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**Dr. Valérie Gonzalez**

**Insights on Islamic Aesthetics,  
Visual Culture and History**

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Mustafa M. Kapidžić**

**Review by:  
Nevad Kahteran and Ugo Vlajsavljević**

**Design and DTP:  
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**Dr Valérie Gonzalez**

**INSIGHTS ON ISLAMIC AESTHETICS  
VISUAL CULTURE AND HISTORY**

Sarajevo, march 2006



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# Insights on Islamic Aesthetics, Visual Culture and History

## INTRODUCTION

I have the honor and pleasure to present these essays which are the result of a series of lectures to be delivered at the University of Sarajevo. The translation of these essays into Bosnian language, published together with their original English version, gives to this work a particular dimension, beyond its purely scholarly value, as it allows it to be read by a public deeply concerned by the development of knowledge on Islamic culture.

The selected topics reflect the diversity of interests and approaches I implement in my research on Islamic art, aesthetic and visual culture. They also illustrate different chronological steps in my intellectual itinerary. Following my university education in art history, the first subjects I have studied were purely historical. The essay *The Perception of Muslims by Christians in the Poetry of the "Romanceros Fronterizos" in Medieval and Post-Medieval Spain* is one of these historical subjects that concerns Islamic Spain, the cultural area I have explored during the first few years of my professional activity. The essay underlines the complex and fascinating relationship between Muslims and Christians in this country, through an analysis of an ill-known genre of popular poetry. The second and third essays, *Aesthetic Phenomenology of a Late Ottoman Calligraphy from the Museum of Raqqada (Tunisia)* and *Aesthetic Connection versus Cultural Differentiation: Comparing Islamic and Western Art*, are the product of the new critical method I have developed these last years. This method resorts to philosophical tools in order to understand the conceptualization and meaning of Islamic works of art like an Ottoman figurative

calligraphy and the throne hall in the Alhambra palaces. Aesthetic phenomenology and the comparative study constitute very useful and promising paths of research but still are very little used in the field of Islamic art studies. Hopefully these essays will stimulate other initiatives in this direction. The fourth text deals with the Qur'an itself that contains elements of elaborated aesthetics. This aesthetic dimension of the sacred book was suspected and mentioned but never investigated by the specialists. Therefore I dedicated a full inquiry to this crucial topic that has resulted in few articles and a book in French *Le piège de Salomon, La pensée de l'art dans le Coran* (Albin Michel, Paris, 2002). At last, the fifth essay *The Aristotelian Concept of Mimesis as One of the Foundations of Islamic Aesthetics*, also refers to major sources in Islamic culture, namely a selection of texts from the medieval corpus of the classic *falsafa*. These texts develop ideas on aesthetics obviously resting upon the Greek legacy, but a close examination shows that they are also innovating and specifically Islamic in their approach of this legacy. These two last essays, which are dedicated not to the works of art themselves but writings, are intended to situate the Islamic artistic creation in the broader perspective of the visual cultural context. Eventually, Islamic art and aesthetics should be seen in the universal dimension, that is to say in the dynamic continuum of the international artistic creation.

I would like to thank my Bosnian Publisher, Mr. M. Kapidzic, and especially Prof. Nevad Katheran for giving me the great opportunity to expound these ideas and propositions in the inspiring framework of Bosnia, and particularly for his Bosnian translation that has required such tremendous work and efforts.

Valdivia, Chile, 11<sup>th</sup> January 2006

**THE PERCEPTION  
OF MUSLIMS BY CHRISTIANS  
IN THE POETRY OF THE  
«ROMANCEROS FRONTERIZOS»  
IN MEDIEVAL AND  
POST-MEDIEVAL SPAIN**

Medieval Spain was *par excellence* the ground of cultural encounter and intermingling between Islam and Christianity. In the realm of visual culture, architecture is undoubtedly the medium that reflects this phenomenon in the most conspicuous way. It clearly shows the significant influence the Muslim civilization of Al-Andalus<sup>1</sup> durably has had on Christian Spain. It suffices to cite the adaptation in Christian buildings of the sharp horseshoe profile of arches which characterizes the interior design of the Great Mosque of Cordoba, particularly in the 10<sup>th</sup> century-Mozarabic<sup>2</sup> churches and, later, in Mudejar architecture marking the evolution of Andalusian Islamic aesthetics in Christian milieu. In the art of painting, the celebrated illuminated books called “Beatus” - from the very name of the 8<sup>th</sup> century-Asturian monk whose commentary of St John’s Apocalypse became very popular among the Mozarabic population- represent imaginary cities displaying architectural and decorative patterns borrowed to Muslims by Christian artists and architects<sup>3</sup>. But there also

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<sup>1</sup> The Arabic term “Al-Andalus” designates the Muslim territories in Medieval Spain. See Henri Terrasse, *L’Espagne du Moyen Age*, Fayard, Paris, 1966; E. Levi-Provençal, *Histoire de l’Espagne musulmane*, 3 volumes, G.P. Maisonneuve, Paris 1950 and *La civilisation arabe en Espagne*, G.P. Maisonneuve, Paris, 1948.

<sup>2</sup> Christians living under the Muslim yoke in Early Medieval Spain were called “Mozarabs”. They succeeded in maintaining their own independent church during a while before joining eventually the Roman Church in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. See Jacques Fontaine, *L’art préroman hispanique*, Zodiaque, Paris, 1973 and *L’art mozarabe*, Zodiaque, Paris, 1977.

<sup>3</sup> These books display exceptionally large, colourful and expressive paintings. Copies were produced up to the 11<sup>th</sup> century, mainly in the Northern region of the Asturias where Mozarab refugees found asylum. See Henri Stierlin, *Le livre de feu*, Editions Sigma, Geneva, 1980; Manuel Gomez Moreno, “Arte Arabe hasta los Almohades, arte Mozarabe”, in *Ars Hispaniae*, Volume 3, 1951.

exist many other cultural features of the Spanish civilization during the critical period of the “Reconquista”<sup>4</sup> that reveal this strong impact of Al-Andalus. They are to be found both in literature and material culture, namely precious objects, jewels, metalwork, woodwork, ceramics, garments, textiles and so on. For example, ivories, luxurious wares and silk pieces taken as booty or tribute from the Muslim enemy were deposited in church treasures where some of them still can be admired<sup>5</sup>.

This article deals with a less known medium testifying the Islamic influence that endowed Spain with a unique character within the spectrum of the European cultures. This medium is a poetry genre called “*romancero*” or “*romancero fronterizo*” in textual sources. It appeared in the Middle Ages but still remained very popular in the 15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> centuries and even onward<sup>6</sup>. The celebrated 20th century-Spanish poet Federico Garcia Lorca explicitly referred to this old poetic tradition from his homeland, Andalucia, by significantly entitling

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<sup>4</sup> The “Reconquista”, the long conquest by Christians of Muslim lands in Spain, began with the historical date of the fall of the city of Toledo in 1085. It ended with the famous surrendering of the last Nasrid Sultan nicknamed “Boabdil” to the Catholic kings Fernando and Isabel, in Granada in 1492. See the historical account on Al-Andalus and North Africa from the Arab conquest to the 13<sup>th</sup> century by the Moroccan historian Ibn Idari, *Al-Bayan Al-Mughrib fi Akhbar muluk al-Andalus y al-Maghrib*; L. Chalon, *L’histoire et l’épopée castillane du Moyen Age, Légende du Cid, le cycle des Comtes de Castille*, Editions Honoré Champion, 1976; Pierre Guichard, *L’Espagne et la Sicile musulmane aux 11<sup>ème</sup> et 12<sup>ème</sup> siècles*, Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 1990.

<sup>5</sup> See Amador de Los Rios, *Trofeos militares de la Reconquista*, Establecimiento tipografico de T. Fortanet, Madrid, 1893; Valérie Gonzalez, *Emaux d’Al-Andalus et du Maghreb*, Edisud, Aix-en-Provence, 1994.

<sup>6</sup> See R. Menendez-Pidal, *Poema de mio Cid*, anonymous chronicle from the 11<sup>th</sup> century, Espesa Calpe, Madrid, 1911 (translated in French, Paris, Klincksieck, 1955).

“Romanceros gitanos” some of his most beautiful literary pieces.

The *romanceros* consist of poetic compositions comprising eight-syllable verses that do not belong to the category of high literature as it is usually understood insofar as they are not related to a particular or famous author, except for the very late case of Frederico Garcia Lorca. They did not flourish either in royal or educated circles. Instead, the *romanceros* are the product of a collective mode of cultural expression, that of the common people. Therefore, beyond the purely literary interest they may arouse, they offer a genuine highlight in aesthetic, historical and sociological terms of the popular culture in the mentioned period. Short poems depict the daily life of ordinary people, as opposed to the court members, aristocrats and noblemen, in the specific historical and sociological context of Islamic cities newly taken over by Christian armies. This context, let us recall, is that of the *Reconquista* (1085-1492) and the following century<sup>7</sup>, deeply marked by religious adversities and political and cultural rivalries resulting from the difficult and complex coexistence of Muslims, Jews and converts on the one hand, and Christians on the other hand. Although, as just said, the first group included different communities set a part by distinct religious faiths or attitudes, it nevertheless shared the one and same cultural Hispano-Arabic cultural background. Therefore it opposed the second group of people coming from the Christian kingdoms that have constituted themselves progressively by fighting the Muslim power since the beginning of its establishment in the peninsula. Triggered by

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<sup>7</sup> Actually, to be more accurate regarding this historical frame, one has to extend it up to the fatidic date of 1609-1610, when King Philip III officially ordered the expulsion of the Moorish people from Spain. See Fernand Braudel, *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II*, 2 volumes, Armand Collin, Paris, 1985.

the fall of the Umayyad Caliphate of Cordoba in 1031, the series of wars of the *Reconquista* created a problematic and painful situation for the Muslim population that dramatically changed social status from being dominators to being dominated and considered a minority, until their disappearance as an independent nation in 1492, to the benefit of the Catholic Kings.

From the purely cultural point of view, this historical evolution generated an increasing intermingling process between the rival communities that intensified and reached its peak at the epoch of the ultimate Islamic kingdom of Spain, the Nasrid Sultanate of Granada ((1231-1492)<sup>8</sup>. The arts conspicuously attest this phenomenon nurtured by actual exchanges of artists between the Christian and Nasrid kingdoms. The neo-Islamic or Mudejar style became highly fashionable in the Spanish courts, while the abstract Nasrid aesthetics opened itself to artistic representational traditions from Latin Europe, like the art of monumental figurative painting that one can contemplate in the Alhambra palaces. In particular, narrative scenes inspired by the court literature appear alongside with the Hispano-Islamic geometrical ornamentation, thereby forming a high visual contrast between the two opposed artistic conceptions, the representational and the abstract<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> See Rachel Arié, *L'Espagne Musulmane au temps des Nasrides*, 1232-1492, Editions de Boccard, Paris, 1973; W. Montgomery Watt and P. Cachia, *A History of Islamic Spain*, Edinburgh, 1965; M. Sanchez-Albornoz, *La Espana musulmana*, 2 volumes, El Atenco Editorial, Buenos Aires, 1960.

<sup>9</sup> In the palaces of the Alhambra, few vaults and walls display figurative representations painted by Christian artists. These works mix Muslim and Western iconography. See Jerrilynn D. Dodds, "Paintings from the Sala de la Justicia of the Alhambra: Iconography and Iconology", in *Art Bulletin*, V. 61, 1979; Emilio Garcia-Gomez and Jesus Bermudez Pareja, *The Alhambra: The Royal Palace*, Florence, 1967; Valerie

However, due to the conflicting relationship between the two communities, this cultural combination was necessarily resting upon a deep dichotomy which was manifest in antagonisms of all orders, religious, political, ethnic, social, etc., unavoidably leading to an ambiguous sense of otherness. It is precisely this ambiguity in the perception of the rival and its corollary, the mapping of “the image of the other”, that interest us in the *romancero* genre as significant cultural pattern. Indeed, through entertaining pieces of poetry that resound like popular songs, at the plebeian level and from the particular Christian viewpoint, the *romanceros* release a live and informative interpretation of this confrontational articulation between the different ethnic components of the Spanish culture during and after the Reconquista. Here is one of these poems:

Ahora trae borceguies  
Argentados alosados  
Vestido de terciopelo  
En tafetan aforrado  
Y espada muy plateada  
Y punal sobredorado<sup>10</sup>

Here he is wearing shoes  
Decorated with silver  
Dressed with velvet  
Padded with silk  
And a sword glittering with silver  
And a golden dagger

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Gonzalez, *Beauty and Islam, Aesthetics in Islamic Art and Architecture*, IBTauris, New-York-London, 2001, p.43-49; Oleg Grabar, *The Alhambra*, Solipsist Press, Sebastopol California, 1992; Antonio Fernandez Puertas, *The Alhambra: From the Ninth Century to Yusuf I*, Saqi Books, London, 1997.

<sup>10</sup> See R. Menendez-Pidal, *La Espana del Cid*, 2 volumes, Madrid, 1969.

This *romancero* expresses in simple but colorful words the perception the Christian population had of the defeated Muslims by drawing a kind of archetypal portrait of them. In order to understand the content and meaning of this portrait, it is necessary not only to analyze the textual semantic itself, but also to consider the historical and archeological material that may back up the cultural information released by the poem.

At the literal level, the verses describe the physical appearance of a Muslim man, more especially his dress and the luxurious accessories he is wearing. By thus focusing on sartorial features and being devoid of any psychological insight or individual characterization, the poetic description implies a distant gaze on the portrayed subject. This gaze is usually the one people have on others who are alien to them and whose only acquaintance relies on a purely visual encounter. The distanced portrait and the atmosphere it emanates free of any intimacy suggest that the context of the poem is basically an anonymous public space. By “public space” I mean at first instance the street, the very place of immediate and spontaneous cultural meeting and, by extension, all possible premises where the various communities could randomly meet each other, without knowing each other or interacting. The very fact that in this process of encounter the clothing monopolizes the attention is highly telling of the nature of relationship between Christians and Muslims and some of their particular social features, behavior and habits in the specific historical frame of the *Reconquista* previously expounded<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> See the historical monography on Al-Andalus by Al-Maqqari (born in Tlemcen, Algeria, in 1591), *Nafh al-Tib*, Edition Al Qahira, 1949; the 13<sup>th</sup> century historian Ibn Sa'id al-Maghribi, *Al-Mugrib*, translated into Spanish by E. Garcia-Gomez, *El libro de las Banderas de los campeones de Ibn Sa'id al-Maghribi*, Madrid, 1978.

Thus, costly accessories and a sophisticated sartorial fashion constituted a major distinctive cultural sign of Muslim men and women. In public appearances, such a striking look was denoting the remarkable refinement of the old Andalusian traditions elaborated during centuries. These traditions did not vanish with the political defeat of Al-Andalus and were still perceptible, more exactly visible in public life long after the end of the *Reconquista*. The 16<sup>th</sup> century-author of a historical chronicle, Perez de Hita, talks about a Christian nobleman with Moorish origins in the following significant terms: “An old *Idalgo* [nobleman in Spanish] named Fernando de Almodovar, a brave man that was a descendant of the Almodovares [family] from Murcia [...], and although he and his father and grand-father married Christian women, they did not loose neither their nobleness nor the use of being armed”.<sup>12</sup> This account mentions in particular a habit that seemed to have provided the Christian archetypal “image of the other” with one of its main visual patterns: armament elements wore as sartorial accessories.

Indeed, likewise the *romancero* points out the glittering sword and dagger the man it describes exhibits, Perez de Hita notices the armament as an essential theme of the Muslim male look and identity, even though it concerns people integrated into the Christian population through conversions or/and marriages. These items were not conceived and used for the combat. Instead they did form an integral part of the clothing, both casual and ceremonial. Leaving aside the obvious aesthetic purpose of wearing such accessories, their function was utterly symbolic as carriers of high Islamic values of various orders. First, decorative arms were emblems referring to the topic of the courageous and pious Muslim

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<sup>12</sup> J. Martinez-Ruiz, “La indumentaria de los Moriscos segun Perez de Hita y los documentos de la Alhambra”, in *Cuadernos de la Alhambra*, volume III, 1967, p. 55-124.

warrior embodied in the sacred figure of Prophet Muhammad. By thus alluding to the wars that accompanied the beginnings of Islam, military devices used as sartorial elements somehow conveyed a religious connotation<sup>13</sup>. Second, these devices were symbols of social rank, depending on the quality of the artistic work and the degree of material preciousness they were displaying. Third, at a broader level and in light of the composite Spanish society of this period, decorative military accessories were aiming to release a clear sign of cultural affiliation.

The emphasis on this particular Muslim custom happens to be recurrent not only in literature, poetry and chronicles, but equally in visual representations. For example, in the chess treatise written by the Christian sovereign Alfonso El Sabio (the Wise) in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, a miniature shows a Spaniard and a Muslim playing together under a tent. The Muslim is immediately recognizable thanks to his garment, turban and beard, but also to the emblematic attributes of the Arab knight he proudly displays, namely a huge sword hanging on his chest and two impressive spears driven in the soil outside the tent, just besides the place where he is sitting<sup>14</sup>. This Christian image clearly reveals the feelings of fascination mixed with fear the spectacular military equipment of Muslims was inspiring. The same canonical representation of the Muslim nobleman, bearing an impressively big sword on the torso following the Berber military fashion, characterizes a 14<sup>th</sup> century-vault painting depicting a gathering of kings or government officials in the *Sala de la Justicia* (Hall of

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<sup>13</sup> See the celebrated historical and sociological treatise of the 14<sup>th</sup> century Muslim historian Ibn Khaldun, *Al-Muqaddima, Discours sur l'Histoire universelle*, translated from Arabic into French by Vincent Monteil, Thesaurus, Sindbad, Beirut, 1967-68, p. 400-05; Maurice Lombard, *L'Islam dans sa première grandeur*, Flammarion, Paris, 1971.

<sup>14</sup> See the picture in Valerie Gonzalez, *Emaux...*, op. cit. p. 148.

Justice) in the Alhambra palaces in Granada. This painting was most likely made by a Christian artist working for the Nasrid court or a Muslim artist trained in the Christian style of painting<sup>15</sup>.

As a matter of fact, the production of beautiful arms and other military devices occupied a very important place among the luxury manufactures that contributed to the reputation of decorative arts and metalwork in Al-Andalus<sup>16</sup>. An international trade allowed a wide diffusion of this production and the Christians of Spain themselves assuredly were among the best customers and collectors. They actually adopted the fashion of bearing Islamic pomp arms until the 16<sup>th</sup> century and only abandoned it under the pressure of a sumptuary law of prohibition. When it was not through the market or by means of honorific gifts given by Muslim princes or noblemen, they could obtain this highly valuable material by less pacific means, directly on the ground of the battlefields after a victory, as reported in contemporary chronicles<sup>17</sup>. In

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<sup>15</sup> Idem, p. 152. See, again, Jerrilynn D. Dodds, "Paintings from the Sala de la Justicia of the Alhambra", op. cit.

<sup>16</sup> An anonymous Arabic source reporting on two centuries of battles between Christians and Muslims in Spain contains interesting descriptions and stories about the military equipment of the warriors of the two sides: *Al Hulal al-Mawsiyya*, translated into Spanish by A. Huici-Miranda, *Cronica arabe de las dinastias almoravide, almohade y benimerin*, Editoria Marroqui, Tetuan, Volume I, 1951-52. Otherwise see catalogues of exhibitions and collections: "*Las joyas de la exposicion historica-europea de Madrid*, Sucesor de Laurent, Madrid, 1993; *Catalogue de la collection d'armes anciennes europeennes et orientales de Charles Buttin*, Imprimerie Sadag-Bellegade, Rumilly, 1933; *Catalogo de las armas*, Instituto Valencia de Don Juan, Madrid, 1927; L. Williams, *Arts and Crafts of Older Spain*, Volume I, Edinburgh, 1907.

<sup>17</sup> Countless stories tell how arms were grabbed on the very body of the defeated enemy. These objects were both symbolically and materially important to the point that they were given names and so somehow personified. See the epic story of the swords called "Colada" and

1555, an official document written by Alonso Herrera specifies that the Royal Armeria of Charles V in San Pablo de Valladolid counted six typically “Moorish swords” (like those represented in the mentioned medieval images). In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, a famous Spanish historian, Don Antonio Conde, describes in detail another of these magnificent arms that was stolen from his own collection in his house by soldiers from the Napoleon’s Army, during the war against the French invaders.

This practice of collecting, whatever was the way to do so, developed among Christians very early in the period of the *Reconquista* and let preserve beautiful historical specimens up to nowadays. The most remarkable items, an embroidered silk *kaftan* (male dress), a precious worked dagger, a splendid sword and a small leather bag belonging to Boabdil himself were carefully kept in the private collection of the Marques de Comptejar. These pieces are shared out between the Army Museum and the Real Armeria in the Royal Palace in Madrid. Another example is the set of Hispano-Arabic armament pieces the grave of the monarch Don Sancho IV “El Bravo” (dead in 1295) contained, now in the Treasure of the Cathedral of Toledo. Many of these sumptuous objects presenting specifically Islamic morphologies, metalwork techniques and ornamentation can be seen in various museums of the world. To cite some of them, few private collections, the Army Museum and the Archaeological Museum in Madrid, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York or the Cabinet

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“Tizon” in *Poema de mio Cid*, verses 2420-2422; A. Zaky, “Introduction to the Study of Islamic Arms and Armour”, in *Gladius*, Insula, Madrid, Tome I, 1961, p. 17; A. Soler de Campo, “El armamento en epoca omeya”, in *Madrid del siglo IX al siglo XI*, Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando, Madrid, 1990, p. 171-187.

des Médailles (Bibliothèque Nationale) in Paris, possess historical masterpieces of the kind<sup>18</sup>.

The sartorial appearances of Muslim women did not get less attention than those of their male counterparts<sup>19</sup>. Likewise, their garment and costume accessories form an essential pattern of the synthetic image of the Muslim in the Christian imagination. They also enriched the Christian amateurs and connoisseurs' collections to which the museums owe a substantial part of their acquisitions. Fine, expensive and particularly heavy jewels, loaded with multiple pendants and wore on different parts of the body, brightly contributed to the colorful design of the Muslim female dress<sup>20</sup>. Ostentatious aesthetics was certainly not the only motivation of the emphasis put on these costly metalwork accessories. Many of them were linked to talismanic and prophylactic practices more or less associated or allied to orthodox piety, often linked to very old traditions from the Ancient Middle East and pre-Islamic North Africa<sup>21</sup>. They were fulfilling specific

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<sup>18</sup> See *Emaux...*, op. cit., p.141-175; J. Fernandez y Gonzalez, "Espadas Hispano-arabes", in *Museo Espanol de Antiguedades*, Imprenta de T. Fortanet, Tome I, 1872, p. 574-590; C. Barberan, "El arte suntuario de las nuevas salas del Museo Archeologico Nacional", in *Africa-Espana*, 342, Madrid, p.7-8; A. Bruhn Hoffmeyer, "Introduction to the history of the European sword", in *Gladius*, Tome I, Insula, Madrid, 1961; A. Jacob, *Les armes blanches de l'Islam*, Collection A. B. C., Paris, 1975; P.A. Zeler, *Armes orientales*, Editions Princesses, Paris, 1976.

<sup>19</sup> See Ibn Khaldun, *Al-Muqaddima*, op. cit., p. 415-17 and p. 645-46.

<sup>20</sup> See M. Keene and Marilyn Jenkins, *Islamic Jewelry in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, M.M.A., New York, 1983.

<sup>21</sup> See Ibn Khaldun, *Al-Muqaddima*, op.cit., "51. Prédications et divination" p. 518-41 and "27. La magie et les talismans", p. 837-49; W.L. Hildburgh, "Note on Spanish Amulets", in *Image*, 79, Folklore, December 1906, p. 461-62; *Medieval Spanish Enamels*, Oxford, 1956; Ramirez de Arellano, "Estudios sobre la orfebrería en Cordoba", in *Coleccion de documentos ineditos para la historia de Espana*, CVII, Madrid, 1893.

functions dictated by beliefs shared between faith, mysticism and superstition, whether they were enclosing tiny scrolls covered with Koranic quotations, Soufi formulas and other secret writings reported from a *sheikh*'s sacred word (*sheikh*: wise and pious religious leader), or were displaying patterns and signs invested with all kinds of benefic and protective powers<sup>22</sup>. Moreover, similarly to armament items for the men clothing, they were openly indicating both the social rank and the cultural identity of the bearer.

Naturally, the Christians were fascinated more by the brightness and material richness of these objects than their deep significations. To them, the theme of precious jewels constituted an almost innate feature of the Muslim, like the morphological character of a face or a body. In 1612, shortly after the implacable expulsion of the Muslim population (also called "*Moriscos*") ordered by the king of Spain Philip III in 1609, a Christian author, Pedro Aznar de Cardona, published a text untitled *Justified Expulsion of the Moorish of Spain*. An excerpt illustrates the "vision of the other" focused on sartorial devices which are perceived like a shield or a screen that hides inner feelings:

"From time to time, one could see a group of women (those from the wealthy *Moriscos*), with various silver medals on the chest, around the neck, with heavy pendants, necklaces, earrings, bracelets, and with thousands of trimmings and colors on their garments and linens behind which they were hiding the pain of their broken heart".

As both this text and the quoted *romancero* imply, the Christian population was little accustomed to such a luxury, usually exclusively reserved to aristocrats and monarchs that anyway, in Spanish culture, were more inclined to austerity. The sophisticated look of the newly defeated seemed to contrast so much with the more sober uses of the conquerors

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<sup>22</sup> See *Emaux* ..., op. cit., and the bibliography at the end of the book.

that it aroused ambivalent feelings of fascination, hostility and indignation. To Christian eyes, the Muslim sartorial habits appeared at once admirable and condemnable. Accordingly, the cited *romancero*, like many others poems of the same kind, has to be understood as a denunciation of an attitude considered arrogance, although at the same time it implicitly recognizes the great aesthetic value of the object it decries. While, for the Muslims, cultivating traditional fashion was part of a surviving process in terms of cultural existence, the Christians mainly perceived this behavior as a deliberate effort to undermine a new social order meant to build a new legitimate national identity under the Catholic banner. To the latter's eyes, this new order could only be built by suppressing all visible traces of the previous one. In such conditions, in the Christian mind the rich beauty of the Muslim clothing was crystallizing the fear of the insidious continuation of the Islamic power within the recently established Spanish State and, more radically, of the threat of its actual return.

Then, needless to say that at a more prosaic level, unavoidably these luxury items publicly exposed provoked envy and greed that triggered all kinds of criminal activities. As abundantly reported in contemporary chronicles, thief, black mailing and physical threats forced wealthy Muslims either to make cheap deals of their precious assets or to hide them in supposedly secure places with the hope of a future retrieval in better days. Some historical sources relate that genuine treasures hunts have occurred. A popular saying translates this atmosphere: "*Donde hay un Moro / Hay un Tesoro*" (Where there is a Moorish / There is a Treasure)<sup>23</sup>.

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<sup>23</sup> A rumor was saying that after the fall of Granada in 1492, the Islamic court members buried their gold somewhere in the Alhambra, perhaps in the *Torre de Siete Suelos* (Seven Floors Tower). The romantic writer Washington Irving retook this legend in his famous *Tales of the*

But more severely, the consequence of this community confrontation was the flight abroad of a substantial part of the Muslim population from the Iberian Peninsula. In their exile, when they could, the desperate Muslims took away their precious belongings and with them many of the elaborate techniques with which they were made were lost or ceased to be practiced on the Spanish soil.

Few observers from the Islamic elite itself could foresee what was becoming a serious social problem brought up by the historical shift of the *Reconquista*. The 14<sup>th</sup> century-historian and Vizir of the Nasrid sultans Yusuf I and Muhammad V, Ibn al-Khatib, echoes the discontent expressed in other Spanish literary sources when he writes:

“About the adornments and jewels of the ladies of Granada; they are used to wear richly worked necklaces, ankles bracelets, rings and earrings of pure gold; the whole with quantities of silver and precious stones on their shoes. I am talking about the middle class. Concerning the ladies of the aristocracy and old noble families, [they display] a great variety of gems, rubies, emeralds and pearls of high value. The ladies of Granada are usually elegant, well proportioned [...] witty and pleasant in conversation. However, unfortunately, at the same time their passion for embellishment and dressing up with all sorts of jewelry and costly garments had reached a point which is no longer tolerable.”<sup>24</sup>

At the higher level of the royal circle, several historical events reflect this very situation and the ambivalent attitudes that underlie it. In spite of the capitulations statement issued in June 2<sup>nd</sup> 1492 guaranteeing the respect of Islamic cult and customs, safety of Muslim people themselves and protection

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*Alhambra*. See Ibn Khaldun, *Al-Muqqadima...*, op. cit., “4. La recherche des trésors cachés”, p. 610-15, and note 1 p. 610.

<sup>24</sup> See the major historical account of Ibn Al-Khatib, *Al-Ihata fi Akhbar Garnata*, Edition Inan,

of their belongings and properties, the actual events turned out to demonstrate an open intolerance. Indeed, while Queen Isabel of Aragon herself was greedily seeking after Islamic jewelry and fine accessories that she was secretly collecting, in 1476 she released an official edict at Madrigal forbidding the Moorish population of the kingdom to use gold, silver, silk and purple fabric in the horse equipment<sup>25</sup>. In 1508, Queen Jane, known by the sad nickname “the mad”, reiterated a similar sumptuous law against the wearing of Moorish cloth in order to eradicate cultural differences between Muslims, Jews, Christians and converts. Yet, many features of this loathed custom penetrated the privileged Catholic class, in particular the use of bearing ostentatious arms we have pointed out above. In the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, royal portraits displaying princes covered with all kinds of oriental talismans and amulets illustrate the strong attraction Muslim and Kabbalistic jewelry exerted on the Christians, whether they secretly adopted certain superstitions or simply succumbed to the very glittering charm of these exotic adornments. A magnificent necklace in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York attests this contradictory attitude through its very patterns. Probably the work of a Muslim or a converted artist and commissioned by a Christian customer, this piece assembles typically Islamic talismanic beads from Al-Andalus and North Africa called *Qannuta* with a rounded central pendant bearing the Latin inscription “Ave Maria Plena”. One has to have in mind the original function of the *qannuta* to understand the meaning of such a decorative combination. A *Qannuta* is a kind of small cylindrical box meant to contain Koranic excerpts and other Islamic sacred writings. Although,

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<sup>25</sup> See excerpts of the inventories of the Catholic Queen from 1504 in Manuel Gomez-Moreno, “Joyas de la Reina Catolica”, in *Al-Andalus*, Madrid-Granada, Volume III, 1943, p. 473-475; see also the series called *Etudes sur les Moriques andalous*, Tunis, 1982 onward.

in the case, the *qannuta(s)* are empty and fulfill a purely ornamental need, the typical cylindrical morphology of these beads somehow still refers to the original Islamic use, thereby creating a strange contrast with the pious Christian formula on the pendant. Actually, the fashion of prophylactic jewels was so deeply rooted and generalized among all the components of the Spanish society that in 1525, the ascetic king Charles V again delivered a law to prevent the practice; whoever was caught violating this law had to be severely punished.

This contradictory dynamic of the double process of oppressing on the one side and resisting on the other side, expressed in popular poetic terms in the *Romanceros*, succeeded during a while in keeping a certain balance so that few Hispano-Muslim sumptuous customs still could be observed in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. However, one must not forget that the increasing fears and hostility facing the Other's natural determination in fighting cultural assimilation fatally yielded to the dramatic history of exiles and the Inquisition. As a result, the bright Islamic culture of Al-Andalus gradually became a civilization of the past that had to wait the 20<sup>th</sup> century to be recognized and scholarly studied as a major part and a unique feature of the Spanish cultural and historical legacy.



**AESTHETIC PHENOMENOLOGY OF  
A LATE OTTOMAN CALLIGRAPHY FROM  
THE MUSEUM OF RAQQADA (TUNISIA)**

3. Read: And thy Lord is the Most Bounteous,
4. Who teacheth by the pen,
5. Teacheth man that which he knew not.

*Qur'an, XCVI, Al-'Alaq*<sup>26</sup>

The universal principle set forward by Edmund Husserl, according to which the word constitutes not only a graphic sign but also an object, a proper body (*Leib*) or a spiritual corporeality (*geistige Leiblichkeit*),<sup>27</sup> was never so widely applied as in the Islamic calligraphy of modern times. This is especially true for Ottoman art that used to designate calligraphies under the highly significant Arabic term *Surah* (picture, image, form). Indeed, artists worked writings and words as entities made flesh, standing or floating in space; and from then on, they treated them also like a figurative subject. Conversely, they transformed representational patterns into scriptures, thereby transgressing the boundaries between the conceptual and the material, the ideal and the real. a practice that is still very successful today. As a result, these calligraphies can be considered pictures - pictures of words or word-images, securing the role of both linguistic incarnation and iconography. A double ontology, linguistic/-conceptual and visual/corporeal, and a double aesthetic nature, abstract and representational, that an illustrated folio from the Museum of Raqqada, powerfully displays. Through the study of this illustration, I wish to discuss the aesthetic phenomenon of making the visible correlative to the legible,

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<sup>26</sup> Surah of "The Clot", *The Holy Qur'an*, English translation of the meanings of the Qur'an with notes by Mohd M. Pickthall (Delhi, Millat Book Centre, 1994).

<sup>27</sup> See Edmund Husserl, *Formal and Transcendental Logic*, translated by Dorion Cairns (The Hague, Nijhoff, 1969), p. 21.

by displacing or connecting up the sphere of language to that of icon. As a matter of fact, this phenomenon is proper to calligraphy in general, but characterizes in a very single manner Islamic calligraphy, as Uğur Derman's work magnificently demonstrates. This reflection is thus our way to celebrate this artist and scholar in this volume.

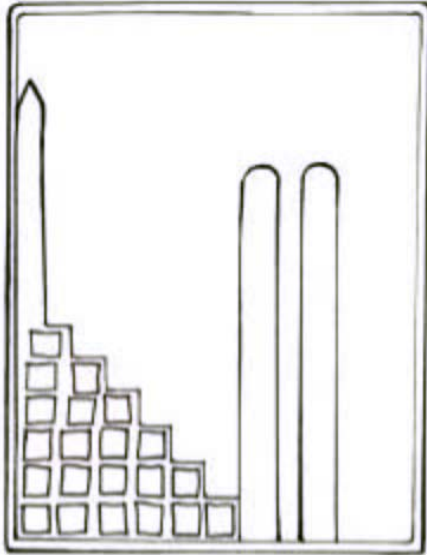
The folio is part of the small collection of Islamic objects from various periods and sources in the aforementioned museum. Located in a medieval site nearby the city of Kairouan, in Tunisia, the Museum of Raqqada is a small and new institution that, therefore, does not yet provide all the required elements for an exact identification of the object under consideration. There is no date, nor name to indicate the place from which it comes and eventually by whom it was made. Nor is there any indication as to the type of book to which it once belonged. Consequently, to make the necessary presentation of the folio, there is no other choice but to describe it and to guess, according to the visual information it supplies, the kind of work with which we are dealing. In addition, the only document I could get is a drawing after the real, made spontaneously by myself *in situ*.<sup>28</sup>

The illustration is made of monochromatic black ink on a white thin paper that seems quite recent, probably from the late Ottoman period, the eighteenth or nineteenth century. It measures approximately 12 x 7 centimeters. A unique feature on the ground-page, it represents in minimalist terms a *minbar* seen from one side within a rectangular framework. Though this picture is the very first pattern delivered to the

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<sup>28</sup> The conditions in which I made the drawing were not favorable for an exact reproduction of the folio. Consequently, though the general structure is clearly respected, the number of stairs and squares in the *minbar* depiction as well as the precise dimensions of the various pictorial elements may not correspond, as they should, to the real object. Nevertheless, for lack of a photograph, this sketch constitutes a basic informative document.

gaze, it turns out that it is entirely designed by calligraphy - the monogram *Allah* - namely by a scriptural morphology. In fact, even for those who are used to this sort of visual games, phenomenologically the writing does not appear immediately to the eye since the letters that compose it are hidden by the distortion imposed by the representation,



Freehand sketch of a folio with the monogram *Allah* forming an interior view of a mosque. (Museum of Raqqada, Tunisia.)

and so disappear in a certain way within its outlines.<sup>29</sup> This is a characteristic that, as Oleg Grabar explains in his study on

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<sup>29</sup> There is a need here to insist on the fact that the pictorial arrangement appears positively for the first time. We do not believe indeed that this assertion is the result of a culturally determined eye that, by habit, detects in a more immediate manner representational figures than scriptural subjects.

calligraphy,<sup>30</sup> all artistic writings share beyond their diversity, and which consists in rendering access to the textual content difficult, or complicating its reading, or often attributing a secondary importance to content, even no importance at all. In this sense, calligraphy obviously opposes plain writing that intends to communicate clear messages.

Thus, on the Tunisian manuscript, the *alif* generates the framework that follows all along the edges of the folio. Then, the double *lam* spreads vertically in two long and narrow curves while the final letter, *ha*, thanks to its basic triangular shape, draws the shape of the *minbar* itself, standing in one vertex of the rectangle of the frame. The two curves form a kind of very synthetic anthropomorphic pattern, like a vague figure of two people facing the pulpit. The whole composition constitutes a sort of highly minimal picture of the interior of mosque. Given the religious character of this illustration, one can assume that perhaps the folio belonged to a *Qur'an* or a Sufi treatise.

Such a calligraphic work exemplifies all the more starkly the phenomenon we want to observe, since the writing is nothing less than the Sacred Name itself, *Allah*, which gives birth to an image. Though this image is of religious order and so fits the semantics of the linguistic unit, the plays of meaning resulting from the dialectics between the figuration of discourse and the discourse of figuration are, in addition, here subtended by the theological tension concerning representation and the sacred. All of the games of dialectic and semantisation that this kind of figurative calligraphy necessarily involves, turn out to be particularly dynamic and at the limits of the possible in this little, anonymous, and perceptually very simple but elegant drawing. We can say

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<sup>30</sup> See Chapter II dedicated to calligraphy, “The intermediary of the writing”, in Oleg Grabar, *The Mediation of Ornament* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1992).

that it concentrates in its few strokes of *qalam* the essential aesthetic problematic concerning Islamic figurative calligraphy. And firstly, it postulates that as morphology by essence, the artistic scripture is fundamentally borrowing the eloquent expression of the French art historian Hubert Damisch, a “*peinture prise au mot*” (a “painting taken at the word” with which it is combined.).<sup>31</sup> This expression fits the type of scripture we are studying, insofar as its artistic vocation undoubtedly aims at showing other things than words as such, by transcending the basic acts of writing and reading in order to explore more sophisticated modes of expression and perception. In the case of the Tunisian folio, we should say more accurately that it is an “image taken *in* the word”.

## **I. The Double Ontology of the Folio: an Image Taken in the Word**

Although - as we observed above - what one sees at first glance is a perfectly autonomous figurative image within a frame, comprising two major immediately recognizable patterns (the *minbar* and the two anthropomorphic signs) by “mono-optic experience,”<sup>32</sup> this image has no existence except through the word inscribed on the page background, the name *Allah*. Matter, materiality and immateriality are given simultaneously, literally, in a plastic structure that joins together figure, form and linguistic content. It concerns more accurately the typical case, in Islamic calligraphy, of the

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<sup>31</sup> This expression is the title of the long foreword Hubert Damisch wrote for the French edition of the book by Meyer Schapiro, *Les Mots et les images* (Paris, Macula, 2000) [*Words and Pictures, On the Literal and the Symbolic in the Illustration of a Text* (The Hague, Mouton, 1973)]

<sup>32</sup> I borrow Oleg Grabar's expression in *The Mediation of Ornament*.

image that perceptually absorbs the scripture, or of the scripture perceptually eclipsed by the image.<sup>33</sup> However, the geometry of the picture's composition, comprised of three vertical lines on the right side, namely the combination of the twin curves and the design of the frame completed by the triangle on the left side, corresponds in the absolute to the geometry of the graphics of the Sacred Name. There exists no other possibility of interpretation for, as Ludwig Wittgenstein argues about the concept of scriptural identity,

the mere look of a printed line is itself extremely characteristic. It presents, that is, a quite special appearance, the letters all roughly the same size, akin in a shape too, and always recurring; most of the words constantly repeated and enormously familiar to us, like well-known faces.<sup>34</sup>

So due to this inscription in the geometry of the word *Allah*, in its "morphological ideality,"<sup>35</sup> the picture does not take place in the material space on which the world of figuration usually relies, but proceeds instead from this specific graphics subtending the physiognomy<sup>36</sup> of the word that determines in the bi-dimensionality of the line the conceptual space proper to meaning. This corporeality of the word is defined, again by Wittgenstein, by comparing it

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<sup>33</sup> See Grabar, *The Mediation of Ornament*, chapter II; for a bibliography on the subject, see note 8.

<sup>34</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, translated by G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1972), vol. I, p. 68.

<sup>35</sup> Expression by Jacques Derrida, (see the quotation in footnote 15 of our paper) in *Edmund Husserl's Origin of Geometry, An Introduction*, translated, with a preface and afterword, by John Leavey, Jr. (Lincoln and London, University of Nebraska Press, 1989); for a phenomenological study of writing, see pp. 87.96, especially footnote 92.

<sup>36</sup> This theme is amply developed by Wittgenstein, in *Philosophical Investigations*, Part II, vi, p. 181.

precisely to the forms of a picture, both objects and subjects of gazing:

Though - one would like to say-every word has a different character, in different contexts, at the same time there is *one* character it always has: a single physiognomy. It looks at us-but a face in a *painting* looks at us too.<sup>37</sup>

Nevertheless, and therein lies all the complexity of the folio's aesthetic ontology, his geometrical territory of letters initially constitutes the formal site of meaning of this fundamentally ideal and conceptual object that the word primarily is, in the following sense stated by Jacques Derrida:

the word (*mot*) has an ideal Objectivity and identity, since it is not identical with any of its empirical, phonetic, or graphic materialization. It is always the same word which is meant and recognized through all possible linguistic gestures.<sup>38</sup>

In the sensible embodiment operated by the graphic sign, there occurs the localization in physical space and time of this word's ideality, its semantic content, which is by its being-sense "unlocated and untemporal".<sup>39</sup> This concretely signifies that, on the Maghrebi manuscript, the calligraphic geometry realizes the embodiment of the absolute free (unlocated and untemporal) ideality of God, the highest, purest and most free

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<sup>37</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, p.181.

<sup>38</sup> Derrida, *Edmund Husserl's Origin of Geometry*, p. 67.

<sup>39</sup> Derrida quotes Eugen Fink's words about speech: "In sensible embodiment occurs the "localization" and the "temporalization" (*Temporalisation*) of what is, by its being- sense, unlocated and untemporal". ("Die Frage nach dem Ursprung der Geometrie als intentional-historisches Problem" in *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 1, 2 [January 15, 1939], p. 210) in *Edmund Husserl's Origin of Geometry*, p. 89.

of all idealities in Islam, within the necessarily “bound”<sup>40</sup> ideality of the linguistically identified word, the Arabic name *Allah*, and within matter by writing, this name’s own corporeal exteriority, its scriptural morphology.

Starting from these observations, it is henceforth possible to define more subtly the aesthetic ontology of the Tunisian illustration. Contrary to appearances, the whole arrangement is of a scriptural order, and by extension, in the first place, of an ideal and conceptual nature. As such, it signifies primarily by means of the written unit, and only secondarily by means of figuration. Actually, it belongs to the category of the so-called “word-bound image” proposed by Meyer Schapiro<sup>41</sup> - an extreme case of that sort, we should say, since the image, being made up of the graphic substance of the word, not only depends on it to exist and make sense, but *is* positively, ontologically this word. So that the latter acquires the authority of the generic image and the represented picture, as disguised word, gets the signifying power of the idiom: a peculiar plastic proposition that we will qualify as “an iconographic alphabet” or “an alphabetical image”. In other words, picture and scripture are one and the same entity with two faces, two properties and two natures, one textual and

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<sup>40</sup> It is the phenomenological concept of the ideality bound to the sensible world and factuality (for example the ideality of the culturally determined language) as opposed to that of the absolutely free and objective ideality (for example the ideality of divine truth). Derrida very explicitly says: “The forms of graphic and vocal signs must have a certain identity which is imposed and recognized each time in the empirical fact of language. Without this always intended and approximate ideal identity (that of letters and phonemes, for example), no sensible language would be possible or intelligible as language, nor could it intend higher idealities. Naturally, this morphological ideality is still more “bound” than the word’s ideality”. (*Edmund Husserl’s Origin of Geometry*, p. 89.)

<sup>41</sup> Hubert Damish quotes Meyer Schapiro in *Les Mots et les images*, foreword, p. 12.

the other figurative, i.e. a double ontology with a primary (scriptural/ideal) ontology and a secondary (figural/material) ontology. This fact commands the entire analytical approach to the aesthetic system of the manuscript. For its meaning must be understood on the basis of its textual/ideal semiotics, in correlation with its figural semiotics, not the other way around. But before any further discussion, one has first of all to distinguish the type of work this manuscript represents from another one that belongs to the same generic group of figurative calligraphy, except that it follows different aesthetic rules.

This other type of calligraphy is in the first place and occurrence a figural ontology, not a linguistic ontology, and so constitutes the opposite of the latter. As a matter of fact, the word or the text is “taken in the picture,” not in the reverse order as on the Tunisian manuscript, insofar as the writing supplies an additional feature to an arrangement fundamentally rooted in the sensible space of visual forms. In Oleg Grabar’s book, *The Mediation of Ornament*, one finds two representative pictures of that sort.<sup>42</sup> One picture shows a funeral procession in which a human figure and a camel are literally filled with Arabic characters, like colours in certain drawings. The term “filled” itself expresses very well the important distinctive feature that characterizes this kind of calligraphy, with respect to that of the Tunisian work. This point is that the letters are *contained* in the figurative shapes, constituting a separate body of features from the representational field instead of being organically bound to it. So there is insertion of an element into another, a contained element and a container that necessarily form two entities (replacing the unique one characteristic of the Raqqada calligraphy). As always in such configuration, the determining element for the structural organization of the

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<sup>42</sup> Grabar, *The Mediation of Ornament*, illustrations 56 and 57, p. 86.

work is the container. Therefore it is the figuration, not the script, that governs the whole calligraphy, following its own, specific laws which are those of the concrete world. The picture's background, sprinkled with flowers, strengthens this aesthetic inscription of the calligraphy within the realm of existing things. Moreover, the treatment of the writing itself follows the representational aesthetic that the figures dictate, through an emphasis on the purely perceptual properties of the letters, to the detriment of their properly linguistic values, almost ungraspable without decipherment. Such treatment makes the graphic characters act more as plastic patterns than as genuine scriptures featuring a textual intention. Clearly there, the writings perform their role of linguistic sign solely at a second level of perception. More than that, the appreciation of their textual semantic appears as quite accessory. Consequently, in terms of aesthetic ontology, these writings are in the final instance both distinct and qualitatively analogous to the representational patterns with which they share a pictorial ground, i.e. they appear similarly invested with representational qualities and values. The other picture is of a bird whose body is made up of a *basmalah*. The sacred sentence spreads itself in accordance with the fowl's silhouette, within its flesh in a sense, and it consequently submits to the regime of the figure. So that again, it is positively the latter that defines the pictorial field as a true morphology taken from the real. In the Tunisian folio, let us remember, it is on the contrary the graphic sign that rules the figure, determines its shape, and so defines the general scriptural regime of the drawing.

To underline this important distinction between the two types of artistic writing, we will qualify the first as “figurative calligraphy of the *scriptural* regime,” as opposed to the second, “figurative calligraphy of the *representational* regime.” This distinction is suggested by Grabar in the

captions of both these illustrations and another picture similar to the Raqqada page.<sup>43</sup> Regarding the two calligraphies of the representational regime, the title mentions in the first place and explicitly the figurative content, and then goes on to indicate the presence of scriptures: “Funeral procession of letters”; “Bird in the shape of a *basmalah*.” Conversely, the caption of the third picture, one that displays Koufîc letters composing the figure of a ship, mentions the two topics in reverse order: “Writing in the shape of a boat.” In this fashion, the author specifies the fundamental scriptural nature of the illustration, as a “figurative calligraphy of the scriptural regime.” Returning to our manuscript, the question is now to shed light on the modalities of interconnecting and inhabitation of the pictorial pattern in the scriptural one, given that they specifically form a double ontology.



Figurative calligraphy of the scriptural regime: Profession of faith (“*Amentu*”) in the form of a boat. (Ottoman; from Malik Aksel, *Türklerde Dinî Resimler: Yazı-Resim* [Istanbul, Elif Yayınları, 1967], p. 43.)

<sup>43</sup> Oleg Grabar, *The Mediation of Ornament*, illustration 60, p.89.

## II. Scriptural Figuration and Figural Scripture

Reduced to a few, easy to grasp features, the image works as - borrowing another meaningful expression from Schapiro- a “pictorial title”<sup>44</sup> which invites the viewer to play the game of binding the semiotics of the visible with that of the legible. The mosque furniture and the evocation of human presence indeed provide elements of signalization, on the levels of both form and meaning, which set the rules of this phenomenologically complex experience involving the coordinated acts of seeing and reading. Let us begin with the formal level, the ground upon which everything occurs, and all the activities comprised by the aesthetic experience initially take place.

Through simple lines quickly embraced by sight, at this primal and overall perceptive state and following this collectively consented acceptance thanks to which one understands effortlessly a system of signs (Grabar’s so aptly named “optisemic level”<sup>45</sup>), the figurative patterns make appear almost simultaneously, but not without a certain unpredictability their scriptural roots. Under their apparently minimal representational network, that hides but momentarily their authentic identity, arises, in all the transparency of old cultural acquisitions, the instituting evidence of the Divine Designation through its characteristic graphic shape. We will dare to say that there occurs “a scriptural epiphany,” with all that this kind of “event” conveys in terms of perplexity, emotions, and sensations. The manuscript’s figurative topics thus enter into lexical order, indicating in this way their founding linguistic ontology in an enjoyable effect of

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<sup>44</sup> Hubert Damish quotes Meyer Schapiro in *Les Mots et les images*, foreword, p. 13. See also François Dagognet, *Écriture et iconographie* (Paris, Vrin, 1973).

<sup>45</sup> Grabar, *The Mediation of Ornament*, chapter IV: “The Intermediary of the architecture.”

astonishment (in Arabic, *‘ajaba*). Let us recall that astonishment or surprise is one of the aesthetic qualities required to produce a good calligraphy according to some common Islamic artistic norms.<sup>46</sup> So the visual topics are stating and announcing signs (in Arabic *āyāt*) that in a sense “make a sign” themselves to the word they conceal, initiating the sliding process from the occurrence of the picture to that of the writing. The image thereby reveals itself as a true scriptural figuration or a figurative scripture.

This is the key process that yields to the promising and playful discovering of the complex cognitive reality of the illustration as, again, not a monolithic and plain icon, but a stratified statement displaying the plurivocity of a word and an image visually crossed. To which concrete reality does this statement correspond?

This question unavoidably raises the crucial problem of “figurability” (*figurabilité*, *Darstellbarkeit*), a concept of expression famously developed by Sigmund Freud and which indeed traverses all interrogation on visual arts associated in one way or another with texts or words. As Hubert Damish writes,

in its form as well as its substance, in its scriptural foundation, all linguistic expression more or less proceeds from the reign of image one will qualify as “pictorial.”<sup>47</sup>

However, starting from this general postulate, it is necessary to specify how the concept of figurability operates regarding the particular case of our manuscript as scriptural figuration, for, in the art of figurative calligraphy in general, there exist several possibilities.

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<sup>46</sup> Grabar accurately talks about “creative expectation” in *The Mediation of Ornament*, chapter II.

<sup>47</sup> Damish, “La peinture prise au mot,” in *Les Mots et les images*, p. 27.

In the Tunisian folio, as a matter of fact, this concept acts strictly within the realm of the sensible, namely on the surface – “the texture of the world” to use an eloquent phenomenological expression - on which



Figurative calligraphy of the scriptural regime: “As God wills” (“*Mā shā Allāh*”) in the form of an oil lamp. (Ottoman; from Malik Aksel, *Türklerde Dinî Resimler: Yazı-Resim* [Istanbul, Elif Yayınları, 1967], p. 50.)

the body of words stands out: it deals with the purely visual figurability of the corporeality of the monogram *Allah*, certainly not with the figurability of the signification it embodies. In order to avoid all confusion, especially with works that could incorrectly appear similar to the Raqqada calligraphy, this negation needs an explanation. Firstly, from an overall point of view, the absolutely “non figurable” character of the contents of the term *Allah* eradicates for obvious religious reasons all possibility of aesthetic

exploitation of the figurability of the folio's scriptural semantics. Secondly, at the more specifically aesthetic level, such exploitation does not apply to this calligraphy for reasons of plastic configuration. The process of making pictures after texts is that of visual transposition or visual translation, which actually subtends the relationship between textual and figural subjects in many other calligraphic works, and also of course many illuminated manuscripts.<sup>48</sup> In principle, the visual transposition imposes a "mirror-relationship" that involves a reflexive identification between the pictorial and the textual fields by means of various manners of symbolization or designation, through the path of images common to both. But in the Tunisian drawing, the arrangement of the different composing elements does not offer any path for such a mirroring relationship. The two modes of designation (by writing and figuring) turn out to designate two different topics with no possible representational link, as we just pointed out, although they belong to the common realm of religious meaning. Neither are there otherwise two represented features between which the mirroring relationship could eventually be established, since the word constitutes the sole and unique aesthetic being of the page (of a double nature). This means that the Raqqada manuscript displays a calligraphic configuration notably distinct from other figurative calligraphies in which visual transposition truly occurs. To clarify this idea, let us consider these works.

One can classify these figurative calligraphies in two categories: the category of calligraphy displaying a unique represented entity (equally a double ontology), whose two modes of designation designate the same content; and the category of calligraphy displaying two coexisting represented entities whose two modes of designation point to the same

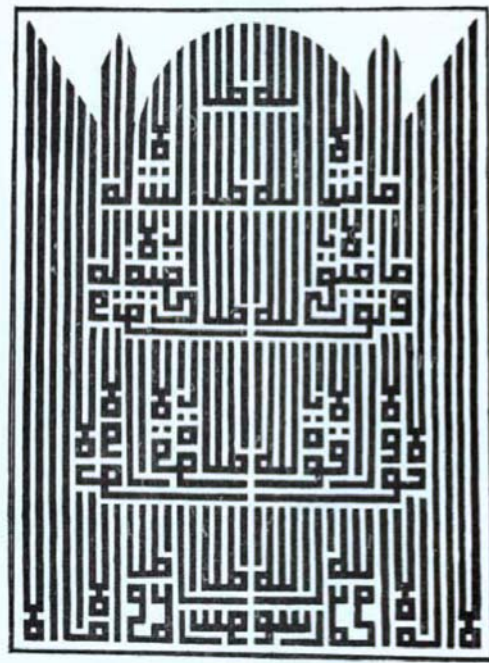
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<sup>48</sup> About illuminated manuscripts, see Meyer Shapiro, *Words and Pictures*.

content. The feature common to both cases that fundamentally distinguishes them from the Tunisian page, is clearly the mutually shared signification by picture and scripture, whether the aesthetic configuration relies on a double system of designation by a single represented entity or by two autonomous represented entities. In the first category, the mirroring relationship takes place through the double designation, while in the second one it is produced by equality of meaning between the two autonomous entities. So that in both configurations, forms and letters visually and semantically reflect each other. In other words, these calligraphies are tautological propositions that use the two modes of expression of figuring and writing to say one and the same thing, thereby increasing the rhetoric power of the linguistic statement. In the art of scripture in general, these works are called “calligrams,” i.e. basically writings that are arranged in such a fashion as to form a picture illustrating their topic and so intend to lodge the same statement in two premises, the word and the visual shape, in order to render visible the scriptural sense or to provide it with a visible equivalent. In light of this theoretical statement, it appears that the Maghrebi drawing is not properly speaking a calligrammatic construction. A comparison with concrete examples of the both mentioned categories of calligraphy/-calligram will sustain this argument. Concerning the first group, in Islamic calligraphy, one can imagine, for instance, a picture of bird shaped by the graphic lines of the Arabic word that names this animal, “*usfur*”.<sup>49</sup> The shape of bird and the name form the one and the same being, like the scene of mosque and the monogram *Allah* composing the Tunisian work.

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<sup>49</sup> Let us notice that this is not the case with the aforementioned picture of a bird in Grabar’s book, since there, as in the Tunisian folio, the visual and textual semantics are not identical.



Figurative calligraphy of the scriptural regime: Various pious sayings (“*La ilâhe illâ Allâh,*” “*La quwwata illâ billâh,*” “*mâ tawfiqi illâ billâh,*” “*mâ shâ Allâh*”) in the form of a mosque. (Ottoman; from Malik Aksel, *Türklerde Dinî Resimler: Yazı-Resim* [Istanbul, Elif Yayınları, 1967], p. 28.)

But unlike the latter, the name’s content is identical to the shape’s content in this depiction of a bird, that is, its content is doubly signified by shaping and naming. In the totally different cultural context of modern Western literature, the type of calligram called “figured verse” presents a structural scheme similar to the Islamic scheme discussed earlier, which we will define symmetrically as “figured word.” The French poet Guillaume Apollinaire, famously interested in the secret and enigmatic relationship between forms and language, inaugurated this kind of aesthetic practice lying halfway between picture and poetry, between figure and script. One of his beautiful works, dating from 9th February 1915, consists of a poem beginning by the declarative sentence “*cette adorable personne c’est toi..*” (“this adorable person is you...”) that generates the design of a

female portrait wearing a hat.<sup>50</sup> The poem realizes the double procedure of designating through language its object and drawing in the bi-dimensionality of the page the body of this object with which it forms a single morphology, in such a manner as to identify the linguistic proposition to the visual one. We can say in summary that compared to these two examples of the first calligrammatic group (with double ontology), the Raqqada folio shapes not a figured word, nor a figured verse, but a figurative word: what we called a figurative scripture or a scriptural figuration.

Then, to illustrate the second category of calligram comprising two distinct represented entities, one cannot fail to mention René Magritte's celebrated painting entitled "*Ceci n'est pas une pipe*" ("This is not a pipe"). The sentence "*Ceci n'est pas une pipe*" occurs beneath a representation of the cited object that, precisely as image, is not the object itself but itself but a fiction.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> See "Calligraphy and Games with Letters," in Georges Jean, *Writing: The Story of Alphabets and Scripts*, translated from the French by Jenny Oates (New York and London, Henry N. Abrams Inc., Publishers, 1992 [Paris, Gallimard, 1987]), pp. 162-173. The calligram by Guillaume Apollinaire is on p. 162.

<sup>51</sup> This masterpiece of the Belgian painter Rene Magritte was commented on in a very enlightening essay by Michel Foucault who discusses these philosophical and aesthetic problems raised by forms and words: Michel Foucault, *This is not a pipe*, translated and edited by James Harkness, (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London, University of California Press, 1984). See particularly the chapter "The Unraveled Calligram," pp.19-31. This painting is also reproduced and commented on in Richard Calvocoressi, *Magritte*, (London, Phaidon, 1992), p. 91.



Figurative calligraphy of the figural regime: Ewer featuring the “*çifte vav*” (“double waw”) motif. (Ottoman, eighteenth or nineteenth century; from *Turkish Arts: Calligraphic Figures 2* [Istanbul, Ada Press Publishers, n.d.] )



Figurative calligraphy of the figural regime: Funeral procession in which the veiled Caliph Ali is leading a camel carrying his own coffin and sword, followed by his sons Hasan and Husayn. (Ottoman, nineteenth century; from *Turkish Arts: Calligraphic Figures* [Istanbul, Ada Press Publishers, n.d.] )

The figuration bodily expresses what the writing ideally postulates, so that the whole artistic work traps ideas in a double cipher infused with highly rhetorical as well as plastic values. Unlike this painting, in the Raqqada illustration, not only do the word and the image merge into one unique morphology, but furthermore their respective semantics differ. Let us repeat that the synthetic interior view of a mosque is not a visualizing substitute for the ideality of the Name of God, that possesses value for and by itself in the absolute, in a pure ideal manner, since it eludes all visibility. And to put an end to this discussion on figurability in the Tunisian work, we will definitely confirm that its modalities of operation do not call on the imaging (*imageant*) potential of language or its metaphorical dimension. The concept of figurability acts on the strictly sensible ground of forms, in the event, the physiognomy of the word *Allah*: a fact that justifies the qualifications “scriptural figuration,” “alphabetical picture,” or “figurative scripture,” instead of “figured scripture” or “figured word”. These definitions nevertheless need further development before we can undertake a properly semantic analysis of the whole work.

The Raqqada calligraphy is a scriptural figuration or a figurative scripture insofar as its visual features constitute formal *extensions* generated by the metamorphosis of the textual body, or *extend* the writing under figurative forms. These features allow the scripture to exist and to signify in a space no longer possessing the neutrality, the abstractness and the inert blankness of the page, but in a living space the viewer physically penetrates, through sight. In other words, the iconography is built on what this textual body comprises in terms of figuring and visualizing properties, as true object of perceptual experience, by virtue of its natural inscription in the material space. These graphic and representational properties permit words to commit themselves to this silent

activity at the margin of the strictly linguistic expression that Michel Foucault admirably called “*le sourd travail des mots*” (translated as “the subterranean work of words,” and could be rephrased as “the soundless or deaf work of words”).<sup>52</sup>

This soundless work of words in matter, this purely sensible phenomenon that at a certain ontological level renders visual representations and graphic characters of language identical, is accurately what the Maghrebi illustration points out and plays with. Through iconographic extensions or figural developments, the graphic sign *Allah* shows itself in the full corporeality of this graphic body-being that is both ideal and carnal, which possesses the peculiar ability of a double designation, by the abstract content of the word and the fiber of its form.<sup>53</sup> More than that, the illustration positively signifies because the writing, originally the receptacle of an ideality by definition addressing the mind, is equally and fully an object of visibility. Only as such can the monogram *Allah* refer to the natural existent and give shape to worldly things, strengthening the carnal union of the sensible form, constitutive of the “bound” ideality<sup>54</sup> of the linguistically determined word, with the sensible matter, constitutive of the

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<sup>52</sup> This is the original title of chapter 4, “Burrowing words,” in Foucault, *This is Not a Pipe*, p. 36.

<sup>53</sup> Following the Husserlian conception of the word as flesh and proper body.

<sup>54</sup> It concerns this type of ideality linked to that reality that is language, as opposed to the totally free, totally ideal ideality. (the Divine truth or mathematics for instance are free idealities). For a discussion on the idealities embodied in word and writing see Chapter VII in Derrida, *Edmund Husserl's Origin of Geometry*. See also the other celebrated text by Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), to which Grabar aptly refers in his study on writing in *The Mediation of Ornament*.

image and the written unit. In this way, thanks to the protective intermediary of the word's envelope, the sacred ideality of God is preserved from all illicit association with the material world.

From this analysis we can deduct that the folio's meaning itself can only be produced by a cognitive system of semantic derivation - not semantic transposition or translation - from the linguistic topic to the pictorial one, in logical accordance with this plastic configuration of morphological derivation. This deduction leads to our next subject for consideration, the cognitive system of the manuscript. As this system rests on the written Sacred Name, we define it by the expression "visual *dhikr*."

### **III. Cognitive System and Experience of the Folio as Visual *Dhikr***

A clue of significance as a first approximation, the figuration, which is - let us recall - the first proposition offered to the gaze, declares the global content of the manuscript dealing with the semantics of Islamic faith. More precisely, through the attractive and appealing medium of the visual staging (*mise en scène*), of artistic mimesis in the broader sense, that projects the viewer onto the solemn atmosphere of the place of worship, the figuration manifests and announces the very intention of the calligraphic work going far beyond the mere perceptual game. This intention is clearly to summon the mind to spiritual meditation through the recognition of the written name of God; going back to the title of Michael Baxandall's book, the pictorial configuration

constitutes here a “pattern of this intention.”<sup>55</sup> In the specific terms of Islamic thinking, the work’s intention is to prepare the viewer to a *dhikr* of visual order, i.e. to realize in favorable physical and psychic conditions the mental procedure of remembrance of the Divine Existence. Like the kind of dance and choreography practiced in the ceremonies of *dhikr*, the calligraphic picture supplies the specific framework of an aesthetic experience to this procedure, in order to increase its spiritual power. More accurately, the indirect access to the vision-reading of the Divine Designation through the picture and the experience of beauty it induces, strengthens the rhetorical effectiveness of this vision-reading and enhances its spiritual resonances with dramatic emotions and sensations. emotions and sensations that plain script, or a mere oral statement, could not arouse, for only aesthetic creations are suitable to do so. This experience of visual *dhikr* generated by the Raqqada manuscript works according to a peculiar process.

A scene of pious life nudging the viewer toward a devotional figural reverie, the pictorial composition initiates a sort of natural movement of cognition that refers firstly to the usual religious environment, and that changes content as soon as the Holy Name appears, with no break, through the soft path of derivation, to operate in the conceptual field of the Divine Idea. The viewer thus moves on from the thing seen to the thing read, incessantly going back and forth between vision and reading, between the sphere of corporeal forms and that of pure meaning: a perceptive movement that converts in both directions the scriptural figuration into a figurative scripture, the alphabetical image into an iconographic alphabet. The switching process is endless to the point that the legibility of the name *Allah*

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<sup>55</sup> Michael Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Explanation of Pictures* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1985).

- which usually, by virtue of the cultural principle of linguistic collective recognition, rests on the sole sight of its graph - on the folio now proceeds only from the visual assimilation of the pictorial statement. Consequently, the graphic emergence occurs only in the spatiality of the picture. In concrete terms, the corporeality by which the written unit signifies is perceived through the visual combination of the *minbar*, the anthropomorphic curves and the frame. So that the cognitive system through which the Tunisian folio fully makes sense consists in recovering within the illustration and its formal signalization, the trail, the path of reading that leads up to the recognition of the Sublime Name as an altogether linguistic entity, specific graphic morphology, and pure meaning. This recognition that we called “visual *dhikr*” allows the indefinite repetition of the constitution in the concrete world of the transcendental Divine Truth and its ideal validity, exactly as does the vocal repetition of the term *Allah*. For, as Wittgenstein points out, “remember that the look of a word is familiar to us in the same kind of way as its sound.”<sup>56</sup>

In other respects, this complex cognitive system fulfils the same double function of preparatory intellectual work and poetic invitation to grasping deep and difficult ideas, as the parable or the tale in literature. Indeed, as fiction with a similar binary semantic structure - the literal, and the hidden or latent, levels - the parable or the tale yields to abstract predicates by the enjoyable and accessible means of images, in the event, images in language, the narrative. Certain forms of this literature proceed likewise, as the visual representation of the manuscript opens a door, in concrete and earthly terms of things familiar by use and habits, to an

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<sup>56</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, pp. 67.68. See also Paul Ricoeur, Essay II, “Speaking and Writing”, in *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth, Texas Christian University Press, 1976), pp. 25-43.

immaterial realm of ineffable thought, the thought emanating from the disguised Sacred Name. Nevertheless, for the full understanding of the folio's cognitive system, one has to take into account a fundamental difference that distinguishes the two elements in comparison. Unlike the parable or the metaphorical text, what corresponds in the Tunisian calligraphy to the narrative discourse of the work - to its immediate appearance or its rhetorical aspect, i.e. the discourse of the figuration clearly does not *represent* or *symbolize* the abstract terms of the second level of significance, the content of the written pattern. The visual discourse of the figuration, distinct from that of the ideal discourse of the writing, is *connected* to the latter only insofar as it occurs within the same religious semantic field. As we said above and will demonstrate hereafter, one derives from the other. This means that the signification relationship between the two discourses or levels of signification does not rest on similar schemes in the Tunisian work and the metaphorical texts; likewise, calligrams also organize differently their double expression, the figural and the scriptural. On the Raqqada page, then, the pictorial statement is definitely not the literal/figured sense of the proper meaning contained in its ideal/scriptural counterpart, nor does it involve a mirroring relationship to it. By extension, its cognitive organization is not that of the parable or metaphorical tale, which consists of one and the same designation (by figured language, i.e. by narration) of a double sense, nor that of the calligram which consists of a double designation (by figuration and textual statement) of one and the same sense; it is a double designation<sup>57</sup> (by figuration and textual statement) of a double sense (see Chart I). In short, the double meaning of the Tunisian calligraphy

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<sup>57</sup> A double designation, but one that is realized by a single being, the word, as double ontology (two natures in a single being).

emanates from the double discourse of the figuration and the name.

#### **IV. The Double Discourse of the Figuration and the Name**

Just as it determines the plastic structure and the ontological identity of the picture, the Divine Designation necessarily determines the conceptual field in which the latter signifies, in the event, the field of the religious. Nevertheless, we observed that within this same field the picture covers a semantic territory that is its own and does not overlap with that of the inscription. While the monogram *Allah* expresses the supreme ideality in Islamic thought, God Himself, the representational ramifications of its graph express symmetrically, we might say, through the evocative image of worship, the practical implications of this absolute postulate in the reality of the believer's life, the religious practice. So while the writing refers to the timeless and immaterial Divine Being, the absolute ideality, the depiction of a mosque refers in contrast to the factual and material reality of human existence, namely what we could call in phenomenological terms "the absolute reality,"<sup>58</sup> or what corresponds in theological terms to the absolute concreteness.<sup>59</sup> These two opposed conceptual poles,

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<sup>58</sup> Let us quote Husserl's phenomenological definition of the real: "We call real in a specific sense all that which, in real things in the broader sense, is, according to its sense, essentially individualized by its spatiotemporal position." (*Experience and Judgement: Investigations in a Genealogy of Logic*, translated by James S. Churchill and Karl Americks [Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1973], pp. 265-266.

<sup>59</sup> On these notions of the ideal and the real in religious thought, see Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and its Relation to the Rational* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1958).

constitutive of all religious thought, organize the semantics of the Raqqada folio under the specific form of a perfect binary scheme of two discourses, joined and in accordance with each other, but absolutely distinct: the double discourse of the figuration and the name whose content can be described as illustrated in Chart II.

Between the depiction of a mosque and the name of God - and, beyond that, the ungraspable idea of the Divine Truth - there takes place a chain of interconnected significances that rely on the various ontological grounds the word explores through its multiple forms, thanks to its combined signifying, graphic, and iconic properties. More accurately, these significances are gathered within the two spheres of meaning, or ontological grounds, defined by the two conceptual poles of the concrete and the ideal to which each perceptual component of the folio refers. The first sphere is naturally the linguistic/ideal one that comprises the various idealities embodied in the monogram *Allah*: at the most elevated rank, so to speak, the pure ideality of the Divine, the Divine Truth or God Himself, then gradually the ideality of the word, the Name of God, and its already real identity in language or the so-called “bound” ideality of the Arabic designation *Allah*. The other sphere, necessarily correlated to this linguistic and ideal sphere, is that of perceptual signs in which occur both the real-sensible events of the writing of the name *Allah* and the representation of the pious scene. This chain of signifying

## COGNITIVE SYSTEMS OF FIGURATIVE WRITINGS

**Figurative calligraphies of the scriptural regime**  
(*The Raqqada folio, writing in the shape of a boat*)

One being (double ontology)

Double designation

Double meaning

**Figurative calligraphies of the figural regime**  
(*Funeral procession of letters, bird in the shape of a  
Basmalah*)

Two beings

Double designation

Double meaning

### **Calligrams 1**

(Figured verse, *Apollinaire,s calligram*, and  
figured word, *picture of bird – ‘Usfur*)

One being (double ontology)

Double designation

One meaning

### **Calligrams 2**

(Magritte’s painting “*Ceci n’est pas une pipe.*)

Two beings

Double designation

One meaning

### **Parables-tales**

One being

Single designation

Double meaning

Chart I.

## SEMANTIC SCHEME OF THE RAQQADA FOLIO

GOD

(The absolute ideality)

THE WORD “GOD”

(The ideality of the word)

THE ARABIC NAME OF GOD, *ALLAH*

(The bound ideality of the word in language)

**THE MONOGRAM ALLAH**

**(The embodied ideality of the written word)**

**THE REPRESENTATIONAL EXTENSIONS**

**(The empirical reality of the visual representation)**

HUMAN EXISTENCE

(The absolute concrete reality)

Chart II.

elements connects the absolute contingent to the absolute ideal and generates a movement of meaning, going back and forth from one to the other, that puts both in a sort of dialectical perspective: a semantic configuration that obviously comes from the specific articulation of the discourse of the name with that of the image. What are exactly the terms of this articulation?

The discursive articulation of both topics proceeds from derivation. In detail, the figurative discourse derives from the nominal discourse just as iconography perceptually derives

from the scriptural graph. Moreover, the figurative discourse prolongs the nominal discourse whose semantic field it broadens; it is, borrowing Paul Ricoeur's term, "an iconic augmentation"<sup>60</sup> of it, as its visual corporeality extends into figural space the linear spread of the written character. We can apply to this peculiar semantic morphology Wittgenstein's striking remark about general semiotics:

it is almost as if "seeing the sign in this context" were an echo of a thought. "The echo of a thought in sight" - one would like to say.<sup>61</sup>

Thus, the picture prolongs the nominal discourse insofar as it puts the reading of the name *Allah*, the very element carrying the supreme meaning of the folio, into the visual context of the familiar atmosphere of a place of worship. In this sense, the picture makes itself the echo of the ineffable thought of God in the factual believer's existence that it represents. This leads us to point out the accurate function of the picture in respect to the name in the semantics of the calligraphy.

Even though the writing's presence *per se* already implies a process of incorporation of the ideal (proper to words) into the real (proper to perceptual signs), the iconic extensions introduce into the abstract field of linguistic cognition of the monogram *Allaha*, dimension that it did not originally have, namely the dimension of the pure contingent, of the strictly concrete real. For writing by itself does not completely penetrate factual life, while contingency is the territory *par excellence* of all visual representation. Indeed, figurative images are tied much more tightly to the empirical subjectivity of the historical time than script. This means that - within this real that, by nature, the letter deposits on the manuscript's ground or within this spatiotemporality of the written page - the figurative extensions of the graph *Allah*

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<sup>60</sup> Ricoeur, "Writing and Iconicity," p. 42.

<sup>61</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, p. 212.

open another horizon: that of the factual real of life (shown through the scene inside a mosque). By opening to it this horizon of pure factuality, the picture widens this reality proper to the written sign that, by itself, is still interrelated with the objectivity of the word's meaning, but yet is freed from contingency insofar as it conveys the possibility of reproduction and translation, or has the property of translatability.<sup>62</sup> This opening to the very contingent by the visual image's presence provides the global dialectic discourse of the calligraphy with all its depth in terms of religious sense. This actually is the last point to treat, the interpretation of the work's deep meaning.

Above all, the signification of the Raqqada folio is clearly *named* and consequently is the meaning of a name, that "primitive sign"<sup>63</sup> that conceals an invisible presence. The postulate according to which the name is an "integral resorption of all discourses into a sole word", as Michel Foucault explains,<sup>64</sup> is all the more apt for the Tunisian calligraphy since it concerns the sacred designation of God itself. As a matter of fact, the Arabic term *Allah* contains also the verbal statement of being and so gathers all the essence of language. It is the being of thought itself in Islam. Through this initial and pure interjection,<sup>65</sup> the origin of all discourse, and in the silence of its graphic expression, what the monogram *Allah* attempts to perform is the transcendental reduction that consists in depositing in factual reality the

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<sup>62</sup> On these notions of translatability and translation, see the discussion on writing's ideal identity, in Derrida, *Edmund Husserl's Origin of Geometry*, pp. 70-75.

<sup>63</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, translated by C.K. Ogden (Mineola, New York, Dover Publications, 1999), p. 38: "3.26 The name cannot be analysed further by any definition. It is a primitive sign."

<sup>64</sup> Michel Foucault, *Les Mots et les choses* (Paris, Gallimard), p. 316.

<sup>65</sup> Derrida, *Edmund Husserl's Origin of Geometry*, p. 94.

absolutely ideal and objective Divine Sense that, by definition, is freed from all types of empirical subjectivity. Like the vocal repetition of the Sacred Designation, the visual *dhikr* of the Raqqada folio realizes the spatiotemporal embodiment in the finitude of the world of what belongs to the infinite and the ineffable, and so is out of grasp. However, this act obviously irremediably conceals a kind of failure or impossibility. For

all factual writings, in which truth could be sedimented, will never be anything in themselves but sensible “exemplars,” individual events in space and time (which is only true to a certain degree for “bound” idealities). Since truth does *not* essentially depend on *any of them*, they could be all destroyed without overtaking *the very sense of* absolute ideality.<sup>66</sup>



Figurative calligraphy of the figural regime: A hawk and its prey. (Indo-Muslim; from Chaubey Bisvesvar Nath, “Calligraphy,” *The Journal of Indian Art and Industry* XVI, 124 [October 1913], fig. 24.)

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<sup>66</sup> Derrida, *Edmund Husserl's Origin of Geometry*, p. 94.

This failure is in a sense suggested or expressed by the sophisticated composition of the scriptural graph with the devotional picture. Through the series of channeled embodiments including the visual representation, i.e. by covering all the degrees of concreteness proper to both the linguistic and perceptual spheres, the figurative calligraphy tries all the available possibilities to set down and “to communalize” (*mettre en communauté*)<sup>67</sup> the ineffable truth in the spatiotemporality of earthly reality. It is as if these embodiments would intend to fill up, by all licit means, the incommensurable distance between the purest ideal and the material world, in order to engrave the former into the latter, down to the most empirical and uncertain of realities, human daily life. From then on, the true meaning of the Tunisian work can be interpreted through two epistemological approaches that will serve as a conclusion to this study.

The first approach is logically the theological one. As an object of expression of the Islamic faith, the calligraphy's sense clearly lies in this metaphysical tension toward the ungraspable and supreme being, God - an impossible task whose trail the scriptural and figural patterns draw within the limits of sensible reality, within the limits of the possible, which are those of the acts of saying and showing (*les limites du dire et du montrer*).

The second approach, which cannot fail to raise some philosophical questions with respect to the previous one, proceeds from phenomenology.<sup>68</sup> What the Tunisian calligraphy intends to operate by the transcendental reduction explained above, or what constitutes its meaning as a phenomenological object by essence, is to gather the optimal

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<sup>67</sup> Phenomenological expression used by Husserl, Derrida, and others.

<sup>68</sup> Nevertheless, the phenomenological approach is justified, imposes itself we should say, for artistic works are by themselves objects of phenomenology as objects of perceptual experience.

conditions for the internal completion of the ideal Objectivity of the Divine, the absolute ideality. For phenomenologically, although ideal objectivity possibly exists *per se* independently of any type of embodiment, it can only be fully constituted by a procedure of incarnation or deposition in matter, so, paradoxically, against the empirical subjectivity of worldly reality. Following Husserl, Derrida accurately states that:

writing is no longer only the worldly and mnemotechnical aid to a truth whose own being-sense would dispense with all writing-down. The possibility or necessity of being incarnated in a graphic sign is no longer simply extrinsic and factual in comparison with ideal Objectivity: it is the *sine qua non* condition of Objectivity's internal completion. As long as ideal Objectivity is not, or rather, *can* not be engraved in the world. as long as ideal Objectivity is not in a position to be party to an incarnation (which in the purity of its sense, is more than a system of signals [*signalisation*] or an outer garment) - then ideal objectivity is not fully constituted. Therefore, the act of writing is the highest possibility of all *constitution*, a fact against which the transcendental depth of ideal Objectivity's historicity is measured.<sup>69</sup>

In this sense, the graphics of the Sacred Name - as well as the vocal *dhikr* in other respects, that embody the being-sense of the religious truth, are positively a procedure for realizing the ultimate or complete constitution of this truth as such, i.e. its total freeing from worldliness (and *a fortiori* against it). We will add that on the Maghrebi manuscript, the peculiar conjunction of writing and figuring phenomenologically

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<sup>69</sup> Derrida, *Edmund Husserl's Origin of Geometry*, p. 89. But to better understand this complex phenomenon of the possibility of being written of idealities, see Chapter VII, pp. 87-107.

“constitutes” the Divine Ideality, each at different degrees and with different modalities of incarnation. If writing is the condition *sine qua non*, figuring supplies the complementary condition that increases the possibilities of such constitution. Nevertheless, one immediately sees the problem posed by this analysis when one considers the religious context in which the calligraphy was produced and the type of ideality the latter incarnates. It is obvious that, in theological and metaphysical terms, the ineffable Divine Being - as the absolute permanent ideal objectivity, as pure transcendence - cannot be constituted or measured. The rational procedure of constitution “occurs” or works as long as one puts the artefact, as positive phenomenon, not the entity to which it refers, into the very heart of the analysis from which all the deductions proceed. To make both approaches coincide, we could perhaps state that the process involved in the calligraphy is a *re-constitution* in the sensible ground, for the human community, of an ideality that by definition has always been constituted or was never constituted, that of the infinite being. Indeed, “the authentic act of writing”, and so the sacred act of writing the name *Allah* – “is a transcendental reduction performed by and toward the *we*,”<sup>70</sup> by and toward the believer. We shall not, then, resist the temptation of returning to Derrida’s penetrating idea for the final term of our discussion. If “to constitute an ideal object is to put it at the permanent disposition of a pure gaze,”<sup>71</sup> the Raqqada folio, thanks to its peculiar visual expression mixing forms and letters, “re-constitutes” the ideal Divine Truth. “Constitution” or “re-constitution,” is the fundamental question raised by the artistic work not that of *how* to express pure transcendence?

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<sup>70</sup> Derrida, *Edmund Husserl's Origin of Geometry*, p. 92.

<sup>71</sup> Derrida, *Edmund Husserl's Origin of Geometry*, p. 78.

**AESTHETIC CONNECTION  
VERSUS CULTURAL DIFFERENTIATION:  
COMPARING ISLAMIC AND  
WESTERN ART**

The subject matter of this essay deals with a method of analysis that contributes to renew and broaden the horizon of the study of arts nowadays: the comparison between two works or more that do not necessarily belong to the same culture or period. To begin with, I will talk about the comparative study as an epistemological question, then I will illustrate my argument with a comparison between the Comares Hall, a 14<sup>th</sup> century building within the Hispano-Arabic architectural masterpiece of the Alhambra in Granada (Spain), and a contemporary work of art, a construction by the minimalist American artist James Turrell in the Sculpture Garden of the Israel Museum, Jerusalem.

The comparative study is the product of a transdisciplinary and transcultural attitude that changes the categories and rules of the history of art as it is traditionally understood and practiced, that is to say the method using almost exclusively historical tools and criteria in the analysis of an art produced before the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These categories and rules are obviously the history and sociology of art, iconography and iconology which are practiced within the epistemological frameworks defined according to the concepts of civilization, ethnic group, religion, geography, periodicity, etc. It is only recently that the transdisciplinarity and transcultural approach in general and the comparative study in particular are implemented on the research ground and in scholarly institutions. For example, the label « history of art » is still used in order to designate a discipline that actually includes many different non-historical approaches like aesthetic philosophy, visual semiotic, phenomenology, critical studies, etc.

Although this epistemological question seems a bit speculative, it actually points out a complex situation where the domination of the historical tradition happens to be called into question by the development of new analytical streams. Sometimes even conflicts occur between the old school of

history of art and these recent methods, particularly in the field of non-Western art studies that remains quite conservative. But what do the terms « transdisciplinary » and « transcultural » exactly mean and what is at stake in the comparative vision?

A transdisciplinary and transcultural reading is a particular manner of seeing a work of art as if it belongs to an imaginary geography whose boundaries would constantly be redrawn. This type of reading refutes cultural differentiation as the condition sine qua non for doing research on art. By extension, it eliminates the intellectual constraints imposed by the traditional classifications mentioned above. These classifications imply a vision that tends to reduce the work of art to a historical object or a visual form of archive. Yet, as the master of Surrealism Andre Masson significantly underlines in his text *Une crise de l'imaginaire* (A crisis of the Imaginary): « a work of art is not written information ». The work of art is an object fundamentally perceptual that necessarily involves visual concepts such as form, color, space, lines, and modes of expression such as figuration, abstraction, realism, idealism and so on. The way the artifact manifests these concepts and resorts to these modes of expression cannot be fully understood by the sole historical analysis. It requires also a purely aesthetic screening by means of appropriate critical tools which refer to aesthetic philosophy and visual and critical studies. Consequently, the art historian which is interested in the transcultural and transdisciplinary method has to transcend (but not to ignore of course) the sphere of cultural existence of the artistic work in order to better confront its aesthetic nature and focus on its aesthetic function. In other words, he has to modify or widen his mode of thinking and diversify his sources.

The question of the sources is essential. For it is necessary to resort to a hermeneutic that specifically targets issues of

aesthetics. This hermeneutic comprises everything that is the product of thinking about the constitution, conception and conceptualization of the work of art as bodily object and the aesthetic experience it induces as well. So it comprises theory of art, criticism, artists' writings and all the philosophical resources that may help decipher the visual strategies and phenomena artifacts implement, from phenomenology to semiotic, logic and philosophy of language. It is within this open, diversified and rich framework that the comparative study takes place. Then, the main criterium justifying the use of comparison in the investigation of an artistic production is not necessarily the historical, religious or cultural community but a set of significant common features of any order that brings together two works or more. These common features indicate that the comparison may contribute to the knowledge of each work involved in the investigation.

Thus, a comparative reading situates the compared objects in the universal perspective, that is to say it places them in an order of things whose only principle is their "mode of appearing" as Edmund Husserl explains in his short essay *Phenomenology of Aesthetic consciousness*: « Yet, the issue that arouses in particular is to know which mode of appearing is in question in which one is led to not the isolate object but precisely the object in connection with objects where it is conscious and to the modes of appearing of this connection». This connection is meaningful, for it constitutes a potential source of knowledge. Noticeably, the work of art seen in this way, in the dynamic of the interaction with other works foreign to it in cultural or geographical terms, reveals its semantic richness: a richness which is nurtured not only with the endogenous significances of the work or its own signifying content, effective and intrinsic, but also the exogenous significances this very interaction may bring up.

In summary, the comparative study aims to deepen the knowledge of an artifact thanks to a new evaluation of its multiple meanings and a particular consideration of its contribution on the global scene of artistic creation. Let us examine concrete examples of this theoretical argument. First, I will evoke an article published in the French newspaper *Le Monde*, second I will present the comparison itself.

In *Le Monde*, the French critic Philippe Dagen has written an article about an exhibition held in the Louvre Museum in 2004 “Paris 1400, Les arts sous Charles X” which appears particularly relevant to our subject. About French medieval manuscripts he says: “The Louvre shows how Paris was, around 1400, the center of an amazingly rich artistic creation whose works break up cultural chronologies and hierarchies...One thinks about Matisse, Durer”. Further in his text, Dagen says again “In an exhibition that would deal with the history of color, the illuminations of Jean de Berry’s psalms book and those from the Oeuvres of Christine de Pizan showing she offering her own book to Isabeau of Baviere would be necessary. The red bed, in a bedroom with walls covered with outremer blue and gold. The window in the background is designed with a perfect geometry. The beams of the ceiling are red and green: What do we think about? About L’Atelier Rouge of Matisse.” Through these remarks, Dagen points out that these manuscripts should be considered in a fresh light, with new critical tools and on a basis of purely visual issues such as color or geometry. He implies that the traditional historical and iconological approach of the medieval art of the book does not give a proper account of the deep aesthetic dimension of these images. The manuscripts were indeed thoroughly studied as historical objects but there are still aesthetic aspects in them to consider further. Consequently, Philippe Dagen suggests that as long as one

observes these works in the light of their aesthetic properties, they appear in connection with artistic productions that yet belong to other times or cultural spheres. He thus opens a new path of study that leads to refine the comprehension of the manuscripts by means of the comparison with modern paintings presenting aesthetic affinities with them.

The comparison of structural order Dagen proposes not only expounds an aesthetic dimension of the medieval art of the book that was not suspected up to now, but also it implicitly invites to explore a new technique of hermeneutic. This technique consists in using the modern and contemporary critical material on art history and aesthetics in order to analyze any artistic object whatever its origin or date is. Indeed, the analytical practice of focusing on forms, their visual qualities and power of expression in art was nowhere else at work than in the Western world since the Renaissance through nowadays. The Western critical tradition has left to us the unique spectrum of resources that we know since Leonardo Da Vinci and Alberti's famous treatises. The comparative approach allows appropriate legitimately this textual material provided a connection exists between the compared elements. For example, regarding the medieval manuscripts quoted by Dagen one may consult Matisse's celebrated writing *Ecrits et propos sur l'art* as a reading grid in order to better understand the aesthetic strategies at work in these images.

The comparative study is even more relevant in the case of non-Western art from cultures with no significant literature talking about their own artistic production, like Islamic art. Thanks to this method, the parallels between works may reveal new formal features that could not be seen otherwise, while the Western aesthetic hermeneutic allows improve the comprehension of the visual concepts and strategies they express and develop. This is precisely what I will demonstrate

bellow with the example of the comparison between the Comares Hall and Space that Sees by James Turrell<sup>72</sup>. I will show how this scholarly work has contributed, I believe, to the advancement of the study of both monuments.

The Comares Hall is the throne room within the royal compound of the Alhambra palaces<sup>73</sup>. Space that Sees is the title of the minimalist construction in shape of a cube James Turrell has built in 1992 in the Israel Museum. At first glance, the two works have nothing to do with each other. Yet, when I had the opportunity to experiment Turrell's cube, I immediately had the feeling and thought that this edifice was somehow similar to the Comares Hall both conceptually and structurally. I also had the intuition that this likeness was very meaningful and therefore should deserve a serious inquiry. The comparison not only seemed to be interesting per se, but more than that I thought that it could help solve an enigma posed by the complex aesthetics of the Comares Hall. I wrote few texts that propose a solution to this enigma<sup>74</sup>. I will explain it in the main lines after talking about the structural affinities that put together the two constructions.

A detailed comparative study shows that the Comares Hall and Space that Sees constitute analogous architectural objects. In spite of the immediate appearances, the two monuments do share many common formal features to the extent that Turrell's work appears as a contemporary secular epitome of the Hispano-Arabic masterpiece. Both works are radical geometrical objects involving a phenomenology of pure space

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<sup>72</sup> This example relies on my article "The Comares Hall in the Alhambra and James Turrell's Space that Sees: A comparison of Aesthetic Phenomenology", *Muqarnas*, 20, edited by Harvard University, Brill, 2004.

<sup>73</sup> See my a essay "Understanding the Comares Hall of the Alhambra in the Light of Phenomenology", in *Beauty and Islam, Aesthetics of Islamic Art and Architecture*, IBTauris, London-New York, 2001.

<sup>74</sup> See notes above.

and form that shape a kind of visual cosmogony; a microcosmic construction inviting to meditate on the world and existence. In both buildings, the central architectonic theme is the ceiling that catches the gaze and dominates the architectural experience. These similarities are not in conflict or contradiction with the differences that obviously distinguish the works from one another. For those differences actually generate complementarities, not an incompatibility. To mention one example, the most striking distinctive sign of each monument resides in the geometrical design. The cumulative aesthetic in the Alhambra opposes the reductive aesthetic of Turrell's cube. But it concerns two versions of the one and same aesthetic system and the one and same visual rhetoric resting upon geometrical abstraction - consequently excluding formal imagery. This aesthetic strategy in both works aims to produce the same effect which is putting the viewer in a meditative and contemplative state by means of an overwhelming physical experience of the ceiling. The elaborate geometry of the upper part of each building forms a sort of observatory whose function is not scientific but altogether metaphysical and imaginary. The ceiling is conceived as "an instrument to confront the cosmos", to borrow Gaston Bachelard's expression in *The Poetics of Space*<sup>75</sup>. In other words, the same existential issues are expressed in the architecture in similar terms but in radically distinct cultural contexts.

We see how likeness can be found in difference and how it even makes sense through it. But beyond that, as said previously, the aesthetic proximity between the two buildings has constituted a critical argument to explain and refine the definition of the Comares Hall design.

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<sup>75</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *La poétique de l'espace*, translated from the French by Maria Jolas, *The Poetics of Space*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1964.

The aesthetics of the Hispano-Arabic architecture presents what appears to be a contradiction that, in fact, has led to many misinterpretations. This contradiction lies in the two aesthetic processes at work in the edifice. The first process is the geometrical abstraction whose functioning rests on the elimination of observable images and explicit representational discourse. The second process is a particularity of Islamic art in general which seems unusually developed in the case of the Alhambra, namely calligraphy. The building comprises an extensive set of decorative Arabic inscriptions with a content of different orders, historical, religious and poetic. This element constitutes assuredly a major distinctive feature of the Comares Hall that does not exist in Turrell's construction.

In the discussion about the structure of both works, I implicitly signified that geometrical abstraction was the unique aesthetic strategy in place in the hall and did not mention this particular aspect of its ornamentation. The reason is that on the strictly visual level, the decorative inscriptions do not contradict the abstract logic of the geometrical configuration. On the contrary, they participate in this logic since perceptually they belong to the family of geometrical forms, as opposed to that of figurative forms. The issue is actually quite complex and one wonders what the exact nature of the contradiction is. Here are the details of the problem.

First, decorative writing or calligraphy in general, is formally an abstract object while, on the semiotic level, it constitutes a form of representation because of its discursive function. Second, the inscriptions in the Alhambra turn out to be highly imaging with abundance of celestial pictures following the medieval tradition of Arabic poetry and rhetoric. In particular, the poems comprise many allusions to the architecture itself. However a close examination of these texts shows that they never identify the architectonic features

with the representations of the heavenly and astral world they colorfully depict. Let us quote some of these inscriptions<sup>76</sup>:

“In here is a cupola which by its height becomes lost from sight; beauty in it appears both concealed and visible”.

A bit further: “And the bright stars would like to establish themselves firmly in it rather than to continue wandering about in the vault of the sky”.

Then : “You would think that they are the heavenly spheres whose orbits revolve”.

Underneath the dome is inscribed the soura of «The Kingdom» that describes the seven spheres of the Islamic heaven: “Bless be he...who hath created seven Heavens one above another: no defect canst thou see in the creation of God of Mercy: repeat the gaze: seest thou a single flaw?

Then twice more repeat the gaze: thy gaze shall return to thee dulled and weary”.<sup>77</sup>

What makes the aesthetic interpretation of the architectural forms difficult is the crossing of two opposed logic resulting from the presence of these inscriptions in the abstract decoration. At the purely semantic level, the inscriptions introduce the subjective and factual order of discourse into the trans-aesthetic, mathematical and transcendental logic of geometry. Consequently, the two opposed processes of abstraction and representation take place in the same aesthetic field and somehow, a priori, generate a strange contradiction. Naturally, the deep aesthetic meaning of the Hispano-Arabic monument relies on the double articulation formal/visual and semantic/semiotic of these two processes. The meaning and aesthetic functioning of the architecture cannot be understood without a proper definition of this articulation.

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<sup>76</sup> From Oleg Grabar, *The Alhambra*, Solipsist Press, Sebastopol, California, 1992, p. 116-117.

<sup>77</sup> *The Koran*, translated from the Arabic by J. M. Rodwell, Everyman, London, Vermont.

Up to now, the explanations the historians of Islamic art have proposed are either wrong or little satisfactory. What does the interpretation of the specialists consist of and what is wrong with them? In order to solve the problem of the aesthetic articulation between the inscriptions and the geometrical design, the historians have resorted to the methodology they are trained for when texts and forms are combined in a work of art. They have considered the semantic content of the epigraphy a literal explanation in writing of the geometrical forms as if its function was necessarily to inform about the architectural significance. As a result, the geometrical configuration, in their opinion, forms a kind of iconography featuring the astral pictures and cosmography the inscriptions draw. According to this approach, the dome is a representation or at less an allusive image of the Islamic heavens.

Such an interpretation leads to a paradox which is that the abstract ornamentation would be somehow filled with a figurative symbolism investing it with a representational function in the pure tradition of figuration, that is to say the tradition of objectives images. Given the remarkable development of geometrical decoration in Islamic art in general, characterized by starry patterns which are not necessarily related to cosmology, the explanation appears little convincing. However, while looking at the dome and half-cupolas of the Comares Hall, the viewer does think about celestial pictures. But does this aesthetic phenomenon prove that these celestial images truly exist in the architectural forms of the monument? In order to find a response to this question, I have resorted to the comparison of the hall with Turrell's Space that Sees.

A careful analysis of the American work lets see in crude light the aesthetic mechanism which also functions in the Alhambra. Indeed, due to its minimalist radicalism, Turrell's

cube does not comprise any ambiguity or contradiction whereas it produces similar effects on the viewer's state of mind and bodily experience. In both monuments the viewer has a quasi ecstatic visual experience of the ceiling purposely elaborated. This experience includes a vision of images, but objectively or formally the design of the ceiling relies entirely on geometrical abstraction. In *Space that Sees*, it is clear that the pictures the viewer sees are kind of illusions. They do not exist in the construction since the ceiling features a real aperture, a physical void. For sure there is no representation. However, what *Space that Sees* sets working is the imaging power of geometry which is a product of suggestion, evocation or allusion, not of objective representation. The images are generated outside the work, in the skies that can be seen through the aperture forming a kind of frame. They take shape in the viewer's eye, being at the same time real and imaginary or virtual. The ceiling thus constitutes a dream space whose objective constitution is a pure geometry but that powerfully plays with virtuality as component of the work of art and perception as active element in the process of artistic elaboration.

If we apply this sophisticate aesthetic system of imaging geometry in place in Turrell's work to the Alhambra, we realize that actually there is no contradiction between the epigraphy and the geometrical design. On the contrary, they form a coherent duo. Like in Turrell's construction, the geometrical ornamentation of the Comares Hall which is definitely abstract and has no iconographic content per se, exerts on the viewer's mind an imaging power, mainly by analogies of its patterns with celestial tableaux. This imagery flourishing in the viewer's imagination is ontologically independent of the imagery depicted by the inscriptions that do not interfere in the visual order possessing an imaging property on its own. The former is a mental and potential

imagery, the latter a representational and defined imagery. This means that the two orders, the visual and the textual, constitute two separate and autonomous aesthetic fields: the inscriptions signify independently of but in correlation with the visual design. In other words, the architectural experience induced by the Alhambra triggers a double imaging process through the calligraphy and geometrical decoration coexisting on the one and same medium. In Turrell's work, the sophisticated geometry is the unique origin of the imaging process. This observation confirms that, on the perceptual scene of the architecture itself, the inscriptions play a purely visual/aesthetic role while their linguistic function operates and is intended to work at another level. How does the epigraphy in the Alhambra implement its linguistic function and correlatively its own imaging property?

The decorative writing activates its linguistic properties outside the architectural work. It is conceived like a voice that sings the praises and expresses feelings and thoughts about the architecture, but it does not describe or explain it. We may say that, except for the Qoranic quotation, the inscriptions inscribe in the architecture the vision of a particular viewer, the poet or the epigraphist's vision (a vision heavily conditioned though by cultural conventions). In the architectural experience, a semantic interaction between the textual and visual fields does occur but only when the viewer hears -so to speak- this voice, that is to say during the cognitive process allowing him to know the content of the inscriptions by either means, effective reading, memorizing, hearing, etc. This semantic interaction does not occur objectively in the very architectural forms but subjectively in the viewer's mind. It is not a material process but a mental phenomenon that confers a highly signifying power on virtuality and subjectivity in the work conceptualization by means of the double stimulation of the imaging geometry and

epigraphic messages. Accordingly, the images the viewer sees in the architecture can combine themselves with those depicted in the epigraphy, forming a mixed flow of constructions of the mind and literary pictures. The architectural scene serves as a screen of projection on which all these images virtually take place. Their aesthetic nature is infinitely variable and ephemeral hence we may call them “potential images”.

Thus both reality and virtuality participate in the aesthetic game in both the Alhambra and Space that Sees, the very specificity of the Hispano-Arabic architecture being of course the triggering role of the inscriptions in the whole process. However, the epigraphy has also another major cognitive power that generates a conspicuous difference with Turrell’s work and that concerns the metaphysical meanings the two buildings convey. This point will be the conclusion of the essay.

Turrell’s aesthetic cosmogony is a mute work that lets the viewer entirely free to elaborate a mystic or metaphysic thinking of his own in so far as it does not deliver any written information or clue in the process of artistic communication. This cosmogony makes sense in a world indifferent to any religious or philosophical determination. It operates in the sphere of the universal, in a secular sacredness or an absolute spiritual realm where all metaphysical and mystic projections are possible. At the opposite, the explicit Islamic and historical content of the inscriptions in the Alhambra generates a didactic dynamic in the aesthetic cognition giving to it a defined religious orientation. But secular or Islamic, both buildings express the same fundamental and ineffable question of the mystery of the world. The Alhambra provides explanations whereas Space that Sees remains open to all possible responses.

**FRAME OF VIEWING,  
AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE  
AND JUDGMENT IN QUR'AN XXVII/44**

This essay presents some aspects and thoughts about a work of mine that includes an article published in another collection of essays entitled *Beauty and Islam, Aesthetics of Islamic Art and Architecture*<sup>78</sup>, and a book in French *Le piège de Salomon, la pensée de l'art dans le Coran*<sup>79</sup>. This work consists of an exegesis of Verse 44, in Surah 27 of "The Ant" that focuses on the aesthetic dimension of the text. Verse 44 tells the final episode of the visit of the Queen of Sheba (Bilqis) to the king-prophet Solomon. The queen is invited to enter Solomon's palace which is covered with glass or artificial crystal. She sees water instead of glass and, in order to go towards the king she pulls up her skirts in front of him to avoid getting them wet. Solomon corrects her mistake by asserting that the device is made of glass. Thereafter, she realizes that she is wrong and submits to Solomon's God.

44 "*Qila laha udhuli l-sarha  
fa lamma ra'athu hasibathu lujjatan wa kashafat 'an  
saqayha  
qala 'innahu sarhun mumarradun min qawarira  
qalat rabbi 'inni dalamtu nafsi wa 'aslamtu ma'a  
sulaymana  
li-llahi rabbi l-'alamin*".

44 "*She was invited to enter the court.  
When she saw it, she took it for a sheet of water,  
and uncovered her legs.*

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<sup>78</sup> Valerie Gonzalez, *Beauty and Islam, Aesthetic of Islamic Art and Architecture*, IBTauris, New York-London, 2001 (translated from the English in Bosnian by Lejla Music, University of Sarajevo)

<sup>79</sup> Valerie Gonzalez, *Le piège de Salomon, la pensée de l'art dans le Coran* Albin Michel, Paris, 2002 (forthcoming in English under the hypothetical title *Solomon's Plot, Aesthetics in the Qur'an*)

*Solomon told her: "this is a court paved with tiles of glass"*

*"O Lord", she said, "I have wronged myself,  
and I submit to the Lord of all the worlds with  
Solomon"*<sup>80</sup>

The verse presents the literary form of a Solomonic parable, one of these sacred legends with multiple meanings that new hermeneutic techniques bring into light. The story belongs to a rich corpus of sources in the three monotheist traditions concerning the double myth of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. Numerous scholarly writings were produced on this very popular theme but actually very few talk about its aesthetic aspects. For example, Jacob Lassner in his book *Demonizing the Queen of Sheba* has expounded the anthropological dimension of the story of the two sovereigns while drawing its philosophical and theological evolution from the Judaic scriptures to the Islamic versions<sup>81</sup>. A relatively recent article on the subject by Fabrizio Pennachietti, "La Reine de Saba, le pavé de cristal et le tronc flottant", vaguely evokes the aesthetic content of the double myth, but still is more interested in its historiography<sup>82</sup>. Yet, likewise the historian and the historiographer, the historian of art has at his disposal an abundance of evidences showing the influence of the Solomonic thematic in the artistic production at different periods and in different cultural areas, from numerous representations in medieval manuscripts to the

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<sup>80</sup> Translated from the Arabic by Ahmed `Ali, Princeton University Press.

<sup>81</sup> Jacob Lassner, *Demonizing the Queen of Sheba, :Boundaries of Gender and Culture in Postbiblical Judaism and Medieval Islam*, The University of Chicago Press, London-Chicago, 1984.

<sup>82</sup> Fabrizio Pennachietti, "La Reine de Saba, le pavé de cristal et le tronc flottant", in *Arabica*, Paris, January 2002.

famous fresco of Piero della Francesca displaying a Christian iconographic version of the Queen of Sheba visiting Solomon.

Indeed, well-known artistic paradigm, Solomon represents the archetype of the royal sponsor of arts, architecture and urbanism. The monotheistic tradition assigns to him the building of the Temple and the royal residence in Jerusalem and, in the Islamic version of the myth, existing towns like Palmyra in Syria, Persepolis in Iran or Kaboul in Afghanistan. He is also the builder of the imaginary Cooper City described in *The Thousand and One Nights* and the legendary commissioner of luxurious baths still in situ in Palestine<sup>83</sup>. The Qur'an itself mentions, among other distinctive signs of the king-prophet, some metalwork marvels that he has ordered to be made. This paradigmatic function of the Solomonic myth in art and architecture is also conspicuous in Islamic literature in which references to Solomon's palace as an ideal model are plentiful. In his *Diwan*, Al-Buhturi (9th century) sings the praises of a big pool in an Abbassid residence, by comparing it to the Qoranic court paved of glass: "*It is as if the Demons of Solomon would have built it, after plans carefully studied. And If the Queen of Sheba would go across it, she would say: "it resembles to the floor paved with slabs of glass"*"<sup>84</sup>. But in spite of these contextual evidences, the story of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba was never considered a purely aesthetic thematic that could reveal doctrinal elements on Islamic artistic creation and the category of knowledge that deals with the notion of beauty and arts in general. And at first place, the literal semantic of the verse itself is obviously of aesthetic order.

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<sup>83</sup> See Maria-Jesus Rubiera, *La arquitectura en la literatura arabe. Datos para una estetica del placer*, Libros Hiperion, Madrid, 1988; *Ars Orientalis, A Special Issue on Pre-modern Islamic Palaces*, vol. 23, University of Michigan, 1993.

<sup>84</sup> Jesus Rubiera, *La arquitectura en la literatura arabe*, p. 87.

The story rests upon two narrative elements of aesthetic nature described with the minimal but powerfully rhetorical language that characterizes the Qoranic discourse. The first element is an object, the Solomonic glasswork designated by the word “*sarh*”; the second element is an action which is the bodily experience of this object, the misperception of it by the Queen of Sheba. An artifact, the glass device, in an architectural space, Solomon’s *sarh*, a viewer, the Queen of Sheba, seeing and using this artifact through her own subjective perception: do we need anything else to assert that the scene related in Verse 44 is an aesthetic experience in the world of visual art? We can positively say that Verse 44 develops an aesthetic philosophy beyond its fundamental religious semantic. Moreover, within the generic field of aesthetic philosophy, it deals with the particular branch of the aesthetics of visual forms. This branch of aesthetics appears all the more important for our inquiry on Islamic artistic conception that it raises the fundamental issues of material forms, frame of viewing art, visual judgment and perception.

Concerning the artifact, Solomon gives a quite accurate definition of it in his assertive phrase “*Innahu sarhun mumarradun min qawarira*”, “*this is a court paved with tiles of glass*”, except for what he calls *sarh* whose exact constitution is not specified. Nothing indicates whether it is a court, a floor, a room or a complete building. All these possibilities are valid and the Islamic sources themselves provide various lexicographic interpretations of the word in the context of Verse 44. For in other respects, *sarh* appears twice in two other *surat*, in Verse 38 Sura 28 of “The Story”, and Verse 36, Sura 40 of “The Believer”. These verses evoke a construction erected by Pharaoh that Muslim lexicographers have interpreted unanimously as a tower. In any case, Solomon clearly talks about an architectural object that possesses all the qualities of a sophisticated work of art. First,

he mentions the nature of the material the object is made of called *qawarir*. This term designates the glass substance whose generic Arabic name actually is *zujaj*, used for example in the Surah of “The Light” for describing the lamp containing the symbolic divine light. *Qawarir* is a more specific term that also conveys the notion of fragmentation as a result of a process of cutting or dividing into pieces the rough product either tiles, slabs or small fragments. Second, Solomon indicates the technique with which the fragmented glass is applied on the architectural medium through the word *mumarrad*, variously translated by “paved” or “made smoothed”. This technique consists in covering a plane or surface with a material without leaving any free space in order to obtain a perfect isotropy. The linguistic association of the two words, *mumarradun min qawarira*, “*paved with tiles of glass*”, induces a range of plastic qualities that implicitly involve sophisticated skills and a high degree of elaboration. As a result, the phrase forms a kind of textual picture depicting a device one can walk on, paneled with an overall glass set, transparent, bright, white or green, isotropic and probably reflecting light. An object of excellent fashion like any of Solomon’s marvels, endowed with the attributes of geometrical perfection and that the reader can mentally visualize either in bi-dimensionality or three-dimensionality.

The text is also precise concerning the experience of this object which moreover confirms explicitly what is only implicit in Solomon’s description, namely the resemblance of the glasswork with water. Upon entering the palace, the queen sees water instead of glass. This confusion is not an accident but is brought about by the perceptual similarity between the glass substance and the aquatic element. Obviously, such a similarity is not a product of random. It reveals the intention that has motivated the conception of the artifact; it is a “pattern of intention” as the

philosopher of art Michael Baxandall put it<sup>85</sup>. Here the intention has consisted in bringing up a likeness between the glass cover and water to the point that the artifact appears as an aesthetic isomorphy of a watery layout. Under the powerful effect of this likeness, the queen loses her faculty of distinction between the artifact and the natural model or reference. She confuses reality and fiction, nature and art, according to a scenario of aesthetic experience typical in visual arts called “optical illusion”. In religious terms, the queen confuses human and divine creation. Before analyzing in detail the aesthetic philosophy itself this narrative delivers, we must consider its religious meaning and context in so far as its primary goal is of course to fulfill a spiritual predicative function. We will begin with explaining the religious meaning and then talk about the monotheistic context of the verse.

The narrative being a parable, its religious significance is not openly signified but induced according to the double semantic system of this type of literary expression, articulated into two cognitive levels, the literal or manifest level and the hidden, latent or induced level. Through the concrete and imaging terms of the narrative, the verse aims to communicate spiritual abstract thoughts, concepts and principles. The story itself thus constitutes a powerful rhetorical tool to express the ineffable. As Michel Serres says in his book *Esthétique sur Carpaccio* “the iconic communication carries all the abstractions”<sup>86</sup>. Accordingly, the structure of the parable draws a limpid double scheme of opposed topics which are the literal and induced cognitions of the verse. The literal level of the story describing a

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<sup>85</sup> Michael Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention*, translation from the English in French *Formes de l'intention*, Paris, Chambon, 1991.

<sup>86</sup> Michel Serres, *Esthétique sur Carpaccio*, Herman, Paris, 1975.

protagonist committing a mistake (the optical illusion) before another protagonist correcting this mistake forms an elementary “Manichean” duality of opposed emblematic figures: the one who is wrong versus the one who is right, the one who fails versus the one who knows etc. This duality generates, at the induced level, a second binary scheme of positive and negative religious figures and values opposing the believer to the unbeliever, the divine wisdom given to prophets to the mere human spirit, and ultimately the true religion represented by the incarnating figure of power, grandeur and truth, Solomon, to paganism represented by the Queen of Sheba. In other words, the scene of the optical illusion metaphorizes in imaging terms the abstract concept of ignorance of the true God and the queen’s dramatic conversion the triumph of Islam over paganism. More broadly, it symbolizes and celebrates the glory of the Unique God.

Although this Quranic passage is unique in many aspects, semantically, literarily and symbolically, it nevertheless belongs to a whole of traditions embracing the three monotheisms. Its aesthetic content results from a complex theological and philosophical evolution of a blend of sacred scriptures concerning Solomon rooted in the Jewish tradition and then interpreted in Christian and Islamic sources. It begins with the account of the meeting between the king and the Queen of Sheba in the Hebrew Bible, Book I of Kings (Chapter 10 Verses 1-13) and book II of Chronicles (Chapter 9, Verses 1-9). It is briefly mentioned in the New Testament, in Saint Luc’s Gospel (Chapter XI, Verse 31). However, these founding Biblical sources do not report the story of the glass palace, nor do they mention the previous episode told in Verses 42-43 from the same Sura XXVII. This episode tells the story of the Queen of Sheba’s throne that was disguised by

Solomon in order to test her intelligence. The Qoranic version of the Solomonic palace narrative, with its specific aesthetic content, originates not from the Bible itself but literary development in post or extra-biblical Jewish tradition<sup>87</sup>. For example, in the Talmud it is said: “*Solomon prepared the reception of his visitor (the Queen) in a mansion covered and plastered with glass, and the Queen was immediately abused by this appearance to the point that she imagined that the king was sitting amidst water*”. Another version of the story exists in the *Targum Sheni to the Book of Esther*, early medieval source that is the second translation in Aramaic of the *Book of Esther*. This text is actually the closest Jewish book to the Qur’an regarding the narrative approach of the legend of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. It tells: “*And after three years, the Queen of Sheba arrived in front of Solomon... It was Benayahou, son of Iehoyada, who took her to the king’s palace. To receive her, the king set in a room whose floor was made of crystal. While penetrating it, the Queen had the illusion to see a pool of water; she pulled up her dress to go through and displayed the hair of her legs. The king told her: “your beauty is indeed that of a woman, but your hair are rather those of a man...”*”

As we can notice, this excerpt contains narrative elements that are absent in the Qur’an but actually appear in the *tafasir* (commentaries) and texts of Islamic sacred history. However this concerns more broadly the history of the narrative itself. From the specific aesthetic point of view that interests us, the post or extra-biblical material in general in which the Qoranic Solomonic account is rooted, presents a component essential for the comprehension of Verse 44. This component is the relationship between the two

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<sup>87</sup> Concerning Jewish religious sources, see the substantial bibliography in Jacob Lassner, *Demonizing the Queen of Sheba*.

protagonists that displays the peculiar form of a joust of erudition and a philosophical game. The king and the queen test each other with a series of riddles or puzzles which is precisely based on issues dealing with viewing, judgment and experience of physical objects. Examples of these riddles can be found in the Midrashim literature that has nourished Muslim scriptures. The *Midrash Mishle (Proverbs)* describes a challenge the Queen of Sheba requires Solomon to carry out: *“She now offered another type of challenge. She presented him with very young children of equal height, all of whom were dressed alike. ‘Distinguish the males from the females’, she said. Solomon signaled to his attendants and they brought him nuts and roasted grains which he began to spread before the youngsters. The males, who were not embarrassed, gathered them and placed them in their garments. The females, who were modest, placed them in their headdresses. Whereupon, he replied, ‘those are the males and those, the females’. At that, she said, ‘you are a wise man’”*. Another example is told in the *Midrash ha-hefez*, a Jewish scripture based on a rabbinic source of the second century A.D. A sawn section of cedar is brought to the king and he is asked at which end the root had been. Then he is asked the same question concerning the branches. Obviously it is impossible to reply to that question by simply looking at the object since both ends appear to be the same. The challenge requires further knowledge. Therefore Solomon orders the cedar be thrown into water and afterwards he declares: *“That which sank was the root that which floated was the end containing the branches”*.

The main philosophical issue raised by these riddles and several others from the same sacred tradition as well, is that of appearances and the reality which exists beyond them or is hidden behind them. The riddles aim to evaluate the ability of the tested protagonist to cross over the distance

between what is seen and what ontologically *is*, between visual perception or the elementary pre-logic means of knowing, and the deep knowledge acquired by wisdom, thought, experience and, in the case of Solomon, divine grace. If this philosophical issue does not necessarily concern aesthetics of art, it assuredly supplies the conceptual framework within which questions about art may be addressed. It is in this very conceptual framework that the puzzle of the glass palace is elaborated. But the peculiar aesthetic content it conveys approaches the general issue of appearances and reality in the more specific realm of visual art.

From this aesthetic point of view, the Judaic and the Islamic versions of the puzzle are invested with different meaning and semantic weight and do not have the same impact in the collective consciousness and imagination. The Qur'an has remodeled the original Jewish narrative material for its own rhetorical purpose and did so precisely by stressing upon the aesthetic aspect of it. As we have shown previously, in the Islamic version of the Solomonic mythology, the aesthetic subject matter plays the role of metaphorical carrier of the deep and ineffable religious concept of the divine truth. The riddle of the glass palace has thereby acquired the authority of a sacred aesthetic paradigm and the value of an aesthetic doctrine applied to Islamic artistic practice. In Judaism, it remains a philosophical narrative conveying strong ethical values but without any particular aesthetic connotation or determining religious symbolism. While in Islam the glass trap reveals to the Queen her spiritual mistake and leads to the highly symbolic gesture of conversion, in Hebrew sources it fulfills no specific religious didactic function within the whole of the riddles. It constitutes only a part of a complex philosophical game whose goal is to prove the king's

superiority, greatness and political power as ruler of the Kingdom of Israel among other nations. In summary, we can assert that the aesthetic dimension, meaning and value of the Solomonic glass palace puzzle play a much more significant role in Islamic scriptures than in the original Judaic ones.

The abundance of commentaries and debates concerning the story in Verse 44 brings further evidence sustaining this observation<sup>88</sup>. Significantly, the exact constitution and perceptual qualities of the Solomonic glasswork have strongly preoccupied the classical Muslim exegetes. They propose a tremendous variety of opinions on the topic, showing the impact of the Qoranic “icon” of the *sarh* on both the religious and imaginative Muslim consciousness. For example, one of the most celebrated commentators, Tabari, in his *Tarikh al-rusul wa'l-muluk* (History of the Prophets and Kings), proposes a precise definition of the glass palace as a real watery device containing live water creatures. A 14<sup>th</sup>-century Persian painting at the Freer Gallery of Washington illustrates literally Tabari’s explanation<sup>89</sup>. Another important figure of the *tafasir* literature, the 11<sup>th</sup> century exegete Tha’labi provides two opinions on this single question. First, following Tabari’s vision, he says that the *sarh* “*was a palace of glass resembling white waters in which they placed real water stocked with fish beneath the floor*”. Second, he refers to another commentator, Wahb b. Munnabih, who has asserted that there was no water in it. Al-Bukhari speaks about broken glass in small pieces, almost a powder. Although this exegetic debate is mixed with

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<sup>88</sup> Concerning the Islamic religious sources, see the substantial bibliography in my book, *Le piège de Salomon*.

<sup>89</sup> See the illustration of this painting in *Beauty and Islam, Aesthetic of Islamic Art and Architecture*.

arguments of narrative and theological nature, it nevertheless belongs to the aesthetic field and reveals the deep aesthetic resonance of the glass pattern in classical Islamic thought. This may be called “the Solomonic aesthetic consciousness” in medieval Muslim culture.

These classical texts have prepared the ground for modern techniques of textual analysis to proceed with the aesthetic reasoning and deepen it. Indeed, the riddle of the glass palace in Verse 44 can be accurately defined in purely modern aesthetic terms by answering the following question: how to experiment a work of art that looks like a natural thing or being. This question refers to the fundamental principle in the making of art, the principle of *mimesis*, meaning imitation in the Aristotelian sense<sup>90</sup>. Let us briefly explain this principle Aristotle was the first to rationally set forward in his books on *Rhetoric* and *Poetics*<sup>91</sup>.

The concept of *mimesis* primarily does not mean literal reproduction or faithful copy of something in artistic practice but refers to the ontological principle directing all types of human creation that, in a way or another, is produced based on or against the model of existing things in nature. As a result, human creation is not/cannot be truly independent from existing natural things. Human creation is, by essence, imitative. In the particular field of art, the most mimetic of all human activities, the *mimesis* subtends the complex relationship between the work of art and its model or reference, nature. Art shares perceptual similarities with its natural model or reference because of its fundamental imitative character. More than that, art may aim at presenting

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<sup>90</sup> See the article on the concept of *mimesis* in this very book.

<sup>91</sup> See *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, the revised Oxford translation, edited by Jonathan Barnes, Princeton University Press, 1991.

the appearance of a natural object or being in order to be a substitute of it. In the Islamic world governed by the ineffable omnipotence of God, these analogies and similarities enliven the mimetic relationship between fictive and natural entities with a high dialectical tension in terms of ontological status, value and order. That is the challenging aesthetic problem Solomon tests the Queen of Sheba with in order to evaluate her capacity of judgment and discernment. By extension, the Qoranic approach of the issue of *mimesis* in art is to be deduced from the meaning given to the response of the queen to the problem in question.

The response to Solomon's puzzle is the optical confusion that appears as a fundamentally negative behavior, a mistake as the incongruous gesture of uncovering the legs followed by the conversion suggests. Simply put, it is a wrong action corrected by the right action of the conversion. Accordingly, as we saw, the optical illusion forms a metaphor of paganism. Therefore the Islamic conception of *mimesis* in the Qur'an has to be understood both in its negative and positive aspects and values. The inability to distinguish an element of nature from a mimetic artifact simply should not occur. In spite of misleading appearances, any viewer possessing an elementary wisdom is able to grasp the real order of the world according to which human creation and its reference or model in nature are two distinct entities in essence. The natural entity, water in the text, belongs to the great creation of God, and art, the glass device, belongs to the mimetic production of mankind. Consequently, human creation cannot compete with nature, even though art and its natural source may be perceptually isomorphic. This phenomenon of likeness manifests the truth of the ontological principle of *mimesis* in human activity but does not signify that permutation, substitution or equivalence is possible between art and nature. Failing to recognize this ontological order

constitutes a fault that the Queen of Sheba has made by judging only on appearances.

To conclude on this issue of *mimesis*, we can say that, although Verse 44 definitely acknowledges the mimetic essence of art and its physical proximity with things in nature, it implies that the mimetic attitude aiming at replacing natural things by artifacts is not an appropriate artistic practice, even an illicit one. As a matter of fact, this type of aesthetic strategy called “mimetic representation” did not significantly partake of traditional Islamic artistic habits. In the same way, the Solomonic glass device does not constitute a paradigm of naturalistic art. However, it is certainly the paradigm of some type of art since it has played a highly significant role in Islamic aesthetic imagination as the monotheistic tradition shows. What type of art does the glasswork exemplify and what is its exact aesthetic nature are the last questions we will investigate.

Does the resemblance of the glass device with water signify that this element is represented or constitutes the subject matter of the artifact? If the conclusion we have just expounded is right, the answer is obviously no. The Solomon’s *sarh* is not a representation of a watery device and does not exemplify representational art. The textual logic of Verse 44 itself corroborates this assertion. What the text objectively describes through the conjunction of the sentence “*this is a court paved with tiles of glass*” and the account of the visual experiment of the Queen of Sheba is only a phenomenon of likeness. In art, likeness does not necessarily imply that the work represents what it resembles, for the aesthetic concept of likeness and corollaries like similarity or analogy are absolutely distinct from the specific concept of representation and even from that of imitative representation or the extreme form of it called “*trompe l’oeil*”. Imitation is not representation and imitating

is different than representing by literal imitation or to reproduce faithfully a selected model. In other words, making an artifact on the basis of a selected model is a different artistic strategy than representing this model, although both aesthetic processes generate perceptual similarities between the two elements. The process of imitation here has to be understood in its broader sense following the Aristotelian theory of *mimesis*, namely as the generative process which is at the source of the making of artifacts in general. Based on these observations, it is then possible to define the aesthetic function and status of the natural element, water, involved in the signifying system of the non-representational Solomonian glasswork.

If water is not the subject matter of the work in question, still the perceptual similarities indicate that it forms a reference by analogy. In this sense water constitutes a *potential* reference which becomes effective by making the analogy. In my book *Le piège de Salomon*, I have defined this complex articulation between the glass palace and the watery layout it resembles “a referential relationship through likeness”. In generic terms, one talks about metaphor regarding this type of non-representational work of art that conceals the possibility of a double reading: a strict reading focused on the work’s own forms and a reading by referring to some external entity with which the work presents significant aesthetic likeness. The first reading maintains the reference at the latent state, as a potentiality. The glass pattern being a visible object, it belongs to the category of visual metaphors. In the theological perspective, the interpretation of Solomon’s palace as a visual metaphor of watery pattern fits both the textual logic of the verse and the basic religious principle according to which in Islam the creation of God is fundamentally inimitable. This order nevertheless allows human invention to refer to the divine creation which

constitutes the sublime and inspiring aesthetic model. Thus, the Solomonic glass palace in Qur'an 27/44 is a visual metaphor and accordingly exemplifies this particular mode of artistic expression.

However this interpretation can be completed by another proposition which is that the Solomonic marvel may also be seen as a radically abstract object, a minimalist auto-signifying architectonic work with no reference to external recognizable things in the same spirit as the famous sculptures called "Specific Objects" by the contemporary American artist Donald Judd: an artifact whose significance resides in its pure forms and materiality<sup>92</sup>. Following this interpretation, the *sarh* is nothing else than literally "*a court paved with tiles of glass*" displaying isotropic qualities that involves an aesthetic notion of physical expansion governed by the geometrical law of regularity. As such, the glass pattern exemplifies the art of abstract forms and pure geometry. The likeness with water suggested by the experience of the queen would just be an unavoidable trace of the ontological principle of *mimesis* that fundamentally, ontologically, guides human creation, including Donald Judd's work although his aesthetic vocation consists precisely in eradicating any mimetic element from the artistic piece. Viewed under this light, the Quranic image of the *sarh* suits particularly well the Islamic architecture itself characterized by decorative applications of different materials, ceramics, marble mosaics, etc., in the "all over" style. This type of Islamic ornamentation aesthetically operates like the Solomonic glasswork, by setting assembled and repeated pieces of a selected material in order to cover a surface with a beautiful homogeneous layer of color and texture. Besides, pieces of real transparent glass have been found in a real palace from the Abbassid city of Raqqa in

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<sup>92</sup> See Donald Judd, *Complete Writings, 1959-1975*, New York University Press, 1973.

Northern Syria; another prove of the exemplifying function of the Solomonic mythic palace described in Verse 44.

Visual metaphor and/or “Specific Object”, the Solomonic palace conceals basic aesthetic principles which indeed are those that have given Islamic art and architecture highly distinctive features, in particular the orientation toward abstract and geometrical plastic strategies. This means that with Verse 44, the Qur’an truly provides an elaborated tool to understand Islamic visual art and aesthetics. From this point of view, this Quranic passage occupies a unique place in relation to the other verses. There exists no comparable parable or statement in the sacred book that could be used as an elaborated theoretical grid for understanding Islamic works of art.

**THE FOUNDING ARISTOTELIAN CONCEPT  
OF MIMESIS IN ISLAMIC AESTHETICS**

The Islamic aesthetics and conception of art necessarily convey the legacy of Greek philosophy. Therefore consulting the main classical Greek texts constitutes one of the conceptual tools to be used in order to investigate this subject. From a contemporary point of view, Aristotle is certainly one of the most important figures within the spectrum of the Greek philosophers that have approached the field of aesthetics. The great master was the first to define essential aesthetic concepts independently of any metaphysical consideration, that is to say according to a way of thinking that isolates aesthetics from metaphysics as an *episteme per se*<sup>93</sup>. In particular, Aristotle has analyzed the primal ontological attitude that specifies mankind among other living beings which basically consists in creating or inventing things that do not exist in nature but are inspired by it. The principle that subtends this activity is that of *mimesis*, meaning "imitation", to be found for example in the following passage from Aristotle's *Poetics*:

*"Imitation is natural to man from childhood, one of his advantages over the lower animals being this, that he is the most imitative creature in the world, and learns at first by imitation. And it is also*

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<sup>93</sup> Plato also deals with the concept of *mimesis*, but in incorporating it within the whole of his emanatist theory according to which the entire material world is an emanation of the superior world of ideas. The material world thus is an imitation of the superior world of ideas but it possesses inferior properties and qualities. Within this highly hierarchic system, likewise other processes and phenomena in nature, human activity conveys the same imitative essence derived from this metaphysical generative principle of emanation. Consequently, instead of being presented as a positive principle linked to human practices like in the Aristotelian conception, the Platonic *mimesis* embraces all the material categories of entities and activities available in the universe. Thereby it tends to be invested with properties and qualities related to emanation, notably the distance that generates remoteness from the truth.

*natural for all to delight in works of imitation. The truth of this second point is shown by experience: though the objects themselves maybe painful to see, we delight to view the most realistic representations of them in art, the forms for example of the lowest animals and of dead bodies. The explanation is to be bound in a further fact; to be learning something is the greatest of pleasures not only to the philosopher but also to the rest of mankind, however small their capacity for it; the reason of the delight in seeing the picture is that one is, at the same time, learning - gathering the meaning of things, e. g. that the man there is so-and-so; for if one has not seen the thing before, one's pleasure will not be in the picture as an imitation of it, but will be due to the execution or coloring or some similar cause"*<sup>94</sup>.

This excerpt provides a generic definition of the Aristotelian principle of *mimesis* that not only concerns visual arts, particularly pictorial art, but also all types of creative activities that fundamentally rely on the imitation of things, beings and phenomena observed in nature and life<sup>95</sup>. In this sense, imitation refers more to an ontological process than to the modern concept of *mimesis* called in specialized terms of art history "realism", "naturalism" or "imitative art" which aims at a literal perceptual likeness between the artifact and its natural model or reference. Following the Aristotelian conception, mankind imitates by means of the various categories of *technè* it elaborates in order to learn and understand. This technical elaboration by imitation is the very

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<sup>94</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, 4, 5-20, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, the revised Oxford translation, edited by Jonathan Barnes, Vol. Two, Princeton University Press, 1991, p. 2318.

<sup>95</sup> Aristotle also develops the *mimesis* concept in other texts, particularly in *Rhetoric*.

cognitive and creative process that gives birth to art. In other words, the concept of *mimesis* is the very essence of all creative acts in general and the making of art in particular. By awarding imitative practices, including the artistic ones, with highly cognitive qualities Aristotle inscribes the *mimesis* in the very heart of knowledge and sets forward the basis of what will become a branch of philosophy: "aesthetics". We should rather call this philosophy "meta-aesthetics" insofar as the Greek master did not specify the concept of art as it is understood nowadays, namely the product of a mode of pure expression that addresses the senses and imagination beyond any utilitarian purpose<sup>96</sup>.

The theme of the imitative essence of human activities developed by Aristotle was naturally investigated by and incorporated in the Islamic *falsafa* (philosophy) but in the framework of a religious conception of the world that places God at the origin of all creations. In such a context, the human mimetic behavior raises two problems which are dealt with in a wide spectrum of Islamic writings including the sacred founding text itself, the Qur'an, the *falsafa* and the texts of Islamic law. The first problem is obviously that of the inimitability of the Qur'an developed in the official dogma of *Ijâz*. The second problem, more directly related to art and aesthetics, is the dialectic relationship between the work of art and its source of inspiration in the existing world. Verse 44 in Sura 27 delivers the Islamic conception of this relationship by means of a Solomonic parable. In this very book, the essay *Frame of Viewing, Aesthetic Experience and Judgment in Qur'an XXVII/44* examines this text and its aesthetic content. In this article, first we will evoke the question of *Ijâz* and the *mimesis* according to the Islamic conception of visual arts.

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<sup>96</sup> In such a context, clearly "aesthetics" cannot be understood in the modern specific acceptance of the term based on recent epistemological definitions of the aesthetic philosophy and theory.

Second, we will investigate two examples of interpretation of the Aristotelian *mimesis* by celebrated thinkers from al-Andalûs, Ibn Rushd (1126-1198) and Hazîm al-Qartâjannî (1211-1285).

### **I - The conception of *mimesis* through the dogma of *I'jâz***

The dogma of *I'jâz* results from a complex theological debate about the question of the ontology of the Quranic text raised by its materiality. Given the absolute Islamic double principle of divine transcendence and non-associability of God with any other entity, the embodiment of the very word of God in language and scripture implies a disturbing paradox that has nurtured many debates and generated different theological streams. Is the Qur'an holy and miraculous because of its sole content or because of both its content and material form? This problem concerns what phenomenologists accurately call "transcendental reduction" that means the setting down of an absolute ideality, in this case the divine truth stated in the Qur'an, in the concrete reality of the sensible and matter which are the Quranic language and text<sup>97</sup>. This process of "reduction" is necessary and obligatory for the Revelation to be communicated to mankind, but it somehow associates the divine to the human. The question of God's attributes is the corollary to that of the definition of the nature of the Quranic scripture.

By thus fitting the cognitive forms of human language (by means of the "reductive" acts of stating, naming and writing) the Qur'an exposes itself -so to speak- to the risk or the possibility of imitation. In this context imitation means

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<sup>97</sup> Here I refer to philosophers like Edmund Husserl, Maurice Merleau-Ponty ou Jacques Derrida whose some works deal with the phenomena of language and writing.

basically a mimetic attitude of linguistic order which aims at producing a discourse or a literary piece that formally would appear similar to the holy text. Such a possibility opens the door to a rational conception of the Qur'ân based on the conceptual dichotomy meaning/form and absolute ideal/concreteness that emphasizes the phenomenological level of the revelation as sensible event instead of considering it exclusively a pure miracle. Assuredly, to the eyes of some people such a conception could put in danger the foundations themselves of the new religion. The importance of the issue is such that the Qur'an dedicates several verses containing warnings against any attempt of imitation. These verses argue that the unbelievers may use literary forgeries as an argument for denying the divine character of the holy book. They also propose to the unbelievers the challenge (*tahaddî*) to imitate the Qur'ân while implying the unavoidable failure of such a project. For example, in the sura of "The Mountain", LII/30-33, it is told:

*Will they say, "a poet! Let us await some adverse turn of his fortune?"*

*Say, wait ye, and in sooth I too will wait with you.*

*Is it their dreams which inspire them with this? Or is it that they are a perverse people?*

*Will they say, "He hath forged it (the Qur'ân) himself? Nay, rather it is that they believed not. Let them then produce a discourse like it, if they speak the Truth."<sup>98</sup>*

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<sup>98</sup> *The Koran*, translated from the Arabic by J.M. Rodwell, foreword and introduction by Alan Jones, The Oriental Institute, Oxford, The Everyman Library, London, 1999.

Similar warnings appear in XI/16-13, X/38-39, II/21-23 and in the sura of “The Night Journey”, XVII/88-89:

*Say: Verily, were men and Djinn assembled to produce the like of this Koran, they could not produce its like, though the one should help the other.*

*And of a truth we have set out to men every king of similitude in this Koran, but most men have refused everything except unbelief.*

As these verses show, the possibility of *mimesis* of the sacred scripture not only involves linguistic concerns but also aesthetics in the pure Aristotelian sense. In fact, the fundamental problem the material embodiment of the Divine Word raises is the likeness it may display with Arabic poetry. In the historical context of the beginning of Islam, poetry was the greatest art, the most representative cultural expression of the pre-Islamic Arab society. In other words, for the Arabs of these times, poetry and literary expression constituted the mimetic activity by excellence. In fact, the official doctrine of *I'gâz* which radically postulates the miraculous character of both the meaning and form of the Qur`ân in spite of the apparent likeness with poems, has provided a sort of tool to put an end to a potentially dangerous aesthetic game.

The aesthetic game in question relies on a poetic practice called with the technical noun *mu`ârada* in classical Arabic poetry. This practice precisely consists in making verses with the same rhyme and metric composition as a selected poetic model. In general rule, the *mu`ârada* aims to surpass the model in beauty and poetic quality<sup>99</sup>. At the very origin of Islam, this traditional poetic strategy of *mu`ârada* was used to deny the divine nature of the Qur`ân claimed by the new

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<sup>99</sup> See the *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 2, article “Mu`ârada”, by A. Schippers.

Muslims and to dismiss the new religion and its representative<sup>100</sup>. The adversaries of Prophet Muhammad argued that he was just one of these soothsayers and the pretended holy verses were nothing else than the product of his own *mu'ârada*. Therefore Muhammad particularly hounded the poets when he became militarily and politically strong. In the Qur'an itself, some verses denounce this attitude and stress upon the distinction that has to be done between poetic works or occult discourses and the divine word. For example in the sura of "The Mountain" LXIX/33-34 it is said:

*And that it is not the word of a poet –how little do ye believe!*

*Neither is it the word of a soothsayer –how little do ye receive warning!*

Or in XXI/5, LII/29-30 (quoted above) and in soura "Ya-Sin", XXXVI/69:

*We have no taught him (Muhammad) poetry, nor would it beseem him. This Book is no other than a warning and a clear Koran...*<sup>101</sup>

The ambiguity of the stylistic likeness between the Qur'ân and contemporary Arabic literary productions could be an argument against the uniqueness of the holy book. But more than that, the possibility of making a *mu'ârada* of the Qur'an thanks to this very likeness could nourish the idea that the supposed divine messages were fundamentally lies. Poetry indeed was associated with fiction and falsehood. The danger of being confused with a poetic fiction is clearly expressed by verses 224-225 in sura of "The Poets":

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<sup>100</sup> About the use of *mu'ârada* in the beginning of Islam, see Dominique Urvoy, *Les penseurs libres dans l'Islam classique, L'interrogation sur la religion chez les penseurs arabes indépendants*, Albin Michel, Paris, 1996, p. 55-60.

<sup>101</sup> *The Koran*.

*It is the poets whom the erring follow:  
Seest thou not how they rove distraught in every  
valley?*

*And that they say that which they do not?*

However, at the very beginning of Islam the practice of *mu'ârada* did not truly constitute a theological problem. The new believers understood the Qur'an not as a whole entity but in separating the religious ideality it carries from its literary expression seen as a linguistic envelope, a pure product of Arabic poetic tradition. The likeness of the form of the Quranic discourse with Arabic poetry rather appeared as a logic fact and the *mu'ârada* based on it seemed to have been considered merely a literary manner with no specific ambiguity nor illicit implication regarding the significance of the divine word. As the French specialist of Arabic literature Claude Audebert has demonstrated, the change toward the doctrinal position of the formal inimitability of the sacred book took place only progressively, after a period of astonishing freedom concerning the approach of the linguistic material of the Qur'an<sup>102</sup>. In this period, Muslim thinkers were essentially focused on the deep signification of the Revelation, its origin and cognitive status in relation to the contemporary and traditional Arabic poetry<sup>103</sup>. As for the treatises of *I'gâz*, they did not flourish before the tenth century.

Several important Arab authors then were accused of having produced a *mu'ârada* of the Qur'ân, like Ibn al-Muqaffa', al-Mutanabbî, al-Ma'arrî or al-Tawîdî. Historical documents indicate indeed that the Qur'ân offered to the

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<sup>102</sup> Claude Audebert, *Al-Hattâbî et l'inimitabilité du Coran. Traduction et introduction au Bayân i'jâz al-Qur'ân*, Institut Français d'Etudes Arabes de Damas, Damascus, 1982.

<sup>103</sup> Dominique Urvoy, *Les penseurs libres dans l'Islam classique*, p. 57-59.

talented Muslims of this early period a stimulating paradigm for literary compositions. Their mimetic compositions became themselves models after which any poet could practice a literary *mimesis* in a channeled way. Thus, verses by the celebrated al-Mutanabbî apparently imitate some Quranic passages and probably explain the expression with which the poet was also designated: “the one who presents himself as a prophet”<sup>104</sup>. Another significant example is that of Ibn al-Muqaffa’, wellknown for his imitation of the sacred formula “*In the Name of (God) the Light, the Compassionate, the Merciful*”<sup>105</sup>. Seven fragments of text by this author studied and published by J. Van Ess clearly result from the poetic process of a *mu’ârada* of the Qur’ân<sup>106</sup>. Six of these fragments are the product of a pure literary game in rhymed prose (*sag*), while the seventh one also conceals polemical ideas about the aesthetic value of the holy scripture. In this peculiar fragment, in comparing his own poetic composition with the divine word, Ibn al-Muqaffa’ does not hesitate to assert that both texts possess an equivalent linguistic perfection therefore it is recommended to read both frequently.

In spite of the evolution toward the strict doctrine of the inimitability of the Qur’ân protecting it from further attempts of poetic *mimesis*, the concept of imitation in the arts of language definitely became the main criterium of literary virtuosity. If the holy text quickly ceased to be the choice for the producers of *mu’ârada* for religious reasons, nevertheless from the purely aesthetic point of view, it became for ever the

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<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.

<sup>105</sup> M. Guidi, *La Lotta tra l’Islam e il Manicheismo. Un libro di Ibn al-Muqaffa’ contro il Corano confutato da al-Qâsim b. Ibrâhîm*, Roma, 1927, p. 8 and p. 14.

<sup>106</sup> J. Van Ess, “Some fragments of the *Mu’âradat al-Qur’ân* attributed to Ibn al-Muqaffa’”, in *Studia arabica and islamica. Festschrift to Ihsân ‘Abbâs*, Beyrouth, 1981, p. 151-163.

most sublime of all linguistic models. The literal imitation of the Quranic text was no longer licit but the principle of imitation remained the highest value and guarantee of talent in the art of writing. Classical authors that sing the praises of the *mimesis* in poetry in general are countless.

Things are different concerning visual arts. Imitation was never developed in Islam as a major strategy for making forms and religious sources convey a negative conception of it. As my essay on this subject argues, the Qur'an develops a particular approach of the concept of *mimesis* in Verse 44/XXVII that does not encourage imitative practices in visual forms.

## **II - The concept of *mimesis* in visual arts**

Likewise the arts of language, visual forms engage a problematic phenomenon of likeness between two elements that should not lead to any form of replacement of the one by the other. In the case of material art, this phenomenon involves things and beings in the natural world that constitute the paradigm for the making of artistic objects. Like the Qur'an is the divine word and so inimitable, things and beings of the natural world are the work of God and cannot be imitated and replaced by imitative artifacts. This is basically the message that Verse 44/XXVII delivers at its aesthetic cognitive level.

The Quranic attitude toward the arts and the aesthetic *mimesis* conveys a lot of common points with the Aristotelian theory. Similarly, it denounces the illusory character of imitative practices that attempt to compete with the perfect construction of nature, while nevertheless recognizing the important role of these practices in human accomplishment. This "Aristotelian connivance", so to speak, is clearly

perceptible in the *falsafa*. The Muslim medieval philosophers have interpreted in various ways the Aristotelian concept of *mimesis* called in Arabic *al-muhakat*. Not only they have incorporated this concept in their aesthetic theories, but also they have refined it with new complex notions like *al-takhyîl*, "fantasy" or "imaginary suggestion", *al-tashbih*, comparison, simile or likeness, *tamthîl*, representation, *isti'arat*, metaphor and so on<sup>107</sup>. Among these thinkers, Ibn Rushd and Hazîm al-Qartâjannî, both deeply impregnated with Aristotle's *Poetics* and *Rhetoric*, propose two different approaches that, nevertheless, present the common feature of focusing on the strictly human character of the *mimesis* and its tight relation with artistic production.

### III - The concept of *mimesis* according to Ibn Rushd

Ibn Rushd is famous as the "commentator of Aristotle". His philosophy is characterized by the positivism that distinguishes the Greek master's theories, as opposed to the metaphysical philosophies linked to the Neoplatonism of other great Muslim medieval thinkers like Ibn Sîna or the Ikhwan al-Safa'. Therefore, the conception of *mimesis* of Ibn

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<sup>107</sup> For a survey of medieval Islamic texts dealing with this subject, see the remarkable book by Jose-Miguel Puerta Vilchez, *Historia del pensamiento árabe, al-Andalus y la estética árabe clásica*, Akal, Madrid, 1997, p. 276-406. In other respects, let us mention that the medieval Latin philosophy conveys an analogous approach of the Aristotelian *mimesis* as a fundamentally imitative attitude of the human towards Nature. For instance, in his *Commentarium in Timaeum*, William of Conches says "every work is either the work of the Creator, or a work of Nature, or the work of an artificier imitating nature" (*omne enim opus est vel opus Creatoris, vel opus Naturae, vel opus artificis imitantis naturam*), quoted by Umberto Eco, *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, translated by Hugh Bredin, 1988, p. 165.

Ruchd, developed in his treatises *Talkhis kitâb al-chi'r* and *Talkhis al-khitâba*, derives from a systematic analytical approach of the sensible reality and its physical organization. The universe is understood as a coherent and ordered whole governed by the logic laws of nature, a physical order that in Islam is the creation of God. Mankind possesses a *spectrum* of cognitive faculties by means of which it establishes a rational relationship with the divine creation, following a conception of human existence articulated on both concepts of faith and reason. This relationship resting upon the conjunction of logic, intellectual and ethical values, poses speculative knowledge at the source of consciousness. In the perspective of this rational mode of existence, for Ibn Rushd the mimetic activities are syllogistic and pedagogic tools rather than aesthetic practices aiming at producing objects addressing the senses and involving delight and beauty. In his opinion, the aesthetic function is secondary while learning and understanding constitute the main purpose of any type of human creation. This Rushdian conception of imitation appears particularly well defined in a text of his middle commentary on Aristotle's *Rhetoric*. This text significantly concerns the perception of visible artistic forms, paintings and sculptures that generate delight through the aesthetic experience they induce:

*"-Aristotle- said: Since teaching is pleasant like the fact, for the human kind, of being admirable and admired, to make imagine and to imitate are equally pleasant, because of their similarity with teaching; and this as well as the imitation by painting, sculpting and all the other acts through which one searches to imitate the primary models - I mean the existing things - not the acts through which one imitates things that do not exist. Indeed, the delight enjoyed during acts through which one*

*imitates existing things does not come from what these resembling images are beautiful or ugly, but from what in these acts, there is a kind of syllogistic activity; then, in the activity of making know the more hidden, which is the absent compared by the more manifest, which is the example put instead of it, there is, in a sense, one of the sorts of teaching that occurs through syllogism, for the imagination of the thing takes relatively to it (the thing) the rank of the premises and the thing that one searches to make imagine and understanding takes the rank of the conclusion; and because of this similarity that exists between making imagine and teaching, making imagine is pleasant".<sup>108</sup>*

By comparing teaching and making imagine - the two main vocations of the artistic works and practices (of all kinds) - Ibn Rushd, following Aristotle, elevates mimetic art to the rank of the noblest human inventions which are those whose function is to acquire knowledge. Art, likewise teaching, possesses a syllogistic property insofar as, by means of its mimetic forms, it reveals hidden or not immediately understandable significations in the existing world. This idea applies to poetics as well that Ibn Rushd also situates in the field of logic. This conception is quite rigid since it does not recognize the value of the pure aesthetic delight and beauty and free imagination that he considered meaningless and superfluous. Art and poetics are noble strategies as long as their imitative qualities are associated with cognitive properties. In accordance with this positivist approach, Ibn Rushd

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<sup>108</sup> Averroes, *Paraphrases in Libros Rhetoricum Aristotelis*, edited by 'Abderahman Badawi, Le Caire, 1960, p. 96, 12-21, "Commentaire d'Aristote, Rhétorique, 1371 b 4-10", translated from the Arabic into French by Maroun Aouad. Dr. Aouad kindly provided me with this inedited text in both versions; this English translation is my own.

assimilates the particular concept of *takhyîl* (fantasy or imaginary suggestion) of which the mimetic artifact is the carrier with the more speculative constructions of rhetoric, whereas in other Islamic philosophical works it corresponds to the intuitive process triggering imaginative activity and raising feelings and emotions. In other words, for Ibn Rushd, *al-takhyîl* is a rhetorical process rather than an imaginative re-creation of the worldly things.

From a contemporary point of view, such a vision of human creativity excludes the aesthetic proposition "art for art" (*l'art pour l'art*). It states that the *mimesis* is a logical and syllogistic tool of comprehension but not a means of inspiration. Consequently, the work of art cannot be estimated, evaluated and appreciated on the basis of perceptually pleasant or well configured forms. Its appreciation goes through a measurement of the degree of excellence of the syllogistic system its mimetic forms set up. Likewise Aristotle, Ibn Rushd attributes nobleness to art but only through the narrow prism of its cognitive and ethic functions, not through its aesthetic properties. Unlike Ibn Rushd, Hazîm al-Qartâjannî does take these properties into account in his theory of *mimesis*.

## **VI - The concept of *mimesis* according to Hazîm al-Qartâjannî**

Hazîm al-Qartâjannî belongs to the Andalusian philosophical trend of the thinkers of Aritotelian tradition after Ibn Rushd. In particular, he has worked on Arabic versions of *Poetics*. His conception of the *mimesis* to be found in *Minhâj al-bulagâ'*, draws the most elaborate aesthetic

theory in Islamic philosophy of the Middle Ages<sup>109</sup>. Although he shares with Ibn Ruchd a focus on Aristotle works, Hazîm's theory appears noticeably different from that of the master of Cordoba. Hazîm deals with genuine aesthetic notions related to the concepts of beauty and ugliness, thereby inscribing the *mimesis* in the intuitive and subjective field of feelings, imagination and emotions. Beauty and ugliness generate psychic effects that do not occur within the speculative field of cognitive perception. These effects are exclusively perceived through the soul and the heart, a theme that does not take part of the theory of *mimesis* by Ibn Rushd. This exploration of subjectivity in the aesthetic process of *mimesis* provides Hazîm's philosophy of art with a remarkable originality.

Thus, to Hazîm's eyes, it is through great emotions resulting from the impact of a beautiful imitation that art fulfills its mission. The artistic *mimesis* can succeed in showing the truth of faith or science only by raising feelings of joy, pleasure and astonishment. Conversely, pain or absence of delight provoked by an unpleasant formal disposition or falsehood leads to a failure of the artistic goal which is educating and enlightening. One passage from the cited text shows the emphasis of Hazîm places on this necessary condition the work of art must fulfill in order to acquire excellence and efficiency that is displaying qualities of beauty, harmony, proportions and derived perceptual properties. The excerpt concerns specifically poetry likewise many medieval texts dealing with aesthetic subject matters but it can be interpreted as a generic aesthetic idea:

*"The best poetry is the one of which the imitation and formal composition (muhâkâtu-hu wa*

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<sup>109</sup> This is the idea that the Spanish specialist of *falsafa*, Jose-Miguel Puerta Vilchez develops in his *Historia del pensamiento árabe*, p 360-365.

*hay'ātu'-hu) are good; it is the one which strenghtens its popularity or its credibility, hides its falsehood and is capable to raise surprise (qâmat gharâbatu-hu)...*

*The most depreciable in all poetry is the one that shows an ugly (bad) imitation and formal composition (qabîh al-muhâqat wa-l-hay'a), and is the one that obvioulsly displays falsehood and is not unwonted... The ugly formal composition prevents clearness of speech and its setting up in the heart; the ugly imitation almost disguises all beauty (husn) of the imitated or its ugliness (of the imitated), and avoids its assimilation by imagination (takhayyul). The soul does not allow any influence on itself, and the obviousness of falsehood restraints all influence"<sup>110</sup>.*

We will conclude with few general remarks. As we saw with the example of both authors and the Islamic tradition based on the Qur'an, classical Muslim culture does possess the founding elements for a genuine aesthetics of art. The different writing recognize the two fundamental phenomenological functions of artistic objects. The first function is to awaken consciousness. In Sura *al-Naml* (XXVII/44), the Solomonic glasswork clearly presented as a mimetic product in the Aristotelian sense, awakes the consciousness of the false and the true. Concerning the practice of the Qoranic *mu'ârada*, even though it was eventually considered an illicit literary strategy, it demonstrates the capacity of language to compete with the

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<sup>110</sup> Hazîm al-Qartajânnî, Abû l-Hasan, *Minhâj al-bulagâ' wa-sirâj al-udabâ'*, edited by Muhammad al-Habîb Ibn Khûja, Dar al-Garb al-Islâmî, Beyrouth, 1986, p. 72, text quoted by Jose-Miguel Puerta-Vilchez, *Historia del pensamiento árabe*, p. 378.

highest of all writings, the Divine Word. The second function of art consists in arising emotions and feelings through the enjoyment of beauty and the direct perception of well structured forms and delightful appearances. However, in medieval Islamic philosophy, the first function, the cognitive one that Ibn Rushd emphasises, is widely dominant, whereas Hazim's vision that corresponds to the modern conception of art addressing all the levels of perception through the intellect, the heart and the soul, appears quite original and innovative. This is also true for the medieval philosophy of the Latin world that received the influence of Aristotle's views through Arabic philosophy. For example, Thomas Aquinas whose links to Aristotle and Ibn Ruchd are wellknown, discusses about human creation in the following terms:

*“Every craftsman intends to give his work the best possible constitution, not indeed absolutely speaking, but in relation to its purpose”*<sup>111</sup>.

For philosophy of art in the Middle Ages in general provides elements of aesthetics but not yet a definition of what we call today “fine arts”. In that sense, we should rather call this philosophy “meta-aesthetics”. However, no doubt that the basic understanding of the nature of art was achieved in this period prior the modern developments about aesthetics. Medieval thinkers indeed understood the mimetic essence of art, its complex relationship with nature and its primordial role in human existence.

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<sup>111</sup> Quoted by Umberto Eco, *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas*, p. 181.