Historical texts

The major chronicles of the countries of Islam were rarely illustrated, except in the early fourteenth century, during the formation of the first Mongol empire. Rashid al-Din's history of the world (he died in 1318) was frequently copied and illustrated during the centuries following its composition, but these later images are of poorer quality and it was not until the Ottoman and Mughal periods that we find beautiful paintings principally celebrating the military victories of the sultans. At every period one also finds stories that are popular in origin or more or less fictitious, the illustrations of which reflect a world other than that of the royal court.
This miniature most probably comes from an illustrated manuscript of the "Compendium of Chronicles" (Jami' al-Zawarih) by Rashid al-Din, composed by the great statesman around 1310. It may indeed represent an episode in the capture of Baghdad by the Mongols in 1268, Baghdad having been the capital of the caliphate for almost 300 years. Certain details—for example, the two women on a balcony, the three figures in turbans in a boat, the large floating bridge, the red plumes of the soldiers defending the city, the importance given to a large river from which emerges a fortified island—seem to indicate a specific event. It is also a rather mysterious one—what is happening beyond the image itself? What are the two soldiers at the lower left looking at?

Where is the boat heading? These things are left to the viewer's imagination.

The image also provides valuable information about weaponry (for example, a catapult can be seen), the uniforms worn by soldiers of the period and also about the drums and trumpets that accompanied battles. It is in fact an audacious composition, if at times a rather clumsy one, in which a talented artist has created numerous figures and brick constructions. He has left a unique image of the military world of the time, which—with the multiple viewpoints and varying proportions between people and objects—also bears witness to his ambitions as a draftsmen and arouses the viewer's curiosity.
From the Suleymanname, the great chronicle of the reign of Suleiman written by Alii, this formal image shows the young and elegant sultan receiving the most famous admiral of the Ottoman fleet, Haydr Pasha (Barbarossa) in his divan. Haydr Pasha (Barbarossa) is shown as smaller than the sultan, with a white beard to signify his age, kneeling in front of his monarch. The view of the sultan, with his attendants, is shown in the background, while the sultan, in the foreground, is shown receiving the admiral in his presence. The painting, which shows the clothing and jewels in great detail, without any apparent attempt at artistic effect, presents the sultan’s apartment as part of the great palace. Thus, illustrating the restraint that was the great strength of Ottoman painting.
Historical texts

PL. 7 MISHAIL’S SHOP
Page from the Namaznaimeh, or “Adventures of Hamza, uncle of the Prophet”, Volume 11, Fig. 52
in the reign of Akbar (c. 1556–1605)
Painting attributed to Dasavanta and Mithral, Mirali School, 1570
New York, MET, 1934.24.48.1

The Namaznaimeh is a long tale based on legends already familiar in the sixteenth century. This version was composed between 1595 and 1597, probably under the aegis of Emperor Akbar himself. It consisted of a dozen volumes, each containing around a hundred illuminations, i.e. in total close to 1,200 images now dispersed among collections all over the world. It is the story of the somewhat fantastical adventures of a certain Hamza, uncle of the prophet Mohammed. This was a large-format book (15.72 cm / 20 in, b. 85 cm / 33.1 in), and the pages were intended to be viewed from a distance while the story was read aloud. The precise subject of the scene illustrated here has not been definitively established. It may be the story of a day by the name of Timur, who entered the shop of Mishail, who is shown as an armorer rather than a grocer as the text suggests. Both are placed in the center of the painting. Like princes at court, they are surrounded by an entourage of people seated quietly, sheltering among themselves, holding weapons or standards, or preparing to eat and drink. In front and to the left is a figure with his finger to his mouth, denoting his position as a model for the armorer to follow. In the iconography of these scenes, like the armorer with his head turned in astonishment at what is happening around him (see also the following page).