

Titus Burckhardt in Fez, 1972-1977

by

Jean-Louis Michon

Source: *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Vol. 16, No. 1 & 2 (Winter-Spring, 1984).

© World Wisdom, Inc.

www.studiesincomparativereligion.com

At this time, when the many friends of Titus Burckhardt are placing their tributes and tokens of admiration and gratitude on his grave, I should be sadly remiss if I failed to recall, if only briefly, the splendid, unostentatious and largely unrecognized work he carried out in Fez between 1972 and 1977. He was, during those five years, the expert consultant designated by UNESCO and the Moroccan Government to safeguard the Kingdom's "intellectual capital"—as the Moroccans themselves call it.

Towards the end of 1971 I went to see Titus Burckhardt in his retreat at Lutry to ask whether he would agree to go to Morocco on a mission to conserve that country's traditional artistic heritage. He agreed unhesitatingly. Although he was then over sixty and living, with his wife, in one of those favored spots which it is so hard to turn one's back on—a rustic house, with a garden terrace overlooking Lake Léman and the Alps—he reacted like a doctor called to the bedside of a patient, or like a man who hears that his betrothed is longing for him. For Titus Burckhardt's relationship with Morocco was a beautiful and longstanding love story, which began in the 1930's and which was faithfully continued and renewed by frequent visits later.

Patiently and firmly he waited for the lengthy formalities that precede the nomination of international experts to be completed. A few months later, we left for Morocco together. Once there, it did not take us long, in consultation with the Moroccan authorities to draw up a joint working schedule and to allot tasks in the zones where we would start our survey.

Titus Burckhardt had a profound knowledge of the city of Fez, and had written a masterly work¹ about it. It therefore seemed advisable for him to take up residence there in order to study its problems and to decide how best to safeguard not only its monuments but also its urban fabric and crafts.

I should be attempting the impossible if I were to try to cover several years of activity on the part of a man whose speed of work and concentration were astounding. I shall therefore limit

¹ *Fez, Stadt des Islam*, "Stätten des Geistes", Urs Graf-Verlag, Olten, 1960. It is hard to see why this work, a masterpiece of intelligence about traditional life, still exists solely in the original German edition, which has, moreover, been out of print for some time. An English edition is now being prepared, and we hope that a French edition, for which there is already a translation, will appear in the not too distant future.

myself to two aspects to which Titus Burckhardt never ceased to devote much time, so convinced was he of their usefulness and value: his educational activities, as both writer and speaker, and his field work, as investigator and organizer. In each of these roles, Titus Burckhardt excelled.

As a speaker, he showed himself to be an exceptional teacher. With the humility that was natural to him, he always managed to keep his talks on a level easily understood by ordinary people. Though he never stooped to over-simplification or popularization, he managed to present key ideas and basic concepts with great clarity, and he would then proceed to develop them from various angles with a kind of benevolent slowness which enabled his audience to grasp what he was saying almost in spite of themselves. In just one hour of leisurely talking, interspersed with pauses designed to ease the processes of thought and assimilation, he would keep to a few main themes, illustrating each of them with a number of particularly striking examples.

To illustrate the above, let me offer the outline of a talk given by Titus Burckhardt in April of 1973 to some prominent citizens of Fez who had just formed an Association to conserve the Medina. This was entitled, "Fez, a Human City". He began with a perceptive and intuitive vision of the basis of Moslem "civilization", which gives the Islamic city, and Islamic town planning, its special value: "This way of life, of which Fez is the crystallization, answers to the needs of the whole man, who is at once body, soul and spirit, having physical needs, an affective life of the soul and an intelligence which surpasses both these planes . . ." The explanations which then followed, and which flowed naturally from this premise, amounted to a complete lecture on the city and on the importance of water (Fez is built on a watercourse, with tributaries and underground springs) as a necessary element of material life, aesthetic pleasure and ritual purity; the inward-looking architecture, so well suited not only to the city's climate and social needs but also to a particularly spiritual perspective; the streets and passage-ways which are "dramatic" in feeling, "now narrow now wide, with many twists and turns like the passage-ways that guard the entrance to private houses. Wisdom and prudence have always counseled Fez against giving her heart away too easily"; and, finally, the city's crafts, which are uniquely able to meet physical requirements, delight the soul and allow a spiritual dimension to shine through them. "It is in the nature of art to rejoice the soul, but not all art possesses a spiritual dimension. In the case of Moroccan art, this dimension is manifested directly by its intellectual transparency and by the fact that this geometrically and rhythmically harmonious art is addressed not to a particular kind of intelligence, stamped with passionate tendencies to a greater or lesser degree, but rather to intelligence itself, in its universal aspect".

Important as these considerations undoubtedly were for grasping the normative role of the Islamic city and for justifying the immense labor of conservation and repair that had become necessary, it was never the intention of Titus Burckhardt to let them remain merely theoretical. In his eminently practical fashion, he set about putting them into practice with outstanding professionalism and competence. How did he learn to be at once by turns architect, city-planner, sociologist, researcher and organizer? His *curriculum vitae* contained none of the diplomas and

university degrees which are considered so vital to-day. He probably inherited an innate artistic sense from his father, the Basle sculptor Carl Burckhardt. More important than this, though, was his lucid vision, the clear-sightedness, which Pastor Borel, in his sensitive tribute at the funeral so aptly described as the “the limpid gaze he would turn on all beings and all things”.

Once defined and classified, how were the permanent values of the city—its water resources, architecture, urban texture, its intellectual and artistic life—to be conserved and rehabilitated?

It did not take Titus Burckhardt long to realize that no strategy would succeed without an inventory of the architectural heritage. This had never been done before. Accordingly he set to work alone. Every morning he went down to the Medina with his drawing board and camera. Once there he would start looking for the leading personalities in the district and, with their help, would meet the owners of the large middle-class houses, who would then show him around the houses whilst he began an inventory, made sketches and took photographs. In this way, an album describing some 70 beautiful Fez houses was prepared, followed by a similar inventory of larger and smaller sanctuaries, mosques, mausoleums and *zawiyyas*. Each of these was identified and reasons given for its artistic importance. Its state of preservation was also described. Later, these studies were the subject of many preliminary documents that often remained anonymous and which are now kept in a voluminous file entitled: “Outline of the town plan for Fez” published, with appendices, in 1980.

Titus Burckhardt’s artistic taste and judgment were infallible. He was devoted to Moroccan crafts, being well aware of their importance in shaping the kind of setting for daily life through which the spiritual values shone; and many of his friends were craftsmen. He walked around the Medina as a careful observer who saw not only the old or contemporary products of real quality that were displayed in the shops and bazaars, but also the “hybrids”, often made by semi-industrial processes and bought by unwary tourists in the belief that they were genuine. With unflinching courtesy, he would express admiration and encouragement to the sellers of the old-quality craftsmanship and, to the others, he would subtly indicate his reservations about the value of objects that could tarnish the reputation of Moroccan craftsmanship.

Having myself been called upon to look into the situation of the crafts throughout Morocco, and then to prepare recommendations for their preservation and renewal, I had the privilege of working with Titus Burckhardt to develop a program of instruction for the traditional art professions in Morocco. Together, we worked out a plan which included the founding of special schools designed both to teach art and to provide general instruction. Let me quote the following passages from the presentation prepared for the Ministry of Cultural Affairs in Rabat, in which Titus Burckhardt has expressed, with his usual succinctness and perceptivity, exactly what these art schools should consist of and why it was vital that particular emphasis should be placed on apprenticeship in certain subjects:

It is important not to lose sight of the fact that the major goal of the proposed schools is to reverse the state of sheer decadence into which craftsmanship has fallen. Tourism, which causes certain arts to flourish, also corrupts them, by encouraging concessions that distort the style and thus lead, from one compromise to the next, to the final loss of the inimitable character and uniquely precious quality of Moroccan art. It is well-known that tourism tends to destroy what it most admires. The only way to bring this fatal trend to a stop is to set up strict artistic training procedures, whereby master craftsmen trained in the purest traditional technique, would wish to pass on its full form and spirit to their pupils....

Schools of traditional art must by no means be allowed to become some sort of refuge for pupils who are not gifted enough to study at normal schools. On the contrary, art schools must represent an elite at the level of visual talents....

The importance of calligraphy does not depend upon the simple fact that Maghrebi ornamentation includes epigraphy: Arab calligraphy, with its synthesis of rhythm and form is, as it were, the key to Islamic art as well as being the touchstone for the mastery of a given style.

The practice of calligraphy in all its stylistic variations determines a certain way of seeing and thinking, which is found in all the arts we are discussing here.

As for the *geometry of regular figures*, this is the basis of the decorative arts of the Maghreb. The pupil must learn to make these figures with a ruler and compass, build up one figure from another and recognize the laws of proportion that flow from this. This use of geometry has of course nothing in common with the analytical geometry taught in mathematics classes.

The teaching of *art history* must be essentially visual; the goal is not to fill the minds of the pupils with dates and scientific terminology—but to nourish their visual imagination. This history—or typology must concentrate, without being exclusive, on Islamic art, whose many variations contain lessons that are of direct relevance to the pupils of these schools. Is there, after all, anything more instructive for a pupil being initiated into the art of *zellij*, for example, than the study of enameled terra-cotta decorations from Bokhara or Samarkand? Examples of this kind exist *ad infinitum*, and it is well to recall in this context that the various Islamic nations have always exchanged techniques and arts without thereby compromising specific local features.

Sadly enough, up to the present, his advice has not been followed in any concrete fashion. Nonetheless it is this advice, formulated in different ways and upon different occasions, which permeates the entire philosophy of the rehabilitation and protection program for the historic city of Fez, a program pioneered for over two years by Titus Burckhardt alone, who became its guiding force from the time that the Town-Planning Workshop was set up to establish a master plan for the preservation of the Medina and the future development of the city as a whole.

Once this plan was completed by the end of 1977, Titus Burckhardt went quietly home to the shores of Lake Léman; he returned to Fez in April 1978 for a public lecture entitled “Fez and the Art of Islam”² and to describe the sanctuaries of Fez, their typology and architectural features, to a group of young civil servants from local government offices whose job it would shortly be to interest public opinion in conservation measures.

One year later, also in Fez, he was a participant in a seminar arranged by the committee of the Aga Khan Prize for Islamic Architecture—he was a member of the Grand Jury—on the subject of “Architecture as a Symbol and a sign of Identity”; in the course of the debates, Titus Burckhardt intervened on several occasions to emphasize and defend the symbolic and central nature of Islamic architecture. In April 1980 he went to Fez for the last time as a guest of honor at the ceremonies organized by the Head of UNESCO to inaugurate a worldwide campaign to save Fez.

This was to be his last earthly journey. Already much weakened by the illness from which he was never to recover, he returned home with the feeling that, despite the many speeches, no concrete step had yet been taken towards the realization of long overdue protective measures.

Today, Fez remains the same seriously overpopulated metropolis, with the same, outworn infrastructure, which Titus Burckhardt wished to rejuvenate by giving it a new lease of life capable of bearing witness to the most noble values of Islam, and of handing them on to future generations. But Fez is a metropolis where many miracles have already occurred and where, some day, the far-seeing ideas implanted by Titus Burckhardt may well break ground and burst into flower; God grant that we do not waste his labors, *Amīn*.

Geneva, April 13th, 1984

² Published in *Actes du Séminaire expérimental d'animation culturelle*, Fez, March 7th-April 28th, 1978, International Fund for the Promotion of Culture, UNESCO—Conférences, Vol. I, pp. 109-119.