LAURENCE BINYON, J. V. S. WILKINSON, AND BASIL GRAY

Persian Miniature Painting: Including a Critical and Descriptive Catalogue of the Miniatures Exhibited at Burlington House, January–March 1931

London: Oxford University Press; H. Milford, 1933. 212 pp., 113 pls.

Published at a time when scarcely any books in the field of Islamic art and architecture were reviewed in art history journals, Persian Miniature Painting: Including a Critical and Descriptive Catalogue of the Miniatures Exhibited at Burlington House, January–March 1931 was intended as a “permanent record” (p. v) of the “International Exhibition of Persian Art” staged at the Royal Academy of Arts, Burlington House, London, that ran from January 7 through March 7, 1931.1 Comprising nearly two thousand objects of various media, the “International Exhibition” was initially conceived by the American Arthur Upham Pope and realized through a complex structure of executive, selection, general, and national committees, with loans made by numerous institutions (minus the British Museum, London, and the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris), auction houses, and a pantheon of private collectors. The principal patrons were King George of England and Riza Shah Pahlavi of Iran, highlighting the mutual contemporary political interests that underpinned the exhibition (Britain had supported Riza’s coup d’état in 1921, and the alliance with Iran, like that with Afghanistan, remained crucial in Britain’s defense of India).

The stated goal was to introduce the public to “the main springs of Persian character” through art and to represent “the genius of the oldest and most stable of Eastern nations” in a history reaching back from the present through a sequence of Islamic and pre-Islamic dynasties (Sasanian, Parthian, Seleucid, and Achaemenid) to the fourth millennium BCE of prehistoric Susa.2 In its geographic conception of Persian art, the exhibition embraced objects made well outside the political boundaries of Iran in the 1930s—including artworks from Asia Minor, Egypt, Syria, the Caucasus, Central Asia, Afghanistan, and northern India—and adopted wholesale a nationalist ideology of identity that had been forming under Pahlavi patronage since the early 1920s, in which heritage played a programmatic and central role. As Kishwar Rizvi has observed, powerful and productive affinities between an incipient Pahlavi ideology and Pope’s personal and intellectual beliefs had already been exposed in 1925 when the American gave a lecture to the Society of National Heritage (Anjuman-i asar-i milli) in Tehran. Only a few years later, art was enlisted and deployed in the 1931 “International Exhibition” to constitute and proclaim a deep national identity for Pahlavi-era Iran that stretched back thousands of years and had been transmitted to all intervening generations since, as if emanating from the land itself, despite political and cultural shifts, no matter how transformative (chiefly, the advent of Islam in the seventh century and the Mongol invasions of the mid-thirteenth century).3 The nationalist ethos formed under the Pahlavis carries potency to this day, particularly among the diasporic communities that left Iran after the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

Several publications were arranged to coincide with the opening of the exhibition, including the conveniently portable catalog and the co-authored Persian Art edited by E. Denison Ross, made up of chapters on history, a synthetic overview of “Persian art” (contributed by British artist and critic Roger Fry), early Persian art, architecture, painting, textiles, carpets, and metalwork.4 Other books followed in the wake of the exhibition, including the monumental, multivolume A Survey of Persian Art from Prehistoric Times to the Present, edited by Pope (1938–39), and Persian Miniature Painting by Laurence Binyon, J. V. S. Wilkinson, and Basil Gray (1938), which immediately became the standard monographic introduction to the material.5

Initial considerations of the individual academic formation and expertise of Binyon, Wilkinson, and Gray suggest an improvised, jerry-rigged art history for this landmark of Persian miniature painting, an impression compounded by the fact that none of them could read any Middle Eastern language. The most senior of the three authors, Laurence Binyon (1869–1943), started gainful employment at the British Museum, London, in 1893 in the Department of Printed Books and in 1895 moved to the Department of Prints and Drawings, where he published on such varied topics as Dutch painting and William Blake. Over these years, he continued to write poetry and plays, his other major calling. In the first decade of the twentieth century, his interests migrated to the study of Chinese and Japanese art. In 1913, Binyon was reassigned to the Department of Oriental Prints and Drawings, where he became keeper in 1932. He retired in 1933.5 James Vere Stewart Wilkinson (d. 1957) joined the Department of Oriental Manuscripts at the British Museum in 1924 and held the post until his departure in 1946 to become librarian of the Chester Beatty Library, Dublin. During his London years, he published monographs on Indian and Persian manuscripts.7 Basil Gray (1904–1989), the youngest of the group, began his career by studying Classical and Byzantine art, with a curtailed effort to work under Josef Strzygowski in Vienna, and quickly changed fields to Islamic art. By 1930, he was leading the division of Oriental Prints and Drawings, then a unit within the Department of Prints and Drawings directed by Binyon, whose daughter he married in 1933. After that Gray installed South Asian sculpture at the British Museum and co-curated with Leigh Ashton an exhibition of Chinese art at the Royal Academy of Arts in 1935. He served as head of the Oriental Department at the British Museum from 1945 until 1969. While his focused writings on Persian painting and arts of the book came much later in his career—Persian Painting (Geneva: Skira, 1961) and the edited volume The Arts of the Book in Central Asia, 14th–16th Centuries (Paris: UNESCO, 1979)—during the preparation for the 1931 exhibition and after, he was very much concerned with the impact of East Asian art in Iran during the Mongol and post-Mongol periods (from the mid-1200s through the 1300s).8

In their preface to Persian Miniature Painting, the three authors indicate a profound—and often excitable—awareness of the synergy between the 1931 “International Exhibition” and a genealogy of scholarship, comprising both exhibitions and publications then only a few decades old, concerning the study of Persian miniature painting. Describing its parameters, their book would be “more detailed than the catalogue sold at the Exhibition, and fully illustrated” and "not merely a be record of the Exhibition but should cover the whole field of Persian miniature-painting, though illustrated only by examples shown at Burlington House" (p. v). In addition, their publication would exclude manuscripts that did not contain paintings and would not address bindings as an art form. Sketching the historiography of Persian miniature painting, they single out the formative studies of Edgar Bolchoz, Gaston Migeon, Clement Huart, Frederick R. Martin, Georges Marteau and Henri Vever, and Philipp Walter Schulz and various exhi-
made for Baysunghur. The exhibition afforded an opportunity to confront, by gathering as many materials as possible (manuscripts, albums, single-page drawings, and paintings), the controversy spinning around the artist Kamal al-Din Bihzad (d. 1355–56). Works on display clarified the contributions of other artists, including Qasim ‘Ali and Mahmud Muzahhbih.

To organize the 394 items included in Persian Miniature Painting—each one given its own catalog entry—Binyon, Wilkinson, and Gray “attempted” a chronological order (p. vi). After an introduction focused on matters of form and style and cross-cultural comparisons to art traditions in Europe and China—in which they endeavor to sharpen an aesthetic characterization of Persian miniature painting—there are six chapters, arranged according to chronological divisions, each one presenting a robust recapitulation of key historical events, dynasties, and historical persons (chiefly patrons and artists). The first, and last resolved, chapter deals with Persian painting before and after the fulcrum of the Mongol capture of Baghdad in 1258 and the “Mesopotamian style,” a corpus of illustrated manuscripts mostly written in the Arabic language and produced in Iraq, Syria, and Egypt. The second chapter, “The Early Persian Style and Fourteenth-Century Changes,” concerns the overlap of East Asian pictorial conventions and subjects on the “Mesopotamian style” in the wake of the Mongol conquests. A host of possible stylistic impulses and their putative sources are considered through the important Mongol-era Jami’ al-tawārikh and Shahnama. The authors conclude, “The fact remains that in the fourteenth century the formative influence is Chinese, and in these most extreme instances it is difficult to detect in what way the older Persian style persists” (pp. 36–37).

The next two chapters are devoted to Timurid manuscripts. These, among the most complete and developed essays in the book, cast Timurid-era painting as emerging from a series of traditions fostered throughout Iran in the 1300s and nurtured by patrons of the Jalayirid dynasty. From about 1410 through the 1440s, the time of the Timurid ruler Shahrukh, his sons Baysunghur and Ibrahim Sultan, and cousin Iskandar Sultan, “we reach the great age of the Persian book. There is no longer any question of detecting foreign influences or disentangling various elements; the whole now forms a perfectly fused unity and expresses to the full the Persian genius” (p. 50). After the 1450s, the balance of power shifted. The ascendant Turkmen paintings of the Qaraqoyunlu (Black Sheep) and Aqqoyunlu (White Sheep) are mentioned but not dwelled on, in favor of emphasis on the last great Timurid ruler, Sultan Husayn (d. 1506), whose court in Herat witnessed the “highest pitch of excellence” in painting and the book arts and “the perfect flowering of the Persian artistic genius” (p. 77). Much stress is given to Bihzad through a group of extant signed and attributed works, and many of the written sources are considered. Here, Binyon, Wilkinson, and Gray offer some bold, but just, assertions: for example, qualifying the scope of pictorial change in late fifteenth-century painting in that it did not “represent any abrupt break with the past” (p. 84); suggesting that Bihzad could “change his style at will” (p. 85); and, on the ultimate question of Bihzad’s innovation, claiming that “he was the greatest, by a little, among many great miniaturists who, in circumstances especially favourable to painters, brought the formulae of their predecessors to a higher perfection of rhythmic grace and refinement, and his name should be shared by others, from whom his work is hardly to be distinguished” (p. 92).

The last two chapters divide the output of Safavid dynastic patronage and production between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Like all other chapters, these are prefaced and interspersed with historical data and highlight important patrons, artists, and manuscripts. The authors are careful to consider the ascent of Shah Isma’īl (d. 1524), founder of the Safavid dynasty, and then turn their attention to the patronage of his son and successor Shah Tahmasp (d. 1576), who learned painting as a youth and commissioned two major works, a Shahnama of Firdawsī (in 1931 owned by Baron Edmond de Rothschild) dated to about 1537 and a Khamsa (Quintet) by Nizami (in the British Museum) dated 1539–43. After slighting the Shahnama as a “set task conscientiously performed, without particular enthusiasm” (p. 113), the authors hold up the Khamsa as the greatest achievement of Safavid-period artistry, the culmination of several years in which separate artistic traditions of east and west, chiefly in the cities of Herat and Tabriz, came together and blended. The end of Shah Tahmasp’s interest in painting, later life, and death leads Binyon, Wilkinson, and Gray into a consideration of the rise in production of single-page drawings and paintings “not intended for the illustration of manuscripts” (p. 117), the migration of artists to the Ottoman and Mughal courts, and the varied fate of Persian painting in those environments. The last chapter begins with the formation of Isfahan as the new Safavid capital under Shah ‘Abbās I (d. 1629), the growing openness of society to Europe through diplomatic and mercantile activity, and the increased practice of making art independently of court patronage, as exemplified by the artist Riza ‘Abbasi. Though the authors see the first traces of “decadence” in the art of the period, they identify some “refreshing originality” among “much uninspired work” (p. 153). The chapter closes with the sober,
almost nostalgic, observation, "Genuine book miniature painting has disappeared" (p. 164).

As an art history, Persian Miniature Painting stemmed from an unprecedented (and unrepeated) opportunity to assemble many of the key manuscripts, albums, and single-page paintings and drawings known by an expansive network of scholars, curators, collectors, and dealers. The history was structured as a familiar tripartite model of birth, rise, and decline. The artworks composing this history were classified into a taxonomy founded on chronology, dynasty, and center of production ("schools," namely, Herat, Tabriz, Shiraz, Bukhara, Isfahan), further inflected by named patrons and artists. The artworks were surely the primary source to flesh out this developmental narrative, but numerous written Persian sources from the thirteenth through the seventeenth centuries were introduced and discussed (the book includes two appendices: an "abstract of the more important passages" from the preface composed by calligrapher Dust Muhammad to introduce an album that he assembled for Safavid prince Bahram Mirza at Tabriz in 1544–45, and excerpts of biographical sketches on Herati artists taken from Mirza Muhammad Haydar Dughlat's Ta'rikh-i rashidi, a history of the khan of Moghulistan composed after 1541). The result was the formation of an art historical canon.

It is legitimate to ask why a review of Persian Miniature Painting is important today. The first response might be that it is a pity that so few scholars read this book now, the vast majority choosing instead to bypass the formative discourse of their field of study. The latter remain unaware that many observations about artistic trends and watersheds, the historical processes that led to the formation of particular pictorial idioms and aesthetic values—basically, the constructs of the field—were already in place by 1953. Despite the considerable expansion of scholarship on illustrated Persian manuscripts made between the 1200s and the 1600s and the growing depth of specialization in the field, the model fashioned by Binyon, Wilkinson, and Gray in fact continues to hold sway, not only considering illustrated manuscripts but also others without paintings, as well as treating the book as a holistic object (calligraphy, illumination, binding) that demanded various forms of expertise. In its framing and approach, Persian Miniature Painting has been rehearsed, with minor corrections here and there, in several monographs from its publication through the 1990s. In reviewing the book in 1953, Maurice Dimand was correct in asserting: "With its splendid illustrations this publication of the Oxford Press will remain for some time the standard work on Persian miniature painting."

A second response to the question of why reading Persian Miniature Painting today might have continued value relates to the authors' goal to assess painting's "achievement from the aesthetic point of view" (p. 3). Aside from its obvious and highly problematic racial, even racist, overtones (which linked art to race, ethnicity, climate, religion, and land and made it possible to distinguish the "European" from the "Oriental mind") and ultimate art historical Eurocentrism—and this despite the heuristic of comparing Persian painting to art traditions in China and Europe—Binyon, Wilkinson, and Gray tried to attend to the formal and stylistic features of paintings in books. They were struck by the "uniqueness" of paintings in Persian books and wanted to get past the easy disparagement that came by "dwelling on qualities it does not possess and does not attempt" (p. 3). Though they themselves spilled much ink dwelling precisely on these differences—stereotyping Persian miniature painting as convention-bound, favoring romanticism over empiricism (p. 5)—their project of grappling with the form and effect of paintings in books remains admirable, and largely ignored.11 Though this project should be pursued, although under entirely different assumptions, the questions posed by Binyon, Wilkinson, and Gray remain valid and worthy of investigation: what do paintings do to books; in what ways do books shape paintings; how do extrinsic societal, cultural, and historical forces and beliefs work on the book with paintings; what effect do these totalities have on their reader-viewers, and how do they make their demands? These are the questions I confront after rereading Persian Miniature Painting.

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Notes

1. For the large pocket-size complete catalog of the exhibition, see Catalogue of the International Exhibition of Persian Art: Patrons His Majesty the King, His Majesty Rita Shah Pahlavi, 7th January to 7th March, 1931; Royal Academy of Arts, London (London: Office of the Exhibition, Printed by Gec, 1931).


3. These complex issues are deftly addressed by Rivzi, "Art History and the Nation," 45–49.