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Behzad: Jewelers of Islamic Painting

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Abstract

Behzad is equally skilled in the organic areas of landscape, but where he does use a traditional geometric style, Behzad stretches that creative tool in a few ways. In addition he aspires to masterfully move his compositions to move the observer's eye in a bizarre organic flow around the picture plane. The movements of the figures and objects are not only uniquely natural, expressive, and dynamic, but they are also arranged to keep the eye moving across the picture plane. Behzad is the most famous of the Persian miniature painters, although he is more accurately understood as the director of a workshop (or kitabkhana) that produced manuscript illuminations in the style of his imagination. Behzad had technical mastery as well as keen artistic vision as he was able to create a visually complex yet compelling scene. This does not mean that Behzad created unsophisticated works, rather, what he chose to include was exquisitely rendered and cooked up with emotion and excellent control over brush and colour.

Key Word: *Behzad, Painting, Persian miniature, Timurid Empire, Herat school, Tabrīz school*

Behzad's full name is Ustad Kamaluddin Behzad. The exact year of his birth is unknown, and according to various sources, it ranges from 1450 to 1460.¹ He was born and spent most of his life in Herat, a city in modern-day western Afghanistan and an important center of trade and cultural and economic capital of the Timurid Empire. He was very prominent in his role as Kitabdar at the Herat Academy, as well as in his position at the Royal Library in the city of Herat. His art is unique in that it incorporates the common geometric features of Persian painting, as well as his own style, such as the vast empty space around which the painting's subject dances. His art includes masterful use of value and individuality of character, one of his most famous works being "The Seduction of Yusuf" from Saadi's *Bustan* of 1488. There exists a vast amount of contemporary work to be given due credit.²

Career and Style

Behzad was also a disciple of Mir Ali Shir Nawai, a vizier, poet and humanist, and was at the court of Herat during the reign of the Timurid sultan Husayn Bakrah (reigned 1469–1506). Behzad's participation is attested to in several manuscripts issued in the Kitabkhana (library) of Sultan Husayn Bakrah in the 1480s, evidenced by his work at the court in this period. In 1486, with an order from Sultan Husayn Bakrah, Behzad was appointed head of the royal atelier in Herat and successor to the Mirak carving. Under his leadership the academy reached its greatest zenith. In 1506, Sultan Husayn Bakrah died, and a month after his death, Herat was occupied by troops of the Bukhara Khanate led by Muhammad Shibani Khan. Some researchers believe that between 1507 and 1510, Behzad was in Bukhara, as he followed Shibani Khan and other hermits to Herat (although Babur reports that he was in Herat during those years).³

Behzad's fame reached its peak during this period. A legend states that during the Battle of Chaldiran in 1514, in which the Ottoman Turks defeated the Persian army, Shah Ismail I hid Behzad in a cave as a treasure. An example of his earlier work, also in the British Museum, which in fact seems beyond doubt, is a manuscript by Nizami written in 1442.⁴ These Three of miniatures bear Behzad's signature between the column margins of the text in the corner of the painting. The writing appears to be that of the calligrapher of the text, who filled in this portion of the poem after the miniature had been prepared. But the style of the work itself is more convincing. Two other hands are visible in this manuscript and some pages are still left blank. One is much later, rather harsh and gaudy, and, as evidenced by the poles in the turban, of Safavid date. These are the last miniatures of the section. The second appears to be a contemporary of Behzad, and his work is scattered in the latter. There are probably one or two more from Behzad as well, and they're all close enough to work at the studio. The palette is the same as in the signed paintings – light turquoise, light green and olive, yellow, vermilion and scarlet with gold and silver; But the colors are not used with such restraint or discretion and the drawing, though subtle, does not have the wonderful solidity and excellence of Behzad's own work.⁵

In technical excellence these portraits of Behzad are equal to those of the Royal Asiatic Society Shah-Nama: the composition is not more advanced, but the individuality is of greater interest. In his picture of the fight between the clans of Laila and Majnun, the camels grind their teeth and their eyes shine brightly, the iris being cast from gold. He reserves a good proportion of the area as a neutral passage, and his tone is much cooler than usual in Persian miniature painting. It has the same blue, cool undertones, and golden eyes, and the same effortless grace of outlook. It is quite possible that all its eleven miniatures are made by him. But another copy of the same poem is in the Khedival Library in Cairo and is dated 1488, which appears to be quite another hand.⁶

In 1522, Behzad was appointed by Shah Ismail I to Tabriz (the capital of the new Safavid Empire), where, as director of the royal atelier, he exerted a decisive influence on the development of later Safavid painting. Shah Ismail died suddenly in 1524. Behzad's later work is generally associated with the name of Shah Ismail's son, Shah Tahmasp I (reigned 1524–1576). Behzad continued to work in the Shah's workshop until his death in 1535. Behzad's tomb is located at the foot of the Koh-e Mukhtar ("Hill of the Chosen") in Herat.⁷

Behzad is the most famous of the Persian miniature painters, as the director of a workshop that produced manuscript illuminations in the style of his imagination. In 1486, Behzad became head of the Herat Academy with the support of Sultan Usayn Bakrah. He left that position in 1506, at the end of Bakrah's reign. In 1522, Behzad moved to the city of Tabriz after Shah Ismail I's son Tahmasp had been named governor of Herat in 1514. It was in this city that he became head of the Safavid royal library. He worked there until his death in about 1536. Persian painting of that period often uses the arrangement of geometric architectural elements as a structural or compositional reference in which the figures are arranged.⁸ He uses value (dark-light contrast) more forcefully and skilfully than other medieval miniaturists. Another common quality in his work is narrative playfulness: Bahram's almost-hidden eye and partial face when he peeks out of the curtain to look at the girls frolicking in the pool below, the upright goat that looks like a monster on the edge of the horizon, a story about an old woman confronting the sins of Sanjar, the wonderful cosmopolitan kind of human being on the wall in the sample image. This surprising individuality of character and narrative creativity are some of the qualities that distinguish Behzad's works and match his literary intent. The Sufi also uses symbolism and symbolic color to convey greater meaning. He introduced greater naturalism into Persian painting, especially in the depiction of more individual figures and the use of realistic gestures and expressions. If we compare Jami's words with Behzad's depiction, we can see that one is an allegory of the soul's search for heavenly love and beauty, and the other an invitation to mystical contemplation. All the stylistic features involved help the artist convey something. Not much is known about Behzad's childhood, but according to author Qadi Ahmad, Behzad was orphaned at an early age and raised by the prominent painter and calligrapher Mirak Nakkash, who was the director of the Timurid royal library.⁹

Legacy

Behzad's lasting influences stems from his skillful depiction of humans and other organic motifs, which bring new depth to the stories and characters of his paintings. Behzad's human figures were less rigid in their stance and more dynamic in their movements, creating a greater sense of energy and emotion in the paintings. Similarly, Behzad used a method of painting that relied on geometric formulas and levelling of the visual plane to represent the entire narrative in one painting.¹⁰ Behzad's reputation was already established during his lifetime, as surrounding rulers such as the Mughal emperors were willing to pay large sums for his paintings, further adding to his fame and legacy. With such prestigious exposure Behzad became a central figure for the Herat school of painting, eventually becoming the head of the Herat Academy in 1486 and leaving in 1506. As head of the Herat Academy, he exerted a great influence

on the students and influenced the styles and techniques of future generations of Persian painters. Behzad's fame and artistic fame would lead copyists or other artists to learn from his paintings and also more formally Behzad had great authority over the production of manuscripts and thus their appearance.¹¹

These represent a more academic school, with many manuscripts surviving from around this date. The poem was written two years before this date by the minister of Sultan Bakra who was Behzad's first patron.¹² He was a publisher himself, had a good library, and showed the concern for retirement from the world which is the main outward sign of Sufism. He actually joined the dervish sect called Naqshbandiya.¹³ The great group of miniature painters at Herat appears to have worked exclusively for patrons imbued with this mystical philosophy of contemplation, which was a natural resource for contemplative people in a country troubled by frequent wars and a foreign army encamped in the midst of it. He filled them with carpets and tiles and calligraphic architecture: trees and rocks with gazelles, and flat trees topped with variegated leaves and gleaming silver trunks. These are not paintings but invitations to merge into nature: they have an inner meaning like Hafiz's ode, but the artist is probably just as ready to forget it. In contrast, such a reflection is necessary to show the more conservative character of Behzad, who was not a Sufi.¹⁴

Summary

Much of the attention of scholars in contemporary times has been to ensure correct attribution to Behzad as there are concerns that some works previously attributed may not be to Behzad. The attribution of some works can be relatively assured with properly dated and retained signatures, but others were attributed in the 16th century and have only stylistic similarities to Behzad's works. Thus, the question arises as to whether some works are skilful imitations, or whether they are genuine. Although Kamal al-Din Behzad is considered the greatest master of Persian painting, there has been no comprehensive study of his life and work to date. Behzad flourished during the golden age of artistic achievement in the late Timurid and early Safavid periods, working in Herat and then Tabriz. This beautifully illustrated book traces the roots of the style developed by Behzad, its heritage, and its legacy in Iran, Mughal India and Ottoman Turkey. Behzad's work in a way that has generally been neglected by Western art historians. Furthermore, he argues strongly that Behzad and his atelier were moved to Tabriz in 1528, much later than previously suggested. He also presents a critical reappraisal of some of Behzad's pupils, presenting new evidence that Sheikh-Zadeh, who continued to work in Bukhara in the tradition of his master.

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