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CENTRAL ASIAN MINIATURE PAINTING SCHOOLS AND THEIR ARTISTIC AND AESTHETIC FEATURES

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Abstract. This article examines the schools of miniature painting that developed in Central Asia and in the neighbouring Timurid cultural sphere, and analyses the artistic and aesthetic features that give these schools their identity. Using a comparative, historical and formal-analytical approach based on museum, encyclopaedic and academic publications, the article follows the tradition from its pre-Islamic and Mongol-period roots to the Timurid workshops of Shiraz, Samarkand and Herat, and then to the Bukhara school of the Shaybanid and Janid periods. The results show that the Central Asian miniature is a courtly art of the book in which painting, calligraphy and ornament form one system; that its space is constructed in layers rather than by linear perspective; that colour, line and pattern carry meaning as well as decoration; and that the picture is closely tied to the poetic text it accompanies. The discussion argues that the notion of a “school” is better understood as a network of workshops and artists in motion than as a set of isolated local styles, and that the heritage of the Herat and Bukhara masters continues to shape the modern revival of the miniature in Uzbekistan.

Keywords: Central Asian miniature, Timurid school, Herat, Behzad, Bukhara school, art of the book, artistic and aesthetic features, Uzbekistan

Introduction

The miniature is one of the most distinctive forms of painting created in the Islamic world and in the cultural area that surrounds it. It was produced for the book: for histories, epics, mystical poems and collections of lyric verse that were copied by calligraphers, decorated by illuminators and illustrated by painters working in the library-workshops of rulers. Central Asia occupies a special place in this story. It was the home of the Timurid dynasty, whose courts in Samarkand, Shiraz and Herat gathered some of the finest artists of the fifteenth century, and it later gave the miniature a new centre in Bukhara.[1] For Uzbekistan the subject has a double importance, because these workshops are part of the national artistic heritage and because the modern revival of miniature painting relies on their methods.[2]

The word “school” is used constantly in writing about the miniature, but it needs to be defined. It does not denote an academy with a curriculum. It denotes a recognisable tradition of drawing, colour and composition that is connected with a city, a court or a circle of workshops and that is passed on from master to pupil. In the Central Asian case the traditions are closely connected with one another:

[1] Metropolitan Museum of Art, The art of the Timurid period.

[2] Madraimov, The study of the miniature painting of Uzbekistan.

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artists moved with their patrons, manuscripts travelled as gifts and as war booty, and styles created in one workshop were copied, adapted or deliberately revived in another.[3]

Research on the subject is extensive but unevenly distributed. The Persian and Timurid miniature has been studied in detail in Western and Russian scholarship, and the Bukhara school has attracted attention mainly as a provincial continuation of Herat.[4] Less attention has been paid to the aesthetic logic of the tradition, that is, to the question of how space, colour, line, writing and symbolism are organised into a coherent artistic language. Without this question, the history of schools remains a list of names and dates.

The aim of this article is to describe the principal schools of Central Asian miniature painting, to identify the artistic and aesthetic features that unite and distinguish them, and to discuss their significance for the present. The article is organised into methodology, results, discussion and conclusion sections.

Methodology

The study uses a comparative and historical method combined with formal analysis. The historical part establishes the sequence of centres, rulers and workshops and relies on encyclopaedic entries, museum essays and academic monographs. The formal part describes recurring features of composition, space, colour, line and the relation between image and text, and compares how these features appear in different schools.[5]

The schools were selected according to three criteria: a clear association with Central Asia or with the Timurid court tradition, the survival of dated illustrated manuscripts that allow the school to be identified, and the availability of reliable scholarly descriptions. On this basis the article discusses the pre-Islamic and Mongol-period background, the Timurid workshops, and the Bukhara school of the Shaybanid and Janid periods. The Safavid, Ottoman and Mughal traditions are mentioned only where they interacted directly with the Central Asian one.

The study has limitations. It is based on published descriptions and reproductions and not on direct examination of manuscripts; attributions of individual paintings to named masters are frequently debated, and the article therefore reports them with the caution used in the literature. Dates follow the sources cited, and where a source gives a Hijri date together with a Gregorian one, the Gregorian date is used.

Results

3.1. Roots of the Central Asian pictorial tradition

Painting in Central Asia did not begin with the Islamic book. Wall paintings from Sogdian cities such as Panjikent and from Afrasiab near Samarkand show that narrative and courtly imagery was highly developed in the region in the seventh and eighth centuries, with large figural compositions, banquet and battle scenes and an interest in epic and fable. Scholars of Sogdian art have also shown how stories circulated across Eurasia in visual form, which prepared the ground for later book illustration. Direct continuity between these murals and the later miniature cannot be demonstrated, but the earlier tradition proves that the region had a long habit of telling stories in pictures.

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[3] Gray (ed.), The Arts of the Book in Central Asia, 14th–16th Centuries (1979).

[4] Encyclopaedia Iranica, Bukhara VI: Bukharan school of painting.

[5] Barry, Figurative Art in Medieval Islam and the Riddle of Bihzād of Herāt (2004).

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The decisive moment for the illustrated book came in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. In the Mongol period, painting at the Ilkhanid courts absorbed Chinese compositional devices, such as rocks and clouds drawn with a flowing line, and combined them with Persian narrative and with the Arab tradition of illustrated texts. Rulers promoted the production of historical and epic books partly for reasons of legitimacy, and the court workshop became an institution in which painters, calligraphers and illuminators worked together.[6] This model of the royal workshop, rather than any single style, was the main inheritance that the Timurids received.

3.2. The Timurid workshops: Shiraz, Samarkand and Herat

The Timurid period, which begins with Timur's conquests in the last decades of the fourteenth century and ends with the fall of Herat in the early sixteenth, was decisive for the formation of the Central Asian miniature. Timurid princes governed provincial capitals and competed as patrons of books, so that several workshops flourished at once. In Shiraz the court of Ibrahim Sultan produced manuscripts with clear, lightly modelled landscapes; in Samarkand the court of Ulugh Beg supported learning and the arts; and in Herat the library of Baysunghur became a model of a princely workshop in which calligraphy, illumination, binding and painting were organised as a single enterprise.[7]

The fullest development took place in Herat under Sultan Husayn Bayqara, who ruled from 1470 to 1506. The ruler's circle included the poet and statesman Mir Ali-Shir Navai, who was himself a patron of painters and a major literary figure of the Turkic-speaking world. Painters served in the royal and the vizier's workshops, and their manuscripts illustrated the classics of Persian and Chaghatay literature. The poetry of Navai, in particular, linked the visual culture of Herat with the Turkic literary tradition of Central Asia.[8]

The most famous name of the Herat workshop is Kamal al-Din Behzad. According to the Encyclopaedia Iranica, he worked first for Navai and then for the sultan, and in both workshops he stood under the master Mirak Naqqash. The securely attributed core of his work is the set of paintings in the copy of Sa'di's Bustan finished in 1488 for the library of Sultan Husayn, now in Cairo. Other manuscripts associated with him include a Zafarnama of 1467–68, a copy of Attar's Mantiq al-tayr of 1483 and a Nizami Khamsa, though attributions in such collaborative books are discussed by specialists.[9]

The qualities for which Behzad is admired are balance, clarity and psychological economy. His compositions are carefully structured, the space is more legible than is usual in Persian painting, and figures are idealised yet are given mood and individuality through gesture and posture. The text panels are integrated into the page, and signatures are often hidden in architectural inscriptions. A cautionary point must be added. Contemporary writers did not unanimously place Behzad above his colleagues, and the image of the supreme master was strengthened later, especially in the Safavid period. The Herat school is therefore better described as a collective achievement in which Behzad is the best-known representative.

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[6] Carboni & Adamjee, The art of the book in the Ilkhanid period.

[7] Metropolitan Museum of Art, The art of the Timurid period.

[8] Alisher Navoiy, Mukammal asarlar to'plami (20 vols.).

[9] Encyclopaedia Iranica, Behzād, Kāmal-al-Dīn.

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After the death of Sultan Husayn in 1506 and the Shaybanid conquest of Khorasan, artists dispersed. Some worked briefly for the new Uzbek rulers, and Behzad is thought to have spent his last years in Tabriz, where he died in the mid-1530s and was buried. The movement of masters from Herat to Tabriz, Bukhara and, later, India is the clearest proof that the schools formed a connected system.[10]

3.3. The Bukhara school

Illustrated manuscripts are known from Bukhara only from the Shaybanid period (1500–1598) and the Janid period (1599–1785).[11] Under Ubaydullah Khan, who ruled from 1512 to 1539, raids on Herat brought Persian manuscripts, artists and calligraphers to Bukhara, and the influence of Herat remained dominant for a long time. The first phase of the school is therefore archaising. Manuscripts such as Assar Tabrizi's Mihr u Mushtari of 1523 continue the Timurid manner of the court of Sultan Husayn, and the calligrapher Mir Ali of Herat copied books in Bukhara after he moved there around 1528–29.[12]

From the 1530s a recognisably local style emerges. A group of manuscripts associated with the reign of Abd al-Aziz Sultan (1539–50) shows flattened architectural space, dense ornament and broad, flat female faces; scholars connect it with Shaykhzada, a pupil of Behzad who had worked at the Safavid court and who brought a Herat-derived idiom to Bukhara. Dated examples include Hatifi's Haft manzar of 1538 and the Rawzat al-muhibbin of 1549, which carry the names of artists such as Abd Allah Bukhari and Mahmud Muzahhib. Mahmud Muzahhib is described in Ottoman sources as a better illuminator than calligrapher, and many works attributed to him were probably produced by members of his workshop.[13]

In the later sixteenth century royal patronage continued. Copies of Navai's works were produced for Yar Muhammad Khan, and for Abdullah Khan a large Shahnama dated 1564 was made, the biggest royal cycle of the school, although its quality is usually judged to be lower than that of the earlier books. Bukharan artists also worked outside the city: one of them is recorded at the Mughal court, where signed pages of a Gulistan dated 1567 survive.[14] The Bukhara workshop was thus part of the same system of mobile artists described above.

The Janid period produced a more heterogeneous style. According to the Iranica account, it combines Khorasani landscape and male types with Bukharan architecture and female types, and it has a rough vitality that distinguishes it from the polished Herat manner. Dated works include a Bustan of 1616 and a Nizami Khamsa of 1671, which is regarded as the masterpiece of the late style; painters named in sources include Muhammad Murad Samarqandi, Muhammad Darvish and court artists of the second half of the seventeenth century. There is no evidence of illustrated book production in Bukhara after the late seventeenth century, and imported manuscripts took the place of local ones.[15]

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[10] Roxburgh, The Persian Album, 1400–1600 (2005).

[11] Encyclopaedia Iranica, Bukhara VI: Bukharan school of painting.

[12] Encyclopaedia Iranica, Bukhara VI: Bukharan school of painting.

[13] Encyclopaedia Iranica, Bukhara VI: Bukharan school of painting.

[14] Encyclopaedia Iranica, Bukhara VI: Bukharan school of painting.

[15] Encyclopaedia Iranica, Bukhara VI: Bukharan school of painting.

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3.4. Artistic and aesthetic features

The first feature concerns space. The Central Asian miniature does not use linear perspective with a single vanishing point. The picture plane is built up in tiers: a high horizon, a landscape that rises towards the upper edge, and buildings shown in a flattened, often cut-away manner so that interior and exterior can be seen at the same time. The effect is a space that is conventional rather than illusionistic. Studies of the Uzbek miniature emphasise that time is treated in the same way: several moments of an episode may be gathered into one image, and the viewer reads the picture in the manner of a text. He Herat masters introduced a greater clarity in the arrangement of this space, with architecture serving as a stage and figures grouped in balanced clusters around it.[16]

The second feature is the treatment of colour and line. Colour is applied in clear, saturated areas, with blue, green, red and gold dominating and with minimal modelling by light and shade. The drawing is precise and continuous, and the contour defines forms rather than dissolving them. The effect is decorative but not merely decorative. Colour distinguishes ranks and settings, gold marks the sphere of the court and of the sacred, and the surface of the page is intended to be admired as an object, in the way a jewel or a carpet is admired. The Bukhara school shifts the balance: its palette is often denser and warmer, the ornament is heavier, and figure types are broader, which gives the pictures the vitality that Iranica describes.[17]

The third feature is the unity of image, text and ornament. The miniature is not a free-standing picture. It is a part of a page that includes a calligraphic text, a frame, illuminated headings and marginal decoration, and the painter has to adapt the picture to the text block so that writing and image support each other. In Behzad's compositions inscriptions on buildings carry the signature or an additional verse and thus become part of the picture itself. This integration explains why the tradition cannot be understood from reproductions that isolate the painting from the page.

The fourth feature is the relation to literature and symbolism. The miniature illustrates the Shahnama, the Khamsa of Nizami, the Bustan and Gulistan of Sa'di, the poems of Attar and the works of Navai, so that the choice of subject follows the literary canon of the court. The pictures are more than visual retellings. A garden, a hunting scene or a meeting of lovers is read through the allegorical and ethical vocabulary of the poem, and a number of scholars emphasise the spiritual meanings that Islamic art assigns to light, geometry and pattern. Other scholars argue that such interpretations should be treated with care and that courtly representation, patronage and workshop practice explain more of the tradition than metaphysics alone.[18] Both positions are useful, and the aesthetic analysis of the miniature should combine them.

The last feature is the social organisation of art. The workshop produced books collectively: a master designed the page, assistants prepared pigments and outlines, and several painters could work on a single manuscript. This explains the difficulty of attributions and the importance of style groups. It also explains the continuity of schools, because the training of apprentices in the workshop was the main way in which methods of drawing and colour preparation were transmitted.

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[16] Encyclopaedia Iranica, Behzād, Kāmal-al-Dīn.

[17] Encyclopaedia Iranica, Bukhara VI: Bukharan school of painting.

[18] Roxburgh, Prefacing the Image (2001).

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Discussion

The results show that the Central Asian miniature should be understood as a connected family of traditions and not as a succession of unrelated local styles. The connections were created by dynasties, by library-workshops and by the movement of artists, and they ran in several directions: from Samarkand and Shiraz to Herat, from Herat to Tabriz and Bukhara, and from Bukhara to India. For students of art history this means that the question "which school does a manuscript belong to?" should be asked together with the questions "who commissioned it?", "which workshop made it?" and "whose models did the painter follow?".

The second conclusion concerns the status of Behzad. His name is deservedly famous, but the sources show that the cult of the individual master developed over time, and that the quality of the Herat school depended on a whole circle of painters, calligraphers and illuminators. The recent inscription of "Behzad's style of miniature art" on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, submitted by Afghanistan, confirms the international importance of this legacy and shows that a heritage created in the Timurid world now belongs to the cultural memory of several modern states.

The third conclusion is about the aesthetics of the tradition. The features described above are not technical limitations of a "pre-perspectival" art. They are the elements of a consistent pictorial system that values clarity, order, richness of surface and the union of word and image, and whose logic differs from that of the European tradition of illusionistic painting.[19] The same quality explains why the miniature was admired by early twentieth-century European artists, who were looking for alternatives to illusionism.

There are practical implications for Uzbekistan. The revival of miniature painting in the twentieth century and its development by contemporary masters have drawn on the Timurid and Bukhara heritage, and the international exhibitions of Uzbek miniature art show the interest that this heritage arouses. The aesthetic analysis proposed in this article can be used in teaching, because it gives students a vocabulary for describing what they see: type of space, treatment of time, colour system, relation to the text and workshop context. It also suggests a caution for contemporary practice. A modern miniature that copies the surface of the old manuscripts but ignores their internal logic risks becoming decoration, while one that adapts their principles to new formats and themes can continue the tradition.

Conclusion

This article has surveyed the principal schools of Central Asian miniature painting, from their Sogdian and Mongol-period background through the Timurid workshops of Shiraz, Samarkand and Herat to the Bukhara school of the Shaybanid and Janid periods, and has analysed their artistic and aesthetic features. The analysis shows that these schools were connected by court patronage, by the library-workshop as an institution and by the movement of artists.

Five features define the aesthetic of the tradition: a layered, conventional space and a flexible treatment of time; saturated colour and a precise contour; the unity of picture, calligraphy and ornament on the page; a close relation to the poetic canon with its allegorical readings; and a collective, workshop-based method of production. The Herat style associated with Behzad is characterised by balance and clarity, while the Bukhara school develops a denser, more vigorous variant.

[19] Gombrich, Art and Illusion (1960).

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http://houghtonstreetreview.com/index.php/hsr

The significance of this heritage is both historical and practical. It is an independent and highly developed pictorial system, it is recognised internationally as cultural heritage, and for Uzbekistan it remains a living resource for art education and for contemporary creative work. Further research should be directed to the systematic comparison of identified manuscripts, to the study of pigments and techniques, and to the local Uzbek and Russian-language scholarship that could not be fully covered here.

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