

Color Symbolism in Medieval and Safavid Manuscripts and in Islamic Aesthetics: A Historical and Comparative Analysis

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Abstract

The inquisitive nature of mankind is always looking for ways to explore things of its interest. It is interesting to write about art, architecture and artefacts but without consulting about color; the study remains incomplete. Color symbolism in manuscripts has always been a rich source of studying diverse cultural and religious history. In the art of manuscripts, colors were not solely used to create an ideal reality but also gave meaning to the illustrations. Color symbolism is an essential part in every religious as well as secular art but the meaning and symbology may not be similar. The aim of this research paper is to draw attention to the color symbolism of Christian Medieval period and 'Safavid' Period manuscripts. The study provides that the metaphorical use of colors, their similarities, comparisons and expressionist style having different impacts in two diverse art works belong to mystical, religious and emerging time periods. Moreover, the paper is based on hermeneutic exploratory and descriptive research using the technique of innate expressionism.

Keywords: Symbolism, Manuscripts, Colors

Introduction

Colors have always played a symbolic role in every culture, religion and history. From the prehistoric time, color symbolism represents the visual language of specific time, era, aesthetics and region. The concept of light and



splendor were extremely important in almost every theology and color was an important medium for expression. The core idea of using colors in both Islamic and Christian art was not only to create ideal reality but to clarify the meaning of given content and to enhance its beauty. This research paper has mainly focused on Medieval Christian period and Safavid period illuminated manuscripts study. Both eras have some commonalities and contrasts. The role of color has great significance in the production of luxurious manuscripts in both Islamic and Medieval Christian art and mysticism, spirituality, and usage of vibrant colors were their common features. They put an extreme importance on the purity of colors. Color symbolism is the reflection of their theology, philosophy and religious context. Some lavishly embellished books in the Medieval Christian Period, Biblical stories and folios were decorated with the pigments made from gold, silver and other precious mineral substances that were extensively used during the Medieval time period (500 AD-1500 AD). But digging deeper we came to know that the color aesthetics of Latin Christian art is different from Byzantine Christian art. Similarly, many art historians document that the early Islamic aesthetics were greatly influenced by earlier cultures like Sasanian, Mesopotamian, Greek and Roman. Most manuscripts from the early period of Islam adopted foreign styles and color palettes. Therefore; with the spread of Islam, Muslims had not only developed their aesthetics with indigenous region but also established their own color and visual vocabulary. The difference is observed from Umayyads (622 CE- 816 CE) to Safavid Manuscripts (1501 AD-1722 AD), clear distinctions in the art of illuminated manuscripts and color production were accustomed. Islamic Artists and craftsmen considered that the color theory, hues, shades, its meaning and production were as important as any other art. Similarly, in the Safavid period (1501 AD-1722 AD), the art of illuminated manuscripts had fully developed and exceptionally evolved. Like Medieval Christian manuscripts which were appointed by clergy and royals, many patrons who ruled Persia, foreign and local, commissioned the production of illuminated and illustrated manuscripts to preserve the copies of epics. Prestigious illuminated manuscript widely known as *Shahnameh*,

“Book of Kings” by Abul-Qasim Ferdowsi Tusi² was documented and patronized almost the reign of many Persian rulers. These epics contain cultural treasures, securing their ideas and values. This documentation also influenced many foreign rulers to adopt this ideological tool and helped them to establish their legitimate series to the former kings. The main aim of this research paper is to find the deep relationship and comparative analysis of colors in two diverse folios from famous manuscripts, taken from “Book of Hours³” folio “Hours of Catherine of Cleves” Gothic Art style⁴, c. 1440 CE; Medieval Christian time period and Safavid period, “Sultan Muhammad, The Court of Gayumars”, c. 1522 CE (10th c. AH), *Shahnameh of Shah Tahmasp I* (Safavid)⁵, Tabriz, Iran.

Moreover, the study helps us to explore their visual color vocabulary and importance of light in their creative expression. Scientific analysis of colors widely used in these luxurious manuscripts and their role in creating these manuscripts may be relatable and reflect their indigenous sensibility of creating beautiful compositions. This systematic study could also provide information about their social, artistic, religious and economic factors included in the manufacturing and production of manuscripts. The focus of this research paper will be on color symbolism in above mentioned artworks from Christian Medieval period and Safavid period.

Study of color Symbolism

Color glossary in ancient arts, specifically in manuscripts; provides us the magnitude of aesthetics and symbolic expression of any artistic era. Colors can be explained through light and have their own significance in the production of illuminated manuscripts and illustrations. In the medieval period, colors were not only explained in purely descriptive and aesthetic domains but they have been used in religious context as well. According to some art historians and scholars, they documented that colors were not used only for utilitarian purposes or depending upon availability of resources but applied according to the requirement of the subject. Some colorful illustrated books and manuscripts lavishly embellished with covers made of gold, rubies and other precious objects⁶. Colors made from gold, silver and other

expensive minerals like lapis lazuli, were used extensively in manuscripts illustrations and illumination. (Dickson and Welch, pp. 263-66). A large number of illustrated manuscripts from early centuries (Carolingian period 7th century A.D) had limited color palette and gold illumination, grey illustrations, black and brown scripts and red, green, blue typographic signs were created on white ground. Gradually, manuscript illustrations became more illuminated and colorful in the later (Gothic) Medieval period with the addition of more colors. Similarly, many scholars have discussed that color symbolism in Islamic art is distinctive. The importance of color in Islamic manuscripts was equal to any other media. Manuscripts from the early Islamic period had less decoration and limited color palette. In the beginning of the 10th century, Islamic art of manuscripts developed its own distinguished style. Hence, application of colors has symbolic significance in Islamic art and Architecture. Color theory in the Safavid period reflects the aesthetic appreciation of the patron and subjectivity of the art work. In the beginning of the 14th century, a wide range of colors were used in book illumination and illustrations. The availability of sources and material also helps to understand the color symbology in the Safavid period. In general, color schemes in the Safavid period have had two distinctive and dominant elements; use of bright solid pigments like deep blue, turquoise, red and yellow with subdued tonal gradations. Detail colors and tones were extensively used with gold and silver to create visual vocabulary of the story. Moreover, color symbolism of the Safavid manuscripts were inspired from various themes like astrological texts, folklores, mysticism and knowledge of nature⁷. Artists were able to compose three groups of pigments from different sources: mineral colors, organic colors and non-organic manufactured colors. Following colors are widely used in Safavid manuscript:

1. Red: with its different grades-red vermilion, bright red, orange and reddish brown
2. White: white led or smooth chalk
3. Blue: dark blue (Azure)
4. Yellow: from yellow plumbic oxidum

5. Green: from Azurite
6. Black: obtained from boiled coal with walnuts
7. Purple: mixture between yellow and Indian carminum

Color and inks in Safavid manuscripts from 15th to 17th centuries contained malachite, iron gall, red, lead, vermilion, ultramarine and range of yellow and red arsenic sulfides⁸. The philosophy of color has deeper and diverse meaning in Safavid manuscripts. Moreover, the system of color symbolism in *Shahnameh*, a specific color palette was used for a particular subject, time and story. Each illustration from *Shahnameh*, is meant to create the intermediate world through colors; where time, space, movement and forms seem to link with the metaphysical world, events were happening but not in real manner.

Philosophy of Light in Medieval and Islamic Aesthetics

The role of light in Medieval and Safavid periods reflects their conceptual framework and aesthetics. Although both chosen manuscripts for discussion are extremely diverse in nature but looked upon nature as a reflection of the transcendental world. The importance of light in every religion, mythologies and theological writings, plays a fundamental role which has also been reflected in their art and artistic expression. But the actual challenge is to find the link of this reflection in manuscript production and in color application. To find the deeper meaning and value of specific colors used in these manuscripts, many artists of that time period had used such color pallets to connect with the spiritual and imaginative world.

The role of light in Medieval aesthetics has been emphasized by many Saints of that time⁹. They were inspired by luminosity and anticipated light from the center of the church as light of God. Moreover, they followed classical Antiquity¹⁰ and their philosophy was culminated in the 'Scholastic'¹¹ ideology inspired from logical works of Aristotle¹² and some themes of Plato¹³. According to St. Victor¹⁴, light perceived as an original metaphor of God. Robert Grosseteste added that "Light was also defined as the best of all proportions, as proportion itself"¹⁵. St. Bonaventure's views declared that all knowledge originated from a single source of light, from God. They believed that like light; God is also very simple.¹⁶ Light in color symbolism was

understood as a source of beauty and being. In Medieval manuscripts, scholars have documented that influence and significance of light in book illuminations and illustration is common and subjective for both celestial and for earth. Folio from “Book of Hours” suggests that the light is substantial in every form. Through greater and lesser participation of light, composition and illustrative characters acquire dignity from light. Colors seem to shine with their own light.

Similarly in Islamic aesthetics the concept of light and its importance in colors, has been discussed by many Islamic scholars. It is present in the Quran, Hadiths, Islamic literature and Sufi writings:

“Allah is the light of the heavens and the earth. The example of His light is like a niche within which is a lamp, the lamp is within glass, the glass as if it were a pearly [white] star, lit from [the oil of] a blessed olive tree, neither of the east nor of the west, whose oil would almost glow even if untouched by fire. Light upon light. Allah guides to his light whom He wills. And Allah presents examples for the people, and Allah is knowing of all things”. (24:35)

In Islamic traditions color is seen from a metaphysical viewpoint which allows the duality of light and shadow. From these verses of the Holy Quran, many scholars verified that, to understand the core concept of Islamic faith; one should understand the theory of light in Islamic aesthetics. The contrast lies between good and evil, light and dark, faithful and ignorant and right and wrong evident through the concept of light. Famous Islamic scholar Imam Ghazali¹⁷ depicted that,

“God is the source of the ultimate light, and by seeing that light a person reaches a state of revelation since only the faithful see that light.”

Initially many Islamic scholars were greatly influenced by Greek philosophies of light but Al-Kindi¹⁸ analyzed that an object creates color by blocking light, and this concept had rejected Aristotle’s theory about medium being the

source of color. Ibn al-Haytham¹⁹ (d. 1039) and Qutb al-Din al-Shirazi²⁰ (d. 1311) followed Al-Kindi's views and developed further ideology. In the Quran word *Sibgha*, which means color used in Surah Al-Baqarah for the first time.

“Take on Allah’s color, and Whose color is better than Allah’s?” (138:2)

Colors as the representation of light in Islamic aesthetics, equally important during different time periods. Muslim’s artists and artisans dedicated and paid huge attention in color symbology. Both religious and secular illustrated manuscripts had been beautified with lavish color schemes inspired by natural, organic, cosmological, minerals and many other synthetic sources. The *Shahnameh*, Book of Kings, concerns love, humor and supernatural instead of religious theme and folio selected for discussion is undoubtedly a fascinating and colorful expression of Persian culture at that time.

Manuscripts Analysis

Medieval aesthetics based on religious themes and scholars explores that those superstitious beliefs and religion ruled the lives of medieval people. Besides religious influence, Safavid aesthetics focuses on interpretation of poetry and fiction in manuscripts and book paintings. Islamic theories about light and color provide a foundation to many modern theories and this reflection can be determined in Persian illuminated manuscripts. The visual perception of colors and mystical interpretation in both manuscripts has shown that greatest art works of that time period were not only displayed in churches or in museums but shine forth from book folios as well. Regardless of specific cultures, time period and religion; both manuscripts tended to reflect the richness of artistic implementation of colors. Thousands of copies of “Books of Hours” made during 1250 CE to 1700 AD and now displayed in museums and libraries. Similarly, the *Shahnameh*, Book of Kings were illustrated countless times.

Color connotation in *Shahnameh*; linked with Sufism, as the Safavid ruler claimed that they were the descendants of Sufi Sheikhs from Ardabil, northwest Iran. Even the name Safavid originated from Sufi Sheikh named

Shaykh Safi al-Din.²¹ It was the reign of Shah Tahmasp I, when artistic advancements at its peak and manuscript illumination was fundamental in their arts. The manuscript of *Shahnameh*, of Shah Tahmasp I, comprises on 759 illustrations and 258 miniatures and it took several years in production and was given as gift by Shah Tahmasp I to the Ottoman Sultan Selim II²². This specific page from *Shahnameh*, The Court of Gayumars, is an illuminated manuscript and an epic poem defining the history of royalties in Persia at that time. Because of its fine details, composition, luminous colors and imagery, the Safavid period has been distinguished in history due to its artistic production and fine aesthetics in Central Asia. Color strategy in this manuscript fascinated by pure imagination and blend of colors with gold beautifies the dignitaries. Safavids selected the best color material for the production of *Shahnameh*. This Masterful example of pure and tonal colors application without any perspective definitely the 'Classical' example of manuscript production at that time. This illuminated manuscript describes the supremacy of kings through composition and color application plays a central role in this folio. Safavids were greatly fascinated by embellishments and decoration, so the usage of both golden and bright blue tones with a blend of violet creates beautiful visual harmony. The shiny colors in this folio reflect the rhythm of light and connect it with the metaphysical world; beyond the realm of time and space. The application of colors in this composition feels like pouring them delicately on a floating surface. Flora and fauna; even waterfalls, clouds and mountains were painted in realistic manner. Trees and foliage colored in a dense green color which appears as a sign of life and symbolized paradise, even tiny ripe fruits painted in red color. Although, iconoclasm is prohibited in the religion of Islam but Persia has long tradition in image making and it is prominent in their book illustration.



Sultan Muhammad, The Court of Gayumars, c.1522, 47 x 32 cm, opaque watercolor, ink, gold, silver on paper, folio 20v, *Shahnameh of Shah Tahmasp I* (Safavid), Tabriz, Iran (Aga Khan Museum, Toronto)

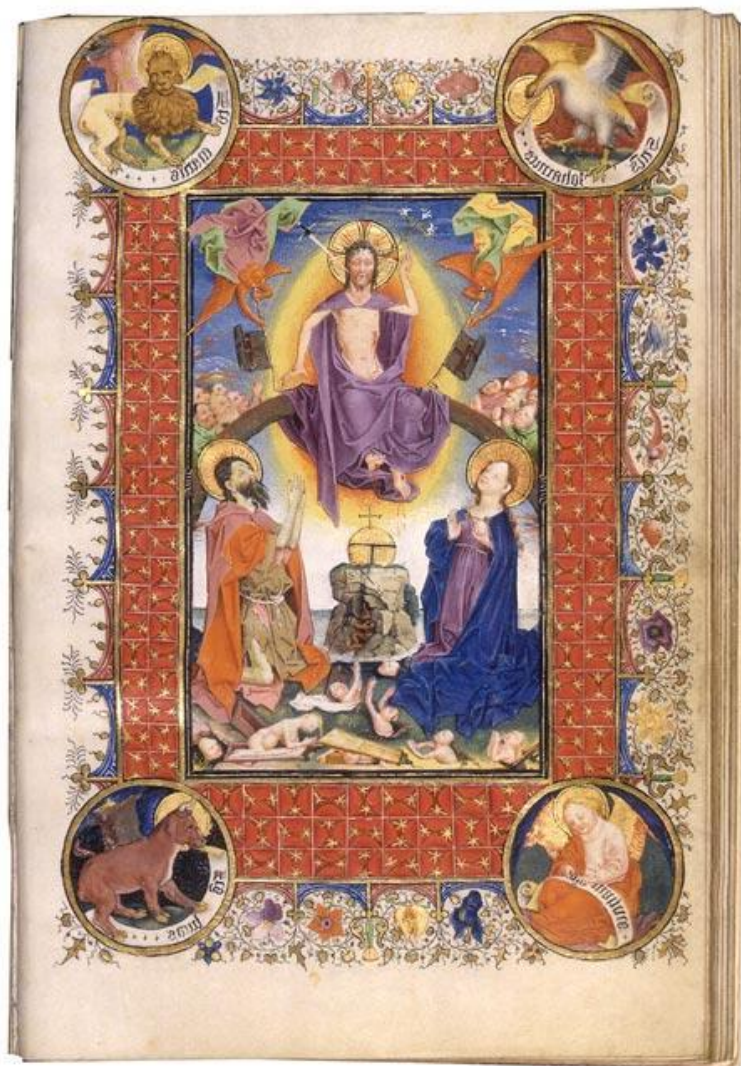
They had figural history even after the advent of Islam, they used to paint human figures and animals at specific places and occasions. While analyzing the color palette of illuminated manuscripts, it is essential to remember that it was created by a number of artists and their apprentices. Even calligraphy in *Nastaliq*²³ and arabesque²⁴ borders might be painted by different artists. In this folio gold is used as the dominant color because it was assumed that when Gayumar became ruler of the world, his reflection rejuvenates the whole world. Thus, the extensive usage of gold has shown to glorify the heavenly

figure of the king. He was seated in a cross-legged position above his courtiers and they wore leopard patterned robes; painted in subdued brown and earthly tones. Symbolically the use of violet and blue colors connected with the pious disciplines of Sufi saints and also suggested the multiple moments in one illustration. Flowing waterfalls and swirling grey blue clouds are colored in different tones of blue with silver; which symbolizes world and frequency of color beautifully explained through its rendering. The whole composition is filled with dense details of colors, even red-yellow often used to create more depth to the composition. On the contrary, the color symbolism in the Gothic period, devotional “Book of Hours”, painted in flat, pure and mostly primary colors. Detail shadows and rendering were avoided as they believed that things appeared beautiful, when they painted in bright colors. Like *Shanameh*, ‘The Book of Hours’ was also commissioned by clergy and monarchs and produced exquisitely elegant illustrations. In Late Christian period, from Gothic to Humanism²⁵ illumination became more significant and the concept of space was skillfully illusionistic by applying gold and flat colors. In the early Christian period, during Charlemagne's reign, the art of book illustration contained Biblical stories and mainly focused on signs, symbols and allegorical concepts. Therefore, parchments and vellum were used with flat color pallets for codices and illustrations which were centrally focused on Old Testaments.

This folio from “Book of Hours” “Hours of Catherine of Cleves” c. 1440 CE; decorated with floral color borders and zoomorphic illustrations. The Book contained a detailed series of monastic orders, calendar of saints and devotional prayers cycle for followers. The color philosophy is the reflection of classical Antiquity. Although book painting techniques greatly improved during this period and basic colors were Nepal yellow, lead-tin-yellow, smalt, and red were vermilion and madder, while blue were indigo, azurite and ultramarine tones and white were lime white and lead white, green were malachite and earth green and black were used in carbon black tones.

This color's vocabulary is massively used with gold and silver leaf for illumination and Gothic style is famous for manuscript illuminations. A

youthful Christ was sitting in the middle of composition, adorned with purple robe around his body, whereas illuminated halo painted behind the heavenly figure of Christ. The symbolic interpretation of purple associated with royalty, bravery, wisdom, and spirituality. Two more standing illustrated figures of a holy man and a woman; on the right and left side of the illustration bearing halo around them, robed in a beautiful rich color of burgundy, orange, gold, earthly brown and solid blue color. Several semi-nude figures in different expressions and positions painted in different skin tones. Naturalistic colors seem to shine with its own light and panel outer border decorated with motif-like lattice patterns filled with colorful foliage. Flowers painted in similar color palettes as of illustration; with addition of green tint. According to St. Victor²⁶ Green was the most beautiful color of all and a symbol of spring and an image of rebirth. Another inner floral-patterned border painted in rose color. As this folio illustrates, the illuminators explored the various ways to create painted objects in three dimensional against paper flatness. Background was filled with different tones of blue and flat white color. Such illuminated manuscripts engaging the emotions of followers and utilization of color created the impression of depth. In the Medieval period, a wide range of plants, chemicals and minerals were used for color manufacturing. The most expensive were Lapis Lazuli from blue gemstone and violet colors. Moreover, Iron gall inks were used for color making by mixing it in different minerals. Color symbolism in the late Medieval period is greatly inspired by the art of stained glass as they perceived luminosity as the light of God.



Book of Hours, Catherine Cleves, Meester van Catherina, (Morgan Library and Museum), c. 1440, by anonymous Dutch artist, ink and gold on vellum, approx. 454 X 650 cm.

Conclusion

The research stream that the work of two finest handmade manuscripts illustrate in different time periods, in diverse belief systems and regions; still have some commonalities. These findings are based on value-laden descriptive research, as study of manuscripts helps us to understand the nature of ancient cultural values and their literal methods. Secondly the research is heavily contextualized in the era of two emerging time periods, along with its

reflection of cultural dispositions with Safavid and Medieval artistic practices. “The principle of Contextualization” suggests research to be embedded in context. It asserts that the historic and social background of research settings should be acknowledged so the audience can relate to its context. Medieval manuscripts were purely based on religious context while the art of illuminated manuscripts in the Safavid period deals with religious and secular themes. Therefore, the method of comparative and aesthetic analysis has been reflected in their color application and color harmony, the usage of symmetrical balance, decorative borders and bindings, multiple perspectives and usage of color in reflected and transmitted light. All salient features were narrated through colors and symbolized mysticism and divine proximity. Thus, this research paper may provide contextual work of art of manuscripts study through color symbolism.

References

¹ The Shahnameh or Shahnama is a long epic poem written by the Persian poet Ferdowsi for Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni between c. 977 and 1010 CE and is the national epic of Greater Iran. Consisting of some 50,000 "distich's" or couplets, the Shahnameh is one of the world's longest epic poems. www.brittanica.com

² Abul-Qâsem Ferdowsi Tusi, (Persian: c. 940–1019/1025), was a Persian poet and the author of Shahnameh

"Book of Kings", Encyclopedia Iranica

³ The Middle Ages was the period in European history from the collapse of Roman civilization in the 5th century CE to the period of the Renaissance (variously interpreted as beginning in the 13th, 14th, or 15th century, depending on the region of Europe and other factors). www.brittanica.com

⁴ Gothic art, the painting, sculpture, and architecture characteristic of the second of two great international eras that flourished in western and central Europe during the Middle Ages.

⁵ King Gayumars (detail), Sultan Muhammad, The Court of Gayumars, c. 1522, 47 x 32 cm, opaque watercolor, ink, gold, silver on paper, folio 20v, *Shahnameh of Shah Tahmasp I* (Safavid), Tabriz, Iran (Aga Khan Museum, Toronto). The Art of the Safavids before 1600, Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

⁶ Mahmoud, “Color and the Mystics,” 100-119

⁷ Scholars such as Ebba Koch, Sheila Canby, Sheila Blair and Jonathon Bloom discussed color in their writings but very few addressed the symbolic meaning of colors

⁸ Daneshgar, Majid. “Perception of Color in Islamic Texts and Traditions with Special Reference to Shi’ia Sources,” in *Essays in Global Color History: Interpreting the Ancient Spectrum* (Piscataway, 2016), 211-223.

⁹ Hofstadter, Albert and Richard Kuhns, ed. *Philosophies of Art and Beauty: Selected Readings in Aesthetics from Plato to Heidegger*. The University of Chicago Press, 1964 (This book was primarily used for its selections from Augustine).

¹⁰ The ancient past, especially the period of classical Greek Period and other human civilizations before the Middle Ages.

¹¹ A term for the medieval philosophy taught in schools, and exemplified by Thomas Aquinas. www.britannica.com

¹² Plato, (born 428/427 BCE, Athens, Greece—died 348/347, Athens), ancient Greek philosopher, student of Socrates (c. 470–399 BCE), www.britannica.com

¹³ Aristotle (c. 384 B.C. to 322 B.C.), was a Greek philosopher and polymath during the Classical period in Ancient Greece. Taught by Plato

¹⁴ Richard of Saint-Victor, (born, Scotland/England—died March 10, 1173, Paris, Fr.), Roman Catholic theologian whose treatises profoundly influenced medieval and modern mysticism. www.cambridge.org

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Giovanni di Fidanza (St. Bonaventure), 1221-1274. Italian Scholastic and leading Franciscan theologian. www.hetwebsite.net

¹⁷ Al-Ghazali (c.1056–1111) was one of the most prominent and influential philosophers, theologians, jurists, and mystics of Sunni Islam. Plato.stanford.edu

¹⁸ Lindberg, *Theories of Visions*, 3

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Hasan-Ibn-al-Haytham was a Muslim Arab mathematician, astronomer, and physicist of the Islamic Golden Age. Referred to as "the father of modern optics". www.ibnalhytham.com

²¹ Schimmel and Soucek, "Color," 46

²² David J. Roxburgh, "On the Brink of Tragedy: The Court of Gayumars from Shah Tahmasp's *Shahnama* ('Book of Kings'), Sultan Muhammad," in Christopher Dell, ed., *What Makes a Masterpiece: Artists, Writers and Curators on the World's Greatest Works of Art* (London; New York: Thames & Hudson, 2010), pp. 182-185; 182.

²³ An Arabic script developed about the 15th century, characterized by a tendency to slope downward from right to left, and used mainly for Persian poetical writings and in Urdu and Malay manuscript. Merriam. websetter

²⁴ An ornamental design consisting of intertwined flowing lines, originally found in ancient Islamic art.

Merriam. websetter

²⁵ Humanism, system of education and mode of inquiry that originated in northern Italy during the 13th and 14th centuries and later spread through continental Europe. www.britannica.com

²⁶ Godfrey of Saint-Victor, (born c. 1125—died 1194, Paris), French monk, philosopher, theologian, and poet whose writings summarized an early medieval Christian Humanism that strove to classify areas of knowledge, to integrate distinctive methods of learning, and to recognize the intrinsic dignity of man and nature. www.britannica.com