

Books

The Koran says no, but art says yes

The plenitude of human figures in Islamic art.

By **Robert Irwin**

The Human Figure in Islamic Art: Holy Men, Princes and Commoners
Kjeld von Folsach and Joachim Meyer
Strandberg Publishing, 280pp, €45 (hb);
also available in Danish

This lavishly produced volume draws exclusively on items in the David Collection in Copenhagen to illustrate a series of arguments about the depiction of the human body in Islamic art. The collection was established by a wealthy lawyer, C.L. David (1878-1960), but it was expanded subsequently and is now one of the most important collections of Islamic artefacts in the Western world. Introductory essays are followed by catalogue entries and further probing essays are interleaved with those entries.

The one thing everybody knows who knows nothing about Islamic art is that Islam forbids figurative representation in art. Actually, the know-nothings seem to be right about this. Both the Koran and hadiths (records of the sayings and deeds of the Prophet and his immediate companions) are unambiguous on the matter. Nevertheless, an awful lot of statues, frescoes, manuscript miniatures, textiles, ceramics and pieces of metalwork that did feature human figures were produced in the Islamic lands. (A similar and perhaps related problem arises with wine-drinking. This too was prohibited in the Koran and hadiths, yet there is ample textual evidence of heavy drinking at the Islamic courts and elsewhere – and, as many of the images in this book testify, wine-drinking was also celebrated in the visual arts.)

Even so, in the Arab lands in the early centuries of Islam, there was a slow drift towards abstraction and non-figurative decorative motifs. The earliest Muslim coins had featured human figures and the earliest Umayyad palaces contained frescoes and statues portraying, among others, the rulers of the world, musicians and slave girls. Early portraits on coins were eventually replaced by inscriptions, and the elaborate

mosaics of the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus showed trees, flowers and houses, but no inhabitants of the dwellings. The interesting thing about the chronology is that coins abandoned figural representations before the relevant hadiths are thought to have been fabricated – so it is possible that the drift to abstraction in the Arab lands owed more to the evolution of a certain kind of aesthetics than it did to religious proscriptions.

Confident generalisations about early developments in Islamic art are not possible once one realises how much has been lost. The *Adab al-muluk*, a treatise on kingship, provides textual evidence that illustrated books were being produced at least as early as 900, yet the earliest fragmentary scrap of an illustration to a text is at least a century later, and those in the David Collection are later yet. Again and again, the catalogue entries are necessarily reduced to query and speculation. A fritware ewer is decorated with figures linked in a chain dance; was this a Zoroastrian ritual, a folk dance or a court festivity? Who knows? Are the men featured on an earthenware bowl acrobats, dancers or wrestlers? A few pages on, we come across a figure on a lustreware bowl who is holding what may be a playing card or perhaps a beaker. “We might be seeing a person who was recognisable at the time or may have had a symbolic significance that has been lost today,” the author writes. It is as if we are receiving enigmatic messages from an alien planet.

In the Arab world, the production of illustrated books became less frequent and usually less accomplished by the 14th century. But in Persian, Turkish and Mughal culture, there was a rich tradition of visual art, and many miniatures were produced to illustrate texts or to be pasted into albums. A theorist of figural representation, the Turkmen soldier and miniaturist Sadiqi Beg (1533-1610) produced the *Qanun al-suwar* (the canon of forms). Joachim Meyer, in one of the introductory essays (*The Human Figure in Islamic Art: the Religious Injunctions*), quotes Sadiqi on how the man who taught him painting “could see beyond the rules of sight... with a single hair he painted both worlds” and how, when painting animals, the result should be far from “the likeness of animals”. So the artist’s aim was to

What do these men think they are doing? A 10th-century, white slip, earthenware bowl from Nishapur, featuring dancers, wrestlers or acrobats

conjure up an ideal world rather than accurately represent it. Later on, in the entry for a miniature by Sadiqi illustrating the Persian epic the *Shahnama*, he is again quoted on how to carry out figurative painting. This time, however, “if this be your intent, then Mother Nature alone must serve as your guide. In this respect, only a fool would think to parody the works of the past great masters.” Not only does this contradict what has been quoted above, but the miniature by Sadiqi on the facing page gives the lie to any claim to imitating nature and dispensing with the examples of “past great masters”. The picture has been executed in the traditional manner and is formal, idealised and stylised. It perhaps shows the world as 16th-century Persians would have liked it to appear.

Portraiture was unknown in the Medieval Islamic world. When the 14th-century Moroccan globetrotter Ibn Battuta visited China, one of the marvels he discovered there was painted portraits. “I saw my and my companions’ portraits painted on paper hung on the walls. We each one of us looked at the portrait of his companion; the resemblance was correct in all respects,” he wrote. Such paintings could be used to identify criminals on the run: a marvel indeed. Persian, Turkish and Indian miniatures displayed the jewel-bright colours and sharp edges of the world as it was when it was younger. Shadows were unknown in this world until at least the late 18th century. Decorum and impassivity prevailed even in the depiction of battles, executions and supernatural miracles. Only a finger of wonder lifted to the mouth by one or two of the figures might suggest that anything remarkable might be going on. The real life of a Medieval nomad was hard, but

a 16th-century Persian illustration of Sana’i’s Sufi treatise *The Walled Garden of Truth* portrays a gorgeously idealised nomad encampment in which the rich fabrics of the tents suggest a carnival atmosphere and the brightly costumed nomads seem to be hardly more than clothes horses.

Rulers commissioned illustrated manuscripts as advertisements for themselves, and the miniatures therein tended to foreground pleasure rather than duty. Drinking features remarkably frequently. Are the images featured in this catalogue always what they seem? Certainly, most of the visual celebrations of princely pleasures – drinking, feasting, hunting and women – were commissioned by princes. Nevertheless, it seems likely that similar images, particularly on ceramics and metalwork, were produced for people who were not princes, and that such images of the good life were intended to bring fortune and prosperity to their owners in the future. Just as amulets and talismanic robes might avert evil, so other designs might attract luck and happiness.

To take another kind of case, the catalogue includes an attractive image of “Automaton pouring wine” from a manuscript (1315) of al-Jazari’s *Book of Knowledge of Ingenious Mechanical Devices*. In the early 13th century, al-Jazari had produced a manual giving guidance on how to make automata that actually worked. But I have never come across any reference in the Mamluk period (around 1250-1517) to any automata being commissioned by a Mamluk sultan or entertaining his courtiers. So there is the possibility that this manuscript and other late copies were produced to delight the eye rather than to instruct the engineering mind. Still, it is one of the many merits of this book that it not only delights the eye, but also instructs and stimulates questions.

• **Robert Irwin** is the Middle East and Islam editor of the *Times Literary Supplement*. His book *Ibn Khaldun: an Intellectual Biography* is due to be published by Princeton University Press in March



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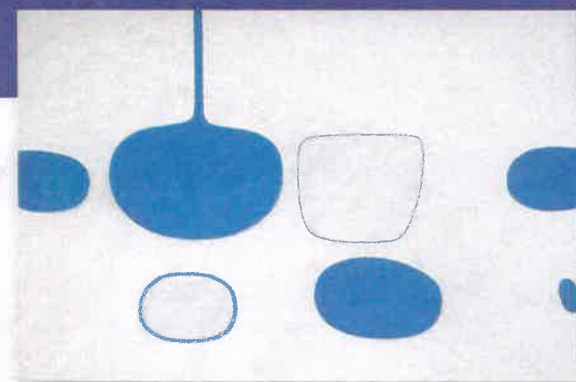
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