

## Chapter V

### Art and Architecture and the Qur'an\*

The relationship between the revealed scripture of Islam and attitudes towards art and architecture and the practice thereof will be discussed under three headings: 1. Qur'anic references or allusions to art and architecture, including passages later [162] cited with respect to artistic creativity, even if they were not initially so intended; 2. The uses of the Qur'an as a source for citations in the making and decorating of works of art; and 3. The enhancement of the Qur'an itself through art.

#### Art and architecture in the Qur'an

It must be stated at the outset that, with the partial exception of Q27:44, which will be discussed later, the Qur'an does not contain any statement which may be construed as a description of manufactured things or as a doctrinal guide for making or evaluating visually perceptible forms. The world in which the revelation of the Qur'an was made was not one which knew or particularly prized works of art and later *hadith* – the reports recording the Prophet's words and deeds – only briefly mention a few fancy textiles owned by the members of the entourage of the Prophet. Furthermore, although *hadith* do attribute to the Prophet theoretical positions or practical opinions on the making of works of art, none is directly asserted in the Qur'an itself, but only deduced from various passages. Finally, while the Qur'an is quite explicit about such practices as prayer or pilgrimage being specifically restricted to Muslims, it provides no direct or implied definition or even a requirement for a particular locale for the accomplishment of these practices. For all these reasons, the consideration of art and architecture in the Qur'an does not lead to a coherent whole, but to a series of disjointed observations which may be divided into two groups: the direct references to things made or to spaces built; and the indirect implications for the making of things and the design of spaces.

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### Direct references

There are, first of all, references to categories of manufacture and especially of construction. One rather striking set of examples involves concrete items which are mentioned only once. All of them are described as being in the possession of Solomon, the prophet–king whose patronage for works of art was legendary and whose artisans were usually the no less legendary jinn. In Q34:12 he ordered the making of a fountain of molten brass, a Muslim adaptation of the celebrated brazen sea in Solomon’s temple in Jerusalem as it is described in *2 Kings* 25:13 and *1 Chron.* 18:8. Then in Q34:13, the jinn manufacture for him *maharib*, *tamathil*, *jifan* of enormous size and *qudur*, which were anchored down so that they could not easily be removed. The meaning of the word *mihrab* (sing. of *maharib*), which will be discussed later, appears in other contexts as well. *Jifan* – meaning some sort of receptacle, usually translated as “porringer,” a term of sufficiently vague significance to hide our uncertainty as to what was really involved – and *qudur*, “cooking-pots,” are only mentioned in this particular passage. The exact meaning and function of these two items are somewhat mysterious. *Timthal*, also in the plural, appears again in Q21:52, where it clearly refers to the idols worshiped by the father of Abraham. These idols would have been sculptures of humans or of animals and it is probably sculptures in general rather than idols in particular that must be understood in Q34:13.

The association of Solomon with unusual buildings is confirmed by Q27:44, where, in order to test the Queen of Sheba and ultimately to demonstrate his superiority to her, Solomon orders the construction of a *sarh* covered or paved with slabs of glass (*mumarrad min qawarir*). Usually translated as “pavilion” or “palace,” the word *sarh* occurs also in Q28:38 and Q40:36. Both times it is modified by the adjective “high” and refers to a construction ordered by Pharaoh [163]. Since all these passages deal with mythical buildings and because the root of the word implies purity and clarity, the term may reflect the attribute of transparency in a building rather than its form. It would then be a pavilion comparable to the elaborate construction alleged to have existed on top of pre-Islamic Yemeni palaces. Generally speaking, it seems preferable to understand the term as a “constructed space of considerable merit and attractiveness,” without being more specific, though the matter remains open to debate. What is of import here is not the exact meaning of the term but the presence within the Qur’anic images of works of art that have not been seen, but only imagined. Further on it will be seen that the story of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, as told in the Qur’an, has many additional implications for the arts.

A second category of Qur’anic terms dealing with or applicable to the arts consists of much more ordinary words. There is a series of terms for settlements, such as *qarya* (Q25:51), usually the term for a city as well as for smaller settlements; *madina*, a word used only twice (Q28:18, 20), possessing very

broad connotations; *masakin* “[ruined] dwellings” (Q29:38), which often occurs in poetry; and a more abstract term like *balad* in *al-balad al-amin*, “the place of security” (Q95:3), which is probably a reference to Mecca. *Bayt* is the common word for a house and it is supposed to be a place of privacy (Q3:49; 4:100; 24:27–9), a quality which has been sought until today by architects building in what they assume to be an Islamic tradition. The word was used for the dwellings of the wives of the Prophet (Q33:33–4), for whom privacy was an essential criterion, and also for the presumably fancy abode of Zuleika, the wife of Potiphar (Q12:23). When it is mentioned as adorned with gold (Q17:93), it is meant pejoratively as an expression of vainglorious wealth. *Dar* occurs occasionally (e.g. Q17:5; 59:21) with no clear distinction from *bayt* except insofar as it implies some broader function as in *al-dar al-akhira* in Q28:83, indicating “the space of thereafter.” The rather common word *qasr* (castle, palace) occurs only four times, twice metaphorically, once in a well-known cliché referring to the destroyed “palaces” of old and once with reference to paradise in a passage which will be examined later. Other terms for something built or at least identified spatially are rarer, like *mathwa* (dwelling, Q47:19) or *masani* (buildings, Q26:129). There are a few instances when techniques of construction are indicated, often in a metaphorical way as in Q13:2, where the heavens are depicted as a miraculous, divine creation built without columns.

A third category of terms consists of words which, whatever their original meaning, acquired a specifically Muslim connotation at the time of the Prophet or later. The two most important ones are *masjid* and *mihrab*. *Masjid* (place of prostration) occurs twenty-eight times in the Qur'an. In fifteen instances it is modified by *al-haram*, a reference to the Meccan sanctuary whose pre-Islamic holiness was preserved and transformed by the Muslim revelation, i.e. the Ka'ba, the holy house (*al-bayt al-haram* in Q53:97) which Abraham and Ishmael built (Q2:125). It is mentioned as the *qibla* or direction of prayer (Q2:142–7) and as the aim of the pilgrimage (Q5:96–7). However, nothing is said about its form or about the space around it and there is only a vague reference to the importance of its proper maintenance (Q9:19). Even this action is not as important as professing the faith in all of its truth. In Q17:1, the word is once used for the Meccan sanctuary while in Q17:7 it refers to the Jewish temple in Jerusalem. The word is used a second [164] time in Q17:1 in the expression “the farthest mosque” (*al-masjid al-aqsa*), the exact identification of which has been the subject of much debate. There is no doubt that, at some point in history and possibly as early as the mid-second/eighth century, it became generally understood as a reference to Jerusalem. This, however, was not the case during the first century after Muhammad's emigration to Medina (*hijra*), when it was identified by many as a place in the neighborhood of Mecca or as a symbolic space in a miraculous event.

The remaining ten occurrences of *masjid* do not form a coherent whole except insofar as they all mention a place where God is worshiped (Q7:29). It literally belongs to God (Q72:18, a passage often used in mosque

inscriptions, see below) and unbelievers are banned from it (Q9:17). “Those who believe in God and his last day, practice regular prayer and give to charity, and fear none but God must maintain and frequent [the verb *‘amara* has a complex range of meanings] the mosques of God” (Q9:18, another passage frequently used in inscriptions). In recounting the story of the seven sleepers of Ephesus, the Qur’an asserts that God built a *masjid* over them (Q18:21). A most curious and somewhat obscure passage is Q22:40, which contains a list of sanctuaries that would have been destroyed had God not interfered to save them. The list includes *sawami’*, *biya’*, *salawat* and *masajid*, usually – but there are variants – translated as “monasteries [or cloisters], churches, synagogues and mosques.” The first two words are never again used in the Qur’an. The third term, *salawat*, is the plural of *salat*, the word commonly used for the Muslim ritual prayer. Here it seems to mean a place rather than the act of prayer. But the sequence itself suggests four different kinds of sacred spaces, probably representing four different religious traditions. If there are four religious groups implied, Islam, Judaism and Christianity are easy to propose – even if one does not quite know which term goes with which system of faith – but what is the fourth religion? It is, in fact, with some skepticism that the word *masajid* is translated as “mosques” since nowhere else in the Qur’an is the word *masjid* used alone to be understood correctly as a place of prayer restricted to Muslims. It always means a generally holy space which could be used by Muslims. This verse must, therefore, be connected to some particular event or story whose specific connotations are unknown.

In short, the proper conclusion to draw from the evidence is that, while the Qur’an clearly demonstrates the notion of a sacred or sanctified space, it does not identify a specifically Muslim space as a *masjid*. The only specifically Muslim space mentioned in the Qur’an is the *masjid* of Mecca and its sacred enclosure. The vagueness of nearly all references to it may explain some of the later problems in actually defining the exact direction of prayer (*qibla*). Was it toward the city of Mecca, a large enclosure, the Ka’ba, one of its sides or the black stone in its corner? In short, the word *masjid* – destined for a long and rich history in Arabic and in many other languages – soon after the death of the Prophet in 11/632 came to mean a special type of building restricted to Muslims. In the Qur’an it appears to have a very broad significance with a very uncertain relationship to exclusively Islamic worship.

Matters are almost as complicated with the word *mihrab*, which also possesses a range of practical and symbolic meanings. It too was destined for a long and distinguished history as the name for the niche indicating the direction of prayer on the wall of all Muslim sanctuaries. The term [165] *mihrab* also refers to a type of decorative recess found on tombstones, faience panels and rugs. As has been shown in a recent article (N. Houry, “The mihrab”), the word originally designated elevated structures which had acquired some sort of honorary significance, although the element of height

is only clearly present in one qur'anic verse. In Q38:21 the disputants go *up* to the *mihrab* where David is. The honorific quality applies to this particular place by inference, as it does in the three instances (Q3:37, 39; 18:11) where the term is used for Zechariah, the servant of God and the father of John the Baptist. When used in the plural *maharib* (Q34:13) it has usually been interpreted as "places of worship," but, even if consecrated by tradition, this interpretation does not seem necessary since the other terms listed in this passage – the *maharib*, *tamathil*, *jifan* and *qudur* (see above) that the jinn manufactured for Solomon – are mostly exemplars of power and wealth rather than of religious, though pagan, needs. Altogether, the exact meaning of this word in the Qur'an seems to be more secular than pious and bears no direct relationship to the word's later uses in mosques and as a theme of design.

While *masjid* and *mihrab* became terms to define major elements of Islamic architecture and while other terms dealing with created forms remained consistent and relatively clear (*bayt* or *dar*) or rare and fairly obscure (*sarh*), there is a category of qur'anic references to visually perceived matters which have not been seen, but which nonetheless are held to exist. The numerous accounts of paradise include a great number of references which fall into the category of architecture and planning. These accounts may have had an impact on the design of gardens, most particularly in Mughal India as with the tomb of Akbar in Sikandara near Agra and with the Taj Mahal in Agra itself (see W. Begley and Z. A. Desai, *Taj Mahal*, although their arguments are not universally accepted). It has also been argued that these qur'anic passages were literally illustrated in the decoration of mosques, most specifically in the early second/eighth-century mosaics of the Great Mosque of Damascus, also known as the Umayyad Mosque (B. Finster, "Die Mosaiken"; C. Brisch, "Observations") although others (O. Grabar, *The formation*) have remained more skeptical. Whatever turns out to be appropriate to explain later developments in decoration and in design, an architectural and decorative imagery pervades most of the Qur'an's vision of paradise and even, at times, of hell. Both paradise and hell are entered through fancy gates, green being the color of the ones for paradise (Q39:72). Rivers and formal – as opposed to natural – gardens abound (Q43:70–3; 44:51; 47:15; 76:12, among many places) in paradise. There are also fountains (Q76:6). In a celebrated passage (Q61:12) gardens are described above underground rivers and beautiful dwellings (*masakin* in Q61:12 or *qusur* in Q25:10) are erected in the gardens. In five passages (Q25:75; 29:58; 34:37; 39:20–21), these dwellings are called *ghuraf* (sing. *ghurfa*), in all cases but one modified by the adjective "lofty" with apparently the same equation between height and importance as in the instance of the word *mihrab*. It is difficult to know what was meant or imagined by the term in its singular occurrence in a strange passage (Q25:75), which seems to state that there is only one *ghurfa* in paradise. Were these meant to be whole architectural establishments

or simple pavilions? Inasmuch as we have no means to enter the imaginary world of qur'anic sensitivity, the question cannot be answered in historical terms, although it possibly, as will be seen, may be entered in the fiction of later art.

[166] The same difficulty appears when we try to imagine the *khiyam*, “tents or pavilions” (Q55:72) in which houris (*hur*) are found, the *surur* (sing. *sarir*, one of the several words for “throne,”) with perpetually youthful companions (Q56:15) and especially the throne of God himself. The word for God’s throne is *‘arsh*, as in Q40:7, only one of its twenty-nine occurrences in the Qur’an. Most of the time the word is used in the singular and refers to the throne as the place of divine presence. The word *‘arsh* is also used once in the story of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba (Q27:41–2). When used in the plural (*‘urush*, Q2:259; 18:42; 22:45), it refers to some part of a larger architectural composition. Here it is usually translated as “turrets” or “trellis,” which reflects the uncertainty of the translators and commentators about a feature which is always shown as destroyed by divine wrath.

One last visually significant qur'anic reference dealing with paradise and with visually perceived matters is that the elect are beautifully dressed (Q35:33; 76:21) and the companions they find there (Q76:15–17) carry vessels (*aniya*), cups (*akwab*) and goblets (*ka’s*) polished to look like crystal or silver (this seems to be the correct interpretation of *qawarira min fidda*, Q76:16). Their clothes are of silk, the most precious metals are silver and crystal, and polished glass is the model for the expected visual effect. These images are important in suggesting the materials and objects which were considered luxurious in early first/seventh-century Arabia and also serve as inspiration for later Persian painting, where the association between paradise and luxury through expensive clothes and other objects was fully exploited.

### Implications for art

Quite early passages from the Qur’an came to be used to justify and explain Muslim attitudes toward the arts in general and the representation of living beings in particular. This last topic has been – and will continue to be – the subject of much debate and discussion because it reflects the ever-changing needs and concerns of the prevailing culture and society as much as the actual positions apparent in the Qur’an. The latter is, on the whole, quite clear. Unlike the second commandment of the Old Testament, there is no opposition to art or to representation, just as there is no call for the creation of works of art or of a material culture that would be distinctly Muslim. Thus terms like “iconoclasm” (a call for the destruction of images) or even the German *Bilderverbot* (forbidding the making of images) are inappropriate to define any part of the message of the Qur’an. The term “aniconism,” meaning simply “the absence of a doctrine or even of much thought about

representational imagery," has found favor among some scholars and is more accurate in reflecting the attitude of the Qur'an.

On the other hand, once a broad Muslim culture had been established over vast territories, it was compelled to deal with the rich and varied artistic traditions of the alien cultures it encountered and it sought in the Qur'an either direct answers to its own questions about the validity of artistic activities or, at the very least, references that could lead to such answers. In the absence of direct statements, three kinds of arguments could be, and were, derived from the Qur'an.

One is based on a few passages which may be construed as dealing with representations. The "statues" made for Solomon (Q34:12-13) have already been mentioned. A more frequently used passage to uphold a prohibition of images is Q6:74, where Abraham, a far more saintly figure than Solomon in the Islamic tradition, says to his father Azar: "Do you take idols [167] (*asnam*) as gods? Indeed, I see that you and your people are in manifest error." This passage must be connected with Q5:90, where idols (*ansab*) are also mentioned, together with wine and games of chance, as "abominations of Satan's handiwork." Both words mean "idols," which usually have the shape of men or animals, or "statues" of figures that could be used as idols. The two passages are usually seen as expressing an objection to images, but they are more appropriately construed as being in opposition to idols regardless of their shape. A third passage is more specific and, therefore, more pertinent. In Q3:47-9, God says to Mary: "God creates what he wills. When he decrees something, he only says to it 'be' and it is." An example is the case of Jesus, who comes with the following message: "I have come to you with a sign from your lord. I will make for you out of clay the figure of a bird. I will breathe into it and it will become a [real] bird by God's leave." Here it is clear that the making of a representation is only meaningful if life is given to that representation. Since the giving of life is reserved to God alone, it is only with his permission that the creation of a three-dimensional and lifelike bird can occur.

These few specific passages dealing with representations are not conclusive in themselves, but they served as important points of reference in the later development of the opposition to the making of images. They acquired their particular importance when put next to a second type of argument based less on specific passages than on two themes which pervade the Qur'an: the absolute opposition to idolatry and God's uniqueness as creator. These two Islamic doctrines were used as arguments against the legitimacy of images as long as images were indeed worshiped and the belief existed that they partook of the spirit of what was represented. It may also be argued that they lost their pertinence once the old equation no longer held. Over the years, much has been written arguing that abstraction, visual distortion and ornamentation occur with such frequency in Islamic art because mainstream Muslim patrons and artists sought to conform to a doctrine that always

aimed at the equation of the representation and the represented. According to this view, alternate modes of expression had to be found in order to avoid criticism or even condemnation for vying with God, as a result of such an alleged doctrine.

Another doctrine alleged to have been derived from the Qur'an has been that of opposition to luxury – what may be called an ideal of reasonable asceticism in private and public life. Its premise is that art is a luxury, a point which has certainly been argued forcefully by fundamentalist groups and more moderately by moralists down through the centuries. Although common enough in any religious movement with a populist base, as Islam was certainly at the beginning, such a doctrine is difficult to represent as one which has maintained itself on a significant scale throughout time, and even its qur'anic basis is somewhat uncertain.

In spite of a number of contrary arguments, on the whole it is difficult to explain the development of an Islamic art through doctrines derived from the Qur'an. This view may only appear to be correct because too many problems have not received the proper attention. Instead, it would seem to have its roots in the complex contingencies of a new ethic encountering the well-developed cultures of the world with their rich visual heritage. There is a need for a careful investigation of the terminology dealing, directly or potentially, with the arts. Words like *asnam* (idols), *ansab* (idols), *tamathil* (statues), *sura* (shape, Q82:8), *hay'a* (form, Q3:49; 5:110) are all terms [168] which actually refer to or imply a likeness or copy and suggest some sort of relationship to a previously existing original. The full investigation of the occurrences of these terms in the Qur'an and in early Arabic poetry, as well as later usage both among *littérateurs* and in technical philosophical thought, may well provide a sketch of the conceptual framework implied by the revelation and give some idea of what the arts may have meant at the time. An interesting beginning in that direction occurred in a recent article by Muhammad Qlaaji published in a Saudi Arabian legal journal which argues, on the basis of a set of qur'anic citations, for the canonical value of ornament in Islamic art. A much more imaginative work by the young French esthetician Valérie Gonzalez (*Piège de crystal*) demonstrates the deep philosophical problems behind the qur'anic passage mentioned earlier (Q27:44) in which Solomon creates an object, the mysterious *sarh*, which is supposed to appear real and to be understood as such, without in fact being what it appears to be. The implications are striking not only for Islamic art, but for the very nature of art in general. Comparable statements have been made by twentieth-century surrealists like René Magritte. Yet such efforts at an interpretation adapted to the needs, tastes and paradigms of our own century are rare. Also they may well go against an interpretative current which asserts that only in its historical truth can the divine message be accepted.

Altogether, there is no doubt that the Qur'an will continue to be mined for answers to the aesthetic and social needs of Muslim societies and cultures



as they evolve with time. It is also fairly clear, however, that the arts were not a significant concern of the revelation nor did they play a large role in the modes of life prevalent in the Arabian peninsula during the first decades of the first/seventh century. Fancy and elaborate objects were largely absent in the surroundings of Mecca and Medina, and the vision of architecture was limited to the simple Ka'ba. There was a vision of art and architecture based on the legends of Solomon and memories of the ancient Arabian kingdoms. Ruins in the desert or in the steppe could then, as they do now, be transfigured into mirages of a lost man-made world of awesome proportions. It does not, however, seem that the milieu in which the Qur'an appeared was truly aware of the great artistic traditions of the Mediterranean, Mesopotamia, Iran, India, or even of the Yemen and Ethiopia. Furthermore, the Qur'an contains no trace of the Neoplatonic debates about the nature of art. The emerging universal Muslim culture had to seek in the Qur'an answers to questions which were only later formulated.

### Uses of the Qur'an in later art

It is well known that script played an important part in the arts of all Muslim lands, regardless of whether that art was primarily secular or religious. Large inscriptions are a common part of the decoration of buildings and many objects have long bands or short cartouches with writing, at times even with imitations of writing. These inscriptions often used to be identified in older catalogs and descriptions as "Koranic" without proper concern for what they really say. It is, of course, true that there is an ornamental or aesthetic value to these inscriptions which is independent of whatever meaning they convey. In order to organize a subject, which heretofore has received little attention, it has been broken into two headings: iconographic uses of the Qur'an and formal uses of qur'anic scripts.

#### [169] ICONOGRAPHIC USES

The founder of the systematic study of Arabic epigraphy, Max van Berchem, was the first scholar to establish that most formal inscriptions in monumental architecture consist of citations from the Qur'an which bear or may bear a relationship to the function of the buildings on which they were found. He initiated the systematic publication with commentary of all Arabic inscriptions. Beginning in 1931, these were published under the title *Matériaux pour un corpus inscriptionum arabicarum* as part of the *Mémoires* of the Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale in Cairo. M. van Berchem himself published the volumes on Cairo (with a supplementary volume by G. Wiet), Jerusalem and Anatolia, while E. Herzfeld produced the volumes on Aleppo. A similar survey, although less elaborate in its commentaries, was made by Muhammad

Husain for the Archaeological Survey of India. In recent years, G. Wiet and M. Hawary, using almost exclusively secondary sources, produced collections of the inscriptions of Mecca. In addition, S. Blair recently collected the inscriptions of pre-Mongol Iran and M. Sharon published those of Palestine. Unfortunately, M. van Berchem adopted the practice of providing only the sura and verse numbers of the qur'anic quotations, usually according to the verse division of the G. Flügel edition, which does not always agree with the now standard Egyptian edition. Therefore, there are problems whenever one tries to identify the exact wording of an inscription. Although most recent publications have abandoned this practice, it is still found in the most important corpus of Arabic epigraphy, the eighteen volumes published so far of the *Matériaux pour un corpus inscriptionum arabicarum*.

A particularly important tool has been derived from all these efforts. Erica Dodd and Shereen Khairallah produced the work *The image of the word*, the first volume of which contains a list of all of the qur'anic passages cited in inscriptions and where they have been used, thus allowing one to study the frequency of use of certain passages and the temporal or geographical variations in their use. The second volume comprises a series of essays on individual monuments and on questions which grow out of these catalogs, for example why certain inscriptions were placed in different places on different monuments. All of the essays show the influence of a major article written by E. Dodd in 1969 entitled "The image of the word," outlining the historical and psychological premises behind the existence of an iconography of the Qur'an. She argues that in trying to avoid or even reject the religious imagery of Christianity and paganism, the mainstream of Islamic culture replaced images with words whenever it wished to make some pious, ideological or other point. Within this scheme, the Qur'an was preeminent both because of its sacredness and because most Muslims were familiar with it. Therefore, the viewer appreciates the significance of the selection of the particular passages from the Qur'an and interprets them in accordance with the expectations of the patron. It may be noted that Buddhism and Hinduism do not appear to have been pertinent to the formation of Islamic culture, even though this assertion may be modified by future research.

Though never established as a formal doctrine, this "iconography" of the divine word developed quite early in Islamic times under Umayyad rule (r. 41/661–132/750). It might even be proper to associate its appearance with the caliph 'Abd al-Malik (r. 65/685–86/705), who made the [170] language of administration Arabic, and introduced Arabic inscriptions on the coinage. For the latter, the so-called "mission verse," "It is [God] who sent his messenger with guidance and the religion of truth to proclaim it over all religion, even though the pagans may detest it" (Q9:33) became the standard formula for thousands and thousands of coins. It is, in fact, rather remarkable how rarely alternate passages were used. Even if there are sixty-one qur'anic citations identified in North African coinage (H. W. Hazard, *Numismatic*

*history*), many are only pious statements rather than fuller citations and should not be considered as iconographically or semantically significant quotations.

The ideological and political assertion of truth made by the passage chosen for coins is easy to explain for a coinage that was used all over the world and which, quite specifically, competed in its inscriptions with Byzantine gold and silver. It is also quite early that the glass weights and stamps used for internal consumption received as decoration "Give just measure and be not among the defrauders" (Q26:181; G. C. Miles, *Early Arabic glass weights*). This selection demonstrates a considerable and very early sophistication in the manipulation of qur'anic passages for pious as well as practical purposes.

The most spectacular early use of qur'anic quotations on a building occurs in the Dome of the Rock (dated 71/691) in Jerusalem, where 240 meters of Umayyad inscriptions running below on either side of the dome octagon are divided into seven unequal sections, each of which begins with the phrase known as the *basmala*, "In the name of God, the merciful and the compassionate." The first five sections contain standard proclamations of the Muslim faith. "There is no god but God, one, without associate" is the most common of these. There is also a series of short passages which are probably excerpted from the Qur'an (Q112; 35:36; 17:111; 64:1 combined with 57:2), but which might also be merely pious statements not taken from the Qur'an. The sixth section contains historical data while the seventh, occupying half of the space, repeats a few of the formulas or citations from the first half and then creates a composite of Q4:171-2; 19:33-6 and 3:18-19 with only one minor addition in the middle. This statement exposes the main lines of the Christology of the Qur'an, which makes sense in a city which was at that time a major ecclesiastical and devotional center of Christianity. Other inscriptions in the Dome of the Rock use various combinations of Q2:255 and 2:112 (or 3:1 and 6:106); 3:26; 6:12 and 7:156, 9:33, 2:139 or 3:78 (slightly modified) in order to make clear the eschatological and missionary purpose of the building. Although the matter is still under much discussion, it is possible that the transmission of the qur'anic text used for the decoration of the Dome of the Rock was done orally rather than through written copies of the text. This would seem to account for the fact that many of the inscriptions do not exactly agree in wording with the most common version of the Qur'an in circulation.

While the use of the qur'anic passage Q9:33 on coins remained a standard procedure throughout Islamic history and the selection of verses made for the Dome of the Rock remained unique, other citations appear in several early Islamic inscriptions and deserve to be studied in detail. Such is the case with the series, known from later texts, of inscriptions from Mecca and Medina (see *RCEA*, nos 38, 40, 46-52; G. Wiet and H. Harawy, *Matériaux*) with a primarily religious content. A curious painted graffito in Medina

dated 117/735 contains a long citation dealing with faith (*RCEA*, no. [171] 30), but its context is unclear and slightly troubling. There are no such concerns about the fragment of an inscription found on a floor mosaic in a private house, probably from the Umayyad period, excavated in Ramallah in Palestine. It contains a fragment of Q7:205, “Do not be among the unheedful,” next to the representation of an arch which may or may not be a *mihrab* (Rosen-Ayalon, “The first mosaic”). The actual point of the inscription and the reason this particular citation was chosen are still difficult to explain.

These early examples all suggest a considerable amount of experimentation in the use of qur’anic citations during the first two centuries of Muslim rule. A certain norm became established from the third/ninth century onward. Epitaphs will almost always contain the Throne Verse Q2:255, sura 112 in its entirety, or both. These verses proclaim the overwhelming and unique power of God. Often these passages are accompanied by Q9:33, with its missionary universality. Mosques will have the throne verse and Q9:18 beginning with “the *masajid* of God will be visited and maintained by such as believe in God and the last day.” *Mihrabs* have their own qur’anic iconography with the beautiful Q24:3: “God is the light of the heavens and of the earth, the parable of his light is as if there was a niche [*mishkat*, another mysterious architectural term] and within it a lamp, the lamp enclosed in glass, the glass like a brilliant star, lit from a blessed tree, an olive neither of the East nor of the West, whose oil is luminous, although fire hardly touches it. Light upon light. God guides whom he wills to his light.” There is little wonder that the decoration of *mihrabs* and of tombstones often included lamps hanging in a niche and tree-like vegetal ornaments.

The history of this iconography is still in its infancy but almost every major monument of Islamic architecture bears, in addition to the common and frequently repeated passages, citations expressing some special function or purpose or references to events which have been mostly forgotten. Examples include the great mosque of Isfahan (O. Grabar, *The great mosque*); the minarets of Iran (J. Sourdél-Thomine, *Deux minarets* and S. Blair, *Monumental inscriptions*); the striking minaret at Jam in Afghanistan (A. Maricq and G. Wiet, *Le minaret* and J. Moline, “The minaret”); the inscriptions of the small al-Aqmar mosque in Cairo, which expresses Shi’i aspirations through qur’anic citations (C. Williams, “The cult”); the Ghaznavid palace of Lashkar-i Bazar in Afghanistan, which is the only building known so far to have used the Solomonic reference of Q27:44 (J. Sourdél-Thomine, *Lashkar-i bazar*); the Firdaws law school (*madrassa*) in Aleppo, where a relatively unusual qur’anic passage (Q43:68–72) is found together with an extraordinary mystical text made to look like a qur’anic inscription (Y. Tabbaa, *Constructions of power*). In the great mausoleums of the Mughal emperors of India (r. 932/1526–1274/1858), a wealth of qur’anic inscriptions have allowed some scholars (W. Begley and Z. A. Desai, *Taj Mahal*) to interpret the buildings themselves

in an unusual way as slightly blasphemous attempts to create on earth God's own paradise. These interpretations have not convinced all historians, but the point still remains that the choice of inscriptions and of qur'anic citations is not accidental and reflects precise concerns on the part of patrons and constitutes a powerful message to the outside world.

In general, it is proper to conclude that qur'anic citations were important signifying components of Islamic art, especially of architecture. They became part of the monument and served as guarantors or witnesses of its function and of the reasons [172] for its creation. They could be highly personalized, as in the epitaphs filling graveyards, where endlessly repeated statements are attached to individuals or more general proclamations of power, glory or good deeds projected to the whole of humankind and especially to the faithful. What is, however, less clear is the extent to which these messages were actually understood and absorbed. It is, in part, a matter of evaluating the level of literacy which existed over the centuries or at the time of a building's construction. It is also a matter of seeking in the chronicles and other sources describing cities and buildings actual discussions of the choice of inscriptions made. These descriptions, however, are surprisingly rare. Often it seems as though this powerful visual instrument, from which modern scholars have derived so many interpretations, was hardly noticed in its own time. Much remains to be done, therefore, in studying the response of a culture to its own practice, if one is to accept the position that the use of the qur'anic word can be equated with the use of images in other religious systems. It is just possible that modern, primarily Western, scholarship misunderstood the meaning of these citations by arbitrarily establishing such an equation.

In a fascinating way, the contemporary scene has witnessed rather interesting transformations of this iconographic practice. A recently erected mosque in Tehran, the al-Ghadir Mosque designed by the architect Jahangir Mazlum and completed in 1987, is covered with large written statements, for the most part in glazed or unglazed bricks. Some of these calligraphic panels are indeed placed like icons or images in a church and contain qur'anic passages. Others are pious statements or prayers, for example the ninety-nine names of God on the ceiling and the endlessly repeated profession of faith. While the aesthetic success of the structure is debatable, the building itself is impressive for its use of writing so well blended into the fabric of the wall that its legibility is diminished and its value as a written statement difficult to perceive. It is almost as if the difficulty of reading the words contributes to their aesthetic and pious values (M. Falamaki, "al-Ghadir mosque"). Many other contemporary mosques, especially the monumental ones, provide examples of the same difficulties (R. Holod and H. Khan, *The mosque*).

A particularly spectacular use of the Qur'an has been proposed by the architect Basil al-Bayati for the city of Riyadh in Saudi Arabia. He envisioned

huge arches in the shape of open books of the Qur'an along the main highway leading into the city as a sort of processional alley greeting the visitor. The project, however, has not been executed. Yet an open book appears as the façade of a mosque designed by the same architect in Aleppo and the Pakistani sculptor Gulgee created a stunning free-standing *mihrab* in the shape of two leaves from an open Qur'an for the King Faisal Mosque in Islamabad. The effect is striking, if unsettling for those who are used to traditional forms, but it demonstrates the contemporary extension of an iconography taken from the Qur'an to one that uses the book itself as a model. Whether successful or not as works of art, these recent developments clearly indicate that the future will witness further experiments in the use of the Qur'an as a book or as a source of citations, to enhance architecture, especially that of mosques, and to send religious and ideological messages. Thus, shortly after the end of the Cultural Revolution in the primarily Muslim Chinese province of Sinkiang, a modest plaque at the entrance of a refurbished mosque in the small town of Turfan (Tufu in Chinese) on the edge of the Tarim Basin quoted in [173] Arabic script, which presumably was inaccessible to the secret police, Q9:17: "It is not for idolaters to inhabit God's places of worship (*masajid*), witnessing unbelief against themselves. Their work has failed and in fire they will forever dwell." Thus the Qur'an continues to reflect the passions, needs, and aspirations of Muslims everywhere.

### The forms of the Qur'an

Thanks to important recent studies in the paleography of early Arabic (F. Déroche, *Les manuscrits du Coran*; Y. Tabbaa, "The transformation"; E. Whelan, "Writing the word") and to the stunning discovery of some forty thousand parchment pages of early Islamic manuscripts of the Qur'an in the Yemen, we are beginning to understand the evolution of the Arabic script used in manuscripts of the Qur'an in spite of the total absence of properly dated examples before the third/ninth century: the variety of early scripts was already recognized by the bibliographer Ibn al-Nadim (d. c. 385/995) and modern collectors have transformed early pages of what is known in the trade as "Kufic" writing into works of art which frequently fetch high prices on the market.

It is much more difficult to decide whether these early manuscripts were indeed meant to have a formal aesthetic value independent of their sacred content. Some of them acquired many forms of ornamental detail, which will be examined in the following section of this chapter. It is also difficult to evaluate whether they or the many styles of angular writing discovered in the San'a' trove or elsewhere were meant primarily for the pleasure of the beholder. Matters changed considerably after the introduction of a proportioned script

(*al-khatt al-mansub*) by the 'Abbasid vizier Ibn Muqla (d. 328/940) in the fourth/tenth century. The establishment of a modular system of writing made it possible to create canons for scripts and variations of these scripts around well-defined norms. As a result, from the time of the small Qur'an of Ibn al-Bawwab (d. 413/1022) in the Chester Beatty Library dated to 391/1001 (D. S. Rice, *The unique Ibn al-Bawwab*) until today, thousands of professional scribes and artists have sought to create variations on the conventional scripts which would attract and please the eyes of buyers. These scripts were not restricted to the text of the Qur'an but, with the major exception of manuscripts of Persian poetry, the holy book was the text on which the most effort was lavished. This is demonstrated by the magnificent Qur'ans of the Mamluks (r. 648/1250–822/1517) in Egypt, Syria and Palestine and those of the Ilkhanids (r. 654/1256–754/1353) in Persia (D. James, *Qur'ans and After Timur*). It is also for the accurate reading of the Qur'anic text that diacritical marks and other identifying signs were carefully integrated into the composition of words and of letters without detracting from the availability of the text. Already with the celebrated "Qarmatian" Qur'an of the fifth/eleventh or sixth/twelfth centuries, the leaves of which are spread all over the world (B. St Laurent, "The identification"), each page became a composed entity to be seen and appreciated in its own right and in which writing and ornament are set in an even balance. A potential conflict between form and content has begun, with the former of greater importance to the ordinary faithful and the latter more important to the collectors of artistic writing or calligraphy.

### Enhancement of the Qur'an through art

Two aspects of the enhancement of the Qur'an have already been mentioned: the varieties of styles of writing and the addition of small, ornamental, usually abstract or floral, features in the midst of the text itself or in the margins. At some point, large [174] headings were introduced between suras and some of these acquired decorative designs. A group of pages, presumably in the Egyptian National Library in Cairo but not seen since their publication by B. Moritz almost a century ago, uses arcades and other architectural features, perhaps representing or symbolizing places of prayer, as well as geometric and floral designs. Large floral compositions project into the margins and the design of these headings has been compared to the *tabulae ansatae* of Classical Antiquity. In Mamluk, Ilkhanid or later manuscripts, the cartouches with the titles of each sura are often dramatically separated from the text proper, while in earlier manuscripts they are more closely imbricated with each other. Enhancement could also be provided by variations in size. There are minuscule copies of the Qur'an and gigantic ones, like the Timurid one which requires a special stand to be used and whose pages

cannot be read and turned simultaneously. Accounts of calligraphers, especially in Iran, often boast of such feats of marvelous transformations of the holy book, thereby illustrating the major traditional aesthetic value of being “astonishing” (*‘ajīb*). Qur’ans were also honored with fancy and expensive bindings. Especially valued copies were even kept in special boxes. When the Almohad ruler ‘Abd al-Mu’min (r. 524/1130–558/1163) received from the people of Cordoba the copy of the Qur’an which had allegedly belonged to the caliph ‘Uthman (r. 23/644–35/656) and preserved traces of his blood, he hired jewelers, metalworkers, painters and leather-workers to embellish it. In Ottoman times (r. 680/1281–1342/1924) particularly beautiful cabinets were made for keeping pages and manuscripts of the holy book.

It is, on the whole, clear and not particularly surprising that many techniques were used to honor manuscripts of the Qur’an by making them more attractive and more exciting than other books and by treating them like precious items, if not literally like works of art. What is more difficult to decide is whether certain styles of writing, certain techniques of binding, certain ways of ornamenting pages and certain motifs were, generally and exclusively, restricted to the Qur’an. The argument may be made for the composition of pages after the fifth/eleventh century and for scripts which, angular or cursive, were written with particular care when used for the holy text. More tentatively, it may be argued that certain types of decorative feature like the marginal ornaments – which also served to signal divisions within the text – were exclusively restricted to the Qur’an. All these hypotheses, however, still await investigation and discussion. The difficulty they present is well illustrated by two hitherto unique pages from the trove in Yemen which were published by H. C. von Bothmer (*Architekturbilder*) and discussed by O. Grabar (*The mediation*). They illustrate large architectural ensembles, which have been interpreted as mosques shown in a curious but not unique mix of plans and elevations. Are they really images of mosques? If so, are they representations of specific buildings or evocations of generic types? Could they be illustrations of passages in the Qur’an describing buildings in paradise? There are as yet no firm answers to these questions, but it may be suggested that there was a complex vocabulary of forms more or less restricted to the enhancement of the Qur’an. These forms did indeed create an art.

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