

Figural Line

Persian Drawing, c. 1390–1450

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A page from the Timurid workshop album features Persian drawings made between 1400 and 1450 (» *Fig. 1*).¹ Most of these drawings have been approached as either training exercises or preparatory drawings providing the basis for later, more definitive works of art.² At the lower left, we see a rectangular sheet with a geometric composition of vegetal designs – scrolls of leaves and palmettes are organized symmetrically into interlacing cartouches. A similar decoration was used on contemporary metal jugs.³ Figurative drawings, on the other hand, present generic figures that could be replicated, with slight variations, across a large number of manuscript paintings. The figures in the square sheet at the lower edge – the man reading from an open *safina* (an oblong manuscript) and the mounted rider who has just shot a deer with an arrow – are common in Persian painting, appearing, respectively, in representations of scholarly and festive gatherings⁴ and in illustrations of epic and lyric poetry.⁵

Yet, even if resemblances exist, we can only rarely identify the final product. Contemporary written documents such as historiographical texts and lyrical poetry suggest, moreover, that the line's expressive qualities were just as important as the concept the drawing helps to visualize. According to historical audiences, the line reads less as a contour designed to create motifs than as an object in its own right, endowed with

1 Assembled in Herat shortly after the death of the Timurid prince Baysunghur (1397–1433), son of Shah Rukh, the album contains texts, drawings, calligraphies, and paintings mostly made between the 1400s and the 1450s.

2 This view is very common. According to David Roxburgh, for example, “most of the sheets of paper, cut to various dimensions and shapes on which they were drawn, functioned as intermediaries in a design process that led from sketches and exploratory designs to meticulously inked line drawings” (Roxburgh 2002, *Persian Drawing*).

3 One example, made in late Timurid Herat, is now kept in Berlin (Museum für Islamische Kunst, I.6052 (Komaroff 1988, pp. 89–90)). For more examples, see Carboni/Komaroff 2002, pp. 189–193.

4 Houston, Art and History Trust Collection, no. 77b (Soudavar 1992).

5 New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 13.228.13.1: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/455054> [29.11.2018]; Lentz/Lowry 1989, p. 379, fig. 6.



Fig. 1 Album page with various drawings. Iran and Central Asia, c. 1400–1450. Ink and paper, 68 x 50 cm. Topkapi Palace Museum, Istanbul, Hazine 2152, folio 87a (© Topkapi Palace Museum).

plastic meaning and expressive effects. Following these indications, I take a closer look at the underexplored relationship of drawing and sensation. Seeking out the sensible within works of art usually approached as illustrative, this paper argues that the early Persian drawings' system of representation, although seemingly articulated into differentiated signs, cannot be reduced to a pre-given text.⁶ Looking more carefully at the plastic values of the line's sensory configuration, it uncovers what François Lyotard has called the figural potency of the line, its ability to chronicle, and capture, the sensory work of the artist.

Expressive drawing

The notion of the mediatory drawing reflects a mimetic, discursive understanding of the image, limiting drawing to an iconographic content. Drawing, it suggests, produces images that can be replaced by words, as though the figure drawn at the upper left of the album's folio, for instance, was equivalent to the verbal notation of "a seated figure, turning their back to the viewer." Especially when it represents figural motifs, drawing has been considered as an illustrative device, a means to produce pictorial signs that are transparent to their meaning.

The graphic style of Persian drawing has probably contributed to such reading. The hard-edged, weighted line appears indeed as an outline, transforming matter, here ink and paper, into differentiated signs. Because it is so firmly outlined, every motif can be linked to a fixed signified. The precision of the line defines Persian drawing, setting it apart from expressive, abstract artistic productions that aim at capturing the artist's body. On each album folio, and within each sheet, there are, moreover, clear intervals between the motifs. The difference between figure and ground is also emphasized. We seem to be dealing with a discontinuous system, one that foregrounds outlines, intervals, and gaps so as to create, just as in linguistic communication, an articulated field of significations.

Rather than registering a gestural performance, for most modern scholars, Persian drawing functions to generate visual signs. We recognize in this approach the classical conception of the outline as "a trap set by language," to use Yves Bonnefoy's expression,

6 Although the expressive dimension of the line has rarely been discussed, scholars have sensed the inadequacy of certain binaries such as preparatory and finished in describing Persian drawings, an important step to a discussion of drawing's function. Writing in 1936, Armenag Sakisian proposed to classify Persian drawing, *tarh* in Persian, into two groups. He distinguished preparatory drawings, *aşl-i tarh* in Persian, from drawings designed as finished works, which, he considered, should be approached "like easel pictures." He also termed the former "line drawing" instead of "sketch," suggesting that any Persian drawing, regardless of its apparent level of execution, could be appreciated as a work of the line, not necessarily defined by a utilitarian value (Sakisian 1936, p. 19).

as the graphic signifier of invariant significations.⁷ Displaying discrete, self-contained forms, Persian drawing fashions a textual, informational space, designed to visualize words. In Nelson Goodman's distinction between image and language, it would fit within the latter category.⁸ As a catalogue of visual prototypes, the albums read less as a dense, infinite system than as an alphabet, as a finite, discontinuous system with a limited number of marks.

Yet many fifteenth-century drawings appear to resist the category of the preparatory drawing, and the linguistic approach to the image. They do not seem to match any paper-based or non-paper-based finished works of art. As noted by Thomas Lentz and Glenn Lowry, who included them in a separate category, characterizing them as "pictorial," they manifest elements usually absent from manuscript paintings and portable objects, such as "increased expression, freedom of line, and virtuosity."⁹ They also manifest "a tendency toward fantastic transformation of conventional subjects."¹⁰

One of the Timurid workshop album's most enigmatic images is a black-ink drawing situated in the middle of folio 57a.¹¹ It represents a mesh of swirling leaves, delineated by a thick, fluid line (» *Fig. 2*). Often rendered in a lighter tone and confounded with the vegetation, a throng of animals can also be discerned. It includes waterfowls, hoopoes, a heron, a pair of monkeys, and a snake. In contrast with more illustrative drawings, wherein figural elements appear as discrete, independent units, here, vegetal and animal motifs are closely integrated, almost fused together. At the lower left, two monkeys are mounted on a wide, sprawling leaf whose lobes resemble animal paws or perhaps even faces, one of which, to the left, interlocks with a heron's legs. These, in turn, are grabbed by a monkey, whose ear is bitten by the second monkey. Meanwhile, the latter claps the head of a snake whose body interweaves into the leaf. One motif is linked to another in one continuous, interlacing movement.

This drawing clearly marks a distance from the illustrative image. Blurring the limits between the animal and the vegetal, the animate and the inanimate, the figurative and the ornamental, it reads less as a set of legible motifs than as a dense entanglement of lines. Instead of generating clear-cut visual signs, it stands out for its expressive qualities. We see not only vegetal and animal motifs but also the movement of the

7 Louvel 2011, p. 35.

8 Goodman 1968. For a convenient summary of Goodman's theory, see Louvel 2011, p. 40: "the image is part of a dense, even system, which provides an example of a continuous system akin to infinity. Each element is connected with the totality and derives from its meaning from the rest. [...] Language, on the contrary, is a differentiated symbolic language which functions in a discontinuous way, as evidenced in the alphabet, which contains a limited number of well-separated letters. [...] Language relies on a finite system due to the limited number of characters, whereas a dense system remains open to an infinite number of marks which are new, significant, and easy to integrate with the symbol."

9 Lentz/Lowry 1989, p. 180.

10 Lentz/Lowry 1989, p. 182.

11 Istanbul, Topkapı Palace Library, H. 2152, folio 57a.



Fig. 2 Detail of an album page. Iran and Central Asia, c. 1400–1450. Ink and paper. Topkapi Palace Museum, Istanbul, Hazine 2152, folio 57a (@ Topkapi Palace Museum).

artist’s hand and the action of the wrist, changing direction, speed, and inclination to create a sinuous, fluid line. The drawing’s expressive dimension sheds a new light on the illustrative and decorative images (» *Fig. 1*). Approaching the line negatively, as the limit of a positive, namable space, one sees standing figures, horsemen, vegetal motifs. However, as we come closer to the contour, focusing on the line’s materiality, on its modulations and speed, the figurative dimension slowly disappears, superseded by an image of the artist’s gestural effort.

The arts of *tahrīr*

Such expressive reading of the line appears in fact at the center of contemporary accounts. Historical viewers turned to the line to evaluate an artist’s work, whether in painting, illumination, calligraphy, or contour drawing. They did not linger on the images’ iconographic content. “Spectators with a critical eye” (*nāqidān-i baṣīr*)

as Dawlatshah Samarqandi (d. c. 1500) called them,¹² “viewers with a subtle eye” (*mubašširān-i nuktidān*),¹³ “who can see in a fair manner” (*az ruy-i inšāf*),¹⁴ to use the words of the Timurid historian Ghiyath al-Din Khwandamir (c. 1475–1534), practiced a form of close, critical looking. They examined the expressive qualities of the work, designated in the sources as *uslūb*¹⁵ (style), *tab*¹⁶ (character) or *awšāf-i tašwīr*¹⁷ (the qualities of pictorial art). Specifically, they focused on the graphic quality of the visual arts.

Completed between 1541 and 1547, the *Tarikh-i rashidi* (The History of Rashid) of Mirza Muhammad Haydar Dughlat (1499 or 1500–1551) offers a rare insight into the late Timurid artistic scene.¹⁸ It contains a description of painters and draftsmen. The passage starts with two Timurid painters, Shah Muzaffar and his father, Ustad Mansur. About the latter, we read:

He possesses a fine, thin brush, and aside from Shah-Muzaffar, no one else has had a brush of such a fineness; however, it is slightly drier [than Shah-Muzaffar’s]. He does combat scenes very forcefully.¹⁹

We then move to Ustad Mansur’s student and son, Shah Muzaffar:

His brush has such a fineness and clarity and possesses such grace and maturity that the eye of the beholder is astonished.²⁰

Notions of fineness, clarity, dryness, and grace foreground visual and material aspects of the line, such as its width, weight, speed, and regularity. It is not clear whether the text refers to painting or drawing. But whatever the medium, it comments on graphic qualities, as opposed to chromatic aspects or iconographic content.

The following entry is about the painter Bihzad:

12 Samarqandi 1901, p. 380.

13 Khwandamir 1954, vol. 4, p. 19.

14 Muhammad Haydar 1934, p. 157.

15 Muhammad Haydar 1934, p. 167.

16 Khwandamir 1954, vol. 4, p. 157.

17 Muhammad Haydar 1934, p. 167.

18 For a short biography of Muhammad Haydar, see W. Barthold: “Haydar Mirza,” in: *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd edition, Leiden 1960–2004.

19 Muhammad Haydar 1934, p. 166. English translation by Thackston 1989, p. 361. The Persian text reads:

قلم نازک باریک دارد که بغیر شاه مظفر دیگر قلم هیچ کس بآن نازکی نیست اما چیزی خشک تراست گرفت و گیرها را بغایت محکم ساخته

20 Muhammad Haydar 1934, p. 166. English translation by Thackston 1989, p. 361. The Persian text reads:

قلمی دارد در غایت نازکی و صافی و ملاحظ و پختگی که چشم بیننده خیره ماند

As a painter he is a master. Although his hand is not so delicate as Shah-Muzaffar's, his brush is more forceful than the former's but the former's underdrawing and articulation are better than his.²¹

Here aspects of draftsmanship – the precision, delicacy, and strength of the hand – are observed in the medium of painting. Afterward, the text broadens its historical scope, turning back to the Ilkhanid period (1256–1335) and its iconic master painter 'Abd al-Hayy:²²

Long ago in the time of the Hulaguid khans who were emperors of Iraq there was Khwaja Abdul-Hayy. [...] In clarity of brush, fineness and solidity, indeed in all characteristics of painting, he has had no peer.²³

Artistic evaluation, again, relies almost exclusively on an apprehension of the line and its plastic qualities, isolated from context and meaning. Works on paper, whether drawings or paintings, are approached as a web of lines, as a display of non-representational contours. They appear less as images than as material objects, evaluated for their “clarity,” “fineness” and “solidity,” considered to be the “characteristics of painting.” Despite its figurative content and its controlled execution, drawing and painting elicited a mode of interpretation that moved from motif to line, from sign to hand.

The contour is a furrow, inscribed into the paper by the movement of the hand, precise and measured. The hand serves as a tool, laboring away at the perfectly outlined image. In Muhammad Haydar's account, the body's synecdoche is indeed the hand, but also the instrument. The *qalam* (whether the reed pen or the hair brush) is endowed with the aesthetic characteristics of the artist's work. What is described as fine, clear or graceful is the tool itself, not just the result of its endeavor. The metonymic displacement from work of art to instrument indicates an aesthetic reception that concentrates on making processes. Foregrounding labor instead of product, it defines the line less as an autonomous object than as the result of a physical effort. The metonymy of tool highlights the manual quality of the drawing as well as the tactile rather than strictly visual or even intellectual aspects of such labor.

21 Muhammad Haydar 1934, p. 166. English translation by Thackston 1989, p. 361. The Persian text reads:

وی مصور استادست اگر مقدار شاه مظفر نازک دست نیست اما قلم این ازوی محکم تراست طرح و استخوان بندی آن ازوی بهترست

22 On this painter, see Priscilla Soucek: “Abd-al-Hayy, K'ājā,” in: *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, www.iranicaonline.org/articles/abd-al-hayy-kaja [18.01.2019].

23 Muhammad Haydar 1934, pp. 166–167. English translation by Thackston 1989, p. 361. The Persian text reads:

در قدیم الایام در سلسله خواقین هلاکوهی که باد شاهان عراق اند خواجه عبد الحی [...] در صفائی قلم و نازکی و محکمی بلک در اهمه اوصاف تصویر مثل وی پیدا نشده است

The same vocabulary is used for the art of calligraphy, for example when describing Ja'far and Azhar, two calligraphers from the early fifteenth century:

Mawlana Ja'far's writing was heavy and broken yet it was solid, graceful, masterful and mature, while Mawlana Azhar, the delicacy that has been mentioned notwithstanding, wrote correctly but his hand was uneven.²⁴

The line is the common denominator of drawing, calligraphy, and painting.²⁵ It defines a transmedial aesthetics, an aesthetics of "*tahrir*," as we would like to call it. Meaning both "outline" and "writing," used in sources to address painters and calligraphers alike, *tahrir* defines painting and writing as forms of visual writing.²⁶ *Tahrir* resonates with the concept of writing as defined by Roland Barthes. "What constitutes writing," Barthes suggests, "is not the sign [...] but, much more paradoxically, the cursivity of the discontinuous." Writing and drawing are also both governed by the hand, "which bears down and advances or hands back, in short the hand which plows."²⁷

Drawing is, moreover, a mode of self-revelation. Virtuosity had an ethical dimension. Muhammad Haydar's artistic biographies play with the limits between literal and figurative descriptions of the line, confounding the formal features of the work of art with the moral qualities of the maker. Hence the insistence on the purity (*safā'i*) of the drawing, its delicacy and niceness (*liṭāfat*), its grace (*malāhat*), and maturity (*pukhtagī*). The aim of the line, as the Timurid calligrapher Sultan 'Ali Mashhadi said about the mythical inventor of kufic script, 'Ali ibn Abi Talib, "was not merely characters and dots but fundamentals, purity, virtue."²⁸ In his advice to future calligraphers, Sultan 'Ali uses a series of aphorisms to foreground the relationship between calligraphy and morality, highlighting that "purity of writing proceeds from purity of heart" and that "writing is the distinction of the pure."²⁹

Appearing "clean" and "light," "solid" and "mature," to use again some of the terms privileged in primary sources, the line bears witness to the artist's mood and personality. The pre-modern viewer might not be able to make the kind of empirical analysis favored by Morellian connoisseurs. A method of indexical reading established in the early nineteenth century by Giovanni Morelli (d. 1891), Morellian connoisseur-

24 Muhammad Haydar 1934, p. 162. English translation by Thackston 1989, p. 349. The Persian text reads:

مولانا جعفر کند و شکسته نوشته است ام محکم و ملاحه و پخته اما مولانا اظهر با وجود این لطافت که مذکور شد درست نوشته است اما دست ناهمواری دارد

25 On the relationship between painting and calligraphy, see Roxburgh 2002 (*Pen of Depiction*), pp. 43–57; Rice 2014.

26 *Tahrir* could also be used to describe the frame of the *jadwal* or the contours added by the artist to enhance a stenciled design (Porter 1992, pp. 57, 59, and 64).

27 Barthes, Roland: "Réquichot et son corps," in: Barthes 1982, p. 199.

28 Cited in Ahmad 1959, p. 108.

29 Cited in Ahmad 1989, p. 122.

ship relates works of art with individual hands through the study of *Grundformen* or fundamental forms – involuntary, unintended traces unconsciously repeated by artists across their work, for instance in the way they shape an ear or a hand, and which betray their physical identity.³⁰

Yet, despite the lack of modern codicological, paleographical, and stylistic means, the “experimented eye” of the late Timurid beholder could still discriminate between different artists. Muhammad Haydar noted that Bihzad’s hand was at once more forceful (*muhkam*) and less delicate (*nāzūk*) than Shah Muzaffar’s. In calligraphy, Ja’far’s line is “solid, graceful, masterful, and mature.” Azhar’s hand, by contrast, can sometimes be “uneven.” These are not objective criteria; they are evaluative. They reflect an aesthetic judgment as much as a practice of visual analysis. As such they can be used for different artists, and applied to different periods, regardless of issues of individual and temporal difference.

Persian drawing inflects a relation of line to person that goes beyond their physical contiguity. It is more of a spiritual activity, attesting to a draftsman’s personality – his discipline, his rigueur, and his morality. Dawlatshah Samarqandi lauds the Timurid prince, also a renown calligrapher, Ibrahim Sultan, by comparing the elegance of his calligraphy (*lutf-i khatt*) to the graciousness of his character (*lutf-i tab*).³¹ Although artists did not draw likenesses of themselves (no self-portraits were produced at the time), they invested their works with traits of their character, as Sultan ‘Ali suggested. The result is as much a physical remnant of the artist’s gesture as a figure of his morality. Emphasizing graphic qualities, the painting becomes the emblem of a painter’s moral character.

The whole thrust of the line, then, is not just aesthetic: it is also ethical. But how is it, exactly, that a material object can signify its maker, without resembling the artist’s likeness, or offering unconscious traces of the individual hand? To use Charles Sanders Peirce’s terminology, the line in Persian drawing, painting, and calligraphy does not work as an icon resembling its maker.³² Concealing signs of physical individuality, it does not function as a fingerprint either, an index from which the viewer could infer the presence of a single, historically situated artist. It does not invite to a description of the artist’s working procedure. Albeit registering an artistic movement, each brush-

30 For a recent discussion of Morellian connoisseurship, see Davis 2011, esp. chapter 4. On the broader epistemological context of the emergence of this method, see Ginzburg 1980. Carlo Ginzburg relates the emergence of Morellian stylistic attribution in the nineteenth century to a positivist practice of indicial reading, also shared by scientific methods, police investigation, and psychoanalysis.

31 Thackston 1989, p. 34.

32 Charles Sanders Peirce divided signs into three categories: icons, indices, and symbols. Each type of sign produces meaning in a different way: “There are three kinds of signs. Firstly, there are *likenesses*, or icons; which serve to convey ideas of the things they represent simply by imitating them. Secondly, there are *indications*, or indices; which show something about things, on account of their being physically connected with them. [...] Thirdly, there are *symbols*, or general signs, which have become associated with their meanings by usage” (Peirce 1998, vol. 2, p. 5).

stroke is so perfectly executed that it seems to defy the very notion of causality. The line does not reveal its signification through iconic or indexical means. How then does it evoke the artist? How come it can mediate between work and author?

Figural line

My centerpiece for understanding this problem of signification is a late fourteenth-century manuscript, a copy of the *Diwan* (collected poems) of Sultan Ahmad Jalayir (r. 1382 and 1410), the last great ruler of the Jalayirid dynasty.³³ Composed of some three hundred folios of unadorned text written in black ink on a glossy white paper, the *Diwan* of Ahmad Jalayir contains, deployed in the margins of eight folios, a series of black-ink drawings.³⁴ The images show no direct connection to the text that they accompany. In addition to challenging the expected illustrational function of figurative images in Persian manuscripts, these pictures constitute the first known examples of drawings conceived as autonomous works of art.

Each drawing presents a harmonious integration of nature, animals, and humans. One can see, in the lower margin of the first drawing, a farmer guiding water buffaloes and before them, ducks swimming in a pond (» *Fig. 3*).³⁵ Framed by reeds, the landscape oscillates between dry land and marsh. In the outer margin, it evolves into a rockier terrain, with diagonal planes marked by rough, gnarled shrubs. Holding an infant, a woman walks with an elderly man toward the page's outer space. Beneath them, two buffaloes are looking in the other direction. In the upper margin, surrounded by swirling clouds, a flight of geese traverses the page.

Although legible, the figural drawing cannot be so easily linked to the text written on the same page. In the poem, the author has closely followed the conventions of the mystical *ghazal*. A poetic form of five to fifteen couplets, the *ghazal* developed a mystical inflection in the fourteenth century, weaving into the poem's customary emphasis on love an allegory of the divine.³⁶ Here the first half of the poem stages an encounter

33 Washington, D.C., Freer Gallery of Art, F1932.29a–b and F1932.30–F1932.37: *Diwan* (Collected Poetry) of Ahmad Jalayir, c. 1400, 30x20.3 cm, 337 folios, including eight pages with border drawings (Klimburg-Salter 1977; Atıl 1978, p. 11–27).

34 In addition to the references given in the preceding note, reproductions can also be searched online at <https://www.freersackler.si.edu/collections/> using the inventory numbers F1932.30 to F1932.37 [16.11.2019].

35 Washington, D.C., Freer Gallery of Art, F1932.30: <https://www.freersackler.si.edu/object/F1932.30/> [29.11.2018].

36 Lewis 1995; Meisami 2003, pp. 45–54; J. T. P. de Bruijn: *Ġazal i. History*, in: *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/gazal-1-history> [29.11.2018]; Ehsan Yarshater: *Ġazal ii. Characteristics and Conventions*, in: *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, 2006, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/gazal-2> [29.11.2018].



Fig. 3 Poems of Sultan Ahmad Jalayir (r. 1382–1410), Iran, c. 1400, 30 x 20.3 cm, f. 17 (?). Freer Gallery of Art, Washington D.C., F1932.30 (@ Smithsonian Institution).

of the narrator with his beloved.³⁷ The scene takes place in a garden (*gulistān*) at dawn. Comparing his companion to a cypress (*sarw*), the poet wonders what water and what air might have nourished such beauty.³⁸

In its second half, the poem carries mystical inflections. As is customary in the mystical *ghazal*, the erotic introductory theme segues into a reflection about the pursuit of love (*'ishq*), the passage of time, and the final dissolution of the lover into divine plenitude.³⁹ Love is a mystical allegory for the spiritual quest of God's wisdom, wherein the lover stands for the Sufi seeker and the beloved for God. The poem is couched in figurative language. The cypress figures the beloved and the mystic is compared to a traveler (*sālik*).

The accompanying drawing echoes some of these themes. The geese and the family walking through the page convey an idea of movement, allegorizing the mystic's journey. Other elements of the landscape project a sense of motion, including the convolutions of the clouds, the diagonal lines of the hills, the wake of the ducks, or the movement of the reeds, quivering in the breeze. The topography itself is in constant flux: a field becomes a pond, which turns into a hilly landscape.

Yet the drawing also departs from the text. There is no specific meaning in Sufi literature that can be associated with the representation of ducks and buffaloes for instance, or with the image of the woman carrying her newborn. Despite its emphasis on nature and movement, which can prompt a mystical interpretation, the drawing stands out for its generic aspect. In contrast with the *ghazal's* multilayered structure, it presents a rather simple image of pastoral life. It also projects a sense of peacefulness, contradicting the poem and its emphasis on annihilation. Breaking from the illustrational paradigm that had informed courtly-sponsored book paintings, the drawing creates an effect of surprise.

Puzzled by the discrepancy between word and image, most scholars have concentrated on identifying the hidden literary source of the iconography, thus privileging again the mimetic paradigm mentioned earlier. The key study of the *Diwan* remains the article published by Deborah Klimburg-Salter in 1977, in which she claims the drawings to be an illustration of the *Manṭiq al-ṭayr* (The Speech of the Birds) by the poet 'Attar (1142–1220).⁴⁰ 'Attar's poem is a collection of tales and moralistic anecdotes, framed by a story recounting the spiritual journey of a group of birds. The frame narrative is an allegory of the mystical pursuit of truth. According to Klimburg-Salter, the drawings of the *Diwan* illustrate the first six valleys through which the birds must travel before they can discover Simurgh, the fantastic bird that represents God: the

37 I would like to thank Abdullah Ghouchani for his help in transcribing this poem. This is the first verse:

38 In verses 4 and 5:

39 The final verse reads:

40 Klimburg-Salter 1977.

دلبرا امشب چمالت را صفائی دیگرست ناظران را با لقاییت ملتقائی دیگرست
در بلای قامت سرو تو گشتم مبتلا چشم فتانت چه گویم خود بلای دیگرست
در کدام آب و هوا پرورده اند این خوب را شهر خوبانرا مگر آب و هوائی دیگرست
احمدافانی شو اندر عاشقی مردانه وار در حقیقت نیستی را خود بقائی دیگرست

valley of the quest, the valley of love, the valley of understanding, the valley of detachment, the valley of unity, and the valley of astonishment. No illustration was made for the seventh valley, the valley of nothingness; an absence is in itself illustrative of the text, which describes the valley as incomprehensible.

Upon closer examination, one realizes, however, that the drawings cannot so easily be linked to ‘Attar’s narrative.⁴¹ The second drawing represents two enamored couples and might indeed point to the valley of love. The third one features a gathering of scholars, echoing the pursuit of knowledge addressed in the valley of understanding. But the other drawings do not so easily match the poem. To the extent that we interpret the first image as a representation of travelers, the drawing might represent the valley of quest. This reading, however, does not apply to all the characters depicted in the image. The fourth image, presumably an illustration of the valley of detachment, represents the exact opposite. Featuring a bustling nomadic camp, filled with earthily possessions from livestock to tents to food, it is a celebration of materiality.

Unless it is that the images, through their enigmatic appearance, parallel ‘Attar’s allegory in the experience that they provide. Perhaps they were set, as Oleg Grabar put it, “as so many surprises comparable to the surprising adventures of the search for salvation in Attar’s poetical account.”⁴² Perplexing the viewer’s mind, generating multiple readings, they invite the beholder to a ceaseless hermeneutic labor, like the Sufi seeker in his pursuit of Truth. The pictures do not convey a single meaning but rather propose a detour to prolonged, concentrated meditation.

We cannot do justice to the drawings unless we consider them together with another major novelty of the *Diwan*: the style and quality of its calligraphy. The text is penned in an elegant, fine *nasta’liq*, a script that developed at the same moment.⁴³ From *ta’liq*, an Arabic and Persian word meaning “hanging” or “suspended,” *nasta’liq* is characterized by a certain restlessness. In contrast with former calligraphic styles such as *naskh*, which was more rectilinear, the letters never quite sit on the baseline. Rather, following oblique lines, they seem to hang and swing, hooked up to an invisible point at their upper right.

In fact, *nasta’liq* closely echoes the line drawing in the same page of the *Diwan*. We are struck indeed by the graphic quality of the calligraphy and the calligraphic flow of the drawing, which appears like a flourish, extended from the text. There are visual resonances between both art forms, in the ways in which the pen strokes of the *nasta’liq* and the lines of the drawing, for instance, swirl or slant. The art of *tabrīr* informs both text and image, center and periphery, harmonizing the page into one lyrical entanglement of lines.

41 For reproductions, see Atil 1978, pp. 11–27 and the museum’s website <https://www.freersackler.si.edu/collections/> using the inventory numbers F1932.30 to F1932.37 [16.1.2019].

42 Grabar 2006, p. 231.

43 For a thorough analysis of the emergence of this script and further references, see Wright 2012, chapter 4.

The drawing registers a wide array of rhythmic movements, equating every motif with a set of gestures. In the tufts of grass, one sees a quick, impressionistic brushstroke. The cloths' contour records a longer, more fluid movement. The bushes are quite heavy and dense, while the stem of the reeds expresses a lighter, almost immaterial touch. With every figurative element functioning as the residue of a specific hand movement, the drawing as a whole is a seismograph, measuring and recording the draftsman's sensations. The lyrical drawing represents the topography of a landscape as much as it diagrams the artist's performance.

Each motif embodies a particular aspect of the draftsman's skills. As such the Freer drawing offers more than a seismograph; it herds the artist's activity into regular, figurative patterns. We gain access to the draftsman's mastery through the detour of figural representation, as though the artist needed figurative images in order to express the full range of his skills.

That the line could provide the basis for metaphorical associations is quite strongly suggested by Persian lyrical poetry. This is no coincidence as all three modes of expression – drawing, calligraphy, and lyrical poetry – developed at the same moment. It is even possible that *nasta'liq* was directly influenced by the *ghazal*, a highly stylized poem offering a mixture of courtly, erotic, and mystical themes (the *ghazal* also dominates the *Diwan* of Sultan Ahmad). *Nasta'liq*, which emerged in the second half of the fourteenth century when the mystical *ghazal* was developed by Hafiz, “may well have been affected by the emotion and mood of the poem, expressed through both its language and rhythm,” as Elaine Wright noted.⁴⁴

Several verses of *ghazal* bear witness to the consubstantiality of calligraphy, drawing and poetry. More specifically, they point to a metaphorical reading of the line, for instance in this verse, where Hafiz describes the beloved's hair:

At the scent of that musk-sac which, at last, the Saba loosed from those locks,
From the shining twists of his musk-black curls, what blood rushed into (lovers')
heart.⁴⁵

The hair of the beloved is compared to a mesh of black, shiny curls, one that recalls the twists of the *nasta'liq* script and the sinuous line of Persian drawing. It is also likened to a bag of musk, whose perfume is liberated by the morning breeze (*saba*), an image that further alludes to both calligraphy and drawing, since black ink was sometimes perfumed with musk.

44 Wright 2012, pp. 251–252.

45 This is the first *ghazal* of Hafiz. English translation by Meisami 2003, p. 419. The Persian text reads:

به بوی نافه‌ای کاخر صبا زان طره بگشاید
ز تاب جعد مشکینش چه خون افتاد در دل‌ها

The sense of smell, moreover, emphasizes the tactile aspect of the mystical experience. The poem describes a haptic space in which a breeze comes through, unlocking the lover's hair. Loosening the curls, freeing the scent of musk, it turns the beloved's face into a calligraphic performance. The sinuous line, then, the scent of the ink, and the shiny quality of the paper can be compared to the beloved. They do not only point to their makers' gestural efforts; they evoke the mystical quest for love.

Dated to the end of the fourteenth century and attributed to the Herati poet Mawlana 'Ali Badr, another poetic verse uses a more explicit link between mystical love and book arts, emphasizing the visual and olfactory resonances between calligraphy and human figure:

The musky down on the camphor page of your cheek is a verse (sign) of beauty
scriven.⁴⁶

The beloved's face is compared to a manuscript page and his down to a line of calligraphy from which emanates the odor of musk. As well as recording the lyrical movement of the artist's hand, lines could also embody the poet's object of desire, encoding the face of the beloved into the twists of the line, the smoothness of the paper and the scent of the ink.

A verse by Hafiz further links calligraphy to the poet's body:

Cupid's arrow tore and cleaved Hafiz's heart
I see his verses, with their wet ink, bleed.⁴⁷

Associating ink with blood, Hafiz's verses are likened to the poet's own flesh. The wetness of the ink, most visible in the moment when the pen nib touches the paper, evokes the wound caused by Cupid's arrow. To pen Hafiz's verse is to recreate the poet's experience of love. The calligraphic line is not a passive object. Activated by poetry, it reveals the face of the beloved, and the countenance of the poet. Body and line stand in a reciprocal relationship to one another: the hand inscribes the line that draws, metaphorically, a face.

Examining the lyrical verve of the drawing, the eye uncovers the artist's sensations as well as, with the guidance of historiographical writings and lyrical poetry, a series of associative images linking the line to the artist's bodily movements, to the poet's pursuit of divine love, and to the beloved's face. I am not suggesting that drawing has become illustrative again. The line's materiality evokes figurative motifs in a metaphorical way,

46 Quoted in Khwandamir 1954, p. 101. English translation by Thackston 1989, p. 114. The Persian text reads:

خط مشکین تو بر صفحه کافور عذار
آیت حسن و جمال است مقرر گشته

47 This is Hafiz's *ghazal* no. 240. The Persian text reads:

تیر عاشق کش ندانم بر دل حافظ که زد
این قدر دانم که از شعر ترش خون می چکید

prompting an association with these images through the viewer's sensual engagement. These associations in effect are not there. They only emerge in the subjective experience of the beholder who considers the line as a platform for metaphorical elaboration.

As such the line reads less as figurative than figural, to use Jean-François Lyotard's distinction. The figurative belongs to what Lyotard calls a textual space: a space where signs are "formed so as to permit the recognition of significations, in the same way that words are spoken by the addressed for the addressee to hear them."⁴⁸ In a figurative representation of the artist, we would see his likeness. The figural, by contrast, privileges materiality over content. Exceeding the figurative, the figural lies in the sensory body of letters and images – for instance, in the "letter's form, energy, thickness, size, weight."⁴⁹ Like the varied thickness of the line in Persian drawing, these aspects have no bearing on the informational value of the verbal message: the text does not need them to convey its meaning. Attending to the figural instead of the figurative, we move from iconography to materiality.

In Persian drawing and painting, the calligraphic line can be read both ways, either figuratively or figurally. On the one hand, the line creates a textual space: we recognize concepts, and we can read stories. But it is also the "trace of a condensing, displacing, figuring, elaborating energy, with no regard for the recognizable," to use Lyotard's general characterization of the line.⁵⁰ It takes time and patience to detect the figural dimension of the graphic medium. One must "remain permeable to the floating presence of the line," and foster a certain "sensitivity to plastic space," skills that our "discursive education and teaching" have not necessarily enforced, urging us instead "to enclose every object in the field of signification."⁵¹

To return to our conundrum – how can the line represent the artist if it does not offer an icon of his face, and if it withholds individual traces of execution? – the line, it can now be suggested, evokes the painter in a figural way: not through self-portraiture or impression evidence but through the symbolic possibilities of the medium. Self-representation is not an inherent feature of drawing. Rather, it is relational: it lies in the equation between the line's visual and material characteristics and the cultural and aesthetic values that shape the viewer's gaze.

48 Lyotard 2010, p. 207.

49 Lyotard 2010, p. 208.

50 Lyotard 2010, p. 232.

51 Lyotard 2010, pp. 212–213.

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