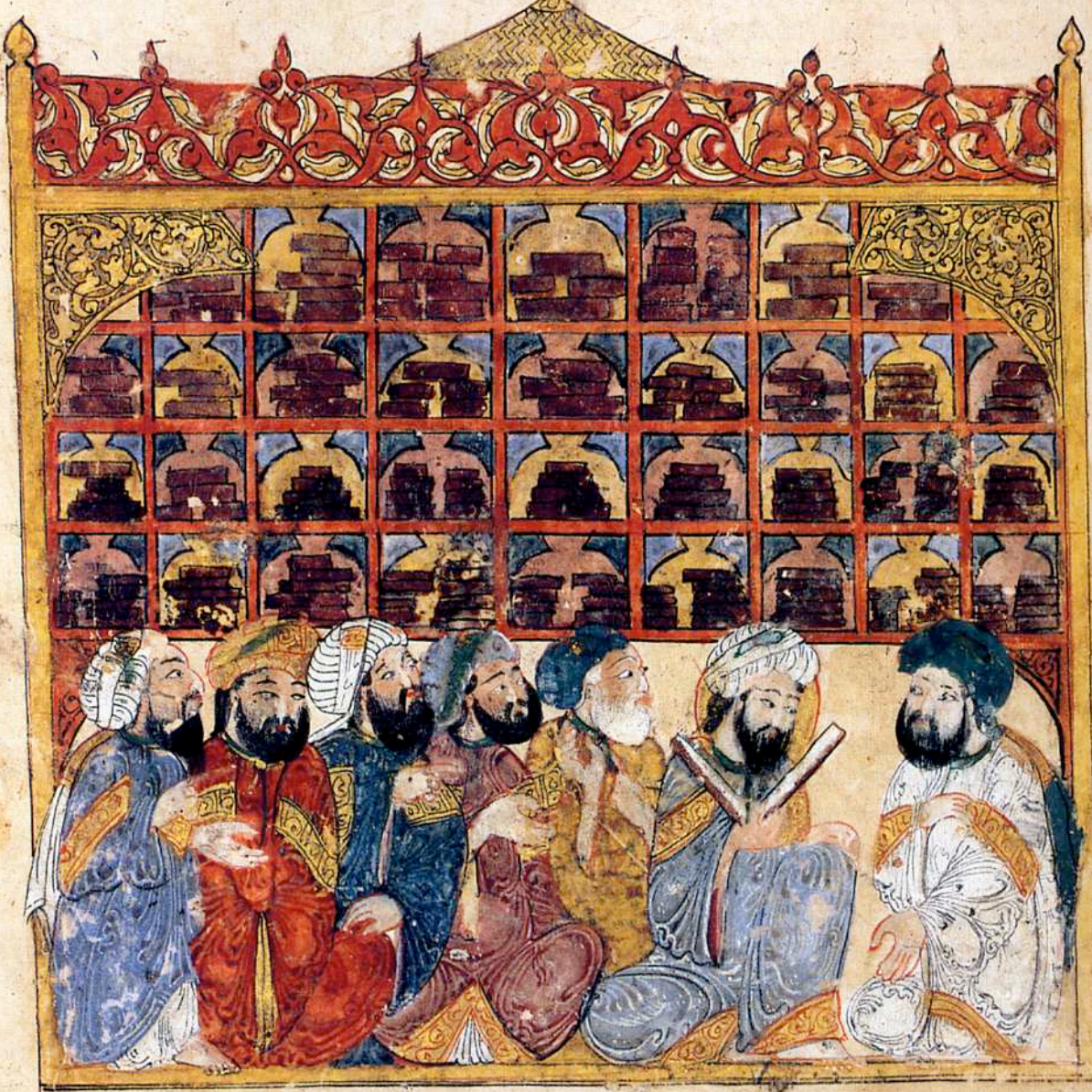


THE OXFORD
HISTORY
of ISLAM

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فقال يا لله لوجوه ان شبع وللصدوقين ان شمع انما يوم للحجيج وللذليوم قال فكان الجماعة
 ان شبع وابت تصديق عوته فوجس ما يحسن في افكارهم وفتن لما بطن من اشتكاهم وحاذرك



Handwritten marginal notes in red ink on the right side of the page, including the number '١١٦' and some illegible script.

ثم قال يا رواة القرض ولسانه القول المبرر ان خلاصة الجوهر
 في هذا الكتاب قد قيل فيما عجز من الزمان عن بيانكم الرجل الوثاق

Art and Architecture

THEMES AND VARIATIONS

Sheila S. Blair and Jonathan M. Bloom

All cultures throughout history have expressed themselves visually, and Islamic civilization was no exception. One need think only of oriental rugs, Persian miniatures, and Moroccan tiles, not to mention the Dome of the Rock, the Alhambra palace, the Selimiye Mosque, and the Taj Mahal, to see the great range of visual expression in the Islamic lands over the centuries. Islamic art encompasses all these and much more. As used in this chapter, the term *Islamic art* refers to all the visual arts produced in the lands in which Islam was the dominant religion, regardless of the confessional affiliations of the individuals who made the art or the purposes for which it was made. Unlike the term *Christian art*, the term *Islamic art* is not restricted to works made only for religious situations and functions, and many of the most cherished examples of Islamic art have little, if anything, to do with the religion of Islam. A page from a parchment manuscript of the Quran is obviously considered a work of Islamic art, but so is a bronze bowl inlaid with Christian scenes from thirteenth-century Syria.

What Is Islamic Art?

Islamic art could not have begun, of course, before the rise of Islam in early seventh-century Arabia, but it was nearly a century after that before Muslims began to be great and sophisticated patrons of the arts. Although Muslims began erect-

(Left) A typical medieval library, as depicted in a manuscript of al-Hariri's *Maqamat* (Assemblies), transcribed in Baghdad in 1237. The leather-bound volumes were stacked flat in niches cut into the wall.



The broadest definition of Islamic art would include this life-size oil portrait of the nineteenth-century Qajar ruler Fath Ali Shah, although it can also be considered to represent a distinctly Persian style of painting.

ing structures soon after the revelation of Islam, the first example of Islamic architecture is generally considered to be the magnificent Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, ordered in 692 by the Umayyad caliph Abd al-Malik ibn Marwan (r. 685–705). Following this broad definition, Islamic art continues to be produced to this day; artists continue to work in a variety of media in all Muslim countries. Nevertheless, the emergence of national identities, especially in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, has changed the ways in which people think about works of art produced in the Islamic lands in modern times. Thus, a portrait of the Qajar ruler Fath Ali Shah (r. 1797–1834) is more often considered to exemplify a distinctly Persian style of painting rather than to illustrate Islamic or Iranian attitudes toward representation in the nineteenth century. In current usage concerning modern art, the term *Islamic* generally refers to purely religious expressions such as calligraphy.

Today, many museums in North America, Europe, and the Islamic lands proudly display their masterpieces of Islamic art, but traditionally the visual arts played a relatively minor role in Islamic civilization, especially compared with the important arts of poetry and music. For example, there is no word for art per se in classical Arabic. The word most commonly used today, *fann*, is a neologism because it traditionally meant “craft” or “skill.” The same is true of the Persian and Turkish words *hunar* and *hüner*. In addition, artists did not usually enjoy high status in Islamic society, and there were few if any Michelangelos or Rembrandts, whose lives became the stuff of legends.

Of all the visual arts, the only one that was widely appreciated within its own culture was calligraphy, the art of beautiful writing. The names and biographies of calligraphers were collected and preserved, and treatises were written on the aesthetics of calligraphy. Calligraphy was the exception rather than the rule,

however, and there was no Islamic equivalent to the first-century B.C.E. Roman architect Vitruvius or the fifteenth-century Italian architect Alberti, who wrote treatises on the theory of architecture. Nor did Islamic civilization produce figures comparable to the Chinese literati, who wrote treatises on the aesthetic appreciation of Chinese painting as early as the period of the Six Dynasties (229–589 C.E.). Because Muslims wrote so little about the aesthetic appreciation of their own visual culture, the study of Islamic art dictates a positivist approach. It must be based on the examination of the remains themselves. Some present-day scholars have tried to derive aesthetic principles for all Islamic art, but these principles tend to reflect modern preoccupations, as they were not generated by traditional Islamic society itself.

Islamic art comprises an unwieldy grab bag of media, techniques, styles, periods, and regions. Its study, a relatively new discipline, developed not in the Islamic lands but in western Europe as an offshoot of studying the history of European art. From the European perspective, Islamic art evolved in the Near East out of the remains of ancient Near Eastern and late antique artistic traditions and bridged the gap between late classical and early medieval art. As Islam spread far beyond the geographical confines of the Near East to western and Sub-Saharan Africa, Central Asia, India, and Southeast Asia, and beyond the temporal confines of the Middle Ages, so did its visual expressions. The models created to understand the arts of the Mediterranean region in the eighth century thus are not necessarily valid for understanding the Islamic arts of Indonesia or Mali.

The arts of western civilization are traditionally understood in a hierarchy, in which architecture and the representational arts of painting and sculpture have dominated the artistic landscape to this day. This hierarchy does not hold for Islamic art. Although architecture is equally important in Islamic culture, Islam produced few sculptures or panel paintings. In Chinese civilization, another long tradition of artistic production, there was a clear division between artists (painters, calligraphers, and poets) and craftsmen (sculptors, potters, metalworkers, and so forth), and therefore between art and craft. This division does not hold in Islamic art, because there was no such distinction between art and craft. Indeed, a distinguishing feature of Islamic art was the transformation of utilitarian objects into sublime works of art. Looking at Islamic material culture,



This bowl, probably made in Iran or Central Asia in the tenth century, is inscribed with the phrase "Blessings to the owner," followed by a proverb, "It is said that he who is content with his own opinion runs into danger."

therefore, one should be prepared to find artistic expression in a vast range of situations, from the humblest oil lamps to the most monumental tombs. Nevertheless, Islamic art remains a useful rubric under which to consider the visual cultures of the past fourteen centuries in much of Eurasia and Africa, because it allows certain connections and relationships to be established.

Architecture was universally the most important form of Islamic art. It cost the most, lasted the longest, and was seen by the widest audience. Buildings built for religious purposes, such as mosques and *madrasas* (theological colleges), are often the best known and best preserved because they continued to be used and maintained over the centuries. Religious buildings may provide the framework for tracing the development of Islamic architecture, but the conservatism inherent in religious architecture means that these structures would have been slow to present innovations. It is more likely that architectural innovation was introduced in secular buildings—such as palaces, houses, caravanserais (medieval motels for caravans), bathhouses, markets, and the like—because they were constructed at the whim of a particular person to meet his own needs. Far fewer of these buildings, however, have survived: some literally have been worn to ruins, while others were deliberately destroyed. Few rulers, for example, saw any purpose in preserving the personal fantasies of their predecessors. Thus, the architectural sample available for study is skewed; in attempting to reconstruct the shape of the past, it is important to remember that what survives is not all that was made.

As calligraphy and calligraphers were revered in all Islamic societies, the arts of writing—and by extension all the arts of bookmaking—were given extraordinary importance in Islamic culture. In the age before printing, all manuscripts, from copies of the Quran to popular tales and scientific works, had to be laboriously transcribed by hand, first on sheets of papyrus and parchment and later on paper. From an early date, the works of gifted calligraphers were particularly appreciated and collected. The individual sheets were often embellished with elegant decoration and, where appropriate, beautiful paintings, and then gathered together in boxes or bindings made of tooled and gilded leather. Books were preserved in libraries attached to mosques and palaces. At a time when European monasteries might treasure a few dozen volumes, libraries in the Islamic lands regularly contained hundreds, if not thousands, of volumes.

A third medium that achieved preeminence in Islamic art was cloth. The production and trade of fibers, dyes, and finished goods was a major source of revenue in many places. One modern historian has likened the textile industry in medieval Islamic times to the heavy industries of modern industrial states, because textiles laid the economic foundations of medieval Islamic society. The two major fibers were wool, produced from sheep, and linen, produced from the flax plant. Silk and cotton were also important because they, like wool, could be



Textiles permeated the lives of nomads and urbanites alike, covering floors and defining living spaces. The ubiquitous role of textiles is seen in a painting of a nomadic encampment, attributed to the sixteenth-century Persian painter Mir Sayyid Ali.



A growing taste for abstract motifs was already apparent by the ninth century, as in this bowl decorated with a flowering plant painted in four colors of luster.

died relatively easily with brilliant colors. Many other fibers were used where available. Perhaps the most telling image of the centrality of textiles in Islamic culture is the *kiswa*, the cloth veil covering the Kaaba in Mecca, which may represent a vestige of the sacred tent—similar to the Israelites' tent for the Ark of the Covenant (2 Sam. 6:17)—in which God dwelled. Although today the *kiswa* is always black and embroidered in gold with quotations from the Quran, in the past it could be of virtually any color, including white, green, or even red.

As in many societies, clothing made the man or woman. Dress distinguished not only men from women and rich from poor but also nomads from townspeople and Muslims from non-Muslims. Dress was also used to make countless other social and religious distinctions: green turbans were worn by descendants of the Prophet Muhammad,

turbans wrapped around a red baton signified followers of the Safavid rulers of Iran. A coarse cloak of wool (*suf* in Arabic) was often worn by mystics, whose very personal approach to religion became increasingly important alongside the communal practice of Islam. These mystics became known as Sufis.

Textiles were also used for furnishings. There was little or no need for the tapestries that kept down the drafts in the cold castles of the medieval north, just as there was no need in the relatively dry and warm climate that prevails in most of the region for wooden furniture to raise people off damp and cold floors. Most people sat on mats or carpets spread on the ground, leaned against pillows or cushions, and slept on rugs on the floor. Meals were normally communal affairs; spread on the carpet or floor was a washable cloth on which diners would sit and serve themselves off communal trays laden with food, which were sometimes set on a low stand.

Perhaps most distinctively, textiles were also used for portable architecture in the Islamic lands. The area in which Islam originally spread encompassed the two great traditions of tent construction. The bedouins of the Arabian deserts used tents made from long strips of woven cloth supported by posts and tied down with strings and pegs. By contrast, the Turkic nomads of Central Asia used tents made from self-supporting wooden frames covered with felts. Under Islam both types of structures, the Arab tensile structure and the Turkic compression structure, spread into the traditional regions of the other group, and characteristic features were exchanged. Because of the important and often powerful roles played by nomads in sedentary

Islamic society, these humble dwellings were adopted by rulers, who transformed the utilitarian structures with luxurious accoutrements made of the finest and most costly materials.

In the study of Islamic art, many of its other aspects—such as metalwork, ceramics, and glassware, and carved wood, ivory, and rock crystal—are usually encompassed under the rubric “decorative” or “minor” arts. In Western art these terms have somewhat derogatory connotations because these media are considered less noble than the major arts of painting and sculpture. This is simply not true in Islamic art. As in many other cultures, craftsmen working for rich patrons transformed expensive materials, such as elephant tusks, gold, and precious stones, into luxury items. In the Islamic lands, however, craftsmen also transformed the humblest materials, such as clay, sand, and ores, into brilliantly glazed ceramics, limpid glasswares, and glimmering metalwares used by many classes of society.

These objects were often utilitarian, such as pitchers and basins for washing and trays and bowls for serving. It takes a great leap of imagination to transport an earthenware bowl, austere displayed in a museum case, to its original setting as a serving dish at a medieval meal.

The Bobrinski Bucket, one of the masterpieces of Islamic art, exemplifies many of these characteristics. Bought in Bukhara (now part of Uzbekistan) in 1885, it was later acquired by the Russian count A. Bobrinski, from whom the piece gets its name. The round cast-brass body is inlaid in copper and silver with horizontal bands of inscriptions and figural scenes. According to the dedicatory inscription on the rim, the bucket was ordered by Abd al-Rahman ibn Abdallah al-Rashidi, formed by Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahid, and inlaid by Masud ibn Ahmad, the designer from Herat (in present-day Afghanistan), for the merchant Rashid al-Din Azizi ibn Abul-Husayn al-Zanjani. The handle is inscribed with the date Muharram 559 of the Islamic calendar, corresponding to December 1163. None of the people mentioned in the inscription is known from other sources,



Muslim artists transformed everyday objects into artistic masterpieces. The Bobrinski Bucket, cast of brass and inlaid with copper and silver, was a bathpail made in 1163 as a gift to the man who had everything.

and the function of the bucket is somewhat of a puzzle. It was once called a "kettle" or "cauldron," but it is too fancy to have been used for cooking. Nor could it have been intended for carrying food or liquids, because contact with the interior might have caused food poisoning from verdigris (corroded copper). The most likely explanation is that the bucket was a bath pail, intended to hold water for washing when the merchant went to the bathhouse. In short, the Bobrinski Bucket was a present for the man who had everything in 1163, the medieval equivalent of a costly gadget from an expensive catalog store.

Despite the enormous variety in Islamic art, which can range from great structures to tiny objects produced between the Atlantic coast of Africa and the islands of Indonesia from the eighth century to the present, several themes have had universal and perennial appeal. In the limited space available in this volume, it would be impossible to recapitulate the long and varied history of Islamic art over fifteen centuries and three continents. Furthermore, this approach tends to emphasize regional and chronological divisions. Instead, this chapter takes a thematic approach that emphasises common features that unite much Islamic art over the continents and centuries. Five themes have been chosen: the art of writing; aniconism, the absence of figures; the decorative themes of arabesque and geometry; the exuberant use of color; and the notion of willful ambiguity. Each of these themes may not appear in every work of Islamic art, but collectively they define an aesthetic approach that makes Islamic art distinct from the artistic traditions of surrounding regions and cultures.

The Art of Writing

Writing is the most important theme to run through all Islamic art. The use of inscriptions is not unique to Islamic culture; the Islamic tradition developed in part from precedents in the region in which Islamic civilization first developed. There was, for example, a long tradition in the classical world of using inscriptions, particularly to decorate the fronts of building as well as monuments, such as triumphal arches. In turn, this tradition passed to the Christian world, and Byzantine art was often decorated with inscriptions (although pictures eventually became more popular). Similarly, in the ancient Near East inscriptions were often used, as on the wall reliefs at Bisitun (or Behistun) in western Iran, where a trilingual inscription in Old Persian, Elamite, and Babylonian lauding the great Achaemenid king of Persia, Darius I (r. 522–486 B.C.E.), surrounds a monumental relief showing his triumph over the usurper Gaumata and the rebels. In all these cases, however, writing supplemented and explained the image. What is different about Islamic art is that writing became the main, and sometimes the only, element of decoration.

This fundamental change was due, in large part, to the pivotal role of writing in the religion of Islam. The first words that God revealed to Muhammad were the five verses opening chapter ninety-six of the Quran:

Recite in the name of thy lord who created,
Created man from a clot;
Recite in the name of thy lord,
Who taught by the pen,
Taught man what he knew not.

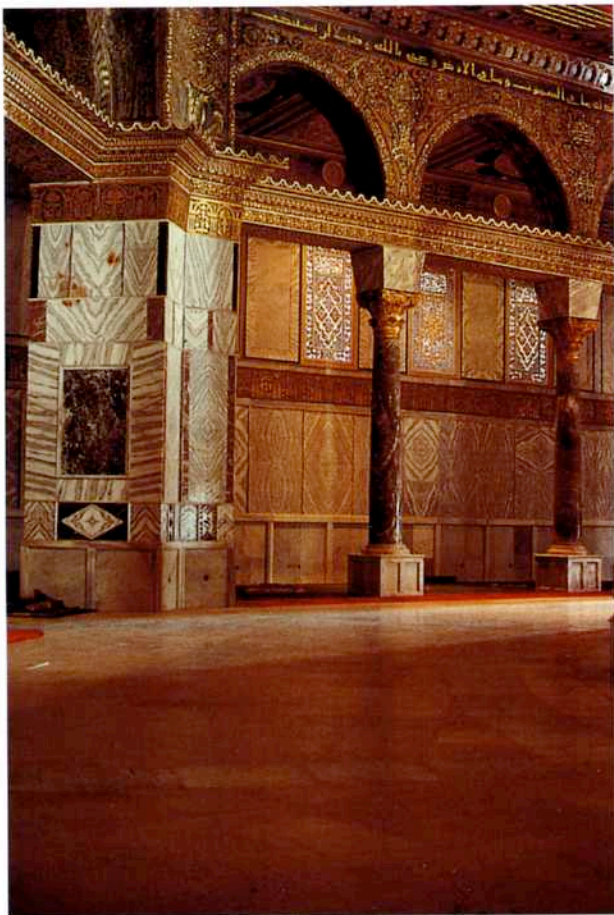
In other words, the knowledge of writing distinguishes man from God's other creatures. The importance of writing is stressed throughout the Quran. Chapter sixty-eight, another early revelation known either as *surat al-Qalam* (The pen) or *surat al-Nun* (The letter nun), opens with the words "Nun. By the pen and what they write." According to another pair of verses revealed slightly later (Quran 50:17-18), two noble recording angels sit on man's shoulders to register his every action and thought. The one on the right writes down good deeds, the one on the left evil ones. On Judgment Day man's every deed will be tallied for the final accounting in the Book of Reckoning (Quran 69:18-19).

Given the importance of writing in revelation, it is no surprise that writing became such an important feature of Islamic culture. Books and book production became major art forms, and beautifully written words became a major decorative motif. Because the Quran was revealed in Arabic, the Arabic language and script quickly came to dominate the languages that had been used in the region, becoming the *lingua franca* that united the vast area. By the late eighth century calligraphers were responsible for making the Arabic script more legible and beautiful, and their efforts can be seen in surviving examples ranging from coins and milestones to buildings.

Byzantine and Sasanian coins bore pictures of the emperors under whose auspices the coins were struck. After a brief period of experimentation, Muslim rulers rejected this type of figural coin in favor of one purely dependent on words. Beginning in 692, under the Umayyad caliph Abd al-Malik, virtually all coins were exclusively decorated with writing. This is true, for example, of early gold coins, known as *dinars*. On the obverse or front, the center is filled by the



Writing was one of the most common themes of Islamic art. Since Umayyad times, when the first Islamic coins were struck, almost all coins minted in the Islamic lands have been decorated exclusively with writing, as with this gold dinar minted for the Umayyad caliph Abd al-Malik in 696.



The first great monument of Islamic architecture, the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, erected by the Umayyad caliph Abd al-Malik in 692, was decorated with writing. The top of the mosaic panels on the interior has texts from the Quran in gold letters set against a blue ground.

profession of faith, which continues along part of the edge; the rest of the space contains a verse from the Quran (9:33) about the prophetic mission. On the reverse the coin is inscribed in the center with a Quranic verse (112) stating God's oneness and refuting the Trinity; the text around the edge contains the invocation, mint, and date. All of this appears on a coin less than twenty millimeters in diameter (smaller than a quarter). Although the style of script changed in various locales and periods, this type of epigraphic coin remained characteristic of virtually all Islamic coinage to modern times.

Inscriptions are found in all media and materials, even those in which the technical limitations of the medium made it extremely difficult to incorporate a running text. This is the case, for example, with textiles. It is relatively easy to weave symmetrical patterns of repeating motifs on a loom, but much more difficult to set up a directional design that reads in one direction. By the tenth century, however, Persian weavers had overcome the limitations of the medium and figured out how to incorporate

long bands of inscriptions on their elaborately patterned silks. A good example is the fragmentary silk textile known as the Shroud of St. Josse, because it was used in medieval times to wrap the bones of St. Josse in the abbey of St. Josse-sur-Mer, near Caen in northwestern France, where it was probably brought by a Crusader returning home from the Holy Land. It shows how Islamic textiles were considered precious both at home and abroad. From the two surviving pieces, the textile can be reconstructed as a large square measuring one and a half meters (five feet) on a side, with a carpet-like design of several borders surrounding a central field. The borders contain a train of two-

humped or Bactrian camels, and the field would have had two identical bands of elephants. Beneath the elephants' feet is an inscription band written in Arabic. The animals are arranged symmetrically, but the inscription band can be read only from right to left. The text invokes glory and prosperity to the commander, Abu Mansur Bakhtikin, who is identified in medieval texts as a Turkish commander in northeastern Iran. He was arrested and executed on orders of his Samanid sovereign Abd al-Malik ibn Nuh around 960. The silk had to have been made before that, however, because it invokes good wishes on a living person. Although it is the only example to survive, this silk must have been one of many identical pieces. It was extremely time-consuming and expensive to set up a drawloom to weave this complicated design in seven colors, but by weaving multiple copies of the silk squares the costs would have been spread more reasonably. It is not known exactly how the St. Josse silk was originally used, but it probably was woven to be a saddlecloth for the troops serving under Bakhtikin's command.

The St. Josse silk is just one example of how artists in medieval Islamic times used inscriptions to decorate works of art. On objects made from expensive materials, such as silk textiles or jade cups, the inscriptions often name the patron or user who commissioned the object. On objects of more humble materials or those made for the market, however, the inscriptions contain more generalized texts. This is the case with a bowl with flaring sides, produced, like the St. Josse silk, in northeastern Iran in the tenth century. Made of buff-colored earthenware covered with a fine white slip, painted in red and dark brown slips, and covered with a transparent colorless glaze, the deep bowl is notable for its size and fine decoration on the interior.

In the center the bowl has an abstract plant motif of a single stem with five leaves, but the major decoration is a wide band of elegant angular script encircling the walls. Assuming that the bowl was meant to hold food, only the scallops on the edge would have been visible when the bowl was full. As the food was eaten, however, the inscription would have become more and more visible until all the decoration was revealed when the bowl was empty. The Arabic text inscribed on the bowl begins after a small decorative motif set at about four o'clock, with the phrase "blessing to its owner." After a small teardrop motif set at about eight o'clock, the text continues with the proverb, "It is said that he who is content with his own opinion runs into danger." Assuming that the bowl was intended to be held and appreciated with the stem of the plant at the bottom, closest to the viewer, then the most important part of the inscription, the blessing to the owner, is immediately legible below it. To read the proverb, the reader must turn the bowl around in a counterclockwise direction.

Other bowls and plates made in the same milieu are decorated with similar aphorisms, such as “Planning before work protects you from regret; patience is the key to comfort,” or “Knowledge is an ornament for youth and intelligence is a crown of gold.” The inscriptions on these ceramics are thought out extremely carefully, and the stylized script, quite distinct from contemporary handwriting known in manuscripts from that time, justly deserves to be called calligraphy. Modern viewers, even those who know Arabic well, find these inscriptions difficult to decipher. It is likely that even in their own time they were meant to be entertaining puzzles for a sophisticated clientele, who not only appreciated having their dinnerware decorated with stylized writing but also knew the Arabic language well enough to understand the moralizing aphorisms. In tenth-century Iran and Central Asia, New Persian was coming to the fore as a popular language, but Arabic was more appropriate for writing. The earliest surviving manuscript written in Persian dates only from the eleventh century.

These two inscribed wares—the shroud and the bowl—both date from the tenth century, but inscriptions are found on objects created throughout the history of Islamic civilization, from the earliest times to the present. The earliest work of Islamic architecture, the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, shows a sophisticated use of inscriptions executed in glass mosaic. In the sixteenth century the Ottoman sultan Süleyman (r. 1520–66) had the mosaics on the outside of the



The Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem was extensively decorated with glass mosaics like those that survive on the interior. Those on the exterior were replaced with tiles first in the sixteenth and again in the twentieth century, but it may well have had inscriptions like those on the interior.

dome replaced with tiles, which were themselves replaced again in the twentieth century, so it is impossible to say anything about the original role of inscriptions there. The interior, however, preserves most of its original aspect and is the most lavish program of mosaics to survive from ancient or medieval times. Two long bands of inscriptions, written in gold letters that sparkle against the deep blue ground, encircle the inner and outer faces of the octagonal arcade. The texts contain pious phrases and verses from the Quran about God's omnipotence and Muhammad's prophetic mission as well as the name of the patron, the Umayyad caliph Abd al-Malik, and the date of construction.



Writing remains a potent theme in modern Islamic art. The dome around the King Khalid International Airport, built in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, in 1984, is inscribed with verses from the Quran about God's glory.

As on coins, the script used on the Dome of the Rock is carefully thought out and planned to fit the available space. The inscriptions there provide the first dated evidence for the writing down of the Quran, and they show that there were already calligraphers trained in exploiting the decorative possibilities of the Arabic script. No manuscripts of the Quran have survived from this early date, and some scholars have used this lack of evidence to suggest that Arabic script evolved rather slowly over the centuries. Judging from the inscriptions on the coins and the Dome of the Rock, there can be no question that the art of writing in Arabic was already well developed by the end of the eighth century.

Inscriptions remain an important theme of decoration in modern Islamic architecture. They are prominent, for example, inside the mosque erected in 1984 at King Khalid International Airport in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. As at the Dome of the Rock, the inscription in this mosque is written in a large band around the dome's base, but in this instance the text is entirely from the Quran (57:1-7). The verses state that whatever is on the earth or in the heavens declares the glory of God, the Almighty who has power over all things. The verses conclude with the statement that whoever spends money on a pious work will be justly rewarded. The text was clearly chosen as a reference to the motives of the patron in founding a mosque.



Medieval masons evolved sophisticated methods of laying bricks in patterns. Contrasting light and shadow, these designs sometimes spelled out words and phrases. The minaret built around 1100 by the Ghaznavid sultan Masud III in Ghazna, Afghanistan, is the first surviving example of this script.

At all times and in all places, Quranic verses were carefully selected to fit a particular situation. Closely examining the chosen verses can provide clues about the original function or meaning of a work of art. Tombs were often decorated with verses referring to death and paradise, such as “All that dwells on the earth will perish, except the face of thy Lord” (55:26–27). Doorways might be inscribed with the verse asking God for a “just ingoing and a just outgoing” (17:80). Other Quranic texts were chosen because certain words had particular resonance. For example, the front of the tomb in the Shifaiye madrasa erected in 1220 at Sivas by the Rum Seljuk ruler Kaykaus is inscribed with a Quranic verse (69:28–29) that ends with the word *sultaniya* (power), undoubtedly chosen as a pun on Kaykaus’ most important title, sultan.

Writing in Arabic was also the means by which non-Islamic forms were made Islamic. This can be seen in the arched screen that the Muslim ruler of Delhi, Qutb al-Din Aybak (1206–10), added to the congregational mosque there in 1198. Known as *Quwwat al-Islam* (“Might of Islam”), the mosque had been built less than a decade earlier, following the Islamic conquest of the region. The screen, which stands in the courtyard in front of the prayer hall, serves no structural purpose and was apparently added to the hypostyle building for aesthetic reasons, to mask what lay behind and to make the new building look more attractive. The screen is richly decorated with bands of naturalistic vine scrolls and inscriptions. The vine scrolls belong to the local tradition of stone carving that can be seen on Hindu and Jain temples. There, the scrolls are usually accompanied by exuberant figural sculpture depicting the activities of innumerable gods and goddesses with multiple arms and legs. The new Muslim patrons found this idolatry horrific and had the local masons replace the figures with Arabic texts from the Quran.

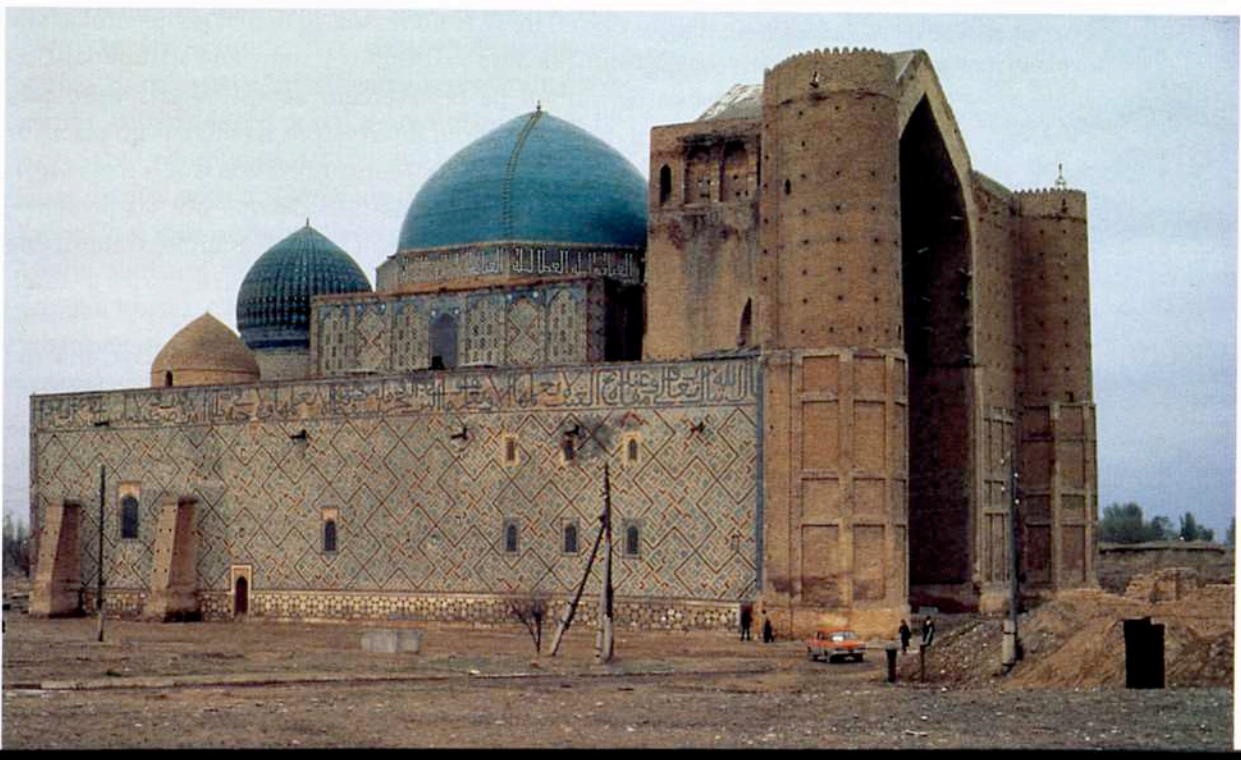
The desire to use writing to decorate buildings and objects in the Islamic lands was overwhelming, and builders and designers, particularly in medieval times, vied to create new styles and methods of writing out their messages on buildings. In some cases they added flowers and

leaves around and among the letters. This style was particularly popular in Cairo, and many of the stone buildings erected under the patronage of the Fatimid dynasty, wealthy and sophisticated rulers there from 969 to 1171, have beautifully sculpted texts in the style known as floriated Kufic. These are some of the finest architectural inscriptions known from the Islamic lands, because they judiciously balance the demands of decoration and readability.

In Iran and the adjacent region, where baked brick was the most common material of construction, designers evolved other types of script, particularly those with knots and other geometric elements of decoration. One of the architectural styles that lasted the longest is known in Persian as *bannai* or builder's technique. The script developed out of the techniques of bricklaying, as bricks and other elements of construction were set in relief to spell out words and simple phrases. The earliest example of this script survives on the minaret erected at Ghazni (in eastern Afghanistan) about 1100 by the Ghaznavid ruler Masud III (r. 1098–1115). The panels on the minaret's shaft spell out the ruler's name and various titles. The text is unusual, as it is one of the only examples known of an inscription in this technique containing historical information. The text is also very difficult to read, because the letters are formed by small pieces of terra-cotta sandwiched between larger bricks that are laid vertically in stepped bond.

Designing and setting out this inscription must have been extremely labor-intensive (and therefore expensive), and builders and designers soon figured out how to adopt the technique to faster methods of production. They simplified the text itself, so that instead of having the names and titles of a specific ruler, the text contained sacred names or a common pious phrase, such as "There is no prophet after Muhammad" or "Dominion belongs to God." Builders and designers also

Builders also used colored bricks and tiles to spell out words and phrases. The walls of the shrine that Timur erected in the late fourteenth century in memory of the Sufi shaykh Ahmad Yasavi at Turkestan City in the Kazakh steppe glows with such sacred phrases.



simplified the technique. Instead of setting pieces of terra-cotta in relief, they used the bricks themselves to spell out the text. They first exploited the spaces between the bricks so that the shadows cast in the voids would form the words or phrases. It was a short step for designers to fill the spaces between the bricks with glazed elements, so that the words were spelled out by glittering surfaces that were flush with the brick bonds and contrasted with the matte surface around them.

This technique became widespread in the eastern Islamic lands from the thirteenth century, because it was an ideal way of covering large surfaces of brick buildings. A good example is the shrine that the Turkic conqueror Timur (1336–1405) built for the Sufi shaykh Ahmad Yasavi north of Samarqand. The shrine is a huge rectangular block that floats above the flat, dusty steppe. The expanse along the side walls is divided into a grid of cross shapes outlined in bricks glazed dark blue. Each cross is filled with light blue glazed bricks that spell out the names God, Ali, and Muhammad. The technique was not only visually effective but also religiously resonant, because anyone staring at the building from afar could repeat the sacred names, just as a pious believer would repeat sacred names as part of his or her devotions. The building was literally wrapped with sacred writing.

Aniconism: The Absence of Figures

It is often said that the depiction of living things is forbidden in Islamic art, but this is simply not true. The Quran has very little to say on the subject of figural representation, although it does explicitly forbid idolatry, divination, drinking, gambling, and other vices, which seem to have been commonly practiced at the time of the revelation. Making pictures of people was apparently not a topic of paramount importance in Arabia in the late sixth and early seventh centuries. Furthermore, there is no reason to depict people in Islamic religious art, because Muslims believe that God is unique and without associate and therefore that He cannot be represented, except by His word, the Quran. God is worshiped directly without intercessors, so there is no place for images of saints as there is in Christian art. Muhammad was God's messenger, but unlike Christ, Muhammad was not divine. His deeds—not his person—represent the ideal to which Muslims aspire. Unlike the Bible, little of the Quran is narrative, so there was little reason to use illustrated stories to teach the faith.

In time, this lack of motive and opportunity hardened into law, and the absence of figures (technically known as *aniconism*) became a characteristic feature of Islamic religious art. Thus, few, if any, depictions of people can be found in mosques and other buildings intended for religious purposes. Palaces, bath-

houses, and locales designed for other activities, however, may well have had figural decoration, although in later periods the aniconism of the religious milieu often spilled over into the secular realm. According to the *hadith* (traditions of the Prophet), even Muhammad was aware of the difference; he ordered all the idols removed from the Kaaba in Mecca, but he is recorded to have used curtains and cushions decorated with figures in his house.

Representations of people and animals were used, often exuberantly, within private settings. One example from early Islamic times can be seen in the ruins of the Umayyad palace known as Khirbat al-Mafjar near Jericho. Destroyed in an earthquake in the 740s, the building was the retreat of the playboy prince al-Walid ibn Yazid, who partied with his friends for two decades waiting to succeed his elderly uncle, the Umayyad caliph Hisham ibn Abd al-Malik (r. 724–43). The palace contained an elaborate music hall, complete with swimming pool, hot bath, and private audience room. All that remains intact is the enormous mosaic floor, decorated with an extraordinary array of geometric patterns that resemble stone carpets. From the many fragments of stone and stucco that litter the site, the excavators were able to reconstruct much of the building's superstructure. The doorway, for example, was elaborately decorated with a stucco statue, presumably representing the patron, and inside the portal more stucco statues of half-naked voluptuous dancers suggested the pleasures that lay within. The dome over the small audience room culminated in a cap of luscious acanthus leaves from which protruded heads of handsome young men and women, who peered down over other carvings of birds and winged horses. Clearly, what one did in private could be quite different from what one did in public.

In the same vein, German excavators in the early twentieth century found thousands of fragments from wall paintings that once decorated the houses, bathhouses, and palaces at Samarra, the site north of Baghdad that served as the



Muslims disdained pictures or sculptures of living beings in religious settings, but they often used them in palaces and other secular settings. The entrance to the bath at Khirbat al-Mafjar near Jericho, a palace erected for the Umayyad prince al-Walid II in the eighth century, was decorated with stucco statues of bare-breasted dancers.



Paintings of people decorated the walls of the ninth-century palaces at Samarra, the Abbasid capital north of Baghdad. Excavators found one mural in the caliph's private quarters that shows two dancing girls with interlocked arms, pouring wine.

Abbasid capital in the mid-ninth century. The excavators were able to reconstruct some of the scenes from the palace, which included cornucopia scrolls inhabited with wild animals and naked ladies, hunting scenes, and one mural showing a pair of dancing girls. The two figures have interlocked arms; while they dance, each pours from a long-necked bottle into a cup held by the other. The liquid must surely be wine, because fragments of painted wine bottles also littered the site. Official histories may chronicle the official acts of the great and powerful, but art, like poetry and song, often shows aspects of private life that are at variance with the official ideal.

The same distinction between the religious and the secular stands for book decoration. Manuscripts of the Quran were often embellished with geometric or floral designs. Scholars do not know

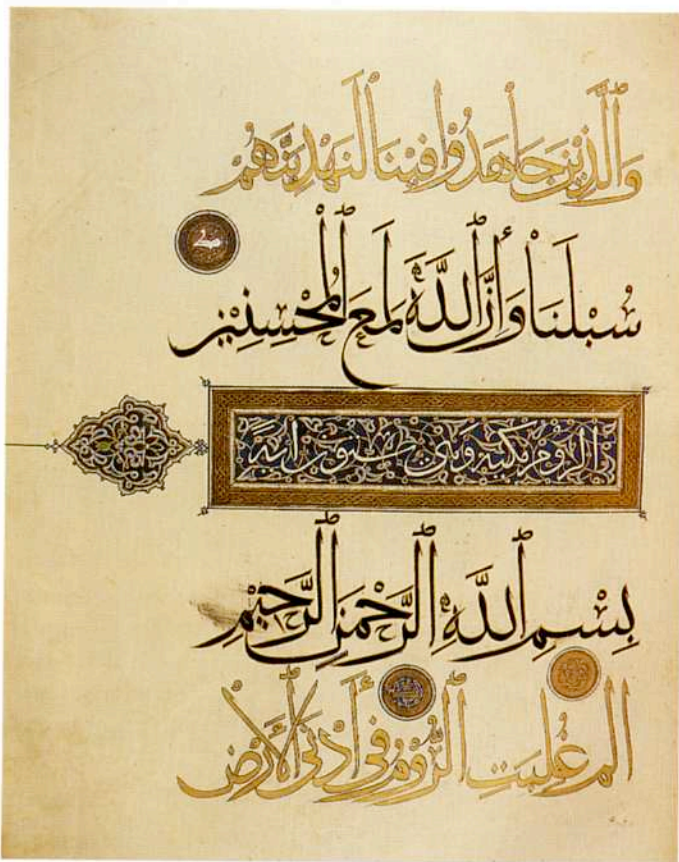
of any Quranic manuscript that was decorated with paintings of people, as were contemporary Christian manuscripts of the Bible. By contrast, pictures were often included in other kinds of books made in the Islamic lands, including scientific treatises, literary works, epic poems, and histories. In some cases these pictures were necessary to make the text understandable, in others, they made it pretty.

Only fragments of illustrated books survive from the period before 1000 C.E., but there is no reason to doubt their existence, particularly because they are described in other books. One of the earliest illustrated manuscripts to survive is a copy of Abd al-Rahman al-Sufi's treatise on the fixed stars. The work, ultimately derived from classical writings, particularly Ptolemy's *Almagest*, was composed around 965 by the astronomer al-Sufi (903–86) of Rayy for the Buyid ruler Adud al-Dawla (r. 949–83). The oldest surviving copy was made from the original by al-Sufi's son, and its illustrations show how classical traditions of representing the constellations were adapted to Muslim taste. The figures, for example, wear turbans and robes with long flowing drapery.

From this time, books of all kinds, including illustrated ones, have survived in greater numbers and represent a wider range of subject matter. One of the



This copy of al-Sufi's treatise on the fixed stars is one of the earliest Islamic manuscripts with illustrations to survive. It was transcribed from the original by the author's son in 1009. This illustration of Andromeda wearing a long flowing robe shows how classical traditions of representing the constellations were adapted to Muslim taste.



Manuscripts of the Quran were never illustrated with human figures, but in addition to the beautiful calligraphy used to transcribe God's word, many manuscripts are decorated with plant and geometric designs, as with this fabulous thirty-volume copy made for the Ilkhanid ruler Uljaytu at Hamadan in 1313.

known as the Ilkhanids, books were transformed into a major art form for royalty, particularly after the Mongol rulers converted to Islam at the very end of the thirteenth century. Books became physically much bigger, probably because larger sheets of finer and whiter paper were available, and these large surfaces provided more room for elaborate decoration. Sumptuous manuscripts of the Quran were produced. These were often presentation sets comprising thirty volumes, which would have been given to a mosque, shrine, or tomb complex, where one volume would have been read aloud each day during the holy month of Ramadan. The largest manuscript to survive (each page measures 72 x 50 centimeters) was copied at Baghdad and endowed to the

most unusual is the *Maqamat* (Assemblies), written by the Arab writer al-Hariri (1054–1122), who lived in Basra. The *Maqamat* contains the merchant al-Harith's witty account of the rogue Abu Zayd's fifty adventures throughout the Islamic lands. Linguistically inventive and punning in style, the work was immensely popular among the educated bourgeoisie of the Arab lands. The verbal pyrotechnics of the text did not lend themselves easily to illustration, but the demand for illustrated books was so strong that the work was repeatedly illustrated. Eleven illustrated copies produced before 1350 have survived, suggesting that there were once many more. The illustrations provide rare glimpses of daily life in medieval times, showing such scenes as markets and libraries.

While books such as the *Maqamat* would have been an appropriate possession for a bourgeois bibliophile, under the Mongol rulers of Iran who were

mausoleum of the sultan Muhammad Khudabanda Uljaytu (r. 1304–16) at Sultaniyya. It took eight years to copy; each page has three lines of majestic *muhaqqaq* script in gold outlined in black, alternating with two lines of a more fluid *thuluth-muhaqqaq* script in black outlined in gold—one of the most spectacular examples of monumental Qurānic calligraphy. Like the other thirty-volume sets, it has magnificent double frontispieces containing geometric designs.

Large manuscripts of other works were produced in the Ilkhanid period. Histories, for example, were extremely popular, probably because the foreign Mongol rulers were interested in fitting themselves into the long traditions of Islamic and Persian history. The Mongol sultan Mahmud Ghazan (r. 1295–1304) commissioned his vizier Rashid al-Din to write a history of the Mongols, and Ghazan's successor Uljaytu expanded the commission to make it a universal history, the first known of its kind. Rashid al-Din's *Jami al-tawarikh* (Compendium of chronicles) was a multivolume work, comprising histories of the Mongol and the non-Mongol Eurasian peoples, a genealogy of ruling houses, and a geography. To make his book more attractive and comprehensible, Rashid al-Din had it illustrated. His painters drew from the wide range of sources available in this cosmopolitan society. Sections on Chinese history, for example, were illustrated following Chinese models, and sections on biblical history followed Byzantine manuscript prototypes.

Perhaps most interesting and unusual in this multivolume work is the set of illustrations showing events from the Prophet's life. As there was no earlier tradition of representing Muhammad in Islamic art, and as Rashid al-Din's text



Islamic art transformed many of the subsidiary elements of pre-Islamic art into major themes. The mosaics on the walls of the Great Mosque of Damascus, erected by the Umayyad caliph al-Walid in the early eighth century, show a paradisaical riverside landscape of fantastic buildings separated by trees. In earlier times, such landscapes would have been peopled with figures.

provided only the most skeletal details of events in Muhammad's life, the painters had to look elsewhere for inspiration. One painting from the work shows Muhammad mounted on a horse leading the Muslims in battle against the Banu Qaynuqa, a Jewish tribe of Arabia. The Prophet is depicted against an ultramarine blue background and surrounded by white clouds and angels. Behind him are the Muslim forces, including his uncle Hamza, identifiable because he has a red beard and carries the Prophet's banner. The angels have bare heads with tight curls and wear long garments derived from the *chiton*, the basic garment worn by Greek men and women. In Mongol Iran, there seems to have been quite a bit of interest in depicting the Prophet, and several surviving manuscripts illustrate scenes from his life. These depictions of Muhammad are not religious images; they are historical illustrations not intended for devotional use. Somewhat unusual in the larger scheme of Islamic art, these images nevertheless show the continuing distinction between the religious and secular realms of Islamic art.

The Decorative Themes of Arabesque and Geometry

Because figural imagery was unnecessary in Islamic religious art, other themes of decoration became important. Several of these themes had been subsidiary elements in the arts of pre-Islamic times. In Byzantine art, for example, depictions of people had been set off, framed, or linked by geometric elements (shapes and patterns) and vegetal designs (that is, stylized fruits, flowers, and trees). In early Islamic times these subsidiary elements were transformed into major artistic themes. Thus, the mosaics decorating the Great Mosque of Damascus, erected by the Umayyad caliph al-Walid (r. 705–15) in the early eighth century, were clearly derived from the traditions of late antiquity. The panel that survives along the west wall of the mosque shows a continuous landscape of fantastic buildings separated by trees and set above a flowing river. In classical and Byzantine art these subjects would have been background elements for large figures, but in this panel the landscape itself is the subject, probably meant to depict the garden paradise promised to Muslims in the Quran and described as a place of lofty chambers beneath which rivers flow.

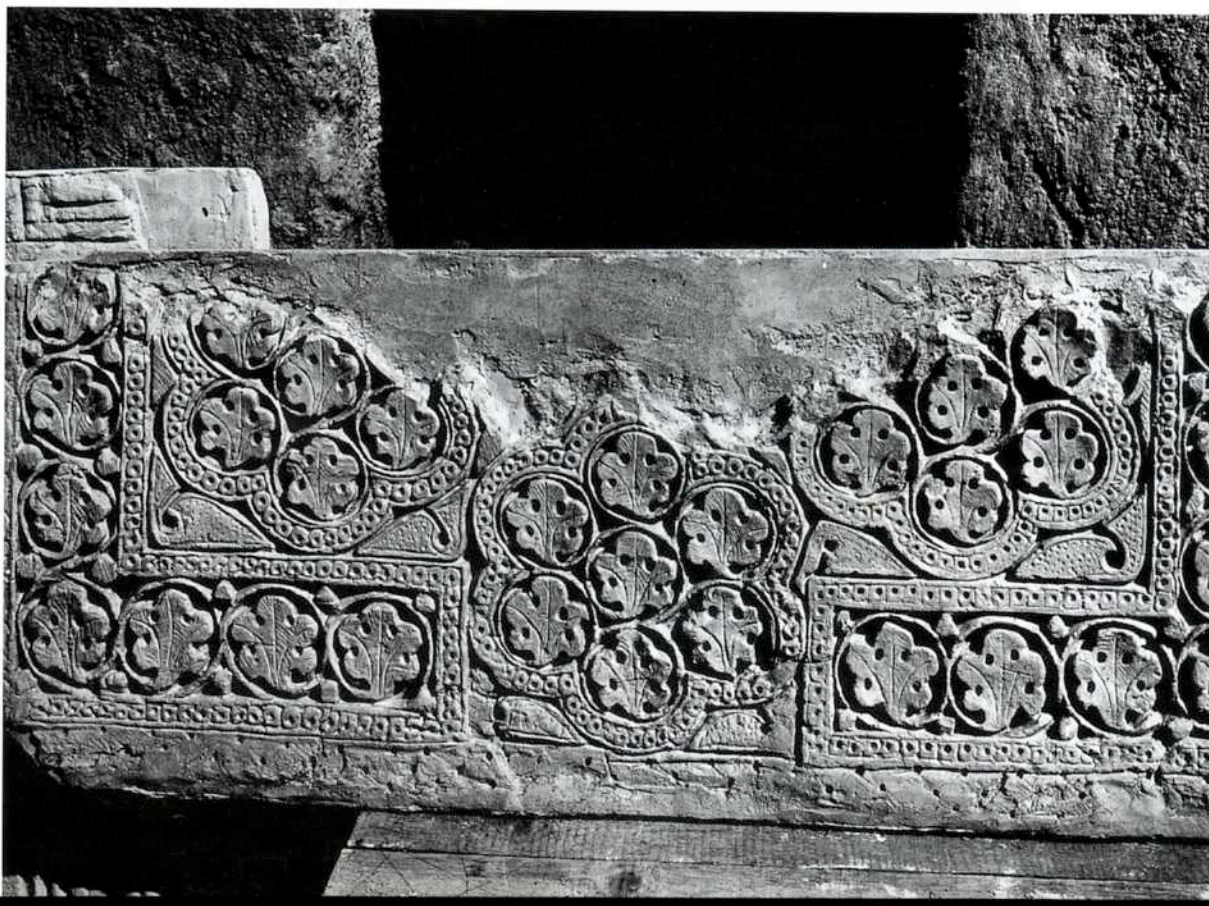
In the Damascus mosaics the trees and buildings are still readily recognizable, but with the growing reluctance to depict figures, such specific representations were replaced by more stylized, abstract, and geometric motifs. This style was already popular by the ninth century, evident in a small ceramic bowl from this period that is decorated with four colors of luster. The main motif shown in the center of the bowl is a plant with a central stalk and paired leaves. The basic

design is quite simple, but it has been elaborated with many different geometric patterns—spots, herringbones, blots, peacock's eyes, and so forth—that cover as much of the surface as possible and negate the organic quality of the main motif. In short, naturalistic elements, such as the flowers and leaves, were becoming increasingly stylized and subjected to the laws of geometry.

Little of the decoration has survived from the mosques in the Abbasid capital at Samarra, but one can get an idea of the abstract style of decoration that might have been used on the mosques there by looking at copies erected elsewhere. The mosque in Cairo, completed in 879 on the orders of the Abbasid governor Ahmad ibn Tulun (835–84), for example, is said to have been a close copy of a mosque in Samarra. In contrast to the earlier Damascus mosque, the decoration at the mosque of Ibn Tulun is restrained. A long wooden inscription runs around the building under the ceiling, and the undersides and borders of the heavy brick arches are embellished with stucco carved with simple elements to create patterns that combine geometric and floral elements. The decorated surface is totally filled so that there is no distinction between the background and the subject. This decoration, in which organic elements are subjected to the rules of geometry, can be extended infinitely in any direction.

A similar type of decoration was used in a small mosque at Balkh in northern Afghanistan, datable on stylistic grounds to the ninth century. Although badly ruined, the small square building has four massive cylindrical piers that once supported the nine covering domes. Most of the upper part was covered with

An original style of Islamic art evolved in the ninth century, when artists abstract organic forms into a geometric style, in which there is no distinction between subject and background. This style was first developed in ninth century Iraq, as exemplified in the plaster panels discovered at Samarra.





A more evolved stage in the abstraction of vegetal motifs can be seen in the plaster decorating the arches of the mosque of Ibn Tulun (879) in Cairo.

stucco, carved in geometrical and vegetal patterns with a distinctive slanted cut. The use of a similar style, documented from Cairo to eastern Iran in the ninth century, suggests that it must have had a common source, undoubtedly in the Abbasid capitals in Mesopotamia. Its widespread use shows how styles could be disseminated over wide areas during this period of centralized power.

This type of design, which is based on such natural forms as stems, tendrils, and leaves rearranged to form infinite geometric patterns, became a hallmark of Islamic art and architectural ornament from the tenth to the fifteenth centuries. To describe it, Europeans coined the term *arabesque*, first used in the fifteenth or sixteenth century, when Renaissance artists incorporated Islamic designs in book ornament and decorative bookbindings. Over the centuries the term has been applied to a wide variety of winding, twining vegetal decoration in art and meandering themes in music and dance,

but properly it applies only to Islamic art. The nineteenth-century Viennese art historian Alois Riegl laid out the principal features of the arabesque: The tendrils of its vegetation are heavily geometrized and do not branch off as in nature from a single continuous stem; rather, the tendrils grow unnaturally from one another. Furthermore, the arabesque has infinite correspondence, meaning that the design can be extended infinitely in any direction. The structure of the arabesque gives sufficient information so that the viewer can extend the design in his or her imagination.

Like the Samarra style of ornament, the arabesque was probably disseminated from Iraq, the capital province of the Islamic world in the tenth century, and quickly spread to all Islamic lands. An early stage of this distinctive and original development may be found in carved marble panels flanking the *mihrab* (the niche in the wall facing Mecca) of the Great Mosque of Córdoba, which was completed in 965. A central stem, itself patterned, has tendrils growing unnaturally from its base and tip; the stem provides the armature for a symmetrical interlacing of tendrils, leaves, and flowers that seems to press out against the con-

lines of the similarly patterned frame. In Islamic art the arabesque's popularity lasted until the fourteenth century, when it was slowly displaced by designs using the Chinese-inspired chrysanthemum, peony, and lotus motifs that became popular in Iran and by the fantastic naturalistic foliage of the *saz* style that became popular under the Ottomans. Even these designs retain some of the arabesque's geometric underpinnings, however.

The popularity of the arabesque was due no doubt to its adaptability, because it was appropriate to virtually all situations, from architecture to the illuminated pages that were added to decorate the beginning and end of fine manuscripts, particularly copies of the Quran. One small manuscript of the Quran, for example, has five sets of double pages, three at the beginning of the manuscript and two at the end. Some manuscripts contain tables with writing added on top of the geometric and floral ornament; others are purely geometric and vegetal. The designs are elaborately drawn in brown ink and enhanced with gold, blue, white, green, and red. The circles on the vertical axis are self-contained, but those on the horizontal axis can be extended infinitely; the design thus achieves an equilibrium between static and dynamic.

The new style of geometrized vegetal designs was widely popular. Here, in ruins of a small mosque erected at Balkh, Afghanistan, in the ninth century, artists carved the motifs into the wet plaster covering the piers and arches.

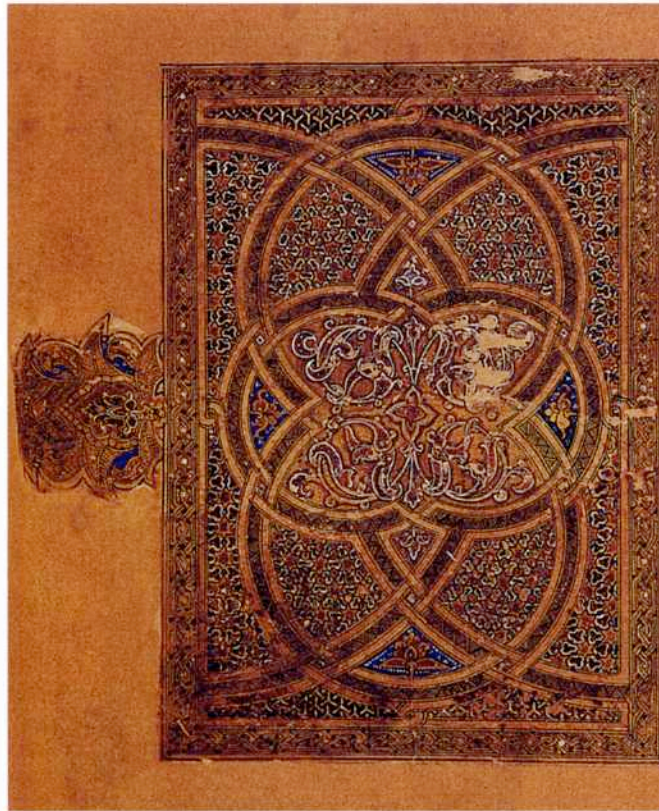




Arabesques, in which vegetal forms grow infinitely in all directions according to the laws of geometry, appeared in many media. In this detail of a carved marble panel, probably added to the Great Mosque of Córdoba in 965, the arabesque ornament betrays its early stage of development because it is still restrained by a frame.

These pages are the work of a master hand, and according to the colophon, this manuscript was completed by the scribe Ali ibn Hilal in Baghdad in 1000–1001. He can be identified as the famous calligrapher commonly known as Ibn al-Bawwab, who refined the “proportioned script”—developed a century earlier by the Arab calligrapher Ibn Muqla—in which letters were measured in terms of dots, circles, and semi-circles. The script used in this manuscript confirms Ibn al-Bawwab’s talents; the 280 folios are transcribed in a bold rounded hand of the type called *naskh*. The script is remarkable for its clarity and regularity, all the more impressive because there are no traces of blind-tooled lines of the kind used by later calligraphers to guide their hands. The manuscript also represents a technical innovation because it is one of the first surviving copies of the Quran transcribed on paper.

The double pages of illumination with geometric designs, often known as carpet pages, became increasingly splendid over the years. Some of the finest were produced under the Mamluks, the sequence of sultans who controlled Egypt and Syria from 1249 to 1517. These rulers and their intimates commissioned elaborate copies of the Quran as furnishings for the large charitable foundations that they ordered in Cairo and elsewhere to preserve their names and fortunes after their death. According to Islamic law, property endowed to institutions founded for charitable purposes was safe from seizure by the state. This type of charitable endowment is known as *waqf* (pl. *awqaf*) or, in North Africa, as *habus*. In unsettled times, when rulers fell like dominoes, such charitable foundations allowed families to pass on their fortunes safely, as the deed of endowment could specify that the founder or his descendants be appointed as trustee.



Arabesques were a major element used in decorating books, particularly manuscripts of the Quran. This page of illumination from the copy of the Quran transcribed by the noted calligrapher Ibn al-Bawwab in Baghdad in 1000–1001 is one of the earliest examples to survive.



Egyptian woodcarvers transformed the abstract curved forms of the beveled style into birds and other animals, as on this ninth- or tenth-century panel of Aleppo pine.

new minbars wished to make them as splendid as possible, but with the deforestation of the Mediterranean lands due to overharvesting in medieval times, wood was increasingly scarce. To make the most of this expensive material, new techniques of woodworking were exploited. One technique common from the eleventh century was marquetry, in which large panels were formed of angular interlacing strapwork radiating from central stars. To make these large and important pieces even fancier, artisans used different colors of exotic woods, which were sometimes inlaid with other precious materials, such as ivory and mother-of-pearl.

To furnish these charitable foundations, the Mamluks often ordered large manuscripts of the Quran, typically embellished with elaborate frontispieces decorated with designs of star polygons. The most famous is a manuscript commissioned by an amir of Sultan Shaban, Arghun Shah al-Ashrafi, who was put to death in 1376. Its rectangular frontispiece is divided into a square central field bordered by rectangular panels with a stylized kufic script. The central square contains a sixteen-pointed star set within a geometric trellis. This composition, which is often likened to a sun, seems to explode from the center but is actually closed and cannot be extended beyond the frame. The various frames are decorated with arabesque and floral arrangements, including many Chinese-inspired elements such as peonies and lotus flowers.

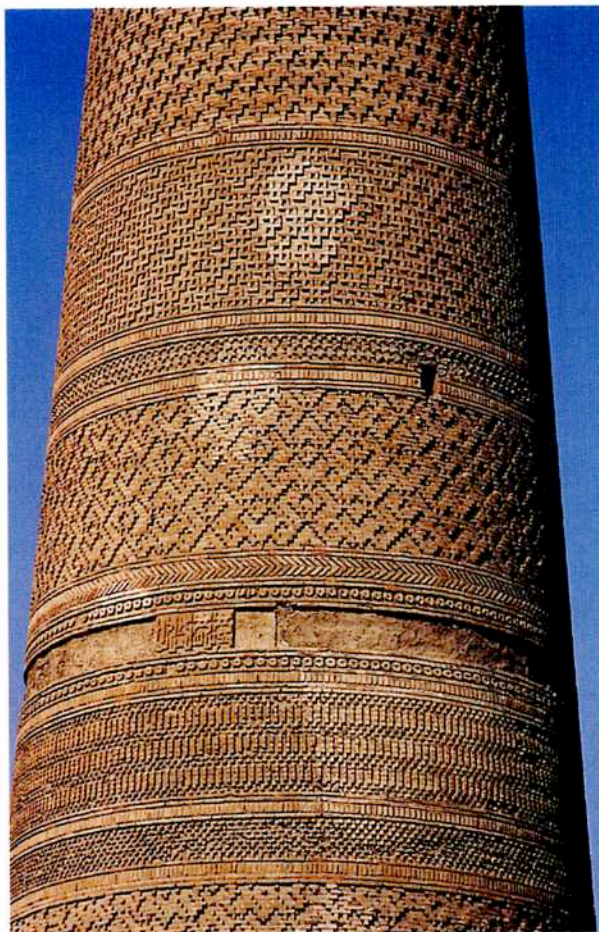
Complex geometric effects were also achieved in other media, including woodwork. Wood was often used for fine mosque furniture, such as Quran stands, lecterns, and bookcases, but the largest pieces were minbars or pulpits. The minbar was the place in the congregational mosque from which the weekly sermon was given during the Friday bidding prayer, so it became a potent symbol of political authority. Patrons who ordered

Aleppo (located in modern-day Syria) became a center for woodworking in the marquetry technique, and the finest and most famous piece produced there was the exquisite minbar that the Zangid ruler Nur al-Din ordered in 1168–69 for the Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem. The city was then in the hands of the Crusaders, and Nur al-Din ordered the minbar in anticipation of taking the city. It was installed in its intended place two decades later after his nephew, the Ayyubid sultan Salah al-Din (also known as Saladin), successfully conquered the city, in 1187. This minbar, which was the most famous example of this prolific school of woodworking and signed by no less than four craftsmen, was destroyed by arson in 1969.

Nur al-Din's minbar followed the typical triangular form. Along the hypotenuse was a narrow flight of steps leading to a platform at the top; both the steps and the platform were enclosed by railings, and the platform, evident in many other examples, was surmounted by a cupola. The major fields of decoration were the large triangular sides. On Nur al-Din's minbar they were decorated with eight-pointed stars, and the extensions of their sides were traced in a net of joinery. The polygonal interstices were filled with minutely detailed arabesques. The intricacy of the design was matched by the expense of the materials, for the minbar showed an extensive use of inlaid ivory, both for the outlines of the polygonal figures and for some of the smaller interstitial stars. The marquetry technique made the most of expensive materials, but the geometric design, in which the arabesques varied from polygon to polygon, added to the aesthetic effect by inviting contemplation of the design from near and far.

Geometric designs were also popular methods of decorating buildings in the Islamic lands. In Iran and much of the eastern Islamic lands there was no suitable stone for construction, so the typical building material was brick. Mud brick had the advantage of being cheap and remarkably serviceable in areas with little rain, and its fragile surface could be protected by plaster or stucco revetments, which could be carved or painted to enliven the inherent drabness of the material. In the ninth century when the Abbasids needed to decorate the enormous palaces and other mud brick structures in their sprawling new capital of Samarra, they used molded panels with geometric designs that could be quickly executed in stucco.

Baked brick was more expensive because it required scarce supplies of fuel for firing. It had the advantage that it was much more durable, however, and where affordable, its durability was preferred, particularly in regions with greater precipitation and a more extreme climate, such as the Iranian plateau. Although baked brick could also be covered with plaster, particularly on interiors, it was usually left exposed on exteriors. With the adoption of fine quality baked brick, builders in Iran and adjacent areas quickly turned the material of construction into the material of decoration. By setting the bricks in patterns, they could



Builders in the Seljuk period exploited the decorative possibilities of light and shade on brick, particularly for the tall cylindrical towers known as minarets. Horizontal bands with different brick designs decorate the shaft of the Kalyan ("tall") minaret finished in 1127 in Bukhara, Uzbekistan.

enliven the wall surface. These patterns were particularly effective in a climate in which bright sun often rakes over the brick walls, and projecting and receding bricks could create patterns of light and shade.

One of the earliest examples of this decorative use of brickwork is the tomb of the Samanids in Bukhara. Constructed and decorated with baked brick, the tomb is a small cube with sloped walls supporting a central dome and little cupolas at the corners. Despite the simple forms, the interior and exterior are elaborately decorated with patterns worked in the cream-colored brick. The quality and harmony of construction and decoration show that this building, although the first of its type to have survived, could not have been the first to have been built. By the early tenth century there must have been a long tradition of building ornate brick structures in the greater Iranian world.

This so-called naked style of brickwork became a hallmark of medieval architecture in the region. Builders exploited the decorative possibilities of brick patterning, particularly for the tall cylindrical towers known as minarets.

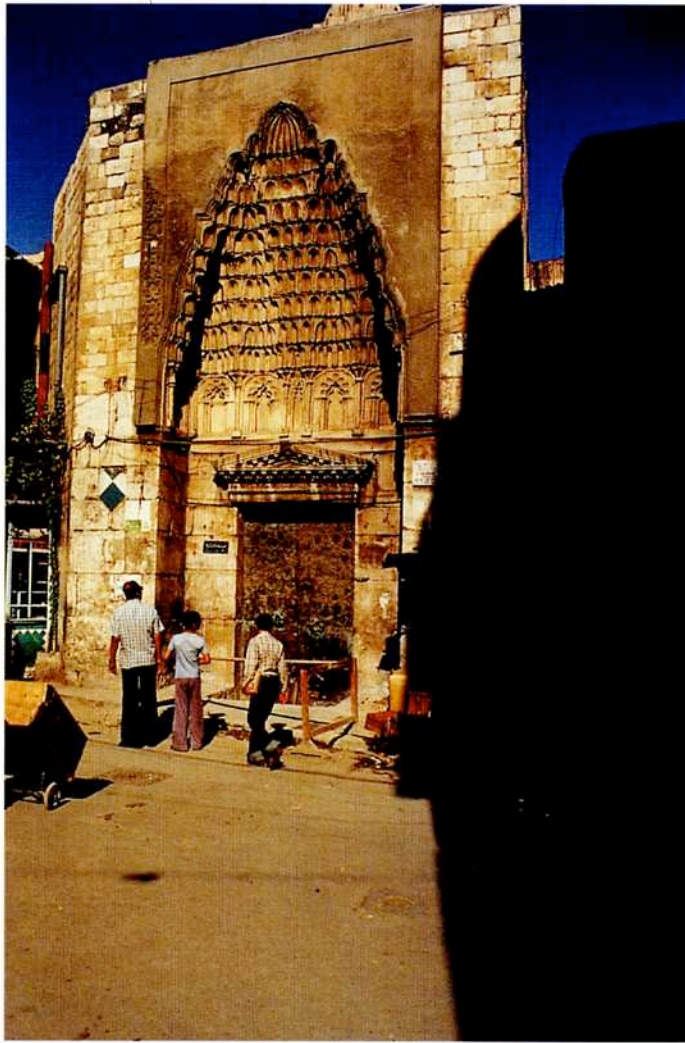
These towers, often attached to mosques and used as the place from which the muezzin gives the call to prayer (*adhan*), are often considered to be hallmarks of Islamic architecture. Although a common feature of Islamic religious architecture, the minaret is neither a necessary or ubiquitous one. Minarets were apparently not used under the Umayyads, and only under the Abbasids was the idea of a single massive tower located in or beyond the middle of the wall opposite the mihrab disseminated throughout the Islamic lands, perhaps as a sign of caliphal authority.

By the end of the twelfth century the minaret, in the form of a slender free-standing shaft, had become the universal symbol of Islam from the Atlantic to

the Indian Oceans. Minarets were often added to earlier mosques. They were less expensive than building a new mosque and were gratifyingly visible both from afar, where they indicated the presence of a town—or from nearby, where they indicated the location of the mosque. They served to advertise the presence of Islam at the same time that they demonstrated the piety of the founder.

More than sixty towers dating from the medieval period still stand in Iran, Central Asia, and Afghanistan, either attached to mosques or isolated and freestanding. This large number attests to the explosion in popularity of this form, and the assurance of their decoration attests to the skill of their builders and the esteem in which these tall towers were held. Their shafts are typically decorated in broad bands of geometric brick decoration, often separated by guard bands and inscriptions. Builders exploited the decorative possibilities of the geometric patterns, deliberately widening the bands or setting the bricks in deeper relief along the height of the tall shaft.

Another form of architectural decoration that developed at this time is known as *muqarnas*. Sometimes likened to stalactites, *muqarnas* consists of tiers of niche-like elements that project out from the row below. Apparently developed in the late tenth century, *muqarnas* was first applied to supporting elements inside domes, such as squinches or arches over the corners, and to dividing elements between different



Muqarnas, tiers of superimposed niche-like elements, is a unique contribution of Islamic architects to the decoration of their buildings. *Muqarnas* half-vaults were often above important doorways, as on the entrance to the hospital Nur al-Din, founded in Damascus in 1145.

parts of buildings, such as cornices on tombs or minarets. By the eleventh century muqarnas elements were used to cover the entire inner surface of vaults. Although the earliest muqarnas may have had a structural role, they increasingly became a purely decorative element. In Iran and the eastern Islamic lands decorative muqarnas vaults were made of plaster and suspended by wooden beams from the brick vault above. In the Mediterranean region, where stone is the prevalent medium of construction, muqarnas vaults, set over the portals of important buildings, were often laboriously carved in stone. Like writing, muqarnas was adopted by builders from Spain to Central Asia and beyond, so that it became the most distinctive decorative feature of Islamic architecture. Unlike other decorative motifs, muqarnas was never applied to any medium other than architecture and such architectural fittings as minbars.

The repeated module typical of brick construction made geometric ornament appropriate decoration; such ornament was equally appropriate to textiles, where the crossing of warp and weft threads also generates a geometric grid. Nowhere is this more apparent than in knotted carpets, where a weaver could easily create geometric designs by tying knots of different colors onto the warp threads. Throughout history, weavers worked to combine more-or-less stylized floral and animal motifs with the geometric grids. Knotted carpets have been produced for millennia in the Near East and Central Asia. The oldest surviving example, perhaps dating to the fifth century B.C.E., is the carpet that was discovered in a frozen tomb at Pazyryk in Siberia. Other fragments perhaps dating from the ninth or tenth century have been discovered in Egypt. The oldest carpets to have survived in significant quantities, however, were made in Anatolia in the early fourteenth century, using a fairly limited range of strong colors, such as red, yellow, blue, brown, and white. Some of the carpets have designs of repeated geometric motifs, others have extremely stylized representations of animals, but all have borders of geometrical motifs or stylized letter forms.

The Exuberant Use of Color

The epigraphic and geometric designs commonly used in Islamic art were often enhanced by color, and the exuberant use of color is another hallmark of Islamic art. The Arabic language itself has a particularly rich chromatic vocabulary, and in it concepts can easily be associated through similarities in morphology. The Arabic root *kh-d-r*, for example, gives rise to *khudra* (greenness), *akhdar* (green), *khudara* (greens or herbs), and *al-khadra* (the verdant, or the heavens). Blue, the color of the sky in the western tradition, is often conflated with green in the Islamic lands, where the spectrum is traditionally divided into yellow, red, and green. Tonality was less important than luminosity and saturation, probably



Geometric designs were especially easy to execute in the traditional techniques of woven textiles and knotted carpets. One of the earliest carpets to survive, probably from the fourteenth century, shows four stylized quadrupeds.

because of the sun-drenched environment in much of the region.

In the early Islamic period various philosophical schools elaborated the Aristotelian theory of color, and this interest in color was taken up by mystics, who saw parallels between the phenomenon of colors and the inner vision of the divine. The symbolic use of color runs throughout much Islamic literature. The

great Persian poet Nezami (ca. 1141–1203 or 1217), for example, structured his classic poem, *Haft paykar* (Seven portraits) around the seven colors (*haft rang*) traditional in Persian thought (red, yellow, green, and blue complemented by black, white, and sandalwood). In this poem the ideal ruler, exemplified by the Sasanian king Bahram Gur, visits seven princesses, each housed in a pavilion of a different color; the princesses recount seven stories, which can be interpreted as the seven stations of human life, the seven aspects of human destiny, or the seven stages along the mystical way. The seven colored pavilions of the *Haft paykar* became favorite subjects for book illustration in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Iran.

One of the most famous manuscripts of Nezami's poem has an unusually long and witty colophon that recounts the manuscript's peregrinations and shows how important these illustrated manuscripts were to rulers of the time. The Timurid prince Abul-Qasim Babur, ruler of Herat (in northwestern Afghanistan) from 1449 to 1457, commissioned the calligrapher Azhar to transcribe the manuscript, but it was unfinished at the prince's death. After Jahan Shah (r. 1438–67), the Qaraqoyunlu ruler of Azerbaijan, sacked Herat a year later, the manuscript passed to Jahan Shah's son Pir Budak. It then went to the Aqqoyunlu ruler Khalil Sultan (r. 1478), who commissioned the calligrapher Abd al-Rahman al-Khwarazmi (known as Anisi) to finish copying the text and two artists, Shaykhi and Darvish Muhammad, to illustrate it. Still unfinished at Khalil Sultan's death in 1478, the manuscript passed to his brother Yaqub (r. 1478–90). He also died before the book was finished, and the manuscript ultimately passed to the Safavid shah Ismail I (r. 1501–24), founder of the Safavid dynasty, under whose patronage the last of the nineteen illustrations were completed.

The painting *Bahram Gur in the Green Pavilion* exemplifies the lush style of manuscript illustration practiced at the Aqqoyunlu court. It was probably added by the artist Shaykhi when the manuscript was in the possession of the sultan Yaqub. It shows the Sasanian monarch reclining with his writing table and books beside him, listening to one of his ladies read a poem while another massages his feet. The reclining figure may actually represent the young Aqqoyunlu prince, who would have been less than twenty years old at the time. The nominal subject, the prince in the pavilion, however, is engulfed in a riot of fantastic vegetation. Nature bursts from the constraint of the frame, as lollipop trees with imbricated leaves sprout among rocks concealing human and animal faces. The colors are particularly vivid, with acid greens set against rosy reds and brilliant blues.

This flamboyant color typical of the Aqqoyunlu court style can be contrasted with the carefully modulated style that is associated with contemporary Herat and exemplified in the work of Bihzad (ca. 1450–1535) the most famous Persian painter, and the one whose name is attached (rightly or wrongly) to more paintings than any other artist. Bihzad's masterpiece is generally acknowledged to be

(Right) Color was used symbolically and extravagantly in much of Islamic art and culture. The Persian poet Nezami structured his classic poem, *Haft paykar*, around the seven colors traditional in Persian thought. In a fine manuscript of the poem prepared for several fifteenth-century princes, the painter Shaykhi used brilliant color to depict *Bahram Gur in the Green Pavilion*.



مخون دعا کرد بر سپهر پیر بلند
برکش داد زمین چشمت نازد

گورمت تقدیر ملکیت زانجا
نزد عالم بود گزشت قحاج



Medieval potters revolutionized the industry by developing a technique to paint on the surface of a ceramic with designs that did not run into the glaze. A black heron struts across the turquoise-glazed surface of this twelfth-century Syrian bowl.

The Seduction of Yusuf. The painting illustrates a manuscript of the Persian poet Sadi (ca. 1213–92) entitled *Bustan* (Orchard), transcribed in 1488 for the library of the Timurid ruler Sultan Husayn Mirza by the most renowned calligrapher of the age, Sultan Ali Mashhadi. Sadi's text, written on uncolored paper in cloud bands at the top, middle, and bottom of the illustration, mentions the seduction of Yusuf, the biblical Joseph, by Potiphar's wife, known in Islamic tradition as Zulaykha, but nothing in the text requires Bihzad's elaborate architectural setting. Instead, this setting is described in the mystical poem, *Yusuf and Zulaykha*, written by the Timurid poet Jami (1414–92) five years before the Sadi manuscript was transcribed. Four lines from Jami's poem are inscribed in white on blue around the arch in the center of the painting.

According to Jami, Zulaykha built a palace with seven splendid rooms that were decorated with erotic paintings of herself with Yusuf. She led the unwary Yusuf from one room to the next, locking the doors behind her until they reached the innermost chamber. There, she threw herself at Yusuf, but he fled from her grasp through the seven locked doors, which miraculously opened before him.

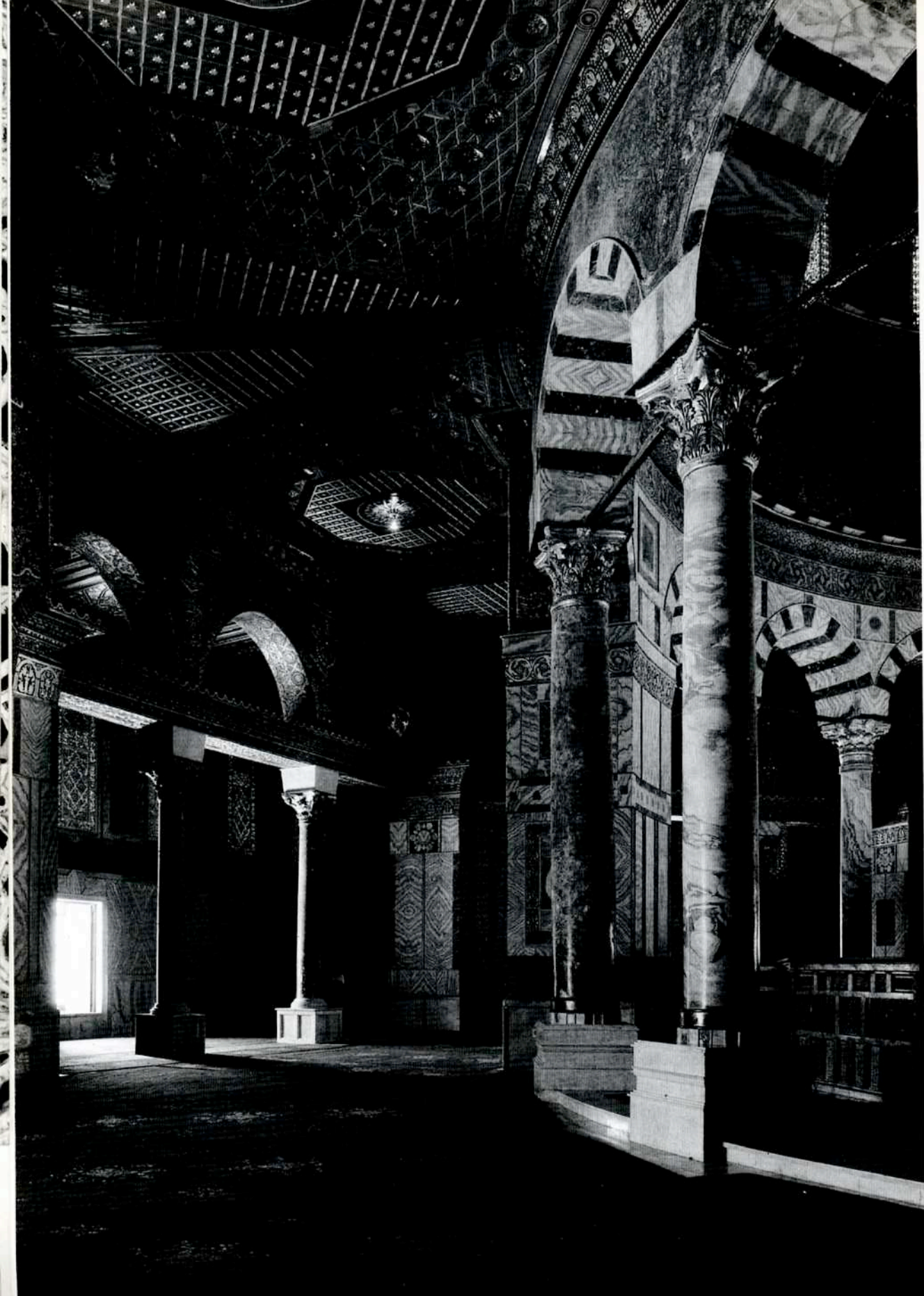
Just as Jami's text is an allegory of the soul's search for divine love and beauty, Bihzad's image invites mystical contemplation. The splendid palace stands for the material world, the seven rooms represent the seven climes, and Yusuf's beauty is a metaphor for God's. As there was no witness, Yusuf could have yielded to Zulaykha's passion, but he realized that God was all-seeing and all-knowing. The seven locked doors, which form the matrix of the composition, can be opened only by God. This brilliant image transcends the literal requirements of the text and evokes the mystical themes that were prominent in contemporary literature and society. Bihzad was obviously proud of his creation, because he signed it on the architectural panel over the window in the room on the upper left and dated it 893 (corresponding to 1488) in the final blue-and-white cartouche on the arch following the verses from Jami's poem.



Metalworkers exploited the chromatic possibilities of metals by inlaying copper, silver, gold, and a black bituminous substance into brass and bronze. The master metalworker Muhammad ibn al-Zayn inlaid this large basin with an extraordinary range of figural scenes, many depicting life in the Mamluk lands around 1300.

Bihzad's masterpiece shows a sophisticated but subdued use of color, in which blues and greens predominate but are tempered by complementary warm colors, especially a bright orange. The carefully modulated use of color leads the eye through the complex architectural setting to focus on Zulaykha, striking in her flamboyant orange robe, a stark contrast to Yusuf, who is dressed in cool green. The colors are jewel-like; the fine quality pigments were made from such expensive minerals as lapis lazuli and gold, which were carefully ground, mixed with binder, and applied with fine brushes. The colors appear all the more brilliant in the dream-like world of Persian book painting, as they were unmodulated by cast shadows or atmospheric perspective, two pictorial techniques that were only introduced into Persian painting from European art in the seventeenth century.

The use of brilliant color was not limited to fancy books made in the Persian world in the later centuries. The spirited use of color is found in most Islamic art from an early date. Potters in the Islamic world hid drab earthenwares under cloaks of brightly colored slips and glazes. The most significant invention for the future history of ceramics in the Islamic lands, as well as in China and Europe, was underglaze decoration, in which a fine and white ceramic body provided an ideal surface for painting in colored metallic oxides. This painted surface was



then covered by a transparent alkaline glaze, which protected the painted surface but, unlike lead glazes, did not cause the pigments to run together during firing.

Similarly, one of the most important contributions of medieval Islamic metalworkers was the development of the inlay technique, in which the monochrome object, usually made from brass or bronze, was enlivened with inlays in gold, silver, and copper, as on the Bobrinski Bucket. Other objects, such as magnificent basins to be used for handwashing before and after eating, were inlaid with inscriptions and figural scenes worked in silver and a black bituminous substance.

Color is also one of the most distinctive features of Islamic architecture, for glittering azure domes and dazzling expanses of multicolored tile decorate many of the best known buildings. The first great monument of Islamic architecture, the Dome of the Rock, originally had polychrome and gold glass mosaic covering both inside and outside. The coloristic effects of the interior mosaics were enhanced by a brilliantly painted and gilded ceiling and a lavish use of marble. The dadoes (lower walls) were decorated with panels of quartered marble, sliced and arranged so that the natural grain would form symmetrical patterns. In some cases vegetal motifs were inlaid in black mastic to contrast against the white marble. The same color combination was extended to the arches, which were constructed of alternating black and white voussoirs (the wedge-shaped pieces forming the arch).

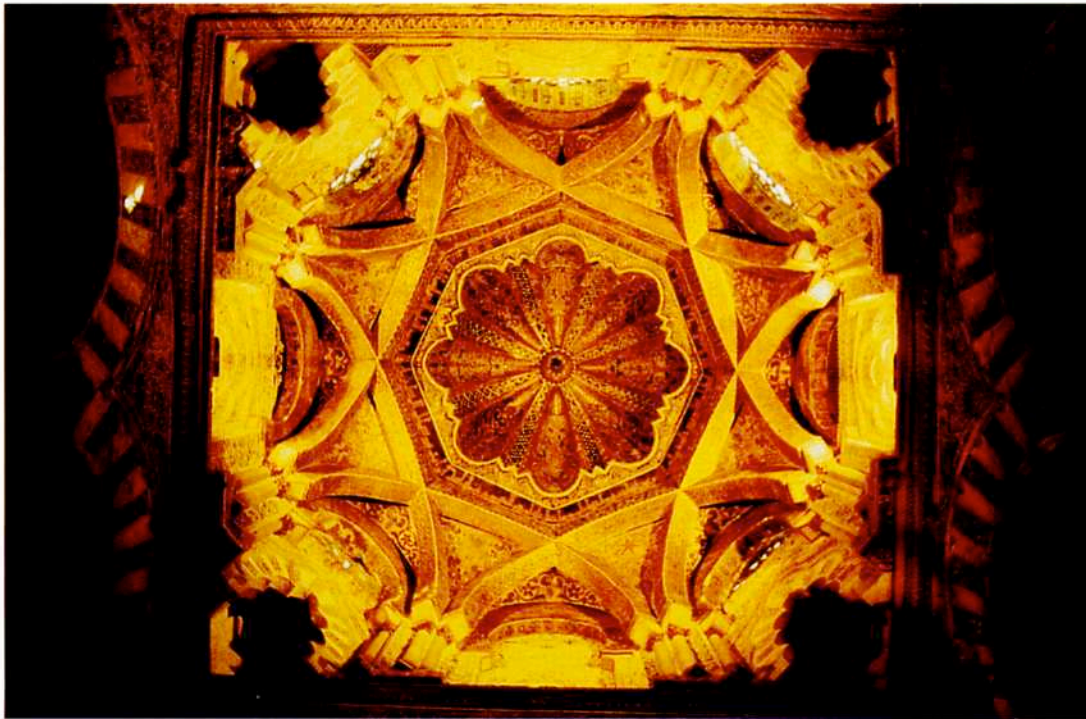
This brightly colored style typical of Umayyad architecture set a precedent that was often repeated by later patrons. But just as the fragile mosaics on the exterior of the Dome of the Rock suffered from weathering, the coloristic effects on many other buildings, much like those on Greek temples and Romanesque churches, have often faded under a haze of dust and smog to uniform earth tones, giving an erroneous impression that only later buildings were brightly colored. In other cases, as under the puritanical Almohad dynasty, which ruled in Spain and Morocco in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, rather plain exteriors and whitewashed interiors were preferred for mosques.

But many buildings were brightly colored. In the tenth century, for example, when one of the Umayyad caliphs of Spain decided to enlarge the congregational mosque at his capital of Córdoba, his builders attempted to imitate many of the coloristic effects of Umayyad architecture in Syria, although they knew these only at great remove. The original Córdoba mosque, completed in 786–87, had used an inventive system of double-tiered columns and arches to support the wooden roof, probably because only short, stubby columns were available from abandoned Visigothic buildings in the region. By stacking two short columns on top of each other, the mosque's designers could achieve the necessary height, although they needed to add intermediate arches to stiffen the inherently unstable construction. They unified this motley collection of columns and capitals

(Left) The coloristic effects of the mosaics decorating the interior of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem were enhanced by a brilliantly painted and gilded ceiling and lavish use of marble paneling.

with a striking design for the voussoirs of the arches, which were alternately of white stone and courses of red brick.

The striped effect of the two-tiered arches was maintained by later builders, who enlarged the mosque in the ninth and tenth centuries. These renovations culminated when the Umayyad caliph al-Hakam II (r. 961–76) expanded the prayer hall and added a dome over the center entrance to the addition and domes in front and on either side of the new mihrab. The screened area, which was connected to the palace by a passageway in the wall of the mosque facing Mecca, was a *maqṣura*, an enclosure for the ruler, meant not to protect the caliph from harm (as the early *maqṣuras* were said to function) but to emphasize the great pomp and ceremony with which the Umayyad caliph surrounded himself. These areas were distinguished by elaborate screens of intersecting arches and richly colored revetments in glass mosaic; the glass mosaics were clearly meant to evoke the great mosaics that decorated the Umayyad buildings of Syria. According to local Arabic histories, there were no laborers in Spain capable of executing these mosaics, so the caliph sent an ambassador to the Byzantine emperor in Constantinople, requesting him to send a workman to decorate the mosque. The



The area immediately in front of the mihrab added to the Great Mosque of Córdoba in 965 was elaborately decorated with intersecting arches supporting mosaic-covered vaults, clearly meant to recall the mosaic-covered buildings of Umayyad Syria.

emperor complied, and the ambassador returned with a master craftsman and sufficient mosaic cubes to complete the job.

Although the difficult technique of glass mosaic was infrequently repeated in later centuries and usually with some reference to the Umayyads of Syria, multicolor revetment in glazed ceramic tile became a hallmark of later Islamic architecture from Spain and North Africa to the borders of India. By the late eleventh century builders in the eastern Islamic lands had reached the ultimate exploitation of carved- and patterned-brick decoration and were ready to experiment with glazed revetment. They began by incorporating small pieces of cut tile, mainly colored a light (turquoise) blue, which was easy to make from the readily available copper deposits in Iran. Soon they expanded the surfaces covered, and by the fourteenth century the palette was extended to include dark blue (colored with cobalt), black (manganese), and white as well as green and ocher. Including the buff natural color of the brick surface, this brought the total number of colors to seven, the number of colors in the traditional Persian palette. With the expanded range of color came the elaboration of design, and geometric patterns gave way to naturalistic and floral designs, made by cutting small pieces from monochrome tiles and fitting the irregular pieces together.

The technique reached its apogee in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, alongside the development of Persian book painting. Some of the finest tile panels were prepared for the gargantuan palace that the Turkic conqueror Timur erected in his hometown of Shahr-i Sabz, but only fragments remain to attest to its original splendor. More can be seen at the Blue Mosque, built by the Qaraqoyunlu in their capital at Tabriz (in northwestern Iran) around 1465. The mosque takes its name from its superb tile revetment, which was never surpassed in later monuments.

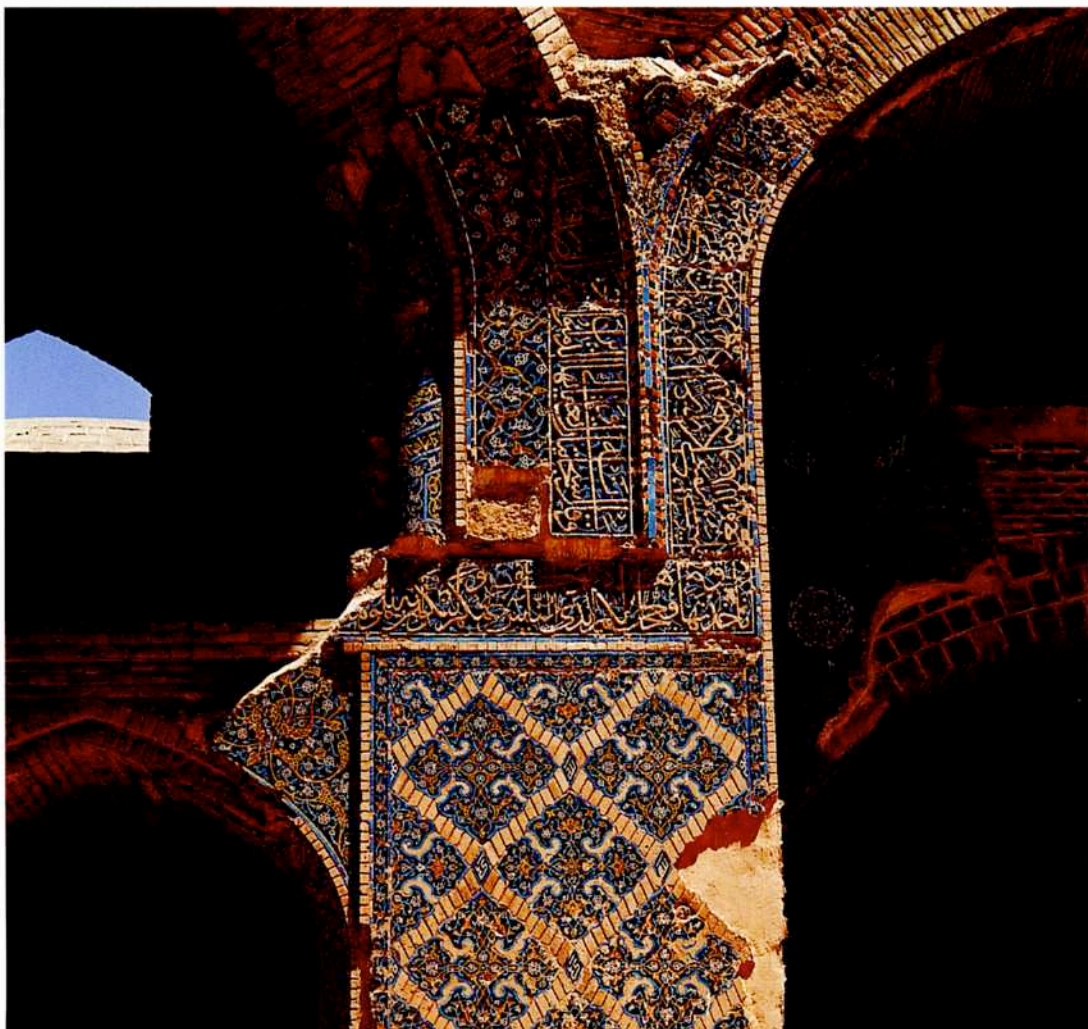
Although in ruins, the Blue Mosque displays an unusual variety of tile decoration of magnificent quality. Seven-color tile mosaic covers the exterior and much of the interior walls above a marble dado. Particularly striking are the fluid arabesque motifs and the inscriptions, often set out in white or gold against a deep blue or green background. The building is a virtual catalog of tile techniques. Hexagonal dark blue glazed tiles covered the upper surfaces and vaults of the main chamber, and purple tiles overpainted in gold were set in the sanctuary. Luster tiles were set at the base of the cable molding on the entrance portal, one of the very rare instances of this technique in the fifteenth century. Highly embossed molded fragments of underglaze-painted tile remain on the corner buttresses.

Tile mosaic is a laborious and expensive technique because it is time-consuming to cut and fit the tiny pieces together. In the fifteenth century it was gradually replaced by a cheaper technique in which large tiles of uniform shape

were painted with patterns worked in different colors of glaze. To prevent the glazes from running together during firing, they were separated by a greasy substance mixed with manganese, which left a matte black line between the colors after firing. The technique, known in Spanish as *cuerda seca*, is much faster than tile mosaic, but the colors are not as brilliant because they are all fired at one temperature.

Tile mosaic was also popular at the other end of the Islamic lands in the Maghreb or Islamic west, where it is known locally as *zellij*. The technique may have developed even earlier there, but it flowered during the fourteenth century under the Marinids in Morocco. In the eastern Islamic lands the predominant color was blue, whereas in the west the main colors were green and tan, usually on a white background. Lower walls were covered by tiled dadoes, which were normally surmounted by epigraphic friezes with the black letters formed by scraping through the glaze to the clay body. Upper walls were covered with elaborately carved stucco decoration and capped by wooden friezes, consoles, and cornices. Floors, unlike those in the east, often had glazed highlights or were completely covered in tiles. Even the piers and columns in courtyards were revetted in tile. The overall effect of such interiors is glistening, and the tripartite com-

Builders enveloped their structures with glittering webs of glazed ceramic tile. Perhaps the finest example is the ruined Blue Mosque in Tabriz (ca. 1465), decorated with exquisite tile mosaic in seven colors.



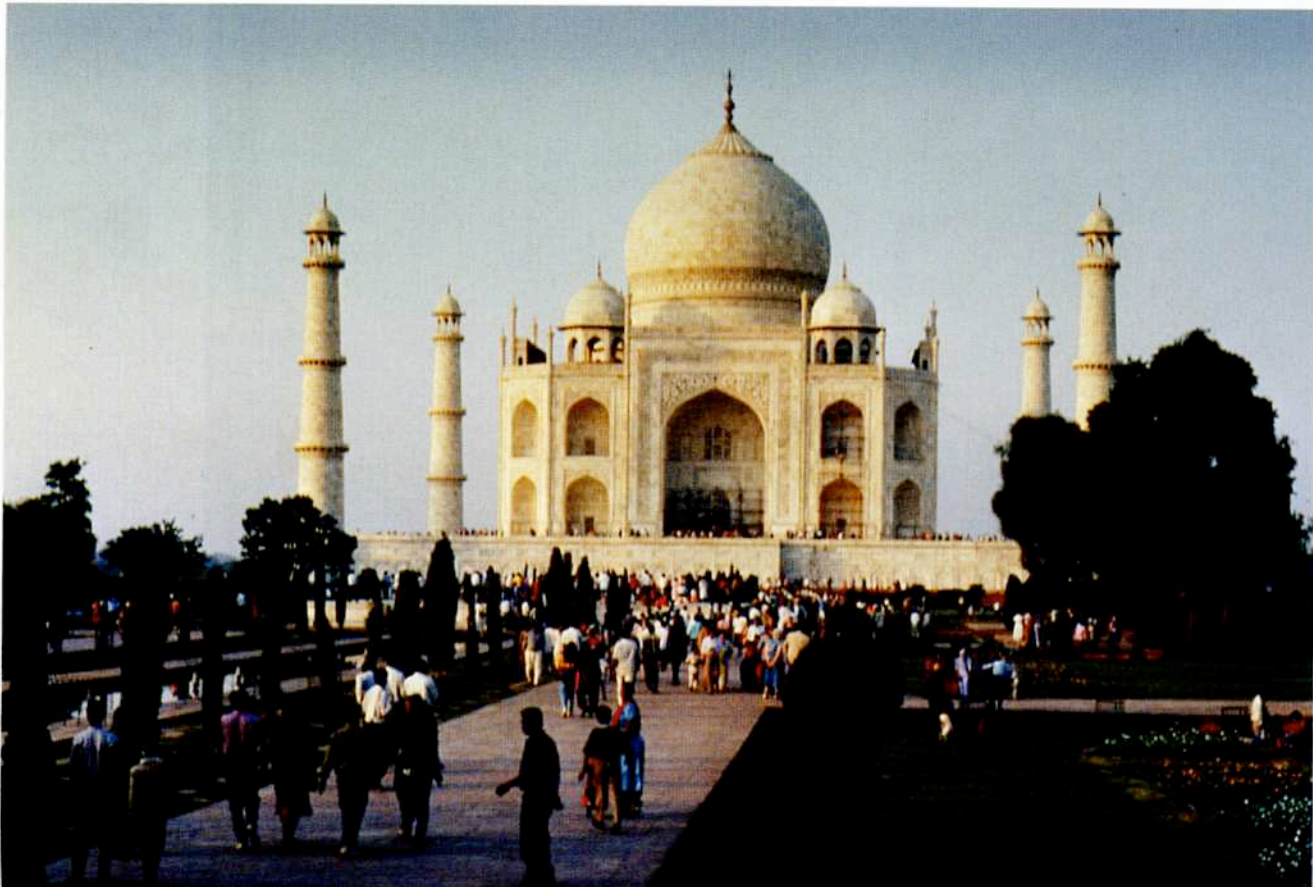


Builders in the western Islamic lands decorated interiors with tilework combined with carved plaster and wood, as in the courtyard of the Attarin Madrasa (1325) in Fez, Morocco.

bination of tiled dado, stucco wall, and wooden superstructure remained standard in the region for centuries.

Perhaps the most refined coloristic effects were achieved in the buildings erected under the Mughals in the Indian subcontinent. Polished white marble that reflected light was played off against matte red sandstone that absorbed it. The effect was heightened by the use of *pietra dura*, multicolored inlay in such hard and rare stones as lapis, onyx, jasper, topaz, carnelian, and agate, which emphasized the jewel-like qualities of the building. The small tomb of Itimad al-Dawla, the minister of finance to the emperor of India, Jahangir (r. 1605–27), is like a jewelbox. Constructed by Nur Jahan, who was Itimad al-Dawla's daughter (and Jahangir's wife) after her father's death in 1622, the small tomb is decorated with traditional geometric designs and arabesques, combined with representational motifs of wine cups, vases with flowers, and cypress trees, visual allusions to the Quran's descriptions of Paradise. The intricate inlay in yellow, brown, gray, and black contrasting with the smooth white marble prefigures the later phase of Mughal decoration in which white marble was garnished with gold and precious stones. Elsewhere, particularly in more public settings, the repertory of designs and colors was somewhat narrower. For example, at the Taj Mahal, the tomb constructed by Jahangir's son, Shah Jahan, this decoration is restrained and used only for slender arabesques and extensive inscriptions done in black that contrast with the polished white marble.

The Taj Mahal, the enormous tomb built by the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan for his wife, shows a sophisticated sense of color. The polished white marble used for the tomb reflects light and contrasts with the red sandstone used for the outlying buildings and with the black inlaid decoration of arabesques and inscriptions.



Perhaps the most sumptuous of the Mughal private quarters were at the Red Fort in Delhi. They were part of Shahjahanabad, the quarter of the city laid out under the emperor Shah Jahan's auspices from 1639 to 1648. These palaces, now called the Rang Mahal (Painted Palace) and the Divan-i Khass (Private Audience Hall), are set behind the main audience hall and overlook the river. They are decorated with lavishly carved marble, paintings, and pietra dura inlay in gold and precious stones.

The extravagant use of color in Islamic art and architecture has been explained in several ways. It is often thought to be a reaction to the dull and monochromatic landscape in much of the traditional heartland of Islam, but this explanation is simplistic. Colors also had a wide range of symbolic associations in the Islamic lands, but these were often

contradictory and meaningful only in specific geographical or chronological contexts. Thus, black was often associated with the mysterious Black Stone embedded in the Kaaba at Mecca toward which all Muslims pray, but black was also associated with vengeance and revolt, as in the black flag that became the standard of the Abbasid dynasty. In the Maghreb black could be the accursed color of hell, and in order to avoid pronouncing the name, the opposite color (white) was substituted. Thus, to this day coal is sometimes known in North Africa as *al-abyad* ("the white [thing]").

White generally conveyed a sense of brightness, loyalty, royalty, and death, much the same values as in many other cultures. Two seamless white lengths of cloth made up the garment worn by all male pilgrims to Mecca, and these were often saved for use as a burial shroud. White was also the color associated with the Fatimid caliphs, the opponents of the Abbasids. Blue had prophylactic connotations, and many people wore blue, particularly beads, to ward off the evil eye. The magical power of blue made it the dispenser of evil fortune and at the same time a defense against it. Green, the color of plants, was thought to bring equilibrium, good luck, fertility, and youth. Green was the color of the Prophet Muhammad's flag and the cloak of his son-in-law and successor Ali. In later times



Mughal architects achieved some of the most refined coloristic effects by inlaying white marble with semiprecious colored stones, as on a panel from the Red Fort in Delhi, built by Shah Jahan (r. 1628–57).

green turbans were worn by descendants of the Prophet, and the heavenly throne is said to have been carved from a green jewel. Tiled domes and roofs were most often green or blue, but the auspicious or heavenly associations may have been outweighed by practical considerations, because copper oxide, a ubiquitous coloring agent, produces a green color in a lead glaze and a turquoise or blue color in an alkaline one.

The Notion of Willful Ambiguity

The changing and variable interpretations given to any particular color at any particular time or place exemplify a final characteristic of much Islamic art: its willful ambiguity. Because there is no clergy in Islam to prescribe or maintain any given meaning for any particular symbol or theme, there was much more latitude for the viewer to interpret it at will. One example is found on a lusterware dish discovered in the course of the 1911–13 German excavations at the Abbasid capital of Samarra. The design is caught somewhere between abstraction and representation. At first glance the design seems to be abstract, but on closer observation it can be interpreted as a plant or a bird. A circle in the middle of the dish is transformed into the body of a bird by adding palmettes at the sides to form wings and at the top to form the bird's head holding another sprig in its mouth.

Similar ambiguity marks much of the stucco decoration of the contemporary Abbasid palaces at Samarra. Scholars have distinguished three styles of stucco carving there. The first style is a carved technique derived from the geometricized vegetal decoration used in the Umayyad period. The second style is characterized by the use of crosshatching for details. Subjects are somewhat simplified but are still distinguished from the background. The third style, known also as the beveled style, is a molded technique suitable for covering large wall surfaces. It uses a distinctive slanted cut which allows the plaster to be released easily from the mold. Decoration in the beveled style is distinguished by rhythmic and symmetrical repetitions of curved lines ending in spirals that form abstract patterns in which the traditional distinction between subject and background has been dissolved. The beveled style was undoubtedly developed for stucco, but was soon applied to wood and other carved media such as rock crystal, not only in the major cities of Iraq but also in provincial centers.

The transfer of techniques and designs from one medium to another is another hallmark of Islamic art. By contrast, in pre-Islamic times specific designs had been used for different materials—one design was appropriate for textiles, another for metalwares, still others for architectural decoration or for glassware. This division

does not hold in Islamic art, where a textile design might reappear on metalware or ceramics and an architectural motif on glassware, despite the enormous differences in scale. For example, the same design of roundels with pearl borders enclosing mythical lion-headed birds, called *simurghs*, is known on textiles, metalwares, and wall paintings made in early Islamic times over a wide region from Central Asia to the Mediterranean.

The beveled style clearly derived from plant motifs, but contemporary viewers, like modern ones, must have seen that these repeated motifs could also be interpreted as human faces or other animate motifs. A wooden panel from Egypt, for example, is carved in a pure abstract beveled style, but the vegetal motifs have been arranged in such a way that they can also be seen as representing

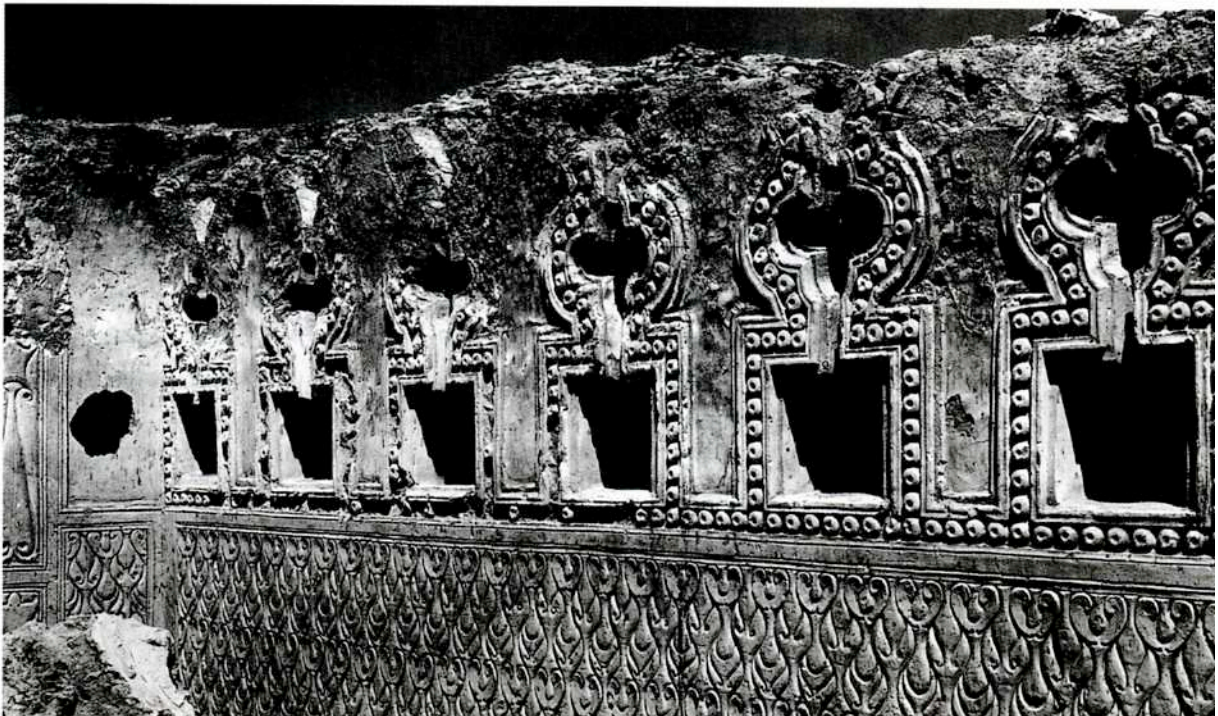
a bird. Although it clearly is not a bird, it is more than some abstract leaves. This willed sense of ambiguity is an essential part of the object's artistic content.

Writing, too, could deliberately be made ambiguous, as on the Bobrinski Bucket. The body of the bucket is decorated with five horizontal bands. The top, middle, and bottom bands contain Arabic inscriptions bestowing good wishes on an (anonymous) owner. The two bands in between contain figural scenes. The second band from the top shows scenes of entertainment, includ-



Ambiguity characterizes many of the designs decorating works of Islamic art. The figure on this ninth-century luster-painted dish might be interpreted as an abstract design, a plant, or a bird.

The interior walls of many residences at the Abbasid capital at Samarra were decorated with molded decoration, characterized by a distinctive slanted cut that allowed the panels to be released easily from the mo-





The design of a simurgh on an octagonal silver dish attributed to ninth- or tenth-century Iran probably derives from a textile pattern.

ing drinking, music making, and game playing such as backgammon, which was known in the medieval Islamic lands as *nard*. The second band from the bottom contains scenes of horsemen hunting and fighting. Unlike the dedicatory inscription written clearly around the rim and handle in Persian, the Arabic inscriptions on the body of the bucket are extremely difficult to read. In the top and bottom bands, the upper parts of the letters are formed from human figures and some of the lower parts are formed from animals. In the middle band the stems of the letters are elaborately knotted. The text in the anthropomorphic and knotted scripts is so banal—"glory and prosperity and power and tranquility and happiness . . . to its owner"—that any viewer could immediately guess its content.

These inscriptions were probably not meant to be deciphered and read literally but rather taken metaphorically as representing the same good life depicted in the accompanying figural scenes.

Even architecture could be made ambiguous. Designers and builders juxtaposed and played with the concepts of interior and exterior. This is seen readily in the Alhambra, the medieval palace complex built on the hills overlooking the city of Granada in southern Spain. One of its most distinctive and attractive features is the commingling of the outside and the inside. A courtyard is open to the sky but is inside a building; a porch is covered on three sides but opens to the courtyard. This ambiguity was enhanced by the use of water to connect the exterior with the interior. Water, carried by aqueducts from the surrounding hills, was piped into buildings, where it flowed from fountains through an elaborate system of channels in the floor. The ubiquitous sound of flowing water further blurred the distinction between inside and outside. Vistas also brought outside and inside together. Many rooms had windows or loggias (roofed open galleries) designed to command an extensive outlook and from which one could gaze on gardens or the city below.

Similar ambiguity can be seen in *muqarnas*, the distinctive stalactite-like motif used in Islamic buildings from Spain to Central Asia. The playful ambiguity inherent in the form often makes it difficult to determine its load-bearing capability in individual cases. Just as its visual and structural roles were often ambiguous, so were its symbolic implications, and it may well have had different implications at different times. Some scholars have suggested, for example, that the fragmenta-

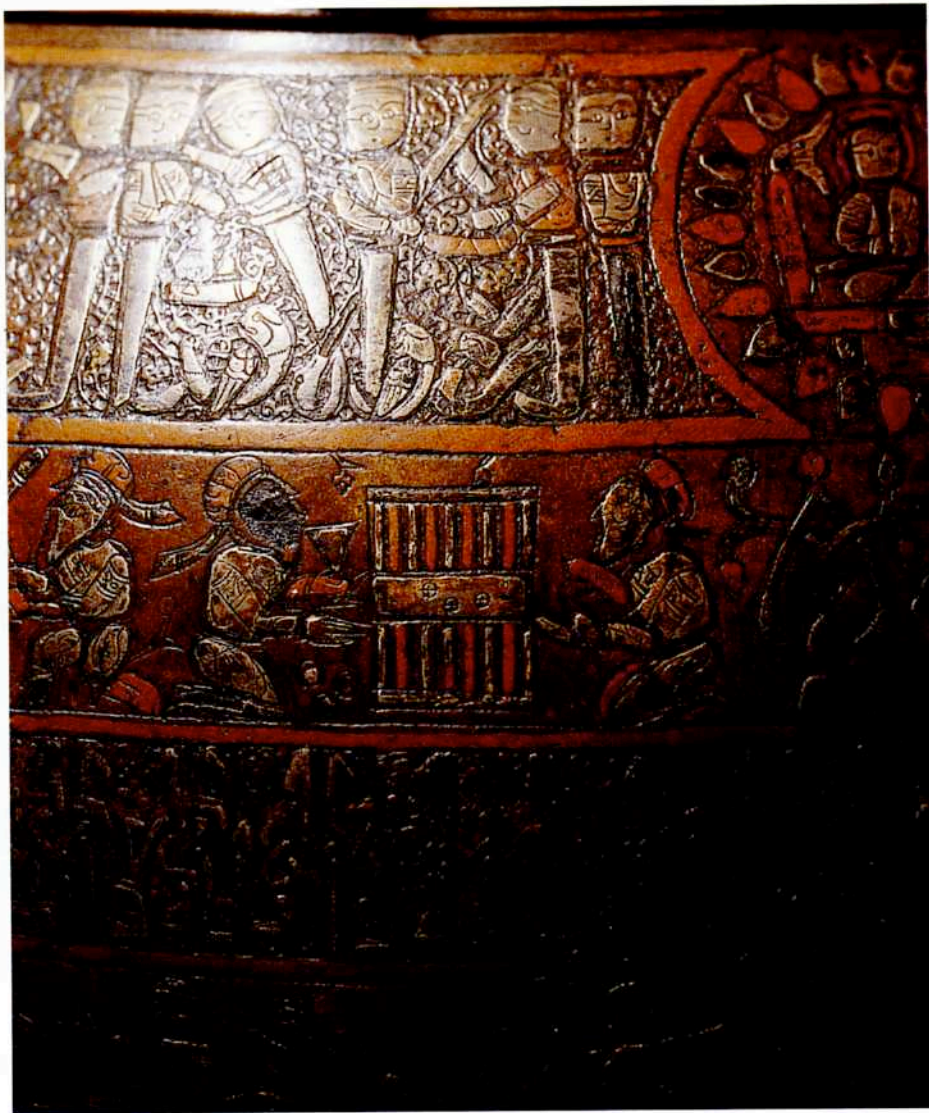
tion and ephemerality inherent in muqarnas were suitable metaphors for the atomistic theology of Abbasid apologists. In Iran and neighboring areas muqarnas vaults were often used over the tombs of saints and mystics, probably to enhance the sanctity of the specific site. At the shrine of Ahmad Yasavi, for example, stunning muqarnas vaults cover the tomb room and the mosque.

The muqarnas motif was also exploited as a metaphor for the dome of heaven. This is clear at the Alhambra palace, where writing drives home the message suggested by the form. Two magnificent muqarnas vaults are suspended over the rooms in the center of the long sides of the Court of the Lions. To the north is the so-called Hall of the Two Sisters, a romantic name applied in memory of two captive sisters who are

said to have perished from love at the sight of the amorous happenings they could witness in the gardens below but in which they could not participate. The muqarnas vault is set over an octagonal drum with eight paired windows, itself supported by muqarnas squinches over the square room. On the opposite side of the court is the so-called Hall of the Abencerrajes, whose apocryphal name derives from the famous family brutally murdered at the end of Muslim rule in Spain. In this case the muqarnas vault is set over an eight-pointed star. The walls of both rooms are inscribed with verses taken from a longer poem by the fourteenth-century court poet Ibn Zamrak. The verses describe the movement of the celestial bodies through their orbits in the heavens and reinforce the metaphor of the rotating dome of heaven. As sunlight passed from window to window in the drum of



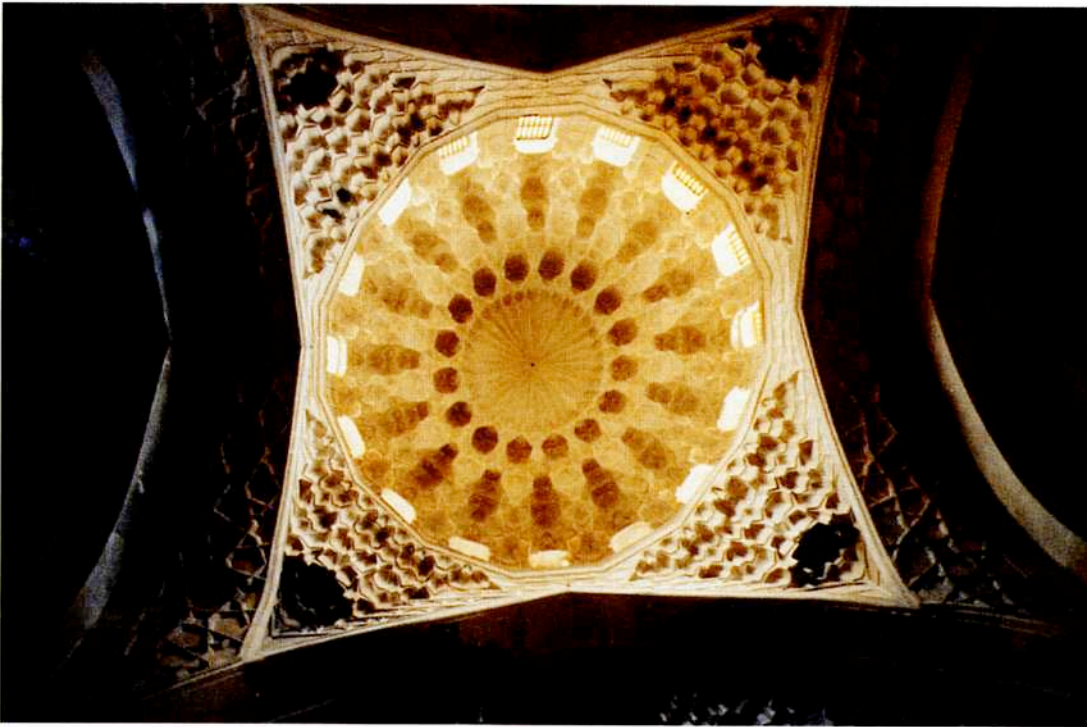
This detail of a silk caftan worn by a prince in the Caucasus mountains in the eighth century shows the same design of a simurgh as seen on the octagonal silver plate.



Writing could be ambiguous. The Bobrinski Bucket, for example, is decorated with an inscription band in which the letters end in human heads. They contrast with the figural scene of a game of backgammon below.

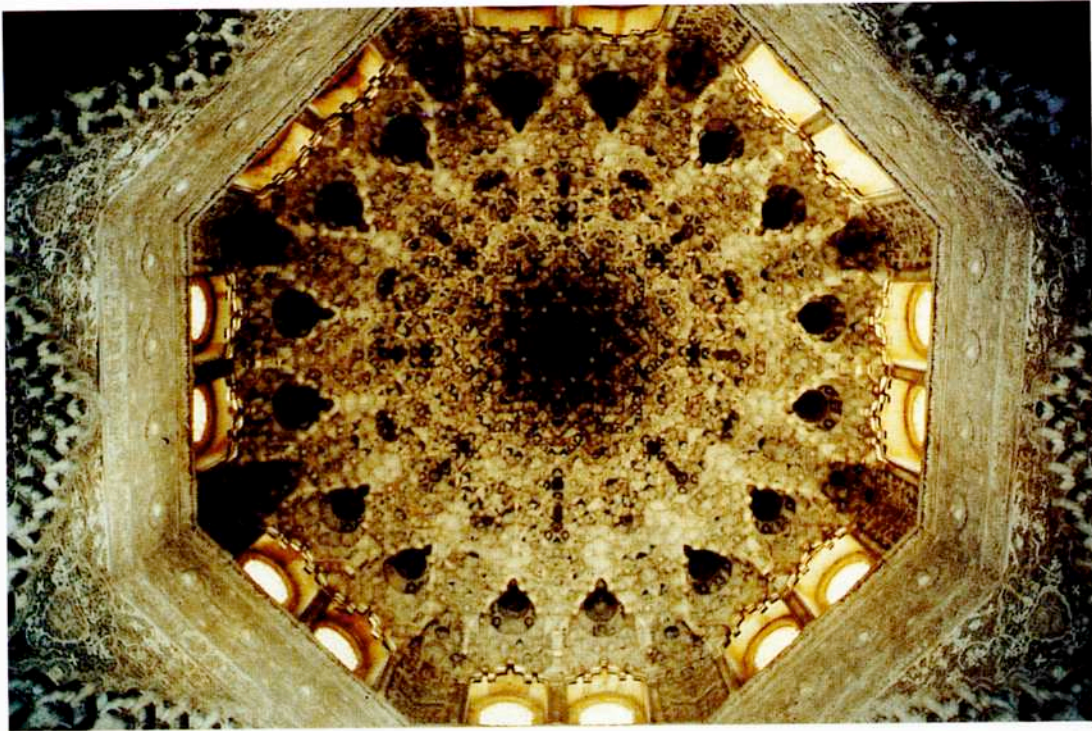
the muqarnas vaults in these two rooms, the movement of shadows would create the effect of a rotating starry sky.

Paradoxically, the ambiguity inherent in many forms and motifs used in Islamic buildings may have contributed to their survival, as they were reinterpreted to suit the needs and aspirations of later users. This hypothesis of variable meaning and changing interpretation may in part explain why the Dome of the



Muqarnas vaults were often used to sanctify the space underneath, as at the late fourteenth-century shrine of Ahmad Yasavi at Turkestan City.

Rock in Jerusalem, especially its interior mosaics, has survived so well. Scholars are still at somewhat of a loss to explain why the caliph Abd al-Malik ordered its construction, although several different and even contradictory explanations were put forward for its presence. One early explanation, known since the eighth century, was that Abd al-Malik had the Dome of the Rock erected as a substitute focus of pilgrimage to replace the Kaaba in Mecca, which at that time was in the hands of his rival Abdallah ibn al-Zubayr. This heretical idea is discounted by many today, but it certainly carried currency for a long time. A second interpretation, still held by many today, connects the Dome of the Rock to Muhammad's miraculous night journey (*isra*) from Mecca to Jerusalem and his ascension (*miraj*) into heaven. This event is mentioned in the Quran (17:1). According to the text, Muhammad traveled from the sacred mosque (*masjid al-haram*) to the farthest mosque (*masjid al-aqsa*). The sacred mosque is commonly taken to refer to the mosque in Mecca, and by the mid-eighth century the farthest mosque was taken to refer to some location in Jerusalem. Gradually, each of the events in the journey was related to a specific site in the city, but only from the twelfth or thirteenth century can a direct association between the Dome of the Rock and the



Muqarnas vaults could also be exploited as a metaphor for the dome of heaven. This one soars over the fourteenth-century Hall of the Two Sisters at the Alhambra, the palace-city of the Nasrid rulers of Granada.

Prophet's journey be documented. Regardless of the ultimate truth of either explanation, what is important is that variable explanations could be and were accepted by different audiences.

The same is true of the mosaic program in the interior of the Dome of the Rock. Some scholars have related the iconographical program of trees and other vegetation to medieval stories about Solomon's temple, particularly his palace, and associated the mosaic decoration with the garden paradise that is promised to believers. Similar eschatological explanations have been proposed for the contemporary mosaics in the Great Mosque of Damascus, and such an explanation fits Jerusalem, the third holiest city in Islam. A second interpretation focuses on the jewelry depicted in the mosaics, particularly the crowns and other regalia. These are interpreted as trophies from conquered enemies that were arranged as offerings in a sanctuary or memorial monument. However, none of these explanations—pilgrimage, night journey, ascension, paradise, or victory—are mentioned in the contemporary inscriptions, which speak about Islam and Christianity.

Patrons, artists, and consumers in the Islamic lands seem to have delighted in such ambiguity. Just as the Arabic language encourages plays on words, so too

was Islamic art open to multiple and even contradictory interpretations. Writing could impart information, but it was also decorative. Geometry formed the architectural module of construction, but it was also used as a major theme of decoration not only for buildings but also on objects. Color was attractive and enlivening to the eye, but it also had symbolic overtones. The multiple meanings and willed ambiguities are part of the appeal of Islamic art, which can be both unchanging and variable to the modern eye.