

Reviews

Mazhar S. İpşiroğlu, *Siyah Qalem*. Graz: Akademische Druck- und Verlagsanstalt, 1976. 48 pages + 79 tables. ÖS 2900. -

For the past twenty-five years very few art historians have known of the existence of a particular group of 79 paintings in the Saray Albums of the Topkapi Museum in Istanbul. The Saray Albums contain folios attributed to a certain "Ustad Muhammad Siyah Qalem". It is not known who this so-called "Master Muhammad Black Pen" was. Unknown, too, are the time and place of origin of the paintings.

As the Siyah Qalem folios were rather unique documents of an unknown style of painting for which no comparative material was available, expert opinion on the subject was rather cautious. All 79 folios have now been published for the first time in colour facsimile and are accessible to students of Asian art. The publication has encouraged the debate about the origin, date and nature of the paintings.

The uniqueness of the folios becomes obvious even to the lay observer. The paintings of Siyah Qalem cannot be attributed of any of the conventional art patterns. Neither their style nor their iconography are familiar to us. However, we can quickly begin to appreciate them: They represent nomadic life, life in the steppe, camps, horses. They show a drastic sense of realism. Even the folios representing figures of a demonic character show these creatures in a realistic form, rather short, and stooped, dancing or fighting. The hard life of the steppe seems to leave no room for the charming delights of Indian or Persian miniatures. A certain Chinese stylistic influence is clearly visible, but the paintings definitely lack the typical East Asian delicacy. They are not court paintings but folk paintings. They were not meant for princes but for ordinary people.

İpşiroğlu is right in suggesting that the folios are the remains of painted scrolls. These scrolls are known to have been used by storytellers as a kind of film, illustrating legends. Both the Paitan paintings of India and the leather puppets known throughout South East Asia have a similar background. The "text" explaining the Siyah Qalem "film" is missing, so an understanding of the iconographic contents of the folios is almost impossible.

It is highly unlikely that a written text will be found, as such painted scrolls were mostly used by storytellers relying on oral tradition.

İpşiroğlu has divided the 79 folios into three different groups. The major part is attributed to Siyah Qalem himself, a small part to the Siyah Qalem School, and about 20 paintings to Siyah Qalem's successors. There is much to be said for such a division, but the last word has most probably not yet been said. The same holds true for the dating of the pictures and for their provenance, which İpşiroğlu assumes to be Turkestan.

With this costly edition the publishers have broken new ground. It was a bold step but possibly a far-sighted investment, provided that in the near future the Siyah Qalem folios furnish us with a key to a better understanding of Central Asian art.

Franz -Josef Vollmer