LE CHANT DU MONDE: A DISENCHANTING ECHO OF SAFAVID ART HISTORY

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Abstract

The catalogue of a major Safavid exhibition at the Louvre, written by Assadollah Souren Melikian-Chirvani, seems to be primarily aimed at contradicting established art history theories. Unfortunately, most of its author’s contentions are based on the erroneous reading of Persian texts and false assumptions. The aim of this article is to try to prevent the readers of that catalogue being misguided by incorrect information.

Keywords

Shāh Tahmās Shāhnāmeh; Mīr Muṣawwir; Mīr Sayyid ʿAlī; Qiṣṣeh-khwān.

I. INTRODUCTION

Exhibitions come and go and what remains is a catalogue. For a major Safavid exhibition at the Louvre curated by Assadollah Souren Melikian-Chirvani under the title Le Chant du monde: L’Art de l’Iran safavide 1501–1736, expectations were high, and many hoped to have a solid catalogue with new revelations. If anything, Melikian’s catalogue is what a catalogue should not be. Many of its entries have no description at all, not even the standard technical information on size, medium and provenance. There is hardly a page without a mistake. Typos and erroneous cross-references notwithstanding, the major problem of the catalogue is its methodology, one that solely relies on deciphering inscriptions, often wrongly, and using them to develop theories in defiance of available evidence. For years, Melikian has attacked scholars for their lack of attention and understanding of inscriptions on miniatures and objects. He has also gained an unchallenged repute in explaining the hidden or esoteric meaning of Persian poetry, to the extent that when, based on the erroneous interpretation of the word tarbiyat in a poem, he wrongly assumed that it was ʿAlāʾ al-Dīn Juvaynī who had converted the Il-Khānīd Ahmad Tegudār (r. 1282–84) to Islam,1 even the late Jean Aubin fell for it.2 It is to avoid the occurrence of such misunderstandings that I shall try to produce, in what follows, a survey of the numerous problematic or erroneous conclusions by Melikian. I believe that the long list of his mistakes will justify the harsh criticism that I have presented in this article.

II. “AUTHENTIC SIGNATURES” VERSUS STYLISTIC ANALYSIS

In a veiled attack on stylistic analysis, which he qualifies as a method based on “information much too incomplete”, Melikian proposes to focus on the “signature modes” of five prominent painters of the early fifteenth century, as well as an “array of indices that will eliminate any uncertainty on the identity of these authors” (p. 46). His attack feeds on a methodological controversy that has divided the Persian and Islamic art historians of the last three decades into two rival camps: (a) the school of Stuart Cary Welch that emphasised “looking” at works of art, and (b) the rival school of Oleg Grabar, which, rather than looking, preferred to indulge in nebulous theories that seldom produced a concrete result. The divide between the two schools was mainly in reaction to Welch’s exploit in attributing some three hundred Safavid masterpieces to various painters. While his early publications offered attributions without much explanation, his monumental The Houghton Shahnama, co-authored by Martin Dickson, provided a detailed stylistic analysis that reverberated against an informative historical backdrop. Unable to see what he saw, and unwilling to delve into the myriad information buried in Welch and Dickson’s text as well as its numerous

footnotes, the proponents of the second school ridiculed his “arbitrary” attributions and his reliance on conjectural evidence. In the same vein, while discussing a painting from the ex-Vever Collection, Melikian qualifies Welch’s attribution to Mir Sayyid ‘Ali as being “guided by his intuition only”, while asserting that proof only resided in the signature that he (Melikian) had found (p. 71). Conveniently, by claiming to value only authentic signatures and to shun the practice of attributing unsigned works (pp. 17, 86), Melikian avoids mentioning previous attributions, except of course when he has something to add. In the case of Sultan-Muhammad’s—unsigned—masterpiece, the Court of Gayumars, for instance, he accepts Welch’s attribution even though derived from stylistic analysis in combination with circumstantial evidence (p. 60), because he wants to explain how the painter had interpreted Firdawsi’s verses and why the word ðā‘n meant “beauty” (which it does not). Oddly, he even faults Glenn Lowry and Milo Beach (p. 225) for publishing an unsigned drawing that they qualified as “attributable to Mir Sayyid ‘Ali” rather than stating “by Mir Sayyid ‘Ali”, as he did! One cannot switch methodologies whimsically. If stylistic analysis is only intuition, Melikian should avoid it as well. I shall try, below, to demonstrate that the inscriptions and signatures that Melikian considers as authentic are anything but that, and that stylistic analysis is in many instances preferable to reliance on dubious signatures or texts.

III. BIHZĂD’S SIGNATURES

The first of the five painters whose signatures Melikian sets to investigate is the celebrated master, Bihzăd of Herat. He is primarily known for his Timurid-period paintings, and his activities in the Safavid period are not well documented as yet. As an example of Bihzăd’s authentic signature for this period, Melikian chooses the sawvara-hu al-‘abd Bihzăd (“has painted it the slave Bihzăd”) inscription under a roundel (Figs 1, 4). He asserts that the use by the master of “his customary formula in Arabic, guarantees it to be by him” (p. 47). He also affirms (p. 48) that the identity of the painter, and hence the authenticity of his signature, is further emphasised by a direct reference in the introduction to the anthology to which this roundel belongs. Bihzăd is recognised in there as the author of the roundel (Fig. 6). There are, however, several problems with these assertions:

(a) The most elementary understanding of Bihzăd’s paintings forbids accepting this awkward inscription to be by the master’s hand; for Bihzăd’s forte was his ability to fit into a single page a complex architectural setting that could meticulously combine a multitude of rooms with staircases, doorways, courtyards, walls, fences, balconies and rooftops. The same ability allowed him to fit into his compositions numerous persons, each neatly placed in his position without overlapping, and without being cut by architectural elements or the painting frame. His sense of order and tidiness of design also extended to his calligraphy, best exemplified by a corner cartouche (Fig. 2) in which the inscription proceeds at first vertically, then turns precisely ninety degrees to the left, with a transition assured by the judicial positioning of a marvellously executed “hā-alif” combination on a 45° angle. A person imbued with such a talent for geometrical precision could have never produced a non-centred and slanting

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3 An example of this approach is the recent article by Oleg Grabar and Mika Natif which deconstructs Stuart Cary Welch’s attribution of the two Harvard paintings (Camp Scene, and Nighttime in a Palace) to Mir Sayyid ‘Ali as “arbitrary” (Grabar and Natif 2001: 196). I shall deal with their unwarranted remarks, false assumptions and erroneous conclusions in a separate paper.

4 Melikian claims to see the full sentence sawvara-hu Sayyid ‘Ali but I only see the word ‘Ali and perhaps the remnants of Sayyid.

5 In the context used by Firdawsi (مینا گشت‌باز فرود انس و الب) the word ðā‘n means ethics or customs rather than beauty, the best example of which is the Æn-i Ækbari, the compendium on ethics and customs at the court of the Mughal Emperor Akbar written by Abu ‘l-Fâzîl Ællâmi; ‘Allâmi 1985.

6 Welch can make mistakes, as we all do, especially when dealing with more than three hundred paintings, but that is no reason to reject his approach. I myself had disagreements with his attributions on two occasions, and if I have proposed alternative ones, this is not by refuting his methodology but by using Welch’s own line of reasoning. Thus in the case of a folio of the Shâhnâmeh page (Rostam’s First Ordeal) that Melikian reproduces on pp.

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inscription which does not even follow the faint tracing circles around the roundel (Fig. 4).\textsuperscript{8} If Bihzād really wanted to affix his signature on this work, he could have easily incorporated it in the surrounding illuminated strip, thus avoiding an eyesore in the unpainted area of the paper.

(b) Bihzād was trained by his adoptive father, Mīrak-i Naqqāsh-i Khurāsānī, who was a master painter and designer of monumental calligraphies. His inscriptions in the cartouches of his famous Būstān (Cairo adab farsi 908) are a testimony to his calligraphic skills (Fig. 2).\textsuperscript{9} They clearly show well-balanced letters in the rayhān script, penned by a steady and continuous hand, as it should be for any trained calligrapher. The anthology inscription, though, is clearly disjointed (between the sād and wāw, and between the ‘ayn and bā), and starts with rayhān but degenerates into a sort of nastaliq by the time it reaches the word abd. To me, these indicate an attempt to imitate another person’s handwriting (we shall see more of this further below).

(c) The verb sawwara-hu (lit. “has produced this figure”), which is in the third person, can of course be used by painters. But as Melikian himself observes (p. 53), the label of a drawing attributed to Bihzād, which reads naql az kār-i mawlānā Vali, sawwara-hu al-‘abd Bihzād (“copied from a work by Vali, has drawn it the slave Bihzād”) was probably penned by Dūst-Muhammad, who had put together an album for Tāhmāb’s brother, Bahrām Mirzā. The words al-‘abd Bihzād, penned again by Dūst-Muhammad, appear on another painting produced by Melikian (p. 55). Therefore, neither the presence of the word ‘abd (“slave”), nor that of the verb sawwara-hu, can guarantee that such an inscription is by the painter’s hand, even if proven to be from the same period.\textsuperscript{10}

(d) Massumeh Farhad pointed out to me traces of an inscription by a different hand along the left edge (Fig. 1), which reads ‘amal-i ustād Bihzād. Its presence deals a fatal blow to the authenticity of the first inscription. Because, if it was there first, then the one under the roundel was only added to emphasise the attribution to Bihzād. If on the other hand, it was written despite the presence of the one below the roundel, it means that the latter was not considered as a valid signature and the authorship of the painting had to be re-emphasised. In either case, the one under the roundel cannot be by the hand of Bihzād.

(e) As for the preface explaining the compilation of this anthology (Fig. 6), it does not seem to reflect the truth for one major reason: it explains how the patron was able to employ, in addition to Bihzād, a host of calligraphers such as Sultān-Muḥammad-i Khandān, Sultān-Muḥammad-i Nūr, Mir ‘Alī-yi Hiravi and Muḥammad-Qāsim-i Shādīshāh, to write sections of it and yet the preface itself is penned in a rudimentary calligraphic style. If the patron could commandeer so many talented artists for each section of his anthology, he could afford one for his preface as well. The commentaries seem to be yet another attempt, by jobless Safavid artists of the first half of the sixteenth century, to package genuine and fake works into a compendium destined to be sold on foreign markets.\textsuperscript{11}

(f) The painting roundel, however, displays many of Bihzād’s compositional characteristics, such as crooked branches on bear trees and hunchbacked individuals. The execution seems much less precise than his Timurid period works; that, however, is also the case for two other Safavid paintings attributable to Bihzād, the portrait of Hāfīz (p. 58) and a Winter Scene (Freer Gallery 46.13).\textsuperscript{12} It may or may not be the work of the master. But, even if one accepts it as genuine, it still clashes with the preface of this anthology that dates its compilation to 1524: not only do the painting figures lack the Safavid baton in their turban but the young man on the left is wearing an Uzbek conical bonnet, which places its execution closer to 1510 (the year Ismāʿīl drove the Uzbeks out of Herat) than 1524.

(g) Therefore, neither the so-called signature, nor the commentaries, can be relied on for the attribution of this painting to Bihzād.

Melikian focuses next (pp. 47–50) on the three lines inscribed into a window incorporated at the top of a painting from the Gulshan album (Fig. 7), in which

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\textsuperscript{8} These tracing circles were used to set the radial length of the short and long finials protruding from the illumination.

\textsuperscript{9} Soudavar 1992: 98.

\textsuperscript{10} For an inscription which reads sawwara-hu ‘Alī al-Ḥusaynī, kataba-hu Shāh-Muḥammad al-Neyshābūrī, obviously written by the painter and not the scribe see Soudavar 1999: 53, pl. XVIa.

\textsuperscript{11} For another example see Soudavar 1992: 118–19.

\textsuperscript{12} Soudavar 1992: 97.
Bihzād supposedly claims to have painted the scene of the Two Camels at the age of seventy. He states: “one has only to compare these lines with the inscriptions by the hand of the master under the paintings of the Cairo Būstān to accept that these lines are also by his hand.” Unfortunately this “as-a-matter-of-fact” assumption that he throws in is completely wrong. I have reproduced in Fig. 5, the inscription from the Dārā and the Herdsman scene from the Cairo Būstān. It clearly reveals that the inscription under the frame is in an even more mature nastā'liq than that of Sulṭān-ʿAlī Mashhadi, the scribe of the Būstān. When this Būstān was prepared in 1488, the nastā'liq script was not well developed, and if Sulṭān-ʿAlī was regularly, and almost exclusively, used for major works in Herat at the end of the fifteenth century, it was simply because there were no other nastā'liq calligraphers around. It is only with the advent of the next generation of calligraphers such as Sulṭān Muḥammad-i Nūr, and especially Mīr ʿAlī Hirāvī, that nastā'liq evolved stylistically and found more practitioners. If Bihzād, or any other calligrapher, was capable of producing in the 1480s a nastā'liq comparable to the one under the painting frame, he would have surely been commissioned for many other works.

More importantly, the Būstān has been re-margined and these so-called inscriptions by Bihzād are not on the original page but on the margins! The purpose of these inscriptions is not clear, because they only give a summary description of the painting. They were perhaps markers to ensure that the correct cut-out painting would be re-glued in each empty location. In the case of another painting from this manuscript, Zulaykhā Seduṣes Yūsuf, they were perhaps considered onerous or wrong, because they were subsequently erased.13 Time-wise, the manuscript must have been re-margined several decades later, when Bihzād was not even alive.

As for the rather bold nastā'liq inscription on the Two Camels painting, it may or may not be by Bihzād. It is true that in between 1488 and the date of this illustration (perhaps painted in the early 1530s when the master was supposedly seventy years old), nastā'liq made a lot of progress and became the choice script for calligraphers, as well as painters. Bihzād’s own grand-nephew, Muʿazzar-ʿAlī, and another painter from that younger generation, Mīrzā ʿAlī, who were probably both trained by the old master, used a solid nastā'liq in their paintings.14 By the same token, Bihzād may have had time to train in this new script. But the main problem, as I see it, is the incorporation of this bold inscription on the top right corner: it is so prominent that it totally distracts the viewer’s attention (especially if one cuts down the album page to its original size; Fig. 7).15 It does represent a radical departure from the subtle incorporation of the master’s signatures in the Cairo Būstān. Also, it seems pretentious to call one’s own creation bāṭī ḵilqat (“unprecedented creation”). Even if the prose is by him, the chances are that it was written somewhere else and got re-written on this spot at the Mughal Library, when the Gulshan album was being assembled. In any case, it is not a reliable proof for attributing the painting to Bihzād. The stylistic analysis of the painting, and a notation of the Emperor Jahāngīr on an adjacent page of the Gulshan album, offer better reasons for attributing it to Bihzād.

Melikian’s third choice for an authenticated Bihzād is the Ottoman Painter (Freer 1932.28.450) that bears the inscription ʿawwarahu al-ʿabd Bihzād (Fig. 3) and that may or may not represent the Venetian Gentile Bellini (pp. 50–54). It is rather strange for Melikian, who considers the inscription under the roundel as authentic, to believe that this one, too, is by the same hand, for clearly they are not (Figs 3, 4).16 More importantly, Melikian wants to re-establish the authenticity of this signature against the opinion of past scholars, who not only saw it in a radically different style from that of Bihzād but also saw an impossibility for Bihzād, who lived in Herat, to have drawn a subject that rather belonged to the triangular interaction of Ottomans, Venetians and the Aq-Qoyūnlū of Tabriz.17 It is to counter the latter objection that Melikian stipulates that: (1) “being a profoundly pious man”, Bihzād would have certainly gone for a pilgrimage to Mecca, on the way to which he could have stopped in Tabriz; and (2) “that he was previously attached to the court of Sulṭān-Ḥosayn Bāyqara does not exclude the possibility that he undertook one or several trips to Tabriz” (p. 53). Once

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13 Sims 2002: 248. In the case of the Būstān frontispiece they are in red ink, ibid p. 248.
15 Many paintings of the Gulshan album are enlarged to match the size of the facing page painting or to respect a certain dimensional norm.
16 At the very least, they are in two different scripts: the one on Fig. 4 is imitating the rayḥān script while the one on the Ottoman Painter is nastā'liq.
again, Melikian envisages possibilities built upon incorrect assumptions. Indeed, Būḍāq-i Munshi-yi Qazvini, who was secretary to Bahram Mirzâ as early as 1536, reported: “that master Bihzâd, who reached the age of seventy, could not live a moment without ruby-red wine or the ruby-red lips of a wine-bearer; constant wine had kept him young and despite the ban, he continued drinking and the shâh knew it (but didn’t mind).” I wonder how an alcohol addict who kept drinking despite a royal ban punishable by death, could be qualified as a “profoundly pious” man who had been to Mecca. As for the trips from Herat to Tabriz, they were arduously long and prohibitively costly for those with limited means such as painters. If a person attached to the court of Herat went to Tabriz, it had to be for good reasons. Thus when the vizier Afzal al-Din-i Kirmâni (d. 1504) left Herat for the court of Sultan Yaqub Aq-Qoyyunlu, it was to escape from an arrest ordered by Sultan-Hasayn Bâyqarâ; he stayed there for ten years. If Bihzâd had decided to go to Tabriz, he would have even fared worse than in Mecca, for the city was under the tutelage of Qâzî ‘Isâ Sâvajî, the notoriously conservative sadr of Sultan Yaqub, who applied the shar‘a and created much hardship for the population. The wine-addicted Bihzâd had certainly no incentive to trade liberal Herat for a city under the spell of Muslim zealots.

All available information about Bihzâd places him in Herat prior to his summons to Tabriz by Ismâ’îl I (at some time after 1522); it is impossible to imagine that Bihzâd, despite the hardships involved, took a trip to Tabriz just to make a copy of a European-type painting and returned to Herat without attempting to produce anything else for one of the Aq-Qoyyunlu rulers. Sensing the weakness of his arguments, Melikian then reverts to a stylistic analysis that he had professed to avoid, comparing not only the sinuous lines of the Ottoman Painter with the Portrait of Shaybak Khân (Metropolitan Museum 57.51.29), but affirming that they both make use of the same colour tones of green, crimson red and blue (p. 54).

The most important element for stylistic comparison is the treatment of facial features as well as the hands. Their treatment is so different in these two paintings that they cannot be by the same hand. More disturbing, though, is Melikian’s reliance on colour tonality. The following anecdote may be revealing in this matter:

Cary Welch recognised the paintings of four folios of the Freer Haft Awrang manuscript (Ferreer 46.12) to be by the same hand and linked them to Qâdîmî, a painter of the Shâh ‘Abbâs Shâhnâmeh. In a first step, I had argued that three of them (fols 58a, 188a, 275a) were by ‘Abbâlî-i Shirâzî who had illuminated and signed the double-page frontispiece of that manuscript. I could not express an opinion for the fourth one (fol. 100b) on the basis of reproductions alone. When I finally had a chance to revisit the manuscript in company of the Freer curator, Massumeh Farhad, it was clear to both of us that the fourth one was also by ‘Abbâlî-i Shirâzî. The most decisive element that linked all four paintings to the signed frontispiece was the colour tone of the blue. It simply jumped to the eye. But no reproduction, not even a transparency, can accurately duplicate that colour tone. The colour similarity between the five works can only be perceived if they are physically put side-by-side. Therefore, to claim, on the basis of reproductions, that the colour tones of two differently located paintings are the same is not only inconclusive but certainly more “subjective” than any other component of the stylistic analysis that Melikian had avoided to avoid.

IV. READING WHAT IS NOT THERE

Trying to explain the poetical context of Persian miniatures, Melikian focuses on the oft-published page of the Divan of Haftiz, the ‘Id-i Far âr, one of the two works signed by the celebrated painter Sultan-Muhammad (pp. 62–65). Stuart Cary Welch twice provided an English translation of the poems inscribed therein, and I have provided a slightly different version (courtesy of Wheeler Thackston). It was even translated into French on the occasion of the publication of the French version of Welch’s Five Royal Manuscripts. But true to his style, Melikian, who does not want to rely on other people’s translations, gives a Persian version followed by his own translation in French (p. 63):

عبد است و آخر گل و ورای در انتظار
سافی برود یاد بینم ماه و می بیار

24 Welch 1976b: 68.
Voici la Fête (‘eyd) la fin des roses et les compagnons dans l’attente,
Échanson contemple la lune dans le visage du Shâh et apporte le vin.

There is of course nothing wrong with this approach except that what he writes and translates is not exactly what is on the miniature. He reproduces the standard version of Ḥafiz’s poem, while on the miniature (Fig. 8), in lieu of the word in parenthesis, ḍkhair (‘end of’), appears the word mawṣim (‘the time of’). As I shall argue in a forthcoming article, this was a deliberate change of words in order to evoke a contemporary ‘Īd-i Fitr that occurred on 9 June 1528, a time when flowers were in full bloom in Iran and one that could not be qualified as the end of the rose period. If one cannot read the visible, one will not comprehend its hidden meaning either.

A second inscription (on the doorway) reads (Fig. 9):

الهادي ابطال المنفر سام ميرزا

al-Hâdî Abu ’l Muṣaffar Sâm Mirzâ

I have previously argued that it was not by the hand of Sultan-Muhammad but is a later addition, with its first two letters (al) transgressing over the ruling lines, and that it projects Sâm Mirzâ as the true heir to his father. The linchpin of my theory is the string of titles used in this sentence, especially al-Hâdî, which was solely used by his father Ismâ’îl. Melikian, who praises my entry on this miniature as containing “important historical commentaries”, offers nevertheless an erroneous reading of this doorway inscription by changing the first word into اذاعة (iddi‘ā-yi) that he translates as “revindications” (“claims of”). He not only omits the letter lâm but introduces an unacceptable—almost insulting—word at the beginning of a string of eulogising epithets for the prince. Moreover, if one qualifies a theory as “important,” one should at least provide some justification before undermining it by removing its linchpin.

V. MÎR MUṢAWWIR

In a section dedicated to Mîr Muṣawwir, Melikian asserts that the only painting to bear incontrovertibly this painter’s “signature” is a painting from Shâh ʿAlî Shâh’s Khamsheh (British Library OR2265, fol. 15), Anushervân and the Owls (pp. 66–67). The basis for his assertion is an inscription on a ruined wall within the painting, in which he claims to read ḥarrara-hu Mîr Muṣawwir (“penned by Mîr Muṣawwir”) below two couplets supposedly composed by the painter himself (Fig. 11).25 Welch’s attribution of the same painting to Aqa Mirak is only briefly mentioned in a footnote, perhaps because it was thought to be “intuitive” and did not merit refutation. However, Welch spent some fifteen years comparing details of the paintings of the Shâh ʿAlî Shâh’s Shâhnâmeh with those of the Khamsheh in order first to group them by distinct hands, and then to find a name for the painter of each group. This second task was mostly achieved through the set of attributions inscribed on the pages of this Khamsheh. Logic dictates that if somebody dared to add inscriptions on the pages of one of the two most important Safavid royal manuscripts, which remained in the royal Persian library until the nineteenth century, he was a connoisseur with access to that library. If one wants to discard his markings as unreliable, one must do it on the basis of perceived stylistic contradictions. Melikian, though, discards them with the stroke of a pen by characterising them as mere graffitis (p. 80).

As a group, these inscriptions (which identify works by Sultan-Muhammad, Mîr Sayyid ʿAlî, Mirzâ ʿAlî and Aqa Mirak) constitute the most reliable body of stylistic information within the realm of Persian paintings because they accord with all other signed works by these artists. For the first two artists, for instance, Welch established a close concordance with their known signed works.26 In the case of Mirzâ ʿAlî, no signed works had as yet been recognised when Welch and Dickson published The Houghton Shâhnâmeh. But a manuscript that the Metropolitan bought in 1986 has three signed pages by this artist, with stylistic characteristics that tie in with Welch’s attributions;27 his signature therein as ʿAlî-yi Muṣawwir (Fig. 10) only refers to him as ʿAlî the Painter and does not include his sobriquet Mirzâ (a

25 Melikian even claims that Mîr Muṣawwir is his takhallus or pen-name. Unfortunately, by definition, the takhallus of a poet only appears within the poem itself (usually in the last couplet) and never after a poem!

26 Dickson and Welch 1981: 58–63, 180–87. A further signed work by Mîr Sayyid ʿAlî was presented by this author in Soudavar 1999: 53, pl. XV1a.

diminutive of amirzadeh “prince”).28 As for Aqā Mirak, I have previously argued that the very inscription on Anushervān and the Owls contains his signature, for two reasons: (1) if four other paintings of the Khamseh that Welch attributed to this artist bear an attribution to him, the chances are that the connoisseur who wrote them refrained from adding another one to this painting because it already had one;29 and (2) the signature line of this painting has been damaged and has needed reconstruction (Fig. 11); if the middle name is rendered as Mīr he is still an unjustifiable gap until the next word (Musawwir). Commonsense dictates that there was initially another letter in lieu of the gap, probably kāf to complete the signature as ḥarrara-hu Mi[rak]-i Musawwir. As in the case of Mirzā ‘Ali’s signature (in which Mirzā was eliminated), the honorific epithet Aqā (“Mister”) for Aqā Mirak’s signature was dropped as well.30

I cannot fault Melikian for not being able to see the large gap in the signature inscription nor the stylistic discrepancies between the paintings of Mir Muṣawwir and Aqā Mirak. I do take umbrage, however, when he criticizes others for not following rules that he ignores himself. Indeed, in regard to a painting on which appears the name Sayyid ‘Ali he faults a number of authors for having stated that it was “signed by Mir Sayyid ‘Ali”, because he argues that the epithet Mir “could not be part of his signature” (p. 86, n. 71).31 Yet he asserts that the painter of Anushervān and the Owls has signed his name as Mir Muṣawwir (with Mir included), despite observing that the latter’s name was actually Sayyid Muḥammad (p. 76).32 Like Mirzā ‘Ali and Mir Sayyid ‘Ali, who dropped their honorific epithets from their signatures, Mir Muṣawwir would have never included Mir (a diminutive of amir) in his signature, because it was an epithet that others used to honour him as a descendant of the Prophet Muḥammad.

Finally, Būdaq-i Munshi-yi Qazvīnī who, for some fourteen years after 1535 was secretary to Bahram Mirzā, mentions that when the Mughal Emperor Humāyūn visited Ţāhmāsb in 1545, Mir Muṣawwir had long been in disgrace.33 His downfall was probably due to his association with Ţāhmāsb’s rebellious brother Sām Mirzā who was arrested in 1535.34 Therefore, Dickson and Welch’s contention that Mir Muṣawwir did not contribute to Ţāhmāsb’s Khamseh also finds a historic justification in the writings of Būdaq-i Qazvīnī. They all negate the Mir Muṣawwir signature theory for this Khamseh page.

Melikian next presents another “signed work by Mir Muṣawwir”: the portrait of an old man reading a petition, which he qualifies as the artist’s self-portrait (Fig. 14). When he first published the same in 1998,35 he was unaware that I was concurrently writing about it.36 Since then John Seyller has written about it as well, using my reading of the text to confirm my conclusions and to criticise Melikian’s one.37 Melikian does not mention either but simply refers to an old publication by Amina Okada who had attributed this work to Mir Sayyid ‘Ali (p. 68). He contends that his reading will clarify matters. Unfortunately, his reading is wrong, and so are all arguments presented in support of his conclusions:

28 “Mirzā” was probably added to this painter’s name because he was talented and considered to be the heir to his father Sultan-Muḥammad, the king of painters, Soudavar 1992: 170.
29 Welch attributes a sixth painting to Aqā Mirak (The Physicians’ Duel), which is the only painting not to bear an attribution to this painter or his signature. As the manuscript was re-margined, and as some of the attributions to Mirzā ‘Ali are on the new margin, one may assume that this Aqā Mirak painting had originally an inscribed attribution on the margins too, but discarded with the old margins.
30 Melikian omits Ebadollah Bahari’s—unsubstantiated— attribution of Anushervān and the Owls to Aqā Mirak (Bahari 1997: 223, 252), even though he highly praises him elsewhere in his catalogue.
31 Personally, I see nothing wrong in this statement, for painters are usually referred to by their better-known names than the name they actually include in their signature; one can easily say that a painting is signed by Picasso when the signature actually reads Pablo Ruiz.
32 For a more complete discussion of Mir Muṣawwir’s name see, Soudavar 1992: 156.
33 Soudavar 1999: 50, 61.
36 Soudavar 1999: 50.
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Fig. 1. Detail of a page from an Anthology, the Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC, F1944.48, fol. 3.

Fig. 2. Detail of a page from a Būstān (Cairo adab farsi 908, fol. 52b).

Fig. 3. Detail of the Ottoman Painter, the Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC, F1932.28.450.

Fig. 4. Detail of a page from an Anthology, the Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC, F1944.48, fol. 3.

Fig. 5. Detail of a page from a Būstān (Cairo adab farsi 908, fol. 10a).
A DISENCHANTING ECHO OF SAFAVID ART HISTORY

Fig. 6. Detail of a page from an Anthology, the Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC, F1944.48, fol. Iv.

Fig. 7. Two Camels painting cut down to original size (Gulshan album, Golestan Palace Library).

Fig. 8. Detail of a page from the Divan-i Ḥāfiz, Art and History Collection, Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC, LTS95.2.42.

Fig. 9. Detail of a page from the Divan-i Ḥāfiz, Art and History Collection, Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC, LTS95.2.42.

Fig. 10. Detail of a page from a Būstān copied in 1529, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (1986.216.2).

Fig. 11. Detail of Anūshervān and the Owls from the British Library Khamseh (OR 2265).
Fig. 12. Detail of a painting by Mir Sayyid ‘Ali, LACMA M.90.141.1.

Fig. 13. Detail of Bârbad Playing Before Khusrâw from the British Library Khamseh (OR 2265).

Fig. 14. Vizier Reading a Petition, Musée Guimet.

Fig. 15. Detail of a drawing by Mir Sayyid ‘Ali, The Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC, S1986.291.

Fig. 16. Margin detail of Nâshâbeh Recognising Iskandar from his Portrait from the British Library Khamseh (OR 2265).

Fig. 17. Signature detail of a drawing by Muhammadi, Sultan by a Stream, Art and History Collection, Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC, LTS95.2.67.
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Fig. 18. Detail of a Seated Dervish, Art and History Collection, Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC, LTS95.2.79.

Fig. 19. Signature of Rizâ on drawing of Melikian cat. no. 106 (Private collection).

Fig. 20. Fake signature of Rizâ on drawing of Melikian cat. no. 107 (Louvre OA 7137).

Fig. 21. Fake signature of Rizâ on drawing, Melikian catalogue (p. 97).

Fig. 22. Court scene by Muhammad-`Ali b. Muhammad Zamân, British Museum OA1920.9-17.0299.

Fig. 23. Portrait of Muhammad-Bâqir Majlisi on his tomb in Isfahan (Honarfar 1965: 159).
To interpret his reading, and justify this painting as the self-portrait of Mir Mušawwir, Melikian asserts that “it was an Iranian practice to include the name of the author of a petition on top of it” (p. 68). The fact is that the only ‘arzeh-dāšt (“petition/report”) that we have from the Timurid or early Safavid period is the one presented to Bāyāsungur, which does not name the petitioner (whom we usually assume to be the head of the prince’s library, Ja’far-i Bāyāsunguri). It was up to the functionary who presented the petition to inform the king about the author’s identity. If the petition was to be presented in person, there was obviously no need to write one’s name. Melikian’s unfamiliarity with chancery practices also shows in his lack of understanding for the missing words after in shā’ā: he completes it with a supposedly missing Allāh. In accordance with a practice that goes back to Mongol times, important words from the text were always pulled out to the margin, or to the top of the letter; here, the two words Allāh ta’ālā (“God Almighty”) were pulled out from the words in shā’ā and placed on top to serve also as an invocation to God. Melikian though, completes the missing words with a supposedly dropped Allāh. Minor reading errors notwithstanding, Melikian’s main problem is the misreading of the key sentence of the letter in which Mir Mušawwir, after stating that his son (Mir Sayyid ‘Ali) is already in the services of Humāyūn, declares that he will join him shortly. The sentence accords with the information provided by Būdāq that the Mir’s son went to India first “and the father followed him there”. At the same time, it negates the possibility of Mir Mušawwir presenting his own petition to the king: the petitioner could not be writing to Humāyūn from afar and presenting it to him at the same time. Moreover, according to Persian painting conventions, a dark-skinned person in an Indian garb is an Indian person (therefore not the Persian Mir Mušawwir). Also, the person to read a petition for the king had to be a person of high rank, most probably the vizier. The sumptuously gold-embroidered robe of the old man clearly vouches him to be a man of means and not a lowly-paid court artist (see below).

Furthermore, paintings inserted in Mughal albums usually bear two signs of connoisseurship. One is a number, which, as demonstrated by Seyller, indicates the

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40 Compare the underlined words with my own transcription. His reconstruction umūdwar bi ānast is not wrong. But as a poem that he himself produces on p. 77, the expression umūdwar chūnān-ast is the prevailing formula to be used in conjunction with umūdwar. As for his ending wish (“May the shadow of the sun be blessed”), it is rather more Mithraic than Islamic.

41 Melikian seems to be unfamiliar with the expression az sar qadam sākhān (lit. “to use one’s head as legs”, i.e., to rush) because he reads the word sar therein as seyr.

42 Soudavar 1999: 50.
relative value of the painting.\textsuperscript{43} The number 3 assigned to this painting (Fig. 14) is a function of its simplicity and small size. The second notation is usually an attribution of authorship inscribed under the painting: in this case, the attribution is to Mir Sayyid ‘Ali. Whether we can trust this attribution or not is unimportant. The fact is that the functionary or librarian who wrote it could certainly read the inscription on the petition with Mir Musawwir’s name on it. If he still chose to add the Mir Sayyid ‘Ali attribution underneath, it was because it was clear to him that the name on the petition was not the painter’s name. For this librarian, Mir Sayyid ‘Ali had captured a snapshot of an event that pertained to his father and obviously was of concern to him. He therefore ascribed the latter’s name. Stylistically, the painting has one important characteristic: the perfect sense of weight and balance conveyed by the kneeling posture of the old man. Only two artists from the early Safavid period were gifted with the ability of conveying it: Mirzâ ‘Ali and Mir Sayyid ‘Ali. The forward leaning position of a kneeling man also seems to be a characteristic of this artist.

VI. MIR SAYYID ‘ALI AND THE QUESTION OF “SELF PORTRAITS”

In addition to the previous painting, Melikian claims three other single-figure paintings, two signed by Mir Sayyid ‘Ali and one by Muhammad Qāsim, to be self-portraits (pp. 70–73, 390–91). His contentions suffer from reading too much into an inscription. What all of these figures have in common is that they have rich garments and wear intricate ornaments. In the Freer drawing (Fig. 15), the young Safavid prince (holding a booklet) wears earrings with hanging pearls. He also has a very elaborate belt buckle, probably of gold. In the LACMA painting (M.90.141.1), the sitter wears a most sumptuous robe with gold brocade, has a golden-hilted knife in his belt and wears a golden headband around his bonnet. In the painting by Muhammad-Qāsim, the holder of the petition wears an even more elaborate turban, with a gold brocade robe and overcoat. To think that artists of the Safavid court could afford such sumptuous outfits is to greatly overestimate their income. Indeed, a petition presented on behalf of the painter Mu‘azzaf ‘Ali clearly states that his stipend of six tūmāns had been cut in half by Tahmāsib and that he could not make ends meet with such an income.\textsuperscript{44} Moreover, of the two supposed self-portraits of Mir Sayyid ‘Ali, the one in a Mughal outfit is very young-looking (almost in his teens), and certainly much younger than the one in the Safavid outfit. This cannot be, for Mir Sayyid ‘Ali matured at the Safavid court and went to the Mughal court later on.\textsuperscript{45} As for Muhammad-Qāsim, the face of his petition holder is the same that he uses over and over again as a standard prototype for the image of an idealised prince. He even sometimes puts several of them in the same painting. They cannot be interpreted as self-portraits. Art historians, whom Melikian criticises for not understanding that these three paintings were self-portraits (p. 86), have long been able to read the signatures on them but would never claim that they were self-portraits because of the above-mentioned considerations.

Melikian discovered (as part of his 1998 essay) that the verses on the rug depicted in the Mir Sayyid ‘Ali painting of LACMA were by the relatively unknown poet Ahlī-yi Turshizī (Fig. 12). Perhaps emboldened by his discovery, and finding that the same poem was written on a rug depicted in a painting from Tahmāsib’s Kamseh, Bārbad Playing Before Khusraw, he concluded that this painting too was by the same hand, despite bearing an attribution to Mirzâ ‘Ali.\textsuperscript{46} In the present catalogue, though, while re-emphasising that the rug inscriptions are by the same hand, he refers to the Bārbad painting of the Kamseh in his text but actually illustrates another folio (48v) from the same manuscript, Nūshābeh Recognising Iskandar from his Portrait, which does not have such a carpet (p. 80). To add more confusion to the issue, the latter painting is even labelled as Portrait of Khusraw Drawn by Shāpūr and Presented to Shīrīn! This chaotic referencing notwithstanding, I have compared in Figs 12 and 13, the rug poems that Melikian claims to be by the same hand. They both display the couplet:

دو چشم فرش آن منزل که سازی جلوه گذه گانجا
به چن یا به خواهی که گرم خک کرده گانجا

May my two eyes become carpets in the abode that you shall choose to dazzle us from, May I be dust on whichever road you shall set your foot on.\textsuperscript{47}

\textsuperscript{43} Seyller 1997.
\textsuperscript{44} Soudavar 1999: 53.
\textsuperscript{45} Melikian claims that the Mughal one must look “twenty years” older (p. 220).
\textsuperscript{46} Melikian 1998, p. 38.
\textsuperscript{47} The beginning of the hemistich is wrongly
The use of a couplet by two painters does not make them one and the same. Popular or appropriate poems, idioms, or Koran verses were shared by many artists. This poem was obviously a good candidate to become popular among painters, since it refers to carpets and is included in the Tuhfih-yi Sāmī, a compendium of various popular verses compiled by Sām Mirzā, a talented prince who employed or befriended many artists. Furthermore, their calligraphic styles are different. We can see that Mirzā ‘Ali, who uses a consistently strong and mature nastalīq in the building headings of his paintings, displays a more mature style on his carpet (Fig. 13), as evidenced by the use of an elegantly drawn shin and kāf in farsh and khāk. More importantly, the cursively connected ending hā in jilveh, which is only used by accomplished nastalīq calligraphers (then and now), appears in Mirzā ‘Ali’s carpet and not the other one. They are simply not by the same hand.

As stated before, Melikian discards the attribution to Mirzā ‘Ali (on the non-reproduced Barbad painting) as mere graffiti. The Nashābeh painting—which is actually illustrated in the catalogue—bears on its margin the inscription ‘amal-i ustād Mirzā ‘Ali (“the work of Master Mirzā ‘Ali”). It is not only written in an elegant nastalīq but was set into the surrounding illumination when the page was re-margined (Fig. 16). It is therefore not a haphazard inscription by a visiting connoisseur but the work of the person in charge of revamping the manuscript, who, like his predecessor, qualified Mirzā ‘Ali as ustād, a term frequently used in the milieu of Persian artists for Mirzā ‘Ali but not for Mir Sayyid ‘Ali. If he is referred to as ustād, it is because his paintings are all executed in a masterly fashion and form a cohesive group. One cannot re-attribute a painting from this group to Mir Sayyid ‘Ali and not address the issue of the remaining paintings bearing the same attribution to Ustād Mirzā ‘Ali.

When it comes to reading poems incorporated in paintings, Melikian seems to do a better job when they are on carpets rather than on a sheet of paper. Not all Melikian’s reading of minute inscriptions are as successful as his decipherment of the rug poem by Ahl-e-yi Turshez. His reading of a poem on an open booklet held by a young prince in Majmū‘ Goes to School (Freer S1986.221), for instance, is far from correct:

**Soudavar**

| بی تنویع که در مکتب سبیق میداد استادش | نظر بر صورتی میکرد و معنی میشد از یادش |

I saw a beauty in a school whose teacher was giving him a lesson. He would look at his face and lose all senses.

**Melikian**

| بی تنویع که در مکتب سبیق میداد استادش | نظر بر صورتی میکرد و معنی میشد از یادش |

Je vis une beauté à qui en cette pènurie le maître avait donné un pichet. Il jetait un regard sur son visage et en oubliait le sens [de toute chose]

The erroneous reading of maktab (“school”) as qillat (“penury”), and sabqā dāḏān (“teaching”) as sabā (“pitcher”), leads him to develop a whole thesis as to why a pitcher or a jar must appear in a school scene (p. 71).

To justify the Freer drawing (Fig. 15) as a self-portrait, Melikian adds a series of convoluted arguments. First, he argues that by styling his affiliation as “son of Sayyid Muhammad” in lieu of “son of Mir Muṣawwir,” Mir Sayyid ‘Ali was designating himself as the subject of the drawing. By this argument, every treatise in which the author signs his name as “son of so-and-so” must be an autobiography! Second, he quotes a certain Qūb al-Dīn Muḥammad-ı Qīṣṣeh-khwān, who had written the preface to an album supposedly prepared in 1556, in order to propose that this drawing belonged to the said album (muraqqat). His reasoning is that Qīṣṣeh-khwān cites “Mir Muṣawwir, his son Sayyid ‘Ali, the son of Master Sultan Muḥammad, his son, Mirzā ‘Ali” among the artists represented therein, (p. 76). Unfortunately, this is not what Qīṣṣeh-khwān (“The Story-teller”) says. Like so many other muraqqat prefaches, he gives an extensive account of past and present calligraphers and painters, and mentions that “some of the calligraphies and paintings of the masters” had come into his possession; he also says that the purpose of his preface was to recollect the name of some past masters whose works are included in the album.48 In no way did Qīṣṣeh-khwān...

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"میر معاویر، پسر ایشان، پسر میر محمد، پسر میرزا ‘الی""نazer hā in jilveh-

Al hamd o lāmmā tabī'īwān kām-

Also the translation of jilveh-gāh as "nuptial chambers" by Melikian is unjustified.
pretend to have possessed a specimen of each and every artist enumerated in his list, which begins with the Imam ‘Ali and includes all the classical calligraphy masters such as Ibn-i Bawwāb, as well as Yaqūt and his disciples. If Qīṣeh-khwān had the works of all of these masters, his album would have been more valuable than all Topkapi muraqqas put together.

Melikian then posits that, because the text eulogises Ṭahmāsb, it must have been prepared for offering to him, and he speculates that this drawing must have been its frontispiece. These eulogies, however, were meant to add more weight to Qīṣeh-khwān’s account, and were introduced therein by way of mentioning that such enterprise was only possible because of Ṭahmāsb’s good governance (bi yumn-i dawlat-i-...), and because of his belonging to the entourage of the king (taqarrub bi ‘atābeh-yi-...). I also fail to understand why Mīr Sayyid ‘Ali’s drawing has to be a frontispiece, if inserted in such an album.

What needs to be considered here, however, is the reliability of Qīṣeh-khwān’s account, around which Melikian has built up his imaginary scenario. In their thorough search for sources, Dickson and Welch referred to this account and the possibility that Sayyid Aḥmad-i Mashhādī plagiarised him for his preface of the Amir Ghayb Beyk album (dated 1565). In his meticulously-documented survey of Topkapi albums, David Roxburgh has noticed that Sayyid Aḥmad Mashhādī referred to his own preface as in qīṣeh-khwānī (“this story-telling”), a term that Qīṣeh-khwān also used and was more likely to exploit because of its affinity with his name and function. Due to his familiarity with the process of album prefacing, Roxburgh also envisaged another possibility: that both of these accounts were copying an earlier model. All of the previously-mentioned scenarios make sense, but none provide an answer to the multitude of problems inherent in Qīṣeh-khwān’s account. I dare to propose yet another scenario: that it was he who

plagiarised Sayyid Aḥmad’s text (in which he found the fortuitous in qīṣeh-khwānī expression), and added a fake date through a monogram.51 This I put forward for the following reasons.

First, I see two distinct writing styles: the core subject is precise and solid, while the superfluous story-telling that he engages in is disjointed.52 The latter seems to be his own and the former copied from another text. Sayyid Aḥmad’s text, however, seems to be solid throughout. Second, I find it hard to believe that a simple story-teller had a collection of works that merited being assembled in an album, unless the purpose of the album was to mix genuine and fake works to be sold on foreign markets. In Sayyid Aḥmad’s text, however, it is Amir Ghayb Beyk who claims to possess a collection of calligraphy and paintings, and his album is now in the Topkapi. Third, both claim to have encountered Bihzād. Of the two, Sayyid Aḥmad was the more likely, for he was much older and as a pupil of Mīr ‘Alī Hirāvī could have seen Bihzād, while there is no reason for a story-teller to have encountered the master. According to ‘Alī Effendi, Qīṣeh-khwān was a pupil of Mālik-i Daylāmī, who was himself a pupil of Sayyid Aḥmad-i Mashhādī.53 Fourth, a sentence correctly used by Sayyid Aḥmad (a), becomes grammatically incorrect with Qīṣeh-khwān (b):

Because in (a) the author says to have arranged the items of the album with the help of master calligraphers and painters, and in (b) he is only rearranging “words” with their help. Finally, the sentence that Melikian quotes from Qīṣeh-khwān displays a lack of familiarity with

51 While Qīṣeh-khwān only uses the phrase, Sayyid Aḥmad uses a more rhythmic sentence: In qīṣeh-khāni va izhar-e sukhān-dānī. Aimée Froom indicates that the early part of the album of Sultan Murād III (Vienna National Library Codex Mixtus 313), dated 1574, is also a copy of Sayyid Aḥmad Mashhādī’s preface; Froom 2001: 14.
52 See e.g. the story of the “The Jeweller and the Painter”; Khādījavī 1967: 671–73.
53 Qīṣeh-khwān had reportedly met ‘Alī Effendi in Baghdad in 1581 some 8 years after Sayyid Aḥmad Mashhādī had died; Māyel-Heravi 1993: 63–64.

I am indebted to Kambiz Eslami for providing me the text of this treatise.

49 Dickson and Welch 1981: 242. Melikian posits (p. 220) that it was Hosayn Khādījavī who first brought to light the content of this text. This is not exactly true, because the bulk of the informative section of the text existed in the preface of Sayyid-i Mashhādī, which Mehdi Bayānī had published a year before. Its text had been dispersed between two Topkapi albums: H2161 and 2156; Bayānī 1966: vol. 1, 49–52.
50 Roxburgh 2001: 34.
the artists of that period because Mirzâ ‘Ali was not the son of Sultân-Mâhîmd but of Sultân-Muhammad, and the latter was not the son of Mir Sayyid ‘Ali. On the other hand, Sayyid Ahmad’s account omits the reference to this erroneously-named father and son. Whatever the truth, Qish-e-khâwin’s text is an unreliable source, one with false pretences, and cannot be used as the foundation of any theory, let alone one built upon wrong assumptions and interpretations.

VII. DÜST-MUHAMMAD

Melikian revels in reviving controversies. Through his entry on The Story of Haftvâd and the Worms from the Tahmâsib Shâhâmëh, he wants to re-establish the theory that its painter, Düst-Muhammad, is the same as the calligrapher who wrote the preface to Bahram Mirzâ’s album and penned the labels for its paintings, and whose father’s name was Sulaymân. It was Dickson and Welch who first suggested that this painter was a multi-talented artist, equally at ease in painting, calligraphy, illumination and découpage. 54 In 1990 Chahryar Adle published an article on Bahram Mirzâ’s album in which he expressed his belief that there were at least two artists “hidden under the name Düst-Muhammad”, but that he lacked a concrete proof to contradict Dickson and Welch’s contention in this respect. 55 Upon receipt of an offprint that he had kindly sent me, I telephoned Adle to say I had the proof he needed. In a fortuitous visit to the Center for Middle Eastern Studies of the University of Chicago, I had stumbled upon a photocopy of the Javâhir- al-akhbâr of Bûdâq-ı Munshi-yi Qazvinî that nobody else seemed to possess outside Russia. It had much information on Düst-Muhammad and was perhaps the only relevant text that Dickson and Welch did not consult. Upon Adle’s request, I sent him a copy of my own analysis of the Düst-Muhammad question, 56 as well as photos of a découpage work signed by a Düst-Muhammad whose father’s name was Shâykh ‘Abdalâh (as opposed to Sulaymân), and a copy of Bûdâq’s text. 57 Although tucked in a footnote, I had demonstrated why the Javâhir- al-akhbâr clearly allowed us to make a distinction between Düst-Muhammad the calligrapher and his namesake, the painter whom Bûdâq preferred to call Düst-i Divanîh (“Düst the Mad”). Adle’s comprehensive 1993 study of the different Düst-Muhams of that period has fully confirmed my conclusions. 58 A synopsis of the relevant arguments has also been published by David Roxburgh. 59

However, Melikian only quotes Adle’s text and attacks it by focusing on one word, tahrîr, which he translates as “calligraphy” (p. 83). He seems to prefer the modern definition of words to their contextual meaning. In the case of the word tahrîr alluded to in my Introduction, he has understood it as “education” as one would today, rather than “protection” as used in the historical texts of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. 60 In the same vein, he chooses to substitute the nowadays rather loose usage of the word tahrîr (as “calligraphy”) for the precise meaning that it had among calligraphers and painters of the past, i.e., the exercise of producing thin lines in black ink. One could of course apply it to calligraphy, if written in a thin black line, e.g. as in the case of Aqâ Mirak’s inscriptions on the ruined wall of the Khamsheh page (Fig. 11) where he signs his name by using the verb harrara-hu. It could also be used for ink drawings, especially when drawn with thin lines. Thus the artist Muhammadi, who was a specialist in such drawings, would sign them as harrara-hu Muhammadi- yi Mourswîr, where harrara-hu could only refer to his drawing since the page was otherwise devoid of calligraphy (Fig. 17). 61 But by and large, the word tahrîr was used for the art of outlining in black calligraphic letters which had been penned in gold or other light colours. Bûdâq thus qualified Düst-Muhammad’s pupil, Shâykh Muhammadi, as a muharrer and a calligrapher of nasta’îq. 62 A calligrapher of nasta’îq could never be a muharrer because the thickness of the lines so varied in this script; he was simply referred to as a khaqtaî or ustâd-i khâtî (master of calligraphy).

The very passage that Melikian quotes from the Mughal chronicler Bâyazid-i Bâyât was already translated by Dickson and Welch, and they used the word “margining” to describe tahrîr; yet he insists on

54 Dickson and Welch 1981: 119.
56 Soudavar 1992: 258, n. 74.
57 My only request to Adle was to credit the Chicago Center and John Woods, who had kindly allowed me to make a copy of Bûdâq’s account. Unfortunately, Adle referred to Bûdâq without crediting Woods or the Center.
62 Adle 1993: 288. Qâzî Ahmad, who is the author of the Gulistân-i Hunar, did the same, ibid, p. 291.
translating it as “calligraphy.” In support of his argument, he oddly chooses an image from the Bahram Mirza album reproduced by Adle, in which the nasta’liq in white by an unknown calligrapher is outlined in black ink and below which appears the words ḥarrara-hu Dust-Muhammad-i Muṣawwar. He argues that it refers to Dust-Muhammad as a calligrapher, even though Adle clearly explains in its caption that the noun tahrir meant “encadrement linéaire”. Yet, he skips over the next calligraphic piece reproduced by Adle, below which appear the sentences: kataba-hu al-ʿabd ʿAli; ḥarrara-hu Dust-Muhammad. In this piece, the calligraphy is in white and has an outlining in black ink. Because the verb kataba-hu unequivocally means “has written it,” the ḥarrara function performed by Dust-Muhammad on this piece can only refer to the further embellishment of the initial white calligraphy by (Mir) ʿAli, through the addition of the black outlining.

Finally, Melikian professes that one should not contradict contemporary sources and signatures in order to ascertain the existence of two separate Dust-Muharram. His contemporary source is Bāyazid, who may have met Dust-Muhammad the painter, after he had travelled to India. But Bāyazid can in no way be a more reliable source than Būdāq, who was secretary to Bahram Mirza in the very days that his album was being prepared. Būdāq personally knew the calligrapher Dust-Muhammad, whom he says had a lips and pronounced “li” instead of “ī” and who never quitted Tārmāš’s services. The latter calligrapher is certainly not the painter who went to India. The painter who went to India and died there he refers to as Dust-i Dīvāneh in order to distinguish him from his namesake, the calligrapher.64

There comes a point when one wonders whether Melikian refuses to carefully read the sources that he refers to (such as Adle’s), or whether he deliberately adopts a nobody-knows-but-me attitude to impress the average uninformed viewer of the Louvre at the expense of his peers?

VIII. DRAWINGS “SIGNED BY” RIẒĀ AND RIẒĀ-ʾABBĀSĪ

Not all Melikian’s attacks on past scholarship come as open rejections. When he cannot find arguments. He sometimes opts for seemingly harmless statements that nevertheless negate established theories. For instance, he still refers to Rīżā and Rīżā-ʾAbbāsī as two distinct persons, when it has long been settled that they are one and the same.

Ivan Stchoukine’s careful stylistic analysis of drawings that incorporated three different signatures (Rīżā, Āqā Rīżā and Rīżā-ʾAbbāsī), backed by the study of historical texts, established that they were all the work of one extraordinarily talented artist.65 Sheila Canby has confirmed the same by adding new elements in a book written solely on this artist.66 In the meantime, my reading of the notations on portraits of Rīżā, in support of Schtoukine’s thesis, was criticised by two Iranian scholars; in rebuttal, I published an article in Persian that included a quotation from Rīżā’s contemporary, the historian Vāleh-ye Ḩṣafānī, which clearly shows that Āqā Rīżā was also called Āqā Rīżā-ʾAbbāsī.67

Āqā Rīżā-ʾAbbāsī, who in the days of the everlasting reign of his Majesty the World Conqueror and now in Heaven (i.e. Shāh ʾAbbās I) was the zenith of the age and the pinnacle of his century, is the son of the aforementioned Master ʿAli Aṣghar; and even though, under the protection of the said Majesty, he had become notable as the sun and most celebrated among the people, he did not appreciate his good fortunes, and like Sādīqī Beyg he wasted his time gravitating around the circle of wrestlers and qalandars. Despite being constantly the subject of royal munificence, but because of such frequentations, he was mostly poor and in a dire state. In any event, the paintings of Āqā Rīżā were much prized even in the early days of his Majesty (Shāh ʾAbbās II)…68

Melikian publishes one illustration from the Louvre (OA7136) signed by Rīżā (p. 330), and four others bearing the inscription raqam-i kamineh Rīżā-ʾAbbāsī (it is the work of Rīżā-ʾAbbāsī) that he considers as authentic signatures (pp. 97, 336–39). Two of the latter are not by him and bear fake signatures. Since the issue of authentic signatures is what Melikian values, I shall address it first.

In Figs 18–21, I compare the signatures from the drawings on pages 97 and 339 with the one on page 337 that I consider as correct, and a fourth one from the image of a Seated Dervish that I have discussed.

63 Adle 1993: pl. X, figs 7 and 8.
64 Soudavar 1992: 258.
65 Stchoukine 1964.
68 Vāleh-ye Ḩṣafānī 1993: 471.
elsewhere and is generally agreed to be an authentic work of this artist.²⁶ Rûzû was certainly not a trained calligrapher, and his calligraphy is stylistically weak. But his mastery in penmanship is undeniable. He can trace long, sinuous and complex lines in one stroke without lifting his pen. No matter how immature his calligraphy may look, all of his connectable letters are penned in one stroke, as in his drawings. Therefore, the easy test to distinguish his authentic signatures from forgeries is to check for disconnections in letters that should normally be stuck together. A second test is the thickness of the lines in the word Rûzû. In authentic signatures the first letter is invariably drawn with a thin line, and the variation in thickness of the lines in the following letter (āzû) is hardly noticeable. Thus in Fig. 21, we see not only a break in between the letters mim and yâ of āmânûneh but a noticeable thickening of the lines in Rûzû. In Fig. 20, we can notice a Rûzû that hardly follows the authentic prototype and the sin of ‘Abbâsî that lacks one tooth. These two signatures are therefore forgeries.

As for the stylistic comparison of the drawings, I shall limit my argument to just one tell-tale sign: the tail of Rûzû’s sashes end in quick zigzag strokes that give it an airy and light-looking quality similar to the Louvre painting. The rigidity of the sash-ends in the drawings with fake signatures only confirms their erroneous attribution to Rûzû.

IX. WRONG READING

For a person who vehemently criticises authors for reading the inscription in Fig. 12 as sar-lawh, instead of sar-i lawh (p. 86, n. 71), Melikian’s own readings are certainly not faultless:

He reads the inscription penned by ‘Abd al-Šamad on a page of the Gulshan album (pp. 111, 436):

Le calame d’‘Abd os-Samad a tracé sur le vif
Le portrait de de Shâh Humâyûn et de Shâh Akbar

The last word, read as sar, and translated sur le vif (on the go), should be hunar (artfully):

The pen of ‘Abd al-Šamad artfully drew
The portraits of Shâh Humâyûn and Shâh Akbar

His reading of the poems adorning the magnificent carpet of the Cincinnati Museum (1953.24) has many mistakes that I have underlined, followed by the corrected version in parenthesis:

1 - Ainsi Astan Qâdès ke Shâhân mun al-jallal
2 - Br xâh Râh àl ’Xûrû (sâr) ûs-far Nêfahân nd
3 - Astan an Shân Stepurac ou Rây o Đoû
4 - Dbr Baraghâ Hosarr o ûs-e Nêfahân
5 - Yawah Abjân ûn Rûzû o ûn Dângû (tûnab ûnànke Towb yârûngû)
6 - Dbr Astân Stepûر Pêrân Nêfahân
7 - Dst Râzûwû Xûwsh Mucatk Shûnd o ûnd
8 - Dst Shêrûl Pêrân o Dst Shêrûl
9 - Zirr Qâm Qarûsh o Brh kisp Pêrân
10 - Kwirûbîn Dester Shêrûl Pêrân
11 - Bey xûwsh o Hûndi Al ’Îhâyûf Đoû
12 - Kânq dâqeq né Rûq Nêfahân
13 - Bey Xûwsh (hûnd) Qâm Dêrghsh
14 - Dst Shêrûl Pêrân o Dst Shêrûl
15 - Aqzû Dst Shêrûl Pêrân o Dst Shêrûl
16 - Mûbaqshô Têrû (ëbû) Mûbaqshô Têrû (ëbû)
17 - Dst Shêrûl Pêrân o Dst Shêrûl
18 - Gûnîl Dst Shêrûl Pêrân o Dst Shêrûl
19 - Bey Rûzûwû Xûwsh Dst Shêrûl Pêrân
20 - Tûnd Mûbaqshô Têrû (ëbû) Mûbaqshô Dst Shêrûl
21 - Aqzû Bey Sâqis Tûnd Mûbaqshô Têrû (ëbû)
22 - Aqzû Bey Tûnd Mûbaqshô Têrû (ëbû)

I have interspersed my English translation with the French lines that have erroneous translations (underlined):

1 This sacred threshold where glorious kings (2 posent la couronne de le raison sur leur tete)
2 Put head and crown on the dust of its road
3 Humans and genies, birds and wild animals, and angels and demons,
4 Have kissed the grounds of his Court (5 Sans doute, ô merveille, ont-ils déposé )
5 One shouldn’t be surprised if some have clung their ring of servitude
6 To the threshold of this progeny of the Prophet
7 They shall have their wishes fulfilled because
8 They have become (in fact) ‘All’s supplicants
9,10 Pour l’arrivée des pélerins, désireux de s’assurer les faveurs divines, On a déposé l’eau des ablutions et l’exposé du caractère sacré de la
Melikian’s wrong reading of some of the couplets allows his imagination to take the upper hand. Whereas the main purpose of these verses is to praise the fine qualities of the carpet and exalt the holiness of the sanctuary, he sees it as a vehicle of esoteric quest (p. 269). The poem lauds the fragrances of the carpet (9, 10), and its softness that is likened to the feathers of angels (16), which, through an exaggerated praise of the importance of the sanctuary, will benefit from being trampled over by pilgrims. And in order to emphasise this imagery, angels are incorporated in the design of the carpet. Melikian has, however, transformed fragrances into feedstock, and interprets the feather of the angel as a feather pen to scribble esoteric discourses and “elucidation” (p. 269).

A more disastrous interpretation is that of the inscriptions on a brass candlestick (p. 374). His reading errors are presented in parenthesis and are underlined:

In the sanctuary of the immaculate Son of the Imam, Shāh Zayd the Great, son of the immaculate Imam, the Imam Mūsā Kāżīm—may God’s grace be upon him and them all—the Imam for whom people clean the dust of his door with their eyelashes, and angels with the feathers of their wings. Whoever will take possession (of this candlestick) shall do it against the orders of God and his Prophet. May the curse of God be upon wrongdoers. Year 1008 A.H.

Misguided perhaps by the Shāh-i Zindeh tomb complex in Samarqand, Melikian applies the same name to Zayd, who, according to the Tārīkh al-Ya’qūbī, is one of the eighteen sons of the Imam Mūsā Kāżīm70 and who in Iran is called Shāh Zayd-i Kabir. Yet a more serious error is to think that an Imam could be addressed as Imamzādeh, which, although it means “son of the Imam”, defines a lower rank than Imam. Melikian thus considers the terms “Imam-zadeh”, “Shāh-i Zindeh”, “Kabir”, and “Mīr’sūn”, all as epithets of the seventh Imam, Mūsā Kāżīm, for whom he wrongly thinks this candlestick was made.

Among the hundreds of real and unreal shrines of the Imam descendants in Iran, the sons of the seventh Imam are the most popular. A simple Google search, in Persian, gives at least two shrines in the name of Shāh Zayd-i Kabir. For some odd reason, in both places, the Imamzādeh has been gradually “upgraded” to be the son of the second Imam Ḥasan rather than of Mūsā Kāżīm. One is in the province of Zanjān and datable to the fifteenth–sixteenth century. The other is in Isfahan and dated 994/1592. Given the proximity of the date of the candlestick to the construction date of the latter shrine and its location in Isfahan, the city that became the capital of Shāh ʿAbbās I, the chances are that it was meant for this one.

Two candlesticks bearing the inscription ʿabdu-hu Ḥaydar al-Ḥusaynī are stated by Melikian to be executed for the prince Ḥaydar, a Šafāvid who lived at the court of Shāh Jahān (pp. 452–55). The two candlesticks are of different sizes (28 cm., 24.9 cm.) and obviously not a pair. Unlike the previous candlestick, no shrine name is indicated on them. Melikian develops an elaborate story, based on an inscription that in reality gives the name of the maker of the candlestick and not its recipient or donor. The artisan Ḥaydar al-Ḥusaynī seems to have

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70 Yaqūbī 1960: vol. 2, 421.
made these as part of a commercial production for whoever wanted to offer them to a shrine. Because he was a Sayyid of Husaynī descent, he emphasised it as part of his signature in order to give more importance to the item. A Shi'ite would have felt prouder to offer a candlestick made by a descendant of the Prophet. It is true that the Safavids — unjustifiably — used the al-Husaynī nisba in their name, but so did a thousand other Sayyids. The idea that this type of candlestick was Safavid has been recently put into question by Hamid Atighechi, who has shown that most of these type of metal works were actually produced in Lahore and in the Indian subcontinent. Like so many other goods of Indian origin, they were exported to Iran.

X. JIBĀ-DĀR VERSUS ‘JOBBEH-DĀR’

There are different ways to determine a fake signature. The comparison of calligraphy characteristics was useful in the case of drawings attributed to Rizā. In the case of the late seventeenth-century painter ‘Ali-quli Beyg Jibādār, however, there is an easier way to discern the good from the bad, and that is through the spelling of his very name. For, as I have explained elsewhere, the first part of his surname jibā is a Chaghātāy Turkish word meaning “coat of mail, piece armour”, and jibā-dār was the title of the Keeper of Armour. In Safavid times the word jibā was written as جیب (jihāb). Because of the similarity of its spelling with the Arabic juba (“long overcoat”) it could lead to confusion. It is to avoid this that the painter intentionally spelled his surname as جیبار (Jibā-dār). Thus if a signature reads جیباری جیه دار it is a forgery. By the same token, it is wrong to call him “Jobbedar” as do two entries for the Encyclopaedia Iranica, one by Priscilla Soucek (I:872) and the other by Barbara Schmitz (XIII:79). Melikian produces the portrait of a French-looking gentleman in armour (p. 398), previously published by Layla Diba as the work of “Ali Quli Jabbadar” copying a portrait of Louis XIV of France. Melikian, who writes the surname of this artist as “Jobbedar”, translates it wrongly as a “man in armour” in order to suggest that it might actually be a self-portrait.

Unfortunately, nobody wore European-type armour in Iran and the inscription is a later addition and fake.

XI. OMITTED INFORMATION

A number of entries can be complemented by relevant information.

As part of the entry for a painting ascribed to the library of the governor of Herat, Qulbābā Kūkaltāsh, Melikian writes that he was the “frère rezāt” of the Uzbek ruler ‘Abdallah Khan (p. 290) without further explanation. In fact, the Chaghātāy Turkish word kūkaltāsh and the Perso-Arab expression barādar-i rizāt both mean “foster-brother”. It was used for Qulbābā to emphasise that he was the foster-brother of ‘Abdallah Khan.

A banquet scene from the Louvre (OA 7100a) is described as a Nawrūz banquet without specifying the manuscript from which it originally came (p. 324). The scene actually shows Timur enthroned and comes from a dispersed manuscript of the Habīb al-siyar: Volumes I and II of this manuscript are in the Gulistan Library, a section of volume III (ex-Vever Collection) is now at the Freer Gallery and another section from the same volume was sold at Christie’s. Most images, if not all, have been added and are devoid of inscriptions. It was possibly done for the library of the Shāmlū governors of Herat in the early seventeenth century.

Two paintings from the Rizā ‘Abbāsi Museum in Tehran, which I have previously published, are produced without any description (pp. 288–89). The title of the first one is most confusing: “Les compagnons se disent adieu”, Shāh-Nāme de Shāh Esmā‘īl II, page du Bāstān; Melikian presumably thinks that the page contains the texts of the Shāhnāme and the Bāstān. The second one is qualified as a page of the Bāstān only. In reality, they are two pages from a set of four paintings from a dispersed manuscript that has the text of Sādi’s Gulistan in the centre and the Bāstān in the margin. I have attributed all four to Muḥammad, whose drawings are also presented in the catalogue (pp. 318–21).

A courtly audience painted by Muḥammad ‘Alī b. Muḥammad Zamān and dated 1133/1722 is reproduced on p. 383. At its centre is seated the last of the Safavid

71 Atighechi forthcoming.
73 I have signalled the matter to the editors, who have informed me that they will include it in the next set of corrections.
74 Diba and Ekhtiyar 1998: 110
kings, Shâh Sulṭân-Hosayn (Fig. 22), and to his left is the notorious Shi‘ite theologian, Muhammad-Bâqir Majlisi, a portrait of whom is hanging over his tomb in Isfahan (Fig. 23).  

Melikian illustrates a page from the Gûy-u-chuğân manuscript that Shâh Tahmâsb caused to be copied in 931/1524 (St Petersburg, Dorn 441, fol. 18), and mentions that the identity of the painter is undetermined (p. 200). As a reference, he only gives Anatoli Ivanov and omits Welch who has attributed this specific painting to Sulṭân-Muhammad and has discussed the rest of its paintings in his The Houghton Shahnama.

A page from the Gulistân Library manuscript of the Zafarnâme, copied in 935/1529 by Sulṭân-Muhammad-i Nûr, is produced by Melikian without any further information (pp. 206–7). The size and quality of the reproduction of this page, as well as six other paintings of this manuscript recently published in Tehran, clearly show that their attribution to Bihzâd in its colophon is incorrect. The page produced by Melikian is nevertheless particularly interesting because it is by the hand of an artist that I have long recognised as a forger who embellished a cache of Timurid manuscripts by adding paintings to them. A characteristic of this painter is the drawing of faces with a drooping T-shaped mustaches and beard. I long suspected that this painter had worked on the Tahmâsb Shâhnâmeh. I believe it can now be established that he is the one designated as Painter C by Welch (who may be the painter ‘Abd al-Wahhâb). The acceptance of my theory in respect to this forger went against the doctoral thesis of Feliz Čâgman, who was for a long time the gatekeeper to the Topkapi treasure trove and whom nobody dared to contradict. It is hoped that her departure from that museum will allow art historians of this field to be more forthcoming about the non-existence of a second school in Herat, which she had imagined to be based on a manuscript of the poems of Sulṭân-Hosayn Bâqarâ made by our forger.

Finally, I had previously attributed to Mirzâ ‘Ali the painting incorporated in a page of the Gûšhân album that Melikian produces on p. 435. Because of its size, composition, and more importantly, its particular combination of coloured ruling lines, I had suggested that it was originally made for the Khamseh of Shâh Tahmâsb but was taken by Mirzâ ‘Ali to the Mughal court. The proximity of this page to the Khamseh pages in the exhibition has allowed me to reconfirm my thesis in this respect. The issue is also relevant to the topic of two ex-Cartier Collection paintings at Harvard that Welch has attributed to Mir Sayyid ‘Ali and that Grabar has tried to refute (I shall discuss this in a forthcoming paper).

XII. THE SHÂH TAHMÂSB SHÂHNÂMEH

The topic of the Shâh Tahmâsb Shâhnâmeh is one that Melikian has covered as both a journalist and a scholar. In this catalogue he makes new assertions and proposes new theories. Based on the dedicatory rosette of the manuscript, he affirms that it was solely made for Tahmâsb (pp. 28–29). Yet we have the example of the Jâmi’ al-tawârîkh that began under the rule of Ghâzân Khân, as acknowledged in the text by its author Rashid al-Din, but was only finished under his successor Uljâyutu. As a result, it was dedicated to Uljâyutu. Similarly, according to the stylistic analysis of its paintings by Welch, the early ones are in the tumultuous Turkoman style of Tabriz and devoid of Bihzâdian influence. The arrival of the master c. 1522, a year after the return of the seven-year-old Tahmâsb from Herat, allowed a synthesis to occur between the Turkoman and Herat schools of paintings. The project had begun under Shâh Ismâ’îl and was finished under Tahmâsb, hence the dedicatory rosette in his name.

Melikian attributes the lack of a colophon in the manuscript to Tahmâsb’s indecision, as a connoisseur and painter, on how to bring to an end this project (p. 39). There is perhaps a more simple explanation because the early pages are quite different from the last ones. One has to only compare the folios 62, 118, 73, 85, 86 and 95 (pp. 184–95) with folio 742 (p. 199) to see that: (a) the early pages are gold-sprinkled and the late pages are not, and (b) that the early nastârîiq calligraphy is primitive and awkward, while the late one is substantially more advanced. In between, these folio’s 300 (pp. 196–97) is perhaps by a third hand. A unique calligrapher usually wants to take credit for his work; the second (or third) one does not have such an incentive.

As for Melikian’s theory about the arrival of this manuscript at the Topkapi c. 1800, it contradicts not only the textual and visual evidence produced by Dickson and Welch but the history of diplomatic relations between the Safavids and the Ottomans. As I have proposed...
elsewhere, the manuscript was probably gifted back to
the Iranian court c. 1824.87

XIII. THE ISSUE OF INTEGRITY

But the story that has most captivated the attention of Mr.
Melikian in the past thirty years is that of the dispersal of
the pages of this manuscript. The writing of this
catalogue presented him with yet another opportunity to
deplore the dismemberment of this manuscript as “the
mutilation of a monument of world culture,” and to
accuse the “orientalist” (read S.C. Welch) or orientalists
who were counselling its owner for ignoring “the
multiple bonds, material as well as conceptual that united
the paintings of the sixteenth century with the volumes
for which they were destined” (p. 20). When the problem
is presented in this way, it obviously strikes a chord with
most people because dismemberment resonates as a loss
of integrity and an act of cultural vandalism. The reality,
however, is different.

One cannot evoke the principle of integrity for a work
of art without invoking preservation. Museum conserva-
tors and exhibition specialists attach much importance to
discoloration and light damage to miniatures. However,
it is the mechanical handling of the illustrated pages that
damages them most. Their paint is mostly constituted by
mineral pigments that are affixed by a bonding agent to
the paper and then burnished to obtain a uniform surface.
With age, the painted surface becomes as brittle as stucco
and any action resulting in the bending of the page will
produce minute cracks in it, which will eventually lead to
flaking. The only way to conserve the integrity of a
manuscript is never to open it. For it is impossible to peer
through a bound manuscript without bending its pages
and sending ripples through them, even if placed on a
stand. The larger the manuscript, the more susceptible it
is to damage. As a collector, Chester Beatty knew this.
He had illustrations removed from his manuscripts, and
placed each under a separate glass. The Freer Gallery has
unbound its famous Haft awrang of Sulṭān Ibrāhīm
Mīrza, and the British Library has done the same for its
Khamsheh of Shāh Ẓahmāsb. An illustrated page must lay
flat and unbound for people to look at, even if they are
experts. But once you unbind a manuscript, its integrity,
as Melikian defines it, is lost anyhow.

What about his claim that a page must be seen in its
original setting? It sounds good, but it is mostly
irrelevant. Because the artist himself devised his
paintings individually and on a flat sheet of paper, one
cannot see it in the same way that he did, with the page
still in a manuscript. The areas close to the gutter are
usually hard to see. Besides, if it is such an important
issue why did not Melikian, as the curator of the
exhibition, insist on displaying each individual page with
its facing text page?

Once a manuscript is unbound, the matter of the
location of individual pages, whether in Tehran or in
New York, becomes secondary. The primary focus
should be on preservation, especially from calamities. To
leave 258 of the greatest paintings in the whole realm of
Persian painting in one place is to incur the risk of losing
them all in one disastrous calamity. Flooding did not only
occur in Florence and at the Uffizi; it also happened in
Lisbon, where the illustrations of the magnificent
Timurid Zafarnāmeh of the Gulbenkian Museum were
damaged (and horrendously repainted afterwards). Fire
is always a possibility. But a more important danger
lurking for illustrated manuscripts is the danger of
defacement, or total destruction, by iconoclasts. Many
manuscripts have been defaced in the past. Closer to our
times, the Taliban have destroyed the Bāmiyān Buddhahs.
If illustrated manuscripts are not destroyed by religious
zealots, the chances are that their display will be pre-
empted, since so many images with female figures are
not allowed to be seen in Iran nowadays.

The second most damaging factor for miniature
painting is variation in humidity. Kept under a sealed
frame, a miniature fares much better than unframed or
even in a manuscript. The effect of this factor becomes
amplified when items have to travel for the purpose of
exhibitions. A prime example is a page from the Berlin
album that was sent to New York for the 1985
Metropolitan exhibition India. This magnificent scene, at
the centre of which sits the Emperor Humāyūn, was
painted by Dūst-Muḥammad.88 Most unfortunately, by
the time the painting came back to Berlin, Humāyūn had
lost his face! A combination of variations in humidity
and perhaps vibrations in travel had caused the paint on
his face to pulverise and fall down. Knowledge about
miniature conditions and their remedies is minimal in
Western museums, and curators, as well as conservators,
generally shy away from having damaged miniatures
repaired in order to stabilise their condition.

In the very case of the Shāh Ẓahmāsb Shāhnāmeh, the
full publication of its paintings by Dickson and Welch


88 Welch 1985: 145.
has made available information that is seldom available for other manuscripts. The dispersal of its pages has also allowed many people to get a first-hand experience of the quality of its pages and has stirred much interest in the study of its various aspects, certainly more than if it had remained as a bound manuscript in an inaccessible museum.

As for Melikian’s contention that in 1993 the Iranian government consented to swap a painting by Willem de Kooning for the remaining pages of the Shāhnāmeh only because it was broken, this is simply not true. The government of Iran was twice offered the remnants of this manuscript: once before, and once after, the Islamic Revolution. It had ample money both times, but preferred to surrender it on political extravaganzas the first time and on religious propaganda the second one. The main reason for the swap was that de Kooning painting (entitled Woman III) represented a woman and could never be exhibited under the present réégime. Nevertheless, I applaud the swap, and all those who, like Mr Melikian, worked behind the scene to bring the remnants of this manuscript back to Iran because I believe it can generate there a renewed interest for this field. But I resent the blame for the dismemberment of the Shāhnāmeh on S.C. Welch or any other “orientalist.” The decision was solely the owner’s, Arthur Houghton. In a twist of fate, Welch had to buy at a high price pages that he himself had made famous. Welch wrote passionately about items that he subsequently bought, Melikian, however, writes extensively, in this catalogue, about items that he already owns. Both can contribute to our knowledge in this field. The veiled attack on Welch, however, is highly inappropriate.

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