

Lesson: The Musician Barbad Up in a Tree

This lesson is accompanied by a handout,
Visual Analysis: Four Steps toward Critically Thinking about Art.

Essential Question: How does early modern Iranian painting express emotion through line, color, and landscape?

Learning Experience: Students will investigate the relation between music, poetry, and the visual arts through a page from a famous illustrated manuscript. They will also create an art piece of their own in response to this inquiry.

Anticipatory Set: Cartoons and comics marry the visual arts with the written word. How are these modern forms of expression similar to and different from pre-modern illustrated manuscripts?

Context: The [*Shahnameh*](#) (“*Book of Kings*”), completed in 1010, is Iran’s national epic. Its fifty thousand rhyming couplets begin with the creation of the world and end with the [Sassanians](#) (224-651), Iran’s last pre-Islamic dynasty. The poem’s glorification of Iran’s legendary, semi-legendary, and historical past reflects the politics and culture of West and Central Asia during the late Abbasid dynasty (750-1258). The Abbasids were the second Islamic caliphate, ruled by descendants of Muhammad's uncle Abbas. Its domains stretched from North Africa to the borders of China and India.

From the mid-ninth century on, the Abbasids’ ability to control such an empire gradually weakened as regional centers of power sprang up. One of these, the [Samanids](#) (819-1005, the ruling family came from a place called “Saman”), was of Iranian stock. It controlled large parts of eastern Iran, Afghanistan, and [Central Asia](#). This region had been conquered by the Arabs in the seventh century—the Samanids were the first native dynasty to rule Iran after the Arab conquests. Great patrons of Iranian culture, they were the first sponsors of the *Shahnameh*.

Read about the *Shahnameh* and the arts of the book:

[*Shahnama: 1000 Years of the Persian Book of Kings*](#)

Freer/Sackler Galleries

[*The Shahnameh: A Persian Cultural Emblem and a Timeless Masterpiece*](#)

The Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge

The *Shahnameh*’s author, Hakim Abul-Qasim [Firdawsi](#) (940–1025), was born in northeastern Iran and belonged to the region’s landed nobility. The preservation and

transmission of Iranian culture was extremely important to the members of this local elite (www: Khaleghi-Motlagh 2012). As time passed, the *Shahnameh* came to occupy a central place in Iranian culture:

In the Persianate tradition the *Shahnameh* was viewed as more than literature. It was also a political treatise, as it addressed deeply rooted conceptions of honor, morality, and legitimacy. Illustrated versions of it were considered desirable as expressions of the aspirations and politics of ruling elites in the Iranian world (Lentz 1989: 126).

The mid-sixteenth century painting featured in this lesson is part of a famous manuscript of the *Shahnameh*. The story of “The Musician Barbad Up in a Tree” is part of Ferdowsi’s account of the reign of Khusraw Parviz (r. 590-628), the last important Sassanian emperor before the Islamic conquest.

During much of their four-hundred-year rule the Sassanians were “the most stable, entrepreneurial, and politically significant power within Eurasia.” They were also

the dominant culture of the Silk Road. Their style, expressed through key trade items and diplomatic gifts, especially the silks and [metalwares](#) produced in the imperial workshops, became a visual lingua franca, found dispersed from Japan to Europe (www: Feltham 2010: 2, 4).

Although Khusraw was a leader in war for most of his reign, for Ferdowsi

Khusraw is already master of the world. So it is the peacetime pattern of Khusraw’s life upon which he dwells. In place of battles, long marches and fraught negotiations, he holds forth about Khusraw’s reunion with his great love, Sirin, after many years of separation, about Sirin’s successful intrigue against another of his wives, the Roman Maria. . .about his first encounter with Barbad the musician (www: Howard-Johnston 2010).

Barbad sought to become one of Khusraw’s court musicians, but his efforts were continually thwarted by Sarkash, the jealous chief minstrel. Taking matters into his own hands, Barbad hid in a tree during an evening banquet. Concealed among the leaves he sang three songs, delighting the king. Khusraw then made him chief minstrel.

Barbad became an important figure in the Sassanian court:

The legends related by Islamic authors clearly show Barbad’s influence with the king. According to one legend. . .when the king’s favorite horse, Sabdez, died, neither the master of the horse nor any other courtier dared for fear of death to notify the king. Barbad, however, was able to save the life of the master of the horse by composing a poem and singing it for the king (www: Tafazzoli).

After Khusraw’s death, Barbad vowed never to play again. He cut off four fingers and burned his instruments.

The painting featured in this lesson depicts this widely known tale. What did the court painters bring to Ferdowsi’s story? How did they express the beauty of his music in line

and color? In this lesson, students are asked to think about such questions and also to create some art of their own.

Rationale: Students will engage in discussion, storytelling, and creating original art based on study of the painting “The Musician Barbad Up in a Tree.”

Time: Three to four forty-minute sessions.

Instructional Resources: *Visual Analysis: Four Steps toward Critically Thinking about Art* handout; translation of the *Shahnameh* passage about Barbad; painting of “The Musician Barbad Up in a Tree.”

The Musician Barbad Up in a Tree
Iran, Tabriz, Safavid (1501-1732)
Mid-16th century
(KHAL.2006.0020)



<p>(A) "The Angel Suresh Rescues Khusraw Parwiz" Iran, Tabriz c. 1530-1535</p>	<p>(B) "Kusraw Parwiz's Charge" Iran, Tabriz c. 1530-1535</p>
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- This painting is part of a manuscript called the ["Shahnameh of Shah Tahmasp"](#) (r. 1524–76),

arguably the most luxuriously illustrated copy of Firdowsi's epic ever produced in the history of Persian painting. . . This project was realized at the royal atelier in Tabriz, the first capital of the Safavid dynasty (1501–1736), and involved two generations of the most renowned artists of the time. . . The artistic importance of this manuscript cannot be overestimated. It is considered one of the highest achievements in the arts of the book for its superb calligraphy, painting, and illumination (www: Leoni).

The surviving pages of this work are divided among several institutions and collections. Companion paintings (A) and (B) are from the same manuscript.

- Early evidence for illustrations of *Shahnameh* texts exists on [ceramics](#) and metalwork from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The earliest [paintings](#) are from the Ilkhanid period (1256-1353) when Iran was under Mongol rule.
- The figures in the painting are dressed in sixteenth-century clothing. The baton-like shapes projecting from the men's turbans are part of a woolen hat worn underneath the turban. This type of hat was a symbol of Iran's [Shi'ite](#) faith—Iran became Shi'ite under Safavid rule.
- The instrument Barbad plays is a short-necked lute called a *barbat*, believed to have originated in Central Asia.
- Notice the Chinese-style clouds with their trails of vapor. They look as if wind was blowing them across the sky. Also, notice the moon surrounded by a halo of mist.
- According to one scholar, “the most important descriptive passages of the *Shahnameh* are descriptions of war, the beauty of people, and the beauty of nature” (www: Khaleghi-Motlagh 2012). This painting of Barbad and the two companion works (A) and (B) show students how painters expressed these qualities in visual terms. Although the handout, *Visual Analysis: Four Steps toward Critically Thinking about Art*, helps students define what makes a painting effective in formal terms, they still have to work on establishing suitable concepts and vocabulary to express the visual impact of these works.
- In painting (A) the “focus of the composition remains [Surush](#), an epitome of beauty whose fine features and noble stance make the humans in the painting pass almost unobserved.”
- Painting (B) is a battle scene. How does the painter convey the violence and confusion of combat within the conventions of this painting style?

The following translation of the *Shahnameh* is out of copyright and available in a few places on the internet:

Warner, Arthur George and Edmond Warner (tr.)
The Shahnama of Firdausi
Keegan Paul, 1905-1925
<http://archive.org/details/shahnama01firduoft>

Although complete, the language is antiquated and teachers will probably have to adapt it for student use. The following modern (abridged) translation is frequently recommended:

Dick Davis (tr.)
Shahnameh: The Persian Book of Kings
Penguin Classics, 2007

Procedure:

- The class studies the painting of Barbad in the tree. Using *Visual Analysis: Four Steps toward Critically Thinking about Art* in a general class discussion, have students describe what they see and what they think about what they see. Of the seven design elements—line, color, value, texture, space, shape, and form—do some stand out as more important than others? Can you make a general statement with respect to the design issues that the creator of this work regarded as important?
- Study the basic artistic principles—balance, unity, emphasis, contrast, pattern, movement, and rhythm in terms of this painting. Do some of these principles stand out as more important than others? Can you make a general statement with respect to the artistic principles that the creators of these works thought important?
- Give each student a copy of “Handout: The Musician Barbad Up in a Tree.” Then have one student become the storyteller and read from it. Have a full class discussion: What moment in the story does the painting describe? What words would you use to describe the mood of the painting? What elements of the painting establish this mood?
- For homework have students create their own art depicting any aspect of the story that interests him/her.

Whole Group Reflection: Students will discuss the stories they have read and the original art they have produced. Does the epic—a long poem telling the story of legendary and traditional heroes—have relevance today?

Instructional Modification: Have a day of storytelling and storytellers. Assign stories from different epics for comparison and discussion. Is the *Shahnameh* unique in world literature in that it has a tradition of illustrated manuscripts?

Application: If the school has a newspaper, encourage students to publish a summary of their favorite story and include the art that depicts it. Create a class book of student-illustrated *Shahnameh* stories.

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Acknowledgements

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