

When Is a Bird a Bird?¹

OLEG GRABAR

Professor Emeritus of Islamic Art and Culture
School of Historical Studies
Institute for Advanced Study

THE HISTORY and understanding of art and of material culture are based, among other principles, on two pillars of knowledge. One is the existence and availability of works of art. Although there have been attempts to hypothesize intermediary or original, but now disappeared, phases of art, like the linguistic constructs preceded by stars in the history of languages or the reconstruction of classical texts, these attempts have been rare and, on the whole, not very successful nor very useful. What this means is that new discoveries, usually archaeological ones for antiquity and the Middle Ages, can easily modify whatever paradigms are dominant at any one time and compel the formulation of new paradigms. The second pillar of knowledge, formulated early in the twentieth century primarily in Vienna, is that there is an almost compulsory, Darwinian, evolution of forms according to accepted, if not always clear, patterns usually simplified through such terms as “early,” “standard or classical,” “late,” and “decadent,” with all sorts of terminological variants. Neither one of these pillars requires a knowledge of the cultures or societies sponsoring or surrounding the works of art, because of the presumption of an implicit autonomy of visual forms. Although much can and should be said about the intellectual and methodological limits of arguments and conclusions based on these premises, the fact remains that, by following them, any new object can be provided with vital statistics and definitions acceptable to museum catalogues and inventories and sufficient for presentation in exhibitions.

Let me turn now to a set of examples for which the standard approach seems to me to be deficient and through which other and more rewarding possibilities are raised. There is, first, a stucco-covered wall (fig. 1) excavated by a German expedition shortly before World War I

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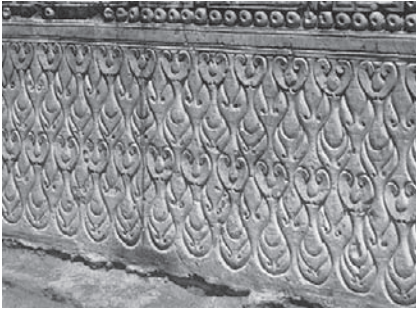


FIGURE 1. Samarra, Iraq. Balkuwara Palace, room 19, ninth century.

in Samarra about eighty miles north of Baghdad, a city which was much in the news some months ago when one of its shrines was destroyed or much damaged during the ongoing civil war, but which, in the ninth century, shared with Baghdad the prestige of being a capital city for an empire extending from Morocco to India.² The excavators and subsequent students defined the style of the decoration as Style C or beveled style, the latest in a presumed

evolution of styles leading to a system of asymmetrical grooves creating the design. General agreement was reached that the technique and the style derived from it were a development of vegetal designs going back to late antique vegetal friezes. The latest metamorphosis of this development would have occurred in Samarra in the ninth century, the apogee of Abbasid power and culture within a relatively unified Islamic cultural system, at least in Iraq. And this particular, latest, development was explained as fulfilling two requirements: a new taste for what has been called *horror vacui*, repugnance of empty spaces or total coverage of space to be decorated, and the evolutionary need of transforming clear representational forms like acanthus leaves into abstract patterns. The first requirement was given a cultural explanation, allegedly being a desire to avoid representations of living things, supposedly an obligation of the practice of Islam, by making the whole surface to be decorated the object of decoration and not a set of motifs on a neutral background. This style was spread all over the Islamic world and could be considered as a sort of “imperial” sign.³ The second requirement would be the illustration of an evolutionary impulse toward abstraction and simplification inherent in artistic creativity, an impulse given a striking demonstration with the formation of abstract expressionism in the middle of the last century and with the arguments and proclamations of a modern critic like Clement Greenberg.

Everything seemed to fit: the existence of excavated (and therefore not affected by contemporary taste) forms, a cultural explanation or justification of the form, and a theoretical paradigm to justify the expla-

²The latest presentation of the excavated wall in situ is Alastair Northedge, *The Historical Topography of Samarra* (London, 2005), pl. 62 and pp. 198–200.

³Richard Ettinghausen, “The ‘Beveled Style’ in the Post-Samarra Period,” in *Collected Papers*, ed. Myriam Rosen-Ayalon (Berlin, 1984), 182–201.

nation on absolute rather than strictly cultural and chronologically restricted grounds. The basic structure of the argument has been developed by E. Herzfeld in the twenties of the last century and acquired easy accessibility through Creswell's *Early Islamic Architecture* and a succession of manuals, the latest one having been partly authored by me.⁴

But during the years I spent teaching introductions to Islamic art or using the Samarra example for general surveys of medieval art, a small but consistent group of undergraduates used to come after class to tell me that they saw on these walls a pattern of human faces with eyes, a nose, a mouth, and a neck. My standard, historian's, answer, well schooled in traditional evolutionary theory, was that the students were looking with eyes formed in the twentieth century, whose art allowed for numerous modifications to standard and realistic representations of anything, but that such views were anachronistic for something from the ninth century and that it was wrong to explain the past through principles of the present. There are theoretical objections to my flip answer of many years on which I will not elaborate, except briefly at the end of my talk. But, insofar as I was dealing with the specific instance of ninth-century beveled styles from Iraq, it seemed like a reasonable answer, at least in the context of an introductory course on Islamic art.

But then here is my second example (fig. 2). It is a sculpted wooden panel from Egypt now in the Louvre and usually dated to the end of the ninth century,⁵ when the impact of an "imperial" Abbasid art from Iraq was at its highest. The exact function of the piece is unknown, but it served probably to decorate a wall around a window or a door, or else it could have been part of a large piece of furniture. As in many other examples of Egyptian woodwork, the design is executed in beveled



FIGURE 2. Woodwork panel, Egypt, ninth or tenth century. Louvre Museum, inv. 6023.

⁴Ernst Herzfeld, *Der Wandschmuck der Bauten von Samarra und seine Ornamentik* (Berlin, 1923); K.A.C. Creswell, *Early Muslim Architecture* (Oxford, 1940), 2:286–88; Richard Ettinghausen, Oleg Grabar, and Marilyn Jenkins-Madina, *Islamic Art and Architecture 650–1250* (London, 2001), 58.

⁵Lise Anglade, *Catalogue des boiseries de la section Islamique, Musée du Louvre* (Paris, 1988), 30–31; Oleg Grabar, *The Mediation of Ornament* (Princeton, 1992), 9–10.

style and all background has been eliminated. The subject of the design has always been identified as a bird, although no one has seen a bird like that and almost all the major parts of the representation are leaves bunched together in what we see as the body of the bird or the transformation of the beak of the bird. In fact the only bird-like features here are the curved shape of the alleged neck and the dot on the round ball, which would then be seen as a bird's head with an eye. But even these are acceptable as parts of birds because a non-bird-like beak and a bunch of leaves arranged in an oval shape could be identified as representations of birds.

We have no way of finding out what the artisan's ambition or the patron's request may have been, to represent a bird or to fill an unusual space provided by the decoration of a building or of a piece of furniture. But there are other examples that provide a range of transformations of leaves into simple designs or into birds (figs. 3 and 4) and even,



FIGURE 3 (*left*). Woodwork panel, Egypt, ninth or tenth century. Cairo, Museum of Islamic Art inv. 13173.

FIGURE 4 (*right*). Woodwork panel, Egypt, ninth or tenth century. New York, Metropolitan Museum, gift of V. Everit Macy, 1930 (30.112–7).



FIGURE 5. Woodwork panel,
Egypt, tenth century. Cairo,
Museum of Islamic Art.

in a slightly later example, the sudden inclusion in the vegetal design of a realistic horse's head (fig. 5).⁶ All of this could be interpreted, as much of our own contemporary painting can be, as a series of attempts to use abstract and simplified features to evoke representations of animals, and perhaps even of humans. Thus, while it is probably still wrong to see faces in the Samarra stucco panel, it is so because there are too many of them, thereby diminishing the value of any one of them, not because they evoke faces without appearing to look like them. It is sufficient to look at certain African sculpture, for instance, to see human faces that hardly look human, but whose simplified elements cannot be understood otherwise, because we tend to see most images as images of something.

I will not pursue the problem of perceptual interpretation, but return to my professional habit as a historian. What remains to be done is to provide a cultural explanation for a development that would have

⁶ Grabar, *Mediation of Ornament*, figs. 2 and 3; Ettinghausen, Grabar, and Jenkins, *Islamic Art*, 201.

gone from specific representation to abstraction and then back to representation during the eighth to tenth centuries, inasmuch as parallel developments can be traced in the representation of non-bird-like birds in slightly later northeastern Iranian ceramic decoration.⁷ Or else, in opposition to the standard evolutionary theory, we can simply argue that what happened in the ninth century is a turn to representation from abstraction similar to phenomena like the passage from pre-historic and early historic simplified forms to classical full representations. And we can explain this development in historical terms by finding for them a social or intellectual reason or in purely formal manner as a necessary growth from one way to another way, as part of some continuous and repetitive cycle of creativity of images.

But there is another way of studying and appraising these examples. It is to say that the decision to see birds or faces in them is a decision made by the viewer, not imposed by the maker. This can be seen as a way to read images as one reads clouds, the dregs of coffee cups, magic potions, or the entrails of animals, a free exercise in interpreting a work with a low level of iconographic specificity. But it can also be seen as something more forceful and more positive: the illustration of an art that, willfully and, in the case of ninth-century Islam, partly in reaction to the Christian and Buddhist arts that surrounded it, transferred to the viewer the interpretation of forms by making the latter sufficiently imprecise to allow for a range of possible interpretations. It is possible to develop a cultural explanation for this type of art within Islamic culture in general and the ninth century in particular—for instance in the theory, common at that time, of atomism, the argument that infinitely numerous combinations of a small number of similar units make up the whole creation—but the complex mix of historical and social reasons involved is beyond the scope of my remarks.

I would like finally to show an example from later times, which may well demonstrate the permanence of this attitude toward the making of some of the most original features of Islamic art, but which also introduces an additional twist to the explanation of the phenomenon I am discussing. The example is a striking page from the fifteenth century with a very modern Mondrian-like design of squares and rectangles in six colors over a red background (fig. 6).⁸ It is a fascinating piece to study in detail and its key feature is that it has an axis based on five (actually there are nine of them) white squares, which suggest a rotation of the image. With the rotation what really turns is (most easily seen in black but present in the other colors as well) the name of Ali,

⁷ See examples in Grabar, *Mediation*, figs. 11 and 12, pl. 2.

⁸ Grabar, *Mediation*, pl. 3 and pp. 47 and ff.

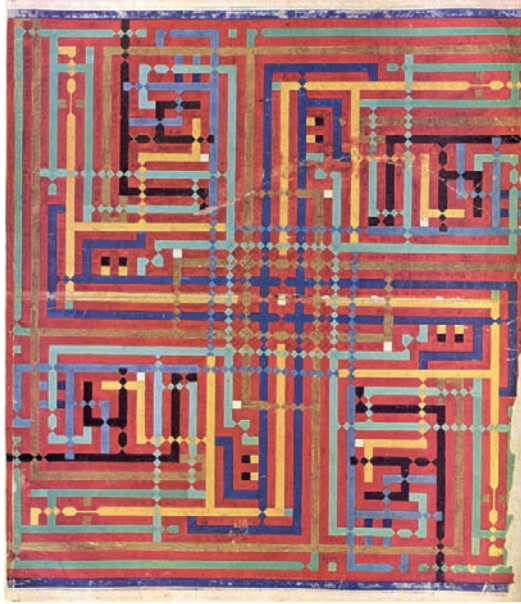


FIGURE 6. Painting on paper, Iran, fifteenth century.
Istanbul, Top Kapi Seray Museum, *hazine* 2152, fol. 9v.

the son-in-law of the Prophet and the first Shi'ite *imam*. You turn it around in your mind, not as a piece of paper. This image is a sort of icon or mantra for pious meditation. But this is so only if you can identify the Arabic letters and understand their significance. For everyone else it is a complicated and pleasing (or repulsive) composition of geometric forms of different colors.

There are other similar examples, some found even in Kabbalistic Jewish art from Iran. In all cases, we can argue that, at best, the artist developed techniques for meaningful ambiguity. But in many of these examples the modification of material forms of representation, letters in the instance of my fifteenth-century paper painting, can be explained as the result of a secret language, of a code, available only to those who share a certain belief or form of piety. The genius of the artist lies in the success of his occlusion of meaning.

There are two concluding points to my brief remarks. One is that any work of art is at the same time a historical document with restricted meanings and a visual document with a far greater range of possible interpretations. The second point is that the intensity of one or the other value of any one monument varies enormously and the question remains whether and, if so, how cultural, social, or other features determine their intensity. That, however, is a topic that needs more than twenty minutes to develop.