

## PERSIAN PAINTING

BY LAURENCE BINYON

PERSIAN painting is unlike any other pictorial art in the world, and the pleasure it gives is unique in its kind. It is still very little known. The splendid exhibition in London in 1931 was an opportunity that rarely comes; it was to many a revelation. The reason why it is so little known is that the great majority of the finest paintings are in manuscripts, hidden away in libraries; and their small scale gives them a great disadvantage compared with paintings on the walls of a gallery, which attract even the casual gaze.<sup>1</sup> If some of the Persian miniatures were enlarged to fresco size they would be famous throughout the world for their great qualities of color and design. As it is, even students of art are prone to judge the Persian painter by average specimens, which are indeed distinguished for their decorative virtues but reveal nothing of the scope and splendor of the masters.

The first impression received from a superficial acquaintance with the miniatures is of an art exquisitely sensuous, refined in color, delicate in line, with an inclination to the softly voluptuous. This is true perhaps of Persian painting after it has passed its meridian in the sixteenth century. It is always sensuous, certainly always supremely decorative. But even where, at first blush, it seems to be nothing more, it often conceals a deep and rare emotion. A large part of Persian poetry is saturated with mysticism, using the language of the lover or the symbol of the wine-cup to shadow forth the inexpressible joys of the soul's desire for the divine and its union with God. A like ecstasy will inspire paintings

<sup>1</sup>There is, however, a collection of facsimiles of mural paintings, made with conscientious accuracy and exquisite sympathy by a Persian painter, Sarkis Katchadourian, now touring American museums under the auspices of the American Institute for Persian Art and Archaeology. The originals are largely from the reign of Shah Abbas and principally from his palace of the Ali Kapu in Isfahan, a period which, Mr. Binyon says, represented a stage in the art's decline. And to be sure they do not show the purity, intensity, and rarefied elevation of the great miniatures of two or three centuries before. Nor, indeed, would these qualities be relevant to their purpose and their themes, for these were the decorations of a pleasure palace, and in keeping with that end they convey a happy, if somewhat languid charm, an accomplished sophistication, and a sensuous attraction, embodied in exquisitely evanescent colors and palpable rhythms, which make them unique in the history of painting.—Ed.

where lovers commune or sages meditate in gardens where the scented blossoms of spring hang radiant against a sky of profound blue, and streams ripple through verdure to water the roots of iris and narcissus, scenes of magical beauty in which the miracle of the spring's unfolding seems to be shared by the human mind. No other art has the secret of quite the same ecstasy of the senses, attuned to a consciousness of the oneness of the universe.

Then, again, if we turn to the paintings of the fifteenth century, the era of the greatest masterpieces, as yet so little known, we find other and very different elements from the luxurious refinement of later time. Here there is a splendid energy and an extraordinary gift of dramatic design. True, the drama is expressed by other means than those familiar in western art. Emotion is rarely expressed in the faces of the personages; these are impassive; but in the relation of the figures to one another, and of the figures to the background, nay, even in the juxtaposition of the colors, there is a dramatic element which thrills. This sense for drama runs through the whole tradition from early times, combined with the incomparable sense for color-design which is in the very genius of Iran. In a Persian painting the color has an almost intoxicating effect: not only are the pigments choice and pure, a delight in themselves, but the elimination of shadow gives them a clearness unparalleled in European art. The notes of color are not, as in Chinese painting, foiled by spaces of low-toned silk or paper, but the whole field is covered, the brightest colors used, yet never is there garishness or extravagance. We seem to be in a world where every object seen has become precious to the sight.

The imagination of the Persians is romantic. They delight in the superlative beauty of their heroines, in the fabulous exploits of their heroes; they eagerly accept the incredible. A large proportion of the miniatures consists of illustrations to the *Shah Nameh*, the Book of the Kings, Firdausi's enormous national epic; and here we have endless combats against backgrounds of strange rocks or forests, castles on insuperable precipices, the slaying of dragons or ogres on flame-colored crags or in fantastic caverns. Another inexhaustible source of pictorial motive is the *Five Poems of Nizami*: the loves of Majnun and Layla in deserts of burning gold, the loves of Khusrau and Shirin, Bahram the Hunter pursuing the

lion and the wild ass. In scenes of the chase the animal painting is superb.

Persian painting grows from no simple continuous tradition. Mesopotamian art, the work of men of various races working for Arab patrons, is one of its roots; the Mongol invasions brought Persia into contact with Chinese art, but scant as the documents are, owing to unheard-of destruction, we cannot believe that the old traditions of the Persian race were wholly submerged by the domination of Islam. At any rate, before the end of the fourteenth century, the Persian style, in all essentials, and with its own unique character, was fully formed. Then with the fifteenth century comes a growing refinement of execution, a greater range and deeper glow of color, a subtler complexity of design, especially at the Court of Herat, but also in other centers. Bihzad, the most famous of the Persian painters, is the chief glory of the later part of the century, but there were others who nearly rivaled him. With the Safavid dynasty, in the sixteenth century, pupils of Bihzad and his successors produced at Tabriz pages of a sumptuousness of splendor that is simply dazzling, yet full of energy in all their grace. Now, and later, line drawings become more frequent, and the Persian line is as unique as is the Persian color. Calligraphic, in the sense that it communicates the artist's joy in the beautiful line for its own sake, the drawings nevertheless in the hands of the masters are equally expressive of the form within the line. Without the vehemence of the brush-stroke of the Chinese and Japanese, their line in its even purity and sensitiveness yields a peculiar thrill.

The independent small painting now becomes more common. These naturally are better known than the miniatures in the manuscripts. But let no one suppose that in the animated and graceful drawings of Riza Abbasi and his school, or even in the earlier sixteenth century paintings of lovers, pages, falconers, and similar groups or single figures, ravishing in color though they may be, the real power of the Persian genius is revealed. Envious are those for whom that revelation still waits: they will enter a world of strange enchantment.