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IL-KHANIDS III. BOOK ILLUSTRATION

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The Il-khanid period is no doubt the historical moment during which the art of painting, in particular in illustrated manuscripts, witnessed a dramatic increase in number, subject matter, artistic output, and patronage as compared to the late Saljuq epoch in Persia, to the late ʿAbbasid period in Baghdad, and to the rule of the Atābaks (q.v.) of Mosul in the Jazira region in northern Mesopotamia that preceded the advent of the Mongols in the area. It is fair to surmise that increasingly fewer works on paper are likely to survive as one goes back in time, so it is to be expected that, comparatively, more manuscripts from the Il-khanid period have been preserved than earlier ones, but this is not sufficient to challenge the notion that the late 13th century and especially the first quarter of the 14th can be regarded as perhaps the most important formative period in the history of Persian painting, an epoch of great changes, and a moment of fervor and stimulation on the part of both patrons and artists. As a matter of fact the number of complete, illustrated manuscripts that survive from this period is not so large, just a dozen or a few more; but dispersed folios, the miscellaneous material included in albums in Istanbul and Berlin, as well as documentary evidence, help to suggest that book illustration became one of the most popular art forms in Il-khanid Persia,

trickling down from the patronage of the courtly elite to that of powerful viziers, governors, and less wealthy patrons in just a few decades.

From the artistic point of view, the single major change that took place in Persian painting was due to the strong influence and incorporation of eastern Asian, mostly Chinese, elements that freely circulated in Persia, an area that represented just one section of the pan-Asian highway that was open to all kinds of traffic during the Mongol period. It is not clear whether Chinese painters were actually transferred to Persia and trained local artists or if it was mostly a matter of wide circulation of Chinese scrolls and other works on paper in Persia that made a special impression on Persian artists. There was, however, a clear evolution in the selection, integration, elaboration, and ultimately reinterpretation of Chinese elements in a context (the manuscript or codex), and in pictorial compositions (images illustrating an Arabic or Persian text in prose or poetry) that were familiar to local patrons, calligraphers, and painters. It is this integration and elaboration of exotic constituents into the traditional fabric of book illustration that marked a new chapter in the history of Persian painting, one that would carry its effects all the way to the new heights reached during the Timurid period in the 15th century.

It is not surprising that the Il-khanid city first subjected to these changes, at least according to the extant works, was the former ʿAbbasid capital Baghdad, where a so-called Arab school of painting had flourished around the second quarter of the 13th century (Ettinghausen, 1962, pp. 59-124). There is no question that artistic activities almost came to a halt for a few decades following the Mongol sack of the city in 1258, but it is interesting that the first three dated, illustrated manuscripts that survive from the Il-khanid period were produced in Baghdad or nearby in Iraq, whose central cultural role obviously had not been entirely wiped out, having actually been revived under the control of local Arab or Persian governors working for the Il-khanids. One of these was ʿAṭā Malek Jovayni (1226-83); an early copy of his historical work *Tārīḵ-e jahāngošā* (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, suppl. persan, 205), dated 689/1290, almost certainly produced in Baghdad, is the earliest Il-khanid work on paper that includes a frontispiece incorporating Chinese elements such as peony-like flowers and clouds with a “flaming pearl” (Richard, 1997, p. 41). These elements are, however, isolated or outright awkwardly positioned in the painting (for example, large peonies on a pomegranate tree; Manāfeʿ-e ḥayawān<.em>. Courtesy of The Pierpont Morgan

Library, New York, Ms. M. 500, fol. 55r." href="/img/v12f6/il_khanid_book_illustration/plate2.jpg">Plate II).

In addition to another copy of the *Manāfeʿ-e ḥayawān*, now dispersed and surviving in just a few folios, two other manuscripts created during Ġāzān's rule (1295-1304) or in the very first years of Öljeitü/Oljāytu's (1304-16) show a similar eclectic approach. One is a partially surviving copy of the abovementioned *ʿAjāʾeb al-maḵluqāt wa ġarāʾeb al-mawjudāt*, a text that had been conceived by Zakariyāʾ b. Moḥammad Qazvini toward the beginning of Il-khanid rule in Iraq in the 1260s-70s and compiled in honor of his governor and mentor ʿAṭā Malek Jovayni (London, British Library, Or. 14140). Here, the traditions upon which the three, possibly more, painters that contributed to the codex drew are even wider than in previous works, since they include those from the Jazira around the capital Mosul as well as those from southeastern Anatolia. They, however, represent the beginning of the blended, eclectic new style that became typically Il-khanid (Carboni, 1992; ʿAjāʾeb al-maḵluqāt wa ġarāʾeb al-mawjudāt. Courtesy of The British Library, London, Or. 14140, fol. 62v." href="/img/v12f6/il_khanid_book_illustration/plate3.jpg">Plate III). This process was virtually completed in a copy of Abu Rayḥān Biruni's *Ketāb al-āṯār al-bāqia ʿan al-qorun al-ḵālia* (known as "The Chronology of Ancient Nations") dated 707/1307-08 and most likely copied and illustrated in the area of Tabriz or nearby northern Iraq (Edinburgh, University Library, Ms. Arab 161). This unique, illustrated codex, a treatise of calendar systems, is clearly a step forward in both the choice of subject matter and complexity of painted compositions. It demonstrates a specific Il-khanid interest in patronizing works that deal with different religions of the past and present, emphasizing the prominence of Islam above all the others and in particular of Shiʿite Islam, which became the official religion under the Il-khanids during the rule of Öljeitü in those very years. The last two illustrations in the manuscript, both of obvious Shiʿite content and the largest in the codex, make an everlasting impression. They can be regarded as a turning point in Persian painting in that their compositions demonstrate that the artists who conceived and executed them had come to terms with the new artistic language developed in the previous years and had finally blended all elements, the East Asian and the multiple indigenous ones, into successful works, thus creating a truly original style (Soucek; Hillenbrand, 2000; Ketāb al-āṯār al-bāqia ʿan al-qorun al-ḵālia. Courtesy of Edinburgh University Library, Ms Arab 161, fol. 162r." href="/img/v12f6/il_khanid_book_illustration/plate4.jpg">Plate IV).

In the same years as the making of Biruni's *Chronology*, which may or may not represent a courtly commission, during the rules of Ḡāzān (1295-1304) and Öljeitü (1304-16) and in particular under the influence of their most powerful vizier, Rašid-al-Din Faẓl-Allāh (d. 1318), the role of the élite in the creation of this new style and in bestowing royal status on the production of manuscripts becomes evident. This is the time when Ḡāzān commissioned the vizier to compose a history of the Mongols beginning from the life of Čengiz Khan. The initial single volume developed under Rašid-al-Din's supervision into a four-volume work that represents the earliest world history ever written, a text in both Arabic and Persian that became known as the *Jāmeʿ al-tawāriḵ* or "Compendium of Chronicles." The universal scope of the work was very much in step with the developments that were happening in the art of illustration, and it is not surprising that also its artistic sources were drawn from around the known world in order to illustrate new subjects: from China to Byzantium, from the Europe of the Franks and the Crusaders to Nepal and Tibet, from Buddhist, Christian, and Jewish models. In general, Chinese sources, mostly scroll painting, predominate (Jāmeʿ al-tawāriḵ, Tabriz, 714/1314-15. Courtesy of The Nasser D. Khalili Collection of Islamic Art, London, MSS 727, fol. 261r." href="/img/v12f6/il_khanid_book_illustration/plate5.jpg">Plate V). It must be kept in mind, however, that only about two hundred pages with just over one hundred illustrations survive from the original Arabic work of 1315, corresponding to the second half of the second volume and therefore to about one-eighth of the entire work (Edinburgh, University Library, Ms. Arab 20; London, Khalili Collection, MSS 727). If one considers that a second set of volumes in Persian was created in the same year and that Rašid-al-Din's endowment stipulated that two illustrated copies were to be produced every year, one can surmise that we are allowed today only a glimpse of the complexity of the sources utilized to complete these colossal achievements. What, however, unifies these manuscripts is the Mongols' sense of their role in history, whereby the rulers, warriors, and heroes of the past throughout Eurasia are represented in Mongol guise, an anachronism that served only one purpose, that is, the celebration of Mongol power (Rice; Blair, 1995).

Fragments from the *Jāmeʿ al-tawāriḵ* and other examples of paintings and drawings from the Il-khanid period are also preserved in three albums in the library of the Topkapı Saray in Istanbul (Hazine, 2152, 2153, 2160) and in three out of five codices, known as the Diez Albums, in the Staatsbibliothek in Berlin (Diez A, foll. 70-72; Plate VI). The works that are now in Germany, collected by the Prussian Heinrich Friedrich von Diez at the end of the 18th century, were

also compiled from material originally assembled at the royal Ottoman palace. This practice of arranging in albums miscellaneous examples of calligraphy, illustrations, and drawings detached from their original context actually started during the Timurid period, when works from the Il-khanid era were regarded as important models from the past. We are fortunate that these albums preserve Il-khanid works and help fill in the rather limited view of Persian painting from the 14th century (Ipşiroğlu; Roxburgh, 1995).

Illustrations that are clearly derivative from the format and the Chinese-inspired color-washed chromatic choices that are present in the *Jāmeʿ al-tawāriḵ* are also found in a poetic anthology copied in 1314-15 by a scribe from Kāšān (London, British Library, Ms. 132). Hardly of great artistic importance and rather repetitive, this manuscript testifies nonetheless to the popularity of that style of painting at the beginning of the 14th century (Robinson, pp. 3-10).

Like many other conquerors, the Mongols made an effort to find a place in history by adopting and reinterpreting events of the past. The Il-khanids found themselves in an ideal position to do so, because Persia's literary past had preserved both the factual and the legendary history of the nation. The Il-khanids soon understood that, if they blended in a single work the power of the written word and the highest expressions of Persian poetry with the intensity and immediacy of illustrations, they would create an everlasting vehicle to transmit to posterity their legitimacy to rule over their new homeland. This vehicle was the *Šāh-nāma*, by then a classic of Persian literature, although there are no extant illustrated copies before the advent of the Il-khanids. It is highly unlikely that it was only under the Mongols that the first illustrated copies of the *Šāh-nāma* were made, but there is no doubt that the Il-khanids enthusiastically sponsored its production, particularly because they could reinterpret it through its images in order to make a powerful statement of legitimacy. The undisputed masterpiece of Il-khanid painting is a fragmentary copy of the book, known as the "Demotte Šāh-nāma" (q.v.) or, more recently, as the Great Mongol *Šāh-nāma*. What remains of the manuscript after several centuries and, especially, after its dismemberment at the hands of the dealer George Demotte in the early 20th century, is about one-third to one-fourth of the illustrations (according to the most recent reconstruction, 57 out of the estimated 190 survive, at present widely dispersed in public and private institutions worldwide) and much less of the original text, parts of which were also rewritten in recent times. Study of this codex is made even more difficult by the fact that some illustrations have been

pasted over unrelated text and that a number of extant paintings have been restored. There is little doubt, however, that the surviving illustrations suggest a careful, deliberate, and sophisticated choice of subjects to be portrayed, almost as if every Il-khanid ruler could be identified with a sovereign or a hero of the Iranian past and thus carry the epic significance of the *Šāh-nāma* into contemporary times and serve a specific agenda. From an art historical point of view, many of its illustrations are true masterpieces as regards to composition, fully and successfully integrated elements from different pictorial traditions, interpretation of the subject, craftsmanship, and use of color. Since the scenes are transported into Mongol times, the attention to architectural details and the illustration of portable objects are extremely useful to contribute to the scant information we have on the material culture of the royal Il-khanid milieu. Court and funeral scenes help us to understand Mongol customs and manners as adapted to the Iranian environment (Šāh-nāma, Iran, probably Tabriz, ca. 1330s. Courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Joseph Pulitzer Bequest, 1933, inv. 33.70. ” href=”/img/v12f6/il_khanid_book_illustration/plate7.jpg”>Plate VII). Some of the scenes are memorable because they express a kind of pathos, unbridled emotions, or simply a sense of action and dynamism that are unique to this phase of Persian painting (Šāh-nāma, Iran, probably Tabriz, ca. 1330s. Courtesy of The British Museum, London, inv. 1948.12-11.025.” href=”/img/v12f6/il_khanid_book_illustration/plate8.jpg”>Plate VIII). The fragmentary condition of the manuscript is especially unfortunate, because its beginning and end are lost and therefore its patron or dedicatee and calligrapher and/or painters are unknown. Scholars largely agree, however, that it was produced toward the end of Il-khanid rule under the reign of Abu Saʿid Bahādor Khan (1316-35, q.v.) or perhaps shortly after his death, that it was a royal manuscript, that several artists worked on its illustrations in an established atelier, and that it can be regarded as one of the greatest expressions of the arts of the book in Persia (Grabar and Blair; Blair, 1989; Soudavar, 1996; Blair and Bloom).

The popularity of the *Šāh-nāma* as an illustrated text in the Il-khanid period is evident from a number of small-format copies, two of them dispersed and known as “The First Small” and “The Second Small Shahnameh” and one known as “The Gutman Shahnameh” (New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, inv. nos. 1974.290, 2003.330), which include lively compositions and consistent use of gold, but which were clearly made for patrons less affluent than the royal family and perhaps were not even specially commissioned. Their lack of

a surviving colophon and the relatively modest attention to details make their place of manufacture and date rather uncertain, with suggestions ranging from Baghdad at the beginning of the 14th century (Simpson, 1979) to northwestern Persia around 1330, except for the Gutman manuscript, which has been convincingly attributed to an atelier in Isfahan in around 1335, when the city was indirectly under Il-khanid control (Swietochowski and Carboni, pp. 67-145).

That Isfahan was indeed a center of production of illustrated codices is proven by internal evidence in an anthology of poetic artifices compiled by a self-appointed poet, Moḥammad b. Badr-al-Din Jājarmi, who lived most of his life in Isfahan and finished his collected works in 1341 without a specific dedication (Kuwait, Dār-al-Āṯār al-Eslāmiya, LNS 9 MS). The codex, however, includes a double frontispiece that seems to suggest that it was indeed made for a princely Il-khanid couple. One of its chapters, now dispersed, is also heavily illustrated in simple, didactic compositions with red backgrounds dictated by the nature of the poetic text (Swietochowski and Carboni, pp. 8-66). Red or yellow backgrounds and other details in the frontispiece relate this provincial Il-khanid production to a series of manuscripts, the earliest of which is perhaps a copy of the *Kalila wa demna* dated 707/1307-08 (London, British Library, Or. 13506; Waley and Titley), which were produced in Shiraz under the Injuids and are therefore outside the scope of the present discussion. It is not surprising, however, to notice a mutual influence in two cities that were relatively close to each other but far from the centers of Il-khanid power in northwestern Persia.

The last dated, illustrated manuscript in a clear Il-khanid style, completed well after the demise of the dynasty, is a copy of the epic poem *Garšāsp-nāma* (q.v.) of Asadi Ṭusi finished in 1354 (Istanbul, Topkapı Saray Library, Hazine 774). In its five paintings, the compositions are as sophisticated as some of the best earlier Il-khanid illustrations, whereas their vivid, bold chromatism shows that the painter was moving forward to the developments that would take place in Baghdad and Tabriz under the new rulers, the Jalayerids (r. 1336-1410; Ettinghausen, 1959, pp. 60-65, Carboni, 2002, p. 216). It was indeed at the beginning of Jalayerid rule that a new style started to develop parallel to the Il-khanid, while at the same time drawing inspiration from it. The earliest surviving illustrations are in the double-page frontispiece of an alchemical treatise dated 739/1339 (Istanbul, Topkapı Saray Library, Ahmet III 2075; Farès, pp. 156-60; Grube, 1978, pp. 18-19; Berlekamp). The last flourishing of Il-

khanid painting and the first steps of the new Jalayerid style correspond to the years during which, according to Dust Moḥammad two centuries later, the master painter Aḥmad Musā changed the style of Persian painting while working for both Il-khanid and Jalayerid rulers, thus lifting “the veil from the face of depiction” (Chagtai; Thackston, pp. 3-17). The very fragmentary picture of Il-khanid book illustration that survives today seems sufficient to confirm this assessment of Persian painting in the 16th century.

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