

OCCASIONAL PAPERS SERIES 24

# The ARTS *of* Islamic Civilization

Ismaʿīl Rājī al Fārūqī



THE INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE OF ISLAMIC THOUGHT  
LONDON • WASHINGTON

© THE INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE OF ISLAMIC THOUGHT  
1434AH/2013CE

P.O. BOX 669, HERNDON, VA 20172, USA  
www.iiit.org

LONDON OFFICE  
P.O. BOX 126, RICHMOND, SURREY TW9 2UD, UK  
www.iiituk.com

*This book is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception  
and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,  
no reproduction of any part may take place without  
the written permission of the publishers.*

978-1-56564-558-5

*The views and opinions expressed in this book are those of the author  
and not necessarily those of the publisher. The publisher is not  
responsible for the accuracy of the information presented.*

IMAGES p.6, 7 (COPPER PLATE), 10, 18, 21, 27 iStockphoto  
p.8, 9, 10 (PRAYER RUG), 11, 12, Wikimedia Commons

Typesetting and Cover design by Shiraz Khan

Series Editors  
DR. ANAS S. AL-SHAikh-ALI  
SHIRAZ KHAN

## Foreword

THE INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE OF ISLAMIC THOUGHT (IIIT) has great pleasure in presenting Occasional Paper 24 *The Arts of Islamic Civilization* by Ismaʿil al Fārūqī. It was originally published as chapter eight of *The Cultural Atlas of Islam* by Ismaʿil al Fārūqī and Lois Lamyāʾ al Fārūqī (1986), and formed part of a monumental and authoritative work presenting the entire worldview of Islam, its beliefs, traditions, institutions, and place in the world. Aside from the map illustrations, all other images have been updated and are not those of the original unless specified. Where the text refers to chapters these are to be found in the original work.

Professor Ismaʿil Rājī al Fārūqī (1921–1986) was a Palestinian-American philosopher, visionary, and an authority in comparative religion. A great contemporary scholar of Islam, his scholarship encompassed the whole spectrum of Islamic Studies, covering areas such as the study of religion, Islamic thought, approaches to knowledge, history, culture, education, interfaith dialogue, aesthetics, ethics, politics, economics, and science. Without doubt al Fārūqī was one of the great Muslim scholars of the 20th century. In this paper he presents the meaning and message of Islam to the wider world, pointing to *tawḥīd* (the unity of God) as its essence and first determining principle which gives Islamic civilization its identity.

The IIIT, established in 1981, has served as a major center to facilitate serious scholarly efforts based on Islamic vision, values and principles. The Institute's programs of research, seminars and conferences during the last thirty years have resulted in the publication of more than four hundred titles in English and Arabic, many of which have been translated into other major languages.

ANAS S. AL-SHAikh-ALI  
Academic Advisor, IIIT London Office



# The Arts of Islamic Civilization

---

IN DEALING WITH ANY ASPECT of Islamic civilization, its final *raison d'être* and creative base must be seen as resting on the Qur'ān, the Holy Scripture of Islam. Islamic culture is, in fact, a "Qur'ānic culture"; for its definitions, its structures, its goals, and its methods for execution of those goals are all derived from that series of revelations from God to the Prophet Muḥammad in the seventh century of the common era. It is not only the knowledge of Ultimate Reality that the Muslim derives from the Holy Book of Islam. Equally compelling and determining are its ideas on the world of nature, on man and all other living creatures, on knowledge, on the social, political, and economic institutions necessary for the healthy running of society – in short, on every branch of learning and activity known. This does not mean that specific explanations and descriptions of every field of endeavor are literally spelled out in that small book of 114 *sūwar* (sing. *sūrah*) or chapters. It does mean that in it the basic principles are provided for a whole culture and civilization. Without that revelation, the culture could not have been generated; without that revelation, there could have been neither an Islamic religion, an Islamic state, an Islamic philosophy, an Islamic law, an Islamic society, nor an Islamic political or economic organization.

Just as surely as these aspects of Islamic culture may be rightly seen as Qur'ānic in basis and motivation, in implementation and goal, the arts of Islamic civilization should also be viewed as aesthetic expressions of similar derivation and realization. Yes, the Islamic arts are indeed Qur'ānic arts.

This statement may be startling to non-Muslims who have long viewed Islam as an iconoclastic and conservative religion that denied

*Ismaʿīl Rājī al Fārūqī*

or prohibited the arts.<sup>1</sup> It may be equally strange to some Muslims who have misunderstood the efforts of the *ʿulamāʾ* (learned men) and the *ummah* to guide aesthetic participation toward certain forms and types of art, and away from others. Some Muslims have thought that that guidance implied a rejection of, rather than a guidance for, Islamic art. Both of these views are misunderstandings of Islamic art and its genesis.

How then are the Islamic arts to be seen as “Qurʾānic” expressions in color, in line, in movement, in shape, and in sound? There are three levels on which such an interpretation rests.

L E V E L I

## The Qurʾān as Definer of *Tawhīd* or Transcendence

### The Message to be Aesthetically Expressed: *Tawhīd*

The Qurʾān was a revelation sent to mankind and intended to reteach the doctrine of monotheism, a message conveyed to numerous Semitic prophets of earlier times – Abraham, Noah, Moses, and Jesus, for example. The Qurʾān comprised a new statement of the doctrine of monotheism, of the one God Who is the unique, unchanging, and eternal Creator as well as Guide of the universe and all that exists within it. Allah is described in the Qurʾān as a transcendent Being of Whom no visual or sensory experience is possible. “No vision can grasp Him, . . . He is above all comprehension” (Qurʾān 6:103) . . . “Nothing is like unto Him” (Qurʾān 42:11). He is beyond exhaustive description, and incapable of being represented by any anthropomorphic or zoomorphic image. In fact, Allah is that which defies answers to the questions of who, how, where, and when? It is this idea of the utter oneness and transcendence of Allah that is known as *tawhīd* (literally, “making one”).

The Qurʾānic statements regarding the nature of God certainly preclude God’s representation through sensory means, whether in human or animal forms or in figural symbols from nature; but this is not all

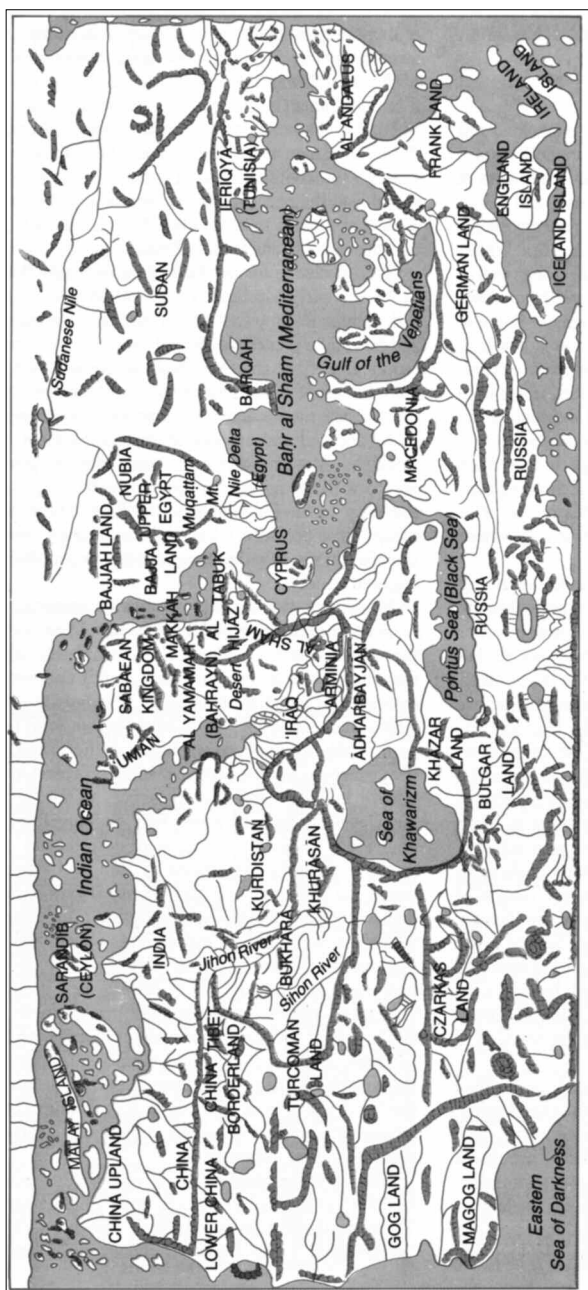
## The Arts of Islamic Civilization

that the Qur'ānic message contributes to the Islamic arts. We find that the whole iconography of Islamic art has been significantly influenced by the Qur'ānic doctrine of *tawhīd* or Islamic monotheism. If God was so completely nonnature, so ultimately different from His creation, it was not just a negative prohibition of naturalistic images of Him that was necessary as Islam began its new career. That was an aesthetic achievement of the Semitic soul which had been made in an earlier period by the followers of Judaism. Images of Yahweh were strongly condemned by all the Hebrew prophets, as well as in the well-known Second Commandment of the Mosaic Code. Even setting down the name of God was discouraged. Instead, the four consonants of the name "Yahweh," or other abbreviations, often served as written symbol for the God of the Hebrews.

Arising after the aesthetic influence from an alien tradition (that of the Greco-Romans and their Hellenistic offspring) had exerted itself for centuries over many regions of the Semitic East, Islam brought a demand for a new manner of aesthetic expression. The new Muslims needed an aesthetic mode that could supply objects of aesthetic contemplation and delight that would reinforce the basic ideology and structures of the society and be a constant reminder of its principles. Such art works would reinforce the awareness of that transcendent Being, the fulfillment of Whose will was the end-all and be-all, the *raison d'être*, of human existence. This orientation and goal of Islamic aesthetics could not be achieved through depiction of man and nature. It could be realized only through the contemplation of artistic creations that would lead the percipient to an intuition of the truth itself that Allah is so other than His creation as to be unrepresentable and inexpressible.

This challenge for aesthetic creativity was taken up by the early Muslims. They worked with motifs and techniques known to their Semitic, Byzantine, and Sassanian predecessors; and they developed new motifs, materials, and techniques as the need and inspiration arose. Even more important was their creation of new modes of artistic expression which were to be adopted and adapted in various parts of the world as Muslim individuals and political power spread with the religion in the regions from Spain in the West to the Philippines in the

*Ismaʿīl Rājī al Fārūqī*



Map 25. The Earth  
According to Al  
Sharīf al Idrīsī,  
562/1177

## The Arts of Islamic Civilization

East. These new modes have provided a basic aesthetic unity within the Muslim world without suppressing or prohibiting regional variety.

Islamic art was to fulfill the negative implications behind the declaration of *Lā ilaha illā Allāh* – that there is no God but God and He is completely other than human and other than nature. But it also was to express the positive dimension of *tawḥīd* – that which emphasizes not what God is *not*, but what God *is*. Probably the most salient aspect of the Transcendent which the Islamic doctrine taught was that God is infinite in every aspect – in justice, in mercy, in knowledge, in love. However fully one might try to enumerate His many attributes, or describe any one of those attributes as applied to Him, the attempt would end in failure.<sup>2</sup> His qualities are always beyond human comprehension and description. The pattern which has no beginning and no end, which gives an impression of infinity, is therefore the best way to express in art the doctrine of *tawḥīd*. And it is the structures created for this purpose that characterize all the arts of the Muslim peoples. It is these infinite patterns, in all their ingenious variety, that provide the positive aesthetic breakthrough of the Muslims in the history of artistic expression. It is through these infinite patterns that the subtle content of the Islamic message can be experienced.

The art of the Muslims has often been designated as the art of the infinite pattern or as “infinity-art.”<sup>3</sup> These aesthetic expressions have also been called “arabesques.”<sup>4</sup> The arabesque should not be limited to a particular kind of leaf design perfected by the Muslim peoples, as has sometimes been maintained.<sup>5</sup> It is not simply any abstract two-dimensional pattern that uses calligraphy, geometric figures, and stylized plant forms.<sup>6</sup> Instead, it is a structural entity that accords with the aesthetic principles of the Islamic ideology. The arabesque generates in the viewer an intuition of the quality of infinity, of that which is beyond space-time; but it does so without making the – to the Muslim – absurd claim that the pattern itself stands for that which is beyond. Through contemplation of these infinite patterns, the recipient’s mind is turned toward the Divine, and art becomes a reinforcement and reminder of religious belief.

This interpretation of the *raison d’être* of Islamic art rules out many common misconceptions regarding this art’s rejection of figural art

### *Ismaʿīl Rājī al Fārūqī*

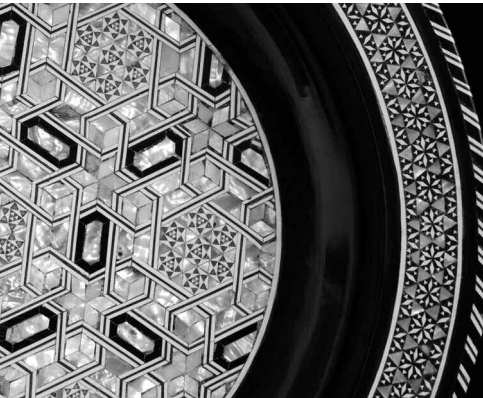
and the concentration instead on abstract motifs. For example, it denies the notion that nature is regarded by the Muslim as an illusion. For the Muslim, nature is part of God's tangible creation, equally as real and valid and marvelous as humanity and the animal world. In fact, nature is regarded as a proof of the Creator's power and beneficence (Qur'ān 2:164, 6:95–99, 10:4–6, and so on). Neither can one maintain that it is an Islamic idea to regard nature as an evil to be derogated. How could the Muslim think of God's creation as evil? Instead, nature is described by the Qur'ān as a field of perfect and beautiful marvels presented for mankind's use and benefit (Qur'ān 2:29, 78:6–16, 25:47–50, etcetera). For the Muslim, nature, although glorious in its variety and perfection, is only the theater in which humans operate to fulfill the will of a higher realm or cause. God, for the Muslim, is this highest Cause, "the greater One." *Allahu Akbar* is the ubiquitous Muslim exclamation of appreciation, admiration, thanks, and inspiration that expresses this belief. While other cultures and peoples may have regarded man as "the measure of all things" or nature as the ultimate determiner, the Muslim's concentration has been on God in His uncompromising transcendence.<sup>7</sup> Islamic art then has a goal similar to that of the Qur'ān – to teach and reinforce in mankind the perception of divine transcendence.

### **Characteristics of the Aesthetic Expression of *Tawḥīd***

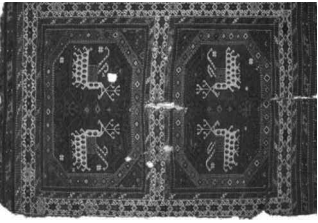
That is not the only way in which a bond exists between the Qur'ān and Islamic art. It is also embodied in the aesthetic characteristics which the

Muslims devised in order to create the impression of infinity and transcendence demanded by the Qur'ānic doctrine of *tawḥīd*. How is this doctrine emphasized through aesthetic content and form to stimulate the impression of infinity and transcendence?

*A Middle Eastern wooden plate decorated with mother-of-pearl and camel bone inlay. The entire design is inlaid – not painted.*



## The Arts of Islamic Civilization



**ABSTRACTION.** The infinite patterns of Islamic art are, first of all, abstract. While figural representation is not totally absent, there is generally little argument that naturalistic figures are rare in the Islamic arts. Even when figures

*Stylized animal design on thirteenth-century rug from Konya, Turkey.*

*[Courtesy Ministry of Culture and Tourism, Government of Turkey].*

from nature are used, they are subjected to denaturalization and stylization techniques that render them more suitable for their role as deniers of naturalism than as faithful depictions of natural phenomena.

**MODULAR STRUCTURE.** The Islamic art work is composed of numerous parts or modules which are combined to produce the larger design. Each of these modules is an entity carrying a measure of climax and perfection which allows it to be perceived as an expressive and satisfying unit on its own as well as an important part of the larger complex.

**SUCCESSIVE COMBINATIONS.** The infinite patterns of sound, sight, and movement evidence successive combinations of the basic modules and/or their repetitions. In this way, larger additive combinations are formed which carry their own independent status and identity. The successively larger combinations in a work of Islamic art in no way destroy the identity and character of the smaller units of which they are made. Even such larger combinations may, in turn,

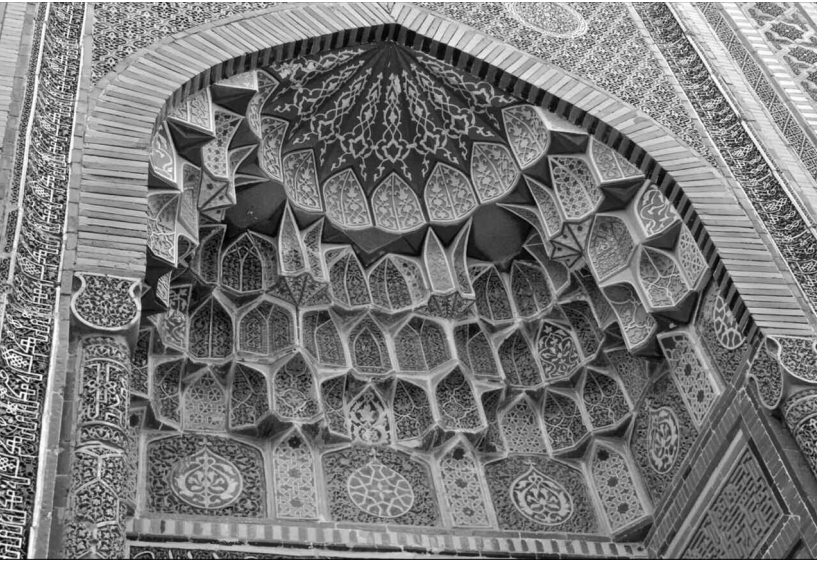


be repeated, varied, and joined to other smaller or larger entities in order to form still more complex combinations. Thus the infinite pattern has numerous centers of aesthetic interest,

*Arabic engraving and design on a copper plate (Islamic Cairo).*

## *Ismaʿīl Rājī al Fārūqī*

*Mausoleum  
of Koutloug  
Aka (Shah-  
i-Zinda,  
Samarqand).*

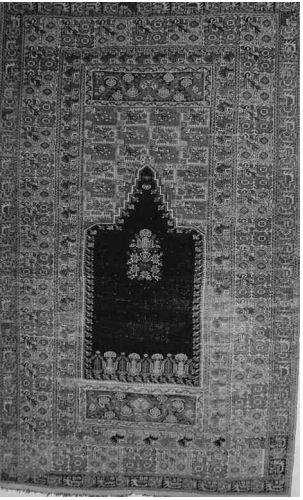


numerous “views” to be experienced as the successive combinations of smaller modules, entities, or motifs are experienced. No design has a single point of aesthetic departure or a progressive development to a culminating or conclusive focal point. Instead, the Islamic design has an inexhaustible number of interest centers or foci, and a mode of internal perception that defies assignment of a beginning or conclusive end.

**REPETITION.** A fourth characteristic which is demanded in order to create the impression of infinity in an art object is a high level of repetition. The additive combinations of Islamic art use repetitions of motifs, of structural modules, and of their successive combinations which seem to continue *ad infinitum*. Abstraction is enhanced and reinforced by this curbing of the individuation of the constituent parts. It prevents any one module in the design from taking precedence over another.

**DYNAMISM.** The Islamic design is “dynamic,” that is, it is a design that must be experienced through time. Boas has described art

## The Arts of Islamic Civilization



works as being based either on time or on space.<sup>8</sup> For him the time-based arts include literature and music, while the arts of space are those of the visual arts and architecture. Dance and drama are categorized by Boas as arts utilizing both time and spatial elements. Although this description may prove meaningful for classifying the arts of Western culture, it proves misleading for an understanding of the Islamic arts. The superficial or obvious aspects of time and space do apply here, of course. A literary or musical composition, for example, is normally experienced through a series of temporal aesthetic events. In the case of literature, the art product is experienced either through reading or listening to its recitation; and in the case of music, through participating in or listening to a performance. Less commonly, the musical performance might be “read” from a score. On the other hand, the visual arts and architectural monuments all make use of space. They occupy physical space and use spatial elements (points, lines, shapes, and volumes) for their creation.

*Ancient Kirşehir prayer rug in the Tilavet room, Mevlâna mausoleum, Konya, Turkey. The rug includes many “successive combinations” of design motifs and modules.*

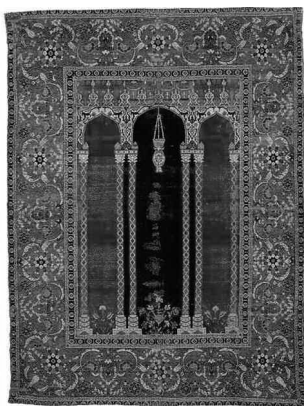
While granting these characteristics as pointed out by Boas, one needs to go further in qualifying the Islamic arts if they are to be properly understood. In addition to having the external temporal or spatial characteristics mentioned above,



*Talā Kārī Madrasah, Samarkand, 1646-1660.*

### *Ismaʿīl Rājī al Fārūqī*

*The James  
F. Ballard  
late 16th  
Century  
Bursa Prayer  
Rug*

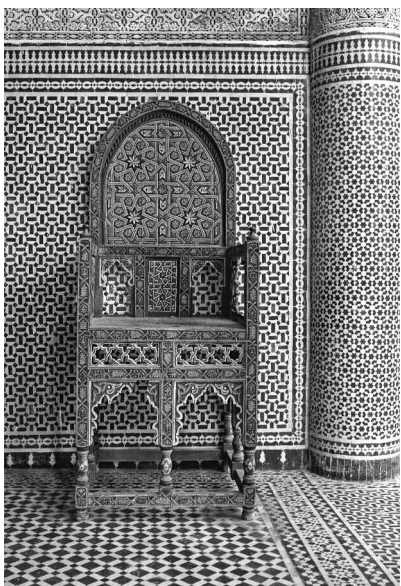


characteristics that may be regarded as universally relevant, every work of Islamic art partakes, on a more subtle level, of a strong and perhaps unique temporal orientation. In fact, the visual arts in Islamic culture, though dealing with spatial elements, cannot be properly experienced except through time. The infinite pattern can never be comprehended in a single glance, in a single moment, with a single view of its multifarious parts. Instead, it

draws the eye and the mind through a series of views or perceptions that must be comprehended serially. The eye moves from pattern to pattern, from center to center of a two-dimensional design. The architectural monument is experienced in the successive movement through its rooms, aisles, dome chambers, or subdivisions. Even the building or complex of buildings is not comprehended from afar as a totality, but necessitates its being experienced through time as the visitor moves through its many segments and quarters.<sup>9</sup> The pictorial miniature art likewise presents a series of characters or scenes that must be experi-

enced successively and sequentially, as in the time arts of literature, musical expression, or dance. Whether belonging to the so-called space arts or the time arts, the Islamic art work is comprehended serially and cumulatively. The imagination is pushed to supply the continuation of an evolving, repeating pattern which seems even to extend, by implication, beyond the edge of a plate, the page of a book, the panel of a wall, or the facade of a building. No overall understanding of even the architectural infinite pattern is possible

*Traditional  
wooden chair  
against a  
blue and  
white mosaic  
wall in the  
historic med-  
ina of Fez in  
Morocco.*



## The Arts of Islamic Civilization



except after the actual or imagined movement over its surfaces and through its spaces in a temporal sequence. Ardalan and Bakhtiar speak of “a moving architecture . . . that reads like a musical composition.”<sup>10</sup> The totality cannot be comprehended simultaneously; instead, one only knows the whole after experiencing and savoring its many parts.<sup>11</sup>

*Persian  
Miniature:  
Jamal al-Din  
Muhammad  
al-Siddiqi -  
al-Isfahani -  
Bahram Gur  
Killing a  
Dragon.*

The arabesque therefore can never be a static composition as has sometimes been charged by mistaken interpreters.<sup>12</sup> On the contrary, appreciation of it must involve a dynamic process that investigates each of its motifs, modules, and successive combinations serially. For those who understand its message and structures, it is the most dynamic, most aesthetically active, of all art forms.<sup>13</sup> It is an expression in which both the arts of time and those of space require a temporally determined experience and apprehension.

**INTRICACY.** Intricate detail is a sixth characteristic that defines Islamic art. Intricacy enhances the ability of any pattern or arabesque to capture the attention of the viewer and force concentration on the structural entities represented. A straight line or a single figure, however gracefully executed, could never be the sole iconographic material of the Islamic pattern. It is only with the multiplication of internal elements and the increased intricacy of execution and combination that the dynamism and momentum of the infinite pattern can be generated.

### LEVEL II

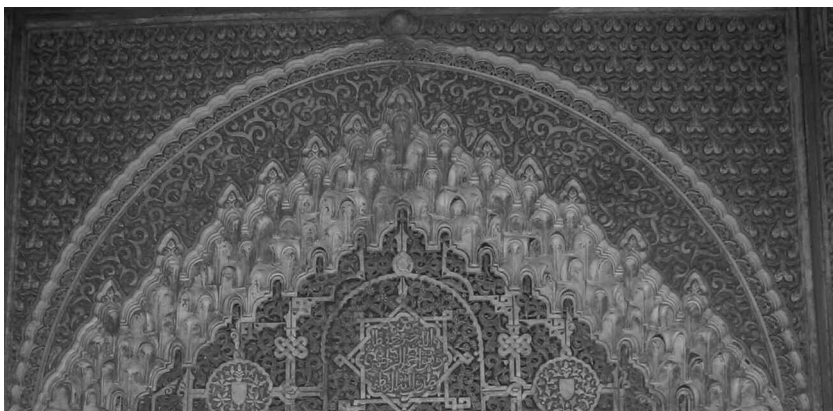
## The Qur'ān as Artistic Model

In addition to being determined by the ideological message of the Qur'ān, Islamic art is also “Qur'ānic” in the sense that the scripture of the Muslim peoples has provided the first and prime model for aesthetic creativity and production. The Qur'ān has been described as “the first

### *Ismaʿīl Rājī al Fārūqī*

work of art in Islam.”<sup>14</sup> This is not to be understood as meaning that the Qurʾān is regarded as the creation of the literary genius of the Prophet Muḥammad, as has been repeated so many times by non-Muslims and so vigorously denied by Muslims. On the contrary, Muslims hold that the Holy Scripture is divine in its form as well as its content, in its letters as well as its ideas; that it was revealed to Muḥammad in the exact words of God; and that its present arrangement in *āyāt* (verses) and *suwar* (chapters) was dictated by God.

Carved arch  
in the  
Alhambra.



This content and this form of the Qurʾān have provided all the distinguishing characteristics which, as we have noted above, are representative of the infinite patterns of the Islamic arts. The Qurʾān itself is the most perfect example of infinite patterning – the example that was to influence all future creations in the literary arts, the visual arts (both decoration and architectural monuments), and even the arts of sound (see Chapter 21) and movement.<sup>15</sup> As a literary work, the Qurʾān has had a tremendous aesthetic and emotional impact on Muslims who read or heard its poetic prose. Many conversions to the new religion were in fact made through the aesthetic power of its recitations, and many are the accounts of people weeping or even dying from listening to its recitation.<sup>16</sup> Even non-Muslims have been deeply impressed by its literary excellence. This inimitable perfection of the Qurʾān has been designated as its *ʾiǧāz*, or “power to incapacitate.” But the inability to match its eloquence has not kept it from being a model for all the arts. This contribution to Islamic culture has shaped the

## The Arts of Islamic Civilization

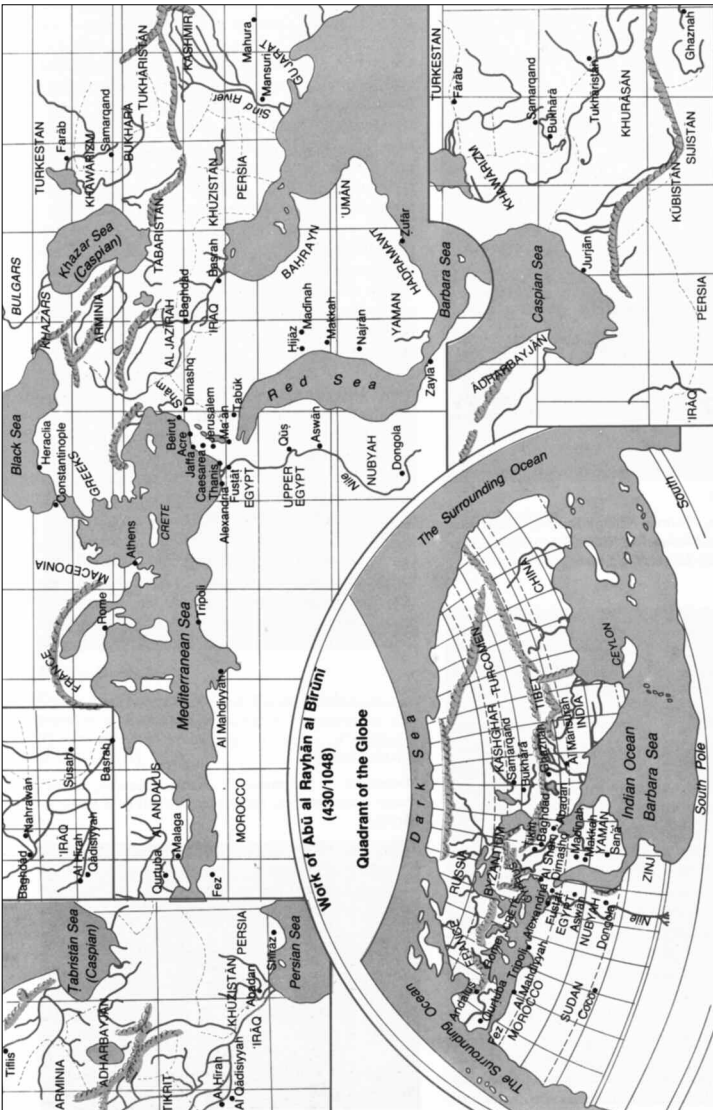
adoption and use of countless artistic motifs and techniques borrowed from many cultures and many peoples over the centuries. It is this core or model that molded the adoption of those materials and ideas and determined the creation of new motifs and techniques. The sublime embodiment of the Islamic message of *tawhīd* was to be the norm and the ideal for all future examples of Islamic art (see Chapter 19).

The Qur'ān provides the first model for the six characteristics of Islamic art mentioned above. First, instead of emphasizing realistic or naturalistic depiction, the Qur'ān evidences a rejection of narrative development as a literary organizational principle. References to certain events are treated segmentally and with repeated mention, as if readers were already familiar with the stories and characters. The main purpose is not narrative, but didactic and moral. The very ordering of the work (the longer, more proselike Madīnan *suwar* near the beginning, and the shorter, strongly poetic Makkan *suwar* near the end) contributes, as well, to the Qur'ān's abstract quality. Verses do not lead the reader through a series of contrasting and dramatically stimulated moods. Instead, the reader is moved by emotions that seem abstracted or divorced from specific characterization. The *āyāt* and *suwar* certainly arouse the emotions of the listener, but they do so without evoking specific moods.

Second, the Qur'ān, like the Islamic work of art, is divided into literary modules (*āyāt* and *suwar*) which exist as satisfying segments standing on their own. Each one is complete, and not dependent on what went before or comes after it. The modules have little or no organic relationship that would necessitate a particular sequence. In its cantillated recitation, periods of silence (*waqfāt*) provide a clear division of the musical rendering into aural modules (see Chapter 23).

Third, Qur'ānic lines and verses are combined to form longer entities or successive combinations. These may be short chapters or sections within a longer chapter. For example, ten *āyāt* constitute a *ʿushr*. A series of *ʿushr* divisions make a *rubʿ* or "quarter." Four "quarters" combine to form a *ḥizb*. Two *ahzāb* (pl. of *ḥizb*) constitute a *juzʿ* ("part"), and thirty *ajzāʿ* (pl. of *juzʿ*) are contained in the complete Qur'ān. Even the *āyāt* modules are further subdivided into separate lines by end rhymes and assonance.

# *Isma'īl Rājī al Fārūqī*



Map 26. The Earth According to Abū al-Rayhān al Birūnī, 430/1048

## The Arts of Islamic Civilization

So long as the meaning is not distorted, stopping places for these combinations of verses may be varied. A reading (*qirā'ah*) of the Qur'ān may end with the completion of a *sūrah* or may stop after any verse or cluster of verses, even if they overarch two or more *suwar*. The Muslim reads or hears *mā tayassara* ("what transpires"), that is, whatever he/she is moved to read or hear at that particular time. The recitation is therefore without predetermined length or beginning and end. It leaves no impression of conclusive development or finality.

The fourth characteristic that can be found in all the arts of Islamic culture – the profusion of repetitive means – is equally represented in the Qur'ānic prototype. Poetic devices resulting in sound or metrical repetitions abound in the Qur'ān. In addition to frequent instances of single- or multisyllable end-rhymes, the Qur'ān contains numerous rhymes internal to the lines. Repetitions of metrical units and of vowel and consonant sounds abound and poetically enliven this literary work. Refrain phrases and lines return again and again to reinforce both the didactic and the aesthetic message. The repetition of ideas and of patterns of speech are counted among the elements of eloquence or *balāghah*. It is this eloquence that has provided substantiation for the argument of the Muslims that the Qur'ān is indeed miraculous, and therefore the eternal word of God.

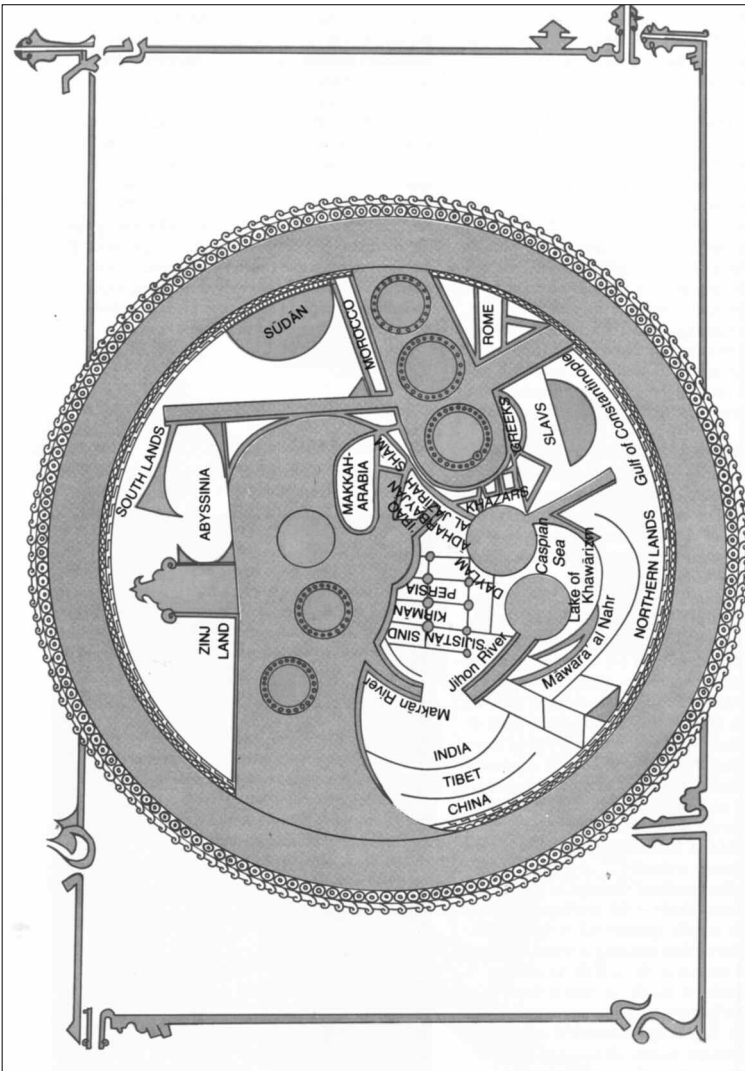
The fifth outstanding characteristic of the visual arts of Islamic culture – the necessity of experiencing them through time – is to be expected in the Holy Qur'ān, since all literary works are considered to be time arts. In this case, however, as in all the Islamic arts, there is a serial process of perception and appreciation that defies development to a single major climax and subsequent conclusion. The impression of overall unity is weak, and only through experiencing its individual parts in succession does the reader or listener grasp a sense of the whole.

Intricacy, the sixth characteristic of the arts of the Muslim peoples, is equally modeled after the Qur'ān. Parallelism, antithesis,



Muslim woman carrying Qur'ān on her head, Jolo, Sulu Province, Phillipines. [Courtesy I. E. Winship]. (Taken from the original as it appears in *The Cultural Atlas of Islam*).

*Isma'īl Rājī al Fārūqī*



Map 27. *The Earth According to Ibrahīm ibn Muḥammad al Iṣṭakhṛī (4th/10th century)*

## The Arts of Islamic Civilization

conger, metaphor, simile, and allegory are only some of the many poetic devices that provide verbal richness and elaboration in the Qur'ān. The proliferation of these elements causes those who hear or read its passages to marvel at its beauty and eloquence.

### LEVEL III

## The Qur'ān as Artistic Iconography

The Qur'ān not only provided Islamic civilization with an ideology to be expressed in its arts; it not only furnished the first and most important model of artistic content and form; but it also provided the most important material for the iconography of the Islamic arts.

The long tradition of literary emphasis and excellence among the Semitic forerunners of the seventh-century Muslims is well known. Following their interest and excellence in literary creation, the art of writing had been developed by the Semitic peoples at an early stage. Writing was used for millennia in the pre-Islamic Mesopotamian cultures as a component of the visual arts. Accompanying bands of script have been found on numerous artistic reliefs and statues of the Sumerians, the Babylonians, and the Assyrians, to name but a few of these peoples.<sup>17</sup> The function of those pre-Islamic calligraphic inclusions was, however, primarily discursive. Writing was used as a logical accompaniment to explain the meaning of a visual representation. Such use of writing in artistic products continued in Byzantine art. With Islam, however, writing and calligraphy were to undergo a profound metamorphosis which changed them from merely discursive symbols into aesthetic and fully iconographic materials.

It was not by chance that this development took place. Rather, it can be seen as another dimension of the basic "Qur'ānic" influence on the aesthetic sense and behavior of the Muslims. The aim of art for the Muslim is to direct human beings, as vicegerents of the one transcendent God, toward contemplation and remembrance of Him. Toward this goal, no more suitable agent could be found than the poetically inspiring passages from the Holy Qur'ān. Though God is indeed beyond nature and beyond representation, His Word as revealed to the

*Ismaʿīl Rājī al Fārūqī*

*Qubbah al  
Ṣakhrah  
("The Dome  
of the Rock")  
Al Quds,  
completed  
691 C.E.*



Prophet Muḥammad carries remembrance of Him to the viewer or listener without fear of violating divine transcendence. It is therefore the iconographic material *par excellence* for the work of Islamic art. Already in the seventh century C.E., this tendency had become manifest, as is so clearly demonstrated in the decoration of the Dome of the Rock (*Qubbah al Ṣakhrah*) in Jerusalem. This monument, which has an extensive decorative program incorporating Qurʾānic quotations, was completed by the Umawī caliph ʿAbd al Malik in 71/691. Through continued and prolific use of Qurʾānic expressions and passages, the art objects of the Muslim peoples were to be constant reminders of *tawḥīd*.

Realization of the effectiveness, ennoblement, and suitability of Qurʾānic visual and discursive motifs brought in its wake a wealth of correlative influences on Islamic culture and the arts. These include the astonishingly rapid development of the Arabic script, its elaboration into a highly malleable catalog of forms, the incredible proliferation of distinctive styles, and the widespread use of calligraphic materials in artistic works.

Inclusion of Qurʾānic passages was never to be executed without care, reverence, and perfection. Consequently, the art of beautiful writing, or calligraphy, developed among the early Muslims with

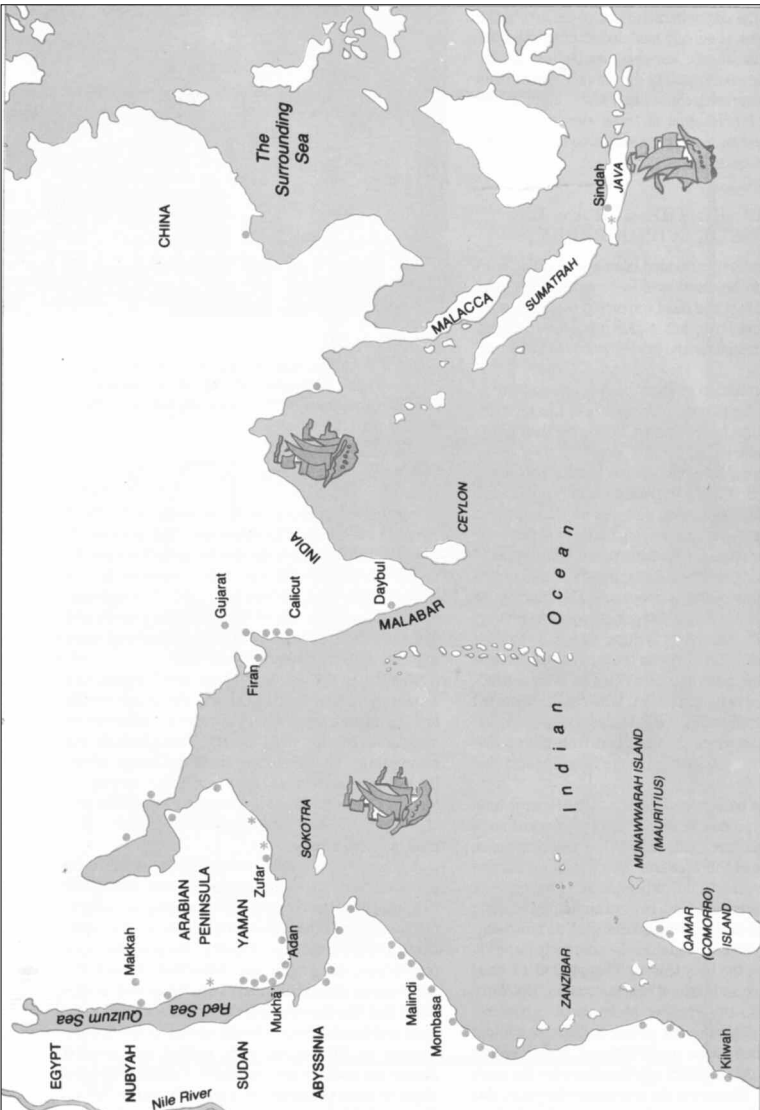
## The Arts of Islamic Civilization

astonishing inventiveness and rapidity. No pre-Islamic or post-Islamic calligraphy has demanded of itself the cursiveness, malleability and plasticity, as well as legibility, that was demanded of the Arabic script. Elongations and contractions in height as well as width were essayed as the letters were molded into various shapes and sizes. Numerous styles of script were used alone or were combined with noncalligraphic motifs. Scripts of every imaginable angular and rounded mien have been created by the Muslim peoples. Some of the most interesting contemporary aesthetic efforts in the Muslim world are indeed those developing around this most popular artistic subject matter of the Muslim peoples.

Since every act and thought of the Muslim carries a religious connection or determination, the incorporation of the words of God in every possible decorative scheme, in every aural and visual experience, is a desired objective.<sup>18</sup> Qur'ānic passages have been used as decorative motifs not only on religiously significant items but also on fabrics, garments, vessels and service trays, boxes and furniture, walls and buildings, even the lowly cooking pot, in every century of Islamic history and in every corner of the Muslim world. It is no less prevalent and prominent in the literary and vocal arts. With the inclusion of beautiful calligraphy reproducing passages from the Qur'ān, the Islamic work of art derives not only a discursive influence from the Qur'ān but also a Qur'ānic aesthetic determination. Even when the writing conveys material other than passages from the Holy Scripture – pious sayings; proverbs; names of God, the Prophet, or religious persons; or details of construction, patronage, or artist – there has been an emphasis on imaginative and beautiful exemplifications of Arabic script. From Rabat to Mindanao, from Kano to Samarqand, the Qur'ānic passages executed in Arabic script have provided the most revered ingredient of the arts. In no aesthetic tradition of the world has such a decisive role been played by the art of calligraphy or by a single book.

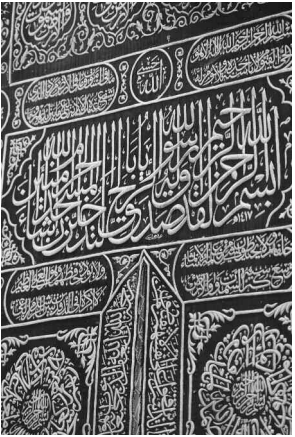
A number of scholars have written in recent years about the symbolic nature of Islamic art.<sup>19</sup> Some of them are non-Muslims; others are Muslims. In both cases, however, these writers, almost exclusively, have been born or educated in a Western environment. Their attribution of symbolic significance to the Islamic arts does not merely imply

*Isma'īl Rājī al Fārūqī*



Map 28. *The Indian Ocean*, by Ahmad ibn Majid (10th/17th century)

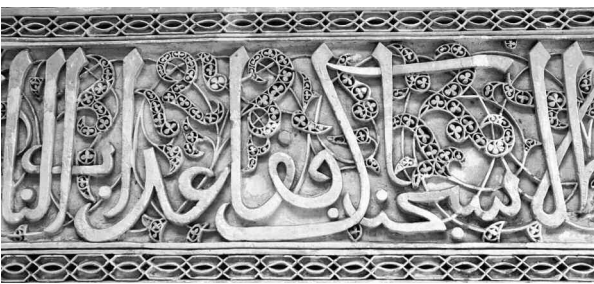
## The Arts of Islamic Civilization



*Qur'anic verses in gold and yellow thread on kiswah (covering cloth on the Ka'bah).*

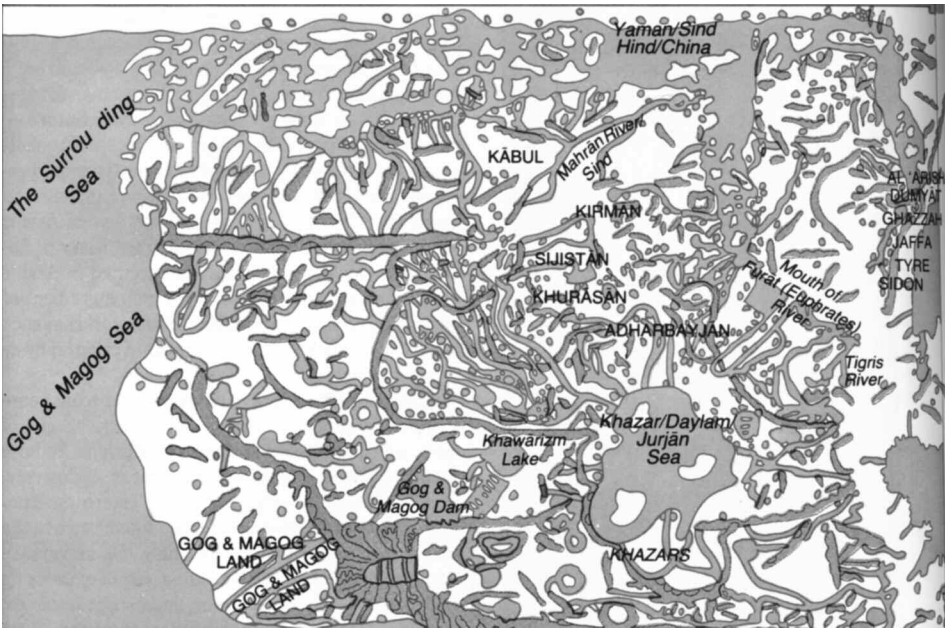
the universally accepted notion that the arts are a way of expressing an abstract idea in poetry, color, lines, shapes, sounds, movements, and so on. In this sense, of course, all art is symbolic. These writers claim much more for what they see as the symbolic implications of Islamic art. For them, the forms, shapes, objects, scenes, and even letters and numbers used in Islamic art have a hidden (*bāṭinī*) significance. As the *mandala*, the phallic pillar, or the anthropomorphic representations of gods and goddesses hold special religious significance for the Hindu, or the cross, the Crucifixion scene, and the statue of Christ are powerful symbols for the Christian, so their argument goes, there are specific “Islamic symbols” which visually represent a wealth of meanings to be grasped and understood by the viewer. Although the motifs or symbols of which these scholars speak are judged to be peculiar to Islamic culture, the aesthetic *logique* is identical to that which pertains to certain other artistic traditions. The dome is to be regarded as the dome of heaven, it is claimed<sup>20</sup>; the medallion at the center of a carpet is a representation of the passageway into heaven<sup>21</sup>; the blue of the manuscript illumination is a symbol of the Infinite, of God<sup>22</sup>; the epigraphic decoration including the ruler's name is a symbolic stand-in for the political state,<sup>23</sup> or even a manifestation of Allah.<sup>24</sup> Even emptiness or the “void” is regarded as “the symbol of both the transcendence of God and His presence in all things.”<sup>25</sup>

All of these ascriptions of literal symbolic content are antagonistic



*Detail of mosque exterior wall, Fez, Morocco.*

to the essence of Islamic art and to its abstract quality. Islamic art was born and developed in a Semitic environment which forswore

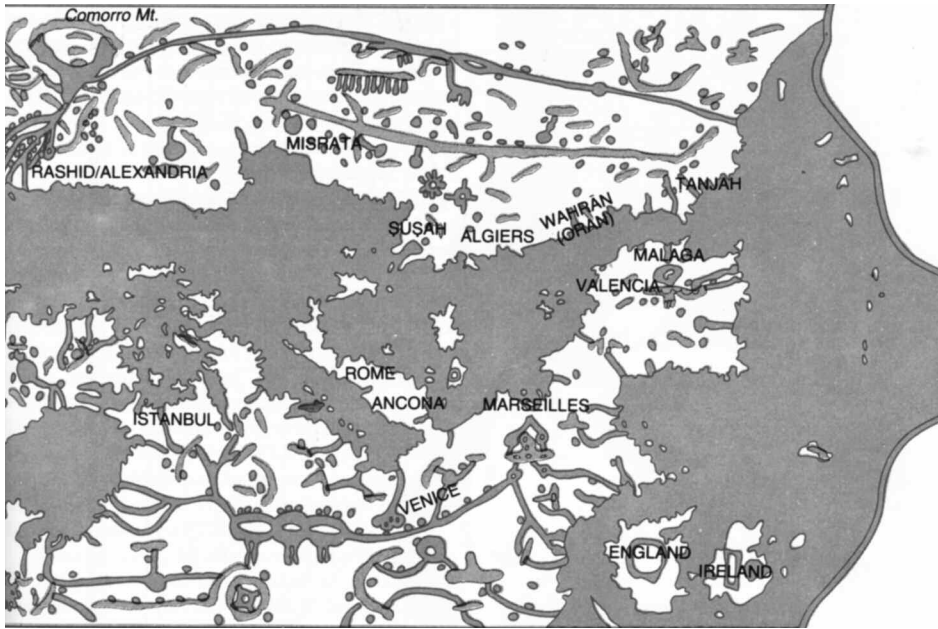
*Ismaʿīl Rājī al Fārūqī*

Map 29. *The Earth According to Al Şafaqşī (4th/10th century)*

and condemned all representations of the transcendent realm. It is an art based on an ideology – *tawhīd* – that cannot be aesthetically expressed by real or imagined linkages between nature and God. Such linkage would be a kind of *shirk* or “associationism” of other beings and objects with Allah; and this has been judged as the most hated practice, the major sin, in Islam.

These beliefs and premises have generated a uniquely asymbolic quality in the religion and culture of Islam. It has frequently been noted that even the rituals of Islam are functional rather than symbolic in essence. The call to prayer, even the minaret itself, are not symbolic aural or visual elements. They are, respectively, an act to help the Muslims congregate for prayer at specific times of the day and an architectural member to facilitate that act.<sup>26</sup> The *mihrāb* niche of the mosque commands no special deference on the part of the worshipper; the area is not holier than any other in the mosque.<sup>27</sup> The crescent, which has often been associated with Islam by non-Muslims,

## The Arts of Islamic Civilization

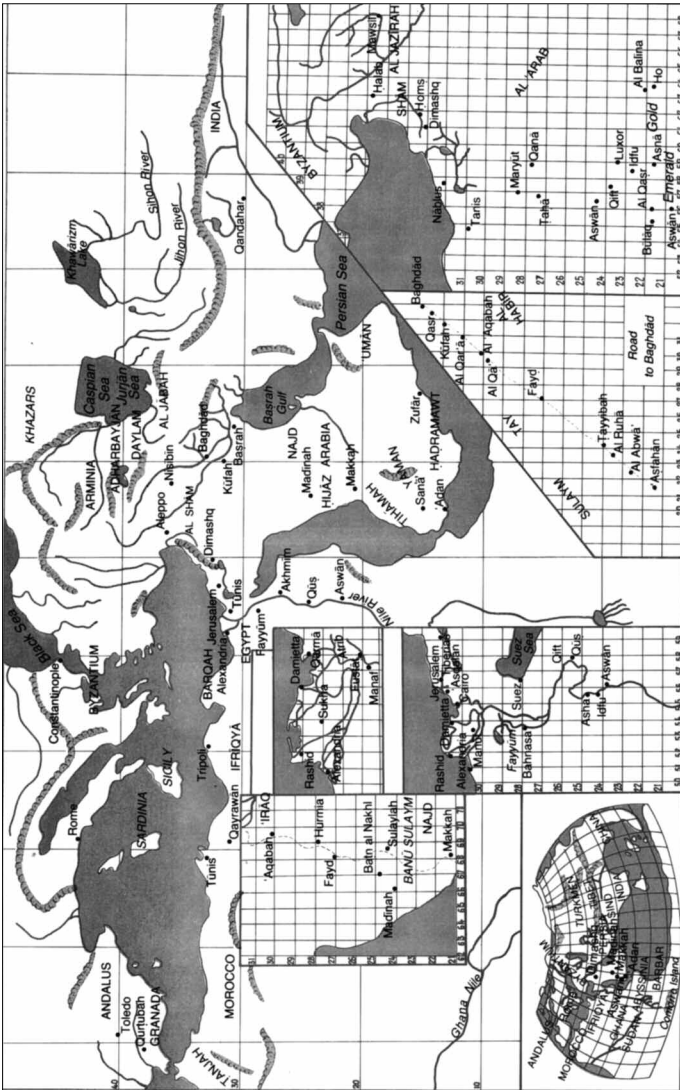


has no significance as a visual symbol of the faith within Islamic culture.<sup>28</sup> It is rather an insignia of the Ottoman army which the Europeans mistakenly regarded as a symbol of the religion of Islam. Since the cross had much earlier come to symbolize Christianity, they jumped to the conclusion that Islam had adopted the crescent as its comparable symbol.

Surely these facts are known to the non-Muslim as well as Muslim scholars of Islamic art. It is strange, then, that these scholars persist in interpreting that art in a way that is inconsistent with the rest of the culture. The following hypotheses may help explain their adherence to such explanations of aesthetic meaning in Islamic art.

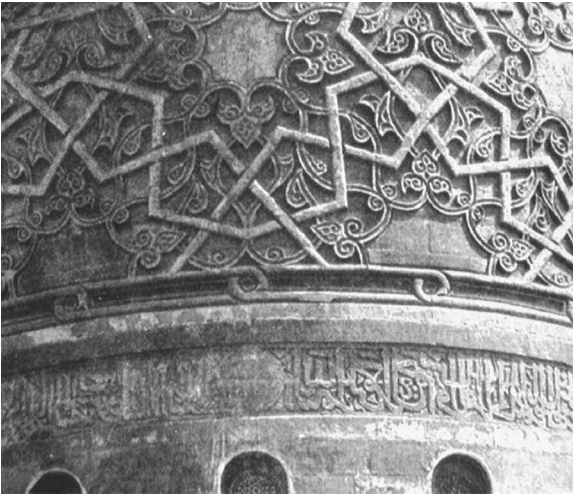
One hypothesis is that the authors are so indoctrinated by Western interpretations of art that it is difficult, if not impossible, for them to escape those civilizational biases when dealing with the art of Islam. Unfortunately, premises that may fit perfectly for interpreting the Christian art of Europe seem to have been transplanted to the field of Islamic art, where they are patently out of place. This certainly underlines the need for extreme caution, deep knowledge, and empathy to be

Isma'īl Rājī al Fārūqī



Map 30. The Earth According to Iban Yunis al Miṣrī (339/951)

## The Arts of Islamic Civilization



exercised when dealing with comparative and intercultural studies in general and with Islamic art in particular.

A second reason for the prevalence in recent publications of symbolic interpretations of Islamic art is that the field of aesthet-

*Carved calligraphy decoration (from the Qur'ān) on dome of Mausoleum of Sulṭān Qayt Bay, Cairo (1472-1474 CE).*

ics and art history is dominated either by Western scholars or those with Western training. The field has been held in such low esteem in the Muslim world that it has attracted few significant talents from within, necessitating its control by religio-cultural outsiders. In addition, since colleges and universities in the Muslim world have been negligent in fostering studies in aesthetics and art history, Muslims interested in those disciplines, practically without exception, have been trained in Western institutions, under the influence of Western tutors and Western art principles. The Muslim scholars, therefore, whether converts or Muslims by birth, are often as affected by the exogenous misinterpretations of Islamic art as are their non-Muslim counterparts.

There is a third reason for the recent attributions of a blatantly literal symbolic content to Islamic art, in contradiction to its inherent abstract quality. This is the influence of Ṣūfism, the mystical current within Islam. Mysticism, in addition to its stress on the personal, inward experience of religion, is a doctrine or persuasion that emphasizes the mysterious, the esoteric, and the magical qualities of religion. Such ideas are true of mystical thought in Islam, as well as in Christianity, Hinduism, Jainism, Judaism, and other religious traditions. Mystics have commonly ascribed hidden meanings to letters, words, and phrases as well as to all types of visual motifs and figures. As they have sought, by various means, to achieve union with the divine, they

*Ismaʿīl Rājī al Fārūqī*

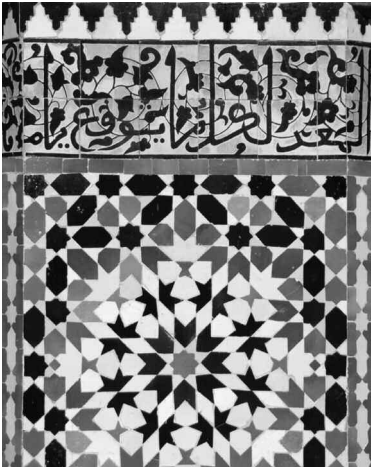
have been much less careful to maintain the clear distinction between the transcendent and the natural realms which is a hallmark of orthodox Islam and *tawhīd* (see Chapter 16).

No one can deny the existence of such ideas within Islamic history or the proliferation of certain occult practices and interpretations which they brought in their wake. But these facts should not be blown out of proportion to explain the whole phenomenon known as Islamic art. Though mystics have tried to argue that the originator of Ṣūfism was Muḥammad himself, it was only centuries after the Prophet's death that the movement gained any statistical significance. Its wider acceptance in certain periods of Islamic history cannot be adduced to explain the genesis and whole history of Islamic art. The presence of a uniquely Islamic art was already evident in the first century A.H., a period certainly antedating widespread Ṣūfī influence. 'Abd al Malik's *Qubbah al Ṣakhrāh* (Dome of the Rock) in Jerusalem (71/691) has all the ingredients and characteristics of Islamic art – of Qur'ānic art – long long before Ṣūfism proliferated and began to attach its interpretations of literal symbolism to the Islamic arts. The Dome of the Rock was certainly not a product of mystical Islamic ideology. Therefore, it must be accorded an aesthetic interpretation that accords with Islam as a whole.

Exaggerations (both religious and social) of some mystical groups have given Ṣūfism a bad name in many parts of the Muslim world. Its inward-looking, personalist tendencies have been regarded by the Islamic modernists as one of the prime causes for the subjugation and degradation of the Muslim peoples at the hands of internal and external powers. It is argued that an overemphasis on personal piety was achieved at the expense of the traditional Islamic stress on individual and collective achievement, development, and progress. This transvaluation diminished the striving for cooperation between *dīn* and *dunyā* (between "religion" and "this world"), and brought an exaggerated concern instead for the afterlife. Recent Islamic reform and revival movements are therefore generally opposed to mysticism, and the leadership of the contemporary Muslim *ummah* is largely nonmystical or even antimystical.

Although the majority of Muslims living in the Muslim world are

## The Arts of Islamic Civilization



not adherents of mystical brotherhoods, and although those organizations and their activities are regarded with some suspicion by many in the Muslim world, it would certainly be erroneous to say that the mystical movement of Islam is dead. However, the power Ṣūfism held over the people after the disruptions of the Mongol invasion and the Crusades, and the influence it exerted during the subsequent decline in power and increase of political fragmentation, is

*Courtyard of  
an old  
madrasah,  
Marrakech,  
Morocco.*

no longer widely evident. In fact, it is primarily in Europe and America that Ṣūfism flourishes, whether in actual communities or in scholarly interest, research, and publication. It is there that Muslim Ṣūfīs find a sympathetic ear and attain power and prestige. It is there that Westerners – divorced from their former religious traditions and cast adrift without religious moorings – have taken an interest in the ecstatic and exotic practices of Islamic mysticism and espoused its emphasis on the inner spirit. A latent background in Christian or Jewish mysticism often provides a bridge for the Westerner to the mystical elements in Islam. In fact, a considerable number of the Anglo-Saxon converts to Islam in recent decades have entered through the influence of Ṣūfī movements. Contributors of writings expounding the symbolic interpretations of Islamic art have come mainly from this group of white, upper-class, educated Western converts or their non-Muslim Western counterparts.

The mystical, literally symbolic interpretations of recent writings are in opposition to the abstraction so deeply imbedded in the aesthetic consciousness and production of the Muslim peoples. They are also antagonistic to the Islamic aversion to any practice that hints of divine immanence or compromises divine transcendence. Although they may attract the Western-trained scholar and the mystic, they do not satisfy the need for a comprehensive and internally consistent interpretation of the Islamic arts.

*Ismaʿīl Rājī al Fārūqī*

An acceptable theory of Islamic art is one that assigns its premises to factors internal to the religion and culture rather than to those imposed by an alien tradition. It is also one that bases itself on the most significant rather than on the minor or accidental elements affecting that culture. Given such demands, the Holy Qurʾān provides a ready and logical source of inspiration for aesthetic creation. The Qurʾān has been as influential of the arts as it has been of the other aspects of Islamic culture. The Qurʾān has provided the message to be expressed aesthetically, as well as the manner of expressing it as evidenced in the six characteristics of its literary form and content. It has even supplied its own expressions and passages, as most important subject matter for the iconography of the arts. The Islamic arts therefore can rightfully be designated “Qurʾānic arts.”

NOTES

1. This negative view is exemplified by such statements as the following: “The Islamic doctrine of the unity of God, and its correlative, the menace of *Shirk*, or deification, have demanded the prohibition of all representational art. In the realm of worship Islam enforces, often with a puritan severity, a total veto on artistic joy in shape and image, music and iconography” (Kenneth Cragg, *The House of Islam* [Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1975], p. 15).

2. The *ṣifāt* or attributes of God are traditionally considered to be ninety-nine, though the implication is that they are infinite.

3. Ismaʿīl R. al Fārūqī, *Islam and Culture* (Kuala Lumpur: Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia, 1980), p. 44.

4. The “arabesque” is most narrowly defined as a particular form of stylized leaf and vine design created by the Arabs/Muslims. According to Ernst Kühnel (*The Arabesque: Meaning and Transformation of an Ornament*, tr. Richard Ettinghausen [Graz, Austria: Verlag für Sammler, 1949], p. 4), it was in the late nineteenth century that Alois Riegl wrote a book in which he limited the term to this specific category of design. It has generally had a much wider meaning which included a whole range of ornamental designs, including calligraphic, geometric, and vegetal motifs. A still wider significance for this term has been claimed by Lois Ibsen al Fārūqī in “Ornamentation in Arabian Improvisational Music: A Study of Interrelatedness the Arts,” *The World of Music*, 20 (1978), pp. 17–32; idem, “The Islamization of the Hagia Sophia Plan,” paper delivered at the Symposium on *The Common Principles, Forms, & Themes of Islamic Art*, Istanbul, April, 1984; Ismaʿīl R. al Fārūqī, “Islam and Art,” *Studia Islamica*, 37 (1973), pp. 102–103.

## The Arts of Islamic Civilization

5 Kühnel, *The Arabesque*.

6 Ernst Kühnel, "Arabesque," *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, new ed. (Leiden: E. J. Brill), Vol. I, pp. 558–561.

7 See for a more detailed discussion, Lois Ibsen al Fārūqī, "An Islamic Perspective on Symbolism in the Arts: New Thoughts on Figural Representation," *Art, Creativity, and Religion*, ed. Diane Apostolos Cappadona (New York: Crossroad Pub. Co., 1983), pp. 164–178.

8 Franz Boas, *Primitive Art* (Oslo: Instituttet for Sammenlignende Kulturforskning, 1927).

9 See the description of the city of Isfahan in Nader Ardalan and Laleh Bakhtiar, *The Sense of Unity: The Sufi Tradition in Persian Architecture* (Chicago, 1973), pp. 97ff.

10. Ibid., p. 95.

11. See Marshall G. S. Hodgson's description of Jalāluddīn Rūmī's *Mathnawī* in *The Venture of Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), Vol. II, pp. 248–249.

12. Ernst Diez, "A Stylistic Analysis of Islamic Art," *Ars Islamica*, 5 (1938), p. 36; Arthur Upham Pope, *Persian Architecture: The Triumph of Form and Color* (New York: George Braziller, 1965), p. 81.

13. See David Talbot Rice, "Studies in Islamic Metal Work–VI," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* (University of London), 21 (1958), pp. 225–253.

14. I. R. al Fārūqī, "Islam and Art," pp. 95–98.

15. Lois Ibsen al Fārūqī, "Dance as an Expression of Islamic Culture," *Dance Research Journal*, 10 (Spring–Summer, 1978), pp. 6–13.

16. 'Alī B. 'Uthmān Al-Jullābī Al-Ḥujwīrī, *Kashf Al-Mahjūb of Al-Ḥujwīrī*, tr. Reynold A. Nicholson, in *E. J. W. Gibb Memorial Series*, 17 (London: Luzac & Co., 1976), pp. 396–397.

17. See Giovanni Garbini, *The Ancient World* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966); André Parrot, *The Arts of Assyria*, tr. Stuart Gilbert and James Emmons (New York: Golden Press, 1961); *The Great King: King of Assyria*, photographs by Charles Wheeler (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1945).

18. See René A. Bravmann, *African Islam* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1983), chap. 1; and Clifford Geertz, "Art as a Cultural System," *Modern Language Notes*, 91 (1976), pp. 1489–1490.

19. For example, Martin Lings, *The Quranic Art of Calligraphy and Illumination* (London: World of Islam Festival Trust, 1976); Titus Burckhardt, *The Art of Islam* (London: World of Islam Festival Trust, 1976); Nader Ardalan and L. Bakhtiar, *The Sense of Unity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973); Anthony Welch, *Calligraphy in the Arts of the Muslim World* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979); Erica Cruikshank Dodd, "The Image of the Word," *Berytus* 18 (1969), pp. 35–58; Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "The Significance of the Void in the Art and Architecture of Islam," *The Islamic Quarterly*, 16 (1972), pp. 115–120; Annemarie Schimmel, "Schriftsymbolik im Islam," in *Aus der Welt der*

*Ismaʿīl Rājī al Fārūqī*

*islamischen Kunst: Festschrift für Ernst Kühnel*, ed. Richard Ettinghausen (Berlin, 1959), pp. 244–254; Schuyler van R. Cammann, “Symbolic Meanings in Oriental Rug Patterns,” *The Textile Museum Journal*, 3 (1972), pp. 5–54; idem, “Cosmic Symbolism on Carpets from the Sanguszko Group,” *Studies in Art and Literature of the Near East in Honor of Richard Ettinghausen*, ed. Peter J. Chelkowski (Salt Lake City and New York, 1975), pp. 181–208.

20. Burckhardt, *Art of Islam*, chap. 4.

21. Cammann, “Symbolic Meanings” and “Cosmic Symbolism on Carpets.”

22. Lings, *Quranic Art*, pp. 76–77.

23. Welch, *Calligraphy*, p. 23.

24. Ibid.

25. Nasr, “Significance of the Void,” p. 116.

26. In contrast with the sacraments of Christianity and the libation ceremonies of the Hindus.

27. In contrast with the significance of the altar of the Catholic cathedral and the statue of the god in a Hindu temple.

28. Thomas Arnold, “Symbolism and Islam,” *The Burlington Magazine*, 53 (July-Dec., 1928), pp. 155–156.