CHAPTER II
A BRIEF HISTORY OF MINIATURE PAINTING IN IRAN AND INDIA

2.1. HISTORY OF MINIATURE IN IRAN

Iranian miniature is one of the brightest manifestations of our ancient history which undoubtedly comprises an important chapter of the world art history. It is a long time since this art has attracted the attention of many artists and researchers. Iranian painting and miniature with a seven thousand year background has hidden many experiences within itself. Here we will refer to aspects of this art in various periods.

2.1.1. Ancient Miniature

Some researchers consider the Achaemenian era as the beginning of painting or miniature while this art must be traced back to the Stone Age and cave dwelling in Iran.

In archeological researches, types of troglodytic miniature have been discovered in the caves of Lorestan province including “Mir Melas and Dusheh Tapeh” caves. In these paintings much attention has been paid to the scenes of hunting, animals and fights.
Instances of murals have been found in “Fahlian” hills in Fars province which are among the oldest examples of Iranian painting in the pre-historic or historic era. There are seven thousand year old seals, signs, and especially cylinder stone seals which besides the art of painting show the art of engraving. These paintings and engravings are interesting because they form the basis of Iranian miniature.

Painting on earthenware has been one of the major artistic activities of the Iranians. By studying painted prehistoric pottery in Iran the evolution of painting and miniature can be observed. In these miniatures, the artist does not stay loyal to nature and does not draw its details but rather makes mere references to it and tries to depict the remarkable characteristics of the subject or, in other words, the essence of shapes and objects.

Since the fourth millennium B.C. we see a wide variety of patterns on the earthenware; cultural symbols, signs, tokens, geometrical and plant designs appear in different forms. Also in the bronze works of Lorestan and in the Achaemenian sculptures the characteristics of Iranian painting and miniature are vividly observable. In Apadana palace in Shoosh, very beautiful glazed bricks have been discovered which in a way represent the ancient miniature. Images of “immortal soldiers” and the exquisite clothes they are wearing are seen on this bricks with special elegance and they indicate the condition of miniature at that time. Even the goblets show the miniature art of that era (Figure 2).
Figure 2: Pattern (Immortal Soldiers) on tiles found in Shoush
Golden goblets known as “Hasanloo, Marlik and Kalardasht” are full of ancient miniatures which represent mythologies part of which belong to Iran and part of which are from outside the limits of Iran all of which comprise the miniature of the first millennium.

2.1.2. Miniature in the Parthian Era

In the Parthian era many murals have been made a significant portion of which are located beyond the current borders of Iran. Morals of Dura Europos city in Syria or the banks of Euphrates are very beautiful and similar to Iranian miniatures. One of these murals depicts a hunt scene. The form of the rider and the drawing style of this work reminds us of the Iranian miniature of the following eras (Figure 3).

“Dedjekoooh Khajeh” in Sistan in the middle of Hamoon Lake is a temple and palace of the Parthian era which is full of designs and patterns. These works which comprise the most significant instances of murals of the Parthian era in Iran belong to the first century. In these murals we see subjects such as king, queen, musician and horse rider. One of the characteristics of these works is the use of black and white lines for drawing the margins and lack of shadings in the colors (Figure 4).

The use of plain colors without shading is one of the features of Iranian miniature throughout historical eras and is the same method which continued
Figure 3: Hunting-grounds; Mural found in Dura Europos, Syria
Figure 4: A mural of the king and the queen. KuohKhaje
during the Sasanid era and has been followed in the early Islamic miniatures and has been interestingly reflected in the later periods.

2.1.3. Evolution of Miniature in the Sasanid Era

In the Sasanid era, Iranian miniature entered a new phase of its evolution. In general, the tradition of miniature in this era can be divided into two main branches. One is the western branch which somehow has a close connection with the Byzantium art and while it is affected by it, it has also influenced it. The other branch is that of the eastern parts of Iran which has been common in this land since time immemorial and over the centuries has continued through its various manifestations. And this is the same art form which later with influences from painting of the Far East has created the school of Iranian miniature and especially the school of Heart (Figure 5).

2.1.4. Mani and the Works of Manichaeists

At the time of the Sasanid, the eastern Iranian miniature is associated with Mani, the artist about whose artistic skillfulness so many stories are related. Mani, who claimed to be a prophet, propagated his ideas and beliefs, a mixture of the beliefs of Buddha, Zoroaster, Mithraism and Jesus, using miniature. His religion flourished very quickly and had followers beyond the borders of Iran. The significant point about Mani is his skill in painting or miniature. It is said that he was so skillful in this art that he offered it as his miracle and illustrated
Figure 5: Fresco: The Hunting-ground, Shoush; Sassanid period
his book, Arjang (Artang). Mani is considered the father of Iranian miniature. Maybe this title is given to him because he decorated his books as a result of which the art of book illustration reached its pinnacle in Iran which was his homeland and, more than ever, miniature became associated with books.

Studying the painting style of the Manichaeists, we may observe the conventions which are seen in the Iranian miniatures of the subsequent periods. These conventions include:

1. Using human figures, birds, flowers and plants
2. Using pure colors without any shadings
3. In the paintings of the Manichaeists there was always a background color which could be blue, green or red. In the first Iranian miniatures the same procedure has been used and one of the reasons for the antiquity of Iranian miniatures, especially those which belong to the pre-Timurid era, is these background colors.
4. Using precious metals such as gold and silver for illustrating and gilding books.

Mani considered the art of painting a means for human ascent. He believed that the mission of art is to draw our attention to the heaven, and attract love and admiration towards children of light and create hatred for the offspring of darkness. The belief of the Manichaeists was that they should use gold and silver to depict light (Figure 6).
Figure 6: Figure taken from a Manichaean book, Musicians; 8th/9th century AD
2.1.5. Post-Islamic Miniature

While discussing post-Islamic Iranian miniature, its background must be traced in the early Islamic rule and while discussing Islamic miniatures, its culmination must be sought in Iran.\(^1\) On the one hand, Iran presented a sort of painting to the world which has unique and superior characteristics and, on the other hand, powerful Iranian miniaturists of the Islamic era have played a significant role in influencing the art of painting in other countries such as India and the Ottoman Empire.

Downfall of the Sasanid Empire by the Muslims and political revolutions in Iran led to changes in Iranian art. With the expansion of Islam in Iran and other parts of the world, the cultures of different nations come together. Due to the geographical expanse of Islamic territory, cultural diversity, traditions and their artistic amalgamation, Islamic art is created.\(^2\)

The exact date of development of the art of miniature or Iranian painting during the Islamic era is not clear and maybe the reason for this ambiguity is the prejudice which condemned the painting or miniature.\(^3\)

Regarding the development of Iranian miniature in the Islamic period or creation of miniatures, art experts have proposed different theories and some consider it influenced by the Byzantine or Christian art.


Dr. Ghamar Arian writes:

“Is its origin as some suppose the influence of the art of the Coptic Christians or Manichaeans? This is subject to controversy. Some researchers even have tried to find signs of the style of Byzantine-Christian and Nasturic artist in the Islamic miniatures of the sixth century Hirji- such as what exists in the volumes of “Maqamat” and “Klile o Demneh”. It is true that in genuine art we cannot speak of a constant and one-way influence but it is not acceptable to say that ancient Iranian conventions have had no impact on the evolution of the Islamic miniature in Iran.”

Dr. Zaki Mohammad Hassan in his book, The Art of Iran in the Islamic Era, believes that development of Iranian-Islamic miniature in the manuscripts of Iranians has been influenced by all these sources as well as the styles imported to Iran from China and India.

Considering the discovered works by Manichaeists, some researchers consider Manichaeists artists as the real founders of miniature after the introduction of Islam because the miniatures of Islamic era artists are quite similar to the works of Manichaeists artists in terms of designs and colors.

---

Manichaeists painters were among the group who after the spread of Islam and collapse of the Sasanid rule remained in Iran and accepted the new system and as painters illustrated nonreligious books and decorated palaces and public places. Nevertheless, the art of miniature flourished in Iran and the subject of this newly flourished art form was illustration of historical books, poetry divans and stories with small and brilliant paintings.

From what went above we can infer that:

“By combining elements of central Asian art and especially Iranian-Sasanid conventions, Manichaeist artists founded the Iranian art of miniature and book illustration and made it unique all over the world.”

2.1.6. Prohibition of Miniature in Islam

Orientalists have written a lot about prohibition of painting and portraiture in Islam. Some of them have thought that Quran has banned painting and sculpture. But this is wrong and baseless because in Quran there is no direct reference to this issue. In regard to prohibition of painting or miniature in Islam there is no evidence to show that pre-Islamic Arabs have prohibited painting or have had special laws about it.

---

8 Zaki Mohammad Hassan, History of Painting in Iran, translated by Abolghasem Sahab, Tehran, Sahab Geographical Institute, 1975, p. 36
Some of the followers of Hadith ascribe few Hadiths about prohibition of painting living creatures and copying them to the prophet, but some of the modern scholars believe that the prophet did not believe in the prohibition of painting and painting has been permissible in the early days of Islam and the Hadiths ascribed to him are not correct.

We do not mean to say that painting has not been execrable in the age of the prophet and his descendents, but the common belief is that first the prophet and then the descendents following him and later rulers of Bani Omayeh prohibited this work in order to prevent Muslims from worshiping idols, sculptures and paintings which propagated forgetting God and making idols intercessors or worshiping them. Besides, the religious elders considered painting or sculpture as an abject imitation of the creator. However, the Hadiths ascribed to the prophet in regard to prohibition of painting whether authentic or fabricated have had an undeniable impact.

Titus Burkhart in his book, Immortality of Art, in regard to prohibition of painting and presentation of portraits, has discussed the prohibition of idolatry and explains that:

“It is prohibition of idolatry in Quran which in view of the majority of Muslims includes the formal representation of God in any form possible even in the form of words because the reality of God is beyond any description. On the other hand, based on the teachings of the prophet, the attempt to imitate the
creation of the creator by simulating the shapes of living creatures, especially human face, is considered sacrilege. But this rule is not always and everywhere observed because it is mostly related to personal intention rather than the act. Especially in Iran and India it was argued that an image that does not claim to have imitated living creatures and is merely a similitude of them is permissible.\(^9\)

Abomination of painting has been shared by the scholars of both Shiite and Sunnite sects and this belief of some who hold that Islam does not believe in prohibition is not right. In fact, in Shiite books there are Hadiths about prohibition of painting and the ruling of the Shiite religious elders about the prohibition of painting and sculpture is the same of that of Sunnite leaders. Besides, Shiite sect did not become the official religion of Iran before the rise of the Safavid in the 16\(^{th}\) century."\(^{10}\)

As for Iran and prohibition of painting or miniature in the book Iranian Art in the Islamic Era we read:

“Both in Sunnite and Shiite countries we come across many instances in which lack of respect for the prohibition of painting may be observed. But what we mean here is that Iran is the pioneer of the Muslim states which have not been considerably influenced by this prohibition.”


In the same book we read:

“It is true that religious leaders in Iran disapproved of painting and painters and maybe prohibition of painting in Islam has been one of the reasons to which part of the stagnation and lack of free and independent development of this art can be ascribed, but in general it can be said that the effect of this prohibition in Iran has been less than other Islamic countries.

Generally, prohibition of painting in Islam did not make it unpopular among Iranians and their Indian and Turkish students. On the contrary, Iranians did not fail to paint religious subjects especially the stories of the prophets.

However, we must not forget that Iranian miniaturists did not use miniature as means to propagate Islamic beliefs and, unlike Christian painters; they did not believe that their paintings express their religious views.”

2.2. A BRIEF HISTORY OF INDIAN PAINTING AND ARCHITECTURE

Paintings in the Gupta Age

We find traces of colour work on plater in cave temples from the first century B.C. onwards, but the paintings have peeled off or been eaten away by insects, fungus and moisture.

There are many stories from the centuries after Christ, which show that painting was a popular pastime.

In olden days people thought that creation of all kinds was a way to God. And this idea remained in our people from generation to generation.

In Kalidasa’s play *Shakuntala*, King Dushyanta paints a picture of his beloved when he is away from her and longs for her. Once he hugs the picture mistaking it for the live Shakuntala. His clown tells him that he is being foolish, and reminds him, “It is only a picture!”

In fact, the wall paintings in the caves of Ajanta, Bagh, Sittannavasal, which have survived from the first and second century A.D. would not have been done, had the making of forms in colour not already been a living tradition.

So advanced were the skills involved in paintings in the *Kamasutra* by the sage Vatsyayana. This sage lived in the third to fourth century A.D., and he says that he learnt about *Sadanga* from previous books. The six limbs of painting which he mentions are: *Roopa Bheda* (the knowledge of forms); *Pramanam* (correct perception of measure and proportion); *Bhava* (feeling, emotion or mood created by form); *Lavanya Yojanam* (the fusion of grace or charm); *Sadrisya* (likeness); *Varnika Bhanga* (knowledge of colours and brushwork proper to its subject).

The Chinese too had defined six similar principles of painting.
There seem to have been two main kinds of painting in the country from the earliest times to the eighteenth century. There were pictures of gods and goddesses, flying spirits, of ugly demons and human beings praying. Many of these, specially of the Jain faith, were on palm leaves, which could be carried about in the satchels of wandering monks and merchants. Then there were paintings of heroes, and heroines, birds, animals and flowers on cloth, on mud plastered walls, and on wooden panels and palm leaves.

Later, when paper became available from China via Persia, miniature pictures were drawn in books. These illustrated the heroes and heroines of poems, kings and nobles performing wonderful deeds. Or they were love paintings, of beautiful women decorating themselves, or emerging from their baths, or with their loved ones. There were also magical drawing for contemplation or to inspire worshippers.

As the images of gods were a medium for prayer, they are not art in the Western sense of the word. They story behind an image, such as Shiva dancing in a circle of fire, is to be recalled by the worshipper, as he sits before the icon. In this way, he tries to acquire the energies of Shiva and thus the image becomes the medium for attaining union with God. And there were ritual decorations, or alpanas in almost every village and hamlet of our vast country.

The artisans made images according to the rules laid down in the how-to-do-it books. According to the texts on painting, the gods must be shown big, the
kings smaller, and ordinary people smaller than gods and kings. Moreover, the hair on the head of the gods and on kings had to be fine and curly, coloured a heavenly blue. As for women, they had always to be shown young. But the best craftsmen put their own deep feelings into the images they made.¹²

**Ajanta (approximately first century B.C. to sixth century A.D.)**

The first examples of Indian painting which have been discovered on the walls of Buddhist rock temples to the southwest of Deken as partially preserved are in Gupta. The greatest numbers which have remained in the best condition have been discovered in a collection of 29 Caitya halls and Vihara caves in Ajanta (Figure 7).

The strokes of the first Buddhist inhabitants of the shoe-horse shaped river of Ajanta should have echoed in the 2nd century B.C. But in the 7th century there was no sign of them and Buddhism had declined in India. Deserted stone rooms grew uncontrollably and then were lost. Then in 1817, soldiers in red uniforms guided by a jungle boy went up the hills. Removing the foliage, in the middle of a huge stone wall, by crossing a dark doorway, they faced a gigantic Buddha which was in a tranquil meditation posture. When the soldiers crossed this doorway, Ajanta art was retrieved to the world (Figure 8).

Figure 7: Mural in Ajanta Cave, Caitya Halls, Bodhisattva Padmapani, Gupta; probably towards the end of 5th century AD
Figure 8: Mural in Ajanta Cave
The first inspectors of the place numbered the caves respectively along the walls. It is obvious that these numbers have nothing to do with the creation dates of these caves. In fact, inspectors believe that the cave No. 10 in the Caitya hall is the first room because there is an inscription which dates this cave back to the first half of the second century B.C. Also this cave contains segments of the oldest instances of Indian murals. Unfortunately, most of the painted surfaces have shattered and are indistinguishable. But in one of the corridors, the drawings are so perfect that we can see a royal scene of approximately the first century B.C. A handsome Raja and his attendants approach a wreathed tree where they meet a group of musicians and dancers. The simple realism of the scene immediately astounds you (Figure 9).

Later paintings in Ajanta expand in all directions and cover all the surface of the walls but the narrative concept has been preserved throughout the works and its complexity suddenly enlivens the paintings. Only occasionally is the order of painting interrupted with the architectural structure or a collection of odd cubistic shapes which create obstacles in the way of various activities and at times even serve as base for other sculptures. It is quite evident that murals of the cave No. 10, although the first known examples of Indian painting, have been followed by a long tradition. Studying the perfection of this only example, we can only regret the loss of that tradition.
Figure 9: Ajanta Map
2.3. ISLAMIC INDIA: ARCHITECTURE AND PAINTING

There is no doubt that Islam first entered India via sea. However, the origin of the penetration of Islam goes back to the year 712 when the governor of Iraq in order to punish the King of Indus for his illegal actions and robbing the ships, dispatched an army of Arabs to the western parts of India. Nevertheless, the real attack of the Arabs took place about three centuries later when the banners of Islam gradually entered India through the northern passage of Hindu Kush by the invaders and Bedouin bandits. Finally, Afghans, Turks and Persians who realized that the condition was favorable for establishing an empire settled in India.

Nothing much is known of the history of Delhi prior to the entrance of Muslims into this city in the late twelfth century. The name Delhi has been first recorded towards the end of the tenth century that is; just like Lalkat, this city was the local center of Rajput.

In fact, this ruler united the forces of Rajput to resist against the raid of Mohammad Alghafur Afghan in 1192.

Qutb al-Din Ibek, the generalissimo and deputy of Alghafur, constructed the first permanent mosque in Delhi to commemorate this fateful victory.

The magnificent mosque of Qovat al-Islam, or The Power of Islam, which has been constructed on the site of the largest Hindu temple in Delhi, with the large
area of 45.72 in 64.62 meters is a conspicuous landmark. Rows of stone pillars established on the three sides of this mosque have been transferred to this place from some of the 27 local Hindu and Jain temples. The western side of the building which is oriented in the direction of Mecca overlooks a vast veranda with existence of a corridor with magnificent carvings of five pointed arcs the height of the central one of which is 13.47 meters, has added to its status and significance. To the south eastern part of the building the huge Qutb Minar is located which its initial height reached about 72.54 meters. This Minar has been built to symbolize Muslim victory and the inscriptions all indicate that this mosque is a symbol that represents God’s permanent presence in the conquered city of the Hindus. Qutb al-Din employed local Hindu artisans of Delhi whose delicate and exquisite stonework is conspicuous everywhere. In the decorative strips surrounding the Minar, artisans have carved Quran verses in the beautiful naskh calligraphy and have decorated them with flower designs which are of Indian origin. Thus, using a new hybrid art form, the first significant historical Islamic building was constructed in India (Figure 10).

The interval between the rise of the Bardegan dynasty in Delhi in the early thirteenth century and the entrance of the Mughals in the sixteenth century, many different Muslim dynasties ruled the historical territory of northern India. In the first quarter of the sixteenth century, a new group of Afghan invaders came to power and Indo-Islamic culture under the rule of the early Mughal kings reach pinnacle in Delhi and Agra. Babar, the conqueror who founded this
Figure 10: Qutub Minar
Dynasty, was like Timur the Lame and Genghis and their blood flowed in his veins. Although he was a military man, yet he had a tendency for knowledge and aesthetic matters. Humayun, his son, became the first official emperor of this dynasty.

In 1540, a rebel named Shir Shah from Bihar region started an uprising as a result of which Humayun fled to Iran and was in exile for fifteen years. Humayun’s son, Akbar, was born on the way while crossing the western desert—the person who later became the highest ranking ruler of this dynasty. During his stay in Shah Tahmasb the Safavid, he fell in love with miniature and decided to take some Iranian artists with him to India after he took back the empire.

Therefore, when in 1555 with the aid of Shah Tahmasb he succeeded in recapturing Delhi, he took two Iranian masters named Mir Seyed Ali and Abdolsamad with him to India. These two ran the Mughal school of painting in India.

A year after conquer of the Indian empire, Humayun died and the fourteen year old Akbar came to throne. He never learned to read and write officially but due to his intelligence he memorized every word that was recited and he was quite pleased this method of education. In his adolescence, on his way back from exile to India with his father, in Kabul he took a drawing course and developed a liking for painting.
One of Akbar’s greatest contributions to Indian art was foundation of the Mughal school of painting. He opened a governmental painting workshop and appointed about one hundred mostly Hindu artists to work under the supervision of the masters he had brought to India with him. In the early years of Akbar’s reign, the Portuguese founded trade centers in India and in 1578, Akbar asked Goa, Portugal’s colony, to dispatch a delegation of Christian fathers to Fateh Pursikri. And they, hoping to convert the emperor, brought him illustrated Bibles and religious images as a tribute. These gifts fascinated him so much that he immediately ordered his painters to use the principles used in them in their own paintings. Thus, European realism was added to the evolving Mughal style.

A distinct example of this combined art is the first page of the manuscript of “Amir Khosrow’s Khamseh” which has been painted for Akbar in 1595. On this page an imaginary incident in the life of Alexander has been depicted in which Alexander in a glass diving bubble has been dropped into the water. The atmosphere of the image is quite modern and few Europeans are seen in the picture. Akbar’s support for painting, like his occasional religious liberalism, was confronted by severe disagreement of traditionalists. These traditionalists, following Quran’s prohibition of depicting living creatures, condemned portraiture. In response to this opposition, Akbar said: “But I think the painter is in possession of a particular instrument in recognizing God, because in
painting each living creature the painter must reach the realization that he cannot accomplish this on his own. Therefore, his attention is directed toward the creator and in this way he adds to his knowledge of God.”

Mughal painting which is reflective of Akbar’s combined cultural policy had a humble beginning and after mixing with the lively Rajasthan style, eventually, led to realism.

Following the death of the great emperor, Akbar, in 1605, his son, Jahangir, ruled the Mughal territory (1605-1627).

Not as much as his father but Jahangir was also a patron of art and rewarded distinguished high quality works of the royal workshop. He boasted on being able to distinguish works of different artists and naming the master by merely seeing the work. Just as some artists were known for their work on a special style (portrait, traditional costume, and scenery) there was also the possibility that several artists created the same work together.

The emperor was also fond of animals, birds and flowers and had asked his artists to record the wide diversity of the species in his domain.

The subject of one of the unique paintings at the time of Jahangir is sycamore tree which grows in Kashmir. Colors of this painting in a patterned context are so vivid and lively as if they transfer the excited sounds of the fleeing squirrels above the head of the hunter to the viewer.
In the last years of his reign, Jahangir gradually lost his power. Addiction to alcohol and opium not only deteriorated his physical health but also made him unable to rule authoritatively. Some remarkable paintings of him which have been painted around the end of his reign vividly reveal his miserable condition.

Art works at the court of Jahangir’s son, Shah Jahan, in spite of being rich and magnificent show the first signs of weakness. These paintings even though seemingly faultless but are declining toward coldness and dispiritedness. This is true of many majestic buildings made of white marble throughout the empire.

More than anything else, architecture was noticed by Shah Jahan in the early years of his reign. Undoubtedly, Taj Mahal (1632-1654) which is his queen Momtaz Mahal’s tomb in Agra, is the main masterpiece inspired by his own interests. Its white marble entrances and minarets, which are located in a ceremonial garden facing the Jamuna River, shine in the sun and reflect an otherworldly magnificence.

So long as the power and intellectual ideas of Akbar survived, Mughal Empire also preserved its grandeur and power. This power continued into the three successive periods of ruling. But when Aurangzeb (1707-1608), Akbar’s grandson inherited the throne from his father Shah Jahan, he established the traditional rules of Islam and cut the government’s support of art. The unfavorable effect of his shift of attitude on the Hindu residents of his territory
who had no frictions with the ruling system and the many Mughal artists and musicians who after being estranged from his court were drawn toward serving minor royalties and the Hindu courts of Rajasthan was the same.

Nevertheless, throughout Aurangzeb’s rule the royal workshop was not completely closed and when Aurangzeb’s great grandson, Mohammad Shah, again supported the workshop, still many artists worked at it. With this support a new life was breathed into the Mughal painting.¹³

¹³ Roy C. Craveli, A brief History of Indian Art, translated by Farzan Sojudi and Kaveh Sojudi, Tehran, Published by Farhangesian Honar (Art Research Center), 2009, pp. 217- 236.