

Prefacing the Image: the Writing of Art History in Sixteenth century Iran. By David J. Roxburgh. Leiden; Boston; Köln: Brill, 2000 (Studies and sources in Islamic art and architecture; Vol 9). 272 pages. ISBN 90-04-11376-2 . doi: 10.22679/avs.2020.5.1.009

The appearance of an Italian man's portrait in the preface to the album of Persian miniatures, created for Bahram Mirza, the Safavid grandee of the 16th century, is no coincidence. The placement of the European painting among Persian miniatures is an invitation for album viewers to participate in a *Sukhbat* (conversation) about the image aesthetics, the legitimacy of optical-naturalism, creative freedom, and the canon. Exploring the creation of the album preface, David Roxburgh, a historian of Islamic art, engages the reader in a sociocultural *sukhbat*. His monograph itself resembles a miniature preface and reflects its essential elements: the origin of a particular Calligraphy script or canonical depiction, the continuity of traditions, biographical stories about patrons-practitioners, and perceived images. Thus, it becomes the preface to the actual preface: Roxburgh even begins the monograph with a *chronogram*, the characteristic feature of prefaces as his epigraph. Roxburgh considers the compilation of loose miniatures, drawings, calligraphy sheets, and historical information into albums from 1491 to 1609, as proto-art history: "These genealogies of practice [prefaces] formed "chains" (*silsilas*) that were staged as histories of art" (p.1).

This art study was accompanied by other socio-cultural developments, such as the creation of an extensive library (*kitabkhana*) in Herat in the 15th century, the increasing number of art-patrons, the "democratization" of cultural values (through increased production of single sheet miniatures) (p.21), and the organization of various kinds of gatherings, including *majlises* and *sukhbats*, during which guests listened to poems and stories, competed in poetic improvisation and admired miniature paintings, a hobby perhaps comparable to the love of movies, which partially explains the rise in allegorical and mythological language (p.198), encouraging the playful use of imagination. Roxburgh suggests that a group of viewers would gather around a compiled album to observe images which could be rotated clockwise and counterclockwise as they were examined (p.63). The preface aimed to introduce the reader to its content.

The Preface to the Image consists of seven essay-chapters, each divided into several sections with sub-subheadings. The research is thematically organized around ten prefaces, created in Herat, Tabriz, Qazvin, Mashhad, and Bukhara. At first, the non-chronological organization of Roxburgh's research is difficult to grasp but it turns out to serve as multiple mirror fragments reflecting the complex relationship between text and image, tradition, and practice.

In the first chapter “Introduction to the Prefaces,” Roxburgh acknowledges that little attention has been paid to textual analysis considering the historical, cultural, and linguistic context of Persian art. This is due to the existence of few primary sources in comparison to the art-historiographic traditions of Europe and China (pp.5-9). Roxburgh’s further research shows that the absence of “expected” examples does not indicate a lack of aesthetic thought (p.11).

The second chapter “The Authors and their Milieu” contains brief biographies of the album compilers, and discusses the historical and cultural background and intellectualism of court life in Herat. Roxburgh states that the impetus for the development of art historiography was conditioned by “new visibility in the eyes of the cultural arbiters, many of... [whom] extended their power to shape aesthetics and define canons by mentioning artists in their biographical and historical works” (P.51). The third chapter “Composition and Context” discusses the arrangement of the prefaces and their cultural reception. Representing “collected materials enhanced through techniques of decoration and processes of recontextualization” (p.53), the album was perceived as a garden with precious jewels (calligraphy, paintings) scattered over the pages, and framed in a golden encrusted cover. The language of the prefaces implies multi-layered meanings and mental gymnastics (pp.57-59).

Chapter four “Literary Dimensions” further develops this concept. The prefaces share many common features – praise of God, a section on the evolution of a particular canon via the master and his students, or creative influences. Next follows the details of the album (the patrons, processes, and compilers), general praise, the completion date, and a blessing (P.95, 102). Album-making was often compared to the creative acts of God, and the calligraphy was considered an art most pleasing to God. Practitioners, therefore, had to meet several ethical requirements, including being of noble lineage (P.107-113). Most intriguing here is the discussion on prefaces concerning plagiarism, in the context of a tradition of imitating predecessors’ work. This “intertextuality [is caused] by the conventional usage of language (figures of speech, lexical incidence, and recurring themes)” and referencing well-known literary sources (pp.115-118).

The fifth chapter “Art in History and Practice” examines the prefaces as a chain of art-historical data on the origins of calligraphic scripts, modes, and techniques of image-making. The prefaces variation in methodology is caused by the absence of a “master narrative of a history of art” (p.143). Roxburgh points out that “the tradition defined a field for performance... contributing to the tradition was not about overturning its rules and prerogatives but working within a universe of predetermined terms” (p.159).

Chapter six “Lifting the Veil from the Face of Depiction: Dust Muhammad’s Preface,” is particularly interesting. The title of the chapter draws a parallel to the “Miraj-nama” miniatures of Ahmad Musa, featuring the unveiled face of the Prophet Muhammad. Unveiling the image implies comprehending the truth, which is further discussed in stories about Mani, the legendary painter and a founder of Manichaeism, and Ahmad Musa, a practitioner of Safavid.

Roxburgh introduces the reader to some aspects of Islamic mysticism and its take on the reproduction of images. Mani, considered a false Prophet, was condemned for painting realistic optical illusions (pp.175-178). The Persian painter Dust-Muhammad’s preface aims to justify the figural depiction because the recreation of living beings had only been considered God’s prerogative and thus mentions the legend of *The Chest of Witnessing* containing copies of the portraits of the Koranic Prophets, initially painted by God, but then copied by Daniel.

The examples of Mani and Ahmad Musa illustrate the difference between art that is man-made (illusory) and that which is not made by hand and created through divine revelation. Ahmad Musa, who copied the Prophet Muhammad’s image from Daniel’s copy of the God-made portrait, reproduces “images not made by human hands” (pp.171-174, 189). While the practice of depiction was forced to exist within the “aniconic culture” and was considered a covert activity, it was justified by “turning away from an optical-naturalist mode of depiction” to avoid confusion with real-world references (p.198). The monograph ends with a conclusion that the word and image were perceived autonomously from one another, and that “words were [considered] inadequate for conveying visually perceived phenomena.” As a result, the descriptive tradition in works of art, similar to European art criticism, wasn’t widely spread (pp.214-215).

Considering Roxburgh’s focus on primary texts, it’s surprising that the book’s impressive bibliography overlooks the work of Galina A. Pugachenkova, a significant art historian in the region, who proposed alternative methods for attributing miniature paintings in Central Asia and Iran. Pugachenkova was the first to show that the costumes of characters depicted in miniature paintings allow us to determine the time and place of their production, similar to indicators in European art.¹ She points out discrepancies in identifying some miniatures within the “east-Timurid” group, which had been attributed to the Herat miniature school and works by Khorasan artists, despite evidence of

¹ See G.A. Pugachenkova, *K istorii kostyuma Sredney Azii I Irana 15-pervoy polovini 16 veka po dannim miniatyur* (On the history of the costume of Central Asia and Iran of the 15-first half of the 16th century based on miniature paintings’ data) (Tashkent: Trudi Sredneaziatskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta (SAGU), 1956) Vol.LXXXI.

their Mawarannahr origin.² Attribution of miniature albums requires additional study, considering the migration of art practitioners from Herat to Central Asia and back in the 15th and 16th centuries. Quite possibly the methodological differences in various prefaces mentioned by Roxburgh reflect the distinctive miniature schools developed in Herat, Tabriz, Bukhara, Samarkand, and Shiraz, etc. Perhaps that's why Roxburgh addresses the unicum, the unique preface copied in Bukhara by Muhammad Salih (p.224). Considering that the tradition of depiction continued following the dynastical shift in Herat from the Timurids to the Safavids, the monograph's title, referring to Iran, can be questioned for a narrow geographic focus and for homogenizing the Central Asian cultural contribution.

Nevertheless, Roxburgh's monograph is a comprehensive study on the intertextual relationship of the word, image, and sociocultural context based on the album prefaces of the 16th century. It may be of interest to art historians, cultural scholars, and audiovisual studies researchers. Moreover, the research analyzing the culture of depiction in an aniconic context is especially relevant considering the calls of some orthodox Muslim communities to outlaw cinema and the fine arts.

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² G.A., Pugachenkova and L.I Rempel, *The Art of Uzbekistan from the Most Ancient Times to the middle of the 19th century* (Moscow: Isskustvo, 1965), 287.