

OLEG GRABAR

*The Mediation of
Ornament*

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INTRODUCTION

AFTER YEARS OF research and meditation in a field of expertise, the historian of any art, probably any historian, is enriched by the depth and breadth of that experience, regardless of the time and space limitations that affected his work. Difficulties begin when he seeks to share with other scholars or with the general public views, ideas, information, and interpretations derived from that experience. An almost missionary zeal exists to persuade others of the fascination of one's own field and of its importance for all areas of visual knowledge, learning, and pleasure. But on the other hand there lies the paralyzing fear that endlessly honed subtleties of cultural interpretations and carefully worked out distinctions in chronology or typology must give way to superficial generalities in order to be understandable. The difficulty of communicating properly to other fields the lessons of any one of them is compounded when the world or worlds with which one deals are, in reality or in perception, alien to the mainstream of the history of art and of the prevailing culture of the Western world. It is twice compounded if the world of one's concerns is also remote in time.¹

Such is the predicament in which I found myself in introducing the topic of the lectures that led, in turn, to this book of essays on and around ornament. Observations and questions about works of Islamic art inspired the investigations and reflections that follow, and nearly every one of the chapters begins with a discussion of objects or buildings from the formative and medieval centuries of Islamic art, from the eighth to the thirteenth, and from the vast area extending from Spain to the frontiers of China through the southern shores of the Mediterranean and across the whole of western Asia, which had become predominantly Muslim after two major periods of expansion, the seventh–eighth centuries and the eleventh–twelfth.² At times I will deal with the specific factors and processes that surrounded the creation of these works of art and artifacts or that legitimize the interpretation I shall provide within their own historical context. But the thrust and the ambition of this book are not simply to discuss the character and the meanings of a number of works of Islamic art within the cultural and intellectual constraints of Islamic civilization, but to use them and the experience I have had of them in order to deal with wider questions about the arts as they are created, preserved, and perceived. It has seemed to me that the monuments involved and the questions

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surrounding them bring up issues that transcend their own time and space and are useful and significant to areas and periods other than those of the medieval Islamic world of western Asia and northern Africa and also to considerations about the visual arts which are not primarily historical.

There are methodological and philosophical difficulties in transferring explanations derived from one historically identified field to another one or even in drawing conclusions from individual works of art that extend beyond the specifics of their history. There is little point in discussing, not to say judging, a Chinese landscape by comparing it with an Impressionist painting or an Indian sculpture according to the canons developed in Hellenistic representations of men and women, because the cultural and historical contexts of classical Greece, traditional China, Hinduist India, and nineteenth-century Paris were so different from each other as to make comparisons irrelevant or gratuitous.³ It is as though, at least in a traditional reflection upon the arts, each moment is sufficient unto itself and contains within its own time whatever meaning can appropriately be given to any one of its products.

There is, however, another kind of acceptable and reasonable discourse about the visual arts. Instead of beginning with individual works of art clearly identified in space and time, one can start with general questions or problems—for example, how is it that men and women, artists and patrons, view now, or imagined in the past, nature or the human body? No acceptable answer to such general questions will emerge if the experience of certain times or places is ignored. Yet it is also true that the art of some times or places does not enlighten these particular topics. It is unreasonable to discuss the representation of man or of nature without considering classical Mediterranean sculpture or French Impressionism as well as Gupta religious representations or Chinese painted scrolls, but eastern European medieval painting contributes relatively little to meditating on man's physical characteristics and properties, whereas African or Islamic art makes only limited contributions to theories of landscape presentation and of visions of nature.

Conversely, for reasons probably as mysterious as those which explain why all people are differentiated from each other and yet so similar, there hardly is an issue or a question about the arts or about esthetic perception for which some artistic tradition is not more pertinent and more compelling than others. One of our epistemological objectives will be to define that zone of learning, feeling, or understanding which is affected or enriched by the availability of artistic experiences alternate to one's own. It is, of course, true that a viewer fully immersed in Japanese or west central African culture is bound to be affected by and identify with Japanese painting or Benin sculpture in ways

inaccessible to others, but this does not invalidate the understanding and empathy individuals without the same immersion may have of Japanese or West African art. Logically and often in the polemical practice of our time, it is possible to argue that interpretative visual experiences by "aliens" are difficult for "natives" to the culture to accept, but this rejection, logical or visceral, does not make the experience wrong or even untrue.⁴ Therefore, it will be one of the premises of this book that the knowledge and awareness of the monuments of one artistic tradition, that of classical Islamic times in this instance, can legitimately lead to considerations applicable to other times and other places.

In a general and as yet very crude sense, the examples I have given so far suggest also that the way or ways in which we see or interpret, intellectually or emotionally, sets of images or of types of images may well depend on the questions that are posed. It is one thing to begin with something that exists, a concrete object or the carefully delineated production of a time or space, and to draw as many explanatory and interpretative circles around it as may seem worthwhile. It is quite another task to derive theories and interpretations from a body of visual documents or else to answer queries formulated outside of individual artifacts or of discrete cultures and times by drawing on whatever examples may be necessary.

This book, like the lectures that preceded it, is based almost throughout on all three of these methodological approaches. In nearly every chapter, the study and the contemplation of a very small number of objects will pave the way for the various conclusions and hypotheses of the book. Yet the evaluation and the ingestion over several decades of a vast body of materials from the rich inheritance of the many lands where Islamic art flourished led me, like many scholars and students before me, to identify certain visual characteristics as frequent enough to be typical of Islamic art. These characteristics in turn—for example, the schematization of vegetal or animal shapes—could be understood in several ways. They are part of a precise visual domain, that of medieval Islamic art. But they are also examples of a visual order available elsewhere, perhaps everywhere, and to whose elaboration this book is devoted.

The visual order we shall be exploring is the one loosely called ornament. Ornament, as an initial definition, is differentiated from decoration in the sense that decoration is anything, even whole mosaic or sculpted programs, applied to an object or to a building, whereas ornament is that aspect of decoration which appears not to have another purpose but to enhance its carrier.⁵

Ornament, in this sense, exists everywhere, in every artistic tradition, but it is generally acknowledged that, whatever is meant by the term, its most engaging and best-known examples belong to the arts developed in regions of predominantly Muslim culture. The intricate patterns on imperial Safavid or Ottoman rugs (pls. 21–23), the brilliant geometry of tile work or stucco molding in the Alhambra (pl. 12, fig. 120), the colorful sensuality of Iranian paintings and illuminations (pl. 20), the shining panache of Ottoman ceramic wares (figs. 189, 190), the strongly articulated walls or domes of Timurid Iran or Mamluk Egypt (pl. 15; figs. 123, 124), the ubiquitous cascades of *muqarnas* ceilings from Egypt or Iran (figs. 124, 125)—these are all examples from late Islamic art, the time of the great empires and of the great cities, as the earliest of the monuments I have mentioned is of the middle of the fourteenth century. They illustrate, singly and as a group, treatments of the surfaces of buildings, books, or objects that share two characteristics. One is that the range, expressive impact, and variety of motifs and techniques used to decorate objects and buildings of Islamic art are truly astounding. No category of design, no group of motifs, escaped a kind of treatment that has been called ornamental or decorative, and it is difficult to avoid being affected by the sheer sensuality of most of them. The other characteristic is that nearly every one of these motifs and patterns can also be found in some other artistic tradition, often without demonstrable or even likely impact from or on Islamic art.⁶ The art of the Islamic world, it would seem, made more expressive, more tangible, more exclusively its own, aspects of artistic creativity that are found everywhere.

It is, therefore, reasonable to assume that the exploration of the phenomenon of ornamental decoration within a Muslim context is of intellectual and hermeneutic value to decoration everywhere. Some may, of course, argue against this assuredness of universal principles in the perception and explanation of art, primarily on the grounds that such principles are only valid at obvious and elementary levels and that the specificity of a moment in time and space and the historical integrity of a given work of art are far more important matters than the search for elusive universal truths. In fact, however, the search for universals and the integrity of any monument need not be seen as antagonistic expectations, but simply as alternate facets of the visual experience whose elucidation is sought by the historian.

There may be other facets as well and, from the very outset, therefore, I would like to state two premises underlying the essays that follow. One is that I shall try to develop an equilibrium between, on the one hand, observations on and explanations of specific works of art or motifs and, on the other, broader concepts of artistic perception or visual understanding. The second

premise is that the methods and procedures I will be expounding are not the only possible ones. They are part of what I see as a cluster of approaches, indefinite in number, to the study of the visual arts. At any one time, within the context of any one book or article, only one or at best two ways can be explored. But in reality there are many mansions for the feast offered to the mind by the eyes. In the contemporary jargon with gourmet connotations of computer programs, many menus are possible and provided for our pleasure and instruction. The menus I have chosen or the mansions that I have explored are neither historical with a concentration on time and space nor critical with the expectation of a personal or collective judgment of quality. They can be called thematic, as they imply or suggest the existence of consistent categories of focus or of perception that are not tied to the time of their execution and, therefore, do not require the contextual breadth and the judgmental appreciation of value required in historical or critical discourse.⁷

In recent years, rich, if at times hermetic and dense, philosophical, anthropological, and semiological (in the widest meaning of the word) discourses have been spun around all our intellectual and sensory involvements with the visual world. As a result, the history and appreciation of art have acquired new dimensions and new requirements, as answers to novel intellectual challenges or to old challenges set in the new language of the waning twentieth century are expected.⁸ I shall return to some of these issues in the concluding chapter of this book, but I do want to stress at the beginning one key premise as well as objective of the investigations that follow. I will keep as a backdrop of my consideration of individual works of art or of motifs found on them the firmly held belief that each of them is valuable in itself, as a discrete object, but also that each one is an exemplar of or a beacon toward the complex interactions between the work, life, thought, and emotion of men and women today as well as in the past. Pure theory has its place in a philosophical discourse and the results or paradigms issued from theory can, probably must, be used by historians of art, but no discourse on the arts can avoid the direct, immediate, encounter with objects. The topic of this book is the investigation of some of the intellectual assumptions and visual procedures that make this encounter possible.⁹



Fig. 1. Wooden panel,
representation of a bird (?),
Egypt, ninth or tenth century.
Paris, Louvre Museum,
inv. 6023.

CHAPTER I

A Theory of Intermediaries in Art

THE CLAIMS that certain works of art are decorative and that some of the motifs found on them are ornament derive from two different categories of visual knowledge. One is the general and almost automatic agreement that otherwise identified features—for instance, a rinceau of flowers and leaves or heart-shaped dots set in rows—are decoration rather than representations of something or significant of something else. The second category involves the manner of treating something rather than the nature of what is represented. The colorful patterning of Matisse's representation of dancers, the oval elongation of Modigliani's portraits, or Andy Warhol's serially repeated cans of Campbell soup may, at some level of perception and understanding, be called ornamental, because, at least for the setting of my argument, the transformations of perfectly accessible subjects are not dictated by those subjects and do not alter whatever original quality was the privilege of these subjects.

The aim of this chapter is to elaborate on these definitions, to identify their assumptions and implications, and, in conclusion, to elaborate a hypothesis or a set of hypotheses for further investigation. I shall begin with observations on works of medieval Islamic art and then expand my remarks into considerations affecting other times and other places.

The Louvre Museum owns a very peculiar piece of woodwork, seventy-three centimeters (about two feet three inches) high and thirty-two centimeters (a bit over a foot) wide (fig. 1). It is a flat panel shaped to fit into a tympanum of some sort and decorated with what has usually been called a bird. It is dated to the late ninth century, a dating neither demonstrated nor unlikely. Its physical function is that of a carved wooden panel to be fitted into the walls of buildings or, less likely in this case, into a piece of furniture like a

chest or a door. In terms of decorative typology, it contains a motif, which can be unique or frequently repeated, set within a carefully delineated frame, usually a square or a rectangle. Both function and decorative typology are known in Egypt from the eighth to the thirteenth centuries.¹

The Louvre piece is original in two ways. One is the odd shape of the frame for the principal motif. It probably reflects something in the architectural setting for which it was designed, but I have at this stage no specific explanation for it. The second originality is the agreement to call the motif a bird. Seen objectively, that is to say without prejudice as to meaning, the motif can be divided into several parts: below, a roughly ovoid mass filled with beveled volutes that derive from representations of leaves, then a curved elongated stem, and, finally, a nearly round ball with a smaller ball cut out in its center and terminating with a leaf extending from its lower left. None of these elements is by itself birdlike or even remotely resembles a bird or any part of a bird, but the combination strikes as "sort of" reflecting the outer shape of one. The stem becomes a bird's neck because of the way in which it emerges from the back of what then is the seated body of a bird because the stem has made it so once it is seen as a neck. A narrow band like a collar separates the neck-stem from what becomes then a head with an eye in its middle. The historically sophisticated, or at least knowledgeable, viewer can recall a fairly common textile motif of a bird holding a leaf or something else in its mouth and thus explain the plantlike look of the beak.² A historical comparison also explains the beveling of the carving and the tour de force of design that transformed primarily vegetal or neutral motifs into a bird, for in the ninth century beveling became a manner of carving wood or stucco characteristic of the main cultural centers of Islam in and around Baghdad and eventually under the influence of the Abbasid capital.³ The "birdiness" of the image disappears almost completely once its parts are analyzed separately and only comes back through the apprehension of a silhouette for which no explanation seems to exist except that of a bird.⁴ What is, at this stage, quite unclear is whether an artisan wanted to represent a bird, or a patron or a designer ordered one, or whether it is today's spectator who needs to interpret this particular design from a non-western European source in zoomorphic fashion.

There are a few other remaining pieces of carved Egyptian wood with real birds or possible birds, and one of them, in the Museum of Islamic Art in Cairo (fig. 2), has the striking formal qualities of the Louvre piece with the additional complexity of a symmetrical overall design.⁵ Other pieces have less clearly identified birdlike features⁶ and some (fig. 3) are usually described as



Fig. 2. Wooden panel, representation of a bird (?),
Egypt, ninth or tenth century. Cairo, Museum
of Islamic Art, inv. 13173.



Fig. 3. Wooden panel, vegetal design (?),
Egypt, ninth or tenth century.
New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art,
gift of V. Everit Macy, 1930 (30.112.7).

floral, a “palmette design” according to the label of the Metropolitan Museum, but it is possible to see it as an elongated bird with two heads (a common enough motif) carrying leaves. The whole set could probably be put in chronological sequence according to time-honored art historical practices. But the point of my observations is not a historical one of formal development, but the ontological one of an apparent ambiguity between what we see and the meanings we usually give or can give to that which we see.

This kind of interpretation is not peculiar to Egyptian woodwork of the ninth and adjoining centuries. At roughly the same time and continuing into the eleventh century, paintings on ceramics from Iraq or especially from northeastern Iran exhibit decorative motifs that are remarkable for their inventiveness and for their novelty.⁷ Very few among them go back to earlier, pre-Islamic times or derive from the better-known vocabulary of designs on contemporary techniques of manufacture like metalworking. All these objects more or less share the same shape. They are bowls and plates with one dominant side visible immediately and, in most cases, simple and minimally enlivened exteriors (fig. 4). All Iranian examples are decorated in the same technique of painting on an opaque slip and under a transparent glaze. The best Iraqi examples, on the other hand, are often covered with luster, which gives a brilliant effect to the surface of the dish or bowl, but they too are meant to be seen primarily from one side.⁸ A few objects within this group with decorative patterns that are unique—for example, a bowl in the Freer Gallery of Art (fig. 5) or a plate formerly in a private Iranian collection (fig. 6)—are true masterpieces of design within a circular space.⁹ These bowls or plates demonstrate, among other things, that the technique was used for a considerable range of taste and probably financial means.



Fig. 4. Ceramic bowl, side view, northeastern Iran, ninth century. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1939, and Rogers Fund, 1939 (39.40.7).



Fig. 5. Ceramic bowl, side view,
northeastern Iran,
ninth or tenth century.
Washington, D.C., Freer
Gallery of Art, 57.24.

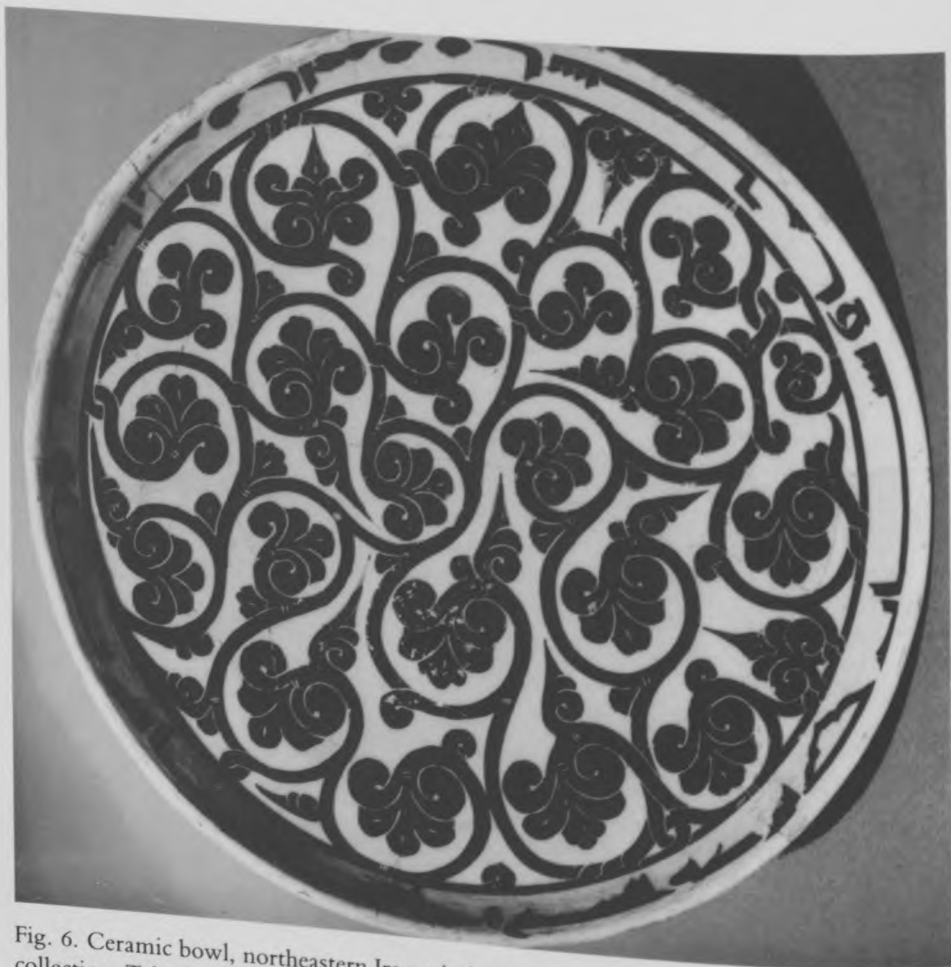


Fig. 6. Ceramic bowl, northeastern Iran, ninth or tenth century. Formerly Foroughi collection, Tehran; present whereabouts unknown.

There is no comprehensive study of the themes and styles decorating these bowls and plates. Some topics, like writing (figs. 5, 7), are perfectly clear and easily relate to external referents.¹⁰ Others are fascinating exercises in composition within a circle in which neutral lines or forms, very remotely and vaguely relatable to traditionally known vegetal or animal motifs, are organized according to very strict (pl. 1, fig. 8) or, equally frequently, very loose patterns (figs. 9–12). Some ceramics have perfectly legible inscriptions and only ask the viewer to transform writing arranged in a circle into a normal right-to-left linear projection (fig. 7), and then to translate it into the simple message of homey proverbs, since the statements put on these bowls are striking for their repetitive lack of personality. But, then, the writing itself can range from utmost simplicity and clarity (fig. 7) to meaningless imitation of



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Fig. 7. Ceramic bowl,
northeastern Iran, ninth or tenth
century. New York, Metropolitan
Museum of Art, Rogers Fund,
1965 (65.106.2).

Fig. 8. Ceramic bowl,
northeastern Iran, tenth century.
New York, Metropolitan
Museum of Art, Rogers Fund,
1928 (28.82).



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Fig. 9. Ceramic bowl, northeastern Iran, ninth century. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Museum excavations, 1937, and Rogers Fund, 1938 (38.40.120).

writing (fig. 11). Similarly, birds or fish or even vegetal motifs appear in these ceramics reasonably clearly at times but quite often are distorted or altered to the point where their zoological identity is dubious (pl. 2 or fig. 12).

This range of ways to handle motifs within the same set of objects serves to make two points. First, most of the existing objects and designs are unique, with significant exceptions almost entirely restricted to writing. It is, therefore, reasonable to assume that artisans and users or patrons did not simply repeat learned formulas or order by number; they were conscious of what was depicted on these ceramics, even if we do not know which categories of visual perception—iconophoric, formal, or expressive—affected them most. Formal distinctions must have been specifically ordered or, at least, acknowledged as meaningful in one of many possible ways. Second, the explanation for this variety lies somewhere within the complicated cultural and social makeup of Muslim urban society in the early Middle Ages. It may reflect the



Fig. 10. Ceramic bowl,
northeastern Iran, ninth century.
New York, Metropolitan
Museum of Art, Museum
excavations, 1936, and Rogers
Fund, 1937 (37.40.16).



Fig. 11. Ceramic bowl, northeastern Iran, tenth century.
Copenhagen, David Collection, 10/1975.



Fig. 12. Ceramic bowl, northeastern Iran, tenth
century. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art,
Purchase, Huntley Bequest Fund, 1958 (58.152).

divisions of urban population into ethnic, cultural, religious, or professional groups whose separate individualities are only beginning to emerge. The further elaboration of this particular point lies outside the scope of my present investigations.¹¹

The problems which *are* part of my investigation are two. First, what makes us recognize or identify a bird, a fish, writing, or a leaf, when what we see does not bear any real resemblance to what we call it? Once we cannot identify a represented figure as being part of our physical experience of the phenomenal world, what makes us say that it is a fish or a bird? What psychological reactions or modes of behavior appear to require a mimetic interpretation of so many forms, that is to say, an interpretation that assumes all forms are related to an actual physical world or to a potential one, as, for instance, with a unicorn? These questions deal with the way we today comprehend what we perceive. They are directed to the contemporary viewer, the scholar equipped with a mass of comparative material who can provide the functional context of objects or the pedigree of motifs, but also a public attracted by the variety and playfulness of forms and finding in these objects an excitement independent of the object's history and context.

A later example from the realm of Islamic art may serve to focus the issue. The celebrated albums from Istanbul possess a striking fifteenth-century Iranian painting (pl. 3) whose combination of squares of seven different colors separated by black lines inevitably recalls some of Mondrian's best-known and most exciting compositions (pl. 4). It is easy enough to become mesmerized by the richness of color of the Iranian painting, to play with its patterns, and to wonder about the majestic mystery of artistic creativity that would have made so strikingly alike the work of a Dutchman painting in New York toward the end of World War II and of an unknown master at a Turkic court of Iran. At the same time, the pedestrian scholar and those who read the Arabic script can point out that the squares, lines, and dots of the Iranian painting are in fact a sort of whorl repeating dozens of times and in different colors the name of Ali, the son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad, Ali, from whom alone, according to the Shi'ite branch of Islam, legitimate rule derived, but whose importance in Muslim culture extended much beyond sectarian legitimacy.¹² In other words, it seems appropriate, even necessary, to ascribe to this painting an iconographic or, better, iconophoric meaning—that is to say, an exact and nonnegotiable relationship to an external referent whose expression is not, however, restricted to this particular object. To put it yet another way, once the subject of a representation is identified on a given image, that particular image is no longer the only possible way for the subject

to be represented.¹³ And, at another level the knowledge of iconographic specificity may in fact modify or even cancel out the initial sensory experience of forms alone. For instance, some may appreciate the painting less or more once they know that it contains a Shi'ite religious message. Others will never understand its visual sensuality, as they are only spiritually affected by its meaning.

In short, as we perceive these various images and try to restate in words what they are and what they mean, two conclusions emerge. One is a set of valid statements ranging from something inalienably true, like an incontrovertible iconographic meaning as well as the presence or absence of the color red, all the way to subjective or ideological truths valid primarily for each observer, such as the excitement provided by a pattern, the association made between a formal unit and a thought or a belief, or the emotional appeal of a design. The other thing we discover is that all these truths can be present simultaneously in any one object. They may even conflict with each other, as is already the case with liking or disliking works of art, and yet they remain both appropriate and accurate.

The second set of questions raised by the Egyptian bird and the Iranian or Iraqi ceramics is directed to the past, to the time of creation and to the people who made, bought, ordered, or otherwise used these objects. What did *they* see or mean to represent? If an intimation of some sort of reality was their aim, why the variety of ways to show it? And why move so far away from physical reality or from obvious signs of literal communication like letters? Could it be that what they meant is not what we see, at least not entirely? That the *transformation* of the mimetic sign is important, not the sign itself? It has been argued, already three generations ago, that the modifications brought to the representation of physical reality by the Muslim world in the ninth century had a religious, even a theological, meaning. By withdrawing from a recreation of tangible or visible reality, these modifications, it was argued by the great French scholar Louis Massignon, expressed the impermanence of the visible, an alleged tenet of the Muslim ethos.¹⁴ An alternate but, at this stage of research, much more tenuous relationship may be suggested between the interpretation of visual forms I am sketching and a theory of the linguistic sign metaphorically used that was proposed by al-Jurjani in the eleventh century. That extraordinary philosopher of language and literature argued for the existence in poetic language of transferences of forms, such as groups of letters, which removed them from their original meaning.¹⁵ His theories applied to the visual world would argue that the autonomy of forms from meaning allows for greater freedom in creation than if forms are tied to specific mean-

ings. The thought of this unique personality in early medieval literary criticism is strikingly contemporary, with its concern for structures, but unfortunately little is known about al-Jurjani's actual impact on his time and on theorists or artists, in his time or later on, within the Muslim world. There, as in the Christian Middle Ages, the validity of correspondence between the visual arts and literary criticism still needs to be demonstrated.¹⁶

I shall return in conclusion to the limits of cultural interpretations for visually perceptible forms and indirectly to the appropriateness of al-Jurjani's or Massignon's explanations for a form issued from the Muslim world. What concerns me at this stage is the assumption of an intellectual or social explanation for a visual phenomenon when there is no identification or suggestion of the process by which society or culture actually affects the making of works of art. Such intimations are automatic and justified for all creations with an iconographic meaning, when one can identify the narrative, the event, or the practice that led to the forms they have acquired. Yet, for the examples from the Muslim world I have given, it can just as easily be imagined, as was done by Kandinsky, Matisse, and a few contemporary Western critics who worried about such issues,¹⁷ that the artists of the ninth to eleventh century in Egypt, Iran, or Iraq engaged in exercises of imaginative freedom more or less tied to iconographic or culturally precise statements.

To choose between sociocultural control with a concrete symbolic or ideological intent for visual creativity and a more romantic vision of free artists at work is nearly impossible on rational grounds. The hypothesis of artistic freedom is an anachronistic transfer to the past of nineteenth-century dreams in western Europe. And cultural control, in the particular case of the woodwork and of the ceramics, is difficult to demonstrate, because it would have affected the *manner* of presenting motifs as much as the motifs themselves.¹⁸ Such a control of process would have required an organization or an ideology for which there is, to my knowledge, no evidence in the social history of the time.¹⁹

THE THOUGHTS and queries inspired by the rapid observation of a few examples of ceramics and woodwork from Iraq, Iran, and Egypt can be summarized, at least temporarily, into the following statement. In the ninth century and those immediately following, the Muslim world created forms that are not mimetic representations, yet are usually defined by contemporary scholars in mimetic terms. Furthermore, their synchronic (time- and place-bound and, therefore culturally specific) and diachronic (timeless but evolving and universal) meanings vary considerably inasmuch as there is no way to demonstrate how these images were understood in their time or whether our

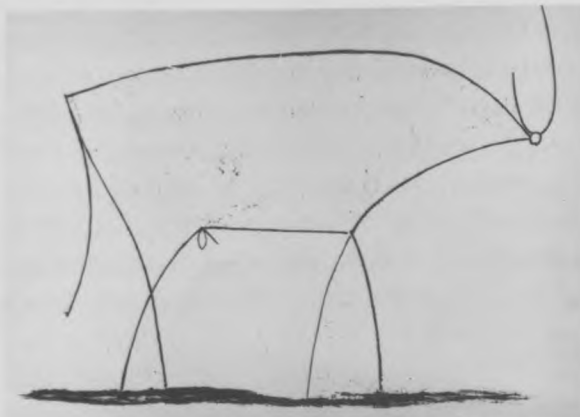
own contemporary explanations and even descriptions are accurate for the past. But it is possible to go even further. We could see a bird or a fish without knowing whether one was intended and we could see pious writing as a colorful formal game, as a metaphor for something or other, or as the mystical expression of a truth. In various permutations, such legitimate and occasionally incompatible interpretations will surface more than once in the pages that follow. What is important at this stage is simply to acknowledge the apparent paradox of forms with a tenuous and at times debatable relationship to outside referents. How is all of this possible?

Traditionally two concepts and two sets of terms were attached—as they still are—to the phenomenon I have been describing. One is abstraction and the other is ornament or decoration, two words frequently used as synonymous, although they should be understood differently.²⁰ All these terms exist as nouns and adjectives. They also exist as verbs, but the verbs are not as clear as the nouns or the adjectives. “To abstract” does not simply mean to modify something by making it schematic, as in the celebrated sequence of bulls so brilliantly sketched by Picasso (figs. 13 and 14),²¹ even though some

Fig. 13. Pablo Picasso, *The Bull*, first state, lithograph. Washington, D.C., National Gallery of Art, Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund, 1982.



Fig. 14. Pablo Picasso, *The Bull*, eleventh state, lithograph. Washington, D.C., National Gallery of Art, Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund, 1982.



of the transformations we saw in the early Islamic examples may be imagined as summarized simplifications of a fuller original just like Picasso's. The verb "to stylize" may be more appropriate, but its exact meaning is nebulous, except in the sense of generalizing in a consistent manner from a concrete and differentiated reality, as when Modigliani creates "stylized" versions of upper-class women during the early part of this century.²² "To ornament" or, better, "to decorate" are verbs with clearer meanings, but they imply the act of putting something on something else rather than describe the nature of what is put.

It is easy enough to give up on the word "abstract" and its derivatives.²³ Its first and simpler definition, as in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, is "separated from matter, practice, or particulars; ideal; abstruse," and in Webster's dictionary it is "considered apart from any application to a particular object or specific instance; separated from embodiment." However one is to interpret these phrases (and the differences between them) in logic or in semantics, they are not appropriate to my purpose, because the historian of art always talks about something that *is* embodied, be it only through the material of its creation, and because our concern has so far been not to exclude something from experience but to understand how it operates within it. An example consists in the series of lines and dots that form the plan or even the section of a building (see fig. 148). A plan is an abstraction in the terms of the simple definitions I have quoted, but it is also the expression of a very concrete building and I shall deal at some length with this problem in one of the subsequent chapters.²⁴ Except for extremists in schools of architecture who have been known to worship a plan for its own sake, it is the building behind the plan that interests most people and historians.²⁵

Thus, the first and simplest definition of the word "abstract" may be appropriate only to the extent that there are indeed instances of forms removed from the specifics of a model through a process of simplification or of alteration. Abstraction, in this sense, becomes one of many possible attributes or avatars of a form. Picasso's celebrated sequence of endlessly simplified bulls (figs. 13, 14) would be an example of this sort of simple abstraction. A pattern like the ninth-century one found in the ruins of the new city of Samarra north of Baghdad and known as Samarra III (fig. 15) is another example. The possible sequence of transformations of floral patterns that led to it have disappeared and it itself is best defined in terms of tension between light and shade or line and volume or else through general words like symmetry, repetitiveness, infinity, and so on. Since the experiments that led to Samarra III are no longer available, we may have to assume the kind of arbitrary yet



Fig. 15. Samarra, Iraq, palace of Balkuwara, stucco wall covering, ninth century.

mechanical process of simplification illustrated by Picasso. In any event, abstraction is not, in any of these instances, an explanation. To say that the bird from Egypt (fig. 1) or the fish in a northeastern Iranian ceramic (fig. 10) are abstract or stylized may be telling the truth but a useless truth, because the fact itself neither explains the form nor my reading of it. It is only in dealing with architecture that, as we shall see later on, the analysis of this type of abstraction as simplified rendering of a reality may be considered to have been productive for the consideration of meaning in certain types of forms.

The second meaning of the word "abstract" found in dictionaries is directly connected to the visual world. Its long version found in the unabridged Webster's deserves a ministudy on its own right, as it was affected by concrete intellectual or ideological positions of our time.²⁶ Its shorter form in the Webster's Abridged goes as follows: "having only intrinsic form with little or no attempt at pictorial representation or narrative content." Once again the definition is a negative one, but it is also clear that it is chronospecific—that is, directly affected by its time, as it derives from the development of western European painting since the beginning of the twentieth century, or a decade earlier. At that time artists from several countries consciously created forms that bore little direct resemblance to the commonly experienced world. Many

of them, like Kandinsky and Mondrian, saw spiritual values in these forms, and therefore attributed abstract qualities to abstract designs, at times even using the word itself to refer to their paintings. Others, like Barnett Newmann, Jackson Pollock, or Mark Rothko, occasionally entitled their paintings through numbers, thereby acknowledging something of the arbitrariness of their works and certainly asserting their remoteness from the world of mimetic representation. But just as often, they provided their paintings with titles that strike by their concreteness more strongly than the paintings themselves, thus introducing a confusing ambiguity for the viewer. But, then, confusion or ambiguity is part of the message of the picture.²⁷

One is tempted to seek in the art of our own times verbal pronouncements from contemporary artists and critics that could provide elements for a terminology to consider abstract forms and their processes everywhere and at any time. But, in reality, the contemporary experience is bound to the questions, anxieties, ideologies, and economics of the twentieth century. It is dangerous to use that experience to explain the past or areas removed from western Europe and America, just as it is often disingenuous to claim that contemporary art discovered or rediscovered values hidden in other or earlier artistic traditions. It is, however, true that we look at the past with today's sensitivity and that we feel and understand contemporary creativity through whatever knowledge or sense of the past has been lodged in us. The pursuit of *that* particular contradiction will not be central to my discourse in these essays, because it derives from another experience than that of the Islamic art of centuries back. In any deeper exploration of our perceptions of art, its further investigation is essential.²⁸ In the meantime, the word "abstract" should simply be capitalized and restricted to a contemporary movement—at best used only as a temporary lexical purgatory for otherwise nameless motifs as suggested by the first definition of the word. For it is probably all right to say that something "separated from matter, practice, or particulars" is abstract until one discovers that it is really connected to a specific subject.

Let us turn to the terms "ornament" and "decoration." Much has been written about ornament since the early decades of the nineteenth century, as every one of the thinkers, educators, and creators involved in all the arts except perhaps canvas painting had to develop a position or a doctrine on whatever was considered ornament. Ornament played an essential part in the debates surrounding the formation of schools for the industrial, applied, or decorative arts. In their own very different ways, Owen Jones, William Morris, John Ruskin, Carl Semper, Viollet-le-Duc, and Alois Riegl all contributed passionate statements about ornament and, in a far more academic fashion, the echo of

these statements permeates and weakens Sir Ernest Gombrich's long and learned treatment of ornament with the programmatic title of *The Sense of Order*. Twentieth-century architects and architectural historians also confronted decoration in which, during the previous century, Ruskin, Viollet-le-Duc, and a less well known German philosophical esthetic tradition going back to Kant and Hegel saw the inner spirit of what they used to call the races of mankind. Architectural modernism rejected the very idea of ornament with passionate vehemence and postmodernists brought it back, frequently as a mere toy to amuse themselves and the spectators around them.²⁹

Eventually, in the concluding chapter, I will respond to some of the positions taken over the past two centuries with respect to an ever present and yet so elusive ornament. But, as the approach I am developing is not a historiographic one but a more pragmatic and immediate one dealing with actual practice and immediate observation, it seems more useful to deal initially with the term "ornament" in a more basic, more direct, fashion. In the *Encyclopedia of the Arts*, a standard statement of generally accepted verities, ornament "refers to motifs and themes used . . . without being essential to structure and serviceability, . . . [but] for the purpose of embellishment." The contrast is clear between structure and function, on the one hand, and embellishment on the other, with ornament connected to the expression of the latter but not to the former. Paintings are excluded from most of these definitions, as though a "Virgin and Child" escapes the need for embellishment or the intention of it. Perhaps only a still life may be arbitrary enough to be decoration and, therefore, beautiful. Something is clearly wrong with this and nearly all definitions of ornament found in manuals of art, as they simultaneously imply the secondary side of ornament and, almost as a result of that, its singular and exclusive attribute of beauty.

IT IS INTERESTING to note that the terms "ornament" and "decoration" or their derivatives have been used as literary metaphors or have unusual etymological relations. A wise medieval Jewish saying from the Book of Ben Sirach goes as follows: "A mind settled on an intelligent thought is like the stucco decoration on the wall of a colonnade."³⁰ The contemplation of something intelligent is compared to what makes a wall beautiful, that is something plastered on it, in a technique prevalent in Iraq whence the saying probably came. Decoration seems to complete an object, a wall or a person, by providing it with quality. In classical Arabic *adab* literature, literary theory, or practice, words like *naqqasha* ("to cover with decoration" in many different

techniques), *zawaqa* ("to embellish"), and especially *isti'ara* ("to use metaphorically") have different meanings dealing with artistic or esthetic practice or description; all are positive in their judgment and all imply effective completion and even transfer of meanings from one form to the other.³¹

A related but much more complicated development occurs around the Sanskrit word *bhusati*, which means "to adorn." It too implies the successful completion of an act, of an object, or even of a state of mind or soul. In being applied to the adornment of women, it means the prosperity of the male head of a family or of a household. For a king in battle, the word denotes the sound and sight of his victory, just as it can be an attribute of copulation, which perfects a union in creating life. And, in a most beautiful image, the moon is the adornment of the night, because, without it, the night is incomplete.³²

The point of all these verbal or metaphysical examples is the apparent agreement, in several highly literate and articulate societies, on the existence of an action that completes something, that makes it perfect. That action is to decorate and the medium of its effectiveness is ornament, independent from but essential to the expression of the action or of the reality. Thus the generalization of the contemporary esthetician writing for the general public and the specifics of cultural contexts as different as medieval Judaism and traditional India both identify ornament as bringing beauty to whatever it adorns, as though this particular attribute was lacking until some last moment of creation. Ornament is, to coin a word, exclusively *calliphoric*; it carries beauty with it.

And yet, in a disquieting passage, the urbane Bassanio from Shakespeare's troubling *The Merchant of Venice* argues, before choosing the casket with Portia's portrait, that "[Thus] ornament is but the guiled shore / To a most dangerous sea; the beauteous scarf / Veiling an Indian beauty; in a word, / *The seeming truth* which cunning times put on / To entrap the wisest." Earlier in the same monologue (act 3, scene 2), he said: "The world is still deceived with ornament / . . . There is no vice so simple but assumes / Some mark of virtue on his outward parts." The beauty and attractiveness of ornament are fully acknowledged, but so is its surfacelike superficiality, its impermanence, and ultimately its evil.

A third verbal example is equally unsettling. Le Corbusier relates that one of his teachers used to preach that "only Nature is inspiring and true," and that one must "penetrate" it, "make a synthesis of it by creating ornamentation." Ornament is like a microcosm of nature and physical reality.³³

It is not, at this stage, appropriate to debate these statements. What is pertinent is to realize that Shakespeare, a man of the word, makes ethical

judgments through the guise of ornament, thus implying, correctly as I shall argue at the end of this series of essays, that morality is never far away from beauty or pleasure. In far less poetical ways and less directly implying ornament, tenth-century humanists from Baghdad, seventeenth-century French architects, or contemporary theologians from Tehran argue the same point of art and beauty as evil, while some Persian mystics saw them as an appearance of the divine.³⁴

AS SO OFTEN with verbal reasoning about the arts, the fascination with philosophical or even poetic discourses hides the fact that they rarely help in dealing with individual works of art. As will be evident more than once in the course of these essays, one of the main expectations of words on the history and criticism of art is that they contribute to the understanding of works of art, not merely that they be a sort of poetic or pedantic gloss over them. In order to reach these results, a dialogue must constantly be established with objects and monuments. Let us consider then a few well-known examples of monuments and ask what in them should be considered ornament and especially why are some features so identified.

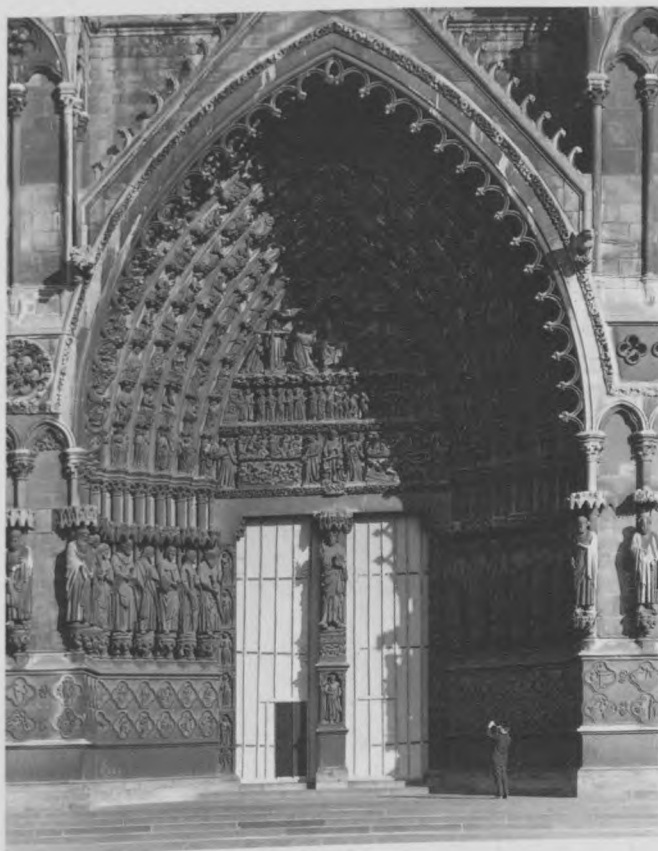
A first example is the thirteenth-century facade of the cathedral of Amiens (fig. 16). Since my concern is not one of historical connoisseurship but of attitude to what is seen, and inasmuch as I have already alluded to the differences in perception between the time of creation and the moment of viewing, the extensive nineteenth-century restorations are not pertinent to the remarks that follow. The structural skeleton of stone is transfigured, on the facade, by life-size statues (fig. 17), narratives of holy history, local stories, moralizing references, plants, buildings, animals, gargoyles, and even geometric designs, as under the feet of the standing Christ (fig. 18). This decoration, unnecessary to the maintenance of the building or to the celebration of the liturgy, can be read from many different points of view, whether examined as excerpted segments glued on the facade or as a single visual program. It can be seen as grandiose theological statements of a vision of Christianity, as a very local interpretation of the faith in action, as the joyful labor of artists, as chronological sequences of styles, as a form of social and economic domination, and in many other ways as well.³⁵ But, regardless of the way one chooses, there remains on the facade of the cathedral a hierarchy in the intensity of visual presentation, whereby the apostles in the central west portal (fig. 18) are more forcefully imposed on the viewer than the labors of the month in low relief below them or the lively floral ornament presented at times with acrobatically mauled personages on their pedestals (fig. 18). It is not simply



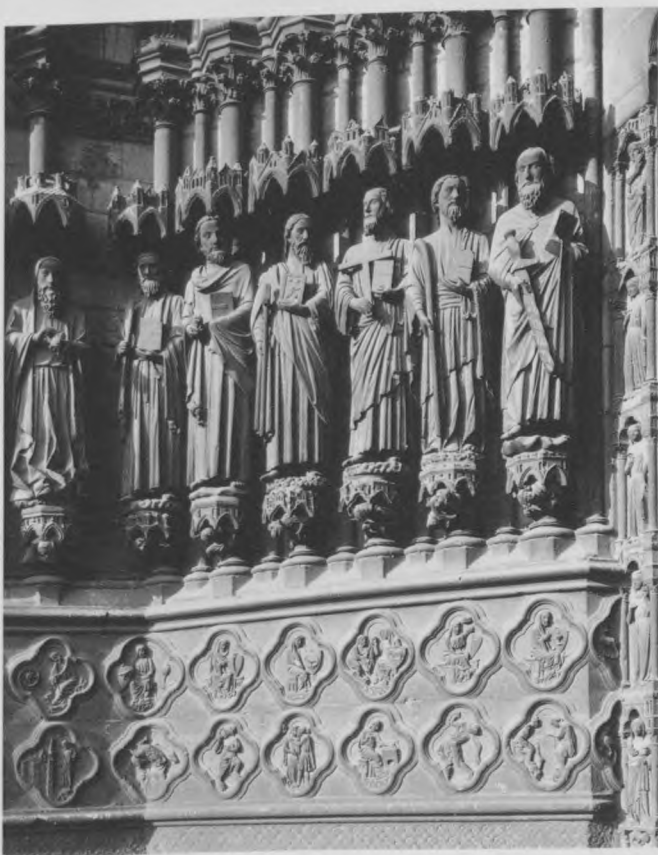
Fig. 16. Amiens, cathedral,
thirteenth century, west facade.

Fig. 17. Amiens, cathedral,
thirteenth century, west facade,
central portal.

Fig. 18. Amiens, cathedral,
thirteenth century, west facade,
central portal, right side.



17



18

the absence or presence of external referents—that is to say, of signs in the memory of viewers identifying Saint Peter among apostles and a Nativity as different from a birth scene—that separates one kind of decoration from another. What may be called the muscular structure of the decorative program is also involved.

The relative size of decorations, the degree of relief, the actual location of different kinds of motifs, and other such organizational or compositional characteristics are attributes of a work of art that are logically independent of the subject matter, yet which allow the viewer to identify, among other things, a hierarchy of importance in the use of motifs and in the shape of designs. Like the muscles of a body, these attributes manipulate the subject depicted *and* the perception of the viewer. There are, of course, perfectly valid theological and religious reasons for apostles to be nearly life-size, three-dimensional sculptures jutting out of the portal, while the narrative illustrations of the labors of the month are in low relief and the delicacy of floral tracery in windows is hardly visible (fig. 19), but these differences are also made visible to those who are not attuned to thirteenth-century Christianity in northern Europe by the manipulation of other attributes than iconographic or cultural ones.

This point could be made for nearly every major monument. It is true of the Sistine Chapel where different sizes of available spaces create a formal hierarchy regardless of the iconographic or expressive content given to these various areas. It is also true of Benvenuto Cellini's salver (fig. 20), where a whole range of types of relief exists. At this stage I am only arguing that the hierarchy exists, not that certain motifs—plants, for instance, or people—tend to be at one end or the other of the level of charge that can be given to forms.

The celebrated Roman altar known as the Ara Pacis seems to have two realms neatly separated by a dry fret (figs. 21, and 22). One is focused on an imperial procession with men, women, and children marching in a disorderly and individualized way. Some of them can, through comparison with contemporary representations on other media, be identified as members of the imperial family of Augustus. Several allegories with fairly obvious and common subjects are also part of this realm dominated by images of people. The second level below has more or less the same height and consists in rich compositions of stems and leaves with an occasional bird thrown in for no immediately apparent reason (fig. 22). The perception of this vegetation does not lead automatically to references in nature then or now but at best to other similar vegetal designs for comparisons of style and of quality. It is, of course,



Fig. 19. Amiens, cathedral,
thirteenth century, west facade,
tracery on windows.



Fig. 20. Benvenuto Cellini,
Salver, 1539–1543. Vienna,
Kunsthistorische Museum,
inv. no. 881.



Fig. 21. Rome, Ara Pacis,
first century A.D.,
general view.



Fig. 22. Rome, Ara Pacis,
first century A.D.,
detail.

true that in recent years an iconographic explanation has been provided for this vegetation. It represents, so it is argued, the harmonious peace and the overall bounty created by the reign of Augustus. Plants like the elegant acanthus leaves and birds like the superb cranes in the vegetation are seen as references to or symbols of ceremonies and ethnic or other identifications.³⁶ All of this may well be true, at least in the convoluted minds of the altar's designers (or of the scholars of today), but it is difficult not to feel that the procession and the allegories above belong to a different order of meaning from the order with which the vegetal design below should be associated. By suggesting for the vegetal realm a precision of meaning reasonable for the realm of people, contemporary interpreters may have transferred one order of meaning to a realm that does not lend itself to that particular order. Perhaps classical scholarship, so steeped in meanings, hidden or overt, failed to deal with an ornamental realm in which esthetic values prevail. To this issue we shall return shortly. In the meantime, whatever the reason and even if partly contradicted by the cultural context, on the Ara Pacis two different and separate visual worlds are set next to each other.

Just about the opposite reasoning is usually made for the facade of Mshatta (figs. 23, 24), the celebrated unfinished palace of the middle of the eighth century located in contemporary Jordan, whose decor was removed to Berlin early in the twentieth century. There also partly geometricized vegetal patterns hide animals or objects, and iconographic interpretations have been proposed for some of them, although without great success.³⁷ There are no obvious and easily detectable human beings on Mshatta's facade, but on thirteenth-century inlaid metalwork (fig. 25), personages abound in the midst of vegetation or geometry and one can recognize standard representational sets, such as signs of the zodiac, princely activities, or labors of the month.³⁸ In these examples of early and medieval Islamic art, specificity of identifiable meaning through representations seems to have been overtaken by an ornament that makes these meanings less immediately accessible. One could, of course, argue that the context of an Islamic culture, uneasy with the very idea of representation, led to what could be called visual obfuscation, whereby a concrete message comparable in intensity to the procession of the Ara Pacis or to the apostles at the entrance of Amiens is being hidden in an ornamental pattern, with the intent that its intensity be diminished or only recognized by those who, as our bureaucracy puts it, need to know. Ornament in these examples from Islamic art would be a sort of cultural thermostat regulating the power and therefore the effectiveness of a visual message, but the message is still present and has the same intrinsic meaning as have the apostles in

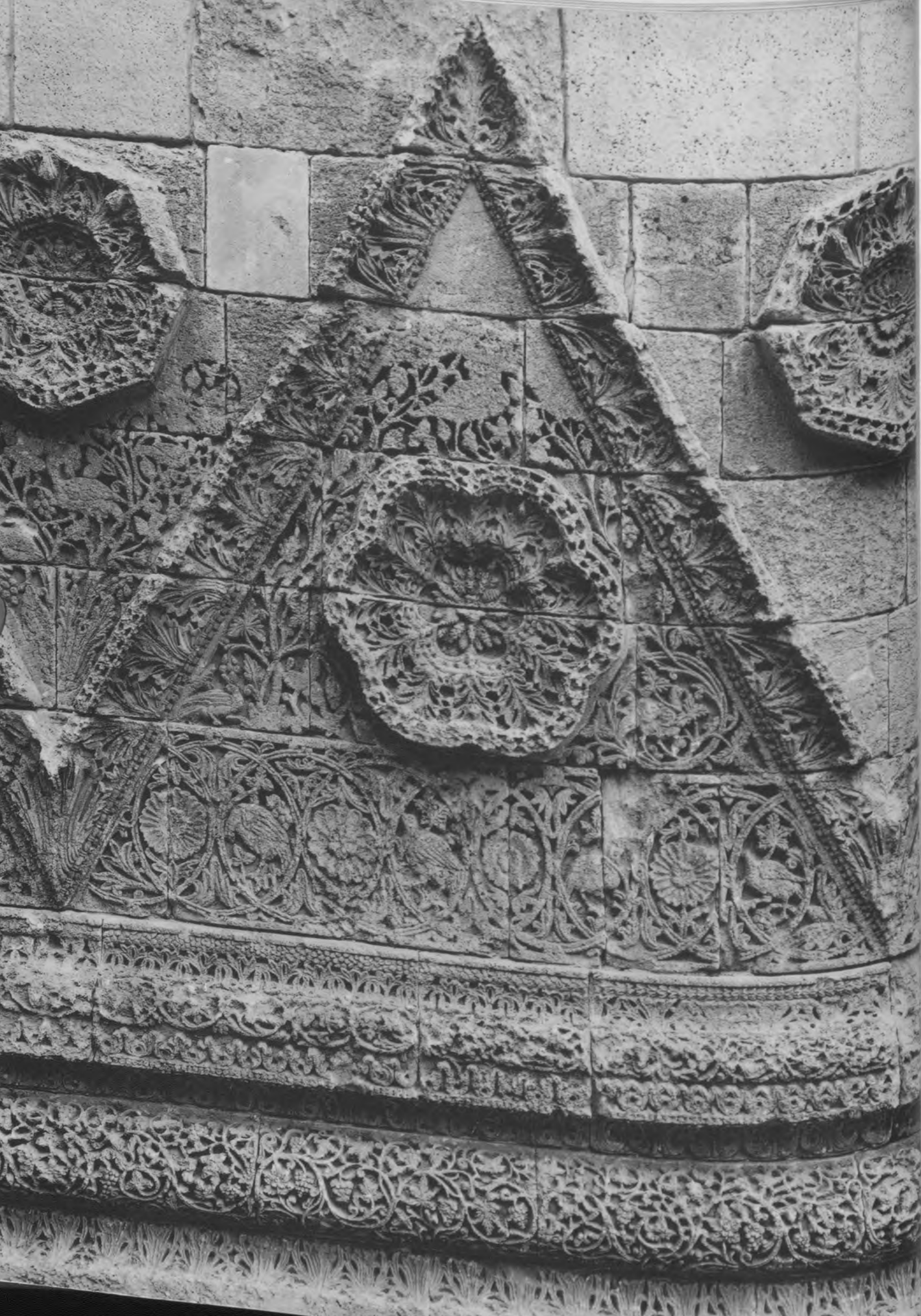




Fig. 24. Mshatta, palace, eighth century, base of frieze.

Fig. 23. Mshatta, palace, eighth century, decorative triangle.



Fig. 25. Ewer, silver inlaid bronze, 1226–1227, signed by Ahmad b. 'Umar al-Dhakki. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, acc. no. 91.1.586.

Amiens. And in an example like Mshatta's we simply have not learned to understand the message in the mass of signs thrown all over the facade. Or, possibly, there was no iconographic message and the ornament was there for its own sake. It alone carries its own message and, since we are unlikely to get fascinated by grapes or pine cones for their own sake, some other purpose, ambition, or expectation has to be acknowledged for the Mshatta facade. The only logical one is that it was meant to attract by providing what, since Plato, has been recognized as a central result of dealing with the arts—that is, *pleasure*. The ornament of Mshatta is *terpnopoietic*, a neologism to mean “providing pleasure,” and, until the contrary is proved, this is all it is.

We may by now have moved forward a bit in the sense that what written documents have allowed us to call a “carrier of beauty” is now explained through the pleasure it provides. This conclusion is in part a circular one, as it simply argues that beauty provokes pleasure or pleasure can be acquired from beauty, a point made by nearly every philosopher of art and by nearly every practitioner. Even if one agrees that a theory of pleasure includes much more than agreeable satisfaction, my more immediate point is slightly different: to argue that some monuments are exclusively harbingers of pleasure does not really explain them but only identifies a reaction to them. More important for my purposes, it does not explain how ornament differs from nonornament, as the conclusion seems to apply equally well to all forms of decoration, to nearly anything that we call art.

All we know then is that ornament is not a motif nor is it a manner of presenting motifs, although it could be both. It can include representations and nonrepresentations. It may be the result of an attitude of the viewer or of a decision by an artist. In short, it is perhaps too vague a term, at least at this preliminary level of investigation, for the themes and designs whose operation I seek to elucidate, because it is used simultaneously for a type of design, a process of working, and a final result. As we looked at individual objects, however, in all cases the need arose to define two kinds of information: what are the visual attributes of a given artifact, both the topics it contains and what I called its musculature; and how does one define their meaning, through something provided by the object or by the memory of the user.

The difficulty of using the term “ornament” is further increased by looking at two of the most common or most used statements on ornament: their grammar, styles, or dictionaries and their philosophical interpretation.

Grammars and dictionaries are for the most part lists of designs with appropriately drawn plates (fig. 26) arranged either simply typologically (vegetal, geometric, calligraphic, and so on) or culturally *and* topologically

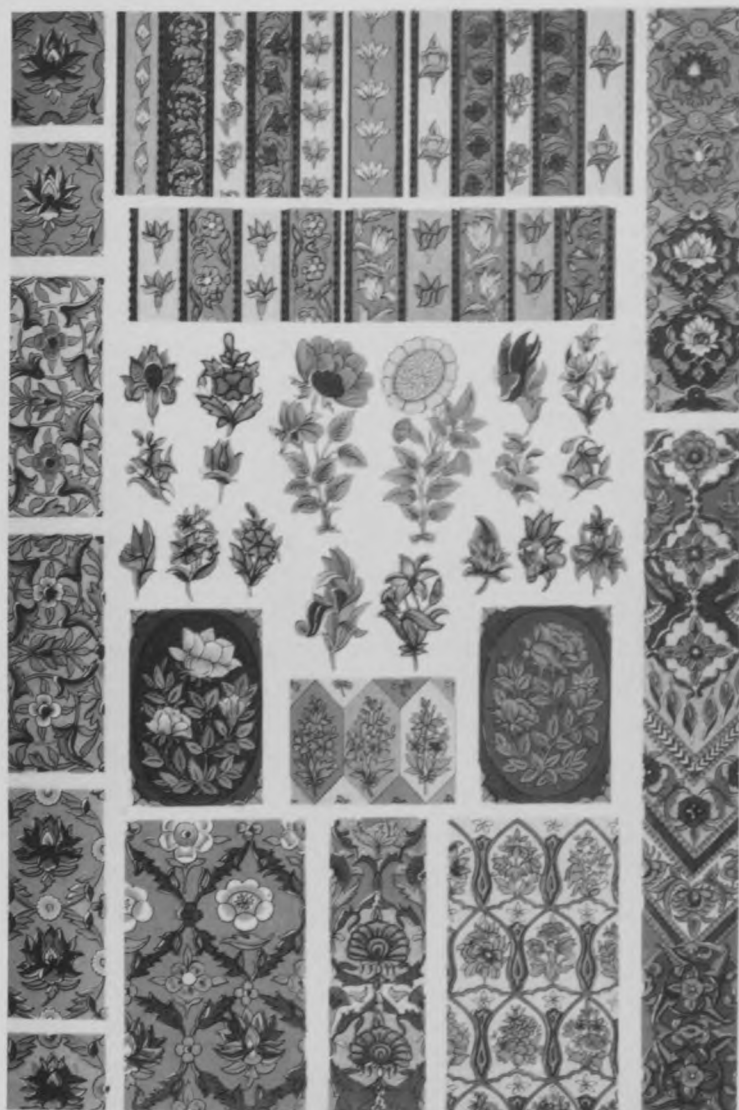


Fig. 26. Table of ornamental designs.

(English, French, Chinese, baroque).³⁹ Typological definitions by geometric figure or floral origin are descriptive and relatively free of value judgments. They are excellent resources for any designer seeking inspiration, but their only real usefulness to the historian or to the critic is that of providing *the* correct or *a* correct name for some foliage or for a sequence of circles and squares. Typological and cultural definitions are, at first glance, innocuous enough, as nothing seems less threatening than “Mexican fret” or “Persian faience scrollwork.” In fact, however, the perusal of plates in Speltz’s *Styles of Ornament*, not to speak of discussions by Ruskin, Viollet-le-Duc, Riegl, or Strzygowski, brings into ornament an ideological content that is at times quite virulent. National (Persian) or cultural (Moorish or Islamic) names for ornamental designs are not simply indicative for classification purposes, they im-

ply certain national or racial, occasionally cultural, judgments and values. Such arguments were an accepted part of thinking about art at the turn of the century. Their inappropriateness in our own time is due in part to the possibly temporary, even if justified, diffidence with which we attribute formal qualities to ethnic or national entities.⁴⁰ But it is mostly that an explanation of the origins of a motif rarely justifies its presence on any one monument or object, except at times of conscious revivals or of ideological statements tainted with historicism, which have been studied in Western art at great length but which are certainly present everywhere, as one tries to understand the operation of building or of making objects.⁴¹ The study of origins in the manner of Riegl, for instance, who genuinely felt the presence of permanent visual qualities attached to ethnic culture, is not so much premature as it is irrelevant to anything but an abstract fascination with etymologies, unless one shares the historicism behind it.⁴²

The philosophical commentaries on ornament are more productive. Three approaches can derive from the more thoughtful essays among them.

The first approach is not one I shall pursue in these chapters. Inspired originally by Riegl, it was used by the first major generation of collectors and curators of Islamic art, including E. Kuhnel, M. Dimand, and G. Flury, and sometimes misused by J. Strzygowski. This approach sees ornament primarily as a diagnostic tool for the elaboration of a monument's pedigree.⁴³ As in the principles developed by Morelli for attributions and dating,⁴⁴ ornament is the detail in which every worker is trained, so that his cultural signature is bound to appear in whatever he does, wherever he goes. It is easy enough to parody and to scoff at an art history that saw in ornamental details stirring cultural and racial connections identifying the presence of workers from one area in another area and therefore contributing to the pernicious vision of the history of art as a bundle of influences.⁴⁵ This sort of reasoning bears, I believe, too little relationship to historical reality to need pursuing, although contemporary nationalism may well return to it.

A second approach, eloquently and beautifully illustrated in some of Ruskin's most evocative pages, can be put in somewhat different terms from his. Ornament is to be recognized and praised because it shows (or can show) the pleasure of work. "I believe the right question to ask," writes Ruskin, "respecting all ornament is simply this. Was it done with enjoyment—was the carver happy while he was about it?"⁴⁶ The question can obviously not be answered by a scholar, only by a poet or a moralist, perhaps by an artist. But Ruskin's approach does imply that ornament and its perception lead to a sense of what is beautiful and of what is good. Esthetics and ethics are, once again, automatically the issues of ornament, whereas painters and sculptors obfus-

cate the Beautiful and Good with distracting subjects or idiosyncratic styles. Ornament on objects produced by artisans and on monuments of architecture, on the other hand, is what gives value to the buildings or practical artifacts on which it is found. Labor, cost, and usefulness predominated in the creation of ornament. All three have a human component independent of what is being produced, but the propriety of handling craftsmen, the appropriateness of spending money, and the actual practice of ornament lead to one conclusion. It is that the perception we have of its motifs requires that beauty and morality become the appropriate, in fact almost exclusive, categories for analysis and judgment.

The point that visual impressions of surfaces occasionally lead to the moral evaluation of whatever or whoever bears those surfaces is easy to demonstrate from daily experience. We reject and dismiss ties or dresses much more readily and easily than paintings and other ordained works of art, and we are far more likely to draw conclusions about the moral values of people from the clothes they wear or the interior decoration of their abodes than from their taste in art. The more exciting side to this sensory approach to ornament is its proclamation of joyful forms endowed with the gift of providing pleasure. It implies that decorative forms are alive, that they breathe more easily than ponderous statues and endless Madonnas. This joy permeates Ruskin's drawings and Focillon's "life of forms."⁴⁷ But, beyond its value as a first and immediate reaction to artistic forms, this kind of beautifully written outburst may be too personal to have more than inspirational value. It may help to love works of art, but does it explain anything?

The third approach, best demonstrated by Gombrich (although not necessarily with the same emphasis and for the same reasons as mine) avoids the taxonomy of forms as a purely lexical activity and identifies the practical effects of ornament.⁴⁸ To Gombrich, the main ones are framing, filling, and linking. These attributes, which are not exclusive, are certainly appropriate definitions of three common features of ornament. In addition, and more important, Gombrich identified ornament through processes in the relationships of maker and user to some object, a picture to be framed or a wall space to be covered. This process, as I understand it, was essential to Gombrich in providing the support needed for an appreciation of what is truly important about art, which is the nonornamental, that grand and grandiose recreation of the natural world that forms, at least within a mainstream art historical tradition, the major achievement of Western painting.

It is at this level that I part company with Gombrich's position. I do so only in part by rejecting the European-centered criticism of a vision of art based so exclusively on Western representations. Within the constraints of

these essays, I do it primarily because, as I hope to have shown already indirectly, it is possible for an ornament to be *the* subject of the design. In fact, any artifact, Mshatta's facade (figs. 23, 24) or the Sistine Chapel, is to the viewer (but not necessarily to the maker) only ornamented surfaces until such time as other meanings are provided for them. In the meantime, they are not simply examples of "filling," since they were visibly the reason why a building or an object was made. There is a difference between "filling" a space with a design and transforming an object by covering all or parts of its surfaces with that design. In the first instance, the filling design has no other purpose than to partake of whatever uses its carrier has; in the second one, it can transform the very purpose of its carrier.

Ornament can make a utilitarian woven fabric into an elegant and sensuous rug (see fig. 186), but a similar design on a wallpaper or in a painting does not necessarily have the same effect, because, as I have tried to demonstrate with the facade at Amiens, the hierarchical location of a decorative motif may well modify its impact. One rug design becomes a minor iconographic or descriptive detail in a Dutch painting depicting it once or loses all sense when endlessly repeated on a wallpaper. In this hypothesis of a type of design without semantic charge, without specific and consistent meaning, ornament may only be ornament because of our ignorance, as meanings may well be hidden within delicate curlicues of vegetal scrolls and in animals cavorting amid flowers and leaves (see pls. 21–23).⁴⁹ In the world of Nuba body paintings (fig. 27),⁵⁰ brilliant geometric decoration is fraught with social and cultural meanings, and the piety of the Ethiopian makers and users of sacred



Fig. 27. Geometric painting on shaved head, Nuba culture of southern Sudan.



Fig. 28. Ethiopian popular images.

images (fig. 28) is not lessened by the apparent senselessness of their colorful designs.⁵¹ It is indeed to the credit of Gombrich's work that processes of analysis and of creation took over from endless lists of design or from poetic trances, but the constriction of his interpretative sources to the written European, post-Renaissance tradition prevented him, I feel, from fully realizing the potential of his own approach.

MY REMARKS so far began with the assumption that there is an order of forms called, usually indiscriminately, ornament or decoration and with the particular role played by Islamic art in the creation and especially the identification of such forms. Through the discussion of a few examples of early Islamic art I tried to show the logical ambiguities and the contradictions involved in the prevalent discourse on these or similar forms. Whatever thoughts and explanations are spun around words like "abstract" or "ornament" seem inadequate to handle the variety of experiences found in decoration. All that is reasonable to conclude so far is that decorative forms can sometimes be identified or described in terms of qualifying attributes like symmetry or simplification independent of their motifs, that more complex meanings may or may not be found in them, but that they definitely do (or at least are meant to) carry beauty and provide pleasure. To say this, however, is hardly helpful without knowing what beauty or pleasure is. Although there are difficulties in the theoretical presumptions and assumptions of the subject,

the preceding remarks are not entirely useless as, in a more practical way, they suggest the presence of four levels or layers of interpretation in handling ornament.

One level is that of the motifs, life-size statues or vegetal scrolls, put on the surfaces of buildings and objects. These motifs appear to have, at least within the traditions of Western art, a set of hierarchies. One set has, at this stage, been defined through the existence or absence of an outside referent, of an external statement, which, in most cases, is something represented (a bird, a house, a circle) but need not be that. To the topical hierarchy assumed for motifs I have added a hierarchy of design or a musculature that, through relationships of size, location, and so forth, favors one motif over the other. Whereas the first hierarchy is independent of any one object or building, the second one is on the contrary only apparent in an artifact. Further reflection is likely to bring additional hierarchies to light.

This leads me to the second layer of suggestions emerging from my examples. Even if they can be made to coincide, it is essential to separate, at least analytically, the making of an object or a motif from its perception. In Gombrich's great and wonderful game of "making" and "matching,"⁵² the issues are not as clear and simple as finding the "correct" meaning for a given form. For the historian, the critic, and the viewer have a degree of right to their own interpretation of someone else's work, and this interpretation need not be the same as the maker's or patron's. The very fact, for instance, of putting icons or other religious and liturgical objects in museums diminishes, perhaps even removes entirely, their original pious meaning, but maintains and even enhances their calliphoric and terpnopoietic values. And it is certainly possible, as has often been done, to appreciate profoundly and thoughtfully an image from a religious setting of which one is unaware or which one even abhors.

The example of icons is but one of many instances in which the discussion has constantly reached a third level of understanding the arts, a level in which ethical and esthetic values and purposes are involved. How they operate and whether it is indeed true that ornament highlights the morality of artistic creativity and judgment are still matters to be examined.

Finally, a preliminary sketch of the concerns raised by just trying to find out about decoration led me to dismiss traditional terms like "abstraction," or even "decoration" itself, as confusing and imprecise. Neologisms like "calliphoric" or "terpnopoietic" stress the importance of attributes (beauty and pleasure in this instance, but these need not be the only ones) of works of art that are not so much the property of the object as something—an emotion,

perhaps, a momentary involvement, or a passion—given to the object by its user or viewer and then, almost by necessity, attached to it. Following Bakhtin in a visual sense, then, I would argue that a progressive dialogue is established between viewer/user and artifact that feeds on itself and changes both viewer and object as it goes on.⁵³ It is easiest to see in architecture, where the continuous dialogue between a building and society leads to constant redecorating, additions, and other modifications that reflect the wealth and depth of a relationship between a built space and a surrounding society. Even in the academically and visually stable field of Western painting since the Renaissance of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, what we feel today about a Raphael or a Rembrandt is hardly what the artist or his contemporaries experienced.⁵⁴

Why is it that even a cursory consideration of the nature of certain designs that are neither entirely mimetic nor nonmimetic and of theories of ornament and decoration could lead us to consider such weighty issues of esthetic and moral philosophy? It is perhaps true, as Ruskin or Le Corbusier's anonymous teacher, among others, would have suggested, that to deal with whatever ornament may be strikes at the very core of the visual experience, where that experience is not skewed by taste, snobbery, ideology, social convention, ecclesiastical or political restrictions, stylistic salesmanship, and all sorts of other refinements that limit the emotional and sensory freedom of each viewer. If so, artistic traditions, like the one issued from the unique conditions of medieval Islamic history, like the worlds from which come the Irish manuscripts of the sixth century (see fig. 30), Inca sculpture, or ancient Chinese bronzes (see fig. 94), are all traditions that avoid the straitjacket of copying nature or else transfigure visual and imaginary experience into other types of forms. By doing so, they lead most powerfully and most directly to the very root of our need for pleasure through the eyes. Clearly there is a process of ordering visual experience, as was indeed well seen by Gombrich, that is independent from the cultural forms it has taken. To call this process ornament or decoration is not appropriate, for ornament itself can be the message that is communicated. What then is this process?

The answer to be elaborated in these essays derives from the remarks made earlier that to study and to understand an object, an artifact, or a building is to establish a relationship with it and that these relationships are practical, physical, sensory, and psychological, but in large part emotional. They are or can be relationships of love, as when the French architect Claude Perreault compared his feelings for a building with the emotions aroused by "passionately . . . lov[ing] a face."⁵⁵ And, indeed, reading one of the most cele-

brated philosophical discussions of love yields a possible cue to guide thought and reasoning in dealing with ornament.

The text is found in Plato's *Symposium*. The assembled companions of Socrates, as is their habit, fail to find a reasonable definition of love and bog down in a series of logical contradictions between what they think is love and the effects or aims of that love. Socrates intervenes by relating the disquisition made to him by a woman of Mantinea called Diotima. The premise of her argument is the existence of a unique and eternal pure form whose absolute beauty is the object of man's contemplation and the source of his action. But that ideal is a theoretical one that does not allow for enactment in time and therefore for its own continuity through procreation. In practice there is a being, love, that "interprets and conveys messages to the gods from men and to men from the gods," which hovers somewhere "between wisdom and ignorance." Love is neither the lover nor the beloved, neither the possessor nor the object possessed, neither a man nor a god. "He is a great spirit; everything that is of the nature of a spirit is half-god and half-man." He is "of an intermediate nature." The word used by Plato for this "spirit" is *demon* (*daimon*).⁵⁶

A similar reasoning can be developed around what has been called ornament, without necessarily agreeing to Plato's idealistic premise or with his intellectually and logically developed distrust of the arts in general and of the visual arts in particular.⁵⁷ Ornament is itself or exhibits most forcefully an intermediate order between viewers and users of art, perhaps even creators of art, and works of art. This intermediate spirit takes many forms, but all of them are characterized by one central feature: while necessary to the comprehension of a work of art, they are not, except in a few extreme cases, the work of art itself. Like Plato's demons they are what some literary critics have called the prisms mediating between the world and the text or the text and its readers.⁵⁸ In the words of a French poet and litterateur well versed in the cultures of Asia, beauty itself is an intermediary,⁵⁹ suggesting by inference that it is not a property or an attribute of a work of art. And Sigmund Freud wrote in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* that repetition, so common in ornament, "give(s) the appearance of some demonic force at work."⁶⁰

It is clear indeed that the existence of demons and of intermediary zones of perception and understanding, perhaps even of creativity, have been suggested by many scholars and thinkers. In proposing that these terms are of particular, if not exclusive, importance in revealing what ornament is, I only mean to argue for terminological convenience. As I will try to show, to deal with these intermediaries is a different process from that of mimetism or of abstraction. It seems, therefore, important to argue for a differentiation of

CHAPTER I

terminology according to the ways of understanding required by different kinds of visual experiences.

How many intermediaries are there? Probably a limited number of demons or spirits really exist, although the question may deserve further theoretical elaboration. Four of these demons will be presented here as intermediary veils through which works of art are perceived and ultimately reached and as examples of the kind of search that could be pursued with other motifs.

The four intermediaries with which I shall deal are writing, architecture, nature, and geometry. The first one is the most complex, but I shall begin with it because it is the one for which traditional Islamic art has provided the most numerous documents and because it can most easily allow for synchronic and diachronic arguments and conclusions. The other three intermediaries are more ubiquitous, although the monuments of Islamic art or within the traditions developed in Muslim lands exhibit many and unusually important examples within each group. Yet, as I shall indicate, with architecture and with nature, we also reach other, nonornamental features and it is to an elaboration of these murky boundaries between ornament and representation that the conclusion will be devoted.

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

1. There is a curious paradox in art historical practice around these issues. On the one hand, there lies an acknowledged art whose history—that is, development through time—is consecrated by manuals and series of surveys. The latter, like the German *Propyläen Kunstgeschichte* or the Pelican *History of Art* in the English-speaking world and, in a shorter version, the two Larousse volumes edited by Albert Châtelet and Philippe Groslier under the title *Histoire de l'art* (Paris, 1985), are written by several authors specializing in different periods and concentrate, for the most part, on the art of western Europe seen in a chronological sequence beginning with ancient Egypt and the ancient Near East as vaguely acknowledged ancestors. The rest of the world is present, usually through single chapters or individual volumes, but rarely as related or relatable to periods identified in Western art. Although less obvious than in the past, the notion is still there that other cultures than the western European one do not have as defined a sense of history.

Manuals are usually written by a single individual, at best by a small team, and, for reasons peculiar to the economics of the textbook and to the nature of curricula in universities, they are by now almost exclusively an American phenomenon. The most popular of these manuals are H. W. Janson, *History of Art*, 2d ed. (New York, 1977); Frederick Hartt, *A History of Art*, 2d ed. (New York, 1985); and H. Gardner, *Art through the Ages*, 8th ed., (New York, 1986). Equivalents for architecture are Spiro Kostof, *A History of Architecture* (Oxford, 1985); M. Trachtenberg and I. Hyman, *Architecture from Prehistory to Post-Modernism: The Western Tradition* (New York, 1986); and

the old standard, Banister Fletcher, *A History of Architecture on the Comparative Method*, 15th ed. (New York, 1950). The concentration of all these books except the one by Kristof is on Western art. With varying degrees of effectiveness and depth, they recognize the existence of other traditions, but rarely to argue from them some broader issue of understanding, judging, or appreciating the arts. The partial exception to this generalization is Hugh Honor and John Fleming, *The Visual Arts: A History* (New York, 1982), with the subtle introduction of several non-Western traditions around themes like religious art.

There is in short an intellectually assumed and emotionally felt attitude among art historians that the major issues of visual understanding are the ones elaborated in the grand tradition of Western art. Internal debates within the study of that tradition argue at times against the domination of Western art itself by the paradigms developed around classical Greek and Roman art or the art of the Italian Renaissance, and Svetlana Alpers has been the most vocal exponent of the problems involved with an art history centered on Italian issues, as in "Style Is What You Make It," in B. Lang, ed., *The Concept of Style*, (Ithaca, N.Y., 1979), pp. 137–62, and *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century* (Chicago, 1983). But there is an assumed overall unity of perception within Western art and the best other traditions can usually do is show additional "examples" of otherwise known features and approaches. Nikolaus Pevsner has made the point of a discrete and original western European tradition quite forcefully in the introduction to his *Outline of European Architecture*, rev. ed. (Baltimore, 1972) with its

implication, quite "modernist" in tone, of a universal value of the high European artistic tradition.

Relatively little has been written about these issues from the point of view of "other" traditions (see note 4). Even less attention has been given to an issue that affects Western art as well as any other art: whether the same approaches and attitudes can be assumed for the study of medieval and earlier arts as for the arts provided with the mass of documentation and the articulateness of expression available from the sixteenth century onward. Jean Bony is one of the few scholars to have identified the problem of dealing with a pre-fourteenth-century past with so few documents that men and monuments seem to be "mere tools of a superior destiny, which can now be deciphered only in terms of general concepts and of developing principles." Cited with comments by Bruno Queysanne, "Traditions and Modernity," *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review* 1, no. 1 (1989), p. 5. The original statement was published in Jean Bony, "The Genesis of Gothic: Accident or Necessity," *Australian Journal of Art* 2 (1980).

To expect of the monuments of the past the range of demonstrable and documented attributes available for later ones is impossible. But the limitation may also be one of meaning, as the semantic field of any one object—the range of meanings and uses to which it can justifiably be put—is also restricted. Logically it is possible that restrictions on the synchronic meanings that can be proved increases the possibilities of diachronic interpretations, as the artifact is not as constricted by contemporary information as a painting or a building for which patrons, makers, and initial viewers would have left memoirs and other memorabilia or practical documents like bills or sale slips.

2. The periodization of Islamic art and history is still a matter of considerable uncertainty, but unfortunately not of debate. For a rapid introduction to the formative and medieval periods, see Richard Ettinghausen and Oleg Grabar, *Art and Architecture of Is-*

lam, 650–1250 (London, 1987). For the later periods there is no adequate introduction and individual studies will be mentioned as examples of later monuments are used.

3. Often present at the elementary level of classroom exercises, such comparisons have rarely reached the august realms of scholarship or even of high-level criticism. One set of exceptions consists in studies on places or monuments for which different and even a priori unconnected cultures came into contact with each other. Such is the case with the Buddhist art of Gandhara in Afghanistan, which fascinated an essentially Mediterranean medievalist like Hugo Buchthal, "The Western Aspects of Gandhara Sculpture," *Proceedings British Academy* 31 (1945). On a totally different level, a scholar like Jurgis Baltrusaitis was able to make fascinating and unexpected comparisons in very different traditions, but often sought an explanation in terms of historical—that is, physical—contexts. See *Le Moyen Age fantastique* (Paris, 1981) and *Formations, déformations* (Paris, 1986).

An alternate and more generally philosophical approach to cultural comparisons was taken by A. Coomaraswamy, whose *Selected Papers: Traditional Art and Symbolism* ed. Roger Lipsey (Princeton, 1977), attempts to compare and contrast social and artistic traditions.

Perhaps less sophisticated in their reasonings but far clearer in their results are works by Kenneth Clark, *Landscape into Art* (New York, 1949; repr. 1976) and *The Nude* (Princeton, 1956). Clark picks a theme and then looks for ways in which it was interpreted wherever he is aware of its presence. Baltrusaitis observes a series of artifacts and then deduces ideas and explanations from his observations. My own procedure will be closer to that of Baltrusaitis than to Clark's, but it differentiates itself from both by seeking to develop a general theory rather than establishing parallels and comparisons, because, as I shall argue, comparison is a very treacherous procedure of art historical analysis. Like people, works of art, except for

prints and photographs, are almost never alike and no one has worked out what is appropriately "similar" to something else. At the same time, works may look very different that were meant to be alike, as physical likeness is no guarantee for similarity.

It is more curious and certainly a sign of the Western cultural domination of art historical thought that practically nothing has been written about the complex relations between Western art and the art of the rest of the world in the twentieth century. I only know of one general book on the arts of the twentieth century that even acknowledges the existence of other worlds; it is William Curtis, *Modern Architecture since 1900* (New York, 1984).

4. This important issue has not surfaced at all in Western criticism of art except a little bit in dealing with architecture; see, for instance, Kenneth Frampton, "Prospects for a Critical Regionalism," *Perspecta* 20 (1983). The issue can be defined in the following manner. To the extent to which a work of art is identified by its appurtenance to a land and a time, it partakes of the qualities of this time and/or land and these qualities are necessarily different from those of another land or place, since, in the contrary hypothesis, they would have to be the same land and place. Such absurd positions were taken or assumed in works written in the midst of wars like Emile Mâle, *Art français et art allemand* (Paris, 1916) or, to a lesser degree, Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Englishness of English Art* (London, 1956). They can be explained as observations necessary in moments of patriotic tension. But, among emerging new nations or cultures that, rightly or wrongly, have felt dominated by Western thought, the assertion of exclusive right to the making and explaining of certain forms of art has become a way to maintain self-identity and a certain type of dignity. For an example in the sciences, see Ziauddin Sardar, ed., *The Touch of Midas* (Manchester, 1984) and review by O. Grabar, "From Utopia to Paradigms," *Mimar* 18 (1986). These ideologically charged intellectual positions can easily

become means of controlling judgments and opinions and especially of distributing certificates of "acceptability" for this or that interpretation. The dangers of such results are obvious within the framework of a dominating Western culture, but it is difficult not to understand the anger of so many artists and interpreters of the arts in other lands who feel excluded from a common adventure controlled by Western media.

In general, it is necessary to keep two distinctions in mind for an eventual elaboration of the issue of appropriate interpretation of works of art. One is that several equally true views of a given work of art can coexist and these truths are different from the veracity of a work of art where correct and incorrect statements are incompatible with each other. And then, as is more commonly agreed by the general public but not by experts, the synchronic views of a time need not be the diachronic ones and it is possible to approve an understanding compatible with our own times that is demonstrably wrong for older times, perhaps even to argue that visual values and interpretations can differ from place to place in the contemporary world without any one of them being wrong.

5. This distinction was first elaborated in O. Grabar, *The Formation of Islamic Art* (New Haven, 1974; 2d ed., 1987), p. 179. I am not aware of any discussion of the issue since then.

6. This statement cannot be proved without a type of statistical evidence that is shunned by historians of art, probably justifiably so. In fact the density of ornament varies enormously from one tradition or period to the other and it may be interesting to evaluate the differences between, for instance, pre-Columbian and ancient Egyptian densities with some worthy conclusion about the expectations made of visual forms in each civilization.

7. Although historical scholarship still dominates the field except for the study of twentieth-century art, where it shares the stage with criticism, thematic studies of

more detailed character than Kenneth Clark's works cited in note 3 do exist, for instance John Onians, *Bearers of Meaning* (Princeton, 1988); Joseph Alsop, *The Rarer Traditions of Art* (New York, 1982); or Lars-Ivar Ringbom, *Paradisus Terrestris* (Helsinki, 1956). Many iconographic studies are typical thematic investigations.

8. Three recent books illustrate quite well that there are new ways of thinking about the arts, even though the issues raised always go back to the philosophical and esthetic concerns of the nineteenth century. The books are: Donald Preziosi, *Rethinking Art History* (New Haven, 1989); Hans Belting, *Das Ende der Kunstgeschichte* (Munich,

1983); Michael Podro, *The Critical Historians of Art* (New Haven, 1982). Often these books argue points that have been made earlier. The important issue is, however, that each generation (perhaps even each decade) restates ways of dealing with the arts according to its own needs and in its own terms.

9. In being introduced to the use of word processors, I have been fascinated by the implication of a DOS, that is to say of a system that has nothing directly to do with one's work with the computer, but without which one could not do the work. Something comparable, it is suggested, may well exist in the making and perception of visual (and perhaps other) creativity.

CHAPTER I A THEORY OF INTERMEDIARIES IN ART

1. This fragment has been often published and often exhibited, but never studied. Latest information on it in the catalogue by Elise Anglade, *Musée du Louvre, catalogue des boiseries de la section islamique* (Paris, 1988), pp. 15–17. Appropriate bibliographical information will be found there. Examples of typologically similar panels are found in this and in any other catalogue or survey of Islamic objects. The dating of the Louvre piece is based on the assumption, probably correct, that it is later than but under the influence of decorative patterns and ways developed around the middle of the ninth century in the 'Abbasid capital of Samarra (Richard Ettinghausen and Oleg Grabar, *Art and Architecture of Islam, 650–1250* (London, 1987 pp. 108–10). But, to my knowledge, none of the allegedly early panels found in Egypt are dated on their own and it is an area where the recently developed field of dendrochronology could be useful to check the visual sequences proposed by historians of art. Specificity of date is, however, not pertinent to the purposes of this book.

2. See, among many places, Otto von Falke, *Kunstgeschichte der Seidenweberei*, 4th

ed. (Tübingen, n.d. but after 1936), figs. 18, 70, 71, 135, 136, etc. The history and iconography of this peculiar motif still need investigating. In all likelihood it belongs to the category of themes that illustrate royal wealth (birds as inhabitants of princely gardens and with many wondrous properties like carrying precious objects) or else that are supposed to suggest Paradise; see Lars-Ivar Ringbom, *Paradisus Terrestris* (Helsinki, 1958).

3. Ettinghausen and Grabar, *Art and Architecture of Islam*, p. 104. It was Richard Ettinghausen who argued in one of his classic articles that the "beveled" style, that is, a certain manner of treating diverse motifs, can be seen as an indicator of an Iraqi inspired pan-Islamic "imperial" stamp, "The Beveled Style," in G. C. Miles, ed. *Archaeologia Orientalia in Memoriam Ernst Herzfeld*, (Locust Valley, N.Y., 1952), reprinted in Ettinghausen's collected papers edited by M. Rosen-Ayalon, *Islamic Art and Archaeology* (Berlin, 1984). Most recently, Terry Allen, *Five Essays on Islamic Art* (Sebastopol, Calif., 1988), esp. pp. 1–15.

4. What complicates matters a bit is the

vagueness of the archaeological or architectural context in which the bird was found. Was the unusual and hitherto unique frame of the "bird" dictated by the decision to show a "bird" or by some other need or prescription, for instance the composition of the whole surface for which this fragment was originally meant?

5. Anglade, *Catalogue*, p. 31, fig. 15a, published this piece, without, however, giving its dimensions. Although the piece is complete, its actual use or potential use are impossible to deduce.

6. Anglade, *Catalogue*, figs. 14 and 16, also 23 and 23a.

7. There is no study of these ceramics as a coherent group (except briefly in Ettinghausen and Grabar, *Art and Architecture of Islam*, p. 225) and most discussions have been either fairly general or archaeological. The best recent introduction to ceramics in general is by Jean Soustiel, *La céramique islamique* (Fribourg, 1985), pp. 55–64, with important examples for the purposes of this book, pp. 65–76. While interesting and legitimate, the selection of illustrations in this rich book does not, in my judgment, do justice to the quality of some of the pieces remaining from this period. For archaeological reports that are somewhere between archaeology and the history of art, see Charles K. Wilkinson, *Nishapur: Pottery of the Early Islamic Period* (New York, 1976) and M. Rosen-Ayalon, *La poterie islamique, Ville Royale de Suse* (Paris, 1974). For a dry but clear-cut typological approach, see Sh. S. Tashhodjaev, *Hudozhestvennaia Polivnaia Keramika Samarkanda* (Tashkent, 1967). For an attempt at a visual analysis of a single bowl, see O. Grabar, "Notes on the Decorative Composition of a Bowl," in R. Ettinghausen, ed., *Islamic Art in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, (New York, 1972), pp. 91–98. For wider considerations on dealing with ceramics, see O. Grabar, "Between Connoisseurship and Technology," *Muqarnas* 5 (1988), pp. 1–8. None of these books, articles, and reflections can unfortunately dispense the student from looking

through exhibition or museum catalogues or through a few general manuals with good visual surveys like A. Papadopoulos, *L'Islam et l'art islamique* (Paris, 1976), esp. pp. 75 and 415–17.

8. For luster, in addition to Soustiel, see now Alan Caiger-Smith, *Luster Pottery* (London, 1985), and Oliver Watson, *Persian Luster Ware* (London, 1985). Although much progress has been made, the origins of luster as an esthetic phenomenon rather than as a technical one and the iconographic as well as stylistic or expressive peculiarities of the earliest examples in Iraq still need reflection.

9. Esin Atil, *Ceramics from the World of Islam* (Washington, D.C., 1973), pp. 36–37 for the often reproduced Freer bowl. A. Papadopoulos, *Islam*, fig. 85, for the best reproduction of the Iranian piece, published originally in the catalogue of a traveling exhibition of Iranian art: R. Ghirshman, ed., *Petit Palais, sept mille ans d'art en Iran*, (Paris, 1961), no. 904 and pl. C1.

10. The writing on these ceramics consists primarily of proverbs and of simple wishes of good feeling; it has been studied in a series of articles by O. Bolshakov published in *Epigrafika Vostoka* 4 ff. (1960–).

11. For a very tentative sketch of an explanation, see O. Grabar, "Reflections on the Study of Islamic Art," *Muqarnas* 1 (1983), pp. 11–12.

12. This striking painting was, I believe, first published in color in E. Akurgal, Cyril Mango, and Richard Ettinghausen, *Treasures of Turkey* (Geneva, 1966), p. 220. It struck many of those who flipped through the pages of this beautiful coffee-table book and found its way into the second edition of a manual like Janson's, H. W. Janson, *A History of Art* (New York, 1977), color plate 30. But, to my knowledge, it has never been really studied. I will return several times to this stunning work of art. Its date and place of origin are tied to the complex problem of dating the content of four extraordinary albums in Istanbul and one in Berlin. For the latest, unfortunately still incomplete, information, see *Islamic Art* 1 (1981), entirely de-

voted to the Istanbul albums. The Berlin album was published in a particularly cumbersome manner by M. S. Ipşiroglu, *Sarayalben* (Wiesbaden, 1964).

13. A rather peculiar problem of logic on this issue has plagued the handling of all the areas and periods for which we do not possess adequate information about works of art other than an understanding of the works of art themselves. The problem can be defined through two questions. First, to what degree is a given representation or image necessarily unique in its way of showing something? Second, if, as is obviously the case, very rarely, can one extend that conclusion to times when we have no sense of the relationship between what remains and what existed? There is no way of answering these questions without investigations that are not pertinent to the topic of this book. They must, however, be kept in mind, because they maintain a factor of uncertainty about the originality of any work of art remaining from earlier time. Some scholars tend to treat all existing artifacts as a closed set whose conclusions are modified as new discoveries are made. Others prefer to imagine all sorts of "missing links." Both positions are justified.

14. The statement of that position was first formulated by Louis Massignon, "Les méthodes de réalisation artistique des peuples de l'Islam," *Syria* 2 (1921). Its more popular and more recent version is found in Papadopoulos, *L'Islam et l'art islamique*, but its impact is also visible, consciously or not, in general interpretations of Islamic art developed by Titus Burckhardt, *Sacred Art in East and West* (London, 1967); Laleh Bakhtiar and Nader Ardalan, *The Sense of Unity* (Chicago, 1973); Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality* (Albany, N.Y., 1987); and many others. The trouble is that what began as a brilliant but tentative essay was too rapidly seen as a doctrine without leading to further investigations within the rich literature on ethics and, to a smaller degree, esthetics in traditional Islamic culture. It was also unfortunate that

the original essay, which was tied to medieval Islamic art, was later used without consciousness of historical evolution and changes over time.

15. K. Abu Deeb, *Al-Jurjani's Theory of Poetic Imagery* (Warminster, 1978), especially chap. 5 dealing with *isti'ara*, a complex word translated at times as "metaphor."

16. Once again we deal with an important methodological issue. The classic example of correspondence is Erwin Panofsky, *Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism* (New York, 1957), but it is as attractive a theory as it is an impossible one to prove. A parallel example for Byzantine art, with greater concern for the autonomy of images, is Henry Maguire, *Art and Eloquence in Byzantium* (Princeton, 1981).

17. Henri Matisse, *Ecrits et propos sur l'art* (Paris, 1972), pp. 159, 185, among other places. Pierre Schneider, *Matisse* (Paris, 1984), pp. 162–64. For W. Kandinsky, see K.C. Lindsay and P. Vergo, eds., *Complete Writings on Art*, vol. 1: 1901–1921 (Boston, 1982), pp. 73–76. Like Matisse, Kandinsky was strongly affected by the 1910 exhibition of Islamic art in Munich, followed by one in Paris in 1911. Fewer critics saw these connections, but it is a pleasure to recall one who died too young, Amy Goldin, who spent a semester studying with me and brought contemporary freshness to jaded antiquarians. She wrote "Beyond Style," *Art and Artists* (September 1968), and "Islamic Art: The Met's Generous Embrace," *Art Forum* 14 (March 1976), preparatory statements for ideas which, to my knowledge, never came to fruition.

18. In general, art historical reasoning is easier to develop around motifs that are concrete and can be seen as deriving from each other as well as generating each other, whereas processes, especially from more remote places and times than the contemporary West, must usually be hypothesized.

19. Although the matter still needs verification, the difference seems clear between the Muslim functionaries in today's Iran or in Wahhabi Saudi Arabia who do judge vi-

sual practice and, on the other hand, their medieval ancestors who concentrated on controlling the marketplace by developing mercantile and industrial regulations based on the Revelation rather than doctrines on art. Insofar as we know in a little-studied subfield, medieval control tended to be of measurable attributes like quality of manufacture or genuineness of material, whereas the contemporary one, in countries with a strict application of late medieval Islamic law, takes very much into consideration artistic judgments. It is probably true that, at some point in the consciousness of religious thought and practice in the Islamic world, the realization of the existence of "art" in the Renaissance sense of the word led to a wide spread of different reactions. Some are as early as the sixteenth century, others are only contemporary. But the matter needs more scrutiny for today as well as in the past.

20. See pp. 5 and 241.

21. Museum of Modern Art, New York, *Pablo Picasso: A Retrospective* (New York, 1980), pp. 190–91. E.-G. Güse and B. Rau, *Pablo Picasso. Die Lithographien* (Stuttgart, 1988), p. 24. These are publications of the lithographs. To my knowledge they have never been analyzed and explained. For sources, see Herschel B. Chipp, *Theories of Modern Art: A Source Book by Artists and Critics* (Berkeley, 1968), p. 60; Robert Goldwater and Marco Treves, *Artists on Art* (New York, 1958), pp. 363, 417, 443, 445. I am grateful to my colleague Professor Irving Lavin for showing me his hitherto unpublished study of the Picasso lithographs. His purpose and point of view are quite different from mine.

22. Furthermore, the verb "to stylize" is connected to the protean word "style," whose meanings could fill a volume. See my comments in the preface. For a classical definition, see Mayer Schapiro, "Style," in Morris Philipson, ed. *Aesthetics Today* (Cleveland, 1961), and for a more contemporary view, S. Alpers as quoted in Introduction, note 1.

23. It turned out to be particularly diffi-

cult to discover when the word "abstraction" or the adjective "abstract" began to be used to describe compound forms or to identify artistic ambitions and expectations. For general introductions, see Tate Gallery, *Towards a New Art: Essays on the Background to Abstract Art 1910–1920* (London, 1980), and Maurice Tuchman, *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890–1985* (New York, 1985). The following components seem to have entered into the set of associations made with the words "abstract" and "abstraction": decisions by painters like Larionov or Kandinsky to use the term for their works (circa 1911); judgments by critics, as when Maurice Denis, also a painter, warned Matisse of the dangers of abstraction (1905); ideological movements like theosophy or Worringer's philosophy of history, which saw in abstract forms a higher level of interpretation of the inner soul (circa 1905–1910). See Henry G. Gardiner, ed., *Color and Form 1909–1914* (San Diego, 1981). There are additional ideas and documents in "Non-objective Art," *Encyclopedia of World Art* (New York, 1965).

24. See chapter 4.

25. I realize, of course, that this statement simplifies the more profound point that any transformation of shapes and ordering of lines, dots, and hues constitute a creative art, which may acquire a value of its own. I shall return to this question in conclusion.

26. Here is the full text: "presenting or possessing schematic or generalized form frequently suggested by and having obscure resemblance to natural appearances through a contrived ordering of pictorial or sculptural elements."

27. For Kandinsky, see references in note 23. Anna Chave, *Mark Rothko's Subjects in Abstraction* (New Haven, 1989), p. 195; I have also profited from the first version of an article by Natasha Staller on "The Ideology of Symbolist Style," which has not yet appeared. See also Ann Gibson and Stephen Polcari, eds., "New Myths for Old," *Art Journal* 42 (1988), especially the very telling

quotations from Barnett Newman. Random references to abstraction or decoration are common among critics of modern art; see, for example, Harry Rand, *Paulanship* (Washington, D.C., 1980) or *Arshile Gorky* (London, 1981), pp. 194–95.

28. In recent years a certain amount of thinking has been directed to the uses of the past in art and history within a broader spectrum than the traditional one provided by the relationship of Western art to antiquity. Works like John Sweetman, *The Oriental Obsession* (Cambridge, 1988), D. Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge, 1985), or an exhibition like the one held in Berlin in 1989 under the title *Europa und der Orient* (with a superbly illustrated catalogue), edited by G. Sievernik and H. Budde (Berlin, 1989), are all more or less successful and more or less profound explorations of the theme that a patron, a user, or a maker of art relates the experience or the needs of his time to something older or alien. Less frequently mentioned is that often the questions of any one time define that time's judgment over the past. These issues are particularly noteworthy when one looks at the art, and especially architecture, produced in newly independent countries. In Lahore, Pakistan, for instance, the systematic use of Mughal ideas in the architecture of imperial Britain led to its rejection as a model by the first architects of independence. The latter found in a certain type of "modern" internationalism a secure base for nearly a generation until a more authentic past was searched for and the old Mughal imperial buildings were discovered. See Kamal Khan Mumtaz, *Architecture in Pakistan* (Geneva, 1987). What is implied by this example is something well known to those who have studied the "reception" of art—that the visual and other memories of observers affect their perception of any work of art. Mark Rothko even argued the point in a positive sense when he said: "If people want sacred experiences, they will find them here [in his paintings]. If they want profane

experiences, they will find them too. I take no side." (Chave, *Rothko*, p. 195). Does this statement on his own work by a nearly contemporary painter, shaped by his time, justify any interpretations of works from the past?

29. There is no way of entering simply into the history of ornament in the nineteenth century. For a general introduction centered on much neglected German literary examples, see Frank-Lothar Kroll, *Das Ornament in der Kunsttheorie des 19. Jahrhunderts* (Hildesheim, 1987). For standard examples, see J. Bourgoïn, *Théorie de l'ornement* (Paris, 1883); F. S. Meyer, *Handbook of Ornament* (New York, 1895); Richard Glazier, *A Manual of Historical Ornament* (London, 1948); A. Spelz, *The Styles of Ornament* (London, 1900); Peter Jessen, *Der Ornamentistik* (Berlin, 1920).

30. Ben Sirach quoted in Werner Foerster, *From the Exile to Christ: A Historical Introduction to Palestinian Judaism* (Philadelphia, 1964), p. 25.

31. The verb *naqqasha* is as difficult to translate as it is usually easy to understand, for it means "to do something to a surface in order to make it fancier." *Zawaqa* is more general in implying the aim to embellish. *Isti'ara* is the most complex of these terms, as it implies a transfer of meaning; see Abu Deeb, *Al-Jurjani*, esp. pp. 61 and 313. The vocabulary for esthetic and technical terms in Arabic and other languages and by Muslim communities has not been studied in much detail. See A.F.L. Beeston, *The Epistle on Singing-girls of Jahiz* (Warminster, 1980), pp. 25–26, for terms used for qualitative judgments dealing with harmony. More has been done for construction, as in O. Grabar and R. Holod, "A Tenth-Century Source for Architecture," *Eucharisterion*, *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 3–4 (1979–1980), p. 314.

32. J. Gonda, *The Meaning of Vedic Bhusati* (Wageningen, 1939). See also A. Coomaraswamy, *Selected Papers: Traditional Art and Symbolism*, ed. Roger Lipsey (Princeton, 1977), pp. 241–45 (and through-

out for all sorts of exciting vistas). I owe the first reference to my colleague Professor Pramod Chandra. All of my examples except the last one came from Gonda's book. Professor Chandra gave me the quotation of the moon as an adornment of the night, but he could not recall where he had read this sentence. It is such a beautiful image that I am keeping it as the contribution of an anonymous Indian sage. It curiously fits with the following passage by E. Le Roy-Ladurie describing the relationship in premodern France between the king and the nobility: "les nobles sont groupés autour du trône comme un ornement et disent à celui qui y prend place ce qu'il est" (*L'état royal* [Paris, 1987], p. 19).

33. William Curtis, *Le Corbusier, Ideas and Forms* (Oxford, 1986), p. 24.

34. The evil of art or of beautiful objects was a topos of classical Islamic thought, as in Ibn Miskawayh, *Traité d'Ethique*, trans. Muhammad Arkoun (Damascus, 1969), pp. 301–3, who argues that the provision of pleasure makes any object a source of evil leading man astray. Philippe de la Hine, second director of the Academy of Architecture, followed its motto to "strip architecture of its vicious ornaments"; J. Ryckwert, *The First Moderns* (Cambridge, 1988), p. 15. In recent times, shortly after the Iranian revolution of 1979, the Iranian delegation of UNESCO opposed a prosaic plan to make slides on Islamic art on the grounds that true Islam is incompatible with whatever art is. More modulating and more complex views come out of mystical writing, as in the cases of Rumi and Nizami. For Rumi, see examples in Ettinghausen and Grabar, *Art and Architecture of Islam*, p. 330 with references. For Nizami, see Priscilla Soucek, "Nizami on Painters and Painting," in Richard Ettinghausen, ed., *Islamic Art in the Metropolitan Museum of Art* (New York, 1972).

35. Maurice Crampon, *La Cathédrale d'Amiens* (Amiens, 1972); Jean Bony, *French Gothic Architecture* (Berkeley, 1983); Robert Mark, *Experiments in Gothic Structure* (Cam-

bridge, 1982). It is rather curious that the work of architectural historians is so independent from that of scholars dealing with representations.

36. For the Ara Pacis, a recent discussion with full bibliography is Peter J. Holliday, "Time, History and Ritual on the Ara Pacis Augustae," *Art Bulletin* 72 (1990).

37. The long bibliography on Mshatta is reviewed by K.A.C. Creswell, *Early Muslim Architecture*, 2d ed. (Oxford, 1969), pp. 604–6. For a controversial hypothesis about its date, see O. Grabar, "The Date and Meaning of Mshatta," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 41 (1987), where novelties of interpretation since 1969 are mentioned.

38. Metalwork is probably the most studied of all techniques of Islamic art next to architecture. The objects of the period of the illustration and earlier ones are discussed in Eva Baer, *Islamic Metalwork* (Binghamton, N.Y., 1983), with complete bibliography and especially appropriate references to the works of D. S. Rice, who did make occasional allusions to formal problems of visual judgments.

39. Examples of manuals are Owen Jones, *The Grammar of Ornament* (London, 1868; repr. New York, 1986); D. Ware and M. Stafford, *An Illustrated Dictionary of Ornament* (New York, 1974); and the works by Spelz, Glazier, Mayer, and Bourguoin in note 29.

40. There probably is something silly in pursuing ghosts of past sins, as one condemns or mocks the "orientalist" terminology of so many manuals from the nineteenth century or issued from its ideologies. The problem, however, is only in part that some of these identifications like "Moorish" or "Saracenic," which are ideologically charged in ways resented today, are still used. It is also that this kind of categorization has affected the contemporary arts of new nation-states and has been seen as reflecting modern national states and their ideologies rather than visual configurations.

41. The operation of the past becomes

apparent as monuments are scrutinized beyond their mere physical appearance and basic vital statistics or beyond an automatic acknowledgment of their existence. The study of Islamic art has only very recently reached the stage where the historicism of certain monuments is singled out, especially when it extends beyond obvious copies or revivals. An interesting Cairene example is that of the early eleventh-century mosque of al-Hakim. It reflected a ninth-century model and inspired a late thirteenth-century one. The historical concerns involved in these revivals have been brought out by Jonathan Bloom in several articles like "The Origins of Fatimid Art," *Muqarnas* 3 (1985), and "The Mosque of al-Hakim in Cairo," *Muqarnas* 1 (1983).

42. A. Riegl, *Spätromische Kunstindustrie* (Vienna, 1927), trans. Rolf Winkler as *Late Roman Art Industry* (Rome, 1985). David Summer has perceptively suggested that both Riegl and Worringer preferred ornament to images "because ornament is a purer expression of form and therefore provides a less encumbered view into form's spiritual meaning." D. Summer, "Art Historical Description," *Critical Enquiry* 15 (1989), p. 376. See a good critique of Riegl by E. Gombrich, *The Sense of Order* (Oxford, 1979), pp. 180–90.

43. This method is not always explicitly identified, even in typical articles like M. Dimand, "Studies in Islamic Ornament," *Ars Islamica* 4 (1937), and "Studies in Islamic Ornament II," in George C. Miles, ed., *Archaeologica Orientalia in Memoriam Ernst Herzfeld* (Locust Valley, N.Y. 1952). But it is a method that totally permeates the dating and attributions of most museum catalogues.

44. I. Iermolieff-Schwarze, alias Giovanni Morelli, *Kunstkritische Studien über italienische Malerei* (Leipzig, 1889), pp. 1–78, esp. p. 40. See also Hayden B. J. Maginnes, "The Role of Perceptual Learning in Connoisseurship," *Art History* 13 (1990).

45. This happens, for instance, in K.A.C. Creswell's tabulation of the "influ-

ences" at work in the Dome of the Rock, *Early Muslim Architecture*, 2d. ed. (Oxford, 1969), p. 123. In a more sophisticated way, D. S. Rice's analysis of metalwork from Mossul obeyed the same principles; See "The Bronzes from Mossul," *Ars Orientalis* 2 (1957), pp. 321–25.

46. John Ruskin, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (London, 1880), p. 173; *The Stones of Venice* (London, 1853–1858). In general, see Kristine O. Garrigan, *Ruskin on Architecture* (Madison, Wis., 1973).

47. Henri Focillon, *La vie des formes* (Paris, 1947).

48. Gombrich, *Sense of Order*.

49. It is difficult to know where there are "hidden" motifs in vegetal ornament. I have already alluded to the Ara Pacis and to Mshatta. Another example is the so-called Antioch Chalice (K. Weitzmann, ed., *Age of Spirituality* [New York, 1979], pp. 606–8) and I shall return to the issue in Chapter 5.

50. James C. Faris, *Nuba Personal Art* (London, 1972). I was introduced to this book and to some of its ideas by the extraordinary man and mind that were the late Joseph Alsop.

51. Jacques Mercier, *Rouleaux magiques éthiopiens* (Paris, 1979), pp. 21–22, for the example I have illustrated and an explanation of its meaning.

52. E. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion* (Princeton, 1960).

53. For Mikhail Bakhtin, the most direct introduction is K. Clark and M. Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin* (Cambridge, 1984). The latest in an ever growing literature on Bakhtin is the translation of his early essays by M. Holquist, *Art and Answerability* (Austin, Tex., 1990), where further references will be found.

54. This point has often been denied by those who restore old buildings to their pristine state. Following the practice of philologists and of historians of painting, the assumption has been made that the earliest state of a building is always the "correct" one. Yet a building that survives is one that adapts itself to the evolution of life and the

changes of taste and a great building may indeed be one that changes, not that remains the same. Although many paintings and sculptures were occasionally changed for reasons of taste, such fig leaves are not supposed to be appropriate. One possible reason is that paintings or sculptures rarely had the useful and practical functions of architecture. And they could be stored away or painted over, if no one wished to look at them.

55. Quoted from Rycrwert, *First Moderns*, p. 37.

56. My quotations are from the translation by Walter Hamilton (London, 1951), pp. 79–95.

57. For a general statement on Plato's es-

thetics, see Rupert C. Lodge, *Plato's Theory of Art* (London, 1953), and Margaret R. Mills, *Image as Insight* (Boston, 1985), p. 142. For related arguments, see Gerald F. Else, *Aristotle Poetic's* (Cambridge, 1957), pp. 129ff., for ideas of pleasure. For demons, see Angus Fletcher, *Allegory: the Theory of a Symbolic Mode* (Ithaca, 1964), pp. 38 ff., and A. D. Nock, *Conversion* (Cambridge, 1933).

58. Alain Viala, "Prismatic Effects," *Critical Inquiry* 14 (1988), p. 563.

59. Henri Michaud, *Un barbare en Asie* (Paris, 1933), p. 28.

60. Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, vol. 18 of *The Complete Works of Sigmund Freud* (London, 1955), p. 21.

CHAPTER II

THE INTERMEDIARY OF WRITING

1. See p. 18

2. For the purposes of this essay, there is no point in speculating about the reasons why this painting was made. But it is an intriguing question, as it is hardly likely that it illustrated a text and it is too complete an image to have served as a sketch or model for something like a wall panel. It might have been a frontispiece or some other kind of page enhancing a book. Maybe it was after all a devotional picture, even though this conclusion assumes a pious behavior ascertained among Christians, Buddhists, or Hinduists, but not among Muslims. A thorough study of shrines and of religious practices, especially in the wider Iranian world, could, however, show that doctrinal objects of the type of our page did exist or propose an alternate explanation. The only account known to me of a contemporary religious treasury is by Soad Maher Mohammed, *Mashhad al-Imam 'Ali fi al-Najaf wa ma bihi min al-Hidaya wa al-Tuhaf* (Cairo, 1968). It concentrates on textiles, but has information on other items.

3. Examples by Piet Mondrian are the most telling because, within one of his series

of paintings, small squares or rectangles of different colors are common; Kermit S. Champa, *Mondrian Studies* (Chicago, 1985), most particularly some early paintings (circa 1918–1919) on pp. 61–68 or the celebrated *Broadway Boogie-Woogie* of 1942–1943, pp. 127–38. But several other, more recent schools of painting also used geometric units of different colors; for examples see E. C. Goossen, *Ellsworth Kelly* (New York, 1973), pp. 42–53, and Lawrence Rubin, *Frank Stella Paintings 1958 to 1965* (New York, 1986).

4. Lisa Golombek and Donald Wilber, *The Timurid Architecture of Iran and Turan* (Princeton, 1988), with interesting examples on fig. 324 (Abrandabad) and fig. 336 (Baku). The whole motif deserves a true taxonomic and interpretative study. Suggestive remarks were made on the "whorl" by Richard Ettinghausen, "The Wade Cup," *Ars Orientalis* 2 (1957), pp. 342–43.

5. There is no comprehensive study of 'Ali in history and in myth. For examples of the range of meanings he has had, see Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1975), and