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Jacket illustrations:
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Animal carpet from Herat, 16th
century. Collection of Mr and Mrs
Louis E. Seley, New York. On loan to
the Metropolitan Museum of Art,
New York.
Photograph: McGraw-Hill Book
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back
Scene from The History of Sultan
Salayman, Constantinople, 1579.
Chester Beatty Library, Dublin.
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Islamic Art
An Introduction

The fortress-palace of the Alhambra at Granada and the Great Mosque at Cordoba are virtually all that remain in Europe of the Muslim conquests of the Middle Ages. These exotic monuments offer the Westerner a glimpse of a culture in which art and religion were indivisible, not only in architecture—as in the magnificent mosques of Isfahan, Tamerlane's tomb at Samarkand, and the Taj Mahal—but also in ceramics, textiles and metalwork.

Throughout the Islamic world the decorative arts achieved an intricacy and refinement unsurpassed elsewhere. Nevertheless, in this introduction David James explodes the myth that all Islamic art is abstract, and illustrates for example the strong representational traditions in the various schools of manuscript painting, notably in Persia and Mughal India. Other surprises and delights await the reader who explores with the author the cities, the courts and the workshops of the vast empire that once stretched from Spain to the gates of China. He gives us the chance to see the Islamic world as a whole, so that the art can take on for us the significance that, as a matter of course, it has for the faithful.

60 colour plates
Over 40 black and white photographs and line drawings
Islamic Art
An Introduction
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David James
Curator of Islamic Art
The Chester Beatty Library, Dublin

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Introduction

The Islamic world comprises a vast area stretching from Morocco to India and beyond, extending as far as the East Indies and reaching down into Africa below the Sahara. The present area of the Islamic world has contracted marginally from what it was in the Middle Ages, but basically it still embraces the same regions of Asia and Africa as it did at the height of the Ottoman Empire in the 16th century.

Many peoples and races inhabit this area, speaking languages which are quite distinct, and yet there is a fundamental unity about the Islamic world which is apparent to any visitor. It is a unity brought about by an allegiance to common religious ideals and, to a lesser extent, the sharing of a common history.

Islam is one of the three great Semitic religions, sharing with Christianity and Judaism a religious tradition stemming from the patriarch Abraham: a belief in the One God, creator of the universe; of humanity responsible to that creator for its actions; and in the certainty of the Final Judgement.

Islam was established in western Arabia by the Prophet Muhammad in the early 7th century, making it the most recent of the three 'revealed' religions. Nevertheless, the new faith claimed a historical mandate going back to the time of the creation; it saw itself as the original faith of mankind whose purpose had always been the communication of a divine plan for humanity and its implementation on earth. This divine plan was made known to Adam at the dawn of history, and then by successive prophets or messengers (among whom Islam numbered Abraham, Moses, Christ and finally Muhammad) to all the nations of the earth.

Muhammad differed from the earlier messengers, who had been only partially successful, in two important respects. For the first time mankind received the true revelation of the divine plan in the form of the Koran, which Muhammad believed to have been communicated to him by supernatural means; and with his acceptance by the inhabitants of Medina in 622 AD, an Islamic state was established to put the divine plan into practice. It is with this momentous event that the Islamic era commences.

Within a century of the Prophet's death in 632 AD, Muslim armies had extended the borders of the Islamic state to Spain in the west and Central Asia in the east. The head of the state was the caliph, temporal successor of Muhammad, whose function was to protect the domain of the believers and ensure that the divine law, the Sharia, was observed. The Sharia was based on the Koran and the actions and decisions of Muhammad which were assumed to have been divinely inspired. There was no division into secular and religious spheres and the law was all-embracing, codifying the minutest detail of the Muslim's daily life. It was observed by all members of the state except Christians and Jews, who on payment of a tax in lieu of military service lived a separate existence as protected communities.

Conversion to Islam was a simple matter; all that was necessary was to repeat the formula, 'There is no deity but God (Allah) and Muhammad is his Messenger.' But with these simple words the convert acknowledged the Islamic interpretation of history as an unending endeavour to establish an ideal society based on the divine plan, and in so doing he committed himself to a community of believers dedicated to the observance of that plan.
3 The Citadel, Aleppo, Syria, about 1210. Built by the Ayyubid Sultan Al-Zahir Ghaazi (1186–1216), with later additions.

4 The Dome of the Rock, Jerusalem, 691. The most sacred building of Islam after the holy places of Mecca and Medina, erected over the spot from which the Prophet is believed to have ascended to Heaven. It is the oldest Islamic monument and one of the architectural masterpieces of the world. The high dome covers the Rock, the most important part of the shrine, and is surrounded by two concentric octagonal ambulatories for ceremonial processions. The interior is sumptuously decorated with marble, sheet metal and mosaics. The style of decoration is late Classicist (i.e. Hellenistic), but with a strong Sasanian element. The façade was originally marble and mosaic, but in the 16th century the building was restored by the Ottoman Sultan Sulayman and the external mosaic replaced with tile faience, including the magnificent Thuluth inscription which runs right round the upper part. Apart from the Ka’ba, the sacred shrine of Mecca, there is nothing quite like the Dome of the Rock elsewhere in Islam.

5 Ceramic vase, Damascus, Syria, 13th century. Height 12 in. Collection of the Marquis de Guay, Paris. This vase bears the classic forms of Islamic decoration—calligraphy, foliate arabesques, geometric interlace—while the colours—blue and yellow-gold luster—are perhaps the most important of the Islamic colour repertoire.
Thus to accept Islam was to live in accordance with the very structure of the universe.

The historical background

The Umayyad caliphate 661–750 The first four caliphs after the death of Muhammad were chosen from among his immediate followers and are called the Orthodox Caliphs. They controlled the expanding state from its first capital Medina (632–661). After the assassination of the last Orthodox Caliph, the Prophet’s son-in-law Ali, the caliphate passed into the hands of the Umayyads, relatives of Muhammad, and the capital was removed to Damascus. In frank contradiction to the egalitarian principles of Islam, the Umayyads favoured the Arab subjects of the state and this led to their downfall.

The Abbasid caliphate 750–1258 In 750, largely due to Iranian assistance, the Umayyads were overthrown by the descendants of the Prophet’s uncle, Abbas. The Abbasid caliphs built a new capital at Baghdad from where, in name at least, they ruled until 1258. The establishment of the Abbasid caliphate signalled the end of political unity. Beginning with Spain which remained in the hands of the Umayyads, the fragmentation of the huge state set in. The governors of outlying provinces had always enjoyed considerable freedom of action and they now became totally independent, though the spiritual authority of the caliph as Muhammad’s successor was usually acknowledged. By 800, Spain (called Al-Andalus) and all North Africa were independent, and in 868 Egypt too was lost when its governor Ibn Tulun established a separate dynasty.

The Samanids 874–999 There was a similar disintegration in Iran and Central Asia. The most important of the early independent states in the east was that of the Samanids of Samarkand and Bukhara (874–999). The Samanids encouraged the revival of the Persian language and literature which had suffered in the short term by the prominence of Arabic. It was a vassal of the Samanids who encouraged Firdausi to begin his epic history of the Iranian nation, the Shah-Nameh, in 957.

The Buyids 932–1055 Some local Iranian states became powerful enough to occupy Baghdad and to intimidate the caliph. The Buyids for example, having established themselves in southern Iran, occupied Baghdad in 945 and turned the caliph into a mere puppet. The spiritual-secular unity of Islam had now disappeared at the highest level, for political necessity and ambition demanded that the two be separate, at government level at least. Although the Buyids favoured the Shi’ite cause, they paid lip-service to the caliph and allowed him to remain in office. The Shi’ites were the largest sect of Islam, believing that the caliphate was not an elective office but a hereditary one passed down from Ali, the last Orthodox Caliph, through his descendants.

The Fatimids 909–1171 The Fatimid rulers of Egypt and Syria were Shi’ites who did set up a rival caliphate which lasted until the dynasty was suppressed by Saladin.

The Umayyad caliphate of Cordoba In reply to the Fatimid threat, the Umayyad ruler of Spain, Abdal-Rahman III (912–961), proclaimed himself caliph in 927 and the Andalusian caliphate flourished until abolished in 1031. Thus for most of the 10th century there were three caliphs, one in Baghdad, another in Cairo, and a third in Cordoba.

The Seljuks and Ayyubids In the 11th and 12th centuries orthodoxy reasserted itself. The Seljuk Turks, a Central Asian people who established themselves in Iran (the Great Seljuks 1037–1157) and Anatolia (the Seljuks of Rum 1077–1300), destroyed the Buyids and occupied Baghdad in 1055, taking the Abbasid caliph under their ‘protection’. Saladin put an end to the Fatimid caliphate, at the same time founding a dynasty, the Ayyubids, which controlled Egypt and Syria until the middle of the 13th century.

The invasion of the Mongols At the beginning of the 13th century the eastern part of the Islamic empire experienced the terrifying holocaust of the Mongol invasion, which turned northern and eastern Iran into a desert and, in 1258, extinguished the Abbasid caliphate when the city of Baghdad was sacked and the last caliph put to death.

Iran: the Ilkhanids 1256–1349 After the Mongol invasion the eastern part of the Islamic empire split up into several distinct areas. Iran continued