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# Painting and Society The Formation of the Persian Painting in the 14<sup>th</sup> Century

Mohamadreza Abolghassemi\*

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## Abstract

Persian painting has usually been studied from historical point of views. But its formation is rooted in a specific social context. In this study, we will try to contextualize it and we will show that this social context has a crucial role regarding its aesthetic. Persian painting is an art of royal courts and it represents the life of princes combined with Persian epic legends. This social context and its impact on the Persian painting will be studied here, showing that ordinary life of royal families is the central theme of these paintings and not, as it is said usually, the spirituality of mystical realms. The formation of the Persian painting in the 14<sup>th</sup> century is typically related to the Persian cultur ruled by the Mongols and Timûrids who tried to legitimize their kingdom by supporting the arts and particularly painting. That is why the art of painting flourished in Persia during their dynasties.

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\*. Assistant Professor of Art Studies, School of Visual Arts University College of Fine Art, University of Tehran  
Email:mr.abolghassemi@ut.ac.ir

Throughout the work of art, we find the fundamental categories of the human mind at a given moment. The ability to express the sum of the usual and intellectual experiences of a society belongs as much to the plastic form as to the verbal, gestural or musical languages (Francastel, 1965: 15)

Persian painting is a private painting (*peinture privée*), made for the pleasure and edification of one person at a time and not for a collective effect (Grabar, 1999: 58)

## Introduction

Before attempting to enter into the debate on the sociological aspect of the formation of the Persian painting in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, we present some general points as an introduction. First, let us consider the illustrative character of the Persian miniature, and then try to speak of it from a sociological point of view. Firstly, this “collective” art –created by painters, calligraphers, bookbinder, etc – has always been created to illustrate different texts, be they poems, stories or scientific books, which leads us to seek the origin of this stylistic specificity. Secondly, we will consider the role of patronage in the formation of the various styles of Persian miniature.

Indeed, the sociological aspect of this art appears clearly through the relationship between patrons and artists, because one could not imagine an art of the book as it existed in medieval Iran without conceiving the formative influence of patronage on the developments and the aesthetic evolutions

of the Persian miniature. The art of the book as an artistic fact, a collective creation at the level of the interactions between several individuals – patron, calligrapher, painter, and bookbinder – will be susceptible to a sociological study. It seems that an analysis of these interactions will show us how and why the Persian painting emerged on the artistic scene of Iran in the fourteenth century after eight centuries of absence following the Arab invasion in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. The Persian painting did not arise, as *dei ex machina*, for it is known from the several archaeological sources that the pictorial art in pre-Islamic Iran - mural painting, miniature, for example, the work of Mani the prophet (216-277 AD) and the Manichaeans that this pictorial art existed in a form, evidently different from Western painting. It is therefore possible to speak of are-emergence, a sparkling blossoming of the Persian painting in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. We will try to highlight the origins of this reemergence.

## I. Illustration: the general context of the Persian painting formation

The history of the Persian painting is the history of illustration, of the art of the book: a true assemblage of *liber* and *pictura*. Indeed, it was for this very reason that we did not call it “painting” since this term, in its western sense, refers to the ontologically independent objects not linked to other objects (e.i books). We must remark that we can not find a pictorial tradition throughout the world whose reliance on books is as long-lasting as Persian



painting.

We must therefore ask how has been formed the art of illustration at the beginning of the 11<sup>th</sup> century in Iran, considering that during this period Iran has been destructed because of the massacres of the Ilkhanide invasions. Although Gombrich does not indicate the basis on which the art of an epoch is formed, he rightly declares that “the specific language of a people has not been formed by chance; nor does the style used by the artists of a certain period is itself a product of chance” (Gombrich, 2003: 74). If, according to Gombrich, “chance” can not be the reason for the emergence of an artistic style, we must seek it through certain facts, for example, historical and sociological. It seems that in order to find a convincing answer explaining to us the emergence of the Persian painting at this time, it is essential to make a study that will deal with the sociological aspect of the question. It is evident, moreover, that we cannot define here all the historical questions concerning this art.

What is obvious is that Iranians have always been fascinated by poetry: synthesis of all the arts, art par excellence as Hegel said. And this is the reason why during their entire medieval history they tried to illustrate poetic works:

Long before the conquest of Islam, Persia honored literature and especially the poetry that was first oral. Very soon this

literary form had to honor the sovereign. In the 11<sup>th</sup> century it expanded and improved. At the same time, there was a poem sung by the Ismailis and Sufis. While the fragmentation of the empire which followed the Ilkhanids favored a revival of literature, poetry was refined by contact with the courts of the fifteenth century. (Bérinstain, 1997: 6)

It is important to ask where the correlation between Persian pictorial art and the art of the book comes from. Several hypothetical answers can be given to this question. Some think that the Persian painting contributed to the diffusion of the ethical and metaphysical ideas expressed in the poems, and the images, in one way or another, revealed them to patrons, princes, etc. There is a contingent reason that artists have illustrated books, so that the prince may send them to several provinces or even dedicate them to foreign countries; If one accepts this functioning of the work of art it is therefore possible to induce that the illustrations could illuminate the themes related in the books, and made them perceptible by the images presented in each illustration.

History reminds us that most of the leaders of medieval Iran were of tribal origin and changed their place of residence several times even for a year, needing pasture for their herds. For example, the Seljuks

dynasties (1037-1157), Ilkhanids (1290-1353), Tīmūrids (1387-1502), Safavids (1501-1732) and Qadjars (1786-1921) were all of tribal origin. In this way of life, works of art had to be transportable. If we consider that the masterpieces of the Persian painting were created during the governance of these dynasties, we can understand why artists have created works that are easy to transport.

But the reason that seems more accurate to us is that the miniature was created by Muslim artists for patrons who also presented themselves as Muslim. This sociological fact has forced the two agents, i. e. the patrons and the artists, to be faithful to religion and its laws. Although there is no Islamic law that directly prohibits the creation of the image by believers (while one of the ten commandments of the Old Testament prohibits it) each artistic object, an image or a realistic statue, which could assimilate itself to an idol and which would prevent the believer from being a monotheist has always been condemned in Islam. In other words, Islam does not promote so-called realistic images since they can be a prodrome of blasphemy. This is why in the Islamic civilization we voluntarily avoided creating *vera similitudo*, the true image, similar to the objects created by God. In the Persian miniature,

In order not to seek to equal the only creator who is God, the artist must not attempt to represent reality. He often stages an imaginary universe realized from disparate elements. [...] Similarly,

the stylization of the characters is paramount. At no time should the painting attempt to paint identically the most important creation of God. Its role is to *illustrate* and not to paint model on the real world. (*Ibid.*)

In summary, about the interaction between religion and the Persian miniature, as far as the iconographic aspect of the question is concerned, it can be said that Muslim artists could create images provided that

- A. They don't appear as real as they are in the world, that is, the figures and the objects must be distinguishable through not having verisimilitude properties;
- B. The face of man is not alive and does not express the presence of the soul in the body – because the image must never disturb the *potentia absoluta Dei*; it is God alone who is able to give the soul to the bodies.
- C. The artist shortens the figures to make a clear distinction between the creations of God, nature, and a simple image. Indeed, Muslim artists have never accepted the theory of art as *imitatio naturae*.
- D. The imaginary aspect of the image is obvious. The work shows that we are before a soulless image, a simple object that has no verisimilitude properties. It is precisely for this reason that we



never find a linear perspective in the Persian painting since its aesthetics is that of pure visual effect, a plastic language based on the aggregative space instead of the systematic space of the painting of the Renaissance.

Although all the great religions of the world (*Weltreligionen*, a Weberian term) have normative systems and include “a number of precepts and prohibitions” (Boudon, 1994: 494), Shiite Islam has always tolerated the existence of pictorial art. Moreover, it should be noted that “the works of Iranian art, especially for painting, have shaped the taste of all the great modern empires of the Muslim world” (Grabar, 1999: 5). According to the Islamic tradition, art must not guide the Muslim people towards paganism; this is the unshakeable limit of all art in Muslim countries.

## II. The general themes of the Persian miniature

The subjects of the Persian painting was for a long time unknown outside the Iranian cultural area and many are difficult to identify without familiarity with a whole world of written and oral sources. Nevertheless, considering the themes which presented themselves throughout the history of this art, it is possible to categorize all the works that have come down to us in three general categories:

A) Illustration of historical events;

B) The illustration of the idyllic stories and themes of Ferdowsi, Nezami (1141-1210) etc.;

C) The illustration of the mystical poems of Hafiz (c.1320-1389), Attar (c.1142-1220), etc.

The first category presents the wars, the triumphs, the events of the life of a king or a patron. For example, *Zafar-nâme* or the *Book of Victories*, which is the official story of Taymûr (Tamerlane), founder of the Tîmûrids dynasty, shows not only the victories of the conqueror, but also his work as a builder. One of the most interesting images in this book is the one representing the construction of the great Samarkand mosque completed in 1404.

The second category, which is also the largest among the three, is related to the *Shah Nâmah* or *The Books of Kings* (1010) of Ferdowsi (c.940-1020), an Iranian poet known for his epic which is both historical and mythical. Because the poet recounts the history of the country from the creation of the world to the Arab conquest in the seventh century and relates the birth and life of the Iranian people, this book played a fundamental role in the formation of Iranian identity as well as in the emergence of the art of book in Iran, to the extent that 10,000 miniatures have come down to us today that illustrate several scenes of this book. We will return to it later.

The third category, that is, mystical poems, has rarely been illustrated, simply because mystical themes are difficult to paint. Feeling incapable of representing mystical content because of their thematic and formal

complexities, miniaturists were often content to paint historical and mythical narratives in their works.

### **III. Court and its role in the formation of the Persian miniature**

Undoubtedly, the courts possessed all the means of the production of book art in medieval Iran. According to Grabar

Persian painting is above all a *profane painting controlled and directed by the princely courts*. In this it is totally different from Western painting until the 17<sup>th</sup> century [...] On the one hand this characteristic contributes to its refinement; but, on the other hand, the cultural importance of this painting is perhaps diminished, for only an elite seems to have protected this art (Ibid., 94 ; my italics).

From a sociological perspective, we will attempt to elucidate the relations between the court, the patrons, and the art of the miniature as a “collective” artistic phenomenon at the level of creation. Obviously, the appearance of the miniature, as a historical artistic fact, must be studied while considering the sociological parameters. Unlike the Western world, which has well studied the role of the patrons in art, in any case, and in spite of all the efforts undertaken by art historians, little attention

has been paid to the sociological aspects of the emergence and development of the Persian painting and, a fortiori, the medieval art of Iran in general.

It is well known that in the West the Church has always been the principal protector of Christian art up to the modern era. Without going into the details of this debate, the Christianity is an iconophilic religion, one that accepts the presence of artistic phenomena, particularly figurative in religious practice, to exalt the religious passions and feelings of believers. Art – taken in the pre-modern sense of the word – through the Church was constantly in contact with religious society. Artists were the mediators between the spiritual message of the Book and the people praying in the holy places. Consequently, the presence of figurative art in society was visibly acceptable. As for Muslim society, as we have said, we do not find a veneration of (figurative) art among the religious authorities in general.

Knowing that, on the one hand, the only book placed at the top of the Islamic tradition is, of course, the Koran, the word of God carried to the prophet by the angel Gabriel, and the eternal guide of the Muslim people according to the Text and, on the other hand, the miniature was an art stricto sensu of the book, it will be necessary to ask why the Koran was never illustrated?

Unlike the Bible, which could be illustrated by different images, Muslims never illustrated the Koran. The only way to embellish the Book was the most beautiful writing possible. Because of this religious

requirement we see an outbreak of calligraphy among Muslim peoples. In fact, writing the Koran, *scriptura sacra*, procreated a sort of calligraphy unequalled in the history of art. The calligrapher could illuminate the cover and engraving of the Koran without painting figures.

After briefly recalling the general perspective of figurative art among the Muslim people, we will now study the reasons why this type of art appeared in Iran and always remained an Iranian art. In what follows, we will try to propose three fundamental aspects – artistic, technical and sociological – of the emergence of the Persian painting in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, during Ilkhanid period.

### III. I The artistic aspect

From the thirteenth century Asia was in the hands of the Mongols. China was their political center and the great Khan designated the governors of each part of the empire. At the time Iran was close to China and thanks to the Silk Road the relationship between these two great civilizations grew more and more. We know, moreover, that China has had a scintillating tradition of painting, especially that of painting on silk: “In China, of all the arts, painting occupies the supreme place. It is the object of a true mystic; because, in the eyes of a Chinese, pictorial art reveals the mystery of the universe par excellence” (Cheng, 1991: 11).

According to some historical documents, Chinese painters worked for the Mongols in Iran and taught the Iranian painters

the techniques of painting. This technical influence, according to some, was the main reason for the birth of the Persian miniature: “every history of art presents itself as a constant struggle with matter. In this struggle, it is not the tool, the technique that is primordial, but the contrary creative thinking that wants to extend its field of intervention, increase its capacity to shape” (Riegl, 2002: 31). It seems, then, that the profound effect of Chinese art has only led to the development of artistic technique among Iranian painters, and that in China there existed a sort of dexterity which probably did not exist in Iran under Mongols; However, “Persian painting is not an avatar of Chinese painting” (Grabar, 1999: 131).

Comparing a classical Chinese painting with a Persian miniature, one finds only certain similarities at the level of the motifs. Hence the presence of the so-called Chinese motifs in the images or even on the craft objects of Iran. Nevertheless, each work represents a totally different world in relation to the other: emptiness is the essence of Chinese painting, whereas the Persian painting is an image full of innumerable details, as long as one often speaks of *horror vacui* in the Iranian miniature. The influence of Chinese art was only an impulse to the re-emergence of the Persian painting and, of course, did not preside over the formation of its aesthetic canons, for in the eyes of Muslims calligraphy has always been the major art although “the Chinese consider painting as the only true art” (Swann, 1958: 21).

According to historical sources, alongside the Chinese painters, Christian painters from Syria and Mesopotamia worked in Tabriz, capital of the Ilkhanids. It is probable that a painting representing the birth of Muhammad (pbuh) in the *Universal History* was made while considering the Italian painting of the 13<sup>th</sup> century since its composition diametrically resembles the scene of the birth of Christ in the Christian pictorial tradition.

### III. II The technical and patronage aspects

The creation of great works demands considerable material facilities. Wealth can only be evoked when we consider that gold was the color frequently used in the Persian painting to represent the shimmer of the purified essence of the defilement of the darkness of the material bodies – an artistic tradition that came from Mani and his doctrine in relation to light and darkness (see Massignon, 2000 [1936]). Moreover, the manufacture of a manuscript in the princely library was a dazzling collective production. The implementation of such projects required cooperation between several sectors of the library. As for color, for example, it is known that

the colors used for manuscripts are similar to our gouaches. The basic pigments are mineral for the most part and from very different sources. Thus, the famous ultramarine,

derived from the lapis-lazuli, comes exclusively from the mountains of Badakhshan, in Afghanistan. Cinnabar or vermilion is imported from Europe, perhaps from Spain. The best indigo comes from India, while saffron, orpiment or copper green are produced locally. The preparation of colors occupies, in the royal workshops, a category of specialized personnel (Porter, 1997: 15).

It should be noted that the artists who worked in the library were the best of their time. For this reason, for example, the manuscripts produced in Shiraz are less refined than the manuscripts made in Tabriz where Ghâzân (1285-1304) established a workshop where several painters, calligraphers, worked in such a way that, “from beginning of the fourteenth century that Persian painting acquires a set of conventions in the representation of men and things” (Grabar, 1999: 141).

From the seventh century when Iran was conquered by Muslims until the beginning of the Mongol invasion in the thirteenth century, the Islamization of the country was a complicated process. On the one hand, the Iranians insisted on their Iranian identity but, on the other hand, they accepted Islam and, nevertheless, tried to resist an usurping force, that is to say, the Arabs. In this situation, art does not always have the same function. The calligraphers traditionally were admired and they were able to work easily without any

stigmatization because they wrote the word of God, an unquestionably imposing task. In addition, for Muslims, writing was the “collar of wisdom”. The painters, however, naturally lived in a totally different situation, since they practiced an art almost prohibited by religious law and their professional existence was always a prey to dissolution. In short, “the Iranian tradition, and Muslim in general, considers painting as an aspect only of an art of the book in which writing plays the principal part” (Grabar, 1999: 28). It is known, for example, that Timurid prince Baysungur Mirza (1433), one of the greatest patrons in the history of Iran, employed forty scribes for his court.

12 One of the artistic specificities of Islamic art is the use of writing, in the form of calligraphy, in all public monuments, mosques, mausoleums and objects: “writing on objects other than Books – and especially monuments – is an originality of Islamic culture, and writing has escaped the rarefied domain of the connoisseur, which has not been the case either in the West or the Far East” (Grabar, 1996: 59). There was then always the opportunity to work for the calligraphers out of the princely courts.

In this case, the only institution that could protect painters and insure their lives was evidently the court. If Church has been the protector of art in the West, the Islamic authority has only established the restrictions for the artist. Given these limitations, it was natural that the artist wanted to seek professional protection. And what enabled him

to achieve this was the so-called professional and economic protection of the court. It is therefore possible to infer that at every moment when the court has been powerful, pictorial art was soaring. This is the reason why the art of the book has always manifested itself through dynasties which were the most powerful at the time and which possessed the best artists and artisans.

### III. III The sociological aspect

As regards the aspects of the formation of the Persian painting at the beginning of the fourteenth century, the sociological aspect was the most effective. By the sociological aspect, we mean openness to figurative art that did not have its equal in Iran – or even in the Muslim world – until the Ilkhanid period. We will try to explain here the clearly intentional action of the Mongol princes to support the art of book in Iran during fourteenth century. First, we recall that in the ‘comprehensive’ methodology of methodological individualism, “to understand an action is to find the reasons that led the actor to perform it. And to find these reasons, the sociologist tries to ‘put himself in the place’ of the typical actor he studies” (Boudon, 1969: 56-57). In the comprehensive method, if one possesses sufficient information, one can “put oneself in the place and understand the acts of any type of individual, living at any time and in any Society” (Ibid.). Based on this method, we then proceed to a study that postulates a possible interpretation of what happened in Iran under the Ilkhanids in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, and which brought out the Persian miniature.

To achieve this interpretation, we must trace a *world of art* (to speak like Howard Becker) in which the patron and workshop, as two actors in the art of the book, prove their interactions.

The initial culture of the Ilkhanid princes was Mongol. But according to some (Grabar, for example), the art of painting and the patronage of artists were among the means chosen by the Ilkhans to *legitimize their power* by demonstrating their ‘iranicity’. Such an assumption is inaccurate for the very reason that the art of miniature was a private art *stricto sensu*, that is, the artist illustrated a book in a private workshop of a patron while knowing that his work will not leave the court and will not contact the public. In what way and how was it possible for a prince to use an illustrated book to reveal his tendency to Iranian culture? It is true that a probable function of any work of art is that of the propagation of an ideology, of a specific attitude of an artist or of a patron; But this functioning will be accomplished when the work is accessible to the public, while the art of the book remains restricted to courts and private workshops of a prince. It seems that ‘personal interest’ was the main source of the re-emergence of the Persian painting in Iran in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, since, as Grabar has shown, the Persian painting “was a private art in the sense that its images could not be seen and, a fortiori, appreciated by more than one person at a time” (Grabar, 1999: 132). What personal interest could persuade the prince to spend so much to illustrate several books?

the support given to the

production of fine books, illustrated or not, was part of the ‘glory’ of the prince. [...] Few of these princes read or even looked at these books, but it was important for them to have them in their treasures. [...] At this level, that of the paintings considered as merchandise, the detail of the subjects represented was of little importance, but the richness of the presentation and the reputation of the painters, gilders and calligraphers associated with the manuscript were essential (*Ibid*).

One can not always be in full agreement with Grabar, since, at least during the Timurid period, the princes were themselves painters or calligraphers, and according to several sources they favored artistic creation alongside a master who worked in the princely studio. Hence, such a reductionist way *like that of Grabar* seems insufficient for us to conceive of the complex phenomenon of the art of book in Iran. Material concerns were undoubtedly a motivation for all the support given to illustration during this period, but it must not be forgotten that, according to the sources that reached us, there was not a market of art for which the princes loved to spend their wealth. Rather, it was a personal tendency to assimilate to the elites and live like an enlightened prince, attaching to a social class historically known in Iran, that



of patron princes of good reputation. Thus, the Iranian patrons were not a definite social group as, for example, the case of Florence at the time of the Renaissance.

Although the third governor of the Ilkhanid Mongols, Il-Khan Ahmad (1282-1284), proclaimed himself a Muslim, it was Ghâzân (1285-1304) who established a Mongol Islamic state par excellence. Before he came to power, Ilkhanides were Buddhists or Christians. For example, Abâqâ (1265-1282), the one who built a Buddhist temple in Tabriz,

had a Christian wife, Maria Palaeologos, and was in correspondence with several Western rulers: Christian influence is to be seen in the art of the Mongol court for long after this. Meanwhile Arghun (1284-1291) was a Buddhist, and this was no doubt one of the reasons why the country was open to artistic influences from Central Asia and China. The early capitals of the Il-Khans were cosmopolitan centers with, in general, *wide tolerance of other religions*. Even after Ghazan (1285-1304) had officially made Islam his state religion, his interest in scholarship ensured the presence in the Tabriz of foreign scholars from many countries (Gray, 1961: 21-22; my italics)

The interesting point is that the Mongols chose Shiite Islam while at the time the hold of Sunni Islam represented by the Caliphs was evident all over the Muslim world. Moreover, as we have already pointed out, they leaned intelligently towards Shi'ism for two contingent reasons: first, they presented a kind of sympathy in the eyes of the Iranians, especially to the Sunni Muslims who always regarded the Iranians as their subjects and profited at every opportunity to insult them like profane, pagan etc.; secondly, this choice allowed them to justify their usurpation and to ensure the stability of their governance. In any case, we know that religion for the Ilkhanids was only a kind of political game, for, for example, Öljeitü (1304-1317) who proclaimed himself a Muslim died because of alcoholism!

Throughout the history of Islamic art, an image, an effigy of the prophet Muhammad can only be found under the Ilkhanids governance in Iran. Apparently the first image of the prophet of Islam appeared in the *Universal History* of Rashid al-Din, illustrated in Tabriz in the 14<sup>th</sup> century and in the time of Ghâzân, at the very beginning of what we know of Persian painting in the manuscripts. So we see that at the time, religious tolerance allowed artists to do what is impossible, even today! For the representation of Muhammad is a religious prohibition and it is an impassable tradition in all Muslim countries. What is interesting is that in all the illustrations in this book the prophet was illustrated as an ordinary

man without any nimbus around his head.

A national epic has a deep political and cultural content and appears when a nation tries to form itself as a nation or when *Volksgeist* (a Hegelian expression) is attacked by a foreign force. It is created so that the nation can be formed again and the organism of society continues its existence. Ferdowsi wrote the *The Book of Kings* when Iran was under the blows of the Arab cultural whip. He created an epic work which includes the mythical history of Iran as well as an inexhaustible reserve of the Persian language for all poets who succeed him.

So it seems that the obvious trend to illustration of the *The Book of Kings* is not a coincidence in Iran under Mongols. This epic, as far as we know, was never illustrated before the 14<sup>th</sup> century, when the Ilkhanids decided to identify with the legendary kings of the Iranian people: “around 1300 in particular, the Ilkhanids inspired a real revival of interest in the masterpiece of Ferdowsi and consecrated it as the main source of images in Iranian art” (Grabar, 1999: 112).

According to a pre-Islamic tradition of Persia, the Mazdean king had to have the light of glory so that he could justify his governance. In the iconography of Iranian art, this divine light was described by a nimbus around the head of the king. Drawing on the illustrations that came to us from the Ilkhanids period, we can see that the legendary king of the image is dressed in the same clothes as the Mongol king of the time and carries a luminous nimbus around his head. We said

above that in the illustrations, the image of Muhammad does not wear it but, on the other hand, the king was presented with a halo gilded like a saint. We can infer that the *The Book of Kings* symbolized the Iranicity of dynasties of foreign origin and represented the acculturation of the Mongolian warriors.

Moreover, in the Persian painting we do not often find the decrepitude of age. This stylistic character can be interpreted in several ways. Eternal youth, the absence of senility, in short, immortality: this is the presage of the interest of a Mongolian warrior, the present patron, to become immortal as an image without decay. This aspect of the Persian painting seems to be apparent when we consider that in the pictorial art of Iran of the fourteenth century, the notion of portraiture never existed. Moreover, unlike Chinese painting, the Persian painting “stabilizes a vision of one of the world’s appearances” (Jacquet, 1990: 1012). It gives the world of mortal creatures, a sort of everlasting life; it *stabilizes* the juvenility of the king and his entourage in a scene in the image of paradise, without any mess, a quiet lodging, an interminable enjoyment, an indestructible life under a gentle light.

Not having enough historical sources, it is difficult to sketch a scheme of patronage system in medieval Iran. We have been shown that in the Christian West there were several forms of interaction between the patron and the artist and we do not enter into this debate here. As for the Iranian artist who worked for a prince, we do not know whether he was a

*servitù particolare*, or whether there was a form of relationship between a client and an employer. It is not known whether the artist lodged in the court or whether he lived in the city as a citizen or – to be more exact – as a ‘subject’ of a king. The method of payment is unknown to us. It is unclear whether the artist was paid, for example, monthly or if he received a fee after completing the project. It would be easier to talk about the artist’s situation in medieval Iran if there was sufficient information concerning the fees, authorities, prerogatives, immunities, advantages, rights, emoluments, exemptions and other benefits that the artist could obtain in working for a prince.

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The work of an artist has been assessed according to what criteria? Was it the prince himself who assessed it, or was there a certain person in the court who determined the artistic value of a miniature? We do not know. What seems obvious is that there were categorical degrees in each workshop and all the artists worked under the direction of someone we would today call ‘art director’. This director could be the great vizier of the time (Rashid al-din c.1247-1318 or Mir Ali Shir Nava’i 1440-1500), a calligrapher Mir Ali Tabrizi (c.1340-1420), or a painter Behzad c.1460-1535). As in the case of 17<sup>th</sup> century Italy, the protection of the patron contributed greatly to the recognition of the work of an artist because “in the absence of professional criticism such support and encouragement was the easiest way for a painter to become known. To establish one’s name it is vital to start with the

protection of some patron” (Haskell, 1980: 7).

In the absence of historical sources, it is not clear that how was the social position of a painter in medieval Iranian society. Nevertheless, what has come down to us shows that in the court, in the fifteenth century, all the elites knew that, for example, Behzad, the master, was a painter unique to artistic innovations and named him Mani, the second. Very little is known about the reception and celebration of a painter outside the court. As we have already remarked, the calligrapher always had a famous situation in Muslim societies whereas the painters had no professional social protection than in the princely courts.

It is necessary to ask why, in this difficult situation, some people consciously devoted themselves to a profession that was always in danger by religious authority and was often criticized by the Orthodox Muslims. One of the possible answers would be the considerable emolument of a painter, and perhaps many profits which would be absent from the court. In the 14<sup>th</sup> century Iran, according to historical sources, there would have been no demand for the image of man, portrait, or landscape painting except what the princes made in their private workshops. However,

with some exceptions concerning image painters in Persian cultures [16<sup>th</sup> century] of Iran and India, only copyists saw their creations purchased as real works of art; Recognized as such by the name of their author

and by their intrinsic qualities  
(Grabar, 1999: 58).

If the Mongols had not begun the creation of a princely workshop to illustrate several books, could one imagine a pictorial art such as it existed throughout the medieval history of Iran? Answering this question is not easy. What is evident is that all the dynasties which succeeded the Mongols will continue a cultural tradition already begun. In the name of Iranianism and acculturation, the Mongols protected hundreds of Iranian artists by giving them, the opportunity to work.

The artists showed their creative capacity by emitting stylistic elements specific to their artistic will. One could therefore say that without the will of these dynasties of foreign origin for a pictorial art, there would not be something like the Persian miniature: a lack for the whole history of art. Indeed, it is certain that the Iranian painters had talent because their works are in several museums of the world. Nevertheless, it should not be forgotten that

we can not separate the talents of painters from the circumstances in which they worked, nor can we understand artistic patronage by isolating it from the wider social context in which it manifests itself. When art is considered in relation to power, patronage constitutes the vital link between the two, art and power can enlighten one another (Kempers, 1997: 10).

## Conclusion

We have attempted to show that the Persian painting emerged in the 14<sup>th</sup> century under the Mongol Ilkhanids. This emergence, at first sight, would seem like a *contradictio in adjecto*, for in a country usurped by a wild tribe one can not hope for the apparition of a subtle art like miniature. But, as we have seen, this paradoxical situation provides an unparalleled background for the Iranian artist to realize his creative will. Religious tolerance, rich courts, Iranian acculturation tendencies, patron princes and personal interest in immortality through images were the reasons for the emergence of the art of book in medieval Iran.

We know that “works of art are not the product of brilliant individuals, but rather the collective result of the work of all those who cooperate through the conventions characteristic of a world of art which allow these works of art exist” (Becker, 1999: 102). Outside this cooperation, the formation of the Persian painting was impossible because what we consider as a painting was the result of a collective process of patrons, painters, calligraphers, etc.

The aesthetics of this art is a ‘collective aesthetic’ since in an evaluation of the work one must consider several aesthetic aspects of the different arts. The aesthetics of drawing, calligraphy, composition, color and even the aesthetics of the relationship between the text, the poem and the image form the set of aesthetic values of a Persian miniature.

We have seen that without the protection of the Mongol and Timurid patronage, the painting could not take its rise because Muslim society had no place for a pictorial art. The patron appeared, of course, as a Muslim, whereas the customs of the court were rather secular, and what followed was an eagerness for what was forbidden in society, including painting.

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