ISLAMIC ART
DAVID TALBOT RICE.

The delicate creations of the art of Islam—like the Islamic world itself—have an extraordinary unity, yet they are infinitely diverse. With the general growth of interest in art of every kind, Islamic art—no longer of fascination to the specialist alone—has come into its own. David Talbot Rice has satisfied this new and burgeoning interest in his comprehensive general survey of Islamic art—the first of its kind in English. His work defines principal styles in Islamic art, explores the methods and mechanics of creation, and offers, in lavish illustration, some of Islam's finest and most colorful examples.

The art of Islam is one of great character and beauty, and Professor Talbot Rice traces its development with insight and precision. Islamic craftsmen produced some of the finest pottery ever made—pottery that ranks in quality with that of China and Japan; they produced superb examples of metalwork and fine carved in ivory. Their architecture, too, had great distinction and had a great impact on the Romanesque and Gothic schools of the West. Their textiles had a quality of design which the Florentines and Venetians were quick to copy. Moreover, the miniatures of Mesopotamia and Persia are to be counted among the finest in the world. In this splendid book, Professor Talbot Rice has now opened up—for all to enjoy—vast, comparatively unknown realms of exquisite taste and delight.

with 55 color plates
and 193 black and white plates
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Frontispiece to a medical treatise, 'Book of Antidotes' of Pseudo-Galen, showing a central figure holding a crescent-shaped halo and surrounded by four other figures. Probably painted in northern Iraq, 1199.
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Introduction

One of the most striking things about Islamic art is the way in which a completely definite style, a whole repertory of motifs, and a distinct architectural system became, quite early in the era of the Hegira, associated with an idea and a faith. Islamic art is, in this respect, quite distinct from Christian, where diversity rather than uniformity was the characteristic. The arts of the various phases of Christendom — Byzantine, Carolingian, Romanesque, Gothic, Renaissance — were wholly different, and there was great diversity between the regions; indeed, variety was the very essence of the art. In the Islamic world, on the other hand, there was much greater uniformity, both with regard to time and to space. In the first place the artists did not seek the new and unfamiliar in the way that the Renaissance artists did, but rather remained attached to the model whose merit had been sanctioned by time and convention, seeking to renew its appeal, rejuvenate its character, by subtle variations of detail. In the second, the adoption over the whole area from India to Spain of a particular script which also served as a basic form of ornament in art exercised a tremendously unifying effect.

Because of these factors Islamic art has, at first glance, a certain degree of sameness for the Western eye; it seems hard to assign its products to a locality, harder still to date them. Closer acquaintance, however, dispels this first impression, and the aim of the writer in compiling this book has been to present the works first according to their period and second according to their geographical provenance, in order to illustrate both the developments that took place over the ages and the variations for which the different regions were responsible; for the Islamic world was of vast extent and its population was drawn from virtually all the known races of man.

This aim has necessitated a division of the chapters quite distinct from that in most other books on Islamic art, where it has usually
been determined either on purely geographical lines or on the basis of material, the text being devoted to a particular region, or the pottery, metalwork, painting or whatever it may be being treated for itself in separate chapters. It is hoped that the arrangement followed here may help to indicate both the nature of the developments that took place at different periods throughout the regions, as well as the factors that distinguish the arts of one region from those of another.

It has been by no means easy to cover the whole sphere of Islamic art within the compass of a small book; to do so certain rather artificial bounds have had to be set up, with regard both to time and to space. In respect of the former, the story has been brought virtually to a close with the early seventeenth century, even if, because of this, it proved impossible to say more than a few words about such things as the carpets of Persia or the rugs of Asia Minor, which for many people probably constitute the best known field of Islamic art. In respect of the latter, India has been omitted from the survey, because the art which developed there on the basis of what was introduced from Persia around 1400 followed very distinct lines, different from those taken elsewhere. Similarly it has been impossible to say anything about arms and armour, jewellery, bookbinding or lacquer, though products in these spheres were often very fine; nor has it been possible to treat of certain specialized aspects of Islamic art such as costume, heraldry or calligraphy, despite the very considerable importance of these subjects. So far as the last of these, calligraphy, is concerned, we can do little more than call attention to the outstanding importance of script as an essential element of decorative art; any more detailed analysis either of the formal kufic or the more fluent naskhi proved unfeasible in the space available, though such an analysis must be regarded as an essential preliminary to any truly penetrating study of Islamic art. Much has thus been omitted, but the major problems have, it is hoped, all been noted and the principal styles defined, with the object of bringing before a wider public a mass of material which has been a source of delight and interest to the writer through many years; more important, much of it may also, in all justice, claim to hold an outstanding place in the story of the art of the past.

CHAPTER ONE

Early Islamic Art

The Islamic era is counted from the year AD 622, the date of Muhammad’s journey to Mecca. Within little more than twenty years of that date Syria and Egypt had been wrested from the Byzantine empire and Iraq and Persia from the Sassanian. The great Byzantine state, heir of Roman territory and Roman glory, was thus brought to its knees by the loss of two of its most important provinces, while the mighty power in Persia that had halted the progress of the Roman advance in an easterly direction for some four centuries was wholly subjugated.

But though the rise of Islam marked the inception of a new and extremely important phase in the world’s history, the conquered Byzantine provinces and the old Sassanian empire left a cultural and artistic heritage which was to affect the world of Islam for many a century; indeed so far as art was concerned, this dual heritage was fundamental, and its importance was only equalled at first by the influence exercised by Semitic thought and, rather later, by the role played by the non-figural style of the East. These divergent trends, unified by the universal adoption of the Arabic script which, in one or another of its forms, became more than anything else the factor which made the art of the Islamic world into a distinctive style, the distribution of which coincided with the bounds of the faith, and not with those of any particular ethnic or political element within it.

The earliest caliphs were established in Mecca and Medina, but it soon became apparent that these cities, however desirable as the centres of an unworlly religious faith, were not suitable for the administrative capital of what had, in two decades, become a great political empire; nor could the old life of the Arabs, depending as it did for variety and to a great extent for income on the raiding of more prosperous neighbours, continue, now that a mass of peoples, who were already accustomed to a settled and cultural life under urban
conditions, had been brought within the fold. A new capital had to be chosen and a new way of life developed.

For a century or so this new capital was established at Damascus, in what is today Syria, and it was in this area that the earliest developments of an art which can truly be termed Islamic took place. The earliest phase take its name from that of the first dynasty of Islam, the Umayyads, which sponsored it. It continued until about 750, when the capital was transferred from Syria to Mesopotamia and a new dynasty, the Abbasids, came to power. Thereafter a new style was rapidly developed under the patronage of the eastern caliphs.

We know at present practically nothing of the arts of metal working, textile weaving, or manuscript illumination in Umayyad times – the very arts which were later to become so characteristically Islamic – while with regard to pottery the only vessels, other than purely utilitarian unglazed wares, that can be attributed to Umayyad times are the fairly large jars covered with a blue or green alkaline glaze which had first been developed by the Parthians. It is hard to be sure of the date of many of these. One example (III. 2), in the Damascus Museum, bears a luted inscription and is dated to the eighth century on archaeological evidence. In architecture the situa-

tion is different, for quite a number of buildings do survive, both religious and secular. The most important of them are the Dome of the Rock and the mosque of al-Aqsa at Jerusalem, the Great Mosque at Damascus, a few mosques and fortes, and a series of palaces on the fringe of the desert which were erected by the caliphs or their sons. To these palaces they could retire to escape not only from the cares of state but also from the ties of settled urban life which still seemed to them oppressive and hampering, even after several generations of residence in the luxurious lands of Syria, away from the harsh atmosphere of desert Arabia.

The Dome of the Rock was founded by the Caliph Abd al-Malik in 687 and completed in 691 (III. 6); the al-Aqsa mosque was also founded by Abd al-Malik, but it was thereafter rebuilt several times, and little of the original structure survives today. The Great Mosque at Damascus was begun in 705 by the Caliph al-Walid and completed in 715 (III. 10). All these monuments are interesting, the mosques for their architecture and their decoration, often in mosaic, the towns for their layout, and the palaces for their stucco work and their paintings, as well as for the light that they throw on the nature of contemporary life and conditions.

The Dome of the Rock is octagonal on plan, or rather it consists of an outer solid octagon enclosing two open octagons composed of columns. Above the innermost of these stands a dome on a tall circular drum. The plan represents an elaboration of one which had previously been developed in the Byzantine world in Justinian’s day, in such churches as SS Sergius and Bacchus at Constantinople (526–37) and San Vitale at Ravenna (526–47). The interior again owes a great deal not only to the Christian art of Syria and Palestine, but also to that of the Byzantine world proper; the columns, the capitals and the marble revetments of the walls are therefore hardly distinct from those which might have been found in a church in Constantinople. Some of the scansion designs on the metal coverings of the tie-beams are often closer to local than to purely Byzantine forms, while other decorative motifs on these, as well as those of the mosaics (III. 4), owe as much to Sassanian Persia as to Byzantine art. The double-winged motif follows Sassanian prototypes (III. 3).
6 The Dome of the Rock, Jerusalem. The building was begun by the Caliph Abd al-Malik in 687. Its plan represents a variation on that of the centralized buildings of the Byzantine world such as San Vitale, Ravenna, or SS Sergius and Bacchus, Constantinople closely and the love of representing jewels and precious stones as essential elements of the decoration is wholly Eastern. The great composite vase patterns again are completely oriental in character and spirit (III. 5). They are just as severely formal as some of the trees are naturalistic. The art is in many ways eclectic, but in its very diversity it is also new and original and fully justifies its apellation as Umayyad. The unification of the Arab-speaking world under the Umayyads had certainly opened up the frontiers to numerous diverse influences, but it had also provided the raison d'être for the birth of a new art.

The mosque of al-Aqsa at Jerusalem appears originally to have
had the form of a great columned hall, and represented a new conception in Islamic architecture, though its columns and capitals were Byzantine. They were re-used when the building was reconstructed by al-Walid, but most of what we see today is later still, for it was repaired by either al-Mansur in 745 or Mahdi in 780, and again by the Fatimid az-Zahir in 1035. The Great Mosque at Damascus has undergone fewer changes and in spite of restorations retains its original form. It therefore approaches closely a normal Christian basilica, though the building has been re-orientated, so that the shrine, the mihrab, is at the centre of one of the longitudinal sides and not at the end, and the great forecourt, derived ultimately from the classical atrium, is opposite the mihrab, so that one of its sides is formed by the long façade of the mosque itself. Once more the capitals and marble revetments are of Byzantine type and the mosaics (ills. 7, 8, 9) would seem to owe a more marked debt to Constantinopolitan than do those of the Dome of the Rock. They are more naturalistic, less formal, but once again no living figures are included, though both trees and villages are depicted in an entirely naturalistic manner.
The stylized architectural compositions in many cases depict façades like those of the rock-cut temples of Petra, whereas others would seem to be the figments of the imagination of the artist rather than true depictions, although they derive from an old classical tradition which first made itself felt in the wall-paintings of Pompeii. In the fantasy and delight of their compositions, however, the Damascus mosaics far surpass any similar works of Roman, Hellenistic or Byzantine art that survive, and they undoubtedly constitute not only one of the greatest glories of all Islamic art, but also one of the most delightful mosaic decorations known to the world. In technique they are superior to any other work in Syria and on this account suggest comparison with the floor mosaics of the Great Palace at Constantinople. Certain details of the work are also more closely paralleled there than anywhere else, especially the way in which the green leaves of the trees are set before an indigo-coloured background following the same outline like a foil.

The anticonic character of these mosaics gives rise to an interesting question – when did the ban on representation of living figures, which is generally believed to be characteristic of Islamic art, arise? The subject is one which has been argued and discussed by numerous authorities, but it would seem that in the early days of Islam there was no widespread veto; there is certainly no passage forbidding
representational painting in the Koran itself. The Hadith or Traditions on the other hand did take up a hostile attitude, though it is questionable whether this hostility was actually formulated before the ninth century. It certainly did not affect the secular art of the period, as witness the paintings at Qur al-Hair, Qasr Amra and Khirbat al-Mafjar, which will be discussed below, nor was it ever universally enforced with regard to secular art in later times. But the fact that no figures whatsoever are included in the mosaics either of the Dome of the Rock or at Damascus does suggest that in mosques the dictum was already in force by about 690.

Many other mosques of importance must have been set up under the Umayyads, and the records tell that those at Aleppo and Hama closely followed the plan of that at Damascus. Nothing else, however, survives in Syria with the exception of part of the great mosque of Harran which dates from the time of the last Umayyad caliph, Marwan II. In Iraq there were mosques of these early years at Basra, Baghdad and Kufa. The latter was founded in 639; it was adorned with mosaics, and had a gallery supported on marble columns; it was rebuilt under Muawiya, but was subsequently destroyed entirely. Remains of an important mosque have, however, been excavated in the now deserted city of Wazir on the Tigris, about half-way between Baghdad and Basra. It had a great court and the roof was supported by massive piers like those we find at a rather later date at Damghan in Persia; both must have been inspired by Sassanian prototypes. The mosque at Medina was built by Al-Walid about 708, and as workmen and materials were collected from all parts of the world to forward its construction, it was perhaps more like those of Syria. The mosques at Tunis, Qairawan and Cordova are also perhaps to be counted as Umayyad foundations, but all were considerably altered subsequently, and in the two former only small areas of wall of a more or less featureless type can be assigned to the original structures. Both were restored on a new plan in the ninth century. The mosque at Cordova now bears little resemblance to anything Syrian, for its affinities are mainly Persian; as it was not begun until 785, it is hardly to be counted as Umayyad from the point of view of art history.

11 Column capital at Anjar, Lebanon, about half-way between Damascus and Beirut. It is square in plan, with a massive enclosing wall. A section of it was occupied by a palace, the sculptured decoration of which was wholly Umayyad in style.

Of secular architecture rather more survives. A whole city, which would seem to be of Umayyad date, has recently been discovered at Anjar (III. 11) on the frontiers of Syria and the Lebanon, close to the road from Damascus to Beirut; no doubt it served as a half-way stage along this important trade route. Like a Roman camp it is square in plan, with an entrance at the centre of each of its four sides. These are linked by streets meeting at a tetrapylon at the centre. In one of the quarters so formed is a palace, the entrance façade of which rose to a height of three storeys. The city walls are strengthened at regular intervals along the outside by solid semi-circular towers. The streets were bordered by columned arcades, most of the columns and capitals being taken from a neighbouring Roman site, but in the palace some of the sculptures are clearly Umayyad and though less extensive resemble in style those on the façade of Mshatta. Other such walled cities no doubt existed and may well be discovered in the future; a palace at Minya on Lake Tiberias is rather similar in plan.
The fortresses and palaces presented in many cases a similar aspect from outside, for the palace walls too were reinforced by semi-circular buttressed towers, but the enclosures were, of course, smaller. There was usually but one entrance, and the layout inside was different. Apart from their artistic and architectural interest the palaces have an additional significance, for they clearly reflect the desire on the part of the patrons who were responsible for their construction, the early caliphs, to maintain their contacts with the desert and at least to continue the sport of hunting, even if the speed of their conquests had brought to an end the frequent raids or ‘razzie’ which had previously been as much a sport as a means of acquiring wealth. Many of these palaces were elaborately decorated both outside and in, and were on quite a large scale, capable of accommodating a considerable retinue; others were comparatively small, but were nevertheless extremely luxurious.

The most important of them, in all probability, was the palace of Mshatta (III. 12), for its exterior walls were elaborately sculptured, whereas those of the other palaces were plain. When it was first discovered in the early years of this century it was assigned to the third or fourth century, and though a few writers still believe that it is of early date, the case for an Umayyad origin cannot now be seriously disputed, and a date in the eighth century and reign of al-Walid II seems much more likely. The palace is of considerable size; on plan (III. 13) it is a square measuring about 144 metres internally, with semi-circular bastion towers like those at Anjar along the sides; but there is only one entrance which leads to the living quarters. These were arranged in three sections, separated from one another by great rectangular courts, which no doubt served to stable camels and horses and to stack up goods. One of the chambers has, on good evidence, been identified as a mosque. The carved façade flanked the entrance gate; the other walls were plain. Each of the bastions was adorned with sculptures up to a height of some five metres, but the motifs of the decorations varied from bastion to bastion and the work of several distinct hands is to be discerned. Some of the motifs are essentially Hellenistic, while others show the influence of Sassanian Persia; it would seem, indeed, that Persian motifs such as confronted animals, candelabra forms or double wings, found even greater favour with the sculptors of Mshatta than with the mosaicists who decorated the Dome of the Rock. The whole of the sculptured façade was presented to Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany by the Sultan of Turkey, and is now reconstructed in the archaeological museum at Berlin (East).

The general layout of Mshatta was closely paralleled in another palace, Qasr al-Tuba, which Creswell assigns to the same date. The same basic plan was broadly followed, if on a smaller scale, in most of the other palaces built by the Umayyads in Syria; it even reached Iraq, where similar palaces were built by the early Abbasids (see p. 29).
If Mshatta is outstanding because of its sculptures, the palace of Khirbat al-Mafjar is equally important on account of its mosaic floors (Ill. 15) and the profuse stucco decoration (Ill. 14) which once adorned its interior. The mosaic floors are of two types. Most of them are formal and severe, and use geometric patterns of Roman origin, though they are disposed in a new and rather distinctive manner. One section, however, is more naturalistic, for a tree is depicted, of much the same type as those in the mosaics of the Great Mosque at Damascus, and there are animals beneath its branches. Though this mosaic is similar to those at Damascus and finds its origins in the floors of early Byzantine times at Antioch, and even more, in those of the Great Palace of the Byzantine emperors at Constantinople, the animals below savour of the East. The motif of the lion eating a gazelle which appears on one side of the trunk reproduces a theme which had been extremely popular in Persia since Achaemenid times.

The wall-paintings that decorated some of the rooms were so fragmentary that it is impossible to say much more than to state that the motifs comprised both formal decorative patterns and the figures of living persons, and that Sasanian elements were nearly as much to the fore as Hellenistic. The stuccos, though also very fragmentary,