

Christiane Gruber
December 2003

Fellowship Report

My two weeks at the Princeton Rare Books and Manuscripts Library permitted me to continue my dissertation research on Islamic manuscripts concerned with the Prophet Muhammad's ascension (*mi'raj*), its depiction in manuscripts from the 14th to the 17th centuries, and related topics. I am very thankful to the Friends of the Princeton Library for their generosity, their vision, and the opportunity to become acquainted with such a rich collection of materials. As an alumna of Princeton University (B.A. 1998), it was a real joy to return to campus and make use of resources at my alma mater.

Some of my more unexpected finds helped me broaden my research into fields I had not considered previously. One of the primary concerns in my dissertation revolves around the reason for selecting the *mi'raj* as the primary narrative vehicle for illustrating the "portrait" of the Prophet Muhammad. Many scholars have already noted that many paintings and manuscript representations of the Prophet Muhammad depict the Prophet's face in a physiognomic fashion until the 15th century, at which time a change in iconography (and perhaps religious sentiment) led to the addition of a facial veil. It seems that this dichotomy, i.e. the visible vs. invisible face of prophecy, is too simplistic.

The beginnings of my research on new ways to analyze the "portrait" of the Prophet began when I discovered an unfinished tinted sketch of the Prophet Muhammad riding Buraq and surrounded by angels, located in the Pozzi Collection at Musée d'Art et d'Histoire in Geneva. It probably was made in the city of Shiraz in southwestern Iran at the turn of the 15th century (**right**).

The sketch includes the foundations of the painterly process: red highlights are applied to Gabriel's hair, Muhammad's turban top, the saddle and crown of Buraq (Muhammad's mythical horse of the ascension), the angels' hair and crowns, as well as the gold balls or stars in the sky. However, the most intriguing aspect of this tinted sketch consists in our ability to witness the artist's creative processes, which evolve before the composition is provided with paint and thus becomes a finished product.

The artist has sketched out the angels', Gabriel's, and Buraq's faces. On the other hand, the Prophet Muhammad's in this sketch is neither provided with facial features such as a mouth, nose, or eyes nor is it left blank to be later covered with a painted veil.



Rather, the oval of his face is inscribed with a written vocative statement reading: “Oh Muhammad” (*Ya Mu’ammad*).

In my dissertation, I have termed this kind of portrait, which appears in several other instances, the “inscribed portrait” of the Prophet. It is a portrait defined by infra-inscription or an inscription not meant to be seen in the finished product. This kind of representation renders the Prophet as corporeal body with verbal components, giving him volume and presence through two very dissimilar techniques of depiction: that of physiognomic form combined with verbal enunciation.

It is like the Ottoman *hilya*, or verbal portrait of the Prophet, in that it describes the Prophet’s body and imagines him as a corporeal form. An example of a similar phenomenon appears in single page paintings inscribed with the Prophet’s names (something that is well known), but, even more interestingly, the inscription of his name girdled by a description of his physical being also takes place in Islamic manuscripts concerned with the medieval esoteric “science of letters” (*‘ilm al-huruf*).



In a manuscript of al-Bistami’s *Kashf asrar al-huruf wa wasf ma’ani’l-zuruf* (*The Discovery of the Secrets of Letters and the Description of the Meanings of [Verbal] Inflections*) dated 1260/ 1844 (Princeton Library, Yahuda 2476), a similar procedure takes place. After describing how each letter is spread over the human body and how angels and signs of the zodiac exert power over each unit of the alphabet, al-Bistami (d. 858/1454) discusses the wonders of the most glorious name of Muhammad (*al-ism al-amjad al-ladhi huwa ism Muhammad*, f. 22r) and how one can have a vision of the prophet in one’s sleep (*fasl fi bayan ru’yat al-nabi fi’l manam*, f. 26r). In the latter section appears a *hilya* of the Prophet (**below right**), with a large central inscription of the Prophet’s name “Muhammad” surrounded with his many other names and their corresponding numerical values. This inscribing the Prophet’s name within a “physical frame” in al-Bistami’s esoteric tract is not dissimilar from the Pozzi sketch (**above left**). The fact that al-Bistami wrote his treatise during the same century as the Pozzi sketch was produced cannot be a mere coincidence. It seems, rather, than portraiture (of the Prophet, in particular) at this time was linked intimately to pseudo-scientific practices, which deemed a vision or embodiment of the Prophet through letters as achievable.

Other methods of depicting the Prophet's face seem related to letter magic as



well. In one case, the Prophet's face appears as a gold disk into which horizontal and vertical lines have been incised, creating a checkerboard of sorts (left). Now held in the Museum of Islamic Art in Cairo, this painting belongs to a manuscript calligraphed in Ottoman Istanbul in 947/1540 and possibly provided with paintings at a later date. The text itself, the *Tuhfat al-Salawat* (*Gift of Prayers*), is a rare Persian treatise composed by the author al-Wa'iz, in which he brings together— in the form of a popular prayer book— a variety of sayings, prayers, interpretations (*tafasir*) and judgments (*ahkam*) related to the Prophet Muhammad and the events of his life.

The Prophet's face, composed as a grid of empty squares, appeals to oral invocations and popular piety. Prayer manuals inducting the reader into the manner of praying for God and his Prophet, such as al-Juzuli's *Dala'il al-Khayrat* (*Proofs of Good Deeds*), were produced widely during the Ottoman period. In several manuscripts of al-Juzuli's work, for instance, the many names of the Prophet (*asma' al-nabi*) are inscribed in a grid as a means to convey or "portray" the entirety of his being. At the same

time, more occult and mystically inclined works belonging to the science of letters (*'ilm al-huruf*) postulate that the enumeration and inscription of the Prophet's names or epithets in a magic square (*murabba'*) can bring good fortune as well.

In a manuscript of the *Kitab fi'l-kalam ʿala huruf ism Muhammad (On the Letters of*



Muhammad's Name) calligraphed during the 13th/ 17th century (Princeton Library, Yahuda 4522), the Gnostic-cabalistic author al-Bistami stresses the mystical significance of the letters of the alphabet and their various arrangements, in particular the letters M, H, and D, which combine to form the name of Muhammad. Al-Bistami lists God's eight names beginning

with the letter "H" and states that the diagram of these names and the reciting of them constitute beneficial activities (**below**). God's eight "H" names (*asma'*) and attributes (*sifat*)— i.e. Hayy (The Living), Halim (The Gentle), Hakim (The Wise), Hafiz (The Guardian), Hamid (The Praised), Hasib (The Noble), Hakam (Judge), and Haqq (Truth)— prove that the letter "H" in the Prophet Muhammad's name can exist as an adjective or a noun, and the realization of his being arises from a unity comprised of multiplicities (*tawhid al-kathra*) linked to the divine. This practice parallels the invoking of God through His Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names (*Asma' al-Husna*), though it adds a distinct pictorial quality directed to the Prophet via an inscribed diagram.

The similarity between the Prophet's checkerboard face in the Cairo painting and the *murabba'* of God's "H" names in al-Bistami's treatise is not coincidental. The ideas and practices in letter magic manuals, so popular during the Ottoman period, must have migrated into practices of portraiture, in which artists inserted a checkerboard of the Prophet's "face" into an otherwise physiognomic frame provided with arms, hands, legs, and feet. The conscious decision to depict the Prophet's features in a manner reminiscent of magic squares and the mysterious letter or number combinations enclosed therein hints at a larger phenomenon concerned with portraying and praising the Prophet of Islam through God's own names. This phenomenon consists in a widely held belief in the transformative power of the divine word (*kalima*) into physical being. In this case, imaging the Prophet's presence simultaneously exists within the bounds of the factual (i.e. the bodily form) and vigorously trespasses them by depicting his facial features through the allusion to sacred names or attributes as practiced in medieval Islamic letter magic.

Without the opportunity to spend time working with the Princeton Library's holdings of Islamic magical manuscripts, I would not have discovered the close connections between the depiction of Muhammad in *mi'raj* paintings and practices concerned with making the Prophet of Islam visible and attainable in *'ilm al-huruf*. I am pursuing the topic further in my dissertation and hope to include a discussion of the link between the Prophet's portrait and letter magic in a future article on "The Portrait of the Prophet Muhammad." I have also included some of my findings from the Princeton Library in an article on depictions of the *mi'raj*, which will be published by the *Bulletin of the American Research Center in Egypt* (April 2004).

I wish to extend my many thanks to the staff at the Princeton Library, who helped me with all aspects of my research: Don Skemer for his kindness, enthusiasm, and knowledge of all things magical; AnnaPaul Lee for providing me with slides in record time; and Margaret Rich for arranging my visit and all details related to the Fellows program. I am particularly grateful to the Friends of the Library, once again, for keeping the collections alive and providing an arena for the advancement of research through the continuous interaction of scholars with the Library's materials.