

16th Century Safavid Persian Illumination: Shamsa Medallion



1

“A shamsa (image of the sun) was regularly placed on the frontispiece of a manuscript made for a royal patron. According to the official historian of Shah-Jahan's grandfather, the Emperor Akbar: 'The Shamsa is a divine light, which God directly transfers to kings, without the assistance of men (Matthews).’”

Description

Shamsa medallions were decorative illuminated rosettes used most frequently as frontispieces in books, especially Korans, where the owner or patron of the book is celebrated by name in the center. They were used particularly in Qur’ans due to the fact that images of animals or people were strictly forbidden and they were an allowable elegant form of decoration for the holy manuscripts. There are many examples to be found in the manuscript arts of the East during the Safavid Persian Dynasty (1501-1722) time frame including those of the Ottoman Turks as well as Indian artists.

This particular shamsa medallion was designed by the hand of another artist, but traced & then illuminated by my own hand with mostly period pigments. This is a very period methodology as the complete production of an illustration could involve many people including painters, assistants, gold-sprinklers, etc (Canby). The design of the medallion is based on an extant piece from Safavid Persia out of the Emperor Akbar’s Khamsa of Nizami circa 1580-1590. Unfortunately, the photograph of the original shamsa is in black and white but you will find a copy of it depicted in my appendix.

¹ Chester Beatty Library Image Gallery. “Sunburst Motif (Shamsa) Safavid Qur’an 1558”. 1999 Chester Beatty Library. 7 June 2007. http://www.cbl.ie/cbl_image_gallery/images.asp?Collection=Islamic

Materials

Persian painters mixed a dazzling range of hues utilizing minerals, inorganic and organic materials including but not limited to gold, silver, lapis lazuli, cinnabar, orpiment, malachite, indigo, azurite, verdigris, vermilion, red and white leads, red-brown iron oxide, carmine from the kermes insect, carbon and some unidentified plant dyes (Canby). However, in Persian Painting, Canby shares that expense and availability of materials dictated the choice of pigment types so substitutes for various pigments was not uncommon. I mixed my own period hues by combining a small amount of water & my pigments with gum arabic, which in the late 16th century Persian painters adopted as a binding medium (Canby). I used a ratio of 2 parts pigment to 1 part gum arabic & enough water to muddle. Please find a list of colors, period material and my own materials for your review below:

Color	Period material	My material	Notes/Difference if any?
Black	Carbon Black	Carbon Black	
White	Lead white	Modern Permanent White-Zinc Oxide	While I used other toxic materials, I wished to avoid using lead.
Gold	Gold paint	Modern shell gold	Modern variant is extremely similar in composition to the gold paint the Safavids created using gold mixed either with gum arabic or glue to form a paste, which was then filtered with a clear water wash. The sediment which fell to the bottom was the most pure gold. This was collected and mixed with saffron and dry glue to create gold paint (Tittley).
Purple	Alizarin Violet	Alizarin Violet	
Blue	Lapis Lazuli	Lapis Lazuli	
Light Blue	Cobalt blue	Cobalt blue	
Green	Cobalt green	Cobalt green	
Light Green	Verdigris	Glauconite-a period pigment used in other medieval illuminations (Baker)	Verdigris is caustic to paper
Turquoise Green	Malachite	Mix of Glauconite, Lapis Lazuli and modern permanent white	Utilized mix for cost savings
Yellow	Orpiment	Cadmium Yellow	
Dark Yellow	Yellow/Gold ochre	Yellow/Gold ochre	Orpiment is caustic to paper
Red	Vermillion	Vermillion	
Dark Red	Hematite	Hematite	

How this piece was illuminated

“In Iran, the hair particularly favoured for artists’ brushes was that of long-haired white cats which were especially bred for the purpose, but squirrel hair was also used. The hairs were tied into a bundle and then fitted into a quill, preferably one taken from a wing of a pigeon (Tittley).” I have utilized modern paint brushes for this purpose for a variety of reasons including time, cost, efficiency and the unfortunate happenstance that my cat happens to be short-haired.

I inspected the hue combinations used in a variety of shamsas illuminated in Safavid Persia as well as Ottoman Turkey to determine what the medallion should look like. Some of these examples included shamsas 1 and 3 as seen in this documentation as well as the original extant piece from Emperor Akbar's Khamsa of Nizami. The original I studied from is a black and white photograph which only lends itself to showing whether light or dark shades were used in each area of the piece. While this made illuminating the piece challenging, it also allowed me more creativity with my color choices. I chose to use the lapis lazuli and gold ochre as my base colors and utilized the glauconite, hematite, carbon black, turquoise green mix and permanent white for accents as well as shading.

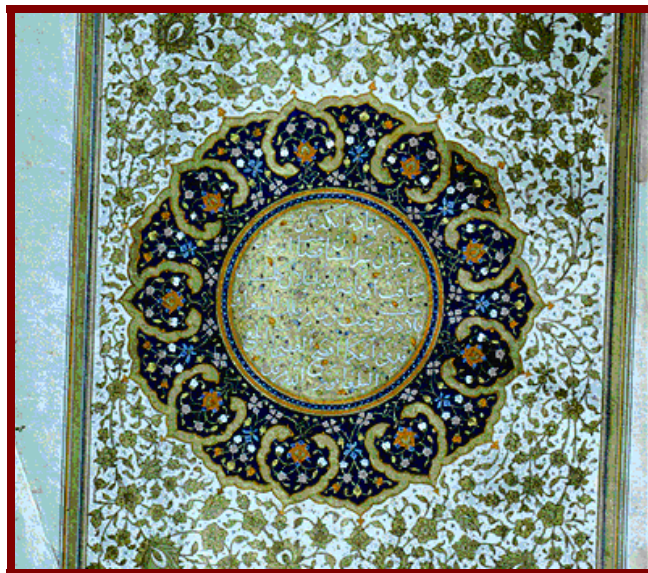
Conclusion

Many of the art forms of Safavid Persia were exquisitely detailed masterpieces of their genre. Certainly illumination is included in that statement. The precision, technique and care that went into creating symbols of beauty such as the shamsa are traits that were common of the frame. Manuscript artists, including illuminators, calligraphers, gold-sprinklers, gilders, and bookbinders were well respected members of Safavid society due almost entirely to the brilliant nature of their work. I have been illuminating now for well over 2 years and had never attempted something of this complexity. I had, in fact, intentionally avoided Persian illuminations for that very reason. I wished to have my skill set at a level that would do justice to the pieces of the period prior to trying my hand at them. The challenge involved in both the research and execution of the piece is something I have enjoyed immensely. I have garnered a wealth of knowledge that will only aid me in my continuing pursuit of Persian illumination arts.

Examples



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² Matthews, Rory. "Illustrations from the Padshahnama c.1630-40". The Royal Collection Royal Palaces, Residences & Art Collection. 2006 Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. 7 June 2007.

<http://www.royalcollection.org.uk/eGallery/object.asp?detail=scrapbook&object=1005025&row=0&scrapbook=1005025%5F002>

³ Denny, Walter B. "Shamsa" University of Washington Library Digital Collections. 2006. 7 June 2007. <http://content.lib.washington.edu/u/?/dia,4349>
Shamsa: Firdawsi. Shahnamah, Safavid c. 1560 (Denny)

Sources Cited

- Baker, Amy. "Common Medieval Pigments". Austin, TX. 2005
- Canby, Sheila R. Persian Painting. Trustees of the British Museum. London, UK. 1993
- Matthews, Rory. "Illustrations from the Padshahnama c.1630-40". The Royal Collection Royal Palaces, Residences and Art Collection. 2006 Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. 7 June 2007.
<http://www.royalcollection.org.uk/eGallery/object.asp?detail=scrapbook&object=1005025&row=0&scrapbook=1005025%5F002>
- Titley, Norah M. Persian Miniature Painting. First University of Texas Press. 1984.

Stages of Piece



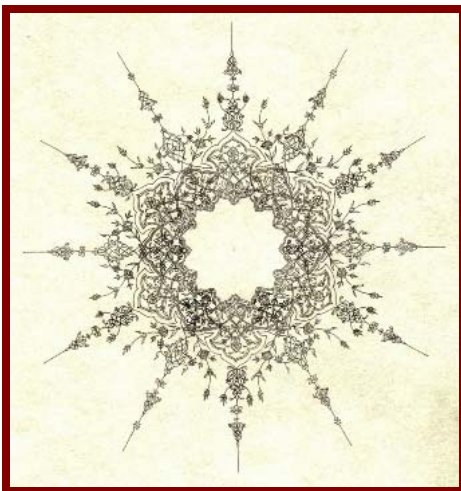
Some of my pigments & gum arabic



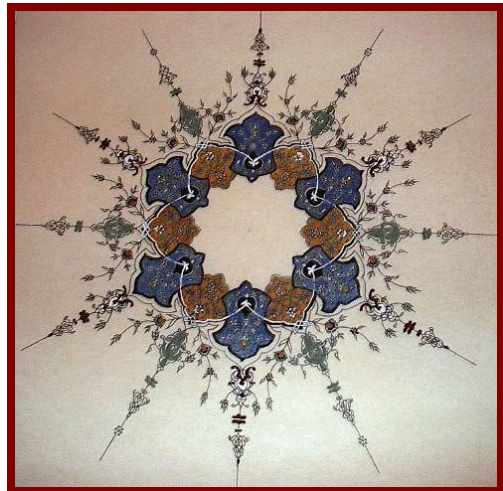
Mixing pigments on glass (2 parts pigment to 1 part gum arabic & water to mix)



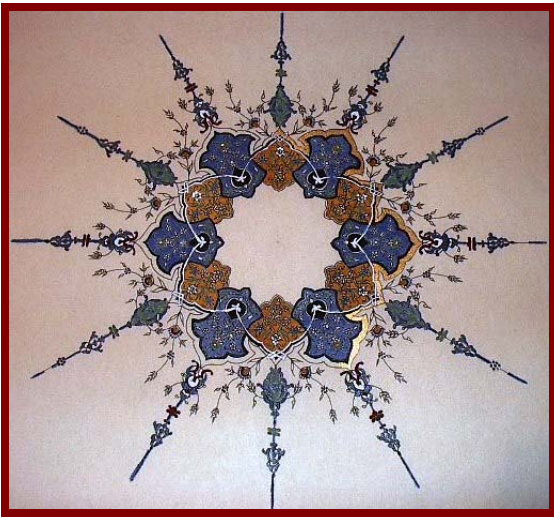
Gold ochre mixed pigment



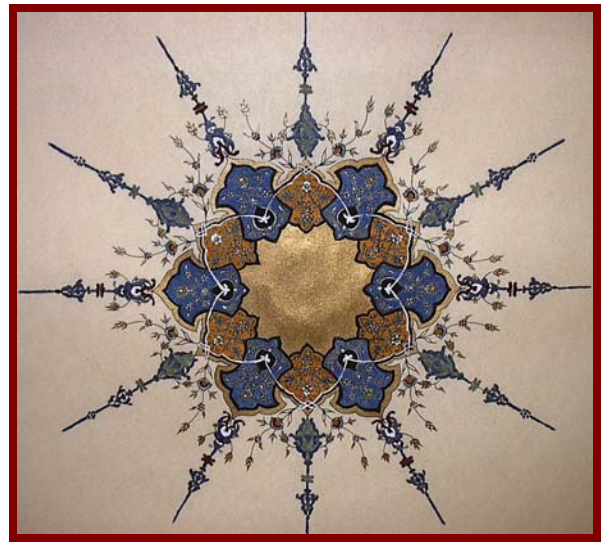
Final line drawing of piece prior to illumination (design by another artist)



First stage of illuminating



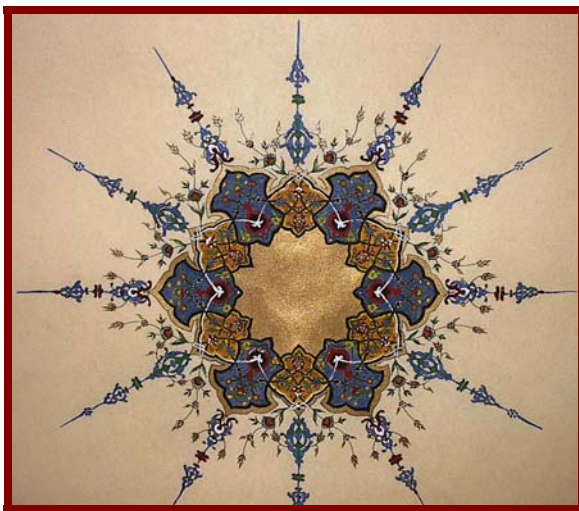
Second stage of illuminating



Third stage of illuminating



Third stage of illuminating (Close-up)



Fourth Stage of illuminating



Fourth stage of illuminating (Close-up)