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I. INTRODUCTION

One important difference between Islamic and Western aesthetics is that, in the former, there has been little if any critical discourse on art and beauty until very recently. Yet, from the eighth to the thirteenth centuries, a vast literature related to the arts, from architecture to poetry and music, existed in Islamic countries. This literature was initially stimulated by the translations of classical texts, such as those of Plato, Aristotle, and Euclid. These translations were soon followed by Arabic texts that developed ideas of theory and practice, which have become classical references in the Islamic artworld. Gülru Necipoğlu's *The Topkapı Scroll*, an important modern source on the aesthetic basis of arts and crafts in the medieval Islamic world, gives us detailed information on this literature and on the aesthetic implications of the decorative patterns and the mathematical and geometrical principles at the foundations of these arts and crafts.¹ These texts were not formulated as texts about aesthetics, but rather as technical manuals or scientific books.

Insofar as there has been any criticism of the arts in the Islamic world prior to the modern age, it exists in the artwork, in the artistic expression itself. In other words, one thinks or comments about an artwork through another work. There is poetry that responds to other poetry, musical compositions that respond to other music. Indeed, in cultures where tradition is a dominating force, artists compete by producing their own interpretations as a way of commenting on each other's work, rather than by trying to make something totally original or new. The work then constitutes both a critique

and an innovation. In Islam (as in many other non-Western cultures) the only way to move away from a tradition, or to be original, would be through knowing the tradition itself. Such movements may create new approaches in artistic practice, but they can never be radical because they must always stay within traditional norms.

One limitation of this dependence on tradition is that it does not produce an analysis and evaluation—a theory—of its own arts and aesthetic approaches. Even when such attempts are made, the results are often descriptive rather than analytical or conceptual. For example, even as late as the early twentieth century, there was little documentation and writing on Turkish architecture and its history.² What analysis and evaluation of Islamic art and aesthetics there was, was done by Orientalists who viewed Islamic art and aesthetics mainly through Western values and concepts. Islamic or oriental forms in general would be explained by their narrative or figurative content or, at best, shown in a positive light through their association with the values of modern Western art, such as the absence of the appearance of three-dimensionality in painting.³ Even the most sympathetic approaches rarely ventured into the background and sources of the deep cultural meaning of the forms, but concentrated mainly on history, influences, and descriptions of style and technique.⁴

Basic differences between Islamic and Western cultures are manifested not only in how language is—and is not—used to talk about art, but also in profound differences in their approaches to the world in general. It is this dimension that I pursue in this paper. In Islam, for example, there is a

conviction that the relationships of humans to the world and human perceptions of it are not fixed, not codifiable, and cannot be captured using language that expresses generalized concepts. Some Sufi teachings deny that definitions of truths about the world and human relationships to it can be captured in language.⁵ Literal explanations provided by words are considered only superficial, so discussion is conducted in various kinds of riddles, and points of view are best expressed in symbols or in artistic expression.

Taking these constraints into consideration, I attempt to clarify various Islamic ways of seeing the world and how they establish meanings for artistic forms.⁶ I concentrate here mostly on the Sufi tradition, which can be taken as representative of various heterodox Islamic traditions after the fifteenth century, when musicians, miniaturists, calligraphers, and poets were often believers in one of those traditions—whether Alaoui, Sufi, or Bektashi—and in transcendentalism. In the final section of the paper, I discuss some consequences for the possibility of an Islamic aesthetics in contemporary art.

II. TIME AND SPACE

The ways of conceiving and perceiving space and time underlie the most basic symbolic forms of a culture. According to Islam, for example, the world is perceived from a constantly moving and changing vantage point. Cafer Çelebi, in admiration of the work of Mehmet Ağa, the architect of the Blue Mosque (Sultan Ahmet Mosque in Istanbul, c. 1605), describes this well: “When looked at from one angle, one type of form or circle was seen, and when one looked again from another angle, other types of designs and patterns emerged, and other forms appeared. However much the point of view changed, that many times forms were transformed into other shapes.”⁷ Because the world is accepted as constantly changing, freedom of expression is not an important issue for art or for the artist.⁸ Neither does the artist lay claim to some privilege or priority in how his or her work is to be seen, as the work might if it were conceived as created from a fixed point of view.

Similarly, the Islamic view of the world contains no assumption that the world itself is fixed or stable. In Islamic aesthetics, no definitive final state of an artwork or of an utterance (as in criticism)

is pursued as a value. In domestic architecture, no fixed function is given to a space, and the divisions of the spaces themselves are not fixed. Architecture is taken to be constantly changing, according to light and to function; the way one acts in a certain space, the way one lives in it, transforms it. The constant transformability of space is instead pursued as a value.⁹ Similar implications hold for the way pictures and visual images are constructed and seen. Several different points of view can be taken when drawing landscapes or cityscapes, as is obvious in miniatures.¹⁰

Various forms or aesthetic structures for artistic expression in the Islamic world can be traced to certain underlying principles of belief. These beliefs concern the deeper, metaphysical aspects of a worldview, and they impact one’s sense of art’s meaning and expressiveness in a profound manner. These principles are: (1) the principle of constant change within permanence, (2) the principle of the uncertainty of human cognition, and (3) the principle of love, or understanding with the heart. These principles are mentioned and elaborated on directly by ancient Islamic philosophers such as Ibn-Arabi and Hallac Mansur, as well as by more recent commentators on Islam and Sufism. The understanding of some of these principles, such as “uncertainty of the human condition,” can also be derived from allegories and symbolism in the artworks.¹¹

1. The Principle of Constant Change Within Permanence

What is typically seen as “merely decorative” or as “arabesque” from the Western point of view is actually an expression of the constant flux of the world and of how all creation is interrelated. Various visual arrays are designed to reflect the constant movement of the world. For example, the basic forms of movement that are reflected in painted, mosaic, or stalactite stars are based on the understanding that the human world, which is symbolized by directionality and the orthogonal (a square or a rectangle), is constantly moving within the permanent universe, the spiritual world, which is symbolized by the circle. In classical Ottoman architecture of the sixteenth century, the two dominant structural forms, the cubic base and the domical cover, express this relationship. Stars and constellations that appear on domes are

hardly merely decorative, but have deep significance in their reference to the orientation of humans and of the human world in relation to the universe. They also refer to the breath of the universe, and the expansion and contraction of that breath: the universe and the world and the environment take shape from the breath of God.¹²

In the Sufi tradition, the stimulation of all five senses is crucial to attaining truth. Consider Avicenna, who wrote: “Know that access to that by which our soul becomes knowing begins by way of the senses.”¹³ Here, the emphasis is on sense perception; however, Avicenna also mentions the importance of the imagination and of emotion.¹⁴ Education, as in early Greek culture, begins with the discipline of the body and hence with music and dance. One is constantly moving and involved in exercising all the senses rather than in conceptualizing about them or about a supposed stable, external object of perception. The involvement of all the senses, moreover, is taken to lead to a profound knowledge of the Absolute, a knowledge that is therefore in the most basic or fundamental way aesthetic. Any kind of artistic involvement may be a path to the knowledge of God, who is manifested in the physical, sensible appearance of the world. For the artist, the goal is to create something worthy of the creation of God.

The sensory or aesthetic means to knowledge is best understood by the fact that, in Sufi, it is through symbols that one is awakened; it is through symbols that one is transformed; and it is through symbols that one is expressive. Symbols are realities contained within the nature of things. The entire journey to God is a journey in symbols, which refer to both the universal aspect of creation and the particular aspect of tradition. In fact, the whole of the visible, sensible world and its many manifestations is the symbol of God. Symbols are the “place of encounter” between the “archetypes or the intelligibles and the sensible, phenomenal world.”¹⁵ Thus, the sensible becomes the link between meaning and form, whether the symbols are general—such as basic geometric forms and the patterns resulting from their relations, or spirals, or numbers—or particular, such as those that arise in individual works of visual art and music. Examples of particular symbols are the image of the rose petal in painting, which refers to the skin of the prophet, and the use of certain musical keys or orders (*maqam*) in certain rhythms to refer to love or separation or death.

In Sufi, as in Islam in general, one can never say that an artist creates a symbol. Symbols are given; they are there to be discovered. The artist does not claim originality; it is a gift that the artist can see the value and beauty of the universe. The artist attempts to put forward sensible forms that are worthy of the beauty of creation and that will attract one to the original beauty created by God. Artists may put forward sensible forms almost unconsciously, as if in a trance, or by giving themselves to the act of creativity. In this selflessness, which is a kind of unconsciousness, tradition creates the bond to the spiritual or to God.¹⁶ The process, as a whole, of presenting sensible forms as a work of art, as a beautiful thing, as a symbol, is a path for coming closer to the spiritual. This dynamic quality of the process is not only characteristic of Islamic arts and of Sufism; it belongs also to many other non-Western artistic traditions, including the traditional Japanese approach to the arts, where artistic practices are defined as “ways.”¹⁷ Ultimately, it is the *process* of *making* a work that is important.

Artistic expression through symbols is a way of coming closer to the spiritual and to a state of peace. Through this act, this “invocation,” as one might translate it, the soul attains peace: “the resistance of the restless is gradually worn down” by artistic expression, such as in dance, music, chanting, or poetry.¹⁸ The Islamic world is known as the world of peace: Dar el Sulh—or Dar el Salam. Islamic arts, including architecture, strive to attain complete harmony through the synthesis of opposites, such as dark and light, inside and outside, square and circle. Though the architecture, for example, is sometimes seen as being overly decorative or as having a quality of “horror vacui,” its decorative qualities are a reflection of the beauty and richness of the universe, and with them the tensions of architecture, the tensions of structure, are brought into balance.

One of the most important symbolic, structural, and compositional forms is the spiral. It has introverted and extraverted movement; it is both concentric and eccentric. It represents the inner being and the outer world; it signifies constant change upon permanence. In miniatures, the basic compositional principle is the arrangement of major visual movements in the spiral form.¹⁹ At architectural sites, this principle is also in operation. In the site organization of the Imperial Complex of Suleiman the Magnificent (Istanbul, c. 1557),

one circulates among the different buildings of the complex and enters the main portal through spiral movements. The path is never linear.²⁰

Decorative qualities of architecture are also the elaboration of structures that are believed to be the basis of all the universe and of all existence, such as the patterns that result from some basic geometries, which are symbolic of relationships between humans and God, or of some basic movements, which are thought to underlie the processes of time and the structures of space. These not only constitute the basis from which elaborate decorative patterns in architecture are produced, but also condition other spatial arts and the forms of music. Both Sufi and Islamic artistic expression in general are to be understood in relation to these basic understandings and interpretations of existence.

2. *Principle of the Uncertainty of Human Understanding: Illusion or Reality?*

Another basic claim about how humans are related to the world is about human perception, in particular, that what one sees may be illusion or reality. This uncertainty is expressed in many artistic and architectural forms—such as mirrors, reflections, and screens—which abound in Islamic architecture. They create a visual effect where the real and the illusory are confused, where appearances are seen as though through a veil, where the multiple repetitions of the same confuse the boundaries of the real world.

A well-known example is the Alhambra Palace and its gardens. The gardens are designed as sequences of small, connected garden courts. As one looks through the openings between the connected spaces, one sees an unending series of spaces with repeated arches cut into hedges. Water, which has many symbolic meanings, produces illusions and repeated images that create uncertainty about the reality of any of these appearances. Small water ponds adorning these spaces also create a dreamy world of reflections and “veils” created by water sprays.

Another example from Andalusia is the Cordoba Mosque, whose forest of columns and arches creates a sense of indefinable limits. The repetitive character of many elements in Islamic architecture is responsible for the perceiver’s doubts about what is real. Repetition also points to the principle

of constant change; what is otherwise perceived as simple and monotonous can be seen in many ways and from a variety of viewing angles. (Something similar happens in the work of the conceptual artist Sol LeWitt.) The spiral form of circulation and the circular form of directionality are also important movements for taking different points of view.

Mirrors and mirror-like reflections, which abound in Islamic architectural works as elements of decoration, are vehicles for displaying the world’s many different appearances. Multidimensionality is a way of implying the impossibility of knowing reality as it is. This second principle is reflected in the impossibility of knowledge about the Absolute because the Absolute manifests itself in infinite ways. Except for the ninety-nine names attributed to God, God cannot be known.

Another element that adds to confusion between appearance and reality is the use of lattice screens made of wood or metal. Screens typically have beautiful patterns through which changing effects of lights and shadows create a playful imagery. At the same time, however, the world is shown as if through a veil. Like many patterns used for decoration, screens reflect Islamic beliefs about how one perceives the world—as moving and as through a veil—but Ibn-Arabi says, “yet one is not ordinarily aware of this [movement] because of the extreme thinness and fineness of the veil.”²¹

3. *The Principle of Love: Understanding with the Heart*

This principle is perhaps the one most deeply connected with spirituality. In Islam, existence as a whole is possible because of Love. Because God wanted to make his presence known, he created humankind to admire and love him, and made himself manifest through the world. As a person is part of the world, one is also part of God. As the whole world is the manifestation of God, one finds God within oneself. It is through admiring God’s creation that one understands the spiritual world and becomes close to it. As artists view their work with admiration, they lose themselves in its beauty. They become like what they admire; observers become similar to what they look at. Art serves this mimetic purpose since all creation is the reflection of God.