



SIĀH-QALAM

SIĀH-QALAM (*siāh-qalam*, lit. 'black pen'), a term referring to both the genre of paintings or drawings done in pen and ink (also known as *qalam-siāhi*; Swietochowski), and to the painter or, more likely, painters (more commonly known as *Siāh-qalam*) of a particular collection of such pen and ink drawings, preserved principally in the albums at Topkapi Saray Library (see [TOPKAPI PALACE](#)). This collection contains some of the most interesting as well as controversial drawings in the field (Rogers; O'Kane, 2003b).

Qalam-siāhi. While medieval Iranian artists were more renowned for their painting than their drawing skills, the two mediums were not unrelated. The planning of any painting involved laying down a preliminary drawing in red or black ink, which would later be painted over. In an unfinished Arabic manuscript of al-Ḥariri's *Maqāmāt*, the under-drawing is relatively finished and shows greater vivacity and spontaneity than the finished paintings in the same manuscript (Haldane, fig. 23). The disparity is not so noticeable in Persian manuscripts where the under-drawing is typically sketchier ([FIGURE 1](#)).

The Topkapi Saray Library albums, and the closely related Diez albums in Berlin (Roxburgh, 1995), provide the most significant body of material for the study of early drawings produced during 14th and 15th centuries. Included in both are a substantial number of drawings of Chinese origin (Cahill), whose importation in the Il-khanid period may well have stimulated the subsequent workshop production of drawings (see [IL-KHANIDS iii. BOOK ILLUSTRATION](#)).



The drawings in the albums range from highly finished products designed to stand on their own, to practice sketches and preliminary drawings for manuscript paintings. Although certain paintings and calligraphies in the albums date back to the Il-khanid period, it is unclear whether any of the drawings were produced that early. However, the albums do include a sizable body of drawings from the main schools up to the end of the 15th century, namely the Mozaffarid, Jalāyerid and Turkmen period.

Dust Moḥammad (see [DUST-MOḤAMMAD b. Solaymān HERAVI](#)) mentions two persons proficient in *qalam-siāhi*, one being Amir Dowlatyār, a pupil of the famous [Aḥmad Musā](#) (Thackston, p. 13), and the other being one of the Jalāyerid sultans: “Khvaja ‘Abd al-Ḥayy... instructed Sultan Ahmad in depiction so that the Sultan himself produced a scene in the *Abusa‘idnama* in pen and ink” (Thackston, p. 13). One commentator on this passage considers this to be a garbled reference to the divan (*divān*) of Solṭān Aḥmad (Rogers, 1996, p. 541, n. 42). This latter manuscript is one of the main pieces of evidence for the incorporation of ink drawings into the periphery of Persian painting, if not the mainstream (Atil, pp. 14-27). It illustrates a manuscript of poems by the eponymous sultan. It is unique not only in its exclusive reliance on drawing in its illustrations (with occasional touches of blue wash and gold), but also in their placement behind or around the text space rather than taking up part of it. These drawings have much in common with many others in the albums, providing evidence that the techniques and part of the style visible there spilled over into somewhat more conventional painting ([FIGURE 2](#)).

Although subsequent 15th century Persian painting produced nothing to match Solṭān Aḥmad’s divan, the number of pen and ink drawings that can credibly be attributed to this period seem to indicate that, in the workshop at least, artistic interest in pen and ink drawing remained at a high level. However, this conclusion is controversial, given the lack of consensus on the dating and provenance of the *siāh-qalam* paintings.

An increase in production was also likely because of the increase of interest in albums (*moraqqas*). The earliest known reference to this new method of displaying calligraphy, drawings and paintings is from the Timurid period, but the practice probably started earlier in the Jalāyerid period (O’Kane, 2003b, p. 216, n. 67). Several Safavid examples survive in which drawings play a major role (Roxburgh, 2001). By the end of the 16th century the popularity of album paintings freed artists from the requirement to be a member of a manuscript-producing atelier, enabling them to work from their own homes and at their

own pace and to produce individual drawings as much as paintings. Reżā ‘Abbāsi and Mo‘in Moṣāvvar are two of the best-known practitioners of this period (Swiectochowski).

Siāh-qalam. What of the artist who is synonymous with the genre? The name *Siāh-qalam* is scrawled as an attribution on many paintings and drawings from the Istanbul albums, the most famous of which are of demons (FIGURE 3) and what at first glance look like nomads (FIGURE 4). However, some of the demon painting done on silk shows them carrying palanquins with figures which put them clearly in the mainstream of Persian manuscript painting, And the so-called nomads sport bare feet, strongly suggesting, as Julian Raby aptly put it, that we are dealing with a “courtly artist’s rustic conceit” (Raby, p. 162). There is indeed no other likely center of patronage for them than a court, ruling out the rather nebulous idea of a Central Asian provenance that was first mooted for these paintings.

Related to the demon and “nomad” group is another group in the albums that includes both drawings and polychrome paintings and which also has features in common with the Chinese paintings mentioned earlier (FIGURE 5). There is by no means universal agreement on the boundaries of these groups; calligraphy in the albums spans the range from the Ilkhanid period to the Aq Qoyonlu with every main center of painting in between represented. Some images in the albums appear in up to four copies, and the ability of later generations of artist to copy precisely earlier styles also renders dating more problematic.

The most recent detailed study of the *Siāh-qalam* group (O’Kane, 2003a) highlights a number of features that relates it to mainstream Jalāyerid painting, in particular to the Great Jalāyerid *Šāh-nāma*, an unfinished manuscript whose illustrations are also scattered throughout the albums. One drawing in the *Siāh-qalam* style is an adaptation of a European drawing or print of Hercules strangling the lion, suggesting that wherever it was made, European versions of it were readily available. Indeed a copy of what was probably a thirteenth or fourteenth century Italian drawing of figures, perhaps from an artist’s model-book, has survived in one of the albums (O’Kane, 2003a, Fig. 26). Venetian and Genoese merchants were active in western Iran from the Ilkhanid period up to the middle of the 14th century (see [GENOA](#) and [ITALY ii](#)).

The iconography of the *Siāh-qalam* group is mostly uncertain. Some drawings



can be identified with scenes from the *Šāh-nāma* while others may be related to the stories of Solomon. Others drawn against a blank background, such as the encampment (Rogers, 1990, fig. 7) that at first sight constitute coherent scenes, can equally be read as individual studies. The large size of some of the drawings suggests that their main function may have been as storytelling aids to a select court audience. That they were immured in workshop sketchbooks helps explain their limited influence on later mainstream Persian painting.

What we can at least be sure of is that Siāh-qalam incorporated elements from Western, Persian and Chinese painting and fused them into images of startling power and originality.

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