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Islamic Aesthetics: An Alternative Way to Knowledge

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.

These three principles—of change, of uncertainty, of love—point to a conception of the perceptual world as constructed of opposites that work in conjunction with each other: sacred and profane, humans and God, lover and beloved, male and female. Meaning is created in their conjunction, accessible through love, rendering us similar to what we try to understand. To understand the world, one has to become like artists who, drawing or painting, somehow become similar to what they draw or paint, and who approach the world with love. To approach with love one has to see the beauty. Thus art and understanding become intimately related.[22]

III. THE PROBLEMATICS OF MODERNIZATION

It is an important question today whether one can still talk about Islamic aesthetics and whether an aesthetic approach that has its grounding in traditions and lifestyles that are no longer sustainable can possibly survive and have a role in contemporary artistic practice. If the answer is negative, we can talk about Islamic aesthetics only as a thing of the past. However, if we look at certain artists' work in Turkey during the era of modernization (roughly the late nineteenth century) and today, we can often see an Islamic approach, even if in the guise of Western painting styles and techniques and in the language of Western contemporary art.

Notwithstanding long years of exposure to Western art, certain ways of seeing have been slow to change. A typical Islamic sensibility that surfaces in the modern art of Islamic countries is the profuse use of patterns and calligraphic effects to produce rich surface qualities in a work. The use of diverse color contrasts and tonal effects in the same painting, for example, produces visual qualities similar to those of architectural decoration on Islamic buildings. It is also common to find fantastic creatures and a mixture of plant and animal forms in modern Islamic arts, not so much to create a surrealistic style, but rather to convey the sense of confusion and uncertainty about what is real and what is imagined.

During the twentieth century, especially as a result of modernization, many artists outside the West tried to create a modern language using elements reminiscent of their historic culture. One typical approach is to use the representation of space in ways that are similar to what is done in miniatures: piling depth planes on top of each other, eliminating three-dimensionality, and rendering size independently of distance. Other traits, as mentioned before, include geometric patterning, texture, and calligraphic movement. Figures may be truncated or placed without regard to where the pictorial surface ends. These features of painting should not be interpreted as the direct copying of traditional motifs and styles, but rather as choices artists make because they consider them to be true to the common visual experience within their culture.

Today, many artists still attempt to create an aesthetic based on a traditional Islamic worldview, such as is described by the three principles above. One approach is to create hybrid expressions, which may be seen as symbolic in the way traditional Islamic principles of understanding involve the integration of opposites. An engaged art involving political, sexual, and social commentary can be constituted using calligraphy, traditional decorative patterns, and images belonging to Islamic cultural traditions. The work of Murat Morova, a Turkish artist whose work is strikingly contemporary, yet still expresses an Islamic aesthetic understanding, provides us with a good example of this approach.[23]

The criticism that many modern visual works of art in Islamic cultures are merely decorative and lack significant content is an important problematic, at least in the eyes of many contemporary critics. Yet, these features need not be viewed as weaknesses. One can assume that the richness and complexity of visual effects that are sought after by many modern artists in the Islamic world are related to visual habits rooted in deep structures of tradition. At a time when such traditions were still alive and images carried the symbolic significance of a worldview, they carried deep meanings and were never merely decorative. Today, with modernization and the penetration of technology into everyday practices, the symbolism has apparently dissolved. Yet visual habits often remain, even when their religious and theoretical groundings do not, influencing artists' technique and style and the resultant surface qualities of their work. In addition, visual habits and preferences remain in the popular taste. The human figure does not have the deep spiritual references that it has in much Western art, especially its religious painting, so that figural painting becomes generally narrative. Abstraction no longer contains the symbolism of

traditional worldviews, so the stark, subdued, and subtle, as features of style, are usually seen as alien and unaesthetic. Islamic artists striving for a modernist expressive style find themselves in a serious plight. In this regard, sustaining an Islamic aesthetics in modern and contemporary art depends on its being embedded in an engaged worldview, as in the case of some contemporary artists who create new visual configurations that count as an Islamic aesthetic because of their spiritual affinities.

I have attempted to explain how certain forms and orders of Islamic art reveal and reflect basic values and views about human existence and the relation of the human to the spiritual. Focusing on certain principles of Islamic understanding of the world, I tried to clarify how they are form-generating principles that create an environment, a world that caters to an Islamic way of seeing. Finally, I briefly described a dilemma faced by modern and contemporary artists. Worldviews are profound structures that have direct bearing on artistic practices even when the worldview is no longer shared. Yet, it is in part because patterns of visual experience are slow to change that they can become an important aspect of an artist's own cultural identity, and of his or her work.

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1. Gülru Necipoğlu explains that the medieval Islamic scholar Al-Farabi classified mathematical sciences "into seven specialized fields (arithmetic, geometry, optics, astronomy, music, weights, mechanics) each of which had both theoretical (*al-nazari*) and practical (*al-'amali*) branches." Gülru Necipoğlu, *The Topkapi Scroll—Geometry and Ornament in Islamic Architecture* (Santa Monica: Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1995), p. 132. Al-Farabi, Al-Ghazali, Ibn-Khaldun, Ibn Rushd, Ibn Sina, Al Jazari, and Ibn Al-Haytham can be reasonably taken as the most important medieval Islamic writers whose work reflects aesthetic views and concepts related to architectural and decorative applications. See Necipoğlu, *The Topkapı Scroll*, pp. 363–380.

2. Albert Gabriel was one of the early scholars who made drawings and elevations of architectural works in Turkey. Albert Gabriel, *Les Monuments Turcs d'Anatolie, I, II* (Paris: E. de Boccard, 1940).

3. On the influence of Islamic art on Matisse, see Yves Alain Bois, *Painting as Model* (MIT Press, 1990).

4. Both Oleg Grabar and Richard Ettinghausen were great scholars of Islamic art; however, one rarely finds aesthetic *interpretations* in their books. See Richard Ettinghausen and Oleg Grabar, *The Art and Architecture of Islam* (Yale University Press, 1987); David Talbot Rice, *Islamic Art* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1965).

5. See Laleh Bakhtiar, *Sufi—Expressions of the Mystic Quest* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1976), p. 17. A similar view may be found in Zen Buddhism. See T. Daisetz Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture* (Princeton University Press, 1959), pp. 5–18.

6. An explanation of what constitutes a worldview and its relation to symbolic forms can be found in Erwin Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, trans. C. S. Wood (New York: Zone Books, 1991). See also Allister Neher's discussion in "How Perspective Could Be a Symbolic Form," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 63 (2005): 359–373.

7. Cafer Efendi, *Risale-i Mimariyye: An Early Seventeenth-Century Ottoman Treatise on Architecture*, facsimile, trans. and notes by Howard Crane (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1987), p. 34.

8. Bakhtiar, *Sufi*, p. 17.

9. Such a position also explains the lack of any musical notation in the Islamic world until the eighteenth century. Cem Behar, *Klasik Türk Musikisi Üzerine Denemeler* [*Essays on Classical Turkish Music*] (Istanbul: Bağlam Yayınları, 1987). Behar explains why music had to be memorized and repeatedly practiced, but not notated or written down.

10. Especially notable is the work of Levni, the eighteenth-century Ottoman miniaturist, in which one finds multiple perspectival systems in one view. See Esin Atıl, *Levni ve Surname* (Istanbul: Koçbank, 1999).

11. References for Islamic thought on these principles include: René Rebetez, *La Odisea de la Luz* (Bogota: Ediciones M. Roca, 1997); Al-Ghazali Muhamad, *The Alchemy of Happiness*, trans. Henry A. Homes (Albany: Munsell, 1873); Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (University of Carolina Press, 1975); Dahdal Masser Musa and Al-Husayn ibn Mansur Al-Hallaji, *D.D. Dissertation*, (Erlangen: Erlangen University 1983); Idries Shah, *The Way of the Sufi* (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1968); Le Mesnevi, *Mevlana Jalaludin Rumi*, trans. Veled Celebi Izbudak (Istanbul: MEB Sark-Islam Klasikleri, 1966); Henry Corbin, *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital* (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960); Henry Corbin, *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn Arabi* (Princeton: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969).

12. Bakhtiar, *Sufi*, p. 16. One important source about this principle being expressed in decorative patterns is the Topkapı Scroll, which has been analyzed by Gulrü Necipoğlu in *The Topkapi Scroll*.

13. Necipoğlu, *The Topkapı Scroll*, ch. 5. As articulated by Necipoğlu, there were very developed theories on perception that greatly influenced the arts, as in the writings of Ibn Al-Haytham. See *The Optics of Ibn Al-Haytham: Books I–III, On Direct Vision* (originally, *Kitab al-manazir*), trans. and with a commentary by Abdelhamid I. Sabra, 2 vols. (London: Warburg Institute, 1986) (mentioned in Necipoğlu, *The Topkapı Scroll*); also for the importance of sensory perception, see Bakhtiar, *Sufi*, pp. 18–19.

14. Avicenna, born in Bukhara in 980, wrote: "[F]or all beauty which is suitable and goodness which one perceives (*kul cemal mulayim wakhayr mudrak*), that one loves and

desires (*mahbib wa mashug*) the principle of perceiving them (*mabda idrakihi*) relies on the senses (*his*), imagination (*hayal*), the estimative faculty (*wahm*), conjecture (*zan*) and the intellect (*agl*)." (Valerie Gonzales, *Beauty and Islam*, [London: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 2001], pp. 16–18).

15. Bakhtiar, *Sufi*, p. 25.

16. It is a plausible generalization that in most non-Western arts the artist does not claim to be a creator. See Ken-ichi Sasaki, "Issues in Contemporary Culture and Aesthetics," in *Aesthetic Life in the Anti-Urban Culture of Japan*, ed. Heinz Paetzold (Maastricht: Jan van Eyck Akademie, 1996), pp. 59-65.

17. Haruhiko Fujita, "Arts and Ways," in *IAA Yearbook*, ed. Jale Erzen (2003), available at http://www.2.eur.nl/fw/hyper/IAA/index.htm.

18. Bakhtiar, *Sufi*, p. 24.

19. A. Papadopoulo, *L'Islam et l'Art Musulman* (Paris: Mazenod, 1976). For the spiral, see pp. 458–469.

20. See Jale Nejdet Erzen, "Site Organization," in *Sinan Ottoman Architect* (Ankara: METU Faculty of Architecture, 2004), pp. 153-167.

21. Bakhtiar, *Sufi*, p. 17.

22. Beşir Ayvazoğlu, *Aşk Estetiği* [*Aesthetics of Love*] (Istanbul: Ötüken Neşriyat, 1993).

23. Murat Morova's works can be accessed at www.geocities.com/kareninarivista/biennalecountries.htm.