

By Juliet Highet

What a controversial subject! Most people believe that it is forbidden to depict human figures in Islamic art, or at least images of the Prophet Muhammad. As Kjeld von Folsach, Director of the David Collection, Copenhagen, writes about a current exhibition: 'This is not correct, though it can be considered a qualified truth. It is correct that in many religious contexts there was and still is a reluctance or caution, with regard to figurative renditions... Muslim views of this have changed throughout the ages and can vary according to different geographical locations, and in different strata of society. While some Muslims have criticised and destroyed human depictions, believing them to be idols, other have from the very beginning of the Islamic era, commissioned works of art with human figures as an essential element.'

The exhibition *The Human Figure in Islamic Art: Holy Men, Princes & Commoners* focuses on this highly debatable subject with 75 works from the David Collection's masterpieces created up to about 1850, all of them featuring in different ways human figures in Islamic art. The eponymously titled book divides the work into nine themes, naturally including The Religious Sphere, but also Exotic & Supernatural Beings, The Prince & the Court, Women, Love and others.

Today there is uncertainty about what attitude to figurative art prevails in the Islamic world. In disapproval both in the past and nowadays, some orthodox groups invoke Islam's religious scriptures. But in previous decades of Muslim miniature paintings in particular, images of humans are rife. The first section of the book is 'The Religious Injunctions', focusing on attitudes to figurative depictions initially found in the *Qur'an* and the *hadith*. It transpires that there are no passages in the *Qur'an* directly forbidding figurative depictions of humans. In fact, there are many portrayals of characters in the *Qur'an* in historical illustrated books. The written traditions surrounding the life of the Prophet, the *hadith*, are much more critical of figurative depictions. They are associated with idolatry in contravention to the Prophet's insistence on monotheism, and belong to secular life that impedes religious devotion. Another aspect is the belief that humans, artists in this context, must not compete with God's creative powers. It was and still is considered that images of the head are particularly offensive, since the head is associated with the soul, the core of life itself. Iconoclasm over the ages particularly attacks portrayal of the head, sometimes focusing on just the face.

Sculptures and reliefs portraying human beings were and are considered even more objectionable than paintings from an orthodox Muslim point of view. The belief is that those mediums' three-dimensional forms endow them with a more pronounced identification with the physical, yet divinely created world than two-dimensional flat renditions. Plus they could be viewed as having a closer resemblance to idols that other religions worship.

Curiously, it might appear, figurative depictions, particularly of animals, have sometimes been associated with magical and supernatural powers in Islamic art. And paintings of human figures were also used for divination. Even more

The Human Figure in Islamic Art



A Prince with his Beloved, miniature pasted on cardboard, Jaipur, India, circa 1740, 23.4 x 17.8cm

surprising perhaps, are depictions of the Prophet himself, both where his face is visible and where it is covered with a veil. Most often he is depicted with a flaming halo and the winged horse, *Buraq*, that conveyed him to Paradise, and to view Hell. His mystical ascension on *Buraq* in which he met supernatural beings are the inspiration for many wonderful paintings, most of them dating to the 14th century, and many of them in the exhibition created in Persia. Instead of Semitic features, he has Turkish-Mongol ones that were common in Persian portraiture from the 13th to the end of the 16th

century. And it is fascinating that the noble steed, *Buraq*, has a woman's face.

In the category of the book called *The Human Figure in Islamic Art*, von Folsach comments: 'It is surprising to see how often human figures in some form are part of decorations in virtually all materials and different types of objects and works of art. They appear on everything from utility ware such as ceramic dishes, inlaid metalwork, and textiles to architecture, reliefs, sculpture, monumental and detailed miniature paintings, illustrating manuscript and scientific diagrams'.

The earliest Islamic coins were

figurative, copying Byzantine and Sasanian ones. Not until 696 was a coin of purely Islamic design created, all figurative elements replaced by inscriptions in Arabic, primarily quotations from the *Qur'an*. This transition had a political as well as a religious element – revolt against Byzantine Christian symbolism. A similarly deliberate aesthetic policy is evident in two important early buildings – the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem (689-69) and the Umayyad Mosque at Damascus (706-715). Although their fabulous mosaics were made by Byzantine artisans, neither feature figurative images. Instead, in Damascus, there are trees, uninhabited buildings and patterns, and inside the Dome of the Rock a monumental inscription from the *Qur'an* offsets stylised plants.

As anyone can see, walking round museums the world over containing Islamic art, there are so many depictions of human figures, whether highly stylised or quite naturalistic. There were exceptions to the emphasis on stylisation, as in the intense emotion expressed at the death of Alexander in a delicate, moving Persian painting of circa 1325-1335, titled *Sorrow at the Bier of Alexander the Great* from *The Great Mongol Shahnama*. Individualisation with an emphasis on distinctive, personal features was not present except in a few periods and places such as Mughal India for about a century after 1600. In fact during this period psychological characterisation and naturalism were at their highest level ever in the Islamic world. A Mughal miniature *Portrait of a Holy Man* of the 1630s in the exhibition depicts a very real looking ascetic, an old mullah. He is painted with individual features, such as a hooked nose and aspects of ageing, such as his grey beard, wrinkled hands and eyes. Also the three-dimensional effect of his standing figure contrasts directly with the two-dimensional proliferation of earlier Mughal miniatures.

Three successive emperors – Akbar (r 1556-1605), his son Jahangir (r 1605-1627), and his grandson Shah Jahan (r 1627-1657), all prolific art patrons, encouraged their artists to take note of the European art that was filtering into India via diplomats and missionaries. An eclectic style emerged, emphasising naturalism and realism, fundamentally different from the classical Persian. This approach also recognised perspective, volume and shadows.

Later Qajar art too began to convey telling facial expressions when photography was introduced in the 1840s and European modes of portraiture influenced artists. A humorous element of caricature is evident too in a painting in the exhibition dated 1850, titled *A Couple Making Love Spied Upon*. One of the three women behind the amorous couple is an indignant black servant raising her fist, another seems to be an older envious sister or rival, and the third a much older woman who does not seem surprised at the scene; indeed she could have been a

conspiratorial asset to the couple.

Other than in these genres, idealisation or stylisation were predominant, and psychological depictions very rare. The emphasis was on generic types, rather than individuals. Looking closely, one suddenly realises – these figures cast no shadows and are two-dimensional. Their faces are mainly in profile and don't express human emotions. In fact their gestures, rather than their faces, sometimes convey feelings, but they too have a narrow repertoire. As Joachim Meyer, Senior Curator of the David Collection, writes: 'Even when it comes to portraits, the paintings in general seem to depict types rather than being credible renditions of the appearance of individuals who once lived'.

Elucidating his theme, he continues: 'If we look past museum walls, we also see a situation in which depictions of the human figure had a different function in the Islamic world than, for example, in Europe or the Far East during the same period. Figurative art has not played a public role in the Islamic world as it has in churches and temples, with their religious cult images ... Instead, visual art in the Islamic world developed in the private sphere and especially in the smaller forms of miniature painting'.

A dominant theme in the exhibition is *The Prince & the Court*, featuring portraits of rulers, their public appearances, and personal lives, often in their harems. As patrons princes had great power and influence, as well as the wealth to train and employ artists. The princes' fondness for figurative art was in most periods mainly expressed within the confines of their palaces. Depiction of them, the rulers, was frequently symbolic, inferring royal power rather than individual personalities. However, in the realm of miniature painting, these potentates were depicted in many different guises, including ones that were not flattering. Artists presented them of course as wise and courageous, but also as silly, foolhardy, unqualified and even evil. Some good monarchs exuded a distinctive, positive aura, in some cases an actual light – *farr* – which they could lose all too easily.

A classic miniature of *The Mughal Emperor Babadur Shah Enthroned* (circa 1707-1708) shows him at a *darbar*. It is very stiff and formulaic with both ruler and ruled all painted in profile. He is holding a globe, a symbol of royal power. Isolated on his magnificent covered throne, he is of course the only one with a halo, emphasising his status.

These miniatures are fascinating in that some of them take us behind the official façade of the court, away from governance and sentencing, to polo, hunting, banquets, trysts and actual scenes of lovemaking. But much more common are depictions of amorous couples in a princely setting, often staged as a courtly ritual. In a very structured Persian miniature of 1554, Bahram Gur visits one of his seven wives, who are foreign princesses and live in pavilions of



A Palace Complex with Harem Gardens, Faizabad or Lucknow, circa 1765, 45.5 x 31.8cm

different colours. In a book illustration of *Nizami's Khamsa*, one of the wives is telling the ruler a love story, which becomes a metaphor for the tryst.

On this note, we move on to the section called Love. The theme is a central one in Islamic art, as it is in poetry, and many are its illustrations commissioned from elite artists. But this is not just love between people, but also love for God. And depiction of lovers often has underlying themes. Desire for union with the beloved exemplified for example in miniatures by loving looks between a couple, can be interpreted as the search for union with God. And the tribulations a couple may go through can be seen as a metaphor for the obstacles on the way to the divine goal.

In an enchanting miniature from Lucknow an elegantly dressed couple drink together in a lovely landscape accompanied by a musician on her lute. Does the mutual imbibing suggest a degree of equality in the relationship, or is it all just an evocation of 'the good life'? A double portrait unusually in close-up of *A Prince with his Beloved* shows him raising a little glass to her lips, so that they can drink together, and is one of the very few examples in which people express intense emotions. These lovers are entwined in such a tender embrace with delicately erotic undertones. Gazing at each other, he encircles her, placing his hand on her breasts, while she ardently grips his arms.

Typically, sexual activity is treated in Islamic art with a measure of restraint, though examples exist of princes being painted in very explicit erotic situations, demonstrating their potency. Naked bodies hardly ever appear; usually lovers or newly-weds make love hidden beneath quilts, only



Miniature from a copy of the *Firdawsi's Shahnama (Book of Kings)*, Tabriz, Iran, between 1520 and 1535, 31.4 x 24cm

their heads showing. But there was a trend in the opposite direction in both Persia and Turkey where the influence of European art could be traced behind erotic paintings. From the end of the 18th century, erotic motifs were a potent element of Qajar art. They appeared not only on small formats such as lacquer pen cases and mirror frames, but also in large oil paintings. The subject matter included dancers, revealingly dressed women and intimate scenes of lovers. Interestingly, the erotic element is not apparent in the faces of couples, which lack expression. This has been interpreted as a comment on their behaviour as immoral, scandalous.

In the section titled Depictions of Women, Joachim Meyer emphasises that in the Islamic world, as in so many other world cultures, women had a subordinate role in relation to men, associated with the home. And of course visual art was almost all created by men for men. Around 900, a book about etiquette, the *Adab al-*

muluk (Conduct of the Kings), was written, intended for princes. The author warns against giving women access to illustrated books which could arouse them with depictions of the 'embrace's climax'. Far preferable was to allow them to 'look at pictures of the prophets of the Kaaba, of the mosques in Medina and the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, so that their hearts can know humility and open up for spiritual refinements'. Around the same time as this book pontificated, the physicist and philosopher Muhammad Ibn Zakariyya (864-925), with men in mind in their bathhouses, mentioned paintings, specifically motifs with lovers embracing or arguing, as having a therapeutic effect, as well as a spiritual one. He also recommended images for men showing them in battle, hunting or horse-riding to cultivate their 'bestial' potential. In the 'desert castles' of Jordan, Syria and Palestine, which were often hunting lodges and contained bathhouses, there were murals and sculptures of voluptuous women.

Among the earliest depictions of women are the partially nude, almost life-sized sculptures in the Syrian desert palace of Khirbat al-Afjar (724-743). They were probably dancers, working to entertain a prince, a theme echoing through the history of Islamic art. Naturally, the emphasis in these semi-nude images was on physical beauty, lacking all individuality. As in so much of Islamic art, they are like film extras, the attention focused on the 'star' male protagonist in art, whose position entitled him to enjoyment of female sensuality.

This lack of uniqueness extends to portraits of women, hardly differing from one painting to the next. Elite

women led cloistered lives in their quarters of the palace or home, which were absolutely off-limits to men, except their closest male relatives and a few servants. Naturally, this seclusion precluded painters, who were men. And so there are hardly any true depictions of harem women. An iconic example of this genre is the magnificent, highly elaborate miniature of *A Palace Complex with Harem Gardens*. Interestingly, the women's part of a huge princely palace and gardens is in the foreground and the main focus of this complex work. The high angle from which the scene is painted enables the viewer a glimpse of the part of the palace not normally visible to outsiders. Like movie extras, they are carefully placed, engaged in various dilettante pursuits such as smoking water pipes or having their feet stained with henna, though one of

them is sending off a carrier pigeon with a message – one wonders to whom.

There are very few examples of portraits displaying distinctive character that might really be linked to a real woman, rather than an ideal of a female, embodying sensual beauty. However, from the 17th century, a few paintings of women who were probably princesses, had more authentic uniqueness, as in the delicate Mughal miniature of 1630, *A Lady with Flower & Fly Whisk*. She is also turning to present a three-quarter view, rather than the stereotyped profile. Nevertheless, she is voluptuously buxom, (which may of course have been accurate), and wears a transparent top.

• *The Human Figure in Islamic Art*, until 13 May, at *The David Collection*, Copenhagen, davidmus.dk. Catalogue available



The Prophet Muhammad Meets the Angel with 10,000 Wings & the Angel with Four Heads by Sultan Ali. Miniature from a copy of al-Sarab's Nahj al-faradis (The Paths of Paradise) Herat, Iran, circa 1465, album leaf 40.8 x 30cm

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