is astonishing to think that in the twelfth century it was for a time abandoned. But happily it was brought into use again, and it would seem that the curious form of its minaret is to be attributed to a restoration done in 1296. The minaret is square and has three storeys of diminishing size, with outside stairs, which, again, recall the ziggurats of ancient Mesopotamia, but is different from those which inspired the minarets at Samarra.

Though Mesopotamia was to remain the main centre of power and culture until the arrival of the Seljuks in the twelfth century, no other site of importance equal to that of Samarra has been excavated, and our knowledge of the period from the close of the ninth century until around 1200 is much more complete with regard both to Egypt on the one hand and Persia on the other than it is with regard to Mesopotamia. In both these areas local styles were developing along independent lines. In the East, for instance, a dynasty called the Samanids ruled at Bokhara (874–999) and an art of a very distinctive type was developed under its patronage, while in the West direct descendants of the Umayyads of Syria were carving out an empire of their own in North Africa and Spain, which owed little to Mesopotamia and the Abbasids. It is the story of art in these more peripheral areas that must therefore now concern us, rather than that of developments in Mesopotamia itself.


text

**Chapter Three**

**Art in Persia until the Mongol Conquest**

The course of developments in Persia during the early centuries of Islam was differentiated from that in Mesopotamia, Syria or Egypt by the fact that the inhabitants of the region were not of Arab stock and because the area was in close contact with the regions to the north, Turan, and to the east, Central Asia, and therefore subject to influences from these areas. These influences – but little felt in the more westerly parts of the Islamic world – were of very great importance in the East, and we shall have more to say of them as we proceed. Also, the development was different. The Persia of the Islamic age was not only the most direct cultural heir of the great Sassanian empire, but was also divided into separate kingdoms, ruled by a series of independent dynasties from early in the Islamic era. The most notable of these dynasties were the Tahrids in Khorasan, with their capital at Merv and then at Nishapur, from 820 to 872, the Saffarids in Seistan from 867 to 903 and the Samanids, whose capital was at Bokhara in 874. Later, they extended their rule from Transoxiana controlling most of northern Persia from soon after 900 until 999, when Mahmud of Ghazni (999–1030) brought the whole of the area from central Persia to farthest India under his sway. At much the same time a people of Turkish origin, the Ghuz, had begun to exert influence in western Oxiana and in the eleventh century one of these tribes, the Seljuk, was established first at Bokhara, then at Merv (1037), then in central and southern Persia, and finally at Baghdad (1035). By the last quarter of the century the Seljuks controlled the whole of Western Asia. One branch remained in firm control of Iraq and Persia, while another, which came to be known as that of the Seljuks of Rum, followed up a victory over the Byzantines at Manzikert in 1071 by ousting them from most of Asia Minor.

Though the age of Seljuk supremacy was to be one of the most glorious in the history of Persia. Those that preceded it, though less
well known, were by no means insignificant so far as art was concerned, as a few buildings of considerable importance, and some truly outstanding groups of pottery which are to be assigned to these years, survive to show. Moulded and cut glass of great beauty was made. The designs were strong and bold, suggesting the inspiration of Sassanian prototypes, and this same influence was also prominent in the textiles, which were made in a number of different centres. Work in both materials went on anyhow until the thirteenth century without any very marked changes of style.

Of the buildings the most important is a mosque at Damghan in central Persia known as the Tarik-khana (III. 39). It was built between 750 and 786, and its great circular columns, topped by elliptical arches, are extremely impressive. The plan was a simple square, with a columned arcade on three sides and a three-aisled structure on the fourth. The whole conception of the building clearly owes a great deal to Sassanian architecture and such buildings as the palaces of Sarvistan and Firuzabad.

Very few monuments of the next two centuries survive, and it is only from the tenth century that enough buildings become available to permit a proper study of the architecture; thereafter the monuments are reasonably numerous. Thus the next example in point of time that is well enough preserved to be classed as a work of art rather than a piece of historical evidence is the Mausoleum of Ismail the Samanid (d. 907) at Bokhara (III. 41). The decorative brickwork of the setting for its dome is of great quality and originality (III. 40); it is the earliest example we have of a technique which was to become very popular in Persia and in which work of great beauty was to be executed.

39. The Tarik-khana mosque, Damghan, Persia. 750-86. Its arches are elliptical, but approach the true pointed form closely. The massive circular piers are distinctive and very impressive.

40. The Mausoleum of Ismail the Samanid, Bokhara, c. 907. Most imaginative use is made of ornamental brickwork. It was popular all over Persia as well as to the north of the Oxus.

41. Exterior of the Mausoleum of Ismail the Samanid, Bokhara, c. 907. Here the patterns of the brickwork seem to have been inspired by basketwork.
The next example in chronological sequence, the Masjid-i-Jami at Nayin, was built around 960. The same basic plan of a square court surrounded by arcades was followed, but at the centre of each side there was an arch of slightly larger size, which represented in embryo an idea which was later to be developed as the characteristic mosque form in Persia, namely, that of a great porch or iwan at the centre of each side of the central court. The stuccos that adorn the building show much the same sort of progressive development as the architecture (ill. 42). The dark and light effect achieved by deep undercutting was considerably intensified, the designs being more minute than they were a century earlier at Samarra, and the horror vacui, or insistence on filling every available space with ornament, is more advanced. But there is still a certain majesty of conception which tends to disappear in subsequent work, where figures came to be included and where the artists tried to do in stucco things that could have been done better in paint. Some important examples dating from between 961 and 981 were found at Nishapur.

42 The Masjid-i-Jami at Nayin, Persia, c. 960. Its stucco decoration, though ultimately related to that of Samarra, shows the development of a new and more flowing style.

The stuccos of the tenth, eleventh and twelfth centuries, however, are hardly of the same artistic quality as the pottery. In this art the craftsmen seem never to have put a foot wrong, whatever technique they adopted. Similar motifs to those used on the stuccos were employed from time to time as the basis of the relief adornment of the plain unglazed wares, but they seem more balanced, more beautiful on the smaller scale, and on the glazed wares a wholly new repertory of figural motifs of great originality and variety appears.

As stated above, one of the most important centres during these early centuries was Nishapur in Khorasan, capital for a time of the Tahirid dynasty, though it was most important under the Samanids (874-999). Fortunately, unlike most sites in Persia, it is one at which scientific excavations have been undertaken, so that we know something of its artistic history. The houses were quite elaborate and the walls decorated with paintings which included trees, views, animals and figure subjects of basically Sassanian character. Most important, however, were the pottery finds, which included wasters and even actual kilns. Wares of several distinct types were made, the most distinctive of which had a red or buff body and designs in several colours, black, green, tomato red and bright yellow being the most usual, under a colourless glaze (ill. 43). The bowls were mostly thin, with widely flaring sides, but a few vessels of more elaborate

43 Pottery bowl from Nishapur. Tenth century. As a result of excavations at Nishapur by the Metropolitan Museum of New York, it is now possible to associate this very distinctive type of pottery with the city of Nishapur.
form were also found, notably a ewer, with the neck ending in the shape of a bull’s head; it must have been inspired by a Sassanian metal prototype. In another group the decorations were in black on a smooth white ground (III. 45), while another was distinguished by its dark brown glaze with a decoration of flowers with white petals and tomato-red centres (III. 44); both types are paralleled at Samarkand. At Nishapur, however, examples can be dated on archaeological evidence to the eighth and ninth centuries.

In addition to these very distinctive wares, examples of sgraffito ware, the engraved designs strengthened by painting in manganese brown, were found; yellow and green glazes were also used. The vessels resemble examples from Rayy, Saveh, Hira and elsewhere but date from the eighth rather than from later centuries. Sometimes they are close to T’ang prototypes, and evidence for relations with China is further supported by the presence of a few sherd of celadon. At a somewhat later date contacts with Mesopotamia were proved by the finding of pieces of lustre ware of Samarra type, and another type of local ware, with a decoration in very deep brown on a cream slip, seems to have imitated lustre. Wares of the characteristic

Nishapur type, with decorations in black and yellow, have also been found in Afghanistan, so providing further evidence of the great extent of trade and cultural interchange at this time.

Across the Oxus, in the region of Samarkand, other groups of pottery were developed which were related to those of Nishapur, though the designs were in general less harsh and angular. These types of pottery are usually known by the name of Samarkand wares (III. 46), though they were probably manufactured in a number of different centres, and remained in use over a very long period. Indeed, the peasant wares which were made at Samarkand, Bokhara and elsewhere in Turkistan down to quite recent times belong to the same family. The bodies of the vessels were red or pink, and were covered with a white, red or black slip, over which the designs were executed. The result comprised patterns in white, red, black, brown and yellow, under a thick colourless transparent glaze. The forms were mainly restricted to simple plates and bowls, though a few jugs and jars are known also. The designs were in general of a basically geometric character, but were balanced and sophisticated; kufic script was freely used, with very fine effect.
Other arts of this age were characterized by the same vigorous, rather violent traits, though in the metalwork the influence of Sasanian prototypes is very clearly apparent. A dish in the Hermitage (Ill. 47), depicting an attack on a fortress, may serve as an example. It is probably to be dated to the ninth or early tenth century, yet it is still in a purely Sasanian style. This kind of figure-work remained popular for a long time, especially in the Caucasus area, and its legacy is to be seen in a group of stone sculptures from Dagestan, examples of which are now in the Hermitage, as well as in metalwork. A particularly interesting example in the latter material is a bronze cauldron (Ill. 48) now in the Victoria and Albert Museum, which is probably to be dated to the twelfth century.

Many of the textile designs show the influence of the same trend, notably the famous elephant stuff from Jouse sur Mer in France, now in the Louvre (Ill. 49). Its style is distinctly Sasanian, and were it not for the inscription on the border, in a fine, majestic Kufic, it might well have passed as a Sasanian piece. Yet an atmosphere of change is in the air, for the griffons between the elephants' legs show hints
of China and indicate that Far Eastern elements were already beginning to make themselves felt. The textile is to be dated to 690, and assigned to Khorasan, which was an important centre of manufacture.

In addition to Khorasan there also seems to have been a flourishing textile industry in Soghdia, and recently D.G. Shepherd and W. B. Henning have shown that a number of silks with stylized, confronted birds or animals can with reasonable certainty be assigned to that area and are dated to the eleventh century or earlier. A well-known textile in the Musée Lorrain at Nancy, another in the treasury at Sens and a number of related examples in various museums (Ill. 50), are assigned to the group. In the south of Persia a more delicate type of work, with linear designs and very full – almost finicky – backgrounds was being developed. Work seems to have begun in that region during the tenth century, though few of the actual examples that have come down to us are earlier than the eleventh.

In the later years of the tenth century, however, it was in Afghanistan rather than in Persia itself that the principal source of patronage was centred, thanks to the rise to power of the Ghaznavid dynasty, first under Sabuktigin (976–97) and then under Mahmud of Ghazni (999–1030). Except for the two great towers of victory, one set up by Mahmud in 1010 (Ill. 52) and the other dating from 1114, little survives at Ghazni itself, but excavations are now being conducted there by an Italian expedition under the direction of Professor Tucci, and results may be expected in the near future.

51 The Rahat-i-Malik, Persia, which is strangely modern in its lines and proportions. Nowhere was plain brickwork used to better advantage than in Persia. Second half of the eleventh century

Some remarkable paintings of the early eleventh century which appear to depict the royal guard have, however, been excavated at Lashkari Bazaar not very far away. The Ghazni Towers today terminate in great bands of inscription; originally another storey rose above, as can be seen from the somewhat later tower, or rather minaret, at Jam (Ill. 53), built by Ghiyath ad-din Muhammad (1116–1202) of the Ghurid dynasty. The minaret is well preserved, though the mosque which it served has perished. It stands in isolation in a narrow gorge, one of the most impressive structures that time has left to us. The famous Qutb minaret of Delhi must have been inspired by it. Here, as on so many buildings from the eleventh century onwards, script forms the main basis of the ornament.

In the region farther to the west the Seljuks crossed the Oxus and established themselves in power there after their victory at Merv in 1040. It is from this period that date some of the
most remarkable buildings in Persia, for it was an age of very great activity. We perhaps know it best through its architecture, for a number of outstanding buildings survive, some of which seem strangely modern in appearance (Ill. 51). They are mostly in brick, and the craftsmen all had an astonishing feeling for that material, which they invariably used to the very greatest advantage, especially in the treatment of main façades. It was, however, in the construction of the domes that their greatest achievements were made, both inside, in their manipulation of the transition from the square base below to the circle of the drum above, and outside, in the form and proportions of the domes themselves. Sometimes the exterior faces of the domes were plain, sometimes adorned with geometric patterns in coloured tiles, as in the Masjid-i-Jam'i at Qazvin (1113) (Ill. 55). Inside, the proportions and decoration in monochrome brick were particularly outstanding and the dome chambers were often of supreme beauty; those of the Masjid-i-Jam'i at Isfahan (1088) (Ill. 54) are numbered among the finest products not only of Persian but also of all architecture. The system of building, however, was not only beautiful, it was also creative, for it would seem to represent an ingenious exploitation in brick of an idea first tried out in wood, where a square compartment was roofed by setting beams across the corners, so forming an octagon, then across the corners again, until the whole area was covered; the brick-vaulted ribs (Ill. 56) thus cross and recross in a manner similar to that of the beams of the wooden prototypes, and the way that ribs were used as frames on which the masonry of the domes and vaults was supported anticipated developments in the Gothic world by some centuries.
Lovely though the brickwork was in itself, the Persian builders were not always content to leave it in its natural state. As at Qazvin glazed tiles, usually blue and black, were frequently applied over the brick, while for interior decoration stucco work like that used in earlier centuries at Nayin was considerably developed, especially for the adornment of mihrabs. Some of the best of these date from the twelfth century (III. 57). The detail of the background areas is perhaps over-minute while the main designs are sometimes rather heavy, but technically the work was extremely proficient and it was an art that was much admired.

Apart from the magnificent mosques that they built in Persia, however, the Seljuks were responsible for the development of another and very individual type of building, the gunbad, türbe or tomb tower. These were usually circular in plan, though sometimes there were star-like projections all round and the later examples were sometimes polygonal. Nearly always there was a band of decoration and usually an inscription at the top, irrespective of the shape of the plan. The Gunbad-i-Qabus (III. 58), in the north of Persia not far from the Caspian shores, is perhaps the most spectacular and certainly one of the most beautiful of these structures. It was set up as a burial tower for the Emir Shams al-Ma‘ali Qabus about 1006, and is built of brick, with a conical roof and a band of inscription at the summit. This may serve as the type example of a group which was to constitute one of the principal architectural forms, first in Persia and then in Asia Minor, for the next three centuries.

Inside there were usually two storeys, the burial, in a sumptuous coffin, set in the upper one, with wives of the deceased sometimes buried in smaller sarcophagi beside the principal one. Outside the niched façades produce a particularly delightful effect in the bright sunlight of the Middle East, especially in the simple undecorated form...
that was usual in early times. Later, in the Caucasus and in Anatolia, the gunbats became more ornate (III. 59). But the simple undecorated brickwork of some of the Persian examples of the eleventh century, offset by an impressive inscription at the top, often produces an effect of very great beauty, and the gunbats are to be counted as a really important contribution to Islamic architecture.

Diez, in his Die Kunst der islamischen Völker (p. 71), suggests that the towers were derived from pre-Islamic prototypes, and cites in proof of his thesis, an example at Vahneh, which has now perished. But it is to be questioned whether this structure was really pre-Islamic, for it might equally well be a rather more primitive version of the popular Seljuk type, and it seems more likely that the development of this important architectural form was due to Seljuk patronage. But whence was it derived? The classical form of the martyrium, as we see it in what is now the church of St George at Salonica or in a more barbaric variant in the Mausoleum of Theodoric at Ravenna, at once springs to mind. But we know of no earlier examples in the Middle East, and if the form was carried from northern Persia to Anatolia by the Seljuks and was not derived from a classical prototype, a source in the East must be found. We have it in the conical tents or yurts (III. 60) so exactly, that one may conclude that these towers are to be regarded as a transformation of the fragile abode of the living into a more lasting accommodation for the dead, set up in a more substantial, more permanent material. The fact that the earliest of these buildings are to be found in northern Persia and the regions closest to Transoxiana, where the Seljuks first settled, supports this suggestion.

The Seljuks were not only considerable builders, but also great patrons of the minor arts. As is always the case where excavations have to be depended upon for the provision of the evidence which is available for the study of an art, pottery must play a role which is perhaps out of proportion to that which it performed originally, for it has survived whereas more fragile materials have perished. The great variety of pottery techniques that were in common use and the quality of the wares serve nevertheless to attest the brilliance of the Seljuk age, while the excellence of the figure drawing gives some
idea of what the paintings that adorned the palaces and some of the richer houses must have been like. We know from the records that these paintings were highly prized, but very few examples have come down to us.

Of the types of pottery, sgraffito wares of various types, following on from those encountered at Susa and in Mesopotamia, were still perhaps the most popular, but the variations on the technique had become more numerous. A number of groups may be distinguished. The first, the least common, consisted of wares where a thinly engraved design played a very subordinate role, the main decoration

being splashed on in green and yellow glazes (Ill. 61). As in Mesopotamia, this ware was made in direct imitation of imports of the T'ang ware of China, and in this most purely T'ang form it was comparatively short lived, for it was especially popular in the eighth and ninth centuries, but tended to disappear after that.

The next group belongs mainly to the tenth century, and is represented by vessels of a red body, covered with a white slip, and with a thinly engraved design under a colourless lead glaze (Ill. 62). Thinly engraved designs which are very similar appear on metalwork of the period. The designs often represent birds, usually against a fully