

Arab or Islamic Art?

The impact of the Arabic language on the visual arts

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Source: *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Vol. 5, No.1. (Winter, 1971) © World Wisdom, Inc.
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THE expression "Arab art" is commonly employed to designate Islamic art; however the legitimacy of this term has often been contested with the aid of arguments which are seemingly plausible but which in reality are vitiated by a superficial or even prejudiced view of things. The question to be asked first of all is the following: what is it that characterizes the Arab genius, and how may this be discerned in art? The only arts possessed by the pre-Islamic Arabs, who were mostly nomads living at the crossroads of several civilizations, were a rectilinear architecture and the various kinds of crafts—which, incidentally, it would be wrong to underestimate, and whose influence was later to become very great; be that as it may, the predominant and most striking expression of the Arab genius is the language, including its script. The Arabs bequeathed their language to the whole civilization of Islam, and it not only was the means of preserving the Arabs, heritage outside Arabia, but even caused this to bloom at a far remove from its own racial source. By the intermediary of this language, every essential of the Arab genius was effectively communicated to the whole of Islamic civilization.

The extraordinary normative power of the Arab language derives both from its role as a sacred language and from its archaic character, these two things, moreover, being connected: it was its archaism that predestined Arabic to the role of a sacred language, and it was the Qoranic revelation that in a sense actualized its primordial substance. In the linguistic realm, archaism is by no means synonymous with structural simplicity, quite the reverse: languages are generally impoverished with time, they lose both the hierarchical differentiation of meanings and the logical concision of forms, while becoming complicated on the plane of rhetoric, in order to compensate this impoverishment. What surprises historians of language is that Arabic has been able to preserve a morphology already exemplified by Hammurabi's code in the 19th or 18th century B.C.¹ and a phonetic system which perpetuates, apart from one single sound, the very rich sound range born witness to by the most ancient Semitic alphabets discovered,² and that it has done so despite the absence of any "literary tradition" which might have acted as a bridge between this remote age of the Patriarchs and the time when the Qoranic revelation was to fix the language forever. The explanation of this perenniality of Arabic resides precisely in the conservative role of nomadism: it is in the towns that language decays, by the very fact that it becomes attached to things and institutions and undergoes their fate; the well-nigh timeless life of the nomad, on the contrary, protects the language and permits it to bloom in all its fullness: the portion of primordial symbolism which fell to the lot of the nomads was the art of speech, which is not bound to place, and whose dynamic character corresponds to that of nomadic life itself, whereas the sedentary peoples developed the plastic arts, which require stability and which in their symbolism are connected, quite naturally, to the idea of a center in space.³ It can thus be stated, in general terms, that the Arabic language guarantees the survival, on the mental plane, of a primitive Semitism, nomadic in character.

To explain in a few words, and without the need of any special linguistic knowledge, what is the specific nature of this language, it should be recalled firstly that every language comprises two roots or poles, one or the other of which will predominate, and which may be designated by the terms "auditive intuition" and "imaginative intuition". The first is normally manifested by the fact that a given word is derived from a simple combination of sounds which, as such, expresses a typical event or more exactly, a fundamental action; it does this in a more or less immediate manner, not by means of onomatopoeia, but because the sound itself is an event which unfolds in time, so that it corresponds *a priori*, and independently of all semantic conventions, to action; speech is essentially act and, according to this logic, the language fundamentally conceives everything that it names as an action or an object of action. Imaginative intuition, on the other hand, is manifested in language by means of the semantic association of analogous images: every word pronounced inwardly evokes a corresponding image, which calls forth others, general images dominating more particular images, according to a hierarchy which in turn is inherent in the structure of the language. The Latin languages belong mainly to this latter type whereas Arabic displays an almost pure auditive intuition or phonetic logic, the identity of sound and act, as well as the primacy of action, being affirmed throughout the rich tissue of this language: in principle, every Arabic word is derived from a verb whose root, consisting of three invariable sounds, is like the sonorous ideogram of a fundamental act such as "gathering together", "dividing", "including", "penetrating", with the full physical, psychical and spiritual polyvalence of the idea in question; from one single root up to twelve different verbal modes are developed—simple, causative, intensive, reciprocal and so on—and each of these modes produces, by the polarization of the active and the passive, of the subject and the object, a whole pleiad of substantives and adjectives, whose meaning is always connected, in a more or less direct manner, with the fundamental act represented by the trilateral⁴ root of the whole verbal "tree".

It is obvious that this semantic transparency of the language, the fact that, in its symbolism, it derives entirely from the phonetic nature of the verb, is a proof of its relative primordially. In the origin, and in the very depth of our consciousness, things are spontaneously conceived as determinations of the primordial sound which resounds in the heart, this sound being none other than the first and non-individualized act of consciousness; at this level or in this state, "to name" a thing is to identify oneself with the act or the sound which produces it;⁵ the symbolism inherent in language—more or less veiled or deformed by acquired habits—grasps the nature of a thing not in a static manner, as one grasps an image, but, so to speak, *in statu nascendi*, in the act of becoming. This aspect of language in general and of the Arabic language in particular is moreover, in the Moslem world, the object of a whole group of sciences, some philosophical, others esoteric. It may be said that Moslem scholars have not only preserved this structure of Arabic, but that they have even contributed to rendering it explicit.

In order to understand how Arabic, which is of Bedouin origin, could become, with almost no borrowings the language of a civilization that was intellectually very rich and differentiated, it is necessary to know that its verbal roots are capable of expressing, in a so to speak active manner, determinations which the Indo-European languages generally express by an adjective associated with the verb "to be": the root BTN, for example, comprises the meaning of "being inside," and the root ZHR that of "being outside"; the verbal root RHM summarizes all the modes of "being merciful" or "having compassion", etc. The fundamental act which is at the root of a "tree" of expressions is thus not necessarily an action in the ordinary sense of the term; it may be an existential act, like that of light which radiates, or even a purely logical act, such as "being big" or "being small", and it is in this possibility of gathering every manner of being of a

thing into a principal act, that the great power of abstraction of the Arabic language resides. What we must grasp here, so far as art is concerned, is the implicitly auditive character of this abstraction: the passage from the particular to the general or principal is *a priori* indicated by the presence, in a given expression, of root sounds which recall a given prototypal act.

The relationship between prototypal acts and their verbal derivations is however not always easy to grasp, because of the sometimes very particular and conventionally fixed meaning of such and such a derived term, and also, above all, because the fundamental ideas expressed by the roots are of an eminently complex nature. An orientalist went so far as to say that "the structure of the Arabic language would be of an incomparable transparency if the meaning of the verbal roots was not arbitrary"; it is however scarcely possible that the basis of a language should be arbitrary. In fact, the verbal roots mark the threshold between discursive thought and a kind of synthetic perception which has its models both in the spirit and in the body; the Arabic language is as though suspended from auditive intuition.⁶

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If these data are transposed into the realm of art, with all the reservations which generalizations of this nature presuppose, it can be said that the Arab is *a priori* an auditive rather than a visual type, that is to say that he is the former before he is the latter;⁷ in fact, his need for artistic exteriorization is largely absorbed by the culture of his language, with its fascinating phonetism and its almost unlimited faculty of producing new verbal derivations. Nor is the Arab a contemplative in the ordinary sense of the word, if one means by this the type of man who looks or contemplates rather than acts, and who spontaneously reduces perceived forms to prototypal forms which are in principle immutable; the Arab loves to analyze things in view of their intrinsic functions and of the activities reflected in them; this is to say that his mentality is not static, but essentially dynamic. However, since he is nevertheless a contemplative—Islam proves it and the Arabic language includes this possibility—he finds access to unity by means of rhythm, which is like the refraction of the eternal present in the current of time.

The plastic examples which illustrate these tendencies spring to mind: the arabesque, in particular, with its deployment at once regular and indefinite, is indeed the most direct expression of rhythm in the visual order. It is true that its most perfect forms are not conceivable without the artistic contribution of the nomads of central Asia; nevertheless it was in an Arab milieu that it had its fullest development. Another typical element of Moslem art, and one whose development goes hand in hand with Arab domination, is the interlacing motif; it appears in all its perfection from the time of the Omayyads, in the form of sculpted lattices in the windows of mosques and palaces.⁸ To enjoy the geometrical interplay that constitutes the interlacing motif, it is not enough to look at it directly, it is necessary to "read" it by following the course of the forces that cross one another and compensate one another. Interlacing already exists in the pavement mosaics of lower Antiquity, but in a rudimentary state and deriving from a naturalistic conception devoid of the complexity and the rhythmic precision of the Arab-Moslem interlacing. These examples belong to abstract, not figurative, art, and this likewise characterizes the Arab genius: contrarily to what is usually believed, the average Arab scarcely possesses a "luxuriant imagination". In so far as this appears in Arab literature, for example in the stories from the Thousand and One Nights, it is non-Arab in origin being in this case Persian and Indian; only the art of storytelling is Arab. The creative spirit of the Arabs is *a priori* logical and rhetorical, then rhythmical and incantatory; the richness is in the mental arabesque and not in the profusion of images evoked.

The more or less categorical rejection of images in the art of Islam obviously has its explanation in reasons of a theological order. But it is a fact that the Semitic nomads did not possess a figurative tradition—the pre-Islamic Arabs imported most of their idols—and that for the Arabs images never became a transparent and spontaneous means of expression,⁹ as it is for Iranians and Mongols who are Moslem by religion. The reality of the verb eclipsed that of static vision: compared with the word which is always in act, and whose root plunges into the primordially of sound, a painted or sculpted image appears as a troubling congelation of the spirit. For the pagan Arabs, it pertained to magic.

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But the Arabic language is not entirely dominated by the idea of the verb-act; it also comprises a static, or more exactly, a timeless pole, which shows itself in particular in what is called the "nominal sentence", in which the "noun" (subject) and the "predicates are juxtaposed without a copula. This permits the formulation of a thought in a lapidary fashion and outside any consideration of time. A sentence of this sort is like an equation; but the use of certain prepositions can impress on it an internal logical movement. The most striking example of this kind is the formula constituting the fundamental "testimony" of Islam: *lā ilāha illā 'Llāh* ("There is no divinity apart from God"), a phrase that would be translated literally as: "no divinity if not The Divinity"; in Arabic, the symmetry of the negations—*lā* and *illā*, "not" and "if not"—is even more apparent. In this formula, the static character of the nominal phrase disappears in favor of a purely intellectual action, which corresponds to an integration: "There is no autonomous being apart from the only Being". It is the distinction between the relative and the absolute and the reduction of the first to the second. The Arabic language thus comprises the possibility of condensing a whole doctrine in a brief and concise formula, which will appear like a diamond with sharp edges and reverberating facets. It is true that this possibility of expression is only fully actualized by revelation; it belongs above all to the Qoran; but it is none the less inherent in the genius of Arabic and is reflected in its fashion in Arabo-Islamic art, for this is not only rhythmical, it is also crystalline.

The concision of the Arabic sentence, while it obviously does not limit the profundity of the meaning, nevertheless does not favor a synthesis at the level of description: Arabic rarely accumulates several conditions or circumstances in a single sentence, it prefers to link together a whole series of short sentences. In this connection, an agglutinating language like Turkish, which is related to the Mongol languages, is less dry and more supple than Arabic; it is clearly superior when it comes to describing a situation or a landscape, which is true also of Persian, which is an Indo-European language close to Gothic; nevertheless both of these languages have borrowed not only their theological terminology but also almost all their philosophical and scientific terminology from Arabic.

The extreme opposite of Arabic is a language like Chinese, which is dominated by a static vision of things and which groups the elements of a thought around typical "pictures", as the ideographic character of Chinese script itself indicates.

The Turks are of nomadic origin like the Arabs, but their language connects them to a very different mental type; the Arab is incisive and dynamic in his way of thinking; the Turk, on the other hand, is enveloping and prudent. Within the general framework of Islamic art, the Turkish genius is revealed in a powerful capacity for synthesis, one might almost say by its totalitarian spirit. The Turk possesses a plastic or sculptural gift which the Arab does not have; his works

always derive from an inclusive conception; they are as though chiseled out of a single block. The interior of the most ancient Turkish mosques with a cupola recalls the closed space of the yurt, and Turco-Arabic calligraphy reveals a Mongol influence.

As for Persian art, it is distinguished by its sense of hierarchical differentiations; Persian architecture is perfectly articulated, without ever being "functional" in the modern sense of the term. For the Persian, Unity is manifested above all by harmony. The Persians moreover, are "visuals" by nature and by culture, but lyrical visuals, so to speak, their artistic activity being as it were animated by an inward melody. It is commonly said in the East that "Arabic is the language of God, and Persian the language of Paradise", which sums up very well the difference that exists, for example, between a typically Arab architecture, like that of the Maghreb, where the crystalline geometry of the forms proclaims the unitary principle, and Persian architecture with its blue cupolas and floral ornaments.

The Arab architect is not afraid of monotony; he will add pillar after pillar and arcade after arcade and will dominate this repetition only by rhythmical alternation and by the qualitative perfection of each element.

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The language of the Qoran is everywhere present in the world of Islam; the whole life of the Moslem is constellated with Qoranic formulas, as well as prayers, litanies and invocations in Arabic, whose elements are derived from the sacred Book; innumerable inscriptions bear witness to this. One might say that this ubiquity of the Qoran acts as a spiritual vibration—there is no better term to designate an influence that is both spiritual and sonorous in nature—and that this vibration necessarily determines the modes and measures of Moslem art; the plastic art of Islam is thus in a certain manner the reflection of the Qoranic Word. It is nonetheless very difficult to grasp the principle that unites this art to the Qoranic text, not on the narrative plane, which plays no part in the normal plastic art of Islam, but on the plane of formal structures, for the Qoran obeys no law of composition, either in the internal relationships of its contents, which are strangely discontinuous, or in its verbal style, which eludes all metrical rules. Its rhythm, although so powerful and so penetrating, follows no fixed measure; it is composed entirely of the unforeseen, sometimes employing a striking rhyme, then suddenly changing its breadth and pace, and upsetting cadences in a manner that is as unexpected as it is remarkable. To assert that the Qoran is Arabic poetry because it comprises passages in monotonous rhyme, similar to the Bedouin *rajaz*, would be an error; but to allege that its monotonies and abrupt discontinuities do not correspond profoundly to the Arab soul would be an error likewise. In reality, the state of inward harmony which the Qoran engenders, and to which both its consonances and dissonances, both its beauty and its harshness contribute, is situated on a completely different plane from that reached by art. Perfect poetry —like every perfect work of art—plunges the soul in a certain state of plenitude; the Qoran, on the other hand, engenders in whoever hears its words and experiences its sonorous magic both plenitude and poverty at one and the same time. It gives and it takes; it enlarges the soul by lending it wings, then lays it low and strips it bare; it is comforting and purifying at one and the same time, like a storm; human art can scarcely be said to have this virtue. This amounts to saying that there is no Qoranic "style" which can without more ado be transposed into art; but there exists a state of soul which the recitation of the Qoran supports and which predisposes to certain formal manifestations while excluding others. The diapason of the Qoran always unites intoxicating nostalgia with the greatest sobriety: it is a radiation of the Divine sun on the human desert. To a certain extent, the fluid and flamboyant

rhythm of the arabesque and the abstract and crystalline character of architecture correspond to these two poles; they are two elements which constantly recur.

The most profound link, however, between Islamic art and the Qoran is of a completely different kind: it resides, not in the form of the Qoran, but in its *haqīqah*, its supra-formal essence, and more particularly in the idea of *tawhīd* (unity or union), with its contemplative implications; Islamic art—in the sense of all the plastic arts of Islam—is essentially the projection, in the visual order of certain aspects or dimensions of the Divine Unity.

Let us not forget, nevertheless, that sacred calligraphy reflects in its fashion the majestic style of the Qoranic *sūrahs*, without it being possible to define the nature of this analogy in detail. By the very fact that writing serves to fix the word of God, it is the noblest art of Islam;¹⁰ and it is likewise, almost by definition, the most typically Arab art.

In this latter connection, it is significant that the abstract nature of the signs—the Arabic script being purely phonetic—gives rise to an extraordinary development of graphic rhythms, without the essential forms of the letters being thereby diminished. The general and to some extent natural development of Arabic writing tends towards a fluidity of forms, but in parallel with this tendency there is also a hieratic stylization of these same forms; very different styles not only follow one another, they exist side by side, especially in monumental epigraphy. Arabic calligraphy is at the antipodes of Far Eastern calligraphy, which should be mentioned here because it too represents a peak in the art of writing: the Chinese or Japanese calligrapher isolates the signs, each of which corresponds to a distinct idea; using the paint-brush, he invokes in a few more or less broad strokes a key-picture or a visual nucleus of related ideas. The Arab, on the other hand, traces with the pen precise and often interlacing lines; as far as possible he joins the letters to each other, while stressing their contrasts: the writing runs from right to left, and it is in this horizontal direction that the forms interlink and marry with one another, whereas in the vertical direction the uprights of the letters stand out in isolation and in a sense punctuate the continuous melody of the lines. From the point of view of the symbolism of the spatial axes, which is appropriate here, and which moreover is also inherent in the art of weaving, the vertical elements of the letters, which "transcend" the flow of the writing, correspond to their essences, while the horizontal movement represents the "material" continuity of their forms; the upright is like a ray of the one Essence, which distinguishes by its very unity, just as the present instant distinguishes between the past and the future; the horizontal movement, on the other hand, which proceeds in continuous waves, is the image of becoming or of life. In certain calligraphic styles such as *thulūṭ*, for example, this polarity is carried to its limit; in the direction of the horizontal current, the melody of the ample and varied curves corresponds to the rhythm of the incisive uprights, formed especially by the vertical lines of the *alif* and the *lam*: it is like a tireless attestation (*shahādah*) of Unity accompanied by a joyous and serene expansion of the soul.

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The classical poetry of the Moslem Arabs is linked by its form—its monotonous rhyme and its complex meter—to the pre-Islamic Bedouin poetry. It thus shows the influences of the Qoran only through the ideas that it may vehicle. But there exists a semi-poetic literature whose very forms reflect the Qoran, namely that of the prayers, litanies and incantations composed by the holy masters. One example of this sort is the *dalāil al-khairat* of Shaikh al-Jazūli, a collection of praises of the Prophet or more exactly of "prayers upon the Prophet": the Moslem addresses his prayers only to God Himself, in conformity with his unitary perspective, but by asking God to

bless the Prophet, he communicates in fact with the latter. These prayers evoke one after the other the human and cosmic perfections present in the nature of Muhammad, the synthesis of all the Divine reverberations within creation. Sometimes the form of the prayers or incantations remains the same, while their terms of comparison vary, going from the virtues to the beauties of the visible and invisible universe, and sometimes the subject of the prayers is constant, and their forms change; and this alternating repetition describes a spiral movement, whose aim is the integration of all the positive aspects of the world in the Spirit, in the inward prophet, who is "nearer to men than their own souls", according to a verse of the Qoran.

The inversion of perspective in relation to Christianity will be noted: whereas the latter views God from the starting point of man, Islam views man from the starting point of God, which excludes any fixation of an anthropomorphic image; the image of the Divine man is as it were dissolved in its elements; it disappears in the universal theophanies, whence its absence from plastic art, which becomes an impersonal incantation like the waves of the sea or the twinkling of the stars.

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The predominance of the auditive over the visual in the Arab soul has to show itself even in plastic art; and it is the same for a certain form of spiritual intuition or ecstasy, which finds its support more especially in rhythm and sound: it is like a sudden cessation of time, an immobilization of all movement in the lightning flash of the pure present. The world may henceforth be compared to a waterfall, which flows without changing form, or to a flame which, although being consumed, appears motionless. Arabo-Moslem ornamentation essentially expresses this suspension of becoming in the instant.

(Original editorial inclusions that followed the essay:)

If we would know what some other than ordinary experience is, we must actually shift not our speculative thought on to it but our being into it.

Arthur Avalon.

¹ Cf. Edouard Dhorme, *L'arabe littéral et la langue de Hammourabi* in "Mélanges Louis Massignon", Damascus 1957.

² The most ancient Semitic alphabets comprise 29 sounds or letters, of which Arabic has preserved 28, the "lost" sound being a variant of s. It may be that the reduction of the alphabet to 28 letters reflects a symbolic intention,

since some Arab authors consider that the sounds correspond to the 28 lunar mansions: the phonetic cycle ranging from the gutturals to the palatals, dentals and labials retraces the "lunar" phases of the primordial sound emanating from the sun.

³ As René Guénon has pointed out. Cf. the chapter "Cain and Abel" in *The Reign of Quantity* (Luzac, London, 1953).

⁴ There are in fact verbs composed of four or five root sounds, but in these cases groups of consonants such as *ts* or *br* play the role of simple sounds.

⁵ According to the Qoran, it was Adam who knew how to "name" all beings, whereas the Angels could not do so.

⁶ The phonetic symbolism which underlies the Arabic language shows itself more particularly in the permutation of the root sounds. In fact, according to *al-Jafr*, the science of letters, the words which are formed from the same letters arranged in different orders all spring from the same "pythagorean number" and therefore from the same idea. This is not easy to grasp, however, owing to the often too particularized use of the words, but it can be sensed in certain cases: the root RḤM, for example, means "being merciful", "having pity", whereas its permutation ḤRM has the meaning of "forbidding", "making inaccessible", *sacrum facere*; the underlying complementarism is to be seen more clearly in the most simple nouns derived from these two roots: RaaḤM means "womb" and by extension "bond of relationship", whereas ḤaRaM means "sacred place"; we can divine here the idea of maternity both in its inclusive and exclusive character. Another example is offered us by the root RFQ which has the meaning of "accompanying", "binding", and its permutation FRQ which means "separating", "dividing" (the Latin *furca* seems to be derived from an analogous root), whereas the group FQR means "being poor, needy" (whence the expression *al faqīru ila-Llah*, "the needy unto God", "the poor in Spirit"; these give us three variants of the theme "polarity": joining (RFQ), separation (FRQ) and dependence (FQR).

⁷ Which obviously does not exclude the existence of pure visual types in the Arab race.

⁸ In the Omayyad mosque at Damascus, for example, or in the palace of Khirbet al-Mafjar.

⁹ It is not absolutely certain that the miniatures of the "Baghdad school" are attributable to the Arabs; in any case, their style is crude, and owes its few positive elements to Byzantine and Asiatic influences.

¹⁰ In a certain sense its role is analogous to that of the icon in Christianity, since it represents, like the icon, the visible form of the Divine Word.