

Persian art

see DVD for additional material

نقاشی
naqqaashi
painting

عمارت کلاه فرنگی
emaarat
pavilion

درخت
derakht
tree

The *Khamsa* is a collection of five long poems by Ilyas Yusuf Nizami (c. 1141–c. 1209) from Ganja in Azerbaijan.¹ Nizami is considered one of the greatest exponents of Persian romantic epic poetry and his works have inspired many illustrated manuscripts. This page, from a dismantled manuscript, combines an illustration with Persian text hand written in *nastaliq* script set within cartouches.²

The *Khamsa* includes one of the Nizami's most famous poems, *Haft Paykar* (Seven Portraits), which is a narrative poem composed c.1197 that describes the exploits of the Sasanian king of Iran, Bahram V (r. 420–438).³ Due to his love of hunting wild ass (*gur*), he became known as Bahram Gur.

The biographical narrative of the *Haft Paykar* is divided into two parts by a central interlude of seven tales, which relate to seven portraits of beautiful princesses from different parts of the world. According to the *Haft Paykar* story, the portraits were discovered by Bahram in a hidden room in his palace and were arranged in a circle with a portrait of Bahram at the centre. When Bahram became king he married the princesses and installed them in a specially constructed palace with a separate pavilion for each princess. Each domed pavilion was a different colour that accorded with a planet and day of the week.⁴ Bahram Gur visited the princesses in turn, starting with the Indian princess in the black-domed palace on Saturday and ending with a visit to the Byzantine princess in the white-domed palace on Friday. Each of the princesses told him a love story with a moral message, symbolising the passing of man's spirit through seven stages on the mystical path to God.

This painting is set in the white pavilion, identified by the white dome embellished with gold tracery. Bahram and the Byzantine princess are seated within, and two servants talk outside beneath a tree bearing autumn colours. The interior of the pavilion is luxuriously appointed, with intricately patterned surfaces indicating tiles, carpets and wall paintings. On the back wall are two works that may be of Chinese origin; a hanging scroll depicting plum blossom, and a blue and white panel depicting a deer, a lion and the mythical Chinese *qilin*, possibly illustrating a panel of Chinese ceramic tiles painted in cobalt blue.⁵ Food and wine vessels are placed before the seated lovers.

The painting is an excellent example of Persian imagery, combining fresh, luminous colours; delicate brushwork; areas of flat, intricate patterning; abstracted planes and lack of single point perspective; and dainty, elongated figures. It epitomises the tradition of the Islamic art of the book, and in particular secular illustration, in which the text and image combine to impart the histories, romances and moral tales that are a feature of Islamic literature. The structure of the *Haft Paykar* also recalls the Persian tradition of oral storytelling, used to convey wisdom as well as entertain, which is best known in the West from the *Thousand and One Nights*.

PERSIAN
A page from a *Khamsa* (Quintet) manuscript: *Bahram Gur in the white pavilion*
15th – 16th century, Persia
opaque paint and gold on paper
32 x 21.5 cm
Purchased, 1946 (1668-4)

- 1 The five poems are: *The treasury of mysteries*, a didactic and philosophical composition; *Khusraw and Shirin*, a love story; *Layla and Majnun*, a romantic tragedy; *Haft Paykar*, a biography including a series of seven moral and romantic tales; a retelling of the legend of Alexander the Great.
- 2 *Nastaliq* is a style of calligraphy that was developed in Iran in late fourteenth century Baghdad and Tabriz, and became the standard script in which literary, non-Qur'anic works were written in Persia and Mughal India. It is distinguished by long sloping horizontal strokes, short vertical strokes, and the minimisation of serifs or hooks at the ends of the characters.
- 3 The Sasanian Empire included Iran and most of the ancient Near East, and lasted from AD 224 until AD 642 when the Empire was defeated by the Islamic Arab army. This marked the introduction of the Islamic faith in Iran. The Sasanians were originally from southern Iran and practised the ancient Iranian religion of Zoroastrianism.
- 4 The concordance is as follows: Black dome/Saturn/Saturday; Yellow dome/Sun/Sunday; Green dome/Moon/Monday; Red dome/Mars/Tuesday; Turquoise dome/ Mercury/Wednesday; Sandalwood dome/ Jupiter/Thursday; White dome/ Venus/Friday.
- 5 Chinese blue and white porcelains were first exported to markets in the Islamic world in the mid fourteenth century. The hard, durable quality of porcelain, its relatively light weight and the beauty of the glossy, smooth surface highly prized. Wares made specifically for the Islamic market included large food dishes and ewers, based on Middle Eastern metalware shapes. By the early fifteenth century Islamic potters were producing local stoneware versions of Chinese blue and white porcelain wares. During Bahram Gur's reign, when the story of *Haft Paykar* is set, the blue and white tiles shown in the illustration did not exist, but they would have been considered appropriate for a ruler's palace in the fifteenth century, when the painting was made.

تو که چینی جوین حکایت است
شاه جا از میان جان کردش

بزیان سپسته کرد دست
یعنی از چشم بد نهان کردش



روز آدیندیکین مقرر پس پید
زمره برج پنج قلمش
چون شب از سر فلک برود
خوابت تا از صبح بگذرد

خاندان کرد از آفتاب سفید
بج نوبت زمان پیش
چشم ماه و شماره روشن کرد
آرد آواز عشقش پیش

شاه بایزور سفید بنام
تا بود و حسین طلایه کند
شاه از آن جان نواز و طرد
بس کزان آفرین آن بسند

شد سپوی کعبه سفید طراز
شیر شادی کرد دیده آن
ترب نشین سفید ارم دور
خوابد بر تاج و بر میر لبند

آن عا که در دولت آفرید

وان چنان تاج تخت شاید

شاید

شاید