

## Chapter 59: Minor Arts

### A

Anyone embarking on the study of Muslim arts would, during the course of his investigation and research, have to answer three fundamental questions satisfactorily.

- (1) What is the reason for the surprising unity of style which we observe in works of art throughout the Muslim countries during a certain period?
- (2) Why is it that a period of almost hectic artistic activity is followed, sometimes almost immediately, by qualitative decline and technical decadence?
- (3) What is the reason for the remarkable success achieved by the Muslims in the domain of minor arts?

The answers to the first two questions rest on an appreciation of the relationship which existed between the artists of the Muslim countries and the rulers thereof.

The development of Muslim arts—major or minor—is related inalienably to the rise and fall of powerful dynasties of rulers. Every dynasty invited to its Court craftsmen and artists from all over the land under its sway. If an invitation was not enough, force was sometimes employed to compel their appearance. Under the Umayyads, the 'Abbasids, and the Fatimids, therefore, artists flocked to Damascus, Baghdad, and Cairo which alternately became centers of artistic activity, learning, and letters. Artistic traditions were developed and techniques perfected under the patronage of the rulers and the aristocrats. The middle class, obviously, had no say in the matter, and the artists kept themselves aloof from the masses.

As a particular dynasty fell from power and another emerged as its successor all the artists flocked to the new center of patronage, and overnight, as it were, the new dynasty “at one stroke inherited an artistic tradition that had been matured elsewhere.” The transport of works of art themselves over great distances also helped to spread style and technique.

This answers more or less the first question. The second question is, perhaps, easier to answer. Since

the development of arts was linked primarily with the fortunes of ruling dynasties, as soon as political conditions were disturbed at their center of activity, the artists deserted it and proceeded to other centers to put their fortunes to the stake. If a new dynasty arose which was capable of patronizing the artists and maintaining the artistic tradition, the artists' activity continued unabated, but if there was a period of chaos or political disturbance spread over a considerably wide area, artistic traditions had a tendency to evaporate into thin air. The artists deprived of royal patronage could not produce great works of art and, thus, in a few years the tradition built up by conditions of stability and prosperity would lose force, and products of art suffer qualitatively. It may be observed that just as the decline of artistic traditions was amazingly swift, the stabilizing of artistic activity was also correspondingly quick. Now for the third question.

The line of demarcation between arts and crafts is admittedly fine. It necessarily follows that it is finer still between major and minor arts.

In the case of Muslim minor arts there is another factor which has to be taken into account, if we are to assess correctly the value and worth of the contribution made by the Muslims in this domain.

On account of certain restrictions imposed upon Fine Arts even where State patronage was available, there existed a lurking suspicion in the mind of the artist that he was working contrary to the precepts of religion. Since religion has always been a living force and a vital factor governing human activity, especially in the East, artists in Muslim countries were forced to adapt themselves to the conditions created by theological restrictions on Fine Arts and to devote themselves to the minor arts, such as calligraphy, carpet-making, wood-carving, etc. This is why we find that the Muslim peoples have achieved such remarkable success in the minor arts. The inspiration which would have molded works of Fine Arts was diverted into other channels. The Muslims, therefore, developed crafts indicative of such exquisite skill, superb craftsmanship, and artistic sensibility as is not to be found among the artists of any other nation, race, or country.

As a matter of fact, arabesque—a minor art of great importance—derives its name from those who originated and practiced it with great skill—the Arabs. Before we proceed to discuss in detail the phases of the various minor arts it would perhaps be expedient to take note of another remarkable phenomenon related to artistic activity in Muslim countries.

It is generally believed that the fall of the 'Abbasids and the destruction of the Caliphate as a symbol of authority and a pivot of political sanction led almost immediately to qualitative decadence in the realm of major and minor arts. This is not the whole truth. As a matter of fact, the fall of the 'Abbasids did lead—as was usual in Muslim countries with the fall of a powerful dynasty—to qualitative decadence in the realm of art for some time immediately after the destruction of the Caliphate.

However, the opening up of the trade routes by the Mongols, the diffusion of cultural and artistic traditions generally, and the establishment of powerful dynasties which inherited, as it were, the cultural

and the artistic legacy of the 'Abbasid Caliphate, resulted after a century or so in the creation of conditions which were favorable to the birth of new ideas in the domain of art and were also responsible for the continuity of new artistic traditions which had come into being due to the diffusion of cultures and the admixture of civilizations as a direct result of the Mongol invasion.

This remarkable phenomenon of the development of artistic traditions can be observed to be occurring almost simultaneously under the Mughul rulers of India (933–1119/1526–1707), under the Safawids in Persia (908–1052/1502–1642), and the Ottoman Kings in Turkey during their most glorious period (768–1058/1360–1648).

## **B**

Of the leading minor arts we shall consider one by one the following: (1) calligraphy and illumination, (2) book-binding, (3) pottery, (4) textiles and rugs, (5) wood-carving, ivory and bone-carving, and (6) metal-work, glass, and crystal.

### **1. Calligraphy and Illumination**

The art of calligraphy or artistic writing can be divided into two principal types: (a) the Kufic, deriving its name from Kiifah where it was probably first used and (b) the naskh.

The Muslims have shown themselves to be worthy practitioners of both types. The earliest copy of the Qur'an which has come down to us is in Kufic characters. This style of calligraphy with angular letters remained popular for many centuries amongst the Islamic peoples.

After the fifth/eleventh century the Kufic script gave place everywhere almost invariably to naskh with rounded letters in sharp contrast to the angularities of the Kufic script.

The Muslim genius in Spain, having come in contact with Western influence, gave birth to another distinctive school of calligraphy known as Maghribi (western). This school is also known as Cordovan.

In Iran, after the Islamic conquest, the indigenous artists cultivated the scripts adopted by the Arabs and also the methods of illuminations which were then popular in other Muslim countries. The Iranian calligraphers, under the Great Saljugs, however, generally emphasized in their calligraphy the vertical as distinguished from the horizontal. The type of illumination and calligraphy found under the Saljugs is varied, rich, and extremely beautiful since the Iranian genius could fall back upon the tradition of Mani. Maui (third century A.D.) himself was reputed as an excellent painter, but his disciples were also well known for beautiful illumination and charming calligraphy. Specimens of the works of Mani's followers have been unearthed in Central Asia in the Turfan basin and it has become abundantly clear that the Iranian calligraphists and artists gave free reign to their indigenous genius while adapting the Arabic script and method of calligraphy.

The most beautifully illuminated copy of the Qur'an of this period was prepared by Abu al-Qasim in the fifth/eleventh century. It is preserved in the British Museum.

It was perhaps during the sixth/thirteenth century that a new school of writing was developed in Iran which was to be known as ta'liq: the characters in this type of writing tend to slope downward from right to left. Ta'liq flourished but naskh also remained in use especially in religious texts.

It is the irony of fate that the descendants of Hulagu, who was responsible for massacring millions of Muslims and killing the last 'Abbasid Caliph, became the patrons of calligraphy when they embraced Islam.

These convert kings known as 11-Khans of Persia had many fine works executed under their patronage. Uljaitu Khuda Bandah Muhammad was one of the most celebrated patrons of this art.

It was perhaps during the regime of 11-Khans (654-750/1256-1349) that illuminated pages of books were for the first time decorated with abstract ornamental designs. This may have been due to Chinese influence which permeated painting, and since calligraphy was considered to be a branch of painting, it was bound to be affected thereby. The illuminated manuscripts of this period show geometrical compositions of great beauty and charm, the favorite colors being gold and blue. It may be remembered that the use of gold-dust was a peculiar feature of the book-illuminations produced by Mani's followers. There is no doubt that the Iranian artists never forgot their national heritage and used the background colors-mainly gold and blue-in sharp contrast to other colors in the foreground with great dexterity and sensibility.

It was during the rule of Timilrids in Iran that calligraphy really came into its own. The princes of the House of Timur were polished diplomats, skillful administrators, and celebrated devotees of Fine Arts. Their possessions were vast and the talent which mustered to their courts was correspondingly impressive. It was during their regime that the art of calligraphy underwent a revolutionary change and the Nasta'liq was invented which is a highly developed type of writing combining the elegance, vigor, and charm of both Naskh and Ta'liq.

It is generally stated that Mir'Ali of Tabriz was the inventor of this type of writing, but most probably his calligraphy was the culmination of the fusion of the two types, namely, Naskh and Ta'liq-a process which must have been going on for a very long time. One of the princes of the House of Timor, namely, Sultan Husain, is justly celebrated for being one of the greatest patrons of arts and learning. Sultan 'Ali Meshedi, the famous calligraphist, was a protégé of his. Other celebrated calligraphers of the period were Ja'far of Tabriz, 'Abd al-Karim, and Sultan Ibrahim (son of 4h rah Rukh). The story goes that Sultan Ibrahim was capable of writing in six different styles. A copy of the Qur'an written by him in 828(1424 is preserved in the shrine of Imam Rida' (Meshed, Iran).

In the domain of illumination also certain changes occurred after the Mongol invasion. Arabesque was interlaced with figures of grotesque Chinese dragons and fantastic imaginary plants. The use of gold-a

remnant of the Sassanian tradition—however, remained a constant feature.

Calligraphy and illumination as developed under the patronage of the Timarids continued to flourish also under the Safawids, who were contemporaries of the Great Mughuls and who gave to India the gift of miniature painting. One of the most famous calligraphers of the Safawid period was Mir 'Ali of Herat who prepared a manuscript of one of Jami's famous Mathnawis.

The art of the book—calligraphy and illumination—found its most worthy and celebrated exponent in Mir 'Imad Katib whose name for all practical purposes is even today synonymous with elegance, charm, and beauty of writing. He settled in Ispahan in 1008/1599 and copied for Shah 'Abbas many manuscripts revealing superb skill and unique craftsmanship. His rival 'Ali Rida' 'Abbasi—not to be confused with a painter of the same name, well known for his devotion to the Chinese technique of painting—also executed many works of beauty and elegance.

Illumination painted in gold also came into its own under the Safawids and reached the culminating point of the development of the Sassanian tradition. Mahmud, a celebrated painter and calligraphist of Bukhara, appended to his signature the cognomen Mudhahhib. Sikandar Munshi, the celebrated historian of the Safawid princes, opines that “Hasan Baghdadi was unmatched, unsurpassed, and unique in his time in the art of gilding. In short, he brought the art of gilding almost to a miracle ... and the gilding of Bari cannot bear comparison with his minute and fine work.”

Several other techniques practiced by Safawid artists may here be named: stenciling in which the design emerges in the form of light or dark silhouette, de coupe work in which the design is cut out and then pasted on colored ground, generally blue.

Turkish calligraphists also achieved distinction but, as compared with the Iranians, their contribution does not appear to be very significant.

## **2. Book-binding**

It is obvious that book-binder had played a very important role in the preservation of valuable manuscripts before the press made it possible to produce mass duplicates of valuable works. It is quite possible that the bookseller was also the book-binder because it was one of his duties to ensure that valuable manuscripts are not destroyed or damaged by the passage of time. This view is strengthened by the fact that the word warraq means both a book-binder and a bookseller.

The earliest known book-covers of the Muslim period were made by Egyptian artists and we may safely assert that they may be dated from the second/eighth to the fifth/eleventh century.

Book-binding also reached its zenith under the Timurids. The artists of the Herat Academy executed leather work of great beauty and distinction, leather being the ideal material for book-binding.

The exterior of the cover generally shows stamped decoration with Iranian landscape, Chinese motifs, and arabesque interlacing.

Under the Safawids the book-covers were more decorative, and gold was used more abundantly. Gilded arabesque was interlaced with very fine and beautifully executed floral scrolls and Chinese cloud bands. Birds and animals were also represented, but, generally speaking, it was arabesque interlacing which was more emphasized.

Under the Safawids painted and lacquered book-binding also became the rage of the day. The process was as follows. The covers which were to be painted were given a coat of very fine plaster or gesso and then a thin layer of lacquer. This constituted the background for watercolor painting. Again, the watercolor was given several layers of lacquer so that climatic changes may not prove damaging to a fine work of art.

Ustad Muhammad was one of the most notable book-binders who painted lacquer covers. The Cartier Collection in Paris and the Royal Asiatic Society, London, possess some very beautiful examples of lacquered book-binding.

The Turkish artists, as usual, followed in the footsteps of their Persian brethren in book-binding, but, though their work was beautiful, it bore no comparison with the original and polished products of Iranian craftsmen.

In concluding this short note on calligraphy and book-binding, it is necessary to point out that book-binding and illumination in the West is indebted to the East. The Italian painters, book-binders, and artists, especially in Venice in the late ninth/fifteenth and tenth/sixteenth centuries, imitated Eastern technique especially that of the Iranian craftsmen, and through them many Oriental motifs and decorative features were introduced in the West, the book-binding of which today is the envy of the East.

### **3. Pottery**

There seems to be no doubt that Mesopotamia or the "Land lying between the two rivers" was the most important center of the potter's art even in the most ancient times. In the ancient kingdoms of Assyria and Babylon the potters were at their best, especially when using what is commonly termed as the "naturalistic style." The Parthians (249 B. C. to 226 A. D.) whose language is known as Pahlawi, the forerunner of modern Persian, and the Sassanians (226-641 A. D.) who were justly celebrated for the grandeur of their architecture and the splendor of their monuments and inscriptions, liked their artists to express themselves in abstract patterns. Mr. Arthur Lane in his monograph, *Early Islamic Pottery*, would have it that the Assyrian and Babylonian traditions almost died out after the Sassanian times and that Islamic pottery developed in accordance with the technique current in the Mediterranean area and not with that in the Asiatic hinterland. It is difficult to agree completely with this assessment of the Near

Eastern influences as they contributed to the development of pottery in Muslim countries because when pottery came into its own in the third/ninth century it was in Mesopotamia that it found its most skillful exponents and designers.

Pottery fragments found in Samarra show signs of great skill and craftsmanship. Not only the variety of the different specimens of the potter's art found at Samarra is interesting and significant but it so appears that there were certain secrets pertaining to the manufacture of luster pottery which were known only to the Mesopotamian potters. These closely guarded secrets, however, became common property when the Mesopotamian potters migrated to the Courts of the Fatimid Sultans. By a curious anomaly of fate the descendants of these immigrant artists again came to Persia after the collapse of the Fatimids and brought to this country a skill which had been vastly improved in the congenial atmosphere of Egypt under the Fatimids from 359–567/969–1171.

The conquest of the Near East by the Arabs was responsible for the evolution of a new technique of the potter's art. In the beginning the Muslim potters followed in the footsteps of the local artists but, in due course of time, they became the originators of new and far more elegant and beautiful varieties of pottery.

Under the 'Abbasids, Iranian potters from the second/eighth to the fourth/ tenth century achieved astounding success in their art and their products revealed such richness of pattern, warmth of color, and beauty of design as were never seen earlier. Usually designs were painted under a transparent glaze or over an opaque one. In the former case, the painting was usually over white or dark slips. Nishapor was a great center of this branch of art and excavations made reveal that even before the advent of the Saljids, the potter's art had achieved maturity if not that consummate elegance which was to characterize the products of the Saljuq period.

The greatest contribution of the Muslim potters is the luster technique. It would appear that the Muslim potters were infatuated with the patterns created by light—"light mysteriously refracted by their luster pigment; light playing over a carved or subtly modelled surface; light gleaming through the glazed windows pierced in the walls of a vessel or through the translucent material itself," as Arthur Lane would have it.<sup>1</sup>

Almost all historians suggest that it was the Chinese porcelain or pottery which inspired the Muslim artists, but it may be pointed out that, whereas the art of China is a little stilted and stiff, the pottery of the Muslims is at once "easy, harmonious and well bred."<sup>2</sup>

After Nishapour it was Kashan which became the center of the activity of the potters of the Saljiq period. It was here that the potters gradually learnt the art of manufacturing wall-tiles painted in luster. The origin of luster painting is uncertain, but it would appear that it was first used in Egypt in decorating glass. Even if we concede that the Iranian artists of Kashan are indebted to Egyptian artists it does not detract from the originality and brilliance of their technique in manufacturing glazed tiles. If we compare

the specimens of Egyptian pottery found in Fustat (it was at the same time a city of some importance under the Fatimid rulers) with Iranian pottery and glazed tiles, we arrive at the conclusion that the Iranian artists showed greater skill in execution and mature sense of color.

The glazed tiles of Persia, especially of Kashan, became so celebrated that the word Kashi is now a synonym for a glazed tile. The most beautiful works were executed by the members of one single family (602–735/1205–1334). Apart from tiles the Kashan luster-ware is justifiably praised for technical perfection. The decoration is typically Persian—flowers and birds on the wings and interlaced arabesque. After the Mongol invasion, Mongol hats, Chinese dragons and lotus flowers also appear as a natural consequence of the fusion of the traditions of Chinese and Iranian arts. The three mihrabs in the sanctuary of Imam Rida<sup>1</sup> at Meshed are perhaps the most elegant examples of the Iranian artists' skill so far as glazed tiles are concerned. These were made by Muhammad abi Tahir.

During the Mongol period lustered tiles were commonly used for the decoration of public buildings, mosques, tombs, and the houses of the great and the rich. Some of these tiles are cross-shaped, some rectangular, and some in the form of stars. It was during this period that another technique was evolved, viz., and the faience mosaic, which became very popular.

The technique of the Mongol era was followed by the artists of the Timurid period, but it may be observed that almost all types of pottery had suffered qualitatively. It may be due to the fact that the Chinese influence being predominant during this period, the artists, instead of reviving the indigenous traditions, tried to imitate specimens of art imported into Iran.

During the Safawid period Iranian artists continued to imitate the Chinese ware and the imitation was sometimes so skillful that the copy was mistaken for the original. Even the decorations consisted of Chinese landscape with typical birds, animals, and foliage, especially legendary dragons and serpents.

In the time of Shah 'Abbas the Great the art of lustre-painting, however, was revived by the potters of Isfahan. Typically Iranian decoration came into vogue. Iranian landscape with birds, animals, and foliage came into its own. The products of these Isfahani potters show great originality and can be clearly distinguished from the imitations of Chinese pottery, especially in porcelain.

Turkish and Egyptian potters also continued to execute beautiful works of art, but there is no doubt that supremacy rested with the Iranian artists.

Gradually, industrialized Europe excelled the East even in the field of pottery, and the Persian market was flooded with white earthenware from Staffordshire.

#### **4. Textiles and Rugs**

**(a) Textiles under the `Abbasids, Tulunids, and the Fatimids of Egypt (second/ eighth to sixth/twelfth century).**—When the Arabs conquered Egypt in 21/ 641, the weaver's art began to undergo

a change of great artistic significance. In the early stages, the Copts, who were really very skillful technicians and weavers, were pressed into the service of the Arab Caliphs and noblemen. They taught and practiced the weaver's art in royal factories, known technically as Tiraz factories. It is necessary to point out at this juncture that the term "Tiraz" was used for (i) bands containing woven or embroidered inscriptions, (ii) embroidered garments and clothes, and (iii) institutions where such garments were manufactured. Unless this three-fold significance of the word "Tiraz" is kept in view, one is liable to get confused.

The importance of the Tiraz factories may be gauged from the fact that many of these were situated in the very homes of the Caliphs—palaces and State mansions.

The Tiraz factories, having been established in Egypt and working under the skillful guidance of the Copts, produced linens and silks of very fine quality. The city Tinnis near Port Said had 5,000 looms and was justly celebrated for producing fabrics of great excellence, such as Kasab, Bukalimun: the former was used generally for turbans and the latter with amazingly changing colors for saddle cloth and for covering the litters for the Caliphs. Every year the 'Abbasid Caliphs sent a covering for the Ka'bah at Mecca known technically as Aiswah manufactured by the craftsmen of the Royal factories established in Tuna. Another city famous for its silks was Dabiqi; the term "Dabiqi" is mentioned very often in Persian lyrics and Arabic odes. Fustat or old Cairo was also a celebrated center of the weaver's art.

During the regime of the Fatimids, the Egyptian craftsmen surpassed their Coptic masters. The linens and silks of the Fatimid period became so elegant and fine that they were exported to all parts of the civilized world. Generally speaking, the Fatimid artists followed the artists of the 'Abbasid regime in the sense that they used either geometrical patterns or figures of animals for decorative purposes, although the Kilfic writing was also observed flanking the decorated pattern. When naskh replaced the Kilfic script, the linen and silk fabrics were decorated with arabesque motifs and the cursive writing of the naskh.

The linen textiles on which decorations and inscriptions were painted or stamped were even more skillfully manufactured. These inscriptions were occasionally in liquid gold, again reminding us that the Sassanian traditions were very strong even under the Fatimids. The technique of stamping and printing decorations on fabrics was developed to such an extent by the Fatimid artists that it spread to Europe, and the Germans showed great skill in imitating the artistic patterns and motifs of the Egyptian Muslims.

**(b) Textiles of the Ayyubid and Mamluk Dynasties.**—From the sixth/twelfth to the eighth/fourteenth century, the weaver's art continued to flourish but signs of decline were occasionally noticed. As a matter of fact, the decorations of this period are simple as compared with the superbly executed Fatimid, embroideries in polychrome silk or gold thread.

Stamping and printing were also practiced in accordance with the traditions inherited by the artists. There was a departure in the manufacture of silk which deserves mention. During this period the silk fabric was usually woven with a shuttle on a draw-loom in sharp contradistinction to garments and

fabrics with tapestry-woven decorations wherein the weft threads of the designs were introduced with a bobbin or a needle. With the advent of the Mongols and even earlier, the Chinese technique began to influence the weaver's art. It would appear that the Mamluk Sultans of Egypt especially favored the Chinese style of decoration.

**(c) Iranian Textiles**—When Tiraz factories were established throughout the territorial possessions of the Caliphs, Iran was no exception. As a matter of fact, the Iranian craftsmen who had inherited the traditional skill of the Sassanian craftsmen very soon adapted themselves to the new conditions and began to produce incomparable works of art. During the earlier period Merv and Nishapur housed famous Tiraz factories.

The Iranian artists of these cities produced silk textiles which appear to have been influenced by the fusion of many artistic traditions—the Sassanian, the Coptic, and the Egyptian. The use of the gold thread is certainly reminiscent of the Sassanian traditions, while the decorative patterns bespeak of Coptic influences. History is curiously silent about the place occupied by Samarqand so far as textiles are concerned, but in literary works we find many allusions to the beautiful fabrics, silks and linens, woven in this great city which witnessed the emergence of the Persian renaissance and which under the princes of the House of Saman became a great center of intellectual activity, learning, and cultural movements.

Under the Great Saljuqs, the Iranian artists proceeded from strength to strength. There was a revival of almost all crafts and minor arts, and Rayy during this period became the most celebrated weaving center. The Sassanian tradition lost its hold, and, slowly but steadily, arabesque motifs of Islamic origin with finely executed scrolls came into their own.

It would appear that Baghdad also was a famous center of the weaver's art during this period, since Marco Polo (seventh/thirteenth century) praises the silks, linens, and gold brocades of Baghdad and Mosul. Allusions in works of literature would tend to show that weavers in this period had spread all over the territorial possessions of the Saljuqs: it has been proved beyond any shadow of doubt that many fine brocades, silk fabrics, and linens preserved in European museums were manufactured in Asia Minor, especially at Qunyah.

It is an admitted fact that the Mongol invaders of Persia patronized the craftsmen and the artisans and massacred the learned and the erudite, considering the latter as useless appendages of civilized life. Amazingly, however, very few Iranian textiles can be assigned with any amount of certainty to the Mongol or Timirid period. M. S. Dimand has pointed out that many brocades attributed to Iran by Falke are most likely of Spanish origin. The matter, however, is not free from doubt. All that we can assert safely is that the weavers continued to flourish under the Mongols and Timirids; unfortunately, however, very few genuine fabrics manufactured by them have been preserved.

As with other branches of art, Iranian weaving blossomed forth into its full splendor under the Safawids who had become infatuated with craftsmanship of all types except that of words since poetry excluding

the elegy was looked at askance by them. Safawid silks were primarily of three types: (i) plain silks, (ii) silk brocades, and (iii) silk velvets. All the three types were most elegant and were used commonly for the garments of the rich, as hangings and curtains of palaces, and as gifts from the Safawid princes to those who deserved them or who had the good fortune of being present when the kings and princes were in their high spirits during festivities or celebrations.

The decoration of these fabrics is almost typically Iranian—animals moving about gracefully, birds on the wings or perched on branches and foliage moving or still as in breathless suspense. The Iranian artists painted even scenes taken from the famous Persian romances or the epic of epics, the Shahnameh. Nizami seems to have been one of the most favorite authors; incidents from the stories that he weaves have been interwoven by the weavers into silks and fabrics manufactured for their royal patrons and generous nobles. Linens, brocades, and velvets of this period are to be found in many museums all over the world and appear amazingly fresh, spick and span, glowing with life, with warm and soft colors.

Under Shah `Abbas the Great who was a generous patron of all Fine Arts, artists manufactured textiles of great beauty in Yazd and Kashan. Some of these fabrics have come down to us and we know also the names of some artists, for example, Ghiyath and his son. All critics and historians of art agree—and it is very refreshing to observe this agreement—that the velvets and the brocades manufactured under the Safawids, especially during the reign of Shah `Abbas, constituted the most glorious fabrics ever produced in any part of the world.

Under the Safawids the Iranian artists also developed the art of embroidering and printing cottons. Many specimens of block-printed cotton hangings known technically as *galamkar* have come down to us and it appears that they were made most probably in Isfahan, Hamadan, and Yazd.

**(d) Turkish Textiles and Embroideries.**—The fabrics of the Ottoman period consisted mainly of finely made brocades and velvets, but it may be observed that the decoration of these fabrics is far less skillful and varied than of those manufactured by the Iranian or Egyptian artists. The Turkish artists almost invariably confined themselves to floral and geometrical patterns. However, Turkish textiles are important in the sense that the artists of Venice imitated the Turkish craftsmen and, slowly but steadily, this art spread to Europe via Italy.

Turkish artists were very fond of embroidering handkerchiefs and towels, and it is obvious that they were used merely for decoration or ceremonial purposes. Most of them belong to the twelfth/eighteenth and thirteenth/ nineteenth centuries.

**(e) Indian Textiles.**—The Indian artists of antiquity were justly celebrated for manufacturing cotton muslin so fine as to be considered miraculous.

When the weaver's art came into its own under the Moghuls, both Iranian and Hindu motifs became clearly discernible in fabrics manufactured in India. During the period of Shah Jahan very fine velvet was produced. The decoration consisted primarily of floral scrolls.

Silk brocades were the specialty of the Indian artists under the Moghuls. We know on undisputable authority of Abu al-Fall and others that Lahore, Aurangabad, Benares, and Ahmedabad were great weaving centers. Silk brocades were very skillfully designed with vivid colors and abundant use of gold. The elegant saris and head-dresses and sashes (shash) manufactured during the Moghul period have been justifiably claimed to be specimens of the finest weaving in the world: some of them are to this day preserved in museums.

Europe knows Indian textiles most probably through Kashmir shawls, some of them embroidered and others woven.

The art of block-printing and resist-dyeing reached its zenith under the Moghuls. Specimens of printed cotton known to Europe as palampores and pintados were beautifully designed and executed with great skill and ingenuity.

**(f) Rugs**—Although fragments of rugs have been excavated at Fustat in Egypt which would show that rug-making was very well known to the Egyptian artists, yet there is no doubt that it was only with the advent of the Saljugs that fine rugs were manufactured for the first time. Marco Polo, who passed through Asia Minor in 669/1270, informs us that the most elegant rugs in the world were made by Greek and Armenian artists under royal patronage. It is surprising, indeed, that the Saljugs Turks, barbarian by origin, were responsible for reviving many major and minor arts throughout their territorial possessions. The Saljug rugs have simple decorative patterns—interlacing arabesque, geometrical figures, and medallions.

As is the case with textiles, very few rugs of the Timurid and Mongol periods have come down to us, but if we closely observe the rugs as represented in miniature paintings and as described by poets, we have to concede that the art of rug-making had achieved considerable maturity under the Timirids. As a matter of fact, spring with all its beauty, colors, and abundance of flowers and foliage is described by the poets as inferior to the decorated rugs found in royal palaces.

The finest Iranian rugs were manufactured admittedly under the Safawids. Tabriz was the center of Iranian arts and crafts and it was here that the weavers of Kashan, Hamadan and Herat would learn the craft of rug making and go back to their homes to spread this artistic activity throughout the possessions of the Safawids.

The most celebrated types of rugs manufactured under the Safawids may be grouped as follows: (i) medallion and animal rugs with arabesque and floral designs, (ii) woolen rugs with animal figures drawn, with the greatest skill, realistically and not in stilted conventional manner, (iii) silk rugs, (iv) rugs with floral designs, and (v) vase rugs.

Under the Moghuls rug-making or carpet-making in India became very favorite with kings and princes and Abu al-Fadl, eulogizing Akbar, writes that “all kinds of carpet weavers have settled here and drive a flourishing trade. These are found in every town, especially in Agra, Fatehpur, and Lahore.”

Some of the Moghul rugs have been preserved, particularly those in the collection of the Maharajah of Jaipur. Dimand is of opinion that “in technical perfection the Indian weavers of the time of Shah Jehan often surpassed their Iranian Masters.”

Turkish rugs are mainly of two kinds, (a) manufactured by royal factories with all facilities attendant thereupon, (b) made by ordinary villagers and peasants who occasionally grouped themselves with industrial ends in view. The design of the Turkish rug is mainly geometrical and this characteristic can be traced even in the peasants' productions right from the tenth/sixteenth to the thirteenth/nineteenth century.

Some time back a series of beautifully designed rugs of different sizes with floral patterns was wrongly attributed to the skill of Damascus craftsmen, but recent research has established beyond any shadow of doubt that these rugs are the products of Turkish looms; many technical specimens of these are to be found in the Metropolitan Museum. Rugs bearing floral patterns and designs may safely be assigned to Court manufactories, especially those established by Sulaiman (906–974/1500–1566) in Constantinople or Brusa (Asia Minor). Obviously, the rugs made by the peasants are comparatively coarse and their patterns and designs clearly show that the sensibility of the designers was not fully developed.

There is no doubt that these Turkish rugs, whether manufactured by artists attached to the Court or by peasants, are, on the whole, inferior to the Persian rugs of the Safawid period which were brilliantly conceived and superbly executed as works of art.

## **5. Wood-carving, and Ivory and Bone-carving**

**(a) Wood-carving.**—There is no doubt that the Muslim artists during the early centuries of Islam developed the art of wood-carving under Hellenistic and Sassanian influence.

The most celebrated specimen of wood-carving produced during the early 'Abbasid regime is the prayer pulpit in the mosque of Qairawan situated in North Africa which, it would appear, was brought from Baghdad during the third/ninth century along with some lustered tiles by some notables of the Aghlabid dynasty. This pulpit contains panels decorated with geometrical patterns and designs. It is regarded as a masterpiece of wood-carving of the Baghdad School and was most probably executed under the patronage of Harun, the `Abbasid Caliph. The abstract art of modern times would benefit to a great extent if its exponents study carefully the fine patterns and designs executed during the early 'Abbasid period.

Gradually, the `Abbasid artists developed a style of their own and freed themselves from the fetters imposed upon them by the Sassanian and Hellenistic conventions. The 'Abbasid style of decoration was imitated by the Egyptian artists under the Tulunids (324–359/935–969) and it became very popular in all parts of Egypt, especially in Cairo.

The craftsmen of Egypt, however, gradually improved upon the `Abbasid technique and evolved out a

style of their own in the fourth/tenth century. The motifs “were more deeply undercut and there was a tendency towards roundness.”

It is extremely difficult to estimate the part played by the ancient crafts and arts of Egypt in the development of wood-carving by the Egyptian artists. After all Egypt had inherited artistic traditions of great significance and value and it would perhaps be safe to assert that the artists must have benefited from the heritage of ancient Egypt.

With the passage of time geometrical patterns gave way to other types of decoration, namely, the carving of animal figures and arabesque scrolls; the devotion to detail in these works is amazing and is indicative both of the skill of the artist and of his painstaking labor.

Some of the panels of wood made during the Fatimid regime are magnificently carved and depict typically Egyptian scenes; the figures of birds or animals are emphasized and this is but natural because the ancient Egyptians worshipped certain birds and animals as gods and goddesses.

During the Ayyubid period the Fatimid tradition continued to influence wood-carving with the difference that arabesque scrolls became more delicate, fine, and complicated, and nasj h replaced Kiiific inscriptions. With the passage of time the devotion to detail which has already been noticed was emphasized still further. It was in this period that various valuable types of wood including ebony came into use.

The art of carving in Egypt declined in the ninth/fifteenth century.

The wood-carver's art in Iran showed signs of considerable maturity even during the regime of Mahmnd of Ghaznah; a door from his tomb has been preserved, ironically enough, in the Museum at Agra. This door reveals that the Iranian artists evolved a style of their own and arranged the deep undercutting of the ornament in several planes. This characteristic feature is undoubtedly of Iranian origin.

Wood-carvings of the Saljug period have, unfortunately, not come down to us in sufficient quantity to enable us to evaluate their artistic worth but it may be safely asserted that the artists of Asia Minor during the sixth/twelfth and seventh/thirteenth centuries produced works of very high quality the decoration of which compared favorably with that of the Egyptian and the Syrian artists.

Wood-carvings pertaining to the early Mongol period are also very rare but there is no doubt that in the second half of the eighth/fourteenth century the Iranian artists, especially in Western Turkestan, achieved a technical perfection which leaves nothing to be desired.

The art flourished for some time under the Safawids but in the eleventh/ seventeenth and the twelfth/eighteenth centuries signs of decline were noticeable: during this period the panels were painted and lacquered, not carved.

**(b) Ivory and Bone-carving.**—Ivory and bone-carving of the early Islamic period has been found at

various places in Egypt, especially in old Cairo, and shows that Coptic traditions influenced the work of the earlier artists to a large extent. Artists flourished under the Fatimid, Ayyubid, and Mamluk dynasties. Decoration during this period was very elaborate and finely executed.

Sicilian ivory-work has also been preserved in certain museums and it reveals a fusion of the Eastern and Western styles. The decorative motifs are mainly arabesque, human figures, animals, birds on the wings and perched on the branches of trees with dark somber and sober outlines and occasional flashes of vivid red, bright violet, blue, and dazzling gold.

## 6. Metal-work, Glass and Crystal

**(a) Metal-work.**—The Sassanian tradition in Iran was so strong that the earlier products of Muslims, particularly silver and gold vessels, have been attributed mistakenly to the artists of the Sassanian era. However, it is easy enough to distinguish earlier Islamic metal-work from the Sassanian because vessels which are decorated with Kufic inscriptions, birds, interlaced arabesque, and medallions are definitely of Islamic origin. It has been conjectured and there seems to be merit in this conjecture—that the earliest products of the art of metal-work pertain to the period of the Samanids who were responsible for heralding the Persian renaissance in letters, learning, and Fine Arts.

Early Islamic vessels consist mostly of trays and ewers fashioned in the shape of animals and birds.

With the advent of the Saljuq Turks in 429/1037 Muslim metal-work came into its own. The bronze, gold, and silver utensils which have been preserved in different museums reveal patterns and decorations which are extremely original and seem to have been developed by the artists of the Saljuq period. Enamel-work was also known, although it was not of very high quality. Gold jewelry of a considerably high standard consisting mainly of ear-rings and pendants, fashioned again in the shape of animals and birds, has come down to us. During this period both Iran and Mesopotamia became centers of the art of casting bronze objects with relief decorations—mirrors, plaques, and animal figures. Two mirrors which have come down to us (preserved in the Harari Collection in Cairo) reveal that the artists devoted great care in the execution of their work and paid painstaking attention to details.

Metal-work during the Fatimid period consists mainly of jewelry and is relatively very rare. Some specimens are to be found in the Harari Collection mentioned above.

It is interesting to note that some of the metal-work under the Ayyubid Sultans is decorated with Christian motifs.

Although artists in metal-work continued to flourish during the Mongol period and after, signs of qualitative decline were apparent.

Under the Safawids, however, the metal-workers achieved great distinction in moulding iron and steel and produced works of art which are technically perfect and in no way inferior to the earlier

masterpieces. Unfortunately, very few specimens of Safawid metal-works have survived, but in the tenth/sixteenth century miniature paintings we can observe the elegance and charm of some of the metal-works represented therein.

The artists of other Muslim countries did not achieve any great distinction in this art as compared with the Iranian artists.

**(b) Glass and Crystal.**—During the Roman period the artists of the Near East, particularly Syria and Egypt, were justly celebrated for their skillfully executed glass-ware. The Muslim artists learnt the various techniques of decorating glass from the local artists.

Excavations made at Susa, Rayy, and Sava have given to us specimens of glass-work which prove that the Iranian artists continued to walk in the footsteps of their Sassanian masters and even copied the Sassanian forms and decorative features.

The glass-work of the earlier Islamic period consists mainly of bottles, flasks, cups, and receptacles for oil and perfume. The earlier works were undecorated but with the passage of time the artists learnt the art of decoration and produced works which were exquisitely beautiful. Especially charming were the small thick prismatic perfume bottles.

Under the Fatimids the glass industry reached its zenith. Excavations at Fustat and Alexandria have revealed that the artists had achieved great skill in this art and developed technical perfection. The greatest distinction achieved by the artists of the Fatimid period was the decoration of glass with luster-painting and enamel. It is unfortunate indeed that this type of work has come down to us only in fragments.

Some pieces, incomplete as they are, in the Arab Museum in Cairo, the British Museum, and the Berlin Museum, each decorated with beautiful scroll work and abstract geometrical patterns of Kufic inscriptions, sometimes painted in brown luster and sometimes in silver, reveal great skill.

The cut decoration was also perfected by the Fatimid artists.

There were signs of deterioration of this art under the Mongols and the Tienfirids and it was under Shah Abbas the Great (996–1039/1587–1629) that glass-making again reached technical perfection most probably due to the impact of the West, especially the influence of the Italian art. It would appear that Shiraz and Isfahan were the greatest centers of the glass-maker's art.

After the Safawids, industrialized Europe gave the quietus to this branch of artistic activity in the East.

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[1.](#) Arthur Lane, *Early Islamic Pottery*, Faber and Faber, London, n.d.

[2.](#) z *Ibid.*

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