3. The Arts in Iran and Central Asia under the Ilkhanids and their Successors

The Mongol conquest in the mid-thirteenth century changed the balance of artistic production in Iran. In the preceding century the decorative arts – textiles, pottery, metalwork, jewelry, and manuscript illumination – were “perhaps at their most inventive and brilliant.” These “basic" crafts continued to be produced after the Mongol conquest, but the arts of the book took on a new role as the central focus of artistic production and the means by which new ideas and motifs were introduced to the other arts. The pivotal role of the arts of the book, particularly illustration, is one of the most important developments of Islamic art after 1250, as it characterizes the later history of the arts not only of Iran, but also of Turkey and India. The widespread availability of paper was one of the primary reasons for this development; paper had been known for centuries, but it seems to have become available more readily and in larger sizes. Designs executed on paper were easily transferred from one medium to another, and professional designers (naqqāš) signed works in such other media as inlaid metal, carved stucco and wood, and glazed tile.

THE DECORATIVE ARTS

Textiles continued to be a major industry and underpinning of the economy, but only one gold and silk textile can be attributed with certainty to Ilkhanid Iran. It bears the name and the titles that the Ilkhanid sovereign Abu Sa‘id (r. 1317–35) assumed after 1319. This sumptuous textile is woven in lampas, with areas of compound weave in tan and red silk with gold wefts made of strips of gilded silver wound around a yellow silk core. The striped pattern consists of a wide band of staggered polylobed medallions and ornamental diamonds with peacocks in the interstices, flanked by narrow bands of running animals and wide epigraphic bands. The official inscription indicates that it was woven in a state factory, probably in Tabriz, and was not a commercial trade good produced for export. The clear provenance of this...