THE WEALTHY GREEK COLLECTORS of Alexandria grew up in the cosmopolitan colonial society of late 19th-century Egypt. Greeks and other foreign nationals had begun to settle in Egypt since the beginning of the century, mainly for commercial reasons, but the turning point came after 1860 when a combination of historical circumstances led to the country acquiring the world monopoly of the cotton trade with the support of the British. In 1882 Egypt became a de facto British protectorate, and the international port of Alexandria, the centre of the cotton industry—the principal business activity of the Greek residents of Egypt, including the Benakis family—housed the country’s largest foreign community. Greeks formed the majority, followed at some distance by Italians, French and British, but the city also contained a significant number of Syrian, Jewish and Armenian residents. Greek-owned commercial houses were already operating between Liverpool, Marseilles, Trieste, Syros and Constantinople and, with the support of European—mainly British—capital, they had amassed considerable wealth. Families such as Benakis, Cherevas, Salvagos and Zerboudakis were among the richest in the country and they represented the Greek element of the international haute bourgeoisie of Egypt. In addition to their prominent social position, these families were at the forefront of the Greek community of Alexandria, making generous endowments to its schools and other institutions, and fostering a spirit of national identity and ethnic cohesion.

The cosmopolitan internationalism of the cultivated upper middle class and the prevailing romantic view of the Greek past were the two main influences on Antonis Benakis’ interests as a collector. The poet Napoleon Lapiathiotis describes Benakis’ residence in Alexandria as having a salon filled with pictures by well-known artists and a vast library of rare editions, while the mansion’s civilised refinement, with its collections of jewellery, arms, medals, porcelain, textiles and fabrics, prompted a foreign resident of Alexandria, the American judge Jasper Brinton, to call it a “museum”.

Paintings and oriental armour seem to have formed the starting-point of Antonis Benakis’ collections. Both had been conventional interests for the European aristocratic and bourgeois collector since the 17th century, but the combination of armour and the other items mentioned by Brinton is also typical of the vogue for applied arts which was current in the second half of the
19th century, encouraged by the international exhibitions of the period. In her book of childhood reminiscences Antonis’ sister, Penelope Delia, describes the family’s visit to the Paris Exhibition of 1889, at a time when her brother, then a student at Rossall School in Liverpool, was already under the influence of contemporary ideas. “Every step brought a new discovery and a new revelation”, she tells us.

These exhibitions put on show for the visitor the achievements of the industrial era, interpreting the products of manufacturing as landmarks of technological progress and objets d’art as artefacts to be prized for their technical and decorative qualities. The exhibits were arranged according to their ethnic origins – as defined by the developed nations – and in the process the commercial and aesthetic values of non-European works were brought to public attention for the first time. The Paris exhibition contained a reconstruction of a Cairo street with genuine fragments from demolished buildings, as well as a model of the architectural complex of Sultan Qaybay, while “oriental” artefacts were created on the spot for the visitor’s benefit. All this attracted the attention of the cultivated collector and prepared the ground for the specialised exhibitions of Islamic art which began to be held in major European cities at the start of the 20th century.

The Paris “Exposition des arts musulmans” of 1903, organised by the collector Raymond Koechlin and the Louvre curator Gaston Migeon, seems to have made a great impression on Benakis. Twenty years later, as president of the Alexandrian cultural society “Les amis de l’art”, he asked Migeon to write the introductory article for an exhibition of objects drawn exclusively from private collections, “L’exposition d’art musulman à Alexandrie”, which he organised jointly with Christoforos Nomikos in 1923. In the following year he acquired five important Iznik ceramics which had belonged to Koechlin.

“Les amis de l’art” began its activities in Alexandria shortly after the end of the First World War. It may well have been associated with the society of the same name in Cairo, which was founded in 1921 and was responsible for the establishment of the Egyptian Museum of Modern Art, inaugurated by King Fuad in 1931. Both had the support of the Egyptian royal family, but the driving force in Alexandria was the society’s president, Antonis Benakis, who patronised its activities “in princely fashion”, in the words of Jasper Brinton. Prior to “L’exposition d’art musulman” it had presented exhibitions of the Faustian artist Kees van Dongen and of the Russian artist Ivan Bibbin, and

other events included lectures by leading figures from overseas such as the French author Georges Duhamel and Adamantios Adamantioú, first professor of Byzantine Art and Archaeology at Athens University. A further exhibition of 17th-century art (presumably European painting) was arranged in Alexandria shortly before Benakis’ move to Athens in 1926.

The Greek and foreign collectors who contributed items to the Alexandria exhibition were nearly all descendants of the first generation of merchants who had long been settled in Egypt and had acquired great fortunes in the late 19th century. They included H.E. Barker, a banker and leading cotton exporter who was president of the British community, R.A. Harari, a Jewish collector – the only one from Cairo – who specialised in metalwork, and other Jewish merchants and bankers such as E. Gea, Max Roia and Baron Alfred de Menasce; also A. Tortilla and his wife, a French couple who were well known in Alexandrian society for their Persian-style mansion. Seventy of the 105 exhibits belonged to Greek collectors – mainly Antonis Benakis and his brother Alexandros, but also Christoforos Nomikos, Stelanos Lagenikos,
Konstantinos Synadinos, Mikes Salvagos, Konstantinos Bakos and Alexandros Choremis. The objects provide an indication of the tastes of the Alexandrian collectors of the period: they included Egyptian woodcarvings, metal artefacts with precious inlay ornamentation, enameled glass, Persian and Ottoman ceramics, fabrics from Persia and Bursa, woven and carpets.

The previous generation of Greek collectors in Alexandria had turned to Egypt's Greco-Roman past, inspired by the prevailing belief that contempor- ary Hellenism was a continuation of the Hellenistic cultural tradition in an- cient Alexandria; indeed, the M. Zmnias and I. Antoniadis collections provided the nucleus of the Greco-Roman Museum in Alexandria. By the turn of the century, however, the Greek community had acquired sufficient self-confi- dence to acknowledge that its roots lay in Egypt, and that it was time to turn the spotlight onto the country's Pharaonic, Coptic and Muslim past. It was no coincidence that this was the period when Greek publications in Egypt began to include articles on Arab literature and Egyptology, and books on Phar- aoonic Egypt, by the dealer Dionysios Kyriakos among others, first made their appearance.

The fascination which Islamic art held for Antonios Benakis and his generation may have followed trends set by collectors in western Europe, but it also had a specifically Greek aspect which was nurtured by the interest in medieval Byzantium and modern Hellenism then current in Greece itself, following the European reappraisal of the Dark Ages. The links between Hellenism and Islam, an unmentionable issue during the period of bitter hostilities with the Ottoman Turks, were already beginning to emerge through the writings of the collector and historian Christophoros Nomikos. Nomikos pursued sub- jects of general historical interest such as the erection of the first mosque in Constantinople in 717, the first military encounter between Arabs and Byzantines at Mu'ta in 629, and the early exchanges between Greeks and Turks, but his prime importance is that he was the first Greek historian to make a study of the Arab peoples. "Arab Stories" (Alexandria 1920) [in Greek], and "Introduction to the History of the Arabs" (Alexandria 1927) [in Greek] attack the distortions arising from the official ethnocentric view of history which glorifies the nation state and treats its neighbours and enemies as objects of hatred and contempt. He does not hesitate to criticize Konstanti- nos Paparrigopoulos, the spokesman of the national historical school, and Constantine Porphyrogenitus, the cultivated Byzantine emperor-scholar, for describing the Arabs as hostile barbarians. "The more we study the history of the Arabs and observe the splendours of their race," he writes, "the more glorious and mighty Byzantium appears to our eyes. Its Arab foes were a truly great and a genuinely civilised people, the only ones who bear comparison with the historical and moral essence that was medieval Hellenism."

Nomikos' passion for Arab culture was kindled when he witnessed the monu- ments of Muslim Cairo: "those proud relics of a civilisation which had fulfilled its destiny". The main focus of his interests as a collector lay in ceramics, and his first book, "The so-called Rhodian Pottery" [Alexandria 1919] [in Greek], was illustrated with examples from his collection of Ottoman Iznik pottery. Earlier collectors in Egypt, such as the celebrated Nikolaos Kazoulis (himself originally from Rhodes) had treated these ceramics as Rhodian, but Nomikos redefined them within the historical context of Ottoman art. His expertise became well known and led to an invitation from the director of the Cairo Museum, Ali Bahgat Bey, to advise on the classification of the ceramic fragments from Fustat, the first capital of Islamic Egypt, to which he had devoted a chapter of "Arab Stories". Nomikos and Antonis Benakis shared similar ideals and interests as collectors, and Nomikos acted as consultant and agent for Benakis in the art market; in 1911-1913, during negotiations for the purchase of weapons and other relics of the 1821 Greek Revolution from Dimitrios Kambourogiou, he took the opportunity to commend Benakis' unique qualities as a collector. The two men jointly organised the exhibition of Islamic art in Alexandria in 1925, and later, after the death of Benakis' brother Alexandros, Nomikos was responsible for cataloguing and assessing his collection of Iznik ceramics.

Antonis Benakis was the exemplar of the assiduous collector, the charis- matic connoisseur who refuses to allow his interests to become diffused and who cannot be diverted from his chosen path. This probably explains why his collection never extended to manuscripts or miniatures, but remained within the bounds of the exhibits shown in Alexandria: wood carvings, metalwork, ceramics, glass and fabrics. He acquired objects from a large number of dealers in Egypt (Fokion Tanos, Ali Bahgat Bey, Gayer Anderson, Maurice Nahman, Dionysios Kyriakos, Boghos Israim etc.), and many in Paris (Kalebjian, Beghan, Vignier etc.), Constantinople (Theodore Makridis) and in the international art market generally. Although only Persian and Ottoman ceramics were exhibited in 1925, Benakis had begun to acquire Egyptian and
other early Islamic pottery in the 1910's, and he gradually accumulated a vast collection both of intact works and of fragments, most of which came from Fustat. His move to Athens in 1936 and the opening of the Benaki Museum in 1931 did not result in a lessening of his interest in Islamic art; on the contrary, he continued his methodical and painstaking accumulation of objects for the collection. In 1930, while the museum was in the course of preparation, he made important acquisitions such as the well-known carved wooden door from Baghdad (fig. 35), and an inlaid brass bowl from Shiraz, dating from the 14th century (fig. 13) was purchased, among other items, just twenty days after the inauguration of the museum; a few years later, in 1936, he acquired the important door panels from Samarra, which were put to secondary use in the rock-cut sepulchre at Tikrit (fig. 20). During the same period he offered to found a Chair in Arabic Literature at Athens University and sponsored the studies of a specialist in Islamic art in Paris. He was in contact with the international academic community, and corresponded with the director of the British Museum, F.J. Forsey, and with A.U. Pope, the director of the American Institute of Persian Art and Archaeology, of which he became a member in 1934. Benakis' collection contained only a limited number of Persian works, but during the 1930's—at the height of the international interest in Persian art—he succeeded in attracting donations for the museum from other Greek collectors, notably the ceramics collection of Marina Lappl-Diomidous.

Despite the problems of the post-war years, purchases and donations of Islamic works continued, the main supplier being the Cairo dealer Pekion Tanos. In 1948 the Museum acquired a group of 36 carved wooden plaquettes from the Fatimid and Mamluk eras and in 1950 eight important Fatimid ceramics were purchased for 450 Egyptian pounds (figs. 11-12). The flow of Fustat fragments did not cease with Benakis' death in 1954, and gifts from Tanos and his family continued as late as 1970.

Until the 1930's collectors in mainland Greece concentrated almost exclusively on objects of archaeological or national interest and even connoisseurs were shocked at the range of interests shown by their counterparts in Egypt. As the painter Konstantinos Maleas wrote in 1924, "The Greeks of Egypt suffer from xenophilia and often seem not to know, and indeed not to care, what being Greek can mean". The change in attitude over the next thirty years can be illustrated by a passage in the novel "The Yellow Envelope" by
Χώρες με μουσουλμανικό πληθυσμό πάνω από 50%
Countries with Muslim population over 50%

Χώρες με μουσουλμανικό πληθυσμό 30-50%
Countries with Muslim population 30-50%
ISLAMIC ART CAN BE DEFINED as the art which is created in a Muslim environment, where Islam is the majority religion or represents the dominant political or cultural force. Works of Islamic art have a religious and/or a secular function, depending on whether they are destined for the place of worship and the holy book of the Muslims—the mosque and the Qur’an—or the centres of secular power and the city—the palace and the bazaar.

The term Islamic or Muslim art was invented at the turn of the 19th century by European scholars who were making a systematic study of the art of the Islamic world for the first time. Descriptions such as “Saracen”, “Persian”, “Arab” or “Muhammadan” art had long been used by earlier generations of travellers, collectors and Oriental linguists, but they now seemed outmoded and inadequate, ill-matched to the new approaches to scholarship emerging in parallel areas such as the Christian art of the middle ages. Early studies focused on the medieval period and in particular on the first formative phase of Islamic art, a period when political and artistic developments emanated from a centralised ecumenical power. The main stimulus in this regard came from archaeological finds and excavations, notably the discovery of the Umayyad “desert palaces” in the late 19th century and the excavation shortly afterwards of the Abbasid city of Samarra which, among much else, revealed to the public the existence of figurative Islamic wall painting.

Two world wars and the subsequent creation of nation states in the Muslim world effectively transformed the political and ideological background to Islamic art studies. The development of national schools of history and the parallel elevation of regional or national forms of art made the term "Islamic" art a controversial one, and it was condemned as a simplistic generalisation fabricated by the European colonialist powers. There is indeed a link between colonialism and the racist theories of the 19th century, since scholars tended to exaggerate the contribution to Islamic culture of the Indo-European Persians while discounting, if not denying altogether, that of the Semitic Arabs and the Turks.

In more recent times the history of the art of Arabia, Egypt, Iran, India, Turkey and other regions has been the subject of continuous academic interest, not only as regards the medieval period, but over the widest possible range of
time and space. Specialisation and the use of inter-disciplinary methods have now turned the scholar’s attention towards areas defined by strict geographical and temporal parameters, which highlight anthropological, sociological or cross-cultural issues and give emphasis to material culture and production techniques. The debate as to the relevance of the term “Islamic” continues, however: it can reasonably be argued that the arts of the Muslim peoples contain many common features which justify the continuing use of the label by the academic world, without in any way minimising the importance of local variations and national traditions.

Islam and Aniconic Art

ABHORRENCE OF IDOLATRY and of the pictorial representation of God lies at the heart of all monotheistic religions, but unlike the Bible, which expressly forbids the worship of idols, the Qur’an contains only indirect references which indicate a general aversion to statues and images. One verse (IV, 90) collectively condemns “wine, games of chance, statues and arrows for divination”, while other passages (VI, 74, XXX, 32–671 describe how Abraham, the progenitor of the Arabs, destroyed the idols and denounced those who worshipped them as gods.

Islam’s opposition to figurative art is expressed in the Hadith, the traditions relating to the Prophet Muhammad, which were codified in the 9th century to form a sacred and legal canon which later became the basis of orthodox Islamic theology. Its strongest exposition can be found in the story of the artist who on Judgement Day will be condemned to hell because he depicted living creatures without having the power to bring them to life; this attempt to usurp the creative powers of God is considered a presumptuous act, since God himself is the only Creator and only he can breathe life into mortal creatures—a tradition which finds support in the Qur’an (III, 49), where Jesus obtains God’s permission to create a bird from clay, and God himself then gives it life. Other traditions can be given a different, or at least a less uncompromising, interpretation. When Muhammad ordered the destruction of the idols in the Ka’ba, at the time of his triumphant return to Mecca, he made an exception for the image of Mary and her Child, which was painted on a pillar. On another occasion Muhammad was disturbed when at the hour of prayer his wife Aisha hung over the door a curtain embroidered with animal and human figures, but he had no objection to the material being cut up and made into cushions.

Muhammad’s uncle, Ibn Abbas, is similarly said to have advised painters to sever the head from the body in depictions of humans and animals, or make them resemble flowers, not living creatures.

The prohibition of the portrayal of living creatures, which was strictly enforced in the mosque and other religious institutions, resulted from the hostility of early Islam to idolatry, and represented a conscious reaction to the image-filled world of the pre-Islamic Near East. The Muslims found in the newly-conquered territories countless representations of God, images and idols venerated for their mystical and magic properties, statues of the Byzantine Emperor and of the Iranian Great King, and cults of local saints and other intercessors with the deity, all of which were in conflict with the basic tenet of their faith, the uniqueness of the One God. The dualism of the Zoroastrian religion, in which the forces of Good confront the forces of Evil, and the tripartite deity expressed in the Christian doctrine of the Holy Trinity both contravene the strict aniconic monotheism of Islam with its creed “There is no God but God and Muhammad is His Prophet.”

The affirmation of Muhammad’s mission as prophetic underlies his mortal nature. Muhammad is not a saint, a saviour or a miracle-worker but rather...
God's last Prophet, who sets the seal on a long line of prophethood. His life and death never became the subject of an iconic tradition like those of Jesus and the Buddha, and, by contrast with the holy books of other religions, the Qur'an was never illustrated.

If the original decision to prohibit representation of God can be explained by reference to prevailing religious practices and political circumstances, the subsequent Muslim attitude to figurative art varies according to period, locality and ideological landscape. Virtually no depiction of a living creature is to be found in North Africa (the Maghreb), presumably because of the area’s religious conservatism. This form of conservatism originated with theologians and jurists who, whether Sunni or Shi’ite, propounded the ban on images, but the extent of its actual enforcement depended on political, social and even aesthetic factors. The official religious art of the Islamic world remains anachronistic, but in other contexts there is a long list of exceptions: for example, despite the theocratic structure of the present-day Iranian state, depictions of heroes of the Iraq war can be found all over the country. Perhaps the most surprising instance of figurative art – apparently in total contradiction to orthodox theology – is the portrayal of Muhammad seated on Buraq, the legendary winged horse, during his miraculous Night Journey to the seven heavens. Like the depictions of Ali and his son Husayn, these representations are generally found as illustrations to Lives of the Prophet and of other Shi’ite martyrs, objects of private devotion which appear at a relatively late date, in the 14th-15th centuries.

Islamic Ornament: Vegetal and Geometric Arabesque

If the non-anthropocentric aspects of Islamic art have somewhat negative connotations for the European viewer, its striking potentialities for ornamentation were appreciated from the start. The term “arabesque” or “moresque” is first found in Renaissance Italy in the late 15th century as a description of the stylised vegetal decoration which originated in the Arab world and became widely disseminated through pattern books published in Italy and France for the use of goldsmiths, bookbinders and other craftsmen. The models were taken from portable works of art, mainly of Mamluk provenance – metal artefacts, fabrics, and leather bookbindings – which were imported to Venice from the Near East. Three centuries later, when the fashion for Orientalism was at its height, European interest in the arabesque was rekindled, this time by the writings of first-hand observers of Islamic buildings. Among the earliest of these was Owen Jones’ The Grammar of Ornament (London 1856), which takes as its starting-point the architectural decoration of the Alhambra palace at Granada.

Serious study of Islamic ornamentation began in 1893 with Alois Riegl who limited his discussion to the vegetal motif. Starting from the vegetal ornamentation of late antiquity he identified its various permutations and stressed that the dominant feature of the arabesque was its potential for “infinite correspondence”. The same method of structural analysis was followed by Ernst Kühnel in 1949: the arabesque consists of stylised tendrils and bi-labeled leaves or half-leaves which sprout unrealistically one from the other, coil, intertwine and bifurcate in a rhythmical and symmetrical pattern which covers the entire surface and has the potential for endless repetition. This vegetal design, which does not correspond to any phenomenon in nature, incorporates palmettes and geometric interlace, medallions and panels, human and animal figures and even Renaissance-style masks.

The ultimate form of the arabesque emerges in the 11th century and is the product of a long period of development. Up to then – and even afterwards in regions such as Fatimid Egypt – its origins in the vegetal ornamentation of late antiquity were still apparent. The transformation of the vine scroll and the acanthus into more abstract forms such as the stylised palmette and the half-palmette was a process which had already begun in the 6th century.
with the decoration of Hagia Sophia and the church of St Polyeuctus in Constantinople. In the early Islamic period the motifs of late antiquity continue in both their Byzantine and their Sassanian forms, but they now have a different place in the hierarchy of ornament. Decoration which was previously supplementary or peripheral to a basically representational work now becomes the dominant motif. A similar development can be observed in the complex geometric ornamentation of mosaic floors, ceilings, window balustrades and walls of early Islamic buildings.

The ultimate divorce of the vegetal motif from naturalism can be observed at Samarra, the early Abbassid capital. The stucco decoration of the palace complex presents a variety of abstract styles but its most striking feature is the endless rhythmic repetition of curved lines terminating in spirals. The beveled relief, the lack of any dominant motif and the wholly abstract nature of the background all contribute to the overall effect. This innovative style originated in the capital, but its repercussions were felt as far as the peripheries of the Abbassid empire: it can be found, for example, on the mosque in Cairo erected in 879 by Ibn Tulun, the son of a Turkish slave, who had served the Caliph at the court of Samarra before becoming governor of Egypt. The adaptation of the beveled style to other materials such as wood and glass persisted in certain areas for a long time, though in Abbassid Baghdad it had been superseded by the geometric and foliate arabesque in the 11th century.

Geometric arabesque is formed of star medallions and polygonal shapes which intertwine and interlock on one or more levels, in a strict geometric pattern which allows for infinite correspondence. The polygonal elements may be undecorated or contain foliate arabesque: in the latter case they combine to form part of the geometric network. The earliest examples of the geometric arabesque, named *girih* after the Persian word for a knot, can be found on the architectural decoration of late 11th-century buildings which survive today in Afghanistan, but they represent provincial variations of a metropolitan style which first appeared in Abbassid Baghdad at the end of the 10th century. The first known instance of the combination of star medallions and polygonal shapes with vegetal arabesques occurs on the frontispiece of the Ibn al-Bawwab Qur'an, executed in Baghdad in 1000/1. From the 12th century onwards geometric arabesque, sometimes combined with the vegetal, dominates architectural decoration, wood-carved panels and the portable furnishings of religious buildings.
The arabesque has been variously interpreted along symbolic or esoteric lines, and has even been credited with pan-Islamic or theological connotations, though most of these are beyond the scope of academic enquiry. It may be more useful to note that Islamic ornamentation, both vegetal and geometric, achieved its classical form during the Sunni revival in 11th-century Baghdad, at the same time as the introduction of cursive script, and that its widespread dissemination was facilitated by the unification of the central Islamic territories under the Seljuq Turks.

In its later development the arabesque incorporates features from Chinese ornamentation which were introduced into the Islamic world from the 13th-century onwards. Lotus and peony palmettes and stylised Chinese cloud patterns now enter the field of the arabesque, which expands to cover entire surfaces, whether the context is the exterior of a dome or the interior of a ceramic or metal bowl. At the same time the classic vegetal arabesque takes on a life of its own, becoming the dominant decorative element in Qur’anic illumination or filling a circumscribed space bordering on Chinese-style floral decoration. The distinction is emphasised by the Turkish terminology: ornamentation imported from China is called hatayi, while the vegetal arabesque derived from the Seljuqs of Rum is known as rumi.

The Art of Writing

ARABIC SCRIPT is a hallmark of Islamic culture and represents its earliest and its foremost artistic expression. Arabic was the language in which the Qur’an, the written form of which comprises the visual manifestation of the uncreated Word of God, was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad. Indissolubly linked with the divine origin of the Qur’an, the use of Arabic script and the Arabic alphabet has been a unifying influence for Muslims all over the Islamic world throughout their history, sanctifying every form of the written word and conferring on it a specifically Islamic symbolic significance.

The imagery and religious iconography of the Christian world was in one area soon supplanted in the Islamic world by writing. Coins of the first decades of Islamic rule reproduced the Byzantine and Sassanian iconography of power, which was symbolised by the portrait of the Emperor or of the Great King. As early as the end of the 7th century, however, the reforms of Caliph Abd al-Malik prescribed the use of Arabic script in the administration and on the coinage, and writing replaced the image as the symbol of power.

Calligraphy, the art of writing, began by fulfilling a religious function, the recording of the Qur’an, and went on to meet the secular requirements of the ruler, the bureaucracy and the literate middle class. The written word was not restricted to the holy book, but was applied to materials of every kind—stone, ceramic, stucco, metal, and fabric. Inscribed on everyday objects in the form of a prayer or of the owner’s name, it also perpetuated the fame of the ruler or the donor through the epigraphic ornamentation of sacred and secular buildings. Writing developed into an organic element of decoration prized as a work of art in its own right, and in the words of Ibn al-Muqaffa, a prolific 8th-century Persian writer and convert to Islam, it represented “a source of ornament for the prince, of perfection for the rich and of riches for the poor.” In similar fashion Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi (d.1023) tells how the Byzantine emperor so admired the appearance of a letter sent to him by al-Ma’mun that he put it on show among his treasures.

The art of the calligrapher required a lengthy period of study and apprenticeship, and its exponents had to conform to strict rules and elevated aesthetic ideals, but they acquired in the process a high social status. In the 15th century individual pages of calligraphy began to be collected in folios and detailed genealogies were made of famous calligraphers and their pupils. Not only
professional scribes but rulers, intellectuals and ordinary believers were involved with calligraphy. The Ottoman Sultan Bayezid II, when governor of Amasya, was caught calligraphy by the celebrated Şeyh Hamdu'llah and the Sultan is reputed to have stood respectfully at the Şeyh's side as he wrote, holding his inkind. On a more personal level calligraphy could also represent an expression of piety: copying out the 99 attributes of God, the name of the Prophet Muhammad or the invocation "In the name of God the Merciful, the Compassionate" was considered a religious exercise, an experience which brought the faithful closer to God.

By the mid-9th century various forms of writing were in use, notably a form of cursive script created exclusively for the administration and Kufic, an angular script apparently named after the city of Kufa in Iraq, which is found mainly in copies of the Qur'an and in inscriptions. In the strikingly austere, quasi-hieratic Kufic certain characters tend to be elongated so as to form horizontal or vertical lines which are often difficult to read. Legibility was not, however, the main purpose, as the Qur'an was intended to be memorised, and the real objective was to produce an artistically pleasing result. Particularly when employed in inscriptions, Kufic lettering gradually acquired decorative features – foliate and floral scrolls, interspersed with knots, braids, and human or animal figures – or took on the appearance of rectangular geometric shapes, in which legibility is almost totally subordinated to the aesthetic effect. It is only a small step from ornamental writing to pseudo-inscriptions – isolated letters or words which merge into the overall decoration and are transformed into symbols which are capable of a variety of interpretations, allegorical, esoteric, magical and prophylactic. The impact made by this emblematic Arabic script on the ornament of the neighbouring territories of Byzantium and western Europe becomes apparent in the 10th-11th century, when it can be found in paintings and on luxury objects made of glass, ceramics and metal.

The need for simplification led to the systematisation and refinement of cursive script, which was written in rounded characters and used in commercial documents. This reform is attributed to the near-legendary figure of Ibn Muqla, the vizier of the Abbasid Caliph in 10th-century Baghdad, who, together with Ibn al-Bawwab (d. 1021) and later Yaqut al-Mustasim (d. 1298), developed a system of symmetrical and proportional writing with six variants, the so-called six styles, the most common of which is naskhi. The popularity...
of cursive script may be linked with the increasing use of paper, which was a cheaper and more practicable material than parchment and thus facilitated the development of book production. Cursive lettering on paper and other materials was designed according to strict geometric canons; for this reason, the characters were not transformed into decorative motifs like Kufic, but were deployed against an opulent vegetal background. In places where the two forms of script were used side by side, Qur’anic texts were written in Kufic and historical inscriptions in cursive, an indication of the contrasting environments, religious and administrative, for which they were created.

The development of cursive script is associated with Baghdad and the political-religious crises of the 10th-11th century which brought the Sunni capital into conflict with Cairo, the capital of the Shi‘ite anti-caliphate. The impenetrable Kufic script was well suited to the esoteric, allegorical Shi‘ite interpretation of the Qur’an, while cursive script became the vehicle for articulating the unique and unambiguous Sunni version of the word of God. It is no surprise that cursive prevailed in 12th-century Egypt after the fall of the Shi‘ite Fatimid dynasty.

The connection between writing and the politics of power remained strong in later centuries and set its mark on whole epochs and dynasties. Mamluk Sultans and their officials swamped the monuments and artefacts of the period with inscriptions which glorify their might and reflect their hierarchically militaristic society. Written in the conventional Mamluk thuluth script, these massive inscriptions reiterate at length a series of laudatory epithets. Quite different in content is the nasta‘liq script used for Persian poetry and prose at the court of the Timurid and Safavid rulers of Iran. The leading role played by poetry in Iranian culture is reflected in its presence on objects of every kind, where instead of the Arabic prayers for blessing on the owner we find verses from Hafiz and other poets who sing the praise of beauty and wine and thus, allegorically, of God.
Islam and Figural Art

The celebrated portrait of Mehmed the Conqueror by Gentile Bellini was a commission from the Sultan himself, yet when Süleyman the Magnificent erected in the Hippodrome at Istanbul the bronze statues which had been taken as booty from Buda he so offended the religious feelings of the capital’s inhabitants that he was subsequently forced to remove them. A distinction between sacred and secular art, between the public and the private space, can be traced back to the earliest Islamic public buildings of the Umayyad era. The Dome of the Rock (692) and the Great Mosque of Damascus (715) are covered in mosaics with architectural landscapes, floral and vegetal designs, and symbols of power, but for their private spaces the Umayyad princes chose to decorate their palaces in the Syrian desert with wall paintings and sculptures depicting the Caliph, the court, and aristocratic pastimes such as dancing, music and hunting. Similar motifs can be found in the fragmentary paintings on the walls of the palace of the Abbasid Caliph at Samarra.

The role of painting in court life is well illustrated by a passage from the Egyptian chronicler al-Maqrizi (1364-1442) which describes a contest between an Iraqi and an Egyptian painter organized by an art-loving vizier of the Fatimid Caliph, al-Mustansir (1035-1094). Reincarnating the celebration competitions between painters and sculptors in antiquity, the story tells how, when challenged to depict a dancer in a niche, the Iraqi showed her emerging from the wall in a red dress against a yellow background, while in the Egyptian’s portrayal (which was declared the winner) she was retreating into the wall, dressed in white on a black background.

Wall paintings from the first centuries of Islam survive in fragmentary form only, but figural motifs drawn from court life represent the diachronically established iconography of power and frequently appear on ceramic, metal, wooden and other portable artefacts. From the 12th century onwards these objects were aimed mainly at the wealthy city elites who constituted the economic and social backbone of Muslim society. Court iconography becomes enriched with representations of genre scenes and mythical creatures, astrological symbols and signs of the zodiac; less commonly, personifications of the labours of the months and vignetettes of everyday life can be found on objects from areas such as Egypt, Syria and Anatolia, where late antique traditions still survived. Such iconography is a regular feature of Islamic art of the 10th to 14th centuries but its character is emblematic rather than purely narrative: in the midst of vegetal ornamentation the figural representations display a cosmic symbolism or hint at the carefree affluence of the life of the ruling elite.

A broader range of iconography can be found in the illustrations to Islamic manuscripts, which represent a purely private form of painting addressed to a specific clientele, the cultivated city libraries attendant on rulers and powerful administrators who could afford the high costs of production. The earliest surviving examples, which date from the late 12th and 13th centuries, come from Baghdad, northern Syria and Mesopotamia and were made for scholarly treatises, works of Arab literature and animal fables. Their debt to Byzantine models is most apparent in the illustrations to translations from the classics and in frontispieces bearing the author’s portrait. A different, purely Arab background is reflected in a group of manuscripts with innovative genre scenes of city and country life. Scenes like that of the camel with the enclosed litter and the two servants were also painted in pattern-books which were probably intended for weavers (fig. 72). The disruption caused by the Mongol invasions of the 13th century and their aftermath halted the creation of new manuscripts.
of Arab manuscripts of this nature, but this was anyway indicative of a more
general development in 14th-century Arab culture which resulted in a near-
complete transition from figural to aniconic art. Representations of living
creatures gradually disappear from both portable artefacts and manuscripts,
making way for exclusively epigraphic, vegetal or geometric ornamentation.
Conversely, in those areas of Iran which took over as centres of manuscript
production, the content and style of painting underwent a radical change.

The primary context of Persian miniature painting is the illustration of Iranian
epic and lyric poetry, the Shahnama (Book of Kings) of Firdawsī, the historical
epic of pre-Islamic Iran, and the works of Nizami, Sa’di, Hafiz, Jami and other
poets. The dignity and the ethos of the mediaeval Islamic world are more
immediately perceptible in poetry than in any other form of art, and Iranian
poetry is perhaps its most striking manifestation. Manuscripts bring to life its
dreamlike lyricism, its feast of natural colour and its mystical symbolism.

Works of supreme quality were created in court workshops such as those
of 15th-century Timurid Herat or 16th-century Safavid Tabriz, where a vast
team of craftsmen, ranging from paper- and leather-makers to calligraphers,
painters and bookbinders, were employed in the creation of sumptuous vol-
umes; one of these, the celebrated Shahnama of the Safavid Shah Tahmasp I
(1524–1576), took no less than ten years to produce.