

REVIEWS

Renard, John. *Rumi: A Life in Pictures*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021.

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John Renard accepts and engages in a truly difficult task: bringing together word and image in a collection of manuscripts illustrating the biography of Jalāl al-Din Rumi (d. 1273), the well-known Persian mystical poet and founding persona of the Sufi Mawlawi order. The book is published by Edinburgh University's series dedicated exclusively to Islamic art history. Nevertheless, the limitations of the interdisciplinary approach to word and image relationships in the tradition of sixteenth-century Persianate manuscripts are not to be dismissed and certainly relevant to Renard's approach. He deliberately casts a wide net, comparing his project in the opening pages to a set of Russian nesting dolls that consecutively narrow physical support for the same visual content. While certainly fun, the analogy would carry more interpretive weight had Renard begun with a selection of images from the illustrated manuscripts in question or focused explicitly on concerns of reception throughout. Instead, Renard initiates the project with a broad historical account of the lives of Rumi and his biographer, Shams al-Din Aflāki. Renard subsequently narrows his focus to analyze the interplay of word and image in three sixteenth-century Baghdad-Ottoman illustrated copies of Aflāki's biography, this book's primary material of study and subject.

Taking the long view of history, Renard emphasizes the extent to which Rumi's familial relationships, his historical context, and the institutional foundations of post-Seljuk and post-Mongol religious orders secure the Mawlawi community's stability and staying power. Over time, local reverence for Rumi's spiritual and ethical leadership assumes legendary status and ultimately informs both the content of and market investment in a collection of illustrated hagiographies produced three centuries after his death. Within that broad contextual framework, Renard briefly introduces Sultan Murad III's royal patronage for two late sixteenth-century illustrated abridgements of Aflāki's hagiography of Rumi and new *madrasa* named after Rumi's son and popularly recognized founder of the Malawi order, Soltān Valad (d. 1312).

Clearly erudite, Renard closes his first chapter by establishing additional big picture associations and noting Ottoman reverence for Persian literary figures including 'Abd al-Rahmān Jāmi (d. 1492), a shaykh of the Naqshbandi Sufi order and legendary literary figure of the Timurid courts. These connections, while intriguing, merely ground Renard's brief discussion of visualized hagiographies in the Islamic manuscript tradition, the topic to which he devotes chapter two. It remains unclear how Renard understands the relationship between Ottoman reverence for Rumi and Jāmi and pictures in illustrated books. In regard to Islamic art history and manuscript studies, a nuanced discussion of Timurid and post-Timurid book arts could assist in clarifying this notable association.

Renard continues his sweeping chronological survey, and intriguing yet broad connections, in his second chapter devoted to Islamic pictorial hagiographies. He begins with representations of religious figures in post-Mongol manuscript production. Here, Renard chronicles the secondary literature available and establishes a scholarly context against

which to write his own observations. In particular, he summarizes Christiane Gruber's important scholarly contribution of images depicting the Prophet. Because he neither analyzes the state of the field nor utilizes the images referenced, it remains unclear how Renard will approach the images in the manuscripts discussed in the following chapters. It is instead clear that the manuscripts in question belong to a rich and complex tradition of picturing religious figures in combination with a variety of textual materials. This emphasis on broad contextual tradition seems intentional given chapter three's brevity in introducing the manuscripts and methods. A missed opportunity, it remains essential to explicitly consider *how* the sixteenth-century Ottoman examples negotiate the complex and existing tradition of pictorial hagiographies in which they exist. Renard's broad contextualization only scratches at the surface of interpretation. His juxtapositions and the expansive chronological sweep he initiates in the first two chapters offer intellectual fodder for anyone analyzing images of poetic spiritual figures in the Islamic manuscript tradition, and a not-so-gentle reminder that a secure foundation in the history of Islamic manuscripts, literary history, and art history is necessary to any future comparable studies.

Toward the end of chapter three, Renard makes an important thematic shift and clarifies his approach to word and image relationships. He builds on the foundational interpretations and art historical work of especially Rachel Milstein; yet, he merely hints at a localized investment in context. Renard here suggests that the images offer "additive" or extra-textual elements against which one can infer meaning in Aflāki's biography. Fair enough. Art history has long invested in the iconographic potential of imagery when juxtaposed with textual materials and regularly eschews "illustrative" interpretations. Renard interrupts chapter three with a useful appendix that lists the images for all three manuscripts to be considered. He thus sets the stage for a detailed exploration of inserted pictorial elements that might carry interpretive weight for the manuscript's sixteenth-century Ottoman patrons and their viewing circles. Again, he cites Jāmi and indicates a precedent for potential additive visual metaphors. These metaphors, according to Renard, elicit a witnessing effect and point to the underlying didactic mysticism. What follows does not take up the gaze, a common art historical theme that can adeptly negotiate object-audience relationships and clarify reception and content in a particular place and time. Instead, Renard references underlying messages and initiates an iconographic interpretation that maps an allusion or metaphor to specific pictorial figures.


Attention to iconography is warranted and a welcome contribution in Islamic manuscript studies. It offers a clear and direct understanding of word and image interplay and the possibility to read pictures in relation to their verbal companions. As an art historical methodology, however, symbolic or iconographic readings tend to oversimplify and retain an illustrative interpretation that Renard explicitly attempts to avoid. Had he instead focused on contextualizing the manuscripts in Ottoman Baghdad and a nuanced discussion of post-Timurid literary interests that inform this specific corpus of manuscripts, Renard could have better negotiated the witnessing effect that he initiates.

The publication is well timed. It corresponds with a current scholarly investment in the peripheral centers of book arts, especially for Ottoman patrons in Baghdad, and engages a corpus of visual materials depicting celebrated religious figures or invested in religious themes. It offers a notable shift away from exclusively political interpretations of Islamic illustrated manuscripts based on imperial productions and inter-court exchanges toward literary content and community interests. In this respect, it is a useful addition to the sub-field of Islamic book arts and arrives at a moment when many emerging scholars must grapple with the chronological expanses that account for the reception of literary or philosophical works whose authors are incorporated in living cultural traditions and whose reception varies according to the moment. That broad chronological entry is especially difficult to broker, and Renard's contributions need to be read alongside more focused materials on the biography of Rumi and Baghdad-Ottoman painting that predate his work, including Frank Lewis's *Rumi Past Present and Future* and Melis Taner's more recent *Caught in a Whirlwind*, a

Cultural History of Ottoman Baghdad as Reflected in its Illustrated Manuscripts.¹ Renard's book is most valuable when read, with some distance, alongside a comparable yet not directly related project in which the pictorial legacy and historical reception of an inimitable spiritual figure are indeed the point. He offers a clear reminder of the insight gained through a long view of history. What is more, his handy appendix of images and numerous pictorial reproductions provide supportive materials to any future projects that seek to pick up the topic of reception in relation to Rumi and his biography as mediated by images.

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The American College of Tehran: A Memorial Album, 1932. Edited by Ali Gheissari (Irvine, CA: Jordan Center for Persian Studies and University of California, 2020). Hardcover, 464 pp. ISBN: 978-1949743227

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Historically, studies of the history of modern education in Iran have tended to focus on topics such as the modernization of its educational system and its social and political consequences, the role of modern education in the emergence of the nation-state, important teachers and teaching, and, in a few cases, the history of specific institutions. Additionally, some studies have examined the role that foreign missionaries or key administrators and educationists have played in the last century. In such studies, scholars have explored historical documents such as textbooks, administrative documents, and governmental policies as key archival materials.

However, student culture and student learning have remained notably understudied. There is now growing interest in exploring the student-centered aspects of the history of modern education. To provide a more extensive and multilayered exploration, it is essential to make student journals and publications accessible, to historicize them, and to analyze their contents. Ali Gheissari's newly edited volume is a valuable attempt to recover a rare window into student life at the American College of Tehran in the late 1920s and early 1930s. This publication is a welcome contribution to the field; it brings student writings and publications into the broader field of education research. Other works in a similar vein include Tavakoli-Targhi's edition of *Āyin Dāneshjuyān*,¹ the first student journal of the University of Tehran, and Ganjavi and Mojab's exploration of *Gāhnāmeḥ: Ān Zamān In Zamān*,² a 1971 independent student publication from the Faculty of Sciences of the University of Mashhad. More specifically, Gheissari's edited volume is a notable addition to our understanding of early modernization in Pahlavi education. This volume is an annotated transcription of a historical memorial collection, accompanied by a reproduction of the original.

¹ Frank Lewis, *Rumi Past Present and Future* (Oxford: One World, 2000); Melis Taner, *Caught in a Whirlwind, a Cultural History of Ottoman Baghdad as Reflected in its Illustrated Manuscripts* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2020).

¹ Tavakoli-Targhi, *Āyin dānishjūyān*.

² Ganjavi and Mojab, "A Lost Tale of the Student Movement in Iran."