



## ĀQĀ MĪRAK

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**ĀQĀ MĪRAK**, Sayyed JALĀL-AL-DĪN ḤOSAYNĪ (or Ḥasanī) EŞFAHĀNĪ, prominent painter of the 10th/16th century in the workshop of the Safavid Shah Ṭahmāsp (r. 930-84/1524-76). Little is known about his personal background other than he was a *sayyed* of Eşfahānī origin, was a pupil of Behzād, became a confidant and boon companion of the shah, and also wrote poetry. Writing in 951/1544, Dūst Moḥammad mentions him as a figural and portrait painter who worked, along with Solṭān-Moḥammad and Mīr MosĀjawwer, on Shah Ṭahmāsp's copies of the *Šāh-nāma* and of Neẓāmī's *Kamsa*. He and Mīr Moşawwer were also responsible for wall paintings in a section of Bahrām Mīrzā's palace known as the *ĵām-kāna*. Sām Mīrzā refers to him in 957/1550 as a leader (*moqtadā*) of Tahmasp's artists and praises his skills in figural painting and drawing (*ṭarrāḥī*). Another contemporary author, Qoṭb-al-dīn Moḥammad Qeşşakvān of Yazd, writing in 964/1556-57, places Āqā Mīrak last in a list of painters just before his discussion of Shah Ṭahmāsp himself saying that he was skilled in all forms of painting (*Resāla*, p. 674). These statements suggest that Āqā Mīrak remained a close associate of Shah Ṭahmāsp even during the period between 951/1544 and 964/1556-57 when the Shah's enthusiasm for painting was waning. In 963/1556 this period of doubt climaxed with Shah Ṭahmāsp's renunciation of interest in artistic patronage. According to Qāzī Aḥmad, Āqā Mīrak ultimately attained the bureaucratic rank of *gārāk-yaraq* (purveyor) at Shah Ṭahmāsp's court (p. 139, tr. p. 185; for the function of *gārāk-yaraq* see *Taḍkerat al-molūk*, p. 178).

Despite the effusive praise lavished on him by Safavid authors, there is little



firm evidence, from which to reconstruct Āqā Mīrak's personal style or artistic contribution. No works signed by him are known. Modern efforts to reconstruct this style take as their basis paintings from Shah Ṭahmāsp's Neẓāmī, now in the British Museum, on which attributions to Āqā Mīrak have been written (L. Binyon, *The Poems of Nizami*, London, 1938, pls. 3, 8-10, 13). However, these attributions to Āqā Mīrak appear to be casually written and are of uncertain date and value. An extensive repertoire for Āqā Mīrak has, nevertheless, been reconstructed by S. C. Welch and M. B. Dickson (*The Houghton Shahnameh I*, Cambridge, Mass., 1981, pp. 95-117). It postulates several phases of his career including a period of instruction by Behzād and an interval at Mašhad in the workshop of the Safavid prince, Ebrāhīm Mīrzā, son of Bahrām Mīrzā.

Āqā Mīrak's long association with Shah Ṭahmāsp raises an important question. If the king ceased to commission manuscripts in the middle 1540s, with what was Āqā Mīrak occupied until 963/1556 when the workshop definitively closed? One suggestion can be made from textual evidence. The earliest sources, Dūst Moḥammad and Sām Mīrzā stress Āqā Mīrak's skill as a figural and portrait painter whereas later authors make rather general comments. More precise, however, is the discussion of Šādeq Beg Afšār who, writing sometime between 984/1576 and 1011/1602, mentions Āqā Mīrak as the supreme master of *ĵānvar-sāzi* (*Qānūn al-šowar*, p. 44), a type of painting using four exotic creatures of Far Eastern origin: the *aždar* (dragon), the *sīmorǧ* (phoenix), the *hežabr* (lion) and the *gāv-gaň* (a bovine creature). These creatures are prominent in the ornamental repertoire of the Safavid period and can be found on book-covers, in textile patterns, and in wall paintings. It is thus possible that as Shah Ṭahmāsp grew less interested in figural representations, Āqā Mīrak increasingly cultivated this more widely applicable decorative mode. Finally, he may have abandoned painting altogether for the life of a bureaucrat and courtier. Unfortunately, confirmation of these or other hypotheses concerning Āqā Mīrak's life must await the discovery of new information.



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