The Ottoman sultans who settled in Istanbul in 1453 were great collectors of painting from all over the Islamic world; some were the fruit of their conquests, others gifts or items of mutual exchange among royalty. This is why the treasures found in their palaces and in certain royal mosques are among the best examples of painting from earlier centuries originating both in the Islamic world and in a variety of European countries. These treasures were accessible to the rulers and their court but above all to the numerous secretaries who, acting as librarians, often associated the albums and manuscripts. The Ottoman monarchs had at their disposal a studio of painters and calligraphers at their disposal. Not only did the latter bring a rational clarity and great elegance to cursive drawings (fig. 22), they also developed other runiform scripts in which letters were transformed into images (fig. 21). While court painters may indeed have illustrated literary texts, such as a Turkish version of the Shahnama, their originality lay mainly in the illustration of books of contemporary history, such as accounts of the conquests of Suleiman the Magnificent, Mattraki's description (fig. 23) of the towns that the sultan, his admirals and generals visited, and descriptions of the celebrations that marked certain great occasions such as the circumcision of the royal heir (see p. 180). Manuscript chronicles of this kind depicting festivities, whether produced in 1582 or 1728 by the great painter Levnì, constitute long visual descriptions of the wealth of Istanbul.

Two genres of painting are particularly original. One is the portraiture of emperors (fig. 23), see also pp. 138-139), which was a new development under the Ottomans, perhaps influenced by European art, and the other was the illustration of religious books, mainly stories of the prophets from Adam to Mohammed (Mahomet) (fig. 41 and 43). These books exist in Turkish and Arabic and were illustrated in Istanbul and Baghdad. Their aesthetic quality is not always of the first order but the fact that this genre of painting existed once again demonstrates the presence of an art form aimed at different social classes and the novel to perceive images of the devout history of Islam.
PL 29 Portrait of Sultan Selim II

(1524–1574)

Painting attributed to Reis Vagjdar
Nakâkes, known as Hişâr (1546–1572)
Istanbul, Topkapı Sarayı Müzesi
TMS 2534, fol. 3 b

PL 30 View of the town of Nice

Page from the Süleymanname of Murad I
1543 (Istanbul)
Istanbul, Topkapı Sarayı Müzesi
halves 1605, fol. 27 b–28 a
MUGHAL PAINTING

Apart from architecture, little is known about the art of the early centuries of Muslim rule in northern India. From the fifteenth century one finds illustrated versions of the Shahnama, but in a very provincial style. Things changed when Babur, who reigned from 1526 to 1530, founded the Mughal empire that would continue until the nineteenth century.

The princes and members of the Mughal court collected Persian manuscripts and paintings and many Safavid artists emigrated to India, where they trained numerous students and created a unique form of painting by blending Iranian elements with a rich local tradition.

The classic subjects of Iranian art such as the Shahnama and Khvaju of Nizami existed alongside local versions on the same themes and great illustrated panegyrics on the lives of the princes (Padshahnama) (fig. 25) and historical figures, taking inspiration from epics (Hazarahnama, "The Adventures of Hazrat, uncle of the Prophet", see pp. 63–64). There are also portraits, sometimes allegorical, of reigning monarchs (see pp. 134–135). As the seventeenth century progressed, schools began to flourish in all the Indian provinces and Islamic themes were adapted to subjects that were Hindu in origin. However, the most remarkable change was in the manner of representation.

The dazzling clarity of color in Iranian miniatures was succeeded by tonal variety and chiaroscuro, in fact an atmosphere that placed greater emphasis on reality and giving an impression of veracity to the most extraordinary subjects (see pp. 140–141). Moreover, drawings and paintings brought by Portuguese and Italian merchants inspired new techniques in landscape painting and composition and contributed to the originality of Mughal painting, as in the image of the dying Isray Khan (fig. 26) in which the striking anguish of a human drama illustrates an entirely new approach to pictorial art.