
The Practice of Album-Making in Islamic Art

Islamic art is created not only for the Muslim faith, but it consists of artworks such as textiles, architecture, paintings and drawings that were produced in the regions that were once ruled by Muslim empires. Artists from various disciplines take part in collaborative projects and artworks. Over this semester, I have learned the development of Islamic art in album-making, metalworks and calligraphy.

This essay is an assessment of the collaborative nature of artists and art workshops in the pre-modern Islamic world. The paper will highlight the practices and the significance of the process of album-making, the importance of contributing artists, and the standard Islamic art style and representations.

In the fifteenth century, the collaborative practices of album-making dates back to the early Timurid empire. The production of albums were mainly concentrated in workshops in centralized locations. Empires such as the Mughal kings drew upon various talented artists across the Persian and Indian worlds to contribute to the creation. Thus, there were lots of artists that were enlisted, and careful coordination was put into place. Courtiers often gathered together to discuss literature, calligraphy and paintings. Materials such as decorated paper, sketches and pounce were used as a model book that offers patrons a glimpse of the artistic process. Sponsorships came from royal and noble patrons who would provide money to the kitab-khana. Transcription of the payment of the album creation can take a while as patrons might not be able to pay the full amount upfront. For example, Safavid Prince Sultan Ibrahim Mirza may not have been able to pay the calligraphers regularly due to his lack of funding. Thus, it affects the kitab-khana operations and the prince's ability to maintain his staff. It also displays that the function of the kitab-khana depends on the monetary assets and resources given by the sponsors.

The album does not hold a singular theme, as there are multiple themes and genres, such as the autobiography of the patron, poems, stories and their regular lifestyles. In summary, biographical traditions date back to the early prototypes from the pre-Islamic times. The practice of oral biography was a form of short narratives that people used to identify remarks and accounts of their life. Historical figures and reports of the Prophet's career have been collected and arranged into a narrative called hadith reports. Biographical writing started to emerge in the second Islamic century where literary genres appeared. Exemplary life stories, biographical dictionaries and notices were among the few. Other influences such as ancient Greek, Persian and Indian literature were translated into Arabic text. Thus patrons in kitab-khana workshops can choose specific historical poems and autobiographies into their future albums.

Album prefaces provide readers with a brief content and organization on the narratives of the artistic production, location and contributing artists. The preface might include a few political and religious concerns from the director. Some authors dedicate the album to significant artists such as Persian illustrator Bihzad (d. 1536), who played a significant role in his style associated with his name. Signatures and ascriptions of artists who contributed to the pages are often visible on the calligraphed page. Sometimes on the painted page, painters would inscribe their name, role, or under the name of the workshop director on a small part of the composition. Prefaces from

the fifteenth-century Turkish painting consist of lovers in a lush landscape inspired by Chinese designs. The pages also include different orientations, which enable the composition to be viewed at multiple angles.

An illuminated page follows prefaces in Mughal albums and facing pages of a portrait of the loyal patrons. Pages are often arranged in groups that display a particular theme and juxtaposition. Also, the albums consist of a central composition with an ornamental frame and decorated margins, which are arranged in a tight formation.

The process of creating an album is complex as it takes a team of artists with diverse abilities to complete the project. To create a collection, a director envisions the production and decides which artist or calligrapher to take on the project. A specific text is selected, and a suitable paper is made to size and burnished. Careful coordination of text, passage and intended images are laid down through guidelines written and marked on the surface of the paper. The marks indicate the location for the preliminary drawings, paintings and text.

Artists such as calligraphers, illuminators, painters, and binders work to perfection through a painstaking pace. Directors would note the number of days the artist should spend on the individual miniature. For example, from an album at the Topkapi Sarayi Muzesi in Istanbul, a progress report included a detailed description of artist assigned parts, attendance of the artists and scribes, and the completion date of the artwork. What is learned throughout this process is that each artist had to work quickly and efficiently to complete the task.

Most importantly, calligraphers are one of the critical artists when it comes to album-making. They write out the text in several lines to fill up a section of the page. The text is written in various styles, depending on the patron. In Islamic literature, calligraphy is the dominant element in decorating and ornamentation on an artwork. It is the most fundamental element in Islamic art because it links with the Muslim faith and language.

Artists in the Islamic album-making world adapted common forms of Islamic ornamentation into their artworks. Painters would create human figures, and animal forms that are stylized. Human subjects are often depicting a portrait of a historical or royal individual who is painted with a side profile. Characters are often portrayed standing with decorated clothing. There is a lack of three-dimensional representation; however, artists in the later period of the Islamic timeline started to incorporate shading into their work. Figural motifs can be found on the surface and book decorations of the object.