



Fig. 1, "A Mosque Scene," from the *Divan of Hafiz*. Rare Book Department, Free Library of Philadelphia, Lewis P 263. Image courtesy of the Free Library of Philadelphia.

## Big Little Lies: Reconsidering Copies of Persian Book Paintings

by Ryan Mitchell

A man rends his garments, prostrate before an *imam* who ponders his distress. Figures within the crowded mosque place their fingers to their lips in surprise, watch the man with sympathy in their eyes, or disregard his outburst entirely, consumed with their private conversations and prayers. Something, however, appears strange about the composition. The color of the tiles strikes the viewer as too bright and the figures oddly monochrome in comparison to the technicolor architecture. The overall effect edges on collage, and suggests that the elements of the painting may not belong together, leading viewers to ask: is this a copy? A forgery of some older work? And, perhaps most importantly, *does it matter?* These questions of authenticity confront viewers when approaching Lewis P 263, “A Mosque Scene” [Fig. 1], found within the collections of the Free Library of Philadelphia.

Acquired in 1922 by Philadelphia lawyer and art collector John Frederick Lewis (1860-1932), the scene is the creation of an artist variously referred to as Turabi Bek Khorasani and Turabasi. Lewis P 263 lives alongside six other paintings by Turabi Bek in the Free Library, each with their own unique characters and values determined not by historical age value, but by what the artist chose to omit or include, in the colors he brightened or blanched, the instances when he grafted his own creativity onto that of the artisans who laid down the original compositions, and where he adhered to veristic copying.

The scenes depicted in the seven paintings acquired by Lewis come from stories in the [Khamasa of Amir Khusraw Dihlavi](#), a thirteenth-century collection of stories that includes the famous [Dīvān of Hafiz](#), although the verse that informs Lewis P 263 is a brief and rather ambiguous episode from the poem that is frequently excluded from illustrated copies.<sup>1</sup> Turabi

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<sup>1</sup> Simpson, Marianna Shreve. “Mostly Modern Miniatures: Classical Persian Painting in the

Bek inscribed the verse on the arch (*iwan*) in *thuluth* calligraphy on a gold rectangular panel. Different translations from the original Persian alternately read: “Mind your own business, preacher man, what are you yowling for? / I've lost my heart in love, and you – what are you prowling for?” or “O preacher, mind your own business. What is this outcry? My heart is sunk in sorrow; what has befallen you?”<sup>2</sup> As documented and discussed by Marianna Shreve Simpson, the Free Library paintings were likely created between 1912 and 1920 and are based on sixteenth-century originals. Exactly how the sixteenth-century originals came into Turabi Bek’s atelier remains an open question. Simpson notes that photographs of the sixteenth-century paintings appear in a catalogue created for a 1914 auction in Paris, a catalogue that potentially found its way to Iran and into Turabi Bek’s hands. The demands of buyers in major European and American cities in the early twentieth century would later bring a number of the same paintings shown in the 1914 catalogue across the Atlantic. In the case of Lewis P 263, the original upon which it is based even became its neighbor when it entered the Harvard Art Museum’s collection.

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Early Twentieth Century.” *Muqarnas* 25 (2008): 382. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27811128>.

<sup>2</sup> Stuart Cary Welch, *Wonders of the Age: Masterpieces of Early Safavid Painting, 1501-1576*. Cambridge, 1979. cat. no. 42 and Ebadollah Bahari, *Bihzad: Master of Persian Painting*. London and New York, 1996. 254.

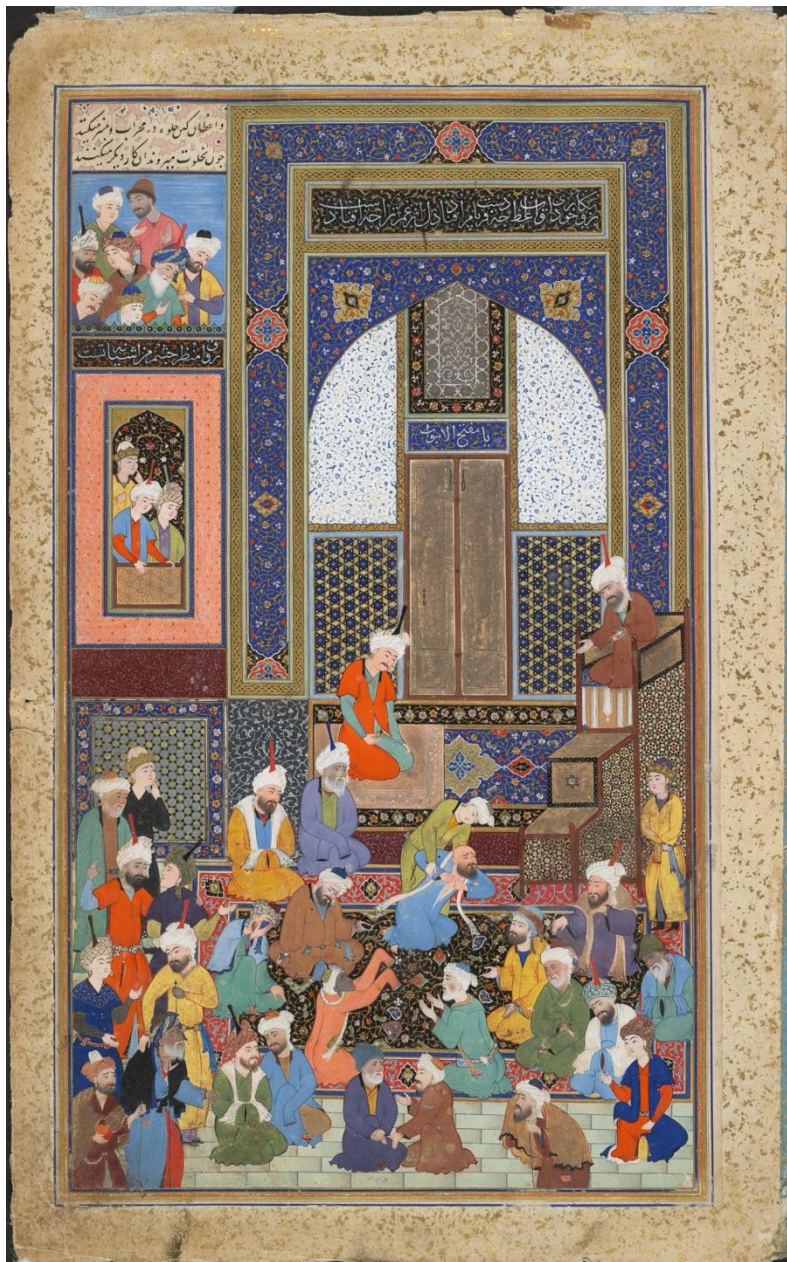


Fig. 2, "Incident in a Mosque," from the *Divan of Hafiz*, painting attributed to Shaykh Zada (c. 1525-27). Image courtesy of the Harvard Art Museum

Viewing the original painting [Fig. 2], which has been titled by Harvard as "An Incident in a Mosque," reveals the degree of artistic license that Turabi Bek allowed himself when copying the scene. Attributed to Shaykh Zada, the original work shows the hallmarks of the Persianate painting tradition practiced across diverse geographies that spanned from Central Asia to what is now Turkey and the Indian subcontinent.

The Shaykh Zada painting, unlike Turabi Bek's version, originally appeared in a bound book decorated with other paintings that illustrated fables, myths, and epic poems in elaborate detail. Complexity and intricacy generally define Persianate painting, and it is these qualities that encourage viewers to pause, lean in, and allow the eye to travel. Every scene rewards patience and multiple viewings because of the layers of embellishment used to depict tiled architectural spaces, battle scenes, and even seemingly-straightforward portraits.<sup>3</sup> Given the range of artists working across a vast region who created these books, a singular definition of what Persianate paintings actually are is impossible. The endless variations draw primarily from sixteenth and seventeenth century painters active in Herat, Afghanistan (historically part of [Transoxiana](#)) as well as in Isfahan and Shiraz in modern Iran. The workshops (*kitab-khana*) of Herat tended towards more muted colors and compositions [Fig. 3-4], than the Isfahani and Shirazi styles, which both feature [undulating technicolor landscapes and complex perspectives](#).

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<sup>3</sup> Roxburgh, David. "[Micrographia: Toward a Visual Logic of Persianate Painting](#)." *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, vol. 43: 12-30. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003.

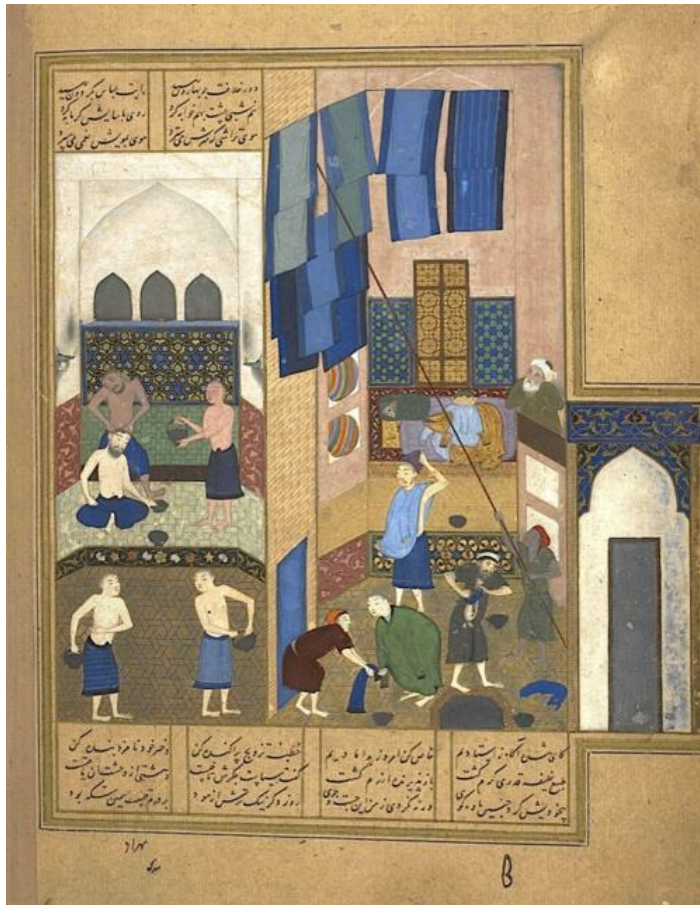


Fig. 3, "Harun al-Rashid and the barber," Folio 27r from the Khamsah of Nizami, ascribed in notes to Bihzad and to Mirak. ca. 1494-95 and created in Herat, Afghanistan. Image courtesy of the British Library

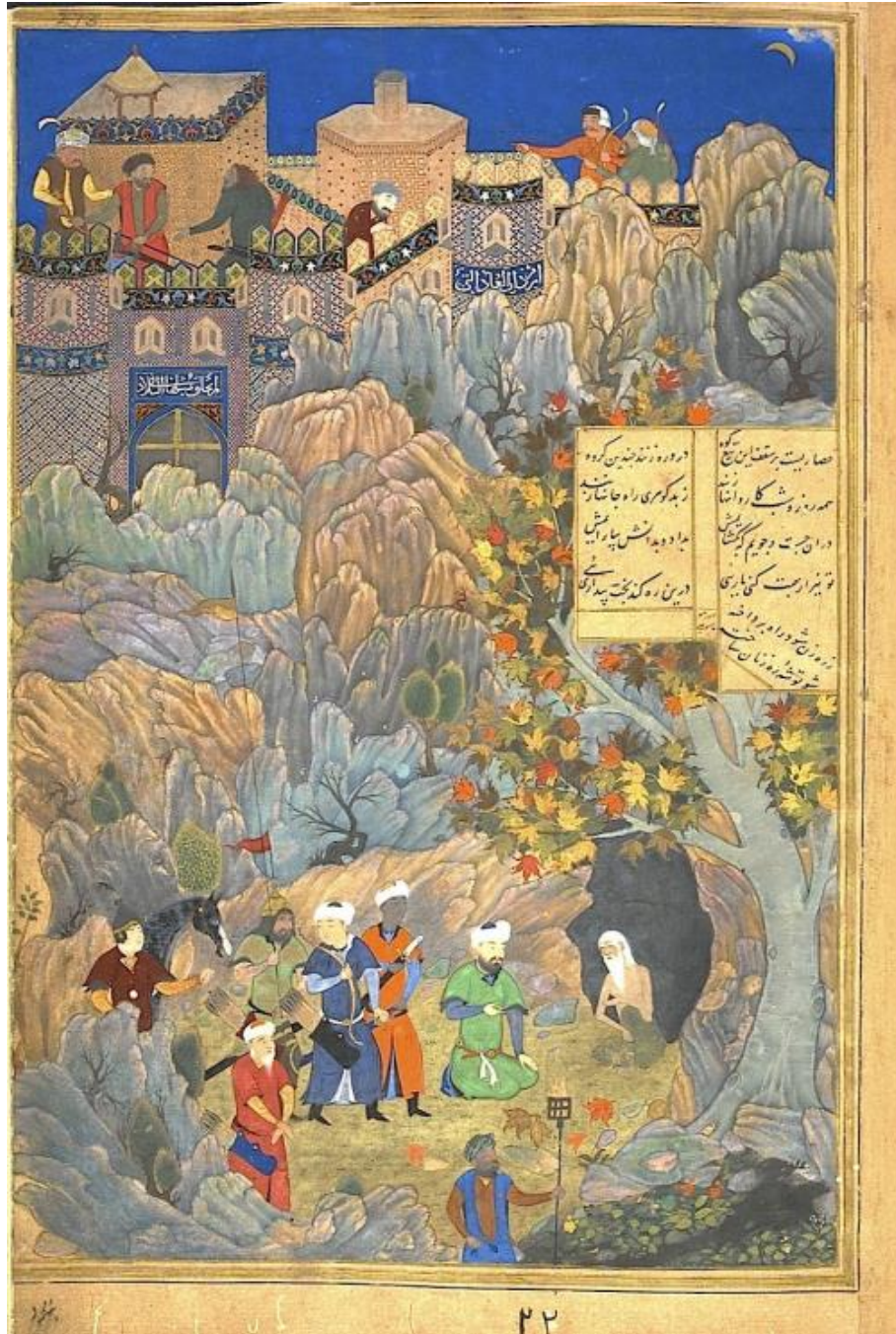


Fig. 4, "Iskandar (Alexander) Visits the Wise Men of the Cave", Folio 273r from the Khamsah of Nizami, ascribed in notes to Bihzad and to Qasim 'Ali. ca. 1494-95 and created in Herat, Afghanistan. Image courtesy of the British Library.

Shaykh Zada's painting at Harvard adheres to the Tabrizi and Shirazi styles, but, rather than make an attempt at an exact copy, Turabi Bek selected a composite style that marries the

styles of the Afghan and Iranian schools. His painting depicts figures larger and closer together, with the central figure thronged by additional characters not included in the original. The most notable deviation from the Harvard painting is the selection of a nearly monochromatic palette for the figures similar to that of Isfahani artisans such as [Reza Abbasi](#). Turabi Bek lightened the rich orange and blue robes, softened the black details of the mosque's carpet into rust, and removed the variegated colors of turbans and garments worn by worshippers in the scene, instead coloring them with gold leaf and placing just a touch of red on their lips. The monochrome figures also offer spectacular contrast for the architecture of the mosque. Intricate geometric and vegetal decoration create the same sense of *horror vacui* as the Harvard original, but, in Turabi Bek's version, patterns from the arch of the *iwan* creep into the upper galleries, onto the floor, and over the steps of the [minbar](#) where the *imam* sits.

Given how much Lewis P 263 deviates from the Harvard original, can the Free Library painting work truly be considered just a copy? Or does Turabi Bek's exertion of his own creative impulses make the Free Library painting something entirely original, worthy of consideration on its own merits rather than just in relation to a work that retains the age value and authenticity? Surely, if Turabi Bek intended to pass off his painting as a Safavid original to both Iranian and international buyers, he would not have made such a radical change to the blueprint from which he worked. So, what may have been his goal?

Unlike a forgery intended to deceive buyers, Turabi Bek seems to have responded to the tastes of buyers such as Lewis for original works by master painters like Shakykh Zada and found a way to adapt the Persianate painting tradition to his own ends. We do not find the "answers" to questions of the value of original works versus copies in this visual exploration, but



Turabi Bek's work reminds that those questions are historically situated, and that we must ask ourselves who exactly gets to decide.

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