

# Perennial Values in Islamic Art

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Source: Studies in Comparative Religion, Vol. 1, No.3. © World Wisdom, Inc.  
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MUCH has been written about the formation of Islamic art from pre-existing elements, of Byzantine, Persian, Hindu and Mongolian origin. But very little has been said about the nature of the power which wrought all those various elements into a unique synthesis. Nobody will deny the unity of Islamic art, either in time or in space; it is far too evident: whether one contemplates the mosque of Cordoba or the great madrasah of Samarkand, whether it be the tomb of a saint in the Maghreb or one in Chinese Turkestan, it is as if one and the same light shone forth from all these works of art. What then is the nature of this unity? The religious law of Islam does not prescribe any particular forms of art; it merely restricts the field of their expression, and restrictions are not creative in themselves. On the other hand, it is misleading, to say the least, if one simply attributes this unity to "religious feeling" as one often does. However intense an emotion may be, it will never be able to shape a whole world of forms into a harmony which is at the same time rich and sober, overwhelming and precise. It is not by chance that the unity and regularity of Islamic art reminds us of the law working in crystals: there is something that evidently surpasses the mere power of emotion, which is necessarily vague and always fluctuating. We shall call it the "intellectual vision" inherent in Islamic art, taking "intellect" in its original meaning as a faculty far more comprehensive than reason or thought, a faculty involving the intuition of timeless realities. This is also the meaning of *al-'aql* in Islamic tradition: faith is not complete unless it be illuminated by *al-'aql* which alone grasps the implications of *at-tawhīd*, the doctrine of divine Unity. In a similar way, Islamic art derives its beauty from wisdom.

The history of art, being a modern science, inevitably approaches Islamic art in the purely analytical way of all modern sciences, by dissection and reduction to historical circumstances. Whatever is timeless in an art—and sacred art like that of Islam always contains a timeless element—will be left out by such a method. One may object that all art is composed of forms and, since form is limited, it is necessarily subject to time; like all historical phenomena forms rise, develop, become corrupted and die; therefore the science of art is of necessity a historical science. But this is only one half of the truth: a form, though limited and consequently subject to time, may convey something timeless and in this respect escape historical conditions, not only in its genesis—which partly belongs to a spiritual dimension—but also in its preservation, to a certain extent at least, for it is with regard to their timeless meaning that certain forms have been preserved in spite of and against all material and psychic revolutions of an epoch; tradition means just that.

On the other hand, modern history of art has derived most of its aesthetic criteria from classical Greek or from postmedieval art. Whatever its more recent evolution has been, it has always considered the individual as the real creator of art. In this view, a work is "artistic" in so far as it shows the stamp of an individuality. Now, from an Islamic point of view, beauty is essentially an expression of universal Truth.

Thus it is not astonishing that modern science, in studying Islamic art, often stops short at a negative judgement. We find such negative judgements in many if not in most of the learned works on Islamic art; they are more or less the same, though different in degree. One often reads that Islamic art was creative only at its first stage, while integrating and transforming earlier legacies, and that later on it congealed more and more into sterile formulas. These formulas, we further learn, have not quite cancelled the ethnic differences of the peoples of Islam, but they have unfortunately suffocated the individual initiative of the artist. This happened all the more easily—so it seems—as Islamic art was deprived of a most vital and profound dimension through the religious interdiction of images. We have quoted all these judgements in their most acute form, well knowing that few European scholars would subscribe to all of them. Yet is it good to look these judgements in the face for they will help us by their very limitation to point out the view that really corresponds to the nature of Islamic art.

Let us first consider the last of the afore-mentioned reproaches, that which concerns the religious interdiction of images. This interdiction is two-fold: on the one hand there is the Koranic condemnation of idolatry which from the general Muslim point of view involves all visual representation of God in any form, the nature of God being beyond all description even in words. On the other hand there are the sayings of the Prophet according to which wanting to imitate the Creator's work by imitating the form of living beings and particularly the form of man is irreverent and even blasphemous. This last injunction has not always and everywhere been strictly observed, since it concerns more the intention than the deed: in the Persian and Indian world especially, it was argued that an image which does not claim to imitate the real being but is no more than an allusion to it, is allowed. This is one of the reasons for the non-illusory style of Persian miniatures, the absence of shadows and perspective in them. However, no mosque has ever been decorated with anthropomorphic images.

If we consider things superficially, we may be tempted to liken the Islamic point of view to that of Puritanism which ignores symbolism and therefore rejects all sacred art as a lie. Symbolism is based on the analogy between the different degrees of Being: as Being is one (*al-wujūdu wāḥid*), everything that is or exists must in some way reflect its eternal source. Islam by no means ignores this law, which the Koran proclaims in a thousand metaphors: *wa in min shay'in illa yusabbiḥu biḥamdih* (there is nothing which does not exalt His praise; Koran, 17.44). It is not by disregard for the sacred character of creation that Islam proscribes human images; on the contrary, it is because man is the viceregent (*khalīfah*) of God on earth, as the Koran teaches. The Prophet explained that God created Adam "in His form" (*'alā ṣūratih*), "form," in this case, meaning qualitative likeness, for man is gifted with faculties which reflect the seven "personal" qualities of God, namely Life, Knowledge, Will, Power, Hearing, Seeing and Speech.

A comparison between the Islamic and the Christian attitude towards the image of man will aid us to outline things more exactly. In response to the Byzantine iconoclasm, more or less influenced by the Islamic example, the seventh oecumenic Council justified the use of icons in liturgy with the following argument: God is indescribable in Himself; but since the divine Logos assumed human nature, he reintegrated it into its original form and penetrated it with divine beauty. In representing the human form of Christ, art reminds us of the mystery of incarnation. No doubt, there is a sharp distinction between

this point of view and that of Islam, but nevertheless both refer to a common basis, namely the theomorphic character of man.

Here it is worth mentioning that one of the deepest explanations of the Christian attitude towards sacred art has been given by the famous Sufi Muḥyi-d-dīn Ibn `Arabī, *ash-shaikh al-akbar*, who writes in his *al futūḥat al-makkiyyah*: "The Byzantines developed the art of painting to its perfection, because for them the unique nature (*fardāniyyah*) of Sayyidnā `Isā as expressed in his image, is the foremost support of concentration on Divine Unity." As this witness proves, the symbolic role of an image is not in itself unintelligible to contemplative Muslims, although, in obedience to the Koranic law, they will always reject the use of sacred images, thus giving precedence to *tanzih* (incomparability) over *tashbih* (analogy). In a way, the first of the two "aspects"—that of divine incomparability or transcendence—even absorbs the theomorphic character of man. In fact, the seven universal qualities which constitute the divine "form" of Adam, namely life, knowledge, will, power, hearing, seeing and speech, escape all visual representation; an image has neither life nor knowledge nor power nor any of these qualities; it reduces man to his corporeal limits. Although limited in man, the seven qualities are potential bearers of a divine Presence, according to the *hadith qudsi* : ". . . I shall be the ear by which he hears, the eye by which he sees," and so on. There is something in man which no natural means of expression may render; the Koran says: "We offered the trust (*amanah*) unto the heavens and the earth and the hills, but they shrank from bearing it and were afraid of it. And man assumed it" (Koran, 33.72). This trust is merely potential in ordinary man: it is actual in perfect man, in Messengers (*rusul*), Prophets (*anbiyā*) and Saints (*awliyā*); in them, it even overflows from the interior to the exterior, shining forth in their whole corporeal appearance. Fearing to offend this divine trust in man, Islamic art always shrinks from depicting the Messengers, Prophets and Saints.

Instead of "Islamic iconoclasm" we prefer to say "Islamic aniconism," for the absence of icons in Islam has not merely a negative but a positive role. In excluding all anthropomorphic images, at least within religious precincts, Islamic art aids man to be entirely himself; instead of projecting his soul outside of himself, he will rest in his ontological centre where he is at once the viceregent (*khalīfah*) and the slave (*'abd*) of God. Islamic art as a whole aims at creating an ambiance which helps man to realize his primordial dignity; it therefore avoids everything that could be an "idol," even in quite a relative and provisional degree; nothing shall stand between man and the invisible Presence of God.

Thus Islamic art creates a void; in fact, it eliminates all the turmoil and passionate suggestions of the world and builds in their stead an order expressing equilibrium, serenity and peace. From this, one will immediately understand how central the position of architecture is in Islam. Although the Prophet said that God favoured his community by giving it the whole surface of the earth as a place of prayer, it is architecture which, in populated regions, has to re-establish the conditions of purity and calm elsewhere granted by nature. As for the beauty of virgin nature, which is like the imprint of the Creator's hand, it is realized by architecture on another level, nearer to human intelligence and therefore more limited, in a way, but none the less free from the arbitrary rule of individual passions.

In a mosque, the believer is never a mere visitor; he is so to say at home, though not in the ordinary sense of the word: when he has purified himself by ritual ablution, being thereby freed from accidental alterations, and then recites the revealed words of the Koran, he symbolically returns to the "station" of Adam, which is in the centre of the world. According to this, all Muslim architects endeavoured to create a space entirely resting in itself and showing everywhere, in each of its "stations," the plenitude of spatial qualities. They reached this aim by means as different as the horizontal hall with pillars, like the ancient mosque of Medina, or the concentric domes of Turkey. In none of these interiors do we feel drawn in any particular direction, either forwards or upwards; nor are we oppressed by their spatial limits. It has rightly been remarked that the architecture of a mosque excludes all tension between Heaven and Earth.

A Christian basilica is essentially a way leading from the outside world to the main altar. A Christian dome ascends to heaven or descends to the altar. The whole architecture of a church reminds the believer that the divine Presence emanates from the Eucharist on the altar as a light shining in the darkness. The mosque has no liturgical centre; its *mihrah* merely indicates the direction of Mecca, while its whole order of space is made to suggest a Presence which en-compasses the believer on all sides.

It is most revealing to see how the great Turkish architect Sinan, adopting the constructive scheme of Hagia Sophia, developed it according to Islamic vision until he reached the perfect order of the Selimiye-Mosque in Adrianople; the huge cupola of Hagia Sophia is supported by two half cupolas and extended by several small apses. The whole interior space is elongated in the sense of the liturgical axis, its different parts melting into each other, in a kind of indefinite immensity. Sinan built the main cupola at Adrianople on an octagon supported by straight walls on the cardinal sides and by vaulted apses on the four diagonal sides, creating a kind of clearly cut jewel, the contours of which are neither fluctuating nor narrow.

When Muslim architects took over and enlarged some Christian basilicas, they often changed the interior plan so that what has been its length became its width; frequently—and even besides such transformations—the arcades in a mosque run across the main space; they do not "progress" in a certain direction like the arcades framing the nave of a cathedral, they rather stem the movement of the space without interrupting it, thus inviting one to rest.

Muslim architects spent much attention and love on the form of arcades. No wonder that the Arab name for arcades—*rawq* or *riwâq*—is almost synonymous with beautiful, graceful and pure. European art knows mainly two forms of the arch, the Roman arch, which is plain, rational and static, and the so called Gothic arch—indirectly derived from Islamic art—with its ascending movement. Islamic art developed a great variety of arch forms, of which two are most typical: the Persian arch in the shape of a ship's keel, and the Moorish arch in the shape of a horseshoe with a more or less accentuated point. Both arches combine the two qualities mentioned above, namely static calm and lightness. The Persian arch is generous and gracious at the same time; it ascends without effort like the calm flame of an oil lamp protected from the wind. As for the Moorish arch, its extreme width is balanced by the rectangular frame: a synthesis of stability and amplitude; there is in it a breathing without movement; it is the image of a space expanding inwardly by an

overabundance of beatitude; in the words of the Koran : "*a lam nashrah laka şadrak ...*" ("Did we not widen your breast ?" Koran, 94.1).

A simple arcade, built according to right measure, has the virtue of transforming space from a purely quantitative reality into one which is qualitative. Qualitative space is no longer mere extension; it is experienced as a state of being (*wajd*). Thus traditional architecture favours contemplation.

Between the architecture of a mosque and that of a private Muslim house, there is a difference in plan but not in style, for each Muslim dwelling is a place of prayer: the same rites are celebrated here as there. In general, Islamic life is not separated into a sacred and profane domain, just as the community is not divided into consecrated clergy and laymen: each Muslim with a sound mind and morality can act as *Imam*. This unity of life manifests itself by the homogeneousness of its frame: whether it be the interior of a mosque or that of a private house, its law is equilibrium, calm and purity. Its decoration must never contradict the idea of poverty. In fact, ornament in Islamic architecture, in its rhythm and regularity, helps to create a void by dissolving the raw body of wall and pillars and thus enhancing the effect of the great white surfaces so characteristic of Muslim interiors.

The floor of a traditional Muslim dwelling, like the floor of a mosque, is never trodden on with shoes, nor are the rooms filled with furniture.

Much of the unity of Islamic life is lost when the clothes worn in every day life are no longer adapted to the prescribed rites. Costume, indeed, is part of the frame which Islamic art created for Islam, and the art of dressing is not the least of Islamic arts; as the Koran commands explicitly: "O sons of Adam, take your ornament whenever you approach a mosque" (Koran 7, 31). The traditional masculine costume shows many variations, but it always expresses the role which Islam endows man with, that is to be the viceregent and the slave of God. Therefore, it is at the same time dignified and sober, we might even say: majestic and poor; it veils the animal nature of man, enhances his features, dignifies his gestures and makes easy the different postures of ritual prayer. Modern European costume, on the contrary, while it claims to free man from his servitude (*ubūdiyyah*), in fact denies his primordial dignity.

We have seen that the exclusion of images from Islamic art—more severe in Sunnite than in Shiite countries—has a positive meaning, even on the level of art, as it restores to man the dignity which elsewhere is so to speak usurped by his image. The immobility with which Islamic art is reproached is in a certain sense connected with the absence of images, for it is by making images of himself that man changes. He projects his soul into the ideal he shaped, thus influencing himself until he is driven to change the image he made of himself, which in its turn will awaken his reaction, and so on, in a chain without end, as we can observe in European art since the so-called Renaissance, that is, since the purely symbolical role of the image was forgotten. Sacred art is normally protected by its traditional rules from falling into that torrent of change. However, the use of anthropomorphic images is always fragile, for man is inclined to transfer his own psychic limitations to the image he shapes, in spite of all canonical prescriptions, and then sooner or later he rebels against it, not only against the image but also against what it stands for: those epidemic outbursts of blasphemy which marked certain epoques of European history are not conceivable without the existence and actual decay of anthropomorphic religious

art. Islam cuts this whole problem at its root. In this respect as well as in others it manifests itself as the last of religions, one which takes heed of the weakness of actual man, and reveals itself as a return to primordial religion. The criticized "immobility" of Islamic art is simply the absence in it of all subjective motives; it is an art which is unconcerned with psychological problems and retains only those elements which are valuable at all times.

This is the reason for the extraordinary development of geometrical ornament in Islamic art. Attempts have been made to explain this development by the fact that the prohibition of images created a void to be filled by another kind of art. But this is not conclusive; the arabesque is no compensation for images, it is rather their opposite and the very negation of figurative art. By transforming a surface into a tissue of colours or into a vibration of light and shadows, the ornament hinders the mind from fixing itself on any particular form saying "I," as an image says "I" The centre of an arabesque is everywhere and nowhere, each "affirmation" is followed by its "negation" and vice versa.

There are two typical forms of the arabesque; one of them is geometrical interlacing made up of a multitude of geometrical stars, the rays of which join into an intricate and endless pattern. It is a most striking symbol of that contemplative state of mind which conceives "unity in multiplicity and multiplicity in unity" (*al-wahdatu fil-kathrati wa-l-kathratu fil-wahdah*).

The arabesque commonly so called is made up of vegetable motives, stylized to the point of losing all resemblance with nature and obeying only the laws of rhythm. It is a real graphic of rhythms, each line undulating in complementary phases, and each surface having its inverse counterpart. The arabesque is at the same time logical and rhythmic, mathematical and melodious, and this is most significant for the spirit of Islam in its equilibrium of love and intellectual sobriety.

In such an art, the individuality of the artist necessarily disappears, without his creative joy being abated; it is simply less passionate and more contemplative. Suppression of all creative joy is the privilege of modern industry alone. As for traditional art, be it even at the level of mere handicraft, its beauty proves the profound pleasure involved in it.

Moreover, the universal character of geometrical ornament—the fundamental elements of which are essentially the same, whether they appear in a bedouin rug or in a refined urban decoration—corresponds perfectly to the universal nature of Islam, uniting the nomads of the desert to the scholars of the city and this late epoque of ours to the times of Abraham.

By what we have said up to this point, we have implicitly answered the critics of Islamic art mentioned at the outset. We have still to say what the notion of art means in Islamic thought. From this point of view, art can never be dissociated either from a craft (*san'ah*), as its material foundation, or from a science (*'ilm*) regularly transmitted. Art (*fann*) in its specific meaning partakes of both craft and science. The latter moreover has to be not only a rational instruction but also the expression of a wisdom (*hikmah*) which links things to their universal principles.

The Prophet said: "God prescribed that every thing should be accomplished to perfection"—we might also translate: "in beauty" (*inna-Llaha kataba-l-ihsana `ala kulli*

*shay*). The perfection or the beauty of a thing lies in its praising God; in other words, it is perfect or beautiful in so far as it reflects a divine quality. Now we cannot realise perfection in anything unless we know how that thing can be a mirror of God.

Taking architecture as an example, we see that its material foundation is the mason's craft while the science involved in it is geometry. In traditional architecture, geometry is not limited to its more or less quantitative aspects, as in modern engineering, for instance; it has also a qualitative aspect, which manifests itself in the laws of proportion by which a building acquires its almost inimitable unity. The laws of proportion are traditionally based on the division of the circle by inscribed regular figures. Thus all measures of a building are ultimately derived from the circle, which is an evident symbol of the Unity of Being containing in itself all possibilities of existence. How many cupolas there are with polygonal bases and how many vaults composed of alveolar squinches which remind us of this symbolism!

Considering the internal hierarchy of art, built on craft, science and contemplative wisdom, it is easy to understand that a traditional art may be destroyed either from the top or from the bottom: Christian art has been corrupted by the loss of its spiritual principles; Islamic art gradually disappears because of the destruction of the traditional crafts.

We have mainly spoken about architecture, with regard to its central role in the Islamic world. Ibn Khaldun, indeed, relates to it most of the minor arts, such as carpentry, joinery, sculpture in wood or stucco, mosaic in earthenware, decorative painting and even carpet-making, so characteristic of the Islamic world. Even calligraphy can be related to architecture in the form of decorative inscriptions; in itself however, Arabic calligraphy is not a minor art; since it is used for the writing of the Koran, it occupies the highest rank among all Islamic arts.

It would lead us too far to display the whole fan of Islamic arts; let it suffice to consider two extreme poles of visual art: architecture and calligraphy. The first of these is the art which is the most conditioned by material circumstances, whereas the second is the freest of all arts in this respect. It is none the less dominated by severe rules with regard to the distinctive forms of the letters, proportions, continuity of rhythm and choice of style. On the other hand, possible combinations of letters are nearly unlimited and styles vary from the rectilinear *kūfi* to the most fluid *naskhi*. The synthesis of utmost regularity and utmost liberty lends Arabic calligraphy its royal character. In no other visual art does the spirit of Islam breathe more openly.

The frequency of Koranic inscriptions on the walls of mosques and other buildings reminds us of the fact that the whole of Islamic life is interwoven with quotations from the Koran and spiritually supported by its recitation as well as by prayers, litanies and invocations drawn from it. If we are allowed to call the influence emanating from the Koran a spiritual vibration—and we find no better word for it, since that influence is at the same time of a spiritual and of an auditive nature—we may well say that all Islamic art must needs bear the imprint of that vibration. Thus visual Islamic art is but the visual reflection of the Koranic word; it cannot be otherwise. However, there is a paradox, for if we look for Koranic models of art, we cannot find them, either in the contents of the Koran or in its form. On the one hand, except in certain Persian miniatures, Islamic art does not reflect the stories and parables contained in the Koran, as Christian art for instance depicts the episodes of both Testaments, nor is there any cosmology in the

Koran, which could be translated into architectural schemes, as Vedic cosmology finds its expression in Hindu architecture. On the other hand, it is in vain to search in the Koran for something like a principle of composition which might be transposed into any art. The Koran is of a startling discontinuity; it shows no logical order nor any interior architecture; even its rhythm, powerful as it is, obeys no constant rule, whereas Islamic art is all made of order, clarity, hierarchy, crystalline form. In fact the vital link between the Koranic word and visual Islamic art must be not sought for on the level of formal expression. The Koran is no work of art but something entirely different, notwithstanding the overwhelming beauty of many of its passages, nor does Islamic art derive from its literal meaning or its form, but from its *ḥaqīqah*, its non-formal essence.

At its beginning Islam had no need for art, no religion cares for art when it first enters the world. The need for a protective frame made up of visual and auditive forms comes later, just like the need for extensive commentaries of the revealed book, although every genuine expression of a religion is already included as a latent possibility in its original manifestation.

Islamic art is fundamentally derived from *tawhīd*, that is from an assent to or contemplation of Divine Unity. The essence of *at-tawhīd* is beyond words; it reveals itself in the Koran by sudden and discontinuous flashes. Striking the plane of visual imagination, these flashes congeal into crystalline forms, and it is these forms in their turn which constitute the essence of Islamic art.