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Donning the Cloak: Safavid Figural Silks and the Display of Identity

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Introduction

In a red world bathed in shimmering gold light, a man sits with his head in his hand as wild beasts encircle him. He is emaciated, has unkempt hair, and wears only a waistcloth—but he has a dreamy smile on his face. Nearby, a camel bears a palanquin carrying a stately woman, her head tipped to one side, arm outstretched from the window of her traveling abode toward her lover. Beneath her, the signature “Work of Ghiyath” is woven in Kufic script inside an eight-pointed star on the palanquin (Fig. 1).¹



Figure 1. *Silk lampas fragment depicting Layla and Majnun. Signed by Ghiyath. 1580-1625. Iran (Yazd or Isfahan). The Textile Museum, Washington D.C. TM 3.312.*

This depiction of the literary characters Layla and Majnun² is one of a small group of figural textiles from the cache of fine luxury silks produced in Safavid Iran (1501-1722 CE). The red lampas metal-ground silk³ resides in the permanent collection of the Textile Museum in

¹ Mary Anderson McWilliams, in Carol Bier, ed., *Woven from the Soul, Spun from the Heart* (Washington D.C.: Textile Museum, 1987), 188.

² For background information see Nizami, trans. Rudolph Gelpke, “Layla and Majnun” (New Lebanon, NY: Omega Publications, 1997), xi-xvii.

³ The structure of satin lampas weaves are described in detail by Milton Sondag in Bier, ed. 1987, 57-83. Metal-ground silks are characterized by weft floats wrapped with gold strips, which create a gold or silver ground.

Washington, D.C.⁴ The designer of the textile, Ghiyath al-Din Ali of Yazd, was a Safavid court favorite whose fine silks were donned by the Iranian aristocracy at the turn of the seventeenth century.⁵ Additional Layla and Majnun textile designs include a second satin lampas by Ghiyath al-Din, as well as unsigned works whose techniques include double weave (Fig. 2) and velvet, in rich reds and metal-wrapped thread.⁶ All of the Layla and Majnun textiles known are dated 1580-1625, corresponding with the reign of the Safavid ruler Shah Abbas I (r. 1587-1629).



Figure 2. Silk double cloth depicting Layla and Majnun. Late sixteenth century, Iran. The Textile Museum, Washington D.C. TM 1969.36.1.

The Safavids: Sufi Kings and Dervish Silk

The appearance of these particular textiles during the reign of Shah Abbas is an indicator of the philosophy within the Shah's court. Shah Abbas actively sought diplomatic alliances with European heads of state, and strove to present an exterior façade representing the wealth and power of his court. According to travelogues from Western visitors, the court of Shah Abbas in

⁴ The Textile Museum was founded by George Hewitt Myers in 1925. Myers had a passion for rugs and textiles from the Middle East, and the Museum's collection of figural silks is the largest in the U.S. See Carol Bier, "Legacy of Collector George Hewitt Myers," *Arts of Asia*, Vol: 26 (1996), 58-65.

⁵ Phyllis Ackerman, "Ghiyath, Iranian Master Weaver," *Apollo*, Vol.18, (1933), 252-256; also see Ackerman, "A Biography of Ghiyath the Weaver," *Bulletin of the American Institute for Iranian Art and Archaeology*, Issue 7 (1934), 9-13.

⁶ For a reproduction and commentary on the Layla and Majnun velvet fragment, see Friedrich Spuhler, *Islamic Carpets and Textiles in the Kier Collection* (London: Faber and Faber, 1978), 88-9. For a color reproduction of the additional Layla and Majnun lampas weave signed by Ghiyath, see Patricia Baker, *Islamic Textiles* (London: British Museum Press, 1995), 105-6.

the capital city of Isfahan was resplendent with silk carpets and gold brocade textiles used for everything from *soffrehs* cloths to garments and turbans.⁷

However, the Safavids, whose claim to the throne was their connection with the Shi'a lineage of the Prophet, also had the moral responsibility to express piety and humility.⁸ In the Islamic world, the cloak was an outward expression of faith: the pious gravitated towards less tailored garments with austere unpatterned fabrics, while more ostentatious metal-ground silks were donned by less observant individuals.⁹ Although Shah Abbas never was documented or depicted in figural silk, he propagated its production for sale within Iran and the International market as a signature luxury item.

This dual identity of the Safavids in the time of Shah Abbas—as wealthy self-governing empire and humble servants to their religion—created a paradox in the court culture of late sixteenth and early seventeenth century Iran. Shah Abbas aspired to impress European visitors at his court, who compared the Safavid luxuries with their own. This desire to impress was juxtaposed with his obligation to follow the humble example of Imam Ali and the lineage of Shi'a successors. This paradoxical philosophy provided the foundation for the development of a new genre in garments: dervish silk.¹⁰

In addition to establishing Shi'ism as the state religion, the Safavid rulers celebrated their Sufi heritage, creating a new era in which this esoteric mysticism, formerly persecuted under previous governments, became main stream.¹¹ The new openness towards mystic practices led to a great surge of patronage in the arts depicting Sufi themes and stories.¹² Sufism's increasing popularity during the reign of Shah Abbas, changed the face—and dress—of Iranian culture.¹³ Safavid gentlemen rejected the woolen cloaks of the dervish lifestyle, instead donning the expensive silks that represented the essence of their Sufi convictions, while maintaining the splendor of the Safavid persona. The Layla and Majnun silks embodied their desire to display their humble ideology in an elegant and glamorous way.

The Legend of Layla and Majnun

The characters Layla and Majnun are based on actual people who are believed to have lived around the second half of the 7th c. The events took place in the Arabian Peninsula between a young man and a young woman, who fell in love but were separated due to family and tribal disapproval. The depth of the lovers' sorrow was documented in the elegant impromptu verses of

⁷ Della Valle observes the use of octagonal gold brocaded *soffrehs* cloths (floor cloths used for dining purposes), as well as gold and silver plates and serving dishes. See Pietro Della Valle, trans. Winifred Blunt, *Pietro's Pilgrimage* (London: James Barrie, 1953), 145.

⁸ For information on Safavid genealogy and divine right to power, see the Introduction of Eskandar Munshi, trans. Roger Savory. *The History of Shah Abbas the Great* (University of Toronto: Westview Press, 1978).

⁹ Although Sufi practices vary based on the Order, many early Sufis were living an ascetic lifestyle (Farsi, *darveesh*). These Sufis were identified by their austere woolen garments and wandered the streets as mendicants, inspiring a range of reactions from pity to hatred within mainstream society.

¹⁰ The phrase "dervish silk" is my own oxymoron, which I define as luxury silks depicting Sufi imagery.

¹¹ The Safavids were the second of only two indigenous Shi'a dynasties to rule Iran. See Roger Savory, *Iran under the Safavids* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 30.

¹² For a more detailed connection on Sufism and the arts, see Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Sufi Essays* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd, 1972), 100.

¹³ Nasr 1972, 43-51, and Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1987), 87-97.

the young man, Majnun, who experienced fits of madness that prompted his recitations. The story of the mad poet Majnun and his beloved Layla was circulated orally for centuries before a formal narrative was put together. The poet Nizami Ganjavi (1141-1209 CE) was commissioned by the ruling Shah in 1188 to compose an epic poem in Farsi retelling the Bedouin Arab legend of Layla and Majnun. Nizami's version of the story, summarized below, gained such immense popularity as to become one of the classic stories of Medieval Persian literature.

Layla and Majnun meet as children in school, fall in love and innocently bloom in the joy of their happiness. However, they are naïve to the social constructs that dictate discretion and subtlety in romantic expression. Soon their open affection for one another leads to criticism, particularly for the young man, who is singing the praises of his beloved openly in the streets. This openness leads Layla's father to forbid her to come in contact with her admirer. The forced separation induces an erratic state in the young man, whose wandering and overtly oscillating emotions vary from depression to exhilarated recitations of love-poems for Layla, earning him a reputation of being a madman, or "majnun" (trans Ar., "one possessed by jinn"). Majnun becomes increasingly disturbed as time progresses, roaming the desert in his love-struck oblivion, but also reciting eloquent and lucid verses of poetry in praise of Layla.

Soon the mad poet has groups of admirers following him and memorizing his verses, which later find their way eventually to Layla, who composes her own verses in response on scraps of paper that she entrusts to the wind. The two lovers meet on three occasions, but only briefly. Both lovers are overwhelmed in one another's presence and either faint or stare shyly at one another. Layla is forced to comply with an arranged marriage, which she refuses to consummate. In the end, the two innocents die early and tragically, without ever having united as lovers.

Despite its Bedouin origins and characters, Nizami's Farsi version added a mystical element to the story that set a new precedent. The characteristics of the chaste young lovers, particularly the character of Majnun, established new ideals for behavior in Iranian society, and the mystical element was absorbed into Sufi teachings. The burning love that Majnun felt for Layla became a metaphor for the burning love of the Sufi for the Beloved.¹⁴ The Sufi interpretation of Nizami's work imbues emotional and romantic love in the physical world with the potential to become a vehicle for spiritual and divine love. Majnun's suffering forged the Sufi path to enlightenment, and Majnun himself became a veritable saint that literary believers would take on as a personal patron—whose devotional image was depicted on his outer cloak.

Donning the Cloak: Layla and Majnun on Silk

The most successful versions of the Layla and Majnun textiles were achieved using the lampas technique, the most commonly used technology for creating figural silks (see Fig. 1, above). Lampas weaves effectively consist of a ground cloth in satin or twill with supplementary weft brocade, which allowed for metal threads to float on the top of the cloth, without the expensive gilt threads disappearing to the back of the textile.

¹⁴ In Sufi poetry, the term "beloved" can be used interchangeably to reference either an interpersonal relationship or a relationship with God. In English translations, reference to the "beloved" indicates a personal relationship, and "Beloved" references God.

Iranians had been weaving “cloth of gold” or metal-ground textiles for centuries on the drawloom, a multi-harnessed loom that allowed for two warps to be manipulated through a numerical sequence. The sequencing of the threads was controlled at the top of the loom by a “draw boy,” a young apprentice in the textile workshop, who would lift and lower the warp threads according to the pattern for each design. The repeated motif was mapped out on a grid to determine the numerical and color sequencing.¹⁵ Keeping a continuous color in the weft also allowed the weaver to disguise the repeated elements with more fluidity, while additional weft threads outlined the figures to create a delicate hand-drawn line.¹⁶

The Safavids were the only weavers to achieve this level of sophistication and specificity in their figural textiles, increasing the value and cost of the textiles and emphasizing the cultural association of dervish silk to Iran. There are two known versions of dervish silk featuring a scene from the “Layla and Majnun” story signed by textile designer Ghiyath.¹⁷ The textiles signed by Ghiyath were minimal in color, usually with a ground color woven in satin, and metallic threads tacked down as supplementary weft brocade.

A favorite at the court of Shah Abbas, Ghiyath hailed from his native town of Yazd in central Iran, already known for its personage fabrics which featured human figures as the main design element.¹⁸ Arthur Upham Pope writes of Ghiyath:

The romance of Layla and Majnun, one of the perennial tragic love-stories of Persia, seems to have especially absorbed this master—who was a poet in his own right as well as draftsman, weaver, entrepreneur, financier, wit, and, at the end of his life, religious.¹⁹

The most complete biographical information on Ghiyath comes from Ackerman, who quotes a couplet by the artist in which he admits to wine drinking and womanizing in his youth.²⁰ Though the exact dates of Ghiyath’s life are unknown, he was documented as having been an older, well-established gentleman at the court of Shah Abbas, which corresponds with the date of the production of the Layla and Majnun textiles (1580-1625).

Ghiyath’s interest in this story and its subsequent depiction on silk seems concurrent with the master’s change in lifestyle which were executed in the latter part of his life. The interest of the designer in Majnun and Nizami’s story could signify this transition from hedonism to piety. In addition, Ghiyath’s Layla and Majnun designs corroborate the aforementioned paradox at Shah

¹⁵ A drawloom is an upright loom that allows for the manipulation of multiple weave structures through two or more warps. The warp threads are attached to harnesses, *which* are lifted and lowered by a “draw boy” seated at the top of the loom, according to a numerical sequence determined by the textile designer. Drawloom textiles employ a ground cloth usually woven in satin or twill, allowing for weft threads in silk and metal to float on the surface of the ground, thus preserving the more expensive materials from being on the underside of the textile.

¹⁶ Ackerman 1939, 2079.

¹⁷ Ackerman 1933, 252-256.

¹⁸ Ackerman 1939, 2078.

¹⁹ Arthur Upham Pope, *Masterpieces of Persian Art* (New York: Dryden Press, 1945), 186.

²⁰ Womanizing and drinking alcohol are forbidden in Islam, and therefore the repentance by Ghiyath of having engaged in these activities would have signified a shift toward a more pious and orthodox lifestyle. Actual wine-drinking is often confused with spiritual “drunkenness” or “wine-drinking,” famous metaphors from Sufi poetry indicating union with the Beloved.

Abbas' court, of a lavish exterior expressing a humble interior. Ackerman writes about the Safavid gentleman in the 1939 *Survey of Persian Art*:

A Persian gentleman was an amateur in poetry, hence trained to the perception of grace. He was a connoisseur of calligraphy, hence exacting in the appreciation of rhythm and flowing line. He was an artist in leisure, which meant long contemplative hours in a garden, so that he felt the beauty of flowers, equally by a pool or on a silk. He was a poet in love, and so sensed loveliness. All this fitted him to require and understand beautiful stuffs.²¹

It is precisely at the intersection of beauty, poetry, and the absent beloved that the Safavid fashion of narrative figural silks takes root. Impression management allowed the person wearing the figural cloak to associate their inner character with the ideal Sufi lover Majnun, while still maintaining the luxury lifestyle to which the Safavids had become accustomed.

Robert Sherley and the Figural Cloak: Garments as Identity

In addition to a number of renderings of figural cloth as garments for both men and women in Iran, there are surviving depictions of figural silk cloaks beyond Iranian soil. Anthony Van Dyck's 1622 portrait of Englishman Robert Sherley depicts the former Safavid ambassador in a figural cloak of gold brocade.²²

The story of the Sherley brothers is one that has generated a great deal of interest and scholarship.²³ Anthony and Robert Sherley were sent to the East on the patronage of the Earl of Sussex, who had served with Anthony in the English army, and wished to pursue commercial opportunities on the Earl's behalf involving silk trade through Iran.²⁴

Upon receiving the Sherley brothers in Qazvin in 1598, Shah Abbas requested that they come before him in Safavid dress, a request to which they complied.²⁵ This was a convention in the time of Shah Abbas; in fact, appearing before the Shah in the dress of one's place of origin was a punishable offence.²⁶ Sherley chronicler Davies wrote: "[Shah Abbas] sent word that the English were to ride out to meet him in Iranian costume, which they did. Sir Anthony for the occasion wore a turban worth two thousand dollars... Robert Sherley was attired in cloth of gold [metal-

²¹ Ackerman 1939, 2070.

²² Anthony Van Dyck's 1622 portrait of Robert Sherley, alternately titled "Portrait of Sir Robert Shirley," is at Petworth House in Sussex, England. See figure 3.

²³ For accounts of the Sherley brothers, see D.W. Davies, *Elizabethans Errant: the strange fortunes of Sir Thomas Sherley and his three sons, as well in the Dutch Wars as in Muscovy, Morocco, Persia, Spain, and the Indies* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967); Boies Penrose, *The Sherleian Odyssey, being of the travels and adventures of three famous brothers during the reigns of Elizabeth, James I, and Charles I* (Taunton: Barnicotts Limited, The Wessex press; London: Simpkin, Marshall, Ltd., 1938); and Sir Edward Denison Ross, ed., *Sir Anthony Sherley and his Iranian adventure, including some contemporary narratives relating thereto* (London: G. Routledge & Sons, Ltd., 1933).

²⁴ Davies 1967, 48.

²⁵ At the close of the sixteenth century, figural metal-ground silks had already been in fashion for at least 50 years, as documented in contemporary miniature paintings (see figure 4). The silk cloak depicted in the miniature "Young Prince" (F1937.8, Freer Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C.) is of the "prisoner" sub-genre, indicating its use as a propagandist tool used during the time of Shah Abbas' grandfather, Tahmasp (r. 1524-76). See Mary Anderson McWilliams, "Prisoner Imagery in Safavid Textiles." *The Textile Museum Journal*, Vol. 26 (1987): 4-23.

²⁶ Herbert 1929, 231-2.

ground silk costume]...and all of the others wore silk and velvet.”²⁷ Shah Abbas, pleased with the meeting and compliance of the brothers, held a great banquet in honor of the Englishmen and invited the brothers to Isfahan to discuss the purpose for their visit. On their departure there was a mutual exchange of gifts, including textiles of gilt velvet, carpets and tents.²⁸

Both Sherley brothers served in some capacity as ambassadors to Shah Abbas, during whose reign these fine textiles found their apogee. Shah Abbas sent Anthony Sherley to Rome as his Ambassador, and the older of the two brothers never returned. Robert Sherley remained in Iran, and spent a considerable amount of time at the turn of the 17th century in Isfahan at the court of Shah Abbas, and was also given the official title of “ambassador.”

Robert Sherley’s assignment in this capacity was to approach European heads of state on behalf of Shah Abbas with proposals for alliances against Safavid enemies, the Ottoman Turks and the Portuguese. His appearance at foreign courts was always in Safavid dress, which confused the Europeans and struck the English as downright treasonous. The question of Sherley’s allegiance and patriotism became an issue.

The proposal by Sherley to the English court included maritime trade involving free trade for English ships at Iranian Gulf ports, which had been approved by King James before his death in 1625. However his successor, Charles I, nullified any agreement between King James and Shah Abbas via Robert Sherley in favor of the English East India Company,²⁹ putting Sherley in an awkward position with the Shah and wreaking havoc in the English court.³⁰ Sherley never managed to get any of the Europeans to agree to the Shah’s proposals, and Shah Abbas had grown downright bitter, having dismissed Robert Sherley as a good-natured but ineffective man.³¹

In light of his precarious position at the court of Shah Abbas in 1622, it seems reasonable to assume that Sherley had his portrait painted to immortalize himself in the role of Ambassador, already under scrutiny by his European contemporaries. Though there is no known evidence that Shah Abbas ever saw Van Dyck’s portrait of Sherley, it could also be assumed that this particular choice of costume was a further attempt for Sherley to solidify his position with the Shah. He has his portrait executed by the young Van Dyck in the finest Safavid court attire of gold brocade figured silk (Fig. 3). Notes from Van Dyck’s sketches of Sherley read, “Persian Ambassador in Rome,” and there is also a note indicating the gold figural textile (*brocade d’oro*) for the cloak.³² The Sherley portrait is significant in that it puts dress at the forefront of identity. This is a point which is most significant with regard to dress: his figural cloth represents the

²⁷ Davies 1967, 106.

²⁸ Davies 1967, 107-8.

²⁹ The English East India Company was royal monopoly formed under Queen Elizabeth ca. 1600 to outrun its competitors—the Dutch and the Portuguese—at sea, creating a state-run commercial industry that would benefit the monarchy rather than independent entrepreneurs.

³⁰ When the English, such as the Sherleys, first entered Iran on their commercial enterprises, it was through privately funded sources. However, towards the end of the reign of Elizabeth I (r. 1558–1603), a royal charter was issued establishing the English East India Company, which allowed for a royal monopoly on the colonization of East and Southeast Asia and India. The implementation of the Company’s exclusive position as traders and usurpers in the region in the successive reign of James I created an inherent tension with these privately funded merchant-ambassadors.

³¹ Ross 1933, 132.

³² Christopher Brown, *Van Dyck* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), 67.

identity of not only himself, but of Safavid Iran as well, in that the ambassador of any country is also a representative of its national pride.



*Figure 3. Portrait of Robert Sherley. (Alternate title Portrait of Sir Robert Shirley)
Anthony Van Dyck. 1622. Petworth House, Sussex, England. NTPL25813.*

Conclusion

If one applies the basic premise of what psychologists refer to as “Impression Management”—that external features can alter other people’s view of who we are—then clothing is the most powerful tool we have to affect the outside impression of who we are on the inside.

Majnun is one of the most recognizable characters from Persian literature. He is often surrounded by beasts and usually holds a deer, which is a symbol of Layla. He is shown with his ribs outlined, because he is wasting away in the desert without tending to his physical needs, and he is half naked but for a loincloth, because he has torn off his fine silk clothing as a gesture of mourning and sorrow. And yet, he is in an elevated spiritual state, and composes poetry that is on par with Qur’anic revelation. His love and his separation from his beloved have both transformed him into a figure of admiration for Sufis, who long to be in the presence of the Divine. Majnun has forged a new path to Allah: his love for his earthly beloved mirrors his love of the Divine.

And it’s in the Safavid period that Sufi ascetic practices—the practice of rejecting the luxuries of the world—as the path to the Divine, is compromised in order to allow for the practices of the Safavid elite, whose favorite activities include the recitation of mystic poetry in lush garden pavilions, while donning their figural silk cloaks.

Although there aren't any surviving garments or pictorial representations of garments with the Layla and Majnun design theme, it seems that, given the evidence of other types of figural cloth and the association of visual imagery with Sufi poetry, it is likely that the use for this textile was also for apparel.



Figure 4. *Young Prince.* Signed by Muhammad Haravi. Miniature Painting. Ca. 1550, Iran. Freer Gallery of Art, SI, Washington D.C. F1937.8.

There are multiple examples of figural textiles from which to draw the conclusion that these garments were important signifiers in the Safavid era. The miniature painting entitled “Young Prince” by Mohammad Haravi (Fig. 4) in the Freer Gallery of Art is an excellent illustrated example of what these garments would have looked like.³³ The sub-genres of these textiles are slightly different and communicate different messages than the narrative figural textiles, but serve similar functions.

On the expression of the inner self through dress, Islamic Scholar Lisa Golombek states: “Clothing provided the opportunity for an individual to emphasize any chosen aspect of his inner

³³ For a surviving figural cloak in the Hermitage Museum, Moscow, see Scarce 2002, ed. Thompson and Canby, pl.13.2, 321.

or outer state at any given moment.”³⁴ Because the Safavid rulers perpetuated the open practice of Sufism, mystic culture was expressed throughout the visual language of the court, the urban circles, and subsequently through the Iranian artifacts collected by European visitors while visiting the East. The cloak is an expression of spirituality: the dervish silk cloak worn by the Safavid elite depicting Layla and Majnun expressed the inner Sufi. The relationship between artist workshops and Sufi communities became the driving force behind much of the symbolism that permeates the core imagery of the Safavid era.

The freeform, uninhibited expression of desire and the longing imposed by separation created an important theme in Iranian culture, expressed in the decorative arts, particularly the woven figural silks so highly prized at the Safavid court.

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³⁴ Lisa Golombek, “The Draped Universe of Islam” in Priscilla Soucek, ed., *Content and Context of Visual Arts in Islam* (University Park: Published for the College Art Association of America by the Pennsylvania State University Press, 1988), 30.