

CHAPTER XIII

THE PRINCIPLE OF ESTHETICS

I. MUSLIM ARTISTIC UNITY AND ITS CHALLENGERS

It is idle to dispute the unity of Islamic art. Although the historian will recognize a large variety of motifs, of materials, of styles differentiated geographically or chronologically, the overwhelming fact of all Islamic art is its unity of purpose and form. From Cordoba to Mindanao, the arts of these lands once converted to Islam betrayed the same constitutive characterization and development; a preference for stylization, for formalism generative of movements, for limitlessness. All Islamic art has recoured to and used the highly emotive words of the Quran and the *ḥadīth*, of Arabic or Persian poetry or of the Islamic wisdom literature, and rendered them in Arabic calligraphy. Likewise, all Muslims across the ages have responded with the deepest emotion to the chanted recitation of the Quran and of the *adhān*, even when they understood little or nothing of the Arabic meanings involved. In such cases, their discursive reason and understanding were not at work, but their sensory and intuitive faculties went into full play, apprehending the aesthetic values in evidence. Indeed, their aesthetic comprehension was just as strong as that of those whose theoretical understanding was competent enough to read and to understand, for in the apprehension of aesthetic value, immediate intuition is always prior. The discursive understanding here plays a secondary role by lending, as it were, a helping hand only.

Such was the power of the aesthetic values of Islam and such was the artistic unity they produced out of the most diverse assemblage of cultures, that the traveller who moved from the eastern shores of the Atlantic to the western shores of the Pacific did so in territory made familiar by its Islamic architecture, decorated with arabesques and Arabic calligraphy. In the daily lives of men of different race, color, language and life-style,

he could behold an identical sensitivity to the literary, visual, and musical values Islam had brought.¹

In an article entitled "Misconceptions on the Nature of Islamic Art," to which the reader is referred,² we have given samples of this so-called "scholarship" of the orientalists in the fields of decoration, painting, architecture, literature, music and theory of art. In each case, we have taken the position of one great Western scholar (e.g., Richard Ettinghausen, H.G. Farmer, M.S. Dimand, T.W. Arnold, E. Herzfeld, K.A.C. Creswell, G. von Grunebaum), whose claim to fame is partly or wholly due to his contribution in this field. In each case, the scholar's argument has been analyzed and refuted. To a man, every one held the erroneous assumption—nay, prejudice—that far from contributing anything to the arts of Muslim people throughout the ages, Islam has impeded or restricted, and thereby impoverished, their artistic tendencies, that the only aesthetic growth Islam was responsible for was the ubiquitous use of Quranic verses in Arabic which Herzfeld called "bigotry" and in the breach of which—through the translation of the Quran into languages—Ettinghausen saw with no little relish as the beginning of the end of that monopoly. Every one of them tried to show that whatever art free of "bigotry" the Muslims have produced was in spite of Islam and against its injunctions. According to them, the Muslim nobility or royalty enjoyed and patronized figurative representations in their palaces and libraries, as well as music which "procures drunkenness and fornication," in spite of Islam. Little did they realize that even these "sinful" arts were fully Islamic, aesthetically speaking, not to speak of the infinitesimal place they occupy in the total artistic production of the Muslim world.

Some of them even attempted psychoanalytic explanations. *Horror vacui* they contended, was the reason why the Muslim artist covered all surfaces with design. Others advanced the opposite: the Muslim artist, they reasoned, was a color-hedonist who naively stimulated a passion for empty, bright flashes of color, thus reducing the toil and ardor of geniuses over centuries to a mere *Reizfähigkeit* of some color-spoilt eccentrics.

¹The evidence for this judgment is the fact that everywhere throughout the Muslim world the same aesthetic values predominate. At the top of the valuational hierarchy stands the virtue of copying the Qur'an in beautiful Arabic calligraphy; decorating with its verses one's house, mosques, and public buildings, chanting it in improvisations based on a few notes of a scale, and utilizing its phrases to decorate literary tableaux.

²See this author's article "Misconceptions of the Nature of the Work of Art in Islam," *Islam and the Modern Age*, vol. 1, no. 1 (May 1970), pp. 29-49.

Unfortunately, it never occurred to any one of them that they were judging Islamic art by the norms and standards of Western art; and no one ever voiced the charge. Their interpretation of the artworks as expressions of Muslim culture were blunders at which intelligence blushes. Except for minor flashes of vision by Titus Burckhardt and Louis Massignon, and the cool self-restraint of Earnst Kuhnel on matters of interpretation, the historians of Islamic art have unanimously judged that art by standards of Western esthetics. Every one of them stood before the absence of figures, of drama, of naturalism, in utter bewilderment. No reader of their works could miss their confusion at not finding something of Western art to which they could relate, or the spiritual revulsion with which they passed their prejudgement of Islamic art.

In yet another article,³ we have analyzed the nature of Greek art, and of the Near Eastern artistic tradition in reaction to Greek art since Alexander's invasion. The essence of Greek art is naturalism. However, this is not to be understood as naive, photographic imitation of nature. Rather, it is sensory representation of an *a priori* idea which nature seeks to embody forth, but hardly ever succeeds, to do so. All creatures are therefore partial instantiations of the ideas of nature. Nature has implanted in each of its creatures, an idea akin to *arete* of ancient Greek *paideia*. Human portraiture in stone is, according to his theory, the highest art. The idea of man is nature's richest and most complex entelechy. Its depth and inner diversity constitute an infinite mine for the artist to probe, to explore and to represent. For this reason, man was "the measure of all things"; he was the crown of creation, the carrier and concretizer of all values, the highest and the lowest. For this reason divinity itself was conceived in his image, religion was humanism, and worship of divinity became a contemplation of the infinite depth and diversity of man's inmost nature. It was necessary that the whole art of Hellenic civilization be made to reflect this essence of Hellenic culture.

The Near East presents us with a diametrically opposite tradition. Here, man is only an instrument of divinity, created by the latter to serve. Man is never an end in himself and certainly not the measure of anything. It is divinity that furnishes the standard. Its norms are the law for man. There is no Prometheus; only a servant in the divine manor, blest when he fulfills the command, unblessed when he falters, and doomed when he defies. God's divinity, however, is a *mysterium*, a *tremendum* and a

³See this author's article, "On the Nature of the Work of Art in Islam," *Islam and the Modern Age*, vol. 1, no. 2 (August 1970), pp. 68-81.

fascinosum. As such, it is man's obsession, his *idée-fixe*. His constant preoccupation is the what and how of the divine will; his destiny is to be God-bound. From this, man drew his significance, his pride and his cosmic status. Just as necessarily, the whole art of Near Eastern civilization was an expression of this aspect of Near East culture. The natural, and above all the human-natural, is the mightiest contender for the divine place, and Prometheus is not at all a story but a mythopoeic chronicle of man's struggle with the divine for supremacy. First, such temptations and such confusion of divinity and nature as nearby Greece and Egypt had produced must be combated and banished from consciousness; and second, all consciousness must be absorbed in the divine realm which is its source, its norm, its master and its destiny. Long before Alexander, therefore, Near Eastern art invented stylization as a breakthrough against naturalism. Certainly, this became far stronger and more emphatic when the Near East was invaded by the Greeks and Hellenism was imposed by force upon the people.

Judaism, another Near Eastern culture and religion, fought imperialist Hellenism valiantly; and Philo was perhaps its greatest casualty in matters cultural. Until its esthetic transcendentalism was partially corrupted by Western culture and religion in modern times, especially since the advent of European romanticism that furious, irrational, particularist naturalist of *la nation, das Volk, Blut und Erde*. Mother Russia, God-King-Country, etc., Judaism managed to keep its art true to the original Near Eastern vision. "Thou shalt make no graven images" was understood by the Jews not only as a defence against idolatry but as a principle of esthetics as well. Their synagogues remained artistically-empty halls except in the Muslim world where they emulated Islamic developments. Their esthetic need was filled to saturation with the poetry of holy writ, and their senses were denied all claims to assist in the vision of the divine. The divine, their faith asserted and reminded, is either intuited without such sensory aids, or it is not the divine at all. The less the senses were involved in intuiting the First Principle of all being, the more transcendent the object of that intuition, the purer the vision itself.⁴

⁴It is a necessary part of the definition of transcendence that the transcendent be perceived immediately by the rational faculty, i.e., if the senses play any role however small in the process of institution, then the object perceived would not be transcendent at all.

II. TRANSCENDENCE IN ESTHETICS

Al tawhīd means the ontological separation of the godhead from the whole realm of nature. Everything that is in or of creation is a creature, nontranscendent, subject to the laws of space and time. Nothing of it can be God or godly in any sense, especially the ontological which *al tawhīd*, as the essence of monotheism, denies. God is the totally-other-than-creation, totally-other-than-nature, and hence, transcendent. He is the only transcendent being. *Al tawhīd* further asserts that nothing is like unto Him,⁵ and hence, that nothing in creation can be a likeness or symbol for God, nothing can represent Him. Indeed, He is, by definition, beyond representation. God is He of Whom no aesthetic—hence, sensory—intuition is whatever is possible.

By aesthetic experience is meant the apprehension through what is given to sense, of an *a priori* metanatural—hence transcendent—essence which acts as the normative principle of the object beheld. It is what the object is to that ought to be. The nearer the visible object is to the essence, the more beautiful it is. In the case of living nature, of plant, animal and especially man, the beautiful is that which comes as true to the *a priori* essence as possible, so that whoever is capable of judging would be right in holding that in the esthetic object nature has articulated itself eloquently, clearly; that the beautiful object is what nature meant to say, as it does so rarely among its thousand and one shortcomings. Art is the process of discovering within nature that metanatural essence and representing in it visible form. Evidently, art is not the imitation of created nature; not the sensory representation of *natura naturata*, the objects whose “naturing” or natural reality is complete. A photographic representation which reproduces the object as it is may be valuable for illustration or documentation, for the establishment of identity. As a work of art, it is worthless. Art is the reading in nature of an essence that is non-nature, and the giving to that essence the visible from that is proper to it.⁶

As it has been defined and analyzed so far, art is necessarily the presumption to find in nature that which is not of it. But that which

فَاطِرُ السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ... لَيْسَ كَمِثْلِهِ شَيْءٌ وَهُوَ السَّمِيعُ الْبَصِيرُ (الشورى: ١١)

⁵[Allah], Creator of heaven and earth... Nothing is like unto Him; the One that hears and sees all things (42:11).

⁶Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*. tr. R.B. Haldane and J. Kemp (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Limited), vol. 1, third book, p. 217.

is not of nature is transcendent; and only that which is divine qualifies for this status. Moreover, since the *a priori* essence which is the object of esthetic apprehension is normative and beautiful, man's emotions are especially affected by it. That is why humans love the beautiful and are determined by it. Where they see the beautiful in human nature, the *a priori* metanatural essence is humanness idealized to a transcendent degree. This is exactly what the Greeks called *apotheosis*, or the transfiguration of a human into divinity. Humans are particularly prone to adore such transfigured humans and regard them as gods. Modern Western man has little toleration for any deity as far as metaphysics is concerned. But as far as ethics and conduct are concerned, the "gods" that he creates out of his idealization of human passions and tendencies are the real determinants of his action.⁷

This explains why among the ancient Greeks the arts of representing the gods as *apotheoses* of human elements, qualities, or passions, visually as in sculpture and imaginatively as in poetry and drama, were the foremost esthetic pursuits. The object they represented, namely, the god, were beautiful because they were idealizations of what human nature ought to be. Their beauty did not hide the innate conflict of each with the other gods, precisely because each was the real object of nature absolutized to its divine, i.e., supernatural, level.⁸

It is only in Rome, the theater of Greek decadence, that the supreme Greek art of sculpture degenerated into realistic, empirical portraiture of the various emperors. Even there, however, this would not have been possible without the deification of the emperor. In Greece, where the theory remained pure for centuries, the art of drama developed alongside that of sculpture precisely in order to represent the eternal conflicts of the gods with one another by means of an unfolding of a series of events in which the characters were involved. The overall purpose was the representation of their individual characters which the spectators knew were human, all too human, but which were the source of immense delight. If the dramatic events unfolding before their eyes led to a tragic end, this was regarded as necessary and innate. Its necessity removed its sting, and through catharsis it helped remove from them the guilt they felt as their immoral affirmations and pursuits. That is why the art of tragedy, born and perfected in Greece, was the apex of the literary

⁷Friedrich Nietzsche, *Works*, tr. and ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: The Viking Press, 1954), p. 459; Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche, Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* (Princeton: Princeton Press, Meridian Books, 1956), p. 102.

⁸Murray, *Five Stages* pp. 57, 60, 63.

arts as well as of all the humanities. In a rare statement of truth, the orientalist von Grunebaum said that Islam has no figurative arts (sculpture, painting and drama) because it is free of any gods incarnated or immanent in nature, gods whose activities conflict with one another or with evil.⁹ Von Grunebaum meant it as a reproach to Islam, though it is in reality Islam's prime distinction. It is the unique glory of Islam that it is absolutely free of idolatry, i.e., of the mistaking of the creature for the Creator.

Al tawhīd is not against artistic creativity; nor is it against the enjoyment of beauty. On the contrary, *al tawhīd* blesses the beautiful and promotes it. It sees absolute beauty only in God and in His revealed will or words. Accordingly, it was prone to create new art befitting its view. Starting from the premise that there is no god but God, the Muslim artist is convinced that nothing in nature may represent or express God. Therefore he stylized everything of nature he represented; i.e., through stylization, he removed it from nature as far as possible. Indeed, the object of nature was thereby so far removed from nature that it became almost unrecognizable. In his hand, stylization was a negational instrument by which he said "No!" to every natural thing, to creation itself. By denying its naturalness altogether, the Muslim artist expressed in visible form the negative aspect of the *shahādah*, namely, no other-than-God is God. This *shahādah* of the Muslim artist is indeed the equivalent of the denial of transcendence in nature.¹⁰

The Muslim artist did not stop here. His creative breakthrough came when it dawned on him that to express God in a figure of nature is one thing, and to express His inexpressibility in such a figure is another. To realize, that God—may He be glorified in His transcendence!—is visually inexpressible, is the highest aesthetic objective possible for man. God is the absolute, the sublime. To judge Him unrepresentable by anything in creation is to hold His absoluteness and sublimeness seriously. To behold Him in one's imagination as unlike all that is in creation is to behold Him as "beautiful—unlike any other object that is beautiful." Divine inexpressibility is a divine attribute whose meaning is infinity, absoluteness, ultimacy or nonconditionedness, limitlessness. The infinite is in every sense the inexpressible.¹¹

In pursuit of this line of Islamic thought, the Muslim artist invented

⁹See this author's... "On the Nature of the Work of Art in Islam."

¹⁰Ibid., p. 76.

¹¹See this author's... "Divine Transcendence..." pp. 11-19.

the art of decoration and transformed it into the "arabesque," a non-developmental design which extends in all directions *ad infinitum*. The arabesque transfigures the object of nature it decorates—whether textile, metal, vase, wall, ceiling, pillar, window or page of a book—into a weightless, transparent, floating pattern extending infinitely in all directions. The object of nature is not itself, but is "transubstantiated." It has become only a field of vision. Esthetically, the object of nature has become under the arabesque treatment a window onto the infinite. To behold it as suggestive of infinity is to recognize one of the meaning of transcendence, the only one given though only negatively—to sensory representation and intuition.¹²

This explains why most of the works of art produced by Muslims were abstract. Even where figures of plants, animals and humans were utilized, the artist stylized them adequately to deny their creatureliness, to deny that any supernatural essence is resident within them. In this endeavor, the Muslim artist was assisted by his linguistic and literary legacy. To the same end, he developed the Arabic script so as to make of it an infinite arabesque, extending nondevelopmentally in any direction the calligrapher chooses. The same is true of the Muslim architect whose building is an arabesque in its facade, elevations, skyline, as well as floor plan. *Al tawhīd* is the one denominator common to all artists whose worldview is that of Islam, however geographically or ethnically separate they may be.¹³

A. THE ISLAMIC BREAKTHROUGH IN ESTHETICS

That nothing is *rerum natura* can serve as a vehicle for expressing the divine, does not by itself rule out the possibility of an object of nature serving as a vehicle for expressing that very truth itself, namely, that the divine is indeed infinite and inexpressible. It is one thing not to express the divine because it is inexpressible, and another to express the truth embodied in this preposition. Admittedly, the challenge to express sensorily the truth that God is sensorily inexpressible staggers the imagination of any artist. But it is not impossible. Indeed, it is here that the artistic genius of Islam scored its triumphal breakthrough. We have seen that stylization, which was known and practiced in the ancient Near East

¹²See this author's... "On the Nature of the Work of Art in Islam," p. 78.

¹³See this author's... "Divine Transcendence..." p. 22.

was pushed to a new level of perfection in the reaction to Hellenic naturalism imposed by Alexander and his successors. Under Islam, now confronting that same Hellenism in Christian disguise, the Semitic reaction was as strong in the field of esthetic endeavor as in that of theological endeavor. Islam's vehement denial of the divinity of Christ is matched by its denial of naturalism in the esthetic representation of nature, by its encouragement of stylization. A stylized plant or flower is a caricature of the real object of nature, a not-nature. By drawing it, the author seems to say "No" to nature. May it not be a fitting instrument to express not-natureness, i.e., the mere negation of naturalism? Given alone, however, the stylized plant or flower would express non-nature but in an individuated way which suggests that the death of nature in that object is itself individuated. By giving the denaturalized state of the natural object, it may even express a heightened naturalism, the very opposite of the Islamic purpose, as health is often represented through sickness and life through death. Something else therefore is needed to preserve the inexpressibility of the divine being if Islam was to succeed where Judaism had failed.¹⁴

It is to this challenge that the Muslim artist now rose. His unique, creative and original solution was to represent the stylized plant or flower in indefinite repetition in order, as it were, to deny any and all individuation, and in consequence, to banish naturalism from consciousness once and for all. An identically repeated object of non-nature does express non-natureness. If the artist could, in addition, express esthetically by means of a repeated object of non-nature infinity and inexpressibility, then the result might well be tantamount to the witness, *lā ilāha illā Allāh* expressed verbally and discursively, for the inexpressibility and infinity which are the content of artistic representation would suggest themselves as qualities of non-nature. The Islamic soul therefore thought that there is a way for the visual arts to conform with the primal dictate of Semitic consciousness. But the major hurdle here is how can anything in *rerum nature*, however stylized, be the vehicle for expressing infinity or inexpressibility?

1. Arab Consciousness: Islam's Historical Substrate

To achieve a solution, Islamic consciousness fell back upon its own

¹⁴See this author's... "On the Nature of the Work of Art in Islam."

historical substrate, namely, Arab consciousness. This was the historical matter which the divine revelation informed and used as a *Sitz-im-Leben* for its occurrence, as a vehicle and carrier of divine truth. It was this consciousness, concretized in the person of Muhammad (SAAS), that received the revelation and communicated it to mankind in space and time. It was the medium of prophecy. Its achievement in the art of language and letters was indeed a miracle before Islam, and this fact determined that the mode of the new revelation be that of the literary sublime, for it was ready for and capable of carrying it.

The first instrument of Arab consciousness and the embodiment of all its categories is the Arabic language. Essentially, Arabic is made up primarily of three consonant roots, each of which is susceptible of conjugation into over three hundred different forms by changing the vocalization, adding a prefix, suffix, or "middle-fix." Whichever conjugation is affected, all words which have the same conjugal form have the same modal meaning regardless of their roots. The meaning of the root remains; but attached to it is another, a modal meaning, given to it by the conjugation and remaining always and everywhere the same.¹⁵ The language then has a logical structure, at once clear, complete and comprehensible. Once this structure is grasped, one is a master of the language, knowledge of the meaning of roots being then of secondary importance. The literary art consists in the construction of a system of concepts related to each other in such ways as to put into play the parallelisms and contrasts engendered by conjugation of the roots, while enabling the understanding to move through the web in continuous, unbroken line. An arabesque in which a thousand each of triangles, squares, circles, pentagons, hexagons and octagons are all painted with different colors and interlace with one another dazzles the eye, but not the mind. Recognizing each figure for what it is, the mind can move from one pentagon to another despite their color variance and cross the tableau from end to end, experiencing some delight at each stop with realization of the parallelism provided by the identical shapes, i.e., by the identical modalities of the various root-meanings, and of the contrast provided by the root-meanings themselves.

This constitutive character of the Arabic language is also constitutive of its poetry. Arabic poetry consists of autonomous, complete and independent verses, each of which is an identical realization of one and

¹⁵This role applies to nearly all Semitic languages as any grammatical text would indicate. The triconsonantal structure of roots is one of the most salient characteristics of Semitic linguistics.

the same metrical pattern. The poet is free to choose any one of some thirty patterns known to the tradition. But once chosen, his whole poem must conform in each part to this pattern. To hear and enjoy Arabic poetry is to grasp this pattern and, as the poem is recited, to move with the metrical flow, to expect and to receive what the pattern has anticipated. Surely the words, concepts and percept-constructs are different in each verse. That is what provides the color variation. But the structural form is one throughout.

This basic geometry of the Arabic language and of Arabic poetry enabled Arab consciousness to achieve a grasp of infinity on two dimensions. The root words are many, indeed infinite, since any new combination of any three consonants could by convention be assigned any new meaning. Arab consciousness adopts foreign roots with impervious equanimity, relying upon its conjugation mill to Arabize them thoroughly. The infinity of their number is matched by an infinity of their conjugation. There are known patterns of conjugation; a limited number of roots have been conjugated and their conjugations known and used. But a dictionary of the Arabic language such as Webster or Oxford, wherein all the words can be gathered and listed, is categorically impossible. For not all the traditionally known roots have been conjugated; the root list is never closed; not all modalities of conjugation have been used; and the list of modalities is not closed. New modalities are not ruled out by tradition-consensus, but await the genius who can justify and use them to his advantage. The Arabic language, therefore, like the Arab stream of being, is a system bright at the center (because of tradition) and fuzzy at the edges which spread indefinitely in all directions.¹⁶

To return to poetry. The metric pattern of the verses being constitutive, it does not matter for the verses of a poem whether they are read in the order the poet had composed them or in any other order. Read forward or backward, the poem is just as sweet, for the poet has taken us through the pattern with every verse; and the repetition has delighted us by disciplining our intuitive faculty to expect and to realize what we expected in the variety of facts of meanings and percept-constructs. By definition therefore, no Arabic poem is finished, closed and in any sense completed so that no addition to or continuation of it could be affected or conceived. Indeed, the Arabic poem can be extended in both directions, at its beginning and at its end without the slightest offence to its *esthétique*, if not by any man on account of personal style, then surely

¹⁶See this author's article "Islam and Art," *Studia Islamica*. fasciculi xxxvii (1973), p. 93.

by its own composer. Indeed, if we are good listeners, we would be supposed first to join the poet in his poetry-making as in a live performance and second, to continue his poem for our own benefit now that his recitation has wound us up in the momentum it generated and launched us into its own infinite poetical space. It is not an uncommon phenomenon in the Arab world for a poet, when attended by a good audience, to be “assisted” extemporarily by that audience in the recitation of his poetry which they have never heard before, or to be commented upon by addition to his poetry of more of the same.¹⁷

2. The First Work of Art in Islam: *Al Quran al Karīm*

It was this Arab consciousness which served as substrate and matrix of Islam. The Islamic revelation, *al Quran al Karīm*, came as the *chef d'oeuvre*, the sublime fulfillment of all the ideals and norms of that consciousness at once.

If anything is art, the Quran certainly is. If the mind of the Muslim has been affected by anything, it was certainly affected by the Quran. If this affecting was anywhere deep enough to become constitutive, it was so *in esthetics*. There is no Muslim whom the Quranic cadences, rhymes, and *awjuh al balāghah* (facets of eloquence) have not shaken to the very depth of his being; there is no Muslim whose norms and standards of beauty the Quran has not rekneaded and made in its own image.

This aspect of the Quran the Muslims have called its *ijāz* (power to incapacitate), its “placing the reader in front of a challenge to which he can rise, but which he can never meet.” In fact, the Quran itself defied its audience, the Arabs, with their highest literary excellence, to produce anything “like the Quran” (2:23), and chided them for their failure to do so (10:38; 11:13; 17:88). Some of the enemies of Islam among the Prophet’s contemporaries rose to the task and were humiliated by the judgement of their opponents as well as by that of their own friends.¹⁸ Muhammad (SAAS) was called “a man possessed” (18:22) and the Quran

¹⁷The same cooperative interaction between reciter or performer and audience characterized the musical and poetical recitation of medieval salons throughout the Muslim world, as the literature of the period so often indicates (e.g., *Kitāb al Aghānī* by al Iṣfahānī).

¹⁸Abd al Qādir al Jurjānī, *Dalā'il al Ijāz* (Cairo: Al Maṭba'ah al 'Arabīyah, 1351 H).

“a work of magic” (21:53; 25:4) precisely on account of its effect upon the consciousness of its hearers (69:38-52).

Everybody recognized that although the Quranic verses did not conform to any of the known patterns of poetry, they produce the same effect as poetry, indeed, to a superlative degree. Every verse is complete and perfect by itself. It often rhymes with the preceding verse or verses and contains one or more religious or moral meanings embedded in literary expressions or articulations of sublime beauty. So mighty is the momentum it generates that the recitation impels the audience irresistibly to move with it, to expect the next verse and to reach the most intense quiescence upon hearing it. Then the process starts again with the next one, two or group of three or more verses.¹⁹

Did then the Muslim Arab come out of Arabia in the seventh century with any art? Did he contribute anything relevant to the subsequently developed arts of the conquered peoples? In ignorance or prejudice, and often in a pitiable combination of both, every Western historian of Islamic art has answered, “No.” The grandfather of the discipline asserted: “The men who formed these armies [the first Arab armies of Islam] were mainly Bedouin, but even those who came from permanent settlements, such as Makkah and Madīnah, knew nothing of the art of architecture.”²⁰ The younger generation repeat after him *ad nauseam*: “From its Arabian past, the new Muslim art could draw almost nothing.”²¹

How contradictory to their allegations is the truth! All the new Islamic arts obtained from the Arab past, all that is constitutive and important, namely their spirit, their principles and method, their purpose and the way to achieve that purpose. Surely, Islamic art needed materials and themes for its efforts in the visual fields, and it got these wherever it found them. But it is offensively superficial to point to this as “borrowing” in any discussion of the meaning and significance, history or theory of the art. An art is an art by virtue of its style, its content, its manner of rendering, not by the *matériaux* it uses which, in most part, are derived by geographic or social accident. Islamic art is a unity at all because of this foundation, through Islam, in Arab consciousness. It is the categories of Arab consciousness that determined the artistic productions of all Muslims.²²

¹⁹Abū al Faraj al Isfahānī, *Kitāb al Aghānī* (Beirut: Dār al Thaqāfah, 1374/1955) witnesses to a countless number of such instances.

²⁰K. A. C. Creswell, *Early Muslim Architecture* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932-1940), vol. 1, p. 40.

²¹See: Richard Ettinghausen, “The Character of Islamic Art,” *The Arab Heritage*, ed. N. A. Fais (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1944), pp. 251-67.

²²See: Al Fārūqī, “Urūbah and Religion,” p. 211.

B. ESTHETIC REALIZATION IN THE VISUAL ARTS

Western visual art has relied almost totally on human nature, whether expressed in the human figure, the landscape, the still life or even the abstract design or no-design. Islamic visual art was not interested in human nature, but in divine nature. Since its purpose was not to express new facets of human nature, it did not esthetically discuss the figure, i.e., it did not portray the infinitesimal shifts in human appearance expressive of human nature. Human character, the *a priori* idea of man analyzable into a million details revelatory of another depth or height in the human personality—all this was for the Muslim artist just beside-the-point. The divine is his first love and his last obsession. To stand in the presence of divinity is for him the hallmark of all existence and all nobility and beauty. For this end, Muslims surround themselves with every prop and stimulus inductive of an intuition of that Presence.

First, since stylization produced a denaturalization of nature, the first Arab Muslims pushed that device to its conclusion. Further, stylization means the absence of variation, and of development from trunk to branch and leaf extremities as occurs in the vegetal kingdom. Trunk and branch became of the one thickness, one texture, and one share or shape throughout the drawing. Development was annulled also by the absence of variation. All the leaves and flowers in the same drawing were made alike. Finally, the deathblow to naturalism is repetition. By repeating the stalk, leaf and flower over and over again, and making them proceed one from another indefinitely in a manner impossible in nature, all idea of nature is banished. Repetition produces this effect so assuredly and unmistakably that it even tolerates its own enemy i.e., development—provided what has developed within a portion of the work of art is repeated in the work of art as a whole. Thus, nature is annihilated from consciousness, and un-nature is presented. If stalk, leaf and flower still leave a vestige of nature in the consciousness of the beholder, then the line, straight, broken, circular, jetting or trajecting, in free-lance designs or geometrical figures, will do the job better, beyond all doubt. It may be combined with the stalk-leaf-flower material to tell the beholder still more eloquently the “geometrizing,” un-naturalizing aspect intended. Finally, if repetition is subjected to symmetry, so that it extends equidistantly in all directions, then the work of art becomes in essence an infinite field-of-vision. By accident, only a part of this infinite field is arbitrarily singled out by the artist and framed by the physical ex-

tremities of the page, wall, panel or canvas. Where animal or human figures are used, as in the miniatures of Persia, un-nature is achieved by stylization of the animal, and by giving the human faces and bodies no individuation, no character and no personality. A man, like a flower, can represent un-nature, through stylization. But this is precisely the effacement of personality and character. That is why the greatest Persian miniatures always have a plurality of human figures indistinguishable from one another.²³ Like the Arabic poem, the miniature is made of many parts, detached from one another and each constituting an autonomous center of its own. As the audience takes its delight in holding in consciousness the literary jewels set up in the patterned body of the verses, so the spectator contemplates the minor arabesques in the carpet, door, wall, horse saddle, man's turban or clothes, etc. within a given center in the miniature, bearing in mind that there are other centers *ad infinitum* to which he may move.²⁴

In all painting and decoration in Islamic art there is movement, indeed compelling movement from one unit in a design to another, and then from one design to another, indeed, from one whole field of vision to another as in the great portals, facades or walls, is beyond question. But there is no work of Islamic art where such movement is conclusive. It is of the essence that the vision of the spectator continue; that it see the production of the continuation in the imagination; that the mind set itself in motion requesting to behold infinity. Mass, volume, space, enclosure, gravity, cohesion, tension—all these are *facta* of nature to do away with if an intuition of un-nature is to be gained. Only a design, a momentum-generating pattern will surround the Muslim lover of beauty, bursting into infinite space in all directions. This puts him in the contemplative mood requisite for an intuition of the divine presence. Not only the design on the cover of a book, an illuminated page he is reading, the carpet under his feet, the ceiling, front, inside and outside walls of his house, but its floor plan as well, constitute such an arabesque where the garden, patio, vestibule, and every chamber is an autonomous center with its own arabesque generating its own momentum.

But what is an arabesque? We have used the term above assuming the reader's knowledge of it. Rightly so! For the arabesque is immediately distinguishable from any other artistic form. It is ubiquitous in all Muslim

²³T.W. Arnold, *Painting in Islam* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1928), p. 133.

²⁴Stuart Cary Welch, *A King's Book of Kings: The Shah-Nameh of Shah Tahmasp* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1972), p. 30.

lands and constitutes the definitive characteristic or element in all Islamic art. It is rightly called "arabesque" because it is Arab as Arabic poetry and the Arabic Quran are Arab in their *esthétique*. Its presence transforms any milieu into something Islamic, and it is what gives unity to the arts of the most diverse peoples. It is readily recognizable, indeed unmistakable. Essentially, it is a design composed of many units or figures which join together and interlace in such way as to cause the spectator to move from one figure or unit to another in all directions, until the vision has crossed the work of art from physical end to end. The figure or unit is indeed complete and autonomous; but it is joined to the next figure or unit. The vision is compelled to move on, having followed the outline and perceived the design of the one figure, to seek those of the next. This constitutes its "rhythm." The movement can be dull the more detached the figures are from one another. It can be uninvolved as in the case of a simple weave of straight lines. However, the more closely related the figures are, thus compelling movement, punctuation and rhythm, and the more resistance to the movement is put up by the circuitry and brokenness of the lines, the more power is the arabesque's momentum. The greater the momentum, the easier will the mind generate the "idea of reason" for the imagination's take-off beyond the physical boundary of the work of art, as it attempts to produce what the mind has demanded. It is necessary for this process to be repeated, and so there are many different arabesques in any work of art, each covering one structural part. The purpose is obvious: the launching of the imagination upon its doomed flight. It may come with the second, third, or tenth arabesque, if not with the first.

Arabesques are floral or geometric, depending on whether they use *al tawrīq* (the stalk-leaf-flower), or the geometric *rasm* (figure) as artistic medium. The geometric figure can be *khatt* (linear) if it uses straight and broken lines, or *rāmī* (trajectory) if it uses multicentered curved ones. It may also combine all these together and be called then *rakhwī*. Arabesques are planar if they have two dimensions, as most decorative ones on walls, doors, ceilings, furniture, cloth and carpets, book covers and pages have. They can also be spatial, or three-dimensional, constructed with pillars and arches and the ribs of domes. This kind is the distinguished specialty of architecture in the Maghrib and Andalusia, and has reached its highest exemplification in the great Mosque of Cordoba and al Ḥamrāʾ palace in Granada. In al Ḥamrāʾ, a whole dome is made of innumerable interlacing arches standing on visible columns,

which only the most fervid imagination can see and trace in their course. There, the momentum is so mighty that it can propel and launch anybody willing to move with its rhythm to immediate intuition of infinity. The grand facade of a tremendous mosque, the portal in a large wall, the panel in the portal, the knob on which vision happens to fall, the miniature on a page of a book, the design on a carpet, or one's own clothes, or belt, or buckle of a belt express to the Muslim: *lā ilāha illā Allāh* by causing him to perceive the infinity and inexpressibility of the transcendent realm of notnature, of not-creation.²⁵

C. ARABIC CALLIGRAPHY: THE ULTIMATE ART OF THE CONSCIOUSNESS OF TRANSCENDENCE

So possessed has Muslim consciousness been with transcendent divinity that it desired to see it expressed everywhere; and so anxious has that consciousness been to find ways and means of proclaiming the divine Presence that its genius brought forth with the greatest effervescence of pattern-making mankind has ever known. Even the infinite variety of arabesque was not enough for its genius in the visual arts. It has used every conceivable *matériel d'art* and transfigured it into a mirror reflecting its own core. It still stood ready for one more decisive victory.

Pre-Islamic history has known the *esthétique* of the word, in literary prose and poetry. Although it was nowhere as developed as in the hands of the Arabs on the eve of Islam, the Mesopotamians and Hebrews, the Greeks and Romans, and the Hindus had pushed the frontiers of the *esthétique* of the word to no mean degree. In no case, however, was there anywhere—including Arabic—any *esthétique* of the visual word. Writing was crude and esthetically uninteresting throughout the world and, for the most part, still is. In India, Byzantium and the Christian West, writing was used in its proper capacity, namely as logical symbol. The visual (figurative) representations of the arts of Christianity and Hinduism were contemplated by writing, i.e., by the logical symbolism of the letter to express the discursive concept desired. Discursive thought need not come to rescue visual art except and unless that art is visually incapable by itself of expressing the *a priori* idea desired. Apollo and Aphrodite needed no such prop. Visually and visually alone, they spoke “divinity” to the

لَا تَدْرِكُهُ الْبَاطِنُ وَهُوَ يُدْرِكُ الْبَاطِنَ وَهُوَ اللَّطِيفُ الْخَبِيرُ (الأنعام: ١٠٣)

²⁵No sight can behold Him; and yet He sees all things. He is the Merciful, the All-Knowing (6:103).

spectator; for divinity or the *a priori* idea was intuitable in the very beauty of human form and character given to sense. Not so in Byzantine and Hindu art where the figures were devoid of such suggestive beauty, where they were even stylized. That is why writing was resorted to. Its function in the arts of the West and India is thoroughly discursive, its symbolism thoroughly logical and given to the understanding alone, not unlike numbers written in Arabic or Roman numerals. This was certainly the case with whatever script the Arabic language used before Islam. With the advent of Islam and its drive towards transcendence in the visual arts, a new horizon in writing awaited to be explored; and the Islamic genius rose to the challenge.

The Arabic word of God was written in the *naskh* (cursive) inherited from the Nabatean script or in the *kūfi* (angular) inherited from Aramaic through the Syriac. The signification was logical and discursive throughout as in any other language, perhaps even more so as the Near Eastern peoples knew hardly anything worthy of the name "calligraphy." The Romans had developed some calligraphic capabilities but the signification of the letters remained as logical and discursive as before. The Celtic monks in Ireland produced a few illuminated manuscripts such as the *Book of Kells*. Their calligraphy, however, did not move beyond the Roman level. The letters are rounded and beautified through decoration, but the total signification remained logical. The decoration was superfluous, as it did not change the letters' character, and each letter stood alone. The vision had to jump from one letter to another, the understanding had to mediate; and reason and memory combined to translate the graphic letters into the word or concept of the mind. There was no aesthetic intuition of the written letter, word, line or sentence.

Gradually, but within the space of two generations, the Islamic artist transformed the Arabic word into a visual work of art, carrying in aesthetic signification given to sensory intuition totally other than the discursive meaning given to the discursive faculty, to the understanding. Like the rest of the arts, this new art was subject to the overall purpose of Islamic consciousness. Its visual capacities were developed so as to constitute an arabesque. In the Nabatean and Syriac scripts the letters were detached from one another, as in the Greek and Latin scripts. The Arab artist joined them so that instead of seeing a letter, the eye could at one glance and with one sensory intuition see the whole word, and indeed, the whole phrase or line. Second, the Arab artist plasticised the letters so that he could now stretch them, prolong, contract, incline,

spread, straighten, bend, divide, thicken, narrow down, enlarge in-part or in-whole, as he pleased. The alphabet became an obedient artistic *matériel*, ready to embody and execute any aesthetic scheme or idea the calligrapher might entertain. Third, he pressed into service all that has already been learnt in the art of the arabesque, especially floriation and geometrization, not only the better to decorate the writing, but to make of writing itself an arabesque in its own right. Arabic writing thus became a freely undulating line, capable of bursting here and complete in itself, whether symmetrically arranged or widely scattered. The newly acquired plasticity of the alphabet enabled the calligrapher to do it in either way or both ways following the esthetic overplan he sought to develop. Finally, he "opened-up" the alphabet so as not only to receive the arabesque decorations but to merge with it in constituting one large arabesque. He made it possible for the other arabesque to emerge out of the writing, or for the writing to emerge out of them. The essential character of the letter which gave them their legibility was preserved, and it constituted in writing what metric patterns constitute in poetry, and geometrical and flowery, forms constitute in the planer arabesques. The rendering of the legible shapes gave them their momentum. As an arabesque, Arabic writing transformed the ultimate medium of the discursive understanding barely, the alphabet or logical symbol, into a sensory art material, and aesthetic medium, productive of an aesthetic intuition *sui generis*. This was a triumph for human art as such to overcome the last domain of discursive reason, to annex and to integrate it into the realm of the sensory esthetic. It was Islam's highest and ultimate artistic victory.

Islam holds the word of God to be ideationally the nearest approximation of Him, the most immediate expression of His will. Since as transcendent being He is forever impossible to know or to perceive, His will has been communicated in revelation through His word. The word of the Quran is then *God-in-percipi* and ought to be accorded the utmost in respect as well as beautification. Its writing is then the esthetic sublime in Islam, *par excellence*. All the more reason, therefore, for Arabic calligraphy to be developed so as to bring about a sensory intuition of the divine by realizing to the full, divine inexpressibility and unrepresentability in consciousness. Since Arabic writing has become an arabesque, it can enter any work of art and stand there *de jure*, regardless of its ideational content. Or, it can invade any work of art and ennoble it by complementing its esthetic momentum or value,

whether the writing is integrated with that work or otherwise. With the reverence accorded by all Muslims to holy scripture, the art of writing spread quickly, mobilized the greatest amount of talent and entered every moment of the Muslim's life. In stone, stucco or wood, on paper, skin or cloth, in house, office, shop and mosque, on every wall and ceiling. Arabic writing became the public art of Islam. So pervasive was its influence and presence that no city or village through the centuries could fail to produce masters of this art by the dozen. Even the enemies of Islam were not immune to its influence. In Christian Spain, France and Italy, Arabic writing was ideationally bungled by ignorance and incompetence but still used, esthetically to great advantage.²⁶ The esthetic sensory intuition which it renders is capable of producing the same "launching" of the imagination on its flight towards the idea of reason as any arabesque. Perhaps even more, for to the spectator capable at the same time of reading its discursive content, Arabic writing will produce through intellection—a further specification of the imagination's objective, a further rise in the momentum of its movement towards that objective. No wonder then that Arabic calligraphic copying of the Quran became the most popular art in the Muslim world across the centuries. Kings and plebeians entertained one supreme hope for their whole lives: To be able to copy a whole Quran—and die!²⁷

It was the Vizier Muḥammad Abū 'Alī Muqlah who, according to the report of al Zamakhsharī (in the latter's *Asās al Balāghah*, s.v. "Qalam"), compared writing to poetry and assigned to "composition" the same esthetic function in the two arts. He defined the cardinal virtues of the art of writing as five: *al tawfiyah* (giving the word its full share of the letters of which it is composed so that the relation between the whole and part is balanced and harmonious); *al ilmām* (giving every letter its due of space and power or emphasis); *al ikmāl* (giving every letter all that accords with its visual personality expressed in posture standing arightness, lying flatness, resolute bentness, self abandon, experienced curvedness); *al ishbā'* (giving every letter all that is demanded by its internal-audial personality expressed in finesse or assertion); *al irsāl* (the jetting of the line in free movement unhampered by either hesitation or any inner inhibition, thus generating momentum of high speed).²⁸

²⁶Historians of art have created the word "Mozarabic" to identify a whole tradition of Christian Italian and Spanish decoration involving Arabic motifs and designs.

²⁷This is indicated by the limitless profusion of copied texts of the Quran executed by or belonging to people of all levels—royalty, noblemen, as well as plebeians.

²⁸Nāḥī Zayn al Dīn, *Muṣawwar al Khatt al 'Arabī*. Baghdad: Al Mu'jam al 'Ilmī al 'Irāqī, 1288/1968), p. 372.

And it was Abū Ḥayyān al Tawḥīdī in his *ʿIlm al Kitābah* who said: “Generally, writing is spiritual designing with material means.”²⁹ Throughout the ages, the Muslims have recited the sayings of anonymous sages, such as: “The minds of men stand under the teeth of their pens”; “Writing is the irrigation of thought”; “Beautiful writing mitigates poor thinking, but it endows the sound idea with the power of life.”³⁰

Many scholars of the Middle Ages who have acquired great names in the humanities, such as Ibn ‘Abd Rabbih, Muḥammad Amīn, Ibn al Athīr, Ibn al Nadīm, al Qalqashandī, etc., recognized what had been done by their fellow Muslims in the field of writing. They took pride in the fact that Arabic writing had been more developed than any other; that it had reached heights of beauty, expression and glory which were absolutely without parallel; and finally, that it had been invested with the supreme value—the religious value—as the vehicle and expression of divine wisdom. Even the Quran, they maintained with satisfaction and final conviction of the correctness of their esteem, had hallowed writing in a verse which opens with an adjuration by the pen and writing.³¹

While all art exercises an ennobling and humanizing influence on those who appreciate it, Greek and Renaissance art enhanced man’s esteem of himself and inspired his imagination and will to greater heights of self-realization. It did so by teaching him a nobler and deeper humanness, a humanness so great that in his consciousness it merged with the divine, the ultimate standard and hope. In Islam, art attempted and achieved the same task of ennoblement, humanization and self-realization. But it did so by putting man constantly in the divine presence. The divine Being, being something non-human and transcendent, the idealism Islamic art generated was never Promethean, boastful or defiant. Human as it was, it disciplined itself through consciousness of its own transcendence. Is this a limitation? Certainly! But it is limitation by transcendent values which, by definition, begin at infinity; by values which are better “seen” and “appropriated” by standing squarely in front of them than by “confusion” with them. Since both realms of value are a priori, “confusion” with them by man is impossible *ex hypothesi*; and

²⁹Ibid., p. 396, where Zayn al Dīn quoted a whole section of al Tawḥīdī’s *Risālah fi ‘Ilm al Kitābah*, an unpublished manuscript at the University of Cairo Library.

³⁰Ibid.

بِالْقَلَمِ وَمَا يَسْطُرُونَ (القلم: ١) اقْرَأْ وَرَبُّكَ الْأَكْرَمُ الَّذِي عَلَّمَ بِالْقَلَمِ عَلَّمَ الْإِنْسَانَ مَا لَمْ يَعْلَم (العلق: ٣-٥)

³¹Nūn! By the pen and by what it commits to writing! (68:1-2)...Read by your Lord the Most bounteous. He taught the art of the pen, taught man what he did not know (96:3-5).

Prometheus is forever a complacent man! The greatness of Islamic art is identically that of the religion of Islam itself, namely, always to strive after and ever to keep the distance from the supreme, transcendent reality.