HSR (LONDON),
HOUGHTON STREET REVIEW JOURNAL
ISSN: 2058-5519|Impact factor-15.9
http://houghtonstreetreview.com/index.php/hsr

THE WORK OF KAMOLIDDIN BEHZOD AND HIS PLACE IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF WORLD FINE ART

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Doi: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.24200681

Abstract. This article studies the work of the Herat painter Kamoliddin Behzod (Kamal al-Din Behzad, c. 1455-1535/36) and assesses his place in the development of Eastern and world fine art. Using a historical and source-critical approach based on encyclopaedic, museum and academic publications, the article describes his formation in the Timurid library-workshop of Herat, the paintings of the Cairo Bustan of 1488 and other manuscripts linked to him, the problem of attribution and the growth of his fame, his activity in Safavid Tabriz, and the routes by which the Herat tradition reached Bukhara and Mughal India. The results show that Behzad’s importance rests on a combination of careful observation, balanced composition and close unity of image and text, and that his reputation was also shaped by later authors and by the transmission of his style through pupils and workshops. The article concludes that his significance is best described as the culmination and transmission of the Persianate book painting tradition, and that in present-day Uzbekistan he has become a symbol of national artistic heritage and a basis for art education.

Keywords: Kamoliddin Behzod, Behzad, miniature painting, Herat school, Timurid art, Safavid painting, Bukhara school, artistic heritage

Introduction

Kamoliddin Behzod is regarded as the most famous painter of the Persianate world. The Encyclopaedia Iranica describes him as a master painter proverbial for his skill, active in Herat during the reign of the Timurid Husayn Bayqara (1470-1506).[1] The Metropolitan Museum of Art calls the Herat school the apogee of Persian painting, and Behzad’s name is the one most often connected with that achievement.[2]

The statement that Behzod occupies an important place in world fine art, however, needs careful formulation. The sources show that his work was part of a collective workshop practice, that his fame grew after his lifetime, and that his influence reached later artists mainly through pupils, workshops and the movement of manuscripts. The article therefore asks two questions: what are the verifiable features of his work, and by what routes and in what sense did it influence the later development of painting?

[1] Encyclopaedia Iranica, Behzād, Kamāl-al-Dīn.

[2] Komaroff & Yalman, The art of the Timurid period (ca. 1370-1507), Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History.

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The aim of the article is to describe the work of Kamoliddin Behzod on the basis of reliable sources, to distinguish documented facts from later tradition, and to assess his significance for Eastern and world art and for present-day Uzbekistan. The article is organised into methodology, results, discussion and conclusion sections.

Methodology

The study uses a historical and source-critical method. The biography and works of the painter are reconstructed from the Encyclopaedia Iranica, Britannica, museum records and academic articles, and the interpretation of his legacy relies on monographs on Persian and Timurid painting and on sources concerning Uzbek institutions that preserve his heritage.[3]

Three groups of evidence are distinguished: the manuscripts and paintings associated with Behzad, the testimony of contemporaries and later authors, and the evidence of transmission, such as pupils, albums and the movement of artists between courts. For each group the dating, the patron and the strength of the attribution are noted.

The study has limitations. It relies on published descriptions and reproductions and not on direct examination of manuscripts. The date and place of Behzad's birth and death, the circumstances of his move to Tabriz and the attribution of many paintings are debated, and the sources are reported here with the caution they use. The article does not discuss the Western reception of Persian miniatures in detail and does not cover the large Uzbek- and Russian-language literature on Behzad, which requires separate treatment.

Results

3.1. Herat and the formation of the master

Behzad was born in Herat around 1455 and died in Tabriz in 1535-36, according to the chronogram in Dust Muhammad's preface to the Bahram Mirza Album.[4] The sources of Herat stress that he was employed first by Mir Ali-Shir Navai and then by Sultan Husayn Bayqara. Some accounts say that he was orphaned early and trained by Mirak Naqqash, the chief painter and director of the court library.[5]

The Metropolitan Museum places this career in a court where the poet Jami, the calligrapher Sultan 'Ali al-Mashhadi and the painter Behzad were active together, and describes Husayn Bayqara as the last effective Timurid ruler, under whom the cultural flowering of the dynasty found its fullest

[3] Encyclopaedia Iranica, Behzād, Kamāl-al-Dīn.

[4] Adamova, Bihzad's Lost Album (2022).

[5] Encyclopedia.com, Behzad.

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expression.[6] Behzad's formation therefore took place in a library-workshop in which poetry, calligraphy and painting were closely connected.

3.2. The works of the Herat period

The most secure evidence of his art is the set of paintings in a Bustan of Sa'di made for the library of Husayn Bayqara, with a text colophon of 1488 (AH 893), now in the National Library of Egypt in Cairo. Britannica reports that five miniatures in this copy are considered by many scholars to be the best surviving examples of his work. Iranica adds that the paintings contain text panels carefully integrated into the design of the pages, which suggests that Behzad and the calligrapher Sultan 'Ali worked closely together.[7]

Other manuscripts frequently linked to him are a Zafarnama of Yazdi dated 1468, Attar's Mantiq al-tayr of 1483 in the Metropolitan Museum, Navai's Khamsa of 1485 divided between Oxford and Manchester, and two copies of Nizami's Khamsa in the British Library. Britannica also names two signed illustrations for a Gulistan of Sa'di among his earliest surviving works.[8]

Britannica characterises his work as careful observation combined with the ability to show significant detail while removing unimportant clutter. In the Herat paintings this is visible in the individuality of figures, the clarity of architectural space and the balance of the composition, which together are usually seen as the mature form of the Timurid classical style.[9]

3.3. Attribution and the growth of fame

The sources show that Behzad's reputation developed over time. Statements by Mirza Haydar Dughlat and Babur indicate that in fifteenth-century Herat he was regarded as only one of several skilled painters in the circles of Ali-Shir and Sultan Husayn. Khwandamir's history, completed in 1499-1500, gives a glimpse of his status, and in the revised version completed in 1524 Khwandamir praises him more lavishly, comparing him to Mani and saying that his skill surpasses that of all other artists.[10]

Attribution is also uncertain at the level of individual works. A folio in the Aga Khan Museum from the album of Bahram Mirza (1544-45) bears an inscription naming Behzad, but the museum notes that it is not a genuine signature.[11] Roxburgh has analysed how authorship in Persianate painting was constructed and shows that the name of a master could serve as a label for a style and a workshop.

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[6] Komaroff & Yalman, The art of the Timurid period (ca. 1370-1507), Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History.

[7] Encyclopaedia Iranica, Behzād, Kamāl-al-Dīn.

[8] Britannica, Behzad.

[9] Canby, Persian Painting (1993).

[10] Encyclopaedia Iranica, Behzād, Kamāl-al-Dīn.

[11] Aga Khan Museum, Two Caracals and Two Deer (AKM95).

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This caution does not diminish Behzad's importance; it changes the way it should be described, as the name of a school and of a standard of quality as much as the name of one hand.

3.4. Tabriz and the Safavid transmission

The date and circumstances of Behzad's move to Tabriz are unknown. A decree in the name of Shah Isma'il dated 1522 (AH 928), which appoints Behzad head of the manuscript workshop, is often cited, while Safavid authors such as Dust Muhammad, Iskandar Beg and Qadi Ahmad state that he was employed by Shah Tahmasp. Britannica states that at Tabriz he was named director of the royal library and held the post until his death, and lists among his pupils Qasim Ali, Mir Sayyid Ali, Aqa Mirak and Muzaffar Ali.[12]

The importance of Behzad for the Safavid court is also shown by the Bahram Mirza Album, compiled by Dust Muhammad in 1544-45. Adamova suggests that some works in this album came from an album earlier compiled and decorated by Behzad, that Dust Muhammad followed his style in adding inscriptions, and that Behzad's album may have served as a model for its arrangement.[13] Dust Muhammad's preface to the album is an early source on the history of Persian painting and on the standing of earlier masters.[14]

3.5. Bukhara and the Mughal route

The Herat tradition also continued in Central Asia. The Metropolitan Museum chronology states that the Shaybanids employed many Timurid artists and that the legacy of Herat lived on in the work of Bukharan painters. Iranica notes that Babur links Behzad with the patronage of Muhammad Shaybani Khan, the ruler of Herat between 1507 and 1510, although the course of his life after the death of Husayn Bayqara in 1506 is poorly documented.[15]

A second route led to India. Painters trained in the Persian tradition, among them Mir Sayyid Ali and Abd al-Samad, took part in the early imperial projects of the Mughal workshops. Britannica lists Mir Sayyid Ali among Behzad's pupils, so the line from Herat through Tabriz to the Mughal court can be followed through named artists.[16] The Metropolitan Museum adds more broadly that Timurid art provided inspiration to lands stretching from Anatolia to India.

3.6. Behzod in present-day Uzbekistan

In Uzbekistan Kamoliddin Behzod has become a central figure of national artistic heritage. The National Institute of Painting and Design is named after him as the founder of the Oriental school of

[12] Britannica, Behzad.

[13] Adamova, Bihzad's Lost Album (2022).

[14] Thackston, A Century of Princes (1989).

[15] Encyclopaedia Iranica, Behzād, Kamāl-al-Dīn.

[16] Britannica, Behzad.

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miniature, and its Faculty of Fine Arts includes a department of Miniature and Book Graphics. A memorial park-museum named after Behzod operates in Tashkent, and miniature painting is presented as an independent type of Uzbek fine art.[17]

The scientific community also treats his work as a subject of international research: the Academy of Arts of Uzbekistan, the Academy of Sciences and the Behzod Institute organised an online conference on his creativity at the intersection of the artistic cultures of East and West, held under the UNESCO Silk Roads programme. The exhibition "A legacy linking the centuries: Uzbek miniature art" in Berlin presented works that preserve the traditions and refined techniques of the Timurid era.[18]

Discussion

The results allow a more precise statement of Behzad's place in world art. First, his work represents the culmination of the Timurid book painting tradition: the careful observation, balanced composition and unity of image and text visible in the Cairo Bustan are the mature form of qualities developed in the earlier workshops of Shiraz and Herat. Second, his importance for later art was realised through transmission. Pupils, workshop practice, albums and the movement of artists carried the Herat manner to Tabriz, Bukhara and India, and through these centres it affected the wider Islamic world of the book.

Third, the claim of world significance should be stated with the limits that the evidence allows. The sources document influence within the Persianate and related traditions, from Anatolia to India, but they do not by themselves establish a direct influence on European painting. It is more accurate to say that Behzad belongs to world art as a highest example of a non-perspectival, book-based tradition of painting, which differs from the Western easel tradition in its conception of space, and which is now studied and exhibited internationally.

Fourth, the growth of Behzad's fame shows that heritage is also constructed by later readers. Safavid authors and later historians raised him to the rank of an emblematic master, while the Herat sources of his own time present him as one among several painters.[19] For research and teaching this means that his work should be studied together with the workshop, the calligraphers and the patrons, and that attributions should be treated as hypotheses supported by evidence.

For present-day Uzbekistan, the practical implications are clear. Education in miniature painting that bears his name should include the study of calligraphy, pigments and page design, since the logic of his painting is the logic of the book. Museums should present his works as pages of manuscripts and not only as separate pictures, and joint research with the libraries that hold Herat and Tabriz manuscripts should be expanded.

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[17] Uzbekistan Travel, The art of Uzbek miniature.

[18] ICCU, The exhibition "A legacy linking the centuries: Uzbek miniature art" was organized in Berlin.

[19] Encyclopaedia Iranica, Behzād, Kamāl-al-Dīn.

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Conclusion

This article has examined the work of Kamoliddin Behzod on the basis of reliable sources. It has shown that he was formed in the library-workshop of Herat under Husayn Bayqara and Mir Ali-Shir Navai, that the Cairo Bustan of 1488 is the best-documented evidence of his art, and that his style is characterised by careful observation, balanced composition and a close union of painting and text.

The analysis has also shown that his reputation was strengthened after his lifetime and that many attributions remain uncertain. His place in world art is therefore best described as the culmination of the Timurid tradition and as the starting point of a line of transmission that led through Tabriz and Bukhara to Mughal India, and that today gives Uzbekistan a basis for art education and heritage policy.

Further work should compare identified manuscripts directly, study materials and techniques scientifically, examine the reception of Persian miniatures outside the Islamic world, and include the Uzbek- and Russian-language scholarship that could not be covered here.

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