

PRINCIPLES OF ISLAMIC ART

A TALK GIVEN BY

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Since I come from a land which, like the host country, is exceptionally rich in its artistic heritage and master pieces of Islamic art and which represent one of the most important branches of Islamic art, I would like to present a few points about religious art, focusing myself on Islamic art and referring to it as one of the greatest specimens of an art which draws its wisdom, world view and artistic inspiration from a specific religious tradition and its sapiential doctrines. I would express these points with reference to the very essence and nature of Islamic art and not particularly in reference to the art of a specific land but as it is in itself.

First of all, the question of Islamic art. It was a category not accepted until a few decades ago. The reason was that the western scholars judged all the other civilisations from the point of view of their own civilisation. Until the end of the Middle Ages all European art was Christian art. With the gradual weakening of Christianity and the rise of secularism the national borders began to emerge as the distinguishing features of art. Thus we witnessed the emergence of categories like Italian art, French art of the 18th century, the German art of the romantic period, American art of the 20th century and so on and so forth. Western scholars started looking at other things and other civilisations, including the Islamic, in a similar way. A whole subject, a separate discipline, developed that pertained to the study of art, considered as distinct from the making of art. Generally speaking, the study of art is a 19th century German invention. It was born of the 19th century German philosophical thought, which still carries with it its origin, and the ideas, which brought it about. When it came to be applied to the Islamic world, this way of looking at the art of the Islamic world tried to belittle as much as possible the Islamic character of Islamic art and attention was usually paid to regions. All the major collections and museums of the West had collections on Persian Art (it being the most famous and easily available),

Mughal art, Andalusian art etc. The category of Islamic art did not exist. Once in a while some one would write a book on Muhammadan Art. Even that was rare.

The idea that there should be a study of Islamic art and that it is really a distinct category of art was initiated with in the West, more than any one else, by the late Titus Burckhardt (Ibrāhām ʾIzz al-Dân)¹¹⁵ to whom we all owe the greatest debt in the understanding of Islamic Art. The event that really crystallised this was the festival of the world of Islam, in London, in 1976. It was the first time that Islamic Art was presented qua Islamic Art. It was objected at that time that the event did not include the regional titles i.e. Persian Art, Moroccan Art, Indian Art! It is true that regional arts exist but all of these are integrated into a larger worldview, which is that of the Islamic Art. All of the art produced in the Islamic world, from the rise of Islam to the time when, about 150 years ago, the Western Civilisation began to make its encroachment, was Islamic art. The fact that Islam didn't undergo the process of secularisation that began in the West during the renaissance should not make us forget the truth that every thing made by Islamic civilisation is Islamic Art. The West, on the other hand, had decided otherwise. That was its own prerogative and its own history and it is quite correct to say French Art or English art after the Middle Ages. But before the Middle Ages the situation of the West was very similar to that of the Islamic civilisation. One could distinguish between the Spanish art of the 13th century and the Irish art. The Book of Kelts is not like the illuminations of France. Never the less they all belonged to the Christian civilisation. Every body would accept the usage of "Christian Art" for that earlier period. The whole argument that we read in the newspapers by the modern secularist writers saying that since they use English painting, Italian architecture, etc. in the West, why can't we use this as well? This is because of two civilisations that have not followed the same path. If Islamic civilisation continues in this direction and becomes totally secularised which it has not, a Turkish painter would do something totally different from a Pakistani painter and we could talk of Turkish art, Pakistani art etc. Meanwhile much of which we see as Turkish art, Persian art, Mughal art are really specimens of Islamic art in the sense that they carry the ethos and principles of a particular revelation. This is not accidental. The term Islamic art does not mean art made by Muslims. For example there are buildings in every Islamic city, designed and built by Muslims that have absolutely nothing to do with Islamic art. It is because Islamic art is not to make a few domes here and attach a few arches there. Islamic art has its principles. This leads us to the question of the worldview that informs the various artistic and intellectual manifestations of different civilisations.

¹¹⁵ See M S Umar, "Titus Burckhardt" in *Iqbal Review*, Vol. 40, Nos. 3-4, 1999, pp. 123-146.

The type of art cultivated in every civilisation depends upon the structure of that religion which creates that civilisation. For example, in Islam and in the Far East, the art of calligraphy is central. Calligraphy (كُتُبُ) is central to Islamic art as it is to Chinese and Japanese art. But in two other great civilisations, the Hindu and the Western, it is very secondary. Writing Latin or Divanagari in artistic calligraphy is very secondary. In contrast Islam has never developed sculpture because of certain religious views. They treated painting in a very different manner as compared to the West. The central sacred art in Christianity is the depiction of the image of God-made-Man i.e. Christ which acted as the source for all Christian art and most of the modern art, which happens to be painting, is a de-sacralization of the Christian art of the Icon. In Islam, where the Divine never manifested Himself in a human form,¹¹⁶ this type of art can never be central. It is very essential to understand that even today when painting is so important in the West it has its historical reasons. Whereas other forms of art like calligraphy and architecture are so central to the Islamic World and not so to the modern and post-modern Western civilisation.

Another point that should be considered here is that the Turkish art or the Persian art or Mughal art that look different at the surface participate in the same language and the same spirit. The question must be asked; where does this come from? Many of our religious scholars who are supposed to be the guardians of the Islamic learning do not find it easy to provide an answer. The reason for that is twofold. First of all the sharâ'ah is the source of Islamic law, it is not the source of Islamic art. It tells us how to act. It doesn't tell us how to make, except by putting certain prohibitions on what not to make e.g. not to put a statue in front of a mosque or adorn the mosque with images. Islamic Law forbids that. But how do we go about doing art? That is not in the sharâ'ah. Many people looking in the sharâ'ah and not having found the principles of Islamic art have severed themselves

¹¹⁶ See Muslim, *Birr*, 115; Bukhārâ, *Isti'dbâc* 1. The hadâth is Bukhārâ says that “*ḵbalaq Allḵbu 'l-jydama 'ak 'Äeratibâ*” i. e. God created man in His form, meaning a reflection of Divine Names and Qualities. But the external human face is never considered to be similar to God. That is *kufr* according to Islam.

The Prophet ﷺ referred to this peculiar characteristic of human beings when he repeated the famous saying found in the Bible — a saying that has also played an important role in Jewish and Christian understandings of what it means to be human — “God created Adam in his own image” *صورته على صورة الله الأدم* though we will employ “form” for “image,” in keeping with the Arabic text. Many authorities understand a similar meaning from the Qur'anic verse, “God taught Adam the name, all of them” (2:31). In effect, all things are present in human beings, because God taught them the names or realities of all things.

completely from the Islamic artistic tradition thus resulting, for example, in creating some of the most monstrous buildings; more monstrous than those of the colonial period. These are done by the Muslims on the basis that this is the art of our period.¹¹⁷

Let us ask ourselves a question about what is that has created the Qaraviyân Mosque, perhaps one of the most beautiful in the Islamic world or the Cordoba Mosque. Both are so similar yet so different. Both are so serene. You cannot go into a mosque without a feeling of peace and tranquillity that is a characteristic of Islamic architecture. It was brought about ultimately by the oral tradition which was handed down from master to student in every generation. It was not connected to the sharâ'ab but to the Aaqâqab which is the heart of the Qur'ân. Qur'ân is the origin of Islamic art, though not in an external sense. It is a great task for serious Muslim scholars to bring this out.

Some parts of this question are relatively easy to understand. The very rhythmic structure of the Qur'ân, when we talk about non-plastic arts, is the source of the phenomenon that every Muslim people, from Malaysia to the Arab world, have developed an exquisite art of poetry. English is very rich in poetry also. But is it accidental that in every Islamic country poetry plays a much more important role than it does in any Western country except Spain. It is because Spain was a part of d«r al-Isl«m for 800 years and all of the languages¹¹⁸ of that area were influenced by the cadence of Arabic. This is obvious. However there are other aspects that are much more subtle.

Why is it that all Islamic mosques are characterised by emptiness? Why is it that in Islamic architecture emptiness is fullness? Why is the role of the ground more important in the Islamic civilisation than any other civilisation except Japan? Why have they developed the art of carpets, which existed earlier but never had such an importance? It is because of the significance of the floor, the ground. Why is the floor of the ground significant? It is because ultimately the forehead of the Prophet touched the ground when he bowed before the Divine Throne. The daily prayers are performed on the ground. The ground is sanctified. One can give many examples because these are not merely accidental things. But let us mention that which is absolutely essential.

¹¹⁷ Billions of dollars have been taken by western architects to enjoy the gullibility of the Islamic world.

¹¹⁸ Latin, Provençal and even Catalin and Castillian. It is significant that Spanish has won practically no prize for physics or chemistry while having a large number of prizes in poetry and literature.

The principle, the truth of the Nature of Reality which dominates over Islamic art and the philosophy of beauty which governs it, comes directly from the Qur'ân and hadâth. It is, however, much too subtle to be seen externally. One of the reasons is that you don't have a book in Islam on the philosophy of beauty or how they did architecture? No body knows how the Badshahi Mosque or the Taj Mahal or Ispahan mosque was built. This tradition was handed over orally from generation to generation through the artistic guilds, those of chivalry, the brotherhood organisations that were ultimately connected to the Çarâqah or the esoteric path. What are these principles that have dominated over all forms of Islamic art from its beginning?

The first is tawââd, the doctrine of unity. All authentic Islamic art must reflect Divine Unity. There are consequences for that. First is that you must always have an integration of the form. There is a centre to it.⁵ Islamic art is always a cantered art. It has a centre from which it speaks-whether architecture, calligraphy, miniature, carpet weaving etc.-and that is a reflection of tawââd. One can extend this principle to great lengths, as it is the most important of all principles of Islamic art. It means to exclude from Islamic art all forms of idolatry.

Theologically idolatry means to make an idol or statue and say that it is God. This is only the external understanding of idolatry. But an understanding of Islamic art is always related to Sufism which tries to transcend the external forms to reach tawââd within, to understand the unity of creation. It is not accidental that every great calligrapher of Islamic lands is related to Sufism. Anyhow the first important principle i.e. tawââd works on many levels; of integration, of lack of alienation, of lack of tension between parts, integration of the psyche of the listener instead of dispersion etc. These are all the consequences of the principle of tawââd.

Second principle is that of Jamâl. Up till modern times all art took beauty into consideration. Modern art has developed the cult of ugliness, considering beauty to be trivial and unnecessary and even a luxury. The modern theoreticians of art considered that art should be related to utility and not to beauty. The Islamic perspective has been summarised in an important Âadâth that defines Islamic art in the whole of Islamic civilisation. "Allâhu Jamâalun yu'âibu 'l-jamâl" (God is beautified and He loves beauty). Beauty is reality, ugliness is unreality. To live in ugliness is to live in illusion, in unreality. This is in contrast to much of the modern art, which tries to discover the ugly, the evil and says that it

⁵ One is reminded here of the work of the famous Austrian art historian whose work *Art without a Center* which he criticized modern art.

is important, the good is not important. Much of the modern literature tries to bring out the filth in the depths of the souls of the human beings considering that to be the real and important and beauty and goodness to be irrelevant. Islamic art in all of its forms, from literature to painting, has a common goal. It seeks to bring out the beauty of things. God creates all things and they reflect the Divine Jam

*There is the famous saying, "In every thing there is a sign which bears witness to His Oneness." Islamic art tries to accentuate that aspect instead of hiding it. Jam is therefore *sina qua non*, absolutely essential condition of the creation of any form of art which is Islamic. It is proven by the fact that just a century and a half ago every thing in an Islamic city was marked by beauty, even the things of common daily use, from shoes, combs, cloth to kitchen utensils. That was one of the reasons why in Islam there is no distinction between fine arts and non-fine arts. This is a horrendous tragedy for the human species to have fine arts. It means that all of the rest of life is bereft of art and beauty. You do a few paintings and put these in a building that is to be visited for a few hours while the rest of life is devoid of art. In Islam such distinctions are totally irrelevant. There is also the distinction of major arts and minor arts in the West. The paintings of Michelangelo are one of the major arts and minor art is, for example, the bowl in which you have your soup. How many times you see Michelangelo and how often you use the bowl? This makes a lot of difference from the point of view of the human soul. Islam demolished that sort of an idea by stating that the art that is closer to the soul is the most important and that at every level of art there should be a sense of beauty.*

*Thirdly, there is the un-iconic character of the Islamic art. In many civilisations art flows from the representation of the Divinity. Examples of the Christian or Hindu art could be cited in this regard. All Christian art is dominated by the image of Christ. On the other hand, un-iconic art means an art that refuses to depict the divine in a direct form. It excludes a statue or an image that represents divinity. The reason for it is the emphasis of Islam upon *taw* on the highest level. It is not a religion based upon the manifestation of divinity like the Hindu avatars or Christ who, in a sense, is the Abrahamic avatar since for the Christians he represents the descent, the incarnation of the Divinity. Islam places itself on the position of the Divinity Itself, the pure Divinity, the Absolute Reality which cannot descend in the world of forms or it would no longer be the Absolute. You cannot have a direct form or image of Allah. That is why Islamic art is characterised by an attempt to bring the Sacred into the world without representing the Divinity directly.*

When we go into a Hindu temple or a Christian Church, the central thing that attracts your attention is a painting, statue or image that in the direct representation of the Divine

presence. In Islam when you enter a mosque the presence that characterises it is that of emptiness. The lack of any point to be taken as the centre of divine presence. Every thing points to the Divine presence without an object, a stone, a painting, a wood cut image etc. This one single fact creates the completely different consequences in Islamic art, in architecture, city planning etc. Its concentration upon al-Áad is the secret of the richness of mathematical designs in Islamic art. This un-ionic nature of Islamic art is also the very origin of the incredible development of geometry and arabesque because the geometric form, which represents symmetry and not asymmetry, always comes to a centre. Look at the traditional Islamic arch. We have two of these, the Persian and the Maghribi. They always point to a centre. That is why Islamic art does not include asymmetrical gardens or buildings. In Islamic the forms of geometry represented for us the celestial. That is why Islamic philosophy could absorb the Pythagorean idea of mathematics so easily since it was a kind of Abrahamic overflow into the Greek world. Geometry and mathematics represent the intelligible world, the archetypes upon which God created the physical world in which we live. We may not dwell on this point but to emphasise that the use of geometric designs and mathematical patterns is there not for ornamentation only. They remind us of God, of the centre, the Divine centre that is always present and it is a proof or a demonstration of the famous verse of the Qur'án "where ever you turn there is the face of God". Islamic art, in fact, is the application of this verse because in the traditional Islamic civilisation "where ever you turn there is the face of God". You could not run away from it.

The next principle of Islamic art is what we can term as "Realism". It is not as defined by the modern British empiricists. It is used here in the older philosophical sense, "to remain true to the nature of reality". Islamic art tried to avoid fooling itself and its audience i.e. making something appear something that it is not hence the avoidance of three dimensionality. Islamic mathematics had developed perfectly the possibility of creating three dimensionality in art but it never did. Mughal art, Persian art, Turkish art i.e. the three great miniature arts of the Islamic world were always two dimensional and as soon as three dimensionality came into India through Dutch painters that was the swan song of the great Mughal miniatures. Same was the case in Persia, though it came later. The paper is two-dimensional. To make it appear three-dimensional is to fool your selves. That is to be unfaithful to the nature of the material with which you worked. Same is true for stone, brick, stucco whatever you are working with. The thing should be as it is. The great Gothic cathedrals of Europe are among the greatest examples of sacred art. When we go into a good cathedral e.g. the Notredame of Paris, your head goes up because the whole construction is to pull you towards heaven. It is as if the stones are moving towards heavens. The stone is heavy. In the Islamic context this is going against the nature of the stone.

Islam does not try to do that. As soon as you enter a truly great mosque you find the centre right here. The stone does not try to fly. The flying buttresses and flying stones cannot occur in Islamic art.

The original Islamic art is always realistic. It tries to remain faithful to the subject with which it deals and to understand the nature of the material with which it works. It was the same principle, which prevented Islam, and to understand the nature of the material with which it works. It was the same principle that prevented Islam from developing naturalism. In Islamic art realism is totally opposed to naturalism. Naturalism was avoided by Islamic art precisely because naturalism tries to make a thing appear what it is not. It draws a horse which is exactly like the horse in the street but it is not that horse. Naturalistic art came into the Islamic art as a result of the influence of the European art that destroys this relationship. If you draw a horse that is exactly like a horse what does it add to reality? This was banned in Islam. Not painting but naturalistic painting was banned by the Aādāth that spoke of the punishment of the painters on the Day of Judgement.

Islam is not opposed to painting. It is opposed to the image of the Divinity. It is opposed to naturalism. In the most beautiful Persian miniatures of the Safavid period, which were the peak of this branch of Islamic art, the horses do not look like the horses in the stables. What is the artist doing here? He is really painting the Spiritual world, paradisaical world. He is not painting the world of nature and need not claim to be naturalistic. The only time Muslim painters were allowed to paint naturalistically was for scientific purposes i.e. to depict a particular stone for books on the subject or to depict the body for the books on medicine and anatomy. That was allowed. Out of it the artist was not supposed to be naturalistic because naturalistic art is to try to play the role of God, and as is well known, Islam has never allowed man to claim the nature of Divinity for himself.

The Titanic, Promethean character of man appeared in Europe after renaissance. Its example can be seen in the Michelangelo's statue of David. It is not the David of the Psalms. He is a David, which is Herculean, with a big head protrusion, battling heaven. That kind of man never developed in Islam and therefore the need to be bombastic and express one's ego didn't come about. So the greatest artists were able to produce their incredible works in the context of what it means to be human. Not to be an other God, creating, but always be humble before God, to be his servant. It is that kind of man which is in Islamic art. Once the image of oneself changes, the whole of art and society would change.

Another very important principle of Islamic art is the significance of the nothingness of the world. It goes back directly to the most important verse of the Qur'ân and the first shabadah $\text{لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا اللَّهُ}$. This is understood on every level, from the anthropomorphic, popular interpretation to the profound metaphysical understanding that there is no reality but Allah. Reality means Divinity. Artistically $\text{لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا اللَّهُ}$ means emptying all things other than Allah of their own reality and returning all reality to God. That is why that void or emptiness is fullness for the Muslim soul. Why is it so important for us? It is because it generates faqr, i.e. poverty in the spiritual sense. Even the most luxurious buildings of the Safavid and Mughal periods that seem to be so exuberant-some of them having gold designs etc. - are not totally worldly luxury. Geometry, arabesque, the principles of intelligibility and the lack of naturalism always control this exuberance and luxury. Poverty is always kept. The original mosques were extremely simple and it is natural in the growth of a civilisation that it grows from unity to multiplicity. The usual superficial argument advanced in this regard is that all Islamic art is a removal from the origin and it is not needed. This is unacceptable. It fails to understand how the mentality and the psyche of people in a civilisation, as it grows more and more distant from the original message of tawâd, is in more and more need of the representation of tawâd in multiplicity. This is why traditional Islamic art goes from the simple white washed rooms or simple spaces of early Islamic centuries to the Shah Mosque or Wâzir Khan Mosque and other great mosques that are all, nevertheless, Islamic art of the highest order. So this is not against poverty. Poverty in the sense of realising our nothingness in front of Allah and the fact that all richness comes from God. It is a sine qua non for the understanding of Islamic art.

Islamic art is always non-individual. It is not there for the expression of individualism. Principles transcend individuals and that is what transforms the artist. Art in the Islamic world was also a way of spiritual realisation. Many of the people who practised calligraphy, architecture etc. were also attached to a spiritual discipline. It is a wedding between artistic guilds and Sufi orders in the Islamic world, which still survives. The artist, as a result of the spiritual discipline, never tried to simply represent his ego or try to be individualistic, to be different. He tried to participate in the Divine reality and creativity always came from this. In Islam originality means always to go back to the origin. Not representing one's ego. This also is the reason that deep down in Islam there is no division between secular and religious art. There is a difference between traditional art and sacred art that is at the heart of the former. There is also a difference between religious music i.e. chants of the religious orders and secular music that for example was played before

Jahangir. But all musicians in the court of Jahangir were also Sufis. Also look at the quality of that music. Even today when you listen to Bismillah Khan, the famous *shahnā* player you cannot not think of God. That is not secular music. The whole division between secular and religious is false. If one is working to revive Islamic arts one must remember that the very word secular does not exist in Arabic or other Islamic language. The word *dunyā* does not mean secular. It means worldly but now every body uses it. The very category of secular has no meaning in the Islamic civilisation and words don't exist for it. This proves that the idea of a division between religious art and secular art is meaningless.

Now let us say something about the hierarchy of the arts. We have mentioned the principles. What is, then, the hierarchy of the arts? In other civilisations there are other hierarchies e.g. painting is the highest art in Christianity, statues of the gods is important in Hinduism. In the Islamic art the highest art is the art that has to do with the Word of God. The nature of the Islamic revelation is based on the manifestation of the Divine Word in the form of word and not flesh or thing or human being as in other religions. Therefore the highest art is the art of the chanting of the Qur'ān, psalmody of the Qur'ān. It is an oral art. In the visual arts there are two arts that are most closely related to the Qur'ānic art. First is calligraphy, which is the visual writing of the Word of God. That is the supreme art in Islam. Then other forms of visual art that go all the way from ornamented buildings to the bowls of soup. You cannot walk through an Islamic city without seeing the word of God every where. The incredibly beautiful art of calligraphy of Islam which is more developed than in any other civilisation in the world, even the Chinese and Japanese, for its variation of forms. It is the peak of the visual arts because it is the art of the Word of God. All other writing flowed from that.

*After calligraphy, which has the honoured position, and complementary to that is architecture, creation of places in which the Word of God reverberates. In later Islamic history the two were wedded together and much of the Islamic art of the last 700 years is a remarkable combination of the two. Not only in mosques but also in palaces. Where would have been Alhambra without the ornamentation of *lā ghālib illā Allāh!**

Then after these two great arts, Islam has a very large category of dealing with the arts. Importance of this is judged by the criterion of being closer to the human soul and the more effect it has on the human soul. Limitations of time not allow me to go into the details of the hierarchy that comes into existence by the application of the principles and criteria that were very briefly alluded to. Nearest to our soul is our body. Therefore all art has to do

with the body. First of all is the art of the dress. Dress is the closest to us after our body. What we wear effects how we feel inside. Classical Islamic civilisation produced the most beautiful male and female dresses. The male dress was always very masculine and the female always very feminine. The philosophy of dress in Islam was to bring out the male and female beauty, the latter not being however for the public. The male dress was to bring out the patriarchal character of man. It was also to facilitate the prayers. The idea that the beauty in the external form of worship is not important-importance is that of just praying-is false. It is to negate totally the aspect of Divine Jamal.