Robert Hillenbrand: *The Great Mongol* Shahnama

504 pp. London: Hali Publications Ltd, and Washington: National Museum of Asian Art, 2022. ISBN 978 1 898113 83 6.

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Among the most discussed illustrated copies of the *Shahnama*, the famous poem by Firdausi (940–*c.* 1020), is one very large one that no longer exists in manuscript form. Intense research by historians of Islamic art identified 58 illustrated folios (called the canon) as once belonging to the manuscript and suggested candidates, illustrations long since placed in albums. Research was and is still hampered by a lack of information about the making of the manuscript, its state of completion, and its later destiny, in particular its treatment by the dealer Demotte whereby connections which may have been visible up to that point were destroyed. Consequently, research has concentrated on establishing when, where, and for whom the manuscript was produced. It is now generally presumed to have been created in about 1320–36 at the court of the Ilkhan Abu Saʿid in Tabriz, and that the 58 canon miniatures may represent only about a quarter of those that once existed or at least had been planned.

While the many open questions that may never receive a final answer discourage research, the fascinating miniatures remain a permanent challenge. This is there where the book under review starts out. As Robert Hillenbrand states in his foreword, he is responding to the neglect of the paintings "as complex, ambitious and beautiful works of art" (p. 22). That all the 58 canon miniatures and several candidates are presented in colour, and, thanks to the large dimensions of the publication, mostly in a size close to the extraordinarily large original, is very helpful in following his arguments. Moreover, opening the book, the reader is immediately exposed to their spell, seeing several miniatures accompanied by related verses from the *Shahnama*, and is thus enabled to gain a strong impression before the historical and cultural context of the Great Mongol *Shahnama* is explained and the analysis of the miniatures starts.

First, the reader is introduced to different modes of visual storytelling, all of which surpass a cursory visualization of the text. The following chapters examine in detail the role of the individual elements that constitute such a composition, how each contributes to the singular visualization of the text and consequently to the emotional impact of the picture.

In particular, the examination of the effects achieved by the inclusion of elements forming the sky and the landscape, including individual trees and plants, proves their important compositional function. Often a dark atmosphere of fear, terror, or grief is created by these means, and is strongly supported by a generous, but meaningful use of colour. Fortunately, the information gained from such detailed analysis of the individual picture does not need to be qualified by bearing in mind the large number of lost miniatures.

This reservation is always mentioned by the author when he analyses groups of miniatures connected by content, such as the Rustam cycle, the Iskandar cycle, the representation of the Sasanian kings or repeated subjects like enthronements or burials. Nevertheless, for instance the conclusions drawn from the unusually small number of illustrations representing Rustam, the greatest hero of the *Shahnama*, and the interpretation of the emphasis placed on visualizing the deeds of the "Persianized" Alexander are very convincing and contribute to the understanding of the political and cultural positioning of the Mongol court in the early fourteenth century. The reader can thus follow

the author's conclusion that the illustrations impart to the Great Mongol *Shahnama* "an extra freight of Mongol history" (p. 367).

It is suggested that artistic production in Ilkhanid Iran should be checked for the influence of Chinese art. Pointing out many landscape and natural elements inspired by Chinese models, the author emphasizes their thoroughly different application for the creation of a certain mood, for instance, or a symbolic mark. Looking for the adaptation of visual elements of European art comes as rather a surprise. Whether, for instance, certain gestures or poses are inspired by European works of art is difficult to establish because they are used in a completely different context. One can see, however, why the artists may have been inclined to make use of such inspirations.

Finally the author turns to the problem of "orphan leaves", now in albums like H. 2153 in the Topkapı Palace Museum or the Diez Albums in the Staatsbibliothek in Berlin. He discusses 11 miniatures which, very probably, may once have belonged to the Great Mongol *Shahnama*, and thereby extends the inquiry he started with a contribution in J. Gonnella, F. Weis and C. Rauch (eds), *The Diez Albums: Contexts and Contents* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2017, 441–68).

The analysis of the preserved illustrations of the manuscript is complemented by four appendices put together by colleagues. Manijeh Bayani identified the text around the miniatures. This is not only helpful in following the context of a miniature, but even more importantly, it makes visible when the picture was placed on a leaf that was not originally illustrated. The appendix also includes information about unillustrated leaves and inscriptions on miniatures now part of H. 2153. Appendix 2, by Christine van Ruymbeke, examines the calligraphy and decoration of the rubrics and captions. Here too, discrepancies between these and the verses of the poem are pointed out. A contribution by Hoa Perriguey examines the physical structure of the folios from the Great Mongol *Shahnama* in their original state, including an analysis of the colours. As far as the later treatment of the folios is concerned the list of split leaves is of particular interest. Appendix 4 contains Helen Loveday's paper analysis, which takes the leaf with the miniature showing "Rustam slaying Shagad" as its example.

With a new approach to the pictures, and its systematic and detailed realization of varying aspects, the author provides us with a better understanding of each recognized illustration of the Great Mongol *Shahnama*. Through the enormous scope of this work, the reader is provided with comprehensive information on the Great Mongol *Shahnama* and thereby with a perfect starting point for further research.

Salma Samar Damluji and Viola Bertini: *Hassan Fathy: Earth & Utopia*

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This book is among the most recent volumes on the work of award-winning Egyptian architect Hassan Fathy (1900–1989). It can be considered an edited volume with