

# *'Ajīb and Gharīb: Artistic Perception in Medieval Arabic Sources*

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*In the tiny part of art in the prodigious medieval Arabic historical output the mention of specific art objects reveals unfamiliarity with elementary aesthetic vocabulary. The authors usually refrain from judging the quality of art, unlike the expert discussion of literary works. This article uses a famous, relatively long and oft-quoted text from al-Maqrīzi's *Khiṭaṭ* describing three examples of Fatimid painting to explore how did Arab historians see the visual arts, and why. It explores the linguistic roots of the most frequently used terms, such as 'ajīb and gharīb, in twelfth and fifteenth century texts and how they were transposed from their semantic fields to the description of art objects. It then examines the sources' reticence vis-à-vis the description of art and seeks an explanation in the intellectual formation of the historians and class distinction between historians and artists.*

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The visual arts occupy a tiny corner in the prodigious medieval Arabic historical output of the period between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries. The written sources, which are on the whole expansive and rather chatty, hardly ever mention artists, their artworks, or their reception by their contemporaries, in a manner similar to the ways they speak about poets, *udabā'*, musicians, and scholars and the meaning and impact of their work. In those very rare instances when the sources mention art objects, they do it in the context of royal patrons rather than artists, usually in lists of gifts sent by rulers to foreign sovereigns or objects looted or

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confiscated from fallen dignitaries and amirs.<sup>1</sup> Even then, they focus primarily on the monetary value and functional aspects of the objects and almost always refrain from giving an opinion about their form, look, or composition—in contrast to their typical expert judgement of literary work, be it poetry or prose.

Moreover, where specific art objects are noted, the texts reveal a lack of familiarity with the most elementary visual vocabulary which is otherwise known from lexical works or from philosophical or optical treatises.<sup>2</sup> They do not go beyond exclaiming the ‘*ajīb* or *gharīb*, that is the marvellous, wondrous, and extraordinary qualities of a painting or an object, or observing extra-artistic attributes such as the real jewels adorning representations of women in one instance or the *ranks* affixed above the images of Marluk amirs in another.<sup>3</sup> The venerable classical and medieval Islamic philosophical tradition that propounded some sophisticated reflections on art and beauty does not seem to have penetrated the chronicles and the biographical dictionaries which constitute the two main types of historical sources for the medieval period. Not even the towering Ibn Khaldūn and his student al-Maqrīzī, who otherwise show a keen interest in conceptual and theoretical questions, include in their work any discussion on artistic subjects such as representation or beauty as it was developed in the philosophical Islamic tradition. Likewise, the encyclopaedist *kuttāb*-historians—such as Ibn Shaddād, al-Nuwayrī, Ibn Faḍl Allāh al-‘Umarī, and al-Qalqashandī—who cover in their exhaustive and vast compendia all the theoretical sciences and practical skills a successful *adīb* needs: literature, history, epistolography, cosmography, geography,

<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, the list of artifacts taken from the Fatimid palace in Cairo, al-Maqrīzī, *Khiṭaṭ*, 1: 414–16; or the list of presents sent to Baraka of the Golden Horde by Baybars in Ibn ‘Abd al-Zāhir, *al-Rawd al-Zāhir*, 172–73; or the list of objects sent to al-Mu‘ayyad by the Doge of Venice in al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk*, 4, 1: 325; or the list of objects sent out as dowry for the daughter of Baktimur al-Ṣāqī when she married Anūk the son of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad in 1332, in al-Ṣafadī, *Waḥī*, 10: 194–95; al-Maqrīzī, *Khiṭaṭ*, 2: 68; or the objects confiscated from the estate of Tankit after his fall in 1340, in al-Ṣafadī, *Waḥī*, 10: 428. The terms used need a special philological and contextual study before they can yield useful information on these objects.

<sup>2</sup> For a succinct discussion of notions of aesthetics in classical and medieval Islamic writing, see Necipoğlu: *Topkapı*: 185–215.

<sup>3</sup> For the first instance, the hall was called the *Bayt al-Dhahab* (House of Gold) in Khumarawayh’s palace (884–96) covered with larger-than-life-size painted wooden reliefs depicting him and his favourite concubines and singers, see al-Maqrīzī, *Khiṭaṭ*, 1: 316–17; for the second, the diwān of al-Ashraf Khalīl which had representations of his amirs, each with his own *rank* above his head, see Ibn al-Dawadarī, *al-Durrā al-Zakiyya*, 345; al-‘Aynī, ‘*Iqd*: 3: 79–80; al-Maqrīzī, *Khiṭaṭ*, 2: 213.

botany, zoology, religion, law, and politics, find no place for philosophy, and its concomitant topics including aesthetics.

Ignoring the representational in art is to be expected in a tradition that shunned any attempt to express its ideals or to embody its values and virtues in figural representation. Early Muslim historians seldom notice the figural representation in their surroundings—in the form of ancient statuary and murals say, or contemporary modest attempts at depicting the human form in drawing or sculpture such as the few examples known from Umayyad Syria, Abbasid Samarra, or Fatimid Egypt. But their medieval successors go one step further by even failing to report the vigorous emergence of representational tendencies in Seljuq, post-Seljuq, and early Mamluk art, which covered a wide array of art forms including reliefs, murals, sculptural *ranks*, coins, metalwork, woodwork, glass and miniature painting, and popular figurines, and which lasted well into the fourteenth century. This state of affairs is perplexing to modern students of medieval culture, for it is clear that the flourishing of representational art underlies an appreciation of its visual and symbolic meanings, at least among those who sponsored, acquired, displayed, and viewed and admired it. Yet, the laconic information on art in the sources and the ways it was recorded imply that both authors and readers were little moved by art objects and the effect they had on their environment.

One famous and often-quoted example is the comparatively long (all of five lines!) and detailed citation from al-Maqrīzī on three specimens of realistic representational painting.<sup>4</sup> The wording of the reference reinforces the general impression just mentioned of how rudimentary the understanding of the visual arts among the literati/historians, even the most open-minded of them—and otherwise highly sensitive to other creative forms, i.e., architecture—such as al-Maqrīzī must have been. While describing the Fatimid mosque of al-Qarafa in his *Khīṭaṭ*, al-Maqrīzī pauses to marvel at a visual *'ajība* in the painting of the intrados of its arcade that, through apparently colouristic means, makes its surface

<sup>4</sup> al-Maqrīzī, *Khīṭaṭ*, 2: 318. For a translation and an analysis of al-Maqrīzī's text, see Arnold, *Painting in Islam*: 21–22; Ettinghausen, 'Early Realism': 267–71. See also idem, 'Painting in the Fatimid': 112–13; Both articles are reprinted in idem, *Islamic Art and Archaeology: Collected Papers*, M. Rosen-Ayalon (ed.), 1984. Berlin. al-Maqrīzī compares the two painters, al-Qaṣīr and Ibn 'Azīz to Ibn Muqlā and Ibn al-Bawwāb respectively, further indicating that for a member of the literati, calligraphy was the more fathomable artistic referent. Grabar, 'Patronage': 35, thinks the report dubious because of its use of a kind of rhetoric narrative known from Antiquity.

appear like a three-dimensional *muqarnas* if seen from the centre and flat if seen from the side.

Not uncharacteristically, he then shifts to a discussion of various painters who lived in the eleventh century and their chefs d'oeuvre, as reported in the unfortunately lost *Ṭabaqāt al-Muzawwiqīn*, or *Ḍaw' al-Nibrās wa-Anas al-Jullās fī Akhbār al-Muzawwiqīn min al-Nās* (*The Guiding Light and the Pleasure of Company of the Biographies of Painter Among People*), the sole prosopography of painters mentioned in medieval sources.<sup>5</sup> Al-Maqrīzī reports a competition between two otherwise totally unknown artists, the Egyptian al-Qaṣīr and the Iraqi Ibn 'Azīz, which was sponsored by the Fatimid vizier al-Yāzūrī (r. 1049–58) who, we are told, 'loved painting and never tired of looking at illustrated books'. Ibn 'Azīz boasted that he could 'paint (*yuṣawwiru*) a dancer that looks as if she was coming out of the surface of the wall'. Al-Qaṣīr claimed that his dancer 'will look as if she was going into the wall', to which the listeners responded, 'This is more wondrous (*a 'jab*)'. To demonstrate their claims, they used simple painterly techniques of contrasting colour in the foreground and background (black on white and yellow on red respectively), to give the image of a dancer framed within a niche the illusion of depth and motion either into or out of the painted surface.<sup>6</sup>

Al-Maqrīzī's comparison is certainly at the heart of the question of art as illusion of life and movement. Traditional views on Islamic art would have us believe that such an endeavour would have aroused religious misgivings on the part of this *fiqh*-trained author who would be expected, on principle and by formation to oppose the representation of life in art.<sup>7</sup> But al-Maqrīzī's text betrays nothing of the sort. No

<sup>5</sup> Arnold, *Painting in Islam*: 22, erroneously attributes the book to al-Maqrīzī, when in fact al-Maqrīzī does not make such a claim.

<sup>6</sup> Ettinghausen, *Arab Painting*: 55, suggests that the illusion of movement may have been achieved by foreshortening in addition to the colour contrast. Al-Maqrīzī's text cannot be interpreted to support this proposition, although some surviving images from the Fatimid period, notably at the Capella Palatina in Palermo, hint at foreshortening.

<sup>7</sup> The debate on whether a ban on representational art was effectively imposed still rages, despite the fact that examples from every period and place exist to just make the proposition itself moot. It is true that many famous legal authorities, such as al-Subkī (*Mu'id al-Ni'am*: 135), unequivocally forbid representational art, but the mere fact that they admonish their readers to efface or destroy statues and images that they encounter especially in hammams betrays the idealistic nature of their exhortations, cf. Taymūr Pāshā, *al-Taṣwīr*: 10–11. Also check Al-Bāshā, Ḥasan. *al-Taṣwīr al-Islāmī fī-l-'Usūr al-Wuṣṭā*, Ettinghausen, Richard. 1977. *Arab Painting*; David James, *Arab Painting*; Terry Allen, 'Aniconism and Figural Representation', 17–37.

condemnation, no injunction, not even a trace of legal or religious polemic can be discerned. Instead, the text, especially when it describes the paintings themselves,<sup>8</sup> is a simple, awkward, and clearly inexperienced analysis. The choice of terms suggests that al-Maqrīzī was perplexed by this apparently unusual representational possibility and was uncertain how to deal with it or cast it into words. Representational art in this instance seems to have been an amazing, even an enthralling, visual feast, wonderful perhaps, but clearly not intellectually and aesthetically understandable or easily explainable.

This superficial and somewhat amateurish approach to the visual arts is not limited to al-Maqrīzī. It is shared by other chroniclers and biographers, such as Ibn ‘Abd al-Zāhir, Ibn Shaddād, Ibn al-Dawadarī, al-Ṣafadī, and al-‘Aynī, who record, in short and trite sentences, the instances when a sultan decorated his palace with representations of himself and his amirs and mamluks or other figures, but fail to describe the images, reflect on their meaning, or to register any objection to the practice.<sup>9</sup> In none of the references is the blanket ban on figural representation even mentioned. On the contrary, incidents of effacing images or demolishing statues by some zealous individuals are reported with arguments for and against the legality of the action.<sup>10</sup> In one extraordinary instance, al-Maqrīzī straightforwardly condemns an act of destruction as insensitive to the majesty and beauty of the objects destroyed and hypocritical. The incident happened in 1379, when a certain sufi shaykh by the name of Muḥammad Ṣāyim al-Dahr (the Eternally Fasting) tried to deface the feline *ranks* of Baybars inscribed on the Qanātir al-Siba’

<sup>8</sup> This is especially true of the third painting mentioned there by al-Maqrīzī, *Khiṭaṭ*, 2: 318, that of the Patriarch Joseph in the well, painted on a black background in a house in al-Qarafa. Try as I might, I could not make sense of what al-Maqrīzī actually says about that painting.

<sup>9</sup> Ibn ‘Abd al-Zāhir, *Rawd*: 246, for Baybars’s Dār al-Dhahab; Ibn al-Dawadarī, *al-Durrā al-Zakiyya*: 345; al-‘Aynī, *Iqd*, 3: 79–80; al-Maqrīzī, *Khiṭaṭ*, 2: 213, for Khalīl’s *iwān* or *rafraf*.

<sup>10</sup> Taymūr Pāshā, *Taṣwīr*: 65–66, cites a report from the still-unpublished chronicle of ‘Abd al-Bāsiq al-Ḥanafī, *al-Rawd al-Bāsim fī Ḥawadīth al-‘Umr wa-l-Tarājim* in the events of 1461 when the father of the author, Khalīl al-Zāhirī, a Mamluk amir who was a famous chronicler himself and who opposed statues for religious reasons, refuted the argument of ‘some alleged *‘ulamā’* in the presence of the sultan Khushqadam and convinced the sultan to remove a gilded statue of a falcon from his reception hall. Another instance cited by Taymūr Pāshā who shows that al-Qāḍī al-Fāḍil, Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn’s vizier, was inclined to condemn the shadow-play for its use of figures, but after he watched it for a while, declared that he finds it to be of ‘great effect as conveyer of moral stories.’ Aḥmad Taymūr Pāshā: *Khayāl al-Zill*: 12.

(Bridge of the Lions) in Cairo and the face of the Sphinx and claimed it to be his moral obligation. Al-Maqrīzī ends the story with a moral that roughly translates as, ‘Those who have reached the high rank they covet have but one purpose: to trick the people with all sorts of chicaneries (*hiyāl*)’.<sup>11</sup>

The prosaic attitude towards representational art encountered in medieval sources, therefore, seems not to have been the reflection of a legal or religious imperative. Some form of religious censure (*taḥrīm*) or aversion (*karahīya*) may have induced the disposition to ignore figural art in early Islamic writing, or at least sustained it and gave it shape.<sup>12</sup> But this is not sufficient to explain the scope of the phenomenon in the medieval period when figural art itself underwent a real revival in a variety of media. Many other religiously prohibited practices—drinking and homosexuality for example—seem to have thrived unabated from pre-Islamic times despite the opprobrium attached to them. They flourished as literary *topoi-khamriyyāt* (Bacchic poetry) and *ghulāmiyyāt* (love of youth), if not as practice. The two types were interconnected and belonged to an extraordinary libertine literary tradition whose ups and downs depended on the religious mood of the time, but which never totally disappeared.<sup>13</sup> In the medieval period, in fact, numerous scholars, including those definitely known to have had a religious inclination, such as Ibn ‘Abd al-Zāhir and al-Ṣafadī, excelled in detailed, realistic, and highly informed descriptions of drinking sessions, homosexual trysts, or wine itself, but there is no evidence that they either condoned, engaged in, or even had a fleeting experience with any of them, although they were popular among certain classes.<sup>14</sup> Not all religiously banned practices—and there is no

<sup>11</sup> al-Maqrīzī, *Khiṭaṭ*, 2: 147, 177.

<sup>12</sup> This state of affairs has frustrated many authors who dealt with early and classical Islamic art, whose examples of figural representations appear to have been unnoticed by the contemporary historians who otherwise commented on many other aspects of cultural life. Citations are unnecessary for this lament has become a regular routine in studies on Umayyad and Abbasid art and architecture.

<sup>13</sup> An overview is art. ‘Khamriyya’ by J.E. Bencheikh, EI<sup>2</sup>, 4: 998–1009.

<sup>14</sup> For Ibn ‘Abd al-Zāhir’s poetry see his biography in al-Ṣafadī, *Wafī*, 17: 257–90; or his *Diwān*, ed. by M. Aḥmad, Gharīb. 1990. Cairo. An outstanding example is ‘Abd al-‘Azīz ibn Sararya, Ṣafīyy al-Dīn al-Ḥillī (1278–1349), the most famous poet of the early fourteenth century in Egypt, whose work ranges from extremely pietistic poems to outrageously sensual and homosexual ones. His contemporary al-Ṣafadī, *Wafī*, 18: 481–512, lists all of them in his biography with palpable admiration and without any hint of shame or trepidation. It is odd that the contemporary anonymous editors of his poetry are the ones who seem to have censured his libertine poetry by eliminating it from his published *Diwān* (Beirut, n.d.).

definite evidence that figural representation ever fell into that category—were omitted from the repertoire of the literati interests and their intellectual, literary, or recreational pursuits.

Unlike the medieval *khamriyyāt* and *ghulāmiyyāt*, which handle these literary types with subtlety and mastery despite their moral dubiousness, contemporary references to the visual arts are inept. Many authors resorted to poetry, a more familiar terrain, to describe paintings in terms of established literary tropes. Even more revealing, they appropriated verses by others to do their descriptions for them.<sup>15</sup> This was not just a personal preference. It was probably a symptom of an intellectual rustiness or perhaps visual illiteracy, from which the literati had suffered for a long time. Ever since a set of subjects and opinions about what was proper and what was not for a member of the literati to deal with began to take form in the mid-ninth century and was fully formulated and universally embraced by the eleventh century the visual arts had been excluded.<sup>16</sup> A medieval Islamic litterateur was expected to be well-versed in *‘ilm* (religious sciences) and *adab* (general literary education) and, in the early period, in some form of philosophy (but that was almost totally banished by the eleventh century). *‘Ilm* included Qur’anic and Hadith studies and its concomitant sciences of transmission and textual criticism. *Adab* involved proficiency in Arabic language and poetry, in Arabic and Islamic historical traditions, and in some secular sciences such as geography and cosmology. But the medieval litterateur had no exposure to the visual arts and no training in art appreciation or concern for art history, aside from calligraphy, either through formal curricula or the informal agenda that governed educational and literary settings (madrasas, mosques, *diwaān*, or even *majālis al-adab* and their long manual-like

<sup>15</sup> Ibn Shaddād, *Tārīkh al-Zāhir*: 340, only reports the existence of images in Baybars’s *qubba* but does not say anything about them. Instead, he quotes a few verses from a poem of the long-dead Ibn Hayyus praising a different setting to describe their subject matter and stops short of quoting the full poem because, as he says ‘the rest of its verses mention images that do not exist in the *qubba*’. Another example is a poem recited by al-Rashīd al-Nābulī on the occasion of the inauguration of Dār al-Shukhus (House of Figures) built by al-Zāhir Ghāzī at the Citadel of Aleppo in 1193, see Ibn Shaddād, *al-‘A ‘lāq al-Khaṭira*: 1, 1: 25–26; Ibn al-Shiḥna, *al-Durr al-Muntakhab*: 52–53; al-Ghāzzī *Naḥr al-Dhaḥab*: 2: 26.

<sup>16</sup> Makdisī’s *Rise of Humanism* presents one of the most thorough discussions of the types of knowledge and kinds of settings available to medieval Islamic ‘humanists’ (to use Makdisī’s term). Makdisī, (Append. A, pp. 355–61) provides a summary of Diyā’ al-Dīn ibn al-Athīr’s eight scholarly requisites for poets and *katibs* from his *al-Mathal al-Sā’ir fī Adab al-Kātib wa-al-Shā’ir*, (Riyadh 1983–84), which shows clearly that no visual concerns penetrated those lists.

compendia). The uncertain handling of images and figures by al-Maqrīzī and other historians thus illustrates a historical condition in which many generations of literati have found themselves with a visual-less education, initially prompted and perhaps later maintained by the religious abhorrence and rarity of images.

Even the ostensibly technical terms frequently used in reporting any painting, *'ajīb* and its analogue *gharīb*,<sup>17</sup> seem not to have been based on visual perception or artistic vocabulary. They were both probably borrowed or appropriated from literary categories whose elaborate discussions formed the basis of at least two genres—one in *'ilm* and one in *adab*—which were particularly common in the medieval period.<sup>18</sup> The first is the branch of Qur'anic and Hadith studies that could be collected under the rubrics *Gharīb al-Qur'ān* and *Gharīb al-Ḥadīth*. The second could be termed *al-'ajā'ib wa-l gharā'ib*, an *adab* genre that seems to encompass several interrelated subgenres from among the ones that dealt with natural and supernatural wonders: astronomy, astrology, zoology, mineralogy, geography, cosmology, paradoxology, *mirabilia*, and *miracula*.<sup>19</sup> *'Ajīb* in this context is usually translated as wondrous, *gharīb* as strange or singular. Together, they seem to span the scope of cognitive reactions to the extraordinary and unusual, with *'ajīb* as the more encompassing term. *Gharīb* was little used and may have been borrowed from its original lexicographic niche to function more or less as a rhyming complement to *'ajīb* rather than as a denotative or connotative extension of it.<sup>20</sup> *'Ajā'ib* and *gharā'ib* motifs appeared early on in Arabic literature, at least since the early ninth-century treatise of al-Jāhīz, *al-Ḥayawān* (the Animal), but the first systematic compilation on the subject was the famous book by Zakariyya al-Qazwīnī (1203–83), *'Ajā'ib al-Makhlūqāt wa-Gharā'ib al-Mawjūdāt* (*Wondrous Creatures and Strange Things [or Beings]*), the prototype that influenced many medieval authors.

Historians were all versed in the discourses *Gharīb al-Qur'ān* and *Gharīb al-Ḥadīth* literature, which constituted part of their philological,

<sup>17</sup> See art. 'Gharib' by Bonebakker, S.A. EI<sup>2</sup>, 2: 1011.

<sup>18</sup> See the discussion of the concept of *'ajā'ib* in Qur'anic studies in Arkoun, 'Peut-on parler': 87–144.

<sup>19</sup> For a recent survey of the field, see Bynum, 'Wonder': 6–14 for the various theoretical approaches to wonder in Europe in the medieval period. For the relationship between geography and *'ajā'ib* in medieval Islamic texts, see Miquel, *La Géographie*: 2: 484ff.

<sup>20</sup> I differ here from earlier attempts to conceptually distinguish between the two terms, cf. Tawfiq Fahd, 'Le merveilleux dans la faun, la flore et les minéraux', and the ensuing discussion, in Arkoun, *L'étrange*: 117–65. My position is similar to that of Miquel, *La Géographie*: 138–39.

grammatical, and Qur'anic training. Some of them, such as Diyā' al-Dīn ibn al-Athīr and Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalānī, even composed their own *Gharīb al-Qur'ān* to *Gharīb al-Ḥadīth* treatises.<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, the popularity of al-Qazwīnī's book, which was copied and illustrated many times in the medieval period, meant that the literati were also probably familiar with his definitions of the wondrous and extraordinary.<sup>22</sup> Many Mamluk encyclopaedists, including al-Nuwayrī, Ibn Faḍl Allāh al-'Umarī, and al-Qalqashandī, appear to have incorporated most of al-Qazwīnī's material into those sections of their compendia dealing with cosmography and geography, and even devoted sections to the '*ajā'ib* in nature.<sup>23</sup> The literati were thus accustomed to think of '*ajīb* and *gharīb* in a literary sense as more or less technical terms designating rare and unfamiliar language in the Qur'an and Hadith. To paraphrase al-Qazwīnī's definition, they were the expression of puzzlement vis-à-vis a thing or an event, not because it was unobservable but because it occurred so rarely or because its cause and/or effect were not readily graspable or because the way to react to it was unknown.<sup>24</sup> Al-Qazwīnī's '*ajā'ib* and *gharā'ib* are natural and supernatural phenomena that are either observed directly, or reported by trustworthy authorities, or accepted and believed to exist because the scriptures said they did. They range from astral and celestial bodies, to the angels and demons and other heavenly spirits, to atmospheric and terrestrial phenomena, and finally to human beings, animals, plants, and minerals, and even man-made objects and monuments. They are so intricate or extraordinary or rare as to escape immediate comprehension, hence their status as wondrous.

In transposing the terms '*ajīb* and *gharīb* to painting, medieval authors seem to have combined the two ranges of connotation, the rare and the

<sup>21</sup> Two of the three famous *Awlād al-Athīr* brothers compiled a *Gharīb al-Ḥadīth*, Diyā' al-Dīn Ibn al-Athīr, 1852 (rprt. 1904). *al-Nihayah fī Gharīb al-Ḥadīth wa-al-Athār*, Tehran.; Majd al-Dīn Ibn al-Athīr, 1983. *Manāl al-Ṭālib fī Sharḥ al-Gharāib*, Mecca.; Ibn Hajar, al-Asqalani. *Tafsīr Gharīb al-Ḥadīth: Murattaban 'alā al-Ḥurūf*, Cairo., n.d.

<sup>22</sup> See article 'Qazwini' by T. Lewicki, *EP*, 4: 865–67.

<sup>23</sup> Ibn Faḍl Allāh al-'Umarī, *Mamālīk al-Abṣār*: vol. 2, sec. 3, art. 3, entitled '*zīkr nibza min 'ajā'ib al-barr wa-al-baḥr* (listing of some '*ajā'ib* of the sea and earth) of which many items appear to have been glossed from al-Qazwīnī. Al-Nuwayrī, *Nihāyat*, vol. 1, deals with the celestial and the terrestrial phenomena as they appear in al-Qazwīnī's '*ajā'ib* section. Al-Qalqashandī, *Subḥ*, quotes Qazwīnī several times and devotes half of vol. 2 to the celestial and the terrestrial phenomena as well. It seems that at least the 'scientific' repertoire of '*ajā'ib* has, by the fourteenth century, moved out of its specialised niche and became incorporated in the usual curriculum of *kuttābs* and literati in general.

<sup>24</sup> Al-Qazwīnī, '*Ajā'ib*: 29, 31, 38.

puzzling, perhaps because for them they were exactly what these images signified. Paintings were uncommon, and, when encountered, difficult to comprehend since they had lain outside the cognitive range of the literati's interests for such a long time. The literati's reactions to them had to be verbalised using concepts and terminology that already existed for other, well-charted intellectual and scholarly categories, which share some perspectival qualities with representational painting. Extraordinary natural phenomena, supranatural occurrences, myths of the ancients, and stories of the prophets, all fell into the wondrous category. So did intricate literary and poetic inventions and paintings. But it was not the wondrous that induced further investigation or fired the imagination. It was rather the explanation for the unexplainable, or, perhaps more accurately, the exclamation in front of the unexplainable.

That the literati did not expand their vocabulary to include notions and terms more appropriate to discussing painting—i.e., the professional terminology of the artists themselves or the more theoretical aesthetic terminology of philosophy, geometry, music, and the like—suggests that they were either cut off from, or not seriously trained in these fields. The absence of artistic or artisanal idiom reinforces the impression that the literati and painters, and probably other artisans as well, belonged to different social spheres that did not easily and systematically communicate with each other.<sup>25</sup> The dearth of philosophical and theoretical terms, on the other hand, points to an intellectual rather than a social impediment. It could be taken as evidence that the conservative elements among the ulama in late medieval times were successful in stamping out most of the suspect fields of *al-'ulūm al-'aqliyya* (philosophical sciences) from scholarly inquiry. Their specific propositions, concerns, and even terminology ceased to be part of the literati discourse. Geometry and music, and to a lesser extent philosophy, were still taught and written about, though on a much smaller scale and sometimes in hiding to avoid the risk of being denounced by the establishment. They seem to have become so marginal that they no longer even furnished the proper vocabulary, as they once apparently had done, where it was truly needed, such as in aesthetic or visual appreciation.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>25</sup> For a discussion of the status of artists and builders in the Mamluk society, see Rabbat, 'Architects and Artists'.

<sup>26</sup> Sabra, *The Optics of Ibn al-Haytham*: 2:99, discusses the example of the famous essayist al-Jāhīz (767–869) in his *Risālat al-Qiyān in Rasā'il al-Jāhīz*, vol. 2: 162–63. Al-Jāhīz explains physical beauty in terms of two aesthetic principles: *tamām* (fullness) and *i' tidāl* (moderateness), both are dependent on *wazīn* (measure, balance, rhythm) which

This is not to say that a religious aversion to figures and figural art did not exist. Quite the opposite: exegetical and legal treatises of the medieval period routinely reiterate an unbending position against them, citing the famous *ḥadīth* against the *muṣawwirun* (a word that in this context can mean either painters or makers of figures of living things), whose final abode will be in hell, and elaborating on its implications.<sup>27</sup> Figures may even have been banned and the ban customarily upheld in whatever milieu religious scholars controlled (mosques, madrasas, and the like), since no images existed in them. But this attitude should not be seen as either objective or collective. That is, the sources that report the ban or neglect art could not have been impartially recording the situation as it was (a claim that they never make, yet we always expect it of them), nor could their stance be representative of general attitudes toward art in the medieval society at large. Despite their apparent editing by the literati, several reports in the sources suggest that the two other main groups in the medieval society, the ruling elite and the common people, had different opinions on the question of figural art and the function of art in society in general.

The military and administrative elite patronised and enjoyed figural art not only in their private residences and their illustrated books, but also in public spaces, such as royal palaces, hammams, and citadels, and even in books that they endowed as *waqfs*. They sponsored figural paintings, reliefs, and murals, sculptural *ranks*, metalwork with figures and miniature painting, in addition to textiles adorned with images. They even used images on temporary structures and models built for celebratory processions and festivals, or, in a few instances, as warnings for people to desist from some prohibited public behaviour. An example of the first case was for the triumphant entry into Cairo in 1303 of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad and his army after defeating the Mongols. Seventy model

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varies according to every case under consideration. Al-Ĵāḥiẓ goes on to say that *wazīn* governs also the beauty of vessels, furnishings, embroidered textiles, and water channels, all of which have to achieve balance in form and composition (*al-istiwā’ fī al-khart wa-l-tarkīb*). (Sabra considered *tamām*, *i’ tidāl*, and *wazīn* to be three separate principles although it seems that al-Ĵāḥiẓ suggests *tamām* and *i’ tidāl* to both derive from *wazīn*). Another example, closer in time and place to the Mamluk authors is ‘Abd al-Laṭīf al-Baghḏādī, *al-Ifāda*: 30–31, where he employs the notion of *tanasub* (proportionality) to analyse the beauty achieved in the ancient Egyptian statues.

<sup>27</sup> See Arnold, *Painting in Islam*: 1–40; Creswell, *EMA*, vol. 1: 269–71, for an interpretation tinged with what we would today call racist expressions; expanded in idem, ‘*The Lawfulness of Painting*’: 159–67. The usual list of Islamic references is amended by Farés, *Sīrr al-Zakhrāfa*, 31–34, to include legal opinions that see no problem with painting.

*qal'as* (citadels) were built by the amirs along the road from the Bāb al-Naṣr to the Citadel of the Mountain.<sup>28</sup> An example of the second case was Amīr Manjak al-Yūsufī's putting images (*ṣuwar*) of executed women(?) in 1351 on the walls of the city to dissuade Cairene women from wearing men's cloaks.<sup>29</sup>

The common people, especially the urban riffraff, seem to have enjoyed and responded favourably to the public display of images, figures, and unusual artifacts sponsored by sultans and amirs. They also seem to have used similar representational techniques, though more crudely executed in cheaper versions, coupled with chants, slogans, and *zajal* (popular strophic poetry) to communicate their hopes, fears, discontents, and convey sarcasm and mockery, or even to mark some unusual events and holidays.<sup>30</sup> A remarkable example, not unlike an instance of contemporary advertising, took place in the 1370s in Cairo when the commander of the royal *harariq* (warships), a certain Ibn 'Abīd, managed to construct a hoist to transport two particularly cumbersome marble columns from the Citadel mount to the city. The event was considered so extraordinary that people composed and sang sonnets and made models of the hoist and even embroidered the machine on handkerchiefs and silk clothing, dubbed *jarr al-'amūd* (the pulling of the column), just as T-shirts are routinely used today to promote events and companies.<sup>31</sup> Another example was when a *kawwāz* (jug maker) parodied the entry of the famous Ayyubid prince, Abū al-Hayjā' al-Samīn (The Fat), into Baghdad in 1197, by casting his corpulent form on his horse in a clay figurine. The figurine was soon duplicated all over Baghdad. The amir responded with admirable good humour.<sup>32</sup> But not all popular figurines were made as joyous farces. On more than one occasion, the people expressed their rancor against fallen officials by making grotesque figures of them, along with demonstrations, looting their properties, and even sometimes desecrating

<sup>28</sup> al-Maqrīzī, *Al-Sulūk*, 1: 938–40; Ibn Taghrī-Bīrdī, *al-Nujūm*, 8: 165–68; for a discussion in the context of popular culture in Cairo, see Shoshan, *Popular Culture*, 67–76. On p. 133, note 80, Shoshan noted that displaying model citadels seems to have been used on more than one occasion, perhaps it was a tradition, but still the sources give us no idea about its exact meaning.

<sup>29</sup> al-Maqrīzī, *Khiṭaṭ*, 2: 322.

<sup>30</sup> Popular culture in medieval Egypt is a subject that has often been evoked but rarely studied despite the wealth of information that can be gleaned from particular sources. Some recent studies began to investigate some aspects of Cairene popular culture such as Shoshan, *Popular Culture*; Lutfi, 'Manners and Customs'.

<sup>31</sup> al-Maqrīzī, *Khiṭaṭ*, 1: 405.

<sup>32</sup> Abū Shāmā, *Dhayl*: 11; Sibṭ Ibn al-Jāwzī, *Mir'āt*: 8: 290.

their corpses. Both the formidable Amīr Qawsūn and al-Nashw, al-Nāsir Muḥammad’s hated supervisor of the privy purse (1333–39), were portrayed in sugar figures (named ‘*alaliq*’<sup>33</sup> at their executions: Qawsūn was nailed on a camel, and al-Nashw was shown on the gallows.<sup>34</sup>

These examples suggest that there was some sort of a public dialogue between the rulers and the ruled carried on, in part, by figures and figural representations, but the literati appear to have been oblivious to it.<sup>35</sup> They record some of the instances in their chronicles, though they recast them in their language. They sometimes evince real and heartfelt appreciation of an artistic element that happened to catch their fancy, as al-Maqrīzī did in his report. But as historians, they do not seem to notice the eloquent potential of images and figures in conveying meaning. Again, there is no evidence that this was the result of socio-religious stands—such as the condemnation of figures—consciously adopted as part of what a proper religiously minded literati should adopt. It appears rather as just another aspect of the lack of visual acuity caused by the long neglect of philosophical reflection and artistic appreciation among the literati. These intellectual shortcomings and not the usually postulated collective religious attitude is what characterised how the literati experienced, appreciated, and dealt with representational art. They formed part of their mental and social structures. They are the most conspicuous simply because they conditioned how art is reported in the historical sources. Modern studies of medieval Islamic art have to take this into account whenever they use the written record of the period.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Al-Maqrīzī, *Khiṭaṭ*, 2: 99–100, gives a definition of ‘*alaliq*’, and a description of their more common and benign forms: fruits, vessels, animals.

<sup>34</sup> For Qawsūn, see al-Maqrīzī, *Al-Sulūk*, 2: 574–77, 579, 586–95; Ibn Taghrī-Birdī, *Nujūm*, 10: 24–30, 38–48, 51–52, 60–61; for al-Nashw, see Mufaḍḍal, *Al-Nahj*, 78; Shoshan, *Popular Culture*, 53–58, discusses both instances as aspects of the ‘political expression’ of the Cairene crowd.

<sup>35</sup> Can this imply that the literati, not unlike their European counterparts, who produced and consumed written texts, considered the visual arts to be the texts of the illiterates and therefore unworthy of their attention? For a discussion in connection to medieval Europe, see Duggan, ‘Book of the Illiterate?’.

<sup>36</sup> Gulrū Necipoğlu, in her review of *Risale-i Mi ‘mariyye*: 210–14, notes how the religious training of Ca’fer Efendi, the author of the treatise, tinged his approach, understanding, and appreciation of architecture and its terminology. Her concern about the use of this Ottoman source in interpreting the status of architecture at the time resonates with the caution presented here about the medieval case.

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