THE ISLAMIC WORLD FROM THE 16TH TO THE 19TH CENTURY

From the 18th century onwards the economic and cultural infiltration by European colonial powers had a major effect on the Islamic world. This was the outcome of a long process which had begun in the 16th century, when the centre of gravity of the world economy moved from the Mediterranean to the New World and the Far East. The Ottoman empire and the Qajar state in Iran survived until the First World War as marginal powers, but the Mughal empire in India yielded to direct British colonial rule in 1858.
O ΙΣΛΑΜΙΚΟΣ ΚΟΣΜΟΣ ΓΥΡΩ ΣΤΟ 1900
THE ISLAMIC WORLD CIRCA 1900
Qajars (Iran 1779-1924)

THE QAJARS, a dynasty of Turkoman origin, initiated Iran's transformation from a traditional Islamic society to a modern state. British, Russian, and French diplomatic and military personnel flocked to the new capital of Teheran in an attempt to bring the country within their own sphere of influence. As the Russian forces penetrated the Caucasus, Iran became the theatre of conflict between the Tsarist empire and Britain, which was trying to keep open its communications with India. Despite this the reign of Fath Ali (1797-1834) saw a recovery of the monarchy's authority, which was paraded at court with oriental ostentation. The predilection for figural art which originated in the Safavid era intensified, with a new emphasis on portraiture, notably representations of the Shah which promoted his public image through life-size oil paintings and enamelled gold miniatures. The wealthy classes followed the court taste for enamelled jewellery and household objects which were painted with erotic or romantic scenes of couples and women surrounded by flowers, in a hybrid of Persian and European styles.

Mughals (India 1526-1858)

THE MUGHAL DYNASTY owed its name to its founder's descent from the Mongol conquerors, Genghis Khan and Timur. The Sunni Mughal empire reached its zenith in the 16th and 17th centuries, when it incorporated North and Central India with capitals at Agra and Delhi, and extended its cultural influence to both Muslim and Hindu areas of the Indian sub-continent. The art of the Mughal rulers derived largely from their Timurid forefathers, but the vast wealth of the country, its increasing contacts with Europe and the influences from Hindu culture all contributed to its individual character. Notable features include the extravagant use of precious stones—often of immense size—ivory and jade, the production of exceptionally delicate fabrics and hangings, and the adoption by court artists of portrait painting and western-style perspective.
TOUR OF ROOM IV

Next to the map beside the door is an early 16th-century Persian fabric, woven with polychrome silks and metallic threads (Fig. 213). It contains repeated motifs of a Chinese dragon attacking an ox and a cheetah pouncing on a wild ass against a background of small flowers, deer and leopards. The superb quality of the weaving and the near-miniature size of the motifs are typical features of early Safavid silks. On the right is a wooden mihrab intended for private worship. It was made in 17th-18th-century Iran and is ornamented with a relief foliate arabesque. The few surviving traces of colour indicate that the carved surface was originally painted. Next to the mihrab is a silk embroidered fabric from Turkey (18th-19th-century) with a pattern of large flowers, the details of which are highlighted with gold and silver thread.

The recess to the right contains a wall panel of 17th-century iranitiles painted with the popular Ottoman quintamani motif, which combines three circles with two wavy lines and resembles a tiger skin (Fig. 216). This emblematic motif is associated with the Ottoman dynasty and its origins in the Turkic tribes of the high Mongolian plateaus. Similar tiles are found in the Fountain Room at Topkapi Palace in Istanbul.
The ceremonial processions of the Ottoman cavalry required special parade gear to show off the wealth of the Empire. The helmets of the riders and their horses' equipment were made of gilded copper; examples are displayed at the back of the case, together with accessories to protect the jaw, the cheeks and the neck, and nasals for the horses (fig. 217).

All bear the engraved mark of the arsenal of St Irene, which was housed in the Byzantine church of that name at the entrance to Topkapi Palace. Part of its contents were sold off to European collectors in 1839, when Sultan Abdülmecid decided to free up space there. The third helmet from the left has an inscription with the date AH 1007 (1598) below the mark (fig. 218).

At either end of the case are two 19th-century double-edged Persian daggers, with curved watered-steel blades and hilts made of walrus tusk. The relief representations of a princely couple and cupids dancing are typical of the Qajar era (fig. 219). On the left, next to the dagger, are a grease container for lubricating weapons, and two flint strikers from 18th-19th-century Iran, which were also used as screwdrivers (fig. 220).

The pair of iron Shirgans from Deccan, with foliate decoration and inlaid gold inscriptions, are a good example of 17th-century Indian metalwork. In the middle of the case is a large 19th-century bronze axe with relief inscriptions and representations of birds in overlaid gold, evidence of the technical mastery of Persian armourers of the period (fig. 221).
On the right are symbolical and a flute for use in parade and in war. Flutes, which were sometimes two metres long, were played on the battlefield to stave off the charge and to boost the soldiers' morale. Beside them are 17th-century Ottoman powder cases made of wainus kuslas (Fig. 222), 18th-century bird-shaped brass powder case from Iran, and an elaborate butcher's steel, which bears a stamp with the signature of the maker, a certain Khara.

On freestanding bases between Cases 1 and 2 are two 15th-century chain mail shirts. The steel plates, which provide additional protection for the chest and back, are decorated with arabesques and inscriptions, partly in inlaid silver. The shirt on the left bears engraved passages from the Qur'an (Fig. 223), and that on the right some of the 99 holy attributes of Allah.

Above the shirts are two contemporary conical steel helmets, one of which is grooved to imitate the folds of a turban (Fig. 224). The particular care lavished on the engraved foliate arabesques and the inlaid silver inscriptions of good wishes indicates that the helmet was part of the booty seized by the Ottomans in 1472 when, under the leadership of Mehmed the Conqueror, they crushed the Akkoyunlu Turks in their last stand in south-east Anatolia. The military equipment of the Akkoyunlu (literally "White Sheep"), made in Anatolia or Iran, was taken to Istanbul and housed in the arsenal of St Irene, whose mark it bears. The helmet on the right, a near-contemporary of the other, bears on the nasal a tear-shaped medallion with the word Allah.

Between the chain mail shirts are Shi'ite processional standards from Iran, dating from the 16th to 19th centuries, which were used during the religious festival of 'Ashura, the day of mourning for Husayn, Muhammad's grandson, when his martyrdom was reenacted. The five fingers of the standards symbolise the five members of the Prophet's family. Muhammad himself, his daughter Fatima, his cousin and son-in-law Ali, and his grandsons Hasan and Husayn (Fig. 224). The standards, of varied shape and decoration, served to distinguish the guilds taking part in the procession. The almond-shaped standard with dragon finials bears a pierced arabesque design and inscriptions invoking Ali and Husayn (Fig. 225).
Shelves at either end of the case hold two iron primers, with a stopper and suspension chain, from the northern Arabian peninsula. On the back wall are a number of daggers and short swords from various parts of the Ottoman empire. They include two typical 19th-century Caucasian swords, one of which has a hilt and sheath decorated with inlaid ivory panels (fig. 226), and a small 16th-century Ottoman dagger whose blade is ornamented with an inlaid gold arabesque (fig. 227). The inscription on the back contains a verse from the Ottoman poet, Necati, which probably has erotic connotations: "I asked to drink a drop of water from your sharp sword; what would you have lost, had you let me drink but once?", and a second one in the centre are superb examples of the elaborate silverwork of the tribes of the Arabian peninsula. Produced in Oman, the Hijaz and Mukalla in southern Yemen (fig. 228), they were attached to their owner's belt and constituted symbols of status and prestige.

On the bottom shelf at the left are two elaborate firearms. The first is a snaphance gun—a kind of rifle—from Isfahan, the butt of which is ornamented with gold, silver and coloured glass paste (fig. 230). Inscribed on its grooved barrel are the date of manufacture AH 1131 (1718/9), the names of the owner and the maker and some of the 99 attributes of Allah. The second is an Ottoman rifle, whose butt is decorated with vegetal designs and animals in inlaid ivory and mother-of-pearl (fig. 231). It was made in northern Greece in the early 19th century.

To the right is a wooden blunderbuss with silver ornamentation, made around 1880 in Algeria and fitted with a European-type cock and barrel (fig. 229).
At the front of the case are two Ottoman yataghans from Fosia in Bosnia; the gilded grips are ornamented with coral and the blades, inscribed with the dates AH 1209 (1794) and AH 1227 (1812) respectively, are engraved with the name of the owner and the signature of the craftsman (fig. 232). Yataghans have a slightly curving blade and a grip with pommels in the shape of two prominent ears. They were widely used from the 17th to the 19th century and were one of the standard weapons of the Ottoman army.

In the centre is one of the most important items of the collection, an Ottoman sword with a 16th-century watered-steel blade inscribed with Qur'anic verses and invocations to Allah and his sword Dhu'lfikar (fig. 233). The silver hilt, of later date, is engraved with the names of the owner and the maker, al-Sa'id Husayn ibn al-Sa'id Ahmad, and the date AH 1302 (1884/5). Blades of watered steel, famous for their durability, flexibility and iridescent surface were made according to a complicated secret formula which was transmitted by swordsmiths from generation to generation.

Beyond Case 2, on a separate stand, is a bronze helmet with benedictory inscriptions in inlaid silver. It was made in the 15th century in Iran or Anatolia. On the wall to the right hang two of the famous velvet fabrics from 16th-17th-century Bursa. The larger is made of two strips of fabrics, each one woven with rows of two large carnations (fig. 234). In its several variants this became the most popular motif for Bursa velvets, and is found on garments, hangings and cushion covers.

In a recess opposite the entrance to the room is a panel of wall tiles from the peak period of the bric workshops (figs. 7 and 278). They come from the summer palace of the Ottoman Sultan Selim II (1566-1574) at Edirne (Adrianople), which was destroyed in 1878/9 during the Russian occupation of the city, when the tiles were dispersed among private collections and museums in Western Europe. The recent reconstruction has reunited tiles on loan from the Caire teen Foundation in Lisbon with those already in the possession of the Benaki Museum. The painted sections reproduce the patterns as tiles in the Victoria and Albert Museum, and those with crescent-shaped crowns of the dome, as shown in the drawing in fig. 279, are in the Museum of Islamic Art in Cairo.
High up on the walls flanking the recess are two identical 19th-century Ottoman dome finials (fig. 238). Below are two panels of wall tiles from Iznik. The panel on the left, decorated with feathery leaves enclosing red medallions bearing tulips (fig. 237), can be dated circa 1588, as similar tiles are found on the shrine of the martyr Eyyûp, which was erected at that date just outside Istanbul. Eyyûp was Muhammad's standard-bearer, who died a heroic death in 688 during the first siege of Constantinople by the Arabs. The shrine was built over his tomb, which was miraculously discovered in 1453 during the siege of the city by Mehmed the Conqueror, and became the basilica for the accession ceremony of the Ottoman Sultan. The panel on the right-hand wall is decorated with a repeat pattern of eight-petalled rosettes, lotus blossoms and feathery leaves. Tiles of this type were a standard product of the Iznik workshops during the second half of the 16th century.

On separate stands near the recess are two footed basins made of copper (fig. 236). They were manufactured in Egypt or Syria in the late 15th–early 16th century. The engraved arabesques, geometric patterns and inscriptive verses decorating the surfaces are typical of late Mamluk metalwork from just before the Ottoman conquest of 1517.

Further along, hanging on the wall, are two Ottoman velvet fabrics from Bursa. The first one is a 17th-century cushion cover ornamented with carnations. Velvet cushion covers for Turkish sofas were the main product of the weavers of Bursa from the late 16th century and were often woven in pairs. Next comes another velvet fabric from the second half of the 16th century, displaying vegetal compartments, tulips, pomegranates and carnations (fig. 238). The design recalls Italian velvets, which were exported to Ottoman markets from the 15th century.

On a separate stand beside the fabrics is a bronze helmet with a pointed tip and inscriptions running around its base. Helmets of this kind were made for ritual use in Persia in the early 19th century and were worn by warriors participating in the annual enactment of the Shi'a passion in the month of Muharram.
Case 3 and most of Case 5 contain items from the Iranian jewellery collection of Arghin Salavagou (1883-1972), the youngest sister of Antonis Benakis. The 240 objects which make up the collection, most of which were purchased in the early 20th century in the markets of Alexandria and possibly Cairo, constitute the largest collection of jewellery of the Qajar era (1779-1925) outside Iran. The gold ornaments with their plethora of precious stones match the lavish dress of the court and the wealthy bourgeoisie, both male and female. The use of painted enamel and of motifs inspired by European art had been introduced into Iran in the 17th century, but it became standard in the Qajar era, when Persian court artists were sent to study in Venice and came into direct contact with European painting.

At the back of the case is a group of gold necklaces and bracelets ornamented with enamel, pearls and precious stones: all were made in Persia except for two 19th-century gold necklaces from Uzbekistan. The front of one is ornamented with turquoises, which were believed to be endowed with magical properties, and the back was made of gold leaf with embossed vegetal designs (fig. 240). Immediately below are two rows of gold earrings and eagle-shaped ornaments, studded with precious stones and pearls (fig. 239).

At either end of the case are two gold water-pipe bases, enameled with plant motifs in vivid colours and human figures (fig. 241). Tobacco was cultivated in many parts of Iran in the 19th century, and represented a major export. The area around Shiraz produced the finest quality tobacco which was reserved for nargile smoking, a favourite pastime of the Persian aristocracy.

The elaborate equipment used by the smoker included the socket for the tube and the bowl in which the tobacco was burnt; superb specimens of both are exhibited towards the front of the case. The gilded bowls were often decorated with themes from Western art, such as portraits of European nobility and groups of figures suggesting the Virgin and Child and the Holy Family (fig. 242).
Artists did not neglect classical themes such as the nightingale singing in a rosebush (fig. 243), an allegory first found in 16th-century Iranian literature. The rose can symbolise either the beloved or the Prophet Muhammad, from whose body a drop of rosewater fell during his ascension to heaven, while the nightingale represents the lover or the poet who sings the praises of eternal beauty.

Towards the front are two gold armlets with long strings and box-shaped amulets, cases for holding miniature Qur’ans (fig. 246). At either end of the case are small velvet and leather purses, decorated with gold thread, enamel and pearls, while the lavish sets of gold buttons and beads inlaid with precious stones evoke the sumptuous costume and extravagant lifestyle of the Iranian noblemen of the time.

Towards the right of the case is a rare Persian agate seal dated AH 1256 (1840/1), a gift to the British colonel D’Arcy Todd, who was engaged in the turbulent Anglo-Russian conflict for control of Iran and Afghanistan (fig. 247). D’Arcy Todd played a decisive role in Iran’s only victory over the Russians, in 1812, and he was duly honoured by the Qajar Shah, Fath Ali. The importance of the battle to the Iranians is apparent from its depiction in an oil painting which used to hang in the palace of the Qajar prince Abbas Mirza and is now in the Hermitage. The seal comes from a later period when, between 1839–1841, D’Arcy Todd was the British political officer resident at Herat. He was appointed by the British Governor of India immediately after the unsuccessful siege of Herat by the Persian army which was backed by the Russians. The seal has a border carved with Persian verses and a central part inscribed with the name of D’Arcy Todd referring to him as the “envoy of the mighty government of England from the governor of the lands of India”. The handle of the seal is decorated with enamelled floral motifs typical of the Qajar period and with a portrait of a European nobleman, perhaps the seal’s owner.
A central position in the case is occupied by a writing chest belonging to a calligrapher from Gujarat, a region of western India known from 16th-century European and Indian sources as a centre of production of objects made with inlaid mother-of-pearl (fig. 248). The chest is inscribed with Persian verses and bears the signature of Shaykh Muhammad Munshi Ghaznavi and the date AH 995 (1587). A pen case from the same writing chest with identical inlaid mother-of-pearl ornamentation, and with the signature of the same craftsman and the same date, can be seen in the Freer Gallery of Art in Washington. Such objects were exported to the Ottoman and Safavid empires and to Europe. They are first mentioned in European sources in 1587, when Vasco da Gama is recorded as being presented with a chest ornamented with shells from Cambay, a port in western India.

On either side of the casket are a group of Iranian works dating mainly from the 17th century. The large figure of a cock (fig. 249) and the steel jug with gold and silver overlay come from the celebrated workshops of Tehran, which received commissions for steel artefacts from European residents and visitors. At the front are four double-edged knives with handles made of walrus bone. On the handle of one of these is a carved representation of an enthroned prince and an inscription with the date AH 1222 (1807).

On either side of the knives are mirror cases with various scenes painted in lacquer. In Persian poetry and mysticism mirrors symbolised the presence of God, whose creations were reflected in them. On the cover of one of the cases is a young follower of a religious order, wearing the conical hat of the dervishes with its twelve pleats which represent the twelve Shi'ite imams (fig. 250). Nearby are two ceramic vessels decorated with a blue glaze and lustre paint which were made in the second half of the 17th century, a period when this medieval technique was being revived.

The case also contains a group of small Indian ivory caskets, which from the 17th century onwards were exported to the markets of the East and West. They were mainly produced in areas where Europeans had settled, and they adopted western shapes and decorative features. On the left is a casket with dotted circles and pierced plaquettes depicting mythical animals, which was made in southern India in the 19th century (fig. 251). Another casket, ornamented with incised floral scrolls and lanceolate leaves, dates from the second half of the 18th century.