

**Introduction**

The Shahnamah, "the Book of Kings," is the Iranian national epic outlining the four mythical/historical eras of pre-Islamic Iran: the Pishdadian, Kayanian, Ashkanians, and Sassanians. Many of the episodes of the Shahnamah have existed for thousands of years within the Iranian world's oral tradition, but it was first written by the poet Firdowsi in the late tenth century in present-day Afghanistan. The work includes some sixty thousand verses.

The Shah Tahmasp Shahnamah, the subject of the present study, was the result of several decades of collaboration between dozens of artists. Under the direction of some Iran's greatest talents—Aga Mirak, Sultan Muhammad, Mirza Ali, Mir Sayyid Ali, Muzaffar Ali, Shaykh Muhammad, Abd al-Samad—the work traces the development of the Safavid court style of Turcoman and Timurid modes. The full manuscript includes 258 paintings. The Shahnamah has no colophon, and the book must have been the primary project of the Safavid royal atelier for around twenty years. We do know the Shahnamah was completed by the time the painter, calligrapher, and belles lettrist Dust Muhammad wrote his "Account of Past and Present Painters" (1546). This author himself contributed to the completion of the manuscript.

The work was later presented to the Ottoman Sultan Selim II in 1568. The Manuscript surfaced again in the Ottoman Royal Library in Istanbul, where it was catalogued and annotated by Muhammd Arifi, Sultan Selim III's librarian. By the twentieth century, the Shahnamah had made its way to Paris where it was exhibited in teh Islamic art collection of the Musee des Arts Decoratifs. The work was on loan from the collection of Baron Edmond de Rothschild, who retained ownership until he sold it to Arthur A. Houghton Jr. in 1959 (it is often referred to
as the "Houghton Shahnamah"). It was Houghton who broke up the complete work first donating seventy-six folios with seventy-eight painting to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1970. He also sold four folios to the British Rail Pension Fund through Agnews of London. On November 17, 1976, Houghton had seven folios auctioned at Christie's. A second auction of fourteen folios were auctioned off at prices ranging from 14,300 to 253,000 in 1988. Soon after Houghton passed away and the executors of his estate auctioned the rest of the manuscript—still in its original binding—of some 120 paintings. Knowing the art market could not the sale of such a large number of paintings, the entire work was traded to the Museum of Contemporary Art in Tehran for the De Kooning “Woman III.” The manuscript is now on display at the museum in Tehran.

The four folios in the possession of the British Rail Pension Fund were resold in 1996 at Sotheby's. They include the episodes "King Firieydun Striking Down Zahhak" (L419,500); "Kay Qubad and Rustam" (L793,500); "Manuchihr in his palace" (L535,500); and "Rustam Deflecting an assailant's Bolder" (L397,500). The prices these works raised were the highest paid for any Persian paintings.

The folios examined in this study are among those donated to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The Visual Media Center greatly appreciates their contribution to this project.

For more information, see:

Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers. (esp. the articles "Safawids" and "Shah Tahmasp")
