Layla and Majnun in the wilderness with the animals: an illustration to the *Khamsa* of Amir Khusrau Dihlavi (cat.29)

Attributed here to Sanwalah
Mughal, circa 1590-1600
Opaque watercolor on paper, laid down with four panels of Persian poetry in *nast`aliq* script above and below; an inscription added on the picture surface at upper right reads *Majlis Layla va Majnun āshiq wa m`ashaq* ("meeting of Layla and Majnun, lover and beloved")
Page: 9¾ x 6½ in (24.7 x 16.8 cm)
Miniature: 7¾ x 6½ in (20 x 16.8 cm)

Provenance:

Published:
Aitken, *The Intelligence of Tradition in Rajput Court Painting*, 2010, fig.4.15
This painting is an illustration to the mystical romance Layla va Majnun, one of the most popular and frequently composed poems of the late medieval period. Based on the tale of a 7th century Arab poet and his beloved, the romance was first written in Persian by Nizami Ganjavi in 1192, who wrote a poem of 4,600 distichs. Numerous other versions by a large number of poets followed over the next few centuries - the Encyclopaedia Iranica gives the figure of at least 59 versions (see Encyclopaedia Iranica, article “Layla and Majnun"). Among those who wrote poems specifically about Layla and Majnun or who included the story in other works were Amir Khusraw Dihlavi, Jami, Sa’di, Hafiz and Hilali. The two most popular versions in India were those of Nizami (1141-1209) and Amir Khusrau Dihlavi (1253-1325), which in both cases formed part of these authors’ Quintets (Khamsa or Panj Ganj). It also became one of the most popular texts to be illustrated in the Persian and Mughal traditions.

The story of Layla and Majnun is well-known and involves a boy and girl who fall in love at a young age. As they grow, their passion for each other increases, but they are kept apart by a combination of the vicissitudes of fate and the objections of Layla's family. The more they are prevented from being together, the more their love grows, until the young man becomes increasingly deranged (Majnun literally means mad or possessed in Arabic) and wanders the desert wastes, emaciated, chanting poetry and pining for his beloved. Layla is kept away from him in her family’s encampment, and her yearning for him is as great as his for her. Majnun is befriended by the wild animals of the desert, which become tame in his presence and protect him from strangers. Despite several meetings, Layla and Majnun’s passion can never be fulfilled, and they die consumed and heartbroken by love.

In the context of Mughal painting of the late 16th century, at least four illustrated copies of the Khamsa of either Amir Khusrau Dihlavi or Nizami were produced in the context of the royal court, all of which include illustrations to the story of Layla and Majnun. These are (in chronological order):
A copy of Nizami’s Khamsa in the Bodleian Library, Oxford, of circa 1590 (Ms. Pers. D.102, see Topsfield 2008, nos.8-10); the British Library manuscript of Nizami’s Khamsa (the Dyson Perrins Khamsa), made for Emperor Akbar in 1593-95 and copied by the royal scribe ‘Abd al-Rahim Ambarin Qalam (Ms. Or.12208, see Brend 1995; several miniatures from the manuscript are in the Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore, W.613, see Brend 1995); a copy of Amir Khusrau Dihlavi’s Khamsa datable to 1597-8 and copied by the other senior royal scribe Muhammad Husayn Zarin Qalam, in the Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore (Ms. W.624, http://art.thewalters.org/detail/7538/five-poems-quintet/; eight folios of this manuscript are in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (13.228.26-33), but the illustrations to the section on Majnun are in Baltimore); and a copy of the Khamsa of Amir Khusrau Dihlavi dated 1600 in a private collection (see Bonhams 1996, lot 481. This copy was more probably made for a prince or courtier rather than the emperor himself. The manuscript was executed by Husayn ibn Haydar ibn Muhammad Kashmiri and Bonham’s catalogue description discusses the possibility that this is the artist Husayn Naqash, and that the scribe and artist of this manuscript are one and the same). Unlike the Persian examples mentioned above, none of these show Layla embracing Majnun, but they all have compositional elements that relate closely to our picture (for a wider discussion of the Layla and Majnun story in Indian painting see Aitken 2010). The closest to our miniature in terms of overall composition is the scene of Majnun visited by his mother in the British Library Nizami (f.150b, see figs.1a-b below, see also Brend 1995, fig.20, p.31).
The composition is remarkably close to ours, so much so that one of the pictures must surely be based on the other, or both on a third model. Both have the two main figures seated on a rock platform under a large spreading tree with rocky outcrops, a bubbling stream, docile wild animals all around, and a distant townscape the far side of a lake. The figure of Majnun is extremely close, apart from the fact that in one he is kneeling and the other reclining. The arrangement of the compositional elements around the page is also very similar, save for the key factor that they are reversed - almost mirror images of each other. In ours the two figures are placed just to the right of centre and lean diagonally towards the upper right. In the BL miniature they are placed just to the left of centre and lean towards the upper left. In ours the tree is also placed just to the right of centre, and in the BL example it is just to the left of centre. The same goes for the distant townscape, which is at the upper left in ours and in the upper right in the BL picture. And in ours a pair of lions stretches languidly on a grassy rock at the lower left, whereas in the British Library version a pair of cheetahs stretches, in an identical and distinctive pose, at the lower right (see figs. 2a-b above). The two miniatures are of similar dimensions, and although one cannot be a pounce of the other - the compositions are not identical enough - it is possible that a general compositional pounce existed, perhaps an outline sketch, that served as the basis for both works.
possibility that our picture and the British Library illustration of Majnun visited by his mother shared a common template is strengthened when we compare two other images from among the four manuscripts mentioned above. The British Library Nizami has another image from the Layla and Majnun story, this one showing the two lovers fainting when they meet (see Brend 1995, fig.21, p.32; Aitken 2010, fig.4.3). The Khamsa of Amir Khusraw Dihlavi dated 1600 mentioned above (private collection, hereafter referred to as the Bonhams Khamsa), has an illustration of the same scene with an almost identical composition, but again in mirror-image with a few details slightly altered (see figs.3a-b below). It is also worth noting that both these scenes of Layla and Majnun fainting contain the figure of a camel (Layla’s mount) that is remarkably similar to that in our miniature.

It is unlikely that the present miniature was originally part of the Bonhams Khamsa or intended for it. The subject matter and compositional context would fit, especially the double link to the British Library Nizami illustrations, but the proportions of the page sizes differ - all the other Bonhams miniatures are somewhat narrower and most have text within the picture area, which ours does not. Furthermore, the Bonhams miniatures are all executed in a very similar style and are probably the work of a single artist (possibly Husayn Naqqash, as discussed in the catalogue description, or possibly Haydar Kashmiri), whereas ours is painted in a rather different style, certainly by a different hand from the Bonhams miniatures. Thus a fifth courtly manuscript of the Khamsa was probably produced in the 1590s, using a common set of compositional models, and showing these mystical poems to have been highly popular in royal Mughal circles towards the end of Akbar’s reign.

It is worth examining the composition of our miniature is greater detail. The miniature as a whole has a strong sense of its Persian pictorial ancestry, both in general terms and specifically related to Layla and Majnun illustrations. The piled-up rocky outcrops, the diagonally-running stream and the high horizon can all be seen in 15th and 16th century Persian miniatures (see figs.4a-d below). And yet the picture is unmistakably Mughal.
The palette, the particular mode of the rocks, the depiction of the tree, the figure of Majnun, the pool with ducks in the foreground, many of the animals, and the distant townscape all place the miniature firmly in the Mughal tradition of the 1590s. The figure of Majnun is interesting in itself. In the story, Majnun is described repeatedly as emaciated, like skin and bones, darkened by the sun and dirt, ragged, cadaverous etc. In earlier Persian examples he is often shown thin and gaunt, but in a strongly stylized way. Here, and in other Indian versions of the period, his emaciated state and darkened skin are shown with a more direct realism. This may be due to the natural understanding that Indian artists and an Indian audience would have had for an emaciated ascetic. The Majnun of the story is likened to a hermit and a “fool of God”, so the link to a religious ascetic, whose need for and interest in the worldly had been consumed by his devotion to God, was explicit in the text. But the existence in India of a strong visual tradition of ascetic holy men, especially that of the Emaciated Buddha, and even of perhaps of Chamunda, the Horrific Destroyer of Evil, both of whose images were embedded in the visual language of the Subcontinent, would have allowed and encouraged the treatment of Majnun with a realism absent in the Persian examples.

There are several less obvious aspects that nevertheless demonstrate the Mughal-ness of the picture. The lion at the lower left is stretching his hind leg in a distinctive manner, one that is repeated in the British Library Nizami (see figs.2a-b). The stretch looks almost awkward and uncomfortable, and yet anyone who has owned even a domestic cat or lived with one for more than a few days will recognise this hind-leg stretch as something that felines do regularly when relaxing or having just woken from sleep. This relatively minor element underlines the interest in realism that Mughal artists had in comparison to their Persian predecessors (see, for contrast, the lions in figs. 4a-d above).

And yet the same pair of lions here reveals a more traditional motif that had a long Persian lineage as well as many Mughal examples. This is the thin screen of grassy reeds behind which the lions lie. This specific combination of the lion behind tall reeds features in numerous earlier Persian miniatures, from the 14th century onwards and includes several illustrations in the Shahnama of Shah Tahmasp. In the Mughal context this trope was used on many occasions, including in a drawing in the Benkaim Collection (vol.1, cat.41) showing a prince hunting lion in a landscape (see figs.5a-g below).

Other animals among Majnun’s menagerie help to locate the natural setting firmly in India. The monkeys climbing in the tree above Layla and Majnun are an obvious example, but more subtle are the presence of at least two types of deer that are native to India but that do not occur in Iran. Between Layla and Majnun and the camel to the left is a pair of brown spotted deer, one of which has antlers. This is a pair of Axis deer (cerus axis), also known as Indian Spotted Deer, or Chital. Another distinctive species is the Indian Blackbuck (antilope cervicapra), which are placed to the right of Layla and Majnun. The male is shown as dark grey with long, sharp horns, and the female as brown. Both have white underbellies.
The influence of European engravings and illustrated printed Bibles, brought to India in large numbers by Jesuit missionaries and other European travellers and merchants in the second half of the 16th century, was strongly felt in Mughal painting. Through them a wide variety of Christian and European iconography entered the Mughal artistic milieu. The imagery was enthusiastically taken up by Akbar’s artists, encouraged by the emperor himself, who was fascinated by Christianity and other religions and by Christian and European works of art.
Their influence on early Mughal painting, especially in the late 16th century, when their novelty value to patron and artist alike was at its strongest, is well-known and widely discussed. In the present miniature the most obvious example of a motif borrowed from European art is the distant townscape, seen mistily on the horizon beyond a wide body of water. Just such townscapes appear frequently in Northern European engravings and woodcuts of the late 15th and 16th centuries, and occasionally in Italian engravings of the same period (see figs.6a-e below), and became popular elements in Mughal painting of the late 16th and early 17th century. And yet the presence of a distant town is true to the general narrative of the poem, for Layla’s encampment is referred to on occasions as a town, and Nowfal (Majnun’s sometime friend and champion) is described as living in a far-off town (in the original tale he is meant to be the governor of Medina).

A more subtle but perhaps more significant European influence can be seen in the central figures of Layla and Majnun. Of the related illustrations of this scene in Mughal manuscripts of the 1590s (discussed above), only the present one has the two figures embracing in this manner, with Majnun reclining against a tree and Layla cradling him with her body. In earlier Persian examples in which they embrace, the majority show Majnun sitting upright, while only the Cairo Bustan image shows him lying flat with his head on Layla’s lap. Thus our version is quite distinctive, and it may not be a coincidence that the pose of the two figures, as well as their
emotional interaction, is akin to images of the *Pieta* and *Lamentation over the Body of Christ* as depicted in European engravings and paintings of the 15th and 16th century (see figs. 7b-e below for a selection). The *Pieta* and *Lamentation* were key episodes in the Passion of Christ, and were among the most frequently painted and engraved scenes in Christian iconography. Printed versions of this scene would certainly have been among the European prints circulating in India in the late 16th century.

A distinctive motif is the way one of Christ’s legs is bent up at the knee while the other is straight, which is repeated and adapted in the present miniature. In several of these European images Christ and Mary are placed (not surprisingly) at the foot of the Cross, often leaning against it, which in our painting has been replaced by the large tree, and indeed in the *Lamentation* by Baldung of 1515 the figures are leaning against a tree rather than the cross. One further related European image is a scene of *The Lamentation over the body of Adonis*, which shares many of the same elements as the Christian version, but has an even more direct link to ours in the way the figures are seated on a rocky plinth, propped against a large and leafy tree (see fig. 7f above). Thus the figures of Layla and Majnun are a precise example, a microcosm, of the essence of early Mughal painting. Their specific form is influenced by Persian, Indian and European modes and iconography, including the traditional image of Layla and Majnun based on the narrative itself and earlier Persian miniatures, of Indian iconography such as the Starving Buddha and other emaciated ascetics, and of European iconography including Christ and Mary, Venus and Adonis.
The present painting is so close in composition and style to the scene of Majnun visited by his mother in the British Library Khamsa that the probability of the same artist having executed both works is very strong. The compositional similarities have been discussed above, but it is worth looking more closely at one element of Sanwalah’s style as seen in other signed or firmly attributed works. One of the motifs that Sanwalah uses on several occasions is a particular manner of depicting the distant misty mountains on the horizon, often growing almost organically beyond a small townscape, and coloured in a hazy white and blue. This is seen here at the upper left of our picture. In other works by Sanwalah a very similar motif can be seen (see figs 8a-e), and while distant townscapes and mountains occur frequently in Mughal painting of the period, this particular manner seems rather specific to Sanwalah.

8a Detail of the present miniature
8b Akbarnama, 1603-1605, by Sanwalah, CBL 95 (detail)
8c European Scene (detail), by Sanwalah, CBL 11A.11
8d Maria and Alchemists (detail), by Sanwalah, BL Or.12208, f.294a
8e Khamsa, 1597-8 (detail), by Sanwalah, Walters Art Gallery, W.634, f.59a