CHAD KIA

ART, ALLEGORY AND THE RISE OF SHIISM IN IRAN, 1487–1565

EDINBURGH STUDIES IN CLASSICAL ISLAMIC HISTORY AND CULTURE
Art, Allegory and the Rise of Shiism in Iran, 1487–1565
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I would not have undertaken this project had Pricilla Soucek not suggested to me, many years ago, that I should have a look at the ‘very odd’ paintings from the *Mantiq al-tayr* manuscript at the Metropolitan Museum, and I would like to thank her for her early help, advice and encouragement. Also crucial to my pursuit of this project was Robert Hillenbrand’s early support and continued prodding. I would also like to thank Michael Hillmann and Jonathan Alexander, for their counsel and early guidance. I am especially grateful to Marianna Shreve Simpson for her overwhelming generosity and extraordinary knowledge, and I am forever indebted to Massumeh Farhad for her unfailing encouragement, invaluable advice and for her extraordinarily sensitive, thorough and insightful reading of earlier portions of this study. To John Short, I owe more than words can adequately express.

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Here, this imagination is hidden, but for a trace.
There, this imagination will reveal images!

Rumi
Introduction: Coming to Terms with Meaning in Persian Painting

The experience of considering a Persian manuscript painting for the first time may be both perplexing and beguiling. As an outstanding example from the mid-sixteenth century shows (see Plate 1), the impression of vivid colours and the compositional intricacy of the image could be as instantly striking as encountering a contemporary Flemish painting by Pieter Bruegel the Elder.1 ‘Depraved Man Commits Bestiality’ – an important work from Safavid Iran – is reminiscent of Bruegel’s visual allegories, with their rich mosaic sociology.2 However, beyond the sharp differences in form, style and patronage between this painting and an early modern Flemish work, we might also note that ‘Depraved Man’, like many Persian paintings of its period, is an illustration in a manuscript and as such programmatically bound by a narrative text.3 Indeed, as the second of twenty-eight paintings in a deluxe manuscript made for Prince Ibrahim Mirza in Mashhad between 1556 and 1565, the most historically comparable counterpart to the ‘Depraved Man’ may be the late Gothic Parisian illustrations.4 In contrast to some of Bruegel’s great ‘figurative anthologies’,5 the ambiguities in the elaborate content of ‘Depraved Man Commits Bestiality’ ought to be resolved by consulting the text it illustrates.6 Such ambiguities are the starting point of this study.

Turning to the text to locate the narrative moment that occasioned this striking illustration – and the appellation by which art historians refer to it – we find an anecdote about a ‘depraved’ (فاسد – fasad, literally rotten) man who is overcome by lust.7 Searching ‘the valley and the desert’, the concupiscent man encounters a ‘she-camel’ that appears serviceable enough for his pressing urge.8 Given the size of the beast, however, the depraved man satisfies
his cravings only after he ties two pieces of wood to his own (or the camel’s) legs in order to mount it. While engaged in the act, however, Satan appears before the lustful man to denounce him: people are bound to blame Satan for such a ‘vile trick’, even though, as Satan explicitly states, the vulgarity of this act is such that not even he, Satan, could have dreamed it up. That is the entire content of the anecdote that ‘Depraved Man Commits Bestiality’ illustrates. The anecdote, or more properly the parable, itself comes from the first book of The Golden Chain (Silsilat al-dhahab), the title referring to the lineage of spiritual masters, their teachings and practices to which its author was devoted. The author, the great fifteenth-century Herati poet and mystic, Abdul Rahman Jami, composed the didactic narrative about the depraved man in rhyming-verse couplets between 1468 and 1472. This work later came to form part of a septet of well-known epics in verse, titled The Seven Thrones (Haft awrang), nearly a century before this sixteenth-century painting of it.

The depiction of the vile trick in the lower-left corner of the composition appears conspicuous enough; the inherently striking act could scarcely make it less so. But the figures and actions from Jami’s parable appear to occupy only a small part of the surface of the painting. There are other figures and details – some rather prominent – in the painting that seem to have little or no direct relation to the story of the lustful man. Indeed, such apparently unrelated figures and elements occupy almost three-quarters of the painting’s surface. Nowhere in the text is there any mention of the languid youth listening to a man playing the flute as he holds a book beside his ear, another man spinning wool with a spool, an encampment with children at play, a figure blowing on the fire beneath a caldron, an acrobat-like figure walking on his hands, musicians …

To assume the figures to be unrelated to the story about the lustful man is to render such details wholly fanciful or to reduce them to ornaments. But such prominently placed figures as the washerwoman in the upper-left of the painting, or the less conspicuous shepherd on the upper-right, are too emphatic to be whimsical and demand a better explanation. In any case, to equate such figures with ‘ornamentation’ of the main action relayed by the text merely displaces or defers the question as to the relevance, meaning and origination of such extravagant ‘ornaments’. Among the crowd of figures depicted, those that transparently represent the actors and actions related by
the text are not exceptionally privileged compositionally, except for the fact that they are rather confined to a small quadrant of the composition in the lower-left and therefore easily identifiable. In illustrating the text, the artist (or artists) seems to have selected the exact moment in the story – or immediately after – when Satan has appeared before the depraved man, just before addressing him. This reading of the image would be fairly consistent with Jami’s text, which states explicitly that Satan appears before the depraved man and addresses him directly. We see a dark-faced figure with a white beard and a red cap peering from the rocks in the lower-left side of the painting. This figure appears to be in the line of vision of the depraved man (and vice versa), and is holding a finger to his mouth in bewilderment.\textsuperscript{10}

However, as Marianna Shreve Simpson has observed in her monograph study of this \textit{Haft awrang} manuscript to which this painting belongs, even here there is ambiguity, since there are other similarly dark-faced figures depicted in the painting.\textsuperscript{11} Is the figure in the immediate foreground of the lower-right another representation of Satan? Also dark-faced, this man gestures in the direction of the bestial act, and appears to be complaining to a companion, who is spinning thread on a spool, with little apparent interest in what he is being told or the event taking place to his right. In fact, the only two figures in the painting that are depicted unambiguously, and most specifically corroborate the details offered in the story, are the ‘depraved man’ and the ‘she-camel’ he is mounting.\textsuperscript{12} The text of the narrative, both preceding and following the anecdote about the lustful man, contains very little that might relate to this crowd of painted figures, and Simpson’s compendium helps to put in relief the complicated process through which one comes to understand the supposed literal meaning of even the first verses of the anecdote by Jami – a ‘literal’ meaning that itself turns out to be quite specialised and idiomatic.\textsuperscript{13}

Any anticipation that the indirect and figurative language of Jami’s verse may offer some obvious clues as to the significance of the depicted figures is soon disappointed. The first four verses of Jami’s tale introducing the depraved man suffice to show that the figurative language of the text does not offer much in the way of connotation for the enigmatic figures.\textsuperscript{14}

\begin{quote}
\textit{Gasht por bad mofsedy ra buq}
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
\textit{گشت پر باد مفسدی را بوق}
\end{quote}
his soul took his blare to Alcyone

chasing his desire he sought a mascara-stand

running about, searching the desert and the plain

It is immediately clear here that the depiction of a man mounting a camel in the 'Depraved Man Commits Bestiality' does not represent a narrative that literally describes a man with a loud trumpet searching for a mascara-stand. Whether a word like ‘inkwell’ in this context conjures up its literal or figurative meaning in the mind of a reader, the general idea of the ‘figural’ and the inescapable figurativeness of language is palpable. The verses by Jami show that, as with much in poetry, ‘literal’ meaning is an evasive notion. The axiom that images always come before words often frees the poet from the bonds that may be imposed by the lexical meaning of words. In this case, understanding ‘verbal imagery’ as a metaphor for metaphor itself may be one way of describing the status of these ambiguous figures. The literal translation of the anecdote’s initial verses may be rendered as follows: ‘a foul person’s horn became filled with wind / his [carnal]-soul let out a cry that reached Alcyone. Following his desire, he sought a mascara-stand / running about searching the desert and plain’. The discrepancy between the literal meaning of the words and the conventional understanding of the tropes used by Jami is obvious. The first verse of the first couplet describes a ‘trumpet’ or ‘horn’ (buq) that apparently belongs to the ‘depraved man’, and the third verse mentions a ‘mascara-stand’ (mekhaleh) that is sought by him. In this context, Jami is using the words ‘trumpet’ and ‘mascara-stand’ as tropes for the male and female sexual organs, respectively, while the reference to Alcyone, the brightest star in the Pleiades cluster, signifies the distance of the star from the Earth, hyperbolically alluding to the magnitude of the depraved man’s carnal desire – and desperation. Parenthetically, the choice of Alcyone in this case was probably also determined by the rhyme scheme (buq / oyuq). In all three cases, the artists of the ‘Depraved Man’, clearly took for granted the idiomatic understanding of Jami’s use of simile or kenayeh, where the instrument of comparison is not stated.
As a manuscript painting that illustrates an accompanying textual passage, an obvious question regarding the ‘Depraved Man Commits Bestiality’ is its function as a visual interpretation of the story it illustrates. What is to be made of the lack of a more transparent correspondence between the narrative content of the text and this illustration of it? Why would so many apparently unrelated figures be included in an illustration of an anecdote about a sexually aroused man desperately mounting a she-camel? Assuming the often didactic function of medieval art, what moral interpretation of Jami’s parable would compel the artists to include both an acrobat walking on his hands and a man spinning wool in the visual representation of it? Our inability to answer such basic questions regarding the contents of this painting might be reasonable were the ‘Depraved Man’ a European panel painting – such as one by Bruegel – and not accompanied by a text. If many paintings by the Dutch master contain symbolic meanings or social-historical commentary, as does, for instance, his nearly coeval ‘Massacre of the Innocents’, their identification would require making use of textual sources and research into the broader contemporary cultural contexts and historical circumstances – whether or not such expressions were consciously intended by the artist or were unconscious but still of some ‘symbolical’ value.

But the ‘Depraved Man’, like the great preponderance of figural paintings in the premodern Islamic world since the late thirteenth century, was a commissioned illustration in a privately viewed codex of literary narratives, where its conventional function, subsidiary to the narrative text, ought to have remained substantially transparent. In fact, regardless of the setting, background and details, the greatest number of both earlier and contemporary Persianate manuscript paintings unambiguously correspond to the narrative subject they illustrate. Even the highly complex and expertly executed ‘Depraved Man’ remains programmatically predicated on the narrative subject of Jami’s text, despite the apparently vigorous complication of its representative function.

Simpson’s study of this Haft awrang manuscript mentions the covert significance of several figures that appear in a number of its twenty-eight illustrations, including the ‘Depraved Man’. Her acknowledgement that the themes and lessons of Jami’s seven narratives are based on the spiritual, philosophical and ethical ideas of Sufism implicates the text as the source of ambiguity, suggesting that the significance of the parable about the depraved
man ought to be the starting point for any inquiry into the broader cultural contexts and historical circumstances that might explain the painting’s content. Indeed, Jami’s *Haft awrang* is a heptalogy, or septet of didactic or allegorical epics in the service of Sufism, which, like medieval Jewish or Christian mysticism, sought a direct, individual experience of God. By referencing Sufism with respect to the illustrations of *Haft awrang*, Simpson rightly situates Jami’s narrative within a larger, centuries-old discourse on gnostic devotion to which Jami intended to contribute.

As illustrations of a Sufi text, therefore, the covert significance of the inexplicable figures in the ‘Depraved Man’ may refer to a wider discourse that transcends the specifics of the narrative subject in Jami’s text. Indeed, the ‘Depraved Man’, illustrated in the mid-sixteenth century, is not an isolated case but rather a late and a fully developed example of an extraordinary trend in the history of Islamic art that began some seventy years earlier. The object of this book is to uncover the genesis, development and significance of that trend, which also highlight a neglected function of pictorial arts in the Persianate world.

The often acknowledged, but never fully explained, system of enigmatic figure-types that make their first appearance in Persian figural paintings in the late Timurid period, remained a distinctive feature of Persianate iconography throughout the sixteenth century. Many luxury Persianate manuscript paintings produced during this period, which have been praised as masterpieces of medieval art, exhibit some of these enigmatic figures. It was in Herat, Afghanistan, during the rule of the last Timurid prince, Husayn Bayqara (r. 1469–1506) that the illustrations of literary works, in addition to conveying the actors and actions of a given narrative passage, began also to include depictions that seem to have little or no connection to the story related by the text. The artists at the workshop of Sultan Bayqara began to include what Simpson refers to as ‘fixed figure-types’ in illustrations of narratives with themes or agendas that were based on ideas and practices of what may be generically called Sufism. No figure that seems so purposefully unrelated to the narrative subject of an illustrated text had appeared in Persianate painting prior to this time.

Fixated on an ultimate union with God, the ascetic-mystical strand of Islam we know as Sufism emerged in Iraq and Khurasan in the ninth cen-
tury, and for millions of Muslims the religion of Islam has been inseparable from it ever since. Sufism, as a powerful tradition of knowledge and practice, is believed to bring proximity to God for its adherents. Conservative and dependent on the past, Sufism is an inherently authoritarian system, founded on problems of interpretation and reliant on both discursive authority – ultimately of the Quran and the Prophetic Example – and the miraculous powers of those who were believed to have achieved proximity to God – something that was possible only if God’s grace was already present within them. Since a miracle-working and blessed Sufi master could also accumulate a significant amount of endowments and property, many Sufi shaykhs also came to enjoy considerable economic power and political influence. Initially drawn to pre-Islamic Arabic poetry – especially the *nasib*, with its prototypical themes of the intoxication of wine and especially the lost beloved and the lover ‘perishing’ from longing for the loved one – the discursive power of Sufi Islam has been irretrievably bound up with poetry, with its phonemic patterning and figurative richness, to express ineffable experiences and beliefs. Throughout the so-called ‘classical’ period of Persian literature, literary production consisted overwhelmingly of verse that was refined and constrained by conventions of style, form, and patterns of meter and rhyme. Inherently circuitous and indirect, Persian literary expression became more so after the twelfth century, when the ‘Iraqi style’ increased the ambiguity of verses with more figurative and abstract language. From very early on, Sufi ideology and language influenced this poetry, increasing possible ambiguities still further and giving some words several possible connotations. In addition to their lexical definitions and conventional figurative usage, many words and constructs came also to represent gnostic and religious ideas. On the other hand, the profuse repertoire of figurative language was organised in a highly structured system. By developing certain constant metaphors that came to require no explanation, words and concepts in Sufi verse created a whole figurative nomenclature that was readily apprehended by initiates. As a conscious exercise in inducing contemplation in readers and listeners, Sufi poetry had little use for literal expression; rather, whether lyric or narrative, such texts participate in a complex network of hermeneutic intertextuality that – through Persian poetry – imaginatively articulates a metanarrative
transcending any single literary work, trend or genre, and is apprehensible by readers across many centuries.

Before the artists at the workshop of Sultan Bayqara began to include mystically coded figures in illustrations of narrative poetry in the late fifteenth century, medieval Persianate painting, mostly confined to the pages of codices as it was, consisted largely of illustrations of historical and mythical narratives or – more often – the depiction of a moment in the unfolding plot of well-known epic romance or heroic poetry, with often recognisable genre scenes of enthronements, lovers’ encounters, battles, and hunting or heroic feats. It was – not unlike Christian devotional books of hours – a private art that, especially during the Timurid period, came to function as celebratory affirmation of the ruling elite and their worldview. The highly stylised ‘classical’ mode of painting at the end of the fifteenth century in Herat gave way to a more naturalistic representation of temporal and physical reality. This shift in visual mode occurred at the same time that the content of paintings also gave way to some unconventional iconography – a repertoire of humans and animals marked by the objects and activities with which they were engaged – that served as pictorial re-presentations of an allegorical reading of the text: a figurative understanding, leading to depictions that display an aspect of the esoteric tenor of the narrative. As such, the apparently enigmatic figure-types depend on an anagogical reading of the illustrated text – even if the passage does not readily divulge to us the spiritual or mystical significance attributed to it by a fifteenth-century reader. Further, the initiated reader or viewer ought also to recognise that an ‘enigmatic’ depiction in the illustration of the passage – such as that of a flute player – is a figurative or intertextual stand-in, pictorially alluding to a literary trope from another mystical narrative, itself an allegory. For the so-called enigmatic figure-types to be meaningful, therefore, not only must their original historical context – temporal and geographical – be considered, but also the contemporary reception of the illustrated text.

Understanding the interpretive scope of the late medieval reader in Herat would require familiarity with the constellation of tropes and idioms that formed contemporary Sufi literary discourse, as well as an appreciation of the broader symbolic order in the religious landscape of the period. The multiple levels of signification interposed in each painting by the patron and
the artist, intentionally or otherwise, require of us a combination of visual readings and layered interpretations that may be at once historical, gnostic, poetic, religious and perhaps even astrological. Which is to say, that the fixed figure-types presented here as an enigma are in fact intelligible – obliquely, indirectly but with the promise of meaning – in the context of a world saturated with otherworldly and occult meanings.

This study posits that these enigmatic figure-types were theologically prescriptive. Encoding extraliteral meanings, the figures were intentionally introduced into illustrations of didactic Sufi allegories in order to emphasise certain praiseworthy moral qualities and virtues adhered to and advocated by mystical, trade-guild and other contemporary popular associations. The figure-types populate illustrations of well-known narratives that are either generically didactic or are allegorically coded with aspects of spiritual, philosophical and ethical ideas that were commonly adhered to by many contemporaries in fifteenth-century Herat, especially Sufis and ‘chivalric’ (futuwwat) artisans and craftsmen. The seemingly purposeful yet unrelated figures in illustrations of an allegorical narrative, for instance, came to form a normative relation between the story that served as a vehicle, and a tenor that advocated some aspects of Sufism. At first sight the figures in the illustrations of such texts share their conspicuous lack of any semantic link to the narrative subject of the vehicle, which is otherwise represented pictorially. As we will see, notwithstanding the nuances caused by contemporary circumstances, whether human, animal, object or activity (such as spinning thread, a playing a flute, herding goats and sheep) the figures most generically allude to stock images, metaphors and parables from Persian Sufi poetry going back to the twelfth century. The depictions of the figure-types, therefore, emphasise the primary subject of the text – the moral lessons of the narrative from a generic Sufi perspective – by deploying familiar tropes, in pictorial form, from a largely Sufi intertextual literary discourse.

The inherent difficulties in linking the cognitive system, the language and the culture of the medieval Persianate world to the contemporary English-speaking audience make designation of exact terminology for this phenomenon deserving of a separate study, but it may be stated here – and is discussed further in the next chapter – that the depiction of, for example, a flute player in certain Persianate manuscript paintings may best correspond
with the late fifteenth-century English concept of ‘emblem’: a parable that was expressed in picture or in verse and often in both.\textsuperscript{43} By the late sixteenth century, emblem was understood, at least partially, as a ‘symbolic picture’, implying the conjunction of word and image. ‘The emblem was both didactic and secret, riddling … and the context was needed to decide on the picture’s meaning.’ Artificial, the emblem does not aspire towards a universal, unchanging meaning, but rather is uninterpretable out of context.\textsuperscript{44}

The conscious adoption of apparently inessential – but contextually emblematic – images in the iconography of manuscript illustrations produced during the 1480s was concomitant with a stylistic change or a ‘shift’ in Persianate painting. Art historians refer to this formal shift towards more naturalistic depiction in late fifteenth-century paintings from Herat as a ‘new style’. Long associated with the works of the most well-known premodern painter in the Islamic world, Kamal al-Din Bihzad (c. 1450–c. 1535), this move towards a less idealistic, more naturalistic rendering of individuals, animals and landscapes appears to be concurrent with the adoption of the emblematic figure-types.\textsuperscript{45} Over the years, despite the geographical movements of artists and manuscripts, the preferred subjects, special compositions and characteristics of style were perpetuated, whether through direct copying or from master to pupil.\textsuperscript{46} Stylistically, the appearance in the late fifteenth century of the emblematic figure-types foregrounds the dense discursive formation through which these paintings become meaningful. The transmission of cultural memory through conservative artistic education in Iran, where the two basic mechanisms of continuity in manuscript illustration were literal reproduction and selective adaptation, suggests that initially the innovation of depicting emblematic figures-types in luxury manuscript illustrations of Persian narrative poetry was something that was directed by patrons.\textsuperscript{47} But such innovations in content and style, despite adherence to tradition – which according to art historians remained an important factor in the field of Islamic manuscript illustrations – are remarkable enough to suggest a world undergoing social-historical transformations beyond the workshops at the Herati court. The steady growth in the status of poetry, which played a fundamental role in the Timurid project of cultural assimilation, led to an unprecedented number of poets among ordinary people as well as at court, which led in turn to ‘new forms of poetic education and an intensive effort to
define and conceptualize the literary tradition’. Events that shaped Timurid literary history during the fifteenth century affected the practice of poetry and in due course also the style and the iconography of manuscript painting.

The influence of esotericism, often expressed through verse literature, at Husayn Bayqara’s court as well as in Herat, the greater Khorasan, and indeed in Transoxiana and the whole of the Iranian world during the late fifteenth century, has often been acknowledged. The author of *Haft awrang*, Abd al-Rahman Jami (1414–92), repeatedly referred to by premodern writers who came after him as the most distinguished poet, scholar and Sufi, was the highest authority in the Naqshbandi order of Sufis in Herat, and composed many of his didactic and allegorical Sufi romances at the height of his prominence during Bayqara’s reign in the 1470s and 1480s. Jami is considered to be the second most important figure in disseminating the teachings of the influential Andalusian mystic Ibn Arabi (1165–1240). He is also credited with the integration of Ibn Arabi’s teachings into the intellectual world of the eastern lands of Islam. Jami’s writings, whether in prose or verse, invariably contain edifying messages of gnosticism in some form, either overtly or covertly. Any contemplation, or ‘reading’, of the illustration that accompanies Jami’s passage about the ‘depraved man’ without knowledge of the mystical connotations of Jami’s parable – itself predicated on the larger Sufi discourse to which his didactic epic *Golden Chain* (*Silsilat al-dhahab*) contributes – would be bewildering, leading exactly to the kind of enigma that we have encountered with respect to the iconography of the ‘Depraved Man’.

Jami’s pre-eminence as a poet in late Timurid Herat was predicated on established ‘reading formations’ whose norms and ideals his Sufi allegories both reproduced and reinforced. The absence of armed conflict and the accumulation of wealth by military and religious elites immune from taxation helped to make this period a ‘golden age’ for cultural and artistic achievements. Bayqara and Alishir Navai (1441–1501), the progenitor of Chaghatai poetry who enjoyed close relations with the sovereign as his confidant and ‘foster brother’, were two great patrons of the arts under whom Bihzad’s famous school of painting flourished, and, as some art historians believe, Persianate painting reached its apogee. Popular literary circles in which notables and literati engaged in flights of ribaldry and bawdy rhetorical exchanges, replete with sophisticated verbal retorts and puns, cultivated a
penchant for intricacy expressed in the practice of composing elaborate literary puzzles, especially logographs, acrostics and chronograms. This is the field of reception in which manuscript illustrations containing ‘enigmatic’ figures first appeared. The refined ambiguity and indirection of the dominant poetic language suffused ‘high’ literary discourse and correspondingly penetrated illustrations of Sufi narratives through the ‘emblematic’ figure-types. However, it must be emphasised that no elite enthusiasm for literary puzzles and no measure of appeal of rhetorical intricacies would have triggered this iconographical innovation in late Timurid Herat had it not been for the powerful impulse towards esotericism that dominated Persianate societies of the fifteenth century; the same impulse that lay less obliquely behind the many other religious innovations of the period. In fact, it has been argued that, conversely, the pleonastic language of contemporary poetry – a sufficient enough change for it to mark the end of the so-called ‘classical’ age in Persian literature – was itself undergirded by a strong cosmological framework.

Therefore, prior to assessing the discursive and the visual means by which Persianate high culture of the late fifteenth century found artistic expression, it is important to consider the socio-historical context of the late fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century world in which such innovations were triggered and flourished. The fact that towards the end of Jami’s life, in the last decades of the fifteenth century, such unconventional mutations of style and iconography emerged in the supposedly conservative, tradition-bound field of Persianate painting, and then continued unabated well into the next century, is even more intriguing if we consider that only a few years after their inception numerous profound and sweeping political and religious changes transformed the Iranian world without any perceptible alteration in their appeal. In fact, at least as far as the use of the ‘figure-types’ is concerned, their appearance in manuscript paintings seems to have increased after the violent takeover of the Safavids in 1501. Whatever socio-cultural causes triggered the appearance of these emblematic figure-types in Timurid manuscript paintings during the 1480s and 1490s, and whatever their significance may have been to the late Timurid patrons in Herat, the spectacularly violent campaigns of the early 1500s, which resulted in the military conquest of Iran and the forced conversion of its population to Imami Shiism, seem to
have done nothing to diminish the appeal of these apparently superfluous and flamboyant depictions in manuscript paintings. Whether or not their significance as Sufi emblems also changed, most of these same figure-types continued to proliferate in paintings commissioned by the notables of the new dynasty, including the first Safavid shah, Ismail (1487–1524), and his son and successor, Tahmasp.

Despite the many gaps in our knowledge of the rise of the Safavids and the success of Ismail in establishing an empire – not to mention the endurance of the radical political and religious transformations brought about by him after 1501 – we may still consider the rise of the Safavids and dominance of Shiism in Iran in the light of the continued growth and spread of Islamic heterodoxy and pseudo-Islamic popular religious organisations during the centuries that preceded their takeover. The introduction of new figures into the iconography of Persianate painting, when considered in connection with the success across the Iranian plateau of Imami Shiism, will reveal their shared origins. Each phenomenon in its own way stems from the same socio-cultural developments in a fifteenth-century world dominated by varying intensities of esoteric beliefs in reincarnation, the transmigration of souls and in a leader invested with divine attributes. Whether it was the influence of Naqshbandi Sufi ideas in Timurid Herat, or the association of the Turkmen tribes of eastern Anatolia with the Safavid order in Ardebil, this was a period marked by heterodoxy, other-worldly beliefs, millenarian movements and ‘extremism’ (Ghuluww).

It is important to note that, at least for the eastern Islamic lands, the identification of many followers of specific mystical teachings and practices with distinct confraternities that today we refer to as Sufi orders would be anachronistic. During the fifteenth century and earlier, the charisma of individual leaders remained the basis of many heterodox practices and beliefs, especially those movements infused with messianic fervour. It was the hereditary transfer of the charismatic leader’s station to a follower that sustained the coherence of what gradually came to be defined as organised orders discernible from the magnetism of their Sufi masters. Indeed, the followers of Baha al-Din Naqshband (1318–89) and Safi al-Din Ardabili (1252–1334), who comprised what came to be known as the Naqshbandi and Safavi Sufi orders, formed but two currents in a broad stream of militant messianic
movements, popular cabalistic associations, and pseudo-Islamic and outright heretical groups that had arisen in the aftermath of the Mongolian devastation of the thirteenth century and the collapse of the sacred caliphal authority. The reconfiguration of religious and political authority along these messianic and charismatic lines was a reaction against the paganism and socio-economic injustices of Turko-Mongolian rule. Such communities as the Bektashi dervishes and the followers of Shaykh Badr al-Din in Anatolia, Ahl-i Haqq in Kurdistan, the Sarbedaris in Khurasan, the fervently Shia Mushashais in Kuzestan, or the Kubravis and the Yasavis in Transoxiana, the Nimatallahis, the Qadiris, the Nurbakhshis, or the Hurufis and their breakaway faction, the Nuqtavis, stand as the more notable of the esoteric religious movements of this period. The ubiquity of such associations, along with the ‘independent’ (ovaysi) mystic or deviant dervish networks like the Qalandars, Haydaris and Abdals prompted one scholar to describe the spread of mysticism during the fifteenth century as an ‘incredible epidemic’.

The sharp post-Mongolian upsurge in esoteric, occult and messianic tendencies was in at least one respect also congenial to craftsmen such as those who worked at Bayqara’s workshop in Herat. Having yet to organise into guilds in the conventional sense, craftsmen and artisans shared with almost all other popular heterodox associations, as well as the various creeds of Shiism, a strong sense of devotion to Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet of Islam. With the exception of the Naqshbandis, the initiatic chain of nearly all other heterodox religious associations included Ali and often a number of the other Shia imams who were viewed as saints and spiritual guides. Even the Khwajagan-Naqshbandis Sufis were not precluded from veneration of the first Shia imam, Ali. Although, unlike nearly all other Sufi groups the Naqshbandis traced their lineage not back to Ali, but to the soon-to-be-reviled-by-decree companion of the Prophet, Abu Bakr.

One striking exemplar of continuity between the mystical and messianic currents of the fifteenth century and the Imami Shiism of the Safavids in the sixteenth century is Fazlallah Astarabadi (d. 1394), the founder of the lettrist, Hurufi movement. Astarabadi’s thaumaturgical views stemmed from the supposed attributes of letters in the Arabo-Persian alphabet: their shape, diacritical markings and numerological properties. The influence of Hurufism on Ismail, the spiritual guide of the Safavid order and the founder
of the dynasty has been noted and can be seen in the propagandist, emotive verses that are attributed to him.\textsuperscript{79} The implicit claim of direct inspiration as a source of legitimisation for political power that became the ideological basis of the Imami-Safavid authority was integral to Fazlallah Astrarabadi’s concept of charismatic messianic kingship and played an important role in the emergence of the dynasty.\textsuperscript{80}

Significant as such ideological through lines may be in connecting the pre-Safavid world of eastern Islam to the Shia polity that was brought about after Ismail’s conquests, among the most tangible – and neglected – indications of continuity between the Persianate world before the takeover of the Safavids and after – indeed, what survives to our own day as the most visible evidence of continuity – is the appearance of fixed figure-types in luxury manuscript paintings which persisted into the Safavid period. This late fifteenth-century innovation, the earliest examples of which were commissioned by the Timurids, continued to appeal to Safavid notables through the first century of their rule. The appearance of these enigmatic figures within illustrations of Persianate luxury manuscripts occurs mainly between the 1480s and 1560s, that is, during the period marked by the reign of three of the most influential patrons of painting in the premodern Persianate world: besides Husayn Bayqara, the last Timurid ruler in Herat (Afghanistan), the first two Safavid kings, Ismail in Tabriz (Iran) and his son Tahmasp, who moved the capital of the nascent empire to Qazvin and dispersed the royal atelier. The latter two patrons remain unrivalled in their diversion of riches to this particular art form.\textsuperscript{81} The figure-types that appear to us as enigmatic show that the intent of the Timurid patrons in producing an observable exposition of ‘higher’ truths in painting, and the first two Safavid rulers’ appreciation of ‘symbols’ as mediators between the physical and the metaphysical world, were not irrelevant to their status as prodigious enthusiasts of the art of painting.\textsuperscript{82}

It was only fourteen years after the initial appearance of the first emblematic figure-types in Herati manuscript illustrations that the militant Turkmen tribesmen – the Qizilbash – triumphantly entered the city of Tabriz in Azerbaijan, enabling their thirteen-year-old spiritual leader, Ismail, to declare himself temporal king. In verses of poetry attributed to him, Ismail seems to go well beyond the heterodox Sufi veneration of Ali, the archetypal saint of the Shias and the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad,
‘cloaking himself in the robe of the Mahdi [messiah]’. As many have already observed, Ismail’s poetry combines Sufi mystical ideas about metempsychosis with apocalyptic imagery to present himself not only as the ‘eye of God’ but also as the spirit or reincarnation of Ali himself, as well as, among others, Ali’s son, Husayn, mythical Persian kings like Jamshid and, of course, the Mahdi, the saviour. Among all the heterodox confraternities, it was the fanatical devotion of the Qizilbash to their teenage godhead that led them to conquer a territory stretching from Armenia to Baghdad to Afghanistan, transforming the followers of a mystical shaykh into a ruling dynasty and the centre of political and – for a time – religious authority in Iran. These conquests enabled Ismail to impose the Imami creed on the population, which is known today as Twelver Shiism and stands as the most enduring synthesis of diverse mystical and extremist traditions that, at least since the Mongolian conquests of the thirteenth century, continued to grow and spread in the Irano-Turkish cultural world. Indeed, Amir-Moezzi’s description of Shiism’s twofold vision of the world, ‘one manifest, apparent, exoteric (zahir), and another non-manifest/inner, secret, esoteric (batin)’, furnishes a striking articulation of the types of truth-determining discourse that Imami Shiism already had in common with the other pre-Safavid popular religious organisations of the eastern Islamic world. This shared, dual vision of the world is fundamental to understanding the matrix that helped patrons and artists determine the iconography of manuscript painting towards the end of the fifteenth century and sustained it after the Safavid takeover.

The appearance of emblematic figure-types in late Timurid manuscript painting was occasioned by the unique historical moment when the refined, high-literary culture of Herat and the dominant system of esoteric beliefs converged to form a new field of reception for iconographical innovation. Without denying the unique historical circumstances that propelled the inception of the figure-types at the Timurid court, the continued depiction of such figures as the spinner or the flute player in the ‘Depraved Man’ nearly seventy years after the rise of the Safavids and the establishment of Imami Shiism clearly demonstrates a degree of congruency between their meaning and reception at the Timurid court of the 1490s and their significance for Shia patrons after many decades in Safavid Mashhad. Still, the use of received imagery as either metaphors for the sycophantic aggrandisement of Safavid rulers and Imami
Shiism, or for the assertion of esoteric ‘truths’, certainly worked to shift the specificity of meaning of the fixed figures-types and the significance of their metaphorical values for the Safavid audience. They ultimately complemented and expressed Safavid political power at its greatest extent, in the Shia conversion of Iran. Significantly, despite the influence of Persian painting on the art produced at the Mughal and Deccan courts, as well as by the Uzbek and Ottoman schools of painting – through acquisitions of manuscripts and migration of artists – with some notable exceptions, the emblematic figure-types do not have a conspicuous presence in pictorial arts that were produced outside the Safavid realm. The visual means through which the Persianate high culture of the late fifteenth century found its innovative artistic expression of religious truth was clearly more appealing to the early Safavid rulers, who continued to covet and appropriate such figure-types in paintings they commissioned. However, these emblematic figures may have seemed too closely linked with the ‘abominable Shia’ Safavids to be tolerated by at least some of the Ottoman and Uzbek patrons who saw themselves as upholders of the canonical practices of the ‘upright community of Muhammad’.

Vladimir Minorsky, in his translation of Ismail’s messianic poetry, suggests that esotericism is ‘fond of special dialects and symbols’ that are intelligible only to the initiated in the ‘immediate milieu’, a premise that draws attention to the relationship between texts and their sociohistorical contexts. The claim of apocalyptic messianism associated with the followers of Ismail is based mainly on the verses of poetry that are attributed to him. Far more reliable evidence that compellingly confirms the dominance of esotericism in Herat during approximately the same period is present in the content of texts produced by prolific contemporary authors residing there – writers who, it is important to note, openly embraced their indebtedness to literary forebears. It is through these texts that the connections between the hegemonic esoteric ideology of the late fifteenth century and the emblematic – or ‘symbolic’ – figure-types that make their first appearance in Herat in the last decades of Timurid rule can become intelligible to the uninitiated modern observer. The emblematic figures that were introduced into the iconography of manuscript paintings in Herat during the late fifteenth century may have been an innovation in the visual arts, but the conventions of poetic composition through figurative expression and a superabundant indirection had been commonplace
in Persianate poetry, especially Sufi poetry, for centuries.⁹¹ Writings by such contemporary authors as Jami, or the Herati preacher and polymath Husayn (Vaiz) Kashifi (d. 1505), supply the language of mystico-religious didacticism on which what I have called the emblematic figure-types in manuscript paintings depended for both origin and intelligibility. Given the intertextuality of Sufi literature and the numinous authority of previous mystical works, the writings by such revered ideological forebears as Ibn Arabi or Sufism’s most famous poet, Jalal al-Din Rumi (d. 1273) may be just as instructive to us as they were edifying for the beholden Herati authors or, for that matter, the patrons and artists directly involved in reception, interpretation and illustration of narrative Sufi poetry.

Through close reading and contextual analyses of select manuscript paintings, the study that follows aims to detect or trace possible borrowings, appropriations, simulations or acquisitions from one ‘culturally demarcated zone’ to another.⁹² Given that almost all Persianate manuscript paintings were created after the text they illustrate was composed, often centuries after, and given that the core objective of the present discussion is deciphering the significance of enigmatic figure-types that make their first appearance in Persian figural paintings in the late Timurid period and remain a distinctive feature of Persianate iconography through the sixteenth century, attention devoted to such possible borrowings is mainly one-directional: the main interest will be in language, metaphors, stories, emblems and so forth, taken from texts and appropriated visually by artists in paintings. Although many literary and artistic works will be referred to, the chapters that follow will focus on the iconography of three seminal paintings and the discursive and textual constellations through which they gained their contemporary significance. The first of these is one of the earliest – if not the earliest – instances of the phenomenon: a 1487 painting in Attar’s Sufi allegory, the Conference of the Birds.⁹³ The second formative painting, a 1494 illustration from Nizami’s romance Layla and Majnun (Plate 6), may well have set in motion the trend in emblematic depiction that infiltrated Persian book illustrations for the next several decades. And, finally, the illustration that appears at the beginning of this Introduction, from a decidedly Sufi septet of didactic narratives, Haft awrang (The Seven Thrones) by Jami (Plate 1), which exemplifies the phenomenon in its full maturity some seventy years later.⁹⁴
of the concealed correspondence of figure-types to the normative discourse of Sufism, especially in the iconography of the first two paintings would provide a basic template for analysis and decoding of other paintings in this genre.

Chapter 1 contextualises the programmatic dependence of the Persianate figural arts on narrative literature by highlighting the role of Sufi poets in the development of Persian verse and its dense use of imagery, word-play and illustrative tales, which make it central to any assessment of the common repository of forms, symbols and structures that informed the production of Persian manuscript painting in the late fifteenth century and permeated its iconography. Through a brief appraisal of previous studies relevant to the iconography of medieval Persianate painting, Chapter 2 introduces the 1487 manuscript of Attar’s *Mantiq al-tayr* as the seminal work in which scenes and figures that are unconnected to the narrative subject first appear, launching the new iconography that would characterise Persian manuscript painting for decades. Chapter 3 continues the discussion of the *Mantiq al-tayr* manuscript by scrutinising one of its illustrations in detail and explicating one of the earliest examples of enigmatic depictions in Persianate manuscript painting. The exposition links the tenor of the text – Attar’s allegorical tale – to the enigmatic iconography of the image through dense contextualisation in the world of Sufi initiates, their beliefs and practices in Herat.

Drawing on the intertextuality of Sufi discourse, Chapter 4 is devoted to the analysis of the 1494 illustration from Nizami’s romance of *Layla and Majnun*, painted a few years after the Attar manuscript initiated the depiction of enigmatic figures. The painting contains the first instance of several of what I am calling emblematic figure-types that continued to appear in Persianate painting for decades. In this case, the conventional iconography is re-valourised and re-energised by the same impulse that animates the iconographical innovation in the *Mantiq al-tayr* manuscript. The discussion demonstrates how the emblematic depictions relate not directly to Nizami’s text but rather correspond to intertextual layers of Sufi discourse and the contemporary allegorical mode of reading romance.

Chapter 5 returns to the Safavid painting ‘Depraved Man Commits Bestiality’, discussed in the Introduction, in order to decipher the significance of the enigmatic figure-types in their maturity, seven decades after their first
appearance and after the dramatic changes in the politico-religious life of the region. Exposing the subject matter as a portmanteau of the narrative subject and a contemporary royal dictum, the analysis of the figure-types demonstrates their appropriation by the Safavid programme of legitimacy and their convergence with the propagated ideology of the Imami creed.