Mesopotamia: Tenth to Thirteenth centuries

The period of Samarra’s supremacy (836-83), so far as art was concerned, was one of the most brilliant in Islamic history; at no time before had so much been built in so short a space of time or had such elaborate decorations been devoted to so large a number of houses as well as to mosques and palaces. As one wanders over this immense field of ruins one can but marvel at the age which was responsible for such lavishness and at the callous way in which the city was deserted almost as rapidly as it had been constructed. In 883 Baghdad once more became the capital, and remained so until it was sacked by the Mongols in 1258. But it would seem that the period between its reestablishment and its sack saw nothing like the same profusion of expenditure as the earlier age. Indeed, the power of the Abbadid caliphs was at this time nothing like as great as it had been, for they had become virtually puppets in the hands of their ministers the Buwayhids, and though much was no doubt sponsored in the arts and there was certainly a good deal of building, the ruins of old Baghdad are inaccessible and no other large city of the period has so far been excavated in Mesopotamia.

Curiously enough, the most important work of art that has come down to us from these years that can be assigned to Baghdad with certainty is of the most fragile of all materials – paper. It is a Koran now in the Chester Beatty Collection which was copied and decorated in Baghdad in the year 1000 (ill. 96). It is written in very fine naskh lettering, and on quite a number of folios there are ornamental frames for the text which take the form of octagonal or similar compartments. At the sides of the pages are projections of stylized floral form, like the motifs which appear on some of the Sassanian silver plates. The geometric ornament, however, savours of the art of Central Asia, which was later to be so effectively developed by the Seljuks in the tile mosaics of their mosques in Asia.
interesting mihrabs, dating from the twelfth century, human figures have quite a part to play in the decoration (ill. 95). Attention may also be called to the stone sculptures which adorn the Armenian cathedral on the island of Achthamar on Lake Van, built between 904 and 918 for, as Professor Otto-Dorn has shown, they reproduce many of the motifs that were used in the Samarra wall-paintings. Contacts between Armenia and northern Mesopotamia were close, and were maintained for some centuries; some two hundred years later Badr ad-din Lulu, ruler of Mosul and its region from 1233 to 1259, though a Muslim, was actually an Armenian by birth.

Motifs that are allied both to the Samarra paintings and to the sculptures of Achthamar are also to be found on ivory carvings done in Mesopotamia between the tenth and the twelfth centuries; the most important of them are the drinking horns, known as oliphants, of which there is a particularly fine example in the Royal Scottish Museum at Edinburgh (ill. 97). Even in the tenth century the Mosul area stood to some extent apart, for it was under the control of the Hamdanids from 929 to 991 who were of the Shia persuasion and maintained themselves in independence through the days of Abbasid decline. Later it became a more or less independent emirate.

Minors. Illuminations of a similar geometric character were to be used in numerous later korans, but few are as majestic as this early example, which is also the first book that can be assigned to Baghdad, a city which was later to become important in the story of secular book illustration.

We know rather more about the art of the north of Mesopotamia than about that of the south, however, for there good stone was available, and even if no excavations have been made and not much survives in the way of architecture, there is quite a lot of stone sculpture lying above ground. It was all carved in an independent, individual style. A series of extremely interesting mihrabs are available to illustrate it; some of them are now installed in the old Abbasid palace at Baghdad which has been turned into a museum, others are still in situ in Mosul and its region. On one of the most

97 Ivory oliphant or drinking horn. These great horns seem to have been especially common in Mesopotamia. Eleventh century
In the middle of the eleventh century Baghdad was captured by the Seljuks, and their arrival marked the final degeneration of the Abbasids, for although they continued as caliphs they were no more than puppets in the hands of their vassals. The names of three of the Seljuks stand out. Türgül Beg, the conqueror of Baghdad, Alp Arslan (1063–72) who penetrated into Asia Minor, and Malik Shah (1072–92). Alp Arslan is commemorated for us by a lovely silver plate which was made for him in 1066; it is now at Boston (ill. 98). The most important figure of this age, however, was the grand vizier, the Nizam al-Mulk, who virtually controlled all the affairs of the state until his death in 1092. He was a truly remarkable personality: learned, balanced, a keen supporter of literature and patron of the arts, in Persia as well as in Iraq. In Persia, for example, he was responsible for the lovely domed chambers (ill. 36) and for other parts of the great Maqsūd-i-Jamī at Isfahan which were finished in 1121/22. It was he too who set the state on a sound basis and restored the fortunes and reputation of its capital Baghdad, which was to stand firm until the arrival of the Mongols soon after the middle of the thirteenth century. This was no mean task, for it was an age of turmoil and disorder for western Islam which began with the conquest of Jerusalem in 1099 and only ended with the victories of Saladin around 1170.

Although firmly dated works are rare, it may be concluded that production in every sphere continued in Mesopotamia during the tenth and eleventh centuries, but that the differentiation between Mesopotamian and Persian products became less considerable. In the present state of our knowledge a distinct Mesopotamian school is only to be distinguished towards the end of the twelfth century, and this primarily with regard to miniature painting. Then there were produced throughout Mesopotamia a number of secular book illustrations of really outstanding quality; they may be grouped together under the heading 'Mesopotamian school'. Some of them can be assigned to Baghdad, others are to be attributed to Mosul and its region, and it would seem that there were also important workshops at Basra and Kufa, as well as at certain places in Upper Mesopotamia, like Diyarbakir, and in northern Syria, in the region of plants which were grown for their medical properties. Medical manuscripts were much valued in Iraq and quite a number dating from the early thirteenth century have survived. Probably northern Iraq, 1199.
99 Silver dish made for the Seljuk sultan, Alp Arslan, in the year 1066. The linear design is typical of the Seljuk age and its restraint and balance distinguishes the dish as a work of outstanding quality.

Aleppo. It is not always very easy to tell the products of the different centres apart.

The types of book that were illustrated were comparatively limited; they comprised medical treatises, books about animals, a few volumes of lyrical poetry and, most important of all, books in which were recorded the adventures of the traveller al-Hariri. The examples of this last book are particularly attractive because the subject-matter called for a satirical approach and for a liveliness of portrayal, and the painters of the school were masters in both these veins.

The earliest of this school that can be definitely dated is a copy of Galen's works now in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. It was copied in 1190 for a certain Mahmud, but unfortunately the colophon does not say where. Its frontispiece (Ill. 1) is a truly remarkable work, depicting a figure surrounded by a halo like a crescent moon and framed by a serpent, both motifs which stem from an old Mesopotamian repertoire; the serpent was repeated in relief on the lovely Talisman Gate at Baghdad (Ill. 100), built in 1221, but unfortunately blown up in 1917. But there are numerous other illustrations in the book, some concerned with medicines and the method of their preparation, and some with the cultivation of the herbs from which they were made. In some illustrations agricultural labourers are shown at work (Ill. 98), and many of the scenes are vivid and delightful, in spite of the two-dimensional convention they follow, according to which all the figures are shown on the same plane and look as if they are silhouetted against an open background. There is another copy of Galen's works at Vienna, closely akin but perhaps rather less spirited; it is probably of slightly later date. Both would seem to have been done at Mosul, for many of the figures are close in style to those of two Syriac gospel books which were illuminated there around 1220; one is in the British Museum (Synt. Ms. 7170), and another in the Vatican (Synt. Ms. 559).

Another work which is akin and which is also to be assigned to Mosul or its region is a copy of the Kitab al-Aghani or 'Book of Songs', copied in 1217. There were originally twenty volumes in this
set, but only six now survive, one at Copenhagen, two at Cairo and three at Istanbul (Ill. 102). Each has one illustration, a frontispiece, which in two volumes represents a mounted figure, in two others the same person is shown enthroned, in another he is approached by two suitors, while in the last a group of females who have been identified as nuns engaged in ritual dances and lustrations are depicted. In every case the work is grand, majestic and impressive, and great attention has been paid to the pattern of the textiles of which the costumes were made, with the result that the effect is at the same time both decorative and monumental.

The style of these paintings may be contrasted with that of those in a copy of the medical treatise of Dioscorides at Istanbul (Ahmed III,
where the figures have clearly been copied from a Byzantine model. Another copy, now divided between the Aya Sofya Library, Istanbul (No. 3703 – now in Suleymaniye Library) (ill. 107), and a number of private collections, is dated to 1224. It was probably executed at Baghdad – in any case the figures are taller than those in manuscripts executed at Mosul, and more attention has been paid to the modelling of the costumes and less to rendering the decorative patterns that adorned the textiles of which they were made. This is to be seen in those of the illustrations depicting individuals or subjects such as chemists’ shops or drug manufactories; others depict medicinal plants, simply and in two dimensions only, but with considerable realism, while the animals shown with them on some of the pages are similar to those which appear in the animal picture-books.

It is in these that some of the most enchanting of all the miniatures of this school are to be found, especially in the illustration of the Fables of Bidpai (Kalila wa Dimnah); the finest copy is one in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris (ms. arabe 3465) (ill. 108), to be dated to about 1222. It contains as many as ninety-two miniatures, all of them extraordinarily expressive in spite of the wholly two-dimensional approach. In all the pictures the artist seems to have penetrated to the very soul of the animals he is rendering, while the rocks, trees and other accessories are imbued with a strange charm and delight. In these books the subject-matter is in the main confined to animals; in other works the same brilliant powers of characterization were dedicated to the depiction of human beings and to the expression of their emotions.

As stated above, one of the favourite books of the age was that known as the ‘Assemblies’ (Magamat) of al-Hariri, in which were recounted the hypothetical travels of al-Hariri and his companions in various regions and in very diverse circumstances. Three outstandingly important copies of this book survive, all in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris although a fourth copy exists in Leningrad and a fifth, very damaged version is in Istanbul. The earliest of them, which is probably to be dated to the early thirteenth century, is known as the St Vaast Hariri (ms. arabe 3929) (ill. 105). Its miniatures are by three distinct hands, but all their work is closely akin. All of them paid considerable attention to pattern. They probably worked in the Mosul area, and certainly owed a considerable debt to the Christian painters of the region who were responsible for the illustrations of the Syriac gospel books mentioned above. The figures throughout have haloes of a Byzantine type, but the style is fundamentally distinct from that of Byzantine art in the narrow sense of the term – that is to say the art of Constantinople and its dependencies – as is clearly shown if the illustrations are compared with those of the volume of Dioscorides at Istanbul mentioned above, where the figures are tall and elegant, the costumes rendered in a classical manner, and the gold backgrounds wholly Byzantine; only the turbans worn by the figures serve to mark the miniatures as Islamic.

The text of the Hariri in the Bibliothèque Nationale (ms. arabe 6094) (ill. 106), which is to be dated to 1222/23, is rather more polished than the earlier St Vaast Hariri and has departed further from a Christian prototype in that none of the personages have haloes. The faces too are rather more Persian and greater attention has been paid to detail. More important still is the fact that the artist was also more concerned with an attempt to set his figures in a three-dimensional background, and this aim is carried further in the last manuscript of the series, the famous Schefer Hariri (ms. arabe 3847) (ill. 108), which is dated to 1237. It is signed by Yahya-ibn Mahmud al-Wasiti, and was certainly done in southern Mesopotamia, probably at Baghdad. The work is of outstanding quality. The figures are extremely expressive, the compositions are often very beautiful in themselves, and the colours are gay, brilliant, and remarkably effective. The rather formal trees, the way in which the figures are confined to two planes, and the nature of the facial types attest its heritage, but there is in some of the pictures, like that of the Eastern Isles (ill. 107), a new complexity, a new outlook, and this page at least is to be counted as marking a very important stage in the development of landscape painting in Islamic art.

Though the manuscript illuminations constitute the most interesting and original products of this age in Mesopotamia, outstanding metal objects were also made, especially in the north. At Innsbruck
105 (above left) Leaf from a manuscript of the 'Assemblies' of Hariri, known as the St Vaast Hariri. Here Hariri is seen with a half-naked, old man who speaks to him in verse. Late thirteenth century.

106 (below left) Illustration from the 'Assemblies' of Hariri, a sermon in a mosque. This copy is rather more polished and finished than the St Vaast Hariri and was probably written in northern Iraq in 1225.

107, 108 (above right) The Eastern Isles; (below right) The standard bearers of the caliph. Two miniatures from the 'Assemblies' of Hariri, known as the Schérer Hariri. This is probably the finest of all the Hariris. Baghdad, 1237.
Whether or not the technique was first developed at Mosul is hard to say, for in recent times the priority of this city has been questioned in favour of eastern Persia (see p. 75). But Mosul was certainly an important centre, even though very few actual examples can be associated with the place with absolute certainty. The most important of them is a ewer in the British Museum, usually known as the Blacas ewer (Ill. 110); it dates from 1233 and is signed, 'Made by Shuja ibn Mana of Mosul'. A jug found at Hamadan in Persia and signed by Ali ibn Hamid of Mosul may also be noted. A number of other vessels bear the name of Badr ad-din Lulu, who was first Atabeg and then independent ruler of Mosul throughout the period from 1218 until 1262, and these again may be assigned to the city with a reasonable degree of certainty. To Mosul or Aleppo are also to be attributed a number of vessels which bear as a part of their decoration medallions containing figures either directly modelled on Christian prototypes or close in style to those which appear in the illuminations of Syriac gospel books.

109 Detail from a bronze dish inlaid with champlevé enamel with the name of an Ortokid prince of Mosul, Suleyman ibn-Daud (1114-44). It was probably made at Mosul, though the design must have been inspired by the Byzantine world.

There is a most interesting bronze dish decorated with enamels (Ill. 109), which bears the name of an Ortokid prince who reigned in the region of Mosul from 1114 to 1144. It is an isolated example, showing both in its technique and in its decoration a good deal of Byzantine influence, whereas the name of Mosul is associated with another, completely distinct and entirely Islamic group which was to flourish over the whole of the Islamic world, except for Spain and the western parts of North Africa. It was distinguished by the very difficult technique of inlaying a decoration of silver and sometimes also of copper onto a bronze core, and was developed especially for the decoration of tall jugs, ewers and large candlesticks.

110 Bean ewer inlaid and inscribed 'Made by Shuja ibn Mana of Mosul'. It is the most important example of the technique known as Mosul work which is both definitely dated and which can be associated with Mosul itself.
The technique was also very popular in Syria and it was probably from there that it spread to Egypt, and the signatures of craftsmen who can be associated with one or other of those countries appear on quite a number of examples. Others can be identified on the evidence of the designs, which are sometimes close to those of Egyptian or Syrian carved woodwork. The stylized scrolls or arabesques and kufic inscriptions are particularly important in this connection.

With the rise to power of the Ayyubid dynasty (1171–1250), Syria had become the primary centre of western Islam. At Raqqa, on the fringe of Mesopotamia, was situated the most important home of pottery manufacturing, while Damascus was the centre of thought and culture. The Raqqa potteries produced sgraffito, painted and moulded wares, and, after about 1170, lustre of a rather distinctive chocolate colour, often on a blue ground. The potters who worked there followed Persian models fairly closely, though the vessels they made were heavier and coarser and the pastes softer and more friable. In 1299 Raqqa was sacked by the Mongols, and little pottery seems to have been made there subsequently; instead Damascus became more important, and there production continued without interruption, for the Mongol advance was halted by Sultan Beybars at Ain Jalut on September 3, 1260 and western Syria escaped the destruction suffered by Persia and Mesopotamia. As a result the old Mesopotamian school of painting which was to a great extent eclipsed in its native land left a heritage which was very fully developed in Syria and thence penetrated into Egypt, where miniatures of very great beauty were produced under the patronage of the Mamluk sultans right down to the latter part of the fourteenth century. Though the revival of painting in Persia, which took place around 1300, owed quite a lot to the work of the old Mesopotamian school, it was in the main a wholly new Persian style that developed there, owing just as great a debt to Central Asia as it did to the old art of the Arab world. The Mongol conquests thus marked for a time the end of Arab art in the east. Thereafter the Arabs of the west and the Persians in the east were to hold the stage, and it is to a study of developments in the east that we must turn in the next chapter.

Persia: The Mongol Period

The first Mongol invasions of Western Asia began under Jenghis Khan about 1220, when Samarkand and Rayy were devastated; they reached their farthest extent in 1260, when Hulagu's invasion of Syria was halted by the Mamluks. From Mongol rule can be said to have dated from the capture of Baghdad in 1258, soon after which Mesopotamia and Persia were united under the control of the Ilkhanid or Mongol dynasty, which lasted until 1336. The capital was transferred to Tabriz, but although Baghdad declined, a number of cities in Persia such as Isfahan and Shiraz achieved a new importance in spite of the terrible destructions wrought by the invaders.

It is no doubt true to say that the way had been to some extent paved for the Mongols by the advent of the Seljuks who had also moved westwards from Central Asia, but the effect was very different. The Seljuks had penetrated slowly, their rulers had risen to power gradually and, generally speaking, peaceably, and stable government and prosperity followed their advance. The Mongols came like a hurricane, destroying all before them. Historians have described their passage in terms of the greatest horror, and many years were to elapse before life could once more resume its normal course. But artists were sometimes spared in the general holocaust, and by the end of the century the majority of them had congregated at the capital, Tabriz, which thenceforth became the main centre of cultural activity in the Middle East. Unfortunately no buildings of this age survive there, nor do we know much about the minor arts of the specific period of Ilkhan rule. In contrast, however, we do know quite a lot about the paintings of the age, not, it is true, about those of the first thirty years, but about those done during and after the last decade of the thirteenth century. Quite a considerable number of manuscripts have survived, and their illustrations show the birth of a new and very distinct style.
Illustrations from a manuscript known as the ‘Morgan Bestiary’ showing (above) two bears, and (right) a phoenix. Its illustrations are in different styles, some recalling work of the Mesopotamian school and others being distinctly Chinese in character. Probably made at Maragha, 1294.

The first of the manuscripts that may be mentioned is a copy of the Manafi al-Hayawan or ‘On the Usefulness of Animals’, of Ibn Baktishu now in the Pierpont Morgan Library; it is usually known as the Morgan Bestiary and was probably at Maragha, written and illustrated in 1294. Its illustrations are by several painters, one at least of whom was working in a manner fairly close to that of the old Baghdad school – he must have been schooled in Mesopotamia and have survived the slaughter that followed the Mongol invasion, for his paintings were two-dimensional, his figures heavy and solid, his trees followed the same stylistic convention as the plants of the early Dioscorides manuscripts, while his colours were brilliant and contrasting. Another man who worked on the same volume had, on the other hand, adopted a completely distinct style, linear and three-dimensional, using light, feathery brush-strokes, and employing motifs that were basically Far Eastern. Indeed, some of the illustrations in this book are so Chinese that they might even be attributed to immigrant artists from the Far East. The two styles are absolutely distinct; such a miniature as that depicting a phoenix is wholly Chinese (ill. 112), while one showing two rather delightful bears (ill. 111) is in the solid, two-dimensional homely manner that we met in Mesopotamia half a century or more earlier.

In some manuscripts, like the Morgan Bestiary, the two manners appear side by side, in others they have been blended together, to constitute a new and distinct style. Indeed, as time went on the blend became so complete that it is only by careful analysis that the two lines of inheritance can be separated one from the other. It was this blend that constituted the basis of Persian miniature painting from the mid-fourteenth century onwards, and had it not taken place, the art could never have developed in the way it did.

The blend was, of course, not complete at first, and the miniatures of another important book of the age belong only to the first stage of coalescence. This is a copy of al-Biruni’s ‘Chronology of Ancient Peoples’, dated 1007, and now in the library of Edinburgh University (No. 161). The blend is to be seen very clearly in a miniature showing the temptation of the first man and woman (fol. 48v), where Ahirman, the spirit of Evil, induces them to eat the forbidden fruit by eating it first and so transforming himself from an aged man into a youth (ill. 113). The haloes worn by all three figures and the way in which the folds of the costumes are shown attest an ultimate influence from East Christian art; the bright colours and solid figures derive directly from the miniatures of the Mesopotamian school, like those of the Hariri manuscripts discussed above; the knobby tree-trunks and the attempt to render the background in three dimensions by multiplying the number of planes are features derived from the Far East.

In some of the other miniatures of the book which are to be attributed to a different hand, the blend was still far from complete, for the old manner of Mesopotamia definitely remains to the fore. But in other volumes, written and illuminated at Tabriz at much the same time, the Mesopotamian style has been almost completely subordinated to the Far Eastern, characterized by its light, feathery