THE SPIRIT OF MOSLEM ART

By

CARL JOHAN LAMM.

The Persian Shah Nasir al-Din, who visited Europe three times in the 70's, makes the following statement in his Memoirs, which certainly sounds queer to a Westerner: "European towns are all alike. Having seen one of them, you know the external appearance, the qualities and characteristics of all the others."

When I read this, I thought about the impression made by Moslem towns upon many European visitors of general education but having no special knowledge of Eastern Art: These Moslem towns are so like each other that, having seen one, there is no need to visit others.

Obviously, such statements, on both sides, are the result of imperfect understanding or superficial observation. But if one were to ask a European with a deeper knowledge of the East, which of the two statements — that of the Shah or that of the European tourist — is the least superficial, he would probably say, that of the tourist. If the same questions were put to an Oriental with a corresponding knowledge of Europe, I think he would admit, if he were sincere, that there is more variety and more obvious differentiation in European art than in Moslem.

This certainly does not imply that Moslem art is inferior to European, but simply that Moslem art is more homogeneous. Such a statement, however, can only be made if the monuments remaining from earlier periods are included in the conception, as well as modern art. For instance, what a difference there is between one of the small towns of Central Germany and one of the Renaissance cities of Italy! Nor is there much similarity between an English university town, such as Oxford, and its still more ancient Continental rivals, such as Padua, Bologna or Cracow. To find such extreme variations in Islam, even a journey covering the incomparably longer distance between Rabat and Kabul would not suffice.

Nevertheless most Europeans speak a tongue belonging to one and the same large family: that of the Indo-European languages; whereas Moslem art is the artistic expression of ideas connected with three predominent languages — Arabic, Persian and Turkish — which at the dawn of Islam were not related to each other. Since in the Moslem world the diversity of races is almost as great as that of languages, all this tends to show that effect of the racial element on art is nowadays frequently overestimated.

The reason for Moslem art being, as we have remarked, comparatively homogeneous is quite obvious; it is implied in the term itself. Moslem art is the art of Islam; the art of men speaking the most varied languages and belonging to most varied races, but all confessing the same creed: "There is no God but God, and Muhammed is the Prophet of God."

How far the extension of Islam in time and space corresponds to that of Moslem art and to what extent the racial differences within the Islamic world have affected the form in which this art has revealed itself, I will not discuss in this connection. Here I will only consider the direct influence that Islam may have had on the artistic activity and tendencies of its adherents.

The first point to study must be the attitude of Islam towards the arts, as expressed in the Koran and the Hadith (Tradition), which give detailed rules for conduct and behaviour in the many different departments of human activity. But to our great surprise we find that Islam has so little regard for the aesthetic needs of man, and makes so few statements in regard to the way in which these needs may be legitimately satisfied, that we are inclined to doubt whether we have been too hasty in inferring the fundamental importance of Islam in the creation of a clearly definable Moslem art.

Being the Chief of a nation of warriors, whose greatest virtue was the power of endurance in the face of privation and not wishing this virtue spoiled by the material indulgences which an ever increasing booty could offer, Muhammed was the sworn enemy of luxury — excepting only that of perfumes. Thus he strictly forbade the use of golden ornaments, but this prohibition has been constantly transgressed. Still, gold vessels and ornaments were, of course, never used in connection with religious services, and even in the palaces of princes and other magnates, who did not hesitate to surround themselves with all the luxury that art could provide, gold receptacles were generally replaced by vessels in other material which would give an impression of similar splendour without actually violating the precepts

of the Koran : such materials, for instance, as lustre pottery and glass, gilt and enamelled glasses, and bronzes inlaid with silver, sometimes even with gold or copper. We can here observe that the effect of religion on art was not direct but indirect in this case, and that it emanated not from positive but from negative commandments, and from the wish to evade these commandments without formal disobedience.

Still more is the same true in regard to the attitude of the Moslem world towards figural representations. This subject has become so commonplace that I feel somewhat reluctant to treat it anew. But, alas, in this connection it is certainly too important to be passed over in silence, so I shall have to sum it up briefly.

The Koran itself does not contain any formal prohibition of figural art, but, as the law of Moses, and evidently as a result of Jewish influence, it strictly forbids idolatry ; idols having been worshipped by pagan Arabs as well as by the ancient Hebrews and other Semitic tribes of antiquity, the Semitic repugnance against figural representations being much less innate and universal than most people realise.

In the *Hadith* (Tradition) we find forbidden the adoration of tombs and of images of prophets or saints. According to another statement, "The artists, those who make images, will be punished on the Day of Judgement by the judgement of God, who will impose upon them the impossible task of giving life to their creations." The classical myth of Pygmalion, who fell in love with his own creation ; the Homunculus dreamed of by the Cabbalists, and its analogy in this age of machines, the Robot, all these imaginary conceptions help us to understand to what extent the *Hadith*, just quoted, is in accordance with universal mystic ideas.

According to another *Hadith*, the use of textiles and cushions with figural ornament is forbidden. The authenticity of this tradition, however, is dubious, and we know that the Prophet himself used objects of the kind referred to in his tent, and even the Hanbalite sect, although being the most rigorous of the four main Sunnite schools, permits the use of such textiles and cushions.

The traditions here quoted show that even if figural representations were not entirely prohibited in Islam, yet their creation was not an activity that from a religious point of view could be regarded as in any way meritorious. One teacher of jurisprudence, al-Nawawi, d. 1278 A.D., interprets the sacred texts and traditions so that all figural representations that can give a shadow, imply a violation of the laws of God. Ibn Daqiq al-'id, d. 1302, on the other hand, thinks

that the prohibition of figural representations only had a bearing on these days when Islam had to fight idolatry and prevent converts from falling back to such pagan abominations.

About Ibn Abbas, a cousin of the Prophet, there is the following *Hadith*, [1] which is certainly curious. A Persian painter, who had conscientious scruples about his artistic activity, once asked him: "Then, finally, can I no longer represent animals? If that be so, I shall no more be able to exercise my profession." Ibn Abbas replied: "But you may behead the animals so that they do not look as if they were alive, and make them resemble flowers."

The first method was very much favoured by Moslem fanatics in their fight against what they regarded as pagan idols, but what we know about Islamic art will suffice to convince us that no Moslem artist would apply it to his own practice. Besides, the Persians, who became Shiites, were more tolerant towards figural art than the bulk of the peoples of Islam, and in Persia, as in Mughal India, we occasionally find painters mentioned with almost as much reverence as calligraphers, the art of which has always been the most highly regarded in Islam. Still, even Persian painters would not dare to represent in detail the Prophet's face, and the almost plastic portraiture, with its aim at psychological characterization, that for a time flourished in India, would hardly have arisen without European influence. As a rule, even the best Moslem painters and sculptors render their models, be they men or animals in a quite conventional way, not only the general types or species, but even gestures which are meant to express the emotional state of acting personages.

The naturalism which nevertheless occasionally reveals itself in such creations of Moslem art as do not betray European influence, is either that unstudied interest in the surrounding world which one remarks in children's and all other primitive art, or, occasionally, the reflection of Hellenistic impulses, or, finally, and in most cases, a kind of vague and almost pantheistic naturalism akin to, and probably derived from, Chinese art which was always held in great esteem by the Moslems.

In the representation of space, the Moslem painters have no more aimed at a correct perspective, in the sense that this was first understood by the Renaissance painters, than their Far Eastern colleagues. Still, European perspective did not fail to exert some in-

[1] Like the traditions just mentioned, quoted by Massignon in "*Syria*," Vol. II, pp. 47 ff. and 149 ff.

fluence upon Moslem painting, and its effects were nothing less than disastrous.

But let us return to the advice given by Ibn Abbas to the Persian painter. If he could not, as we have seen, follow the first part of it, that about the beheading of the animals, the second part of it, where he is told to let the animals resemble flowers, is in full accordance with Moslem aesthetics. The Moslem artist or artisan does not only, like his forerunners in the ancient Orient, betray a marked predilection towards those symbolic representations which are composed of numbers of different real and imaginary creatures, but he combines many of his animal motives with floral designs. The fauna of the old-time Orient is thus mixed with arabesque elements in a most graceful way, quite different from the effective but savage-looking combination of animals, one issuing from the other, that we meet on ancient Scythian and Germanic metal works.

On some faience produced in Ancient Egypt, picturing hippopotamus, the water lilies and papyrus are drawn in black on the turquoise blue body, representing the natural environment in which the beast lives. On the corresponding Moslem images, there is no such logical relation between animal and floral motive. If a relation exists, it is merely a formal one. A palmette might be inscribed in the pear-shaped devices which, as so often occurs in the arts of the ancient East, marks the place where an animal's leg joins the body; but the floral decoration might as well be a mere decoration of the surface formed by the body, or it might be a spring held in a bird's beak and transformed into an arabesque, or perhaps a similar motive emanating from the elegantly curved tail of an animal, or from the symmetrically displayed wings of a bird.

Thus the animal, although not losing its character of being an animal, develops into a spray or a palmette. This device, in its turn, might evolve into a band or some other kind of geometric ornament, but still without losing its original significance. Only when such a motive has been repeated not once, but a thousand times, the significance might be lost, the ornament degenerate, and the spray or the palmette be reduced to form a part of the geometrical ornament.

In Moslem art, motives taken from nature have a tendency to take on geometric forms, although an evolution in the opposite direction might, incidentally, take place too. In any case, except for a few standard forms which, once created, remained more or less unchanged for centuries, Moslem art is not as unchangeable as was generally believed when hardly anything was known about it except

carpets, modern bazaar products, and a few buildings such as the Alhambra. Now, textile art has generally a marked tendency to conservatism, which is first of all due to the predominating influence of technique on the minds of the artisans. If this art is a real "Volkskunst," which to a great extent is the case with Oriental carpet weaving, this conservatism will be strengthened. As to the products of the bazaars, there seems nowadays to be a great loss of creative spirit, and similar sterility marks the late Moorish art, to which the Alhambra belongs.

Our general conclusion must be that Moslem art makes use of schemes which are gradually undergoing changes which we, without expressing an opinion on their aesthetic value, might call evolution, development or degeneration.

Is this not a contradictory statement? Could an art working with schemes be subject to changes at all? Logically speaking, no, if the sense of the words is pressed to the utmost. But palaeontology gives us the solution. It shows how at a given moment all living creatures, be they human beings, animals or plants, seem to belong to particular species, but that time brings changes which are unnoticeable at any given time.

Reality changes. What appears to the mind as a fixed form is nothing more than a versatile phantom. Only God is reality and stability. This is the belief of eminent Moslem theologians, and although the humble artisans who executed those graceful objects which we can still admire were certainly no learned thinkers, they cannot entirely have failed to be influenced by the learning of the wise men.

If God is the only reality, his most direct revelation, as Massignon has pointed out, must be in the strict system of logic and mathematics. The Arabic predilection for these subjects is reflected by Moslem art. Of all the schemes employed, the most essential are the geometrical ones. These are mere abstractions, outlines of spaces and solids, or simple lines of partition, that might take material form as well on the dome of a Saint's tomb, as in the arabesque design on the prayer carpet that is placed in front of its Mihrab.

Thus geometry, rather than geometrical ornament, forms the basis of all Moslem art, just as the human body forms the starting point of the art of Greece. Moslem art proceeds from abstraction to end in ornament, Greek art from static division and accentuation to spiritual individuality. So the Greek artist acquires a self-consciousness which his Moslem colleague would call impious self-worship.

While the artistic language of the former is clearly apperceptible and elastic form, that of the latter is graceful' design and harmonious colouring; in the first case ornament forming part of the form, and in the other merely being used as a fine pattern on a lady's garb, not intruding on the general affect of cut and folds.

Thus Moslem art knows how the combine the simplicity of the entire subject with a puzzling intricacy of detail. This causes the mind to vacillate between clear conception and perplexing incomprehension that charms emotion and incites the intellect. Such an art can be enjoyed by everybody. The ignorant man in the street lets his eyes follow the curves of the arabesque on a Mosque until they come to an inscription, forming part of the decoration and which appears to him to a mere ornament of higher bearing. To the learned Sheikh who beholds the same inscription, its real sense is gradually revealed, giving him the intellectual and emotional satisfaction that a plain and clear Latin inscription could never produce.