

## Chinese Influence on Persian Paintings of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries

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## Chinese Influence on Persian Paintings of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries

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Cultural exchange between the Islamic world and China became considerably active during the Tang dynasty. This, as with earliest stage of exchange between these great civilizations, can be documented by extant artifacts, such as original Chinese ceramics and their imitations by craftsmen elsewhere. These latter include celadon and white wares found in various Islamic countries, such as in Samarra of Iraq, in Siraf of Iran and in Fustat of Egypt. These Islamic potteries in Chinese style also document diffusion of Chinese techniques to Islamic potters. Various types of ceramics of later Song, Yuan and Ming dynasties of China were also exported to the Middle East and Central Asia almost without interruption. The whiteness, shimmer and clinky hardness of Chinese porcelain inspired local Islamic potters to produce imitations. Above all, the so-called blue-and-white ware of Yuan and Ming China (itself originally of Persian inspiration as its Chinese appellation "Moslem Blue" testifies) was diffused throughout the Middle East, being favored not only in the royal courts but also among the wealthy social class of the Islamic world. Thus was created a sort of *chinoiserie* in West and Central Asia of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, even before the fashion of Orientalism in the arts and crafts of seventeenth-eighteenth century Europe. Besides actual Yuan and Ming blue-and-white wares and shards unearthed in Iran, Egypt, Syria and Turkey, fine examples of *chinoiserie* in Islam are found in some fourteenth-fifteenth century manuscript and album paintings of Persia. For instance, banquet scenes in these paintings frequently display blue-and-white style wares<sup>1)</sup>. Apart from ceramics, there is another medium by which the tracks of cultural intercourse between Persia and China of this time can be traced.

Before discussing this particular group of pictorial works, we must review their historical background in the pre-Mongolian period, when the East-West interrelation culminated.

It is likely that Seljuk Turks coming down from Central Asia to Iranian Plateau to establish new dynasties there (1038-1194) and in Anatolia (1077-1308), might have carried certain Far Eastern cultural elements that derived from northern China under the Liao (907-1125) and Chin (1115-1234) regional dynasties. For instance, mural paintings of Qing-ling<sup>2)</sup> (慶陵), tomb of the third emperor of the Liao in south Xing-an-ling, northeastern China, may have linked China and Persia prior to direct contacts by the Mongols. The representation of nature and color

scheme in Qing-ling mural paintings may find some common features in Persian painting.

When the Mongols gained supremacy over Central Asia and the Middle East and brought forth the so-called "Pax Mongolica" or "Pax Tartarica", East and West Asia were closely connected by exchanging diplomatic missions accompanied by merchants with products of their own countries. Under the Mongols, Chinese impact on Persian painting became even more prominent. Cultural activities in the Mongol period centered in Tabriz, capital of the Il-khanids and site of the Rashidiyya, academic center of Rashīd al-Dīn. Some manuscript paintings produced here, such as *Jāmi' al-Tawārīkh* (Universal History) of Rashīd al-Dīn<sup>3)</sup>, *Shāhnāme* (Book of Kings) of Firdausi<sup>4)</sup> and *Kalīla wa Dimna*<sup>5)</sup>, reveal strong influence from China. As far as these manuscript paintings of the fourteenth century are concerned, it would seem that Persian painters were attracted mainly by the representation of nature in Chinese painting—in other words, such landscape elements as knotty tree trunks, rocks, fungus-like clouds called *Ling-chih* (靈芝雲), in addition to spatial structure and moderate color scheme. These elements of naturalistic rendition were introduced from Chinese painting of Song and Yuan. However, other alien motifs and themes were not taken into the traditional stream of Persian painting: for instance, bird, flower, fish and insects, all major themes in Chinese painting, were never introduced into the Persian repertoire.

Even after the fifteenth century, era of the discovery of maritime routes, mobility of people and goods on the land route between East and West Asia was still active, even more accelerated than before. The cultural center was transferred from Tabriz eastward to Samarkand and Herat to play an important role as a cosmopolitan city linking East with West. Commercial activity resumed again when in the West Shah Rukh, Timur's son, ascended the throne, and in the East Emperor Yong Le (永樂帝) dispatched expeditions, truly a sort of commercial venture, headed by eunuch Zheng Huo (鄭和) to Southeast Asia, India and Middle East from 1405 to 1433. During the first 30 years of the fifteenth century diplomatic relation between Timurid and Ming courts, and the Mongol and Ming courts as well, was regularized. Later, Shāh Rukh and Ulug Beg, Timur's grandson, resumed diplomatic relations with China and sent missions frequently by land route.

Mobility of objects and artisans from one cultural zone to another accelerated diffusion of artistic ideas, style, form, technique, and design from East to West and vice versa. The fifteenth century cultural exchange between China and Persia is well exemplified by Persian manuscript and album paintings in Chinese style, such as a group of flower paintings, some with birds, now in the Topkapı Sarayı Museum, Istanbul and other collections in Europe and the United States. Many of them are not manuscript paintings, but independent works without any text, like portraiture, although technically speaking they are painted within the traditional framework of Persian painting. In terms of subject matter and style, the "flower-and-bird" paintings in question are quite unusual.

This essay is not a detailed research into flower or bird paintings of China and Persia, but a general survey of paintings on this theme, comparing the notion of plant or flower painting of both areas.

There are several interesting groups of "flower-and-bird," portraiture among album paintings of the Topkapı Sarayı<sup>6</sup>, some of which are painted on silk. Drawings of similar subject and style, composing a considerable portion of the Topkapı corpus, are exempted from our discussion. Those paintings selected here are classified into three groups: flowering bough (Plate 1): flowering tree growing from a mound (Plates 2 and 3): flowering bough in figural composition (Plate 4).

Before discussing this group of unusual subject matter, we should review plant representation in Islam.

## REPRESENTATION OF PLANTS IN ISLAM

Derivation of plant painting in Islam stems from the Arabs' interest in herbs and agriculture.

The oldest example of extant manuscripts depicting plants is *Kitāb al-Hashāesh* (Book of Herbs), which was translated from the Greek, where it was known under the name *De Materia Medica* by Dioscorides<sup>7</sup>. Similar manuscripts have been translated, accompanied by precise representations of plants. Common features of these manuscript illustrations are scientific analysis of the forms of plants, classification and pharmacological effects from the botanical point of view. This type of manuscript dealing with useful plants is characterized by practical purpose. Consequently for identification of species, the representation is quite naturalistic. Characteristics of flower representation in scientific manuscripts are: texts in Arabic explaining the characteristics of plants depicted; every portion of the plant from flower to root is represented realistically and analytically; in most cases flowers are exclusively represented, that is, not with birds or insects. In comparison with that in East Asia the Islamic approach is more scientific.

In spite of great progress in pharmacology, medical botany and herbal studies, style and technique of manuscript painting hardly changed until the fifteenth century. Although in the fifteenth century Timurid painters initiated their interest in portraiture, it was only in Safavid Iran, above all during the reign of Shāh 'Abbās I (r. 1588–1629), and in Zand and Qajar periods<sup>8</sup>, and in Mughal India, that a new genre of floral and bird portraiture developed, not only by eastern but also western influence.

## TRADITIONAL PAINTING IN ISLAM AND FLOWER PAINTING

Whether in the form of mural painting or of manuscript illustration, from a fairly early stage of the history of Islam several types of plants and birds are depicted within their natural setting or as illustration of medical books or as decorative filling motifs. Except in medical books, they are rarely single,

independent, or close-ups of flowers or birds. In other words, they compose only a part of an overall composition, where plants tend to be painted separately from birds in a natural setting, such as at a reception or feast in the garden, in hunting scenes and visions of Paradise. Although there are some bird paintings in Topkapı Sarayı albums—such as falcon, crane, quail and sparrow, possibly copied from Chinese originals—the use of birds as well as flowers as decorative patterns is exempted from our discussion.

Apart from flowers as elements of landscape setting, there must be a case in which flowers are endowed with certain symbolic and magical connotation, although this view remains unexplored<sup>9</sup>). For instance, the creatures in an idyllic garden in Paradise must be bestowed with certain metaphors or symbolic meanings.

Flower painting in Persia in general lacks naturalness and plasticity or three-dimensionality, on the one hand, because of flat application of color as decoration, and indifference to reality on the other hand. In most cases the major parts of plants are visible, unlike Chinese “flower-and-bird” painting in which flower and leaves, flowering boughs, birds, tree trunk or bamboo stalks are selectively represented.

It is not only the case of flower painting, but also in landscape settings that flora-fauna play a secondary role. They are often used as background to narrative scenes with figural composition. At times depiction of nature is almost symbolic, revealing only an essence of the landscape elements to suggest the natural environment of a scene.

Reviewing the representation of flowers in Islam—it is apparent the flowers in question, particularly those of the Istanbul albums, are outside the tradition of Persian painting. Now we have to look for the possible source of inspiration not in the world of Islam, but in a different cultural milieu.

### “FLOWER-AND-BIRD” PAINTING IN CHINA *Hua-niao-hua* (花鳥画)

Although landscape painting has a long—probably the longest—tradition in the history of Chinese painting, the theme of floral paintings of China may also be as old as other themes like figural composition. Though flowers and birds have been used in many genres of decorative art, those in creative art must have seen a different approach in each cultural area and era. For instance, for Chinese literati painters the major purpose of “flower-and-bird” painting was more to seek for spiritual value than formal beauty, which seems to be the primary purpose for Persian painters.

In Chinese “flower-and-bird” painting there are two main traditional streams: One is the so-called *Mo-gu hua fa* (没骨画法) (simple style ink-painting without outline), said to have been initiated by Xu Xi (徐熙) of Southern Tang, plus his followers’ style, called *Xu-shi ti* (徐氏体), at times combined with colors. Second is the so-called *Gou-le tian-cai hua fa* (鈎勒填彩画法) (filling outlined space with colors) which is a decorative style of colorful representation, adopting moderate

naturalism. This latter style, called *Huang-shi ti* (黄氏体), is said to have been initiated by Huang Quan (黄筌) of Shu (蜀) (934–965) of Five Dynasties. This came to be a leading style of “flower-and-bird” painting of the Northern Song Academy. In the Song dynasty when the naturalistic style prevailed, Hui-zong (徽宗) (r. 1100–1125), emperor of Northern Song and patron of arts, established this Academy at the end of the dynasty. Here exquisite works of naturalism and of eclectic style combining traditional styles were produced, whereas Southern Song Academy style was followed by painters such as Li Di (李迪) (d. post-1197), who painted “flower-and-bird” paintings of minute and exquisite style. It was in the following Yuan period when previous Northern Song, and above all Tang, painting style was reintroduced by a group of painters like Zhao Meng-fu (赵孟頫) (1254–1322) and ink painting and drawing in archaic style prevailed. Later, in-Ming and Qing painting the Northern Song style was again followed but accentuating more decorative aspects, as in decorative arts.

It is said that the Chinese attitude towards flower paintings is rather aesthetic and lyric in comparison with that in early Islam.

In Chinese “flower-and-bird” painting there are mainly two types in terms of format; in large format an entire tree tends to be depicted, whereas a part of tree trunk or flowering branch only is frequently depicted in small format as stated below. It is worth noting that one of the favorite subjects in Chinese “flower-and-bird” painting is called *zhe zhi hua* (折枝花), and shows only a major portion like a flowering spray taken from a tree trunk, often in a small format. This realistically represented flowering spray is not a mere part of the whole, but is the whole like a hologram, all represented in a small part. The “flower and bird” paintings in Chinese manner in the Topkapı Sarayı are mostly in this style and differ from any kind of paintings known in the Persian world. They do not represent a particularly individualistic style of celebrated Chinese “flower-and-bird” painters; what Persian painters copied from Chinese “flower-and-bird” painting is a period style that developed during the earlier Song dynasty and the following dynasty.

Monochrome ink-painting without outline undoubtedly did not appeal to the Persians, who are fond of colorful expression. In fact, no Persian ink paintings with flower and bird survive today. Even if two types of Chinese “flower-and-bird” paintings would have been brought to Persia simultaneously, Persian artists would not have been attracted by monochrome ink-painting. The extant Chinese “flower-and-bird” and their copies in the Istanbul collection are executed in the traditional scheme of vivid, bright, powerful colors.

In particular, a group of paintings in the Istanbul collection in question are accompanied by various species of birds perching on boughs or flying nearby.

## ADAPTATION OF ALIEN SUBJECT AND STYLE

Speculating from the extant Persian paintings in Chinese mode of expression, there two ways to adapt alien motif and style: one is blind copy, and the other a

composite of disintegrated elements of alien derivation and of indigenous elements.

With regard to the former case, there are a few paintings revealing a bird or birds on loquat ((*Eriobotrya japonica*; pipa (枇杷)) branch in a Topkapı album. One of them (Plates 5 and 7)<sup>10</sup> could be a blind copy of a Chinese "flower-and-bird" by a Persian painter. Although its flatly applied colors are brilliant and strong and the bird is somewhat clumsy, it seems to be a close study of a model no longer extant. The dominating colors are green, yellow, gray and brown. In another example of this group (Plate 6)<sup>11</sup> a bird hangs down from a loquat spray, a pose very close to one in "Wintry Cold of Snow at Twilight," said to be painted by Cui Bai (崔白), a painter of Northern Song, although the strong blue of the bird is no longer characteristics of Chinese painting.

The second mode of adaptation is a composite of diverse motifs and of style. One characteristic of this mode is superimposition of certain motifs over a different composition, or connection of two entirely different compositions side by side. In the manuscript of *Kat'ila wa Dimna* of Istanbul's University Library, is revealed an indoor scene in Persian traditional style connected with an outdoor scene composed of flowering tree and a part of architectural construction (a fence) in Chinese style<sup>12</sup>. This mode of adaptation in the Topkapı Sarayı collection is well exemplified by "Ensemble under a Flowering Tree"<sup>13</sup> in which a flowering tree (Plates 1 and 2) and a figural composition (Plate 4) are combined to produce a new composition. A similar example is also found in a fifteenth century Persian painting on silk showing an outdoor feast scene<sup>14</sup> under a flowering branch. At times landscape or genre is combined with flowers and birds. The consequence is that integration of diverse elements leads to an eclectic nature or, in other words, pastiche. This is one of the distinguished characteristics of the Istanbul album paintings.

Many "flower-and-bird" paintings of the Istanbul collection in question represent only upper parts of plants, namely flowers, buds, leaves, boughs and tree trunks, but some show plants growing from the ground or mounds. The former are without doubt based on Chinese originals. In the latter, often we are not able to trace the trail of Chinese derivation.

The Chinese original paintings of various subjects in the Topkapı Sarayı albums are categorized as second-class works at best, lacking in virtuosity<sup>15</sup>. Their copies by local painters in the same collection, however, are by far more interesting and important in terms of East-West cultural interrelations during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Judging from their mediocre quality, those Chinese paintings could have been brought to Persia as souvenirs, rather than as royal gifts or tribute. It is curious that the Chinese models of any of these copies and studies in Chinese style by Persian painters do not survive, neither in the Topkapı collection nor in other collections outside Turkey or Iran.

## CONCLUSION

It was during Southern Song to Yuan Dynasties (thirteenth-fourteenth century)

that so-called Ning-bo Buddhist paintings (寧波仏画), characteristics of which are stylized iconography, decorativeness, and minute representation, were exported to Japan and other neighboring countries from Ning-bo region, Zhe-jiang (浙江) province. It may be hypothesized that a small group of Chinese originals like the Ning-bo Buddhist paintings, could also have been brought to Persia, where local painters attempted to copy them as studies, and finally must have reached the present Topkapı Palace collection in Turkey (probably taken by the Ottoman sultan) from Safavid Persia.

With regard to the derivation or provenance of these copies in Chinese style: Because they display aspects of both Chinese and Timurid paintings, Samarkand, Herat or some other unknown center of artistic activities could be the possible site of production. It seems that Persian painters adored Chinese works of art for many years from the Mongol period on. They borrowed diverse decorative motifs and landscape elements of China, some of which survived for centuries, while the naturalistic rendition, spatial organization and the format of handscroll of Song and Yuan paintings were not very influential and disappeared in the long tradition of Persian painting.

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## NOTES

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2. Tamura Jitsuzo and Kobayashi Yukio, *Tombs and Mural Paintings of Ch'ing-ling, Liao Imperial Mausoleums of Eleventh Century A. D. in Eastern Mongolia*. 2 vols. (Kyoto: Kyoto University, 1952-53).
3. Produced in Tabriz, 1306 (now in University of Edinburgh) and in 1314 (now in Royal Asiatic Society, London).
4. Produced in Tabriz, 1330~70, now in various collections in Europe and the United States.
5. Produced in Tabriz, 1360~74. Now in the University Library, Istanbul.
6. Oktay Aslanapa, *Türkische Miniaturmalerei am Hofe Mehmet des Erobers in Istanbul, Ars Orientalis I* (1954): 77-84; Richaard Ettinghausen, *Some Paintings in the Istanbul Miniatures*; *ibid.*, pp. 91-103; Toh Sugimura, *The Chinese Impact of Certain Fifteenth Century Persian Miniature Paintings from the Albums* (Hazine Library Nos. 2153, 2154, 2160) in the Topkapı Sarayı Museum, Istanbul. Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Michigan, 1981; *idem*, *The Encounter of Persia with China: Research into Cultural Contacts Based on Fifteenth Century Persian Pictorial Materials*. *Senri Ethnological Studies*, 18 (1986), pls. 5 (color), 43, 46-49.
7. A manuscript of *Materia Medica* completed in 1224 describes some five hundred plants and their pharmaceutical efficacies.
8. There are some good examples in the Binney collection. As a Safavid example "Iris and Butterfly," (Isfahan, 1721, painted by Muhammed Rashid Khan) and as the Zand and Qajar examples "Iris-blossom," "Rose-buds," "Spray of five-petalled flowers with a butterfly," "Rose-spray," "Tulip," and "Rose and tulip," may be enough to give an idea of the later Persian flower paintings. They are published in *Persian and Mughal Art* (London: P & D Colnaghi, 1976), pls. 62, 63, 65i, 65xxi-c, 65xxi-d, 65xxiii, and 65xxvi.
9. *Kitab ash-Shifa'* (Book of Healing) by Ibn Sina.
10. "A Bird on a Loquat Branch." H. 2160, fol. 54a, color on paper, 227×304 cm.
11. "A Bird on a Loquat Branch." H. 2160, fol. 13b, color on paper, 206×168 cm. See *Chinese Paintings of Flowers and Birds*. (Taipei, 1973), pl. 28.
12. "An Attempted Murder Frustrated" and "The Thief Discovered in the Bedchamber" in *Kalila wa Dimna*, Tabriz, 1360-1374. F. 1422, fol. 11v & 24r, University Library, Istanbul. Illustrated in B. Gray, *Persian Painting*. (Geneve: Skira, 1961), pp. 38 & 39.
13. "Birds on a Flowering Branch." H. 2153, fol. 51b (Plate 1), color on paper, 192×290cm; "Birds on a Flowering Branch." H. 2153, fol. 30b (Plate 2), color on paper, 322×175cm; "Ensemble under a Flowering Tree." H. 2153, fol. 36a, color on paper, 485×286 cm.
14. "A Prince Seated in a Garden," Central Asia or Iran, ca. 1425-50. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, No. 14. 545, illustrated in *Timur and the Princely Vision, Persian Art and Culture in the Fifteenth Century*. (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1989), cat. no. 86.
15. Max Loehr, *Chinese Elements in the Istanbul Miniatures*. *Ars Orientalis* 1 (1954): 85-89.

## LIST OF PLATES

### Plate 1. Flowering Bough

Color on paper, 192×290 cm

Topkapı Sarayı Museum, Istanbul, Hazine 2153, fol. 51b.

Signed "Kār-e Ustād Shaykhi"

- Plate 2. Flowering Tree Growing from a Mound  
(A mound on the left of the picture is not reproduced.)  
Color on cloth, 322 × 175 cm  
Topkapı Sarayı Museum, Istanbul, Hazine 2153, fol. 30b.
- Plate 3. Flowering Tree Growing from a Mound  
Color on silk, 390 × 277 cm  
Topkapı Sarayı Museum, Istanbul, Hazine 2153, fol. 66a.
- Plate 4. Ensemble under a Flowering Bough  
Color on paper, 485 × 286 cm  
Topkapı Sarayı Museum, Istanbul, Hazine 2153, fol. 36a.
- Plate 5. Bird on Loquat Branch  
Color on paper, 227 × 304 cm  
Topkapı Sarayı Museum, Istanbul, Hazine 2160, fol. 54a.  
Signed “‘Amal-e Ustād Muḥammad Siyāḥ Qalam”.
- Plate 6. Bird on Loquat Branch  
Color on paper, 206 × 168 cm  
Topkapı Sarayı Museum, Istanbul, Hazine 2160, fol. 13b.
- Plate 7. Birds on Loquat Branch  
Color on paper, 273 × 294 cm  
Topkapı Sarayı Museum, Istanbul, Hazine 2160, fol. 49b.  
Signed “‘Amal-e Ustād Muḥammad Siyāḥ Qalam”.



pl. 1. Flowering Bough.  
Topkapı Sarayı Museum, İstanbul, Hazine 2153,  
fol. 51b.



pl. 2. Flowering Tree Growing from a Mound.  
Topkapı Sarayı Museum, H. 2153, fol. 30b.



pl. 4. Ensemble under a Flowering Bough.  
Topkapı Sarayı Museum, H. 2153, fol. 36a.





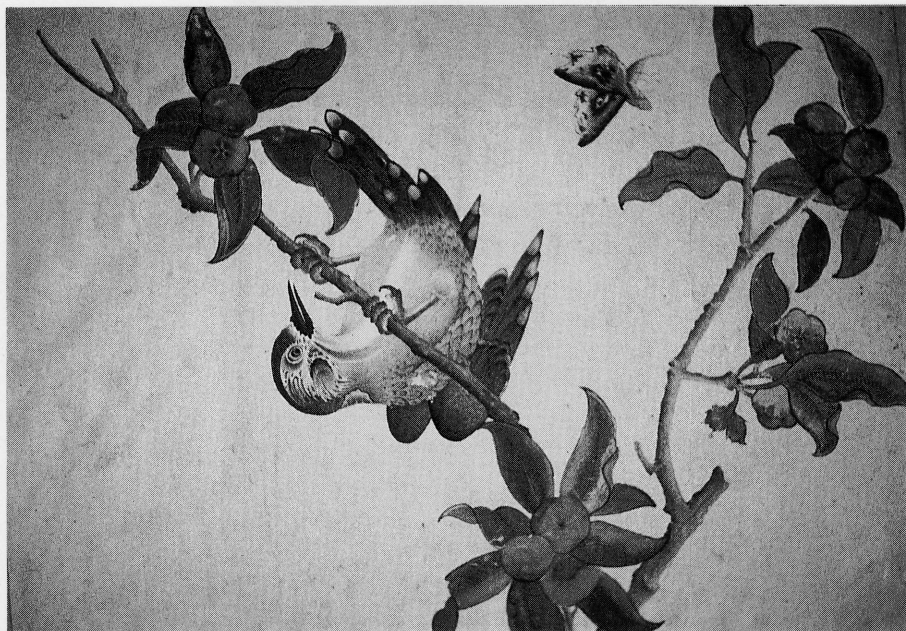
pl. 3. Flowering Tree Growing from a Mound.  
Topkapı Sarayı Museum, H. 2153, fol.  
66a.



pl. 5. Bird on Loquat Branch.  
Topkapı Sarayı Museum, H. 2160, fol. 54a.



pl. 7. Bird on Loquat Branch.  
Topkapı Sarayı Museum, H. 2160, fol. 49b.



pl. 6. Bird on Loquat Branch.  
Topkapı Sarayı Museum, H. 2160, fol. 13b.