

## Chapter II

### An Art of the Object\*

One of the results of the Metropolitan Museum's brilliant installation of its Islamic collections has been that art historians, critics, journalists and the general public have, willingly or not, been confronted with the need – or, at the very least, the opportunity – to understand the creativity of a culture previously relegated to a few pages in general manuals of art history, if not omitted altogether, as a distant relative of the grand tradition without sufficiently redeeming exotic qualities.

Specialists may have rejoiced at this turn of events, but, as is often the case with academic humanists faced with a large public, they were hardly prepared to answer the legitimate questions of visitors to the galleries: what does one see in objects of so many techniques? What do ninth-century ceramics and sixteenth-century miniatures or rugs have in common? Is this an art which stylized the forms of Late Antiquity because it made certain conscious choices within an existing language, or did it create an entirely new visual idiom? In either case, does it express new meanings or retell the same stories with a new alphabet? What internal historical, ideological or regional motors led to changes in the development and use of its forms? Are the generally accepted categories of analysis and explanation for Western art appropriate, when no formal hierarchy of forms and functions is immediately visible, or at best an unusual hierarchy of repetitive designs over unique motifs, of writing over personages, and of objects of daily use over large panels or sculptures? What are the aesthetic ambitions of Islamic art? Are they culturally restricted or trans-cultural?

Curiously enough, partial answers to some of these questions were more readily available seventy or a hundred years ago than they are now. In reacting against the dogmatism of a classicizing tradition, architects like Pascal Coste, Bourguin, Prisse d'Avesnes, Owen Jones and a few others were inspired by their travels to Spain, Egypt or Iran to seek alternate solutions to formal problems and to develop more or [37] less coherent theories of ornament in architecture. Roughly a generation and a half later, scholars like A. Riegl or J. Strzygowski also concerned themselves with

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Islamic art as a theoretical paradigm and saw in its monuments (once again mostly of architecture or architectural decoration) examples of pure formal developments or proofs of complex theories of art history or artistic perception.

But neither the beautiful drawings of French and British architects nor the abstract and historical considerations of Viennese art historians had much impact on subsequent work on Islamic art. The field was almost entirely taken over by academic investigators and by collectors. The technical accomplishments of the former are enormous, as dates, attributions, regional or temporal distinctions, and social and symbolic associations became clearer than they had been, although hardly comparable to the state of affairs in Western or even Far Eastern art. And collectors provided an impetus for museum acquisitions beyond the automatic antiquarianism of old European establishments. As in many other fields, it is American collections – the Freer Gallery, the Cleveland, Boston and Cincinnati museums, the Fogg Museum, and most spectacularly the Metropolitan – which profited most strikingly from the acquisitive instincts of a small group of amateurs and dealers.

But, although much has been written and discussed in museum bulletins or occasional catalogs, no vision has emerged, no statement about qualitative distinctions or about the intrinsic properties of an artistic tradition which is visually so distinctive. A few recent exceptions by the Iranian architect Nader Ardalan and by the Swiss convert to Islam Titus Burckhart have, in spite of considerable eloquence and many fascinating and cogent observations, fallen off the mark by over-emphasizing mystical esotericism or ethnically defined vernacular forms which cannot possibly have been sole sources of inspiration for centuries and, more importantly, which derive from judgments and interpretations of Islamic culture rather than from an analysis of its monuments.

It would be wrong to criticize academic scholarship or private and public collecting of the past decades for having failed to provide conceptual means to answer the fundamental questions posed by the works exhibited at the Metropolitan Museum or by any comparable presentations of a collection. For this failure is not simply the result of insufficient accomplishments in detailed identifications and explanations, or of intellectual timidity, although both factors are involved. It is in fact quite fundamentally the result of the monuments themselves, and perhaps even paradoxically of the inability of most museum settings to show them properly.

Both points require some elaboration. There are two striking characteristics of any large collection of Islamic art. One is that nearly all items in it have a practical function which does not require the technical elaborations of forms which normally concern the art historian. An appreciation of a great epic like the *Shahnameh* does not need illustrations, water or wine can be poured from undecorated pitchers, fruit can be piled up on plates without fancy

designs, and floors can be covered with felt mats. Furthermore, the functions involved are always those of daily life: washing, pouring, eating, keeping perfumes, reading, playing chess, sitting, writing. We could conclude that the creative energy involved in Islamic art is an entirely gratuitous addition to the setting of life, a pure pleasure of the senses, whose peculiarity is that it was extended to a far greater number of techniques and social levels than most other traditions.

It would be a *Prachtkunst* (art of splendor) which became a *Kunstindustrie*, and its understanding and appreciation need only the viewer's own free sensuousness, his fascination with forms for their own sake, without message or objective. Alternately one can conclude that, just as the sculpture of cathedrals is connected to the cult and symbolism of the faith, so there must be a way of connecting the functions of the objects with the forms on them. The decoration of an incense burner or of a pitcher is somehow to be related to the purpose of the object. Yet, with a few exceptions such as miniatures which can be presumed to be illustrations of texts or the *mihhrabs* which are known to have had a symbolic, almost liturgical significance, the casual observer or even the specialist is rarely led from the decoration of an object to its uses.

I shall return to further considerations on this question, but it is important to identify beforehand a second characteristic of a large collection like the Metropolitan's: many objects within it are remarkably alike in technique, size, shape, style and decorative theme. To put it another way, it is as though there are no masterpieces, no monument which emerges as being so superior to others within a comparable series that a qualitative or developmental sequence can easily be built up.

It is, of course, true that a number of pages from the *Shahnameh* of Shah Tahmasp are stunning paintings, and that three or four Nishapur ceramics and at least one Kashan luster plate stand out from the rest. But the differences are generally of degree rather than of kind; they almost always involve details of workmanship and composition rather than "nobility" of subject or power of expression. The effectiveness and interest of the Nishapur room with its large number of ceramics and stuccos excavated by the museum lies precisely in the mass of objects which belong together, as though the group makes better sense than any one of its elements. But can one appropriately talk of "works of art" when dozens, if not hundreds, of similar objects are involved?

These remarks suggest that the monuments of Islamic art may not really belong in an art museum whose [39] setting detaches them from their purpose, and that they are in fact to be seen as ethnographic documents closely tied to life, even a reconstructed life, and more meaningful in large numbers and series than as single creations. It is perhaps for this reason that the early eighteenth-century room from Damascus, or even the less unified rooms dedicated to the art of the mosque or to late Arab art, are the most

effective and the most popular in the exhibition even though the periods involved were far less original and creative than earlier centuries. For a ceramic plate or a brass bucket makes better sense in a room where we can imagine it being used, just as a rug makes more sense on a floor than on a wall. This apparent requirement of a context is important, in that the objects lead constantly to the architectural setting in which they could be used. The real or fantasized memories of the Alhambra, of Isfahan or of Cairene mosques provide the objects with their meaning. The very character of the exhibition may thus indicate the primacy of architecture in Islamic art, the primacy of a creativity which is almost by definition collective and social.

One last preliminary and general observation is the absence of obvious inspiration from nature and from physical experience. There are no shadows in the paintings; mythical animals are more frequent than real ones; geometry or writing predominates over landscapes; vegetal motifs rarely reflect known vegetation; and human beings are almost never shown in concretely possible settings or poses. It is as though an entire visual creation was set in imaginary terms, that is to say, in terms which are willful inventions of man, possibly artificial and conventional reflections of cultural or broadly human archetypes. Artificiality and conventions identify most well-defined artistic traditions, but it is rare indeed that in over a thousand years, from Spain to India, hardly a trace occurs of a perception of surroundings. There is little humor and little sorrow; the few exceptions on Egyptian ceramics or in some Persian miniatures stand out by their rarity. Whatever was meant to be achieved by artistic creativity seems to have been dehumanized, like a superb sheath of propriety over strife, passion and the visible world. Either there was a striking cultural agreement on the modalities of visual creation, or visual creation was secondary to the realities of life, or else we are simply unable to decipher the forms of the tradition.

These remarks can be summed up in the form of a series of intellectual and methodological dilemmas which, consciously or not, have prevented the formulation of adequate categories of judgment for Islamic art. The predominance of industrial arts over single works of art, the apparent requirement of a physical context, the practical usefulness of almost all objects, suggest that anthropological rather than art-historical methods are more appropriate for analysis. But is it conceivable that a complex and varied culture did not create for itself at any time an aesthetically definable ideal or ambition? A second dilemma lies in the forms themselves. It is easy enough to see that they are repetitive and artificial and that many of them are common to several different techniques as well as to different periods. Does this mean that we are confronted with an art with a slow rate of formal change and, therefore, if we accept the notion of style as a manner of meeting creative challenges, that there was in Islamic art a single vision of life and of visual experience with only secondary variants? Whose vision was

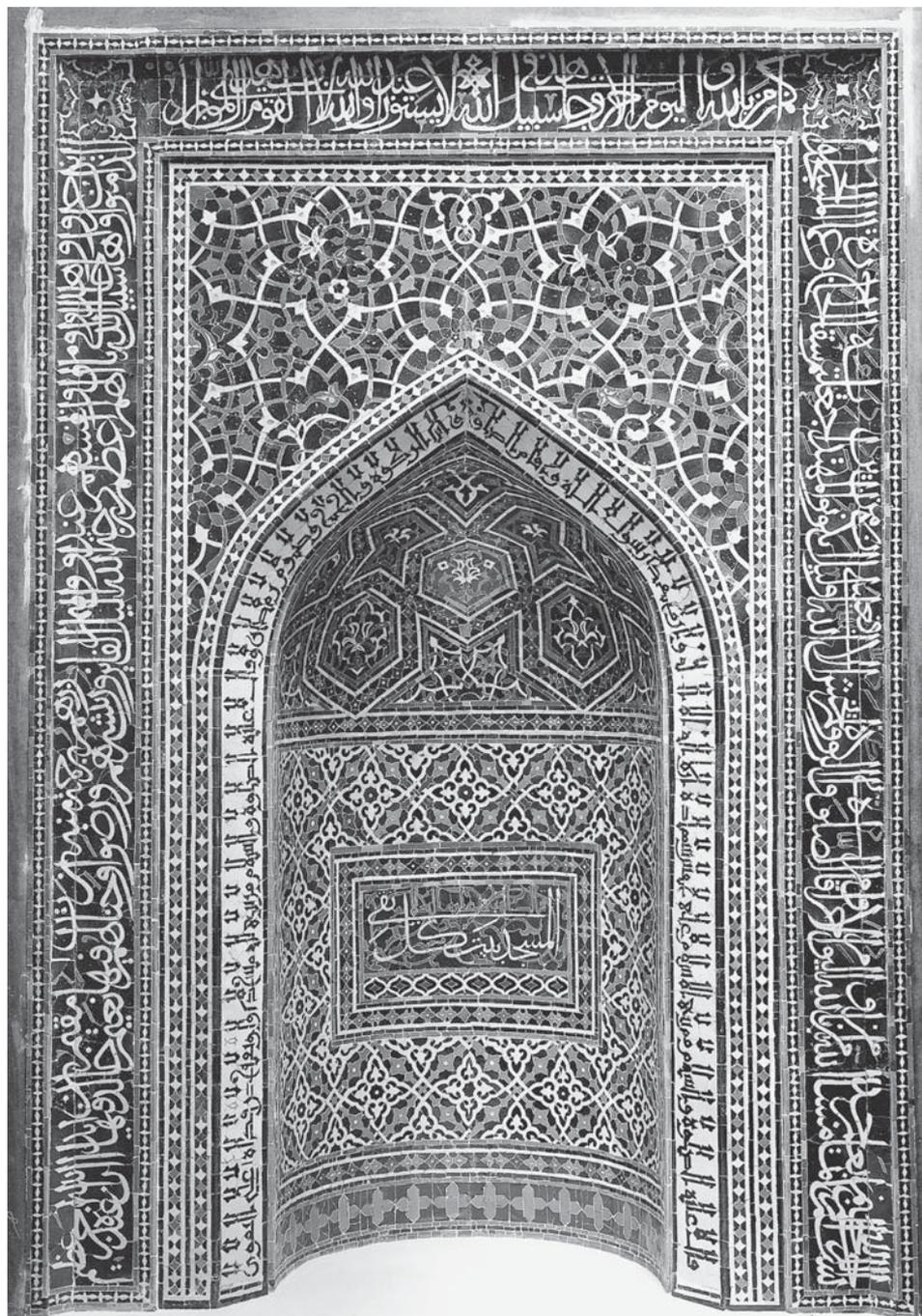
it? The luxurious dream of princes filtered down to other orders of society? The grandiose vision of divine majesty appearing sometimes as a majestic overlay of colors and arbitrary designs over mosques or ceramic plates and other times as an esoteric system of symbolic signs? The vision of a more popular, urban and nomadic world in which several folk traditions were somehow or other welded together? If no clear and obvious answer emerges to these questions, we should perhaps consider this tradition as a strikingly contemporary phenomenon in which, for whatever reasons, forms are to be seen in themselves, without consideration of time and space, simply as intellectual and sensuous exercises which aimed only to please.

It is not possible in a short essay to answer all these questions. I should like to limit myself to the discussion of a single problem and to draw from it a few ideas which could eventually help in understanding the modalities of this particular artistic development. The problem is, in a broad sense, that of the meaning of ornament in Islamic art, but much more concretely it is that of the ways in which motifs can legitimately be isolated from each other and assigned meanings, when the visual effects of the tradition seem to have avoided the immediate identification of a hierarchy of subjects.

As one contemplates an elaborate tenth-century plate from Nishapur (Fig. 4), the luscious sixteenth-century "Emperor" carpet (Fig. 8), the colorful fourteenth-century *mihrab* from Isfahan (Fig. 1), a more modest ivory plaque from eleventh-century Spain (Fig. 3), a fifteenth-century miniature (Fig. 7), or a ninth-century luster bowl from Iraq, it is possible to identify a large number of ideographic motifs, that is to say, discrete units of composition for which it is possible to imagine, if not always to demonstrate, an extrinsic meaning independent of the motif's carrier.

There are written words, animals, personages, trees, houses, elaborate geometric designs, real or imaginary flowers, and so forth. Excerpted from the object on which it is found, any one of these motifs can – at least *a priori* – be transferred to another medium; it does not "belong" to the technique in which or object on which it occurs. Furthermore, it can be presumed that each motif has enough formal specificity or clarity of perceptual value to lend itself to iconographic and iconological analysis according to traditional norms or, at least, to indexing according to subject matter, interpretation and formal variations. A few such investigations have been carried out, and it has been cogently proposed that the human-headed harpy was a symbol of felicity, that fish ponds on metalwork and ceramics had a cosmic meaning, that the painter Behzad included naturalistic details in traditional Iranian forms, that the depiction of landscape changed during the fourteenth century, or that writing fulfilled a vectorial function in many monuments by indicating the social, symbolic or iconographical meaning of otherwise [40] neutral motifs.

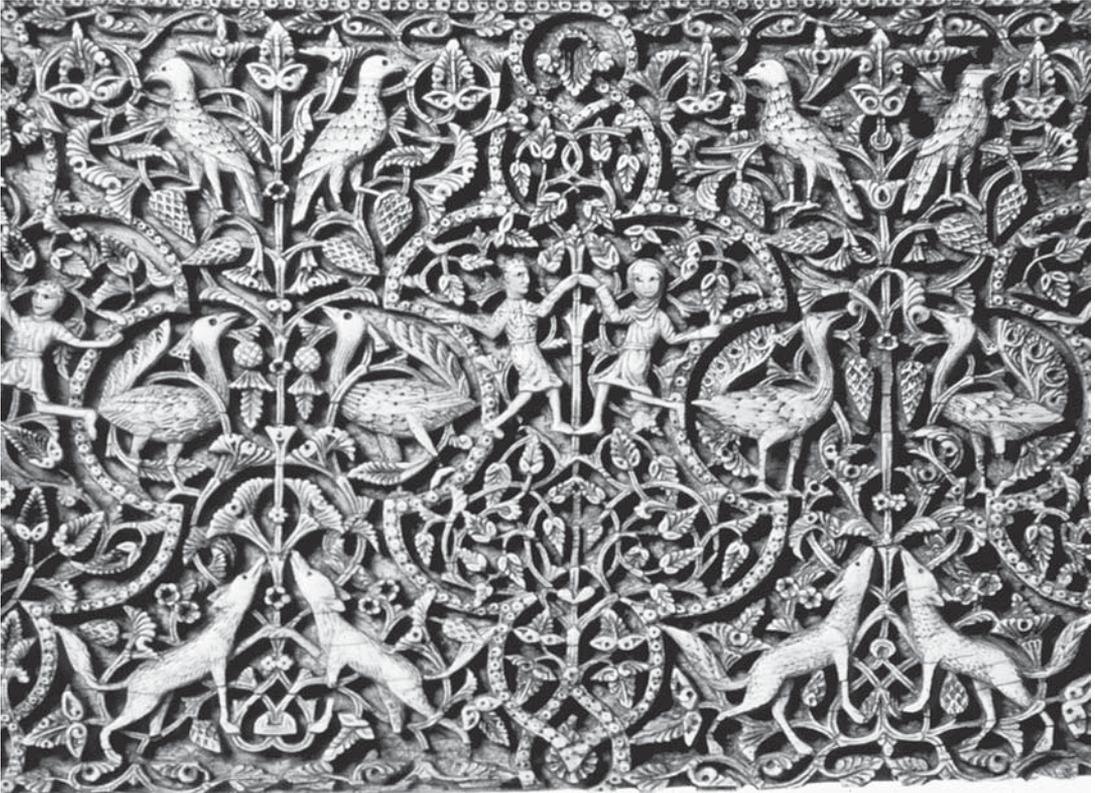
All this is true, and many more studies will refine the understanding of identified features or discover the meaning of hitherto undetected ones. The



1 *Mibrab*,  
Isfahan,  
fourteenth  
century,  
Metropolitan  
Museum of Art



2 Nur al-Din  
room, Damascus,  
1707



3 Ivory plaque,  
Spain, eleventh  
century, 8" long  
(detail)

Mendeleevian task of isolating primary elements and of explaining the ways in which they form compounds, repetitive types or unique creations, is an indispensable activity of gathering the tools for understanding any artistic tradition, especially one which has been so little investigated.

And yet this procedure of identifying the vocabulary of an art may not be entirely adequate or sufficient to explore and explain the mainstream of Islamic art. For in reality the skills and energies of almost all craftsmen and artists were directed in a way which minimizes the meaning of any one motif. Personages or animals are rarely given a greater visual importance than vegetal backgrounds. In fact, the very notion of a background is open to doubt, as almost all motifs appear on the same level of perceptibility. On the *mihrab* (Fig. 1), for instance, it is impossible to decide whether the white or light blue patterns are the main ones, just as on a celebrated Nishapur plate in the Freer Gallery (Fig. 4), the Mshatta façade, or the so-called beveled style, all parts of the design are of equal value.

Under these circumstances one may wonder whether it is legitimate to extract one subject – a planet's symbol on an inlaid bronze ewer, a personage or an animal on a rug or on an ivory, a small realistic detail in a miniature – and assume that it alone has signifying power because it can be provided with external meaning. Furthermore, while it is quite true that many motifs



can be isolated, it is equally true that a large number escape coherent definition, such as the so-called “fills” and curlicues on the luster plate from Iran or the tenth-century bowl from eastern Iran. It is hardly important that a given vegetal motif is identified as a palmette or a calyx, for in most instances the only coherent definition of decoration lies in fitting it within a series of abstract ranges: more or less light and shade, more or less explicit geometrical basis, varieties of color contrast, more or less symmetry, and so on.

This tendency to avoid immediacy of interpretation is most clearly visible in the most uniquely Islamic motif: writing. It is true, of course, that the Qur’anic citation on the border of the *mihrab* is quite legible, as is the *hadith* or Prophet’s Tradition in the center, but the proclamation of the principles of the faith in the inner border is already far less clear, and it is not by

4 Ceramic bowl, Nishapur, late ninth–tenth century, 10 $\frac{3}{16}$ ” diameter

5 Bronze ewer  
inlaid with silver,  
late twelfth  
century, 7¼" high

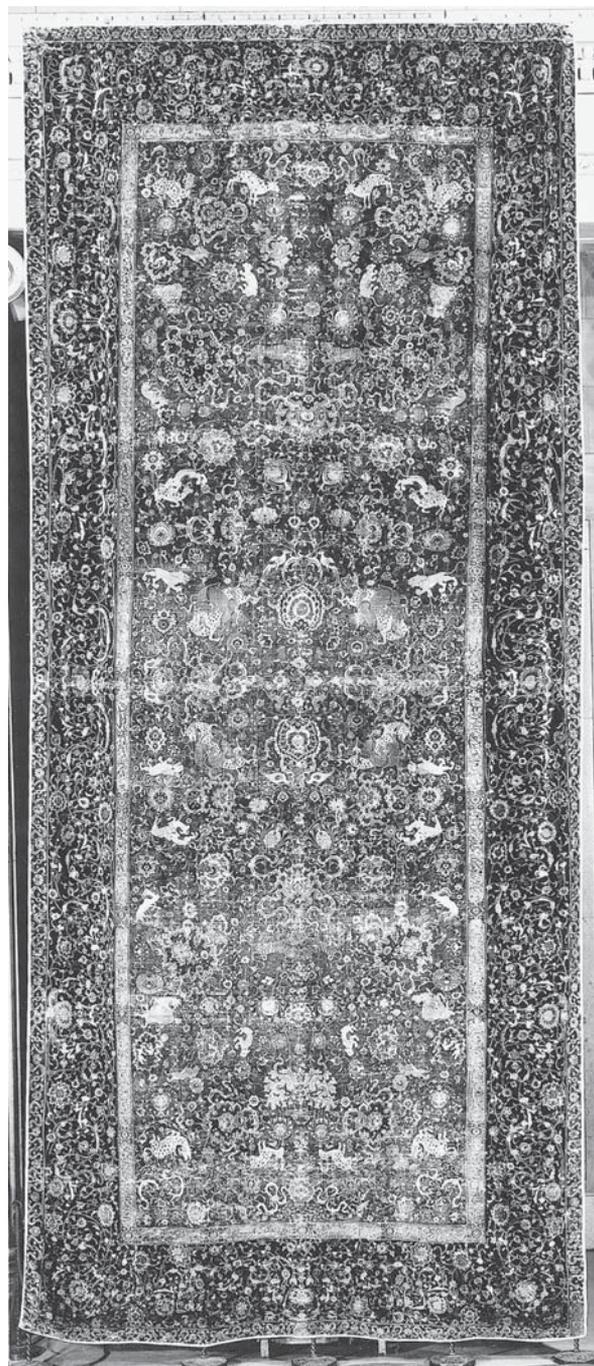




6 Brass ewer  
inlaid with silver,  
Eastern Iran,  
Seljuq period,  
thirteenth  
century, 15½"  
high

7 Att. to Behzad, Miniature from *Mantiq al-Tayr* (Conference of the Birds) by Attar, Iran, Herat school, 1483, 9¼" × 5⅜"





8 "Emperor Carpet," Iran, sixteenth century, 24' 8" long

accident that the reading of inscriptions on monuments of Islamic art has become a major sub-field for specialists. The point of calligraphy is not to transmit a message in written form, but to endow writing with certain aesthetic or symbolic qualities.

The point of these examples is that, many exceptions notwithstanding, it was not the concern of Islamic art to develop a language of forms comparable to the antique or medieval Christian system, in which a hierarchy of subjects and forms was endowed with a range of meanings whose truth and persuasiveness can be gauged – almost demonstrated – by a variety of stylistic and qualitative devices. Here, on the contrary, there is no such hierarchy of forms and even writing seems obfuscated by calligraphy. There is in fact an almost total equality of all possible forms and subjects, a suggestion that no visual invention or development is inferior or superior *per se* and that all of them can serve to endow their carriers – humble ceramic bowl, the page of a book, fancy gold jewelry, or the exterior of an Iranian dome – with a certain quality. If we recall that we are almost always dealing with useful and practical objects, the further implication is of an art which did not *tell* something but which made life's activities more beautiful and more exciting. Its paradox may then be that it was an art without ideal formal ambitions and depended entirely on the uses to which it could be put. To call it ambiguous or ambivalent – as many scholars, including myself, have done occasionally – is just as misleading as to define its compositions of forms as a *horror vacui*. It is preferable to assert that all forms were endowed with visual meaning. Can one speak of ambiguity when the point of the art did not lie in the specificity of any one of its themes, but simply in their presence on all “things” used by man? It is precisely because of this unique quality that Christian Europe consistently copied almost all features of Islamic art, even writing proclaiming Muhammad's mission, while the reverse was rare indeed.

Several historical and cultural explanations may be proposed for the interpretation I am suggesting. They are partly incompatible with each other, and I am still uncertain about their respective merits; but, since each one of them offers additional perspectives for the understanding of Islamic art, it is preferable to discuss all of them.

There is an *Islamic* explanation. Its point of departure is the absolute unitarianism of a faith which asserts that God alone is a Creator; time and physical reality are but illusions, as nothing remains but God. Artistic creativity must never seek to compete with the divine will, and thus, on the one hand, must avoid any resemblance to the fleeting world of perceived living things and, on the other, must demonstrate ceaselessly that “things” are never what they seem to be. A wall is not a construction, a jug is not a piece of ceramic or a piece of metalwork, and a representation of a hunting prince is never the image of a precise individual in a concrete activity.

Instead, the artist can either compose totally arbitrary designs which mask the physical reality of an object or a building, or else suggest a variety

of metaphors for the divine. Geometrical variations, for instance, in which the same motif appears in several different garbs, can be seen as a metaphor for the infinite expressions of the same God, as occurs in the traditional litany of the names of God. The dissolution of spatial relations so typical of early ornament or of late miniatures would be a way of showing the impermanence of physical impressions. And, at times, as in the frozen, contemplative personages gazing at a fish pond on thirteenth-century ceramics, we may encounter very specific metaphors for complicated mystical imagery, as may also be the case in some miniatures. Whatever variations occur, an “Islamic” explanation would be that a system of beliefs so intimately tied to the regulation of daily life permeated the ethos of patrons and artists to the extent that they instinctively sought to express the unreality of the tangible, if not at times the awesome permanence of God through the transitory nothingness of man and nature. [41]

Then there is a *princely* explanation. In a culture without clergy or ecclesiastical patronage and with limited liturgical and cultic practices, taste and the means to sponsor creativity were almost entirely in the hands of an aristocracy of power. Legitimate caliphs in early centuries, sultans in later times, military elites at most times, were the most consistent patrons of the arts. For complex reasons possibly going back to the memory of pre-Islamic empires, and to the all-pervasive mythology of Solomon, the prophet-king, the art of the prince was, justifiably or not, identified as one of immense and artificial luxury. In restricted gardens surrounded by high walls there were elaborate palaces and pavilions sheltering a life of sensuous pleasure in a setting filled with beautiful textiles and objects. Certain activities – drinking, dancing, hunting, music – are generally associated with the actual or imaginary life of princes. Much of the actual art of princes has disappeared, and more is known about it from historical or imaginative literature than from monuments. But the sensuousness of Islamic art, its fascination with techniques – giving to ceramics the illusion of metal, to bronze the impression of silver, or to mud brick the intense colors of rugs – the consistent representation of princely life in non-aristocratic contexts, as on a popular bronze bucket made for a merchant, these and other features may be explained as having been inspired by the single consistently present patronage of Islamic culture. Calligraphy alone may have escaped princely impact, but even in this instance further research may lead to different results. Altogether, it is possible to consider Islamic art as primarily secular and thus explain the ease with which its motifs were transmitted to other cultures or adopted by alien rulers, like the Turkish military or Mongol princes.

A third explanation focuses on the urban bourgeoisie as the main creator of the Islamicity of Islamic art. We may call this explanation *urban-populist*. It is now generally accepted that classical Islamic culture was created in the cities of the Middle East, old cities taken over by the conquering Arabs or new ones developed in part for the purpose of maintaining the integrity of

the new faith and way of life. The economic and administrative features of Islamic urban structures were not, at least initially, particularly new, and the mechanisms of Islamicization are still far from clear. There was a new language, Arabic, and eventually a new alphabet for Persian and Turkish. There was a new morality, which some authors have called a legalistic moralism, based on a complex mixture of family and tribal ties, sectarian associations and a pervading legal system. But, most importantly for our purposes, there was a consciousness of being different from and better than earlier and surrounding cultures. The maintenance of this difference was particularly complicated in the realm of forms, where Islam had no official doctrine and the Arabian homeland of the faith no tradition to continue. The process of creating a visual expression meant, therefore, inventing new forms, for instance calligraphy, and discarding older forms which had too many concretely alien associations, for instance the representation of man. It is precisely in the new cities of Iraq and of eastern Iran that the first new "Islamic" monuments appear and that the stylistic tendencies which became constant within the culture first come into being. The [42] apparent rarity of the unique masterpiece within most series of Islamic art can then be explained by the fact that there rarely was within the city a single patron of overwhelmingly unique taste. The art of a middle class is an art of types. Many of these features were then adopted by the art of princes, especially after 1300 when the urban and populist patronage declined considerably, but by then the art's directions, its limits as well as its strengths, had been defined by the bourgeois and popular taste which had created the culture in the first place.

Finally, one can propose a psychological and aesthetic explanation, which I would like to call *private*. It is a curious peculiarity of much of Islamic art (with the notable exception of Ottoman architecture) that even its grandiose architectural compositions can best be seen and appreciated, not as a collective experience, but as a lonely and private one. The understanding of a stalactite façade with its almost infinite subdivisions cannot be shared, just as the elaboration of the endless details of a rug and of the subtleties of a miniature or the use of a ewer or of a plate are individual, private activities. The varieties of themes and motifs on many objects, the difficulty we have in defining many of them, the fascination with subtleties of detail rather than overwhelming ensembles, these and many other features can be explained as individual experiences or experiments. It is as though the point of artistic creativity were to compel the viewer or user to withdraw within himself, to meditate on his own, in effect to find his own explanation of the work of art or to discover in it an inspiration for his own life.

It may be possible to relate this privacy of aesthetic enjoyment to a faith which puts man alone in front of God, without the mediation of hypostatic avatars. But it is also possible that it derived from a much more complex cultural decision to limit the available means and functions of visual

expression, thereby compelling the elaboration of forms for private, individualized [43] experience. It is possibly for this very reason that the Muslim world has not provided us with many statements about its own aesthetic judgments. Most of what is known tends to fall into the category of literary clichés, but the search for evidence in the area is still too young to allow for definitive conclusions. Until such time as we succeed in penetrating more fully into the conscious or automatic ethos of traditional Islamic culture, we may simply assume that something in it led to the interiorization of aesthetic experience, to satisfaction with the internal intricacies of artistic creativity. As a result, even monumental creations like the Alhambra or Iranian mosques often appear as magnified objects, and their appreciation is only possible privately.

Between these explanations – and there may be others – it is difficult to choose. Some may be more typical of a given time, area or social setting than others. Altogether they illustrate the aesthetic wealth of Islamic art, but, perhaps more significantly, they raise fundamental questions about the nature of visual understanding and pleasure, as well as about the process by which artistic creativity is achieved. The excitement of a major tradition which has not been much studied and which is only beginning to penetrate the collective memory of our own age is that it lends itself more easily than well-established traditions to the formulation of new hypotheses. But its true challenge does not lie so much in whatever it may tell us about our own taste and visual experience as in discovering the motivations behind a unique artistic achievement which succeeded in lifting all its techniques and almost all its subjects to the level of works of art, and in the process endowed nearly all aspects of life with beauty and pleasure.

