



## Sa'di and the Safavid: The Material Culture of a Treasured Persian Manuscript Now at UO

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### ABSTRACT

The Burgess MS 43 manuscript of Sa'di's *Bustan and Gulistan*, now at the University of Oregon Special Collections Archive, was created in 1615 CE in Persia. It was later transported to Europe, where the original Persian leather binding was swapped for a more European style: soft, red velvet with two silver clasps. John Ruskin, the preeminent art theorist of Victorian England, once held this manuscript in his own private collection. Ruskin's view of a Persian manuscript eloquently depicts the richly decorated first page, "wrought with wreathed azure and gold, and soft green and violet, and ruby and scarlet, into one field of pure resplendence. It is wrought to delight the eyes only; and it does delight them." The intricate illuminated ornaments open a window to the Safavid dynasty. In this paper, I will reconstruct the manuscript's original historical and cultural context, returning us to seventeenth-century Shiraz.

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In 1615 CE, the Burgess MS 43 manuscript of Sa'di's *Bustan and Gulistan* was created in Persia. At some point in its life, the manuscript was transported to Europe, where the original Persian leather binding was swapped for a more European style: soft, red velvet with two silver clasps. According to a book seller's catalogue entry, this manuscript once belonged to John Ruskin, the preeminent art theorist of Victorian England. His view of a Persian manuscript eloquently depicts the richly decorated first page, "wrought with wreathed azure and gold, and soft green, and violet, and ruby and scarlet, into one field of pure resplendence. It is wrought to delight the eyes only; and it does delight them."<sup>1</sup> Gold, red, and blue colors border the text in a frame and illuminate the pages with varying floral and leaf patterns. Microscopy of a similar Persian manuscript suggests that vermilion may have been used as red ink and in the floral decorations, while red lead was employed as a principal hue or tempered with vermilion.<sup>2</sup> The brilliant blue pigment most likely comes from ultramarine, a highly expensive material, yet common for important, well-done illuminated manuscripts. The generous use of gold on every page further adds to the expense and high value of this manuscript, both in its time and beyond.

While this intricate design is typical for Persian works of art, and can even be found in the patterns of modern Persian carpets, this paper reconstructs the original historical and cultural context of this manuscript based on the design of the first page. The Burgess Sa'di

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traveled throughout Persia and Europe, and now has made its way to the University of Oregon Special Collections Archive, adopting a whole new set of contexts and associations. Yet, it can serve as a lens into Persia and, given its known date of creation, leads us back to the Safavid period.

The Safavid dynasty (1501-1736) cultivated a culture of the arts, including calligraphy, painting, literature, and decorations, during their more than two-century rule of Persia. This high esteem for the arts stemmed from the fact that “virtually every member of [the royal] family (both male and female) was accomplished as a calligrapher and poet and active in the patronage and collecting of art.”<sup>3</sup> While the royal court commissioned “the great masterpieces of Iranian painting,”<sup>4</sup> they themselves practiced the arts as well. For instance, Sultan Ibrahim Mirza (1540-1577), prince of the Safavid family and later the governor of one of the key cities, Mashhad, composed verses, bound books, and decorated pages with gold and varying colors. His artistic endeavors were encouraged by his uncle, Shah Tahmasp, the second Safavid ruler. Shah Tahmasp was not only an avid patron of the arts, but also established the imperial workshops called “*kitabkhana* (literally, ‘book house,’ but actually signifying both artistic studio and library) where numerous calligraphers, painters, illuminators, binders, and other specialists created deluxe volumes of classical Persian texts.”<sup>5</sup>

Each decadent text coming out of the *kitabkhana* was a miniature treasure, not only decorated in highly valuable and expensive material like gold and ultramarine, but also produced by the best calligraphers, painters, and illuminators in all of Persia. *Kitabkhana* were established in all of the large cities and provincial centers, including Tabriz, Isfahan, Shiraz, and Mashhad, and the works created were almost always either directly for the Shah (king) or other members of the royal court. Each town, however, had multiple bazaar workshops for themselves, where local artists, most often apprentices, practiced their skills and created manuscripts for the general public, rather than for the elites.<sup>6</sup> Manuscripts that came out of the bazaar workshops are of lower quality, both in terms of materials and artistic skill. They also have fewer decorations and ornaments, whereas each page of *kitabkhana* manuscripts brim with geometric designs and often included miniature paintings.<sup>7</sup>

The Burgess Sa’di manuscript’s high quality material and design – with its generous use of gold, vibrant colors on every page, uniform and symmetric calligraphy, and strong, durable paper – is most likely not a product of modest bazaar workshops. However, its lack of full-page miniature paintings within the text suggests that though it was created in a *kitabkhana*, it was perhaps meant for a member of the outer royal court rather than, say, the Shah himself. Indeed, “if the Shah was Iran’s leading patron, he was not the only one. While employed at court, royal artists augmented their incomes by illustrating humbler manuscripts for government officials or rich merchants,”<sup>8</sup> and so it is perhaps to the favor of such officials or merchants that our Burgess Sa’di came to be.

For sixteenth and seventeenth-century Persian artists, “the peak of worldly success was recognition at the Shah’s court and membership in the royal workshop, a virtual magnet to which exceptional artistic talent was drawn.”<sup>9</sup> Without the formal job application process that we have today, aspiring artists had to rely on natural talent, a network of connections, and just a bit of luck. The typical acceptance procedure into a *kitabkhana* might look something like this: “If an apprentice painter in Shiraz revealed extraordinary ability, he was likely to be hired away from the bazaar workshop by the local governor, who would before long offer him to the Shah in hopes of currying favor.”<sup>10</sup> Accordingly, *kitabkhana* and placement into one relied on a network of class structures, social positions, cultural tradeoffs, and a system of favors. The Safavid court’s love of literature and arts thus inspired generations of artists and successfully wove a new system of workshops into the fabric of Persian culture from the sixteenth century onwards.

At the *kitabkhana*, artists produced the greatest masterpieces of Persian literature, had access to the best and most expensive materials, and received training in how to improve their skill and hone it to the specific Safavid artistic taste. Safavid period painters who worked at or trained at the court *kitabkhana* expressed a principle stylistic characteristic that can be found in almost all manuscripts of this tradition, which includes “large-scale composition that frequently overflow into the surrounding margins; a bright and extensive palette of jewel-like (and often precious) pigments polished to a high sheen; fluid, rhythmic lines...and intricate ornamental patterns.”<sup>11</sup> Ornaments were often used to decorate the page margins and served an essential role of establishing page structures and controlling the surfaces.

The specific ornament present throughout the Burgess Sa’di, particularly prominent in the carpet-like design on the first page, was referred to in the West as *arabesque*: “at the time of the Renaissance, entering the vocabulary of a wide range of art forms.”<sup>12</sup> However, due to its Orientalist origins and several misleading definitions,<sup>13</sup> the more accurate and Persian term for the design on the Burgess Sa’di manuscript is *islīmi*. While the Persian word *islīmi* “means both ‘Islamic’ and ‘arabesque,’” *islīmi* shouldn’t be identified solely with Islamic design because “the definition of *islīmi-khata’i* (used as a doublet) is the lines traced around paintings.”<sup>14</sup> This “rhythmic design based upon flowering vines,”<sup>15</sup> has now become integrally associated with all Iranian compositions and art work, as seen in architecture, furniture, and paintings. As scholar and curator Stuart Cary Welch observes, without *islīmi*, “these paintings would be as unthinkable as an orchestra playing a Bach suite without rhythm. With it, they are the visual equivalent of poetic verse.”<sup>16</sup> The *islīmi* in our Burgess Sa’di thereby compliments the written words themselves, the flowers and leaves symbolically nodding to the literal meanings of *Bustan* (“garden”) and *Gulistan* (“place with flowers”), as well as bordering the calligraphy of prose and poetry with a visual, aesthetically pleasing poetry of its own.

Although the Safavid court established an artistic style used all over Persia, major cities developed their own particular styles in addition to the broader Safavid style. One such city was Shiraz, depicted as “a city of enduring artistic vitality,” which “had held its

position as the centre of commercial manuscript production throughout the sixteenth century.”<sup>17</sup> Shirazi artistic style stressed two-dimensional and decorative values, rather than space and volume, and typically

Throughout the codex, the written surfaces and the illustrations are enframed with colored and gold lines or rulings...their headings written within a central gold cartouche, which is rounded with either slightly scalloped or distinctly projected ends. The inscribed cartouches are always flanked by two smaller units filled with diverse geometric designs in contrasting colors...the illuminated forms [of] scallops, medallions, lappets, zigzags [all] defy easy description. All are typical of Shiraz illumination.<sup>18</sup>

The Burgess Sa'di has elements of this Shirazi design, as evident with its border of scalloped units, primarily in gold and blue, varying geometric design, and *islami* blossoms. Though the designs point towards our manuscript being made in Shiraz, the strongest indication comes from the calligraphy. Our manuscript is written in *Nasta'liq*, the elegant cursive script “common for Shirazi scribes and now believed to have originated in Shiraz.”<sup>19</sup> Thus, the painting, decorations, and calligraphy combined strongly suggest the Burgess Sa'di was created by a team of artists, illuminators, and scribes in a Shiraz *kitabkhana* for a member of the wealthy elite.



**Figure 1.** The decorated first page of The Burgess MS 43 manuscript of Sa'di's *Gulistan and Bustan*.

Source: Louie, Elmira. *Burgess MS 43 Gulistan and Bustan*. 2019. The Burgess Manuscript Collection, University of Oregon, Eugene.

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<sup>2</sup> Dan A. Ciomartan and Robin J.H. Clark, "Raman Microscopy Applied to the Analysis of the Pigments Used in Two Persian Manuscripts" 7, no. 6 (1996): 395-402.

<sup>3</sup> Marianna Shreve Simpson, *Persian Poetry, Painting & Patronage: Illustrations in a Sixteenth- Century Masterpiece* (Washington D.C: Freer Gallery of Art, 1998), 12.

<sup>4</sup> Oleg Grabar, *Mostly Miniatures: An Introduction to Persian Painting* (Princeton University Press, 2000), 66.

<sup>5</sup> Simpson, *Persian Poetry, Painting & Patronage*, 12.

<sup>6</sup> Stuart Cary Welch, *Persian Painting: Five Royal Safavid Manuscripts of the Sixteenth Century* (New York: George Braziller, 1976), 12.

<sup>7</sup> Grabar, *Mostly Miniatures*, 23.

<sup>8</sup> Welch, *Persian Painting*, 14.

<sup>9</sup> Welch, *Persian Painting*, 12.

<sup>10</sup> Welch, *Persian Painting*, 12.

<sup>11</sup> Simpson, *Persian Poetry, Painting & Patronage*, 14.

<sup>12</sup> Marty Roth, "Gilman's Arabesque Wallpaper," *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 34, no. 4 (2001): 147.

<sup>13</sup> Mohammad Khazâie, "The Source and Religious Symbolism of the Arabesque in Medieval Islamic Art of Persia," *Central Asiatic Journal* 49, no. 1 (2005): 1.

<sup>14</sup> Yves Porter, "From the 'Theory of the Two Qalams' to the 'Seven Principles of Painting': Theory, Terminology, and Practice in Persian Classical Painting," *Muqarnas* 17 (2000): 113-14, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1523293>.

<sup>15</sup> Welch, *Persian Painting*, 13.

<sup>16</sup> Welch, *Persian Painting*, 13.

<sup>17</sup> Sheila R. Canby, *Persian Painting* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1993), 86.

<sup>18</sup> Marianna Shreve Simpson, *Princeton's Great Persian Book of Kings: The Peck Shahnama* (Princeton University Art Museum, 2015), 25, 70.

<sup>19</sup> Simpson, *Princeton's Great Persian Book of Kings*, 23.