

A gentle young lady stands half naked in a pond, surrounded by blooming trees. Her black hair is loose. Her hips almost sway modestly. An exquisite prince hides to watch the sensuous body of that virginal girl, his future spouse. Is it Bathsheba taking her bath while spied by King David?

No, it's Shirin and Khosrow, a famous Iranian myth beautifully translated into poetry by Nizami. In fact it's a page of a Muzaffarid manuscript from the 14th century, one of the earliest known manuscripts. It could as well have been a later production since the repetition or adaptation of the same iconology connects early paintings to its later manifestations.

We actually pin-point one important paradox of miniature. The repetition through centuries of the same pictorial vocabulary haloes miniature paintings with a lingering feeling of eternity. It also cements a strictly codified tradition. The use of the same iconology often shared with western mythical stories such as "Wis and Ramin" who are kin to "Tristan and Isolde" reinforces the concept of universality. The same myths have sprang out everywhere with variations, alterations but the basis are the same.

However, it's almost impossible to identify and further more to appreciate most miniature paintings without mastering the standard repertoire of mystical and mythological themes. Every Iranian, high brow as well as illiterate, is supposed to know by heart most of Hafez, Saadi or Ferdowsi, the classical poets. But how many share the same visual culture? Although in Western countries people may read Ovidus and Virgile, how many are still able to recognize a scene representing Echo and Narcisse or Psyche and Cupido. Very few, merely because such imagery isn't part of their visual environment. No contemporary European or American artist would paint an 18th century portrait or a "vanity." No one would be interested anymore in the representation of Napoleon battles. So why do we, Iranians, cling to falcon hunts, picaresque battles or fawning courtiers. Whenever we

want to stress the importance of our civilization we refer to the past. It's natural to appreciate the tarnished images for being part of a glorious history, but should we stick to tradition and keep it alive without shedding the load of archaic icons.

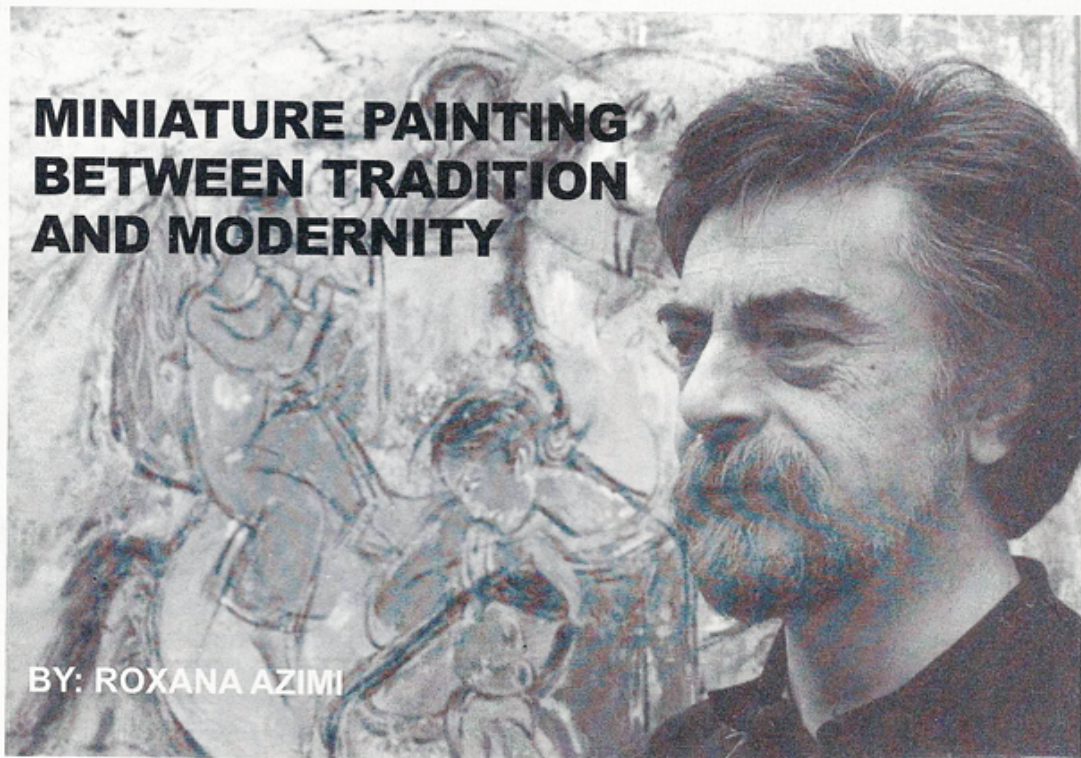
In the 18th and 19th centuries a gap between miniature and painting was introduced with the invention of the word "miniature" by eager European collectors willing to define paintings enclosed in

and miniaturist who works and teaches in France, wish to keep the same refined patterns without neither any Europeanized perversion nor new concerns.

"I can't break with my culture in an artificial way. An artist is always influenced by its cultural environment. Therefore, I prefer to borrow from miniature some symbolic elements such as the arabesque, a typically Persian rhythmic design, horses, birds and cypress and intro-

MINIATURE PAINTING BETWEEN TRADITION AND MODERNITY

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manuscripts. The use of oil-painting instead of gouache generated another difference. A change in the medium induced a change in the shapes. Bigger scales replaced progressively the small, minute devices.

Naturalistic portraits didn't represent life as it should be but life as it was. Canvas replaced manuscript sheets.

Taking those new parameters into account, is it still relevant to keep the old master's formulae without introducing contemporary issues? Some foreign artists such as Francesco Clemente have matched Indian miniatures with their own private world. Comic-strips have also been inspired by the Persian composition and balance between script and image. However, the graft of new issues to traditional imagery and vice versa hasn't borne much fruits among Iranian artists. Maybe miniature isn't the convenient media for such a combination. Some artists like Mr. Abbas Moayeri, an outstanding painter

duce them in my modern artistic production. In the origins, Manicheism considered miniature painting as a way to unveil the unknown, hidden part of the universe. The images were used to propagate Mani's religion like following the Christian policy. Even when you want to invigorate miniature with new influences, you must make a point of keeping the mystery without giving way to any trivial or prosaic images. You must purge all the unnecessary adornments and look for simplicity," argues Mr. Moayeri. Unfortunately, even when the technique is marvelously mastered, people are prone to wonder whether it's still *art* or merely *craft*. Some would even think that in spite of their beauty, those miniatures are works for tourists, copies of old manuscripts.

The evolution of Persian painting in the 20th century has long been hampered by the reluctance to give up old codes. From the clumsy flimsy looking miniatures of the 14th century to the highly

YOUR PERSIAN HERITAGE

mastered devices of the late 16th, miniature has reflected the disparate influences linked to the numerous invasions of Persia transcended by the desire to represent an ideal world, melting together the ethnic and linguistic diversity of the country in a certain stylistic unity. The characteristic elements of Persian miniature are almost the same from the 14th to the late 16th century: intricate devices, a perfect balance between brilliant and subdued colors, a mastery of line. When you look at an old miniature you can feel a deep breath remnant of a mythical era. "People who come to my lessons are not just interested in the techniques. They are receptive to the transcendental aspect of miniature. People look for beauty and yearn for the lost Eden," points out Mr. Moayeri.

Is it worse hanging on the Fair Arcadia? Can't we use modern tools in order to create another kind of representation adapted to contemporary issues? Or maybe modernity is a vain meaningless word.

It has been common to intertwine the notion of eternity to most oriental work of art. Magic is still alive even centuries later. This magic often comes along with the misuse of modernity's concept. Western critics are amazed by the "incredible modernity" of an African mask, a Japanese print or a Chinese calligraphy. In their way to discover and accept other cultures, they feel the need to link them to the almighty notion of modernity inherited from the Renaissance. One should restate the meaning of modernity. As a matter of fact,

it happens to be extremely difficult to give a brief and accurate definition of this concept which is philosophical, aesthetic as well as economic.

Modernity is supposed to be the most positive value of the 20th century. It derives from the capitalistic notion of productivity and speed. Miniature paintings, commissioned by princes, slowly and delicately realized in a royal work-shop, has obviously nothing in common with the striking economic modernity. What western countries abusively name modernity, stems from a major misunderstanding of the oriental vision. Frontality, a taste for void, stylized human figures, purity of line, geometrical arrangement of space, all the rhythmic elements that shape most oriental visual devices have become the principles of a so-called western modernity. The misapprehension of oriental philosophy leads to other confusions. Repetition for instance is regarded as mere copy whereas it holds a positive meaning in eastern philosophy. It helps to suffuse and unify a collective imaginary. "I personally make no copy in the way foreigners mean it. My compositions are all unique. The way I paint is quite similar to the way a Persian musician tackles a piece of music. Whenever he plays, following the repetitive musical form (see how arabesque is everywhere), he creates something new, with unnoticed modulations," says Mr. Moayeri. Nonetheless, even if contemporary western art refers more and more to a repetitive style (techno music, serigraphy, prints) this concept is still mainly dismissed.

Modernity doesn't make an easy marriage with Persian tradition, at least as far as painting is concerned. A brief survey of other artistic fields such as cinema and video reveal harmonious innovations. Artists such as Abbas Kiarostami or Shirin Neshat, both worldly acclaimed, give a beautiful merge between traditional imagery and modern tools. Their narration is fluid, the message they convey is easy to understand. Their works focus on contemplation and mystery. They let their eyes roam on a landscape or on a veiled face. Subtly, almost insidiously, they pluck off the different layers of an image, like a woman who slowly takes off her clothes, revealing her intimate mystery. "You must raise human's soul: that's my idea of modernity," Mr. Moayeri asserts. In a certain way, they fulfill the purpose of old miniatures much better than many contemporary painters.

