

SECTION 1
THEORETICAL ISSUES

THE MANUSCRIPT AS A WHOLE

Anna Contadini

The approach of looking at manuscripts only for their pictures or, more simply put, just looking at the pictures, is one that prevailed in Islamic art history for a long time. It was, perhaps, historically inevitable that this should have been so, since the field was long dominated by dealers and collectors, some of whom were on a treasure hunt which resulted in manuscripts being mutilated, their miniatures taken out and sold on the market as separate items. An early instance of this is the case of Heinrich Friedrich von Diez, who, while serving as a Prussian diplomat at the Sublime Porte between 1786 and 1790, amassed from various sources a wealth of Islamic paintings, drawings, and examples of calligraphy. These he subsequently assembled into five albums, three consisting entirely of independent images that, in the process, were divorced from any text which may originally have accompanied them.¹ Diez's approach was followed by numerous others throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, but was not only confined to Middle Eastern manuscripts: rather, it is to be considered as part of a general trend, as Western manuscripts also suffered in the same way. An illustrious case is that of John Ruskin, who cut out illuminations and miniatures from medieval Western manuscripts.²

The result of this sort of activity has been the frequent dispersal of miniatures from the same manuscript in public and private collections all over the world, so that the art historian is confronted with problems that are sometimes insurmountable, and at best still require painstaking and time-consuming study.

The literature on the subject partially reflected this, but also reflected the theoretical approach that Western scholars had in treating this material. An initial given is that Islamic art history has had to be elaborated in the absence of an indigenous theory. This is not, of course, to claim that there are no discussions to be found, say, of aesthetic criteria, but rather that there is no coherent body of work that treats of the nature, purpose or stylistic parameters of artefacts, whether considered synchronically or diachronically. There are a handful of historical texts that record the lives of various esteemed artists or generically trace the development of a particular branch of Islamic painting (more will be said on this presently), and there are also scattered statements about visual beauty in scientific and philosophical works. Among the latter are the *Rasā'il* (Epistles) of the Brethren of Purity (Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'), written in late-10th-century Basra. The fifty-two epistles that make up this encyclopaedic work on the philosophical sciences show the extent to which the Neoplatonic and Pythagorean intellectual traditions had been absorbed. Arguing for the primacy of numerical relationships, the Brethren believed that beauty in art, as in music, resulted from the ability of artists to capture the proportions and harmonies of the

¹ These are the five Diez albums, MSS. Diez. A. Fols. 70–74, now held in the Staatsbibliothek in Berlin. For a recent account on how the albums were compiled, see Roxburgh 1995, esp. p. 115.

² For an account of Ruskin's activities see Watson 2003.

universe, an idea echoed in other writings also.³ But such generalised cosmological propositions cannot really be said to provide answers to specific questions relating to the artistic criteria that underlay, say, miniature painting, and it remains the case that there is next to nothing that clearly elucidates how or indeed if any presumed aesthetic values of the Muslim world were theorised.

Not surprisingly, some modern scholars attempting to investigate Islamic aesthetics have sought to supplement the lack of textual evidence for art by appealing to parallels elsewhere. For example, Arabic poetry and poetics have been considered a potential source of insights into the sort of aesthetic criteria that may have been historically valid in the Middle East, and it has been argued that analogous qualities may be detected in the visual arts, thus confirming the existence of an Islamic conceptualisation of aesthetics, even in the absence of a theory proper.⁴ But comparisons between poetry and art, although supported to some extent by medieval Arabic sources,⁵ offer only general analogies, and it is difficult to argue that there is any meaningful correlation between the techniques of verbal and visual representation.⁶

Another way in which modern scholars have sought to explicate a theory of Islamic aesthetics is by arguing for a religious interpretation of the material in some ways akin to that associated with the *Ikhwān*. This approach presents Islamic art as a conscious effort on the part of its makers and patrons to move the viewer towards the contemplation of Divine Order, principally through geometric designs and patterns that, we are told, symbolise the workings and structure of God's creation.⁷ As regards

painting, the general lack of three dimensionality and perspective in the Islamic tradition is considered in this specific framework to be a manifestation of a peculiarly Islamic concern for geometry, which evokes a reality more profound than the merely material verisimilitude that is achieved by Western naturalism.⁸ An interesting anecdote in this regard was included by Titus Burckhardt in his book on Fez, where he records an encounter with a craftsman of that city. When asked how he would choose to ornament an area of wall, Burckhardt responded, he tells us, by proposing an arabesque scroll inhabited by animals, to which the Moroccan responded:

No... that would not be worth much. Birds, horses, weasels and other quadrupeds are to be found everywhere. One only has to look around and imitate. That requires no knowledge. But if I say to you, deploy four rosettes (*tasātir*) beginning alternately in an eight-ray and in a ten-ray star, so that side by side, and leaving no spaces, they fill the entire wall, that would be a different matter. And that is art!⁹

But while this anecdote is valuable insofar as it records the opinions of a practitioner from the culture, its implications for a theory of Islamic art are by no means clear cut: if 'art' translates *fann*, the reference might rather be primarily to skill in problem-solving. Further, even accepting that 'worth' here is a term of aesthetic valuation, and that comparisons of this kind find favour with many Muslims today, to accept such an aesthetic theory as valid for the entirety of Islamic artistic production is highly problematic, especially given the lack of any substantiating historical sources.

³ See Bausani 1978; and for a discussion of the ideas they contain relevant to the aesthetic debate see Necipoğlu 1995, pp. 185–196.

⁴ See Kahwājī 1971; Behrens-Abouseif 1999 and Gonzales 2001.

⁵ For a discussion of medieval authors see Behrens-Abouseif 1999 and Gonzales 2001.

⁶ To take just one example, that of female beauty, we may certainly find in what is perhaps the most celebrated descriptive passage, that in the *mu'allāqa* of Imru' al-Qays, an anatomy consisting of cascading similes and metaphors that conjure up visual images, but these can hardly be considered analogous to a single visual representation (unless, perhaps, one by Salvador Dalí!). For a translation of the *mu'allāqa* see Bateson 1970, pp. 138–9.

⁷ Among the literature arguing for or reflecting such interpretations are Critchlow 1976; Aul in Riyadh 1985,

pp. 13–17; El-Said 1993; 'Ali 1998, esp. pp. 31, 36–38, 42–43. Whereas Necipoğlu 1995, pp. 74–83, Behrens-Abouseif 1999, pp. 118–120, 131–33, and Leaman 2004, esp. pp. 12–14, 66–69 argue against such views, urging against an over-interpretative approach and suggesting that Islamic geometric patterns and designs may well have been deployed and appreciated primarily for their beauty. However, Necipoğlu believes that a semiotic reading which endows geometric ornament and forms with meanings relevant to their respective milieus is valid: Necipoğlu 1995, pp. 91–123, 217–23. Gonzales reads certain sources as clear examples of Medieval aesthetic thinking, one that will also influence European thought: Gonzales 2001 (see also her useful bibliography for further readings). The most comprehensive treatment of the source material is to be found in Puerta Vilchez 1997.

⁸ Critchlow 1976, p. 8; 'Ali 1998, pp. 31, 36–38.

⁹ Burckhardt 1992, p. 95.

To be sure, the importance of geometry in the Islamic artistic tradition cannot be denied. Abbasid Baghdad of the 9th and 10th centuries was marked by the development and popularisation of the mathematical sciences, and at the same time by the rise and proliferation of a geometrical decorative mode in the arts, a trend that was to continue and climax during the so-called Sunni Revival of the 11th and 12th centuries, affecting much of the Muslim world, albeit with marked regional differences. It has been argued that these simultaneous intellectual and artistic developments may have been related, reflecting an ethos that sought to explore and emulate the perfect order of God's universe.¹⁰ Contemporary writings such as the *Rasā'il* emphasize the importance of harmonious proportions that can be expressed as numerical relationships reflecting the divinely ordered structure of the cosmos. These relationships underpin music and the visual arts, through which the soul is drawn to a realization of, and a longing for, a higher spiritual reality. However, such views spring very much from a Neoplatonic tradition common to both East and West and cannot be said to support the belief that the entirety of Islamic art is governed by a distinctly Muslim, religiously-inspired taste that prefers geometrical ornament to other forms of design, and still less the argument that such a preference led to a deliberate tendency towards stylisation in figurative representation. Indeed, as will become apparent below, what little in the way of aesthetic theory relating to miniature painting can be gleaned from the historical sources contrasts strikingly with this notion of geometric preference.

In fact, the desire to determine an explicitly Islamic framework within which to understand the material is a fairly new one, and it certainly had no place in the work of the exclusively Western scholars who, beginning in the late-19th century, were the first to establish Islamic art history as a discipline. Given this origin, the subject was inevitably based on Western models, and it is therefore no surprise to find that the trajectory it has followed, from its early attempts to characterize styles, arrive at chronologies, and ascertain iconographical affiliations, to its more recent attempts at contextualization and the problematiza-

tion of methodologies, should follow that traced earlier by Western art history.

An important consequence of the Western genesis of Islamic art history has been, until relatively recently, an emphasis on a notion of historical evolution akin to the Vasarian concept of artistic development. Here the classic paradigm is the shift from Medieval to Renaissance painting, long perceived as a dynamic phenomenon in which earlier models were superseded by works whose decisive virtues were the use of perspective, greater figural naturalism, and increased formal complexity, all of which were considered advances. These attributes, whether employed singly or combined, were seen to enable both the production of aesthetically pleasing compositions of considerable subtlety and technical virtuosity, and the creation of great psychological depth in the portrayal of events and personalities. The influence of this model has meant the imposition of a comparable scale of values on Islamic material, promoting the merits of, say, miniature painting of the Safavid period not merely intrinsically but comparatively, to the detriment of the output of earlier periods. This approach resulted in the selection of a spread of isolated pictures arranged chronologically to give an idea of stylistic development.

As an early, famous example of this type of scholarship one may cite F. R. Martin, *The Miniature Painting and Painters of Persia, India and Turkey from the 8th to the 18th Century*, 2 vols. (London, 1912),¹¹ and although now increasingly being questioned, the evolutionary perspective it adopts is still to be found in recent publications that select and order pictures according to aesthetic criteria derived from Western art history. With regard to the focus of the present volume, it is interesting to note the lack of any reference to the Arab world in Martin's title, particularly since the chapter he devotes to the Fatimids and Abbasids surpasses in length the sections on both Indian and Turkish material. The reason for this omission is of its time: the Arabs were a 'simple race, without great artistic feeling or interests', and the artists who worked for them were predominantly Christians.¹² Under the Fatimids he discerns an artistic revival

¹⁰ For a full discussion of this topic, see Necipoğlu 1995, esp. pp. 91–123; and Tabbaa 2001.

¹¹ See Martin 1912. For a discussion on Martin's approach, see also Vernot 2000, pp. 35–36.

¹² Martin 1912, p. 1.

orchestrated by the Copts, and suggests that once the dynasty fell, Egypt's artists (presumably still Copts) spread throughout the Islamic world 'diffusing their skill'.¹³ The painting produced under the Fatimids and Abbasids Martin judges to be superior to its Byzantine and Western counterparts,¹⁴ but by seeing Muslim Arabs primarily as patrons and denying them any significant creative role they can both be rendered invisible in his title and offered up to art-historical scholarship as little more than custodians of a transitional phenomenon. Smoothly inserted into an evolutionary paradigm, Arab art could be classed as an unoriginal prolongation of earlier iconographical traditions the function of which was to serve as a springboard for later developments.

To be sure, the idea of a progressive development is not entirely alien to the Islamic tradition, for hints of it can be found in those (relatively few) Islamic art-historical writings to which reference was made above. These take the form of prefaces or treatises on the arts of the book that contain sections on painting.¹⁵ Although the majority of surviving examples were produced in Safavid Iran and are concerned mainly with Persian artists,¹⁶ their rather standardised nature suggests that there was a fairly extensive and long-standing tradition of such writing in the Islamic world: we certainly know of the existence of much earlier Arabic treatises on calligraphy.¹⁷ Most of the surviving examples contain chronologically arranged biographies, and although most deal with the history of calligraphy, some also contain sections on miniature painters. Perhaps the most famous of these works is the preface written by the artist Dūst Muḥammad in the album of calligraphy and painting that he prepared in 1544 for Bahrām Gūr, brother of the Safavid Shah Ṭahmāsp.¹⁸ After presenting an apologia for the painting of figural imagery and sketching a cursory history of early portraiture, Dūst

Muḥammad describes the principal painters of the Persian tradition, starting with Aḥmad Mūsā, who worked at the time of the Ilkhanid ruler Abū Saʿīd (r. 1317–35) and who is famously credited with having 'lifted the veil from the face of depiction'.¹⁹ The enumeration of artists that follows is couched in florid hyperbole and culminates in the late Timurid/early Safavid painter Biḥzād, who is 'beyond all description'.²⁰ Although not quite Michelangelo to Aḥmad Mūsā's Giotto, Biḥzād is certainly presented in a manner that suggests that he is the fulfilment of a line of artistic development. But quite what the determining values of this development were is difficult to tell, since Dūst Muḥammad offers almost nothing in the way of real aesthetic criticism or evaluation. Another important source of this type is the treatise on painters and calligraphers written around the turn of the 17th century by the Iranian scholar Qāḍī Aḥmad.²¹ Like Dūst Muḥammad before him, Qāḍī Aḥmad enthusiastically eulogises a role-call of Iranian painters, with Biḥzād considered to be the greatest among them. He, unlike Burckhart's craftsman from Fez, holds verisimilitude to be one of the key achievements of painting, and indeed goes so far as to credit painters with an almost divine power to 'conjure up to life the likeness of everyone' and in so doing furnish 'a guide to the plan of the universe'.²² It is interesting to note that we thus find here clear evidence to counter the view, mentioned above, of those modern scholars who assert that it was by the conscious *avoidance* of naturalism that Islamic painters sought to evoke cosmic order.

A similar appraisal of portraiture is given in the *Qānūn al-ṣuwar*, a treatise on painting written by the Safavid artist Ṣādiq Beg or Ṣādiqī some time between 1576 and 1602.²³ On his master, Muḥaffār-ʿAlī, Ṣādiqī writes that:

When minded to portray a certain person (*tīmṣāl-i kaṣī*), his creative imagination (*khiyāl*) could penetrate to the inner man beneath. And none could truly distinguish

¹³ Martin 1912, pp. 3–4, 6–7.

¹⁴ Martin 1912, pp. 13–15.

¹⁵ For translations and discussions of these texts, see Minorsky 1959; Dickson and Welch 1981, pp. 259–69; Thackston 1989, pp. 335–62; Grabar 2000b, pp. 22–35; Roxburgh 2001; and Thackston 2001, pp. 3–42.

¹⁶ For enumerations of the extant texts, see Grabar 2000b, pp. 22–25; and Roxburgh 2001, pp. 3–4.

¹⁷ B. N. Zakhoder in Minorsky 1959, pp. 17–18.

¹⁸ See the translation in Thackston 1989, pp. 335–50, esp. pp. 343–47, 348–49 and in Thackston 2001, pp. 4–17, esp. pp. 11–15, 16.

¹⁹ Dūst Muḥammad in Thackston 1989, p. 345 and in Thackston 2001, p. 12.

²⁰ Dūst Muḥammad in Thackston 1989, p. 347 and in Thackston 2001, p. 15.

²¹ See the translation by Minorsky 1959.

²² Qāḍī Aḥmad in Minorsky 1959, pp. 178–79.

²³ See the translation in Dickson and Welch 1981, pp. 259–69.

between original and likeness unless, perhaps, purely physical considerations of motion were invoked.²⁴

He then goes on to say that those who ‘incline towards figural painting’ should ‘let Mother nature alone (*āfarīnīsh*)’ serve as their guide.²⁵

Presumably, then, naturalism and even insight into character were aesthetic criteria in the circle in which these men of the arts were writing, although one should not, of course, equate this Safavid conception with the Western idea of naturalism/realism, for much of what these artist-authors say on painting’s ability to capture likenesses is anecdotal and hyperbolic in character, and is undermined by other passages in the same texts which would appear to promote the artist’s free use of imagination. It is, moreover, evident that Safavid painting remained distinctly stylised in terms of figural representation and so cannot reasonably be compared in intent to the European mimetic tradition. Nevertheless, the writers of these texts clearly believed that their art captured at least something of the real world, and the framework within which they worked was certainly far from being governed by the sorts of anti-naturalistic, geometricising attitudes that have in modern times been ascribed to Islamic painters.

But even accepting that such writings as those by Dūst Muḥammad and Qāḍī Aḥmad might appear to imply something akin to the Vasarian model for the study of Islamic painting, it must be borne in mind that they were produced mainly in Safavid Iran and deal almost exclusively with the Persian tradition. They cannot, therefore, be treated as authoritative or comprehensive in relation to the history of Islamic painting in general. Further, the evolutionary approach they adumbrate is nowhere near as pronounced or explicit as it is in Western scholarship. In particular, although naturalism is clearly presented as an admired quality, it is never treated as it is in traditional European art history as an absolute goal towards which painters have progressed. And thirdly and most importantly, painting is dealt with in these texts as just one branch of the arts of the book, alongside calligraphy, illumination, and bookbinding, an approach that contrasts sharply with the Vasarian privileging of representational art. Thus while it is

true that the prefaces and treatises have long been cited by Western scholars in support of their construction of a canonical developmental narrative for Islamic painting,²⁶ they could have provided neither sufficient impetus nor the model for the direction that the study of the field has traditionally taken.

A further specifically Western factor that contributed to the construction of an evolutionary narrative was the interpretation of the history of European miniatures associated especially with Weitzmann. This proposes that miniature paintings become more and more independent of the text, a view that has been taken up by scholars of Islamic material. Weitzmann’s well-crafted and in many ways convincing argument, formulated in his *Illustrations in Roll and Codex* of 1947,²⁷ has it that miniature paintings began life in ancient papyrus scrolls as small-scale illustrations within the columns of text, not distinguished by any sort of border or background, and strictly ‘subordinated to the writing.’²⁸ But after the rise of the vellum codex from the second century onwards, paintings became ever more ambitious: artists took advantage of the new format to execute works of greater size and complexity, adding borders and backgrounds and, if visual impact so required, moving them away from the immediate vicinity of the text that they accompanied. This development is one that in Weitzmann’s opinion constitutes the freeing of the picture, as if it had previously been the slave of the text—indeed, the chapter in question is entitled ‘The Emancipation of the Miniature’. It culminates in the establishment of the full-page illustrative miniature (as distinct from frontispiece paintings, which had long been of this format).²⁹ Moreover, it is a shift that he presents in unequivocally positive terms as the realisation of some sort of irresistible artistic impulse, the miniature becoming ‘more and more independent of the text until it reached perfection as a picture which occupies the entire page.’³⁰

²⁴ Ṣādiqī in Dickson and Welch 1981, p. 261.

²⁵ Ṣādiqī in Dickson and Welch 1981, p. 264.

²⁶ Dūst Muḥammad’s preface, for example, was published in Binyon, Wilkinson, and Gray 1933, appendix 1. For further discussion on this topic, see Roxburgh 2001, pp. 6, 162.

²⁷ Weitzmann 1947. For Kurt Weitzmann and the role of Princeton in this type of scholarship, see Grabar 2001, p. 1.

²⁸ Weitzmann 1947, p. 52.

²⁹ Weitzmann 1947, pp. 69–112.

³⁰ Weitzmann 1947, p. 83.

Weitzmann can also be seen as promoting the view that text and image ultimately grew separate from one another, this being the basis for the evolution of fine art in the Western world.

The changes in typology and approach that Weitzmann traces certainly took place, but the conclusions that he draws from them are highly problematic. It would not be too great a stretch of his logic to arrive at the view that miniature paintings developed into entirely independent entities that had no further need of an accompanying text. That they are to be found in scripted books thus becomes almost incidental, and they may just as well be viewed in isolation, ignoring their book context. This inference cannot but have strengthened the temptation to regard the development of Islamic miniature painting as a parallel phenomenon, with earlier and clearly text-related but less interesting paintings being followed by larger, more independent and complex paintings of greater aesthetic interest, an evolution that would go some way to justify studying (and appreciating) them without reference to their texts.

There are three main reasons for rejecting such an outcome. The first is quite general and straightforward: miniature paintings may certainly be enjoyed and appreciated independently of the texts to which they relate, but the point of art-historical study is to deepen that appreciation through arriving at a better understanding of their cultural context, of their production, function and, where possible, reception; and in pursuing this goal, the relationship of image to text cannot be ignored. The second is that the evolution of Islamic miniature painting cannot be reduced to a small to large, simple to complex, subservient to independent trajectory. Although it is true that grand pictures are found in, say, Safavid manuscripts, large-format illustrations that dominate and even fill the entire page can also be seen in some of the earliest surviving Arabic manuscripts, a notable instance being the famous copy of the *Maqāmāt* dated 1237 and illustrated by al-Wāsiṭī. Indeed, not only are the miniatures of this and other early manuscripts often larger than those of subsequent ages, but they can also be said to be more monumental: later Persian paintings, with their profusion of small-scale detail, evince a trend towards miniaturisation, even if the images themselves may be of considerable dimensions. Weitzmann's conclusions cannot, therefore, be readily applied to the Islamic tradition, which did not

undergo a clear-cut, linear development. The third reason is simply that Weitzmann's conclusions are not wholly convincing in relation to the European tradition itself. Even accepting (and applying cross-culturally) the notion of emancipation, miniatures—both Eastern and Western—still remained illustrations in a book primarily composed of text. The progressive enlargement, monumentalization, and displacement of pictures may, where it occurred, be seen as the result of a search for new formulae and approaches to the illustration of text rather than as a conscious effort to 'free' the images. And while these changes may have rendered the relationship between word and image subtler and more complex, they did not by any means sever it or deprive it of relevance.

It is clear, then, that the evolutionary conceptual framework hitherto applied to Islamic painting derives straightforwardly from the fundamentally Eurocentric bias of most scholarship, and cannot be said to be representative of what little we know about contemporary indigenous attitudes. However, this is not to say that European art history offered no adequate methodological means for the study of Islamic material. From the evolutionary approach would naturally emerge a concern with techniques, stylistic affiliations and iconographical derivations, but allied to this was the development of a second trend in scholarship, one concerned with biography, authorship, and the modalities of production. This would no doubt have emerged under the pressure of the perennial needs of the market for authentication of provenance and the detection of forgery, but it was in any case a natural consequence of scholarly curiosity and the research that inevitably followed into the lives of painters, their methods of working and, broadly, the social contexts in which they operated. But in addition to questions of patronage and the economics of production, it engaged, importantly, with the intellectual environment, thereby having a crucial impact upon interpretation, which increasingly had to abandon hermetic reflections on ineffable achievements of form and painterly technique in an autonomous object and encompass aspects of contemporary culture and belief that bore upon both production and reception, and in particular to take account of complex referential systems pointing to layers of associations and symbolic meanings. Paintings, in short, required not just appreciation but decoding.

This was all the more true when attention was directed away from the Renaissance towards medieval material. One might cite in this regard the research on Western medieval manuscripts fostered by the Warburg Institute, the Courtauld Institute, and Princeton University, which have for some time sought to integrate the study of iconography within a wider examination of textual transmission, an approach that requires an understanding of the relationship between what survived of medieval allegorical strategies of interpretation, the burgeoning world of humanist scholarship, and the classical tradition.³¹ An interesting example is that of Fritz Saxl (1890–1948) who, after serving as Aby Warburg’s research assistant and librarian, became director of the Institute in 1929, five years before its move from Hamburg to London. Saxl inherited from Warburg an interdisciplinary approach in which Islamic art was considered a valid field of study, and it was a topic that he himself took up in some of his writings. In one essay, for instance, he demonstrated that Arabic descriptions of Sabian divinities from Harran provided the basis for astrological images on both Islamic metalwork and on Giotto’s Campanile in Florence.³² Among modern representatives of this methodology, one might pick out the volume of articles edited by Stephen G. Nichols and S. Wenzel and aptly entitled *The Whole Book*.³³ In particular, Nichols’ own essay, which examines a late-13th-century *chansonnier*, exemplifies the integrated approach to illustrated manuscripts, noting as it does that the distribution and choice of miniatures in this codex not only reinforce the organisation of the book but also convey key messages in conjunction with the text; ‘in consequence’, Nichols writes, ‘the visual art cannot be dismissed as simply decorative or adventitious.’³⁴

A similar stance is taken by Daniel H. Weiss in his assessment of the Arsenal Old Testament,³⁵

an illustrated French translation produced in the Crusader kingdom of Acre during the second half of the 13th century. Noting that the text of this bible is selectively and idiosyncratically abridged in order to promote the themes of kingship and holy warfare, Weiss demonstrates that the book’s pictorial cycle has also been formulated with these ideas in mind, so that ‘text and images must be seen as complementary expressions of a highly specific, even personalized, conception.’³⁶ Even very specific topics can benefit from this new approach, as witness Michael Camille’s study of marginalia in Medieval art,³⁷ which, ‘rather than looking at the meaning of specific motifs’, instead focuses ‘on their function as part of the whole page, text, object or space in which they are anchored.’³⁸

As a final example, it would be appropriate to mention the study by Robert S. Nelson, a student of Weitzmann, on prefaces in Byzantine Gospel books and their associated miniatures.³⁹ In his assessment of this little-known topic Nelson never loses sight of the interrelationship of text and image, stating in the introduction his aim to ‘define the genesis, evolution, and dissolution of that association.’⁴⁰ As this quote suggests, Nelson’s discussion does trace a growing divergence between the miniatures and the texts that they accompany, but this does not lead him to abandon his integrated approach or to argue, as Weitzmann had, that manuscript illustrations somehow outgrew their book context.

Traditional scholarship on early Islamic miniature painting has hitherto failed to develop a similarly balanced view:⁴¹ the miniatures have either been regarded as subservient to the text they illustrate or have been foregrounded and studied in isolation from it. In the latter case, for the reasons given above, attention has been focused especially on late miniatures and, in particular, on Persian and Indian examples. As such paintings often illustrate literary works with a strongly defined narrative, whether heroic, as with the *Shāhnāma*, or romantic, as with

³¹ This new iconographic approach was in many cases advanced by émigré German Jews, for which see Hillenbrand 2000, pp. 175–77.

³² Saxl 1912. For Fritz Saxl and the Warburg Institute’s contribution to scholarship in iconography, see Vernoi 2000, p. 46.

³³ Nichols and Wenzel 1996. See esp. the introduction, pp. 1–6; and the essays Huot 1996 and Nichols 1996.

³⁴ Nichols 1996, p. 91.

³⁵ Weiss 1998, pp. 81–195.

³⁶ Weiss 1998, p. 113.

³⁷ Camille 1992.

³⁸ Camille 1992, p. 9.

³⁹ Nelson 1980.

⁴⁰ Nelson 1980, p. 4.

⁴¹ As observed in relation to Persian painting by Grabar 2000b, p. 12.

Nizāmī, scholars have certainly attended to their subject matter and the ways in which they exemplify the related passages of the text, but there has still been a concentration on content at the expense of context and a disregard of the fact that many such paintings are best understood not in isolation but as functioning as part of an integrated, text-based series, within which they interact with those that precede and follow them.

The situation is even worse with regard to non-literary manuscripts. Their miniatures have not been perceived to be intrinsically interesting to the extent that they might justify individual attention, and their relationship to the text, which was often expository and baldly factual rather than dramatic and imaginative, did not seem to demand the same urgent attention. Yet that relationship is just as intimate, and is often more direct, so that it can justifiably be claimed that previous studies have failed to grasp the essentially integrated nature of such manuscripts.

A pioneering step towards redressing this imbalance occurred with the publication of Ettinghausen's great book, *Arab Painting*, in 1962.⁴² Set against the two trends in Western art history noted above, Ettinghausen's seminal work can be seen to be alert to some of the problems investigated by the second, contextual trend, but ultimately not to transcend restrictions imposed by the first, evolutionary one. This assessment, it should be emphasized, is not meant to detract in any way from the significance of his achievement: *Arab Painting* is still indispensable, and will long remain so. Nevertheless, one only has to consider the central concept of maturation followed by decline⁴³ to see how much its approach has been coloured by traditional Western evolutionary attitudes. The concept of the autonomous work of art also inevitably affects the nature of his aesthetic pronouncements and the kinds of analysis he offers. A good example of his evaluative language occurs in his discussion of the al-Mubashshir finispieces, in the course of which he speaks of 'inner drama', 'plastic quality', and the artist's 'power to imbue them with life, even with vibrant energy'.⁴⁴ A further basic characteristic that betrays the same disciplinary

origins and its associated limitations is the lack of any concern for the relationship of the illustrations to their text. Text/image relationships are simply ignored, and it is symptomatic that the images to which most attention is devoted are those that are extraneous to the semantic core of the text, although highly relevant to the social purposes and status of the book, namely the frontispieces, where variations on the representation of power relations allow art-historical affiliations to be posited and iconographical derivations traced, thus stressing the general at the expense of the particular. When attention is turned to the miniatures that illustrate the text and are embedded within it, the productive potential of their juxtaposition is not considered: attention is fundamentally restricted to relationships between paintings, and even then not within the single manuscript, as a possibly coherent cycle with a potentially cumulative impact, but as material from which may be extracted stylistic groupings providing linkages over space and time. Intertextuality, in short, is restricted to the visual domain, and concerns less interpretative enrichment than derivational categorization.

Only in the last couple of decades has a decidedly new approach finally started to emerge.⁴⁵ Not surprisingly, perhaps, it is in the study of Persian painting that some of the most significant steps in this regard have been taken. The illustrations of the *Shāhnāma* have benefited particularly from this new approach, with scholars paying far more attention than before to the relationship between image and text in both the genre as a whole and in specific manuscripts.⁴⁶ For instance, it has been demonstrated that a *Shāhnāma* miniature will typically illustrate the verse or verses directly preceding it, and this concern for the alignment of image and text may well explain the frequent occurrence of stepped miniature formats in manuscripts of the 14th century onwards.⁴⁷

⁴² For the importance of Ettinghausen's approach, see Hillenbrand 2000 and Vernoit 2000, pp. 46–47.

⁴³ Pp. 97, 100 and 142.

⁴⁴ P. 78.

⁴⁵ Grabar and Robinson 2001. See especially in this volume Grabar 2001, which concisely outlines the importance of considering Islamic painting in the wider context of the book. This new approach is also advanced in Grabar 2000b, pp. 11–13, and applied to productive effect in Roxburgh 2003 and Hoffman 2003.

⁴⁶ These developments are summarized and discussed in Shreve Simpson 2004.

⁴⁷ Shreve Simpson 2004, pp. 15–16, citing F. Mehran, "Frequency Distribution of Illustrated Scenes in Persian Manuscripts", *Student*, vol. 2, 1998, pp. 351–79, which I have not been able to consult.

In other media also we may find extremely subtle and playful connections between text and image. A case in point is the Ayyubid enamelled beaker known as the Palmer Cup, on which the frieze of figures and the poetic inscription that runs above them relate in a palpably meaningful way to one another⁴⁸ (Fig. 1). The inscription comprises two separate bacchic verses, the longer one, which refers to a beardless youth (*aghyad*) holding a cup while music is played, running above an enthroned ruler and the attendants and musicians who flank him. It is surely no coincidence that the word *aghyad* is placed directly over the princely figure, who is indeed clean-shaven, nor that this figure's hand is in the attitude of holding a cup. But no actual cup is depicted, so that the vessel upon which the text and imagery are painted would appear to fill this role. The truncated verse that makes up the second part of the inscription may be even more allusive, possibly referring to the figure holding a mace who is positioned directly opposite the seated ruler. The carefully crafted interweaving of text, image, and object presented here should alert us to the resonances possibly to be found in manuscripts, and thence to the importance of approaching illustrated Islamic books as potentially complex integrated entities.

To return to the *Shāhnāma*, specific copies have also been the object of this new, holistic approach, as exemplified by Robert Hillenbrand's assessment of the famous manuscript made for Shah Ṭahmāsp: the *Shāhnāma-yi Shāhī*.⁴⁹ While he does not explicitly relate text to image, Hillenbrand examines its 258 miniatures as a programmatic whole rather than as individual 'masterpieces',⁵⁰ paying particular attention to which parts of the narrative have been chosen for illustration and what these choices might tell us. In so doing, he demonstrates that the distribution and subject matter of the illustrations render this a *Shāhnāma* that is 'devoted to a quite exceptional extent to war', and specifically to the ancient conflict between Iran and Turan. True, this is the central theme of Firdawsī's text, but whereas other illustrated copies depict its more fantastic and romantic episodes

in addition to those relating to battle, the *Shāhnāma-yi Shāhī*'s paintings are uniquely and distinctively focused on warfare. This emphasis, Hillenbrand argues, is a direct reflection of Ṭahmāsp's struggles against the Uzbek and Ottoman Turks at the time of the book's production. Previously admired as individual wonders of art, the illustrations of Ṭahmāsp's *Shāhnāma* are thus at last being considered in relation to a context of production that helps refine our interpretation of them, in the same way that the French Bible discussed above was studied.

For a final illustration we may turn from a *Shāhnāma* recognized as containing masterpieces of Safavid art to one of the Arab manuscripts that lie at the core of the present work. The *Kitāb na'ī al-ḥayawān* in the British Museum, derived mainly from the Ibn Bakhṭīshū' tradition of books on animals, contains descriptions and depictions of various animals, real and imaginary, accompanied in nearly every case by a miniature painting (Figs. 2, 3). These relate to the text in the most obvious of ways, illustrating the animals under discussion. As in the case of the *Shāhnāma*, they place the miniature within the relevant segment of text; and from a zoological point of view in some cases the miniature also depends upon it, for given that the representations are stylized recourse must on occasion be had to the text in order to determine the species in question. But the relationship is more than that of a dominant text to a functionally subordinate appendage, for accepting that the manuscript is an evidently purposeful combination of the two elements, the miniatures are not just a reflection of the verbal content but a visual (and pleasurable) counterpoint to it. The two intertwine to form a composite whole, the manuscript, that transcends the sum of its parts. It would thus do violence to the miniatures to divorce them from it and study them in isolation, for they are more than just insertions within the text: they supplement it by providing a complex parallel, in their continuing variations on particular representational and formal devices, to the formulaic organization of the text.

Further, as we have seen in relation to *Shāhnāma* miniatures, their positioning within it is usually carefully contrived, a case in point being the bustard: the miniature of two birds, one flying over the other, is placed exactly at the point where the text informs us that it uses excrement as a defence against other birds while flying (Fig. 3). Further, on the occasions where

⁴⁸ For a detailed discussion of the Cup, its inscriptions, iconographical cycle and the interplay between the text and imagery see Contadini 1998.

⁴⁹ Hillenbrand 1996.

⁵⁰ Hillenbrand 1996, p. 66. See also Soucek 2003.

the text departs from its standard pattern to launch into a more extended narrative, the miniatures keep pace. The account of the unicorn, for example,⁵¹ contains two miniatures, one generic, the other specific, and only by relating them to the narrative can the difference be accounted for. The first, of a quadruped with no horn, precedes the text, which begins with a comparison with a known animal and leaves mention of the horn till later. In the second it is equipped with wings as well as its horn, reflecting the narrative shift towards the fantastic (Fig. 5). Recalling the punning complexity of the visual and textual interaction on the Palmer cup, we may also note that the lines of text framing this second miniature both begin with *šūra* (image), and that the text refers to images that, it is said, are to be found in the horn after it is split.⁵²

It might be objected that this line of argument fails to take account of the phenomenon of albums. Specifically, in Iran from the early 15th century there began the practice later taken up in Ottoman Turkey and Mughal India of creating albums of calligraphy, painting and drawing with many of the images being without any accompanying text.⁵³ These, it could be claimed, do provide evidence from the Islamic world itself for the progressive freeing of miniature paintings from their textual bonds. It is true that the whole into which the individual items have been incorporated sometimes includes a preface which usually relates in some manner to the choice of pictures,⁵⁴ but this does not weaken the claim, for the relationship between text and image in such instances is surely of a very different order from that of illustrated manuscripts, the preface being not an antecedent

basis for the pictures but a posterior accompaniment to them. Further, some albums contain paintings that have evidently been taken from a pre-existing manuscript with a text, from which they are now largely severed. In her eloquent assessment of the fragments of the 14th-century *Kalīla wa Dimna* that were remounted in an album made for the Safavid Shah Ṭahmāsp around 1560, Jill Cowen writes that ‘the Safavids considered paintings the *raison d’être* of their album’, and consequently, she suggests, pillaged the old manuscript for its images while disposing of its text.⁵⁵ There is, however, no evidence for such a history of the album, and it is just as likely that the miniatures were, as David Roxburgh proposes, taken from a damaged or already fragmentary manuscript.⁵⁶ We cannot, in short, detect here the sort of attitude that led much later to the dismantling of Islamic manuscripts in order to supply individual paintings for the Western market. It is difficult to imagine that books in good condition were, before the days of mercenary dealers, wilfully dismembered: it seems more probable that the paintings that found their way into albums either came from manuscripts in poor states of preservation or had never actually been included in the codex for which they were intended. Indeed, the Istanbul album referred to above contains three rejected folios from the magnificent *Shāhnāma* made for Shah Ṭahmāsp. The presence in albums of miniatures taken from books thus cannot be considered convincing evidence of an attitude that disassociated text from image, especially since they sometimes seek to reinforce their relationship to the manuscript tradition. We thus find that the relevant passages of text are added to remounted *Kalīla wa Dimna* paintings,⁵⁷ and there is also a case of a picture being mounted in such a way that the text on its reverse can still be seen.⁵⁸

Moreover, the majority of pictures contained in albums did not derive from pre-existing manuscripts at all, but were created from the outset as individual single-sheet works. The prefaces make clear that album paintings frequently began life individually as independent artefacts, and that their collection and placement in a codex was born of a desire to

⁵¹ There are in fact two separate sections based on unicorn lore in the *Nāʾi*, although only in the first is the beast explicitly identified as a unicorn (*kardunn*), whereas in the second, it is more ambiguously dubbed a *dābba* (animal), presumably because the book’s compiler was unaware that it should be identified with the unicorn. In spite of its more prosaic name, however, the *dābba* still occupies an important place in the *Nāʾi*, likened as it is to a Prince of beasts capable of purifying stagnant water for the benefit of his thirsty subjects. For the full implications of the rich narrative of the *dābba*, see Contadini 2003, pp. 21–27.

⁵² See Contadini 2003, esp. pp. 21–29. For more on the relationship between text and image in the *Nāʾi*, see also Contadini 2005.

⁵³ For the first two centuries of this tradition, see Roxburgh 2005.

⁵⁴ Roxburgh 2005, esp. pp. 31, 34–35, 193, 251.

⁵⁵ Cowen 1989, p. 8.

⁵⁶ Roxburgh 2005, p. 207.

⁵⁷ Roxburgh 2005, p. 207.

⁵⁸ Roxburgh 2005, pp. 203–05.

protect and preserve them. For example, the preface written by the calligrapher Mīr Sayyid Aḥmad in the album he compiled between 1564 and 1566 for the Safavid nobleman Amīr Ghayb Beg states that the calligraphics and images therein had been ‘continually discussed in his majesty’s [the Shah’s] paradisiacal assemblies and celestial gatherings’ as loose works, and were brought together and arranged in an album so that they could be viewed in a more convenient and orderly fashion.⁵⁹ Among these loose works may well have been pieces ultimately derived from manuscripts,⁶⁰ but what is significant here is that no mention is made in this preface nor indeed in any other of intact books being plundered for their material.

Being as they are images in their own right with no accompanying text, the majority of album paintings are, then, radically different in nature from those of the manuscript tradition, even if stylistically and iconographically related to them. Such pictures can be seen as small-scale, portable equivalents of mural paintings: they simply belong to another category of artistic production unrelated to that discussed here. True, in some cases they may be assembled in a meaningful order that can be regarded in a certain sense as narrative, but the fact that they can then be ‘read’ in some way still fails to bring them within the orbit of the ‘functional’ miniature cycles which are our present concern. They were not, in other words, conceived as miniatures that had at last gained their emancipation from the constraints of a surrounding narrative, but as free-standing entities to which questions about the nature of the text/image relationship are irrelevant. This becomes increasingly apparent the further one moves on in time. For example, the single-sheet works produced by Rizā-yi ‘Abbāsī and his contemporaries in Iran in the late-16th and early-17th centuries, which consist mainly of depictions of courtly individuals or couples engaged in genteel pastimes, some of them, no doubt, real personages,⁶¹ have moved so far from the classical Islamic narrative tradition both in subject matter and feel that they must be deemed a totally separate branch of

production from manuscript miniatures. Indeed, by privileging the figure as a subject in its own right and dispensing with any sort of text, these works might be regarded as being closer in intention to European figural studies and *fêtes champêtres*, especially since, stylistically and iconographically, they betray Western influences.⁶²

Earlier production, however, is dominated by manuscripts within which illustrations are intimately wedded to the text, thus rendering the notion of the emancipation of the image irrelevant. It is hoped that the present publication will help nurture and develop a type of approach to these which, I have argued, is both more appropriate and more productive, so that we can arrive at a more balanced estimation of what survives of a significant segment of Islamic art: early manuscript illustration. To do so means to shift perspective: not to downplay the search for iconographical relationships and derivations, but rather to avoid the kind of stylistic comparison of evolutionary intent that produces sterile implications of relative aesthetic rankings at the expense of placing the images not just in relation to a host text but also in the context of the cultural, political and economic world within which they were produced and consumed. It is, then, an approach that rejects the search for the visual masterpiece to be evaluated in isolation according to criteria on which the culture itself is largely silent, and instead insists on the relevance of context. With no loss to the critical evaluation of the visual domain, but rather a potential enrichment, it places centre-stage not the individual image but that complex and fascinating artefact, the manuscript. Such indeed is the approach found in what little survives of historical Islamic writings on painting, for the painter in these texts is never considered apart from other practitioners of the arts of the book. The relationship in the history of Islamic painting between image, text, and book

⁵⁹ Roxburgh 2005, p. 223.

⁶⁰ Roxburgh 2005, p. 231 states that only two of the album’s thirteen paintings may have come from manuscripts, although even this is not certain.

⁶¹ See Canby 1996b, esp. chapters 3, 4, 5, 9 and 10.

⁶² These include attempts at suggesting spatial recession and at modelling and shading. Sheila Canby, who has assessed these influences in detail, notes the importance of European prints as the means by which they were conveyed. (See Canby 1996a and Canby 1996b, pp. 17–18, 32–34.) A particularly striking example is a drawing by Rizā of a reclining semi-nude (*c.* 1595) which is based on Marcantonio Raimondi’s print after Raphael of the sleeping Cleopatra, for which see Canby 1996a, p. 50 and figs. 4–5; and Canby 1996b, pp. 33–34, fig. 1, and cat. no. 8.

is, then, an indelible one, and it will serve as one of the guiding factors underpinning the articles that make up this collection.

Another concern here—one again related to better and more balanced contextualisation—will be to overturn the traditional prejudice that views Arab painting as essentially no more than a preliminary stage in some kind of linear incremental development towards the glories of Safavid Persian art. In fact, what survives of early Persian painting exhibits a variety of stylistic inputs, not all of which are attested in later material, so that lines of development are difficult to map. We now have a rather better understanding of later Persian painting, which has been the object of considerable scholarly attention, but it still remains the case that the early periods have been relatively neglected, and one of the main topics requiring further investigation is the nature of the relationship of early Persian miniature painting to the Arab painting that preceded it. By considering Arab painting here both separately and in conjunction with early Persian painting, it should be possible to investigate in greater depth its characteristic contexts and the nature and sources of its painterly techniques. Such an endeavour requires that we also deal with illustrated scientific literature, hitherto largely excluded from art-historical consideration but fortunately now gradually being accorded greater weight.

But I do not wish to dwell in too parochial a way on the problematical history of a single discipline. Rather I would hope that it is not only art historians who will benefit from this change of approach, but also our colleagues in textual studies. This is not, I must stress, to erode the domains proper to each: the philological skills deployed in editing a text are the same whether the manuscripts are illustrated or not, and the study of iconographical borrowings can be pursued independently of any textual surround. But for the study of manuscripts as wholes, especially when aimed at furthering our knowledge of their cultural place in history, relating visual content to textual surround is, I suggest, not only of benefit to a study of the images. In attempting to understand the status of a text, and how it was received and interpreted by its public, much can surely be learned from what was illustrated, and how.

Hitherto, then, Islamic art historians have too often ignored the contributions that textual scholarship

could make; and textual historians are perhaps not always aware of the cultural significance of illustrated copies, nor of the fact that at least some art historians do deal with texts: there is every reason to think that both parties stand to gain from a pooling of ideas. Indeed, one might go so far as to suggest that historians of Islamic miniatures would benefit from grouping their material not into ‘schools of painting’ determined by date and region, as has been the tendency hitherto,⁶³ but rather by the texts they illustrate. Works such as Grabar’s monograph on the *Maqāmāt*⁶⁴ and O’Kane’s on the *Kalīla wa Dimna*⁶⁵ have demonstrated the benefits of this approach, which accords the relationship between text and image its due status and allows processes such as iconographical transmission and variation to be more clearly traced.

In all fairness, it should be said that the lack of an integrated approach in the past reflected the fact that various areas of potential contextualization were closed off because of lack of information. Although research continues and further information comes to light, it must be conceded that given, for example, the general paucity of archival material, this inhibiting situation is unlikely to improve dramatically, just as we are still afflicted by the problem that manuscripts are all too often mutilated and dispersed. Even those works that remain intact can, depending on the location or nature of the place in which they are kept, be difficult to access and view.⁶⁶ That being so, our knowledge of the nature and narrative of the source manuscripts may well remain limited. But it is nevertheless the case, as the following chapters demonstrate, that as well as gaining further interpretative insights into the images themselves, much may still be learned about both the cultural milieu

⁶³ As exemplified, for example, in Ettinghausen *Arab Painting* (Ettinghausen 1962) and Binyon, Wilkinson, and Gray 1933.

⁶⁴ Grabar 1984.

⁶⁵ O’Kane 2003. Although O’Kane’s work concentrates on late-14th-century Persian manuscripts, his approach is one guided by a common text rather than notions of a regional or chronological school, as he makes clear in his introduction (esp. p. 18).

⁶⁶ For some of the difficulties affecting the study of Islamic miniature painting and the often limited resources open to the scholar of this field, see Grabar 2000b, pp. 16–29.

of production and the complex textual traditions manipulated within them.

In extending our knowledge of a body of work hitherto insufficiently studied, they also underline how unjustified was Martin's omission of 'Arab' from his title. But the term is not without snags. Grabar had already reflected upon criteria and nomenclature in *The Mediation of Ornament*, and here we may also refer, more specifically, to the difficulties revealed by Ettinghausen, for whom the concept 'Arab painting', if not problematic, was certainly not straightforward. Dismissing a crude ethnic definition, he stresses the complex melting-pot character of the world of culture, but in so doing is in effect obliged to retreat to the somewhat arbitrary notion of a chronologically cut segment of 'Islamic' civilization within which Arabic retained its pre-eminence. However, the relevance of a linguistic criterion to painting is by no means clear, and further cracks appear with attempts to separate off most of Iran (tenaciously preserving Sasanian traditions), to invoke the notion of 'Arab-Muslim art', or to speak in terms of an 'Irano-Iraqi style'. Hardly surprising, then, that Grabar should find it necessary to critique conventional terminology and find it lacking. The title of our proceedings had, though, already been formulated, and however methodologically open to objection the phrase 'Arab painting' might be, we are at least agreed that the materials gathered for scrutiny under this rubric contain, if by no means all, at least a representative sample of a fascinating corpus of illustrated manuscripts that fully deserves independent consideration.

Although evidently born of the desire to transcend inherited methodological limitations in its exploration of this corpus, the present work is also inevitably of its time, inscribed within the recent stages of the history of ideas. Islamic art history is still articulated, essentially, in relation to the approaches and ideologies whence derive our interpretations of Western art, and is still produced overwhelmingly by scholars from or trained in the West, however suspicious of orientalist biases they may be. But at least it can now claim that by abandoning the isolation of images for aesthetic contemplation in favour of a more sensitive appreciation of the whole of which they form a part it allows for richer interpretations. At the same time, the increasing alertness to the intellectual, material and political environment that is fostered by fuller consideration of the factors controlling the produc-

tion and consumption of illustrated manuscripts should provide a securer footing for our attempts to arrive at a sympathetic and better informed understanding of this hitherto somewhat neglected body of material.

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