Invitations to reverie and reflections of reality

The following pages contain a selection of 70 paintings which in a sense form the core of this book. It is from these images that we shall seek in the third part of this volume to identify the messages they convey about many worlds that have since disappeared, the messages they may have given to those who looked at them, and the aesthetic and other values that they can still teach us today. These works are not presented in chronological order as it is not our aim here to retrace the history of this art form. Nor is it a question of iconographic presentation where the same subjects are shown in a variety of forms corresponding to a range of different tastes and ideologies. The presentation we have adopted here is, instead, thematic.

First we shall show the decorative elements (motifs, ornamentation, repertoire of subjects and images) of many manuscripts that are not directly associated with the subject of the book. We shall then go on to look at various types of illustrated books: chronicles, history, literary texts, epics, lyric poetry, etc., and will finish with a series of self-contained images not associated with any text, literary or otherwise. Each work is accompanied by commentary and each of the genres is introduced by a few general remarks.
Opening pages

The majority of illustrated manuscripts open with illuminations ornamenting the titles of works celebrating the glory of God or the work's patrons. Sometimes illuminated calligraphy is accompanied by astronomical symbols, scenes illustrating the life of or celebrating the great exploits of the prince to whom the book is dedicated, or by portraits of authors. Ornamented pages are also often found at the start of a new chapter or a new section of a book.
This page is the left half of the frontpiece that opens the book. The inscription in refined Kufic script refers to the book’s authors, copyists and decorators. The image could be interpreted as a response to the authors’ wish to place themselves under the protection of the celestial figures illustrated by the full moon surrounded by two intertwined serpents and accompanied, or supported, by angels. One notes here a solidly balanced composition with the moon at the center, a sort of magic ball in perpetual rotation, framed by the horizontal calligraphy of the inscription. Apotropaic images of this kind derive from the Greco-Roman tradition, embellished with details borrowed from Buddhism or Iran. Also worth noting is the draftsmen’s very precise technique.