

Chapter II

Islam and Iconoclasm*

The most obvious difference between Byzantine and Islamic iconoclasm is that the former is usually spelled with a capital “I” and the latter with a small “i”. This secondary typographical distinction illustrates first of all the difference between a historical moment (these are presumably capitalized) and an attitude or mode of behavior, the latter being apparently too common to deserve capitalization. In Byzantium the historicity of the events which are called the Iconoclastic period is defined through very specific dates: a crisis involving the relationship of worshippers and religious images in the seventh century; a succession of edicts and debates starting around 726 and remarkable for their verbal wealth, intellectual content and occasional violence; and finally in 843 a final Restoration of Images, once again capitalized by becoming a Feast of the Church. There is nothing comparable in the Muslim world. There are no internally decided edicts; the Qur’an is totally silent on images except insofar as they were used as idols, which are most forcefully condemned; to the extent that there was a debate, it was hardly a significant one, and our evidence for it is far more tangible in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries or, even more so, in the twentieth, than in the seventh or eighth. Forceful destruction of images is usually quite late, the action of brutal conquerors like the Ghaznavids in India or Nadir Shah attacking the Buddhas of Bamiyan with his artillery, and almost always directed against non-Muslim monuments, with a few exceptions of late defacing of miniatures by pious librarians. While there are instances of technical destruction of representations, as when Mahmud of Ghazna asked his son to remove erotic

* First published in *Iconoclasm*, A. Bryer and J. Herrin, eds (Birmingham, 1977), pp. 45–52. This lecture was left essentially in the shape in which it was delivered at the symposium with two modifications other than the elimination of most obvious features of oral presentation. I have simplified the second half of the paper, since many of its points have been reworked for a meeting of German Orientalists in Freiburg (September 1975) and it was published in the proceedings of the meeting. “Das Ornament in der islamischen Kunst,” *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenlandischen Gesellschaft*, suppl. III, I (1977), xli–liv. I have also eliminated all illustrations as they consisted almost exclusively of well-known and often-illustrated monuments; for the same reason bibliographical notes have been limited to references which are immediately pertinent to the text.

paintings from his palace,¹ such instances are few, and on the whole, literary references to the use of representations tend to take the form of titillated disapproval, not unlike our own cultural, if not individual, reaction to pornography.

There does not seem to be in fact any real parallelism between the Byzantine phenomenon and a Muslim attitude, even though it is possible that the adjective “iconoclastic” can justifiably be attributed to both. Why then concern oneself with the Muslim world when dealing with Byzantine Iconoclasm? Beyond the theoretical possibility that a general phenomenon can be of use in explaining a specific one, the most important reason is the coincidence in time between Byzantine Iconoclasm and the rise of Islam. Several decades ago many a scholar had seen the Christian phenomenon as directly influenced by the new faith and culture, and a number of rather troubling arguments do exist to support such a contention. There is the celebrated edict of Yazid in 721 which is supposed to have led to the destruction of Christian images.² It is the most clearly focused of a group of alleged instances of forceful removals of Christian images from religious buildings, and several examples of replacements of representations by vegetal or geometric ornament seem *prima facie* to demonstrate the actual implementation of such edicts. The Ma’in mosaic is the most celebrated instance but there are others, curiously concentrated in Jordan and still unpublished.³ Then it is possible to relate the well-known changes in the coinage of Justinian II, both iconographic and epigraphical ones, to the cold and at times hot war between the first Umayyad caliphs and their Byzantine counterparts.⁴ And finally, the mosaics of the Dome of the Rock, of Bethlehem’s Church of the Nativity, of the Aqsa mosque (redone in Fatimid times but certainly reflecting Umayyad models), perhaps even those of the mosque of Damascus – all following each other over twenty years at most – can be construed to reflect, in their unusual sequence, a series of statements about Christian or Muslim, imperial or caliphal, power, for which it is possible to propose the conscious will of formal assertions directed to the competitor or the enemy rather than to one’s own culture.⁵ However these

¹ Quoted by T. A. Arnold, *Painting in Islam*, repr. edn (New York, 1965), p. 86.

² Most texts gathered by Vasiliev, “The Edict of Yazid,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 9–10 (1956).

³ R. de Vaux, “Une mosaïque byzantine à Ma’in,” *Revue Biblique*, 47 (1938).

⁴ Grabar, *Iconoclasm*, p. 67 ff.; J. Breckenridge, *The Numismatic Iconography of Justinian II* (New York, 1959).

⁵ For the Dome of the Rock see K. A. C. Creswell, *Early Muslim Architecture*, 2nd edn (Oxford, 1969) and O. Grabar, “The Umayyad Dome of the Rock,” *Ars Orientalis*, 3 (1957); for the mosque of Damascus, Creswell and now B. Finster, “Die Mosaiken der Umayyadenmoschee,” *Kunst des Orients*, 7 (1970–71), where the arguments of R. Ettinghausen, K. Otto-Dorn and others are mentioned; for the basilica of the Nativity at Bethlehem I am following H. Stern, “Les Représentations des conciles,” *Byzantion*, 11 and 13 (1936 and 1938), and Grabar, *Iconoclasm*, p. 50 ff. rather than R. W. Hamilton,

examples of wall mosaics must in fact be interpreted, it seems hardly [46] accidental that the Muslim statements reject all representations of anything living and that the Christian answer in Bethlehem is equally devoid of the usual personages of Byzantine imagery, just a few years before the formal opening of the Iconoclastic period.

It seems altogether possible to hypothesize for the Byzantine phenomenon an Islamic influence or impact and it could be imagined that a deeper investigation into the few documents we possess would clinch the argument. But, even if one could delve more profoundly into the matter – and I for one am far from sure that it is really possible – it is hardly likely that the argument would be clinched, for there is no real need for Islam to explain Byzantium. The edict of Yazid is a very suspicious document, curiously absent from early Muslim sources and appearing in the Christian ones as an anti-Muslim and anti-Jewish document of doubtful historical importance, and, in my judgement, even validity. Floor mosaics may have been redone but is it necessary to make Muslim power responsible for the changes rather than local Christian practices, perhaps the impact of Monophysites or changes in ecclesiastical allegiances? The changes in coinage, be they iconographic like the sudden emphasis on Christ, or verbal like the *servus Christi* so close to the *'Abd Allah* of the Muslims, can easily be explained in purely internal Christian terms.⁶ And the mosaics in official buildings all make sense internally, the Dome of the Rock, Aqsa and Damascus as statements of some significance to Muslims, and the Nativity mosaics for Christians. At best, one could argue that the lack of representations in the latter was a concession to a prevailing mood, an expression of taste rather than a conscious and formal rejection of representations.

It is not going to be my purpose to pursue the investigation of these well-worn questions, for in the absence of new evidence or of a new perspective, arguments become circular and interpretations more persuasive by the eloquence of their expression than by their intrinsic value. It is even possible that stylistic changes and iconographic purposes within the Muslim world are not pertinent to the Christian phenomenon, and in a wider sense, that the two empires were at that time irrelevant to each other artistically, if not politically. At best the Muslim world served as a political haven for actually persecuted or ideologically threatened Christians, but it is curious to note that from John of Damascus to Theodore and Theophanes, two monks from Palestine who were punished under Theophilus and one of whom became bishop of Nicaea after the restoration of Orthodoxy, it is Christian Iconodules rather than Iconoclasts who resided within the Muslim world.

The examples of John of Damascus or of the saintly brothers from Palestine a century later illustrate a medieval version of a well-documented

The Church of the Nativity (Jerusalem, 1947), pp. 59–69; for the Aqsa mosque see H. Stern, "Recherches sur la mosquée al-Aqsa," *Ars Orientalis*, 5 (1963).

⁶ O. Grabar, *The Formation of Islamic Art* (New Haven, 1973), pp. 89, 97.

phenomenon of the nineteenth century or of our own time: the possibility of living in peace within one culture while fighting battles, mostly verbal ones, within another. There is no evidence known to me during the Iconoclastic century (as opposed to the end of the seventh century) that either empire utilized such groups for political purposes, although one can wonder whether the striking Muslim military successes between 813 and 840 may not have been helped by Iconoclastic populations. A more interesting point may be that the Iconoclastic period, and most particularly its second phase in the ninth century, was a time of considerable cultural contacts between Greek and Arab Muslim worlds. It was the time of the largest group of translations of science and philosophy into Arabic and it has long been recognized that the Emperor Theophilus was strongly influenced by the themes and possibly styles of the 'Abbasids.⁷ His pavilions bearing names like Love, Pearl or Harmony, as well as his gardens filled with spectacular automatic machines, all find parallels in the art of the caliphs in Baghdad. The ruins of Küçükyalı, identified with some likelihood as those of Theophilus' Bryas, bear some resemblance to earlier or contemporary Muslim monuments.⁸ Regardless of its other aspects, the later Iconoclastic period, with its secular concerns, seems to be a reversal of the phenomenon of the late seventh and early eighth centuries. Instead of Muslim patrons struggling with Christian Byzantine art, we find the emperors of Constantinople fascinated with the forms developed in Baghdad and laying the ground for the partial Orientalization of Macedonian taste.⁹

The actual nature of these forms transmitted from one culture to the other is difficult to illustrate in the ninth century, for both in Islam and in Byzantium, a number of key documents are missing and will probably never be recovered. There are also problems of dating individual monuments, which complicate matters even further. Regardless of the solutions to be given to these, a possible conclusion may be that, instead of thinking about Iconoclasm and Islam in terms of relatable and comparable or irrelevant and separate ideologies and attitudes, we should rather investigate questions of taste within a period of time in which each entity developed its own modes of behavior and forms; emphasize, in other words, a system of cultural contacts and of mutual or contradictory [47] concerns rather than seek out a single explanation for diverse phenomena. One should concentrate on the Muslim search for Greek books to be translated into Arabic and on the Orientalization of Christian taste, not only in Constantinople but also in the provinces, most particularly in Armenia and northern Mesopotamia, those extraordinary regions which still await coherent cultural and artistic

⁷ Grabar, *Iconoclasm*, p. 169 ff.

⁸ S. Eyice, "Contributions à l'histoire de l'art byzantin," *Cahiers Archéologiques*, 10 (1951).

⁹ A. Grabar, "Le Succès des arts orientaux," *Münchener Jahrbuch der bildenden Kunst*, 2 (1951).

investigation. Within this perspective, the religious and intellectual quarrel recedes somewhat in importance, except in the relatively narrow area of specifically Byzantine religious art. What emerges instead as particularly significant is a period of shifting cultural currents, and the church of Aghtamar datable between 915 and 921 as well as Gagik's palace described by the Armenian historian Artzrumi are the most remarkable results of the formal and ideological currents of the Iconoclastic period.¹⁰

These preliminary remarks can be summed up in the following manner. Just before the Iconoclastic controversy in Byzantium, a group of Islamic monuments utilized primarily Byzantine forms but avoided representations of living beings, even though there is no intellectual or doctrinal argument for such an abandonment of living things in what we know of Islamic thought at the time, and the roughly contemporary Byzantine monuments and symbolic images like coins do not require the explanation of an external impact, at least not on their "iconoclastic" level. A long century later, Byzantium established a reasonably rational and formalized definition of images, but in the meantime there had occurred a shift in the relationship between the new Muslim culture and the old Byzantine one and it has been argued that the changes introduced by Iconoclasm – but not necessarily Iconoclasm itself – were at least in part responsible for the new Byzantine receptivity to eastern things.

In both instances, the early eighth century or the middle of the ninth, two concurrent questions are raised. One is historical and requires a precise reconstruction of the kinds of events and social, political or cultural attitudes which would make it reasonable, if not always necessary, to explain an impact of Byzantium on Islam or vice versa. The second question is one of artistic ideology: what made certain forms and themes rather than others pass from one culture to the other? Is it an aspect of the "giving" culture or of the "receiving" one? Is it both? Can such aspects be defined? Or should one tend to interpret similarities in terms of some vague common *Zeitgeist*? Since a full investigation of all four of these questions – Byzantine and Muslim history and ideologies *c.* 680–730 and *c.* 820–50 – is clearly beyond the possibilities of a single paper as well as way beyond my competence, I should like to limit my remarks to one major question, which is the nature and meaning of what has been called Islamic iconoclasm, thus trying to answer the subsidiary one of whether or not the nature of a Muslim attitude to the arts is of any real pertinence to the Byzantine phenomenon.

The historical setting in the Muslim world of the years 680–720 seems reasonably clear, and I only want to summarize conclusions reached elsewhere on fuller evidence.¹¹ My argument is essentially that the early Muslims were indifferent to images, that in a group of coins they sought to create an

¹⁰ S. Der Nersessian, *Aghtamar* (Cambridge, 1965).

¹¹ Grabar, *Formation*, p. 75 ff.

imagery and a symbolism of their own,¹² and that this effort failed for many reasons, but primarily because they could not create a meaningful and effective imagery without becoming like the Christians. The result appears in a succession of major creations – the Dome of the Rock, Abd al-Malik's new coinage, the mosque of Damascus – which rejected representations in official art, emphasized writing, and sublimated symbolic meanings of whatever sort into what appears to us now as being primarily ornament. This rejection was not carried down to private art, as is amply demonstrated by the so-called “desert palaces” of the Umayyads or by the more hidden parts of Samarra in the ninth century. But in the public art of the mosque or of coinage, it is only exceptionally that representations occur, at least until the eleventh or twelfth centuries. A rational and intellectual justification for these changes did not occur on a doctrinal level until later. Its earliest traces seem to be in polemical writing of the middle of the eighth century, although I have often wondered whether the celebrated text of Theodore Abu Qurra which has so frequently been used to indicate this particular date really does have all the implications attributed to it.¹³ It is possible that a careful study of early traditions and of legal literature will bring out some additional information on the elaboration of the doctrine within Islam itself, but these are notoriously difficult sources to use, especially when one seeks to date them properly, and their serious investigation has barely begun.¹⁴ But, even if more information is found, I rather doubt that it will alter in any [48] significant way the conclusion that there is nothing within early Islamic thought comparable to the late antique and especially medieval Christian concern with formulating a precise relationship between representation and the represented.

The paradox seems then to be that, for immanent cultural, psychological and political considerations of a very specific time, official Islam succeeded in doing, apparently painlessly, bloodlessly, and without rational justification, what required, at almost the same time in Byzantium, endless discussions, often of a very high level of sophistication, and a violence hardly seen before or after, around what we would consider as works of art. Furthermore, Byzantine Iconoclasm was eventually rescinded, while an absence of representations in all aesthetic or symbolic creativity pertaining to the faith and a reluctance to images in other arts became accepted characteristics of Islamic art. Without a capitalized Iconoclasm, iconoclasm with a small “i” became apparently the norm for an enormous culture extending from Spain to India and the inheritor of practically all the forms which had grown in

¹² The latest statement on the evidence, with full bibliography, is found in G. C. Miles, “The Earliest Arab Gold Coinage,” *ANSMN*, 13 (1967).

¹³ Creswell, *Early Muslim Architecture*, pp. 411–12.

¹⁴ R. Paret, “Textbelege zum islamischen Bilderverbot,” *Studien H. Schrader dargebracht* (Stuttgart, 1960). A statement on the evidence, with full bibliography, is found in Miles, “The Earliest Arab Gold Coinage,” *ANSMN*, 13 (1967).

the Mediterranean and the Middle East. How was it possible? And, if an explanation can be provided, does it in any way help in understanding Byzantine Iconoclasm?

Let me begin with a parenthetical remark dealing with an important problem of formal interpretation of monuments and affecting the hypothesis I will propose later. While it is true that calligraphy and geometric or vegetal ornament predominated in the visual tradition created by Islamic culture, these two modes did not exclude representations of living beings whose analysis brings out frequently enough complex meanings. Umayyad palaces like Qusayr 'Amrah and Khirbat al-Mafjar are obvious examples which are reasonably well known, but the 'Abbasids, the Fatimids, and almost every secondary dynasty as well as the non-dynastic substructure of Islamic civilization sponsored and utilized figural art, with the exception so far of North African Berber dynasties.¹⁵ After the middle of the twelfth century, there occurred a true explosion of such images which continued in India, Iran and the Ottoman empires, although a taste for and interest in representations disappeared almost entirely in the Arab world c. 1350 onward.¹⁶ Under these circumstances, is it really correct to talk of an Islamic iconoclasm or even of an avoidance of representations of living things? And should one not limit investigations to those aspects of the arts which are directly and exclusively related to the faith? Maybe so, but it is important to note that, in scale and in formal character, Islamic representations are, with a few exceptions, of a different order than figures in classical, Byzantine, or western medieval arts after the early Romanesque period.

Three examples may suffice to make my point. In the Cairo Museum there is a celebrated group of wooden beams which presumably came from the Fatimid palace and which are usually dated in the latter part of the eleventh century.¹⁷ They are elaborately carved and contain a simple geometric progression of cartouches with a standard imagery of royal pastime. In the twelfth-century ceiling of the Cappella Palatina in Palermo, almost every facet of an elaborate *muqarnas* ceiling contains images with an unusually wide variety of subjects.¹⁸ The point, however, is that in neither case could the figures be easily seen. Obviously their point as decoration, as a manner of transforming a high ceiling or wooden beams far above the eyes of the users of whatever room contained them, overshadowed, not to say obliterated,

¹⁵ There is no coherent history of Islamic iconography. A general introduction may be found in R. Ettinghausen, *Arab Painting* (Geneva, 1962) and specific examples are discussed by many studies by Ettinghausen, the latest one being *From Byzantium to Sassanian Iran* (Leiden, 1973). See also various studies by E. Baer.

¹⁶ O. Grabar, "Les Arts Mineurs de l'Orient Musulman," *Cahiers de Civilisation Médiévale*, II (1968).

¹⁷ G. Marçais, "Les figures d'hommes et de bêtes," *Mélanges Maspéro*, III (Cairo, 1940).

¹⁸ U. Monneret de Villard, *Le Pitture Musulmane al Soffitto della Capella Palatina* (Rome, 1950).

their immediate visual impact as figures belonging to a variety of otherwise definable iconographic cycles. My third example is that of one of the celebrated group of Spanish ivories of the last decades of the tenth century. Their quality has long been recognized and, although some of the subjects of their decoration are not entirely clear, there is a general agreement that it included principally typical scenes of princely life.¹⁹ These ivories differ from the Cairo woodwork or the Palermo paintings in that they were meant to be handled directly and their representations could not remain unseen or barely imagined. Yet one of their stylistic characteristics is that there is no hierarchical distinction between medallion frames, vegetal ornament and personages. They are all shown on the same plane or planes, and subjects with the same iconographic meaning are found inside and outside medallions. It is as though they were meant to be equal in the visual effect they produced. This rather curious egalitarianism in the use of forms and subjects lends itself to several interpretations, one of which is ambiguity or uncertainty about the meaning to be given to images. Similar ambiguities occur in the eighth-century sculpture at Khirbat al-Mafjar,²⁰ in Nishapur pottery of the ninth or tenth centuries,²¹ and, in a different way, in later Persian miniatures.

[49] The first point of these examples is that even if it is incorrect to imagine Islamic art as devoid of representations, it probably is correct to say that they played in it a different role, perhaps best defined at this stage as undifferentiated from other motifs, as though part of a “total” system of designs in which not a single category, except writing, was unduly emphasized. But there is a second point to these examples which is more important to my subject. It is that a culture and an art which picked up its visual vocabulary in the richest repertoire of representations known in history managed to use these forms in a manner least suited to the models and kept up for centuries, with only occasional disruptions after the twelfth century, a use of representations which seemed at first glance to be defeating its subjects.

In other words, the central tradition of Islamic art always downplayed representations of living things and, even though the contrast between the right side of the Mshatta façade which is in front of the mosque and contains no animals and the left side which does have animals and human heads makes the point in a rather crude manner,²² the visual contrast between the two sides is one of degree rather than of kind, and there is something disingenuous in doing what so many of us have done: to excerpt a representation of man, however deeply hidden it may be, and to give it the importance only of a design.

¹⁹ See now E. Kühnel, *Die Elfenbeinskulpturen* (Berlin, 1969), esp. pls XVIII and XXII.

²⁰ R. W. Hamilton, *Khirbat al-Mafjar* (Oxford, 1957), pls XXXV.1 or LIII.2.

²¹ E. Atil, *Ceramics from the Islamic World* (Washington, 1973), pl. 12.

²² Creswell, *Early Muslim Architecture*, pls 119 and ff.

To propose an explanation for this phenomenon we must turn to what may be called considerations of social ethics. For it is probably neither artists and artisans nor legal scholars and theologians nor even caliphs and lesser princes who determined a Muslim artistic attitude, but rather that peculiarly unique social phenomenon which has still evaded coherent definition by social scientists, the corporate *ummah*. Centered primarily in urban settings, its components were related to each other by a complicated set of bonds, at times formalized as through the workings of the *shari'ah*, the legal system, at other times more informal, as the complex of ties which has been called the *asabiyah*.²³ It is this body which created the norms around which the visual creativity of the culture was developed and it is rather remarkable that only one scholar, the late Marshall Hodgson, has tried in a brilliant article published over ten years ago to disentangle the components of this social ethic as it applied to the arts.²⁴ Starting with his rather abstract analysis, I shall try to develop a slightly different interpretation of a Muslim attitude toward the arts and suggest a way in which it may be, at least conceptually, of some value in understanding the Byzantine phenomenon. I will only deal with monuments and ideas which seem to me valid for a period earlier than the middle of the twelfth century, for, in spite of a generally accepted notion of a monolithic Islamic position, so many things changed in the latter part of the twelfth century that generalizations applicable to earlier times simply do not work, as mysticism together with many ethnic and regional modifications require entirely different explanations.

Influenced in many ways by the formally expressed or subjacent views of various forms of Protestantism, most specifically early Calvinism and the Quakers, Hodgson identifies four key aspects of a Muslim social ethos: *populism* in the sense that a working urban bourgeoisie established itself, at least until the thirteenth century, as the main taste-maker in opposition to the court of princes; *moralism* in the sense that an ethical justification, usually in legal terms, must be given to any action or form of behavior; *factualism* in the sense that there is no real mystery in the universe, and since God alone is Power and Reality, there is no need for the obvious substitution for physical reality which characterizes any representation; and, finally, *historicism*, a term which strikes me as less clear than the previous one but which I interpret to mean that no event or no life (with only a very partial exception for the Prophet) could acquire the kind of extra-temporal or parachronic value which has led to the Christian or Buddhist attempts to represent the intelligible. Although an Islamicist may quibble with some aspects of this rough definition of a culture, it seems to me at least that, on the whole, it succeeds quite adequately in identifying the key features of early Sunni Islam. It implies a distrust if not an outright rejection of two essential

²³ See Marshall Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, esp. vol. 1 (Chicago, 1974).

²⁴ M. Hodgson, "Islam and Image," *History of Religions*, 3 (1964).

aspects of artistic creativity. It denies the possibility or the value of escaping time through the freezing of a moment or of an idea; this objection is particularly valid for the visual arts, for poetry or music were precisely arts which are intimately bound to the time of recitation or of performance. And, secondly, Hodgson's model implies a rejection or at the very least a disapproval of expensive possessions, and, in our fascination for the public art of churches, it is essential to remember that the arts most commonly known or seen were privately owned or used objects, ranging from simple ceramics to fancy textiles and gold cups. The rejection is not of art *per se*, nor even of representations, but, as Ibn Miskawayh, a typical *honnête homme* of the tenth century, put it, of becoming attached to something beautiful [50] and expensive.²⁵ The cardinal sin is not one of artistic creativity but of greed and of temptation away from divine truth.

Up to this point, Hodgson's analysis, which I have only modified, I trust, on minor details, seems reasonable enough, for it does provide an explanation for the striking practicality of so much of Islamic art of early centuries: its emphasis on public architecture with social functions, its development of an elaborate art of textiles and of ceramics. It also explains why so much of the fancier arts is identified with royal or princely luxury: the palaces of the Umayyads with their exuberant sculptures and paintings, the silver objects continuing Sasanian practices, so many themes of the Cappella Palatina. This was precisely the stuff which was morally and socially wrong and it is curious indeed, especially when compared to Christian historiography, that so little information about all these royal orgies of forms is given in the literature written by and for the learned bourgeoisie. But Hodgson and many other writers may have overstated their point when they deduce from their analyses of a Muslim ethos that there was no Islamic visual symbolism and that there was no concern for the intellectual problems of images and of representations. I should like to suggest, on the contrary, that Islamic culture did in fact develop both a visual symbolic system and a rather complex, if limited, argument about representation.

The key point about symbolism and the reason why it is not usually detected is that it rarely took the form expected in the classical tradition of a one-to-one relationship between a visual motif and an external subject. The celebrated third style of Samarra stucco decoration from the ninth century is usually interpreted as a fascinating ornamental achievement of utilizing the full surface of a wall in the creation of an endlessly repetitive pattern which can only be defined in abstract terms: that is to say, not in terms of separate motifs which can be excerpted from the design but as a set of relationships of symmetry, light and shade, and so on.²⁶ The Kalayan minaret in Bukhara is a striking composition of brick combinations in which each stage is a

²⁵ Ibn Miskawayh, *Traits d'Ethique*, tr. M. Arkoun (Damascus, 1969), pp. 301–3.

²⁶ Grabar, *Formation*, p. 198 ff.

different aspect of the same basic diamond motif.²⁷ And the surface of a celebrated plate from Nishapur in the Freer Gallery contains an inscription with a proverb and five floral designs in the center.²⁸ All these examples can be interpreted as visual interpretations of medieval Islamic intellectual currents. The abstraction of the Samarra design can be seen as a visual translation of the philosophical, legalistic and ethical concerns of the ninth century which attempted to discover the basic, abstract principles of thought in such a fashion that no aspect of reality would be immune from them, just as no part of the decorated wall escapes from a meaning in the design. The Nishapur plate or the Kalayan minaret are not really examples of a *horror vacui* but of the fact that everything has meaning and value. And in the instance of the minaret, as in several other examples more particular to Iran, it may even be suggested that the expression of the same motif in several different appearances is a translation through elaborate geometry of a profoundly Islamic notion of one God with many equivalent names. What gives some credence to these hypothetical explanations is, first of all, that symbolic meanings through inscriptions pervaded so much of Islamic art,²⁹ and secondly, that there is such striking correspondence in time between the visual phenomena and scientific, legal and philosophical interests, just as the mystical developments of later times will, together with other reasons, lead to a reappearance of images and of concrete symbols. And then there is a logical argument which is that the absence of a developed visual symbolism is simply an unlikely phenomenon for a huge world over several centuries.

Now in all these examples there are no representations of living beings, men or animals. The reason, I submit, is only secondarily the negative one of rejecting actual or potential idols. It is rather that the Muslim world had not quite managed to come to grips with the key problem of visual reality. Or rather it gave to this problem an unusual and contradictory solution. Two examples will serve to make my point. One is the celebrated text of Maqrizi describing the competition around 1058 between two painters, Qusayr and Ibn Aziz. One claimed to be able to represent a personage so that it can be seen in relief, while the other one said that his personage will seem to be imbedded in the wall. Both succeeded by an artful combination of colors (in one case white on black, in the other red on yellow), according to the account. But preceding this story is another one, less frequently quoted, which relates that in a mosque of Cairo there was a representation of a fountain with steps leading to it and that the combination of colors was such as to give, from one particular spot, the typical *trompe-l'œil* feeling of an actual staircase.³⁰ Both stories suggest [51] an illusionist perfection which

²⁷ D. Hill and O. Grabar, *Islamic Architecture and its Decoration* (London, 1967), figs 10–11.

²⁸ Quoted in Atil, *Ceramics from the Islamic World*.

²⁹ E. Dodd, "The Image of the Word," *Berytus*, 18 (1969).

³⁰ Maqrizi, *Khitat* (Bulaq, 1869), II, 318.

hardly accords with the works known from that time. The explanation is that the eye of the medieval viewer in the Muslim world interpreted automatically the simplest outlines of what it saw as an illusion of reality, because there is no way of interpreting something one knows otherwise except as potentially real.

My second example comes from Ghazali's *Alchemy of Happiness* written around 1106 and discovered in a very rarely mentioned article by Ettinghausen.³¹ His main emphasis is on the pleasure of that which is beautiful and he writes:

the beauty of a thing lies in the appearance of that perfection which is realizable and in accord with its nature. When all possible traits of perfection appear in an object, it represents the highest stage of beauty; when only part of them occur, it has that measure of beauty which appears in the realized degree of perfection.

But then, in ways which recall Plotinus, Ghazali adds that there is a difference of degree existing between those things which belong to the outer world and to the inner world: "there is a great difference between him who loves the painted picture on the wall on account of the beauty of its outer form and him who loves a prophet on account of the beauty of his inner form." The point of these passages is that, however one enjoys it, one can only represent that which one knows, a doctrine strikingly akin to that of socialist realism. The further point, however, is that the truth or reality of anything alive does not lie in its shape, its physical character, which is but an accident, but in its inner worthiness, which is only hidden by the accidental shape.

What these two examples suggest is not at all iconoclasm, but beyond a truly sensuous feeling for pictorial beauty, the ultimate impossibility of representations of living things. It is of course true that out of these two examples of the eleventh century it is probably not proper to define a doctrine, and clearly a search for additional texts, not in juridical and religious treatises where scholarship has tended to look for them but in philosophical and ethical ones, is a needed task for research. Yet, when related to my earlier example from Ibn Miskawayh and to the monuments I have mentioned they suggest a pattern for the Muslim attitude to images.

First of all, it is not proper to refer to it as iconoclasm. At best aniconism is perhaps acceptable, for its key point is that it saw images not as evil *per se* (only man can do evil with them) but as irrelevant since unable to capture reality, and at worst temptations away from the requirements of a good life. This position was not achieved immediately and is not pertinent to the monuments of c. 700. They are the result of a specific inner growth of the Muslim world and not necessarily influenced by other cultures and

³¹ R. Ettinghausen, "Al-Ghazzali on Beauty," *Islamic Art and Archaeology: collected papers*, ed. Myriam Rosen-Ayalon, with an introduction by Oleg Grabar (Berlin: Gebr. Mann Verlag, 1984), pp. 16–21.

developments. But aniconism did not mean absence of symbols or a negative rejection of representations, at least not in early times. It rather meant the elevation of other visual forms, writing, vegetal ornament, geometry, abstract pattern, possibly color, to the level of meaningful forms, around which the culture developed its own systems of association whose study is still in its infancy.

From these remarks it could be concluded that an understanding of Islamic attitudes has nothing to do with Byzantine Iconoclasm, except perhaps to the extent that the phenomenon of Islam is pertinent to explain the Byzantine crisis. Such has been the conclusion of many scholars in recent years, for instance that of Grünebaum, among others.³² At best one can simply argue, as many have done, that Islamic monuments serve as examples of styles and motifs which would have disappeared from Byzantium because of Iconoclastic destructions. But there are perhaps two areas in which an awareness of the Muslim phenomenon is quite pertinent to the Byzantine one. One is technical. The fact that the Muslim attitude developed as it did was one of the reasons why Islamic art could have an impact on other arts, especially in Christendom, whereas the reverse was no longer possible. For the very qualities of its abstraction and purely interiorized symbolism made it adaptable to other tastes and other purposes, and even its writing could be copied with impunity if one did not become aware of its meaning.³³ It transformed Islamic forms into a uniquely intercultural system of forms in the Middle Ages and even in the Renaissance. And, when its princely cycles were copied, they did not represent so much Islamic art as the Near Eastern version of the art of all princes. The uniqueness of the Muslim ideological development may therefore explain its impact on Byzantium in the ninth century.

But the second aspect of the Muslim attitude is perhaps more important, although more difficult to focus properly. One can argue that Islam elaborated a mode of creativity which illustrates far more than itself. It is in fact a manner of "seeing" and of "showing" which tended to refuse the hierarchy of subjects imposed by Antiquity in which the representation of man [52] occupied the first place. Thereby, like early Buddhist art from which the Buddha is absent, it avoided the dilemma of Christian art which was that God can only be represented in human form but how can one make a human form to be understood as God? The choice existed in Byzantium as well, just as it existed later in the West, and the problem becomes less why Iconoclasm with a capital "I" began than why it did not succeed, for the questions it posed were universal ones rather than localized ones in time and

³² G. von Grünebaum, "Byzantine Iconoclasm and the influence of the Islamic Environment," *History of Religions*, 2 (1962).

³³ Much remains to be done in this area: see R. Ettinghausen's contribution to S. Schacht and J. Bosworth, eds, *The Legacy of Islam* (London, 1972).

space. To this question also the Muslim phenomenon may provide an answer, or at least the elements of an answer. It is that the starting point for an explanation of a phenomenon like the destruction or avoidance of images does not lie in immanent formal changes or in specific philosophical positions, but rather in the coexistence, at all times and in all places, of two equally potent attitudes toward the visual world: one which seeks the relationship between the thing made and its subjects or functions, and the other one which seeks to emphasize the relationship between works of art and their viewers and users. The Muslim world, for historical reasons of its own, chose to develop primarily the latter, while being occasionally tempted by the former. Christianity adopted the former and was compelled to struggle with the complex of Pygmalion, of images which become alive. Islam, by leaving the choice of interpreting visual creativity to men rather than by creating a doctrine of visual interpretation, may have succeeded in setting the nature of the arts in a totally different dimension.