

# ROTUNDA

*the magazine of the Royal Ontario Museum*

**IN SEARCH OF  
SHEHERAZADE**

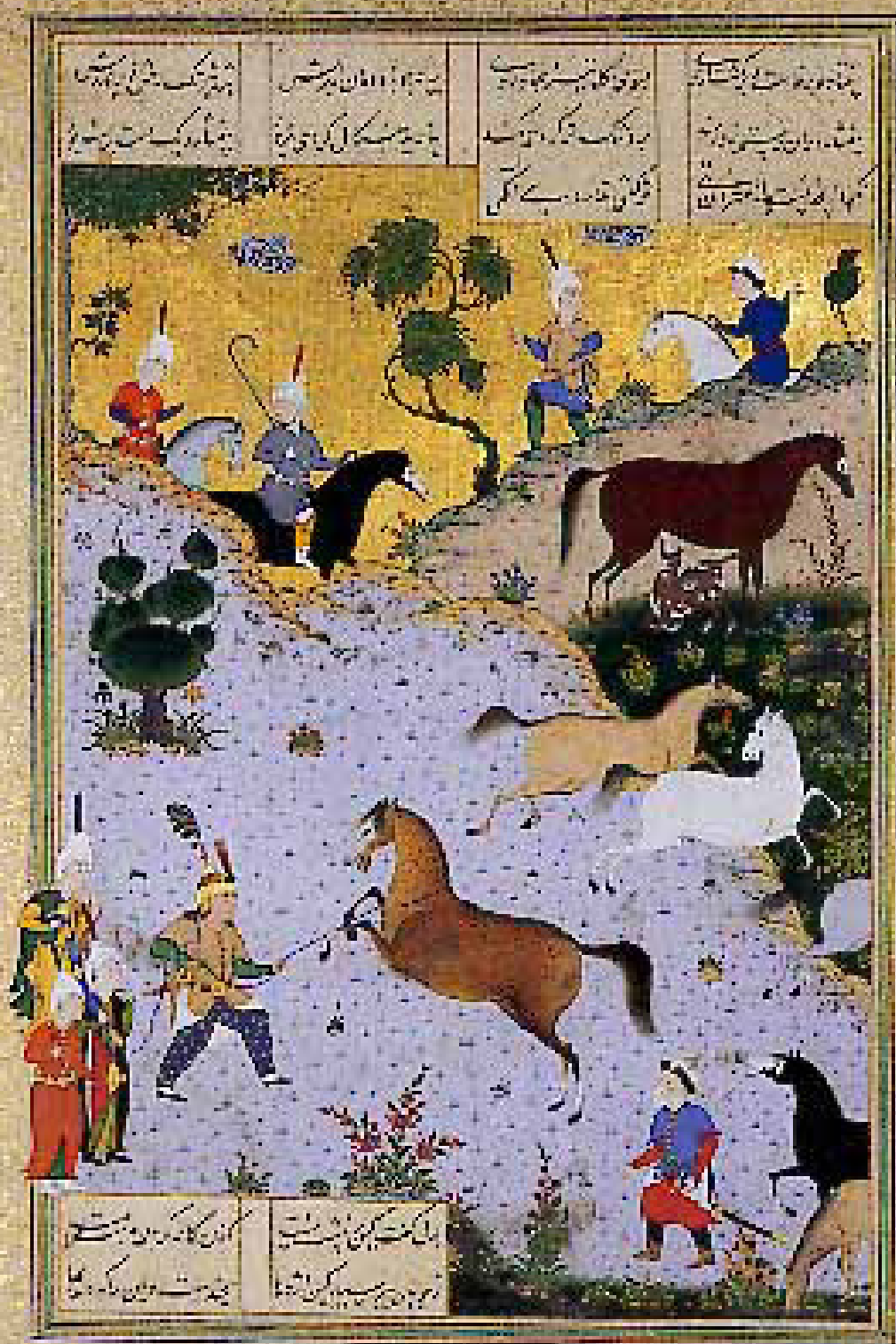
**NATIVE  
EARTHWORKS  
EAST OF THE  
SUN AND WEST  
OF THE MOON**

**THE SULPHUR  
EATERS**

**HOW POPCORN  
GOT ITS  
CRUNCH**

**A SHIPWRECK  
MUSEUM**

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IN

To the romantic

imagination of

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# SHEHERAZADE

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SEARCH

OF

*Does East meet West through Sheherazade?*

LISA GOLOMBEK

COURTESY ART AND HISTORY TRUST COLLECTION  
IN 1910 THE CURTAIN LIFTED AT THE PARIS OPERA TO REVEAL A steamy harem setting for Diaghilev's new Ballet Russe production of Rimsky-Korsakov's *Sheherazade*. Enthralled by the seductive movements of Nijinsky and Geltzer, Parisians loved *Sheherazade* as they did almost anything that conjured up images of a mysterious and sensual Orient, a world that seemed to be everything that theirs wasn't. To the romantic imagination of turn-of-the-century Europe, the Middle East evoked wild adventure and hedonism, where life was subject to both unfathomable peril and sublime good fortune.

Sheherazade is the heroine of *The Arabian Nights*, which was introduced in Europe through Antoine Galland's French translation of 1704. During the preceding century, reports of travellers, merchants, missionaries, and colonists had fired the imaginations of Europeans with descriptions of the far-off

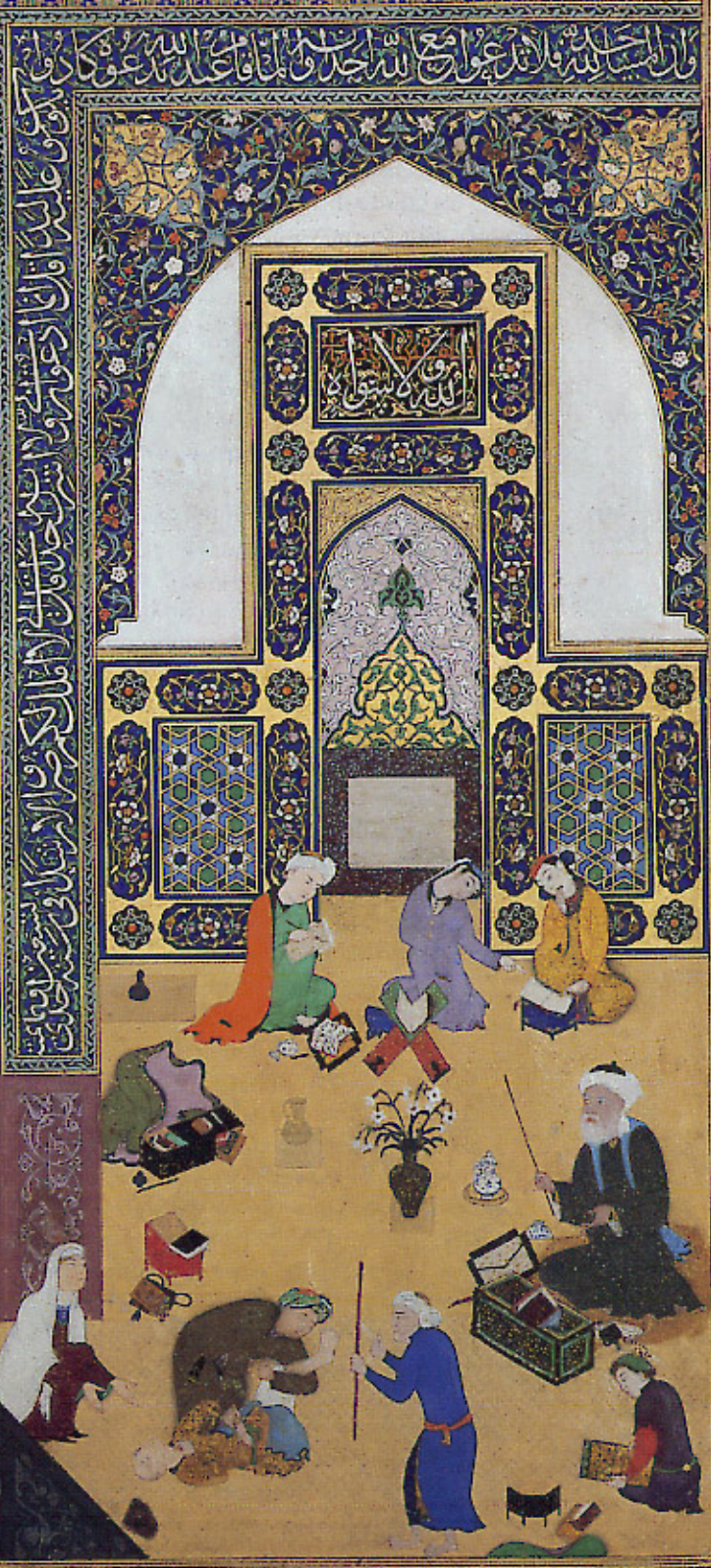
In this painting,  
attributed to Bihzad,  
the poet Sa'di visits  
a mosque where class  
is in session. Nizami's  
tragic teenage lovers,  
Layla and Majnun,  
pass notes in the  
back of the room.

Painted in Herat, 1486,  
Art and History Trust  
Collection, Houston.

*Lisa Golombek is curator in charge of the West Asian Department,  
Royal Ontario Museum*



و مولودم پر سپید گفتم خاک شیراز  
گفتم از تیران سعدی چه داری گفتم  
بلیست بخوی اصول معاصدا  
علی کرید فی مقابلہ العیسم  
علی خلیل لس یرفع راسہ  
و ہل یتیم الزفع من عامل الخ





King Shahriyar,  
devastated by his  
first wife's infidelity,  
has her put to  
death. To avoid  
such misfortune  
in the future, he  
decides to slay  
whomever he  
marries on the  
morning following  
the wedding night

lands. In the 19th century, painters such as Delacroix and Gérôme favoured Biblical scenes of violence and passion in Oriental settings. Neither photographs nor astute observers could subsequently wean Europe from its romanticized vision of the Orient. Not content to translate literally the famous tales, also known in English as *The Thousand and One Nights*, Richard Burton, in 1885-86, and a host of others paraphrased, interpreted, and embellished the originals.

Sheherazade figures only in the frame story for the tales. According to the story, King Shahriyar, an Indian ruler devastated by his first wife's infidelity has her put to death. To avoid such misfortune in the future, he decides to slay whomever he marries on the morning following the wedding night. After several of the finest young women in the kingdom are slain, Sheherazade, the vizier's daughter, devises a plan to end the bloodbath and volunteers to marry the king. As dawn breaks after their wedding night, she begins to spin a tale. The king is so fascinated that he postpones her execution. Night after night she presents new tales. Finally the king comes to trust Sheherazade and spares her life.

Over the centuries, tales from a multitude of sources came to be included in *The Thousand and One Nights* that we know today. During the height of their popularity in the Islamic world, the 13th and 14th centuries, there were only 11 tales covering 271 nights. In 19th-century Europe, *Aladdin's Lamp* was added, as were the stories of Sinbad the Sailor, which reflected the important maritime trade between India and the West.

India was the source of the frame story and many of the tales. However, before reaching Europe and the Middle East the Sheherazade story first travelled to Iran where it was translated into Pahlavi (Old Persian). In fact, the names Sheherazade and Shahriyar are Persian.

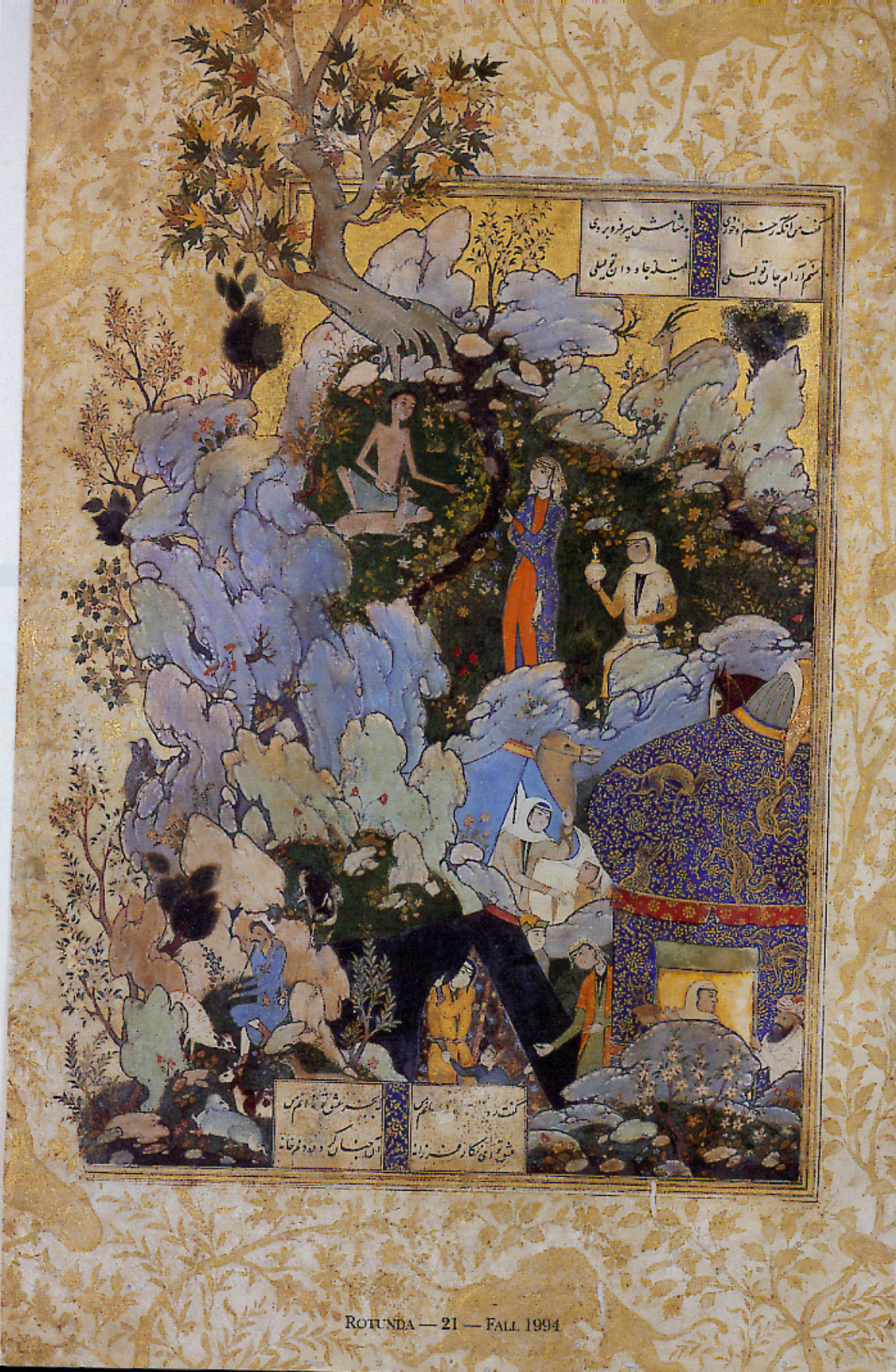
When Baghdad became the Islamic capital in AD 762, new stories were added to the collection focusing on the court of the caliph, Harun al-Rashid (AD 786-809). He joined the ranks of kings, who as legend has it, showed such dedication to his subjects that he wandered among them in disguise, searching out injustice. In the 13th and 14th centuries, the tales spread to and gained popularity in the Arabic-speaking world of Syria and Egypt. While Arabic was the language of religious discourse in Iran, Persian remained the language of both the street and the court. The story line of *The Arabian Nights* was picked up and transformed into stunning Persian poetry in the romance of the *Seven Princesses* by Nizami (1141-1209).

Foremost among the Persian poets, Nizami is often called the creator of the Persian love story (*Gelphie*). His work was imitated by poets for many generations in Iran as well as in India and Turkey. In *Seven Princesses (Haft Paykar)*, a carefully constructed poem (*masnavi*) comparable in structure and length to Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, Nizami tells the story of a Persian king, who was promised that once he came to power, he could marry the seven women portrayed on the walls of his palace. After seizing the crown, which was placed between two lions, the king prepares to wed the seven beauties, who arrive from each of the seven climes of the world. On successive evenings of the week, the king visits each of the women in her own, distinctively coloured pavilion, where he is told a tale that lasts through the night. Beginning on Saturday in the black

Majnun, emaciated  
and sick with  
love, receives visitors  
at his desert home  
(here portrayed as a  
lush forest). Bedouin  
tents in the fore-  
ground are shown  
as elegant yurts.

Painted for a  
manuscript of the Silsilat  
al-Dhahhab of Jami,  
in northeastern Iran,  
c. 1575. Art and History  
Trust Collection, Houston.





کشف من اندر حرمش و در  
سهم آرام جان تو یسلی  
پیشش پیروز بری  
استد جا و دانی تو یسلی

کشف من اندر حرمش و در  
سهم آرام جان تو یسلی  
پیشش پیروز بری  
استد جا و دانی تو یسلی





هزار و دویست و پنجاه و دو	برین کوزه تار و زکار روز	کوبی شیر زمان می خون	سجای کوزه گریست این کرم
بیش که بچم و میانش چو	کی مرده چون کی زنده	بران کوب بر کار و اینا کت	چون کوب خیزد بر مایه گشت



شش پراگنده شاد	به ویک مرگ زنده
به مریه میان رسیدگی	آنان سپید و پراگنده



Sheherazade

marries the king

and as dawn

breaks on their

wedding night,

she begins to spin

a tale that so

fascinates him

he postpones her

execution. Night

after night she

presents new tales

pavilion, he proceeds to the yellow pavilion on Sunday, the green on Monday, the red on Tuesday, the blue on Wednesday, the sandalwood on Thursday, and finally the white on Friday. Each colour is associated with a planet and its astrological meanings. The stories move the reader from a state of despair, symbolized by black, to a state of joy symbolized by white. Although the influence of *The Arabian Nights* is obvious, the stories in Nizami's poems fit a tighter structure.

Princes and, occasionally, princesses, nobles, and amirs commissioned artists at great expense to illustrate in jewel-like miniature paintings scenes described in their favourite verses. These were added to beautifully handwritten books, bound in richly gilded and embossed leather covers. The paintings would only be shown to a privileged few. *Hazar Afsan (A Thousand Stories)*, the Persian transliteration of *The Arabian Nights*, was very popular but its prose was considered a blend of high and low literature. To the collectors of fine books, poetry, the highest form of literature, was more desirable.

In the illustrated books, the complex, intricately woven tales of Nizami's seven princesses are complemented by equally intricate page design that includes lyrical rendering of imagery and rich ornamentation and colour. In spite of the many dramatic scenes in the stories, those chosen for illustration are usually the quiet moments between the king and one of the princesses. Sometimes a book contains only seven illustrations that are identical except for the colour of the pavilion.

The story of the princesses is part of a quintet of lengthy poems known as the *Khamasa*. One of the most popular poems in this group, set in pre-Islamic Arabia, describes the romance of two Arab teenagers, Layla and Majnun. Majnun's love for Layla appears to drive him mad. (Majnun means mad in Persian; the boy's real name is Qays.) The episode describing Layla and Majnun at school was a subject for the famous painter Bihzad, who illustrated the happenings of the classroom even though Nizami does not describe them in detail.

Nizami's poems remained among the favourite subjects of Persian artists for centuries. However, the style in which they were rendered changed. For example, a work of the late 16th century combines Bihzad's genre style with a show of lush vegetation, an image that was becoming pervasive in painting of the period. Majnun, emaciated and wearing only a loincloth, is visited in the wilds by Layla, whom he doesn't recognize: "Love has so filled my heart that there is no room left for the beloved." The bedouin encampment described by Nizami is transformed into a rich tent city with a gold-embroidered yurt (circular Mongol tent), filled with women and children who are busy spinning thread and chatting.

Many of Nizami's works were inspired by characters in the verses of the *Shahnama* (Book of Kings), which was equally popular as a subject for illustration. Based on history and legend, the epic was composed by Firdausi at the beginning of the 11th century. Stories of the kings who ruled Iran before the coming of Islam run the gamut from courtly events to battles, romance, and tragedy. However, the most important hero of the *Shahnama* is not a king. He is Rustam, a figure who combines superhuman strength with dedication to justice. Rustam was born to Zal, an albino abandoned by his father who considered him unlucky. Zal had been rescued by the Simurgh, an extraordi-

The fabulous bird

Simurgh carries prey

to feed her young.

Sitting on the rocks

is the abandoned

infant Zal, who

became the father

of the famous

Persian hero Rustam.

A caravan in the

foreground spots

the infant.

Painted for a manuscript

of the Persian epic

*Shahnama* of Firdausi.

For Shah Tahmasp

in Tabriz, Iran, c. 1525.

Art and History Trust

Collection, Houston.



nary bird. In a breathtaking image from a manuscript painted for Shah Tahmasp (1524-76), a ruler of Iran, a caravan spots Zal being cared for by the bird in the wilds. The depiction of the Simurgh was influenced by the image of the Chinese phoenix on silks and porcelains imported to Iran. Although the Simurgh or phoenix had become a common decorative motif in Persian art in the 14th century, here it is treated as a living creature with its own crying nestlings to feed.

At the beginning of the 17th century, European merchants, missionaries, and arms dealers introduced foreign goods that intrigued the powerful rulers of Iran and India. Western painting idioms, such as naturalism and perspective, influenced Persian and Indian artists. When the Persian painter Muhammad-i Zaman illustrated Majnun visiting his father, his style was quite different from the 16th-century portrayals of this subject. All of the elements of the composition have been manipulated to form a uniform image. The laws of perspective demanded that the foreground figures be larger than those in the middle distance and background. That is why a reclining camel rather than Majnun is the dominant figure in Zaman's painting. An architectural ruin and stylized landscape are other European touches. Yet in spite of the attraction of Western culture, the Persian love of poetry and its historical link to painting persisted.

By the end of the century, however, tradition was abandoned. European oil painting with all of its conventions had been fully adopted. Ironically, it was at this very time that interest in the Orient peaked in England and Europe, and *The Arabian Nights* found its way into Western parlours.

The search for Sheherazade in traditional Persian painting and in 19th-century and early 20th-century European art takes some interesting twists. Her influence is subtly hidden behind the structure of the classical Persian poetry that inspired very serene and lyrical Persian art; but it becomes overt in the creation of a romanticized, spicy, and quite distorted picture of a foreign culture in European art—from dance to literature to painting. An entertaining comparison illustrates these antithetical views of Oriental culture. An Austrian porcelain of a "harem girl" (c. 1925) in the ROM's European collection portrays her as scantily dressed and seductive. In the supreme love scene of the Nizami romance, the couple always appears contemplative rather than amorous. Women are always fully clothed and, in keeping with Islamic tradition, head, arms, and legs are completely covered.

As Haddawy, a recent translator of *The Arabian Nights* commented, "It weaves the extraordinary into the fabric of everyday life." In spite of their differences, the Orientalist and Persian images are not only more or less derived from but have broad appeal much the same as Sheherazade's stories. ♦

Art of the Persian Courts is on display at the Royal Ontario Museum from 4 October 1994 to 2 January 1995. It is organized by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and drawn from the Art and History Trust, an outstanding collection amassed by Iranian collector Abolala Soudavar

**Rustam wrestles and  
subdues the White  
Div. Other demons  
throw rocks at  
Rustam to no avail.**

Painted for a manuscript of  
the *Shahnama* in Tabriz, Iran,  
c. 1525. Art and History  
Trust Collection, Houston.



