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A Comparative Study of the Representation of Nature in Chinese Painting and Iranian Miniature

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Abstract

Two essential characteristics of Iran and China have played a significant role in the evolution of art: the influence of religion and the importance of art to the royal courts throughout various eras. There are both similarities and differences in how religion impacted the formation of the arts particularly painting as well as in the political and commercial exchanges between these two civilizations. By examining relevant artworks, one can trace the influence of these factors on the artists of their time and their creations. The central issue of this research is the examination of how nature is represented in the painting traditions of two ancient Asian civilizations Iran and China and the analysis of the similarities and differences that arise from their respective intellectual, cultural, and aesthetic foundations. The main research question is: How have the philosophical roots and dominant worldviews of each civilization influenced the representation of nature in painting, and what differences have these produced in their artistic perspectives on nature? Rather than focusing on the symbolism of natural elements, this study adopts a holistic approach to investigate the representation of nature through artistic techniques and intellectual contexts. The article is structured in two main parts: the first explores the philosophical foundations and conceptual approaches to nature in each civilization, and the second presents a comparative analysis of their painting techniques and visual structures. This research aims to provide a clearer understanding of how Iranian and Chinese artists have engaged with nature and to highlight the role of Eastern worldviews in shaping their visual language.

Keywords: Nature, Chinese painting, Iranian miniature, Dao.

1 | Introduction

In specific periods of history, the influence of religion is clearly evident in painting works. In Daoism, Confucianism, and later Buddhism, the importance of meditation and contemplation of nature encouraged

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artists of the time to represent nature in their paintings. In Iran, Manichaeism and later Islam led artists to approach the representation of nature in their works in a different manner. In China, painters held a special status and respect, similar to that of poets in Iran. Chinese painters would sign each of their works and often accompany the painting with their distinctive style, a poem, or an inscription. In Iran, on the other hand, stories and poetic epics were illustrated alongside paintings in a different manner. Therefore, writing and literature have a special connection with the paintings of both civilizations. This research aims to identify the points of convergence and divergence in the representation of nature in Iranian and Chinese paintings. It is based on the hypothesis that nature is one of the most prominent elements in the paintings of both Iranian and Chinese civilizations, to the extent that by looking at any artwork from either civilization, the presence and significance of natural elements such as flowers, trees, rocks, mountains, rivers, and springs can be easily recognized.

What is important is that nature acquires a transcendent spatial significance, which can be attributed to the influence of religion, philosophical schools, and the political and commercial interactions between these two civilizations. This research is theoretical and employs a comparative-descriptive method, gathering information from books and articles. The existing literature on this topic is limited to studies and articles focused on parts of the history of Iran or China, often emphasizing one specific natural element in the paintings. For example, the following articles and studies can be mentioned: "Examining the influence of Chinese thought and social conditions on landscape painting during the Song dynasty," by Atabati and Dadvar [1]. A Comparative Study of the Second Tabriz School of Miniature and the Iranian Garden during the Timurid and Safavid Periods," by Mojtaba Ansari and Elham Saleh, [2]. "A Study of Symbolic Elements in Iranian Miniature Painting," by Asghar Kafshchiyan Moghadam and Maryam Yahaghi" [3].

The Influence of Iranian Miniature on the Indian Subcontinent with Emphasis on Mughal Painting," a research study by Farhang Khademi Nedoushan and Rasul Baba Moradi, [4]. A thesis titled "The Purification of Iranian Miniature from Foreign Chinese Elements from the Ilkhanid to Safavid Periods, with Emphasis on the Three Great Shahnamehs: Demotte, Baysunghur, and Tahmasbi," by Bahram Dorostkar Ahmadi, [5]. This research adopts a different approach from the studies conducted so far. In this study, an attempt has been made to explore the similarities and differences in the general representation of nature in the paintings of Iranian and Chinese civilizations by examining their intellectual roots. Therefore, it does not delve into the symbolism of natural elements, but rather, in two sections, it reflects on the philosophical thought and painting styles of each civilization to analyze the representation of nature.

2 | A Reflection on Religion and Philosophical Schools of China

The first sentence in the sacred book of Daoism states: "The Dao that can be told is not the eternal Dao." Such expressions help us understand the painting techniques and the use of empty space in most Chinese artworks. One of these sayings conveys that humans are in harmony with the earth, the earth with the sky, the sky with the Dao, and the Dao with the Way of Nature [6]. In general, Dao is in harmony with the flow and movement found in nature. For example, when it rains, when grass grows, when a bird sings, when the sun shines, and when the earth and time revolve, all these phenomena manifest the Dao.

It is the nameless source of all names, the colorless origin of all colors. From it arise Yin (the feminine) and Yang (the masculine). Art and artistry arise from the interaction of Yin and Yang, as well as Ming (the creator of history and civilization). Therefore, history emerges and life comes into existence. Chinese art is the art of non-being. It is the manifestation of emptiness, void, nothingness, and absence. Art lies in bringing forth this non-being, which is the origin of everything, and in presenting the state of non-being. This principle is the foundation of all Chinese arts. The Sumi-e painting style also arises from this principle, where three-quarters or four-fifths of the painting is left empty (*Fig. 1*).

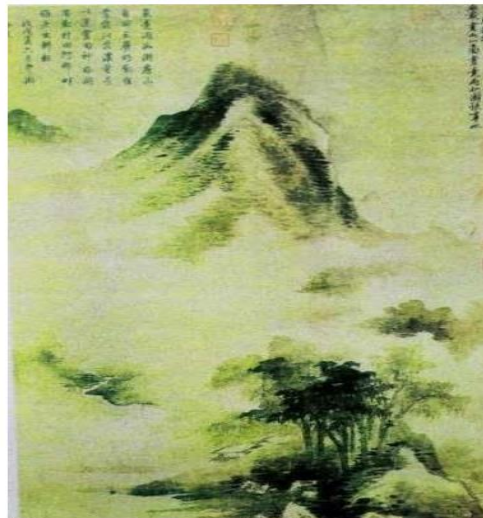


Fig. 1. Attributed to Kao Ku-kung, Landscape After the Rain, circa 1300 AD, hanging scroll, ink on paper, 122.1 × 81 cm, National Palace Museum.

This emptiness is far more critical than what is filled. In fact, it is an opportunity for the Dao to manifest—painting through the act of not painting, which is Wu Wei (non-action). This concept can also be observed in other arts such as Chinese theater, music, and dance: an ocean of silence in musical rhythms and stillness in performances. Buddhism is another source of inspiration and motivation for Chinese art. In this tradition, meditation is one of the most essential methods for artistic inspiration. Meditation involves hours of reflection and contemplation on the infinite sacred truth. They meditated on natural elements, such as water, considering what can be learned from it—how humble it is, how fruitful, how clear, cool, and gentle, and how it gives life to the thirsty field [7]. Similarly, they meditated on mountains and trees. Thus, Chinese painting rarely depicts Buddhist religious stories or ritual ceremonies; instead, it uses art as a means to aid meditation. Even landscape paintings of mountains and water were not created as mere decorations but as subjects for contemplation, painted with a respectful and thoughtful gaze (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Miao An, Landscape in Moonlight, circa 1200 AD, hanging scroll, ink and color on silk, 149.7 × 78.2 cm, National Palace Museum.

According to Confucianism, humans are not masters over nature but rather a part of it, responding to its interactions like all other beings. To live joyfully and happily means to be in harmony with nature. Being a painter means becoming a tool through which nature reveals itself to humanity [8]. By studying Chinese thought, one can easily recognize the importance of nature, encouraging us not to pass by Chinese paintings. Taking time to reflect and contemplate Chinese artworks can bring us closer to understanding what the artist was thinking in their time.

3| Chinese Painting Technique

In China, landscapes held significance far beyond the realm of human actions in grand narratives. A landscape should evoke both the harmonious and ideal relationship between humanity and the cosmic order, as well as nature's potential ability to transform the human spirit. The ideal that humans pursue throughout their lives is akin to wandering among streams and mountains, which combined with the variable, rather than fixed, perspective in painting induces this process of viewing in the observer [9]. In the Chinese philosophical perspective, nature is not measured or categorized by the standards of time and place. Similarly, Chinese painting does not confine nature within frames of perspective or by the use of dark and light colors. The symmetry found in growing beings, the endless and intertwined movements of nature, and the infinite events of the sky are all restricted by limiting them to a rectangular frame, straight and rigid lines, which create contradictions between beginnings and ends.

The outward form transforms as the artist passes through it; just as his art expresses the entirety of his experience with nature, he becomes part of the overall expression of his art [8]. In landscape painting, Chinese artists did not go out into open spaces to sit and sketch; rather, they first acquired skills by studying the works of renowned masters before them. Initially, they focused on painting pine trees, rocks, and clouds. Once they mastered these techniques, they would embark on journeys to contemplate the beauty of nature in order to grasp the essence of a landscape. Upon returning home, they would compose paintings by assembling their mental images of nature. The Chinese often wrote a few lines of poetry on silk scrolls and painted accompanying images. They preferred to express emotion and feeling in their images [7]. For example, if we look again at *Fig. 1*, we realize that it is composed merely of subtle, faint forms of mountain peaks emerging from the clouds. We understand that the artist felt a sense of grandeur for these majestic summits. For them, it is naive to compare nature by depicting its details with the real world.

In Chinese painting, a landscape can occupy the entire composition, and figures can be depicted small or omitted entirely. In *Fig. 2*, the painting itself depicts a vertical landscape of towering mountains in the distance. The imposing natural forms reduce the figures of humans and animals to dwarfs. Pathways and bridges fade away in the middle area. Chinese painters have had a deep appreciation for delicate and graceful curves. As seen in *Fig. 3*, the mastery and keen observation of the artist are evident in the brushstrokes used to convey movement. The forms lack the symmetry and distribution typical of Iranian miniature painting, yet they still possess a unique balance and beauty.

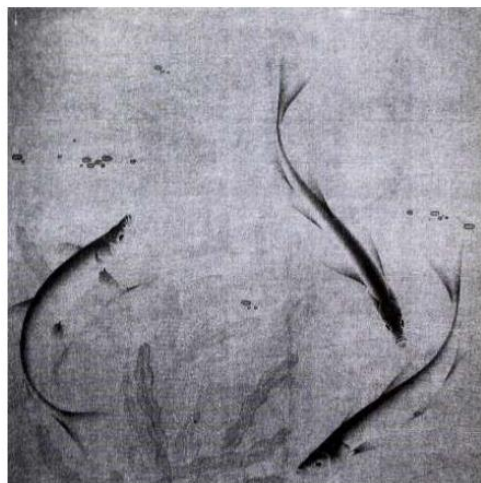


Fig. 3. Attributed to Liu Ts'ai, Three Fish, years 1068–1085 AD, ink and color on silk, 22.2 × 8.22 cm, Philadelphia Museum of Art.

The horizontal scroll, or handscroll, has been a vital format for painting in East Asia, primarily used to display illustrated religious texts, sometimes exceeding fifteen meters in length. Only a small portion of the scroll's

surface would be visible at any time, and it was shown to a limited audience. Later, horizontal scrolls were also used for continuous landscape paintings.

4 | A Reflection on the Iranian School of Thought

Three types of thought have influenced art in Iran. The Zoroastrian faith, which was the official religion of Iran before the spread and influence of Islam, was primarily monotheistic but still exhibited elements of dualism in the division between forces of good and evil, mainly reflected in poetry and literature. Then there is the Manichaean religion, with several images found in the Turfan region of China, and surviving examples of wall paintings and banners from that era. Finally, Islam, which upon its arrival had a significant impact on arts such as architecture, pottery, and painting. The Manichaean faith, which was a living and distinctive expression of the Iranian spirit, from the very beginning utilized art to explain and justify Manichaean theology and to promote, record, and convey its ritual principles. The *Arzhang* book is an illustrated manuscript in which the principles and teachings of Mani are depicted. Plant-based ornamentation in the text is a characteristic feature of Manichaean art, featuring bright and golden colors that form the titles of the manuscript. The decoration, composed of large fruit branches, vegetal ribbons, and flowers, creates a structural framework and background for the words and phrases without merging with or becoming part of them [10].

Mani told his followers about the *Arzhang* book: "I brought this with me from heaven as a miracle of my prophethood." A prominent aspect of the Manichaean faith and its teachings was the deep connection between text and image [11]. He sought to make the book understandable even to the illiterate by illustrating it. Mani's worldview rested on two fundamental principles and three epochs, which could only be comprehended through reason. The two principles were Light and Darkness, and the three epochs consisted of the Past, the Present, and the Future. Light was good and united with God, while darkness was associated with matter. The world was formed from the interaction between these forces born from the struggle between light and darkness which led to the dispersion of fragments of light.

The spreading of this divine essence and its entrapment in matter gave rise to the existence of spirit in human beings and the life of plants [12]. By understanding the illustrated myths of the Manichaean faith, one can comprehend the reason behind the bright and vivid decorations. Manichaean painting primarily served to convey the concepts of Mani's teachings and aligned with his particular worldview. Therefore, images of figures holding flowers and plants have been preserved, each engaged in narrating a religious story. The use of natural elements trees, flowers, and shrubs in Manichaean paintings was mainly to aid in the storytelling or the depiction of a myth. A mural, possibly titled "The Tree of Life," has been discovered, symbolizing the Land of Light. The Land of Light encompasses both the eastern and western regions, representing the realm of light and goodness, and is bordered to the south by the Land of Darkness [13].

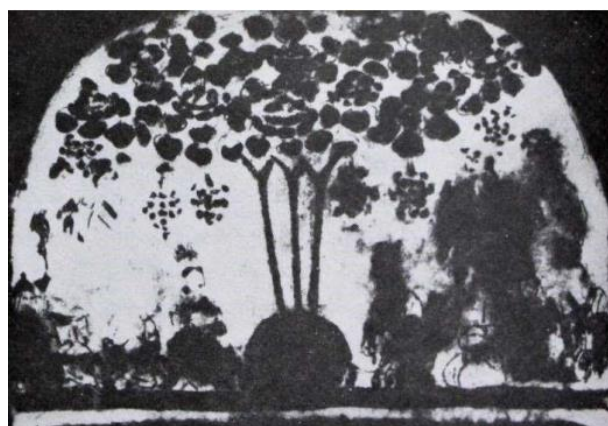


Fig. 4. Three-Trunked Tree from Bezeklik, dimensions unknown, location: Bezeklik, Cave: 17.

Manichaean art was heavily influenced by Buddhist and Hindu art. The lotus flower, or water lily, appears symbolically in Manichaean paintings beneath Mani's elect. According to the manuscripts, breaking a branch from a tree was considered a sin, even akin to murder. A Manichaean who had caused the spirit of a tree to wither was believed to be destined for rebirth in the same plant form [13]. In Islam, Prophet Muhammad declared idol worship forbidden and prohibited. One of his first actions after the conquest of Mecca in 630 AD was to take control of the Kaaba and remove all the idols present there. According to one of the earliest Arabic sources, the walls of the Kaaba were adorned with religious paintings, which, by the Prophet's order, were all destroyed except for the images of the Virgin Mary and the infant Jesus, which the Prophet himself preserved.

The Arabs detested any form of idol statues. Still, they did not oppose the installation of Hellenistic natural landscapes in mosques or the dispersal of animal motifs in the style of the Sasanians among the relief decorations of the Palace of Mushatta [9]. Theoretically, painting human or animal figures in any form was prohibited in Islamic law (Sharia). However, in practice, this prohibition mainly applied to large-scale works intended for public display. Depictions of living beings, if they had no shadows, were created in small sizes, or were part of everyday functional objects, and were considered permissible and did not cause harm. Gradually, these images became decorative motifs whose significance was essentially no greater than geometric and floral decorations [9]. Many nations — Arabs, Turks, Iranians, Mongols — were traditionally nomadic peoples who preferred small, portable objects over large-scale visual works. Later, when painting developed among them, it was primarily in the form of small-scale illuminations on book pages [14].

5 | The Style of Miniature Painting in Iran

The art of book illumination and miniature painting emerged during the Sassanian period with the advent of Mani and Mazdak. The paintings in the sacred book *Arzhang* (or *Ardahang*) revolutionized the painting style of this era. Decorative floral motifs and borders became common in the *Arzhang* and later in other manuscripts. Mani painters expressed symbolic concepts through conventional motifs, refining the designs with rhythmic lines and bright colors. To execute each design, the main outlines were first drawn with red or black ink on a smooth, polished surface. Then, the interior shapes were filled with pigments or gold leaf, and finally, certain parts were detailed with delicate brushwork. Most of the exalted Mani figures are depicted seated on lotus flowers [15]. The Sassanian Empire fell to the Islamic armies. After this period, attention must be given to the study of Iranian painting following the advent of Islam. The Arabs' interest in illumination art arose almost incidentally, as a byproduct of their efforts in translating and copying illustrated scientific texts from Greece.

Thus, one of the most outstanding schools of Iranian book illumination emerged and developed. Although the Iranian kings were Muslim, the strict Islamic restrictions on the depiction of living beings were interpreted liberally by them and did not affect non-religious arts. As a result, scenes of joyful life, such as hunting, celebrations, music, romantic stories, and battle scenes, filled the pages of their books. The decorative quality of the miniatures was emphasized by placing wide borders around the pages, which had a pale blue tint adorned with golden dots [14]. Due to the prohibition of image-making and likeness in Islam, restrictions were imposed on painting for artists. Therefore, artists focused their imagination on patterns and motifs. One of the achievements of Islam is that artists turned away from worldly matters and reality, and instead let pure line and color flow freely in the realm of dreams and imagination. Therefore, floral and animal motifs, influenced by the art of India and China, found their way into Iranian painting. And portraiture was allowed only for the kings, as well as scenes of their battles and hunts, which are categorized into two groups: religious and non-religious art.

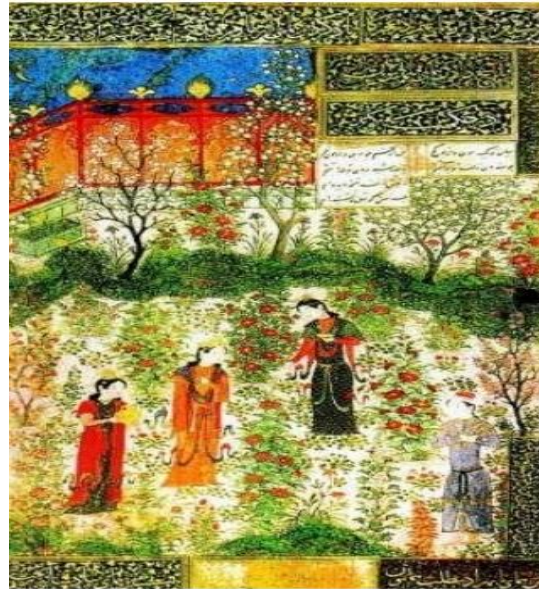


Fig. 5. Homay and Homayun in the Royal Garden, from the Masnavi of Homay and Homayun by Khwaju Kermani, Herat, circa [11].

Fig. 5 resembles a carpet that has come to life and found beauty within the realm of a fairy tale. The people and plants appear like shapes cut from colored paper and spread across the surface to create a visual composition. This painting is more suitable for narrating a legend than for depicting a real-life scene. In analyzing the paintings of this period, movement is the most crucial element to consider, influenced by Manichaean and Greek painting. Increased use of floral and animal motifs, often outlined designs, simple colors without shading or highlights, and the absence of perspective are characteristic features of painting in this period. In later periods, due to the interest of the Samanid rulers and exchanges with Chinese kings, Chinese artists were employed. During the Seljuk era, faces were noticeably influenced by Mongol and Chinese art. Despite broad faces, the eyebrows were drawn very small and delicate like buds, with dark outlines. However, due to restrictions on portraiture, painters turned to abstract styles, illumination, and geometric shapes. Usually, humans were depicted engaged in conversation, battle, or festivity in natural settings. In Fig. 5, most of the painting's surface is occupied by flowers and trees, with humans depicted within them.

With the Mongol invasion and the establishment of the Ilkhanate, Chinese influence increased, causing the paintings of this period to incorporate more characteristics of Chinese art than before. It was also during this time that illustrated epics became common, and book illumination flourished. Landscape painting became popular during the Safavid period. The paintings feature a vivacious atmosphere filled with beautiful flowers and blossoms, skies, plants and bushes, weeping willows, and towering cypress trees. The style of this era is characterized by the use of minimal colors and delicate detailing of men's beards and hair [15]. During this period, the influence of Chinese and Mongol art diminished, and Iranian and Islamic elements and motifs reemerged, with certain features of Manichaean painting becoming popular once again. Single-page paintings (Takhleef) also became widespread. Very delicate plant motifs, including Islimi, Khatayi, and the famous Shah Abbasi floral patterns, as well as fine and precise animal designs, became common in paintings and designs. In the subsequent Qajar period, painting on canvas became prevalent, and gradually Western painting influences started to appear in Iranian art.

6 | The Influence of Chinese art on Iranian art

It was after the Mongol invasion in the 13th century that the influence of Chinese art became a significant factor in Islamic art. This influence can be most clearly seen in the illuminated Iranian manuscripts. Chinese painters had mastered the art of landscape painting with great spatial depth, featuring mountains lost in the mist, streams, and rushing rivers, symbolizing a poetic representation of pristine nature [16]. The extent of the influence of Chinese art on the traditions of Islamic miniature painting and its transformation can be clearly seen in the battle scene of Rostam and the White Demon set against a natural landscape (*Fig. 6*).

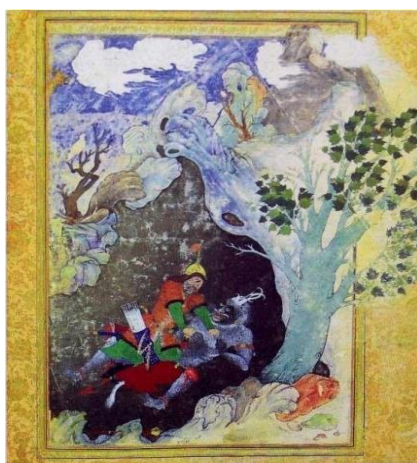


Fig. 6. The Killing of the White Demon by Rostam, from Ferdowsi's Shahnameh, Safavid School, Qazvin, circa 983 AH, 31.5 × 27.3 cm, Ken Bay :94.

As you can see, the painter's main effort is dedicated to depicting the environment and natural landscape rather than illustrating the activities described in the text. The delicately shaded rocks, trees, and flowers in this artwork clearly show the influence of Chinese painting. However, in terms of form and style, it resembles an Iranian carpet more than a Chinese natural scene [11]. The influence of China on Iranian book illumination is evident primarily in the illustrated manuscript *Manafe' al-Hayawan* by Ibn Bakhtishu. This influence stems from two aspects of Chinese painting: scroll painting and landscape depiction. From the former, the use of floral and foliate motifs with minimal branches and leaves to depict the nature surrounding animals and birds was adopted, and from the latter, the landscape painting style using ink and bright colors was incorporated (*Fig. 7*).



Fig. 7. The face of Simurgh, Manafe' al-Hayawan, Ibn Bakhtishu, Maragheh, Pir Panth, Morgan Library, NewYork.

Another example is the illustrations in *Jami' al-Tawarikh*, where shapes of clouds, dragons, and cranes are visible. Notably, the depiction of water in the landscape features scale-like patterns or swirling waves. A prominent element borrowed from Chinese painting is the form of mountains and trees. The trees are both naturalistic and linear, and the land is filled with cliffs and hills, each outlined by two boundary lines. These can be seen as imitations of motifs and images found on Chinese silk scrolls. The lines and composition undoubtedly reflect the influence of Chinese painting, yet the arrangement and movement of figures remain characteristically Iranian (*Fig. 8*).

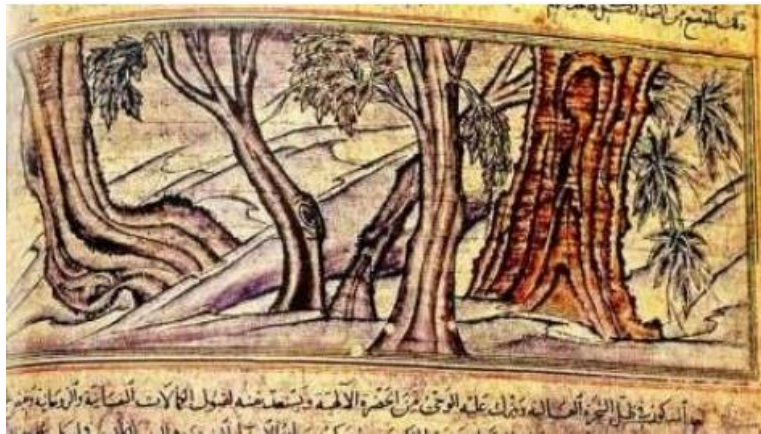


Fig. 8. The Jatavana Tree, Al-Tawarikh al-Rashidi, Private Collection of Nasser Khalili, London.

Although Chinese landscape painting was integrated and imitated in Iranian miniature painting, it did not alter its traditional principles and concepts. For example, the symbolic and mythological meanings of Chinese animals were unfamiliar to Iranian painters. Therefore, they used these images in complete harmony with their own cultural myths and symbols. For instance, they transformed the phoenix into the Simurgh, and unlike in Chinese culture, the dragon took on a negative meaning in Iranian miniature painting. The influence of Chinese painting can also be seen in the illustrations of the Great Ilkhanid *Shahnameh*. However, during this period, artists tried to distance themselves from direct Chinese influences and move closer to the Iranian visual language. Although Iranian painters borrowed detailed Chinese elements, they blended them with Iranian culture and aesthetic characteristics [11].

7 | Conclusion

There is no other way but to recognize the fundamental principles of each land to analyze works of art. Considering the Iranian way of thinking from ancient times, the importance of nature and its representation in paintings and illustrations is noteworthy. The representation of nature has neither appeared as realism nor held an independent position; rather, throughout the ages, it has symbolically conveyed another meaning aligned with religious teachings. In Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, and Islam, repetition is an inseparable part of expressing religious principles, clearly visible in paintings and illustrations where natural elements flowers, trees, mountains, and rocks are repeated to cover the entire surface. In contrast, in Vedic and Buddhist traditions in China, contemplation of nature, silence, and solitude are emphasized. Therefore, in the paintings and illustrations, there is neither symmetry nor repetition; some parts of the page remain blank and unpainted. However, a notable point is that in the artworks of both civilizations, a large portion of the page is dedicated to nature and its elements, conveying meanings beyond nature itself as merely a place for leisure and recreation. In Chinese painting, nature is a space for contemplation, self-recognition, and salvation, whereas in Iranian illustrations, nature and its elements serve as a backdrop for storytelling, carrying significant events and evoking an idealized world.

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