

CONTEMPORARY ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS ART

I chose this subject because I thought this was something I was myself trying to produce and I was interested in what other artists were doing along these lines, particularly in Britain but also elsewhere. I had been inspired by three things; firstly an exhibition 'Jewish subjects in Spanish ceramics' at the Sephardic museum in Toledo in November 1999. All the artists had names both Spanish and Jewish and I thought how much I would have liked to see a parallel Muslim exhibition in one of the many previous mosques. Plate (1) shows my sketch of Esther Ramos' 'Nave de Tiberiades'. Nave can mean ship as well as aisle so I think it must refer to an episode of Jewish history – perhaps in Roman times?

Secondly, last year, in a women's exhibition in Wakefield, I came across Lale Indic's glass standards. Plate (2) shows three of my photographs of these alongside examples of Safarid standards from the British Museum, not all of which are widest at the base. These standards from 17th and 18th century Persia were carried in battle as well as in religious processions by craft guilds. Her interpretations used hot glass techniques with some surface iridescent effects. She is Turkish.

Thirdly Ismail Gulgee's ecstatic octagonal panel at the Pakistan: Another Vision exhibition at the Brunei Gallery SOAS last year. (Plate 3). The reproduction does not at all convey the impact of seeing this panel across a room. Near to, the surface texture is as rich as an embroidered textile, incorporating beads as well as paint and gold leaf. Gulgee is also a calligraphic painter of note using very thick oil for his brushstrokes. Indeed I have been so impressed that when I read his statement "...I live only when I paint. The rest is but a wait...for crossing the threshold from life to the experience of life." I don't automatically shout "pseud!"

As it happened trying to track down enough contemporary Islamic art to make a proper survey was much more difficult than I had expected.

Problems of definition.

Conventional European art history dates the beginning of modern art variously to Turner, the Impressionists, the post Impressionists, the Bauhaus etc., i.e. sometime between 1800 and 1900 according to personal preference (prejudice). Since 'modern' now sounds dated we call most work by living artists 'contemporary' even if it was finished 30 – 40 years ago and furthermore is a clear steal from Dadaism (~80 years ago) or even the Stone Age (>10,000BC). And of course the term contemporary excludes 'traditional' and 'folk' art – which is usually merely craft anyway!

The art history of largely Muslim countries is of course closely related to European art history but by colonialism and the continuing problems of so-called post-colonialism. It is this experience which changed forever the context of traditional and folk art, later revivals notwithstanding. This is broadly true even for Iran which, never a colony, only fell within the clashing spheres of influence of Britain and Russia; and Turkey which narrowly escaped becoming a protectorate along with its own ex-colonies in 1908. Modern or contemporary Islamic art history therefore begins in nationalist struggles which give the specific context for the debate between tradition and modernism. Traditional forms may be encouraged from nationalist pride but 'modernism' (always seen as Western) may also be advocated to prove a country's up to date tastes and consequent fitness for self-rule.

'Islam' is a noun of which the correct adjectival form is 'Muslim'. However, the convention is to use 'Islamic' about the culture of countries where a majority of inhabitants profess Islam even it is technically a secular state like Turkey. Muslim art would have had a specifically religious meaning. This betrays the Western assumption that culture is or can be separate from religion of course! Arguably this is never the case. Even in the West, if secular

humanism really is its religion; this explains why art (seen as the ultimate individual self expression) is its idol.

Since Islam does not recognise the post Enlightenment split between the secular realm of public affairs and private life in which religion has an optional place it is possible to regard any art produced by a Muslim to be religious in some sense. In fact the names and attributes of God, prayers and other religious texts turn up frequently on jewellery, clothing and other everyday objects because there is no part of life from which God can be excluded. This can be compared with the use of Christian symbols and images in the art of Europe before even Christianity, openly displayed, became bad taste. Plate (4)a-d are photographs of the Madinah Gift Centre, a local shop selling the contemporary version of this kind of thing alongside more directly devotional merchandise. Note the extraordinary clocks – my personal kitsch favourite being the alarm clock (in 4c) in the form of the Ka'aba which sounds the call to prayer. The first prize for missing the point, however, must go to the hijab advertised as if it were a beauty aid (also 4c). I was going to photograph a Catholic shop as well for comparison but did not have the time. Is there something about the vitality of successful (i.e. expanding) faiths which produces such boundless vulgarity? On reflection I wondered why evangelical Protestantism does not? But of course the artistic genius of Protestantism at its best has expressed itself pre-eminently in literature and music.

In order to narrow down the subject area I decided to look at three possible meanings of the term 'religious art' from the Western perspective; art meant as an aid to devotion, art expressing devotion and art commenting on aspects of the religious life. Art meant as an aid to devotion would cover the aforementioned use of religious symbols on everyday objects to encourage 'recollection' in the Christian sense, the design and decoration of places of worship, the calligraphy of scriptures and the development of specialised forms for ritual objects. I would argue that in Islam none of these are strictly *necessary* for devotion, although in practice it is much easier to have mosques, written scriptures and rugs kept exclusively for prayer. The prophet Muhammad had none of these things but then he had a degree of consciousness of the Divine presence which is given to very few.

Art expressing devotion does not necessarily overlap except in the case of Koranic calligraphy. Obviously craftsmen in the past as now had to earn a living from whoever was paying so that the beauty of an artefact does not necessarily reflect the faith of the maker so much as the faith of the one who ordered it and wished the most skilled execution available. Christian Greeks are known to have worked on the earliest (Ummayyad) buildings such as the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem (690-692), the Coptic Christians of Cairo were renowned artisans particularly in Fatimid times (969-1171AD) and apparently Jewish craftsmen were important throughout the ~900 years of Moorish Spain. Contrariwise there was even a special word, 'mudejar' for Muslim craftsmen working under Christian rule in Spain, both before the fall of Granada in 1492 and after until the final expulsion in 1610. There are mudejar churches as well as palaces such as the Palacio de los Cárdenas, 15th century (an octagonal ceiling is shown in Plate(5)). Hispano-moresque lustre pottery likewise depended on Muslim craftsmen. Plate (6) shows an armorial dish of about 1430. Some ware includes Muslim and Christian decorative motifs.

Problem of Historical Research

Racism, Anti-semitism and Orientalism

"The chief difference between classical and Eastern architecture is that the buildings of Greece and Rome repose; those of the East strive; feeling and emotion have given them a restless vitality, as uncontrolled and clamorous as a riot. They recall the non-stop babble of an oriental bazaar, just as a Greek temple suggests the reasoned conversation of intelligent men with open, active minds."

“New, strange and restless forms spread through all the countries subjected to the Arab conquest, typical of the excitable, valorous and romantic temperament of the conquerors” (of the Great Mosque at Córdoba) “The interior is obviously the work of people without building traditions, who were almost hysterically excited by rich materials which they could assemble with gusto but with no thought beyond producing a rich effect.”

I was startled to find these hilarious passages in a book as recent as John Gloag’s ‘Architecture’ (part of Cassell’s Arts of Man series) published in 1963. But then consider this from a pro-Islamic standpoint. Titus Burckhardt on miniature painting; “For Aryan peoples like the Persians, as well as for the Mongols, the representational image is far too natural a mode of expression for them to be able to pass it over.”

“A certain grandiloquence of gesture, a love of linear arabesque and a caustic wit that falls occasionally into triviality – these are perhaps Arab characteristics.”

He goes on to explain that the best Arab painting (the Baghdad School) was not done by Arabs but by ‘Christians and Sabaeans’ apparently unaware of Arab Christians or that Sabaeans come from Arabia!

This does not seem a million miles away from Bernard Berenson’s assertion that the Jews could not have illustrated certain Alexandrian Old Testaments – the artists must have been Greek or ‘completely hellenized’ Jews – because in their own country they had never had any skill in the plastic arts (Namenyi)

Seyyed Hossein Nasr et al vs Oleg Grabar

At first I was much inclined to Nasr’s views, having read him on Islamic philosophy and science. Possibly I was trying to find a ‘native informant’ as Edward Said puts it, in an attempt to get more trustworthy information. However, the repetition and amplification of similar ideas between Burckhardt, Lings and Nasr has made me wary of all the other authors in the World Festival of Islam series, despite the beauty of these books. I find their theory highly contentious although it is presented as objective fact. The basic tenets seem to be :

1. Islamic art is sacred and not merely religious i.e. more like an icon than a ‘mere’ oil painting of a biblical subject. They assume, of course, that sacred art is more beautiful than profane art.
2. Islamic Art is Platonic i.e. it attempts to portray ideas (ideals) rather than physical objects and therefore is never naturalistic/realistic.
3. It is essentially anonymous i.e. if it isn’t it ought to be or the artist is taken over by a higher reality or Islam itself is really the artist.
4. It is unprecedented and unsurpassed.

Any counter examples are ignored or re-categorised as not really Islamic or not ‘major’ art. Thus pottery and textiles, except tiles and carpets respectively, are not dealt with. Anyone who knew nothing of Islam would also be given the impression that Shia Muslims, far from being an almost heretical minority in a Sunni world, are actually a spiritual elite with the esoteric keys to Islam. This is regarded by some as a theory properly based on Islamic Art’s inner meaning and thus Oleg Grabar’s scholarship is compared unfavourably with it. However, it is much more archaeological and descriptive. He does not *seem* to have an overarching theory into which the facts must be bent to fit and he is constantly setting work in a historical and sociological context. Of course his biases are more hidden! However, for a liberal humanist Westerner he is not noticeably offensive.

I have used both schools of thought as resources because I am in the uneasy position of being a Eurasian Muslim who, although not a convert, has had an entirely Western intellectual and artistic training. On the other hand, although my grandfather was born in Afghanistan where there has been considerable Persian (and hence Shia) influence, we are Sunni and his surname, Nagdee, means ‘the Arab’. Thus I do not feel able to slip into the relieved European

admiration for all things Persian which allows an 'appreciation' of Islam which leaves the anti-Arab branch of anti-semitism untouched. My own view of Islamic art and how it expresses the lived religion comes from my experience of praying five times daily (salah) and the yearly fast of Ramadhan. Both appear to impose an external pattern on human life but actually serve bodily as well as spiritual needs – the pattern feels natural. Prayer times are not fixed by the clock but by the position of the sun and so will vary during the year and over the earth. The month of Ramadhan depends on a lunar calendar and so varies its season (and hence difficulty) gradually over the years. So the pattern is not rigid but varies dynamically, adapting to context.

Similarly, the famous patterns of Islamic art also 'feel natural'. Apparently the Islamic innovation to existing curvilinear patterns was to allow new lines to spring from bifurcations. This allows arabesques to extend in any direction and hence cover any surface (see Plate (6)). It also happens to be the way plants actually grow and spread. (Fascinatingly, there is a parallel, almost contemporary, development of Celtic knot-work but with curvilinear designs based on animals). Even the straight line patterns from Euclidean geometric figures do exist in nature whether in honeycombs, visible crystal clusters and snowflakes, or at the atomic level in crystal structures. Amazingly, these can also be adapted for a curved surface. Consider Plate (7) – the shrine of Shah Ni'matuollahi, Mahan, Persia. The dome is covered with a straight-line interlace forming many-pointed stars, a common arrangement on flat walls or Koran frontispieces. Now look at the stars; the first row have 10 points, the second 9, the third 11, the fourth 12, the fifth 9, the sixth 7 and the seventh 5! I still haven't worked out exactly how it has been done.

Classical geometry developed from building and its laws were used in turn for architecture in times of classical revival (such as the renaissance) as well as in Islam. Again, however, mathematical rules of proportion were interpreted flexibly e.g. al Kashi's 'The Key to Arithmetic' (14th/15th century) includes applications of geometry to architecture but notes that heights of component parts can be increased or decreased according to the craftsman's judgement.

The interplay of repetition and variation particularly recalls the recent excitement about fractals.

The Figurative Issue

Last year I went into the presumed ban on all representation under Islam for a whole essay on figurative art and came to the conclusion that the total ban only applies to mosques and then only to avoid misleading the faithful. Many injunctions have to be seen against the contemporary pagan and Christian context in the Arabia of early Islam. Idol-worship in the most 'magical' form i.e. imputing powers to the image and not the reality beyond it, was widespread. Christian cults of the saints already strongly resembled pagan ancestor worship and they too were producing images for worship – icons- which were, and are, credited with miraculous powers. The Koran forbids idols and so Muslims are careful where images of human beings, animals and plants are placed. Since last year, I have realised there was plenty of floral ornament within mosques and not all 'disguised' as arabesque. Even in the 7th and 8th centuries, Umayyad mosques like the Dome of the Rock contain mosaic murals of cities, waterfalls, trees and flowers. I have found an example of tile work incorporating two tiny birds (I think on the outside of a Central Asian mosque) and carved dragons on the roof of the minaret of the Great Mosque in Xian, China (792). However, animals are rare and human beings non-existent in either 2 or 3d in mosque precincts. This raises an interesting possibility – if Islam had first arisen in Northern Europe surely trees would have had too strong a connection with local pagan worship to be countenanced in mosques. Does that therefore mean that plants were not important to pagan Arabic ritual?

Actually Islamic figurative art shows up a lot of the difficulties with the Nasr et al school of thought. It is actually widespread but never 'sacred' in their terms i.e. no icons or crucifixes. Painted pottery and woven and embroidered textiles can be dismissed as minor arts (crafts). Painting is either not Islamic (foreign), mere illustration of textbooks or in the last resort not naturalistic/realistic/representational and so compatible with Islam but still only peripheral.

I had also not come across *any* figurative sculpture anywhere in the Islamic world before the modern era and speculated that this was because of the common pagan practice of having idols everywhere e.g. the household gods of Roman times and the universal tendency of rulers to make a bid for divinity by having portrait statues erected. Unfortunately I have now found counter examples. However, the stucco statuary of some early Umayyad palaces cannot be dismissed as "frankly pagan" (Titus Burckhardt) simply because hunting scenes and dancing girls are portrayed. (What about all the court miniatures and painted plates?) Ettinghausen and Grabar point out that in one excavation the throne room of a palace complex had a side wall where there was no sculpture. This was a puzzle until it was realised that it was a party wall with the mosque next door. This is the kind of scrupulousness also shown by the shrines erected at tombs (a much more pagan practice!) always being arranged so that those praying cannot do so facing the grave.

I had thought that Jewish art shared Muslim prohibitions (in fact the commandment is much more stringent) but apparently this was not always the case – the scene of Abraham binding Isaac, the Akeda, being particularly important. Even outside the mosque however no image of Allah or the Prophet Muhammad is permitted. It is interesting that to get round this, the Persian miniaturists when depicting the night of the miraculous ascent always show the Prophet veiled (Plate (8)).

Modern Developments and Personal Favourites

The Prayer Rug

Hand knotted and hand woven wool and silk carpets continue to be made in all the traditional areas. The main modern development was the introduction of synthetic dyes in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and by contrast the more recent attempted re-introduction of natural dyes which will not only help to keep certain traditional patterns but, it is hoped, halt the migration to the cities and the dependence on imports – the chemical dyes not being as cheap as first appeared, in total costs. As a traditional art or craft it has not entirely degenerated to bad copies for tourists. The worst carpets are the viscose and polypropylene machine woven mass products (see Plate (4a)). The average buyer at Ikea, Habitat or Oxfam gets something rather better; after all most of the antique collectable rugs were only made in the 19th century, not so long ago that techniques have been lost. However, this traditional craft does not get regarded as contemporary art. I can only think of Maria Martinez, the Pueblo potter who managed *that* transition.

Calligraphy

This is also a surviving traditional craft. Although Korans have been printed for a long time, trained calligraphers still do the ornamental letters particularly of Surah ('chapter') headings. Similarly in the 1960s they still did newspaper headlines as well as sign writing generally.

Calligraphy has managed to move into 'fine art' becoming the basis for much abstract painting by modern Islamic artists. It is frequently combined with printmaking.

Plate (9) *Kufic* script on vellum 9th century near East (Iraq or Persia) Surah VII, 206 and then VIII, the heading.

Kufic is widely used in architecture (plate (18)) and on pottery and to contrast with more cursive styles. See Plate (16)

Plate (10) *Nashki* script by Yaqut-al-Musta'simi 1286 Baghdad.

VIII 43 – XIV 6 in Rayhani (a variant) with heading in Eastern Kufic

This is much easier to read than Kufic and so became most usual for books. It is also used in architecture.

Plate (11) Image of Faith II Ahmed Khan oil and silver on canvas 84 x 84

It is not silver leaf but a reaction which reduces a salt to a thin film of mirrorlike metal. He says he wishes to get "colours without any substance". The effect is stunning.

Plate (12) Calligraphic Tiger 1993 Tehmina Shah etching with handpainting 315 x 24
Collections of Bradford City Art Galleries.

When I was a child in the Sudan animals made from letters were commonly used in advertising and in newspapers almost as cartoon characters. Shah's tiger is quite different and much more elegant and tigerish.

Plate (13) Red and White Letter and Blue and Gold, Rima Farrah, both 1997, carborundum etchings 55 cm square. "Is there a point where a letter ceases to be a fragmentary symbol of language and instead becomes a visual feast?" she asks.

Plate (14) Eruptions...of the Soul 1994 h18cm w26cm (left). Sisters of Black and Gold 1988 h57cm w28cm (right), both stoneware with onglaze and gold metal. Maysaloun Faraj. She says "I am inspired to a large extent by my Islamic faith which expresses itself naturally in my work."

Plate (15) Perspective of the 'Bismillah' 1977/8. Limited edition silk screen 110 x 75cm in square Kufic.

Plate (16) Still Life of Quranic solids (detail) 1987 Oil and watercolour on hand made paper 125 x 76 cm. Surah LIV, 49 determines the planes, shapes and sizes of all the solids. The floor pattern is based on Surah III,2. Both Ahmed Moustafa

He researched for fourteen years his doctoral thesis "The Scientific Foundation of the Arabic Lettershapes" which deals with Ibn Muqla and his 'proportioned script'. He was a mathematician and scribe of the 10th century.

Plate (17) My 2 best greetings cards, both calligraphic. The top one is designed by Sundas Omer Ali and the bottom one by Mohamed Abu Mustafa.

Mosques

Very broadly, it can be argued that the main difference in modern mosques is whether they are built in Muslim countries or not. Certainly the design problems are different. The most innovative work has usually been able to have been done in Muslim countries because at least the potential mosque users will expect the building, however odd, to *be* a mosque. In non-Muslim countries you either have minority immigrant communities who might also be homesick or prestigious projects associated with embassies e.g. The Regent's Park Mosque. Neither will probably want something too radical but will also not want to merge into the surroundings. After all, it is a great comfort for a Muslim to spy a minaret or dome in among a forest of alien buildings. Not that these 2 features have been necessary to mosques in all Muslim countries.

Plate (18) Al-Ghadir Mosque (1977-87) Tehran designed by Jahangir Mazlum. The dome is formed from alternating octagons and squares and the exterior is decorated with Kufic in blue and also cut into the golden coloured brick.

Plate (19) Kinali Island Mosque, Istanbul 1964 designed by Turhan Uyaruglu and Basar Azam. I don't usually like modernist concrete but this is just right.

Plate (20) The Great Mosque (1909) Djenne, Mali. This has been built in the local style using local materials. It is of mud brick with wooden reinforcements which are left as projections to help workers climb the walls for ease of replastering (with mud). The white tips which can just be seen are ostrich eggs used to protect the most exposed parts from heavy rain.

Plate (21) Al Rashid Mosque, Edmonton, Alberta 1938. the first mosque built in Canada (by Lebanese and Syrian immigrants). A serene building, only the twin minarets give it away as not a church. This is a perfect balance between local and Muslim character.

Plate (22) Dar al-Islam, Abiquiu, New Mexico 1980- (unfinished and partly abandoned) designed by Hassan Fathy, the well-known Egyptian architect was chosen because he was an expert on mud brick construction and this would have been in keeping with local adobe buildings. However, New Mexico building regulations would not allow the original ideas to be carried out using the demonstrated techniques and the local builders seem to have had a basic distrust of mud brick. The 2 views here show the possibilities of the site for an Islamic 'village'. Perhaps the problem was really the usual impossibility of setting up self-sufficient utopian communities.

Political/Religious Commentary

This introduces the special problem of photography. Why do all Muslims accept it? This includes those who are most strict about figurative art (and everything else). I have never seen a photograph of a person in a mosque but it is not unusual to see photographs of religious and secular leaders in other public places. I recall my mother's horror many years ago watching Iranian demonstrators on television when the crowds were carrying placards with Khomeini's face on. "How can they call themselves Muslims?" She also told me that her grandmother, who was the family's resident religious authority only okayed photography after many years and because everyone else seemed to be doing it.

However that may be, Peter Sanders, a Muslim convert and Nudrat Afza, a Bradford based woman both photograph Muslims and the Muslim life positively. Possibly this is just propaganda, still the images are beautiful and a healthy corrective to the usual media coverage.

A strand of commentary that currently interests me very much are paintings about the hijab. This is usually translated as 'veil' but actually means 'curtain' with subsidiary meanings of 'boundary' and 'protection'. Taking it off is not a simple matter of opting for freedom and feminism. The Western attitude is also suspect and by no means simply benign; for example: The British governor of Egypt after 1882 was vociferously against the veil for Egyptian women. He also closed down the only female medical school because Egyptian women should be more civilized and be attended by male doctors.

During the Franco-Algerian war "French army trucks had transported village women to urban areas. There they were forced to unveil publicly thereby proving their renunciation of outworn traditions" Marie-Aimée Hélie-Lucas quoted in Lloyd 1999.

In fact as Akbar Naqui has pointed out the hijab can be seen rather as the way you control how you are seen by others. (Do women really have a duty to display themselves?)

Some illustrations from last year's essay:

- 6) Captive III 1999 gouache on wasli 28 x 21 Aisha Khaled.
- 7) Lunch break Nudrat Afza. (left) girls from the Bradford Muslim School sometime in the 1980s. This is almost as good as a girl I saw once in a hijab in a Tae-kwon-do class!

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 Serageldin, Ismail with Steele, James 'Architecture of the Contemporary Mosque' 1996 London
 Theophilus, Jeremy 'An Alchemy of Letters, the art of Ahmed Moustafa' 1993 England
 Theophilus, Jeremy 'Divine Inspiration, Ahmed Moustafa's revival of the Islamic tradition of calligraphic art' in *Crafts*, July/August 1993
 Wilcox, Timothy ed. 'Pakistan, another vision. Fifty years of painting and sculpture from Pakistan.' (Exhibition catalogue) 2000 London

Electronic Resources

N.B. Internet: None of the LMU recommended art and design resources could provide any match for 'Contemporary Islamic Art'. The only relevant web sites were accessed via Excite (see log book).
 Otherwise
www.petersanders.com

Exhibitions

"Temas judíos en la cerámica española" Sinagoga del Transito, Samuel Levi, 45002 Toledo
 November 1999
 "Shine" women artists at Artsmill Wakefield March 2000
 "Pakistan: Another Vision" Brunei Gallery SOAS April 2000 and Huddersfield Art Gallery July 2000
 "Eclectic 2001" Aartvark Gallery, Dewsbury April 2000
 Hali Antique Carpet and Textile Art Fair London June 2000
 Rukshana Shah – paintings and textiles Harris Museum, Preston November 2000
 "In the Shade of the Tree" Peter Sanders photographs Cartwright Hall, Bradford January 2001; The Crescent Exhibition, Rotherham March 2001

Permanent Collections

Transcultural Gallery, Cartwright Hall, Bradford

Victoria and Albert Museum, Kensington, London

The John Addis Islamic Gallery in the British Museum, Great Russell St, London

Private Galleries

Aartvark Gallery, 113b Branch Road, Pioneer House, Dewsbury www.aartvark.co.uk specialising in Eastern, Islamic and Contemporary Art

Egee Art Consultancy, 9 Chelsea Manor Studios, Flood St, London SW3

as yet I have only visited their website; www.egeeart.com/nav.htm

