

Of course, there's more to most word-portraits than physical features. The next, a miniature of Salah al-Din's (Saladin) multitasking chief minister al-Qadi al-Fadil, manages to combine a brief physical

likeness with a few deft touches of character—and, somehow, to catch the spirit of a whole cultural setting.

I saw a thin old man, all head and heart, simultaneously writing and dictating to two secretaries. The force of concentration needed to produce the words caused every possible shade of movement to play across his face and lips. Indeed, it was as if he was writing with every part of his body.

The minister questioned his visitor on some abstruse points of Qur'anic syntax,

and not once during this did he interrupt his writing and dictation.

Sometimes, the briefest anecdote throws a memorable spotlight on some aspect of character. Here is the 13th-century biographer Ibn

Khallikan on another bookish man, the early Muslim scholar al-Zuhri, and—just as importantly—his long-suffering wife:

When he sat at home, he would surround himself with books, and would become so absorbed in them that he would forget all other worldly concerns. One day his wife said to him, "I swear by God that these books are more trouble to me than three co-wives!"

Writer and reader might not always agree on what a certain characteristic is. In the next extract, the biographer wants to illustrate his subject's naïveté.

One day, Ibn 'Abd al-Nur stuck his hand in the outlet of a cistern and happened to find an enormous toad sitting in it—at which he called out to his friends, "Come over here! I've found a squashy stone!"

Naïveté? Or is it what you might call a surreal take on things? No one, however, could disagree that the following sketch of a

scholar of Khurasan province in eastern Iran, Hatim al-Asamm ("the Deaf"), portrays anything less than the perfect gentleman:

By the 13th-century cosmographer al-Qazwini.

He was not in reality deaf, but got his name from having once pretended to be so. The reason was that a woman who had come to ask his opinion on some matter or other happened involuntarily to break wind. In order that she would not feel embarrassed (and much to her relief), he said to her, "I'm hard of hearing and I can't catch what you're saying, so please speak up."

Arabic lends itself to painting "group portraits" in big, broad strokes. Here is the 11th-century author Ibn Hazm on the Muslim

inhabitants of his native Spain (and, indirectly, on quite a lot of the rest of humanity):

The fame of the ancient Nabataeans as agriculturalists went back to an early 10th-century book on the subject, "translated from the Chaldaean"—but later unmasked as a forgery.

They are Arabs in their ancestry, nobility, haughtiness, eloquence of speech, blitheness of spirit, opposition to injustice, refusal to submit to humiliation and freedom from subservience; Indians in their extraordinary attention to and love of the sciences; Baghdadis in their fondness for novelty, the care they take over their cleanliness, the delicacy of their character, the sharpness and subtlety of their intelligence and the copiousness of their ideas; Nabataeans in their ability to locate sources of water and in the diligence with which they apply themselves to the planting of seedlings and trees and to agriculture in general; Chinese in the perfection of their various crafts of manufacture and the excellence of their pictorial arts; and Turks in their waging of wars, in their development of the weapons of war and their close attention to all the duties incumbent on warriors.

Here by their compatriot al-Qazwini.

Sometimes a portrait, and particularly a group portrait, can home in on a single feature, exaggerate it and end up as caricature. The

unfortunate townspeople of Isfahan in Iran, for example, have always had a particular characteristic enlarged:

The piece comes from an autobiographical sketch by the Iraqi physician 'Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi (died 1231). It was said that al-Qadi al-Fadil's short treatises, alone, if bound together, would have filled a hundred volumes. (And we complain about information overload!)

Although very few have more than one, Muslim men are permitted to have up to four wives at a time.

The 14th-century Spanish scholar and politician Ibn al-Khatib. Here, in one of those heavyweight biographical dictionaries (nearly 2000 printed pages, listing anyone of any interest who ever had anything to do with Granada), he is writing about a 13th-century scholar of Malaga called Ibn 'Abd al-Mur. "There are morals to be drawn from the universe of God Almighty," Ibn al-Khatib says after this anecdote, "and the strangest part of that universe is the world of man."