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The Study of Painting and the Arts of the Book

The essays in this volume are revised versions of papers first presented at the conference, “The Making and Reception of Painting in the Pre-Modern Islamic World,” held in May 1999 under the auspices of the Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture at Harvard University. Over two days, the speakers presented new research on various topics about painting and the arts of the book in the pre-modern Islamic world. Despite the breadth suggested by the conference’s title, the majority of papers reflect a critical mass of scholarship that has grown up around painting and the arts of the book in Iran, Central Asia, and the Middle East, and within a literary milieu that was predominantly Persian, in the so-called classical period of Persian painting, spanning the fourteenth through the sixteenth century. Some of the essays dealt with earlier periods or expanded the geographical boundaries to offer perspectives on the art tradition in its formation and in its later reception as a cultural construct.

The division of this volume’s essays into four categories reflects the organization of the conference.1 As defined at the conference’s inception, the categories encompass, first, the materials and methods used for book production; second, the conception and realization of painting; third, theories of painting and aesthetics; and fourth, later responses to paintings and books. By providing a thematic framework, these categories allowed a critical discussion of the physical and written sources that extended beyond the specifics of individual papers to question methods used to study manuscript painting and generally accepted scholarly paradigms and the foundations of arguments. The critical insights of the four discussants—Yves Porter, Marianna Shreve Simpson, Irene Winter, and Gülru Necipoğlu—greatly added to the debate.

From its formative stages, Persian painting in both manuscripts and single-sheet images quickly emerged as a principal subject of scholarly interest, alongside the equally developed categories of architecture, ceramics, and carpets. Significant space was allocated to painting and the arts of the book in the first exhibitions of this century; indeed, some of them displayed painting to the exclusion of all other arts.2 But it has been quite a long time since a conference was devoted exclusively to painting and the arts of the book, and this requires some comment.

Changes in the scholarship on Islamic art and architecture, as well as in pedagogy, have been reflected in the conferences of recent years. A few—for example, a recent conference on the exhibition and collection of Islamic art,3 and another about pre-modern Islamic palaces4—were organized along thematic lines. Conferences on the art and architecture of the Timurids (Toronto and Washington, D.C., 1989);5 Mongols (Oxford, 1995);6 Safavids (London, 1998);7 and Fatimids (Paris, 1998)8 were framed regionally, presented under a dynastic rubric, and embraced a wide range of media from portable objects to immobile buildings and in varying degrees involved a measure of interdisciplinary effort—historians of art were joined by historians and philologists. Regionally defined and chronologically limited approaches permitted a more complex analysis of the blanket term, Islamic art and architecture, and offered nuanced characterizations of a culture in a given time and place by avoiding those reductive Orientalist formulations that have plagued the field. A particularized portrayal of Islamic art and architecture was sought through its synchronic setting.

Most of these conferences, whether regional or thematic, responded to broader intellectual currents in the humanities by giving weight to contextual analysis along cultural, political, social and economic lines. When appropriate, the arts of painting and the book were accorded a prominent role, but they ultimately were lost in the wider interpretation of cultural patronage as a politically motivated, programmatic activity. Although it is true that buildings and objects can possess the power to embody ideologies and thereby to give a hegemonic group’s prerogatives some
productive developments along three lines: the study of painting and the arts of the book in this cultural project and its scholarly formulations remained unclear, however, despite the fact that some illustrated texts clearly deal with topics of legitimacy, even if their effect would have been constrained by a book’s limited audience. Formal and stylistic connections between media were explained by the presence of the court-sponsored workshop as a site where visual idioms associated with a hegemonic group were codified and disseminated. Hence, although painting and the book were an important part of what constituted “cultural” identity in a specific time and place, a book’s role as a political tool demanded tempering despite the fact that its broadly generative aesthetic dimension could be retained.

These intellectual gatherings and the accompanying publications that followed produced some significant and fruitful results. They redefined corpuses of objects, expanded the pool of sources used by historians of art, and together established a new base line for the training of young scholars. However, they were also marked by a tendency to bracket off image from object and from context. Connections between objects and contexts are useful, except for the problem that the historian wants the object simultaneously to reflect its historical context, to be produced by it, and to be read synoptically as a gateway to it. The object reflects, but it can have no agency—it is inescapably of and in its time rather than something that shapes it. Ironically, the object often becomes a decoy, with the study of its physical features and properties, its materiality, put aside. What it “means” is emphasized over “how it might mean.” The object is decoded and interpreted, though the mechanisms of the response that the object produces are not. Is it possible now to unite these elements—image, object, context—and return to issues that have been largely neglected?

In the past twenty years or so, the study of painting in the pre-modern Islamic world has yielded some productive developments along three lines: the holistic study of the book as an object; artist’s materials, techniques, and practices; and the visual properties and functional aspects of painting. These three lines formed the starting point for conceptualizing the conference with the hope that the potential of such methods of analysis and directions of thought could be charted, and then pursued and further expanded.

The first development is the close examination of the book as an object—basically the study of its physical elements and processes of production—using codicological methods. Interest in the book’s constituent parts was first manifest in the 1979 publication, Arts of the Book in Central Asia: 14th-16th Centuries, edited by Basil Gray. Although it emphasized painting, its opening chapters covered the rarely treated subjects of calligraphy, illumination, and binding. Numerous volumes on manuscript bindings and bibliopegy followed. Collections of essays and journals dealing exclusively with the diverse aspects of bookmaking and monographic studies of illustrated manuscripts have also been published. Recent catalogues of manuscript collections also reflect a higher standard of documentation. The cumulative effect of these perspectives on the book has been startling; the application of codicology forced scholars to acknowledge the potentially complex history of the book as an artifact in the period of its formation and/or subsequent reformation at later times, and hence challenged models of production (centered on the kitābkhāna, generally understood as library-cum-workshop) and the underpinnings of what is vaguely referred to as patronage. Most of these challenges await further study.

An unremitting focus on the book, as a portable, self-contained site for reading and seeing also demanded reassessments of the place of painting in it. One immediately obvious line of scholarly pursuit was the relationship between word and image, perhaps motivated by developments in the study of Western medieval illuminated manuscripts. This new tack was probably a reaction to the purely visual response to paintings by generations of scholars who were unable to read the painting’s relevant text, or had no interest in it; they were satisfied with translating its caption in a rubric panel or locating a practitioner’s signature. The emphasis on the illustrative function of paintings in books led to word-and-image studies that explored the development of pictorial cycles for commonly illustrated texts and the iconographic formulas used to portray individual players and stock characters. After gauging changes in the handling of individual subjects and differences between the illustrative cycles or sequences of separate manuscripts, some illustrated books were singled out for their anomalous nature and explained as manipulations.