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## MANUSCRIPT STUDIES

### ***DISCOVERIES FROM A CHARMING MINIATURE MANUSCRIPT: A 16TH CENTURY VOLUME OF HAFEZ'S GHAZALS***

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#### ABSTRACT

The Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas Library (SMNAL) at the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilisation (ISTAC, IIUM) houses a remarkable collection of Hafez's *ghazals*, compiled in a charming miniature-sized manuscript from the 16th-century Safavid Iran. Its exquisite lacquer binding, adorned with colorful floral motifs; the creatively developed page layouts that, while maintaining overall visual unity, vary to meet the aesthetic demands of each page; and the consistently excellent quality of Nasta'liq calligraphy throughout the volume make this manuscript truly exceptional.

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The absence of *rekābeh* (catchwords), as well as the fact that each page contains a carefully selected five or six self-contained couplets – complete in itself – and that the two illuminated opening folios along with four miniature paintings in the Isfahani style are later additions, all suggest that the pages may have originally been intended for a *muraqqa* ‘ (album).

This essay is divided into seven distinct sections. “About the Manuscript” provides essential information on the volume. Its aesthetic and codicological features are examined under a few headings, namely “Binding,” “Illuminations,” “Layout,” and “Illustrations.” Additional markings on the manuscript reveal traces of two former owners prior to its acquisition by ISTAC in the 1990s; these are discussed under “Barker’s Remarks” and “Seals.” Finally, “Physical Condition” offers an account of the volume’s deterioration and subsequent restorations. The essay is accompanied by twenty-two images, selected and photographed by the author.

**KEYWORDS:** Hafez; Persian manuscript; Safavid period; lacquer binding; page layout

## 1.0 ABOUT THE MANUSCRIPT



Figure 1: Selected ghazals of Hafez, Safavid Iran, sixteenth century (ISTAC–IUM Collection).

This charming miniature-sized manuscript of the selected *ghazals* by Hafez displays various artistic features, from its captivating jewel-like binding, to creatively developed layout compositions that vary in different pages, and its fine Nasta‘liq calligraphy that soothes the eye.

The general information about the manuscript is provided in the following table.

Accession no.	SMNAL. Persian MSS-145
Title, Author	<i>Ghazals</i> of Hafez, by Shams al-Din Hafez Shirazi
Date and place	16 <sup>h</sup> century, Iran
Language	Persian / Farsi
Style of script	Excellent <i>Nasta'liq</i> in black ink
Dimensions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Size with cover: 14 x 9.3 cm</li> <li>▪ Page size: 13.5 x 9 cm</li> <li>▪ Text area: 10.7 x 6 (including the borders).</li> </ul>
Pages, Line per page	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ 115 folios, 10 or 12 lines per page</li> </ul>
Binding	Colourful lacquer binding adorned with vivid floral and foliated designs.
Illuminations	Two intricately illuminated <i>sarlowhs</i> , sharing a similar overall composition on pages 1-L and 2-R.
Illustrations	Four exquisite miniature paintings executed in the Isfahan school.
Seals	Seal impression of a previous owner appears two times on the obverse and reverse of page 115
Physical Condition	Overall good condition, with minor traces of deterioration, water stain, ink smudging, and restoration.

## 2.0 BINDING

The first attractive feature of this fine manuscript is its charming colourful lacquer binding. Adorned with vivid floral and foliated designs, framed within a border decorated with delicate floral patterns in golden and black, each panel is an artistic masterpiece in itself. Though its shiny surface is damaged with deep cracks, the aesthetic quality remains intact. The binding of this manuscript displays a skillful restoration. The original front and back of the binding are preserved, while the damaged spine is replaced with plane black leather support (Figure 2).



Figure 2: The style of rendering the flowers and technical details indicate Mid-Safavid era, late 16th century.

### 3.0 ILLUMINATION

The two intricately illuminated *sarlowhs* in this manuscript share a similar overall composition. Curiously, they appear on opposite sides of the same leaf—p. 1-L and p. 2-R—yet neither is accompanied by any text. Although consistent in size and style with the rest of the manuscript, these pages show clear indications of being later additions, intended to provide a formal opening for the volume — an intention that ultimately remained unrealised. (Figures 3 and 4)



Figure 3 and 4: Details of *sarlowhs*: page. 1-L (left), page. 2-R (right)

A close inspection of pages 1-L and its reverse, 2-R reveals that the ornate *sarlowhs* were skillfully pasted onto a blank page that had originally been prepared with layout outlines for couplets, in the same manner as the other folios. On page 1-L, an attempt was made to fill the surrounding space with red paint, possibly to create a visually striking opening; however, this embellishment was never completed (Figure 5). On the reverse, page 2-R, a more advanced approach is evident (Figure 6).



Figure 5 (page 1-L): Unfinished opening page (*iftitāh*) with later interventions

This page demonstrates an attempt to transform an ordinary page into a grand opening (*iftitāh*), a plan that was ultimately left unfinished. A *sarlowh* was carelessly pasted onto the page, which is then framed by a wide maroon border featuring sketchy floral designs at the top. On the left margin, a large letter “A,” casually written and circled, may have served as a guide for decorative motifs yet to be added. Barker’s name, written in blue pen in his own hand at the top edge of the page, together with additional pencil notations beneath the *sarlowh*, suggests that he may originally have intended to use the page as a flyleaf.

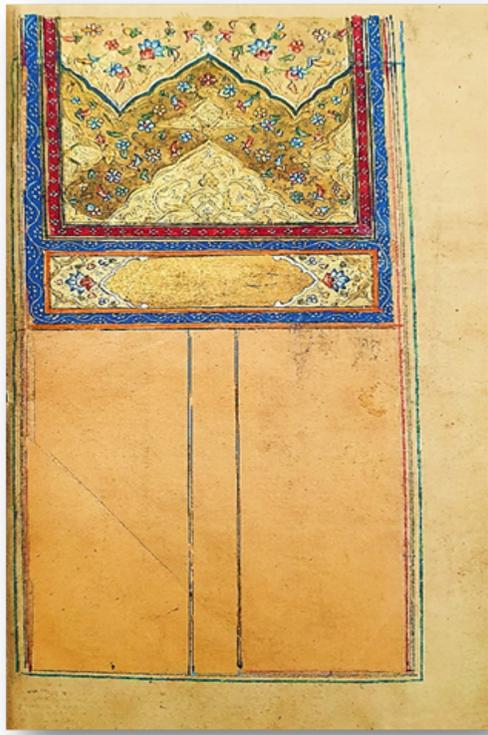


Figure 6 (page 2-R): Unfinished opening page (*iftitāh*) with affixed *sarlowh*.

This page carries a beautifully executed *sarlowh*, prepared separately and affixed to the upper portion of the page, with a width precisely matching that of the manuscript's text block. Its upper edge extends above the layout border, in accordance with traditional *iftitāh* page design. Below this, within the defined text area, a distinct orangish-toned sheet was pasted to conceal the original ruling for couplets. This overlay is divided into two columns and intended to accommodate the opening *ghazal* in the customary format; however, this plan was likewise left unfinished.

## 4.0 LAYOUT

A creative idea has been employed to develop a well-planned layout template throughout the manuscript. The template emerges with different variations according to aesthetic considerations, as well as the number of couplets selected for the specific pages.

To develop this flexible template, the text block is elegantly divided into distinct sections. On most pages, the following arrangement is adopted: at the center lies the largest area, reserved for four lines (two couplets) composed diagonally in a *chalipā* layout. Horizontal couplets are placed in the top and bottom rectangles, while the narrow side-panels contain vertically written verses—running top-down along the right margin and bottom-up along the left. These divisions—subject to slight variations from page to page—are meticulously outlined in gold and enclosed within double black lines. This compartmentalised structure often creates small blank squares and rectangles that contribute to the aesthetic balance of the composition. Such defined empty spaces are typically filled with colorful decorative motifs—an indication of the careful planning undertaken by the artist or the project's commissioner (Figures 7 and 8).

It is worth noting that such elaborate composition is more characteristic of calligraphic panels produced for *muraqqa'* albums. The fact that each folio is visually and textually self-contained—and that each showcases a selective excerpt of only five or six couplets from a *ghazal*, in contrast to the average length of Hafez's *ghazals* which typically range from seven to ten couplets—suggests that the original intention of the commissioner may not have been to produce a complete *dīvān*. Rather, it appears more likely that the aim was to assemble an exquisite *muraqqa'* album. This assumption is further supported by the absence of *rekābeh* (catchwords)—a traditional Persian manuscript practice in which the first word (or part of it) from the next page is written in the bottom corner margin of the preceding page to ensure correct pagination. The lack of such pagination markers reinforces the idea that the folios were not initially conceived as part of a continuous manuscript.

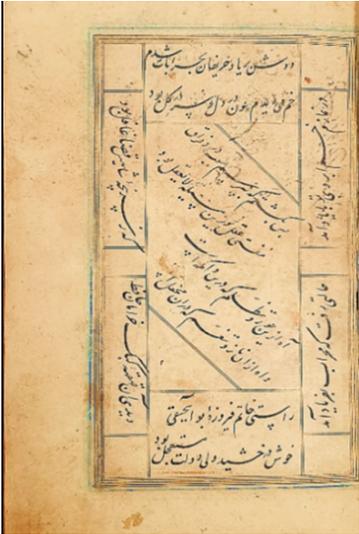


Figure 7: (page 2-L):  
Empty spaces are reserved for  
illuminative ornamentation

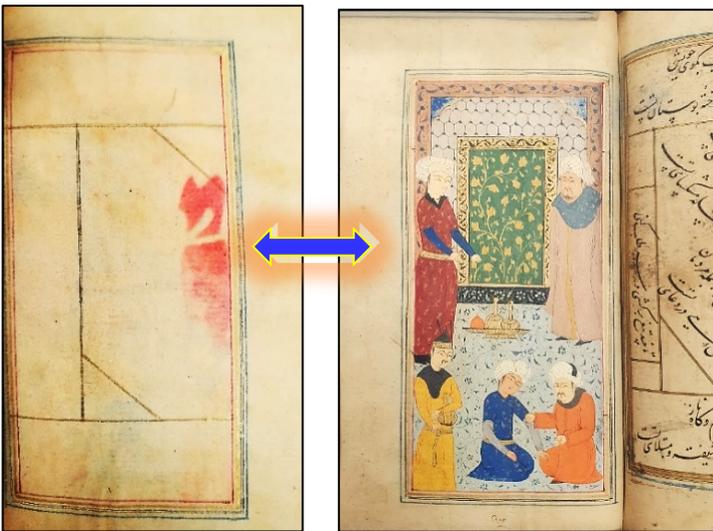
The four corner areas of the text block—two small vertical rectangles along the sides and two larger triangular spaces—were deliberately left blank to allow for additional illuminative ornamentation, intended to further enhance the visual and aesthetic richness of the composition (Figure 7).



Figure 8: (page 3):  
Different yet  
harmonious layouts  
of opposite pages

These two facing pages (Figure 8) exhibit different yet harmonious layouts, with the right-hand page containing ten lines, while the left-hand page accommodates twelve.

The entire text blocks of Figures 9 and 10 are framed with multiple fine lines in gold, black, red, and green. On many folios, these border colours have faded, likely due to frequent handling and the natural aging of the manuscript. Interestingly, the reverse sides of illustrated pages are blank, although the same template outlines have been drawn on them, suggesting that they may have been prepared for future completion or embellishment.



Figures 9 and 10:

The blank page on the left (p. 91-R) features a layout template that is simpler in design than the more elaborate compositions found on other pages. In addition, the wet red pigment used for the standing figure on the illustrated facing page (p. 90-L) has bled through the paper, leaving a faint silhouette of the figure visible on the reverse side.

## 5.0 ILLUSTRATIONS

The manuscript is adorned with four exquisite miniature paintings executed in the Isfahan school. The depiction of faces, indication of style of outfits, and some architectural features suggest Turkish influences. The paintings appear on pages 17-R, 43-L, 65-R, and 90-L (Figures 11, 12, 13, and 14).

Several factors suggest that these illustrations are later additions to the volume:

- a) Each painting appears on an independent leaf, with the reverse side left blank;
- b) The subject matter of paintings bears no direct connection to the *ghazal* on the adjacent pages; and
- c) The remarkably well-preserved and vibrant condition of the painted surfaces contrasts sharply with the overall aging and deterioration visible throughout the rest of the manuscript.

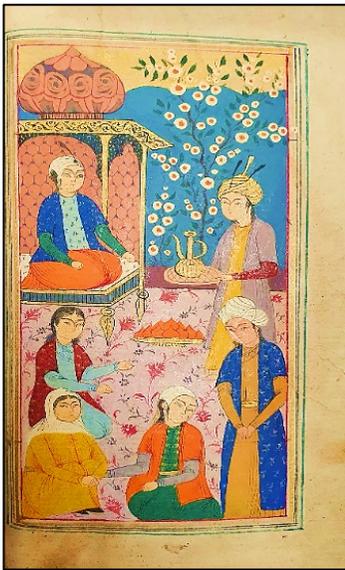


Figure 11: p. 17-R

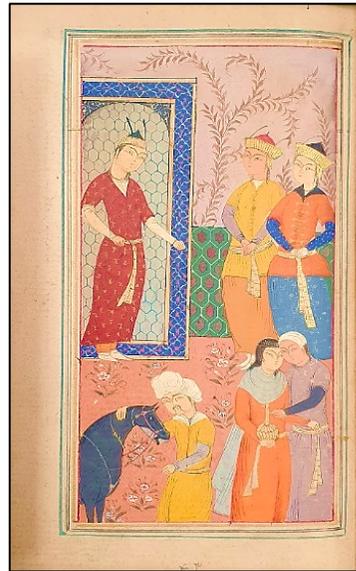


Figure 12: p. 43-L



Figure 13: p. 65-R

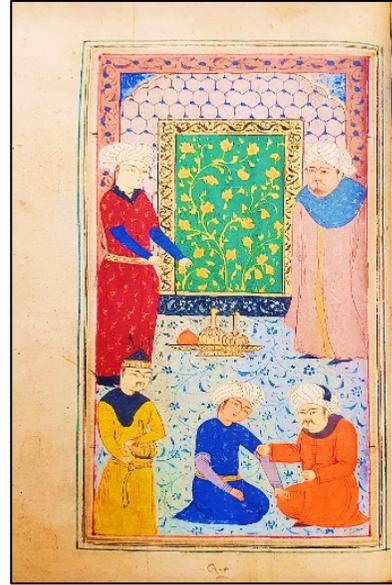


Figure 14: p. 90-R

There are additional marks on the manuscript that enhance our understanding of its history and provenance. These include the remarks of its last owner, Abdul Rahman Barker, and a seal impression belonging to one of the manuscript's earlier owners.

### **Barker's Remarks**

The handwriting of the manuscript's last known owner, Muhammad 'Abd al-Rahman Barker, appears in two places. It is found first on the flyleaf—added during the most recent rebinding—where it is written in Urdu script (Figure 15).

His handwriting also appears on p. 1-L (see Figures 3 and 5).

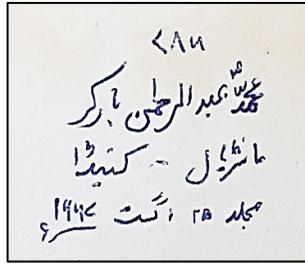


Figure 15: Flyleaf inscription recording rebinding. Barker recorded the date and place as 25 August 1967, Montreal, Canada. The inclusion of the term *mujallad* (“bound”) indicates that the manuscript had been formally rebound at that time, possibly under Barker’s supervision or commission, before it entered the ISTAC collection in the 1990s.

## 6.0 SEALS

Seal impression of a previous owner appears two times on the obverse and reverse of page 115 of the manuscript, carrying a devotional phrase (Figure 16). Barker’s handwritten note on the flyleaf indicates that the seal is dated 1206 AH (1791–92 CE). However, this date has not yet been independently verified.

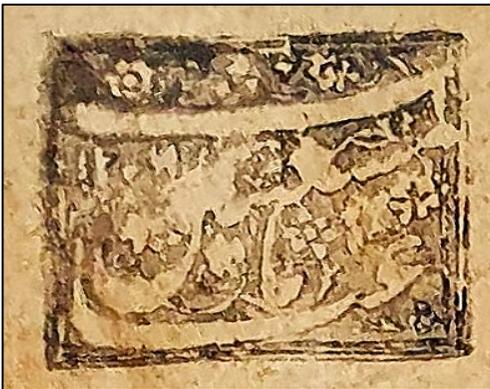


Figure 16;  
Previous owner’s seal  
with supplicatory  
inscription

This seal, executed in fine *Nasta'liq* script against a floral ground, bears the inscription: *Yā Ghiyāth al-mustaghthīn*, meaning “O Helper of all those who seek help.” The phrase constitutes a prayer or supplication, invoking God as the ultimate source of aid in times of distress.

## 7.0 PHYSICAL CONDITION

The manuscript is in an overall good condition. The volume has undergone restoration, and is given a new binding by adding a plain leather spine to its original colourful lacquer binding. The handwritten text by Abd al-Rahman Barker – it’s previous owner before moving to ISTAC’s SMNA Library – suggests that the new binding, and some restorations were perhaps done while in his possession in August 1967. A thorough inspection of the manuscript shows traces of water stain, ink smudging, discolouring and charring of paper along the rule lines – likely a chemical reaction to the copper-based pigment Verdigris (Figures 17 to 21).



Figure 17 (page 43): Visible signs of ageing and restoration appear near the centre of the folio, particularly along the stitching at the spine.



Figure 18 (Page 60): Ink smudging and poor restoration  
Significant ink smudging, paper deterioration and discolouration, as well as an unsympathetic restoration involving the pasting of paper over the original page, are clearly visible.



Figure 19 (page 29-L): Some pages, display a distinct greenish tone that contrasts with the overall warm ochre hue of most folios. This discolouration may result from a chemical reaction caused by verdigris – a copper-based pigment – used in the ruling lines that frame the text block.

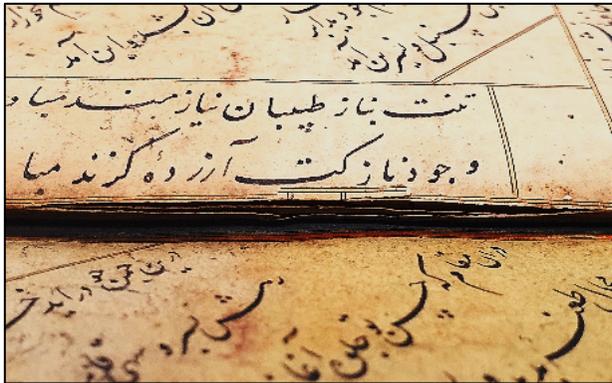


Figure 20 (page 29-L): The corrosive effect of verdigris—used in the ruling lines—combined with the pressure exerted by the tight binding, has led to localised charring and deterioration of the paper.

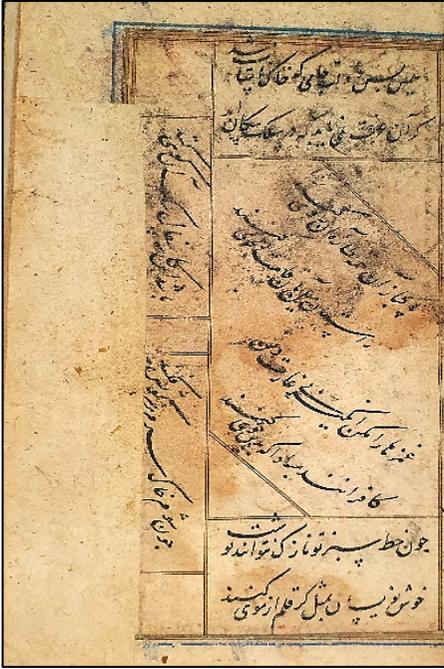


Figure 21 (page 111-L):  
Careless restoration of  
the outer margin of a  
damaged page

Restoration work is evident on page 111-L, where a paper patch has been applied to reinforce the damaged outer margin. Residual darkened areas in the upper half of the page mark earlier deterioration.

### 7.1. Acknowledgement

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Dr. Mostafa Rostami of the University of Mazandaran for his expert opinion on the dating and attribution of the manuscript's lacquer binding. I am also deeply thankful to Mr. Ahmad Zaki and the dedicated staff of the SMNA Library at ISTAC, whose support and assistance greatly facilitated the smooth progress of this research.