FROM A 16TH CENTURY PERSIAN MANUSCRIPT—a copy of the Shahnama, the great masterpiece of Firdausi, already described. This manuscript is written in an early form of Shekasteh Nasta’liq, which was to develop at a later period into the exquisite calligraphy that flourished, as it were, at the expense of Persian pictorial art. It was written for, and dedicated to, Amir Shal Jalal, one of the Mongol feudal kings of Persia, and bears the name of the calligrapher, Mohammed ibni Hassan, the Kateb, with the date A. H. 929 (A. D. 1520). The miniatures, which correspond to our text illustrations, were evidently the work of two master artists of the period. The delicacy and richness of coloring in this example are at once apparent, and no less striking is the stylized treatment of figures, landscapes or backgrounds, characteristics that are essentially decorative, particularly when compared with the work of contemporary western schools. "Among the many beautiful arts that were practised in certain famous cities of Eastern Asia", writes Percy Brown, "few attained a higher state of refinement than that of book illustrating. . . . The cities chiefly famed for those proficient in the painter’s craft were Baghdad, Basrah, and Wasit in the 13th and 14th Centuries, Samarqand, Bukhara and Herat in the 15th Century, and Tabriz, Kazvin, Ispahan, and Shiraz in the 16th Century. This art of illustration, which was distributed over a wide area, has been generally described by modern European writers as 'Persian painting'". Recent researches in Central Asia reveal a close connection between the pictorial art of Persia and the Indo-Hellenistic art known as the Gandhara school, which, with Hindu culture, spread into Turkestan, and thence Eastward to China and West to Persia. Turkestan naturally received counter influences from both these lands, which are very evident in her later art, and thus became a medium of exchange, so to speak, whereby Persia eventually influenced China, and vice versa. But Persia was at the same time under strong Western traditions, from her direct contact with the Hellenistic world; and Byzantine, Syrian, and Alexandrine influences are almost equally apparent in the art of her different schools and periods.
Persian Miniatures from the Shahnama

A collection of miniatures of various sizes surrounded by the written text, from a Sixteenth Century copy of the Shahnama. (For a description of this Persian epic see below.) This manuscript was written for and dedicated to Amir Shah Jalal, one of the Mongol feudal kings of Persia. The final page (in ORIENTALIA'S possession) bears the name of the calligrapher, Mohammad ibni Hassan, the Kateb, with the date 929 A. H. (A. D. 1520). The miniatures are by two different painters, both of whom worked in the heroic style. As the Shahnama embraces 3,600 years, a large portion of which is purely mythical, it is natural that mythological characters, such as Rustam, blend with historical personages, such as Darius and Alexander the Great. These mythical figures, including demons, dragons, and other monsters, recur constantly throughout the historical period, and must not mislead one into supposing that each scene, where such superhuman beings are pictured, is necessarily prehistoric. In the descriptions, owing to a lack of minute familiarity with the text, we have not attempted to name or classify these historic or mythical characters, but any Iranian scholar, with the assistance of the text accompanying each miniature, can probably work out the exact event and the principal characters involved. These miniatures include many fine examples, a few retouched in places, the majority with scarcely a blemish, and unusually fresh considering the four centuries that have elapsed since their execution. The place of origin was Turkestan, probably Bokhara. Since every leaf shows at least a portion of the script it may be added that this is an early form of Shekasteh Nasta'liq, which was to develop at a later period into the exquisite calligraphy that flourished, as it were, at the expense of Persian pictorial art. The border surrounding each leaf measures 9¾ x 6¾ inches, although here and there it is extended to permit a miniature to project into the margin. Where this occurs the cream mat surmounting the page is cut to match the irregularity. The outside measurement of mounts and mats is 16 x 12 inches, a convenient size for framing. The size of each separate miniature as distinct from the whole leaf is indicated below, following its description. The prices charged for these authentic miniatures are exceptionally low. Indeed, we had difficulty in preventing them falling into the hands of enthusiastic Oriental dealers, and tremble to think what the latter might have charged had we yielded to their seductions.

THE WARNER TRANSLATION OF FIRDAUSI

As described in Orientalia Catalogue No. 41, Item 303:

The Shahnama of Firdausi, done into English by Arthur George Warner and Edmond Warner. The first volume of this gigantic work was published just twenty years ago, but the task had been started twenty years before that. Arthur George Warner, a noted Semitic scholar, died while the translation was in progress, but his brother has continued the work until it has now been happily brought to completion. It will scarcely be necessary to explain to anyone inclined to possess himself of this nine volume work that Firdausi was a great Persian poet who lived in the 10th and 11th centuries and finished the Shahnama, his chief work, about the year 1010. He has been likened to Homer, but the two poet-chroniclers were as different in their methods as it was possible to be, Firdausi's masterpiece being quite loose in structure, with innumerable personal references and egotistical digressions. Yet it embraces the whole mythological history of the Iranians and celebrates the achievements of their kings and rulers from earliest times to the invasion of the Saracens, a period of more than 3,600 years. Needless to say there are historical and critical introductions, notes and commentaries on each division of the poem and besides the index to each volume, a general index in Volume IX, that occupies more than half the book. In nine volumes, 8vo., cloth, London, 1905-25............................$32.50