

A LOOK AT PERSIAN ILLUMINATIONS

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This article will focus on Persian Illuminations of the 1500's. However, many of the issues that will be discussed are relevant to other Middle Eastern cultures and other times. The ability to discuss all of the Middle East is too broad a topic for this article.

Many people in the Society use illuminations as a base for their recreations. Most of us are aware that you have to be careful when using any artistic rendering, as artists weren't always accurate to their subjects. This basic problem becomes compounded when looking at another culture. When religious restrictions are added the water becomes even muddier. None the less, in many cases, these illuminations are all that are available to draw conclusions from. I believe that it is possible, with care, to produce an accurate product using Persian Illuminations.

One of the first things to consider is the cultural influence of Persia, itself. This is a region that historically was conquered again and again. All of those cultures left their mark on Persian painting. The Seljuk Turks had an entire style of painting to themselves and those illuminations depict items with a slightly different view. The Mongols greatly influenced Persian painting, bringing the distinct Chinese influence into the art. During this time Chinese archetypes begin to be seen in the illuminations. By the time the Safavid dynasty is established in the early 1500's, the art is a beautiful mixture of all of these cultures and their different artistic styles.

Another thing to consider is the Persian culture, itself. The Persian culture reflected in the illuminations is very stylized. This was in deference to Islam. While the Persians did not, obviously, follow the Arab prohibitions against drawing the human form, they did use a stylized depiction rather than the more realistic approach seen in western art of the same time. It is necessary to spend quiet a bit of time looking at the illuminations to become used to this "view". Otherwise, many things can be misinterpreted. For example: it is often difficult to tell young men from women in Persian illuminations. Even when drawing nude females, the artists of the time leave them without breasts. It is necessary to rely on details to determine sex. These details often must be garnered from historical and culture knowledge. In the above example, it helps to know that women in Persia, during this time period, did not wear turbans. Therefore, if the figure in question does have a turban on, it is almost surely male.

Also to be considered, is the fact that scenes and people represented in those scenes are those determined to be acceptable to the court nobles and religious men of the period. This was done because; those men were the patrons commissioning the work in the first place. A good artist doesn't displease his or her patron, if they wish to continue working! Rarely is the common man represented, except as perhaps a noble in disguise from some legend. Using fixed or archetypal representations, such as demons and

angels, skirts certain subjects. This has to be considered when using these figures to draw conclusions.

Another important consideration when studying Persian illumination is the influence of the Ottoman Turks. During the 1500's Persia's political territory and influence was shrinking or in many areas gone. The Ottoman influence and political territory was growing. Therefore, you often had Persian artists painting Ottoman courts in cities that used to be Persian cities and courts. The style of the painting is Persian, but the subject and many of its details are Ottoman. Many people who use illuminations don't distinguish between what is or might be Ottoman in these paintings and what is or might be the Persian artist taking liberties. While there are many similarities between the two cultures, they are distinct cultures and once some attention is given to this, it is not difficult to distinguish between the two. Soudavar in "Art of the Persian Court" discusses this situation in depth and points out details that allow the researcher to make these determinations. He also includes many illuminations that serve as examples of this situation.

There are several things that indicate when this is occurring. One is the tall red taj-e-Haydari displayed as a base in the men's turbans. This is a distinctly Persian element and won't be found when the scene is Ottoman. Although a similar hat is depicted in Ottoman illuminations and scenes, it is constructed and depicted differently. A second thing to look for is the coat closures. In the Ottoman scenes, the frog closures on the coats will be very distinct and elaborate. While Persia's also used frog closures, they were smaller and often barely visible. There is one region in Persia that used more elaborate closures, but this is an Eastern region and quite probably heavily influenced by the Ottomans.

Once this is determined, several questions must be asked. Are these Persians dressed as Ottomans and painted in a Persian style? Are these Ottomans dressed as Persians? Or did the artist take that "artistic license" that they are so famous for? Which elements are actually Persian and which are not? If you can identify the artist, and many books do, it is at times possible to answer some of these questions. Otherwise it is necessary to rely on your own experience and studies and err on the conservative side!

When using Persian illuminations to document an actual product, it is a good idea to find that particular item in more than one illumination. The more illuminations used, the better. At that point you can begin to make comparisons between artists and locations. Does this item appear to be consistently drawn in an archetypical way? Even if it is, many archetypes are chosen just because they occur so often in the real world. Is the element Turkish? Well, if the product is supposed to be Persian, I would advise against using this element unless you can find it in distinctly Persian scenes. Just because two things existed at the same time, doesn't mean they were combined. Perhaps the Turks and the Persians intermingled their clothing, as they did their Political power and their cultural influences. However, most of the research shows that while the people mingled, the lines between conqueror and conquered stayed sharp until the "sting" of the conquered wore off. Even so, Turkish and Persian elements stayed

distinct well into the late 1800's. The Persians are a proud people and even today distinguish themselves from other racial groups in their country.

Then there is that nasty question concerning artistic license. Does the coat actually hang that way or did it just suit the artist to draw it that way? One way to solve this is to compare this detail with another artist's rendition of the same item. Often this will clear up any questions. However, I've often had to compare four or five illuminations before I could make a decision. This is not a quick solution, but thankfully Persian illuminations are plentiful!

Another question that invariably comes up is the colors of the illuminations. Was the fabric actually that brilliant pink or was it just the paint? As the Persians usually wore silk and silk takes dye brilliantly and the Persians had easy access to dyes that the Western Europeans of the time did not; I tend to believe that the fabrics are fairly accurately rendered. However, that conclusion is based on other research concerning textiles, dyes, and trade lines. Each item must be placed in a context separate from the illumination.

All this makes it seem like using illuminations is a time consuming process. It is. They cannot be taken on face value and no reproduction should rely only on one illumination. They should be backed up with other research wherever possible. However, there is no substitute for "seeing" the product! Hopefully, this article will encourage more people to look a bit closer at their illuminations before drawing conclusions. Simply spending time perusing Persian illuminations, will soon give you an "eye" for these details. They quickly assimilate into your subconscious and become easily distinguishable. Included in the bibliography are several books that discuss the art of these illuminations in greater detail. Some of you may also want to read, "Ruritanian Purple Feathers and Other Problems of Documentation" in TI #77.

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