

Islamic Art and Architecture

Robert Hillenbrand



Thames & Hudson **world of art**

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270 illustrations, 80 in colour



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*For Margaret and Ruthie,
with love and thanks for years of encouragement*

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و زین بازو که ز سپاه سوار
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 تجماعت اندری شاه شام
 بنیاش بکلی اندر او کرد
 زدن بر زشت شک و دار کرد
 که چون بنیاش اندر او کرد

نیاید که بنیاش تیغ سوار
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که در آمد زهر سوپ سپاه
 ز خون و شمشیر که رود دشت
 جهان مبادان رشت برآورد کرد
 ز خون فرو ماید بر سینه کرد

شد از کار و کین و کرد و کین سپاه
 نه زدم کو پلشتن بر سینه شت
 پیداشت از ادب فرخنده خام
 که کشی نیم اندر میاش نه د



پیکار برآم و پست شین
 که شد تا بهر دوار شین

زخونی ناک دریا شد و دشت کوه
 که شد تا بهر دوار شین

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THE ISLAMIC WORLD FROM ANATOLIA TO CENTRAL ASIA





Introduction

Any attempt to make sense of Islamic art and architecture as a whole while retaining a chronological framework runs the risk of distortion. Bias of several different kinds is hard to avoid. It is simply not possible to be equally well informed and equally interested in all aspects of the subject. The need to consider in some detail the early centuries of Islamic art is made imperative by the major impact which work of this period had on later art. But a great deal of this early art has perished, and to do justice to what survives in the context of its own time and of subsequent periods demands a closer and more detailed focus than is appropriate for the more numerous examples of later art. Some degree of over-balance is therefore inevitable.

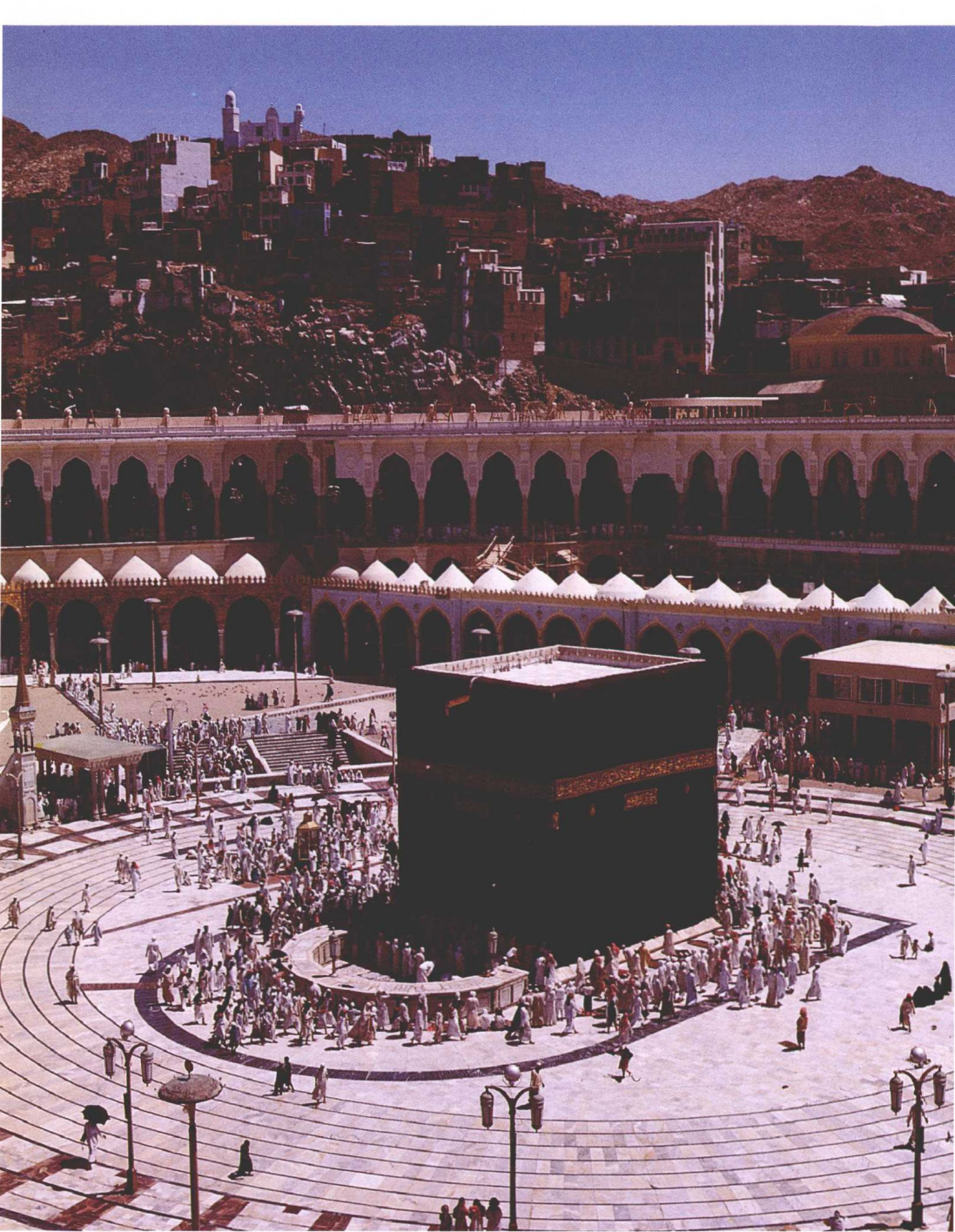
Certain art forms such as calligraphy or textiles continued to be produced in most parts of the Islamic world from early times, but they are not of equal significance in each area or period. Thus the absence of a discussion of, say, Tulunid woodwork, Maghribi pottery, Timurid textiles, Spanish metalwork or Ottoman Qur'ans should not be interpreted as a signal that they did not exist, have not survived or are of peripheral interest. It is simply that it seemed best to reserve a discussion of certain media for those periods in which production was of the most significant scale and quality. Similarly, the art of entire dynasties – Ghaznavid, Turcoman, the *beyliks* of Anatolia, the *muluk al-tawa'if* of medieval Spain – is virtually ignored. Such omissions are dictated by the rigorous word limit and the need to see the wood rather than the trees. In other words, the option of trying to say something, however little, about almost everything, and thus writing a rather bland and trivial text, was rejected. It seemed preferable to single out key objects and monuments for relatively detailed scrutiny, in the hope that they would provide a means of entry into the school or style that produced them. This book, then, is more a study of the peaks than of the valleys; its colours are intended to be bold and primary.

A secondary aim has been to set the various schools and types of Islamic art in a reasonably full historical context so that the images are not, so to speak, trapped in limbo. Specialists will have to console themselves with the thought that this book was not written with them in mind. It is truly no more than an introduction to a vast field.

Moreover, the very fact that a book with the all-inclusive title of *Islamic Art and Architecture* can be written – whereas the books on western European art in the World of Art series are of a very much more specialized kind, and are often devoted to a single school, or even artist – is a reminder that the volume of scholarship consecrated to this field is tiny in comparison with that available for European art. Basic guides to the territory therefore still have their function. But it would be a serious mistake to assume from that disparity that there is any less ‘going on’ in Islamic than in European art. You just have to dig rather deeper for it.

NOTE CONCERNING DATES

For the sake of simplicity and consistency, year dates are shown in accordance with the Gregorian calendar, but with occasional mentions of their equivalents in the Muslim calendar (based on the lunar cycle) in connection with specifically dated buildings or works of art. Muslim years are calculated from the date of the *hijra* – the Prophet’s journey from Mecca to Medina – in July 622.



1 The pivot of Islam. The Ka'ba in the Masjid al-Haram, Mecca: principal Islamic shrine and the goal of Muslim pilgrimage. Frequently restored, it contains the Black Stone, the directional focus for Muslim prayer, and is covered – 'like a bride' according to medieval poets – with the *kiswa*, a silken veil, now black but formerly in many colours.

The Birth of Islamic Art: the Umayyads

The genesis of Islamic art is customarily linked with, indeed often attributed to, the whirlwind military conquests of the Arabs following the death of the Prophet Muhammad in AD 632. Such an idea is plausible enough. The creation of a world empire, the proclamation of a new faith, the formation of an art that bears its name – all seem to belong together. But do they? Is there a causal connection, and – if so – what is the exact chronological sequence? Dazzling and exciting as the spectacle of the Arab conquests is, it in fact has relatively little to do with the early years of Islamic art. Yet the formative nature of those early years is plain. What, then, is the precise connection between the seismic political events of the seventh century and the earliest Islamic art?

The answer to such questions demands a refinement of the chronological and geographical focus. To view early Islamic art as even approximately representative of an empire that stretched from the Atlantic to India and the borders of China is grossly to misunderstand its context. In the two generations which saw the Arabs flood out of their desert homeland and overrun all of western Asia and North Africa there was, it seems, neither the desire nor the time to foster artistic expression. That was to be the achievement not of the first conquerors themselves but of their grandchildren. At all events, no major building or artefact survives from these early years. This sluggish start may owe something to the fact that in this period the nascent Muslim state was being ruled from Arabia, an environment in which the visual arts, though by no means absent – as recent excavations at Qaryat al-Faw (frescoes of royal scenes) and elsewhere (figural sculpture) have shown – nevertheless had no very significant role, though architecture flourished. Arabia certainly lagged far behind the Levant. Similarly, there can be no question of a ‘universal’ Islamic art at this early stage. The horizons of that art were effectively limited to Syria. The rest of the Islamic empire might as well scarcely have existed at all, except insofar as works of art or