

ISLAMIC ART AND ORNAMENTATION

Reflections on the Study of Art from Alois Riegl
to Ernst Gombrich and Beyond.

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By

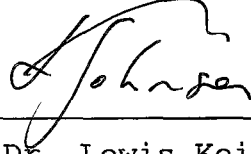
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June, 2000

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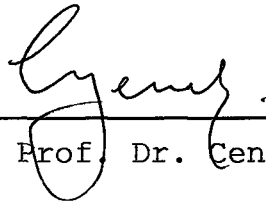
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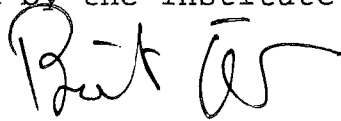
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ABSTRACT

ISLAMIC ART AND ORNAMNETATION: REFLECTIONS ON THE STUDY
OF ART FROM ALOIS RIEGL TO ERNST GOMBRICH AND BEYOND.

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In this study certain arguments about two different but related phenomena are presented: Islamic art and ornamentation. The problem of maintaining a relevant definition for both cases is emphasized by giving examples of diverse and even opposing explanations. For ornamentation, the work of two art historians, Alois Riegl and Ernst Gombrich is elaborated and the differences in their approach to ornamentation are tried to be shown. In order to understand the issue of Islamic ornament, first the discussions about the term Islamic art are given, then the place of ornamentation in Islamic art is argued by taking arabesque as an example case. Finally the possibilities of experiencing the artwork in such a situation which the plurality of approaches that may subject to contradict each other exist, are investigated. The ambiguity of Islamic ornamentation is expected to give way to an inquiry about the nature of artwork.

KEY WORDS: Islamic art, Ornamentation, Arabesque, Alois Riegl, Ernst Gombrich, Sublime, Philosophy of Art.

ÖZET

İSLAM SANATI VE SÜSLEME: SANAT ÇALIŞMALARINI HAKKINDA
ALOIS RIEGL'DEN ERNST GOMBRICH'E VE ÖTESİNE DÜŞÜNCELER.

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Bu çalışmada iki farklı fakat birbirleriyle bağlantılı olgu, İslam sanatı ve süsleme hakkındaki tartışmalar sunulmaktadır. Her iki olgu içinde de yeterli bir tanımlamanın yapılamamasından doğan sorun; çeşitli ve kimi zaman zıtlaşan açıklamalardan verilen örneklerle vurgulanmıştır. Süsleme için iki sanat tarihçisinin Alois Riegl ve Ernst Gombrich' in çalışmaları ele alınmış ve yaklaşımlarındaki farklar gösterilmeye çalışılmıştır. İslami süsleme meselesini anlamak için, ilk önce İslam sanatı kavramı hakkındaki tartışmalar verilmiş, sonra süslemenin İslam sanatı içindeki yeri, arabesk'in örnek olarak verilmesiyle tartışılmıştır. Sonuç olarak birbirini ile çelişmeye müsait çeşitli yaklaşımların varolduğu bir durumda sanat eserini deneyimlemenin olanakları araştırılmıştır. İslami süsleme üzerindeki belirsizliğin sanat eserinin doğası hakkında yeni bir incelemeye yol açması beklenmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İslam Sanatı, Süsleme, Arabesk, Alois Riegl, Ernst Gombrich, Yüce, Sanat Felsefesi.

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*to the Memory of Töre Tunail
and my Father*



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INTRODUCTION

The present study started off with mere curiosity about the nature of ornamentation and turned out to be a serious investigation. Ornamentation is commonly found in every culture produced and used by every civilization. Great numbers of motifs have been created, different styles have been formed by traditions developing and at the same time interacting with each other through ages. Many examples of ornamentation produced by using different materials and designed to appear in different places from great monuments to sacred books have been the subject of gratitude and caused excitement among the spectators.

Yet the definition of ornamentation is problematic. First of all ornamentation has an obscure character. It is not clear whether the ornamentation has an independent nature from the object that carries it. Ornamentation may be regarded as being attached to the surface for only beautification of the object and having only a decorative purpose. On the other hand a certain understanding would like to treat ornament as being different than the object and being an art work in itself.¹

If ornamentation is not only embellishment, it can be asked that whether the ornamentation could reveal something more than the taste of its creators and users. It is evident that each ornament indicates the aesthetic understanding of its time but is it possible that it also represents certain aspects like power,

¹ Even in some cases ornamentation surpasses. For example as it is claimed that in Islamic architecture ornamentation of the building may cover the whole surface to the degree of concealment. Then it appears as an ambiguous situation since it is the building that physically bears the ornamentation, but it is the artistic production that bears the building. See chapter two.

divinity, etc. and the motifs employed may be political, theological, cosmological symbols.

Depending on these arguments it is claimed that ornamentation can be understood, studied and learned as a language, a language which enables researchers to comprehend the cultural context in which it was created and the aim of the artist.

Even if the possibility that ornamentation conveys such representation of this or that for any purpose may be found acceptable, there exists the problem of meaning, since there is not a relevant written evidence remaining from ancient cultures that explains all of the meanings intended by the production of ornamentation or explains its vocabulary.

Hence the meaning of a specific ornamentation, symbolization in the motifs provided by scholars and art historians however carefully studied and presented with numerous examples would still be their own interpretation. Most of the explanation would seem reasonable and in accordance with historical facts. Nevertheless whatever ornamentation is claimed to

represent is only an attribution. One can never be certain about the intention of the artist as rival explanations can be formulated for nearly for every case².

Bearing in mind the difficulties of maintaining a proper definition to ornamentation, two art historians views about the matter are studied and elaborated in chapter one of this inquiry. One of these art historians is Austrian Alois Riegl (1858-1905). Under the influence of the historicism of his time, Riegl in his book *Stilfragen* (Problems of Style) has tried to evaluate the history of ornamentation from ancient times to the Late Antiquity and Islam. Riegl traces the changes and transformations of certain motifs from

² One may object to this point of view in the case of calligraphy. Usage of language enables transfer of certain meaning apparent in the writings. Apart from the problem of legibility, both depending on the calligraphy's design and viewer's education, some writings may contain connotations. For example certain suras from the Koran written on the mosque walls remain as what they are: sacred texts. But it can be claimed that they have been chosen to form a reference as greeting the power of the authority that financed the construction of the mosque.

the lotus plant in ancient Egypt to acanthus leaf in Hellenistic times, and to the arabesque of Islam. Riegl tries to see this development related to a certain principle inherent in arts that is called *Kunstwollen* (Will to Art). There are different interpretations for *Kunstwollen* supplied by Riegl's followers. Nevertheless for Riegl history of ornamentation turns out to be the realization of the principle of *Kunstwollen*.

"All of art history presents itself as a continuous struggle with material; it is not the tool -which is determined by the technique- but the artistically creative idea that strives to expand its creative realm and increase its formative potential" (Riegl 33)

Another art historian who works on ornamentation is Ernst Gombrich (1909-). In this study before mentioning his book on ornamentation, titled *Sense of Order*, his critique on Riegl has been given. Therefore a presentation of the difference between these two scholars' understanding of art and their approaches to ornamentation has been tried.

Also Gombrich's method of art history influenced by Karl Popper's (1902-1994) philosophy is mentioned. Basically Gombrich's depends on individual artist who works within a tradition proceeds by making necessary improvements. Norman Bryson argues against Gombrich's formula of making and matching for the reason that such account leaves aside the issue of social structure 'present' in the moment of production has been added. This critique of Bryson is important as Gombrich uses a similar method in *Sense of Order*. Gombrich tries to prove that through the articulation of ornament that there is an inherent tendency for capturing order which causes the detection of the regularities and becomes a part of our perception.

Both of the studies about ornamentation have added more insight to this inquiry but none of them has provided any accurate answer to the questions of the beginning. It is as if they have taken ornament as given and exploited the matter through the employment of many examples for their own reason.

Nevertheless it can be seen that none of the approaches to ornamentation are free from criticism

and the existence of opposing argument that challenge the theories.

As for the opposing views, second chapter contains many of them. This chapter deals with Islamic art. Islamic art was chosen for the inquiry with the expectation of forming a kind of case study since it is in Islamic art that ornamentation was applied (related to the famous ban on representation in general) and used in an even excessive manner. (That is what caused Western art historians to produce the term *horror vacui*.)

Before starting the investigation about Islamic ornamentation, another problem of definition has occurred. It concerns the very definition of Islamic art. The examples of artwork regarded as Islamic from many different regions of the world, produced in different times are vast. So it is hard to decide what all these have in common to be called as Islamic.

There are definitions of Islamic art depending on the historical, religious, cultural and aesthetic aspects and while some of them convey similar points, there

are also others opposing each other. Terry Allen for example rejects the idea of Islamic art based on the spiritual understanding by referring to them as being 'absurd'.

The situation is the same for Islamic ornament. The attempts of the researchers to explain Islamic ornament may cause even more contradiction. In the case of arabesque for example, in one of the arguments arabesque is considered as the manifestation of religious aspects:

"... the arabesque is not merely a possibility of producing art without making images; it is a direct means for dissolving images or what corresponds to them in the mental order, in the same way as the rhythmical repetition of certain Koranic formulae dissolves the fixation of the mind on an object of desire." (Burckhardt 88)

As Allen rejects the possibility of Islamic art as an original creation, and uses the case of arabesque to prove his argument. He proposes that whatever called Islamic -especially arabesque- is the consequence of progress started long before Islam and had taken the

suitable course to happen under the rule of Islam. This argument reminds us of Riegl inevitably.

It is in the third chapter that the consequences of the ambiguities around the definition of these two terms are investigated. In this chapter it is argued that existence of the problems of uncertainty presented in the preceding chapters might give way to a different consideration.

Both terms Islamic art and ornamentation contain diverse explanations. Hence the inquiry reaches the crucial point in which the possibilities occurred by the awareness about the lack of definite answers about the issue are to be discussed. Such a situation of uncertainty cannot be the end. As a matter of fact this thesis argues that such a point can be only the beginning of a new consideration of the work of art.

Thus all the efforts to display the presence of different approaches in this study leads to a questioning of the present situation. One can not help to wonder what all the diversity of these arguments may lead to.

This study has begun with the questions. It is interesting that these questions direct the study for the production of the new ones. Hence the aim of the study appears as the presentation of the possibility of arising questions in art by using the issues of ornamentation and Islamic art.



CHAPTER 1

Theories of Ornamentation

It seems possible to find diverse approaches to ornament. There are certain studies presenting original arguments about the matter. There are also others carrying the echo of the ideas presented in main important studies by celebrated scholars. Two major studies have been chosen in this chapter for the purpose of presenting the difference in the way ornament is thought and observed. One of them belongs to Alois Riegl, and the other to Ernst Gombrich.

Riegl in his book *Stilfragen (Problems of Style)* tries to give the history of ornament in Europe and the Near East from its origins to Islam. Mostly it was against

those working with the idea of a kind materialistic evolutionism in which style is explained depending on three factors: material, technique, and purpose. Against this Riegl opposed "the independence of aesthetic choice from material conditions, claiming the latter had only a negative and not a formative influence" (Zerner 178). As Riegl sees the development of art as a continuous process, he opposes the idea that alludes to the creation of ornamental motifs as a result of spontaneous generation in local regions and bounded to the determination of contingent material conditions.

Riegl's thought on ornamentation is affected by the Arts and Crafts movement. The so called reformers of the midcentury regarded ornament as an important tool for representation, while the modernists of the twentieth century, on the other hand, abhorred ornamentation as being an obstacle for the representation of structure and function. Owen Jones suggests that ornament should be used grammatically in architecture to indicate the relationship between parts, and within each part, the unity of the surface.

History of ornament for Riegl is a continuous trajectory from 'simple row' of Egyptians to the systematically elaborated, all-over pattern of late antiquity. A study of ornament then inquires into a historical investigation of transformations and disseminations and such a history of changes is depended on an innate principle of development: *Kunstwollen* (Will to Art).

Kunstwollen

Riegl coins the term *Kunstwollen* to explain the development in art. There are two interpretations of this term as understood by the followers of Riegl. One is Hegelian and according to this *Kunstwollen* is the driving principle that enables the production of the artwork. It appears as a 'deep structure' as the followers of Riegl who adhere to this interpretation name its method *Strukturanalyse* in which the task of the historian is to discover the principle and then be able to comprehend the phenomena that exists on the surface. The other interpretation advocated by art historian Erwin Panofsky (1892-1968) is defined as being Neo-Kantian. For Panofsky and others *Kunstwollen*

is a 'content or objective immanent meaning'. Depending on this immanent meaning it is possible to find in each work a whole of culture to which it belongs and art historian can discover this 'virtuality of the work of art'. For Zerner both interpretations can be proved with reference to Riegl's writings. "The meaning of the word *Kunstwollen* is elusive because it seems to vary with its context" (Zerner 181). Zerner claims that different uses of the term can be related to Riegl's tendency 'to study art as a closed system' and Riegl, while trying to avoid using the term 'style' uses *Kunstwollen* in place of this word in his writings. Despite the different understandings of *Kunstwollen* one has to bear in mind Riegl's attempts to establish art history as science and define its autonomy. His approach was consistent with the renouncing of metaphysical explanations about the development of art.

"As for what determines the aesthetic urge to see natural objects represented in works of art by stressing or repressing the features that isolate them or conversely unify them, one can only indulge in metaphysical conjectures that an art historian must absolutely refuse to make" (Zerner 181).

Riegl explains the development of art as series of changes where every work of art forms a link in the developmental chain, carrying the change within itself. Riegl asserts that there is a movement, a kind of transition in art that is necessitated by certain natural sequences to take place as the tendency to move from 'tactile' to 'optical' qualities in the work. To understand the natural sequence one must carefully examine the work of art that is a link in the chain of progression. An Egyptian relief, for example, would be defined as being haptic or tactile, remaining independent from any context and setting. The haptic and tactile qualities would have been used by the artist working under such cultural traits, to emphasize the outline and to suppress three-dimensional space. As optical devices such as overlapping or foreshortening are not used the figures appear as if flat and schematic. By means of working in two dimensions, a maximum of clarity and a presentation of characteristic view of figures are achieved. Such a projection of the figure for Riegl, is the most 'objective' one. Also with the outlines of the figure, the edges and ridges of the form it is the

one that appeals to our sense of touch. Hence an objective experience is possible related to the tactile qualities of the work. On the other hand Riegl gives the late Roman reliefs as the examples of 'subjective' experience in which the optical qualities are utilized. Such optical elements as depth, foreshortening and shadowing provide a dimension before the surface, a third or spatial dimension which is purely illusion. The optical as defined by Riegl, depend on the relation of light to shade -which is intangible-, as opposed to the solid forms with simple shape and definite limits. The optical can be received from a distance as the forms are integrated and the effect of third dimension is maintained. Hence what is optical, subjective takes place according to the progression of art.

Such progression as shown above can be thought as the effect of historicism in Riegl's work. Historicism is explained as "the conviction that each culture possesses its own values and the consequent demand that a phenomenon be judged within its own historical context" (Olin 4). Also there is in historicism a "tendency to regard each individual phenomenon in

terms of the place it occupies within a process of development." (Ibid) Hence the art historian must confront the whole of art history and try to find the trace of the development of art in each individual work.

Another point about that can be mentioned about Riegl, apart from his work containing detailed analysis of works of art, is his opposition to certain accounts:

"...biographical criticism, which interprets the work in the light of artist's life; the primacy of the individual artist's consciousness and will; the 'materialistic' or mechanic explanation of stylistic evolution; any aesthetic theory that severs art from history; any normative system that attempts to reach a definitive interpretation or judgement; the hierarchal distinction between the applied or decorative arts, on the one hand, and the higher arts (painting, sculpture, and architecture), on the other, where the latter all alone are considered to be art in the strict sense of the word" (Zerner 179).

Thus it can be said that Riegl tries to do away with the notion of individual artist as creator and leaves us with the term *Kunstwollen* to explain the issue of

change in the development of art such as the history of certain motifs transforming like lotus motif in Ancient Egypt to Arabesque in Islamic art-when it comes to the issue of ornament.

Gombrich on Ornamentation

In his book *Art and Illusion* Gombrich criticizes Riegl's view about the progress of ornament as being dependent on the principle of *Kunstwollen* which he calls 'the ghost in the machine.' For Gombrich, by employing such a term, Riegl has become a "prey to those prescientific habits of mind by which unitary principles proliferate, the habits of the myth makers" (Gombrich 19). As Gombrich proposes a history of 'making and matching' that is based on individual efforts to criticize and to improve on predecessors' achievements, he is against the Historicism of Riegl that favours the work of collectivity while paying the least importance to the deed of the individual artist. It must be added that Gombrich's opposition to Historicism is related to Karl Popper's influence on his ideas about history of art.

Ernst Gombrich owes much to Karl Popper, British philosopher of science, in his studies of the history of art. So it is best to investigate the methodology of Popper to understand its impact on Gombrich. Gombrich is inspired by Karl Popper's 'logic of scientific discovery' and, he believes that it can provide a key to the understanding of artistic discovery as well. According to Popper, The process of scientific discovery begins by an initial problem which is to be explored. A trial solution is provided forming a hypothesis that is most relevant to the problem and most likely to bear a solution. Then a test is applied where the weakness and the strengths of the hypothesis are subject to falsification. The result leads to the improvement of the hypothesis. Thus the scientific observation continues with successive tests adjusted to the hypothesis.

Gombrich identifies the development of the work of art in the same way. Painting proceeds, not through artists copying unguided observations of nature, but through 'schemas and corrections'.

"Making comes before matching. The matching process itself proceeds through the stages of

'schema and correction'. Every artist has to know and construct a schema before he can adjust it to the needs of portrayal" (Gombrich 99).

For Gombrich, there is a gradual modification of the traditional schematic conventions of image-making under the pressure of novel demands. Since in Gombrich the painting is taken principally as the mimesis of perception, modified by schema, the development of painting appears as each new artist, working under the schema provided by the tradition, makes his contribution modifying the schema depending on the observation of the artist in the previous work.

Norman Bryson criticizes the Perceptualist account with its key notions of schema, observation and testing for leaving no room for the question of the relationship between the image and power. The social formation is omitted in Perceptualist account where the painter is expected to depict the perceptions as well as he can and the viewer on his part expected to receive them in a most passive way. The image is constructed as a line of transportation from painter's vision to the gaze of the viewer, and the social power

takes place 'as something which intervenes' between the two sides.

However, the place of the power lies outside the 'perceptual activity of painting'.

"power seizes, catches hold of, expropriates and deflects the channel of perception that runs from painter to viewer, perhaps it enables, supports, maintains, finances that channel; but however we view it, power is theorized by the Perceptualist account as always outside this relay of the visual image" (Bryson, Visual 64).

Bryson also adds that one can not take social formation as something that uses the image after its production, the painting as an activity of the sign, is subject to be developed within the social formation from the beginning. And it can be said that "the social formation is inherently and immanently present in the image" (Ibid).

But the Perceptualist account leaves art trivial, as the making of images depends on the ocular accuracy and continue to be made as if outside the society, at the margins of the social concerns. Against this

understanding, Bryson proposes to take painting as an art of the sign which is to say an art of discourse. Then we can see painting as being "coextensive with the flow of signs through both itself and the rest of the social formation"(Visual 66). Hence painting is saved from the marginalization and put back in the - "same circulation of signs which permeates or ventilates the rest of the social structure" (Ibid).

Bryson's view of considering the visual image as sign enables painting to be replaced in the social sphere inherently which means without depending on some other agency. Thus the image appears to be an "discursive work which returns to society". The painter accepting the society's codes of recognition works within such limitations provided by these codes, but also they may give way to the production of new combinations of the sign, and hence cause "evolution in the discursive formation". The consequence of such process, "the result of painting's signifying work, these are then recirculated into society as fresh and renewing currents of discourse" (Visual 70).

Thus what Bryson proposes for art history is putting the painting back to an "original context of production". Such context should be constructed as being free from "the understanding of the circumstances of patronage or commission or the conditions of original perception and its notation". (Visual 72) For Bryson this original context should give way to the formation of a complex interaction between "all the practices which make up the sphere of the culture". (Ibid)

Gombrich uses the same method of making-matching which is derived from Popper as described above, in his book about ornament, *Sense of Order* subtitled 'A study in the psychology of Decorative art.' Gombrich states that just as he uses and emphasizes the formula 'making comes before matching' which is explained as "...the minimal schema is first constructed before it is modified or corrected by matching itself against reality" (Gombrich, *Sense* 5) in his *Art and Illusion*, he provides a similar formula that would be '...grouping comes before grasping or seeking before seeing' in his later book *Sense of Order*. Gombrich's psychological point of view leads him to stress that there is an

inbuilt sense of order and this inbuilt sense determines the way 'the organism as an active agent' reaches out to its environment.

Hence it is evident that throughout the book Gombrich uses many examples of ornamentation from different periods, cultures, artistic genres as evidence to prove his claim. For example after giving the hypothetical situation that one may become aware by chance that his/her name is printed on a newspaper or consciously pay attention and search for his/her name, he concludes that:

"This distinction between seeing and attending is certainly not an idle one; we know that we rarely attend to the details of design, but if we did not see them at all, decoration would fail in its purpose." (Sense 97)

It seems that Gombrich attributes a 'purpose' to decoration, which is linked to the position of the viewer. (That may remind one Riegl's *Kunstwollen*: in which the ornament is employed to display how this principle works. Hence it seems there is another attribution of purpose.) Gombrich tries to work the same procedure as explained above from the side of the

artist. Here through a change in the roles, 'a simple substitution of viewer for the painter' as Bryson puts it, it becomes possible for the viewer to seize the order that is inherent in the design. The decoration for Gombrich bears the possibility for the viewer to apprehend a certain order present in the motifs or design which it carries within itself. It comes to mean that decoration in this sense is employed as a tool to justify claims about a certain way of perception.

Gombrich's arguments in *Sense of Order* are subject to the same criticism mentioned above since it is evident that the same method of his former book is applied for supporting the idea of the sense of order that is found embedded in man. Hence the psychological aspects of perception can be applied to a history of art.

"We could never function if we were not attuned to certain regularities. This tuning, moreover, could never have come about by learning; on the contrary, we could never have gathered any experience of the world if we lacked that sense of order which allows us to categorize our surroundings according to degrees of regularity, and its obverse" (Gombrich, *Order* 113).

There are similar points and differences between Riegl and Gombrich. The former puts less emphasis on the contribution of the individual artist to the progress of art. For the latter, such development is only possible by the corrections applied to the schema by the artist. But their understanding of the development of art may contain similar points. (One can argue that this may depend on Riegl's influence on Gombrich.) Since both scholars understanding of art history necessitates the notion of convention. As Margaret Olin asserts "Riegl and Gombrich share a similarly scientific view of the artistic project, and both recognize art's heavy dependence on the convention" (210).

It can be said without mentioning the differences, that both Riegl and Gombrich, in their books have expanded their inquiry with many examples and shared the tendency to exploit ornament as a tool to develop and prove their own arguments about art history, about the way and the reason art is created about art in general. So while there is a study about ornament in each case, there is also a presentation of author's

general understanding of art generated by the argumentation on ornament. Thus the ornament gains a double role: being the subject of the inquiry on the one hand, and the object of another and somewhat major work on the other.



CHAPTER 2

The Problem of Islamic Art

When one starts working with certain art forms created in a certain age by a certain power, the term Islamic is attributed as if the content of this term and the reason behind the inclination to define any artwork produced according such qualities of time, culture, artistic style as Islamic is almost taken for granted.

The problem of maintaining a proper definition of Islamic art is a hard one without any precise answers. There are different views of Islamic art or about the nature of the Islamic art. Some writers claim that Islamic art can be defined as being spiritual and

certain religious aspects of Islam determine the nature of Islamic art. This argument leads to the understanding that there is an unity evident in Islamic art no matter how vast and diverse regions of world are the places where the Islamic art is produced. There are also others who would like to see Islamic art as nothing but the continuation of the cultural trends that still exist or used to exist at the time when Islam met them. For there would be nothing Islamic in Islamic art as Islam only absorbs new cultures and enables the continuation of the development of the artistic styles that have taken their course long before Islam.

Both of the arguments proposed by these two opposing views contain certain points that are plausible. It is true that the religion of Islam has influenced all the arts produced under its rule and also it is true that there is a link, a continuation that can be traced between the culture of Islam and the other cultures it has met and dominated. So for the sake of any study of Islamic art, all the arguments must be examined carefully, considering the fact that:

"The interpretation of [Islamic] as a whole as well as the understanding of its specific parts can only be successful and meaningful if seen against the background of Islam as a cultural, religious and political phenomenon, and only in the precise relation to specific circumstances that led to its creation" (Michell 14).

Oleg Grabar in his book *The Formation of Islamic Art*, elaborates different assumptions about the issue of Islamic art. First the uniqueness of Islamic art as being the art of Muslims. Grabar rejects this idea by stating that Islamic cannot designate the art of a religion, namely Islam and adds that "a vast proportion of the monuments have little if anything to do with the faith of Islam." (Grabar, *Formation* 1)

There are many examples of artwork created by the communities other than Muslims under the rule of the Islam which also may be included in the designation of Islamic art. Hence the term 'Islamic' in Islamic art can not be understood in the same way as 'Christian' or 'Buddhist' in Christian art or art of Buddhism. (Formation 2)

Another explanation offered is taking 'Islamic' as suggesting a culture or civilization where most of the

community "or at least the ruling element profess the faith of Islam". (Ibid.) In this way the art of Islam is unlike Italian art or 'the art of the Steppes' as for Grabar, a particular land of Islam or 'Islamic people' do not exist.

Islamic art, then "would be one that overpowered and transformed ethnic or geographical traditions", or one that enables a "kind of symbiosis" between "pan-Islamic" (Ibid.) and local artistic style. Grabar maintains that in both cases the term Islamic would be comparable to 'Gothic' or 'Baroque'. Here a problem arises when one tries to differentiate the native and the Islamic overlay at a certain moment.

Recently scholars from North Africa, Turkey, Iran, and Central Asia have a tendency to stress the significance of local or regional arts as opposing the earlier scholars who claimed the unity of arts produced with the patronage of Islamic rule. As it would be misleading to interpret "the term Islamic as simply a cultural overlay affecting [the] lands which became Muslim by faith or civilization" (Ibid.), their

work is important to demonstrate that the local arts have never lost their specific character.

After exposing these different views on the issue Grabar concludes:

"...we are not very clear on what is really meant by 'Islamic' except in so far as it pertains to many of the usual categories -ethnic, cultural, temporal, geographic, religious- by which artistic creations and material culture in general are classified, without corresponding precisely to any of them." (Formation 3)

Another difficulty for defining the term Islamic art is the way these definitions are maintained: depending on the point of the view of the observer who may be confined by his own aesthetic background. On the other hand, it is not easy to grasp how the creator or original user comprehends the artwork.

Grabar concludes that it is only after Islam has completed maintaining its domination of the Muslim elites and 'the Law of the new faith' over the vast geographical areas and cultures that a formed Islamic art would be possible. Then the issue of change which

provides the difference between the artworks produced under Islam and artworks remaining from previous artistic traditions can be discussed. For Grabar, the possibility of Islamic art inevitably presumes this change.

"...that an understanding of whether and how Islamic art may be an intellectually valid concept requires a precise elucidation of those common features which at varying times in varying regions led to changes in the arts of different cultural entities." (Formation 4)

An identification of the change above requires a process of distinguishing material depending on an acceptable scientific manner. Hence detailed models of art historians that explain the evolutionary (or even revolutionary) ways in which these changes occur are subject to use.

It would be difficult if not superfluous to expect coherent answers from an investigation depending on these models. The lack of documentation on the matter and the existence of loose and scanty material will always carry the option of failure of the models or at least cause them to be less reliable.

For this reason, with the notion of change one must consider the point that the "change in meaning and the change in form are two distinct phenomena". (Formation 5) Although they may not happen at the same time but they adhere to each other. Another point is that the change contains not only the form of the material but also the understanding of its producer and user.

"...the fact that a Muslim looked at or used a form gave a different sense to that form, and that this difference of visual understanding or of practical use is largely what affected the making of further forms." (Formation 5)

It seems Grabar tries to add the historical, social and political dimensions to the issue as an attempt to provide a better understanding. His intension seems correct, but also extends the scope of the research. And it demonstrates that the question of Islamic art is a complex matter. Since every new claim added to the question is also forming new subjects of debate that can be articulated to the question itself. Still Grabar insists that the possibility of Islamic art is found not in the works of art, but certain political, historical developments. "[I]t was a political and

religious impetus, not an artistic or even material one, which created Islam and so made Islamic art possible". (Formation 12) Nevertheless the same author is cautious to add that "the rhythms of the visual arts and of the thought or of political and social events need not coincide". (Ibid)

This indicates that, while all the diverse approaches are taken into consideration, it still necessitates an understanding of "certain identifiable habits and thoughts, which had to be translated into visually perceptible forms". (Formation 17) when regarding Islamic art as the consequence of aesthetic and physical requirements of Islamic culture.

"[T]he more important problem is to decide how these themes [of decoration] were understood when they were made, why they were made and whether they were but accidental collections of motifs or significant and conscious accumulations of subjects in the process of creating a new aesthetic and material vision." (Formation 16)

After explaining the ambiguities of working with Islamic art, we can end our discussion by adding these points: After the conquests, Islam had used the

earlier artistic traditions. After the domination of Islam totally established, then a formed Islamic art can be claimed to take place in the regions where Islam rules.

The problems related to the artistic creations of a certain age and culture can not be explained only within the limits of art history. As a result there are arguments and claims of definition about the term Islamic art but none of them seems to bring a sufficient answer all alone. It may be claimed that a researcher has to investigate them all and try to maintain his own understanding of Islamic art in order to proceed with his work. What is then required, apart from studying certain scholars' work, an approach for an understanding of the artwork within the context of the age of its creation and the mind of its creator and also reflection of these two aspects on the artwork.

Some researchers like Nasr and his mentor Titus Burckhardt approach to Islamic art from such a point of view that favours an understanding depending on the spirituality claimed to be intrinsic to arts of Islam

and religious aspects that determine the nature of Islamic art.

Nasr rejects the idea Islamic art as being the consequence of cultural and artistic interactions and links between earlier civilizations and the newly developing culture of Islam. Although he accepts these links, the problem is that they do not reveal the 'origin' of Islamic art. Hence an understanding of Islamic art depends on the explanation of the character of this origin.

It seems for Nasr, there is an inevitable issue of the origin of the Islamic art, as a sacred art. Nasr ties the traditional Islamic art to the sacred art of Islam as both of them reflect the 'principles of Islamic revelation and Islamic spirituality'; the former working in an indirect way, the latter being more direct.

So such sacred art is tied to the Islamic world view in that it performs a spiritual function which can be related to the "most intimate manner to both form and content of the Islamic revelation." (Nasr 4) The

origin of the Islamic art can not be found by an investigation of the changes in the socio-political conditions that took place in the time of Islam. "The answer must be sought in the Islamic religion itself".

(Nasr 5)

Nasr claims that from the point of view of Islam neither the Divine Law (al-Shari'ah) nor the juridical sciences and theology can provide the answer to the question of Islamic art. The Divine Law constitutes the basic rules for a Muslim to obey, gives a direction to act and also "limitations upon some arts and encouraging others", (Ibid.) but does not contain the artistic prescriptions for creation of sacred art. As for the theology Nasr asserts that although theologians do have writings on beauty and art, their work cannot illuminate questions about Islamic art. Thus one must search for an 'inner dimension' for the origin of Islamic art which, for Nasr, lies in Islamic spirituality.

"It is within the inner dimension of the Islamic tradition that one must seek the origin of Islamic art and the power which has created and sustained it over the ages while making possible

the blinding unity and inebriating interiority which this art possesses."(sic.) (Nasr 6)

The spirituality of Islam is found in the inner realities of the Koran and the Prophetic grace.(Nasr 6) These two are also identified as being the true sources of Islamic art as they both enable the Islamic revelation that give way to Islamic art as to the Divine Law.

There is an inner nexus between the forms of art and the Islamic spirituality. Because of this Muslims are likely to fall into ecstasy when confronted with these art forms. This interaction between the Muslim believer and the artwork is claimed to be the proof against the arguments which consider Islamic art as merely the product of external historical factors apart from the principles of Islamic revelation.

The spirituality mentioned above provides certain characteristics to the arts of Islam. Opposition to individualistic creativity as Islamic art depends on the inner dimension that is directly related to the Divinity. "Only the Universal can produce the Universal". (Nasr 8) Islamic art tends to reveal the

principles in which the nature of things is bound, instead of imitating their outer forms.

"The Muslim is not fascinated by the drama of the individual artistic creation, rather his soul vibrates through the idea of the unity and the immensity of God which are reflected in the cosmic order and also in the artefacts shaped by the hand of man- and shaped not according to his imagination alone but also according to the nature of the object, by bringing forth of the laws and the qualities which are inherent in the object itself" (Burckhardt, Intro. 32).

All these arguments about spirituality, inner dimension, etc. leads to the basic trait of Islam: Unity (al-tawhid). "Islamic art is the result of the manifestation of Unity upon the plane of multiplicity". (Nasr 7)

According to Burckhardt unity in Islam gives the abstract character of Islamic art. And this unity can not be expressed in terms of any image."... to a Muslim artist ... abstract art is the expression of the law, it manifests as directly as possible Unity in multiplicity." (Burckhardt, Sacred 103)

"Unity, it is true, has a participative aspect, in so far as it is the synthesis of the multiple and the principle of analogy; it is in that aspect that a sacred image presupposes Unity and expresses its own way; but Unity is also the principle of distinction, for it is by its intrinsic unity that every being essentially distinguished from all others, in such a way that it is unique and can neither be confused nor replaced" (Sacred 101)

Burckhardt adds that both architecture and decoration arise from 'qualitative geometry' that excludes all individualistic improvisation but which have nothing sterile in them. The exclusion of individualistic expression is linked with the idea of unity of God reflected in the cosmic order and also with the idea of an object to be reflected in the man made artefacts. These artefacts are produced not solely depending on the imagination of the certain maker, the artisan but also the nature of the object, hence bearing the "the laws and the qualities which are inherent in the object itself". (Burckhardt, Introduction. 32)

In Islamic art the figurative representation is excluded from the liturgical domain: that means it is

excluded from "the central core of Islamic civilization" (Ibid.) and only allowed to be used peripherally, so that the potentiality of any object to become a cult which represents a sacred personage is abandoned.

"...by excluding all anthropomorphic images, at least within the religious realm, Islamic art aids man to be entirely himself. Instead of projecting his soul outside himself, he can remain in his ontological centre where he is both the viceregent (khalifah) and slave ('abd) of God." (Burckhardt, Mirror 223)

Thus Islamic art avoids "everything that could be an idol, even in a relative and provisional manner. Nothing must stand between man and the invisible presence of God." (Ibid.)

For Burckhardt the absence of images in sanctuaries creates a void. The void is the lack of every image may divert one's attention. "By its static, impersonal and anonymous quality [the void] enables man to be entirely himself, to repose in his ontological centre." (Mirror 234) Hence an analogy is established between Islamic art and nature (especially desert)

which suggests contemplation. Also from another point of view, there is an opposition between the chaos intrinsic to nature and the order that is found in art. Nasr adds that the void is the manifestation of "both the transience of God and His presence in all things". (Nasr 186)

More arguments supporting the idea of unity and explanation of Islamic art according to the spirituality originated from religion can be given. Also there are other explanations regarding the impact of religion but not from a metaphysical point of view. For example, while there are many styles and motifs found in Islamic art due to the diversity of ethnic and regional preferences, Ettinghausen adds another explanation for this diversity related to the different consideration of art in the orthodox Islam and heterodox "mystic orientation". According to this view, the former favours "a straight, more rigid, and calculated style", while the latter prefers "... an abstract, undulating approach which nevertheless seems in its orderly manner to represent the rationalization of an ineffable inner experience". (Ett. 277)

The Nature of Ornamentation in Islamic Art

Ornament is the soul of Islamic art, and the understanding of it is essential in dating monuments and finds. Each period of Islamic art has its own characteristic style of ornament. New motifs, introduced by invading races, were added constantly; old motifs were modified or stylized in a different manner according to the prevailing artistic tendencies. (Dimand 293)

Maurice Dimand may be right, but the understanding of the ornament is not only essential to the problem of dating motifs it also enables one to understand culture and art of Islam more properly. There are still more questions and problems about Islamic ornament.

"It was a general rule that when an artist tried to improve on a design he did so not by introducing new imaginative motifs and combing them ingeniously, but by elaborating the concepts already available." (Ett 281)

Both Jones and Hillerbrand (though their main concern is Islamic architecture) seem to agree with

Ettinghausen on the reluctance of the artist to create new forms. "If their choice of forms the artist and the architects of Islam were rarely innovatory, their preoccupation with surface decoration was highly original." (Jones 161) "The Islamic architect, in short was not restlessly experimenting with new forms the whole time; he preferred to refine existing ones or to load them with extra decoration." (Hill 24) Ornament works like an outerskin or mantle for the objects and specially for the buildings as if the primary function attributed to it is to maintain this overlay covering their structures. Hillerbrand even claims that there is a kind of struggle between architecture and ornament.

"...If a wall is richly embellished, attention is inevitably drawn in some measure to the decoration. By the same measure the impact of the building as pure architecture is diminished. Architecture and decoration are therefore permanently at war." (Hillerbrand 25)

Nevertheless Dalu Jones affirms that Islamic ornament has a kind of independence apart from its visual impact.

"The decoration underlines not so much the structures of the buildings and the forms of objects as the interplay between forms and surfaces. The tendency is for surfaces to be fluid: decoration helps to make the transition, imperceptibly, from one plane to another. No sharp divisions are allowed. Light is filtered, water reflects, unifies and cools". (Jones 162)

Though the arguments are mainly about the architectural decoration, they can be applied to decoration in general. Eva Baer's book *Islamic Ornament* expresses the self-contained, independent character of Islamic ornament as one of the certain qualities which enables it to be recognisable. "...the ornamentation is essential neither to the underlying structure of an object or building nor to its serviceability." (Baer 2) This character is evident in the stone facade of Mshatta or walls of Samarra. Since the ornament is found to be independent from the underlying body of the object or building, it becomes "widely applicable and easily transferable from one technique to the other and from one medium to the other." (Baer 2)

The ornament can be classified according to the elements which are used to compose it, such as vegetal, geometric, epigraphic, figural or a combination of two or more of these elements. Also geometry and symmetry have an important place as a tool to create order and harmony. Ornament can be organized within a number of methods. One of them is framing and linking. Here, the pattern is based on a grid of closed shapes which are linked by their borders and can spread out horizontally and vertically on any given surface. Another way of handling organization of patterns is based on taking them not as expansion but as a continuous subdivision of the motifs into smaller units. This reductive process produces a number of new sub-units which in spite of their smaller size give the space for new and additional decoration. (Baer 3-4)

As there is an enormous diversity of Islamic patterns and ornamental designs, geometrical, vegetal, architectural or combinations taken from different sources, usually scholars are confining their research to specific motifs, to geographical areas and to periods of time.

Some writers try to approach ornament as a kind of language. Grabar asserts that Islamic decoration especially in architecture carries a series of themes that give meaning to the building. When the issue of meaning is involved, Grabar gives the example of ancient languages such as Minoan and Hittite in which some words and structures are evident but a total comprehension of the language is not yet maintained. Eva Baer seems to share the same idea of language: "I will try to understand ornament as a language, as a vehicle by which Islamic artisans and artists expressed contemporary ideas or modified ancient ones to conform to their own concepts." (Baer 5)

The attempt of both writers to approach Islamic ornament as a language is worth further discussion. One can argue that the riddle of any ancient language is subject to be solved with the aid of more capable computers and with the laborious work of the generations of the scholars since the subject matter of their study is a cluster of forms, and figures that were designed and used by a certain community to communicate, to carry some meaning, them, no matter

how few examples of this language there are. When it comes to ornament the approach to understand ornament depending on the same language like communicative character seems questionable. It is maintained by various art historians that there can be found samples of ornamentation which work as symbols of power, divinity, cosmological order etc. But it is also possible that different art historians may provide different explanations for the same motifs or there may be cases where a motif is applied as a certain symbol by a culture and chosen and used only for its aesthetic appeal by the preceding one while the original meaning is forgotten.

"...though at times symbolism existed, ... it did not continue for long to express its message. The message becomes almost immediately purely decorative, and therefore, devoid of a directly understandable meaning...when a symbol finally disappeared, its well-formed frame, that is, its carrier, nevertheless persisted." (Ett. 282)

Even in the case of calligraphy, wherever used as decoration, it is evident that the writings convey certain meanings, it is still hard to say that the calligraphy functions perfectly to bear certain

information. "Inscriptions were not only a means of decoration but also a vehicle of information, although their transformation was often on account of their legibility." (Baer 127) As calligraphy becomes more decorative, it becomes hard to read even for the experts, and the calligraphy gains a symbolic character by carrying a non-verbal message which can be understood by every Muslim.

"An inscription in impressive Arabic letters, the vehicle of Koran, had the most sacred and solemn connotations and made the viewer conscious of the *umma*, the community of Muslims." (Ett. 280)

Depending on Baer's approach which tries to understand ornament as a language, a search for meaning in the ornamentation according to the motifs used and the ideas attributed to them can be realized. There are a number of examples under such groups: Ornaments invoking blessings: these are fruit and vegetables and also flowers. Ideas of welfare are often linked with vegetal motifs- blossoming or fruit bearing trees occasionally flanked by real or imaginary animals or birds, palm trees, flower vases, blooming bushes and etc. As for the flowers since they are associated with

the garden, the flower motif is thought to refer to not only an earthly garden but also to the Garden of Eden. Another group is the ornaments with metaphoric qualities. This group of ornaments includes stars and whorls which transform the interior of hemispheric dome into a celestial sphere. Also this group includes fish and other creatures. These creatures, fish and imaginary water creatures form a motif by encircling as a sun or solar symbol reflecting notions about the universe in medieval Islam. More examples could be sustained for an examination of the meaning in ornament depending on the socio-historical conditions of their creation. A proper understanding of the ornament can be achieved through a "detailed studies of the regional, social, and temporal variations of the techniques of individual motifs". (Formation 186)

It seems that a classification of the ornament according to its form, and the attribution of meaning according to the symbolic or metaphoric thought is possible. But there are still questions to be asked about ornamentation whether there is a possibility to find a common ground which provides an understanding of Islamic ornament within a set of certain

characteristics. Oleg Grabar proposes a number of abstract principles that can help.

After mentioning his observations on the ornamentations from Quasr al-Hayr to Khribat al-Mafjar, from Cordoba to Sammara, Grabar comes with the idea that in all these works the visible unit of design can be understood with such abstract principles. First each object or wall is totally covered, no part is left without ornament. This is the celebrated *horror vacui* by which Islamic decoration has often been defined. Second the ornament can best be defined as a relationship between the forms rather than as a sum of forms. Third principle is the impact of the geometry. Fourth principle is the possibility of infinite growth. The design can be extended in any direction which gives its observer a feeling of freedom. Fifth principle is that any theme from any origin could be and was used in ornament. Sixth principle is the arbitrariness of the ornament. In early Islamic ornament neither its size nor its internal forms are dictated by anything but itself.

Arabesque

Some scholars have the tendency to consider arabesque as a kind of spiritual manifestation related to the mystic and religious aspects of Islam. Basically arabesque is vegetal ornament in which the parts are "completely growing into each other, and always arranged in rhythmic alteration." (Baer 3) This rhythmic character gives way for scholars to regard arabesque "as a reflection of the cosmic process of creation. For them it expresses the idea of infinity and transmits a sense of timelessness as it is manifested in forms and patterns of the creator." (Baer 5) Such examples can be given from Titus Burckhardt:

"The arabesque is a sort of dialectic of ornament, in which logic is allied to a living continuity of rhythm. It has two basic elements, the interlacement and the plan motif. The former is essentially a derivative of geometrical speculation, while the latter represents a sort of graphic formulation of rhythm, expressed in spiraloid designs, which may possibly be derived from not so much from plant forms as from a purely linear symbolism". (Burckhardt Sacred 109)

An interesting interpretation about the arabesque can be found in Jalal Toufic's article about Middle Eastern films. Though the article is mostly about film, reflections from Islamic philosophy can be found in his argument. Toufic proposes that when one tries to follow the motifs in arabesque, inevitably skips some of them or at least has a sensation that he has done so. Such situation for Toufic, sustains the feeling that one supposed to have, such a feeling that there is a connection between "spatial repetition and the temporal recreation that passes normally unperceived". (Toufic 64) Hence Toufic claims that a kind of recognition happens when one is confronted to arabesque, since the individual standing against the arabesque is "himself or herself a temporal arabesque, myriad extremely similar but non-identical versions of himself or herself". (Ibid.) The arabesque then, works like a mirror which reminds one via the multiplication its motifs, the "spatial rendition" of one's own "temporal multiplication" and also reminds one through the abstraction of its unit motif, one's own abstraction, one's "being without a nature and proper characteristics". (Ibid.) What Toufic asserts depending on the argumentation above, the

confrontation with arabesque causes such an experience that causes one to be "divested of the weight of time and even of his own nature and characteristics". (Ibid.) Toufic has a certain understanding of Islamic art. He uses the arabesque as an example, referring to its repetitive trait. It can be said that such understanding is not very different than the approach which Burckhardt or others (such as Nasr) may maintain.

Terry Allen has different idea about arabesque. For Allen the arabesque appears to be the outcome of artistic development that was in motion before arabesque was produced in Islamic culture. Allen refuses such explanation that defines arabesque as revelation of the spirit of Islam. Allen also mentions Riegl and criticizes for using the term 'oriental spirit' in the same manner as the spirit of Islam is used to explain the formation of arabesque. Instead he proposes that Byzantine art and Medieval Western art carry the same potential with Islamic art but they all moved along different paths. Hence arabesque is not an original development on ornament but the very result

of a certain impetus that moves from Late Antiquity onwards and meets Islam to be realized.

"Because of the division of the Late Antique world by the Arab conquest, not because of the details or 'spirit' of the new religion (whatever spirit means when applied to art) that artistic developments [which leads to arabesque] could occur in the Islamic world and elsewhere" (Allen 9)

Allen's understanding of arabesque can be linked to Riegl's elaboration of the development of ornament. Only Allen takes the argument to a further point which enables him to present his ideas and objections about the way arabesque and Islamic art is understood in general.

There are several approaches to Islamic ornament and opposing views as in the case of arabesque. So diverse arguments appear in this issue as it happens for the term Islamic art. As both Islamic art and Islamic ornament are related to each other it is not possible to work on ornamentation of Islam without considering the arguments about Islamic art.

"The ornament of the time, ...fully expressed the tensions of the complex culture created it. And it is perhaps ultimately as the expression of this culture, so varied as to shirk definition, so wide as to lack unity, yet so unmistakably different from any of the cultures which were near it, or which followed and preceded it, that the ornament can best be understood." (Hill 75)



CHAPTER 3

Islamic Art and Ornamentation

Different views about ornament and Islamic art have been elaborated in the preceding chapters. It is evident that there are various views and approaches to both issues, but one can say for every argument or explanation there exist a counterpart. There are views that bear the character of mutually opposing each other. There is not a single theory which is free from criticism. It would not be wrong to say despite all the efforts of the art historians and scholars to provide a relevant understanding of the subject matter, despite all the evidences they present and however strong their point may be, still it may suffer from being a subject of criticism and objection.

Hence a kind of ambiguity concerning the combination of the uncertainties about the definition of ornament and Islamic art remains. The question then for this chapter to conclude this inquiry about ornament and Islamic art arises on this ambiguity. The lack of acceptable definitions without any objections directs one to work on the present situation.

In the present situation Islamic art has been attributed diverse explanations from social, cultural, historical, religious, traditional perspective. Each of these approaches carries their own concern. For ornament scholars provide within their study their own understanding of ornament. Also they employ ornament to prove and improve their own understanding of art and art history. This may seem strange as both scholars Riegl and Gombrich try to avoid regarding ornament as having a lower status against fine arts. Although they tried not to refer to ornament as merely a product of decorative arts, by making it the subject of a separate study, it seems the ornament is still carrying a supplementary characteristic among their work. That reminds us of the first uncertainty about

ornament: whether it is a supplement that indicates the artwork or (as it is claimed for Islamic ornament) that conceals it or free from such occupations, does ornament merely decorate the artwork.

Ersnt Gombrich in his *Sense of Order* mentions about the ornamentation in Alhambra and its impression on some critics who were 'overwhelmed by the assault on their senses' and despise the ornament as being tasteless and barbaric. Gombrich thinks they were wrong.

"We are confident that we are facing orders within orders which would respond to our probing for regularity without making us lose the feeling of infinite and inexhaustible variety. These may be large claims for an art form which is mostly even rightly relegated to the lower ranks of aesthetic creativity. But history shows that some of the great traditions of ornamental styles transcended the limitations of pure decoration and were able to transmute redundancy into plenitude and ambiguity into mystery" (Gombrich, *Sense*. 116)

Just as the question about Islamic ornament arises, Gombrich leaves it to the side of mystery after taking

what he needs to confirm his faith in the science of psychology. What is important for his study is the way the regularities are captured. Gombrich seems to rest at a point where above mentioned issues about ornament may appear.

Oleg Grabar in his book *The Mediation of Ornament* tries to deal with ornament mostly using examples from Islamic art. After discussing various aspects of ornament he comes to propose that ornament has an intermediary nature.

"Ornament is itself or exhibits most forcefully an intermediate order between viewers and users of art, perhaps even creators of art, and works of art" (Grabar, Med. 45)

Grabar relates this intermediary nature of ornament to pleasure by defining ornament as beauty carrier-calliphoric and providing pleasure-terpnopoitetic. (A word coined by Grabar.) "[The] intermediary agents facilitate or even compel access to the work of art by strengthening the pleasure derived from looking at something." (230) Grabar gives four examples such as writing, geometry, architecture and nature functioning

as intermediaries and provide for the viewer different emotions. "...control and forcefulness of assertion with writing, order with geometry, boundaries and protection with architecture, life forces with nature." (Ibid)

One may think about the pleasure of looking at something (a work of art) mentioned above, as bearing a positive aspect. Inevitably one can think of another kind of pleasure when one remembers the example Gombrich gives about the ornamentation in Alhambra: simply produced for the task of providing pleasure, but also may cause repulsion or even disgust. What this situation indicates is the notion of sublime. According to Kant, sublime appears as a consequence of the conflict between the faculties of a subject, namely, the faculty of conception and the faculty of presentation. Knowledge is possible when the objects presented by sense conform to the conception present in the subject. As Lyotard explains knowledge happens "if, first the statement is 'intelligible', and second, if 'cases' can be derived from the experience which 'corresponds' to it". (Postmodern. 77) Lyotard explains that taste gives way to reflective judgment

as it affirms "an undetermined agreement, without rules", in between "the capacity to conceive and the capacity to present". (Postmodern. 77) And he adds that the pleasure is subject to experienced in this situation. Reflective judgement bounds the object of beauty (the artwork) to the concept but there are other cases where it is not pleasure but rather it is pain that happens to be experienced. Such are the cases where sublime occurs. In these cases, "imagination fails to present an object which might, if only in principle, come to match a concept". (Postmodern. 78) Certain Ideas such as totality or infinity can be given as an example in which the subject simply has, but any attempt for their presentation would be "painfully inadequate". "Those are Ideas of which no presentation is possible". For Lyotard, "they ... prevent the free union of the faculties which gives rise to the sentiment of the beautiful; and they prevent the formation and stabilization of taste". (Ibid.) Hence Lyotard finds these Ideas unrepresentable. Lyotard claims that Kant "himself shows the way when he names 'formlessness, the absence of form' as a possible index to the unrepresentable". (Ibid.)

In another place Lyotard explains the situation as such:

"[The] dislocation of the faculties among themselves give rise to extreme tension (Kant calls it agitation) that characterizes the pathos of the sublime, as opposed to the calm feeling of beauty. At the edge of the break, infinity, or the absoluteness of the Idea can be revealed in what Kant calls a negative presentation, or even a non-presentation. He cites the Jewish law banning images as an eminent example of negative presentation: optical pleasure when reduced to near nothingness promotes an infinite contemplation of infinity". (The Sublime 204)

Although Lyotard uses the notion of sublime in his discussion about modern aesthetics and avant-garde art, thinking about this account of the sublime within the context of present study may help for its progress.

Since Lyotard maintains that there is a gap between the faculties of conception and presentation which indicates to "a incommensurability within our experience that neither reason nor understanding is

capable of resolving". As opposed to the aesthetic of beautiful which points to the existence of "a bridge between the realms of the theoretical and the practical, of a totalizing philosophy in action, ...the aesthetic of the sublime consistently seems to announce the impossibility of such totalization ever being accomplished. (Sim 102)

Hence in Lyotard's terms, in its sublimity the artwork presents the unrepresentable, it exceeds and always carries within itself an excess that makes it impossible to capture by any theory, explanation or approach. Lyotard maintains that the task of art is to bear "pictorial or otherwise expressive witness to the inexpressible". And explains (although he mentions about pictorial art, it is possible to think his argument as being relevant for arts generally.):

"The inexpressible does not reside in an over there, in other words, or other time, but in this: in that (something) happens. In the determination of pictorial art, the indeterminate, the 'it happens' is the paint, the picture. The paint, the picture as occurrence or event, is not expressible, and it is this that it has to witness". (The Sublime 199)

What artwork presents is the unrepresentable, the situation in which every claim about the artwork is in vain. It is the limitlessness of the artwork makes it work and consistently give way to new possibilities. Such possibilities that would be present in the experience of the work of art

It is then not diverse arguments about qualities and expectations ascribed to ornament, but the very act of experiencing the ornament that counts. It is only possible for the arts to take place when one confronts the work of art when one 'touches' it, or vice versa, when one feels being moved.

CONCLUSION

One of the ways to conclude the study of Islamic ornamentation is to mention the visual impact it creates on the viewer: infinitely stretching without an end (similarly without a beginning.) The questions about Islamic ornament and answers provided from various point of views are developing and interlacing within each other like the motifs weaving in arabesque. There is no precise answer, explanation, or definition since every new attempt brings its counterpart with itself and the ambiguity about the matter expands.

Throughout this inquiry, approaches to ornamentation and its history, attempts to define and understand Islamic ornamentation have been studied.

The studies of the art historians provide vast information about the history of ornamentation, the development of the designs, progress of the motifs. Riegl's *Stilfragen* and Eva Baer's *Islamic Ornament* are the examples of such kind of studies. Ernst Gombrich on the other hand tries to constitute a more 'scientific' way of understanding of ornament that works as kind of contribution to improvement of his methodology he has established long before. Yet none of these scholars maintain in their work a study directly related to the questions intrinsic to the definition of ornamentation.

Only Oleg Grabar deals with the problem in his book *the Mediation of Ornament*. But his proposition seems to fail when he tries to relate ornament as the carrier of beauty and leaving aside the potential situation when ornament does not bring beauty but evokes opposite response on the viewer.

Islamic art is another subject of dispute. The definitions given by scholars and researchers vary and some of them oppose each other. The term Islamic is being applied to cover a vast numbers of artwork from various places and times. There are a great number of artworks that are referred to as being Islamic. Hence defining this term to perform the task of including all the aspects of the matter is a difficult one. This difficulty increases as a proper definition requires employment of common points.

All these difficulties about maintaining a relevant definition and explanation of Islamic art and ornamentation cause ambiguities. Uncertainties about both matters inevitably cause Islamic ornamentation to obtain an indefinite character.

The ambiguities presented then do not maintain an uncertain position which one is left puzzled and confused. On the contrary such presentation is aimed to indicate the possibility of comprehension. A possibility of an experience regarding the relation between the viewer and the artwork.

Then there exists an opportunity enabled by situation for one to confront the artwork without hesitating about its meaning, about what it represents, about for what reason it is produced and stands for. Knowing the fact that there is not a single stance without its own limitations, even failures, makes it possible for experiencing the artwork free from the requirements deriving from the plurality of the arguments. That does not suggest that one can receive the artwork as being free from judgments. But the awareness of the situation in which the obscurity prevails would lead one to be free of all boundaries. Such boundaries that bear the risk of limiting one's own understanding and lead one to search for only certain aspects in artwork: order, divine law, reflection of social and economic conditions, style, tradition, individual talent.

Any artwork be it Islamic ornamentation or not contains always more. Nevertheless the tendency to explore and explain produces many arguments and will continue to do so. Just as the moment when one is left bounded and confused by the opposing views, it is this plurality of the arguments enables the possibility for one to be

relived. Like an ornament that covers the surface, which turns around and starts once again at the point here it just seems to end, confronting the work of art as released from the boundaries one can then begin to search for new ways to understand what one receives.

This inquiry has its own limits. Further elaboration about the topics discussed here can be given. For example, the issue of ornament can be thought within the low art/high art distinction. The dichotomy of high and low in arts can be related to understanding of the concept of art in modernism. This dichotomy is claimed to be a produced as being a part of the modernity.

"The dichotomy of 'high' and 'low' and its interrelated dichotomies are part and parcel of a textual culture that is essential and foundational component of modernity - in particular, of new mode in which individuals constitute their subjectivity" (Schulte-Sasse 4).

Certain distinctions have been presented to the individual for the reason that his or her identity is constructed within a culture that works with these distinctions. Ornament inevitably takes its place in

the low art/high art dichotomy. The position of ornament in this distinction provides another dimension for the study about the nature of ornament.

The subject of Islamic art is a vast one as many aspects can be related. (For example theory of religion, socio-economic history of Islam, etc.) In this study these issues have been slightly considered, but a better understanding of Islamic art requires a further research especially about the history of artistic production in Islam and the cultures before Islam in order to capture the influence of the latter to the former.

Orientalism is another issue that can be related for an investigation of Islamic art. Recent discussion about Orientalism depends on Edward Said's famous book *Orientalism*. Said's asserts that Orientalism can be taken in several ways: first it refers to the investigation of the Orient by Orientalists, second, the way of thought depending on the distinction created between the Orient and the West, and thirdly, Orientalism as the way of producing statements and making attributions on the Orient by the West in order

to maintain its dominance. Thus Orientalism appears to be attempt to define, describe, teach, and authorize the Orient and dominate. Said argues that the relation between two sides is a relation of power and domination. For Said the Orient is a construction, that is a consequence of certain representations. Such representations give way to the production of the Orient as being the other for the formation of Western image which is bounded to rationality and civilization. Said asserts that all the claims of the West on the Orient depends on misrepresentations, since none of these representations are free from ideological interest. Said adds that same situation continues in the contemporary representations of Islam.

Said's position seems to be ambiguous since it is not clear what makes him an exception while no Western scholar is free from making misrepresentations. So the existence of a true representation turns out to be the problem.

"The real issue is whether indeed there can be a true representation of anything or whether any and all representations, because they are

embedded first in the language and then in the culture, institutions, and political ambiance of the representer." (Said 272)

Orientalism brings various statements about the Orient, about Islam, or about Islamic art. The nature of these statements are discussed by Said and found to be inaccurate. Said himself is also criticized in the same manner.

Also a further research on the philosophy of Islam and Sufism can be articulated with the arguments of this study to present the aesthetic understanding in Islam. (Instead of relying on the interpretations of Nasr or Burckhardt.) Apart from that other approaches to ornament by different scholars, researchers can be given to contribute to the plurality of the arguments.

There are no precise answers or definitions achieved by this study. Instead the study presents only an opportunity to take. That brings the basically a confrontation with the artwork, bearing in mind the uncertainties that one can not escape but still try to maintain his own understanding. Such an understanding may necessitate the consideration of the relation

between the artwork and the viewer. This study may then be taken as the starting point for a further investigation since it does not end with answers but rather reaches towards a point from which new questions may arise.



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