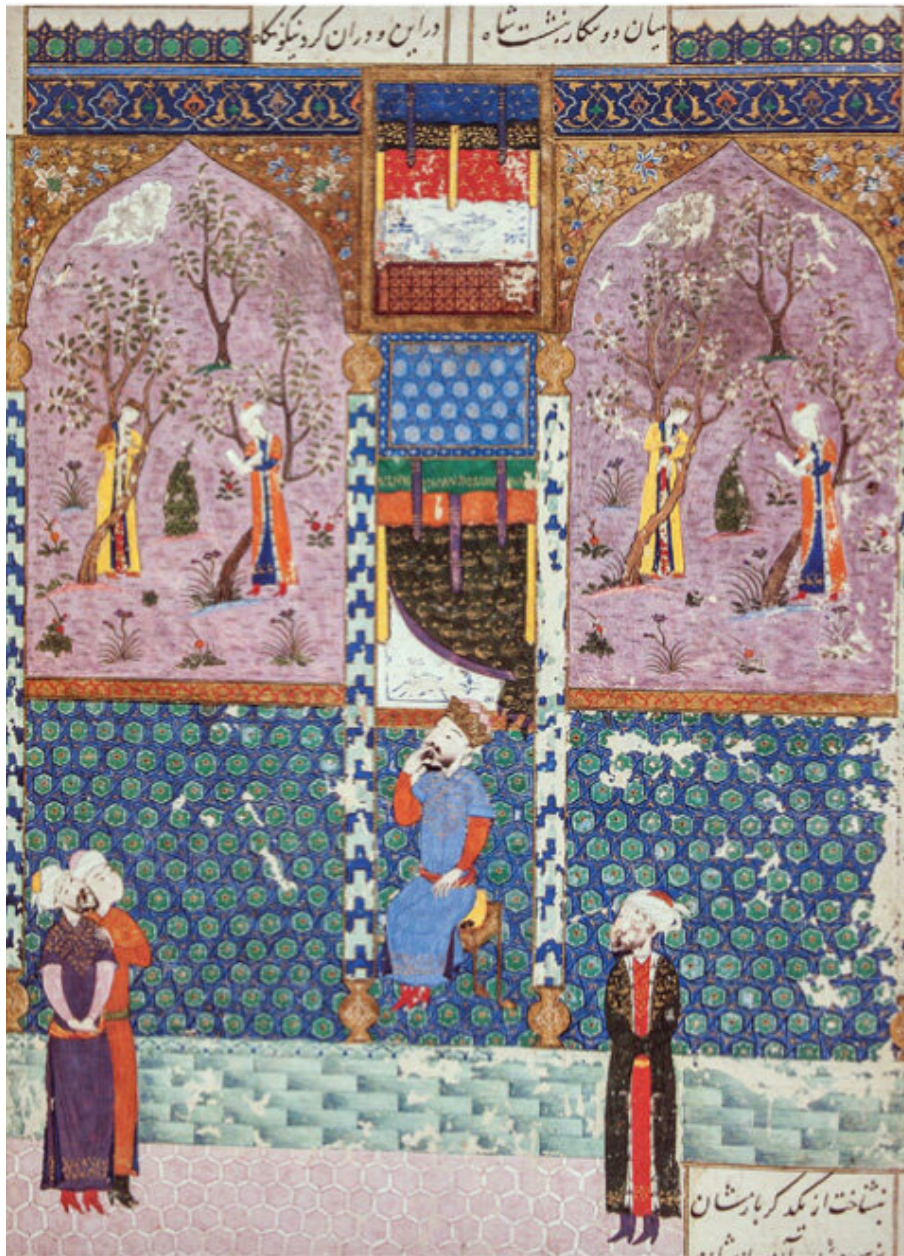


The Pavilion of Three Mirrors: Postscript

Han Mengyun



"Alexander judges between the Greek and Chinese painters"

Painting from a Khamsa of Nizami

ca. 1455-60, Turkmen

Topkapi Palace Museum, Istanbul

Introduction

Shown at the first Diriyah Biennale in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia in late 2021, artist Han Mengyun's work *The Pavilion of Three Mirrors* reflects a unique feature of this exhibition -- the conversation between China and Islam, one of the focuses of Han Mengyun's persistent exploration of transcultural dialogues in art. This new body of work is inspired by the famous story of the "Competition Between Two Painters" told in *Khamisa* by the 12th-century Persian poet Nizāmī Ganjavi.

The story goes that Alexander the Great, hearing that both the Romans and the Chinese were famous for their painting, wanted to see who was the best in the world. He summoned a Roman and a Chinese painter, who were then told to paint on two opposing walls in the king's hall. A curtain in the middle of the room prevented the two painters from seeing each other while working. At the end of the competition, Alexander lowered the curtain and was surprised to see two identical paintings. The Roman painter's work was splendid in its incredible realism and deceptively lifelike quality. However, the Chinese painter did not paint but had polished the entire wall into a mirror within which anything in the world could be reflected, including the Roman painting across the hall.

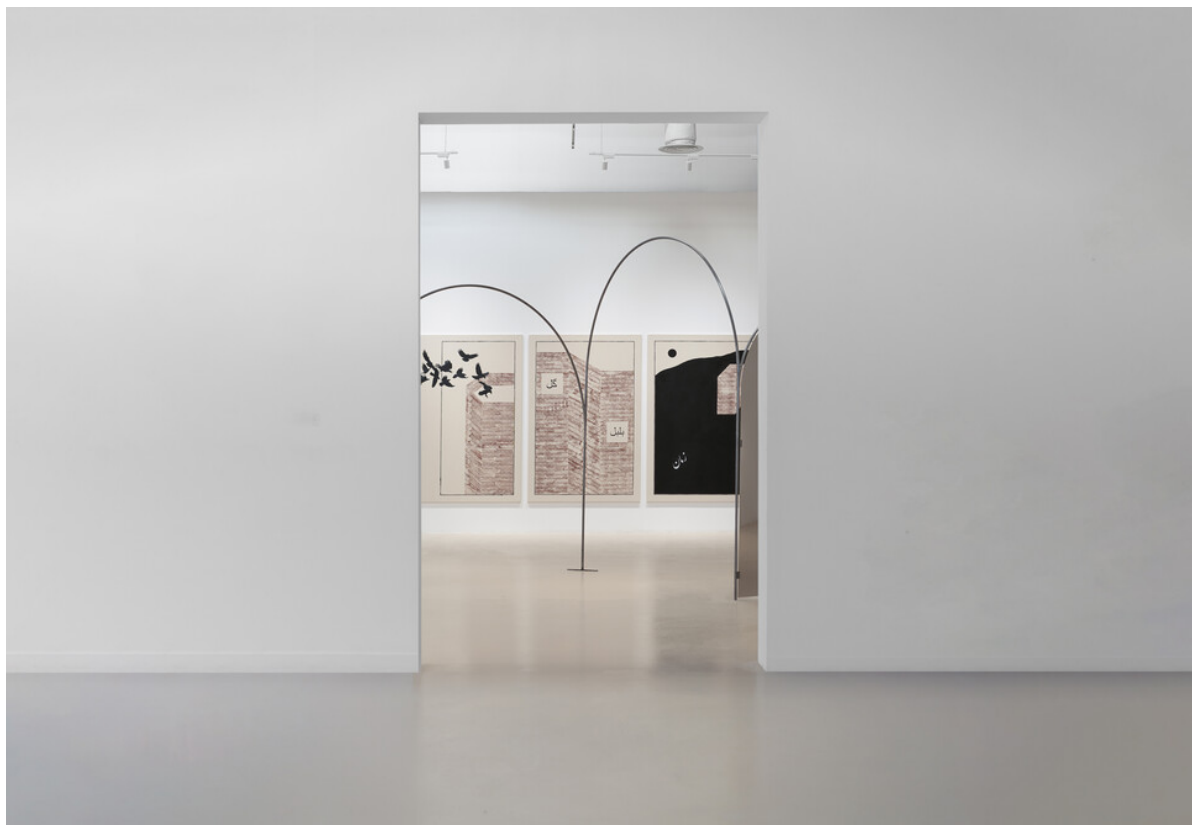
The installation is an abstract and poetic representation of the story as it enacts a site of cultural memory: the audience traverses the mirror vaults as if going between reality and illusion, history and mythology, while the paintings unfold like a manuscript, chapter by chapter, page by page, interweaving motifs, iconography and literary tropes across various ancient cultures.

Postscript

There are multiple versions of the story. I chose the version retold by Nizami, where the Chinese painter is the mirror polisher. The story itself contains many, many layers of meaning and possibility for interpretation; such is the nature of literature and poetry. While the story reveals the obvious layer of cultural communication in history, it also aims to unravel Sufi ideas of comparing the mirror to the mind. The polishing of the mirror is an act of

purifying the mind, which reflects God without distortion. Not only does the story contain references to Greek philosophy, it also has origins in Buddhist stories which made their way to Persia and went through phases of adaptation.

The more I research the story, the more extensive the influences become, and the “truth” about any individual culture becomes less clear as reality and imagination, history and mythology merge. In other words, there is no single original author of the story. It is ultimately a making of collective wisdom, cultures, philosophies, ideas, facilitated by various peoples in different times. It continued to expand and procure new and different meanings by way of people’ s retelling. One can also argue that no individual culture retains meaning and definition without the presence and influence of the other or others, and the reality of existence lies in those particular connections exemplified by this story.



Installation view of *The Pavilion of Three Mirrors*, Diriyah Biennale, 2021, Saudi Arabia © Han Mengyun