


The Visual Language of Plants: An Aesthetic Reading of Plant Motifs in the Illustrations of Ibrahim Sultan's Shahnameh

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Abstract

The Shahnameh of Ibrahim Sultan is a valuable illustrated manuscript of Ferdowsi's Shahnameh, dating to the Timurid period and currently preserved in the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford. Commissioned by Ibrahim Sultan, son of Shahrukh Timurid, this manuscript was produced between 817 and 838 AH and consists of 468 folios (936 pages) containing a remarkable collection of refined and distinctive miniatures. The illustrations reflect a stylistic transition in Persian painting, moving from strong Chinese influences toward increased realism and the formation of an indigenous Iranian approach to landscape representation. This study aims to analyze the visual language of botanical elements in five selected miniatures: Ferdowsi and the Poets of Ghazni, The Reign of Zahhak, The Reign of Manuchehr, The Court of Ibrahim Sultan, and The Queen and the Ladies. The central research question examines the visual and symbolic functions of plant motifs and their role within the compositional structure of each illustration. Using a descriptive-analytical methodology based on library sources and direct visual analysis, the findings demonstrate that plant motifs in this manuscript function not merely as decorative elements, but as meaningful visual components that organize pictorial space and reinforce narrative expression.

Keywords: Ferdowsi's Shahnameh; Shiraz School of Painting; Ibrahim Sultan's Shahnameh; visual language of plants.

1. Introduction

The Shiraz School of painting entered a new phase of artistic flourishing and refinement during the Timurid period, reflecting the cultural patronage and artistic support of Timurid rulers. Among them, Ibrahim Sultan, son of Shahrukh Timurid (r. 817–838 AH), demonstrated a particular interest in book production, especially in the illustration of the *Shahnameh*. The manuscript bearing his name, now housed in the Bodleian Library at the University of Oxford, stands as a testament to this patronage and is regarded as one of the outstanding artistic achievements of the Timurid era. The form and function of plant motifs—constituting the central focus of this research—play a prominent role in many illustrations of this manuscript. The present study examines the visual characteristics of trees, bushes, and flowers in five selected paintings from Ibrahim Sultan's *Shahnameh*: *Ferdowsi and the Poets of Ghazni*, *The Kingdom of Zahhak*, *The Kingdom of Manuchehr*, *The Court of Ibrahim Sultan*, and *The Queen and the Ladies*. The analysis considers their external form, compositional role, spatial placement, posture, and surface area. While numerous studies have addressed various aspects of this *Shahnameh*, comparatively little scholarly attention has been devoted to the analysis of plant motifs and landscape elements. Accordingly, this research seeks to address this gap by focusing on the formal and aesthetic qualities of botanical motifs and exploring their role in constructing pictorial space, visual narrative, and compositional structure.

2. Literature Review

Despite the significant role of natural elements in Iranian art, scholarly studies on landscape and nature in Iranian painting remain limited. Among the most important works in this field is Yaqoob Ajand's article "Landscape Painting in Iranian Painting" (2005), which examines the historical development of natural landscapes in Iranian visual art.

With regard to the manuscript under study, the *Shahnameh* of Ibrahim Sultan—despite its prominent status in the history of Persian painting—has received relatively little independent analysis focused on its visual structure. The primary source for this research is the original manuscript preserved in the Bodleian Library, Oxford (Ouseley Add. 176). Additionally, the book *The Shahnameh of Ibrahim Sultan* by Firuzeh Abdollahova and Charles Melville (2008/1397) provides an essential introduction and analytical overview of the manuscript and serves as a key reference. In the theoretical domain, Ajand's book *Iranian Painting: A Study in the History of Iranian Painting and Drawing* (2018) offers valuable insights into the aesthetics of pictorial space and forms a conceptual foundation for this study. Complementary sources include Hossein Parvin's article "The Aesthetics of Plants in Baysunghuri's *Shahnameh*" (2015) and the article "A Comparative Study of the Second School of Tabriz Painting and the Iranian Garden in the Timurid and Safavid Periods" by Mojtaba Ansari and Elham Saleh (2012).

To date, however, no independent research has systematically analyzed the visual structure, form, placement, and function of plant motifs in the illustrations of Ibrahim Sultan's *Shahnameh*. The present study therefore seeks to address this scholarly gap.

3. Research Methodology

This research employs both qualitative and quantitative approaches and follows a developmental research design. Data were collected through library and documentary sources, as well as through the digital archive of the Bodleian Library, Oxford. Among the approximately 45 illustrations contained in this manuscript, five images were selected for detailed analysis due to their dense and varied use of plant motifs. These include: *Ferdowsi and the Poets of Ghazni*, *The Kingdom of Zahhak*, *The Kingdom of Manouchehr*, *The Court of Ibrahim Sultan*, and *The Queen and the Ladies*. Each image was examined through

direct visual analysis focusing on botanical representation.

4. Findings

Plant motifs in Iranian painting can generally be categorized into two groups: naturalistic and abstract. Naturalistic motifs include flowers, bushes, vines, and trees, while abstract motifs appear in stylized forms such as salimi and sara-salimi. Although illustrators occasionally rendered plants in decorative and abstract styles, they consistently preserved their essential natural characteristics. Iranian artists thus reinterpreted nature through a mental, symbolic, and imaginative lens, emphasizing abstraction, simplification, exaggeration, and the elimination of excessive natural detail. Another defining feature of these motifs is the use of flat color surfaces and the avoidance of shading and volumetric modeling. As a result, plants are depicted not through light and shadow, but through line, color, and spatial placement within the composition.

In the analytical section of this study, the visual language of plant motifs in the *Shahnameh* of Ibrahim Sultan (Bodleian Library, Ouseley Add. 176) was examined. From the total of 56 illustrations in this manuscript, five images were selected for analysis based on the high concentration of botanical elements. These images collectively contain 54 identifiable plant motifs, all of which were examined in terms of form, function, and visual impact.

5. Conclusion

Nature constitutes one of the most prominent pictorial elements in Iranian art, and its presence in Iranian painting is particularly pronounced. Within this tradition, natural elements often serve decorative purposes while simultaneously supporting literary narratives. Rich coloration, intricate detail, and imaginative compositions characterize the depiction of nature in Iranian painting. This study examined plant motifs in five illustrations from the *Shahnameh* of Ibrahim

Sultan: Ferdowsi and the Poets of Ghazni (5 motifs), The Kingdom of Zahhak (17 motifs), The Kingdom of Manouchehr (12 motifs), The Court of Ibrahim Sultan (6 motifs), and The Queen and the Ladies (11 motifs). In total, 54 plant motifs were analyzed, comprising 42 floral motifs, 11 tree motifs, and one green bush. Green was the most frequently used color in plant representations. However, floral motifs displayed greater chromatic diversity, including 11 purple flowers, 11 red flowers, 5 red-orange flowers, 5 orange flowers, 2 yellow flowers, and 2 white flowers. Among the trees, four featured white blossoms, two were fruit-bearing trees with orange-colored fruit, and the remaining specimens displayed green foliage. The sole bush motif was also green.

An examination of linear design reveals that most motifs are rendered with considerable detail, reflecting a fundamental characteristic of Iranian painting in which each element maintains an independent identity while contributing to overall visual harmony. Each painting exhibits a distinct compositional structure: Ferdowsi and the Poets of Ghazni follows a spiral composition; The Kingdom of Zahhak is organized around a circular axis centered on the throne; The Kingdom of Manouchehr displays a semicircular arrangement; The Court of Ibrahim Sultan features a symmetrical composition centered on the throne; and The Queen and the Ladies divides the page into two vertical zones—architectural space and a dense vegetal area, itself subdivided by plant forms.

Of the 54 analyzed plant motifs, 41 contribute to compositional structure and visual rhythm, 23 possess symbolic significance, 16 serve decorative functions, 10 guide the viewer's gaze, 6 enhance spatial depth, and 4 act as framing elements. These functions highlight a key feature of Iranian painting: despite the independence of individual elements, an organic relationship among them generates visual unity. In terms of symmetry, 28 motifs were asymmetrical and 26 nearly symmetrical, indicating that alongside tendencies toward realism, visual balance and proportional harmony were central concerns

for the illustrator. Future research may further explore the symbolic dimensions of these motifs and investigate whether similar symbolic patterns appear in other Shahnameh manuscripts of the same period or constitute distinctive features of Ibrahim Sultan's commission.

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Author's Contribution

The research was conducted solely by the author.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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