



Today's Masterpiece: [*Moses' staff becomes a serpent and devours Pharaoh's followers.*](#) Page from a dispersed the *Qisas al-anbiya'* (Tales of the Prophets). India or Iran. Ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on paper. Edwin Binney 3rd Collection, 1990.259.



Welcome back to **Masterpiece Minute at Virtual SDMA**. This is your host, **Hannah Hyden**, Research Assistant for South Asian and Islamic Art at The San Diego Museum of Art. Drop in each month to hear a new mini talk led by SDMA curators or guests focusing on works from the Museum's collection.

Today's episode explores a startling scene featuring a giant serpent swallowing a person whole, as onlookers and demons stand by in amazement. This painting from an Arabic manuscript of the *Qisas al-anbiya'*, or Tales of the Prophets, was most likely produced in India in the late 16th or early 17th century. It depicts the biblical story of the duel between the prophet Moses and the Pharaoh's sorcerers.

In the first centuries of Islam, several texts were written in Arabic under the title *Qisas al-anbiya'*. Among these works, at least five were translated or rewritten in Persian. The stories included in them were collected from the Qur'an and oral tradition, but also drew upon Jewish and Christian scriptures and historical sources. The texts describe the miraculous deeds of the prophets from Adam to Muhammad and the early Caliphs.

Illustrated books of the *Qisas al-anbiya'* flourished in 16th-century Iran, Ottoman *Turkiye* and the Muslim sultanates of the Deccan in southern India. By far, the most popular *Qisas al-anbiya'* text for illustration was that of the 11th-century Persian scholar Ahmad ibn Ibrahim Naysaburi, whose moralizing tone sought to encourage piety and provide ethical guidance to readers. In Naysaburi's version of the story, Moses is called to a duel by the Pharaoh of Egypt, who sends for his seven thousand sorcerers to challenge the prophet. In our illustration, the pharaoh, accompanied by an attendant, sits on his throne and raises his arm in amazement. To the right, we see Moses with a figure standing beside him, likely his brother Aaron. A closer look reveals the prophet's body was painted over some time after the painting was completed, likely out of respect for his holy status. His fiery halo was later expanded to cover his face as well. By illustrating the miracles of God's prophets as recounted in *Qisas al-anbiya'* manuscripts, paintings such as this sought to communicate the wondrous power of the divine.

In both the Jewish and Islamic traditions, the moment in which Moses' serpent swallows the servants of Pharaoh demonstrates the greatness of God's power in comparison to that of the king, foreshadowing the ruler's ultimate demise. In the Persian epic tradition, the trope of kings or armies of rulers being swallowed by a dragon often represents the illegitimacy of a ruler—or worse, his incompetence or injustice. Stories and images of rulers who meet their end in the mouth of a serpent are not only described with contempt, but with ridicule. For instance, the *Qisas al-anbiya'* describes Pharaoh's immense fear of Moses's serpent, stating that he "was so terrified



that he jumped off his throne, dropping excrement; indeed, he had to rise forty times that day on account of his bowels.” Such remarks were not only intended to discredit the authority of the ruler, but to make a mockery of him.

Returning to our illustration, we can see how the artist brought an equally amusing tone to the depiction of this story. The painting portrays the pharaoh’s entourage as *jinn*, the Arabic word for demons, whose over-the-top gestures and exaggerated physical features often lend a comedic quality to Persianate painting. Among the mayhem of the astonished demons in the foreground, a half-eaten body with curled toes juts out awkwardly from the mouth of the dragon, adding to the absurdity of the scene. The painting showcases how artists engaged the texts they were illustrating in order to draw out emotional responses, eliciting awe, outrage, or even amusement to instill moral lessons to their readers.

Thank you for listening. This has been **Hannah** on **Masterpiece Minute at Virtual SDMA!**



Today's Masterpiece: [*Moses' staff becomes a serpent and devours Pharaoh's followers.*](#) Page from a dispersed the *Qisas al-anbiya'* (Tales of the Prophets). India or Iran. Ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on paper. Edwin Binney 3rd Collection, 1990.259.