

## **The Islamic Milieu: Remapping “Islamic” Art**

By Doris Bittar

Etched into the rock walls of the steep Kaddisha Valley of Lebanon are a dozen Christian monasteries. Among them are superb examples of “Islamic Art” with filigreed windows and scalloped doorways. Only rooftop crosses reveal that these are Christian holy places. Another excellent example of “Islamic Art” is the Great Synagogue in Aleppo, Syria with its striped stone walls and arched courtyard. Glimpsed through a wrought iron window, the Hebrew text carved into the marble wall assures us that it is, in fact, a synagogue and not a mosque.

The geographical and cultural boundaries of what we call the Islamic world are in soft focus rather than sharply defined. The Islamic Middle East indelibly marked the lands around it, braiding the ancient worlds with Byzantium to create the foundations of modern European civilization. Yet Western scholarship has ignored this shared history and portrayed Islamic society and its culture as a static and inert substance that never spills over, influences or absorbs. In the Western account of artifacts from Islamic lands, Islam’s tolerance toward diversity and its links to ancient civilizations are rarely researched or mentioned.

### **The “Forbidden Graven Images” Mantra**

A Persian drawing from about 1650 depicts a curvaceous woman holding a flask of wine and a cup. Her serpentine posture and provocative smile are suggestive to say the least. Given our understanding of the forbidden use of

graven images, how could an artist engage in such folly, not only depicting the human form but a female engaged in possible illicit behavior? Examples that defy our expectations of Muslim society include intricately detailed hunting scenes, clandestine lovers in a field of patterned flowers and artisans performing their crafts in the shadows of noblemen. Narrative was not only written, it was illustrated.

The profusion of richly figurative Persian miniatures is usually cited as the singular exception to the rule against graven images. However, there are many artifacts that exemplify the figurative tradition throughout the Islamic world. A 14th century Egyptian brass engraved bowl at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art exquisitely marries detailed figures with Arabic calligraphy.

Iconography in Islamic art has been branded as “forbidden” by scholars and is the most stubborn of Western mantras that survive to this day. What are the aims behind persistent assertions that are easily refuted by tangible evidence from the past to the present? Is it to prove that Islam is limited in its scope or that it is evidence of repression such as is found in Saudi Arabia? For example, the proliferation and influence of photography has gripped the entire world and Islamic societies along with it, yet, in its single-minded focus, the West has ironically rendered itself the enforcer of this particular “rule”.

Some evidence suggests that the colonizers may have used this “rule” to control their subjects. Intriguing research by Allen and Mary Roberts, at the University of Californian at Berkeley, on Senegalese Reverse Glass painting tell a bizarre narrative about the use of “graven” images. During the French

colonization of Senegal the natives depicted their political and spiritual leader into an iconic figure, originally taken from a photograph, who opposed the colonization. The French accused the Senegalese of not being observant Muslims by using graven images. The Senegalese natives ignored the reprimand and subsequently, the French imposed a law against the use of images and that image in particular.

### **Links to Ancient Civilizations**

We take for granted terms such as “Judeo-Christian” and “Greco-Roman” whose underlying assumptions are that Western connections to the past are part of a direct continuum from the Roman period to the colonial era skipping over other intermediary eras. Rather, there are several continuums that are woven into the very fiber of Islamic Middle Eastern society for many centuries. The links of Egyptians to Greece, Moors to Spain and Arabs to Sicily are all but ignored, not to mention the numerical system, astronomy and other technological advances introduced to Europe from as far away as India. “Judeo-Islamic”, “Egypt-Islamic” or “Hispano-Islamic” may be more meaningful phrases. These are among the connective strands on which Europe’s eventual civilization was built.

A clear example of Islam’s continuity with ancient civilizations is seen in a bowl from 13<sup>th</sup> century Persia depicting an angel, which harkens back to the harpies and sphinxes of Mesopotamia and Egypt. Angels – among the most

Christian of icons – have their roots in pagan iconography and we can trace part of their evolution through Islamic renditions.

The Great Umayyad Mosque in Damascus marries all of the “restrictions” into a grand fusion that lovingly embraces the past, paganism and Christendom, iconography and all. The Mosque’s foundation is Roman where the original Corinthian columns still function as structural supports for wooden ceilings painted in floral and geometric patterns. The adorned Byzantine facades of the medieval courtyard are shimmering mosaics of bounty: fig trees, olive trees, urban and rural architecture as well as animals.

### **Arabic Calligraphy: Geometry, Perspective and Ornament**

Imagine being able to float among texts in a three-dimensional space where one can hang on the hook of the letter “J” or slide down the steep slope of the letter “A”. This fantasy is made almost tangible through Arabic calligraphy.

Although Arabic is a phonetic language, the proportions of its letters are loosely based on geometric and ornamental guidelines that refer to the natural world. The calligraphic tradition of layering text, one in front of the other, with words in the background receding to varying degrees and mimicking human, animal and plant forms created a covert iconography that was embedded into the practice of calligraphy. In the 1362 text titled, “Address to Mamluk Sultan” a vast space is defined.

The 11th century Persian tile mosaic, “Thuluth and Kufic Koranic Verses”, mimics the space of a room or small courtyard. Even in ordinary texts with punctuated visual markers we are drawn to read into the space as well across it. These elegant calligraphic examples preceded the rules of one point and two point perspective that were formally established in Europe a few centuries later during the Italian Renaissance.

In other examples, Arabic letters “fill in” the outer shape of an animal, as is seen in the radiant “Lion” by Sa Mahmud Nasburi in 16th century Persia. At times the letters act as part of the synthetic support for the shape, whether it is a street scene as in the “Ornamental Nashiki Peace Prayer” of 1883 Persia or a hawk in flight as seen in an Andalusian “Bismallah”.

The “Islamic milieu” grew out of a delicate network of metropolitan centers that flourished from Moorish Spain to India, including Granada, Fez, Timbuktu, Istanbul, Alexandria, Cairo, Jerusalem, Damascus, Baghdad and Isfahan, to name a few. These oases produced the variety of artifacts and archives of what we call “Islamic” art.

The perceived fissure between East and West christened as “the clash of civilizations” permeates our informational and educational resources. Its ideological and institutional foundations are among the factors that have contributed to catastrophic losses such as the recent pillaging of Baghdad. Besides relentless misrepresentations and a negligent attitude, the “clash” theory may leave us all – East and West - deprived of our rich cultural inheritance.