



Miniature painting and the world it reveals

Islamic art is often associated solely with beautiful patterns and variations upon the Arabic script. An entire new world opens up, however, when we look at Islamic book painting, also called miniature painting. This is where we find a vibrant, narrative universe, full of fantastic images.



What we mean by Islamic miniature painting

Islamic miniature painting, or book painting, refers to fairly small paintings that are intended to be bound in a book. A miniature painting is rarely larger than an A4 sheet and is generally an illustration for a historical manuscript, a scientific text, or a work of fiction. A miniature painting can, however, also be an independent work of art, for example a beautiful rendition of a bird or a portrait of a prince.



Some of the most fantastic miniature paintings come from Firdaws's *Shah-nama* (Book of Kings), the famous epic about the history of Iran before the Arab conquests. This magnificent poem, some 60,000 verses long, presents us with invincible heroes, love stories, and colorful confrontations with demons, dragons, and all manner of other mythical creatures.

Interesting miniature paintings are also found in scientific works, with illustrations of everything from medicinal herbs to ingenious mechanical devices. One of the most amusing miniature paintings in this genre in the David Collection depicts a robot! It looks like a man, but is actually an automaton that can fill a glass and offer it to a guest.



Good questions – and answers

Where and when were miniature paintings made?

The earliest miniature paintings that have been preserved were made in Baghdad in around the year 1000, but not until around 1200 were larger numbers of these paintings found elsewhere in the Islamic world. We often categorize miniature painting into four regional schools: the Arab, the Persian, the Indian, and the Turkish.

Who made the miniature paintings?

Illustrated manuscripts were made by several highly specialized artists or craftsmen working in collaboration, often in court studios or commercial workshops: papermakers, calligraphers, illuminators, painters, and bookbinders. A master was responsible for the painting's composition and the most difficult sections, and for ensuring that the completed painting was a harmonious whole.

Who bought the miniature paintings?

It was mostly princes and their courtiers who were wealthy enough to buy books with miniature paintings. More ordinary manuscripts were also made for the general public. Nothing like the Christian church's purchases and commissions of figurative art existed in the Islamic world.

Where did the pigments come from?

Many pigments were made from crushed minerals. Dark blue might come from lapis lazuli, green from malachite, and red from cinnabar. Pigments were also made from organic materials. Insects provided a special blood-red color, and a yellow pigment used in Indian miniature painting is said to have come from cow urine. Certain pigments change over time and others can cause the paper to decompose.

DURING THE GUIDED TOUR OF THE MUSEUM:

When pupils are shown around the museum, the guide will focus on the special history of miniature painting as part of the Islamic art tradition, which is otherwise not usually figurative. The role of the artist will also be taken up and, depending on the work of art, relevant historical and cultural aspects will be discussed.