A thousand years of images
From the Atlantic Ocean to China

FIRST STEPS

From the time of its creation in the seventh century, the Muslim world began developing a culture of books and script. Once the art of the Qur'an had been established—according to Muslim tradition by Caliph Uthman around 650 AD—it was disseminated to every corner of this immense empire, orally and in the technique of writing on papyrus, parchment, and, eventually, paper. Calligraphers of the Arabic language have begun to bring order to the chronology and typology of thousands of pages of sacred text preserved in many corners of the globe. Around forty years ago, a precious collection of around 15,000 manuscript leaves of the Koran was discovered at the Great Mosque of Sam'm in the Yemen. Study of these leaves has only just begun, but already these pages and others found in collections all over the world lead us to two conclusions.

Firstly, the angular script, often known as Kufic, appears in a variety of forms from one manuscript to another, but remains constant on each page and within each manuscript (figs. 3 and 4). These forms, often very different from one another, appear to suggest an aesthetic concern with the creation of letters, with the composition of lines and indeed pages. These are the first steps in calligraphy, which was to become one of the great fields of Islamic art. Another feature, perhaps partly inspired by the practice of the surrounding Christian world, is the addition of decorative elements (fig. 5) sometimes serving to indicate beauty in the text, but more often to render it visually attractive, highlighting certain passages by surrounding them with geometric or plant motifs. In one exceptional case—two leaves generally dated to the eighth century—an entire page is devoted to reproductions of architectural structures. The principal example is unfortunately damaged (fig. 6). This appears to be a frontispiece of the Koran showing a schematic representation of a hypostyle mosque, with a handsome façade, interior courtyard, and axial nave leading to a miḥrāb (a niche indicating the direction of prayer), and various other details of the Muslim place of prayer. It seems likely that this was a representation or evocation of a particular masjid rather than a generic one, but various other explanations of what remains a very mysterious image also exist. Whatever the true explanation may be, this very large page (51 x 47 cm / 20 x 18 in) is the oldest and most unusual example in a Muslim book of an image occupying an entire page and associated with a manuscript of the Muslim sacred text.

The significance and visual importance of these pages of the Koran are indisputable, however, as none of the surviving fragments has either a date or a location; it is only by theory and conjecture that we believe it to have been produced in one of the great cities of early Islam: Medina in Arabia, Damascus in Syria, Kufa, Baṣra or perhaps Baghdad in Iraq or Sam’ā in the Yemen. This is simply educated speculation and should be treated with caution. It seems likely that it was in these towns and cities that manuscripts were copied, but it remains very difficult to establish the characteristics of each school.
THE BIRTH OF BOOK ART

In order to try to understand the contribution made to book art by the early centuries of Muslim civilization, we need to adopt a different approach.

The period from 650 to 1150 AD saw the formation of a Muslim state and the development of a new, universal Islamic culture. The importance of the latter in areas such as law, and the transformations that took place in science and in philosophy through the impact of Hellenistic and Hindu knowledge are already well known. But these were also revolutionary centuries in terms of agriculture and craftsmanship: new techniques for applying color transformed the arts of glasmaking and ceramics.

In the second half of the eighth century, the advent of paper (see pp. 36–37) played a major role in the dissemination of new knowledge among levels of society whose knowledge until then had depended entirely on oral transmission.

New centers of production sprang up. Relative peace and flourishing trade contributed to the development of Egypt, Central Asia and Andalusia, which joined more central regions such as Syria, and especially Iraq, the seat of the caliphs and the main administrative center. There was also constant contact with other major centers of contemporary art and culture such as Byzantium, the Mediterranean region and, above all, China.

The paintings dating from these centuries are known to us on the one hand from frescoes in the Omayyad palaces of Greater Syria, the Abbasid palaces of Iraq, and recently excavated palaces in Central Asia and Afghanistan; and on the other from the decoration of certain artifacts, in particular ceramics. A few rare texts describe the reactions of the patrons who commissioned these paintings but do not allow us to draw conclusions about the characteristics of taste of that period.

With the exception of Koran decoration, we know almost nothing of the appearance of books; the few leaves of paper with paintings or drawings that have survived are generally of very poor quality or too fragmentary for us to be able to judge their artistic quality (fig. 6). However, these early centuries do allow us to identify three trends that would go on to leave a permanent impression on the periods that followed.

First, a true art of calligraphy began to develop from the original angular script. This was followed by cursive script that acquired its own rules of letter composition known as Kufic or proportioned script (see p. 55). This art, formalized in the early tenth century, underwent variation over the course of the centuries and up to the present day, transcending Arabic, then Persian and finally Turkish. Calligraphers became the best-known artists and craftsmen in the history of art in Islamic countries. Their names, the history of their training and their careers feature in written sources and many albums, to which we shall later return, have preserved collections of specimens of script associated with great masters such as Yaqut (thirteenth century) and Karahissar (fourteenth century). However, from our twenty-first-century viewpoint it remains difficult to assess or even to describe the quality of the detail of this calligraphy. We rightly refer to the elegance of the proportions between the letters, the varied rhythms imposed on the vertical letters and indeed the relationship between the words, sentences and the empty page on which they are written. But these are merely descriptive terms that only partially reflect the often highly poetic judgments related in traditional texts. Only a lyrical or poetic language could express and make us feel the evocative power of a fine script. Indeed, these qualities judgments were not expressed through words but through imitation of the script of a master calligrapher. The calligraphic art was necessarily humble without being modest and his capacity for imitation provided over originality. To some extent this principle applies to all the arts of the Islamic world, at least up to the seventeenth century, just as it is true, to some extent, of Western art up to the fourteenth century.

Secondly, the work produced in these early centuries was characterized by the greater importance given to the secular rather than the religious arts, and by exchanges with the creative art of other civilizations.

Many private palaces and residences of the time contained rooms entirely decorated by ornamental and figurative paintings that took their inspiration from the secular literature of the period. Artifacts, richories and simple ceramics often reflected, in both their form and decoration, everyday activities such as drinking, eating, applying fragrance, producing light, etc. What makes this secular art particularly remarkable is the richness of the subjects represented and the styles employed which range from...