Chapter V

Geometry and Ideology: The Festival of Islam and the Study of Islamic Art*

About a century ago the study of Islamic art acquired its intellectual and in part academic autonomy. Accounts of travelers to remote and exotic lands and occasional catalogs of private or public collections had dominated the field; around 1880 this began to be transformed into surveys – no doubt limited in scope for the most part, but implying an idiosyncratic, even if ill-defined, character in the art from Muslim lands. Prisse d’Avesnes, J. Bourgouin, S. Lane-Poole, A. Gayet are some of the authors associated with these early synthetic enterprises which had an impact on the mainline historians and thinkers like Violet-le-Duc, Riegl and Choisy. By the end of the nineteenth century the more formidable Orientalist intellect of Max van Berchem gave a scholarly direction and a technical methodology to what he himself still called “l’archéologie arabe.”¹

From then on, the study of Islamic art went on its way, the privilege for the most part of a Western academic and collecting establishment around a few major institutions in Europe and America, followed fairly soon by major outposts in Istanbul and Cairo. But the development or growth of Islamic art is not a simple linear progression of accomplishments by scholars, curators and teachers in the usual languages [146] of European learning. At irregular intervals an event or a combination of events suddenly channeled scholarly activities in certain directions or increased concern and publications toward specific subfields of Islamic art. One such occurrence was the 1910 Munich exhibition, which brought to light the brilliance of the industrial arts within Islamic creativity and initiated studies on ceramics, metalwork, glass, crystal and even miniatures, whose concepts, categories and ideas are still alive today.²

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² F. Sarre and others, Die Ausstellung von Meisterwerken in Munich, 1910 (Munich, 1912).
The 1931 exhibition of Persian painting in London was a major breakthrough in the establishment of the standard chronology for Iranian miniatures, just as the appearance in 1939 of the *Survey of Persian Art* revolutionized both the prevailing perception of Iranian art and its importance within world art, with the help, no doubt, of the charismatic personalities of Arthur U. Pope and Phyllis Ackerman. Other occasions, like the Leningrad congress and exhibition of 1936 or the Paris shows of 1938 and 1971, had more restricted national or individual impacts, and it was argued recently, for instance, that the 1913 show of several private collections in the Musée des Arts Décorsifs in Paris played a major role in transforming Matisse’s painting style.3

Naturally, an exhibition or a major publication on any artistic tradition will affect the subsequent scholarly activities or critical discourse dealing with that tradition. What is more interesting and in the long run more important is to acknowledge and understand the more subtle, willful or accidental, immediate or slow-burning, directions provided by these “events.” The Munich exhibition, for instance – beyond identifying the wealth of certain public collections – especially the Istanbul ones – clearly established the key value of inscriptions in classifying objects. The 1931 London show, focused as it was on Dust Muhammad’s history of Persian painting translated in an appendix to the catalog, led to a series of more or less acceptable matches between existing manuscripts or album paintings and names of painters. The 1939 exhibition at the Bibliothèque Nationale alerted a number of Byzantinists and other medievalists to the importance of twelfth- and thirteenth-century illustrated Arabic manuscripts for medieval art in general.4

And the *Survey of Persian Art* gave a possibly imbalanced importance to Iran within Islamic art and as a pre-Islamic source for the themes and motifs of the Muslim tradition. [147]

In short, the impact of these “events” could be informational, intellectual or even ideological – whether or not these results were always consciously sought by the organizers and sponsors of the “events.” The most recent such “event,” the Festival of Islam held all over Britain but most particularly in London during the spring and summer of 1976, is an interesting example of the complex web of expressed or implied objectives and ideas which may or may not end up by affecting a whole field but which certainly reflect concerns, feelings, prejudices, questions, answers and attitudes of a very special moment in time. Aside from whatever historiographic merit there

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4 For instance H. Buchthal, “Hellenistic Miniatures in Early Islamic Manuscripts,” *Arts Islamica*, 7 (1940).
may exist in recording these attitudes, to become aware of them is a way of recognizing the conflicts and the compromises, the queries and the certitudes, which, properly or not, affect the continuing discourse on Islamic art.

I shall not discuss the origins of the Festival nor its governance which, it has been often murmured but rarely said, left a lot to be desired. Nor is it useful for my purposes to know why the Festival fell apart and so many of its expected and even announced publications, among other activities, never saw the light. For a sufficient number of events of significance did take place then and a series of films and books remain as permanent records of the Festival.

To the historian of art, the key events were the exhibitions and, first and foremost, the extraordinarily ambitious exhibition of some 640 items at the Hayward Gallery. Celebrated chestnuts used in every textbook cohabited with little-known and even hitherto unpublished items dug out of museum reserves. Except for Islamic India, every area of traditional Islamic culture was represented. Yet, as all visitors to the Hayward Gallery agree, it was not a successful exhibition. There were, no doubt, many reasons for this failure. Some were mechanical and organizational and do not deserve to be recollected. The one I would, however, like to single out is that the grouping of the objects and their sequencing were done according to a series of categories (e.g., calligraphy, vegetal ornament, geometry), which implied an aesthetic and visual judgment of Islamic art. What I mean by that is that the traditionally automatic ways of ordering series of objects by time (chronological sequence), space (regional grouping), medium (technical arrangement), style (connoisseurship), or subject matter (iconography) have been replaced by characteristics or attributes which are alleged to be particular to the artistic creativity of the Muslim world, which make Islamic art different from other arts, and therefore justify an idiosyncratic presentation.

There is nothing inherently wrong or improper about an alternate approach to traditional ones, but in 1976 the objects had been chosen for inclusion in the exhibition according to traditional norms (quality, notoriety, place of origin, date, even the more debatable norm of present location so that every country or center should be represented), but then they were shown according to concepts which had not been discussed or thought through by the scholarly community as appropriate modes through which Islamic art can be organized. Furthermore, these concepts were only superficially introduced in the catalog of the exhibition.

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6 In fact the whole organization of the exhibition reflected a complex and fascinating web of pressures on the organizers which are not important today except for having alerted so many among us to how frequent these pressures are and how easy they are to identify in most loan exhibitions without coherent preliminary planning.
The reason for the dichotomy between the choice of objects and their presentation is easy to understand when one turns to the handsome publications of the Festival. The three most important are S. Husain Nasr’s *Islamic Science*, Issam El-Said and Ayse Parmari’s *Geometric Concepts in Islamic Art*, and Titus Burckhardt’s *Art of Islam, Language and Meaning* (all London, 1976). The first one, which has been severely criticized by specialists, is not pertinent to my purposes. The other two, which have hardly been reviewed in scholarly journals and which deal directly with Islamic art, share two more or less explicit premises. One is that the works of Islamic art, obviously barring occasional exceptions in early times (much of Umayyad secular art) or at cultural frontiers (central India, Indonesia, northern Mesopotamia, or parts of Africa, perhaps the whole contemporary world), can be identified, described and judged according to a relatively small number of principles which form their “essence.” One of these principles is geometry, which therefore became a whole book. The second premise is a reluctance to deal with history, to accept even incompatible varieties or irreversible changes as expressive of cultural wealth rather than as regrettable weaknesses.

I have dealt elsewhere with some disturbing implications of the rejection of history in recent writing on Islamic art. The notion of a few principles governing the whole of Islamic art is equally troublesome, at least as it is presented in these books and in much related writing. This is so because the justification for the principles does not derive from an analysis of appropriate written or other data defining the cultural boundaries of the Islamic world, for instance its legal system, the various socio-theological systems which affected the lives of the Faithful, or formal as well as oral literature with its reflections of the real world. Instead, a hodgepodge of ideas from very different sources and inspired by very different experiences of the Muslim world has been promoted into aesthetic canons. There is the old Orientalist myth of a nomadic ethos which would have brought both certain ways of geometricizing design known through weaving and an immediacy of perception in stark desertic lands which favored repeatable themes. There is the contemporary Moroccan experience (Titus Burckhardt was a long-time resident of Fez) with its unique transformation of medieval Andalusian art into a by now long-standing artisanal and urban tradition of elaborate geometry in the process of being revitalized. The arabesque is another Orientalist theme corresponding to an outsider’s view of an alien art rather than an insider’s definition of himself. Calligraphy is the only one of these principles which has specific and conscious Islamic definitions and categories.

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and one of the Festival’s smaller exhibitions, at the British Library, was devoted to calligraphy. Subdued and scholarly, its impact on specialists was striking and it may well have inspired an unusual recent increase in books (unfortunately only rarely intellectually acceptable) on the art of writing.11

The main limitation of calligraphy for the general public is that its appreciation is very difficult and often incorrect for those who do not know the appropriate languages. No such limitation exists for geometry, whose presence in Islamic art as well as within a general theory of art had already been explored for several years, especially in Britain in circles eventually to be involved with the Festival of 1976.12 That geometry played a crucial role in Islamic art is self-evident, just as it is relatively easy to relate its growth to the scientific and technological innovations of the tenth and eleventh centuries in Baghdad and northeastern Iran.13 What is more difficult is to explain this phenomenon in cultural terms – to explain why it is precisely Islamic art which so developed geometry, and to do so in the terms of Muslim culture.

But the main point of my remarks is not to quibble with one or the other of the principles proposed in 1976 as characteristic of Islamic art, nor to criticize them in detail. It is rather to note that, in developing [150] these principles, the Festival was formulating an ideological message. The message was that of the basic unity of Islamic art and by extension of Islamic civilization in the past and, ideally, of most Muslims today. By a fascinating sleight of hand, the profoundly Islamic theological notion of tawhid, of the absolute oneness of God, was transferred not only to the community, the ummah, but also to the objects and buildings sponsored and used by the community of Muslims. To the single message of a unique Divine Revelation there corresponds a visually perceptible artistic creativity of comparable unity. And then the identification of the principles which create that unity acquire automatically a culturally normative value.14

It is no accident that this kind of message appeared precisely at a time when the Muslim world, especially in the Near East, had become a major patron of new architecture and when the drawing boards of the world were humming with projects and competition entries. The need had arisen for normative and prescriptive statements about the art of a culture in history, no longer for interpretations of the history of an artistic tradition. Those

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13 M.S. Bulatov, Geometric Harmonization in the Architecture of Central Asia (Moscow, 1978), in Russian, is a far more scholarly work, although not without its own limitations and prejudices.
14 It is interesting to compare the geometry–calligraphy movement with the Sufi universalism expounded by L. Bakhtiyar and N. Ardalan, The Sense of Unity (Chicago, 1973), partly under the same influences.
were the years when many among us succumbed to the temptation of providing prescriptive judgments for some of the major new buildings of Iran and of Arabian lands or for monuments never to be built. Certainly scholarship was the loser, if not because of what we wrote, certainly because of misspent energies in not writing what should have been written. The excitement and the energies of these years have now abated, but we are left with their aftermath. It is the ideas of these years which still form the most coherent statement about Islamic art available to students or to the general public. Geometry and calligraphy rule the field and architecture is more studied than all other arts, because, even though least represented in the 1976 Festival activities, its financial implications and potential as well as its social significance gave it undue importance.

The pendulum is swinging back. One begins to talk about regionalism within an alleged universal Islamic culture. To a spatial regionalism some are even adding a chronological one, differentiating periods from each other and even suggesting that incompatible forms may have existed if they reflected different tasks or different needs. And exhibitions, from blockbusters like India to more specializing ones like the one on Fatehpur-Sikri at the time of Akbar or several in [151] preparation, tend perhaps to be more specific, more precise, more questioning than providing answers. But then two of the exhibitions during the 1976 Festival did not claim the universalism of the Festival’s books or of the Hayward Gallery show. One was a low-keyed but fascinating discourse on scientific instruments, while the other was an astounding reconstruction of a Yemeni setting. Like all great “events,” the Festival was a harbinger of things to come as well as the expositor of a very special ideology.

Retrospectively, it is easy enough to see sinister, merely commercial or fanatically ideological motives behind fancy and expressive artistic events of our time. More often than not, they are but exercises in public relations for countries, museums or individuals. They leave traces, however, and these may be harmful and lead research and explanation in unnecessary or downright incorrect directions, unless their values and limitations are properly understood.