

**TITLE:**Buddha **LOCATION:**Bamiyan, Afghanistan **DATE:** C. 400-800 C.E.

**ARTIST:** **PERIOD/STYLE:** Gandharan **PATRON:**

**MATERIAL/TECHNIQUE:** Cut sandstone with plaster and polychrome paint.

**FORM:**

Details such as facial features and hands were modeled using mud mixed with straw and then coated with stucco and painted bright colors. Stucco is a kind of plaster that is sometimes put on the exterior of houses as a protective coating against the elements. The stucco wore off long ago, but we do know that the larger Buddha figure was painted a deep red and the smaller Buddha was multi-colored with both jewels and copper. The legs were carved in the round which allowed for circumambulation.

**FUNCTION:**

The Silk Road composed an overland network of trade routes linking China and Central Asia with India and ultimately the Mediterranean Sea. The Bamiyan Valley's fertile fields attracted merchants and Buddhist missionaries. Thus between 500 and 750, the region served as both a commercial hub and an important Buddhist spiritual center.

**CONTENT:**

The Bamiyan Buddhas served as centerpieces of a flourishing Buddhist community. Both statues manifested the power and piety of their royal benefactors. Visible for miles, they provided pilgrims and merchants with a dramatic reminder to follow Buddhist practices. The two timeless images also marked a momentous development in Buddhist art. The gigantic Bamiyan statues represented Buddha as more than a gifted teacher; he was now presented as a guiding, enduring, and universal spiritual presence.

**CONTEXT:**

Bamiyan was situated right on the Silk Route as it went through the Hindu Kush mountain region in the Bamiyan valley of Afghanistan. This road was the caravan route, or the main thoroughfare, linking the luxury markets of China with "shoppers" in the Western world. Bamiyan was the site of several Buddhist monasteries and in those early centuries of the first millennium C.E. it was a thriving center for religion, philosophy, and the arts. Buddhist monks lived as hermits in small caves and embellished them with religious sculptures and brightly painted frescoes. Bamiyan was a Buddhist site from the second century C.E. up until the time of the Islamic invasion in the latter half of the seventh century C.E.

**INNOVATION/CONVENTION:**

Gandhara is the name given to a region in modern Pakistan and Afghanistan, conquered by Alexander the Great in 330 BC. Alexander introduced classical art and culture to Gandhara. His successors adopted a Gandharan style that combined realistic hellenistic elements such as flowing robes with Buddhist subject matter. Both Buddhas wore Greek style robes that reflect the Gandharan aesthetic, which brought Hellenistic influences to the arts of Central and Southern Asia.

**ARTISTIC DECISIONS:**

Figures are a key element in the Buddhist art of Central Asia because so much of the story of Buddhism is told through the depiction of various deities, teachers, practitioners, and attendants. There are no restrictions on the depiction of figures in Buddhist art. Unfortunately for the Buddhas of Bamiyan, their figural nature may have been part of what led to their destruction by the Taliban in 2001.

**INTERPRETATION:**

A lot of people ended up wanting these sculptures gone. When Genghis Khan came through the area in 1221, his armies did great damage in Bamiyan, but the sculptures were spared. Later, a Mughal emperor named Aurangzeb used heavy gunfire in an attempt to destroy the sculptures. In the 19th century, Persian King Nader Ashfar shot cannons at them. Yet, through all these attempts, the sculptures managed to remain unscathed. Perhaps it was faulty artillery or perhaps they were just too sturdy to be destroyed by this unwarranted type of aggression.

**DETAILS/TERMS/DEFINITIONS:**

In the end, the leader of the Taliban, Mullah Omar, won. In 2001, he had the sculptures blown up. He said he mainly destroyed them because foreigners had offered to repair the sculptures while overlooking thousands of Afghans who were dying of hunger. It isn't known for sure if Mullah Omar was truly making a point about priorities in humanitarian aid, about intercultural influences of the past, or about the fact that figural representations go against Muslim religious practices. What is for sure is that these two Buddhas, over 1500 years old, finally met their match and are now gone forever.

**TITLE:** The Kaaba **LOCATION:** Mecca, Saudi Arabia **DATE:** 631-632 C.E.

**ARTIST:** **PERIOD/STYLE:** Pre-Islamic **PATRON:**

**MATERIAL/TECHNIQUE:** Granite masonry, covered with silk curtain and calligraphy in gold and silver-wrapped thread

**FORM:**

REbuilt innumerable times throughout the centuries, The Ka'ba stands at the center of an enormous public square surrounded by the colonnaded cloister of the Masjid al-Haram mosque in the Saudi Arabian city of Mecca. The Kaaba is approximately 43 feet high, two of its sides measuring about 42 feet, and the other two sides measuring about 36 feet. However, it is covered in a special silk curtain decorated with calligraphy sewn in gold and silver-wrapped thread called the Kiswa.

**FUNCTION:**

The Kaaba is considered by Muslims to be "The House of God," and no matter where a Muslim person is, he or she must orient him- or herself in the direction of the Kaaba when praying. The simplicity of the form does lend itself well to this function of moving large numbers of people around the structure during pilgrimage time.

**CONTENT:**

According to Islamic tradition, God ordained Abraham and his son Ishmael to build the Kaaba as a holy shrine for worship. While Abraham was building the Kaaba an angel brought the Black Stone which he then placed in the structure's eastern corner. Following Ishmael's death, the Kaaba became a holy site for Bedouin tribes. As time passed, the Bedouins gradually turned to Polytheism and idolatry. Thus, although the Meccans worshipped Allah as their chief deity, He shared His power with over 300 other gods and goddesses whose statues filled the Kaaba. The idols attracted throngs of people who came on pilgrimages to worship these deities.

**CONTEXT:**

One of the requirements of Islam is that every Muslim who is able to do so must make a pilgrimage, called the hajj, to the site of the Kaaba at least once in his or her lifetime. Part of the hajj is to participate in tawaf, which is the ritual of walking around the Kaaba seven times. The ritual of pilgrimage is a key feature in the religious practices of Islam and Buddhism. Pilgrimage is the main reason that many monuments and artworks in West and Central Asia have survived the ages and still exist today to be visited by the faithful. Examples of pilgrimage sites or objects include the Kaaba in Mecca, the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, and the Buddha statue known as Jowo Rinpoche in Tibet.

**INNOVATION/CONVENTION:**

This mosque, which is what exists today, is composed of a large open space with colonnades on four sides and with seven minarets, the largest number of any mosque in the world. At the center of this large plaza sits the Kaaba, as well as many other holy buildings and monuments. The last major modifications were carried out in the 1950s by the government of Saudi Arabia to accommodate the increasingly large number of pilgrims who come on the hajj. Today the mosque covers almost 40 acres.

**ARTISTIC DECISIONS:**

The Kaaba is considered by Muslims to be the "House of God," and it sits on the grounds of Islam's most sacred mosque, Al-Masjid al-Haram.

**INTERPRETATION:**

In the holy book of Islam, the Qur'an, it is said that the Kaaba was built way back in the day by Abraham and Ishmael according to direct instructions from God. This is why it is labeled as "pre-Islamic." The building existed as a sacred site before the prophet Muhammad rededicated it in 631-632 C.E. Devout Muslims today believe that there are just two original stones still in place—one called the Black Stone, placed at the eastern corner of the building, and one called "The Station of Abraham"—that were put there by the hands of Abraham himself. Everything else we see today is from subsequent rebuilding and maintenance efforts over the centuries.

**DETAILS/TERMS/DEFINITIONS:**

This cube-shaped building sits in the center of Islam's most sacred mosque, Al-Masjid al-Haram, in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. The Arabic word Kaaba means "square" or "cube," so this sacred building is certainly well-named.

**TITLE:** Dome of the Rock **LOCATION:** Jerusalem **DATE:** . 691-692 C.E.,

**ARTIST:** \_\_\_\_\_ **PERIOD/STYLE:** Islamic, Umayyad **PATRON:** Abd al-Malik

**MATERIAL/TECHNIQUE:** Stone masonry, wooden roof decorated with glazed ceramic tiles, mosaics, and gilt aluminum and bronze dome.

**FORM:**

The building is octagonal and sports a wooden dome that's about 20 meters in diameter. The dome sits on an elevated circular drum comprised of 16 arches. In Islamic Art blue is the color of the sky which represents infinity, and gold represents knowledge of Allah.

**FUNCTION:**

A lot of the architecture in the West and Central Asia region serves a religious function. In the Islamic tradition, there are beautifully decorated mosques, as well as commemorative structures, like the Dome of the Rock. This particular building and the site on which it stands have particular significance for three different religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. However, the Dome of the Rock has spent most of its history as an important shrine for Muslims.

**CONTENT:**

Forbidden by Muslim beliefs to depict Allah, Muhammad or any figural form, mosaicists instead portrayed motifs such as crowns, jewels and chalices. These objects may have been intended to provide visual references to the triumph of Islamic forces over the Byzantine and Persian Empires. The stone that is contained in the building is revered as the Holy of Holies, an inner sanctum within Solomon's Temple that contained the Ark of the Covenant.

**CONTEXT:**

Some Islamic scholars believe it is the place from which Muhammad ascended to heaven and that Muhammad, brought to the rock by the angel Gabriel, prayed on that very spot with Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. Jewish tradition holds that the rock is the spot where Abraham took his son Isaac to sacrifice him on an order from God himself. Muslims believe the almost-sacrifice was actually Abraham's other son, Ishmael, the son whose descendants would later become the Islamic people. The Jewish people believe that the rock sits above the Well of Souls, a cave where the spirits of the dead await judgment day. This cave is also believed to be the resting place of the Holy of Holies, aka the Ark of the Covenant, which, according to tradition, holds the Ten Commandments.

**INNOVATION/CONVENTION:**

The use of arches, columns, mosaics, and the gold covering the exterior of the dome all reflect the influence of Byzantine architecture from the surrounding areas. Like San Vitale in Ravenna, the Dome of the Rock was built on an octagonal plan. A dome supported by a circular drum topped both structures. The Dome of the Rock's drum stands above a circuit of 12 columns and 4 piers. The interior space is filled with light, which enters through 16 windows in the drum and 40 windows in the 8 sided lower panels.

**ARTISTIC DECISIONS:**

Skilled craftsmen created the distinctive golden dome by melting down 100,000 gold coins. This shimmering sight far surpassed the drab dome atop the nearby Christian Church of the Holy Sepulcher. Over time, the golden crown disappeared and was replaced with copper and gold colored aluminum plates. During the 1990's King Hussein of Jordan provided funds to gild the dome with 5000 glittering new gold plates. The restored dome thus remains a symbol of Jerusalem and one of the glories of Islamic Art.

**INTERPRETATION:**

In 1099, Christian Crusaders captured Jerusalem and took over the Dome of the Rock, turning it into a church. The form of the building was much admired, and it became a model for many "Round Templar" churches all across Europe. Then in 1187, Jerusalem was recaptured by the Muslims. Saladin took over the city and reconsecrated the Dome of the Rock as a Muslim shrine. The cross on the top of the church was replaced by the crescent of Islam, and the structure has remained a Muslim sacred place ever since.

**DETAILS/TERMS/DEFINITIONS:**

The Dome of the Rock sits on the site believed to be where the first two Jewish temples stood. The Romans destroyed the second of these temples in 70 C.E. The site remained under Roman rule and undeveloped until the Muslim Siege of Jerusalem in 637. At that time, the Umayyad Caliph (an important dude in the Umayyad cultural group) whose name was Abd al-Malik ordered that the shrine be constructed.

**TITLE:**Great Mosque      **LOCATION:**Cordoba, Spain      **DATE:** . C. 785-786

**ARTIST:**      **PERIOD/STYLE:** Umayyads      **PATRON:** Abd al-Rahman, Al-Hakam and others

**MATERIAL/TECHNIQUE:** Stone Masonry

**FORM:**

The Great Mosque of Córdoba boasts a hypostyle plan, or columned hall, which was a feature of the Prophet Muhammad's house and mosque in Medina. This type of plan became associated with the Umayyad dynasty of caliphs and can be seen throughout Damascus, where their presence was strongest. The other eye-catching feature of the Great Mosque—the horseshoe arch made with alternating red brick and white stone voussoirs, or wedges—was also typical of the Umayyad style seen in Damascus.

**FUNCTION:**

The Mosque was built in Córdoba, where the Umayyads relocated after being driven out of the caliphate in Damascus. They desired to bring a little bit of home to their new digs in southern Spain, so they constructed a Mosque that was reminiscent of Umayyad buildings in Damascus.

**CONTENT:**

After some trials and tribulations, the Umayyads finally regained power; in the tenth century, they were restored to the caliphate. In response, Abd al-Rahman III decided to have a minaret, or slender tower where a muezzin would call Muslims to prayer, built on the Great Mosque. This was his personal signature to the building, an act that was not uncommon for leaders who desired their names to live on through history. His son, al-Hakam, then later expanded upon the mosque by increasing the size of the sahn, or courtyard (now called the Patio of Oranges), to more closely resemble the sahn in Damascus. Al-Hakam continued the renovations, creating a new maqsura, a screened space that was enclosed for prayer, with three polylobed arches that resemble lace. This screened area leads to the mihrab, a niche in the wall that designates the direction of Mecca. This space is covered floor to ceiling in decorative mosaics and calligraphy.

**CONTEXT:**

The Great Mosque of Córdoba has a layered history of early Christian, Islamic, and Catholic presences. Built on the site of an old Christian church dedicated to St. Vincent, construction of the Great Mosque was begun in 785 after drama ensued between dueling Islamic forces, the Umayyads and the Abbasids. The Mosque became the center of the Spanish Muslim dynasty of the Umayyads after they were kicked out of Damascus by the Abbasids, who took over the caliphate. In response, the Umayyads retreated to Spain, or what they called al-Andalus. When Abd al-Rahman of the Umayyads arrived in Spain, he began the major project of building the Mosque under his new title of emir, or local chief. Over the course of the following centuries, the Umayyads reclaimed their power as caliphs and continually added to the Mosque in Córdoba to commemorate their power.

**INNOVATION/CONVENTION:**

Because the Umayyads hailed from Syria, where they had established the caliphate, their architecture in Córdoba mimicked that of buildings in Damascus. The alternating red and white voussoirs are a good example of a style that they brought with them and integrated into the Great Mosque to make it feel like home-sweet-home.

**ARTISTIC DECISIONS:**

It's distinguishing feature was its collection of over 500 columns, scavenged from the ruins of Roman and Visigoth structures and connected by two tiers of arches, horseshoe shaped on the bottom tier and semi-round on the top.

**INTERPRETATION:**

The Christians re-conquered the south of Spain in 1236, shifting Muslim power to Granada, where the Alhambra is located. That year, the mosque was converted into the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Ascension; the minaret was converted into a bell tower as well and any evidence of Muslim occupation was promptly covered up. During the Renaissance, the building saw more reconstructions; a cruciform cathedral was built within the Mosque and a number of fortifications were made to the outside. The altar, not the mihrab, was now considered the most important part of the building. Despite the building's new purpose as a cathedral, many of the elements from the Mosque were preserved.

**DETAILS/TERMS/DEFINITIONS:**

Called La Mezquita in Spanish. In 711 a Berber army led by Arab commanders conquered the Spanish in the Iberian Peninsula, laying the foundations of Islamic Spain. Although its boundaries shifted over time, the territory controlled by the Spanish Muslims, called al-Andalus or Andalucia, maintained a significant political power and cultural influence for several centuries.

**TITLE:** Folio from a Qur'an **LOCATION:** Arab, North Africa, or Near East **DATE:** 8th-9th century C.E.  
**ARTIST:** **PERIOD/STYLE:** Islamic **PATRON:**

**MATERIAL/TECHNIQUE:** Ink, color, and gold on parchment.

**FORM:**

These lovely, lyrical black shapes drawn on a page of parchment are examples of calligraphy. The page comes from the Qur'an, which is the holy book of Islam. Although earlier versions of Qur'ans were laid out in a vertical format, those from the late eighth to the eleventh centuries, like this one, were formatted horizontally. The band of gold leaf in the middle of the page indicates a section heading, and the red dots over the writing provide instructions to the reader as to how words should be spoken.

**FUNCTION:**

The quran is the sacred book of Islam. Muslim's believe it contains the word of God as revealed through the archangel Gabriel to the prophet Muhammad.

**CONTENT:**

The Qur'an represents the words of God that Muslims believe the angel Gabriel spoke to the prophet Muhammad over a period of 23 years. The prophet was born in about 570 C.E. in Mecca, and he began receiving these words in 610 while hanging out in a cave on Mount Hira near his birthplace. The angel was a talker, and his oratory continued when Muhammad left for Medina in 622 and continued until his death in 632. The death of Muhammad marks the end of God's revelations and the beginning of the Islamic calendar.

**CONTEXT:**

According to Muslim tradition, Muhammad received divine revelations between the years 610 and his death in 632. Because very few of his followers were able to write, they memorized his messages. Shortly after Muhammad's death, the first Muslim caliph instructed trusted followers to compile their oral recollections into a fixed written form. As Islam spread beyond the Arabian Peninsula, it became necessary to establish a standard text to preserve the sanctity of Muhammad's message. In about 650 Muhammad's surviving companions collected his divine revelations and combined them into an authorized manuscript known as the Qur'an.

**INNOVATION/CONVENTION:**

There are no figures allowed in Islamic religious art, so decoration in mosques, manuscripts, or any objects that include sacred text is restricted to non-figurative elements such as calligraphy, floral or vegetal forms, or geometric shapes. The decoration on the Great Mosque at Isfahan is a prime example of a building that is covered in calligraphy; the Dome of the Rock is another. There is also calligraphy embroidered with gold and silver thread on the black curtain that covers the Kaaba in Mecca.

**ARTISTIC DECISIONS:**

Each page is laid out thoughtfully, and the elaborate calligraphy fills only a portion of the page. The sizes of the individual words, the size of the entire block of script, the placement of the text on the page, and the surrounding white space all follow careful proportions. The art of calligraphy was exalted as a sacred art form. Gold leaf has been applied in Qur'an manuscripts since as early as the eighth century. The three ornate gold medallions on this page mark the breaks between verses. The calligrapher has decorated the large one with organic, plant-inspired patterns, while the two smaller ones feature a more geometrical linear design. The line in gold at the top identifies the chapter, or sura, of the page's text. The beautiful, thick gold script is carefully edged in red, adding to the visual richness of this important heading.

**INTERPRETATION:**

Kufic Script features short vertical strokes, elongated horizontals, and angular letters. The process of creating a Qur'an required years of arduous training. Since the text was traditionally read aloud, scribes included diacritical marks to serve as visual guideposts. The red dots represent vowels, and a pyramid of six gold discs marks the end of a verse. Each of the 114 suras is named after its theme. Scribes highlighted the title by using gold ink.

**DETAILS/TERMS/DEFINITIONS:**

The word Qur'an means "recitation," suggesting an emphasis on oral tradition rather than on written scriptures, but luckily for those who study the holy scriptures of Islam, the words were written down. In Qur'ans from Northern Africa and Islamic Spain, the calligraphic script used, known as maghribi, has its own distinct look, style, composition, and, often, coloration. Maghribi, or "western" script, can be seen in this example of a Qur'an leaf dating to the thirteenth or fourteenth century. As is characteristic of this style, there is an emphasis here on extending the horizontal elements of letters, and certain diacritical marks are made in blue or green.



**TITLE:**Pyxis of al-Mughira **LOCATION:** Al-Andalus, Spain **DATE:** c. 968 CE.

**ARTIST:** Madinat al-Zahra workshops **PERIOD/STYLE:** Umayyad **PATRON:** Caliph Abd al-Rahman III

**MATERIAL/TECHNIQUE:** Ivory

**FORM:**

This pyxis, or cylindrical container, has detailed ivory carvings celebrating the Umayyad dynasty of caliphs that lived in Córdoba, Spain, during the tenth century. The pyxis has four medallions, or scalloped areas, that all feature small illustrations. One medallion shows two lions charging two bulls, a sign of victory that originated in Persia. Another medallion portrays two figures collecting eggs from a falcon's nest, probably because the Umayyads were known as "the falcons of Quraysh." The third medallion features men picking dates, and the fourth depicts two princes listening to a lute player.

**FUNCTION:**

An inscription running along the base of the lid calls for blessings and victory for al-Mughira, for whom the pyxis was made. al Mughira was the last son of Caliph Abd al-Rahman III, the same leader who decided to erect a minaret at the Great Mosque of Córdoba. This pyxis was probably used to store precious metals and perfumes, though, not the bones of saints.

**CONTENT:**

Although Islamic rulers made the pyxis of al-Mughira, the pyxides weren't Islamic in origin. They also weren't Christian in origin, but the Christians, especially Byzantine Christians, loved them to use them to store holy relics. Decorated with four 8-lobed medallions which are surrounded by figures and animals that include falconers, wrestlers, griffons, peacocks, birds, goats and animals to be hunted. Each medallion has princely iconography. This medallion shows two men collecting eggs from the nests of Falcons, a symbol of Umayyad legitimacy. This medallion centers around a lute player flanked by two figures, one of whom holds the braided scepter and flask of the Umayyads, while the other holds a fan. Presumably the man with the scepter and flask symbolizes the Umayyad Caliph, and the figure with the fan, the Abbassids. The final scene shows men on horseback date-picking. The date-palm, found primarily in the Middle East and North Africa, may allude to the lost lands of the East (the lands under Abbasid control). This too was a theme of Umayyad poetry.

**CONTEXT:**

In the ninth century, the trade in ivory in North Africa resumed after being closed for two centuries. This was bad for the elephants but good for Byzantine and Muslim rulers, who desired ornately carved ivory objects such as platters, book covers, altars, and, yes, pyxides. This and other pyxides were made from a single tusk, but they were typically carved out in such a way that the inside of the tusk was completely wasted.

**INNOVATION/CONVENTION:**

The Pyxis of al-Mughira, now in the Louvre, is among the best surviving examples of the royal ivory carving tradition in Al-Andalus (Islamic Spain). The use of visual imagery which is also found in the poetry of the era demonstrates that these two art forms were in communication.

**ARTISTIC DECISIONS:**

Because the city's Muslim population had grown, al-Rahman expanded the size of the sahn at the Great Mosque of Córdoba. The pyxis was a small object compared to the mega-palace he had built right outside of Córdoba. Named the Madinat al-Zahra, the caliph's elaborate crib even had its own ivory workshop, where this pyxis was probably made. The generations of caliphs that followed continued employing ivory for small and large objects alike. In fact, al-Rahman's son added a pulpit into the Great Mosque that was inlaid with ivory.

**INTERPRETATION:**

Human and animal figures played a vital part in iconography. We see them here in this pyxis, which some scholars (including those at the Louvre), have interpreted as expressing the political authority and legitimacy of Umayyad Caliphs (as opposed to the Abbasid Caliphs, who ruled in Baghdad). An Arabic inscription in the kufic script runs around the base of the lid and reads: "God's blessing, favours, joy, beatitude to al-Mughira son of the Commander of the faithful, may God have mercy upon him, in the year 357."

**DETAILS/TERMS/DEFINITIONS:**

It's no surprise that ivory was a item everyone desired. Also called "white gold," ivory had a cream-white color, was easily carved, and didn't warp over time like wood. It was used for a variety of Christian objects, including diptychs and triptychs. But even though the ivory trade gained momentum while the Umayyads lived in Córdoba, everywhere else the market for ivory slowed to a mere trickle. It's possible the Muslims had a monopoly on the precious object and there just weren't enough tusks to go around.

**TITLE:** Basin (Baptistère de St. Louis) **LOCATION:** \_\_\_\_\_ **DATE:** 1320-1340 C.E.

**ARTIST:** Muhammad ibn al-Zain **PERIOD/STYLE:** Mamluk Dynasty **PATRON:** Bahri Mamluk or other patron

**MATERIAL/TECHNIQUE:** Brass inlaid with gold and silver.

**FORM:**

### **FUNCTION:**

The basin was probably commissioned by a rich Mamluk patron to be used either at banquets or for ritual hand-washing. Somehow, perhaps through trade on the Silk Route, this vessel made its way to France. There, from at least as early as the 17th century, it was used in the baptisms of children born into the French royal family. Basically, an object created in a secular Islamic context found its use in the Christian ritual of baptism.

### **CONTENT:**

Inlaid with silver and gold, the basin's wide central, outer band depicts a finely crafted procession of Mamluk emirs, or officials, among them a mace-bearer (jumaqdâr), ax-bearer (tabardân), and bow-bearer (bunduqdâr). Four horsemen in roundels punctuating the procession of dignitaries may be personifications of different aspects of furusiyya, or "horsemanship." Friezes of animals and coats-of-arms frame this exterior band and decorate the basin's interior as well.

### **CONTEXT:**

The basin was made sometime between 1320 and 1340 by a master metal craftsman named Mohammed ibn al-Zain, who was either Egyptian or Syrian. He was working for the Mamluks, a group of ethnic Turks who took control of Egypt and Syria from 1250 to 1517. It is remarkable because of its contrast to religious objects from the same period and region, which were decorated only with the text of the Qur'an. The Mamluks, the majority of whom were ethnic Turks, were a group of warrior slaves who took control of several Muslim states and established a dynasty that ruled Egypt and Syria from 1250 until the Ottoman conquest in 1517. The political and military dominance of the Mamluks was accompanied by a flourishing artistic culture renowned across the medieval world for its glass, textiles, and metalwork.

### **INNOVATION/CONVENTION:**

### **ARTISTIC DECISIONS:**

In West and Central Asia, metal was used to make all kinds of useful things, including commemorative plaques, vessels, armor, sculpture, and decorative objects of all kinds. The amount of metalsmithing skill required to make the detailed decoration that appears on this basin is quite remarkable. Artists in both the Islamic and Buddhist traditions worked with metals to make some incredible objects and sculptures, and this basin is the best of the best.

### **INTERPRETATION:**

On the outside of the basin, the merry parade depicts Mamluk emirs (officials) holding different objects, such as maces, axes, and bows, that designate their positions and duties. There are also horsemen in roundels (circular borders) who may be examples of different aspects of horsemanship. Depictions of many different animals and coats-of-arms frame the decorations on both the inside and the outside of the basin. On the inside of the basin, there are four panels which feature two hunting scenes and two battle scenes. These panels are separated by scenes of monarchs on thrones and escutcheons (shields) with the arms of France. Everything is surrounded by a leafy design, and the base on the interior features aquatic animals, including a toothy crocodile.

### **DETAILS/TERMS/DEFINITIONS:**

The various coats-of-arms on the basin were later worked over with fleur-de-lis, a motif that might have appealed to both the basin's original Islamic and later European owners. The flower was a popular Mamluk emblem in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries as well as a heraldic device of the French royal family.

**TITLE:** Bahram Gur Fights the Karg **LOCATION:** Iran **DATE:** 1330-1340 C.E.

**ARTIST:** artists in the Mongol court **PERIOD/STYLE:** Islamic, Persian, Il’Khanid **PATRON:** court vizier,  
a high-ranking official.

**MATERIAL/TECHNIQUE:** Ink and opaque watercolor, gold, and silver on paper

**FORM:**

In its original form, scholars believe this complete manuscript probably comprised about 280 folios (pages) with 190 illustrations painted by several different artists, bound into two separate volumes. Today, however, only 57 folios are known to have survived. Like many other manuscripts, the Great Mongol Shahnama was taken apart by an early twentieth-century art dealer so that the pages could be sold separately.

**FUNCTION:**

The Shahnama is, in fact, still taught in Iranian schools today, and is considered to be Iran’s national epic—to know or recite the stories of the Shahnama is to express pride in the country’s glorious past. The illustration Bahram Gur Fights the Karg depicts one such story of the brave deeds of a Persian king, Bahram Gur, who singlehandedly defeated the monstrous Karg (horned wolf). It is much more than just an exciting tale, however; the Mongol artists who created this work were fulfilling their patrons’ strong desire to identify with the noble, virtuous, and powerful warrior-kings of ancient Persia.

**CONTENT:**

As Bahram Gur’s men faced the Karg, a monstrous horned wolf that had been terrorizing the countryside, they cried, “Your majesty, this is beyond any man’s courage...tell Shangal this can’t be done....” Bahram V was a king of the Sasanian empire that ruled Persia from the third to the seventh century, just prior to the arrival of Islam. His nickname, Bahram Gur, refers to a “gur” or onager—a type of wild ass which is one of the world’s fastest-running mammals. The word “gur” may also mean “swift.” He was known as a great hunter of onagers, a favorite game animal in ancient Iran.

**CONTEXT:**

This ink and watercolor drawing is a page from an illustrated manuscript of a Persian text called the Shahnama. It’s an epic poem whose name means, “The Book of Kings,” written by a poet named Ferdowsi between about 977 and 1010 C.E. There are numerous illustrated versions of the text that were made during different times and under different rulers. This is a page from a version that was created during the Il’Khanid period, showing the Iranian king, Bahram Gur, slaying a horned wolf-like creature known as the Karg. Here’s to hoping that Karg wasn’t being controlled by a warg.

**INNOVATION/CONVENTION:**

The artist uses the conventions of Chinese landscape painting to create the setting, and in this way produces a multicultural interpretation of this Persian story. Since the Mongols began as, and largely remained, nomadic peoples (moving from place to place during the year to satisfy the needs of their herds), artworks tended to be small and portable. Their long nomadic history also meant that the Mongols developed strong oral traditions of storytelling, which gave them an appreciation for narrative art—especially manuscripts with paintings to accompany the stories. Illustrated manuscripts were also prestige items, created in very sumptuous formats suitable for kings, princes, and members of the court. It was within this environment of lavish artistic book production that the manuscript depicting Bahram Gur Fights the Karg was created, probably in a court workshop. The artists who crafted it used silver and gold accents over ink and opaque watercolor.

**ARTISTIC DECISIONS:**

This image is a great example of the notion of the “melting pot of cultures” that took place in the great courts along the Silk Route. There is the Persian subject matter combined with details like the European-influenced fabric of Bahram Gur’s jacket and the Chinese conventions of landscape painting. The image is a well-crafted and subtle blending of many different cultural influences joined together to make a visually interesting and dramatic telling of a legendary Persian tale.

**INTERPRETATION:**

The Shahnama tells the story of the development of the Persian Empire and includes a mythical creation story, a series of hero tales, and many historical references. Ferdowsi wrote the epic of more than 50,000 couplets in order to preserve the cultural identity of Persia, even as it was being assimilated into a broader Arabic culture. The Great Il’Khanid Shahnama was illustrated about 200 years after Ferdowsi wrote the text of the epic poem. The Il-Khanid court in Tabriz (today found in northwestern Iran) was a cosmopolitan center in the 1300s, when this manuscript was made. It was a place that was positively rolling in merchants, missionaries, and diplomats from the far reaches of China and Europe; this image reflects all those cultural influences.

**DETAILS/TERMS/DEFINITIONS:**

Some translations of Firdawsi’s work describe the Karg as a rhinoceros, some as a wolf, and some, as we find here in Bahram Gur Fights the Karg, as a combination of the two—a ferocious horned wolf. When Bahram Gur and his men found the lair and saw the beast, his men beseeched, “Your majesty, this is beyond any man’s courage...tell Shangal this can’t be done....” The hero, of course, went forward alone, first using his bow to weaken the Karg with arrows, then using his blade to cut off the Karg’s head to present to Shangal.



**TITLE:** Alhambra **LOCATION:** Granada, Spain **DATE:** 1354-1391

**ARTIST:** **PERIOD/STYLE:** Nasrid Dynasty **PATRON:** Yusef I & Abd al Ahmar

**MATERIAL/TECHNIQUE:** Whitewashed adobe stucco, wood, tile, paint, and gilding

**FORM:**

Built on an elevated point in the southern Spanish city of Granada (Spanish for pomegranate), the Alhambra was the last bastion of Islamic presence on the Iberian Peninsula. The whole joint is a continuous piece of art, from the tile work to the fountains. Speaking of fountains, the Court of Lions is an outdoor patio space in which elaborate stucco arches set on columns lead viewers toward a fountain flanked by majestic white marble lions. These arches, and others throughout the building, show off the honeycomb style of stucco work for which the Nasrid were famous.

**FUNCTION:**

The Alhambra had many functions in its day: fortress, office building, and general hang spot for Abd al Ahmar of the Nasrid dynasty. The Alhambra's nearly 26 acres include structures with three distinct purposes, a residence for the ruler and close family, the citadel, Alcazaba—barracks for the elite guard who were responsible for the safety of the complex, and an area called medina (or city), near the Puerta del Vino (Wine Gate), where court officials lived and worked.

**CONTENT:**

The Hall of the Sisters features the same type of honeycomb detail, giving the sense that the ceiling is made of frosting that has somehow frozen into beautiful cave stalactites. Paired with the tile work that runs across the bottom half of the room, the overall effect is truly wondrous. No surface remains untouched by stucco decoration, showing how seriously the Muslims took the prohibition of images and that led to other forms of decorative ingenuity. There are no images here, but the walls are so full of texture and repetitive geometric designs that pictures aren't even missed. Toward the center of the Hall of the Sisters is another smaller fountain that bubbles down a narrow pathway cutting through the floor.

**CONTEXT:**

The Alhambra was built after the Moors, or the Muslims living in Spain, had been expelled from Córdoba. They retreated to Granada and ended up building this beauty, which vastly differs from the Great Mosque, which was famous for its red-and-white alternating voissiors. Unfortunately, in 1492, the Moors were kicked out of Spain for good because Isabelle and Ferdinand came to the Spanish throne and united the kingdoms of Castile and Aragon. Afterwards, Spaniards destroyed some parts of the building, but Charles V, the successor of King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella, decided to embrace the beautiful architecture as opposed to destroy it. He added to the complex when he built his own palace within the Alhambra. He commissioned Pedro de Machuca to build the structure in the popular Italian style, though it's clear that the resulting building has nothing in common with the intricate Moorish designs that dominated the space beforehand. Charles V wasn't much worried that the Italian decorative elements wouldn't match what the Alhambra already had going on, since he was going for prestige. Building on top of a foe's old stomping grounds outweighed any design hesitations.

**INNOVATION/CONVENTION:**

To the West, the Sala de los Mocárabes (Muqarnas Chamber), may have functioned as an antechamber and was near the original entrance to the palace. It takes its name from the intricately carved system of brackets called "muqarnas" that hold up the vaulted ceiling. The Alhambra's architecture shares many characteristics with other examples of Islamic architecture, but is singular in the way it complicates the relationship between interior and exterior. Its buildings feature shaded patios and covered walkways that pass from well-lit interior spaces onto shaded courtyards and sun-filled gardens all enlivened by the reflection of water and intricately carved stucco decoration.

**ARTISTIC DECISIONS:**

To be sure, gardens and water fountains, canals, and pools are a recurring theme in construction across the Muslim dominion. Water is both practical and beautiful in architecture and in this respect the Alhambra and Generalife are no exception. But the Nasrid rulers of Granada made water integral. They brought the sound, sight and cooling qualities of water into close proximity, in gardens, courtyards, marble canals, and even directly indoors.

**INTERPRETATION:**

The Alhambra, an abbreviation of the Arabic: Qal'at al-Hamra, or red fort, was built by the Nasrid Dynasty (1232-1492)—the last Muslims to rule in Spain. The name of the complex, "Alhambra" means "red," and it references the red clay used on the outer walls.

**DETAILS/TERMS/DEFINITIONS:**

Just before the Spanish kicked the Moors out of Spain, the Ottoman Turks had kicked members of the Eastern Roman Empire (Byzantium) out of Constantinople. Everyone was kicking everyone out of somewhere. In any case, Mehmed II leveled the Byzantines in 1453. The city of Constantinople had already seen a lot of destruction during the fourth crusade, which took place there, and it never quite bounced back. Once the Turks took control of Constantinople, they effectively had a monopoly on the spice trade. This eventually triggered Columbus' exploration, which commenced in 1492, for another route to the Indies in search of spices. It's all related man.

**TITLE:** Mosque of Selim II      **LOCATION:** Edirne, Turkey      **DATE:** 1568–1575 C.E

**ARTIST:** Sinan (architect).      **PERIOD/STYLE:** Nasrid Dynasty      **PATRON:** Selim II

**MATERIAL/TECHNIQUE:** Brick and stone

**FORM:**

Built in the city of Edirne in Turkey, the Mosque of Selim II comprises a massive dome and courtyard, which encompasses the entire complex and two madrasas, or colleges for Islamic teaching. Arches span the piers with alternating red and white voussoirs just like those in the Great Mosque in Cordoba. Similar to the Hagia Sofia, the Mosque of Selim II also has four minarets that are approximately 255 feet high. Selim actually added two minarets to the Hagia Sofia, making his work at the Mosque of Selim II a continuation of his previous endeavors. Each minaret has corresponding prayer halls on the ground as well as three staggered balconies that wrap around the upper reaches of the pencil-like structure.

**FUNCTION:**

Sinan sought to build a monument for the Sultan that expressed Islam's triumph. His achievement—building a mosque that surpassed Hagia Sophia—was recognized as soon as the mosque was complete.

**CONTENT:**

The mosque's epigraphic program—its inscriptions, was developed after the devastating defeat that the Ottoman fleet suffered at Lepanto in 1571 against the navies of the Christian Holy League. This loss prevented further Ottoman expansion along the European coast of the Mediterranean. The mosque's inscriptions focus on a central difference between Islam and Christianity—mainly that Allah (God) is indivisible and that the prophet Muhammad is God's human messenger. Certain passages from the Hadiths were included to emphasized Muhammad's position as a messenger both and intercessor.

**CONTEXT:**

Known as a gifted poet with blonde hair and blue eyes, Selim II was a less-than-gifted ruler, despite being the son of the renowned Suleiman the Great. It helped that Selim II had an able-bodied grand vizier who took over the reins while Selim II was out gallivanting and drinking wine, which he was rumored to consume daily, contrary to the Islamic prohibition of alcohol. Unsurprisingly, this habit gave him the reputation of a lush, as it was also well-known that Selim II had never led a battle or been engaged in a war, which only worsened his public image; many simply called him "the sot." Depictions of him at the time aren't very forgiving. In most, he is portrayed as plump and slovenly. Selim's rule was short; he is rumored to have died from falling and concussing his head after a night of heavy drinking. Despite this short period, he made waves by constructing large-scale buildings to commemorate himself. In the seven years of his short reign, Selim II not only commissioned the best architect (Sinan) to construct a mosque that rivaled all historical and contemporary architecture, but he also went to war with the Holy Roman Empire and Russia. In the first instance, Selim II wanted control of Cypress (renowned for its tasty wine) as well as the right to build a canal between the Volga and Don Rivers. He succeeded in the first endeavor, after a couple of false starts and the loss of much of his navy, but was completely thwarted by Czar Ivan the Terrible in the second pursuit.

**INNOVATION/CONVENTION:**

Just like the architects who built the dome of the Hagia Sofia in Constantinople (Istanbul), the architect of the Mosque of Selim II, Sinan, was faced with the challenge of securing a massive dome (102 feet in diameter) on a ground structure that wasn't circular. Sinan came up with a different solution. He used eight piers arranged in the shape of an octagon to bear the weight of the dome. On each of the octagon's corners, muqarna squinches—mini arches that crossed the corners of the octagon—transferred the weight of the dome onto the piers. The interior of the dome shows off the fresh stylings of Islamic geometric and floral motifs. The placement of the muzzin's platform (müezzin mahfili), under the center of the dome is very unusual. From this platform, the muzzins who lead prayers, chant to the congregation. Gülru Necipoğlu, a leading Ottoman art historian, has compared its placement to that of a church's altar or ambo, a raised stand for biblical readings in a church. She notes that while this innovation disrupts the space below the dome, it reflects Sinan's interest in surpassing Christian architecture. The position of the platform also creates a vertical alignment of square, octagon, and circle, using geometry to refer to the earthly and heavenly spheres.

**ARTISTIC DECISIONS:**

Sinan's goal was to out-dome the Hagia Sofia. Since it had been built in the sixth century, no one had been able to build a dome that rivaled it—until Sinan. After numerous projects—including the Süleymaniye Mosque and the Şehzade Jami (Prince's Mosque), both in Istanbul—and renovations to the Hagia Sofia, Sinan became the first earthquake engineer, gaining enough experience to build a mosque that was on par with the Hagia Sofia. Because of his use of eight pillars and squinches to hold up the weight of the dome, he didn't need to use smaller semi-domes to distribute the weight of the largest dome as in the Hagia Sofia. In total, Sinan built around ninety mosques throughout the Ottoman Empire, making him one of the greatest architects of all time. Edirne was the first major city that Europeans traveling to the Ottoman Empire reached—so building a large complex here offered the Sultan an opportunity to use architecture to impress the Ottoman Empire's greatness upon visitors. Furthermore because Edirne was not Istanbul, whose Golden Horn and many hills were already home to monumental mosque complexes, it also offered an opportunity to build a mosque that would dominate the city. Built in an area of the city once known as Kavak Meydani, the modern designs of the Selimiye complex overshadowed Edirne's more traditional architecture.

**INTERPRETATION:**

**DETAILS/TERMS/DEFINITIONS:**

The muqarna, or honeycomb design, had been used in the Alhambra in Granada, Spain. In the Mosque of Selim II, the honeycomb design was inset into the space of the squinch

**TITLE:** Great Mosque (Masjid-e Jameh) **LOCATION:** Isfahan, Iran **DATE:** . C. 700 C.E.; additions and restorations in the 14th, 18th, and 20th centuries C.E.

**ARTIST:** Islamic, Persian: Seljuk, Il-Khanid, **PERIOD/STYLE:** Timurid, and Safavid Dynasties **PATRON:** Sha Abbas and others

**MATERIAL/TECHNIQUE:** Stone. Brick, wood, plaster, and glazed ceramic tile.

#### **FORM:**

The architectural complex consists of outdoor spaces, prayer niches (mihrabs), and open, vaulted rooms called iwans. All of this architectural glory surrounds a central courtyard which can be accessed by four gates that lead into it from each cardinal direction. The Great Mosque is renowned for its two brick-domed chambers, the first of which was built to contain the mihrab, or the niche that indicates the direction of Mecca, at the south end of the mosque. The second brick-domed chamber is located on the north side, and it was constructed a year after the first. The specific function of the second dome is uncertain, though its presence and placement suggest that it was added to complete the four-ivan style that is now prevalent throughout the Islamic world.

#### **FUNCTION:**

This mosque is the biggest and oldest Islamic congregational Friday mosque in Iran. It is a place of worship for Muslim believers. The Iwan's function as gateways, the minarets function as a roost for the Muezzin to announce prayers. The site as a whole represents Paradise on earth. Each one of the four Iwans represent a branch of a river that irrigates paradise, and the ever-present floral mosaic decor allude to lush gardens full of flowers and fragrance. Due to its immense size and its numerous entrances (all except one inaccessible now), it formed a pedestrian hub, connecting the arterial network of paths crisscrossing the city. Far from being an insular sacred monument, the mosque facilitated public mobility and commercial activity thus transcending its principal function as a place for prayer alone.

#### **CONTENT:**

Worshippers enter the Great Mosque by passing into a large rectangular courtyard surrounded by a two story arcade. The courtyard provides a transitional zone between the outside secular world and the spiritual world inside the mosque. Each one of the four courtyard sides contains a centrally located IWAN. An Iwan is a monumental barrel-vaulted hall with a wide open arched entrance. The four facing iwans create an elegant architectural composition, inviting imitation. The the 4- iwan plan devised at the Great Mosque in Isfahan became a prototype for mosques across the Muslim world.

#### **CONTEXT:**

During the mid 11th century the Seljuk Turks rebuilt the mosque and made Isfahan the capitol of their short lived dynasty. About 500 years later, the Safavid sultan Sha Abbas launched an ambitious building program. Under his leadership Isfahan once again became a center of religious activity and artistic innovation.

#### **INNOVATION/CONVENTION:**

The 4 iwan plan was an innovation of the Great Mosque of Isfahan as well as the ornamental Muqarnas decoration. Congregational mosques are often expanded in conjunction with the growth and needs of the umma, or Muslim community; however, it is uncommon for such expansion and modification to continue over a span of a thousand years. The Great Mosque of Isfahan in Iran is unique in this regard and thus enjoys a special place in the history of Islamic architecture. Its present configuration is the sum of building and decorating activities carried out from the 8th through the 20th centuries. It is an architectural documentary, visually embodying the political exigencies and aesthetic tastes of the great Islamic empires of Persia.

#### **ARTISTIC DECISIONS:**

The building was first completed in 771 C.E. by the Seljuks, but it has undergone a series of additions and renovations even into the 20th century. Depending on functional needs, political whims, religious factors, and changes in aesthetics, modifications were incorporated into the original by the Mongols, the Timurids, and the Safavids.

#### **INTERPRETATION:**

A lot of the architecture in West and Central Asia serves a religious function, and the Great Mosque at Isfahan certainly falls into that category. Because figures can't be represented in Islamic religious art, all the decoration on the mosque takes the form of calligraphy or floral, vegetal, or geometric designs. The sinuous, repeating patterns on the ceramic tiles that cover the outer and inner walls of the mosque create a beautiful and intricate decorative scheme for the entire building.

#### **DETAILS/TERMS/DEFINITIONS:**

Muqarnas: Sometimes described as honeycomb vaulting, they provide a striking multi-faceted surface, reflecting light and casting shadows. (an iwan is a vaulted space that opens on one side to a courtyard).

**TITLE:** The Ardabil Carpet      **LOCATION:** Tabriz, Kashan, Isfahan or Kirman, Iran      **DATE:** 1539-1540 C.E.

**ARTIST:** Maqsd of Kashan      **PERIOD/STYLE:** Safavid Dynasty      **PATRON:** Safavid Shah Tahmasp

**MATERIAL/TECHNIQUE:** Silk and wool.

**FORM:**

The Ardabil Carpet is one of the largest carpets in the world, measuring 34.5 feet by 17.5 feet. The design is full of a swirling array of leaves, stems, and flowers, which were made using ten different colors of threads tied in about 26 million knots. There are 300 to 350 knots per square inch. The intricate floral detail is typical of the decoration of the Safavid Dynasty. The dyes used to color the carpet are natural and include pomegranate rind and indigo.

**FUNCTION:**

Carpets are among the most fundamental of Islamic arts. Portable, typically made of silk and wools, carpets were traded and sold across the Islamic lands and beyond its boundaries to Europe and China. Those from Iran were highly prized. Carpets decorated the floors of mosques, shrines and homes, but they could also be hung on walls of houses to preserve warmth in the winter. This carpet was one of a matching pair that was made for the shrine of Safi al-Din Ardabili when it was enlarged in the late 1530s.

**CONTENT:**

Features rich geometric patterns, vegetative scrolls, floral flourishes. A central golden medallion dominates the carpet; it is surrounded by a ring of multi-colored, detailed ovals. Lamps appear to hang at either end. The carpet's border is made up of a frame with a series of cartouches (rectangular-shaped spaces for calligraphy), filled with decoration. The central medallion design is also echoed by the four corner-pieces.

**CONTEXT:**

The carpet takes its name from the town of Ardabil in north-west Iran. Ardabil was the home to the shrine of the Sufi saint, Safi al-Din Ardabili, who died in 1334 (Sufism is Islamic mysticism). He was a Sufi leader who trained his followers in Islamic mystic practices. After his death, his following grew and his descendants became increasingly powerful. In 1501 one of his descendants, Shah Isma'il, seized power, united Iran, and established Shi'a Islam as the official religion. The dynasty he founded is known as the Safavids. Their rule, which lasted until 1722, was one of the most important periods for Islamic art, especially for textiles and for manuscripts.

**INNOVATION/CONVENTION:**

This beautiful carpet of silk and wool is a wonderful example of the production of textiles from this region. Persian carpets have long been famous throughout the world, and their movement from one continent to another over time is a good example of how foreign collectors often acquired these objects through gift or trade.

**ARTISTIC DECISIONS:**

Look carefully at the two lamp forms that appear on either side of the central flower motif. One is smaller than the other. There is a good reason for this, and it's not that the maker, Maqsd of Kashan, fell asleep at the loom. In fact, Maqsd was very deliberate about this, taking into account that, when the carpet was used, someone would be standing at one end of the carpet looking across it. When viewed from one end—the end with the smaller lamp—the foreshortening would create the illusion that the two lamps are the same size.

**INTERPRETATION:**

The Ardabil Carpet includes a four-line inscription placed at one end. This short poem is vital for understanding who commissioned the carpet and the date of the carpet. *Except for thy threshold, there is no refuge for me in all the world. Except for this door there is no resting-place for my head. The work of the slave of the portal, Maqsd Kashani.* The fourth line of the inscription is also important. It provides the date of the carpet, AH 946. The Muslim calendar begins in the year 620 CE when Muhammad fled from Mecca to Medina; this year is known as the year of the Hijra or flight (in Latin anno hegirae). AH 946 is equivalent to 1539/40 CE (the lunar Muslim calendar does not exactly match the Gregorian Calendar, used in the west).

**DETAILS/TERMS/DEFINITIONS:**

There are actually two "real" Ardabil carpets, along with many "knock-off" versions. The two real ones found their way to England in 1893, by which point they were virtually falling apart. The smaller of the two originals was cannibalized to repair the larger, though the usable sections of the smaller one were put back together afterward. The larger original is now in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. The smaller is in the collection of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Many replicas have been produced over the years in various sizes, and some of them are even full-scale. One can be found in the residence of the British Prime Minister (10 Downing Street), and Adolf Hitler also had one in his office in Berlin.

**TITLE:** The Court of Gayumars      **LOCATION:** Tabriz, Iran      **DATE:** 1522-1525 C.E.

**ARTIST:** Sultan Muhammad      **PERIOD/STYLE:** Safavid Dynasty      **PATRON:** Shah Ismail I, but was completed under the direction of his son, Shah Tahmasp I

**MATERIAL/TECHNIQUE:** Ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on paper.

**FORM:**

This image is the very first illustration in Shah Tahmasp's version of the Shahnama, and it shows the court of the Gayumars, the first Persian king. The king is positioned at the top of the composition, and his courtiers appear in a cascade below him. The vibrant color and rich detailing employed by the artist, Sultan Muhammad, give this painting a fantastical and otherworldly feeling.

**FUNCTION:**

While the entire manuscript of the Shahnameh of Shah Tahmasp I consists of approximately 759 illustrated folios and 258 miniatures all produced over the span of several years,[5] this particular miniature is attributed to the workshop of Sultan Muhammad, according to Dust Muhammad, an artist and historian from this period.[6] In 1568, this lavish Shahnameh was given as a gift by Shah Tahmasp I to the Ottoman Sultan, Selim II.[7]

**CONTENT:**

Gayumars' son, Siyamak, sits to his left, and his grandson, Hushan, stands to his right. Siyamak holds the seat of favor relative to his father, and clearly, he expects to succeed his father on the throne one day. However, Gayumars has already been told by an angel that his son will be murdered by a demon before he can take the throne. While the colorful scene is not in the least tragic, the story, which would have been familiar to pretty much everyone at the time, puts the imagery into a whole different context.

**CONTEXT:**

The Court of Gayumars (also spelled Kayumars), comes from an illuminated manuscript of the Shahnama (Book of Kings)—an epic poem describing the history of kingship in Persia (what is now Iran). The Shahnama was written by Abu al-Qāsim Ferdowsi around the year 1000 and is a masterful example of Persian poetry. Over a two-hundred-year span starting in 1501, the Safavids controlled large parts of what is today Iran and Azerbaijan. The Safavids actively commissioned the building of public architectural complexes such as mosques, and they were patrons of the arts of the book. In fact, manuscript illumination was central to Safavid royal patronage of the arts.

**INNOVATION/CONVENTION:**

Because of its blending of painting styles from both Tabriz and Herat, its luminous pigments, fine detail, and complex imagery, this copy of the Shahnama stands out in the history of the artistic production in Central Asia. The epic chronicles kings and heroes who pre-date the introduction of Islam to Persia as well as the human experiences of love, suffering, and death. The epic has been copied countless times—often with elaborate illustrations

**ARTISTIC DECISIONS:**

Even though Islamic beliefs dictate that figures cannot be used in religious art, there are many examples in Islamic secular (non-religious) art that include the human form. In manuscripts or ceramics, there are plenty of human figures lolling around or going about their business, everyone from hunters and courtiers to kings and heroes. A great example of the use of figures in art are the many different manuscript versions of the Shahnama.

**INTERPRETATION:**

As with many of the workshops of early modern West Asia, producing a page such as the Court of Gayumars often entailed the contributions of many artists. A miniature painting from an illuminated manuscript should not be thought of in isolation. The individual pages that we today find in museums, libraries, and private collections must be understood as but one sheet of a larger book—with its own history, conditions of production, and dispersement. Text and image, within these illuminations, do not always mirror each other. Nevertheless, the framed calligraphic nasta'liq (hanging)—the Persian text at the top and bottom of the frame can be roughly translated as follows: *When the sun reached the lamb constellation, when the world became glorious, When the sun shined from the lamb constellation to rejuvenate the living beings entirely, It was then when Gayumars became the King of the World. He first built his residence in the mountains. His prosperity and his palace rose from the mountains, and he and his people wore leopard pelts. Cultivation began from him, and the garments and food were ample and fresh.*

**DETAILS/TERMS/DEFINITIONS:**

The Shahnama is the long poem that tells the story of Persian culture. According to legend, King Gayumars was the first king of Persia, and he ruled at a time when people clothed themselves exclusively in leopard pelts, as both the text and the represented subjects' speckled garments indicate.



**TITLE:** Taj Mahal **LOCATION:** Uttar Pradesh, India **DATE:** 1632-1653 C.E  
Masons, marble workers, mosaicists, and decorators working under the supervision of Ustad Ahmad Lahori, architect of the emperor  
**ARTIST:** der the supervision of Ustad Ahmad Lahori, architect of the emperor **PERIOD/STYLE:** Mughal Empire **PATRON:** Shah Jahan

**MATERIAL/TECHNIQUE:** . Stone masonry and marble inlay of precious and semiprecious stone; gardens.

**FORM:**

The building is set on the bank of the Yamuna River in Agra, and it features a formal garden and reflecting pools, which magnify the glory building, in front. Its elevation of inlaid white marble is quite striking against the red sandstone of the other buildings in the complex.

**FUNCTION:**

Shah Jahan ruled from 1628 to 1658 C.E. He built this structure to house the tomb of his favorite wife—he had three of them—Mumtaz Mahal, who died giving birth to their fourteenth child in 1631.

**CONTENT:**

Qur’anic verses inscribed into the walls of the building and designs inlaid with semi-precious stones—coral, onyx, carnelian, amethyst, and lapis lazuli—add to the splendor of the Taj’s white exterior. The dominant theme of the carved imagery is floral, showing some recognizable, and other fanciful species of flowers—another link to the theme of paradise

**CONTEXT:**

The Taj Mahal was built by the emperor Shah Jahan, who ruled the Mughal empire in India immediately after Jahangir. When all was said and done, its total cost amounted to 32 million Indian rupees back in 1653. Translated into today’s U.S. dollars, that’s 827 million dollars. Hey, she was his favorite wife! The project to build the Taj Mahal involved 20,000 artisans and was guided by a board of architects led by Ustad Ahmad Lahauri. Shah Jahan was eventually deposed by his son, Aurangzeb, and put under house arrest for the rest of his life. When he died, he was laid to rest in the Taj Mahal, next to his favorite wife.

**INNOVATION/CONVENTION:**

The style in which the Taj Mahal is built incorporates and expands on Persian and earlier Mughal architecture, which were often built using red sandstone. While there is some sandstone used in the Taj Mahal, what is most visible here is the vibrant and pure white marble. Shah Jahan specifically requested the use of white marble inlaid with semi-precious stones to create a building that appears extremely opulent and also very refined.

**ARTISTIC DECISIONS:**

The white-marble mausoleum is flanked on either side by identical buildings in red sandstone. One of these serves as a mosque, and the other, whose exact function is unknown, provides architectural balance. The marble structure is topped by a bulbous dome and surrounded by four minarets of equal height. While minarets in Islamic architecture are usually associated with mosques—for use by the muezzin who leads the call to prayer—here, they are not functional, but ornamental, once again underscoring the Mughal focus on structural balance and harmony. The interior floor plan of the Taj exhibits the hasht bishisht (eight levels) principle, alluding to the eight levels of paradise. Consisting of eight halls and side rooms connected to the main space in a cross-axial plan—the favored design for Islamic architecture from the mid-fifteenth century—the center of the main chamber holds Mumtaz Mahal’s intricately decorated marble cenotaph on a raised platform. The emperor’s cenotaph was laid down beside hers after he died three decades later—both are encased in an octagon of exquisitely carved white-marble screens. The coffins bearing their remains lie in the spaces directly beneath the cenotaphs.

**INTERPRETATION:**

When Mumtaz Mahal died at age 38 in 1631, the emperor is reported to have refused to engage in court festivities, postponed two of his sons’ weddings, and allegedly made frequent visits to his wife’s temporary resting place (in Burhanpur) during the time it took for the building of the Taj to be completed. Stories like these have led to the Taj Mahal being referred to as an architectural “symbol of love” in popular literature. But there are other theories: one suggests that the Taj is not a funeral monument, and that Shah Jahan might have built a similar structure even if his wife had not died. Based on the metaphoric specificity of Qur’anic and other inscriptions and the emperor’s love of thrones, another theory maintains that the Taj Mahal is a symbolic representation of a Divine Throne—the seat of God—on the Day of Judgment. A third view holds that the monument was built to represent a replica of a house of paradise. In the “paradisiacal mansion” theory, the Taj was something of a vanity project, built to glorify Mughal rule and the emperor himself.

**DETAILS/TERMS/DEFINITIONS:**