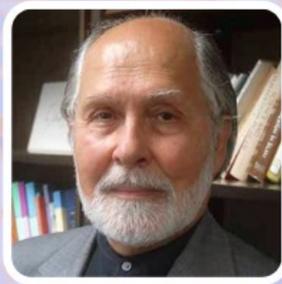


The Divine Word and Islamic Art



Seyyed Hossein Nasr

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Seyyed Hossein Nasr [3]

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This article analyses the development of Islamic arts showing how every form of art stems from the Divine Word of the Holy Qur'an and the continuous remembrance of God.

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Abstract

The Word of Allah is the origin and principle of Islamic art par excellence. Just as the Word descends from the unseen and un-manifest order to the visible and material realm, so too does the art that is based upon it descend from the 'formless' sonoral level to the formal visual plane. And just as the Word, once having entered the formal plane of calligraphy, 'develops' horizontally by becoming ever more complex, similarly Islamic art unfolds its diverse possibilities through the course of history and in numerous Muslim cultures. By continuously reaffirming the presence of the One in the many and Unity in diversity. Islamic art, through its multifarious forms, allows for all Muslims to gain access to the spiritual journey back to the Origin from which the Divine Word issues.

Keywords: Islamic art, Divine Word, Sacred art, traditional art, development of art, calligraphy, Quranic art, sonoral art, Quran recitation.

In seeking to understand the relation between the Divine Word (Kalimat Allah), which for Muslims is of course the revealed text of the Noble Qur'an, and Islamic art, it is important to turn our attention to an important reality which concerns the outward manifestation of the Islamic revelation. If one studies carefully the way in which Islam grew on the earthly plane, one becomes struck by the fact that the outward signs of the revelation, such as Qur'anic calligraphy, become more and more apparent in the plastic arts as one draws further away in time from the origin of the revelation.

Today one often forgets that according to traditional Islamic sources, which are the only ones to matter for us, the Qur'anic revelation was first received aurally by the Blessed Prophet (s.a.w.w.) and only later was it written down. Before the revelation became visible in the form of calligraphy, it was an invisible sonoral revelation. In entering this earthly abode, the Qur'anic revelation followed the metaphysically necessary trajectory from the Invisible (or absent) World (Alam Al-Ghayb) to the Visible World (Alam Al-Shahadah).

It is important to pause a moment and explain further the nature of a sonoral revelation because of its central importance for the understanding of the Islamic experience of the Divine Word and also for its consequence for Islamic art as a whole. Now, sound cannot be seen and therefore from the point of view of our natural external senses is associated with not only the invisible but also the immaterial, for in our natural experience of things we usually associate the material with the visible and palpable.

Being immaterial, the sonoral refuses to become imprisoned in any earthly vessel. Sound in fact penetrates our body rather than being an object out there to be seen or felt. When we hear music or poetry, and, on the highest level, the Revealed Word, all of which are sonoral in nature, they break the barrier between us and the world outside of us and enter into our corporeal reality. While objects of plastic art remain objective to us, the sonoral arts seem to become part of our subjective reality without of course losing their objective reality.

The Qur'anic revelation, once manifested in this world through the agency of the archangel Gabriel, first came as a sonoral revelation which penetrated into the inner being of the Prophet and only later was it written in the form of calligraphy as the Sacred Text.

If for the moment we identify form with its corporeal aspect, we might say that the process of the manifestation of the Qur'an was from the formless to the world of form. The Noble Qur'an first descended vertically from the World of Divine Command (Alam Al-Amr) into the heart of the Prophet, or from the Formless in the metaphysical sense through a series of descents to the world of form, and then manifested itself horizontally from sound to writing, a process which traced on the horizontal plane the transition from the formless to the world of forms, according to established metaphysical principles.

This transition from the formless to the world of form has also been interpreted by certain Muslim sages as the transition from colorlessness to color, here colorlessness referring to the unconditioned and

formless truth and color to the truth conditioned by formal constraints. The famous Sufi poet Jalal Al-Din Rumi, for example, speaks of the link that relates colorlessness to color when he compares color to a cloud and colorlessness to the moon covered temporarily by that cloud.

The flowering of Islamic art itself follows this process and exemplifies this principle. First of all, the sacred art of Qur'anic psalmody precedes in time the sacred art of Qur'anic calligraphy, which itself unfolds from the original Kufic into many other distinct forms and styles. Secondly, when one studies Islamic architecture, one sees that in the earliest mosques, the Divine Word is hardly depicted anywhere while the walls are completely white, a color that in the domain of colors symbolizes the colorless.

In these early mosques one experiences the ubiquitous presence of the Divine Word without its becoming identified with a particular form, like the ever present white color which stands above any particular and distinct color. Gradually, calligraphy, and also in many cases color, make their appearance in the Mihrab, which is like the heart of the sacred space of the mosque and into which the Divine Word is uttered during the canonical prayers, symbolizing the process whereby the Qur'an descended into the heart and the mind of the Blessed Prophet (s.a.w.w.).

And in the same way that from the heart and tongue of the Prophet the Qur'an spread to those around him as sonoral revelation, then was written down and spread all over the Islamic community in both its sonoral and written forms, the calligraphic forms and colors spread from the mihrab to the rest of the mosque, both inside and outside, and then to the rest of the urban setting and objects made by artisans. Gradually, they became an abiding reality of the whole of life of traditional Muslims, surrounding them everywhere.

The depiction of the Word of God in the form of beautiful calligraphy at a later stage of Islamic history is therefore in accordance with the metaphysical laws of manifestation which require the process of externalization to proceed from the invisible to the visible, from the formless to the formed and in this case from the audible to the visible and, on another plane, from the colorless, symbolized by white, to colors. Islamic art displays ever-greater use of the depiction of the Word of God in the form of Qur'anic calligraphy as one draws further away from the source of the revelation. This should be more easily understood in light of the aforementioned principles and also the principle that manifestation involves a movement from unity to diversity and complexity with continuous reassertions of unity as long as a spiritual tradition is alive.

There is, however, another principle that is also at play here. The less one knows, the more one is in need of explanation and, also, the less aware one becomes of the presence of the Sacred, the more one is in need of external reminders of that presence. One can see this principle in action in many different religious climates. As for Islam, since its whole history lies before us, it is easy to observe how the living traditional community responds to this greater need for palpable reminders as the centuries go by.

Gradually the use of Qur'anic calligraphy, usually combined with symbolic geometric patterns which are

also reminders of the presence of the One in the many, becomes even more common until it becomes an ever present reality reminding Muslims wherever they go in the city and also wherever they are within their private living spaces of the reality of God and His Word.

We can see this process in going from the Mosque of the Prophet in Medina, on the basis of descriptions of it since the original edifice is no longer extant, to such early mosques as those of Khurasan, Yemen, Tunis, and Spain, to those of Ottoman Turkey and Safavid Persia. In the first case there is no mention of the use of calligraphy. In the second category calligraphy is found around the Mihrab, a pre-eminent example of it being the celebrated Mihrab of the Mezquita in Cordova. In the third category the use of calligraphy is very extensive both inside and in the case of the many Safavid, or for that matter Seljuq and Mamluk mosques, outside of the mosque.

This unfolding from the state of formlessness to form and principial unity to manifestation in multiplicity is also to be seen on another level in the art of calligraphy itself. The earliest Qur'anic calligraphy is of course the Kufic which is bound to the depiction of the Word of God more than any other Islamic style of calligraphy. This is a script that is difficult to read even by those whose mother tongue is Arabic. The letters seems to be closed upon themselves, refusing to reveal their inner secrets.

And there is discontinuity in the script as if each letter or cluster of letters were a world unto itself. Kufic is like the bud of a flower folded upon itself. Then gradually this bud seems to open up into a full blooming flower in later calligraphic styles where lines become more explicit and the flow more continuous. After the development of the great classical styles such as the Thuluth and the Naskh, calligraphy becomes even more ornate and even occasionally somewhat baroque in some parts of the Islamic world, leading to what from the Islamic point of view is nothing but a kind of decadence.

Fortunately, however, the classical styles continue in a vibrant way to this day, but to the extent that there is a "development" seen in the change of styles over the centuries, one can detect this movement from an enclosed formal reality to the unfolding of this reality, and in certain areas to the decadence of forms through excessive immersion in externalization and forgetfulness of the original unity. For Islamic calligraphy as a whole, however, in contrast to Western art, the forms that attained perfection over the centuries have remained vibrant and living forms and this includes the Kufic. One can therefore say that the development thus outlined is not essentially temporal but principial, although it does possess a temporal dimension. But since it is not only temporal, the various stages of the "flower" from the bud to the full bloom are also simultaneously alive and none of the traditional styles is of only historical interest.

The Qur'an as the Divine Word also left its indelible mark upon Islamic art in ways other than in calligraphy. Of course the external form of the Qur'an as written word led to calligraphy becoming a central sacred art of Islam while its content provided for the Divine Law and social conditions within which Islamic art was created. On a deeper level the metaphysical principles or the Haqiqah of the Qur'an, are the ultimate source and fountainhead of all Islamic sacred art and not only calligraphy.

But there are other aspects of the Qur'an which are of central importance for Islamic art as a whole. One of these aspects is the invisible presence of the Qur'an as the sacred reality determining in the deepest manner the spiritual and artistic ambience of the Muslim artist. And then there are certain characteristics of the structure of the Sacred Text which determines the life of the soul of the Muslim including its rhythm.

Everyone familiar with Islamic art is aware of the rhythm that dominates the various forms of that art from architecture and calligraphy to music and poetry. One can experience this rhythm in meditating on the ever-repeating columns of mosques, or strokes of calligraphy and in ornamentation in the rhythmic repetition of geometric patterns and arabesques. One should pose the question, "where does this rhythm come from?" Of course rhythm is to be found in the arts of other civilizations, but the emphasis upon it in Islamic art is particularly notable. The answer to this question is the structure of the Qur'an.

The Sacred Text possesses a strong rhythmic quality not only in the cadence of its poetic utterances, but also in the repetition of certain central refrains and ideas and realities such as the Divine Names to which the text of the Qur'an returns over and over again. This pattern is like that found in classical Persian music in which the composition flows outward from an origin to which it always returns and so its movement is not linear but cyclic or more precisely helical. The imprint of the Qur'an upon the Muslim soul creates a strong sense of rhythm which then manifests itself in various ways in different Islamic art forms.

Furthermore, the language of the Qur'an displays the effect of the shattering of human language by the Divine Word. The phrases are in a sense "atomized" rather than forming one long didactic or descriptive narrative. The Qur'anic narrative for the most part seems to have no beginning or end, continuous narratives such as the story of Joseph being an exception. Most other Qur'anic narratives are like broken pieces held together by the Divine Reality and brought back again and again to central truths which concern man's final ends.

Meanwhile, sacred formulae such as the Divine Names are scattered throughout the text, bringing man back again and again to the ubiquitous presence of God. The unity of the Qur'an is in fact an inner one and not on the plane of the external meaning of words. The outer form is like a galaxy of atomized sentences and narratives returning over and over to the essential truths, seemingly without beginning or end. It must be remembered that in the Islamic canonical prayers (Salah) one can recite after the Fatihah (the opening chapter of the Text) any set of verses of the Qur'an one wishes from anywhere in any of the chapters (Surahs) without regard to beginning or end.¹ The beginning and the end seem to be everywhere, reminding us that God is everywhere and nowhere. In this way, the sense of infinitude is invoked and formal limitations are transcended.

This reality of the structure of the Qur'an is directly reflected in the major sacred arts of Islam, that is, sacred calligraphy and architecture along with ornamentation consisting of geometrical patterns and arabesques, not to speak of the sonoral arts such as poetry and music. Of course in the less central arts

such as painting, one does also deal with limited forms such as a plant or a horse or, in Moghul miniatures, even with portraits of emperors, but in the central sacred arts, the sense of infinity is invoked by repetitions, which the eye can contemplate without beginning or end.

Of course, in calligraphy one reads from the beginning to the end of a passage, but its artistic effect when looked at as a whole is like that of beholding the ever repeating patterns of columns in a mosque or geometric and arabesque patterns on a wall or a paravan. The eye can begin anywhere and stop anywhere. Every point can be a beginning, which in fact never ends. In this way a sense of infinity is created, which is a direct reflection of the structure of the Qur'an on the artistic plane and it is also a way of bringing out the reality of the Qur'anic verse:

وَلِلَّهِ الْمَشْرِقُ وَالْمَغْرِبُ فَأَيْنَمَا تُولُوْا فَتَمَّ وَجْهُ اللَّهِ إِنَّ اللَّهَ وَاسِعٌ عَلِيمٌ

Whithersoever ye turn, there is the Face of God. (2: 115)

One of the greatest achievements of Islamic art is its ability to bring out for those living in the human and therefore formal world something of the reality of that Infinite Reality beyond all forms, which in revealing the Qur'an has left a mark of infinitude upon the formal language chosen for the expression of the Divine Word in Islam.

Another element of great importance for Islamic art and one which is related to the Divine Word is the void. One realizes this aspect of the reality of the Qur'an even when one listens to the Qur'anic psalmody in which stops and moments of silence are of the greatest importance and are, in a sense, as important as moments of recitation. The Qur'an itself refers to the invisible or abstract (Al-Ghayb) and the visible (Al-Shahadah), the first always identified with the spiritual world and the second with the material.

Numerous Qur'anic commentaries have been written by Sufis, philosophers and theologians in which it has been pointed out that the Ghayb, which literally means absent, does not mean simply not present in the ordinary sense, but the unmanifested, the spiritual, the immaterial. Ghayb and Shahadah are not complementary terms in the horizontal sense but in a vertical one. And in the traditional Islamic cosmologies which provided the framework for Islamic art, there was always an awareness of both dimensions.

The Shahadah was identified with the formal world and, on the level of art, with objects, lines, colors, etc. with which the artist expresses certain intelligible forms or ideas, while Ghayb was identified with the void. Hence, the central significance of the void in Islamic art, which also symbolizes the reality of the non-manifested.

Any non-Muslim who enters a traditional mosque for the first time is especially surprised by the

emptiness of its space. In fact the central reality of the space of the mosque is precisely its emptiness, giving the beholder a sense of nothingness before the Majesty of the Divine Reality. This experience of the void is also to be found in traditional Islamic homes and in all the other central arts of Islam. Even decorations, before some decadence set in in certain parts of the Islamic world, have always contained the element of emptiness and void.

This emptiness or void observable in Islamic art, which is so thoroughly opposed to an excessive cluttering of space such as one finds in Baroque and Rococo art in the West, has two profound effects upon the human soul, both directly related to the Divine Word. The first is to help us to become aware of our nothingness before God, of our spiritual poverty about which the Prophet said, "Poverty (Al-Faqr) is my glory."

This attitude of spiritual poverty, so central to Islam that it is in fact a name for Sufism, which is also called Muhammadan poverty (Al-Faqr Al-Muhammadi), prevented the human ambience in traditional civilization from becoming excessively cluttered by things and also the heart and mind from becoming so filled with idols, diverse ideas and images as to prevent the Divine Reality from presiding within the being of those for whom Islamic art was meant. Islamic art made use of the void to aid man in this necessary emptying of himself of all that would prevent him from realizing the reality of God within and about him.

The second effect of the void is the creation of the necessary space for the manifestation of the Divine Presence and the spiritual world. The void for the traditional Islamic mind is not simply nothing, but the "presence of the absent," a palpable symbol of the Ghayb. Islamic art had made use of the void in its architecture, calligraphy, traditional designs and even objects of everyday life as well as on the highest level in the psalmody of the sonoral revelation of the Qur'an. It has provided a direct means for the Muslim to realize the Qur'anic injunction:

هَآ أَنْتُمْ هُوَآءِ تُدْعُونَ لِنُفْقُوا فِي سَبِيلِ اللّهِ فَمِنْكُمْ مَّنْ يَبْخُلُ وَمَنْ يَبْخُلْ فَإِنَّمَا
يَبْخُلُ عَن نَّفْسِهِ وَاللّهُ الْغَنِيُّ وَأَنْتُمُ الْفُقَرَاءُ وَإِن تَتَوَلَّوْا يَسْتَبَدِلْ قَوْمًا غَيْرَكُمْ ثُمَّ لَا
يَكُونُوا أَمْثَالَكُمْ

God is the rich and ye are the poor. (47:38)

The greatest wealth of man in this world is in fact in the realization of his utter poverty before God who alone is rich, Al-Ghaniy.

On the basis of these and certain other principles, Islamic art developed a unique formal artistic language and philosophy which are inseparable from the Divine Word or the Qur'an in both its content and formal structure. The depiction of the Divine Word in Islamic art began with Qur'anic calligraphy, then became used in the interior and later exterior of mosques and from there spread to homes and

public spaces of the Islamic urban environment. Gradually, a wedding took place between Islamic architecture and calligraphy, which is unique in world art.

Whereas, much of the grandeur of Christian architecture of the Gothic period resides in its wedding of architecture to sculpture as one observes in the major medieval cathedrals such as Chartres or Notre Dame, in Islam, where for theological reasons sculpture of religious subjects and even for the most part human beings in general was not allowed, Qur'anic calligraphy, or the direct depiction of the Divine Word, took the place of sculpture in Christian sacred architecture. Thus, gradually, words of the Qur'an became ubiquitous in urban surroundings adorning not only mosques but other public and private buildings. One can see examples of this type of architecture especially in the central lands of Islam from the Sultan Hasan Mosque in Cairo to the tiled mosques of Isfahan and Samarqand but also in the Maghrib (Tunisia).

In this way, in a more outward and less esoteric sense to which allusion was made above, architecture itself, became the means for the depiction of the Divine Word. Moreover, this depiction surrounded the daily life of Muslims in many other ways since Qur'anic calligraphy was used on objects of daily usage, even on shirts worn by soldiers going to war and on swords and shields. Since, there is no legitimate secular realm in Islam, there was no part of life into which the depiction of the Word of God did not reach.

In fact, there is strictly speaking no such thing as secular art in traditional Islamic civilization corresponding to categories drawn from Western art. The music played in the Topkapi Palace in Istanbul was before the sultan and his court, but it was played by musicians of the Mawlawiyyah Order and certainly cannot be called secular music. Nor can the Delhi Fort be called secular architecture because it is based on the same principles as the Delhi Mosque nearby.

One can distinguish between classical and sacred art in Islam but not between sacred and secular art for which there is not even a word in traditional Arabic or Persian texts. One can say that such arts as Qur'anic psalmody and calligraphy as well as architecture are sacred arts whereas traditional carpet weaving and miniature painting are traditional, but one cannot consider the latter as secular.

In fact, they, like the sacred arts, were created on the basis of the same principles as various kinds of Islamic sacred art and bear the mark, albeit in a less direct manner, of the Divine Word and the principles contained therein already outlined above. But, everywhere throughout Islamic art, one can discern the ubiquitous presence of the Divine Word.

In the deepest sense traditional Islamic art complements the Shari'ah and both have their roots in the Divine Word as revealed in Islam in the form of the Noble Qur'an. The Shari'ah represents the concrete embodiment of the Divine Will and teaches man how to act in accordance with God's Will.

Islamic art is the product of principles which teach man how to make so that the Divine Word is reflected in human life and so that through what man makes and the objects that surround his life he is able to

remain in the remembrance of God's Word. Islamic art issues from the Divine Word and through its multifarious forms is able to aid those who are aware of its inner meaning of that Word, which is also the barque that carries us to the other shore of existence.

1. Certain schools of Islamic jurisprudence stipulate that an entire Surah be recited. [Ed.]

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