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Cultural Vandalism

Art lovers everywhere should feel grateful to Professor Souren Melikian, the famous authority on art, for drawing pointed attention to an act of vandalism which has ruined a priceless treasure but which, paradoxically, has been perpetrated by those who most value the world's cultural heritage. He has related the story of how a manuscript of the Persian epic Shah-Nameh, executed by order of Shah Tahmasp (1524-1576), whose last depository was the Houghton Library at Harvard has been dismembered and is now being sold folio by folio. The master plan of the volume was the work of Dost Mohammed, great painter and calligrapher, and the illustrations, according to Professor Melikian, represented the ultimate in Persian miniature painting.

The manuscript which passed through several hands was acquired in 1959 by the founder of the Houghton Library which was later given to Harvard University. One should have supposed that the volume would henceforth be in safe custody, but it is here that the disintegration process began. Leaves began to be taken out for exhibition from 1962 onwards, and in 1972-1978 leaves were donated to the Metropolitan Museum. The first public sale of folios was held at Christie's in London in 1976 and a total of seven folios fetched £785,000.

The most recent sale took place again at Christie's in London this month, and 14 folios were sold for a total of £976,800. The most expensive one is reported to have fetched £253,000.

The dismantling of the work completely ignores the close relationship between text and image which, Professor Melikian asserts, exist in illustrated manuscripts of this kind. The painter inserts calligraphed quotations into the miniature, which introduce an additional meaning by echoing the text of the book in a metaphorical way. To separate the two, as any one who has seen any illustrated Persian manuscript, would readily agree, is to disfigure and dismember what is conceived as an integral whole.

The same, and even in some respects, a worse fate has befallen many Mogul manuscripts, the most famous among them being the Tuti Nameh illustrated under the patronage of Emperor Akbar. Only a few pages from it now survive in Western libraries.

Professor Melikian attributes the vandalism to the ignorance of Persian and Arabic languages, (or of Chinese in the case of Chinese scrolls). Real knowledge, not high prices, will preserve artistic treasures.