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# Where Have All the Symbols Gone?: A Study of Sufis and Sufi Symbolism in Ottoman Miniature Paintings

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# Where Have All the Symbols Gone?: A Study of Sufis and Sufi Symbolism in Ottoman Miniature Paintings

## **Abstract**

Ottoman miniature paintings represent some of the best preserved and documented works of Islamic art still extant. They differ critically from other forms of miniature painting, such as Persian miniature painting, by not representing Sufi symbolism. In the two potential sources of such symbolism, Ottoman Sufism and Persian miniature painters in the Ottoman Empire, appear to have not critically influenced Ottoman miniature painting to produce Sufi symbols, do to political, religious, and cultural factors. Instead, political factors of the Ottoman imperial state and the economics and standards of production in the empire produced an art medium where Ottoman Sufi symbols were not introduced.

## **Keywords**

Sufi, Sufi Symbolism, Ottoman Art, Symbolism

## **Disciplines**

Cultural History | European History | History

## **Comments**

This paper was written for *History 330: Ottoman History*, taught by Professor Karen Pinto in Fall 2013.

# Where Have All the Symbols Gone?

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A Study of Sufis and Sufi Symbolism in Ottoman  
Miniature Paintings

Jesse Edward Siegel

11/3/2013

I affirm that I have upheld the highest principles of honesty and integrity in my academic work and that I have not witnessed a violation of the honor code.

When I set out to research Sufi symbols in Ottoman miniatures of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, I expected to find a treasure trove of miniature paintings for observation and interpretation. After all, my last exploration into Persian miniatures opened a wonderland of the metaphysical depicted in pictorial art. In my earlier study, the position of lovers in a mosque and the color of the dome were not merely an illustration of a poem but a lesson on the principles of Sufi principles in the poem itself. But as my new research progressed, I discovered something strange: I was not seeing story illustrations, but paintings of ships and cities, portraits of sultans and their courts and depictions of street festivals and battles. Of course, there were some miniatures from manuscripts of Persian stories, but they seemed devoid of the details that I would have looked to for indication of symbolism. Nowhere did I see the placement of characters in the miniature or use of color that I could point to as being obviously Sufi influenced. I was finally forced to ask the question: Where are the Sufi symbols? Are they portrayed in any fashion in the work of the Ottoman miniaturists? Why were the powerful Ottoman Sufi orders not expressing themselves in the illustrated manuscript? Why did the Persian influence not bring over these symbols? What I eventually discovered was that Ottoman culture, by a combination of political goals, regional originality and simple stereotypes prevented the appearance of Sufi symbolism in Ottoman miniature painting altogether.

In my research I identified two sources from which Ottoman miniature painting could have been influenced by Sufi symbolism: the Sufi communities within the Ottoman Empire, or the tradition of Sufi symbolism in Persian miniature art. I will examine these two areas of influence and provide an explanation for why these sources failed to influence Ottoman miniature painting to include Sufi symbolism. Following this examination, I will then present a broader discussion of Ottoman miniatures and seek to find a unifying reason for the failure of both these areas of influence to bring Sufi symbolism into Ottoman miniature painting.

The absence of obvious Sufi symbolism does not mean Ottoman miniature art was entirely devoid of Sufi influence. One source for the depiction of Sufis, the *Mathnawi*--which translates to *The Acts of Mevlana*--turned out to not be from the main source of the miniatures, the imperial atelier of the Ottoman court, but from a Sufi lodge in Konya. The *Mathnawi* is a biography of sorts of Persian poet Mevlana Celaleddin Rumi, who came to Anatolia and, after contact with a mystic, became a Sufi, eventually helping to create the Mevlani Order of Sufism.<sup>1</sup> As might be expected with a text from the heart of Anatolia and without an overt Persian source, the miniature paintings bear no direct relationship to the symbolism of Persian miniatures. The primary version of the *Mathnawi* I will focus on for evidence of Sufi symbolism is a 1590 version by the Konya Mevlevi sheikh and reciter of *Mathnawi* (alternatively *Mesnevi*) Mahmud Dede. This particular manuscript was eventually presented to the Ottoman sultan Murad III.<sup>2</sup> The illustrations were, in my opinion, painted to match the tastes set by the imperial atelier and therefore representative of how the Sufis sought to portray themselves to society.

Using the reproductions in Talat Sait Halman and Metin And's book *Celaleddin Rumi and the Whirling Dervishes*, I examined the miniatures from two copies of the 1590 Konya manuscript. Halman notes in his introduction to the miniatures that they deviate from the usual miniatures of the nakkashane, or imperial workshops, by breaking out of the limitations of frames. He also cites the historians Nurhan Atasoy and Filiz Çağman, who described the provincial miniatures as having a "free intimate atmosphere" that separates itself from the mood of the imperial atelier's products.<sup>3</sup> This unique attitude in the paintings is most certainly true: while the works of the Ottoman atelier tend to stand still and manage to appear almost static, even when showing dancing in festivals, the Mevlani Sufis are shown dancing in wild ecstasy, displaying their love of God and their mystical search to become

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<sup>1</sup> Talat Sait Halman and Metin And, *Mevlana Celaleddin Rumi and the Whirling Dervishes: Sufi Philosophy, Whirling Rituals, Poems of Ecstasy, Miniature Paintings*, (Istanbul: Dost Yayinlari, 1983), p.16-20.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.

<sup>3</sup> Nurhan Atasoy and Filiz Çağman, *Turkish Miniature Painting*, (Istanbul: R.C.D. Cultural Institute, 1974), quoted in Talat Sait Halman and Metin And, *Mevlana Celaleddin Rumi and the Whirling Dervishes: Sufi Philosophy, Whirling Rituals, Poems of Ecstasy, Miniature Paintings*, (Istanbul: Dost Yayinlari, 1983), p. 81-2.

one with Him.<sup>4</sup> But other details in the miniatures, on closer inspection, appear less unusual. Each miniature depicts a specific scene from the life of Mevlana. The scene is not always well described, with fewer details to be observed. The characters have expressionless faces; even Mevlana and his followers do not show any particular emotion when they are lost in their mystical dancing. The miniatures, therefore, are specific and direct portrayals, not deviating from the theme, and not open to drawing in the reader too deeply.

Why is this? Was there a disconnect between the Persian Sufis and the Ottoman Sufis that inhibited the adoption of metaphysical symbolism? When I examined the relationship between the Sufi miniature painters and the Persians, I found that the opposite was true. In his comprehensive essay, "Sufism and Sufis in Ottoman Society," Filiz Cagman-Zeren Taninidi writes how the Sufi miniaturists made frequent travels to the court of the Safavid Shah during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, obtaining the Shah's patronage and benefiting from the Safavid Empire's care for the shrines of the Sufi saints to find places to carry out their vocation. Taninidi then makes an important point: the same was not done in the Ottoman Empire<sup>5</sup>. Many of the Ottoman Sufi illuminators stayed in the Safavid Empire and did not return to Ottoman territory, where the benefits to the Sufis were fewer due to the Ottoman sultans' overall lack of interest in maintaining Sufi shrines. There are instances of Sufi painters coming to the Ottoman Empire, but Taninidi points out that these were mainly Sufi painters of Safavid origin who went through the Ottoman Empire while on pilgrimage to Mecca and who chose to stay in the Empire, but on the periphery in Bagdad rather than at the heart in Istanbul. That the Sufi artists chose not to settle in the center of power and patronage in the Ottoman Empire is telling. Their reluctance to go to Istanbul could stem from a desire to avoid the monopolizing power of the imperial workshops and

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<sup>4</sup> "After reciting from the *Koran* and Mevlana's *Mesnevi*, the dervishes whirl to musical accompaniment," Sawaqib al-Manaqib, 1588-1590, in Talat Sait Halman and Metin And, *Mevlana Celaleddin Rumi and the Whirling Dervishes: Sufi Philosophy, Whirling Rituals, Poems of Ecstasy, Miniature Paintings*, (Istanbul: Dost Yayinlari, 1983), p.110.

<sup>5</sup> Filiz Cagman-Zeren Taninidi, "The Book in Sufi Orders of the Ottoman Empire," in *Sufism and Sufis in the Ottoman Empire*, ed. Ahmet Yaşar Ocak, p. 501-27, ( Ankara: Turkish Historical Society, 2005), p. 516-7.

perhaps pursue a more independent existence away from their stifling influence. Bagdad became a thriving place for Sufi painters who made works for Ottoman bureaucrats stationed there.<sup>6</sup> Despite the distance from Istanbul, the lack of evidence for the production of miniatures with Sufi symbolism around Bagdad suggests that the wishes of the Ottoman elites shaped the main characteristics of the Ottoman miniature paintings wherever they were made, and that these wishes may have excluded any use of overt Sufi symbols in the miniatures paintings in the text.

But why would the Ottoman officials want these symbols excluded? One potential explanation comes from another Sufi order in Anatolia, the Bektashi Sufis. The Bektashis have obscure origins and only came into popularity during the seventeenth century.<sup>7</sup> Critically, the Bektashi Sufis had a definite system of symbols to draw upon, which they used in many forms of pictorial art, including in some miniature paintings. The Bektashi style was entirely different style those used by the imperial atelier or the Mevlani Sufis and mostly used Arabic calligraphy to form images. One of the key symbols for the Bektashi was the lion, a symbol which does appear in miniature paintings of the nakkashane. But while the miniature paintings made by the imperial workshops show a lion from a story that predates Islam itself by three hundred years, the lion to the Bektashi was a representation of 'Ali, the grandson of the prophet Muhammad.<sup>8</sup> The symbolic lion, along with the other pictorial images, are meant to convey religious imagery that most directly relates to the tenants of Shi'ism and its veneration of 'Ali and his descendants as the Imams of Islam. In the Ottoman Empire, which already by the beginning of the sixteenth century was locked in conflict with the Persian Safavid Empire, any representation of the sect of Shi'ism promoted by an Ottoman Sufi sect may have been seen as a direct challenge to the authority of the Ottoman Sultan and his defense of the traditional, or Sunni, Islam. In the sixteenth and

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<sup>6</sup> Filiz Cagman-Zeren Taninidi, *op. cit.*, p. 517-23.

<sup>7</sup> Frederick DeJong, "Pictorial Art of the Bektashi Order," in *The Dervish Lodge: Architecture, Art, and Sufism in Ottoman Turkey*, edited by Raymond Lifchez, p.228-41, (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992), p. 228.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 233.

seventeenth centuries, the Ottoman Empire and the Safavid Empire were champions of the opposing Sunni and Shi'a sects, respectively, and used that identification in their political struggles.<sup>9</sup> In a power play of religious symbols for political justification, the Sufi symbols may have been tossed by the wayside in the name of political security.

The idea that the Ottoman government suppressed Sufi symbolism, while convenient for finding an easy cause for the dramatic differences in the miniatures, has its flaws. The lion does appear in Ottoman miniature paintings of the period, and if the lion had been such a potent symbol of political opposition to the House of Osman, it would have most certainly been excluded from paintings created by the Ottoman sultan's own workshops, regardless of its importance to illustrating the text. In addition, Sufism, in most of its forms, does not identify with any particular sect of Islam. This universality is why the Sufis were not regarded as a threat to the political power of the Ottomans and why they could flourish in the Ottoman Empire. Further study of the repression of Safavid sympathizers under Selim I and whether they were primarily Sufi or others will be necessary to completely discount the influence of repression.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, many of the Persian symbols that were later adopted by Sufism in fifteenth century Timurid Iran predate the split between Shi'a Persia and Sunni Anatolia.<sup>11</sup> As I will demonstrate later, the ancient Persian symbols had no difficulty entering into the imagery of Ottoman art and were popular for much of the sixteenth century.<sup>12</sup> This prominence and the lack of other signs of repression make it unlikely that the absence of Sufi symbolism in Ottoman miniatures stems from political repression by Istanbul of Sufis leaning towards Shi'ism. The lack of repression also means that Persian miniatures, with their tradition of Sufi symbolism in the early fifteenth century under the Timurids,

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<sup>9</sup> Leslie P. Pierce, *The Imperial Harem: Women and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire*, (Oxford University Press: New York, 1993), p.160.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p.160.

<sup>11</sup> Walter Denny, "Art of the Ottoman Court," in *Masterpieces from the Department of Islamic Art in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, ed. Maryam D. Ekhtiar, Priscilla P. Soucek, Shelia R. Canby and Navina Najat Haidar, p. 285-8, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), p. 287.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 286-7.

could have had an impact on Ottoman miniature painting and introduced Ottoman miniature painting to Sufi symbolism.

In examining the influence of Persian miniature painting, I shall turn to the miniatures produced by the *nakkashane*. The Ottoman imperial workshop quickly acquired a group of talented Persian miniaturists, who were still steeped in the traditions of Timurid art. They were brought back to Istanbul by Selim I as a prize of defeating the Safavid Shah Is'mail at the Battle of Chaldiran in 1514. He then incorporated them into his imperial workshops. They later created many miniature paintings under his son, Suleiman the Magnificent. Some scholars of Ottoman miniatures view the arrival of the Persian painters as a turning point in the development of the Ottoman miniature painting.<sup>13</sup> I shall now examine the impact the Persian style had on the development of the Ottoman miniature painting. Through this, we may be able to determine whether any Sufi symbolism crossed over into Ottoman art.

When trying to identify the effect of Persian miniature painting on Ottoman miniatures, it is important to compare the styles of Persian miniaturists to what was produced by Ottoman miniaturists at different times during the fifteenth century, both before and after their recorded presence. Norah M. Titley, in her book *Persian Miniature Painting*, holds that Persian miniature painting made an impact, but not always an easily observed one, on the budding Ottoman miniaturists. She notes that, at the end of the fifteenth century, there was a definite Ottoman style that differs greatly from the Persian painting of the period in its simple instead of more varied palate, plain instead of detailed landscapes, and orderliness of tents instead of haphazard additions.<sup>14</sup> She also notes that in a depiction of a reunion scene of Farhad and Shirin in the *Khamsa* of Shaykhi produced in the late fifteenth century, the Ottoman

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<sup>13</sup> Esin Atil, "The Art of the Book," in *Turkish Art*, ed. Esin Atil, p.137-238, (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1980), p.164.

<sup>14</sup> Norah M. Titley, *Persian Miniature Painting and its Influence on the Art of Turkey and India*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983), p. 136.

miniaturists create an image with more action than the Persian miniatures of the same story.<sup>15</sup> The difference not only reveals an original Ottoman style that predates the arrival of Persian miniaturists at the imperial workshops but also opens the possibility that the development of a unique Ottoman style may have prevented any addition of Persian Sufi symbolism to Ottoman miniature paintings.

The presence of an original Ottoman style does not mean, however, that it prevented any Persian influence. In further comments on miniatures from the beginning of the sixteenth century, Titley describes them as having “typical Ottoman architecture against a Persianised background.”<sup>16</sup> In an example, a set of miniatures from the beginning of the sixteenth century are described as either Ottoman or Persian, a confusion which is not due to a prevalent mixture of Ottoman and Persian styles in the paintings themselves but in how they are organized in their borders. What Titley eventually concludes about these pieces is that they show the “characteristic realism of Ottoman work set against a background of Persian romanticism to such a degree that these miniatures might well be examples of the joint work of Ottoman and Persian artists.”<sup>17</sup> The possible collaboration between Ottoman and Persian miniaturists means that the Persian miniaturists, while having the opportunity to influence Ottoman miniatures directly, also had to work with the conceptions of the Ottoman miniaturists themselves. This situation could have prevented the Persian miniaturists from incorporating their own symbols into the miniatures they worked on.

While the analysis of early sixteenth century miniatures suggests an Ottoman emphasis, this did not always continue. Titley identifies the use of characteristics of the Shiraz school in particular in the work of later Ottoman miniaturists, in the late sixteenth century. In these works, Titley points to the liveliness of the color selections that were not typical of Ottoman work. This color change would suggest that Persian painters had a part in choosing the color schemes of the miniatures and perhaps the awe

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 136.

<sup>16</sup> Norah M. Titley, *op. cit.*, p. 136.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 142-3.

that Persian miniatures inspired through their vivid colors. But in an examination of the background of the miniatures, Titley again points to background motifs of pavilions with gardens, “the gold sky, [and] flying birds,” as being based in Persian miniatures while “the costume and faces are purely Ottoman.”<sup>18</sup> This conclusion is a continuation of the theme of Persian miniature painters being used in collaboration with the Ottoman miniaturists to provide a background and add a Persian flair, but not much else. The formula of Persian miniatures apparently was agreeable to their Ottoman admirers over the course of the sixteenth century, but the details belonged exclusively to the Ottoman world with which the viewer was most familiar. This suggests that Persian miniature painters’ best opportunity to influence Ottoman miniature paintings was through background imagery. None of the background elements of the Persian miniatures, without further evidence, can be declared to be Sufi in nature. To fully recognize any element as a symbol requires cooperation of all parts of the miniature, from the context to position of details. It would have been difficult, if not impossible, for Persian miniaturists to have made elements symbolic of Sufi ideas by using background imagery alone.

This answer on the presence Sufi symbols does not mean that Persian symbols did not make an appearance in Ottoman art. When mentioning the Battle of Chaldiran and the transfer of Persian miniaturists to the Ottoman Empire in his essay “Art of the Ottoman Court,” from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Walter Denny cites the arrival of the painter Shah Qulu, who helped to create the *saz* style which was adopted into many different media of Ottoman art, including tilework, sword blades, carpets and drawings. Symbols included “dragons and mythical *simurgh* birds from Chinese and Persian mythology; angels; peris and hoursis, the fairylike denizens of Paradise’ and above all a turbulent world of writhing, curling, featherlike leaves and elaborate composite floral palmettes...,”<sup>19</sup> all at odds with the world of Ottoman realism. That Shah Qulu made such an important contribution to Ottoman symbols

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<sup>18</sup> Norah M. Titley, *op. cit.*, p. 146-7.

<sup>19</sup> Walter Denny, *op. cit.*, p.286-7.

flies in the face of the previous conclusion about the role of Persian miniaturists in the creation of Ottoman miniatures. The symbolic elements Denny mentions are details that would require Persian miniaturists to break out of the mold and add new elements to the miniatures. This change could have only happened with the cooperation of Ottoman miniaturists, who are otherwise depicting their own world, not the world of ancient Persian myths. But another key difference to mention here is that while Shah Qulu is mentioned as a painter, Denny does not provide any examples of miniature painting. Instead, Shah Qulu drew individual paintings on plain paper in black ink. If this was his primary art form, then Shah Qulu was very limited in his opportunities to bring these symbols to Ottoman miniature painting and should perhaps be regarded as influencing the general attitude of Ottoman art rather than bringing specific ideas to Ottoman miniatures. With one exception, the symbols Shah Qulu used also lack any direct reference back to themes of Sufi ideals. The *simurgh* bird has its place in the story called by some “The Parliament of the Birds,” where a group of birds go on a mission to find the greatest bird of all, the *simurgh*, who they have declared their king.<sup>20</sup> The story is a traditional Sufi story, invoking the suffering of coming closer to God and the final unity with Him. The bird, if it was used in Ottoman miniature painting, could be used to portray the Sufi ideas of seeking final unity with God. Denny keeps the *simurgh* bird in the context of Persian mythology, but the Sufi context makes the bird’s presence in Ottoman art curious and worth investigating. If the presence of the *simurgh* bird means that ancient Persian symbols that had been adapted to Sufi stories made a transition into Ottoman miniature art, then there is a possibility that the bird could have been used in a context to represent Sufi ideas. While there is a lack of widespread examples of the bird in art, certain assumptions can be made about their presence in Ottoman art by pursuing areas where the bird would have most likely appeared. Directions to pursue are the Persian origins of the “The Parliament of the Birds” and other possible Persian sources for Sufi symbolism in Ottoman miniature painting.

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<sup>20</sup> Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, (The University of North Carolina Press: Chapel Hill, 1975), p. 307.

One place where Persian art had an opportunity to change and influence Ottoman art without the presence of Persian artists themselves was in Ottoman artists' reproductions of works of Persian literature. Metin And's analysis of manuscript production under the Ottomans devotes an entire section to the Ottoman miniature paintings done for works of Persian literature. Among the groupings of texts and poetry that the Ottoman atelier reproduced, the "Parliament of the Birds" is mentioned.<sup>21</sup> Another text with Sufi connections, "Leyla and Mecnun," is also mentioned.<sup>22</sup> Leyla and Mecnun is a classic romance: a young man, Mecnun, falls in love with a young girl, Leyla, and when Leyla's father locks her away to avoid Mecnun's attentions, Mecnun is driven by his love into the wilderness. When they finally meet again, in secret and at night, Mecnun cannot bear to be in such close presence to the one who he has loved for so long, and flees back into the wilderness. He returns one last time, to die of grief on her grave.<sup>23</sup> The story bears the hallmarks of Sufism in its devotion of the lover, despite distance and time, and in the dependence of the lover's existence on the beloved's existence as through love they become one. Like "Parliament of the Birds," "Leyla and Mecnun" contains a subtle Sufi subtext that could be explained more thoroughly by the use of symbolism in a miniature painting. These stories appear in And's analysis under the category of *mesnevi*. *Mesnevi* sometimes have the subject of "a romance or of mystical significance. It can also be of religious content or combining mysticism and romance."<sup>24</sup> While "Leyla and Mecnun" falls into this category as a more traditional romance with a mystical under current, "Parliament of the Birds" does, too, as it is a story of a quest for a source of devotion, in this case God. With the "Parliament of the Birds" and "Leyla and Mecnun," the *mesnevi* presents an opening for mystical ideas, such as those of Sufism, to enter into the mind of an Ottoman miniaturist. He could then use the context to create a painting with symbols to emphasize the Sufi ideas.

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<sup>21</sup> Metin And, *Turkish Miniature Painting*, (Ankara: Dost Zazınlari, 1974), p.109.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p.109.

<sup>23</sup> Reza Aslan, *No god but God*, (New York: Random House, 2005), p. 194-8.

<sup>24</sup> Metin And, *op. cit.*, p.108.

The presence of references to Persian literature in the works of Ottoman miniaturists does not mean that the miniaturists depicted Sufi symbolism in the miniatures. Once again, there is lack of readily available examples of miniatures depicting scenes from these works of Persian literature. It is also not enough to assume that the presence of the *simurgh* bird in a miniature painting is symbolism. As stated earlier, a symbol requires the collaboration of the context of the work, the background, the characters, and the details in the painting to convey a set of ideas to the initiated viewer. In the absence of a painting from these works, we can instead try to understand the general purpose of Ottoman miniature painting and how the Ottomans treated other works of literature in their illustrations.

To examine how Ottoman miniaturists portrayed literature and how they used symbolism in their portrayals, we must also understand the scope of their commissions. And's analysis of Ottoman literature makes mention of, besides works of Persian literature, mystical manuscripts, such as the aforementioned *Mathnawi*, the *Siyer-i Nebi*, "The Acts of the Prophet," the *Nefehat-ul-uns*, a biography of the saints, and *Falname*, "The Book of Divination." And does not conduct any analysis on these miniatures except those from *Siyer-i Nebi*, which he describes as employing "some conventions and symbols," including "a pear-shaped flaming haloes representing the Prophet."<sup>25</sup> While the Ottoman miniaturists used symbolism to illustrate their mystical texts, it is also important to know how it was employed. In the miniatures found in Emel Esin's *Turkish Miniature Painting*, the haloes and veil of the Prophet Muhammad are enormous, drawing a great deal of attention to the Prophet and his position in the miniature.<sup>26</sup> There is some comparison between these mystical texts with the prominent position and enlarged size of Mevlani and his followers in the paintings from the *Mathnawi*. In this circumstance, it can be said that Ottoman miniaturists did use symbolism in a very blatant fashion. It is not clear if that

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<sup>25</sup> Metin And, *op. cit.*, p.110.

<sup>26</sup> "Muhammed Praying with Khadija and Ali," *Siyer-un-Nebi*, 1594, in *Turkish Miniature Painting*, ed. by Emel Esin, 1st ed., (Rutland: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1960), p.18-19.

symbolism is intended to emphasize the major characters in the picture or should be interpreted for some deeper meaning.

The reason for this confusion about emphasis extends from another major category for And: the historiographies and annals that became important during the sixteenth century. Examples of such texts include *Suleymanname*, the *Sahname-I Selim Han*, and the *Selimname* "The Book of Selim." These works were depicted with scenes of "various land campaigns, his naval battles, sieges of enemy fortresses, his hunting expedition, his sportive interests and several other such displays of strength."<sup>27</sup> In other words, the miniatures detail the events of the Sultan's life and provide an illustration to the biography. When describing these miniatures, And emphasizes that "Artists devoted all their attention to composition and subject matter reproduced in minutest detail combining skillfully narrative intent with pictorial realism."<sup>28</sup> Here, the realism seems to return to portraying the life of the Sultan accurately, not imaginatively. From the miniatures of imperial texts that appear in And's work, we can see that the depiction of sultans was rendered with such detail and vividness that strong comparisons might be made to Persian miniatures, except for the lack of imaginative imagery. The scene of the Battle of Mohacs does nothing besides enlarge the figure of Sultan Suleiman I to show his centrality to the army and depict a scene of how the battle may have looked: cannons blazing, cavalry charging, and the Hungarian army in full retreat.<sup>29</sup> Another miniature, that of the ascension of Murad I, places the Sultan in the upper portion of the image, sitting upon a golden throne with his courtiers about him. A few details indicate that this is not completely realistic. A fountain sits near the middle of the image, a detail that appears in many of the other miniatures of enthroned sultans receiving courtiers. There is also the

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<sup>27</sup> Metin And, *op. cit.*, p. 106.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p.106-7.

<sup>29</sup> "The Battle of Mohacs in 1526," *Hünername*, 1584-9, in Metin And, *Turkish Miniature Painting*, (Ankara: Dost Zazınları, 1974), p.47.

lack of a definite background, a golden sky broken by a couple of trees and blooming branches.<sup>30</sup> These may be taken as both whimsy of the painter, or perhaps a form of symbolism.

The symbolism in the annals tell a great deal about the Ottoman miniaturists: they were not strangers to depicting scenes from history and literature and were accustomed to the use of symbolism. We may even extract some details about the kinds of symbols used by the miniaturists. In the annals and historiographies, the Ottoman Sultan is set apart from his courtiers in a small building with a dome roof. The dome appears frequently in other paintings as well, usually to emphasize the sultan. A fountain and a wall surrounding the characters is also typical of depictions of the sultan with his courtiers, suggesting that this represents the Ottoman court. These scenes cannot be taken as representative of how the miniaturists displayed symbolism in the text. What I shall now consider is the context in which these works were created.

The symbolism of the miniatures of the Ottoman imperial workshops should not be viewed in a vacuum. The rise of the creation of annals during the sixteenth century was probably a result of the increasing security and prosperity of the empire, allowing the sultans to invest more in the creation of illuminated manuscripts. But they did not merely glorify a single Ottoman ruler. Oleg Grabar's case study of Ottoman art in "An Exhibition of High Ottoman Art," makes the bold claim that art across all media of the period "have anonymity of forms, their lack of signifying charge, the relative poverty of written expression, the absence of expressions of faith from everything but a few restricted areas, and their visual brilliance." From this system he concludes "Suleyman recedes as a person and as a patron. He is replaced by a concept—Ottoman power—which constructs forms to act out and proclaim for itself the system's wealth and brilliance."<sup>31</sup> While it is not within the constraints of this essay to examine whether

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<sup>30</sup> "Accession of Murad I," *Hünername*, 1584-9, in Metin And, *Turkish Miniature Painting*, (Ankara: Dost Zazınları, 1974), p.49.

<sup>31</sup> Oleg Grabar, "An Exhibition of High Ottoman Art," Chap. XVII, in *Islamic Visual Culture: Constructing the Study of Islamic Art*, Vol. II, p.327-43, (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2006), p. 342.

such a statement is true or whether it extends through the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, that Suleyman's reign is marked by some historians as a transitional period that gave way to the classical period of miniature painting hints that this may be the case across much of Ottoman miniature painting.<sup>32</sup> This aesthetic would mean that depictions such as the ones collected by And represent the cultivation of symbols in Ottoman miniature painting to depict the power of the House of Osman. Conscious of these symbols gleaned from the imperial Ottoman miniatures, we should now reexamine the one definite, explicitly Sufi Ottoman text, the *Mathnawi*.

Returning to the miniature paintings from the *Mathnawi*, we are able to see the symbols used in the depictions of the sultans quite clearly. Mevlana is somewhat anonymous, except that he is sitting down or is the largest figure in the painting. He also might sit under a dome or within a frame, emphasizing his importance.<sup>33</sup> But his anonymity and the simplicity of the symbolism in the painting should give us pause. While the symbolism is evident, it does not link itself back to the tenants of Mevlani Sufism, or even Sufism in general. What the symbols accomplish instead is to tie themselves more closely to the predominant styles of the Ottoman imperial atelier, affirming their use of the stereotypical symbols of the time.

The discovery of re-appropriated symbols does not lead to a conclusion that this predominant stereotype represents the enforcement of a political ethos upon the provincial painters. To investigate that conclusion would require asking why symbols applied to the sultan could then be used to symbolize other leaders or significant persons in paintings. Then it would suggest that the Ottoman government was somehow afraid of the creation of new symbols to illustrate a manuscript. Instead, we can come to the conclusion that the symbols used in the imperial atelier became the standard to which other

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<sup>32</sup> Esin Atil, *op. cit.*, p. 164.

<sup>33</sup> "Mevlana protects Konya during the battle between Sultan Selim and Sultan Beyazid," Sawaqib al- Manaqib, 1588-1590, in Talat Sait Halman and Metin And, *Mevlana Celaleddin Rumi and the Whirling Dervishes: Sufi Philosophy, Whirling Rituals, Poems of Ecstasy, Miniature Paintings*, (Istanbul: Dost Yayinlari, 1983), p. 92.

painters aspired and sought to emulate. Again, we return to the detail that the 1590 *Mathnawi* manuscript was eventually presented to the Ottoman sultan. The Sufi monk may have been seeking to emulate the style so as to fit with the patron, and Sufi symbols would not have had a place in that style.

This interpretation of the symbols offers a potential explanation for what might have happened in miniature paintings in Persian literary works. Important elements such as the *simurgh* bird and Leyla and Mecnun would have appeared in the miniature and their place would have been enhanced due to their significance in the story. But these potential sources of symbolism would not have been invested with any more symbolism than highlighting their textual significance. The *simurgh* bird would be prominent, not as spiritual truth but as a significant bird. Leyla and Mecnun would have a central position in the miniature, perhaps under a dome or larger than the other characters, but they would have not carried any further charge. Mecnun's position would highlight his importance as the protagonist of the tale, and not be enhanced by colors or his placement in the miniature compared with Leyla to emphasize how his love is symbolic of a love of God. The miniatures would, like the *Mathnawi*, help to illustrate the text and not deepen the meaning. They are instead following an "imperial style" set by the patron and which spans all miniature paintings of the time.

In the context of an "imperial style," we may conclude that Ottoman art as a style stifled the potential of Sufi symbolism in miniature painting. While homegrown symbolism and imported Persian culture could have introduced the symbolism using either the symbols important to the Anatolian Sufi community or the longstanding, traditional symbols of state-endorsed Persian Sufism, both faced a roadblock in developing Ottoman culture. It is beyond the scope of this paper to examine whether the stability of Ottoman and Persian states affected the variety of imaginative symbolism in the miniature paintings their societies produced. What can be said is that the Ottoman state went to great lengths to portray the continuity of the Ottoman family and the power invested in that family through their

stylized depiction of Ottoman sultans. The colors and styles that were used by the Ottoman imperial workshops became the standard for the center of Ottoman culture in Istanbul. Persian and provincial artists who produced miniatures might have introduced new varieties, but in fitting in with the stereotypical painting style that was expected by imperial patrons, the painters subsumed ideological ideas by adhering to the standard style. By not providing a symbol of power to the regime, Sufi symbols failed to enter into this “imperial style” and did not appear in the work of Ottoman miniaturists.

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