The world of images

Insofar as it depicts people, animals and objects, all representational art reflects the world around us and sets out to fulfill two parallel though sometimes divergent functions: on the one hand, it seeks through its images to show the qualities of this world, and on the other, it aspires to proclaim the ideologies that inspire and govern it, and indeed at times to criticize and satirize it. In the pages that follow, our principal aim will be to identify some of the values expressed by album images, and to enrich them by adding various supplementary images and by highlighting details that might otherwise pass unnoticed. We shall also seek to show how the artists of the Muslim world sought to give visual form to the life and ideas of those they served. These were both universal values common to all men and other values particular or unique to them because of their varied ethnic and cultural backgrounds. A twelfth-century Cairo merchant professed the same faith as a sixteenth-century Turkic-speaking courtier in Isfahan, or a Mughal prince in Samarkand or Agra in the fourteenth or seventeenth centuries, but their languages, their activities and their manner of expressing their beliefs were totally different.

We are still unable to comprehend these differences properly, or even to guess what they may have been. Above all, nothing guarantees the validity of the judgments we apply today to periods in the past. It is not always easy to distinguish our own value criteria from those of the past or to perceive what the nuances of interpretation conveyed by the quality of these images were at the time they were produced. Matters have been simplified in the pages that follow by making what are perhaps arbitrary choices among the wealth of possibilities that exist. These pages aim to provide an insight into album images and to entice the viewer to return to them often. They may also open the way to the more profound analysis these images require when taken in isolation or gathered into the iconographic or stylistic groups to which they belong. In short, we should like to encourage the reader to ponder what might be learnt through these images, what their value may be in terms of the history of art and thought. We open with images associated with the representation of the real world and have divided these into two groups: prince and court; nomad world and urban world. We then turn our attention to a field that represents more of a challenge in terms of cultural specificity, but which is common to all the arts: the representation of man and nature. A third section is devoted to Islam itself and the expression of faith. We then go on to consider a specific cultural area—the Iranian world—and the highly original way in which it translated epics and lyric poetry into visual form. And finally we consider the aesthetics of image art from the lands of Islam, that is to say, the many visual values that can rightly be attributed to this world and which will be accessible to all who view these paintings.
Prince and court

entourage—including his wives, sons and some musicians—watch from a balcony above. The prince, perhaps the celebrated patron Hossein Mirza Bayqara, is adorned with a black lion's leather; with his right hand he is accepting a goblet of wine, while in his left he holds an unidentified object. It is possible, or even likely that this image illustrates a specific event well known at the time but which today eludes us.

These images of the prince and his court deserve detailed study as they offer variants that may be explained by specific historical references as well as by artists' whims. Whatever the variants,

Royal figures are shown on their throne in a variety of ways, sometimes contained within the great vaulted space or iron of a palace (see p.102), sometimes simply on a raised platform in a courtyard (see p.93), and in some fifteenth-century manuscripts, on a simple carpet placed in a garden, embellished by fine terris in the background. Royal personages are almost always accompanied by a crowd of people. These may be soldiers with their weapons, or attendants and religious leaders wearing turbans, as well as in all manner of guards, servants and courtiers. Festivities were a constant of the royal courts and there are almost always musicians, dancers, acrobats and of course refreshments and dishes of food brought from unseen kitchens by a whole army of servants. Some courts (see pp.86–87) prepared their wine and other beverages themselves. The majority of these festive scenes include female figures. They may form part of the prince's immediate entourage, sparsely grouped alongside the men (see p.103), or they may be looking through the windows (see p.104) at what is happening in this separate men's world. Although of limited aesthetic quality, one extraordinary miniature (fig.57) shows harem women dressed in heavy robes dancing in a circle while the prince and his immediate
there are two characteristics of these courtly images that merit our attention. One is that all of them take place in an architectural space that almost always includes a multi-storey pavilion or a large vaulted space with a paved courtyard and pool in front and a hedge enclosing a garden of trees and flowers. The elements of this architectural background are repeated and often appear like open sets that can be modified and adapted to different purposes and requirements. Figures appear as if suspended (fig. 6a, below) so that they can be clearly seen and appear to create something in the nature of a skillful "group photo". It is worth noting too that this theatrical element can also be seen in the richness of the garments, regardless of rank, and often—particularly in the fifteenth century—in the extravagant hairstyles and headgear worn by both men and women (figs. 51 and 56). It seems certain that these differences in attire and color had an iconographic significance of which we are no longer aware. They add a special value to the "staging" around the prince and his entourage and contribute to creating the impression of an idealized world where pleasure and beauty reign. Even vapid or destructive acts, for example a murder (see pp. 24, 66 and 73), are but transient events and everything returns to order once the drama is concluded.

However, if we look at the great celebrations and ceremonies depicted under the Ottomans in Istanbul or seen in seventeenth-century Mughal painting and as early as the sixteenth century in Iran, we find that the individuals shown are easily identifiable and their character and behavior are clearly conveyed. These princely images emphasize the highly codified attributes of the courtiers but also, on occasion, highlight certain exceptional details such as Shah Abbas's moustache, for example.

The representational codes associated with images of royal courts were later taken up again when depicting different environments that bore little connection with royal life; this is demonstrated in the scene in which members of the middle classes are shown in a state of inebriation in an illustration of a text by Hafer (see p. 92), and again in the roguish adventures of Majnoun, but most notably in the depiction of large Bedouin encampments where young lovers can see one another but not meet (see pp. 112-113).

One specific aspect of court life—hunting—used an iconography and symbolism similar to that of warlike combat: the Shihabnama in particular relates a number of royal battles with wild beasts, monsters (figs. 52 and 53) and more placid animals (fig. 54 and pp. 194-195). Battles and hand-to-hand combat were an opportunity to transform warriors into heroes dressed in fine armor and their steeds into stallions (see pp. 32, 95 and 120).

All these images of princes and courtiers are therefore a reflection of a reality based on power and authority but also the invention of an ideal world of pleasant pursuits, emotionless masks and colorful visions of wealth.
FIG. 47 Shinghad
Shinghad slaying his brother Rudam
Detail from a page of the Jami' al-Tawarikh or "Universal Chronicle" of Rashid al-Din [1247 – 1318]
1306–1307 (Tehran, Iran)
University of Edinburgh,
ms. Di. 201, fol. 15v

FIG. 48 Gajamahs
The throne of Gajamahs
Detail of pl. 19, p. 77
Page from the Shahnama of Shah Tahmasp
c. 1530 (Tehran, Iran)
Painting attributed to Sultan Muhammad
(?-post 1550)
Geneva, Aga Khan Trust for Culture,
Ms. 202, fol. 20v

FIG. 49 Hormuzd
Elders pleading the cause of the young Khosrow with Hormuzd
Detail from a page of the Khamsa or "Quintet" of Nizami (1141–1209)
1494–1495 (Herat, Afghanistan)
London, British Library,
MS 6802, fol. 37v

FIG. 50 Solomon
Solomon and the Queen of Sheba
Detail of pl. 46, p. 107
Page from the Shahnama or "Book of Kings" of Ferdowsi (940–1020/21)
c. 1000–1010 (Shiraz, Iran)
Washington, The Freer Gallery and
Arthur Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, S. 1990.1–2

Right page.

FIG. 51 Royal figure
[perhaps San Mirza]
Feast at the end of Ramadan
Detail of pl. 28, p. 93
Page from the Divan of Hafiz
(1385–1388)
c. 1557 (Tabriz, Iran, or Herat,
Afghanistan)
Painting signed (on the throne in the
blue and white medallion below the
prince's feet): Sultan Muhammad
(?-post 1550)
Washington, The Freer Gallery and
Arthur Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, F1492.2.42