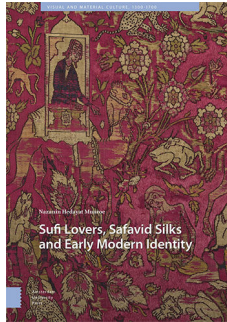


NAZANIN HEDAYAT MUNROE, *SUFI LOVERS, SAFAVID SILKS AND EARLY MODERN IDENTITY*

Visual and Material Culture, 1300–1700 42, Amsterdam:
Amsterdam University Press 2023, 248 pages with 19 color and
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Reviewed by
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In the past few years, the textile histories of Asia have interested a new generation of scholars, as well as several who are more established. Books focusing on the silks, cottons, and other fabrics from both Tang and Qing China, the Mongol Empire, Mughal India, Mamluk Egypt, and the Ottoman Empire are now joined by a monograph by Nazanin Hedayat Munroe, focusing on Iran.¹ *Sufi Lovers, Safavid Silks and Early Modern Identity* also brings a new perspective on links between textiles, painting, religion, and literature. This volume, which is available in print and in digital format, takes a relatively small group of figured and figural compound silks made in Iran between the late 1500s and the late 1600s and explores them

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Doris Behrens Abu-Saif, *Dress and Dress Code in Medieval Cairo. A Mamluk Obsession*, Leiden/Boston 2024; BuYun Chen, *Empire of Style. Silk and Fashion in Tang China*, Seattle 2019; Sylvia Houghteling, *The Art of Cloth in Mughal India*, Princeton, NJ 2022; Corinne Mühleemann, *Complex Weaves. Technique, Text, and Cultural History of Striped Silks*, Afalterbach 2023; Amanda Phillips, *Sea Change. Ottoman Textiles between the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean*, Oakland, CA 2021; Eiren Shea, *Mongol Court Dress, Identity Formation, and Cultural Exchange*, London 2020; Rachel Silberstein, *A Fashionable Century. Textile Artistry and Commerce in Late Qing*, Seattle 2020.

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in depth. The fabrics in question were patterned with vignettes from one or the other of two major Persian-language poems, both of which feature a pair of star-crossed lovers and both of which were part of Nizami Ganjavi's *Khamsa* (Five Tales), set down around the year 1200. Both the motifs and the possible uses of the fabrics themselves, as well as their attribution to the hero of Islamic weaving, Ghiyath al-Din 'Ali Yazdi (fl. ca. 1580s–1595 [?]), are main topics here.

The book shares its multidisciplinary approach with other recent scholarship, but also makes several important departures in keeping with the author's principal concerns: the relationship between poetry and its illustration, whether painted or woven; dress and self-fashioning among rulers and other elites in Iran and South Asia; and the Sufi context for the poetry, the images, and the cloth itself, whether in its making or wearing.² Alongside their significance within Sufi circles, the textiles with figures also become a sort of brand for the Safavids in the early years of the seventeenth century, featuring in both local and western European portraits and apparently sent as part of diplomatic gifts on the part of the Shah. Hedayat Munroe also details the movement of artisans, literature, and religious ideas between Mughal South Asia and Iran, especially in terms of royal patrons.

Among the early modern Islamic dynasties, the Safavids were and are known for textiles that depict the human figure – elegant young people drinking wine or engaging in falcon-hunting, men on horseback leading prisoners, lounging youths and the like. Scholars have identified some of the scenes with historic practices and others with poetry waxing lyrical about the beloved.³ Previous scholars, as Hedayat Munroe notes, have also linked some of these representations with manuscript painting; Safavid ateliers, some of them royal, created both single folio images and illustrated manuscripts. The question of how closely the motifs on these textiles might be aligned with either paintings or drawings by artists working on paper is the topic of the first chapter.

The first chapter also carefully considers the role of the textile designer – who conceptualized both the motifs and the way they repeated in the finished textile – and the *naqshband* – who translated the motifs into a template that was then mounted on a drawloom and used to create the overall pattern. The nature of textile design poses questions about the signature of Ghiyath included in three of the eleven *Khamsa* silks, as well as other textiles. A Ghiyath al-Din 'Ali Yazdi is also mentioned in literary sources; he was a paragon among designers and men, and a friend to the Shah. Hedayat

2

Sufism is a philosophy and practice in Islam which emphasizes a personal connection with the divine; it is often referred to as a mystical practice. It is transregional and adherents can be found among every school/sect.

3

Mary McWilliams, Prisoner Imagery in Safavid Textiles, in: *Textile Museum Journal* 26, 1987, 4–23.

Munroe queries what authorship might mean for textiles, as well as the use of the name by later weavers or by another later Mughal designer who might have shared the name, by coincidence or not. As with most centuries-old textile types, issues of survival and sample size vex firm conclusions, as does the destruction of Safavid archival sources.

One of the most original contributions in the book is the attention Hedayat Munroe pays to the literary sources of the vignettes, the main topic of Chapter Three. While the protagonists – Layla and Majnun, and Khusrau and Shirin – had been identified, several of the scenes had remained unidentified. This chapter proves that several vignettes are not inspired by the famous versions of these tales by Nizami Ganjavi (d. 1209), but rather by those of an author named Amir Khusrau Dihlavi (d. 1325), who lived and wrote on the Persian-Indian frontier. The chapter also explores ways in which textile metaphors worked their way into Persian poetry. Of special note is the way in which Majnun – made mad by his love for Layla – rends his garments. The section also pushes this idea about dress: designers and patrons must have decided to depict scenes from these poems themselves on the textiles, which were then used as garments, which extends and complicates meaning and metaphor.

Majnun, in his madness, disavows worldly goods and isolates himself in the wilderness. Chapter Four discusses the ways in which Majnun is considered a model for Sufi ascetics, both for his self-imposed poverty and for his obsession with his beloved – another metaphor, this time for the soul seeking unity with the divine. Beyond metaphor and image, though, Hedayat Munroe considers how Sufi ideals and practitioners inform ideas about dress in Persian and in larger Islamic thought. The ethos, also informed by principles of spiritual chivalry, permeated artisan brotherhoods. This discussion is especially useful – many art historians, as well as scholars of Islamic history and thought, have been slow to recognize the many ways in which textiles were used in religious contexts. Mantles, robes-of-honor, Sufi patchwork cloaks, and ceremonial girding were all laden with meaning. Historical and literary sources round out the picture, including a useful discussion about the symbolism of color.

The tension between luxury silks and ideas of pious austerity is the main topic of Chapter Five, which also explores the exchange of ideas, literature, and art between Safavid and Mughal realms. For the second topic, Hedayat Munroe can build in part on existing work about émigré painters, who are better documented in primary sources and much discussed among art historians. Her focus on Mughal rulers – who derived spiritual authority from Sufi orders in South Asia and in fact depicted themselves as deferring to Sufi sheikhs – is part of a larger discussion of the use of luxury textiles for state occasions, despite the dubious position of silk garments in Islamic philosophy and law. A textile depicting Majnun communing with the wild beasts, which the author has re-attributed to South Asia, may also be linked with Sultan Jahangir (d. 1627); he also

endured separation from his beloved, though his story had a happy ending. At first encounter, it may seem unlikely that a ruler requested a specific textile design because it held personal meaning, but the Mughal court was awash in both the tales themselves and poetry as a genre; Hedayat Munroe has built a largely tacit but compelling case for this possibility.

The final chapter returns to Safavid Iran and the role of these textiles in diplomacy both east and west. In these cases, written records do not capture the dazzle of the figured garments worn by envoys from England and India. The portraits of Robert Sherley and Naqd 'Ali Beg, both ca. 1626, are illustrated in this chapter and demonstrate – if indirectly – the powerful visual impact of the textiles as used in costume. The efforts of Shah Abbas (d. 1629) to centralize sericulture and monopolize the silk trade has been relatively well studied by historians, but here the innovation is about a focus on the types of textiles the Safavid rulers selected to send abroad and the messages they were meant to convey. In this chapter, too, the importance of Ghiyath returns: the Safavid Shahs sent many textiles by Ghiyath to their Mughal counterparts.

Hedayat Munroe builds an excellent historical, religious, and artistic picture for the milieu of the material but makes no single over-arching argument. Nor does she attempt to resolve every last question, including those of attribution to either Ghiyath of Yazd or the other Ghiyath, or those otherwise assuming his mantle. Perhaps better than an argument, she has given her readers a way to understand better and re-think these textiles, from production to trade to consumption. Some of her ideas – and especially those about Sufism and poetic metaphor, clothing and material, and literature and pictures – might also be used as models for scholars hoping to decipher the meanings and uses of Safavid and Mughal textiles and of other media as well.