

## Chapter XVII

### Graffiti or Proclamations: Why Write on Buildings?\*

To commemorate Laila Ibrahim is an easy task if one merely wishes to remember and praise her life-long concern for and defense of the monuments of Cairo, her intellectual and scholarly achievements, and especially her unstinted generosity for all those, young or old, Egyptian or foreign, men or women, who needed help and advice when working in or on the arts of Islamic Egypt. The task is more difficult when one tries to match her half a century of work with a piece of scholarship of one's own. I have not engaged for years in research dealing with Egypt and such queries as I have about Cairene monuments – and there are many – would take more time to resolve than I can now manage. This is why I offer for this volume a series of observations of a more general character about the presence of so much writing on monuments of Islamic architecture. These remarks are based on a talk given at a meeting of the College Art Association in 1983 devoted to writing on works of art. The direction taken by my talk, starting from a specific experience of Islamic art and ending with the operation of visual perception anywhere, is one of the ways in which the kind of work, concrete and precise, preferred by [70] Laila Ibrahim may find usefulness for all historians of art, whatever part of the world's history becomes their own fiefdom.

To write on buildings is a nearly universal urge in every literate society except classical India, and there probably are ancient Egyptian examples of “Kilroy was here,” of the “*Défense d'afficher, loi du 26 Juillet 1888*” which adorn so many blank walls in France, of Emerson's or Paul Valéry's ponderous words on the lecture halls of Harvard University and the Trocadéro Museums in Paris respectively, or of Dante's frightening inscription at the entrance to Hell with its horrible twentieth-century twist at Auschwitz.

There are two paradoxes in these examples. One is that the texts I mentioned and any comparable ones are not necessary to the functions and

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uses of the building on which they are found; often they are difficult to see and to read, whether because of their inaccessible location or because of the convoluted actions they require of a viewer: a sudden stop in a crowded public space or focusing on a minute detail from a large monument. The other paradox is that, while perceived as part of a visually significant whole, writing implies or recalls another order of knowledge, another mental process than visual experience. One example will suffice to make my point. As historians study a building or even a segment of a building (its court, its dome or its sculpted portal), their normal associations are other buildings, domes or sculptures. But, as one reads an inscription, one's automatic, instinctive, association is rarely another inscription or another building, but rather a text, a person or an event. The information it contains is an end in itself and limited in its significance to the building on which it is found, or, as we shall see, pertinent to realms which have nothing to do either with the building or with the inscription.

These paradoxes lead to two questions: what is the status of writing in architecture? Is it in fact a privileged one or is it just *one* of the orders of forms which serve to give meaning to a building?

Islamic architecture is an obvious field to discuss these questions, as it is generally – and correctly – seen as the product of a highly verbal culture, in which, to paraphrase a well-known book,<sup>1</sup> the word did become image, and it is not altogether an accident that the dramas of Iran, Lebanon and Palestine in the 1970s and 1980s led to hundreds of Persian and Arabic inscriptions in the Paris subway or on the walls [71] of Kensington in London and even Cambridge in the United States, in contexts where the majority of the local population could not comprehend the messages sent, only be aware of a wealth of communication.

I shall provide seven examples of the uses of writing in Islamic architecture and then propose a few functions which can be given to writing in the hope that further discussion will hone and even modify the appropriateness of these meanings.

In the late fifteenth-century mosque–*madrasa* of Qaytbay in the eastern cemetery of Cairo, a large number of qur'anic passages frame the main parts of the building and appear as long bands on its walls. Most of them refer primarily to the eschatology of Islam, as is appropriate for the mausoleum attached to the building. But some can be connected to a very concrete event of the time, the dramatic defeat and execution of a rebel.<sup>2</sup>

In the early fourteenth century, at Linjan, south of Isfahan, a frequently illustrated square stucco plaque was set on the walls of the sanctuary. It includes the names of the twelve *imams* and of the wives of the Prophet in a

<sup>1</sup> Erica C. Dodd and Shereen Khairallah, *The Image of the Word* (Beirut, 1981).

<sup>2</sup> Oleg Grabar, "The Inscriptions of Qaytbay," in D. Kouymjian (ed.), *Studies in Honor of George C. Miles* (Beirut, 1974).

stunning spiral composition arranged in such a way that the whole surface of the panel is covered and no free space is left anywhere.<sup>3</sup> While those who know the succession of anointed names will easily recognize them, the panel can only be read with difficulty from its position on the wall and remains a mystery to the non-initiated.

The twelfth-century Qazvin mosque, in Iran, is decorated with a long inscription at the base of its large dome which contains a legal endowment deed with all the properties whose income was to serve for the building and upkeep of the mosque.<sup>4</sup>

In Istanbul, Hagia Sophia, the great sixth-century masterpiece, was transformed into a mosque after the Ottoman conquest of 857/1453. Huge shields with the names of the Orthodox caliphs were hung, probably in the eighteenth century, on its pendentives. Among other visual functions, they strengthen the proclamation of Sunni Muslim possession of a celebrated space by their simple presence rather than by what they say, although the choices of names are significant indeed. [72]

The Hall of the Two Sisters, the most brilliantly decorated space adjacent to the Court of the Lions in the Alhambra in Granada, contains, at eye level so that it can be read as one moves in the hall, a long poem which interprets the *muqarnas* ceiling as a rotating Dome of Heaven.<sup>5</sup>

In most fifteenth-century Timurid inscriptions on the portals of mosques, or of *madrasas*, the main or narrative (often called historical) part of the inscription is in blue or white and identifies the building's sponsors, its date and other specific data, while above, like a litany, an inscription in another color, often red, repeats "Power is to God" or some other similar pious statement.

My last example is of a completely different kind, not usually recorded by historians of art. During our excavations at Qasr al-Hayr East in Syria, we found a stone on which someone, many centuries ago, had repeated three times: "God's forgiveness on Hassan ibn 'Ali, the merchant."

These examples from different areas and times and fulfilling different purposes lead me to propose five functions for writing on buildings, it being clear that more than one function can be attributed to any one inscription.

The first function can be called "indicative." It is a fairly obvious one as a building is identified, a date given, a sponsor or patron glorified. Today the interest of this indicative function is for the most part only for the writing of labels or of captions; it is secondary to any visual understanding of the monument itself and at best serves to establish its context. What is more

<sup>3</sup> Among other places see Oleg Grabar, *The Mediation of Ornament* (Princeton, 1992), fig. 59.

<sup>4</sup> Janine Sourdel-Thomine, "Inscriptions seljoukides et salles à coupole de Qazwin en Iran," *Revue des Etudes Islamiques*, 42 (1974).

<sup>5</sup> Oleg Grabar, *The Alhambra* (London, 1978, repr. Sebastopol, 1992).

difficult is to determine the function of that level in its own time; at first glance, it is nothing but a redundancy, as it is hardly likely that no one knew who built a building, what the building was, or how it was meant to be used. I do not know of a single example in classical Islamic civilization of an inscription like our “exit” sign which would have been used to indicate or compel behavior in a building. The redundancy of the indicative function is, therefore, a selective redundancy which chooses some but not all the possibilities involved in identifying something in a building. It is similar to the redundancy of a manuscript illustrator who chooses some but not all possible episodes of a text to make images. There are exceptions, [73] but for the most part, like the rank and serial numbers of the military, indicative inscriptions are formulaic and standardized. They may well have had a legal status in establishing certain rights of ownership and this would give them a culturally unique meaning. Until this is demonstrated, however, the indicative function remains a fairly universal one and an obviously informative one.

My second function is a commemorative one, also a universal one. The signature of an architect or a decorator, the name of a king, or the graffito of a medieval Kilroy are put on a building because of the wonderfully touching human trust in the permanence of building materials, if not of a specific building. The point of the commemorative function is that writing alone is seen as a guarantor of preservation; other visual modes, like portraiture, are not sufficient to ensure that perpetuation of existence which is so central to human vanity or to belief in eternal life. Yet it is often more than the simple expression of vanity. When Qaytbay makes through a Qur’anic quotation an allusion to a contemporary event, he is recalling more than his victory, he also recalls or proclaims the power of an office, that of the sultan. When Mas’ud of Ghazna covers the walls of his palace with Persian poetry, he is proclaiming his literary taste as a prince. And when an endowment deed serves as a base to a cupola as in Qazvin, it is the identification of legal allegiance as a social bond which is proclaimed. Commemoration is therefore much more than the compelled remembrance of an individual patron or artist; it is also the statement of certain social, political, intellectual values which writing alone can perpetuate.

The third function of writing is semantic. In the Alhambra (or, for that matter, the Dome of the Rock or the Taj Mahal), writing gives the specific and exact meaning of architectural forms, the specific significance a patron wanted to emphasize. In many ways this is an unusual function which does not simply state the meaning of a building or of its parts, but provides in written form the program of the building. In Hagia Sophia, it is the writing on the shields which most forcefully proclaims the permanent transformation of the church into a mosque; the Timurid example of two messages written alongside each other shows how several simultaneous meanings could be coordinated in the same formal unit. It would be easy to argue that this semantic function is essentially what historians of [74] art call an iconographic

one when it contains representations. If I prefer the term “semantic,” it is because it incorporates several variants. There is an *evocative* variant, whereby the writing of a religious formula – like the “There is no Victor but God” in the Alhambra – maintains the presence of the faith in a secular setting. There is a precisely *iconographic* variant by which writing compels an interpretation or a use and makes alternate ones incorrect or wrong. There is a *symbolic* variant, as in tall minarets with unreadable inscriptions so high up that they cannot be deciphered from below, where the mere presence of the Arabic script *connotes* rather than denotes meanings. And in all likelihood many other variants can be detected. The fascinating point about these variants is that they are all classical categories of the visual analysis of representations. Writing at this level is simply (or complexly) an idiosyncratic pool of forms used to develop a program, like representational sculpture or floor mosaics in Christian or Late Antique art. Its difficulty is that, in a visual context, it requires a non-visual competence and this is perhaps why it is culturally far more restrictive than representation, yet epistemologically far more precise. But I will venture yet one step further. These semantic uses of writing on buildings, while possibly existing in other cultures, developed a unique range in Islamic architecture and may be considered as peculiar to it.

The fourth function is iconic. Writing in the Linjan shrine is a pious statement which uses an architectural medium for its religious message. It has become an independent image and could be excerpted from its setting without losing its sense. From the point of view of this paper, this is the least interesting function of writing, as its architectural context is secondary to its significance. For an interpretation of writing in general, it is, of course, an essential function. And this is why I would put within the iconic function nearly all the attributes of what is called calligraphy, that is the transformation, at times even obfuscation, of meaning through a variety of formal means. The development of the art of calligraphy was not a function of architecture, nor was it peculiar to Islamic culture. But, when compared to Western medieval or antique uses of writing in architecture, the Islamic case is striking for its use of an enormous variety of calligraphic styles developed outside of architecture and, in a few cases perhaps, acquiring a specifically architectural quality. [75]

The fifth function is more interesting, obvious in its general statement, but with one peculiar issue attached to it. It is the *formal* function of providing frames to architectural parts, of filling certain parts of buildings, of connecting parts to each other, in short of fulfilling all the purposes of ornament, at least as defined by E. Gombrich in his *The Sense of Order* (London, 1975). The issue is precisely that the *formal* definition of writing in architecture utilizes terms usually reserved for ornament, and most manuals put writing within categories of ornamental design, but the nature of the verbal message is almost never simply ornamental. Is the historian wrong in his categories? Or has there occurred an “ornamentization” of writing in architecture?

This last question leads to my concluding remarks. As part of a complete and discrete syntagm (the building) to be perceived and understood visually, writing is in a strange position as, on the one hand, it is transformed by the rules and needs of the visual arts and, on the other, it nearly always contains a message which is not visual. This is why the semantic function of writing developed by Islamic architecture is its most original contribution, as it attempted to use writing as part of the fabric of the monument, not as an optional choice for its adornment. In doing so, it correctly reflected what writing is but it also removed the immediate understanding of the monument from those who are not conversant with the language. In other words, except in its semantic function, writing on architecture loses its substantive value when it is incorporated in the fabric of a visually perceived monument or else requires an exclusively and unusually profound contextual analysis. The implications of this point for the history of art in general are fascinating, because the instance of writing may in fact call into question the ease with which we allow ourselves to interpret representational themes without engaging them with the cultural depth which is always required of writing. In other words, is it intellectually and methodologically correct to assume that a visual and comparative analysis suffices for representation or ornaments, when writing requires so much more varied and complex means to its understanding?

Why, then, did one write on buildings? When it is not simply to express one's vanity or, as in the graffito I quoted, one's fears, it was to ensure that the point and aim of a building were clearly understood for all times. It was an official proclamation across time of the truth of a moment. Somehow the word, or so it was thought, is far clearer and more definitive than the image. It is for having understood that particular value of writing that Islamic architecture acquired one of its most unique features. For its ambient culture transformed it and nurtured it into its messenger of knowledge and of beauty.