

Note on the Attitude of Islam Towards Painting

by

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Dr. Zaky Hasan has very kindly suggested that I should defend my point of view in a note to follow his paper on "The Attitude of Islam Towards Painting."

I am very glad to avail myself of this opportunity. First of all I would like to emphasize the fact that we have no contemporary evidence to show that the prohibition against painting goes back to a period earlier than the end of the eighth century A.D. Against this we have contemporary indirect evidence of great importance.

1) The statement of Azraqi that Muhammad, on entering the Kaba after the capture of Mekka gave orders that the picture of Mary with Jesus on her lap was not to be rubbed out. This early evidence cannot be set aside merely by refusing to believe it.

2) The fact that Sa'd ibn Abi Waqqas and his Arabs, after the capture of al-Mada'in or Ctesiphon, used the great Iwan for the Friday prayer and were not disturbed by the paintings of the siege of Antioch which decorated it, cannot be explained away as due to lack of time, the victorious troops being in a hurry to celebrate their great victory, for these paintings were allowed to remain for long after, and were seen by al-Buhturi who died in A.D. 897.

3) The only instance cited of an Umayyad Khalif objecting to a painting is the case in which Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz expressed his indignation at a painting in a bath. I suggest that this painting was most probably pornographic, as was often the case in *hammams* (e.g. al-Ghuzuli, *Matali' al-Budur*, Cairo 1300 H., II, p. 8., Ibn al-Hagg, *Madkhal*, Cairo, 1348 H., II, pp. 178-9, and that this was the real cause of Omar's anger.

4) Dr. Zaky Hasan says that the attitude of a dynasty like the Umayyads towards painting is no test of the real feelings of Islam at the time. To which I reply, let us leave this dynasty for a moment and consider the fact that the most rigid Khalif of all — 'Umar I — used a censer with human figures on it, to perfume the Mosque of Madina, and that it was only in A.D. 785 that a Governor of Madina had these figures removed (Ibn Rusta, p. 66, II. 15-19). This hardening of opinion towards the end of the eighth century is in perfect keeping with what we learn from John of Damascus and Theodore Abu Qurra.

The former, who occupied a prominent place in the court life of the later Umayyad Khalifs (c. A.D. 700-750) was a great opponent of the Iconoclastic movement which had broken out in the Byzantine Empire, and wrote three books against it. But although he also wrote against Islam, he never accuses the Muslims of being guilty in this respect, but only the Christians and Jews. On the other hand Theodore Abu Qurra, Bishop of Harran, who was a contemporary of Harun ar-Rashid and al-Ma'mun and the first Father of the Church to write in Arabic, actually does include the Muslims amongst the people opposed to painting.

Dr. Zaky Hasan says that Abu Qurra "could judge the Muslims by what they said in their books, and not merely by what they practised — No wonder he was better acquainted than his master with the attitude of Islam towards pictorial art". This argument won't hold for a moment, for John knew what the Muslims wrote every bit as well as Theodore. for, as Becker points out, his quotations from the Qur'an in Greek are sometimes almost literal translations of the original, and he even gives the actual names of the suras when citing them.

All this indirect contemporary evidence is so consistent that I feel bound to accept it in the absence of any contemporary evidence to the contrary.

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