

The Paladins in the snow

Godfrey Goodwin on the Shahnama of Muhammed Juki and how it ended up with the Royal Asiatic Society.

THE Paladins and the pages are caught in the snowstorm far off in a lonely country. They stop by a river to wait because they cannot go on. If we look at the dark sky we can see that this is a story without a happy ending, neither for the noble men seated so calmly in its shadow nor for their young and so innocent pages nor even for their thoroughbred horses. It is the inward calm that is magical for they are at the threshold of that sombre mystery which is the long ride to the other side of time where there may be a welcome: or, may be, there will not.

One may ask how can such a moment be painted and yet it has been as one can see even from a reproduction of the original. The artists used colours just like the rest. Indeed they did and they were the finest that the royal resources could command. The artists used accepted stylized forms for trees and water like the rest. They avoided all details in the faces which might record the experience of the individual and detract from the universality of the record, like the rest. So why, indeed, do we return again and again to this little picture which is no bigger than a handkerchief until we can see it entire in the mind's eye whenever we wish?

Is it because some artists have the power to turn mud into gold and gold into light itself? One need not be a mystic to be aware of this. Nor does one need to be an art historian to be aware that the painters of Herat who depicted the miniatures in the Shahnama of Firdawsi, that most loved of all the Persian poets, were not as other artists were. Who they were by name we cannot be sure and guessing will keep experts amused for generations to come. But whosoever they were, these unknown fellows, they share immortality with the famous names of the masters of east and west, Bihzad or Titian, whose works are indeed catalogued.

"The Paladins in the snow" is surely the most touching of all miniatures even if not necessarily the most

beautiful. Over beauty there can be endless dispute and the beholder may sort the masterpieces which follow one upon the other in this book into whatever order they may prefer. We cannot hope to understand what it is that may echo in our neighbour's mind and yet awakens no response in ours. But only the blind who cannot even glance will not instantly see that this Shahnama is exceptional; and the longer that one has the time to look, the greater becomes the reward.

Even "Rustam extracting the liver of the White Demon" is a scene transformed into poetry while the drama of his dragging Haqan from his elephant is not simply floodlit with brilliant colours, and held together with a spectacular composition, it is work pregnant with nobility. For with the stories of Firdawsi we are concerned with heroes and not mortal men like ourselves.

Again, with "Arjap slain by Isfandiyar in the Brazen Hold" there is mystery in the atmosphere which derives in part from the extraordinary, not to say ethereal, landscape. Here is no ordinary trodden path and here no common mid-day sun. This miniature is related to that of "Rustam's siege of Gang Bihist" where siege engine and architecture are ordered into frozen drama, a scene from the philosophers' war. Everything is as still as night but it is day. One movement and the composition would collapse and we would be running in the sludge of modern battle.

If I leave "The Simurgh returning the baby Zal" to last it is because the full orchestra of symbolic landscape in the Persian manner here has its finale. Study these essences of the rock and bush and one is on the way to understand the life within the colours and the forms. One will also discover the core of all that is human is encapsulated here. Indeed, all that is touching in paternity is heartfelt in this scene. These artists one and all, whomsoever they may have been, were visually poets as great as Firdaw-

si himself and enhance these stories which are not only immortal in the Muslim world but wherever human beings care for verse.

Where did this version of the poems come from, for of all the attempts to depict the work which are reproduced so often only one or two may be compared with the one executed for Muhammad Juki. Its best known rival is the former Houghton Shahnama created for Shah Tahmasp and it would be absurd to attempt to judge between these two. The Royal Asiatic Society Shahnama was painted at Herat in troubled times for the monarch's son. The Turkmen tribes had driven the last of the Timurid dynasty to this far corner of a once vast domain. But it is to be noted that while some of the paintings are purely in the style of mid-15th century Herat others appear to belong to that of Shiraz or to have been influenced by that school. It is also important to record that the text is written in a fine nasta'liq script and that it is adorned with two exceptionally fine headings. While 32 miniatures have survived, two were lost when the manuscript was still unbound: that is to say at some time before the end of the 18th century. The more important of the two is likely to have been a picture of the "Court of Gayumarth", the subject that is almost too exquisitely depicted in the album of Shah Tahmasp. For that version is so suffused with Sufi mysticism and refined by chinoiserie mists and so exquisite in detail and colour as to seem to the harsher judges to approach decadence.

There is also the problem of the "Origin of chess: the battle between Gaw and Talhand" for this picture is almost certainly an interloper. Indeed, it is the only one painted on a separate sheet and then stuck in. In the opinion of Basil Robinson, an authority in this field, it could be a later addition ordered by Sultan Jahangir when the Shahnama was in the Mughal imperial library. But if this is so, then it was specially painted in order to match the earlier Herat style. Evidence in favour of this is that some details are not always successful. Little is known of such imitations of older styles by Persian or Indian artists and this adds to the confusion. So it is that we are left puzzling with little hope of quickly discovering an answer to the problem. This need not prevent one marvelling at the complexity of fascinating detail that this extraordinary and somewhat bloodcurdling battle scene depicts.

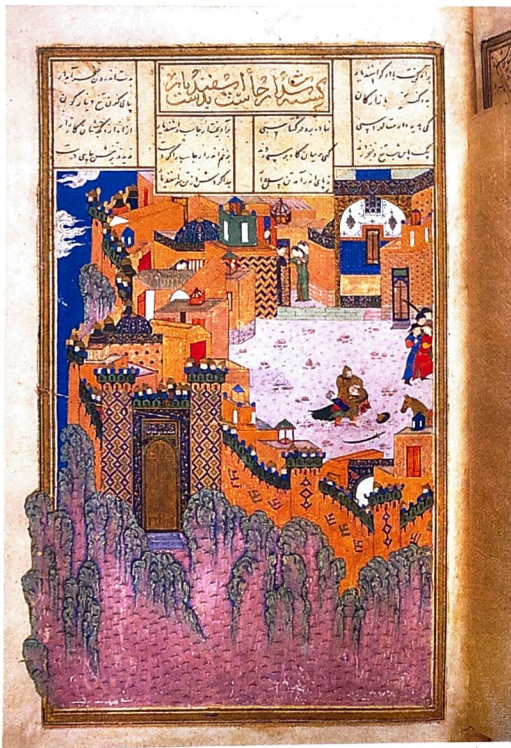
لرزان بریدن بنده را شکسته
 پد سپاس مل سلطان محمدان
 روا باشد اکنون که بردارست
 ششم تو خشنده گاه نیست
 مگر کین نیست نیاید بکار

میری شکر که راتو کن دلپذیر
 سزاوارتر کس میان همان
 نیی آزار نزدیک آوارست
 دو پر تو نشکر کلاه نیست
 کچه آزارش کن از روزگار

چنین ک سپهر با پور سپاس
 بدین گونه نوز مذجوری است
 سپهر بنگر که دستان کنست
 بدو کنت سپهر اگر تاج و
 ابا خورشید بر یکی پز من
 که بازیر پرت پرورده ام
 سما که پیام چو ابری سیاه
 دلش گشت بدرام و برداش

که ای دین رنج ششم و کیم
 تر از داو آب روی است
 که سپاس هستی همانا ز خجست
 بسته تو تخت و یگان کلاه
 چو خواجهی که پنی بیک فرمن
 ابا چکانست بر آورده ام
 نه آزارت آرم من کلاه
 که از آن با بر اندر او است





How did such a manuscript come into the possession of the Royal Asiatic Society? To answer that question it is essential to analyse the beliefs and points of view which were shared and not shared by various societies and by various people within those societies during the 19th century; and no less in our own.

During the last century great fortunes were amassed in the West. Such

a one was the estate of Jessie Boot, the Nottinghamshire chemist who became Lord Trent. In the USA another chemist made an even greater fortune. The latter established a great public collection of works of art and a centre for the study of the visual arts; so that the name of Bliss is unlikely to be forgotten. Trent believed deeply in education and his wealth was spent endowing departments of the Universi-

ty of Nottingham. Why did these two men spend their wealth in these ways?

Both wished to be remembered by posterity at a time when a title or landed estates would no longer ensure this. What they did hope to be remembered for was doing good: putting a wholly abstract concept to concrete use. Boot was unshaken in his belief that learning and its wisdom was the greatest benefit he could offer

the human race and he believed that it was the modern sciences which needed the greatest support so that a generation capable of accepting the future could be taught and in turn teach students of their own. In terms of the Shahnama, his achievement was less important than that of Bliss because we are concerned with a unique and immortal work of art; moreover one that was created too long ago for its beauty ever to be imitated. Nonetheless, the sciences of conservation of part and paper are essential for its preservation.

Men like Bliss believed in education too and by collecting masterpieces of art directed their attention to that aspect which most concerns us here. It is true that each newborn generation has the right and the inborn impulse to create afresh whether their work be bad, good or superlative. And the force to create is indestructible. So it is that the arrival of new worlds of art of any kind can be seen to oust the works of the past be it our immediate past or a past from long ago. But wait! If something of unique beauty is achieved does that beauty fade because new words are born and new ideas are seeded? Do we kill our mother or father on the day that we are born?

This is not a silly question because new achievements often thoughtlessly destroy old which are then regretted just as is the mother who dies in childbirth. There can, of course, be no standards if there is no past.

The achievements of our past are the essential measure of present creation. Besides which, even if they are but good and not exceptional as is the Muhammad Juki manuscript, they have a vitality which is their own because they have something to tell us about no just history or social history, though they may do that as well, but much more. They unveil the inward eye through which we glimpse the soul.

For those who believe that all creation must come from God alone the position is much simpler. For how can any sensitive human being destroy a monument or a miniature which was originally dedicated to all that is creative and so of God? There is the roofless mosque at Tinnel in Morocco, for example, which retains its beauty and sanctity which even the religious illiterate can recognize under the sky although they may be unable to understand this mystery. Is that roofless mansion to be pulled down or reconstructed in ferro-concrete and neon strip lighting like an under-

ground railway?

When Boot and Bliss and many like them were collecting masterpieces (or more modest works of art) and endowing colleges, their outlook was largely confined to the western quarters of the world: although, by no means entirely. The leisure might still exist in Asia but the education had declined. Confidence had temporarily declined too. Not only were superb buildings uncared for but small and portable works of art were neither treasured nor sought after. A silver or lacquer pence or a 10th century plate could be bought for a few pence from Isfahan to Calcutta and beyond.

The West did have men who were interested, however, and continued to collect and treasure and compare. Compare, because this is the root of all judgement and so of all education. Not that all westerners cared. Many were homesick for the porcelain of Sèvres or Dresden rather than the superb dishes that come from Nishapur. Yet many women admired the beautiful materials of the Islamic world and it was through these silks and cottons that the ever growing influence of the art of Islam was fed to the West.

Among those who worked in India at that time were diplomats and scholars who rapidly formed little groups of men of like mind. Thus the Asiatic Society of Calcutta was born and is even now sustained by the Government in Delhi. Out of this union was to be formed the Royal Asiatic Society of London which from its foundation was to be dedicated to the study and care of works of art east of the Mediterranean, the enhancement of a great library which now holds 100,000 books and many manuscripts, the discussion of ideas and the publication of a scholarly journal. Its achievement is that today it has as many fellows who are Asian as there are in Britain and Europe, America and Africa.

When the Nawab-Vezier of Oudh presented the Shahnama of Muhammad Juki to the then governor-general, Lord Hastings, who had no great interest in Mughal works of art, it was to become a parting gift to someone who most certainly had. This was Hasting's military secretary, Charles Joseph Doyle. Doyle went to be governor of Grenade where his health broke down. He retired as a major-general to live in Regent Street where he died shortly after in 1848.

Charles Doyle was not just a soldier but like many fellow artists officers was an amateur artist. His large

painting of the Marquess of Hastings long hung at London Castle in Scotland. He was more than aware of the importance of his Shahnama and naturally turned to the Royal Asiatic Society as a body which would appreciate its great value to civilization. Indeed it did. It was regarded as the outstanding gift of the period and all the unique aspects of the treasure were recorded at the time: including the fact that it carried the imprint of the seals of all the Mughal emperors from Babar to Aurangzeb.

A special meeting was convened in order to receive the gift with due dignity and to record the gratitude of the society under the chairmanship of the vice-president, Sir Gore Ouseley who had been ambassador at the court of Fath Ali Shah of Persia, and who was himself responsible for giving many treasures to the society.

At this time and for the next century and more, many hundreds of manuscripts in particular were rescued from dusty market stalls, repaired and bound and preserved. Now the world is changing because in the new Islamic republics respect for their own treasures has been reborn. Scholars have been trained and the first workshops capable of the long, painstaking work of preservation are being created.

Yet it is no reason for sadness that many eastern works of art are lodged in Western museums and such private collections as have so far survived economic pressures. They have been a challenge to entrenched academic thinking in the arts. They have awoken a love when love is the root of fraternity and fraternity is the real basis for democracy. Some of these works are too frail to travel but many are not. The Muhammad Juki Shahnama itself has been cared for, rebound and reordered during this century. Today, the only frontiers are ourselves.

It is sad to note that Muhammad Juki probably died before his Shahnama was completed. In the last section, the pages lack headings and there is evidence of haste. He had been a sick man for several years before his death in 1445 and besides this had fallen out with his father Shah Rukh because of the enmity of his stepmother. Yet his manuscript synthesizes all that was creative - and therefore happy - about his life as a prince. Perhaps, after all, had he lived a few weeks more there would only have been a sense of anticlimax. But not for us, or not for so long as the human race is fit, to be the guardian of such a masterpiece. ■