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INTERPRETATION OF HUMAN FIGURES ON TIMURID BOOKBINDINGS

Abstract. *This article examines the emergence and development of human imagery on Timurid bookbindings during the second quarter of the fifteenth century. Particular attention is given to the binding of the Divan of Jahan Malik Khatun, copied in 840/1436–1437; Nizami Ganjavi’s Khamsa, copied in 846/1442–1443; Jalal al-Din Rumi’s Masnavi, copied in 849/1446; and another copy of Nizami’s Khamsa, produced in Shiraz in 853/1449–1450. A comparative examination of these examples reveals a significant change in the compositional role of the human figure. Initially represented as a principal figure within a medallion, the human image was subsequently incorporated into increasingly complex pictorial settings involving landscape elements, animals, fantastic creatures, and epigraphic decoration. The article argues that this development should not be understood merely as an iconographic innovation. It was closely related to advances in binding techniques, the artistic environment of Timurid court culture, and the circulation of craftsmen, motifs, and compositional models among major centres of manuscript production. Particular caution is proposed in attributing figurative bindings to a specific artistic centre solely on stylistic grounds, since the date and place of copying of a manuscript do not necessarily establish the date and place of its binding.*

Keywords: *Timurids, book art, bookbinding, Herat, Shiraz, human figure, figurative decoration, Jahan Malik Khatun, Nizami Ganjavi, Masnavi, leather binding, stamping.*

INTRODUCTION

In the history of Islamic manuscript culture, the bookbinding served not only as a protective covering but also as an integral component of the book’s visual conception.

The relationship between calligraphy, illumination, painting, and binding became particularly sophisticated under the Timurids. From the late fourteenth through the fifteenth century, courtly environments in Samarkand, Herat, Shiraz, and other centres contributed to changes in both the techniques and decorative vocabulary of bookbinding.

After Amir Timur granted Khurasan to Shahrukh Mirza as a *soyurghal* in 1397, Herat gradually strengthened its political and cultural position. During the reign of Shahrukh Mirza, the city became one of the major centres associated with the copying, decoration, illustration, and binding of manuscripts. It would, however, be misleading to reduce Timurid book production to Herat alone. Important manuscript-making environments also developed around other Timurid princes, including Ulugh Beg in Samarkand and Ibrahim Sultan in Shiraz. Jean Aubin treated the patronage of Ibrahim Sultan in Shiraz as a significant cultural phenomenon in its own right, while subsequent studies have examined the prince's library, calligraphers, and manuscript commissions in greater detail (Aubin, 1957; Aubin, 1987; Nasr al-Soltani, 2001; Uluç, 2013).

One of the most notable developments in Timurid bookbinding was the introduction of human figures, animals, birds, and fantastic creatures into the decoration of leather covers. Geometric and vegetal ornament did not disappear; rather, figurative compositions began to coexist with the established ornamental repertoire. By the second quarter of the fifteenth century, the surface of a binding could therefore function as more than an ornamental frame. In certain examples it became a pictorial field capable of accommodating figures and narrative-like compositions.

Oktay Aslanapa drew particular attention to the binding of the *Divan* of Jahan Malik Khatun, copied in 840/1436–1437, regarding it as an important early example of the use of human imagery in bookbinding (Aslanapa, n.d.:79). He also observed affinities between some of the figurative motifs employed in book decoration and motifs that later appeared in other forms of applied art, including carpets (Aslanapa, 1988). Such observations invite a broader examination of bookbinding within the interconnected visual culture of the Timurid period rather than as an isolated craft.

The purpose of this article is to examine how the human figure entered the decorative programme of selected fifteenth-century bindings, how its compositional role changed during the second quarter of the century, and how these developments may be understood within the wider artistic networks of Timurid manuscript production.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The primary material for this study consists of several fifteenth-century manuscripts whose bindings incorporate human imagery. Particular attention is paid to the *Divan* of Jahan Malik Khatun, copied in 840/1436–1437 and preserved in the Topkapı Palace Library under shelfmark H.867, and to Nizami Ganjavi's *Khamisa*, copied in 846/1442–1443 and preserved there under shelfmark R.862. Comparative material includes the binding of a copy of Jalal al-Din Rumi's *Masnavi*, dated 849/1446, and the binding associated with a copy of Nizami's *Khamisa* produced in Shiraz in 853/1449–1450.

The study combines historical-comparative, codicological, iconographic, and art-historical methods. Comparative analysis is used to trace changes in the compositional position of the human figure across approximately a decade and a half. The codicological approach considers the external and internal structure of the bindings, including medallions, corner pieces, flaps, borders, stamped decoration, and gilding. Iconographic analysis focuses on the relationship between human figures, animals, birds, fantastic creatures, and vegetal motifs.

A methodological distinction between the date of copying and the date of binding is essential. A dated colophon establishes the production of the manuscript text but does not necessarily establish when or where its present binding was made. Manuscripts could be rebound, restored, or provided with new covers at a later date. Consequently, chronological and geographical attribution of a binding should ideally be supported by its construction, materials, decorative techniques, tool impressions, and provenance rather than by the colophon alone.

RESULTS

The Human Figure on the Binding of Jahan Malik Khatun's Divan

The *Divan* of Jahan Malik Khatun, copied by Murshid ibn Muhammad al-Hamadani in 840/1436–1437, provides an important early example of a binding incorporating human imagery. The manuscript is preserved in the Topkapı Palace Library under shelfmark H.867 (Aslanapa, n.d.:79).

The central medallion on the exterior of the front cover contains a scene in which a seated woman offers a drink to a man facing her. The man wears a crown and turns his head slightly to one side. Human figures also appear within the corner decoration, seated among floral elements and arranged in opposing positions.

The significance of the composition lies in the role assigned to the human figure. The figures are not secondary ornamental details; the interaction between them determines the subject of the central medallion. The scene recalls the courtly and convivial imagery familiar from manuscript painting. Nevertheless, it should not be treated simply as a miniature transferred mechanically onto leather. Its composition has been adapted to the physical constraints of the medallion and to the techniques of relief decoration on the binding surface.

The exterior of the flap presents a symmetrical arrangement of two gazelles and two leopards accompanied by trees, flowers, and other vegetal motifs. On the interior of the back cover, rabbits appear within a medallion, while five ducks are arranged in a circular composition on the flap.

The binding therefore brings together human, animal, and vegetal imagery within a coordinated decorative programme. H.867 is important not merely because human figures occur on its cover, but because it demonstrates the expansion of the visual vocabulary available to fifteenth-century bookbinders.

Human Figure and Landscape on Nizami's Khamsa. A different stage in this development can be observed on the binding associated with Nizami Ganjavi's *Khamsa*, copied in 846/1442–1443 and preserved in the Topkapı Palace Library as R.862.

The central panel depicts a human figure engaged in combat with a bear. Trees, monkeys, birds, and a dragon surround the encounter. The design of the central field was impressed with a large stamp or mould, while the border consists of interlaced lines and geometric ornament.

The role of the human figure differs noticeably from that in the binding of Jahan Malik Khatun's *Divan*. In H.867, the figures occupy a self-contained medallion and dominate its subject. In R.862, the human figure has become part of a broader pictorial environment. The encounter with the bear is integrated with vegetation, animals, and a fantastic creature, giving the composition a stronger narrative quality.

It would nevertheless be premature to identify the combat scene, the dragon, monkeys, and birds with a specific literary episode without further textual or iconographic evidence. At present, it is more appropriate to regard them as part of a visual repertoire shared across fifteenth-century manuscript and applied arts.

The Binding of the 849/1446 Masnavi. The binding associated with a copy of Jalal al-Din Rumi's *Masnavi*, copied in 849/1446, represents a further development in figurative composition.

The exterior of the front cover is made of dark tan leather. Its central field contains a stamped composition combining animals, a dragon, a flying fantastic bird, a flowering tree, and other vegetal elements. In the upper part of the composition, a young man is represented fighting a bear beneath a tree. Three monkeys occupy the branches: two appear to be playing, while another observes the struggle below. Reclining foxes and a flying bird further enrich the scene.

Real and fantastic creatures thus inhabit the same pictorial environment. The human figure no longer functions as the sole visual focus; instead, it participates in a densely constructed composition in which animals, fantastic beings, and vegetation have comparable visual importance.

Above and below the central field is an Arabic inscription expressing wishes for happiness, well-being, and long life. The integration of the inscription with the figurative composition demonstrates the close relationship between pictorial and epigraphic decoration on the binding.

The interior is equally elaborate. Cut-leather ornament is combined with stamped and gilded decoration. Two phoenix-like birds are symmetrically arranged within an almond-shaped medallion against a background of flowering branches.

The 849/1446 binding therefore differs from the earlier examples not simply in the number of figures represented, but in the way several categories of decoration—human, animal, fantastic, vegetal, and epigraphic—are brought together within a unified visual scheme.

The Shiraz Khamsa and the Continuity of a Compositional Model. The binding associated with Nizami's *Khamsa*, copied in Shiraz in 853/1449–1450, displays notable affinities with the examples discussed above. Its importance lies in suggesting that such figurative solutions were not necessarily confined to a single workshop or city.

Timurid manuscript culture was characterised by movement between courts and regional centres. Craftsmen, calligraphers, painters, manuscripts, and potentially tools and compositional models circulated within these networks. Similarities between bindings associated with Herat and Shiraz should therefore not automatically be interpreted as evidence of a simple, one-directional transfer of a “Herat style.”

Shiraz had already developed a substantial courtly manuscript culture under Ibrahim Sultan. Its artistic production should consequently be understood as part of an interconnected Timurid environment in which local practices and interregional exchanges operated simultaneously.

DISCUSSION

When the bindings examined above are placed in chronological sequence, a meaningful change in the compositional role of the human figure becomes visible.

In the 840/1436–1437 *Divan* of Jahan Malik Khatun, human figures occupy the central medallion and constitute the principal subject of a courtly scene. The traditional medallion structure nevertheless remains dominant.

By 846/1442–1443, in the binding of Nizami's *Khamsa*, the figure has moved into a broader natural setting. The human encounter with a bear is surrounded by trees, monkeys, birds, and a dragon. The visual logic of the cover consequently shifts from an enclosed figural medallion towards a more complex pictorial scene.

In the 849/1446 *Masnavi*, this tendency becomes still more pronounced. Human, animal, fantastic, vegetal, and epigraphic elements are treated as parts of an integrated composition rather than as independent decorative units.

The material considered here therefore allows the development to be understood, provisionally, in three stages: the incorporation of human figures into the traditional medallion; the integration of the human figure into a landscape populated by animals and fantastic beings; and, finally, the formation of a unified pictorial programme combining human, zoomorphic, fantastic, vegetal, and epigraphic elements.

This sequence should not be interpreted as a rigid evolutionary scheme. The surviving corpus is limited, individual bindings may have different production histories, and earlier or contemporary examples may alter the chronology. It is nevertheless useful as an analytical model for understanding the changing compositional role of the human figure in the examples considered here.

Technical developments were equally important. The use of large stamps or moulds made it possible to reproduce increasingly complex multi-figural compositions on leather. The expansion of figurative imagery was therefore not independent of developments in the techniques of bookbinding. Iconographic and technological change appear to have proceeded together.

The religious interpretation of such imagery also requires caution. The predominance of geometric and vegetal ornament in many Islamic bindings has sometimes encouraged attempts to explain the presence or absence of figural imagery primarily through religious or sectarian affiliation. Such an explanation is insufficient

for the Timurid material. Court patronage, the intended function of an object, workshop traditions, the availability of craftsmen, and the circulation of artistic models must also be taken into consideration. The occurrence of a human or animal figure cannot, by itself, be used as a reliable indicator of a particular Sunni, Hanafi, or Shi'i environment.

The same caution applies to geographical attribution. Herat was unquestionably one of the most important centres of Timurid book production during the fifteenth century, but stylistic similarity alone does not prove that a particular binding was manufactured there. A manuscript copied in Herat might have received its present binding elsewhere or at a later date. Conversely, techniques associated in modern scholarship with Herat may have circulated across several workshops.

For this reason, the attribution of Timurid bindings should combine stylistic comparison with codicological evidence: leather, construction, tooling, stamped impressions, gilding, doublures, repairs, ownership history, and provenance. Such an approach makes it possible to distinguish the history of the manuscript text from the potentially more complicated history of its binding.

Aslanapa also noted that certain figurative compositions encountered in book art find parallels in later artistic production associated with Herat and Tabriz, including carpets (Aslanapa, 1988). If supported by further comparative evidence, these parallels suggest that figurative motifs circulated not only between manuscript workshops but also between different branches of the applied arts.

Human imagery on Timurid bindings should therefore be studied not simply as an unusual form of decoration. These covers provide evidence for the circulation of motifs, craftsmen, tools, and compositional ideas across the artistic centres of the Timurid world.

CONCLUSION

The evidence examined in this study indicates that the second quarter of the fifteenth century was an important period in the development of figurative decoration on Timurid bookbindings.

The binding of the *Divan* of Jahan Malik Khatun, copied in 840/1436–1437, represents an important early example in which human figures constitute the principal subject of the central medallion. The binding associated with Nizami's *Khamsa* of 846/1442–1443 reveals a different conception: the human figure is incorporated into

a broader setting populated by animals, vegetation, and fantastic creatures. In the 849/1446 *Masnavi*, the relationship becomes still more complex, with human, animal, fantastic, vegetal, and epigraphic elements integrated into a single visual field.

The affinities between these examples and the binding associated with Nizami's *Khamisa*, copied in Shiraz in 853/1449–1450, further suggest that figurative models were not restricted to a single artistic centre. Their circulation should be considered within the wider network of Timurid courts, workshops, craftsmen, and manuscript production.

The appearance of the human figure on Timurid bindings was therefore more than an isolated decorative experiment. It formed part of a broader transformation in the artistic function of the book cover. By the middle decades of the fifteenth century, certain bindings were no longer conceived merely as protective surfaces decorated with ornament; they could also operate as pictorial fields capable of conveying figures, action, and complex visual relationships.

At the same time, the surviving evidence calls for methodological restraint. The date and place at which a manuscript was copied cannot automatically be transferred to its binding. Attribution must take account of construction, materials, tooling, later interventions, and provenance. This distinction is particularly important when reconstructing relationships between Herat, Shiraz, and other Timurid centres.

Viewed from this perspective, figurative bindings constitute an important source for the history of Timurid manuscript culture. They illuminate not only changing aesthetic preferences but also the circulation of craftsmen, techniques, and artistic models across the Timurid world.

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