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Folio 17b, Rashīd al-Dīn's *Jāmi' al-tawārīkh* (Compendium of Chronicles),
University of Edinburgh Library, Or. Ms. 20.
Image provided by the University of Edinburgh, Centre for Research Collections.

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A Reflection on ‘The Paintings of Rashīd al-Dīn’s “Universal History” at Edinburgh’

by Professor Hugh Goddard

Editorial Note: Looking back into the archives of the *Journal* for inspiration, this is the first of our ‘legacy’ articles to be reprinted—Robert Hillenbrand’s piece on the paintings of Rashīd al-Dīn’s *Jāmi’ al-tawārīkh* (translated as the ‘Compendium of Chronicles’, ‘World History’, or ‘Universal History’). The original 1974 article is reprinted here in front of a modern reflection kindly provided by Hugh Goddard, and with a post-script written by Hillenbrand himself after fifty years. Hillenbrand first explores the vital importance of the Rashīd al-Dīn manuscript, while Goddard focusses on the developments made in Islamic studies of the past half century, including the forthcoming publication of a new three-volume work by Hillenbrand.

The Paintings of Rashīd al-Dīn’s ‘Universal History’ at Edinburgh

by Robert Hillenbrand

First published in the *University of Edinburgh Journal*, 26(4) (1974), pp. 330–33.

Edinburgh University Press is shortly to publish a substantial monograph on one of the great treasures of the University Library—a manuscript of the ‘Universal History’ by Rashīd al-Dīn, the vizier of the Mongol

rulers of Persia, copied and illustrated in 1306. This was the last book written by the late Watson Gordon Professor of Fine Art, David Talbot Rice, and was the culmination of his long-standing interest in the manuscript. The text has been seen through the press by Basil Gray, the noted expert on Persian painting who was formerly Keeper of Oriental Antiquities at the British Museum. The volume will reproduce all seventy miniatures not only in monochrome plates but also in colour, in microfiche form, an unusual feature in fine art publishing.

The historical context of these illustrations explains why they have fascinated generations of art historians. They probably originated in Tabriz, which for a brief period of less than a century was one of the key cities of the East and in which Persians and Mongols mingled with Arabs, Turks, Chinese, Byzantines and Venetians. This unique conjunction of races and cultural traditions naturally produced a highly individual art. In the field of manuscript illumination this art, though of striking power and originality, could be termed a hothouse product, owing its very existence to the official scriptoria established at Tabriz by Rashīd al-Dīn. Each year copies of his encyclopaedic work, written in Arabic and Persian, were sent to one of the major cities of the Mongol realm. This practice implies a series of highly organised workshops, and indeed contemporary historians have left detailed accounts of the extensive scale of the vizier's patronage. Such unusual circumstances explain why the style of the Edinburgh manuscript so closely approximates to that of the copies of the same work in London and Istanbul, which are roughly contemporary with it. They also explain an otherwise puzzling feature of this style—its virtual disappearance within less than twenty years. Its demise coincides with the downfall and execution of Rashīd al-Dīn himself in 1318. With him collapsed the whole administrative apparatus which had underpinned his scriptoria. The Tabriz style could not survive the loss of the patronage which had created it, for it did not have its roots in the native Persian tradition.

This latter conclusion applies also, though with diminished force, to the subject-matter of the manuscript. In keeping with its title—literally 'Compendium of Histories'—the text ranges freely over the Old and New Testaments and the Apocrypha, the Qur'an, the life of Muhammad, the legendary Persian past, and recent Islamic history. The London manuscript also illustrates Buddhist and Indian legends. No subsequent Persian illuminated manuscript attempted to encompass such a variety of subjects. Even when the artists of the 'Universal History' illustrated subjects which were later to be the mainstay of Persian painting their approach was marked by a vigour, inventiveness and sense of grandeur which makes later versions of these subjects seem rather tame. It is fascinating to see the incidents of the *Shāhnāma*—the 'Book of Kings', the Persian national epic—transfigured in this way, even though one sees them in the distorting mirror of an alien tradition. For once the heroes of Persian legend are indeed heroic, not feeble puppets.

Enthronements and Battles

In the later part of the manuscript, which deals with Islamic history, the artists were no longer obliged to ransack their imaginations for suitable illustrations to the text. Two types of scene dominate this section: enthronements and battles. For depictions of the enthroned ruler the artists could draw on a millennial Near Eastern tradition, familiar in Persia from pre-Achaemenid to Sasanian and early Islamic times. The seated ruler was always shown as larger than the serried rows of standing courtiers flanking him, and was distinguished by the appurtenances of rank. Apart from an almost Western appreciation of the positive qualities of empty space, which dictates the grouping of figures, the rendering of these tableaux in the Rashīd al-Dīn manuscript adds little to this tradition. It is quite another story with the battle scenes. Dominated as they are by Mongol faces, costume, weapons and horses, they testify to the traumatic effect on the Persian mentality of repeated invasions by Mongol hordes. Galloping horsemen erupt with explosive force from the sides of the page and crash together in a hideous tangle of lances, swords and maimed limbs. In some details one is reminded of Uccello's 'Rout of San Romano', also a careful rendering of the field of battle but one which, with its toy figures and dream-like atmosphere, lacks the frightening urgency of these scenes. Not since the Sasanian bas-reliefs had Persian artists devised so powerful a formula for battle, and in later years they never succeeded in matching it.

In some ways the varied subject-matter offers the key to the style of the manuscript. Even if all the artists were Persians—and this has often been disputed—there would have been no suitable models in the native tradition for many scenes of this manuscript. It is thus scarcely surprising that the inevitable borrowing should have extended also to style and technique. Very few examples of Persian painting of the pre-Mongol period exist, but they suffice to highlight the startling novelty of the Tabriz style. The unusually large size of many of the pictures invites speculation that the presumably Chinese models included not only book illustrations but also paintings on silk or even frescoes. This generous scale—the pages measure about 17 inches by 12 inches, and some of the paintings take up half that area—allows the artists to achieve a monumentality that would be almost impossible in small-scale paintings, and they take advantage of it to infuse their compositions with drama and action.

The large format also facilitates the introduction of new landscape elements taken from Chinese sources, such as cloud forms resembling scrolls, water rendered as a series of interlaced curlicues, mountains of pyramidal form receding one behind the other into the distance, and trees in which knotted branches and gnarled boles are deliberately emphasised. A landscape infused with these elements need no longer serve simply as the background to the action. It can mirror the fantasy, solemnity, or, occasionally, as the 'Death of Shāghād' shows, the suffering

of the main scene. No wonder that the earliest pure landscape in Persian painting, without any figures, appears in one of the Rashīd al-Dīn manuscripts. A century later, all the savage power of these landscapes had been forgotten, to be replaced by the delicate fairy-tale world thenceforward synonymous with Persian painting.

Calligraphic Mastery of Line

A less obviously Chinese trait in these miniatures is the calligraphic mastery of line. Figures are drawn with the utmost economy and finesse, but the draughtsmanship is often nervous rather than smooth and they can be instinct with tension. This is because the artist's treatment of line is unpredictable. He may interrupt the sweeping fall of a robe by a knot of drapery with an outline like broken waves, or reinforce a gesture by a swathe of jagged drapery aligned in the same direction. This style depends on drawing rather than painting, for colour is confined to areas where it can have maximum impact. Many of the miniatures resemble tinted drawings. The artist makes two colours do the work of a dozen simply by placing them selectively and by varying their intensity. Red and blue are the commonest primary colours. The eyes of the figures are rendered in silver, now tarnished. They have no pupils—apparently a minor detail, but one which invests the figures, otherwise expressionless and devoid of emotion, with a sinister, spectral air.

It is difficult to overrate the importance of these miniatures as documents of cultural history, iconography and style. They transcend the multiple borrowings of subject-matter and technique from Western and Far Eastern sources which their unique historical context encouraged. It was the high ambition of the artists and patrons of Tabriz greatly to extend the range of Persian miniature painting not only in subject-matter but also in emotional depth. With their first efforts they scored an unqualified success. Subsequent artists shrank from emulating this extraordinary achievement and kept to a safer and lesser range of subjects and tone. It is a sad irony that the very qualities of the Tabriz style should have made it effectively a dead end for later Persian painting.

Editorial Note: The image on page 11 was included, in black and white, with Hillenbrand's original article. We have been able to include it here in full colour thanks to the University of Edinburgh's Centre for Research Collections. It also marks the division between the legacy article, and Hugh Goddard's modern commentary, which begins on page 12.



Rakishb impaled in a pit and Rastam shooting his half-brother Shaghad.

A reflection on 'The Paintings of Rashīd al-Dīn's "Universal History" at Edinburgh'

by Hugh Goddard

In its 1974 issue, the *University of Edinburgh Journal* published a short article by the university's still relatively newly appointed Lecturer in Islamic Art, Robert Hillenbrand, who had taken up the post in 1971. The theme of the article was the paintings contained in a very significant manuscript which was acquired in India by Colonel John Baillie of the East India Company (1772–1833), and then passed to the library of the University of Edinburgh in 1876, the 'World History' (or literally 'Compendium of Chronicles') by Rashīd al-Dīn. This manuscript had originally been produced in 1314, at the court of the Mongol Ilkhanid dynasty in Tabriz (in modern Iran). The particular reason for the inclusion of this article in the *Journal* was the imminent publication, by Edinburgh University Press, of a monograph by the late David Talbot Rice, the Watson Gordon Professor of Fine Art, on the seventy illustrations which were included in the manuscript. Talbot Rice is, of course, the scholar after whom the University's art gallery in Old College is named, and having served as Vice-Principal of the University from 1967 to 1971, the gallery was established in his memory by his successor, Giles Henry Robertson.

Talbot Rice died before the monograph on the paintings themselves was completed; it was released posthumously in 1976, and was seen through the press by Basil Gray, who had been the Keeper of Oriental Antiquities at the British Museum. As well as black-and-white reproductions of all of the miniatures in the manuscript, the volume also included colour reproductions of each of them, in microfiche form. The book's publication was therefore not only significant, but also highly innovative.

Robert Hillenbrand went on to have a stellar career in the field of Islamic Art, being awarded a personal chair in Islamic Art in 1989, and going on to publish, among many other things, his *Islamic Art and Architecture*, in the renowned Thames and Hudson 'World of Art' series, in 1999 (with a revised and expanded edition published in 2021), and his magisterial survey *Islamic Architecture*, published by Edinburgh University Press in 2000. He has also continued to work on significant manuscripts other than the Rashīd al-Dīn *World History*, most recently the Great Mongol *Shāhnāma* (Book of Kings), a text of the great epic of Persian history which was probably also produced in Tabriz, in the decade following the production of the Rashīd al-Dīn manuscript. Hillenbrand's forty-five years of work on this manuscript have recently come to fruition in the publication of his *The Great Mongol Shahnama* by Hali Publications in London in 2022. This contains reproductions of all the paintings in the manuscript, which are scattered around the world, in

London, Dublin, Paris, Geneva, Teheran, Kuwait, Istanbul, and the United States of America, with discussion of its major themes and the artists themselves.¹

The significance of the Rashīd al-Dīn manuscript is twofold: firstly, its author has been described by J. A. Boyle, the Professor of Persian Studies in Manchester, as 'the first world historian'.² This article was originally a lecture delivered at the British Institute for Persian Studies in Teheran on 9 April 1969, and, on the basis of Rashīd al-Dīn's chronicling of the histories of all the peoples with whom the Mongols came into contact, in other words the Jews, the Persians, the Muslims, the Turks, the Chinese, the Franks (including their Emperors and Popes), the Indians (including Buddha and Buddhism), and, of course, the Mongols themselves, Boyle concludes that:

The fame of the statesman-historian rests [...] on the attempt [...] to complete a general world history of the whole Eurasian continent [...] the first World History in the true sense of the word ever written in any language.³

More recently, a full-length monograph has appeared on Rashīd al-Dīn's text, Stefan Kamola's *Making Mongol History: Rashid al-Din and the Jami' al-Tawarikh*, published in 2019. As well as locating the work in its context and telling the life-story of Rashīd al-Dīn, including his conversion from Judaism to Islam in around 1280, Kamola discusses the composition of the work and its purpose in great detail, including, in Appendix A, a reconstruction of the different works of Rashīd al-Dīn, including their illustrations, from the sections of them that are contained in different manuscripts around the world;⁴ and then, in Appendix B, a descriptive catalogue of all of the manuscripts of the *Collected Histories*, as Kamola calls them.⁵

Secondly, the Edinburgh Rashīd al-dīn manuscript is significant because of its illustrations, which were the main focus of attention by Robert Hillenbrand in his 1974 article for this journal. These have been of ongoing interest to art historians all over the world, and have had a place of honour in numerous exhibitions and their catalogues over the past sixty years, especially after the manuscript was disbound and its paintings very lightly cleaned and conserved. Having outlined, in his 1974 article, the circumstances and setting in which the Edinburgh Rashīd al-Dīn fragment was composed, Hillenbrand continued to work on it, as seen in a number of articles, such as 'Ancient Iranian Kings in the World History of Rashīd al-Dīn', written jointly with his wife Carole and published in *Iran*.⁶

With regard to the illustrations in Rashīd al-Dīn's work, Kamola highlights the importance of both Chinese and European influences on them, especially through Chinese block-printing technology, as used in Buddhist texts. He underscores the idea of a scriptorium, or workshop, to produce multiple copies of texts, as was done in Tabriz in what was called the Rashidi Quarter, named after Rashīd al-Dīn himself. Kamola also explores the whole idea of an illustrated history, as seen in

a French text which, though entitled *Universal History*, was actually focused mainly on the history of the Mediterranean world, including that of the Greeks and Romans, and was produced in such a scriptorium in Crusader Acre around 1286. He acknowledges that there is no direct evidence that Rashīd al-Dīn drew from, or even knew of this text, but goes on to suggest that:

[...] given the proximity in time and space between Crusader Acre and Ilkhanid Tabriz and the general mobility of artists in the medieval Islamic world, it is entirely possible that the Rashidi Quarter in Tabriz benefited from a diaspora of people, books and ideas from the Acre atelier after the fall of that city in 1291.⁷

This is a very interesting suggestion concerning cultural and artistic transmission from one society to another in this period.

As a result of the efforts of Talbot Rice and Hillenbrand, other scholars too began to publish on Rashīd al-Dīn, particularly Sheila Blair, who produced a fine volume on the other and smaller surviving section of the Arabic text, which is now in the possession of the Nasser D. Khalili Collection of Islamic Art in London. This included a facsimile of the 59 folios which make up this text, with its 20 major illustrations, which focus on the History of the Jews, China, and India.⁸ Appendix II contains a very helpful table of all the illustrations contained in the text, reconstructed from both the Edinburgh and the Khalili manuscripts.⁹ Since the publication of Hillenbrand's short article in the *University of Edinburgh Journal* back in 1974, therefore, interest in, and knowledge of, the Edinburgh Rashīd al-Dīn fragment has continued to grow. Four examples may serve to illustrate this.

Firstly, utilising the opportunities made available by digital technology, the entire text of the Edinburgh manuscript was digitised in 2010, and made available on the Internet.¹⁰ Together with the digitised version of al-Bīrūnī's 'Chronicle of the Ancient Nations', which was completed in 2016,¹¹ and which comes from the same time and milieu, this means that the University of Edinburgh's two finest manuscripts from the Islamic World are fully accessible to researchers and the wider public anywhere in the world, at any time.

Secondly, to mark the 700th anniversary (in the Western calendar) of the copying of the Edinburgh fragment of the *World History*, the University of Edinburgh, through the Centre for Research Collections and the Alwaleed Centre for the Study of Islam in the Contemporary World, arranged an exhibition about the manuscript in the University Library, in 2014.

Details of this exhibition can be found in the advance publicity for it;¹² in an account on its impact in the annual report of the Alwaleed Centre for 2014–2015;¹³ and in a short article reflecting on the exhibition by its curator, Dr Yuka Kadoi, 'Exhibiting "World History": the 700th Anniversary of Rashid al-Din's

Jami' al-Tawarikh'.¹⁴ The eighteen folios from the manuscript which were displayed in the exhibition attracted a significant amount of interest, with over 5,000 people visiting the exhibition; in association with the exhibition, two lectures about the manuscript, by Sheila Blair and Robert Hillenbrand, were delivered at the National Gallery of Scotland, and recordings of these are available.^{15, 16}

Thirdly, as a history of the world, Rashīd al-Dīn's text naturally covered the coming of Islam, as do some of the images in the Edinburgh fragment. This matter was sensitively discussed in a two-part BBC documentary first shown in February 2022 under the title 'Mary Beard's Forbidden Art', in one section of which Prof. Beard and Dr Fozia Bora of the University of Leeds discuss two images from the Edinburgh fragment of the Rashīd al-Dīn manuscript. On this matter, Prof. Christiane Gruber, who has produced the most thorough study of visual representation in the Islamic tradition, in her *The Praiseworthy One: the Prophet Muhammad in Islamic Texts and Images*,¹⁷ concludes that 'veristic images have tended to fade from view since around 1800CE', a development which attests to 'the increasing influence of more conservative Muslim discourses promoting the avoidance (or even prohibition) of figural imagery, especially of the Prophet Muhammad'.¹⁸ As the publication of this book makes clear, however, this does not mean that earlier images, particularly from the eastern Islamic World, can simply be expunged from the historical record, a view which she outlines in a six-minute interview with the BBC from August 2020.¹⁹

Fourthly, and finally, and returning to the original article on which the present short article is a reflection, Robert and Carole Hillenbrand have continued to work on the Edinburgh manuscript of Rashīd al-Dīn, and it is a great pleasure, therefore, to be able to conclude with a reference to another forthcoming publication, namely a three-volume study on the Edinburgh fragment of the *World History* of Rashīd al-Dīn: Volume I consisting of an edition of the Arabic text of the manuscript, Volume II an English translation of the illustrated sections, and Volume III a series of studies by the two authors. Publication of the three volumes, by Edinburgh University Press, is tentatively planned for 2025, and is eagerly awaited.

Acknowledgements

May I express my thanks to Daryl Green and Lucy Deacon in the Centre for Research Collections in the University of Edinburgh Library, Robert and Carole Hillenbrand, and Steve Hillier, John Sutherland, and Tom Lea for their kind assistance, in different ways, with the composition of this article.

About the Author

Hugh Goddard is Honorary Professorial Fellow in the Alwaleed Centre for the Study of Islam in the Contemporary World, University of Edinburgh.

Editorial Note: Goddard, having recently met Hillenbrand at an academic conference before writing his modern commentary, was able to request a post-script fifty years after the publication of the 1974 article.

Post-Script from Robert Hillenbrand – Half a Century On

It is a curious experience to revisit one's published work after almost five decades. Happily, what I wrote about the Edinburgh fragment of Rashīd al-Dīn's *World History* in 1974 was designedly short and never meant to be more than an appetiser or curtain-raiser for the last book by David Talbot Rice, one of the great personalities of the University in the fifties and sixties. This was duly published by Edinburgh University Press, then under the dynamic leadership of Archie Turnbull, a man ferociously dedicated to the highest standards of publishing, who put the book into the hands of his top designer, George Mackie. And in the event, it was a prize-winning volume whose oblong shape was the perfect objective correlative to the format of most of the paintings of the fragment. The work profited from its excellent collotype illustrations and has held its own steadily ever since. As for my own article, I confess I have a soft spot for it—not as a piece of enduring scholarship, but as a memento of the instant attraction that I felt for this masterpiece, an attraction which the next fifty years would deepen into powerful respect, admiration, and knowledge beyond anything that I could have imagined back in 1974. Helped by the infectious enthusiasm which it has triggered among the many generations of undergraduates with whom I have been privileged to share that admiration, I have now reached, in partnership with my wife, the last stages of an ambitious three-volume project (edition, translation, and ancillary studies) funded by the Binks Trust on this fragment, for which Edinburgh University Press is the publisher of choice.

Robert Hillenbrand, FBA, FRSE
Professor Emeritus of Islamic Art,
University of Edinburgh

Notes

1. The Great Mongol Shāhnāma, <<https://www.greatmongolshahnama.com/>> [Accessed 30 May 2023].
2. J. A. Boyle, 'Rashīd Al-Din: The First World Historian', *Iran: the Journal of the British Institute of Persian Studies*, 9(1) (1971), pp. 19–26.
3. Ibid, p. 26.
4. Stefan Kamola, *Making Mongol History: Rashīd al-Dīn and the Jami' al-Tawarikh* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), pp. 183–208.
5. Ibid, pp. 209–271, with the Edinburgh fragment, the earliest surviving example in Arabic, being described on p. 246.
6. C. Hillenbrand & R. Hillenbrand, 'Ancient Iranian Kings in the World History of Rashīd al-Dīn', *Iran: the Journal of the British Institute of Persian Studies*, 56(1) (2018), pp. 34–46.
7. Kamola, p. 132.
8. Sheila Blair, *A Compendium of Chronicles: Rashīd al-Dīn's Illustrated History of the World* (London: Nour Foundation, 1995).
9. Ibid, pp. 116–118.
10. Manuscripts of the Islamic World and South Asia, <<https://tinyurl.com/UEGA51013>> [Accessed 30 May 2023].
11. Chronology of Ancient Nations, 1307 - Manuscripts of the Islamic World and South Asia, <<https://tinyurl.com/UEGA51011>> [Accessed 30 May 2023].
12. The World History of Rashīd al-Dīn, 1314. A Masterpiece of Islamic Painting, Library & University Collections, <<http://libraryblogs.is.ed.ac.uk/blog/2014/07/14/the-world-history-of-rashid-al-din-1314-a-masterpiece-of-islamic-painting/>> [Accessed 30 May 2023].
13. The Annual report of the Alwaleed Centre for 2014–2015, <https://www.ed.ac.uk/files/atoms/files/alwaleed_centre_annual_report_2015.pdf> [Accessed 30 May 2023], pp. 10–11.
14. Yuka Kadoi, 'Exhibiting "World History": the 700th Anniversary of Rashīd al-Dīn's Jami' al-Tawarikh', *Orientalism*, 45(7) (2014), pp. 56–62.
15. Sheila Blair, 'Illustrating History Rashīd al-Dīn and his Compendium of Chronicles', <<https://tinyurl.com/UEGA51014>> [Accessed 30 May 2023].
16. R. Hillenbrand, 'Stories of the Prophets in the Edinburgh World History of Rashīd al-Dīn', <<https://tinyurl.com/UEGA51012>> [Accessed 30 May 2023].
17. Christiane Gruber, *The Praiseworthy One: the Prophet Muhammad in Islamic Texts and Images* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018).
18. Ibid, p. 361.
19. 'Beyond Belief, Interview with Professor Christiane Gruber', BBC Radio 4, 30 August 2020 <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p08px6zz>> [Accessed 30 May 2023].

Images:

Page 11: Rakhsh impaled in a pit and Rustam shooting his half-brother Shaghād. Folio 17b, Rashīd al-Dīn's *Jami' al-tawarikh* (Compendium of Chronicles), University of Edinburgh Library, Or. Ms. 20. Image provided by the University of Edinburgh, Centre for Research Collections.



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The Editor of the *University of Edinburgh Journal* welcomes and encourages submissions from all corners of the University community, including students, alumni, staff, and friends of Edinburgh. Submissions can be scholarly in nature, dealing with a personal experience, a particular interest, or a piece of research, or they can be comprised of creative prose or poetry.

Contributors are also welcome to write reviews of books, films, theatre productions, or other media for inclusion in our reviews section. Our Editorial Team can normally secure review copies from publishers which the reviewer would be welcome to keep after publication.

There is no cost for submitting a piece of writing to the Editor, and all contributions will be seriously considered. Our Editorial Team will provide support and advice on the preparation of material and accompanying illustrations, and each author will receive a complimentary hard copy and PDF file of the issue which includes their published work.

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University of Edinburgh's Centre for Research Collections.

As Robert Hillenbrand writes in a 1974 issue of the *Journal*:
'It is difficult to overrate the importance of these miniatures as documents of
cultural history, iconography, and style.'



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