Artists working in the imperial ateliers of the Safavids, Mughals, and Ottomans were keenly aware of their role within the art historical canon. Genealogies were constructed of great artists (calligraphers and painters) and albums were compiled of their works. The artist displayed his mastery over pen and brush, utilizing his tools to show his knowledge of older precedents while at the same time creating that which transformed them entirely. The past, present, and future were mobilized through a mark on the page, through allusions and references, and through the materiality of the ink, paint, brush, and paper, themselves. By looking closely at the traces left by the artists, be they painters, poets, or architects, the art historian may gain insight into the cultural production of these great empires of the early modern period.

Over the past thirty years scholars of Islamic art and architecture, in keeping with trends in art history more generally, focused on the social and historical contexts of the works they studied. Issues of patronage and politics were foremost among the concerns of art historians. This was a shift away from the formalist roots of a discipline that had earlier focused on questions of attribution and connoisseurship. Thus we now may understand the motivations behind great works of art and architecture, the ways in which they were funded, and the roles they played within their broader political and religious contexts. Less work has been done on how those objects and buildings were received and, in some case, how they functioned. For example, despite the use of the term “Islamic” as a descriptor, there remains much to be known about devotional practices in the early modern period or the manner in which ritual spaces and objects were used. Questions about reception and intentionality, as well as about audiences and their responses, remain to be fully addressed through closer study of personal diaries, portraits and chancellery documents. The goal of this anthology is to further this discourse and contribute new research that expands our understanding of art and culture in the Persianate Islamic world.

In the early modern period, the arts of writing and depiction were intertwined with the social practice of connoisseurship. Modes of evaluation, by kings and courtiers, were tabulated in the prefaces of poetic and literary texts, as well as the emerging genre of art historical collecting in the form of albums, or muraqqas. The album preface became an important site for setting forth rationalizations for creating certain works and establishing standards for appreciating the arts of writing and depiction. Calligraphic exercises were juxtaposed next to sketches by master draftsmen and artists. The traces of the artists’ hands were indexed through physical gestures and the impression made by a brush loaded with ink or a reed sharpened to perfection.

The massive folios collectively known as the Timurid Workshop Album provide opportunities for examining the criteria for judgement and evaluation in the fifteenth-century. The pages are massive (680 × 500 mm) requiring at least two hands
to turn a single page. They comprise mostly of calligraphy exercises, as well as hand-drawn sketches and preparatory drawings (see Fig. 0.1). Together they lend credence to the idea of “the albums’ unique potential as sources for the study of how art history and aesthetics were theorized in pre-modern Iran.”4 The album also requires us to think of the embodied experience of art and what that meant not only to the makers of the artworks within it, but also those that encountered the object through visual and tactile means. In its gigantism, the album overpowers the senses of the beholder, especially if considered in the context of illustrated manuscripts, which were often designed to be intimate objects, primarily (though not exclusively) for individual reading and viewing. Monumental calligraphy, of which there are also examples in the album, would have been less unexpected, given that elite calligraphers were often commissioned to design architectural epigraphy. Yet what spaces – physical and intellectual – would the large sketches of animals, lovers, and

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