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Among Harvard's Libraries

ELEVEN LITHOGRAPHED SHAHNAMAHS COME TO HOUGHTON¹

IN 2001, HARVARD COLLEGE LIBRARY acquired a set of eleven lithographed *Shahnamahs*. Due to the books' fragility and rarity, this new acquisition was placed in care of the Department of Printing and Graphic at the Houghton Library. Until recently, Persian lithographs were deemed ephemeral, and like comic books or chapbooks, were collected only by few institutions. Consequently, our seemingly small group of the eleven lithographic *Shahnamahs* now ranks among the best such collections in any research library in North America. In order to understand the historical and cultural value of this modest set, we should consider the context of Persian book production and the history of Persian book collecting in the West.

Regardless of the mode and the period of production, many Persian illuminated manuscripts and illustrated books have suffered badly from handling and the passage of time. While well-made luxury productions were subjected to the lust and knife of dealers and collectors, the more fragile lithographed books, which were rarely valued or collected by libraries, were read to shreds and often discarded. In the end, few copies of either group remain intact today, in a satisfactory condition, and available for study.

Shahnamah: history and production

The *Shahnamah* is the great Iranian national epic, completed by Abul Qasim Firdawsi in 1010 AD. In 30,000 couplets Firdawsi recounts the history of Iran from its prehistoric legends to the arrival of Islam in the seventh century. A didactic poem that stresses issues of legitimacy and effective rule, the *Shahnamah* has played an extraordinary role in Persian culture. Over the centuries, scenes from it have been

read and memorized, performed on stage, used for decoration in miniatures and mural paintings, and inspired pictorial carpets and political cartoons. Therefore as a text (with or without illustrations,) the poem has always been a part of popular culture in Iran and in Persian-influenced cultures, like India. As a result, vast numbers of *Shahnamahs* have been produced over and over for centuries by any technique available.

Before the advent of printing, the *Shahnamah* was transcribed and decorated by hand either in imperial or provincial ateliers for a small and elite group of wealthy customers. Depending on the patron for whom the manuscript was prepared, some verses were omitted and the choice of illustrated scenes varied to reflect current trends and personal tastes. For royalty, manuscripts were written in beautiful calligraphy on large sheets of thick and polished paper. They were illustrated with expensive pigments, such as lapis lazuli, and generously illuminated with gold and silver. The value of such luxury books was in their physical aspects and masterful execution as well as in the text; they were valued as precious objects and given away as gifts to highly placed persons. For lesser patrons (such as viziers), books were less elaborate and tended to be smaller with fewer illuminations.

In the Islamic culture, the art of calligraphy was held in supreme regard, more revered and artistically valued than painting. In fact, illustration—together with binding and marbled paper—were viewed as secondary in relationship to the beauty of the script.² Due to the technical difficulty of adapting the cursive Arabic script to cast type and taking into consideration the cultural and aesthetic value assigned to the art of writing, the printing in Arabic or Persian developed late and was slow to gain acceptance.

The first books printed in Persian are dated around 1818, more than three hundred fifty

1 The author thanks András Riedlmayer and Elmar Seibel for their knowledge and contributions to this piece.

2 Aziz, Abdul. *The Imperial Library of the Mughuls*. Delhi: Idarah-I Adabiyat-I Delli, 1974.

years after woodcuts and movable type had come into wide use in Europe. Even though European printers experimented with using movable type to print Arabic and Persian texts relatively soon after Gutenberg's discovery, these languages demanded an immense number of ligatures to mimic the cursive fluidity of the script, and once printed with movable type looked unsophisticated and unattractive. With the introduction of lithographic printing in India and Iran in the early 1820s, many of the problems associated with movable-type printing were solved. Lithography was a "logical continuation of manuscript production," because it permitted the text to be written on the lithographic stone or zinc sheet with the desired artistic merit, and would ideally produce hundreds of imprints.³ Each run of lithographed books typically contained approximately 400 copies.

To economize on the production costs, the printed books were monochromatic (though some had hand-colored illustrations), printed with chemical inks, on inexpensive thin paper and modestly bound in cardboard or leather. Some of these productions were completely devoid of illustrations and others were illustrated with only one or two simple images. Since lithographed books could be produced faster and cheaper than manu-

scripts, copies of popular books like *Shahnamah*, *Hamza-nama*, *Kalile va Demne* and such became more widely available. Production of lithographed books peaked in the early 1900s and was overtaken by other technologies such as offset printing and typeset texts in the years following World War II.

3 Marzolph, Ulrich. *Narrative Illustration in Persian Lithographed Books*. Leiden: Brill, 2001, p 15.

4 Marteau, Georges and Henri Vever, *Miniatures Persanes*

exposes au Musée des Arts Décoratifs Juin-Octobre 1912, Paris: Bibliothèque d'art et d'archéologie, 1913.





*Tradition of collecting Eastern books
in the West*

In June of 1912, the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris organized a grand exhibition of 277 privately owned illustrated manuscripts and miniatures from Persia and Iran.⁴ This exhibition did not show whole books but only beautiful illuminated leaves excised from manu-

scripts and framed to hang on the walls just like oil and watercolor paintings.

The 1912 show exemplified the Western attitude towards Islamic art, which had developed in the period between 1890 and World War I. By the 1920s, Western principles of collecting and appreciating Islamic art were established, and in the eyes of the European and American audience, they legitimized the Middle Eastern book tradition and encouraged new collectors to pay attention to this field. Unfortunately, the European and American collecting communities were primarily interested in the decorative aspect of these Arabic and Persian books. Unable to read the text and ignorant of their cultural value most Western collectors and institutions during the early twentieth century were satisfied with owning just the illustrations from these manuscripts as art works, and did not take care to preserve them as artifacts. Consequently, two of the most important *Shahnamah* manuscripts

that had survived intact until the twentieth century—the fourteenth century Great Mongol *Shahnamah* and the sixteenth century *Shahnamah* of Shah Tahmasp—were then taken apart for sales of their miniatures. This high-end vandalism further raised the status of the Eastern book illustrations but continued to ignore the text and the cultural value of the books and, consequently, the later productions of less elaborate or unillustrated volumes.

"Rustam hits the white elephant," lithographic illustration between pages 46 and 47, from Firdausi, Shāhnāmāh, Teheran: Tāstikhānah-i Āqā Sayyid Murtazā, [1901-1904]. Typ 983.01.7855F, Department of Printing and Graphic Arts, Houghton Library, Harvard College Library.

It is important to realize that even though lithographic books demonstrate technological advances in the East and the continuity of tradition and visual reference, they never reached the same level of artistic sophistication as the illuminated manuscripts from which they were derived. Thus these Persian books of the mid-19th to early 20th century were seen as works of inferior quality and dismissed by academicians as folkloric and non scholarly. Due to this lack of interest, the inherent weakness of materials, and rough handling to which they were often subjected not many lithographed copies have survived.

First Houghton Shahnamah

The first notable *Shahnamah* that came to Houghton Library was the Great *Shahnamah* of Shah Tahmasp. This codex contained 759 folios, including over sixty thousand lines of verse and 258 illustrations attributed to at least fifteen artists. Its production was thought to have begun around 1522 for Shah Ismail, father of Shah Tahmasp and the founder of the Safavid Empire, and completed in two decades. In 1568 Shah Tahmasp presented this book as a gift to the Ottoman Sultan Murad III, who placed it in the library of the Topkapi Saray Palace, where it remained for three centuries. It is not clear how the manuscript left the Topkapi Library, but in 1903 it resurfaced at an exhibition of Islamic art works in the Fine Arts Museum in Paris as the property of Baron Edmond de Rothschild. During the next fifty some years, it remained in private hands, intact, virtually unstudied and rarely exhibited.⁵

In 1959, heirs of Baron de Rothschild offered this manuscript for sale in New York, and it caught attention of the Harvard community.⁶ Both Philip Hofer, curator of the Department of Printing and Graphic Arts, and Arthur Houghton Jr., benefactor of Harvard's rare book library, were interested in purchasing this manuscript. Encouraged by Stuart Carry Welch, honorary assistant keeper of Islamic art for the Fogg Art Museum, the man-

uscript was purchased by Arthur Houghton Jr. with an understanding that it would be donated to the library that bears his name.⁷

Exact agreement between Arthur Houghton and the Library remained unclear, and unfortunately many illustrations of the Shah Tahmasp's splendid manuscript were cut out and dispersed by the legal owner.⁸ Some were sold to private collectors or given away as gifts, while others were sold through auctions.⁹ In 1994, what remained of the manuscript—118 miniatures together with the title-page, colophon and all of the text—was returned to Iran in exchange for a painting by the modern artist William De Kooning, entitled "Lady No.3."¹⁰

New Houghton Shahnamahs

Fixated on the illuminated manuscripts of the imperial ateliers, Western collectors could not appreciate nor recognize cultural values of the later printed popular editions. So like other popular illustrated books produced in Iran and Indian from 1820s to 1930s, the lithographed *Shahnamahs* were part of a cultural domain ignored by the Western collectors and book historians until the latter half of the twentieth century. By then these books had gone out of fashion and out of production in their homelands and they became hard to find. As it turned out, only a few libraries around the world—primarily in Iran, Russia and Germany—in due time had acquired collections of Persian lithographic books.

Modern librarians, museum curators and scholars seek a more thorough and all-inclusive understanding of the context for the items that they choose to study and acquire. They have moved away from collecting based exclusively on high culture and connoisseurship into an age when visual culture is a part of a broader cultural history. Clearly they still collect scholarly publications and masterworks of art on paper, but now they no longer look askance at artifacts of popular culture, seeking to understand their inherent social and cultural importance.

5 Falk, Toby ed. *Treasures of Islam*. London: Sotheby's/Philip Wilson Publishers, p. 30.

6 Melikian, Souren. "A Persian Tale of Splendor and Destruction," *International Herald Tribune*, 28 September 1979, p. 9.

7 Correspondence and interview with Elmar Seibel, Ars Libri Ltd., March 6, 2003; Welch, S.C., *Salute to a Co-Author*, [unpublished].

8 For more information related to the dispersal of the *Shahnamah* of Shah Tahmasp, read Richard Feigen's *Tales from the art crypt: the painters, the museums, the curators, the collectors, the auctions, the art* (New York: Alfred

A. Knopf, 2000) and see Nicholas Basbanes, *A Splendor of Letters: The Permanence of Books in an Impermanent World* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003), pages 188-193.

9 Messrs. Christie, *Seven Folios from the Houghton Shahnameh*, auction catalogue for November 17, 1976 and Messrs. Christie, *Fourteen Folios from the Houghton Shahnameh*, auction catalogue for October 11, 1988.

10 Melikian, Souren, "Destroying a Treasure: The Sad Story of a Manuscript," *International Herald Tribune*, April 27, 1996, pp.8-10.

For these reasons Harvard recently purchased a small collection of eleven lithographed *Shahnamahs*. These books came from the private collection of Mohammad Tavakoli-Targhi, professor at University of Toronto. He was able to acquire this modest collection on a series of annual visits to Iran over a period of many years. When he finally decided to offer it for sale, both the owner and the potential buyer thought it more valuable to keep the books together as a set rather than to disperse them as isolated items.

Following a long period of negotiation, Harvard's purchase of this collection combined the expertise, funds and facilities of three divisions of the Harvard College Library. András Riedlmayer of the Aga Khan Center at the Fine Arts Library worked together with Michael Hopper and Sunil Sharma of the Middle Eastern Division at Widener Library in arranging and negotiating the sale. While the purchase of these books was made possible by the Aga Khan Fund for Islamic Art and Architecture, the Middle Eastern Division provided necessary cataloging expertise, and the newly acquired and catalogued books were placed in care of the Department of Printing and Graphic Arts at the Houghton Library.

Even though this set of *Shahnamahs* is by no means exhaustive, it provides a good temporal representation of lithographic production in the region. Of the eleven books, seven were printed in India and four in Iran, and the dates of publication range from 1849 to 1938. This collection is a body of work that can be studied in a variety of ways, ranging from an examination of the patterns of illustrations to technical adeptness and development of lithographic and drawing techniques. While these *Shahnamahs* are very different from luxury manuscripts, they are nevertheless related to the study of cultures either those that produced them, that used them or that collected them.

Reconciliation

In November of 2002, ninety years after the Parisian exhibition of 1912, the Smithsonian Institution's, Sackler Gallery in Washington

DC reunited sixty-one of the 200 extant manuscript illustrations from the great *Hamzanamah*, a dispersed masterwork of Islamic book arts of Mughal India.¹¹ Prof. John Seyller of the Univ. of Vermont (Harvard Ph.D. 1986) who envisioned and organized this show, wanted to reassemble as many of the pieces of one dispersed manuscript as possible, his project sympathetic to the contemporary tendencies in the field of art history and cultural studies.

While the early twentieth century exhibitions in Europe heightened Western awareness of the arts of the Islamic world, the more recent exhibits, such as the one that briefly reunited the dispersed Mughal *Hamzanamah* in Washington, DC heighten public awareness of the cultural losses incurred during the twentieth century. The destruction and looting of libraries in Iraq following the American invasion of April-May 2003 has reminded us of the vulnerability of books, which can perish through fire, vandalism, rough handling or defects in production. At the same time, this recent acquisition of the inexpensive and ephemeral lithographed books reminds us of their occasional resilience. In light of these tendencies, it is particularly encouraging that Harvard's library has marked the turn of the new century with a collaboration of three of its divisions by acquiring a small but important collection of Persian lithographed *Shahnamahs*.

Postscript

Since this article went to press, Hope Mayo and András Riedlmayer again have collaborated on the purchase of a *Shahnamah*, bringing their acquisitions to one dozen copies of this important text. Interdepartmental cooperation will continue as the Aga Khan Center, which Riedlmayer heads, prepares to offer Houghton Library's Department of Printing & Graphic Arts its linguistic expertise to update and enrich the bibliographic records of all of Houghton's *Shahnamas*.

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¹¹ Seyller, John, *The Adventures of Hamza: Painting and Storytelling in Mughal India*, Washington, DC: Freer Gallery, c2002.