CHAPTER 1

The Rise of Islam and the Artistic Climate of the Period

A great deal of occasionally acrimonious confusion surrounds the use and meaning of the word 'Islamic' when applied to art. The origins of the adjective lie clearly in the faith of Islam, about which more will be said presently. But, when applied to art, it refers to the monuments and remains of material culture made by or for people who lived under rulers who professed the faith of Islam or in social and cultural entities which, whether themselves Muslim or not, have been strongly influenced by the modes of life and thought characteristic of Islam. 'Islamic', unlike 'Christian', identifies not only a faith but also a whole culture, since – at least in theory – the separation in the Gospels of the realm of Caesar from that of God is not applicable to Islam. Also unlike Christianity, Islam did not develop first as the faith of a few, increasing the numbers of its adherents under the shadow of a huge state alien to it, slowly developing the intellectual and artistic features which would characterize it, finally to blossom centuries later into an empire and giving birth to an art as well as a philosophy and a social doctrine.

In the Islamic case, these developments were telescoped into a few decades of the seventh and eighth centuries C.E. In 622, the year of the Hijra, when the Prophet Muhammad left Mecca to found the first Islamic state in Madina (originally, Madina al-Nabi, 'the town of the Prophet', ancient Yathrib), a handful of followers from the mercantile cities of western Arabia constituted the entire Muslim community, and the private house of the Prophet was their only common, political and spiritual, centre. But by 750 Arab Muslim armies had penetrated into southern France, crossed the Oxus (Amu Darya) and the Jaxartes (Syr Darya) in Central Asia, and reached the Indus. The first Islamic dynasty, the Umayyads, had come and gone. New cities had been created in North Africa, Egypt, and Iraq. The Dome of the Rock had been built in Jerusalem, while also in Jerusalem, as well as Damascus, Madina, and many other cities, large and small mosques had been erected as gathering places for prayer as well as to strengthen the political and social ties which bound the faithful together. Dozens of splendid palaces had been scattered throughout the lands of the 'Fertile Crescent', the lands of Mesopotamia and the Syro-Palestinian coast. In other words, Islamic art did not slowly evolve from the meeting of a new faith and state with whatever older traditions prevailed in the areas over which the state ruled. Rather, it came forth almost as suddenly as the faith and the state, for, whatever existing skills and local traditions may have been at work in the building and decoration of early Islamic monuments, their common characteristic is that they were built for Muslims, to serve purposes which did not exist in quite the same way before Islam.

In order to understand this art and the forms it created as well as the way it went about creating them, it is necessary to investigate first whether the Arabs who conquered so vast an area brought any specific tradition with them; second, whether the new faith imposed certain attitudes or rules which required or shaped artistic expression; and, finally, what major artistic movements the Muslims encountered in the lands they ruled.

Written information about pre-Islamic Arabia is not very reliable, because it is almost always coloured by later prejudices downplaying the heritage received by medieval Islam from the 'jahiliyya', the 'time of ignorance' which preceded the advent of Islam. It is, however, likely that the full investigation of texts like al-Azraqi's *Akhbar al-Makkah* ('Information about Mecca,'), written in the ninth century C.E. when many pre-Islamic practices and memories were still alive, will yield a great deal of information on the religious and other ways of pre-Islamic Arabia and on the spaces needed for their expression.[1] A serious archeological exploration of the area has only begun in recent decades with a few surveys and some excavations, the most notable of which is that of al-Faw in southwestern Arabia.[2]

It has generally been assumed that, at least in the period immediately preceding the Muslim conquest, the Arabs of Arabia had very few indigenous artistic traditions of any significance. The Ka'ba in Mecca [1], the holiest sanctuary of Arabia, was the shrine where tribal symbols were kept for the whole of Arabia. It was a very simple, nearly cubic building (10 by 12 by 15 metres), for which a flat roof resting on six wooden pillars was built around the turn of the seventh century, according to tradition, by a Christian Copt from Egypt. Its painted decoration of living and inanimate subjects, whatever their symbolic or decorative significance may have been, was also in all probability an innovation of the early seventh century under foreign influences.[3] If the most important and best-known building of Arabia, venerated by practically all the tribes, lacked in architectural quality, it is probable that the other sanctuaries for which we have references in texts were even less impressive.

With respect to secular arts, our information is even slimmer. No doubt the wealthy merchants of Mecca and the heads of other settled communities had palaces which showed their rank and wealth,[4] but the only private house of Arabia which has acquired some significance and about which much more will be said later, the house of Muhammad in Madina, consisted of a simple square court with a few small rooms on the side and a colonnade of palm trunks covered with palm leaves. Nor do we know much about the artefacts, metalwork, or textiles which mus[t] have been used by the inhabitants of Arabia in the first c[entu]ries of our era. Were they of local manufacture or i[mported]? The excavations at al-Faw brought to light a fairl[y] of objects brought in from the Mediterranea[n], possibly of Indian origin, and several enigm[atic]

1. Mecca, Ka'ba

2. Palmyra, temple of Bel, relief, first century

of paintings. But the archeological record is too meagre to draw too many conclusions, and the dominant ideal of life, that of the nomad, held the artisan in low esteem.[5] This contempt need not have carried over to the artisan's work, but pre-Islamic Arabic legend does not appear to have given to manufactured objects the attention it lavished on horses, and there is no trace of the specific attachment to a sword or armour found in classical, Iranian, or western medieval epics.

This impression of poverty in the artistic development of pre-Islamic Arabia must be tempered by the paucity of excavations and explorations, and by the very spotty study of literary documents.[6] But the lack of remains or descriptions should not obscure the fact that the religious, intellectual, and social milieu out of which Islam grew espoused concepts and modes of thought and behaviour which exerted an influence on the development of the faith and of its art. For instance, in Mecca and a number of other oases we find the ancient Semitic notion of a *haram*, i.e. of an area, often quite large, physically mapped out in a more or less crude fashion, which was both holy and forbidden except to certain people and at certain times. The word *masjid* (a place for prostration, whence 'mosque') is also of pre-Islamic origin. In the rather simple religious ceremonies of the pre-Islamic Arabs, the symbol of the divinity was often placed in a tent, at times referred to as *qubba* (dome), or covered by a cloth on an apparently domed frame, as can be seen on a well-known Palmyrene relief [2].[7] The *mihrab*, later a characteristic element of the mosque, was the hallowed part of a religious or secular institution.[8] These and other examples show that many of the forms and terms developed by Islam with precise connotations in the new faith and the new civilization already existed in pre-Islamic Arabia, even though they rarely found more than a rudimentary monumental or artistic expression.

In addition to these rather simple notions with few tangible effects, the inhabitants of central Arabia at the time of Muhammad were also conscious of the earlier artistic achievements of Arab rulers in the steppes and the deserts extending from Anatolia to the Indian Ocean. Although the monuments of the Nabateans (in what is now more or less the modern state of Jordan) and the Palmyrenes (in centr Syria) from the first century B.C.E. to the fourth century C. seem to have left little impression, three other early Ar cultures made a more lasting impact. One was that of t Lakhmids, an Arab Christian dynasty centred in Iraq whi served as a buffer state between the Persians and t Byzantines in the fifth and sixth centuries. Their half-le endary palaces of al-Khawarnaq and Sadir, symbols of royal luxury unavailable in the Arabian peninsula, count among the marvels of the world.[9] They introduced a fa number of Iranian features into the Semitic world of t Arabs and, most importantly, even though the matter is st under discussion, it would have been in their capital of Hirah, in south central Iraq, that the scripts which led to t common written Arabic would have been developed.

Another civilization which struck the imagination of t Arabs before and on the eve of Islam was that of Yemen, the southern edge of the peninsula, where the Queen Sheba was assumed to have lived. In recent years numero explorations of pre-Islamic and Islamic Yemen have take place. Their primary emphasis has been on modern and pr modern times, but, from literary sources as well as from small number of actual excavations, we know that many ce turies before Islam Yemen had developed a brilliant arch tecture of temples and palaces, together with an origin local sculpture.[10] From later legends we know also th Yemeni painters were of sufficiently high repute to be calle to the Persian Sasanian court.[11] And by the late sixth ce tury a short-lived Christian domination of the area led to specifically Christian architecture which, for a long time remained in the collective memory of Arabs, even if th buildings themselves barely lasted a generation. The hig level of South Arabian civilization in general was made pos sible by an expensive and highly organized system of irriga tion symbolized by the Marib dam, the destruction of whic (apparently in the late sixth century) was taken as the mai cause of the decline of Yemen. Actually, the wealth of Yeme grew from its role in the trade between India and Ethiopi on the one hand and the Mediterranean on the other; in th sixth century much of this trade was diverted to the Persia Gulf. Whilst best known today for its numerous temples South Arabia is chiefly important because of the appeal of it secular monuments to a later Arab imagination. The tenth century al-Hamdani's *Antiquities of South Arabia* allows u not so much to reconstruct the architectural characteristi of the great Yemeni buildings (although some of its info mation can in fact be verified in remaining ruins) as to pe ceive a half-imaginary world of twenty-storey-high palace with domed throne rooms, sculpted flying eagles, roarin copper lions, and black slaves guarding the royal house.[12]

The third pre-Islamic Arabian culture of note is that o the Christian Ghassanids, who, as occasional instruments Byzantine policies, dominated the Syrian and Jordania countryside as late as the sixth century. Many buildings, s ular and religious, which are part of the so-called Byzanti Christian architecture of Syria, such as the *praetorium* Rusafah, were sponsored by Ghassanid rulers, but the exa nature of their visual identity, if any, is still very vague at no objects or works other than architectural can be attri uted to them. Their importance lies primarily in the fa

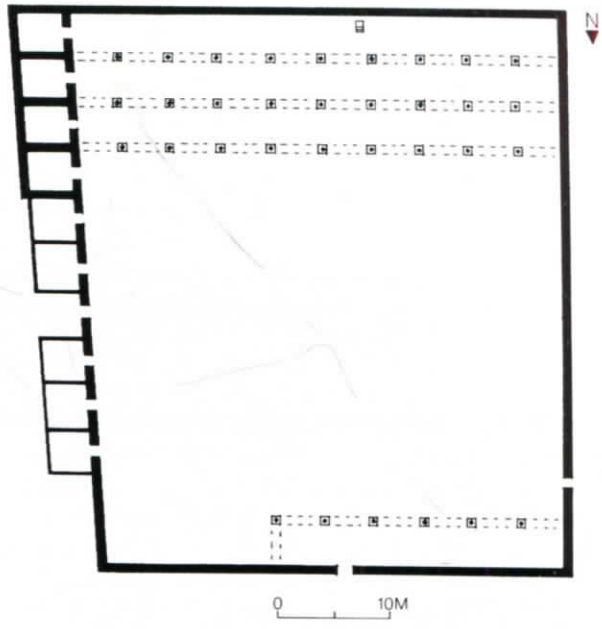
that they lived in and exploited the areas where the Umayyads settled in the seventh century. There may well have been a direct passage from Ghassanid to Umayyad patronage which makes it often difficult to disentangle one from the other.[13]

Thus the memories of Yemen, of the Lakhmids, and of the Ghassanids kept alive by the legends and poems recited at camp fires or at occasional meetings in the richer oases, fed the minds and the imagination of early Muslims with the vision of a splendid secular art created many centuries earlier by Arabs at the two extremities of the arid desert. Together with the rudiments of symbolic forms found in their religious life, and some awareness of the more expensive techniques of architectural decoration and of the arts of objects, this vision, based on monuments which were, by then, little known, furnished a major component to the making of an Islamic art.

When we turn to those attitudes and requirements which the faith established and which sooner or later influenced Islamic art, a number of difficulties arise. First, our only fully acceptable source for the period is the Qur'an; the Traditions (*hadith*) which sprang up to supplement or clarify the Prophet's thought are not always reliable as historical documents and the time of their first codification is the subject of much discussion.[14] Second, since such questions did not arise in his lifetime, Muhammad did not rule on or consider problems which immediately affected the arts or artistic activities either in the Qur'an or in his otherwise well-documented actions.[15] Those statements, attitudes, or prescriptions which were eventually of consequence to the arts were not consciously aimed at them. Their identification has therefore to be based, at least in part, on later intellectual commentaries and artistic developments.

As far as later architecture is concerned, the major contribution of early Islam in Arabia was the development of a specifically Muslim *masjid* (pl. *masajid*) or mosque. Muhammad took over the ancient *masjid al-haram* of Mecca and transformed it into the *qibla* (place towards which prayer is directed) of the new faith (Qur'an 2:144). In addition, every Muslim was enjoined to try once before he or she died to make the pilgrimage to Mecca. The Meccan sanctuary underwent few modifications over the centuries, and very few buildings in Islam attempted to copy it; in general it remained a unique and inimitable centre towards which all Muslims turn to pray.[16] Muhammad also introduced a ritual of individual prayer (*salat*), a pure act of devotion, to be performed five times a day wherever the worshiper happens to be. On certain occasions however, such as Fridays at noon, it should take place in the *masajid Allah* (Qur'an 9:17–18, 'the mosques of God'), because, from the time of Muhammad on, a sermon (*khutba*) on moral, religious, and also political and social themes formed an integral part of the ceremony, and because this was the time and the place when through the leader of prayer (the *imam*) the Muslim community expressed its allegiance to its rulers. The corollary – an essential point for understanding early Islamic architecture – was that every major Islamic community required a suitable *masjid* adapted to the size of the community for its religious as well as its political and social functions.

The *masajid* of Muhammad himself are not really known.



3. Madina, House of the Prophet, 624, reconstructed plan

For certain major ceremonies or feasts the Prophet used to go outside the town of Madina into large *musalla*(s) (lit. 'places for prayer'), probably ancient holy spaces in most cases. In the town itself the major centre was Muhammad's own house. Modern historians have generally argued that the sudden and rapid development of Muhammad's new faith transformed what started as a private dwelling into a place of worship and of government, and that this was an accidental, not a willed, development. The Prophet himself would have considered his house merely a convenient centre for his manifold activities (cf. Qur'an 33:53, asking the believers not to enter his house at will, although this may have referred to private side rooms only). But numerous later accounts describe it as the first Muslim-built *masjid* and more recent historiography has argued that its growth, as told in the *hadith*, is one of a public space acquiring private functions rather than the other way around.

Regardless of the explanation of its origins, this mosque/house or house/mosque was not a very spectacular building. It consisted of a square of sun-dried bricks approximately fifty metres to the side [3]. On the east of the southern part of the eastern wall were rooms (nine of them by 632, when Muhammad died) for the Prophet's wives. On the southern and northern sides short colonnades (*suffa*) of palm trunks supporting palm branches were erected after complaints about the heat of the sun in the court. On each of the other sides was a door; the southern wall had become the *qibla*.[17] The Prophet used to lean on a lance near the northern edge of the southern colonnade to lead prayer and deliver sermons. At times he would climb a simple pulpit known as the *minbar*, a judge's seat in pre-Islamic times which eventually became the symbol of authority in the ceremony of prayer and in all related mosque activities.[18]

Although the reconstruction and interpretation of exclusively written evidence, often hagiographic in character, can be no more than hypothetical, it must be conceded as pos-

sible (in spite of very scanty evidence)[19] that the Prophet eventually built a separate mosque near his house. Literary sources refer to Muslim *masajid* in neighbouring villages or towns,[20] implying a consciousness on the part of the early Muslims that theirs was a new kind of structure, if not in its physical appearance, at least in its purpose of harbouring the believers of the new faith. But, of all buildings mentioned in texts, the only one to have had a great impact on later religious architecture is the very one whose contemporary identification as a *masjid* is least certain. Perhaps the safest hypothesis is that there occurred in Madina between 622 and 632 a coincidence between the accidental development of the Prophet's house into a centre for the faithful and a general idea of restricted sanctuaries for God. With respect to architecture, not much else can be derived from the Qur'an or, for that matter, from most other early textual sources.[21] To be sure, specific Qur'anic texts came to be almost standard in the decoration of certain parts of mosques or other buildings for functions only invented later; for instance, Qur'an 24:35, the beautiful verse evoking God as 'the Light of the heavens and the earth', became common on *mihrabs* many centuries afterwards and a group of three minarets near Isfahan quote Qur'an 61:33, praising those who call men to God. Such later interpretations and uses do not imply a direct impact of the Qur'an or of the Prophet on future Islamic architecture, but the fact that they occurred points to the uniquely Islamic relationship between the Qur'an and buildings.[22]

On the aesthetics of paintings, sculpture, and other arts the Holy Book is silent. Nevertheless it contains a number of precise statements and general attitudes whose impact on later Islamic art was significant. One such is Qur'an 5:93: 'O you who believe, indeed wine, games of chance, statues, and arrows for divination are a crime, originating in Satan.' While the word used here (*al-ansab*) is often translated as 'statue', in fact it refers to idols, many of which were in human form. The same ambiguity exists in a second passage (Qur'an 6:74), in which Abraham chides his father for taking idols in the shape of statues (*asnam*) for gods. While it is uncertain – indeed unlikely – that the Revelation implied a condemnation of representational statuary in these and a number of related passages, its statements are quite unambiguous with respect to idolatry. As we shall see later, at the time of the growth of Islam images had acquired a meaning much beyond their value as works of art; they were symbols of mystical, theological, political, imperial, and intellectual ideas and were almost the equivalents of the acts and personages they represented. Thus, the opposition to idols, a fundamental principle of Islam, when taken in its setting of almost magically endowed images, eventually led to an opposition to representations of living forms. However, this opposition manifested itself principally in architecture and in the arts of the object and the book specifically associated with the religion of Islam. In the secular realm, the figural tradition – which had been so very strong in most of the areas conquered by the Muslims during the seventh century – not only survived (contrary to a common misconception) but continued to develop throughout the period covered by this volume.

The position of Muhammad in Islam also differed radically from that of most religious reformers: he was but a man and the Messenger of God. No miracles were officially attributed to him, and he constantly reiterated that he could not perform them; he did not undergo a Passion for the salvation of others; except for a few episodes at the beginning of his prophetic life, there was no particular significance attached to the narrative of that life; and even the example of his life was superseded by the doctrine of the Qur'an. Thus, despite the eventual development of a hagiography of Muhammad (probably already by the middle of the eighth century), it never acquired the deep significance given to the lives of Christ or the Buddha, at least not on the level of official Islam. Lacking a specific life as a model of behaviour or as a symbol of the faith, Islam in general and early Islam in particular were little tempted by an iconographic treatment of the Revelation.

Opposition to figurative art was also read into another Qur'anic statement of principle, that of God as the only Creator. 'God is the Creator of everything, and He is the Guardian over everything' (Qur'an 39:62) is but one of the ways in which this creed is formulated. And in view of the almost physically meaningful nature of images at that time, one can understand the often repeated tradition that the artist who fashions a representation of a living thing is a competitor of God and therefore destined to eternal damnation.[23] The one Qur'anic passage referring to the creation of a representational object (3:49) strikingly confirms this point. The meaning of the statement there attributed to Jesus – 'Indeed I have come to you with a sign from your Lord; I shall create for you from clay in the form of a bird; I shall blow into it and it will become a bird, by God's leave' – is clear: not only is this a miraculous event, made possible only through God's permission and for the purpose of persuading people of the truth of Jesus's mission, but the act of bringing to life the representation of a living form was the only possible aim of its creation. Therefore, in many later traditions, on the Last Day the artist will be asked to give life to his creations, and his failure to do so – since God alone can give life – will expose him as an impostor as well as one who assumes God's power.

These and other similar texts were not elaborated, nor were corollaries concerning the arts established, for many decades after the death of Muhammad,[24] and all theologians did not propound the doctrine of opposition to images with the same absoluteness.[25] Yet, from the time of the very first monuments of Islam, Muslims evinced reluctance or shyness with respect to human or animal representation. This attitude manifested itself in an immediate veto in the case of religious art, and a subtler reaction concerning secular art. It is, therefore, incorrect to talk of a Muslim iconoclasm, even if destruction of images did occur later; one should rather call the Muslim attitude aniconic.

The final aspect of the Qur'an's importance to Islamic art is the very nature and existence of the Book. It represents a complete break with the largely illiterate Arabian past. From the beginning, Islam replaced the iconographic, symbolic, and practical functions of representations in Christian or Buddhist art with inscriptions, first from the Qur'an and by extension from other works.[26] Writing not only became an integral part of the decoration of a building, at times even its

an object, but also indicated its purpose. In addition, the greatest possible care was taken over copying and transmitting the divinely directed Book. As a result, calligraphy spread to works other than the Qur'an and came to be considered as the greatest of all arts. For a long time it was the only one whose practitioners were remembered by their names in written sources, thereby rising above the general level of artisanal anonymity.[27]

These four elements – a ritual for prayer to be accomplished by preferences in a mosque, an accidental prototype for the mosque in the house of Muhammad in Madina, a reluctance concerning representation of living beings, and the establishment of the Qur'an as the most precious source for Islamic knowledge and of the Arabic script as the vehicle for the transmission of that knowledge – comprise the most important contributions to the formation of Islamic art during the ten years which elapsed between the Hijra (622) and the death of Muhammad (632). With the partial and possibly controversial exception of Muhammad's house, it is a question largely of moods and attitudes; forms and motifs came almost exclusively from the lands conquered by Islam.

We can summarize briefly the major characteristics of Western Asian art by the middle of the seventh century. All the lands taken over by the Muslims in the seventh century, which formed the core of the Islamic empire, had been affected by the classical art of Greece and Rome in its widest sense. Carl Becker put it succinctly: 'Without Alexander the Great there would not have been a unified Islamic civilization.'[28] The significance of this is twofold. On the one hand, Islamic art, like Islamic civilization and Byzantine and western Christian arts, inherited a great deal from the Greco-Roman world. On the other hand, in varying degrees of intensity, from northwestern India to Spain, a remarkably rich vocabulary of formal possibilities had developed more or less directly from the unity-within-variety of the Hellenistic *koiné* and became available to the new culture. In architecture the main elements of building from central Asia to Gaul were columns and piers, vaults and domes, 'basilical' plans and 'central' plans, stone and brick, with manifold local variations. In human or natural representation, the most illusionistic traditions of the first century C.E. coexisted with the more abstract, linear, or decorative modes which developed after the third century, and the vast majority of the techniques of decorative and industrial arts had been elaborated. The Muslim conquest did not take over large territories in a state of intellectual or artistic decay. Although the empires of Byzantium and Iran had been weakened in the first part of the seventh century by internal troubles and wars, these disturbances barely hampered their intellectual or artistic activities. The Muslim world inherited not exhausted traditions but dynamic ones, in which fresh interpretations and new experiments coexisted with old ways and ancient styles. The whole vast experience of ten brilliant centuries of artistic development provided the Islamic world with its vocabulary of forms.[29]

The traditions of this world were many and diverse, and early Muslim writers were fully cognizant of the distinctions in culture between the Byzantine and Sasanian empires, between *Qaysar* and *Kisra*, 'Caesar' and 'Khosrow', names of emperors transformed into symbols of imperial rule and behaviour. The Muslims conquered two of the wealthiest Byzantine provinces, Egypt and Greater Syria (including Palestine). Syria is best known for the excellence of its stone architecture, still visible in hundreds of ancient churches, the sobriety of its stone-carving, and the wealth of its mosaic floors. In addition, it was a centre of great imperial foundations, such as the Christian sanctuaries of the Holy Land. The actual presence of imperial Constantinople in much of this art is subject to debate, and there is the special problem of Coptic art, the art of heterodox Christian Egypt, whose monuments of sculpture, painting, and the minor arts are preserved in large numbers, but whose exact position, as original or provincial, is a much debated topic.[30] In North Africa and Spain the pre-Islamic traditions may have been less vigorous, because of a more chequered and unfortunate political history. The crucial point in dealing with the Christian art known to or seen by the newly arrived Muslims, however, is not so much its specific character in this or that province (which had mostly a technical impact on the young Islamic art) as the presence in the background of the awesome and dazzling, even though unfriendly, power and sophistication of the Byzantine ruler, the *malik al-Rum* of the sources. His painters were recognized as the greatest on Earth, and the early Muslims had the mixed feelings towards his empire of a successful *parvenu* for an effete aristocrat. Whenever an early Islamic building was held to be particularly splendid, contemporary or even later legend – the facts are uncertain[31] – asserted that the Byzantine emperors sent workers to execute it.

On the other side, beyond the Euphrates, the Sasanian empire of Iran was entirely swallowed up by the Muslims, and its artists and traditions were almost immediately taken over by the new empire. To contemporaries, the Sasanian ruler was the equal of the Byzantine emperor, but unfortunately our knowledge of Sasanian art is far less complete than our understanding of the Christian tradition. Most of what we know concerns secular achievements: great palaces, with one exception (the celebrated vaulted hall of Ctesiphon) of mediocre construction, but lavishly covered with decorative stucco; rock reliefs and silver plate glorifying the power of the kings; and textiles presumably made in Iran and sold or imitated from Egypt to China. But the paucity of our knowledge – which tends to reduce Sasanian art to a small number of decorative patterns such as pearl borders on medallions, royal symbols like pairs of wings or fluttering scarves, and a few architectural peculiarities like the majestic *iwan* (a vaulted rectangular room with one side giving on an open space) and stucco decoration – should not obscure the fact that at the time of the Muslim conquest it was one of the great arts of its period and, more specifically, the imperial art *par excellence*, in which everything was aimed at emphasizing the power of the King of Kings. Yet, however originally they used or transformed them, the Sasanians derived many of their architectural and representational (but not always decorative) forms from the older classical *koiné*.[32]

The political and artistic importance of the two great empires of the pre-Islamic Near East should not overshadow the existence of other cultural and artistic traditions. Their

monuments are less clearly identified, but their importance is considerable because many of them became heavily Islamicized or served as intermediaries between Islam and the rest of the world. An example is furnished by the Semitic populations of Syria and the upper Euphrates region. Although they were Christians and ostensibly part of the Byzantine world, their artistic individualization began before their conversion to Islam, and in general they rejected Hellenization in favour of various heretical movements. They were often supported by the Sasanians and affected by eastern traditions in art. In their midst the early Muslims found many supporters and, most probably, converts. We do not know their art well, especially in the centuries immediately preceding the Muslim conquest; but through the monuments of Dura-Europos, Palmyra, Hatra, and the Tur Abdin, we can imagine what must have been their great centre, Edessa; and we may assume that they had begun before the third century and continued most wholeheartedly the transformation of classical motifs and forms into abstract modes and decorative shapes which became a feature of Byzantine art.[33] Another such area, of secondary importance in the seventh century as far as Islam is concerned, acquired a greater significance in later centuries: Armenia. Torn between the rivalries of Byzantium and Iran, it developed an individuality of its own by adopting elements from both sides. Further out in the mountains, in later centuries, Georgia fulfilled a similar role. But despite their specific significance and artistic peculiarities, these cultures depended a great deal on the two imperial centres of Byzantium and Iran.[34]

In addition mention should be made of two peripheral regions, whose impact was more sporadic, at least at the beginning. The first is India, reached by the Muslims in the eighth century and soon a great goal for Islamic mercantilism as well as for centuries the proverbial exotic 'other'. The other is Central Asia, long thought to be a mere variation on the Sasanian world, but now, after spectacular archaeological discoveries, identifiable as a culture of its own, where Chinese, Indian, Sasanian, and even western elements curiously blended with local Soghdian and Kharizmian features into an art at the service of many faiths (Manicheism, Christianity, Buddhism, Mazdaism) and of many local princes and merchants.[35] Far in the background lies China, whose influence will appear only sporadically.

Beyond its unity of formal and technical origin and its innumerable local variations, the art of the countries taken over by Islam shared several conceptual features. Much was at the service of faith and state and, in the Christian world at least, even part of the faith and of the state. This point is significant because, as was mentioned earlier, it was the Christian use of images that, in part, influenced Muslim attitudes towards representation. The Byzantine crisis of Iconoclasm, which followed the Muslim conquest by a few decades, may not have been inspired by Muslim ideas, but it certainly indicates a concern within Christian circles over the ambiguous significance of images.[36] We know less about the purposes and values of Sasanian art. Yet the very official nature of its iconography on silver plates or on stone reliefs strongly suggests that there were more than mere images of some kind of reality; they were symbols of the kings themselves and of their dynasty. Soghdian merchants, Coptic monks, Aramaic-speaking Syrian villagers, petty Turkic dynasts, all sought by means of buildings, decoration, and objects to communicate their power, wealth, and beliefs.

Thus the conquering Arabs, with relatively few artistic traditions of their own and a limited visual culture, penetrated a world which was not only immensely rich in artistic themes and forms yet universal in its vocabulary, but also, at this particular juncture of its history, had charged its forms with unusual intensity. The methodological and intellectual originality of Islamic art in its formative stages lies in its demonstration of the encounter between extremely complex and sophisticated uses of visual forms and a new religious and social system with no ideological doctrine requiring visual expression.