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PART II

THE MESSAGE OF ISLAMIC ART

Read: in the Name of thy Lord Who createth,
Createth man from a clot,
Read: And it is thy Lord the Most Bountiful
Who teacheth by the pen,
Teacheth man that which he knew not.

(Koran 96: 1-5)

It was with this summons, this command given to the Prophet Muhammad by the archangel Gabriel that the Koranic Revelation opened fourteen centuries ago in 612 AD, ten years before the start of the Hegira. And this same summons which exhorted Muhammad to read aloud, to proclaim the Divine Message is, it seems to me, well suited to introduce an exposition on the subject of which is the art of Islam.

This is so not only because these verses of the Koran were the first to be revealed, thus marking the beginning of the great adventure of Islam, but equally for more precise reasons, because with these first words of the Sacred Book, with what they say and with the form in which they say it, the art of Islam is already present.

96. *Opposite*: Koran illuminated by ʻAbd Allāh ibn Muhammad al-Hamadānī for the Sultan Ūlljaytū, 713/1313, frontispiece to part 28, ff. 1v-2r, Hamadan, Iran

97. *Below*: Anonymous Koran, Ottoman Empire, c. 1750-1800

These words, as said in Arabic, have a very precise resonance, an intrinsic force which is linked to, among other things, the principal meanings of the following triliteral roots and the alliterations and permutations of letters which they give rise to: Kh-L-Q—to create and ʻ-L-Q—the clot; Q-R-ʼ—to read and Q-L-M—the pen or calamus; ʻ-L-M—to know, recognize and again Q-L-M, the calamus.

In short the Koran, which as its name in Arabic suggests, is the "reading", the "recitation" *par excellence*, given to be heard, memorized, and repeated in full, carries within itself the roots of the first art of Islam which is recitation of the Koran in Arabic. And because the words of the Revelation are assembled in a Book and are composed of letters we have already in embryo the second major art of Islam which is calligraphy, an art which man carries within himself, in a certain manner, from the beginning of the Revelation since "God teacheth man by the pen", the calamus or reed, a symbol of the Prime Intellect, which, having been plunged in the ink of divine Wisdom traces the sacred signs which grant the human being access to knowledge.

Recitation, the art which manifests the sound and modulations in Arabic of the verses of the Koran in time; calligraphy, the art which transcribes visually the vocables and fixes them in space … with these two modes of expression we find ourselves at the very source of the art of the Muslims, the source from which the artists of Islam have never ceased over the centuries to draw their inspiration.

Specialists in Islamic art usually approach their subject from an angle that is both chronological and geographical; they describe its evolution in time, analyze the borrowings and original contributions, point out the individuality of works created at different periods, in the various parts of the Islamic world and in the various spheres of application: architecture, music, the industrial and decorative arts. Such an approach is evidently inappropriate in the frame of a concise essay, where it would only lead to a tedious enumeration of places, art works, and patrons. Besides, the analytical character of such an approach would hardly allow it to set in relief the characteristics and permanent values of Islamic art which enable the latter, everywhere and at all times, to be true to itself and confer on it an incontestable originality.

That is why I deemed it important to consider Islamic art from another point of view that is neither historical nor descriptive but which is based on what one could call the "spiritual universe" of Islam. Without doubt this universe is not the property of artists alone. Being that of the revealed Message, it belongs to every Muslim. But as soon as the artist intervenes, the ideas which he entertains are transferred to the material objects which become the common property of the community. Hence the necessity of knowing the meaning of these ideas if one wishes to be able the better to read and understand the language into which they are transcribed.

98. The Suleymaniye Mosque, Istanbul, Turkey

99. "Verily in the remembrance of *Allāh* do hearts find rest" (*ʻalā bi-dhikri-Llāhi tatma'innu 'l-qulūb*) (Koran 13: 28); calligraphy by Shahriar Piroozram

1—ART: AN INTEGRAL PART OF MUSLIM LIFE

In the Koran, God says, in speaking of man, "I created him only that he might worship Me" (51: 56). Further, it is said, "Nothing is greater than the remembrance of God!" (29: 45). It follows then that the real *raison d'être* of man is to worship God, which implies that the whole of his existence should be an act of devotion and remembrance vis-a-vis his Maker.

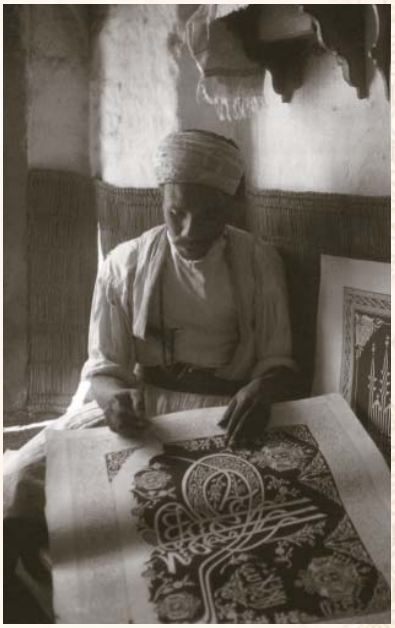
The idea of remembrance, of recollection—*dhikr*, *tadhkīr*—is fundamental to Islam. The Koran is called *dhikr Allāh*, remembrance of God, and *dhikr Allāh* is also one of the names given to the Prophet Muhammad, not only because he was the trustee and transmitter of the Koran, but also because his behavior, his words, and his teachings—in short all that makes up the *Sunnah*, the Prophetic Tradition—show to what extent he remembered his Lord, and as a result of this constant remembrance, was near to Him.

This preoccupation, this obsession one might even say, with the recollection, the remembrance of God is not only a factor in individual perfection. It is also a stimulating ferment to social life and artistic development. In order to remember God often, it is necessary in effect that the members of the Muslim community should contrive to surround themselves at every moment of their lives—and not only during the ritual prayer—with an ambiance favorable to this remembrance. Such an ambiance would need to be beautiful and serene so that the human beings one met as well as all the things, natural or artificial one encountered, could become the occasion for and the support of the *dhikr* (remembrance of God).

With regard to the human and social milieu, such an ambiance is realized through the practice of the *sharī'ah*, the revealed religious Law which contains the rules to which all are obliged to conform. Thanks to this law, the five essential pillars of Islam, a network of sacralized behavior patterns, as much individual as collective, is woven into the heart of the collectivity, the *ummah*.

As to the imprint given to the material environment so that it too might become a mirror of the spiritual world, it is here, precisely, that one enters the domain of art, of sacred art which, according to the words of the contemporary *Maitre a penser* Frithjof Schuon, "is first of all the visible and audible form of Revelation and then also its indispensable liturgical vesture".[1]

The function of artists consists in translating the principles of Islam into aesthetic language, in other words, transposing them into forms and motifs which will be incorporated into the structures and used in the decoration of all things from sanctuaries and palaces to the most humble domestic utensil. "God is beautiful; He loves beauty", says a *hadīth*[2] which could be regarded as the doctrinal foundation of Muslim aesthetics.

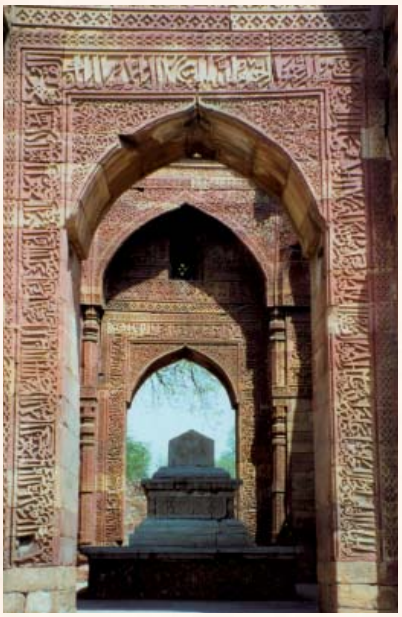


100. A calligrapher in Tunis, Tunisia

101. *Hadīth*: "Verily God is beautiful; He loves beauty" (*Inna'Llāhu jamīl yuhibbu'l-jamāl*); calligraphy by Shahriar Piroozram

1. F. Schuon, *Understanding Islam*, trans. from French by D.M. Matheson (London: Allen & Unwin, 1963, 1976, 1979; Baltimore, Maryland: Penguin Books, 1972), chap. 4.

2. Imam Ahmad, *Musnad.*



102. *Top left*: Detail of a *kiswah* (embroidered black cloth which covers the Ka'bah)

103. *Bottom left*: Inscriptions on the crypt of the Qutub Minar, Delhi, India

104. *Center*: Brass lamp from Isfahan, Iran

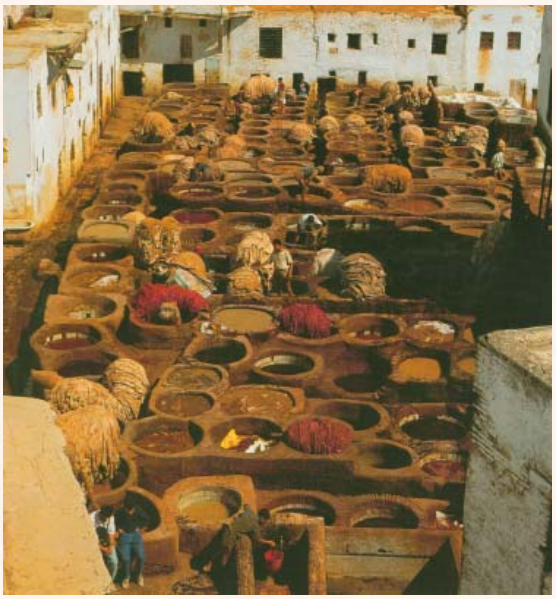
105. *Center right*: Engraved washbowl from the Timurid period, Iran

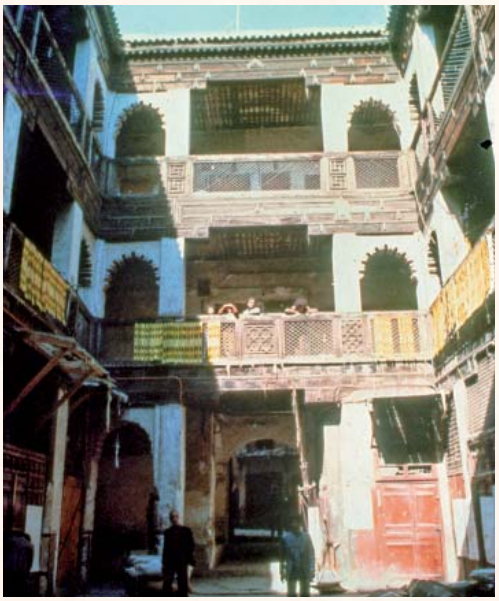
According to the Islamic perspective, which underlines the absolute supremacy of the rights of the Creator over those of the creature, artistic creativity is nothing other than a predisposition which God has placed in man to help him follow the path which leads to Him. The artist is therefore only one among others of the servants of God; he does not belong to any exceptional category. He should himself, the better to fulfill his role in the collectivity, become, by means of effacement and disinterested service, an as transparent as possible interpreter of the Tradition to which he subscribes. Whence the relationship that has always existed with Muslim artists between the practice of virtues and the excellence of professional work. The Prophet said: "God loves that when one of you does something, he does it thoroughly." And one can confirm that this advice has been followed to the letter, in particular by the artisans of the guilds and brotherhoods of the entire classical period for whom the artisanal pact was a unanimously respected professional code of honor.

Another characteristic of artistic creativity in Islam is that it is never exercised "gratuitously", by which we are to understand that it always answers to well-defined ends. Unlike the art of the modern West, Islamic art has never known the distinction between an art supposedly "pure", or "art for art's sake", and a utilitarian or applied art, the first aiming solely at provoking an aesthetic emotion and the second supposedly responding to some need. In fact, Islamic art is always "functional", that is to say useful, whether the utility is directly of the spiritual order—like the Koranic verses engraved on the pediment of a mausoleum or embroidered on the veil which covers the Ka'bah at Mecca—or whether it pertains to many levels at the same time, as with a chandelier or a bronze basin inlaid with arabesques.

It will perhaps be noticed that I use the terms "artist" and "artisan" without distinction to designate those who are responsible for the artistic expression of Islam. This is because in classical Arabic there is only one word to indicate the man who works and fashions with his hands; it is *sāni*, the artisan, someone who practices a craft or trade, for which he must serve an apprenticeship in a technique, in an "art"—in the sense in which this term was used in the Middle Ages, and not in the modern world. The Arabic word *fann* (art) carries the same ancient

connotation. This meaning is found expressed, notably, in the adage *ars sine scientia nihil*, "technique (or skill) without knowledge (or wisdom) counts for nothing"—an adage Muslim artisans could have made their own and of which, it may be said in passing, our modern technocrats would do well to take note. Therefore, the artist, as we know him today, with his search after individual expression and his rather marginal position in society does not exist in the world of traditional Islam which is what we are now concerned with and that is why the use of either term, "artist" or "artisan", should not lend itself in this context to any misunderstanding.





106. Tannery in the old quarter of Fez, Morocco

107. The city of Fez in Morocco has some 150 caravanserais (*fondouk*), which may serve as a hostel for travelers (and a stable for their mounts), a storeroom for merchandise, a workshop for craftsmen, and as a trading center. Some, like the Fondouk Sagha, built in 1749-50, are of fine architectural quality

There are, no doubt, some crafts which by their nature do not give rise to obvious artistic products. Certain professional specialties, like the tanning of skins, the carding or the dyeing of wool, cannot, however, be detached from the process of production the final product of which—a ceremonial saddle or a carpet—will be a work of art. On the other hand, certain artistic elements—for example the work songs or the badges and special costumes worn on the feast days of the guilds are nearly always associated with the practice of the traditional crafts and constitute a not inconsiderable contribution to the cultural life of Muslim society.

In brief, there are two essential characteristics of Islamic artistic production. Firstly: from the spiritual and ethical point of view, it derives essentially from the Koranic Message, the values of which it aims to translate onto the formal plane. Secondly: from the technical point of view, it rests on the transmission from father to son, or master to apprentice, of unchangeable rules and practices. Such a transmission does not in any way imply stagnation and the automatic repetition of earlier designs. On the contrary, at most times, it has assured a constant source of inspiration to the artists and a stability on the technical level

which have favored the creation of numerous masterpieces that are in no way repetitive. If, at other times, the ancient formulae have become somewhat exhausted as a result of being reproduced, it is necessary to look elsewhere than in the formulae themselves for the cause of this decadence.

Selections fromThe Message of Islamic Art

Features in
Introduction to Traditional Islam: Foundations, Art and Spirituality
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