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# RARE STORYLINES IN NIZAMI'S KHAMSA MANUSCRIPTS

**T**he creative work of Nizami, which is a unique phenomenon of human artistic thought, has been an integral part of the spirituality of our nation for more than eight centuries. The entire life and prolific literary activity of this outstanding personality are linked to Ganja, which was known at that time not only as one of the largest cities of Azerbaijan and the Caucasus, but also as an important cultural center of the Middle East. The poet lived and created his works there throughout his life, enriching world poetry with his masterpieces of the art of versification, which are of ever-growing value.

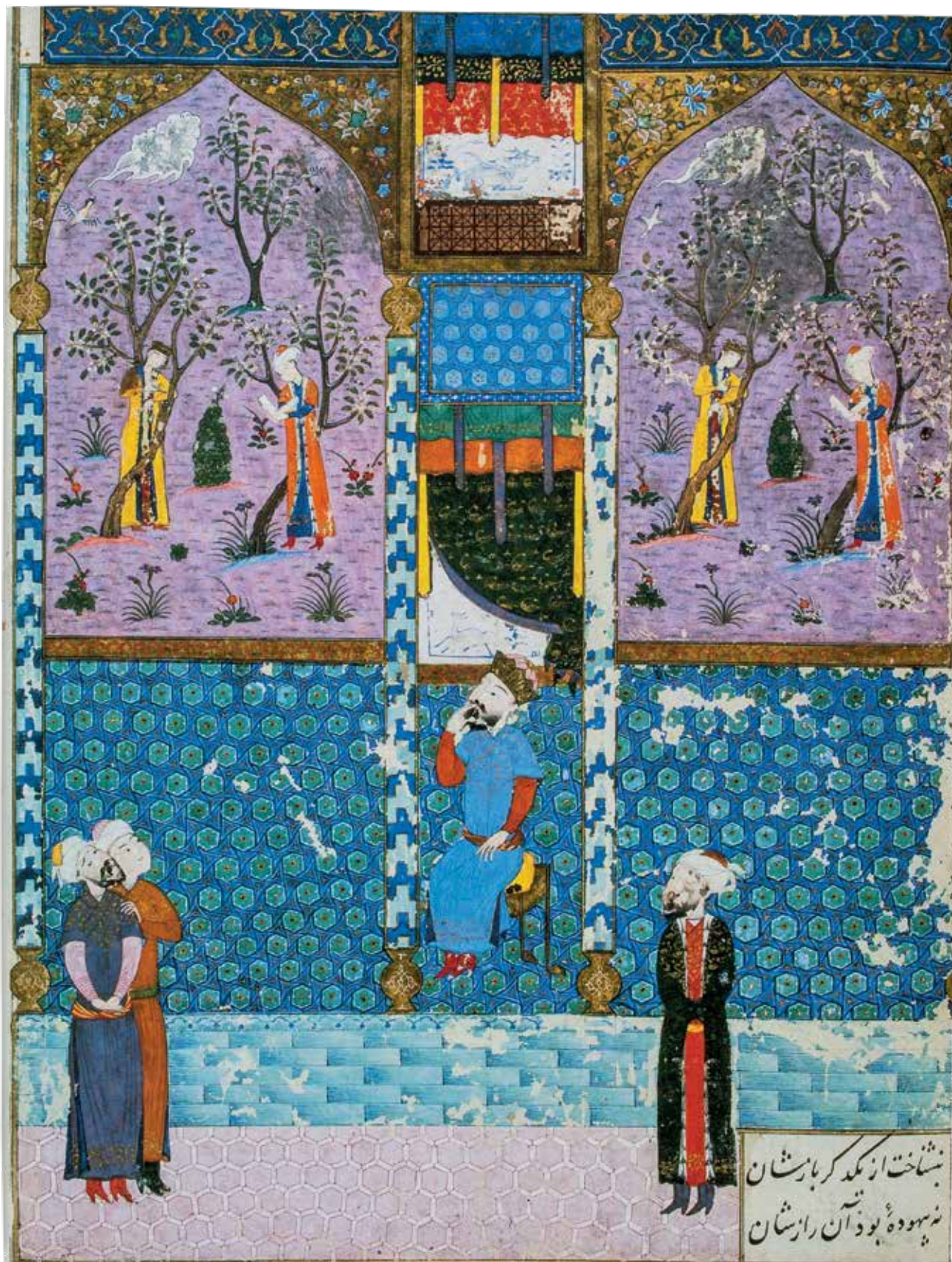
Nizami Ganjavi's creative art, which possessed universal human essence and magical poetic power, enriched the artistic thinking of the East with scientific and philosophical thought and raised poetry to unseen highs. The well-known Khamsa of the poet and thinker is the pinnacle of mankind's quest for spiritual

riches, which occupies a worthy place among the masterpieces of world literature. The works of Nizami, which are assets represented in the most abundant and recognized libraries in the world, also gave an impetus to the development of visual art in the East, in particular, the art of miniatures.

Nizami's "Khamsa", along with "Shahnameh" written by Ferdowsi, is the most illustrated piece of Oriental poetry. The choice of illustrations reflects the trends of that time, i.e. the great style of the era, the tastes of that time and those who ordered and authored miniatures. Many prefer well-known storylines that are immediately recognizable. However, when it comes to samples containing up to a hundred and more illustrations, rare storylines known exclusively to great connoisseurs emerge. As for the numerous copies of Khamsa, which includes about 4,000 manuscripts, very rare plots sometimes go along

“The Tradition of Living Water” miniature. Qazvin, 1560s







*“Beasts Listen to Plato’s Music” miniature*



*“Bishr and Maliha” miniature*

with only one or two manuscripts. In addition to classical storylines there are such pieces as “Animals listen to Plato’s music”, “The idol erected by Iskandar at sea”, “The contest of Rum and Chinese artists”, “The story of artist Mani”, “Bahram gives fitnah to the military leader”, etc.

The miniature “Bishr and Malikha” from the Herat-based “Khamasa” dating back to the late 15<sup>th</sup> century could be cited as one of the true masterpieces. According to the story, an honorable man named Bishr lived in Rum. Once he encountered a girl on the street, accidentally saw her face and fell in love with her. Making a journey had long been considered the best cure from love, therefore, he decided to make a Hajj pilgrimage. On his way back, he ended up traveling with a companion. His name was Malikha. His appearance suggested that he was an educated and gentle person, but in fact, he was an insidious and hateful man. They were trudging the path through a hot, waterless desert. They were tormented by thirst and were nearly drawing their last breath when all of a sudden a tree discerned far away. Having approached it, they saw a huge clay jug at the foot of it filled to the brim with clear water and buried

in the ground. Bishr opined that a God-fearing person arranged this under a pledge to help exhausted travelers. However, Malikha disagreed and insisted on bathing in that jug and then breaking it. Bishr did his best to talk him out of it, but Malikha persistently declined the reasonable advice, quickly took his clothes off and jumped into the water. It turned out that this was not a jug but a deep pit, and Malikha choked and drowned in it. With great difficulty, Bishr found Malikha’s house in the city to give his money back, but learned that his wife was the only family member he had and asked to be hosted by the widow. Bishr was sure that this was the woman that he was once enamored with. They had a truly happy marriage, and Bishr, who wanted to display his happiness, wore only clothes of green color like the inhabitants of Paradise.

“The contest of Rum and Chinese artists” has a storyline that is just as rare. In this story, Iskandar arranges a contest of painters. They set up a partition in a large hall dividing it into two equal parts. The painters were told to create a mural on the wall in each of the two sections. The Rum residents created a beautiful painting,



*“Artist Mani” miniature*

but when the partition was removed, it turned out that the Chinese picture was a precise copy of the Rum residents’ painting. Everyone was amazed that the Chinese had managed to replicate the painting accurately without seeing it. Iskandar revealed the secret. The Chinese simply polished the wall, making it as smooth as a mirror, and the Rum residents’ painting was reflected in it. Iskandar concluded that though Rum residents could be considered excellent painters, no one could compete with the Chinese in the art of polishing.

The image of legendary artist Mani is also quite rare. The story about the painter describes a scene when Mani breaks a jug. He tried to scoop water from a spring skillfully created by a Chinese artist. Having exposed the deception, Mani drew the dead body of a dog in the spring, scaring travelers away from the pit. The miniature scene showed Mani painting the dead dog on the edge of that basin, while passers-by, who perceived this

as reality, did not approach it to get water. According to the Muslim tradition, Mani is considered the founding father of painting and an inimitable and unsurpassed artist. Indeed, Mani was an aesthetically developed person. He was fond of and highly appreciated music and pictorial art. Nevertheless, Mani’s success as an artist played the greatest role for the descendants.

One of the rarest stories is the miniature “Animals listen to Plato’s music” dating back to the late 16<sup>th</sup> century, derived from a privately owned collection in the United States. Plato, who was offended by the words of Aristotle about his superiority over other sages, created a musical instrument that had a magical effect on animals. Thus, Plato invented a musical instrument called organon. Taking into consideration the laws of world harmony, he managed to find such musical tunes that could attract wild animals from the desert, put to sleep or awaken any creature. Aristotle was tormented by envy and sought to achieve the same result on his own. He was capable of putting people to sleep by means of music but unable to wake them up. He had to resort to Plato’s help and it turned out that Plato had the superiority over all wise men. Aristotle, who failed to endow his musical instrument with such magical power, extended apology to Plato for his arrogant remarks.

One of the sections of the “Book of Iskandar’s glory” or “Sharafname” informs us of the legend about life-giving water. Iskandar accidentally learned from an old man about a life-giving miraculous spring hidden in the land of eternal darkness. He decided to find that wondrous spring. Having approached the borders of the country of darkness, however, he saw that entering it would be extremely dangerous as it would be impossible to find the way back. The solution was found by one old man, who was taken on a hike by his son, a young warrior, despite the Shah’s ban. He suggested taking a horse that just gave birth to a foal, slaughtering the foal on the edge of the country of darkness and then going into the darkness. The horse, guided by the maternal instinct, would always be able to find a way back to the place where the foal died. Iskandar was accompanied by Khyzr into the darkness. Ilyas, a prophet, was with them. They managed to find the spring and gain immortality. Initially, they had realized that Iskandar was not destined to find it and left without returning to the Shah. They found the spring by chance. They settled down nearby to have rest and get a snack, but when they dropped salted fish taken with them to eat into it, the fish came to life and



*“Contest of artists” miniature*

got away. From then onward, both of them had been immortal and they were assigned the duty to help stranded travelers, with Khyzr working onshore and Ilyas helping people at sea.

The illustrated Khamsa manuscripts of Nizami, kept in museums around the world, including the above-mentioned ones, date back from the beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> century till the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century and contain numerous miniatures, excluding decorative pages with “unvans”, etc. They are attributed to the Timurid, Turkoman and Safavid periods. This is an entire gallery of images (works). Despite their small size, they present a complete picture of the artistic life spanning two centuries. These miniatures prove the existence of a huge number of unexplored miniatures created for Nizami’s poems, as well as provide us with new material for the study of the realities of those epochs. ❀



*“The Tradition of Living Water” miniature.  
Turkey, late 16<sup>th</sup> century*

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