The Great Jalayirid Shāhnāma

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Early Jalayirid Painting

Is or was there any such thing as the Great Jalayirid Shāhnāma? Before attempting to answer this question, it may be useful to summarize very briefly the state of knowledge (or rather our lack of it) regarding early Jalayirid painting.

The Jalayirids, a Mongol tribe, were one of several petty principalities that emerged as successors to the Ilkhanids. They controlled the territory of ʿIraq-i ʿArab and Azerbaijan for most of their reign (c. 1336–1410). The first Jalayirid ruler, Shaykh Hasan-i Buzurg (r. 1340–1356) ruled in his own name initially from Baghdad, but his earlier possession of Tabriz just after the death of Abu Sa’id, where he ruled in the name of a puppet Ilkhanid khan, and his later orderly retreat to Baghdad, may have enabled him to maintain in his possession the most important manuscripts of the Ilkhanid atelier. We have no definite knowledge of illustrated manuscripts made under Shaykh Hasan’s reign.1

1 Although there are several candidates, such as the Garshāspnāma of 1354 (see Richard Ettinghausen, “On Some Mongol Miniatures”, Kunst des Orients 3 (1959), pp. 60–5), which would fit as easily into his dominions as those of any other candidates. The Cairo Kalīla and Dimna was written in 1343 and was still in Jalayirid hands when the illustrations were added some forty years later. It may also therefore have been planned in Shaykh Hasan’s reign; see Bernard O’Kane, Early Persian Painting: Kalīla and Dimna

Shaykh Hasan-i Buzurg’s successor was his son Shaykh Uvays (r. 1356–74). Despite continuing battles with surrounding powers – the Qara Quyunlu, Shirvan-Shah and Golden Horde to the north and the Muzaffarids to the east, Uvays was able to expand from Baghdad to Azerbaijan, with Tabriz being taken in 1358, and ʿIraq-i ʿAjam (northern central Iran) added to his territory shortly afterwards. Uvays based himself in Tabriz for the rest of this reign. His artistic interests and abilities were chronicled by Dawlatshah as follows:

He was a refined and artistic ruler, handsome, generous, and quite capable in various arts. He drew pictures in the Wasiti style at which painters were astonished. Khvaja ʿAbd al-Hayy, the most outstanding exponent of Manuscripts of the Late-Fourteenth Century, London 2003, Appendix 18. The copy of al-Māʾ al-waraqi waʾl-ard al-najmiyya (also known as the Allegory of Alchemy) of Muhammad b. Umayl b. ʿAbdallah, dated 11 Muharram AH 740 (20 July 1339), Topkapı Saray Library, Ahmet 111, 2075, also seems to have had its frontispiece added at around the same time as the paintings of Cairo; it too may have been designed for the library of Shaykh Hasan. For this manuscript, see Bishr Farès, "Figures Magiques", in Aus der Welt der islamischen Kunst: Festschrift für Ernst Kühnel zum 75. Geburtstag am 26.10.1957, ed. Richard Ettinghausen, Berlin 1959, pp. 156–69, figs. 3a–b.

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the art in his day, was his protégé and pupil.2

Even allowing for poetic license, that Uvays should be credited with being not just a pupil but a teacher of painting is clear evidence for his love for it, and marks him out as a likely patron. Other evidence for the importance of the arts to the period of Uvays comes from the well-known preface by Dust Muhammad to the Bahram Mirza album (dated 1544). In it, Shams al-Din, one of the most important artists of his day, is also credited as the master of Khvaja ʿAbd al-Hayy. According to Dust Muhammad, Shams al-Din received his training from Ahmad Musa, the chief artist of the Ilkhanid court, during the reign of Sultan Uvays, indicating both the continuity of Jalayirid with Ilkhanid painting and the flourishing of the royal atelier at the time.3

But the almost complete lack of major dated metropolitan manuscripts between the Jamiʿ al-tavārīkh of 13144 and the Jalayirid Khamsa of Nizami and the Mathnavīs of Khvaju Kirmani manuscripts of the 1380s and 90s5 makes establishing a chronology for paintings between these dates problematic. This is all the more so with regard to paintings in albums, whether specifically made as practice drawings or sketches for the albums, or orphaned from their original manuscripts.6 This would account for some of the many disagreements in the past on the dating of the some thirty paintings in the Topkapi Saray albums that have been identified as Shāhnāma illustrations.7

In 1970 Nurhan Atasoy made the only major study to date of these paintings, dividing them into six groups and dating all but one of the groups between 1330 and the end of the fourteenth century, the exception being early Timurid.8 At that time she also dated the Great Mongol Shāhnāma to the period 1330–1375.9 There is now general agreement that the Great Mongol Shāhnāma dates from the 1330s10 and that the Istanbul University Library Kalīla and Dimna is from the reign of Sultan

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3 W.M. Thackston, Album Prefaces and Other Documents on the History of Calligraphers and Painters (Supplements to Muqarnas, Studies and Sources in Islamic Art and Architecture, 10), Leiden 2001, p. 13.


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9 Atasoy, “Four Istanbul Albums”, p. 32.