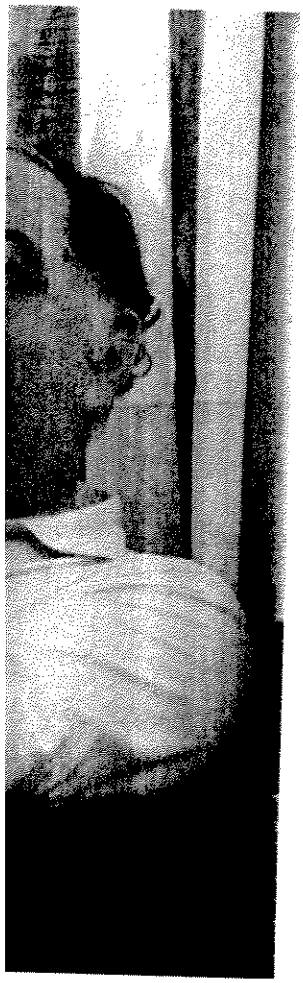

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Oleg Grabar

Islamic Art and Beyond

Constructing the Study of Islamic Art, Volume III

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Chapter XVIII

What Makes Islamic Art Islamic?*

A series of major recent exhibitions – the Paris collections in the Orangerie, new and brilliantly organized permanent wings in the Berlin Museum and at the Metropolitan Museum in New York, the arts of Egypt at the occasion of Cairo's millenary, several successive presentations of the rich collections of the Freer Gallery in Washington, a newly acquired collection in Los Angeles, the arts of Isfahan under Shah Abbas at Asia House in New York and the Fogg Museum at Harvard University, the opening of the Leo Mayer Memorial Museum in Jerusalem – and now the forthcoming Festival of Islam in England following more modest earlier gatherings sponsored by the Arts Council have, rather suddenly, brought to the public eye the artistic creativity of the Muslim world. More or less learned catalogs have been published and, almost for the first time since the middle of the nineteenth century, a field which had been for decades the concern of a limited set of specialists has attracted the attention of art historians, connoisseurs, collectors, architects and the general public in surprisingly consistent ways.

Why this interest? There are, no doubt, mundane reasons: the new role played by Muslim countries in the world; overexposure to the more traditional arts through books, exhibitions or easy access; a search for exotic fields for a jaded public. But there may be more profound reasons as well, deriving from inner characteristics of Islamic art which are peculiarly exciting to our times.

The following pages are devoted to a few speculations on some of these possible reasons and to the question whether they can appropriately be considered as Islamic. It is necessary, however, to preface these thoughts with a few words of caution. One is that it is foolish, illogical and historically incorrect to talk of a single Islamic artistic expression. A culture of thirteen centuries which extended from Spain to Indonesia is not now and was not in the past a monolith, and to every generalization there are dozens of exceptions. The glorious Selimiye in Edirne reflects an entirely different aesthetic from the one found in the mosque of Cordoba, and the Alhambra is not the Taj Mahal. Even if it can be argued, or at best debated, that

* First published in *AARP*, 9 (1976), pp. 1–3.

Mughal and Ottoman art have more in common with the art of the Umayyads in Syria and Spain than with Buddhist or Renaissance art, the question is whether whatever they share is a quality of their Islamic culture or of other temporal or regional idiosyncrasies. Another cautionary word is also an apology. The views and opinions which are here expressed were developed as a Western observer sought to understand an art. They do not derive from a Muslim experience, and it is indeed a problem faced by nearly all scholars in the field that neither the traditional nor the contemporary Muslim cultures have so far provided the kind of intellectual and verbal framework which facilitated the perception of Chinese or Japanese art for those who are outside the culture itself. In all likelihood there are many more examples of aesthetic and artistic judgments within the tradition than have been recognized so far. There certainly was a whole vocabulary for visual forms which is as yet undetected, and all of us will greatly profit from contemporary Muslim meditations on Islamic art as well as from more practical investigations into the psychological and emotional attitudes of the modern Near East toward its own visual expression. For the time being, we have no choice but to understand the Muslim tradition of art from the outside and for this reason whatever follows is still very preliminary.

Three themes have seemed to me to be particularly distinguishable within the mass of works of Islamic art: its social meaning, its abstract ornament, its tension between unity and plurality.

The Art of a Society

It is self-evident that monumental architecture has a close relationship to the society which surrounds it, sponsors it and uses it. Walls or fortresses protect and sanctuaries house the varieties of expressions a culture develops for its piety and sense of the sacred. Palaces like the early Umayyad ones, the Alhambra, or Iranian garden pavilions are less obviously useful for the whole social body, but then they form but a fraction of the culture's architectural production. A peculiarity of Islamic architecture was its early concern for the monumentalization of more settings for social activities than any architectural tradition before the nineteenth century except Rome. Schools, caravanserais, baths, markets, hostelries acquired very rapidly forms of unusual quality and at times comfort. Furthermore, the funding for these establishments was more broadly spread than elsewhere. Private revenues were used already by the turn of the ninth century to build up facilities for pilgrims all over Arabia and, with variations which still require [2] investigation, the pattern continued until the Ottomans.

Yet it is not only in architecture that we see an art at the service of a society. Practically all other artistic activities were similarly directed to making daily, public or private, life more attractive and more exciting. New or

rediscovered techniques revolutionized the art of the potter and of the metalworker and transformed the humblest object into a potential work of art. Although we are less precisely informed on textiles, the prestige of Islamic textiles all over the world indicates that they too were unique in their time and used at all levels of society and for all kinds of purposes. Muslim painting is almost throughout its history an art of illustration serving to enhance the pleasure and usefulness of a written text, while calligraphy, the most prized of all arts, is a way to make the reading of anything a more exciting experience. The numerous techniques of architectural decoration managed to give to the simplest wall an aesthetically expressive quality. But the key point is that almost all these techniques and forms were used for implements needed in daily life and were available to all levels of society. Regardless of the luxurious fantasies of the *Thousand and One Nights*, Islamic art is characterized by an aesthetic democratization, as the forms of the Alhambra, of Safavid palaces, or of gold objects are also present in the street façades of hostels, the interior of mosques, and in glazed ceramics.

One can only speculate on the reasons for this phenomenon, which is so strikingly contemporary in its intent if not in its execution, but one reason surely was the deep egalitarianism of Islam, its sense that, even if princes and kings have certain privileges and advantages, at least a reflection of such advantages may be available to all.

Ornamental Geometry

Few have ever denied that Islamic art was concerned with surface decoration. From its early masterpiece, the Dome of the Rock, all the way to Safavid mosques, the walls of Islamic monuments and the surfaces of its objects have been covered with motifs distinguishable by the fact that they so rarely reflect the physical world of men and animals. Except for inscriptions, there are comparatively few instances of coherent iconographic programs. Even the consistent astrological or princely cycles of so many objects in ivory from tenth-century Spain or in inlaid bronze from the thirteenth-century Levant require such precise attention in order to be perceived properly that they were not likely to have been the main point of the decoration. This tendency to overwhelm surfaces at the expense of emphasizing specific topics can properly be called ornamentation.

Why Islamic culture developed this particular tendency is still an unresolved matter. Recent studies have, however, begun to show that it may not be correct to interpret this ornamentation as a purely arbitrary exercise in design, whose only objective would have been the beautification of the surface on which it occurs. At the same time its aim may not necessarily have been the presumed opposite of pure decoration, that is to say the direct expression of some message in visual form.

The example of geometry may be a case in point. Although much work had been done on geometric patterns in the second half of the nineteenth century, it is mostly in the past decade that the contemporary fascination with pure design has led many observers back to Islamic ornament. The results of these interpretations are far from being conclusive. Yet two leitmotivs can be detected. One is the technical one of the ways in which certain figures were generated, and the fascinating fact seems to be that highly complex number theories and elaborate developments of rotation, symmetry and transformation were involved in many designs. The problem is the degree and nature of the consciousness of theoretic principles which existed among the creators of the designs. What were the modes of transmission of the motifs? When and where did they develop first? These are still unanswered questions.

A more tantalizing problem lies in the interpretation of this geometry. It is tempting, as has been suggested by some, to understand this geometry as a metaphor for the all-pervasive but intangible divine, for the presence of God in all human creations. And it is perhaps valid to explain the endless variations in the same geometric forms as the visual version of the names of God so common in Muslim piety. The very notion of using geometry for such purposes would be a deeply Islamic semiotic creation, which, just as in writing, used arbitrary but modular signs to express its deepest meanings rather than ideographic borrowings from the perceived world of nature. While occasionally hermetic, the process is a strikingly contemporary one.

Unity and Plurality

Few exercises are more exciting than the contemplation of a most Islamic form like the *muqarnas*. It is easy enough to become fascinated by the technical effort involved in the carving of stone blocks, the composing of stucco fragments, or the ordering of glass panels so as to create uniquely Islamic cupolas, half-domes, capitals, squinches or even wall decoration. The origins of the motif as well as the reasons why it maintained itself for so many centuries all over the Muslim world are still not well understood. But one aspect of the *muqarnas* may serve to illustrate a point valid for much of Islamic art. It is a single completed entity whose segments are, however, often treated as complete units in their own right; it is at the same time a delineator of space [3] and a surface for ornament. The implication is that the *muqarnas* represents a whole which subsumes an almost infinite number of parts which are visually independent of each other. And as one looks at a *muqarnas*, it is possible to begin with the completed form and then lose oneself in an array of different shapes or else to begin with the smallest leaf on one panel and end up with a vision of the full unit.

It is obvious enough that the degree of success which has been achieved varies a great deal and that not all *muqarnas* illustrate in particularly striking

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fashion a tension between parts and whole which may be proposed as a characteristic of much of the Muslim artistic effort. Thus it is not always easy to decide whether an inlaid bronze of the thirteenth century meant to make fully understandable the intricacies of its iconographic programs and ornamental designs or to provide a certain kind of overall luxury in which individual subjects are drowned into insignificance. Certain Nishapur plates or even miniatures pose similar problems, each medium according to its own internal rules. And perhaps Islamic aniconism – a far better term than iconoclasm for the peculiar Muslim attitude toward representation – can, at least in part, be understood as another way to avoid the temptation of visual precision by overwhelming single topics of potentially restricted significance with artificial patterns, colors, or whatever means were appropriate and possible in any one technique.

This particular aesthetic process can be explained at several levels. It may be considered as a conscious metaphor for the Muslim cosmology, a highly unified order with a divinely ordained direction whose perception, however, lies almost always in disjointed fragments. But the process can also be seen on a much broader level as a search for ways to separate forms from meanings, to create the purity of visual expression which has also identified so many modern monuments. Perhaps one of the lessons of Islamic art is in fact its constant failure to reach this purity, as the third Samarra style is used in Egypt to represent animals and seventeenth-century painting becomes fascinated with the human details of existence rather than with the abstract colorful visions of older centuries. Yet at a third level of understanding the process may be historical in that, just as in some trends of contemporary architecture, there was a conscious or unconscious rejection of older pasts. A world without renaissances (other than a few internal ones in Mamluk Egypt or Safavid Iran) may be destined to ascetic artistic tendencies, and the fact that some of these generalizations are less applicable to Ottoman art may find its cause in the Ottomans greater awareness of older and alien traditions than the Fertile Crescent or Iran.

Other explanations may exist as well, but the more important point is that, whatever the reasons, Islamic art did manage to evolve a type of visual tension which is quite different from the man-centeredness of Western art or the natural complexities of Chinese art. It is the tension which ought be stressed, it seems to me, for, in a deeper sense, it bequeaths the interpretation and pleasure of the artistic experience to the viewer and leaves him free to make his own choices and judgments. Therein lie its greatest achievements, even if we cannot quite explain as yet why it was so.

Chapter XXIII

The Aesthetics of Islamic Art*

The expression "Islamic art" covers many different and possibly incompatible objects, monuments, and even ideas and interpretations. In fact, some scholars and critics, especially from areas which have preserved or inherited whatever is understood to be Islamic art, have, over the past decades, in writing and more frequently orally, challenged the use of the expression.

Part of their reasoning is simple enough to understand. It derives from the feeling that the word "Islamic" implies or even requires a religious explanation whenever it is used and thereby misrepresents the values of an artistic creativity which was much richer than whatever is involved in religious thought and in piety and which included aspects of life and forms of behavior incompatible with the precepts of the faith. The point is certainly valid in a narrow and lexicographic sense. The late Marshall Hodgson had recognized the difficulty and proposed using "Islamicate" instead of "Islamic" whenever wider issues come up than strictly pious ones. But, in the conservative world of humanistic scholarship, new terms are rarely accepted with ease, and it is very slowly and irregularly that the neologism "Islamicate" is in fact used. Yet it has even spawned a descendant with "Iranicate," to separate the numerous and often deeply settled components of Iranian origin found in Ottoman and Mughal culture which emerged from the culture and history of a land called "Iran."

One could adopt the word "Islamicate" or one could even argue that, like so many adjectives identifying historical categories (Gothic or Romanesque for example), the adjective "Islamic" should not be taken seriously in its literal sense. It is a conventional term to cover a broadly defined cultural entity over many centuries and the faith of Islam is only one aspect of that entity.

But the criticism against the term "Islamic" runs deeper than a sort of negative objection to its most apparent, religious, association. There are positive objections as well. Some have argued, for instance, that national or ethnic categories should be the primary ones in dealing with the arts, and

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* First published in Ahmet Ertuğ, ed., *In Pursuit of Excellence* (Istanbul, 1993), pp. xix–xxxvi.

much has been written on Arab, Turkish, Uzbek, Tajik, Indian or Persian art. This tendency has at times been refined into the art of each of the forty-four contemporary countries which claim to be Muslim or to have a significant Muslim past. Others have preferred regional distinctions and separated Anatolian from Egyptian or North African art, southwestern Iranian from northeastern (Fars as different from Khorasan), Bengali from Punjabi, and so on, ending up with cities like Herat or Aleppo as individualized centers of artistic production. Or else the argument could be developed, although I do not believe that it has been done except indirectly and by implication, that the art of Muslim lands would best be understood in socioeconomic terms. One [xx] can indeed identify imperial themes and modes reserved to caliphs and sultans, themes associated with viziers or feudal lords, or else the art of the merchants and artisans from large cities. Using more complex ethnographic procedures, one can probably even talk about the art of the illiterate, of peasants and of nomads, perhaps even of the urban poor. Or else, in line with the most contemporary critical thinking, one could attempt to separate the making or appreciating of art by women from the ways of men and to imagine, if not always demonstrate, an enormous range in the taste of traditions, "Islamic" or other.

One last reason for questioning the notion of "Islamic" art is a more technical one. So far no real evidence has been brought to light which would have presented a doctrine about the arts created by the theology and the ethics of the Muslim faith or, even if its sources were other than the faith, shared over the centuries by a significant number of Muslim communities. It would be silly to expect medieval manifestos on art, but an event like the Iconoclastic controversy in eighth-century Byzantium showed that medieval cultures did develop very sophisticated arguments about the arts, when such arguments were needed. Does the absence of such discourse say something about the values of the arts in a given society?

Granted the validity of nearly all of these queries and criticisms, it is both common and appropriate to group together the products of the artistic creativity from Muslim lands. It is common, as collections from their medieval or later times are, almost everywhere, housed in museums or galleries of Islamic art, not medieval or national (except for the latter in some of the countries from which objects originate). And it is appropriate in the sense that elementary observation and judgment tend to separate works from Muslim lands from other groups, Western or African and east Asian, and to find that all of them possess what is called in French an *air de famille*, a relatable series of formal and other characteristics. If indeed these common features exist, how can this apparent family relationship be defined and then explained, especially in light of an alleged absence of a doctrine about the arts? Was there not after all some other impulse than a doctrine for the arts of Muslims to seem alike? Should one argue for the term "Islamic art" on some other ground than that of visually perceived commonalities? Some

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social structure perhaps or some way of life? Should it not, in the final analysis, only be considered as a convenient, even if misleading, label like "Gothic"?

The purpose of this essay is to initiate a discourse for eventual answers to these questions. The premiss of my argument is that, before an aesthetic can be defined or rejected, some awareness must be obtained of the range and type of categories through which an artistic tradition, whether justifiably or improperly identified, defines the differences and commonalities within it. I shall discuss five very different factors which affected the ways in which works of art were made within the cultures of the Muslim world and the attitudes we have today toward Islamic art. Two of these factors – the spaces and times of Islamic art and its meanings and constraints – are essentially the products of the very history of Islamic culture. Two others – the ways of judging and appreciating Islamic art and the "Orientalism" effect – are functions of the critical approaches which have led scholars or amateurs from whatever origin to study, collect and enjoy [xxi] Islamic art. With varying degrees of intensity and not necessarily in the same ways as my own, these four approaches have already been elaborated by other writers. The fifth considers how our own time has learnt to deal with the arts, especially those of other cultures than one's own.

These five factors are probably not the only ones involved in the formulation of a theory of understanding Islamic art, but they will, I hope, help to provide more solid foundations for an aesthetic definition of that art than seems to be currently available. In conclusion I shall then try to return to the questions raised earlier, but, it is hoped, at a different and more useful level of meaning than before.

Spaces and Times of Islamic Art

It is not my purpose to recall in a few paragraphs the long and complicated history of Islam since the Revelation to the Prophet in Arabia in the third decade of the seventh century. Nor can I identify and discuss in any useful way the many different landscapes, the dozens of different climates, and the numerous ways of communicating between dozens of regions which have affected the behavior and the taste of Muslims over fourteen centuries. What I shall rather try to do is to define two sets of contrasts between extremes which have consistently affected the character of the Islamic world and whose effects on the arts I shall evoke in part. One of these contrasts concerns the spaces occupied by the Muslim community and the other deals with the course of the community's history.

There were enormous differences between the cultural and artistic pasts of the areas taken over by Muslims, whenever conquest or conversion occurred. In all cases these pasts consisted of identifiable elements such as

visible standing remains from older cultures, current practices, technological competencies with whatever materials were available, and real or mythical memories. Remains, practices, competencies and memories were integrated within a new Muslim matrix, but the ways and depth of this integration depended on the strength of the charge carried by these various elements at the time of the conquest in contrast or in competition with whatever cultural force the Muslim community carried with it. A few examples may make my point clearer.

At the time of their conquest, Egypt (seventh century) and Anatolia (essentially twelfth to fifteenth) shared many features: existence of ruins from powerful ancient empires like those of the Pharaohs or of the Hittites which had been historically forgotten and mythologically weak (with some exceptions for the Pharaohs, whose buildings, the Pyramids, for instance, could not escape attention); presence of many visible remains from the classical world (Greek and Roman) whose history was still known, although often already in mythified ways, a history that was shared with cultures outside of the Muslim world; several living Christian cultures with ongoing artistic and other practices and with a major involvement in the economy of the land and, in the case of Anatolia, with a direct psychological and emotional connection to Byzantium, one of the major centers of artistic creativity and invention throughout the Middle Ages. [xxii]

The major difference, for the purpose of my argument, between seventh-century Egypt and thirteenth-century Anatolia lay in the character of the incoming Muslim worlds. In Egypt it was a small, young, and not very sophisticated group of Arab tribesmen from the cities and deserts of Arabia which remained as a ruling minority for several centuries. It took over a local technology of building and probably of manufacturing nearly everything needed for the new community and, as art historians know well, it is often impossible to distinguish the work made for Muslim or Christian patrons, at least until the eleventh century. In Anatolia the Muslim community was a very complicated and diversified one, containing rough soldiers, all sorts of holy people, learned scholars from Syria, even the great mystical poet Jelal al-Din Rumi; they came with new architectural and ceramic techniques, and even with a mythified past of Muslim and non-Muslim heroes with the memory of Abbasid glory in Baghdad and of an Alexander the Great transformed into a Muslim *dhu'l-qarnayn*, "possessor of two horns," as he was known in the Qur'an, or into the Iskandar of the Iranian epic.

Thus two areas with comparable heritage became so different in their sponsorship of artistic activities. In Egypt several centuries were needed for the establishment of clearly defined Islamic styles and functions, and a significant as well as aesthetically pleasing Christian art existed six centuries after the Muslim conquest. In Anatolia, a brilliant, exuberant, immensely varied, truly exciting even if difficult to understand architecture and decoration appear everywhere in the thirteenth century, dozens of newly

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imported techniques are tried in all the materials of the industrial arts with variable but always interesting results, and Christian art soon enters into folklore. The differences are, among other reasons, the result of very different Muslim charges of intensity affecting very similar bodies of existing materials and memories.

Quite a different picture emerges if we take two other regions of the Muslim world, Andalusia and what used to be called Central Asia. Thinly settled and idiosyncratic in its Christianity, the Iberian world of the early eighth century had preserved a great deal of its Roman imperial past of monuments and had developed an original, if minor, architectural technology of its own and a few decorative arts. Within two centuries of the conquest, a brilliant Islamic art was born around the Umayyad caliphs of Cordoba which is related to but strikingly different from whatever existed elsewhere within the Muslim world, as though the remote frontier and an awareness of local forms, however minor, compelled originality of expression. But the most interesting and the most important aspect of that particular space of Andalusia is that it acquired a mythical character. According to legends whose history is yet to be unraveled, a richly decorated table made for the Prophet Sulayman was discovered there by the conquering Arab Muslims, fantastic stories of wonderful palaces and mysterious cities from the *Thousand and One Nights* were located there, the Alhambra in Granada was both a recreation of all the myths of kingship from ancient times to the end of the Middle Ages and a dreamy memory carried even to Ottoman Istanbul.

The huge lands of Central Asia – today the place of the new republics of Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tadjikistan, Kazakhstan and Sinkiang, and of the older country of Afghanistan – were [xxiii] phenomenally active in the arts when the Muslims arrived in the eighth century. Turkic Uighur kingdoms and Soghdian Iranian city states had developed a brilliant art of painting and of sculpture in which Iranian, Indian, Chinese and indigenous elements mixed in ways and for reasons which have not yet been fully explained. The area remained equally creative under Muslim rule. This is where the Iranian epic was written down and where Turkish Seljuk or Ghaznevid princes acquired their Iranicate and Muslim culture. It was the area where so many new traditions of brick architecture and of ceramic technique seem to have been invented and from where the vaulted constructions known as *muqarnas* or surface brick decorated emerged. In the fifteenth century, the taste in architecture and especially in painting which was, for about a century, to dominate all Muslim lands from Istanbul to Delhi was formed at the courts of the Turco-Mongol rulers of the Timurid dynasty. Yet, this other frontier area of the first Muslim expansion never became the place of mythical memories and legends which so powerfully identify al-Andalus and the Muslim West.

Similar arguments would identify as peculiarly different every one of the major regions of the Muslim world: a Maghrib with almost no memory of

pre-Islamic times; Syria and Palestine with their enormous wealth of classical and Christian monuments and with the memories of all the Prophets; Iraq with one extraordinary monument from pre-Islamic times, the Taq-i Kisra in Ctesiphon, with thousands of tells attesting to millennia of human activities, but with no significant active artistic tradition, yet becoming the center of the only universal Muslim empire, that of the Abbasids with their partly mythical capital of Baghdad, the City of Peace; Fars and western Iran in general with many more memories than artistic remains, transforming Persepolis or Taq-i Bustan into the stuff of legends, including the tragic love of Farhad and Shirin; northern India with its stone technology transferred to the vaulted spaces of Iranicate Islam and its subtle mural paintings of sacred lives squeezed on to the pages of secular manuscripts.

The many spaces of Islamic history have thus acquired an identity which, little by little, historians should manage to learn. For every object, including paintings in books and albums, carries, more so probably than works of architecture, some vestige from the genetic structure of forms, meanings and memories created in any one of these spaces. No object can be understood without whatever sum of spatial combinations it possesses.

It is easy enough to understand that specific historical developments affected the character of spaces at precise moments of time. These historical developments can themselves be defined around two contrasting axes whose confrontation and, at rarer times, alliance form the backbone or the structural helix of most of the history of Islamic lands.

The first axis can be called centripetal or imperial. Whether issued from the tradition of pre-Islamic empires like the Achaemenid, the Roman, the Sasanian, the Gupta, or from the very Muslim notion of the caliphate, the single succession of the Prophet ruling over all the Faithful, it was a tradition which emphasized a divinely ordained power and authority for a ruler, caliph or sultan (at times both), who was the Shadow of God on earth, as is proclaimed on so many coins and inscriptions. Its signs are in everything [xxiv] that pertains to ceremonies, like clothing and processions or audiences. They appear as well as in the architecture of palaces and, in a few examples like Baghdad or Cairo, in the very structure of urban planning. Imperial ambitions are also in the art of writing, as quite obviously in the grandiose *tughras* of the Ottomans, but also in majestic manuscripts of the Qur'an that are like expressions of the imperial control over the presentation of the Holy Book. The first steps in the art of writing, one of the most original characteristics of Islamic art, were taken by the imperial administration of the Abbasids in Baghdad. The Abbasid caliph Harun al-Rashid became only one of a series of emperors who, from the Prophet Sulayman to the sultan Suleyman the Magnificent or to the uniquely inventive Mughal sultan Akbar, were, in myth or in truth, the symbols of the imperial tradition within Islamic patronage. Whether this tradition is more easily identified in forms and styles or in behavior is a matter for scholarly debate. But there is little

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doubt that it is the imperial side of high Ottoman culture which contributed to the quality and prestige of its vestments and to the transformation of the imperial treasury into a unique collection of works of art, curios and wonderful items of all sorts from the whole world. In that respect the Ottomans followed, quite consciously and quite willfully, a pattern known already with the Fatimids in Cairo and especially the early Abbasids in Baghdad, not to speak of the mythical Iranian kings whose wealth is occasionally described in the *Shahnameh* and of the emperors of Rome whose ceremonies were present in sculptures preserved in Istanbul and in other cities of the Ottoman empire.

The second axis of Islamic history can be called centrifugal and feudal. As a result of conquests by invaders or by military slaves from various ethnic groups (most often Turks, Berbers and, for a while, Mongols), of local expressions of independence, or of diverse combinations of both factors, small or large but nearly always short-lived dynasties established their power over circumscribed areas. Such were the beyliks of Anatolia in the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries or the *reyes de taifas* of eleventh-century Spain, and it is almost impossible to keep in mind what dynasty ruled what city of twelfth- or thirteenth-century Iran and for how long. These autonomous rulers all wanted to express their authority and to demonstrate the legitimacy of their rule. More often than the emperors, they used works of art to show their importance and their wealth and often copied or imitated imperial art. This is why their works are more numerous than those of the imperial tradition, because more among them invested in works of art in order to make themselves accepted. Small princes from the Artuqid dynasty of eastern Anatolia and upper Mesopotamia around 1200 made automatic toys in the shape of Baghdad's imperial palace, as its memory had been kept in legend and in myth.

It is thus not always easy to distinguish imperial themes from those of feudal princes. In fact, it is not always easy to decide which rulers were more imperial than others. The short-lived Ilkhanids of Iran, who did not manage to stay in power even for a century, used and developed more "imperial" themes than the Mamluks of Egypt and the Levant, whose essentially "feudal" taste remained for nearly two and a half centuries and created major works of Islamic art. The point of who specifically was an emperor or [xxv] merely a feudal lord is less important than the awareness of the existence of two kinds of historical situations which used visual forms to express different sets of ambitions.

To sum up, then, the components of time and space provide works of Islamic art with several categories of attributes. Places of origin are expressed through technical competencies and through a range of memories going back, at times, much before the appearance of Islam. And then each object reflects one of two related purposes in the making of objects. It can proclaim the majesty of unique power or it can propose the legitimacy of its patron or

owner. But the point is, I believe, more important than simply to identify a strand within the making and the understanding of Islamic art. For, as one peruses thousands of labels in exhibitions and entries in catalogs, not to speak of hundreds of learned studies, it is amazing how consistently the world of rulers and the memories of lands, often remote ones, appear, as though that particular patronage created the dominant taste of the visual culture. And it is precisely in Istanbul that one can best learn to distinguish between these two trends, for the Ottomans began as a "feudal" dynasty, but rose to be the most successful of the "empires" of the Muslim world, the longest to maintain its presence and the only one to claim universal rights within a Muslim world which it represented to the outside.

Meanings and Constraints

Let us turn now away from the physical presence of lands and of events, however one is to organize them conceptually. Let us turn instead to what can be imagined of the "mind-set," the *mentalité*, of Muslims as they dealt with the visual world. The sketch I will propose is, I trust, valid for the past, but not really for the contemporary scene. Too many new issues have been introduced lately whose investigation is much beyond the scope of this essay. I shall mention three components within the makeup of a Muslim attitude toward the arts: the nature of representation, the problem of ornament, and the elements for a theory of aesthetics.

So much has been written about Muslim attitudes toward the representation of nature or of living beings that it is relatively easy to summarize an approximate consensus of scholarship and traditional believers. Whatever reasons led to it (and there are very different views on these causes) and whatever specific forms of expression it took (from mild avoidance to occasional destructive iconoclasm), the Muslim community developed, for the most part, what can be called an aniconic position.

Aniconism means two things. First, images of the living world do not, normally, serve as formal signs or symbols of significance to the faithful. Thus, with occasional exceptions, no Muslim dynasty or state ever used physical representations of divine or secular themes in its official art. Illustrations of holy subjects are rare, with the important exception of Shi'ite celebrations of the martyrdom of Hussein. The point is of some importance if one recalls its major consequence: that the memory of holy history and of worldly history available to Muslims was not through images. Scholars may have learned to identify the physical traits of Shah Abbas, Akbar or Mehmed the Conqueror and Suleyman the Magnificent, but characteristic [xxvi] mustaches or noses are known either through Western paintings, as with the Ottoman rulers, or through miniatures restricted to a very small number of users. They are not, as in China or the West, ways in which authority

expresses itself to its own subjects. For an eventual psychological profile of Muslims as they related to the visual arts at whatever moment of their history, it is important to remember this relative absence of set images in collective or individual memories, for it must have affected both the judgments believers made and the expectations they had (and possibly still have now) of works of art. But the ways in which critical faculties and taste were affected need investigations which have not yet been carried out.

The second implication of aniconism is more creative and perhaps more interesting. The avoidance of representation did not mean a lack of recognition for the beauty and attractions of the physical worlds of nature, of animals and of people. The most austere philosophers and theologians, such as al-Ghuzuli, for instance, exhibited more than once in their writings considerable sensuality toward creation, as did many mystics like Jelal al-Din Rumi. The fundamental problem was to find ways of expressing that sensuality and of arousing it in others without creating an illusion of physical reality.

Different times and different places found their own ways toward that expression, but almost all of them are connected with what is usually called *ornament*, the second of the themes I wish to pick up in dealing with meanings and constraints. Not much agreement exists about what ornament is, but all those who have written about it agree that the many techniques of Islamic art exhibit a lot of ornamental values. In some circles, already in the nineteenth century but especially under the influence of modernism, these ornamental values were judged very negatively. Postmodernism has been kinder to ornament, and some earlier writers like Ruskin saw in it the quintessential expression of the very pleasure the artist or the artisan had in making his work.

How, then, can one define ornament in ways which can help our understanding and appreciation of works of Islamic art? At an initial level, ornament is that part of whatever one does or sees that does not seem to have any other meaning than the purely visual role it plays on its carrier. It appears to be independent of any practical function of an object or of a work of architecture; nor does it refer to anything else than itself or the object on which it is found. And for the latter it only enhances the quality of how one sees it. At the next level, ornament is a mediator between the object and its viewer or user. But it does not mediate, like a set of directions, to explain how to use an object, but how to love it, how to prepare an affective relationship to it which could be a relationship of possession (the wish to buy and to own something) or one of use (to drink from a specific cup or to walk on a rug), and probably of several other ways of relating to man's creation. But it is not, as, for instance, with an easel painting, an end in itself, something at which the glance of the onlooker stops. The fascination of miniatures lies, for instance, in the fact that as paintings they are an end in themselves, but as pages of a book they lead to the book in its entirety. One can follow with a great deal of excitement the endless ramifications of a

floral arabesque on a rug or on an İznik plate, but it is the plate and the rug which are liked or loved, not the designs. [xxvii]

A third, perhaps more technical, level of ornament is that it can consist of almost any form or theme. Trees, animals, personages, landscapes, buildings can become ornament just as easily as geometric patterns or garlands of flowers and leaves. Several ways exist to transform representational motifs with an apparent external referent into ornament. I will only mention one, which is repetition, as the consistent reappearance of the same theme diminishes its intrinsic value or meaning and transfigures it into a mechanism of entry into the object on which it is found. But, and this is the ultimate and fascinating paradox of ornament, while the meaning of any one example of the same tree or bird is lesser in a set of similar trees or birds than alone, the fact of repetition becomes an engagement with form which is quite powerful once one agrees to follow it. Repeated motifs are like the beads of a prayer chain. They are all alike, but, as one moves them from finger to finger, they become the ninety-nine names of God or, in reality, anything a user is thinking about. In this sense, ornament is a mediation whose objective is not determined by the forms of the ornament but by the will of the user. The constraints of a very closed and at first glance very limited world of forms have become an astounding resource for individual freedom. According to a statement attributed to Stravinsky, "art lives by constraint and dies of liberty." The ornament of Islamic art, at least in its theoretical formulation, shows how liberty can emerge out of constraint.

The difficult problem is whether interpretations which contemporary viewers and scholars may provide of this or that feature of Islamic art are justified in terms of the values which the culture expressed about itself. In spite of almost two hundred years of scholarly effort, we are far from knowing well the details of the immense literature which exists in the various languages of Muslim culture. Discoveries are constantly made and it would be foolhardy to draw conclusions with any sort of assurance. At this time, several approaches to aesthetic issues can be developed from those written sources with which I have been acquainted, even though in elementary form. Each one suggests yet another facet for an eventual aesthetic theory of Islamic art.

There are technical manuals, and the understanding of geometry in particular is in the process of being revolutionized by the study of these manuals. This is partly so on a practical level of how to design, but it is also, more interestingly, in suggesting that geometry expressed a certain type of control over the universe and a means of access to the arts which was available to both genders and to all classes of society. There are scientific studies, especially in optics, which provide a theory of beauty and of pleasure based on the harmonies of one's perceptions of the surrounding world and then on the translations of these perceptions on things made. There are manuals of literary criticism centered primarily on poetry which are often

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taxonomic in providing endless lists of metaphors or of accepted parallels, but which also suggest some of the major topics, like colors, flowers, or parts of the body, which have acquired ranges of meaning. There are philosophical texts which picked up various aspects of Aristotelian aesthetics and which then reworked them within a Muslim construct of the universe. For example, several scholars have sought in the doctrine of atomism, according to which everything visible consists of combinations of atoms which can be recombined in [xxviii] different ways without challenging God's creation, an explanation for the unexpected combinations of Islamic ornament. There are, finally, mystical texts whose rich imagery lends itself easily to transfer on to the sensuous textures of works of art.

Except for the first of these sources, whose importance for the arts is evident, the study of these various kinds of texts has not yet reached the stage where true doctrines about the arts can be formulated. But the possibility exists.

It is clearly premature to define one or even several aesthetics within Islamic art. What can be done, however, is to argue from a rapid survey of monuments and of literature that the visual experience of the Muslim world was consistently affected by two phenomena. One is at first glance the negative one of refusing to represent the external world of man and nature and the other one is the positive one of providing equal value to everything that was or could be represented. Together these two phenomena lead to a series of practical and theoretical questions for which answers may exist in the immense wealth of still unstudied sources. But the continuing observation of and meditation on the works of art themselves should help in sharpening the ways in which the questions should be posed.

Islamic Art and its Critics

The assumed character of any art and the judgments carried out about its representative works depend in part on how that art is and has been perceived. There are fashions in aesthetic judgment as there are in clothing and, in both, fashion is cumulative in the sense that the pleasure and the fad of one moment depends on whatever preceded it, contradicts it at times, but sometimes merely continues it on a different scale. This point is particularly pertinent to an understanding of Islamic art, because its appreciation began as an aspect of Western patterns of thought and behavior, not as the preservation of an indigenous heritage. There were a few exceptions, notably in Istanbul and in Cairo, where wealthy and highly Westernized local patricians developed museums and collections. And to some degree the art of calligraphy maintained itself until the middle of the twentieth century as a continuous endeavor of artisans and often of gifted amateurs. But, on the whole, the Muslim world of today does not show the presence of traditional

practitioners of the arts or of philosophers of visual beauty who are so important in the understanding we all have today of Chinese and Japanese art.

Several concurrent explanations can be provided for the absence of such traditions within the Muslim world. By the end of the eighteenth century a break would have occurred within the intellectual structure and the artistic or artisanal practice of most of the Muslim world. This internal rupture would have been widened by what is generally known as the colonial and imperialist experience. It is only within a couple of generations that a revived interest in the past has emerged, but without the backing of an effective cultural base. [xxix]

I shall return further on to some implications of this situation. In the meantime I would like to trace briefly the history of the judgments carried out on Islamic art and the ways in which these judgments affected the aesthetic interpretation of that art.

During most of the Middle Ages and in fact as late as in the eighteenth century, works of Islamic art were the luxury objects of nearly all European artistic traditions. Christian saints were buried in Muslim silks, chalices and ecclesiastical vestments were made from secular objects made for Muslim rulers, and almost any work of industrial art from the Muslim East could become the reliquary for some holy object. Much of what we know of early rugs comes out of their presence in hundreds of Flemish, German or Italian Renaissance paintings. Spanish *majolica* ceramics, Bernard Palissy's experiments with decorated pottery in late sixteenth-century France, Lucca silks and Venetian metalwork are but a few examples of Western technology directly inspired by the centuries-old ways of Islamic art. It is possible that even some developments of Chinese art, for instance blue-and-white ceramics which will then come back and dominate so much of the art of ceramics within the Muslim world, were inspired by motifs and values of Islamic art. One of the most significant features to have been exported from the Muslim world both East and West consists in letters of the Arabic alphabet made to look like words; even haloes of Virgins in Italian art contain such imitations of Arabic writing.

These borrowings all meant or implied aesthetic decisions about the quality of works of Islamic art. Even though I am not aware of any judgmental statement about this art before the eighteenth century, two themes stand out.

One is that of technical achievement, the creation of something wondrous which cannot be achieved by the normal, everyday exercise of a skill. Pottery is made to shine like metal, textiles carry thousands of designs, because certain wonderful and foreign craftsmen can, like magicians, transfigure techniques known to all. An interesting aspect of this attitude in the West is expressed in the invention, sometime around 1600 but perhaps even earlier, of the word *arabesque*, which came to be associated with an intricate type of design based primarily on vegetal motifs. The qualities implied by the

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arabesque, which is an exclusively Western term, and by the various other attitudes I have mentioned may actually well have been also recognized within the Muslim tradition. The Arabic root *'ajaba* "to wonder" spread to Persian and Turkish as the root which best expresses one's pleasure and excitement with a work of art, and the adjective *'ajib* or *acip* is common in all languages affected by Islam. True or fictitious stories are told of searching for and discovering (or failing to discover) secrets of manufacture. The making of wonders was always like a secret, the secret of a magician or of the traveler from afar.

The second theme is that of luxury, attached most specifically to objects for daily use, so that a cup for drinking, a robe for daily wear, a candlestick, the covering of a wall or of a floor, could all become exciting and be transformed by the mediating and affective power of ornament whose forms were described earlier. Works of Islamic art made it possible to imagine a beautiful setting for one's life without requiring the [xxx] expensive materials, gold or rare and precious stones for instance, known to all but inaccessible to most. It is possible even to provide an "Islamic" explanation for these achievements. One can argue, for instance, that these skills of make-believe in the industrial arts served to demonstrate that nothing is permanent except God, that it is immoral to invest in rich materials, and that there should be as few distinctions as possible between what is available to the rich and what comes to the poor. In other words, according to this argument, what medieval and Renaissance Western art appreciated in Islamic art was exactly what it sought to do, to provide beauty to everything, however trivial, even if all the moral reasons behind that creativity were not really understood outside of the Muslim world (perhaps not even there). By the eighteenth century, these themes from the East had become mere *turqueries*, little games with exotic overtones to amuse the wealthy.

Things changed in the nineteenth century. Early in the century, quite a bit was written on Islamic art and on the arabesque by German philosophers and litterateurs like Hegel and Goethe. Their considerations, however, were very abstract, unconnected to any knowledge of works of Islamic art, and primarily concerned with literature if and when examples were needed for some philosophical point. More or less simultaneously antiquarian interest began to grow, as archivists in Paris, Vienna and a few other major capitals began to describe works of Islamic art in the manner of clinicians describing the patients in a hospital. Since the objects were there, they had to be handled, but no special excitement was required or present and no one worried particularly about how and when these objects came into Western collections.

The second half of the nineteenth century witnessed a dramatic transformation which continued well into the twentieth and some of whose effects are still very much with us. Three aspects of this change are pertinent to my purposes of defining the aesthetic theories around Islamic art. The

first two are closely connected. They are the growth of public and especially private collections and the looting of monuments, treasuries, and archives all over the Muslim world in order to satisfy the needs of curators and collectors. I am not here concerned about the moral and political implications of the looting, but about the reasons which led some groups within the Western world, with a far superior technology and with three hundred of years of extraordinary developments in its own noble arts of painting, sculpture and architecture, to find in works of Islamic art rewards apparently unavailable otherwise. A comparable phenomenon occurred with the sudden *Japonisme* which followed the opening of Japan to international visibility. Several reasons may be given. Since many of the collectors, especially in France, were successful jewelers (Henri Vever, Louis Cartier) or were related to artisanal families, they saw in Islamic art the same values of craftsmanship which had been seen in the Middle Ages, but with a new angle. It was no longer that a technology was absent from the West; it was rather that industrialization and rapid growth were destroying the joy of creating a setting for society and for living. Unable to control that change, the aesthete could at least surround himself at home with images of another world. The Russian Ivan Stchoukine, who became eventually one of the greatest scholars in Persian and Turkish miniature painting, had been born in the rich household of one of the great collectors of modern art; Matisse had come and painted there one of his largest and most impressive sets of *Dancers*. But [xxxi] the young Stchoukine, barely an adolescent at the time, recalled later how his father's collecting turned him away from huge paintings and almost forced him into what became a love affair with Persian miniatures and their impact on Ottoman and Mughal art.

What is important, almost essential, about nearly all of these collectors is that their fascination, at times their passion, with works of Islamic art was the result of a series of personal psychological adventures, almost never an initial interest in the Muslim world. What they brought to our understanding of the arts can be categorized in general terms as connoisseurship, that is to say an exquisite sense of observation and a wonderful memory for details which together allowed them to organize objects into stylistic categories and to propose, at times imagine, evolutions and derivations, often with only minimal concern for history or geography. The stage for collectors was the museum and to this day the vast majority of all those who deal with Islamic art (other than architecture) are curators in museums. Many among them have written major interpretative studies or essays illuminating whole categories of objects or showing the endless fascination of any one of them, but their most typical form of expression is the museum gallery or the temporary exhibition. While strengthening and polishing the visual presentation of objects and the opportunities of a sensory relationship with them, this approach often removes objects from their settings and almost sets them up as separate and individualized "things" to know, to feel, and to

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The third element introduced by the nineteenth century into the aesthetics of Islamic art was high-class international travel, the first elements of colonial life, or the endless expansion of business activities. Sea captains and army majors returned home with hundred of rugs purchased everywhere, and thus the "Oriental" rug became a necessary staple for every home. American painters like Frederick Church, French painters like Matisse and Delacroix, writers like Gustave Flaubert, Pierre Loti and Mark Twain, generations of British administrators in India came back with things, no doubt often of an ethnographic rather than artistic merit, but also with memories of people and of settings. Some, like Mark Twain, were critical and ironic about what they saw, but many, helped at times by romantic images from the East, translated their experience into a dream of sensuous luxury in which every thing and every action could and did acquire a unique value. These travelers cultivated the exotic and, perhaps for the wrong reasons, rediscovered that aspect of "wonder" which, I suggested earlier, was a major part of the Muslim view of its own aesthetic values.

I shall return to some further implications of these attitudes external to the Muslim world proper in the next section. But, at this stage and in order to focus on their importance for understanding how one feels about Islamic art, I would like to emphasize two features of these nineteenth-century judgments which are still common, if not prevalent today. One is the primacy of the object transformed into a work of art almost on a par with the paintings and sculptures of the European grand tradition. Miniatures should be examined as paintings and objects almost as sculptures, so that all can fit, each in its own special way, within the [xxxii] immense store-room of universal (meaning Western) man's visual pleasure. The emphasis is on that pleasure rather than on the idiosyncratic way of each object. The second feature is almost the opposite of the first, for exoticism implies difference and cultivates something alien by making it desirable precisely because it is alien.

Within these schemes and these views two voices were missing. One is that of the university, that is to say of a scholarship tainted perhaps with imperialist dreams but usually not directly involved in the real world. Until World War II, the university hardly contributes anything to the study of the arts from Muslim lands, whereas its contributions to history or religion are enormous. The other missing voice is that of the Muslim world.

The Orientalism Effect

Western collectors may have robbed major treasuries of Islamic art, especially in Istanbul, whose collections were (and still are) the richest anywhere in the world and where, for a century and a half, manuscripts and probably other

things as well were sold to private foreign owners. But these collectors worked for themselves, for their own pleasure and that of their small circles of friends and acquaintances, at best to improve a few public museums. Something quite different occurred with the growth of an Orientalist mentality. The term itself, Orientalism or Orientalist, has acquired considerable publicity since the publication, nearly fifteen years ago, of Edward Said's book with that title. Much of what the book has to say has been seriously criticized and much more sober statements on some of the issues it raised have appeared in nearly all Western languages. But few have read these other books and, in a way and for reasons that go much beyond the lively style of the author's writing, the first statement hit a chord of positive response in an unusual number of readers when one considers its biases and omissions.

The reason for the response lies, I believe, in part in the recognition that the perception Muslims and non-Muslims alike had in common of the Muslim past (and, to some degree, of its present) had been shaped by attitudes developed in the West rather than by a direct knowledge of the Muslim experience. And it is indeed true that the taste of Western intellectual and political centers became the taste of intellectual and political leadership in colonies or in modernized national or even multinational states. But the Western taste involved was not the one developed by collectors with limited interest in the Muslim world, but one created by an elite without any cultural or artistic concern for other civilizations and by a political leadership developing educational and other programs in regions under their control. What I mean, then, by the "Orientalism effect" is the ways in which a Western artistic taste came to dictate or, at best, inspire the attitudes of Muslims and of others toward Islamic art and eventually the categories of aesthetic judgment applied to it.

Here are two examples of what happened. One lies in practical and organizational matters affecting knowledge. In colonized countries like those of North Africa, in semi-independent countries like [xxxiii] Egypt, in mandated countries like Syria or Iraq and in independent countries like the Ottoman empire changing into Turkey and like Iran, excavations of pre-Islamic remains – classical ones around the Mediterranean, Hittite or Achaemenid and Ancient Egyptian elsewhere – were throughout given preference for funding and for exhibition. Museums were built for that lost historical past. Only in Cairo was there a building for what was then called "Arab" art but, even today, it is hardly ever on the map for mass tourist visits. Islamic art was transformed into the art of the "natives." Access to it was restricted by the degree to which anyone wished to feel or was made to feel close to not only an alien world, but one which was inferior in its art, even if nice for the decoration of a tea-room. At times under the guise of protection from Western intrusion, Islamic art was rejected from those places which catered to the high arts of Greek and Roman times and of the accepted empires of old. The intellectual damage that was done in this way

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was considerable, as the new elites of the Muslim world were made to turn away from the art of their live past; and the first book published, to my knowledge, in Arabic on the aesthetics of Arab or Islamic art came out in Syria in the 1970s and begins with a discussion of Plato's theories of beauty.

Next to allowing, if not compelling, a rejection of the Islamic artistic past as inferior to the grand tradition, the "Orientalist effect" had the further damaging result of restricting access to works of Islamic art to Westerners who were not themselves concerned with the cultures which produced that art. Thus, by the time of independence after colonial rule or of emergence on the world scene of countries that remained independent, none of them had competent thinkers about Islamic art, while nearly all had excellent archaeologists of pre-Islamic antiquities and competent historians of Western art.

These effects obviously affected the perception of Islamic art which was available and in many ways which is still available today. It is a perception which keeps comparing it to Western European art and to set up the paradigms for its evaluation by defining it in terms of Vitruvius, Alberti, Vasari, Focillon or Wölflin or else in envisaging it exclusively in archaeological terms. Thus, the study of Islamic ceramics, whether early medieval Iranian ones or the magnificent Ottoman ones from İznik, hovers between three poles: connoisseurship which tries to identify the stylistic sequence of the best pieces as though they were Rembrandts, taxonomy that organizes groups according to more or less arbitrary visual categories for easier reference, and archaeology which seeks wasters and fragments in order to date sequences of building phases. None of these approaches addresses the questions whether and why these ceramics should be considered as objects of pleasure and why patrons and artisans of the Muslim world gave that particular importance to the ancient craft of potters.

But there is an even more important point which affects directly the aesthetics of Islamic art. It is that the circumstances of Orientalism fostered single explanations for an art without the full credentials of Western art. Calligraphy, the arabesque, geometry, nomadic memories of textiles, unity in form and purpose, these are only some of the slogans around which an immense variety of experiences found simple explanations and through which a consistent but limited judgment was established. [xxxiv]

In short, the "Orientalist effect," whose political and other causes may well have vanished or at least been weakened, has had the tragic result of limiting the intellectual range with which the study and understanding of Islamic art was undertaken.

Nations and Tourism

The most immediate factors affecting contemporary judgments of Islamic art are the ideological, educational or political conditions affecting its presence

in any one country and the perception of the Islamic past within that country. The topic of these conditions is a delicate one because it affects and is affected by emotions, beliefs and prejudices which do not easily come to the fore and which are often of a very sensitive nature. For the purposes of this essay, I will single out two relatively new but very potent components in dealing with Islamic art, the nation-state and tourism.

The appearance of national states in nearly all areas of the Islamic world is a phenomenon of the twentieth century. The ethnic, linguistic and cultural uniqueness of each one of forty-four-odd countries varies considerably, but the existence of these countries cannot be denied, and each one of them witnesses or has witnessed the growth of ideological processes serving to identify and refine each country's historically unique culture. The existence and the appreciation of works of art and of antiquities are alleged to contribute to the quality of every nation and of every land.

On a practical level this awareness has had very positive results in that it inspired all sorts of conservation and preservation projects as well as archaeological expeditions for new discoveries. The Hittites in Anatolia, the Arameans in Syria, the Nabateans in Jordan, the Sumerians of Iraq, the Achaemenids and Sasanians of Iran, the ancient Egyptians of the Nile valley, the Soghdians of Uzbekistan, and many other pre-Islamic civilizations owe much of their reputation to their role in shaping a sense of roots within the lands of modern states often created without consideration for past histories. For a long time Islamic art played a relatively small role in this consciousness of one's self and it is, for example, pre-Islamic empires which were, more frequently, revived and imitated in official and private architecture, alluded to on stamps, and sometimes recalled by the names given to children. The monuments of Islamic art were either living and active settings for life which had not yet reached the distance which would have allowed them to be works of art or else representative of an immediate past which prevented growth and progress. Modernism and modernity were Western and international, and roots were older than the alleged or real obscurantism of Muslim institutions and Muslim piety. Revivals were usually understood as returns to more or less mythical moments of ancient glory associated with the territory of each new country and only very rarely related to its present inhabitants.

In ways and for reasons which still need investigation, some time in the 1960s and 1970s a major change occurred with the recognition of the "national" values of the Islamic inheritance. [xxxv] This change affected the names of children as well as the briefs submitted to architects. The latter began to talk of an "Islamic" visual past to be used as a model or as a source of inspiration for new buildings. Specific ways of implementation varied enormously from country to country and, at least at this stage of knowledge, it is impossible to generalize for the whole Muslim world. What, however, can be said is that the objects and artefacts from the Islamic past acquired a

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value because they suddenly belonged to an aesthetic experience which stressed a vertical commonality with pre-Islamic times and a difference from other experiences, for instance the allegedly universal Western one or those of earlier invaders.

Intellectually and ethically this development poses an interesting problem. It is easy to argue, for instance, that the application of contemporary national labels to the arts of the tenth, twelfth or seventeenth centuries is not justified in terms meaningful at the time these works of art were made. But it is also true that the interest which has grown around these objects, the care which is given to their preservation and presentation, the pride which has developed in owning them individually in private collections or collectively in public museums and institutions, all these feelings and activities arose from the expectations, affections and requirements of nation-states. Each one of them wishes to develop aesthetic principles which will make clear the special qualities of the creations found or made on its territory, and to find in history an explanation for the emotional and visual attachments made for contemporary reasons. Over the decades to come one can expect the continuing development of many such national aesthetics seeking to explain and to define Islamic art in a new light. There is no doubt that they will slowly shape the ways in which the works of Islamic art will be displayed and known. And, perhaps with some justice, they may eventually eradicate the very notion of "Islamic" art or limit the use of the term to items directly related to the practice of the faith. Thus an Anatolian *mihrab* from the thirteenth century would be a work of "Turkish Islamic art from the Seljuk period in Anatolia," while an illustrated manuscript from the same period would eliminate the word "Islamic" from the definition and a Gospel book would replace "Turkish Islamic" with "Greek (or Syriac) Christian." Many such distinctions are probably appropriate, but, when they are accurate for the past, they are often cumbersome for the present, and the simplifications of the present appear as falsehoods for the past.

I can be brief with the last of my components in the formulation of an aesthetic of Islamic art. Tourism has become a major industry of services in most countries, and access to works of art is one of the attractions to various lands and, at times, a significant way to proclaim one's greatness. As a result, there has developed what may be called the aesthetic of the tourist, that is to say an expectation that the works to be seen provide certain qualities of alienness, of difference from what is available at home. Color, complexity of technical manufacture, intimations of luxurious living, such are the emotions and the impressions awaited by the tourist, such become also the displays prepared to show originals and to sell reproductions. Together with the needs of national pride, the desires of the foreign tourist, however cultivated and learned he or she may be, shape what becomes visible from the treasures of the past. The history and identity of what is seen become secondary to the effects

they achieve. In a sense not much has changed from the Western medieval expectations [xxxvi] of wonderment and luxury to be found in the works from the East. It is only that now the foreign tourist comes to the country possessing works of art and looks for the satisfaction of yearnings created elsewhere. A totally a-historical and a-cultural expectation predominates, as the satisfaction of the senses rather than the pride and satisfaction of learning becomes the key operative ambition of museums and galleries.

These observations on the factors affecting any consideration of the aesthetics of Islamic art lead to four broad conclusions.

One is the typically academic one that not enough work has been done on sources nor has enough debating filled pages of learned or popular journals to describe in full a theory of aesthetics applicable to Islamic art. Such attempts as have been made are usually very partial to some doctrine or too elementary to be useful.

A second conclusion, in part also an academic one but with implications which extend beyond the closed world of professors, is that the appreciation and understanding of Islamic art is subjected in our times to two sets of pressures. One is the pressure of history, of the complex of factors, well known to any historian of art, which surround the making of anything and its initial use. The other is the ideological and intellectual or emotional make-up of today's user and observer. The tension between these two sets is almost impossible to alleviate, for the demands made by contemporary culture and by contemporary politics are only rarely justified by history, even when history is called as a witness. Today's consumers (in the best senses of the word) of works of art can never *be* the users of the past; at best they can *imagine* what the latter may have done when handling a work of art from their time. But mostly they are affected by their own needs, their own intellectual and aesthetic make-up, and seek in the past answers to the questions of the present. We may have to admit that, quite possibly, two equally valid sets of aesthetic statements and judgments must be expressed around any work of art.

Others will have to propose a "contemporary" theory of aesthetics dealing with Islamic art. Within the tradition, and this is my third conclusion, several components are intertwined in any identification of one or more classical theories: the time and place of making, the social level of an object, the mix of ideas and beliefs, directly or indirectly inspired by the Islamic Revelation, which existed at the time, and probably the uniqueness or "typicality" of any one work of art. The interplay of these components should form the subject of lively debates to come.

But I would like to establish as my last conclusion a point which seems to me to transcend historical specificity or contemporary judgments, universal values or national and ethnic character, Islamic piety or princely luxury. The conclusion is that almost all the works of Islamic art were meant to be used and not simply looked at; they all entered into the life of the ones who came

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into contact with them. However one is to explain it all, whatever considerations learned discussions may bring about, the sensory appeal to do something with the "things" discovered in mosques and *madrasas* or kept in the treasuries of palaces is often present today as it has been for centuries.