Fig. 95 A. Inhabited rocks
The Throne of Gogymarath
Details of pt. 31, p. 95; pt. 33, p. 97;
pt. 52, p. 97; pt. 29, p. 97; pt. 16, p. 100;
pt. 14, p. 67; pt. 36, p. 69

Fig. 96 Inhabited rocks
The Throne of Gogymarath
Details of pt. 33, p. 77
Page from the Shahnamah of Shah Tahmasp
c. 1500 (Tabriz, Iran)
Painting attributed to Sultan Muhammad
[7-post 1535]
Gemeenschap voor het Oosterse Cultureel Erfgoed,
M 200, fol. 20v
Islam and the visual expression of faith

Unlike Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism and many pagan religions, official Islam did not seek to represent religious symbols or base its missionary purpose around images. The Koran was copied with great care but it would be difficult to claim that a particular way of writing the sacred text or decorating its pages was exclusive to the holy book or that it ever became a sacred visual form. There are exceptions, of course, including, from the sixteenth century in the three great Muslim empires, the combinations of letters that make up expressions of religious devotion—the most common being 'In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate'—or that represent Allah (God), Mohammed the prophet and, particularly among the Shites, Ali and the other Imams. One especially striking example is a fifteenth-century page in one of the Istanbul albums where the name of Allah coells endlessly around a fixed point in a composition that is astonishingly modern in spirit (fig. 100).

But these few, late examples never played the complex role of sacred images and objects in other religions. At least this appears to be the legitimate conclusion reached by current research. It is nonetheless possible that further in-depth study of the social psychology of the perceptions of form in the Muslim world and elsewhere may discover that certain signs and forms of writing in particular have a symbolic and spiritual value that we have not yet managed to grasp.

So, for the moment, it is fair to conclude that, with the exception of architecture, there were no exclusively religious forms in the traditional art of the Muslim world. It is, nevertheless true that the faith and practice of Islam provided inspiration for images. Two themes dominate: the real or legendary stories of the prophets and certain forms of devotion. In some images it is also possible to see a reflection of mystic thinking and practices, particularly in the Persian world or in that influenced by Iran.

The illustrated lives of the prophets, the great majority of them Biblical, were produced mainly in Arabic and Turkish in the Ottoman world from the fifteenth century onwards. They are generally simple images and of rather mediocre quality. The same is not true, however, of certain illustrations of the prophet Mohammed produced in a clear, direct style and with elegance of line in the early fourteenth century in manuscripts such as Rashi's "Compendium of Chronicles" (see pp. 22–23). These images accompany a text that is historical rather than religious in nature: the sacred story is transformed here into a simple event lacking any particular visual distinction. A fourteenth-century manuscript in Chagatai Turkish on the Ascension of the Prophet and his visit to hell and to the celestial kingdom are a different matter. Here the Prophet is seen on his miraculous steed (Al-Buraq) holding away through his presence and actions over the world of the angels and the prophets around him (fig. 105). This was also the case with an older manuscript in which the archangel Gabriel (Jibril) shows him the city of Jerusalem (fig. 101).

The Ascension (mi'raj) of the Prophet and his night journey (khayyim), which are both still celebrated in the Muslim calendar of holy days, often appear in illustrations of the poems of Nizami and other lyric poetry. One brilliantly composed example (figs. 99 and 102) shows the Prophet on his steed with the angel Gabriel going before him as his guide; both are surrounded by flames in the same way as Hindu divinities, and are surrounded on three sides by angels bearing gifts. The Prophet is barefoot, his face covered by a white veil, while Jibril and the angels appear to float elegantly across the heavens. Another example of the same subject shows the Prophet, Jibril and the angels enclosed in a kind of carrier of clouds flying through space and over Mecca, the architectural details of which are easily recognizable (fig. 104).

There are three more examples of images that demonstrate the religious devotion, or at least religious sentiments of the faithful. One is a page from the large-format Sa'adun (see pp. 142–147) or 'Book of Omens' already mentioned: an extraordinary series of figures in a mosque surround a pilgrim—identifiable as one of the Shite imams descended from Ali—as he approaches a fantastical six-sided Kaaba with a dome encircled in flame (see p. 141). In the center, some figures in turbans are praying, meditating or simply expressing their astonishment at this spectacle. In the upper part of the image, one can note various expressions of gratitude, while below...
some scholars appear to be about to write or copy something. The structure in the center is the shrine holy to all Muslims, modified to reflect discussions current in the sixteenth-century Shi'ite world but since forgotten. Whatever the precise explanation of this image may be, the gestures of devotion are powerfully depicted and we must imagine viewing it while a holy man recounts the accompanying story. The same practice applied to other images in this rich manuscript (see pp. 145–147).

Two drawings composed in the same style and perhaps by the same artist illustrate a very particular genre of devout or religious image that lies on the boundary between the secular world and the world of faith. One (fig. 105) shows the Queen of Sheba. King Solomon's supposed companion, traveling through the sky to meet with him. She is seated on a golden throne and accompanied by angels and even by monsters that Solomon has defeated. Two angels hold a large veil over her. This is a sort of royal epiphany with the celestial world as its participants. The other image (fig. 106) is a vision of Paradise with graceful, elegant angels, the hours or pets of the Muslim tradition, glorifying their queen who is reclining in a tree. This painting shows elements characteristic of representations of royal palaces, such as the bird's nest and the peasant leaning on his spade. However, the piece as a whole is a heavenly vision and a particularly accomplished illustration produced by an imagination that wished to represent divine gourds although the models available, and perhaps even the underlying ideas, belong to the human world. It is possible that these images were often reminders of the mystic pursuit of the divine so deeply rooted in Iranian poetry, the metaphors for which are often based on love and refreshments. In this respect they reflected many portraits and also illustrations of the adventures of Majmun, Bahram Gur, Khosrow, Farhad and Shiri, or indeed the depiction of the pleasures of the refined world of the court (at least as it was represented, because the reality was certainly quite different, see for example, pp. 86–87). Although it is fair and reasonable to suggest mystical explanations for these images, such explanations are but one aspect of the sensuality and creative joy that dominate these drawings.