

The Significance of Traditional Islamic Art for the Life of Muslim Societies in the Modern World

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Abstract

Art has always been regarded as a branch of philosophy where theory and action meet with a view to create new objects. Sacred and traditional art is itself one of the meeting points between philosophy and religion in their symbolic language. Every religion in order to continue to exist should necessarily be possessed of an outward framework in conformity with its inward dimensions. The relevant art of each religion will be responsible for the creation of this framework, including the built spaces with all the objects they embrace. Islam as one of the most widespread religion in the world has been no exception to this rule. The sacred and traditional art of Islam is concerned with the formation of a peaceful and contemplative environment in which the Muslim would never forget the Divine Reality and where the very body of built space, together with all the material objects it contains, conforms to the needs of his spiritual realization. Modern civilization, on the contrary, reduces man to a mere biological phenomenon and cares only for his bodily welfare, in the name of progress. Modernistic art contradicts the mental and spiritual expectations of the Muslim, to the point of suffocating him. For the ordinary Muslim, who needs to be constantly reminded of his inner celestial reality to remain faithful towards Heaven, the disappearance of traditional Islamic art and architecture would amount to forgetfulness, pure and simple, that is to say *ghaflah*. The purpose of the present

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paper is to discuss the necessity of the traditional ambiance for contemporary Muslims living in the modern world.

Key Terms: Islam, sacred art, pious way of life, Divine Remembrance (*dhikr*), modernism, progress, forgetfulness (*ghaflah*).

Art is basically a branch of philosophy where theory and action meet with a view to create new objects. Sacred and traditional art is itself one of the meeting points between philosophy and religion in their essence as well as in their symbolic language. Sacred art visualizes and thus exteriorizes what is inwardly hidden in Revelation and metaphysics verbally.¹

Every religion in order to continue to exist should necessarily be possessed of an outward framework in conformity with its inward dimensions. The art of each religion will be responsible for the creation of this framework, including the built spaces with all the objects they embrace. Islam as the most widespread religion in the world has been no exception to this rule, while Sufism, the esoteric aspect of Islam, has been the main source of Islamic art, in theory as well as in practice.

Islamic art is one of the greatest manifestations of Islamic spirituality.² Whether it be a piece of Quranic calligraphy of Mamluk art of Egypt, or a mosque of the Safavid period in Persia, or even a humble piece for the domestic life of the ordinary Muslim such as a perforated brass lamp as those that can still be found in many Moroccan houses, sacred and traditional art of Islam can manifest the inner realities of the Quranic revelation and reveal something of the Muhammadan *barakah*.

As the main concern of Sufism is the integral expression of Divine Unity (*tawĕid*) and provision of the means for man to realize Unity, so the sacred and traditional art of Islam is concerned with the formation of a peaceful and contemplative environment in which the Muslim would never forget the Divine Reality and where the very body of built space, together with all the material objects it contains, conforms to the needs of his spiritual realization.

Modern civilization, on the contrary, reduces man to a mere biological phenomenon and cares only for his bodily welfare, in the name of progress.³ It is as such essentially opposed to the outlook and

values of Islam, which regards man as a theomorphic reality in whom God has breathed His Spirit, and upon whom He has bestowed the knowledge of His Names. Modernism has brought about an abnormal situation full of irregularities, and as regards the products of modern art and architecture, they only stir the whims and nourish the passions of profane man. Modernistic art contradicts the mental and spiritual expectations of the Muslim to the point of suffocating him.

From the traditional point of view, art has always had two functions: the first in relation to the artist and the second in relation to those to whom the final piece of art is to be presented. The process of artistic activity was considered as an aid to self-realization of the artist himself, a consideration that is totally absent in the education of arts and production of art objects in modern times. Through particularly *futuwwah*, as a simplified form of Sufism, aspects of spiritual life could enter into the creative activities of artists and craftsmen. It is to be noted that most of the existent *futuwwah nāmahs*, or epistles of spiritual chivalry, are attributed to great Sufi masters, like ‘Abd al-Razzāq Kāshānī, Najm al-Dīn Kubrā, and ‘Alā al-Dawlah Simnānī.⁴

Islamic art and architecture is also significant for Muslims from another point of view: for the first centuries after the advent of Islam, Arabic was the *lingua franca* among the intelligentsia throughout the Islamic world. Islamic art, however, has acted as the universal aesthetic and spiritual language of all Muslims over the vast land of Islam from its formation until now. A Muslim from Lahore, Konia, or Samarkand will intimately feel himself at home in Isfahan, Cairo, or Fez, even today, irrespective of all racial differences and geographical distances between these cities, and vice versa. Nothing will appear strange to him in these cities, unlike the conditions of modern cities in Europe or America today, for example. The unity of Islamic art as part and parcel of Islamic culture manifests the common identity of all Muslims and provides a setting in which they can easily breathe and live according to the norms of Islam.

There is something timeless in the essence of Islamic art and architecture, so that if merely secondary and temporal aspects are adapted, this art can still satisfy the spiritual as well as corporeal needs of man.⁵ What is spiritual is by definition eternal, and only that which is material changes by the passage of time.

Traditional Islamic urban environments as congenial extensions of the space of the mosque, also respond to the religious requirements

and the spiritual life of Muslims in a way that cannot be found at all in any non-traditional cities, including the cities that have recently taken shape in Islamic countries themselves. Only those who have had the experience of living in the crowded modern districts of cities like Tehran, Riyadh or Kuala Lumpur know how difficult it is for a Muslim to adapt his ideals and needs to the structures and forms that have taken shape in these cities.

Compared with men of earlier times, contemporary man by force of new circumstances, thinks less and watches and listens more. Perhaps one can now speak of a new humanity as *homo auditor spectator*, or audio-visual man. As such, and regarding the fact that man is always subject to take to himself the content of forms he encounters, a contemporary man living in milieus fashioned and filled with creations of modernistic art and architecture runs the risk of becoming mentally supplanted by the profane and sinister contents of the pictorial and sonic forms which surround him. These days the cult of the ugly can be seen everywhere. Everything is turned upside down.

Modernism as a whole, particularly through technology with its meaningless products and monstrous buildings on the one hand, and by rapidly devouring works of traditional art, architecture, and handicraft on the other hand, has destroyed the familiar image of human settings. How normal it would be for a Muslim to live in a traditional house in Isfahan, Damascus, or San'a, compared with living in a soulless tower anywhere on the globe. What a great difference there is in spiritual quality of a handmade carpet from Yazd, or any other old center of carpet weaving in Persia, compared with a factory-made product, even when the latter has emulated the design of the former; or similarly between a Syrian copper tray and a cold industrial one, though they may be very analogous in shape. Something of the soul of the craftsman can always be felt in his artifact.

Not only with respect to virgin nature, but also concerning the creations of sacred and traditional arts and crafts, can one rightly speak of the metaphysical transparency of phenomena. By virtue of traditional Islamic art, architecture and urbanism, Muslims could live in a harmonious and serene space and be always in the Divine Presence. From the spiritual point of view, the process of modernization means the destruction forever of a large portion of

Divine Portents (*āyât*) on earth created over centuries by traditional architects, artists and craftsmen as God's vicegerents.

Through the economic and political forces of the West, which have recently come to show themselves under the title of globalization, a great deal of the cultural and spiritual heritage of Muslim societies, from local languages to traditional arts and music, have either totally vanished or been seriously damaged. The destruction of some parts of such traditional cities of Islam as Mecca, Medina, Isfahan, Damascus and Cairo, and the disappearance of most of the centers of Islamic handicrafts can be particularly pointed out in this connection.⁶ The preservation and restoration of the Islamic spiritual and cultural heritage is a religious and sacred duty incumbent upon all Muslims, especially the Muslim authorities themselves. But neither the so called fundamentalists nor the reformists in Muslim countries, despite all the Islamic claims and labels they may bear, have shown that they have the true understanding and enough interest in tackling this vital issue.

There are many among them, as there are many others, who strongly believe that any attempt to restore Islamic art is useless, for modern western arts and products are themselves 'Islamic.' What Muslims need to do, they so say, is only learn to emulate them. Their argument is briefly as such: Islamic art is good because it is fashioned rationally; modern products, in so far as they are based on scientific laws and come out of computerized processes, are also rational and cannot but be good; it is thus concluded that they are Islamic. What is missing here is, however, a criterion of symbolism and the sense of the sacred.

A Muslim saint, or Sufi, who has already attained to the stage of self realization, will of course be in no need of any sacred or traditional object as an external support for contemplation. But for the ordinary Muslim, who needs to be constantly reminded of his inner celestial reality to remain faithful towards Heaven, the disappearance of traditional Islamic art and architecture would amount to forgetfulness, pure and simple, that is to say *ghaflah*.

Finally, modernism has also changed the traditional aspect of human environments in a different way, in the sense that the illogical and horrendous expansion of modern cities has destroyed their natural surroundings. Muslims living in such cities can no longer witness the traces of Divine Wisdom in virgin nature around them, traces to which the Quran repeatedly points out and advises man to contemplate.

We will finish this paper with the assertion of the fact that our age is marked by utmost exteriorization of the most inward truths. This amounts to saying that the inner dimension of religions, which alone can guarantee their outward or social existence, can no longer be preserved effectively unless it be transmitted to a wider audience, and thus as far as Islam itself is concerned, it can only continue to exist through a real and deep comprehension of the significance of its sacred and traditional arts on the part of all Muslims; and the rest will be trusted in the hands of Allah *subhanahu wa ta'âlâ*.

Notes

1. For the meaning of the sacred see: F. Schuon, 'The Sense of the Sacred,' in his *From the Divine to the Human*, Bloomington, Indiana, World Wisdom Books, 1982, pp 103-15; S. H. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, Lahore, Suhail Academy, 1988.
2. For diverse aspects of Islamic spirituality see: S. H. Nasr, *Islamic Spirituality*, 2 vols, vol I, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984, vol II, New York, SCM Press, 1991.
3. For a critique of modern civilization in its roots see: R. Guénon, *The Crisis of the Modern World*, London, Luzac, 1975; Idem, *The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of the Times*, Baltimore, Penguin Books, 1972.
4. For *futuwwah* see: S. H. Nasr, 'Spiritual Chivalry,' in his *Islamic Spirituality*, vol II, New York, SCM Press, 1991, pp 304-15.
5. For Islamic art and architecture see: T. Burckhardt, *Art of Islam*, London, World of Islam Festival, 1976; S. H. Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality*, Ipswich, Golgonooza, 1987.
6. For the study of an Islamic city from a traditional point of view see: T. Burckhardt, *Fez: City of Islam*, Cambridge, Islamic Texts Society, 1992.

References

1. T. Burckhardt, *Art of Islam*, London, World of Islam Festival, 1976.
2. T. Burckhardt, *Fez: City of Islam*, Cambridge, Islamic Texts Society, 1992.
3. R. Guénon, *The Crisis of the Modern World*, London, Luzac, 1975.
4. R. Guénon, *The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of the Times*, Baltimore, Penguin Books, 1972.
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7. S. H. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, Lahore, Suhail Academy, 1988.
8. F. Schuon, 'The Sense of the Sacred,' in his *From the Divine to the Human*, Bloomington, Indiana, World Wisdom Books, 1982.