

PERSIAN BOOKBINDINGS  
OF THE FIFTEENTH CENTURY

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VOLUME I

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PERSIAN BOOKBINDINGS OF THE FIFTEENTH CENTURY

A CONTRIBUTION FROM THE RESEARCH SEMINARY IN ISLAMIC ART

# PERSIAN BOOKBINDINGS OF THE FIFTEENTH CENTURY

BY  
MEHMET AGA-OGU

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## FOREWORD

BECAUSE of the lack of systematically treated material from the period preceding the fifteenth century, the publication of an exhaustive study on the historical and artistic development of Persian bookbinding is almost impossible at the present time. Except for a few significant papers in various periodicals, the literature dealing with this branch of Islamic decorative arts has not been enriched since the publication of two works: *Islamic Bookbindings*, by Professor Friedrich Sarre, and *Islamische Bucheinbände*, by Dr. Emil Gratzl, both dealing particularly with bindings from Arabic countries and with characteristic examples of Persian works of the sixteenth and following centuries.

In the preface of his monograph Professor Sarre has called the attention of art historians to the precious bindings in the Türk ve Islam Asarı Müzesi (formerly the Evkaf Museum), in Istanbul, a number of which are published in the present book. In selecting examples from the rich collection of this museum, the writer has restricted his choice to Persian bindings of the fifteenth century, supplementing them with specimens from the collections of the Topkapu Sarayı Müzesi and the University Library in Istanbul, with the intention of presenting a small, but characteristic group of works belonging to a period during which the art of bookbinding in Persia attained the apogee of its artistic splendour.

It is not the writer's purpose to present here a historical or stylistical study of the subject, but rather to add to already published material additional specimens of artistic value, which may extend the hitherto scanty knowledge concerning the art of Persian bookbinding of the century in question.

This book appears as a contribution from the Research Seminary in Islamic Art of the University of Michigan, which owes its existence to the interest of Dr. Alexander G. Ruthven, President of the University, and Professor John G. Winter, Director of the Division of Fine Arts, to whom the writer desires to express his most grateful acknowledgments.

Thanks are also due to the Director Emeritus of the National Museums in Istanbul, Dr. Halil Eldem, for his valuable advice while the



writer was pursuing his studies in Turkey. For permission to reproduce the bindings in Plates I-III, XIII, XIV, and Figures 5-8 the writer owes a great debt of gratitude to Mr. Tahsin Shükri Oz, Director of the Topkapu Sarayı Müzesi, to Mr. Fehmi Ethem, Director of the University Library in Istanbul, and to Professor K. T. Koetschau, Director of the Städtisches Kunstmuseum in Düsseldorf.

For the revision of the English the writer is indebted to the kindness of Mr. Walter Donnelly, Editor of the University Museums Publications.

Ann Arbor, Michigan  
1935

M. A.-O.

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## INTRODUCTION

THE fifteenth century was the golden age of the art of bookbinding in Persia. Under the zealous patronage of the highly cultured princes of ruling houses and particularly those of the Tīmūrid dynasty, and with the collaboration of masters assembled in the court ateliers, artistic achievement in bookbinding attained its perfection. During this period were produced the most luxurious manuscripts, masterpieces of calligraphy, ornamental illumination, and miniature painting, inclosed in magnificent bindings, the technical workmanship and decorative refinement of which were never to be surpassed in succeeding centuries anywhere.

The technical skill and the wealth of ornamental adornment displayed in the bookbindings of that century were unquestionably the result of a long-continued and many-sided development, the early stages of which, due to the lack of published materials, remain obscure. It is impossible at the present time to determine whether or not book covers were produced in Persia during the Sasanid period (226-641 A.D.) in the form and with the technical methods known to us. It is, however, a matter of general knowledge that bookbinding was known since the early Medieval Age, in Eastern Turkeṣtān and in Egypt. Alfred von Le Coq, the director of the German Turfan Expedition, discovered among the Manichean manuscripts in Khotcho two fragments of book covers, which archaeological evidence led him to ascribe to the period between the sixth and ninth centuries.<sup>1</sup> They are related both in technique and decoration to the Coptic bindings of Egypt, and thus it clearly appears, as Adolf Grohmann rightly suggested, that the art of bookbinding was "taken from the Nile to Eastern Turkeṣtān."<sup>2</sup> This was brought about probably through the agency of Nestorians, whose communities were spread over the Near and Middle East since the period of the foundation of their own church. Therefore, it can be asserted with probability that the method of binding books was introduced also into pre-Islamic Persia where the Nestorians enjoyed a privileged position.<sup>3</sup>

During the Islamic period there occurred another similar expansion of the influence of Coptic bookbinding. This time, however, it was transmitted to Persia through the medium of Arabic books, which

thenceforth dominated Persian bookmaking in all its artistic aspects.

Derived from Coptic sources,<sup>4</sup> the Arabic book covers of the first centuries of the Hidjra were made of wood covered with leather. They were usually of small format and decorated with very modest geometrical ornamentation produced in blind tooling without gilding or fretwork design.<sup>5</sup> With the introduction of paper in a later period the wood was replaced with pasteboard, and although the identical form was retained, the decoration of the leather coverings was somewhat enriched through the use of intertwined and knotted patterns and other geometrical motifs combined with occasional filigree ornaments in various compositions. Simple leather bindings remained the dominant type in almost all Arabic countries until the late Middle Ages. They were introduced into Persia with the first Arabic books, and although somewhat altered by local artistic influence, maintained substantially the same form and ornamentation until about the beginning of the fifteenth century.

The discoveries in 1908 of the Asiatic Expedition of the Russian Geographical Society have shown that the influence of Arabic bookbinding went far beyond the boundaries of Persia. In southern Mongolia P. K. Koslov found a partially preserved book cover among fragments of Persian manuscripts in the ruins of Khara Khoto, a town of considerable importance during the early Middle Ages. Professor S. F. Oldenburg, who has analyzed the archaeological findings of the expedition, ascribed this book cover to approximately the thirteenth century.<sup>6</sup> As may be seen from the drawing (Fig. 1) it is decorated with blind-tooled ornaments. A simple narrow border of a tendril design frames a central panel in which are a medallion and corner pieces formed of braided fillets, these motifs being further embellished by numerous small circular designs. The two panels at the top and bottom of the central field are adorned with arabesques apparently produced in the same technique. The binding is obviously of Persian origin, yet it exhibits technical and ornamental features characteristic of Arabic workmanship.<sup>7</sup>

During the fourteenth century, while the art of bookbinding in the western Islamic countries, particularly Egypt, was reaching its highest level of development, the Arabic influence in Persia became still stronger. The few known Persian bindings of the period, characterized by austere simplicity of ornamentation and complete absence of gilding,<sup>8</sup> are distinctly Egypto-Arabic stylistically both in technique

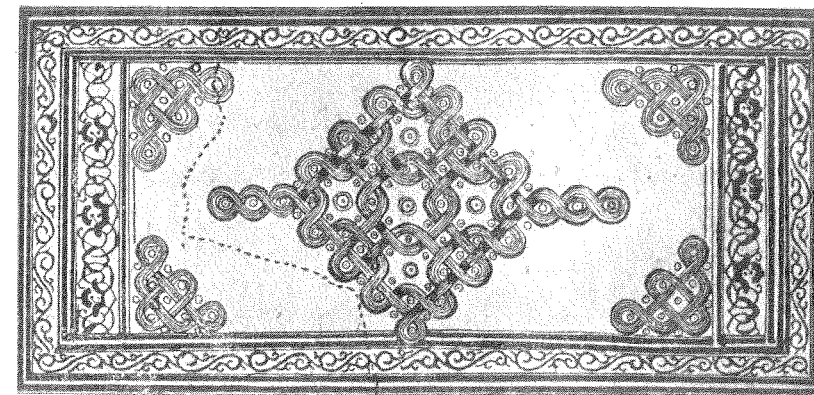


FIG. 1—Drawing of a book cover found at Khara Khoto  
XIII Century, Leningrad, Asiatic Museum

and decorative finish. With the opening of the next century, however, fundamental changes in the decorative adornment took place. Other political and cultural centers, notably Herāt, assumed the leadership of the entire Islamic Near East in the production of books, and new and improved methods were introduced together with radical innovations in the style of decoration.

One of the most glorious and productive periods in Persia was the forty-two-year reign of *Shāh Rokh Mīrzā* (1405–1447 A.D.), the art-loving son and successor of *Amīr Tīmūr*. Under his rule Herāt, the capital of the *Tīmūrid* Empire, became second only to Samarkand as a center of Persian culture and art. There Prince *Bāisonghor Mīrzā* (died 1443 A.D.), *wezīr* in his father's court and the greatest bibliophile of the Islamic Orient, founded an imperial academy and library which were to mark the beginning of a new epoch in the development of Persian bookmaking. Artists from all corners of the empire were assembled at the court academy under the patronage and personal leadership of this zealous connoisseur.

References to the calligraphers, illuminators, miniature painters, and other artists active in the Herāt academy are found in a few contemporary historical sources, but unfortunately none are found in regard to the bookbinders who certainly must have enjoyed a privileged position in an environment favorable to their artistic activity. *Menākib-i-Hünerwerān*, the biographical lexicon of book-artists, written in 1587 A.D., by the learned Turkish author, *Muṣṭafa 'Alī*, does not mention a single name among the Herāt bookbinders, though

he praises the artistic ability of a master of cut-pattern work, a certain 'Abd Allāh,<sup>9</sup> who was a native of the capital city. The filigree cutters, who produced calligraphical works and ornamental patterns in papers, must have been the same artists who so skillfully adorned the doublures of bookbindings with leather filigree designs. This conclusion is confirmed by Dost Muḥammad,<sup>10</sup> the author of a treatise on Persian miniature painters, who states that Bāisonghor Mīrzā invited to Herāt a certain bookbinder of Tabrīz, Ustād Kīwām al-Dīn, who was the inventor of "*munabbat-kārī*" or cut-pattern work. It may be noted that the part of this statement relating to the invention of cut-pattern work is historically inaccurate, for it is known that filigree technique was employed several centuries before the time of Bāisonghor Mīrzā by the Coptic artists of Egypt as well as by the central-Asian craftsmen of the Uighūr Kingdom in eastern Turkestan.<sup>11</sup> It is very probable that the technique of leather filigree was introduced into Persia long before the fifteenth century, though examples of it have not yet come to light.<sup>12</sup>

The bookbindings of the fifteenth century, made in Herāt and other Persian cities, which escaped destruction in the perpetual turbulence of the Near East, prove the highly cultivated artistic spirit of the period and of the academic circles which produced them, as well as illustrate the remarkable imaginative power and creative genius of the Persian artists. These bindings stand out unparalleled in the art of all times and all nations, in displaying every technical and decorative possibility.

One of the most conspicuous achievements of the Herāt school, in the decoration of covers, was the introduction of landscapes depicting real and fabulous animals executed in blind tooling and in cut-pattern work. A new process of employing single metal blocks, which supplemented the traditional method of laborious stamping of geometrical and arabesque patterns with many small dies, made possible this type of elaborate design. Most of the animals, birds, and fabulous beings which fill the landscapes were derived from the art of the Far East, but their realistic form and their composition are characteristic of the contemporary miniature painting of Herāt.

A magnificent example of this new type of binding is preserved in the library of the former imperial palace, Topkapu Sarayı, in Istanbul (Plates I–III).<sup>13</sup> It incloses a luxurious manuscript of the poems of the famous Persian mystic, Muḥammad ibn Ibrāhīm Farīd al-Dīn 'Aṭṭār,

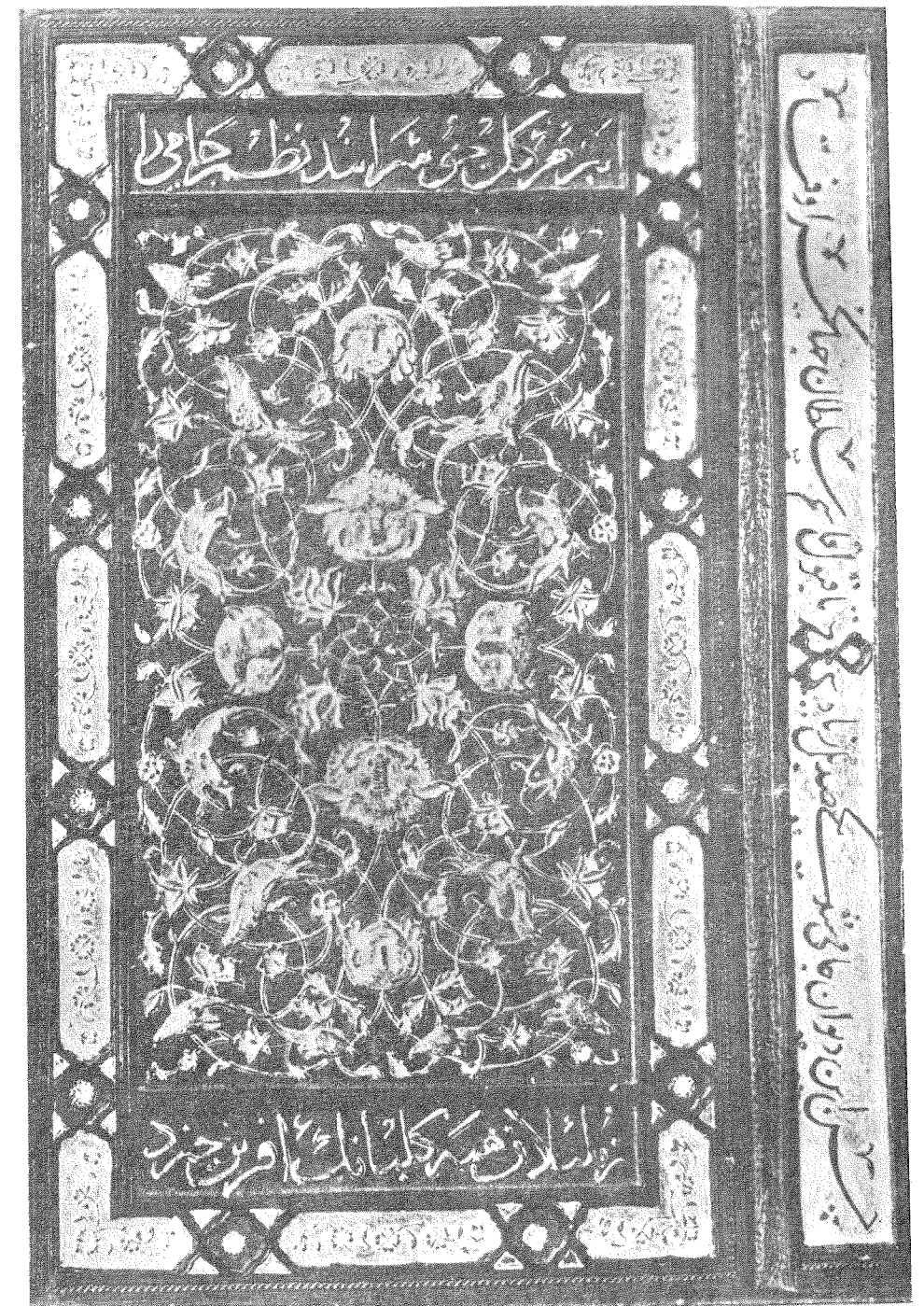


FIG. 2—Cover of a binding from a manuscript executed for Kāsim Sulṭān Herāt, end of XV Century, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale



which was copied and illuminated in 1438 A.D. in the court atelier for the library of Shāh Rokh Mīrzā. The binding, which is undoubtedly contemporaneous with the manuscript, shows the techniques of tooling and leather filigree in perfection. Stamping with a single, large, metal block produced the whole decoration of the front cover and flap. The thorough understanding of the decorative possibilities of the landscape design, and exact observation of animal life shown in the realistic rendering of the figures, indicates that the anonymous maker possessed high artistic ability.

Still more elaborate are the filigree designs of the doublures. Here the landscape motifs are executed with even greater decorative feeling, and their plastic effect is emphasized by dark blue painted backgrounds. In the decoration of the interior of the front cover there is a "grotesque" motif of tendrils ending in animal heads, a design which was much favored in earlier as well as fifteenth century illuminations, metal works, carpets, and other objects of decorative art,<sup>14</sup> and which appears as the principal ornamental motif of a late fifteenth century binding, probably executed in Herāt, now in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris (Fig. 2).<sup>15</sup>

The collection in the library of Topkapu Sarayı includes another interesting example decorated with a landscape scene. It belongs to an illuminated manuscript of a *Kalila wa Dimna* (Inv. 1022), copied in the year 1429 A.D. for the library of Prince Bāisonghor Mīrzā.<sup>16</sup> Made of black leather over pasteboard, the front cover exhibits a blind-tooled landscape similar in style and composition to that of the binding of the Shāh Rokh Mīrzā manuscript.

To the same group belongs the binding of the year 1446 A.D., reproduced in Plates IV and V.<sup>17</sup> The exterior of the front cover, framed by a ribbon-knot design, is divided into three rectangular panels, that in the center representing a landscape. A knotted and braided ribbon pattern, skillfully tooled with small dies on the borders of the exterior and on the corners of the interior, indicates continued adherence to the Arabic style of ornamentation (Figs. 3 and 4). The most interesting feature of this Herāt binding is a new motif in its decoration. Among legendary creatures in the upper part of the landscape a young man and a bear are represented wrestling with each other under a tree. The motif of a man fighting an animal is of ancient oriental origin, but its appearance in this instance marks the beginning in Persian art of the tendency to decorate book covers with human

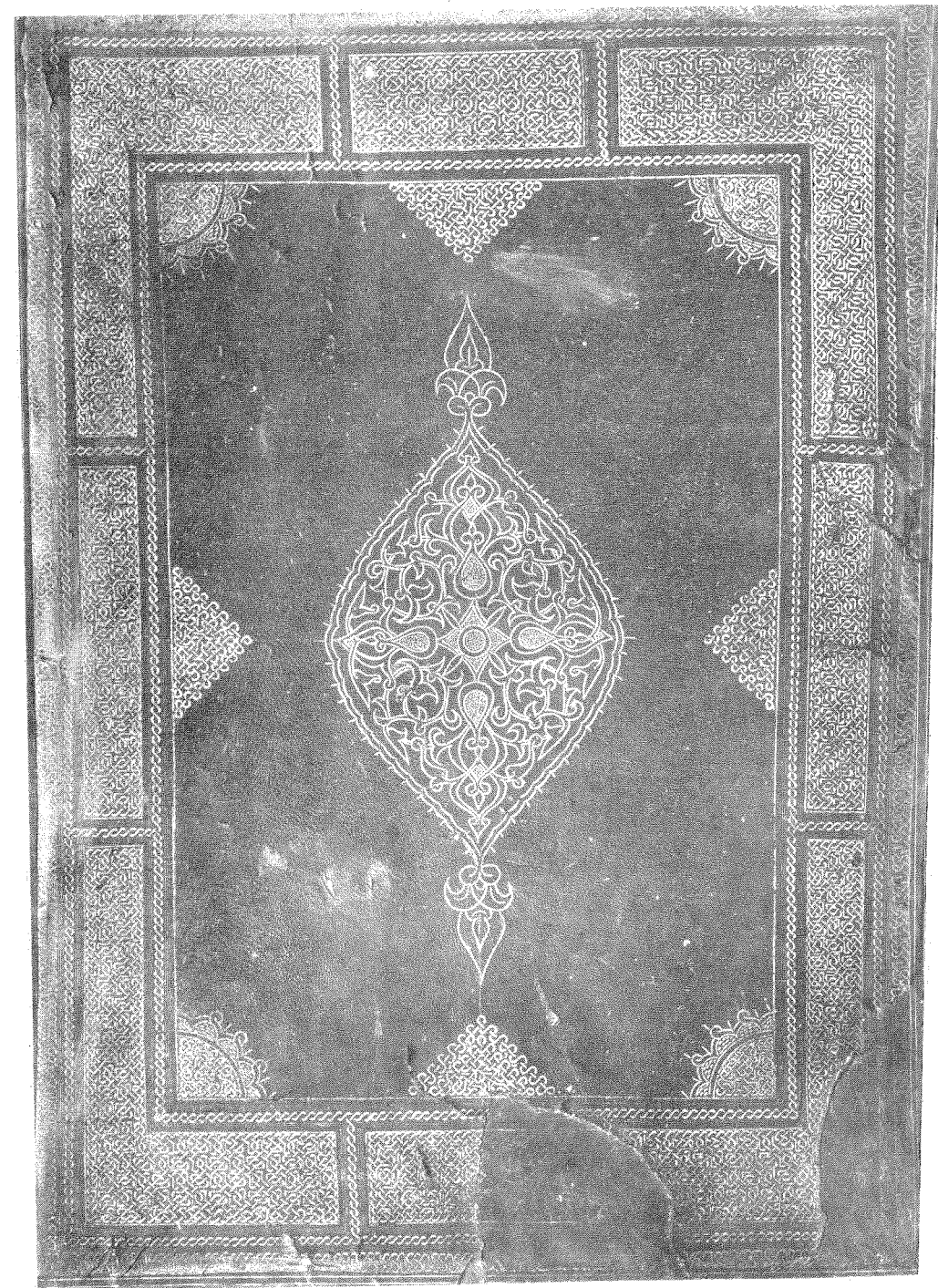


FIG. 3—Cover of a binding, Egypt, XV Century, Istanbul, Çinili Köşk Müzesi

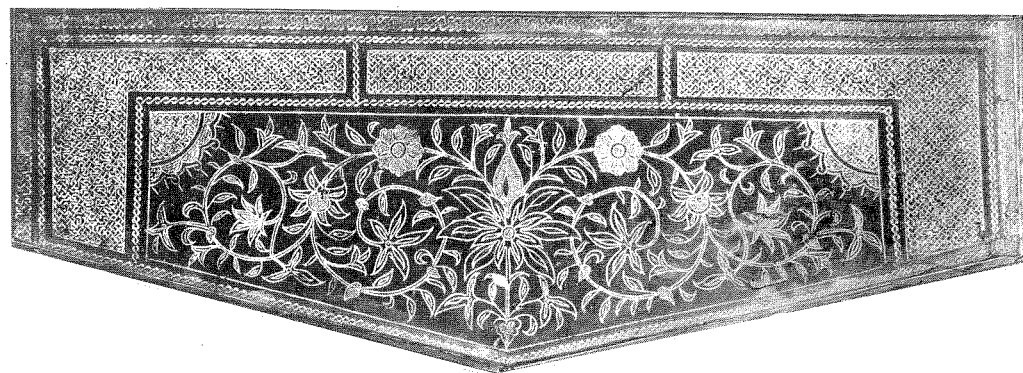


FIG. 4—Flap of a binding, Egypt, XV Century, Istanbul, Çinili Köşk Müzesi

figures; the innovation was frequently employed by Şafawid artists in the lacquered bindings of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.<sup>18</sup>

A similar "fighting" motif is to be found also on a beautiful binding of the year 1450 A.D. in the Städtisches Kunstmuseum in Düsseldorf (Figs. 5–8). In the medallion of the back cover a man is represented pulling apart the jaws of a Chinese lion, a very exceptional motif in Islamic decorative art. The appearance of the Biblical Samson legend on a binding of Herāt origin shows the richness of the Persian decorative repertoire, bringing together mythological elements from both eastern and western Asia. Worth mentioning also is the design of the exterior of the flap, showing two woman-headed dragons, facing each other upon a background of flowering branches, and being bitten by heads of wild boars and lions. The medallion of the front cover contains a landscape with swimming ducks, legendary beings, and a tree with animal heads growing from the boughs—a motif which was often employed by the Persian painters.<sup>19</sup> The doublures are adorned with leather filigree, of which the interior of the flap shows two dragons fighting with phoenixes and lions, represented in ingenious and symmetrical arrangement.

Of unusual decorative beauty is the filigree design of the doublures of the binding with the wrestling motif reproduced in Plates IV and V, where two phoenixes are depicted fighting in mid-air.<sup>20</sup> The theme and composition are direct borrowings from the Chinese.<sup>21</sup> The elegance of line, the mastery of composition, and the decorative effect, show the refined taste of the master of this Herāt bookbinding.

Besides this group representing richly embellished landscape scenes,

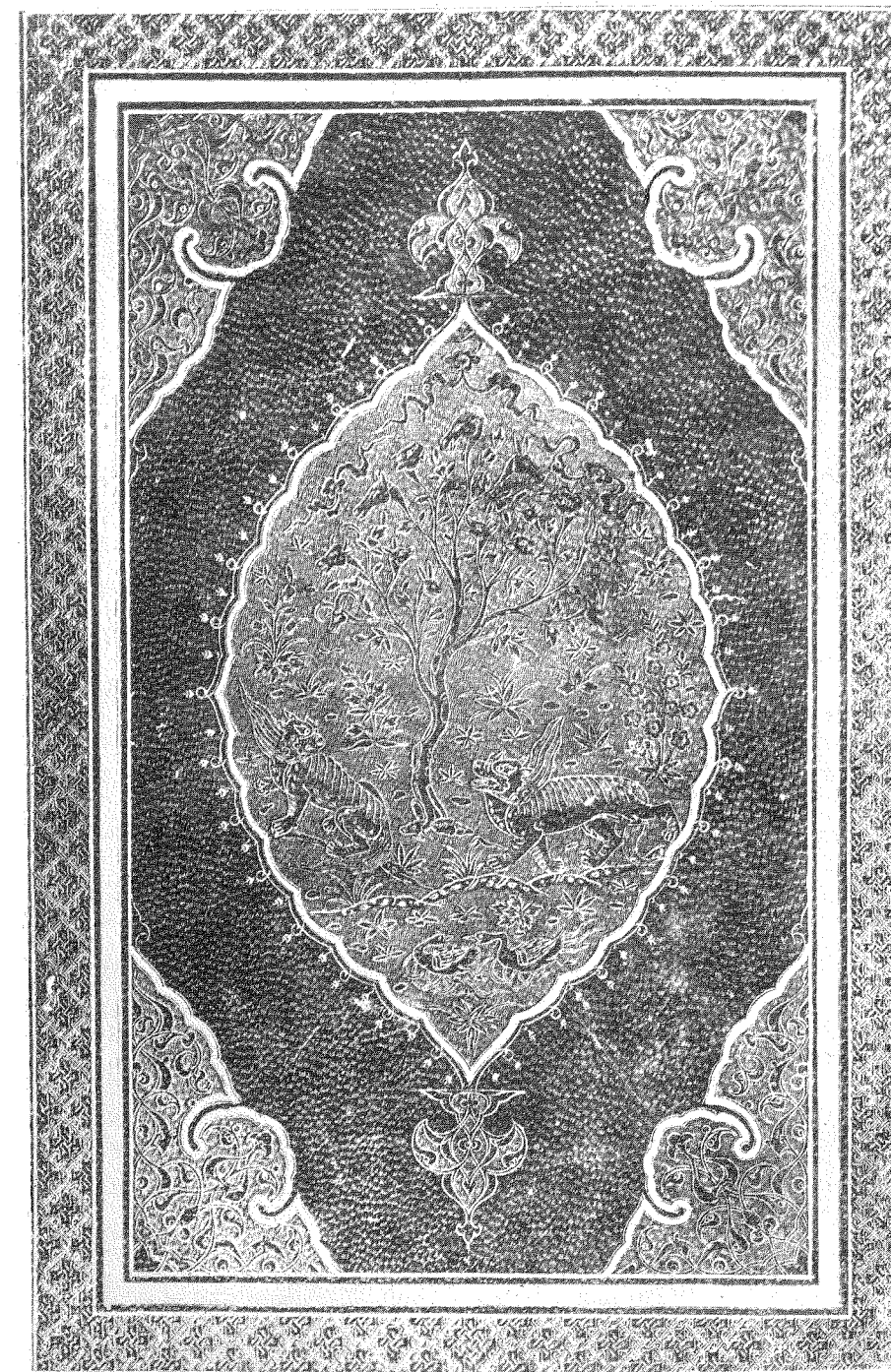


FIG. 5—Exterior of the front cover of a binding, Herāt, XV Century  
Düsseldorf, Städtisches Kunstmuseum



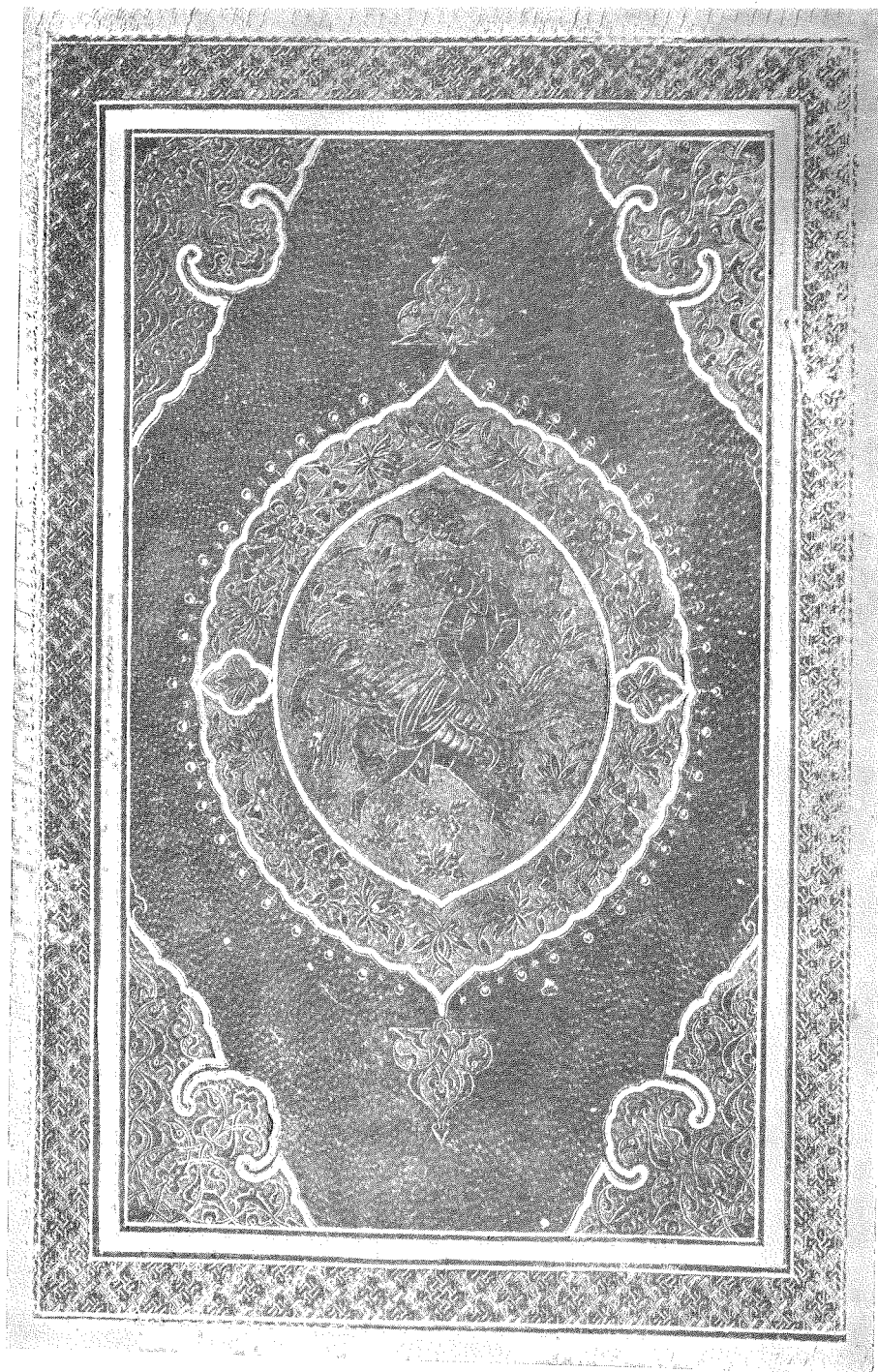


FIG. 6—Exterior of the back cover of a binding, Herāt, XV Century  
Düsseldorf, Städtisches Kunstmuseum

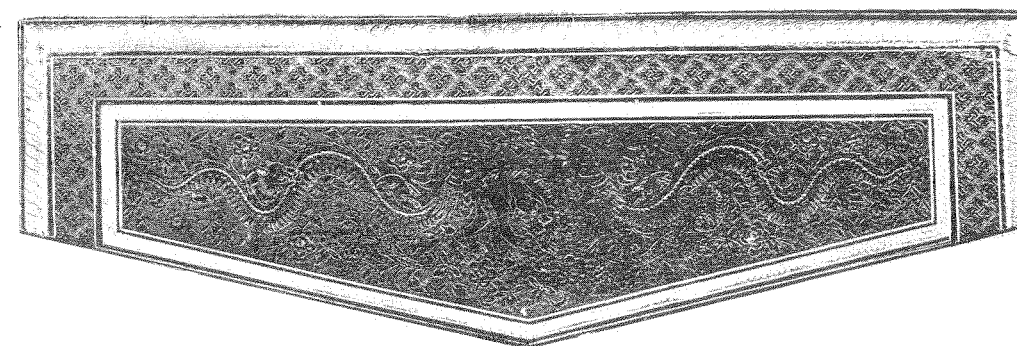


FIG. 7—Exterior of the flap of a binding, Herāt, XV Century  
Düsseldorf, Städtisches Kunstmuseum

there is another large one adorned entirely with geometrical or arabesque designs. An excellent example, reproduced in Plates VI and VII, was made in Herāt before the year 1447 A.D. and incloses a magnificent manuscript from the library of *Shāh Rokh Mīrzā*. The intricate blind and gold toolings of the exteriors, and the no less laborious filigree arabesques of the doublures, make it a masterpiece of the first rank. The individual die-impressions on the various parts of the cover number several tens of thousands; on a similar binding exhibited in the Exhibition of Muhammadan Art in Munich, they are believed to number about half a million.<sup>22</sup>

Another important group of Herāt bindings emphasizes the medallion motif. The center of both the front and back exterior is occupied by an oval or round medallion, a quarter of which is repeated as a decoration for each corner. This compositional type, common also to the bindings of Arabic countries since earlier times, has appeared in filigree work on the doublures of nearly all the previously described bindings, and on the exterior of that in the Städtisches Kunstmuseum in Düsseldorf. A new technique, however, that of relief embossing, enhances the effect of this very simple decorative treatment. A representative example is reproduced in Plates VIII, IX, and Figure 9, which illustrates the pronounced plastic feeling produced in the animal figures of the medallions and corner pieces through the use of such relief. This technical innovation of the fifteenth century was carried over into the succeeding Safawid period in varied applications (*Fig. 10*).<sup>23</sup>

The activity of the fifteenth century Persian bookbinders was not confined to these technical and decorative achievements. For the first





FIG. 8—Interior of the back cover and flap of a binding, Herāt, XV Century  
Düsseldorf, Städtisches Kunstmuseum

time lacquer painting, which was to prove a fruitful field for artistic development in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (*Fig. 11*), was introduced into the art of bookbinding.<sup>24</sup> Doubtless the illuminators and miniature painters of Herāt played a more important part than the bookbinders in the adoption of this Far Eastern technique. From

the very first years of the foundation of the Herāt academy, artistic connections were developed between Peking and the capital of the Tīmūrids, and it is most probable that the first acquaintance of the Persians with lacquer painting took place during this period. It is not known at present who were actually responsible for its introduction to Persia, Chinese craftsmen or painters of Herāt who had visited the Celestial Empire,<sup>25</sup> but lacquer painting was already employed in a masterly manner on a splendid binding dated 1483 A.D. (Plates X–XII).<sup>26</sup> It belongs to a manuscript copied for the library of Sulṭān Husain Bāikara (1469–1507 A.D.), the last of the Tīmūrids, during

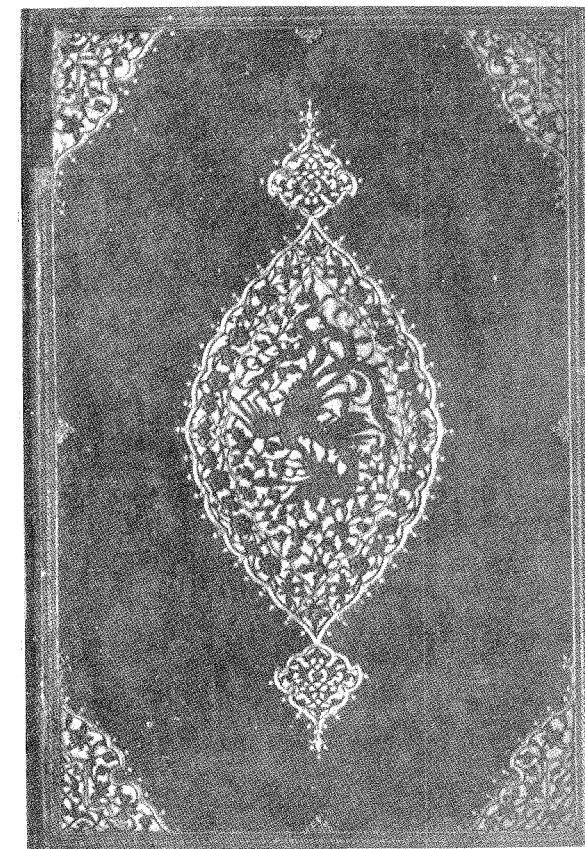


FIG. 9—Interior of the front cover of a binding  
Herāt, about 1430 A.D.  
Istanbul, Türk ve Islam Asarı Müzesi

whose reign the court academy of bookmaking in Herāt, under the patronage of Mīr ‘Alī Shīr Newā-ī, enjoyed its last and greatest period of activity. The exteriors of both covers show exquisite flower tendrils, painted in gold on a black lacquer background; these recur in gold stamping in similar arrangement and with identical details around the medallion of the doublure of the back cover. There appears in the medallions and corner pieces of the exteriors, in connection with the lacquer painting, extensive decoration in gold brush work of a type commonly used on Ṣafawid bindings. Of particular beauty are the decorations of the doublures, which exhibit filigree work in its highest technical perfection. In the exquisite balance and harmonious composition of the landscape scene with animals and birds, in the delicacy of



FIG. 10—Exterior of a binding from a manuscript of *‘Adiāb-i Makblūkāt*, Persia, 1562 A.D. Istanbul, Türk ve İslam Asarı Müzesi

pher, Sultān ‘Alī al-Kāinī.<sup>27</sup> The manuscript probably dates from about the year 1500 A.D. and was made with the binding for the Sultān Husain Bāikara or for the poet himself. The entire ornamentation of the exterior of the covers and of the flap is produced by embroidery in silk and gold on black leather, a technique otherwise completely unknown in the historical development of Persian bookbinding.

The Herāt style exercised a dominating influence during the fifteenth century upon the artistic productions of other centers. The

the border of ducks, and of the “grotesque” tendrils in the rectangular spaces above and below the central panel, and in the perfection of the tendril patterns of the exterior of the back cover, the decorative cut-pattern work of this binding was never thereafter surpassed.

A curious and unique example of Persian bookbinding must be mentioned in connection with these varied types of Herāt work (Plates XIII and XIV). It is the cover of an undated manuscript of the Turkish poems of Mīr ‘Alī Shīr Newā-ī, copied by a contemporary of the poet, the court calligra-



FIG. 11—Exterior of the front cover of a lacquered binding from a manuscript of Ḥāfiẓ’s *Dīwān*, Persia, XVI Century, Istanbul, Türk ve İslam Asarı Müzesi



Tīmūrid princes, who were reared in the art-loving atmosphere of Herāt, and who held governorships in various provinces, followed the example set in the capital and sought to enhance the magnificence of their courts by attracting poets, musicians, calligraphers, painters, and bookbinders. In addition to local craftsmen, undoubtedly there were to be found in the service of these princes others schooled in Herāt, who brought the artistic principles of the capital to the distant provinces. The examples of provincial work reproduced here show a distinct dependence on Herāt in technical workmanship as well as in decorative style.

A particularly fine specimen of provincial origin, dating from the first half of the fifteenth century, is the cover of a manuscript copied in Yazd (Plates XV and XVI).<sup>28</sup> A braided and knotted design, executed in blind and gold tooling, predominates in the decoration and indicates a continuance of the Arabic tradition. The blind-tooled flower scrolls of the exteriors, and the filigree arabesques and flowers of the doublures with gold and blue painted background, are proof of artistic connections with Herāt.

The influence of Herāt is also noticeable on another binding dating from the year 1459 A.D. (Plate XVII).<sup>29</sup> The colophon of the manuscript to which it belongs states that the text was written by the calligrapher Zaīn al-'Abdīn ibn Muḥammad, who was also the illuminator and binder. The statement is of particular interest because it discloses the fact that calligraphers also practiced the art of bookbinding. The cover, made of brown leather, is adorned with geometric and landscape motifs similar to those of Herāt bindings, showing, however, a slight provincial note in the general composition.

An extraordinarily beautiful cover, executed in the city of Shīrāz, is reproduced in Plates XVIII and XIX. The inclosed manuscript, a magnificent piece of Persian craftsmanship, was copied in 1459 A.D. for the library of Sulṭān Pīr Būdāk Khān of the Turco-Persian dynasty of Kara Koyunlu. Both front and back exteriors, embossed in relief without gilding, are decorated with stylized cloud bands which form medallions, corner pieces, and borders, between which are delicate flower scrolls. The entire design produces a quiet yet exceedingly distinguished effect. No less admirable are the decorations of the doublures. The arabesque patterns in filigree, with hair-like lines, and delicate palmettoes and flowers, against a blue painted background, resemble the illumination of the title-page of the manuscript (Fig. 12).

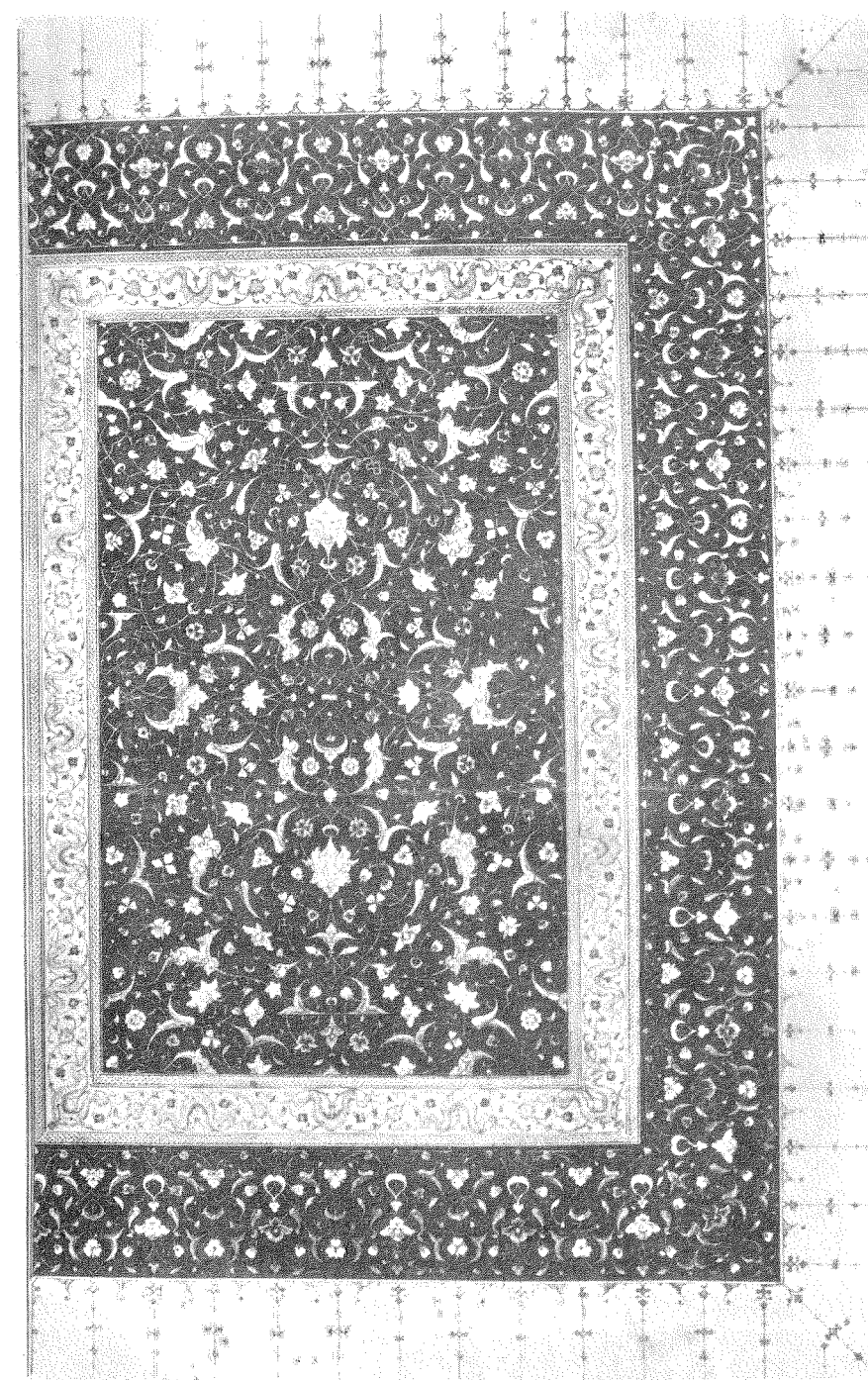


FIG. 12—Title-page of a manuscript executed for Sulṭān Pīr Būdāk Khān Shīrāz, 1459 A.D., Istanbul, Türk ve İslam Asarı Müzesi

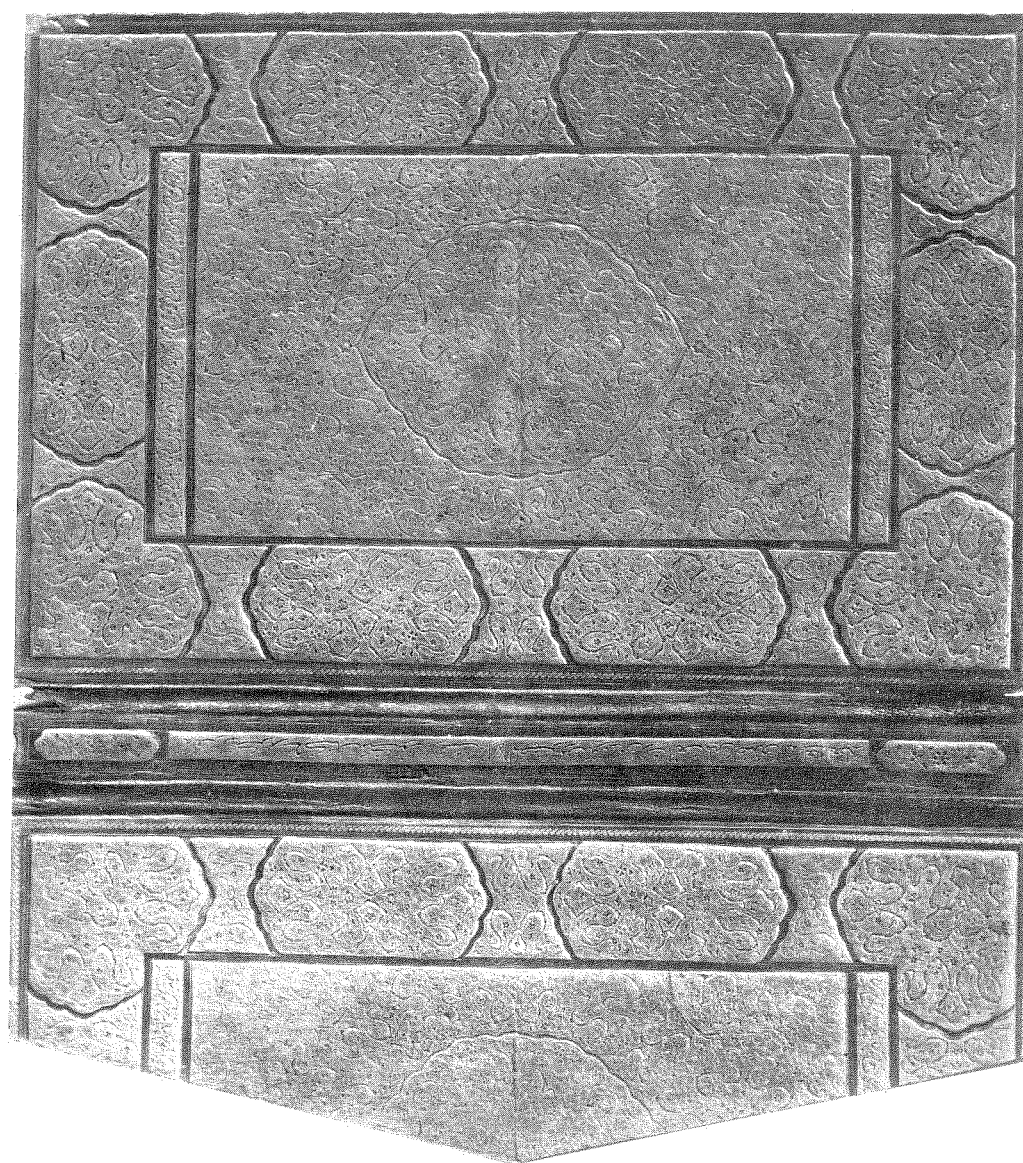


FIG. 13—Exterior of the back cover and flap of a gilded binding from a *Qur'ān* manuscript, Persia, XVII Century, Istanbul, Çinili Köşk Müzesi

This type of intricately cut freehand decoration, marked by exceedingly refined workmanship, reached its perfection in the fifteenth century. It was never surpassed by masters of succeeding periods, who, as already stated, accomplished their best work in the field of lacquer painting. It might be added that the cloud-band design of the *Shīrāz*

binding just described, appeared as the principal decoration, executed in relief embossing and painted with gold, in the *Şafawid* and Turkish works of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Fig. 13).<sup>30</sup>

Plate XX shows another characteristic Persian binding, the decoration of which is an all-over arabesque pattern, symmetrically covering the entire surface. This was produced by embossing each half of the surface with the same block placed in complementary positions.

To the previously described group of bindings emphasizing the medallion motif, belong two examples of the late fifteenth century (Plates XXI and XXII). The first, inclosing a manuscript of the year 1461 A.D., which was copied in the southwestern Persian city of *Işfahān*, shows a medallion with a realistic representation of the old oriental motif of a lion attacking a bull. The second contains the famous *Shāh Nāme* of the Mawlewi Convent in Galata, which was copied and illuminated before 1493 A.D.<sup>31</sup> for the brother of *Shāh Ismā'il*, Sultān 'Alī Mīrzā. This binding, as a result of an ancient repair, lost its borders, but the inner portions of the covers are well preserved and contain landscape scenes with antelopes, apes, and foxes in the medallions and corner pieces. The lack of animation in the beasts represented, and the stiffness of the plant motifs, indicate that the *Herāt* style as followed in provincial ateliers became formalistic during the last years of the century. This apparent decadence, however, did not mark the end of the development of the art of Persian bookbinding. It was merely a phase through which it passed before reaching the last great period, that of the *Şafawids*.

The court academy of book art in *Herāt* was established about 1405 A.D., continued a hundred years, and was dissolved after the conquest of the city by the *Shaibānids* in 1507 A.D. The masters trained in the academy were scattered far and wide over the Islamic Near East; they carried with them the artistic principles of *Herāt*—principles, which, during the next two centuries, were to bring creative inspiration not only to such new *Şafawid* art centers as *Tabrīz* and *Işfahān*, but also to the *Moghul* court of India and distant Istanbul on the Golden Horn.