The creation of images

We know relatively little about painters prior to the fourteenth century. Nothing at all is known about the celebrated artist al-Badri who illustrated the pages of the Maqamat manuscript dated 1237 (see pp. 84–85 and 162–179). His fame is due purely to the uniqueness of his talent in Arab painting and to his being the only identified painter of his period. From the fourteenth century onwards, the names of many painters were recorded in written sources and on occasion a signature identifies its creator on the page itself. Recent studies have attempted to ascertain the style or manner of particular artists but the results are far from conclusive or definitive, partly because of the way the kitābhānāt operated. In fact, individual technical originality was not always a quality particularly appreciated and the desire to maintain tradition that dominated the art of calligraphy also held true for painting, at least up to the early seventeenth century. For art enthusiasts accustomed to the considerable differences between painters and periods that are so typical of European art, the painting produced in Islamic countries may well, at first sight, seem lacking in variety. However, the names of certain artists often reappear and this reveals an interesting aspect of painting in Islamic lands. We shall simply attempt to identify the most important artists and to recall what it was that made them famous at their time, while fully aware that these qualities can rarely be understood today.

The first painter we can speak of with any precision is Kamal al-Din Behzad whose reputation spread to Iran, India and the Ottoman empire. Born in 1469, Behzad was an orphan who was taken in hand as an assistant by Mirsak Nizam, head of the kitābhānāt of Husayn Mirza ibn Bayqara, master of Herat from 1468 to 1507 and a great patron of the arts and of poetry. Behzad became his artist in chief and his first and only signed manuscript dates from 1488 (see pp. 86–87). When Husayn Bayqara died in 1507, Behzad followed the Uzbek sultan Muhammad Suyyani Khan to Samarkand. He remained there for three years, up to 1510, when the first Safavid monarch, Shah Ismail I, took him to his court and in 1552 appointed him director of the kitābhānāt attached to that court. Behzad died in 1535 or 1536, probably in Tabriz. Despite numerous references in chronicles and other sixteenth- and seventeenth-century writings, we have no precise information about the qualities that earned Behzad his reputation. But as this was immense and as he had many pupils, it is reasonable to attribute to him the taste for precision in the representation of the detail and gesture of each character that developed towards the end of the fifteenth century. Although it is far more difficult, or even impossible, to put forward an ideological or social explanation that would help us to understand these changes, we can at least deduce from this the complexity of the great sixteenth-century compositions. These could be linked to a host of known artists. More than 75
name, are recorded in written sources and signed manuscripts. The most famous, some of whose works are signed and others attributed by modern scholars to some of them, include the following: Sultan Muhammad, native of Tabriz who introduced Shah Tahmasp to painting and taught the emperor’s children; the date of his death is uncertain but appears to have been shortly after 1530, and he is known for a number of the finest miniatures in Shah Tahmasp’s Shahnameh (see pp. 74–75, 77, 80, 99, 101, 103, 107). Dast Muhammad, known especially for his history of painters and calligraphers (see p. 78). Agha Mitrak, particularly renowned for the quality of his drawing and for his portraits, who was to become director of Shah Tahmasp’s khanakha around 1530 (see pp. 98–99, 102–103). Mir Musavvir and his son Mir Sayyid Ali (see pp. 76, 79, 82–83) who both emigrated to the Mughal territories; Muhammad, known primarily for his drawings; Sadiqi Beg, a great portraitist who was director of the khanakha in 1576 but was a difficult character and became a devout dervish and later a soldier of fortune. Shiek Muhammad who entered the service of Shah Ismail II in 1577 and lived for many years in the holy city of Mashad and then in the provincial town of Sanjarik; ‘Ala al-Samad who left for India in 1549 and taught the Mughal emperors Humsayun and Akbar to draw (see pp. 63–65).

This selection of names and information is symptomatic of the poverty of information we have on artists’ styles. We are a long way from the abundance found in the more or less contemporary work of Vasari in Italy. We can, however, draw two conclusions that are useful for our purposes here. One concerns the immense creativity of the painting, which can be attributed to a number of teams of artists who grew up around the khanakha. The other is, despite the centrifugal importance of the khanakha, the great variety not only of the individual paths followed by the artists but also their often strangely independent characters. Although they may have all belonged to the same royal circle, they lived within it displaying a wide variety of tastes and talents. In the sixteenth century, their closed world was dominated by almost academic techniques imposed on them but also formed part of a universe comprising very different, sometimes even contradictory tastes. After all, this was the period when the astonishing images found in the Istanbul albums were created, those which were later attributed to the mysterious Black Peri (Strock Qalke).

The positions of artists changed in the seventeenth century as the institution of the khanakha became weaker and painters became free agents in search of employment. Many names have survived, in particular from the signatures that appear on images of everyday life often reflecting the adventures experienced by the artists themselves. The most famous are Muhammad al-‘Asrani who was active in the latter part of the century;
Mohammad Zaman who left to study western art in Rome, appears to have converted to Catholicism, returned to Iran in 1646 and lived in Isfahan until around 1690, producing many paintings with Christian subjects; and Malin Musavir (born in 1617, died in 1698), the son of the celebrated artist Reza-i Abbasi of whom he painted a touching portrait. Ma'ın Musavir was one of the century's great portrait artists, producing images that blended reality with imagination. The most important of this century's painters was Reza-i Abbasi, who was born between 1560 and 1570 and died in 1635. He came from a family of artists and had three sons who followed the same career as their father: An eccentric character, he enjoyed wrestling and in fact became a professional wrestler, but his intractable nature led him into arguments with his royal patron. Reza-i Abbasi started out by producing traditional portraits of courtiers (see pp. 184 and 186–187) and illustrations of Islamic literature but soon moved on to scenes of daily life, often tinged with humor (see pp. 182 and 189), such as the famous image of a man trying to restrain a ram (fig. 39) and the curious image of a European man with his dog (fig. 40). Both technically and in terms of subject matter, Reza-i Abbasi heralded a world of new images.

In Persian painting, the seventeenth century was the first century in which history could be read through individual drawings and pictures rather than through illustrated manuscripts and albums. This form of painting sought to be a reflection of society rather than an illustration of traditional texts; we shall return to it in the third part of this book.

Painting in the Ottoman and Mughal empires developed in two parallel but different directions. In India, a host of local painters such as Bisham Das, Abul Hasan, Baldwad and Bichitr joined forces with painters from Iran and Central Asia to illustrate great poetic texts, imperial chronicles, fauna, flora and local society and they incorporated the new forms and innovative ideas originating in the Christian West far more skilfully than in Iran. The originality of Mughal painting owes a great deal to the Hindu painting tradition. Various local schools sprang up on the periphery of the Mughal empire. However, no such tradition existed in the Ottoman empire, where great painters such as Osman in the sixteenth century and Lefevre in the early eighteenth century produced work that reflected both the reality of imperial conquests (see p. 62) and scenes of festivity (see p. 180) while preserving the pictorial conventions inherited from the Timurid tradition. The Mughals and the Ottomans both retained the Ilahibi as institutions attached to the royal court; the Ottomans in particular continued to run calligraphy schools right up to the twentieth century, although the art of traditional painting disappeared and was replaced by a new form of painting influenced by European-style schools of fine art.
The creation of images

The main subjects

The majority of images of the Muslim world are book illustrations and it is around these books that the art of writing and decorating the pages of a text grew up. However, overall only a limited number of titles received the attention of artists.

In the spiritual and religious field the Koran dominated. Almost all known versions of the holy book were copied in meticulous calligraphy and adorned with decorative elements. The quality of the script and the ornamentation varied greatly, ranging from simple versions of the text accompanied by vegetal medallions or sea titles in larger letters, to large royal volumes (see p. 56) with beautiful initial pages and polished ornamentation on every page. While it is easy to admire these pages, it is almost impossible—at least in our present state of knowledge—to identify the iconographic or even aesthetic purposes of this art. Are they there to illustrate a text or to glorify a patron? Are they simply ornamentation designed to please the eye? These are questions we cannot answer. Doubleday, the royal patron of Central Asia and Egypt who, during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, commissioned the finest and greatest manuscripts of the Koran intended in so doing to demonstrate their support for the religion of their subjects while at the same time displaying their wealth and power. It is also true that such ornamentation sometimes served to highlight certain passages or emphasize the traditional divisions of the text, but there does not seem to have been, as was the case with certain Bibles, any development in the direction of decorative interpretation of the Koran's message. This is why we have selected only a few examples of pages of the holy book (see pp. 14–15), despite the genuine aesthetic quality of a number of them. This is an area that would merit the attention of scholars and art enthusiasts.

A second group of works, also mainly represented here, includes technical, scientific and pseudo-scientific books and countless more or less fanciful descriptions of the world and its inhabitants. Although these books of "marvels of creation" (Ajā'ib al-Makhluqat) are often illustrated with verse and imagination, their technical qualities prove to be generally mediocre. The same is true of many medical manuscripts dealing with illnesses and medicine, some versions of which have been attributed to scholars of Greek Antiquity. Some thirteenth-century volumes were illustrated with talent (see pp. 20–21), but this was rare in the following centuries. The majority, however important they may have been for the history of science and technology, are not works of art in the strict sense of the term. However, their existence does prove the presence of images intended for audiences of different social backgrounds and the existence in the traditional Muslim world of a particularly rich visual language.

The Koran is not the only religious book to have been decorated. Images frequently appear in the lives of the prophets (Qāsīt al-Ammār), popularized from the fifteenth century in the Ottoman Empire, but they are rarely of high quality. The "Book of the Asccent of the Prophet" (Majma' al-Anwar) is a notable exception; it describes the journey of Muhammad from Jerusalem into heaven and the contemplation of divine creation. A unique copy of this book, held in the French National Library, was written in Chaghatai, the Turko-Mongolian language spoken by the fifteenth-century rulers. Its images (fig. 41) may appear primitive but their simplicity of composition and their striking colors give them great visual force. Some even more remarkable illustrations of the same text date from the early fourteenth century; they can be found in one of the Istanbul albums (see p. 48). Also worth mentioning as an illustrated work of a religious nature is the Fatawa al-Maghribiyya ("Book of Omens", many versions of which were used to predict the future. Several versions have survived from the Turkish Ottoman world as well as a monumental Iranian version that is full of life and originality; we shall look at this in the third part of this volume (see pp. 142–147).

The majority of books illustrated with works of art belong to secular literature. One particular book dominates our knowledge of Arabic painting: it is the Maqṣūr bi-l-Maṣā'īl of al-Harīrī, composed in the eleventh century and illustrated in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. We have already mentioned this and will return to it again when considering the value of these manuscripts in gaining an understanding of the society of the period (see pp. 163–179).

There were also historical chronicles which, in principle, lent themselves to illustration but rarely within the traditions of the Muslim world. The great minister Rashīd al-Dīn's "Universal Chronicle", composed in the early fourteenth century and illustrated in the kitāb al-Maṣā'īl he founded in Tabriz (see p. 23) is a unique case. Apart from the quality of the images seen in the fragments surviving from manuscripts that can be dated to the second decade of the fourteenth century, Rashīd al-Dīn's work is important for the fact that it deals with the non-Muslim world as well as the history of the Muslim dynasties. This was rare in manuscripts postdating Rashīd al-Dīn, those that can be described as historical are mainly epics recounting the conquests of Tamerlane, Seljuk civilization Magnificent (see pp. 31 and 62) and the Mogul sovereign Akbar (see pp. 63–65).

The work of literature most frequently illustrated was the book of the two jackals at the court of a lion—Kāfīl and Dīvān— a number of versions of which were produced. Originating in India, these stories attributed to a mythical author, Bīdu, were translated into Arabic in the middle of the eighth century, then into Persian from a number of versions produced over the course of the centuries, and finally returned to India under the Moghals in a new version. In these manuscripts, the animals are shown engaged in all manner of adventures (see pp. 49–51 and 126–127), but there are also illustrations of people whose misadventures serve to instill various moral principles. Other examples of literary prose, such as the Bustan of Sa'di (see pp. 86–87), composed in the thirteenth century and Attar's "Conference of the Birds" (see pp. 88–91), written towards the end of the twelfth century, are more rarely illustrated, but where they exist these illustrations can be counted among the masterpieces of Iranian painting.

Two texts stand out for the quality of their illustrations. One, the Shāhnama or "Book of Kings", is a vast, historical epic, partly mythical, partly real, recounting the story of Iran from the...