



# CHINESE-IRANIAN RELATIONS XII. MUTUAL INFLUENCES IN PAINTING

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## CHINESE-IRANIAN RELATIONS

### xii. Mutual Influences in Painting

In the Chinese cultural sphere Persian artistic influence was at its peak under the Tang dynasty (618-906 c.e.), contemporary with the end of the Sasanian period (30/651) and the first centuries after the Islamic conquest. The reciprocal influence of Chinese art in Persia was apparent in contemporary ceramics (see xi, above) and other small arts but cannot be observed in painting before the Il-khanid period (654-736/1256-1336). These mutual influences were transmitted through a variety of media, and, as always when artists of one culture are exposed to works from another, only those aspects that were particularly compatible with local tastes were emulated and adapted.

*Sasanian and early Islamic periods.* The 6th- and 7th-century (Sui dynasty, 581-618) frescos in the Buddhist caves at Dunhuang (Tun-huang) include pearl-bordered roundels containing horsemen hunting lionesses, probably derived from Sasanian models, as well as a number of motifs associated with the Sogdian art of Pyandzhikent (Gray, 1959, pl. 33B, from cave 427; cf. *Survey of*



*Persian Art* XIV, pp. 3076-77 figs. 1138-39; see also [caves of the thousand buddhas](#)). Sasanian Persian art also strongly influenced Tang metalwork and wall paintings, for example, those found in the tombs of the Tang princes Yide (Li Zhong-run, 682-701) and Zhang-huai (Li Xian, 654-84) in Gan xian, Shensi province, where images like one of a woman under a tree were clearly derived from motifs on Sasanian silver vessels (*Murals*, pls. 38-43, 27-29). Even the Tang painter Wu Dao-xuan was said to have been influenced by Central Asian cave paintings (Eberhard, p. 183). On the other hand, except for a few surviving illustrated Manichean manuscripts found in Central Asia (See [chinese turkestan vii. manicheism in chinese turkestan and china](#)), there is little evidence of Chinese influence on painting from the Iranian world. A travel account of the mid-Tang period (ca. late 8th century), *Jing xing ji* by Du Huan, mentions a Chinese captive from the “battle of Talas” (Ṭarāz, on the steppes north of the Alai river) in 133/751; he spent several years in the ‘Abbasid capital, probably Kūfa (Pelliot). Two Chinese painters, as well as Chinese weavers and potters, are also mentioned, but there are no surviving signed works of such Chinese artists, nor is there any visible trace of Chinese influence on the style of Islamic painting and metalwork from this period, though it was very strong on contemporary Islamic ceramics.

*Il-khanid period.* Although artists under the Saljuqs could have adopted certain East Asian elements from northern China in the Liao (907-1125) and Jin (1115--1234) periods, the rarity of extant contemporary Persian paintings prevents their being identified. Eastern influence on Persian painting first becomes noticeable in manuscripts illustrated during the reign of the Il-khanids, when the center of artistic and cultural activity was their capital, Tabrīz, which was in direct contact with China via the trade routes through Central Asia. Most Persian paintings in “Chinese style” are assumed to have been produced there. The Chinese impact on various aspects of Persian painting is particularly evident in such court manuscripts as the *Manāfe’ al-ḥayawān* by Ebn Boḳṭīšū’ copied at Marāgā in 697 or 699/1297 or 1299 and now in The Pierpont Morgan Library, New York (no. M 500; for illustrations, see, e.g., Gray, 1961, pp. 20-21); two fragments of Rašīd al-Dīn’s *Jāme’ al-tawārīk* in the library of the University of Edinburgh (no. Ar. 20; Rice) and a private collection in Switzerland (formerly in the Royal Asiatic Society, London; Gray, 1978), dated 707/1307 and 714/1314 respectively; and the dispersed fragment of a manuscript of Ferdowsī’s *Šāh-nāma* formerly owned by the dealer Benjamin Demotte and known as the great Mongol *Šāh-nāma* (Grabar and Blair).



An important way in which Chinese influence on the painting of this period manifested itself was in the use of a softer, more delicate and sinuous line and shading, in contrast to the boldly outlined areas of flat color that characterized Persian painting (e.g., “Lion and Lioness,” fol. 11r, from the Morgan *Manāfeʿ*; Gray, 1961, p. 20).

Lighter, more subdued coloring also clearly reflected the impact of Chinese taste, approximating the monochromatic tonality of ink painting (e.g., “The Sacred Tree of Buddha,” fol. 36v, from the former Royal Asiatic Society *Jāmeʿ al-tawārīk*; Gray, 1961, p. 24). The scant available evidence suggests that Persian painters had traditionally preferred to crowd the picture space with a large number of motifs concentrated in the frontal plane, but in this period they learned from the Chinese to place their figures more effectively in space. The devices of superimposing several planes (e.g., “Alexander and His Warriors Fighting a Dragon” from the great Mongol *Šāh-nāma*, now in a private collection in Paris; Grabar and Blair, color pl. 34) and arranging figures and motifs in overlapping rows on the manuscript page (e.g., “Battle of Alexander with the Dragon” from the Mongol *Šāh-nāma*, now in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, no. 30.105; Gray, 1961, p. 28) may have been adapted from Chinese conventions for producing a sense of depth. The use of a bird’s-eye view may also have been an adaptation of the basic perspective of Chinese painting (e.g., “Alexander Builds the Iron Rampart” from the great Mongol *Šāh-nāma*, now in The Sackler Collection, Washington, D.C., no. s86.0104; Lowry and Nemazee, pp. 86-87).

Although Persian manuscripts of this period include many vertical compositions, the horizontal format of Chinese hand scrolls was also adopted; figures were arranged horizontally and in lateral motion, often breaking through the frame and thus suggesting an extension of the picture space. The opposite device of allowing the frame to cut off parts of figures and motifs had long been known in China, particularly in bird-and-flower paintings (Sugimura, pp. 104-05); it, too, was adopted in Persia. (For these compositional devices, see, e.g., “Moses Scolds the Makers of the Golden Calf,” fol. 52r, and, from the summary of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, “Ravana, King of Lanka, Lying Dead,” fol. 30v, from the former Royal Asiatic Society *Jāmeʿ al-tawārīk*; Gray, 1978, nos. 32 and 24). The style of figure drawing was also influenced by Chinese taste. The use of line and shading to suggest volume and the placement of figures in the picture space to suggest interaction were all devices known to Tang painters and were revived in the Yuan period, when they had an impact on the



painting of the Timurids, particularly those preserved in albums in Istanbul and elsewhere (Steinhardt; Sugimura, pp. 27, 29 n. 42, 113).

The Chinese sense of harmony in nature had resulted in the development of landscape painting, whereas the Persians, accustomed to a harsher environment, painted idealized settings that they expected to find only in paradise (Moynihan, p. 48; Burckhardt, pp. 31-36); representation of human figures predominated over backgrounds, which were designed simply to suggest the surroundings. In the Il-khanid period, however, Chinese landscape paintings stimulated Persian painters to emulate their blasted trees with gnarled trunks and dead branches; stylized rocks and mountain formations, sometimes with double outlines reminiscent of Taang blue-and-green landscapes; scalloped patterns and whirls of moving water, with crested waves; and convoluted clouds, the so-called *ling zhi* clouds. All these elements were known in Sung and Yuan paintings and appeared on 14th-century blue-and-white porcelains and textiles. Other decorative motifs included real or fantastic animals like the dragon, the phoenix (*fenghuang*), the “unicorn” (*qilin*, in Western sources sometimes written *qui'lin*, a composite horned creature with cloven hooves), and the crane, usually represented in landscape settings. Even details of Chinese costume were sometime depicted, perhaps because these fashions had actually been adopted by the Il-khanid rulers of Persia. For example, the so-called “mandarin square,” an ornamental gold-embroidered cloth panel on the front of the caftan, was apparently popular from the early 7th/14th century (See [clothing vii. mongol and timurid](#))

Although Chinese landscape conventions and motifs were gradually assimilated, they did not fundamentally alter traditional Persian conceptions. The original Chinese symbolic and mythological associations of animals were, for example, largely unknown to Persian painters, who occasionally adapted such images to myths familiar in their own cultural heritage, as in the representation of the mythical bird *sīmorǧ* in the form of a phoenix (see, e.g., two versions of “The *Sīmorǧ* Carrying Zāl to His Nest in the Alborz Mountains” from Ferdowsī’s *Šāh-nāma*: Tabrīz, ca. 772/1370, fol. 23a in Emmet Hazine no. 2153, Topkapı Sarayı Müzesi, Istanbul, Gray, 1961, p. 41, and Isfahan [?], ca. 998-1009/1590-1600, fol. 12b in no. 277, The Chester Beatty Library, Dublin, Arberry et al., III, pl. 41; and “The *Sīmorǧ* Restores the Child Zāl to His Father Sām,” ca. 848/1444, fol. 16b, from *Jāme‘ al-tawārīk*, no. 239, Royal Asiatic Society, London, Lentz and Lowry, p. 158 no. 43).

*Timurid and subsequent periods.* In the 8th/15th century active diplomatic and



trade relations were maintained by sea between the Timurid and Ming courts (Rossabi, 1973; idem, 1976, p. 28; Serruys, p. 540 and n. 7). Large numbers of works of art and a considerable number of artists traveled between the two countries. The Persian painter Ġiāt-al-Dīn Kalīl Naqqāš, who accompanied an envoy from Prince Šāhroḡ to the Ming court in 823-25/1419-22, has left an important though fragmentary record of his journey, preserved most fully in *Zobdat al-tawārīḡ-e bāysongorī* by Ḥāfeḡ-e Abrū (d. 833/1430; Maitra; Thaeckston, pp. 279-97; cf. Storey, I, pp. 295-96 with n. 1). In this period Persian painting incorporated a new array of motifs, originally imported on Chinese ceramics and textiles. The mandarin square became increasingly popular, and the “cloud collar,” a kind of stole with shaped edges, also began to appear frequently. The importation of Chinese artifacts initiated a vogue for chinoiserie, exemplified in the leaves of the so-called “Fatih albums” (believed to have belonged to the contemporary Ottoman sultan Mehmet II Fatih, 848-50/1444-46, 855-86/1451-8, in the Topkapı Sarayı Müzesi, Istanbul (nos. 2152-54, 2160), and several albums in the Nationalbibliothek, Berlin (West), originally published by M. S. İpşirođlu. These albums contain original Chinese drawings and prints on silk and paper, as well as Persian copies (Loehr); the subjects range from the religious (Buddhist and Taoist) to the historical and literary. Beginning in the Sung period, a considerable number of Chinese paintings on silk must have reached Persia, where they were emulated by painters in the Timurid court workshops. The large-scale horizontal compositions, as well as the subject matter, suggest that the models were Chinese hand-scroll paintings. Many of the album paintings and drawings in “Chinese style” were not originally manuscript illustrations but were independent compositions. The album itself, a new format in Persia in the Timurid period, may also have been inspired by Chinese models. In addition to pictorial works, albums usually include examples of calligraphy in various styles. Such albums remained popular with the Mughal descendants of the Timurids in India (Beach, 1978, pp. 26ff.; idem, 1981, pp. 156ff.). The Timurid album leaves in Chinese taste are assumed to have been completed in Herat and other Persian cities; none of them was produced by a Chinese master, nor can the individual style of even a lower-class Chinese painter be identified. The Yuan revival of the Tang style played a greater role than the contemporary Ming style (Lee and Ho, pp. 4, 30ff.; Cahill, pp. 35, 38, 39ff.).

The technique of Chinese ink painting and *baimiao hua* (drawing in ink without shading) stimulated the development of Persian drawing at the end of the 7th/14th century. Early 8th/15th-century marginal drawings in this style



can be seen in a *dīvān* of the poems of Sultan Aḥmad Jalā'ēr. (r. 784-813/1382-1410, with interruptions) now in The Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. (no. 32.35; see, e.g., Gray, 1961, p. 49); they recall the delicacy and virtuosity of Chinese brushwork. In subsequent centuries such marginal drawings were particularly associated with the works of the much earlier Chinese painter Li Gonglin (ca. 1040-1106), but there is insufficient evidence to regard him as a source. One source for the minute and delicate representations of birds, flowers, dragons, and such landscape elements as dead trees with spiky branches and floating mushroom clouds might be Sung and later porcelains.

Many Chinese paintings of birds and flowers, naturalistically rendered in the Sung period, as well as copies by Persian painters, are included in the Istanbul albums. Although this genre was not developed extensively in Timurid Persia, it became quite popular under the Safavid Shah 'Abbās I (996-1038/1588-1629) and remained in favor until the 13th/19th centuries (see, e.g., “Bird on a Branch,” by Reżā, ca. 1019/1610, Seattle Art Museum, “Birds, Butterflies and Blossoms,” by Šafī 'Abbāsī, 1062/1651-52, The Cleveland Museum of Art, Welch, pls. 11, 58 respectively; and “Rose and Nightingale,” 12-13th/18-19th century, and “Withering Plants and Insects,” 1151/1738-39, Fogg Art Museum, Cambridge, Mass., Simpson and Welch, pls. 41-42).

Persian painters tended to borrow small isolated elements from Chinese painting and to reorganize them, assimilating them to their own traditional aesthetic concerns. For example, a flowering branch, sometimes behind a balustrade or fence, a motif borrowed from Chinese painting, was often combined with a more traditional figural composition (e.g., “An Attempted Murder Frustrated,” from a copy of *Kalīla wa Demna* in the library of Istanbul University, no. F.1422, fol. 11v; Gray, 1961, p. 38; “Couple under a Flowering Tree,” a painting on silk in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, no. 14.545; Grube, pl. 15).

Despite Persian admiration of Chinese style and adoption of a considerable number of Chinese motifs, Chinese influence did not fundamentally alter the themes, style, iconography, and technique of Persian manuscript painting.



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