

Questioning the 'classical' in Persian painting: models and problems of definition

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The history of Persian manuscript painting stretches back at least seven centuries to the Mongol conquests of Iran and the beginnings of the Ilkhanid dynasty (1256-1353), at which time Iran's pictorial art in an Islamic context embarked on its long and brilliant course. Anchored within the codex format, whose scale could range from the diminutive to the oversize, paintings blossomed largely within a literary context. Their subjects were inspired by epic and romantic tales, as well as by historical and mythical narratives.¹ Pictures in turn complemented the written word through visual and aesthetic means, all the while carrying the potential for forwarding particular ideological messages or commenting upon contemporary circumstances.² Iranian artists and viewers of such images understood that paintings primarily functioned as pictorial tools to express and augment narrative tales recorded in written form.³ Moreover, through iconographic elaboration and other modes of interpretation (such as oral explication), agents on both ends of the production process – that is, both inception and reception – could symbolically turn paintings into topical messages belonging to larger political, cultural, and religious agendas. Such visuals could be mobilized in support of an incumbent ruling elite while also promoting the 'authentic' Iranian identity of that elite, and lauding its superiority through its adherence to either the Sunni or Shi'i faith. Like coins and other forms of material evidence, paintings thus offer a kind of 'bulletin of state'.⁴

The corpus of Persian manuscript painting spanning from c. 1300 to 1900 CE is vast and varied, and incorporates illustrated manuscripts on universal history, scientific treatises, mystical poems, and biographies of the Prophet Muhammad, to name just a few. While trying to offer a diachronic overview and helpful paradigms

¹ On pre-modern Persian manuscript painting, see Sheila S. Blair, 'The Development of the Illustrated Book in Iran', *Muqarnas*, 10, 1993, 266-74; and Marie Swietochowski, 'The Development of Book Illustration in Pre-Safavid Iran', *Iranian Studies* 7(1), 1974, 40-71. For a broader classification of Islamic painting, see Lisa Golombek, 'Toward a Classification of Islamic Painting', in Richard Ettinghausen, ed., *Islamic Art in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1972, 23-34.

² The ideological relevance of Persian manuscript painting to contemporary political and cultural concerns has been forwarded most especially for the Great Mongol *Shahnama* (Book of Kings), which was produced during the first half of the fourteenth century. On the manuscript's 'conscious ideological steps', see Oleg Grabar and Sheila S. Blair, *Epic Images and Contemporary History: The Illustrations of the Great Mongol Shahnama*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1980, 13-27, esp. 25.

³ On the multiple functions of painting within medieval Arab manuscripts in particular, see Oleg Grabar, 'Pictures or Commentaries: the Illustrations of the *Maqamat* of al-Hariri', in Peter Chelkowski, ed., *Studies in Art and Literature of the Near East in Honor of Richard Ettinghausen*, Salt Lake City, UT: University of Utah Press, 1974, 94.

⁴ On Islamic coins as a means of providing a 'bulletin of state', see Stefan Heidemann, 'Numismatics', in Chase Robinson, ed., *The New Cambridge History of Islam, vol. 1: The Formation of the Islamic World, Sixth to Eleventh Centuries*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, 649.

to organize and discuss heterogeneous materials, scholars of Islamic art (working largely within art historical models that were first created for the categorization and study of European art) have tended to approach the history of Persian manuscript painting through the temporal model of rise and decline. Within this linear construct, Timurid and Safavid painting of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, falling at a chronological midpoint, came to represent the so-called 'classical' style of Persian manuscript painting. Blossoming after an experimental prelude under Ilkhanid patronage, and preceding an imagined demise in the nineteenth century under the influence of European representational styles that penetrated Qajar art, both Timurid and Safavid painting have been cast as perfect moments of 'classicism' for the pictorial arts of Iran.⁵

The frequently used and interchangeable terms 'classic' and 'classical' as applied to Timurid and Safavid painting within scholarly discourse in the field, however, should not be taken as a given or left undefined and unexplored. On the contrary, such terms and their synonymous variants prove problematic inasmuch as they are based on a number of aesthetic presuppositions and (presumably) agreed-upon methods of judging artistic excellence as found within the broader field of art history. In the broadest sense possible, the term 'classical' has been used as an adjective of aesthetic discrimination applied retroactively to examples of art that have been deemed to be of the highest artistic achievement, having emerged from within the accepted stylistic trends of a specific temporal period. In other words, the term 'classical' is a bivalent descriptive term that is applied, on the one hand, to assess the supposed quality of artistic production and, on the other, to pinpoint artistic high points within a rise-and-decline narrative, itself a scholarly approach to Persian manuscript painting that remains largely unquestioned to the present day.

What is 'classical'?

Obfuscating the manifest distinction between style and time, the term 'classical' has been used to build both conceptual frameworks of inquiry and chronologically circumscribed taxonomies of style. Its art historical application has a long history and therefore is not peculiar in its application to the arts of the book in Iran. The term first emerged in German art historical scholarship during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, at which time scholars such as Johann Winckelmann (1717-68) were keen to develop a system of historical sequencing – known as *Kunstperiode* or art historical periods – in order to create a conceptual system for stylistic

⁵ On Safavid painting as the 'Golden Age' of Persian manuscript painting, see Sheila Canby, *The Golden Age of Persian Art, 1501-1722*, London: British Museum, 1999; and on Timurid art as a moment of 'classicism' and Safavid painting as a subsequent 'glorious synthesis', see, by the same author, *Persian Painting*, New York: Thames & Hudson, 1993, chapters 3-4. Although late fourteenth-century Jalayirid painting appears to have been an essential cultural source, transmitting live artists, library holdings, and pictorial styles as well as connoisseurial patronage models into the Timurid courts of Shiraz and Herat in particular, the dearth of published materials has so far made Jalayirid art difficult to incorporate into larger surveys of the history of Persian manuscript painting. For these reasons, it is not discussed in any detail in the present study.

classification, in which the art of Graeco-Roman antiquity was posited as the 'ideal' and thus constituted a 'classical' norm for both form and content.⁶

In the early twentieth century, other prominent scholars working on European art followed suit and further developed the notion of art historical periods by delineating a system of rise and decline punctuated by peak moments of artistic excellence. Within this expanded framework, the terms 'classic' and 'classicism' (*Klassik* and *Klassizismus*) could describe formal values, stylistic trends, and temporal periods—and thus could be equally attached to artworks deemed 'excellent' despite being produced in various styles and at different times. Without a doubt, this qualitative-chronological synthesis is most developed in the work of Swiss art critic Heinrich Wölfflin (1864-1945), whose seminal study on *Die Klassische Kunst* (Classic Art), first published in 1898, presents a formalist discussion of Italian Renaissance painting that would influence scholarly discourse on the subject for decades to come.⁷ In his study, Wölfflin forwards the argument that 'classic' art must master certain artistic principles that are unquestioningly accepted as the *sine qua non* of (European) artistic traditions. These principles include clarity of depiction, simplicity of style, and variety in content. Additionally, the depicted composition must result in a holistic unit, appearing simple in its formal conception and yet remaining complex in its handling of spatial mass and figural modelling.⁸ For Wölfflin, such principles were best developed and put into practice by the master painters of the Italian Renaissance, and therefore 'classic' art, contra the exuberance of the Baroque, stands as a paragon of pictorial balance and restraint.⁹ Whether applied to Roman statuary or Renaissance painting, this broad definition of the 'classical' has held sway until today, at times used to define a specific artistic period and, at others, a particular artistic style. This twofold application of the term is similarly reflected in the use of the term 'Classical' (upper case) to refer to the period of Graeco-Roman Antiquity and 'classical' (lower case) to designate a model of stylistic excellence.

The term, along with its multiplicity of potential referents, filtered into German scholarship on Islamic architecture and the so-called applied and decorative arts from the nineteenth century onward. During the early decades of the twentieth century, scholars such as Friedrich Sarre, Ernst Kühnel, and Ernst Herzfeld aimed to highlight the 'classical' beauty of Islamic art, with the intention of

⁶ Johann Winckelmann, *History of the Art of Antiquity*, ed. Alex Potts, Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2006; David Irwin, ed., *Winckelmann: Writings on Art*, London: Phaidon, 1972; and Alex Potts, *Flesh and the Ideal: Winckelmann and the Origins of Art History*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1994.

⁷ *Die Klassische Kunst* is available in English translation as Heinrich Wölfflin, *Classic Art: An Introduction to the Italian Renaissance*, tr. Peter and Linda Murray, London: Phaidon Press, 1994. Also see Heinrich Wölfflin, *Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, available in English translation as Heinrich Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History: The Problem of the Development of Style in Later Art*, tr. M.D. Hottinger, New York: Holt, 1932.

⁸ For a summary of Wölfflin's discussion of pictorial forms, see his *Classic Art*, 251-88.

⁹ For further discussion on the implications of the term 'classic' and 'classical' in art historical discourse, see Thomas Pavel, 'Classicism', *Oxford Art Online/ Encyclopaedia of Aesthetics* [accessed 28.02.2012].

stressing its artistic excellence over its exotic appeal.¹⁰ Aside from rescuing the paintings from 'exotic' status, the term gave European connoisseurs of Persian manuscript painting – among them Edgar Blochet, Georges Marteau, Henri Vever, Clément Huart, and Victor Goloubew – the tools with which to appreciate and read the paintings. Thus armed, they could seek out and identify the 'Renaissance' qualities by eye. Once confident that they could 'read' the paintings 'properly', they thus could desire, collect, and study them, in great part thanks to these perceptible qualities. In so doing, these scholar-collectors were quick to equate the Timurid rulers with the Medici family, as patrons and sources of artistic creativity. This elision was facilitated by the particular circumstances of collecting as well as personal relations among scholars. To give just one example: F.R. Martin, a major scholar-collector of Persian manuscript painting, owned a villa in Florence, where he very probably spent time and exchanged ideas with Bernard Berenson, himself a pioneer of Renaissance art history.¹¹ There followed closely the further implied alignment of the twentieth-century bibliophile connoisseur himself with his Timurid and Medici predecessors, thus positing and validating the connoisseurial approach as the original mode of consumption for courtly arts of the book.¹²

As Priscilla Soucek has noted, the application of the 'Renaissance model' to the pictorial art of the Timurid period was predicated on a number of factors, including temporal synchrony, an overarching analytical framework that allowed for evolutionary parallels within specific media, and an aesthetic approach that appealed to collectors and connoisseurs of Persian manuscript painting alike. Soucek further notes that the enthusiasm of European collectors arose from an obvious aligning of Timurid art with Renaissance Italy but that this view 'did not arise from a sober consideration of chronological and factual evidence but rather constituted an attempt to give hitherto alien works of art a secure place in an established cultural hierarchy'.¹³ Within this early framework for inquiry, the term 'Renaissance' rather than 'classical' appears to have been the keyword of choice.

The term 'classical' was not systematically deployed in scholarly writing on Islamic art until 1968, at which time Ernst Grube wrote *The Classical Style in Islamic Painting*. In this book, as well as in his subsequent studies on Iranian pictorial arts, Grube argued that the term 'classical' should be applied to Timurid painting of the fifteenth century. More specifically, he proposed that the pictorial materials produced for the bibliophile Timurid prince Baysunghur (1399-1433) in Herat during the 1420s should be considered the 'artistic yardstick' by which all later Islamic painting should be judged. Indeed, Grube argues, later imitations of the Timurid style by Safavid artists attest to the 'classical' position of Timurid painting as a pictorial art that is consciously refined in its technique, controlled in its

¹⁰ Annette Hagedorn, 'The Development of Islamic Art History in Germany in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries', in Stephen Vernoit, ed., *Discovering Islamic Art: Scholars, Collectors and Collections, 1850-1950*, London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2000, 117-27.

¹¹ Stuart Cary Welch, 'Private Collectors and Islamic Arts of the Book', in Toby Falk, ed., *Treasures of Islam*, London: Philip Wilson, 1985, 26.

¹² On this alignment as a 'seductive contract' between historic patron and modern collector, see David Roxburgh, 'The Study of Painting and the Arts of the Book', *Muqarnas*, 17, 2000, 1-16, 3.

¹³ Priscilla Soucek, 'Walter Pater, Bernard Berenson, and the Reception of Persian Manuscript Illustration', *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, 40, 2001, 126.

attention to detail, aesthetically unified, and hence ultimately worthy of subsequent emulation.¹⁴

The term was further developed by Thomas Lentz and Glenn Lowry in their landmark 1989 exhibition and catalogue, *Timur and the Princely Vision*.¹⁵ Here, the authors substantially expand the term and apply it specifically to painting produced in the Timurid royal book atelier (*kitabkhana*). Within the confines of this formal institution established for the production of elite painting and designs applied to other media, pictorial systems seem to have become more cohesive and unified. The codification of style along with the streamlining of in-house operational procedures facilitated a greater output of materials, resulting in a rise in production that surely complemented the increasingly centralized political and cultural power of Timur's more literate descendants, Shahrukh (r. 1405-47) and Sultan-Husayn Bayqara (r. 1469-1506).

According to Lentz and Lowry, artists at this time were responsible for visualizing princely aspirations within an essentially closed system of practice and protocol. Their imagination and creativity were governed by a circumscribed set of models that represented the products of personal, intellectual, and artistic interactions between the royal workshops and the ruling house.¹⁶ Beyond these contemporary exchanges, painters were further aided by the existence of Ilkhanid and Jalayirid pictorial models held within the royal library, which they adopted and adapted for paintings created for inclusion in newly commissioned illustrated historical, scientific, poetic, and epic texts.¹⁷ Put simply, artists were looking to one another, to their sponsors, and to their shared artistic heritage in order to inventively update artistic models and styles. Within this collaborative venture linking sponsors and actors, time past and present, painting has been argued to represent a 'soft' form of artistic currency aimed at mimicking the Timurid state's equally centripetal tendencies as well as reinforcing its official discourses on the good of the order as promulgated by the major actors working under the patronage of the Timurid dynasts.¹⁸

Over the past few decades, scholars have thus defined Timurid painting as 'classical' based on divergent criteria, revealing a striking lack of consensus over the accepted meaning of this complex term. According to Lentz and Lowry, Timurid painting should be considered 'classical' because it evinces a fully-fledged state-

¹⁴ Ernst Grube, *The Classical Style in Islamic Painting: The Early School of Herat and its Impact on Islamic Painting of the Later 15th, 16th, and 17th Centuries*, Venice: Edizioni Oriens, 1968, 21. Grube's opinion echoes that of Martin who, in 1912, reserved highest praise for Baysunghur as 'one of the greatest bibliophiles of the world'. See Fredrik R. Martin, *The Miniature Painting and Painters of Persia, India, and Turkey from the 8th to the 18th Century*, London: B. Quaritch, 1912, 36; and Soucek, 'Walter Pater', 119. On Baysunghur's library in particular, see David Roxburgh, 'Baysunghur's Library: Questions Related to its Chronology and Production', *Journal of Social Affairs*, 18(2), 2001, 13, and also 37 on Timurid painting as a 'creative process that demanded imitation and engaged with models of the past'.

¹⁵ Thomas W. Lentz and Glenn D. Lowry, *Timur and the Princely Vision: Persian Art and Culture in the Fifteenth Century*, Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1989.

¹⁶ Lentz and Lowry, *Timur and the Princely Vision*, 163.

¹⁷ Lentz and Lowry, *Timur and the Princely Vision*, 50-2.

¹⁸ For a discussion of how an increasingly fixed and centralized Timurid authority helped generate artistic output, see J. Michael Rogers, 'Centralisation and Timurid Creativity', *Oriente Moderno*, n.s., 15(2), 1976, 533-50.

sponsored artistic programme, primarily based in the city of Herat from c. 1420-1500. At this time, artists in the Timurid royal and princely *kitabkhanas* came together from the major artistic centres of Baghdad, Shiraz, and Tabriz to create a more or less codified visual vocabulary that could be applied to various objects such as metalwork, woodwork, ceramics, and textiles. Through the transference of designs, Lentz and Lowry argue, artists and craftsmen created a recognizable canon – that is, a set of 'classical' rules – for the visual arts in the Timurid period. As a consequence, Timurid artists active in this so-called 'classical' period of painting are thus framed as responsible for creating visual expressions of princely virtues and aspirations bound within a relatively self-enclosed system of styles and forms applied across various media.

Thus, according to the framework established by Lentz and Lowry, the term 'classical' should be equated with the formalization and institutionalization of pictorial modes combined with multi-media production. Consequently, a 'classical' period can only occur once artists apply designs en masse to a variety of artworks. Although Timurid artists did experiment with form, creatively adapting and competitively responding to older models, they tend to be described in Lentz and Lowry's *Timur and the Princely Vision* as forming a body of skilled labour subservient to one dominant mode of production dictated by a desire for standardization and consistency.

The problems surrounding this particular definition of 'classical' are many, primarily because the scholarly paradigm presumes a multiplication of forms and idioms across media as well as an artistic vision of state decreed from above. It fails to provide a compelling account for works with exceptional or unusual pictorial language, and prioritizes those displaying motifs that are standardized. Within the parameters of this definition, style is to be regarded as 'classically' normative when it is recurring and thus expected. This is despite the fact that Western models of art historical scholarship tend to regard inventiveness – that is, breaks with the past in favour of the new – as the 'artistic yardstick' by which to judge otherwise petrified artistic traditions that, according to other, more organic interpretive stances, are most commonly conceived of as having embarked on a downward path to repetition, degeneration and extinction. In this way artistic practice is apparently ensnared in a paradox of convention and invention, inasmuch as the 'classical' appears but a serial position between tradition and novelty.¹⁹

What is more, the Lentz-Lowry approach to the 'classical' tends to assume that patrons from the Timurid royal household were typically involved in procedures of pictorial and stylistic selection. Although some Timurid princes (such as Baysunghur) were indeed gifted calligraphers who showed interest in the progress of various art projects or even participated actively in them, others do not appear to have interfered much in the inner workings of the *kitabkhana*.²⁰ More often than not, the Timurid visual idiom seems to have emerged principally from an

¹⁹ George Kubler, *The Shape of Time*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1962, 67.

²⁰ See, for example, Baysunghur's enquiry about the status of various projects in the *kitabkhana*, information about which is contained in an official written report, or *'arzasht*, available in English translation in Wheeler Thackston, *Album Prefaces and Other Documents on the History of Calligraphers and Painters, Studies and Sources in Islamic Art and Architecture, Supplements to Muqarnas*, 10, Leiden, Boston, and Cologne: E.J. Brill, 2001, 43-6.

internal collaboration among artists who refined inherited forms and experimented with new ones, thereby creating a variety of artistic styles. Only then, one might counter-argue, could a more integrated Timurid artistic undertaking coalesce in order to project the state's unity, strength, and wealth – and not the other way around. And still this latter hypothesis remains suspect when it is applied to the study of royal paintings and luxury manuscripts, whose viewership was highly confined. Unlike Timurid architectural projects that could reach a broader audience in the public sphere, illustrated manuscripts and painted pages – even when produced in increased numbers – could only be accessed by a select few. Their influence as vocalizations of a political and cultural agenda beyond a restricted elite class of patrons remains questionable at best.²¹

Within scholarship on Persian painting, the term 'classical' has continuously defied definition and chronology. While Grube and Lentz and Lowry have argued that the Timurid period epitomized a 'classical' moment of refined art, the scholar-collector Stuart Cary Welch (1928-2008) used the same term to describe sixteenth-century Safavid painting in particular. In his studies focusing on the lavishly illustrated sixteenth-century manuscripts of Nizami's *Khamsa*, Firdawsi's *Shahnama*, and others, Welch considered members of the royal elite especially active during the reign of Shah Tahmasp (r. 1525-76) 'supremely civilized ... [and] discriminating connoisseurs ... [comprising] a small army of bibliophiles.'²² Under their enlightened sponsorship, a 'high court art' in a 'fully synthesized' Safavid style emerged, reaching its 'classic' peak c. 1550.²³ This so-called 'Safavi synthesis' of manuscript painting, he continues, represents a '*beau ideal*' in terms of its unsurpassable technical and formal perfection, whose ultimate goal is the creation of melodic patterns of hues that can be enjoyed freed from the burden of text, much like a cluster of musical notes.²⁴

For Welch and his co-author Martin Dickson, Safavid manuscript painting of the mid-sixteenth century represents the 'classical' phase of pictorial art in Iran. It is seen as tempering the expressionist visionary imagination of the Turkman tradition, synthesizing such painterly excesses with the refined 'classicism' of Timurid Herat.²⁵ In this instance, it surely will not escape the reader that the terms 'classical' and 'classicism' are applied in an erratic way and without proper definition as a means to describe both period and style. Notwithstanding this evident shortcoming, Welch nevertheless places the chronological aspect of the term 'classical' within a dominant rise-and-fall discourse. Within this framework, Safavid artists active

²¹ Blair has raised a similar question for the Great Mongol *Shahnama* of the 1330s; see Sheila S. Blair, 'Rewriting the History of the Great Mongol *Shahnama*', in Robert Hillenbrand, ed., *Shahnama: The Visual Language of the Persian Book of Kings, Varie: Occasional Papers*, II, Aldershot and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004, 47.

²² Stuart Cary Welch, *Wonders of the Age: Masterpieces of Early Safavid Painting, 1501-1576*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979, 13 and 26; and Stuart Cary Welch, *Persian Painting: Five Royal Safavid Manuscripts of the Sixteenth Century*, New York: Braziller, 1976, 11.

²³ Welch, *Wonders of the Age*, 13, and 26-7.

²⁴ Stuart Cary Welch and Martin Dickson, *The Houghton Shahnameh*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981, vol. 1, 27-48 and esp. 43; and Welch, *Wonders of the Age*, 26.

²⁵ Dickson and Welch, *Houghton Shahnameh*, vol. 1, 35; and Stuart Cary Welch, *Royal Persian Manuscripts: Five Royal Safavid Manuscripts of the Sixteenth Century*, London: Thames & Hudson, 1976, 17.

during the earlier part of the sixteenth century are to be considered unsteady 'Safavi primitives',²⁶ while painting produced after Shah Tahmasp's reign attests to a decline of the pictorial arts as they begin to surrender to Mannerist and Baroque 'extremes'.²⁷

Welch's chronological sequencing and aesthetic commentary mimic the scholarship of Italian Renaissance art. For the painting traditions of both Iran and Italy, this stylistic chronology carries no small sense of moral judgement: classicism is openly admired for its self-controlled temperance, and reproach is often implicit in narrations of baroque laxity. Welch's method, moreover, bears greater implications for Persian manuscript painting outside of its purely academic study. For example, he states that painters active c. 1550 are 'painter-saints' producing masterpieces, in which the hand of the *maestro* can be identified by the discriminating connoisseur—a scholar-collector discourse that without a doubt echoes the academic rhetoric on artist-geniuses of the Italian Renaissance.²⁸ More discomfiting in the detection (and attribution) of the master's 'saintly' hand may be that this exercise in keen connoisseurship and authentication delivers an aesthetic terminology which is manifestly market-transferable.²⁹ Welch was a lifelong collector as well as a dedicated scholar and teacher, and while the connoisseurial enthusiasm of his approach rendered Safavid paintings all the more readable as primarily aesthetic objects, and thus enjoyably accessible for the general reader and museum visitor, his scholarship also rendered the same paintings deeply desirable as commodities. In other words, the higher the 'classicism', the more collectible the painting, and the higher its monetary value. With its pecuniary underbelly exposed, the term 'classical' thus gains patinas of meanings as it inches closer to the word 'expensive'.³⁰

Within the study of Persian manuscript painting, there exists yet a fourth definition of what constitutes the 'classical'. Going beyond the idea of an efflorescence of the illustrated manuscript (in sheer numerical terms) and the use of art for political, emotional and financial gain, another approach to the 'classical' further stresses the aesthetic qualities of Timurid and Safavid paintings. This artistically valuative definition co-exists with the term's use as a descriptor of style and time period. In the work of Grube, Lentz, Lowry, Welch, and Dickson the term 'classical' thus also comes to denote the visual or artistic mastery exhibited in certain paintings, achieved by compositional form and a highly skilled application of pigments. Other terms used in conjunction with this specific definition of 'classical'—including 'refined', 'sensitive', 'metaphorical', even 'staged' and 'artificial'³¹—show a clear indebtedness to Ehsan Yarshater's influential 1962 study on 'classical'

²⁶ Dickson and Welch, *Houghton Shahnameh*, 1, 27.

²⁷ Welch, *Wonders of the Age*, 30-31.

²⁸ Welch, *Wonders of the Age*, 13 and 26.

²⁹ As noted by David Roxburgh in 'The Study of Painting', 3, the developing market and the growth of collecting were sustained by taxonomy.

³⁰ Although Welch donated much of his own private collection to The Arthur M. Sackler Museum at Harvard University, where he had taught and worked, the remainder of the collection of Indian and Iranian art was auctioned in May 2011.

³¹ Lentz and Lowry, *Timur and the Princely Vision*, 163; and Thomas Lentz, 'Changing Worlds: Behzad and the New Painting', in Sheila Canby, ed., *Persian Masters: Five Centuries of Painting*, Bombay: J.J. Bhabha, 1990, esp. 45-52.

Persian poetry, wherein the poetry itself is described as 'florid', 'stylized', 'formulaic', and 'mystical', as well as studded by rhetorically ornamental devices that are thought to be echoed in the visual arts.³²

Drawing upon Yarshater's conclusions about Persian poetic styles, scholars of Islamic art have argued that the painterly arts of the fifteenth century likewise bear strong decorative tendencies, with pictorial devices that not only embellish a main theme but also become subjects unto themselves. As a seemingly natural result of this text-and-image dialogue, Yarshater's theoretical approach to Persian poetry has been carried over to the study of Persian manuscript painting in the greater effort to uncover and define a 'classical' moment for the pictorial arts of Iran. The transposition of this model has the effect of lauding recurring and standardized patterns, intricate formal qualities, and visual allegory above all else. As a result, Timurid and Safavid painting often are presented through a litany of aesthetic descriptors, including: polished, refined, unified, and coherent.

This literarily-informed definition of 'classical' Persian manuscript painting emphasizes the aesthetic quality of artistic production within manuscript painting, rather than its sheer quantity and the creative character of its top-down patronage. In some sense, the literary model can provide a useful foil, inasmuch as it offers alternative ways to further delve into the symbolic implications of pictorial forms, especially in the case of illustrated texts whose paintings tend toward the lyrical and thus may transcend purely narrative functions. More objectionable, however, is this approach's stressing of non-narrative poetic expression: this emphasis effectively promotes the supremacy of Persian poetic works over scientific, biographical, and historical texts. The illustrations of those non-poetic texts nevertheless must be accounted for and cogently positioned within an overarching discourse on what constitutes 'classical' Persian manuscript painting. Whether defined by numerical output or by high levels of pictorial ornamentation, the various definitions of the 'classical' style discussed so far have patently failed to properly incorporate a cogent discussion of illustrated Timurid and Safavid historical and biographical works.

Rather than incorporate these sorts of manuscripts into a discourse on the 'classical', scholars have devised subcategories of painting. Within scholarly models for Timurid painting, one example of this method would be Richard Ettinghausen's designation of the Timurid 'historical style' of Shahrukh. This style, Ettinghausen argues, is evident in paintings that accompany historical texts, most especially the *Majma' al-Tavarikh* (Collection of Chronicles) of Hafiz-i Abru (d. 1430), the court historian of Shahrukh responsible for updating and completing Rashid al-Din's *Jami' al-Tavarikh* (Compendium of Chronicles), written and illustrated during the early decades of the fourteenth century.³³ As Ettinghausen highlights, although they are based on inherited Ilkhanid models, Shahrukh's historical manuscripts include paintings that are reduced in form and lacking in animation, display little interest in

³² Ehsan Yarshater, 'Some Common Characteristics of Persian Poetry and Art', *Studia Islamica*, 16, 1962, 61-72.

³³ For the illustrated manuscripts of Rashid al-Din's *Jami' al-Tavarikh*, see Sheila S. Blair, *A Compendium of Chronicles: Rashid al-Din's Illustrated History of the World*, New York and Oxford: The Nour Foundation, in association with Azimuth Editions and Oxford University Press, 1995; and David Talbot Rice, *The Illustrations to the "World History" of Rashid al-Din*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1976.

spatial depth, and employ archaizing forms that tend to reiterate Mongol prototypes.³⁴ As such, they should be deemed archaistic and atavistic—and hence are hard to explain away within the continuum of the 'classical'.

While Timurid illustrated poetical texts to some extent relied upon Jalayirid models,³⁵ historical texts produced during the reign of Shahrukh indubitably acted as visual reiterations of Ilkhanid models. The emulation of older manuscripts, including Rashid al-Din's *Jami' al-Tavarikh*, is not surprising as Ilkhanid visual materials were transferred from Tabriz to Herat. They were available to Timurid artists working in the royal *kitabkhana*, who could access visual sources at their disposal in the search for thematic and stylistic models. Moreover, Hafiz-i Abru himself was commissioned by Shahrukh to finish and update portions of Rashid al-Din's text, and so he, too, must have consulted textual materials (most obviously, Rashid al-Din's magnum opus) held in the library as part of his own annalistic endeavours. Timurid writers and artists obviously did not practise their respective crafts in temporal or disciplinary isolation; on the contrary, their projects were often collaborative in nature as well as studiously integrated within the shared written and artistic heritage of Islam.

Beyond the construction of common political and cultural genealogies, such ventures also highlight a Timurid effort to revivify earlier painterly traditions—a pictorial revival befitting Shahrukh, who imagined himself a 'renewer' (*mujaddid*) of learning and glorious ruler (*padishah*) of Islam. Although his self-aggrandizing titles were similar to those employed by Muslim royal patrons both before and after him, Shahrukh was especially interested in promoting Sunni Islam through institutions of higher learning.³⁶ His efforts, however, were not solely 'sectarian' in the sense of furthering a Sunni platform contra Shi'i doctrine. In a more general fashion, Shahrukh's efforts were aimed at promoting the Prophet's tradition (*Sunna*) over practices belonging to his Mongol past. It is for these reasons, for example, that he abolished the Great Mongol Law (*yasa*) and replaced it with Islamic law (*shari'a*) by

³⁴ Richard Ettinghausen, 'An Illuminated Manuscript of Hafiz-i Abru in Istanbul, Part I', *Kunst des Orients*, 2, 1955, 40. Ettinghausen's argument was revisited and his dating refined by Günar Inal, who demonstrated that the 'historical' style of Shahrukh is more varied than was once assumed and that it should not be considered a thoughtless copying of Mongol prototypes. See Günar Inal, 'Miniatures in Historical Manuscripts from the Time of Shahrukh in the Topkapı Palace Museum', in Lisa Golombek and Maria Subtelny, eds, *Timurid Art and Culture: Iran and Central Asia in the Fifteenth Century*, Leiden, New York, and Cologne: E.J. Brill, 1992, 114. For Inal's revised dating of one of the illustrated manuscripts of the *Majma' al-Tavarikh*, see Inal, 'Some Miniatures of the *Jami' al-Tavarikh* in Istanbul, Topkapı Museum, Hazine no. 1654', *Ars Orientalis*, 5, 1963, 163-75.

³⁵ For a discussion of the Jalayirid pictorial contribution to the Timurid 'classical' style, see Eleanor Sims, 'The Timurid Imperial Style: its Origins and Diffusion', *Art and Archaeology Research Papers*, December 1974, 56-67; and on Jalayirid painting more broadly, see Teresa Fitzherbert, 'Khwaju Kirmani (689-753/ 1290-1352): An *Éminence Grise* of Fourteenth Century Persian Painting', *Iran*, 29, 1991, 137-51.

³⁶ Maria Subtelny, 'The Sunni Revival under Shah-Rukh and its Promoters: A Study for the Connection between Ideology and Higher Learning in Timurid Iran', in *Proceedings of the 27th Meeting of Haneda Memorial Hall Symposium on Central Asia and Iran, August 30, 1993*, Kyoto: Institute of Inner Asian Studies, Kyoto University, 1994, 14-23; and Maria Subtelny and Anas Khalidov, 'The Curriculum of Higher Learning in Timurid Iran in the Light of the Sunni Revival under Shah-Rukh', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 115(2), 1995, 210-36.

resorting to the 'classics' of Islamic jurisprudence and restoring the prophetic paradigm.

Shahrukh's rhetoric on reviving the past in both religion and law is echoed within the painterly arts produced during his reign, which likewise relied on older models for the conceptualization of themes and experimentation with styles. For these reasons, the so-called 'historical' style used in illustrated manuscripts produced under his sponsorship should not just be treated as a subsection or even an anathema of the Timurid 'classical' style. For argument's sake, the so-called 'historical' style of Shahrukh instead should be considered an experiment in 'neo-classicism': that is, a pictorial revivalism prompted by an interest in returning to a perceived artistic apex, in this case one that is understood as lying not in Timurid artistic traditions but in Ilkhanid ones. As evidenced by this antiquarian reiteration, the Timurid ruler and his court painters must have considered Ilkhanid painting worthy of recovery for both its themes and styles. Timurid revivalist pictorial practices therefore suggest that the definition and locus of the 'classical' should, on the Timurid painters' and patrons' own terms at least, be pushed back and applied to models of artistic excellence dating from the Ilkhanid period.³⁷ As in literary traditions, the definition of 'classical' in this instance transcends style and period, referring more generally to a standard or model.³⁸

For these reasons, pictorial practices and surviving visual data are discordant with the lexical apparatus that has been used for the study of Persian manuscript painting thus far. This disjuncture arises primarily because the term 'classical' resists singular and precise definition. Additionally, the adjective is a malleable evaluative term applied retroactively to a particular segment of a large and somewhat disparate corpus of visual materials. As has been noted, patrons and artists of Persian illustrated manuscripts certainly drew upon aesthetic practices engaged with tradition and negotiated boundaries with the past. Their practices therefore should be adjudicated based on empirical evidence rather than modern Eurocentric philosophies of art, which impose their own aesthetic judgement and taxonomies of style based on a number of criteria that do not necessarily transfer to other geo-cultural fields of artistic production.

As modern scholarly terminology is thus at odds with Persian painterly practices, it is both wise and timely to revise its use by examining extant visual materials. In what follows, this study offers an analysis of interrelated paintings to assess the viability of the term 'classical'. The paintings belong to Ilkhanid, Timurid, and Safavid illustrated historical manuscripts, with a special focus on sections narrating and illustrating episodes from the life of the Prophet Muhammad. The decision to examine historical texts is a response to their general omission from accepted discourses on 'classical' Persian painting, which tend to highlight epic and romantic tales instead. In the process, such marginalized or unknown manuscript

³⁷ Safavid writers and artists likewise considered the Ilkhanid period a pivotal moment for the inception of Persian manuscript painting. For example, see Dust Muhammad's famous preface to the Bahram Mirza album, in which he notes that the Ilkhanid master painter, Ahmad Musa, 'lifted the veil from the face of depiction, and the [style of] depiction that is now current was invented by him' (Thackston, *Album Prefaces and Other Documents*, 12).

³⁸ René Wellek, *Discriminations: Further Concepts of Criticism*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1970, 78.

paintings highlight the means by which the various criteria of the 'classical' fall patently short of providing a proper conceptual apparatus for creating a coherent and convincing narrative for Persian manuscript painting. The historical text illustrations thus prompt painting scholars to develop new frameworks of inquiry – both intellectual and structural – that may prove more diagnostically nuanced and less value-assessive of the visual data than current models.

A 'cult of classics'

Hafiz-i Abru's *Majma' al-Tavarikh*, mentioned above, was produced as an illustrated text to purposefully emulate and update the earlier work of the Ilkhanid vizier Rashid al-Din, the *Jami' al-Tavarikh*. For the royal patron of this text, Shahrukh, his historian Hafiz-i Abru, and Timurid court painters, the Ilkhanid manuscript surely provided a model of excellence for the production of a universal history in both text and image form. Although separated by a century, the Ilkhanid and Timurid illustrated manuscripts – dated 1307-14 and datable to c. 1425, respectively – reveal a number of striking similarities in their written content and pictorial programs. The ways in which they differ textually and visually, however, are perhaps more significant, inasmuch as they open new opportunities to critically interrogate the concept of the 'classical'.

Both the *Jami' al-Tavarikh* and the later *Majma' al-Tavarikh* examine the history of the world from Adam to the Ilkhanid or Timurid period respectively, with a special emphasis on the early history of Islam and the life of the Prophet Muhammad. Episodes from the Prophet's life selected for illustration in both manuscripts include Muhammad's birth; his recognition as a prophet by the Christian monk Bahira; his receiving of God's revelations from the Angel Gabriel; his night journey and celestial ascension; his miraculous restitution of milk to the dry udders of the goats belonging to Umm Ma'bad; and his battles at Badr and Uhud as well as against the Banu'l-Nadir and Banu Qaynuqa' tribes. All of these illustrated scenes of Muhammad's life, as well as others contained within the manuscripts, deserve close comparative study in the future. However, due to limitations of space, only the texts and paintings of Muhammad's birth in Rashid al-Din's and Hafiz-i Abru's histories will be compared in what follows, in order to highlight procedures of adoption and adaptation within pre-modern Iranian book art traditions.

In the Ilkhanid illustrated manuscript of Rashid al-Din's *Jami' al-Tavarikh* dated 707/1307, the text first discusses 'Abdallah's marriage to Amina and his untimely death before the birth of the Prophet to Amina. The next section on Muhammad's birth is exceedingly brief: comprising only two lines of text before the painting at the bottom of the folio (and none thereafter), the author simply records a statement by the Prophet's companions noting that Muhammad was born in Mecca during the year of the elephant. The equivalent dates are also provided in accordance with the regnal years of the Sasanian monarch Khusraw I Anushirvan (r. 531-79) and Alexander the Great (r. 336-323 BCE). No *hijri* year is provided. On the one hand, this omission may simply underline the fact that the Islamic lunar calendar did not exist at this point in the historical narrative, since Muhammad had

not yet embarked on his emigration from Mecca to Medina in 622 CE. On the other hand, it is possible that Öljeytü (r. 1304-16), the Ilkhanid sultan under whose rule the manuscript was completed, felt comfortable consulting a separate concordance of calendrical systems, like that provided in al-Biruni's *Al-Athar al-Baqiya* 'an al-Qurun al-Khaliya (Chronology of Ancient Nations), a text which was produced as an illustrated manuscript in the very same year as the 1307 *Jami* 'al-Tawarikh. The textual section on the Prophet's birth in Rashid al-Din's magnum opus is succinct and to the point: devoid of particulars and explanations, its only concern consists in establishing the accurate year of Muhammad's birth per two of the major calendars in operation at the time.

Despite the brevity of Rashid al-Din's account, the accompanying painting nevertheless carries forward the narrative of Muhammad's birth by offering visual details that help fill in the gaps left by the text's overwhelming silence (fig. 1).



Figure 1. The birth of the Prophet Muhammad, Rashid al-Din, *Jami* 'al-Tawarikh (Compendium of Chronicles), Tabriz, 707/1307. Edinburgh University Library, Arab Ms. 20, folio 42r.

In the central bay of the horizontal register, which is framed by two red columns, Amina is covered in a sheet and reclines on a pillow as a midwife and other servant ladies tend to her with a gold chalice-shaped bowl and other dishes. A newborn Muhammad is swaddled in a cloth and held aloft by one of two angels, the second of which holds what appears to be a gold censer (above which a later inscription in Persian identifies the scene as the 'royal birth of the Ruler of Mankind, peace be upon him'). In the right register sits an old man with a walking stick; he is most

likely Muhammad's grandfather, 'Abd al-Muttalib. His marginal location may be based on Christian images of Joseph attending Christ's birth.³⁹ Similarly, the three standing women on the far left (as well as behind Amina in the central register) may be loosely based on Christian representations of the three Magi, while the painting's three-part register also recalls the Christian triptych format.

As previous scholars have noted, scenes such as these reveal the influence of Christian iconography on the formation of Ilkhanid pictorial motifs. Such paintings indeed highlight the various religious visual systems with which both artists (some of whom were Christian) and patrons (some of whom, like Öljeytü, were Christian converts to Islam) were familiar during the first decades of the fourteenth century.⁴⁰ Additionally, this painting, like many others included in the *Jami' al-Tavarikh*, appears indebted to Chinese pictorial modes, from the horizontal, scroll-like format of the composition to the light colour washes used to highlight drapery folds.⁴¹ The painting of Muhammad's birth thus provides one salient example in which diverse visual systems were adapted and realigned within the dynamic Eurasian composition of the Ilkhanid *kitabkhana*.

This Ilkhanid synthesis of pictorial traditions has tended to be described as a masterly and vibrant – albeit experimental and unsteady – effort towards creating the first school of painting in Islamic Iran. While such a characterization may suit the overarching rise-and-decline narrative, this and other Ilkhanid paintings prompt the scholar to ask whether one can indeed speak of a coherent 'school' and, if so, what its chronological beginning and end points might be. With a workforce comprised of international conscripts, styles varied considerably within the atelier, from artist to artist, and from the first decade to the third decade of the fourteenth century. Searching for stylistic consistency within the context of continual cessation and recommencement of artistic styles, while also making strict claims for 'clear-cut' period divisions, will not, as Wölfflin wisely cautions, 'carry us very far'.⁴² And this is all the more questionable when Ilkhanid paintings are evaluated *a posteriori* by means of aesthetic criteria belonging to a discourse on the 'classical' apparently occasioned by the later Timurid and even Safavid projects.

³⁹ Talbot Rice, *Illustrations to the "World History"*, 97; and Robert Hillenbrand, 'The Arts of the Book in Ilkhanid Iran', in Stefano Carboni and Linda Komaroff, eds, *The Legacy of Genghis Khan: Courtly Art and Culture in Western Asia, 1256-1353*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002, 134-67, 149-50.

⁴⁰ Priscilla Soucek, 'The Life of the Prophet: Illustrated Versions', in Priscilla Soucek, ed., *Content and Context of Visual Arts in the Islamic World: Papers from a Colloquium in Memory of Richard Ettinghausen, Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, 2-4 April 1980*, University Park and London: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1988, 205-6. As Rashid al-Din's endowment deed makes clear, artists in the Ilkhanid atelier included possibly Christian individuals from Byzantine lands (Rum) and Georgia (see Güner Inal, 'Some Artistic Relationships between the Far and Near East as Reflected in the Miniatures of the Gami' at-Tawarih', *Kunst des Orients*, 10, 1975, 113). Öljeytü himself was a Nestorian Christian before he converted to Islam and thus was quite likely familiar with Christian religious iconography as well. For a discussion of Öljeytü's conversion to Islam, see Judith Pfeiffer, 'Conversion Versions: Sultan Öljeytü's Conversion to Shi'ism (709/1309) in Muslim Narrative Sources', *Mongolian Studies*, 22, 1999, 35-67.

⁴¹ For a comparison of the Ilkhanid paintings to Chinese 'literati painting' produced in the handscroll format and colored with light washes, see Inal, 'Some Artistic Relationships', 121-3; and on Chinese techniques and styles more generally, see Blair, *A Compendium of Chronicles*, 19.

⁴² Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History*, 235.

Turning to the Timurid visual evidence, a similar scene of the Prophet Muhammad's birth is likewise included in Hafiz-i Abru's *Majma' al-Tavarikh* (fig. 2). Although located in the middle of the text folio rather than at its bottom, the painting retains the horizontal format of the earlier painting and its composition maintains three registers, here divided by a wall decorated with blue revetment tiles rather than by two red columns. To the right, 'Abd al-Muttalib sits on a chair, holding a walking stick, as a large green curtain tied up in a bundle creates a bright cornerpiece for the painting's upper right area. A similar curtain balances the composition's layout and coloration in the upper left corner, above an old woman who is hunched over and whose facial features, much like those of her Ilkhanid prototype, appear to have been deliberately erased. In the centre of the composition only a reclining Amina and two angels holding Muhammad and a censer remain; the lady servants originally included in the right of the central register of the Ilkhanid painting have been removed.



Figure 2. The birth of the Prophet Muhammad, Hafiz-i Abru, *Majma' al-Tavarikh* (Collection of Chronicles), Herat, c. 1425. Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC, 2005.5.

From a formal perspective, the Timurid painting appears more minimalistic in its component parts. The synoptic effect is in large part due to the excision of non-essential figures, which may have been felt to detract from the principal subject matter: i.e., the birth of Muhammad, itself located in the centre of the composition and pushed to its foreground in the Timurid painting. The composition's planes also seem somewhat restricted, and the figures' bodily movements are relatively crisp and static. Moreover, unlike the Ilkhanid painting, whose coloured washes are largely restricted to red, blue, and ochre, the Timurid scene includes large swathes of primary colours, including green and yellow, applied in relatively opaque

pigments. In the latter scene, it is clear that a premium has been placed on bright colouration rather than gradated modeling. These formal emphases evidently invert Wölfflin's discourse on the 'classical' which argues for the development of space from flat to three-dimensional, of figural depiction from mass to movement, and of palette from primary hues to a wider and more nuanced spectrum of tonalities. In brief, at least one model of scholarly discourse on the 'classical' is turned upside-down in this specific encounter between an 'excellent' pictorial source and its subsequent 'revival'.

Pictorial elaborations also seem to be echoed in the written section of the *Majma' al-Tavarikh* that precedes and follows the Timurid painting. The passage describes Muhammad's birth. Unlike the *Jami' al-Tavarikh*, whose entry comprises only two lines of baldly factual text, the *Majma' al-Tavarikh* includes a much more elaborate entry highlighting a number of other details related to the Prophet's birth. For example, the text relates that when Amina was pregnant she received a revelation from heaven informing her that she was carrying a 'blessed' (*mubarrak*) creature, who is the 'seal of creation' (*muhr-i khala'iq*) and who must be called Muhammad—that is, 'the Praiseworthy One'. At the time of Muhammad's birth, Amina states that she saw a light emanating from him, which illuminated the entire world. Pavilions in the Levant (*Sham*) were lit with his radiance, which rose upwards and reached the heaven and stars. The text then changes topics, moving from a discussion of Muhammad's sacred primordial light (*nur Muhammad*)⁴³ to the signs of Islam's impending ascendancy at the time of his coming into the world. Such signs include the destruction of all the idols at the Ka'ba in Mecca, the extinguishing of fire in all fire-temples (*atashkadas*), the desiccation of the Lake of Saveh, and the smashing of the twelve parapets of the Arch of [Khusraw I] Nushirvan. From predicting Islam's triumph over Arab polytheism and Iranian Zoroastrianism, to explaining the mysterious disappearance of a body of water,⁴⁴ to projecting the Muslim forces' military victory over the Sasanians at Ctesiphon in 637 CE, the birth of Muhammad thus takes on cosmic proportions, begetting a sacred (and inevitably successful) course for Islam in its Iranian geo-cultural milieu.

Although it would be difficult to uncover a similarly Islamocentric message within the painting, one cannot help but wonder whether the excision of the clusters of triple figures that had been present in the Ilkhanid painting may have been intended not only to simplify the composition but also perhaps to 'prune' some of the elements drawn from Christian nativity scenes. Though this hypothesis remains impossible to prove or disprove, it is nonetheless clear that the painting forwards an argument in favour of Muhammad's sacrality. Visibly augmenting its Ilkhanid prototype, the Timurid painting depicts the newborn prophet as surrounded by an aureole, which transforms into a gold halo that branches out into flames of light that encircle and sprout out to the left and right of the two angels. The gold pigment is further emphasized by the bright blue of the revetment tiles in the background, a

⁴³ On the 'Light of Muhammad', see Uri Rubin, 'Pre-existence and Light: Aspects of the Concept of Nur Muhammad', *Israel Oriental Studies*, 5, 1975, 62-119.

⁴⁴ According to Persian historical texts, the Lake of Saveh dried out on the night of the birth of Muhammad. A recent investigation in the area between Tehran and Saveh has revealed evidence for the existence of this lake in the Zarand Plain. See Rasoul Okhravi and Morteza Djamali, 'The Missing Ancient Lake of Saveh: A Historical Review', *Iranica Antiqua*, 38, 2003, 327-44.

colour itself suggestive of the skies and thus the abode of God. Through these pictorial alterations, the Prophet's birth is no longer an outdoor scene populated by earthly personages; instead, it is depicted as occurring in a quasi-celestial sphere inhabited by angelic beings sent to announce a pre-existentially effulgent prophet unto mankind.

Under the Timurids, then, a clear 'cult of the classics' emerged that encompassed a number of Ilkhanid illustrated texts, including bio-historical works and universal encyclopaedias. Timurid copies of Ilkhanid texts, however, were obviously not one-to-one products, free of editorial intrusion and expansion. Similarly, their attendant paintings were amended in a number of ways that challenge, even discredit, the scholarly approach that seeks to classify such engagements according to 'initial' and 'classical' phases in a putatively linear progression for the visual arts in Iranian cultural spheres. Rather, new meanings of pictorial style emerge when paintings depicting the same subject and/or reliant on a common visual source are placed in opposition. Within this dialectical scenario, in which paintings survive and speciate, images function as platforms for accentuating ideological messages: in this particular instance it is the superior position of Islam and the sacred, celestial character of its Messenger that are visually elaborated. Pictorial modes thus should be seen as specifically complex chronotopes rather than pegs to be pigeonholed within a pictorial development progressing from 'primitive'⁴⁵ to 'classical'.

Much as the 'classical' cannot be accounted for within visual instances of call-and-response, the existence of a Timurid 'historical' style likewise should not be based on the simple premise that it can be extrapolated from illustrations within historical texts. If one were to accept this method of stylistic classification, then one also would have to speak of the 'historical' style of the Ilkhanid⁴⁶ and the Safavid periods, at which times large illustrated historical texts were produced as well. The term 'historical' therefore should be restricted to the field of annalistic literature rather than used as a descriptor of pictorial style.

Although there exist numerous cases of Ilkhanid paintings 'begetting' later copies, one other example can shed further light on the phenomenon, extending it beyond the Timurid project to the Safavid period. One of the best known and most carefully studied illustrated historical manuscripts of the Ilkhanid period is al-Biruni's *Al-Athar al-Baqiya 'an al-Qurun al-Khaliya* (Chronology of Ancient Nations), produced in 707/1307 by the calligrapher Ibn al-Kutubi.⁴⁷ Possibly executed in Tabriz or Maragha, the intellectual centres of the Ilkhanid realm, the manuscript's pictorial program shows a clear bias in favour of the Shi'i cause, perhaps an early

⁴⁵ For Ilkhanid painting as 'primitive', see Georges Marteau and Henri Vever, *Miniatures persanes exposées au Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Juin-Octobre, 1912*, Paris: Bibliothèque d'art et d'archéologie, 1913, 13; and Soucek, 'Walter Pater', 119.

⁴⁶ As proposed in Güner Inal, 'Some Artistic Relationships', 137.

⁴⁷ Robert Hillenbrand, 'Images of Muhammad in al-Biruni's *Chronology of Ancient Nations*', in Robert Hillenbrand, ed., *Persian Painting from the Mongols to the Qajars: Studies in Honour of Basil W. Robinson*, London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2000, 129-46; Priscilla Soucek, 'An Illustrated Manuscript of al-Biruni's *Chronology of Nations*', in Peter Chelkowski, ed., *The Scholar and the Saint: Studies in Commemoration of Abu'l-Rayhan al-Biruni and Jalal al-Din al-Rumi*, New York: New York University Press, 1975, 103-68; and Soucek, 'The Life of the Prophet', 198 and 205-6.

indicator of Sultan Öljeytü's conversion to the faith two years later. Episodes in the manuscript that are particularly significant in Shi'i terms include the two final (and largest) paintings depicting the Mubahala, or Day of Cursing, and the investiture of 'Ali at Ghadir Khumm (fig. 3), at which time Shi'i belief recognizes that the Prophet Muhammad appointed his son-in-law the rightful leader of the Muslim community.



Figure 3. The investiture of 'Ali by the Prophet Muhammad at Ghadir Khumm, al-Biruni, *Al-Athar al-Baqiya 'an al-Qurum al-Khaliya* (Chronology of Ancient Nations), Tabriz or Maragha, 707/1307. Edinburgh University Library, Arab Ms. 161, folio 162r.

These terminal scenes, along with all others included in the manuscript, were recreated in at least two later copies: 1) in an Ottoman manuscript of c. 1560, held in the Bibliothèque nationale de France in Paris and mentioned in previous scholarship;⁴⁸ and 2) in a Safavid copy dated 1057/1647-8, held in the Sepahsalar Madrasa in Tehran and still unstudied today. The Ilkhanid painting of Ghadir Khumm is almost exactly replicated in the mid-sixteenth century Ottoman manuscript (fig. 4). Here, the landscape in the background is retained, studded by two trees and a swirl of clouds. In the foreground, the figures are of the same scale and wear similarly coloured robes. One alteration, however, is particularly noteworthy: in the Ottoman copy, the three individuals accompanying Muhammad

⁴⁸ Hillenbrand, 'Images of Muhammad in al-Biruni's *Chronology of Ancient Nations*', 129; and Soucek, 'An Illustrated Manuscript of al-Biruni's *Chronology of Nations*', 103.

and 'Ali, prominently depicted in the composition's centre, bear facial features. These have been lost in the Ilkhanid original, most likely the target of an iconoclastic act aimed not towards the image *per se* but rather towards the Sunni cause as represented by the first four rightly-guided caliphs, or *Rashidun*.⁴⁹ Within the nexus of Sunni-Shi'i contentions, the image's value here lies in its ability to provide an invitation to the viewer to abuse and destroy oppositional icons or, conversely, to symbolically revivify its revered founding figures and reinvigorate the Sunni cause.⁵⁰ These acts of reception, destruction, and restitution make it difficult to track visual evolution, especially as Persian manuscript painting gained new life and meanings in Ottoman painterly production over the course of the sixteenth century.⁵¹

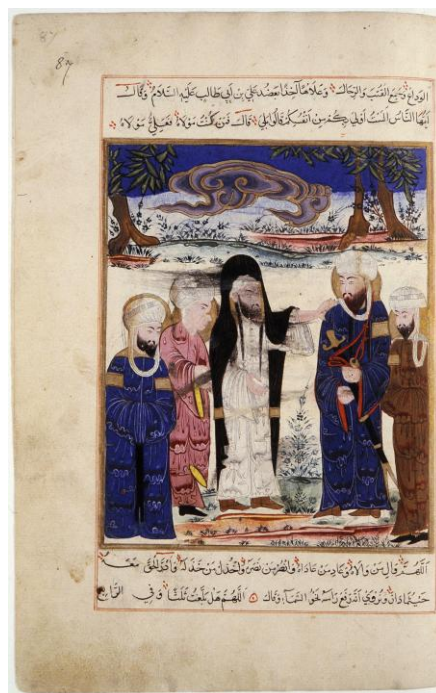


Figure 4. The investiture of 'Ali by the Prophet Muhammad at Ghadir Khumm, al-Biruni, *Al-Athar al-Baqiya 'an al-Qurun al-Khaliya* (Chronology of Ancient Nations), Ottoman copy, c. 1560. Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, Arabe 1489, folio 87r.

Returning to Iran, the Ilkhanid illustrated manuscript of al-Biruni's *Chronology of Ancient Nations* was also copied in full during the Safavid period. The Safavid copy, now held in library of the Sepahsalar Madrasa in Tehran (ms. no.

⁴⁹ On Ghadir Khumm within Shi'i-Sunni debates, see Etan Kohlberg, 'Some Imami Shi'i Views on the Sahaba', *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, 5, 1984, 153-5.

⁵⁰ On this particular form of iconoclasm, see Bruno Latour, 'What is Iconoclasm? Or Is there a World Beyond the Image Wars?', in Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel, eds, *Iconoclasm: Beyond the Image Wars in Science, Religion, and Art*, Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 2002, 27-8. On iconoclasm as an occasion to reinvigorate a cult, see Fabio Rambelli and Eric Reinders, 'What does Iconoclasm Create? What Does Preservation Destroy? Reflections on Iconoclasm in East Asia', in Stacy Boldrick and Richard Clay, eds, *Iconoclasm: Contested Objects, Contested Terms*, London: Ashgate, 2007, 20.

⁵¹ On Safavid-Ottoman manuscript interactions in general, see Filiz Çağman and Zeren Tanındı, 'Remarks on Some Manuscripts from the Topkapı Palace Treasury in the Context of Ottoman-Safavid Relations', *Muqarnas*, 13, 1996, 132-48.

1517), includes a colophon on folio 314r signed by Muhammad Mu' min Gulpayagani and dated 1057/1647-48.⁵² As the calligrapher's *nisba* 'of [the town of] Gulpayagan' suggests, the manuscript is most likely a Safavid product of the province of Isfahan. Furthermore, the paintings leave little doubt that the artist who illustrated its text had direct access to the Ilkhanid original, which must have been held in the palace collections in the capital city of Isfahan by the reign of Shah 'Abbas II (1642-66) at the latest.

The Safavid manuscript duplicates (and in some places expands)⁵³ the original pictorial cycle of the Ilkhanid manuscript, and it includes versions of all five of the illustrations depicting episodes from the life of the Prophet Muhammad that were present in the earlier manuscript. Among these are represented the pivotal events at Ghadir Khumm, composed in the likeness of the Ilkhanid painting (fig. 5).



Figure 5. The investiture of 'Ali by the Prophet Muhammad at Ghadir Khumm, al-Biruni, *Al-Athar al-Baqiya 'an al-Qurun al-Khaliya* (Chronology of Ancient Nations), probably Isfahan, 1057/1647-48. Sepahsalar Madrasa, Tehran, ms. no. 1517, folio 287r.

Even though similarities are strikingly evident, the later painting's composition, style, and other details diverge from the original representation in several ways.

⁵² See the descriptive entry on the manuscript in Muhammad Madadpur, Zahra Ja'fari, and 'Ali Asghar Shirazi, 'Fihrist-i Mawzu'i wa Tahlili-i Kutub-i Tasviri dar Majmu'a-yi nusakh-i khatti-yi Kitabkhana-yi Madrasa-yi 'Ali-yi Shahid-i Mutahhari (Sipahsalar-i Sabaq)', *Nagara: Faslnama-yi Tahlili-Pazhuhashi* 25(3), 1385/2006, 29-33.

⁵³ The Ilkhanid manuscript includes twenty-five paintings while the Safavid manuscript contains thirty-four. The number of paintings and the themes depicted in the 'Muhammad cycle' remain consistent in both manuscripts.

First, the background has been flattened to a mauve plane speckled with tiny tufts of grass; spatial depth and detailed attention to vegetation and the prominent chinoiserie cloud have disappeared. Second, the Ilkhanid painting's use of tonal modelling through coloured washes has been replaced by a flat application of primary colours contained within discrete outlines (this can be seen especially in the figures' robes, whose hues nonetheless remain essentially loyal to the Ilkhanid original). Third, the five figures have been magnified and pushed to the foreground, their bodily mass overtaking the greater portion of the picture plane. Fourth, the gold haloes, which in the Ilkhanid painting had been applied equally to all four characters besides the Prophet Muhammad – who himself is distinguished by a black overcloak (*burda*) in both images – have been manipulated. No longer uniformly applied, in the Safavid painting the gold haloes are reserved only for the Prophet (who had no halo in the Ilkhanid painting), 'Ali (who holds his legendary sword, Dhu'l-Fiqar), and Husayn (wearing a robe colored in bright red, the symbolic hue of his martyrdom). The two other figures on the left have likewise been altered from their Ilkhanid prototypes: these are no longer haloed, vandalized adults but rather two youths witnessing the critical moment of 'Ali's investiture. Perhaps these figures are intended to be Hasan and Zayn al-'Abidin, who thereby visually continue the line of the *imamate* through which rightful rulership was claimed by the Safavid dynasts. As such, the principal figural elements in this Safavid composition display a major iconographic revision of the Ilkhanid original, in the process allowing a Shi'i ideological discourse to be extrapolated from, and woven back into, the painting.

Once again, these images demonstrate that Persian painting does not progress along a presupposed developmental line, from an 'initial' to a 'classical' phase, from flat to three-dimensional, from hieratic to veristic. Instead, here 'evolution' is quite literally contrarian, taking a turn in the opposite direction: spatial depth is compressed and rendered almost irrelevant, while figures are increasingly static, iconic and enlarged. To explain this particular painting as a poorly executed or provincial product is insufficient, and does not explain the clear pictorial efforts that seek to emphasize the figures (and their emblems of sacrality) according to a Shi'i worldview.

Painting in this instance is harnessed in order to reaffirm contemporary sectarian messages while concurrently preserving – and dexterously refashioning – a treasured artistic patrimony more than three hundred years old. Timurid and Safavid artists, writers, and patrons turned to an Iranian Islamic past, especially Ilkhanid textual and visual materials, in their quest to procure and pass down its most meritorious models. Such recurring engagements in the interrelated fields of literature and art without a doubt challenge simple accounts of stylistic progression along a longitudinal temporal axis. And within this data-based defiance of received taxonomy, the term 'classical' finds itself in an especially shaky predicament.

New orientations

Despite its manifold definitions, the 'classical' within Persian painting cannot be firmly riveted to one artistic moment. While scholars alternatively use the term to

describe the Timurid and/or Safavid periods, the revived visual materials suggest that, in the eyes of Persian manuscript painters at least, the term (should one insist on maintaining it) would be best applied to the Ilkhanid period. The very existence of Timurid and Safavid copies pays tribute to Ilkhanid models as being themselves worthy of emulation. Since a number of scholars (especially Grube) have argued that art can be defined as 'classical' on the basis of how often it is subsequently copied and reiterated,⁵⁴ then one could forward the argument that, according to later pictorial practices, Ilkhanid art was deemed for several centuries the 'artistic yardstick' by which subsequent traditions were judged, and with which they entered into both playful and competitive response. In an obvious paradox, Ilkhanid art is thus conceptualized as 'inceptive' in scholarly discourse and yet revered as 'classical' in painterly practice.

Secondly, the term 'classical' does not, and cannot, describe one single painterly style, regardless of the adjectives to which it may be harnessed in scholarly literature (historical, lyrical, polished, or refined). First, there are too many variants from one book atelier to the next, from one manuscript to the next, from one painting to the next, and from one artist to the next. Even when an overarching stylistic trend or 'school' can be detected, such coherence does not a 'classical' moment make. Moreover, the determining of one single 'perfect' stylistic trend – whatever it may be – unfortunately relegates all other pictorial modes to the status of mere exceptions to a preconceived rule rather than recognizing them as equal contributors to a noticeably polyvocal system of visual production.

More critically, styles within Persian manuscript painting are consciously emulated over the course of several centuries: from the Ilkhanids to the Timurids, from the Ilkhanids to the Safavids, from the Timurids to the Safavids, even from the Ilkhanids to the Ottomans. These emulations certainly forward a number of discourses on cultural tradition and heritage, and consequently authority and legitimacy. What is more, such leaps forward and back make the notion of an unbroken, logical 'progression' in the visual arts a highly flawed construct at best. Without a doubt, attempting to sketch a rise, apogee, and decline for Persian manuscript painting is an unwise endeavour when the trajectories of style are at least as helical as they are linear.

For all of these reasons, the scholarly model of rise and decline, with its concomitant moment of classicism – whether this moment is defined in valuative terms or through historicist discourses – thus remains utterly unsatisfactory. Even though it can provide a helpful scholarly and pedagogical tool for organizing ideas and teaching materials, the term 'classical' proves too simple and too vague to be of any constructive use. And yet time and again, within our courses on Islamic painting we continue to simplify our narrative apparatus so that students can follow and make sense of disparate materials through clear-cut conceptual structures and learned keywords. From the point of view of course content and configuration, it is admittedly much more challenging an endeavour to expose the non-teleological

⁵⁴ This is particularly the case for Bihzad, whose oeuvre influenced artists during and after the Safavid period. For a critical discussion of the mythologizing of Bihzad and thus the saleability of works attributed to his hand, see David Roxburgh, 'Kamal al-Din Bihzad and Authorship in Persianate Painting', in *Muqarnas*, 17, 2000, 119-145.

process of artistic development alongside its trans-historical and variegated iterations.

Through and through, deterministic models of progression that highlight moments of stylistic fixity and/or excellence fail to account for the dynamic flows of production that occur within the visual arts. A 'moving collage'⁵⁵ par excellence, Persian manuscript painting exhibits complexity, ambivalence, encounter, citation, appropriation, and transferral. An appropriate scholarly method of inquiry must take into consideration diverse artistic materials while concurrently highlighting mutual relations and mobility, as well as dispersal and fragmentation, through which moments of stylistic encounter, even coalescence, may occur. Furthermore, the spotlight must be placed on the dialectics of transformation – rather than on supposed absolutes on a chain of evolution – in order to show, as the visual evidence so clearly does, that commonalities and contradictions are not unresolvable but rather are mutually constitutive. Loosening inherited scholarly paradigms and questioning received vocabulary would allow for a more nuanced 'bigger picture' to emerge; it also would permit new models of inquiry to take shape, two of which are proposed briefly here.

First is the literary model of *taqlid*, or the written practice of imitation in obeisance to tradition.⁵⁶ The term does not merely describe blind imitation and submission; rather, it denotes a positive orientation, reception, and continuation of the past. As such, practices of *taqlid*, or following and copying, are creative and interactive, engaged with precedent, and aim for a positive recommitment to and rejuvenation of tradition.⁵⁷ Combining faith with loyalty to a past that is recognized within a matrix of shifting tastes, models, and practices, *taqlid* provides an alternative model for understanding the complex patterns emerging from the visual arts, patterns which otherwise have been occluded by contemporary scholarly discourse, with its tendency to put the prime on paragons of individuation and a creative invention. The *taqlid* model thus could allow for continuity within the framework of diversity, acting as a scholarly compass that may prove more intellectually profitable than received narratives that seek to maintain a linear evolution for art forms and styles.

A second possible model is borrowed not from literary studies but from biology. Indeed, the methods for studying organisms might offer scholars of Persian manuscript painting some guidance in formulating new conceptual systems of classification. After all, biology is also a scientific field concerned with data collecting – a process that is never complete – and organizing materials into taxonomies. Taxonomies function as useful and necessary learning aids if they are flexible enough to allow for degrees of likeness (known as homologies) as well as the inevitable process of diversity (known as speciation or the 'principle of

⁵⁵ Nikos Papastergiadis, 'Hybridity and Ambivalence: Places and Flows in Contemporary Art and Culture', *Theory, Culture, Society*, 22, 2005, 60.

⁵⁶ N. Calder, 'Taklid', *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., vol. 10, 137.

⁵⁷ This issue has been raised by Adel T. Adamova in her 'Repetition of the Compositions in Manuscripts: The *Khamsa* of Nizami in Leningrad', in Lisa Golombek and Maria Subtelny, eds, *Timurid Art and Culture: Iran and Central Asia in the Fifteenth Century, Supplements to Muqarnas*, 6, Leiden and New York: E.J. Brill, 1992, 67-75.

divergence').⁵⁸ In other words, classificatory systems – whether they are used to study living organisms or works of art – must take into account the fact that systems, whether biological or visual, are both causal mechanisms as well as products of evolution.⁵⁹ Their dual position as both inceptors and receptors of living tradition powerfully shows that each and every datum is nothing if not a 'moment in an infinite chain of contributions'.⁶⁰

It thus can be argued that the history of Persian manuscript painting does not simply comprise a linear process of birth, maturation, and decline. To the contrary, it emerges from a rich and colourful array of 'contributions' to traditions of pictorial art. However, unlike biological speciation, which tends towards increasing levels of complexity, aesthetic variation tends towards higher levels of reflexivity in aesthetic practice. The cybernetic – or internally regulatory – system governing the practice of Persian manuscript painting reveals that artists continuously looked back to prototypes as sources of visual authenticity and authority. Self-referential aesthetic production thereby enhances the status of pictorial materials as ultimate sources of 'truth'.

From *taqlid* to taxon and beyond, the time has come to consider new models for organizing, presenting, and learning about the vast and varied corpus of Persian manuscript painting. Such approaches should engage with concepts of emulation and speciation, as well as the processes of homology and heterology. Taxonomies should not be so tightly enclaved as to fail to acknowledge the flow of artistic expression across temporal and cultural geographies. Moreover, although scholarship may well find it necessary to retain certain chronologies (such as dynastic ones), it should approach Persian manuscript painting in a less linear narrative fashion, emphasizing the agglutinative character of visual art alongside its capacity to serve as a site of retention as well as a catalyst for mutation.

Perhaps most importantly, in the process of making room for mutations, imitations, and convolutions, the rise-and-decline master narrative of Persian manuscript painting is seriously destabilized. The discrediting of sweeping discourses on history has proven constructive within a number of cognate disciplines. For example, within cultural history, Carlo Ginzburg has encouraged scholars to shed the format of macro-history, preferring instead micro-histories. These smaller units of research are ampler than case studies but smaller than universal histories, and raise big questions in small places.⁶¹ In following Ginzburg's proverbial 'cheese and worms', a larger picture often emerges from the minutest of details.⁶² Without a doubt, Persian manuscript paintings, including those at the centre of the present study, do benefit from tightly focused micro-historical study.

⁵⁸ Ernst Mayr, *This is Biology: The Science of the Living World*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997, 213.

⁵⁹ Mayr, *This is Biology*, 117.

⁶⁰ Nicholas Bourriaud, *PostProduction. Culture as Screenplay: How Art Reprograms the World*, New York: Has & Sternberg, 2005, 19.

⁶¹ This scholarly method, in which case studies are provided in order to raise larger questions about cultural and artistic transmission, can be found in Finbarr Barry Flood, *Objects of Translation: Material Culture and Medieval 'Hindu-Muslim' Encounter*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009.

⁶² Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980.

They also would be much better served if extracted from an overarching rise-and-decline discourse that so evidently causes a distortion of their constituent details and misapprehension of their particular biographies.

In exploring new orientations for the field, it is therefore essential that scholars of Persian manuscript painting embrace the potential of 'splitting' rather than 'lumping' evidence—or, per Isaiah Berlin, of viewing the world as foxes, not hedgehogs.⁶³ While foraging through evidence, both old and new, certain semantically charged terms such as 'classical' must at the very least be critically evaluated. This is especially important because Persian manuscript painting has gone through cyclical periods of revivalism and experimentation, and such a process promises to carry on for centuries to come with future artistic moments of high aesthetic achievement or the cessation and revival of particular pictorial styles. These modes have been, and probably will be, described as 'classical' until the very meaning of the word becomes so utterly archaic that it becomes unworthy of recovery.

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⁶³ The 'splitting' approach was recommended by Isaiah Berlin in *The Hedgehog and the Fox, An Essay on Tolstoy's View of History*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1966. According to Berlin, thinkers tend to divide into two categories: the first includes the 'hedgehogs', who view the world through one defining idea, while the second comprises the 'foxes', who believe that an otherwise fragmented world cannot be compressed to one single, unified idea.