Although generally small in size, Persian miniature paintings show scenes filled with human activity. Inside carefully ruled margins, and reflecting breathtaking technique, lies a wealth of textured details in dazzling color, achieved in precious pigments including gold and lapis lazuli. Looking closely, the viewer is awed by a microcosm presented in the diminutive.

Miniature painting was the only form of painting in Persia (Iran) before regular contact with the West began in the late seventeenth century. It was the most elaborate product of a refined manuscript production system, the kitabkhana, supported by the patronage of the ruling elite. The kitabkhana served as both library and book-making atelier, where epics and poetry were turned into magnificent illustrated books by highly trained calligraphers, illuminators, painters, and many other specialists, such as those responsible for making paper, for grinding and mixing the precious pigments for painting, and for fabricating implements—including brushes for extraordinarily fine lines made from three hairs of a squirrel’s tail.¹

The complex pictorial construction of miniatures, with their hallmark combination of the precise and the imaginary, is a telling indication of Persian aesthetics. Beautiful places that have an idealized, even magical, quality are frequently the settings chosen for the stories illustrated. So whether set in a garden, the untamed outdoors, or in a building and its surrounding courtyard, the Persian miniature is above all otherworldly. In these revealing places of beauty, food is an occasional element, as when the action revolves around a feast, outdoor picnic or, more rarely, food preparation. Far from being incidental, the presence of the culinary carries meaning.

Yusuf Gives a Royal Banquet in Honor of His Marriage, a miniature made in the northeastern Persian city of Mashhad between 1556 and 1565 to illustrate a poem by the mystical Sufi Abdul-Rahman Jami (1414–1492), is an example of the genre at its most accomplished where food takes on importance. The 13¾-by-9¼-inch painting purports only to illustrate a moment from Jami’s romantic allegory of Yusuf (Joseph) and Zulayka (the name Jami gives to Potiphar’s wife) loosely modeled on the life story of the Prophet Joseph. Yet it also conveys, with an arresting combination of precision and typical idealism of the surroundings, a tantalizing slice of the court life of Safavid Persia some 450 years ago.² Customs and etiquette, architecture, rugs, decorative canopies, styles of dress, and rituals surrounding food and drink are arguably as much the subject of this work as the vignette from Yusuf’s life. While much remains of the material culture of the Safavids, regrettably, much is also lost. Paintings such as this—appreciated first and foremost as works of art in their own right—are the closest we will ever come to snapshots of an intriguing time and place.

This miniature was created to illustrate a copy of Jami’s Haft Awrang (Seven Thrones or Constellation of the Great Bear) that has been in the collection of the Freer Gallery of Art at the Smithsonian Institution since 1946. In her enlightening study of the Freer Jami, art historian Marianna Shreve Simpson argues that this particular book—one of only two hundred or so extant copies—is likely the most

---


important and elaborate version of the Haft Awrang ever made. It was inspired by Sultan Ibrahim Mirza, the favorite nephew and son-in-law of the greatest of the Safavid leaders, Shah Tahmasp, whose long reign (1524–1576) was distinguished by remarkable artistic patronage. Like all the men and women in his family, Ibrahim Mirza was an accomplished calligrapher and poet who received instruction in these and many subjects — religious and secular — as he grew up in the artistic court of his uncle in Tabriz. Perhaps in celebration of his appointment by the Shah as governor of Mashhad in 1556, Ibrahim Mirza commissioned his kitabkhana chief Muhibb-Ali to head the nine-year effort ultimately required to produce this book. It contained 503 folios of manuscript in elegant nastaliq script attributed to five named calligraphers, as well as a total of twenty-nine miniatures, including this painting and one now missing. While these works are unsigned and still unattributed, their masterful style and composition indicates that they were produced by some of the most talented Safavid artists.

The mystical Sufi Jami took artistic license with the Yusuf story in his allegorical romance. According to Jami, the chaste Yusuf ignored the overtures of his employer's wife, Zulayka, for years, but, at the death of her husband, was ordered by God to marry her. The marriage is a joyous occasion because Zulayka, who is oddly still a virgin, has always loved only Yusuf. Yusuf’s earthly happiness with Zulayka parallels the fulfillment that comes from his relationship with God. Yusuf is at this time a vizier second in command only to the Pharaoh. To celebrate his nuptials Yusuf invites the nobles of Egypt to a feast. In this particular scene, Yusuf calmly occupies the central focal point, kneeling on his own rug and gracefully inclining his head, which is set off by a flaming aura that marks his righteousness.

Like all the greatest classical Safavid miniatures, numerous points of interest and contrast within the painting compete for attention. For example, the intricate inscriptions and the cut tile work of the archway form an interesting contrast to the pastel “magic rocks” projecting from the top left. Also typical, the relationship between interior and exterior spaces flows organically, although they are architecturally illogical. With obvious relish the artist carefully differentiated the individuals in this large crowd by facial characteristics, expressions, attitudes, body types, and clothing. The party represents a diverse sampling of the male population — old and young, bearded and clean-shaven, portly and lean. No two are dressed alike, except for the near universality of the Safavid turban wrapped around a baton.

This miniature reveals many customs of the Safavid court at a wedding banquet. The bride and all female friends and attendants are absent. Individual members of the all-male cast of characters can be identified as courtiers, clerics, and servants by their clothing and comportment. Most guests kneel on an array of sumptuous carpets under handsomely patterned canopies to either side of Yusuf. They are recently assembled, for the banquet appears about to begin.

As in many cultural traditions, the first order of hospitality for a Persian host is to offer his guests something to quench their thirst. The three servants standing in a diagonal line in the mid-ground proffer shallow gold cups of wine. However, there is some question about what the retainers in the foreground are poised to serve; what are the tall three-part mounds on their trays? Najmieh Batmanglij, an expert in traditional Persian cuisine, believes that the central vessels contain some sort of drink — perhaps tea—cooled by flanking mounds of ice. This hypothesis is supported by the eighteenth-century travel diarist Jean Chardin, who noted the popularity of iced drinks in Persia in summer and throughout the year. Another possibility is that the mounds are traditional Persian sugar cones and other sweets used to celebrate nuptials.

The question arises whether the presence of drink indicated in this miniature and the promise of food to come as the banquet proceeds signify any deeper meaning. There is evidence that they do. The idea of the food to come is intrinsically linked to the story of Yusuf. In fact, his personal rise to power, which made it possible for him to sponsor such an event for his fellow elite of Egypt, is directly related to sustenance. Years before, when the Pharaoh was troubled by symbolic dreams, he had called on Yusuf to interpret their meaning. Yusuf foresaw a widespread famine of seven years coming after seven years of plenty. For this prediction he was asked by the Pharaoh to oversee the stockpiling of food in preparation for the lean years. As a result, Egypt had adequate provisions for its own households during the famine and enough to sell to surrounding nations. Considered in this context, the painting not only celebrates Yusuf’s marriage but also the bounty of Egypt made possible by him.

Also important to consider in this painting is the possibly larger significance of the wine, the inclusion of which in an Islamic context automatically calls for a closer look. While numerous prohibitions against drunkenness and any imbibing of alcohol are associated with the Muslim faith, these prohibitions were not always observed. Wine and
other alcoholic beverages made from grapes, wheat, dates, honey, and barley were native to the region long before the advent of Islam in the sixth century, and their presence continued through the medieval period represented in this miniature. In a long entry on wine, *khamr*, The *Encyclopedia of Islam* notes, “The praise of wine, not uncommon in pre-Islamic poetry, remained one of the favourite topics also of Muslim poets…and at the court of the Caliphs wine was drunk at reveling parties as if no prohibition existed at all.” This painting of Yusuf’s gathering as described by the poet Jami follows a long tradition where wine is associated with poetry and love.

Massumeh Farhad, associate curator of Islamic art at the Freer, relates scenes in Persian miniatures of richly attired figures feasting in outdoor settings to an ancient Persian form of celebration with wine and music—the tradition of *bazm*. These miniatures often illustrate the poetry of Shams ad-Din Hafiz (1326–1390), including the lines

The rose without the beloved’s cheek is not pleasant,
Without wine, spring is not pleasant.9

A lovely painting by Riza Abbasi in Isfahan from around 1600, *A Barefoot Youth*, further illustrates the link between Islamic mysticism, poetry, and wine. The image is of a beautifully dressed figure of indeterminate gender leaning against pillows covered in sumptuously detailed fabric. Pomegranates, a golden beaker, and a cup of wine are casually scattered at his or her feet. Farhad finds that this seductive figure with attributes of both male and female beauty can be seen as a visual metaphor for the earthly or heavenly beloved.10 Here, as in the miniature of Yusuf’s banquet, drinking wine symbolizes a way of acquiring an intuitive understanding of divine love, just as contemplating a beautiful face could assist a novice in transcending earthly pleasures and attaining spiritual enlightenment. Pomegranates signify fertility and rebirth—themes similarly linked with love.11

The stylized full-frame figure by Abbasi contrasts markedly with the crowded compositions of the Freer Jami. It shows a remarkable evolution in style that took place in Persian painting in the half century separating it from Yusuf’s banquet. But as different as these two miniatures are, their treatment of food is similar: both imbue food and drink with symbolic meaning that stems from the poetry of mystical Sufis, attesting to the strength and longevity of this tradition in the Persian miniature.

**NOTES**

1. Stuart Cary Welsh’s *Persian Painting: Five Royal Safavid Manuscripts of the Sixteenth Century* (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1976) is a classic general text on the subject of Persian painting; the introduction deals well with the mechanics of the art of the book. More recently Marianna Shreve Simpson has written the most detailed descriptions available of the workings of the *kitabkhana* and the Freer Jami, the subject of this essay, in her books *Sultan Ibrahim Mirza’s Haft Awrang* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press in association with the Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, 1997) and *Persian Poetry, Painting & Patronage: Illustrations in a Sixteenth-Century Masterpiece* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press in association with the Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, 1998).

2. The Safavid dynasty ruled Persia—an area comprised roughly of contemporary Iran and Afghanistan—from 1501 to 1732.


9. Ibid., referring to the twelfth folio from a copy of the *Divan* of Hafiz dated 1543 (1722–45) in the collection of the Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution.
