



## JOSEPH III. IN PERSIAN ART

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The popularity of Joseph as a subject in the visual arts is by and large a reflection of the popularity of the story of Joseph in Islamic literatures. Several Persian poets composed versified versions of the story (see, e.g., Monzawi, IV, pp. 3331-46), the earliest being the one, now lost, by the 10th-century poet Abu'l-Mo'ayyad Balki (Şafā, I, pp. 369, 402). The most famous among them, however, is *Yusof o Zolaykā* by Nur-al-Din 'Abd-al-Raḥmān Jāmi (q.v.), which forms the fifth versified narrative of his *Haft ovrang* (Şafā, IV, pp. 359-60; Browne, III, pp. 531-33; Arberry, pp. 442-47). The general prominence accorded the arts of the book decoration in the post-Mongolian period are also evident in the figurative depictions that occur overwhelmingly as miniatures illustrating works that feature, or are wholly about, Joseph (Blair and Bloom, pp. 24-25). Book illustrations that represent Joseph or depict an episode in one of the many tales about him have been among the more popular subjects in the history of Islamic painting in general. Figurative depiction of prophets or biblical personalities, and thus iconographic prototypes, date back to the earliest period in Persian painting, but it was above all the far-reaching influence of Islamic mysticism in Persian literature that raised the popularity of Joseph as a subject in manuscript illustrations (Davis, p. 279; Milstein, pp. 8, 15). The story of Joseph has been used as a motif in Sufi discourse at least since the 11th century, when Abu'l-Ḥasan 'Ali Hojviri (d. ca. 465/1071-72) made exemplary references to it to illustrate certain Sufi concepts (Hojviri, pp. 37,



263, 331, 401, 434-35, 477). Joseph, his beauty, his father Jacob (Ya‘qub), the conspiracy of his brothers, his sale as a slave, the ordeal of Zolaykā’s love, his reunion with Jacob, as well as other episodes far exceeding the basic narrative in Chapter 12 of the Qur’ān have been repeatedly used as literary tropes in both lyric and narrative poetry in order to explicate the trials involved in establishing a direct, individual experience of the Divine (Schimmel, pp. 66-67). Illustrations of these or related episodes in the cycle in turn established an iconographic standard that, with the aid of such generic features as Joseph’s flaming aureole, make textual reference for identification of the scene unnecessary, as is the case with a lacquer painting on a bookbinding for Jāmi’s *Toḥfat al-aḥrār*, executed in 1570 in Qazvin (Haase, p. 61).

The most appealing subject from the Joseph story has been the episode involving Potiphar’s wife, called Zolaykā in Islamic lore. The popularity of the stories about Zolay-kā’s love for Joseph as a subject for lyrical and narrative poetry dates back to the Ghaznavid period (Şafā, abr. ed., p. 122), but they attain prominence as subjects for painting after ‘Abd-al-Raḥmān Jāmi’s (q.v.; d. 1492) mystical epic, the romance of *Yusof o Zolaykā* (comp. 1483; Milstein, p. 15; Arberry, p. 442; Jāmi, p. 208, v. 4012). Shortly thereafter, the impact of Jāmi’s romance in the visual arts became manifest in one of the most celebrated paintings in the history of Persian book illustration. It was executed by the master painter Kamāl-al-Din Behzād (d. 935/1535-36, q.v.), who chose to illustrate the scene of Zolaykā’s attempt at seducing Joseph for a passage in Sa‘dī’s *Bustān* (q.v.; Cairo, National Library, MS. Arab Farsi 908). He not only used the descriptions as provided in Jāmi’s version of the story (Golombek, p. 28), but also reproduced a few verses from Jāmi’s poem in the painting itself (Barry, p. 201). Although Joseph’s face has partially worn away, his sense of alarm is apparent as he reaches for the latch of the locked door with one arm while Zolaykā, pulling at his garb, is trying to prevent his escape by grabbing his other arm (Blair and Bloom, pp. 63-64; Jāmi, p. 123, vv. 2183 ff.).

There are some 108 illustrated manuscripts of Jāmi’s *Yusof o Zolaykā* from the 16th century in museums and libraries around the world. Among these, which do not include such images as frontispieces or those inserted later, the most frequently illustrated episode is that of Egyptian women being overwhelmed at the sight of Joseph’s dazzling beauty (54), followed by Joseph being sold at a slave market (38), and being rescued from the well (27). Such images as that of Joseph asking Jacob for a jeweled staff from heaven, or “Joseph arriving before the king of Egypt,” are unique (Simpson, pp. 369-83). In its most celebrated



manuscript, which is one of the septet that comprises Jāmi's *Haft owrang* (com. 1565; ms. 46.12, Freer Galley of Art, Washington, D.C.), the illustration depicting the final scene of Joseph's marriage to *Zolaykā* might also reflect a real event in the life of Ebrāhim Mirzā (d. 984/1577; q.v.), the Safavid prince who commissioned the manuscript. The possibility that the image of Joseph, the legendary paragon of youthful beauty, is the portrait of a historical person seems doubtful, given the tendency in contemporary Persian painting toward idealized depictions of human features. So the miniature of Joseph in the banquet given for his wedding, though not an actual portrait of Ebrāhim Mirzā, could be seen as reflecting an actual event in the life of that young Safavid prince (Figure 1; Simpson, pp. 142-45).

After the 1630s, the sole commission by Shah Ṭahmāsp (r. 1524-76), perhaps the most influential patron of Persian painting (Diba, p. 169), was an illustrated *Fāl-nāma* (q.v.) "Book of divination," which contains a painting of Joseph enthroned (Lowery, pp. 120-21). The appeal of *Zolaykā*'s love for Joseph as a Sufi allegory underlay the execution of almost countless laconic miniatures of Joseph that illustrated commercially produced versions of Jāmi's romance, including some whose Persian text was transliterated into another script, such as Hebrew (Taylor, pp. 34-38; Figure 2). Shiraz (Richard, p. 137) and Kashmir were the two principal centers of production. A manuscript of Jāmi's *Yusof o Zolaykā* produced in Kashmir in the 18th century contains more than seventy miniatures (Ådahl, p. 12). Miniatures of Joseph continued to illustrate the *Bustān* of Sa'di (Canby, p. 130), other Persian classics such as the *Divān* of Ḥāfeẓ (q.v.; Madraimov, III, p. 15), or works with religious and mythical narratives that invoked Joseph's story, like Mirḳvānd's *Rawẓat al-Ṣafā* (Milstein, p. 15). Images of Joseph from the later Safavid period are also extant in the wall paintings at the Čehel Sotun (q.v.) palace in Isfahan (Blair and Bloom, p. 195), as well as in single-sheet drawings and portraits that became especially popular from the beginning of the 17th century (Welch, p. 302). The illustration "Zolaykā meeting Yusof in her newly built palace" in the *Golšan* anthology (a collection of prose and poetry with 100 miniature illustrating episodes described in poems) from the Zand era (1750-79), paradoxically retains the two-dimensional flatness of earlier schools at the same time as it exhibits devices of European painting such as perspective (Akimushkin, pp. 163-64). The paintings of "Joseph with a pair of gazelles" in oil on canvas from the 19th century reflects the prominence of life-size painting during the Qajar period (Diba, p. 169; Ekhtiar, p. 194; Figure 3). The definitive development affecting the portrayal of Joseph in the Qajar period is its inclusion, along with



heroes of the *Šāh-nāma* and the martyrs of Karbalā in what is commonly referred to as the coffee-house paintings (*naqqāši-e qahva-kāna*; Floor, 139). This trend in painting continues, mostly on canvas, into the present time (Sayf, pp. 98-101).

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