

The Visual Evidence of the Connection and Association between Shaykh Muhammed and the Court of Sultan Ibrahim Mirza

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Abstract

Shaykh Muhammed (active 1530s-90s), who was Safavid painter and calligrapher left no clear trace of his association with Safavid kings, However, historical evidence having been obtained from reliable sources confirms that an important part of the artistic activities of Shaykh Muhammed served Sultan Ibrahim Mirza - nephew of Shah Tahmasp- (prince governed in Mashhad over a thirteen-year period -962/1554-55 to 970/1562-63 and 973/1565- 66 to 974/1566-67). Qazi Ahmad reports that Shaykh Muhammed worked for the prince in Mashhad, where author and artist undoubtedly knew each other. Iskandar Beg Munshi, on the other hand, states that the artist entered Ibrahim Mirza's employ in Sabzivar. Munshi Budaqi Qazvini mentions that the artist was with Sultan Ibrahim Mirza only in Khurasan. The recorded oeuvre of Shaykh Muhammed, consisting of several signed tinted drawings, and paintings, supplemented by a large number of attributed works, confirms the artist's virtuosity and versatility even within the same media. Considering the fact that some attributes of Shaykh Muhammed's works are attention to reality, separation from literature and treatment of the subjects of routine life, the main question to be answered in this article is: can a trace be found in his signed and attributed works to prove the relationship between him and the patronizing Safavid Sultan? To answer this question, three illustrations attributed to Shaykh Muhammed from the Sultan Ibrahim Mirza's Haft Awrang (Seven thrones) and commonly known as the Freer Jami and a double page frontispiece in the six Masnavis of Jami (An incomplete Haft Awrang) attributed to Shaykh Muhammed that is kept in the library of Topkapi Sarayi, are presented and analyzed. The method of study is descriptive- analytical via library research. Two main pursues of this article are: 1- finding evidence regarding the attribution of paintings to Shaykh Muhammed and 2- exploring the connection between Shaykh Muhammed and his patron. The results of this study show that these paintings have similarities with other works which were attributed to or signed by Shaykh Muhammed. There are indeed certain affinities between Shaykh Muhammed's paintings of elegant kneeling youths and the unsigned double page frontispiece in the six Masnavis of Jami. He also implicitly illustrates part of the story behind a literary narrative. The iconographies of these works seem to be related directly to the prince and specifically to his marriage to Gawhar Sultan Khanim. When the bride and her entourage arrived in Mashhad, Qazi Ahmad reports, several months of celebration followed until the marriage was consummated. In this way, Shaykh Muhammed has expressed his devotion to and association with his patron.

Keywords

Shaykh Muhammed Sabzivari, Sultan Ibrahim Mirza, Jami's Haft Awrang.

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Introduction

Shaykh Muhammed is the painter and calligrapher of Safavid era who both created some of the masterpieces of this era and some great works were attributed to him. In *Tarikh-I Alam-Ara-yi Abbasi*, the writer states: "Shaykh Muhammed Sabsivari was an eloquent and knowledgeable man and all the masters of that time agreed on this; also, he had been such an excellent calligrapher that he would have easily been mistaken for the great previous masters when he copied their texts (Iskandar Beg Torkaman, 2003:174). In painting, he was a student of Dust`Muhammed (Dust`Divana). However, Dust`Muhammed – the author of the preface to Bahran Mirza album – did not mention his relationship with his student. "According to the book, it is clear only that Dust`Muhammed and Shaykh Muhammed in the late 1540 AD / 946 AH cooperated in the library of Shah Tahmasp; although, we can't ignore the possibility that the two have worked together as student and teacher" (Canby, 1999: 264). He was at the court of the Safavid kings, and especially an important part of her artistic life was spent in the service and attendance of Prince Sultan Ibrahim Mirza, and was involved in the production of royal manuscripts. "Qazi Ahmad reports that Shaykh Muhammed worked for the prince in Mashhad. Iskandar Beg Munshi, on the other hand, states that the artist entered Ibrahim Mirza`s employ in Sabzevar. A native of Sabzevar, Shaykh Muhammed might very well have gone from Mashhad to his hometown when the Prince was appointed governor there sometime in 974-75/1566-67. Munshi Budaq`I Qazvini mentions only that the artist was with Sultan Ibrahim Mirza in Khorasan, Which could mean either Mashhad or Sabzevar. Iskandar Beg is the principal source for Shaykh Muhammed`s subsequent career. From Sabzivar the artist continued to serve Ibrahim Mirza in Iraq, probably signifying that he accompanied the prince on his return to Qazvin in Ramadan 982/ December1574" (Simpson, 1997: 310). After the crowning of Shah Ismail II, he served as a member of the Royal Library And in the court of Shah Abbas I, was once again appointed and worked in a new location called "Dvltkhanh." At the time of his death, he was still in service of Shah Abbas. (Valah Isfahani, 1993: 466). The author of the present research tries to answer the main question: How can some visual evidence of Shaykh Muhammed`s attendance and activity in the court of Sultan Ibrahim Mirza be looked for and identified in the works

attributed to Sheikh Mohammed Sabzevari? Along the main question, in analyzing each illustration, what reasons and evidence caused the attribution of these masterpieces to Shaykh Muhammed? In this regard, three illustrations attributed to Shaykh Muhammed from the Sultan Ibrahim Mirza`s Haft Awrang (Seven thrones) and commonly known as the Freer Jami, as well as a double page frontispiece in the six Masnavis of Jami (An incomplete Haft Awrang) attributed to Shaykh Muhammed - kept in the library of Topkapi Sarayi- are presented and analyzed. The main hypothesis of this study is that the painter somehow reflected some observations and events he witnesses in his long service in the court of Sultan Ibrahim Mirza in his works. This hypothesis is based on the speech of Sadeghi Beik Afshar in *Ghanon Al-Sovar*: "In the Safavid era, the followers of Behzad, were keen to paint the living environment and everyday life. They tried to represent the outside world in their small paintings" (Pakbaz, 2005: 91-93). Owing to the fact that the history of Persian painting has always been mixed with ambiguities, and its historical and genealogical facts are unknown in many cases, this study can illuminate a small part of the history of Iran`s painting in general and the life and works of Shaykh Muhammed Sabzevari in the Safavid era in particular.

Literature rerview

The latest research on Shaykh Muhammed Sabzevari and the works attributed to him in Jami`s Haft Awrang, has been done by Ms Maria Simpson. In a book titled *Sultan Ibrahim Mirza`s Haft Aurang* and also in an article titled "Discovering Shaykh-Muhammed in the Freer Jami" she presents some aspects of the life and works of Shaykh Muhammed Sabzevari. In addition, Ivan Stchoukine studied an incomplete Haft Awrang at the Topkapi library in an article titled "Moulana Shaykh Mohammad un maître de meshed du xvle siècle" and tries to attribute the paintings to Shaykh Muhammed. Also, Mahdi Hosseini in an article titled "Ibrahim Mirza`s Haft Awrang" aimed at analyzing several miniatures including some of those attributed to Shaykh Muhammed and implicitly refers to the relationship between Shaykh Muhammed and his patron. Other sources cited only the biography of the painter. In this paper, we benefit from all the sources and the previous research and the relationship between Shaykh Muhammed and his patron`s court has been emphasized and discovered through the works attributed to the artist.

Research Methodology

Due to the historic nature of this research, data and images were obtained through library research and written documents and the analysis was done through the descriptive / analytical method. In terms of results, this research can be placed in the group of development research. In each entry, in addition to collecting basic information and general features, it has been attempted to depict specific miniatures and representations of everyday courtly relations in regard to the main hypothesis of the research. The main research question is: Can visual evidence about the relationship between Shaykh Muhammed and his patron be realized among the works attributed to him? This question has been answered by comparing the details of image elements and textual inscriptions.

The First Illustration of the Freer Jami

This manuscript of Haft Awrang which took almost 9 years to be produced (from 963 to 972) is representative of the paintings of the Safavid era and is assumed to be the last stage of the outstanding history of Iran's painting era. "The production of Haft Awrang was a turning point in the history of Iran's manuscripts" (Welch, 2010:193). This 304-page manuscript with the dimensions of 37.5* 24.5 containing 28 multiple-figure paintings (Majalis), none dated or signed, were executed by well-known artists for Ibrahim-Mirza, the nephew of Shah Tahmasp. Currently it belongs to the art gallery of "Freer Washington," numbered as 46/120 and is briefly named and made popular as the Freer Jami. At least 10 illustrations are ascribed to Sheykh Muhammed (Canby, 1999: 268) among which there is the Masnavi of Yusef and Zulaykha. The miniature "The Infant Witness to Yusuf's Innocence" is a depiction of the time Zulaykha accuses Yusef of tricking her out of the right path which leads to her attempt at convincing her husband, the Egyptian Aziz, to imprison Yusef (Fig.1-1). The visual and literary content of this Illustration has been doubled by the decorative inscriptions of Zulaykha's palace. However, these inscriptions contain an unexpected and exclusive quality which can resolve some ambiguities. "Recent close scrutiny of the lower left corner of the inscription panel reveals that its punctuating brick encloses an additional element: the signature of the artist Shaykh- Muhammed written in black ink around the small, interior square (Fig.1-2) written by Shaykh-Muhammed [the] painter. The presence of this microscopic signature in a space measuring 2 mm square clinches



Fig.1.The Infant Witness to Yusuf's Innocence, in the Haft Awrang of Jami, 963-72, Source: Simpson, 1997:138

the involvement of Shaykh-Muhammed in the creation of the Freer Jami, as scholars long have imagined given the artist's connection with Sultan Ibrahim-Mirza" (Simpson,1998). Here, not only is his craftsmanship as a painter and calligrapher reminded to the onlooker but it also provides a written version of the painter which can be used as a criterion for studying his handwriting and analyzing his other works. It may be assumed that Shaykh Muhammed predicts the courtier's jealousies of this young and circumspect Safavid prince who possessed a lot of morality and wisdom which

eventually ended in having him exiled and murdered.

The Second Illustration of the Freer Jami

Anthony Welch, Stuart Cary Welch, Mariana Simpson and stchoukine ascribe “Yusuf Gives a Royal Banquet in Honor of his Marriage”(Fig.2-1) to Shaykh-Muhammed (Simpson,1997:145). “Shaykh-Muhammed might have pictured his lovely patron in the figure of the prophet Yusef on page 132A (of the second Illustration) in Haft Awrang of the Freer Jami (Welch, 2010:150). The wedding of Yusef is composed of the men gathered under the sumptuous canopies under which the figure of Yusef occupies a prominent position in the iconography. He has kneeled on the white carpet with a graceful downward look and interlocked hands (Fig.2-2). He is surrounded by guests and participants among whom the noblemen and the Shaykhs are sat for discussion and the servants and attendants are carrying the white sugar cones which has long been considered the customary and auspicious sweet in the traditional Iranian marriage ceremonies. This scrupulous attention to the details of an authentic Iranian ceremony is unprecedented among Iranian paintings and recalls the painter’s record of realism and routine life in his works.

Simpson states: This wonderful painting illustrates the moment when Yusuf has sent Zulaykha to the nuptial chamber and remains behind for a time with his guests. It could easily be understood as a scene of the party in honor of the marriage of Jami’s bride and groom, were it not for the inscription over the iwan: Abu’l- Fath Sultan Ibrahim-Mirza (Fig.2-3). The incorporation of the name of the patron of this manuscript into the architecture just above the head of the divine Yusuf is not simply an artistic conceit. Although this figure may not represent an actual portrait of Sultan Ibrahim-Mirza, it seems very likely that the iconography of the painting, relates directly to the prince and specifically to his marriage to Gawhar-Sultan Khanim (Simpson, 1997: 143-144).

The Third Illustration of the Freer Jami

This Illustration is unparalleled in regard to giving attention to the visual details and precision in depicting the surrounding nature, as if the painter pictures some parts of his own hometown and people. Although the Freer Jami composition clearly belongs to an established iconographic type deriving from the Jami text, its myriad figures, city walls, and other details may have yet another source (Fig.3-1) ;(Ibid:



Fig.2. Yusuf Gives a Royal Banquet in Honor of his Marriage, in the Haft Awrang of Jami, 963-72, Source: Simpson, 1997: 142.

143-121). Plus, the story the painter is narrating in this illustration, though based on the poetic text of Jami, has more affinity with a tangible event and historical moment which corresponds to the marriage of Sultan Muhammed-Mirza and his cousin. In the spring of 967, Sultan Muhammed Mirza the prince married his cousin Gowhar Sultan Khanim, the daughter of Shah Tahmasp. Mir-Munshi, the advisor and the minister of Sultan arranged the preparation of marriage on behalf of the prince. Mir-Munshi had long been appointed for resolving big problems in the ministry of Khorasan. One year later, in 960, he was dispatched by the prince to fetch the eldest daughter of Shah Tahmasp from Mashhad. At the time, Mir-Munshi set off to Tabriz where Shah Tahmasp was in its royal court, was honored with meeting his majesty and told the reality. Shah Tahmasp, who held the prince dear and paid more attention to him than to any other princes, gathered the scholars and the wise of that era and married his daughter to Ibrahim-Mirza. He went to Gazvin afterward, discharged Mir-Munshi and sent the princess to the prince's palace (Munshi Gomi, 1973: 57). Qazi Ahmad, the celebrated author whose father, Mir-Munshi, served as senior adviser to Ibrahim-Mirza and negotiated the marriage arrangements on the prince's behalf, gives a detailed account of the wedding. "According to Qazi Ahmad, the shah sent his daughter to Mashhad in the company of a large party, including members of the royal family and court. When news of his bride's approach reached Sultan Ibrahim-Mirza, he sent white beards and their wives with gifts and presents to Sabzivar to welcome them. The prince himself, accompanied by illustrious amirs, princes, valis and wealthy men, went to the area of Alaqa-band and the plain of Arifi to receive the party. On an auspicious hour, he brought it to the Bagh-I Shhi outside the gate of Sarab to rest. Meanwhile preparations were being made to decorate the city of Mashhad.

The stretch between the Sarab gates and the gates of the Chahar-bagh along the princess's route was decorated in such a way that it became the envy of eternity and the picture gallery of China the heavens with their thousand eyes had never seen such wedding feast preparations, and the hosts of the moon and the sun had never witnessed a celebration as beautiful or preparations as refined. (Qazi Ahmad, 2004: 415-416) ;(Fig.3-2).

The black pupil of your eye is an ambergris scented beauty mark on the face of time,
[You are] the glory of paradise and the envy of the picture gallery of China.



Fig. 3-1



Fig. 3-2

Fig.3. The Aziz and Zulaykha Enter the Capital of Egipt and the Egiptians Come Out to greet them, in the Haft Awrang of Jami, 963-72, Source: Simpson, 1997:119.

"The above lines are not from the Masnavi of Yusef and Zulaykha and Shaykh Muhammed has selected and placed them merely to describe the beauty of Zulaykha" (Hosseini, 1998). Two literary phrases of "the envy of eternity" and "the picture Gallery of China" in the historical account of Gazi Ahmad make us pose the most important question: are the descriptive figures of this line which are selected by the writer of this Illustration correspond fortuitously

with the historian’s description? Simpson believes: Not only do many details found in this painting correspond to Qazi Ahmad’s description, but the verse over the city entrance employs the same literary conceit about the picture gallery of China (Simpson, 1998: 121). This illustration pictures Gazi Ahmad’s description of the welcoming ceremony more faithfully than corresponding to the literary description of Jami.” There’s a probability that Shaykh Muhammed has pictured and composited both the arrival of Zulaykha in Egypt and the marriage of Ibrahim-Mirza and Gowhar Sultan Khanim- thanks to its coincidence with the book and paintings of Haft Awrang - and finished the task” (Hosseini, 1998).

Haft awrang of Jami, 979, Topkapi Saray Museum

“One version of several Masnavis by jami is kept in Topkapi library in Istanbul with the number 360 which contains 229 pages with the dimensions of 353*235 millimeter. This work consists of 32 paintings without signature and 8 colored subjects and its text had been written by Moheb Ali Kateb” (Stchoukine, 1974). This manuscript might have been prepared for Ibrahim Sultan the prince, though it’s scribing and illustrating could have been finished in Gazvin rather than in Mashad. Ivan Stchoukine ascribed these multiple-figure scenes (Majalis) to Shaykh Muhammed Sabzivari (Simpson, 1997: 425). One reason is that some of the miniatures ascribed to him in the Freer Jami closely resemble these paintings. By comparing some details in “the minister’s crowning” of Istanbul version (Fig.4-1) and “the arrival of Majnun at Leili’s Caravan” of the Freer Jami (Fig.5-1) that Anthony Welch, Stuart Carry Welch, Mariana Simpson and Nora Titley attributed to Shaykh Muhammed , the likelihood of the handwriting being that of the painter increases (Figs.4-2 & 4-3 Figs.5-2 & 5-3). The patterns and designs on the richly decorated canopy above the minister’s head and the details of the people’s visage portrayals are undoubtedly very similar to each other in both paintings (Fig.6-2). Furthermore, the way Majnun is embodied in the miniature “Majnun in front of Kaabeh” (Fig.6-1) as a wretched youth who has been wandering in search of his unique beloved is very similar to the miniature of “the arrival of Majnun at Leili’s Caravan” (Fig.5-3).

Istanbul Manuscript

After mentioning the reasons in confirmation of



Fig. 4-1



Fig. 4-2



Fig. 4-3

Fig.4.Choosing a Vizier, in the Haft Awrang of Jami,979,Topkapi Saray Museum, Source: Cagman and Tanindi,1986:114.

Stchoukine’s idea for the attribution of this version to Shaykh Muhammed the painter, this research attempts at asking the main question and searching about the relationship between the painter and the patronizing Safavid Sultan in order better to analyze the double-page frontispiece of this manuscript. “In the beginning of some manuscripts, there are some

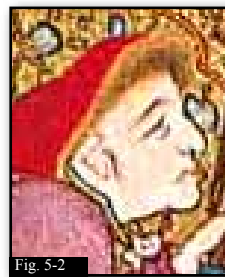


Fig.5 Insane achieve convoy Lily in the Haft Awrang of Jami, 963-72, Source: Simpson, 1997: 198

double-page frontispieces which aren't usually related to the book's subject and text and don't generally contain any text. However, they were mainly made in respect to the client and are mostly about feasts, hunting, and banquets. In these double-page pictures, some parts are allocated to different stages of preparing entertainment instruments by the royal servants or a group of the invitees like army leaders, the princes, the chief of the tribes and in the other part of the picture, the most important figure of the feast can be seen beside the elders, the princesses or the other royal women (Tathiri Moghadam & Morabiyani, 2004). The unmatched and not-much-known miniature ascribed to Shaykh Muhammed in the mentioned version (Fig.7-1) accounts for the relationship of Shaykh Muhammed the painter with his patron Muhammed Mirza. The miniature in question is a kingly banquet in the garden at whose focal point young lovers are busy reveling. Such paintings can be considered as the pioneers of single-figure miniatures with the subject of romance which had yet to spread and thrive in the school of Isfahan. In the foreground of this garden palace, there is a yard paved with turquoise tiles across which a fence passes. In the middle-ground, there is a mountain hill which seems to be covered with a carpet of emerald green grass next to which some pine, cypress, vine and oak trees are raised and in the background, there is the vast expanse of the sky with twirling and

brehtaking clouds and some flying birds. All this is grandiose scenery with a lot of realistic natural elements which provide a background for the action of the courtiers. The right-hand iconography is and central. The two young couples are sitting on a bed in a sycamore tree whose middle aged branches have grown right in the middle of the frame. At the foot of the tree, there is a ladder which connects the bed to the ground and on the bottom there are some guards protecting the area. In the lowest part, there is a pond in the middle of a pool in which the ducks are turning around. Two horses are standing stately head to head on either side of the tree and seem to be showing off their authentic race and pampered life.

The iconography of the left-hand side is also ... but scattered. In this section, the chefs who are standing near the pots on stoves and the servants who are carrying the dishes in hand are all preparing the court food. Another group is also occupied with doing their tasks behind the fences and in the middle of the trees. The aforementioned left- and right-hand pictures are actually two distinct iconographies which can be discussed separately. Only along and in the edge of the sky, the mountain, and the earth, there is a fence which visually connects the two pictures.

The main actors of this Illustration are probably the representation of Ibrahim Sultan the prince and his wife Gowhar Sultan Khanim who are sitting on a bed at top of the tree and offering each other



Fig. 6-1



Fig. 6-2

Fig.6. Layla and Majnun Meet at the Ka'ba, in the Haft Awrang of Jami, 979, Topkapi Saray Museum, Source: Cagman and Tanindi, 1986:116.

drinks because this manuscript of Haft Awrang had been made in Mashad in the library of Sultan Muhammed Mirza by his special librarian and calligrapher Mulana Moheb Ali and finished by 978, the time when Ibrahim-Mirza was still ruling Khorasan powerfully (stchoukine, 1974). On the other hand, the double-page frontispieces, popular as introductory (Dibacheh) miniature, were made in honor of and offered to its patron and its content used to be selected from the interactions and relations of the patron's life. Therefore, as the primary pages of so grandiose and formal a book, only Sultan's legal wife whom he apparently loved greatly could be painted beside him. In particular, in the present courtly illustration, the princess sitting on the bed (Fig.7-2) greatly resembles a number of Shaykh Muhammed's signed portraits (Figs. 8-10). Shaykh has been considered as one of the veterans of one-page miniatures in which he pictured the portrait's



Fig. 7-1



Fig. 7-2

Fig.7. Lovers in a Tree, Double Frontispiece, in the Haft Awrang of Jami, 979, Topkapi Saray Museum, Source: Cagman & Tanindi, 1986:113.

movements and manners delicately and precisely (Ajhand, 2005: 72). In one of these paintings, a youth is sitting on his knee and has a book in one hand and a flower in the other. This page now belongs to the museum of Louvre. In another miniature, a young

man who for having plenty of jewelries, a decorative feather on the turban and the brooch appears to be a prince, is gazing steadily on a parrot in his hand. These paintings are signed by Shaykh Muhammed; he treated the eyes of these three figures in virtually

identical style, with arched eyebrows that Wing off the right side of the forehead and heavy eyelids

that do not fully meet and also project to the side (Simpson, 1997: 313).



Fig. 8. Youth with a Book and a Flower, Musee du louvre, Source: Simpsona, 1997,312.



Fig.9. Youth with a Book and a Flower, Topkapi Saray Museum, Source: Simpson, 1997, 313.



Fig.10. Prince with a Parakeet, Source: Simpson, 1997: 314.

Conclusion

As the historians declared in some of the most significant historical written documents, Sheykh Muhammed the painter spent an important part of his artistic life in the patronizing court of Ibrahim-Mirza in Mashhad and Sabzivar and played an important role in creating some masterpieces of this era. Among other known works, he made more than one third illustrations of the Freer Jami, none signed or dated, and only in the illustration of “the baby witness to the innocence of Yusef” he left his signature in a small space surrounded by decorative designs which confirms his cooperation.

The coincidence of this invaluable product with the marriage of the prince with his cousin Gowhar Sultan Khanim, the daughter of Shah Tahmasb inspired Shaykh to pay his regard to his supporter in some sections of love poems of Yusef and Zulaykha. In the two parts of “Yusuf Gives a Royal Banquet in Honor of his Marriage” and “the entrance of Aziz and Zulaykha and the welcoming of Egyptians” he implicitly and secretly embodies Sultan and the princess in their wedding party as Yuphef and Zulaykha. The details of this grandiose welcoming and the series of celebrations in honor of the arrival of the princess at the royal court of Mashad reported by Qazi Mir Muhammed Munshi, the historian of Sultan’s court, matches completely with the illustrations of Shaykh Muhammed in the aforementioned miniatures. Shaykh Muhammed put the print of his own thin pen and craftsmanship in a book composed of several of Jami’s Masnavis which is kept in Topkapi, Istanbul and in comparison with the Freer Jami and some of his definite works reproduced the same model which reconfirms his creations. In particular, he illustrated the happy life of the prince with his wife as the frontispiece of the Freer Jami and offered it to his patron.

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