THE HUMAN FIGURE IN EARLY ISLAMIC ART:
SOME PRELIMINARY REMARKS

The following lines are a concise summary of a larger project on the development of the human figure in the arts of Islam from its very beginning in Syria and Egypt to about the sixteenth century in Iran and Central Asia. The present notes are therefore preliminary; they require further refinement and probably some elaboration of particular points not touched upon here.

Generally speaking, paintings of the human figure in early Islam can tentatively be divided into two main phases. The first covers the Umayyad and early Abbasid era between the late seventh and tenth century; the second begins in the late tenth or the early eleventh century, covers Fatimid art in Egypt, and culminates in the late-twelfth- to mid-thirteenth-century paintings in Mesopotamia. The two periods differ stylistically and iconographically, but they also share some common sources that are reflected not only in the style of the figures, but also in the themes in which they appeared.

It is common knowledge, and need not to be reiterated, that Umayyad and early Abbasid artists were still in quest of a vocabulary that suited the requirements of Islamic society. The language they used therefore primarily reflected Sasanian and Greco-Roman conventions. From the Sasanian tradition they inherited the frequent representations of royalty, royal entourages, and favorite royal pastimes. They also inherited from them the desire to demonstrate visually the continuity of their princely lineage by painting the "portraits" of their kings on the walls of their royal residences. Indeed, Muslim historians and geographers claim to have seen wall paintings in the form of "picture galleries" of the Sasanian kings and Persian annals with pictures of these kings. In 915, for example, Mas'udi claims to have seen in the house of a notable of Istakhri a precious manuscript which contained portraits of twenty-five Persian kings and two queens, beginning with Ardashir and ending with Yazdegerd. These portraits, Mas'udi claims, had been made at the death of each monarch, and stored in the archives of royal picture galleries. The author adds that the Umayyad caliph Hisham (727–43) had ordered an Arabic translation made of this work. Mas'udi does not say whether the pictures were also copied onto the translation of the text, but he describes these kings with all their garments and attributes, and even mentions their poses and gestures.1 We also learn

Fig. 1. Bas relief with Shapur II enthroned. Bishapur, 309–379. In situ. (Photo: from R. Girschman, Iran, Parthians and Sassanians [London, 1962], p. 184)
from Firdawsi that the palace of Mahmud of Ghazna was decorated with "portraits" of the kings and heroes of Iran and Turan, and many more examples could be cited.

So far no traces of such wall paintings or manuscripts have come to light. But princely effigies made in Umayyad and Abbasid times after Sasanian models are preserved in official art, such as coins and medals, as well as in other media (figs. 1-2), including floor paintings and sculpture.2 They all have one thing in common, and that is that they are based on an idealized type of Sasanian king and show no likeness to the person they are supposed to represent (figs. 3-4).

Equally well documented are human effigies based on Greco-Roman or late-antique models. One has only to recall the bas relief of the reclining woman at Qasr al-Hayr al-Gharbi; or the hunting and other scenes of royal entertainment; or the so-called Fortuna; or the naked woman in an aedicule on the wall paint-
ings at Qusayr 'Amra. Both the Fortuna and the woman in the aedicule recall Faiyum or Antinoe portraits, which in style, costume, and facial shape are Roman, and supposedly were copied by Romans living in the Egyptian hinterland. By the same token the female dancers at Qusayr 'Amra reflect dancing women on Coptic textiles (fig. 5) which, like the painted or carved dancers in Fatimid Egypt, were designed in Egypto-Roman style.

The artistic traditions behind these works of art—be they late Roman or Sasanian—must also have appealed to the taste of early Islamic society. This is particularly evident if we compare pre-Islamic with eighth-century early Islamic representations of the female body which, following a common ideal canon of beauty, had to be voluptuous, with full breasts, fleshy buttocks, and sloping hips. Take, for instance, the late Roman figure of Artemis in a mid-third-century mosaic emblem from Shiahba-Philippopolis, or the representation of Aphrodite in another mosaic from the same site, but dated about a century later. In both mosaics the concentrically placed tesserae clearly accentuate the bosom and belly, as well as the fat hip and thigh of these goddesses. By the same token, some of the Sasanian nudes or semi-nudes, like the harpist in the mosaics of Bishapur, or a female dancer on one of the boat-shaped silver bowls, reveal similar characteristics. In concept they, too, are closely related to the fragmentary stone sculptures of Mshatta (now in Berlin and Amman) (fig. 6), or to the female stucco sculptures at Khirbat al-Mafjar. Whether the latter follow Central Asian or Indian prototypes, as has sometimes been argued, is not rel-

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Fig. 5. Female dancer. Coptic textile, ca. 7th century. Bern, Abegg-Stiftung. (Photo: Abegg Stiftung Bern in Riggisberg [1973], p. 4)

Fig. 6. Fragment of female sculpture from Mshatta. Berlin, Staatliche Museen für Islamische Kunst, no. 1 6172. (Photo: courtesy Staatliche Museen für Islamische Kunst, Berlin)
relevant here, and in any case is questionable. Their importance lies in the fact that they responded to the idea of female beauty in the new Islamic society, and reflected the taste of the patron who commissioned them.

In the first phase, roughly outlined above, the images were related in one way or another to the ruler, and showed either his effigy, his entourage and members of his harem, or various aspects of royal pastimes. In the second phase, beginning towards the end of the tenth century, the range of human imagery widened. Although the preference for princely
imagery remained, Fatimid artists, followed by Mesopotamian painters in the later twelfth and thirteenth century, also included people from the lower social orders in their repertoire. This change, which some scholars have connected to the rising bourgeoisie but which has never been studied in depth, brought about a new attitude towards the human figure, which, as we shall see below, occasionally even led to caricature.

Early evidence for this new attitude is provided by some Fatimid ceramics, which depict scenes of popular entertainment, like the cock fight (fig. 7) depicted on an eleventh-century luster-painted bowl in the Keir Collection (no. 88). The two performers, apparently a man and an eunuch with a fattish, effeminate face, hold the cocks in preparation for the fight, and seem to examine each other with looks so hostile that it appears to be they, and not the cocks, who are the rivals. Or take the two men in a mock fight with staves (Museum of Islamic Art, Cairo, no. 14516), or the wrestlers (fig. 8) who, accompanied by a trainer and what seems to be an audience, are full of movement and action expressing physical strain and individuality—traits totally missing from the images of princely or royal status. This new trend in Fatimid Egypt is given its final expression in early- to mid-thirteenth-century paintings in Mesopotamia. The most obvious examples come from the so-called Schefer Hariri (dated 634 [1237]). Take, for instance, the sleeping travelers in the miniature of a caravan at rest, in Paris, BN 5847 (fol. 9: fig. 9), whose completely relaxed poses and closed eyes are so realistic that they appear to be the result of the artist’s actual observation of tired men having a good night’s rest. The groom, who sits next to the camels, even has caricature-like features. Another example of this new
approach are the mourners in the funerary scene, also in Paris, BN 5847 (fol. 29v; fig. 10), who express their grief by rending their garments, gesticulating wildly with their hands, raising their eyebrows, or tearing their unkempt hair.

These and numerous other examples, which attest to the changing attitude towards the human figure, are also reflected in contemporary writings. A typical instance is an anecdote mentioned by Richard Ettinghausen, according to which a humble Iraqi glassblower threatened the poet Bashshar ibn Burd, known for his ugliness, that if he, the poet, would write a satiric poem against him, he, the glassblower, would paint his face on the door of his house. Had the glassblower painted the face of the poet on the door, it presumably would have been a "mock portrait" or a caricature like the drawing of Bashshar's ugly face. Such an assumption seems reasonable in view of satiric or mocking pictures on Fatimid lusterware. Take, for instance, the satirical "portrait" of a fat, mustached, and double-chinned monk on a fragmentary bowl that originally depicted a scene from the life of the Copts in Egypt. It is a caricature of the Christian monk, as are the funny faces and grimaces on other Fatimid fragments.

A typical example of a satiric or mocking picture in Mesopotamia is a miniature from a dispersed manuscript of the *Materia Medica*, copied in Rajab 621 (June-July 1224). Once owned by Vever and now in the Sackler Gallery, Washington, D.C. (S 86.0097), it shows a blindfolded man (fig. 11) being ministered to by a half-naked person with a big belly. The miniature,
which is not directly related to the text, appears to be a parody of a medical treatment, and the half-naked person seems to be mocking a real one. Curiously enough the man resembles al-Jahiz’s description of a certain Ahmad ibn al-Wahab, who in the Kitāb al-tarbi wa’l-tadwr12 is said to be quadrangular, although because of his enormous paunch and wide hips he appears to be round.

We also have contemporary Iranian evidence for the trend toward painting men and women more realistically. For instance, in an anecdote included in the Chahar maqāla, Nizami Aruzi Samarkandi talks about the use of portraiture in warrants. According to the story, the Khwarazm shah, in order to find Ibn Sina, asked a painter by the name of Abu Nasr-i ‘Arraq to draw his portrait. He then asked other artists to make forty copies of this portrait, which he then sent to all the neighboring rulers, saying: “There is a man after this likeness whom they call Abu ‘Ali ibn Sina. Seek him out and send him to me.”13 Other evidence is provided by Nizami Ganjawi, who in his Khusrav and Shirin romance makes the painter named Shapur declare that the people he draws move and the birds he paints fly. Elsewhere, however, Nizami maintains that since men can only be created by God, the painted image has no soul, and has no more corporeal substance than the reflections in a mirror.14

Be that as it may, between the second half of the
twelfth and the mid thirteenth centuries Iranian painters too "portrayed"—as it were—grotesque figures like jongleurs, popular dancers, and scoundrels, which in fact look as if they were modeled after shadow-play figures. They generally appear as a silhouette on late-twelfth-century Persian ceramics, painted in black slip under turquoise or clear glaze. Typical examples are the so-called devil dancer in the British Museum (1956-7-28.5) (fig. 12), and the male dancer in the Victoria and Albert Museum (fig. 13), where the painter has especially stressed the man's spike-like hair. On another dish of this type a figure, seated with crossed legs and raised arms, has a disproportionately long nose, elaborately curled hair, and an extremely small forehead. It is presumably not incidental that similar silhouette figures occur in contemporary Mesopotamian manuscripts, which probably were also copied from, or at least were inspired by, shadow-play figures. Ettinghausen, who was the first to note these resemblances, pointed, among other examples, to the picture of Abu Zayd leaving al-Harith during the pilgrimage (Maqámát, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, ms. ar. 3929, fol. 69r), and remarked that "even the little plant in the centre [of the scene] looks like a piece of stage property" (fig. 14).

Another example of the relation between shadow-play figures and miniature painting is the half-naked, comic person in a detached page from the dispersed Materia Medica (fig. 11) already mentioned. His elbows and knees are curiously marked by small disks, as if imitating the joints of puppet figures, allowing them to move, raise their arms and feet, and even walk. Recently Shmuel Moreh has shown that by the end of the tenth or early eleventh century Ibn al-Haytham (ca. 965) in his Kitāb al-manāẓir systematically discussed the technical details of the shadow puppets: "There are holes pierced in the bodies of the shadow play figures, so that they can be held against the screen with a stick. . . . The presenter holds another stick in his other hand and with this he moves their heads, arms and legs." He then continues that the "light of a candle or lamp placed behind them casts coloured shadows of the translucent figures on the white screen." Although Ibn al-Haytham was born in Basra, he spent most of his life in Egypt, where he must have seen shadow-play performances and studied their techniques. He does not say where these performances took place, but they were obviously part of the popular entertainments which were also enjoyed by members of the upper class like Salah al-Din. It appears, therefore, that shadow plays and shadow playwrights like Muhammad ibn Danijal (1248–1311) existed much earlier...
than scholars had thought. They may well have in-
spired Fatimid artists to include in their repertoire
scenes from everyday life and popular entertainment
and to feel free to depict them in a more realistic
style.

To conclude: Throughout the first Islamic period,
which roughly covers the seventh to mid tenth cen-
turies, Muslim artists still in quest of their own vo-
cabulary adopted foreign, Sasanian, and Greco-Roman
models and adapted them for their own purposes.
They decorated their rooms with pictures taken from
late-antique traditions, such as hunting and other
scenes of royal pastimes and depicted female danc-
ers and musicians, which at the same time indicate a
continuity of norms Muslim society had inherited from
preceding Mediterranean civilizations. To judge by
written descriptions, they also reflect common ideas
about women and similar concepts of ideal female
beauty. Another motivating factor in official art
was the desire to demonstrate visually the succes-
sion of caliphal power by continuing the Sasanian
tradition of “picture galleries,” for which written
evidence exists up to at least the Ghaznavid period.

In the second phase, beginning in the late tenth
to early eleventh century, the artistic vocabulary be-
gan to change. On the one hand, the impact of Sasa-
nian and Greco-Roman art was retained; on the oth-
er, Islamic artists developed a more “realistic” style,
remnants of which appear on Fatimid ceramics. This
new style culminated, or found its full expression, in
twelfth- to mid-thirteenth-century Mesopotamian book
illustrations.

The reason—or perhaps reasons—for this change
still needs proper explanation, which requires the
cooperation of students from other historical disci-
plines. For example, who were the artists in the
Umayyad and early Abbasid period? Were they local
residents, or Muslims who copied pre-Islamic mod-
els often without understanding their meaning? And
what was the relation between patron and artist? Sec-
ond, the main medium on which lower-class people
appear are Fatimid luster ceramics. The technique
of lusterware suggests, however, that these ceramics
were ordered by members of the upper class who could
afford the greater expense involved. Third, in view

Fig. 14. Abu Zayd leaving al-Harith. Hariri, Maqâmât. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, ms. ar. 3929, fol. 69r. (Photo: from
Richard Ettinghausen, Arabic Painting [New York, 1962], p. 82)
of these questions, the problem of the rising bourgeoisie in Fatimid Egypt and thirteenth-century Mesopotamia must be reexamined.

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NOTES


4. For color reproductions of Fortuna and the dancer at Qusayr 'Amra, see M. Almagro et al., Qusayr 'Amra (Madrid, 1975), pl. IXb and XXVIIc.

5. Janine BaITY, Mosaiques antiques de Syrie (Brussels, 1977), pp. 20–21; for Aphrodite, see ibid., pp. 58–59; also figure of Cassiopea, p. 33.


9. Ibid., p. 54.


11. See H. Philon, Early Islamic Ceramics [9th to 12th Centuries], (Athens, 1980), figs. 487, 489. See also Ali Bey Bahgat and Felix Massoul, La Céramique musulmane de l’Égypte (Cairo, 1930), pl. XXXII,6, which shows the profile of a bearded man with a carrot-shaped nose and open mouth.


15. Reproduced in Arthur Lane, Early Islamic Pottery (London, 1947), pls. 49A and 51A.


17. Ettinghausen, Arab Painting, pp. 82–83.


19. Ibid., p. 48.