

VISUAL AND MATERIAL CULTURE, 1300-1700

Nazanin Hedayat Munroe

# Sufi Lovers, Safavid Silks and Early Modern Identity

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# Visual and Material Culture, 1300-1700

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*Nazanin Hedayat Munroe*

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Cover illustration: Textile fragment depicting Layla and Majnun, with the signature 'Work of Ghiyath' (detail). Attributed to late sixteenth/early seventeenth century, Safavid Iran. Silk, metal-wrapped silk; satin lampas. L: 20 1/8 in. (51.08 cm), W: 27 in. (68.55 cm). The Textile Museum, Washington, DC (3.312). Acquired by George Hewitt Myers in 1952.

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For my family,  
and the weavers of my ancestral past



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## Note on Transliteration

This volume uses transliterations of words from Persian and Arabic, which appear throughout the volume in italicized form. Many words are shared between the two languages, and for these I have used ‘v’ for the Persian *vav* where the origin is Persian, as in *javanmardi*; where the origin word is Arabic, the transliteration corresponds with ‘w’ as in *futuwwat* (both words corresponding to ‘chivalric young-manliness’). In order to minimize confusion for the non-Persian or non-Arabic reader, I have omitted diacritical marks, except where *ayn* (‘) and *hamza* (‘) are indicated, as in ‘Ali or Isma’il. For words used interchangeably between the two languages, I have used the Persianized transliteration, as in *zikr* rather than *dhikr* (ذِكْر). Anglicized words and names are written in their recognized forms, such as *shah*, *Safavid* or *Naqshbandi*.

Compound words are represented as one word, as in *karkhana* (‘workshop’), and by a single space when an adjective is applied, as in *sha’r-bafkhana* (‘brocade-weaving workshop’) or *kitab khana* (‘book workshop’). Letters in Persian and Arabic with no singular equivalent are transliterated as digraphs, such as *kh* (خ) in *khana*; *q* is substituted for letters such as *qaf* (ق) as in *naqsheh* (نقشه).

Published translations of titles retain transliterations in the original published form, as in *Futuwwat Namah-yi Sultani* (Kashifi, trans. Crook) or *Jahangirnama* (Jahangir, trans. Thackston), or in quoted content without modification. Elsewhere, these are transliterated following specifications outlined here, as in *futuwwat nama*.

Please see the glossary in this volume for Persian and Arabic words in the original language, and transliterated with diacritical marks using IJMES standards, with some modifications. These terms are translated and contextualized for the reader. A list of historic figures (each with a brief biographical sketch) follows the glossary of terms. Dates are represented according to the Gregorian calendar (CE) except where noted otherwise (AH or H) for publications or art work, where relevant.







# Introduction: Material Culture and Mysticism in the Persianate World

## Abstract

Introducing the relationship between weaving and poetry, this chapter presents the study as one bringing together seemingly disparate elements as the foundation of early modern cultural and behavioural norms. Nizami Ganjavi (d. 1209) is cited as the poet whose *Khamsa* (Quintet) codified two legendary romances: 'Khusrau and Shirin,' a love story about besotted royals from Iran and Armenia, respectively; and 'Layla and Majnun,' a tale of young Bedouin lovers separated by family strife. Both tales take place in the pre-Islamic era, yet are adapted to medieval Islamic audiences, with strong Sufi mystic references embedded in the text. The Persianate realm is introduced as a broad transnational expanse from Iran to South Asia, unified in the early modern period by the Persian language and Sufi literature.

**Keywords:** Safavid, Mughal, Amir Khusrau, silk, *'ishq, futuwwat nama*

This book addresses the relationship between poetry and textiles by examining a unique group of narrative figural silks depicting lovers from the *Khamsa* (Quintet) of epic poems. Attributed to early modern Safavid Iran (1501-1722), these sumptuous silks were coveted luxury commodities while simultaneously embodying mystical concepts codified in Persian literature. Messages conveyed through figural silks will be analyzed in Safavid and Mughal courtly cultures, as well as in Sufi and Islamic traditions that guided early modern rulers, who fashioned themselves as 'dervish kings' through a shared visual and literary culture. By contemplating luxury dress as a form of self-expression, the portrayal of *Khamsa* textiles functions as an important link expressing worldly and spiritual identities.

The legendary characters depicted on the silks were codified by twelfth-century Persian-language poet Nizami Ganjavi in his *Khamsa*, whose enthralling tales of these historical figures were imbued with Sufi mysticism. 'Khusrau and Shirin' dramatizes the love story of Iranian king Khusrau and his Armenian queen Shirin,

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whose tumultuous royal relationship began with a fated meeting on the road between their two kingdoms. 'Layla and Majnun' recounts the separation and madness of the Bedouin poet-lover Qays (aka Majnun, 'Madman') and his beloved Layla, and his transformation from insanity to sublimity as he wandered through the wilderness. Hailed as one of the great classics of Persian literature, illustrated manuscripts of Nizami's *Khamsa* were produced by workshops throughout greater Iran for the ruling classes in the centuries leading up to the Safavid period, including scenes illustrating each set of lovers meeting privately. By the mid-sixteenth century, these pivotal events in the respective narratives had become well known among the educated elite.

Between 1550 and 1650, eleven different signed and unsigned textile designs were produced portraying the meetings of these lovers in pivotal scenes. Four silk designs depict Khusrau Parviz, a powerful Sasanian king (r. 591–628), who is awestruck as he catches the first glimpse of his beloved Shirin bathing nude in a stream. Three designs show the Bedouin lovers Layla and Majnun together in the deserts of Arabia, unchaperoned and surrounded by wild animals, who are tamed by their love. Additional designs include *Khamsa* characters, but in slightly different scenes that nevertheless allow viewers to easily identify them. Some designs include short verses of Persian poetry, but none identified as being directly from any *Khamsa* manuscript. These provocative scenes, which include partial nudity and indicate *'ishq* ('romantic love/sexual desire'), were popular among the elite in the opulent courts of Safavid Iran and the Persianate world.

Three silks in the group include a subtly incorporated signature – a detail rarely added by designers. The signature has been linked to sixteenth-century Safavid master artisan Ghiyath al-Din Ali Yazdi Naqshband (hereafter Ghiyath), a celebrated textile designer from Yazd, Iran, who is noted in several biographical compilations. Perhaps drawing inspiration from the signed 'designer' textiles, the production of the eight remaining *Khamsa* silks were made without signatures depicting similar imagery. These unsigned silk designs indicate that perhaps these were created by lesser-known textile designers which may have been producing, in contemporary vernacular, 'designer knock-offs.'

Woven images of the poetry's pivotal scenes seem to mirror the iconography of paintings in *Khamsa* illustrated manuscripts; however, careful examination indicates that none of the designs are exact replicas of their painted counterparts. This discrepancy brings forth questions of whether the silk motifs were designed by textile designers or master painters. Although primary sources leave some ambiguity as to whether specialists worked across media in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, this study contemplates the possibilities by examining each respective medium through primary sources and comparing the motifs.

Further investigation of the *Khamsa* silks leads to several new discoveries not explored by earlier scholars. One important oversight is revealed by close readings



of the poetry: later Persian-language poets authored their own versions of the *Khamsa* revising Nizami's storyline, and different designs may reference one or more of these alternate poetic renditions, including that of Amir Khusrau Dihlavi. A recontextualization of the group allows for the subtle variations introduced in each poet's narrative to alter the messages encoded within individual textile designs, which may correspond with these later texts.

Based on the close correlation with Safavid manuscript painting and the signature of Ghiyath, provenance for the *Khamsa* silks as a group has been attributed by curators to mid-sixteenth- and early-seventeenth-century Iran. Yet a comparison of iconographic details indicates that some textiles in the group may have been produced outside the Safavid dominion, proposed here as Mughal India. By reconsidering provenance for these silks, the study examines the shared ideology of rulers in Iran and India during the early modern period, which may have prompted Mughal production of textiles with similar motifs. This hypothesis is further supported by primary sources indicating the migration of silk specialists throughout the Persianate realm, including Safavid weavers seeking patronage in Mughal India during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.<sup>1</sup>

## Material Culture and Mysticism

Luxury silk production cannot be contextualized without consideration of capital output and consumer demand. Figural silks were created by highly skilled master designers, such as Ghiyath, on the technologically advanced drawloom. Employing a compound technique known as *lampas*, these pictorial silks often utilized double the amount of richly coloured silk fibre through the addition of supplemental warp and weft threads to create detailed images. *Khamsa* silks were also produced as silk velvets, even more labour-intensive and costly than their *lampas* counterparts. Based on the materials, advanced skills and technology required to weave detailed pictorial images, figural silk production was an expensive endeavour. Considering these logistics, this study proposes that the *Khamsa* silks were implemented with the intention of creating yardage that could potentially create many garments rather than a 'one-off,' responding to consumer demand for luxury silks depicting *Khamsa* characters. Following this logic, the messages projected by the wearer of these silks seemed to resonate well with viewers in the Persian-speaking world: praising the transformative love of Layla and Majnun, while simultaneously projecting the passion and devotion of Khusrau and Shirin.

1 For a discussion of Iranian immigrant weavers in Mughal India, see Munroe, 'Shared Provenance.'

These messages held deep symbolic meaning for followers of Sufism, the mystical path of Islam. Beginning with individuals and small groups in the eighth and ninth centuries functioning on the fringes of mainstream Islam, Sufism was institutionalized and legitimized during the medieval period.<sup>2</sup> Attracting a wide variety of adherents, Sufism grew in popularity through the proliferation of poetry in court circles and membership of the artisan class, who imbued their works with iconography representing the spiritual codes of Sufi practice. Characterizing human experience within a Neoplatonic framework, Sufis believed that the earthly realm was a mirror of the celestial realm; to reach the Divine Reality, one needed to live in the physical world without being attached to its material reality. Objects of everyday life and experiences in the physical world were symbols on the path of the Sufi, which required humility and annihilation of the ego in order to obtain enlightenment, which happened in stages.

Dress represented two important elements of early modern identity: the external self as it functioned in society, and the internal self in its transformative state. Majnun's love of Layla, as the subsummation of one person in another, symbolizes the potential of *'ishq* to transform the soul, reflecting the essence of the Divine.<sup>3</sup> Khusrau's path is similarly powerful, in that the king is represented as a flawed character who must redeem himself through devotion to his beloved, Shirin. The creation of silks depicting *Khamsa* lovers became a symbol for the aspiring mystic lover (*'ashiq*), who wished to identify with the characters.

The surviving *Khamsa* silk fragments, which are dispersed among high-end museums in Europe and North America, represent what I believe to be only a small portion of the actual silks that were produced in this subgenre. This brings the larger genre of figural silks into the discussion, in that there were additional designs based on Persian poetic themes that were well known among the educated elite. The *Khamsa* silks are often included in this larger grouping; however, they are unique in that they are narrative, depicting specific scenes and characters that evoked a set of events and qualities embodied by the wearer and recognized by the viewer. Although the silks themselves were luxury items, their message would have reverberated among less educated and wealthy viewers, familiar with *Khamsa* tales told by storytellers through the oral coffeehouse tradition.<sup>4</sup>

2 The institutionalization and popular appeal of Sufi orders is generally credited to Shehab al-Din Abu Hafis Omar b. Muhammad Suhrawardi (1145-1234), who formalized the *tariqa Suhrawardiyya* ('Suhrawardi way') in Baghdad in the early thirteenth century, a topic covered in more detail in Chapter 4.

3 For a discussion of *'ishq* in Nizami's poetry, and specifically the symbol of Majnun, see Cross, 'The Many Colors of Love,' 70-73.

4 Matthee cites the accounts of several seventeenth-century European travellers to Safavid Iran, who record the coffeehouse (*qahweh khana*) as a central hub where poetry was performed and recited; as well as the Persian *Tazkira* of Nasrabadi. See Matthee, 'Coffee in Safavid Iran,' 24-25.

The role of silk in trade and diplomacy is also pivotal in the contextualization of the *Khamsa* group. Shah 'Abbas I (r. 1587-1629) centralized the lucrative sericulture industry in Iran, sending bales of raw silk fibre and woven lengths of velvet and lampas fabrics to Eurasian heads of state, gifted and worn by his ambassadors to encourage trade. Safavid figural silks featured prominently as robes of honour in court ceremonies, presented to visiting embassies and sent to rulers through diplomatic missions to Europe and the Islamic World. Many well-preserved Safavid fragments now in possession at Western museums are from church treasuries and palace storehouses, received as diplomatic gifts and offerings, which were also distributed throughout courts in the Islamic World with whom the Safavids wished to ally themselves.<sup>5</sup> Although the imagery may have been unfamiliar to the recipients of these gifts in the West, the delicately rendered designs, brilliant colours and brocading with metal threads made these precious silks the most expensive on the international market.<sup>6</sup>

For the Persian-speaking world, which included Ottoman Turkey and Mughal India, rulers receiving gifts of figural silks would have identified with the iconography and poetry that was memorized and recited among peers to represent erudition among the elite. Based on the iconological properties of the *Khamsa* silks, the message sent seems to be a paradox of worldly success and renunciation: the humility of the character Majnun is contrasted with the sumptuous materials worn by kings, and Khusrau's romantic escapades embody the wearer's mystic quest for union with the Divine beloved. By analyzing luxury dress in conjunction with Sufi poetry, religious practice and political agendas, these silks will be contemplated as an expression of the worldly and spiritual life of the wearer.

## The Persianate World

References to the 'Persianate world' will be used frequently throughout this book. This term is generally used by scholars to denote a vast geographic area in Asia in which the Persian language and the Persian cultural model were dominant. The modern-day borders separating Iran and Central Asia are not reflective of the dynastic boundaries of the medieval and early modern eras. Historically, as well as today, it was common to see a cultural blending of Iranian and Turco-Mongol traditions within these regions, transported with immigrants to South Asia where Persian language was lingua franca in court culture, government documents, commemorative and historical manuscripts, religious instruction and edifying

5 For an overview of gift giving in diplomacy, see Komaroff and Blair, *Gifts of the Sultan*.

6 Mackie, *Symbols of Power*, 340-342.



literature. Within elite circles in all these areas, appreciation of Persian-language literary works and their idealized characters fostered shared cultural values.

Several recent publications have brought the important issue of a universal cultural idiom to the forefront of scholarship. Two volumes edited by Nile Green bring together scholars of Iran, Central Asia, Afghanistan and South Asia, contemplating the cultural hegemony of these areas. *The Persianate World: The Frontiers of a Eurasian Lingua Franca* (2019) includes several chapters addressing the importance of the Persian language as the unifying factor across the realm. *Afghanistan's Islam: From Conversion to Taliban* (2017) includes studies on Sufism as a major diversifying factor in Islamic practice in the regions where Sufi orders were linked to political powers, including Central and South Asia. Richard M. Eaton traces the rise of Persianate culture in *India in the Persianate Age, 1000-1765* (2019), analyzing the development of the cultural idiom in South Asia incorporating Hindu, Turkic and Iranian practices.

Further defining the concept of Persianate courtly culture in modern-day India, *The Courts of the Deccan Sultanates: Living Well in the Persian Cosmopolis* by Emma J. Flatt (2019), analyzes Iranian influences on the culture of the ruling class in the Deccan. Focusing on the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Flatt defines the 'Cosmopolis' as the space in which court culture was based on a shared language practice, which included knowledge of Persian-language literary texts. Addressing the propagation of Persianate visual art forms in the subcontinent, *Iran and the Deccan: Persianate Art, Culture and Talent in Circulation*, edited by Keelan Overton (2020), discusses Iranian culture, literature and visual arts as a powerful prototype for Indo-Persian culture in the Deccan from 1400 to 1700. In *Persianate Selves: Memories of Place and Origin before Nationalism* (2020), Mana Kia contemplates the premodern concepts of what it meant to be Persian or Persianate, before nationalistic identities subsumed a more layered sense of self. Acknowledging that modern-day Iran was not always the epicentre from which cultural norms were established, Kia proposes that Persian identity was one based on education, occupation and community wherever these groups were located. However, these publications do not include chapters looking at garments, textiles and weavers, leaving the important aspect of a shared Persianate identity represented through dress markedly absent.

Given the universal familiarity with Persian literary works and the creation of Persian-language poetry outside of modern-day Iran, a reassessment of the provenance of the *Khamsa* textiles is in order. To suppose that all these 'Safavid' textiles are made in early modern Iran under Safavid rule limits their interpretation. Migratory groups living in West, Central and South Asia transported their skills and expertise in silk weaving throughout a broad region, in which a collective Persianate identity was based on the shared rules of etiquette and chivalry derived from literature rather than geographic origins. As such, the collective cultural



understanding of groups within these regions supports the conclusion that the layered meaning of the *Khamsa* silks would have been appreciated by several factions coexisting in the same geopolitical sphere, and that overlapping interests and identities within the courts – Safavid, Mughal, Deccan and throughout Central Asia – significantly influenced the societies over which they ruled.

Part I of this book presents documentary evidence of the silks, highlighting the discoveries that this analysis brings to current scholarship. The reader is introduced to *Khamsa* poetry as an edifying device for elite listeners/readers during the medieval and late medieval periods. Beginning with the story of Khusrau and Shirin, the concepts of love, kingship and destiny in Iran are examined through Nizami's narrative and corresponding depictions of these characters in manuscript paintings and silk textiles during the Safavid period. The Layla and Majnun silks are analyzed as a shift away from Nizami's text, bringing the reader to consider alternative narratives in Persianate culture, particularly the *Khamsa* of Amir Khusrau. The growth of Sufism is analyzed as the fertile ground in which the seeds of poetic metaphor are sown and cultivated, connecting text with textiles.

Part II examines the *Khamsa* silks in context of the role of garments as material objects imbued with spiritual and temporal authority in Islamic and Persianate culture. The conferral of garments symbolized approval and allegiance between giver and receiver. The role of the cloak in Sufi practice is traced from its origins in the Prophetic tradition to its function as a symbol of commitment to mystic life, undergoing transformation in the medieval period to an object symbolizing group affiliation. Restrictions on silk and figural imagery in Sufi and Islamic sources are deliberated in conjunction with material objects in spiritual practice, and the paradox of 'dervish silk' represented by the *Khamsa* textiles.

Figural silks are then analyzed in the courtly culture of the Mughal and Safavid dynasties. Self-fashioning as *Khamsa* characters for rulers and courtiers in both cultures will be examined here in primary sources. Figural silks will be discussed as luxury commodities, with an overview of the material processes and socio-economic structure that supported luxury silk production in Safavid Iran and Mughal India. Situating figural silks within Eurasian political and economic exchange, diplomacy and commerce between East and West are documented with specific examples. The cultural exchange of material goods, and the dress of ambassadors sent as representatives of their respective courts, reflect the significant role of figural silks as a representation of identity. The discussion includes the Englishmen Robert Sherley, who accepted diplomatic missions on behalf of Shah 'Abbas, and Thomas Roe, who sought commercial ventures in the Mughal dominion, as well as Safavid and Mughal ambassadors sent back and forth between these realms. Finally, the conclusion proposes new concepts of provenance based on the arguments put forth





throughout the book, arguing for a multiregional view of silk textile production in the early modern Persianate world.

Figural silks were key to self-fashioning through dress as a signifier of wealth, social class and ideology. However, the *Khamsa* silks are unique in that they are recounting specific scenes from the stories of these lover-protagonists, rather than representing an idealized non-narrative image. This study will significantly expand current scholarship by contemplating the *Khamsa* silks as garments produced across time and place, conveying mystic messages whose meaning was shared by the designers, wearers and viewers of these exquisite textiles.

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