

BELONGING AS THEY DO TO A CULTURE IN

which drawing, painting and the other figurative arts have usually played a minor role, Arabic speakers and writers have long been masters of the word-portrait. From strange and striking pictures of the beloved and the dead in pre-Islamic poetry, through formal portraits in heavyweight biographical dictionaries, to the more impressionistic sketches that “illustrate” the pages of almost every Arabic book, a lot of the literature of the Arabs has to do with people.

There sat a man with a countenance grave yet luminous, of medium build and brown complexion. His round face was somewhat marked by smallpox, and he had a high forehead, a small mouth, a large head and dark eyes that sparkled with magnetism and light. His nose was short and broad, his beard black and round, and his hands and feet small.

Nazih assumed the man was a court functionary. He took a seat and waited while the official dealt with some papers.

He was stamping them with a personal seal. Out of the corner of my eye, I managed to get a glimpse of the wording on one of the impressions—and saw that it was made by the seal of His Majesty the Imam. I realized immediately that I was in the royal presence, and sat up straight.

After a short conversation, the imam asked if the traveler had any requests. Knowing that the mountain realm was highly

conservative, Nazih asked the ruler for permission to take photographs.

“You may photograph whatever and whomever you wish,” he said, “except me....” Never in his entire life has the imam permitted anyone to make an image of him. The pictures of him that have appeared in various magazines and newspapers are purely imaginary.

Most of the passages translated below are at the impressionistic end of the scale. The first, though, gives a short but detailed physical likeness—and shows why, until quite recently, such descriptions were necessary as records of a subject’s appearance. Seventy-five years ago, but only half a mile from where I’m writing this, Nazih al-Mu’ayyad al-‘Azmi, a Syrian traveler from a distinguished Damascus family, has just entered a room in the palace of the Imam of Yemen:

Imam Yahya Hamid al-Diri, born in 1869, led the resistance against the Ottoman Turkish rulers of Yemen, eventually shared power with them and was sole ruler of Yemen from 1918 until his assassination in 1948.

This may be a dig at the famous Lebanese-American writer Ameen Rihani, who in 1924 published a pen drawing of the imam, subsequently much reproduced. The French filmmaker René Clément tried to get a shot of the imam riding in a covered carriage for his 1937 film of Yemen. Only the potentate’s beard is visible, by now a ghostly white....