30 Scene from the Saliqan-i-Nahin (History of Sultan Salayman), Constantinople 1579. 120 x 64 cm. Chester Beatty Library, Dublin. This scene showing the Imperial army in procession illustrates some of the characteristics of Ottoman painting: its concern with realistic reportage of contemporary subject-matter, its stark landscapes and hard colours. This superb rendering of overwhelming military power has no parallel in Near Eastern art outside of ancient Assyria.

31 Ivory casket, Cordoba, 969–970? Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Large numbers of carved ivory caskets were produced in the Cordoba area during the 10th century. Judging by their inscriptions, and courtly and power theme imagery, most seem to have been destined for the royal family and nobility. This casket bears an inscription in Kufic characters stating it to have been made for the Prefect of Police. The birds and huntsman shown here are an interesting example of the representational art of Islamic Spain, much rarer than in the rest of the Islamic world.
32 Ceramic plate from K Kashan, Iran, dated November 1210. Diameter 13 1/2 in.; Freer Gallery, Washington. This plate may be part of a set and is thought to depict a royal groom asleep by a pool who dreams of a water-sprite, while members of the monarch's entourage look on. The figures are set on a background of tight scrolls, illustrating an important aspect of Islamic art: space is rarely free but usually defined in some way by a foliate-geometric background or laterally by framing devices of various kinds. The design is painted in lustre, which is not only decorative but has important religious overtones, light having divine connotations for Muslims. Around the rim Persian verses are written in an early form of 'Arabic script.

33 Figurine, Rayy, Iran, 12th-13th century. Raymond Ades Collection, Surrey. The production of human and animal figurines was one aspect of the increase in representational imagery in Islamic art in this period. Their purpose is unknown, but it is suggested that they were inspired by Chinese tomb figures exported to the Near East. Sometimes the figurines were glazed in monochrome as here, at others covered in decoration like ordinary pieces of pottery.

34 Ceramic bowl of the mini type from Kashan, Iran, dated 1187. Diameter 8 1/2 in.; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Polychrome pottery such as this became enormously popular in Iran during the 12th and early 13th centuries. As on much pottery of this type the drawing is rapidly executed but extremely accomplished. The painting is related to those in manuscripts, though the themes of real painting are generally not literary and the rapid technique is also quite distinct from manuscript illustration. The subject is not clear though winged genii are usually shown in the company of royal personages. There is a heavy inscription in foliated Kufic around the rim, and the bowl is signed by Abu Zayd Al-Kashani.
was made of transforming those parts of letters which extended below the line of writing into sweeping arcs. In spite of such innovations Maghribi is still identifiable with the script of the early korans. Following established Muslim tradition, calligraphy was employed in both Africa and Andalusia as an element in architectural, textile and ceramic design. Under the Umayyads of Cordoba (756–1031), a simple or slightly foliated Kufic was normally used for inscriptions, in the Great Mosque for example and on the numerous caskets of carved ivory. In later times, however, we find considerable use being made of plaited Kufic for the decoration of architectural surfaces—the Alhambra for instance—textiles and occasionally koran frontispieces. Plaited Kufic, used throughout Islam, was the most intellectual form of the archaic script; in it the vertical letters were plaited into knots, often extremely intricate, but without any corresponding loss of legibility. When this occurs in koran frontispieces of circular format it becomes a clear attempt to wed the evocative potential of the script, particularly if the only word written is the divinename, Allah, to the contemplative geometry of the arabesque and as such becomes religious art of the highest order.

Both Nashk and Thuluth were used in western Islam though neither seems to have established much of a hold on popular imagination, for the Maghribi script was a vital and irreplaceable part of the Andalusian life-structure. This was not simply because the Andalusian were cut off from the influence of Iran and the east where new forms of script were popularised. The Arabs came to Spain as bringers of a superior civilisation before which the Latin culture of the peninsula virtually collapsed, where even many of those who did not convert to Islam were entirely Arabised in dress and language. Thus the form of the script brought by the Arabs in 711 was identified not only with Islam, but with its self-evident superiority over other faiths and was therefore adopted as the normal hand as well as that of the Koran.

The unique character of the Koran, that is its literal identification with the Divinity in the mind of the believer, meant that in its written form it occupied a position analogous to that of the icon or sacred image in other faiths. It is this fact more than any other which explains the absence in Islam of a sanctified pictorial iconography, and it thus also makes any discussion of whether the Prophet did or did not forbid painting largely irrelevant, at least in a religious context. There is no devotional imagery in the mosque in pictorial form because the necessity for such is filled by the calligraphically written verses of the Koran.

With pictorial art cut off from such an important source of patronage this might imply an absence of representational imagery in the civilisation of Islam: in fact quite the contrary is true. Islam possesses a rich and varied pictorial tradition, but one which differs from that of Christendom or the Far East in that it is exclusively secular. Artists may have executed public projects with a definite Islamic meaning (wall paintings celebrating a military triumph over the infidel and implying divine favour for the Muslim faith), miniature painters may have dealt with religious subject-matter, imbuing it with deep spiritual feeling, but neither of these had any devotional purpose and were quite outside the sphere of formal religion.

In some parts of the Islamic world, notably North-west Africa and the Arabian peninsula, representational art never became popular, though this was probably due to the absence of any tradi-

ction of figure painting and carving in those areas. Similarly there were theologians who disapproved of the reproduction of the human form on the grounds that the painter was attempting to emulate the Creator (an argument used in favour of painting in Mughal India). But this attitude seems to have had little effect on the depiction of the human figure in private, and indeed public places.

Representational imagery was primarily at the service of the monarch, and for much of Islamic history the main function of the artist who special-

ised in this form was to portray various ‘power themes’: the submission of an enemy, battles, cer-

tain regal animals, the enthroned monarch, and the hunt. Excavations of the 8th-century Abbasid palace at Samarra have brought to light wall paint-

ings in the more secluded parts of the royal resi-

dence; however it was natural that wall paintings of power themes should be displayed in the audience chamber or throne room, as their purpose was to glorify the ruler for whom they were executed. The 10th-century Arab poet Mutanabbi wrote a poem celebrating the triumph of his patron, the ruler of Aleppo in Syria, over the Byzantines, in the course of which one of these power themes is described decorating the interior of a pavilion or tent erected for the public reception of the victor. The medium in which the theme was rendered is not clear—it may have been painting or embroidery—but what is important is the official status given to artists as propagandists implied in Mutanabbi’s account.

We have many examples in various media of these officially sanctioned power themes: for instance the frontispiece of a manuscript painted for the library of a 14th-century Egyptian Mamluke prince showing an enthroned ruler surrounded by his court, and the famous coronation robe of Roger II of Sicily, made by Muslim craftsmen in 1133–1134.

In addition to the power themes which form the greater part of early representational imagery, there are also certain courtly subjects: retainers, dancers, musicians, boon-companions etc. Often the objects on which these compositions occur bear inscriptions
Frontispiece from the Kitab Al-Tibb (The Book of Antidotes), Mosul, Iraq. 1199, 7 x 7 in. Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris. Although this is one of the earliest dated Arabic manuscripts the painting is in a mature, fully developed style, but quite different from that of 13th-century Baghdad. The subject is not clear but it presumably magical or talismanic. Confronted and interlocking snakes and dragons have a long history in the East going back to prehistoric times. The script is a form of Kufic rather like Qurmantain. This page with its ancient magic symbolism and Islamic elements, both local and international, demonstrates some of the complexity of Islamic art.

Scene from the Divan (collected poems) of Khwaju Kirmani, Baghdad, Iraq. 128 x 9 in. British Museum, London. One of the earliest examples of the high horizon format, increasingly from now on the standard 'locale' of Islamic painting.
enabling us to associate them with a particular ruler or member of his family or entourage.

The imagery of early Islam was heavily indebted to the art of the conquered areas, particularly Egypt, Syria, Central Asia and Iran. It was largely from the pre-Islamic art of this latter area that the formal celebrations of royal power and splendour were adopted, a fact explained by the political and cultural transformation of the Abbasid court of Baghdad in the 8th and 9th centuries at the hands of Iranian favourites and advisers. The ruling institution of early Islamic times, the Orthodox Caliphs, and that of the Umayyads, was democratic but archaic with the ruler trying to administer the empire like a desert chieftain caring for the personal needs of his tribe. Under the later Umayyads and particularly during the Abbasid caliphate of Baghdad, administration and court protocol were transformed as a result of Iranian influence. Iran boasted a glorious imperial past stretching back to Cyrus the Great, and from the reservoir of Iranian imperial tradition much of the administrative expertise and court protocol of later Islamic times was derived. Along with court protocol of pre-Islamic Iran came some of the official iconography of the state.

Another public manifestation of figure painting was in the hammam, or public bath, where the walls were decorated with pictures of beautiful women, lovers, gardens and battle scenes. The purpose of these scenes, so we are told by a 14th-century physician, was not decorative but therapeutic. They were there to replenish energy lost in the course of languishing in the hot bath. This was achieved by stimulating the three vital principles of the body: ‘the animal, the spiritual, and the natural’. Theologians may have raised objection to these pictures; nevertheless their use is widely attested, even in conservative areas like Muslim Spain.

The great bulk of figure painting, however, occurred in illustrated manuscripts. There were certain types of manuscripts for which illustration was absolutely essential: works on medicine, botany, geography, veterinary science etc., in which human and animal figures often appeared. Such works are the earliest known Islamic illustrated manuscripts.

With the exception of these early manuscripts which were probably produced for individual scholars and scientists, manuscript illustration was largely associated with the royal courts of Iran, Ottoman Turkey and Mughal India. Many of the rulers and princes of these areas prided themselves on their fine libraries containing thousands of volumes. Each library was equipped with a large staff of artists and craftsmen whose task it was to produce manuscripts and compendia of paintings and calligraphy bound in albums. Islamic manuscript painting thus mirrors the tastes of the royal courts for which it was created. In Iran it consisted of illustrations to the half-dozen great works of Persian literature led by the Shah-Nama, epic history of the Iranian nation. In Constantinople artists celebrated the lives and triumphs of the Ottoman sultans, while the Mughal painter was almost a court photographer, recording the contemporary life and interests of the emperors.

Prior to the 12th century, Islamic figural art in both theme and luxury media was associated with the royal court. Manuscript illustration was a possible exception, as some scientific and technical works contained drawings connected with their subject-matter. The Book of Fixed Stars written in Baghdad in about 965 almost certainly possessed drawings of the constellations in anthropomorphic form. Other works however, which we can presume to have been illustrated in the early period, such as the Book of Kalila and Dimna, a collection of animal fables, were part of the court milieu, being a polite way of telling sovereigns how to do their job.

In the 12th and 13th centuries Islamic representational imagery underwent major developments; it was applied to media where hitherto it had been virtually unknown, and new subject-matter appeared, taken from the lives of the urban bourgeoisie and lower classes. These developments are associated with the art of Fatimid Egypt, Mesopotamia, and the Seljuk areas of Anatolia and Iran.

The Fatimids

The two most impressive examples of Fatimid representational art are unquestionably the coronation robe of Roger II of Sicily and the painted ceiling of the Palatine Chapel in Palermo, both executed by Fatimid craftsmen. While much of the painting on the honeycomb ceiling consists of power themes and its visual programme, it is not exclusively so, for in addition to the musicians and dancers, servants and others from the lower ranks of palace life are introduced, if rendered rather formally. This interest in ordinary people also appears on a group of ivory carvings in the Islamicus Museum, West Berlin. Although the musicians, huntsmen and servants are superimposed on a formal vine scroll they are rendered with a realism and sympathy verging on social comment: note for example the servant stumbling along under the weight of a basket of grapes directly over the portly figure of the nobleman, reeling, wincecup in hand. It shows an awareness of the lot of the lower classes, even though the overall theme is obviously ‘princely pleasures’. The most important Fatimid figural painting is to be found on lustreware: fascinating genre scenes (a wrestling match, cock fight etc.) taken directly from the remembered reality of the street and marketplace. Although some of the scenes are rather heavily drawn in the manner of the painting in the Palatine Chapel, others have been rapidly sketched in with the tip of a brush. A great deal of this pottery was created for the rising middle class of merchants, hence the interest in new themes. Some of these passed over into the repertoire of the court artists to appear in places like the Palatine Chapel.

The Seljuks: ceramics and metalwork

Figure decoration appeared on Seljuk pottery from the mid 12th century onwards. At first the decoration was carved or moulded while the glaze was monochrome, though on the lakabî carved wares several colours were used. Sometimes decoration was applied directly on to the pot, painted in black slip under a clear or coloured glaze to create a silhouette effect. Large birds, animals and fabulous creatures form the bulk of the imagery, though on the silhouette ware human figures appear. The silhouette figures often stand alone though it is usual for human and animal forms, whenever they occur, to be superimposed on a foliate background.

With the introduction of the minai and lustre techniques figural painting on pottery advanced rapidly. The former enabled many colours to be used and the result is something remarkably like manuscript illustration, an effect increased by the frequent absence of a foliate background. The figure drawing on minai ware is extremely accomplished: the fact that it was obviously executed with great rapidity emphasises the artist’s absolute control of the brush. Such mastery of line is partly explained