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Donning the cloak : Safavid figural silks and the display of identity

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DONNING THE CLOAK
SAFAVID FIGURAL SILKS AND THE DISPLAY OF IDENTITY

A Thesis

Presented to "

The Faculty of the Department of Art History

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Nazanin Hedayat Shenasa

August 2007

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ABSTRACT

DONNING THE CLOAK SAFAVID FIGURAL SILKS AND THE DISPLAY OF IDENTITY

by Nazanin Hedayat Shenasa

This study examines the history of figural silk textiles from Safavid Iran (1501-1722) as transmitters of social information and focuses on figural silks depicting narrative scenes from the twelfth century author Nizami's epic poem, "Layla and Majnun." Safavid silks are renowned for their complex weave structures, delicacy, and iconography derived from medieval Iranian poetry.

In order to understand this narrative trend in textiles, a close historical look at political and religious conditions that preceded its development is essential. The emergence of Sufi thought and practice in mainstream culture after 1500 established narrative motifs and encouraged expression of the internal self through external adornment. In addition, the state centralization of the silk industry by Shah Abbas (r. 1587-1629) and his attempts to form alliances with the European courts through his English-born ambassador, Robert Sherley, fostered international popularity of Iran's signature textiles as a luxury item and communicated a cultural persona.

This thesis is dedicated to my parents

Dr. and Mrs. G. Malek Hedayat

whose love of Iranian culture and art was the greatest gift a child could receive.

I wish to express the utmost gratitude to my esteemed professors

Dr. Johanna Movassat, Dr. Anne Simonson and Professor Consuelo Underwood

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Nazanin Hedayat Shenasa

August 2007

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Introduction

In a red world bathed in shimmering gold light, an unkempt man sits with his head in his hand as wild beasts encircle him (figures 1 and 2). He wears only a waistcloth but has a dreamy smile on his face. Nearby, a camel bears a palanquin with a stately woman, her head tipped to one side, arm outstretched from the window of her traveling abode toward her lover. Beneath her, the signature “Work of Ghiyath” is woven in Kufic script inside an eight-pointed star on the palanquin.¹

This depiction of the legendary characters Layla and Majnun is one of the best-known textiles from the wealth of fine luxury silks produced in Safavid Iran (1501-1722 CE).² The red lampas-woven silk is in the permanent collection of the Textile Museum in Washington, D.C., founded by George Hewitt Myers in 1925.³ Myers had a passion for rugs and textiles from the Middle East, and the Museum’s collection of figural silks is the largest in the U.S. The designer of the textile, Ghiyath al-Din Ali of Yazd, was a Safavid court favorite whose fine silks were donned by the Iranian aristocracy at the turn of the seventeenth century.⁴

Since then, textile historians and connoisseurs have admired figural silks for the technically advanced weave structures, delicate textures and brilliant colors, but another element that set apart Safavid silks from other luxury textiles are the figural motifs featured in the compositions.⁵ The compositions of figural silks fall into three major categories: the taking of foreign prisoners by Iranians, idealized non-narrative scenes depicting royal pastimes of feasting and fighting, and narrative scenes depicting well-known characters from classic medieval Iranian literature. Of these three sub-genres the

emphasis of this study will be on narrative scenes, with a focus on textiles depicting the story of Layla and Majnun.⁶

Nizami Ganjavi's epic poem *Layla and Majnun* is often compared to Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, though Nizami's version of this Middle Eastern love story predates the Western play by four centuries.⁷ The epic poem, written in rhyming couplets in Farsi, was commissioned by a Transcaucasian chieftain, Akhsitan Shirvanshah,⁸ and composed by the beloved poet Nizami in 1188 when poetry was the primary art form commissioned by the rich and powerful.⁹ The character of Majnun, a wandering lover-poet whose ascetic lifestyle leads to enlightenment, comes to represent the ideal dervish character in sharp contrast to the opulence of corrupted court life.¹⁰ Sufis, Islamic mystics who opposed ostentation, distinguished themselves from this corruption by donning cloaks of coarse woolen cloth in contrast to the gold silks of the ruling classes, and they gathered together in lodging houses to practice remembrance of the Divine through poetic recitation, dance and music.¹¹

In the Safavid period, however, we see the paradoxical combination of Majnun's ascetic enlightenment with opulent gold silks in woven textiles depicting narrative scenes from the poem. The Safavids hearkened back to medieval Sufi poetry and converted the verbal imagery of literary classics into visual symbols. Nizami's classic was still being recited and memorized by learned aristocrats at the Safavid court who would have been familiar with the story, its metaphors and characters. Though in past centuries the woolen cloak served as the signifier of spirituality by outcast ascetics, in the Safavid period, mainstream society attempted to preserve the ascetic tradition by wearing

depictions of Majnun while still indulging in luxurious silk cloaks. Figural silk cloaks with Sufi imagery become the new dervish cloak, indicating a new layer in the stratified Iranian society: the mystic gentleman.

The Safavid rulers celebrated their Sufi heritage, creating a new era in which esoteric mysticism, formerly persecuted under previous governments, became mainstream.¹² Sufi literary symbolism, based on the works of medieval authors, became more established in the decorative arts in the fifteenth through seventeenth centuries due to the open practice of Sufi and Shi'a practices among the Safavids.¹³ Sufism's increasing popularity during the reign of Shah Abbas (r.1587-1629), a practicing Sufi, changed the face—and dress—of Iranian culture.¹⁴

Figural silk cloaks are also depicted in miniature paintings from the mid-sixteenth century, and are complemented by a relatively large group of extant silk fragments (figures 5 and 6).¹⁵ The research to date pertaining to this group of luxury textiles has focused primarily on the technically advanced weave structure, without extensive commentary on the narrative content and its potential to reveal the inner self of the wearer. The selection of the figural silks for use as apparel cloth is in direct correlation to the construction of personal identity through dress.¹⁶

The figural silks represented a new freedom of expression promoted by the Safavid rulers to establish a strong Iranian identity after centuries of suppression by non-indigenous conquerors. Not only did the wearing of garments promote one's individual identity and status to others within Iranian culture, the depiction of contemporary economic, political, and social events on the garments served as a conduit for cultural

transmission of the rejuvenated national identity to the world at large. Shah Abbas welcomed Western Europeans to his court for the purposes of establishing commercial alliances, including the export of raw and woven silk, exposing them to this national identity. In addition, technological advances in the silk weaving industry allowed the Iranians to create detailed imagery that specifically communicated their unique heritage to the international community.

Contextualizing Figural Silks

The study of Safavid textiles as art objects is a relatively new phenomenon. In 1939 Arthur Upham Pope and Phyllis Ackermann published the first volumes of the comprehensive *Survey of Iranian Art* the most comprehensive history of Iranian textiles to date.¹⁷ Ackermann also published two biographical accounts of the Safavid master weaver, Ghiyath al-Din Ali of Yazd.¹⁸

According to Ackerman, Ghiyath, as the celebrated designer of several signed figural textiles, was also a wit and poet who was well versed in Nizami's work. Ghiyath set the design trends in his hometown of Yazd, a city in central Iran known for its brocades, located east of the Safavid capital at Isfahan. The narrative designs of Ghiyath and his imitators dominated the motifs in figural textiles, following a figural trend of prisoner designs that are dated to the time of Shah Abbas' grandfather, Shah Tahmasp (r. 1524-1576).¹⁹ The popularity of figural designs continues into the first quarter of the seventeenth century in Isfahan but changed character under the direction of Abbas' court painter, Riza-i Abbasi, whose workshop produced cartoons for the textile industry.²⁰ The Abbasi designs were based on album pages featuring large-scale idealized youths.²¹

Despite the enthusiasm of early twentieth century collectors, scholarship with regard to this particular genre waned until 1987, when an exhibition of The Textile Museum's Safavid and Qajar textiles in Washington D.C inspired another wave of interest. The catalogue for the 1987 exhibition, *Woven from the Soul, Spun from the Heart* edited by Carol Bier, was the first publication in over thirty years to feature and examine Safavid figural cloth.²² Bier also authored *The Iranian Velvets at Rosenberg*,²³ a historical and technical analysis of Safavid figured velvets in Copenhagen's Rosenberg Castle. More recently, in 2003 the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford published conference proceedings researching the court arts of early Safavid Iran in concurrence with the exhibition *Hunt for Paradise: Court Arts of Safavid Iran*,²⁴ curated by Sheila Canby of the British Museum and sponsored by the Asia Society of New York.

A great deal of scholarship precedes this study and has been invaluable to the thorough research of this genre. Milton Sonday, whose technical analyses of lampas-woven cloth is unparalleled, joins Bier as leaders of the late twentieth century study of Safavid textiles, and continue their work in weave analysis into the twenty-first century. In the U.K., Patricia Baker devotes a chapter in *Islamic Textiles* on the unique place of Safavid textiles in the history of Islamic cloth, drawing upon the many examples in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London.²⁵ Jennifer Scarce's diligent studies of costume, dress and their depiction in miniatures, in *Women's Costume of the Near and Middle East* and other publications, is also an invaluable resource.²⁶ Jon Thompson also offers an excellent study of Safavid carpets in comparison to silk produced for apparel and furnishings.²⁷ Recent publications in English by Iranian curators, archaeologists and art

historians such as *The Splendor of Iran* are also an invaluable resource for Western scholars examining the history of the arts of Greater Iran.²⁸ General studies analyzing the importance of the decorative arts in the Safavid period include prominent scholars whose publications have allowed rare figural examples in private and public collections to remain accessible to modern-day research.²⁹

Safavid silk figural textiles are acknowledged as a product of a golden age in the history of the medium, and are recognized in larger studies of Safavid art. The significance of the narrative iconography and the importance of poetry as a resource for the decorative arts, and particularly textiles, are included in the discussions in *Woven from the Soul, Spun from the Heart*, catalogue for the 1987 exhibition of Safavid and Qajar textiles at the Textile Museum, edited by former curator Carol Bier.³⁰ The publication and success of Elizabeth Wayland Barber's publications, *Prehistoric Textiles* and *Women's Work*, also furthered the use of textile iconography, particularly garments, as a tool for deciphering social clues.³¹ Barber analyzes the development of textile production from prehistoric times on a technical as well as a contextual level, and addresses the issue of dress as a transmitter of social information and representations of cultural beliefs. While Barber focuses on Eastern European and Mediterranean textiles, this study will apply the same type of analysis to the study of Safavid figural silks, examining the function of the imagery as an expression of personal and cultural identity.³²

While commentary on the narrative scenes in Safavid figural silks in past exhibition catalogs describes the stories and characters depicted, there has yet to be a

more exhaustive inquiry as to what appealed to the consumers, and exactly who they were.³³ Ultimately textiles produced by the industry for distribution must follow the simple rule of supply-and-demand, and judging from the number of extant fragments in this genre, figural silks were in fairly high demand and held in high esteem. Additionally, the use of these textiles as a tool for impression management will be addressed with regard to the content of the stories and the social context in which they were produced and displayed. Literary accounts of Europeans who visited the Safavid court also illuminate the relationship between East and West, and offer a different vantage point on the aims and views of Shah Abbas.

Ironically, the majority of publications and holdings of Safavid Iran's signature silks are products of scholarship and museum collections in the Western hemisphere, the largest collection of which is in the Textile Museum in Washington, D.C.³⁴ The trend for collecting textiles and other decorative arts for the purpose of creating institutions for education and display is concurrent with the founding of nearly every major museum's collection of Near Eastern and Islamic art in the Western hemisphere.³⁵ When the British Museum opened in 1759 as the first "national" museum, a small Islamic collection was already in place. The development of the field of archaeology in the late nineteenth century led to the looting of much of the Eastern world's rare and valuable works, from architecture to decorative arts, which comprised the major European collections in London, Berlin, Vienna, St. Petersburg and Paris.

Literature Review: Contextualizing Eastern Art for the Western World

American museums developed their own Islamic collections soon thereafter. Concurrent with the founding of The Textile Museum,³⁶ the Freer Gallery of Art at the Smithsonian Institution had a significant Islamic collection in at its founding in 1923, which was carefully documented under Richard Ettinghausen's curatorship (1944-67). The Freer Gallery is adjacent to the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, which had purchased the Vever Collection in 1986 adding 500 superb Islamic paintings and calligraphic works to its holdings.³⁷ In 1932, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (founded 1870) added a Near Eastern collection headed by Maurice S. Dimand, which included a large number of Iranian rugs and a smaller collection of textiles. Other significant U.S. collections include the Boston Museum of Fine Art; the Fogg Museum in Cambridge, Massachusetts; the Cleveland Museum of Art in Ohio; the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in California; and others.

The interest in Islamic and Near Eastern artifacts in the last quarter of the nineteenth century was propagated by several international exhibitions, mostly featuring pieces lent by Islamic countries or European private collectors. The *Exposition Universelle* in Paris in 1867 was the first to feature an exclusive Islamic platform, in which Iranian objects were increasingly esteemed. In 1876 the South Kensington (later the Victoria and Albert) Museum in London arranged the *Exhibition of Iranian Art*, which displayed items recently acquired for its collection through the activities of Robert Murdoch Smith, the director of the Iranian Telegraph Department, based in Tehran. The *Exposition Universelle* in Paris in 1878 also featured national displays with Islamic

pieces from several private European collections. *Iranian and Arab Art*, an exhibition of more than 600 items held at the Burlington Fine Arts Club, London, in 1885, also gathered together for the first time pieces from private collections in Britain and included several Safavid silks.³⁸ The first exhibition in Paris devoted solely to Islamic art was the *Exposition d'Art Musulman*, held in 1893 at the Palais de l'Industrie, which displayed over 2500 objects; and in 1880 and 1891, Vienna hosted impressive exhibitions of pile carpets. Private collectors such as Friedrich Sarre and Friedrich Robert Martin³⁹ began to exhibit their own collections in Berlin and Stockholm, respectively, in the last decade of the century.

American financial leaders, who were considerably less knowledgeable but wealthier than the Europeans, would soon emulate the collecting trend across the Atlantic. Armenian antiquities dealers Khan Dikran Kelekian and Hagop Kevorkian functioned as liaisons with collectors who admired the Eastern aesthetic and craftsmanship and were looking to invest in art.⁴⁰ Among the decorative objects most desired were rare fragments of Iranian sixteenth- and seventeenth-century figural silks, which started appearing on the Paris art market in the late nineteenth century and into the first quarter of the twentieth century. American collectors such as Mrs. W. H. Moore and Miss Lillie Bliss were among the big name customers to purchase the lampas satins, velvets, brocades and double-cloth in record time, and went on to found major collections.⁴¹ It was a good investment—the inherent beauty and revelatory technical achievement of these textiles insured their value in the history of decorative art.⁴²

NOTES

¹ Mary Anderson McWilliams, Carol Bier, ed., *Woven from the Soul, Spun from the Heart* (Washington D.C.: Textile Museum, 1987), 188.

² The legend of Layla and Majnun, an Arab Bedouin folktale about forsaken young lovers separated because of the open lamentations of the young man Majnun for his beloved Layla, originated as an oral tradition dated as early as the latter half of the seventh century. The legend became indoctrinated into Iranian literature by Nizami Ganjavi in 1188, and subsequently became one of the classics of Iranian medieval literature. For further information, see Nizami, trans. Rudolph Gelpke, "Layla and Majnun" (New Lebanon, NY: Omega Publications, 1997), xi-xvii.

³ Carol Bier, "Legacy of Collector George Hewitt Myers," *Arts of Asia*, vol: 26 (1996), 58 -65.

⁴ Phyllis Ackerman, "Ghiyath, Iranian Master Weaver," *Apollo*, Vol.18, (1933), 252-256; Ackerman, "A Biography of Ghiyath the Weaver," *Bulletin of the American Institute for Iranian Art and Archaeology*, Issue 7 (1934), 9-13. The word "donned" is defined: verb (used with object), donned, don-ning; to put on or dress in: to don one's clothes. [Origin: 1560-70; contr. of dol + on; cf. doff]. See Dictionary.com < <http://dictionary.com/> > 7.5.07

⁵ The term "figural" indicates the use of the human figure as a main design component. Additional terminology denoting this group of textiles includes "figured" or "personnage" cloths. Occasionally the term "figured" will also indicate the use of any live creature, such as animals or mythological creatures, as the main design element, in addition to indicating the use of the human figure.

⁶ The group of "prisoner" silks, dated during concurrently with the latter half of the reign of Shah Tahmasp (r.1524-1576) has been thoroughly examined by Mary Anderson McWilliams, "Prisoner Imagery in Safavid Textiles," *Textile Museum Journal*, Vol. 26 (1987): 4-23.

⁷ "Layla and Majnun" (1188) is one of poet Nizami's great works, contained in the *Khamasa* (Quintet), a collection of five epic poems in Farsi. For a summarized English translation of the stories from the *Khamasa* of Nizami, see Peter J. Chelkowski, *Mirror of the Invisible World: The Khamasa of Nizami* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1975).

⁸ Nizami, trans. Gelpke, vii-viii.

⁹ Jonathan Bloom and Sheila Blair, *Islam: A Thousand Years of Faith and Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 142.

¹⁰ For a summary of the medieval dervish tradition, see Ahmet T. Karamustafa, "God's Unruly Friends: Dervish Groups in the Islamic Later Middle Period 1200-1550," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London*, Vol. 59, No. 1 (1996), pp. 152-153.

¹¹ The relationship between mystic poetry and the practice and persecution of Sufism during the thirteenth century is one that is symbiotic: the dervishes were chanting the works of poets who were in Sufi orders, who in turn were lamenting and immortalizing the suffering of their saints and martyrs. See the Introduction by Dick Davis and Afkham Darbandi, trans., Farid ud-Din Attar, *The Conference of the Birds* (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 1984), 9-26.

¹² The Safavids were the second of only two indigenous Shi'a dynasties to rule Iran. See Roger Savory, *Iran under the Safavids* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 30.

Shi'a Muslims are those who believe that the caliphate, following the death of the Prophet, should have been directly handed to Ali (AS), the son-in-law and cousin of the Prophet, instead of being handed first to Abu Bakr and then to Omar, who are seen as having usurped the position from its rightful possessor, Imam Ali. Ali's son, Hossein, who was martyred at Kerbela, reportedly married the daughter of the last Sasanian King, uniting the Arab and Iranian cultures and establishing Iran as the home of the Shi'a sect.

¹³ The ideology of the Shi'a Iranians set them apart from the rest of the Islamic world in many ways, along with the prehistory of Iran, codified by eleventh century poet Firdosi in the *Shahnameh*, the national epic of Iran. The dual identity of pre-Islamic Iran and Shi'ism separated the Iranians from the rest of the Islamic world. A great aid to understanding the relationship of esoteric Islam to the arts comes from the essays by Seyyed Hossein Nasr, esteemed contemporary Iranian scholar on Sufism and professor at George

Washington University in Washington D.C. Dr. Nasr writes extensively of the relationship between artist and Sufi practices. See Nasr, *Sufi Essays* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd, 1972), 100.

¹⁴ Nasr 1972, 43-51, and Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1987), 87-97.

¹⁵ For a miniature painting depicting a seated young man in a figural cloak, see figure 2, "Young Prince" by Muhammad Haravi; Freer and Sackler Galleries (F1937.8), Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C.

¹⁶ In contemporary psychology, the construction of identity through dress and other external factors is referred to as "impression management." See: Barry L. Schlenker, *Impression Management* (Monterey: Brooks/Cole Publishing Company, 1980); and Joanne Finkelstein, *The Fashioned Self* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991).

¹⁷ Arthur Upham Pope, editor; Phyllis Ackerman, assistant editor, *A Survey of Iranian Art from Prehistoric Times to the Present*, Vol. III, "Textiles and Decorative Arts," (London, New York: Oxford University Press, 1939-1953).

¹⁸ Phyllis Ackermann, "Ghiyath, Iranian Master Weaver," *Apollo*, Vol.18, (1933): 252-256; and Ackerman, "A Biography of Ghiyath the Weaver," *Bulletin of the American Institute for Iranian Art and Archaeology*, Issue 7 (1934), 9-13.

¹⁹ For a complete analysis of woven techniques and ideological implications of the prisoner genre of silks, see McWilliams 1987.

²⁰ Anthony Welch, *Shah Abbas and the Arts of Isfahan* (New York: Asia Society, 1973), 11.

²¹ For examples of Riza Abbasi's painting styles, see Sheila R. Canby: 'Art and Time in the Work of Riza', *Iranian Masters: Five Centuries of Painting*, ed. S. R. Canby (Bombay, 1990), pp. 71-84.

²² Carol Bier, ed., *Woven from the Soul, Spun from the Heart* (Washington D.C.: The Textile Museum, 1987).

²³ Carol Bier, *The Iranian Velvets at Rosenborg* (Copenhagen: De Danske Kongers Kronologiske Samling, 1995).

⁴² Sheila Canby and Jon Thompson, ed., *Hunt for Paradise: Court Arts of Safavid Iran* (New York: Rizzoli, 2003).

⁴³ Patricia L. Baker, *Islamic Textiles* (London: British Museum Press, 1995).

²⁶ Jennifer Scarce, *Women's Costume of the Near and Middle East* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1987); also see "Through a Glass Darkly? Safavid Fashions of the Sixteenth Century," in Canby and Thompson 2003, 319-26.

²⁷ See Jon Thompson, "Early Safavid Carpets and Textiles" in *Hunt for Paradise: Court Arts of Safavid Iran*, ed. Sheila Canby and Jon Thompson, (New York: Rizzoli, 2003), 271-318.

²⁸ "Greater Iran" is the geographical region comprising modern-day Iran, as well as the majority of Afghanistan and Uzbekistan, as well Southeastern Turkey, Northwestern Pakistan and Eastern Iraq, all of which have been incorporated into the borders of Iranian rule throughout history. For an inclusive survey of textiles from the region of Greater Iran, see Zohreh Roufar, "Applied and Decorative Arts" in *The Splendor of Iran*, ed. N. Pourjavady, Vol. III (London: Booth-Clibborn Editions, 2001).

²⁹ Leading scholars in the field of Islamic art include: Richard Ettinghausen, Oleg Grabar, Sheila Canby, Priscilla Soucek, Robert Hillenbrand, Stuart Cary Welch and Anthony Welch, Sheila Blair and Jonathan Bloom, and the aforementioned Pope and Ackermann.

³⁰ Bier, ed. 1987.

³¹ Elizabeth W. Barber, *Women's Work* (New York: Norton, 1994) and *Prehistoric Textiles* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

³² See Elizabeth Wayland Barber, *Women's Work* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1994), Chapter 5, "More than Hearts on our Sleeves," 127-46.

³³ See Bier 1987; also *Woven Treasures of Iranian Art* (Exhibition: Los Angeles County Museum, April-May 1959).

³⁴ Bier 1996, 58-9.

³⁵ Bier defines Myers as a connoisseur rather than a collector, with the specific aim of educating the public, and not just a personal desire to possess the objects. See Bier 1996, 63.

³⁶ George Hewitt Myers (1871-1957) was born into the Bristol-Myers fortune and began his collecting career with a few rugs in his dorm room at Yale (so the legend goes), and became a serious collector of Oriental carpets and textiles from 1909, founding the Textile Museum in Washington D.C. in 1925. See S. P. Collins: 'George Hewitt Myers, 1875-1957', *Hali*, xxvii (1985), 6-7.

³⁷ Arthur M. Sackler (1913-1987) was an American psychiatrist who started collecting Asian and Near Eastern art in 1950, and eventually funded the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery at the Smithsonian Institution to house his Islamic collection. The Sackler Gallery purchased the Vever Collection through Sotheby's in 1986. Milo C. Beach, "Vever, Henri C." Grove Art Online. Oxford University Press, [7.27.07], <http://www.groveart.com.libaccess.sjlibrary.org>

³⁸ A.J.B. Wace, "Some Iranian Silks at Burlington House," *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs*, Vol. 58, No. 335 (Feb. 1931): 67-8, 72-5.

³⁹ F.R. Martin (1868-1933) was a Swedish-born diplomat, scholar, collector and dealer of Near Eastern art. He is best known for his collection of Oriental rugs, and authored *A History of Oriental Carpets before 1800* as well as the comprehensive *Figurale Persische Stoffe aus dem Zeitraum 1550-1650* (Stockholm, 1899), which lays the foundation for knowledge of Iranian Figural Textiles.

⁴⁰ Khan Dikran Kelekian (1863-1951) was an Armenian American who was at one time a US diplomat to Turkey. Kelekian opened galleries in Paris and New York during the 1890s, joined by his son Charles Dikran Kelekian (d 1981) in 1918. The Kelekians collected Iranian miniatures, Chinese art, carpets and Islamic pottery. Hagop Kevorkian was an Armenian collector whose collection of Middle Eastern antiques was derived from his experience as an archaeologist in Iran in the 1920s. Pieces from his collection were sold at auction in 1929 at the Anderson Gallery in New York.

⁴¹ Miss Lillie Bliss (1864-1931) was born into an affluent American family and became an avid collector of modern art. She was one of the founding members of the MOMA in New York. Though she is best known for her early modern collection, she also possessed some of the most beautiful silk figural pieces published in Pope's *Survey of Iranian Art* (London, New York: Oxford University Press, 1938-1953), vol. III, "Textiles and Decorative Arts." See *Memorial Exhibition of the Collection of the Late Miss Bliss* (exhibition catalogue, New York, MOMA, 1931); also S. C. Welch and others: *The Emperor's Album: Images of Mughal India* (New York, 1987).

⁴² These techniques are among the most complicated and advanced weave structures in the history of textiles. For detailed descriptions of the weave structures and corresponding terminology, see appendix A.

Chapter One

Dervish Silk

Safavid figural silks were significant as an international luxury item, and as a symbol of Iranian identity. In her influential essay, “The Draped Universe of Islam,” Lisa Golombek wrote: “Clothing provided the opportunity for an individual to emphasize any chosen aspect of his inner or outer state at any given moment.”¹ The cloak, or outermost garment, became the tool for impression management.² The role of garments as a means for expressing the internal condition of the wearer is the core of this study, focusing on the narrative group of figural silks.

Impression management is a contemporary term used by psychologists, referring to the attempt by an individual to influence others’ perceptions of them through external factors, particularly dress. Clothing serves as a window that conceals the physical body, but reveals the internal self.³ The fashioning of the external self also allows the wearer to present not only his inner character, but also the character he wishes to become. Thus, depicting one’s role model on the figural cloak suggests a connection between the characteristics of that role model, such as Majnun, and the wearer of the garment.⁴

In keeping with the definition of impression management, figural silks served the function of representing the person who donned these garments made of figural cloth.⁵ Annemarie Schimmel, renowned scholar on Sufism and Sufi poetry, observes: “To put on a new garment [in the Islamic tradition] is equivalent to changing one’s personality...mystics in all religious traditions have experienced something that seemed to them, expressed in human images, like being ‘clad in God’ or in His grace.”⁶ The role

of the cloak as a link to the celestial, as well as the poignancy of figural garments as tools of self-expression, is compounded by their delicacy and worth as objects.

Affluent Iranians gravitated toward beauty and fine objects, emulating the luxury of the Safavid court. The court of Shah Abbas was resplendent with silk carpets and gold brocade textiles used for everything from *soffreh* cloths to garments and turbans.⁷ Shah Abbas actively sought diplomatic alliances with European heads of state, and strove to present an exterior façade representing the wealth and power of his court.

However, the Safavids, whose claim to the throne was their connection with the Shi'a lineage of the prophet, also had the moral responsibility to express piety and humility.⁸ This dual identity, as wealthy self-governing empire and humble servants to their religion, created a paradox in the court culture of late sixteenth and early seventeenth century Iran. Shah Abbas in particular aspired to impress European visitors at his court, who compared the Safavid luxuries with their own. This desire to impress was juxtaposed with his obligation to follow the humble example of Imam Ali and the lineage of Shi'a successors. This paradoxical philosophy provided the foundation for the development of a new genre in garments—dervish silk.⁹

The expression of ideology through the external medium of dress, such as dervish silk, was not a new phenomenon in the history of Islamic dress, nor specific to the Safavids. In the Islamic world, the level of humility expressed by the ruler was dependent on his attire: the pious gravitated towards less tailored garments with austere unpatterned fabrics, while the more ostentatious metal-ground silks were donned by those

who were known as being less observant. The piety of the ruler, therefore, affected his dress, and the fashions permissible at court.

The use of luxury textiles and apparel was outlined in numerous *hadith*--canonical sayings of the Prophet and his successors--with regard to context. The sixth Shi'a Imam, Jafar al-Sadeq, is documented in the *hadith* as having worn fine textiles as his outer garment, while wearing scratchy wool undergarments beneath this luxurious exterior. When confronted on this practice, he replied that his goal was to represent the strength and wealth of the newly established Muslim rulers, while also maintaining his inner piety. He justified his use of luxury silk by focusing on the discomfort of the inner garment, which represented the cage of the human body and the earthly world, reminding him of the fleeting nature of temporal existence.¹⁰

Neighboring Islamic lands had a similar dilemma as the Safavids, having to balance the desire of court display with their necessity to establish a pious persona. The Ottoman Turks produced some of the finest velvets at workshops in Bursa and Istanbul, particularly under the reign of Suleyman (r.1520-66), and yet also prided themselves on their austere dress—characterized by the absence of figures on their silk garments.¹¹ Figural representation in Sunni, such as Ottoman Turkey, was considered heretical and was an issue debated for centuries by the *'ulema* (scholars of Islamic teaching).¹² From the latter half of the seventh century, following the conquest of the Middle East by the Arab Muslims, sumptuary laws based on *shari'a* (rulings by religious leaders) were enforced in order to control the depiction of human figures.

In addition to the display of dervish silk in Iran, the Safavids exhibited other external symbols of piety in their dress. The Safavid *taj*, a turban comprised of twelve folds of white cloth over a spiked red skullcap made of felt, represented conviction to the Twelver Shi'a belief system, and became a political as well as a religious statement during the reign of Shah Tahmasp (1524-1576). The style of this turban is used for the majority of figures in commissioned manuscripts, regardless of the nature of the character depicted, and is seen as a representation of contemporary convictions through dress in Safavid narrative illustrations.¹³

The fashion trends reflected in the decorative arts were popular at the Safavid court; however, Shah Abbas himself was never documented in visual or literary sources as having worn figural silk garments. Pietro Della Valle, an Italian explorer who traveled to Iran in the late sixteenth century and met with Shah Abbas at his court, recorded his observations on the dress of the monarch:

Except on state occasions, he dressed inconspicuously and discouraged ostentation in the dress of others. When campaigning, he wore 'red twill and cotton only, going poorly clad and even wearing rope shoes...He is very easy and free in his movements...and gives audiences in all sorts of places and even in his shirt and drawers.'¹⁴

However, it is clear from miniatures and extant fragments that figural silks were still in high fashion at the court. This leads one to the conclusion that Shah Abbas, while frowning upon this luxury cloth for himself, was not opposed to its use and display at the court, and later encouraged its manufacture for export on the international market.¹⁵

Shah Abbas' actions and decisions affected the whole of Iranian society, from the court circles to the outskirts of the country, sending out a message that humility was to be

the standard. In contrast, the ambitious monarch also sent out a message that the Safavid court would not express itself to the world with a shabby external persona by adopting a more impressive style on state occasions. This juxtaposition bred the new genre of dervish silk.

In addition to depicting narrative scenes on cloth, text was also used to embellish Iranian garments. During the Safavid era, the practice of adorning garments with talismanic text was extended to include not only Qur'anic verses, but also verses of mystic poetry. Shah Abbas, following in the tradition of his great-grandfather Ismail who went on military conquests in a tunic inscribed with Quranic verse as a protective measure, also used text as a talisman.¹⁶ Abbas, however, had a ceremonial helmet inscribed with the *Bustan* of Sa'di, a thirteenth century Persian poet, in place of the Quranic verse.¹⁷ This set a precedent that elevated the status of mystic poets to that of an intermediary between the layperson and the Revelation, transforming the poet from inspired muse to instrument of the Divine.¹⁸ It is this elevation of the status of poets that celebrates two of the ultimate poets in Iranian society: Nizami Gandjavi, and Qays ibn Mulawwah, also known as "Majnun."

Poet as Divine Muse: Layla and Majnun

The legend of "Layla and Majnun" is dated as early as the seventh century CE and originates from the Northern Arabian Peninsula.¹⁹ The main characters of Layla and Qays (later surreptitiously nicknamed "Majnun," translated from Arabic as "Madman") are based on actual lovers, believed to have lived during the early Islamic Umayyad era, in the second half of the seventh century CE. There are many versions of the story, with

variations incorporated by the oral tradition in which the tale was handed down for centuries. The goal of the early Arabic versions was not necessarily to produce a narrative, but to record and preserve the poems composed by Qays.²⁰ Originally, the story was referred to in Arabic as *Majnun Layla* meaning “the Madman of Layla,” with Layla being the cause of his insanity.²¹

Although the idea of love-induced madness and the indiscreet, excessive declarations of Majnun was an affront to the early Arabic concept of *adab* (rules for culturally acceptable behavior), by approximately the tenth century the story and its characters had been accepted into the repertoire of Arabic *belle lettres*.²² Majnun’s reputation as a mad lover, pining for his beloved, developed a deeper symbolic representation of the separation of human souls from the Soul of the Beloved, mainly through his role as a poet.²³

Majnun also became connected with alternate religious practices still active in the Arabian peninsula during the early years of Islam, when our protagonist was presumed to have lived. These include occultist practices that use written symbols as talisman. In the Arab versions of the story, Majnun is often drawing in the sand with his finger and chanting Layla’s name, which the Sufis will transform into the practice of *dhikr* (incantation of God’s names in remembrance of him, which leads to a hypnotic, ecstatic state). The connection between writing and talismans also figures into the relationship between the poet and his need to cure his madness by composing poetic verse to cure himself of his madness.²⁴

In 1188 the poet Nizami Ganjavi (1141-1209), commissioned by the ruling shah Akhsitan Shirvanshah, completed his epic romance of “Layla and Majnun.” Written in eloquent verses in medieval Farsi, Nizami codified the Arab Bedouin tale while also presenting the characters in a setting and context appropriate for the Iranian court. Comprising part of the poet’s classic *Khamasa*, a collection of five poetic works, “Layla and Majnun” became a favorite of the literati in the court circles, with several illustrated versions commissioned from the Timurid era (1370-1501) well into the time of Shah Abbas at the turn of the seventeenth century.²⁵

Despite its Bedouin origins and characters, Nizami’s Farsi version added a mystical element to the story that set a new precedent. Ideal mystic behavior in Iranian society was based on the characteristics of the chaste young lovers, particularly the character of Majnun. This ideal was upheld at the Safavid court, verified by the wearing of figural silks depicting Majnun. The burning love that Majnun felt for Layla was a metaphor for the burning love of the Sufi for the Beloved. Emotional love in the physical world became the vehicle for spiritual ecstasy and the ultimate union with the source of good in the universe. Majnun’s suffering came to represent the ultimate Sufi ideal, and Majnun himself became equivalent to an apostle or saint, to which the educated believer would then take on as a personal patron, with the devotional image being depicted on the outer cloak of the believer. In time, episodes from Nizami’s narrative would function on a comparable level with *Sunna* (stories) from the life of the Prophet.²⁶

The connection between Majnun’s role as an inspired poet and mad lover became increasingly vital to the visual arts in the sixteenth century and early seventeenth

centuries. The freeform, uninhibited expression of desire and the longing imposed by separation created an important theme in Iranian culture, expressed in the decorative arts, particularly the woven figural silks so highly prized at the Safavid court.

The relationship between artist workshops and Sufi communities became the driving force behind much of the symbolism that permeates the core imagery of the Safavid era.²⁷ Because the Safavid rulers allowed the open practice of Sufism, mystic culture was expressed throughout the visual language of the court, the urban circles, and subsequently through the Iranian artifacts collected by European visitors while visiting the East.

The symbolism used in the decorative arts depicting the narrative of “Layla and Majnun” comes primarily from Nizami’s poetic metaphors, which enhance the episodes from the original patchwork of vignettes about the character’s real life. The same symbols were utilized in the imagery depicting the couple on the figural silks. These visual symbols include the depiction of a young deer in Majnun’s lap as a symbol for Layla’s innocence, which becomes the identifying factor for the characters on cloth, mirroring late Timurid and early Safavid illustrated manuscripts of Nizami’s text (figures 1-4). Nizami writes of Majnun’s response as he encounters a hunter and his prey in the desert:

Two gazelles had been caught in snares and a hunter was just about to kill the poor creatures with his dagger...Without a word Majnun jumped out of the saddle and handed the reins of his horse to the hunter who, well content with the exchange, mounted and rode away, leaving Majnun alone with the two gazelles. Gently kissing their eyes Majnun sang: *Dark as the night, like hers, your eyes!/ What I have lost you can't return.*²⁸

Majnun, whose memory of love for the black-eyed Layla creates sympathy for the deer, later becomes a veritable beast master, with a pack of wild animals surrounding and defending him. It is this association with animals that will be the identifying symbol for Majnun on textiles in the late sixteenth century, with the gazelle often sitting in his lap or wandering nearby (figures 1-4).

Poetry serves as the resource for many of these visual symbols, which are often derived from double entendres or puns in the language. *Ahu*, the Farsi word for “deer” which includes fawns and gazelles, also contains a second definition for “sin” or “vice.” Therefore, the image of Majnun holding a deer who sits demurely in his lap could also be a metaphor for his spiritual unity with Layla (represented by the deer); and yet also a metaphor of his being spellbound by his *nafs* or physical desires, which the practicing Sufi strives to overcome.²⁹

Donning the Cloak: Layla and Majnun on Silk

The most successful versions of the Layla and Majnun textiles were achieved using the lampas technique, the most commonly used technology for creating figural silks (figures 1 and 2). Lampas weaves effectively consist of a ground cloth in satin or twill with supplementary weft brocade, which allowed for metal threads to float on the top of the cloth, without the expensive gilt threads disappearing to the back of the textile.³⁰

Iranians had been weaving “cloth of gold” or metal-ground textiles on the Iranian drawloom, a multi-harnessed loom that allowed for two warps to be manipulated through a numerical sequence. The sequencing of the threads was controlled at the top of the loom by a “draw boy,” a young apprentice in the textile workshop, who would lift and

lower the warp threads according to the pattern for each design. The repeated motif was mapped out on a grid to determine the numerical and color sequencing.³¹ Keeping a continuous color in the weft also allowed the weaver to disguise the repeated elements with more fluidity, while additional weft threads outlined the figures to create a delicate hand-drawn line.³²

The Safavids were the only weavers to achieve this level of sophistication and specificity in their figural textiles, increasing the value and cost of the textiles and emphasizing the cultural association of dervish silk to Iran. There are two known versions of dervish silk featuring a scene from the “Layla and Majnun” story signed by textile designer Ghiyath.³³ The textiles signed by Ghiyath were minimal in color, usually with a ground color woven in satin, and metallic threads tacked down as supplementary weft brocade (figures 1 and 2).³⁴

A favorite at the court of Shah Abbas, Ghiyath hailed from his native town of Yazd in central Iran, already known for its personage fabrics which featured human figures as the main design element.³⁵ Arthur Upham Pope writes of Ghiyath:

The romance of Layla and Majnun, one of the perennial tragic love-stories of Persia, seems to have especially absorbed this master—who was a poet in his own right as well as draftsman, weaver, entrepreneur, financier, wit, and, at the end of his life, religious.³⁶

The most complete biographical information on Ghiyath comes from Ackerman, who quotes a couplet by the artist in which he admits to wine drinking and womanizing in his youth.³⁷ Though the exact dates of Ghiyath’s life are unknown, he was documented as having been an older, well-established gentleman at the court of Shah Abbas, which

corresponds with the date of the production of the Layla and Majnun textiles (1580-1625).

Ghiyath's interest in this story and its subsequent depiction on silk seems concurrent with the master's change in lifestyle which were executed in the latter part of his life.³⁸ The interest of the designer in Majnun and Nizami's story could signify this transition from hedonism to piety. In addition, Ghiyath's Layla and Majnun designs corroborate the aforementioned paradox at Shah Abbas' court, of a lavish exterior expressing a humble interior. Ackerman writes about the Safavid gentleman in the 1939

Survey of Persian Art:

A Persian gentleman was an amateur in poetry, hence trained to the perception of grace.³⁹ He was a connoisseur of calligraphy, hence exacting in the appreciation of rhythm and flowing line. He was an artist in leisure, which meant long contemplative hours in a garden, so that he felt the beauty of flowers, equally by a pool or on a silk. He was a poet in love, and so sensed loveliness. All this fitted him to require and understand beautiful stuffs.⁴⁰

It is precisely at the intersection of beauty, poetry, and the absent beloved that the Safavid fashion of narrative figural silks takes root. Impression management allowed the person wearing the figural cloak to associate their inner character with the ideal Sufi lover Majnun, while still maintaining the luxury lifestyle to which the Safavids had become accustomed.

Popular motifs on metal ground textiles include flowering sprigs, nightingales, and deer, among other elements of the Sufi symbolic repertoire. A non-figurative metal-ground silk from the seventeenth century at the Textile Museum in Washington, D.C. is

analyzed by Mary Anderson McWilliams in relationship to Nizami's verse, in which the sighing nightingale becomes Majnun, and the flowering rose becomes Layla.⁴¹

The popularity of the Layla and Majnun textiles are verified by additional, unsigned versions of similar scenes executed in silk using different techniques. The first example is a red and white double cloth again depicting Majnun in the wilderness, while he holds his symbolic deer in his lap⁴² (figure 4). Additional design components include a leaping ibex and oversized foliage winding its way vertically throughout the cloth, functioning as a decorative deviant from the repeated motifs. The scale of the figures in this version is small, with Layla measuring only five inches tall standing upright, and seated Majnun measuring three and a half inches. This type of design would require an inherent intimacy between the person displaying the cloth and the viewer. A similar design is also executed in red and white using the double weave technique, with vertical registers featuring Nizami's lovers.⁴³

Another unsigned silk depicting Layla and Majnun resides in the Kier Collection in London, rendered in a fine lampas-woven velvet. In this elegant red, cream and brown composition, Layla has come to greet Majnun in the wilderness and holds her sleeve-covered hand to her mouth as Majnun reaches his hand out to her. This velvet lampas is also dated to the late 16th century.⁴⁴

All of the depictions of Layla and Majnun show a scene that never actually occurred in Nizami's version of the story.⁴⁵ Although Layla and Majnun do arrange to meet on three occasions through intermediaries, there was never a time when Layla

ventured into the wilderness to find her lover with her camel and palanquin in tow. This fictitious scene could, therefore, be interpreted in two ways.

The first is that the designer of the original version that spurred the trend in figural silks depicting Layla and Majnun was not familiar with the story, and mistakenly included details that create a new relationship between the lovers. A closer examination of miniatures from the Safavid period, images do not often correspond with the text they are meant to illustrate. However, Ghiyath and his emulators must have been familiar enough with the story and its Sufi connotations to work out the significant complications of the design. The second, and more likely, interpretation is that the designer was purposefully creating a new event in the story, in the desire to show the union of Sufi-lover and Divine Beloved.

Nizami's mystic rendering of the tale recognizes the cosmic and communal forces that prevent Layla and Majnun from uniting in the physical world.⁴⁶ However, the cloth versions depict a union that supercedes the original story. In donning the cloak depicting the union of Layla and Majnun, the Sufi under the cloak is also uniting with his Beloved.

NOTES

¹ Priscilla Soucek, ed., *Content and Context of Visual Arts in Islam* (University Park: Published for the College Art Association of America by the Pennsylvania State University Press, 1988), 30.

² For the definition of impression management, see Barry L. Schlenker, *Impression Management* (Monterey: Brooks/Cole Publishing Company, 1980); and Joanne Finkelstein, *The Fashioned Self* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), as noted in the Introduction.

³ The “fashioned self” is the image that one presents to the outside world through the choice of garments. Finkelstein 1991, 444.

⁴ Earlier textile historians referred to this type of figural cloth as “personnage cloth.” See Ackerman 1939, 2078.

⁵ Extant examples of Safavid figural garments include a velvet coat given as a gift to Queen Christina of Sweden by the Czar of Russia (ca. 1644, in the Royal Armory, Stockholm); and a lampas-woven overcoat (Hermitage State Museum, Moscow). See Harris 1993, 83; and Scarce, ed. Canby and Thompson, 221.

⁶ Annemarie Schimmel, *A Two-Colored Brocade* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 220.

⁷ Blunt 1953, 145. Della Valle observes the use of octagonal gold brocaded soffreh cloths (cloth floor spreads used for dining purposes), as well as gold and silver plates and serving dishes. Herbert corroborates the proliferation of gold and metal-ground textiles, even for the dress of the pages.

⁸ The theocratic nature of the origins of the Safavid rule, and the Shi’a history, required them to emulate the Prophet and his son-in-law Ali, the namesake of the Shi’a (*shi’at Ali*, the followers of Ali).

⁹ The term “dervish silk” is my own oxymoron, which I define as luxury silks with Sufi imagery. Definitions of the following terms are as follows: a *Sufi* is one who practices the esoteric branch of Islam, called Sufism; a *dervish* is a member of a Sufi community who is postulant to a Sheikh or spiritual teacher, rejecting the luxuries of the physical world in favor of a more ascetic lifestyle; and a *mystic* is a believer who follows an individualized, experiential path to attain the goal of enlightenment or ecstasy.

¹⁰ “Imam Sadiq’s Discussion with the Sufis,” *Imam Reza (A.S.) Network*. [5.20.07], <http://www.imamreza.net/eng/imamreza.php?id=986>

¹¹ Patricia L. Baker, “Islamic Art, VI, 3: Dress,” Grove Art Online. Oxford University Press, [10.10.06], <http://www.groveart.com.libaccess.sjlibrary.org/>

¹² Baker 1995, 16-17.

¹³ For examples of the Safavid *taj* in manuscript painting, see Canby and Thompson 2003, figures 4.11 and 4.13, from Tahmasp’s *Shahnameh*, 93, 95.

¹⁴ Blunt 1953, 152.

¹⁵ Steinman 1987, 72.

¹⁶ The donning of the Quranic text is one that is met with a great deal of debate within theological circles, and the Sunni and Shi’a viewpoints on this practice differ. Islamic law dictates that the Word of Allah is sacred once written, and should not be touched by unclean hands or come into contact with bodily fluids, such as urine, feces or blood. In light of this rule, it seems curious that Ismail and his Turkish contemporaries would wear the Word in the form of a garment, where it could easily become *najis* (unclean); however, a new precedent was established.

¹⁷ Mystic poet Sa’di was born 1213 in Shiraz, Iran but traveled through Anatolia, Syria, Egypt, and Iraq. He returned to his native Shiraz as an elderly man where he died in 1291. His tomb is still a place of pilgrimage in Iran. The *Bustan* (translated “orchard” from Farsi) was compiled in 1257 and is a collection of allegories written in verse demonstrating virtuous Muslim behavior. For an English translation, see *The Bustan of Sa’di*, trans. A. Hart Edwards (London: J. Murray, 1911).

¹⁸ Ismail’s family was descended from Shaikh Safi al-Din, a spiritual leader who lived and worked in the region of Ardabil in Northwestern Iran [modern-day Azerbaijan] in the twelfth century, and from whose name the dynasty takes its name. Safi al-Din was comparable to the illustrious Jalluddin Rumi (beloved thirteenth century poet from Konya, Turkey) in his reputation as a theologian-turned-mystic, and founded a large Sufi order in Ardabil. Bordering Eastern Anatolia, the community was a mix of Iranian and Azari

Turkish blood. Ismail himself was born of a Turkish mother and an Iranian father, and therefore was a viable alternative to step in for the corrupted Central Asian Timurids, who despised Sufism and suppressed Shi'ism. The Iranians had occupied the secondary power level of bureaucracy through three successive dynasties of Turks, and the delicate balance of the two cultures required a leader who had roots in both traditions. Savory 1980, 33.

The main goal of the Safavids was to establish a Shi'a theocracy, often referred to by scholars as "twelver Shi'ism," which was implemented by the founder, Ismail, in 1501.¹⁸ Shah Ismail (r. 1501-1524), great-grandfather of Shah Abbas, was a charismatic young man of fourteen whom the disgruntled Iranian courtiers at the Timurid court declared the country's next ruler in 1499, and acquired territory on military campaigns while clad in a tunic inscribed with Quranic verse.

¹⁹ The term "legend" is defined by Michael Dols in *Majnun: The Madman in Medieval Islamic Society* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), as "an unauthenticated narrative, embroidered with historical material and popularly deemed to be historical", 320.

²⁰ Nizami, trans. Rudolph Gelpke, *Layla and Majnun* (New Lebanon, NY: Omega Publications, 1997), xi.

²¹ See Appendix B for a synopsis of the story of Layla and Majnun.

²² Michael Dols, *Majnun: The Madman in the Medieval Islamic World* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 314.

²³ Dols disagrees with Khairullah's view of Majnun's historical connection with mysticism, and instead argues that Majnun's madness had a purely negative connotation in the Arab versions of the tale, acquiring the mystical element only after Nizami produced his Farsi version in 1188. See Dols, 322-3, which disputes Khairullah's view: As'ad Kahirallah, *Love, Madness and Poetry: An interpretation of the Majnun Legend* (Beirut: Orient Institute, 1980).

²⁴ Kahirallah 1980, 67.

²⁵ For a summary of Nizami's additions and changes to the Arab versions of "Layla and Majnun" see Dols 1992, 322-24.

²⁶ Dols 1992, 322.

²⁷ Though manuscript painting prior to the Mongol Invasion of the mid-thirteenth century is relatively unknown, illustrated manuscripts such as the popular story of Layla and Majnun by Nizami were particularly popular during the Timurid era (ca. 1370-1501), during which members of established artist workshops formed alliances with the Sufi orders. Kamal al-Din Bihzad (1460-1535), a Timurid and Safavid era master painter, utilized Sufi symbolism in his paintings, furthering the relationship with the Sufi order in which he resided. See Ebadollah Bahari, *Bihzad: Master of Persian Painting* (London and New York: I.B. Taurus Publishers, 1996), 45.

²⁸ Gelpke 1997, 69-70.

²⁹ Schuyler Camman, "Religious Symbolism in Persian Art," *History of Religions*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (Feb. 1976), 198. For an example of a miniature depicting Majnun with a deer in his lap, see Bahari 1996, 124.

³⁰ The structure of lampas weaves are described in detail by Milton Sondag in Bier, ed. 1987, 57-83. See "lampas" in Appendix A, *Glossary of Textile Terms*, for a summary of the lampas technique.

³¹ See "drawloom" in Appendix A for a description of this type of horizontal loom.

³² Ackerman 1939, 2079.

³³ For information on Ghiyath al-Din Ali of Yazd, see Phyllis Ackerman "A Biography of Ghiyath the Weaver," *Apollo* 18 (1933), 252-256.

³⁴ See figure 1 for the lampas silk at the Textile Museum in Washington, D.C.; for an additional signed Ghiyath lampas satin textile depicting Layla and Majnun, see Baker 1995, 106-7.

³⁵ Ackerman 1939, 2078.

³⁶ Arthur Upham Pope, *Masterpieces of Persian Art* (New York: Dryden Press, 1945), 186.

³⁷ Womanizing and drinking alcohol are forbidden in Islam, and therefore the repentance by Ghiyath of having engaged in these activities would have signified a shift toward a more pious and orthodox lifestyle. Actual wine-drinking is often confused with spiritual "drunkenness" or "wine-drinking," famous metaphors from Sufi poetry indicating union with the Beloved. Here, Ghiyath seems to be referring to the actual partaking of wine.

³⁸ The red satin lampas silk (TM 3.312) at the Textile Museum in Washington D.C. is dated 1580-1625. Though the exact dates of Ghiyath's life are not known, he was documented by Ackerman as being an older man at the court of Shah Abbas (r.1587-1629) and died sometime during the latter half of his reign. Ghiyath's drawing style and composition also point to the miniature style during the reign of Shah Abbas' grandfather, Tahmasp (r. 1524-1576), whose many manuscript commissions established the trends in sixteenth century Safavid figural art.

³⁹ The importance of familiarity with Persian poetry among the educated classes is a standard that is still maintained in Iran today. There is a party game that Iranians will play in which a group of participants will take turns reciting a line or stanza of poetry which begins with the last letter of the last word of the previous line. Though seemingly childish, this "game" actually demonstrates the importance of mystic poetry within Iranian culture. The emphasis on memorizing passages of Sa'di, Hafez or Khayyam, for young scholars, is comparable to the rote memorization of Qur'anic verses by young theologians in training.

⁴⁰ Ackerman 1939, 2070.

⁴¹ See Mary Anderson McWilliams, Bier, ed. 1987, 176. The Nizami verse reads: In every plane tree the ringdoves cooed their love-stories/ and on the topmost branch the nightingale was sitting/ sighing like Majnun; while below, the rose lifted her head/ out of her calyx toward the bird, like Layla.

⁴² For a description of double cloth, see Appendix A.

⁴³ For a silk double cloth of Nizami's lovers housed at the Musee Des Arts Decoratifs in Lyons, France, see: Baker 1995, 118. This fragment is believed to be from the same workshop as the Layla and Majnun sample. In addition to Layla and Majnun, this textile includes two other pairs of lovers: Khosro and Shirin, and another famous pair immortalized by fourteenth century poet Jami, Yusef and Zuleikha.

⁴⁴ For a reproduction and commentary on the Layla and Majnun velvet fragment, see Friedrich Spuhler, *Islamic Carpets and Textiles in the Kier Collection* (London: Faber and Faber, 1978), 88-9.

⁴⁵ Islamic scholars Mary Anderson McWilliams and Marianna Shreve Simpson in Bier, ed. 1987, 187, corroborate this opinion.

⁴⁶ Various texts include an addendum to Nizami's original epic poem of *Layla and Majnun*, which describes a dream by Zayd, one of the intermediaries, who sees the lovers united in heaven. See Nizami, trans. Gelpke, 174-7.

Chapter Two

The Road Was Paved with Silk

The importance of silk as a major source of revenue for Safavid Iran should not be underestimated.¹ The role of silk in the sixteenth and seventeenth century global economy was comparable to the role of the automotive industry in the twentieth century. The success of the product was determined by the simple rules of supply and demand, steered by economic issues, popular culture and politics. These factors came together under the reign of Shah Abbas, whose aim was to centralize the silk industry in order to strengthen the financial base of the state. Shah Abbas encouraged the export of raw and woven silk, as well as encouraging the Iranians to invest in their country's best asset.² Safavid figural silk garments functioned as status symbols, luxury items, and representations of Iranian identity within and beyond the national borders.

The precious commodity of silk traveled for a millennium along a dusty path known as the "Silk Road," which wound its way through barren lands between the east-west edges of the Eurasian continent. Oasis towns and major urban centers broke the journey into manageable trips for merchants, with many of these trading stops in Greater Iran.³

The area of modern-day Iran was a series of self-governing provinces up until the fifth century BCE, when the Achamaenid dynasty of Darius unified these city-states into an empire. Thereafter, Iran was ruled by several groups including the Medes, Parthians, Sogdians, Lurs, and Elamites, related peoples who came from the Caucasus Mountains and the Eurasian Steppe, and settled in the Iranian plateau. The Iranian plateau was

perfectly situated between east and west, China and Rome. Given its geographic location, the role of Iran in the silk industry during the Safavid era (1501-1722) can be assessed as a continuation of the rich history of the Iranian people as middlemen along the Silk Road.⁴

The Silk Road: Histories, Mysteries, and Legends

The cultivation of silk, or sericulture, is credited to the Chinese, whose royal tombs contain silk gauze dating to 2700 BCE.⁵ For over two millennia, the Chinese kept silk a secret from the *Hu* (Western barbarians). Silk is believed to have reached the Mediterranean in the second century BCE by both land and sea routes, at the instigation of Chinese Emperor Wu-ti, who desired the “heavenly horses that sweat blood” from the Ferghana Valley for his army, which were far superior to the steppe ponies of Central Asia.⁶ In the process of obtaining the coveted horses, certain goods from the West were also added to the list of luxury goods that the Chinese would import; these included lead, Syrian and Egyptian stuffs [woven textiles], Syrian cut glass and crystal, and other items.⁷ During the Han Dynasty (206 BCE-220 CE) jade and silk were the primary materials exchanged between east and west, and silk was a highly coveted item. This miraculous cloth was supple against the skin, dyed easily in a range of colors, and was strong and lightweight, which made it easy to transport across long distances.

During this period that opened the doors to East-West exchange, Iran was a gateway on the Eurasian highway across which luxury goods were traded and purchased. Iran was under the political control of the Parthians (c. 211 BCE-224 CE), who functioned as the gatekeepers on the dusty trail stretching between China and Rome, and

took advantage of their position by heavily taxing the merchant caravans passing through the region.⁸

Silk textiles were traded and sold as luxury items as far west as Rome from the first century BCE. The source of the fiber that created this new textile was a mystery to the Romans, who dressed in garments made of sheep's wool and plant-based linen imported primarily from Egypt. The mystery was compounded by the shock of the Romans at the translucency of garments made of silk, known as in the Hellenistic world as "filmy fleeces," which were considered scandalous attire for decent women. Despite the protests of legislators, who attempted to levy a heavy luxury tax on silk in order to discourage the women in the upper classes from buying it—only driving up the cost of and demand for the seductive cloth. Poet and chronicler Virgil, writing in Rome in the first century BCE, writes of the obscure origins of silk as being culled from leaves or bark, a myth which was propagated in the Western world at the delight of the Chinese, who wished to keep sericulture and silk cultivation a state secret from the *Hu* (barbarians).⁹

The cultivation of silk is dependent on agricultural factors, such as soil and climate. The domesticated moths that create the silk fiber, the *bombyx mori*, feed on mulberry leaves¹⁰ from *morus alba* (white mulberry trees) that are required for the breeding of these worms, and grow well in the mountainous regions of Iran.¹¹ The worms eat mulberry leaves continuously for a period of approximately five weeks until they are ready to spin their silk cocoons, and must be kept warm and dry during this

period. Then the cocoons are boiled to kill the pupa, and the silk is reeled off into continuous threads and washed to prepare it for dyeing.¹²

When the Chinese opened the doors to trade beyond the Jade Gate, they also inevitably opened the channels of communication and immigration. Chinese silk workers immigrated beyond their borders taking their silk and silk-weaving apparatus with them, exposing their knowledge to outsiders. And as the Easterners went west, the Westerners also ventured east. Both the Iranian Sasanians (r. 224- 637 CE) and the Byzantines who ruled the Eastern half of the Roman Empire (founded 324-330 CE) recorded their legendary stories of how they learned the secret of silk cultivation through trade and diplomacy.

In the early sixth century CE, Procopius stated in the *Histories* that two missionary monks smuggled silkworm eggs out of China in their walking staffs to the court of Emperor Justinian (r. 527-65) in Constantinople [modern-day Istanbul].¹³ The cultivation of silk allowed the Byzantine financial independence from their rivals, the Sasanians, who discovered the secrets of sericulture earlier than their neighbors, and were producing and selling raw silk to the Byzantines at a healthy profit. The Byzantines reportedly had their own weaving workshops established to meet the royal demand for silk at their lavish court, and producing fine weaves with complex designs.¹⁴

The Sasanians reportedly learned the skill of breeding silk worms and reeling off the fiber from the cocoons in long continuous threads sometime during the late third or early fourth century, though the exact date is obscure.¹⁵ An equally fascinating legend relates that sericulture came to Iran through a Khotanese princess, whose arranged

diplomatic marriage led her Westward from her home. Unable to bear life in foreign territory without her silk garments, the princess smuggled silkworm eggs out of Central Asia into Iranian territory in her large headdress, bringing over a hundred servants with her to cultivate the thread for her royal wardrobe.¹⁶

From the Sasanian era workshops were established in the Iranian urban centers, which specialized in the production of various types of silk textiles, specifically Kashan for its silk carpets and Yazd for its brocade and cloth of gold.¹⁷ Both cities in the Safavid era became the leaders in the production of figural silks.

Isfahan, which became the capital city of the Safavids in 1598, soon took on a leadership role in the arts, profiting from royal patronage.¹⁸ Textiles produced during the latter half of the reign of Shah Abbas I (1598-1629) ranked as the most expensive in international trade.¹⁹ Iranian textile production had reached its apogee, despite an illustrious history, with its distinctive figural silks.

Iconographic Textiles: Tracing the Origins of Figures on Iranian Cloth

When imagery on textiles serves the function of communicating ideology or beliefs within a specific culture, those textiles are categorized as “iconographic.” In many cases, the iconography also functioned as talismans against spiritual evil and physical harm. The tradition of iconographic textiles for use as garments in Iran is documented as early as the Achamaenid era (565-333 BCE). Though there are no existing fragments of cloth from this era, iconographic garments are depicted in architectural decoration, such as the “Archer Frieze” (Louvre, Paris) from the summer palace of at Susa, dating to the fifth century BCE.²⁰ The archers are depicted in profile,

with long draped garments lined with rosettes, a Near Eastern solar symbol deemed protective and also evocative of the solar deity.²¹

The stone reliefs at the palace of Persepolis (circa 515 BCE) outside Shiraz, Iran contain procession scenes featuring tribute-bearers to King Darius. The garments of the palace guards also contain decorative motifs characterized as solar symbols, in the form of circles, rosettes and semi-circles. Other significant recurring icons on garments are lunar deity symbols, represented by crescents and stars, as well as animal motifs.²² It is not clear to modern-day textile historians whether these designs were achieved using woven or embellished techniques, or if they represent applied metal bracteates.²³

After the downfall of the Achamaenid empire by Alexander the Macedonian (331 BCE) and the subsequent destruction of Persepolis, Iran was ruled by the non-indigenous Seleucid and Parthian Dynasties, and its national identity was obscured. In the third century CE, Ardashir I founded the Sasanian Empire, (220-637 CE),²⁴ heralding a new age in the identity of a centrally ruled state with an emphasis on nationalism. The Sasanian rulers implemented a propagandist campaign, striving to prove themselves worthy competitors with the East-West Superpowers of China and Rome.

Lightweight, easy to transport, and literally worth their weight in gold, silk textiles became both a large export business as well as a convenient way of propagating Sasanian power symbols. For the most part, the Sasanians sought to reconnect themselves with the Achamaenids, the last indigenous dynasty to rule the land, and they adopted many of the symbols that had been in use. Seventh century extant textiles from later in the Sasanian dynasty depict real and mythical animals, such as ducks, elks, wild

boars, and the *senmurv*, paired in floral wreaths or roundels studded with “pearls,” small white circles framing the animals.²⁵ Motifs from the silks are featured on sixth and seventh century stone reliefs and on metal wares of the period as well.²⁶ The significance of each motif stems from astronomical symbols and specific associations with the characteristics of the animals. The garments functioned as identifier, signifier and talisman for its consumers.²⁷

The iconography used in Sasanian silks was propagated on figured silks produced by the Sogdians, people of Iranian origin who settled in the area of Central Asia between the Oxus and Jaxartes Rivers in the third century CE. Known primarily for their role as merchants, these predominantly Zoroastrian people continued the traditions of their Sasanian predecessors, and created an interpretive series of figured silks from the third to tenth centuries CE, when East-West trade was at its apogee.²⁸ Though the Sogdian silks are of a heavier weight and lack the superior line quality of the Sasanian models, they were made in the same weave structure as the Iranian silks.²⁹ The silks were used primarily as kaftans, a long belted crossover coat, as depicted in fresco paintings at the seventh century site of the Sogdian palace at Samarqand in modern-day Uzbekistan.³⁰ Additional depictions of the Sogdian type of pearl roundel textile are in situ at Balalyk Tepe in Central Asia, estimated to be from the fifth or sixth century CE.³¹ The garments adorn royalty and wealthy donors, testament to their worth and value. The figure identified as the ruler Vargoman at the palace in Samarqand is depicted in a garment adorned with talismanic *senmurvs* [royal protective birds] in a latticework frame, while

two figures following him in the procession respectively wear figured garments with ducks holding jeweled pendants in their beaks, and a roundel framed boar's head.³²

The ability to produce this type of figural silk came with the technological advances of the Chinese-inspired Iranian drawloom.³³ The origins of the drawloom, a multi-harness loom that involved a "draw boy" sitting at the top, controlling the sequencing of warp threads, allowed for much greater flexibility with image design. Some sources claim the invention of the Chinese drawloom as early as 1900 BCE, but a specific date is uncertain.³⁴ The use of the drawloom during the Han period, when silks became the main commodity of exchange, brought this new technology West, and is generally concluded to have entered the Sasanian workshops in Susa, [Fars province] in Southwestern Iran.³⁵

The defeat of the Sasanian Empire (637 CE) by the Arab Muslims raised new questions about the context of figurative decorative art in Iran for several centuries.³⁶ The newly established religion of Islam banned the use of human figures in the majority of visual arts in any religious context. However, the figural tradition continued in the secular Islamic realm, evident in figural designs executed in fresco and sculpture in eighth century Umayyad palace compounds, which incorporated figural designs in the Hellenistic and Sasanian traditions.³⁷

However, despite the exclusion of figurative representation in other media within the religious realm, early interpretation of the *hadith* allowed for some latitude with regard to figural textiles.³⁸ The long-standing traditions of talismanic figural silk garments in Iran overrode the Islamic aversion to figures, and various dynasties ruling

Greater Iran took liberties with design to include human figures. In particular, the Buyid (932-1055 CE), Ghaznavid (977-1186 CE) and Seljuq (1038-1194 CE) dynasties rejuvenated the tradition of figural silks, and made an effort to reconnect themselves with former Sasanian glory through the production and adornment of figural silk garments.³⁹ The next flourish of figural textiles was not until the Safavid Dynasty.

The Safavids sought to reconnect with earlier glory periods of Iranian rule by instigating a revival of the decorative art forms and figural motifs from those periods, and took the tradition one step further by adding scenes from poetry and literature, such as Nizami, celebrating Iranian culture and philosophy.

Silk as Commodity: Shah Abbas and the Centralization of the Silk Industry

Prior to the reign of Shah Abbas, raw silk produced in the various provinces of Iran was sold independently by silk breeders to merchants who traveled Westwards and in turn marketed the raw fiber to European silk weaving workshops through Mediterranean ports. However, when the Safavid-Ottoman wars over the territories near the Caspian Sea and the Western border of Iran decreased the supply of silk through Istanbul, trade by sea became a more profitable enterprise. By the early seventeenth century, Shah Abbas had conquered the Caspian provinces producing the bulk of the raw silk, and sent samples of to the West, hoping to entice European mercantile travel through ports on the Iranian Gulf, away from overland trade in Ottoman territory.⁴⁰

Shah Abbas was the first ruler in Iran to centralize silk production and export. He accomplished this by buying the raw silk directly from the breeders for a fixed but steady price, which benefited the producers by providing some financial stability. Abbas also

moved the silk merchants and textile workers from the Northern provinces to new quarters in the capital city Isfahan (est. 1598): New Julfa across the Zayandeh River became the domain of the Armenian merchants, with a separate quarter for the Jewish dyers and embroiderers.⁴¹ Silk weaving workshops were established in Isfahan to provide cloth for the court. By creating a center of textile production away from the Ottoman-Safavid border and closer to the Southwestern ports of Gombroon and Ormuz on the Iranian Gulf, Abbas redirected textile trade to the sea routes that he sought to control.

It was these commercial opportunities that brought the Europeans, particularly the English, to the court of Shah Abbas in Safavid Iran.

NOTES

¹ Linda Steinmann, "Shah Abbas and the Silk Trade," *Bulletin (British Society for Middle Eastern Studies)*, Vol. 14, No.1 (1987), 68-74.

² Steinmann 1987, 69.

³ Greater Iran is defined as modern-day Iran and its adjacent territories, formerly connected under Iranian rule, including modern-day Afghanistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan to the East; on the Western border parts of Iraq; and to the Northwest, Azerbaijan and parts of Eastern Turkey, including Konya.

⁴ The term *Siedenstrasse* (Silk Road) was coined in 1877 by Baron Ferdinand von Richthofer, a German explorer. Frances Wood, *The Silk Road* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 9.

⁵ Wood 2002, 28.

⁶ Han Emperor Wu-Ti needed "Heavenly Horses" to fight back the non-Chinese at the Western borders. The appearance of sweating blood was due to a parasite that affected the horses. Wood 2002, 54.

⁷ Tamara Talbot Rice, *Ancient Arts in Central Asia* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Publishers, 1965), 90-1.

⁸ The Parthians (c. 211 BCE-224 CE) were Iranian people of nomadic origin ruling the Iranian lands, through which the "Silk Road" passed. The Silk Road passed through a great stretch of Parthian-controlled territory, including major cities such as Samarkand, Merv, Nishapur, Qazvin and Tabriz before heading south to Baghdad in Mesopotamia, or North to Trebizond on the Black Sea. The earliest recorded foreign embassy to travel to Iran in pursuit of an agreement regarding silk trade was in 120 BCE, sent by the Chinese. See Steinmann 1987, 69.

⁹ Wood 2002, 30.

¹⁰ Wood 2002, 30.

¹¹ Steinmann 1987, 67-8.

¹² Wood 2002, 30-32.

¹³ Procopius, trans. Claudius Maltreus (Venice: 1729), Lob. IV, cap. XVII, p.212; reprinted in Roy C. Cave & Herbert H. Coulson, ed., *A Sourcebook for Medieval Economic History* (New York: Biblio & Tannen, 1965), 244-5.

¹⁴ Joan Allgrove McDowell, "The Roman Empire" Grove Art Online. Oxford University Press, [7.5.07], <http://www.groveart.com.libaccess.sjlibrary.org/>

¹⁵ Agnes Geijer, in *A History of Textile Art*, (Stockholm: Sotheby Parke Bernet Publications, 1979), offers good evidence from Arab sources for the existence of silk cultivation in Sasanian Persia from the late third or early fourth centuries; see 117-18.

¹⁶ A painted wooden panel found at the site of Dandan-Oilik in Central Asia depicts a Chinese princess with silkworm cocoons concealed in her hair, a woman at a loom, and a four-armed male divinity presiding over the weaving (London, BM, D.X.4) see M. Bussagli: *La Peinture de l'Asie centrale* (Geneva, 1963; Eng. trans., London, 1978), p. 56.

¹⁷ Ackerman 1939, Vol. III, 2089-2094.

¹⁸ The term "figural" is used interchangeably with the term "figured," and the term "personnage" refers to a sub-group with human figures as the main design component. Ackerman 1939, Vol. III, 2073-4.

¹⁹ Figural silks are characterized by complicated cartoons, labor-intensive workmanship, and use of polychromatic silk and metal threads, all of which contributed to the cost of production. Amongst figural silks, velvet was the most expensive and highly prized. For example, the gift of a figural velvet coat ca. 1644 from the Russian Czar to Queen Christina of Sweden, now in the Royal Armory, Stockholm; see Jennifer Harris, ed., *Textiles: 5,000 Years* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Publishers, 1993), 83; also Geijer 1979, 125. For information on the value of Iranian woven figural velvet, see Carol Bier, *The Iranian Velvets at Rosenborg* (Copenhagen: De Danske Kongers Kronologiske, 1995), 13.

²⁰ Iconographic textiles are defined by Mary Schoeser in *World Textiles* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2003), as "[textiles] displaying abstract or pictorial motifs meaningful within a particular culture," 69.

²¹ Florence Eloise Petzel, *Textiles of Ancient Mesopotamia, Persia, and Egypt* (Corvallis, OR: Cascade Printing Company, 1987), 51-60.

²² Neighboring lands also had figural motifs in iconographic textiles. The Pazyryk rug, whose date is disputed but generally accepted as far back as the fifth century BCE, is the oldest extant pile carpet yet discovered. Found in the Altai Mountains of the Siberian steppe in a burial pit, the woolen rug contains a border design of human beings riding on horseback.²² See Ann Farkas, "Interpreting Scythian Art: East vs. West," *Artibus Asiae*, Vol. 39, No. 2. (1977), 124-138. Farkas believes that the figural rug found at Pazyryk was made in Iran and found its way to the burial pit through trade or as a diplomatic exchange, 128.

²³ Petzel 1987, 101-114.

²⁴ Though there have been relatively few Sasanian silks found in modern-day Iran, a large number of silks was excavated at Antinoe, Egypt (1908) and have survived in Church treasuries in Eastern Europe. For examples of extant Sasanian textiles, see Ghirshman 1962, 228-31.

²⁵ The significance and symbolism of pearls in Sasanian Persia is addressed in Johanna Domela Movassat, *The Large Vault at Taq-I Bustan: A Study in Late Sasanian Royal Art* (Lewiston, Queenston and Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 2005), 35-6. The origins of the pearl roundel are obscure, but are most often considered a Sasanian motif, propagated by the Sogdians in the East and appropriated by the Byzantines in the West.

²⁶ Such examples of figural silks can be found on the stone reliefs at Taq-I Bustan in Kermanshah, Iran; for a description of King Khosro's garments, see Movassat 2005, 22-24. For a brief discussion of royal garments depicted on metal wares, see Roman Ghirshman, trans. Stuart Gilbert and James Emmons, *Iran: Parthian and Sasanian Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1962). Taq-I Bustan was on the Khorassan-Baghdad highway, a main thoroughfare for Silk Road travelers, and the trade of textiles and metals also contributed to the popularity of these early figural designs, which were appropriated as far West as Byzantium and as far East as Sogdiana.

²⁷ For a discussion of Sasanian dress, see Elsie Holmes Peck, "The Representation of Costumes in the Reliefs of Taq-i Bustan," *Artibus Asiae*, Vol. 31, No. 2/3 (1969), 101-146.

²⁸ Wood 2002, 25.

²⁹ Angela Sheng, "Woven Motifs in Turfan Silks: Chinese or Iranian?" *Orientalia*, Vol. 30 No. 4 (1999), 45-52.

³⁰ Guitty Azarpay, *Sogdian Painting* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 119.

³¹ Tamara Talbot Rice, *Ancient Arts in Central Asia* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Publishers: 1965).

³² The motifs of the figures in the palace at Afrasiyab are significant in that they show the importance and value of figured silk, as well as the perpetuation of iconography on garment cloth. The duck motif, called *zeniao* by the Chinese and disputed as to its origin (Iranian or Chinese) is a symbol of longevity, while the boar's head is a Zoroastrian metaphor for Verithragna, one of the manifestations of Ahuramazda.

³³ The main difference between the Iranian and Chinese drawlooms for silk production can be found in the inherent structure of the cloth. In the Iranian type, the use of weft thread to form a twill-based pattern dominates, and in the Chinese type, warp-faced satin patterns create the design. For a diagram of the Chinese drawloom, see Harris 1993, 18.

³⁴ Schoeser 2003, 70.

³⁵ It is largely agreed that the technology of the drawloom and the cultivation of silk came to Sasanian Persia during the third or early fourth centuries CE, through Syrian silk weavers who were relocated to the Fars province to establish royal workshops. This evidence is mainly from the Arab writer Mashoudi, who indicates that the silk industry was established under Shapur's reign, but neglects to specify Shapur I (241-272) or Shapur II (309-379). See Geijer 1979, 118.

³⁶ Several examples of figural decorative arts, including textiles, of Sasanian influence and/or manufacture have been found in Egypt and Mesopotamia. See Prudence O. Harper, "A Man's Caftan and Leggings from the North Caucasus of the Eighth to Tenth Century: Introduction," *Metropolitan Museum Journal*, Vol. 36 (2001), 83-88.

³⁷ For examples of early Islamic figural decoration in architectural space, see *Qusayr al Amra* near Amman, Jordan or *Jausaq al Khaqani* in Syria.

³⁸ A collection of the Hadith or canonical sayings of the Prophet contains various versions of the Prophet's opinion of images on textiles: *Al-Sahih Bukhari Volume 7, Book 72, Number 841*: Narrated Abu Talha: Allah's Apostle said, "Angels (of mercy) do not enter a house where there are pictures." The sub-narrator Busr added: "Then Zaid fell ill and we paid him a visit. Behold! There was, hanging at his door, a curtain decorated with a picture. I said to 'Ubaidullah Al-Khawlani, the step son of Maimuna, the wife of the Prophet, "Didn't Zaid tell us about the picture the day before yesterday?" 'Ubaidullah said, "Didn't you hear him saying: 'except a design in a garment?'"

³⁹ For examples of decorative arts from the Buyid, Seljuq and Ghaznavid dynasties, see Ettinghausen, Grabar and Jenkins-Madina, *Islamic Art and Architecture 650-1250* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 116-130. For examples of Medieval Iranian figural textiles, see Pope and Ackerman 1939, *Survey of Iranian Art* Vol. IV, 981-995. The date of Buyid silks, however, is debated in an article by Sheila S. Blair, Jonathan Bloom and Anne E. Wardwell, "Reevaluating the date of the Buyid silks by epigraphic and radiocarbon analysis," *Ars Orientalis*, Vol. 22 (1992), 1-41.

⁴⁰ Willem Floor and Patrick Clawson, "Iran's Search for Silver and Gold," *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 32, No. 3 (Aug. 2000), 347.

⁴¹ Harris 1993, 80.

Chapter Three

Silks Make the Man

Technological advancements in maritime travel in the sixteenth century brought new opportunities for trade routes to shift from land to sea, and the Iranians seize the opportunity to benefit from their southern ports. Shah Abbas intended to make Iran the frontrunner of late sixteenth century maritime trade by taxing every ship carrying luxury goods at the ports of Gombrun and Ormuz in the Iranian Gulf. By relocating the silk industry away from Ottoman borders, Shah Abbas also created a state-run monopoly within the raw silk trade, buying materials directly from the Iranian silk breeders at a fixed rate, and then selling the fibers at a higher rate to Western merchants.

It is these merchants who comprised the majority of the visitors to the Safavid court, toward the end of the reign of Shah Tahmasp (r.1524-1576), and especially during Abbas' reign. European visitors also included missionaries and curious aristocrats, many of whom kept detailed accounts of their experiences in the East and published them later in their homelands. Such travelers include Michele Membré, Venetian envoy to the court of Shah Tahmasp (1539-42); Pietro Della Valle, Italian traveler who spent six years in Iran (1617-1623) and personally knew Shah Abbas; Robert Sherley (1598-1626, intermittently) and Anthony Sherley (1598-1600), both of whom functioned in ambassadorial capacities on behalf of Shah Abbas; Sir Thomas Herbert, a young English courtier who accompanied Robert Sherley on his final journey to Iran before his death (1627-29); Sir Jean Chardin, a French jeweler who sought fortune and adventure in the exotic East on two journeys (1666-69 and 1671-77); and Frenchman Jean-Baptiste

Tavernier (between 1632-1668), to name a few.¹ Though all accounts of foreigners in Iran during the Safavid era are valuable and significant, the story and image of Robert Sherley brings the importance of figural silk to the forefront of consideration, particularly with regard to the issue of identity.

The Sherley Brothers: Merchants, Ambassadors, and Spies

The story of the Sherley brothers is one that has generated a great deal of interest and scholarship.² Anthony and Robert Sherley were the two younger sons of an English landowner, officiate and courtier, Sir Thomas Sherley, whose travels as an English army captain served as a model for his sons, who were also possessed with an incurable wanderlust. The Sherley brothers were sent to the East on the patronage of the Earl of Sussex, who had served with Anthony in the army, and wished to pursue commercial opportunities involving silk trade through Iran.³

When Anthony and Robert Sherley, sent into Iranian territory on the Earl's behalf to pursue this commercial enterprise, entered Qazvin in late 1598, figural cloth had already been in fashion for at least 50 years, as documented in contemporary miniature paintings (Figures 5 and 6).⁴ Both Sherley brothers served in some capacity as ambassadors to Shah Abbas, during whose reign these fine textiles found their apogee. The younger brother, Robert Sherley, was immortalized in his title as "Iranian Ambassador" in Anthony Van Dyck's 1622 portrait, in which he wears a cloak of figured cloth. The portrait of Sherley and his Circassian wife, Teresa Sherley, is at Petworth House in Sussex, England, from whence the Sherleys originated (figures 7 and 8).⁵

The Van Dyck image depicts the Englishman in a gold figural cloak and red turban, representing the height of fashion at the Safavid court, and his wife in a fine gown made of Iranian silk.⁶ Orientalist elements, such as a small monkey and Iranian style bow and quiver, stare out at the viewer from the picture frames. Both portraits were painted in Rome in 1622, when Robert and Teresia Sherley were at the Italian court on an ambassadorial mission on behalf of Shah Abbas. Flemish-born Van Dyck (1599-1640) served as the court painter for James V and Charles I in England, and went on to portray subsequent Englishmen in Eastern attire in several theatrical “swagger” portraits, after the style of the Robert Sherley portrait.⁷

Upon receiving the Sherley brothers in Qazvin, Shah Abbas requested that they come before him in Safavid dress, a request to which they complied. This was a convention in the time of Shah Abbas; in fact, appearing before the Shah in the dress of one’s place of origin was a punishable offence.⁸ Sherley chronicler Davies wrote: “[Shah Abbas] sent word that the English were to ride out to meet him in Iranian costume, which they did. Sir Anthony for the occasion wore a turban worth two thousand dollars... Robert Sherley was attired in cloth of gold [metal-ground silk costume]...and all of the others wore silk and velvet.”⁹ Shah Abbas, pleased with the meeting and compliance of the brothers, held a great banquet in honor of the Englishmen and invited the brothers to Isfahan to discuss the purpose for their visit. On their departure there was a mutual exchange of gifts, including textiles of gilt velvet, carpets and tents.¹⁰

In May of 1599, after the meeting at Isfahan, Shah Abbas sent Anthony Sherley to Rome as his Ambassador, accompanied by two Iranians, for the aforementioned

reasons.¹¹ Robert Sherley and various other members of the English party were left behind—or rather, kept behind as hostages, according to some accounts—until Anthony's return with a favorable reply.¹²

The position of ambassador at that time was quite different than how we view the position today. Accounts from late sixteenth century sources verify the rather tenuous nature of this occupation: if the proposal set forth was not accepted by the sovereign, the messenger—or ambassador—was killed or imprisoned by his host sovereign.¹³ With such high stakes, and given the lengthy and treacherous travel conditions of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the position of ambassador did not have the powerful status that one associates with it today. Anthony Sherley was more of a lavishly paid courier than a royal ambassador; and Shah Abbas made a point of sending two other men from his court to keep an eye on him, which indicated a lack of trust between the two parties.

As it turned out, Shah Abbas had good reason to be suspicious: Anthony Sherley did not stand by his word. He lavishly spent the Shah's money, got nowhere with the Iranian-European alliance, and in fact never returned to retrieve his brother Robert. In the meantime, Robert Sherley was treated tolerably by the Shah, in whose good graces he managed to stay, and adapted himself to Iranian culture.¹⁴ Between 1599 and 1608, he learned the language, served in the army, and married a Circassian lady, Sampsonia (later christened Teresa or Teresia by the Carmelites in Iran), who was a kinswoman to the queen.¹⁵ Based on letters sent from Robert Sherley to fellow Englishmen, he was anxious to venture outside of Iranian borders, and in 1608 the Shah sent Robert Sherley, upon the

insistence of the Carmelite Friars in Isfahan (who interceded on Sherley's behalf) to visit the Pope in Rome, on the same mission as his unreliable brother.

Robert Sherley traveled from 1608-1615 to the various courts of Europe on behalf of Shah Abbas, always with the financial support and a letter of recommendation from his adopted sovereign. Although Shah Abbas seemed to treat the position of ambassador lightly, and simultaneously dispatched several "ambassadors" on the same mission, Sherley seemed to take his position quite seriously, much to the dismay of the European courts who distrusted him. It was unclear at this point as to whether he was Englishman or Iranian, as he always made his ambassadorial appearances in Safavid dress--even in audience with King James in 1612, causing an outrage. The English monarchy no longer knew whether Sherley was doing them a favor by establishing trade alliances, or committing treason by representing another culture through his dress.

When Sherley finally returned to the Shah's court in 1615 after a treacherous journey, the Shah immediately dispatched him again to Europe. It seems that Shah Abbas wanted to keep Sherley occupied far from his court, without actually dismissing him. This second ambassadorial mission spanned 1615-1628, with Robert promoting the same alliances against Turk and Portuguese in exchange for trade routes, and led to the same fruitless results.

Sherley, on behalf of Shah Abbas, had made proposals for maritime trade involving free trade for English ships at Iranian Gulf ports, which had been approved by England's King James before his death in 1625. However his successor, Charles I, nullified any agreement between King James and Shah Abbas via Robert Sherley in favor

of the English East India Company, a royal monopoly formed under Queen Elizabeth ca. 1600 to outrun its competitors—the Dutch and the Portuguese—at sea, creating a state-run industry that would benefit the monarchy rather than independent entrepreneurs. King James sided in 1626 with the proposals of the East India Company, putting Sherley in an awkward position with the Shah and wreaking havoc in the English court.¹⁶

The bitter dispute between the Sherley and the Company turned ugly when the latter unexpectedly brought in their own “ambassador,” Iranian Naqd Ali Beg, who tried to discredit Sherley’s relationship with Shah Abbas. Sherley took several courtiers with him to confront the “impersonator,” Naqd Ali Beg, who tore up Sherley’s credentials and struck him, causing a considerable offence to the English courtiers.¹⁷ Interestingly, Naqd Ali Beg was also documented in his ambassadorial role in a cloak and vest of figured cloth, in a 1626 portrait by Richard Greenbury.¹⁸ The portrait of Ali Beg, as well as a similar portrait of Sherley by the same artist, is owned by the Earl of Berkeley and kept at his estate. Greenbury’s portrait of Sherley also depicts him in full Safavid attire, in a figural cloak and vest. It seems possible that the portrait—much like the papers, untranslated from Farsi, that Naqd Ali Beg brought with him to the English court—was meant to further discredit Sherley in order to replace him with the East India Company’s own representative, Ali Beg.

The level of Shah Abbas’ involvement with East India Company in the sudden appearance of Naqd Ali Beg at the English court is unclear. On the surface, Shah Abbas was able to entertain the interests of multiple parties, without making solid commitments to anyone. His own biographer cites him as being a shrewd and suspicious man, who had

a number of informers within his court as well as abroad.¹⁹ Even his ambassadors, as noted earlier with Anthony Sherley, were not trustworthy, so his suspicions may have been well founded. It is difficult to determine, considering these factors, whether or not Shah Abbas was informed as to the Company's manipulation of Sherley. It seems to correspond with the Shah's reputation that he would have known about the Company's aims to discredit Sherley, but turned a blind eye to them, seeing as Sherley was useful to him only in as much as the English court would cooperate with the trade agreements against the Ottomans and Portuguese.

Sherley, on behalf of Shah Abbas, had made proposals for maritime trade between the English and the Safavids, which had been approved by King James before his death in 1625. However, his successor, Charles I, had a different vantage point and sided with the proposals of the East India Company, putting Sherley in an awkward position with the Shah and wreaking havoc in the English court.²⁰

The bitter dispute between the two parties turned ugly when the Company brought in their own "Ambassador," Naqd Ali Beg, who tried to discredit Sherley's relationship with Shah Abbas. Upon meeting, Naqd Ali Beg tore up Sherley's credentials and struck him, causing a considerable offence to the English courtiers.²¹ Interestingly, this later ambassador was also documented as such in a cloak and vest of figured cloth, in a 1626 portrait by Richard Greenbury.²² The portrait of Ali Beg, as well as a similar portrait of Sherley by the same artist, is owned by the Earl of Berkeley and kept at his estate. Greenbury's portrait of Sherley also depicts the Ambassador in full Safavid attire, in a figural cloak and vest. It seems possible that the portrait—much like the papers,

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The level of involvement of Shah Abbas in these matters is unclear. On the surface, Shah Abbas was able to entertain the interests of multiple parties, without making commitments to anyone. However, his own biographer cites him as being a shrewd and suspicious man, who had a number of informers within his court as well as abroad. Even his “ambassadors,” as noted earlier, were not trustworthy. It is difficult to determine, considering these factors, whether or not Shah Abbas was informed as to the Company’s manipulation of Sherley. It seems to correspond with the Shah’s reputation that he would have known about the Company’s aims to discredit Sherley, but turned a blind eye to them, seeing as Sherley was useful to him only in as much as the English court would cooperate with the trade agreements against the Ottomans and Portuguese.

Sherley never managed to get any of the Europeans to agree to the Shah’s proposals, and Shah Abbas had grown downright bitter, having dismissed Robert Sherley as a good-natured but ineffective man.²³

The Van Dyck portrait, painted in Rome in 1622, was a further attempt for Sherley to solidify his position with the Shah: he has himself painted in the finest Safavid court attire of gold brocade figured silk (figures 7 and 8). Notes from Van Dyck’s sketches of Sherley read, “Persian Ambassador in Rome,” and there is also a note indicating the gold figural textile (*brocade d’oro*) for the cloak.²⁴

The Sherley portrait is significant in that it puts dress at the forefront of identity. In light of the precariousness of his position at the court of Abbas in 1622, it seems

reasonable to assume that Sherley had his portrait painted to immortalize himself in the role of Ambassador, a position that had been under scrutiny by his European contemporaries for many years. This is a point which is most significant with regard to dress: his figural cloth represents the identity of not only himself, but of Safavid Iran as well, in that the ambassador of any country is also its symbol and representative.

Textiles and Diplomacy: The Cloaks Make the Man

The gift of a length or silk or silk garment from sovereign to servant produced in the royal workshops, given as a mark of honor and service, is an ancient tradition dating back to pre-Islamic Iran.²⁵ The Sasanian tradition of the gift of a headpiece and cloak to high-ranking members of the court as a sign of distinction was continued through the time of eighth century. Abbasid caliph Mansur, indicating its absorption into the Islamic courts.²⁶ The concept of dress as a signifier of social rank within the Islamic textile tradition still exists in a diluted form in the Western language. Patricia Baker, in *Islamic Textiles*, writes:

Whenever we refer to a gala occasion, we are using the medieval Arabic word *khil'a*, meaning a valuable or honorific gift, and usually consisting of a costly garment or rich fabric.²⁷

The tradition of wearing an honorific garment when in attendance at the court was still very much in effect during the time of the Safavids, when Robert Sherley and his party were visiting Shah Abbas.

Jean Chardin, who visited the court of Shah Safi II (r.1666-1694), also recorded the Shah's requirement of donning honorific clothing in his presence. Chardin was a French jeweler who approached the Safavid court as a merchant, but also ventured East

in the hopes of collecting sociological and political information, which he later related through French and English publications of his travels:

On the 13th [December, 1671?], in the Morning, Calates were carry'd to all the Ambassadors and Envoys that were at *Ispahan* [Isfahan]. These are (as I have often observed) those Cloaths which the King gives to do Honour to those they are sent to. The First Minister sent them word, to put 'em on, and to come and receive their Audience of Leave, at the House of Pleasure, where the Court was, since its departure from *Ispahan*.

No Ambassador or envoy receives his Audience of Leave, but cloath'd with this Habit; and when it is sent to him, it is a certain Mark that he is going to be dismiss'd.²⁸

Chardin's report of the Safavid court gives credence to Robert Sherley's practice of donning his figured cloaks and gold turbans in his role as ambassador to the Shah. Sherley's attire was a visual signal of his position, and clearly communicated his relationship to Shah Abbas. Though Chardin's report is delivered two generations after Shah Abbas, his description of the quality and worth of the metal-ground lampas silks and velvets corroborates the importance of silk textiles in the identity and diplomacy of Iran.²⁹

Another traveler to the Safavid court, Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, also records his observations regarding dress, honor and expectations at court. Tavernier was a French gentleman who first journeyed East at the age of twenty-five to the cities of Istanbul and Jerusalem. Tavernier would later visit the Eastern nations as an information-gatherer on five subsequent journeys, twice visiting Iran during the reigns of Abbas' successors and being received in audience at the court.³⁰ The dress requirement associated with the Safavid court is confirmed by Tavernier as well, who also remarks on the tradition of a *calaat* sent from the Shah to the visitor, in which the inferior party should appear when in

audience at the court. The richness and quality of the robe indicates the level of respect afforded him by the Shah, and judging by Tavernier's praise of the fineness of his gift, he considers himself held in high esteem.³¹

Europeans sent to the Iranian court had the distinct aim of securing a trade route. The Shah was willing to give them the benefits of this in exchange for an alliance against the Ottoman Turks, sworn enemies of the Safavids, whom the Shah was constantly battling at the Northwestern border near Tabriz. Shah Abbas was faced, therefore, with the problem of sending raw silk—the largest source of national revenue for Iran—overland to Europe without going through Ottoman Turkey. Keeping in mind that it was an ongoing aim of Shah Abbas throughout his reign to accomplish this, and that it took him nearly thirty years of negotiations to reach these aims, the main points of discussion between the English visitors and the Shah at the 1599 Isfahan meeting were simple: the English would go to the various European princes and convince them to ally with the Iranians against the Turks and the Portuguese.

The Portuguese, a common enemy to both English and Safavid, were controlling to the ports of Gombrun and Ormuz in the Iranian Gulf. In 1623, Shah Abbas finally defeated the Portuguese with the aid of the English fleet, taking control of Gombrun—which he renamed *Bandar Abbas*—and reestablishing Iranian control of maritime trade.³²

Figural Silks: Beyond the Borders

In addition to the Sherley portrait, there are additional clues as to the function of figural Safavid silks as an important signifier of Iranian identity, as well as luxury items, outside the borders of Iran. A silk figural velvet coat, sent as a diplomatic gift in the

early seventeenth century from the Russian Czar to Queen Christina of Sweden, now housed in the Royal Armory in Stockholm,³³ is testament to Iran's international reputation for their achievements in the style and production of figural luxury textiles, and points to the status symbol of owning such an item. Europeans who wore or displayed this type of very "Iranian" textile were probably more interested in it as a symbol of their wealth and worldliness, rather than trying to connect themselves with the culture. But this, too, is debatable and totally subject to the individual, as evident in the case of Robert Sherley, who was certainly making an effort to link himself through dress to his tenuous position as Safavid Ambassador.

Contemporary visitors to the Safavid court comment on the use of figural cloth for both apparel and interior furnishings.³⁴ After the fall of the Safavids in 1722, the cartoons and techniques of these textiles disappeared from the European and Iranian markets alike, due to both the loss of technical skills within the industry as well as the decline of exports to the West. Ultimately, the design on the part of the Iranians to create an international trend of figural garments did not take flight beyond its own borders.³⁵

NOTES

¹ For travel literature and references to the court of Shah Abbas written by European visitors to the Safavid Court, see: Jennifer Scarce, "Through a Glass Darkly? Glimpses of Safavid Fashions of the Sixteenth Century," *Hunt for Paradise* (New York: Asia Society 2003), 323; Winifred Blunt, *Pietro's Pilgrimage* (London: James Barrie, 1953), A, 123; D. W. Davies, *Elizabethans Errant* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967); Sir Thomas Herbert, *Travels in Persia* (New York: Robert McBride and Company, 1929); Sir Jean Chardin, *Sir John Chardin's Travels in Persia*, Sir Percy Sykes, ed. (London: The Argonaut Press, 1927); Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, *Voyages en Perse* (France: Les Libraires Associes, 1964).

² For accounts of the Sherley brothers, see D.W. Davies, *Elizabethans Errant: the strange fortunes of Sir Thomas Sherley and his three sons, as well in the Dutch Wars as in Muscovy, Morocco, Persia, Spain, and the Indies* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967); Boies Penrose, *The Sherleian Odyssey, being of the travels and adventures of three famous brothers during the reigns of Elizabeth, James I, and Charles I* (Taunton: Barnicotts Limited, The Wessex press; London: Simpkin, Marshall, Ltd., 1938); and Sir Edward Denison Ross, ed., *Sir Anthony Sherley and his Iranian adventure, including some contemporary narratives relating thereto* (London: G. Routledge & Sons, Ltd., 1933).

³ Davies 1967, 48.

⁴ The silk cloak depicted in miniature "Young Prince" (F1937.8, Freer Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C.) is of the "prisoner" sub-genre, indicating its use as a propagandist tool used during the time of Shah Abbas' grandfather, Tahmasp (r. 1524-76). See McWilliams 1987, 1-12.

⁵ Christopher Brown, *Van Dyck* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), 67.

⁶ For a reproduction of Van Dyck's painting of Teresia Sherley, see Brown 1982, 68.

⁷ Andrew Wilton, *The Swagger Portrait* (London: Tate Gallery, 1992), 17. Wilton describes the "swagger" portrait as one referring to pretension or insolence; later the word develops an association with grandeur (early nineteenth century), and social superiority (late nineteenth century), implying a great degree of self-consciousness on the part of the sitter in which the sitter seeks to communicate something with the community at large, instead of just being a dialogue between the artist and sitter.

This desire to communicate a specific persona to his audience applies to Sherley's portrait as well. There are always a number of interpretations that apply to the image of an Englishman in Eastern dress. With the colonization of [what we now refer to as] third world countries also came a kind of sympathy and acceptance of the local customs. More often than not, young soldiers would go overseas to fight for their country and, if they survived, would settle down and take a bride from the local populous. The inevitable result of procreating with a spouse from a different culture is that it becomes the culture of one's children, and by extension one adapts this culture as well. It is this cultural extension that ultimately creates a position of acceptance for the "other" culture, along with the fact that environment influences lifestyle tremendously.

⁸ Herbert 1929, 231-2.

⁹ Davies 1967, 106.

¹⁰ Davies 1967, 107-8.

¹¹ See Davies 1967, "The Iranian Embassy to the Courts of Europe," 114-140.

¹² Davies 1967, 167.

¹³ Davies 1967, 115.

¹⁴ Though Shah Abbas' fickle and paranoid nature defied a lasting or stable relationship with anyone in his court, Robert Sherley was by most accounts in good graces with the sovereign. Anthony Sherley's conceit and lack of honor was negatively remarked upon in contrast to his younger brother's mild diplomacy and good reputation.

¹⁵ Ibid, 169.

¹⁶ When the English, such as the Sherleys, first entered Iran on their commercial enterprises, it was through privately funded sources. However, towards the end of the reign of Elizabeth I (r. 1558-1603), a royal charter was issued establishing the English East India Company, which allowed for a royal monopoly on the colonization of East and Southeast Asia and India. The implementation of the Company's exclusive

position as traders and usurpers in the region in the successive reign of James I created an inherent tension with these privately funded merchant-ambassadors.

¹⁷ This story is related in Davies 1967, 262-65.

¹⁸ Denis Wright, *The Iranians Amongst the English* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1985), 36. This publication also contains a black and white reproduction of Sherley's portrait, again adorned with a figured cloak and vest, by an unknown artist, housed in Berkeley, Sussex, 35.

¹⁹ There are various eyewitness accounts as to the fickle nature of Shah Abbas. See Della Valle, 153-4; also Monshi, trans. Savory 1978, Vol. I, 529.

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²³ Ross 1933, 132.

²⁴ Brown 1982, 80.

²⁵ Chardin and Tavernier have referred to the *Calaat* as the Farsi term for this cloth. It is probable that this is a transliteration of the Arabic term *khil'a*, which signifies a robe of honor.

²⁶ R.B. Serjeant, *Islamic Textiles* (Beirut: Librarie Du Liban, 1972), 74., The "t" is a possessive ending in Farsi for the second person singular, implying "your robe of honor." Per email correspondence with Carol Bier, July 7, 2007.

²⁷ Patricia Baker, *Islamic Textiles* (London: British Museum Press, 1995), 13.

²⁸ Chardin 1927, 112.

²⁹ Chardin 1927, 277-8.

³⁰ Tavernier 1964, 8-9.

³¹ Tavernier 1964, 127-8.

³² Chardin relates his version of the eventual English-Safavid alliance against the Portuguese, which occurred several years after the Sherleys' arrival in Iran [In referring to the English, Chardin indicates independent agents such as the Sherleys, as well as members sent forth by the East India Company.] Chardin, 100-1: The *English* went for the first time into *Persia*, about the year 1613. They were well enough receiv'd by the *Iranians* at *Bandar-Abassi*. The *Portuguese*, who were sole Masters of the Commerce throughout all the *Indies*, not being willing to share any of these thereof to these new Comers, but on the contrary, being resolv'd to oppose their undertaking as much as they could...*Abas the Great*, the then King of *Persia*, who was very well inform'd of what pass'd among the *Europeans* in those parts, caus'd an offer to be made to the *English*, of the Trade in his Ports of the Continent. He sent them presents: He allur'd some of them to the court, where he carress'd 'em very much; and in fine, in the Year 1620, he engag'd them in a League with him, to drive the *Portuguese* out of the Gulph of *Persia*...That the traffick should be transferred to *Bandar-Abassi*, where the *English* should not only be free from all sorts of Duties, but should likewise have an equal share with the *Iranians*, of all the Customs and Duties laid on goods imported.

³³ Agnes Geijer, *A History of Textile Art* (Stockholm: Phillip Wilson Publishers Ltd, 1979), 125.

³⁴ See Chardin, 277.

³⁵ Per conversation with Carol Bier, December 10, 2006, Museum of Quilts and Textiles, San Jose, CA.

Conclusion

In assessing textiles, one must consider more than weave structure and materials. Although these surface details dazzle the eye, particularly in the case of Safavid figural silks, the real value of studying material culture is its ability to reflect and document the state of mind of a society at a given moment in time. The textiles produced by artisans simultaneously steer trends in social and political thought, while mirroring the current state of affairs. It is the combination of political, economic and socio-religious factors that brought these fine textiles into existence.

Using the language of garments as a tool for impression management, figural narrative silks were the pinnacle of self-expression in Safavid Iran. Given the Sufi underpinnings within the Safavid dynasty, the textiles depicting Layla and Majnun are the ultimate declaration of sympathy for the “madman.” The madman Majnun is a divinely-inspired poet and a role model for Sufi “lovers” who seek ecstasy through the liaison of mystic poetry. Nizami and other mystics created a literary culture in the medieval Islamic period, in which poetry was a premier art form. The link between the arts and the Sufi orders created an esoteric visual symbolism, based on metaphors in poetry and subsequently expressed in the decorative arts.

The figural garments express the realization of this ideal union by relating the characters depicted with the wearer who has donned the cloak. The popularity of Layla and Majnun textiles is a testament to the desire of the Iranian people at the turn of the seventeenth century to present their national identity to the world as mystics who appreciate the finest luxuries, while maintaining their internal piety.

Safavid figural silks obtained their importance as luxury items and symbols of Iranian identity through the relationship of Europeans with the Safavid Court. Robert Sherley's figural cloak, featured in Van Dyck's portrait, provides a glimpse of the internal and external messages this type of textile delivered regarding identity, particularly in light of his need to establish his role as the Ambassador for Shah Abbas. The donning of a figural cloak in Sherley's portrait is a testament to the value of these textiles.

Outside of national borders, silk functioned as a huge source of revenue for the Iranian state, due Iran's historical role in the silk road trade and because of its innate geographical conditions in which sericulture thrives. The Iranians sought to depict themselves through the cloak as their ancestors had done, by using iconographic silks to represent their ideology. The Safavids developed textile techniques that were unparalleled by their contemporaries, and never again reproduced. The quality of figural design compositions, the complexity of the weaving and production, and in particular the narrative subject matter are the features of these textiles that secured them a place in the history of textile design and production.

Appendix A

Glossary of Textile Terms

brocade referring to *textiles* which contain supplemental *weft* patterning, often with metal threads, which are not integral to the structure of the cloth

drawloom upright *loom* that allows for the manipulation of multiple *weave structures* through two or more *warps*. The *warp* threads are attached to *harnesses* which are lifted and lowered by a “draw boy” seated at the top of the loom, according to a numerical sequence determined by the textile designer. Drawloom textiles employ a ground cloth usually woven in *satins* or *twill*, allowing for *weft* threads in silk and metal to *float* on the surface of the ground, thus preserving the more expensive materials from being on the underside of the *textile*

float an unwoven length of thread that sits or “floats” on the surface of a *textile*, which passes over two or more threads between binding points (where *warp* and *weft* threads intersect)

harness the part of the loom which contains heddles holding the *warp* threads in place, and designed to lift the attached threads in sections to regulate the *weave structure* of the *textile*

lampas compound weave characterized by the presence of two interconnected weave structures. *Satin lampas*: type of *weave structure* in which one of the interconnected weave structures is *satins*¹

loom a device used for weaving cloth, designed to hold the *warp* threads under tension to allow for the passage of the *weft* shots, or rows, to be interwoven at ninety degree angles

metal-ground textiles cloth which is designated by its use of metal-foil wrapped silk *weft* threads used as supplementary *brocade*

plain weave see *tabby*

satin *weave structure* in which the *warp* threads dominate the surface of the cloth by means of *floats* to create a dense and smooth surface

tabby *weave structure* in which the *weft* threads go over one and under one *warp* thread, creating a strong and balanced cloth; the simplest pattern of cloth weaving

textile any cloth that is woven (from L. *texere*, to weave)

twill *weave structure* in which the *weft* threads pass over two or three *warp* threads on the surface of the cloth, creating short *floats* on the surface of the cloth

warp threads comprising the vertical element in the grid of a woven textile which is stationary on the *loom* and are lifted and lowered by *harnesses*

weft threads comprising the horizontal element in the grid of a woven *textile*, which is interlaced with the stationary *warp* threads

weave structure term used to describe the interlacing of *warp* and *weft* threads, which are often defined and identified by name; e.g. *tabby*, *twill* or *satin*

weaving the process of creating cloth through the interlacing of *warp* and *weft* threads, usually accomplished through the use of a *loom*

¹ Milton Sondag "Patterns and Weaves: Safavid Lampas and Velvets," (Bier, ed. 1987), 77; and Bier 1995, 98.

Appendix B

Background: The Story of Layla and Majnun

The legend of Layla and Majnun is dated as early as the seventh century CE and originates from the Northern Arabian Peninsula.¹ The main characters of Layla and Qays ibn al-Mullawah (later called “Majnun,” translated from Arabic as “Madman”) are based on actual lovers, believed to have lived during the early Islamic Umayyad era, in the second half of the seventh century CE. There are many versions of the story, with variations incorporated by the oral tradition in which the tale was handed down for centuries. The goal of the early Arabic versions was not necessarily to produce a narrative, but to record and preserve the poems composed by Qays.²

In 1188 the poet Nizami Ganjavi (1141-1209), commissioned by the ruling shah Akhsitan Shirvanshah, completed his epic romance of Layla and Majnun. Written in eloquent verses in medieval Persian, Nizami codified the Arab Bedouin tale and immortalized the characters. His version expanded and combined the Arab versions, and provided a deeper psychological view of the character of Layla than any previous storyteller had done. Nizami also revised the setting of the original story from that of two young shepherds in the desert to young students meeting at school, which better suited the court audience. Significant additions to the story include the inclusion of characters such as: Nawfal, the young prince who wages war against Layla’s tribe on Qays’ behalf; and Zayd, whose love for his cousin Zainab parallels that of our protagonists.³ Nizami also includes Majnun’s pilgrimage to Mecca as an integral part of the story, which later becomes a springboard for the Sufi adoration of the character of Majnun.

Without Nizami's codification of the legend in Persian, the characters of Layla and Majnun would not have become immortalized as prototypes for Iranian men and women. The character of Majnun is the symbol of man's potential to achieve revelation through madness, and to unite the human soul with Divine love through love in the physical world. Layla is the essence of the silent suffering female, whose role is to maintain grace under pressure and to swallow her anguish. In other versions of the story, the emphasis on the characteristics of Layla and Majnun is slightly different. For instance, a more contemporary Sufi rendering of the tale includes Layla as the spirit that guides Majnun through the seven stages of enlightenment during his pilgrimage to Mecca.⁴ At the other extreme, an Urdu version relates a visit from Layla to Majnun in the wilderness, during which she tries to reunite with him and he rejects her, imploring her not to disturb him in his adoration of "Layla." In this unusual rendering of the tale, the person of Layla has become the ideal "Layla" in Majnun's mind: the tool to his ecstatic revelations and poetic eloquence, which has superseded the actual person.

The story has been translated into over ten languages, including several versions in Persian (Farsi), Urdu and Turkish, as well as versions in French, German, Russian and English.⁵

Synopsis: The story of Layla and Majnun of Nizami Ganjavi (1188)

The chieftain of the Banu 'Amir tribe, a pious, generous, wealthy and powerful man, longs for a son and prays that God may grant him one. God grants him Qays, who is beautiful and grows to become an eloquent, clever young man.

Qays is a handsome, well-educated youth. At school, he falls in love with a dark-haired beauty by the name of Layla [Ar. *of the night*], who reciprocates his romantic sentiment. New to love, the young couple is happy but indiscreet, and their union leads to jealousy and envy, and eventually gossip, by their community. The two are alerted and try to be cautious, but Qays is impatient and becomes increasingly erratic in his behavior. Qays' wandering and overtly oscillating emotional state, which varies from depression to exhilarated recitations of love-poems for Layla, earns him a reputation of being a madman, or "majnun" [Ar. *one possessed by jinn*], bringing disgrace on his tribe.⁶ Layla is confined to her home and forbidden to see her lover.

Qays, now openly ridiculed and renamed "Majnun," becomes increasingly disturbed, roaming the desert in his love-struck oblivion, and visiting Layla's tent at night where he kisses the threshold and recites his poems to her. Her tribe moves to Najd, and Majnun follows them, resulting in more anxiety from Layla's family to protect her. Majnun's father and his tribe are simultaneously trying to rescue the reputation of the young man and the community, and upon the advice of the elders of the tribe, Majnun's father decides to ask for Layla's hand in marriage.

While as a respected man Majnun's father is well received and feasted by Layla's tribe, her father refuses to accept the proposal. Majnun is brought back to his family, who attempts in vain to console him. Distraught, he breaks his fetters and runs back to the desert wilderness.

Still hoping to cure his son, Majnun's father takes him on a pilgrimage to Mecca during Ramadan. The boy rushes to the door of the Kaaba, but instead of praying for the

return of his senses, he prays for God to increase and sustain his love for Layla. There was no cure for the “lover’s burning brain.”⁷ Layla’s kinsmen are increasingly distraught about the embarrassing attention brought to the young girl, and send emissaries to the caliph’s governor complaining about him. Not only was Majnun roaming about like a madman composing love poetry about an innocent girl; the verses were so beautiful and well crafted that admirers followed him to the desert to memorize and collect them. Soon the commoners in the streets and bazaars were singing praises of the madman’s beloved, disgracing Layla further by putting the situation in public view.

Majnun’s behavior breaks the acceptable norms of decency and custom, and the governor gives permission to Layla’s tribesmen to kill him. Hearing of the danger posed to his son, Majnun’s father implores him to return home, where he is nursed and tended, but the impassioned lover gains no emotional comfort from this and returns to the desert. Layla, upon hearing the verses as the townspeople sing them, responds by writing her replies on pieces of paper and entrusting them to the wind. Though unsigned, when the scraps of verse are found on the ground they are identified as the voice of the madman’s beloved. Layla’s notes are delivered to Majnun by intermediaries, and the indirect dialogue between the lovers intensifies.

One day Layla is in the garden with a group of friends and hears someone singing one of Majnun’s love poems, and begins to cry. Her friends tell her mother, who fears for her sanity but does nothing. On the same day, a young nobleman named Ibn Salam sees Layla and becomes infatuated with the beautiful girl. He approaches her parents

with a formal marriage proposal, but her parents delay the engagement until they can find a solution for the growing problem of the madman that haunts their daughter's heart.

Majnun becomes a recluse in the desert, his frame wasted and his hair unkempt.⁸ He is residing in the territory of a Bedouin prince named Nawfal, who happens upon Majnun one day while hunting, and is informed of his identity and the cause for his pathetic state. Nawfal, who is a formidable warrior but also a kind and generous man, feels sympathy for the love struck boy and invites him to dine with him in his camp.

At first Majnun neither speaks nor eats, but when Nawfal mentions Layla's name, the boy becomes animated and breaks into spontaneous recitation of his love-poems. Nawfal is moved by the constancy and earnestness of Majnun's love and swears to win her hand for him if he will tame his madness. During the following weeks, Majnun reverts to his old self as Qays, eating and drinking and wearing fine clothes, but is impatient for his new benefactor to act on his behalf. Eventually, Nawfal and his men go to Layla's tribe on Majnun's behalf and ask for her hand in marriage. When they refuse, Nawfal threatens to attack, but again they refuse. A fierce battle ensues which greatly confuses and upsets gentle Majnun, who throws himself in the middle of the fray, crying for peace. At one point Layla's tribe experiences a brief success, which Majnun rejoices, witnessed by Nawfal's men. The fighting is indecisive and Nawfal asks for a truce the following morning, since Layla's tribe has been strengthened with reinforcements. The truce is agreed upon, and Majnun accuses Nawfal of betraying him and breaking his promise of obtaining Layla for him. Nawfal, determined to stand by his promise to Majnun, returns with a larger army and defeats Layla's tribe, who sues for peace.

Nawfal asks only for Layla, but her father still refuses to marry her to a madman, whom he considers worse than a dog. The proud old man claims he will kill his daughter before he gives her to such a madman. Nawfal's men support the claim of Majnun's lunacy, since he had taken the side of the enemy during the fighting. Finally Nawfal accepts the plea of the father and relinquishes the demand for Layla. Majnun is bitterly disappointed and turns against Nawfal, fleeing again into the wilderness.

In the quiet of the desert, Majnun sees two black-eyed deer caught in a hunter's snare. The deer's beauty becomes his Layla, and the snare her tent, and he trades the brocaded robes and fine horse given to him by Nawfal to the apathetic hunter for their release. Majnun frees other animals in the desert, and they become his companions in the desert.⁹

On another occasion, an old woman, leading a man in chains, appears before Majnun. She explains that she is a widow and her companion is a dervish; they wander from tribe to tribe hoping people will think the chained dervish mad, and give them charity and food. Majnun offers to take the place of the chained dervish and give the woman all the charity, an offer the woman readily accepts. She frees the dervish, puts Majnun in chains, and:

Whenever the woman and her prisoner came to a tent, they stopped; Majnun recited his love poems, cried out, "Layla, Layla", banged head and body against the stones, and, in spite of his chains, danced around like a drunken madman, while the woman punished him. One day they came to an oasis where a few tents have been erected. Looking at them more closely, Majnun suddenly recognized Layla's tent among them. Tears began to stream from his eyes like floods of rainwater pouring from the clouds in spring. He collapsed, hit his head against the ground and called out: "You have left me to myself, sharing with me nothing but your grief..."¹⁰

Majnun then tears apart his chains and returns to the wilderness of Najd.

In the meantime, Layla's parents marry her to her wealthy suitor, Ibn Salam, though she is still in love with Majnun. Though she is obligated by her family to marry, Layla refuses to share her bed with her new husband. Ibn Salam loves her, and is unable to force his will on her. After a year, a stranger seeks Majnun in the desert, bringing him the news of Layla's marriage, and taunting him that Layla has been faithless to him and that he should forget about her. Majnun is so upset that he loses consciousness. Eventually, the stranger confesses that he is lying and that Layla has remained faithful to her love for him. Majnun's old father, the chieftain, also pays his hermetic son a visit in the cave he has been hiding out in, and pleads with him to return home with him. Majnun refuses, claiming his home and tribe is now a prison for him. His father leaves, heartbroken, and soon dies. When Majnun hears of his father's death, he rushes to the gravesite and throws himself on the tomb, sobbing in repentance and grief.

In the desert, Majnun is protected by his animal companions, and becomes a veritable beast master. He dreams, he speaks to God, to the stars, and the planets. Layla and Majnun exchange letters about her marriage; she professes her constant love for him and he tries to forgive her situation. His uncle, Salim, comes to see him and sees Majnun in his ascetic state, eating only grasses and herbs; he brings his mother to see him, who kisses his wounds and washes them with her tears. Still, Majnun refuses to go home with them. Salim soon returns to tell that Majnun that his mother has died, and as before, he rushes to the tomb in grief and laments the pain he has caused his parents.

Longing for her lover increases with each poetic verse, and Layla arranges with an intermediary for a secret rendezvous with Majnun in a palm grove near her dwelling, where Majnun will recite poetry. When all is ready, the intermediary comes to Layla and tells her that her beloved is in the garden. The two are afraid; Majnun delivers his song and flees again to the desert.¹¹

Meanwhile, Layla's estranged husband Ibn Salam dies, and she goes through the motions of mourning her husband, although she is truly crying for Majnun. Zayd, whose unfulfilled love for his cousin Zainab runs parallel to that of our protagonists, carries the news to Majnun of Ibn Salam's death. At the end of Layla's traditional two-year mourning period, she sends Zayd to bring Majnun to her; when they finally meet they are speechless; they chastely embrace, but Majnun flees. Subsequently, when Layla is about to die, she tells her mother about her deep love for Majnun, and requests that her shroud be blood-red [instead of the traditional white] as a sign of her martyrdom and suffering.¹²

At Layla's death, Zayd takes the news to Majnun, who first faints, then flees to Layla's tomb. Maddened than ever, he tries to return to the wilderness, but keeps returning to the burial place. The animal horde still surrounds him, keeping people away from the lovers; Majnun vacantly recites his love-poems to Layla's resting place and eventually dies on her tomb. After some time, the animals leave and people find his remains, which they bury alongside of Layla. Finally Zayd, in a dream, sees the lovers united in paradise.¹³

NOTES

¹ The term “legend” is defined by Michael Dols in *Majnun: The Madman in Medieval Islamic Society* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), as “an unauthenticated narrative, embroidered with historical material and popularly deemed to be historical”, 320. This synopsis is adapted from Dols 323-328.

² Nizami, trans. Rudolph Gelpke, *Layla and Majnun* (New Lebanon, NY: Omega Publications, 1997), xi.

³ Gelpke 1997, xiii.

⁴ Shadhiliyya Sufi Center, c2002-2005 <<http://suficenter.org/Practices/hajj.htm>> accessed 12.30.2005

⁵ Other versions of the story include a rendition in Turkish by al-Fuzuli (1495-1556), trans. Sofi Huri, *Layla and Majnun* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1970).

⁶ The Arabic word *jinn* (alternate transliteration, *djinn*) can be traced to Qur’anic revelation (15:27): “And the *jinn* We created before, of intensely hot fire.” These fire-beings are believed in popular Islamic culture to reside underground, in an intangible and invisible world. There are good and bad *jinn*, who have certain powers over mankind, in that they can possess the mind and body and are often considered the cause of insane or abnormal behavior. Ultimately, however, mankind (made of clay or earth) has greater spiritual potential than the *jinn*, and the process of Majnun overcoming his possession by *jinn* to compose eloquent poems is a sign of spiritual fortitude. In Sufi symbolism, this transformation is compared to an alchemical process.

⁷ Dols 1992, 325.

⁸ It is often in this pathetic state that we see Majnun depicted on Ghiyath’s textiles, in the wilderness with a fawn in hand, and his Layla coming to meet him; an event which, in Nizami’s version, never really happened. The lovers meet twice more after they are banned from one another: once in a palm grove, and once at Layla’s camp, but never in the wilderness of Najd. This observation is confirmed in Bier 1987, 187.

Miniature paintings of the late Timurid and early Safavid era also depict this imaginary meeting; see Ebadollah Bahari, *Bihzad, Master of Persian Painting* (London and New York: I.B. Taurus Publishers, 1996), 67.

⁹ In depictions of Majnun with the animals we often see among them a leopard, a lion, a deer and other animals who are said to have become tamed by the purity and earnestness of his love, which by now has obtained a mystical dimension. For an overview of religious and mystical metaphors in Safavid iconography, see Schuyler Camman: “The Interplay of Art, Literature, and Religion in Safavid Symbolism,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (1978): 124-36; and “Religious Symbolism in Persian Art,” *History of Religions* 15 (1976), 193-208.

Late Timurid and early Safavid miniatures also depict Majnun in his beast master role. See Bahari 1996, 124.

¹⁰ Dols, 1992, 327.

¹¹ Occasionally in miniatures this meeting depicts the lovers fainting. See Bahari, 145.

¹² Add Farsi here? *Khoon kon kafanam ke man shaheedam, ta bashad rang-e rooz-e eidam.*

¹³ To relate the conclusion of the story to a contemporary work, compare to the ending of the movie “Titanic,” directed by James Cameron (1998).

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Figure 1 Silk lampas fragment depicting Layla and Majnun.
Signed by Ghiyath. 1580-1625 Iran (Yazd or Isfahan).
The Textile Museum, Washington D.C. TM 3.312

Figure 2 Detail, silk lampas fragment depicting Layla and Majnun.
Signed by Ghiyath. 1580-1625 Iran (Yazd or Isfahan).
The Textile Museum, Washington D.C. TM 3.312

Figure 3 Diagram by author, outlining the figures of Layla and Majnun, based on silk lampas fragment
Signed by Ghiyath.
Textile Museum, Washington D.C. TM 3.312

Figure 4 Silk double cloth depicting Layla and Majnun. Late sixteenth century, Iran. The Textile Museum, Washington D.C. TM 1969.36.1

Figure 5 Young Prince. Signed by Muhammad Haravi.
Miniature Painting. Ca. 1550, Iran.
Freer Gallery of Art, SI, Washington D.C. F1937.8

Figure 6 Silk lampas fragment with prisoner motif. 1590-1600, Iran.
Arthur Sackler Gallery, SI, Washington D.C. S1986.489

Figure 7 Portrait of Robert Sherley.
(*Alternate title* Portrait of Sir Robert Shirley)
Anthony Van Dyck. 1622. Petworth House, Sussex, England.

Figure 8 Detail, figural cloak, portrait of Robert Sherley.
(*Alternate title* Portrait of Sir Robert Shirley)
Anthony Van Dyck. 1622. Petworth House, Sussex, England.

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