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Manuscript as a work of art: Calligraphy and miniatures in Islamic manuscripts

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Abstract

The relevance of the study is caused by insufficient scholarly examination of the Islamic manuscript book as an integral artistic object, especially during the key period of transition from manuscript to early print culture. The aim of the work is to identify the interrelationship between material form, artistic design, and genre content of Central Asian manuscripts. The research was conducted using a comprehensive methodology, including comparative analysis of manuscript and lithographic techniques, stylistic analysis of calligraphy and miniatures, as well as the study of material carriers such as paper, inks, and bindings. The main results showed that calligraphy occupied a dominant position in the hierarchy of the arts, and the choice of scripts, such as naskh or nasta'liq, was directly linked to the genre of the work - didactic, poetic, or historical. It was established that figurative and non-figurative elements of the manuscript functioned as “paratext”, where the ornamental programme signalled the sacred or secular nature of the text, and miniatures performed various functions depending on the genre, from exegetical (interpretative) in Qur'anic narratives to narrative in epic literature and documentary in chronicles. This study confirmed that the Islamic manuscript constituted an integral artistic object in which every material and aesthetic component was deliberately used to interpret and enhance the communicative function of the text. The results obtained propose an analytical model for analysing the manuscript as a dynamic space in which artistic form was strategically determined by intellectual objectives, reflecting complex cultural hierarchies and values. The practical significance of the conducted research lies in the development of an interdisciplinary analytical model that provides the possibility not only of descriptive analysis but also of interpretation of manuscript material as an integral cultural artefact. The results obtained and the methodological approaches may be used in subsequent studies of manuscript collections and in related fields of the humanities.

Keywords: Sufism; decorative elements; culture; interpretation; tradition.

Open Rubric

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Introduction

The study of manuscript heritage preserved in the collections of the National Library of the Republic of Kazakhstan has scholarly relevance because the unique representativeness of this collection, encompassing both manuscript and early lithographic editions of a key transitional period (end of the nineteenth century – beginning of the twentieth century), provides an opportunity for a comprehensive analysis of one of the key technological and cultural shifts in the history of book culture of Central Asia. In this study, Central Asia refers to the interconnected book-cultural space of the Kazakh steppe, Khiva, Tashkent, and the broader Turkic manuscript tradition, while recognising their distinct local systems of patronage and production. From centuries-old manuscript codex to mass lithographic manufacturing. Understanding regional Islamic book art adaptation and transformation requires identifying this process's trends. A complex interplay of innovative and traditional techniques marked Central Asia's printing introduction at the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth century. Lithographic technology spread in Khiva and Tashkent, reproducing and improving the manuscript tradition's visual and artistic characteristics (von Kügelgen and Muminov, 2021). One result was a hybrid book culture in which lithographed copies preserved manuscript design. Early lithographic publications are a distinct cultural phenomenon, making this transitional time difficult to understand and requiring extensive multidisciplinary analysis.

S. Ghosh (2020) traced the development and symbolic functions of decorative bookbinding. G. Ciotti (2021) conceptualised the manuscript as both a textual carrier and an autonomous material object, while A. Hamedani (2023) examined how Enlightenment ideas transformed literary genres and cultural narratives in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Central Asia.

G.M. Abikova and A.K. Muminov (2023) carried out the systematisation and description of collections of manuscripts and rare editions preserved in Kazakhstan. The study was predominantly source-based and heuristic in nature, outlining the contours of the national manuscript heritage. The authors catalogued key collections preserved in various institutions. This work provided the necessary empirical basis for subsequent detailed analysis of specific artefacts. A.Z. Haghshenas (2024) examined the aesthetic and technical features of the nasta’liq calligraphic style. The author analysed the history, formal characteristics, and rules of compositional construction in this script. The main focus of the work was placed on the application of nasta’liq in the related genre of contemporary calligraphic painting.

Z.K. Kartova and N.A. Abuov (2024) introduced new narrative sources to scholarship through a source-based analysis. The authors studied Kazakhstan's history using these materials. These sources' informational value and representativeness for historical reconstruction were appraised. The work expanded national history's empirical grounding. B.B. Khadjimetov et al. (2025) analysed Islamic manuscripts using semiotic and multimodal methods. Visual (miniatures, decoration) and verbal (text) rhetoric in manuscripts were examined. The manuscript was viewed as a single sign system with indivisible modes. The study examined how these aspects create meaning and affect readers. N. Nadirkhanova (2025) examined Muslim miniature painting's art. The author compared these miniatures to Eastern classical literature storylines, pictures, and poetics. The work recognised artists' stylistic and iconographic norms for text visualisation. Visual art was used to exegete literature.

Despite existing studies, codicological, palaeographical, and art historical approaches have not been sufficiently synthesised to examine how exactly the transition to lithography affected the artistic and material structure of the book.

In this regard, the aim of this study is to identify patterns in the transformation of book art based on a corpus of manuscripts and early printed editions from the Kazakhstani collection. To achieve this aim, the following tasks were defined. To conduct a comparative analysis of the material and technical characteristics of manuscript and lithographic specimens in order to establish criteria for their identification. To perform a stylistic analysis of calligraphy, miniatures, and ornamental decoration in order to trace continuity and the evolution of artistic canons. To determine how the literary genre and functional purpose of each Islamic manuscript influenced the choice of its artistic and decorative programme.

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Materials and Methods

The material basis of the study was a purposively selected corpus of nine digitised manuscripts and early lithographic books preserved in the National Library of the Republic of Kazakhstan. The items were selected because they: (1) belonged to the period relevant to the transition from manuscript to lithographic book production; (2) represented different literary genres and functions; (3) contained identifiable calligraphic, ornamental, or illustrative features; and (4) were available in a digital form suitable for comparative visual analysis. Duplicate editions, items with insufficient bibliographic information, and digital copies whose quality did not permit the examination of visual features were excluded. As the study examined cultural artefacts rather than human participants, participant recruitment and selection were not applicable.

The corpus included nineteenth- and early twentieth-century editions of works originally composed between the eleventh and seventeenth centuries, as well as works created closer to the date of publication. The dates used in the analysis therefore refer to the examined manuscript or lithographic copies rather than necessarily to the original composition of the texts. These later editions were treated as evidence of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century editorial and artistic practices, not as exact reproductions of the visual appearance of earlier manuscript originals. This distinction made it possible to examine how earlier literary traditions were adapted within the developing lithographic culture of Central Asia.

For systematic analysis, the works were grouped according to genre and function. The first group included identity-forming historical and linguistic works by Abu-l Ghazi (1891) and M. Kashgari (1917). The second group consisted of qissa literature: the anonymous “The Story of Prophet Yusuf (peace be upon him)” (1856), Majilis (1840), and Molla Kashshafuddin bin Shahmardan bin Abdullah (1898). The third group comprised religious and didactic works by Al-Madaini Abdullah bin Abdurrahman (1902), M. Kashimov (1908), Imanbayev (1908), and G. Yusupuli (1913). This grouping enabled comparison of how genre and function influenced script, ornamentation, illustration, and the general visual organisation of the book.

Data were collected using a standard analytical framework applied to each item. The examined categories included publication type, date, genre, script, page organisation, ornamental elements, figurative and aniconic images, binding features visible in the digital copy, and the relationship between visual design and textual function. Catalogue descriptions and relevant published studies were used to verify bibliographic and historical information.

Coding was conducted using predefined categories derived from the research questions: script type, ornament, image type, compositional structure, genre, and presumed function. Individual visual elements could receive more than one code when they performed several functions. Ambiguous iconographic features were interpreted by comparing them with the accompanying text, catalogue descriptions, historical context, and published examples from related manuscript traditions. Where the available evidence did not support a definitive interpretation, the finding was recorded as provisional rather than presented as certain.

Palaeographic analysis was used to identify and classify the principal scripts, particularly naskh and nasta’liq, and to assess the preservation of calligraphic conventions in lithographic editions. Iconographic analysis was applied to the interpretation of narrative, symbolic, architectural, and aniconic compositions. Comparative-historical analysis was used to identify continuity and transformation between manuscript practices and later lithographic production.

Stylistic analysis focused on composition, ornament, colour, and drawing techniques in the works of Majilis (1840), Abu-l Ghazi (1891), Al-Madaini Abdullah bin Abdurrahman (1902), and G. Yusupuli (1913). Semiotic analysis examined how script, ornamentation, and illustration communicated the genre, status, and intended function of each book. Cultural-historical analysis placed these features within the intellectual, religious, and social contexts of Central Asian book production. This combined methodology was more appropriate than a single descriptive or bibliographic approach because the research question concerned the relationship between material form, visual design, genre, and cultural function.

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For example, in the edition by Abu-l Ghazi (1891), the script, ornamental framing, colophon, and architectural calligraphic composition were recorded as separate analytical categories. Their combination was then interpreted in relation to the historical genre and the symbolic function of the edition. The same procedure was applied consistently to the remaining items, thereby improving the transparency and reproducibility of the analysis.

The consistent application of the same coding categories to all nine items increased the transparency and trustworthiness of the analysis. Interpretations were checked against catalogue metadata, textual context, historical evidence, and relevant published scholarship. However, the availability and quality of digital surrogates limited the analysis. Digital images permitted the examination of script, composition, ornament, and visible illustrations but did not allow reliable physical or chemical analysis of paper, inks, pigments, watermarks, or binding structures. Consequently, conclusions concerning materials were treated as provisional interpretations rather than as results of direct material examination.

Results

Manuscript and lithographic traditions of the book culture of Central Asia: Material and artistic aspects

The study of the book culture of Central Asia made it possible to identify key stages of its development associated with changes in text production technologies. Copies of these works, dated 1840-1917, are products of lithographic printing, which became widespread in Central Asia in the second half of the nineteenth century, with major centres in Khiva (from 1874) and Tashkent (from 1881). The distinction between manuscript and lithographic items was based primarily on catalogue information and visually observable production features. Manuscript items showed variations in letterforms, spacing, and page organisation associated with manual copying, whereas lithographic editions displayed greater regularity and repeatability of printed characters. Features requiring physical examination, including impressions made by the qalam, paper fibres, laid and chain lines, surface sizing, and watermarks, could not be reliably established from the available digital images (Al-yahyai et al., 2019).

The digital surrogates permitted observation of the apparent colour, texture, and distribution of inks and decorative elements but did not permit identification of their chemical composition. Therefore, the possible use of plant-fibre paper, ahar sizing, carbon-based ink, cinnabar, red lead, or European paper with watermarks was inferred from published studies of comparable Central Asian manuscripts rather than directly demonstrated in the examined corpus (Beben, 2020; DeWeese, 2023). These characteristics are consequently discussed as historically plausible production practices, not as confirmed material properties of the nine items. Direct examination and non-destructive material analysis would be required to verify these assumptions.

Coloured inks were used to highlight headings, key words, and rubrication. The most common was red, obtained from mineral pigments such as cinnabar (mercury sulphide) or red lead, as well as from organic sources. Analysis of calligraphic styles in the manuscript corpus revealed the dominance of two main scripts, naskh and nasta'liq. Naskh, a rounded, clear, and easily readable cursive script, was the standard for copying the Qur'an, as well as didactic and scholarly texts due to its legibility. Naskh is characterised by strict adherence to a horizontal baseline on which the letters are placed. Within the studied corpus, the originals of the works "Diwani Lugati-t-Turk" (Kashgari, 1917), "The Book of Wisdom" (Kashimov, 1908), and "The story of Prophet Yusuf (peace be upon him)" (1856) were presumably written in regional variants of naskh. It is known that one of the copies of "Is Turkish in History" (Abu-l Ghazi, 1891), dated 1737, is also executed in the naskh script, which indicates its use for historical compositions as well (Figure 1).

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Figure 1. Naskh calligraphy in Tarikh shazhire-i turk

Source: compiled by the authors based on Abu-l Ghazi (1891).

Developed in Iran in the fourteenth century, nasta'liq represents a more fluid and refined script. Its distinctive feature is the effect of "suspension" or "hanging" (ta'liq), in which words and ligatures appear to descend towards the baseline, creating an undulating rhythm. Owing to its aesthetic expressiveness, nasta'liq became the preferred script for Persian and Turkic poetry and belles-lettres. The originals of the works "Is Turkish in History" (Abu-l Ghazi, 1891) and "Qissa-i Seiful-Muluk" (Majilis, 1840) were executed precisely in this script. A copy of "Is Turkish in History" from the eighteenth century held in Uppsala is written in clear Nasta'liq, which confirms its applicability for historical prose within this cultural area. The artistic level of calligraphy in the manuscripts varies from highly professional court calligrapher writing to simpler, utilitarian scripts, reflecting differences in the status of the patron and the intended function of the manuscript.

Islamic bindings were typically characterised by flat spines, pasteboard boards, fore-edge flaps (lisan), chain-stitch sewing, endbands, and stamped or blind-tooled decoration. Because the available digital surrogates did not permit detailed structural examination, these features were used only as comparative historical context rather than confirmed characteristics of the corpus (Comstock-Skipp, 2024).

Iconographic and stylistic analysis of the illustrative cycles in four works—"Is Turkish in History" (Abu-l Ghazi, 1891), "Qissa-i Seiful-Muluk" (Majilis, 1840), "Book of Translation of Ghayn al-Ghaylam" (Al-Madaini Abdullah bin Abdurrahman, 1902), and "The story of the unfulfilled Hajj al-Haramayn" (Yusupuli, 1913)—shows a The genre and aim of the work determined the scenes chosen for illustration. The pictures were meant to highlight crucial plot points, depict essential ideas, or provide symbolic weight to the text. The historical chronicle "Is Turkish in History" depicts scenes other than battles or court celebrations (Figure 2). A stylised mosque-like architectural form is depicted in this complicated calligraphic composition. The ornamental and letter parts give the image a symbolic rather than illustrative sense. This work is a decorative frontispiece or headpiece that emphasises its religious and cultural background (Egamberdiyev and Azmukhanova, 2025).

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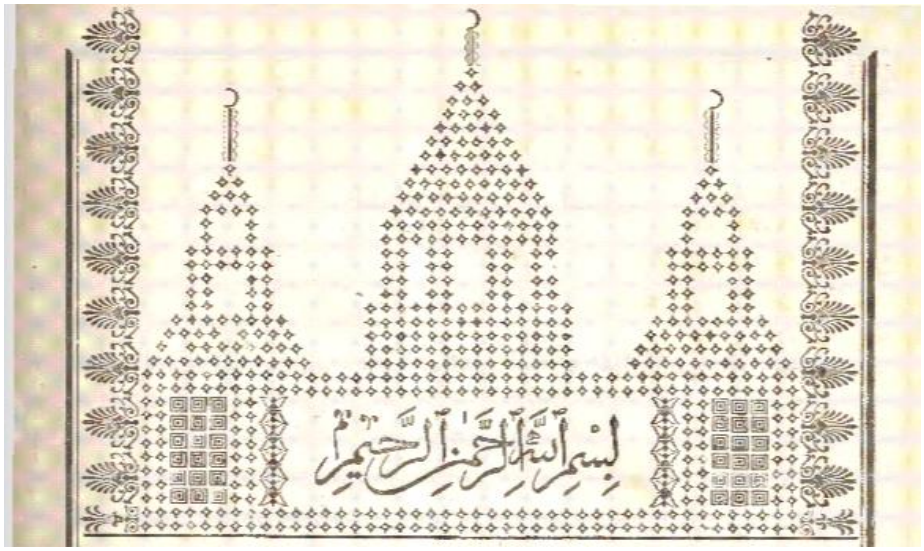

Figure 2. Calligraphic composition in Tarikh shazhire-i turk

Source: compiled by the authors based on Abu-l Ghazi (1891).

Figure 3 shows that this publication of the romantic poem “Qissa-i Seiful-Muluk” (Majilis, 1840) uses decorative adornment instead of narrative illustration. This classical book headpiece (vignette) decorates the opening of the text. The composition centers on a complicated circular medallion with a radiating pattern and arabesque vegetal elements. An exact rectangular frame of repeated geometric figures surrounds the composition. The adornment is meant to give the book beauty and solemnity, not recreate the poetry. This is typical of Islamic book art, which emphasised elaborate decoration and calligraphy above life scenes.

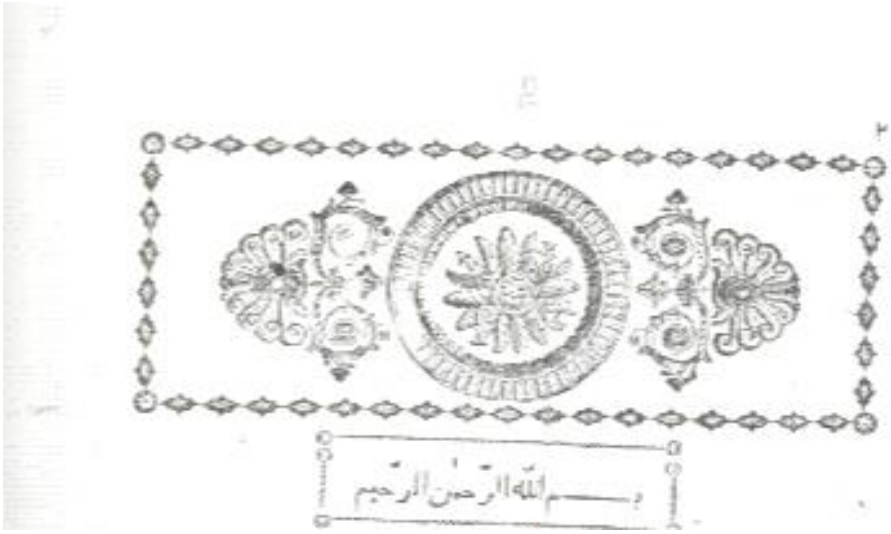

Figure 3. Decorative ornament from the work “Qissa-i Seiful-Muluk”

Source: compiled by the authors based on Majilis (1840).

In the didactic treatise “Book of Translation of Ghayn al-Ghaylam” (Al-Madaini Abdullah bin Abdurrahman, 1902), the illustration has not a narrative but a symbolic character (Figure 4). The presented image is an example of aniconic art, in which an architectural motif with a dome and crescents is created from geometric patterns and calligraphic elements, including a central cartouche with the basmala. This composition does not illustrate a specific event, but serves as a visual metaphor, attuning the reader to a pious perception of the text and emphasising its spiritual content.

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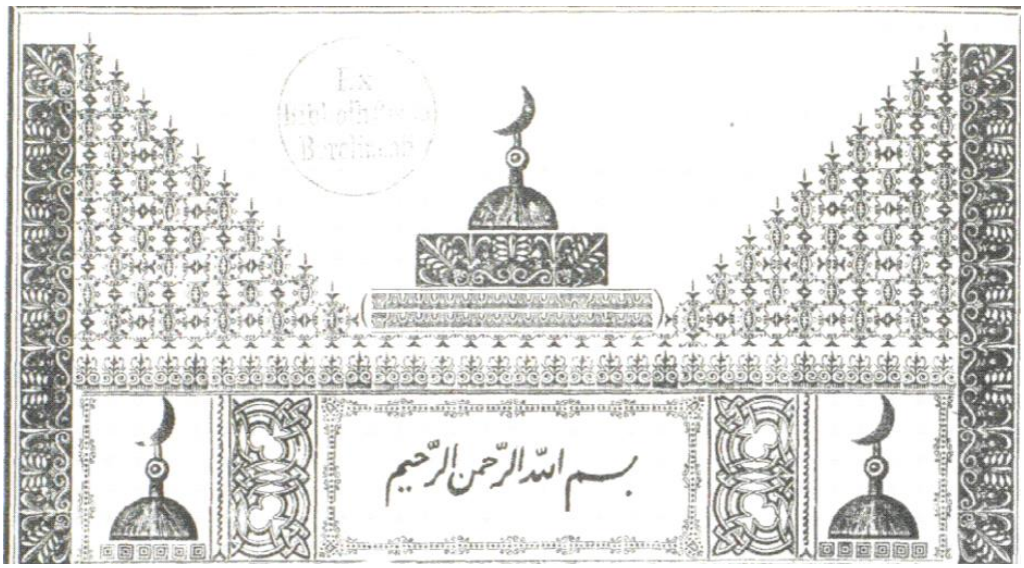

Figure 4. Example of aniconic art from Kitab tarjamat ghayn al-ghilm

Source: compiled by the authors based on Al-Madaini Abdullah bin Abdurrahman (1902).

The paintings in "The story of the unfulfilled Hajj al-Haramayn" (Yusupuli, 1913) depicted Mecca and Medina's hallowed places and hajj procedures (Figure 5). The manuscript miniatures show a complex synthesis of artistic styles, combining imperial school heritage with regional elements (Reichl, 2019). Central Asian painting began with ancient Persian miniature painting. All works follow its canons: a high horizon to generate spatial depth, tiered figures, bright, local colours without chiaroscuro modelling (Muratova, 2025). The Timurid-supported Herat school of the fifteenth century was known for its lyricism, grace, and attention to detail (Rakhmankulova and Rakhmankulova, 2019).

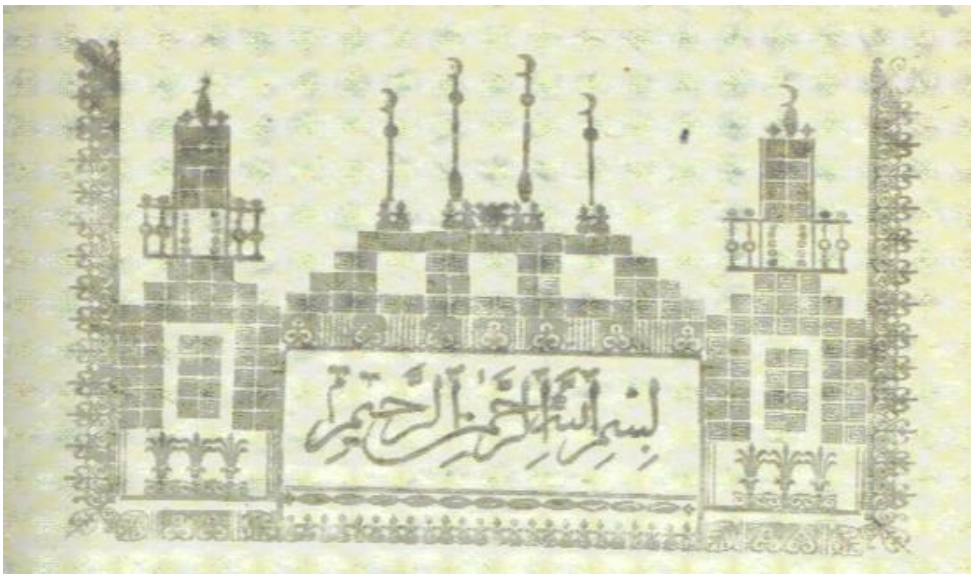

Figure 5. Depiction of Mecca in Ondirbai hajj

Source: compiled by the authors based on G. Yusupuli (1913).

Non-figurative decorative elements are an integral part of the artistic appearance of the Islamic manuscript, structuring the text and transforming each page into an integral work of art. In the examined manuscript corpus, a stable set of decorative elements was identified, forming a kind of "grammar of ornament". The most significant of these is the unvan, an ornamented headpiece at the beginning of a text or its major section (Figure 6). As a rule, the unvan takes the form of a rectangular cartouche filled with complex geometric or vegetal patterns and colours visually resembling gilding and blue pigments. Because no material testing was conducted, their identification as gold or lapis

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lazuli cannot be confirmed for the examined items. In particularly luxurious manuscripts, primarily in copies of the Qur'an, double illuminated frontispieces occupying an entire opening were used, serving as a ceremonial portal leading into the world of the text (Kairbekov, 2016; Knipe et al., 2018).

Other important elements include ornamented panels for chapter headings, frames consisting of several parallel lines of different colours (often gold, blue, and black) enclosing the text field, as well as small ornamental medallions or rosettes that served to separate ayahs or functioned as decorative accents.

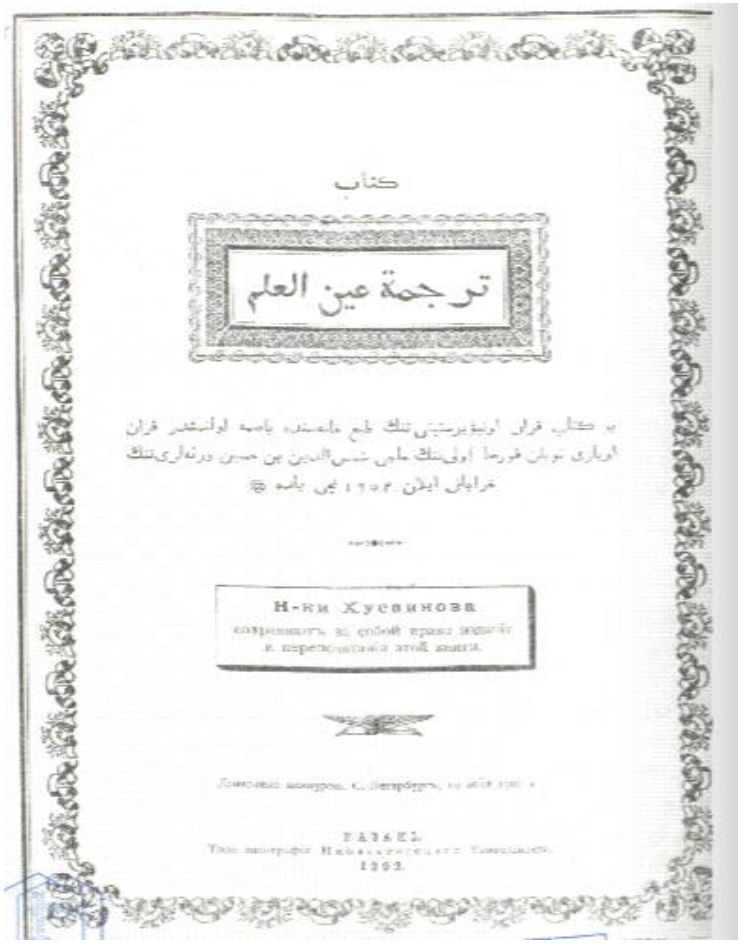
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Figure 6. Unvan in Kitab tarjamat ghayn al-ghilm

Source: compiled by the authors based on Al-Madaini Abdullah bin Abdurrahman (1902).

The colophon, the manuscript's concluding text, was given special attention, where the scribe wrote his name, date, and location. Figural or ornamental frames around the colophon (Figure 7). Comparing the decorative ornamentation of manuscripts of varied content revealed considerable disparities in sacred-didactic and secular text design. Differences in decoration indicate genre hierarchy and guide reader perception.

“The Book of Wisdom” (Kashimov, 1908) and “Book of Translation of Ghayn al-Ghaylam” (Al-Madaini Abdullah bin Abdurrahman, 1902) include aniconic (non-figurative) decorative style. Abstract forms, complicated geometric patterns (girih), arabesques, and calligraphy make up the decoration. Such adornment both graces the sacred text, which is pious, and structures it without distracting the reader with figurative scenes. The same ornamental themes are used in secular manuscripts like “Qissa-i Seiful-Muluk” (Majilis, 1840) and “Is Turkish in History” (Abu-l Ghazi, 1891), but they are integrated into an artistic program that includes figurative miniatures.

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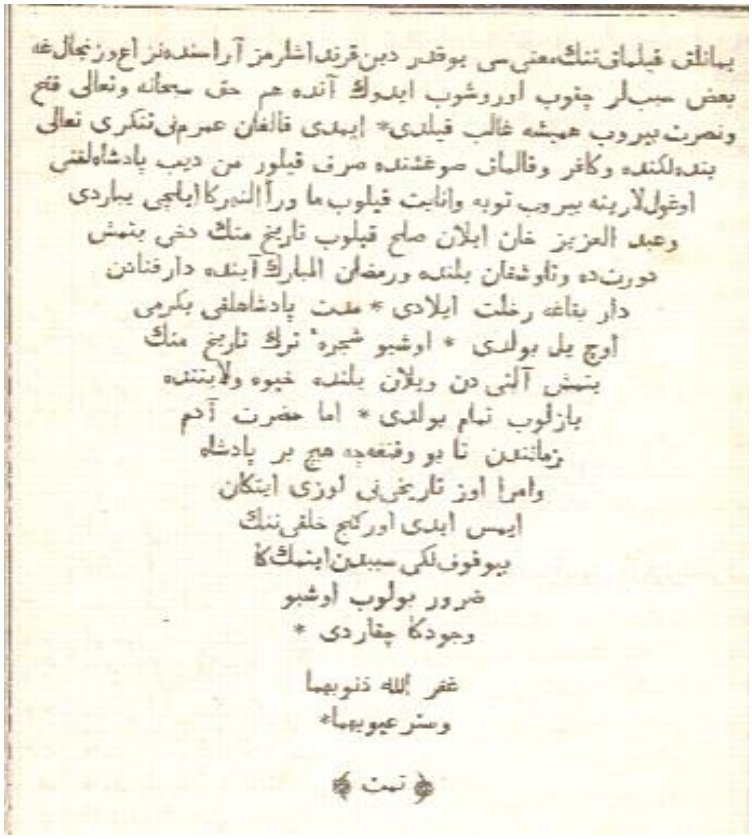

Figure 7. Colophon in Tarikh shazhire-i turk

Source: compiled by the authors based on Abu-l Ghazi (1891).

This ornamentation structures the text and unites text and illustration visually. Jadvāl frames connect the text field and miniature on the site. The decoration of secular manuscripts, meant for a wider audience, may be less lavish than in ceremonial copies of the Qur'an, reflecting differences in text status and patronage (Hak et al., 2024; Chukhanov and Kairbekov, 2024).

The manuscript's ornamental programme acts as a "paratext" to frame vision. A lavish aniconic unvan indicates the work's religious or didactic nature. Ornate frames around miniatures imply epic, poem, or chronicle genres. The “grammar of ornament” reveals the manuscript's purpose and significance to current readers by linking genre hierarchy and cultural norms.

Calligraphy and miniature in the Islamic manuscript culture of Central Asia and adjacent regions

The results showed that calligraphy topped the Islamic manuscript arts hierarchy. Deep theological and philosophical foundations determined its supremacy. The Qur'an's claim that God taught humanity through the pen (qalam) elevated writing and inspired calligraphy. In a culture that banned figurative painting, the written word became the main form of artistic and spiritual expression, equalling the visual. Master calligraphers used calligraphy to express profound philosophical ideas while practicing a spiritual discipline.

As the bearer of divine revelation, the Arabic letter was applied to paper and tree leaves, demonstrating its universal artistic value. Palaeographic and codicological manuscript studies showed a dynamic calligraphic script development and succession (Kartzhan et al., 2024; Khan, 2022). Early Qur'anic manuscripts in the Museum of Turkish and Islamic Arts show script and ornamental embellishment evolution (Figure 8).

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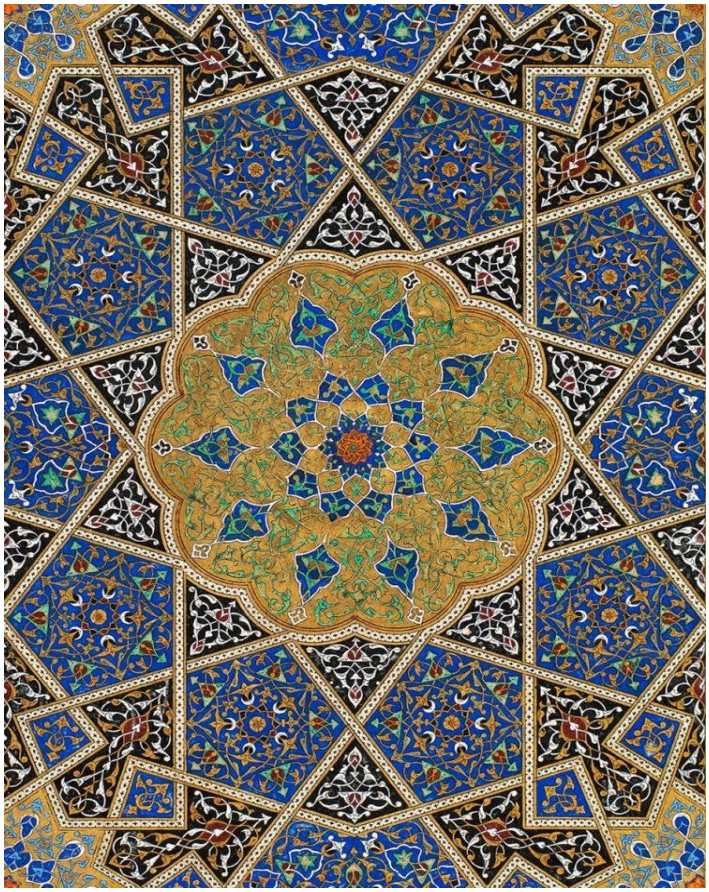

Figure 8. Illustration from an early Qur'anic manuscript preserved in the Museum of Turkish and Islamic arts

Source: compiled by the authors based on M. Farhad and S. Rettig (2016).

Technical characteristics like long vowel marking or diacritical marks are the most crucial criterion for manuscript identification, dating, and localisation. Diachronic graphic system transformation, from one style to another, expressed regional specificities and Islamic world tendencies (Sayed, 2014). In addition to communicating words, calligraphy was an expressive art form. The calligrapher focused on intelligibility and artistic expression, reinterpreting past precedents rather than copying them. The written word is elevated because of divine revelation, which is abstract and ethereal. Classical calligraphy beautifies this abstraction without representing it.

Creating a "animated" script was conceptual (Sayed, 2014). This gave the abstract term a bodily embodiment, not just decoration. Calligraphers were intermediaries between the holy, abstract word and the reader's earthly, figurative world. The script became a liminal place where the immaterial word was "embodied" without breaching idolism laws. This artistic practice visually resolved the tension between aniconic tendencies and the human desire for recognisable, living forms, showing that the manuscript was a site of active intellectual and artistic exploration rather than passive text preservation (Kamoliddin, 2022; Shnanov et al., 2020).

Islamic manuscript miniatures were used to illustrate a literary plot and make it more accessible and entertaining. This interaction created an intimate relationship between language and picture, giving creative imagery an organic connection to poetry, mythology, and epic narratives. Miniature painting stylistic norms were designed to serve narrative and conceptual goals, not mimesis or reality.

Artists rejected linear perspective. Instead, they developed compositionally complicated images with numerous viewpoints (planar yet vertical construction, inside and outside depiction). Not a technological flaw, but an intentional choice for the "advantage of displaying all details". Conceptual hierarchy overshadowed visual verisimilitude in composition. Leaders like the sultan were often represented larger (hieratic scale) to underline their status (Figure 9).

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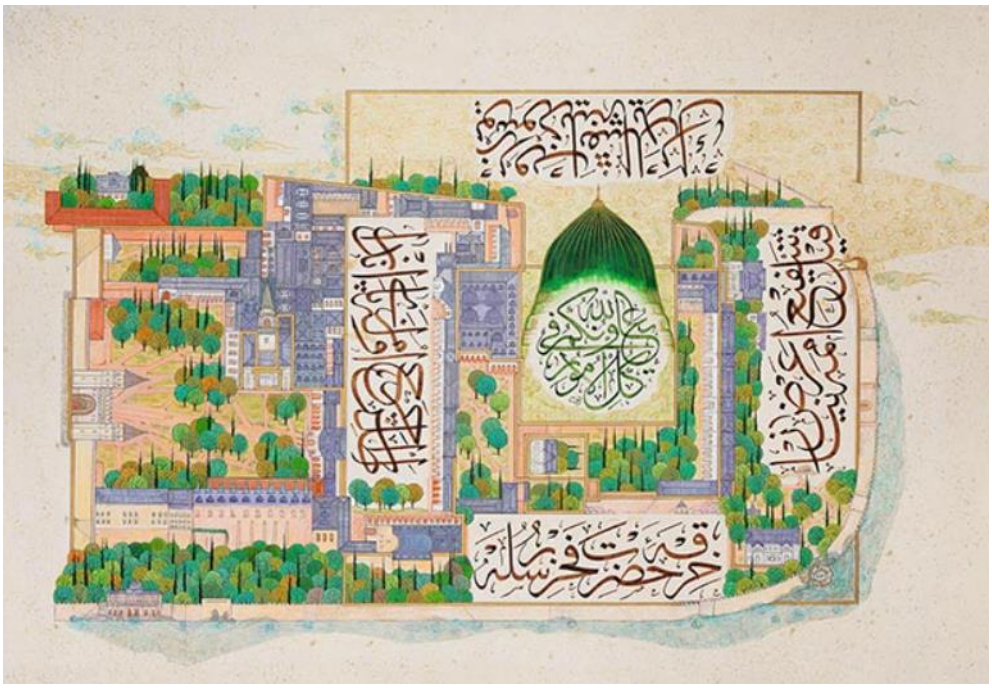

Figure 9. Interior illustration

Source: compiled by the authors based on H. Kazan (2017).

The core concept was emphasised, while minor scenes supported it. This method provided a dense, information-rich graphic area with several focal points that guided the reader through the story. Comparative examination showed varied stylistic traditions in cultural and political centers. Persian schools (Shiraz, Tabriz, Herat) were deeply influenced by “Shahnameh” and Nizami’s “Khamsa”. Tabriz painters were known for their ability to render palace interiors and exteriors in a small space, whereas Herat masters were known for their rhythmic figure drawing. Persian art was characterised by bright, clear mineral colours, even lighting without shadows, and “artistic depiction of an imagined world” rather than actuality.

The Ottoman school, in contrast to the Persian one, had a more factual and documentary character (Fetvacı, 2013). While influenced by the Persian style, Ottoman artists developed a unique visual language characterised by realism based on careful observation, precise rendering of historical details, and a focus on military events, court scenes, and everyday life. The works were less oriented towards lyricism and idealisation and more towards the creation of a factual chronicle, to the extent that miniaturists often accompanied armies on campaigns to ensure accuracy of depiction (Yıldırım and Topay, 2022).

The Mughal tradition emerged as a result of the synthesis of Iranian, Indian, and European styles, which was a consequence of cultural migrations and political alliances with the Safavids. This intercultural influence is evident in such manuscripts as “Babur-Name” (ad-Din Babur, 1992) and “The Adventures of Amir Hamza” (Lakhnavi and Bilgrami, 2012), which demonstrate a deep connection with Persian literature while simultaneously incorporating local Indian elements.

Persian and Ottoman miniature painting differ in style because of their different views of sovereignty and statehood. Patron needs and state self-perception moulded the court's creative tradition. Persian courts (Timurid, Safavid) often claimed legitimacy from epic poetry like the “Shahnameh”. Manuscripts helped reinforce cultural rather than administrative or military identities by visualising this mythopoetic base. The ruler was connected to a mythical past by art. In contrast, the Ottoman Empire was bureaucratic and military (Karassayev et al., 2023). It was legitimised by conquest, legislation, and government. This worldview influenced the Ottoman court's miniature depictions of historical events, campaigns, and royal festivities. A historical record and symbol of organised power, the manuscript became a state tool (Shaw, 2019).

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At the external, explicit level, the image represented the main event of the narrative; however, at concealed levels, deeper meanings were conveyed through “visual codes”. These codes included the symbolic use of colour, deliberate spatial division, and the application of specific types of line to express emotions such as temptation. The artist’s aim was not merely to retell the story, but to transfer “hidden meanings from the written text into the visual”, making the implicit meanings of ayahs visible (Khadjimetov et al., 2025). This approach was caused by the specificity of Qur’anic narrative itself, which differs from linear historical works, often omitting names and place names in order to focus on the visualisation of general principles and divine omnipotence. Thus, illustrations were not merely narrative, but exegetical (interpretative) in nature.

Qissa or dastan is a romantic narrative with “fascination with love and adventure” and “imagination liberated from realistic constraints”. Manuscripts' graphic programs reflected literary flexibility. Epic manuscripts like “The Adventures of Amir Hamza” (Lakhnavi and Bilgrami, 2012), “the longest romantic cycle in the world”—or popular retellings of prophet stories were full of drawings of dramatic and daily occurrences. These miniatures illustrated the text's love of “meticulous, luxuriant description and lush, sensual details”. Artist's visual world was as fanciful and unrestrained as poet's literary universe.

Unlike the genres above, historical and scholarly manuscripts' artistic features were mostly didactic, documentary, or political. In genealogical books like “Is Turkish in History” (Abu-l Ghazi, 1891), the ruler's genealogy was traced back to a mythological progenitor like Oghuz Khan to legitimise his power. The most important graphic feature in M. Kashgari's 1917 encyclopedia “Diwani Lugati-t-Turk” was a global map. This map illustrated the Turkic globe and tribes for Arabic-speaking audiences as an academic and ethnographic source (Kazan, 2017). It organised and presented empirical knowledge as a diagram, not an example.

Visual elements' functions differed by genre and manuscript use, according to the analysis. In Qur'anic narratives, symbolic imagery may have helped explain sacred topics, while epic and romantic depictions may have enlarged the story and imagination. Maps, genealogical schemes, architectural compositions, and documentary scenarios may have explained, commemorated, or legitimised scholarly and historical texts. Since the sources do not record the artists' decisions, these interpretations cannot be used to prove their intentions. They are context-based readings based on genre, literary content, visual organization, and analogous manuscript traditions. The findings suggest that artistic form can communicate in numerous ways, though images and decorations can be interpreted differently.

Discussion

Critical study of the research data shows that the move from manuscript to lithographic book culture in Central Asia reflects modernisation and knowledge democratisation. Compared to manuscripts, lithographic copies preserved the aesthetics of calligraphy (naskh, nasta’liq) and ornamental elements but lost the uniqueness of manual labour, signalling a shift from elite patronage-based book production to mass commercial production. Iconographic analysis of miniatures accentuates genre conditioning, while aniconic compositions in didactic texts promote spiritual awareness. The manuscript is a dynamic place where calligraphy and miniatures embellish the text and perform religious, cultural, and political responsibilities, reflecting a complex blend of regional Islamic art traditions and developments (Hasanov, 2024).

R. Harris (2019) found that didactic Sufi works, such as A. Yesevi's “Divan-i Hikmet” (2003), were mostly performative, oral, and musical. The author prioritised the text's aural and social features over its physical transport. This approach leaves unresolved the question of the manuscripts' material form's functional purpose. The present study, particularly the analysis of the didactic literature “The Book of Wisdom” from the same Sufi tradition, supported this idea. A completely aniconic ornamental scheme, the absence of figuration, and the functional naskh script cannot be explained by aesthetic preferences. This material form may have codified and verified oral tradition. In a culture where oral transmission was the major means of knowledge transfer, a tangible object executed according to

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rigid canons visibly confirmed the text's immutability and holiness. Thus, R. Harris's detailed analysis of the material and auditory components showed that they were functionally interrelated.

A. Helman-Ważny (2020)'s materials science findings provided a technological foundation for interpreting palaeographic and artistic data. In examining early Central Asian paper, the author found that the region's key technology was the use of ahar, a starch-based substance, and polishing to a glossy sheen. This was related to the practical need to stop ink from spreading. Calligraphic script genre difference, such as naskh for didactic texts and nasta'liq for poetry, allowed this functional rationale to be expanded. The sheet's smooth, glossy surface was both functional and appealing. This material's technological property allowed calligraphers to freely and controlledly manipulate the qalam, which was needed to execute the smooth, descending ligatures of the nasta'liq style, called ta'liq. Thus, the author's technological solution and 'Qissa-i Seiful-Muluk' (Majilis, 1840) artistic practice show interdependence. The support's material qualities determined the calligraphic style, which was chosen based on the work's genre.

The work of Y. Porter (2020), devoted to the material and technical basis of the Islamic pictorial tradition, provides a comparative framework for interpreting the visible decoration of the examined books. Porter identified a historical palette that included gold, cinnabar, and lapis lazuli. In the present study, the placement of visually distinguishable gold-coloured, blue, and red elements was examined in relation to the structure and function of the page. Their concentration in unvans, headings, frames, and rubrication suggests a hierarchical and navigational use of colour. However, these observations concern the visible distribution and apparent colour of decorative elements; the specific pigments and metals cannot be identified without direct physical or spectroscopic analysis.

K. Scheper (2023) examined Islamic manuscript bindings and protective flaps (lisan). These elements held manuscript status and function information, forming part of the artifact's semiotic code. The conclusions match the interior artistic decoration analysis. The author found that the sophistication of the outward design matches the richness and dignity of the internal ornamentation. The manuscript “Qissa-i Seiful-Muluk” (Majilis, 1840) has the richest interior content (miniatures, nasta'liq calligraphy) and a high-status flap binding. Both the outward binding and internal decorating worked together to create a semiotic code. The author observed that the outward design set the perception framework, which the inside artistic solution strengthened.

The manuscript visual program confirms R.C. Weller (2023)'s textual ethnographic findings. The author uses literary material to demonstrate that Central Asian Islamic texts recorded and integrated pre-Islamic ideas and local practices. A visual equivalent to this linguistic syncretism. The study of miniature painting in the region showed that its stylistics were complex, combining imperial artistic traditions, mostly Persian, with regional composition, colour, and type iconography. Comparison of these data suggests that miniatures' regional peculiarities are not artistic simplifications but visual reflections of the author's textual local cultural practices and aesthetic preferences. Consequently, the Islamic manuscript in Central Asia likely functioned as a complex artefact in which local identity was codified simultaneously on two levels - textual and visual-artistic (Weller, 2023; Khadjimetov et al., 2025).

Conclusions

The conducted study systematically substantiated the position that the manuscript is not merely a passive carrier of information but a dynamic cultural space whose form actively shapes the perception of content. A key result was the identification and detailed description of the technological transition from an elite, patronage-based model of manual production to more mass, commercial lithographic book publishing, the centres of which in the second half of the nineteenth century became Khiva and Tashkent. It was established that, despite the preservation of traditional calligraphic aesthetics, this shift radically changed the socio-cultural status of the book, making it more accessible.

Visual examination showed that paper, ink, and pigment properties can separate manuscript and lithographic manufacture. However, digital surrogates could not verify paper fibres, ahar sizing, watermarks, carbon-based inks, or cinnabar pigments. These items provide historically informed

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interpretations based on comparable texts rather than validated corpus discoveries. Calligraphy showed that the functional naskh was employed for the Qur'an, didactic, and scholarly literature, while the refined and fluid nasta'liq dominated Persian and Turkic poetry and belles-lettres. The study shows that the manuscript's artistic program was subordinated to its substance and communicative task. The functions of figurative and non-figurative parts were clearly defined. Sacred and didactic literature like "The Book of Wisdom" used aniconic adornment as a "grammar of ornament". The beautiful unvan was a ceremonial entrance into the textual area, while ornamented frames and colophons organised material without diverting the reader from its spiritual and semantic substance. Within the examined sacred and didactic works, aniconic ornamentation primarily performed structuring, symbolic, and contemplative functions, supporting the visual organisation and interpretation of the text.

By contrast, in secular narrative genres illustrations were intended to visualise the plot, while their stylistics depended directly on the literary basis, from symbolic calligraphic compositions in historical chronicles, as in "Is Turkish in History", to documentary-memorial depictions of sacred sites in pilgrimage narratives. Thus, the artistic programme of the manuscript functioned as a "paratext" that guided the reader's perception and signalled the status and purpose of the work. The author's choice of a specific visual strategy indicates a high level of intellectual and artistic self-awareness on the part of the creators of manuscripts.

For further development of the topic, the application of natural-scientific methods is recommended, in particular non-destructive spectral analysis, for precise chemical identification of the composition of inks and pigments, which would allow a transition from assumptions to verifiable data on the origin of materials. Promising directions also include the expansion of the source corpus for more detailed comparative analysis with adjacent book traditions (Persian, Ottoman, Mongolian) and the creation of publicly accessible digital archives. A key limitation of this work was the limited access to physical manuscript originals. This circumstance did not allow for a detailed materials science analysis, necessitating reliance primarily on visual examination of available copies and historical descriptions.

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