



**Today's Masterpiece:** [King Mihrab of Kabul learns of Rudabeh's affections for Prince Zal](#), 19th century. Opaque watercolor on paper. Gift of Edwin Binney 3rd, 1971.69.



Welcome back to **Masterpiece Minute at Virtual SDMA**. This is your host, **Hannah Hyden**, Research Assistant in the Department of 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.

In a nineteenth-century page from the *Shahnameh*, or Book of Kings, the Persian epic by the 10th-century author Abul Qasim Firdawsi, we encounter an enraged King Mihrab, the ruler of Kabul, as he wields his sword and threatens to kill his own daughter Rudabeh, pictured on the ground before him. Behind the king, we find Sindokht, the wife of Mihrab and mother of Rudabeh, arms raised and fists clenched, rushing towards the king to save her daughter's life. With his distinctive long beard and trimmed waist, the figure of King Mihrab is modelled after Fath Ali Shah, the second ruler of the Qajar dynasty, who reigned in Iran from 1797 to 1834.

This scene depicts a climactic moment in the love story of Rudabeh and Zal, a great warrior of Iran. On a visit to the vassal king Mihrab in Kabul, Zal hears of Rudabeh's beauty and endeavors to meet her. Hearing of Zal's incomparable strength, beauty, and heroism, Rudabeh is immediately smitten before even seeing the visitor. Her female attendants conspire to arrange a meeting between them, and they fall in love. Rudabeh sends one of her maids with treasures to give to her beloved, but her helper is caught by her mother, Sindokht, who presses her daughter on this issue. Rudabeh begins to weep, proclaiming a love for Zal that could endanger her own life. As the descendent of a long line of heroes serving the kings of Iran, Zal's father Sam would not be pleased to hear that his son's beloved is the daughter of Mihrab, the grandson of the demon king Zakhak. Sindokht's fear for her daughter is tremendous. Our author Firdawsi writes of the mother being "filled with such anxiety that her skin felt bruised." When King Mihrab sees the distress on his wife's face, he asks her what is the matter. She explains that Rudabeh is in love with Zal. Fearing that his daughter's actions will drive the king of Iran to march on Kabul, Mihrab flies into a rage and threatens to take his daughter's life. Sindokht cautions the king not to act rashly, convincing him to let her negotiate with Zal's father on their daughter Rudabeh's behalf. Swathed in pearls and gold-worked brocade and armed with a bounty of jewels, gold, carpets, horses, and precious perfumes, the Queen of Kabul Sindokht sets out to sway Zal's father Sam. Sam delights in these treasures and in Sindokht's words, stating, "she asked for everything so charmingly that I granted her all of it." Indeed, Zal's father finally agrees even to the couple's union. Through diplomacy and cunning, Sindokht thus succeeds in simultaneously securing her daughter's marriage to Zal and saving the kingdom from destruction.

This story, which is comprised of a clearly complex web of negotiation, is rarely illustrated. In the final line of text just above our nineteenth-century illustration, the king



says that he will kill Rudabeh, prolonging the reader’s anticipation over what will transpire next. We finally learn that she is safe in the lines following this frightening scene, after Sindokht prevails in her efforts to protect her child. While the central figure in this portrayal is the king, the women flank the ruler on either side, underscoring their critical role as agents throughout the plot of this narrative. The author places tremendous emphasis on the way women adeptly navigated social and political spheres within this story, whether by gently swaying powerful players or forcibly willing events into action. Sindokht is no exception, and is especially praised by the author Firdawsi for her eloquence, loyalty, and intelligence—the ideal picture of a mother and queen.

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



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