

# Perspectives on Islamic History and Art<sup>1</sup>

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The motivation to look for a new framework to make Islamic art history legible and understandable came from the observation of a peculiarity of Turkish history. The Turks in their itinerant history passed through different cultural realms and Turkish history often became integrated with them. The history of the land known as Turkey and the history of the Turks do not coincide, whereas the correspondence of space and time remains intact in the history of the major nations: the history of France and the history of French people are almost identical - a definable geographical space contains the history of an identifiable people. The German, Italian, Russian, Egyptian, Chinese and Japanese peoples are also essentially defined by their geographical boundaries. The Turks do not have this congruence between the geography of their history and their ethnic and cultural identity. This relativity of historical space and time and problems of identity connected with them are also found generally in the history of Muslim peoples. Following are some observations on this theme.

From the perspective of art history there is, so to speak, only the art history of Muslim countries. art is referred to under a religious label: Islamic art. This label is extremely misleading. A term such as 'Islamic secular art' would, however, be considered absurd because the word "Islamic" has strong religious connotations and is used in various religious contexts. European art history is not Christian art history. Chinese art history is not Taoist or Confucian or Buddhist art history. When we say 'Buddhist art' we refer directly to Buddhist religion. We refer to a Buddhist temple, but not to a Buddhist house. But, in the Muslim countries, all kinds of artefacts, even those produced against the spirit and principles of Islam are brought together under a single brand name: Islamic art. Yet, no conceptual sophistry can bring together, under the same artistic and cultural brand name an Indonesian mosque together with Turkish mosques. No interpretation can bring together Fatehpur Sikri and Topkapi Palace within a common artistic framework. One could perhaps try to link the architectural concept of the Jami Masjid of Champanir to the Great mosque of Damascus. This would, however, be like linking the early vertebrates to Homo Sapiens. Cer-

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tainly when we say Islamic we understand a physical and temporal realm. If this were only a file name this might still be accepted as functional. But, it is not. In my view the central question is this: Has religion shaped all other historical factors, or did eternal human and social factors shape religious thought through time and space? A religio-centric viewpoint prevailed and, somehow, still prevails. From a purist Islamic viewpoint, forms are transient. Only Allah is eternal, but Allah is also formless. So, referenced against this (religious) view the perception of any continuity of form is not a religious, but a cultural human attitude. The over-simplified categorising of Islamic art has unfortunately led to misguided artistic and cultural interpretation: the presupposed unity of Islamic culture and art has influenced researchers to the extent that they see only unity. They could not develop differentiated 'eyes' when viewing Islamic art.

The myth of the unity of Islamic art had its origins in the nineteenth century observers of the Saracenic picturesque art of Muslim Spain. They found decoration as the main field of creativity, and assumed this was the only genuine expression of Islamic culture. Eventually they thought they had found the main agent of unity: Calligraphy. You hang an inscription on the walls of Hagia Sophia - it becomes Islamic; You write Bismillahirrahmanirrahim on the entrance of a Rococo palace - it becomes Islamic. You put a Saudi tag on a Toyota - it becomes Islamic. Is Indian, Chinese or European art less imbued with religious spirit than Islamic art? They are iconographically much more expressive of the religiosity, because they are anthropomorphic and they tell stories. In this context, no facade of a medieval mosque can be compared to the facade of Notre-Dame. This is why Ettinghausen spoke of the low symbolic content of Islamic monuments. It was this low charge of symbolism which made possible to convert a church or a pagoda into a mosque. If we accept the fact that formal symbolism in Muslim culture operates on a level below transcendental, i.e. religious significance, our problem will be easier to solve. While the term 'Islamic art' seems practical for filing purposes up until now for the Europeans, it is, in essence, untenable. There are historical reasons for this fallacy: There are essentially two factors which impede a differentiated evaluation of the history of Muslim countries, one geographical, the other confessional. The history of the Muslim peoples does not correspond to clearly definable geographic areas, but covers continents. As mentioned above, the History of Arabs does not coincide with the history of Arabia. The History of Turkey does not coincide with the history of the Turks. The History of Iran is not the History of Iranians, and vice versa. (Certainly the relationship of history to geography is much more complex than I can elaborate here.) French art was essentially created on French soil or exported from there. But in the case of Muslim countries religious identity replaced geography as a determinant. This incongruence comes from the fact that in the history of the world the only non-peripheral history is that of the Muslim peoples. On a map of Eurasia the centre is occupied by Muslim countries in direct contact with all the countries of the ancient world. All others, China, India, Europe, Africa are cul-de-sacs in comparison. This is a geographical fact in world history.

This centrality of Islamic influence produced processes of cultural symbiosis with pre-Islamic and peripheral cultures, the extent and complexity of which is unique in history, and defies the methodology of established historiography. In the central lands of Eurasia where the most ancient sedentary traditions intertwined with the strongest nomadic habits, an amazing variety of artistic forms and styles flourished. From Hellenistic to Roman and Late Byzantine, from Parthian and Sasanian to Buddhist Chinese and Central Asian, from Indian Hindu to sub-Saharan, from Far Eastern vernacular to Vizigothic, almost all traditions of the ancient world, in different times, spaces and circumstances had been directly integrated in the exegesis of the arts of the peoples who call themselves Muslims. Depending on political vicissitudes, an ever-changing balance of sedentary and nomad, of sown and steppe, an extraordinary mobility of ideas and artistic forms were created. The formal wealth of Islamic architecture and arts, located outside the central lands, the interpenetration of pre-Islamic Indian, Anatolian, tribal African, Chinese, Southeast Asian traditions with Muslim traditions, and later, the merging of Muslim and European styles have produced an amazing diversity and richness. Nevertheless, the Medieval art of Muslim countries seemed to historians less geography-bound because it was difficult to establish boundaries and identify the sources of artistic creation. In reality there *were* cultural areas that were roughly definable by their geographical location. Especially in later periods of Muslim history the distinctiveness of cultural areas became more conspicuous. India, Central Asia and Iran, Egypt, North Africa, and the Ottoman domains all had their distinct physiognomies. Despite this, a simplified view of a unity in Islamic art has unfortunately persisted.

The second reason for the myth of the unity of Islamic art is its historico-confessional bias. The European mind which created the modern historiography of Islam viewed the Islamic World as a religious antagonist, as 'the other': the Saracens of the Spanish, French and Italian legends, the devil's messengers of Eastern Christendom, the Crusader's lore, the cursed Mongol hordes, the Turkish devils at the gates of Constantinople and later of Vienna. The image of the warriors of Islam haunted Europe for so long that, until the end of the Second World War, the Muslim World has only had one face for the European: that of a religious antagonist, the uncultured, barbaric 'other', the special enemy of Christendom. Accordingly, the view and interpretation of the culture, the arts, and the history of the antagonist has been shaped by this historical perspective. Certainly there are modern eulogists. You may recall the works of writers such as Titus Burckhardt who sees everything in Islamic art as 'sacré' and beautiful. But this does not change the absurdity of the title.

But, there is yet more collected under the label 'Islamic art': the growth of Western historiography and the discipline of art history correspond to a time during which the assumed superiority of Western culture was dominant in historical evaluation. The commonly accepted definition of style as the expression of culture is in harmony with the western model of history. From this perspective, the supposed unity of Islamic culture had to be expressed in Islamic art. Since this is supposed to be a unified realm of art, there must have been a beginning, a development and an end. So

the problems of formation and stylistic changes were discussed under this all-encompassing title. Recall the work of Oleg Grabar. A considerable number of pages in Grabar's 'Formation of Islamic art' is dedicated to the problem of the time when Islamic art actually began. This is the outcome of a static concept of history. It is a gardener's concept, from seeds to a single flower. Nothing wrong with the gardener. He is probably the greatest civiliser. But in historiography it is a Hegelian abstraction and does not correspond to reality. Islamic history or the history of art in the Muslim countries did not have unilinear developments. For example, even in the rather restricted Anatolian context, Ottoman art was not a linear development of Seljuk art. Turkish art in Anatolia passed from an early syncretism with multiple roots to an almost perfect synthesis of an imperial art. While art of the first centuries presents every characteristic of a nomadic society and its symbiotic interaction with the sedentary traditions of the Middle and Near East, the arts of the Classical Ottoman period correspond to a vision of an already settled society aware of its identity.

There were, in fact, many formation periods. With only one formation period, how could we possibly explain Central Asian, Indian and even Ottoman art forms on the basis of Umayyade art? Is the conceptual basis of Ottoman architecture, for example, inherent in the concept of the Great mosque of Damascus, or in the Pantheon, or in the great mausolea of Iran and Central Asia? Was Oljaitu's tomb at Sultaniya potentially inherent in Central Asian Buddhist stupas? Is the mosque at Sian Islamic? It is not. It is as Islamic as a Toyota with a Saudi tag.

Although noted by many scholars - we remember discussions on the 'unity and variety in Islamic culture' since the fifties - such relationships have never been seriously integrated into the concept of Islamic art. The anonymous authorship of artefacts is another great problem. If there is a name, it is mostly an Arabic name which hides an Iranian, a Turk, an Indian or a renegade Christian. For identification there remain two parameters: the place of manufacture and the patron, which brings us into a political realm.

A place may belong to the Samanids today, and to the Ghaznevids on the next day. The Karakhanid prince is Muslim, thus the Caravanserai he built is Muslim. In all similar cases the itinerant character of the producing culture is forgotten. Select any pattern from different cultural areas of the Muslim World and ask yourself the following questions: How many times has an art object been formed into a recognizable 'Islamic' pattern? How many times was a new pattern born to answer the demands of a Muslim society? Were the concepts of subsequent art forms inherent in the exegesis of the so-called Islamic art? Take the concepts and patterns of a madrasa, a tomb, a minaret, a dome, a house, a carpet, even a miniature. None of them were ever specified in the Koran or sunna, none of them were extant during the lives of the Prophet or the four khalifes. All the main items of so-called Islamic art are post-prophetic, even post-Umayyade. Thus, it is clear that in referring to the idea of Islamic art we are more likely to be referring to the user, i.e. the Muslim society - 'Islamic art' understood from the perspectives of purpose and meaning in use, a mosque, a madra-

sa to teach Islamic sciences, the tomb of a Muslim saint, a miniature depicting the life of a Muslim sultan, etc.

Can we also talk about an Islamic car, Islamic aircraft, an Islamic watch? The use of an artefact defines neither its origin nor its character. We may say that so-called Islamic art has been formed, in different times and places, first in Syria, Iraq, Egypt, then in Mesopotamia and Iran, later in Central Asia and Spain, after 12th century in India, in Anatolia. There were no structural, formal, decorative or organisational continuities between the Kufa Mosque and Nur-u Osmaniye at Istanbul. To see the diversity in the arts of Muslim countries, compare the bewildering variety of mosque designs and compare the vitality of the ever-recurring basilical form in church design. Muslim culture, despite the iron clad restrictions of the doctrine, evidently presents more diversity and embraces a larger scale of historical phenomena than other cultural realms because of the centrality of its geography, its moving dominant races in symbiotic relationship with the non-Muslim peripheral world.

Islamic art remains a comprehensible area of research, but it defines neither a homogeneous area of study nor a homogeneous style, or a succession of styles, or a comprehensible system of relationships. This is why the label is an example of utmost reductionism, a crystallised museum of orientalist thought. R. Brunschwig once asked whether "the Muslim people of various countries belong from the very fact of the religious distinctiveness of their members, to some specific civilisation, crossing the barriers of place and time?" The premise that Islamic culture, by its very nature has to give birth to artefacts with a consanguine formalism which inherently expresses a universally accepted Islamic world view does not express a universal attitude, it is a parochialism. It was useful merely because it reduced the classification of artistic phenomena to manageable proportions.

The questions raised by this reductionist approach are unanswerable in the orthodox framework of Islamic historiography, because the two basic components of the history of Muslim countries are disregarded or very superficially noticed by the European and Muslim historians. One is the geographical centrality of the history of the Muslim world, the second is the role of nomads in world history. You can find some pertinent observations concerning these two aspects in the writings of every historian. Historians, and, later, anthropologists, have discovered the symbiotic existence of steppe and sown. But the concept of the geographical centrality of the Muslim Oikumene and the dynamics of the history of the Muslim countries dominated by nomadic elements are not properly understood and evaluated in the historiography of Islam. It remains a static, dynastic history written from the viewpoint of a sedentary people. Islamic historiography as a Western academic discipline followed the paths of the historical interests of the Western world. It started with religious debate. Later, those with a biblical interest decided to concentrate on studies of the Semitic background of Islam. Then comes Arabic philology. Indo-European affinities and Hellenistic heritage decided the status of the Iranian contribution. Later Turkish

history became more interesting for the Europeans when the spoils of the Ottoman Empire were to be redistributed.

History made is not history written. Islamic History as a product of Western historiography is a descriptive meta-history. To recall Edward Said's happy phrasing : "In discussions of the Orient, the Orient was all absence whereas one feels the orientalist and what he says as presence." When you define Islamic civilisation as the history of cities and dynasties, as Gruenebaum and others did, although their writings are full of pertinent insights, the danger is in seeing and evaluating only the final product, and forgetting the processes and complex structures of transitional periods. This is an approach that fails dismally when dealing with the arts.

Men, ideas, forms and technologies wander. Wandering is meeting. Meeting is the real primeval soup of creation. The wanderer, in our case, the nomad is the bearer of the creative flame of civilisation. Wanderers make history. Not only the Turks, but Alexander the Great, the Huns, the Mongols, the conquistadores, the immigrants to the American continent, the seafarers, the explorers, the conquering armies. Within this frame of interpretation the history of the Turks is a story of one of the essential dynamic agents in the history of the Muslim world, and is perhaps the best example of the nature of nomadic influence in the shaping of history. The culture of the Turks is composed of three interconnected spheres of cultural cycles: The Steppe cycle, the Central Asian-Iranian Cycle and the Mediterranean Cycle. In the Eurasian steppes the Turks were carriers and creators of a nomadic culture. The main features of it were the same everywhere, in Siberia or on the Hungarian plain. This nomadic culture came under the influence of Chinese, Central Asian Buddhist and Iranian cultures. When they conquered the Iranian cultural area they adopted everything offered by the settled society, but kept some elements of ancestral customs and techniques, and their town languages. After the eleventh century, Iranian art refers only to a geographical area and a cultural realm. It is neither Iranian, nor Turkish, nor Islamic. Or, it is all of them. The Turks carried their central Asian and Iranian experiences to the Near East, to Egypt and to Anatolia. But the newly conquered Anatolia was no longer a Muslim land. Thus, a new mixture of the elements present, local and imported, play a role in a new formation. In a sketchy way, one may say that there was, with periodic changes of density, a steady flow of nomads, who left in their movement through geographical space, sediments of various depths. In the creation of artistic styles the new formal syntheses were more important than common archetypal forms. From this perspective the art of the Turks moving from Mongolia to the West is a paradigm for the mechanisms of change in artistic forms. It was a (r)evolving theatre of artistic creation shaped during the evolution of the symbiotic history of the Turks. The Turks, nomads par excellence in Islamic history, have symbiotic histories with other nomads, with China, with Central Asia, with Iran, with the Slavic world, with Arabs, with India, with Anatolia and Byzance, with the Mediterranean world, and with Europe. They became Buddhist, Manicheist, some of them adopted Judaism and Christianity, most of them became Muslims. Sometimes they were totally absorbed in conquered countries. In many other areas, in Central Asia,

part of Iran, in Anatolia, they turkicised the indigenous peoples. The dynasties and states founded by them dominated the Eurasian Muslim world almost to the twentieth century. In those domains the question 'Whose art is this?' is a most complicated one. Unfortunately, this nomadic venture is only barely mentioned by scholars, and remains incidental to Islamic art history.

While geography remains a constant, artistic forms, artefacts, and aesthetic ideas move to the frontiers of political, economical and cultural hegemonies, along with the craftsmen. There is a symbiotic relationship between the wanderings of nomads and the 'mobility' of artefacts, craftsmen and artistic ideas. These continuous movements produced a great number of genuine, regional and local styles, even if only ephemeral. They were the outcome of the symbioses between nomadic conquerors and different societies, specific physical environments and local technologies. One of the most grandiose examples of such an ephemeral instance, for example, was the great mosque of Divrigi dating from the first half of the thirteenth century.

The approach to the history of Muslim Peoples that I advocate requires a paradigm shift, as modern scientists would probably call it. It is somewhat similar to the conceptual shift from the Newtonian gravitation law to Einstein's relativity, and from the motion theory of Newton to the Quantum theory of Planck. I do not assume any genial discovery in my argument, since there was no Newtonian theory concerning Islamic art, but rather a makeshift amalgam of erratic generalisations. As Marshall G.S. Hodgson, the author of the illuminating book 'The venture of Islam' might say, Islamic history is the work of 'typicalisers'. According to him my argument might be classified as 'exceptionalising', another argument in favour of variety.

Despite great scholarly achievements, history written according to the frozen perspectives of sedentary societies, and based on religious and linguistic allegiances, has never reached a sufficient clarity of vision to explain the dynamics of a history made by nomadic conquerors. One may recall that since the nineteen thirties, with the publication of 'A Survey of Persian art' and Creswell's volumes on Muslim Egypt, Gabriel's work on Turkey, and the works of Soviet scholars in Central Asia, a considerable number of regional studies have been published. The classical bias toward an Islamic art, the *problématique* of which is founded on religion, Arabic philology and Arabic alphabet, still survives. After the Second World War, the governments of new nation states, while professing Islamic oecumenism, encouraged the development of ideas of national arts. These trends have created more dilemmas which are almost impossible to resolve. Despite many erudite studies, classifications, definitions and sophisticate intellectualisation, Islamic art History remains a *meta* art history. After the oil-crisis, within the resurgent Islamism, some Western and Eastern islamicists tried to see Islam through its inherent value systems, such as sufism. But as long as Islam is used as an 'umbrella concept' for artistic phenomena from the Philippines to Morocco, all efforts at differentiation will remain distorted and descriptive. To balance the sedentary and nomadic components of the history of the Muslim world is a 'must'. A non-sedentary point of view is against all Western traditions of historiogra-

phy. Instead, a multi-layered world view where acting forces, too complex to be calculated on the historians' desk must be envisaged. Complexity in nature, as well as in history, is the outcome of intricate interactions of a great number of unknown and undeciphered historical causes. Simplifying and attempting an ordering of complex dynamics to fit into a few general files is apt to lead to a distorted history.

As Jacques Barzun, portraying William James, wrote:

"The variety of things, people, feelings, ideas were always more fundamental for him than unities. He did not deny the intimate and often hidden connections that link phenomena together, but he mentioned that most of these traits of oneness came second, they were discovered and sometimes made up for the satisfaction of the inquiring mind".