Chapter XXIV

Classical Forms in Islamic Art and Some Implications*

The city of Kashgar (known as Kashi in contemporary Chinese) is located in the extreme west of China, some two hundred kilometers north of Kashmir and the Himalayas, three hundred kilometers northeast of Afghanistan and east of Samarkand in Uzbekistan. It has been a Muslim city for six or seven centuries and is presently populated, for the most part, by Uighurs speaking a Turkic language. At the entrance to the city on the road from the airport, there stands (or, at least, stood, some twelve years ago) a larger-than-life-size statue of Mao Tse Tung in the pose and with the gestures of Augustus of Prima Porta. In the center of town the public library and several other administrative office buildings have façades composed according to the canons created by the Renaissance from its view of the Vitruvian and Roman imperial practices and revised by the taste of tsarist St Petersburg and, in the last instance, by the visual habits of the Stalinist Communist world.

Thus it is that, still today and in the most unexpected and most remote parts of the Islamic world, classical forms and classical themes or themes obviously derived from classical art are used to express, in these particular instances, authority and social significance. It is unlikely that many of the inhabitants of Kashgar are aware of the filiation behind these obvious monuments in their midst, not because they are not aware of the significance of these creations, but because the classical tradition as such is not pertinent to their taste nor to the vocabulary of their traditional artistic expressions.

We can draw two contradictory conclusions from these examples. One is that the classical world of the Roman empire established universal means of expressing anything, or perhaps at worst only some things. But, whatever the limits or the range of a classical appearance in forms, such components of forms that can be identified as classical have had, in the example of Kashgar, the classicism of that component eliminated, or, at the very least,

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made immaterial, like some minor chromosome in the genetic pool of what are the image of a by then semi-mythical ruler and the façade of a space for learning in a provincial town. The second and alternate conclusion is that classical expressions are among the many ways in which Western cultural and ideological domination expresses itself, and, secondarily, that the vehicle of this domination can even be communism. With this conclusion, the classicism of the images becomes a dominant rather than a dormant trait and leads to [36] other ways of behaving with these forms. Instead of ignoring them as immaterial because they are without a specifically classical passport or label, we must judge them and praise them as examples of a triumphant acceptance of Western forms for universal purposes or condemn them as acts of imperialistic control over genuine local ways.

I shall return to other aspects of these issues in conclusion, but I begin with two contemporary and remote examples in order to suggest that, like most genetic problems of the history of art, the question of classical forms in this or that tradition is not merely a historical problem of accounting, of bookkeeping, and of making lists of the percentage of features in this or that object which belongs to a classical (or, for that matter, any other) heritage. Nor is it an iconographic or formal problem of evaluating the degree of presence of one tradition in another or of possible meanings attached to forms. It is rather an aspect of something much more fundamental, I believe, to the discourse on the visual arts, which is to identify the equilibrium, in the forms we see, between meaningless redundancies, willed messages of the time, and operating requirements of the analyses and judgments made by anyone at any time, and most particularly by Western and Western-trained observers today. In order to demonstrate my point, I shall first provide eleven examples of the presence of the Antique in works of Islamic art. I shall be brief about these examples which, somewhat on purpose, I shall present, more or less, in chronological order rather than in any intellectual or methodological sequence. I shall then conclude with some more complicated and perhaps more controversial hypotheses.

1.

The Umayyad mosque of Damascus was built between 705 and 715 of our era. Its dimensions and proportions, its stones, most of its columns and capitals, and its technique of mosaic decoration not only derive from a classical tradition maintained in early Christian times, but are in fact *the* proportions and the building elements of the Roman and possibly even Hellenistic *temenos* built many centuries earlier.[1] The only significant novelty

[1] Most of the basic information and bibliography are found in K. A. C. Creswell/J. W. Allan, *A Short Account of Early Muslim Architecture* (Aldershot, 1989), pp. 46–71. For a

is the syntax or ordering of these elements, not the elements themselves, which are all visual phonemes for a classical text dismantled and recomposed to be made into an early medieval one.

2.

The platform of the Haram al-Sharif in Jerusalem serves as the operational space for the Dome of the Rock built in 691 and for a long and complex series of Islamic religious associations. Although nearly every stone in or on it is a Muslim creation or has a clear Muslim meaning, its dimensions and almost all of its gateways, especially monumental ones like the Golden Gate to the east or the Double Gate to the south, were planned, with a full awareness of Hellenistic practices of design, for the Jewish Temple of Herod the Great, and correspond to functions and to symbolic associations that are quite different from those of the medieval Muslim world. Here the simple phonemes are, with exceptions, primarily [37] medieval and Islamic, but the basic structure of the space is antique. During the short time of the Crusades, a mythology of Old Testament themes from the West was transferred to the Islamic reworking of an antique space and added a special complexity to the implications of the present space,[2] as a Muslim sanctuary became the *Templum Domini.*

3.

Several of the country villas sponsored by the *nouveau riche* Umayyad princes of the first half of the eighth century were covered with mosaics, paintings and even sculptures, an ancient technique which had been revived by Muslim patrons, probably in imitation of an orally transmitted memory of Roman or Hellenistic palaces than of some specific monument. Classical themes, in addition to techniques, appear as well, usually mixed with subjects and styles of different origins. In many instances, as with very geometric mosaics, it is even possible to suggest a deliberate return to topics and to manners of execution of the first centuries.[3]

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discussion of the building according to lines suggested here, cf. Oleg Grabar, "La Mosquée Omeyyade de Damas," in *Synthronon* (Paris, 1968). For a recent survey of the evidence, cf. Klaus S. Freyberger, "Untersuchungen zur Baugeschichte des Jupiter-Heiligtums in Damaskus," *Damaszenische Mitteilungen*, 4 (1989).

[2] There is no accessible description of the space of the Haram, except in guidebooks, some of which, like the recent (1989) *Guide Bleu*, are excellent. For a popular description, cf. Alistair Duncan, *The Noble Sanctuary* (London, 1972); and the most recent scholarly book focusing on related topics, although with a different point of view, is Myriam Rosen-Ayalon, *The Early Islamic Monuments of al-Haram al-Sharif* (Jerusalem, 1989).

[3] The key monuments are Khirbat al-Mafjar in the Jordan valley and Qasr al-Hayr West halfway between Damascus and Palmyra (cf. Creswell and Allan, *Short Account*, pp. 135–

4.

Also in Damascus, but from the middle of the twelfth century, the *madrasa* of Nur al-Din (dated in 1154) has a façade with a superb late antique lintel surmounted by a typically Islamic *muqarnas* half-dome. What is interesting is that a carved stone, which was, almost certainly, a chance find, was used in the construction of a new building and became the module for the composition of the purely medieval *muqarnas* construction.[4] Nur al-Din's façade is not unique and a recent study has been devoted to the complex components of the revival of antique architectural themes in the twelfth century in Syria.[5]

5.

From the same period, but a few decades later, comes a frontispiece from a manuscript of the *Materia Medica* of Dioscorides. It shows the author, identified by the inscription as a "philosopher," seated in a vaguely Byzantinizing garb at the entrance of a sort of palatial pavilion. In front of him there is a very traditional antique or late antique Nilotic landscape.[6] A frontispiece in a Vienna manuscript of roughly the same time has new medieval topics like *shishkebab* and polo playing arranged in a composition typical of late antique and early Byzantine ivory diptychs.[7]

6.

From the same period of the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries comes another rather striking example of relationship to the Antique. In the southern Syrian city of Bosra there stands a [38] very medieval-looking fortress, heavy and lightless in its basalt masonry. It is datable to the twelfth and later centuries and belongs to a type of architecture which grew in Syria under the impact of the Crusades. But the interior of the fortress, its court, is a

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45, 179–200, with further references, especially to Robert Hamilton, *Khirbat al Mafjar* (Oxford, 1959); and Daniel Schlumberger et al., *Qasr el-Heir el-Gharbi* (published posthumously in Paris, 1989).

4 Ernst Herzfeld, "Damascus, Studies in Architecture," *Ars Islamica*, 9 (1942), pp. 2–14 and figs 42–5.

5 Terry Allen, *A Classical Revival in Islamic Architecture* (Wiesbaden, 1986).

6 The manuscript is in Istanbul, Ayasofya 3704, and it is not dated (cf. Ernst J. Grube, "Materialien zum Dioskurides Arabicus," in Richard Ettinghausen, ed., *Aus der Welt der Islamischen Kunst* (Berlin, 1959), p. 172 and fig. 6).

7 Often reproduced, as in Richard Ettinghausen, *Arab Painting* (Geneva, 1962), p. 91. The relationship to Byzantine and antique works has been established by Dr Eva Hoffman in her doctoral dissertation at Harvard University (1982).

perfectly preserved Roman theater which was the module for the dimensions of the fortress and is still used today for theatrical performances.[8]

7.

In two Arabic versions of Galen's book of antidotes to poison (the *Kitab al Diryaq*), one in Paris dated in 1199 and the other one in Vienna (whose frontispiece I mentioned) usually dated around 1220, there are representations of personages who are clearly Arabs, from their clothes and facial expressions. Yet they are all identified in Arabic letters as Greek doctors and learned men of all sorts who have contributed to medical and pharmaceutical sciences.[9]

8.

In the treasury of San Marco in Venice, there is a very unusual cup probably brought back from the looting of Constantinople in 1204. An inscription in pseudo-Kufic is engraved on a mounting which surrounds a series of glass fragments with clearly classical connotations. This object is usually attributed to the middle Byzantine period, but what is important for my argument is that, to someone in the middle Middle Ages, Islamic and antique ideas were mixed together and it appeared reasonable to set them up together.[10]

9.

One of the most extraordinary documents in the history of Persian painting is a page from an album in Berlin's own Staatsbibliothek. It is signed by the Persian painter Muhammad al-Khayyam, who is known to have worked in Samarkand and Herat (in present-day Uzbekistan and Afghanistan) in the early part of the fifteenth century. The image on the page is, without any doubt, the Tazza Farnese received by Lorenzo de Medici from Pope Sixtus IV in 1471. We can only speculate and invent a novel about how this perfect Roman gem found its way into eastern Iran, why it was copied by a

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8 Flemming Aalund et al., *Islamic Bosra* (Damascus, 1990); Klaus S. Freyberger, "Einige Beobachtungen zur städtebaulichen Entwicklung des römischen Bostra," *Damaszener Mitteilungen*, 4 (1989).

9 Bishr Farès, *Le Livre de la Thériaque* (Cairo, 1953); Kurt Holter, "Die Galen-Handschrift," in *Jahrbuch der Kunsthistorischen Sammlungen in Wien*, n.f., vol. 11, 1937.

10 H. Hahnloser et al., *Il Tesoro di San Marco* (Florence, 1971), vol. 1, pp. 77–8.

major court painter, and how it got to Italy half a century later.[11] This seems to be a particularly strange example, but it is not unique in its genre. Many centuries earlier, when, in the middle of the eleventh century, the treasure of the Fatimids in Cairo was looted by Turkish soldiers who had not been paid, the fascinatingly rich collections of that treasure turned out to include saddles which were alleged to have belonged to Alexander the Great.[12] The saddles had been acquired by a caliph from an antique or art dealer and one can easily imagine antique dealers going, in the eleventh or fifteenth century, from court to court with recently manufactured fakes, actual fakes believed to be originals, as well as with originals and with all sorts of intermediary types of [39] objects. Within their baggage, which can at times be imagined through descriptions of royal and princely treasures, an important and presumably valuable category was that of objects with an antique pedigree, because a special and probably variable quality was given to them.

10.

Everyone in this jubilee year of Spain [1992] is aware of the Alhambra in Granada and few features in it are more celebrated than the *muqarnas* domes of the Halls of the Two Sisters and of the Abencerrajes, on either side of the Court of the Lions. They are the epitome of the structural sensuality achieved by late medieval craftsmen in the Islamic world, and much has been written or could be written about the geometry of these structures and their absolute symmetries, about the technique of their construction, and about the magic of their effect on the eyes. But, as it turns out, the design of these ceilings also has a meaning, and that meaning is provided by poems written especially for the Alhambra by the poet Ibn Zamrak and copied in the room below at eye level, so that any visitor would read the poem while looking at the ceiling. These poems describe the cupolas as domes of heaven in which constellations appear or disappear as the sun or the moon lights them up by moving around them. In short, we have to imagine the Alhambra domes as rotating heavenly domes like those built by Nero in his Domus Aurea, whose memory was preserved throughout the Middle Ages and mixed up with all sorts of other royal

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[11] Horst Blanck, "Eine Persische Pinselzeichnung nach der Tazze Farnese," in *Archäologische Anzeiger*, 79 (1964), pp. 307–11; Ernst Kühnel, "Malernamen in den Berliner Saray Alben," *Kunst des Orients*, 3 (1959), p. 73.

[12] This treasure is often mentioned, but the only full discussion of its content is still that of Paul Kahle, "Die Schätze der Fatimiden," *Zeitschrift der deutschen Morgenlandgesellschaft*, vol. 89 (1935). Cf. now also the doctoral thesis of Ghada Qaddumi, *A Medieval Islamic Book of Gifts and Treasures* (Harvard University, 1990), for the translation and commentary of a particularly important related text.

myths like those of Solomon and of Khosro.[13] It is unlikely that the royal patrons of the Alhambra or the artists and craftsmen realizing their dreams, or even the poets who wrote about these domes, were really aware of the classical background of the idea of rotating domes of heaven. Following an interpretation proposed nearly a quarter of a century ago, it can be argued that here semantic continuity was maintained in mutually exclusive languages.

II.

My last example is a relatively simple one. Many explanations, not necessarily exclusive of each other, have been provided for the spectacular domes of Ottoman architecture culminating in the dark and moody Süleymaniye in Istanbul or in the festival of lit space created in the Selimiye in Edirne, both buildings designed by the great Ottoman architect Sinan in the sixteenth century. One of the explanations for these cupolas is to consider them as the technically perfect completion of an evolution which, through Hagia Sophia, goes back to the Pantheon. This genetic affiliation was actually recognized by Sinan himself, although not quite in the terms I am using in this essay.[14]

The first conclusion that can be drawn from this collection of examples is that the Antique appears in many different ways in medieval and pre-modern Islamic art. It can be a single stone or a whole space literally lying around and ready to be reused for the same purpose as before or for a new one. It can be an ancient idea translated into a new language. It can [40] be a treasured memory or a souvenir willfully or accidentally discovered and protected. It can be the subject of a transfer of one's own feelings and needs, as a sort of guarantor of quality or class, like parts of a menu that would be in French rather than in one's own tongue. It can be the original first step in an idea or a form which then, like a ripple or a sound wave, continued its movement through time and across many spaces. These are five ways for the ancient world to appear in one of the medieval ones and each one of these ways could receive a name, in line with the logically ordered procedures of a "scientific" art-historical analysis. One can learn to identify immediate or phonetic ways,

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13 Oleg Grabar, *The Alhambra* (London, 1978), esp. pp. 144–53; E. García Gómez, *Poemas Árabes en los Muros y Fuentes de la Alhambra* (Madrid, 1985); J. M. Puerta, *La Alhambra* (Madrid, 1989).

14 For Sinan, cf. now Aptullah Kuran, *Sinan* (Washington, 1987). For a more complex interpretation of his art, Doğan Kuban, "The Style of Sinan's Domed Structures," *Muqarnas*, 4 (1987). A paper arguing, in particular, that sixteenth-century domes reached a geometric perfection which could not be surpassed was presented by Oleg Grabar at a congress held in Ankara in 1988, "The Meanings of Sinan's architecture": A. Akta-Yasa, ed., *Uluslararasi Mimar Sinan Sempozyomu Bildirileri* (Ankara, 1996), pp. 275–83.

semantic and translated or original, possessive, projective, generative. Each one of these ways – and there probably are others – has its own history, its own rhythms, its own density within medieval Islamic culture, and many of these ways are shared with medieval Christian uses of the Antique, although without the peculiar dialog developed in Latin Christianity. And there is nothing surprising in the existence of these Islamic ways, since nearly half of the ancient world became part of the Muslim one and, at many levels of political behavior, administration, science and thought, the complex relationship between Antiquity and Islam has often been explored.[15] Although they are very different from each other, I would like to call all these ways descriptive, because, ultimately, they allow us to outline better the constitutive components of Islamic art, rather than interpretative, because they do not in themselves explain much about either Islam or the Antique.

But, if all that was achieved by the analysis and discussion of antique themes in Islamic art consisted in lists of examples arranged according to categories of understanding, we would be dealing with a scientifically interesting but slightly pedantic exercise with relatively little importance beyond a small circle of specialists. In reality, the examples I have given raise, I believe, a more interesting and more fundamental question to the historian of the arts facing millions of objects, monuments and images and asked by the scientific community on the one hand, and by the cultures with which he deals on the other, to provide a pedigree or an aesthetic appreciation of these monuments and the grounds for a judgment of their quality.

The question is whether the task of the historian should be to seek and identify an infinite number of variants and of variables in the things done by man and to provide every one, every land and every person, with something which can be called their own and which is different from what is found elsewhere, or, alternately, whether his task is to find the grand principles, the overall terms through which *anyone's* art can be seen and understood, but in which no one art or one monument predominates.

The central issues of the history of art and of the humanities in general are not technical or informational, for in the areas of technology and data gathering and processing, we know how to do our job, even if we do not always do it well. The issues are moral and aesthetic and it is in the consideration of the moral issues of the history and criticism of art that the study of the Antique in Islamic art bears its most fruitful results.

As I suggested with the examples from Kashgar in western China at the beginning of this essay, the search for the Antique in later arts can be seen in

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[15] For example, Franz Rosenthal, *Das Fortleben der Antike im Islam* (Stuttgart, 1965), as a collection of texts; and Richard Walzer, *Greek into Arabic* (Oxford, 1962). For the arts, cf. Oleg Grabar, "Survivances classiques dans l'Art de l'Islam," *Les Annales Archéologiques de Syrie*, 1 (1975); and Robert Hillenbrand, "The classical heritage in Islamic art," *Scottish Journal of Religious Studies*, 7 (1986).

two ways. It may be a way to glorify the achievements of the Mediterranean synthesis of the Roman empire with its numerous ramifications and variants and including the Iranian and Buddhist world of forms, or else it may be the assertion of universal values rightly or wrongly associated with the [41] Antique, but by a certain point freed of the onus of being classified as antique, remaining simply as old. In either case, the purpose of the search does not lie in improving our knowledge of the Antique, but in identifying the categories of thought through which we see and express what we see. Is it because we are Westerners that we see Roman sculpture behind images of rulers everywhere? Or is it that Roman sculpture represented a lot of rulers and, therefore, is only one illustration of a broader potential? The answer to these questions is partly one of psychology of cognition, but much in the question requires an ethical decision on our own motivation when we act as historians of art. For many statements are valid and accurate about a work of art, especially when one seeks to understand its sources and its origins, but it is the historian embedded in his or her time and in his or her values who proclaims what is true.