

Persian Art and Science from the Arrival of Islam to the Safavid Dynasty

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Abstract: In the Islamic period, Persian architecture developed further, particularly regarding mosques. The techniques that were passed on from the Sasanian era began to serve the purposes of the new religion and soon mosques with a central dome and two minarets came to prominence. In the Timurid and Safavid eras, minarets and domes became narrower. The use of ceramic tiles, which are synonymous with Persian mosques, became widespread.

In Islam, immediately after architecture, the most important religious art form is calligraphy: reproducing texts from the Quran is a religious act and, over the years, Muslim artists have developed a variety of Arabic script styles which differ in their degree of fluidity. In Persia itself, several styles developed and calligraphy soon established itself as the highest form of artistic expression. In the Abbasid and Seljuq periods, books began to emerge in which calligraphy was combined with illuminations, as in the Quran, or with illustrations, as was done in some scientific and historical books. With the Quran, bookbinding flourished and reached its peak in the 15th century. The art of making books – be it calligraphy, illumination or bookbinding – represents an important chapter in the history of Persian art.

In Persian painting and pottery, the influence of China can be seen after the time of the Mongol invasion, while miniatures became even more detailed and sophisticated – the most beautiful examples were created in the Timurid and Safavid eras. Ferdowsi's epic, *Shahnameh*, was the most frequently used literary basis for miniature illustrations and is most probably the best-illustrated Persian book.

Keywords: Persian art and science, Safavid dynasty, Umayyads and Abbasids, Persian literature and architecture, calligraphy, Persian scholars.

Introduction

Three factors stand out when examining the achievements of the great Iranian kings following the rise of Islam. The first is the fundamental desire to preserve the identity of this nation – this is confirmed by each and every important Iranian ruler. In many cases this was simply a state of mind, something that was never uttered.

The second factor was the attempt to reconcile the new faith with the country's past. When Islam emerged in Iran, it met with a very developed civilisation that was not easy to fit into a new mould, one that this uncomplicated desert religion required. Despite this, Iranians accepted Islam, primarily because it embodied the monotheistic tendencies that were already present in Zoroastrianism, and also as it put an end to the caste system and advocated the return to the ancient Iranian sentiment of human brotherhood.

The third factor was just as significant: the desire for the country to remain politically united in order to be able to defend itself against traditional problems, such as the invasion of foreign tribes and nations.

Therefore the success of each king depended on his ability to deal with the challenge of each of these three factors. In some cases there was too great an emphasis placed on religion, particularly in the form of Shia Islam, which undermined Iran's identity as a unique cultural entity.

1. Culture and art in the period of the Umayyads and Abbasids

Islam came to Iran with the Arab conquest in the 7th century. It took the Arabs more than 20 years to defeat the Sasanians. The military revolt was particularly strong in certain northern regions and in the mountains. The consequences of the occupation were similar to those Persia had experienced with the invasion by Alexander the Great and the destruction of the Achaemenid Empire.

After the Arab conquest, the Persians started a cultural revolt. They refused to adopt Arabic and continued to use Farsi instead. This cultural arbitrariness soon manifested in the arts.

The new faith brought freshness from the vast territories of Middle Asia, the Mediterranean, Central Asia and India into the Persian artistic styles, enriching the original Arabic culture and fostering strong mutual dependence.

Islamic art found its major expression in mosques, which had become the hubs of religious activities of Muslim communities. The first four successors of the Prophet did not support construction projects. The mosques that were built during their caliphates were simple places intended for prayer. A simple bare wall

which was set up in Jerusalem and later in Mecca in the earliest years of Islam was the designated place of prayer. The wall indicated the direction which the devotees should face. Slowly, the ground plans of mosques changed. Another element, a niche (*mihrab*), which indicated the direction of Mecca, was hollowed out in the sacred wall, from which the imam initially addressed the faithful. Eventually, a platform for the preacher, known as the *minbar*, was added. The exterior of mosques featured another two elements: the dome, as a symbol of heaven, which links Islam to the Byzantine tradition, and the minaret, a tower adjacent or attached to a mosque, from which the call to prayer is announced.¹

One of the precepts of Islamic art is the prohibition of worship of any idol or image that might be considered reminiscent of the paganism of the pre-Islamic era. This rule explains Islam's aversion to figurative art. Few exceptions to the rule exist in Islamic art, but these include the stunning frescoes at Qusayr Amra (Qasr Amra).

Figurative design was replaced by geometric patterns, abstract figures, a sophisticated play of colours, and the use of Arabic or Kufic script as an element of architectural decoration.

The arabesque units are composed of symmetrically scrolling and intersecting stems carrying full and half-palmettes.

In addition to the adherence to traditional patterns and the absence of references to nature, the artists had to abide by their contractor's requests, growing into skilled craftsmen in the process. Creative freedom was limited by the tradition and will of the client. In contrast, secular buildings display a mythical profusion of human figures, animals, etc.

Islamic architecture and art did not truly flourish until the Umayyad period. Umayyad art set the foundations on which most diverse artistic styles were later based. The Arab conquerors relied on the two cultures that had existed prior to their arrival: Hellenistic and Sasanian art. Under the influence of the artistic styles from the East-Roman province of Syria, the first so-called Umayyad mosques were built (a large courtyard surrounded by arcades supported by lines of pillars that supported the roof, under which was the prayer hall). They were inspired by the old Christian basilica and developed in line with the Prophet's original prayer room. These were the foundations for the creation of many architectural masterpieces such as the Chapel on the Rock, the Great (Umayyad) Mosque in Damascus², and the mosques in Kufah and Basra, which no longer exist.³

Literature ranked highest among the other artistic forms. A special place in literature was reserved for two central religious texts, the Quran and Hadith.⁴ Both had a profound effect on the later literary creations. Epic literature evolved as a reminder of the heroic acts from the pre-Islamic period of the legendary Bedouins. Epic poems were supplemented by new topics, e.g. odes to lords and love poetry. The treasure chest of Islamic art attracted non-Arab artists, including St. John of Damascus.⁵

In the Abbasid period, Islam opened up to the Greek influence thanks to the translations of texts by Greek philosophers and scholars into Arabic. The Persian and Central-Asian influence dominated the artistic activity of the time. The impact of Persian traditions, already present in the Umayyad period, intensified under the Abbasid rule and became prevalent in both large capitals established by the Abbasids: Baghdad and Samarra. In an architectural sense, Baghdad sought inspiration in ancient Persian cities. Its circular ground plan resembles a wheel, with roadways emanating outwards like spokes from the hub. The city was protected with a double defence wall and 28 towers. Each of the entrance gates was guarded by a thousand men. The centre of the city was reserved for the mosque and the caliph's palace. These central buildings were surrounded by houses of the most powerful townsmen, an opulent display of mosaics, stucco decorations, carpets, silk curtains, etc.

Caliphs also differed from one another in the cities they chose as their capitals. The most prosperous cities, apart from Baghdad, were Raqqa and Samarra. In the group of new purpose-built capitals, Samarra, which was established north of Baghdad in 836 by caliph Al-Mutasim, who was in exile there, soon began to play an important role. The city is one of the masterpieces of Abbasid art, since it is the only undamaged city that has been preserved, which is also due to Herzfeld's careful excavations in 1911–1913. Samarra was the seat

1 Stierlin, *Iran of the master builders*, p. 43.

2 The Great Mosque of Damascus was built around 715. This important mosque, one of the very first, is built on the site of a former pagan temple that was later used as a Christian church.

3 Markus Hattstein, Peter Delius (edit.), *Islam Art and Architecture (English edition)*. Cambridge: Könemann, 2000, pp. 64–87. (Hereinafter: Hattstein, Delius, *Islam Art and Architecture*). Lunde, *Islam – A Brief History*, pp. 82–86.

4 The term hadith refers to Arabic texts from the late 9th century. It is a collection of the sayings and conduct of Prophet Muhammad which are not included in the Quran.

5 Lunde, *Islam – A Brief History*, pp. 88–90. Henri Stierlin, *Islam – Volume I: Early Architecture from Baghdad to Cordoba*. Köln: Taschen, 1996, pp. 23–82. (Hereinafter: Stierlin, *Islam – Volume I*).

of the Abbasid rule for slightly less than 50 years, from 836 to 892. Its landmark attraction was the spiral Minaret of Samarra, which rises up 50 metres high. The appearance of the capital was copied elsewhere, e.g. in Transoxiana.⁶

Monumental palaces and mausoleums were rising in all the cities of the Middle East. The Samanid mausoleum in Bukhara is particularly well known. The mausoleum, built between 892 and 907, copies the shape of a Zoroastrian temple. The mausoleum, a classical example of brick decoration achieved by combining different geometrical patterns of laid bricks, affected the subsequent development of burial structures in the Islamic world.⁷

Islamic pottery, inspired by the Chinese ceramics from the Tang dynasty, progressed remarkably. Soon this development led to the creation of self-contained Abbasid art, made of glazed tiles. The largest ceramic workshops were based in Baghdad and Samarra. Also noteworthy were the decorative inscriptions on ceramic products, mostly Quran surahs or poets' sayings. This period marks the earliest occurrence of the arabesque. This form of ornamentation was often combined with animal or hunting scenes, which became the source of inspiration for the later Islamic art.⁸

The Quran is the perfect example of Arabic literature, not only because of the sacred nature of its texts but also because of their literary excellence. The birth of classical Arabic literature is closely linked to the golden era of the Abbasids. Initially, the development of Arabic prose was prompted by the earlier-mentioned translations which delivered texts from a host of areas. Over this extensive period of time, many literary forms evolved. One of these literary genres, *adab*, was created when merchants corresponded over large distances with tales of their adventures. The purpose of *adab* was to transmit knowledge in a widely understandable manner. One of the greatest early litterateurs in the Arab language was the Persian writer Ibn al-Muqaffa, who wrote in the first half of the 8th century. His most important work was the adapted Persian translation of an Indian animal fable with an Arabic title – *Kalilah wa Dimnah* (*Kalilah and Dimnah*). Another literary genre that developed simultaneously with *adab* was rhymed prose or *maqama*, which combines its ethical, philosophical and even socially-critical message with genre scenes. The aim of this literary genre was stylistic exploration and the enjoyment of readers. *One Thousand and One Nights* is an outstanding example of the use of the *adab* and *maqama* genres.⁹

It is a collection of Persian, Indian, Arabic and Egyptian folk tales with an Arabic flair. The underlying story is based on Persian and Indian traditions. Its main character is a king who loses his taste for the world and becomes a tyrant because of his wife's unfaithfulness. He executes every woman he has ever spent the night with. The tragic deaths continue until Scheherazade, who stops her exciting tale at dawn, saving the end for the next evening, which manages to capture the monarch's interest and end the carnage.¹⁰

One of the most beautiful blossoms in the magical garden of Arabic literature is the book *The Perfumed Garden of Sensual Delight* by Muhammad al-Nafzawi. This work of erotic literature, written in the spirit of the Indian Kamasutra, presents the medieval understanding and knowledge of the Arabs about sex.

At the Abbasid court, poetry flourished even more than in the Umayyad period. This is the time of the so-called Arabic Renaissance, the zenith of Muslim poetry and culture with its centre in Middle Asia and Persia. Literature was written in the classical Arabic language.

Early Islam in Iran As had already been explained, mosques were the centre of life in an Islamic community. With the spread of Islam to Iran, new mosques were continuously required, and they had to be created out of local materials, techniques and styles. No Persian building from the first two Islamic centuries has survived, but the descriptions from this period are very informative. The texts are abound in praise and excitement over the beauty of the mosques, their exuberant ornamentation and impressive size. Persians entrusted the task to skilled architects who had already built structures during the Sasanian rule. Even in the 14th century, Sasanian designs can still be observed in the construction of the mosques. It should be noted, however, that during the initial years of occupation the Iranians were unable to resist the forced mosque construction types. The change came later, during the national revival, which looked to the magnificent Iranian past for inspiration and was also reflected in the architecture. The result was modified ground floor designs. Initially, a Persian mosque only featured one iwan. In the 11th century, during the reign of Malik-Shah, the originality of

⁶ Stierlin, *Islam* – Volume I, pp. 115–134.

⁷ Ibid., pp. 117–134. Carel J. DU RY, *Islamski svet*. Ljubljana: Državna založba Slovenije, 1971, pp. 56–59. (Hereinafter: Du Ry, *Islamski svet*).

⁸ Lunde, *Islam – A Brief History*, 2005, pp. 90–93.

⁹ Thoraval, *Islam. Mali leksikon*, pp. 27–28.

¹⁰ Anton Šoljan, *100 najvećih djela svjetske književnosti*. Zagreb: Nakladni zavod Matice Hrvatske, 1980, pp. 154–159. (Hereinafter: Šoljan, *100 najvećih djela svjetske književnosti*). *Tisoč in ena noć* (translated by Vladimirja Kralja). Ljubljana: Mladinska knjiga, 1975. (Hereinafter: *Tisoč in ena noć*).

Iranian architecture continued with the construction of mosques and buildings with central squares and iwans stretching out in four cardinal directions (floor plan in the shape of a cross).¹¹

Originally, there were three basic mosque types:

- A pavilion (a dome over a square chamber; the Zoroastrian fire temple adapted to Islamic rituals),
- An open iwan (a simple barrel vault),
- An open court surrounded by arcades.

Eventually, all three types were merged. Within the first three centuries following the Arab conquest, many important mosques, bazaars and caravanserais, as well as other types of structures, were built in the Persian area.¹²

The oldest Islamic structure in Persia is the Tarikhaneh Temple (Tārī Hāna, or the House of God) in Damghan (Dāmghān), built around 760. Its layout comprises of a typical inner-court plan. Its large, almost square, court is surrounded by arcades. The whole structure is simple and gives the impression of grandeur. The mosque, purely Sasanian in design, is considered one of the most magnificent buildings in Islamic Iran. Near the mosque are the remains of a square minaret (undated, but most likely built around the same time as the mosque) and the remains of a cylindrical minaret from the Seljuq period.

The earliest remaining Islamic mosque fragments also include:

- A mosque at Nishapur (late 8th century); the mosque had marble columns, gold-plated roof tiles, polychrome carved stucco walls and richly ornamented roofs;¹³
- The Friday Mosque (Masjid i-Jami) in Shiraz, from the late 9th century;
- The Friday Mosque (Masjid i-Jami) in Nain, from the mid 10th century.

Art during the Samanid era

By the second half of the 9th century, the Persian Renaissance continued in Khorasan (which then included Transoxania and Afghanistan). Under the brilliant rule of the Samanid dynasty, which had enhanced the Sasanian heritage, one of the most exceptional and creative dynasties in Persian history emerged in the area of Bukhara (present-day Uzbekistan) and, particularly, Samarkand. Only one monument from this period survives: the earlier mentioned mausoleum of Ismail Samanid in Bukhara. The mausoleum is a simple and impressive structure with exceptional ornamentation. The ornamentation seems to have been based on wood treatment techniques, which is proven by the fact that wood was a common material used in the early mosques.

Under the shadow cast by the eastern Elburz mountains, facing the vastness of the Iranian steppes, stands one of the greatest masterpieces of the period: Gunbad-i-Qabus (Gonbad-e Kāvus), the tomb tower of Prince Qabus, who was a poet, scholar and patron of artists. He ruled in Gurgan (the province of Golestan (Golestān)) between the years 976 and 1012. His 55-metre-high tomb tower was completed in 1006, six years before Qabus was assassinated. Hard-fired brick, once red, has assumed a bronze and golden tan through the centuries. Ten powerful right-angled flanges project from the circular body, vertically uniting the base and roof.

The tower is situated 93 kilometres north-east of Gurgan, a sizeable city in the northern Iranian region near the Caspian Sea.¹⁴

The Gunbad-i-Qabus is the earliest and the most expressive in a series of more than 50 monumental towers, which are still standing. They can be found in nearly all parts of Iran. Most of them are round, e.g. the tomb tower of Pir-i-Alamdar (1021) at Damghan and at Lajim in the Mazandaran province.

Towers with prismatic flanges like the Gunbad-i-Qabus continue through the 12th century at Rayy and into the 14th century at Bistam (1313). An important group in which the body of the tower is composed of round shafts is at Jar Kugan, Radkan (Rādkān, 1280–1300) and Kishmar (14th century).

A column similar to the column at Rabat-i-Malek or the tower at Jar Kugan appears several thousand kilometres eastwards at the tower of Kutb Minar of Delhi. Several towers are octagonal, e.g. Gunbad-i-Ali at Abarquh (1036) and at Kharagan (1039–1067). Towers were also built in the 14th century, e.g. the tomb at Qum and the Imamzada Jafar (Emānzādeh Ja'far) in Isfahan (1341). Some are square, such as the Gunbad-i-Surkh (Gunbad-i-Surkh) at Maragha (Marāgha) from the 11th century and the tomb of Shahzada Muhammed (Shahzad

¹¹ Stierlin, *Iran of the master builders*, p. 44.

¹² Ayatollahi, *The History of Iranian Art*, pp. 186–187.

¹³ Pope, *Introducing Persian Architecture*, pp. 39–40.

¹⁴ Davood Vakilzadeh, Ismael Salami, *Iran: The land of Ahoora*. Tehran: Land of Ahoora Bidgool, 2008, p. 108. (Hereinafter: Vakilzadeh, Salami, *Iran*).

Muhammed) at Sari in the province of Mazandaran (15th century). The Gunbad-i-Surkh's ornamentation and ponderous corner columns recall the tomb of Ismail Samanid in Bukhara.

The towers, constructed over a period of seven hundred years, differ in size, shape and ornamentation. They are scattered all through the province of Mazandaran and up into the Elburz mountains. These stunning tomb towers often appear in combination with mosques.¹⁵

Art during the time of the Ghaznavids

The renaissance of Persian art initiated under the Samanids continued during the reign of the Ghaznavids, in the form of architectural ambition and traditions, sophisticated taste, and an interest in literature, science and art. Mahmud of Ghazni (997–1030) lavished immense sums of money on these fields, commissioned the best architects and built a number of outstanding monuments. Only two victory towers and the impressive ruins of Lashkari Bazar, a residence from the early 11th century, remain. Lashkari Bazar also boasts iwans and the T-shaped throne hall similar to that in Samarra. The influence of Samarra is also recalled in many other details (wall paintings).

During the reign of Sultan Mahmud, the city of Ghazni also appealed to the great Persian poet Ferdowsi.¹⁶

Art during the time of the Buyids

Central Persia under the Buyids was simultaneously developing a different cultural pattern inspired by the elegant Persian tradition. Almost nothing remains of the buildings. Though at least there were many monumental buildings in the northern Khuzestan. Although explorations were defied by the difficult terrain, a magnificent complex of palaces with domes and vaults was incidentally noted.

The architectural style of the period also emerged in Shiraz and Isfahan. The Jurjir mosque, of which only a portal remains, was very beautiful but too fragile to endure, according to reports. Aḡud al-Dawla's library in Shiraz, a vaulted two-storey building, had 360 rooms, each of a different shape and each decorated in a different style and colour. A side from the sections of the Masḡid-i-Jami (Friday Mosque) in Isfahan, the oldest standing monument from this period is the shrine of Davazdah Imam (Davāzdah Imām) in Yazd, dated 1036.¹⁷

The Buyids also take up a special place in gold and silver art. Equally exquisite were some of their ceramic artefacts.¹⁸

Destruction as beauty – the Seljuqs

The Seljuqs created an empire that, during the reign of Malik-Shah, occupied an area similar to that of the Achaemenid and later Sasanian Empire. It stretched from the borders with China to Syria and from Transoxania to Arabia. This was the golden era of art and culture.

Seljuq architecture, noble and powerful, structurally inventive and sophisticated, was neither sudden nor incidental. Rather it was the culminating expression of a Persian architecture that had begun in the 10th century with the Samanids.¹⁹

Seljuq architecture

Until recently, little was known about Seljuq architecture. Thanks to recent research studies and explorations, it now comprises about 50 monuments and is regarded as one of the world's greatest architectural styles. The monuments highlight amazing structural inventiveness: double domes, ribs, wider vaults, higher minarets and, in decoration, stucco mihrabs, opulent and expressive overall arabesque networks, and, in brick ornamentation, patterns and bonds of infinite variety, vigour and originality. The power and nobility of Seljuq architecture is doubtlessly best exemplified by the Friday Mosque (Masḡid-i-Jami) in Isfahan, one of the greatest buildings in the world.

Actually, the most impressive part of the Friday Mosque is the section dating back to the Seljuq era. More than 900 years of Persian architecture are revealed in the mosque's twenty distinct structures, varying in date from the 11th to the 18th centuries.

During its long history, the mosque has been much fought over, repeatedly damaged and reconstructed. Nevertheless, it endured all and in its thirty or so historical inscriptions – still not perfectly interpreted – it adds documentation to our appreciation of its majestic forms.²⁰

¹⁵ Pope, *Introducing Persian Architecture*, pp. 44, 45.

¹⁶ Du Ry, *Islamski svet*, p. 63.

¹⁷ Pope, *Introducing Persian Architecture*, p. 48.

¹⁸ Du Ry, *Islamski svet*, pp. 51–55.

¹⁹ Ayatollahi, *The History of Iranian Art*, pp. 215–219.

A four-iwan court consists of elements from many different historical periods (approximately from 1073 to 1800). The earliest part of the mosque is the domes set up on the northern and southern sides of the structure, dating back to the Seljuq period. The dome with a mihrab was built during the reign of Malik-Shah, who ruled from 1073 to 1092. Measuring 13.5 metres in diameter, the dome is supported by a wall (*qibla*) in the north and on each side by a pair of columns crowned by four capitals between strong side supports.

The other, northern dome, dated 1088, measures nine metres in diameter and illustrates a building technique that emphasises the vault perfection system.²¹

Two halls (with a pier-supported roof), known as ‘quincunxes’, opening up on each side of the iwan and the north dome, date from the 12th century. These halls show that Iranians adopted the type of Arabic mosques from the original Umayyad style. Two similar 14th century halls flank the north dome. This system of surfaces covered with small domes provided experts with a possibility to study the exquisite masterpieces and the immense imagination of its creators. More than a hundred different vault types have evolved (semi-circular, rib vault, suspension vault, star-shaped vault, etc.).

The Friday Mosque offers a number of original solutions. During the reign of the Mongols, Sultan Uljaitu (Öljaitü) built a hall decorated with artfully crafted stuccowork that combines decorations with a stylised Arabic character that includes elegant ornamental motifs. The hall is reminiscent of the winter hall created in 1447 during the Timurid period. The 48×27 metre hall is covered with a series of vaults crossing diagonally and fanning out towards the ground in ten powerful columns. The low, shallow and unornamented structure appears very modern. This winter prayer room features three naves, 18 vaults and dimmed glass that create yellow light and highlight the incredible richness of the knowledge and skill of the architects.

The vaulted corridors of the staircase surrounding the court also date from the Timurid period. They are decorated with shiny colourful arabesques, which then became the main characteristic of Iranian architecture.²²

The third and fourth iwans are on the north and east side. The first is set on a simple, pointed vault and dates back to the Seljuq period (after 1121).

The east iwan was created much later. Its main and supporting elements are completely hidden under the decorations and based on a combination of a triangle and supporting arches. The feature seems to emanate from the decorative system of the Safavids and is most likely the result of the reconstruction that was intended to imitate the Seljuq type but ignored the 12th century grandeur, perfection and strictness.²³

Cultural background

At that time, the sacred duties of every man were to pray and learn. A crucial element in the development of thought was that Islamic scholars fought to preserve classical Greek culture. Through the translations of Greek classics financed by Caliph Al-Mamun (813–833), Greek philosophy and science also became known in Persia. The works of Plato and Aristotle were particularly carefully studied. In the time from the 10th century to the Mongol invasion (mid-13th century), many great poets, philosophers, mathematicians and astronomers lived and worked in Persia. The majority of the population were highly educated and cultured.

Persian literature before the Mongol invasion

Iran’s long history has produced many exceptional men specialising in the fields of religion, literature, science and politics. We cannot possibly list and describe all of them, only some who have cast their mark on a certain period and earned a larger influence.

The Persian artists described on the following pages deserve a place in the world literature heritage.

Rudaki is the first great Persian literary genius and the court poet to the Samanids. He was born in 858 in Panjakent, a village in present-day Tajikistan.²⁴

Old Persian was preserved in its pure form in the works of poet Ferdowsi from the 10th century, who wrote the most popular Persian book, *Shahnameh* (Book of Kings), an epic poem of more than 50,000 couplets that describes the history of Persia from its mythical origins to the beginning of the Arab conquests. The stories of 50 Persian monarchs recount the struggle for power between kings and heroes, of which the latter are

²⁰ Pope, *Introducing Persian Architecture*, pp. 50–53.

²¹ David Talbot Rice, *Islamska umetnost*. Beograd: Izdavački zavod Jugoslavija, 1968, pp. 59–60. (Hereinafter: Rice, *Islamska umetnost*).

²² Mansour Ghasemi, *Esfahan the never-ending Splendour*. Esfahan: Nahoft Publication, 2011, pp. 45–51. (Hereinafter: Ghasemi, *Esfahan the never-ending Splendour*). Stierlin, *Iran of the master builders*.

²³ Bihishtī, Frank, *Travel Guide to Esfahan, Kashan and More*, pp. 90–97. Vakilzadeh, Qorayshizadeh, *Iran: The Land of Persians*. Stierlin, *Iran of the master builders*.

²⁴“The Land of Poetry”, *Kayhan International*, 14 October 1971, p. 40. (Hereinafter: “The Land of Poetry”, *Kayhan International*).

normally depicted in more favourable light. The poem ends with the Arab invasion, which is regarded a national tragedy. The stories of the knight, Rostam, a courageous and clever hero and the saviour of the nation, are part of Iranian national mythology.²⁵

With this epic poem, Ferdowsi, also called the Persian Homer, has immortalised Persian history and helped save the Persian language from Arabic oppression.²⁶ By reviving the use of this magnificent language, Ferdowsi also rekindled Persian patriotism.

In his work, Ferdowsi also describes chess and the history of this great game that can be traced back to India in the late 6th century.²⁷

Monarchs often competed in who would act as patron to a larger number of poets, artists and scholars. This was considered a duty of the king and a precondition for regal status and public respect.

The libraries of that period reflected the exuberance of Persia. Sahib ibn Abbad (Sahib ibn 'Abbad), who was the grand vizier to the Buyid rulers and a successful statesman that controlled most of Persia, is reported to have a large library with more than 200,000 volumes in 996. Every mosque also had a collection of books.

Poets often praised the love of life, and sang about love and wine. One of these was Omar Hajam²⁸ (around 1048 to 1122), a mathematician and astronomer who introduced the Persian calendar following an order by sultan Malik-Shah. He authored around 600 quatrains called *rubai*. The message conveyed by their works was liberal, mostly directed against religious dogmas and in favour of pleasure, occasionally even mysticism.²⁹

Another form of art invariably connected with literature is the miniature, which was long limited to manuscripts. Initially, the Arabs had no painting tradition. The first examples of miniature painting were probably the work of Christians (Byzantines and Copts). The first miniature schools were formed under Abbasid rule, when illustrations were needed for Arabic transcripts of translated texts for later literary works.³⁰

Scientific progress until the Mongol invasion

With the emergence and spread of Islam into the areas of the Mediterranean, India and China, ideas, cultural values, inventions and discoveries began to be transmitted through commerce. Several centres for cultural exchange between Greek, Arabic and Indian cultures were created. In the 8th century, a centre for translating Greek manuscripts to Arabic was set up in Baghdad. In this centre, and many others like it, Greek and Arab scholars translated scientific and philosophical texts to Arabic. They translated the works of the Greek philosophers Aristotle and Plato, as well as the texts of Neo-Platonists, natural science texts by Euclid, Archimedes and Ptolemy, and the medical handbook of Hippocrates. Baghdad was one of the greatest culture centres of the old world, where the Greek and Persian-Arabic worlds came together and scientists and scholars from all over the world met. Many caliphs protected science and financially supported philosophers and scholars.

In addition to the systematisation of knowledge and influencing the Christian West with the contributions of Persian, Indian and Greek scientists, the Arabic culture enriched scientific and technical knowledge with its many original studies. For this purpose, an astronomic observatory was founded in Baghdad in 829.

Scientific development led to considerable technological progress, which was manifested through important achievements in amelioration, glass making, etc.

In times of peace, Europe familiarised itself with Islamic findings and inventions, finding new cultural inspiration in Arabic translations and Greek tradition.

Under the Buyid and Seljuq rule, traditional textile and pottery making flourished in the Persian territory, in particular in the areas of Nishapur and Samarkand.

The second half of the 9th century brought the publication of numerous encyclopaedias and history books. Many truly exceptional thinkers were active in a variety of fields at this time.

²⁵ *Five stories from Shahnama, The Story of Bizhan and Manizha*. Tehran: Atelier Honar, M. Salahshoor, 1998. (Hereinafter: Five stories from Shahnama, The Story of Bizhan and Manizha).

²⁶ *Shahnameh. The Epic of the Kings. The national epic of Persia by Ferdowsi* (translated by Reuben Levy). Tehran: Edition Yassavoli. (Hereinafter: Shahnameh).

²⁷ Ahmad Tamimdari, *A History of Persian Literature*. Tehran: Center for International Cultural Studies, 2002, pp. 193–195. (Hereinafter: Tamimdari, A History of Persian Literature).

²⁸ Omar Hajam, *Ruba'iyat* (translated by Tomaž Kralj). Ljubljana: Amalietti & Amalietti, 2001, p. 52. (Hereinafter: Hajam, Ruba'iyat). *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam, In the name of God. The beneficent and the merciful*. Tehran: Eghbal Publication, 1986. (Hereinafter: Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam).

²⁹ Amin Maalouf, *Samarkand*. Ljubljana: Cankarjeva založba, 1999, p. 345. (Hereinafter: Maalouf, Samarkand).

³⁰ Lunde, *Islam – A Brief History*, pp. 88–90.

Almost all Islamic scientists were also skilled physicians. The period was marked by the discovery of new illnesses and cures. Ibn Sina, known in Europe as Avicenna (980–1037), is considered one of the most significant physicians of the time. The corpus of his works in the field of natural sciences was enormous. His most remarkable work, *The Canon of Medicine*, quickly became used as a standard medical text at medical universities in Europe. Ibn Sina's medical papers remained in use as fundamental study materials at Oxford and Montpellier until the late 17th century. *The Canon of Medicine* describes the symptoms of diseases. Avicenna's findings on diabetes, encephalitis and jaundice were revolutionary. He studied geometry, sound, mathematics and astronomy as sciences supplementary to medicine.

Another important Islamic physician was Al-Razi (Mohammad-e Zakariā-ye Rāzi; 854–925). Al Razi (Latinised name: Rhazes) was born in Ray, where he also studied medicine. As a physician, he managed to combine the best of the Greek, Syrian, Indian and Oriental medical traditions. His greatest work, *Kitab al-Hawi fi al-tibb*, is the most comprehensive book of medicine of its time. He also wrote several discourses on alchemy. A physicist and chemist, Al-Razi also discovered the process of making alcohol and sulphuric acid.

Al-Tabari (839–923) was an influential Persian scholar, historian and exegete of the Quran. He was born in Tabaristan (a modern-day province of Mazandaran). He is famous for his 10-volume history of music, which contains significant historical and archaeological facts. He also invented many astronomical instruments.

Equally important were the Persians' contributions to mathematics. The Persian mathematician and astronomer Khwarizmi (Al-Khwarizmi; 780–850), who lived in Baghdad, is regarded as one of the most important Islamic polymaths and the founder of algebra. The term 'algorithm' is derived from his name. He codified the decimal positional notation developed by Indian scholars. Since his time, the Indian numerical system, which includes the zero, has been known as Arabic numbers.

Al-Farabi (872–950) was born in Farab, in Khorasan Province. He is believed to be one of the greatest Persian medieval philosophers. His commentaries on Plato's and Aristotle's work form the link between Greek philosophy and Islamic thought. Through his translations, European scientists began to study the forgotten Greek philosophers.

The field of geography and history was dominated by Al-Masudi (896–956), who is often referred to as the Herodotus of the Arabs. He wrote a monumental, 30-volume book titled *The History of Time*.³¹

Another notable scholar was Al-Biruni (Latinised name: Aliboron; 973–1048), a Persian who is regarded as one of the greatest scholars of the medieval Islamic era. A captive of Turkish sultan Mahmud of Ghazni, Biruni worked at his court and accompanied the sultan on his military campaign to India. He is credited as the greatest astronomer and mathematician of his time. His book on astronomy, *The Masudi Canon*, is the most comprehensive text on the topic. His book *Vestiges of the Past* (or 'The remaining traces of past centuries') is a valuable collection of historical, ethnographical and cultural writings. Al-Biruni was the first scholar to describe India.³²

The list of notable Persian scientists is not complete without Al-Ghazali (1058–1111) from Khorasan. He is regarded as the most prominent and influential theologian of Islam. As a very young man, he was offered a teaching position at the University of Baghdad. However, experience pushed him into a spiritual crisis, which made him abandon his career and adopt an ascetic lifestyle for many years. Many years later, he returned to Tus. In his writings, he wanted to refresh the Muslim ethics and integrate Sufism. He defined the position of Sufism according to Aristotle's philosophy. He believed that although reason is valid, it must be subdued to the commandments of the revelation.

1. Destruction and grandeur – the Mongol invasion

After the Mongol invasion, the entire territory of Middle Asia as far as the East China Sea was united in a single state ruled by one ruler. The Mongol invasion left many art centres in Persia completely destroyed. At the end of the 13th century, when the situation calmed down and life returned to normal, the new concept of Islamic art in Persia was created. New motifs influenced by Chinese art in black, blue, and green arose. The figures bore a resemblance to the physiognomy of Mongols in their hair, eyes and protruding brow.

Particularly in architecture, the old Persian tradition survived and the elements appreciated by the Abbasid architects retained their role under the Mongol rule.

The Mongol architecture was characterised by its immense size. Structural elements were multiplied in scale, their functions diversified, the gaps grew wider and the domes sat more elegantly on the buildings they covered. Structural issues, more demanding than those of Seljuq rule, were resolved successfully and elegantly. Arches are perfected and brick-built structures rose to their ultimate triumph (tomb of Uljaytu in

³¹ Potočnik, *Azija med preteklostjo in sedanostjo*, p. 56.

³² Lunde, *Islam – A Brief History*, pp. 94–98. Philip K. Hiti, *Istorija Arapa*, Sarajevo: Veselin Masleša, 1967, pp. 331–369. (Hereinafter: Hiti, *Istorija Arapa*). Braudel, *Civilizacije kroz povijest*, pp. 98–102.

Soltaniyeh). The emphasis is on the thinning of the structures and the vertical rise: iwans and arches are higher, panels extended, courts narrower. Compared to the most elegant 14th century monuments, including the most majestic early buildings (Tarikhaneh, Gunbad-iQabus, the northern domed chamber of the Friday Mosque in Isfahan, the masterpieces produced by the Mongols were slightly abstract and reserved, despite their extreme movable power. The grandeur, which is an expected and justified element of architecture, was introduced by the Mongols and their successors. Generally, the buildings were freed from the bare display of grandeur through their harmonious composition and brilliantly designed and masterfully executed ornamentation.³³

Mahmud Ghazan³⁴ (Maḥmūd Ghazan, or Casanus for Westerners; 1271–1304) ranks as one of Persia's greatest rulers and the initiator of a new and important period in Persian architecture. As he himself said, "I inherited a ruined country". He began its renovation with limitless enthusiasm, creating a series of superb elements. A typical order of his was that a mosque and bath should be built in every city. The income from the bath would be used to support the mosque. His greatest achievement was the suburbs of Sham, about three kilometres south of Tabriz, hardly rivalled by any other complex in its variety, organization and magnitude. Today only rubble, it was once a complex of monasteries, madrasahs, hospitals, libraries, academies, palaces, observatories, luxury residences, gardens, etc.

Ghazan's vizier created a university city in Tabriz, which included 24 caravanserais, five hundred shops, 30 thousand houses, hospitals, dispensaries, gardens and other structures. It surpassed all comparable complexes in that part of the world.³⁵

New Persian rulers continued to use the practically unchanged concept of the Seljuq mosque. The list of the most beautiful mosques of this period would not be complete without the Friday Mosque in Yazd.

However, the typical Mongol style only became apparent in tomb architecture. One of the most important monuments is the mausoleum of Sultan Uljaytu (Üljaitü), who reigned from 1304 to 1316. The only preserved building in this complex near Qazvin is a combination of a huge hall with a dome and a small chapel. Particularly interesting are the minaret-like massive towers which enhance the octagonal layout of the roof.

In miniature art, faience from Kashan came closest to perfection. The Mongols also attempted to create a thriving community at Ray, which had been one of the most prosperous cities in Persia before the Mongol invasion. The city which had had a vibrant commercial economy lost all significance in the 14th century. Sadly, it never recovered.³⁶

The greatest poets of the time were Saadi and Hafez. Saadi Shirazi (Sa'dī) was born in 1184 in Shiraz. The Persian poet and writer earned the greatest fame with his prose work *Golestan* and a collection of poems titled *Bustan*. In verse, he skilfully expressed the moralism and informative thoughts which are regarded as classical expressions of Persian folk tradition.³⁷

In the next century, Shiraz also attracted another important Persian poet, Hafez (1325–1389), who is regarded as one of the world's most widely read and respected poets. His collection of nearly 600 poems was published posthumously. Most of his poems are ghazals, or Hafez's ghazals, in which he lauded wine, life, life's joys and the beauty of nature. Hafez's poems were translated into European languages in the 18th and 19th centuries, and through them Hafez entered the western literary trends. Even today, people still visit the poets' tombs in Shiraz and read their poetry.³⁸

*Awake, my dear.
Be kind to your sleeping heart.
Take it out into the vast fields of Light
and let it breathe.
Say,
"Love,
give me back my wings.
Lift me,*

³³ Pope, *Introducing Persian Architecture*, p. 74.

³⁴ Mahmud Ghazan (also Ghazan Khan) was the seventh ruler of the Ilkhanid dynasty from 1295 to 1304.

³⁵ Pope, *Introducing Persian Architecture*, p. 63. Rice, *Islamska umetnost*, pp. 47–76.

³⁶ Hattstein, Delius, *Islam Art and Architecture*, pp. 392–405.

³⁷ Tamimdari, *A History of Persian Literature*, p. 87.

³⁸ Hafez, *Zapleši z menoj. 108 divje sladkih pesmi sufijškega mojstra* (Slovene translation by Barbara Škoberne). Ljubljana: CDK, Zavod za izobraževanje, vzgojo, razvoj in kulturo, 2003. (Hereinafter: Hafez, *Zapleši z menoj*). Cf. *Divan of Hafez*, in which Hafez' poetry is published in Persian and English. The book was published in Tehran in 1998.

lift me nearer."

Say to the sun and moon,

say to our dear Friend,

"I will take You up now, Beloved,

On that wonderful Dance You promised!"

(Hafez, *Awake Awhile*)³⁹

Another poet from this period was Jalal ad Din Rumi (Ġalāl ad-Dīn Muḥammad Rūmī), a mystic poet credited as the founder of the whirling dervishes. Rumi was born in 1207 and is commonly regarded as one of the world's most acclaimed and widely read authors.⁴⁰

Rumi was a Sufi mystic and wrote in the Persian language. He was born in Balkh. He travelled across the Muslim countries with his father. After a long journey, he settled down in Konya, Anatolia, where he started the order of whirling dervishes. Rumi is the author of the book *Mathnawi*, which is a mystical explanation of the Quran. No other poet had such a profound influence on the spiritual life of people like Rumi.

Not Christian or Jew or Muslim, not Hindu,

Buddhist, Sufi, or Zen. Not any religion

or cultural system. I am not from the east

or the west, not out of the ocean or up

from the ground, not natural or ethereal, not

composed of elements at all.

I do not exist, am not an entity in this

world or the next,

did not descend from Adam and Eve

or any origin story. My place is

the placeless, a trace of the traceless.

Neither body or soul.

I belong to the beloved

(Rumi, *Power of the Soul*)⁴¹

Another poet who has won immortality through his poetry and who lived and worked before the Safavid dynasty is Jami (Nūr od-Dīn 'Abd or-Raḥmān Ġāmi, also Jami). Jami was born in 1414 in a small village near Samarkand. He achieved great fame during his lifetime, and after his death many other poets copied his works.⁴²

During the Mongol invasion, Nasir at-Tusi (Naṣīr at-Dīn-e Ṭūsī; 1201–1274) lived in Persia. He gained the trust of Mongol rulers and preserved many works of Persian cultural heritage. Born in Tus and educated in Khorasan, at-Tusi became a respected philosopher, theologian and astronomer. As a Mongol vizier he ensured the survival of many scientific works. The observatory in Maraga (Marāgha, also Marāghe) was built under his supervision. He reinvented the representation of the planets, which was different from Ptolemy's, and perfected the science of trigonometry. Under his leadership a number of constructions were made which were later adopted by other observatories in Europe, as well as by the Danish astronomer Tycho Brahe. Tusi also wrote the most widely read book on Shia theology and revived the school of philosophy.⁴³

2. Refinement and opulence – the Timurids

A new era of Persian art began when Persia was invaded by Tamerlane's army. Illustrations for epic poems, love poetry and episodes from novels were often made by various art schools. Local art schools in Shiraz, Tabriz and Herat (Herāt) were founded at the time. Richly illuminated manuscripts indicate the overall artistic style of the period, which is also seen in metal products, fabrics and carpets. Timurid art quickly evolved into an ideal of Eastern Islamic art, which culminated in decorative motifs and compositions.

After the collapse of Tamerlane's powerful kingdom, the art of Persia and the wider area entered a period of Timurid renaissance.

The Timurid style emphasised and compacted the trends set by powerful patrons. The most impressive heritage of this period is architectural. Several imposing structures can be found in the area of present-day Iran

³⁹ Ibid., pp. 20–21.

⁴⁰ "The Land of Poetry", Kayhan International, p. 40.

⁴¹ Jellaludin Rumi, *Zakladi duše* (Slovene translation by Žiga Valetič). Ljubljana: Alpha Center, Grafična agencija Potens, 2004, p. 53. (Hereinafter: Rumi, *Zakladi duše*).

⁴² "The Land of Poetry", Kayhan International, p. 40.

⁴³ Šterbenc, *Šiiti*, pp. 320, 321.

and Uzbekistan. Tamerlane and his successors Shah Rukh (Shāhrukh), Ulugh Beg, Baysunghur (Gīāṭ al-dīn Bāysonḡor), Abu Said (Abū Sa'īd Mirza) presided over a golden age of art. Under Tamerlane, Samarkand once again became the focus of splendour. "I was determined to build a mosque in Samarkand that would be unrivalled in any country," Tamerlane announced.⁴⁴ He established his capital city in Samarkand. With the wealth he had accumulated and the best artists of the time, he transformed it into the most glorious city of the Orient.

Samarkand, a city in Transoxania (present-day Uzbekistan) in Achaemenid Persia, was the capital city of Soghdiana. Traders along the Silk Road often stopped there, and the city was often targeted by the conquerors fighting for supremacy over Central Asia. In 712 the city was seized by the Arabs. In 1220 it was plundered by Genghis Khan's Mongols. Half a century later, Tamerlane chose it for his capital city. Under his rule and the rule of his successors, the Timurids, the city experienced a rebirth and built a number of majestic Islamic monuments.

Tamerlane and his grandson Ulugh Beg brought to Samarkand many artists and craftsmen from Persia, India and elsewhere, and commissioned them to make exceptional works of art. In just over two centuries, a wonderful architectural structure with many domes and elegant porticos grew in this place, decorated with skyscraping minarets. The domes were covered in turquoise-blue ceramic tiles. Mosques and madrasses were decorated with abstract geometric patterns, floral motifs and verses from the Quran.⁴⁵

Several neighbouring cities, such as Hiva and Bukhara, thrived in this period. These cities enjoyed an important historical role since their development depended on the wealth generated by the Silk Route trade.

The first, and the greatest surviving, Persian monument of the period is the beautiful mosque of Gawhar Shad (Goharshād; 1418) in Mashhad. Its portal continues the Samarkand style of arch within an arch. The thick, tower-like minarets, merging with the outer corners of the portal screen, extend to the ground and, together with the high foundation revetment of marble, give the ensemble the impression of solidity.⁴⁶

The entire court façade is faced with enamel brick and mosaic faience. The full scale of colours includes a dominant cobalt blue and turquoise, white, green, yellow, saffron, aubergine and black. All tones moving through several shades. The patterns, lucid and vigorous, are artfully adapted to their decorative role. This abundance of colour is accomplished by using floral and geometrical patterns of open galleries, the striking contrast of the iwans, arcades, etc. "It needs no acquaintance with other styles to acclaim this court, among the buildings now existing, as the most beautiful example, of colour and architecture ever devised."⁴⁷

Tamerlane's most famous buildings also include his tomb Gur-i-Mir (Gūr-e Amīr; 1404) in Samarkand. Its bulbous dome is enriched with 64 almost-round flukes and covered in light blue tiles. The interior is also impressive, with an alabaster dado, grey-green jasper cornice, black limestone niches, and a marble balustrade.

Another important building from the Timurid period is the madrassa at Herat, which was commissioned by Shah-Rukh in the early 15th century (1417).⁴⁸

Persian scholars

The famous historical philosopher Ibn Khaldun (Ibn Haldūn; 1332–1406), who lived in North Africa in the 14th century, wrote the following:

"It is a remarkable fact that, with few exceptions, most Muslim scholars both in the religious and intellectual sciences have been non-Arabs ... Thus the founders of grammar were Sibawaih and, after him, al-Farisi and az-Zajjaj. All of whom were of Persian descent. They were brought up with the Arabic language and acquired knowledge of it through their upbringing and through contact with Arabs. They invented the rules [of grammar] and made it into a discipline for later generations.

Most of the hadith scholars who preserved traditions of the Prophet for the Muslims were also Persians, or Persian in language and breeding because the discipline was widely cultivated in Iraq and regions beyond. Furthermore, all the great jurists were Persians, as is well-known. The same applies to speculative theologians and to most of the Quran commentators. Only the Persians engaged in the task of preserving knowledge and writing systematic scholarly works. Thus the truth of the statement of the Prophet becomes apparent, "If learning were suspended at the highest parts of heaven the Persians would attain it".⁴⁹

⁴⁴ Pope, *Introducing Persian Architecture*, p. 75.

⁴⁵ Potočnik, *Azija med preteklostjo in sedanostjo*, p. 206.

⁴⁶ Pope, *Introducing Persian Architecture*, p. 77.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

⁴⁸ Hattstein, Delius, *Islam Art and Architecture*, pp. 416–425.

⁴⁹ "Sayyed Hossein Nasr. A taste for the theoretical", *Kayhan International*, 14 October 1971, p. 39. (Hereinafter: "Sayyed Hossein Nasr. A taste for the theoretical", *Kayhan International*).

Science was also reserved for Persians. Arabs received their education from Arabicised Persians. That was the reason why Persia and its adjacent states, Iraq and Transoxania, were under its strong cultural and economic influence.

The commentary of Ibn Khaldun points to the fact that Iran profoundly affected Islam, the Arabs and the Arabic language.

The extent of this impact in specific fields – from governance, administration, religion and philosophy, science and medicine, art, literature and language – is a subject of separate study.

Public administration and governance

In general, the Persian method of governance had an exceptional impact on Islam, in particular on the Abbasid court. The Arabs did not only seize the provinces of the Byzantine Empire but also the entire Sasanian kingdom. However, only in Iran did they find a perfect administration and governance plan. The Abbasid caliphate was an empire with imperial needs and manifestations. They could not follow the example of government of the first four caliphs or the Umayyads. Instead, they looked up to the mighty Sasanian Empire and its elaborate governance plan. With minor modifications, they maintained the model which the Sasanians had developed in the period before Islam.

In the early period of Islamic conquests, two types of offices, or *divans*, existed in Kufah and Basra: one, run in Arabic was intended for Arabic affairs, while the other, in Pahlavi, handled all affairs relating to Persia. By the end of the Umayyad Caliphate, Arabic had already replaced Pahlavi, which remained the predominant language in the eastern part of the Empire.

Most scribes were of Persian descent or, as Jahshiyar, the author of the book about viziers: “Most scribes in Khorasan are magi and write in Persian.”⁵⁰

Evidently, Persians had to learn Arabic. Admittedly, the number of Arabs learning Persian was much lower, although some of them were in high positions.

The Persians did not only dominate administration but also other governance bodies. Many sources praise the Persians’ exceptional capacity for running a country. After all, the Sasanian Empire is commonly regarded as an example of a well-organised state.

Another term that requires explanation is *vizier* (Arabic: *wizir*). Abu Salama, a banker in Kufah, who offered financial assistance to the Abbasids, was the first person to be appointed vizier. The title appeared during the reign of Caliph Al-Mamun and was used to denote a close associate of the caliph. However, a vizier began to provide personal service to the caliph in the 10th century under the rule of Al-Qahir (Ahmad al-Mu‘taḍid al-Qāhir bi-‘llāh; 932–934).

Many viziers were Persians, e.g. the Barmakids from Balkh, the Banu ‘l-Džaraji (Banu ‘l-Jarrah) from Khorasana, Al-Zajjati (Al-Zayyat) from Gilana, Ibn Yazdad (Ibn Yazdad) from Merv and Al-Fadl ibn Sahl (Abu ‘l-‘Abbās al-Faḍl b. Sahl b. Zādānfarrūḥ as-Saraḥsī), who was a Zoroastrian before converting to Islam.

The most prominent vizier in the history of Islam was the Persian Nizam al-Mulk (died in 1092). He served two Seljuq sultans and ran the state for 20 years. He also wrote an excellent political treatise *Siyāsatnāma* (‘Book of Government’), which is a classical work of Islamic political writing.

The ancient Persian culture also found its way to the court. In the caliph’s absence, vizier Al-Fadl ibn Sahl introduced Sasanian rituals to the court.⁵¹

Conclusion

The world treasury of art and science was immensely enriched by the Islamic civilisation. For nearly half a millennium, Baghdad had been one of the most important cultural centres. It was a space where the Greek- and Persian-Arabic worlds have coincided and where scientists and scholars from all around the world were gathering. So it came to pass, that the Arabs have not only helped Europe to get acquainted with ancient philosophers, but also with discoveries and inventions of the Islamic world, and with science and art originating from India and China. Furthermore, a great merit of the Islamic world is the fact that it gave exceptional scientists like Ibn Sina (Avicenna), Al Razi, Al Masudi, Al Biruni, Al Tusi, etc. to humanity. The inventions of the aforementioned scientists have influenced numerous changes in the world.

In the Islamic period, Persian architecture developed further, particularly regarding mosques. The techniques that were passed on from the Sasanian era began to serve the purposes of the new religion and soon mosques with a central dome and two minarets came to prominence. This style, which is typical for Persian

⁵⁰ Dragan Potočnik, “Prispevek Irana k islamski kulturi”, in: *Sožitje med kulturami: poti do medkulturnega dialoga II*, editor Maja Lamberger Khatib. Maribor: Založba Pivec, 2012, p. 103. (Hereinafter: Potočnik, “Prispevek Irana k islamski kulturi”).

⁵¹ “Sayyed Hossein Nasr. A taste for the theoretical”, Kayhan International, p. 39.

mosques, still defines the profile of Persian cities today. Some of the largest mosques come from the Seljuq period, such as the Jameh Mosque of Isfahan.

In the Timurid and Safavid eras, minarets and domes became narrower. The use of ceramic tiles, which are synonymous with Persian mosques, became widespread. The blue mosque in Tabriz, the Shah Mosque and Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque in Isfahan, as well as the mosques and mausoleums in Samarkand, are all prime examples of this type of architecture. They are adorned with ceramic tiles painted with arabesques, floral motifs and verses from the Quran. The Safavid capital of Isfahan, that boasts an abundance of mosques, palaces, bridges and caravanserais, can be considered a treasure trove of Persian architecture from this period. It also influenced Indian architecture – the Taj Mahal incorporates many Persian elements.

In Islam, immediately after architecture, the most important religious art form is calligraphy: reproducing texts from the Quran is a religious act and, over the years, Muslim artists have developed a variety of Arabic script styles which differ in their degree of fluidity. In Persia itself, several styles developed and calligraphy soon established itself as the highest form of artistic expression. Today in Iran, beautiful handwriting is still seen as a sign of being educated. In the Abbasid and Seljuq periods, books began to emerge in which calligraphy was combined with illuminations, as in the Quran, or with illustrations, as was done in some scientific and historical books. Since Islam forbids the creation of figures, writers who made copies of the Quran poured all their artistic talents into the writing itself or the illuminations, which used geometric patterns typical of Islamic art. With the Quran, bookbinding flourished and reached its peak in the 15th century. The art of making books – be it calligraphy, illumination or bookbinding – represents an important chapter in the history of Persian art.

Painting miniatures was one of the more well-known aspects of Persian art. Despite Islam forbidding the representation of human forms, this restriction was primarily aimed at peoples who had a tendency to idealise and worship idols. In Iran, sculpture never really developed in the Islamic period, while painting became established as an extension of early book illustrations and was closely connected to literary works. In Persian painting and pottery, the influence of China can be seen after the time of the Mongol invasion, while miniatures became even more detailed and sophisticated – the most beautiful examples were created in the Timurid and Safavid eras. Ferdowsi's epic, *Shahnameh*, was the most frequently used literary basis for miniature illustrations and is most probably the best-illustrated Persian book. The most famous Persian painter of miniatures is Behzad. He lived in the 15th century and had an influence on the entire Safavid era. The Safavids dedicated themselves to painting miniatures, which resulted in the exceptional development of this art form and it even had a significant effect on the contemporary Indian painting.

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