

CHAPTER VI

TYPE D

Appearing in only ten of the fifty-one relevant images, type D is the second least commonly manifested motif from the Shahnameh manuscript. Somewhat difficult to disassociate from the closely related vegetal designs of the C type, the images of the D category are defined by their surprising naturalism. Striking in light of Islam's proscription of representative imagery, the type D images seem realistic enough that a trained botanist might recognize individual species of trees and plants. Termed *paysage* in French and *pastoral* or even *genre scenes* in English, the landscape murals depicted in Tahmasp's manuscript appear to be closely related to a group of wall paintings with rural settings discovered in both Seljuk and Timurid mausoleums.¹ Due to both the contested dating and lack of published images regarding the Seljuk funerary frescoes, the following discussion will focus solely on the later Timurid murals. Located in Samarqand, Herat and to a lesser extent Shahrīsabz, the architectural equivalents of the type D images are somewhat more complex than their miniature counterparts. In their illustrated incarnation the *paysage* themes that delineate the D motif can be sub-sected into only two types; D1, realistic vegetals and D2, realistic vegetals with birds perched in them.

Referring back to folio 10r, *Firdowsi Proves his Talents before Sultan Mahmud*, (Fig. 7), motif D1 can be appreciated via both of the ground floor windows that flank the central chamber as well as through the full view of the second floor window at left and the sliver view at right. This latter image is slight enough that other than to assume it acts as a complement to the wall at left, it can be ignored. Unfortunately each of the three main interior scenes are slightly obscured by a set of occupants, men on the ground floor and women in the room above left. Figural components notwithstanding, a careful inspection of each wall reveals a program of decorative plant life that is depicted in a natural, lifelike fashion. The D1 type images in folio 10r are particularly valuable because they allow the viewer the opportunity to compare types C and D at close range. As noted in chapter five, an example of the type C1 motif is seen through the far left hand top floor window where a perfectly symmetrical floriate vine tracks a balanced course around a type A3 medallion. In contrast, the type D image just to the right evinces loose wavy

ferns that spring from realistic clumps of earth. Similarly, in each of the ground floor examples a set of images that at first appear to be matching floral bush forms at closer examination reveal distinct physical disparities. The three branches of the plant at right articulate close to the base while those of the plant at left are staggered, one limb attaching noticeably farther up the trunk and bifurcating quickly along its length. Distinct variation can also be seen in the depiction of each shrub's growth at the ground line as well as in the flower stalks that course up between each set of conversing figures. Unlike the vase and floral motif seen in folio 39v (Fig. 12), the stylistic disparity in these images is strong enough to recommend artistic intent rather than freehanded error. The final notable component of the type D1 imagery seen in folio 10r is the wall's blue background wash and use of both dark blue and white to execute the designs' floral and vegetal elements. Considering that the vast majority of the Shahnameh's walls evince frescoes that follow the popular chromatic pattern of Ming porcelain, blue on white, this and all other images that include ground washes or polychromatic schemes recommend themselves either as descendents of the monumental Sassanian paintings or as tiled or faux-tiled interiors.

Another D1 type illustration that includes the use of a background color is folio 658v, *The Great Sage Questions Hormozd before Nushirvan*. (Fig. 14) Readily apparent as the backdrop to a reception room in Nushirvan's palace at Gurgan, the intensely natural trees and plant-life are situated in a realistic fashion on a single horizontal plane suggested by the tiled dado. Dickson and Welch describe the interior wall as "pale emerald, adorned with blue trees and flowers." In particular this image seems to relate to veritable wall paintings that ornament the Saray Mulk Khanum and Shah-i Zinda complexes in Samarqand and the *madrassa* complex of Tuman Aqa outside Herat. Aply researched by scholar Lisa Golombek, the *paysage* designs that decorate the interiors of these late fourteenth early fifteenth century edifices are likely direct antecedents to the Shahnameh images. In fact, certain elements from the Safavid illustrations have precise replicas in the wall paintings at these Timurid complexes. A fine example is the fernlike plants that sprout fourth from both sides of the wall and just left of the anterior window in folio 658v. These vegetative limbs appear to be near facsimiles of the wavy fronds depicted on the walls of the mausoleum of one of Timur's wives, Saray Mulk Khanum. Referencing the mausoleum's decor Golombek describes a series of painted plaster panels with *paysage* designs where "the branches of the trees wave realistically...surrounded by ferns and bushes." Interestingly, these fern-like shrubs comprise not only the most common element of all the

Shahnameh's D type images they are an equally prevalent component of the décor in all five of the noted Timurid funerary monuments. Stylistically similar to the plant motif seen on a bowl of indeterminate age found in the Miyadin region of Syria, such fern imagery may carry precise Zoroastrian connotations.² Suggesting that the closest natural corollary to this fern-like style of plant is either the acacia or a species of crepe myrtle, scholar Fay Frick notes that in pre-Islamic times the myrtle was "sacred to the Persians and used in Magian rites."³ Specifically the "stems and leaves" of the plant were "pounded in a mortar and mixed with 'sacred fluids'" to create a drink called *haoma*.⁴ The term *haoma* in turn, comes from White Haoma, the name of the celestial version of the gaokerna or ox horn, a tree that is "one of the chief plants of the (Zoroastrian) creation story." Said to flourish "in a sea where all the waters of creation converge," the White Haoma "renovated the universe and to eat of it makes one immortal."⁵ Frick also points out that not only do the "literary" and "artistic" sources correspond on the "form of the tree," but the "ritualistic manuals" used to describe the species for collection even note that the plant has "hanging branches characteristic of the acacia."⁶

Focusing again on the mausoleum of Saray Mulk Khanum, Golombek also notes that "two of the trees have a wispy look and are bent into an S shaped curve," in a fashion similar to the tree at the right of the anterior window in folio 658v.⁷ Yet more examples of "S-shaped" or simply "wavy" tree forms identical to those from the Shahnameh illustrations are found in abundance on the walls of both the Samarqand and the Kuhsan mausoleums of the Jalayirid wife of Timur, Tuman Aqa. In the latter funerary chamber, located just outside Herat, Golombek notes the presence of numerous panels containing the painted images of three basic tree types, "a wispy tamarisk (?), a wavy fruit bearing tree, and the cypress."⁸ While neither the unmistakable linear thrust of the cypress plant nor the sparse, feathery needles of the Salt Cedar (Tamarisk) seem to appear in any of the Shahnameh's interior images, type D does evince multiple depictions of "wavy fruit trees."⁹ These curvilinear dendrites common to both manuscript and mausoleum most likely represent the Chenar or Oriental Plane Tree, a flower and fruit-bearing species long disseminated across much of the Asian continent.¹⁰

A particularly interesting facet of Golombek's study is her association of the funerary frescoes with a group of miniatures from a late fourteenth century manuscript known as the Bihbahan anthology. Encompassing yet another rendition of Nizami's *Khamsa*, the Bihbahan volume contains only twelve illustrations to accompany its 642 pages. Even stranger than the

relative paucity of miniature paintings is the fact that none of the twelve images include figural representations of the relevant characters. Instead the manuscript's miniatures "feature detailed landscapes, filled with mountains, rivers, lakes and various forms of vegetation and birds."¹¹ Regarding this artistic phenomenon, scholar Mehmet Aga-Oglu has suggested that the images are representative of a version of the pre-Islamic "Mazdaean creation-myth."¹² Aga-Oglu formulates a convincing argument by outlining the similarity between the Bihbehan album's miniatures and portions of the "text describing the creation of the oceans and rivers, the mountains, and their covering of green and growing flora."¹³ Noting that the "cypress tree and the date palm," were particularly important in Zoroastrian iconography, the scholar points specifically to the Bihbehan's multiple depictions of these particular species in order to reinforce his hypothesis. Researcher Eleanor Sims buttresses Aga-Oglu's work, proposing that the manuscript was "produced for the open market in Shiraz, the center of the ancient Persian heartland, Fars" an area that "remained an important Zoroastrian center throughout the Islamic period."¹⁴ Further evidence supporting a Shiraz provenance for the distinctly natural vegetals found in both the Bihbehan album and the walls of Timurid crypts may be gleaned from a group of sixteenth century manuscripts that have already been reliably attributed to the region's ateliers. Among these folios, depicting scenes from 'Layla and Majnun' and 'Yusuf and Zulayka' as well as another copy of the 'Shahnameh,' are a number of illustrations including interiors decorated with naturalistic vegetal paintings that could be categorized neatly under the type D motif.¹⁵ Unfortunately, while both the Bihbehan album and the Timurid murals include trees that could be conceived as date palms and cypresses, the images from both the Shiraz and the Safavid albums offer only the aforementioned ferns and perhaps Chenar trees. Therefore, even if the Shahnameh's type D illustrations were originally based on the Zoroastrian iconography of the Bihbehan album, it appears that over time such heretical imagery was subjugated to conform to standardized allusions to the Quranic heavenly paradise.¹⁶

Considering the scarcity of the D type illustrations it seems prudent to question their immediate artistic provenance. In this case unfortunately authorship is ascribed to multiple painters, none of which could be considered a primary executor of the overall style. Welch and Dickson suggest that Mir Mussavir worked on at least four of the images, alone in the context of folio 10r and with the aid of the apprentice painters A and B on the remaining three. Folio 658v is also ascribed solo authorship; in this case that of the elder artisan Dust Muhammad. Two

more folio's 71v and 85v were created entirely by assistants; D, A and B in the former case and A and C in the latter. Finally, the production of three more images was effected by these same novices under the supervision of the Tabriz master Sultan Muhammad. From this farrago of artistic influences only one curiosity is apparent: both instances of the type D2 images were created by the team of Sultan Muhammad and painter A. While this phenomenon might easily be ascribed to shared personal aesthetics (perhaps Muhammad and his apprentice simply enjoyed including birds in their work) it seems equally possible that the avian images of the D2 variety were rendered as an ode to shared spiritual beliefs. Although too little is known of painter A to determine his religious inclinations, Sultan Muhammad was by all accounts a reasonably ardent Sufi. Therefore, much like the images of motif type C3 there is a very good possibility that the iconographic program depicted in the type D2 designs relates to Attar's mystical epic *Mantiq al-Tayr*, 'The Language of Birds.'

In marked contrast to the static avian imagery of the C3 motif, the type D2 birds can be astonishingly lifelike, entertaining multiple orientations and contorting their compact masses into a variety of creative positions. The finest example of the D2 motif is found in folio 50v, *Manuchihr at the Court of Faridun*. (Fig. 15) Here the backdrop to Faridun's throne room consists of the ubiquitous tiled dado capped with a painted plaster profusion of fern-like leaves and birds. Similar to the murals at the mausoleum of Saray Mulk Khanum in Samarqand, the natural vegetal elements "wave realistically" yet sprout forth from a fantastic landscape of multiple horizon points.¹⁷ Animatedly perched within the rippling fronds of vegetation are thirteen birds that seem to be members of the same species. Noticeably different from the hook-billed parrot silhouette of folio 65v (Fig. 8) and the short-tailed songbird depicted in folio 24v (Fig. 13), the avian images from folio 50v closely resemble a group of four birds painted on the wall of another Samarqand Mausoleum, the Shah-i Zinda.¹⁸ Built by the sister of Timur, Shirin Bika Aqa, the paintings at the Shah-i Zinda complex are executed in red and blue against a white plaster backdrop and include the depictions of "magpies perched in trees" and streams all of which are situated within the painted outlines of rectilinear panels and ogee shaped arches.¹⁹ Although none of the Shahnameh images include the overtly paradisial element of water, the prevalent use of ferns, a plant commonly found in damp climates, may well be symbolic of divine bounty. The fact that in each instance such fern-like plants are depicted with sinuous curves, waving fluidly a gentle breeze, only serves to bolster the apparent symbolism.

Whether the D type Shahnameh illustrations were meant to be associated with Zoroastrian creation, Islamic Elysium, or even Sufi spiritualism, there can be little doubt that they are related to both Timurid Mausoleum paintings and to contemporary Shiraz manuscript painting. The component that sets these images apart from others in the Shahnameh is their striking naturalism. At the same time, the realism inherent to type D allies such images closely with the final motif, type E, a sister style that will be examined in the following chapter. Finally, in the vein of so many other illustrations from Tahmasp's manuscript, there is a possibility that a few of the type D images (those that entertain vividly washed, polychromatic interiors) depict either tiled or faux-tiled surfaces.

¹ Lisa Golombek, "The Paysage as Funerary Imagery in the Timurid Period." Muqarnas: An Annual on Islamic Art and Architecture no. 10 (1993): 242.

² Fay Arrieh Frick, "Sources for Decorative Motifs on Islamic Ceramics," Muqarnas: An Annual on Islamic Art and Architecture no. 10 (1993): 235, fig. 3,

³ Frick, 235.

⁴ Frick, 235.

⁵ Frick, 235.

⁶ Frick, 235.

⁷ Golombek, 245.

⁸ Golombek, 247.

⁹ Crete, <http://www.sfakia-crete.com/sfakia-crete/tamarisk.html> (3 May 2003)

¹⁰ Eleanor Sims, Peerless Images (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 159, pl. 73, re 90.

¹¹ Golombek, 247.

¹² Sims, 160, pl. 74.

¹³ Sims, 160, pl. 74.

¹⁴ Sims, 160, pl. 74.

¹⁵ Grace Dunham Guest, Shiraz Painting in the Sixteenth Century (Washington DC: Freer Gallery, 1949) plates; 17, 22, 49.

¹⁶ Golombek, 247.

¹⁷ Golombek, 245.

¹⁸ Golombek, 243, fig. 5.

¹⁹ Golombek, 244.