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# POEMS OF NIZAMI GANJAVI AS A SOURCE OF INSPIRATION FOR MEDIEVAL ARTISTS OF THE MUSLIM EAST

In 2021, Azerbaijan marks the 880th anniversary of the birth of Azerbaijani poet and thinker, the classicist of world poetry Nizami Ganjavi. In this regard, President of the Republic of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev has signed a special decree declaring 2021 as a Year of Nizami Ganjavi in Azerbaijan. "A unique phenomenon of human artistic thought, the works of Nizami have been an integral part of the spirituality of our people for more than eight centuries. All the life and rich literary activities of the great master are associated with Ganja, which was known not only as the largest city of Azerbaijan and the Caucasus at the time, but also as an important cultural center of the Near and Middle East."

Some scholars on Iran see him as a classicist of Persian literature, confusing two different concepts –

Persian and Persianate literature. They seem to forget the well-known truth that regardless of the nationality of the author, all scientific literature in the Middle Ages was created in Arabic and imaginative reading in Farsi.

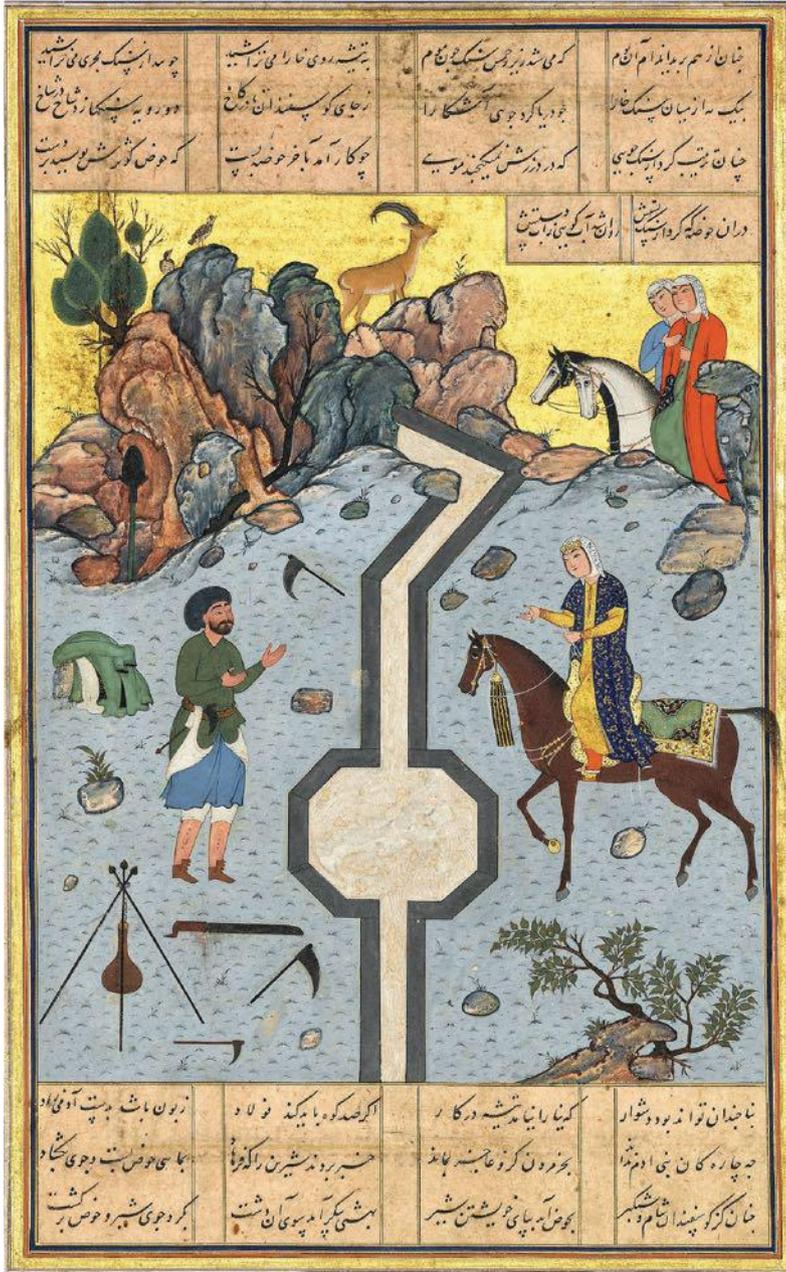
It is well known that the most illustrated work of oriental literature was Nizami's "Khamasa".

The poetry of the Near and Middle East contained several main plots and stable image symbols: Majnun was the personification of adamant love, Farhad was the personification of strength and honesty, Shirin was the personification of love and loyalty, and so on. It was Nizami who selected the brightest characters in folklore and history. It is no coincidence that every major poet after Nizami, as if bewitched by his great authority, wrote exactly five poems like Nizami. Nizami was the first



*Miniature from "Khamasa" by Nizami Ganjavi. Tabriz, 1539-1543*

Miniature from “Khamisa” by Nizami Ganjavi. Tabriz, 1524-1525



to find these plots. By designing them, he established a canon. Before Nizami, there was no “Khamisa”. After Nizami, “Khamisa” became obligatory.

Nizami Ganjavi’s main creation, “Quintet” (“Khamisa”), consists of 5 poems: “The treasury of Mysteries” (written between 1173 and 1180), “Khosrov and Shirin” (1181), “Leyli and Majnun” (1188), “The Seven Beauties” (1197) and “Iskandar-Nameh” (about 1203).

Researchers have repeatedly noted the tremendous success Nizami’s poems were throughout the Middle East. This is evidenced by the myriad of imitations both in Farsi and in various Turkic languages that were

created on their basis.

The poets who became famous by creating their own quintets on the basis of Nizami’s “Khamisa” include Indian poet Amir Khusrau Dehlavi (1253-1325), Persian-Tajik poet Jami (1414-1492) and Uzbek poet Alisher Navoi (1444-1501).

Although there have been countless imitations and they continued to be created until the beginning of the 20th century, none of them managed to push Nizami into the background. The superiority of his “Khamisa” always remained obvious to everyone.

At the end of the 15th century, the late Timurids showed a significant interest in literature. Some of them even tried their hand at this field. Lovers of poetry were particularly fond of the genre of “Khamisa”. The cultural upsurge in the Timurid possessions took place under the leadership of one of the greatest statesmen of the 15th century, outstanding thinker and poet Alisher Navoi. Whereas all authors before Navoi regardless of their ethnicity used Persian as the dominant language of literature, Navoi abandoned this tradition and created the “Quintet” in his native language, which was called “Turki”, or Turkic, at the time and is now usually called Old Uzbek because this language is the ancestor of the present literary Uzbek language.

Also, the truly remarkable poem “Leyli and Majnun” by one of Azerbaijan’s best 16th century poets, the great Fuzuli (1502-1562), may to some extent be compared with Nizami.

Many poets in the following centuries imitated the work of Nizami even if they could not equal him, not to mention surpassing him – Persians, Turks, Indians. Scientists list at least 40 Persian and 30 Turkish versions of “Leyli and Majnun”. More than a hundred imitations (“nazira”) were written to the works of Nizami in Old Uzbek, Persian, Turkish, Arabic, Azerbaijani and other languages by such famous authors as Amir Khusrau Dehlavi (13th century), Alisher Navoi (late 15th century), Abdurrahman Jami (15th century) and others. The latest and one of the most famous imitations is the drama by Turkish poet Nazim Hikmet called “The Legend of Love” (imitation of “Khosrov and Shirin”). The poetry

*Miniature from “Khamsa” by Nizami Ganjavi. Tabriz, 1539-1543*

of Nizami Ganjavi had a tremendous impact on literature and even on the fine and decorative arts of the peoples of the Near and Middle East.

Nizami's works have made a contribution to the literature not only of the East but also of the West. Goethe considered Nizami one of the seven genius poets of all times and peoples (3, p. 336). Heine said, "Germany has its great poets, but what are they compared to Nizami?"

Nizami's poems began to be read in Europe and Russia not so long ago. Goethe learned about them from the stories of outstanding German orientalist von Dietz and translations of some excerpts. Possessing a sense of universal responsiveness, he immediately understood the importance of Nizami, bowed to his genius and used some of his parables in the "West-Eastern Divan".

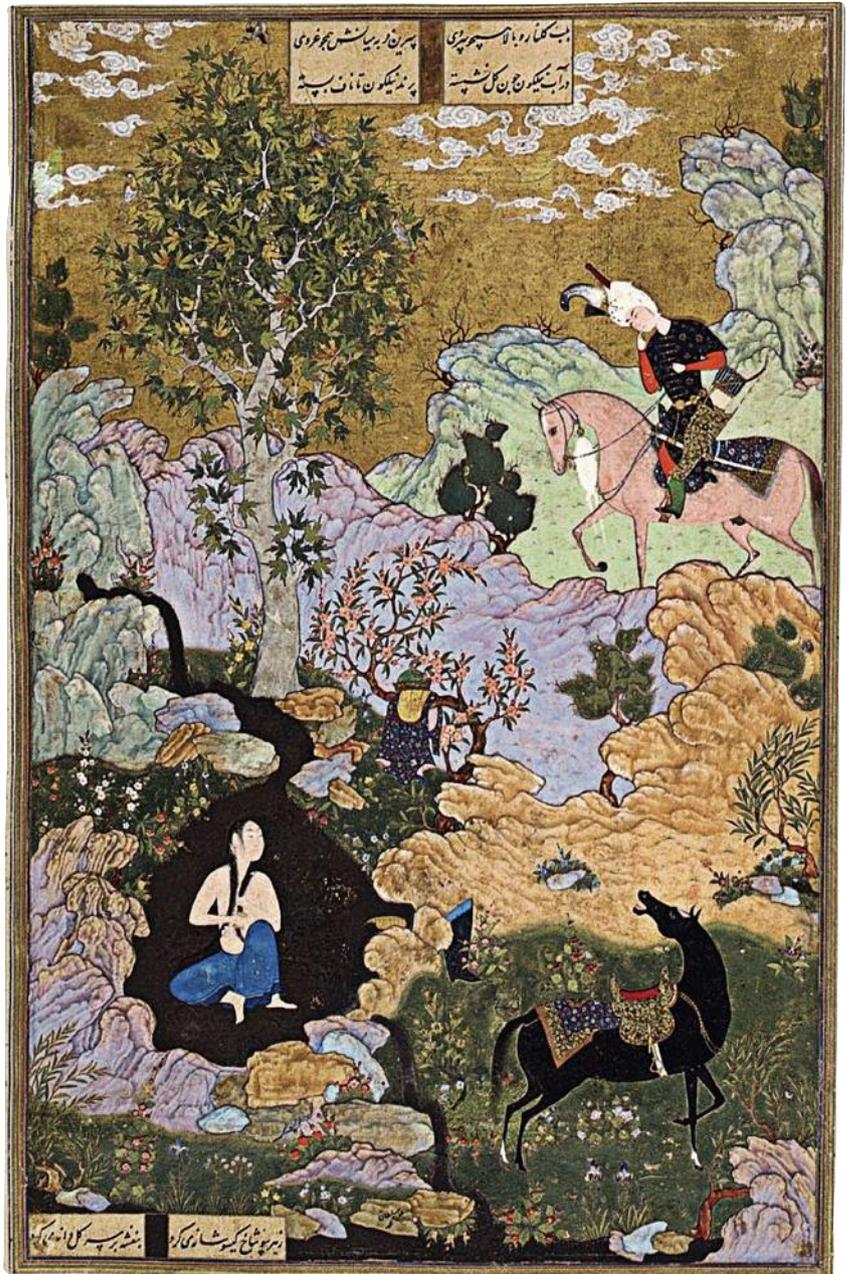
As culture, science, interest in classical poetry and arts developed in Azerbaijan and other countries of the Muslim East in the Middle Ages, the art of handwritten books developed as well, gradually becoming one of the leading areas of artistic creation. Since Muslims considered writing and the book sacred, great attention was paid not only to the beauty and clarity of writing, but also to the decoration of the entire book. Pages, covers and the binding of books were artistically designed to match the content and meaning of the book.

Generations of miniaturist artists repaid Nizami with special gratitude for a deep understanding of their art. They created thousands of miniatures based on his poems. Today, after all the invasions, strife, fires and plunders that swept through the countries of the East over the past eight centuries, the destruction and disappearance of manuscripts, the world's collections number over 6,000 miniature illustrations for Nizami's poems. It is also interesting to look at his works through the multicolored prism of developing miniature.

The Shiraz school gave one of the earliest "Khamsas" at the end of the 14th century, but its artistic features

are not assessed very highly. In general, Shiraz was the center for the production of the so-called "commercial" manuscripts, which were created not for benefactors but for the market. Therefore, it was traditionally influenced by the leading schools of the time.

The Herat school, one of the Middle Eastern schools of miniature, existed in the capital of the Timurid state Herat in the 15th century. Great 15th century poet Alisher Navoi wrote that the last Timurid, Sultan Hussein-Mirza Baykar, was the patron of the arts and "it was thanks to his care that so many incomparable calligraphers, artists, musicians and singers grew up. It is



Miniature from “Khamisa” by Nizami Ganjavi. Tabriz, 1524



not known whether they will appear under any another ruler”. One of such “incomparable” representatives of the late Herat style of the late 15th century was painter Kamaledin Behzad, whose art, imbued with interest in man, was formed through his close friendship with great poets Abdurrahman Jami and Alisher Navoi.

Behzad and his teachers, the head of the court workshop Mirak Nakkash and Tabriz master Pir Seyid

Ahmed Tabrizi, raised a whole galaxy of painters. Many authors note that Behzad liked to insert scenes from real life that were not directly related to the plot in his miniatures in order to revive and diversify them. They also note Behzad’s sense of humor, which was often manifested in his miniatures. His miniature “Gharun al Rashid in a bath”, created on the basis of the parable about famous Baghdad caliph Gharun al Rashid and a barber, can serve as an example of that.

Together with his mentor Mirak Nakkash and student Qasim Ali, Behzad illustrated the “Khamisa” manuscript by Nizami (1494-1495, British Museum, London), which is considered to be the standard of the late Herat school whose artists developed a single style in close cooperation with each other. The miniaturists of the last quarter of the 15th century were attracted by acute dramatic situations. Complex multidimensional spatial compositions often appear on page margins (illustrations “Bahram Gur slaying the dragon” from “Khamisa” by Nizami, 1493, British Library) or are unexpectedly framed. The innovative nature of the Herat school lies in the artists’ keen observation ability, the accuracy of details and, most

importantly, the dominant interest in man, in a desire to convey his emotional state with the help of the surrounding landscape, the expressiveness of gestures and postures.

The late Jelairid period of the Tabriz style is one of the most difficult for a researcher. It represents the last stage in the development of the Tabriz style of the 14th century, the stage of the final consolidation of all

*Miniature from “Khamisa” by Nizami Ganjavi. Tabriz, 1539-1543*

the diverse findings of the previous period. However, the importance of the school is not limited to this. The masters of this time open up such expressive possibilities that surpass everything created before and after them. It should be noted that very little information has been preserved about Tabriz of the end of the century, and this is not surprising. The seizure of the city by Timur in 1384 and the hijacking of the masters to the new capital Samarkand (one can only imagine the magnificent paintings of Timur's palaces described by Arabshah) was a heavy blow to the cultural life of the Jelairid capital. Thus, there was an almost incessant outflow of masters and, as a consequence, an intensive expansion of the style, which has a serious impact on the painting styles of Samarkand, Herat and Shiraz.

The miniatures of “Khosrov and Shirin” from the Freer Gallery in Washington is one of the three most important and first of the history of the Tabriz style. The second is a list of the late 15th and early 16th centuries (Istanbul, Topkapi. N. 762), or the so-called “Khamisa” of Yagub Bey. And this triad ends with a splendid Safavid copy dated 1539-43 and stored at British Library in London.

The manuscript miniatures of 1405-10 from the Freer Gallery first published by outstanding Azerbaijani scientist M. Aga-oglu do not have an exact date, but their dating to the first decade of the 15th century and the determination of Tabriz as the place of their creation are still considered indisputable due to its pronounced stylistic features.

Assessing the role and place of miniatures in the context of the epoch, M. Aga-oglu, concludes, “... The importance of the Freer manuscript is that it confirms the assumption of the existence of painting in Tabriz which was superior in level to the samples of Shiraz and Baghdad that existed at the time and also foreshadows



the development of the Herat school of the first half of the 15th century. This fact has always been emphasized by many researchers, but has not yet been proven by facts.”

One of the miniatures of the “Khosrov Spies Shirin Bathing in a Stream” manuscript is of captivating beauty. It illustrates one of the most lyrical episodes of the poem, when Khosrov becomes an involuntary witness to the scene. The plot allows the artist to create a wide panorama and embody his concept of a lyrical landscape and his own understanding of space.

*Miniature from “Khamsa” by Nizami Ganjavi. Herat, 1491*



Best of all, the revival of the Tabriz school of the late 15th century is observed on the example of “Khamsa” by Yagub Bey, the second of our triad. After a long break caused by the forced relocation of Azerbaijani masters to the Timurid capital Herat, Tabriz was reborn as an arts center again under Yagub Aq-Qoyunlu at the end of the 15th century. In the last decades of the 15th century, the famous manuscript “Khamsa” by Nizami was created in 1481 (Istanbul, Topkapi Museum). The miniatures “Khamsa” by Yagub Bey expand our ideas about the art of that era and provide unique evidence of the first steps

of the nascent Safavid school in the capital of the Aq-Qoyunlu dynasty and later miniatures made under Shah Ismail I.

The miniatures of the era of Yagub Bey stylistically refer to the hand of court painters Sheikhi and Dervish Mohammed, although there are few lyrical moments in them. They are meticulously executed, are rich in color, and the fantastic and lush landscape is typical of Yagub Bey’s style, which can be recognized in the image of Bahram Gur.

Eleven miniatures were added during the reign of Shah Ismail, some of which belong to the brush of Sultan Muhammad. They show the development of the Tabriz tradition in the early Safavid period at the beginning of the 16th century. The same manuscript was decorated with other miniatures during the reign of Shah Ismail at the beginning of the 16th century, of which we are interested in “Iskander and Shepherd” and “Iskander and Nushabe”.

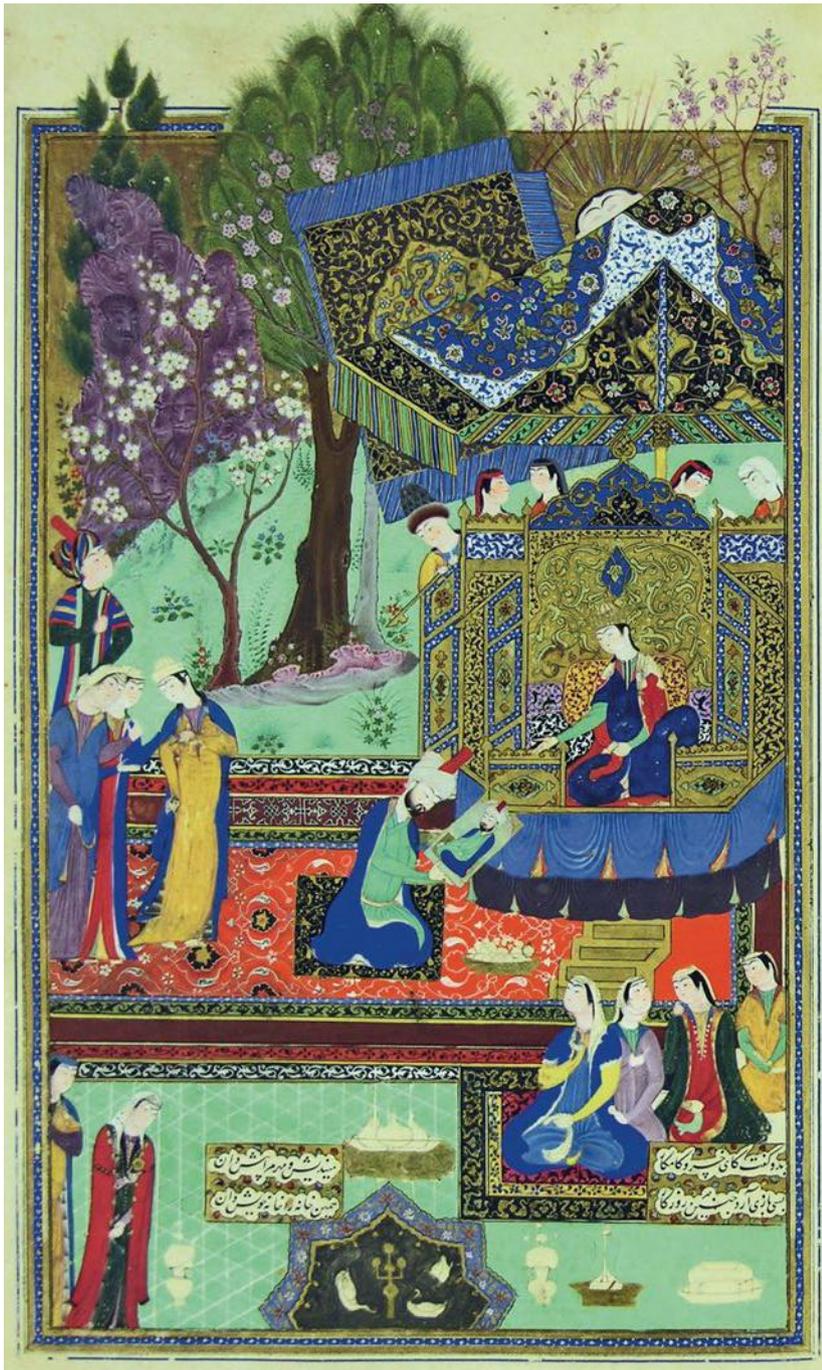
The second half of the 1520s and the 1530s were a period of the most rapid development of the Tabriz style, a time when many artistically significant illustrated manuscripts appeared. In the 1540-50s, the Tabriz style reached a peak of its development. It was during these years that art workshops

worked most productively and at the highest level of skill.

During these years, one of the masterpieces of not only oriental but also the entire world art was created – the illustrations of “Khamsa” by Nizami 1539-43, which are kept in the British Museum in London. The miniatures of the said list of “Khamsa” are illustrated by six outstanding artists of this era: Sultan Muhammad, Mir-Musevvir, Aga-Mirek, Mirza Ali, Muzaffar Ali and Mir Sayyid Ali.

With miniatures of “Khamsa” by Nizami of 1539-43, the Safavid Tabriz painting approached its apogee.

Miniature from “Khamse” by Nizami Ganjavi. Tabriz, 1524



After the rapid and brilliant flourishing of miniature painting, it had to recede into the background of the country's artistic life. Just a few years after the completion of work on this manuscript, the shah's kitab-khane (atelier) was transferred to Qazvin and many of the best masters soon moved to the new capital. But by changing the city, they carried with them all the traditions and technical skills they had acquired in Tabriz. Thus Qazvin became the successor

of the traditions of Tabriz. Prominent French researcher I. Shchukin writes (4, p. 190): "Here in the miniatures of "Khamse" by Nizami of 1539-43, we see Sultan Muhammad revealing himself in all the various aspects of his genius. In "The Ascension of the Prophet", he expands on a religious theme that is often found in Timurid art, but gives this theme a grandeur that was hitherto unseen."

Nizami and his "Quintet" had a profound influence on the development of the artistic culture of the East, especially on the art of miniature painting. There is not a single school of the Muslim East that would not have created illustrated manuscripts of "Khamse" by Nizami. These are, first of all, the Tabriz and Herat schools, as well as the Shiraz, Qazvin, Isfahan, Bukhara, Ottoman and Mughal schools.

The best museums and libraries of the world keep the invaluable manuscripts of Nizami's "Khamse". Among them are the Washington Galleries Freer and Sackler, the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Victoria and Albert Museum London, the British Museum, the British Library in London, the Chester Beatty Library in Dublin, the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and other museums and libraries of all continents.

Outstanding orientalist E. Bertels once wrote, "Nizami's works is immortal. His poems go to all countries of the world like caravans." ❀

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