



# Artistic Traditions in the Worlds of Islam: Eighth to Eighteenth Centuries\*

IN THE EARLY YEARS of the seventh century, the Arabian Peninsula stood on the southern vestiges of two rival empires – Byzantium and Sasanian Iran. In 622, the emigration of Prophet Muhammad and his Meccan followers to Yathrib (known as Medina after this date) gave rise to a new state which grew rapidly over the next century. Initially, from his base in Medina, the Prophet extended his influence throughout the Arabian Peninsula through a series of alliances. Subsequently, during the period of the first four caliphs, who ruled from Medina between 632, the year of the death of the Prophet, and 661, Muslim forces conquered Syria, Palestine, Mesopotamia, western Iran and Egypt and, by 670, the Byzantines had been forced to retreat into Anatolia.

The greatest territorial expansion of the Muslim empire occurred during the rule of the Umayyad dynasty. By the 730s, a hundred years after the death of the Prophet, the Umayyads, ruling as an Arab monarchy from Damascus, had extended the territories of the empire from the Atlantic Ocean in the west to the Indus River valley and the borders of China in the east. Contrary to widely held belief, the conquest of territories outside of the Arabian Peninsula did not bring about mass conversion to Islam. Indeed, for over a century after the conquests, Islam remained a minority religion in these regions. Although the Umayyads sponsored the construction of monumental mosques in Damascus, Jerusalem and Medina, as well as in other newly founded Muslim towns, the richly diversified population encompassed many different ethnic and religious communities, including Syriac Christians, Copts from Egypt, the peoples of Iran, the Romanized and Christianized peoples of Spain, Berbers from Northern Africa, the Sogdians from Central Asia; and scattered Jewish communities. During the era of Umayyad rule, Arabic established

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itself visually in the living space shared by various communities, Muslim and non-Muslim. From this period, we have the earliest inscriptions preserved in Arabic, and the Umayyads established Arabic as the language of administration and coinage: new coins with purely Arabic inscriptions appeared, for the first time, in 696-97.

One of the least explored areas within the subject of Islamic art history is the material culture and decorative arts produced during the first one hundred and twenty-five years of Muslim rule. Reflecting the full scope of their empire, the art of the Umayyads not only adopted the art of earlier times and adapted Greco-Roman forms and Sasanian elements, but this adoption and adaptation was combined with creative and innovative techniques that broke new ground and set a particular and unique course for the arts of Islam. In this highly complex and challenging environment emerged a vocabulary based on four elements: abstract and non-naturalistic vegetal forms, geometric patterns, calligraphy, and figural decoration.

Local uprisings and dynastic conflicts weakened the Umayyad dynasty and, in 750, the Abbasids seized control of the central Islamic lands. The only survivor of this Abbasid overthrow of the Umayyads was ʿAbd al-Rahman who succeeded in establishing an independent dynasty in al-Andalus which ruled nearly three-quarters of the Iberian Peninsula until the first decades of the eleventh century. ʿAbd al-Rahman and his descendants produced a brilliant literary and artistic culture of their own, and the Umayyad court also had a strong impact on the significant Christian and Jewish populations within and outside al-Andalus. Their capitals, Cordoba and Madinat al-Zahra, were among the most important cities of the medieval world. With access to the best available artisans from the whole Mediterranean area, in particular Byzantium and Italy, as well as from the central and eastern Islamic lands, the art of al-Andalus from this period owes a great debt to the vast vocabulary of Antique and Late Antique art, the artistic tapestry that existed in the Mediterranean societies of the early Middle Ages, and the styles that were created in the central Islamic lands.

After overthrowing the Umayyads, the Abbasids moved the capital of the empire to central Iraq, where the dynasty founded Baghdad, Samarra and other cities. The city of Baghdad soon became the wealthiest urban concentration, as well as the greatest centre of cultural and artistic production in the Muslim world. Astronomy, mathematics, geography, optics and medicine were given a major boost with a massive programme of translations from Greek, Syriac, and Sanskrit, and the appearance of paper made possible the rapid spread of knowledge and learning from North Africa in the west to Khurasan in the east. Scientists and translators developed and made available in the Arabic language all fields of knowledge. From algebra to zoology, everything was studied, written down and codified. During this period, the arts and material culture of the central Islamic lands, while continuing the pattern of adoption and adaptation from previous traditions, developed certain specific characteristics. One was the special position given to the activity of writing, which was transformed into a subject worthy of the most elaborate ornamentation. The other was the formalization of vegetal ornamentation – the term ‘arabesque’ being applied to



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signify this formalization – into a continuous pattern of scrolls or repeated motifs which have neither a beginning nor an end.

During the ninth century, the governors appointed by the Abbasids in North Africa and Egypt became semi-independent. Thus, the Aghlabids (r. 800-909) based in Tunisia and the Tulunids (r. 868-905) in Egypt formed dynasties of their own, enjoying considerable political and fiscal independence. Similarly, in Iran and Transoxiana, the Tahirids (r. 821-91), the Samanids (r. 819-1005) and the Saffarids (r. 867-963), who began as administrative appointees of the Abbasids developed into dynasties exercising effective control over large areas. Direct Abbasid rule came to an end and the Abbasid caliphs became mere figureheads when the military dynasty of the Buyids (r. 932-1062) assumed power in Baghdad in 945.

In the first decade of the tenth century, the establishment of the Fatimid state represented a direct challenge to Abbasid hegemony and the authority of the Abbasid caliph. The Fatimid dynasty which began in Ifriqiyya (modern-day Tunisia) around 908 and moved to Egypt in 969 ruled an area of shifting frontiers which, at its greatest expanse, extended from Algeria and Sicily to

northern Syria and Arabia. Under Fatimid rule, Egypt became the focal point of vast trading activities extending as far as Spain in the west and China in the east, and the newly created capital city of Cairo became a major centre of cultural, intellectual and artistic activities. Besides being an extremely important international trading city – silks and ceramics were imported from China and India – Cairo was also a great manufacturing centre and a major employer of artisans and technicians from all over the Muslim world and beyond, with no fewer than two hundred different categories of artisans. The Fatimid era, therefore, was North African, Egyptian, Syrian, Arabian, as well as Mediterranean, and this complexity of contacts, which also included the Christian West, Byzantium, India and China, gave the material culture produced during this period a visual distinction and aesthetic vitality which, in many respects, was unique, and which preceded developments elsewhere. The formalism of vegetal decoration gave way to a more lively arabesque with highly naturalistic features and images of daily life and representations of people and animals appeared in almost all different types of objects.

In the first decades of the eleventh century, the Muslim world was in a state of tremendous religious, social and political tensions. In western Iran, several small dynasties jostled for power with each other, while in eastern Iran, the Samanids were weakened by the ambitions of Turks in the army. Indeed, the Ghaznavids (r. 962-1186), who started under the wing of the Samanids, established their capital in Ghazna and conquered much of northwest India and most of eastern

Iran, while the Seljuqs (r. 1037-1157) expelled the Buyids and took Baghdad in 1055. In the middle of the eleventh century, a major political and economic crisis shattered Fatimid power in Egypt, and the Ayyubids, whose greatest ruler was Salah al-Din (Saladin), succeeded in overthrowing the Fatimids in 1171. Minor dynasties established themselves in the coastal cities and interior highlands of North Africa. Also at this time, the rule of the Umayyads of Spain collapsed and power fell into the hands of local military dynasties based in individual cities. Thus, from Spain to Central Asia, dozens of separate and often independent centres of power had come into being. The further danger of conquest by a revitalized Christian West added to these pressures.

In the eastern Islamic lands, the cultural and intellectual life in the major centres of Rayy, Nishapur, Merv, Herat, and Balkh, as well as in Bukhara and Samarqand, was dominated by two trends, one Arabic and the other specifically Iranian. These two trends were further complicated with the arrival of Turkic tribes into Iran at the beginning of the tenth century. However, in most instances, these trends became blended, and the new rulers adopted, fostered and developed these various traditions. Thinkers of universal importance such as al-Farabi, al-Razi, Ibn Sina and al-Biruni, who had Persian or Turkish origins, wrote primarily in Arabic. On the other hand, the Samanids, who originated from Iranian lineages, were devoted to the revival of the Persian language, as well as Persian historical and literary traditions. They sponsored Persian poets as well as translations from Arabic and Sanskrit, and helped to formulate a new Iranian Muslim



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cultural world. Also, it was in this milieu that Persian became a major vehicle for expression and poetry made its appearance, with the epic tradition of Iran being written down by Firdawsi in the *Shahnama*, which was dedicated to the Ghaznavid ruler, Mahmud Sebüktigin, who was of Turkish origin. In the western Islamic lands, intellectual and religious works were written in Arabic, and some of the most remarkable thinkers of the period – Ibn Rushd, Ibn Hazm, Ibn Tufayl and Ibn al-<sup>°</sup>Arabi – came from Andalusia.

During this period, the arts and material culture of the central and eastern Islamic lands saw the emergence of numerous different centres separated by long distances and with independent types of taste. Artists combined longstanding designs from the central and eastern Islamic lands with adaptations from local traditions, as well as new techniques from China and the arts of Sasanian Iran and Sogdian Central Asia. Foreign and indigenous influences were effectively adapted and new and original possibilities – surfaces of objects were transformed by animated decoration, inscriptions in Arabic as well as Persian, often from well-known literature, appeared on nearly every object – strengthened artistic traditions during this period. Similarly, in the western Islamic lands, in spite of constant political changes and territorial conflicts, the arts spread from a few cultural centres to dozens of new cities. The courts of the various independent sovereigns and party kings became renowned for their sophistication and brilliance. The material culture of this period – echoing and embracing some of the traditions created in Egypt, as well as expanding the existing North African and Andalusian decorative vocabulary – exhibited a high degree of

artistry and sophistication. The Zirids of Granada, for instance, were responsible for the twelve stone lions that now lend their name to the Patio de los Leones in the Alhambra.

The invasion of the Mongols in the second decade of the thirteenth century led to the destruction of Baghdad in 1258. With the Ilkhanid conquests, the Iranian world became the centre of artistic and cultural innovation, with Iranian models and ideas being paramount. By the third quarter of the fourteenth century, a new power, the Timurids (r. 1370-1506), emerged in Central Asia, and the capital cities of the Timurid dynasty – Shahr-i Sabz, Samarqand, Bukhara, and Herat – became important centres of art and culture. In the central Islamic lands, the Ayyubids were replaced in 1260 by the Mamluk sultans, who ruled from Cairo over Egypt, Syria, western Arabia and parts of Anatolia for the next two hundred and fifty years. In the western Islamic lands, from the early thirteenth century onwards, power came to be balanced amongst a few regional dynasties.

Following the Mongol conquests in Iran, one of the most important developments in the artistic traditions of Islam was the pivotal role of the arts of the book, especially illustration and illumination. Under Ilkhanid patronage, impressive manuscripts were produced, and new motifs and concepts were introduced. Court patronage of monumental manuscripts for royal libraries

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was accompanied by smaller productions for the marketplace, and Shiraz became an important centre of manuscript production. Patronage of the arts continued with the Timurids, and this is reflected in the architecture, as well as the arts of the book, from this period. The Timurids set the standard for excellence with beautifully calligraphed, decorated and illustrated manuscripts that were produced in Tabriz, Herat and Shiraz in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The visual vocabulary of the Timurids which had been developed in the fifteenth century in Iran and Central Asia came to permeate the arts of other regions, including Turkey and India. In Egypt and Syria, the Mamluks patronized the architectural traditions, and commissioned fittings – such as glass lamps, ewers, basins and candlesticks – and furnishings for these buildings. Many of these objects were marked with prominent emblems of ownership. The principal cities of the Mamluk realm – Cairo, Damascus and Aleppo – were important focal points for trade between the Mediterranean world and the East. Textiles and spices were exported to the prosperous cities of southern Europe in exchange for wood, silver and copper. In Andalusia, the splendid court life of the Nasrids (r. 1230-1492) was exemplified by their royal city, the Alhambra in Granada, which is one of the most famous monuments of world civilization. More than seven hundred years of Muslim rule came to an end in Andalusia when the Iberian Peninsula was brought under Christian control in 1492.



The Osmanlı or Ottoman dynasty (r. 1299-1924), which had risen to power in northwest Anatolia, expanded their realm to include much of Anatolia and all of Thrace before defeating the Byzantines at Constantinople in 1453. While evidence for the patronage of the decorative arts by the Ottomans before the conquest of Constantinople is limited, a classic Ottoman style had emerged by the middle of the sixteenth century. Inspired by a range of sources of the Islamic and Mediterranean lands, the artistic traditions of the Ottomans had a distinctive visual vocabulary, which struck an extraordinary balance between the geometric order underlying much of the arts of the Muslim world and a lyric naturalism visible in the common representation of plants and flowers. The decline of Ottoman political and economic power in the eighteenth century resulted in a decline in the quality of the artistic traditions; only calligraphy continued to maintain the high standards of quality.

In the opening years of the sixteenth century, the descendants of Shaykh Safi<sup>c</sup> al-Din established the Safavid dynasty (r. 1501-1732). The Safavids dominated Iran and Afghanistan, extending their rule into areas of Central Asia and the Caucasus from their courts in Tabriz, Qazvin and Isfahan. During the first half of the sixteenth century, the arts of the book took on extraordinary significance under Safavid patronage, and manuscripts of the highest quality were produced.

The importance and quality of manuscript illumination and painting is illustrated by the famous manuscript of the *Shahnama* made for Shah Tahmasp. Following Tahmasp's death in 1576, many of the court painters emigrated to Bukhara and Delhi, where they found work for royal patrons. However, a revival of the arts took place during the reign of 'Abbas I who transferred the capital to Isfahan in 1591. An interesting development in the seventeenth century was the replacement of large-size manuscripts prepared by several artists with single-page paintings and calligraphic drawings by one individual. Thus, the works of artists such as Riza 'Abbasi, Mu'in Musavvir and Muhammad Zaman epitomize the aesthetic of seventeenth-century Iran. Although the Afghan invasions beginning in 1732 brought an end to the Safavid dynasty, the patronage of the arts continued during the reign of Karim Khan Zand, who ruled from Shiraz.

Although Muslims had established trading settlements on the Indian coast as early as the eighth century, it was only five hundred years later, at the end of the twelfth century, that northern India was conquered. Delhi was the seat of several dynasties, collectively known as the Delhi sultanates, and became an important centre of learning and culture, with Persian as the language of high culture and administration. The sultanate rulers were succeeded by the Mughals (r. 1526-1858), who were the greatest and longest-lasting Muslim dynasty to rule India.

Under the independent sultanates, a new style of calligraphy, known as *khatt-i bihari*, emerged in manuscripts, and this became the standard in the fifteenth century. Also emerging in fifteenth-century India was a distinctive tradition of illustrated manuscripts in which Indian motifs were added to traditional Iranian themes. Following the example of the Timurids, the Mughal emperors created large libraries and supported ateliers and workshops where manuscripts were produced. Under the patronage of the Mughals, the Iranian and indigenous traditions were combined with European ones, which had begun to circulate as a result of maritime trade with and Jesuit missions to the West. By the end of the sixteenth century, the number of artists working in the royal atelier was over one hundred, and the manuscripts produced had a distinct Mughal style, in which Iranian, Indian and European elements were assimilated into a harmonious whole. Royal patronage came to an end in the early eighteenth century, and book illustration reached a stylistic plateau, with artists reverting to traditional concepts of composition. Various western decorative techniques, such as enamelling, were introduced to India by European craftsmen serving the Mughal court. And gradually, the domination and economic impact of Europe began to be felt not only in India, but also Egypt, Turkey and Iran.