

# NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

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GREAT 16TH-CENTURY PERSIAN PAINTINGS

EXHIBITED BY THE NATIONAL GALLERY

WASHINGTON, D. C. October 19, 1979. Perhaps the greatest assemblage of sixteenth-century Persian painting seen in the last 400 years will open December 16 in the National Gallery of Art's East Building. The exhibition, Wonders of the Age: Masterpieces of Early Safavid Painting, 1501-1576, is currently on view at the British Library, London.

Included are some of the finest Persian miniatures ever created, among them Sultan-Muhammad's The Court of Gayumars, which is considered the supreme example of Persian painting. The exhibition is built, however, around the paintings and illuminations created for Shah Tahmasp's Book of Kings, a sumptuous presentation of the Persian national epic, and his renowned Quintet, the illustrations of which represent the classic peak of Safavid painting. The Book of Kings (Shahnama), a narrative poem completed by the poet Firdawsi in 1010 A.D., consists of more than 50,000 rhyming couplets recounting the legendary histories of the first Iranian dynasties. The Quintet (Khamsa) is composed of five narrative poems by the twelfth-century poet Nizami.

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Stuart Cary Welch, curator of Muslim and Hindu painting at the Fogg Art Museum, Cambridge, and recently appointed special consultant to the Department of Islamic Art at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, has organized the exhibition and written the accompanying catalogue. The exhibition will also be shown at the Fogg in the spring.

The Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, prohibited from lending by its founding statutes, will offer a companion exhibition of 47 paintings, illuminations, drawings and book bindings selected from its own outstanding collection of Persian art from the same period. Entitled Art of the Court of Shah Tahmasp, the Freer's exhibition will also open December 16 and will continue into the spring.

Public institutions lending works to Wonders of the Age from abroad include the British Library, the British Museum, and the Royal Scottish Museum in the United Kingdom, the Musée Guimet and the Musée du Louvre in France and the University Library of Uppsala in Sweden. Contributing institutions in the United States are The Cleveland Museum of Art, the Fogg Art Museum, The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Arthur A. Houghton, Jr. and Edwin Binney 3rd are among the individuals who have lent works from their private collections.

Persian miniatures are highly complex. In rich jewel-like colors, they depict visions of an ideal and often fantastic world populated by fabulous animals and birds in gardens and landscapes, brave heroes, and comical demons and dragons. Often created in col-

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laborative efforts, the miniatures and illuminations were painted for emperors and princes who personally supervised the work. They exemplify a level of court art when both patrons and artists were highly cultivated. All devout Muslims, many were also mystics.

Shah Tahmasp, son of Shah Isma'il who founded the Safavid dynasty and was himself a patron of the arts, was passionately concerned with pictorial art, particularly books or albums of the finest materials, illustrated with the most skillfully rendered paintings and calligraphy. For many years he maintained at his court a royal workshop in which he employed the most talented painters, illuminators, gilders, calligraphers and other artists in his realm. In the middle years of his reign, he became increasingly disaffected with painting and other secular arts, formally banning them in 1556 and remaining adamantly against them until the early 1570s. During that time of austerity, several of his artists joined the Mughal court in India, thus extending their influence to another Persianate school. Others came under the patronage of Sultan Ibrahim Mirza, a nephew of Shah Tahmasp who encouraged more "baroque" mannerisms that challenged the subtle classicism favored by Shah Tahmasp and served as precursors for the next phase of Safavid art.

The exhibition presents a comprehensive view of the art produced shortly before and during the reign of Shah Tahmasp, who ruled the area now known as the Islamic Republic of Iran from 1524 until his death in 1576. In addition to Sultan Muhammad, such masters as

Dust-Muhammad, Mir-Musavvir, Aqa-Mirak, Mirza-'Ali, Mir Sayyid-'Ali and Shaykh-Muhammad are represented. Included are 37 miniatures and illuminations from Shah Tahmasp's Book of Kings and 21 from his Quintet as well as five examples from the Collected Works (Divan) of the fourteenth-century poet Hafiz, probably prepared for Shah Tahmasp's brother Sam Mirza. Two folios from Rose Garden (Gulistan) of the thirteenth-century poet Sa'di with border drawings richly rendered in two tones of gold and silver by Shah Tahmasp's artists will also be on view, as will 17 separate paintings and drawings by those who served in his atelier.

The installation at the National Gallery has been designed by Gaillard Ravenel and Mark Leithauser of the Gallery's Installation Design Department with Stuart Cary Welch. The exhibition will remain at the Gallery through March 2, 1980. It will be on view at the Fogg from March 29 through May 18.

A multi-media audiovisual program, "Early Safavid Painting," has been developed in conjunction with the exhibition and will be presented daily in the East Building auditorium while the exhibition is on view.

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