Page from the Khamsa or "Quintet" of Nizami [c. 1141–1207] c. 1595
Script attributed to Abd al-Rahim and painting by Dawlat
London, British Library, Or. 12206, fol. 325v
an entire team assembled in an institution that appears to have been created in the early fourteenth century and continued until the seventeenth century: this was the new kitabkhana. It was no longer simply a library but a studio where specialists of all kinds prepared manuscripts and trained painters and calligraphers. There were craftsmen specializing in page composition, others in the application of each color. The great artist Behzad, for example, was particularly known for painting beards. The most famous kitabkhana were attached to royal courts and prepared manuscripts commissioned by monarchs to celebrate public or private events or simply for inclusion in the king's treasury and, on occasion, to be offered as gifts to other princes. A remarkable fifteenth-century text known as the Ar'uzadah ("petition") and preserved in one of the Istanbul albums (hazine 2753, fol. 98 a), contains an account drawn up for a royal patron of the activities of his kitabkhana. It refers to the occupations of 27 artists and the fact that a painter from Khorasan had inadequate the faces of an unfinished miniature while another copied ten sections of a history book. All these craftsmen and artists were also employed in the restoration of palace rooms and the decoration of luxury objects. There was in fact an army of artists and craftsmen whose function was to embellish the king's surroundings—in just the same way as the military or civil bureaucracy had their functions to perform.

Shiraz was also home to private studios manufacturing manuscripts for commercial purposes, but we do not know whether these studios also had teams capable of carrying out other artistic tasks. Indeed, preparing an illustrated and illuminated book was not a simple thing. It required considerable investment in materials and in manpower (a few female calligraphers did exist but they do not appear to have been attached to the major studios). The colophons of some manuscripts provide sufficient information for us to reconstruct their history. One particularly remarkable case is the manuscript of poems by Jami now preserved at the Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur Sackler Gallery in Washington (see pp. 112–121). It was created between 1556 and 1565 for Sultan Ibrahim Mirza, nephew of Shah Tahmasp, heir to the Safavid throne. It includes
FIG. 36 Royal celebration
From an album of calligraphy and painting
2nd quarter of the 16th century
[Tehran, Iran]
Paris, Bibl. Persan 129, fol. 2

FIG. 37 Old man visiting a sick acquaintance
Illustration from a manuscript reproduced in an album of calligraphy and painting
2nd quarter of the 16th century
[Tehran, Iran]
Paris, Bibl. Persan 129, fol. 1 v
eight colophons (the ninth having disappeared) giving eight dates and three places of production: Herat in Afghanistan, Mashad in northeastern Iran, and Qazvin in the north. The history of this 306-leaf manuscript has been traced. Five scribes first copied the text on thin sheets of paper. These sheets were then pasted onto thicker paper that determined the margins of the manuscript. The illuminations and chapter headings followed, then 39 illustrations. It was only after the illustrations were put in place that the pages were transformed into books, folded in half and then bound. All these operations were carried out in different places under the direction of one book manufacturer, Mulqeb Ali, most probably for the marriage of Sultan Ibrahim Muzza.

This particular manuscript appears to be unique in that it was a royal masterpiece prepared in specific historical circumstances. However, the fact that such a complex process was possible shows that in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries a luxury industry existed that included genuine book art. Each page could stand on its own as a work of art. It is also worth noting that many manuscripts remained unfinished and only acquired some of their images much later, sometimes even in India, where incomplete manuscripts were taken to be finished. The khitabkhana, some of which would travel from place to place, housed an entire world of creators, an account of which can be found in Orhan Pamuk's novel My Name is Red.

Nor should the khitabkhana be considered simply as centers producing works of art for an enlightened audience or at least an audience drawn to the richness of the resulting object. The Arab and particularly the Iranian tradition added a spiritual element to the transcription of the texts. The texts quote a phrase attributed to Plato: "Script is geometry of the mind." A calligrapher writing in Herat between 1470 and 1507 left behind a poem in which he compares his work with the quest for the health of the soul. A holy man, he recounts, created letters of the alphabet through which it was possible to glimpse mystical ecstasy. In our modern times, some scholars and critics have endeavored to extend this mystical interpretation to all painting in Iran. However, such a generalized concept remains difficult to accept though it is quite possible that this mystical language and the images associated with it had an influence on painting, as we shall see in the third part of this work.

While it is right to see the institution of the khitabkhana as the main creative center for art books and the place where the standards of calligraphy were maintained, the khitabkhana did not have a monopoly on book production. In particular, they lacked any formal administrative organization. These functions remained attached to the royal households, in the same way as kitchens staff and the military, and a mixture of order and disorder, discipline and anarchy ruled in them which depended on the will of the king and, above all, the financial support of the royal authority.

Beautiful illustrated books with fine calligraphy and illuminations were not the only things produced by the khitabkhana. There were also albums (known as jang or misnappu), which were assemblies of images and texts later bound together and often given an explanatory preface like the one we have already mentioned by Hadi Muhammad in the sixteenth century (see p. 22). Originally it seems that these albums fulfilled a requirement by master calligraphers to demonstrate to their pupils and apprentices the various techniques associated with their profession, the collation of examples of sentences, words or even especially accomplished pages. Models to be copied, even more than imitated, also constituted an essential element of calligraphic art. However, the same is not true of painting. We do still possess numerous fragments showing characters, animals, architectural constructions and sometimes even sketches for larger compositions, which were simply exercises for apprentices or indeed rough drafts for more elaborate compositions.

But, from the fourteenth century onwards, album creation took a new turn. Two new trends began to appear. One was the creation of what was known as an album-museum: collectors and recipients of gifts of paintings or calligraphic texts collected these together and glued them on to pieces of paper so as to preserve them better. Some albums that survive in Istanbul contain both examples of art of the time and a certain number of older images interspersed with pages of European or Chinese origin. Occasionally these assemblages contain a history of painting as conceived by the patron or his librarian. In one work dating back to Shah Tahmasp, the introduction compares the album with divine creation as described in Koranic revelation, by means of a quill pen. In other cases the collection seems completely arbitrary, and quality pieces rub shoulders with prints of an altogether secondary value. Sometimes these examples are glued in haphazardly, but sometimes with great care (fig. 36).

These fifteenth- and sixteenth-century albums provide an inexhaustible source of information on the art of painting and the evolution of taste.

There is another type of album that can be considered as designed from the outset to be a work of art. This appeared in the fourteenth century in a number of Timurid courts and continued to be produced for almost three centuries. These albums were created for or commissioned by patrons with a specific aim: to train calligraphers in all the manners of writing by assembling a collection of texts and images linked by their subjects—portraits of forebears, for example—in order to satisfy a personal taste or to present an ideological program. These albums often deserve study, particularly when considered as completed objects rather than through their content. But this type of research conducted on an entire code remains very rare and does not yet offer us reliable results.

By concentrating on pages and images taken in isolation, we risk forgetting that almost all illustrations form part of collections or sets that remain unknown to us.