

## Chapter VIII

### Islamic Ornament and Western Abstraction\*

It is a rare and exciting event to be able to see in the same exhibition works of contemporary, primarily Western but theoretically worldwide art juxtaposed with works made many centuries ago within Islamic culture. It is rare because organizers of exhibitions shy away from comparisons across centuries and across cultural frontiers. It is exciting because it raises several critical questions about the ways in which we can, perhaps even should, think about the arts in general. At first glance, it is a good thing, for one cannot but applaud innovative and original presentations of works of art. But, in another sense, there are disturbing sides to such juxtapositions. Let me elaborate on four critical questions which emerge from such presentations, acknowledge the significant and altogether welcome values which are embedded in them, but also express concerns about some of the implications of these juxtapositions.

The first critical question is one of definitions. Abstraction is a word used to define the quality of a painting. It is an attribute given to a work of art by its viewer and/or its maker in order to distinguish it from representations; it implies that whatever is seen (or to be seen) cannot be defined by its subject, but is a mental or spiritual concept, at worst a technical procedure. At one time, or perhaps still now in some circles, this distinction was (or is) a qualitative one, as though a greater purity, almost a moral value, is bestowed on or expressed by an abstract painting. Ornament, on the other hand, is a functional term that can be applied to many different types of forms, including even representations. This is so because ornament transforms whatever it deals with into visual pleasure to the exclusion of subject matter. Although ornament can be used as a way to enhance representation or function, it is reasonable to relate it to abstraction because both are visually flexible and defined as ideas, almost as formulas, rather than as concrete references to existing things. The problem is that these definitions are creations of certain kinds of contemporary critical reasoning issued from Western thought and art. Can they be considered to have any sort of universal value?

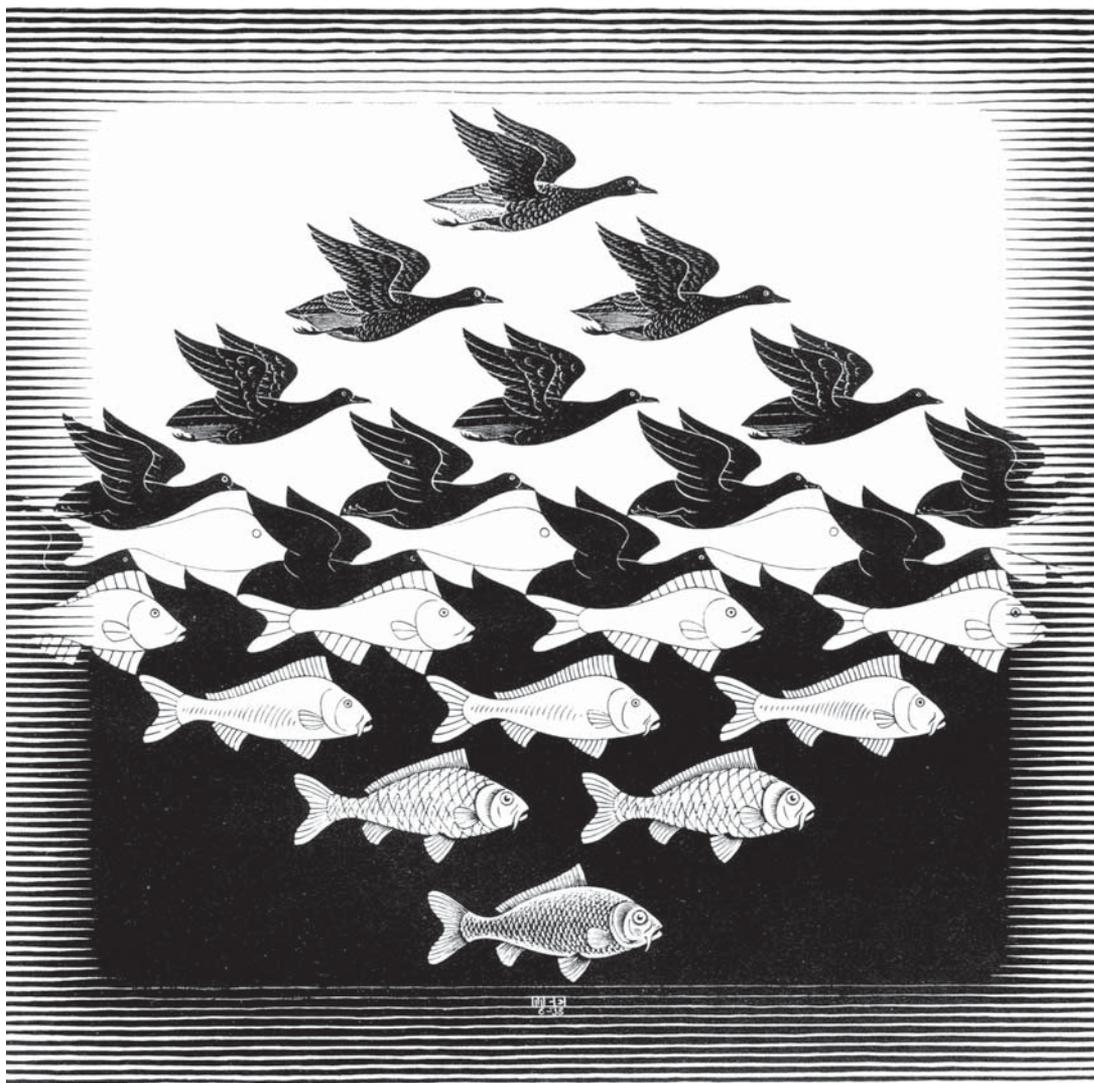
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\* First published in Markus Bruderlein, ed., *Ornament and Abstraction* (Basel, 2001), pp. 70–73.

Hence my second critical question is historical. By juxtaposing works from different places and times, one makes one acceptable statement and another more dangerous one. The problem in juxtaposing contemporary Western art and Islamic art is that such a juxtaposition implies, even unwittingly, that there may be a connection of cause and effect between the two, that the earlier one affected the later one. It is, of course, true that some twentieth-century artists – for example Matisse, Kandinsky, Stella, or Taaffe – acknowledge [72] having been inspired by Islamic art. Some of this inspiration was simply the result of “Orientalist” visits to Muslim countries; at other times, visits to exhibitions of Islamic art or to museums triggered something in the painters; in some cases, it was merely the sound of exotic names heard in one’s youth that affected an artist. There is little evidence that any one of the painters involved actually studied works of Islamic art or sought to understand something of the culture which created them, not even through drawings and sketches as Rembrandt had done in his time. There are exceptions, no doubt, like Maurits Cornelis Escher, but his reputation is not very high among contemporary critics (Fig. 1). If there was no connection (or very little and mostly accidental) between Islamic art and contemporary abstract art, then the juxtaposition may become a gratuitous one, even if it turns out to be true that abstraction was practiced by the makers and appreciated by the patrons of Islamic art. In a broader sense, can one compare abstractions without being aware of their social and cultural context?

The acceptable statement is that in the finite world of forms (as with sounds and grammar), it is reasonable to assume that different times and places bring forth comparable forms. Usually differences tend to be stressed, because historians specialize in different periods and in unrelated areas. But the underlying and usually unacknowledged assumptions of the history of art are that, in an almost Chomskian way, there is a universal language of art and visual experience with its own rules and practices and that this language and this experience acquire very different local colors. It is, therefore, legitimate to develop comparative approaches, to cross over boundaries of time and space, and to seek global patterns and verities.

The third critical question derives in part from the example of Escher. There is something artful but contrived about his compositions, as though they were part of a game, an exercise perhaps, rather than the expression of some deeper purpose. And the question then is whether abstraction and ornament should not always be considered as a game with its own set of rules like coverage of an arbitrary space, equality in importance of morphemic elements used in any one composition, absence of concrete reference to external models, and so forth. A game has winners, as some designs or compositions are found superior to others, more effective in their impact, more pleasing to some eyes. But these “winners” are not permanent; they can always be recomposed, reordered in a different manner. They thus



illustrate an old theory about Islamic art, that the arbitrariness of its formal compositions was a reflection of the theological and philosophical notions that God alone is the creator of permanent things and that man is destined to make temporary, passing, things only. This argument can be made and has been made for over a century now, but its likelihood has never been established in a scholarly fashion, and it is perhaps dubious to assume high philosophical knowledge among the artisans of the traditional Islamic world or, for that matter, among contemporary artists.

This is where my fourth problem comes up. In classical Islamic art, a small number of categories of motifs dominate: vegetation, writing and geometry. Vegetal ornament has a long history and its varieties are not

1 Maurits  
Cornelis Escher,  
*Air and Water I*,  
1938

pertinent to my purpose here. Writing is more troubling, as the transformation of the Arabic alphabet into abstract forms, angular in Kufic, [73] and curved in later Persian scripts, often led to the lack of or difficulty in intelligibility. If one cannot read writing, what is the point of it? To write something that cannot be read is an act of defiance which may well lead to one of the great puzzles of artistic creativity, the one defined by René Magritte's *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*. Can one call unintelligibility abstraction or should it be ornament? The question is even more pertinent with geometry, for geometry is an abstraction. And the development of geometry in Islamic art, from the tenth century onward, was spectacular, culminating, as it did, in the variety of symmetries found in the Alhambra. Similarly, Stella or Sol LeWitt used geometry to compose their paintings or to design the spaces of the walls they decorated. It is unlikely that the craftsmen of fourteenth-century Andalusia were trained in theoretical geometry, and few contemporary artists have dealt with the abstractions of physics or mathematics, except at some very elementary levels. It is as though geometry appears instinctively in the solutions of those who, for ideological, aesthetic or other reasons, need to avoid representations. Is it an accident that abstraction and ornament meet in geometry?