

## *Manuscript Studies*

### Introduction and Analytical Study of Paintings from a Previously Understudied 12th Century A.H. *Khamsa* Manuscript from the Library of Marashi in Qom

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#### **Abstract**

The *Iskandarnāma*, the fifth *Masnavi* of the Nezami's *Khamsa*, recounts the legendary and historical episodes of Iskandar the Great. This study examines an understudied manuscript of the Nezami's *Iskandarnāma* preserved in the Marashi Library of Qom. The manuscript dates to 1115 A.H. (1703 AD). The aim of this research is to introduce this *Iskandarnama* manuscript and analyze its paintings. In this regard, the following questions are answered: Which of the Iranian painting schools are the images of this *Iskandarnāma* most associated with, and what are the specific formal features of this manuscript? By examining the images in a descriptive-analytical manner, we conclude that this *Iskandarnāma* is probably a manuscript commissioned by a court or prince in the late Safavid period. From the uniformity of their images and lines, we can conclude that all the paintings were executed by a single painter and scribe. Its paintings and illuminations reflect the continuity of the artistic style of Herat and Isfahan school of that

period. The writings are in *Nastaliq* script and were executed quickly. The illustrations are unsigned and the scenes of the story are faithful to the text. All elements such as plants, clothes, landscapes and animals are carefully designed.

**Keywords:** Persian painting; Book decoration; Manuscript; *Iskandarnama*; Marashi library

### **Introduction and Methodology**

Painting and literature have had an inseparable and long-standing link in the history of Iran. In different periods, artists have always illustrated literary (book) works that were often full of wisdom. Also, these manuscripts are a valuable treasure of the events and developments of society throughout the history of Iranian art. The illustration of Nezami's *Khamsa* (*Khamsah-negari*) is one of the long-standing traditions of Persian book art and is considered, after the *Shahnama*, among the most frequently illustrated and widely circulated literary manuscripts in Iran.<sup>1</sup> In this context, several of the most significant illustrated manuscripts of the *Khamsa* of Nezami may be highlighted, including the Jalayirid *Khamsa* (788/790 AH)<sup>2</sup>, regarded as the earliest known illustrated copy; the *Baysunghurī Khamsa* (Herat school); and the *Jamālī Khamsa* (869 AH, Baghdad school, preserved in the India Office Library); the *Ṭahmāspī Khamsa* (946–950 AH, Tabriz school, preserved in the British Museum, London), widely considered one of the most exquisite manuscripts of the first half of the 10th century AH. The study of Nezami's *Khamsa* in different schools is useful in the process of better identifying the evolution of Iranian painting.

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<sup>1</sup> Basil Gray, *Persian Painting*. (Skira, 1977), 14.

<sup>2</sup> Sheila R. Canby, *Persian Painting* (British Museum Press, 1993), 42.

Hakim Nezami Ganjavi, Jamal al-Din Abu Muhammad Ilyas Yusuf ibn Zaki Mu'ayyad, alias Nezami (ca. 537–608 AH/1141–1209 AD), was one of the foremost masters of Persian eloquence and among the greatest poets of the sixth century AH.<sup>3</sup> He was born in the city of Ganja. Nezami's most celebrated achievement is his *Khamsa*, which secured his enduring fame in Persian literary and cultural history. The fifth poem of the *Khamsa* is the *Iskandarnāma*, which Nezami has divided into two parts: the *Sharafnama* and the *Iqbalnama*. For twenty-three centuries, Iskandar has been the subject of history books and Iranian stories. He was one of the rare conquerors of history and the one who was able to become king before reaching the age of thirty and created one of the largest empires of the ancient world. Over time, retellings of Iskandar's life accumulated legendary elements that gradually overshadowed the historical figure, leading to his portrayal as a largely imaginary and mythic hero in later traditions.

The aims of the present study are to introduce and analyze the previously understudied manuscript of Nezami, which belongs to the library of Marashi in Qom (with the number 25009), which was written in 1115 AH, and the range of plant, animal, and human motifs and architectural elements have been evaluated. It is necessary to study the manuscript and illustrated manuscript of the *Iskandarnāma* of Marashi's library, which has not yet been introduced and studied, in order to understand Iranian painting at that time.

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<sup>3</sup> Julie Scott Meisami, "Nizami Ganjavi," in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, online ed., accessed April 22, 2026, <https://iranicaonline.org/articles/nezami-ganjavi>.

### **Theoretical and Methodological Framework**

In the tradition of Persian manuscript culture, painting, calligraphy, and layout function together as a coherent visual system shaped by literary content, artistic conventions, and cultural context. In addition to formal analysis, this study draws on iconographic and narrative approaches. The illustrated passages in the manuscript are examined with respect to their narrative function within the text.

Furthermore, a comparative perspective informs the methodology. Selected paintings from the Marashi Library manuscript (MS 25009) are compared with works from the Isfahan and Herat schools. This comparison does not seek to assign the manuscript rigidly to a specific workshop; rather, it aims to situate its imagery within broader pictorial traditions and to identify both shared conventions and distinctive features. This approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of continuity and variation in late Safavid manuscript painting.

Firstly, codicological aspects such as layout, illumination (*tezhib*), and pagination are considered. The manuscript is therefore approached not merely as a historical artefact, but as a visual narrative shaped by artistic choices and cultural expectations. The present study is qualitative in nature. Given its historical orientation, data and images were collected through library resources, documentary sources, and direct observation. The author had direct access to photographs of the folios. The study employs a descriptive–analytical method. Its aim is to introduce and visually analyze a 12th-century AH manuscript of the *Iskandarnāma* from the Safavid period, preserved in the Marashi Library in Qom.

## **The Herat School: The Pinnacle of Persian Miniature Painting**

The Herat School is recognized as the definitive expression of the Iranian aesthetic, representing a transition from foreign stylistic influences toward a purely local artistic language.<sup>4</sup> Scholarly consensus generally divides its development into two distinct phases:

### *a. The Early Timurid Synthesis*

The first period, flourishing under the patronage of Shah Rukh and his son Baysunghur, introduced an unprecedented level of refinement. This era is characterized by a sophisticated palette dominated by gold and lapis lazuli, seen in masterpieces such as the *Baysunghur Shahnama*.<sup>5</sup> During this stage, painters began to move away from the rigidities of earlier styles, favoring fluid human movements and a harmonious balance between figure and landscape.<sup>6</sup> This "softness" in expression set the stage for what would become the classical Persian style.

### *b. The Era of Kamal al-Din Behzad*

The second period is synonymous with the brilliance of Kamal al-Din Behzad, arguably the most influential painter in Islamic history. Under Behzad's leadership, the Herat School achieved "ultimate perfection" by integrating intense naturalism with complex spatial compositions.<sup>7</sup> Behzad's work emphasized individual psychology and the variety of

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<sup>4</sup> Canby, *Persian Painting*, 52–56.

<sup>5</sup> Gray, *Persian Painting*, 44–48.

<sup>6</sup> Canby, *Persian Painting*, 57–60.

<sup>7</sup> Sheila S. Blair and Jonathan M. Bloom, *The Art and Architecture of Islam 1250-1800* (Yale University Press, 1994), 62-70.

human experience, moving Persian art toward a peak of technical mastery.

The legacy of the Herat School served as the foundational bedrock for subsequent dynasties. As the Safavid era began, the Tabriz School emerged not in isolation, but as a sophisticated synthesis of three primary traditions: the Herat School (noted for its refinement), the Shiraz School (Turkman period), and the local Turkman styles of Tabriz.<sup>8</sup> This amalgamation allowed the Safavids to inherit a matured artistic language, which they then adapted to their own imperial and religious narratives.

### **The Evolution of Safavid Book Arts and Patronage**

#### *a. From the Early Safavid Rulers to Shah Abbas I*

The Safavid era (1501–1736 AD) marks a transformative period in Persian visual identity, characterized by the synthesis of regional styles into a unified imperial aesthetic. Following the coronation of Shah Ismail I in Tabriz, the Safavid court became a melting pot of artistic traditions. By capturing Herat in 1510 AD, Ismail I effectively inherited the refined Timurid workshops, blending the lyrical delicacy of the Herat school with the expressive, high-energy dynamism of the Turkman Tabriz tradition. This cultural fusion reached its zenith under Shah Tahmasp I, whose patronage facilitated the production of the most celebrated manuscripts in Islamic history, notably the *Shahnama* (Book of Kings) and the *Khamasa* of Nizami.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Yaqub Azhand, *The Tabriz School of Painting* (Farhangestan-e Honar, 2005), 101.

<sup>9</sup> Oleg Grabar, *Mostly Miniatures: An Introduction to Persian Painting*. (Princeton University Press, 2000), 66-74.

The trajectory of Safavid painting was deeply influenced by the shifting nature of royal favor. While the early reign of Shah Tahmasp I represented a "Golden Age" of manuscript production, his later drift toward religious orthodoxy led to a decline in courtly commissions. This shift forced a migration of talent; artists sought new horizons either in the provincial courts of Khorasan or by traveling to the Mughal Empire in India, where they fundamentally shaped the development of Mughal painting. Furthermore, as the capital moved from Tabriz to Qazvin, the focus of book decoration evolved. The rigid structure of royal workshops gave way to a more commercialized market, giving rise to independent lacquer paintings and single-page illustrations that catered to a broader class of elite collectors.

Shah Abbas I (1588-1629 AD/1039-996 AH) restored Iran to its former glory after organizing the western regions of Iran and the Ottoman and Uzbek invasions. A sign of Iran's success and stability during this period was the new capital, Isfahan, which was built with gardens, magnificent palaces, vast bazaars, and various public buildings. Although the painting of this period continued previous traditions, new changes gradually emerged, including the abundance of single-sheet paintings. Reza Abbasi is the most prominent painter of this period.

b. *The Last Safavid Rulers*

In the later Safavid period, political instability and administrative decline significantly affected artistic production. As central authority weakened, court patronage diminished, and the organized manuscript workshop system gradually disintegrated. Painting during this period reflects both continuity and transformation. On the one hand, it retained elements of the established Safavid visual vocabulary,

particularly the stylistic legacy of the Reza Abbasi school. On the other hand, increasing contact with European artistic models introduced new visual elements, including naturalistic portraiture and landscape representation. Although manuscript illustration continued, it showed limited formal innovation compared to earlier periods. A growing number of artists shifted away from royal and elite patronage toward producing individual portraits and genre scenes, often catering to foreign travelers and new market demands. This transition reflects a broader shift from court-centered production to a more diversified and semi-commercial artistic economy in the late Safavid period.<sup>10</sup>

### **Codicological Description and Ornamentation**

#### **a. Introduction to the *Iskandarnāma* of the Library of Marashi in Qom, an illustrated manuscript from the 12th century AH**



Figure 1. Cover, back cover, and spine in red timaj leather, Nezami's *Iskandarnāma*, Marashi Library, Qom (Source: Authors).

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<sup>10</sup> Canby, *Persian Painting*, 102-116.

*Iskandarnāma* (*Sharafnama*, *Iqbalnama*) of Nezami's *Khamsa* (serial number 25009) is a manuscript consisting of 321 leaves, in each page of which eleven lines in two columns are written in *Nastaliq* script on pea-colored paper with black ink. The headings are in white and in *Nastaliq* script as well, with inscriptions on a background of gold color, Islamic decorations, white flowers, and *Shangarf* (vermillion) (Figure 4). Around the inscriptions, there are *Zangar* (verdigris) color tabulations with dimensions of 6.5 cm in the desired dimension (depending on the number of words in the title of the story), which are placed between the two columns, with a distance of half a centimeter between each column. The black and gold lines of the table are  $8 \times 16$  cm in size, and a black border of the same dimensions is visible all around the table on the entire page.

This manuscript is very exquisite and valuable; it has nine color paintings, as well as some very valuable inscriptions with a *Lajvard* (ultramarine blue) background and gold wash with colorful flowers and leaves, and borders decorated with pure gold decorated in the form of flowers and leaves. At the beginning of each of the sonnets, there is a short studded inscription. The leaves are three-lined, and the lasso is gilded. The possession of the manuscript with the oval seal of "Hossein ibn Ali 1256" and the oval seal of "Ja'far ibn Ali 1246" is mentioned in the final leaf. The beginning of the manuscript has a golden header and pages in *Shangarf*, black, and gold. The dimensions of this manuscript are  $23 \times 14.5$  cm, and its thickness is 3.5 cm. Its cover is a multiplicative *timaj* (fine polished leather, glazed leather used for manuscript binding) with *Lachak* (Corner motif), *Toranj* (Medallion/Central medallion motif), and *Sargolboteh* (Floral crest

motif, Top floral cluster), (inflection: red timaj) (Figure 1).<sup>11</sup> Over time, this *Iskandarnāma* has suffered from scratches, abrasions, and leather wear on the cover, and its leaves have become wrinkled. Apparently, its first and last pages have been exposed to a lot of water and moisture, the effect of which can be seen in this manuscript (Figure 3).



Figure 2. Two-column Nastaliq script in Nezami's *Iskandarnāma*, Marashi Library, Qom (Source: Authors).



Figure 3. Damage to the leaves of Nezami's *Iskandarnāma* manuscript, Marashi Library, Qom (Source: Authors).

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<sup>11</sup> Seyyed Mahmoud Mousavi, *Catalogue of the Manuscripts of the Marashi Najafi Library*, vol. 25 (Marashi Library Publications, 2022), 144.

### **b. Calligrapher**

The text of the poems of the *Iskandarnāma* of the Marashi Library is written in Persian and *Nastaliq* script and in black, and the title pages are also written in *Nastaliq* script and in white. (Figure 2).

*Nastaliq* has been developing steadily since the Timurid era, alongside various forms of calligraphy.<sup>12</sup> During the reign of Shah Ismail, manuscripts were written in *Nastaliq* script that were in line with the manuscripts of the Herat school of the Timurid era. During the reign of Shah Tahmasp I, *Nastaliq* script gained special importance and prestige and became increasingly regular. *Nastaliq* then gained such importance that calligraphers of the Safavid era wrote manuscripts in it.<sup>13</sup>

In manuscripts, the name of the scribe is usually with the date and name of the founder mentioned next to of the book, but in this manuscript, the name of the scribe or scribes is not specifically mentioned at the beginning or end. The only trace of the attribution of the manuscript to the owner of the manuscript is found in the book *List of Manuscripts of the Library of Marashi* in Qom. In this book, an oval seal with the names (Jafar ibn Ali) and (Hossein ibn Ali) is mentioned on the first and last pages.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Fariba Pat, Seyed Ahmad Reza Khazri, and Mehrangiz Mazaheri, "Khoshnevisi dar Aghaz-e Asr-e Safavi: Tahavvolat, Karkardha, Hamiyan va Honarvaran," *Pazhuheshnameh-ye Tarikh va Tamaddon-e Eslami* 44, no. 1 (Spring–Summer 2011), 36.

<sup>13</sup> Soucek, Priscilla, "Calligraphy In The Safavid Period 1501-1576", In John Thompson And Sheila R. Canby, *Hunt For Paradise: Court Arts Of Safavid Iran 1501-1576*, (Skira, 2003), 50-51.

<sup>14</sup> Mousavi, *Catalogue of the Manuscripts*, 144.

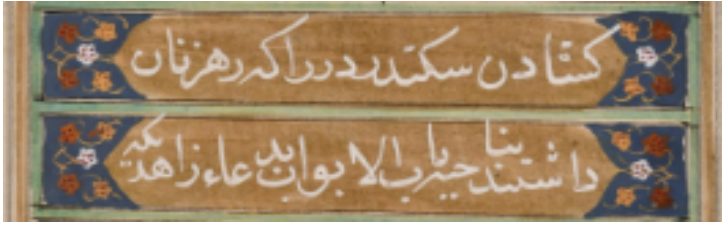


Figure 4. An example of a story title box in Nezami's *Iskandarnāma*, Marashi Library, Qom (Source: Authors).

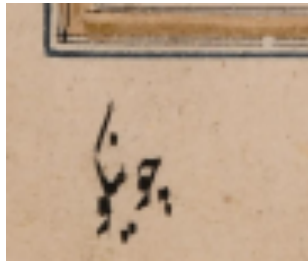


Figure 5. A sample of numbering by the Rekabeh method in Nezami's *Iskandarnāma*, Marashi Library, Qom (Source: Authors).



Figure 6. An example of annotation that was later written by the owners in Nezami's *Iskandarnāma*, Marashi Library, Qom (Source: Authors).

### c. Page layout and tabulation

The relationship between the arrangement of the written elements and the picture frame, as well as the relationship between the shape of the picture frame and the subject and composition of the picture in the *Iskandarnāma* manuscript of the great library of Marashi in Qom, always follows special proportions. The dimensions of the paper plate are 14.5×23 cm, the dimensions of the table are 8×16 ×16 cm, and each column is 27×4 cm. The distance between the columns is half a centimeter, and each column consists of 23 rows, and in the pages with headings, the number of rows is proportionately reduced. It is 4.5 cm from the right and 4 cm from the left to the edge of the paper. In the drawing table, six lines were used in dark blue color and gold for the middle, and for the columns, two lines were used. The arrangement and width of the columns follow the division of the page that is set for writing the poems, which are mostly rectangular and square in shape. The numbering of this manuscript uses the method of *Rekabe* (Figure 5), in such a way that in the bottom left corner of the pages, the first word of the next page is written. On some pages, there are notes in black (different from the color of the poems), which explain the details of the story related to the page and the previous and next pages or in some cases give the meaning of a word or give a sentence about the interpretation of the poem. These notes seem to have a different handwriting from the original text of the manuscript and the ink color is not the same as the original text and it seems that someone who was apparently the previous owner of the book added notes to the page that seemed necessary while reading and reviewing this copy and wrote this near the edge of the paper (Figure 6).

#### d. Beginning and Ending

The opening page of the *Iskandarnāma* manuscript is the background color, pea. The headline of gilded, with the colors of gold, *Lajvard*, *Shangarf*, *Zangari*, and *Arghavani* (purple/crimson), occupies half of the page. There is the title of *Bismillah al-Rahmān al-Rahīm*, which is written in Nastaliq script in the inscription. The text begins with praise and adoration of God and continues until several pages later. Plant motifs: *Islimi*, *Khataei* (the collective set of floral motifs—flowers, leaves, and buds), *Atlasi* (a glossy, delicate floral motif resembling small blossoms, found in Iranian book illumination and textile decoration), and three-petaled and five-petaled flowers can be seen on the background of the gilded. The gilding of the header of the opening plate is crown-shaped. The gold-colored crown is located in the lower half. The entire illumination is depicted with geometric and floral motifs and in the colors of *Lajvard*, gold water, and *Shangarf* (Figure 7). Also, the first two pages of the illumination motifs in the *kamand* (thin, continuous often gold line used to frame and decorate the margins in Persian manuscripts) of the pages are worked with gold color, and the verses are filled with gold color around the first two pages.

From the third page onwards, the writing of the poems continues, and each story is distinguished from the other stories with a golden title in a frame with the desired dimensions  $\times 6.5$  (depending on the title of the story) and in the middle of the columns. The frame is *zangar*, and on both sides of the frame, small slime forms are worked. The five-petaled *Atlasi* have the same proportions. On the golden background, there are five-petaled flowers, *Khataei*, and two modes of Shah Abbasi (a stylized form of the *Khataei* flower that became widespread in the Safavid period, whose shape was inspired by lotus and tulip blossoms) and *Atlasi* flowers, and the *Sharafeh* (crenellation ornament) are executed in *Lajvard* color. At the end of the book,

*Iskandarnāma* refers to the year 1115, which is determined to be the year 1115 (1703 AD and 1704 AD) (Figure 8).

This date corresponds precisely to the years of the reign of Shah Sultan Hossein Safavi in Isfahan. During the reign of Shah Sultan Hossein began in 1105 AH and ended in 1135 AH (1694–1722 AD), although the splendor of the royal workshops of previous centuries had diminished, the tradition of painting and book art continued in Isfahan. In the late Safavid period, “single-page and mural replaced the large courtly illustrated manuscripts,” and a tendency toward European influences, especially in shading and naturalism, is evident in the works of artists such as Mohammad Zaman and his students. This trend continued in the early 12th century AH, and painters such as Mohammad Ali ibn Mohammad Zaman were active in the Isfahan artistic scene, although there is no longer any evidence of the commissioning of the *Shahnamas* or the magnificent *Khamsas* of Shah Tahmasp’s era. At the same time, in the field of architecture, despite the political weakness of the government, important projects were carried out, such as the construction of the Soltani School (Chaharbagh School) in Isfahan in 1116–1126 AH, (1704–1714 AD), which is considered one of the last outstanding examples of Safavid architecture and tile decoration.<sup>15</sup> This evidence shows that although the political authority of the Safavids was declining during the reign of Shah Sultan Hossein, artistic life continued in more limited forms. But it still continued to be dynamic.

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<sup>15</sup> Blair and Bloom, *The Art and Architecture of Islam*, 217.



Figure 7. The opening page of Nezami's *Iskandarnāma*, Marashi Library, Qom (Source: Authors).



Figure 8. The final page of Nezami's *Iskandarnāma*, Marashi Library, Qom (Source: Authors).

At the beginning of this manuscript, the director of the Marashi Library of Qom, as the owner, wrote a note, we checked and found that some items in it were written incorrectly, some of which are mentioned. At the beginning of that note, it is written that there are eight paintings, but in fact there are nine paintings, in which the ninth painting was drawn with a greater distance than the other paintings.

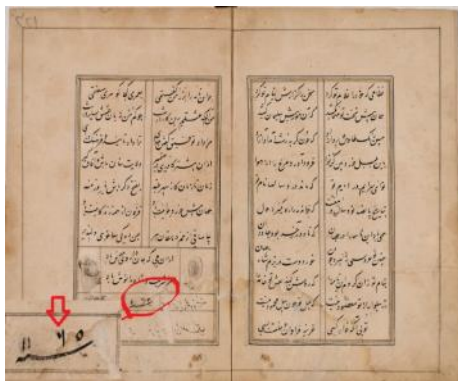


Figure 9.a. The ending's year from Nezami's *Iskandarnāma*, Marashi Library, Qom (Source: Authors).

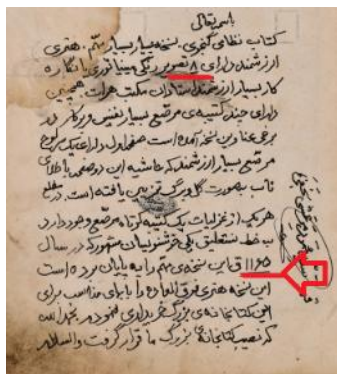


Figure 9.b. The note written by the director of the Marashi Library on the first page from Nezami's *Iskandarnāma*, Marashi Library, Qom (Source: Authors).

At the end of this manuscript is the word "سنه" (*sanah*), which means year. This word has a dot in Persian, and the year is written above this word as 1115. Because the scribe wrote the dot next to the number one, the library employee mistakenly read the number 1115 as 1165 and wrote it down on the first page of this manuscript (Figure 9.a and Figure 9.b).

### e. Stylistic Analysis of the Paintings

Although Iranian society was in turmoil and chaos during the late Safavid period, the production of such a valuable manuscript occurred at this time. The correspondence between the manuscript's date of transcription (1115 AH) and the reign of Shah Sultan Hossein Safavi (1106–1135 AH) indicates that this manuscript was produced during his rule. Given that during that period certain paintings adhered to the prevailing artistic style of the time, the paintings in this manuscript show that the artists continued the visual conventions of Safavid and Herat schools' painting to a significant extent into their contemporary period. The depiction of garden environments and open spaces in nature in this manuscript—especially in scenes such as the "Noshabeh" painting—shows a strong affinity with the Safavid garden-city pattern, and the female figures are among the visual characteristics of the Isfahan school of painting. These features are clearly evident in the single-page *muraqqa'* (an Islamic art album of mounted calligraphy and paintings) produced in Isfahan in the late Safavid period (11th and 12th centuries AH) as well as in the murals of Chehelsotun and Ali Qapu palaces. Among the features that the Marashi's *Iskandarnāma* manuscript shares with them is the similarity in the design and decoration of the female figures (Figure 10.a and Figure 10.b).



Figure. 10.a Detail of the painting “Noshabeh,” from Nezami’s *Iskandarnāma*, Marashi Library, Qom (Source: Authors).



Figure. 10.b Detail of the painting Chehel soton place, central hall, Isfahan (Source: Authors).

On the other hand, the battle scenes—characterized by dynamic compositions, dense arrangement of figures, and spiral organization of pictorial space—are in close harmony with the pictorial traditions of the Herat school of painting (the works of Kamal al-Din Behzad and his students). Such features are clearly visible in the Timurid illustrated manuscripts, including manuscripts associated with the Herat Royal Library from the second half of the ninth century AH. Given these points, it can be concluded that the composition, processing, and postures of the figures in the *Iskandarnāma* manuscript have their roots in the Timurid Herat school, and that the creation of space (especially in the decoration and design of garden and nature spaces) and the representation of the form, postures, and decorations of the faces are characteristics of the Isfahan school of painting.

Also, considering the use of gold paint—melted gold—in the coloring of the manuscript and the delicate finishes and the display of precise details, this manuscript was probably illustrated in the artistic environment of the capital Isfahan and by painters who were supported by the Shah or by princes at the royal court.

In Iranian book arts history, manuscripts are generally divided into two principal categories: provincial (or local) manuscripts and courtly manuscripts. Provincial manuscripts were often produced without illustrations or with only a small number of painted scenes; they typically lack illumination, marginal ornamentation, and ruled borders. In such copies, the quality of calligraphy and painting was lower, and they were executed within a shorter period of time. By contrast, courtly manuscripts were produced under the patronage of kings or princes and through the collaboration of highly skilled artists, and their creation often extended over long periods, sometimes lasting several years. For example, the *Haft Awrang of Sultan Ibrahim Mirza*, now housed in the Freer Gallery, reportedly took ten years to complete.<sup>16</sup> Due to their financial means, kings and princes were able to attract and commission the finest artists of their time.

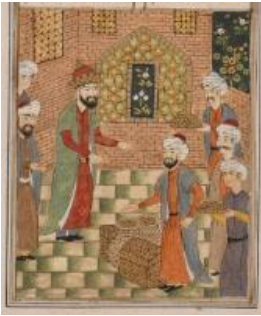
Given its sumptuous ornamentation, meticulous finishes, carefully rendered figures, multiplicity of characters, and the wide range of pictorial elements, the Marashi's *Iskandarnāma* was most likely produced at court or commissioned by the court. This point gains further weight considering that in the late Safavid period, the art of manuscript production had largely given way to single-page paintings.

The visual program of the Marashi's *Iskandarnāma* includes nine paintings and seven inlaid inscriptions, which are listed in

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<sup>16</sup> Marianna Shreve Simpson, "The Haft Awrang of Sultan Ibrahim Mirza," in *Persian Manuscripts*, 6.

Table 1. A general examination of the paintings shows that the painter's degree of fidelity to the text is appropriate and, despite the diversity of subjects, they have common features in visual elements such as composition, type of decoration, color, texture and space-making. All are drawn with good quality and detail. In the paintings, there is no protrusion from the frame and the painter is faithful to the frame of the image, but at the same time, the painter has devoted the entire space of the frame to the painting and the painter's pen has not been drawn on the lines of the table. In most paintings, the space is divided into two parts. The main story and human figures are in the foreground, and the rest of the background space is dedicated to plant and animal motifs, architectural elements, or natural space. The placement of the horizon line at the top of the paintings has given the painter more freedom to describe the story.



**First painting**

Victory of Iskandar over the Zangian  
army (p.70)



**Second painting**

Iskandar's forgiveness and sending  
gifts to the King (p.74)



**Third painting**

Iskandar's deliberation on the wrath of Darius, and his basing and relying on his own victory and triumph (p.77).



**Fourth painting**

Writing a letter to Iskandar (p.99)<sup>17</sup>



**Fifth painting**

Iskandar's Encounter with Dara and Victory (p.110)



**Sixth painting**

The killing of Dara (p.117)

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<sup>17</sup> The numbering of the pages was done by Marashi Library in pencil. We write the page number in parentheses.



**Seventh painting:** Iskandar's Covenant with the Elders of Iran (p.118)



**Eight painting:** The story of King Barda's Nushabeh (p.122)



**Ninth painting**  
(p.280)







**The First Inlaid Inscription**  
(p.134)



**The Second Inlaid Inscription**  
(p.134)



**The Third Inlaid Inscription**  
(p.145)

 <p><b>The Fourth Inlaid Inscription</b> (p.165)</p>	 <p><b>The Fifth Inlaid Inscription</b> (p.165)</p>
 <p><b>The Sixth Inlaid Inscription</b> (p.179)</p>	 <p><b>The Seventh Inlaid Inscription</b> (p.190)</p>

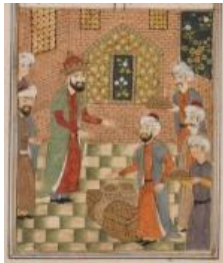
**Table 1:** Various visual program of the Marashi’s *Iskandarnāma*

**Elements of composition considered in paintings**

Composition is the most important element in a visual structure. The meaning of a visual expression depends to some extent on the type of composition in it. In addition, the composition of a painting plays a very important role in attracting the viewer's attention. Each of the elements in the paintings, in turn, plays a decisive role in the overall structure of the painting. In such paintings, the eye does not remain fixed on a specific point, and there is a rhythmic rotation throughout the spiral composition, in which the elements of the painting are arranged to guide the viewer’s gaze toward the intended focal point of the image—the main subject—following the golden spiral. Also, the viewer is led to a unique experience of light and color that is not found

in other paintings. One of the specific examples of this type of combination is in traditional Iranian painting.

Also, the golden ratio is in these paintings—the dividing line which segmentize it into two parts, so that the ratio of the length of the larger segment to the length of the entire segment of the line is equal to the length of the smaller segment to the larger segment. In the past, this ratio was known as dividing the line in proportion to the middle and sides (or consensual division); therefore, in order to create the first frame that has the desired visual characteristics, the index square becomes the basis of the work (Table 2).

<p><b>Painting 1</b></p> 	<p><b>Iskandar's victory over the Zangian army (the battle between the Romans and the Zangians)</b></p> <p>In <i>Iskandarnāma</i>, during Iskandar's conquests of distant lands, he arrives at a land whose inhabitants are called "Zangians". The Zangians are often described as strong, warrior people, with peculiar characteristics —tallness, great physical strength, and sometimes animal characteristics. These descriptions are mostly based on popular imaginations and legends of the time. The battle with the Zangians is often described as a difficult battle in which Iskandar and his troops face serious resistance. In these battles, Iskandar uses his intelligence, resourcefulness, and courage to defeat the Zangians. Of course, in some stories, it ends badly: after victory, Iskandar usually makes</p>
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	a peace treaty with the Zangians or makes them obey him. Sometimes the story ends with Iskandar showing his generosity and chivalry in the face of the defeated Zangians.
Characteristics of the Herat School	The use of very bright colors, and complementary colors, the use of less red colors and the use of brown colors, <i>Lajvard</i> and <i>Arghavani</i> colors, and soft pink, the influence of white and black colors, the clever depiction of carpet decoration and architectural elements, and even the sky.
Characteristics of the Safavid Isfahan School	Subjects such as: daily life, shepherds, dervishes and doctors and pilgrims. Turban around the hat with its tip protruding. Handsome young men in beautiful clothes in the background, big buildings are seen in smaller sizes. The faces are triangular, round and oval face shapes, with almond-shaped eyes and elongated eyebrows, small, plump lips, sharp noses and full cheeks.
Graphic contents	Courage and Victory in the Wake of Iskandar's Epic.
Composition	Spiral.
Figures	The figures, with an elongated body and a turban on their heads, wore a long shirt, a robe or <i>abā</i> , except that its sleeves were longer and the hands were hidden. A shawl or belt was worn over the

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	<p><i>abā</i>. The <i>abā</i> was a long, loose tunic that was usually made of cotton or wool and had two holes on either side for the hands to come out. Trousers: The trousers were loose at the top and tight at the ankles, reaching to the ankles. Shoes: in the Safavid period, men's footwear often resembled women's in overall form, and it was typically made of leather and occasionally of finely processed thin leather (<i>timaj</i>).<sup>18</sup></p>
<p>Color scheme of images</p>	<p>Dominant colors, gold and use brown and red family; Golden sky to show day and azure blue to show night; Empty spaces are filled with patterns and soft colors are used. Use of gold and silver and other vibrant colors.</p>
<p>Influences from other schools</p>	<p>Herat style, Herat school (Behzad), especially the mastery of the court style, and Isfahan school of painting.</p>
<p>Conclusion</p>	<p>In this painting, the dynamic composition, delicate portraiture, rich color palette, and meticulous and elaborate decorations lead us to conclude that the artist's recreation was an attempt to continue the Herat school of painting. Also, considering the past glory of art and</p>

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<sup>18</sup> Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, *Safarnameh-ye Tavernier*, trans. Abutorab Ghafari (Ketabkhaneh-ye Sana'i Publications, 1974), 626.

	<p>painting in the Safavid era and the political turmoil during the time of Shah Sultan Hossein Safavi, it seems that the efforts of artists and the court during the reign of Shah Sultan Hossein to promote and preserve art were significant (for example, the Chaharbagh School). Therefore, the production of such a luxurious manuscript at this time and in the city of Isfahan is likely.</p>
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**Table 2.** Characteristics of Safavid Miniature (Herat School).

### **Figural Representation and Iconography**

In the illustrations of this version, the faces are closely similar to each other and are often depicted with the same type of makeup. The eyes are almond-shaped, the eyebrows are drawn, and the lips and mouth are small, along with a narrow nose. The younger people are without beards and mustaches. The color used in the clothing has a variety of colors and patterns. The human figures are well placed in relation to the surrounding space and a variety of behavioral expressions are used for them. The figure of Iskandar is often located in the center of the image. In some illustrations, a kind of shapelessness is evident in the figures, the ratio of the head to the body or the neck and arms and legs show disproportion. The number of figures in each illustration is limited and the illustrator has avoided depicting unnecessary and unrelated people.

The men mainly wear white turbans with a small colored hat in the center, which in the case of the king, this clothing becomes a crown. Most of the people in the paintings wear a single-colored robe and *Arkhaluq*<sup>19</sup> with delicate and varied decorations, and in battle

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<sup>19</sup> *Arkhaluq* is a Turkic term formed from the combination of arkha, meaning

scenes, a helmet is worn on the head. All the men's shoes are black. The clothes of the first character in the story are decorated with more patterns and decorations, and sometimes with jewelry. If the king is sitting on a throne, wooden decorations and delicate decorative patterns are visible on the throne (Figure 11).

Our examination of the paintings in this manuscript shows that the image of the woman only appears in two paintings: The story of King Barda, whose name is *Nushabeh* (Figure 12) and "Iskandar's forgiveness and sending gifts to the King" (Figure 11). In both of them, the women's faces are seen with great elegance, long and colorful robes with delicate decorations on the clothes and white scarves on the heads, with strands of hair hanging on both sides of the face.



Figure 11. Iskandar's act of generosity and the sending of gifts to the king, from Nezami's *Iskandarnāma*, Marashi Library, Qom (Source: Authors).

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"back" and *liq*, a suffix indicating relation or attribution; thus, the word literally means "related to the back" or "backed"; outer garment fitted at the waist and worn over other clothing. See Yadollah Gholami Mayani, "Arkhaluq" in *Daneshnameh-ye Iran*, ed. Kazem Mousavi Bojnordi (Markaz-e Dayerat al-Maaref-e Bozorg-e Eslami, 2019), 1:1634.



Figure 12. Portrait of the woman, Nushabeh King of Bardae, from Nezami's *Iskandarnāma*, Marashi Library, Qom (Source: Authors).

### Natural and Architectural Elements

The vegetation in *Iskandarnāma* is a dense vegetation, and a great variety of leaves, flowers, and greenery are spread over the hills and the ground. There are also greenery and flowers around the rocks on the ground (Figure 13).

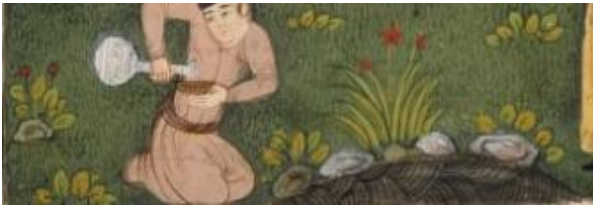


Figure 13. Vegetation in Nezami's *Iskandarnāma*, Marashi Library, Qom (Source: Authors).

The presence of the tree is in the form of a single green tree or a dry tree and plantain tree in a green space, or spring trees with flowers and blossoms with a light shade and noticeable patterns that are drawn in the frame (Figure 14).



Figure 14. The tree patterns in Nezami's *Iskandamāna*, Marashi Library, Qom (Source: Authors).

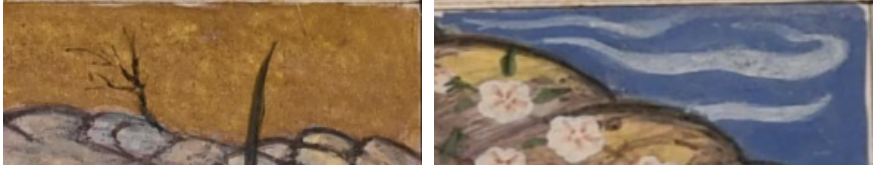


Figure 15. Cloud and Sky in Nezami's *Iskandarnāma*, Marashi Library, Qom (Source: Authors).



Figure 16. The Mountain in Nezami's *Iskandarnāma*, Marashi Library, Qom (Source: Authors).

The motif of mountains in the paintings, with curved lines, separates the space of the earth and the sky from each other. The painter has tried to show a light shadow on the tops of peaks or hills with careful processing, using a darker color than the background and distinct curved lines (Figure 15).

The use of a golden sky to signify daytime and a deep azure sky with white clouds for nocturnal scenes provides a symbolic

temporal framework for the narrative<sup>20</sup> (Figure 16). A mountainous landscapes whose craggy cliffs with gnarled tree and golden sky with Chinese-inspired clouds is typical of the Isfahan school.<sup>21</sup>

There is a hill motif in all the paintings except for the depiction of Iskandar's Seventh War with the Russians, where the mountains are painted with more exaggeration and longer curves. This seems to emphasize the atmosphere of war.

Animal motifs, like other elements in the Iskandar manuscript, are depicted with slight exaggeration: the horse (Figure 17), elephant (Figure 18), fox (Figure 19), pheasant, partridge (Figure 20) and dragon (Figure 22). The color of the horse in all the paintings is white, brown or black. In the battle scenes, the horses do not have the same form or equipment; their heads are drawn smaller in proportion to their bodies, and they are adorned with various decorations, saddles, and accessories. The subtle and delicate shading throughout their bodies is clearly visible. In some examples, the head appears noticeably smaller than the body (Figure 25). The other animals are also illustrated with great beauty and delicacy, showing precise use of light and shadow (*Pardaz*). Their colors are very close to natural tones, and their facial expressions are painted with careful attention to detail.

Architectural structures or interior spaces in the *Iskandarnāma* appear only in a single painting titled “Iskandar’s Victory over the Zang Romy”. In this painting, the surrounding space is depicted with flat colors, brick decorations on the walls, and mosaic designs on the

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<sup>20</sup> Adel T. Adamova, *Persian Manuscripts, Paintings and Drawings: From the 15th to the 19th Century* (Slavia, 1996).

<sup>21</sup> Sheila S. Blair and Jonathan M. Bloom, *Cosmophilia: Islamic Art from the David Collection*, (McMullen Museum of Art, Boston College, 2006), 64.

courtyard floor, without any perceptible visual depth. Three windows with metal railings and a decorative tiled on the wall are visible.

The remaining eight paintings are painting in gardens and natural landscapes. In these natural paintings, motifs of trees, foliage, sky, flowers, plants, and animals define and fill the entire pictorial space.



Figure 17. The Horse in Nezami's *Iskandarnāma*, Marashi Library, Qom  
(Source: Authors).



Figure 18. Vegetation in Nezami's *Iskandarnāma*, Marashi Library, Qom  
(Source: Authors).



Figure 19. The Fox in Nezami's *Iskandarnāma*, Marashi Library, Qom (Source: Authors).



Figure 20. Pheasant with partridge in Nezami's *Iskandarnāma*, Marashi Library, Qom (Source: Authors).



Figure 21. Decorations of saddles and horse leaves in Nezami's *Iskandarnāma*, Marashi Library, Qom (Source: Authors).



Figure 22. The Dragon in Nezami's *Iskandarnāma*, Marashi Library, Qom (Source: Authors).

## **Conclusion**

In this study, a 12th-century AH manuscript of Nezami's *Iskandarnāma* is introduced and its visual elements and components are examined. The introduction and analysis of this manuscript, which has remained largely understudied until now, constitute an effort to deepen our understanding of this chapter in the history of Iranian painting. No information is currently available regarding the scribe or the painter of the manuscript. The manuscript of the *Iskandarnāma*, now housed in the Marashi Library in Qom, displays sumptuous ornamentation, meticulous finishing, careful rendering of figures, a multiplicity of characters, and a diverse range of pictorial elements. These features suggest that it was likely a courtly commission; considering the date of its production, it may be attributed to the court of Shah Sultan Hossein of the Safavid dynasty. The titles are in *Nastaliq* script and in white on a gold background, and the text of the manuscript is in black and executed quickly. In this manuscript, nine unsigned paintings are illustrated and the connection between the text and the images is seen. There are also seven inscriptions with exquisite decorations. Most of the arrangement of elements, especially human figures, have a spiral or helix composition and consist of two levels of foreground and background, which are decorated with the background of the paintings.

The main figure of the story is located in the center of the image, and the climax of the story occurs in the foreground and with the presence of the main characters. The blue sky with white clouds represents the night and the golden sky represents the day. The motifs of flowers, plants, trees and nature are clearly visible in the background space. The landscapes and architectural elements and plant and animal elements are luxurious, and there are impressive decorative

motifs and designs on the clothes of the people, the saddles and bridles of the horses, and the expanse of the land and the surrounding nature. Brown, red, rust (green), azure (blue), white and black are other colors of the paintings. The painting was paint in thick watercolor, and in some parts, the painter has used the pea-colored paper, for the background color. From the uniformity of their images and lines, it can be concluded that all the paintings were executed by a single painter and scribe. The human figures are close to the paintings of the second half of the 12th century AH Isfahan in terms of decorations on clothes and coverings and the design of the faces, but the golden color and warm colors and decorations of the background space, dynamic composition, delicate portraiture, rich color palette and detailed and elaborate decorations lead us to the conclusion that the artist's recreation was an attempt to continue the Herat school of painting.

Also, considering the past glory of art and painting in the Safavid era and the political turmoil during the time of Shah Sultan Hossein Safavi, it seems that the efforts of artists and the court during the reign of Shah Sultan Hossein to promote and maintain this art were significant (for example, the Chaharbagh School was built at this time). Therefore, the production of such a luxurious manuscript at this time and in the city of Isfahan is likely.