



The Innocence of the Image

NASSER RABBAT ON REPRESENTATIONS OF THE PROPHET IN THE ISLAMIC TRADITION

TODAY, IMAGES SEEM TO WIELD unthinkable power—and are subject to unthinkable assault. Over the past decade, horrific reprisals for the publication of images of Islamic religious figures have become tragically common—the latest episodes in Paris and Copenhagen being only the two most recent examples. And as this issue goes to press, we are confronted by near-daily reports of the ideologically motivated destruction of priceless archaeological sites in areas of Iraq and Syria controlled by ISIS. Yet there is a long history of figuration in Islamic art, one that belies the iconoclasm underpinning recent events. *Artforum* invited eminent scholar **NASSER RABBAT** to look back at this representational tradition and provide vital historical perspective on the highly charged questions of iconography, visuality, and cultural difference we now confront.

Opposite page: Page detail from *Miraj-Nasab* (*Story of the Ascension*), 1436, pigment and gold leaf on paper, 10 × 13 1/2". The Prophet Muhammad worshipping at the Seventh Heaven. Artist unknown.

Right: Mir Kashim and Nadir al-Zaman, Emperor Jahangir holding a portrait of his father, Emperor Akbar, ca. 1613, watercolor on paper, 8 × 6 1/4".



OVER THE PAST DECADE, the world has been repeatedly stunned by acts of violence purportedly rooted in a deep-seated Islamic antagonism to figural representation—an antagonism especially directed toward the depiction of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions. From the bloody protests following the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten's* September 2005 publication of twelve cartoons mocking the Prophet, which left scores of people dead in many Islamic capitals, to the terrorist attack on the French satirical weekly *Charlie Hebdo* that left seventeen dead in Paris this past January and was allegedly unleashed in retaliation for the recurring publication of caricatures of the Prophet, Islam's presumed ban on figuration has become accepted as a blanket explanation for those outbursts of deadly religious rage.

Yet any cursory examination of the historical record will reveal that the issue is much more complex than a clear-cut prohibition observed by all Muslims. In fact, there is even doubt about the date, provenance, and authenticity of many of the legal texts usually deployed by contemporary Orthodox thinkers to justify their condemnation of the portrayal of figures. The Qur'an, the ultimate source of Islamic law, says nothing about it. The hadiths (Prophetic sayings), the second source of jurisprudence, present a few inconclusive instances, some of which actually seem to be apocryphal. There are even a number of hadiths that appear to indicate that the Prophet's objection was to the location or subject matter of figural representation, not to the depiction of figures per se. The absence of a clear and consistent directive in Islam's foundational texts, however, did not prevent subsequent religious authorities from resisting figural art. Quite the opposite: Exegetical and legal treatises of the medieval period routinely reiterate an unbending position against figures, citing the lone hadith that decrees a harsh verdict against

Figural representation was, in fact, an important and established genre in Islamic art from its earliest manifestations.



From left: Page detail from poet Ala ad-Din Mansur-Shirazi's *Shahinshah-nama* of Sultan Murad II, ca. 1581. Sultan Süleyman, Takiyuddin, and astronomers at the Galata observatory. Artist unknown. Ahmad Mûsâ, *huzestan* in a winter landscape, ca. 1370, gouache on paper, 15 1/2 x 11 1/4".

the *musawwir*—plural of *musawwir*, a word that in this context can mean either painters or makers of figures of living things—whose final abode will be in hell, and elaborate on its implications, while ignoring other hadiths that reflect more nuanced attitudes.¹ This is regrettably the same reference used by religious commentators and journalists alike to account for violence against illustrators and caricaturists today.

Since the late seventh century, figures have been banned in whatever milieu religious scholars controlled (mosques, madrassas, and the like), as evidenced by the two famous Umayyad monuments of the era still standing, the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem and the Great Mosque of Damascus. But this attitude should not be seen as either objective or collective. That is, the sources reporting the ban were not impartially recording a universal outlook—far from it. Nor do they ever make this claim, although subsequent readers always assume that they do. Indeed, figural representation was an important and established genre in Islamic art from its earliest manifestations, including the frescoes and statues recovered from the seventh- and eighth-century Umayyad and Abbasid palaces; the eleventh- to thirteenth-century Seljuk and post-Seljuk figural wall reliefs; the myriad illustrations of scientific and literary texts in the classical and medieval periods; and the development of miniature paintings in the late medieval age and their efflorescence in premodern times (from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century) under the Ottomans, the Safavids of Persia, and the Mughals of India. Moreover, the depiction of the Prophet himself seems to have been a recurring (if relatively infrequent) theme in the major Islamic painting schools, both Persian and Turkish, since the thirteenth century.

Despite the variety of their provenances and dates, these Prophetic images share a common trait: innocence. In other words, they do not seem to have been made in defiance of the exegetical positions against the depiction of the Prophet. On the contrary, they seem to be expressions of devotion. Consisting primarily of miniature paintings illustrating stories from the Prophet's life, they were presumably meant to enhance the effect of the Prophet's exemplary behavior on their viewer, the reader of the text they illuminate. And in contrast to the common practice of inserting images of patrons in medieval Western illustrations of Jesus's life, these representations of the Prophet do not appear to have been made to satisfy the vainglory of the patrons who commissioned them. No association of the patrons with the figures of the Prophet is to be found in either image or text.

Most renderings of the Prophet are straightforward depictions of the momentous events in his life as elaborated in the various biographies that circulated in the medieval period: birth, youthful virtue, discovery of prophethood in Syria, marriage, revelation, immigration to Medina, battles, conquest of Mecca, and death. There is a noticeable concentration on the most miraculous event in his mission, the Night Journey (*Isra*) to Jerusalem and the Ascension to Heaven (*Mi'raj*). In fact, an entire subgenre, the *Mi'raj-Namah* (Story of the Ascension), became popular in Iran, with illustrated examples produced between the early fourteenth and the late nineteenth century.

Aiming to both educate and amaze, these images combine simplicity of portrayal with dazzling and fanciful details that vary depending on the subject of the particular image and the school to which it belongs. The range of diversity is clearly on view in the *Jami' al-tawarikh* (literally "Compendium of Chronicles")



From left: Unknown artist, the Prophet Muhammad riding the Buraq, 1820–30, opaque watercolor and gold leaf on paper, 7 x 4 1/2". Muhammad Ibn al-Zain, Baptême de Saint Louis (detail), ca. 1320–40, brass, gold, silver, 8 1/2 x 19 1/2 x 19 1/2". Page from the Shahname of Shah Tahmasp, ca. 1525, opaque watercolor, ink, silver, and gold on paper, 18 1/2 x 12 1/2". The Court of Gayumars. Attributed to Sultan Muhammad.



but often referred to as "History of the World") composed by the Ilkhanid vizier Rashid al-Din (1247–1318) in Tabriz, Persia, around AD 1307. On the vizier's order, two copies of this text, one in Arabic and one in Persian, were made and illustrated every year and sent to the empire's cities in present-day Iran, Iraq, Anatolia, Central Asia, and India. A simple, almost reportage-like example can be found in the first cycle of Prophetic representations included in the *Jami' al-tawarikh* in an image depicting a youthful Muhammad before his mission, resolving a dispute between the different clans of Mecca about who would have the honor of replacing the Black Stone back in the Ka'ba. The composition shows the ingenious solution devised by Muhammad: He spread his cloak on the ground, put the sacred stone on it, and asked a representative of each clan to carry one side of the cloak so that they all shared the honor of returning the stone to its place.²

The most awe-inspiring image of an episode from the life of the Prophet is undoubtedly a famous illustration dating from 1436, portraying his visit to the Seventh Heaven during his *Mi'raj*. This painting was made in the city of Herat, in what is today Afghanistan, in a manuscript produced for Shah Rukh, the son of Tamerlane, who ruled his vast Central Asian empire from 1409 to 1447. The artist imagined the culmination of the *Mi'raj*, the Prophet's passage into the presence of the divine, as a field of infinite light (*nur*). Sinuous golden flames, clearly influenced by Chinese art, engulf the Prophet as he prostrates in complete surrender (which is in fact the actual meaning of the term *Islam*) in front of the unseen and unseeable God. The artist has erased any indication of dimensions, proportionality, or finite space: The viewer sees no foreground, no background,

no horizon, no plane to stand on, no shadow—only the emanation of the light of God filling his or her entire field of vision.

In their totality, the images of the Prophet's life constitute a discourse that is complementary to yet distinct from that of the texts they illustrate. Each can be read as a parallel telling of the story, with its own accents, peculiarities, and symbolism, offering a window into the imagination and cultural references of their times. They also allow us to appreciate a crucial aspect of the piety and reverence for the Prophet that animated the generations of Muslim patrons who commissioned and enjoyed collecting these illustrations. This receptivity is lost in the hardened and ahistorical attitudes that dominate discussions of the Prophet's representation today. Such accounts reject an entire Islamic pictorial tradition and cling to a dubious hadith, ascribed to the Prophet about two centuries after his death, which, had it been heeded by the artists or their patrons, would have deprived us of an artistic corpus of sublime sensitivity. □

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NOTES

1. See Thomas Arnold, *Painting in Islam: A Study of the Place of Pictorial Art in Muslim Culture* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1926), 1–40; K. A. C. Crowl, *Early Muslim Architecture*, 2 vols. (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1922–40), 265–71 (for an interpretation, riddled with what we would today call racist opinions); Ahmad Tawfik Fakhri, *Al-taswir 'ind al-'Arab*, ed. Z. M. Hawass (Cairo: Lerner al-Tarikh wal-Tarjuma wal-Nashr, 1942), 10–21. For an expanded list of references that includes legal opinions that see no problem with painting, see Rabbat Fakhri, *Iran al-Zahira al-Islamiyya* (Cairo: Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale, 1972), 55–54.

2. The work resides in the collection of the University of Edinburgh Library, manuscript 20, folio 45, recto. Due to security concerns, the university has refused to release the image for publication.