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AL-WASITI

Iraqi illustrator from the 13th century

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YAHYA AL-WASITI was born in the town of Wasit in Southern Iraq. The date of his birth is unknown.

We only know him through his illustrations of the 12th century picaresque episodes of Al-Hariri known as *Maqamas* or *Assemblies*. It is reported that he learnt drawing at an early age, and in time knew how to mix the black ink made from burnt camphor fibres with mustard oil, to which he would add different colours. In this way he was able to achieve a close connection between what he saw and what he expressed in his drawings. He was also able to reveal the intricate secrets of a literary anecdote in visual patterns and movements. These intricacies were not easy to portray, in spite of the versatility of the paintings which went beyond the artistic influences current in those days, propagated by Eastern Christianity on the one hand, and Persian art on the other.

Al-Wasiti was seeking in all this to achieve distinctive ways of expression, and in the process he established some contact with the first traditions of his Sumerian culture, just as he tried to establish new aesthetic concepts which would in time go far beyond the boundaries of his own country, to become part and parcel of the Arab Islamic artistic tradition.

We should now discuss the artistic works of this original artist. These amount to a number of illustrations of the *Maqamas* of Al-Hariri mentioned above, which were the most renowned literary creations in the last quarter of the 6th century of the Hijra (12th century A.D.) and the first half of the 7th century of the Hijra (13th century A.D.). Al-Hariri, who lived both in Baghdad and Basrah, wrote 50 *Maqamas*. Manuscripts of these *Maqamas* are to be found in the

British Museum in London, the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, the Institute of Oriental Studies in Leningrad and the Suleimaniyya Mosque Library in Istanbul. Five of these manuscripts appertain to the Arab School of art in the style of their illustrations and illuminations.

One of the copies which Al-Wasiti illustrated is known as "*Chiffre Al-Wasiti*". This was presented to the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, and now bears the number (*Arabe 5847*) in the catalogues of the Library. This copy is considered to be one of the complete copies of the *Maqamas*, as it is still bound in its original cover. It contains 167 folios measuring 276mm in width and 337mm in length. It is well preserved and its paper is of good quality.

Al-Wasiti copied and illustrated this manuscript, but without following the traditional method in which the calligrapher left blank spaces for the artist's illustrations. He was able to decide for himself the important dramatic climax of each episode, and to determine the extent of the space needed for his illustrations. This gave him ample freedom to express the full significance of each *Maqama* and its various implications. That Al-Wasiti was his own master is attested by the fact that he illustrated some *Maqamas* with a single picture, others with two or three pictures, and left a few without any illustrations. The result of all this is 99 miniatures, two of which appear at the beginning of the manuscript on successive pages

which have no script, while the other 97 are interspersed among the lines of the various *Maqamas*, with four of them spread over two pages.

It was natural that the artist, in his attempt to follow the basic implications of each *Maqama*, should try to use motifs which were totally independent of the script, and others closely related to it. Al-Wasiti's realisation of the close interaction between an illustration and a literary text is a clear indication of his awareness of the importance of language as a descriptive medium, and the importance of drawing as an expressive visual medium. This awareness and acute perception on his part accounts for the versatility which characterises his paintings and the ease with which he can move from depicting what the subject matter describes to the portrayal of various other aspects of his environment.

Having said this we come to the question as to whether these miniatures, in their distinctive motifs and designs, reflect the special aesthetic values of the Arab School which is one of the Schools of Islamic art. How can we at the same time reconcile the existence of such miniatures with the references that we come across concerning the prohibition of any pictorial representation of the human form in Islam?

We should point out at first that this prohibition was not widespread in the early days of Islam. There was no reference to it in the Qur'an, just as there was no reference to it

in the Islamic apostolic tradition. This was the situation throughout the 1st century of the Hijra and the first part of the 2nd century. It was after that date that some narrow-minded theologians tried to take a specific attitude towards artistic representation, and to make that attitude binding. But the miniatures we have discussed and others like them constitute an irrefutable proof that the decisions of the theologians were ineffective. If at any stage of Islamic history some people tried to disfigure pictorial or other representations of the human form, this constituted nothing more than a bigoted approach based on misunderstanding, rather than a definite religious stance. In spite of this factor the religious decisions of some stern theologians were a basic influence in directing Islamic art towards artistic media totally removed from the visual environment.

As regards the miniatures painted by Al-Wasiti, one can say that the value of any artistic experiment lies in its ability to create specific standards of excellence in the light of which it can operate. In accordance with these standards one can then evaluate the originality of the works of an artist. One would be totally misguided, however, to judge artistic creations by aesthetic standards that are alien to them. Yet, what has happened in the past, and what we see happening now is that these works are often assessed in accordance with Western standards of painting. This approach makes some critics judge these paintings as naïve or incompetent because they lack certain basic dimensions like the

treatment or general distribution of light and shade. Such a basis of comparison isolates the paintings of the Islamic artist from the aesthetic standards which are concordant and compatible with his own culture. The attempt of the artist to shape his work as something independent from his environment, and his endeavour to devise ways of using colour and design has made works of art the basic objective of the artist. The resulting shapes have become mere symbols of everyday life. The particular shaping of every work would then be the subject of a specific logic whether this is related to the linear relationships or to other considerations like contrast and congruity which Islamic art was aware of. In accordance with this, the aesthetic unity takes shape on the basis of the two levels of movement and background. We are then able to perceive Al-Wasiti's astounding ability to convince us that there is a world outside the world of actuality. But in revealing this world the artist resorts to the world of everyday reality without fully depicting it.

Movement is limited in the possibilities of its expression, and can at times be negative. It can, however, acquire tonal distinctions through the movement of the hand or the face or both of them together.

Al-Wasiti's preoccupation with detail and his eagerness to follow a distinctive way of expression made him often resort to artistic creations of a comprehensive perspective. He frequently used three approaches to his perspective which helped to create a tonal

فَأَسْبِرْ بِذَا الشَّرْحِ عَوْرَ مَنْسَكِنِي وَأَرْتَلْ لَمْ يَكُنْ تَعُودَهَا
 قَالَ فَأَقْبَلَ الْقَاضِي عَلَى الشَّيْخِ وَقَالَ لَهُ بِغَيْرِ تَمَوُّبِهِ فَقَالَ



أَقْسَمْتُ بِالْمَشْرِعِ الْحَرَامِ وَمَنْ ضَمَّ مِنَ النَّاسِ كَيْفَ مَنِي
 لَوْ سَاعَيْتِي الْأَيَّامَ لَمْ تَرْنِي مَرْتَهَنًا مِثْلَهُ الَّذِي رَهْنًا

لَمْ يَزَلْ فَفَسَاكَ اللَّهُ وَأَفْوَضَ أَمْرِي إِلَى اللَّهِ وَلَا جَوْلَ وَلَا قُوَّةَ إِلَّا بِاللَّهِ
 لَمْ يَتَّقِ صَافٍ وَلَا مُصَافٍ وَلَا مُعَيَّرٍ وَلَا مُعَيَّنٍ
 وَبِئْسَ الْمِيثَاقُ بَدَا لِلنَّبِيِّ قَدْلًا أَمِينٌ وَلَا مُتَمِينٌ



ثُمَّ قَالَ لَهَا مَنِّي النَّفِيرُ وَعَدِيهَا وَأَجْمَعِي الرِّقَاعَ وَعَدِيهَا فَقَالَتْ لَقَدْ عَدَدْتَهَا لِمَسَا
 كَةِ اسْتَعْدَدْتَهَا فَوَحَدْتُ بِهَا الضِّيَاعَ قَدْ غَالَتْ أَجْدِي الرِّقَاعَ فَقَالَ تَعَسَّ لَكَ الْكَاعُ الْحَرَمُ

cohesion in the picture as a whole. Al-Wasiti also resorted at times to the written word as part of the creative process. Thus where form would fail as a means of expression he would supplement it with words to make his point or to achieve a comprehensive outlook. Perhaps we might find, despite the conventional manner in which Al-Wasiti illustrated the *Maqamas*, that there is often an attempt to transcend convention for the sake of a realistic representation. Nevertheless, it is noticeable that the architectural components of his paintings are far from being congruous with their environment. The structure of the mosque in Basrah, for example, (*Maqamas* 48 & 50) does not differ basically from that of the mosque in Samarkand (*Maqama* 28), or for that matter from any of the mosques in the Maghreb (*Maqama* 16). The relative paintings differ in the incidents they represent and in the relationships of the people pictured in them, more than they differ with respect to the architectural background and structure. Perhaps this applies also to those other paintings which depict scenes inside houses or outside them.

Ornamentation in the work of this artist is one-dimensional as it is generally in Islamic art. His lines enframe the painting but do not create a harmony or correlation between line and colour.

Perhaps we can say that this artist has been able through his illustrations of the 50 *Maqamas* of Al-Hariri to provide us with valuable information about Islamic practices

and conventions in his day. He has portrayed very fine detail, just as he has provided a comprehensive picture of life which is not without its interesting aspects. On the last page of the manuscript we read the following postscript:

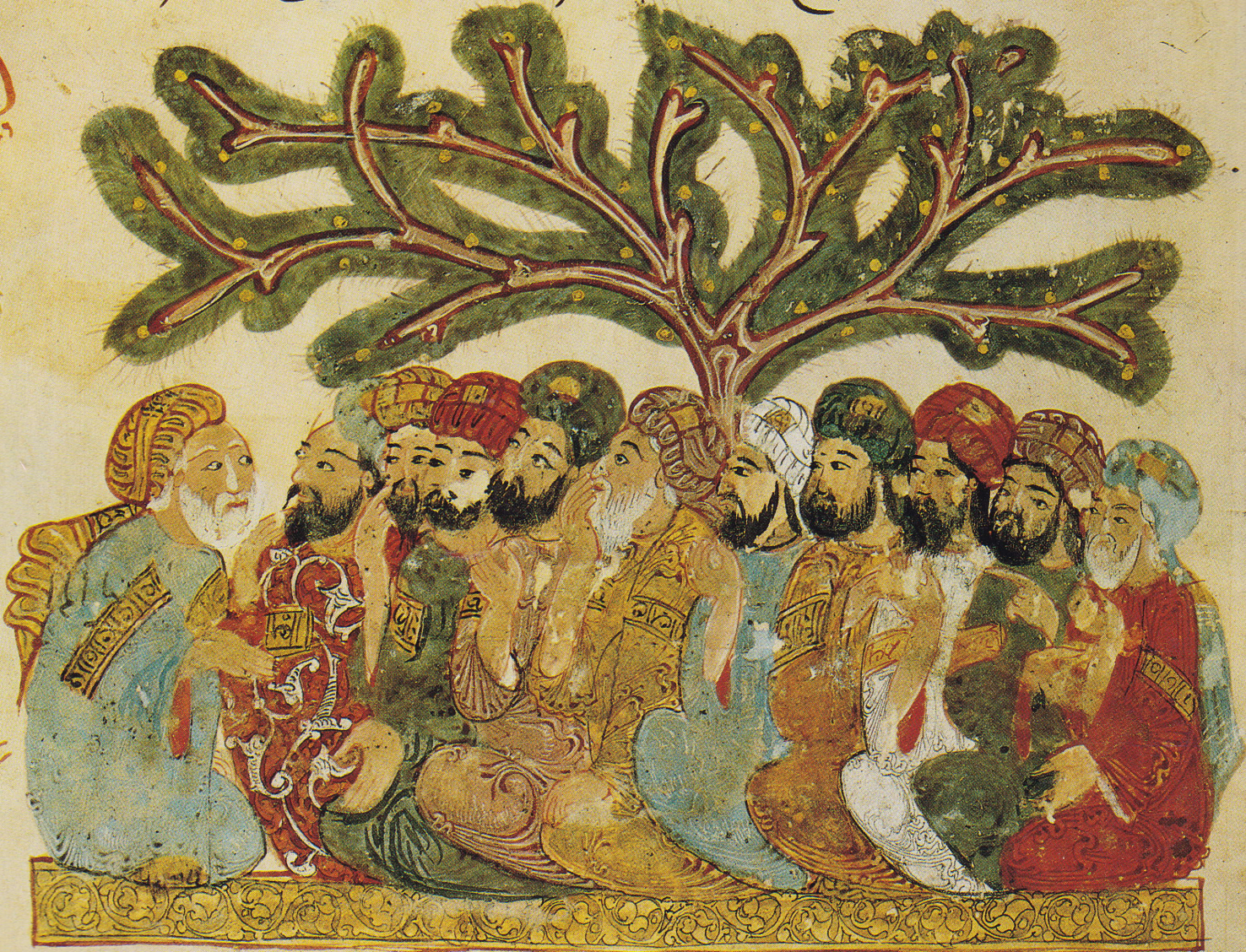
*Yahya b. Mahmud b. Yahya al-Wasiti,
the humble servant of God,
has this day, Saturday
the 6th of Ramadan
of the year 634
finished copying
this manuscript
with his own hand and his own illustrations.*

And with this postscript this manuscript becomes the first work of Islamic painting of which we know the name of the artist with complete certainty.

Dia Al-Azzawi

فلو عنائه مراجعاً ثم مكانه راصعاً وقال ما اذا استرتموني بالبحر فتساجلكم جلم
 سلم في الجزر اعلموا يا ذوي الشايل الادبية والشمول لذعبتة اوضع الاحسية
 لايمان الالمعية واستخراج الحبيبة الحفوية وشرطها ان تكون ذات مماثلة حقيقتة

منظار
 ما هو
 من
 صبيح



الملك

والفاظ مغنوية ولطيفة ادبية فتى نافث هذا النمط ضاهت السقط ولم تدخل
 السقط ولم ار كرم افظم على هذه الجود ولا من تميز المقتول والمرجو
 فقلنا له صدقت فكل لنا من لبا بك وافضل لنا من عبا بك فقال ان فعل ليلنا

الملك

فَلَمَّا جَاءَهُ لِبَعْدِهِ مَنْ كَانَ عَيْبًا فَتَعَجَّبُوا خِرَافَتَهُ وَتَعَوُّدًا مِنْ آفَتِهِ



أَنَا ظِعْمًا وَلَمْ نَدْرِ مِنْ أَعْيُنِ نَاضِعِنَا

الْمَقَامُ الْخَامِسُ

الْكَلْبُ فِي لَيْلَةِ إِدِيمَاذُ وَلَوْ يُزِي وَتَرَاهَا كَعَوِيدٍ مِنْ جَانِبِ

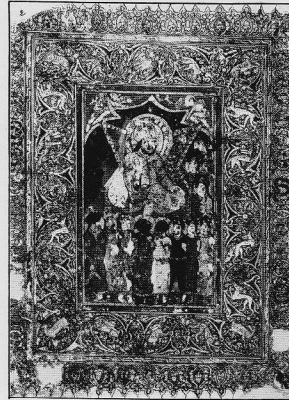






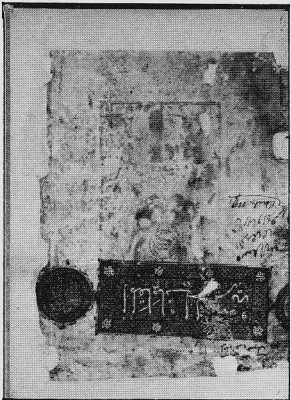
FRONT COVER:

A man, probably the patron for whom the manuscript had been prepared, talking to a group of people.

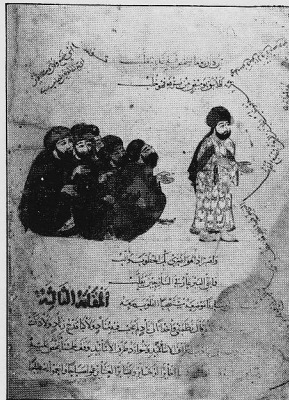


BACK COVER:

A lady, possibly the wife of the Amir or Sultan for whom the manuscript had been produced, talking from an elegant throne to a group of people.



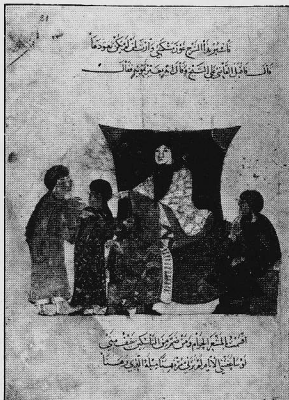
The title of the manuscript



Abu Zayd leaving the library of Basrah. An illustration for the third Maqama.



Al-Hajjam Abu Zayd complains to a group of people about his poverty, and they give him alms. Nearby a boy is crying. Illustration for the forty-seventh Maqama.



Abu Zayd and his son in front of the Qadi of Ma'arrat al-Nu'man. An illustration for the eighth Maqama.



Abu Zayd begging from the worshippers of the Mosque of Barqu'id. An illustration from the seventh Maqama.



Abu Zayd reciting a poem to a literary group. Illustration for the thirty-sixth Maqama.



Al-Harith riding towards Karaj. Illustration for the twenty-fifth Maqama.



Al-Harith discovers the parchment written by Abu Zayd. Illustration for the fourth Maqama.

Designed by Dia Al-Azzawi

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