

KAMOLIDDIN BEHZOD: SHAPING THE CULTURAL HERITAGE

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Abstract: *Kamoliddin Behzod was an outstanding miniature artist of the Renaissance era who left behind a whole generation of renowned painters active in the ancient states of Central Asia and the Middle East. The miniature traditions developed by Behzod—an undisputed innovator—spread through the illumination of Eastern manuscripts and played a significant role in the development of Orientalism in Western painting. The greatest master of Eastern miniature, who lived during the golden age of book art, Kamoliddin Behzod (circa 1455–1536), is the subject of research by many authors, historians, and art scholars studying the Timurid Empire. In the article, the author thoroughly analyzes the legacy of this Timurid-era miniaturist, preserved in Iran, India, and Turkey, while systematizing the artistic principles developed by this genius master. Over the years, scholars compiled extensive material on the historical facts of Behzod’s life and the development patterns in his art and that of his disciples. The art of Behzod can be divided into three periods: 1480–1487, 1488–1510, and 1510–1535. One of the most prominent researchers of Eastern miniature was Ebadolla Bahari. The foreword to Bakhari’s research about Behzod’s art was written by the renowned German Orientalist, Professor of Arabic and Islamic Studies at the University of Marburg, Annemarie Schimmel (1922–2003). Bakhari’s attribution of miniatures to Behzod requires further scholarly examination, an assessment shared by many researchers of Behzod*

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History knows no other medieval miniature artist whose name has been as widely recognized as Kamoliddin Behzod's. He stands among the few painters of the Middle East whose talent evoked admiration among his contemporaries and in the centuries that followed. His works, scattered across numerous

museums and private collections worldwide, some of which are subject to disputed attributions, have not yet been fully identified, making it impossible to compile a definitive list of his authentic creations. Nonetheless, the most prestigious museums and manuscript collections in the East and the West take pride in housing codices and folios featuring miniatures by Behzod or attributed to his school. A few examples are worth mentioning: the portrait of "Shah Tahmasp", held in the collection of the Louvre; in the British Library, there are miniatures in two copies of Nizami's "Khamsa", also attributed to Behzod's hand and dated to the 1490s. The famous portrait of "Sultan Husayn Bayqara", created in the 1480s, is preserved in a private collection in Sweden. The "Bustan" of Saadi, containing miniatures by Kamoliddin Behzod and dated to 1488, is kept in the National Library of Cairo. But let us proceed in order.

Back in 1910, at the exhibition of "Muslim Art" in the center of Europe, in Munich, where Behzod's works were exhibited, the European public awarded him the epithet "Raphael of the East". Indeed, his work significantly influenced his followers – Eastern miniaturists, Russian, and Western European artists. In particular, Vasily Kandinsky (1866 – 1944) wrote in his article about the exhibition: "It was hard to believe that human hands could create this! It seemed that you were standing before something that was born by itself, that heaven gave as a revelation ..."¹

Throughout the centuries, Kamoliddin Behzod was considered a legendary figure both in the West and the East. It was not for nothing that Henri Matisse (1869 – 1954) said, "Revelation always came to me from the East ." He considered Behzod his teacher, and it was under the influence of his miniatures that significant changes occurred in the artist's work.

¹Kandinsky V. article in the magazine "Apollo", Munich, 1910.

Behzod's life, full of events and connected with outstanding thinkers and rulers of his era, still has "blank spots". The exact date of birth of the artist is unknown. Researchers estimate that he was born between 1455 and 1460 in Herat². By the time the artist was born, the Timurid culture had already created unique architecture, unrivaled literary works, unique manuscripts, and exquisite decorative and applied art. However, the Timurid Empire was approaching its decline and no longer had its former power. A cruel, internecine war was waged between his descendants for the legacy of Amir Temur.

Behzod was born and created his famous miniatures during the reign of Sultan Hussein: Baykara (1469–1506), a Timurid who managed to end the great unrest. Sultan Hussein Baykara directed all his efforts to solving internal problems. In a short period, the capital of Khorasan, Herat, turned into a city that at that time had no equal in the Middle East. During his long thirty-seven-year reign, Sultan Hussein Baykara managed to ensure stability and prosperity. Herat became the cultural capital, where Mavlono Abdurrahman Jami, poets Hussein Vaiz Kashifi, Khatifi, historians Mirkhond and Khondamir, and an outstanding calligrapher Sultan Ali Mashhedi. The great Uzbek poet and statesman Alisher Navoi played a massive role in creating an atmosphere of creativity in Herat. His spiritual influence greatly impacted the formation of Behzod in creative and personal terms.

The Bodleian Library holds two poems from Alisher Navoi's *Khamsa* – "The Wall of Iskander" and "The Confusion of the Righteous", rewritten in 1553 and decorated with miniatures. According to the scientists of the Bodleian Library, one of the poems contains a unique miniature with a portrait of Alisher Navoi, where he is depicted in the prime of his life, unlike the famous portrait created by Mahmud Muzahhib. Now the

² Herat is the capital of Khorasan, which was part of the Empire of Amir Temur and the Timurids. The city is now located in Afghanistan.

scientists of the Bodleian Library are investigating whether this miniature could belong to the brush of the great Behzod himself.

According to historians, Behzod was orphaned early. The historian of Timurid Herat, Qazi Ahmad, writes: "He was brought up by the famous calligrapher and artist Mirak Nakkosh Khorasani. He occupied the court of Sultan Hussein. Baykara was given the high position of Kitabdar – head of the royal library.³ The kitabdar's job was to organize the process of creating manuscripts. Having received an order, he selected the performers and determined the handwriting, the number of ornamental decorations, and miniatures. This position required outstanding skill and knowledge in the most minor details of the labor-intensive and responsible process of making an artistic manuscript.

Miraak Miniatures Nakkosha Khorasani testifies that Behzod's teacher was an artist who possessed a fine and elegant line, a master of landscape, and a fantastic colorist. However, experts claim that he was pretty weak in the composition of his works. The atmosphere in the palace kitabkhana (library) and the youth's surroundings contributed to Behzod becoming the leading artist of the Herat workshop by the age of twenty-three. Behzod's artistic authority was already so high that the founder of the Great Mughal dynasty, Zahiriddin Muhammad Bobur, and historians Dust Muhammad, Kazi Ahmad, and Khondamir wrote about him in their famous memoirs.

Scientists who have studied Behzod's work claim that the brilliant artist had another teacher, Mavlon Vali Allah. Behzod worked with him for some time in the palace kitabkhana of Sultan Hussein. Vali Allah worked in the technique of illuminated drawing – this technique was called "siyahi-kalam". His miniature, which is kept in the Topkapi collection, was

³ Kazi Ahmad, "A Treatise on Calligraphers and Artists," article "From the History of Artistic Culture in Iran in the 16th Century." *Art Magazine*, No. 5, 1935, pp. 121–136.

created with pen and ink, resulting in a monochrome composition on paper. This style significantly influenced the young Behzod's style and the content of his miniatures. This is confirmed by the miniature created by Kamoliddin Behzod's "The Poet Attacked by Dogs", kept in the palace library of Tehran. Literary sources of Behzod's contemporaries testify that Vali Allah was an outstanding miniaturist who taught this art to Behzod's teacher, Mirak Nakkosh.

In the early 80s of 15th century, from the walls of Sultan Hussein's kitabkhana, Baykara published several manuscripts in which researchers saw the participation of Kamoliddin Behzod. The miniatures of the manuscript of the royal kitabkhana masterfully convey landscapes, battle scenes, and human figures with individual features. Looking at Behzod's miniatures, you clearly understand that he authorized many artistic innovations.

In 1490, Sultan Hussein Baykara Behzod decreed that Behzod be appointed head of the royal kitabkhana, which contained both a library and a workshop for creating handwritten books. The works that were made in this workshop are considered iconic and are kept in various museums and libraries around the world. In Cairo, the National Library houses, according to many researchers, the most famous miniatures of Behzod. They illustrate Saadi's manuscript "Bustan" (between 1200 and 1219 - 1291 - 1292).

The poem "Bustan" by Saadi, written in 1257, is the poet's first major work. The poem consists of ten chapters. The main themes of "Bustan" are piety and justice. And Behzod's miniatures correspond to these themes. However, they do not always directly illustrate the content of the manuscript. For example, the miniature "Celebration at the Court of Sultan Husayn Mirza". It is reliably known that "Bustan" by Saadi was rewritten in the kitabkhana of Hussein Baykara in 893 AH, corresponding to 1488. The poem was copied by the

outstanding calligrapher Sultan Ali Mashhad (1453–1520). The colophon of the manuscript contains the dates not only of the copying, but also of two miniatures, which include a date a year later – 894 AH – that is, 1489.

During his long life, Behzod left behind a rich artistic legacy. After carefully analyzing the signature, drawing, and style, most researchers consider the miniatures in the manuscripts of the poet Fariddin Attar – “Mantiq at-Tahir” – The Language of Birds – to be authentic works by Behzod. The central part of the poem, consisting of 45 chapters, is devoted to the mystical description of the birds' journey, led by the Hoopoe, who set out searching for their king, Simurg. One of Behzod's works depicts a typical scene of the ruler's court, which he could have observed at the court of Sultan Husayn. The composition is precise and symmetrical, distinguishing the Herat school's miniatures. The manuscript was created in 1486. Today it is kept in the Metropolitan Museum in New York.

Behzod's miniatures also illustrate the manuscript of Nizami Ganjavi, rewritten in Herat, before the artist was born, in 1442. The Khamsa (Quintetiplet) by Nizami was rewritten many times. Behzod's following illustrations for the Khamsa manuscript were created in 1495-1496. Behzod's works are further complicated because his fame sometimes forced manuscript owners to attribute other people's works to him for commercial purposes or to forge his signature. An authentic work by Behzod, not bearing his signature, could be attributed to another artist who copied his style.

The subjects of miniatures illustrating the popular “Khamsa” poems by Nizami and Navoi often depicted not only courtly scenes but also craftsmen and ordinary people, which was no coincidence. Due to the spread of the teachings of the Naqshbandi Sufi order, craft guilds simultaneously functioned as Sufi brotherhoods. As a result, such themes frequently found their visual expression in miniature painting.

The theme of labor was first depicted in medieval Eastern art by Behzod in his miniatures, "The Construction of the Khavarnak Castle." The plot is borrowed from Nizami's poem "Haft paykar (Seven Beauties), which is part of the Khamsa. Behzod, as in the case of the illustration to the Zafarname by Sharofiddin Ali Yazdi, reliably showed the construction process, which he may have observed in Herat. Many beautiful buildings were built in his time. Behzod carefully illustrates the details. The dynamics of the composition are served by both the color rhythm and the varied movements of the workers. The miniature creates a sense of the incessant, discordant noise of the construction site.

In the miniatures dedicated to the stories of the great Alexander the Great, who was called Iskander in the East, Behzod, thanks to his skill, turns fantastic stories into completely real ones. In his following composition, "Iskander and the Hermit," Iskander, in a white turban, is presented as Sultan Hussein, who sits opposite a gray-bearded old hermit. Behind Hussein are his retinue and army. In this miniature, Behzod demonstrates his amazing mastery of composition. A small sheet of paper depicts a vast space where huge rocks, sparse vegetation, the fortress, and human figures live organically. The image of Sultan Hussein can also be seen in the miniature "Iskander and the Seven Wise Men."

Another miniature illustrates the plot of the poem "Leyli and Majnun." It tells the story of the unrequited love of the young poet Qais from the Banu Amir tribe, who fell in love with a girl from the same tribe named Leyli. Having been rejected by her father, he wanders through the desert, composing poems about his love for Leyli, for which he receives the nickname of Majnun.

For Behzod, Landscape is first and foremost a means of conveying mood. A golden sky and streams framed by bright flowers create a feeling of peace and unity with nature. Contemporaries of Kamoliddin Behzod - historians Khondamir

and Kazi Ahmad - write in their chronicles: "Musavvir (artist) created his miniatures not only for the manuscript, but also on separate sheets⁴. "

Among those undoubtedly attributed to Behzod's hand are the portraits of Sultan Hussein, Baykara, Sheibani Khan, and the picture of the poet Hatifi. In the portrait of Sultan Hussein, he creates a monochrome drawing, which takes us to the early period of his work. However, the picture is certainly ceremonial, and the interpretation formed the basis of the iconography of the image of the Herat Sultan Hussein. This is a vivid embodiment of the image of an ideal ruler.

In 1506, Sultan Hussein died. Baykara, and a month after his death, Herat was captured by the troops of the Bukhara Khanate led by Muhammad Sheibani Khan. However, Behzod remained at the head of the kitabkhana in his previous position. Moreover, Sheibani Khan posed for him. Unlike the portrait of Hussein, Sheibani Khan is made in bright colors. The picture looks very decorative due to the contrasting combination of pure local colors and gold in the calligraphic inscriptions, indicating that this portrait belongs to the brush of Kamoliddin Behzod. In two cartouches above the picture, there are two inscriptions. One of them says that this is the work of Behzod, and the second, that this is a portrait of Sheibani Khan. The details of the picture, writing utensils, speak of Sheibani Khan's education and love for poetry.

The portrait of Abdullah Khatifi, nephew of the famous Mavlon Abdurrahman Jami, a famous Herat poet in his time, is dignified. He seems to be turned towards an invisible interlocutor. The gesture of his hand adds dynamism despite the general static nature of this portrait. Abdullah Khatifi enjoyed the patronage of the Safavids. In the miniature, this is

⁴ Khondamir "Khulosat ul-akhbor fi bayon ul-akhvol ul-akhyor" – "The Power of Traditions" Trans. from Persian, preface and notes by V. Grigoriev. – St. Petersburg. 1834. P. 159 (archive of the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts of the Russian Academy of Sciences).

emphasized by the Taji-i-Haydari headdress, typical of the Safavids.

Researchers suggest that from 1507 to 1510, Kamoliddin Behzod worked in Bukhara, where he followed Shaybani Khan and other Herat artists and calligraphers. It has been historically proven that conquerors often took with them not only the contents of libraries and courtiers but also outstanding calligraphers and miniaturists. They were the most valuable "trophy."

In 1510, the founder of the Safavid dynasty, Shah Ismail, killed Shaybani Khan, after which Behzod moved to Tabriz, the capital of the Persian Empire and the Safavid dynasty. Behzod's fame reached its zenith during that period. Historian Khondamir reports that by his April 24, 1522 decree, Shah Ismail appointed Behzod the head of the Shah's kitabkhana, paying tribute to the talent of Behzod. The decree says: "... under this miracle of our century, a model for painters and an example for goldsmiths, master Kemal ad-Din Behzod, who with his painter's brush shamed Mani and with his draftsman's pencil humiliated the pages of Arzhang ...".

Behzod's later work is usually associated with the name of the next Safavid ruler, Shah Tahmasp I (ruled 1525–1576), under whose patronage Behzod continued to serve in the Shah's workshop in Tabriz until his death. Behzod lived to the age of 82. Kamoliddin Behzod died in 1535 or 1536. The place of his death is mentioned in the "Treatise on Calligraphers and Artists" by Qazi Ahmad. He writes: "He died in the capital city of Herat, in the region 'Kukh-i-mukhtar; he is buried in a fence full of pictorial images⁵." The author of this study, being at the burial place of Behzod in Herat, was struck by the modest tombstone, erected at the highest point, from where a panorama of the entire city opens up. For us, this was an indelible symbol of the greatness of the artist who worked in

⁵Kazi Ahmad, "A Treatise on Calligraphers and Artists," article "From the History of Artistic Culture in Iran in the 16th Century." Art Magazine, No. 5, 1935.

Herat during the period of the highest flowering of the Timurid culture.

However, another historian, Behzod's contemporary, Dust Muhammad, reports that the artist was buried in Tabriz. Both Herat and Tabriz, the places where his ashes rest, are sacred places for the entire Muslim world. For many years, his life and work inspired Eastern miniaturists and several Western artists. Behzod's name became a stable phenomenon, testifying to the rise of Eastern art and culture.

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