creation of the world to the end of the Sassanids, around 640. It is a history centered on the succession of the kings and the fate of heroes such as Rostam who protected the Sassanid monarchs from their adversaries—whether real like the Turfs of Turans in Central Asia or imaginary like the barbarians found at the furthest reaches of the earth and beyond. The poem, based
on oral and written sources and composed over many years was only completed around 1011 by the great poet Ferdowsi (940–1020) from Tuz in north-east Iran. He presented his masterpiece to the Ghurid sultan Mahmud, the conqueror of northern India who had his court at Ghazni in Afghanistan (see p.67). The Shahnameh, written in clear language with vigour and eloquence, lent itself to public declamation, which was customary for centuries to celebrate various special occasions. It is also a great historical fresco in which battles, individual combat, major hunts, ceremonies, feasts and the passions—ancient or otherwise—follow one another at a frantic pace. The Shahnameh was in fact a book of model conduct directed at the monarchs of all periods; it lent itself to a contemporary interpretation in which the great figures of the day could be depicted as heroes of the past. Ferdowsi's poem was imitated in other epics, some of which were illustrated, particularly in the fourteenth century; but none of these manuscripts rivals Ferdowsi's Shahnameh in the culture of the Persian world or those cultures influenced by Iran. One translation of it in Arabic survives and another in Turkish (see pp. 66–83).

The other text often illustrated is the Khamsa or “Quintet” of Nizami, which is a collection of five separate poems written at different periods. They deal respectively with mystical love; the relationship between Khurshid and Shams; the passion of Layla and Majnoun; the anonymous adventure of Bahram Gur; and Iskandar (Alexander the Great), conqueror of the world and seeker of truth (see pp. 98–110). In three of these poems the hero is a monarch and very often the stories of the epic Shahnameh reappear seasoned with a different rhetoric. Nizami, born around 1140 in Ganja in present-day Azerbaijan, lived until 1217. Although admired by the royalty who were often his patrons, he was not a court poet and transformed tales from history or legend into explorations of the great themes of human existence, notably and above all, the theme of love, both sensual and spiritual. Inspired by the mysticism in vogue during his lifetime, Nizami's manner of describing human passions lent itself easily to ecstatic interpretations. But the most outstanding aspect of Nizami's work was his lyrical expression, a mystical lyricism also found in other poets such as Attar (died 1222, see pp. 88–91), Hafez (died 1389, see pp. 92–93) and, much later, Jami (1414–1492), see pp. 112–121. The works of all these poets were sometimes illustrated.

It is relatively easy to divide the sources of literary inspiration that lie behind painting in the Islamic world into categories such as epic, history, mystical lyricism, tales of adventures and works of knowledge. In fact, as we shall see, all these genres are intertwined and influence one another. All have been created by what we might term modes of inspiration: epic drama, mystical lyricism, events, and everyday life. In ways that are sometimes different, sometimes analogous, it was these that created the art of the image in the Muslim world. The following pages, without offering a history of these themes, present a selection of this art across the centuries, while in the third part of this volume we shall endeavor to explain the values that underpinned this creativity.