Bilqis, the Queen of Sheba, Flying toward Solomon
From an early 16th-century album
[Tehran, Iran]
Washington,
The Freer Gallery and
Arthur Sackler Gallery,
Smithsonian Institution,
F. 19550.1
FIG. 108
Reverence of the angels
before Adam and Eve’s
entry into Paradise
From a Fathnama or
"Book of Thronation"
c. 1550 (Kazvin, Iran)
Washington, The Freer
Gallery and Arthur Sackler
Galleries, Smithsonian
Institution, S. 1986.254
Aesthetics and visual values

The remarks above are no more than a few preliminary steps in organizing the detail of these images and understanding their range. You might choose simply to extend this type of analysis, thus working towards a fuller description of the painting of the Muslim world. One could then go on to explore the sources, variants and meanings. But this was surely a long and exacting task, the foundation stones of which are still lacking. We have therefore thought it better to endeavor, on the basis of the two hundred or so images in this volume, to set out the milestones that mark the development of the art of the image in the lands of Islam, while hoping that our readers will themselves discover the aspects of thought that deserve study.

Our approach will follow two different routes. One relies on the common points shared by the great majority of these images and on the obvious principles of their language of expression. The other route leads us to consider the culture that created these works. What did it seek to achieve through them?

To begin, let us remember the limitations imposed by these documents and by their artistic quality. None of our images dates back to earlier than 1199 (see pp. 55–56), and none is later than 1700. The majority fall within the period 1400 to 1650. In other words, the great centuries of art inspired by the Timurid, Ottoman, Safavid and Mughal dynasties. In fact, as is the case with all our conclusions (with but a few rare exceptions), the images of superior artistic quality were really all produced within a limited area lying between Istanbul and Agra in India. This region and period were dominated politically by Turks and Persians and culturally by Iranian literature and thought. These territorial and temporal limitations, although valid and correct in terms of the art of the image, recede their historical worth. They prevent us making generalizations about Muslim art as a whole, and the conclusions and explanations that follow must therefore be treated with caution as far as the culture of Islamic lands as a whole is concerned.

How can we characterize this art of the image? First, it is an art that forms in substance as few of the actions or spaces shown are the product of immediate impressions of things seen or experienced. It is an art that almost always recreates a mass of elements and figures, bringing them together to create a spectacle. A principal event, generally with identifiable main protagonists, takes place in the center of the image. Groups of secondary characters form a semi-circle or quarter circle around the event, either serving as a background or actually interwoven into the action (see for example p. 117). There are wide variations in these compositions but the elements used—architecture, trees, flowers, rocks, men, women, courtiers and servants—do not change greatly from one image to another. Like choir members, extras or the painted backcloths of theater and opera sets, these elements are interchangeable and, even when certain major features are missing (for example p. 113), the figures and the organization of space follow the same principles.

This art is, one might say, the product of a combinatory interplay using a limited number of pieces: the originality of an image often lies in the unusual arrangement of well-known motifs. This characteristic has an important visual consequence. It obliges the viewer to look at the images in detail, to seek out what is unique and different and to try to explain it. It is often an unexpected gesture of the hand or the head, an unforeseen object or a particular choice about the order of colors used to draw one’s attention to a significant detail. But, on a more general level, what distinguishes this art is the quality of its detail. Each of these works reflects the preference of a specialist in the kitab al-husn, and it is often difficult to attribute paintings to specific artists because they are the work of
a group of artists; and it is not so much the originality of an image
that merits our attention as its skill in continuing already familiar
practices.

I see this as the theatrical aspect of Persian painting. The image
is a kind of intellectual exercise developed by an artist; it may be
tragic, dramatic, comic or satirical. Indeed, all these nuances can
be found in seventeenth-century portraiture.

The theatrical process involved in this form of painting conceals a
still stranger aspect. The small dimensions of the figures and details
that convey a specific meaning, make our grasp of these works
not only difficult but often uncertain. More than once we have
remarked that the main protagonist is absent or cannot be identi-
fied, that flower gardens and palaces look similar, even though we
know them to be different. The fact that we are not always able to
explain an image in all its detail and that often the text surrounding
it acts only as a very general indicator, suggests that each viewer is
free to make his own interpretation of the piece.

This transferring of the interpretation of the object to the viewer is
already accepted as an exploration of the abstract ornamentation
in the great Islamic art tradition. Here, it would appear, this trans-

fer also applies to representations of concrete objects and individu-
als, which is rare, even in modern Western art. In fact, leaving the
viewer to decide what meaning to assign to an image is profoundly
original. And this originality stems in part from the restrictions
imposed by the technical nature of the book and album. It is an art
that cannot truly be appreciated in a public way as it is difficult for
more than one person to access it at the same time. It is a private
art form, the practice of which requires time, patience and a con-
stantly honed visual curiosity.

Fig. 307  Courtiers
Detail of p. 58, p. 109
Khwarizm Shah and Shams listening to tales told
by Shams’s maid
Page from the album of “Seven”
of Nizam (c. 1341–1357)
1520–1544 (Tehran, Iran)
Painting attributed to Agha Mirak
London, British Library, St. 2265, fol. 8 recto