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A Unique and Mysterious Shahnama Miniature

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Within the first few weeks of the Islamic Art class in the Fall of 2009, our class visited Special Collections to view the Oriental Manuscript collection. I became especially intrigued with a manuscript leaf from the Persian national epic poem, the Shahnama. This particular leaf featured a miniature illustration of a scene from the Shahnama which was unidentified in the information provided in the collection. My curiosity to know what kind of scene was depicted on the Hollins manuscript leaf and its greater artistic context led me to begin researching this item in Special Collections for my final paper for the course.

I began my research by examining the manuscript leaf in the Special Collections office and reading the accompanying materials to glean as much existing information about the piece as possible. Because of the limits of the existing information, I undertook a comparative methodological approach in an attempt to place this unknown Shahnama scene in context with other better known Shahnama scenes of the same time period. I was able to visually compare the miniature illustration on the Hollins leaf to a collection of Shahnama miniatures in Princeton University’s Firestone Library Special Collections through an online digitization project entitled The Shahnama Project. The similarities and differences among these Persian miniatures provided the bulk of my information and the basis of my argument for my final paper. I was able to comment on the variances of style and differing modes of representation between the Hollins leaf and the Princeton leaves and in the process learned a great deal about Persian manuscript painting from the sixteenth century.

This research paper has proved to be an extremely formative academic experience in my time here at Hollins. The challenge of approaching a previously un-researched object and attempting to unlock its mystery and find clues toward its original context has instilled in me a passion and excitement for investigative research that I continue to employ in my current research projects. In fact, this initial foray has inspired me to continue researching Hollins’ Oriental Manuscript Collection through an independent study this semester. Because my first project involved attempting to place a particular leaf back into the original context from which it had been removed and coming up against the challenges this removal had created, I am now interested in approaching the subject from a post-colonial and critical standpoint. This semester I plan to explore the greater phenomenon of Oriental manuscript collecting in America in the early twentieth century and the problematic implications of dismantling original manuscripts and placing them outside of their original cultural and historic contexts.

While my Islamic Art final paper exploring the Oriental Manuscript Collection was not as extensive as my other art history research papers have been since, it represents a turning point in my relationship to art historical research. Facing the challenges this project posed gave me the confidence to pursue even more ambitious research projects in my last year at Hollins and in the years to come in graduate school.
A Unique and Mysterious *Shahnama* Miniature

Among the Oriental Manuscript Folios in Hollins University’s special collections is a sixteenth-century Persian manuscript page from the *Shahnama*, the Persian national epic known in English as the *Book of Kings*. Part of a series of manuscript folios put together by the company Foliophiles, Inc. in 1928, each individual manuscript page is introduced by a brief description written by G. N. L. Brown. The information given with the *Shahnama* page is brief and includes an estimated date of 1520 and the city of Bukhara as a possible place of origin. Also included are the name of the calligrapher, Mohammad ibni Hassan, and the name Amir Shah Jalal, the “Mongol feudal king” for whom the manuscript was thought to have been written. Not included in this information, however, is an idea of which scene or episode from the *Shahnama* the miniature illustration featured on the page may represent.

The miniature in question (Image 1) depicts a scene with five figures, two seated on golden, throne-like chairs, and the three others seated on the ground of what appears to be an outdoor setting. The figure seated on the right can easily be identified as Rustam, one of the heroes of the Persian epic, as he is wearing his signature leopard skin robe and special helmet which looks like a leopard’s head. While Rustam is readily identified by his distinctive helmet and clothing, which have been depicted in similar ways in multiple manuscript illustrations of the *Shahnama* from many different time periods and regions, it proves much more difficult to distinguish the other figures in this scene and thereby more difficult to determine what scene or action from the story may be taking place. In order to gain an idea of what part of the story may
be depicted, it becomes necessary to look for comparable illustrations from other manuscripts of the *Shahnama* for which more information is known.

The *Shahnama* contains many different characters, stories, and motifs that take place over a long period of time. While most characters appear briefly for a few scenes and then disappear from the story, Rustam seems to be a central figure for a much longer space of time than other characters. For this reason, there exists of plethora of known illustrations of Rustam from manuscripts of the *Shahnama* from all over the world. In order to narrow the playing field, I have decided to focus my comparative analysis of the Hollins *Shahnama* page to similar scenes in the Persian manuscripts of Princeton University’s Firestone Library Collection, collected and featured on The Princeton *Shahnama* Project website.¹ The manuscripts from this collection are dated from 1544 to 1674, a similar time period to the estimated date of 1520 for the Hollins manuscript page.

The most common type of scene including Rustam in the Firestone collection seems to be scenes of battle or other overt action. The fact that Rustam is shown in the Hollins illustration seated with other men in a calm scene of peace is somewhat unusual and provides a finite number of possible comparisons with other scenes of Rustam enjoying peaceful moments with other figures. There are two known scenes that stand out as being similar in nature to the Hollins illustration: “Rustam boasts during trial of strength with Isfandiyar” from the Garrett Manuscript #56 dated from 1544-45 and “Sam comes to see Rustam” from the Garrett Manuscript #58 dated 1674. These two *Shahnama* illustrations contain similar visual motifs, composition, and figures to that of the Hollins illustration and could help to explain what kind of scene or story has been depicted in it.
The first illustration entitled “Rustam boasts during trial of strength with Isfandiyar” (Image 2) contains a number of similar motifs as the Hollins Shahnama illustration, namely the peaceful seated figures of Rustam and Isfandiyar, a similar depiction of the figures’ clothing, and the inclusion of a tree with flowers on the tapestry being held up behind the seated figures. In the Hollins illustration, the central tree with blooming pink flowers stands out as it separates the two figures who are seated and conversing peacefully. While it is unclear what the presence of the tree may signify in either illustration, perhaps this common motif links the two illustrations in a way that suggests they depict the same or similar scene. Also, the blue and orange robes of Isfandiyar in the Garrett illustration are very similar to the robes worn by the unknown figure of the Hollins illustration. While the presence of certain visual motifs in the Garrett illustration do seem to correspond in some way with the Hollins manuscript page, the story of Isfandiyar in the Shahnama comes later in the epic tale when Rustam has grown old and is near death. In the Hollins illustration there is no white in his beard, a technique often used to indicate advanced age in a figure. It may be necessary to conclude that because Rustam’s age seems to differ between the two illustrations, they most likely do not depict the same scene from the Shahnama.

Another similar illustration from the Garrett Manuscript #58 of the Princeton collection entitled “Sam comes to see Rustam” (Image 3) seems to also correspond visually to the Hollins illustration. For example, shown in this scene are the same throne-like chairs depicted in the Hollins illustration. The episode from the Shahnama that the Garrett Manuscript depicts actually involves Sam, Rustam’s grandfather, and Rustam’s father Zal, while Rustam was still very young. While not as easily identified as in other scenes because of his lack of leopard skin attire, Rustam seems to be the young man holding a staff with an animal’s head seated to the left and below his father and grandfather. Because of the nature of this particular episode from the
*Shahnama* which does not feature Rustam as a central, adult character as he seems to be in the Hollins page, and despite the unique similarity between the style of the chairs of this scene, it does not seem to correspond exactly with the event being depicted in the Hollins illustration.

In the Garrett Manuscript #58, there are actually a number of scenes including these odd, golden chairs. A large number of them appear later in the story and there is one in particular which seems to be even more of an apt comparison to the Hollins illustration than either of the two previous examples. This illustration appearing on Folio 203 of the Garrett Manuscript #58 (Image 4) depicts the same unusual and notable golden throne-like chairs upon which are seated the adult Rustam to the left and another figure with a similar head covering and clothing as the figure opposite Rustam in the Hollins illustration. Unfortunately, however, this particular miniature which bears such a striking resemblance to the Hollins page comes from a large portion of the Garrett Manuscript that has unidentified miniature scenes. Whereas the majority of the miniatures featured on the Princeton *Shahnama* Project website have been identified according to which episode from the story they correspond to, this particular illustration and those on the pages immediately before and after it have not been identified. This suggests, given the thoroughness and accuracy of the other *Shahnama* descriptions featured on the website, that an entire section of the Garrett Manuscript #58 is not familiar to the *Shahnama* scholars who have compiled the database. In this case, the relative obscurity of the Hollins illustration may run deeper than originally thought.

In addition to the inability to find a sufficiently comparable and identifiable illustrated *Shahnama* page to the one in the Hollins collection, the Hollins illustration is also very different in a number of ways from other kinds of Persian miniature paintings in *Shahnama* manuscripts of the time period to which it is dated. During the sixteenth century, there was a flourishing of
Persian painting under the Safavid rulers who came to control much of the area of modern day Iran. During this same time period, however, groups of Uzbek Turks came to control the region of Central Asia including the cities of Samarqand and Bukhara. This split in political control of the different regions of the Middle East during the sixteenth century may account for the difference in visual style and perhaps even subject matter between the Hollins *Shahnama* manuscript page and *Shahnama* illustrations from the region under Safavid rule. In fact, the political region from which a particular manuscript originates seems to exert a considerable influence over the development of style and iconography of Persian miniature paintings, even more so than the time period to which it may be dated. In an article entitled “The Development of the Illustrated Book in Iran” Sheila Blair explains of the typical patrons of Persian book arts, “They used histories and epics to legitimize their own rule, and they selected events for illustration which had parallels in their own lives.”

In this way, the illustrated scenes featured in Persian manuscripts are often directly related to the rulers or other powerful people in charge who most likely commissioned them.

The flourishing of the book arts under the Safavids is often thought of as the culmination of some of the finest examples of Persian painting. The Hollins *Shahnama* illustration, when compared to these “greats” included in many books of Persian painting, seems to lack the sophistication of style, complexity of design, and rich color palette of much of the painting in manuscripts of the sixteenth century. There are a number of possible explanations for the difference. Oleg Grabar explains that during the sixteenth century, the period usually associated with the Safavids, there was “the appearance of enormous variations in the quality of the works that were produced.” This wide range in quality of manuscript illustrations produced during this time period of Persian painting may account for the seeming lack of sophistication in style in the
Hollins illustration. While many of the most well-known Persian manuscript miniatures from this time period were created for royal patrons and employed well-trained artisans in large workshops, it is possible that the particular manuscript to which the Hollins illustration originally belonged may have been produced on a less sophisticated scale, perhaps for a common consumer market rather than for royal patrons.

Grabar also provides insight into the differences among examples of Persian painting of the sixteenth century that is more region-specific. He explains that while some of the best known Persian painting came out of the Safavid region, there were also peripheral strains of Persian painting in other regions that developed in different ways. For example, he describes a Bukhara school of painting which took influence from the great Persian painter Bihzad but included varying iconography and a more limited color palette than their predecessors or contemporaries. This idea that different styles emerged among different regions may also give a possible explanation for the anomaly that is the Hollins illustration.

Sheila Blair and Jonathan Bloom also state of Central Asia under Uzbek control, “its location at the fringes of the Islamic lands meant that it was increasingly isolated….With economic stagnation, art and architecture became increasingly repetitive as forms became fossilized.” Muzaffar Alam also suggests that due to the nature of the commercial trade and politics during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Uzbek region of Central Asia experienced more direct influence and contact from merchants and traders from India than from the Safavid region also stating that “relations between the Uzbeks and the Safavids were rarely cordial.” This relative isolation of the Uzbek region where the Hollins illustration was thought to have originated from the Safavid region may account for this rather small and simple
miniature which does not seem to be in conversation with methods and styles of other examples of Persian painting most often associated with the time period.

While not much is known about the Shahnama page in the Hollins collection, one can begin to speculate as to the possible reasons behind its vast dissimilarity with other better understood examples of Persian painting from the same period. However, making comparisons based on time period alone is often not sufficient, especially in regards to the period around the sixteenth century where multiple regions under different political control saw the development of vastly different styles in the book arts all across modern-day Iran and its surrounding areas. In addition to these possible reasons behind the unusual style of the Hollins illustration, we can begin to gather the degree to which the modes of depicting the epic tale of the Shahnama employed in this particular manuscript page may be an example of a rather unique and widely unknown style of Shahnama miniature painting that definitely warrants a closer look. As the most comparable illustration from Princeton’s Firestone Library collection depicts a scene that has not been successfully identified by the scholars who have compiled the Shahnama Project website, one can easily appreciate the unique and mysterious nature of the Hollins Shahnama illustration.
Manuscript page from the *Shahnama*, Bukhara, c. 1520, Oriental Manuscripts Folio, the Foliophiles, Inc., New York, 1928, Wyndham Robertson Library Special Collections, Hollins University
Rustam boasts during trial of strength with Isfandiyar, Garrett Manuscript #56, Folio 375, 1544-45, Firestone Library, Princeton University, The *Shahnama* Project website
Sam comes to visit Rustam, Garrett Manuscript #58, Folio 49, 1674, Firestone Library, Princeton University, The *Shahnama* Project website
Unidentified Scene, Garrett Manuscript #58, Folio 203, 1674, Firestone Library, Princeton University, The Shahnama Project website
End Notes


3. Ibid., V-VI: 35-81


6. Ibid., 74.


Bibliography


