Maqamat Al-Hariri

Illustrated Arabic Manuscript from the 13th century

One of the greatest Arabic illuminated manuscripts of all time—a compendium of tales by al-Hariri (1054-1122) illustrated by Yahya ibn M ahmud al-Wasiti.

Al-Maqamat is the title of a book written by Abu Muhammad al Qasim ibn Ali al-Hariri (1054-1122) containing fifty relatively short stories (maqamat = "settings" or "sessions"), each one identified by the name of a city in the Muslim world of the time. The stories tell of actual adventures and especially the verbal pronouncements in verse or in prose of a roguish and peripatetic hero, Abu Zayd from Saruj, a town in northern Syria, as told by al-Harith, a sober and slightly gullible merchant travelling from place to place. Double and triple puns, unusual meanings of words and elaborate grammatical constructions are used to exhibit the astounding and sophisticated wealth of the Arabic language. The genre of the maqamat became an almost instant success because of the extraordinary quality of its writing. Dozens of manuscripts of Hariri's Maqamat have been preserved from his own time, including a probable autograph, and hundreds have remained from the thirteenth and later centuries. Nearly all of them were copied in the core areas of the Arabic-speaking world—Egypt, Syria, Iraq—where there lived and prospered the class of educated Arabs likely to enjoy reading this forbidding book and interested in acquiring, perhaps even in sponsoring, a luxury edition of a beloved work. Even though the text itself and the reasons for its success are hardly topics for illustrations, thirteen of these manuscripts are known to have been provided with images inspired by narrative episodes from individual stories. Of these, six are from the thirteenth century, five are from the fourteenth, one is probably from the sixteenth or seventeenth century, and one is dated in the early eighteenth, even though one of its miniatures appears to be much earlier. Of all the manuscripts with pictures containing al-Hariri's great work, Paris BN ms. arabe 5847 towers above all others for the quality and variety of its illustrations. It was completed in C.E. 1237 (A.H. 634, in the month of ramadan) and, according to its colophon, was copied and illustrated by the same individual, Yahya ibn Mahmud ibn Yahya ibn Abi al-Hasan ibn Kuwwarih al-Wasiti, presumably originating from the city of al-Wasit. The manuscript survives with 99 miniatures. From the time they were first made known, in large surveys of the late nineteenth century, the miniatures from this manuscript were praised for their realism in depicting life.