

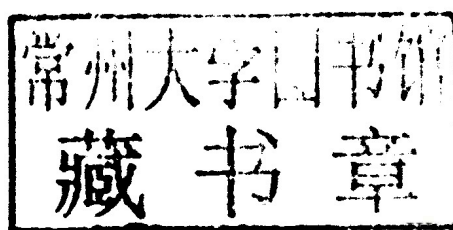
Textiles *of the* Islamic World

JOHN GILLOW

James & Hudson

Textiles *of the* Islamic World

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With 638 illustrations, 623 in colour

For Kay Brooks and Irene Feesey

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Gillow has spent over thirty years studying, collecting and lecturing on textiles. His books include *Indian Textiles* (with Nicholas Barnard), *African Textiles*, *Traditional Indonesian Textiles* and *World Textiles* (with Bryan Sentance).

READER'S NOTE

In this book, historical names and variants – for example, Calcutta in place of Kolkata; Dacca in place of Dhaka; Persia in place of Iran – have been preferred, where appropriate, in order to give historical context.

ON THE CASE

Seventeenth-century Ottoman embroidered textile. Private collection, New York. Photo courtesy Clive Loveless, London.

PAGE 1

Ottoman embroidered cover, c. 1830. This floral style was perhaps an inspiration for certain Central Asian *suzani*.

PAGE 2

Finely embroidered early nineteenth-century *suzani*, Bokhara.

First published in the United Kingdom in 2010 by Thames & Hudson Ltd, 181A High Holborn, London WC1V 7QX

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-0-500-51527-3

Printed and bound in China by C&C Offset Printing Co., Ltd

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Contents

06 FOREWORD

08 INTRODUCTION

20 THE OTTOMAN WORLD

22 Turkey

42 The Balkans

48 ISLAMIC SPAIN AND NORTH AFRICA

50 Islamic Spain

54 Morocco

66 Algeria

72 Tunisia

84 Libya

86 Egypt

94 THE ARAB WORLD

96 Syria

110 Palestine

118 Iraq

122 Saudi Arabia

128 Kuwait

131 Oman

138 Yemen

148 THE PERSIAN WORLD

150 Iran

174 The Caucasus

182 CENTRAL ASIA

- 184 Uzbekistan
- 203 Turkmenistan
- 212 Tajikistan
- 215 Kyrgyzstan
- 218 Afghanistan

232 THE MUGHAL WORLD

- 234 India
- 247 Pakistan
- 260 Bangladesh

266 EAST AND SOUTHEAST ASIA

- 268 China
- 272 Malaysia
- 276 Indonesia
- 290 The Philippines

294 SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

- 296 East Africa
- 300 West Africa

308 GLOSSARY

310 FURTHER READING

312 MUSEUM COLLECTIONS

315 PICTURE CREDITS

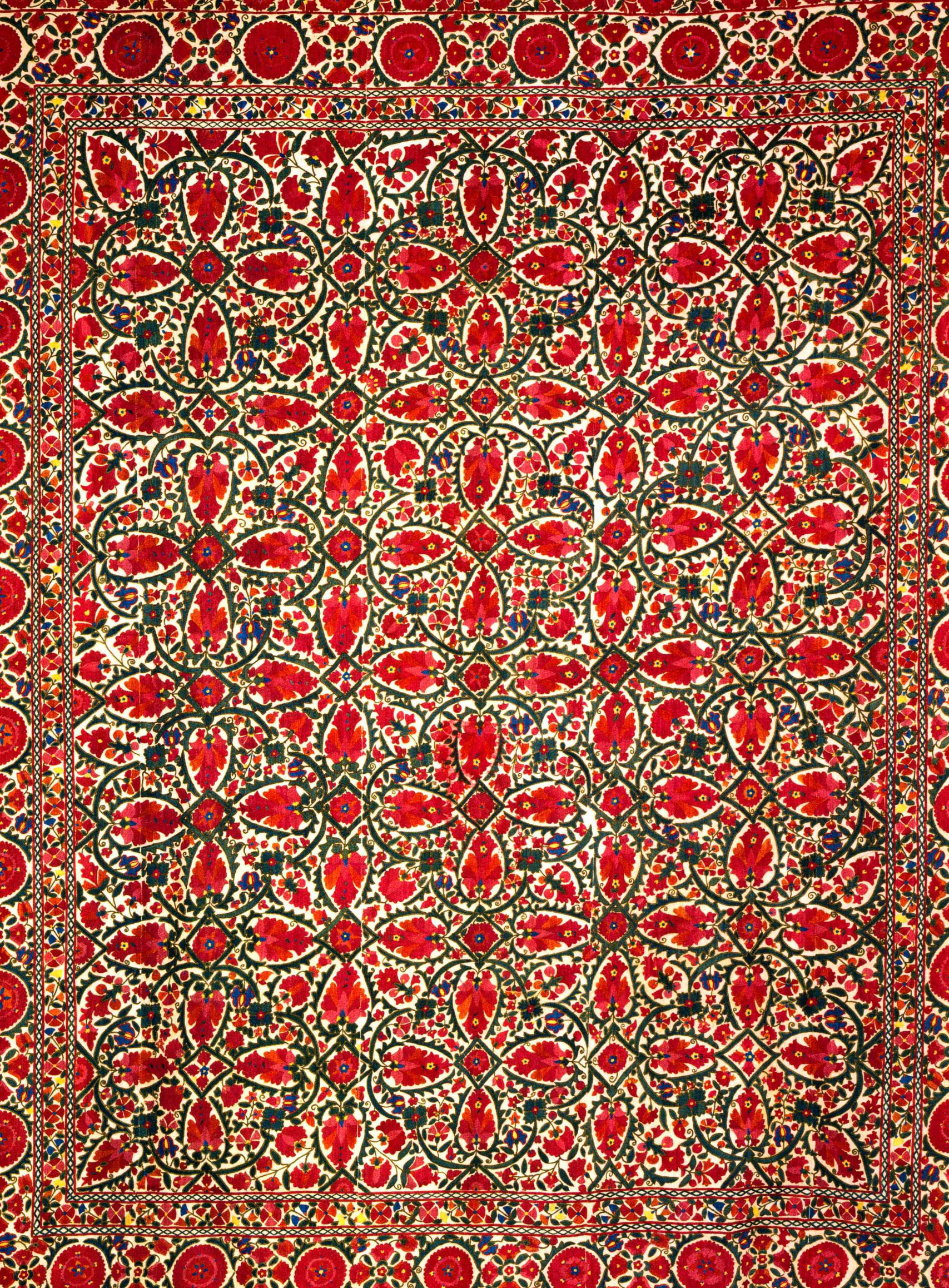
316 ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

317 INDEX



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Contents

06 FOREWORD

08 INTRODUCTION

20 THE OTTOMAN WORLD

22 Turkey

42 The Balkans

48 ISLAMIC SPAIN AND NORTH AFRICA

50 Islamic Spain

54 Morocco

66 Algeria

72 Tunisia

84 Libya

86 Egypt

94 THE ARAB WORLD

96 Syria

110 Palestine

118 Iraq

122 Saudi Arabia

128 Kuwait

131 Oman

138 Yemen

148 THE PERSIAN WORLD

150 Iran

174 The Caucasus

182 CENTRAL ASIA

- 184 Uzbekistan
- 203 Turkmenistan
- 212 Tajikistan
- 215 Kyrgyzstan
- 218 Afghanistan



232 THE MUGHAL WORLD

- 234 India
- 247 Pakistan
- 260 Bangladesh



266 EAST AND SOUTHEAST ASIA

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- 276 Indonesia
- 290 The Philippines

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- 300 West Africa



308 GLOSSARY

310 FURTHER READING

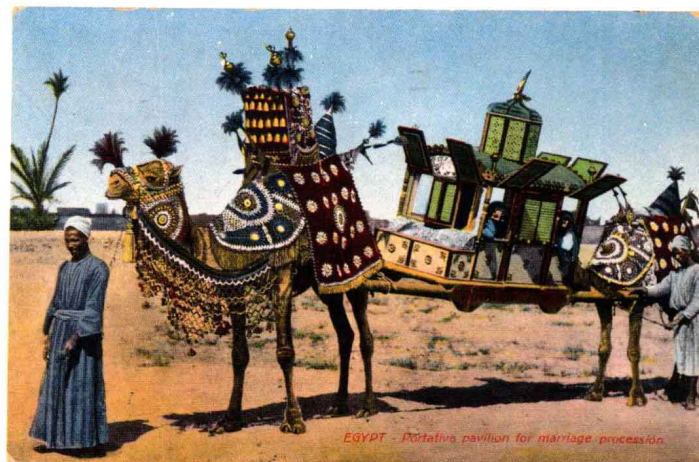
312 MUSEUM COLLECTIONS

315 PICTURE CREDITS

316 ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

317 INDEX

Foreword



Forty years ago, as a young schoolboy, I travelled to Istanbul. Wending my way through the still remaining piles of Byzantine ruins, I found myself a cheap place to stay. The next morning I awoke with a start to the call of the muezzin, a sound that was to become increasingly familiar over the decades, as I spent more and more of my time in the Muslim world. That day I went to the Grand Bazaar, looking for an embroidered waistcoat for a schoolfriend. The search was long, only coming to fruition after several increasingly gauche attempts at bargaining. The Istanbulis always had the better of me; in fact they probably do to this day, much as I would like to think otherwise.

As I wandered around the bazaar, I was entranced by carpets, furs, beaten brass, carved wood and exotic silver jewelry, none of which a poor schoolboy's pockets could afford. What I did find were scraps of Ottoman embroidery, which were then very cheap, and which I bought as presents for my sister, girlfriend and doting grandmother. I was hooked – not just on the textiles themselves, but on the lives of the peasants and nomads who had created them. I resolved there and then to lead a life of travel, focused on finding out more about hand-crafted textiles and their origins.

By the late 1970s I was making my living collecting and selling Asian folk textiles. Though I spent much time in India, and later China and Africa, I kept coming back to textiles used and created by Muslims. If I look in retrospect at my travels, my pathways criss-cross the world of Islam like a latter-day Ibn Battutah, only concentrating on fabrics rather than scholarship. In some sense I have become like the archetypal Muslim merchant, buying in one place, selling (hopefully at a profit) in another, and in the meantime absorbing much home-spun philosophy, together with current political gossip, along the way.

Wandering through an oriental bazaar or souk has remained a constant delight. One walks past the mounds of fruit and vegetables, the fish and meat, the neat pyramids of spices, and there, around a corner, is an old man drinking tea with piles of rugs, shelves of textiles and examples of the now-unfashionable local costume hanging up. Textile heaven awaits, and after a getting-to-know-you period, establishing a common language of business, one can start to sort through every pile and cupboard and, with a little gentle haggling, start to purchase. Sometimes the simplicity and line of the textiles will be what impresses, sometimes the complexity; always the style.

On occasion there are working looms, dye-works and embroiderers nearby, but more often than not one has to ask around and arrange interpreter and transport to an outlying village or suburb. Dealers, once you get to know them, can be sources of information, but its reliability is never to be trusted, so one always has to cross-check and cross-reference before something approaching the truth emerges. If you are trying to find out about a particular textile, you will sometimes have to do the basic research yourself, but usually you will find scholarly works that can help you, or give you clues as to where to look next.

This book aims to supply a broad survey of the textiles produced today and in the past in the Islamic world, putting them in their social and historical context. It is the sum of many years spent travelling and collecting, predominantly in Muslim lands. It has been a most enjoyable task, and one in which I have been so generously helped, not least by the mostly unknown creators of the wonderful textiles that illustrate the pages of this book.



OPPOSITE

Egyptian camel litter with elaborate animal trappings.

ABOVE

Women of North Morocco dressed in shawls and baggy pantaloons.



ABOVE AND BELOW

Turkish dancing girls dressed in cotton chemises, metal-thread waistcoats, pantaloons and silk sashes.

LEFT

Kurdish chieftain wearing a tapestry-weave coat (*mesbla*).



Introduction

The spread of Islam in the seventh century AD not only propagated one of the great world religions but also produced a vast network of trade based on common values and the shared language of Arabic. The rise of the new religion and the founding of a colossal political and trading empire were accompanied by marked interchanges of population. It was not uncommon, for instance, for soldiers, administrators and merchants in Islamic Spain to be Syrians or Yemenis, and for their counterparts in India to be Turks, Persians or even Moroccans.

Technology spread in a like manner, and among the most vital – and often most complex – technologies were those of weaving and related crafts. There is evidence, for example, that looms were set up in early medieval Syria to weave figured silks, and the essential parts were then exported to Spain with the heddles pre-set and ready to be used. Textiles formed a crucial role in the worldwide Muslim economy, providing trade and employment, profits and taxes.

What is it that distinguishes the textiles of the Muslim world? Broadly, within this text, we understand the term ‘Islamic textiles’ to mean textiles made or used by those who profess the faith of Islam. Muslims are found from Morocco in the west to China in the far east, and from the Tatar communities of Russia in the north to as far south as Cameroon in Africa and Indonesia in Asia. Though, in some regions, there is a measure of continuity between textiles that preceded the Islamic era and textiles that followed, there are also certain qualities that distinguish Islamic textiles from those made and used in regions altogether untouched by Islam.

In the Muslim world, pre-Islamic styles were pared down over the years to eliminate any representational images, resulting in what is sometimes known as ‘aniconic art’. No such stylistic restriction took place in those societies that resisted the spread of Islam. Post-Islamic textiles in the Muslim world are characterized, along with their avoidance of human and animal forms, by the use of abstract designs and rich decoration. The accent is on ornamentation – calligraphy (devout Muslims emphasize the spiritual benefits of the repetition of the names of the One God), plant life or geometric forms.

Calligraphic decoration has always been much in vogue. The Arabic script is of itself very attractive and, as there are numerous ways to represent Arabic letters, an extensive artistic lexicon has become available. The plant motif, or arabesque – an unbroken, curling line – derives from the Mediterranean vine motif of the Romans and the Byzantines. The Arabs took this motif and incorporated it into their art, making it characteristically Islamic and using it to fill in empty spaces. Geometric forms – straight lines, squares, triangles, diamonds, circular motifs and their variants – can all be added to the calligraphy and arabesques as the designer requires. These geometric forms may have a talismanic, even magical, significance.

Throughout this book we shall look at why textiles of the Islamic world hold an enduring fascination. We shall explore where they come from, who makes them and what

OPPOSITE

Detail of an early seventeenth-century Ottoman silk and metal-thread brocade fragment.





they are used for. We shall concentrate not only on what are traditionally regarded as Islamic textiles – the prestige textiles of the Near and Middle East, North Africa, Moorish Spain and Mughal India – but also items from the whole of the Muslim world, places where Muslims are in the majority, or are a substantial and important minority.

THE HISTORY OF THE SPREAD OF ISLAM

After the death of the Prophet Mohammed in AD 632, the newly converted Arabs established their capital in Damascus. Leadership devolved upon the Rashidun, a succession of four ‘rightly guided’ caliphs (from the Arabic *khalifa*, meaning ‘deputy’). Ali, son-in-law and cousin of the Prophet, was chosen as the fourth caliph in AD 656. However, Mu’awiya, the governor of Damascus and a member of the Umayyad family, seized the Caliphate in AD 661, thereby causing a war during the course of which Ali was killed. Thereafter the Caliphate was made hereditary. Those who accepted this became known as ‘Sunni’ (from the Arabic *sunna*, meaning ‘those who follow the right path’, i.e. follow the example of the Prophet). Those who had been supporters of Ali were known as ‘Shi’at’ Ali’ (*shi’at* being Arabic for ‘party [of]’); they later divided into different sects. The great schism in Islam – enduring to this very day – is between the Sunni and the Shia.

The Arabs took advantage of the internecine wars that had weakened their neighbours and very soon conquered parts, or the whole, of two of the greatest textile-producing empires of the ancient world. The Byzantine empire survived (though it lost the fabled weaving centres of Egypt and Syria), while the whole of Persia was taken. Under the conquering Umayyads,

the frontiers of Islam underwent expansion at a scarcely believable pace. The Arabs advanced into Central Asia and to the borders of China. They also expanded their rule westward across North Africa, and by AD 711 had crossed the Straits of Gibraltar to commence the rapid conquest of Spain.

In AD 750, however, the Abbasids took control of the Caliphate (the overthrown Umayyads retained Al-Andalus and set up a separate Western Caliphate at Córdoba in Spain in AD 756). The Abbasids moved their capital to Baghdad. Mesopotamia had long been under Iranian control, and the consequence of the creation of a new capital in the region was the increasing Persianization of the ruling Arab elite.

In the late 800s the Abbasids lost control of Egypt, their richest textile-producing province. First, the Tulunids took it over. Then came the brief dynasty of the Ikhshidids. After that came the Fatimids, Shia invaders from Kairouan in Tunisia, who denoted their dynasty by taking the name of Fatima, the Prophet’s daughter and widow of the martyred Ali. In AD 969 the Fatimids established their Caliphate in Cairo. The Abbasids retained their base in Baghdad, but in 1258 the fabled city – site of thousands of looms, and haunt of the legendary caliph Haroun al-Rashid – fell to a new scourge of the world, the Mongols. As with Merv and the other rich cities of Khorasan (the historic region covering parts of modern-day Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Afghanistan), Baghdad was completely destroyed. It was the Mamluks – a militarized dynasty of manumitted slaves of Turkish, and subsequently Circassian, descent – who saved Egypt with all its riches, textile and otherwise. In 1260 they defeated the Mongols at the battle

of Ain Jalud in Palestine, and in the process safeguarded the very existence of Islam.

The Mongols, having wreaked immense destruction, eventually converted to Islam and set up an even greater trading system than the one that had existed before, reaching from Russia all the way east to Korea. The Mongols – and their Turko-Mongol descendants, the Timurids – transferred textile artisans from one part of their empire to the other, encouraging a cross-fertilization of skills and styles, especially between China and the Persian world.

In Persia, the Seljuk Turks had been defeated by the Mongols in the thirteenth century, but prior to that they had rapidly become Islamicized and made inroads into Byzantine Anatolia, establishing a capital at Konya. It was the Seljuk Turks who laid the foundation for another Turkic clan to set up an empire centred in Anatolia and the Balkans. This was to become known as the Ottoman empire. While the Shia Safavid dynasty ruled in Persia from 1501 to 1736, and the Mughal emperors (descendants of the Timurids) ruled in India effectively from 1526 to 1707, and in name up until 1858, the Ottoman empire, from 1453 based in Constantinople (transmogrified into Istanbul), lasted from 1299 to 1923.

Down through the centuries – as dynasty succeeded dynasty, lands were conquered, and people travelled and migrated – Islam spread far and wide. Today, in addition to the Islamic heartlands of Arabia, Syria and Mesopotamia, North

Africa, Turkey, Iran and Central Asia, there are large bodies of Muslims in the Balkans, the Caucasus, India, China, Southeast Asia, and East and West Africa.

THE HISTORY OF THE TEXTILE TRADE IN THE ISLAMIC WORLD

The spread of Islam explains why textiles may be more important in Muslim lands than they are anywhere else. Islam is, ultimately, the creation of the mobile, fast-moving, mounted, nomadic tribesmen who in the seventh century AD swept out of the harsh environment of Arabia to conquer much of the civilized world in a matter of decades. These Arabs perforce travelled light, and used textiles for tent-making, bedding, furniture, storage and decoration.

Once the world of Islam started to settle down after the initial upheavals of the conquests, and once the Umayyad Caliphate was established at Damascus, the new Muslim rulers adopted the methods of textile production that were already in place. In both Egypt and Persia – then the two dominant centres for the weaving of sophisticated textiles – a system of state textile workshops was long established. Given the vast number of costumes and other textiles made of expensive fabrics such as cloth of gold, it was only the state that possessed the capital to undertake such an enormous enterprise; no private entrepreneur could have commanded the resources.

All over the Muslim world, these state workshops were known as *tiraz*, a Persian-derived word originally meaning

OPPOSITE

Sixteenth-century panel of cut-pile velvet, Bursa, Ottoman Turkey.

BELOW

Italian-influenced eighteenth-century embroidered panel, Azzemour, Morocco.



