The Arts of Islam

An exhibition organized by
the Arts Council of Great Britain
in association with
the World of Islam Festival Trust.
The Arts of Islam

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The Arts Council of Great Britain 1976
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Foreword and Acknowledgements

Some years ago Mr Paul Keeler approached the Arts Council with the proposal that a major exhibition of Islamic art should be mounted at the Hayward Gallery as part of a festival of Islamic culture in London. The Council welcomed the occasion to organize an exhibition of the arts of Islam, never before attempted on such a scale in London, or indeed in the West as a whole since the famous Munich exhibition of 1910, and was happy to collaborate with the World of Islam Festival Trust to bring it about. We wish to acknowledge the generous financial contribution from the Trust towards the costs of a necessarily expensive undertaking. Our collaboration over the past three years has been fruitful and our thanks go to the Chairman, Sir Harold Beeley, and the members and staff of the Trust who have throughout advised, helped and supported us.

Early discussions about the nature and range of the exhibition involved a number of scholars and specialists, and led to the formation of a committee to advise on its organisation under the chairmanship of Mr Basil Gray. The members of the Committee are listed on page 7 and we should like to express to them our deep gratitude for putting their knowledge at our disposal and for the time they have given to the realisation of the idea. We should like also to thank Mr David Sylvester, who resigned from the Committee a year ago owing to the pressure of other work, for his considerable help in the early stages of working out a concept for the exhibition.

Islamic art is a vast subject, covering as it does twelve hundred and fifty years of history, and impossible to contain within the walls of an art gallery. An encyclopaedic approach was considered undesirable as well as impracticable. A chronological survey across the lands of Islam was likewise rejected and instead it was agreed to attempt to define the essential character of Islamic art, to trace out the elements that are present in it, separately or more generally together, by which we seek to identify the Islamic creative spirit. These characteristic elements were taken to be calligraphy, geometry, the arabesque and the treatment of figuration. Thus the galleries at the Hayward are arranged to display the unity in Islamic art as well as its diversity; in one gallery objects of widely differing period, medium and scale but exemplifying to a high degree one or other of the essential elements are brought together to form a key to the whole exhibition.

In defining the scope of the exhibition, and in ignoring the art of the
nomadic peoples which has played a vital role in Islamic culture, the Committee has borne in mind also the other exhibitions which are taking place in London and elsewhere during the Festival, all of which treat special aspects of Islamic art and culture and are thus complementary to the present exhibition. It has not been found practicable to attempt to show on this occasion the contemporary arts of the lands of Islam, which would require a large area and involve media such as oil-painting and sculpture in the round which are not traditional in their history.

The organisation of an exhibition on this scale is a co-operative enterprise of considerable complexity, and the goodwill, patience and generosity which we have met in twenty-five countries has made a difficult task particularly rewarding. We are especially grateful to the many lenders to the exhibition who have entrusted us with precious and fragile objects; they are listed on page 19, headed by Her Majesty The Queen.

The presence in the exhibition of very important groups of loans from the national collections of Muslim countries is a source of great satisfaction to us and we are deeply indebted to the governments and cultural authorities of these countries for agreeing to participate so generously, thus significantly enlarging the scope and representative character of the exhibition.

We should like to express our indebtedness to Their Imperial Majesties The Shah an Shah Aryan Mehr and The Shahbanou of Iran who have graciously consented to authorise the loan of the many splendid objects and manuscripts from Iran. We are also most grateful to H.E. Mr Mehrdad Pahlbod, Minister of Culture and Arts of the Government of Iran; to Dr F. Bagherzadeh, Director General of the Iranian Centre for Archaeological Research, who has been most sympathetic and patient in the negotiations; to Mrs Badri Attabaye, Keeper of the Imperial Library; to Dr Seyyed Hossain Nasr, Director of the Imperial Iranian Academy of Philosophy, and to the curators and staffs of the lending institutions.

In Egypt the Festival has the personal support of His Excellency Mohamed Anwar el Sadat who nominated H.E. Minister Tawfiq Oweida, Secretary General of the Supreme Islamic Council of Egypt, to authorise the arrangements. We are greatly indebted to him and to H.E. Mr Youssif el-Sabae, Minister of Culture and Information, to Dr Gamal Mukhtar, Chairman of the Antiquities Organization, to Dr S. M. el Sheneiti, Under Secretary of State at the National Library and Chairman of the Egyptian Book Organisation; and to Mrs Walyiya Ezzy, Director General of the Museum of Islamic Art in Cairo.

The important loans from the National Museum of Iraq have been arranged thanks to Dr Isa Salman, Director General of Antiquities in the Ministry of Information and Dr Fawzi Rashid, Director of the National Museum.

In Syria we have had the valuable collaboration of Dr Asif Bahnassi, Director General of Antiquities and Museums and of Dr Muhammad el Kholy, Curator of the National Museum.

In Tunisia our grateful thanks go to Mr E. Baschaouch, Director of the National Institute of Archeology and Art, Prof. Ibrahim Chabbouh, Director of the National Museum, and Mr A. Gallouz, Director of the National Library, Tunis.

We should not omit to record our deep appreciation of the confidence shown in the value of the exhibition by the authorities responsible for the public collections of Islamic art in this country, in Europe, in India and the United States of America who have allowed us to borrow a number of their most valuable and important objects and manuscripts. Their juxtaposition with the loans from the Muslim countries give a unique importance to the occasion.

In our negotiations with various countries we were fortunate in receiving the guidance and encouragement of the ambassadors and other representatives of these countries and we should like to express our gratitude in particular to H.E. Señor Don Manuel Fraga Iribarne, former Spanish ambassador in London and H.E. Monsieur Stavros Roussos, Greek ambassador in London.

We would especially like to express our thanks to Professor Klaus Brisch, Director, Museum für Islamische Kunst of the Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin, and to Dr Richard Ettinghausen, Consultant Chairman of the Department of Islamic Art at the Metropolitan Museum, New York, and to Señor Don Cesávar Perez, who was appointed by the Spanish Government as special representative for the exhibition, all of whom have helped us in obtaining loans in their countries.

Throughout we have received most valuable advice and assistance from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, and in particular from Mr John Morgan, Head of the Cultural Relations Department and Miss Hilary Evans. British ambassadors and diplomatic representatives abroad have responded most readily to our requests for information and help and we have relied very heavily on their knowledge. We should like to thank especially Sir Philip Adams, KCMG, formerly Ambassador in Cairo, and Mr Willie Morris, CMG, the present Ambassador; Sir Francis Broks Richards, CMG, DSO, Ambassador in Athens; Sir Anthony Parsons, KCMG, MVO, MC, Ambassador in Tehran; Sir John A. N. Graham, CMG, Ambassador in Baghdad; Mr N. C. C. Trench, CMG, Ambassador in Lisbon; Mr A. J. D. Stirling, Counsellor and Head of Chancery in Beirut; and Mr J. E. Marnham, CMG, MC, TD, Ambassador in Tunis. Dr Norman A. Daniel, CBE, Cultural Attaché at the British Embassy in Cairo and British Council Representative, has been responsible for the complex arrangements over the loans from Egypt and we cannot thank him enough. Likewise Mr John G. E. Muir, British Council Representative in Madrid, who has looked after all the arrangements for the Spanish loans. Dr Alan Barr, British Council Representative in Rome, Dr Michael J. Llewellyn Smith, former Cultural Attaché at the British Embassy in Moscow, and Mr William Marsden who succeeded him, Mr Eric Fitzsimmons, former Cultural Attaché at the British Embassy in Tunis and Mr J. E. Lankaster, who succeeded him, have undertaken much detailed negotiation on our behalf and been unfailingly patient and effective in meeting our many demands.
We consider ourselves fortunate that Mr Basil Gray agreed to chair the committee for the exhibition. He was of course one of the scholars responsible for the Persian exhibition held at Burlington House in 1931 and, in consultation with the Committee, he has selected this exhibition with characteristic vision and care. The selection of carpets and textiles has been the responsibility of Mr Donald King and Mr Edmund de Unger, to whom we are much indebted.

The catalogue is the work of a number of contributors whose names appear elsewhere. As is natural, no consensus on the nature of Islamic art emerges in texts written by scholars of widely differing points of view, and it should be said that the views expressed are those of our distinguished authors, and not of the Committee. We should like to thank them most warmly.

Those responsible for compiling the catalogue entries have in certain cases worked under considerable difficulties where the absence of information on unpublished pieces has complicated their task. A special word of thanks is due to the catalogue editors, Mrs Dalu Jones and Dr George Michell, who undertook a formidable task most capably. The decision to attempt to illustrate every object in the exhibition added to their work.

Mr Michael Brawne has brought his considerable knowledge and experience to designing the exhibition and solving the many practical problems which presented themselves.

Much detailed work in planning and coordinating the arrangements for the loans from the Muslim countries has been undertaken on our behalf by Mr Yasin Safadi, Assistant Keeper, Department of Oriental Manuscripts and Printed Books, British Library, whose assistance we greatly appreciate. His advice has been invaluable to Mr Jeffery Watson, Overseas Transport Officer of the Arts Council, who has the responsibility for assembling the loans from all over the world. In this complex task he has had the assistance of Mrs Jane Boyce. The loans coming from the Middle East have been packed in their countries of origin by Mr Norman McManus assisted in some cases by Mr Sidney Portier, both members of the staff of the Arts Council.

Miss Angelina Morhange, who has acted as Exhibition Organiser within the Arts Council, has worked unceasingly coordinating the administrative arrangements.

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Robin Campbell, Director of Art
Joanna Drew, Director of Exhibitions
**Arts Council of Great Britain**
Preface

The Arts of Islam exhibition is at the centre of a major study of Islamic civilization. Alone it is an important and complete exhibition, bringing together rare treasures from the four corners of the world. However, its full significance will only be seen if the exhibition is viewed within the context of the other exhibitions and events, which collectively make up the World of Islam Festival.

The Festival attempts to present the totality of Islamic culture and civilization. The principal themes of the Festival illustrate the essential aspects of the culture; the arts, the sciences, urban and nomadic life, poetry and music and of course what lies at the heart of the civilization, the Koran and its teachings.

The Festival represents a unique collaboration between scholars, institutions and governments from both the Islamic world and the West, and such a participation is bound to have a permanent effect on our knowledge of Islamic culture, as the very act of attempting to see something in a complete way leads us towards a definition which could well serve as a model for our time.

That the Festival could take place at all is a great tribute to the museums and libraries of London, and will bring before the public the magnificent and cumulative work that has been done by the many specialists on Islamic studies and their departments over the years.

The principal exhibitions besides The Arts of Islam are those devoted to the Koran in the King’s library of the British Museum, to the science and technology of Islam at the Science Museum, to the nomad and to the city at the Museum of Mankind and to music and musical instruments at the Horniman Museum. There are as well exhibitions treating specialised aspects of Islamic art at the British Museum, the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Commonwealth Institute and at the Graves Art Gallery in Sheffield and the Whitworth Art Gallery in Manchester.

These major exhibitions are supported by a programme of concerts, lectures, seminars, books and films, which have all attempted to deal with those aspects of the culture best explored within a specific medium. The Festival should, therefore, fit together like a jigsaw puzzle and to be fully experienced, the visitor is invited to participate in all its varied facets.

Paul Keeler  Festival Director, World of Islam Festival Trust

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Introduction to the Exhibition

The explosion of Islam is one of the most extraordinary and crucial events of history. In less than eighty years the new religion proclaimed by the prophet Muhammad had been carried by arms after his death in 632 from the Arabian peninsula to Central Asia in the east and to the Atlantic coast of Africa and Spain in the west. The great empire of the Sassanians which had dominated the middle east for four hundred years had disappeared and its long adversary the east Roman empire of Byzantium had been reduced to a fraction of its former size with the loss of the great provinces of Syria, Egypt and North Africa. These events are explicable in terms of the oppressive rule of bureaucracies; of the alienation of peoples from remote authoritarian control; of sheer exhaustion after wars fought on an imperial scale. But such explanations do not touch the real significance of these events, which were truly revolutionary: not so much in terms of the displacement of persons or of economic disruption (though clearly there were big changes in these ways), as of change of spirit. It is true that there was considerable Arab penetration into Persia, especially into the eastern part, Khurasan, because this was a frontier region and, therefore, Garrisoned, and because the desert terrain was favoured by immigrants from Arabia. Although conversion to the new faith in Persia was slow especially in the countryside, due to the use of Arabic for official business and the omnipresence of the Islamic law (shari`a); the impact on social life was great and those who had most to lose and most to gain in the cities were soonest converted to the Muslim faith. After two centuries, by the 9th, it had gone so far that the Persian language was in danger of becoming a mere dialect. The great Persian revival that followed was however not anti-Muslim but on the contrary led to great Persian influence in the development of Muslim thought and above all art. So Persia which had in 750 seized political dominance in the Islamic state came also to dominate its intellectual life.

If we look more closely at the art forms of the first centuries of Islam, we see first the continued use of the grammar of late Greco-Roman art; in mosaic and wall-painting, in architectural decoration and until 695 even in coin types. The capitals which crowned the columns in Syrian Raqqa or in Andalusian Cordoba are still clearly in the Roman tradition (nos. 472 and 488). Even after the Abbasid revolt and seizure of power, in the new round cities of Baghdad founded in 762 al-Manṣūr sought for a marble mihrab from Syrian workshops
(no. 471). This niche, of clear classical form, well symbolises the assumption in the new Islamic community of the identity of religious and secular leadership (an idea inherited from Sasanian state and not far removed from the Byzantine concept). For the mihrab, the frame which once held the statue of an emperor had now to serve as station for the imam as leader of the Islamic community. So too the mimbar is not so much the pulpit of the West occupied by the preacher as the rostrum from which the will of the ruler was declared to his faithful subjects, and its occupancy was severely restricted to those who pronounced each Friday the assertion of the ruler's title in the Khutba.

The Umayyad princes may have been contented with the luxurious setting of well-appointed villas in Syria, not so much as was once thought because they could not tolerate city life as because they represented the aristocratic life of the displaced Byzantine elite. In Baghdad it was rather the hierarchic court of the Sasanian monarch which was imitated, essentially cosmopolitan, accustomed to age-old imperial rule over subject peoples and outward-looking in keeping open the trade routes to India and China. The palaces of Samarra on the Tigris, built in the mid-9th century, were decorated with stucco dados in the Sasanian style and furnished with Chinese white or green porcelain and local imitations of it (no. 256).

So it was this eastern heritage which from the 8th century onwards conditioned the outward forms of Islam; after the deliberate confrontation with the splendid icon of Byzantine architecture in the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem (692) and the Great Mosque in Damascus, Islamic architecture went its own way in the indefinitely extensible congregational mosque, the great courtyards of Samarra or Ibn Ṭūlūn in Cairo or Kairouan in Tunisia; or the multiplication of columnar units at Cordoba. In the community the Koran extended its control over every aspect of life, thus preventing any distinction between secular and religious and making a cultural bond among all who professed the faith, whatever their national origin. The Arabic language and even Arabic poetry of the 'times of ignorance' became literary models for all from east Persia to Spain. Arabic also dominated commerce and trade and Arab ships plied between Basra and straf on the Persian Gulf and the Far East.

In the sectional introductions it is repeatedly remarked how, in each of the crafts, techniques and skills were inherited from the earlier centres in the lands of Islam, but also how common styles developed so that in forms and decoration passed easily from one medium to another, and how there was a continuing tendency to community of artistic language throughout the Islamic world. A principal aim of the organisers of this exhibition has been to illustrate these features of Islamic art and to seek to identify and demonstrate the essential unities within its varied expressions. This purpose underlies the conceptual arrangement of the key Gallery 1 with its four specific categories of modes of design identified so as to ease the understanding and appreciation by the public of the artistic language in the exhibition as a whole.

What then are the essential characteristics of Islamic art? A defini-
enamelling of glass, the use of mineral and earth colours in ceramic production, or pigments for book illustration. Sometimes such migrations were forced, such as the Mongol stripping of the glass workers from Aleppo; Timur’s removal of the tile-workers from Isfahan and Yazd, and of calligraphers and painters from Baghdad, to his new capital at Samarkand; of Bayazungh’s removal to Herat of the Tabriz masters of the arts of the book; or of the Ottoman abductions from Tabriz in the early 16th century or that of the Uzbeks from Herat to Bukhara in the same period. Other craftsmen fled from such invaders, like the Khurussi inlay masters who established themselves in Mosul in the 13th century (nos. 195–7) and later in Damascus and Cairo; the calligraphers who left Baghdad for Shiraz at the time of Timur (1370–80). All such movements favoured the spread of uniform standards throughout the lands of Islam.

Another factor which contributed to the community of taste and skill was the recognition of the primacy in cultural life of the seat of the caliphs in Baghdad (founded in 762) with all its reputation in cookery, music, poetry, silk-weaving, ceramics including tilework, stucco and painting. It became the model for admiration and imitation. In its heyday (late 10th–11th century) Fatimid Cairo was another centre for all the luxury crafts, and so too was Caliphal Cordoba, where a last branch of the Umayyad house flourished for nearly 300 years. It reached its highest point in art and letters under Hakam II (961–76), when it was the most civilized state in Western Europe.

We have remarked upon the interchangeability of design between the various arts and even of shape and on the persistence of some motifs, such as the classic arabesque, an infinitely extendable scroll, based originally on the palmette but often associated with other vegetal forms: interlace where geometric or vegetal. But the arts of the book do not fall so neatly into this pattern of design. The Arabic script does of course dominate these arts, being the very medium of the text and the essential element in the illumination. So too the book-binding provides one of the best illustrations of the application of the arabesque and of geometric interlacing, closely parallel in lay-out to the architectural decoration. But the miniature art does at first sight appear to go beyond if not to transgress the principles identified as specially characteristic of Islamic art. Yet is this really so? First we should remember that the book held a special place of honour under Islam and that this extended to collections of Arabic poems like the Kitāb al-Aghādīr (nos. 515–7). Again learning was protected and fostered, translations from Greek or Pahlavi encouraged, history esteemed. Such books as the ‘Fixed Stars’ of al-Sūfī (no. 500) were necessarily illustrated and the diagrams of automata edited by al-Jazari belong to the courtly traditions inherited from the Sassanians. So the whole conception of patronage of the arts from the book implied that it was right to devote the highest care to the copying of fine books.

We have still to show that the miniature art itself conformed to the principles of Islam. Apart from illustrations to works of information under which we may include history (no. 530), the two main categories to be considered are the frontispiece and the illustration to works of imagination, mainly poetic. The frontispiece is generally intended to honour the princely patron by depicting him, not as a true portrait but as an idealised effigy, in some suitable princely occupation, enthroned in a diwan, hunting, playing polo, enjoying a feast in a garden or a pavilion. Here the book is associated with other media of the arts, especially inlaid metalwork, in maintaining an old Persian tradition but one which, we have seen, might be adopted as suitable to the Islamic ruler as protector of the faith and administrator of justice.

The other category of miniature accompanies lyrical, romantic or mystical poetry and gives a visual parallel to the poet’s imagery in a way often in harmony with the text rather than exactly illustrating it. This was the special gift of Persia with its intense visual imagination; its love of the natural setting in garden or mountain landscape. Essentially the art is conceptual, just as are many of the other arts of Islam, never the depiction of an actual place or scene but the construction of an ideal scene in which the essential character of the passage chosen is elaborated by the brilliant depiction in loving detail of flower, tree or human form, of tile-cład building, cloud-filled sky, in a closed world as artificial or conceived as the poem itself. In its harmony of brilliant flat colours it is just as much a pattern of design as the geometric or the arabesque; it is a similar exercise more highly organised and complex but still within the same terms, so that it is always perfectly adapted to the book form of painting naturally with calligraphy and illumination, in a single unified product of a team of artists under the control of the master librarian.

There can be no question that architecture has provided the main focus for Islamic art throughout its history. In this exhibition the display of colour projections specially made in all the principal lands of Islam is intended to make its presence as actual as possible. In addition, gathered round this unit, are examples of architectural decoration to illustrate it in its proper scale and most of the media employed. It is a disappointment that it has not proved possible to include examples of the use of tile mosaic decorated inscriptions which were so conspicuous in exterior decoration of buildings from the fourteenth century onwards in Persia, Transoxiana and the Ottoman Turkish domains. But enough is to be seen in the galleries to illustrate the range of ornament and especially the monumental use of Arabic as a major element in design.

We would call attention especially to the Umayyad marble panel from the Great Mosque of Damascus (no. 408), an elegant work of the Caliph al-Walid (714–7), which shows a new use of late Hellenistic motifs in a shape that is characteristic of this time, and comparable with the relief carving at the famous villa-palace of Mshatta. A similar style in wood, perhaps of a hundred years later, shows the tendril pattern developing into an infinitely expansive design typical of Islamic arabesque. But a fundamentally more abstract type of wood-carving was introduced at Samarra in the mid-9th century in which bird and animal motifs are translated into light and shade pattern by deep oblique carving (no. 438) and this was carried to Cairo by the Tulunids (nos. 435–6).
The most important medium for interior decoration, from Central Asia to Spain, was stucco panels carved in situ or moulded with repeat patterns. The technique was inherited from the Sassanian empire but was greatly developed and improved under Islam especially in Mesopotamia and Persia. Characteristic of the patterns in the Umayyad period are the substantial panels from the mosque of Umayyad Banu Junayd, situated on the great Sassanian irrigation canal, the Kāṭūl or Nahrāwān, about thirty miles south-east of Baghdad. Here (no. 473) we see a repeat pattern of individual motifs linked by small scale frames. The Samarra and Nishapur stuccoes are too fragile to travel, but their style is represented by a large flat mihrab panel from Anah on the Euphrates (no. 474) in which the deeply cut scrolled and central panel of palmettes is surrounded by stiff early kufic in the post-Samarra style of the 10th century.

It is generally said that this style was superseded by the impact of the Seljuk conquest. This view has recently been questioned and it may turn out that some features of the so-called Seljuk style were already developed before the time of the great Seljuk Sultans (1055–1157), on the one hand, and on the other that it is the twelfth century rather than the eleventh which saw the full development of the Seljuk style. This is splendidly demonstrated in the exhibition by major works of art in carved wood. The Seljuqs brought a strong revival in Islam, both militarily by their onslaught on the Byzantine empire (their great victory at Manzikert in 1071 brought the greater part of Anatolia permanently into Muslim hands) but also in their elevation of the Sultan as leader of the Muslim people to a position of absolute power in an eastern imperial tradition à la caliph, whom they wished to confine to spiritual functions. This esteem for the secular arm in the state was marked architecturally by the increased importance in the mosque of the ruler’s station, which was now fenced off by a handsome screen known as the waqūūr often surmounted by a dome. From Damascus comes panelling from a great maqbara screen carved in 1103 soon after the Seljuq conquest of the city in 1094 and for the Turkish atabk Yühtıquin. With marvellous skill the great panels of poplar wood are carved with Koranic inscriptions in kufic lettering back to back and with vine trellises twining round the lettering (no. 448). Of rougher workmanship but showing all the strength of the new style of star and leaf motifs framed in wide flat strapwork and with square kufic dedicatory inscription dated 1153 is the pulpit (mihrab) from Mosul (no. 452). Also from Mosul is a pair of 12th century doors with kufic inscriptions as a main motif (no. 451). A similar renewal is to be seen under the Fatimid rule in Egypt, where influence from Persia was strong. Linked in hexagonal panels are motifs of musicians and hunters carved on beams which are the only remains of the Fatimid palace in Cairo (no. 443).

Kufic was still generally used for monumental inscriptions such as those painted in gay colours on the 11th century ceiling planks taken down for conservation from the roof of the Great Mosque at Kairouan, one of the great medieval buildings of Islam; (nos. 439–40) or in the carved wood panel from Raqqa on the Euphrates where the letters have

floriated terminals (no. 438). In the 12th century in Persia and later in Anatolia a new style of monumental kufic becomes the rule, with the tall Lastase of the letters plated. A fine example is to be seen in the great lustre tile panel from Kahan (nos. 376–7) with its inscription in high relief.

This form of kufic is exceptional, though characteristic for its time and occasionally seen in later examples from Ayyubid and early Mamluk times in Syria and Egypt of late 13th and early 14th century, such as the pen-box of al-Malik al-Manṣūr dated 1363 (no. 224). In general, however, monumental kufic is notable for its strong horizontal movement and sharply accented vertical and oblique strokes, a carved letter in relief or incised and of sculptural form: whereas the naskhi is a curvilinear two-dimensional script admirably displayed on the flat surface of glass or metalwork. Nowadays it is seen to better advantage than on the mosque lamps of Syrian enamelled glass (nos. 138–40), where the transparency accentuates the counterpoint with the floral scrolling. It has been remarked that the use of naskhi as a chancery script by the Ghaznavids in the 11th century started its monumental career at the beginning of the 12th century. By the 13th century it was in common use in the applied arts throughout the Islamic world; its freedom of movement enables the designer to fill the girdles of basins or candlesticks (nos. 219, 217) where the ground is densely covered with floral scrolls.

The Mongol invasions of the 13th century brought closer contact with China and Chinese craftsmen were moved to the Mongol capitals of Karakorum and Tabriz. There the Ilkhanid rulers of Persia passed through a Buddhist phase before their conversion to Islam in 1295. The Buddhist lotus became and remained a favourite addition to the repertory of design as well as the peony, ubiquitous in Chinese design. This innovation was extended even to Egypt but was assimilated to Islamic formal symmetrical design, and displayed in zones or other fields defined by plain framing bands. At this time there is a specially close relation between the splendid manuscript illumination (nos. 526, 528–9) both in Persia and Egypt and the inlaid metalwork, both relying on colour as well as design to achieve marvellously rich effects. It is to be noted that the apparent geometric lay-out of the design is, in fact, controlled by the eye and not by mathematical calculation of an advanced kind, and this seems to be true also of architectural decoration which does not follow strictly the structural forms into which exact calculation must of course have entered.

Chinese influence at this time had a more radical liberating effect on the art of miniature painting, freeing it from the diaphanic and silhouette character of earlier periods by the introduction of the concept of the picture space within its framed margins. For a time it seemed as though indefinite space might break the unity of the book but quickly the Persian sense of presentation found the solution in the high horizon as a viable substitute for the traditional monochrome background. This, with the opaque gold or deep blue sky, became the convention of the classic Persian miniature style from the second half of the 14th century till its decline in the 17th century.
Introduction to Islamic Art

By general and tacit consensus the expression the ‘Arts of Islam’, or ‘Islamic Art’, refers to all the arts of the Muslim peoples, whether those arts be religious or non-religious, while the analogous expression the ‘Arts of Christianity’ raises immediately the question as to what extent, and according to which criteria, the arts of the West can be so defined. Is for instance the art of the Renaissance – which borrows its forms from pagan antiquity – still a Christian art in the sense that Byzantine Romanesque and Gothic art are Christian art forms? And why? Is it simply because of some of its themes have their source in the Bible? And is it because Renaissance, however classical in spirit is nevertheless marked by a Christian heritage? Where then is the point beyond which this heritage is not sufficiently clear to justify the term of Christian art?

Let us not forget that there has always been in the Christian world, even in its phases of greatest religious fervour, a place for artistic manifestations which are profane and therefore religiously indifferent, but which exist by right, according to the maxim that one must give to God that which is God’s and to Caesar that which belongs to Caesar. In the world of Islam this separation of life into a religious sphere and a profane one does not exist: the Koran is both a spiritual and social law. We speak now of an Islamic world which is still intact, not fractured by European interference, of the very world which has produced the works of art which we admire in this exhibition. In this context the Koran, the book of God, and the Sunna, the way of life of the Prophet, regulate not only cult and common law but also the fundamental and recurrent facts of everyday life such as the way to greet, to wash, to eat. This means that Islam represents a total order which involves all the planes of human existence, the body as well as the soul, and which decides naturally the place which each art occupies and the role it will play in the spiritual and physical equilibrium of the Dar al-Islam – literally, the House of Islam. It is by conforming to a certain hierarchy of values that the arts are integrated in Islam, and that they become Islamic art, whatever the source of their diverse elements may be.

The ignorance of this hierarchy is the basis of all the misunderstandings which are current about the art of Islam. The European observer who is not aware of this hierarchy of values – and we mean here any representative of Western culture – instinctively values the artistic level of other cultures by applying the scale of values which is
habitually applied in a European milieu. For him the measure of art is the role which representation—be it more or less primitive or near to nature—plays; it is the representation of the human being which is foremost in his mind, which is the touchstone.

In the Islamic order, on the contrary, figurative art does not take the first but the last place in the scale of artistic values. Figurative art is excluded from the liturgical domain, which means that it is excluded from the central core of Islamic civilization and that it is only tolerated at its periphery with the proviso that it must not represent a sacred personage susceptible of being the object of a cult and that it must not have the pretension of imitating the work of the Creator. In this way the role conceded to figurative art is singularly narrowed, for by being cut off from cult it does not participate directly in the spiritual life of Islam. At the same time it is not allowed to reproduce nature but has to transform nature into a fabulous imagery so as to make it visibly unreal. There are certain exceptions to this—Persian miniatures are one—but these exceptions do not change the rule, and its overall effect. The proof lies in the fact that there is not one single mosque which is decorated with human figures. A whole dimension of artistic creation—the most important and the most vital for Christian and Western culture—is therefore non-existent in Islam. Is this, then, a grave weakness? We shall see that this apparent weakness is in reality the condition for the development of other dimensions and other artistic possibilities. Thus, in the sanctuaries the absence of images creates a void comparable to silence—but to a kind of silence which is not that of inertia but that of a state of undivided presence.

This is what is expressed by the limpidity of the architectural forms in Islam. In a general way the absence of anthropomorphic images, with their allied associations which are inevitably subjective, allows for the objective and impersonal character of Islamic art, a character which is most manifest in the architecture and in the decoration based on abstract forms. Both architecture and decoration stem from a qualitative geometry which excludes a priori all individualistic improvisation but which has nothing sterile in it. There is in this geometry of pythagorean origin a harmony and a memory of the music of the spheres. It is no accident that the architects whose names have come down to us were often mathematicians and astronomers as well as poets and musicians. The Muslim is not fascinated by the drama of individual artistic creation; rather his soul vibrates through the idea of the unity and immensity of God which are reflected in the cosmic order and also in the architecture shaped by the hand of man—and shaped not according to his imagination alone, but also according to the nature of the object, by the bringing forth of the laws and the qualities which are inherent in the object itself.

But let us consider again the question of the hierarchical order of the arts of Islam. In a sense the central art in Islam is architecture because its function is that of building sanctuaries and because a whole series of other arts is dependent on it. But there is one art which is still nobler, and that is the art of writing, calligraphy, which owes its excellence to the paramount importance of the fact that it transmits the Koran, the divine word directly revealed in the Arabic language. From this point of view, as the visible record of the divine word, Arabic calligraphy is analogous in function to the painting of icons in the Eastern church. Extreme meet.

From a Muslim point of view Arabic calligraphy is irreplaceable, because the Koran has been revealed in the Arabic language and because its implicit divine nature is manifest even in its sound, with the Arabic script reproducing sonority as faithfully as possible.

From the same point of view a Koran translated into another language is no longer truly the Koran, contrary to what happens to the Gospel which has been translated into various liturgical languages.

This is because the Gospels are not in the form of divine speech but are in some sense a historical narration. For this reason their content can be illustrated in images, something which would be absurd in the case of the Koran where it is the word-by-word faithfulness to the text (with its own phonetic symbolism) which counts.

We understand therefore why the Arabic spirit is present everywhere in the world of Islam, whatever mother tongue this or that Muslim people may use. Everywhere the Koran is quoted in Arabic and, just as the everyday life of a Muslim is punctuated by Koranic formulas, his environment—the mosque, the house, the place of work—is decorated with inscriptions whose text is usually taken from the Sacred Book. Every educated Muslim is more or less familiar with the Arabic script and this experience awakens in him a sensitivity to the interplay of abstract lines, an interplay which is both geometric and rhythmic. To study Arabic calligraphy and the rich variety of its different styles is to feel the heart-beat of Muslim art.

But if calligraphy is the noblest and the most common art in the world of Islam, architecture nevertheless still occupies a central position dominating the whole complex of artistic activities. Some of these—masonry, carpentry, stone and stucco sculpture, tile mosaic, tile covering of walls, stained glass—exist only as a service to architecture, while others, such as sculpture and painting on wood, are only occasionally linked to buildings. Calligraphy itself is linked to architecture in the form of monumental inscriptions. Sometimes its fluid lines contrast with the static character of architecture, sometimes they conform to it: there is a 'built' form of script composed of squares or rectangles, which sometimes is reduced to bricks projecting out of the surface of the walls.

From a European point of view all the arts subordinated to architecture are only decorative arts and therefore arts of secondary importance and of limited creativity. In the world of Islam these arts occupy the place reserved elsewhere for the figurative arts, for whose absence they compensate while at the same time they have a completely different function in that they transform the raw material giving it a nobler, almost spiritual, status made of crystalline regularity and vibration of light.

This art is objective not only because it is based on a real science but also because it never creates illusions. A stone will always remain a stone and will never be made to give the impression of being a live
body. It is true that monumental decorations sometimes incorporate zoomorphic elements – notably in the art of the Seljuqs – but these are reduced to strongly stylised heraldic forms. As for the arabesque based on plant forms, it develops according to its own decorative logic independently of any botanical models. In Ottoman art and in Mughal art the arabesque sometimes comes near to nature but nevertheless remains faithful to the laws of two dimensional decoration.

In the wider sense of the term the arabesque also includes the decoration of purely geometric forms such as the rosettes made of interlaced lines, which were developed from a regular division of the circle. The arabesque with plant form can in any case combine with the purely geometric arabesque and we then have a combination of melodious rhythm with crystalline perfection. Finally the different kinds of decoration can be combined with calligraphy. The decoration is added to architecture proper like a rich cloth, which covers the walls of the building. Without this cover Islamic architecture is often reduced to simple and static forms like the cube and the sphere.

There is in all Islamic architecture, and more particularly in the mosques, a sort of fluctuation between a sobriety or simplicity which recalls the origins of Islam and a richness of decoration, ad maiusor glutiam. The types of mosques differ according to ethnic environment but go back to one prototype which remains unchanging, a plan which is never forgotten so that at any given historical moment it is possible to revert to it, or to a stage in development near to it. This prototype is none other than the courtyard of the house of the Prophet in Medina, a courtyard which was used by the faithful for their communal prayers. This was a rectangular enclosure of which the part situated on the side facing Mecca had been transformed into a shelter by a flat roof supported on palm trunks. The primitive mosques, just like their model, are always made of an oratory with a horizontal roof on pillars open to the courtyard, which increases the liturgical space: when the worshippers are too numerous to find a place in the hall some of them are able to pray in the courtyard. The direction towards Mecca – or more precisely towards the Kaaba – is indicated by a niche, the mihrab, in the facing wall. For Muslims, the Kaaba symbolises the spiritual centre of the world. Its origin is attributed to Abraham. In front of the mihrab – which will become the preferred object of the sacred art of Islam – the imam stands to lead the communal prayers.

In a second phase of its evolution the site which is open in the enclosure, that is the courtyard (zalih), is surrounded by porticoes. Instead of simple pillars to support the horizontal roof of the prayer hall, columns with arcades are used. These arcades are wider along the liturgical axis which links the mihrab to the courtyard. In this way they form a sort of central nave which is externally indicated by an elevated roof or by one or more domes. In the middle of the courtyard there is generally a fountain where the worshippers perform their ritual ablutions. Add to these the minaret from which the muezzin calls to prayer and we have the elements which will remain constant in the architecture of the mosque.

Variation from this model is the consequence of building methods which in turn correspond to the differences in environment and cultural heritage of the different Muslim peoples.

In Syria, which was to become the cultural centre of the first Muslim empire, mosques were built in stone with roofs resting on wooden beams, a method which has found its direct continuation in the countries of the Maghrib (Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco and Spain). In Persia and in Mesopotamia the building material was almost exclusively brick, which meant that the horizontal wooden roofs had to be replaced by a series of vaults resting on groups of pillars. By doing so each spatial compartment was given a certain autonomy which does not go against the function of the mosque which is to serve both communal cult and individual prayer. In consequence the Persian plan is always modelled on the traditional one – with its oratory open on the courtyard and surrounded by porticoes – but its elevation is characterised by high-niched portals (inada) and by vaults and domes which make up a very different profile from that of the North African mosque. The Persian mosque, particularly the Persian mosque of Shii’s origin, is less a place of gathering for communal prayer than a sanctuary composed of a series of spaces increasingly interiorised and sacred. Through the ‘high gate’ often flanked by minarets one enters the courtyard surrounded by arcades and revealing a second triumphal gate, the deep vault of which somewhat prolongs the prayer niche, the mihrab, which is itself sheltered by a domed chamber.

In the Muslim architecture of India the Persian model is further developed. The whole facade of the oratory facing the courtyard becomes a sort of amplification of the mihrab. Thus the place for communal prayer is in practice the courtyard itself.

The Turkish Ottoman mosque develops in a completely different way. At the beginning it was a simple variation of the prayer hall covered by a horizontal roof and supported by pillars. This roof had been replaced by a series of domes, each resting on four pillars. This meant that the plan had to be divided into a certain number of regular squares. The transformation of this cluster of domes into a single dome over a single square space had to impose itself, and the synthesis was achieved, first on a modest scale, in its simplest form, and thereafter on a much larger scale which entailed the solution of serious and difficult static problems. These problems were solved by the adaptation, in Islamic forms, of a method used by the Byzantine
architects of Hagia Sophia, whose huge central dome is counter-balanced by half-domes. These were arranged so as to facilitate the transition between the circular dome base and the cube of the building beneath. Thanks to this method the Ottoman mosque creates a perfect unity of internal space. It is true that the inner space of the mosque is separated from the courtyard, but this separation is justified by the harshness of the Anatolian climate.

What are the objects to be found in a mosque? We have already seen that the prayer niche, the mihrab, is particularly important in the religious art of Islam. Its walls are generally lined or covered with mosaics and its frame almost always contains Koranic inscriptions. Next to the mihrab in the great mosques devoted to the Friday communal prayer stands the mimbar or pulpit, which takes the form of a throne with steps and which is usually made of wood, so that it can be moved. Its high walls are generally decorated with carving or inlay. The mimbar is one of what we can call the liturgical objects, which also include the lectern for the Koran, the lamps hanging from the ceiling—often made of pierced metal or enamelled glass—and finally the mats or carpets which cover the ground and which have great importance because in the course of their prayers the worshippers rest their foreheads on the ground as well as sit on the floor to meditate and rest. The arts which produce the liturgical objects are by the same token linked to religion, while at the same time they are used in the making of practical objects. There are few of the minor arts which do not contribute in one way or another to the sanctuary complex.

The expression 'minor arts', which usually defines those manual crafts which are used for the fabrication of objects for everyday use, should not have any derogatory sense. A simple drinking cup can be an art object of great quality. This is particularly the case of the objects made for the households of rulers, which were generally created by the best craftsmen of the time. But the perfection of an object does not necessarily derive from the richness of the material used; on the contrary, the aim is to attain the highest artistic quality by the simplest means and by using sometimes the humblest materials: 'God has prescribed perfection in all things' according to the word of the Prophet. This ideal gives spiritual meaning not only to the work of the artist who in a way transforms raw material into gold, but also gives meaning to the acts and gestures of those who use the objects made by the craftsmen's work; to drink from a cup whose shape makes clay noble is to savour at the same time the ephemeral nature of things and a permanent beauty reflected in them. There are few things in the city of Islam which were created to last, and few are known which are without any quality of beauty.

Since at the basis of Islamic civilisation there is the sacred book, the Koran, it is not surprising that the arts of the book have been favoured in a special way. We have already mentioned the paramount importance of calligraphy in the art of Islam. In this context we have also to mention bookbinding, which is often of the highest quality, and illumination, generally of a decorative character. There is here a phenomenon to be considered which at first sight might seem strange—

the introduction in Islamic art of figurative painting in the form of miniatures which illustrate not the Koran but scientific or poetical texts. There is an affinity between the script and the miniature whose style is essentially linear. Miniature painting does not include perspective or shadow; there is no attempt to convey three-dimensional space. It is significant that all the miniature painters of whom we know the life history were first of all calligraphers. One must not forget that the art of the miniature is not just outside the religious sphere but also outside the social one, in that its masterpieces are hidden in the pages of books, in the same way as strange stories, disturbing and mysterious, are hidden in them.

The art of weaving is categorised as one of the minor arts of Islam, but it is often forgotten that the arts of costume play an important role—almost as important as that of architecture—in Islamic civilisation. This comparison is not arbitrary because, whereas architecture creates the necessary environment for the lives of men, the art of the costume in a way shapes man himself. There is little which influences the behaviour of most men more than the costumes they wear. The traditional dress of the people of Islam is characterised by its sobriety and dignity. It often combines a monastic simplicity with royal majesty. We are speaking now of a man’s dress, which is more uniform than that of women. For Europeans, a population dressed in Muslim style often evokes the world of the Bible. And this is no mere romanticism, because the ideal which this costume expresses is in fact a continuation of the world of patriarchs and prophets.

All the arts which we have mentioned have as background the urban life. Our description of the categories of Islamic art would be very incomplete, in fact one-sided, without mention of Beduini art. By this word is indicated the art of the people who live in the open country—and more exactly, the Nomadic people who, in the Islamic civilisation, play a role which is both in opposition to and complementary to that of the people in a sedentary world. The town dwellers have nothing to learn from the Beduins in technical and artistic methods, but they have a lot to learn so far as the essence of their art is concerned, because the nomads have a genius for forms which are both simple and bold. They have a conception of greatness and nobility. Every time that nomad tribes have invaded a region with a sedentary culture the arts, which are the first element to be disrupted, are subsequently renovated so as to become more direct, more intense, of a greater depth. The art of the knotted carpet, undoubtedly of nomad origin, is the best example of the Beduini contribution to Muslim culture, and its artistic evolution is at the same time an illustration of the interaction between the two poles of the Muslim world, the sedentary and the nomadic. The nomads love rhythm as a reminder of permanent presence and they love infinite space. The sedentary people love to limit space, to frame it, to order it towards a centre; they prefer melody to rhythm. The nomads simplify the forms which they receive from sedentary peoples, they reduce them to symbols, while the settled people develop the elements taken from nomadic art enriching them with forms reminiscent of nature. The whole Muslim civilisation lives
through the exchange between these polarities. It is a living balance between the town and the desert – stability and movement, contemplation and militancy.

In order to account for the nature of Islamic art we have tried to define the different categories of artistic activity as the Islamic mind conceives them. There are, of course, other ways of distinguishing different aspects of Islamic art considering for instance its various styles or variants according to the different ethnic milieux. One will find nevertheless that, despite differences in style, the hierarchy of the arts as it has been described here remains the same everywhere.

It is always the art of writing, calligraphy, which supplies the key note, and the synthesis between architecture and decoration always rests on the same geometric principles. These are the two aspects of Islamic art which have no direct precedent in other civilisations – whatever some historians may believe, who want to trace Islamic forms to foreign influences.

The historical point of view has its rights certainly; in particular it allows for an understanding of Islamic art by reference to the way in which it has transformed the artistic heritage of preceding civilisations and by drawing attention to the choice which it has made from amongst their forms, what it has assimilated and what it has rejected. This approach, however, carries the temptation to over-estimate the foreign influences that at all moments of history, but most strongly at its beginning, have converged on the arts of Islam. The equilibrium between the various means of artistic expression has never changed under Islam. This equilibrium is based on the doctrine of the One Reality; it avoids certain expression and emphasises others and thus imposes upon itself alternately poverty and richness.

The glossary consists mainly of technical terms referred to in the catalogue entries and includes Arabic, Persian and Turkish words. It does not, however, claim to be definitive.

**Glossary**

albarello A tall cylindrical jar with concave sides.

amir A military commander, prince or senior official. *Amir al-mu'minîn, Commander of the Faithful, a title proper to the Caliphs but used by some other rulers.*

ansa (pl. anse) (in Latin, a handle) An element in Koranic illumination, being a usually triangular projection into the margin from a decorative panel or frame.

aquamanile A vessel designed to hold and pour water.

arabesque Stylised plant motif, developed from the spiralling vine with leaves and tendrils.

âyà A verse of the Koran.

bâhâ'î faith The religion developed by Bâhâ Allâh from the doctrine of the Þâb, a 19th-century Persian mystic. It combines Islamic with Christian and other elements.

basmâla The accepted abbreviation for the Koranic formula bi-ismâlîh al-râhmân al-râhim, 'in the name of God, the merciful, the compassionate,' used to preface inscriptions and manuscripts.

bevelled The carving of outlines at a slant, giving a rounded effect.

bihari script A decorative, angular script used in India during the medieval Sultanate period for writing Arabic, especially Korans.

blazon A badge bearing one or more devices to indicate personal prestige and political standing.

blind-tooling Ungilt ornament impressed on leather.

boss Projection in high relief to decorate metalwork and bookbindings.

caliph (Ar. khâlat gu râsl Allâh) Title of the supreme head of the Muslim community as successor to Muhammad, often called in inscriptions amir al-mu'mînîn.

cameo technique The cutting of gems, ceramics and glass in high relief, especially in contrasting colours.

cartouche In surface decoration, a panel, rounded-oblong or oval, often enclosing inscriptions.

chamfered Cut obliquely (of an edge): furrowed or grooved (of a surface).

champlevé In surface decoration, cutting away the background, leaving the design in relief. The cut-away surfaces may (in ceramics) reveal the clay body, or (in metalwork) be then coated with coloured enamels.

cloisonné A metal surface decorated by division into compartments (cloisons) by soldered-on strips and then applying different-coloured enamels to different compartments.

colophon The inscription, generally closing a manuscript, where the scribe records his name and often the date and place of completion.

compound twill 'Twill weave in which a pattern is produced by bringing various weft threads to the surface of the cloth.'

cuadra seca Decoration of tiles by painting them with different coloured glazes kept in place by waxed outlines, as opposed to faience mosaic.

cursive script One in which most letters are joined, not written separately. This can alter their normal form.

damascene To decorate steel, especially swords, by etching, inlaying, encrusting or producing a watered appearance.

dervish Throughout Islam, a member of a religious fraternity, often Sufi i.e. mystic. In Persian and Turkish, also a religious mendicant or ascetic (*faqîr*).
in-glaze painting In ceramics, painting colours into the glaze before firing.
lamination A weaving pattern in relief on a smoother background.
lattice-work In book-binding, leather or paper cut in geometric or spiral patterns and placed on a coloured ground.
lustre ware Pottery or glass decorated by applying metallic pigments over the fired glaze and then gently re-firing.
madrasa (literally, learning-place) A seminary, teaching especially Muslim theology and law; a courtyard with one or more large arched recesses for classes and with students' quarters, often adjoining a mosque.
mourning: Dressing in black as an expression of mourning.
naqsh The standard Arabic handwriting, daintier and more cursive than Kufic.
nastaliq An elegant handwriting developed from naskh in 14th-century Persia and common to most Persian manuscripts thereafter, with flowing horizontal and downward-oblique strokes.
neolo A black compound used as a metal inlay, particularly on silver.
polymetre A heart-shaped stylised plant motif with radiating symmetrical leaves.
muqarnas An enclosed space at the qibla end of the mosque reserved for the ruler.
mashrabiyya Lattice-work of turned or carved wood, particularly for enclosing balconies, making screens or minbar (pulpit).
mashrabiya Poem in rhyming couplets, usually Persian, especially the mystical poems of Jalal al-Din Rumi.
melons A small round melon, often with a red or yellow skin.
ribānī (from the 9th century scribe Allāh 'Ubayy al-Ribānī) A monumental or ornamental variant of certain Arabic scripts.
Runs From Rum, i.e Byzantium, Asia Minor or Anatolia: in Turkish ceramics, motifs of Islamic as opposed to Chinese origin.
sabi Public fresh water fountain.
shahāda The Muslim profession of faith akhshada tennat lasīh islāh Allāh wa Muhammad rasīl Allāh, 'I bear witness that there is no god but God and Muhammad is His prophet'.
shāhāda (literally, The Book of Kings) A Persian epic of pre-Islamic Persian legend and history by Firdawsi of Tus (died 1020).
shamsa (From the Arabic shams, sun) In manuscript illumination, a large disc, generally with rays, at the opening of a manuscript and sometimes serving as an ex-libris for the patron who commissioned it. More generally, a decorative rosette or roundel.
shāri'a (Literally, the road) The corpus of Islamic law regulating for Muslims their religious and secular duties and prohibitions.
shātī' The son-in-law of Muhammad, 'Ali b. Abī Ṭālib, and the last having disappeared' in 878, but due to his death at the day of judgment. Other sects have fewer imams.
swill A weave in which warp and weft are interlaced to suggest diagonal ribs in the cloth.
underglaze painting Where pigment are applied to the surface of a vessel and covered by a transparent glaze.
unwān (literally, title) Illumination forming the title page or frontispiece of an Arabic or Persian manuscript. It may also begin the first section of the manuscript.
warb The longitudinal threads in a loom, through which the weft is then threaded.
west The transverse threads passed through the warp to make cloth.
waqf The legal form whereby property is transferred to a mosque or other pious purpose: the property so transferred. Waqfīya, the written record of such a transfer.
wauqf tree A legendary tree, found in the equally legendary Waqqaq island, whose fruit resembled men and other animals. It sometimes talked.
Note on Transliteration and Translation

Arabic, Persian and Ottoman (i.e. Persian and Ottoman) Turkish are written in the Arabic alphabet of 28 letters, to which Persian and Turkish add another 4, making 32 letters as against the English 26, and 31 of these are primarily consonants (only 21 in English), short vowels being added only in the Koran and school-books.

Some of the extras are consonants like šh, which English renders by two letters, or distinguish between two consonants rendered in English by one letter (got and gin) or one combination (thin and this), or lack any regular English letter or letters to represent them. But there is a hard core of Arabic letters representing sounds unknown to the British palate: some indeed to the Persian and Turkish palate too, but the full Arabic alphabet continues to be used with confusing results.

All this complicates systematic transliteration if it is to reflect pronunciation. But where, as here, transliteration’s main function is to render into English letters written symbols, not sounds, the need is a constant English symbol to render each additional consonant as written in the Near Eastern languages. No attempt is therefore made to reproduce Persian or Turkish pronunciation of consonants, e.g. by writing masāl for maʿāl or ma for mā, or the spoken assimilation of the article al in Arabic.

The difficult Arabic letters (i.e. those with no English equivalent sound) are rendered as follows:

Hard H by ǧ as hāmān, hard S by ǧ as ḥālīh, hard D by d as dāra, hard T by t as tāb, hard Z by z as ṣāmūm, āyn by a as saʿa, qīf by q as qu, hamza by b (but only in the middle or end of words, as muʾmin, mabāb), and soft h in feminine endings by -a, or -at before a vowel, as hijra, hijrat al-Nabi.

Other consonants are rendered by their obvious English equivalents, including sh, ch, and kh (without underlining) but distinguishing the two th’s — “thin” by th, “then” by dh, as shamma and s ḥālikha, and the two g’s, gin and got, by g and j, as jāmil girīšan, and the soft z as in “measure” by zh (Persian and Turkish only, and then mostly in borrowings from the French, astinglarm).

The transliteration of vowels is more difficult: the short ones seldom appear in inscriptions and the long are not always written as spoken — e.g. the same unvoiced symbol can be pronounced at the end of a word as ā or ī. Here any rational transliteration has to reproduce pronunciation, not simply to render one Arabic symbol by a constant English one. The pure long vowels are ā, ē, and i, the diphthongs iy ā and aw ē. Of the short vowels, fara is a, damma i, kasra e and a is not used in Persian, whose music cannot be adequately rendered without them.

Elisions are reproduced when written as well as spoken, e.g. biʿl, “to the,” where the article disappears in writing, and disregarded when not written, as in abū al-fāth or fi al-Qurʿān. There are exceptions — in particular muʿīl, “and the,” instead of was al, although the alif of al is still written.

The final vowel, or nunation, of nouns is generally omitted, e.g. ḥādī, not kitāb or kitābun, except where followed by a suffix, e.g. kitābun. For verbs, the final vowel is reproduced in the perfect, e.g. kataba and katabu, but omitted in the aorist, e.g. yahktub, yahktubu, etc.

Theoretically the problems of transliterating inscriptions differ from those presented by Arabic words and names in the middle of an English text, and it would have been less pedantic and less troublesome for the printer had diacritical marks and quantities been confined to the transliteration of inscriptions. But it seemed confusing to render the names of people differently in inscriptions and elsewhere. However an effort has been made to economise in diacritical marks and quantities in other names and words, and to use, where such exist, the version to be found in standard English reference books. There is indeed much to be said for a robust attachment to traditional versions such as Mameluke, Turcoman, Vizier, caliph and for eschewing Arabic words where there is a close English equivalent; but exceptions had to be made, and scholars whose Arabic is better than their English must not be forgotten.

Translation

Arabic inscriptions, and those of Persian and Turkish artefacts are often in Arabic, employ a stereotyped vocabulary (for the supreme example see the syro-phantic metal pen-box from Mamlok Cairo, no. 224). Nearly all the inscriptions here reproduced are either (a) long lists of titles applied to rulers, generals, etc.; while some of these may have a defined meaning, most are empty — and futile — honorifics, though there is some distinction between those for soldiers, administrators and clerics: and (b) somewhat shorter lists of benedictions — glory, victory, prosperity, etc. — to the owners of the objects inscribed. Sometimes the same honorific or benediction is used more than once in the same inscription — presumably the craftsman’s vocabulary gave out before the space he had to fill. For both categories, the principle has been to render each Arabic word by one standard English one. The power of English to represent both categories is limited not only by the comparative meaninglessness of the originals, but also by the discrepancy between Arabic’s vast repertoire of sonorous language and the more economical and less expressive nature of English. Thus the English rendering should sometimes be considered more a constant cipher group or symbol representing a given Arabic word than a transliteration of it, and too much importance should not be attached to the actual English word chosen.

The other main category of inscriptions is extracts from the Koran. Here the contributors have naturally drawn on standard translations, attributing their quotations where appropriate. There is thus no question of a uniform vocabulary. Some pieces have other religious inscriptions, particularly invocations to God, using the many epithets applied to Him, the so-called “beautiful names” (al-tima al-hanna), often in the form Ya Rāhman, Ya Ghlīf, O Merciful, O Forgiving: or to revered figures such as ‘All and other Shi’a imams. Here standardisation has been attempted.

Those responsible are deeply conscious that in spite of all their efforts, the rules laid down above have left many places and that the complete uniformity aimed at has not been achieved.
The map indicates cities, sites, regions and physical features referred to in the catalogue but is otherwise simplified. Modern political boundaries are omitted.
The historical chart opposite does not attempt to express the political complexity of the many periods of Islamic history and a large part of Central Asia, China, Southeast Asia and sub-Saharan Africa are not represented. Throughout the catalogue dates are normally given in the Christian era though there are occasional references to Muslim dating. The Islamic era began in 622 AD which corresponds to AH 1 (anne hijra, the year of the move of Muhammad to Medina).