(fig. 2). Hence, the long history of this type of background ornamentation, the need felt for its application, and its specific artistic character, all make it clear why Qâdi Ahmad should state that afi was regarded a special sort of painting.

Fig. 2. Fragment of small luster bowl. Samarra, ca. AD 880.

SUFI ELEMENTS IN THE LATE FIFTEENTH CENTURY PAINTING OF HERÄT

R. MILSTEIN

To what extent did the subject matter of Persian miniatures influence iconographic and stylistic elements? Was a picture conceived of as a one-dimensional, decorative (or at most narrative) unit, so that formal conventions might subserve any content in a given period? Or would a particular period construct a stylistic integrity of its own, in which formal elements might depend functionally upon the subject element? The logical connexion to be sought between dimensions of meaning and functional relationships amongst the elements of a work is treated in detail by Kuhns, who has summed the matter up in two statements:1

A minimum condition for admitting a dimension of meaning to the interpretation of a work of art is the demonstration that a functional relationship obtains between the principles defining one dimension already established and the principles defining the second dimension to be introduced by reference to the work of art.... A set of principles defining a dimension is complete if it is capable of producing thoughts, images and/or affective states which are neither vacuous nor trivial and allows the development of a style.

The late fifteenth century AD school of Herât can serve as a case study for these questions, with the Sufi element as the point of departure for the entire dimension of subject.

The social background of the emergence of the “Behzâd school” differs somewhat from that of earlier Persian schools of painting, in its encompassing contradictory licentiousness and mysticism. The long reign of the Timurid Sultan Ḥusâyın Mirzâ (1469–1506) saw many years of peace and prosperity; Herât, the capital of Khorasan, had become a

spiritual and social centre. But at the heart of the feted-filled royal court, overflowing and debauched atmosphere, the new Sufi trends came to prominence, their essence negating the very concept of royalty. Initially, Sultan Ḥusayn had tended toward Shi'iism but, under the influence of his erudite friend Nawāʾī, he entirely abandoned the Shi'i path. Rather, there were concentrated at his court persons who thought and created in the Sufi spirit, foremost of whom was Jāmī, head of an order and a significant poet. Peculiarly, it was in a rich and debauched society, in a period of no struggle for material prosperity, that a moral literature and thoughts of beyond this world budded forth. All around Ḥusayn Mirzâ a court “mysticism” developed, rapidly letting all ideas of privation and abstinence quite alone, and adhering rather to matters of spiritual devotion and death.

Two features are immediately apparent in this Herāt school of painting — realism in depicting reality, and a restricted and very specific range of subjects. The Shāh-nāme was no longer the principal subject of painting, and the Khamsa of Nizāmi, the moral poetry of Saʿādi and Nawāʾī, and the mystic allegories of ’Attār and Jāmī were coped and illuminated by the best of the court artists. The kaleidoscopic nature of death in this literature effectively eliminated the actual gap between king and pauper. Not even the greatest royalty, power or wealth could be taken beyond the grave. In the words of Farād ud-Dīn ’Attār, in his Mantiq al-Tayr:

Even if you will sit on the (very) throne of the king,
Still you will hold nothing except the wind in thy hand.

And:

Even he who holds the world under the seal of his ring
is now only a mineral in the earth.

2 For an historical and social description of the period of the reign of Sultan Ḥusayn Mirzâ, see V.V. Barthold, Four Studies on the History of Central Asia (Leiden, 1962), 1–72.
3 El, s.v. Ḥusayn Mirzâ b. Manṣūr b. Baykara.
4 Ibid., s.v. Djāmī.

SUFI ELEMENTS IN LATE FIFTEENTH-CENTURY HERAT PAINTING

Or in Saʿādi’s Bustān?

Though thou be a hero or a swordsman
thou wilt carry away but the shroud.

The true hierarchy amongst men is dependent upon their spiritual level and, for the first time in the artistic conceptualization of Persia, plain man — and the more so the dervish — was equated with the man of authority. Even if the true social stratigraphy was quite different at the Herāt of that time, at least the world of the social values amongst the courted was essentially democratic. As Kavoli has shown in his work on the sociology of style, there is a close correlation between a society having a democratic structure or trends, and a realistic style and equalitarian distribution of elements (at the expense of a hierarchy in composition and subject matter, the function of which is to enhance and adorn the apex of a rigidly hierarchical society). On the background of such a conception, the popular genre paintings and the realism in depicting construction labourers, bath attendants and other artisans, are hardly surprising. The well-known patron Ḥātem Ţāy9 once said that he was exceeded in his generosity only by the labourer who lit his own fire in preference to coming to Ḥātem Ţāy’s table. As the examples cited will show, the plastic depictions of kings and their status in painting changed considerably in this period.

The series of subjects of the various periods of Persian painting ranges between heroic battle episodes and emotional scenes touching upon love, with court amusements arranged in between. In the Herāt school of the late fifteenth century, besides the exceptional works of the Zafar-nāme devoted to Tamerlane’s conquests, the paintings approach the opposite pole — the depictions of Yūsuf and Zulaykhā. The hunting scenes or the polo matches are replaced by subjects of daily life, such as depictions of building, the bath, agricultural pursuits and scenes of drunkenness amongst the courtiers. In a book of such a broad and variegated range of subjects as the Khamsa of Nizāmī, the traditional

7 The Bustan of Saʿādi (transl. by A.H. Edwards) (Lahore, [1950?]), 140.
R. MILSTEIN

subjects of royalty and battle make way for illustrations entirely devoted to unfulfilled love, and death. Of the story of Farhād’s love for Shirin, painters of other schools illuminated their meeting in the mountains, near the Milky Way and the rock-cut reliefs. In several miniatures, Farhād is even shown carrying Shirin and her mount on his shoulders.11 And suddenly, in a Khamsa (dating from 1494) in the British Museum (BM Or. 6810, fol. 72v), there is a depiction of the moment of Farhād’s death, with no Milky Way, no rock-cut reliefs and no other signpost on the way to realization of love.

Farhād, and even more so the two lovers par excellence of Persian poetry, Majnūn and Zalaykha, were given recognition and glory precisely because they were literary symbols of the true Sufi image. In the didactic verse of Jalāl un-Dīn Rūmī, the identification is direct:12

The reed tells us the way full of blood
and recounts stories of the passion of Majnūn

while Sa‘ādí’s Bastān has a parallel description:13

One who loved God set his face toward the desert. His father, being grieved at his absence, neither ate nor slept. Someone admonished the son, who said: “Since my Friend has claimed me as His own, no other friendship do I own. When He revealed to me His beauty, all else that I saw appeared unreal.”

Like this lover of God (denoted “mad for God”), Majnūn — mad for Layla (majnūn layla) — goes into the desert and lives amongst the wild beasts. His exclusiveness may even be related with the biographical Lives of the Sufi saints, from which we learn that only the purest man, of highest spiritual degree, attains the trust of the wild beasts.15 In an effort to terminate the love affair, Majnūn’s family took him to the Ka‘aba, hoping that the holiness of the spot might impart to him some understanding and clarity of thought. In a Khamsa manuscript at the British Museum (Add. 25900, fol. 114r; from ca. 1490), however, Majnūn is depicted pressing against the door of the Ka‘aba — for the visit to the holy site did not wean him from love but rather intensified his mania. In a manuscript of the poems of Nawā’i, at Manchester (John Rylands Library, Turkish MS 3), Majnūn and Layla are seen lying unconscious in their longed-for tryst, for union with his beloved could not be realized in conscious life, a mere glance sufficing to cause the lovers to lose consciousness. The Sufi can unite with the object of his devotion only after death — like Majnūn at the grave of Layla, in the same Khamsa (BM Or. 6810, fol. 144v; see pl. XXII, 1).

The paintings just mentioned all utilize a given narrative scene, enhancing it with an additional spiritual dimension by emphasizing one particular moment or another in the development of the story. Another group of paintings abandons the narrative event and turns to static scenes irrelevant to the progression of the actual story but reflecting a spiritual condition or stage on the Sufi path. Thus, for instance, is the scene of the departure of Shakhīb Širāzi from a friend, in a Khamsa of Nawā’i in the Bodleian Library (Elliott 287, fol. 34),16 or the round composition by Behzād, in the Freer Gallery of Art (No. 44.48), in which an Old Man and a Youth, or a Shāykh and his Disciple, are depicted in a landscape.17 The works of this group, abound in powerful content, are all scenes of mourning. Death is hardly a new motif in Persian miniatures, plastic expression of the emotion of mourning having appeared from the beginning, in the love stories of Varqa and Gulshah, and even more in the dramatic paintings of the fourteenth century.18

But in the wonderful picture of the death of Alexander, from the fourteenth century Demotte Shāh-nāme from Tabrīz,19 the composition seems to be built around a central point of focus — the coffin of the dead king. The scene occurs in the palace, amidst all the effects of valour

13 Bastan of Sadi, 65; Golistan, 194, story 31.
14 For this matter, see Mathnavi of Jalaluddin Rumi iv/7, Commentary, p. 11.

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and sanctity. The coffin is surrounded by a mass of people, and immediately adjacent kneel the king’s teacher and his mother. No doubt is left that the deceased was a most important personage, and was greatly honoured even in death. In contrast, in the depiction of the mourning over the death of the husband of Layla, from a Khamsa in the British Museum (BM Or. 6810, fol. 135), there is not even a trace of the deceased. The female mourners closely resemble those of the fourteenth century, with unkempt hair, and hands grasping the head — and even the same blue colour which in Islam symbolizes mourning. But where is the coffin? The composition, like the iconographic elements, is decentralized and it is not clear whether the body is still in the house or whether it has already been buried; in any event, all the signs of a funeral procession are present — blue flag, open gate and beggar.

A funeral procession is depicted on an isolated sheet in the Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore (No. 10.678) and in an almost identical miniature (though of more mature execution) in the Metropolitan Museum of Art Mantiq al-Tayr (see pl. XXIII). In the funeral of Isfandiar, from the Demotte Shah-nama, row after row of mourners moves from the right edge of the picture toward the left, and at the centre a splendid coffin is borne. In contrast, in the two late fifteenth century miniatures, the coffin of the anonymous deceased is in the lower right-hand corner, almost insignificant to the general development of the scene. The event has no horizontal direction (as with Isfandiar), nor is it centred around a focal point (as in the mourning for Alexander) but, rather, movement is upward from the bottom to the top or, pictorially, from the foreground to the inner background.

How is this achieved? By dividing the picture into several planes of depth, not only in the physical sense but also in the significance of the events: In the lower foreground, the newly-deceased is being borne. Within the cemetery, immediately behind the open gate, there is a fresh grave and, behind to the right, a tomb-monument is shown in the last stages of construction, the sealing of the tomb prior to the erection of the actual monument. Behind, the upper left — in the plane most distant

in the composition — is a large, completed tomb-monument. This does not yet signify the end of the path, nor is it the final plane in the picture, for a rope leads up to an open bird-cage hanging on a leafless tree, painted blue; in the lower branches, memorial flags have been stuck, while in the upper branches, birds chirp freely.

Is the latter pastoral scene mere decorative embellishment? In actual significance, it is probably a graphic expression of a concept resembling that of Sa‘adi:

"Tie now the feet of the bird of the soul.
Tarry not till it has borne the rope from the hand.
Thy life is a bird and its name is Breath.
When the bird has flown from its cage,
It cometh back not to captivity."

Or that if Jalāl ud-Dīn Rūmī:

"But if you are accepting (the Qur'an).
When you read the stories (of the prophets) The bird, your soul, will be distressed in its cage.
The bird that is a prisoner in a cage,
(If it) not seeking to escape, 'tis from ignorance."

If indeed this interpretation is correct, we must consider the possible existence of symbolic elements in the iconography of Persian miniature painting. These elements form the "events" of a scene — the tree coloured blue, with its branches bare, and the empty cage contrasting the free birds on the branches.

A second consideration, no less significant, concerns the meaning newly applied to the utilization of space. In the earlier concept of utilization of space, as well as in the late fifteenth century, the upper part of a page was the farthest from the viewer but, as far as sequence of events was concerned, it was the earliest. In a painting of prisoners before Khozaw, in an anthology of Sultan Iskander (from 1410), the course of justice begins on the upper, furthest plane, ending at the bottom with the bodies of the executed criminals. In the schematic landscapes, where figures
peep out from behind a hill on the horizon, such motifs comprise a framework for the principal events in the foreground. Khosraw always comes from beyond the hills in order to find Shirin, bathing in the foreground, before the very eyes of the viewer; and Alexander arrives from a journey in the distant mountains, and sees the pool of nymphs — again in the fore plane.27 (Exceptional to this rule are certain royal scenes, in which the compositional concept is still more archaic; here the king is placed in the uppermost part of the picture — formal height being of a strictly hierarchic significance.)

But here, in the depiction of the cemetery, the time sequence beckons the viewer from the bottom upward, from the earthy world toward the world to come. And since passage from one world to the next is instantaneous and smooth, there is no horizon or line of hills above, as usual, the edge of the cemetery being bordered by a stream and a few plants — representing the termination of the physical world. Passage to the golden sky, which lacks all contour, blurs all distinction between foreground and background. Kavolis28 links such phenomena (of obscuring the background) with future-oriented societies, for whom past and present lack significance, and for whom this life is but a corridor leading beyond. This interpretation well suits the symbolism of our miniature, as well as the composition.

Such movement, toward the depths of space and time, occurs in other miniatures of this school, as well, such as the painting of the Pauper in the Doorway of a mosque, from the Bustân of Cairo.29 The pauper, according to the story, is none other than the Sufi mystic30 who, from the beginning of events to their end, passes through several religious stages. Like the painting of the funeral, the space is divided into several planes: On the first plane, outside the frame, worshippers purify themselves in preparation for prayer, and a dervish converses with a mosque attendant. On the second plane, within the mosque courtyard, the devotee prays, converse or slumber. On the third plane, immediately before the mihrâb, persons of rank are seated. In a manner similar to the events in the cemetery scene — where the narrative and the viewer’s eye pass along a zigzag course from coffin to gate to tomb to second tomb (or tree) — here the same transition occurs, from one architectural unit to the next until the mihrâb is attained. This final point, extraordinarily,

is not coloured, but rather its very whiteness draws the eye to it and to what lies beyond. A similar path, from one room to another, is repeated also in a painting of Yusuf and Zulaykha (in the same manuscript),31 where the farthest spot is again located on such an axis, which commences at a gate in the foreground. In all these paintings there is a time sequence representing neither a narrative nor a definable chain of events. The direction of time is from the fateful world to the eternal. Thus, the direction of movement is not from one flank to another on a definite stage, but from the fixed point of the viewer vis-à-vis the picture — towards the unbounded space beyond the horizon. In paintings with architectural backgrounds, in which there is no division of heaven and earth, the Sufi penetrates deeper and deeper into the structure, from the courtyard into the entrance hall, and to the innermost chamber (in a palace) or the qibla and its mihrâb (in a mosque). The direction of movement is inward, into the heart of the structure, just as the Sufi path ends in the depths of the soul.

The desire to adhere to the axis of progression, with intermediate stages, like the steps of the Sufi path, may well have led to the architectural distortion so foreign to a fine artist (as in the miniature of the beggar in the doorway of the mosque, where the minbar is located to the left of the mihrâb, whereas it should be on the right. But in the miniature, the architectural division appears so natural, and the minbar seems so essential for the composition, that we must assume a definite purpose underlying the error).

The entrance to the spiritual plane, beyond this world — and at one and the same time within the world and within every man — is repeated and emphasized by means of the open gate. We have already seen the gate in the previous scene, where the beggar knocks at the door of the mosque, seeking to begin his journey. But the corpus of literary figures underlying the concept of the gate is broader, and generally denotes the phase in which God receives the Sufi, opening before him the expanse of his realm:

O, man of God, walk in the path of righteousness. Unfortunate is that person who turns his head from this gate, since he will not be able to find another.32

Return to the Way. I open my door to you and wait.33

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27 Stchoukine, op. cit. (above, n. 11), pls. xii, xxvi; Gray, op. cit. (above, n. 16), 76.
28 Kavolis, op. cit. (above, n. 8), 142.
29 Reproduced in Binyon, Wilkinson & Gray, op. cit. (above, n. 23), pl. lxx-ix.
30 Bustan of Sufi, 63.
31 Golombek, op. cit. (above, n. 10), pl. 8.
33 Atjâr, op. cit. (above, n. 6), 53.
It is possibly for this reason that gates of buildings often bear the inscription “O, you who opens the doors!” — the implied continuation being “Open the door for us!” The inscription certainly reflects usual architectural practice but, in checking the better of the fifteenth century paintings, a consistent connexion between the function of the structures and the inscriptions they bear can be discerned. Royal palaces generally bear the inscription "الملك [المسلمة] المخلص" ("The equitable king") and in more special instances, as in the banquet scene of Sultan Husayn in the Bostan of Cairo, the inscription on the entrance states: "الحمد لله على ولده" ("Praise to God for exalted and noble life."). On the mosque in the same manuscript, there appear inscriptions specifically denoting "mosque" and "mihrab", and the inscription on the gate of the cemetery, in the cemetery painting, relates to burial.

In other words, the inscriptions in the depictions of buildings are of intrinsic significance. If so, we can assume that the formula "O, you who opens the doors!” is no mere decorative convention. And if it appears on structures not outwardly of religious nature, we should indeed seek a deeper meaning therein. A good example of the possibility of such implied meaning is the depiction of a destitute poet seeking to enter a city, but who is set upon by dogs.60 And only through proper regard for the inscriptions can we explain the existence of a small drawing (in the Boston Museum of Fine Art) in which two persons stand within a doorway (possibly of a tomb), one facing inward and the other outward. Over the opening is this very inscription.

If indeed the gate structure was imbued with a symbolic dimension, besides its architectural function, the open gate leading into a courtyard may well have a similar connotation. A wooden gate opening, not into the façade before the viewer, but into a garden in the background, appears already in several miniatures of the mid-fifteenth century, and as a motif is undoubtedly related to the development of the concept of pictorial space. But in the paintings of the late fifteenth century, it has become a constant feature — often lacking architectural justification, especially where the horizon is lowered and the strip of landscape behind the gate is reduced in the extreme, greatly increasing the area of sky.

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34 E.g., in the painting of Alexander and the Seven Sages, pl. XXIV.
35 Reproduced in Binyon, Wilkinson & Gray, op. cit. (above, n. 23), p. LXXX.
37 E.g., an anthology dated 1468, BM Add. 16561, fol. iv-2.
38 A single page in the Gulistan Museum, reproduced by Binyon, Wilkinson & Gray, op. cit. (above, n. 23), pl. CXXX.
40 For the significance of green as the colour of the Prophet, generally also denoting pious persons and angels, see the marginal note in `Attar, op cit (above, n. 6), 130-131.
the Sages, on the axis of the garden gate, who addresses the assemblage—very much calling to mind the central figures in the pictures mentioned earlier.

The figures surrounding Alexander, including those in the foremost plane, would seem to reflect an idea based in Sufi practice—the concept of the circle or an axis,\(^42\) which plays a most important role in the pictures of Muhammad and his retinue in a mosque, the madrasa in the Rothschild Gulsan, and of the Dancing Dervishes at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.\(^43\)

The features presented below—only the most outstanding and easiest to grasp—serve to answer the question posed at the beginning of our discussion: To what extent did subject matter determine the choice of elements comprising a given painting, and what is the possibility of there being more than one dimension of meaning?

From our analysis of the miniatures, the first conclusion emerging is that a physical element outwardly lacking iconographic significance—such as a gate, inscription or cage and birds—can indeed have symbolic meaning, stemming from literary similitudes. Moreover, a colour—such as of a garment or a tree—can impart a specific iconographic status to its object; and thus, possibly, Behzad and his disciples may well have become famous through their green and blue palette.

A second conclusion is that in a painting of symbolic scheme and dimension, not even compositions lacking narrative subject are devoid of specific content. Symbols replace events in depicting content—as in the drawing of the two figures in the doorway. Indeed, at Herat in the late fifteenth century almost static paintings do occur, lacking all narrative subject or genre depiction (as for instance the round composition of an Old Man and a Youth with landscape).

A third conclusion is that the scheme underlying a picture can find expression in the composition, or can even determine it. The Sufi "path", the goal of which is to lead toward the inner truth, dictates the deepening of the spatial concept in the picture, arranging the course of events on the axis of depth. The compulsion to resolve the problems of such spiritual depth may well have led to the innovations of this school in the realm of pictorial space. If indeed this conclusion is valid, there may well be further compositional innovations, such as the deflection of the line of the horizon from the horizontal to an oblique axis or even a vertical axis) projecting beyond the frame, or a division of the areas of landscape into units of differing physical character (such as desert as distinct from greenery, hills from plains), with the central figure generally situated at the point of transition (for instance, in the painting of Majnun on the grave of Layla). There is certainly room for an investigation into whether pictorial units subservient to composition, such as a stream, might not have deeper meaning, imparting greater richness to the entire picture.

The element of Sufi content is certainly not exclusive in the design of the miniatures of this period. But if we conceal that, besides the narrative level of painting, there was a second stratum implied in symbolism, it may well be possible to find literary sources or general religious and cultural similitudes for further iconographic and stylistic elements. This could provide a greater understanding of the cultural function of Persian miniature painting. Moreover, if pictorial elements are subservient to given content, it might too be possible to analyze the particularity of a painting, artist or school, on the basis of harmony of the various elements, as well.

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\(^{42}\) EI, s.v. Halka.

\(^{43}\) Muhammad and his Friends, from Hayrat al-Abrar of Nuna't, fol. 7 (Bodleian Library, Elliot 287), reproduced in Stchuikine, op. cit. (above, n. 11), pl. LXXII. Gulistan of Sa'di, fol. 55, reproduced in ibid., pl. LXVI; Dancing Dervishes, single sheet (Metropolitan Museum of Art, reproduced in E. G. Gube, The Classical Style in Islamic Painting (Venice, 1968).
STUDIES
IN MEMORY OF
GASTON WIET

1887—1971
PREFACE

Gaston Wiet, one of the three scholars elected Honorary Members of the Institute of Asian and African Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, was in his own way even closer to this centre of Islamic studies than this honour bestowed on him would indicate. His associations with numerous Jerusalem scholars, his continuous help, advice and encouragement — to both established scholars and the up-and-coming generation — revealed his deep concern for their problems and fields of interest; it was not for him to remain an outsider, but to become a true colleague.

The deep attachment and indebtedness to Wiet felt by many scholars here underlies the enthusiastic response towards participation in this memorial volume, dedicated to Wiet the Man and the Scholar. It was further felt that this homage should also express the acknowledgement and friendship of his friends and admirers abroad, as well as reflect the wide range of fields of research and interests which the long list of Wiet's writings illustrates. We regret that, in the meantime, several of those who expressed their readiness to contribute to this publication have died; Père J. de Mérasche, Professor M. Plessner and Professor M. Avi-Yonah had all submitted titles but were unable to complete their manuscripts; and the death of Professor Otto Kurz adds to our burden of sorrow, though, fortunately, his article was received and is printed here.

The very character of Wiet and his scholarly career dictates the nature of any publication dedicated to his memory. Even so, contributors could readily tie their subject — be it history, literature, art or archaeology — to one facet or another of Wiet's broad interests. The chronological range, too, of the various subjects submitted is considerable, making it most appropriate to arrange the articles according to chronological order. Thus, the volume encompasses studies concerning the pre-Islamic Sassanian empire, and proceeds through practically every significant chapter of Islamic history, down to and including modern times.

The devotion of Mr. Nathan Efrati, secretary of the Institute of Asian and African Studies at the Hebrew University, toward realizing the publication of this volume is fully appreciated. Most precious help was
provided by Mr. R. Grafman, who was involved in all the manifold activities of preparing the manuscripts, translating Miss Milstein's article, laying out the plates and bringing the entire volume through the press.

Finally thanks should be expressed to Professor M. Maoz, former Head of the Institute of Asian and African Studies at the Hebrew University, who initially encouraged this enterprise; and to the present Head of the Institute, Dr. Y. Friedmann, who has been equally encouraging in its subsequent stages.

M. R.-A

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IN MEMORIAM

The death of Gaston Wiet may well spell the end of a period, the disappearance of a particular type of scholar — besides being a great loss to Islamic studies and to all who knew him. His activities were varied, all of them bearing the unmistakable stamp of a scholar. He was of that particular class of Islamist whose mastery was in no way limited to one field — one of the last of a generation who did not “specialize” but who studied Islam as a whole, and whenever he worked on a specific subject it was not because of specialization but because it was one of the phenomena of Islamic culture.

Gaston Louis Marie Joseph Wiet was born in Paris on December 18, 1887. His formal academic training was practically completed by the age of 21. Already in October 1908 he graduated in Law (Licence en Droit) and simultaneously obtained diplomas at the École Nationale des Langues Orientales Vivantes, both in Classical Arabic and in Colloquial Arabic, as well as in Persian and Turkish. He was then offered a scholarship as “Pensionnaire” at the Institut Français d’Archéologie Orientale du Caire, from 1909 to 1911. In the latter year he was invited to start a teaching position in Arabic and Turkish at the Faculty of Humanities of the University of Lyon, where he remained until 1926, except for the period of the First World War, in which he served, winning the Croix de Guerre with bronze star. Toward the end of the war, his orientalist background brought him to serve as an interpreter in the Georges Picot negotiations.

In 1926 a major change occurred in the life of Gaston Wiet, for he was asked by King Fuad I of Egypt to take over directorship of the Museum of Arab Art in Cairo, which important position he retained until 1951, combining his activities at the Museum in Cairo with his academic teaching in Paris. For in the meanwhile he had successively been appointed Professor of Geography and History of the Near East at the École des Langues Orientales in Paris (1931) and Professor of Islamic Art at the École du Louvre (1936). From 1938 on, however, he remained mainly in Egypt. During the Second World War, he was a militant