

**PART 3**

*Optics, Aesthetics, and the Visual Poetics of Desire*





## Between the Human and the Divine: The *Majālis al-ushshāq* and the Materiality of Love in Early Safavid Art

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How long, Sa'eb, will lofty verses pour from your pen?  
There's no longer room left in the notebook of lovers' breasts.<sup>1</sup>

In this verse by the late Safavid poet, Sa'eb-i Tabrizi (d. 1676), words of devotion are subsumed into the body of the poet. The words cover his breast, filling it line by line, as in a notebook. The pen etches the words onto the heart and breast, the ink flowing freely from it like the lover's devotion. The performance of love preoccupied poets such as Sa'eb, defining for them a world filled with desire and devotion. Images of lovers adorned the walls of palaces, were woven into precious carpets, and fired into ceramic vessels.

The period from the fifteenth century onwards has been characterized by scholars such as Walter Andrews and Mehmet Kalpakli as the 'Age of Beloveds' in which the 'culture of love was not only aesthetic and artistic, but political, dynamic and historical'.<sup>2</sup> As in the courts and cities of early modern Europe, in the Muslim empires of the early modern period, literature and art were called upon to be responsive to the passions, both worldly and divine. In Safavid Iran, love was an emotion sought out by mystics and princes, the elite and the low-born. It was a relationship between human lovers, but it was most celebrated in the realm of religion. Sufi mystics wrote of love for their spiritual guides, and shaykhs fell in love with their disciples, all in the name of seeking a higher truth, ultimately, divine knowledge.

In medieval Persian poetry, earthly beauty was viewed as a manifestation of immortality, and the love felt for a beautiful person (a young man, a disciple,

1 *Chand rizad Sa'eb az kilak-i tu abyāt-i buland, dar biyāz-i sineh-yi ahhāb dīgar jah namānand.* Sa'ib-i Tabrizi, *Divan-i Sa'ib Tabrizi*. Qahraman, Q. (ed.), 6 vols. (Tehran: 1364–70/1985–91) III 1212 (Ghazal 2469). I am grateful to Paul Losensky for the citation and translation from the Persian.

2 Andrews W. – Kalpakli W., *The Age of Beloveds: Love and the Beloved in Early-Modern Ottoman and European Culture and Society* (Durham: 2005) 27.

a shaykh) was a metaphor for the love of God. In her essay on eros in Sufi literature, Annemarie Schimmel wrote that Persian and Turkish poets portrayed a beautiful youth as 'a *shahīd*, a witness of God's eternal beauty and an idol, or *ṣanam*. The beloved was meant to represent Divine beauty, *jamāl*, and at the same time God's *jalāl*, His Majesty.'<sup>3</sup> Both beauty and majesty are the attributes of God, meant to also characterize the power wielded by the beloved. Yet by the end of the sixteenth century, the metaphor begins to operate differently, in that love is no longer portrayed solely or primarily to signify divine perfection, but also to represent human, carnal desire.<sup>4</sup>

The conflation of divinity and humanity exemplified political authority and the cultural products of early modern Iran. Safavid rulers were Sufi shaykhs and Shi'i monarchs, whose genealogy linked them with the Prophet Muhammad, propagating a cult of kingship which placed a great deal of emphasis on the adoration of the *ahl al-bayt* ('people of the house,' namely the immediate family of Muhammad). Thus reverence of Shi'i imams was conflated with a love of the ruler, whose body came to represent divinity.<sup>5</sup> By the end of the sixteenth century, the charismatic king, Shah Abbas I (d. 1629), was represented as a pious and repentant man, his mustache bowed in humility and subservience to God. The chroniclers speak of his raging temper and his good humor; his grand urban projects and his generous charitable works; they write of his barefoot pilgrimages to holy shrines and his raucous evenings watching polo in the great public *maydan* of his capital city, Isfahan. The ideal ruler, as exemplified by Shah 'Abbas, was a flawed man, full of contradictions.<sup>6</sup>

3 Schimmel A., "I Take the Dress of the Body': Eros in Sufi Literature and Life", in Coakley S. (ed.), *Religion and the Body* (Cambridge: 1997) 275.

4 Formally, poets focused on shorter *ghazal* couplets—a romantic genre—that broke from narrative towards aesthetic word play. The genre was closely associated with great Persian poets and mystics, such as Hafiz (d. 1390) and Jami (d. 1492), who wrote on the subject of love through metaphor and allegory, seamlessly overlaying sacred and secular themes. Feuillebois È., "Ghazal in Persian", in Fleet K. – Krämer G. – Matringe D. – Nawas J. – Rowson E. (eds.), *Encyclopaedia of Islam Three*, Brill Online. Reference. Yale University. Accessed 01 June 2016 <[http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-3/ghazal-in-persian-COM\\_27440](http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-3/ghazal-in-persian-COM_27440)>.

5 Rizvi K., "The Incarnate Shrine: Commemorating the Cult of Shi'i Imams in Safavid Iran", in Hahn C.-Kelin H. (eds.), *Saints and Sacred Matter: The Cult of Relics in Byzantium and Beyond* (Washington, D.C.: 2015). Please insert page numbers.

6 Idem, "The Suggestive Portrait of Shah 'Abbas: Prayer and Likeness in a 1605 Safavid *Shahnama* (Book of Kings)", *The Art Bulletin* 94.2 (2012) 226–250. Equally contradictory were his policies towards Sufism. Whereas the Safaviyya order's traditions were upheld, Sufis themselves were treated pejoratively by the historians of Abbas's court.

In an age in which the shah represented a contradictory persona, of overlapping divinity and humanity, works of art described a world of love and lust of a most earthly kind. As Paul Losensky and others have written, this was a period when ‘eros and sexuality play a significant role in poetry and social life.’<sup>7</sup> Like paintings and other cultural productions, poetry ‘served as a form of social interaction, courtship, and entertainment among the leisured urban elite.’<sup>8</sup> Recent studies have shown the manner in which love and emotion were central to understanding visual production in the early modern period, especially in the arts of the book.<sup>9</sup> Paintings of Christian courtesans, Uzbek slaves, and young pages fill the pages of illustrated epics, poetic anthologies, and album collections of single-sheet paintings. What unites these works is the treatment of the human subject as an aesthetic object and the materiality of the body as a visual trope.

Scholars have noted the increased attention paid to images of love in Safavid art. As Anthony Welch writes, the verbal and visual came together, as did the mortal and immortal ‘to complement each other and themselves establish the relationship between the “two worlds” that is so common in Persian mystical poetry.’<sup>10</sup> Yet by the end of the sixteenth century, the materiality of love and its place in human subjectivity would move beyond its mystical, poetic roots. Carnal pleasure and the pain of unrequited desire would occupy the artists of this period, who discovered new formats—such as the single-sheet painting—within which to explore these subjects.

Deluxe codices were unparalleled in the opportunity they provided for private contemplation, gifting, and exchange. Imperial albums, for example, contained calligraphic specimens as well as paintings and drawings by preeminent artists. A particularly interesting group of paintings explores the theme of ‘prisoner of love’ by depicting captured Uzbek warriors on single-sheet paintings, surrounded by evocative love poetry [Fig. 7.1].<sup>11</sup> The body of the prisoner,

7 Losensky P., “Poetics and Eros in Early Modern Persia: The Lovers’ Confection and The Glorious Epistle by Muhtasham Kāshānī”, *Iranian Studies* 42.5 (2009) 745–764, 747.

8 Ibid., “Poetics and Eros in Early Modern Persia” 758.

9 For example, Leoni F. – Natif M., *Eros and Sexuality in Islamic Art* (Farnham – Burlington, VT: 2013); Fetvacı E., “Love in the Album of Ahmed I”, *Journal of Turkish Studies* 34. 2 (2010) 37–51; and Rizvi K. (ed.), *Affect, Emotion, and Subjectivity in Early Modern Muslim Empires: New Studies in Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal Art and Culture*, (Leiden: forthcoming).

10 Welch A., “Worldly and Otherworldly Love in Safavi Painting”, in Hillenbrand R. (ed.), *Persian Paintings from the Mongols to the Qajars* (London: 2001) 302.

11 Komaroff L., “A Turkman Prisoner or Prisoner of Love?”, in Korangy A. – Sheffield D.J. (eds.), *No Tapping around Philology: a Festschrift in Honor of Wheeler McIntosh Thackston Jr.’s 70th Birthday* (Wiesbaden: 2014) 369–380.



FIGURE 7.1 "Prisoner of Love," album page, (c. second half of 16th c.) (folio 2a), M.2000.135  
LACMA.

constrained by the stockade, was a metaphor for unrequited desire, the lover trapped in a painful relationship, with no hope of freedom or fulfillment.

Manuscripts, such as those devoted to the lives of saints and prophets, were also sites of experimentation and visual exegesis that at once affirmed their

pious intent while simultaneously asserting their role as conveyors of pleasure. Religious histories were popular during the Safavid period, such as the life of the eponymous founder of the Safaviyya order, Shaykh Safi al din Ishaq (d. 1335), the *Safwat al-safa* of Ibn Bazzaz Ardabili, and the stories of prophets, the *Qisas al-anbiya*.<sup>12</sup> Particular emphasis was also paid to illustrated *Falnama* (*Books of Omens*) and hagiographies of Shi'i imams, such as the *Tariikh-i 'aimay-i masumīn* (*History of the Immaculate Imams*), which were elaborately illustrated manuscripts.<sup>13</sup> The aesthetic and spiritual were merged in Sufi literature popularized during the Timurid period (1370–1507). Love was the focus of texts such as the *Sifat al-'ashiqīn* (*The Qualities of Lovers*) and *Dastur al-'ushshaq* (*The Confidant of Lovers*), both of which use aphorisms and mytho-historical examples that merge the 'mirror for princes' advice literature focusing on ethical codes of behavior with hagiographies to 'highlight love's status as the preeminent human emotion'.<sup>14</sup> These books lay emphasis on the pain and suffering that are part of the experience of love, as a prelude to attaining the affection of God. Love, as Shahzad Bashir explains from the perspective of these texts, 'stirs up human beings in a way more potent than any other force that can act upon their bodies and minds'.<sup>15</sup> That is, the intellectual and physical coalesced in ways that were transformative to the reader, the artist/writer, and the lover.

The focus of this essay is a set of images from a manuscript of Kamal al-din Gazargahi's *Majālis al-ushshāq* (*Assembly of Lovers*) that is now at the Topkapi Palace Museum, in Istanbul (henceforth H829).<sup>16</sup> The text was composed around 1503 and dedicated to the Timurid prince, Husayn Bayqara and gained prominence later in the sixteenth century, when numerous illustrated manuscripts were produced in Safavid Iran, some for export to Ottoman Turkey,

12 See Milstein R., *Stories of the Prophets: Illustrated manuscripts of the Qisas al-anbiya* (Mazda: 1999).

13 For both manuscripts, see, respectively, Farhad M. – Bagci S., *Falnama: The Book of Omens* (Washington, D.C.: 2009); and Canby S. – Thompson J. (eds.), *Hunt for Paradise: Court Arts of Safavid Iran, 1501–1576* (Milan: 2003).

14 Bashir S., *Sufi Bodies: Religion and Society in Medieval Islam* (New York: 2011) 110.

15 Ibid., 110.

16 Kamal al-din Husayn Gazargahi, *Majālis al-ushshāq*, ed. Ghulam Reza Tabatabai Majd (Tehran: 1996). There has been some debate about the authorship of the book, but scholars currently assume that it was written by Gazargahi and dedicated to Sultan Husayn Bayqara. See Gandjei T., "Sultan Husayn Mirza Baykara", eds. P. Bearman – Th. Bianquis – C.E. Bosworth – E. van Donzel – W.P. Heinrichs. *Encyclopaedia of Islam Two*, Brill Online. Reference. Yale University. Accessed 10 June 2014.

where they were popular among Ottoman officials.<sup>17</sup> The *Majālis-al-ushshāq* is a rich and iconographically sophisticated text, which was very suitable for illustration. Through stories, aphorisms, and poetry, the author, Gazurgahi, sought to teach the reader the true principles of Sufi practice. Love, an emotion unlike any other, was nonetheless a resource through which truth could be achieved. Attaining that truth meant submitting oneself, with unyielding attention, to the beloved.

The *Majālis* centers on the subject of divine love, as manifested in the actions of humans (prophets, kings, and Sufi Shaykhs). It comprises of 75 *majālis*, or gatherings, each vignette centered on a particular historical or mythological figure. The last *majlis* takes place in the court of the patron of the book, Husayn Bayqara. The book is distinguished by its emphasis on 'infusing history with the spirit of human love mediated by corporeal contact', and for narrating stories in which the protagonists have a 'special capacity for love'.<sup>18</sup> The episodes are a collage of texts borrowed from previous writers and poets, recomposed by Gazurgahi. The protagonists in these stories are both the lover and the beloved, and at once the object of desire and the desiring subject. In the accompanying paintings, their humanity is not made apparent through increased naturalism, but rather encoded in gestures and glances. It is expressed through line, colour, and composition. These visual techniques shift emphasis away from what we may understand to be the esoteric knowledge embedded in the texts, towards a more visceral appreciation of the work of art as a material object.

H829 is not the earliest known illustrated manuscript of the *Majālis*, however, it does exemplify a group that gained popularity at the end of the sixteenth century.<sup>19</sup> The codex is a bound manuscript, generous in size, opening with an elaborate *unvān* (opening page) followed by beautifully gilded double-page calligraphic pages. There are thirty paintings distributed throughout, executed with varying degrees of intricacy and skill. Themes, too, are diverse; some compositions center on intimate encounters in gardens, others are group scenes in bathhouses and Sufi lodges, full of vibrancy and action. What unites all the paintings is the subject of love between individuals, which means that the

17 This may also explain why this manuscript is now housed in Istanbul. Uluc L., "A New Illustrated Text: The *Majālis al-ushshaq*: 1550–1600", *Turkmen Governors, Shiraz Artisans and Ottoman Collectors: Sixteenth century Shiraz manuscripts* (Istanbul: Türkiye İş Bankası, 2006); 185.

18 Bashir, *Sufi Bodies* 131.

19 Thus, it is unusual but not entirely unique. There are more luxurious copies of the *Majālis* and also better preserved ones. It is clear that the manuscript has been repaired and some of the paintings retouched. Despite these factors, the paintings from H829 are intriguing and provide important insights into the religious and artistic culture of early Safavid Iran.

figures shown are always in relationship with one another—they gaze longingly at each other, fight, converse, and interact across a spectrum of activities.

The assemblies take place in gardens and palaces, but also in urban spaces such as the bazaar and in the *hamām*, or bathhouse. For example, Gazurgahi recounts the story of the famous mystic and poet, Sa'di Shirazi, and his encounter with a young man with whom he had fallen in love. The setting is a bathhouse where men gather, their semi-naked bodies on display [Fig. 7.2]. Young servants are also shown, attending to the bathhouse's clients. Communal scenes are repeated elsewhere in the manuscript, showing Sufi *sama'* in a derish lodge or a class taking place in a madrassa courtyard. Bazaars are the backdrops of many of the stories related in the *Majālis* and allow the artists to depict social rituals and everyday life in the city. These scenes are particularly compelling as they correlate well with the literature of the time, especially the genre known as *shahrangiz*, in which romantic encounters take place within urban spaces.<sup>20</sup>

The *Majālis* is a rich literary and visual document that requires detailed study. The focus of this essay, however, is the preface and four paintings that illustrate episodes related to the prophets Adam, Yusuf, and Muhammad.<sup>21</sup> Like hagiographies of the time, Sufi theology and practice was contextualized within Islamic history, drawing upon religious figures as ideals of human perfection. In this manner, the three prophets discussed in the preface encapsulate Gazurgahi's goals and provide direction for how to approach the entire work. The last story discussed, that of the lovers, Layla and Majnun, is the fifty-eighth *majlis*, or assembly, and provides an important contrast and coda to the previous analyses.

Three issues form the basis of my inquiry into the *Majālis* and the representation of love in early modern Iran. First, is the manner in which the body is seen as an allegory of divine perfection, while at the same time a mortal reminder of the futility of striving to achieve it. That is to say, the body is both the locus of desire and a sign of its denial. Second is the interconnectedness of poetry and painting, and the inherent tension between them. That there is a close relationship between text and image in illustrated manuscripts is a truism, but the ways in which they compete and even negate each other are seldom considered. This leads to my third issue: how the paintings reveal tensions between the aesthetic and esoteric in the discourse on love, by functioning as

20 On the subject of *shahrangiz*, see Sharma S., "The City of Beauties in Indo-Persian Poetic Landscape", *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 24.2 (2004), 73–81. Losensky, "Poetics and Eros" also dwells on the cityscape as a backdrop to romance.

21 The preface makes use of hadiths, *Qur'anic* verses, and poetry by well-known Sufis such as Qasim Anwar (d. 1433) and Jami (d. 1492) to set the stage for the whole text.



FIGURE 7.2 "Sa'di Shirazi at the bathhouse," *Majlis al-ushshāq* of Kamal al-din Gazurgahi, c. 1580. H829 (folio 92b). Topkapi Palace Museum, Istanbul.

a form of visual and intellectual distraction from the primary textual connotations. Together, these insights highlight the manner in which arts of the book took on a more materialist aesthetic in the early modern period, and its implications for Safavid visual culture.

### Adam—Affirmation

In the *Qur'an*, Adam is God's beloved creation and God's viceroy. He is the one to whom God has taught the names of things, and it is to his offspring that He bequeathed the earth and all its bounty. Gazurgahi thus begins the *Majālis* with Adam, whose status is affirmed in the very second chapter of the *Qur'an*, in which the story of his creation and fall from grace is recounted. Upon molding Adam from clay, God orders the angels to prostrate themselves before him. The angels' devotion is depicted in the opening pages of H829, framed within a hexagonal border, with text blocks inserted at the top and bottom of the page [Fig. 7.3]. Adam's body occupies the center of the page, encircled by prostrating angels. The setting is verdant, the deep green accentuating both Adam and the angels. A purple outcrop behind them represents mountains and the horizon. The colours accentuate the differences between the brilliant angels, the flowering garden, and the primordial simplicity of Adam's naked body. He looks out directly at us, his eyes meeting ours. Adam's frontal nudity (his genitals modestly covered by his crossed hands) and direct gaze are unique to the *Majālis*.<sup>22</sup> Just as his eyes lock with ours, his corporeality reminds us of our own mortal vulnerability; this mutual engagement is profound, evoking a fundamental connection between the text/image and reader/viewer.

The break-lines framing the painting describe how the angels entered the paradisiacal courtyard and encountered Adam.<sup>23</sup> Upon seeing his face, the manifestation (*sutūt-i tajjalīyāt*) of beauty, the angels' hearts are filled with

22 A very interesting corollary is to earlier anatomical and medico-mystical treatises, the *Tashrīḥ-i badan-i insān* of Mansur ibn Ilyas (ca. 1390), whose works were published in Shiraz, just like the *Majālis*. The connection is intriguing and requires further study. From what we know, the naked Adam occurs once outside the *Majālis*, in a contemporaneous Shiraz manuscript of Nizami's *Khamsa*, also studied by Lale Uluc; it is Topkapi Palace Library B, 146, folio 14v. Cited in Uluc L., "The *Majālis al-Ushshāq*: Written in Herat, copied in Shiraz, read in Istanbul," *EJOS* (Proceedings of the 11th International Congress on Turkish Art) IV, no. 52 (2001): 1–34; 6.

23 The 'break line' is a couplet or phrase that occurs before and sometimes after the painting, and helps the artist synchronize the image with the text; see Mehran F., "The Break-line



FIGURE 7.3 "Adam adored by the Angels," *Majālis al-ushshāq* of Kamal al-din Gazurgahi, c. 1580. H829 (folio 6b). Topkapi Palace Museum, Istanbul.

wonder and awe as they raise their voices in praise and bow their heads in devotion. The use of the term *sutūt-i tajjalyāt* is important, as it refers to Sufi ideals of divine revelation and power.<sup>24</sup> A Qur'anic phrase is inserted at the bottom of the page, which reads, 'Angels fell prostrate, all of them together, save Iblis'.<sup>25</sup> The disobedient angel can be seen beyond the outcrop, his blackened face transformed from that of an angel to the envious countenance of the Devil.<sup>26</sup> The text and image describe the moment when Iblis, an angel made of fire, refused to bow to Adam, an entity made of clay. The cause for this stand-off is Adam's humble corporeality, which has been presented to the angels as proof of God's love for man.

Adam was revered not only in Safavid literary circles, but also artistic ones. In the preface to a 1544 imperial album of art and calligraphy the author, Dust Muhammad, begins by invoking the *Qur'an* and placing the arts of depiction within the context of theology. Thus, God is the supreme creator, an artist, who gave form to Adam, his vicegerent on earth. In further justification of the arts, Dust Muhammad states that Adam is not only the father of mankind, but also 'the founder of the magnificent affair (writing and drawing) [...] who [first] fashioned a pen and wrote on tanned hide'.<sup>27</sup> Thus Adam is the first person to make use of the pen and, by extension, the primogenitor of poetry and painting; an appropriate subject with which to open an album preface. Given his significance to early modern artists and literati, he is also an appropriate subject in the preface of the *Majālis*, which is both a hagiography and a collection of poems and paintings.

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Verse: The Link between Text and Image in the First Small Shahnama", in C. Melville (ed.), *Shahnama Studies* (Cambridge: 2006). [Please insert page numbers].

- 24 *Tajjalyāt* appears in the *Qur'an* in the context of God's revelation to Moses: 'And when his Lord revealed (*tajalla*) (His) glory to the mountain He sent it crashing down. And Moses fell down senseless' (*Qur'an* 7:143). *Quran Explorer Online*, Yusuf Ali translation, <http://www.quranexplorer.com/quran/>. The Sufi interpretation of the term, especially its use in medieval Persian poetry, is considered in Schimmel A., *The Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: 1975) 298.
- 25 *Qur'an* 15:30. An Ottoman example in which the figure of Adam is revered within an imperial context may be found in Eryılmaz F.S., "From Adam to Süleyman: Visual Representations of Authority in 'Ārif's *Shāhnāma-yi Āl-i 'Osmān*", in Cipa H.E. – Fetvacı E. (eds.), *Writing History at the Ottoman Court: Editing the Past, Fashioning the Future*, (Bloomington – Indianapolis: 2013) 103.
- 26 Iblis's transformation is recounted in another popular text from this period, the *Qisas al-anbiya* (*Tales of the Prophets*). For an English translation, see Thackston W.M., Jr., *The Tales of the Prophets of al-Kisā'ī* (Boston: 1997).
- 27 Dost-Muhammad, "Preface to the Bahram Mirza Album", in *A Century of Princes: Sources on Timurid History and Art*, selected and translated by W.M. Thackston (Cambridge, MA: 1989) 338.

There is a well-known prophetic saying attributed to the prophet, Muhammad, that God made Adam in his own image, thereby installing in chosen men some of His own divinity.<sup>28</sup> This interface between the human and the divine was a constant theme in Sufi literature, and was visualized in intriguing ways in Safavid paintings. It is affirmed in the opening painting in H829, where Adam is revealed as the prototype for all humans. Adam's face is, for Sufi's, the epitome of beauty, 'the qibla of lovers' according to one Iranian mystic.<sup>29</sup> Further, Adam is a reflection of man himself; the viewer sees herself in the painting and, in Adam's eyes, her own humanity.<sup>30</sup> This reflexivity is an important aspect of H829, in which the lines between viewer and image are often blurred.

### Yusuf and Zulaykha—Distraction

The next two images appear sequentially, and both refer to the Qur'anic story of Yusuf and Zulaykha, the wife of the ruler of Egypt (Potiphar). Yusuf, or Joseph in the Biblical tradition, was a central figure in medieval and early modern mystical literature, extolled for his beauty and purity. For early modern artists, too, Yusuf was a popular subject whether in illustrations of poetic anthologies or single-sheet paintings, providing the impetus for creating the beautiful image. For example, paintings and drawings of handsome young men, a popular subject in Safavid Iran, were often juxtaposed against poetic praise for Yusuf, conflating the well-known paragon of divine beauty with his earthly counterparts.<sup>31</sup>

There are several episodes from the life of this prophet that have been chosen over the centuries for retelling by theologians, poets, and artists. In the *Majālis*, Gazurgahi focuses on the story of Zulaykha's passionate desire for the young servant boy, whom she attempts to seduce, unsuccessfully [Fig. 7.4]. As described in the *Qur'an*, which devotes an entire chapter to Yusuf, Zulaykha invites Yusuf into the palace and locks the doors behind him, chasing him from room to room in vain.

28 See *Mukhtaṣar Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim = The Translation of the Meanings of Summarized Sahih Muslim: Arabic-English*, compiled by Zakiuddin Abdul-Azim Al-Mundhiri (Riyadh: 2000).

29 Ruzbihan Baqli (d. 1209), quoted in Schimmel, "Eros in Sufi Literature" 274.

30 Elite women were often the patrons of artists, and Safavid princesses were educated in the arts of writing and painting. The topic of gendered viewership requires more attention, but is beyond the scope of this essay.

31 An example is given in Welch, "Worldly and Otherworldly Love in Safavi Painting", plate 6.



FIGURE 7.4 "Yusuf and Zulaykha in the palace," *Majālis al-ushshāq* of Kamal al-din Gazurgahi, c. 1580. H829 (folio 14b). Topkapi Palace Museum, Istanbul.

And she, in whose house he was, asked of him an evil act. She bolted the doors and said: Come! He said: I seek refuge in Allah! Lo! he is my lord, who hath treated me honourably. [...] And they raced with one another to the door, and she tore his shirt from behind, and they met her lord and master at the door. (Joseph) said: She it was who asked of me an evil act. And a witness of her own folk testified: If his shirt is torn from before, then she speaketh truth and he is of the liars. And if his shirt is torn from behind, then she hath lied and he is of the truthful.<sup>32</sup>

The first painting in the sequence shows the moment when Zulaykha grabs Yusuf's shirt as he attempts to escape from her.<sup>33</sup> The beloved and his pursuer have passed through the seven rooms in the palace—an allegory of the seven stages of heaven and the seven stages of mystical perfection—and arrived at the final one. Gazurgahi quotes extensively from the poetry of the fifteenth-century mystic, Jami (d. 1492), who gave the story of Yusuf and Zulaykha its classical form. Earlier renditions of the story, for example, by Sa'di Shirazi (d. 1292), remained popular in Timurid and Safavid court circles, but Jami's text is particularly suited for visual representation, with vivid descriptions of settings and emotions.<sup>34</sup> Picking parts of the poetry that focus on climactic scenes, Gazurgahi often adds his own poetic flourishes and verses from other poets such as Attar and Rumi.

On the beautifully decorated page facing the painting, the calligraphy is set in three rows of horizontal and parallel texts, the corners embellished in golden sprays. The text focuses on Yusuf's arrival in the seventh chamber of Zulaykha's palace; everywhere he looks—the ceiling, the walls, the carpet—images of the two lovers are painted or woven. The colourful palace has been built and decorated with sensual pictures in the hope of seducing Yusuf.<sup>35</sup>

32 *Qur'an* 12: 23, 25.

33 For some interpreters the shirt is the primary subject of this episode. That it is torn from behind was seen as evidence that Yusuf was trying to escape from Zulaykha, thus proof of his innocence.

34 Arguably the best known painting of this episode comes from Sa'di's *Bustan* (*Garden*). It was produced in 1488 by the famous artist, Bihzad (National Library and Archives of Egypt, Cairo).

35 In Jami, *Yusuf and Zulaikha: A Poem*, trans. R.T. Griffith (London: 1882) 71–72, the palace is described as follows:

The painter there, to his orders true,  
The forms of Zulaykha and Yusaf drew.  
(*dar ān khāneh musawwir sākht har jāh,*  
*mithāl-i Yusaf va naqsh-i Zulaykha*).  
Like lovers both of one heart and mind,

'But how could Yusuf have been tempted to look at such imperfect pictures? He, who is Beauty personified, needs only one thing: a pure mirror'.<sup>36</sup> The seduction of images is powerless in the face of divinity, the reader may infer. The viewer is led to believe otherwise.

Although the section describing the palace is not included by Gazurgahi, it is clear from the illustration that the artists of the episode were well aware of Jami's poem. The painting illustrates the moment when Yusuf starts to run away from Zulaykha, having understood her intentions. The couplets above it read:

Of his lifted finger a key was made  
Which every lock at a sign obeyed.  
But Zulaykha caught him, with steps more fast  
Or ever the furthest chamber he passed.  
She clutched at his shirt as he fled amain,  
And the coat from his shoulder was rent in twain.<sup>37</sup>

The break lines describe the image, telling us that Zulaykha grasped Yusuf's *dāman* (shirt) and lamented her fate. We see him turn towards her, their eyes meeting. The deep orange of her tunic echoes her carnal passion. Yusuf, his blazing radiance depicted by the flames rising from his head, is set against the red background of the final threshold. Doors and windows frame the painting, allegories of the mystical journey the soul must undertake to escape mortal temptations. The carpet is covered in rosebuds, the walls painted with likenesses of Yusuf and Zulaykha in close embrace, fragmenting the surface and space of the painting into smaller vignettes. The decorative flourishes—the tiles cascading along the sides, the multiplicity of pattern—pull the eyes away from the main episode taking place within Zulaykha's palace. These small, seemingly insignificant details performatively function as visual and conceptual distractions: they divert the viewer's eyes away from the divine beauty of Yusuf and towards the materiality of the painted surface itself. That is to say, they focus attention not just on individual elements in the image, but on the substance of the painting, its colours and textures.

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With the arm of each round the other entwined [...].  
The rose sprays twined in close embrace.  
Wherever the foot on the carpet stepped.  
Two lovely roses together slept.

<sup>36</sup> Schimmel, *Two-Coloured Brocade* 66.

<sup>37</sup> Jami, *Yusuf and Zulaikha* 78.

For mystics, beauty can serve as a distraction from the search for truth. Thus the image that follows is a testimony to its dangers, and once again, the material, physical body is central to this conceptualization. Following Zulaykha's attempt to seduce Yusuf, she is shamed by the women of Egypt as a fallen woman. To prove that her passion was unavoidable, she invites them all to her house, and they are served oranges and tea. Yusuf enters with the libations, and the women are awe-struck by his beauty [Fig. 7.5].<sup>38</sup> The painting's description begins at the bottom of the previous page and continues:

Like a bed of roses in full perfect bloom  
 That secret treasure appeared in the room.  
 The women of [Egypt] beheld him, and took  
 From that garden of glory the rose of a look.  
 One glance at his beauty over powered each soul  
 And drew from their fingers the reins of control.  
 Each lady would cut through the orange she held,  
 As she gazed on that beauty unparalleled.  
 [break line]  
 One made a pen of her finger, to write  
 On her soul his name [Yusuf's] who had ravished her sight.  
 One scored a calendar's lines in red  
 On the silver sheet of her palm outspread.<sup>39</sup>

The painting captures the moment when Yusuf walks in through the door and stuns the women of Egypt with his beauty. He stands at the threshold, in the lower left hand corner of the painting. Zulaykha sits on the other side of the room's diagonal axis, her back upright, her eyes focused intently on Yusuf. All the other women turn toward Yusuf, their knives held in their hands. Their shock at his beauty is apparent: one woman swoons; another grabs at her chest in a gesture of anguish and despair. The center of the page is left empty, although the decorative scheme is as complex as that in the previous painting.

<sup>38</sup> *Qu'ran* 12: 31.

<sup>39</sup> Jami, *Yusuf and Zulaikha* 85. In the published text of the *Majālis*, this portion of Jami's poem is not included. Texts such as these were unstable, that is, the calligrapher or compiler of a particular manuscript could take liberties with what verses were included and which ones were omitted. More importantly for our purposes, there is a conscious awareness of which verses are more conducive to visual representation/juxtaposition. Thus, although Gazurgahi himself does not include this section of Jami's poem in his *Majālis*, the compiler of H829 does.



FIGURE 7.5 “Yusuf and the women of Egypt,” *Majālis al-ushshāq* of Kamal al-din Gazurgahi, c. 1580. H829 (folio 16b). Topkapi Palace Museum, Istanbul.

The carpet decorated with roses, the intricate geometric tiles, and floral wall paintings again divert our attention from the main story.

Yet the colours and gestures also draw the viewer into the narrative. The pulsing orange of Zulaykha's robe and the deep red of Yusuf's pull the eye diagonally across the page.<sup>40</sup> The colours anticipate the blood spilled by the distracted women. The poet describes the blood collecting in their hands, blending with the juice of the oranges like the union of two lovers. The knives whittle the fingers into a pen; the blood becomes the ink, which inscribes the story of love. The stunned women inadvertently fashion their fingers into pens, and become the scribes to the unfolding drama. The materiality of the body and the painted surface are evoked here. The bodily experience of pain and wonder is not unlike the inscription of the pen on the page. Jami's poetry, like the painting, makes evident the power of the pen and its role in documenting the story of Yusuf and Zulaykha. Together, words and images also evince their own authority through their primary tool, the pen.

The reflexivity of words and images, of reading and seeing, the resonance between the hands holding the book and those writing it, is central to the manner in which manuscripts such as these conveyed meaning. Indeed, the artist suggests as much by incorporating the anonymous reader into the painting. In an alcove directly above Yusuf sits a solitary woman, an open book in her right hand. Is she the reader of this book, or the narrator of the story? Is she viewing the scene unfolding below her, or imagining it through Gazurgahi's and Jami's words? Her visual counterpart, who appears at the bottom of the page, displays not rapt concentration but dramatic disarray. She wears the same yellow tunic and white headdress and faces the woman in the balcony, even as she falls backwards, awestruck by Yusuf's beauty. The doubling serves to add a temporal dimension to the painting: it is as if the woman from the balcony had stepped into the women's gathering, only to find herself in the presence of Yusuf. Similarly, the painting inserts the viewer/reader into the unfolding narrative. What had been an act of quiet reading now becomes an awe-inspiring experience, setting her senses awry. The image collapses the boundary between seeing the painting and experiencing the story; the hands of the artist here merge with those of the reader holding the manuscript, their bodies momentarily becoming one. Through this overlay, the artist creates empathy between himself and his viewer/reader.

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<sup>40</sup> The same colour scheme, Yusuf in red, Zulaykha in bright orange, is also in the British Library *Majālis* (1.0. ISLAMIC 1138), although the scene is outdoors in a garden. There is clearly a codification of design and colour taking place.

The use of colour in the Yusuf sequence of paintings is significant. Red, in particular, signals identity (Yusuf's robe) and materiality (the blood on the women's hands); it is at once a pigment, and it represents an emotion—love. The early sixteenth-century Safavid courtier, Sadiqi Beg Afshar, in his *Canons of Painting*—a detailed discourse on the making and application of paint—wrote extensively about the use of colour. In considering combinations of colours, he instructs the artists that 'when you wish to mix colours, you will need clean and pure pigments. Whether you make a little or a lot, mix two colours, the lover and the beloved'.<sup>41</sup> The Sufi undertones are undeniable, but so too are the realities of pigments' substance, their inherent physicality. Thus the practice of painting was itself seen as an act of match-making, bringing together pigments and colours in ways that are sensual and material.

Colour in Safavid art may be viewed through the lens of Sufism, but it also moves beyond its esoteric conceptualization. Ann Dunlop writes in the context of Italian Renaissance art that colour 'elides the distinction between the materiality of the work and the fiction put forward by it, and is easily made into an allegory of the chasm between life and language, speech and subjectivity'.<sup>42</sup> While the manner in which colour is made and applied in Safavid art is different from that in Italy, thinking of the mutability of meaning and materiality through the use of colour can certainly be applied to Persian paintings. The issues of narrative and subjectivity that Dunlop raises are especially relevant in the context of devotional imagery, where images were meant to function in several registers. Contemplating the divine body, be it that of Adam or Yusuf, was to consider the beauty of God. Yet the paintings also drew attention away

41 Sadiqi Beg Afshar, quoted in Gruber C., "The Rose of the Prophet: Floral Metaphors in Late Ottoman Devotional Art", in Roxburgh D. (ed.), *Envisioning Islamic Art and Architecture: Essays in Honor of Renata Holod*, (Leiden: 2014) 227–254, esp. 239. In this essay, Gruber also analyzes the use of colour—in particular, pink and red—within the context of Sufi literature and painting in praise of Muhammad. Walter S. Melion raises the issue of colour as an instrument of visual contemplation in "Introduction: Meditative Image and the Psychology of the Soul", in Falkenburg R.L. – Melion W.S. – Richardson T.M. (eds.) *Image and Imagination of the Religious Self in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Turnhout: 2007) 1–36, esp. 12.

42 Dunlop A., "Drawing Blood", *RES: Journal of Anthropology and Aesthetics* 63/64 (2013) 70–79, esp. 75. Another useful comparison is provided in Didi-Hubermann G., *Fra Angelico: Dissemblance and Figuration* (Chicago: 1995), esp. the "Introduction" (1–11) and "Incorporatio: In the Bosom of Color" (217–235). I am grateful to Michael Zell for this reference.

from that contemplation, and towards the viewer's own pleasure and subjectivity, bringing the divine into the realm of human experience.<sup>43</sup>

### Muhammad—Attention

In the Islamic tradition no figure represents the conflation of divinity with humanity better than Muhammad, whom Muslims believe to be the final revealed prophet and the epitome of mortal perfection. The last image in the preface of H829 refers to a *ḥadīth* (prophetic tradition) in which the angel Gabriel appears to the prophet in the form of one of his companions, Dihyah al-Kalbi, a wealthy merchant who was known for his extraordinary handsomeness. According to some traditions, the angel Gabriel appeared to Muhammad in the guise of Dihyah.<sup>44</sup> There are several historical and legendary stories about the life of Muhammad, but Gazurgahi chooses a very interesting (and somewhat obscure) one that locates the prophet within the language of esoteric love. Sufi exegesis focuses on Muhammad's perfection and purity of spirit; he is himself the subject of admiration and devotion. However, in the story regarding Dihyah, the focus shifts ever so slightly away from the perfect man, and towards the beloved.

If Adam is the archetype of humanity, Muhammad is its unattainable ideal [Fig. 7.6]. The prophet of Islam is referred to as the *insān-i kāmil* (the perfect human), a designation that pulls him out of the realm of the everyday. Thus it is not surprising that the artists of the *Majālis* depict Muhammad in a manner that masks any trace of corporeality; his face is subsumed by a fiery radiance and every inch of his body is draped and covered in fabric. His posture imitates Adam's only in so far as he faces us; yet instead of the naked vulnerability of Adam, here we see no face or body. The impression is one not of confrontation, but rather of stillness and control. Muhammad's corporeality is beyond

43 It would be useful to compare the Incarnation in the Christian tradition with the ways in which Islamic theologians resolve the tension between divinity and humanity. In the Qur'an and traditions, Muhammad and the prophets are viewed as humans; conduits for spiritual enlightenment, but themselves not divine. However, several Sufi poets and philosophers blurred the distinction, imbuing holy figures with esoteric knowledge and power, thereby accentuating the tension rather than resolving it.

44 Lammens H. – Pellat Ch., "Dihya", in Bearman P. – Bianquis Th. – Bosworth C.E. – van Donzel E. – Heinrichs W.P. (eds.), *Encyclopaedia of Islam Two*, Brill Online. Reference. Yale University. Accessed on 4 June 2016.



FIGURE 7.6 “Muhammad and Dihya,” Majālis al-ushshāq of Kamal al-din Gazurgahi, c. 1580. H829 (folio 19a). Topkapi Palace Museum, Istanbul.

recognition and, in this case, beside the point. Time stands still, and the scattered glances of the figures encircling Muhammad exaggerate his stillness.

Dihya is represented in the painting by the young, fresh-faced boy entering the room on the left. He is dressed in red (now established as an important signifier of love), and stands apart from the circle of men seated before Muhammad. Gazurgahi tells the story of how the divine spirit entered the figure (*ṣurat*) of Dihya al-Kalbi, causing quietness to descend upon him. Gazurgahi refers to a famous hadith, which is the break-line to the painting: 'I have a time with God that is not available for kings or prophets', which Sufi exegetes understand to refer to Muhammad's night journey through the heavens, in order to be presented to God.<sup>45</sup> The word *waqt*, or 'time', refers to the moment when time itself is subverted, and Muhammad transcends his material limitations; he enters a space that is not accessible to angels, kings, or prophets. The divine union is, like Muhammad's perfection, an aspiration for the mystic, and seldom achieved. Although Dihyah is the object of beauty here, the focus of this image is the luminous presence of Muhammad. He is at the center of the page, yet his body is invisible; his attention is elsewhere, even as the image requires our focus all the more. The dichotomy between the attention that is diverted within the image and that which is bestowed upon it by the viewer points to the complex modes of viewing early Safavid painting, which was never far removed from the text within which it was imbedded or to which it responded. The reader/viewer was thus always in a state of mental vacillation, between remembering, seeing, and reading.

### Majnun—Renunciation

Through adoration of the material body of Adam, through the passionate love of Zulaykha for Yusuf, and through the distracted yearning of the women of Egypt, we are made aware that love can exist as both esoteric and carnal desire. It is, however, destabilized in the last image in the series, that of Muhammad, where transcendent experience is given precedence over bodily expression. The preface of the *Majālis* sets the stage for the rest of the book, which consists of stories of love between men, women, dervishes, and kings. In the following stories and paintings the material and spiritual dimensions of love and art-making come to the fore. Social and even religious boundaries are transgressed, journeys undertaken, and lives lost, all in the pursuit of spiritual love.

45 In Arabic, *lī ma Allah waqt lā sanī fi malik maqrab lā nabī mursil.*

As mentioned earlier, these vignettes echo Sufi themes of temptation, loss, and union. Yet, the milieu within which Gazurgahi wrote was also one in which artists and writers were exploring themes of selfhood and individuality. Similarly, the everyday preoccupied them as much as the esoteric; the quotidian was as appropriate a subject for painting as was the imperial or religious. Tales of young lovers provided ample opportunity to investigate the spectrum of human emotions. One of the most popular and well-known stories of the early modern period is that of Layla and Qays ibn al-Mulawwah, which is the fifty eighth assembly described in the *Majālis al-ushshāq*.<sup>46</sup> Well before gaining fame in Persian through the *Khamsa* (*Quintet*) of the Iranian poet, Nizami Ganjavi (d. ca. 1209), the legend of the two star-crossed lovers was popular in the Arabic tradition. Renditions of the story were also offered by later poets, most notably Jami. Gazurgahi moves back and forth in his version between the poetry of Nizami and Jami, while sometimes inserting his own couplets.

Layla and Qays met as children in school, where they both fell intensely in love with each other. However, whereas Layla's love was discrete, Qays's was intoxicating to the extent of driving him crazy (hence his nickname, Majnun, the 'possessed'). Although the lovers had become close in childhood, Majnun's insanity made him an unsuitable match, and Layla was married off to another man. Heartbroken, Majnun never recovered, and even when Layla came to him, his madness prevented their love from being consummated. He forsook everything to wander the deserts of Arabia writing love songs to his beloved. Sufi poets and commentators understood Majnun's passion to represent the soul's longing for divine union, and the tribulations it must endure to achieve it. Mortification of the spirit and denial of the body were necessary markers of Majnun's devotion, even if the poetry and paintings documenting it remain among the most captivating works of art. What they capture is not just the exterior manifestation of Majnun's suffering, but his 'interior journey' in search of truth and unity.<sup>47</sup>

Layla and Majnun were the epitome of the idealistic lovers, and their story greatly fascinated early modern artists [Fig. 7.7]. Timurid and Safavid illustrations depict several episodes, from their chaste first encounter to Majnun's

46 There are several scholarly articles on the historic, literary, and cultural significance of the Layla and Majnun story, among them Schimmel, *Two-Coloured Brocade* 131–133; and Nicholson R.A., "Maḏjnūn", in Houtsma M.Th. – Arnold T.W. – Basset R. – R. Hartmann (eds.), *Encyclopaedia of Islam Two*, Brill Online. Reference. Yale University. Accessed 6 October, 2015.

47 Schimmel, *Mystical Dimension of Islam* 392, discusses the mystical undertones of the story.

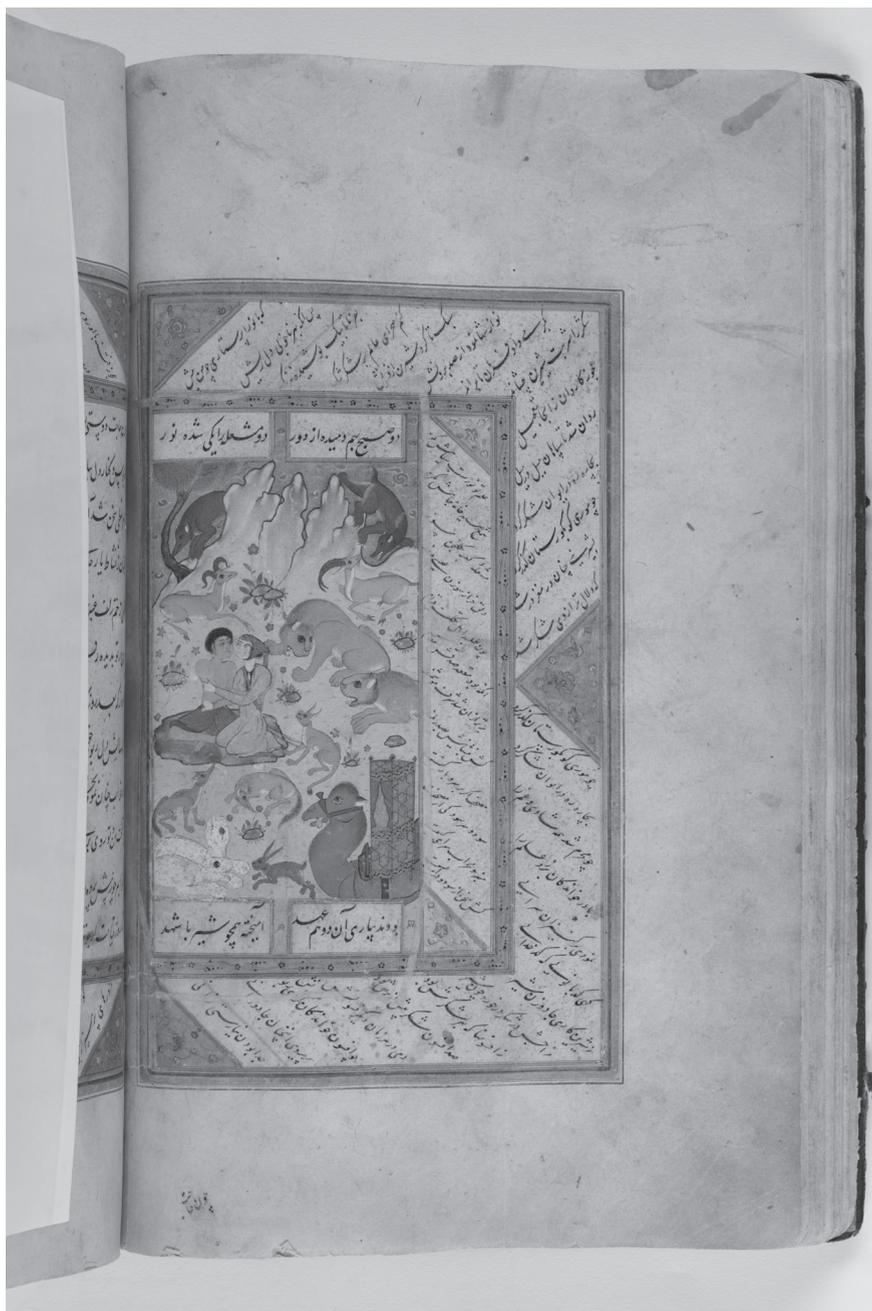


FIGURE 7.7 "Majnun and Layla embracing surrounded by wild animals," *Khamisa of Amir Khusraw of Delhi* (d. 1325) (folio 70). 1958.247.70. Harvard Art Museums/Arthur M. Sackler Museum, Gift of John Goelet.

feverish wanderings in the desert and among wild beasts, his figure changing from that of an ardent lover to that of an emaciated dervish. The artists of the *Majālis* have chosen two episodes for illustration; the first concerns the schoolyard where the lovers first met; the second, Majnun's pilgrimage to the Ka'ba in Mecca [Figs. 7.8 & 7.9].<sup>48</sup>

The latter painting shows the interior courtyard of the Great Mosque, with its arcaded galleries and minarets. The Ka'ba, covered in black cloth, occupies the central foreground, while a rocky outcrop at the top of the page, with two men seated on it, represents the mountainous landscape beyond the mosque. Diverse groups of pilgrims have gathered in the courtyard, from merchants and mendicants to pilgrims dressed in the ritual clothing of those performing the annual Haj pilgrimage.<sup>49</sup> Majnun wears a blue cloth wrapped around his waist, his emaciated body on full display. His left hand gestures towards the Ka'ba as he turns to look back at his father, an elderly man standing behind him.

In Nizami's rendition, quoted here by Gazurgahi, Majnun's father had asked Layla's family for her hand in marriage for his son, but was rebuffed. In despair and seeing his son's condition rapidly deteriorating, the father decided that he and his son must make the pilgrimage in hopes of finding a cure for Majnun's madness. The painting focuses on their arrival at the sacred precinct, where the father advises his son to pray to God and ask for relief from his suffering. The text on the page reads:

The father held his son's hand gently as they stood in the shadow of the Ka'ba. He said, 'My son, this is the place where all plays come to an end, hurry to find your remedy. In the shadow of the Ka'ba, pray for relief from the shadow of your grief. Ask the master of this holy site for a cure. Pray to him, [breakline]: "Dear Lord, save me from this foolishness (vanity?). Give me success in this redemption"'.

48 The image of Majnun at the Ka'ba was widespread in the visual culture of sixteenth-century Iran, travelling from illustrations of Nizami's *Khamsa* to Firdawsi's *Shahnama*, although in the latter the protagonist was no longer Arab Majnun, but the Greek hero, Alexander. See Simpson M S., "From Tourist to Pilgrim: Iskandar at the Ka'ba in Illustrated *Shahnama* Manuscripts", *Iranian Studies* 43.1 (2010) 127–146.

49 During the Haj pilgrimage, men and women are required to wear the ritual white robes marking them as pilgrims.



FIGURE 7.8 "Layla and Majnun in the school yard," *Majālis al-ushshāq* of Kamāl al-dīn Gazurgāhī, c. 1580. H829 (folio 152a). Topkapi Palace Museum, Istanbul.



FIGURE 7.9 “Majnun at the Ka’ba,” *Majālis al-ushshāq* of Kamal al-din Gazurgahi, c. 1580. H829 (folio 154b). Topkapı Palace Museum, Istanbul.



FIGURE 7.10  
 “Majnun at the Ka’ba,” detail  
 Majālis al-ushshāq of Kamal al-din  
 Gazurgahi, c. 1580. H829 (folio  
 154b). Topkapi Palace Museum,  
 Istanbul.

Nizami tells us that Majnun first wept and then laughed defiantly at his father’s words. He leapt forward and started to beat against the door of the Ka’ba, crying, ‘May I always be love’s slave!’<sup>50</sup>

Majnun is surrounded by tribesmen and other pilgrims, yet he stands out in his nakedness and frailty. A closer look reveals a body covered with self-inflicted scars, his arms marked by the burns typical of renunciant Sufis. More striking is the tattoo above Majnun’s heart, which is inscribed with the name of his beloved, Layla [Fig. 7.10]. It reminds us of Sa’eb’s poem that is the epigraph to this essay, in which the author compares the breast to a notebook upon which the names of lovers are inscribed, in ink and blood. The artists of this image, like the poet Sa’eb, use ink as evidence of Majnun’s devotion, filling his breast with the name Layla.

In the cultural milieu of early modern Iran, Majnun exemplified the anti-nomian dervishes whose antisocial and masochistic behavior simultaneously alienated and elevated them. Such men lived in cemeteries, covered themselves in ash, and renounced worldly comforts. They marked their bodies with tattoos and pierced them with needles; they starved and immolated themselves in order to attain their goal of spiritual purity. The endurance of physical pain made evident their disregard for the body and its human limitations.<sup>51</sup> Men

50 The poem is translated in Nizami, *The Story of Layla and Majnun*, trans. R. Gelpke (New York: 1966; reprint ed., New York: 1997).

51 See Karamustafa A., *God’s Unruly Friends: Dervish Groups in the Islamic later Middle Period, 1200–1550* (Salt Lake City: 1994).

such as these called themselves the lovers of God, removing themselves from the day to day in order to spend their time in devotion and prayer.

From the fifteenth century onwards renditions of mystics and dervishes populate albums and illustrations from Turkey to India. A painting in a *Majālis al-ushshāq* from the turn of seventeenth century depicts scenes of wandering holy men that would have been familiar to early modern viewers [Fig. 7.11].<sup>52</sup> The story, of Shaykh Fakhr al din Iraqi and his companions, shows the dervishes with typical accoutrements of ragged clothing and begging bowls. Their beards and hair are in disarray, and their bodies are scarred with burn marks (*dāgh*). Fakhr al-din is in the center reciting from a book while accepting alms from the bystanders. On his chest is a tattoo, *Yā, ‘Alī* (‘Oh, ‘Ali’), evoking the name of ‘Ali, the prophet’s son-in-law and cousin, who was a popular figure for veneration by Sufis and Shi’is alike. A similar painting of a young beggar is in a beautifully decorated album page from the late sixteenth century [Fig. 7.12]. He, too, is dressed in rags, his begging bowl and staff placed in front of him. His eyes are cast downward as he kneels against a floral background. His chest, like that of Fakhr al-din, is marked with the tattoo *Yā, ‘Alī*, and he has burn marks on his arms. Around the painting, poetic verses are arranged in white cartouches against a gold background. Unlike the dervishes in these paintings, Majnun has inscribed the name not of ‘Ali or Allah, but of Layla. The contrast between the Ka’ba—the most holy space for Muslims—and Majnun’s devotion not to God but to a woman is important. Indeed the artist expects you to recognize this tension; he also wants you to note the choice he has made in writing the name of a beautiful young woman on Majnun’s breast, not that of God or his prophets.

Majnun’s presence at the Ka’ba is a challenge to normative ideas of love and devotion. Nizami places him there to call into question religious orthodoxy and the restrictive apparatus of ritual performance. The true believer, in a Sufi ideation, had little use for such conventionality; rather, his Ka’ba was an esoteric concept, held within his heart. The artists of the painting have taken the critique a step further, pointing to the displaced materiality of love. In contrast to the golden Qur’anic phrase woven into the drapery of the Ka’ba, ‘and whosoever enters it is safe’, we see a simple inscription, ‘Layla’, on Majnun’s chest.<sup>53</sup> Layla’s name and its blood red rendition highlight the human dimension of this story and its intrinsic relationship to the body. Love of this nature

52 “Shaykh Fakhr al-din Iraqi (d. around 1289) and his Wandering Dervishes Beg for Alms in Front of a Convent,” [Museum of Islamic Art, Berlin] published in *The Friend of God: The Picture World of Persian Luxury Calligraphy from the 1600s* (Berlin: 2005); 76.

53 The verses referenced here are from *Qur’an* 3:96–97.



FIGURE 7.11 "Shaykh Fakhr al din Iraqi and the dervishes," *Majālis al-ushshāq of Kamal al-din Gazurgahi*, c. 1580. Museum für Islamische Kunst, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. Photographer: Ingrid Geske.



FIGURE 7.12 "Young Dervish," late 16th century. Topkapi Palace Museum.

causes pain and is deeply felt; it drives the lover insane and damages his body. Yet in Majnun's fragility there is beauty and humanity. The delicate brushwork and calligraphy emphasize the disjunctions between the visual pleasure of the image and the evocation of pain in the narrative.

When Majnun marks his body with the name of Layla not Allah, it is not just the displacement of alphabets that has taken place, but that of charismatic authority. That dervishes and lovers, such as those in the *Majālis*, become the subjects of early modern Persian art points to a few important issues: first, the manner in which religio-mystical traditions take on a decidedly materialist form; which is to say that the quotidian and the carnal become primary concerns to artists and poets, who aim to produce works that are at once fresh (*tāza*) and innovative.<sup>54</sup> This is not to suggest that religion becomes secondary—on the contrary, Shiism and some forms of Sufism defined Safavid political life. But the manner in which devotion was made manifest does change in profoundly important ways.

The second point has to do with the body, which becomes the locus of both divine and human longing. This is made evident by the manner in which it becomes the primary subject in several of these images, as a conduit of pain and suffering as well as of emotions such as love and wonder. Love is no longer conceived as an esoteric ambition, but instead expressed as physical desire, a shift evident in the erotic love poetry that also became popular at this time. The materiality of the painted surface, too, takes on urgency, competing with the written word in the creation of affective responses. Indeed, the tectonics of painting were called upon to add emotional depth to the image, through the use of colour, composition, and citation in unprecedented ways.

### Conclusion

The subject of love, a theme so well developed in the literary arts of medieval Persianate cultures, was visualized in the early modern arts of the book in unprecedented ways. In this process, the conceptualization of love was also altered, from an idealized act of devotion to a physical, human, attribute that is literally inscribed on the body and made apparent in the act of painting. Single-page paintings would follow, depicting homo- and hetero-erotic scenes of lovers in intimate scenes [Fig. 7.13]. Burning and tattooing the lover's body

54 On new poetic forms emerging at this time, see Kinra R., "Fresh Words for a Fresh World: *Tāza-Gūī* and the Poetics of Newness in Early Modern Indo-Persian Poetry", *Sikh Formations: Religion, Culture, Theory* 3.2 (2007) 125–149.



FIGURE 7.13 “Young lovers burning marks on each other,” early 17th century. Collection of Prince Sadr al-din Aga Khan, Ir. M. 89.

visually externalized the painful pleasure of ‘belonging’ to another person and was documented in paintings and drawings.

Lives of the prophets and Shi‘i imams were merged with those of Sufi shaykhs and mythical lovers in treatises such as the *Majālis al-ushshāq*. The love of God that Gazurgahi explores in his text was overlaid with the charismatic authority deployed by Safavid rulers in the rituals of devotion they enacted and also manifest in the cultural productions of their courtly milieu. This overlay of worldly and esoteric themes may be among the reasons that the text became so popular during the sixteenth century. Spiritual authority was made incarnate in the body of the Shah, just as divine love was personified by human subjects, such as Majnun. The tension between the texts and images was a powerful one; manuscripts such as the *Majālis* are fraught with conflicting affect, where the pleasure of seeing may distract from the practice of comprehending. The resultant disorientation, not unlike the feeling of being in love, was itself a welcome displacement, of thoughts and emotions.