

The Role of the Historian*

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More than once over the years, and especially after the creation of the Aga Khan Program in Islamic Architecture at Harvard and MIT, and during my many years on the Steering Committee of the Aga Khan Award for Architecture, the question had arisen in my mind on the role and usefulness of the historian within the aims and activities of those professionals—architects, planners, economists, decision makers of all sorts—who are building the future.

Within universities, a historical component is a normal and accepted part of an academic programme, even if the reasons for this acceptance have not always been thought out. What follows then is an attempt to set down some ideas about the values of historical knowledge for discussion by those other than historians or simply as a cathartic exercise, for much is troubling me when I see how misused and misunderstood the past is within the Muslim world. It is well at the very beginning to recall, however, that the issue is not a Muslim one alone. Italian and German fascism were anchored in certain visions of history, and Marxism began with a theory of history that had almost destroyed Russian historical scholarship. But it is not necessary to go to these extremes. All national movements, all nationalisms (the new American right, Corsicans, Basques, Irish, Ukrainians) involve history as some sort of justification. At Trinity College in Dublin, half of the history courses have dealt with Irish history, and none with anything south of the Mediterranean or east of Germany. What these samples mean is that a knowledge of history is not simply a form of culture, like good table manners, it is an instrument in that search for identity, in that pride of one's own world, of one's own past, which concerns political and cultural leaders as well as educational and intellectual ones. History, even the history of architecture, is not a neutral subject, but an active one that can be explosive.

What follows consists only of thoughts for discussion and reflection. I have taken somewhat extreme positions on a few issues, partly to provoke discussion and

partly to protect the integrity of what I see more and more as separate activities: understanding what happened, doing something today, and being one's self.

Can one define History? It is perhaps easier to define the tasks of the historian. There are four fundamental historical tasks. Although the best historians can perform all four, these tasks do not require the same aptitudes and technical equipment, and, for the most part, every historian tends to be better qualified for one of them than for the others.

The first task is that of defining moments of time and space and of identifying the unique characteristics of each such moment. A priori, this is a most objective task. Its questions, limited to architecture, are of two kinds: 1) broad and synthetic: What was the visually perceptible configuration of Cairo, Istanbul or Delhi in 1550? 2) concrete and restricted: It being known that the mosque of Damascus was completed between 705 and 715, what did it look like at that time, what meanings were attributed to it, what techniques or decorations were used in it?

The equipment necessary for the successful achievement of these aims are: the archaeology of a time or of a building, that is, the carefully documented reconstruction of an artefact in a stated and fixed chronological sequence; contemporary or otherwise valid literary sources ranging from inscriptions to descriptions; an awareness of the contemporary ethos through chronicles and literature as well as political and social events. The central concern of this task is as absolute a synchrony as possible. Its ideals are the exact reconstruction of a building, a complete explanation of why it was built, and the reaction of the first person who saw it. Its primary sin is anachronism, that is, attributing motifs and attitudes that cannot be of that time or of that place. Its methodological difficulty is that, since the historian of today is the product of his time and not of the time he describes, he is never free of his ideological constraints and tends to interpret sources according to his ethos. For instance, my own interpretations of the Dome of the Rock could not have been reached without the Cold War in which I was brought up as a young



adult. Did I read in the texts of the time something of my own time? Or could I understand that monument because its period was similar to mine? The ambiguities of this “objective” history, “as it happened” in the words of Leopold von Ranke, can only be removed if the historian moves away from his subject and only serves as a warrantor of authenticity. He separates that which is original from that which is reconstructed, he measures and describes, but he does not explain unless he has contemporary sources to do so. Let me call this historian the antiquarian. His heart is usually quite pure in the sense that he is genuinely concerned for the truth of the past and that he is minimally affected by emotional or other relationships to that past. But is he of any more use to the world of today than a detective in a novel solving murders that were never committed?

Let me give an example. A first-rate antiquarian book is R. W. Hamilton’s *The Structural History of the Aqsa Mosque* (London, 1949). Its 100-odd pages are very difficult to read, as one flips from text to drawings to illustrations, and it explains in unbearable detail based on shapes of stones or fragments of plaster the evolution of one of the great mosques of Islam. It is as nearly perfect as a scientific book can be, even if one can quibble as to whether his Aqsa I and Aqsa II are 8th- and 9th-century buildings or 7th and 8th. But never in this book is there a sense of why the mosque is important, of what led to its erection, of why it was changed so often, and so on. It is a perfect book and yet is hardly ever read and is not found in most bibliographies or most libraries in the world. The “real” truth it depicts seems to be of no interest.

The second type of historian is the diachronist or diatopist. He has studied the works of antiquarians and is trying to extract from them such themes, ideas, attitudes or whatever that seems to him to cut across centuries or areas. It could be the search for constants (a certain type of space usable for large crowds to gather leads him from Roman fora to mosques and to football stadiums), for changes and evolution (the development of the dome), for types of life or behaviour (the history of the palace or of urban piety), for regional characteristics (Anatolian-Ottoman

construction practices), for a broad cut across areas (architecture around 1000 or 1500), or for the meaning of forms (the symbolism of the minaret, the structure of the Muslim city). In theory at least, the practitioner of this type of history must possess all of the technical skills of the antiquarian (often increased linguistically because of different areas and times) and, in addition, two supplementary talents. One is a theoretical skill that allows him to use terms like “symbol”, “squinch”, “ornament” or “space” in ways that are meaningful beyond the restricted field of Islamic architecture. The other is an ability to choose topics that are significant. A very learned and thorough study by an Egyptian scholar of many years ago on the calyx in ornament throughout the centuries is hardly pertinent to any known important issue, even though accompanied by thousands of wonderful drawings. On the other hand, several recent and older books (by authors including Prisse d’Avennes, Jules Bourgoïn, Issam al-Said and Keith Critchlow) on geometric ornament in architecture and elsewhere deal with major issues but are so insufficiently antiquarian as to lose most of their value.

The problem, it seems to me, is that a diachronic or a diatopical approach makes two intellectual or ideological presuppositions. One is that there are threads which tie together certain times, cultural entities, areas and social-economic conditions. Here are a few examples: Whatever influences have come to bear on Syria, they were nearly always translated into stone, whereas Egypt had throughout its history a much more complex interplay between stone and brick, and Iran hardly knew stone at all. The Ottoman Empire developed a type of dome-centered mosque that became as much a place of worship as the symbol of Ottoman presence. In the 7th through 10th centuries, very different areas acquired a fairly common Islamic culture that justifies understanding its monuments as one entity, regardless of regional details. There accordingly is an acceptable ideological parallel between the Alhambra, the Topkapi Seray, the Kremlin, Versailles and the Red Fort in Lahore, because they are all products of princely patronage. There also is an architecture of domes that is only secondarily dependent on the cultures that created it;

and so forth. As one can see, these threads are, if one is just to use this approach, of many different types, and their proper elaboration requires a breadth of knowledge and experience that extends much beyond a given culture, period or area. Hence the study of such threads has easily become superficial or has sought help in pre-established abstract doctrines like functionalism, Marxism, technicism, regionalism, evolutionism and whatever else the social sciences can invent. I should add that while such approaches to history are easy enough to illustrate for Western architecture (as in the writings of Nikolaus Pevsner, Sigfried Gideon, Bruno Zevi, Eugène Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc or Banister Fletcher), they are very rare in Islamic art (with some exceptions for regionalism) where superficiality predominates, at least in the grand manuals or general surveys. The reason is that most writers on these subjects do not have a deep feeling for the variants of Islamic culture.

The second presupposition of the diachronist and, perhaps to a smaller degree, diatopist is that his conclusions and paradigms have a continuing validity up to the present time and into the future. In other words, the definitions of regional style, of culturally identifiable ways of building, are not supposed to be simply definitions of a past but expressions of a permanent identity, one could almost say a *gestalt*, of carefully circumscribed cultural entities. The point was characteristic of Soviet scholarship in which the emphasis on Azari, Uzbek, Turkmen or Tajik traditions up to this day permeates all but antiquarian writing. But certainly Iranian, Egyptian or Turkish works have not escaped the assumption that somehow their millenary past has lessons to offer to today, and it is the historian's role to identify, as carefully and as scientifically as possible, whatever visual systems or meanings from the past are still pertinent. It is legitimate to ask of the historian what are the continuities of any one area. What may not be right is to assume that whatever remains is part of that continuity.

This second approach of the historian is obviously far more rewarding than the first one. It makes an impact on the outside world; it connects Islamic culture with

world culture; it provides ideas and slogans to contemporary practitioners and political leaders; it eliminates immanent peculiarities and idiosyncrasies; and it extracts from monuments their wider and more abstract or paradigmatic significance. Its problems are, first of all, accuracy, but in a deeper sense, it is veracity and more specifically cultural veracity. This is a very important point on which I would like to elaborate. It is easy enough for any trained and sensitive historian to see in a sequence of forms (for instance, the large hypostyle mosque from Damascus to Delhi) a series of changes within a consistent concern for the creation of a large space for the Muslim community. And it is equally easy for an eloquent or articulate writer to derive from these changes an open-ended linear progression from a historical tradition into the future (for instance, the notion that complex geometric designs are necessary means for composing and decorating a building).

The problem lies precisely in the step that extrapolates from the past to the present and future. It is a temptation that is difficult to resist, perhaps even impossible to resist, but it is essential for the historian to stop his interpretation at the moment when a living culture appears. In my view, he must stop—as a historian, even if he belongs to the culture (he can obviously go on as a citizen of the culture, or as a member of the Ummah, the community of the faithful, but not as a historian). And, if he is not a Muslim, he cannot go beyond yet another point. It would be nice if, like the boundaries of the Arabian sanctuaries, this point could be neatly defined. In reality, it is not and I have often over the years tried to imagine where lies that invisible line beyond which only those who belong can go. Or should such a line exist in the 21st century, when everything physical can be seen from a satellite?

I can be much briefer on a third type of historian, the chronicler. The chronicler is the observer of an activity who records it in its minutest details. I do not know of a chronicler of a building or of an architect in classical or medieval times. The closest examples would be someone like Abbot Sugar from the 12th century recording his own activity at St. Denis, or a few passages from the writings of the Persian historian

Rashid al-Din (d. 1318) or the founder of the Mughal dynasty Babur (d. 1530). Perhaps a Maqrizi describing 15th-century Cairo comes closest to the kind of descriptive and interpretive statement found in a Joinville describing St. Louis in the 13th century, Suetonius or Tacitus writing about Roman emperors, or the 16th-century Ayn-i Akbar document describing the administration of the Mughal emperor Akbar. We know that there were no Vasari in the Middle Ages, and I am not sufficiently familiar with literature after 1500 to be sure that chroniclers of architecture did not exist. They certainly can exist for the contemporary world, and, just as no architect can survive today without a good photographer, every architect should perhaps add to his staff a chronicler. Like a photographer, the chronicler can enhance or damage the work created, but he can never create it himself. In part, the role of the chronicler has been taken in the contemporary world by the critic, but I wonder whether the ideal critic does not, in theory at least, choose his subjects, whatever the reasons for the choice, rather than being selected by a creator to record something. But I am willing to stand corrected on this point by those who have more experience with criticism. Thus while I maintain the importance of a historian-chronicler as a type, I am not sure that he exists as yet in the flesh.

Finally there is the “new” historian who has grown most spectacularly in French circles over the past twenty years. He deals either with issues that are so broad (the nature of brick or the geometry of space) that they are not culturally significant, or with the elaboration of the specific to the point where it loses its diachronic value. (I know of no appropriate example in the History of Art, but there are many in literature, or in economic history; a partial and not very successful example could be my own treatment of the Alhambra (Cambridge, MA, 1978), which in some ways defined the building as a type, not as a monument). This kind of history almost rejects a priori the cultural concerns that are ours.

Of my four types of historians, the chronicler is only useful to the contemporary world if he can provide adequate documentation about contemporary practices

and set it down in such a way that it can be of use to other contemporary critics, historians and practitioners, or else if he can provide information for the antiquarian or diachronist of the future. The antiquarian is only useful, in fact essential, for restorations and reconstructions. It is an important activity frequently proclaimed in official pronouncements all over the world. I have developed a lot of reservations about the ways in which it has been implemented in practice and argued in theory. I wonder, for instance, whether reconstructions and restorations are not always an admission that something had died. But death is the normal end for people and for buildings. Then why mummify buildings and not people? Otherwise, the antiquarian’s value is limited, because his objective is always to explain a moment or a monument in the past, in its own time. He confuses issues by pointing out that concepts of today may have been meaningless in the past and, so very often, that the monument we see is not the one that was. The general theorist is only interesting for ideas and formulas.

We are left, then only with the diachronist or diatopist, and especially the former, as the kind of historian who seems to be useful for the contemporary world. But this is exactly where he has failed most conspicuously in dealing with Islamic art, where he has in fact even been destructive. The reason is, I think, a simple one. Whereas most major Western historians of this type began with a concern with contemporary, or, at the very least, modern architecture, their counterparts dealing with the Islamic world began as medievalists and antiquarians and then, through interest or seduction, moved on to more recent times. But their roots, their real expertise, were always in a remote past. They are the ones who defined “Islamic” architectural and aesthetic values through a small number of preserved major monuments of the past rather than through 90 per cent of the architectural setting of Islamic lands that was created in the 19th and 20th centuries.

They created the paradoxes with which we live: an aesthetic ideal and a sense of achievement earlier than the time of the actual visual experience and visual literacy of the contemporary Muslim world.

It thus becomes possible to suggest that, at this stage of intellectual effort, it may be more useful to forget about the past, to leave it to antiquarians. For the present has not yet, at least to my knowledge, discovered what it is that it wants out of the past. I would probably even argue that during the 20th century there occurred in nearly all Western and non-Western countries a definitive break with the evolution of the past and that therefore the return to an artificially created past is particularly destructive, because it is false both from the point of view of the past and the needs of today.

A second reason for my position that the historian has little to contribute to the contemporary effort to create a meaningful Muslim environment is that the historian, whether antiquarian, diachronist, or diatopist, is, at this time, for the most part not a Muslim. Even if he is technically one, his training and his values derive from a Western type of scientific inquiry, a type which is not wrong or immoral by itself, but which is not attuned to the needs and expectations of today's Muslim world. The historian will be able to help whenever questions will be asked of him, which he is competent to answer. He is competent in dealing with restorations, and he is competent in explaining the development of the dome; he is even competent in defining the nature of symbols or of piety or of behaviour in the 13th or the 17th centuries, but he cannot say what any of them should be today and what their architectural expression may be.

To sum up, I would like to argue:

1. that the historian can only react to questions given to him by the contemporary world; I have not seen or heard anything more profound than either "there was a glorious past, let us make a great future but not in the same way", or "drown us in forms, give us clues for significant signs"; I have not heard deeper queries about contemporary quests or contemporary techniques that would make me feel that my knowledge of the past can be anything but quaint and cute;
2. even if cultural values remain traditional (or Muslim lands wish to maintain them as such, with whatever variants are introduced from country to country),

techniques and material aspirations have been revolutionised in the past 50 years to the point that the architectural past is no more relevant than the horse and buggy; knowledge of history can help in developing culture and pride or self-esteem, but not in creating architecture;

3. the historian will always remain the witness of what happened, even its interpreter, but not as an aide to creation;
4. the historian of anything has a role to play in generalising about the history he knows, but he is not equipped to deal with the needs of today.

* This is the text of a lecture delivered in 1995.