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Culture and Art in the Timurid Period: An Analysis of Selected Monshā'āt Texts

Timurlu Döneminde Kültür ve Sanat: Seçilmiş Münşe'ât Metinlerinin Bir Analizi

Abstract

This article investigates the cultural and artistic dimensions of the Timurid period through a close analysis of monshā'āt—collections of official correspondence, decrees, and letters. While these texts have often been studied for their political and administrative value, their potential as sources for cultural and social history has been largely neglected. The study adopts a descriptive and thematic content analysis of three major monshā'āt compilations: Khwāfī's *Mansha' al-Inshā*, Shahab Munshī's *Humāyūn Nāme*, and Abdollah Morvārid Kirmānī's *Sharafnameh*. From these documents, references to authors, scholars, heroes, painters, musicians, and craftsmen were identified, categorized, and contextualized.

The findings reveal a vibrant cultural landscape in which rulers and ministers consistently promoted literature, honored scholars, institutionalized guilds, and supported music and the visual arts. These insights not only highlight the ideological significance of cultural patronage in legitimizing Timurid authority but also shed light on the institutional frameworks that sustained artistic life in Herat and Samarkand. By systematically extracting implicit and explicit cultural references, this research expands the scope of Timurid studies, demonstrating the value of documentary sources for reconstructing dimensions of everyday and intellectual life. The article ultimately argues that monshā'āt provide a vital yet underutilized perspective that complements narrative chronicles and material evidence, thereby contributing to broader debates in Islamic cultural and social history.

Keywords: Timurids, Monshā'āt Documents, Cultural and Art History, Social History

Öz

Bu makale, Timur döneminin kültürel ve sanatsal boyutlarını, münşe'ât (resmî yazışmalar, fermanlar ve mektuplar derlemeleri) üzerinden ayrıntılı bir biçimde incelemektedir. Bu metinler genellikle siyasal ve idarî değerleri açısından ele alınmış olsa da, kültürel ve sosyal tarih açısından potansiyelleri büyük ölçüde göz ardı edilmiştir. Çalışma, üç önemli münşe'ât derlemesinin betimleyici ve tematik içerik analizine dayanmaktadır: Hwāfī'nin *Mansha' al-Inshā* adlı eseri, Şehab Münşī'nin *Humāyūn Nāme*si ve Abdollah Morvārid Kirmānī'nin *Şerefname*si. Bu belgelerdeki yazarlar, âlimler, kahramanlar, ressamalar, müzisyenler ve zanaatkârlara yapılan atıflar belirlenmiş, sınıflandırılmış ve bağlamsal olarak değerlendirilmiştir.

Bulgular, hükümdarların ve vezirlerin sürekli olarak edebiyatı teşvik ettiği, âlimleri onurlandırdığı, loncaları kurumsallaştırdığı ve müzik ile görsel sanatları desteklediği canlı bir kültürel ortamı ortaya koymaktadır. Bu gözlemler, kültürel himayenin Timurî otoritenin meşrulaştırılmasındaki ideolojik önemini vurgulamakta; ayrıca Herat ve Semerkand'daki sanatsal yaşamı sürdüren kurumsal yapılara ışık tutmaktadır. Açık ve örtük kültürel göndermeleri sistematik biçimde ortaya çıkararak, bu araştırma Timurî çalışmalarının kapsamını genişletmekte ve belgelerin gündelik ve entelektüel yaşamın yeniden inşasında ne kadar değerli kaynaklar olabileceğini göstermektedir. Sonuç olarak makale, münşe'âtın anlatı kronikleri ve maddî kanıtları tamamlayan, ancak yeterince kullanılmamış temel bir bakış açısı sunduğunu savunmakta ve böylece İslam kültür ve sosyal tarihi alanındaki genel tartışmalara katkı sağlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Timurlular, Münşe'ât Belgeleri, Kültür ve Sanat Tarihi, Sosyal Tarih

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Introduction

The Timurid Empire (1370–1507) occupies a distinctive position in the history of the Islamic world, not only for its military conquests and dynastic politics but also for the remarkable cultural and artistic florescence that unfolded under its rule. From Timur's establishment of Samarkand as a political and symbolic capital to the later transformation of Herat into a leading intellectual and artistic center, the Timurid court and its elite circles consciously fashioned an environment in which art, literature, and scholarship became central to expressions of power and legitimacy. While narrative chronicles and surviving monuments have long been recognized as evidence of this cultural efflorescence, less attention has been given to the role of documentary sources—particularly *monshā'āt* (collections of official correspondence, decrees, and charters)—in reconstructing the contours of Timurid cultural life.

Monshā'āt collections emerged as a widespread literary-administrative practice in the post-Mongol Islamic world and reached their peak under the Timurids. These compilations typically contain royal letters, decrees, petitions, and official communications, reflecting both the stylistic refinement of chancery culture and the ideological imperatives of the ruling elite¹. Scholars have traditionally approached *monshā'āt* for their value in political and institutional history, focusing on administrative structures or diplomatic exchanges. Yet the same texts also contain rich and often overlooked evidence of patronage, cultural institutions, artistic production, and intellectual life. Systematically analyzing these sources offers an opportunity to broaden the scope of Timurid studies by uncovering aspects of social and cultural history that remain marginal in conventional historiography.

The present article addresses this gap by examining cultural and artistic references in three major *monshā'āt* compilations: Khwāfī's *Mansha' al-Inshā'*, Shahab Munshī's *Humāyūn Nāmeḥ*, and Abdollah Morvārid Kirmānī's *Sharafnameḥ*. Through descriptive and thematic content analysis, the study categorizes and contextualizes decrees and letters that praise authors, honor scholars, regulate guilds, or commend artists and musicians. This approach allows for the identification of both explicit and implicit cultural narratives embedded in bureaucratic texts. By doing so, the article not only enriches our understanding of Timurid cultural patronage but also demonstrates the methodological potential of *monshā'āt* for social and cultural history.

In addition to filling a lacuna in the scholarship on Timurid history, the study contributes to broader historiographical debates on the use of documentary sources in Islamic studies. Just as chancery records have been pivotal for reconstructing the social and cultural worlds of the Mamluks or Ottomans, so too can Timurid *monshā'āt* illuminate the nexus between governance, ideology, and cultural production. Ultimately, this article argues that a systematic analysis of *monshā'āt* reveals the extent to which art, literature, and scholarship were integrated into the political culture of the Timurid state, offering new insights into the relationship between power and cultural expression in late medieval Islamic societies.

Methodology

This study is based on a descriptive and thematic content analysis of selected Timurid *monshā'āt* texts. The primary source corpus comprises three major compilations. Published in modern critical editions, these collections represent the richest surviving documentary sources of the Timurid period.

Selection Criteria: The study focused on documents that contained direct or indirect references to culture, art, literature, or intellectual life. Within the broader corpus, particular attention was given to decrees praising authors, edicts honoring scholars, charters regulating guilds, and documents recording artistic achievements. The chronological framework spans from Timur's reign in the late 14th century to the rule of Sultan Ḥusayn Bāyqarā in the late 15th century, thus enabling a comparative perspective on continuities and transformations across successive rulers.

Analytical Procedure: The research proceeded in three stages: (1) close reading of documents in the selected editions, (2) systematic extraction of cultural and artistic references, and (3) thematic categorization of findings into six domains: (a) praise of authors, (b) honoring scholars, (c) heroism and storytelling, (d) miniature painting, (e) music, and (f) handicrafts. Each thematic category was subsequently contextualized through engagement with secondary scholarship on Timurid culture and social history.

Methodological Approach: The approach is qualitative and interpretive. Rather than quantifying references, the aim is to illustrate the diversity and significance of cultural themes found within *monshā'āt*.

Limitations: The study is not without limitations. The official character of these documents inevitably reflects elite perspectives, while the lack of precise dating in some texts constrains chronological precision. Nonetheless, when read systematically, *monshā'āt* provide a valuable complement to narrative chronicles and material culture, offering a more

¹ 'Alī, Safari Agh Qalā, *Codicology* (Tehran: Miras-e Maktub Publications, 2011), 16.

comprehensive understanding of Timurid cultural history.

Findings

The analysis of the selected monshā'āt revealed a diverse set of references that illuminate the cultural and artistic life of the Timurid world. These findings may be grouped into six thematic domains, each highlighting different aspects of patronage, intellectual engagement, and artistic production.

Praise of Books and Authors

Several decrees demonstrate the court's active encouragement of literary production. Among the most significant is a decree praising Mawlānā Nūr al-Ḥaqq 'Abd al-Raḥmān Nūrā and his celebrated work Bahārestān, which was ordered to be read repeatedly in elite gatherings². Another decree granted generous rewards, including one hundred thousand kapaki dinars, to the vizier and poet Amīr 'Alī Shīr Navā'ī for presenting a Turkic poetry dīwān to Sultan Ḥusayn Bāyqarā. These examples highlight the dual function of literature as both a source of prestige and a medium for cultivating dynastic legitimacy³.

Honoring Scholars and Intellectuals

The monshā'āt contain evidence of the recognition accorded to scholars and specialists across various disciplines. For example, a decree honored the surgeon Mawlānā Ḥājī 'Alā' al-Dīn Jarrāḥ, lauding his innovations in surgery and ophthalmology, while appointing him as the head of the surgeons' guild⁴. Another entrusted the administration of the Dār al-Shifā' Malikat Āghā to the physician Ḥakīm Masīḥ al-Dīn Ḥabīb Allāh⁵. Tax exemption decrees further demonstrate how scholars, artists, and intellectuals were symbolically and materially elevated within Timurid society.

Heroism and Storytelling (Pahlavānī and Naqqālī)

References to heroic figures underscore the cultural resonance of chivalric values. Pahlavān Darvīsh Muḥammad is mentioned in no fewer than six letters, reflecting his elevated social status and influence⁶. Likewise, Pahlavān Mubāriz al-Dīn Shaykh 'Alī Kamandar was praised for his skill in archery and his loyalty to the state⁷. Alongside martial heroism, the monshā'āt also allude to the popularity of entertainment forms such as storytelling (naqqālī) and performance, which—though sometimes socially marginal—were occasionally granted recognition by the court⁸.

Miniature Painting and Calligraphy

The flourishing of miniature painting is reflected in decrees acknowledging the contributions of artists brought from Tabriz, Baghdad, and Iran to Samarkand and later to Herat⁹. Among the most prominent was Mawlānā Naṣer al-Dīn Maṣṣūr, celebrated for his delicate brushwork and also skilled in calligraphy, who was appointed head of court artists. The training of apprentices, such as Kamāl al-Dīn Behzād, further illustrates the institutionalized support for the arts. Such references correspond with material evidence like the Shāhnāmeḥ of Baysunghur, affirming the centrality of book arts to Timurid cultural identity.

Music and Musicianship

Music occupied a privileged place in Timurid cultural life. Timur himself is recorded as having summoned musicians even during political and military assemblies¹⁰. Under Shāhrukh, musical norms became formalized, reaching their zenith during

² Shihāb al-Dīn 'Abdullāh Morvārid Kermānī, *Mansha'āt of 'Abdullāh Morvārid (Sharafnameh)*, ed. Asra al-Sadat Ahmadi (Tehran: Library, Museum, and Documentation Center of the Islamic Consultative Assembly, 2019), 160.

³ Abū al-Qāsim Shihāb al-Dīn Aḥmad Khwāfī, *Mansha' al-Inshā'*, ed. Rokn al-Dīn Ḥomāyounfarrokh (Tehran: National University Press, 1978), 207.

⁴ Khwāfī, *Mansha' al-Inshā'*, 264.

⁵ Khwāfī, *Mansha' al-Inshā'*, 281.

⁶ Shihāb al-Dīn 'Abdullāh Morvārid Kermānī, *Mansha'āt of 'Abdullāh Morvārid (Sharafnameh)*, 202, 203, 205, 209, 210, 212.

⁷ Khwāfī, *Mansha' al-Inshā'*, 254.

⁸ Khwāfī, *Mansha' al-Inshā'*, 250.

⁹ Valiollah Kavousi, *The Sword and the Tanbur* (Tehran: Matn Institute for Compilation, Translation, and Publication of Artistic Works, 2010), 303.

¹⁰ Kavousi, *The Sword and the Tanbur*, 57.

the reign of Sultan Ḥusayn Bāyqarā¹¹. Figures such as Ostad Gul Muḥammad Qājāki were honored with tax exemptions and described as paragons of wisdom and artistry¹², while women musicians like Khurshīd Khānum Bazm Ārā are noted for their prominence¹³. The documents further reveal that some musicians, such as Mawlānā Khāja Kamāl al-Dīn ‘Ūdī, received official protection while traveling on pilgrimage, demonstrating the nuanced relationship between music, religion, and state patronage¹⁴.

Handicrafts and Guilds

The monshā’āt also shed light on craftsmanship and artisanal guilds. Decrees reference textile weavers, carpet makers, shoemakers, and furriers, acknowledging their artistry and conferring leadership roles. For instance, Ustad Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad was praised for innovations in weaving Urmuk fabric¹⁵, while Ustad ‘Alī Shāh, a renowned carpet weaver, received official commendation with technical terms of his craft explicitly recorded¹⁶. These examples reflect both the economic importance of crafts and the symbolic role of artisans in expressing Timurid cultural identity.

Discussion

The findings drawn from the analysis of Timurid monshā’āt invite several levels of interpretation that extend beyond descriptive categorization. They highlight the multi-faceted nature of cultural production under the Timurids, situate this within broader Islamic and comparative frameworks, and point to the methodological value of documentary sources for cultural and social history.

Patronage as Ideological Performance

The consistent praise of authors, poets, and musicians in the documents underscores the ideological centrality of cultural patronage for Timurid legitimacy. As Beatrice Manz and Maria Subtelny have noted in their broader studies of Timurid rule, cultural magnificence was not a by-product but rather a deliberate instrument of dynastic authority¹⁷. The decrees in which Nūr al-Ḥaqq’s Bahārestān was elevated or in which Navā’ī’s poetry was rewarded with immense sums are illustrative of a performative dimension: literature was woven into the very fabric of political symbolism. In comparison, the Mamluk chancery produced extensive documents, but cultural references were often subordinated to religious legitimation through juristic endorsements. The Timurids, by contrast, foregrounded artistic and intellectual achievements, making patronage itself an act of governance.

The Scholar and the State: Medical and Intellectual Authority

The honoring of surgeons, physicians, and teachers demonstrates the embeddedness of scholarly authority within the political order. Appointing Ḥājji ‘Alā’ al-Dīn Jarrāḥ as head of the guild of surgeons not only institutionalized medical practice but also tied intellectual authority to state power. In Ottoman parallels, the rise of court physicians such as Sabuncuoğlu Şerefeddin in the 15th century shows a similar integration of medical expertise into political structures. What distinguishes the Timurid case, however, is the breadth of professions recognized: from jurists and scholars to artisans and storytellers. This inclusiveness reflects the dynamic interplay of elite ideology with popular cultural forms.

Heroism and Public Morality

The repeated references to pahlavāns point to the social significance of martial and chivalric ideals. Figures such as Darvīsh Muḥammad embodied values of bravery, loyalty, and generosity, resonating with both the populace and urban elites. The cultural visibility of these figures in official decrees suggests that rulers recognized their symbolic capital and sought to appropriate it. Similar processes can be observed in contemporary Anatolia, where the Akhī brotherhoods combined martial, religious, and moral authority. The Timurid monshā’āt thus document how states could co-opt semi-popular heroes to

¹¹ (Kavousi, *The Sword and the Tanbur*, 57-61.

¹² Shihāb al-Dīn ‘Abdullāh Morvārid Kermānī, *Mansha’āt of ‘Abdullāh Morvārid (Sharafnameh)*, 128-131.

¹³ Kavousi, *The Sword and the Tanbur*, 69.

¹⁴ Khwāfī, *Mansha’ al-Inshā’*, 156.

¹⁵ Khwāfī, *Mansha’ al-Inshā’*, 255.

¹⁶ Khwāfī, *Mansha’ al-Inshā’*, 267.

¹⁷ Beatrice Manz, *Power, Politics and Religion in Timurid Iran* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), 56-66; Maria Subtelny, *Timurid in Transition: Turko-Persian Politics and Acculturation in Medieval Iran* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 122-117.

reinforce moral legitimacy.

The Arts of the Book: Miniature and Calligraphy

The flourishing of miniature painting under the Timurids has long been recognized through art historical analysis of manuscripts such as the *Shāhnāme* of Baysunghur. The documents provide a complementary perspective by recording the names of artists and their institutional roles. The mention of Naṣīr al-Dīn Maṣṣūr and the elevation of Behzād highlight how individual mastery was acknowledged by the chancery. Such recognition implies that artistic production was not only appreciated aesthetically but was also structurally integrated into the political order through guild leaderships and appointments. In this respect, Timurid practice paralleled but also exceeded earlier Jalayirid traditions, institutionalizing art as part of bureaucratic culture¹⁸.

Music between Devotion and Suspicion

Music occupies a particularly revealing position. The enthusiasm of Timur, Shāhrukh, and Ḥusayn Bāyqarā for music stands in tension with broader Islamic discourses in which music was often contested or morally ambivalent. The protection granted to Khāja Kamāl al-Dīn ‘Udī on his pilgrimage illustrates this tension: music was tolerated, even celebrated, yet framed as requiring cautious legitimation. By granting tax exemptions and ceremonial honors to musicians, the Timurid court positioned music as a pillar of courtly magnificence¹⁹. Comparisons with Ottoman and Safavid practices reveal both continuity and divergence: while all three dynasties invested heavily in music, the Timurid case shows a distinctive readiness to codify musicianship in administrative documents.

Craftsmen, Guilds, and Economic Culture

Perhaps the most striking finding is the recognition of artisans—carpet weavers, shoemakers, furriers—not simply as economic actors but as cultural agents. The recording of technical terminology in decrees, such as types of fabrics or carpets, suggests that chancery scribes possessed (or intentionally displayed) detailed knowledge of artisanal practices. This was more than bureaucratic precision; it was a deliberate affirmation of craftsmanship as integral to Timurid prestige. The conferral of leadership titles to masters such as Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad reflects the institutionalization of guilds. Here the Timurid case can be contrasted with Ottoman *gedik* institutions or Mamluk craft regulations: while the latter emphasized market control²⁰, the Timurid decrees reveal an additional symbolic dimension—crafts as embodiments of cultural glory.

Methodological Implications

These findings affirm the utility of *monshā’āt* as a primary source for cultural history. Their official nature means they inevitably reflect elite ideology, yet precisely for this reason they illuminate how rulers framed cultural production as an extension of power. By reading bureaucratic documents against the grain, historians can recover dimensions of social history otherwise inaccessible. For Timurid studies, this represents a significant broadening of source material beyond chronicles and architectural remains. More broadly, the approach advocates for the inclusion of chancery texts in the comparative study of Islamic cultural history, alongside narrative, material, and visual sources.

Contribution to Historiography

This study contributes in two ways. First, it offers a thematic categorization of cultural references within Timurid *monshā’āt*, creating a framework for future research. Second, it situates the Timurids within wider patterns of Islamic cultural politics, showing how their patronage practices paralleled, diverged from, and at times exceeded those of neighboring polities. In doing so, it challenges the conventional perception of the Timurids as primarily military rulers, instead presenting them as active architects of cultural flourishing.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that Timurid *monshā’āt*—often overlooked in cultural and social history—constitute a valuable corpus for understanding the ideological, institutional, and symbolic dimensions of art and culture in the late medieval Islamic world. By systematically examining decrees and letters that praise poets, honor scholars, institutionalize

¹⁸ Kavousi, *The Sword and the Tanbur*, 317-325.

¹⁹ Khwāfī, *Mansha’ al-Inshā’*, 156.

²⁰ Suraiya Faroqhi, *Artisans of Empire: Crafts and Craftspeople under the Ottomans* (I. B. Tauris, 2009), 45-52.

guilds, and celebrate musicians and artisans, the analysis has revealed how cultural patronage was interwoven with political legitimacy.

The findings underscore three broader conclusions. First, the Timurids consciously positioned cultural production at the center of their political project. Literature, music, miniature painting, and craftsmanship were not peripheral but integral to articulations of dynastic magnificence and authority. Second, the documents reflect the permeability of boundaries between elite ideology and popular cultural practices, as seen in the recognition of pahlavāns, storytellers, and guild leaders. Third, the monshā'āt illustrate the institutionalization of artistic and intellectual life: from the appointment of guild masters to the exemption of musicians from taxation, the state actively codified cultural authority within its bureaucratic framework.

Methodologically, the article highlights the potential of chancery sources to enrich cultural historiography. While narrative chronicles and monumental architecture provide indispensable insights, documentary evidence such as monshā'āt captures the administrative codification of culture and thus reveals how art and scholarship were framed by the state itself. By integrating these sources into the broader study of Islamic societies, historians can arrive at a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of cultural politics.

In conclusion, the analysis of Timurid monshā'āt confirms that the Timurids were not only conquerors but also patrons and architects of one of the most vibrant cultural and artistic milieus of the late medieval Islamic world. The evidence presented here affirms the central role of cultural patronage in consolidating political legitimacy and provides a framework for further comparative research across Islamic dynasties, from the Mamluks and Ottomans to the Safavids and Mughals.

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