from realism to abstraction. At the time, patrons were mainly royalty but also included members of the urban bourgeoisie whose commercial activities brought the Muslim world into contact with Africa, India, China and Europe. The Muslim world's ability to adapt technically enabled it successfully to import and modify techniques originating elsewhere, especially in China (fig. 7, see pp. 25, 72–73 and 191–193).

While the art of Islamic lands may have been influenced by bordering civilizations, the taste of the Muslim world also spread across the rest of the world, in particular via artifactual and fabrics manufactured in its towns and cities. For many, Islamic taste outclassed Christian secular art. The ceiling of the Palatine Chapel in Palermo, decorated with paintings commissioned by the Norman king of Sicily in the first half of the twelfth century, is a remarkable example of secular themes originating in the Muslim world and adopted by a Christian monarch.

This preponderance of secular, often figurative art appears to be at odds with the third characteristic trend of Muslim art during these centuries, known as aniconism (a term preferable to iconoclasm, as the destruction of images was relatively rare at this period). Aniconism is a question much debated by scholars as well as by political and ideological authorities in many Muslim countries. To simplify matters a little, one could say that the revolution of the Koran proclaims the creative omnipotence and unique majesty of God and rejects any form of idolatry. At a period when, in the Christian world as well as in the Buddhist and Hindu worlds, images reflected and depicted the divine world and played a precise and complex role in liturgies and expressions of devotion, the Islamic world refused to follow this dominant trend and, little by little, drew up a doctrine that rejected the representation of living beings that might lead to idolatry or compete with the divinity, the one and only creator. This rejection of figurative representation affected all the arts directly associated with the expression of the faith—esquires for example, and holy books—and, more broadly speaking, all art accessible to the general public. However, numerous formal or implied modifications were to bring a certain flexibility to the aniconic doctrine, the principal one being to establish a difference between the public arts, in general free of images (with a few well-known exceptions), and the private arts, which enjoyed a greater freedom of expression and taste.

These three characteristics—calligraphic script, the richness of the secular art market and aniconism—still form part of the Muslim cultural tradition, with constant modifications imposed by the modern and contemporary environment. They were, however, never laid down in written doctrine, if only because the Islamic world has no single institution recognized by all as being empowered to proclaim and maintain rules proposed or imposed by the Muslim faith. However, these elements do form a groundwork that has always affected sources of artistic inspiration and the judgments made about them in almost all Islamic cultures, even though it is not always easy to identify or evaluate their presence or influence on artistic creation.

![Chinese-inspired dragon](https://example.com/image.png)
THE FIRST BLOSSOMING: THIRTEENTH-CENTURY ARAB PAINTING IN IRAQ

The second half of the twelfth century saw the dawn of—and indeed an explosion of—images in all countries of the Islamic world, particularly in the central area of Syria, Iraq, Iran, Egypt and newly conquered eastern Anatolia. All types of artistic techniques were involved and illustrated books in particular. Two subjects dominated this art: on the one hand what could be termed the applied sciences, often attributed to ancient Greek writers. These included manuals of antidotes against snake bites such as the Kitab al-dinay (see pp. 20–21 and pp. 55–58); descriptions of medicinal plants attributed to Dioscorides, including what was known in the West as De Materia Medica (see p. 20); construction manuals for practical automata (a homeopathic clock in Damascus) and more frivolous ones (machines to serve drinks or dispense balls) created for the entertainment of princes. The other subject was literature. For example, each of the many volumes of the poetry anthology known as Kitab al-Aghani was adorned with illustrated frontispieces (see p. 20). A number of versions in Arabic and Persian of the book Katha and Durna, a "mirror for princes" recounting the plotting of two jacks of the court of a king, were illustrated with charming vignettes (see pp. 59–61 and pp. 126–127), and the tragic Iranian epic of Wira Qohhala was embellished with what were often highly original illustrations, albeit of limited aesthetic quality (see p. 20).

The most famous illustrated book was the text of the Maqamat or 'Sessions' by al-Hariri. This volume of fifty short stories, composed in the eleventh century, recounts the adventures of a picturesque hero called Muza Zaydi whose mastery of the Arabic language enabled him to extricate himself from the most unlikely situations. In fact it was the language of the text that made it popular rather than the hero's bizarre adventures. However, the painter al-Wasiti, who in 1235 illustrated a famous manuscript (BNF, Arabic 5847, fols. 8 and 9, see also pp. 84–85 and pp. 164–170), took advantage of these stories to depict everyday life in the Arab world of the time. The illustrated manuscripts of thirteenth-century editions of the Maqamat vary in quality and style but all appear to share the same purpose: to represent the urban world of the period. They therefore demonstrate the existence of an illustrated book market that was accessible to a variety of social classes and wallets. These illustrations continued into the fourteenth century with technically accomplished images, often set on a gold background, but devoid of life. They then disappeared almost completely, although the text has continued to be read and enjoyed up to the present day.

The same is true of the pseudo-scientific manuscripts, in particular medical works and those describing the wonders of the world that continued to be produced for centuries with what were generally mediocre images. It is therefore fair to conclude that there was a century and a half of high quality: Arab book illustration and that these illustrations were realist in nature and focused on the life and behavior of an urban bourgeoisie in full economic and cultural development. It has often been suggested that these manuscripts should be classified as belonging to the Baghdad school. It is indeed reasonable to suppose that the city that was the intellectual capital during these centuries should have a public interested in such illustrated books. But in fact there are only two or three manuscripts signed in Baghdad and it is perhaps better to attribute this painting to the urban environments of the many fast-growing towns and cities such as Mosul in Iraq, Aleppo and Damascus in Syria, and Cairo in Egypt. Following the destruction of Baghdad in 1258, the principal production centers of illustrated Arab books transferred to Syria and Egypt, while Baghdad, no longer the political or intellectual capital of a great empire, remained an occasional center for the illustration of books in Arabic and Persian.
FIG. 10  Marqas and Gulshah
Early 13th century (Kashan or Iran)
Istanbul, Topkapi Sarayi Museum Hazine 8441, fol. 31b

FIG. 11  Frontispiece
Page from the Kitab al-Aghani or "Book of Songs" of Abu al-Hasan al-Iṣṭaḥkārī
(907–927)
1218–1219
(Mesopotamia or northern Iraq)
Copenhagen, National Library
KOB. Bib. cod. Arabian 158

FIG. 12  Preparing a honey-based medicine
From a translation of the De materia medicina of Dioscorides
(1st century AD)
1224 (Baghdad)
New York, NY, Cora Timken Collection, 1956 (Ms. 12)

FIG. 13  Andromachus overseeing the harvest
Detail
Page from the Kitab al-ṣajjāt or Peniculi-Gentis (1279–1286) "Book of Antidotes" 1198–1199 (Mesopotamia or northern Iraq)
Paris, Bibl. Arabe 2014, fol. 31