

The Role of Paper in the Arts of the Mongols

Jonathan M. Bloom

From the 9th century, paper—which had been invented in China in the centuries before Christ—transformed Islamic civilization. It helped transform an initially oral culture to one deeply rooted in written words and documents. As paper became more widely available and cheaper in the Islamic lands, it also began to transform other aspects of Islamic civilization, particularly the arts, as artists began to develop systems of notation and use it for preparatory designs for finished works. While the oral-literary transformation began in the 9th century, it has long been noted that the transformation of the arts took place somewhat later, beginning in the eastern Islamic lands in the 13th century, particularly after the Mongol conquests. By 1300 manuscripts were being produced on larger sheets of noticeably whiter and finer paper, large-scale illustrations were introduced, maps, architectural plans, and designs for decoration were worked out on paper, and artisans prepared designs on paper for textiles, ceramics, and other arts.

This paper will explore what role the Mongols themselves may have played in this transformation. It will look at the development of papermaking in China in the period leading up to the rise of the Mongols, the roles of paper in the broader visual cultures of the Mongols, and how the *Pax Mongolica* in the 13th and 14th centuries might have led to the spread of particular types of paper, new papermaking techniques, and new uses for paper across Asia.