

ISLAMIC ART: ART OF A CULTURE OR ART OF A FAITH?

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To generalise, as I have been asked to do, on over a thousand years of artistic creativity from Spain to Bangladesh compels a lecturer to navigate between the Charybdis of obvious superficialities and the Scylla of obfuscating obscurantism. Both have been frequent enough over the past decades, as several contradictory concerns, at times passions, have influenced the interpretation of an artistic tradition until recently restricted to a rarefied sect of Orientalists or to an equally uncommon band of wealthy collectors. Whether or not I have succeeded in avoiding superficiality or esoteric meaninglessness will be apparent later, but as this essay moves back and forth between two apparently contradictory ways of seeing Islamic art, let me begin by stating in the widest possible way the main question I should like to discuss.

Interest in and concern for the monuments of Islamic art have grown quite spectacularly over the past few years, as is amply demonstrated by the brilliant exhibitions in London in early 1976 or by the success of the Metropolitan Museum's new installations in New York. But what is it that we, especially those of us who do not belong by religious, cultural or ethnic allegiance to the Muslim world, are looking at? Is it just another body of artifacts which our jaded time, tired of abstract expressionism or of Japanese prints, may adopt for its own aesthetic or sensuous pleasure? Is it that suddenly the arcane discussions of specialised archaeologists or art historians have become of such interest to the public that all are ready to identify Nishapur from Afrasiyab ceramics or to decide which miniatures were painted by Behzad? Or do works of Islamic art possess a unique set of values of their own which can somehow improve our own lives and our own perception of the arts? Is it perhaps that, for good or bad reasons, the Muslim world itself has become of such central interest to everyone that a concern for its art follows naturally? Are we in other words seeking in its past an explanation for its present?

These are obviously not questions which can be answered in a lifetime, but they serve as a backdrop to remarks I should like to develop around a more limited question of central importance to any artistic tradition, and for reasons which will hopefully appear as I proceed, a particularly significant one for Islamic art: what are the possible internal motors of its creativity, the conscious or unconscious factors which gave it some sort of internal unity, at least enough unity to identify it as a different art from European or Chinese?

In its classical centuries, before the major impact of the West, Islamic art can be seen primarily as the art of a culture with any number of regional and temporal subcultures within it. What I mean by "culture" in this context is a broad series of very varied impulses and needs — social, intellectual, ecological, climatic, political, and of course religious — which were sufficiently constant over the centuries to explain the relationship to each other of such diverse attributes of monuments as the sensuous forms of a Safavid portrait, the forceful vulgarity of an Umayyad sculpture, the simple drawings on a Fatimid ceramic, the brilliant compositions of an Alhambra dome, or the monumentality of the bazaars of Isfahan. All these creations, one can argue, must be seen and understood primarily as expressions of, so to speak, an anthropologically defined culture, tied together perhaps by the faith of Islam, but not any more so than, let us say, Versailles and a Russian icon are related by being products of a Christian world.

Yet it can also be proposed that the faith of Islam permeated, even created and compelled the techniques, forms, subjects, and settings of the Muslim world. Unreality of colours and space, as in major Nizami miniatures, and even their subject matter can be explained by the esoteric meanings attributed to colours and to Khosrow and Shirin's search for each other. A celebrated plate in the Freer Gallery has been interpreted in purely mystical terms. *Muqarnas* or domes formally related to the Alhambra's are found in mausoleums as in Samarqand and in mosques as in Cairo, and it is possible that all domes with certain physical properties were endowed with the same, primarily Islamic, significance. It is more difficult to find a religious equivalent to the iconographic wealth and qualitative poverty of Umayyad sculpture, but decoration with concrete subject matter is present in the mosaics of the mosque of Damascus and in many *mihirabs*, while vulgarity, forceful or not, is frequent enough in the additions made over the centuries to many a sanctuary. And the spatial order of a mosque seems at times hardly different from that of a *meydan* or of a bazaar. In other words, one can just as easily argue that, while it is obvious enough that very different cultural needs inspired artists, artisans, or patrons, it is the modalities of the Muslim religious experience which created the predominant tone of Islamic art, at times the logical geometry of Islamic Law, at other times the esoteric depth of mystical imagination.

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Two examples may serve to clarify the nature of the problem I am trying to define. The first one deals with the minaret, the tall tower which is the almost automatic identifying mark of a Muslim landscape. Its purpose, as we all know, is to call for prayer and the minaret must, therefore, be considered as fulfilling a characteristic religious function, whatever the origins and development of its forms may have been. Matters in fact are much more complicated. Early Islam did not have minarets and the call to prayer was made from the roof of the mosque, just as today, in many Iranian mosques graced with some of the most beautiful minarets framing their portals, it is from the *goldasteh*, a small cubicle on the roof, that the muezzin calls to prayer. Dozens of 12th and 13th century towers in Iran bear inscriptions without references to prayer and such masterpieces as the Kalayan minaret in Bukhara, the Jam minaret in Afghanistan, and the Qutb Minar in Delhi, have complex secular functions rather than the simple aim of calling to prayer. And, although the point is more difficult to make in the western Muslim world – or simply has not been investigated – it can be suggested that in their first mosque in Mahdiyah, the Fatimids replaced the traditional minaret at the entrance with a large formal gate and that in Cairo itself the minaret was often a monument of partisan vanity rather than a functionally specific one. As late as with the brilliant compositions of minarets in Ottoman mosques, this presumably most characteristically religious form, uniquely attached to a requirement of the faith, served quite different aesthetic and symbolic purposes. In other words, it is not possible to assume, especially before the 16th century, that an elementary and obvious Islamic religious requirement is automatically attached to the minaret, even though it is not excluded from it, and almost every instance must be examined and studied separately.

My second example involves the art of ceramics, a technique in which Islamic craftsmen were notably inventive, succeeding in creating one of the two richest varieties of shapes, designs, and uses for the potter's art. A priori few techniques are more secular than the plates, bowls, pitchers and other practical objects of ceramic found in all museums. And, while it is perhaps unlikely that any one of these objects was used at any social level, the character of their use (drinking, eating, storing) was probably the same for a prince or a peasant; except for a few lamps, none of them has a liturgical purpose. Some, it is true, carry a pious message, as some Iranian ceramics of the 12th-13th centuries with their illustrations of mystical themes. But this potential, as well as the fact that the same tiles could cover the walls of secular and religious architecture, does not diminish the point that we are dealing primarily with the technique of a culture and not of a faith. Therefore the growth and consistent development of ceramics should be explained in cultural terms, for instance as the expression of an art

of the urban bourgeoisie of the Muslim world. Yet with ceramics as with the minaret, alternate explanations exist as well. Many years ago several scholars (often criticised, admittedly, by their colleagues) tried to explain why so suddenly humble pottery became an art of ceramics, by suggesting that its perishable character made it a suitable vehicle for aesthetic transformation because of the common assumption that the faith and ethics of Islam rejected permanent monuments to wealth or for pleasure. Similarly it is primarily through certain ceramic shapes – especially the inventive mixing of arbitrarily cut off characteristic features of animals or human beings – that the late Bishr Farès sought to explain what he called the atomism of Islamic thought and its illustration of the endless potential of divine creation. And it is curious indeed that the same tile motifs can be found in religious or secular buildings or that the same designs on a plate can be interpreted in mystical terms or in secular ones.

The point of these examples – and I could have used miniatures, calligraphy, or domes – is two-fold. First, a number of forms or techniques which are typical of Islamic art do not necessarily follow the epistemological niche – secular or religious – in which they can legitimately be put. Second, any one of these forms or techniques seems to be endowed with a range of meanings, which creates in the observer a sense of ambiguity, of uncertainty, about their interpretation. It is as though the forms themselves are neutral, almost indifferent. But, to use the felicitous expression of Mrs. Annabelle Cahn, they can be "charged", that is to say, it is possible to transform them into specifically meaningful monuments by a series of very different devices. The most common is inscriptions, as some of the Alhambra cupolas become rotating domes of heaven, thanks to Ibn Zamrak's poetry set around them, or as a late Antique representation of a prince or author becomes Dioscorides the philosopher in a late 12th century Arab miniature. There are other devices as well. Some are typical devices of visual creativity everywhere which may be called variable characteristic details. Such are the bald head and moustache making any king into Shah Abbas, an ox-headed mace identifying Faridun, or physical distinctions within a series transforming gift-bearers into portraits of court attendants on the Baptistère de St. Louis. Other devices are more original, as for instance the transformation of the harpy or of the sphinx – a most common ornamental motif – into a symbol of beneficent good wishes in one context and part of the fauna in a fantastic island in another. At an entirely different level, the closely relatable forms of four *eyvans* around a court in Cairo's Sultan Hassan *madrasah* or in Isfahan's *masjid-i jomeh* have different functions because the rest of the monument, a school in one instance and a mosque in the other, implies different uses. Instead of the vectorial direction provided by an inscription, it is here the setting, the context,

There may be other devices as well, but the main suggestion I am trying to make is that, in contradistinction to what we know in Christian or Buddhist art, there appears to be in Islamic art an absence of specificity of meaning in the forms used. By itself, almost any one of them appears as a bundle of visual impressions for which our judgement may be aesthetic — when we demonstrate that one version of a dome is more effective than another, as in the obviously greater quality of the *masjid-i shah's* dome over the one in the *madrasah* of the shah's mother in Isfahan; or subjective — when we feel that one Nishapur ceramic with writing is more attractive than another; or iconographically learned — as we decide that the mosaics of Damascus are almost literal representations of paradise as it is described in the Koran, if we follow Klaus Brisich's interpretation, whereas their copies in the mausoleum of Baybars, also in Damascus, are just weak and meaningless imitations, to which the same iconographic meaning is not appropriate; or simply confused — as we wonder whether the concrete meanings attributed by inscriptions to two Alhambra domes are applicable or not to other domes of the same type. I even wonder whether the very existence of an art of calligraphy is not an attempt to obfuscate the legibility of a text to the point where its meaning is no longer useful.

Let us for the moment assume that these suggestions are true, that in Islamic art meaning is secondary to form and that a special device — an accent or a diacritical mark — is necessary to transform any one form into a visually meaningful ideogram. How can one explain this rather unique artistic phenomenon, unique at least until certain 20th century experiments?

Several possibilities come to mind. One could imagine that the artistic traditions which formed Islamic art, from Byzantium to Soghdia, paved the way for this development, that as a cultural phenomenon, Islam would have simply continued and developed tendencies existing elsewhere. And there are here and there, especially in the Semitic art of the Near East or in Visigothic Spain, indications of tendencies related to those of Islamic art, but on the whole the complex symbolic iconism of 7th century Christianity or the rich imagery of Soghdian merchants are more typical of their times than whatever aniconic tendencies may exist. Then there is the old view of an Arabian world — considered either with its own specific character of the early 7th century or as an example of nomadic folklore — which would have imposed its absence of, or at least ambivalence about, visual symbols on the rest of the world conquered or converted by the faithful who came out of Arabia. Here again some arguments can be brought up in favour of the hypothesis, but it is most unlikely that the culture of the Arabian peninsula around 600 A.D. maintained its impact for centuries on India or Spain, and in fact some doubt exists about the real visual primitiveness of Arabia

altogether. Hence it is somehow or other within Islamic civilisation itself that we must seek our explanation of the art of Islam, and this "something" must be common and consistent enough to have been present everywhere and to have affected the numerous and varied formal traditions taken over by Islam.

Two only partially divergent "Islamic" explanations exist. One, first formulated by Marshall Hodgson over a decade ago, is that the urban and populist culture of Muslim cities created a social taste which was "avisual" and in many ways opposed to art itself, in the sense that it saw a work of art as immoral because of the type of passions — greed, false generosity, profligacy, narcissism, and other asocial modes of behaviour — it could arouse. The other, more traditional view, is that the faith itself imposed restrictions on artistic creativity. Representations of living things are not prohibited *expressis verbis* by the Koran, but much in the Revelation — its opposition to idols, its monotheism, its profound sense of God as the unique Agent — argues against specificity of iconographic meanings. In all likelihood the historical contingencies of the 7th and 8th centuries when the Muslim Arabs encountered high Christian culture compelled them to maintain the purity of their faith by avoiding the temptation of idolatry and to evolve a justification for their aniconic rather than iconoclastic position in a Revelation which did not deal with the problem as such. Later, in eastern Iran, in India, in Anatolia, new contacts with certain uses of representations only reinforced a formal opposition to or fear of images. It is in these later times that the celebrated traditions consigning artists to eternal damnation were formulated and the structures of Islamic Law required a concentration of visual efforts on architecture, the setting of the culture; writing, the expression of its tenets; or ornament, a loose term on which I do not intend to dwell in this essay, but whose simplest meaning would be adornment without concrete significance.

Both a populist explanation or a more theological-legal one suggest that it was indeed the faith in its manifold expressions which compelled the formal modalities of Islamic art, its aniconism, its development of a setting for life rather than a description of life, its proclamation of divine presence rather than of ecclesiastical or imperial power. Even in the sensuous and obviously royal Alhambra, the most common inscription is that God alone is Victorious, while a Nishapur ceramic extols in its writings the simple human virtues which made up the life of a good believer.

Should we then return to the overall explanation of Islamic functions, forms, styles and modes as essentially expressions of the immense wealth of the Muslim religious experience: high level rational piety in the superb abstraction of geometry as in some ornament from the 12th century or the classical hypostyle mosque and Kufic writings; a more popular folk

piety in the figural ceramics of the 13th century or in the large funerary complexes of Cairo or of Samarqand; mystical thought in the colour patterns of Iranian miniatures; latter day Sunnism in the conservatism of western Islamic architecture or in Ottoman mosques? Possibly so, especially if one grants that certain exceptions did exist — the Umayyad palaces, for instance, or military architecture. Such an interpretation would even correspond to several recent tendencies in Islamic historiography which is refining more and more precisely the religious-intellectual constructs of the culture as a whole and emphasising their close relationship to contemporary social and political struggles. It is even possible that the mass of northeastern Iranian ceramics can be divided, regardless of subject matter, into two tendencies, one technically perfect and crystal clear as to intent and style and the other one much less focused, much wilder at times. Arbitrarily or not, these two tendencies may be associated with the taste of the two factions, identified quite precisely by their religious associations, into which Nishapur, the best studied Islamic city of the area, was divided. It is still difficult to make very precise equivalencies between internal theological positions and styles or subjects, but there is here a clear and obvious path for scholarship. Further research must deal with the intellectual and pietistic context of any one formally defined set, a task which should not surprise anyone who has dealt with Buddhist or Christian art, where it is hardly imaginable that the art historian is not reasonably versed in theology and the history of ideas.

This is a possible path indeed and we may in fact conclude that, regardless of occasional lapses and aberrations, it is the unifying faith which was the consistent inspiration and control of artistic creativity. In this fashion one can explain why Morocco, Syria, or Iran shared a feature like the *muqarnas*, these stalactite or honeycomb domes and sections of domes which are so frequently physical *tours de force*, as they impose their arbitrary forms on matter and serve as endlessly repeated, grandiose or humble, admonitions that the world of nature is not to be trusted and that *lilah al-baqi*, to God is what remains. Or, on a totally different level, the pertinent "Islamic" categories by which any one object or architectural ensemble is to be understood should not lie in a religious-secular contrast but rather in a public-private one, whereby mosques, commercial ensembles, or most ceramic types represent a realm accessible to all the Faithful, even in part to the non-believers who belong to the culture at large, whereas miniature paintings, crystals, palace-villas, belong to the private, often unique world of any one individual. In a culture without formal clergy or consistent patronage from princes, the public realm tends to prefer generalised forms with few concrete meanings, while the private realm can be as uniquely specific as the paintings of Qusayr Amrah with their often un-understandable references or the specific iconography of the illustrations of the

Demotte *Shahnama*. In a particularly deep sense, this public-private dichotomy with any number of intermediary steps would indeed correspond to the fascinating and hardly institutionalised Muslim notion of a unified corporate *ummah* together with the uniqueness of every one Believer's actions.

Tempting though such an approach may be, it is not the only one, and a rather significant body of new and often still unpublished research seems to me to move into a different direction; for some of the points I am about to make I am indebted to work done recently, or in the process of being done, by students in a succession of seminars, although it is Richard Ettinghausen who in a series of major articles written during the 1940s and 1950s opened the way to this manner of seeing Islamic art.

For lack of time, let me discuss only one example: the representation of living beings. It is by now generally agreed that, whatever the reasons, the representation of living beings declined at the beginning of Islamic times, in the 8th and 9th centuries. It is equally true that representation became quite common in most Islamic lands in the 12th century and spread to all classes of society, with notable exceptions in the Muslim West. In reality, of course, there are many examples of representations of animals and of human beings in eastern Iran, Egypt, and Spain before the 12th century, but these are relatively speaking more restricted in their use and significance.

The usual explanation for the reappearance is that, for a variety of social reasons, most clearly defined in Iran and Egypt, themes and motifs previously available to princes alone were spread to other classes of society, where they acquired the meaning of good wishes and blessings expressed earlier through words alone. Princely themes — polo playing, hunting, drinking, music, and so forth — would have become generalised metaphors for a good life, and at times in Iran and possibly elsewhere these motifs may have acquired more complex meanings, for instance the mystical ones identified earlier in the plate from the Freer Gallery. Several difficulties exist with this explanation and I would like to single out one. It is that the predominance of a princely cycle as a sole source of iconographic inspiration before the end of the 13th century does not correspond to the cultural importance of princes within Islamic society and implies a uniqueness of taste and patronage which is belied by the complexity of Muslim society and intellectual or cultural development. Other sources must have been involved as well. In Iran, for instance, there is clearly a series of images illustrating uniquely Iranian motifs like the *Shahnama* and in Egypt, late classical and perhaps even ancient Egyptian motifs reappear as well.

But beyond the princely and the local, there is a third source which has the advantage of being ubiquitous and culturally meaningful while at the same time different from one area to the other. This source is astrology and astronomy. As Mrs. Zick-

Nissari has suggested very recently for eastern Iranian ceramics and, as can be shown for Egyptian and Sicilian painting and ceramics as well, many subjects from birds to human beings and many peculiarities of composition — for instance an awkwardness of poses usually attributed to an interest in abstract designs — can be most easily explained as representations of single stars or of constellations. The most obvious interest of this additional source of inspiration for images is that it corresponds to a consistent concern of Islamic culture everywhere from the very beginning of its history, a concern furthermore which coincides with the intellectual and scientific curiosity of Muslims and which lends itself to an endless variety of interpretations from the very practical and objective all the way to the mystical and esoteric. And, as one looks at a typical object of metalwork with its signs of zodiac, its harpies, its groupings of personages or animals in unusual formal combinations, we should perhaps imagine the range of meanings associated with the elaborate astronomy of the Middle Ages rather than with princely revelry, perhaps even see in these heavenly symbols a unique vision of a universe ruled by the stars, in which the lives, ambitions, wishes, and hopes of man appear in the guise of the animals and personages of thousands of objects. The pair of birds or of other animals around a vegetal motif which can be found on rock crystals, woodwork, ivories, or paintings in the 10th-12th centuries may indeed be a symbol of paradise derived from Antiquity. And the images on the celebrated pyxis of Mughirah in the Louvre can be interpreted as we interpret Roman and early Christian sarcophagi, that is to say, as private or generalised references to life and death.

Whether this kind of interpretation is as yet entirely demonstrated is not at the moment pertinent. Let me say simply that it is possible. Its importance lies in its implications. For, even if themes like death, commemoration, astronomy, paradise, and of course royal life or ethnic memories, have an Islamic specificity, they are not uniquely Islamic at all. Thus the argument can be made that the representations of the 10th-12th centuries were the result of broad cultural impulses and that the faith itself was secondary to the development of forms. The sources of the forms lie in a variety of cultural phenomena, for which explanations lie in patronage, climate, older traditions, new intentions, or whatever else scholarly ingenuity may develop. The possible expressions of the faith itself could only adapt themselves to forms created in other realms, independent of the faith, a point which could also be made for cupolas in architecture or for the use of interior courts in planning sanctuaries or private houses.

Earlier, however, I sought to argue the contrary by suggesting that most of the peculiarities and idiosyncrasies found in the forms used and created by Islamic culture can best be explained by the internal

characteristics of the faith of Islam, that it was this faith which gave "Islamicity" to the monuments. Can both propositions be true? Should we seek some kind of middle ground between them? Should we accept for Islamic art the terms of a *willed visual ambiguity*, so frequently used for it by many scholars, including myself, and so fascinating to contemporary artists and critics who feel that it gives the viewer of a work of art the freedom of choosing the meaning he may wish to provide for it?

Before proposing a tentative answer to these questions, let me draw two other conclusions. The examples I have mentioned run from Spain to Central Asia and from the 8th to 16th centuries. There is obviously something false in trying to tie such a vast area over so many centuries into a single entity. Even if the world of Islam is sufficiently different from earlier or surrounding worlds to be reasonably considered as a unit, it did not remain the same over the centuries and one of the first conclusions of this essay is that we must begin to refine our temporal and spatial conception of Islamic art, to avoid certain kinds of generalisations, or, to put it into more positive terms, to propose that the dilemma I illustrated can possibly be resolved in a fairly simple way. Both of my propositions may be true but not at the same time and in the same areas. Something valid for Egypt and Iran around 1100 may not be true of either area in 1300 or in 900. Thus one could argue that in the 9th century many aspects of Islamic art — Nishapur ceramics, the mosque of Ibn Tulun, or Samarra ornament — must be explained through the impact of a Muslim way, a sunni *tariq*, that in the 12th century secular motifs of different origins predominated, and that in the 15th century a sufi *tariqah* took over, at least in Iran. In other words, we may conclude that, like any other artistic tradition, Islamic art changed constantly and that its uniqueness lies only in the facts that it was less clearly divided according to ethnic and national lines than comparable traditions elsewhere, and that it exhibited few drastic formal and ideological revolutions comparable to the Italian Renaissance or the 1860s in the art of the West.

The second conclusion we can draw is that the faith-culture dilemma may have expressed itself in the relationship between forms and subjects. Subjects came from all sorts of sources, but it is the character of the faith which imposed the forms. The consistent avoidance of illusionism, the fascination with geometric or colour patterns, the emphasis on unspecific setting, and any number of other general features can be explained by various aspects of an all-pervasive Muslim legalism or mysticism, depending on time or place.

Both of these conclusions are essentially academic ones in the sense that their discussion and elaboration require the type of footnoted analysis in which scholars specialise, or at least should do so. Since my concern is not purely scholarly, I would like to end

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by returning to the theme of visual ambiguity, for it is one of more general interest, especially for our own times when qualitative judgements and definitions have been so deeply permeated with uncertainties. It seems true indeed that an ornament like the third Samarra style with its abstract exercises of total space covering, or a painting from one of the Istanbul albums consisting of squares of different colours in which a specialist may recognise the endlessly repeated name of Ali, the Prophet's son-in-law, or an image on a 13th century ceramic in the Metropolitan Museum which could be a prince with his court or a sufi mystic meditating, all of these can be interpreted in several different ways without our being able to demonstrate that one interpretation is better or more correct than the other. But I wonder whether such a conclusion and the concomitant excitement contemporary artists and critics have found in Islamic art is not simply the result of ignorance. For I doubt very much that traditional Islamic culture or any other major and successful culture would have emphasised unclarity in meaning as the objective of its creativity. A solution to its understanding may be proposed with a parallel to its literature. Persian poetry or a work like the *Maqamat* emphasised endless variations on the same topics and prized subtlety of verbal pyrotechnics over novelty of subjects or conceptual imagination. But, even when several meanings are possible for any one verse in a Persian poem or for Hariri's endless puns, the poem itself is not ambiguous but possesses meanings which are finite in number and all true. The poem is a multi-dimensional construct in which, to take a most common example, a physical description of a flower, an erotic idea, mystical thought, and possibly a concrete contemporary reference all co-exist. In order to understand the dimensions of the poem, we must be able to penetrate into the modes of thought of the whole culture, not merely to know the language in which it was written. The same is true, I submit, for Islamic art, whose understanding does not require of us only formal analyses or the assumption issued from classical or Christian art of a reasonable constancy in the meaning of like forms, but an immersion into the culture, its visual associations, its aspirations, its dreams, the metaphors of its internal language, its systems of

intellectual discourse and personal communication, and most particularly the specific contingencies of any one of its moments. Then we may be able to realise that its monuments, a huge complex like Isfahan's *maydan-i shah* or a humble ceramic, are not the creation of a faith or of a culture, but the choices of concrete historical moments whose unique motivations, pietistic or secular, must be discovered before the wider structures of Muslim creativity can be comprehended. The most forceful lesson to be drawn from the exhibitions and related activities of festivals like the Festival of Islam is that we are beginning to know too much to generalise intelligently in old ways and that we still know too little to develop new syntheses. There is an invitation and a challenge in this, an invitation to explore a visual creativity which has not yet been understood in most of its details, and a challenge to discover its inner structures and to enrich our own sensitivity. The next decade will show whether we will have the intellectual wisdom or imagination and, I fear, the financial and institutional will to meet this challenge. In the meantime, we are left with an uncertain choice between seeing a beautiful Nishapur ceramic as a fancy setting for pomegranates to be served at a feast, the dematerialisation of ceramic matter to show that God alone exists, the compositional genius of a brilliant craftsman, or the private dream of an otherwise unknown patron. All these choices may be true, but it should be from the culture itself and not from our contemporary and often foreign imagination that the correct conclusions actually emerge.

NOTE

Except for a small number of formal devices peculiar to oral presentations which have been eliminated, this article is the lecture given during the Festival of Islam in London. Illustrations have been eliminated, since references are made to well-known monuments or else the reader may supply his own illustrations to the text's generalities. Notes have also been given up, as the nature of the text would really require lengthy discussions of sources and monuments for many of its points. The article should be considered simply as an essay, still insufficiently focused, on major problems involved in understanding Islamic art. It will only succeed if it leads to discussion and, hopefully, contradiction.