ROOM III

THE ISLAMIC WORLD IN THE 16th AND 17th CENTURIES

After 1500 three great powers dominated the Islamic world—the Ottoman Turks in Anatolia, the Near East and the Balkans, the Safavids in Iran and intermittently in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the Mughals in the Indian sub-continent. In the 16th and 17th centuries the military competition and religious antagonism between the Sunni Ottomans and the Shi‘ite Safavids overshadowed the political scene in western Asia and had repercussions in the cultural context, where, in spite of reciprocal exchanges, the dynastic art of the Ottomans and of the Safavids were sharply differentiated.
THE ISLAMIC WORLD CIRCA 1700
Ottoman Turks (1281-1924)

AFTER THE MID-13th CENTURY Anatolia fragmented into small Turkoman hegemonies, one of which, the Beyliq of Ottomans, in Bitlis, soon came to prominence. In 1337 the Ottomans crossed the straits of Gallipoli and settled in Europe, and in 1366 they transferred their capital from Bursa to Edirne. Their precipitous advance through most of the Christian Balkan states allowed Mehmed the Conqueror to fulfill the dream which had preoccupied the Arabs since the 7th century, and in 1453 he besieged and captured Constantinople, which he made his capital. The Ottoman empire reached its zenith in the 16th century: in 1514 it defeated the Safavid Persians, and in 1517 occupied Egypt, Syria and Arabia, while by the reign of Süleyman the Magnificent (1520-1566) —whom the Turks call the Lawgiver (Kanunî)— the Empire included most of Hungary and North Africa. The first indications of decline appear in the late 16th century, but it was the abortive siege of Vienna in 1683 which marked the decisive turning-point of Ottoman expansionism.

With a host of bureaucrats and military personnel in its service, the strongly centralised nature of the Ottoman empire was reflected in its art. From the time of Mehmed the Conqueror court workshops had been promoting the artistic taste of the Sultan and his higher officials, which blended Islamic tradition with elements from Western European art. The models for manuscript illustration remained Iranian, but the predilection for depictions of recent historical events led to the introduction of realistic details and topographical features. The design of the Byzantine church of Hagia Sophia had a crucial influence on Ottoman architecture and the complex domed structures scattered throughout the Empire represent the crowning glory of Ottoman art. Decorative arts display a standard Ottoman vocabulary of feathery leaves and naturalistic flowers, often tulips and carnations, combined with arabesque or geometric ornamentation: this style was adopted in all branches of the minor arts —Iznik ceramics, Bursa silks, woodcarving and silverware.

166. Velvet saddle cover
Turkey, Bursa, late 16th-early 17th c.
H: 18½ in. (47.5 cm)
Safavids (1501-1732)

THE SAFAVIDS, originally a militant Sufi order of Shi‘ite inclination from Ardabil in north-west Iran, established a powerful theocratic state in Iran in 1501. The dynasty’s founder, Shah Isma’il, relied on the support of his Turkoman adherents, the so-called Redheads or Kizilbash, who believed that he was descended from Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of Muhammad. The imposition of Shi‘ism as the state religion set Iran apart from its Sunni neighbours and contributed to the creation of a communal ethnic identity.

The Safavids reached their political and cultural apogee in the reign of Shah ‘Abbas (1588-1629). Isfahan became the capital in 1591; it was rebuilt around the ‘maydan’, a vast central square bordered by buildings designed to house the city’s public activities – inns, covered bazaars, mosques and palaces, all with internal courtyards and lofty gateways, and covered with striking turquoise glazed tiles. To balance the power of the Kizilbash, Abbas staffed the administration with Georgians and Caucasians, and in New Julfa, a suburb of Isfahan, he settled the Armenian merchants who held the monopoly of the silk trade with Europe. European diplomatic and commercial missions were dispatched for the first time to Iran, and Europe came into contact with Persian material culture. Luxurious silks and carpets probably represent the aspect of Safavid art best known in the West, and by the reign of Shah Tahmasp I (1524-1576) royal patronage had already transformed carpet-weaving from a traditional domestic craft to a court artform, examples of which were exported to Europe by Armenian merchants. A notable feature of Safavid art is the unrestrained use of human or animal figures in the design of carpets, silken velvets and ceramic plaquettes. The contrast with Ottoman fabrics and ceramics, which display a near total absence of human figures, is striking and may be attributable to religious rivalry and differences of political and artistic tradition.
TOUR OF ROOM III

The outstanding feature of the room is the inlaid marble floor from a 17th-century Cairo mansion, which is flanked by wooden latticed windows and stucco screens decorated with coloured glass made in Egypt between the 15th and 18th centuries (figs. 3 and 113).

Though dating from the Ottoman period, the geometric pattern of the coloured marbles is based on Mamluk prototypes. A key role is played by water: the central space is occupied by a fountain and on the wall beneath the inscribed arch a cascade plays continuously. According to the inscription, the reception hall comes from the seraglio of the Agha Hala, a senior official of the Ottoman empire, who had made the holy pilgrimage to Mecca. The main reception area of Cairo mansions was intended for the master of the house and his guests, who would sit on cushions around the central fountain, drinking coffee, smoking water pipes and perhaps listening to one of the famous storytellers of the Middle East, all to the accompaniment of tinkling water. The niches would have held ceramic and metal household objects, such as coffee pots and rosewater sprinklers.

Latticed windows are a typical feature of the facades and interior spaces of Egyptian architecture, both secular and religious, which allowed for suitable ventilation while shielding the inhabitants from the eyes of passers-by. The projecting ledges would have held jars filled with water to keep it cool.
The city of Iznik (Elýzantine Nicæa) became the Ottoman empire’s principal centre of ceramic production in the late 15th century, supplying the court and the wealthy city elites. The dominant feature of early ceramics is the combination of the cobalt blue colour with arabesques and lotus blossoms, a variation of Persian ceramic decoration, but from the early 16th century, and especially during the reign of Süleyman the Magnificent (1520-1566), polychrome floral motifs acquired a distinctly Ottoman flavour which reflected developments in court painting.

In the centre of the case are ceramic fragments with white ornamentation on a deep blue ground, dating from the last quarter of the 15th century. The fragment depicting palmates with inward-curving tips exemplifies the style attributed to Baba Nakkay, court painter to Mehmed the Conqueror (1451-1481) (Fig. 175). The handle jug fragment is decorated with fleshy bi-labbed leaves curling around the stem, a motif found on the Qur’an calligraphed by Seyh Hamdullah, the protegé and teacher of Sultan Bayezid II (1481-1512) (Fig. 174).

In front are three early 16th-century bowl bases with an alternating blue and white ground. The one on the left bears a small leaves resembling tadpoles, an indication that the bowl was intended for mass consumption. The intact jug next to them, made between 1535 and 1545, is decorated with blue spiralling stems and comma-shaped leaves reminiscent of the ornamentation on the imperial monogram (fragments of the first decades of Süleyman the Magnificent’s reign (Fig. 173). The spiralling stems are also found on a bottle fragment dated 1529 with an Armenian inscription giving the place of manufacture as Kutahya which, with Iznik, was the main centre for this type of ceramic.

The unusual fish-shaped vessel, dated circa 1525, was probably a candlestick (Fig. 177). Above this group is a spherical hanging component of a mosque lamp, which dates from around the mid-16th century (Fig. 178). The decoration, which includes cloud scrolls and three small flowers, suggests a link with a mosque lamp now in the British Museum which is inscribed with a prayer to a local Sufi saint from Iznik, the name of the painter, Musti, and the date 1549. The lamp comes from the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, to which it was presented by Süleyman the Magnificent, probably together with this ornament, at the time of the building’s restoration.
On the left of the case are two deep dishes painted with polychrome flowers on a blue ground (circa 1560) (fig. 179). In the 1540s the İznik potters expanded their chromatic palette with sage green and purple, and introduced new motifs, including tulips and multi-petalled flowers. Particularly impressive is a dish on the right dating from 1550–1560 with a bunch of flowers painted in light purple and green (fig. 180). The cloud scrolls and three-petalled tulips are typical of the workshop of Musti, the painter of the mosque lamp ornament (fig. 178), in the 1550s the introduction of a brilliant red colour gave new impetus to the production of polychrome tiles and other artefacts. The red pigment, which is derived from copper oxides, shows up in relief like seashells under the transparent glaze. A typical example is the dish with a foliated rim, dated circa 1560 (fig. 1).

On the right of the case are dishes painted in blue and turquoise in the Chinese style. An exceptionally fine specimen is the large dish with three bunches of grapes, made circa 1530 (fig. 181). The wine branch motif with three bunches of grapes reproduces the decoration on early 15th-century Chinese porcelain plates, which were stored at Topkapı Palace. The nucleus of the sultans' collection of Chinese porcelain and celadon ware was taken as booty by Selim I after the capture of Tabriz in 1514 and of Damascus and Cairo in 1517.

The motif is frequently found throughout the 16th century; there is another example on the left of the case. In parallel with polychrome painting, potters continued to decorate their ware in a single colour, normally a shade of blue. Chinese motifs were adapted to the Ottoman aesthetic: lotus-shaped petals surround a central rosette, while serrated leaves spring from a stem bearing peonies (fig. 182).

At either end of the case are tankards and jugs from the last quarter of the 16th century. The tankard with angular handle reproduces the shape of traditional Greek wooden vessels, which remained in use up to the 1960s as measures for wine or cereals. On the wall to the left is an İznik tile panel, painted with split leaves revolving around a rosette. Similar wall tiles decorate the mosque of the Grand Vizier Rüstem Pasha in Istanbul, which was completed circa 1568 (fig. 183).
Tinned copper vessels are a standard product of late Mamluk metalwork. Egypt was suffering from a general economic depression through the loss of the trade monopoly in Indian spices, and the supply of gold and silver was insufficient for the decoration of luxurious objects. As a result, craftsmen turned from inlaid to engraved ornamentation, while the technique of tinning, besides giving objects a brilliant sheen, also protected them from oxidation.

At the back of the case are six trays decorated with geometric designs, vegetal arabesques and intertwined Kufic inscriptions (fig. 183). The centre and the cavetto bear Arabic inscriptions wishing the owner of the dish prosperity and the attainment of high office. These dishes, decorated in the centre with the emblem of the officials of Sultan Qaytbay (1468-1496), formed part of the household effects of Mamluk amirs and were used to hold fruit and dry foodstuffs.

The small lunch boxes in front were used to carry food on journeys and military campaigns (fig. 184). The addition of a loop at a later date served to keep the contents secure at a time when assassination of political opponents by poisoning was common practice. When turned upside-down, the lid functioned as a plate, which could rest on the flattened handle. The larger of the two boxes, made for an unnamed Mamluk amir, is unique for its shape and size, while the other was found in a Greek-Orthodox church at Arzana, where it was in second use as a container for consecrated bread.

Other objects in the case include a spouted copper basin with Arabic heraldic inscriptions, which was probably used to carry water (fig. 185). Under the spout is a medallion with the emblem of Sultan Qaytbay and his officials. Next to it is a copper bowl with geometric designs and the emblem of Qaytbay. The Arabic inscription on the rim mentions the owner, Amir Ala ad-Din Huseyn, and the name at some later Ottoman owner of the vessel has been crudely inscribed in an area of worn decoration (fig. 186). Another copper bowl is engraved with an Arabic poem, an inscription bearing the owner’s name and six medallions on the rim with the blazon of an open penda, the symbol of the sultan’s secretary.
In the 15th century Persian craftsmen also gradually replaced silver or gold inlay with engraved decoration which included arabesques and passages from the works of great Persian poets. Vessels were often tinted, as with late Mamluk metalwork, in order to protect food from acidisation, a practice which may have been facilitated by the importation of tin from western Europe. Inscriptions with invocations to the twelve Shi'ite imams are commonly found during the Safavid era (1501–1732) in accordance with Iran's official religion.

On the top shelf are two jugs with vegetal and geometric decoration and inscriptions in verse. They date from the late 15th century and were made in Afghanistan. Of the large number of surviving objects of this type, only a few are ornamented with inlaid silver or gold. The centre of production was Herat, the capital of the Timurid rulers of Iran (1370–1508). A dish in Iran, ornamented with a square geometric design and cloud scrolls, is inscribed on the rim with Persian couplets, the date AH 792 (1397/7) and the name of the owner, Merikhan (fig. 102).

On either side are two hemispherical bowls from 16th-17th century Iran. One of them has an engraved invocation to the Prophet and the twelve imams, while the other is in the shape of an ancient phallic with a raised central boss and was used by the Muslims for magical healing practices. Between the two jugs is an pierced spherical ornament from 16th-century Iran, probably part of a railing, with inscribed medallions invoking Muhammad and the twelve imams (fig. 167). The miniatures reminiscent of manuscript illustrations are a typical feature of Safavid metalwork.

The lower part of the case contains three objects from Iran. One is a pillar torch stand with figures dancing, playing music and wearing animal masks, dating from the first half of the 17th century (fig. 188). This type of torch stand with a holder for a detachable oil container first appeared in Safavid Iran around 1540. A basin ornamented with a rosette on the bottom and scrolling half-palmettes on the wide rim dates from the late 16th century. The rosette recalls the illuminated frontispieces of Safavid manuscripts. The dense chased ornamentation on the round box is typical of the reign of the Shah Abbas I (1588–1629). The four epigraphic compartments on the rim contain verses by the 14th-century Persian poet Hafiz praising the undying fire of love, which he compares to a candle flame. The two candleholders with a bell-shaped body were made in Turkey in the late 15th–early 16th century. One of them (fig. 191), which bears a Greek inscription of a later date, is ornamented with overlapping leaves in a variant of the Iznik ceramic decoration of the reign of Sultan Bayezid II (1481–1512).