

Picturing *Tanbûr* Long-Necked Lutes in Persian, Ottoman,
and Indian Paintings



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Hans de Zeeuw

ARCHAEOPRESS



ARCHAEOPRESS PUBLISHING LTD

13-14 Market Square

Bicester

Oxfordshire OX26 6AD

United Kingdom

www.archaeopress.com

ISBN 978-1-80583-366-6

ISBN 978-1-80583-367-3 (e-Pdf)

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Iconography of music deals with the lessons that pictures can teach the music historian. A more sophisticated definition would be the analysis and interpretation, by the historian of music, of pictorial representations of musical instruments, their players, singers, groups of performing musicians, and all other kinds of musical scenes.

Emanuel Winternitz - *The Iconology of Music: Potentials and Pitfalls*.

In memory of the Persian, Ottoman, and Indian painters and musical instrument makers

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Foreword

The *tanbûr* long-necked lute has long been an emblematic musical instrument in the Islamic world. Its popularity and long tradition of use are best documented by the large number of depictions of the instrument found in the Islamic painting traditions of the Persian, Ottoman, and Indian cultural spheres, where images of both earthly and heavenly players abound. In an extraordinary labour of love, Hans de Zeeuw has spent many years searching for and compiling the visual record of the instrument's heritage, and has brought together in this beautifully-illustrated volume some of the substantive results of his research. These images document an amazing paradox: in orthodox Islamic religious law, only the music of the *adhan* or call to prayer and the recitation of the Qur'an are tolerated; this notwithstanding, secular cultures across the Islamic world have produced a rich historical tradition of music of all kinds, in which *tanbûrs* play a widespread and popular role. Hans de Zeeuw has brought together the visual evidence for this musical tradition, which in turn will hopefully lead to a wider interest in the music itself, music that brings its beauty through great expanses of time and space to the eyes and ears of the twenty-first-century reader and listener.

Walter B. Denny
Distinguished University Professor Emeritus

Preface and Acknowledgements

This book explores the depiction of *tanbûr* long-necked lutes in Persian, Ottoman, and Indian paintings, including works from the Mughal, Deccan, Râjasthânî, and Râgamâlâ traditions. Previous research has demonstrated the significance of these paintings as important sources for studying *tanbûrs* and musical instruments in general. The captions throughout the study also aim to identify other musical instruments depicted in these works. Like the tradition of the *tanbûr* long-necked lutes, the painting traditions within Islamic art are characterized by a great variety, shaped by complex historical and cross-cultural interactions across Western, Central, and Southern Asia.¹

Studies on Islamic art are extensive in areas such as poetry, architecture, painting, and decorative arts. However, many historians of Islamic art tend to overlook the subject of music, particularly musical instruments. This oversight may reflect a broader tendency among art historians to show limited interest in music and musical instruments. Although topics related to music and musical instruments have been explored by scholars like Henry George Farmer (1882-1965), Emanuel Winternitz (1898-1983), Laurence Picken (1909-2007), Jean During, Alvyn Miner, John Baily, Mark Slobin, Eckhard Neubauer, Bonnie Wade, Ann Lucas, Walter Denny, Antonio Baldassarre, Jota Ramírez, Nurhan Atasoy, and Ersu Pekin, they remain underrepresented in the overall discourse on Islamic art. Additionally, encyclopaedias such as *Musikgeschichte in Bildern*, *The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music*, *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, and *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart* include discussions on Islamic music and musical instruments. Despite this, the field remains underexplored compared to other art forms.

Persian, Ottoman, and Indian paintings have become more widely recognized due to numerous exhibitions worldwide and the publication of various studies and catalogues related to museum exhibitions and private collections. Almost all Islamic paintings we know of are created on paper, which makes illustrated manuscripts, as well as single and double-folio paintings, particularly fragile and in need of special care. The remarkable preservation of many royal books and paintings can be attributed to the enduring efforts of generations of librarians. However, only a small fraction of the illustrated books and single and double-folio paintings that once existed have survived, resulting in significant gaps in our knowledge. Moreover, a shocking number of paintings were lost due to war, natural circumstances, and ‘pious’ hands.²

The deeper spiritual dimensions of the paintings produced in the imperial and royal courts are often overlooked. Many of these works were not merely secular; they were embedded within sacred texts that conveyed explicit moral or mystical themes. A recurring metaphor in Islamic art is the *River of Life*, symbolizing the *Spiritual Source*, alongside the *Tree of Life* or *Cosmic Tree*, often depicted as a plane tree (*chinâr*, *çınar*), whose varied coloured leaves represent different spiritual states. The flowing water nourishes the tree, allowing it to bloom, serving as a metaphor for spiritual growth. Unfortunately, much of the symbolism that illuminates these metaphorical and mystical meanings, as well as the significance of colour, seems to have been lost over time.³

Once kept in the libraries of Persianized rulers and princes in cities such as Tabrîz, Shîrâz, Qazvîn, Isfahân, Mašhad, Herât, and Kâbul, as well as Istanbul, Bukhârâ, Lahôrê, Agrâ, and Delhi, illustrated manuscripts, often cut up for profit, such as the *Shâh-nâma-yi Shâhî* or so-called *Houghton Shâhnâma*, and single or double-folio paintings are now widely dispersed in museum and private collections around the world. Paintings were also disposed of by nobles and even museums in the countries where they were produced.⁴ Many are, however, still preserved in Cairo, Istanbul, Tehrân, Kâbul, Lahôrê, and Mumbai.

As with painting, our understanding of the history of musical instruments is also marked by significant gaps, largely due to the scarcity of iconographic sources and surviving instruments. In *The Iconology of Music: Potentials and Pitfalls*, Emanuel Winternitz, one of the founding fathers of music iconography, already pointed out the risks and pitfalls of using iconology in the study of musical instruments. The risks and limits of iconographic and iconological research, an academic discipline dating back to the 19th century, are therefore often discussed. Were the artists’ models accurate? Which elements of the illustrations are imaginary, and which are real? To what extent were artists obliged or even limited by the contemporary style and/or demands of their patron? In addition, depicting musical instruments

¹ Zeeuw, J. *Tanbûr Long-Necked Lutes along the Silk Road and beyond*.

² Arnold, Th. *Painting in Islam. A Study of the Place of Pictorial Art in Muslim Culture*: 42.

³ Barry, M. *Figurative Art in Medieval Islam and the Riddle of Bihzâd of Herât (1465-1535)*: 49-50; See Grube E.J. *Religious Painting in the Islamic World*, in E. Sims Peerles *Images. Persian Painting and its Sources*: 132-152; See furthermore Papadopoulos, A. *Islam and Muslim Art*: 121-122.

⁴ Barry, M. *Figurative Art in Medieval Islam and the Riddle of Bihzâd of Herât (1465-1535)*: 27.

requires certain skills. A particular musical instrument can therefore differ in many aspects from a realistic sketch or a snapshot. As a rule, the more detailed an instrument is depicted, the more likely it is to be accurate.⁵

Given Winternitz's comments, iconography remains an important part of the study of musical practices and musical instruments, such as their organological forms, manufacturing, playing techniques, and environment in which they were played.⁶ In the absence or scarcity of literary sources and surviving musical instruments, images, regardless of their artistic value, are important primary sources that offer an insight into the rich universe of musical cultures and their musical instruments.⁷

Visual sources should be treated with the same care and caution as written sources. Both do not necessarily follow principles of historical truth or credibility: "Especially within the research of music iconography, scholars should keep in mind that the visual source with musical subject is rarely a means of musical communication, which means that criteria of music are usually not the main guiding principle in the process of artistic creation. The image may not be the result of a true copy of existing instruments, but rather the symbolic and ideological story embodied in the image".⁸

Each image of an instrument raises the question of the relationship between the exactness and artistic expression. Although numerous painters have attempted to depict musical instruments with some degree of accuracy, their intention was obviously not to reproduce every detail in order to determine their organological characteristics. Moreover, though musical instruments are depicted in detail, sources with which to compare them are absent or scarce and in most cases insufficient to provide accurate dating or distribution of a particular instrument. For later periods, instrument matching is usually easier although the lack of a nomenclature remains problematical.⁹ The development of a nomenclature, a systematic classification, identification of iconographical sources, and descriptive terminology of the musical instruments of the Islamic world remains to be undertaken.¹⁰

Before the advent of photography, paintings, visual art, and literary sources were the primary means for documenting music and musical instruments, though these methods often lacked precision. With the invention of photography in the 19th century, this changed increasingly. Photography offered a new and more accurate method for capturing images, providing researchers with reliable visual documentation. Consequently, photographic images of musical instruments began to play an essential role in research due to their accuracy and ability to offer insights that were not previously possible. More recently, the development of 3D imaging technology has taken this further, allowing for highly detailed and interactive representations of musical instruments. This allows researchers to examine instruments from multiple angles and gain a deeper understanding of their construction and acoustics.

A point of discussion that should not go unmentioned here is the issue of Islamic hostility towards painting and music. There is no specific mention of images in the *Qu'rân*. The religious basis for the condemnation of painting must therefore be sought in the *Hadîth*, traditions and sayings attributed to Prophet Muhammad by his close companions and collected 'post-mortem' by members of the 'ulamâ (Islamic theologians), in which the painter, by painting a being that has life, appropriates the creative function of the Creator and thus tries to assimilate himself to God. Although the depiction of human and animal forms had no place in a religious context, such representations flourished in the Persian, Ottoman, and Indian courts, where a rich visual culture developed through encouragement and patronage.¹¹

The legal status of music in Islam, like painting, is a complex and debated topic, with diverse opinions among scholars, cultures, and communities due to the character of their relationship with the religion of Islam. Music has therefore suffered to this day from the ambiguities and tensions resulting from Islam's generally hostile attitude towards music and musicians.¹² The *Qu'rân* does not explicitly condemn music, so the *Hadîth* became the main source. Certain types of music are associated with frivolity and sensuality, especially when women were involved in music making and dancing, which led to the banning of music and dancing. Only the chanting of the *Qu'rân* and the call to prayer, and a few hymns for special occasions and holy days have an undisputed status, while certain forms of devotional singing are

⁵ Winternitz, E. The Iconology of Music: Potentials and Pitfalls: 80.

⁶ Guillaume André Villoteau (1759-1839) seems to have been the first scholar to apply visual sources within a music ethnographical study focusing on historic and contemporary musical practices in Greece and Egypt.

⁷ Musical iconography as a discipline, covering the illustration of musicians, instruments, music-making, and the use of musical imagery.

⁸ Baldassarre, A. "Music Iconography: What is it all about? Some remarks and considerations with a selected bibliography". *Ictus: Periódico do Programa de Pós-Graduação em Música da UFBA* 9/2: 77, 93, 95.

⁹ See also Farmer, H.G. *Islam. Musikgeschichte in Bildern. Musik des Mittelalters und der Renaissance. Band III, Lieferung 2.*

¹⁰ Hornbostel, E.M. von and C. Sachs. *Systematik der Musikinstrumente. Ein Versuch*; Eichman, R, P. Pöffgen and N. Beyer: 986; see for discussion Wachsmann and M.J. Kartomi. *Instruments, classification of*: 418-428.

¹¹ Shiloah, A. *Music in the World of Islam. A Socio-Cultural Study*: 18; Abraham, G. *The Concise Oxford History of Music*: 191.

¹² See for discussion Al-Fârûqî, L.I. *Music, Musicians and Muslim Law. Asian Music* 17: 3-37.

tolerated differently within the various Islamic legal schools. Although severely condemned by the *‘ulamâ*, literature is full of stories about musicians and singers, and rich musical traditions emerged at the Muslim courts. Muslim rulers, who were in general indifferent to Islam and often accused of sheer worldliness and impious behaviour, continued to patronize music, which was also deeply embedded in the folk and popular culture of the Islamic world, and musicians.¹³

In various Sûfî orders, music and dancing serve as essential means of drawing the soul closer to God, particularly within the Mevlevî order in Turkey, inspired by Mevlânâ Celâlî’ddîn Rûmî (1207-1273). Outside these orders, music also plays a significant role in heterodox and syncretic Islamic traditions, such as the Ahl-e Haqq in Iran and the Bektaşî and Alevî in Turkey. In southeastern Iran and western Pakistan, especially in Balûchestân, Sûfî music is a form of devotion, while in Central Asia, it is expressed through various spiritual forms accompanied by classical instruments. In India and Pakistan, particularly in the Panjâb and the Indus Valley, spiritual songs sung at Sûfî shrines attract many pilgrims, and in Kashmîr, the urban elite perform *sûfyâna mûsîqî*, which accompanies spiritual songs in a secular context.

This deep connection between music and spirituality in Islamic culture is further enriched by the philosophical understanding that music embodies mathematical principles reflecting the harmony of the cosmos, as highlighted by influential thinkers like Abû Nasr al-Farâbî (c. 872-950), Abû’l-Faraj al-Isfahânî (897-967), and Abû Alî al-Husayn ibn Abd Allâh ibn Sînâ (Avicenna, 980-1037). They emphasized that the numerical relationships found in musical intervals mirror the Divine order of creation, suggesting that the pursuit of musical knowledge is intertwined with the exploration of mathematical laws, thus emphasizing the unity of artistic and scientific endeavours as pathways to understanding the Divine.¹⁴

In this study, the terms ‘Islamicate-Persian painting’ and ‘Turko-Persian painting’ serve as frameworks to describe distinct yet interconnected artistic traditions. The term ‘Islamicate-Persian painting’ encompasses a broader cultural and artistic landscape that reflects the diverse influences of Islamic civilization, including important periods such as the  l-Kh n d and T m r d eras. This tradition is characterized by intricate details, vibrant colours, and allegorical themes that often draw on Persian literary sources. In contrast, ‘Turko-Persian painting’ specifically refers to the artistic expressions that emerged from the synthesis of Persian and Turkic artistic traditions. This synthesis was especially evident during the reign of Turkic dynasties, such as the Safavids and the Ottomans, where artists blended Persian techniques with Turkic motifs and themes. The incorporation of Indian painting styles further enriched this tradition, especially during the Mughal period, when Persian artistic influences significantly shaped the development of Indian painting. Both the Islamicate-Persian and Turko-Persian traditions illustrate how complex cross-cultural interactions over centuries can result in unique visual languages.¹⁵

The book is organized in **Chapter 1** *Painting in Islamic Art*, **Chapter 2** *Tanb rs Pictured in Persian Paintings*, **Chapter 3** *Tanb rs Pictured in Ottoman Paintings*, **Chapter 4** *Tanb rs Pictured in Indian Paintings*. The selected Persian, Ottoman, and Indian paintings show that the closely or distantly related long-necked lutes of the *tanb r* family are only a piece of a much larger puzzle of shared musical instruments in the Islamic world. The book concludes with a *Glossary of Musical Instruments*,¹⁶ *Bibliography*, *Select Discography*, and an *Index*.

This study has greatly benefited from the contributions of numerous scholars across various scientific disciplines, to whom I am deeply grateful. I especially want to acknowledge the work of Henry George Farmer (1882-1965) and Jean During. For the broader background of this study I have benefited from the work of numerous historians such as Marshall Hodgson (1922-1968), Robert Canfield, Richard Eaton, and art historians such as Oleg Grabar (1929-2011), Martin Dickson (1924-1991), Alexandre Papadopoulos (1917-1996), Linda York Leach (1942-2006), Norah Titley (1920-2010), Stuart Cary Welch, Milo Cleveland Beach, Eleanor Sims, Sheila Blair, Robert Hillenbrand, Andrew Topsfield, Michael Barry, Walter Denny, Banu Mahir, Filiz Ca man, and the Orientalists Wheeler Thackston, who translated numerous Persian sources, and Annemarie Schimmel (1922-2003), a scholar of Islamic studies and mysticism.

¹³ See for discussion Arnold, Th. *Painting in Islam. A Study of the Place of Pictorial Art in Muslim Culture. The Attitude of Theologians of Islam towards Painting*: 1-40; See also Allen, T. *Aniconism and Figural Representation in Islamic Art*, in T. Allen *Five Essays on Islamic Art*: 17-37; Neubauer, E. and V. Doubleday. *Islamic Religious Music*, in S. Sadie (ed.) *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* 12: 599-610.

¹⁴ Schimmel, A. *The Role of Music in Islamic Mysticism*, in A. Hammarlund, T. Olson and E.  zdalga (eds) *Sufism, Music and Society in Turkey and the Middle East*: 9-17; Pacholczyk, J.M. *S fy na M s q . The Classical Music of Kashmir*: 8-9; See for further reading During, J. *Musique et Mystique dans les Traditions de L’Iran*; Neubauer, E. and V. Doubleday. *Islamic religious music*.

¹⁵ See for discussion Blair, S.S. and J.M. Bloom. *The Mirage of Islamic Art: Reflections on the Study of an Unwieldy Field*. *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 85, No. 1: 152-184; Kadoi, Y. *A twenty-year retrospect on ‘The Mirage of Islamic Art’: polarising Islamic art, consolidating Persian art*. *Journal of Art Historiography*, 28: 1-9.

¹⁶ Sources used Danielson, V., S. Marcus and D. Reynolds (eds) *The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music. The Middle East Volume 6*: 1077-1095; Wade, B.C. *Imaging Sound. An Ethnomusicological Study of Music, Art and Culture in Mughal India*: 241-244.

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The Islamic world encompasses a wide range of languages, scripts, and transliteration conventions. As a result, names, technical terms, and titles may appear in several forms. This variation is particularly evident in the terminology of musical instruments. Although many instruments have widely recognized or relatively standardized names, sources also contain numerous hybrid, regional, and transitional forms. These differences reflect cultural, geographical, and linguistic diversity and can make it difficult to determine whether variant names refer to distinct instruments, local forms, or the same instrument described according to different naming traditions.

I am deeply indebted to Walter Denny, Professor Emeritus in the Department of the History of Art & Architecture at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, for reading and commenting on the sections of the manuscript that discuss painting, as well as for providing editorial advice on the manuscript as a whole. I am also very grateful to Dr Saskia Willaert, curator of non-Western instruments at the Musical Instrument Museum (MIM) in Brussels, for her insightful comments on the sections of the manuscript that discuss the musical instruments depicted in Persian, Ottoman, and Indian paintings.

Finally, I'd like to thank my wife, Hülya, for her loving support and encouragement.

The shortcomings and lacunae of this book pose significant challenges for future research on the musical instruments of the Islamic world, both past and present. These instruments are not only vividly depicted in paintings but also appear in a variety of other media, including wall paintings, tiled palace walls, textiles, pottery, and luxury vessels crafted from bronze and brass. This book seeks to inspire further research and documentation, ultimately contributing to a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of musical instruments within the Islamic world, encompassing both historical and contemporary contexts.

Istanbul, July 2026