CHRISTIANE GRUBER

BETWEEN LOGOS (KALIMA) AND LIGHT (NŪR):
REPRESENTATIONS OF THE PROPHET MUHAMMAD
IN ISLAMIC PAINTING

Notwithstanding the long-held assumption that Islam forbids the representation of figural images, including the depiction of the Prophet Muhammad—a widespread belief underlying the furor that broke out following the September 2005 publication of a series of caricatures in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*—there nevertheless exists a notable corpus of images of Muhammad produced, mostly in the form of manuscript illustrations, in various regions of the Islamic world from the thirteenth century through modern times. A good number of these paintings, however, underwent later iconoclastic mutilations in which the facial features of the Prophet were scratched or smeared (fig. 1), thus compromising the body of pictorial evidence. Besides cases in which an image was mutilated, further surviving materials underscore the diverse and sometimes conflicting understandings of the permissibility of image-making in Islamic traditions, whether such understandings emerged as cultural constructions or reflect personal preferences.

Variant approaches and responses to images unfortunately render the examination of Islamic pictorial production quite speculative in nature. Despite these impediments, it is possible to explore some of the main iconographic developments and various symbolic implications of representations of Muhammad in a number of Islamic artistic traditions. However, it is not feasible to offer here a complete coverage of this complex subject. Rather, this study attempts to provide a preliminary discussion of textual and visual descriptions of the Prophet by concentrating principally on Persian materials. Although select Arabic and Ottoman Turkish texts and images are considered as well in order to highlight a particular theme or motif, there are two reasons for emphasizing Persian sources: firstly, because illustrations of the Prophet flourished in Persian lands, especially during the Ilkhanid (1256–1353), Timurid (1370–1506), and Safavid (1501–1722) periods; and secondly, because these depictions are often embedded within Persian illustrated historical and biographical texts, as well as illustrated “Books of Ascension” (*Miʿrājnāmas*) and encomia to Muhammad and his heavenly ascension (*miʿraj*) included in poetic texts produced as illustrated manuscripts from the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries.

Examining first how scholarship has approached the concept of visuality in Islamic pictorial traditions and in representations of the Prophet more specifically, this study then attempts to sketch out the ways in which the Prophet Muhammad has been represented, how such depictions developed over the centuries, and some of the possible reasons behind the gradual move from “veristic” representation (thirteenth to fifteenth centuries) to techniques of abstraction (sixteenth to nineteenth centuries). In this development, three principal kinds of “portraits” of the Prophet stand out, namely, veristic, inscribed, and luminous. These divergent pictorial trends at times overlap and therefore reveal that one particular iconographic tradition did not necessarily belong to one time or place.

Verism or veristic representation is defined here as the manner in which an artist attempts to depict the human form as it is visible to the human eye, by including such details as facial features, bodily limbs, and other physical characteristics. The adjective “veristic” is used interchangeably with the terms “mimetic,” “naturalistic,” and “realistic” as a suitable means to describe visually what is essentially not a “real” person but rather a “memory image.” The painter’s technique therefore involves the desire to represent the depicted subject’s
physical reality in a natural manner, even if the subject (like the Prophet Muhammad) is no longer alive and thus exists not in the flesh but rather in recollection—a process of memory-building that can depend on iterations emerging from both culturally circumscribed mnemonic cues and an artist’s own system of visual associations.

Inscribed depictions of the Prophet contain inscriptions either below or above a painted surface—usually the Prophet’s white facial veil—and thus reveal the painter’s processual approach to image-making and / or the viewer’s active reception to it. In general, inscribed “portraits” highlight the affective power of images of the Prophet, and suggest a relationship to personal invocation and prayer (duʿāʾ) practices, which tend to call forth the Prophet through a combination of verbal prayers and mental picturing. In such representations, a written text serves to buttress a visual construct, while the declarative mode helps to realize the demonstrative mode.

Luminous paintings adopt the metaphorical language of the golden aureole to convey the Prophet’s sacred, primordial, and creative light, called the “light of Muhammad” (nūr Muḥammad). This pictorial technique seeks to transcend the restrictions of mimetic description in order to herald the Prophet as a cosmic entity freed from temporal boundaries and corporeal limitations. His body, just like the rest of the existential world, was widely believed to have been created by the sensible touch of primordial irradiation, a sensate yet empyreal substance. Artists interested in conveying the Prophet’s preexistent luminescence purposefully stressed this more avataristic element by including golden blazes and halos in their paintings. In other words, the pictorial technique of representing Muhammad’s numinous qualities engages with abstract thought (as it pertains to the prophetic body) and transfers the process of intellectual allegory to artistic production by deploying certain choice motifs, including the flaming nimbus.

What these three principal genres of depiction disclose is that the Prophet could be imagined in multiple ways and that this variety reveals a complex and nuanced approach to describing Muhammad by writers and artists alike. Similarly, the emergence of methods of abstracting the prophetic body from circa 1400 onward in paintings frequently attached to texts of mystical inclinations suggests that images of the Prophet were, at least to some extent, influenced by various mystical ideas and practices, which themselves became further ensconced within Persian spheres under the royal auspices of the Sufi-Shiʿi Safavid dynasty. Displacing the veristic mode, pictorial techniques that abstract the prophetic body appear to have emerged at this time much more from the allegorical desire to represent a more “metaphorical Muhammad” than from attempts to prohibit or eradicate his depiction—the latter being only one facet of a distinctively modern phenomenon.