الَّذِينَ كَفَّارٍ أُمَّةٌ مُّنْكَرُونَ...
Abu Zayd al-Harith sailing
Respectful Recognitions "Sessnayn"
Abu al-Hasan (1044–1122)
1298
Attributed to al-Wasâj (13th century)
Paris, Bibliothèque 3647 (ff. 119 v°)
Foreword

This is not a history book. It does not provide an account of the often complex and sometimes incomplete story of the evolution of book art and painting in the Islamic world—painting born in the lands that extend from the Atlantic Ocean to China, the product of an extremely diverse range of regions and periods. Nor is this volume a technical introduction to what is known as codicology—the exploration of a whole series of activities ranging from paper manufacture to the decoration of bindings—a field of study that allows us to reconstruct the creative process that lies behind a book or a single page and in so doing to explain how it comes to be the way it is. This forms part of the contemporary study of Arab and Iranian books which has shown such advances in recent years. However, the meticulous research into the study of images and the books and albums in which they appear is too limited to contribute usefully to our purposes here. Nor shall we be devoting much attention to the question of attribution of paintings to familiar or lesser known artists; this is a matter for research and is associated more with the requirements of collectors of the time and of modern art enthusiasts in the West. If, as here, the focus is on pure aesthetics or the simple pleasure experienced by the majority of those who admire these works, the usefulness of such an approach would be somewhat limited.

We shall, however, be addressing the history, and in particular the cultural history of the Muslim world, not systematically but where we feel it important in order to place an image in its context of time and space. We shall also have occasion to describe the technical qualities of these images, and their method of creation. We shall of course discuss what characterizes the work of artists such as Behzad or Sultan Muhammad, but only when we believe such identification to be important to the understanding of an image because, unlike the great canvases of Western and Far Eastern art, the names of the artists who executed these book illustrations are rarely known.

Our main objective, which is both simple and ambitious, is reflected in the album masterpieces found in the second part of this book: “Invitation to reverie and reflections of reality.” These images have been chosen in part because they illustrate important moments in the history of this form of painting, but principally for their aesthetic value. We shall endeavor to capture not only their intrinsic beauty as unique works of art but also their importance as monuments to a culture that is different from the more familiar cultures of the West and the Far East. The fact that the majority of these pieces originated in thirteenth-century Iran demonstrates that this century was, in Iran as elsewhere—in Italy and the countries of northern Europe, for example—a truly great century for painting. The text accompanying each image explains the subject, describes its particular visual features and seeks to highlight its aesthetic qualities. However, our selection is the result of more or less arbitrary judgments rather than a consensus based upon the properties of images in the Muslim world. Some manuscripts we have selected are richly illustrated, others hardly at all, even though they remain important for the history of this art. We have not aimed to be either exhaustive or objective. Consequently, not all the pages of a manuscript are necessarily reproduced in their entirety. Our approach has been to favor details, which are so often more original and more appealing than the full page.

The album of images with commentaries is preceded by an introduction placing it in its temporal and spatial context and explaining the primarily cultural constraints imposed by the Islamic religion in particular, but also by other historical contingencies. We shall explain why certain periods and certain areas of the Muslim world gave rise to so many representations of people and animals, although public opinion and, today, a passionate fanaticism, firmly forbids—all but incorrectly—any representation of living beings. We shall identify the main centers of artistic creation and discuss the context in which those paintings were executed. We shall try to reconstruct the working methods of the artists and calligraphers who produced them, to point out the principal subjects that inspired them and identify the patrons who encouraged their efforts and rewarded the artists by collecting their works.

In the final section, following the album, we shall expand on our interpretations of these images, as they represent key moments in the history, society, faith, devotion, and many other aspects of a culture which, though it maintained constants in its way of life and in its judgments, also evolved over time, with considerable territorial and other variants. What were these constants?

This volume ends with the seventeenth century. There are two main reasons for this. Firstly, from 1700 onwards, the main centers of Muslim art began to lose their originality and vitality and, at times, even the quality of their art. Book and page illustrations gave way to other more dominant art forms. Moreover, the immediate presence of European art and culture changed the creative process and the way images were received. Among the Ottoman Turks, Iranian Qajars and the later Indian Moghuls, new fusion arose which in many respects relied on a universal artistic language and which belonged to the pre-modern period that followed the Baroque. These changes evolved further still in the twentieth century when, with some exceptions, Turkish, Indian, Arab and Iranian artists—often
The selection of images and the nature of the commentaries that accompany them are the product of many years spent contemplating, teaching and indeed studying the arts of the Muslim world. It is only relatively recently that I have begun to focus specifically on post-fourteenth-century painting and I owe a great debt to the energy, skill and creative imagination of a new generation of researchers who have taken up the baton from the great collectors and experts who, from R.E. Robinson and Iran Cheunkia, to S. Cary Welch, created the classifications through which we understand this art, and from historians who, from Richard Ettinghausen to Priscilla Norman, Eleanor Sims, and Ada Adamova, have sought to capture and place certain images in their immediate context. Any errors are my own, not those of this new generation which has contributed, directly and indirectly, to what is of value in the pages that follow. I should like to take this opportunity to thank Ch. Adele, Sheila Carley, Massimiliano Farhad, Francesca Lent, Souran Mohbani-Chivaani, Mika Natif, Bernard O’Kane, Eric Pariat, David Rosborough, M. Shreve Simpson and many others for their help, direct and indirect, over the course of the last few years.