Following tradition

First monument of Azerbaijani miniature

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Warka’s battle with Aden’s army, p. 38b
In his dedication to the ruler who ordered the poem, Ayyuki appeals to a sultan called Mahmud, calling him "the king of the faith and the state". The title "sultan qazi" here applies to Mahmud Qaznavi, who was known for his raids on Northern India. The manuscript was written in wonderful "naskhi", while the quality of miniatures testifies to the royal origin of the customer. The plot of the poem is a love affair with adventures, wars, unexpected twists of fate and a happy end. The author of the illustrations chose the most breathtaking episodes, willingly portraying the external manifestations of the characters' emotions. The book has 71 miniatures, and this is a lot.

Against the backdrop of the tradition of anonymity in medieval arts, the mention of the artist's name is unusual. "Warka and Gulshah" is the only manuscript that survived in full from the pre-Mongol period. Its miniatures lie across the whole textual part of the sheet. They are all narrative, except for the first one. The miniatures strictly comply with the canons into which the characters, animals and plants fit regardless of the nature of the action. In the structure of the composition, there are also a number of unshakeable rules that do not depend on the text and sometimes contradict it. All visual elements are strictly regulated, including faces, gestures and clothes. For example, faces are depicted with a three-fourth turn, round and pink, with a small red mouth and dark pink and almost red cheeks. The face is framed by two braids or locks of hair, while the third one is behind the shoulder. The hair, separating on the forehead, surrounds the face with an arch. The bow-shaped eyebrows are crowned with almond-shaped elongated eyes. The figures of the characters are short and stocky. In fact, no attention is paid to the body, and the painter is only interested in the face depicted as a mask. Only the characters' postures are different in order to specify the nature of the action.

The same conditional idioms are typical of the depiction of animals. In almost all miniatures, horses are depicted in profile. Their mane falls on the neck in locks, and the same lock is on the forehead. Their tail is usually rolled in a knot, and sometimes easily falls. If the horse is standing, all his hooves touch the ground, his knees are straight and his head is leaning forward. Birds are depicted in certain conventional postures. They are disproportionately big compared to the trees, are sitting on the branches or on the ground, and according to the conventional language of miniatures, at the top of the composition.

The third thing that proves the conventionality of the graphic
system after the people and animals is elements of the landscape. If a landscape is shown in miniatures, then it is purely schematic. The boundaries of the ground are not clear and depictions of the soil and the sky are very rare. Sometimes, the painter refuses landscape elements, leaving the background of the miniature untouched, and sometimes, he even uses a decorative background totally covered with an ornament of three types: either branches that end with flowers, or bushes with animal conclusions, or something that resembles patterns of moiré or compressed fabric. The bushes with animal conclusions – caricature human heads in profile, as well as figures of horses, dogs and birds - are unique.

In the composition of a miniature, the main element is the law of symmetry and the balance of parts. In some miniatures, the axis of symmetry is clear enough. This can be a tree like one under which the sweethearts Warka and Gulshah are hugging each other or the cypress that separates Warka and Rabi as they gallop towards each other. It is notable that the painter Abd al-Mumin sometimes pierces the frame of the composition with some graphic element if he wants to underscore the axis of symmetry. In our miniature, the central cypress clearly goes beyond the upper frame of the composition. In some cases, the axis of symmetry may not be outlined, but then the very balance of masses establishes the symmetry of the composition. In some scenes of battles and skirmishes, the symmetry is so obvious that it does not need any explanation. In the scene of the battle between Gulshah and Rabi, the balance is more latent.

The links between the text of the poem and illustrations are represented by three levels: it is the storyline, correlations between the episode and its depiction, the link between the description of the characters and their visual analogues. Finally, it is an indirect, but no less obvious link between principles followed by the painter Abd al-Mumin al-Khoyi and the author of the poem, Ayyuki. In all 71 miniatures, the painter demonstrates full neglect of the text that he illustrates. Even when the miniatures correspond to the episode in the text, these are only various options of a certain archetype and compositional solutions on which the text of the poem had no significant impact. Scenes of mass battles correspond even more to the traditions of arts that do not depend on the text. In some of them, the painter is trying to create a sense of the crowd, a confusion of figures, but cannot overcome the deep-rooted habit of observing the law of symmetry. We can even say that the painter did not illustrate the text itself, but selected battle scenes from it. For example, in the episode in which Gulshah takes the veil off her face (according to the text), and in the miniature, she takes off her turban, Rabi’s horse is depicted in a slow motion, while Gulshah’s horse is shown galloping, which does not correspond to the situation at all.

In all the miniatures of the manuscript, we encounter the presence of a long-established system of depiction. It is exactly this arsenal of pictorial and iconographic stereotypes that Abd al-Mumin resorts to. Most of the scenes of dialogues,
skirmishes and battles represent typical purely conventional compositions that fit any plot in miniature, ceramics, metal, etc. Even if we are talking about episodes of battles, which are shown with specific examples in the text, the main role for the painter is played not by the poetic text, but by pictorial tradition.

Nevertheless, in a number of cases, the painter observes the literary basis, and this, above all, applies to three types of faces: the moon-faced (regardless of sex) type with eyebrows shaped as a bow or desperately closed, the type of an old man of whom the poem only says that he had a grey beard, and finally, the type of a mature knight with a beard around his face – “a crown of fluffy hyacinths around the moon”, as Ayyuki writes.

In the miniatures, a correlation between the motions of people and plants can be seen. For example, when Gulshah spears Rabi, the plant that separates their figures in the center leans over Rabi lying on the horse, repeating the movement of his body, while the stalk on the right becomes round, following the silhouette of Gulshah’s round shield. The fact that the characters’ postures and gestures often coincide with shapes of plants and trees deserves special attention. It is exactly here that the link between poetic and pictorial metaphors manifests itself.

At close examination, you discover a certain parallel between the literary and pictorial narratives. For example, in the text, warriors going to fight raise their heads in response to their tribal leader’s appeal; overwhelmed with terror, they howl together; the loving couple loses consciousness in the blink of an eye and makes a howl of despair. Thus, battle and genre episodes follow each other in a clear rhythm, forming symmetric cycles. This symmetry also manifests itself in the composition of miniatures like the high level of text stylization reflects in the illustrations. Like the author of the text, the painter totally neglects the world of phenomena and the reality, which is totally alien to western consciousness with its aspiration to capture the surrounding material world.

Under the battle miniature “Rabi exterminates Gulshah’s fellow tribesmen”, we read a couplet: “At dawn, he came and saw them with hearts full of desire, and dazzled with fury, he attacked them with a weapon.” Rabi’s name is written above the horseman striking with a saber. The painter draws a detailed picture of the battle here, which does not exist in the text. The next miniature “Rabi b. Adnan’s fight with a warrior from the Banu Sheyba tribe” is very expressive: for the first time, an animal is shown in the manuscript in the center of the composition. It is a fox with its paw raised as if she had come off the sheets of the numerous manuscripts of “Kalila and Dimna”.

One of the most interesting miniatures of the manuscript “Rabi’s Wrath” illustrates an episode in which furious Rabi demands a battle with the leaders of the Sheyba tribe. In contrast to the dramatic and emotional nature of the episode, the scene is full of tranquility and composure. A confrontation between horsemen and their symmetric location are also typical of it.

Gulshah kills Rabi, p. 22a
The next sheet of the manuscript is decorated with another episode of the battle between the main characters “The Fight of Rabi and Warka”. Warka is on the right and Rabi is on the left: “These two Arab princes attacked each other – two princes of a noble tribe and of eminent origin”. The painter himself placed the title of the scene on the margin of the miniature. The symmetry is emphasized even more by the stylized trees on the sides of the composition and in the center.

The emotionally and psychologically informative episode is reflected in the miniature “Gulshah approaches the army of Rabi”, which is described in the text in the following way: “This resplendent beauty queen hit the road on her horse. When she stopped in front of Rabi’s army, she froze in order to look around because she was very strong in terms of artfulness.” From the right to the left, Gulshah, Warka and Rabi are all marked with inscriptions above their heads.

The dramatic episode of the poem “when the veil fell off her face, the whole battlefield was filled with light” is illustrated by a colorful and compositionally full miniature, while the line “both armies were shocked on seeing her face” is reflected with a picture of two horsemen in the miniature. In center, Rabi leads captured Warka with a bare torso and hands tied up, while Gulshah is on horseback on the right. It must be noted that in the miniature “Gulshah takes the veil off her face” and some others, each character is surrounded with a light lilac halo, which is consonant with the color of the background plant ornament, while the background itself shades them with its violet color.

In the miniature “The Fight of Gulshah and Qalib”, there are only two characters, and Gulshah is on the right again. “She attacked him like the Angel of Retribution and struck with a spear, but he snatched the spear out of her hands.” And again, there is a strange tree in the shape of a triple candlestick here like the whole flora of the miniatures of the manuscript. Like in some previous miniatures, voids are filled with flying birds here, while a hunting dog, appropriated from scenes of hunting, runs under the feet of Qalib’s horse.

The miniature “Rabi cuts the head of Warka’s father into two”, at the bottom of the sheet, is framed by text at the bottom and at the top. “So he said and furiously launched an attack. With his sword hardened in battles, he dealt a surprising blow and cut him into two at once.” This miniature which, like others, has strict symmetry stands out because of an interesting detail: Khomam’s horse, who stretches in a leap, takes in the left part of the composition as much space as Rabi and his satellite. The powerful movement from the left to the right ends on the divided figure of Khomam.

In the multi-figure battle scene “Warka defeats Aden’s army”, the painter is trying to get away from the centuries-long iconographic tradition of ancient mural painting and graphic canons typical of products of decorative-applied arts, but these stereotypes are still strong in his consciousness. For this reason, despite all the seeming disorder, his composition is easily dismembered into two registers each of which is built on the law of symmetry. On both sides of the axis of symmetry on top, there are two warriors, and two horsemen on the sides of the composition below frame a horseman and an infantryman fighting in the center.

But the fact that the painter realizes the supremacy of miniature arts in comparison with other types of visual arts and seeks ways of enriching visual methods of expression and overcoming stringent iconographic canons shows a new stage in medieval arts, when miniature illustrations
became the most significant type of visual arts in the Muslim world.

In the last of the 25 battles of the manuscript, the calligrapher clarifies the action: “The Battle of Warka and the defeat of the armies of Bahrain and Aden”. According to the text, Warka’s warriors “went for the enemy, these heroes who wipe out ranks and vanquish armies... When the enemy warriors lost their leaders, they turned their bridles back and took flight”. The painter, remaining within the framework of the law of symmetry, still paints a dynamic battle scene: in the center, an axis runs from top to bottom through Warka’s head and a warrior killed under the hooves of his horse. Three attackers on the right and three others retreating in the left half of the composition frame the central part where a warrior killed by Warka’s saber freezes in the air with his head down, while another one is about to be trodden on by Warka’s horse.

In culturological terms, it is difficult to find a more successful example of parallelism between literary and visual aesthetics. This monument of book art is valuable for history because the identity of its approach to the work of the poet and illustrator lies not in the external layers of the poem or its plot, but in its principle and language.

The manuscript “Warka and Gulshah”, the only one of its kind in Azerbaijan, testifies to the leading role of our country’s arts in the formation of the miniature arts of the East.

References