



Today's Masterpiece: Hamid Rahmani, [*The Seventh Trial: Slaying of the White Div*](#), 2010. Color print on paper. Purchased with funds provided by Patrons of the Arts of Iran and Persian Cultural Center, 2022.33



Welcome back to **Masterpiece Minute at Virtual SDMA**. This is your host, **Ladan Akbarnia**, Curator of South Asian and Islamic Art at The San Diego Museum of Art. Drop in every month to hear a new mini talk led by SDMA curators or guests featuring works from the Museum's collection.

Today we are looking at a dynamic color print on paper by artist Hamid Rahmanian, which depicts a scene from a story told in the *Shahnameh*, or "Book of Kings." Written into verse around 1010 by the poet Abu'l Qasim Firdawsi, this great Persian epic is replete with tales from pre-Islamic oral tradition about semi-mythical kings, warriors, rivals, heroes, villains, and lovers. In other episodes of this podcast, we have learned how this text inspired art, architecture, material culture, and performance in Iran, Central Asia, South Asia, and beyond, including the diaspora. Today, however, we are looking at an exciting contemporary twist on centuries-old artistic traditions seen in Persian and South Asian illustrated manuscripts.

The story presented in this image recounts the last of seven trials performed by Rustam, the celebrated warrior-hero of the *Shahnameh*, before he can rescue his king from the hands of the White Div, or demon. The White Div has been holding the Iranian king Kay Kavus and his army captive in the land of Mazandaran, today a province in northern Iran bordering the Caspian Sea. When this news reaches Rustam, the hero knows he must overcome terrifying feats before encountering the demon leader. One of these — after successfully fighting a lion and dragon, of course — involves the capture of a landowner named Olad. Olad ensures his own survival by promising to lead the warrior to Kay Kavus and the White Div, who lives in a dark, perilous pit guarded by thousands of demons.

Here we see Olad at left, tied to a tree next to Rustam's loyal steed Rakhsh; Olad remains a hostage to the hero until Rustam can achieve his final feat, the slaying of the White Div. At this point in the story, Olad has already led Rustam to his sixth trial, defeating the demon's army chief, and to the Iranian king Kay Kavus, who tells Rustam he must not only defeat the White Div, but return to the king and his men with the demon's blood and brains, three droplets of which will allow them to regain the sight they lost while imprisoned in darkness and sorrow. The focal point of the composition, however, is the dark pit at right, surrounded by a variety of frightening demons. Inside, Rustam, identified by his trademark tiger-skin coat and snow-leopard helmet, battles the White Div in a bloody encounter that ultimately results in the demon's defeat, Rustam's saving his king and fellow Iranians from imminent death, and the liberation of Olad.

While several elements, in particular the figures, can be recognized from Persian illustrated manuscripts, the landscape of soft green meadows and warm, pink sky — a stark contrast to the figures and activity it surrounds — comes from a South Asian source, possibly Mewar, one of the historic Rajput kingdoms in India. This masterful



mixing of elements is a signature of Rahmanian's *Shahnameh* series, the prints of which comprise features in surviving illustrations from Persian, Indian, and Ottoman Turkish manuscripts as well as Persian lithographed books produced from the 15th–19th centuries. Rahmanian digitally edits these to reconceive and produce contemporary, “re-mastered” perspectives on episodes from the great epic.

A palimpsest of the *Shahnameh's* visual history and artistic traditions, these dynamic and colorful prints recount the epic's tales while simultaneously illustrating its layered history of production for a contemporary audience. They are also associated with the artist's popular illustrated *Shahnameh* books and grand performances of shadow theater across the United States and Europe.

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



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