8 Carpet, north-west Iran, about 1700. 22 × 8 ft. E. A. Collection Joseph V. McMullan, Fogg Art Museum, Cambridge, Massachusetts. For both religious and cultural reasons gardens, and the floral forms associated with them, provide a major theme of Islamic art. This carpet is one of a group which create in plan form the layout of an ideal garden, with trees, flowering shrubs and canals stocked with fish.

9 Scene from the Akbar-Nama, Mughal India, about 1600. 11 × 8½ in. Victoria and Albert Museum, London. The scene illustrates an incident during one of the Emperor Akbar’s campaigns: bullocks dragging siege guns for an attack on the Fort at Ranthambhor. Although the artists intended this picture to celebrate the personal power of Akbar (the eye is conveyed straight towards him at the top of the struggling column, aloot and slightly larger than his neighbours), nevertheless the porters and soldiers are rendered with great individualism and realism. This realism extends even to the trees which are now recognisable botanic specimens. Mughal painters and draughtsmen tended to specialise, and often several collaborated to produce a single painting. This picture was drawn by Miskin and painted by Paraz.
to be ruled by a Mongol regime, the Ilkhanids, until 1349 when the country was divided up among a number of prominent chiefs and local governors. In 1384–1393 Iran was once again subject to an invasion from Central Asia, this time by a Turkic people under Timur (Tamerlane), whose descendants controlled Iran for more than a hundred years.

The Timurids and Turkmans 1378–1502 The Timurids were perhaps the greatest patrons of Persian culture, and during their rule the arts, particularly painting, reached one of its highpoints of development. It was a classic case of the victors conquered by the civilisation of the subject people.

The Timurid domains in the west of Iran were slowly eroded by the Aq-Quyumids, or White Sheep Turkmans, Turkish-speaking nomads from the area around Lake Van. After some thirty years of sole authority in western and central Iran, the Turkmans were defeated by the Safavids.

The Safavids 1501–1736 The Safavids were a native Iranian Shi‘ite dynasty which by 1502 controlled all of Iran from east to west. They were among the most successful rulers of Iran and under them the country enjoyed more than two centuries of uninterrupted prosperity. The greatest period of Safavid rule was the reign of Shah Abbas (1587–1629), when Iran recaptured a brilliance unknown since Antiquity.

Turkey: the Ottomans 1299–1922 Implacable enemies of the Safavids were the Ottoman Turks, leaders of orthodox Islam. The Ottomans were one of the many Turkoman tribes which superseded the Seljuks of Anatolia but became strong enough to extend their power over the whole of Asia Minor and to destroy the remains of the Byzantine Empire, capturing Constantinople in 1453.

In the 16th century the Ottomans initiated a new period of conquest similar, in the vast area of territory captured, to that of the first century of the Islamic era, although not accompanied by the massive conversions of the early period. In 1529 Sultan Suleyman the Magnificent besieged Vienna, and in 1540 an Ottoman fleet attacked Gibraltar. The Ottoman armies were equally active within the Islamic world; they defeated the Shah of Iran at the Battle of Chaldiran in 1514, and three years later occupied the Mamluke sultanate of Egypt and Syria.

Egypt and Syria: the Mamlukes 1252–1517 The Mamlukes had controlled Egypt and Syria since the middle of the 13th century. They were originally Turkish and Circassian slaves who served in the Ayyubid army, but who seized power for
Scene from the *Biyan-i Nabi* (Life of the Prophet), Constantinople, 1394. 7 3/4" x 7" in. Spencer Collection, Public Library, New York. One of a huge series of paintings in a work of several volumes. These pictures have an antecedent, fundamentalist religious quality, although they are without any devotional purpose. But the presentation of the Prophet, clad entirely in white with veiled face and flame halo, is calculated to surround his person with an air of sacred mystery. The text is written in majestic Naskh, which on the illustrated pages is floated on a gold background.

Scene from the *Maqamat* (Assemblies) of Al-Hariri, Baghdad, Iraq. 1327, 10 x 10 in. Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris. The paintings in this manuscript, and others from Baghdad in the early 13th century, represent the culmination of the realist tendency in 12th- and 13th-century art. This scene shows a pilgrim caravan on its way to Mecca. The script is Naskh.
themselves. The greatest achievements of the Mamluks were the final extinction of the Crusader states in 1291, and the stemming of the Mongol advance at the Battle of Ayn Jalut in Palestine in 1260. The Mamluks owed allegiance to the Abbasid caliph, and after the sack of Baghdad in 1258 set up a relative of the last caliph in Cairo. His descendants continued in office until 1517 when the reigning caliph was taken to Constantinople by the Ottomans, where the sultan assumed the title.

Islamic Spain 1031–1492 After the abolition of the Umayyad caliphate of Al-Andalus in 1031, Muslim Spain fragmented into many little kingdoms and statelets. As such they were easy prey for the Christian states in the north of the peninsula, and undoubtedly had it not been for the invasion of Spain by two warlike Berber dynasties, the Almoravides in 1090 and the Almohades in 1145, the reconquest would have been completed in the 11th century. After the decline of the Almohades a number of petty states sprang up, but the only important one was that of the Nasrids of Granada (1232–1492), which survived until the conquest of Granada by Ferdinand and Isabella in 1492.

India The conquest of north-west India was achieved not by the early Muslim armies but by the Ghaznavids, a Turkish dynasty which had established itself in Afghanistan after being governors of the Samanids. The Ghaznavids (962–1186) were succeeded by the Ghurids (1148–1213), who, having conquered northern India to the mouth of the Ganges, appointed a Turkish slave, Qutb al-Din Aybak, to act as viceroy at Delhi. Qutb al-Din founded a dynasty, the first Muslim dynasty to reign exclusively in India, which governed Delhi for eighty years. These rulers are known as the Slave Kings (1206–1287). The Delhi sultanate continued in Turkish hands under the Khaljis (1290–1320) and the Tughlakids (1320–1413), until the invasion of Timur in 1399. The sultanate was then controlled by the Sayyids (1414–1443) and the Lodis (1451–1519), though these were only two of many Muslim states in northern India.

In 1526 Babur, a descendant of Timur, arrived in India claiming the country as his right. He established the Mughal Empire, although initially this was short-lived, as his son Humayun was forced to flee India to seek refuge at the Safavid court at Tabriz (1540–1555). However he was able to return and the task of consolidating the Empire fell to his son Akbar (1556–1605), perhaps the greatest monarch of the 16th century.

The art of Islam

Like all the great civilisations of the world, Islam possesses a strong architectural and iconographic tradition. But while the former has been known to Europe ever since the first visitors to Spain and the Middle East admired and grudgingly acknowledged the architectural splendours of Cordoba and Jerusalem, the latter was hardly known to exist. Being for the most part contained in illustrated manuscripts locked away in libraries, it is only in the present century that scholars have been able to evaluate the pictorial tradition of the Islamic world.

But Islam has two other artistic traditions, calligraphy and non-representational art, at least as important as architecture and far more universally used than representational art.

Calligraphy is the highest art form of the Islamic civilisation; no appreciation of Islamic art is possible without understanding the importance and significance of its calligraphic tradition. Non-representational art in the form of the floral or geometric arabesque was even more widely applied than calligraphy, being used to decorate every conceivable surface from the smallest casket, piece of pottery or metalwork, to the wall of the largest mosque.

Calligraphy, the arabesque, and to a lesser extent representational imagery were employed right across the Islamic world, in all periods from the very earliest, and in every conceivable media.

But within the boundaries of Islamic civilisation, there arose a host of smaller local cultures—Islamic Spain, Mughal India, the Mamluks, Ottomans etc.—all owing a basic allegiance to a common ideal yet each in some way distinct from its neighbours and predecessors. Thus the artistic traditions of Islam, while at first presenting an aspect of monolithic uniformity, often prove on examination to be imbued with the particular character of a local civilisation and as such quite different and independent.

For the purposes of this book the word Iran is used to describe the country, while the term Persian is used to describe the art.]
Calligraphy

Although at times in Europe the art of beautiful writing has enjoyed the favour and patronage of both Church and State—Roman monumental inscriptions and the pages of the Book of Kells for example—by and large calligraphy has been an ancillary, if intimate, art form, inevitably associated with libraries, books and scholars. In Islam on the other hand, as even a casual glance through this book will illustrate, the importance of fine writing is overwhelming, as an art form per se and as a means of multi-media decoration, for the application of calligraphy has never been restricted. Just as the early disciples of the Prophet inscribed his revelations on anything that came to hand—the shoulder bone of an animal, a piece of palm leaf—so in subsequent periods when architectural decoration and various craft industries developed, there was no feeling that calligraphy was only properly executed on vellum or paper. Indeed it is arguable that Islamic calligraphy achieved its highest expression not on paper at all, nor even in architectural inscriptions, but on the humble pot.

The suitability of the Perso-Arabic script to occupy its position at the very centre of the visual arts of Islam, the pivot around which all others revolve, is explained and justified by its high level of aesthetic attainment. Nevertheless, this achievement is only understandable as a consequence of the role accorded to the Arabic script by virtue of its association with the Koran. It is the association of script and scripture in the mind of every Muslim that accounts for the rapid development of the script, from graffiti to the first classical form within a century of the Prophet’s death; and it is this association that we must grasp if we are to understand the

dominance of calligraphy in the visual arts of Islam.

The Koran, we have seen, is the collected revelations of Muhammad in written form. However the entire raisum d’être of the Prophet’s mission was that these revelations were of divine origin—literally; in other words that the Divinity communicated His plan for mankind through the agency of Muhammad on certain occasions between the years 600 and 632. Now this meant that the written revelations were of a very special nature: for as the universal divine plan was set forth in the words of the Creator, thus it took on some of His attributes. Consequently the Koran is not comparable with the New Testament (simply the record of Christ’s earthly mission) but rather with the person of Christ Himself.

When, shortly after the Prophet’s death, the revelations were assembled and put into their final written form it must have been apparent that these revelations should be presented in a way worthy of their momentous significance. And so from the first years of Islam arose the idea of presenting the Koran using the finest form of handwriting allowed by the primitive script. In this way religious emotion and aesthetic sensibility were inseparably fused, and from this powerful combination a wave of creative energy welled forth.

The Kufic script

The initial, and always most important, task of the calligrapher was the production of copies of the Koran for both personal and communal use. The latter were employed in the mosque for which they were either officially commissioned or donated by pious bequest. They were regularly of large format, perhaps several feet across when open, and written

towards the rim. Some of the double horizontal strokes are placed, the first signs of the transformation of the script into a purely abstract form of art.

in a special form of Arabic script. This earliest version of the script was called Kufic after the city of Kufa in Iraq, where it was said to have been invented. Like all subsequent developments of the primitive 7th-century script, Kufic existed in numerous variants. However only one of these was used for the Koran. This is based on the circle, short vertical, and elongated horizontal, often doubled so that it hugs the line on which the text rests, conforming thereby to the horizontal format of the 7th- to 10th-century Koran. Koranic Kufic of this period has a bluff, austere quality which is quite easy to recognize.

Kufic was not entirely confined to the sacred scripture, for its use was extended to coinage (quite appropriate given the single character of the state), official documents, and to some extent architectural inscriptions. For the embellishment of a building, however, and for carved inscriptions in general, forms of Kufic were employed in which the expressive, we might even say personal, potential of the letters was more readily released.

From earliest times inscriptions were included in the design of religious architecture, particularly in the case of mosques where quotations from the Koran served a purpose similar to the devotional imagery of the Christian church. The earliest surviving Islamic monument, the Dome of the Rock, contains an inscription in simple Kufic running around the interior octagonal arcade. As this simple form lent itself very well to execution in mosaic and tile brick, later examples in those media—the mibrab of the Great Mosque of Cordoba (963) or the drum of the Gur-i Amir in Samarkand (1405)—preserve the basic form of the letters hardly embellished. However neither of the later inscriptions is entirely free from the influence of the more decorative forms of Kufic.

Throughout the Middle Ages foliated and floriated Kufic were used in both religious and secular architecture, particularly when stucco or carved stone was employed. Although the two forms may appear at first sight to be identical, in reality there exists an essential difference between them. In foliated Kufic the verticals end in half-palmettes, and often the final letters of words are exaggerated vertically and culminate in leaves or half-palmettes. This latter device was very useful to the artist-calligrapher in enabling him to maintain the repetitive, rhythmic procession of vertical strokes which the literal form of the letters may not have supplied.

Foliated Kufic was sometimes set against a curling pattern of leaves and tendrils and in this event its resemblance to its elaborate related form, floriated Kufic, is even more pronounced. The floriated form, however, is readily distinguishable by the fact that, in addition to the characteristics mentioned in connection with foliated Kufic, leaves and palmettes actually grow from the body of the letters themselves.

Whenever floriated Kufic was used to write Koranic quotations on a mosque interior, its apparent indecipherability did not present the kind of problem which we might suppose; Koranic inscriptions were not there to be read but to create a divine presence; and had it ever been necessary to interpret them no difficulty would have arisen, as learning the Koran by heart was the cornerstone of Islamic education.

Floriated Kufic seems to have been invented towards the end of the 8th century, probably in Egypt where similar decoration has been noted in pre-Islamic Coptic writings.

Early calligraphy in Iran

It was not solely in Egypt that special forms of Kufic were cultivated, for both Iran and the Maghreb devised variant forms of the script. The Arabic script...
played a major part in the 12th- and 13th-century 'renaissance' of figurative art.

18 Koran, 9th-10th century, 13 x 9¾ in. Chester Beatty Library, Dublin. Early Kufic script. The vowels are indicated in red and the diacritical points by short black strokes. 'Purist' calligraphers often preferred to leave these out and present the text in its primitive form. This gave the script a majestic simplicity, though this could result in inaccurate readings, particularly if the reader was not Arab. In the center is the illuminated 'heading of Sura [chapter] 37'. At first the Koran was undecorated but gradually, probably due to the influence of Christian illuminated manuscripts, embellishment was added culminating in the magnificent double frontispiece.

19 Gold pitcher from Iraq or Iran, 10th century. Height with handle 6 in. One of the few objects in precious metal to have survived from early Islamic times. It was made for one of the Buyid rulers of Iraq, whose name is given in the Kufic inscription on the rim. The surface is decorated with fabulous animals, some of ancient origin. In the early period of Islamic art representational imagery is generally associated with royal objects.