note 18], p. 143), viz., “When the love nourishing king took his dagger / The fairy-faced one drew the helmet from her head.” Fitzherbert suggests that the poem’s theme (the journey of a soul), told through Humay and Humayun’s love, is embodied in the painting by the metaphor of the mirror image. Representing the self coming to self-recognition, it is structured visually by pairs of like things (e.g., figures, horses, trees). The painting invokes *tajnii* (alliteration), a word play that relies on the near-identical shapes of words. In this way, discursive parallels of a figurative order are established between the painting and the specific couplet selected for it (ibid.).

well known, the absolute functional relationship of text to image is questionable. I can only note the possibility of an act of seeing that was reading-free because the history of Persian reading, especially the cultural practices of reading and the diverse functions of books, remains unwritten. Yet another complication involves the metatextual dimensions of the painting, where a depicted subject can refer to versions of a story other than the one given in its object-carrier (one example discussed later is the seduction of Yusuf from a Bustan of Sa’di).21

There are other ways to think about how text and image were combined. One is through the various compositional shapes used in books; these may often be stepped, creating a visual fusion with the text columns. The picture’s contents may also extend beyond the frame defined by the textblock and into the margins to create an extra-pictorial space and an extra-textual dimension for the image. In the production of most manuscripts, the text was copied on the sheet by the calligrapher before the artist began his work. In this way, the textblock established a framework for the page. It is most often the case that the dominant axes formed by the text serve as anchors for the arrangement of the picture’s contents, its figures and architectural structures, as a series of vertical markers, invisible sight-lines. Pages devoted to painting and with as little as one couplet tended to follow this principle of arrangement even though there was no need to do so. Hence, in one way or another, the text is present in the painting regardless of whether or not there is a significant amount of writing.

Monoscopic composition

Persianate paintings tend to use a continuous space that infers a single temporal moment, a representation of one instant in time.22 In this respect the Persianate painting also differs from the comic book’s endless sequence of image cells, although this most common visual technique of structuring narrative in the comic book was not unprecedented in the Persian art tradition.23 Although monoscopic narratives appear to be a synchronous moment in time they in fact can be read as several discrete moments running continuously in a mélée over the picture’s surface. The trick is to learn how to read the images, to decipher causes and effects.

It is intriguing that the method chosen to visualize narratives in Persianate paintings was the monoscopic composition arrayed in a developed and detailed painting and not the sequence of paintings showing successive narrative moments in time. One of the aspects that made it a viable choice was the eschewal, or the non-use, of a single-point perspectival scheme to organize elements in a pictorial space. The comic book again becomes useful as a comparative tool. Obviously, comic book images—particularly at the level of the single cell—are derived from a way of showing the world that is photographic, and many of the visual tricks employed in the comic book are remediations of photography.24 By retaining this perspectival and photographic conception, a larger number of successive image cells is essential—the narrative cannot move forward without them in much the same way that a movie would not be much of a movie with only a handful of celluloid frames. The recurring sequence of images provides constant clarification of relationships between things and it is a way of seeing to which our eyes have become accustomed. For this reason, making sense of Persianate paintings can be a challenging and counter-intuitive enterprise.

A good example is a painting from a Shahnama of Firdawsi (fig. 7), datable to ca. 1530 and made in Tabriz for the Safavid ruler Shah Tahmasp. It shows the nightmare of Zahhak. In this painting the tyrannical


22. To my knowledge, Kurt Weitzmann was the first to coin the term “monoscopic” (Illustrations in Roll and Codex: A Study of the Origin and Method of Text Illustration [Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1970]. He defined it as “based on the principle of the unity of time and place,” and continued, “Now only one single action is represented in a picture, and the increasingly expressive and individualized gestures of all the participants are related to one precise moment” (ibid., p. 14).

23. The best known example is a stain- and overglaze-decorated (mina’) beaker dated to the early thirteenth century (Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.). Its three tiers show compartmentalized scenes in narrative sequence, each scene one moment from the narrative of Bizhan and Manizha. A large plate in the same ceramic technique and made at the same time, also in the Freer Gallery of Art, depicts a battle in a manner comparable to the complex monoscopic compositions of fifteenth-century book painting. These ceramics show a set of options for depicting narrative.

24. “Remediation” was coined by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin in their study of what they term the “double logic of remediation,” the simultaneous urge for immediacy and hypermediacy in new media technologies. A large part of their book concerns the ways that new digital media “borrow avidly from each other as well as from their analog predecessors such as film, television, and photography,” The combination of media results in hypermediacy (Remediation: Understanding New Media [Cambridge, Mass., and London: MIT Press, 1999], p. 9).
ruler Zahhak has just woken from a terrible nightmare in which he meets his nemesis, the hero who will bring an end to the ruler and his injustices. As Zahhak wakes, the palace trembles as if in an earthquake, waking the ladies of the harem. The palace is structured as two tall pavilions connected by an elevated walkway. The largest pavilion rises over a tiled parterre and well-tended gardens lead away from the palace. Although some sense of volume in space is conveyed by axonometry, the spatial logic of the architecture requires that we read it from changing viewpoints to be assumed by our imagination. We must accept that we can see inside the private chambers of Zahhak, and at the same time see from a side view the figures on the roof. We must understand that although the sleeping youth at the lower right straddles the axonometric steps, the man guarding the door above him is literally beyond him, and that the tipped up plane we see the youth sit on is conceived in plan view while the guard is seen from the side. Combinations of viewing perspectives—plans and elevations, interiors and exteriors—occur throughout this painting and others. These techniques permit a multiplicity of pictorial elements to come into the painting, where they create a dense matrix of information. The expectation that perspectives are not static, as in a single-perspectival scheme, allows the viewer to make sense of the composition while its careful design, the manipulation of interval between figures, and the distribution of colors across the painting, knit the image into a unified entity.

A second example of the monoscene is from a Bustan (Orchard) by Sa’di dated 1488 and made in Herat for Sultan Husayn Mirza, the last Timurid ruler. In this painting we see a scene from the story of Yusuf and Zulaykhā (fig. 8). Zulaykhā, Potiphār’s daughter, has fallen in love with the prophet Yusuf who was famed for his beauty. Before the narrative moment represented in the painting, Zulaykhā leads Yusuf through a series of seven rooms, each one decorated with erotic themes of lovemaking; she locks each door behind them. The scene depicted is the moment when Zulaykhā professes her love for Yusuf and makes amorous advances toward him. She falls to her knees and pulls at his arm. Although Yusuf is hidden away from all witnesses, he realizes that God can still see, and hoping to maintain his chastity, he tries to escape. By some miracle, the doors that Zulaykhā has locked will fly open to aid Yusuf’s escape.

The painting depicts a dense and complex architectural unit that integrates text into its structure; it is another good example of how text columns can demarcate the major axes of a painting. Once again, deciphering the pictorial space requires shifts of perspective. We read some spaces as views from the outside—like the balcony—and other spaces as cross-sections that are in many respects like a doll’s house. Although the seven rooms are not depicted, the complex visual rendering of a sequence of rooms, shown as an interlocking array of trapezoidal planes and vertical rectangles intersected with helter-skeltering text, stands metaphorically for the labyrinthine space that Yusuf has entered and from which he must now escape. And even after he has left this interior and finds his way out to the patio below, he must negotiate a high perimeter wall that is in itself blocked, cut short by the text panels below.

Like the painting showing Zahhak’s nightmare, the painting of Yusuf and Zulaykhā can be seen as a fusion of single compositional units, a series of contiguous cells that organize the picture. And yet, in each example it is the subject matter of “architecture” that necessitates this visual result. The choice of a monoscopic composition and of opening up all spaces for the eye to see allowed the painting to contain a maximum number of narrative components. In Zahhak’s nightmare this allows for the full visual development of the courtly circle, that is, the ruler’s harem, guards, attendants, and sundry other palace workers. The painting is populated by numerous figures. In Yusuf and Zulaykhā, the content is the architecture: the multiple perspectives fragment architecture to create a metaphorical space that conveys Yusuf’s anxiety. Architecture becomes a subject and thus a vehicle of visual narration; the building’s fabric is fragmented into relationships of cause and effect; how architecture is made becomes a story.

This way of showing the world in painted form has critical implications for the “story-telling” dimension of

25. Cairo, General Egyptian Book Organization, Adab Farsi 908. 
Bustan of Sa’di, 54 fols., 305 mm x 215 mm, copied by Sultan Ali al-Mashhadi. The paintings are: a double-page painting showing a celebration at Sultan Husayn Mirza’s court; King Dara and the Herdsman; The Beggar at a Mosque; A discussion at the Court of a Qadi; and The seduction of Yusuf by Zulaykhā.

Of interest in this latter example is that the relevant text played a minimal role in informing the artist’s depiction of the setting. Lisa Golombek noticed that the text that inspired the painting is actually by the poet Jami, a mystical allegory of Yusuf and Zulaykhā completed in 1483. Golombek points out analogies between the painting and Jami’s poem, where Zulaykhā’s palace is “more than a setting for an event. It is a mystical image, a symbol for the splendor of the material world with its seven climes represented as seven rooms” (idem, “Toward a Classification of Persian Painting,” in Islamic Art in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, ed. Richard Ettinghausen [New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1972], pp. 23–34, 28).
Figure 8. The seduction of Yusuf. Manuscript painting from a *Bustan* of Sa'di, copied by Sultan Ali al-Katib [al-Mashhadi] for Sultan Husayn Mirza, dated Rajab 893 (June 1488). Opaque pigment and gold on paper, 305 x 215 mm (folio). Cairo, General Egyptian Book Organization, Adab Farsi 908. (Photo: Courtesy of Cairo, General Egyptian Book Organization, Adab Farsi 908, and Los Angeles County Museum of Art.)
the painting. In both of these examples, the initial impression of the monoscene is of a frozen narrative moment, of the eye capturing a split second of activity. This impression is particularly evident in the painting of Yusuf and Zulaykh. We see the two figures only once and at the culminating moment of seduction, and do not see successive images of Yusuf moving through room after room. The multiple figures in Zulaykh’s palace can also be read as an instantaneous view. And yet, the architecture in each example subdivides the space, creating the potential to read space as time, or spatial interval as time passing. In so doing, the composition emphasizes duration in the beholder’s experience of the image.

Time as duration—and not only as instant—enters into the paintings by other means too. By representing multiple perspectives, the paintings do not control the viewer’s bodily relationship to surface, as in a single-point perspectival scheme, but allow the viewer’s head to move from side to side and up and down. The eye is free to roam over the painting’s surface because it does not dictate a fixed position. Another critical aspect of the paintings that doubles their effect of temporal duration is the complexity of gesture, facial expression, and bodily position that we see in the figures that populate the nightmare of Zulaykh and other paintings. Interpreting the actions of single figures and interactions among groups of men and women is a fundamental response. The multifaceted treatment of architecture in Zulaykh’s palace produces the same visual effect. What I am proposing is that even if the painting does depict a single moment, our experience of the painting—by the power of its compositional makeup and its many details—occurs over time and reading chains of cause-and-effect is an inevitable interpretation that we apply to the image. Of course, this is true of almost any image that holds the potential to become narrativized, but the intimacy of the painting seen in a book and its miniature size only amplify the effect of time passing. Quite simply put, it takes longer to see.

Medium and materiality

Medium and materiality are critical for the particular ontology of the Persianate painting. It seems accurate to generalize that, ever since the time of Baysunghur’s manuscript patronage in the early fifteenth century, artists sought to refine both the materials and execution of painting. Technical virtuosity and perfection of execution became of paramount importance and artists were praised for it in written sources. The preference for “micrographia” is suggested in a progress report (arzadasht), written ca. 1430 to Baysunghur, where the writer states: “On the day this report is being written Mawliana Ali is designing a frontispiece illumination for the Shahnama. His eyes were sore for a few days.” At the end of that century, Khvandamir, the historian and courtier to the last of the Timurid rulers in Iran, Sultan Husayn Mirza (d. 1506), described the artist Bihzad in the following way: “Through his mastery the hair of his [Bihzad] brush has given life to inanimate form / In precision of nature he is hair splitting, and this is no exaggeration.” “Hair-splitting” (mu-shika), an adjective applied originally to the minuteness of the painter’s brushes, could equally be used as a synonym for the miracle-working artist. And nearly a century after Khvandamir, Qazi Ahmad looked back to the time of

27. Noted by Hillenbrand (see note 3), p. 78.
28. The perceived limitations of the narrative when represented as a single moment were noted by Lessing in 1766 (Laokoön oder über die Grenzen der Malerei und Poesie), where he suggested that to avert this problem the artist must “choose the instant that is most laden with significance: that which makes most clear all that has preceded and is to follow.” To this proposition Husserl’s phenomenology added the terms “retentional” and “protentional,” described by Kemp as an awareness of the present accompanied byretentions and protentions or memories and expectations. See Wolfgang Kemp, “Narrative,” in Critical Terms for Art History, ed. Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992), pp. 58–69, 64.
29. These kinds of complexities in the structuring of narrative were examined by Alois Riegl in his final study Das Niederländsche Gruppenporträt (1902). Film studies were quick to develop his propositions, developing the terms diegesis, gaze structure, and scopic regime to discuss “point-of-view identifications” provided by the camera as it was inserted into a “network of glances” (perspectival presentation is the equivalent term used in literature). Riegl focused on “communicated communication,” the ways that paintings can convey group cohesions only through specific kinds of relationship with the viewer (”external coherence” by including viewer; ”internal coherence” by fiction of non-viewer). See Kemp, note 28, pp. 67–68.
30. Clinton is disturbed by what he sees as paintings’ “dramatically intrusive” nature—how the painting “immobilizes characters and action even when the event depicted is embedded in a fluid, ongoing narrative” (see note 5, p. 67).
31. As also noted by Robinson (see note 6), p. 14.
33. Ibid., p. 42.
Timur: “[Umar Aqta] wrote a copy of the Qur’an in ghubar writing; it was so small in volume that it could be fitted under the socket of a signet ring. . . . Umar Aqta wrote another copy, extremely large, each of its lines being a cubit in length and even longer.”34 Umar Aqta’s minutely copied Qur’an was not met with favor by Timur, so the calligrapher made the opposite. These and other references in the corpus of written sources imply that the quest for minuteness of execution was an expectation and that it became one of the criteria of aesthetic judgment.35

In paintings from the Chahar Maqala (Four Discourses) of Nizami Arudi, made for Baysunghur in 1431, the paintings have become increasingly small in dimension, some as little as 102 x 72 mm. The pigment is applied with such perfect execution that no trace of the brush is left; in fact, the execution left no trace of manual production. No matter how close our eyes move to the surface of the picture—and at some point they give up from tiredness—the depicted subjects never give up their identity. Things do not melt away and become patches of factured brushstroke. It is easy to understand why some scholars have likened Persianate paintings to enamel—a hardened medium of bright colors and carefully delineated forms.

In the first decades of the sixteenth century, artists were still working within the limits of pictorial conception defined in the illustrated manuscripts of Baysunghur. In a second painting from Shah Tahmasp’s Shahnama (fig. 9) we see King Gayumars and his court in a mountain location. The image measures 340 x 230 mm. Although the painting results from the participation of several artists, their individual “hands” have been suppressed to the point that no single element of the painting can be understood as expressive of an individual manner. The mark of the artist has been excised, banished from the act of execution. Like the paintings in Baysunghur’s manuscripts, no trace of production, of manufacture, is visible—it is as if the painting came into being spontaneously. The composition of multiple figures and intricate landscape is perfectly designed, intervals between elements and the contours of figures well considered. The restricted palette is used to unify the surface of the painting and to camouflage certain elements within it, especially the numerous animals located amid the rocks. The density of visual content squeezed into this image—with apparent ease—requires long and patient analysis.

Themes of seeing

There is a wonderful set of oppositions at work in the Persianate painting that results from a unique confluence of factors: they include the dimensions and format of the book, compositional paradigms, spatial conception, and medium and material. The Persianate painting’s diagrammatic composition—stacking elements up the page’s vertical axis—and its spatial code of multiple points of perspective seem to afford the eye access to everything. Nothing is concealed or positioned out of view. The minute execution of details and the clarity of overall design deepen this impression. Pictorial elements are described and their interrelationships are shown with clarity. There is no indeterminacy. All of these aspects come together to trick us into the belief that we can see everything all at once.

It is a theme of seeing that is illustrated in numerous poetic works, including such subjects as Iskandar peeping at the sirens as they sport by a lake depicted in an anthology made for Iskandar Sultan in Shiraz in 1410, and Farhad before Shirin in a manuscript of Khusrav and Shirin, dated to ca. 1420.36 Both subjects share the theme of seeing—the capacity accorded some individuals to see and not to be seen. In the example of Iskandar (Alexander) and the sirens it is quite easy to find Iskandar and his companion lurking behind the rocks. In the developed and more heavily populated composition, showing the sculptor Farhad coming before the princess Shirin, it takes us longer to find the silent witnesses hidden throughout the palace.

The theme of seeing, of an individual’s empowerment through the faculty of vision, occurs in numerous stories in Persian literature. And yet, running against it is the equally common theme of the duplicity of vision, of the trickery of images: the object lesson is that images are never as or what they appear to be despite their apparent claims. Curiously, the formal language of the Persianate painting might be understood as combining these two opposite conclusions. First there is a mirage of clarity, of feeling that one can know and come to


35. In his observations about the Persianate painting, Robinson notes the perfection of execution, following Schroeder, but emphasizes that perfectionism was desired as a means of securing the story’s legibility and comprehension (see note 6, p. 13).

36. For illustrations, see Basil Gray, Persian Painting (Geneva: Skira, 1961), pp. 54 and 76.
understand the Persianate painting all at once. It is an intuition fostered by the monoscopic composition—which combines multiple points of perspective that deny nothing to the eye—and the rigorous execution and unifying effect of color distribution. Despite these formal features, the sheer density of information provided in the painting overwhelms the senses and resists being completely understood. This is Persianate painting’s “reality effect,” one often remarked on by contemporaries and misunderstood by scholars today (it is read as a culturally coded form of resemblance and not as the dialectic of the experience of seeing). Returning to the painting that we thought we had comprehended only turns up more surprises, things left unnoticed, or the inevitable connections that were never made. This is the source of the Persianate painting’s power—the right of endless return. We spend time finding elements we had never noticed in previous viewings, imagining stories within stories, deciphering the actions of figures and the responses that their companions will make. Inevitably these last features opened the way to the passage of time, blocking an “all-at-once” comprehension, although the painting seemed to have acquired its existence in no time.