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‘What Remains Belongs to God’: Henri Matisse, Alois Riegl and the Arts of Islam

RÉMI LABRUSSE

I Lilah *al-bāqī*, ‘what remains belongs to God’. The beauty of appearances has the right to be extolled – and brought into play – only to the point at which it reveals its own fragile impermanence, its ephemeral stirrings of life-force that can be bestowed and withdrawn at any moment, in contrast to *baqa*, the only permanent reality, the eternal and invisible base upon which the divine principle reposes.¹

Oleg Grabar, the historian of Islamic art, suggests that the importance accorded to decorative art in Islamic culture is connected with this summarised version of Islamic thought.² Substantially the same formula can be detected in almost all twentieth-century attempts to understand the basic features of the Islamic aesthetic, those innumerable adornments whose fragile materials echo the lack of distinction between artist and anonymous artisan. A world of interdependent forms, dissolving brilliantly one into the other, is produced in the midst of daily life. Dominique Clévenot has called them the ‘arts of the veil’,³ moving screens which stand at

the exact spot where the fragile tenuity of worldly things and the dizzy designation of absence intersect: the insubstantial splendour of the veiled world beyond. In a paradoxical flash, forms are revealed thenceforward as a bonus; they create a momentary dazzle that has neither past nor future. They are rendered more playful, lighter – perhaps we should say they are redeemed – by not having to bear the weight of being: the age-old question of the connection between image and substance suddenly seems to disperse like smoke.

Not only the arabesque – a motion from within whose destiny and great strength, according to Ernst Kühnel (quoting Goethe), is to possess neither beginning nor end⁴ – but also textile art itself has often been interpreted by art historians as bearing privileged witness to this vision; by means of these woven surfaces, the free forms and colours which bring instant light and life to a space when they are unfurled, and which can just as rapidly be folded and put away, be piled on top of one another, be adapted to different kinds of space, can disappear and then bloom once more.

A fabric is like a tactile, visible second skin, whose thrilling presence seems to have borrowed its sensual intensity and its subtle fragility from life itself; while the spectator's gaze wanders across its woven web, the fabric causes the object it covers to disappear. Perhaps this is the origin of the brilliant fabrics which, according to tradition, covered Mecca's holy Kaaba, the sacred stone of black basalt, regarded by Muslims as the navel of the earth, that will bear witness to humanity's sins on the Day of Judgement;⁵ and the royal textile factories, the government monopolies so jealously guarded by the Abbassids in Baghdad and the Fatimids in Cairo (following Byzantine custom), that produced the most costly and highly prized gifts.⁶

2

We know that European art and art history developed a way of interpreting Islamic art through textiles, feeding a growing fascination with these products of the Muslim Middle East that began to develop in the late nineteenth century. The most important works of Islamic art, whether newly discovered or rediscovered, became the subject of research and study, and through them the non-European arts and the idea of decorative art were enthusiastically annexed to the history of art.

Prolonging a centuries-old tradition of admiration for Islamic textiles, historians made such textiles the paradigm for 'Saracenic' creative inspiration, at the same time ascribing unrivalled skill in this field to those regions in which Islamic culture flourished. For example, on the occasion of an exhibition of Islamic art (which included some exceptional Safavid carpets) at the Union Centrale des Arts Décoratifs in Paris in the summer of 1903, Gaston Migeon, the show's organiser, wrote: 'No painted work could ever achieve such accords of superlative harmony and unusual subtlety as the great

weavers of Isfahan have sometimes achieved in these admirable pieces.'⁷ This love of fabrics played a leading role in the re-evaluation of the idea of decorative art, which was now beginning to be considered on its own merits rather than as a secondary area of fine art.

Between 1878, when the critic and connoisseur Henri Lavoix (a tireless champion of 'oriental' art) judged that the 'Arab' peoples, 'doggedly imprisoned in ornamentation', 'do not occupy a very important place in the history of art',⁸ and 1903, when Migeon wrote of Islamic art as 'that marvellous art which, with Japanese art, is the most intoxicating in the world', embodying 'the summum of decorative skill, a high point which has never been surpassed, nor even approached',⁹ a major revolution had taken place within which fabrics and carpets played a leading part. Everywhere (and particularly in the wake of William Morris's masterly example in England), the imitation of Muslim 'decorative artists' was encouraged; only thus would Europe be spared the collapse of any notion of aesthetic decoration in the manufacturing arts.¹⁰ Collections – to mention only the most prestigious examples in France at the time, one in the Musée Historique des Tissus in Lyons from 1891¹¹ and another at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in the Louvre from 1905¹² – began to give prominence to the Muslim East. Finally, speculation and theories about the origins of the textile arts, and the reasons why they flourished so exceptionally in the countries of the Eastern Mediterranean, began to proliferate.

3

Nowhere did the formation of collections and academic debate burgeon so intensely as in Germany and Austria at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. Although the collections in Paris and Lyons were among the largest and most comprehensive



Fig. 28
Fragment of carpet with medallions from Iran (Kerman?), seventeenth century. Wool and silk, 525 × 457 cm. Exhibited in Paris in 1907 and in Munich in 1910, no. 5. Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia

in existence,¹³ those in Berlin (thanks to Friedrich Sarre and Wilhelm von Bode), Munich and Vienna were also of the first rank. In addition, they produced a series of studies that can without exaggeration be hailed as a major advance in the history of art.

It is to Alois Riegl, curator of the department of textiles at the Österreichisches Museum für Kunst und Industrie in Vienna, that this advance is mainly attributable. Riegl gave a powerful critique of the materialist approach, which, in the wake of Gottfried Semper, then dominated stylistic analysis. The disciples of the great architect and theoretician explained away the forms of the earliest ornamental patterns as the outcome of the technical constraints of the weaving process. Riegl, in his *Stilfragen*, reversed this, identifying the concept of

decoration as the source of textile art. By considering 'personal adornment' as 'one of man's most basic needs',¹⁴ he related this need to a specific psychological feature which in 1893 he had not yet named *Kunstwollen*, simply describing it as 'this "something" in us which makes us take pleasure in the beauty of form, and which champions of the technico-materialistic origins of the arts have as much difficulty in defining as we do'.¹⁵

Although this reversal may have detracted significantly from the value of the textile as such, it nevertheless drew its initial vitality from the passionate relationship between Riegl and oriental carpets.¹⁶ Thus the first important theory of decorative art as a 'superior unity',¹⁷ which nothing – neither technical skill, nor history, nor geography, nor race – could explain except, in its irreducibility, an autonomous 'will for art' (*Kunstwollen*), was born from the extreme admiration of an art historian for the garments, velvets and carpets of the 'old Orient' in the reserves of his museum. This was undoubtedly combined with his despair at the decadence of similar products in contemporary Europe and, even more, at the inexorable spread of deadly functionalism to colonial outposts all over the world.¹⁸

It was at this period that Riegl first clearly formulated his version of the principles of Islamic aesthetics: an 'anti-naturalistic tendency verging on abstraction';¹⁹ and, above all, the 'law of infinite relationships', the Arabs' 'absolutely basic law of the constitution of the arabesque and surface decoration'²⁰ which, to his way of thinking, consisted in making the relationships between forms more important than the forms themselves. To this he was to add some years later the idea of the art of 'the pure, subjective surface', the apotheosis of free optical play with lines and colours, completely at odds with the tactile nature and mimetic preoccupations of three-dimensional form.²¹

In 1910, five years after Riegl's death, an exhibition of masterpieces of 'Mohammedan' art was held in Munich. Matisse travelled that October to view the thousands of objects exhibited.

Even now this exhibition remains the most outstanding event ever devoted to Islamic art, a kind of act of allegiance to the departed creator of *Kunstwollen*. To begin with, textiles were its main focus, in quantity as well as quality (figs 28, 29).²² Secondly, in the monumental catalogue published later by Friedrich Sarre and Fredrick Robert Martin, the analytical essays on fabrics and wooden objects were written by two of Riegl's disciples, Moriz Dreger and Ernst Kühnel respectively, and the pair left clear evidence of the formalism inherited from their mentor in their characterisations of Islamic *Kunstwollen*. Dreger, for example, reflects that textiles, in which the laws of 'infinite relationship' and of 'absolute surface' are displayed in their purest form, have the same effect on the human mind as music, creating harmonies with their linear rhythms and their colourful chords.²³ Finally, in a more general way, in the group of texts relating to the exhibition, enthusiastic appreciation of the greatness of Islamic art is often based on opinions originally developed by Riegl: praise for a society's creative skills based on domestic craftsmanship; the idea that the arabesque, the highest point of Islamic artistic invention, proceeds from an internal transformation of the Hellenistic palmette and rinceau; and, above all, the final definition of the arabesque (in the history of forms) as 'the highest expression of an abstract feeling for beauty'.²⁴

Clearly, there is no reason to suppose that Matisse, during the week he spent in Germany visiting the Munich exhibition, was aware of such debates, even though he

had acquired a copy of the pocket catalogue for his visit (Hans Purrmann, his disciple and a great admirer of Islamic art,²⁵ accompanied him to Munich and could have translated the catalogue for him).

However, the very fact of Matisse's visit demonstrates the way shared intuitions predisposed various artists, hungry for radical aesthetic change, and art historians from the most advanced circles towards Islamic art at this time. 'It is becoming clear', Riegl had written in 1901, 'that science itself, despite its apparent autonomy and objectivity, nevertheless finds its orientation in the



Fig. 29
Prayer rug from Turkey, sixteenth century. Wool and silk, 172 x 127 cm.
Exhibited in Munich in 1910, no. 156. Kunstgewerbemuseum, Berlin

dominant tendencies of contemporary thought: neither can the art historian detach himself completely from the artistic tendencies of his contemporaries.¹²⁶

'For whether we want to or not, we belong to our time and we share in its opinions, its feelings, even its delusions,'¹²⁷ remarked Matisse in his 'Notes of a Painter' in December 1908. He immediately sent the text of 'Notes of a Painter' to Odilon Redon,¹²⁸ who had just received a commission to make cartoons for the Manufacture des Gobelins;¹²⁹ soon Redon was gazing with amazement at



Fig. 30
Odilon Redon, Design for a prayer rug, 1908–09.
Distemper on canvas, 92.8 x 66 cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris

the 'shreds of fabrics from Byzantium and Persia' in the Musée des Tissus in Lyons,¹³⁰ while designing more and more prayer rugs heavily influenced by Islamic art (fig. 30).

A few years earlier, Paul Signac (whose intellectual support was so invaluable to Matisse until 1906) had written of the Neo-Impressionists' latest scientific colour theories: 'The least oriental weaver knows as much about them.'¹³¹ In 1908, Henri-Edmond Cross, himself a Neo-Impressionist, congratulated Matisse on the nature of the 'highly ornamental tapestry' in *Harmony in Red* (fig. 2), regretting only the 'prosaic' nature of the chair 'in this beflowered ensemble with arabesques chasing each other over the whole surface'.¹³²

In the wake of the Nabis, who since 1890 had been pursuing speculation about decorative art to great lengths, Maurice Denis, himself disposed in 1905 for a return to classical tradition, criticised Matisse for having out of arrogance wished to exceed 'decorative artifice, as imagined by Turkish and Persian carpet weavers' in favour of 'something even more abstract ... painting removed from any contingency, painting for its own sake, the pure act of painting'.¹³³ In the opposite camp, the young critic Michel Puy, related to the Fauves through his brother Jean, was delighted to observe in 1910 that Matisse's paintings, 'assembled in a gallery ... furnish the walls in sumptuous fashion and match the tonalities of the handsomest carpets'.¹³⁴ In short, to an entire generation, carpets and fabrics, decoration and the Orient were inextricably linked in contemporary debate; there was a renewal of painting on the horizon, and even, on a broader scale, a renewal of the way of looking at images in the West.

It is unusual to find anyone who remains unaware of the very powerful presence of this vein of inspiration in Matisse's revolutionary art, either to grieve over it – he

'confused two genres: the art of the painter and the art of the tapestry-maker', complained the critic Jean-François Scherb in 1910³⁵ – or to give credit to the artist – thus Louis Vauxcelles in 1906, just as he made a permanent break with Matisse, could still comment that some of his paintings possessed the 'radiance of oriental woollen fabrics'.³⁶

6

'Revelation thus came to me from the Orient,' said Matisse at the end of his life, still dreaming of the Munich exhibition.³⁷ This revelation of the Orient came to him through fabrics, and conversely, the revelation of fabrics came to him through the Orient, both visually and conceptually.

The milieu into which it arrived immediately interpreted the Islamic references to suit its own needs, and these references continued to expand and to become more explicit as they embraced the Coptic, Sassanian and Byzantine worlds (fig. 31).³⁸ The exhibition of Islamic art at the Louvre in 1903 gave prominence to textiles and carpets from Parisian private collections. In February–March 1907, in the same galleries, the Union Centrale des Arts Décoratifs organised an exhibition 'of oriental velvets, carpets and silks', which was, according to Maurice Demaison, 'the most comprehensive collection ever presented to the Parisian public'.³⁹ Also featured were Coptic and Byzantine fabrics, Fatimid silks, Safavid embroideries and carpets, and Ottoman velvets from Bursa, among other pieces. One of the largest lenders was the Armenian dealer Dikran Kelekian,⁴⁰ whom Matisse encountered during this period, during which Kelekian's collection gained world fame for its Turkish and Persian art (in 1910 in Munich he offered to lend, among other things, one hundred examples of Bursa velvet).⁴¹



Fig. 31
Fragment of fabric from Byzantium (Asia Minor), sixth–eighth centuries.
Silk, 240 × 140 cm. Exhibited in Munich in 1910, no. 2,252.
Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

Matisse's ability to contemplate the journey to Munich in October 1910 can only be explained by his association over the preceding years with a group of personalities who supported his efforts, sharing his predilection for the Orient as it was embodied in oriental



Fig. 32
Brocade tunic from Turkey or Central Asia.
Exhibited in Munich in 1910, no. 2582. Formerly in the Piotr Shchukin Collection

textiles. Among them were Gustave Fayet, who entertained Matisse in 1905 and encouraged him to make the trip to Algeria in 1906, before completing his own career as a designer of carpets;⁴² the Stein family, surrounded by Turkish carpets, Chinese enamels and works of contemporary art in rue de Fleurus; Karl-Ernst Osthaus, who in 1908 invited Matisse to visit his museum in Hagen where he had some important examples of Coptic and Persian fabrics, some of which were to be lent to Munich;⁴³ Sergei Shchukin, who was very close to his

brother Piotr, whose collection of Islamic textiles was exhibited with other masterpieces in Munich, before Matisse saw them for a second time in Moscow in 1911 (fig. 32);⁴⁴ the dealer Charles Vignier who, having converted Jacques Doucet, the celebrated *couturier*, to Islamic art, introduced Matisse to Doucet;⁴⁵ and Alphonse Kann, an avid collector who became a personal friend of Matisse in 1910, and in whose home, according to Pierre Loeb, 'on a background of Gothic tapestry and Coptic fragments, a Matisse rubbed shoulders with a

painting from Fayoum'.⁴⁶ This was, in short, a very proactive group, busy adapting to the modern visual revolution the treasures of Islam currently being offered to discerning collectors on the European art market, a market patently enriched by colonial (or in the case of Iran and the Ottoman Empire, para-colonial) plunder.

7

In addition to Hans Purrmann and Albert Marquet, who accompanied Matisse to Munich, the painter met one of the liveliest of his 1909–14 acquaintances while he was there. The Englishman Matthew Stewart Prichard provided historical and aesthetic ammunition for the comparison between oriental art (at the centre of which he placed Byzantium) and Matisse's own pursuits. He based his ideas on a highly personal interpretation of the work of the philosopher Henri Bergson. In Prichard's opinion, the *élan vital* or 'life-force' proposed by Bergson was aroused by 'decorative' art, encouraging the onlooker to action rather than contemplation. Prichard spent most of the summer in Munich, fascinated by the great exhibition. He described it to his friend Isabella Stewart Gardner in Boston, emphasising the value of the Islamic decorative aesthetic that was so diametrically opposed to Western mimetic art: 'The error of exaggerating the importance of representation which distinguishes all European art except Byzantine was avoided in the Orient where, with a prescience of its impossibility and vulgarity, the authorities or tradition forbade its encouragement. In compensation, what carpets, what pottery, what crystals, what woodwork, what architecture, and if modern life wishes to look to private rather than to public efforts, what evidence of the unlimited exaltation of the house and palace that these relics, these 'shadows of a magnitude', provide us!'⁴⁷

Others of Matisse's acquaintance, some of them also

friends of Prichard, converged on Munich too. One of them was Thomas Whittemore, who had not yet founded the Byzantine Institute of America, but already noted admiringly, with regard to a Persian tunic with a black background (fig. 33), that it was 'done in the manner of Matisse'.⁴⁸ Also in Munich was Roger Fry, who had met Matisse in 1909 and who, a few years before he created the Omega Workshops (in which fabrics were to occupy an important position, strongly influenced by the French painter), had expressed his enthusiasm in the pages of *The Burlington Magazine* for the 'incredible beauty of Fatimite textiles' and on a more general note for 'an art in which the smallest piece of pattern-making shows a tense vitality even in its most purely geometrical manifestations'.⁴⁹



Fig. 33
Persian tunic, sixteenth century. Wool and silk, height 112 cm. Exhibited in Munich in 1910, no. 2,369. Österreichisches Museum für Kunst und Industrie, Vienna



Fig. 34
Henri Matisse, *Still-life with Geraniums*, 1910. Oil on canvas, 94.5 × 116 cm.
Staatsgalerie moderner Kunst, Munich

Finally, while in Munich, Matisse met two of his German collectors, both admirers of oriental art: Hugo von Tschudi, the new director of the Bavarian museums, and his assistant Heinz Braune. Tschudi had returned from Japan in 1909 via Egypt; although already seriously ill, he was co-president of the working committee of the Islamic exhibition, and had recently added Matisse's

Still-life with Geraniums (fig. 34) to his impressive collection of modern art.⁵⁰ He considered Matisse 'one of the most important painters of this century',⁵¹ and chose this particular painting in February 1910, preferring it to a portrait because of the 'strong bold colours'⁵² of its composition, at whose heart the main pattern is a width of *toile de Jouy* transposed – as in *Harmony in Red* (1908;

fig. 2) – in a way which owed far more to the art of Islam than to eighteenth-century France. (This may explain the enthusiasm it aroused in Kandinsky,⁵³ who was also engaged at this period in intense consideration of the life-giving effect that oriental decorative art was having on contemporary art.)

8

Matisse loved oriental textiles throughout his life, and possessed a collection of Islamic and Coptic pieces. If we are to believe the memoirs he dictated to Pierre Courthion, he began searching for 'Persian fabrics' in the early years of the century, only managing to resist the desire to collect them by claiming to find the same effect in the iridescent light effects of an 'evening sky'.⁵⁴ This did not prevent him giving one of these 'scraps' pride of place in the centre of his painting *The Red Studio* at the end of 1911: 'the warm blacks of the border of a piece of Persian embroidery placed above the chest of drawers', as he put it in a letter to Shchukin from Tangier in February 1912, hoping in this way to encourage his patron to accept 'the most musical of all [his] paintings'.⁵⁵

Several photographs taken during the last years of the artist's life show an Ottoman embroidery lovingly spread over his bed-head (fig. 35), or laid beside his own flower drawings. In 1918 in Nice Matisse asked his wife to 'take care of the carpets that are in the studio'⁵⁶ (they had been brought back from Algiers in 1906, from Spain in 1911, from Morocco in the following year or simply purchased in Paris). In 1920 Marguerite Matisse informed her father that a passing visitor from Japan had admired his collection of textiles, in particular his 'Coptic embroideries'.⁵⁷

All this is evidence of Matisse's passionate interest in oriental art which, between the two world wars, extended to *tapas* from Polynesia⁵⁸ (see p. 161) and Kuba raffia velvets from the Congo⁵⁹ (see pp. 157–59).

9

More important than the provenance or specific quality of the objects Matisse possessed is the way in which he used them. In *Spanish Still-life*, one of the two Seville still-lives (fig. 36 and cat. 11), he deliberately transformed an antique Spanish wool carpet with blue patterns on a white ground that he had recently purchased from an antique dealer in Madrid⁶⁰ into a tiled wall. The pattern of stylised pomegranates, flowers and animals, white on a blue ground, bears a striking resemblance to Seljuk or Ottoman art (fig. 37), while also echoing the Nasrid decorations in the Alhambra (fig. 38), that 'marvel'.⁶¹

Conversely, in *The Red Studio* (fig. 13), an Islamic fabric is unrecognisable as such but is used purely to provide propulsion for the forms, a nucleus of coloured energy, associated with the artist's paintings and with the flowers in the vase – also Persian – in the foreground. This gives tempo to the glowing Venetian red room, as if everything had been set in motion at the same time, in unison. Unwittingly, Matisse subscribes to the theory of Islamic decoration that Riegl had developed twenty years earlier: the artistic essence of the object is not the product of its technique (a fabric can embody the same *Kunstwollen* as a tiled panel, and vice versa), nor of its iconographic content; rather, it is the product of the way the form is experienced inwardly – in compliance with the laws, in this case, of infinite relationship and absolute surface.

Matisse's use of textiles responds to these laws by putting pictorial space under tension in two ways: rhythm and folds. The rhythmical repetition of pattern is the founding principle of an abolition of boundaries, of the *Grenzenlosigkeit* which in 1910 Moriz Dreger, following Riegl, linked to the Islamic 'idea' of the textile, sustained by 'the joy of colour'.⁶² A powerful passage of identical purple motifs in *Interior with Aubergines* (fig. 25) unifies the surface of the painting by superimposing



Fig. 35
Robert Capa, Henri Matisse
at the Hotel Régina, Nice,
with a nineteenth-century
Ottoman embroidery on
the wall, 1941. Photograph

itself over the complex spatial effects, projecting the chromatic vigour of the surface beyond the boundaries of the frame. As for the folds or compartments (the latter produce a similar effect) that are created by superimpositions or juxtapositions of screens: still according to Riegl's categories, they permit the advent of pure optical surfaces. Instead of having his attention caught by tactile stimuli, instead of wishing to seize the three-dimensional forms of which the painting creates an illusion, or being seduced by the display of an interior fiction of the image, the spectator is kept firmly on the outside by these brilliant cliffs of screens which develop surface relationships and thereby magnify the pictorial plane. The risk of being absorbed by the image is averted and the gaze doubly liberated: rhythmical expansion leads the gaze beyond the frame of the painting; the folds and screens hold the gaze at a distance.

Finally, by these two routes, the spectator is required to arrange his or her own perception, endlessly combining the relationship between the forms. Accountability returns, and extends naturally from the pictorial surface to the surrounding space.

10

Delight and enjoyment are accompanied by demands that may be shot through with distress. The 'stratagem of the fabric with variable geometry', in Pierre Schneider's words,⁶³ far from suppressing or disguising tensions, exposes them powerfully. Above and beyond blissful enjoyment, the gaze has to deal with specifically modern ideas about the nature of the process of producing images.

Most of the time Matisse employs his fabrics, whose softness allows them to adapt to the shape of the objects they cover, in ways that are at odds with their normal usage. In *Still-life with Geraniums* (fig. 34) the large central

hanging extends strangely forwards from the background – the studio wall – slashing the depth of the painting in two while at the same time giving it strong emphasis. In *Spanish Still-life* (fig. 36) the powerful two-dimensional expanse of Spanish carpet, transformed into a wall of Islamic tiles, covers only half of the sofa; the other half is painted in perspective, according to the rules that govern the creation of an illusion of depth. In *The Painter's Family* (fig. 11) the same principle is employed: the Afghan carpet on the floor follows the pictorial plane, supporting chairs, a stool and a chequerboard drawn in perspective. This aggressive juxtaposition of form with form is valid for the rule of absolute surface, and also for the rule of infinite relationship. The rhythmical repetition of pattern does not inhabit an unequivocal decorative universe; patterns are displayed in such a way that, once again, the ambiguous relationship between the referential value of the pattern as such and the pure rhythms that emerge from the spaces between the patterns is *deliberate*. The systematic intertwining of the plants and the textile designs based on plant forms in the three still-lives discussed above is an excellent illustration of this ambiguity. The spectator is inevitably challenged on the nature of the figurative impulse and the way it is overstepped.

Undoubtedly what Matisse gained first from his interpretation of Islamic textiles was the promise of grace, in images, which springs from the mitigation of their ontological weight. 'What remains belongs to God': the artist is able to find the beauty of an evening sky in a scrap of Persian carpet simply because life shapes and reshapes itself ceaselessly, sliding from the world of nature to the world of the image, now that the shackles of imitation have been broken, now that figurative activity is no longer reliant on the need to prove that it exists.

For centuries, Western tradition had thought of the image in terms of a mirror, following the dualist paradigm of reflector and reflection. With the encouragement of Islamic art, Matisse suddenly experienced the metamorphosis of the image into an independent, decorated surface. The mirror was succeeded by the veil (a veil represents the visible as such, and inhibits speculation about the figurability of the deepest layers of being); the reflection (in the West, a melancholy symbol of metaphysical deficiency) was

succeeded by the pure, immediate presence of a formal energy, welcoming to life.

On these premises, the Islamic aesthetic in textiles embodies a paradoxical glorification of impermanence: in which the most dazzling formal invention is entropied in daily use, and thereby assumes the nature of a transitory object; and in which the most perfect geometry, rather than consisting of a crystalline, intangible unity, follows the 'kaleidoscopic' impulse (to borrow an expression coined by Ernst Kühnel)⁶⁴



Fig. 36
Henri Matisse, *Spanish Still-life*, 1910–11. Oil on canvas, 89 x 116 cm.
The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

towards constant fragmentation and recomposition.

Thanks to this ambivalence, Islamic fabrics and carpets were well suited (possibly better than any other tradition) to help Matisse 'jump over the ditch',⁶⁵ encouraging him to conjoin decorative practice with critical thought about the nature of images. In Islam, this impermanence is the native land of form, eventually leading to God. For his part, Matisse maintains it as a question that, with all its initial tension, concurrently confers upon his images their impulse and threatens to tear their admirable fabric. Their paradoxical strength lies in a sort of critical decoration, inseparable from a never-ending reflection on the condition of its own existence.

Translated by Caroline Beamish



Fig. 37
Wall tile from Turkey (Iznik), late fifteenth–early sixteenth centuries.
Ceramic, 37.5 × 29.5 cm. Exhibited in Paris in 1903. Musée des Art Décoratifs,
Paris. Formerly in the Maciet Collection



Fig. 38
Panels from the royal bath-house, Alhambra, Granada, Spain,
fourteenth century. Ceramic and stucco. Depicted in a postcard
belonging to Matisse. Matisse Archives, Paris

- 1 For the Arabic adjective *bāqī* ('durable', 'without end') attributed to God in Muslim theology, see Gimaret 1988, pp. 175–82.
- 2 See Grabar 1973, p. 287. The author excludes the idea of any causal relationship between the development of an aesthetic and Muslim theology: 'Such an explanation does not ascribe causes: at best, it is structural in the sense that the manner of thinking about religion and the manner of thinking about the decorative arts have certain postulates in common.'
- 3 Clévenot 1994.
- 4 Kühnel 1949, p. 9. For his part, Louis Massignon defines the arabesque as a 'kind of indefinite negation of closed geometrical forms' (Massignon 1921, p. 15).
- 5 See Grabar 1973, p. 105, and Clévenot 1994, p. 146. The covering of the Kaaba, the *kiswa*, later became a piece of black silk embroidered with calligraphy in silver and gold, woven in Egypt.
- 6 See Grabar 1973, p. 248. On the Fatimid *tirāz* – both a type of fabric and the workshops in which these were produced under the authority of the caliph – see Anna Contadini and Gerorgette Cornu in Paris 1998, pp. 79–81 and pp. 200–3.
- 7 Migeon 1903b, p. 30. Migeon, then curator of the department of objets d'art at the Louvre and a great champion of Islamic art, exemplifies the close ties that then existed between Islamic art and textile aesthetics: in 1907, with Henri Saladin he published the first guide to Islamic art in France (Migeon 1907) and in 1909 a general history of textiles (Migeon 1909).
- 8 Lavoix 1878, p. 770.
- 9 Migeon 1903b, p. 3.
- 10 See for example Migeon 1903a, p. 4 ('It may perhaps be in the carpets and fabrics that the decorative artists will find the most to think about here'); and Cox 1900, p. 11 ('We think it necessary to present a few reflections of a very general kind, to start with on the aspirations peculiar to the oriental mind and those peculiar to the occidental mind. It was from contact between the two, encouraged by conquest and commercial expansion, that the different styles were to be born').
- 11 The Musée d'Art et d'Industrie de la Chambre de Commerce de Lyon was inaugurated on 6 March 1864; after 1885, its new director Antonin Terme caused the collection to specialise in textiles, hoping to make it 'the leading museum of fabrics in the world'. The new exhibition rooms were inaugurated on 28 May 1891, and a new name established: Musée Historique des Tissus de la Chambre de Commerce de Lyon (see Cox 1900, p. 111).
- 12 The Musée du Louvre first assigned a special room to the Islamic collection in 1905 (the former French ceramics room on the first floor of the North Wing of the old Louvre). This development can be ascribed to pressure from Gaston Migeon, as well as to competition with the Union Centrale des Arts Décoratifs, whose museum opened in the Pavillon de Marsan in the same year.
- 13 See Roxburgh 2000, pp. 9–38, and Labrusse 1998, pp. 275–311.
- 14 Riegl 1893, p. 30.
- 15 Riegl 1893, p. 37.
- 16 These were the subject of his first book, in the context of the first serious exhibition devoted to Islamic carpets (Riegl 1891). See also his short study of the Coptic fabrics which had recently come into the museum's collection (Riegl 1889).
- 17 Riegl 1893, p. 4.
- 18 Riegl 1891, p. 214.
- 19 Riegl 1893, p. 10 and p. 214; see also Riegl 1891, pp. 154–6 ('die durchgängige Tendenz zur abstrakten Durchbildung und Ausgestaltung der von der späten Antike überlieferten, vielfach noch an vegetabilische Formen anklingenden Elemente').
- 20 Riegl 1893, pp. 244–5.
- 21 Riegl 1898, p. 182.
- 22 This was thanks to the almost accidental discovery, in the attics of the Wittelsbach palace in Munich, of a group of seventeenth-century Persian carpets, known as 'Polish carpets', which formed the backbone of the exhibition (Sarre and Martin 1910, second edition, p. 32). These carpets, numbers 65–8 and 82–5 in the catalogue, were exhibited in the first room of the exhibition (see Sarre and Martin 1910, third edition, pp. 24–6). Among the 3,572 catalogue entries, 230 were carpets (nos 1–229, Sarre and Martin 1910, pp. 17–37) and 737 textiles (nos 2,232–2,968, Sarre and Martin 1910, pp. 182–218), confirming that textiles were given by far the most important role (see Moriz Dreger, 'Die Stoffe', in Sarre and Martin 1912, vol. 3, p. XII: 'Neben den Teppichen sind es wohl die Stoffe gewesen, die das äussere Bild der Ausstellung beherrscht haben').
- 23 Sarre and Martin 1912, vol. III, pp. I, IV. In the same spirit, at the end of his life Kühnel also talked about the basic 'musicality' of the arabesque: 'Ein derartiges Musizieren mit dem Zeichenstift ... musste für den schaffenden Geist einen unendlichen Reiz haben' (Kühnel 1949, p. 6).
- 24 'Muhammedanische Kunst', in Sarre and Martin 1910, second edition, p. 53, and third edition, p. 11.
- 25 On these aspects, see Rémi Labrusse in Rome 1997, pp. 358–62. In a letter to Marguerite Duthuit, written from Berlin on 23 May 1931, Mathilde Puttmann describes the 'muddle of Persian fragments' to be found in the 'small apartment in rue Denfert-Rochereau' where she lived with her husband before the war (Matisse Archives, Paris).
- 26 Riegl 1901, p. 3.
- 27 Matisse 1908, trans. in Flam 1995, p. 43.
- 28 See the letter from Odilon Redon to Matisse, 3 February 1909: 'I received your letter, but I did not wait for it to read your work; thank you all the same. I really appreciated your article; it is so lucid and written at such a calm pace' (Matisse Archives, Paris).
- 29 See Gloria Groom in Chicago 1994, pp. 325–8.
- 30 Letter to Charles Waltner, 12 April 1910, in Redon 1923, p. 91.
- 31 Signac 1899, p. 149.
- 32 Henri-Edmond Cross, letter to Henri Matisse, September–October 1908 (Matisse Archives, Paris). Cross was reacting to a photograph sent to him by Matisse.
- 33 Denis 1905, p. 96.
- 34 Puy 1910, p. 36.
- 35 Scherb 1910, p. 59.
- 36 Louis Vauxcelles, *Gil Blas*, Paris, 20 March 1906, quoted in Paris 1993, p. 73.
- 37 Matisse 1947, trans. in Flam 1995, p. 178. See also his interview with Brother Rayssiguier on 9 January 1949: 'The Orient saved us, he says, mentioning the carpets he saw in Munich (in the exhibition of Islamic art) and which are some of the things he still remembers to this day' (Matisse, Couturier and Rayssiguier 1993, p. 130).
- 38 A small group of Coptic, Sassanian and Byzantine fabrics were shown in the Munich exhibition (Sarre and Martin 1910, third edition, nos 2,232–2,252, pp. 182–4).
- 39 Demaison 1907, p. 29. This exhibition was part of a wider project: in 1906 Japanese fabrics were exhibited as well, and also French fabrics from the Middle Ages onwards.
- 40 Jean-Louis Vaudoyer mentions 'not less than 250 pieces, Bursa silks and Scutari velvets for the most part, but also some magnificent Persian fabrics and some silk and wool carpets which are as rare as they are seductive' (Vaudoyer 1907, p. 52). For Kelekian, see also Shreve Simpson 2000, pp. 91–112.
- 41 Sarre and Martin 1910, third edition, nos 2,446–2,525, p. 207 in particular. See also Kühnel 1910, p. 247 (who also mentions nearly two hundred Bursa silks lent by Kelekian). In a conversation with Fereshteh Daftari, Pierre Matisse dates his father's encounter with Kelekian to between 1907 and 1912 (Daftari 1991, p. 234). At the same time, the Armenian dealer often emphasised in his writings the modernity of Persian art, especially

- to young people who, like Matisse, discovered as they roamed the museums that 'all the principles, without exception, of this art that is more than seven centuries old meet their own, contemporary needs' (Kelekian 1909, p. 11).
- 42 See Spurling 1998, pp. 355–6.
- 43 Osthaus had begun to build up the oriental collections of the Folkwang Museum in 1899 in Algeria, Tunisia and Constantinople; Coptic fabrics were added to the Persian ceramics, Mamluk lamps, Turkish carpets and Hispano-Moorish ceramics (see Osthaus 1971, pp. 93, 187, 190). Osthaus was a member of the working party for the Islamic exhibition in Munich in 1910.
- 44 After Piotr Shchukin's suicide, Matisse wrote to Sergei: 'It was with sadness that I learned of the death of your elder brother, whom I had seen so busy with his collection' (letter of 17 November 1912, Matisse Archives, Paris). In 1934 again, on the subject of Russian folk embroidery, Matisse confided to Alexander Romm: 'I studied the book on embroidery you sent to me with interest. I had already seen this kind of work in Moscow in the national art museum set up by the brother of Sergei Ivanovich Shchukin' (letter of 14 February 1934, quoted in Leningrad 1969, p. 132). Like Osthaus, Piotr Shchukin was a member of the working party for the exhibition of Islamic art held in Munich in 1910.
- 45 See Labrusse 1998, pp. 283–5.
- 46 Loeb 1945, p. 66.
- 47 Letter to Isabella Stewart Gardner from Munich, 7 August 1910, quoted in Labrusse 1999, p. 105.
- 48 Handwritten note on the flyleaf of a copy of the catalogue of the Munich exhibition, in the Bibliothèque Byzantine (Thomas Whittemore Collection), Paris. This must be the early seventeenth-century Persian tunic now in the Österreichisches Museum für Kunst und Industrie, Vienna (Sarre and Martin, 1910, third edition, no. 2.369, p. 199). On Whittemore, see Labrusse and Podzemskaia 2000.
- 49 Fry 1910, pp. 83–4.
- 50 See Tschudi 1996, p. 260.
- 51 See the letter from Sergei Shchukin to Ilya Ostrooukhov, written from Cairo on 10 November 1909, on the subject of Matisse: 'Chudi told me himself that he is one of the most important painters of this century' (quoted in Kostenevich and Semenova 1993, p. 178).
- 52 Letter to Matisse of 27 June 1910, in Tschudi 1996, p. 260. Tschudi had commissioned a still-life from Matisse in October 1909, when he first visited the studio. After a second visit, in January 1910, and despite Matisse's attempt to sell him the portrait of a girl, he stuck by his first choice: 'I willingly accept your offer to send me the portrait of the girl again, in order to study it closely. It is true, I only saw it in haste and I certainly have not yet appreciated its merit. I do ask you however to include the first still-life which, so far, has made the greatest impression on me' (letter of 22 February 1910, Matisse Archives, Paris).
- 53 See the letter from Shchukin to Matisse (who was then in Spain) of 14 November 1910: 'Yesterday I saw a painter from Munich, Mr Kandinsky, and he hugely admired your still-life which is with Mr Chud' (quoted in Kostenevich and Semenova 1993, pp. 167–8).
- 54 Conversations with Pierre Courthion, 1941 (Matisse Archives, Paris).
- 55 Letter to Sergei Shchukin of 1 February 1912, quoted in Labrusse 1999, pp. 208–9.
- 56 Letter to Amélie Matisse, 31 December 1918 (Matisse Archives, Paris).
- 57 Letter from Marguerite Matisse to her father, 25 November 1920 (Matisse Archives, Paris).
- 58 On Matisse's trip to Polynesia in 1930, see Le Cateau-Cambrésis 1998.
- 59 Matisse must have discovered these fabrics at the beginning of the 1920s through André Level, a friend since 1904 (see Henri Clouzot, *Tissus nègres*, Librairie des Arts Décoratifs, Paris, undated, unpaginated; the author was a curator at the Musée Galliéra in Paris at the time. He tells how, having discovered a collection of these fabrics in Antwerp in 1921, he communicated his enthusiasm to André Level). A Kuba fabric from Matisse's collection was published in *Cahiers d'art* in 1927 (Christian Zervos, 'L'Art nègre', *Cahiers d'art*, Paris, 1927, nos 7–8, p. 229).
- 60 See the letter to Amélie Matisse from Granada, 11 December 1910: 'In Madrid I bought a very pretty white carpet with blue patterns, not in very good condition, but I think I shall use it a lot in my work. Cost 50 F. It is cream with dark-blue patterns. This is what it looks like [sketch]. It might be about 2 m x 1.8 m. It could be a good door covering. It is in beautiful bouclé wool, short pile. This is about the size of the loops [sketch]. I had never seen anything like it. It caught my eye in an antique shop in Madrid. I was amazed to see some here too, but much more expensive, up to 300 pesetas. It seems that foreigners love them. They have been made in the Sierra Nevada for more than 100 years. Every young girl would make a carpet like this for her trousseau, to cover the floor, and the same kind of thing to cover her bed but in silk' (Matisse Archives, Paris).
- 61 See his letter to his wife from Granada, written at the end of December 1910: 'The Alhambra is a marvel. I felt a great surge of emotion when I was there' (Matisse Archives, Paris).
- 62 Moriz Dreger, 'Die Stoffe', in Sarre and Martin 1912, p. 1.
- 63 Schneider 2001, p. 371.
- 64 Kühnel 1949, p. 7.
- 65 Matisse 1947, trans. in Flam 1995, p. 178: 'You surrender yourself that much better when you see your efforts confirmed by such an ancient tradition. It helps you jump over the ditch.'