

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 Ṭahmāsb Shāhnāme; Mīr Muṣawwir; Mīr Sayyid 'Alī; Qīṣṣeh-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 'Alā' al-Dīn Juvaynī who had converted the Il-Khānīd Aḥmad 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

¹ Soudavar 1996: 198–99, n. 62.

² Aubin 1995: 30.

footnotes, the proponents of the second school ridiculed his “arbitrary” attributions and his reliance on conjectural evidence.³ In the same vein, while discussing a painting from the ex-Vever Collection, Melikian qualifies Welch’s attribution to Mīr Sayyid ‘Alī as being “guided by his *intuition* only”, while asserting that proof only resided in the signature that he (Melikian) had found (p. 71).⁴ 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 Sulṭān-Muḥammad’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 Firdawsī’s verses and why the word *ā’in* meant “beauty” (which it does not).⁵ Oddly, he even faults Glenn Lowry and Milo Beach (p. 225) for publishing an unsigned drawing that they qualified as “attributable to Mīr Sayyid ‘Alī” rather than stating “by Mīr Sayyid ‘Alī”, as he did! One cannot switch methodologies whimsically. If stylistic analysis is only intuition, Melikian should avoid it as well.⁶ 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. BIHZĀD’S SIGNATURES

The first of the five painters whose signatures Melikian sets to investigate is the celebrated master, Bihzād 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 Bihzād’s authentic signature for this period, Melikian chooses the *ṣawwara-hu al-‘abd Bihzād* (“has painted it the slave Bihzād”) 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. Bihzād 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 Bihzād’s paintings forbids accepting this awkward inscription to be by the master’s hand; for Bihzād’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.⁷ 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

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 Mīr Sayyid ‘Alī 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 *ṣawwara-hu Sayyid ‘Alī* but I only see the word *‘Alī* and perhaps the remnants of *Sayyid*.

⁵ In the context used by Firdawsī (جهان گشت با فردا و آئین و آب) the word *ā’in* means ethics or customs rather than beauty, the best example of which is the *Ā’in-i akbarī*, the compendium on ethics and customs at the court of the Mughal Emperor Akbar written by Abu ‘l-Fāzil ‘Allāmī; ‘Allāmī 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 *Shāhnāme* page (*Rostam’s First Ordeal*) that Melikian reproduces on pp.

186–87, I had used the idiosyncratic elements of the painter Mīr Muṣawwir, as established by Welch himself, to change the attribution from Qadīmī to Mīr Muṣawwir. Melikian, of course, mentions neither.

⁷ Soudavar 1992: 97–98.

inscription which does not even follow the faint tracing circles around the roundel (Fig. 4).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 farsī* 908) are a testimony to his calligraphic skills (Fig. 2).⁹ They clearly show well-balanced letters in the *rayḥān* 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 *ṣād* and *vāv*, and between the *‘ayn* and *bā*), and starts with *rayḥān* but degenerates into a sort of *nasta‘līq* 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 *ṣawwara-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 Valī, ṣawwara-hu al-‘abd Bihzād* (“copied from a work by Valī, has drawn it the slave Bihzād”) was probably penned by Dūst-Muḥammad, who had put together an album for Ṭahmāsb’s brother, Bahrām Mīrzā. The words *al-‘abd Bihzād*, penned again by Dūst-Muḥammad, appear on another painting produced by Melikian (p. 55). Therefore, neither the presence of the word *‘abd* (“slave”), nor that of the verb *ṣawwara-hu*, can guarantee that such an inscription is by the painter’s hand, even if proven to be from the same period.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 Sulṭān-Muḥammad-i Khandān, Sulṭān-Muḥammad-i Nūr, Mīr ‘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.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 Ḥātifi (p. 58) and a *Winter Scene* (Freer Gallery 46.13).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 Ismā‘il 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

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

⁹ Soudavar 1992: 98.

¹⁰ For an inscription which reads *ṣawwara-hu ‘Alī al-Ḥusaynī, kataba-hu Shāh-Mahmūd al-Neyshābūrī*, obviously written by the painter and not the scribe see Soudavar 1999: 53, pl. XVIa.

¹¹ For another example see Soudavar 1992: 118–19.

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 *nastaʿliq* than that of Sulṭān-ʿAlī Mashhadī, the scribe of the *Būstān*. When this *Būstān* was prepared in 1488, the *nastaʿliq* 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 *nastaʿliq* calligraphers around. It is only with the advent of the next generation of calligraphers such as Sulṭān Muḥammad-i Nūr, and especially Mīr ʿAlī Hiravī, that *nastaʿliq* evolved stylistically and found more practitioners. If Bihzād, or any other calligrapher, was capable of producing in the 1480s a *nastaʿliq* 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 paper *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 Seduces 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 *nastaʿliq* 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), *nastaʿliq* made a lot of progress and became the choice script for calligraphers, as well as painters. Bihzād’s own grand-nephew, Muzaḥḥar-ʿAlī, and another painter from that younger generation, Mīrzā ʿAlī, who were probably both trained by the old master, used a solid *nastaʿliq* 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 *badiʿ khilqat* (“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 *ṣawwarahu 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 Āq-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 Bāyqarā does not exclude the possibility that he undertook one or several trips to Tabriz” (p. 53). Once

¹⁴ Soudavar 1992: 154, 164, 170.

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 *nastaʿliq*.

¹⁷ Melikian repeatedly quotes in this section Bahari (1997), an unreliable work severely criticised by among others Roxburgh 1999: 175–77.

¹³ Sims 2002: 248. In the case of the *Būstān* frontispiece they are in red ink, *ibid* p. 248.

again, Melikian envisages possibilities built upon incorrect assumptions. Indeed, Būdāq-i Munshī-yi Qazvinī, who was secretary to Bahrām Mīrzā as early as 1536, reported: “that master Bihzād, 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 *shāh* knew it (but didn’t mind).”¹⁸ 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-Dīn-i Kirmānī (d. 1504) left Herat for the court of Sultan Ya’qūb Āq-Qoyūnlū, it was to escape from an arrest ordered by Sultān-Ḥosayn Bāyqarā; he stayed there for ten years.¹⁹ If Bihzād had decided to go to Tabriz, he would have even fared worse than in Mecca, for the city was under the tutelage of Qāzī ‘Īsā Sāvajī, the notoriously conservative *ṣadr* of Sultan Ya’qūb, who applied the *sharī’a* and created much hardship for the population.²⁰ The wine-addicted Bihzād had certainly no incentive to trade liberal Herat for a city under the spell of Muslim zealots.

All available information about Bihzād places him in Herat prior to his summons to Tabriz by Ismā‘īl I (at some time after 1522); it is impossible to imagine that Bihzād, 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 Āq-Qoyūnlū 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 Khān* (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 (Freer 46.12) to be by the same hand and linked them to Qadīmī, a painter of the Shāh Ṭahmāsb *Shāhnāmeḥ*. In a first step, I had argued that three of them (fols 58a, 188a, 275a) were by ‘Abdallāh-i Shirāzī who had illuminated and signed the double-page frontispiece of that manuscript.²¹ 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 ‘Abdallāh-i Shirāzī.²² 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 vowed 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 *Divān* of Ḥāfiẓ, the *‘Īd-i Fiṭr*, one of the two works signed by the celebrated painter Sultān-Muḥammad (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).²³ It was even translated into French on the occasion of the publication of the French version of Welch’s *Five Royal Manuscripts*.²⁴ 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):

عید است و آخر گل و یاران در انتظار
ساقی بروی شاه ببین ماه و می بیار

¹⁸ Soudavar 1992: 258; Soudavar 1999: 51.

¹⁹ Soudavar 1992: 113–15.

²⁰ Soudavar 1992: 130–31, Khunji 1992: 358–67.

²¹ Soudavar 1992: 228–31.

²² Soudavar 2000b: 71, n. 38.

²³ “Roses and friend eagerly await, for it is *the time of ‘Īd*”; Welch 1976a: 66; Welch 1979: 127. Soudavar 1992: 159.

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 Shāh 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 Ḥāfiz’s poem, while on the miniature (Fig. 8), in lieu of the word in parenthesis, *ākhair* (“end of”), appears the word *mawsim* (“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 Fiṭr 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):

الهادى ابوالمظفر سام ميرزا

al-Hādī Abu ‘l Muẓaffar Sām Mirzā

I have previously argued that it was not by the hand of Sulṭān-Muḥammad but is a later addition, with its first two letters (*al*) transgressing over the ruling lines, and that it projects Sām Mirzā as the true heir to his father. The linch-pin of my theory is the string of titles used in this sentence, especially *al-Hādī*, which was solely used by his father Ismā‘īl. 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 اَدْعَايَ (*iddi‘ā-yi*) that he translates as “revendications” (“claims of”). He not only omits the letter *lām* 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. MĪR MUṢAWWIR

In a section dedicated to Mīr Muṣawwir, Melikian asserts that the only painting to bear incontrovertibly this painter’s “signature” is a painting from Shāh Ṭahmāsb’s *Khamseh* (British Library OR2265, fol. 15), *Anushervān 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 Mīr Muṣawwir* (“penned by Mīr Muṣawwir”) below two couplets supposedly composed by the painter himself (Fig. 11).²⁵ Welch’s attribution of the same painting to Āqā Mīrak 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 Shāh Ṭahmāsb *Shāhnāmeḥ* with those of the *Khamseh* 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 *Khamseh*. 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 graffiti (p. 80).

As a group, these inscriptions (which identify works by Sulṭān-Muḥammad, Mīr Sayyid ‘Alī, Mīrzā ‘Alī and Āqā Mīrak) 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 Mīrzā ‘Alī, no signed works had as yet been recognised when Welch and Dickson published *The Houghton Shahnama*. 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 ‘*Alī-yi Muṣawwir*’ (Fig. 10) only refers to him as ‘Alī the Painter and does not include his sobriquet *Mīrzā* (a

²⁵ Melikian even claims that Mīr Muṣawwir is his *takhalluṣ* or pen-name. Unfortunately, by definition, the *takhalluṣ* 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 Mīr Sayyid ‘Alī was presented by this author in Soudavar 1999: 53, pl. XVIa.

²⁷ Soudavar 1992: 170.

diminutive of *amīrzādeh* “prince”).²⁸ As for Āqā Mīrak, 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 Mi[r] there is still an unjustifiable gap until the next word (*Muṣawwir*). 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 Muṣawwir*: As in the case of Mīrzā ‘Alī’s signature (in which Mīrzā was eliminated), the honorific epithet *Āqā* (“Mister”) for Āqā Mīrak’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 Mīr Muṣawwir and Āqā Mīrak. I do take umbrage, however, when he criticises others for not following rules that he ignores himself. Indeed, in regard to a painting on which appears the name Sayyid ‘Alī he faults a number of authors for having stated that it was “signed by Mīr Sayyid ‘Alī”, because he argues that the epithet Mīr “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 Mīr Muṣawwir (with Mīr included), despite observing that the latter’s name was actually Sayyid Muḥammad (p. 76).³² Like Mīrzā ‘Alī and Mīr Sayyid ‘Alī, who dropped their honorific epithets from their signatures, Mīr Muṣawwir would have never included Mīr (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, Būdāq-i Munshī-yi Qazvīnī who, for some fourteen years after 1535 was secretary to Bahrām Mīrzā, mentions that when the Mughal Emperor Humāyūn visited Ṭahmāsb in 1545, Mīr Muṣawwir had long been in disgrace.³³ His downfall was probably due to his association with Ṭahmāsb’s rebellious brother Sām Mīrzā who was arrested in 1535.³⁴ Therefore, Dickson and Welch’s contention that Mīr Muṣawwir did not contribute to Ṭahmāsb’s *Khamseh* also finds a historic justification in the writings of Būdāq-i Qazvīnī. They all negate the Mīr Muṣawwir signature theory for this *Khamseh* page.

Melikian next presents another “signed work by Mīr 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 Mīr Sayyid ‘Alī (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 “Mīrzā” was probably added to this painter’s name because he was talented and considered to be the heir to his father Sulṭān-Muḥammad, the king of painters, Soudavar 1992: 170.

²⁹ Welch attributes a sixth painting to Āqā Mīrak (*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 Mīrzā ‘Alī are on the new margin, one may assume that this Āqā Mīrak 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 Āqā Mīrak (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 Mīr Muṣawwir’s name see, Soudavar 1992: 156.

³³ Soudavar 1999: 50, 61.

³⁴ Soudavar 1999: 60–61.

³⁵ Melikian 1998: 32–33.

³⁶ Soudavar 1999: 50.

³⁷ Seyller 2002: 60–61.

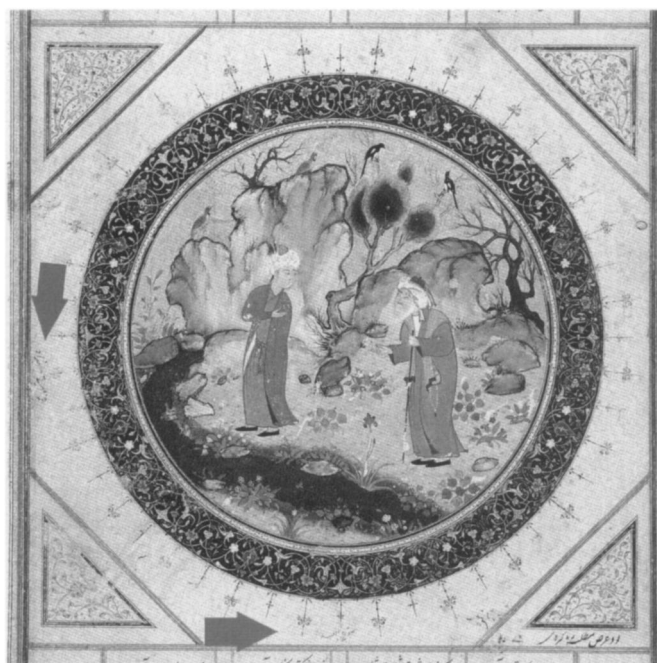


Fig. 1. Detail of a page from an Anthology, the Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC, F1944.48, fol. 3.



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.

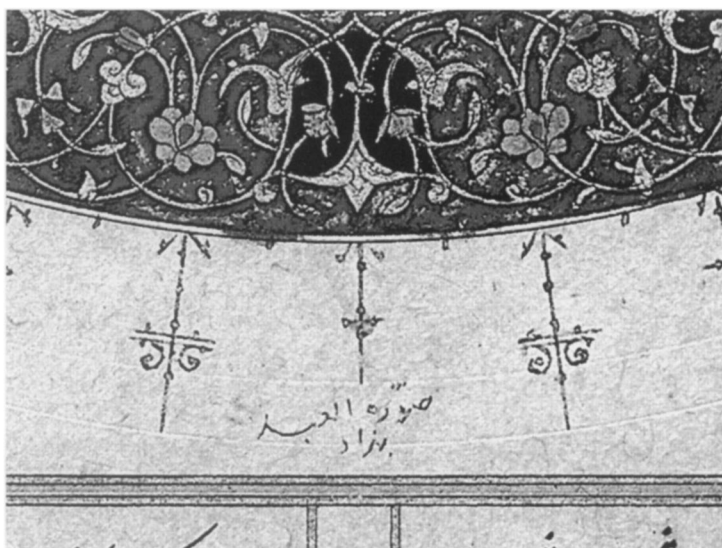


Fig. 4. Detail of a page from an Anthology, the Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC, F1944.48, fol. 3.



Fig. 5. Detail of a page from a *Būstān* (Cairo adab farsi 908, fol. 10a).

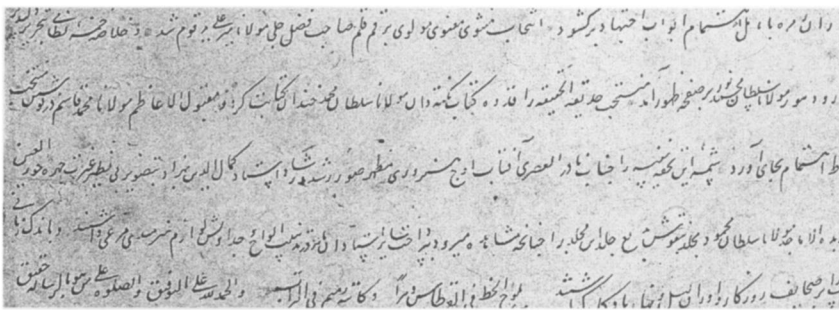


Fig. 6. Detail of a page from an Anthology, the Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC, F1944.48, fol. 1v.

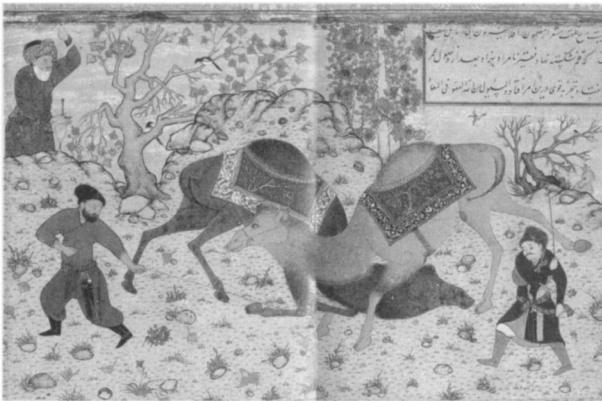


Fig. 7. Two Camels painting cut down to original size (Gulshan album, Gulestān Palace Library).



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

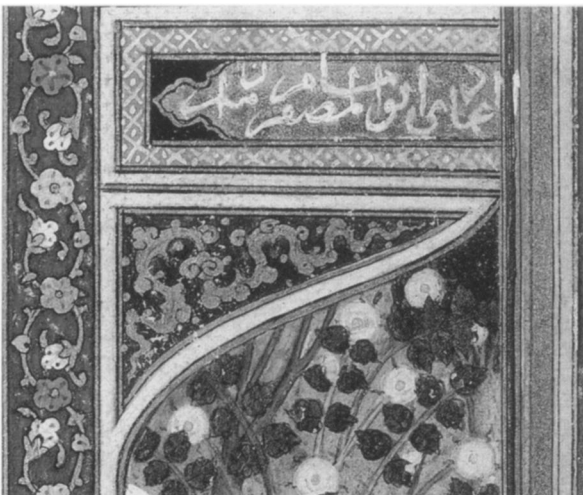


Fig. 9. Detail of a page from the *Divān-i Hāfiz*, Art and History Collection, Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC, LTS95.2.42.



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

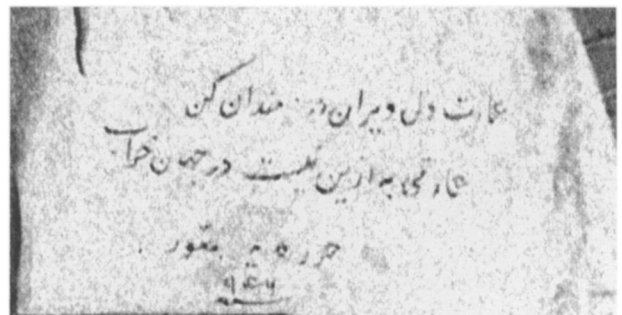


Fig. 11. Detail of *Anūshervān and the Owls* from the British Library Khamseh (OR 2265).



Fig. 12. Detail of a painting by Mir Sayyid 'Alī, LACMA M.90.141.1.



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



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



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

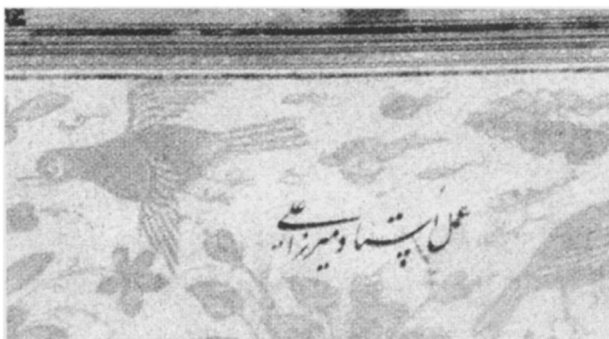


Fig. 16. Margin detail of Nūshābeh Recognising Iskandar from his Portrait from the British Library Khamseh (OR 2265).



Fig. 17. Signature detail of a drawing by Muḥammadi, Sultan by a Stream, Art and History Collection, Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC, LTS95.2.67.

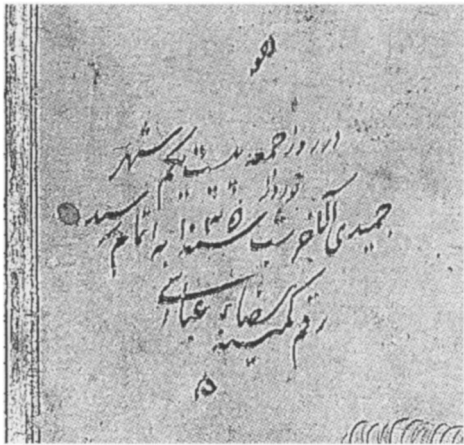


Fig. 18. Detail of a Seated Dervish, Art and History Collection, Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC, LTS95.2.79.

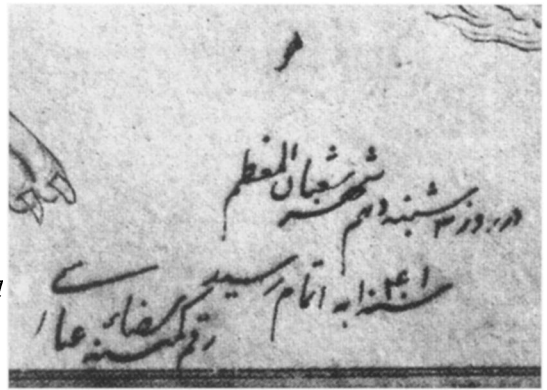


Fig. 19. Signature of Rizā on drawing of Melikian cat. no. 106 (Private collection).



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

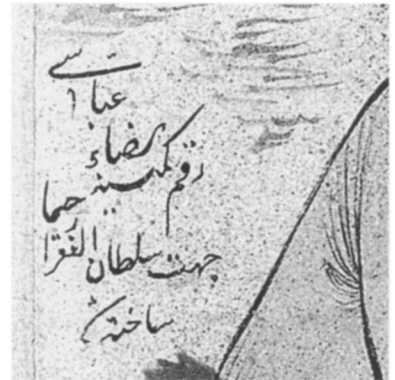


Fig. 21. Fake signature of Rizā on drawing, Melikian catalogue (p. 97).



Fig. 22. Court scene by Muḥammad-ʿAlī b. Muḥammad Zamān, British Museum OA1920.9-17.0299.



Fig. 23. Portrait of Muḥammad-Bāqir Majlisī on his tomb in Isfāhan (Honarfar 1965: 159).

Soudavar*	Melikian*
<p>(الله تعالی)، هو، عرضه داشت پیر غلام دیرینه، میر مصور، بعرض میرساند که مدت مدید شد که بنده زاده در غلامی بسر میبرد، امیدوار [چُن] انست که عنایت از او دریغ نفرمایند، امید [که] فقیر هم عنقریب از سر قدم ساخته بملازمت آید انشاء (الله تعالی) سایه آفتاب [الهی پاینده] باد</p> <p>He, Petition of the old and long-time slave, Mīr Muṣawwir, It is a great honour to report that it has been a while since this slave's son (i.e. Mīr Sayyid 'Alī) has entered the services of Your Majesty. It is hoped that he shall become the subject of royal munificence. (As for me) I am hopeful to start my journey soon and join Your Majesty's services, God Almighty willing, May (you as) the Shadow of [Divine] Radiance [last forever].</p>	<p>الله تعالی، هو، عرض داشت: پیر غلام دیرینه، میر مصور، بعرض میرساند که مدت مدید شد که بنده زاده در غلامی بسر میبرد، امیدوار <u>باتست</u> که عنایت و دریغ نفرمایند، فقیر، امید، هم عنقریب از <u>سیر</u> قدم ساخته بملازمت آید انشاء (الله) سایه آفتاب باد!</p> <p>Dieu le Très-Haut Lui, Requête, Le vieux (<i>pir</i>) serviteur de longue date, Mīr Muṣawwir, fait valoir que depuis fort longtemps le fils d'esclave passe au service particulier [(dar gholāmi) du roi]. Il a l'espoir que les bontés ne lui seront point refusées, Le pauvre espérant qu'ayant très bientôt accompli le parcours il entrera au service de l'entourage [royal] si le veut [Dieu] Que l'ombre du soleil soit [bénie].</p>

To interpret his reading, and justify this painting as the self-portrait of Mīr Muṣawwir, 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-dāsh*t (“petition/report”) that we have from the Timurid or early Safavid period is the one presented to Bāysunghur, which does not name the petitioner (whom we usually assume to be the head of the prince’s library, Ja’far-i Bāysunghurī).³⁸ 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’a*: 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 after the words in *shā’a* and placed on top to serve also as an invocation to God.³⁹ Melikian though, completes the missing words with a supposedly dropped *Allāh*. Minor reading errors

notwithstanding,⁴⁰ Melikian’s main problem is the misreading of the key sentence of the letter in which Mīr Muṣawwir, after stating that his son (Mīr Sayyid ‘Alī) is already in the services of Humāyūn, declares that he will join him shortly.⁴¹ The sentence accords with the information provided by Būdāq that the Mīr’s son went to India first “and the father followed him there”.⁴² At the same time, it negates the possibility of Mīr Muṣawwir 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 Mīr Muṣawwir). 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

* From now on, Melikian’s readings will appear on the right column and mine on the left one.

³⁸ See Lentz and Lowry 1987: 160.

³⁹ Melikian commits the same error in the reading of the letter of Shāh Abu ‘l-Qāsim-i Kāshgarī in which the two words *jannat-āshiyānī* (“he who now resides in Heaven”) referred to Humāyūn, and needed to be re-inserted after the word *ḥaẓrat* (p. 84).

⁴⁰ Compare the underlined words with my own transcription. His reconstruction *umīdvār bi ānast* is not wrong. But as a poem that he himself produces on p. 77, the expression *umīdvār chunān-ast* is the prevailing formula to be used in conjunction with *umīdvār*. 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 sākhtan* (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.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 Mīr Sayyid ‘Alī. 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 Mīr Muṣawwir’s name on it. If he still chose to add the Mīr Sayyid ‘Alī 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, Mīr Sayyid ‘Alī 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: Mīrzā ‘Alī and Mīr Sayyid ‘Alī. The forward leaning position of a kneeling man also seems to be a characteristic of this artist.

VI. MĪR SAYYID ‘ALĪ AND THE QUESTION OF “SELF PORTRAITS”

In addition to the previous painting, Melikian claims three other single-figure paintings, two signed by Mīr Sayyid ‘Alī and one by Muḥammad 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 Muḥammad-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 Muẓaffar ‘Alī clearly states that his stipend of six *tūmāns* had been cut in half by Ṭahmāsb and that he

could not make ends meet with such an income.⁴⁴ Moreover, of the two supposed self-portraits of Mīr Sayyid ‘Alī, 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 Mīr Sayyid ‘Alī matured at the Safavid court and went to the Mughal court later on.⁴⁵ As for Muḥammad-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 Mīr Sayyid ‘Alī painting of LACMA were by the relatively unknown poet Ahlī-yi Turshīzī (Fig. 12). Perhaps emboldened by his discovery, and finding that the same poem was written on a rug depicted in a painting from Ṭahmāsb’s *Khamseh*, *Bārbad Playing Before Khusraw*, he concluded that this painting too was by the same hand, despite bearing an attribution to Mīrzā ‘Alī.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 *Khamseh* 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 Shāpur 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 گاه آنجا
بهر جا پا نهی خواهم که گردم خاک راه آنجا

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 on⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Soudavar 1999: 53.

⁴⁵ Melikian claims that the Mughal one must look “twenty years” older (p. 220).

⁴⁶ Melikian 1998, p. 38.

⁴⁷ The beginning of the second hemistich is wrongly

⁴³ Seyller 1997.

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 *Tuhfeh-yi Sāmī*, a compendium of various popular verses compiled by Sām Mīrzā, a talented prince who employed or befriended many artists. Furthermore, their calligraphic styles are different. We can see that Mīrzā ‘Alī, who uses a consistently strong and mature *nasta‘liq* 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 *shīn* and *kāf* in *farsh* and *khāk*. More importantly, the cursively connected ending *hā* in *jilveh*, which is only used by accomplished *nasta‘liq* calligraphers (then and now), appears in Mīrzā ‘Alī’s carpet and not the other one. They are simply not by the same hand.

As stated before, Melikian discards the attribution to Mīrzā ‘Alī (on the non-reproduced *Barbad* painting) as mere graffiti. The *Nūshābeh* painting—which is actually illustrated in the catalogue—bears on its margin the inscription ‘*amal-i ustād Mīrzā ‘Alī*’ (“the work of Master

Mīrzā ‘Alī”). It is not only written in an elegant *nasta‘liq* 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 Mīrzā ‘Alī as *ustād*, a term frequently used in the milieu of Persian artists for Mīrzā ‘Alī but not for Mīr Sayyid ‘Alī. 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 Mīr Sayyid ‘Alī and not address the issue of the remaining paintings bearing the same attribution to Ustād Mīrzā ‘Alī.

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 Ahlê-yi Turshêzê. His reading of a poem on an open booklet held by a young prince in *Majnūn Goes to School* (Freer S1986.221), for instance, is far from correct:

Soudavar	Melikian
<p>بتي دیدم که در مکتب سبق میداد استادش نظر بر صورتش میکرد و معنی میشد از یادش</p> <p>I saw a beauty in a school whose teacher was giving him a lesson, He would look at his face and lose all senses</p>	<p>بتي دیدم که در قلّت سیو استاد میدادش نظر بر صورتش میکرد و معنی میشد از یادش</p> <p>Je vis une beauté à qui en cette <i>pénurie</i> le maître avait donné un <i>pichet</i>, Il jetait un regard sur son visage et en oubliait le sens [de toute chose]</p>

The erroneous reading of *maktab* (“school”) as *qillat* (“penury”), and *sabaq dādan* (“teaching”) as *sabū* (“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 Mīr Muṣawwir,” Mīr Sayyid ‘Alī 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 Quṭb al-Dīn Muḥammad-i 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 (*muraqqa*). His reasoning is that Qīṣṣeh-khwān cites “Mīr Muṣawwir, his son Sayyid ‘Alī, the son of Master Sultān Maḥmūd, his son, Mīrzā ‘Alī” among the artists represented therein, (p. 76). Unfortunately, this is not what Qīṣṣeh-khwān (“The Story-teller”) says. Like so many other *muraqqa* prefaces, 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

⁴⁸ Khadivjam 1967: 673–76; Māyel-Heravi 1993: 284–88:

“به یمن دولت بی زوال – بعضی خطوط و تصاویر استادان به دست
فتیر حقیر دعاگوی دولت، قطب الثین محمد قصه خوان، افتاده بود”
– “چون

مقصود از این قصه خوانی ذکر بعضی از استادان بود که یادگار ایشان در این

transcribed in the catalogue as: بهر جا و پانمی خواهم که –
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 ‘Alī and includes all the classical calligraphy masters such as Ibn-i Bawwāb, as well as Yāqūt and his disciples. If Qīṣṣeh-khwān had the works of all of these masters, his album would have been more valuable than all Topkapı *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 Qīṣṣeh-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 ‘atabeh-yi...*). I also fail to understand why Mīr Sayyid ‘Alī’s drawing has to be a frontispiece, if inserted in such an album.

What needs to be considered here, however, is the reliability of Qīṣṣeh-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 Mashhadī plagiarised him for his preface of the Amīr Ghayb Beyk album (dated 1565).⁴⁹ In his meticulously-documented survey of Topkapı albums, David Roxburgh has noticed that Sayyid Aḥmad Mashhadī referred to his own preface as *in qīṣṣeh-khwāni* (“this story-telling”), a term that Qīṣṣeh-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.⁵⁰ All of the previously-mentioned scenarios make sense, but none provide an answer to the multitude of problems inherent in Qīṣṣeh-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 qīṣṣeh-khwāni* 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 Amīr Ghayb Beyk who claims to possess a collection of calligraphy and paintings, and his album is now in the Topkapı. 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 Hiravī could have seen Bihzād, while there is no reason for a story-teller to have encountered the master. According to ‘Āli Effendi, Qīṣṣeh-khwān was a pupil of Mālik-i Daylamī, who was himself a pupil of Sayyid Aḥmad-i Mashhadī.⁵³ Fourth, a sentence correctly used by Sayyid Aḥmad (a), becomes grammatically incorrect with Qīṣṣeh-khwān (b):

(a) چندی بدستباری استادان نادر... ، به ترتیب آن قیام نموده درواقع ترتیبی روی نمود و مرقعی چهره گشود که ...

(b) چند بدستباری استادان نادر... ، که به ترتیب آن قیام نموده شد درواقع ترتیبی روی نموده و مرقعی چهره گشوده که... کلمه ای

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 Qīṣṣeh-khwān displays a lack of familiarity with

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 Khadivjam 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 Mashhadī, which Mehdi Bayāni had published a year before. Its text had been dispersed between two Topkapı albums: H2161 and 2156; Bayāni 1966: vol. 1, 49–52.

⁵⁰ Roxburgh 2001: 34.

⁵¹ While Qīṣṣeh-khwān only uses the این قصه خوانی, Sayyid Aḥmad uses a more rhythmic sentence: In qīṣṣeh-khani va izhar-e sukhani-dani. 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 Mashhadī’s preface; Froom 2001: 14.

⁵² See e.g. the story of the “The Jeweller and the Painter”; Khadivjam 1967: 671–73.

⁵³ Qīṣṣeh-khwān had reportedly met ‘Āli Efendi in Baghdad in 1581 some 8 years after Sayyid Aḥmad-i Mashhadī had died; Māyel-Heravi 1993: 63–64.

the artists of that period because Mīrzā ‘Alī was not the son of Sulṭān-Mahmūd but of Sulṭān-Muḥammad, and the latter was not the son of Mīr Sayyid ‘Alī. On the other hand, Sayyid Aḥmad’s account omits the reference to this erroneously-named father and son. Whatever the truth, Qīṣṣeh-khwān’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. DŪST-MUḤAMMAD

Melikian revels in reviving controversies. Through his entry on *The Story of Haftvād and the Worms* from the Ṭahmāsb *Shāhnāmeh*, he wants to re-establish the theory that its painter, Dūst-Muḥammad, is the same as the calligrapher who wrote the preface to Bahrām Mīrzā’s album and penned the labels for its paintings, and whose father’s name was Sulaymān. 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 Bahrām Mīrzā’s album in which he expressed his belief that there were at least two artists “hidden under the name Dūst-Muḥammad”, 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 *Javāhir al-akhbār* of Būdāq-i Munshī-yi Qazvīnī that nobody else seemed to possess outside Russia. It had much information on Dūst-Muḥammad 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 Dūst-Muḥammad question,⁵⁶ as well as photos of a découpage work signed by a Dūst-Muḥammad whose father’s name was Shaykh ‘Abdallāh (as opposed to Sulaymān), and a copy of Būdāq’s text.⁵⁷ Although tucked in a footnote, I had demonstrated why

the *Javāhiral-akhbār* clearly allowed us to make a distinction between Dūst-Muḥammad the calligrapher and his namesake, the painter whom Būdāq preferred to call Dūst-i Dīvāneh (“Dūst the Mad”). Adle’s comprehensive 1993 study of the different Dūst-Muḥammads 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, *taḥrīr*, 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 *tarbiyat* 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 *taḥrīr* (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 Āqā Mirak’s inscriptions on the ruined wall of the *Khamseh* page (Fig. 11) where he signs his name by using the verb *ḥarrara-hu*. It could also be used for ink drawings, especially when drawn with thin lines. Thus the artist Muḥammadi, who was a specialist in such drawings, would sign them as *ḥarrara-hu Muḥammadi-yi Muṣawwir*, where *ḥarrara-hu* could only refer to his drawing since the page was otherwise devoid of calligraphy (Fig. 17).⁶¹ But by and large, the word *taḥrīr* was used for the art of outlining in black calligraphic letters which had been penned in gold or other light colours. Būdāq thus qualified Dūst-Muḥammad’s pupil, Shaykh Muḥammad, as a *muḥarrer* and a calligrapher of *nasta’līq*.⁶² A calligrapher of *nasta’līq* could never be a *muḥarrir* because the thickness of the lines so varied in this script; he was simply referred to as a *khaṭṭāt* or *ustād-i khaṭṭ* (master of calligraphy).

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

⁵⁴ Dickson and Welch 1981: 119.

⁵⁵ Adle 1990: 243.

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 Būdāq’s account. Unfortunately, Adle referred to Būdāq without crediting Woods or the Center.

⁵⁸ Adle 1993: 238–63.

⁵⁹ Roxburgh 2001: 27–28.

⁶⁰ Soudavar 1996: 198–99, n. 62.

⁶¹ Soudavar 1992: 240–41.

⁶² Adle 1993: 288. Qāzī Aḥmad, who is the author of the *Gulistan-i Hunar*, did the same, *ibid.*, p. 291.

translating it as “calligraphy.” In support of his argument, he oddly chooses an image from the Bahrām Mīrżā album reproduced by Adle, in which the *nasta‘līq* in white by an unknown calligrapher is outlined in black ink and below which appears the words *ḥarrara-hu Dūst-Muḥammad-i Muṣawwir*. He argues that it refers to Dūst-Muḥammad as a calligrapher, even though Adle clearly explains in its caption that the noun *tahrīr* meant “encadrement linéaire”. Yet, he skips over the next calligraphic piece reproduced by Adle, below which appear the sentences: *kataba-hu al-‘abd ‘Alī; ḥarrara-hu Dūst-Muḥammad*.⁶³ 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 Dūst-Muḥammad on this piece can only refer to the further embellishment of the initial white calligraphy by (Mīr) ‘Alī, 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 Dūst-Muḥammads. His contemporary source is Bāyazīd, who may have met Dūst-Muḥammad the painter, after he had travelled to India. But Bāyazīd can in no way be a more reliable source than Būdāq, who was secretary to Bahrām Mīrżā in the very days that his album was being prepared. Būdāq personally knew the calligrapher Dūst-Muḥammad, whom he says had a lisp and pronounced “li” instead of “ri” and who never quitted Ṭahmāsb’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 Dūst-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” RIZĀ AND RIZĀ ‘ABBĀSĪ

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 Rīzā and Rīzā-i ‘Abbāsī 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 (Rīzā, Āqā Rīzā and Rīzā-i ‘Abbāsī), 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 Rīzā, in support of Stchoukine’s thesis, was criticised by two Iranian scholars; in rebuttal, I published an article in Persian that included a quotation from Rīzā’s contemporary, the historian Vāleh-yi Iṣfahānī, which clearly shows that Āqā Rīzā was also called Āqā Rīzā-i ‘Abbāsī.⁶⁷

Āqā Rīzā-i ‘Abbāsī, who in the days of the everlasting reign of his Majesty the World Conqueror and now in Heaven (i.e. Shāh ‘Abbās I) was the zenith of the age and the pinnacle of his century, is the son of the aforementioned Master ‘Alī 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 Ṣādiqī 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 Rīzā were much prized even in the early days of his Majesty (Shāh ‘Abbās II).....⁶⁸

Melikian publishes one illustration from the Louvre (OA7136) signed by Rīzā (p. 330), and four others bearing the inscription *raqam-i kamīneh Rīzā-i ‘Abbāsī* (it is the work of Rīzā-i ‘Abbāsī) 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

⁶⁵ Stchoukine 1964.

⁶⁶ Canby 1996: 21.

⁶⁷ Soudavar 1992 : 261–64; Soudavar 2000a: 54.

⁶⁸ Vāleh-ye Iṣfahānī 1993: 471.

⁶³ Adle 1993: pl. X, figs 7 and 8.

⁶⁴ Soudavar 1992: 258.

elsewhere and is generally agreed to be an authentic work of this artist.⁶⁹ Riżā 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 Riżā. 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 (żā) is hardly noticeable. Thus in Fig. 21, we see not only a break in between the letters *mīm* and *yā* of *kamūneh* but a noticeable thickening of the lines in *Riżā*. In Fig. 20, we can notice a Riżā that hardly follows the authentic prototype and the *sīn* of *‘Abbāsī* 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 Riżā'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 Riżā.

IX. WRONG READING

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

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

نگاشت خامه عبدالصمد زروی سر
شبيه شاه همايون و شاه اكبرا

*Le calame d'Abd os-Samad a tracé sur le vif
Le portrait de de Shāh Humāyūn et de Shāh Akbar*

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

The pen of Abd al-Ṣamad artfully drew
The portraits of Shāh Humāyūn and Shāh 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:

- ۱ - این آستان قدس که شاهان ذوالجلال
- ۲ - بر خاک راه او خرد (سر و) افسر نهاده اند
- ۳ - انسان و جن طیور و وحوش و پری و دیو
- ۴ - در بارگاه حضرت او سر نهاده اند
- ۵ - یواجب آنکه آن طوع و بندگی (نبود عجب آنکه طوع بندگی)
- ۶ - بر آستان سبط پیمبر نهاده اند
- ۷ - بر آرزوی خویش موفق شوند از آنک
- ۸ - دست طلب به دامن حیدر نهاده اند
- ۹ - زیر قدم زایش از بهر کسب فیض
- ۱۰ - کروبیان قدسی شهر نهاده اند
- ۱۱ - بهر وجود و هستی آل عبا بود
- ۱۲ - کاین طاق نه رواق نهاده اند
- ۱۳ - بهر ثناء (نثار) قدم زوار درگهش
- ۱۴ - در دست چرخ مهر منور نهاده اند
- ۱۵ - از گرد راه و خاک قدم زایران او
- ۱۶ - طعمه مشک و طیر تغیر (طعمه [به] مشک و طنز بعبیر نهاده اند)
- ۱۷ - گردند مست باده وصل جان (جمال) دوست
- ۱۸ - گونی قدم بعالم دیگر نهاده اند
- ۱۹ - بی رنج ره رسیده (رسند) بسرچشمه حیره
- ۲۰ - ظلمات را نصیب سکندر نهاده اند
- ۲۱ - لذت برند بیشتر از آب زندگی
- ۲۲ - آنان که دل به ساقی کوثر نهاده اند

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 tête)
- 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) 'Alī's supplicants
- (9,10 Pour l'arrivée des pèlerins, désireux de s'assurer les faveurs divines, On a déposé l'eau des ablutions et l'exposé du caractère sacré de la

⁶⁹ Soudavar 1992: 269.

plume de l'ange)

- 9, 10 Under the feet of its pilgrim, angels have laid down their sacred feathers, in order to prosper
- 11 It is for the sake of the existence of Companions of the Robe (The Five Saints)
- 12 That this nine-vaulted dome has been edified
- (13 C'est pour la louange du guide des pèlerins de sa cour)
- 13 It is for sprinkling gold underneath the feet of this sanctuary's pilgrim
- 14 That the shining sun has been set in the hands of the sky
- 15 With the dirt from the road and the dust from their walk, his pilgrims
- (16 Ont fait une nourriture de musc et de volailles)
- 16 Can chide musk and ridicule amber
- (17 Ils se sont enivrés de l'union avec l'âme de l'Ami)
- 17 They shall be drunk with the wine of closeness to god's beauty
- 18 As if they had set foot in another world
- 19 Without suffering the voyage, they shall reach the Fountain of Life
- 20 Leaving the Land of Darkness for Alexander
- 21 They shall enjoy life more
- 22 Those who have given their heart to he who pours water from the Kawthar Spring (i.e. 'Alī)

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:

در روضه امام زاده معصوم مطهر شاه (زنده) زید کبیر بن امام
معصوم امام موسی کاظم صلّ الله علیه و علیهم اجمعین، امامی که
(روینده) می رویند خاک
درش را، خلائق بمژگان، ملائک بشهر - هر کس
که تصرف کند خلاف امر (خدائی) خدای و رسول (خدائی) خدای

کرده باشد، لعن الله علی المخالفین، سنه ۱۰۰۸

In the sanctuary of the immaculate Son of the Imam, Shāh Zayd the Great, son of the immaculate Imam, the Imam Mūsā Kāẓim—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 Kāẓim⁷⁰ and who in Iran is called Shāh Zayd-i Kabīr. Yet a more serious error is to think that an Imam could be addressed as *Imam-zādeh*, which, although it means "son of the Imam", defines a lower rank than Imam. Melikian thus considers the terms "Imam-zādeh", "Shāh-i Zindeh", "Kabīr", and "Ma'sūm", all as epithets of the seventh Imam, Mūsā Kāẓim, 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 Kabīr. For some odd reason, in both places, the Imam-zādeh has been gradually "upgraded" to be the son of the second Imam Ḥasan rather than of Mūsā Kāẓim. 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 'Abbās I, the chances are that it was meant for this one.

Two candlesticks bearing the inscription '*abdu-hu Ḥaydar al-Husaynī*' are stated by Melikian to be executed for the prince Haydar, a Safavid who lived at the court of Shāh Jahān (pp. 452–55). The two candlesticks are of different sizes (28cm., 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

⁷⁰ Ya'qūbī 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 Ḥusaynī 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-Ḥusaynī *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.⁷¹ 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 Riżā. In the case of the late seventeenth-century painter ‘Alī-qulī Beyg Jibā-dār, 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 Chaghatāy Turkish word meaning “coat of mail, piece armour”, and *jibā-dār* was the title of the Keeper of Armour.⁷² In Safavid times the word *jibā* was written as *جبه* (*jibah*). Because of the similarity of its spelling with the Arabic *jubba* (“long overcoat”) it could lead to confusion. It is to avoid this that the painter intentionally spelled his surname as *جبادار* (Jibā-dār). Thus if a signature reads *عليقى جبه دار* it is a forgery. By the same token, it is wrong to call him “Jobbedār” as do two entries for the *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, one by Priscilla Soucek (I:872) and the other by Barbara Schmitz (XIII:79).⁷³ 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.⁷⁴ Melikian, who writes the surname of this artist as “Jobbedār”, 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 *rezā’i*” of the Uzbek ruler ‘Abdallāh Khān (p. 290) without further explanation. In fact, the Chaghatāy Turkish word *kūkaltāsh* and the Perso-Arab expression *barādar-i riżā’i* both mean “foster-brother”. It was used for Qulbābā to emphasise that he was the foster-brother of ‘Abdallāh Khān.⁷⁵

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 *Ḥabīb al-siyar*. Volumes I and II of this manuscript are in the Gulistān Library,⁷⁶ a section of volume III (ex-Vever Collection) is now at the Freer Gallery⁷⁷ and another section from the same volume was sold at Christie’s.⁷⁸ 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 Riżā ‘Abbāsī Museum in Tehran, which I have previously published,⁷⁹ 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 Esma‘il II, page du Būstān*; Melikian presumably thinks that the page contains the texts of the *Shāhnāme* and the *Būstān*. The second one is qualified as a page of the *Būstān* only. In reality, they are two pages from a set of four paintings from a dispersed manuscript that has the text of Sa‘di’s *Gulistān* in the centre and the *Būstān* in the margin. I have attributed all four to Muḥammadi, 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.

⁷² Soudavar 1992: 369.

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

⁷⁵ Soudavar 1992: 219; Soudavar 2000b: 67–68.

⁷⁶ Ḥusaynī-Rād 2005: 179–99.

⁷⁷ Lowry *et al.* 1998: 197–90.

⁷⁸ Christie’s, King St., London, sale of 10 April 1999, lot 79.

⁷⁹ Soudavar 2000b: figs 5–12.

kings, Shāh Sulṭān-Ḥosayn (Fig. 22), and to his left is the notorious Shi'ite theologian, Muḥammad-Bāqir Majlisī, a portrait of whom is hanging over his tomb in Isfahan (Fig. 23).⁸⁰

Melikian illustrates a page from the *Gūy-u-chugān* manuscript that Shāh Ṭahmāsb 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 Ivanov⁸¹ and omits Welch who has attributed this specific painting to Sulṭān-Muḥammad⁸² and has discussed the rest of its paintings in his *The Houghton Shahnama*.

A page from the Gulistān Library manuscript of the *Zafarnāmeḥ*, copied in 935/1529 by Sulṭān-Muḥammad-i Nūr, 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,⁸³ clearly show that their attribution to Bihzād 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.⁸⁴ A characteristic of this painter is the drawing of faces with a drooping T-shaped moustaches and beard. I long suspected that this painter had worked on the Ṭahmāsb *Shāhnāmeḥ*. 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-Wahhāb). The acceptance of my theory in respect to this forger went against the doctoral thesis of Feliz Čagman, 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 Sulṭān-Ḥosayn Bāyqarā made by our forger.⁸⁵

Finally, I had previously attributed to Mīrzā 'Alī the painting incorporated in a page of the *Gulshan* album that Melikian produces on p. 435.⁸⁶ 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 Shāh Ṭahmāsb but was taken by Mīrzā 'Alī 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 Mīr Sayyid 'Alī and that Grabar has tried to refute (I shall discuss this in a forthcoming paper).

XII. THE SHĀH ṬAHMĀSB SHĀHNĀMEH

The topic of the Shāh Ṭahmāsb *Shāhnāmeḥ* 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 Ṭahmāsb (pp. 28–29). Yet we have the example of the *Jāmi' al-tawārikh* that began under the rule of Ghāzān Khān, as acknowledged in the text by its author Rashid al-Din, but was only finished under his successor Uljāyṭu. As a result, it was dedicated to Uljāyṭu. 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 Bihzādiān influence. The arrival of the master c. 1522, a year after the return of the seven year-old Ṭahmāsb from Herat, allowed a synthesis to occur between the Turkoman and Herat schools of paintings. The project had begun under Shāh Ismā'īl and was finished under Ṭahmāsb, hence the dedicatory rosette in his name.

Melikian attributes the lack of a colophon in the manuscript to Ṭahmāsb'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 *nasta'liq* 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

⁸⁰ Honarfar 1965: 159.

⁸¹ Ivanov 2003: 156.

⁸² Welch 1976: 52, fig. 11.

⁸³ Ḥusaynī-Rād 2005: 85–94.

⁸⁴ Soudavar 1992: 118–19; Soudavar 1999: 264–66, pl. 3.

⁸⁵ Soudavar 1992: 118–19; Soudavar 1999: 264–66.

⁸⁶ Soudavar 1999: 54–55, pl. XVII.

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 conservators 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 *Khamseh* of Shāh Tahmāsb. 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 *Zafarnāmeḥ* 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 Bāmīyān Buddhas. If illustrated manuscripts are not destroyed by religious zealots, the chances are that their display will be preempted, 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 Tahmāsb *Shāhnāmeḥ*, the full publication of its paintings by Dickson and Welch

⁸⁷ Soudavar 2002: 110–20.

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 *Shāhnāme* 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 squander it on political extravaganzas the first time and on religious propaganda the second one. The main reason for the swap was that the de Kooning painting (entitled *Woman III*) represented a woman and could never be exhibited under the present régime. 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 *Shāhnāme* 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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