60 Detail from the Ardabil Mosque carpet, Tabriz, Iran. Dated and signed 1539-1540. 36 ft 6 in. x 7 ft 6 in. Victoria and Albert Museum, London. The carpet comes from one of the most important periods of carpet production in Iran, and illustrates one of the major principles of Islamic design: the system of multiple levels. By superimposing series of slender foliate arabesques on top of one another a pattern of infinite complexity is created. In mosque carpets this pattern may be a mirror image of that used in the decoration of the walls and dome of the building.

61 Detail from an Almohade battle banner, Islamic Spain or Morocco, 12th-13th century. Convent of Las Huelgas, Burgos, Spain. The basic design, a circle attached to a square, is closely related to contemporary koran frontispieces from Spain and North Africa. The eight-pointed star in the center is a magic or astral symbol known throughout the Near East, and which here probably reinforces the official Islamic invocations of victory and protection, written in a curious form of Thuluth.

62 Kaftan of Sultan Bayazid II (1481-1512), Turkey. Topkapi Saray Museum, Istanbul. The decoration of this fine robe is typical of 15th century Ottoman work. Naturalistic flowers and plants predominate and only rarely do animal or human figures intrude.

63 Turkish carpet, about 1600. 10 ft x 4 ft 3 in. Ex Collection of Joseph V. McMullan, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. In contrast to the floral carpets of Iran early Turkish carpets and rugs tend to be abstract. Although floral elements were introduced due to the influence of Safavid carpet design, the pictorial imagery of 16th-century Persian carpets never occurs in Turkey. The polygonal shapes and long bands of geometric interlace are reminiscent of Seljuk architectural design in brick and stone.
the great court and mosque carpets of 16th-century Safavid Iran, it also appears on earlier Persian metalwork and koran decoration. And of course, throughout the Islamic Near East, it had long been the practice to superimpose calligraphy and figures over floral arabesque backgrounds.

The Seljuk geometric decoration, like that of the Mamluks, displays a preference for star shapes which often appear as flowers, rosettes or sunbursts. However, Seljuk patterns were often simpler, in the sense that they were made up of regular geometric shapes like octagons and hexagons, which were interwoven in countless different ways. The earliest geometric decoration appears in brick, as shown in the two recently discovered 11th-century Kharraqan tomb towers, and this was translated into other media like tile faience and eventually stone in Anatolia so that the same forms survive intact for several centuries. The occurrence of some of these forms is so persistent that they probably relate to the pre-Islamic beliefs of the Seljuk Turks.

The finest examples of Seljuk non-representational ornament come from the stone-built monuments of the Seljuks of Anatolia. Although there was a certain amount of influence from the long-established stone-carving tradition of the area, the ancient Seljuk motifs endure with remarkable tenacity. Foliage patterns occur as regularly as geometric ones, though there is a tendency to separate the two, unlike woodcarving where both types intermingle in Fatimid and Mamluke fashion. The Seljuk stone masons of Anatolia introduced motifs unknown elsewhere in the Islamic world, like the enlivening of blank surfaces with elaborately carved geometric or floral circular bosses, perhaps inspired by the sight of hardy perennials growing on barren ground.

While the Abbasids, Fatimids and Seljuks were developing new forms of abstract decoration, the craftsmen and artists of Islamic Spain remained firmly attached to the older decorative tradition of Umayyad Syria, from which most of the Arab settlers had originated. The decoration found in the ruins of the caliphal summer palace of Abdal-Rahman III (912–961), Medina Azahara, near Cordoba, although stylised can be linked to earlier Syrian work, such as the carved façade of the Mshatta palace. This decoration was carried a stage further in the carved decoration of the Mikhail and western doors of the Great Mosque of Cordoba, executed by craftsmen from Medina Azahara at the orders of Abdal-Rahman’s successor Al-Hakam II. Decoration in both places was carried out on slabs of stone or marble, and consisted of thistle-like plants growing straight up the centre of the slab with equidistant foliage curling in identical patterns to fill the entire space on each side of the stem. Although the conception of these forms is stylised the treatment of them is not, so that they retain a recognisable character, unlike eastern developments of this type of decoration.

In Al-Hakam’s additions to the Great Mosque of Cordoba, plaster decoration appears for the first time; prior to this only marble and stone had been used. In later times plaster became the basic material of architectural decoration, the finest of which is to be found in Jewish and Christian buildings: this is the so-called Mudéjar art, executed by Moorish craftsmen who were allowed to remain in the reconquered areas of Christian Spain. Some of the best Mudéjar plasterwork exists in the old synagogue of El Transito in Toledo built in 1365. Here the individual leaf forms are no longer defined and there are quite new elements, both architectural and geometric.

The finest plaster decoration however is unquestionably that of the Alhambra (14th century) where a breathtaking range of architectural, floral, and geometric plaster forms occur in the company of calligraphic inscriptions and tilework. It is the decorative plasterwork which gives the Alhambra an almost fragile appearance and makes us marvel that it should have survived for six hundred years. It was certainly never intended to: palaces were built to last for the lifetime of the ruler. Only a series of happy accidents has preserved the Alhambra while every other medieval Muslim palace has disappeared. The fragile nature of this plasterwork illustrates another aspect of Islamic non-representational decoration, which some scholars believe to be intrinsic. It is suggested that the way in which plaster and tilework cause surfaces to ‘dissolve’ is done quite deliberately to reflect the transient, temporary character of all earthly structures, and imply thereby the impermanence of human existence.

The technical developments in the field of tile faience, which allowed coloured inscriptions in the mosque, were also responsible for the polychromatic transformation of the arabesque. This
Decoration such as this, particularly when covering an entire interior, was designed to create a mood of perfect equilibrium by not allowing the eye to fix on any single point. At the same time the colours—predominantly blue, white and gold—and the paradisiacal floral decoration are powerful stimuli with special religious associations in Islam. The superb script reproduces verses from the Koran, occurred as early as the first half of the 14th century in the Masjid-i Jami' of Kirman, but was brought to perfection under the Timurids and Safavids in the 15th and 16th centuries when geometric and floral patterns, often the latter alone, executed in tile faience, were laid one above the other to create a series of levels. Multiple level floral arabesques provide complexity without the confusion of simple repetition at a single level. Like the geometric arabesque they provide a web of contemplative complexity, while their formal and colour associations suggest a whole series of possible reactions. The basic blue and green symbolise water and cultivation, the essentials of civilisation in an arid land; they are the colours of the oasis, goal of the weary traveller. Flowers mean spring and the re-awakening of life, evoking Koranic descriptions of Paradise, the goal of existence. Vines, flowers and foliage descending from the sky, as in the interior of a dome, recall the Tree of Bliss, often represented in prayer books in diagrammatic form, planted by the Prophet in Paradise and growing downwards through the eight heavens. The association of floral arabesque patterns with Paradise and the Tree of Bliss also explains their inclusion in Persian mosque carpets and individual prayer mats.

Although the Ottoman Turks continued to use some of the ancient Turkish geometrical motifs, such as patterns made from octagons and hexagons, down to the 16th century, the huge expanses of geometrical carving and tilework so characteristic of 13th-century Anatolian Seljuk art began to die out after 1300. In Ottoman times geometric motifs were almost entirely superseded by floral ones, which however were quite different from the traditional foliate scrolls of Seljuk art. Beginning with the Green Mosque and Mausoleum of Bursa (1421–1424) there arose a new naturalistic floral style which, aided by the development of polychromatic techniques in ceramic production, gave 16th-century Ottoman tiled interiors an appearance quite distinct from those in the rest of the Islamic world. By the second half of the 16th century, interiors were being decorated with tiles painted in seven different colours using an underglaze technique and showing tulips, carnations, hyacinths, peonies and various species of tree blossom rendered entirely naturalistically. In the same period, hexagonal tiles with self-contained designs began to go out of fashion and new types of tile decoration appeared.
Large patterns, sometimes whole plants like plum trees in blossom, were extended over several tile squares forming an oblong panel and often combined with solid rectangular panels, perhaps several feet high, covered with flower designs. Plant forms, even though quite natural in appearance (though not necessarily in colour), were certainly part of a widely understood religious symbolism. Pictures of the rose for example appear in Turkish prayer books, where the stamen is identified with God, the petals with the Prophet, and the lower leaves with his companions. On most occasions when a particular form of non-figural art is employed in mosque decoration and the applied arts, its secular form is often combined with figures. In Ottoman times however this is rare: the naturalistic plant forms of mosque decoration appear to suffice in most other fields. This phenomenon was also true of North Africa where the unity of decoration has other parallels, notably the use of a uniform script, true to a lesser extent of Ottoman Turkey but where, nevertheless, a fine Naskh script was used for both Koranic and literary-historical texts.

**Manuscript illumination**

By medieval European standards literacy in the Islamic world was widespread. Learning, though often confined to religious studies, was actively encouraged and the rate of book production was enormous. Many books were quite simple in form, copied by a scholar for his own use and then bound in utilitarian fashion. However if books were written for a royal library or a wealthy patron they were raised to the level of works of art.

Of all books, the Koran was the most important. Although the sacred text was first written without embellishment of any kind, during the two centuries following the Prophet’s death illuminated chapter headings and certain kinds of liturgical marginal ornament were added. Artistically, the most important form of Koran illumination was the double (although sometimes single) frontispiece.

The Koranic frontispiece was one of the most consistent forms of Islamic art and once established (about the 9th century) changed only very slowly. Its broad line of development was as follows. The earliest type (8th century) consists of a geometric shape, or series of shapes, often with plaited or knotted elements, within a larger square or rectangle to which is attached, on the right or left, a circular leaf-like device made up of foliage. Although this particular combination of geometric and vegetal forms would appear to have been a Muslim invention, the elements which go into its creation all originate in the pre-Islamic Sasanian and Hellenistic art of the Near East.

Although new forms of frontispiece illumination arose in the 10th century, Islamic Spain and North Africa continued to preserve the older tradition. Some developments did of course occur – colour was introduced, the geometric centre became a circle of white interlace occasionally made up of words or pseudo-inscriptions – but the basic format remained virtually unchanged.

A frontispiece with a vertical axis appeared in the east in the 10th to 11th centuries, quite different from the previous horizontal format and the square one of Islamic Spain and North Africa. Among the earliest examples is that of the Ibn-Al-Bawwab 21 Koran from 11th-century Baghdad. Here we have not only the introduction of colour, but also the appearance of infinitely repeating pattern. Infinite pattern was used by both Seljuk and Mamlukes, often in the star-polygon form found in woodwork and architectural decoration. Appropriate Koranic verses also came to be included, for example, ‘Verily it is a glorious Koran, inscribed in a hidden book’ (ch. 56 vs. 76–77). Perhaps the addition of cali-
graphic inscriptions gave rise to the final development, the incorporation of the opening pages of the Koran into the frontispiece which is so typical of Timurid and Safavid work.

Timurid and Safavid illumination is quite different from that of earlier times: the background is a deep blue and overlaid with golden cloud scrolls and delicately painted foliation, also in gold but with naturalistically drawn flowers in red and white. The effect is one of overwhelming magnificence.

The decline of the abstract frontispiece in Timurid and Safavid Iran is to some extent compensated for by the roundel or rosette which precedes the now sumptuously decorated opening pages. In Persian manuscripts the roundel occurs as early as Mongol times, if not before, and may have originally been a bookplate containing the owner’s name. But, in both korans and secular works, it often became a quite separate device, sometimes with religious verse in the centre, at others with a purely abstract composition.

The abstract koran frontispiece was undoubtedly inspired by the illustrated and illuminated frontispieces found in the books of other religions, notably those of the Christians, and while it is possible to look on them as displays of painterly virtuosity their interpretation is probably more complex. Attempts to create a perfect symmetry are an expres-