



# COSMOPHILIA

ISLAMIC ART FROM THE DAVID COLLECTION, COPENHAGEN

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with essays by Kjeld von Folsach, Nancy Netzer and Claude Cernuschi

McMullen Museum of Art  
Boston College

Distributed by the University of Chicago Press



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## Ornament and Islamic Art

SHEILA S. BLAIR AND JONATHAN M. BLOOM

Ornament is one of the most distinctive features of Islamic art and architecture. It is found on all types of Islamic art, ranging from minbars (pulpits) to crockery, and on all types of architecture, from mosques to houses. It was used at all times, from the very beginnings of Islamic art in the seventh century to modern times, when it continues to fascinate artists working in a variety of media, whether ceramics or paper. Ornament was enjoyed in all parts of the Islamic world, from the Atlantic shores of the Iberian Peninsula and Morocco to the steppes of Central Asia and beyond. For most Westerners, exuberant ornament and pattern are what distinguish the arts of the Islamic lands from the world's other great artistic traditions.

The clearest way to see how ornament is an essential feature of Islamic art is by comparing a work of Islamic art to its Chinese prototype. The typical bowl made in ninth-century Iraq, when the region was the capital province of the vast Abbasid caliphate (749-1258), has a low hollow foot supporting a deep well with slightly rounded profile (fig. 1). Its shape is clearly derived from

the typical porcelain bowl made in ninth-century China under the Tang dynasty (fig. 2).

Chinese porcelains were imported in significant quantities to the wealthy Abbasid caliphate, to judge from the shards discovered at excavations at the capital at Samarra.<sup>1</sup> They were shipped from Chinese ports via the Straits of Malacca around India into the Persian Gulf, a voyage of some 7,000 miles/11,000 km. Contemporary sources confirm the high esteem accorded these *sini* (a word literally meaning "Chinese" and the term used to refer to all Chinese ceramics, including porcelain). The Abbasid littérateur al-Tha'alibi (961-1038), writing in his *Book of Curious and Entertaining Information*, reported, for example, that "the Chinese have fine translucent pottery. The best are the

delicate, evenly pigmented, clearly resounding apricot-colored ware, and after that, the cream-colored ware with similar characteristics."<sup>2</sup>

Not all patrons could afford such expensive Yue and Qingbai wares, so instead they turned to local imitations.<sup>3</sup> Iraqi potters, who did not have access to the fine white kaolin clay used by Chinese potters to make their porcelains, worked laboriously, if not particularly successfully, to imitate the brilliant white of the Chinese originals by covering the buff-colored earthenware body



Fig. 1. Profile of a typical Abbasid bowl, 9th century, Iraq, earthenware painted in blue in an opaque white glaze, 5.5 x 20.5 cm.  
David Collection, Copenhagen, 21/1965  
Copenhagen,



Fig. 2. Porcelain bowl, 9th century, China, Tang Dynasty, porcelain with clear glaze, 4 x 15.9 cm.  
Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC, Gift of Charles Lang Freer, 1914.450

with an opaque white glaze. More importantly, Iraqi potters were not content with the perfect shape and glaze of the Chinese originals, but felt they could improve on them by painting in the



Fig. 3. Interior view of the Dome of the Rock, Jerusalem, 692. Photo: J.M. Bloom and S.S. Blair

glaze with cobalt blue, sometimes with additional splashes of copper green (no. 40). Still not content to leave well enough alone, Iraqi potters also adapted the luster technique, probably invented by Syrian glassmakers to decorate glass vessels, to decorate ceramics of the same

shape (no. 76) on both the interior and exterior surfaces. In short, Abbasid taste was the antithesis of the modern Bauhaus aesthetic espoused by Mies van der Rohe, "Less is more." In Islamic art, "more is more."

The philosopher and historian Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406) attempted to explain this approach in his *Muqaddima*, or *Introduction to History*:

The crafts and sciences are the result of man's ability to think, through which he is distinguished from the animals. [The sciences and crafts] come after the necessities. The [susceptibility] of the crafts to refine-

ment, and the quality of [the purposes] they are to serve in view of the demands made by luxury and wealth, then correspond to the civilization of a given country.

Therefore, for this great thinker, often considered the founder of social science, the degree of intricacy and high quality of finish was a cultivated taste that came to represent the triumph of sedentary civilization over a perceived nomadic past.<sup>4</sup>

Although Ibn Khaldun was born in Tunis to a family forced to flee the advancing Christians in Spain and ended his days in metropolitan Cairo, his assessment is valid for most regions and times in Islamic history. Already by the middle of the Umayyad period (661-750), the extraordinary decoration covering the interior of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem (begun 692) shows a taste for total ornamentation in multiple media (colored glass and gold-foil mosaic, veined marble, gilded bronze, painted wood, etc.), all combined in a rich panoply that provided—and still provides—a sumptuous feast for the eye (fig. 3).

### Terms, Terminology and the History of Ornament

The Arabic word for ornament, *zakhrafa*, derives from the verbal root *zakhrafa*, "to gild." The noun *zukhruf* refers to anything highly embellished, as with gilding, decoration by gilding, gold, and embellishment, either real, as the flowers of the earth, or figurative, as a flowery discourse.<sup>5</sup> *Tāj al-'Arūs*, the great medieval Arabic dictionary, states that the word was applied particularly to the decorations and pictures in gold with which the Kaaba was decorated in pre-Islamic times.<sup>6</sup> The Arabic word seems to be a deforma-

tion, via Syriac, of the Greek word *zōgraphēō*, "to paint."<sup>7</sup>

Although ornament is ubiquitous in Islamic art, the word for it is rare and pejorative in the Koran, the scriptures that Muslims believe God revealed to the Prophet Muhammad in the early seventh century. The Arabic noun *zukhruf* appears there only four times, all of them with negative connotations. For example, in Koran 6.112, it is stated that every one of God's messengers has an enemy, evil ones who inspire with flowery discourse (*zukhruf*) as a way of deception. In Koran 17.93, the unbelievers demand from the Prophet an ill-assorted and crude jumble of miracles, including a house adorned with gold (*zukhruf*), a symbol of rampant materialism. In Koran 43.35, *zukhruf* "adornments of gold" refers to false glitter, the transitory adornments of this world that often hinder more than they help. Finally, Koran 10.24, a parable explaining the nature of present life, describes the earth as clad with golden ornaments (*zukhruf*) that can be destroyed in a second because God has the power of disposal to make it like a harvest clean mown as if it had never existed the day before. The sources for the ubiquity of ornament in Islamic art therefore lie not in the Koran but elsewhere.

Ornament is, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, "something used to adorn, beautify, or embellish, or that naturally does this; a decoration, embellishment."<sup>8</sup> Some scholars have attempted to define the term more narrowly in reference to Islamic art. For example, Oleg Grabar, the noted historian of Islamic art, in his Mellon Lectures at the National Gallery of Art in 1989, distinguished between the larger class of

decoration and the subset of ornament, suggesting that decoration is "anything applied to a structure or an object that is not necessary to the stability, use, or understanding of that structure or object," whereas ornament is "any decoration that has no referent outside of the object on which it is found, except in technical manuals."<sup>9</sup> Few other scholars have followed this distinction, which seems somewhat arbitrary if not obfuscating, and we prefer to follow common usage and employ these terms interchangeably.

The phrase "Islamic art" is more difficult to define. Grammar would suggest that it refers to the art produced by and for the religion of Islam, but this is not the case. The term is more encompassing, referring to "the art made by artists or artisans whose religion was Islam, for patrons who lived in predominantly Muslim lands, or for purposes that are restricted or peculiar to a Muslim population or a Muslim setting."<sup>10</sup> It is, therefore, quite different from terms such as "Buddhist art" or "Christian art," which are generally reckoned to deal specifically with the art of the faith. Islamic art includes works made for mosques as well as works made for coffee-houses. Some historians have tried to underscore this distinction by creating new adjectives such as "Islamicate" to distinguish the secular culture that flourished under the religion of Islam,<sup>11</sup> but these unwieldy neologisms too have not found widespread acceptance. Rather, most people tacitly accept that the convenient if incorrect adjective "Islamic" refers not just to the religion of Islam but also to the larger culture in which Islam was the dominant—but not the only—religion practiced.

Furthermore, Islamic art differs from the arts of the West in that the mimetic, or representational, arts play relatively minor roles. Much of what many historians of Islamic art normally study—inlaid metalwares, luster ceramics, enameled glass, brocaded textiles, and knotted carpets—is not the typical purview of the historian of Western art, who normally considers such crafts to be "minor" or "decorative" arts compared to the "nobler" arts of architecture, painting, and sculpture. While architecture is as important in Islamic culture as it was in Western Europe or East Asia, visual representation, which plays such an enormous role in the artistic traditions of Europe and Asia, is a relatively minor and limited component of Islamic culture, and sculpture is virtually unknown. In contrast, Islamic art accords writing an unusually prominent role, undoubtedly in accordance with the pivotal importance of the Divine Word. Unlike much art in other traditions, whose primary character is its inutility, much Islamic art involves the transformation of everyday utilitarian objects into works of art, often through decoration.

Islam is the world's fastest-growing religion, with more than one billion adherents today, approximately one-fifth of the world's population. Islam continues to be a major force in world events, but Islamic art is generally said to have ended at the beginning of the nineteenth century with the advent of European colonialism and the emergence of distinct national identities. Artists in the Islamic lands, as well as Muslim artists elsewhere, have continued to make art into the twenty-first century, so in that sense Islamic art continues to be made as it had before. Neverthe-

less, the combined effects of regional differences in artistic traditions and the powerful impact of European manufactures exported to the Islamic lands dramatically changed many traditional forms of Islamic art. For example, weavers in Iran and Turkey continued to produce knotted carpets in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but they increasingly made them to the designs and dimensions of European and American interiors. The Manchester firm of Ziegler and Company, for instance, commissioned Persian weavers to make carpets in standard sizes and coarser weaves using chemically-dyed yarns from British mills to better appeal to European taste.<sup>12</sup>

Paradoxically, this is just the moment when Europeans were "discovering" Islamic art, which they called by a variety of names—Arabian, Indian, Moorsque or Moorish, Muhammadan, Persian, Saracenic, Turkish, etc. The most important figure for the study of ornament was Owen Jones (1808-74), who in 1842 published detailed designs of the Alhambra, the palace of the Nasrid sultans in Granada, in two atlas folios conceived as a pattern-book for architects.<sup>13</sup> His *Grammar of Ornament*, published fourteen years later in 1856, laid out thirty-seven axioms of design and was supplemented by one hundred color plates of historical examples, of which fully one-quarter were drawn from Islamic art.<sup>14</sup> Jones worked not only on the Great Exhibition of 1851, but also on many subsequent commissions, and hence his output was highly influential.

William Morris (1834-96), for example, owned a copy of Jones's *Grammar*. A poet, designer and theorist of the Arts and Crafts movement, Morris responded to the geometric

structure he perceived in Islamic art as the basis of pattern making, as well as to the role of the craftsman as artist. Morris used Islamic designs as inspiration; for example, his Bullerswood Carpet, woven in 1889 for the Sanderson family, was based on the design of a seventeenth-century Persian vase carpet (fig. 4).<sup>15</sup>



Fig. 4. Bullerswood Carpet (detail), designed by William Morris, woven by Morris & Co., Hammersmith, London, ca. 1889, cotton warp, jute weft, and woolen pile, 4 x 7.5 meters, V&A T31-1923

Morris and his contemporaries were reacting against the increasing mechanization of production in nineteenth-century Britain, romanticizing the role of Muslim craftsmen as heroes who resisted the forces of mechanization and capitalism. Like some of his contemporaries, Morris was also instrumental in helping European museums to acquire works of Islamic art. As advisor to the South Kensington Museum (later the Victoria and Albert Museum and now the V&A), in 1893 he recommended that the museum acquire the so-called Ardabil carpet, one of an enormous pair of sixteenth-century Persian carpets that had been brought to England by Ziegler, the Manchester carpet merchant.<sup>16</sup> The museum paid the princely sum of £2,500 (nearly half a million dollars today), five or ten times the price of the Museum's typical carpet purchases at that time. Even the "Chelsea carpet," the other

fine early Safavid carpet in the Museum, had cost only £150 when it was acquired from Alfred Cohen's shop on the King's Road in 1890.<sup>17</sup> Morris himself contributed to the public subscription for the Ardabil carpet and encouraged the museum to up its share of the ante, as the public's wallet was not as generous as its appreciation of the carpet's splendid design.<sup>18</sup>

In contrast to the V&A, the C. L. David Collection in Copenhagen is a relative latecomer to collecting Islamic art (see the chapter by Kjeld von Folsach in this volume). Despite its late start, the works of Islamic art it holds rank among the world's finest, thanks to the perspicacious acquisitions by its directors, as interest in Islamic art has burgeoned in recent decades. The David Collection concentrates on the finest examples produced in a wide variety of media across the vast region from northwest Africa and Spain to India. Islamic art was also produced in other regions, notably west and east Africa south of the Sahara and southeast and east Asia, but the Collection does not normally extend that far; although at least one object in this exhibition, a tooled leather book cover from China (no. 105), shows how traditional forms were adapted in outlying regions. In keeping with the traditional definition of Islamic art, most works in the Collection also date from before 1800, although a few works, like the charming tile panels with birds and flowers from Shiraz (no. 87) or the sinuous rosewater sprinkler (no. 79), were probably made in the early nineteenth century. Since the Collection aims to present the finest examples of each type, most works in the present exhibition represent the arts of the court. As in

all times and places, those with the most money could command the best quality. Nevertheless, some of the objects on display—especially the ceramics—probably represent the taste of the bourgeoisie. The white bowl decorated in cobalt blue (no. 40), for example, is an Iraqi imitation of the Chinese porcelains enjoyed at court, and the Syrian luster bowl (no. 51) comes from a time and place when the very rich probably dined off decorated metalwares.

Collections of the Islamic arts of earlier times have been exhibited in the West for well over a century, beginning in 1878 with the *Exposition Universelle* in Paris, where the national pavilions emphasizing contemporary manufactures and handicrafts were supplemented by a range of historic objects belonging to private collectors. A few years later in 1885, the Burlington Fine Arts Club in London exhibited more than 600 items belonging to several private collections, although the emphasis was on Iranian ceramics and their derivatives. The 1893 *Exposition d'Art Musulman* in Paris displayed over 2,500 items, accompanied by French Orientalist paintings. The first comprehensive exhibition in the modern sense was probably the *Exposition des Arts Musulmans*, held in Paris in 1903, which included a wide range of items lent by a large number of collectors.<sup>19</sup> Surely the most notable was the great Munich exhibition of 1910, *Meisterwerke Muhammadanischer Kunst*, which brought together 3,555 works from public and private collections. It even inspired the painter Henri Matisse to make a quick trip from Paris with his friend Albert Marquet to see Persian "miniatures."<sup>20</sup> Although several great exhibitions in the following decades

were devoted to specific aspects of Islamic art, whether by region or medium, only the great London exhibition, *The Arts of Islam*, held in 1976 at the Hayward Gallery as part of the Festival of Islam, was designed specifically to recall the encyclopedic Munich exhibition at a time when the skyrocketing price of oil had brought the Middle East to the center of global affairs and made London the center of the market in Islamic art.<sup>21</sup> The third gallery in the London exhibition displayed the four overarching themes in Islamic art, but much of the rest of the exhibition—like the catalog—was arranged by media and chronology, thereby leaving the viewer somewhat mystified.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, most temporary exhibitions of Islamic art have focused on particular media, countries, dynasties, rulers, or even single works of art, such as an individual manuscript. One exception was a series of four small exhibitions, *The Nature of Islamic Ornament*, organized in the late 1990s for the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Kevorkian Gallery and devoted to the basic forms and sources of Islamic ornament.<sup>23</sup>

For this exhibition, we have taken up the idea proposed in the preface to the catalog from the London exhibition, "to define the essential character of Islamic art, to trace out the elements that are present in it, separately or more generally together. These characteristic elements were taken to be calligraphy, geometry, the arabesque, and the treatment of figuration."<sup>24</sup> To do so, we have selected 123 examples of Islamic art from the David Collection that represent the broadest possible range in medium, technique, place of origin, and date. They are displayed according to the four themes of decoration, which we call

figures, writing, geometry, and vegetation and the arabesque. A fifth section of hybrids comprises objects in which some or all of these themes are present on a single object.

### The Study of Islamic Ornament

The ornament on Islamic art has long fascinated outsiders. As early as the tenth century, Byzantine builders imitated Arabic inscriptions in the angular script, often called kufic, used to decorate Islamic buildings and other works of art. For example, on the exterior of the Theotokos church at the Monastery of Hosios Loukas constructed at Phocis in central Greece around 950, builders replaced the traditional decoration of bricks laid in bond that alternated with courses of stone with decorated bands of brick. The bricks were cut and laid in patterns that imitated the form of Arabic words. Modern scholars have termed this type of decoration "pseudo-kufic" or "kufesque"<sup>25</sup> (fig. 5).

These Islamic-style designs were widely and wildly popular as similar "kufesque" motifs appeared in medieval art as far afield as France, Germany, England, and Italy in the west and as far east as at Bezeklik in the Turfan oasis in Chinese Turkestan, where a wall painting in Temple IV depicts a camel wearing a saddle blanket decorated with kufesque writing.<sup>26</sup>

Italy, which developed extensive trading links with the Islamic lands of the southwest Asia and North Africa, became a center for pseudo-Islamic decoration. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries Venetian metalworkers decorated local metal shapes with the designs usually associated with

Islamic engraved and inlaid metalwares, sometimes incorporating Western coats-of arms. The entire group is known collectively as "Veneto-Saracenic" ware, and scholars have just begun to distinguish the Venetian copies from the Islamic models by the Italian artisans' incomplete knowledge of the principles of the arabesque.<sup>27</sup> While Italian metalworkers were making Islamic-style wares for the Italian market, Italian weavers imitated Ottoman Turkish designs so successfully that they were able to sell their wares to Ottoman patrons. Like the metalwares, Italian silks



Fig. 5. Façade of the Monastery of Hosios Loukas constructed at Phocis in central Greece, ca. 950. Photo: J.M. Bloom and S.S. Blair

are very difficult to distinguish from Ottoman originals, but recent technical analysis shows that the Italian silks were bound in the S-direction (i.e., with a counterclockwise twist) instead of the Z-direction used in Ottoman textiles.<sup>28</sup>

In designing book-covers for the local Italian market, which burgeoned after the invention of printing with moveable type in the mid-fifteenth century, bookbinders began adopting the vegetal designs characteristic of contemporary Egypt-



Fig. 6. Façade of the palace at Mshatta now installed in the Museum für Islamisches Kunst, Berlin. Photo: J.M. Bloom and S.S. Blair

tian bookbindings, along with the techniques of tooling in gold on leather, leather filigree (cut leather interlace against a colored background), and ornamented doublures (linings on the covers). The Paduan bookbinders Bartolomeo Sanvito and Felice Feliciano, for example, knew of contemporary Islamic centralized medallion designs enclosed within a rectangular frame.<sup>29</sup> Such centralized designs are typical not only of contemporary Islamic bookbindings but also of carpets, which began to be imported into Europe just about this time.

Italians called this type of ornament *rabesco*, a term Anglicized as *rebesk* as early as 1611 in

Cotgrave's *Dictionarie of the French and English Tongues*. By the middle of the seventeenth century, the word had become *arabesque*, defined as "rebesk work; branched work in painting or in tapestry," the form it has maintained to this day.<sup>30</sup> By the nineteenth century, musicians and dancers had appropriated the word for a variety of musical ornaments and complex figurations. Perhaps the most famous example is Robert Schumann's *Arabeske*, op. 18, composed in 1839, a rondo for piano with recurrent episodes in stark contrast to the main theme.<sup>31</sup>

Art historians soon took up the study of the arabesque. The Austrian scholar Alois Riegl (1858-1905), who had begun his career as Keeper of Textiles at the Austrian Museum for Applied Arts in Vienna, investigated the subject in his classic work, *Stilfragen* ("Problems of Style;" 1892), in which he traced the development of the acanthus motif from ancient Egypt through later periods, transforming the subject into an epic of vast dimensions.<sup>32</sup> He argued that the development was the result not of artists striving continually towards naturalism, but rather of their recognition of the possibilities of enriched formal ordering. Riegl noted that true arabesque ornament was based on the geometricization of the stems, a particular choice of vegetal elements, and the ability of these elements to grow unnaturally from one another rather than branching off from a single continuous stem. Riegl's most important observation, however, was that the true arabesque has what he called "infinite correspondence" (*unendliche Rapport* in German), meaning that the design can be extended infinitely in any direction. Riegl's analysis became the basis for

most subsequent art-historical descriptions of the arabesque. As his English translator later noted, Riegl's German syntax was as convoluted as the ornament he attempted to describe: the first impression of bewildering complexity ultimately reveals a clear underlying structure to his thought.<sup>33</sup>

Riegl's great rival in Vienna was Josef Strzygowski (1862-1941), who—after being criticized by Riegl for lack of scientific rigor in his work—turned away from the classical world to study the arts of the East, making extensive expeditions through Asia Minor, Armenia, and Iran. Upon returning from his travels, Strzygowski urged Wilhelm von Bode, director of the Pergamon Museum in Berlin, to accept the façade from Mshatta, a ruined structure in Transjordan, as a gift from the Ottoman sultan Abdülhamid II (r. 1876-1909). The ruins stood along the proposed route of the Hijaz Railway, which German engineers were constructing to link Constantinople and Europe with the Holy Cities of Mecca and Medina, and the engineers wanted to crush the beautifully carved stones to make the railbed. The façade was saved when the sultan offered it to his friend Kaiser Wilhelm II, who presented the sultan with a fountain in return. Von Bode accepted the façade as a work of Late-Antique art to complement the series of great structures from Antiquity—including the Ishtar Gate from Babylon and the Pergamon altar—re-erected in the museum as the foci of its collection (fig. 6).<sup>34</sup>

Since Mshatta lacked any inscriptions, scholars had widely divergent opinions about its date, considering it variously Sasanian, Byzantine, Ghassanid, Lakhmid, or early Islamic.

Strzygowski, for example, favored an attribution to the Ghassanids, the Christian Arab dynasty that ruled in Syria from the late fifth century to the Muslim conquest in the seventh century. The young German scholar Ernst Herzfeld (1879-1948), who had trained in Oriental languages and archaeology at Berlin, took up the challenge of its attribution. In his masterful article, *Die Genesis der islamischen Kunst und das Mshatta-problem* ("The Origins of Islamic Art and the Problem of Mshatta," 1910), Herzfeld argued that the palace had to be a work of Islamic art, dating precisely to the reign of the Umayyad caliph al-Walid II (r. 743-44).<sup>35</sup> Rather than compare an endless series of details from Mshatta with those from other places, Herzfeld launched a bold new attack on the problem. Working from what he believed to be securely dated monuments, such as the Dome of the Rock and the Mosque of Ibn Tulun erected in Cairo in 879, he devoted the first part of his article to establishing the general characteristics of early Islamic art. In the second part he showed how all the features of Mshatta—from its techniques and materials of construction to its forms and decoration—were consistent only with an Islamic date.<sup>36</sup>

In discussing the ornament on the Mosque of Ibn Tulun, for example, Herzfeld developed Riegl's point that the difference between Late Antique and Islamic arabesque ornament is not fundamental, but only incremental (see Nancy Netzer's chapter in this volume) (fig. 7).

The character of the arabesque, Herzfeld argued, lies in the transformation of the formal elements through the free play of fantasy, the principle of variation that creates new combina-

tions and variants. The composition arises from the infinite repetition along one or two axes, as well as from the dematerialization of the elements that causes the complete disappearance of their vegetal or objective meaning and produces new abstract decorative values. In this way elements combine and coalesce, as vase, stem, leaf, blossom, and fruit unite without any accentuated separation. These features, in Herzfeld's view, characterize this ornament as true arabesque. From the ornament on the Mshatta façade, he then considered a wide range of comparable Islamic examples from Egypt, Syria, and Spain.

While scholars such as Riegl and Herzfeld were trying to disentangle the formal aspects of ornament, other figures such as the Austrian architect and theorist Adolf Loos (1870-1933), a pioneer of the modern movement, took up the subject of ornament as polemic, arguing that the level of a society's civilization was in inverse proportion to its use of ornament, a position exactly the opposite the one espoused by Ibn Khaldun several centuries before. Loos's 1908 essay *Ornament und Verbrechen* was distilled into the slogan that "ornament is crime" (see Claude Cernuschi's chapter in the present volume). In addition to its political, sexist, and anti-Semitic positions, Loos's views should be understood as a reaction to the debates surrounding the foundation of schools for the industrial, decorative, or applied arts in nineteenth-century Europe in which the study and use of ornament had played an essential role.

Sir Ernst Gombrich (1909-2001), born and trained in Vienna, became the next pioneer in the study of ornament. As a student at Vienna University, he took a seminar on general

problems of method with Julius von Schlosser, a leading figure of the Viennese school of art history. Gombrich had done his class report on Riegl's *Stilfragen* and shared his teacher's ambivalent fascination with Riegl, whose theories were



Fig. 7. Detail of the stucco decoration on the Mosque of Ibn Tulun, Cairo, 879. Photo: J.M. Bloom and S.S. Blair

a hot topic of discussion among the younger art historians in Vienna. Like his teacher, Gombrich felt that Riegl's ideas "tended toward the interpretation of a sufficiently mythical Volksgeist, indeed of a highly suspect 'racial' psyche."<sup>37</sup> Gombrich eventually emigrated to London where he wrote *The Story of Art* (1950), the most widely used textbook in art history, running to sixteen editions in English and translated into eighteen other languages. In it, curiously, he dismisses all of Islamic art in a single paragraph, notable for its misconception that because image making was forbidden by the Prophet Muhammad, the mind

of the Islamic artist was directed away from the real world to a dream world of lines and colors.<sup>38</sup>

Gombrich returned to the study of ornament late in his long career. Having studied the nature of representation in painting and sculpture in his classic *Art and Illusion* (1960), Gombrich was somewhat needled by the criticism that he wanted to equate all art with illusionism, and his early interest in ornament and pattern eventually drew him back to the subject of ornament in his 1970 Wrightsman Lectures at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, published in 1979 as *The Sense of Order: A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art*. In it, Gombrich realized that what had traditionally been described pejoratively as horror vacui (the artisan's desire to fill any void) could also be seen positively as *amor infiniti* (love of the infinite).<sup>39</sup> Avoiding the traditional taxonomic approach of identifying and classifying formal elements, Gombrich turned instead to the organizational principles of ornament, namely framing, filling, and linking. He identified ornament through processes in the relationships to some object of its maker and user. In this way, he moved the study of ornament from an endless list of designs or from rhapsodic outpourings to an analytical level.

Gombrich's approach was not universally accepted. On the theoretical front, he was criticized for distinguishing symbolic art, which largely employed representation, from decorative art, which didn't, because he believed that design and meaning stemmed from two basic and separable psychological features, "the sense of order and the search for meaning."<sup>40</sup> On the practical front, he had based his analysis on Western art and was therefore criticized for limiting the scope of

his analysis to the post-Renaissance tradition in Europe. His critics noted that many of the world's other artistic traditions did not make this distinction between types of art, and Gombrich's work and example inspired several scholars to take up the challenge of discussing ornament in other artistic traditions.

Gombrich's work was followed most closely in two exhibitions at the British Museum that explored ornament in Asia: in 1983, the narrowly focused *Islamic Art & Design, 1500-1700* presented the interrelationships between the arts of the three great Muslim empires in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and in the following year, the more wide-ranging *Chinese Ornament: The Lotus and the Dragon* investigated how certain decorative motifs were carried back and forth across Asia.<sup>41</sup> Both of these exhibitions were devoted to showing visually how ornament functioned within specific traditions, but it fell to Oleg Grabar to take up the more general question of ornament in all types of art and the nature of its meaning in his 1989 Mellon Lectures at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC. Published as *The Mediation of Ornament* (1992), Grabar's lectures expanded the subject to a broader cultural perspective, "in order to test a hypothesis about the universal phenomenon of the visual perceptions and of the visual judgments made by historians and critics of art."<sup>42</sup> As could be expected from Grabar's training and interests as a leading expert on Islamic art and architecture, he focused his investigations on works of Islamic art, although he drew examples from other artistic traditions to meditate on larger issues of the perception, utilization, and fabrica-

tion of visual forms. Ornament, he argued, is a subset of decoration that does not appear to have any other purpose than to enhance its carrier and give pleasure, a concept for which he coined such terms as *calliphoric* (carrying something felt or understood as beautiful) and *terpnopoietic* (providing pleasure). Ornament, he felt, is found in every artistic tradition, but is particularly prevalent in Islamic art, and he hypothesized that an explanation of the phenomenon within the Muslim context would be of intellectual and hermeneutic value for understanding decoration everywhere. The examples he chose were drawn from writing, geometry, architecture, and nature, three of the four themes that had already been staked out in the 1976 *Arts of Islam* exhibition.

At much the same time that Grabar was engaged in theoretical musings, the Israeli scholar Eva Baer, who had previously written on the iconography of sphinxes and harpies in Islamic art as well as on Islamic metalwork, took up the subject of Islamic ornament from the diametrically opposite taxonomic perspective.<sup>43</sup> Deeply involved in the study of the individual object and its decoration, Baer—following directly in Gombrich's footsteps—serially discussed motifs and their transformation, the formation of order and the creation of repeat patterns, the meaning of ornament, and the principles and concepts that lay behind it. The purpose of ornament, she believed, was to create order and harmony, and therefore, ornament was organized according to the principles of geometry and symmetry using techniques such as linking and framing, which had already been enunciated by Gombrich.<sup>44</sup>

These two approaches—the theoretical and the taxonomic—were combined by the art historian James Trilling in his 2003 book on ornament.<sup>45</sup> At once speculative and practical, Trilling considered the cultural and symbolic significance of ornament, its rejection by modernism, and its subsequent reinvention. Like his predecessor Riegl, Trilling had previously worked as a curator of textiles, an experience that surely broadened his interest in ornament and pattern. His book is filled with textiles: it opens with a discussion of Matisse's *Woman in a Purple Robe* (a topic taken up in turn in the hugely successful 2005 exhibition about Matisse's interest in textiles that was shown in London and New York and at the Musée Matisse in France), followed by a comparison of a sixteenth-century Ottoman textile with a scarf woven in Scotland in 1980.

In the preface to his book, Trilling defined ornament as “the art we add to art” and stated that he wrote the book “to revive it,” after it had been treated so shabbily in the past. The first part of his book shows how to look at ornament and “read” it for symbolic meaning; the second half concerns recent attitudes towards ornament, especially the reasons it fell into disrepute. According to Trilling, *cosmophobia*, the “fear of ornament, or, more loosely, prejudice against it” had a long history rooted in the old misgiving about art as deception and corruption. But ornament, he wrote, has the singular goal of giving visual pleasure. His neologism, *cosmophobia*, has led us to coin our own word, *cosmophilia*, to refer to its opposite, the love of ornament, and our exhibition is designed not only to instruct and inform but also to delight.

### Ornament and Image in Islamic Art

Many people think that Islamic art eschews the representation of living beings in favor of abstract decoration that completely covers the surface of a given work of art, but this idea is simply not true. The Koran has very little to say on the subject of figural representation, although it does explicitly forbid idolatry, divination, drinking, gambling, and other vices. Making pictures of people was apparently not a topic of paramount importance in seventh-century Arabia when the Koran was revealed. Furthermore, Muslims have no reason to depict people in their religious art, because they believe that God is unique and without associate and therefore cannot be represented, except by His word, the Koran. This attitude explains the paramount importance of writing in Islamic art. Muslims worship God directly without intercessors, so they have no need for images of these figures as many Buddhists and Christians do. Muhammad was God's messenger, but unlike Christ, Muhammad was not divine. His deeds—not his person—represent the ideal to which Muslims aspire. Unlike the Bible, little of the Koran is narrative, so Muslims have no reason to use illustrations to teach their faith.

In time, this lack of motive and opportunity hardened into custom and then law, and the absence of figures (technically known as *aniconism*) became a characteristic feature of Islamic religious art. Thus, mosques and other buildings intended for religious purposes do not have representations of people in them. Palaces, bathhouses, and locales designed for other activities, however, often have figural decoration,

although in later periods the aniconism of the religious milieu sometimes spilled over into the secular realm. According to the traditions of the Prophet, even Muhammad was aware of the difference between the religious and secular worlds: he ordered all the idols removed from the Kaaba in Mecca, but he is recorded to have decorated his house with curtains and cushions decorated with figures.<sup>46</sup> Over time different attitudes developed in different regions: Iran enjoyed a long and vibrant tradition of representational art, whereas in North Africa figural representations were rare, perhaps because of the conservative Maliki school of religious law that is followed there.

In some places and at some times the avoidance of images moved one step further to the actual destruction of images. That is, aniconism turned into iconoclasm (literally, the breaking of images). For example, on the double-page frontispiece (no. 16) depicting a garden scene in this exhibition, a later reader took offense at the depiction of people and drew a red pen line across their necks, figuratively chopping off all their heads. The iconoclast did not want to destroy the figures, but he wanted to render them lifeless and impotent. Perhaps the most extreme example of Muslim iconoclasm in recent memory is the Taliban's destruction of the two giant pre-Islamic statues of the Buddha at Bamiyan in 2001. Although the Taliban leader Mulla Omar had initially allowed the Buddhas to be preserved, since no Buddhists remained in Afghanistan, other clerics called for their destruction, worrying that the statues might be worshipped in the future. Even more recently, in 2006, Egypt's Grand Mufti Ali Gomaa, the country's top Islamic jurist,

issued a *fatwa*, or proclamation, declaring the exhibition of statues in homes as un-Islamic. He based his decision on the *hadith*, the sayings of the Prophet Mohammad, but art lovers fear that Islamic extremists could use it as a justification to destroy Egypt's incomparable cultural heritage.

The recent controversies over the cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad that were published in a Danish newspaper show how sensitive

the topic of figural representation remains. Some Muslims object to all representations of any living being, while many Muslims accept them in non-religious settings, and certain Muslims have even found it acceptable to represent the Prophet, although never as a focus of worship like depictions of Christ or the Virgin Mary in Christian art. In fourteenth-century Iran, some artists represented the Prophet as an ordinary man,

while others in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries veiled his face and hands, and Turkish artists of the sixteenth century surrounded his head or body with a flaming halo. Many Muslims, like people elsewhere, have believed that essential human character is revealed in the face. In the celebrated copy of

the Persian national epic, or *Shahnama*, made for Shah Tahmasp in the early sixteenth century, there are literally tens of thousands of figural representations among the 258 paintings that originally illustrated its two volumes.<sup>47</sup> Clearly neither the patron nor the many artists who worked on the sumptuous manuscript felt any reluctance depicting people, animals, and birds. In all ten paintings depicting king Kay Kavus, however, including the one shown here, "Kay Kavus Entertaining his son Kay Khusraw" (no. 5), the ruler's face and hands have been blackened. Kay Kavus, a major but unpopular figure in the *Shahnama*, has probably been painted black to underscore his foolish character.

In short, Muslims—like people everywhere—hold and have always held a variety of beliefs, not least about the legality of representation and the approach to art. Lumping everything in this exhibition together under the rubric "Islamic" might suggest that all Muslims today and in the past shared a similar perspective; in actuality there are and have always been many interpretations of Islam, just as Muslim artists, patrons, and viewers have approached the visual arts in many different ways. Nevertheless, there are common subjects and themes that do unite the visual arts of the Islamic lands. Over the centuries, artists from Spain to India and beyond have elaborated four major subjects of decoration—figures, writing, geometry, and vegetal ornament. Many of these same subjects are found in other artistic traditions—the acanthus scroll, for example, was widely popular in antiquity—but the balance is different in Islamic art. Figural art, because it is excluded from the

religious sphere—traditionally one of the major settings of artistic endeavor—plays a much smaller role. Writing, by contrast, is much more important, due to the pivotal role of the word in Islam. Geometric designs were common in Roman art, but they became particularly important and complex in Islamic art, as artisans figured out ingenious new ways of combining and linking polygons and other shapes. The achievements of Muslim mathematicians were unparalleled in the medieval world—algebra and algorithm are, after all, derived from Arabic terms—but the degree to which the practical geometry of Islamic art derived from the sophisticated theoretical mathematics of the scholars remains to be determined, and many of the seemingly complex designs found in Islamic art can be realized with simple tools like a straightedge and a pair of compasses.<sup>48</sup> Similarly, vegetal ornament had been used in pre-Islamic times, but it surely achieved its apotheosis under Islam in the form of the arabesque.<sup>49</sup>

### Ten Aspects of Islamic Ornament

In addition to these common subjects, many unifying principles characterize the arts of the Islamic lands. It would take a whole book to discuss them all in detail, so here we shall simply enumerate ten aspects that can be seen in many, if not all, the works in the present exhibition. There are surely others we could add. No exhibition of this modest size could claim to be truly encyclopedic, but we have attempted to select the widest possible range of examples in many media from different times and places.



Fig. 8. Dome of the Shah (or Imam Khomeini) Mosque in Isfahan, Iran, 1611-30. Photo: J.M. Bloom and S.S. Blair

COLOR is perhaps the most visible, and the exuberant use of color is a hallmark of Islamic art and architecture. Glittering azure domes and dazzling expanses of multicolored tile (e.g., no 60) decorate many of the best-known buildings, like the Shah (or Imam Khomeini) Mosque in Isfahan, Iran (fig. 8).

The Arabic language has a particularly rich chromatic vocabulary, in which concepts can easily be associated through similarities in morphology. The Arabic root *kh-d-r*, for example, gives rise to *khudra* ("greenness"), *akhdar* ("green"), *khudāra* ("greens or herbs") and *al-khidrā'* ("the Verdant"; hence, "the heavens"). Blue, the color of the sky in the Western tradition, is often conflated with green in the Islamic lands, where the spectrum is traditionally divided into yellow, red, and green. Tonality was less important than luminosity and saturation, probably because of the sun-drenched environment in much of the region.

In the early Islamic period, various philosophical schools elaborated the Aristotelian theory of color, and this interest in color was taken up by mystics, or sufis, who saw parallels between the phenomenon of colors and the inner vision of the Divine. The symbolic use of color runs through much Islamic literature. The great Persian poet Nizami (1141-1209), for example, structured his classic poem, *Haft paykar* ("Seven Portraits"), around the seven colors (*haft rang*, in Persian) traditional in Persian thought (red, yellow, green, and blue complemented by black, white, and sandalwood). In his poem the ideal ruler, exemplified by the Sasanian king Bahram Gur, visits seven princesses housed in pavilions

of different colors; the princesses recount seven stories which can be interpreted as the seven stations of human life, the seven aspects of human destiny, or the seven stages along the mystical way. The seven colored pavilions of the *Haft paykar* became favorite subjects for book illustration in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Iran.

Brilliant color was not limited to fancy books made in the Persian world in the later centuries, for the spirited use of color is found in most Islamic art. From an early date potters in the Islamic world hid drab earthenwares under cloaks of brightly colored slips and glazes (no. 37). The most significant invention for the future history of ceramics in the Islamic lands—as well as in China and Europe—was underglaze decoration, in which a fine and white ceramic body provided an ideal surface for painting in colored metallic oxides. This painted surface was then covered by a transparent alkaline glaze, which protected the painted surface, but unlike lead glazes, did not cause the pigments to run together during firing (no. 119). Similarly, one of the most important contributions of medieval Islamic metalworkers was the development of the inlay technique, in which the monochrome object, usually made from a copper alloy such as brass or bronze, was enlivened with inlays in gold, silver, and copper (no. 112).

Various theories have been put forward to explain the extravagant use of color in Islamic art and architecture. It is often said to be a reaction to the dull and monochromatic landscape found throughout the traditional heartlands of Islam, but this explanation is simplistic. Colors also had a wide range of symbolic associations, but these

were often contradictory and meaningful only in specific geographical or chronological contexts. Thus black was often associated with the mysterious Black Stone embedded in the Kaaba at Mecca toward which all Muslims pray, but the color was also associated with vengeance and revolt, as in the black flag that became the standard of the Abbasid dynasty. In North Africa black could be the accursed color of Hell, and in order to avoid pronouncing the name, the opposite (white) was substituted. Thus, coal is sometimes known as *al-abyaḍ* ("the white [thing]"). White conveyed a sense of brightness, loyalty, royalty and death, much the same values as in many other cultures. Two seamless white lengths of cloth made up the pilgrim's garment, and these were often saved for use as a burial shroud. White was also the color associated with the Fatimid caliphs, rulers of Egypt from 969 to 1171 and opponents of the Abbasids. Blue had prophylactic connotations, and many people wore blue, particularly beads, to ward off the evil eye. The magical power of blue made it the dispenser of evil fortune and at the same time a defense against it. Green, the color of plants, brought equilibrium, good luck, fertility, and youth. Green was the color of the



Fig. 9. Remains of the tile revetment in the tomb of Abd al-Samad at Natanz, Iran, 1307. Photo: J.M. Bloom and S.S. Blair

Prophet Muhammad's standard and the cloak of his son-in-law and successor Ali. In later times, the Prophet's descendants wore green turbans, and the heavenly throne is said to have been carved from a green jewel. Tiled domes and roofs

were most often green or blue, but the auspicious or heavenly associations may have been outweighed by practical considerations, since copper oxide, a ubiquitous coloring agent, produces a green color in a lead glaze and a turquoise blue color in an alkaline one.<sup>50</sup>

A second principle used to organize much Islamic art is REPETITION. Perhaps the simplest example is the hexagonal faceting on

the early wheel-cut glass bowl (no. 42), where the repeated grinding of shallow circular depressions in staggered rows creates a honeycomb pattern. On the set of six Ottoman tiles (no. 86), the motif of a flowering tree occupies a set of two tiles set one above the other. By itself the set might appear almost naturalistic, but as the set is repeated, a

more stylized pattern is created. Repetition was particularly suitable for textile designs where the weaver created a module that he (or she) could then repeat in various, often subtle, ways. The exquisite silk samite made in seventeenth-century Iran (no. 73) has a design based on a single upright sunflower that is repeated in staggered rows set first in one direction and then in the other. In the wool and linen hanging from Egypt (no. 52), the pattern is created of repeating octagons. Repetition often involved alternation, for in both these two textiles the basic motif is repeated alternately in staggered rows to create the pattern. Other examples of alternation include the three star and cross tiles (no. 111) that were once part of a much larger set that would have covered an entire dado or wall (fig. 9).

Such repetition was based in the nature of the craft process, in which works of art were made in multiples. Only one example may have survived the centuries, but we must imagine that many of these wonderful works were created in large sets.

Repetition often engendered a third principle, SYMMETRY. Mirror-imaging has been an organizing principle of art from earliest times, but it became particularly important in Islamic art, as artists played around with exact and inexact mirror-images, as in the marble panel from tenth-century Córdoba (no. 84). The field design appears at first glance to be disposed symmetrically around a central stem, but closer examination reveals slight variation in the size, shape and placement of individual elements. These variations serve to enliven what might otherwise be a sterile image, as the stems inter-

twine around one another and flowers grow extra petals. In addition to bilateral symmetry, artists in the Islamic lands also exploited fourfold symmetry, so that the design repeats around both vertical and horizontal axes. This arrangement could be used on different scales. It was particularly popular for bookbindings (nos. 95, 105), textiles (nos. 55, 58), and gardens. The classical Persian garden is called a *chāhar-bāgh*, meaning a four[fold] garden, in which a quadrilateral enclosure is divided into parterres arranged around a central pavilion and separated by paths and watercourses, in which fountains play (fig. 10).

Equally common was radial symmetry, in which the design revolves around a central point. Quite naturally, this organizing principle was particularly appropriate to round objects such as plates and bowls, whether metal (nos. 53, 56), glass (no. 110), or ceramic (nos. 48, 51, 99). Radial symmetry can also be found on textiles, such as the stunning patchwork cloth probably used to cover a tray (no. 47). This is a rare textile with radial symmetry, since the weaving technique did not readily lend itself to this approach to design.

As with color, scholars have proposed various explanations for the prevalence of symmetry, ranging from the symbolic to the practical. Fourfold symmetry certainly becomes more common in the later periods, when paper became increasingly available and artists used it to transfer designs from one medium to another.<sup>51</sup> It was a relatively simple process for an artist to create a cartoon showing a quarter of the finished pattern, which the artisan could flip and repeat to create the full design in wool, leather, or some other medium.



Fig. 10. Fin Garden, Kashan, Iran; begun 17th century. Photo: J.M. Bloom and S.S. Blair

Despite the prevalence of symmetry, Islamic art often has **DIRECTION**. Psychologists and art historians have noted that works of art in the Western tradition are usually meant to be “read” from left to right, as this is the direction in which we are trained to read words. The opposite holds in Islamic art, for all languages written in Arabic script read from right to left. Hence, it is natural for someone raised in this culture to look at a work of art from right to left. Not surprisingly, this directionality is strongest in the pictorial arts associated with the book, since the words read in this direction. The viewer is meant to “enter” single- and double-page paintings, such as the scene of scholars from an unidentified manuscript on the wisdom of the ancients (no. 4), from the lower right and move across the image to the left.

This sense of directionality was also extended to other objects. On the lacquer box cover (no. 18), for example, the princess and her entourage move from right to left. Jugs and other portable objects are designed to be picked up with the right hand—thought to be “cleaner” than the left, normally used for personal hygiene. Hence, the main image is typically set to the left of the handle, as on the silver-inlaid bronze jug (no. 50), where the first roundel depicts a seated figure holding a cup. Similarly, to read the aphorism on the small ceramic jug (no. 39), one turns the vessel counterclockwise. To decipher the witty adage on the slip-painted bowl (no. 29), one has to pick it up and turn it in one’s hands, an action that forces the viewer to engage directly with the object.

**JUXTAPOSITION** is a fifth principle in Islamic decorative art, as different motifs or types of motifs are often placed side-by-side on the same object. On the Nasrid silk textile (no. 109), for example, bands of writing are interspersed with bands of vegetal and geometric ornament. The individual motifs are separated by relatively plain bands, which themselves form another type of pattern. On the leaf of calligraphy from the album prepared for the Mughal emperor Jahangir (no. 123), the central quatrain written in a heavy dark script is inserted between smaller blocks of finer and more delicate script separated by small panels of arabesque; the whole is enclosed within a green and gold border of undulating vines and leaves, which in turn is mounted on a reddish ground decorated in gold with naturalistic sprays of plants and flowers. Neither texts nor images necessarily relate to each other, but they combine to form a visual feast. On an inlaid bronze casket from fourteenth-century Iran (no. 112), roundels with figures are set on a scrolling arabesque ground within a fretted band below an inscription band with human-headed letters.

To the Western eye, often educated to distinguish vegetal and floral motifs from geometric ones, such combinations can seem somewhat excessive and jarring, but artists in the Muslim lands seem to have found their confrontation visually delightful. Moreover, in Islamic architecture, ornament rarely emphasizes the underlying structure; and individual motifs rarely, if ever, are lined up architectonically as they normally would be in Western art, so that the “weight” of one element stands over the “support” of another. This approach is not new to Islamic art, for it already

appears on the façade of the Sasanian palace at Ctesiphon in Iraq, on which the various registers of blind arcades do not line up one above the other. In Islamic times, builders often avoided coordinating the registers’ elements even when they could, as for example, in the dome chamber of the congregational mosque at Ardistan in central Iran. It would have been easy enough for the builders to change the spacing of the arches in the lower story so that they stood under the returns of the arches in the zone of transition (fig. 11).

Not only did the builder stagger the elements, but he deliberately interrupted the vertical flow by separating the lower storey from the zone of transition above with horizontal bands, including a large one bearing an inscription in relief. We know that contemporary builders could align the elements, since they had just done so at nearby Isfahan in a domed room added to the northern part of the mosque in 1084. In this building, which some Western architectural historians have considered the masterpiece of Iranian architecture,

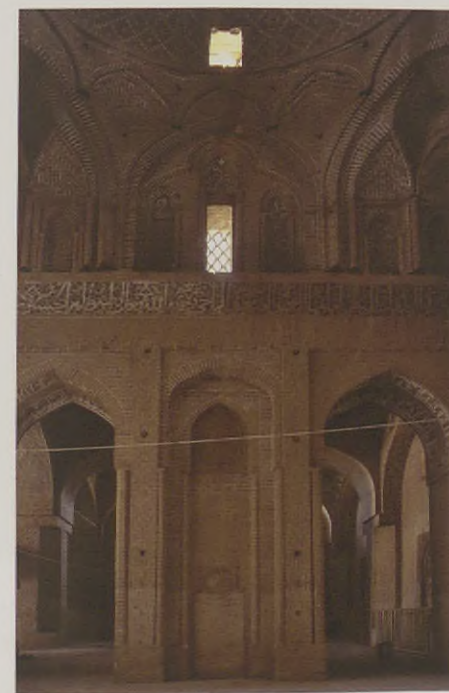


Fig. 11. Elevation of the dome chamber at Ardistan, Iran, ca. 1160. Photo: J. M. Bloom and S.S. Blair

all the parts of the interior line up into an unusually coherent whole (fig. 12).

The pointed arches and alignment of parts initially reminded some scholars of Gothic architecture, misleading some to seek the origins of the Gothic style in medieval Persia!<sup>52</sup> The similarities to Gothic architecture are quite coincidental and the north dome at Isfahan, moreover, is rare

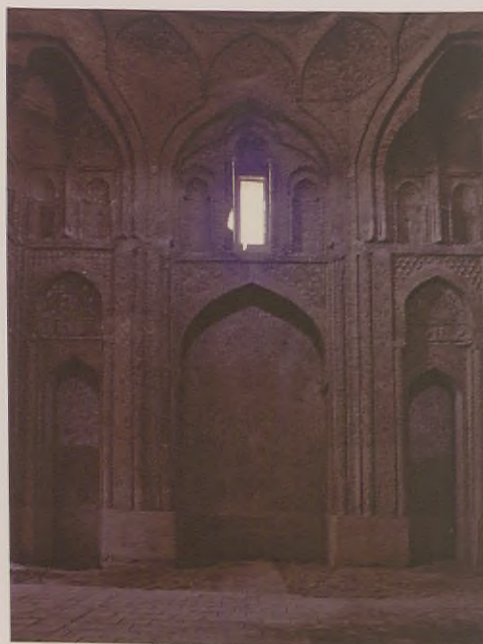


Fig. 12. Elevation of the north dome chamber at Isfahan, Iran, 1088. Photo: J.M. Bloom and S.S. Blair

in Iranian architecture. Its unusual articulation of parts was copied only once, many centuries later, in the same town. The treatment of decoration as articulating structure and the consequent logical alignment of decorative parts clearly strike a chord to Western eyes, but appear to have made little if any impact on contemporary audiences.

Whereas juxtaposition involves combining designs

on a single plane, artists often went one step further to develop a sixth principle, that of *LAYERING*, which creates the illusion of several levels of design or designs working simultaneously. One of the simplest forms is strapwork, another pre-

Islamic technique that continued into Islamic times, in which the artist creates the illusion of one band weaving under and over another. On the carved wooden beam from Córdoba (no. 94), the angular geometric strapwork appears to intertwine with the curvilinear vegetal motifs; the conceit, which is delineated on the wood surface by shallow grooves, is heightened and emphasized by painting the angular strapwork in white and the vegetal motifs in color. In a similar way, the painter of the thirteenth-century fritware dish (no. 48) left stripes of white in reserve on the luster ground to create the illusion of interweaving ribbons; the spaces between them are geometric compartments filled with vegetal motifs that float against a spotted ground. Perhaps the most sophisticated use of layering in this exhibition occurs on the magnificent carpet from seventeenth-century Isfahan (no. 65). Several levels of arabesques pirouette simultaneously across the red field: one is linked by faint white scrolls, another by delicate black scrolls. These two systems are anchored together by a regular pattern of large-scale palmettes, chinoiserie cloud-bands, lotus and peony flowers, and framed by an equally complex border. It is often unclear—or unspecified—where exactly in space these motifs might lie, for the overlappings are constantly contradicted in a way that might please M. C. Escher. At the same time, what might appear to be a cluttered and random assortment of motifs is actually a very carefully planned and structured design. In short, more is more!

One of the primary methods artists in the Islamic lands used to juxtapose various motifs was *FRAMING*. Primary motifs were often set into

panels, medallions, cartouches, and arches created by other patterns or by strapwork designs, as on the luster dish (no. 48). Again, framing is by no means new or unique to Islamic art, but artists exploited it and raised it to new levels of sophistication. For example, the lid and the sides of the small metal box (no. 112) are divided into rectangular panels, bordered by fillets enclosing a scroll frame. On the sides this scroll frame encloses, in turn, an inner fretted frame, while on the lid there is an additional inscribed band along the hip. The fields display two figures, each framed in slightly lobed roundels against a scrolling arabesque design that crosses between frame and framed. On the wooden door (no. 41), artists stretched the limits of framing: while the overall disposition of the valve is a traditional arrangement of three panels—a larger one sandwiched between two smaller ones—within a frame decorated with chevrons, each of the panels is composed in turn of dozens, if not hundreds, of smaller framed elements arranged in a radial pattern. In a sense the “stars” are “framed” by polygons, and each of the elements itself is composed of a frame around a core, itself composed of multiple parts. The possibilities are infinite, and this sense of infinity is clearly what the artisan wished the viewer to appreciate.

The separation of surface decoration from underlying structure, be it on an object or a building, points to an eighth characteristic of Islamic ornament, the principle of *TRANSFERABILITY*. Since a motif was not tied to a particular type of structure, medium, or technique, it was easy for artists to move it from one medium to another. Although a few motifs are more characteristic

of one particular medium, such as the seaweed-like leaves on the rooster-shaped ewer (no. 119) that are characteristic of pottery from Kashan,<sup>53</sup> the vast preponderance can be found on any medium at different scales. The most striking example is the Beveled Style, a technique of decoration developed in ninth-century Iraq for decorating buildings with stucco molded with a particular slanted or beveled cut (no. 74).<sup>54</sup> Since pre-Islamic times, builders in the region had traditionally rendered the mud-brick walls of their buildings with plaster to protect them from the elements. These plain surfaces might be painted or carved to make them more attractive, but both techniques were relatively time-consuming and hence expensive. Faced with the necessity of quickly decorating acres and acres of buildings in the newly erected capital city of Samarra, artisans realized that molded decoration would be much faster (and cheaper) to execute than individually carved panels. Molds with designs cut on a slope were even more efficient, as they released the molded plaster more easily, allowing the artisan to get on with the next job (fig. 13).

Artisans found that this technique was most successful for representing stylized and reciprocal vegetal forms, such as sinuous leaves and buds, with no distinction between figure and ground. Finishing details could, of course, still be added by hand while the plaster was still moist and yielding. The designs produced by this novel technique, which has a very practical basis in stucco decoration, were then transferred to other media in two or three dimensions, including ceramics (no. 76), glass (no. 13), stone (no. 81), and wood.

In an era long before the profusion of images, which characterizes modern times, artists usually had to rely on their memories to transfer motifs from one medium to another. The potter who painted the luster bowl (no. 76) had surely seen similar designs on stucco before he began painting. To explain the transfer of motifs over longer distances and times, however, we need to find other mechanisms. One intermediary was cloth—which was, of course, the mainstay of the medieval Islamic economy and exported far and wide—for artists could adapt a pattern they had seen on a fancy textile and transfer it on to whatever they were working.<sup>55</sup> Metalsmiths, for example, adapted textile patterns to decorate the flanks of the bronze ram (no. 20) and the lion-shaped incense-burner (no. 117).

Although its initial high cost kept artisans from using it freely until the thirteenth century, the introduction of paper further encouraged the transfer of designs from one medium to another.<sup>56</sup> The decoration on the inlaid box (no. 112), for example, includes figures modeled on contemporary Persian manuscript illustrations, although it is more likely that the metalwork relied on intermediary designs rather than on the finished paintings themselves. Such workshop cartoons and drawings were eventually collected in albums for the delectation and delight of connoisseurs.<sup>57</sup> The type of ovoid medallion design found on the album leaf (no. 120) might have been reproduced on a small-scale book cover or a large-scale carpet. The use of paper for cartoons meant that the role of designer was increasingly separated from that of the craftsman, who was expected to realize the creative inspirations

of another.<sup>58</sup> As a result, works of art from the later Islamic period (that is, say, after ca. 1500) generally show a higher level of finish but a lower degree of spontaneity than works produced in earlier times. Comparing the designs on the Ottoman jug (no. 68) with those on the fritware ewer (no. 119) shows what has been gained and what has been lost.

The example of the Beveled Style raises a ninth principle in the ornament used in Islamic art, that of **ABSTRACTION**.

A predilection for abstraction was already apparent in the ornament of pre-Islamic Iran, particularly when it is compared with the more naturalistic styles of decoration preferred in the contemporary Mediterranean lands, but the tendency to abstract and refashion natural forms became a hallmark of Islamic decoration. The bronze ewer (no. 75), which may date as early as the eighth century, already shows a regularized and abstracted vine that scrolls on either side of a striking central palmette. Its abstraction is particularly striking when compared to the naturalistic vine on the roughly contemporary ivory fragment (no. 114). Although this vine's scrolls enclose various animals, the flowers, leaves, and bunches of

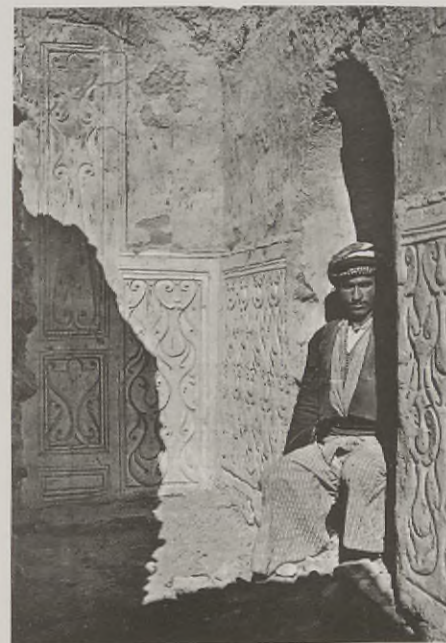


Fig. 13. After Ernst Herzfeld, *Der Wand-schmuck der Bauten von Samarra*.

grapes all display a certain degree of naturalism. The Ottoman velvet (no. 45) displays a pattern of paired wavy lines and three balls thought to be an abstract form of leopard spots and tiger stripes. The luxurious velvet was thus a sort of "faux" fur,



Fig. 14 Tile fragment from the Alhambra at Granada (no. 60), multiplied to show visual effect

which also conveyed to the wearer the strength of the wild beast. The trees and animals on the Caucasian embroidery (no. 58) have been abstracted into lollypops and stick figures.

In many cases the tendency toward abstraction resulted in the dissolution of any distinction between figure and ground. This dissolution is particularly apparent in the Beveled Style, where it is often impossible to say exactly what is the subject and what is the ground, but it is also true in many other cases. On the luster-painted bowl (no. 51), is the "subject" the interlaced white bands or the radial design of brown shapes? On the patchwork tray cover (no. 47), is the "subject" the red hexagonal figures or the salmon-colored

chains? On the tile fragment from the Alhambra (no. 60), what exactly is the subject?

The tendency toward the abstraction of vegetal ornament culminated in the so-called International Timurid Style, a style characterized by chinoiserie floral motifs—such as peony and lotus blossoms—integrated into languid arabesques (no. 69).<sup>59</sup> Developed under the Timurids, rulers of Central Asia in the fifteenth century, it came to permeate the visual arts not only in its Iranian homelands but also in other regions, notably Syria, Turkey and India, as itinerant artists and their designs moved freely across south and west Asia. The blue-and-white bottle (no. 89) represents an early Syrian attempt to copy this style on a Chinese shaped vessel. The two blue-and-white tiles (no. 88) represent an Ottoman variant of the theme, while the encrusted rock crystal vessel (no. 96) represents its Mughal counterpart in the east.

Considering this long tradition of abstracting vegetal ornament, the sudden appearance of naturalistic floral motifs in seventeenth-century Indian art comes as all the more of a shock. The plants depicted on the shawl fragment (no. 101) and the borders of the album leaf showing King David (no. 123) grow up from the ground. Their stems terminate in single flowers; their differentiated leaves sway and bend with their own weight. This kind of ornament is clearly derived from a different source, namely European prints, particularly herbals, brought by Jesuit missionaries to the Mughal court.<sup>60</sup> It stands out as the exception to the rule.

A final principle found in the decoration used in Islamic art is willful AMBIGUITY. Already

in the Beveled Style of ninth-century Samarra, artists exploited the ambiguities between subject and ground, and between abstraction and realism, as abstract lines sometimes appear to form the heads of birds and animals. Ambiguity is found in many other situations in Islamic art. Writing, for example can be ambiguous, as on the rosewater sprinkler (no. 113), where the large band around the body of the piece can either be "read" as an inscription offering good wishes or as a procession of figures and birds, presumably offering the same meaning in a less verbal fashion. Similarly, in the Central Asian silk samite (no. 92), the broad band near the top looks at first to be a stylized inscription, but actually it contains what might once have been a word or short phrase of blessing or good wishes that is repeated in mirror-reverse. To make the writing even less like writing, the designer has put animal heads at the ends of the letters. Was this meant to be an inscription? Was it just meant to recall an inscription?

Even architectural decoration could be ambiguous. The design on the tiles from the Alhambra (no. 60) can be read in several ways, all of them equally valid, particularly when the entire composition is considered (fig. 14). It can be understood as a pattern of stars, composed of yellow, black, and white tiles around a central octagonal star, the whole enclosed in a diagonal grid. Alternatively, it can be understood as a grid of squares within a lattice composed of yellow, black, and white tiles; each square contains another smaller square enclosing a black octagonal star. There are other possibilities as well, and

the designer gives us no clue as to which one he prefers.

The wooden capital (no. 59), the only example of *muqarnas* ornament in the exhibition, epitomizes ambiguity in architectural decoration. *Muqarnas* decoration was popular throughout the Islamic lands from Spain and North Africa to Central Asia (figs. 15-16). Composed of many individual prismatic elements arranged in serried rows and often likened by observers to stalactites or honeycombs, the *muqarnas* gives an effect of weightlessness and infinite subdivision. It was typically applied to weight-bearing parts of buildings, such as cornices, capitals, and the undersides of vaults and domes, and yet it appears to be weightless. How is it that something so insubstantial can support a load?

### Meaning

The insubstantiality of the *muqarnas* raises a final question in our discussion of the role of ornament in Islamic art, that of meaning. Does all this visual delight have some deeper significance or is it all just superficial candy for the eye? Some scholars, trained in the iconography of Western or Eastern art, have tried to find meanings in Islamic art that are comparable to the complex symbolic systems of Christian and Buddhist art. For example, the emergence of strapwork patterns and the development of the *muqarnas* have been linked to the revival of Sunni orthodoxy in the tenth and eleventh centuries.<sup>61</sup> Following this line of thought, these apparently abstract designs become equivalents to the saints and bodhisattvas displayed on Romanesque cathedrals

and Central Asian grottoes. According to these theories, artisans in the Islamic lands, like artisans elsewhere, gave visual form to the ideas expounded by contemporary theologians. Thus these scholars propose that Islamic art has an iconography as complex and meaningful as other great artistic traditions, although most Western observers have been largely unable—or unwilling—to see it.

Surely the figural scenes on some of the objects in this exhibition have specific meanings beyond the type of figures represented in them. For example, the large fritware dish (no. 2) painted in luster with twenty-four small figures and one large one in the center is more than a random assemblage of people. Since the larger figure—the only one with a beard and turban—is set in the center among many other figures sitting with writing tablets or folding bookstands, it is likely to represent a school scene with a teacher surrounded by his pupils. In addition, only one of the small figures looks to the right—all the others face left. One interpretation is that this scene represents Layla and Majnun in school, an episode concerning a Romeo-and-Juliet-like pair of lovers best known from the *Khamasa* (Quintet) composed by the Persian poet Nizami. From its

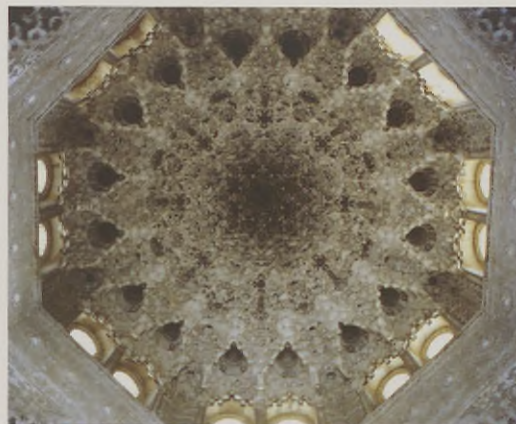


Fig. 15. *Muqarnas* dome in the Hall of the Two Sisters in the Alhambra Palace at Granada, 14th century. Photo: J.M. Bloom and S.S. Blair



Fig. 16. *Muqarnas* dome in the shrine of Ahmad Yasavi at Turkestan City, 1394-99. Photo: J.M. Bloom

style, the dish should be dated to the late twelfth century, which would make this image not only contemporary with Nizami's poem but also the earliest such representation in Persian art. All of this is perfectly possible, but it is equally possible that the artist was illustrating a similar scene from another source that has not survived. It is further possible that the artist was simply representing a generic school scene, although why he should decorate a large dish with a school scene in the first place remains open. If he meant this scene to illustrate the poetry of Nizami or some other poet, it is curious that the artist did not inscribe the rim of the bowl with some of the appropriate verses—for Nizami's remain among the best-loved poetry in Iran to this day. We have no answers to these questions, and as the bowl is unique, we cannot generalize from it. In short, it could be iconographically significant, but then again, it might not be.

Paradoxically, the situation becomes even more complicated when we turn to "simpler" representations, such as single figures of birds, animals, or people. The earthenware bowl filled with a stylized depiction of a bird (no. 14) may just be a bowl with a picture of a bird. Millions of American and European households today own dishes decorated with flowers and/or animals; their owners give nary a thought to the meaning of the specific representation on them, so why must we demand meaning for medieval representations? For the medieval Islamic world, we have no contemporary source that explains the meaning of specific representations, and no image is accompanied by a text taken from literature that deals with the same subject. For example, the beautiful bowl painted in luster by Abu Zayd (no. 118) shows a seated couple in the center, apparently a prince and his consort, to judge from the quality of their clothing. The rim is inscribed with banal love poetry, the artist's signature, and the date, so it is difficult, if not impossible, to posit some more profound meaning to this scene beyond a generic one of felicity. Hence, some scholars have concluded that the representations of birds and animals commonly found on Islamic pottery convey a generalized sense of good wishes or blessing comparable to the sentiments sometimes expressed in words on similar pieces.

Other scholars, however, have suggested that specific motifs had very specific meanings. For example, the representation of men holding scorpions and other details on a thirteenth-century Persian enameled bowl have recently been connected to the ancient Mesopotamian epic of Gilgamesh.<sup>62</sup> Such explanations are often

popular because they can provide easy answers to complex questions. In our view, however, such explanations are successful in inverse proportion to their scope—that is, that it may be possible to explain a motif or group of motifs at one particular time and place, but it is very dangerous to generalize and suggest that any motif, whether animal, vegetal, or geometric, had a constant meaning throughout all Islamic civilizations. Some artistic traditions have had religious or political institutions that were able to maintain meanings and interpretations over long periods and great distances—one thinks, of course, of the papacy—but the Islamic world was not one of them. It is difficult, if not impossible, to prove that any form or motif had the same meaning in Abbasid Baghdad and Ottoman Istanbul, let alone in nineteenth-century Java, and so iconographic arguments in Islamic art often end up as tautologies.

Scholars, particularly those with a mystical or sufi bent, can also find mystical meanings in everything they examine. This approach has become particularly popular among scholars based or interested in Iran, perhaps as a legacy of the long history of studying Iranian mysticism.<sup>63</sup> In a welcome desire to find meaning in art, but perhaps in reaction to the popularity of the mystical approach, other scholars have developed sectarian interpretations of Islamic art, hoping to see reflections of the many varieties of Islam in the many varieties of Islamic art. The Sunni-Shi'i split, which goes back to differing views about who should succeed Muhammad after his death in 632, is often cited as the cause for different artistic forms. These range from the keel-shaped

arches, typical in Iran—the world's largest Shi'ite country today—and also in Egypt during the period of Fatimid rule (969–1171), to the popularity of the tomb and the tombstone, let alone the preference for angular or rounded scripts.<sup>64</sup> Other sectarian divisions, such as the different schools of Sunni law, have been linked to the different types of epigraphic (no. 29), vegetal (no. 98), and figural (no. 14) representations found on the same type of bowls made in eastern Iran during the tenth century.<sup>65</sup>

Sectarian ideas have always been important in Islamic discourse, as the learned class, or *ulema*, has devoted much time and energy to debating them. Sectarian studies of art presuppose, however, that the people who made art were theologically engaged and were inspired to do so by their sectarian ideas. There is little contemporary evidence to help determine the social and educational level of artisans in medieval society. Historians and chroniclers rarely mention them, perhaps with the exception of calligraphers, as the great mass of artisans, in general, belonged to the lower classes. Despite the great quantities of Islamic art that fill museums and galleries around the world, medieval Muslims had surprisingly little to say about the visual arts. The "chattering classes" in medieval society seem to have been far less concerned with writing about the visual arts than with religion, literature, and the responsible acts of individuals. Nevertheless, several scholars have mined these meager sources in attempt to establish and define an overarching esthetic of Islamic art.<sup>66</sup> Once again, in our view, the success of these studies depends upon their limited frame of reference.

Of the four major subjects of decoration explored in this exhibition, only one—writing—surely had meaning, for words not only look nice but also say something. Furthermore, writing in Arabic script was spread and maintained through the faith. Other subjects of decoration may have had meanings, but as yet we are unable to establish them with certainty and precision. For example, it seems likely that depictions of flowers and fruit-bearing trees probably evoked a sense of fertility, blessing, and even paradise, which is described in the Koran as a verdant garden. Since we have very little idea of the ways in which many of the items displayed in this exhibition were actually used, it is also difficult to connect possible meanings with functions. We assume that many if not all of the ceramics in the exhibition were designed as serving and eating vessels used when people ate communally from large platters and bowls. The large glazed earthenware dish (no. 97), for example, would be ideal for serving a platter of cooked grain, which would have covered all the decoration. As the diners scooped away the food with their (right) hands, the arabesque design gradually became clear. Only when they had cleaned the plate, however, did they see the little hare hopping in the center. Did the hare have a special meaning or was it just a visual conceit? Similarly the contemporary bowl with written decoration (no. 29) might have been filled with some liquid like a stew or sauce. As the diners lowered the level of the contents, they would see more and more of the inscribed letters, and therefore be able to decipher the text, a tradition ascribed to the Prophet Muhammad that “He who believes in recompense [from God]

is generous with gifts.” The inscription was therefore a sort of individual “fortune cookie” offering advice to the satisfied diner.

Although the meaning of the decoration on many objects in this exhibition is unclear or ambiguous to us today, at least one object suggests that the primary meaning of decoration was simply to delight. It is an extremely rare case where contemporary written evidence explains exactly what the decoration on an object means. The distich on the fragmentary silk textile from Spain (no. 109) says succinctly that “I exist for pleasure; Welcome! For pleasure am I; he who beholds me sees joy and well-being.” This otherwise-unknown verse was probably composed for this very textile; it is written in the first person, as if the textile itself were speaking to the viewer. The verses are set between bands of exuberant geometric and vegetal ornament. Such luxurious and brightly colored fabric might well have been used to cover mattresses and loose cushions, as well as walls in a fine house or palace, to judge from the fragments that have survived. With its repeated message, the catchy rhyming couplet would have mesmerized the viewer much as modern advertising on TV bombards us with slogans, images, and jingles.

Like this splendid textile, this exhibition exists not only to instruct, but also to please. Welcome! Contemplate the joy and well-being displayed by these magnificent objects that testify to the long and vibrant cultures and rich intellectual traditions of the Islamic lands. In our quest to find subtle and learned meanings for these extraordinary works of art, we may have overlooked their primary meaning as invitations to stop what

we are doing for a moment and contemplate, think, and let our minds explore the beauties before our eyes.

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