Seven centuries ago, when the great caravans journeyed to the edges of the world, there lived a girl who loved all things of beauty.

Her name was Goharshad.

This is the extraordinary story of Queen Goharshad, a 15th-century monarch, who many historians now believe was one of the most powerful women in world history. Ruling from the Timurid artistic and cultural center of Herat in western Afghanistan, Queen Goharshad ushered in a period when poetry, music, calligraphy, painting, and the sciences flourished as never before. A poet and an architect, she designed some of the most beautiful structures ever built on earth.

This story is a celebration of a remarkable woman—talented, generous, benevolent, and brave—whose achievements are an inspiration for young readers to use their strengths to make the world a more beautiful place.
Brave with Beauty: A Story of Afghanistan is historical fiction, but the narrative is constructed using documented facts about the Timurid Era and Queen Goharshad’s architectural legacy—some of which still stands in Mashhad in Iran and Herat in Afghanistan.

The illustrations and book layout pay homage to illuminated manuscripts, an art that reached a high point of refinement under the Timurids.

Selected References and Further Reading:

Goharshad’s achievements and legacy:


The Mosque of the Old Woman in Mashhad:

A History of Persia, Sir Percy Molesworth Sykes, Volume 2, Macmillan and Co., 1921

Art of the Timurids:


Paradise as a Garden: In Persian and Mughal India, Elizabeth B. Moynihan, George Braziller, 1979

History of the Timurids and Afghanistan:


Queen Goharshad (also spelled as Gawhar Shad or Gauhar Shad) was a generous patron of the arts, but her bravery stemmed from the fact that she was a woman. It was audacious at the time for female rulers to commission grand buildings, particularly Friday mosques: influential institutions of religious and political power. Goharshad went one step ahead to patronize the building of two Friday mosques—one in Mashhad and one in Herat—a feat that has been rarely, if ever, repeated in history. Her greatest achievement was the building of the Goharshad Musalla Complex in Herat, a grand vision of bold architecture and glorious use of color that took over twenty years to design and erect. Her name remains forever enjoined with this epitome of beauty.

Today, a Goharshad International Award is given in Iran to ‘benevolent women of monotheistic religions’—those who embody the spirit of the medieval Queen in the modern fields of science, education and research, construction, medicine, management and entrepreneurship.

**Topics for classroom discussion**

1. When you think of a ‘queen’ or ‘princess’, what kind of image does it conjure up? What do you imagine she does with her time? What is her role in society?

2. As a woman and female ruler, what kinds of opposition do you imagine Queen Goharshad might have encountered? Why do you think she was ‘brave’?

**Suggested Activity**

Can you think of ways to be ‘brave with beauty’ in your own neighborhood, school, town, or city? What would you do and why would you have to be brave to achieve it? Present your ideas to the class.

**Sources and Further Reading**

1. Afghanistan’s Islam: From Conversion to the Taliban, edited by Nile Green, University of California Press, 2017


Queen Goharshad’s vision was brought to life through the talent of one of the greatest architects of the Islamic world: Qavam al-Din Shirazi. And though he humbly called himself a tayyan or mason, he designed buildings that were so distinctive in their style—ingeniously engineered and decorated with a flair for color and ornamentation—that he inspired many centuries of rulers across Asia to emulate his work. A great army of workers and artisans painstakingly created the different elements of these masterpieces of architecture, but one craft stood out for its skill: tile making. Buildings, such as mosques, were decorated with jewel-like tiles and the master craftsmen who made these ceramic pieces employed intricate pottery techniques to dazzle the eye of the onlooker.

Underlying their craftsmanship is the art of creating mathematically-precise patterns. Timurid (and Islamic, in general) ornamentation relied heavily on geometry and all motifs were plotted on grids and expanded using the principle of tessellation, or repeating a pattern to create a larger panel. By adding floral elements and calligraphy to these geometrical designs, these master craftsmen ensured that not only was each tile eye-catching, but when placed in a pattern with hundreds of other tiles, their beauty approaches the sublime.

Suggested Activity

Create your own tile pattern in the manner of the great craftsmen of Herat!

All you need are a sheet of paper, a regular pencil, a ruler, and a colored pencil. Downloadable templates can be found at the School of Islamic Geometric Design (www.sigd.org). Print one out and follow their guidelines to create a design that is both challenging to make and beautiful to behold when complete.

Sources and Further Reading

1. The Great Builders, K Powell, Thames & Hudson, 2011

2. The Art of the Timurid Period (ca. 1370–1507), Suzan Yalman, based on original work by Linda Komaroff, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

3. Islamic Geometric Patterns: Their Historical Development and Traditional Methods of Construction, Jay Bonner, Springer, 2017
Afghanistan is often referred to as being at the ‘crossroads of Asia’; it has historically served as a link between many different cultures and civilizations. This exchange of goods, technology, and ideas, has given Afghanistan a rich and diverse history spanning thousands of years. Even in ancient times, this landlocked nation traded with the great civilizations of Egypt, Indus Valley, and Mesopotamia. And from the very outset, one of the most sought-after items from Afghanistan was lapis lazuli, a striking deep blue gemstone, mined in some of the most remote and forbidding areas of the Hindu Kush Mountains.

Lapis lazuli is a metamorphic rock, not a mineral like most other gemstones. Its brilliant color is derived from the presence of the mineral lazurite. Most rocks also contain pyrite, or fool’s gold, that appear like tiny star-like specks in a sea of deep blue. Lapis lazuli stones have been made into jewelry and other ornaments and were even used to decorate the funeral mask of the pharaoh Tutankhamun. Thousands of years later, in medieval Europe lapis dust was used as the pigment ultramarine, and painters reserved this very expensive color for the robes of the Virgin Mary.

Afghanistan is still the world’s leading source of this unique gemstone. Today, however, the mines are largely controlled by warlords and illegal militia groups. In recent years, Afghani government officials are trying to classify lapis lazuli as a ‘conflict mineral’ to regulate its trade and ensure that the wealth derived from the sale of this valuable gemstone is used to rebuild Afghanistan.

Suggested Activity

1. Lapis lazuli is one of the most counterfeited gemstones due to its rarity. Obtain samples of ‘lapis lazuli’ online and observe each specimen carefully. Can you spot a fake? For help, refer Gemological Institute of America’s quality factors for genuine lapis.

2. What are some of the natural ways to create pigments and dyes? Raid the spice cabinet or vegetable drawer at home or try looking outdoors for colors in nature that could be used to create art.

Sources and Further Reading


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