

bronze ewers, with two exceptions. They have no lid and no spout, hence they are identified as jugs.

One of these unglazed jugs is made of grey earthenware and has extensive moulded decoration (figure 13). This type of jug were certainly not known or used in Iran. Its original home must be sought somewhere in Central Asia or, perhaps even in India. It has a perfect spherical body, resting on a concave base and has a funnel-shaped neck which opens up into a cup-shaped mouth.

As to its decoration, what is immediately striking is that there is an epigraphic band around the base of the neck, written in floriated Kufic, repeating the word *al-baraka*. It is in relief, but recalls the Kufic epigraphic bands which are always deeply engraved round the base of the necks of Ghazni bronze ewers, as we have already noticed above. Here it happens the opposite way; it is distinctly and deliberately in high relief. The upper part of the vessel is decorated with small relief rosettes, arranged in five rows. The lower part of the vessel has three registers of different width. The decoration of the top one is most intriguing since it has a series of small oblong tablettes. They are separated by three or four small bosses. The middle register presents three-petal flowers and small rosettes, while the narrowest below, around the base has small rosettes and disks.

It is also proposed here, that when Ghazni was invaded and the city was destroyed by the Ghurid 'Alā al-Dīn in 545/1150-51, it ceased to be an artistic centre. Some of the artists may have moved to Khurasan, i.e. to Herat, while others to India. To

substantiate this theory there are similar bronze and stone ewers of the same spherical body and cup-shaped mouth which were made in India during the Sultanate and Mughal periods. One such ewer, with a double-bellied body, is in the Prince of Wales Museum in Mumbai. It was made in the Deccan during the early 14th century.

A second and later example from Northern India is in the Bargello Museum in Florence, dated to the first half of the 16th century. Another interesting ewer came up for sale at Sotheby's in April, 2008. It was made of agate or some other hardstone and has exactly the same type of spherical body, cup-shaped mouth, spout and handle, dated to the 17th century. It was also suggested that this type owes its origin to the so-called *chambu* water vessels.

During the second half of the 12th century there was suddenly an unexpected renewal of artistic activity in Khurasan and likewise in India. The shapes of vessels were modified or entirely new types emerged, like the bucket, the most famous example of which is the Bobrinsky bucket, made in Herat in 559/1163.

Khurasan metal objects, because of their generously applied silver and copper inlay, became more colourful. There is an innovation in epigraphy by the introduction of the so-called animated script that already appears on the Bobrinsky bucket. In India metal vessels of the Sultanate period were most frequently made in zoomorphic shapes. While the decorative details reveal noticeable differences, earlier Central Asian features which are clearly visible betray the original sources of their inspiration.

Figure 1: *Guldārā stupa* ca. 2nd c. AD

Figure 2a: *Stupa-shaped incense burner, Afghanistan, Ghazni, early 12th c.* Tareq Rajab Museum, Kuwait inv.no.MET-2375-TSR

Figure 2b: *Detail of the Tareq Rajab Museum's incense burner, showing a Bodhisattva*

Figure 3: *Large "lion" or lynx-shaped incense burner, Afghanistan, Ghazni, late 11th c.* Tareq Rajab Museum Kuwait inv.no.MET-682-TSR. Ht. 57 cm; length 50 cm.

Figure 4: *Ewer, cast bronze, engraved and copper inlaid decoration, Afghanistan, Ghazni, 11th c.* Tareq Rajab Museum Kuwait inv.no.MET-1014-TSR.

Figure 5: *Ewer, bronze with fluted body, Afghanistan, Ghazni, 11th c.* Tareq Rajab Museum Kuwait inv.no.MET-183-TSR.

Figure 6: *Ewer, quaternary and copper alloy with engraved decoration. Nasser D. Khalili collection, inv. no. MTW 754, ht. 38 cm (By kind permission of the Nasser D. Khalili Collection)*

Figure 7: *Ewer, unglazed red earthenware with remains of black painted decoration, Central Asia, 7th – 9th centuries.* Tareq Rajab Museum, Kuwait inv.no.CER-1225-TSR.

Figure 8: *Ewer, composite white fritware, coated with an alkaline green glaze, Iran 12th or early 13th century.* Tareq Rajab Museum, Kuwait inv.no.CER-289-TSR.

Figure 9: *Ewer, unglazed white earthenware with vertical spout and black painted decoration. Central Asia, 7th – 9th centuries.* Tareq Rajab Museum, Kuwait inv.no.CER-1211-TSR.

Figure 10: *Pouring vessel in the shape of a bird, cast bronze, with silver and copper inlaid decoration. Nasser D. Khalili collection, inv. no. MTW 1430, ht. 22.8 cm (By kind permission of the Nasser D. Khalili Collection)*

Figure 11 a - b: *Two ewers, cast bronze with copper and silver inlaid decoration, Private collection, London, ht. of both 23 cm.*

Figure 12: *Ewer no. 1, signature on ewer: Mahmud Ibn Abd al-Rahman, Afghanistan, Ghazni, 12th c.* Private collection, London.

Figure 13: *Jug, unglazed grey earthenware, with moulded and carved decoration, Central Asia, 9th – 11th centuries.* Tareq Rajab Museum, inv.no.CER-1239-TSR

A PERFECT RED: *ahmar, surkh and kirmizi* in the history of Islamic art



Marianna Shreve Simpson

Presented in English
19 October 2009

The primary title of this talk is borrowed from a fascinating book by Amy Butler Greenfield, A Perfect Red: Empire, Espionage, and the Quest for the Color of Desire (2005), which tells the tale of a particular red colorant, a tiny insect known as cochineal, used in the Americas long before the arrival of Columbus and from there exported to Europe and beyond by the early 16th century. At the time of its publication I was investigating the subject of gift exchanges between the courts of Habsburg Spain and Safavid Iran. Through this research I learned that in 1614 the Spanish monarch Phillip III sent a diplomatic mission to the Persian shah 'Abbas I, including several hundred presents worth over 32,000 ducats. By far the most expensive item among these royal gifts was five barrels of cochineal, described in the Hapsburg inventories as making the finest crimson colour.

Although this particular incident does not appear in Greenfield's narrative, it certainly reinforces her point about the high value placed on cochineal in early modern times. At the same time it made me wonder just how Shah 'Abbas would have reacted to five barrels of such costly red stuff, and that in turn lead me to think more generally about how the colour red has been regarded within the history of Islamic arts and cultures. As far as I know, there is no book comparable to *A Perfect Red* that considers red in any Islamic context. This presentation is an initial attempt to understand the colour's origins, application and significance in the visual arts of the Islamic world, particularly, as my subtitle indicates, within traditional Arabic, Persian and Turkish cultural spheres.

Even a quick overview of Islamic art reveals that red appears in virtually every medium, including manuscripts, paintings, ceramics, textiles and carpets. (figures 1, 2, 3 and 4) Red's frequent and multiple appearances also reminds us that there are many different shades or tones of red to which distinctive names may be given. In English,

for instance, we distinguish linguistically between crimson, scarlet, vermilion, ruby, rose, fuchsia, and burgundy, not to mention pink, cranberry, tomato-red, fire-engine red, coral, terracotta, and so on. A similarly rich lexicon of reds exists in Arabic; in addition to *ahmar*, the most usual word, there are some 50 other Arabic words for red, and still others that denote the colour's various mixtures and blends.

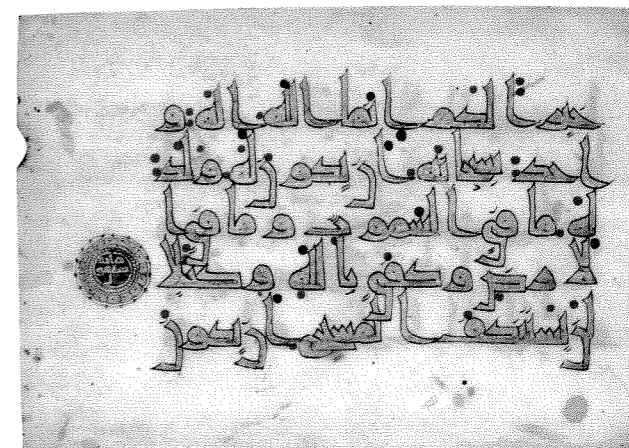


Figure 1

Dr. Marianna Shreve Simpson is a specialist in Islamic art, and has published, taught and lectured widely on Islamic art and the arts of the book, especially Persian illustrated manuscripts. She currently serves as president-elect of the Historians of Islamic Art Association, and begins a two-year term as president in February 2010.

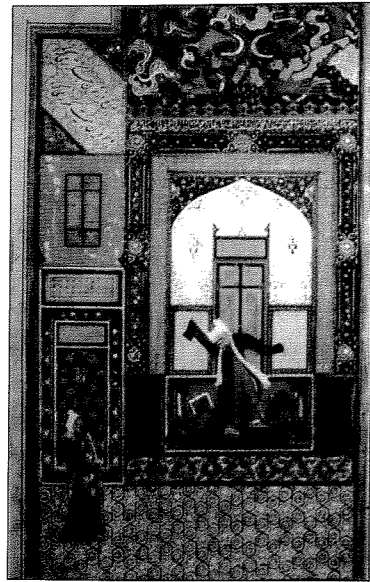


Figure 2

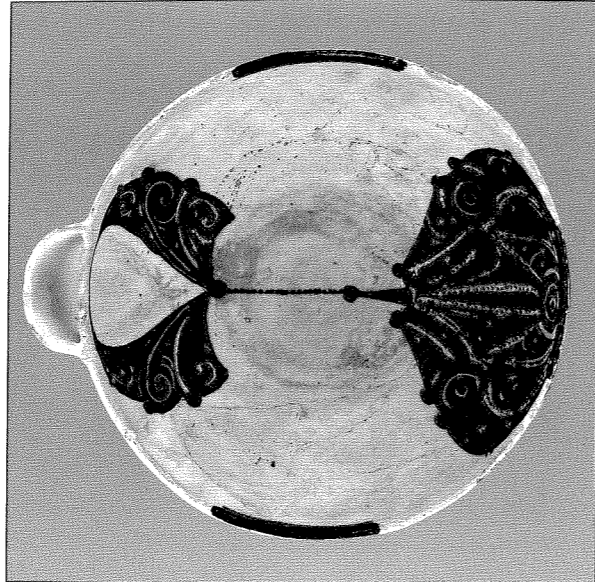


Figure 3

Red's varied vocabulary brings us to another aspect of this ubiquitous colorant, namely, the origin and production of red pigments and red dyes throughout the history of Islamic art. On this topic there is a great deal of information available, thanks to Arabic and Persian treatises written as long ago as the 8th--10th centuries as well as modern-day technical studies. Sufficed to say that the colour red comes from a variety of synthetic and natural sources, including animal, vegetable and mineral substances, and it is the specific ingredients and their varied preparation that determine the difference in red's diverse hues.

Red lead was one of the most common sources for red pigment, and was employed as an ink and as a paint from early Islamic times. In 9th century Baghdad the eminent physician al-Razi recognised red lead as an artificially-prepared substance made by heating lead white at very high temperatures. In the early 11th century Mu'izz Ibn Badis, a princely patron of the arts in modern-day Tunisia and author of an important treatise on bookmaking, cited red lead (*isrinj*) as an ingredient in inks for calligraphy and dyes for leather bindings. By the early 16th century, various recipes for red lead were available, of which one by the Persian artist Sadiqi Beg provided step-by-step instructions for heating, washing and pounding until "red lead should have formed, strong and pure." This last comment, giving the pigment specific attributes, is typical of the metaphorical language often found in treatises on colour-making, and relates directly to the symbolism of colours, including red, in Arabic, Persian and Turkish cultures.

Modern scientific testing reveals that Islamic artists often used red lead together with another red pigment, known as vermilion or cinnabar in English and *zanjafr* in Arabic, that originated as a dense red mineral in mines in Asia, the Altai, Russian Turkistan and southern Spain. Although vermilion could be prepared from the mineral itself, more typically it was based on mercuric sulphide made in a process familiar to the Islamic world by at least the 8th century when the Arab alchemist Jabir mentioned a red compound of sulphur and mercury. Sadiqi Beg also gives a succinct explanation of vermilion's preparation in his day.

Whereas the red pigments used most frequently in traditional Islamic art derived primarily from inorganic sources, red dyestuffs were largely organic in origin. Among the natural substances that produced the highest quality red, and that were the most-sought after for luxury items such as silk robes were certain aphids of the genus *coccus*, indigenous to the Near East. More specifically these were tiny female insects, each containing several thousand eggs, that yielded the particular colorant known as carmine after being collected, killed, dried and crushed.

One particular coccid prized for a deep red or scarlet dye was *kermococcus vermilis*, called kermes for short, found on the scarlet oak tree that grows around many parts of the Mediterranean, across the top of the Fertile Crescent and into the Iranian plateau. Kermes enjoyed great popularity from the 12th century onwards; by the middle of the 16th century, however, its appeal started to be rivalled by that of *Dactylopius coccus*, the cochineal

insect from the Mexican highlands that king Philip of Spain sent as a gift to shah Abbas of Iran in 1614. The New World species grew on the prickly nopal cactus, which made its harvesting even more challenging than Old World varieties, a circumstance that, along with the long distances cochineal had to be transported, contributed enormously to its high value on the global market.

There are still other substances known, either through historical texts or scientific analysis, to have been used for red in Arabic, Persian and Turkish works of art. Indeed, the multiple origins in natural and synthetic materials, diverse manufacturing processes, and widespread distribution of red as both a pigment and a dye from literally one end of the traditional Islamic world to the other and all documented in one way or another from the initial periods of Islamic history to early modern times, speaks to the widespread availability and use, to the profound investment in terms of labour, time and capital, and to the obvious attraction to and demand for the colour red throughout Islamic history. In sum, the colour red constituted a veritable industry with a widespread presence and long-lasting place in Islamic material and cultural history.

With red pigment and red dye in the hands, as it were, of the artists and artisans who used the colorant, we now can look at exactly that – what use did they make of red? Or to put it another way, what role does the colour red play in artistic creation and what are the aesthetics of its application?

In manuscripts of the Qur'an dating from the 8th to the 10th centuries red was used to vocalise the holy text, as well as to colour marginal medallions and Sura dividers. (figure 1) In this context, red simultaneously marks or defines, and in the process draws our attention to, fundamental phonetic and textual elements of the word of God. The colour aides, in other words, in the progression and understanding of both content and calligraphy, a service it provided in manuscripts of all periods, kinds and qualities— religious and secular, luxurious and workaday - through its use for rubrics or headings, key words and phrases, textual annotations, framing lines, diagrams and so forth.

Red serves a similar function on certain 9th-10th century ceramics from Central Asia and north-eastern Iran decorated in slip with Arabic inscriptions where the initial letters of each word are written in red. In addition to selectively highlighting key epigraphic

features of such slip-painted wares, red also sets off and enhances the main elements of their decor, by seeming to activate or propel the circular movement of the central motifs.

Red functions, in short, as the design dynamo. The colour's efficacy in animating designs means that it also was in regular use as a background colour or foil. Within the arts of the book this application can be seen in medieval and later Qur'ans, where the lines of writing are encased in red contour panels, as well as in Persian illustrated manuscripts dating from the 13th-14th centuries where red paint, often tomato-red in tone, provided the standard backdrop colour for formulaic frontispiece images and narrative text illustrations alike.

Islamic carpets regularly feature red backgrounds for imagery of diverse kinds, including epigraphic, floral, geometric and figural designs. Red is also frequently the colour of choice for the central field on Islamic prayer rugs and mats, with their typical architectural elements representing the mihrab niche in a mosque. With such examples, we enter that ambiguous sphere, so often encountered in Islamic art, of uncertain spatial relationships, including background and foreground, and more specifically of how to distinguish and differentiate between spatial planes. On a 16th century Turkish carpet in The al-Sabah Collection, the colour, physically confined beneath the central arch, delineates the flat space where prayers are performed, defines architectural volume where the mosque lamp hangs as a symbol of the light of God, and denotes the space towards which prayers flow. (figure 4) Red thus becomes the locus of multiple functions: of standing, kneeling and prostrating; of looking down, through and beyond (as if a doorway) and of praying and sending those prayers through to a still higher sphere.

For a look at how red's various functions as focus, highlight, animator and background work together in Islamic art, we may turn to classical manuscript painting where there are numerous instances of how the colour both structures a composition and directs the viewer's eye through that composition. One typical example comes from an early 15th century copy of the *Khamasa* (Quintet) by the poet Nizami and depicts the sculptor Farhad visiting queen Shirin in her palace. (figure 5) We enter both painting and palace through the bright red table in the foreground, deliberately placed next to kneeling attendant who wears a slightly paler shade of red for his robe and a bright red hat and who offers a

platter to his mistress attired in a salmon pink robe. So there is a triumvirate of reds that leads us into the painting and immediately identifies the focus of narrative attention. This central unit, defined by reds, is then framed at the sides by figures adorned with touches of the same colour. Up above, red curtains drape across the composition's middle zone, simultaneously framing the windows and forming a rhythmic pattern that unites the figure groupings below. These vivid red drapery swags in turn lead up to the flat wall of pinkish brickwork, similar in tone to Shirin's robe on the lower level. Again, red curtains frame windows, which in turn contribute to the overall symmetry of the composition and at the same time lead our eye upwards to the central, faceted balcony where each of the four figures wears an item of red clothing and where a single red band provides the visual cornice.

It might be possible, of course, to analyse the painting in a very similar way through its use of blue, and indeed red and blue are in close pictorial relationship to one another. But red is optically the warmer and stronger colour of the two and with the longest light wave-length of the spectrum, properties that the artist who designed and executed this charming painting understood full well and exploited in the service of his composition's visual focus, movement, balance, and harmony.

My point of departure here was *A Perfect Red*, which as a study of New World cochineal does not have much to tell us about the taste for red in any Islamic cultural milieu. Another recent book is, however, of relevance in this regard: the novel by the Turkish author and Nobel laureate Orhan Pamuk originally published as *Benim Adim Kırmızı* (2000) and in English translation as *My Name is Red*. Set in Ottoman Istanbul during the late 16th century, the complex plot involves a group of royal miniature painters, one of whom is killed at the outset and another revealed at the end as the murderer. A number of the book's many chapters bear the names of colours in the first person singular, with chapter 31 entitled "I am Red." This begins with a lengthy list of red's occurrence in miniature paintings, recited by the colour itself. "I love illuminating the wings of angels, the lips of maidens, and severed heads bespeckled with blood." From these particulars, the character Red turns rhetorical, even philosophical, saying to us the readers: "I hear the question upon your lips. What is it to be a colour?" After providing some truly evocative answers ("Colour is the touch of the eye,

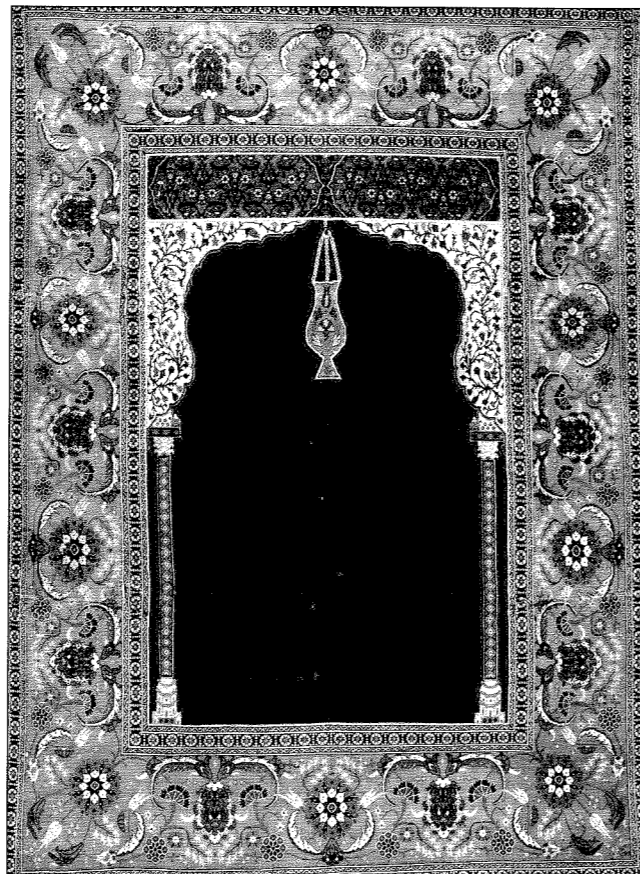


Figure 4

music to the deaf, a word out of darkness."), Red becomes very personal: "I am so fortunate to be red! I'm fiery! I'm strong. I know that men take notice of me and that I cannot be resisted."

Here we come back to red's attributes and move to the symbolism of red in Islamic culture. Not surprisingly, red's metaphorical associations are as diverse and varied as its material origins in both natural and artificial substances. Its symbolic diversity also involves seeming contradictions and contrasts, which to my mind are less oppositional than extended properties of one another: red is the colour of love, ardour, and desire (as per the subtitle of Greenfield's book). In certain traditional cultures such as Iran and Turkey, it is the colour of marriage and, by extension, of procreation.

At the same time it is the colour of violence, anger, danger, intensity, war and, by extension, bloodshed and death. Like their precursors in ancient Greece, Islamic astronomers regarded the planet Mars as red (its surface does actually have a great deal of iron oxide) and endowed it with bellicose attributes. Thus it should come as no surprise that in Islamic pictorial tradition, both the beloved and the warrior are typically attired in red, and weddings and battles alike are cast in the colour's roseate aura.

Basically, red stands for the cycle of life, an association that is hardly singular to Islamic cultures, but that seems to be regularly expressed in their artistic traditions. Red's dual identity – as desirable and life-sustaining on the one hand, and as violent and life-threatening – on the other, may be epitomised in the figure of Bahram Gur, the Sasanian ruler Bahram V, featured in many poetic works, including the *Shahnama* (*Book of Kings*) of Firdausi and the *Haft Paykar* (*Seven Beauties*) of Nizami

In Nizami's poem, the king marries seven princesses, each from a different part of the world, and builds each bride a different-coloured palace pavilion or dome, each one dedicated to a particular day of the week and governed by that day's planet. Bahram visits each bride in turn and each entertains him with a moralising tale on the theme of love and its frustration or fulfilment. Tuesday is his turn with the Russian princess in the red pavilion, governed by Mars, the god of war. Illustrations of this scene in Persian, Turkish and Indian manuscripts of the 15th century onwards invariably show both the king and his princess in red beneath a red dome, following Nizami's description of Bahram adorned in red on red or ruby red and his Tuesday bride as ruddy-cheeked and flame-hued.

Representations of Bahram Gur in other literary contexts, such as the *Shahnama*, do not necessarily come with the same iconographic requirement for red as that specified by Nizami. It is striking, however, how often he is attired in red, particularly when enthroned or in combat, thus making his Mars persona even more explicit.

The same may be said for other epical and historical personages, such as Alexander the Great (Iskandar) and Suleyman the Magnificent, who appear in illustrated manuscripts of all kinds. These are the kinds of representations that Orhan Pamuk clearly had in mind when he had the character Red proclaim his strength, attraction and desirability. Certainly the Nasrid sultans of Spain and the Ottoman sultans of Turkey recognised red's message of rank,

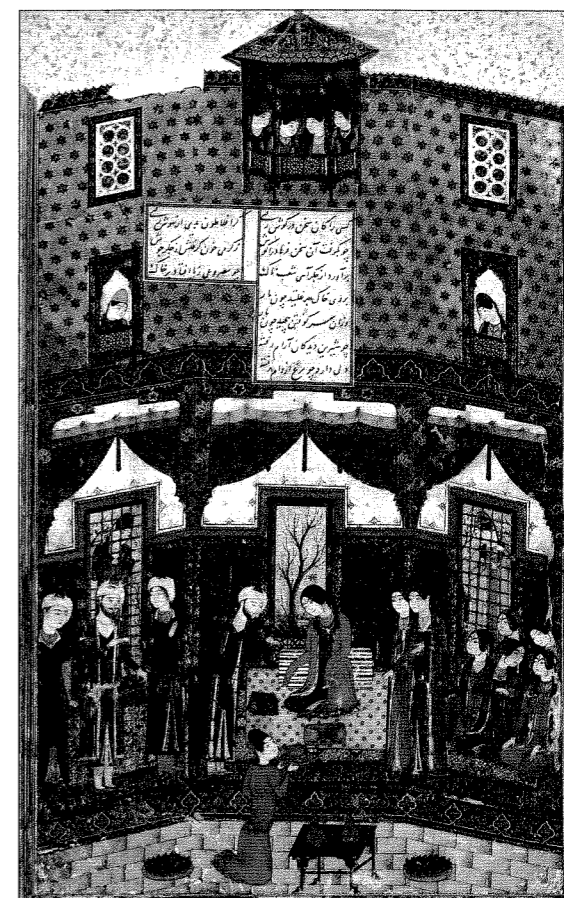


Figure 5

prerogative, power, control and authority given how much of the former's official correspondence was written on red paper and how many of the latter's kaftans came in scarlet and crimson.

A great deal more research is required into red's symbolism in Islamic culture, especially when shifting from the material, earthbound terrain of the colour's potency to the higher, ethereal realm of its cosmic significance. We already have taken note of red how plays an essential role in Qur'an manuscripts in marking the word of God and on prayer rugs in defining the place for prayer and signifying the space towards which prayers flow. Such widespread usage in works of art related to the fundamental beliefs and practices of Islam suggest that perfect red was regarded as the colouristic essence of God. Indeed, Pamuk's Red even asserts that "Life begins and returns to me." It may be at this nexus of sublime synthesis that the positive and negative aspects of red's meaning are finally resolved.

Figure 1: Leaf from a Qur'an, possibly Tunisia, 9th century. The al-Sabah Collection LNS 203 MS



Figure 2: "A Sufi watches Sa'di in ecstasy," illustration in a manuscript of Jami's *Subhat al-Abrar*, Bukhara, dated 1496-97. The al-Sabah Collection LNS 16 MS (C)

Figure 3: Bowl, slip-painted ceramic, Iran, 10th century. The al-Sabah Collection LNS 160 C

Figure 4: Prayer Rug, Turkey, second half 16th century. The al-Sabah Collection LNS 29 R

Figure 5: "Farhad visits Shirin" illustration in a manuscript of Nizami's *Khusrau and Shirin*, Iran, c. 1405-10. Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., F1931.34

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About the journal

Hadeeth ad-Dar is a publication of the Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah. Every year, the Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah organises a series of lectures known as the *Cultural Season*. *Hadeeth ad-Dar* was created to share these lectures with academic and cultural institutions and Friends of the Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah around the world. Cultural Season 15 will get underway in October 2009 and, as with previous years, will present scholars in a wide variety of fields related to arts and culture in the Islamic world.

The Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah (DAI) is a government cultural organisation based on a Kuwaiti private art collection. Since its inception in 1983, DAI has grown from a single focus organisation created to manage the loan of the prestigious al-Sabah Collection of art from the Islamic world to the State of Kuwait to become an internationally recognised cultural organisation.

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