“Among the leaves of gold and green
Someone hopes he can’t be seen.
Who’s hiding here?”1

Prelude

This essay on acts of artistic concealment – and more specifically on disguised or secret signatures in early modern Persian manuscripts – grows out of discoveries made many years ago during research on the deluxe volume of ʿAbd al-Rahman Jami’s *Haft awrang* [Seven Thrones] commissioned by the Safavid prince Sultan Ibrahim Mirza and nowadays commonly known as the Freer Jami. As revealed in that study, the manuscript’s production was protracted and peripatetic, and involved the transcription of its seven *masnavi* poems by at least five Safavid court calligraphers (Muhibb ‘Ali, Malik al-Daylami, Shah Mahmud al-Nishapuri, Rustam ‘Ali, ‘Ayshi ibn ‘Ishrati) based in at least three different Safavid cities (Mashhad, Qazvin, Herat) over at least a nine year period (1556–1565).2 These artists meticulously documented their individual contributions to the volume in distinctive colophons at the end of separate sections of the *Haft awrang* text, with each giving his name and completion date, and in four instances, the particular city where he was working. Several also paid homage to their patron Sultan Ibrahim Mirza in lofty terms and colored script.

While the amount of specific information contained in the Freer Jami’s various colophons may exceed the norm for Persian manuscripts, the fact that its scribes signed their work follows accepted practice in the Islamic world from at least the late tenth century.3 Similar respect for traditional artistic protocol evidently explains the lack of recognition for the many other artists, including

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1 Yoshi, *Who’s Hiding Here?* (Natick, MA: Picture Book Studio, 1987), n.p. This children’s book features cut-out illustrations of various creatures in camouflage, each introduced with a little ditty that ends: “Who’s hiding here?” In the one quoted here, a frog and a snake hide among mottled leaves. I read the book to my young son not long after finding my first hidden signature in an illustrated Persian manuscript, as described below, and its conceit and title have stuck with me through the years.


illuminators and painters, who clearly worked on Sultan Ibrahim Mirza’s *Haft awrang* following the text transcription and who were responsible for its hundreds of lavishly decorated folios and more than two dozen beautiful miniature paintings. Yet two artists involved with this complex collaborative project chose to break tradition by inserting all but invisible signatures into their compositions.

Each section of the Freer Jami opens with an illuminated heading or *sarlawḥ* featuring a central gold cartouche, presumably reserved for its individual *masnavi* title, set within a broad rectangular field and enframed with colored bands. While the cartouches in manuscript’s other headpieces are empty, the one at the start of Jami’s *Yusuf and Zulaykha* contains two independent verses extolling the *masnavi* written in small, but perfectly legible, *nastaʾliq* script (see Fig. 2.1). Directly underneath this poetic cartouche and within a rubbed-out portion of the narrow green framing band, there is a much smaller inscription, measuring about one millimeter high and bracketed by a pair of Xs, which reads: *zahhabahu ʿAbdullah al-Shīrāzī* (illuminated by ʿAbdullah of Shiraz).5

One of the illustrations to the *Yusuf and Zulaykha* poem in the Freer Jami depicts the infant witness testifying to Yusuf’s innocence on the terrace outside Zulaykha’s palace. The building’s central archway, or *ivan*, is surrounded by a frame of beige brickwork and inscribed in orange *nastaʾliq* with a verse that, like the couplet within the same *masnavi*’s headpiece, is not from the *Haft awrang*, and that comprises a panegyric to the future prophet Yusuf. To the lower left of this poetic inscription there is yet another, much more easily overlooked, line of writing nestled inside a brick no more than two millimeters square and reading: *katabahu Shaykh Muḥammad muṣavvir* (written by Shaykh Muhammad the painter).6

By definition a signature is a written name, which, in the case of a work of art, manifests its creator’s presence and attests to his agency, that is, authorship for the composition on which the signature is written.7 So if ʿAbdullah al-Shirazi and Shaykh Muhammad – who by the time of the *Haft awrang*’s production were already mature Safavid court artists – wanted to claim full or partial responsibility for the heading illumination and inscribed cartouche at the start of the *Yusuf and Zulaykha masnavi* and for the subsequent Yusuf illustration, respectively, as autograph works, why did they inscribe their names in such inconspicuous places and in such minuscule hands?8

The following discussion represents an initial attempt to place that question within a broader line of inquiry, including signatures as markers of individual and authorial identity, social and professional standing, workshop practices, and relations both between artists and between artists and their patrons. It also introduces more evidence for hidden signatures, in the form of selected examples drawn from Persian manuscripts dating from the late fourteenth through late sixteenth centuries.

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4 Simpson, Sultan Ibrahim Mirza’s *Haft Awrang*, pages 51–52 and Figs. 31–37.

5 Priscilla S. Soucek, “ʿAbdallah Širāzī,” *Encyclopaedia Iranica* 1 (1985); Simpson, Sultan Ibrahim Mirza’s *Haft Awrang*, pages 34, 300 and 402 and Figs. 32 and 203.


8 Simpson, “Discovering Shaykh-Muhammad,” did attempt to address the artist’s motivation and the meaning of his concealed signature by focusing on the fact that he used both a verbal form that signifies writing – *katabahu* – and a noun exclusively associated with painting – *muṣavvir* – to indicate that he was explicitly proclaiming a dual role in this *Haft Awrang* illustration as both the writer of the palace inscription and the painter of the Yusuf scene in folio 120a. But that still begs the question of his signature’s obscure placement and minute size.