

Mir Sayyid-Ahmad

Preface to the Amir Ghayb Beg Album

Mir Sayyid-Ahmad Mashhadi compiled the Amir Ghayb Beg Album (Istanbul, Topkapı Sarayı Müzesi H.2161) in 972/1564–65. Like Dost-Muhammad and Mâlik Daylami before him, he includes in his preface an apologia and short history of calligraphy and painting.



Art is known as the key to wisdom. What is the key to art? The nib of the pen.

The pen is a designer of patterns, an “unveiler of faces” (*chihragushay*). Two types of pen were created by God:

One comes from vegetal matter: the reed turns agreeable for the writer.

The other type is animal: it scatters pearls from the Fountain of Life.¹

By the painter of a picture that would fool Mani is the workshop of art adorned.

The type that is vegetal sweetens the palate of the noble scribes who are representatives of the recording angels and those who write certain knowledge. According to the dictum of the chosen one of the register of existence, select of God’s court, the Arabian prophet Muhammad al-Abtahi—upon whom be the best of prayers and most perfect of salutations—“He who writes ‘in the name of God the compassionate, the merciful’ in a beautiful script will enter paradise without question.” [7b] By the teaching of him to whom honor is incumbent, the tutor of the garden of nobility, sweet-tongued preacher in the realm of the

imamate, the *sarlawh* of the *debacha* of *wisayat*, guided by the inscription of the register of the city of knowledge, of which Ali is the gate, the Moses of the Sinai of “ask me before you lose me,” majesty of the station of Aaron,²

Lion of God, king of sainthood Ali, effacer
of polytheism open and hidden

everyone is commanded to strive to attain this noble occupation and honorable craft when he said, “Have beautiful writing, for it is among the keys to sustenance.”

Before the scripts now current were employed and the workshop of knowledge was adorned like this album with gems of calligraphy and marvellous designs, [8a] the script that illuminated the eyes of the enlightened with the divine inspiration of the Prophet’s commands and prohibitions was the Kufic script, and there are still extant miraculous specimens of the handwriting of the majesty of sainthood [Ali b. Abi-Talib] that give light to the soul’s eye and clarity to the tablet of the mind.

¹The pun involving *hayawāni* (‘animal’) and *āb-i hayāt* (‘water of life’) is not reproduceable in English.

²Ali is said to have occupied the relationship to Muhammad that Aaron had to Moses.

In the year 310 [A.D. 922] Ibn Muqla derived from the Kufic the six scripts known as the Six Pens, viz. *thuluth*, *naskh*, *muhaqqaq*, *rayhan*, *tawqi'* and *riqa'*. After him, Ali b. Hilal, who is known as Ibn Bawwab, was the master of [these] scripts. After him were Yaqut Musta'simi and his six students, viz. Shaykhzada Suhrawardi, Arghun Kamili, Nasrullah Tabib, Mubarakshah Zarin-Qalam, Yusuf Mashhadi, and Sayyid-Haydar "Gundaniwis" (majuscule writer). After them were Pir Yahya Sufi, student of Zarin-Qalam, and Khwaja Abdullah Sayrafi, student of Sayyid-Haydar. Sayrafi was the teacher [8b] of Hajji Muhammad Bandgir, who was the teacher of Shamsuddin Qattabi. After him, his sons, Abdul-Hayy and Abdul-Rahim Khalwati, and his student Ja'far Tabrizi were the masters of the realm of calligraphy. Ja'far was the teacher of Abdullah Tabbakh and all the other calligraphers of Khurasan. Abdul-Rahim Khalwati was the teacher of Ni'matullah Bawwab, who was the teacher of Shamsuddin Thani Tabrizi. Other calligraphers in Iraq, Khurasan, Fars and Kerman who have acquired repute are mere gleaners of these [aforementioned] masters. So much for the family tree of the six scripts.

The story of *naskh-ta'liq* is as follows. The founder was Mir-Ali Tabrizi, whose son Ubaydullah became the master of his age in this script. [9a] Ja'far was a student of Ubaydullah and the teacher of Azhar, who taught Sultan-Ali Mashhadi, whose calligraphy outshines that of the other masters as the sun outshines the stars. After him, calligraphy reached a high level with his students Muhammad Abrishami, Sultan-Muhammad Khandan, Sultan-Muhammad Nur, and Zaynuddin Mahmud, who was the teacher of Sayyid Mir-Ali, who is known as Mir Ali and whose calligraphy is at present considered on a par with that of Sultan-Ali.

Other famous calligraphers who write in the style of Sultan-Ali Mashhadi are: [Sultan-] Ali Qayini, Sultan-Ali Sabz Mashhadi, Shah-Mahmud [9b] Nishapuri, Sayyid-Ahmad Mashhadi, Mir Ali's student, and Malik Daylami, Mir Jan's student who has taken first place among his peers. Now this splendid album is adorned by some of these.

Abdul-Rahman Khwarazmi introduced a change in this group[']s style]; and his two sons, Abdul-Rahim known as Anisi and Abdul-Karim known as Padishah, were masters of his method. Anisi's style is well known, and the scribes of Shiraz mostly follow him.

The *ta'liq* script is taken from the *riqa'*. Khwaja Taj[uddin] Salmani was the master of this script, and next to him was Abdul-Hayy Astarabadi Munshi. The line of *ta'liq* writers descends from these two. From Khwaja Abdul-Hayy [10a] there are two styles current. One is extremely flowing and fluid, the rescripts of Sultan Abu-Sa'id Kürägän were written in this style; and the *munshis* of Khurasan such as Darwesh, Amir Mansur and Khwaja Jan Jibra'il wrote in it. The other is perfectly solid, mature and tasteful, and the edicts of Hasan Beg, Ya'qub Beg and the Aqqoyunlu sultans were written in it. The *munshis* of Azerbaidjan and Iraq, especially Shaykh Muhammad Tamimi, Darwish and others, follow this style, which is pleasing to the cognoscenti of Iraq.

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Now, the pen that mimics life (*haya-wani*) is the hair brush (*qalam-i mu*) by the aid of which Manichæan³ magicians and sorcerers of Cathay and Europe have become enthroned over the realm of art (*hunar*) and designers in the workshop of fate and destiny. Inasmuch as the unveilers of the beauty of this creative craft (*fann*) postulate a true connection of this

³*Māni-farhang*, meaning that they paint as beautifully as Mani: no religious connotation is intended.

art with the miraculous pen/brush [10b] of the Sun of the Five Members of the Folk of the Cloak, i.e., Ali [b. Abi-Talib] the Elect, and hold fast to [the belief that] among the specimens of his writing decorated with their illumination they have seen with their own eyes the subscription "written by Ali b. Abi-Talib." In this connection there is the following versified tale:

I have heard that the painters (*suratgar*) of Cathay, when first they began to paint (*suratgushay*), mixed colors of their heart's blood and produced images of the roses and tulips. Their brushes of hair became as thin as a strand of hair from their desire for minuteness.

They adorned a page with flowers as beautifully and gracefully as they desired. They called it Cathaian because the Khata'i pen succeeded [in producing it].

When the cycle of prophecy came to the Ahmad, the pen cancelled out all other religions. [11a]

The sinners of the Chinese race designed the first image (*sawad*).

In competition they adorned a page and challenged the king of apostles to produce its like.

Not a page adorned with designs but a tray filled with tulips and roses.

They took it from the essence of infidel-heartedness in competition before the King of Men Ali.

When the king of sainthood saw that drawing, he seized the pen from them in inimitability.

He drew a charming *islami* that astonished the people of Cathay.

When that prototype fell into their hands, all other designs were lesser in their view.

It is no secret that the amazing images and wonderful motifs of the practitioners of this craft are well known in every region and are the object of contemplation for those possessed of insight. The imaginative power and elegance of nature that this group has, no one of the other arts possesses. The beauty that unveils her face in the tablet of the painter's mind

[11b] is not reflected in everyone's imagination.

They say there was a king, with a countenance like the moon, a sun in station. He had an unopened narcissus in the garden, as splendid as the tulip—

A companion who held the coin of art in his sleeve.

He could draw like Mani, and when he made depictions his drawing resembled the design of fate.

When he drew water on a stone, all who saw it broke their jugs.

If he were to draw a line around the moon, the moon would not see the darkness of the end of the month.

From the essence of wetness/limpidity he had in his brush he imparted traces of life to his drawings.

His drawing was of the style of China; his depiction was calamitous to religion.

From the realm of the soul he had a hundred bravos; his pen possessed life itself. [12a]

However, this king as mighty as the sun could be as wrathful as the celestial sphere, and he looked upon his Mani with one eye.⁴

He had another companion who could draw like Mani, and this one had hatred hidden in his heart for [the first painter].

He wanted to make a trick, to beat him with deception.

He made a plan that the world emperor should request a portrait of himself.

That painter as able as Mani imagined to himself the picture of the king.

He took a page and drew on it with successful nature the king with an arrow in his hand, angrily removing a bend from it with the corner of his eye.

To remove crookedness from an arrow one must close one eye.

By this novel image that artist removed the knot from the thread of craft.

When the king discovered his magical thought, he was rewarded with two kingdoms for his pains. [12b]

From the one the reward of his art, and from the other the reward of his imagination.

By these means he crushed his rival, who sat without hope in a corner of agony.

Just as in calligraphy the Six Pens are basic, in this craft there are seven [funda-

⁴To see someone with one eye, or to be one-eyed in Persian means to see superficially.

mental techniques]: *islami* ('Islamic'),⁵ *khata'i* ('Chinese'), *farangi* ('European'), *fisali* ('disjointed'), *abr* ('cloud'), [*waq*], and *giri* ('knot').

What marvelous wielders of pens of sorcery
who bestow life with magic-making pens!

Latched onto every created thing, they
reproduce the likeness of every thing.

They follow the God's craft from the
compass of the spheres to the surface of the
earth.

With their gazes fixed on creation, they take
an image from every prototype.

Their craft leads them to the design of the
world, the pen/brush in prostration, upside
down before them.

I do not know what craft they impart to their
pictures that one would think they speak to
people. [13a]

It is not so much a bird whose head has
been struck off by the pen as a moth
fluttering about a candle.

The masters of Fars and Iraq, such as Master Darwish, Khalifa Muhammad-Hayat, Mir Musawwir and his son Mir Sayyid-Ali, Khwaja Abdul-Razzaq, Khwaja Abdul-Wahhab and his son Khwaja Abdul-Aziz, and Sayyid Mirak are all unequaled in the various techniques of this unparalleled craft... [13b]

Since there are more masters of this craft than can be reckoned or enumerated, we shall content ourselves with only the latter-day masters.

The masters of Khurasan, such as Khwaja Mirak, Hajji Muhammad, Master Qasim-Ali Chihra-gushay and Master Bihzad, are unrivalled. Among them, [I] chanced to meet Master Bihzad, and truly this master was superior to his peers and contemporaries in the power of his hand and strength of his brush, and what he paints is worthy of a hundred thousand praises.

From the labor of his nimble charcoal, a
paradise of penmanship like Mani.

⁵A common corruption of *islami*, see Glossary.

If Mani had known of him he would have
taken his designs and motifs.

His picture of a bird is so charming that,
like Jesus's bird it comes to life. [14a]

The brush attains such heights because it
takes its place between his two fingers.

When the pen/brush boldly begins *tash'ir*,
the hair is raised on the lion's back.

In short, after these preliminary matters, during the felicitous reign of...Abu'l-Muzaffar Shah Tahmasp Bahadur Khan ..., it was deemed necessary by the humble suppliant of the king Amir Ghayb Beg—since in His Majesty's paradisiacal assemblies and celestial gatherings calligraphy and depiction were discussed—to review and inspect the aforementioned tomes and specimens [of calligraphy] (*qita'at*). Whereas they had not been arranged or organized, it was difficult, nay impossible to locate any particular thing one wanted, and therefore it was seen as fitting to organize this album so that the confusion would be righted. With the assistance of uncommon masters, able artisans, outstanding connoisseurs of writing and inimitable calligraphers, he undertook for a time to arrange it; and he has actually produced an organization and unveiled an album, every page and specimen of which is worthy of laud and praise....

Inasmuch as the object of these words was to mention some of the superb masters whose works are contained in this album, it is not necessary to be longwinded. Written by the most humble Ahmad al-Husayni al-Mashhadi al-Katib, may God forgive his sins and overlook his faults, during the months of the year nine hundred seventy-two [A.D. 1564–65].⁶

⁶At the end of the album, on folio 190a, a chronogram for completion of the work yields 973 (A.D. 1565–6).