The creation of images

Whether preserved in public collections—museums and libraries—or in the private collections of art enthusiasts, the paintings of the Muslim world are found mainly as illustrations in books or, of course as individual leaves often gathered into "albums". Mural painting also existed but it is generally poorly preserved and, with a few rare exceptions, mediocre quality where the representation of people and objects is concerned. From 1700 onwards, and particularly in the Qurʾan period (1779-1925), monumental painting on canvas started to appear in Iran; we shall not be discussing this here as it belongs more specifically to the Iranian rather than Muslim heritage. Painting on objects, especially ceramics, also developed in Iraq and in Egypt from the tenth century, in Iran from the twelfth century and then on lacquer ware in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Islamic ceramic ware of the twelfth to fourteenth centuries boasts a wide and rich range of subjects and no doubt reflects the taste of the great trading towns and cities. Although its connection with book illustration has not really been established, it seems likely that there was one.

This form of painting demonstrates once again, as if it were necessary, the almost constant and diminishing presence of secular images and representations in the Muslim world—from Egypt to China. However, this does not form part of our selection in this book, as whatever their importance may be to the history of art, generally speaking the painting on objects does not—with a few rare exceptions—match the quality of the images produced on paper that dominated the arts from the thirteenth century. Only the Muslim West, that is Andalusia and the Maghreb, appear devoid of representations on paper: only a single fragment of a thirteenth-century illustrated literary manuscript survives. On final and original category of images also deserves mention: geographical maps. Several curious examples of these survive but their aesthetic merit is overshadowed by their scientific and social interest.

Leaving aside these fragments and categories of images as yet little studied or which do not fall within our ambitus for this book, we shall endeavor instead to understand how these illustrated books and albums were created, who the patrons were, who the painters and calligraphers were and how they were trained. We shall then introduce some of the great texts that served as their sources of inspiration.

Books have formed part of Muslim culture since the very earliest centuries of its existence. Originally, these were mainly copies of the Qurʾan, thousands of leaves of which have been preserved. These leaves or strips were held together between wooden boards without necessarily being bound. The oldest bound copy only dates back to 905 AD. These works, on parchment—a material that was costly to prepare—were relatively rare. However, everything changed with the introduction of paper, which arrived from China in the second half of the eighth century and rapidly gained popularity throughout the Muslim world, although parchment continued to be used for many years for copies of the Qurʾan, and papyrus remained common in Egypt for many more years. The advent of paper, which became the medium of choice for the documents required to meet the needs of a new society, led to the increasing production of books on a wide variety of subjects. This fascination with books led to the training of dedicated specialists at each stage of the book manufacturing process and even for the different elements on the page. A specialized technical vocabulary began to emerge, along with manuals describing all the activities associated with book production.

Little is known about the economics of the book as a commercial object. Once finished and acquired, books were preserved in private libraries (madihah in Arabic, kitābkhāna in Persian, birûphane in Turkish) or libraries attached to institutions such as the great shrines, religious schools and royal palaces. A miniature dating from 1257 (fig. 28) shows shelves filled with books, placed flat on their sides as they are still sometimes found in traditional libraries in the Near East. Written sources refer to vast book collections—it is said that there were four hundred thousand in the library of a caliph if Cordoba in the tenth century. Even if this figure needs to be treated with caution, the fact remains that there were numerous libraries and these were filled with specialized staff. All the texts refer to the importance of scientific manuscripts—often translations from Greek or Sanskrit—and these were what gave a collection its reputation. The majority were decorated with drawings, either technical or explanatory, for example accompanying descriptions of heavenly constellations.

From the end of the twelfth century, illustrations began appearing in literary works written in Arabic or Persian, inserted into spaces set aside by the copist. Often, in fact, the same artist was
1. ALBUMS

The earliest extant copies preserved are wooden boards painted with red and black ink—probably the original form of paper. They were later used as a medium for writing and painting. By the sixth century, books on salma were written in the book margins, often with illustrations.

In the creation of images, it is essential to consider the role of the artist. As a result, the artist was responsible for both the text and the illustrations. Occasionally, though rarely before 1300, borders were used to enhance the presence of illustrations (fig. 27). The selection and number of illustrations varied from one manuscript to another, and this could be for economic reasons, with the sale of the book used to glorify a patron or an author and sometimes even to cover a book's costs. In some cases, frontispieces were decorated with representations of the book's authors, donors or owners (fig. 29), or indeed with astronomical or astrological symbols transformed into dedications (see pp. 54–55).

Sixteenth-century Iranian manuscripts illustrate several stages of the paper manufacturing process (fig. 30, see p. 36). For example, the drying of differently colored pages contributed not only to vary the colors but also to scatter the pages with gold dust or to marble them using a process imported from China known as abar ("like a cloud") in Persian (see following page). A manuscript could be entirely or partially copied on fine quality paper. The first pages of each book or each chapter of a book carried the titles and names of the patrons arranged in geometric compositions (e.g., a stylized floral or geometric illumination and the texts, particularly poetic texts, were often arranged or rearranged into horizontal or even oblique compositions. There was an opportunity to show off new styles of calligraphy, such as naskhi, a script that accentuates the oblique forms of certain letters (see for example p. 82).

Images showing calligraphers and painters appeared relatively late. A page from a seventeenth-century Moghal manuscript (fig. 31) shows a scribe and a painter at work. They are seated on the ground, the paper resting on their thighs—the ink, pens, and rulers scattered around them. Another image (fig. 30) shows an entire studio. In this the illustrations are being prepared on separate pages before being inserted into a book. This process required a production line of types, organization involving

![Image 27: The prisoner Sargor before Iskander (Alexender)](image)

Page from the Shahnama ("Book of Kings") of Firdowsi (543–602) 1330, Shiraz, Iran. Illustrated, Topkapı Sarayi Museum Hazine 1157/1158, fol. 164 r

![Image 28: Abu 'Ali al Baghawi Library](image)

From the Hepzibah or "Sessions" of al-Hariri (1254–1253)

Attributed to al-Wasiti (13th century)

Paris, Bibl. Arabian 8979, fol. 5 S v

![Image 29: Prince on his throne](image)

Frontispieces of the Kitab al-dawlaq or "Book of Antiquities" in the Viennese National Library, AF 10, fol. 1
FIG. 10 School scene
From an album created under the reign of Shah Tahmasp
(1524–1576)
c. 1550 (Dazeh, Iran)
Painting signed Haji Shagjard Ar
Washington, The Freer Gallery
and Arthur Sackler Gallery,
Smithsonian Institution,
S 1996.272

Right page
FIG. 10, details
Paper pulp manufacture
Students at work
Dyeing sheets of paper