

ANALYSIS OF BEHZAD HERAVI'S KHAWARNAQ PALACE

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Abstract. *Kamal al-Din Behzad, the renowned miniaturist of the ninth century AH/ fifteenth century CE, achieved artistic mastery within the cultural milieu of Herat and played a decisive role in the transformation of Eastern miniature painting. In his works, the human figure serves as the central element of composition, and through the delicacy of line, proportional harmony of the body, and coordination of colors, it dominates the pictorial space.*

Attention to clothing and the spiritual expressions of the faces indicates that, in Behzad's view, the human being symbolizes dignity and divine vicegerency, while other elements such as architecture and nature derive their meaning through a measured relationship with the human figure. A review of previous studies shows that the paintings of Behzad require further analysis, identification, and scholarly investigation—an issue that, unfortunately, has received limited attention. This study places particular emphasis on the analysis of one of his works, The Palace of Khawarnaq. To conduct this research, a library-based method with a descriptive approach was employed, and comprehensive data were collected through the study and examination of authoritative and primary sources. The findings of this study indicate that the painting The Palace of Khawarnaq is among the most outstanding examples of Behzad's art in a manuscript of the Khamsa by Nizami Ganjavi (896–900 AH), which is preserved in the British Museum.

While visually representing a literary narrative, this work depicts the process of constructing a magnificent building through the dynamic movement of figures and the precise organization of space, demonstrating the artist's mastery in integrating storytelling with a human-centered approach.

Keywords: *Painting, The Palace of Khawarnaq, Kamal al-Din Behzad, Art, Miniature.*

Introduction

Among the leading figures of art, certain distinguished artists emerge who shape the course of artistic transformations and determine the main trajectories of art history through their own efforts. Undoubtedly, Behzad of Herat unveiled the essence of thought and Islamic art in Afghanistan, revealing the celestial manifestations of form and image in his invaluable works.

Master Kamal al-Din Behzad, who was born into a modest family in Herat (855 AH), became acquainted from early childhood with the emotions and sufferings of the people, and his elevated artistic spirit was deeply influenced by these experiences. After the emergence of his extraordinary talent, he was given the title “Kamal al-Din.” Perhaps this epithet reflects not only his artistic stature but also his spiritual character and religious insight. Behzad was a mystic detached from worldly affairs and material attachments, and until the end of his life he remained devoted to the khanqah of the spiritual master Khvajeh Abdullah Ansari. He never married and devoted the course of his thought and aesthetic sensibility to the pursuit of true art and the discovery of its hidden mysteries. Behzad was a contemporary of an era that, although life in those times often seemed harsh, was enriched by companions who encouraged and supported his spiritual path, easing his sorrows.

His association with mystics such as Mulla Husayn Va'iz Kashifi and Abdurrahman Jami, the great poet and mystic of that period, guided him along the Sufi path.

Mir Ali-Shir Nava'i—himself a distinguished patron of wisdom, art, and especially poetry—also became his supporter and promoter, facilitating his inclusion among the prominent artistic circle at the court of Sultan Husayn. Likewise, the calligrapher, poet, and devoted mystic Sultan Ali Mashhadi was Behzad's close companion and praised him in his poetry.

However, the role of Ruhollah Mirak Heravi, one of the renowned masters of Afghan miniature painting, may have been more significant than that of others in supervising and providing Behzad's preliminary training in miniature art. Thereafter, the artistic teachings of Pir Sayyid Ahmad transformed the spirit and soul of this "rare genius of the age" more profoundly than any other influence. Mirak Heravi had himself been a student of Vali-Allah and had learned from him the art of illustrating various themes, particularly mystical and ethical subjects; this experience greatly stimulated Behzad's artistic taste and intellectual development.

Behzad, the leader of the painters of his time, gained worldwide renown during his lifetime, and his name was honored everywhere with distinguished titles. One of his most valuable and celebrated works is *The Palace of Khawarnaq*, which enjoys particular fame. The present article includes sections on the main themes, historical background, the painting *The Palace of Khawarnaq*, Nizami, and a description of the *Palace of Khawarnaq*.

Research Background

There are only a limited number of books and articles concerning Behzad's painting *The Palace of Khawarnaq* that have been useful for this study. Among them is *Iranian Miniatures from the Hermitage Collection (15th–19th Centuries)* by Galina Adamova, published in 1386 SH, translated by Zohreh Feyzi, and issued by the Art Academy Publishing House. This valuable and authoritative book introduces the artistic works of Kamal al-Din Behzad.

Another relevant source is the article titled *Proceedings of the International Conference on Kamal al-Din Behzad*, published in the second year, issue no. 14, by Tarahan-e Farda Press, written by Karimzadeh Tabrizi in 1382 SH. This article discusses Behzad and his works and is considered a useful reference for the present research.

In addition, several dissertations and articles have contributed to this study. However, specifically regarding a detailed analysis of Behzad's painting *The Palace of Khawarnaq*, no independent book or comprehensive scholarly article has yet been written. Although a few scattered and limited writings exist on the subject, they are insufficient and indicate the need for a thorough academic and scientific investigation.

Historical Background

Master Kamal al-Din Behzad (854–942 AH), son of Sharaf al-Din, was born in Herat and is regarded as one of the most outstanding painters in the world and among the greatest artists of the ninth century AH. This gifted son of Herat, who was later recognized as the father of the miniature style, performed wonders in the art of miniature painting through the powerful and masterful strokes of his pen. The great and brilliant artist of Herat was even given the title "Raphael of the East" by Europeans (Niazi, 1394: 28).

He had two sisters and one brother, whose destinies remain unknown. However, among his nephews—each distinguished in his own right—one was Haydar Ali Naqqash, the father of Muzaffar Ali Naqqash of Torbat, and another was known as Rustam Ali, the calligrapher of Khorasan. According to Dr. Mehdi Bayani, as mentioned on page 201 of his work *Calligraphers*, the latter passed away after Behzad's death in 942 AH.

According to Qazi Ahmad Qomi in Golestan-e Honar, Behzad lost both his parents at an early age, and Ruhollah Mirak Heravi, known as Mirak Naqqash of Herat and the librarian of Sultan Husayn Bayqara (873–897 AH), undertook his upbringing and education (Aryana, 1387: 276–277).

Master Behzad is considered the most accomplished painter of his era, bringing this art to the height of perfection. For a period, under the guidance of Amir Hedayat—renowned for his virtuous character—he was engaged in refined artistic practice (Mayel Heravi, 1372: 242).

Behzad possessed a distinctive school of his own, which eventually developed into an independent movement in the world of art. It appeared so clearly defined and pure that if an artist were to combine Behzad's style with Indian, Chinese, or Bukhara styles within a single painting, a critic could immediately distinguish it (Miran, 1395: 118).

In the artistic works of Kamal al-Din Behzad, the first visual element that draws the viewer's attention is the human figure. The orderly and delicate human forms in all his paintings, through balanced and beautiful compositions, dominate and command the pictorial space.

Similarly, Leon Battista Alberti, the Renaissance painter, considered measurability a fundamental issue. In his treatise *On Painting*, he stated: "The painter can construct the space of his work according to established principles, and through various methods, an artwork can be made convincing, endowed with a rational and coherent structure" (Woodford, 1386: 83).

Behzad's vision in depicting the human figure differs from that of the painters before him. The contour lines and bodily proportions in his works are rendered with the utmost refinement, suggesting that for the first time the human face was presented with such prominence in his art, becoming an inseparable element of human existence and perception (Rezvanfar, 1382: 3).

Behzad's special attention to the human figure is evident in the type of clothing he depicts. The rich coloration and the selection of diverse hues in rendering garments testify that Kamal al-Din Behzad regarded the human figure as a symbol of grandeur, spirituality, and divine vicegerency on earth, assigning it a unique value. The human beings he portrays seem detached from mere materiality and attain a sense of timelessness.

Architectural spaces, natural landscapes, floral motifs, the treatment of color surfaces, and other elements in Behzad's paintings undoubtedly exist in a logical and measured harmony with the human figures. The dynamism and vitality of his figures, and the clarity with which their forms are articulated throughout the composition, draw the viewer's eye. In Behzad's view, a human figure is not created merely to convey a subject or illustrate a narrative, nor is it simply a decorative form; rather, it functions as a symbol and sign of human dignity and status. The surrounding elements and beings come into existence to complement and elevate the human presence within the higher order of existence.

The Painting The Palace of Khawarnaq

In Farhang-e Amid, Khawarnaq is defined as the Arabicized form of Khorneh, Khorangah, or Khorang, meaning a palace or pavilion used as a royal dining place. It was the name of a palace in al-Hira, commissioned by Lakhmid ruler al-Nu'man and built by the architect Sinimmar (Semanar) for Bahram Gur; in its time, it was considered unparalleled (Amid, 1383: 571).

According to the *Khamasa* of Nizami Ganjavi, the Palace of Khawarnaq was constructed by order of al-Nu'man ibn al-Mundhir for Yazdegerd I, and Bahram V (Bahram Gur) spent his childhood there.

The architect of the palace was Sinimmar, who, after claiming that he could build an even finer structure, was thrown from the top of the palace by order of al-Nu'man. It is also said that he was killed out of fear that he might construct a similar palace for others (Adamova, 1386: 312). The construction of the Palace of Khawarnaq is depicted in one of Behzad's finest paintings created in Herat. This work is preserved in the British Museum and forms one of the illustrations of the Khamsa manuscript dated 896–900 AH (Tabrizi, 1383: 33).

This painting is considered one of the most important and valuable works of Master Kamal al-Din Behzad. In it, not only is poetry rendered visually, but the stages of constructing a magnificent building are also depicted with precision. In the scene, each individual is diligently engaged in a task; the firm steps of the workers further enhance the impression that the work is progressing swiftly (Banuval, 1359: 6).

Nizami Ganjavi seeks to reconstruct and cultivate a particular myth through the use of diverse elements. To achieve this, he employs characters, events, and settings within a mythic framework. One of these elements is the Palace of Khawarnaq. In examining the palace in Nizami's work, attention is first directed to the building itself, which holds a central role, and then to the main characters of the story who are in some way connected to it.

The construction of the Palace of Khawarnaq constitutes, in fact, the second part of the narrative of the Haft Paykar. The first part is devoted to the birth of Bahram. In other words, after narrating the birth of a mythic figure, Nizami envisions a mythic setting for him. He shows particular attention to architecture and building, using them as effective narrative elements. The height of Nizami's focus on architecture can be observed in Haft Paykar, which begins with the construction of the Palace of Khawarnaq and concludes with the completion of the seven domes.

These structures not only inspire wonder and admiration and possess qualities that place them among mythic edifices, but each also brings about a profound transformation in the mythic characters—figures who might even be described as supra-mythical. For the mythic birth, death, or disappearance within the story is connected to them. More precisely, the Palace of Khawarnaq is not only built at the time of Bahram's birth and for his sake; rather, the story of Haft Paykar begins with Bahram's birth and the construction of this palace (Motlagh, 1382: 81).

The story of the poem unfolds as follows: King Luqman orders the architect Sinimmar to build a magnificent palace for him, and Sinimmar carries out the task. This episode of the poem is depicted in Behzad's painting. After the work is completed, Luqman asks Sinimmar whether he could build an even more splendid palace. Sinimmar replies that, if given the chance to construct another, he could create a palace far more beautiful than the current one. Fearing that such a palace might surpass his own, Luqman throws Sinimmar from the top of the palace walls. In Behzad's painting, this dramatic moment from the poem is not represented (Tabrizi, 1383: 34).

Other characters, such as Luqman and Sinimmar, also appear in the composition. The completion of the palace is accompanied by a tragic event—the death of Sinimmar at Luqman's hands—which contributes to the palace's mythic aura. Following this, another astonishing episode occurs: seeing the grandeur of the Palace of Khawarnaq, Luqman experiences a spiritual transformation through the preaching of a Christian cleric, disappears into the desert, and is never seen again. Therefore, most of the major events in this book are closely associated with architecture, particularly as the initial events highlight and affirm the significance of the Palace of Khawarnaq.

But what was the palace like, and what were its distinguishing features? Luqman sent for Sinimmar and, through numerous promises, persuaded him to construct such a magnificent palace

Nizami and the Description of This Work

Nizami Ganjavi, the eloquent master of Persian language and literature, describes the architectural masterpiece known as the Palace of Khawarnaq as follows:

"The hands of five thousand workers measured the iron,
Constructing the palace over fifty years.
At last, with the golden touch of the hand,
Semin shaped the halls of clay and stone.
A pavilion and tower rose toward the moon,
A qibla adorned in white and black.
Workshops rich in beauty and gilding,
Scarlet hues and Seminar's designs.
The celestial spheres were rendered with care,
Yet no sky could match their flight.
A pole from south to north balanced,
A hundred thousand visions compressed within.
Its sight surpasses even dreams,
Quenching the thirsty as if with water.
If the sun cast its light upon it,
He would behold the day's brilliance in his staff.
Inside, it was like Paradise in peace,
Outside, as a firmament in its adornment."

Following this poetic description, Nizami elaborates on the palace's beauty and highlights its most important features, emphasizing the smoothness of the domes and the reflective quality of the colors. In Behzad's painting of this scene, particular attention is given to ordinary people, skillfully depicting the movements of the workers as they construct and bring the palace to life.

"He said to the supervisors,
So that the diligent might take form,
In Khawarnaq he inscribed in gold,
Figures deep and high, lion and tiger.
Arrows struck and clashed in battle,
Immersed in the earth until the dust."

In this miniature, the upper-left section features several couplets of Nizami written in beautiful calligraphy (Figure 1).

"Its polish was of gum and lion's strength,
Becoming mirror-like and reflective.
Through day and night, with haste and pause,
Like brides appearing in three colors.
The remainder of the tri-color not applied,
Save for azure, white, and yellow."

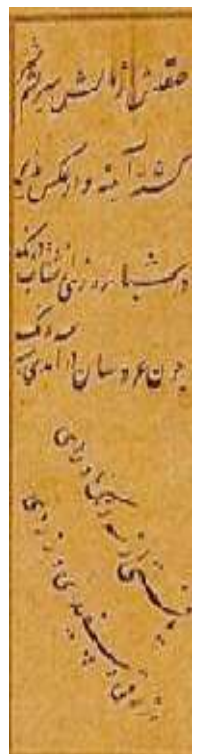


Figure 1 illustrates the components of the painting *The Palace of Khawarnaq*, where three couplets are inscribed in beautiful Nastaliq script (Azhand, 2008: 244).

It should be noted that this corresponds to the scene that Nizami Ganjavi depicts in his *Khamsa* with the following verses:

"The masters sought the task,
Arranging the site of the workshop.
Whoever pursued the work with diligence,
Their efforts were rightly displayed.
News of this reached Luqman,
For such a craftsman was worthy indeed.
Renowned even in the land of Rome,
A clever one who shapes wax from stone.
The skilled hand, sweet in its craft,
Sam's lineage and Semnar's fame."

In this illustration, as mentioned earlier, the scene depicts the construction of a building called the Palace of Khawarnaq, whose architect is identified as Sinimmar. In Figure 2, each worker's activity is depicted with distinct details: some carry bricks, others lift clay, one wields a chisel, and another is engaged in plastering, showing the palace in a partially completed state with its scaffolding clearly visible.

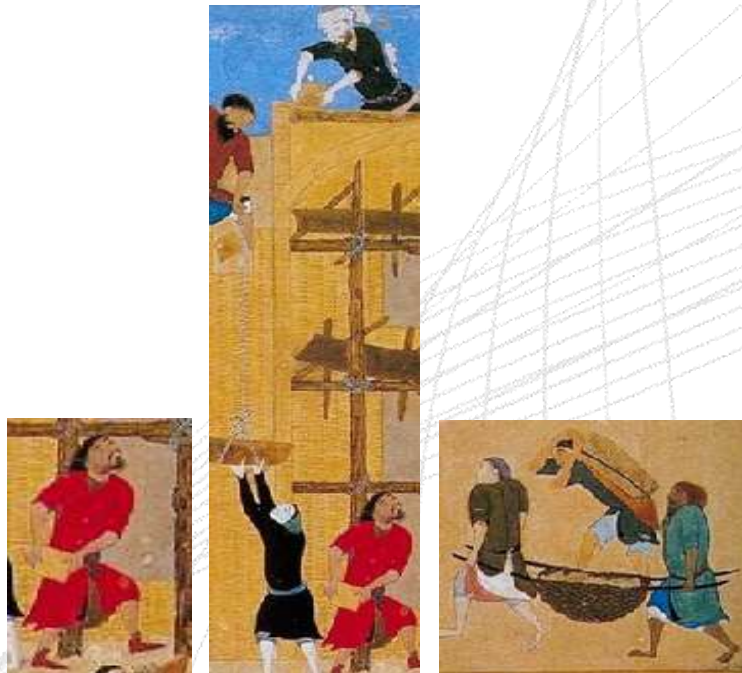


Figure (2). Part's of Khawarnaq Palace painting, HERAVI, Behzad (Azand, 2008,244)

In the painting, several workers carry water and clay to those engaged in plastering, while others transport clay in containers on their shoulders. One worker secures a clay container to a rope, which another worker pulls up from above. Two men at the side are breaking and shaping bricks. Another worker holds a shaped brick, preparing to toss it upward to a man standing on scaffolding, who bends slightly downward with open hands to receive it.

At the top right of the painting, a man receives bricks and hands them to a master standing on the scaffolding. The master, with evident precision and skill reflected in his facial expression and movements, shapes the bricks and passes them to two bricklayers working atop the building. Another man on the right carefully descends a wooden ladder leaning against the wall. The movements and postures of all figures serve the tasks they are performing and are designed with meticulous attention.

The distribution of figures and the composition creates a visual flow upward. Two men bringing soil, along with a man entering from the right carrying a sack on his back, move leftward, drawing and guiding the viewer's eye. A man with a shovel on the right, a man carrying a water skin, and another holding a plank under his arm continue this leftward movement.

On the left, a man with a shovel and a brick-shaper facing right redirect the viewer's gaze back into the painting. This redirection to the right is reinforced by two men moving rightward and a man tossing a brick, whose motion and gaze lead upward and to the right. The upward movement is further emphasized by the worker on the scaffolding receiving the brick, and the movement returns left and upward through a man handing bricks to the left. This leftward motion is reinforced by the positioning of two bricklayers, one above the other, and the posture of the man at the far left top, sustaining the upward momentum (Figure 3) (Tabrizi, 1382: 24).

Everything discussed about this painting reveals two types of movement: first, the physical movement of the figures, who are actively and rapidly engaged in their work; second, the movement inherent in the composition itself, created through the arrangement of forms and elements. This demonstrates that the painting is the product of a keen, highly skilled artist who, with a profound understanding of mystical concepts, masterfully integrates and manifests these elevated ideas in his work. Such dynamic movement can also be observed in Behzad's other paintings (Shaisefar, 1382: 81).

Although he, like other miniaturists and painters of his era, was under the influence of the court and could have focused solely on royal subjects, Behzad paid close attention to his society. His treatment of social ideas in art is distinctive. Essentially, Behzad is a director of contrasts. For example, in one of his exceptional works, he transforms the very simple, unadorned walls of the Palace of Khawarnaq into a harmonious composition through the interplay of shapes, objects, contrasting colors, and dynamic postures. This is similar to what is seen in Leonardo da Vinci's Last Supper. Behzad was, in many ways, akin to da Vinci, yet the level of publicity and recognition that da Vinci and his works received has not been accorded to Behzad and his masterpieces (Mousavi-Lar, 1382: 27).

Conclusion

Master Kamal al-Din Behzad was one of the most renowned painters of the fifteenth century, residing in Herat. At that time, Herat was one of the greatest artistic centers of the East, home to established art academies and manuscript production workshops, which played a key role not only in the development of miniature painting in Central Asia but also in other artistic fields, particularly figurative art.

In Behzad's miniatures, the foremost visual element that captures the viewer's attention is the human figure. The orderly and delicate human forms, arranged in balanced compositions, dominate and govern the pictorial space. Behzad's approach to depicting the human figure



Figure (03). Building the Khawarnaq Palace, Amir Ali Farsi
Behzad, Herat, 500 ruhi, attributed to Behzad, British
National Library, London (Azand 2008:244)

differed significantly from that of earlier painters; the contour lines and bodily proportions in his works are rendered with exceptional refinement. His special attention to human figures is also evident in their clothing: the vibrant colors and varied selection of hues indicate that Behzad regarded the human figure as a symbol of grandeur, spirituality, and divine vicegerency on earth.

Architectural spaces, natural landscapes, floral motifs, color treatments, and other elements in Behzad's paintings are logically and harmoniously integrated with the human figures. The dynamism and vitality of these figures, as well as their distribution throughout the composition, draw the viewer's eye. In Behzad's vision, a human figure is not merely a vehicle to convey a narrative or a decorative form; it serves as a symbol of human dignity and status, with surrounding elements and beings existing to complement and elevate the human presence toward a higher, metaphysical plane.

The depiction of the Palace of Khawarnaq represents one of Behzad's finest works in Herat. Preserved in the British Museum, it is one of the illustrations of *Khamasa*, dated 896–900 AH. This painting is among Behzad's most important and valuable masterpieces, in which not only is poetry visualized, but the stages of constructing a magnificent palace are meticulously depicted. Each individual in the scene is shown diligently performing their task, and the firm steps of the workers convey the impression that the work is progressing swiftly. This painting illustrates a part of *Haft Paykar*, which is one of the five major works of Nizami.

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