THE IDEA OF MANẒŪR, THE PROCESS OF CREATING PICTORIAL SPACE IN ISLAMIC PAINTING

by

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ABSTRACT

The approach followed by this study considers the paintings themselves as documents of visual activity rendered with its own grammar for painting. It is suggested here that one has to learn to read paintings as one has to read a text from another culture. Emphasis is laid on the Islamic concept of pictorial space, especially as it differs from the "Renaissance" interpretation of spatial representation.

This dissertation is divided into four chapters. The first chapter is basically a survey of the general characteristics of Islamic painting.

The second chapter is devoted to the identification of the problem: it will be shown here that understanding the perspective of time and place rather than the photographic accuracy, is the perennial problem facing the art historian.

The third chapter points out the current conceptions of applying "principles" of interpretation which are, on the whole, quite alien to the environment in which Islamic paintings were conceived.

The fourth chapter concerns the nature of images, and how they become a language, unique and recognizable to others within a culture. This chapter also deals with the idea of Manẓûr, a more descriptive and correct term that is extremely important in the analysis and study of Islamic painting; and why it is vital to present it as autonomous and not parasitic on another system of interpretation.

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of my thesis is to discuss and illustrate the way that Islamic art can be evaluated from an art-historical point of view, but without applying the imperatives laid down in the Western tradition.

It has often been stressed that objectivity is of prime importance if we want to treat art history as a scientific discipline. However, the word "objectivity" presents a problem in this case. What do we mean when we say "objective evaluation" of a painting? Do we mean that there are universal parameters which can be applied to each and every product of art, regardless of cultural or historical considerations? Or, do we mean that we evaluate a piece of art by its texture, shape and colour, without taking into account its intrinsic character, which is due to the artist and the prevailing culture in which the artist lives. In the case of the former, it is possible to maintain a detached objectivity, however, it would be only partial truth. Objectivity becomes more than difficult, when the artist's intention is being considered, especially after the lapse of time. How can we ensure that we know that intention? This is one of the questions that is going to be discussed in detail in the following paragraphs.

There is another factor that is important in art-historical analysis. The nature of accepted concepts, for example, the concept of perspective, or space. Are these concepts universal? If not, then how can we apply them intelligently and without prejudice to all works of art? With all the wealth that the preserved manuscripts provide to the understanding of Islamic painting, we find authorities in this field complaining that there is still an insufficient quantity to develop a visual coherence of this art. They are like a bird attempting to fly with one of its wings as yet inadequately feathered. They wade through the manuscripts in such a clear matter-of-fact style that their readers also are seduced into the same logical error.

Chapter three will illustrate how misleading concepts can be when we only know them within a familiar cultural setting. However, when we try to use these concepts as criteria for assessing the worth of a work of art of a different culture, they become prejudicial, and objectivity no longer prevails.

Chapter IV concerns the nature of images, and how they become a language, unique and recognizable to others within a culture. It deals with the idea of Manẓûr. Until the present day, Islamic art has generally been

evaluated by Western-trained art historians. Evidently, they applied their knowledge of Western art as the measure for comparison. It is hoped that this thesis is going to contribute valuable information about how Islamic art may be viewed from a different angle, and thus initiate new ground for dialogue concerning the role and method of the art historian.

Throughout this thesis, reproductions of Islamic paintings will be presented. To begin with, I am going to show the pictures in their entirety, together with the assessments of one or more prominent Western art historians, followed by my own analysis. Further, some of the pictures will be dissected into their individual components and examined, which, it is hoped, will assist me in making my point stronger and clearer.

CHAPTER ONE

GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF ISLAMIC PAINTING

In this chapter I would like to demonstrate certain dominant trends in Islamic painting. The painter is not different from any other member of the community, and besides living his own life, he also assumes the characteristics of the civilization in which he finds himself. It is therefore the duty of the art historian to study all aspects of the civilization, the art of which he is evaluating. Without the knowledge of the context in which the particular piece of art is produced, his evaluation will be coloured by personal bias, or the criteria of comparison will be invalid. When we are studying Islamic art, we must be aware of the imperatives of Islam and, as Ferber writes, we must examine it through its own internal imperatives without superimposing Western chronological periodicity upon it.[1]

It is very important to realize that art is the manifestation of something that is particular, and not of something that is universal. If it were universal, then there would not be such diversity in depiction.

Islamic civilization had the multi-national and multi-religious approach that operated in its civilization as well as in the arts.[2] Recognising the explicit current which was at work, we find Ettinghausen quoting from a ninth-century philosophical society, Ikhwân al-Safâ, the Brothers of Purity, whose influence and pure dedication need no emphasis:

> The ideal and morally perfect man should be of East Persian derivation, Arabic in faith, of Iraqi education, a Hebrew in astuteness, a Greek in the individual sciences, an Indian in the interpretation of all mysteries, but lastly and especially, a Sufi in his whole spiritual life.[3]

It is the basic approach of Ikhwân al-Safâ to cultural history and methodology that we may consider as an example of a different kind of approach which has been applied in medieval Islam to autonomous functions and expressions. Unlike earlier artistic activities, Islamic painting was not confined to a particular territory or society. In this study we are aware of further important aspects in surveying Islamic painting. It is generally acknowledged that due to unfavourable conditions for excavation and the availability of recent discoveries, a considerable barrier is presented to the art historian. Events in history, such as the Mongol invasion, destroyed valuable evidence, a factor which contributes to the difficulties encountered

while interpreting and dating material. However, the question which seems to be asked most often is whether or not the Muslim artist, in his paintings, tended to be interpretively "informative" with the text as an annotator, or whether he tended to be more poetic in choosing the images as being epigrammatic. Though there are clearly distinctions between the above two cases, there are also continuities. There seems to be no good reason for making this sharp division between the two cases. The relationship of the text to the miniatures is an internal relationship: it essentially involves the meaning of the images, in the way that words are dependent upon the structure within which that language is embedded. Both images and words can only tell us what we can see, read and understand. It is never easy to decide what the artist had in mind when he illustrated his text, that is to say, his choice of images. This problem, which has haunted the minds of many Islamic art historians, must also be emphasised. Namely, the relationship between the text and the illustrations. So much time has been wasted on this dandical approach, and by example, induced others to waste even more. One text and its illustrations cannot be intelligibly interpreted as separate entities. It would be wrong to assume that one can establish the correct relationship between a text and its illustrations

by merely studying each of them as the sole elements interceding with and substituting for one another. The above assertion usually ignores the many experiences, flights of fancy, and linguistic experiments which may or may not have readily perceptible character. This is especially so for the student who has not an extensive knowledge of the social structure within which that text and its illustrations are embedded.

Concept formation is a gradual process, and therefore we must go back a few hundred years in order to understand how we form ideas about civilizations; we may learn something by looking beyond the contemporary view of human development. A presentation of Islamic art, writes Ettinghausen, has to begin with a basic question: Is there such a phenomenon as Islamic art - an art which is characteristic of the civilization in its totality? But it is clearly desirable that before such a presentation is undertaken, we must attempt to arrive at an understanding as to what constitutes the study of Islamic art. What Ettinghausen is querying must be preceded by a critical examination of the assumptions and principles on which this study depends.

There is a great deal of searching to be done into what the Muslim artist had in mind when he painted scenes or illustrations.

FIGURE 1 One of the earliest paintings depicting an Islamic village. By al-Wâsitî (AD 1237). Maqâmât of al-Harîrî (Forty-third Maqâma). (Detail).

Was the painting carried out from observation and relating images from nature, or with actual rendering from nature? What influences had he observed from his culture and civilization that were to become his tools of expression and communication? Finally, his solutions to the problems in terms of his chosen medium also have to be examined. (Fig. 1), the illustration of the Forty-third Maqâma by al-Wâsitî is a good example of the scheme of composition which was developed to portray his conception of the society in which he moved. Scenes of everyday life are seen in the background, men and women are observed pursuing their customary occupations.

FIGURE 2 "The Eastern Isles", Painted by al-Wâsitî (AD 1237). Maqâmât of al-Harîrî (Thirty-ninth Maqâma).

In this work we also see the realistic surroundings which document the evolution of the landscape and, to use Ettinghausen's words in his description of this same painter's "The Eastern Isle", that he produced the earliest known extensive landscape in Islamic painting.[4] (Fig. 2).

He recalls in this connection that European art reaches the state of "pure" landscape painting only about two-and-a-half centuries later in the "Creation" painted

on the outer side of the wings of Bosch's triptych depiction of the "Garden of Earthly Delights". But while Bosch's works retain a fantastic character, al-Wâsitî's paintings are more frequently connected with his social surroundings, while at the same time, the particular value of Islamic painting is its quality of perception. These perceptions are derived uniquely from creative processes belonging to the Near Eastern mind.[5] The study of Islamic paintings remains best evaluated through a comprehensive attitude that recognises the more closely bound traditional elements in this civilization, and through an objectivity that can appreciate and correlate more than one civilization.

In viewing the illustrations we must also query whether they were meant to add to the literal meaning of the text, or whether they were considered no more than complementary to it, not bound by anything else except by the artist's commanding vantage point.

If we expect anything more than a "literal hint" to the context of the text, are we not in that same instance restricting, by our own boundary lines, the artist's natural response to the text, thus reducing the possibility of gaining a host of other informative

components that may prove to be invaluable on their own, in order to broaden our understanding of the text?

There apparently exists a so-called restrictive attitude in the study of Islamic art, and it is not an attitude that is easily overcome, as Ettinghausen points out:

> ... in the various Muslim countries there is a new generation of scholars eagerly exploring their own artistic heritage. Having grown up in a secular and nationalistic period of history, most of them see their past primarily as a national achievement in which international, religious and cultural factors played only a small part.

Such an approach is, indeed, restrictive. And such an attitude surely affects both arriving at the truth and carrying out any future research work objectively and successfully. But it cannot be denied that there are ideological preferences, aesthetic tastes and techniques involved in creativity that play their role as well. Such an approach is, however, only temporary, for it becomes meaningless when the prevailing conditions change.

The third question to be asked is: If there were not particular references to an illustration found in the text, are we then justified in passing judgements which claim that the artist must have relied on an earlier

unknown model? It may be constructive to examine another quotation from a much earlier source, possibly an eighth-century scholar of the highest rank who wrote in his important introduction to the translation of Bidpai's Sanskrit Fables, Kalîla wa-Dimna, from Persian into Arabic, Ibn al-Muqaffa' (died AD 759?).

> It may be desirable for him (al-Nâẓir) who is looking into our book not to have as his purpose the leafing through of its ornately rendered paintings (al-Tazâwîq) but to attend to what it contains of anecdotes until reaching the end, having time for cognisance into every anecdote and every word.[7]

At first glance, the above statement made by Ibn al-Muqaffa' may seem to express a derogatory attitude towards the illustrations of the Manuscript of Kalîla wa-Dimna. However, this statement is, in fact, an acknowledgement of the visual command of the illustrations. Ibn al-Muqaffa' goes on later to point out the importance of these paintings.

> The king's mind will be relieved by them, and they will be an incentive for keeping his interest in the work as a whole, because their visual entertainment is an integral part of their survival values.[8]

Thus he assures both the painter and the scribe of a good income, for the job acquired through viewing the

illustrations will cause continuous demand for their reproductions.

It is beyond doubt that a great deal more can be conveyed about the rendered images represented in various texts, which attract the eye of the reader. The scenes rendered tell us, in a way, of the relationship between looking and presenting the images to a particular environment.

Ibn al-Muqaffa''s statement, therefore, is to be taken as evidence of the strong visual command and influence which these paintings must have had. This much, at least, we must grant the artist - he must have painted not only in the way he wished, but also in the manner in which his contemporaries were able to appreciate and perceive them.

Leonardo da Vinci, for example, has said that the artist must first please the painters around him, and not solely his customers.[9] Whether or not such a practice was carried out among Muslim artists, we may never know. The Muslim artist may or may not have had a circle of friends, a kind of artistic sub-culture where such discussions could have taken place. The importance of understanding the cultural background in which a particular work has been conceived is, again, inherent. Such knowledge is

obviously not easily taught or learnt from books alone. Short or long visits to the area may equally lead nowhere, and might at first confuse the truth of the matter. That is not to say that a native is luckier than his international colleagues in these terms of cultural interpretations.

It must be emphasised here that the culture within which th artist found his expressions suitable are not as easily appreciated or interpreted by our modern-day standards. To be able to grasp the fundamental facts about any culture requires us to look beyond our own culture's limiting factors. According to Gombrich, culture and education have effectively interfered with man's primitive reactions.[10] It must be borne in mind, therefore, that there may be more to a painting than first meets the observing eye. Sensitivity towards the elements of its cultural environment is necessary, otherwise a host of subtleties may be lost. Eric Newton's assessment of Chinese painting is a good illustration of this point: Chinese painting is made of lines as subtle as a silken thread blown on to the paper, and of tones as elusive as the smoke of a cigarette. Yet it is not enough to be contented with an art that leaves the material appetites unsatisfied.[11] It goes without saying that Newton knew

far less about Ch'an painting,[12] for example, and its method of representation of intuitive flashes of the mind, than he knew about Chinese culture. However, the inability readily to see these qualities does not in any way affect the truth, depth of vision, and beauty of the Chinese way of painting. In order to attain sufficient objectivity, or at least consistency of approach, one is required to be mindful of applying observations from one's own culture to other cultures.

Discussing European painting, however, Newton writes:

> A European who has absorbed very much
> the same kind of culture and civilization
> as ourselves - the probability is that
> we shall find his pictures beautiful.
> Our preconception will be, at least
> collaterally, related to his own.[13]

Knowledge of the culture and civilization of China is also essential to the understanding and appreciation of Chinese painting. Cultural awareness ensures that a piece of art is judged in the right context. Culture is considered as a source of artistic inspiration, in harmony with the chain of long-standing events. "Each art and each culture should exist in its own right and should not be judged by other standards."[14] It is not a closed system, but a line of historical continuity with distinctive characteristics, and these characteristics are the result of inherited principles of past artistic parlance.

Another neglected aspect in cultural studies has been the close relationship between language and sight. The only people who can appropriately discuss this matter today are probably the new generation of psychologists dealing with the two hemispheres of the brain. To use a piece of their terminology, the conflict between the mind of a wordsmith and that of a craftsman and an artist has been a major obstacle in cultural studies.[15] But this is obviously going beyond the scope of archaeological and art-historical studies at the present time.

It is said of the history of the Arabs and of Islam that it was a triumph of language and that their real art is their language.[16] Not to recognise this fact would present a serious handicap to the study of their arts in general, and their painting in particular. The close relationship between language and sight is a well-known fact in the East. Therefore, in the case of a highly language-conscious people like the Arabs, approaching their art without this point in mind is, in a way, similar to studying a Rembrandt painting from a black and white reproduction - still a masterpiece, but one whose reality has been lost. In the last few years, it has become generally clear that "Each mother tongue teaches its children a way of seeing and feeling the world, and of acting in the world, that is quite unique".[17]

Language can be "Man's richest art form".[18] From pre-Islamic times language, to the Arabs, has been like the use of colour. In poetry and prose one can find the masterly application of these elements.

> It was only in the field of poetical expression that the pre-Islamic artist excelled. Herein his finest talents found a field. The Bedouin's love of poetry was his one cultural asset.[19]

The lack of understanding of the Arabic language sometimes evoked unjustified interpretation, as is illustrated in the following quotation:

> Arabic poetry moves in a world apart, and therefore, notwithstanding all its splendid qualities, will never become popular in ours ... We are baffled again and again by the intensely national stamp of the ideas, the strong local character of the imagery ...[20]

> The centrality of language, the fascination with the WORD, the concern with the medium rather than the message has long been remarked upon as a distinctive semitic characteristic. Language is not an art form, it is <u>the</u> art of the Arabs.[21]

Besides the imperatives laid down in the Qur'an, the preoccupation of the Near East with Mythopoetic streams, the factor of language as an essential mode of seeing, has long been neglected in the study of Islamic art.

Like the illustrations that adorn it, the text in itself projects its own imagery. On the Persian poetic influence on Persian painters, Arnold writes:

> A more difficult matter, in regard to which no investigation whatever appears to have been attempted, is to discover in the enormous range of Persian literature any passages which may have suggested some principle of aesthetics or some artistic ideal to the painter. The love of beauty is so manifest in Persian miniatures that it ought to be possible to find in literature similar aspirations expressed in written language.[22]

J.B. Phillips, in his translation of the New Testament, demonstrates another important point. He shows, with rare sensitivity, three essential principles of translation. Firstly, he writes that it must not sound like a translation if one was unaware of its original rendering. Secondly, it must have the capability of producing in the reader's mind an effect equivalent to that produced by reading the original work.[23] Thirdly, he states:

> ... the translator himself may be a skilful writer, and although he may have conveyed the essential meaning, characterisation and plot of the original author, he may have so strong a style of his own that he completely changes that of the original author. The example of this kind of translation which springs most readily to my mind is Fitzgerald's Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam.[24]

On this same phenomenon, Robert Graves points to an important aspect, common in East and West. Fitzgerald, for example, was celebrated as the assumed originator of the Rubaiyat, "rather than an easy-going amateur Orientalist, who constructed a mid-Victorian poem of his own from an ill-understood classical Persian text".[25] What concerns us most in this context is not whether the translation was true to the original, or whether the writer had faithfully endeavoured to collect, sift and compare the available evidence, and made a conclusive remark from the evidence he had acquired, but the disheartening fact that Muslims and Arabs especially, tended to take the works of the orientalists as their starting point for an analysis of their culture. The disadvantages are apparent. As Laroui explains it,[26] the orientalists' works are an ideological (in the crudest sense of the word) critique of Islamic culture. If the result of this great intellectual effort is to be more than just another way of keeping adolescents of all ages out of mischief, and if it is to have any value at all, the accepted convention that Western orientalism is Western "science" applied to a particular subject must be abandoned. Again, Western orientalism is not Western "science". It goes almost without saying that such an attitude affects both the truth and the feature of

research work to varying degrees. It must have become obvious by now that many orientalists have wasted much time on private prejudice and exclusiveness, and by example induced other to waste even more.

Finally, a word must be said about the translated material and its contemporary context. The translator may be a first-class scholar in his field, and "know the significance of every traditional crux, and yet be abysmally ignorant of how his contemporaries outside his scholastic world are thinking and feeling".[27]

Islamic painting has undergone various influences affecting the formation of its character. Influences from within the tradition and without, both by acquiring and adapting from other civilizations, ancient and contemporary. No artistic movement or style is a sudden endowment to any region. From the earliest times, and between the great civilizations of antiquity, information, skill and general knowledge travelled a remarkable distance. This is best demonstrated in the Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean between 2000 and 1000 BC. The process of learning was considered a sacred activity. The quest for truth was in evidence, as is illustrated in the development of writing. Many "alien" civilizations pooled

their inventiveness to make communication precise and easy. From the cuneiform and hieroglyphic, the Phoenicians developed the alphabet and transmitted it. The Greeks used it and Egypt provided the papyrus, the Romans adopted it to fit Latin and ever since the written word culture has been in evidence. In writing, in art, in medicine, and in mathematics, the chain has never been broken.

As far as artistic motives are concerned, Mesopotamia, for example, had a far-reaching effect on various cultures. This was discussed by H. Frankfort, who showed how oriental art has affected the budding art of Greece. In the history of art, the earliest experiments undertaken in Mesopotamia are of vital and far-reaching consequence. H. Frankfort also points out the possibility of diffusion from Eastern Europe and the Middle East.[28] How did all this take place, and what was the nature of this dependence and its possible transmission?[29] In some cases, since the idea of this way of transmission is not well documented, many examples, even within one region, are shelved. There are many arrows pointing in one direction, to the diversities in the art of Islam which project themselves as a common imprint of imagination.

Ernst Kühnel wrote on the matter of the diffusion and its unifying effects:

> ... it is therefore desirable to set out by finding a few of the factors general to the whole development, which stress the unity transcending differences of region and period.[30]

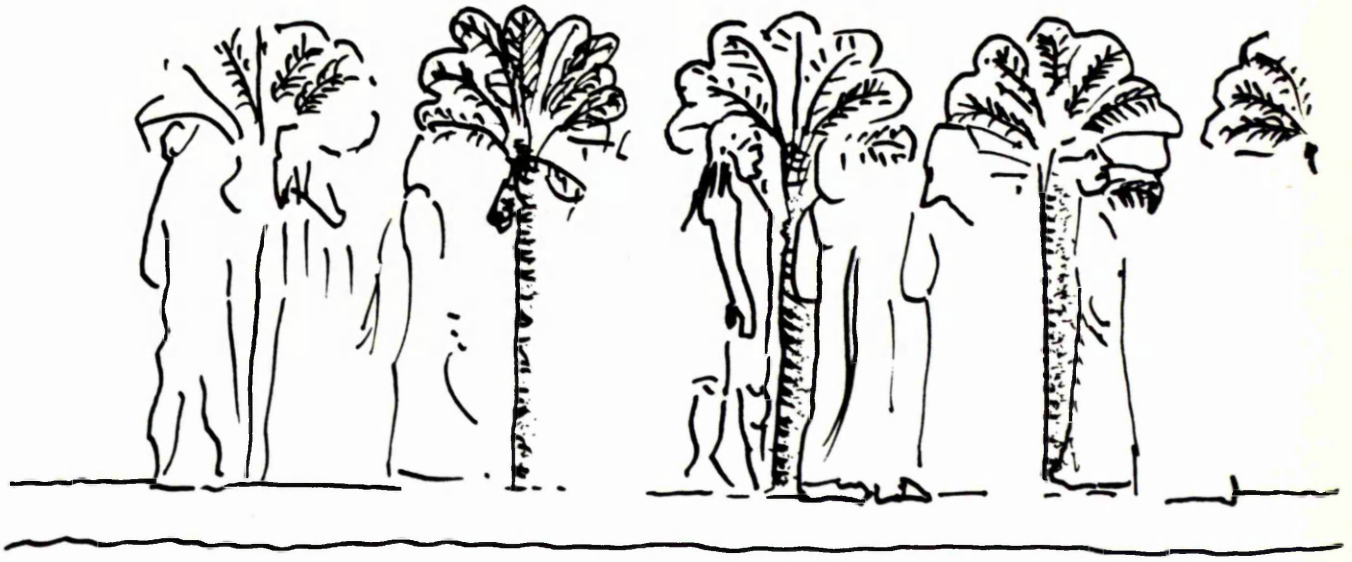

FIGURE 3 Prisoners of war among palm trees (relief from the palace of Ashurbanipal, Nineveh, 7th century BC) Stone. Paris, Louvre.

Let us examine a few examples from the Mesopotamian civilization, a characteristic feature in the depiction of man and animal can be noted. This characteristic has continued to present itself in the generations to follow. However, it is found mainly in the rendering of landscape. On a famous stone relief found at Ninevah, prisoners of war are depicted amongst a grove of palm trees (Fig. 3).

FIGURE 4 Impression of Sumerian seal. Uruk, early 3rd Millennium BC

This relief, together with an impression from a Sumerian seal (Fig. 4), illustrates the employment of plants and animals as essential communicative elements in both religious and social statements. The palm trees used in Figure 3 and depicted above, give the location of the scene and indicate motion. The trunks of the palm trees provide a kind of animated effect which is taking place in the background. The palm leaves are drawn proportionately and quite accurately, whilst the traditional way of pruning the palm tree, still used today, is evident in the way it has been cut; as we shall see later on in al-Wâsitî's renderings of palm trees.

In both Figures 3 and 4, the rendering of the trees has not only an "ornamental" use, but is an essential communicative tool. As in the depiction of Tammûs, the Lord of Plants and Sheepfolds (Fig. 4), the trees serve the purpose of tying the total structure of the scene together.

FIGURE 5 Prisoners of Seti I.
About 1300 BC. Stone relief.

Comparing these two themes with yet another relief on similar lines, Prisoners of Seti (Fig. 5), we see that the trees are absent. The scene does not give information about its location, nor does it tell us anything about the people portrayed, or give any reference points for comparing their proportions to any other object.

The depiction of trees in a landscape setting, with particular attention given to individual branches and leaves, has long fascinated the inhabitants of the Near East.

FIGURE 6 Impression of a cylinder seal.

Another example, on a cylinder seal rendition (Fig. 6), is not unlike what we find in later Mesopotamian paintings and in early Christian art and, yet, again in the earliest depictions made during the Umayyads (Fig. 7). The gazelle in the jaws of a lion symbolises the persecution of the passions and the self-destructive aspect of the unconscious.[31] The entire scene, however, is dominated by an image of a magnificent tree, the tree being one of the most important traditional symbols in Islam. The many associations between God and trees need no emphasis.

This accurate "visual inventory" was so complete in the art of Egypt, Mesopotamia and Crete, that sometimes even differences between a change in function and change in formal treatment became blurred in the history of art.[32]

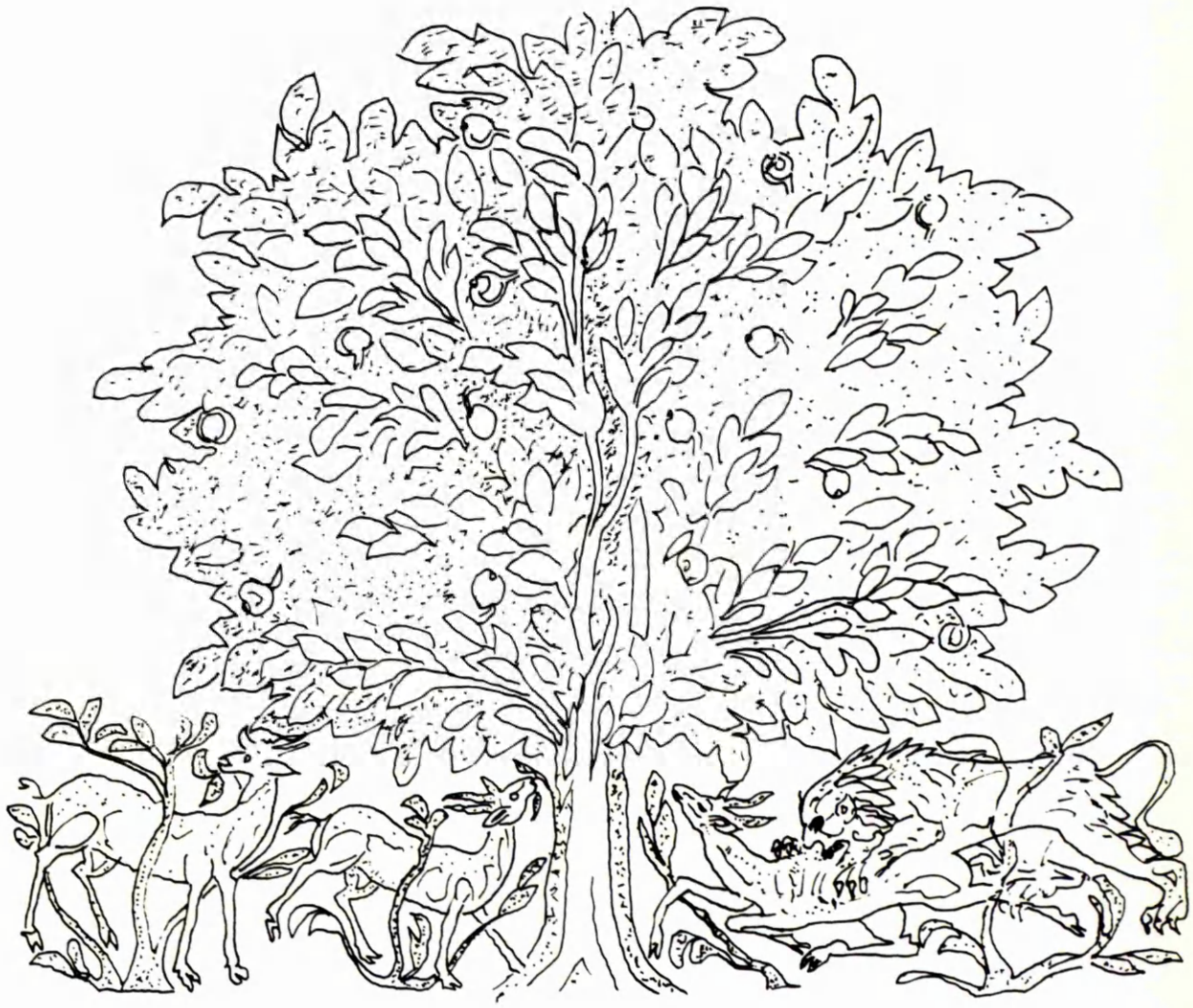

FIGURE 7 Tree with Animal Scene, AD 724-742. Floor Mosaic in the Audience Chamber of the Bathhouse of Khirbat al-Mafjar (Jordan)

In these early cultures, writes Gombrich:

> ... the schemata of animals and plants were often refined to an astounding degree. One may ask whether Greek art produced anything to surpass in this respect the lioness under a palm tree from the Palace of Assurbani-pal.[33] (Fig. 8).

FIGURE 8 Lioness under a palm tree. From Assur-bani-pal's palace. About 650 BC.

Another example, from the mural paintings in Tell el-Amarna, was the sight of the city of Akhenaton. It was soon abandoned, like Sâmarrâ, to remain relatively preserved. Since their discovery in the early 1920s, these intricate paintings, which were executed with great skill and attention to detail (Figs. 7-10), have told us a great deal about man's capacity to interpret and depict nature.

One wonders at how strangely "modern" these paintings appear. Both in terms of character and skill, "they seem to have no date, belonging not to a particular age and country, but to the world of all ages".[34]

FIGURE 9 Mural Painting from
Tell el-Amarna 1365 BC (Upper Egypt).

FIGURE 10 Mural Painting from
Tell el-Amarna 1365 BC (Upper Egypt).

FIGURE 11 Assemblies (Maqâmât)
of al-Harîrî: The Eastern Isle
(detail), Thirty-ninth Maqâma.
Baghdad (Iraq), 634/1237
Painted by Yahyâ ibn Mahmûd al-Wâsiṭî.

In a magnificent landscape painting for the Thirty-second Maqâma of al-Harîrî (Fig. 11), al-Wâsitî provides two important aspects concerning the image transmission in its traditional setting. Firstly, he illustrates the traces of a common imprint of ideas; both in their nearness to nature and the way nature was observed and thus illustrated. Secondly, he shows the traditional artistic parallelism which existed and which was at his disposal.

These paintings should be looked at with an eye and with more awareness of the movement of the lines, the organisation and the location of each bright and dark area, and possibly also the inner consistency that is individual in its style should be observed. Perhaps only then it may be possible clearly to detect the force of its unity.

There are, however, some difficulties attached to the above statement. In the first place, it is seldom realised, let alone admitted, that visual records themselves have the greater hold on the imprint of the arts rather than the common tendency to see them through one's coloured imagination.[35] In other words, there is a tendency to ignore the artist, his skill and methods of arriving at his achievements:

> We, I think, should again turn to the working artist to learn what actually happens when somebody makes an image. What use does he make of tradition, what difficulties does he encounter?[36]

Although painting was never used to propagate Islam, the bindings and the geometric decorations of the Qur'ân were only a symbol of honouring the Holy Recital. The few renderings of the Prophet Muhammad were, again, not of any devotional nature, but a means of communicating certain ideas and deeds of the Prophet.

Every student of Islamic art will face the curious question of how cultural transmission took its course despite the invasions, massacres and other hostile circumstances. Even one of the most sober of scholars, facing this question, had to use the word "mysterious" as the only possible source of transmission. Arnold writes:

> The student of the history of art is constantly faced with the following difficult problem: From the thirteenth century onward there is an almost unbroken series of paintings which, for lack of better designation, have been styled Persian, they are obviously the outcome of a highly developed artistic feeling, but to what source can the ancestry of this school of painting be traced, or whence do certain constantly recurring characteristics of it derive their origin? Examination of the existing materials shows that similar artistic conventions occur in the art of an earlier civilization that had perished six centuries before, and that in some mysterious manner they succeeded in remaining alive, through that long period, under alien and often hostile circumstances.[37]

In his The Transformations of Man, Lewis Mumford writes in this context:

> One of the most characteristic features of the old world culture, indeed, is that it preserves its archaic ways and has in turn been preserved by them: its art was precious to it as its techniques for it cherished every artifact and ritual that bore the imprint of the human imagination.[38]

Discussing al-Wâsiṭî's landscape painting, Ettinghausen reminds us of the el-Amarna paintings, in reference to its timelessness and its astonishing perfection, "a vision of an untarnished country of the mind".[39] In this context he writes:

> European art reaches the stage of 'pure' landscape painting only about two and a half centuries later in the 'Creation' painted on the outer side of the wings of Bosch's triptych depicting the 'Garden of Earthly Delights' (Prado, Madrid), and even there the question has been raised of a possible influence from Chinese scrolls. Al-Wâsitî's representation of an 'Eastern Island' may strike us as primitive and naive; but we may at all events be sure that it derives uniquely from creative processes belonging to the Near Eastern mind.[40]

Another important characteristic of Islamic painting that remains to be commented on as a notable feature from antiquity, is the portrayal of animal life, which exhibits a keen sense of observation,[41] readily reflecting a unique concept of beauty. The artist's ability and profound love of colour, the brilliant hues and their harmonious use have seldom been surpassed.

The decorative inclination of the Muslim artists found a fertile ground in their pursuit of ultimate harmony, and sought expression in the beautiful display of intricate

abstract patterns,[42] and in the typically ornate character of its landscape concepts.

Binyon writes:

> One should add a word on the marvellous, often fabulous and fantastic, character of the landscape: the coral-like formation of the rocks, multi-coloured and of strange hues; the desert sands of a burning gold, threaded by rivulets, on the moist banks of which has sprung up a miracle of delicate verdure and trembling flowers; the gardens festal with spring, the pavilions, the palaces, the castles set on towering crags.[43]

There are also the book illustrations of a scientific, medicinal, astrological and mathematical nature on the one hand, and popular books like Kalîla wa-Dimna and Harîrî's Maqâmat on the other. The artistic concepts of certain themes indicate a distinct tradition which evolved with time.

The unique contribution to the world of art by Islamic painting can become clearer only through attentive observation. We shall find in the next chapter how, for the most part, the Western mind has gradually evolved from the strict European feeling that a picture should conform as closely as possible to visual appearances,[44] into a realisation that "Behind this art is an oriental mind,

which regards the problem of picture-making from quite a different point of view from that of the European mind, at least since the beginning of the Renaissance".[45] Binyon, in his introduction to a classical book on the study of Persian miniature painting, made a remarkable observation which is invaluable to our study of Islamic painting:

> It keeps constantly in view the requirements of the spectator for whom the painting is brought into being; and for the spectator's convenience it performs miracles which, to the Western mind, with its scrupulous respect for the laws of nature, seem outrageous.[46]

Finally, it is worth noting that this way of painting which owed nothing to the study of anatomy or of perspective,[47] must be investigated without the usual prejudice against the absence of perspective.

NOTES

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3. Ibid., p. 57.

4. R. Ettinghausen, Arab Painting (Geneva, 1962).

5. Ibid., p. 124.

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7. Translation by the writer of these lines.

8. S. Walzer, "The Topkapu Saray Manuscript of the Persian Kalila wa-Dimna (dated AD 1413)", in Painting from Islamic Lands (Oxford, 1969), p. 49.

9. Treatise on Painting, Codex Urbinas Latius 1270, A.P. McMahon (ed.), II, Facsimile (Princeton, 1956), fd. 32r.

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12. Lately better known as Zen painting.

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15. For a superb view of hemisphere functions, see Joseph E. Bogen, "The Other Side of the Brain", I, II, III, Bulletin of the Los Angeles Neurological Societies, Vol. 34, No. 3 (July 1969).

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35. E.H. Gombrich, Meditations on a Hobby Horse (London, 1978), p. 108.

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37. Sir T. Arnold, Survivals of Sasanian and Manichaean Art in Painting (Oxford, 1924), p. 6.

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39. R. Ettinghausen, Arab Painting, op. cit., p. 124.

40. Ibid., p. 124.

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42. L. Binyon, "Book Painting and Qualities of Beauty", in Survey of Persian Art (London, 1965), pp. 1914-5.

43. Ibid., p. 1938.

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CHAPTER TWO

THE IDENTIFICATION OF THE PROBLEM

In an illustrated edition of his A Study of History, Arnold Toynbee begins his search for a unit of historical study, "that is relatively self-contained and is therefore more or less intelligible in isolation from the rest of history".[1] By rejecting the present-day habit of studying history in terms of national states, he uses a large-scale unit to classify his information before interpreting it. This unit he called "a civilization". Toynbee perceives a much "wider horizon than the old European landscape". He starts with a succession of twelve illustrations, beginning with a circular, the thirteenth-century Mappa Mundi, a subjective partial vision of the world. "Men", he writes, "see largely what they expect to see, and record what seems to them important".[2] This Mappa Mundi "is absurd, but on its own terms it is a logical picture of a Christian world".[3] (Plate 1).

The last plate in this success which Toynbee entitled "An objective vision", is a photograph of the world from space (Plate 2).

> Historical horizons have in a comparable way rolled back during this century, opening the way for Man to achieve an 'ecumenical' vision of all the civilizations he has created.[4]

We should contrast Toynbee's attitude in interpreting a piece of art to that of Berenson. "The business of the art historian", writes Berenson, "is to rise, not above unchanging values, but above preferences, instigated by fads, stampedes, and hysterias of the moment". He harshly criticises the prejudice and the dandical exclusiveness of the art historian, who is frittering his energies and our attention away with tricky questions of origin, while the tendency of recent decades has been to ignore learning art representation as one should learn any other language, even one's mother tongue:

> For in matters of art we have no desire to get away from a convention we have accepted with or without a struggle. We make small effort to know the other conventions, assuming that they are numberless and no concern of ours.[6]

Almost no effort has been given to try to discover how representational elements were received and how the visual representations were regarded by the communities to which they were offered. Not only should they be considered as aesthetic products with symbolic values, but also as useful information about a way of looking at the world beyond the point where the Western limit lies.

The modern Western academic discipline of studying works of art and architecture owes its origins to the Renaissance historiography of Vasari and to classical archaeology. Art historians since that time have carried on in the same tradition, each according to his or her inclinations and interests. Berenson and Pope, for example, provide between them an interesting insight into the ways of looking at, selecting, interpreting and evaluating the works of art that were most appealing to them.

Far apart they may have been in their selective taste, in many ways, however, both seem to point to a similar direction during the most mature and learned stages of their lives. Berenson, for example, categorises Islamic Persian art as what he calls the Exotic Arts. He includes in this category Chinese art in particular. Compared with European art, all these so-called exotic arts appear to be, in his eyes, limited and they would soon become wearisome, so he does not include these arts in his history. Though he generously affirms that he "should not discourage the study of these developments in art".[7]

Pope, on the other hand, has an entirely different attitude to the art of the Islamic world. He was among

the few who believed that "Islamic art is perhaps the most eloquent and comprehensive exponent of Islamic culture".[8] Both find remarkable companionship of thought, however, in areas where most art historians would fear to tread.

Firstly, they both attach great importance to the modes of cultural representation. What counts for them is the actual experience of representation, and its associations with the cultural environment. Both Berenson and Pope have constantly warned against the "creeping caution" instead of independence that is found in the present ideal of the perfect scholar, which tends to produce commonplace pedants, constricted by anxieties, while the answer to many a problem may be just over the academic fence.[9] In this respect, Berenson had even harsher words for what he called

> ... a trait of that skyscraping pedantry which characterises so much of the automatic pecking of brainless 'research fellows' in our myriad schools of useless knowledge.[10]

Obviously, this sort of harsh attack made both of them tacitly resented and unpopular, to say the least. But this must not blind us to their other serious contributions in this field of study. Very seldom may we

find an art historian so straightforwardly writing about problems he had to face and tried to overcome during his lifetime. In a short paragraph rendering indispensable ideas to any concerned student of art, Berenson writes,

> Art history is the story of what art has created, of the problems that it has had to solve before producing what it did; of what it could achieve and transmit; to what spiritual needs it gave expression, thereby bringing them into the field of consciousness, what technical or psychological handicaps prevented it from yielding better fruit at given moments. It should tell what art shapes were presented to the public from age to age by artificers and artists; how related these objects were to one another, how lit and how coloured.[11]

We must remember, however, that Berenson was a great authority on the Italian painters of the Renaissance, an area of study, most certainly, which represents a watershed in the stream of the European history of art, and consequently, Renaissance art became a great influencing factor, if not a yardstick, in interpreting all the other arts of the world.

This, in essence, brings us to the main objective of this chapter, which is to formulate a concept of Islamic painting which has seen its most important results in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

Art should be looked at with eyes not conditioned to the "correctness" of Renaissance art, but the observer should bear in mind the mode of communication, and the way the message and the solutions to visual problems were transmitted - the poetic, or the creative rendering, rather than its strict submission to the Construzione Legitimata.

Tedious arguments about Classical, Mesopotamian and other influences that have played their part in the evolution of this unique art, have no doubt yielded greater speculative and intellectual horizons than the actual analyses of the paintings themselves. However, various other influences were also at work. What can be detected from the scholarly works undertaken since Arnold is a tendency to trace the evolution of distinctly "local" or "national" styles from among the various influences then at work.[12] This has proved to be an interesting endeavour. However, what has been neglected or less emphasised is the role of the artist, and how he has observed his world. It is a subject which contains an equally invaluable and intriguing problem.[13]

> We should stick to art and not run off the track into cultural, economical sociological, religious and literary fields - at all events without knowing what we are doing.[14]

The records of the history of Islamic paintings are not complete. The most important and disheartening single event in the history of the artistic and intellectual heritage of the Islamic world was the loss of the Fâtimid libraries. It is with this in mind that any serious pursuit of a reconstruction of the history of Islamic painting must be undertaken. A great section of Islamic artistic achievement was no doubt lost. No study of Islamic painting claiming scientific objectivity can afford to trivialise the magnitude of the artistic and library documentation which was consequently and for ever lost; or to forget the date of AD 1258, when the Mongols, under Hülegü Khan, captured the city of Baghdad and destroyed its municipal monuments.[15]

The situation in Islamic painting, therefore, is that an internal articulation of its own artistic heritage has been destroyed. Consequently, any effort, in whatever state it may be, deserves serious attention. Had al-Maqrîzî's book: طبقات المصوّرين المنعوت بضوء النبراس وأنس الجلاس في أخبار المزوّقين من الناس

On the Classes of Painters survived, we would have had another great document like that of Giorgio Vasari's Lives of the Artists, the finest contemporary account we have of the Italian painters of the Renaissance. But,

> As it is, we owe such knowledge as we do possess to the special interest which this indefatigable historian (Maqrîzî) took in such matters; he exhibits an assiduous eagerness in the collection of all possible kinds of information connected with the culture of his native land, and gives long lists of the precious objects to be found in the Palace of Mustansir.[16]

For example, a rare document on the activity of painting and what went on during the eleventh century, is indicated by al-Maqrîzî:

> " وقد جرى مثل ذلك للقصير وابن عزيز في أيام اليازورى سيد الوزراء الحسن بن علي بن عبد الرحمن وكان كثيرا ما يحرّض بينهما ويغرى بعضهما على بعض لأنه كان أحبّ ما اليه كتاب مصوّر أو النظر الى صورة أو تزويق ولما استدعى ابن عزيز من العراق فأفسده وكان قد أتي به في محاربة القصير لأن القصير كان يشتطّ في أجرته ويلحقه عجب في صنعته وهو حقيق بذلك لانه في عمل الصورة كابن مقلة في الخطّ وابن عزيز كابن البواب وقد أمعن شرح ذلك في الكتاب المؤلف فيه وهو طبقات المصوّرين المنعوت بضوء النبراس و أنس الجلاس في أخبار المزوّقين من الناس وكان اليازورى قد أحضر بمجلسه القصير وابن عزيز فقال ابن عزيز أنا أصوّر صورة اذا رآها الناظر ظنّ أنها خارجة من الحائط فقال القصير لكن أنا أصوّرها فاذا نظرها الناظر ظنّ أنها داخلة في الحائط فقالوا هذا عجب فأمرهما أن يصنعا ما وعدا به فصوّرا صورة راقصتين في حنيتين مدهونتين متقابلتين هذه ترى كأنها داخلة في الحائط وتلك ترى كأنها خارجة من الحائط فصوّر القصير راقصة بثياب بيض في صورة حنية دهنها أسود كأنها داخلة في صورة الحنية وصوّر ابن عزيز راقصة بثياب حمر في صورة حنية صفراء كأنها بارزة من الحنية فاستحسن البازورى ذلك وخلع عليهما ووهبهما كثيرا من الذهب " .

> And this cas is similar to that of al-Qasîr and Ibn 'Aziz in the time of Yâzûrî, the chief minister of Hasan b. 'Abd ar-Rahmân (i.e. the Caliph Mustansir), for he often used to incite them and stir up against the other, since he was especially fond of an illustrated book or anything like a picture or gilding. Thus he invited Ibn 'Aziz from Iraq and excited his evil passions, for (the Wazîr) had sent for him to contend with al-Qasîr, demanded extravagant wages and had an exaggerated opinion of his own work - and it really merited so high an estimate, for in painting he was as great as Ibn Muqlah was a calligraphist, while Ibn 'Aziz was like al-Bawwâb. I have already given a detailed account of the matter in the book I have written on this subject - namely, the Classes of Painters, with the title The Light of Lamp and the Amuser of Company in Respect of the Annals of Artists.[18]

At this point, al-Maqrîzî, with his great narrative power, describes an event that took place at the assembly of Yâzûrî, the interesting wazîr. It portrays an encounter between two famous artists, al-Qasîr and Ibn 'Azîz. This incident, obviously, is invaluable for our case. It demonstrates that the process of creating pictorial space in painting during this early Islamic period was a problem which had already been tackled and well employed:

> Now Yâzûrî had introduced al-Qasîr and Ibn 'Azîz into his assembly. Then Ibn 'Azîz said, I will paint a figure in such a way that when the spectator sees it, he will think that it is coming out of the wall'. Whereupon al-Qasîr said, 'But I will paint it in such a way that when the spectator looks at it, he will think that it is going into the wall'. Then [everyone present] cried out, 'This

> is more amazing [than the proposal of Ibn Azîz]'. Then Yâzûrî made them make what they had promised to do: so they each designed a picture of a dancing-girl, in niches also painted, opposite one another - the one looking as though she were going into the wall, and the other as though she were coming out. Al-Qasîr painted a girl in a white dress in a niche coloured black, as though she were going into the painted niche, and Ibn 'Azîz painted a dancing-girl in a red dress in a niche that was coloured yellow, as though she were coming out of the niche. And Yâzûrî expressed his approval of this and bestowed robes on honour on both of them and gave them much gold.[19]

One example may suffice at the moment to illustrate the scope of artistic activity during the early Islamic period, namely the rare drawing of "The Lutanist with a Cup" (Plate 3). Let us see what this apparently simple drawing can tell us about the location of the scene, and the pictorial space it provides and finally how the dimension of depth was communicated and solved.

We shall demonstrate this by picturing our lutanist in three other drawings. Each time we shall eliminate one of the objects which were drawn by the original artist.

In the first illustration we will have the lutanist, as it were, stripped of any of her surroundings (Fig. 13).

What this drawing is telling us is obviously limited. It gives no indication or hint as to where this event is actually taking place, whether in the open or in sheltered surroundings, or wherever. All we can see is a suspended figure of a woman holding a cup and a lute in her hands.

FIGURE 13

In the second illustration (Fig. 14), however, we can observe the small shelf in the background. This can immediately tell us two things. Firstly, that the scene is taking place in walled surroundings, and secondly, that the figure is at some assessable distance from this shelf.

FIGURE 14

FIGURE 15

The third illustration (Fig. 15) can fulfil our curiosity even further. The placement of the flowerpot between the shelf and the figure in the foreground tells us that the lutanist is not only further from the shelf and the wall, but also further than the flowerpot, which is placed somewhere in between.

This simple act of elimination and addition from the given total of the illustration can bring us a step closer to "why" and thus may provide another link with "how" our artist was thinking. Therefore, looking at the complete drawing, the location of the scene indicates that the Lutanist is standing at some distance from a wall on which we can see a small shelf, with two containers half full

with some kind of liquid. A bit closer to us is a flowerpot with a bunch of flowers. There may well have been a desk on which this pot was placed.

Under the patronage of the enlightened Fâtimid caliphs (AD 969-1171), this rare drawing was a product of a refined art that flourished in Egypt, which has escaped the holocaust and systematic looting during the downfall of the dynasty.[20]

Art has always been an integral part of life. From the dawn of civilization to the present day, the accumulative knowledge of man about art is still in process. Twenty-five centuries of arguments and analysis have provided many answers, but none final, for that will never be possible as long as man lives.[21] There is no need to rehearse these arguments here, but it is most appropriate to put in clearer focus a number of very serious concepts of Islamic painting. One is the outdated interpretation of the "historically changing concepts of beauty".[22]

Our case is the Islamic concept. Not so much the "transcendental", "spiritual", or the "metaphysical" aspects which some scholars decided to write out.

The most reasonable approach would be, however, to re-examine Muslim painting while bearing in mind the accumulative knowledge that we have so far at our disposal, casting aside the trivializing attitude usually expressed towards the achievements of "Modern Art" and its contributions to widening our visual experience. Perhaps it is from lack of exposure to the great achievements and contributions of modern art, more than anything else, that unlearned statements are still written in the latter half of the twentieth century.

The example of Cézanne, to mention but one great modern artist, and his efforts and contributions to the refinement of painting, cannot be overemphasised. His words during the final stages of his life when he conceived the idea of "the arrested image", were, "The lines are falling! The lines are falling!" To the painter these words are full of meaning, but to the art critic they may mean nothing at all. Probably no one expressed it better than Rûmî, more than seven hundred years ago:

When, with inspiration at hand, you seek
book-learning,
Your heart, as if inspired, loads you with
reproach.

Traditional knowledge, when inspiration is
available,
Is like making ablutions with sand when
water is near.[23]

From weakness of vision you see not the
new moon;
If I see it, be not angry with me![24]

Once the bracket on any subject is closed, all sorts of new possibilities that may throw further light on it may go untapped. Therefore, even illustrations with admittedly inferior artistic quality, are, in Ettinghausen's words, the only traceable expressions of a particular belief and are thus valuable as historical documents.[25]

In order for the subject to be adequately grasped, we need once more to examine our method of approach through "perspectivism". While Paris has given birth to one "ism" after another in its logical devotion to theory,[26] we find at times that even the best-trained eyes do not always detect the sometimes faint, sometimes overpowering handling of colour and surface which are in concert with the Eastern temperament.

One cannot help but think of the pedantic prejudices of the eighteenth-century French Academy. Courbet, who gave no importance to them in his painting, received the abuse and indignation of his contemporaries. Yet those prejudices now seem to us ridiculous, but it is not we but Courbet and his kind who have swept them away".[27]

Gombrich in his "Standards of Truth", has chivalrously put in focus the puzzle that had plagued the history of painting for so very long:

> For this history has been written by critics (ancient, Renaissance, and later) who accepted the snapshot vision as the norm and who could not but notice how rarely it was adopted in the past. The images of great civilizations such as those of Egypt or China were never constructed on these principles, and so their essentially different approach was seen as deviation from a natural norm.[28]

As our comprehension of the globe increased, many styles from all parts of civilization (obviously or strangely) failed to adapt to the Western standard of truth. Examples were interpreted in order to fit established standards. Gombrich wrote,

> When this degree of ethnocentricity began to worry historians, they escaped into a facile relativism, declaring that all standards are equally conventional and that the

> Western method, that of the camera, is no less arbitrary than any other.[29]

But this declaration was, and still is, no more than that of convenience taken at face value, as it were, a "yes, but", syndrome. The student of art whose mind has been trained to believe in the monopoly of ideas of certain civilization, will not easily be able to have a synthesizing understanding of this most important art-historical concept, as discussed by Gombrich.

Fortunately for the Muslim painter, he was not, like us, intimidated by the cold perfection of the machine. Hence he demonstrated that there could be more in his painting than meets the eye in nature. To obscure the gifts of panoramic vision which man possesses by closing one eye, or squinting, must have been an absurdity. For example, in the traditional Near Eastern art, "hierarchic scaling",[30] a non-perspective method of representation which has nothing to do with the peculiar non-perspective renderings of pre-Greek art, derives its inspiration from an emotional attitude towards the represented object.[31]

> Why, then, has perspective so often been called a convention which does violence to the way we see the world?[32]

As Professor Gombrich noted recently,

> Clearly because the eye witness principle demands the witness to stand still and only look in one direction - and that we must indeed close one eye if the object of interest is sufficiently close for binocular parallax to make a difference.[33]

He also explains that the method of the "perspectival painter" tends to conform to the "potentially visible landscape" negatively, and that the positive postulate is:

> The question of how much visual information he should include in his painting, presents a very different problem and leads to very different standards of truth.[34]

At this point, we may pause and think about the problems and the difficulties behind what Gombrich has called a "very different standard of truth", and why it has been for so long not so much overlooked as deliberately avoided, to say the least.

In an academic setting the problems are obviously great. This is so in issues of style which implies a widely accepted attitude to life, its meaning and its finality.[35] What is adapted in formal publications, however, is only what can conform to "sober analysis". We may nod in agreement with what the artist says about his own painting, but could not go much further than that.

For example, what comment can the art historian make when Cézanne says, "There exists a pictorial truth of things", or when Blake says,

> a spirit and a vision are not, as the modern philosophy supposes, a cloudy vapour of nothing: they are organised and minutely articulated beyond all that the mortal and perishing nature can produce. He who does not imagine in stronger and better lineaments, and in stronger and better light than his perishing mortal eye can see, does not imagine at all.[36]

Finally, we may quote Picasso, "To draw, you must close your eyes and sing". This statement further illustrates the point. But it will not mean much to those who have not sat diligently exploring those factors that make a valuable drawing - valuable in terms of its lucidity, power and harmony. The non-experienced scholar could interpret it as another emotive statement from an emotional artist. Undoubtedly such statements pose serious problems to the study of representational art, and in an academic setting are obviously inconceivable. Yet who are we to say, for example,

> Where exactly we should draw the line between the classical norm and the un-classical complexity? Is it not rather natural that the artists tried to explore how far they could go in this game of virtuosity?[37]

The origins of stylistic terminology, according to Gombrich,

> ... represent only a series of masks for the two categories, the classical and the non-classical[38] ... and there can be few lovers of art who have never felt impatient of the academic art historian and his concern with labels and pigeon-holes.[39]

Because,

> Man is a classifying animal, and he has an incurable propensity to regard the network he has himself imposed on the variety of experience of belonging to the objective world of things.[40]

The balance, therefore, must be restored. The art of the Near East no doubt was wrapped in a keen sense of imagination. As in the centuries before, the scope of early Muslim artists, unlike that of the contemporary art historian with his severely limited "speculative thought", was not restricted by a scientifically disciplined search for truth.[41]

Without going too much into the areas of theory and practice, some of the information available to the Western art historian of Islamic art may have been only accidentally appropriate to the task of writing art history, and it may well have appeared to be no more than

"pure poetry", as in the case of Fitzgerald's so-called translation of Khayyâm's Rubâiât. His own poetic formulation concealed the intention of Khayyâm's Rubâiât, thus giving the reader a false picture of the original work, and consequently of Khayyâm himself.

We are here concerned particularly with Islamic painting, and how the problem of pictorial space was created. Our interpretive approach is basically inspired in addition to, but not instead of, the works of many specialists in this field.

It is assumed that the basic concerns of Western and Eastern man in medieval thought and its influences on successive generations are understood. Yet no harm will be done if a few words are said about these significant influences, which at the same time may further clarify our own conception of the problem.

Before drawing an outline of how Muslim painters actually developed their way of "arrest and movement" in representational art, it is necessary to clear up certain basic misunderstandings. For example, the reasons that have favoured or hampered the artistic approach in Muslim schools of painting, and the sources of their artistic expression.

Political and economic conditions certainly cannot be ignored, but their influence on the cultural development must not be exaggerated either.

After having "cast off the evil barbarity", wrote Leonardo, "the good painter of the West must in principle, paint man, as well as the intention of his mind.[42] Eastern man, however, was not as equally concerned with the "knowledge of man", who is, "a transient pilgrim on the way towards non-being, but Nature".[43] His concern was more,

> with things and with life itself, which is sometimes greater than man and expresses the essence of being better than he can do through his fleetingness.[44]

The basic difference between these two points of view of Eastern and Western man, according to Chiari,

> is summed up in their respective attitudes to time. Whether in the case of Incarnation for the Christians, or in that of Allah's revelation of His truth to Mohamed, time for both the Christian and Islamic world is made to be the Mediator of Eternity.[45]

It is man, rather than nature, which is the basic traditional factor that influences Western civilization. The nude in Greek art, which was later clothed, obviously illustrates a change in mores and not aesthetics.[46] The

Greeks, on the whole, accepted man as being the yardstick of all things.

The Greeks accepted, to a great extent, the basic Protagorean principle that "man is the measure of all things". To which Plato replied, "Nothing imperfect is the measure of anything",[47] and that "God is the measure of all things".[48]

> This Platonic and neo-Platonic concept of man and of the Universe pervaded Augustinianism and dominated Christian thought until the emergence of the Thomistic existentialism. The Incarnation is the crux of Christianity and Christ is the perfect man. The stress on the importance of man is the meeting ground of Greek and Christian thought, the main element of Renaissance art, and above all, the most important factor of Western civilization.[49]

Chiari has outlined the crucial differences between Western and Eastern art history. Yet these traditional and essential sources of inspiration have not been evaluated, instead different criteria have been used by art historians when delving into stylistic analysis. As Oppenhaim wrote,

> In other words, neither the easy joys of specialization nor the equally hedonistic escape into penetration centred on restricted data must hinder the advance toward an over-all synthesis of the field.[50]

Muslim art developed along lines which were basically conscious of avoiding as much as possible the temptation that might have come from the portrayal of animated things.[51] The emphasis on the form of man, as it is in the Christian tradition, especially during the formative years of Islam, was not something which inspired a meaningful or lasting tradition. That is not to say that the artist in the East did not observe man as closely as the artist in the West. He observed man intensely, but in a different spirit.

In his book كتاب الافادة والاعتبار, 'Abd al-Latîf al-Baghdâdi (b. AD 1162), may be quoted not only to show his interest in the art of human proportion, but also to illustrate the kind of visual experiences that were put into language. 'Abd al-Latîf relating his answer to an inquirer as to what, of all he had seen in Egypt, had most excited his admiration, writes,

" وسألني بعض الفضلاء ما اعجب ما رأيت فقلت تناسب
وجه ابي الهول فان اعضاء وجهه كالانف والعين
والاذن متناسبة كما تصنع الطبيعة الصور متناسبة
فان انف الطفل مثلا مناسب له وهو حسن به حتى لو
كان ذلك الانف لرجل كان مشوها به وكذلك لو كان
انف الرجل للصبي لتشوهت صورته وعلى هذا ساير
الاعضاء فكل عضو ينبغي ان يكون على مقدار وهيئة
بالقياس الى تلك الصوره وعلى نسبتها فان لم
توجد المناسبة تشوهت الصورة والعجب من مصوره
كيف قدر ان يحفظ نظام التناسب في الاعضاء مع
عظمها وانه ليس في اعمال الطبيعة ما يحاكيه."[52]

A sensible man enquiring of me as to what, of all I had seen in Egypt, had most excited my admiration, I answered, 'The nicety of proportion in the head of the Sphinx'. In fact, between the different parts of this head, the nose, for example, the eyes, and the ears, the same proportion is remarked as is observed by nature in her works. Thus, the nose of a child is suitable to its stature, and proportioned to the rest of its frame, while if it belonged to the face of a full-grown man it would be reckoned a deformity. The nose of a grown man on the visage of a child would equally be a disfigurement. The same holds good with respect to all the other members. There are none but should have a certain form and dimension in order to bear relation to such-and-such a face, and where these proportions are not observed, the face is spoiled.

Hence the wonder that in a face of such colossal size the sculptor should have been able to preserve the exact proportion of every part, seeing that nature presented him with no model of a similar colossus or any at all comparable.[53]

In al-Maqrîzî's كتاب المواعظ و الاعتبار , there is an almost verbatim description of the same subject.[54] What is important in reading similar descriptive works like that of Baghdâdi and Maqrîzî, is to be aware of their expressiveness so that a very useful and perhaps a more accurate rendering of the curiosity of the "twelfth-century man" and the extent of his engaged attention to the works of art may become clearer. In Christian art, "the Church itself, as has been said, had educated its children to understand painting as a language".[55] So it can be said that Islam taught the Qur'ân, so that a rendering of the nature of life may be perceived. Sculpture, relief, painting, drawing and the expressive use of words have, from the earliest beginnings of man's consciousness been employed to reflect the invisible unity of the world.

In the following chapter we shall introduce and discuss another way of looking at the paintings executed by early Muslim artists. As far as possible, I shall invite the reader to become aware of what the painter has intended to present, by carefully observing his work. At the beginning this may seem to deflect our intention from the pictorial qualities of the subject, but, hopefully, quite soon our critical faculties may begin to operate and some dominating motive, or root idea, from which the painting itself derives its effect, may become clear.[56]

NOTES

1. A. Toynbee, A Study of History (London, 1976), p. 15.
2. Ibid., p. 16.
3. Ibid., p. 16.
4. Ibid., p. 29.
5. B. Berenson, Aesthetics and History (London, 1950), p. 202.
6. Ibid., p. 205
7. Ibid., pp. 226-7.
8. A. Pope, "Scientific Method and Cultural Studies", in R. Ettinghausen (ed.), Aus der Welt der Islamischen Kunst, Festschrift für Ernst Kühnel (Berlin, 1959), p. 381.
9. Ibid., pp. 380-1.
10. Berenson, op. cit., p. 203.
11. Ibid., pp. 204-5.
12. Binyon, Wilkinson and Grey, Persian Miniature Painting (London, 1933), p. 29.
13. "Historians of some centuries ago could not compose the history of their own home town without going back to Adam and the Creation, or at least to Noah and the Flood", Berenson, op. cit., p. 203.
14. Ibid., p. 230.
15. "Eight-hundred-thousand of the inhabitants were ruthlessly massacred, and the city was given over to the savage soldiers for a whole week to be plundered", T. Arnold, Painting in Islam (Oxford, 1928), p. 44.
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17. Ahmad ibn 'Ali, al-Maqrîzî, Al-mawa'iz wa 'l-i'tibar, Volume 1 (Cairo, 19xx), p. 318.

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20. D.S. Rice, "A Drawing of the Fatimid Period", The Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, Vol. XXI, Part 1, 1958, p. 31.

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23. Jalâl al-Dîn Rûmî, Teachings of Rûmî: The Masnavi, translated by E.H. Whinfield (London, 1973), p. 191.

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30. A term first employed by M.S. Bunim, Space in Medieval Painting and the Forerunners of Perspective (New York, 1940).

31. H. Frankfort, Kingship and the Gods (Chicago, 1978), p. 7.

32. Gombrich, op. cit., p. 251.

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43. Chiari, op. cit., p. 95.

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46. A. Papadopoulou, Islam and Muslim Art (London, 1980), p. 89.

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48. Plato, Laws IV, 716c.

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53. Ibid., p. 125.

54. Maqrîzî, op. cit., p. 197.

55. B. Berenson, Italian Painters of the Renaissance (London, 1957), p. 8.

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CHAPTER THREE

THE READING OF IMAGES IN ISLAMIC PAINTING: CONCEPT AND CONVENTION

The discussion in this chapter deals with the question of reading the Islamic images. This is a complex issue, which needs further factual verification. No doubt, to use Morawski's words, "Each work of art carries an open dialogue with both its tradition and the gamut of artistic practices current at the moment".[1] Therefore, discussing images without any attempt to understand this "open dialogue", would not yield positive results in art-historical investigations. The genesis of this problem is both theoretical and historical. The problem of aesthetic judgement, writes Morawski, emerged rather late in European aesthetic thought.[2] However, the problem of judgment was treated more fully following Aristotle and Diogenes the Babylonian, while further steps were taken by Ibn al-Haytham (Alkhāzen) and Vitello.[3] "It is remarkable", continues Morawski,

> That the Renaissance failed to introduce any new consideration of the question of how beauty is perceived. Its poetics and art theory concentrated on the

> artistic process and the possibility of knowing the essence of the empirical world.[4]

It is well known that in any scientific experiment mere accumulation of results may point to different conclusions. How, then, do we go about verifying our analysis of an image? The problem of verification, again, is well indicated by Morawski:

> The chief problem in verification ... has to do with differences among the major ethnocultural traditions. Is it reasonable to expect that the same constants would recur in the Indian, the Chinese, and the European heritages of art and aesthetic experience? This question must be studied without equivocations.[5]

We shall give a few illustrated examples as to how important it is to be familiar with the traditional processes that are still lingering in the milieu where an (ancient) image was rendered. Vision without knowledge to back it up, said Ibn al-Haytham, is like seeing only light and colour. Reading an image is something which is quite different from reading into it, as analysis and description have frequently been taken to be one. This can be catastrophically misleading. Often we read works written by people who are conscious of the defects in the established methods of investigations and in their shortcomings, however, they set out to investigate the

"what" and not the "how" of the image, and end up writing about what they think an image is expressing, which may be quite different from the message behind it. However, this may not be altogether without advantage; it indicates to the student what to avoid in his own writings:

> They know how to use words to articulate their sensations and they let us profit in our own sensibility by teaching us differentiation.[6]

The main contemporary defect, as we see it, is not knowing "how to establish a living rapport with the past"!

What Professor Gombrich called "a number of ghosts which haunt the literature of art ..."[7] still frequently appear, in one way or another. The traditional view of representation which has greatly misunderstood primitive man's intentions and consequently has labelled the reading of his images by imaginary concepts like "imitation of nature", is becoming clearer every day:

> ... We find it difficult to rid ourselves of the prejudice that all images should be 'read' as referring to some imaginary or actual reality ... But recently we have been made aware how thoroughly we misunderstand primitive or Egyptian art whenever we make the assumption that the artist 'distorts' his motif or that he even wants us to see in his work the record of any specific experience ... We often try instinctively to save our idea of 'representation' by shifting it

> to another plane. Where we cannot refer the image to a motif in the other world, we take it to be a portrayal of a motif in the artist's inner world.[8]

Whether it is admitted or not, the impact of the Renaissance with its predominant interest in classical learning, attained such a hold on the modern interpretive faculties that offered no help in the understanding of the real creation of ancient art and the art of the Islamic world.

Turning for a moment to the art of the ancients, we find that in the history of man's creative acts, the first recording of his perception of the environment and the oldest surviving remnants of his aesthetic roots found their expressions more than thirty thousand years ago during the upper Paleolithic period. The purpose and meaning of this art has been for nearly three-quarters of a century still unsettled and obscure.

There is an argument, which seems most reasonable, that there must have been art as an aesthetic expression before there could be art. A magical influence in representation deliberately designed to exercise some dominant influence on the original. It has often been asked, however, why should not the primitive man try to make his marks and his

symbols as pleasing as possible, since to him aesthetic needs are no more foreign than to civilized man?

In his treatise on ancient painting, in a facsimile reprint dated AD 1740, George Turnbull[9] wrote that experience and observation - not hypothesis, verbal metaphysics and dialectic - are the surest route to knowledge of both the external world of physical reality, and the internal world of morals, aesthetics and human nature. Turnbull's analysis arises, on the whole, from an original understanding of beauty and goodness common to man and which prompts him to carry out such investigations into the nature of beauty and harmony.

As has already been pointed out, however, if Turnbull had lived to visualise the following three centuries that have seen the uniformity of the civilised man's barbarism amidst the variety of mankind, he would have, to be sure, sought to establish a different underlying principle in human nature and the moral world of art. Where he is most accurate, however, is in his observations of the painting of the ancients in that the power of sympathy in ancient man to engage the thoughts, feelings and concerns of men in the intellectual and moral actions of other men when such actions are depicted in works of art.

Let us take an early Islamic text which, as a starting point, can demonstrate how ᶜAbd-al-Latîf al-Baghdâdî (born in AD 1162) would have responded to works of antiquity, which comes from Cairo entitled The Eastern Key. We can see ᶜAbd al-Latîf in this work reflecting the artistic and philosophical opinions of his day, which are all the more valuable to students of sixth- and eighth-century Islamic art. ᶜAbd al-Latîf writes:

> Let us now return to the description of the ruins of Memphis, which was the capital of ancient Egypt ... in spite of the ravages during upwards of four thousand years, its ruins yet present to the spectator a combination of wonders which confound the understanding, and which to describe, the most eloquent would attempt in vain. The more the collection is considered, the greater admiration it inspires; and every additional glance at the ruins is a source of fresh delight. Scarcely do they give birth in the mind of the beholder to one idea, than another originates, still more admirable. One moment he prides himself on his perfect comprehension of them, and again, another instant, his pride is lowered by the staring conviction of the inadequacy of his conceptions.
>
> Among the wonders of the ruins of Memphis must be placed the house called the Green House. It is formed of a single stone 9 cubits high by 8 in length and 7 in breadth. In the midst of this stone a chamber has been hollowed out ... Without as well as within it is entirely covered with sculpture and paintings, and inscriptions in ancient characters. Externally is seen a representation of

> the Sun in that part of the heavenes where it rises, and likewise of a number of stars, spheres, men and animals. The men are here represented in various postures and attitudes, some fixed, others walking, some with their legs stretched out, and some again with them at rest. Some of them have their garments tucked up in a state for working, others are carrying materials, and lastly, some are giving directions relative to work. It is manifestly evident that these were intended to portray important matters, remarkable actions, extraordinary incidents, and under the figure of implements to delineate secrets most profound. It is clear that all this was not exhausted upon similar works for the mere purpose of embellishment and decoration.[10]

The curiosity of the twelfth-century man and the extent of his engaged attention to the works of art is clear. It goes almost without saying that his work also illustrates the kind of visual images that were at the disposal of a twelfth-century man to experience and to put these close observations into a language which is truly remarkable, even by modern standards.

But modern philosophy, as modern aesthetics, hates such transcendental universals,[11] like being, goodness, beauty, feeling, etc., and I have a great deal of sympathy for that, as these categories have been abused and trivialised in our contemporary world. But this does not mean that we should look at these universals in the way

that popular conventions of society tend directly or indirectly to dictate to us. Scepticism is acceptable while cynicism is not. For in aesthetic theory, these categories are absolutely necessary in order to arrive at a positive aesthetic observation. In order to appreciate the language of ancient art, we must lay aside some of our preconceived aesthetic ideas. We should also be aware of what these paintings meant to those for whom they were created.

No one can say for certain how the time and place influenced the way in which, for example, the caveman saw his world. It is generally acknowledged that art is a reflection of social reality. The painter, like any other member of the creative community, learns through perceptions and personal experiences which he then transforms into symbolic entities.

But we cannot, however scientifically qualified we may be, turn supposed "facts" of an artist's life into explanations of his work, as psychoanalysts desire to do. This is not to say, however, as Joseph Chiari writes, that events and facts of an artist's life have no influence or effect on his work. They do have, but in an unanalysable way.[12] Thus it is quite safe to say that, "The painter

is a man who notices". The established general view of the paleolithic man, for example, as being no more than a primitive toolmaker and hunter, has been undergoing a process of change. Now he appears to be more of a modern human than had been believed possible.[13] The cave paintings found in north-western Spain and south-western France testify to an artistic ability which is most startling and remarkable, even to this day. In the paintings of his animals (Fig. 16, Painted bison, Altamira-Paleolithic epoch) the outline of the bodies is executed in a broad black line giving full effect to the character of the animal. The heads and shoulders are filled in with black and the heads are rendered in a way that conveys the essential impression received on looking at these animals.

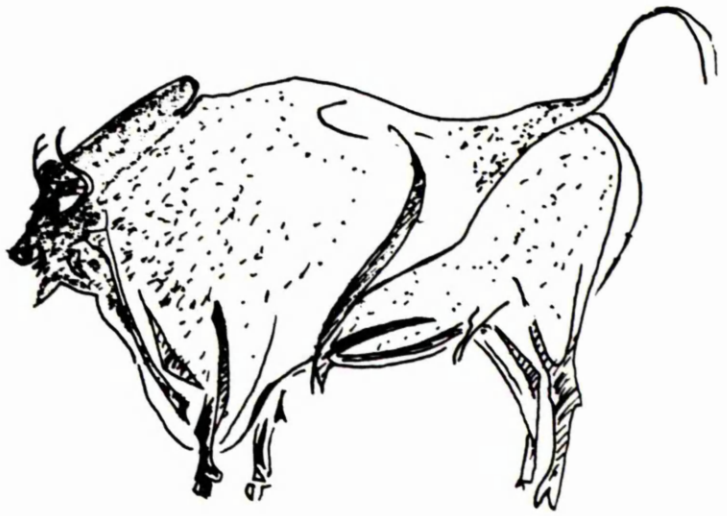


FIGURE 16

These paintings required intelligence and exceedingly impressive continuity of portrayal. They point to more perfect, more complete and more significant reality. What, then, is the difference, if any, between what the cave artist saw and painted and the corresponding modern view of art (which expressed itself in painting by light and colour), and how in our present state of knowledge can this difference be brought into view and described?

One of the main obstacles in the modern age while studying ancient aesthetics and, for that matter, the medieval and modern artistic problems, apparently started with the method employed by a nineteenth-century art historian named Morelli. The Morellian approach has been a refuge

not only for other art historians who followed him, but also for critics of art and for dilettantes. Its main features were, in short, to study separate parts of, say, a painting, and then to concentrate on their stylisation. Abandoning this path is not as easy as it may appear. It was no surprise, therefore, when some scholars themselves finally admitted to this conditioned approach, which is of little use in explaining Islamic art.[14] The results achieved by this method have consistently been an insignificant amalgam of verbal patchwork and, probably to the extreme dismay of the working artist, have ignored the total impact of the visual material - something which is most essential in any artistic endeavour. The interrelationships of rhythm, sequential subtleties and the overall concepts, have been ignored.

the impact of the Morellian method on the students of the history of art was decisive. They have been trained to see painting through a variety of stylistic labels and conventions within which the art historian usually appears to be operating. This is, in a sense, misleading, as Professor Gombrich writes, and the procession of styles and periods represents in its essence only a series of masks for two categories: the classical and the non-classical.[15]

We can imagine, therefore, how much more increased the difficulty becomes for the student of Near Eastern art, for example. His problem seems to me to begin when he is faced with one Eastern artist demonstrating a stylistic versatility and a sense of ironic, if not multiple perspective. We find him desperately trying to fit conceptions in Islamic painting into basic conceptions of painting which have been acquired from a purely Western orientation to art.

At times we find that the whole effort of constructing the study of paintings done under totally different motivations and backgrounds, so that it would fit concepts developed under other intentions, is totally unacceptable.[16] As mentioned in the last chapter, "this serious problem has been the consequence of the immersion of Western cultures in the traditions of Greek and Italian Renaissance so that conceptual tools are assimilations along Western standards".[17]

Dr. B.W. Robinson puts this point into more acute focus when he explains that the essential obstacle in understanding Islamic painting is that the Western interpretive faculties are governed by a set of conventions established in the Italian Renaissance which

still lies heavily and, indeed, greatly influences the accurate reading of Islamic images and, in fact, all other branches of oriental art.[18]

We find that historians of art, well up the scale of scholarship, sometimes point out faults of perspective in painting or drawing, but these are not faults! Perspective is more properly a matter of science than of art. It was eagerly adopted as such by the scientifically-minded painters of the Italian Renaissance.

Often we find works by Near Eastern artists who disregarded perspective to the positive advantage of their design. Among knowledgeable circles, perspective so often has been called a convention which does violence to the way we see the world.[19]

The Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris possesses one of the most remarkably illustrated Arabic manuscripts ever to survive intact to this day. It is a copy of the Maqâmât by al-Harîrî أبو محمد القاسم بن علي بن محمد بن عثمان الحريرى

dated 1237, and known as the Schefer Harîrî.[20] In this chapter we shall discuss three of these paintings and give our first-hand impressions and understandings of them.

The significance of these illustrated Maqâmât of al-Harîrî in the study of Islamic art is invaluable. Their immediate value, however, does not lie only in that it is a generously illustrated manuscript, but also that it is one of the most important socio-psychological documents ever to describe the creative lingual-artistic imagination and the mentality of thirteenth-century Iraq.

Al-Harîrî's Assemblies have been regarded for eight centuries as one of the greatest treasures in Arabic literature. He was an outstanding teacher and an enlightened man. His religious understanding, his aim to shatter the static vision and enrich the eye with secular light, endeavoured to resemble the reality. Al-Wâsiṭî most ably supported these efforts with his paintings.

The author of these Maqâmât was a native of the city of Basra in southern Iraq, and by a happy coincidence, the the artist and scribe who illustrated them was also a native of Iraq, probably from the city of Wâsiṭ which is halfway between Basra and Baghdad on the old course of the Tigris river. His full name at the end of the text is

signed thus:

" فرغ من نسخها العبد الفقير الى رحمة ربه
وغفرانه وعفوه يحيى بن محمود بن يحيى بن
ابي الحسن بن كوريها الواسطي بخطه وصوره آخر
نهار يوم السبت سادس شهر رمضان سنة أربع
وثلثين وستماية حامدا الله تعالى على نعمه
و مصليا على خير خلقه سيدنا محمد النبي
وآله وصحبه للأخيار الأبرار الأطهار وشرف
وكرم و سلم " .

The Thirty-ninth Maqâma, which is entitled العمانية or "The Encounter at Oman", has five paintings. The one we are discussing illustrated Abû Zayd and al-Hârith, the two main characters of the Maqâmât when they steered their ship towards an island after a sudden storm. (Fig. 17).

In this striking scene, the artist distinguished himself as a painter of animals with extraordinary gifts as a colourist. But, indeed, the more brilliant the achievements of the Muslim artists turn out to have been, the more discomforting the problems become. So remarkable is this painting, in fact, that even Professor Ettinghausen expressed doubt, thinking it possible that it was not al-Wâsiṭî who originally devised this ensemble,

FIGURE 17 Maqâmât of al-Harîrî (Thirty-ninth Maqâma).

but that it was wholly, or in part, founded on illustrations of slightly earlier books dealing with voyages to strange lands.[22] Unfortunately, he did not discuss this possibility any further: what slightly earlier books, and dealing with what voyages to what strange lands?

Let us turn to the painting itself and see if we cannot read it more accurately then before.

It should be pointed out that in the original, the island is clearly shown by a darker brown area where the middle ground becomes intensely and more effectively clear. (Plate 4). But photographic reproduction and transparencies give a quite different picture. Again, we can clarify the visual statement even further and why it was called the earliest known extensive landscape in Islamic painting.[21] (Plate 5)

Closer inspection reveals that it is far more complicated in structure than we may find in nature, and thus it gives rise to a host of attitudes of mind.[22]

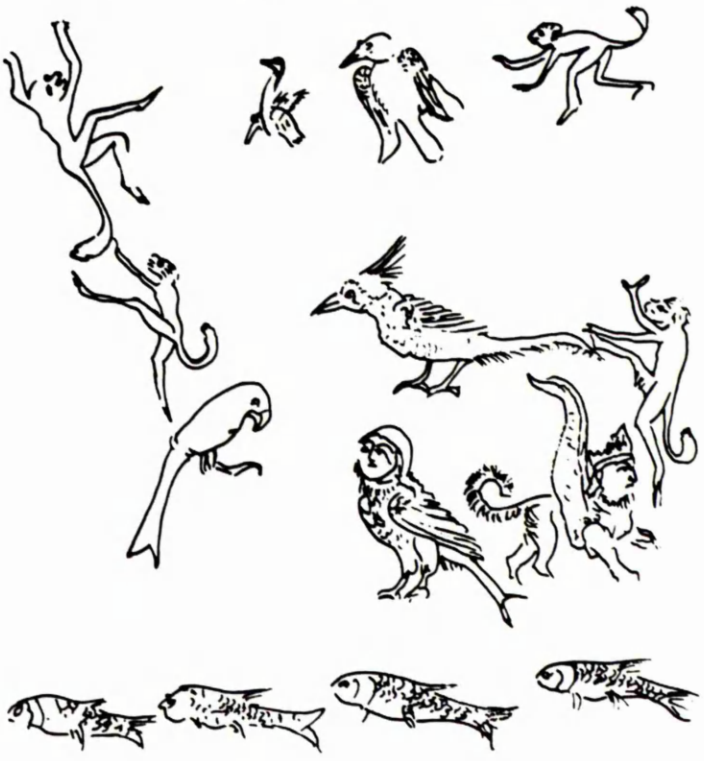


FIGURE 18

What is interesting in this painting is the thoughtful and sensitive rendering giving a great deal of information with unusual completeness and well-defined shapes, on to which the artist has spread his pigments in such a way that they convey the clear intentions that existed in his imagination, and this imagination was enriched, spiced and nourished in the land wher the tales of Shaharazâd delighted every ear, and Baghdad then provided the true seeker with caravans of dreams that came true.

We see part of a ship cautiously approaching an unknown island, the side view of it is rendered to show its hasty approach to the island. There are a variety of exotic animals inhabiting it. On the low branch to the right, the painter includes one of the most appealing birds in Iraq, the Hoopoe الهدهد . This elegant and colourful bird is found throughout the eastern hemisphere. It is admired most particularly for its magical movements in flight. (Fig. 18).

Rounded faces are usually characteristic of his images of women. The painter has used it to portray a harpy, as we can see, in the centre of the tree. The bird's mouth is expressive of greed; its golden neck, the blue chest, black and gold tail and elegant red wings, all bring to life this legendary image.

To the right, going in the opposite direction as if to balance the evil of the harpy, is a sphinx with a lion's body and colouring, and the head of a human. A monkey, climbing up the tree to the right, with another above it, seems to complement the next tree to the left.

The parrot appears content and humble, while the famous stork, as usual, towers on top of his nest.

This painting is beautiful not only because it is like life as we know it, but because it is unlike a mere pictorial representation and because it penetrates pure aesthetic levels. And this subtle distinction between a man-made image and a machine-made image calls for experience and a sharpened sensitivity. We shall come back to this painting in the next chapter.

The relevance of the visual truth that appeals to the ordinary man's viewing habits when dealing with aesthetics becomes irrelevant, and the falsehood of such truth can be demonstrated by considering the way in which the artist treats his images.

The distinction between what we see and what we infer through the intellect is a problem as old as human thought

on perception. As for the role of judgment in the process of vision, writes Gombrich, it was the greatest Arab student of the subject, Alkhâzen (died AD 1038), better known as Ibn al-Haytham, who wrote, "Nothing visible is understood by the sense of sight alone, save light and colour". And it was Ibn al-Haytham who taught the medieval West the distinction between sense, knowledge and inference. In fact, it is the aspect of inference which is a core issue concerning the special processes involved in the reading of images.

To illustrate this point, let us examine the illustration of the Eleventh Maqâmâ in the Schefer Harîrî. This sort of tumultuous rendering of a poem by Abû-Zayd is a typical representation of an entombment scene, which is almost the same to this day in Iraq. A wife, a mother, or a close relative would rend her dress in an expression of grief. We see to the right of the painting, full-throated ululation and outcry, with beating of the top of the head and of the face, rendered in the upper right half. The clawing of the cheeks, and the high-pitched tension of their tumult is uproarious (Fig. 19 Plate 6).

FIGURE 19 Paris arabe 5847,
Eleventh Maqâma.

Let us, for a moment, hear the opinion of another observer who also read this same painting. Professor Oleg Grabar of Harvard writes,

> The frozen silence of the personages, the quietitude of the setting, the elaborately massive composition, the gestures stopped in mid-air, all paraphrase superbly the meditation on death of Abû-Zayd's poem.[23]

I think the point that this picture was interpreted in a totally different manner is clear. We shall come back to this point in the next chapter when we will be discussing how language and images within a culture lead to readily recognisable symbols by others within the particular culture. Also we shall demonstrate how unfamiliar expressions and gestures may be totally misinterpreted by an observer, listener, or reader unfamiliar with the context or the background. There is no doubt that the painter's vision is based upon an observation of the world around him, human beings, nature, etc., and if we are to understand his work we must have some knowledge of his particular historical situations, for they are reflections composed into his paintings.

Finally, to illustrate the last point, let us look at the painting of the Forty-third Maqâma. The author of the

text here relates two most interesting stories: the first when Abû-Zayd was seeking marriage and was desperately looking for an answer concerning the type of woman he should choose for his wife. (Plate 7). The second part of the Maqâmâ is devoted to how Abû-Zayd proves to his friend al-Harîth that times have changed and that without money to back it, education and literary accomplishment are of no cash value. Scholarship brings man nothing but hardship, and he advises that a line of prose never filled an empty stomach!

In the illustration we see a large block of public buildings, like a marketplace or a bazaar. There is also a palm tree with a mosque and minaret. The two men on the camels are depicted with extreme sensitivity, and they sport well-groomed beards and moustaches. The rider on the right is given a magnificent red turban with decorations flowing down his back. From his light-blue dress, a tiny leg in black appears. The cloth beneath the saddle has a dominant green with involved patterns and two rolls of inscriptions in gold decorating the edges. Clearly they are elegantly dressed, and the second rider has a light-brown camel. He, in turn, is presented wearing a light-yellow shirt with patterns highlighted in red. The two golden decorations and inscriptions on the

arms of the two travellers are indicative of their wealth and sophistication. Obviously, the camel riders are the images of al-Harîth and his friend Abû-Zayd.

Attention should be directed to the position of the back legs of the two camels. Even though the grey camel's right leg, technically speaking, should be covering the right leg of the brown camel, since it is in front of it, it does not. However, in this harmonious and pleasing rendering the painter demonstrated his typically startling visual understanding. (Fig. 20).

FIGURE 20

One may be tempted to ask oneself "Is this real?", but this question becomes meaningless when we contemplate whether an optical illusion is real, and whether there is something more valuable than the apparent reality of things.

We can imagine, for example, that if the two legs were rendered in accordance with the conventional and established laws of vision, the entire flow and harmony of the lines would abruptly transform this harmonious and masterful statement into a cold and static image.

Among the impressive figures here are those of a child and a woman standing in the room to the left. This is, by Near Eastern standards, beautiful. The woman is rendered with a rounded face. Arab poets and prose writers often use the roundness of the moon to which they liken their beloved's shining face. This artist often presents women with round faces and big, slightly slanted eyes, like the woman in this painting. We can see that her headcover falls across her back like a shawl with inscriptions on what seems to be embroidery in gold thread.

A white cow is shown moving out of another room (Fig. 21). Its sudden appearance adds a great deal to the movement and dynamism of this painting. It seems to have brought the entire row of rooms much closer to the eye and, at the same time, its size and white colour are a welcome surprise. It is also an integral part of the compositional language of our painter.

FIGURE 21
Detail
(Forty-third Maqâma)

This is clear from the character of this work and its historical circumstances. The rest of the unexpected images of the Maqâmâ become quite harmonious with the rest of the story. The gaiety and joviality is the true theme and the foundation of this painting. There has been some professional criticism of this painter's unrelated images that appear, as it were, from nowhere, and that are not entirely faithful to the text. Grabar describes this painting as "A boorish community without intellectual enthusiasm and literary taste".[24] Clearly, what we have here is Grabar's notion of what the "provinces" were like. He was distracted from considering the peculiar character of this painting by the habit of perceiving Islamic painting, as he himself noted, through an "approach conditioned by scholarship that had developed around medieval Christian manuscripts".[25] In either case, whether initial or latterday, conditioning has led art historians to these inextricable contradictions through not having understood the perfection of art in artistic language very different from, for example, the Graeco-Roman.

In order to answer this sort of criticism, I am going to quote from a contemporary master-painter, Marc Chagall:

> But please defend me against people who speak of 'anecdotes' and 'fairy tales' in my work. A cow and a woman to me are the same - in a picture both are merely elements of composition. In a painting, the images of a woman or of a cow have different poetic values ... I needed that sort of form there for my composition. Whatever else may have grown out of these compositional arrangements are secondary.[26]

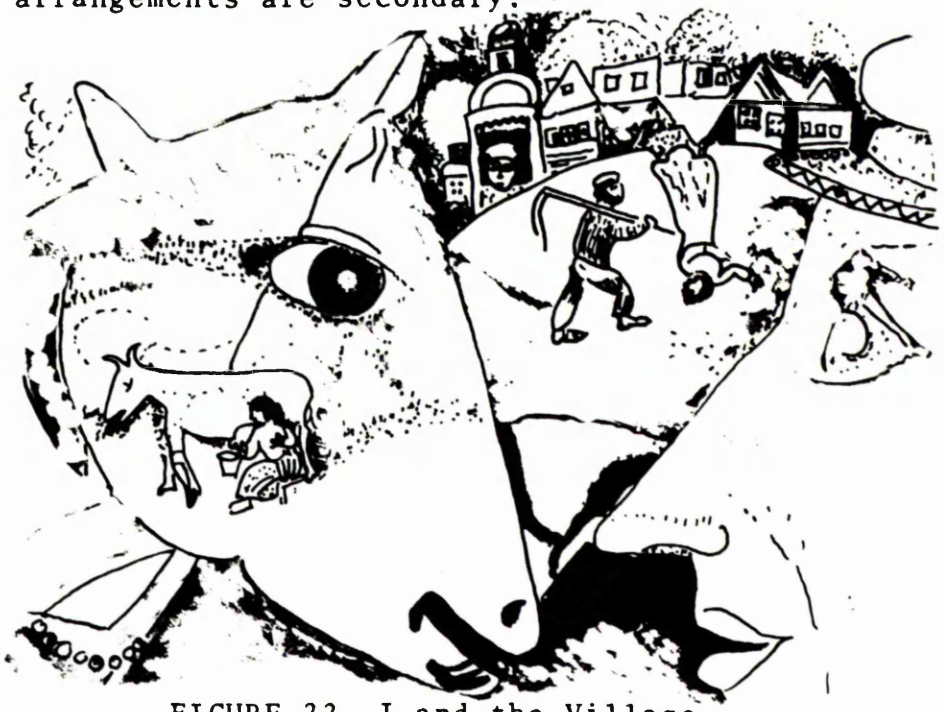


FIGURE 22 I and the Village, M. Chagal.

We have also attempted to look at this painting more sensitively by discussing what is illustrated there in order to understand how the painter's visual language may be viewed, in spite of our training to read almost every image as if it were a photograph, a machine-made image. (Plate 8). We tried to expand this image of the artist's condensed version of this panoramic painting. In the

distance we see the goats surrounding a pool of water, and the involvement of village life intimately depicting the social life of ancient Iraq. We see no attempt at the "illusion" of reality which seems to add a special force to this delightful composition. All we really did here was to reduce the upper quarter of the painting by about 50 per cent and complete the water pool, then reintroduce the original foreground of the painting. I think that once we understand, for example, the painter's interpretation of space and his own way of telling his story and, at the same time we realise that the medium of words is not always compatible with visual meaning, then I hope we can at least attempt to push beyond the immediate art-historical convention of enquiry in order to reach a new kind of perspective.

The painter, we understand, had certain technical problems to deal with. Firstly, there was the size of the paper which he had at hand. Secondly, the method of using the visual vocabulary which he needed in order to translate his mental sense picture, because the space of which the painter makes use is a transposed space within which all objects are at rest. This, I think, is a central issue in the appreciation and understanding of paintings. This may be done in practice, but philosophically its nature has

not been identified. Al Wâsiṭî's intimate involvement and excitement with al-Harîrî's text can be sensed through his paintings. Finally there comes a point where the painter is faced with combining the best aspects of these two practical problems. Here a phenomenon which we call the aesthetic impulse plays its part. It is precisely at this point where works of art transcend all else and become one of the most cherished visual statements of mankind.

It was not our purpose to speculate upon the stylistic - "the where" and "the who" influences in this chapter. Instead, we argued that the given image must be deciphered and correctly evaluated. Having placed the "image" in the centre of our investigation, the chief aim was to come to grips with these images, because apart from the "creative processes", we have no other verifiable data but the result itself.[27]

From the few examples which offer a representative selection, we hope it has become clearer that this kind of interpretive approach of the image itself offers a more accurate way to study the concepts of Islamic painting. We must stress that if we had started the evaluation with predetermined associations imposed on us by a set of conventions developed around totally different motivations

and backgrounds, and if through these same influences we might have asked the wrong questions, the answers obtained would have undoubtedly been misleading, and most probably wrong.

In the next chapter we shall consider the issue of the relationship between a variety of images, in order to ascertain whether it is possible to demonstrate the confluence between the creativeness in the rendering of the image, and the traditionalism which characterises Islamic painting.

NOTES

1. S. Morawski, Inquiries into the Fundamentals of Aesthetics (Cambridge, Mass., 1978), p. 76.

2. Ibid., p. 156.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid., p. 26.

6. E.H. Gombrich, Meditations on a Hobby Horse (London, 1978), p. 11.

7. Ibid., p. 1.

8. Ibid., p. 3.

9. G. Turnbull, Treatise on Ancient Painting (London, 1740), p. 45.

10. Al-Baghdadi, Abd al-Latîf, The Eastern Key, translated into English by K.H. Zand and John Videan (London, 1964), pp. 137-9.

11. J.N. Findley, "The Perspicuous and the Poignant: Two Aesthetic Fundamentals", from the British Journal of Aesthetics 7, 1 (January 1967), p. 5.

12. J. Chiari, op. cit., p. 9.

13. See A. Marshack, "Exploring the Mind of Ice-Age Man", National Geographic, Vol. 147, No. 1, January 1975, p. 66.

14. Oleg Grabar, The Illustrations of the Maqamât (Chicago, 1984), p. 155.

15. E.H. Gombrich, Norm and Form (London, 1971), p. 83.

16. For example, on the organisation of space in Islamic painting, see: Alexander Papadopoulo, Islam and Muslim Art, translated by Robert E. Wolf (New York, 1979), and David James, "Space-forms in the Work of Baghdad Maqamât Illustrators, 1225-58", Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, Vol. 37, Part 2 (1974), pp. 305-20. For a brief analysis of the above, see, Grabar, op. cit., p. 140.

17. Sapare Aude, "Assyriology - Why and How?" introduction to A.L. Oppenheim, Ancient Mesopotamia (London, 1977), p. 30.

18. B.W. Robinson, Persian Paintings in the J. Rylands Library (London, 1980), p.3.

19. E.H. Gombrich, "Standards of Truth: The Arrested Image and the Moving Eye", in Critical Inquiry, Vol. 7, No. 2 (Winter 1980), p. 251.

20. Ms. arabe 5847 (Schefer:Harîrî), Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.

21. R. Ettinghausen, Arab Painting (Geneva, 1977), p. 124.

22. Ibid.

23. Oleg Grabar, "Pictures or Commentaries: The Illustrations of the Maqamât of al-Harîrî", in Studies in Art and Literature of the Near East in Honour of Richard Ettinghausen (The Middle East Centre, Utah, 1974), p. 92.

24. Grabar, The Illustrations of the Maqâmât, op. cit., p. 95.

25. "My initial approach was conditioned by the scholarship that has developed around medieval Christian manuscripts with its well-defined objectives of establishing the relation between miniatures or manuscripts, and the ways painters interpreted a given text ... thus the sacrosanct art principle of post hoc ergo propter hoc ... became of very little use in explaining the Maqâmât", ibid., p. 155.

26. In J. Hospers, Meaning and Truth in Art (Chapel Hill, 1979), pp. 101-2.

27. "If we ask how indeed we are to describe the creative process, we find that generally this task leads us at last to study its exteriorization, that is, the art object itself. Patently, this must be the procedure for objects made long ago and for whose 'mysterious' creative process we have no other data but the result itself", S. Morawski, op. cit., p.3.

CHAPTER FOUR

PAINTING, EXPERIENCE AND THE THINKING IN IMAGES

Progress has given man an opportunity to observe himself, and to utilise art to be his reflection. Art historians tended not to take this progression into consideration, and have devoted almost no attention to it. The study of Islamic art has gone no further, in all the years of research, than the Morellian stage of investigation, which was discussed earlier.

The art of this century is a reflection of modern thought which is not fettered to the objects of reality. This new concept in Western art is an attainment which closely resembles the basic ideas of Eastern art. Were it not for such an aim, art would still be a prisoner of artificial boundaries. In other words, it should obey the rules set down in the classical and neo-classical periods of Greece and later Italy.

However, it was not the achievement of art historians that helped art out of this apparent cul-de-sac, but the artists themselves who realised that art had no boundaries. In order to understand and view seriously the products of Islamic art, one should break away from the

old bonds of Western values. The main obstacle that prohibits most historians of art from penetrating the Muslim artist's ultimate intention in art, is the genre inherited from the Renaissance theory of representation.

It follows from the above that the only way this complex situation of reading Islamic images can be resolved is if we consider it against its appropriate historical background, and not by trying to squeeze it into a predetermined set of co-ordinates. But in all fairness, how could the art historians who have obtained their conceptual tools, which are geared to assimilation along Western standards, help but measure the contributions of others against Western models? The background that has conditioned these scholars is only part of the problem. The diction and phraseology for the study and appreciation of works of art - better known as the history of art - was conceived for the understanding of Western art. This academic discipline was first accepted in this country by the Courtauld Institute in 1931. Until then, the majority of Western art works had been created for religious, ceremonial, or memorial purposes, and were to be seen in their own settings.

The extreme difficulty lies in organising a new diction and phraseology pertinent to another civilization, with other purposes in mind. Although some scholars indeed admit that, for example, "Muslims regarded elaborate ceremonies and official symbols as vain and pompous nonsense,[1] they have tended to concentrate on, and look for, what they expect to discover in their own normative world.

In spite of what one's beliefs may be, there seems to be no way of knowing or conceiving the central creative force of the world in one definitive and specific way. Asking the wrong questions and using descriptive words like "Muslim iconography", "perspective" and the like, are at variance with the treatment and undertaking that Islamic art demands.

To demonstrate the point that I am trying to make, let us look at "natural scenes" and the way they are expressed in painting. For example, we shall see in our discussion of the painting of the Twenty-second Maqâma that the painter may use an image, as a writer may use a word, in an appropriate context, and yet we may have difficulty in understanding or defining its meaning and intention correctly. For the person who has not heard or seen

a مشحوف (Mashhuf) can hardly make the connection with the title of the Maqâma الفراتية (al-Furâtiya) and its content. Thus he may call the illustration meaningless or unfaithful to the text. The reasoning behind the Islamic pictorial vocabulary becomes clear as soon as we consider the relationship between perception and image-making, which are in turn related to definition and criterion. These two are overlooked, if not neglected, aspects in the study of Islamic painting. "Definition" is understood here in the sense that the painter demonstrates or defines his capacity to render an object or image distinct to the eye of the observer. Criterion is the distinguishing mark or characteristic of a thing by which it can be judged or estimated.

The sources of creative renderings can be a part of such a relationship. The real scene does not cause the artist to abandon altogether his impression of the scene. In other words, his imagination of, say, a river, helps him and enables him to see the river in a way that is easily translatable into two-dimentional representation, and thus recognisable by others.

Let us, for a moment, go back to al-Wâsiṭî's Eastern Island, since we have become more familiar with it in the last chapter (Plate 9). In his interpretation of a boat approaching the Island, as described in the Thirty-ninth Maqâma, he had an interesting problem to deal with. He chose to add a bit of drama and suspense to the scene: only the front of the boat is partially nearing the Island from behind a thicket, (Plate 10). We find the water well contained, and we can see how two different perceptions are brought together demonstrating their unmistakable unity. What is most interesting, however, is how he conceived the Island as a whole, surrounded by the water. Again, let us clarify how this Island was conceived, and how the artist's experience, which is clearly drawn from his environment and from the culturally-related things of the mind, is applied when interpreting certain impressions cast on the retina.[2] The painter demonstrated this by the curve to the left, separating the boat from the Island.

Particularly in this painting, and in many other paintings by the same artist and his contemporaries, it would be a grave mistake to assume that there was an "artificial convention" used only for compositional purposes. The evidence refutes this assumption, which some experts seem to have inherited without much thought or observation.

The painting shows that this painter, and also others, were looking and observing all the features of natural landscape that they needed. Al-Wâsiṭî did not have exclusive rights.

Looking closely at this painting, we realise the following. Firstly, the conception of an island which is indicated by a circular shape. (Fig. 23).

FIGURE 23

Secondly, the trees and the animals placed in their intended positions, and thirdly, the water, which, as will be discussed later, had its own depiction, namely through the emphasis on the wave lines and the fish (Fig. 24).

FIGURE 24

Finally, we come to the problem of the placement of the boat. Obviously, there is no limit to the possibilities that one may come up with, but we know that boats at this period were almost always depicted in side view (Fig. 25).

That greatly narrows the problem, as we have fewer options. One possibility may be the depiction of the boat in its full size, and this has four obvious possibilities: showing the boat nearing the island and viewed from the back, i.e., shown from behind the scene of the island; from the sides, or in front of the island. Instinctively, we realise that placing the boat at the back of the scene of the island would not give much scope for showing it clearly.

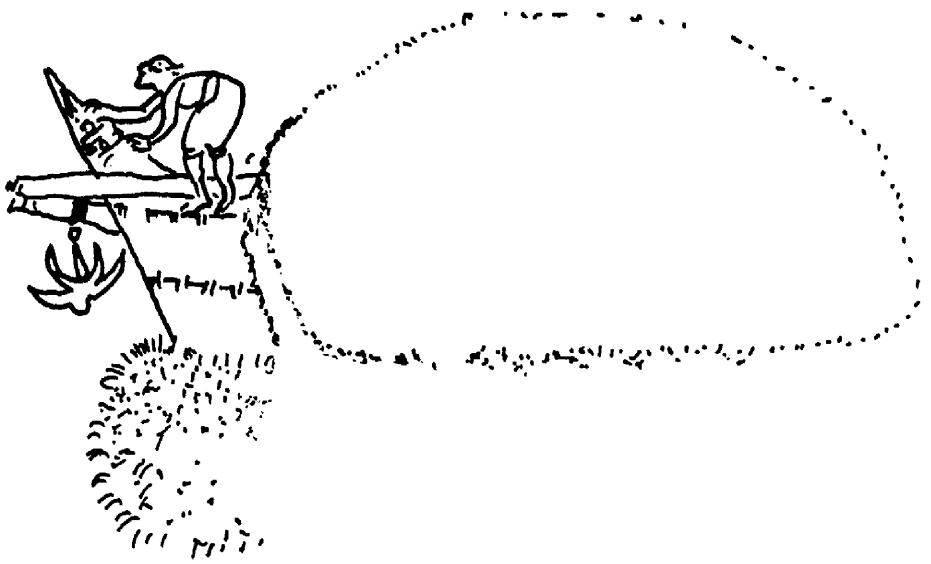


FIGURE 25

The two side views, however placed, would stretch the full image of the composition most awkwardly, and showing the boat in front of the island would obstruct the view of this enchanted place and its inhabitants. The remarkable solution of the partial view is both practical and theoretically sound. It affirms the remarkable sense of composition this artist possesses. If, for a moment, we consider the mental, not a popular term, image of a boat nearing an island, we see that this idea is effectively supported and depicted by this artist, and his solution is therefore most remarkable. (Fig. 26).

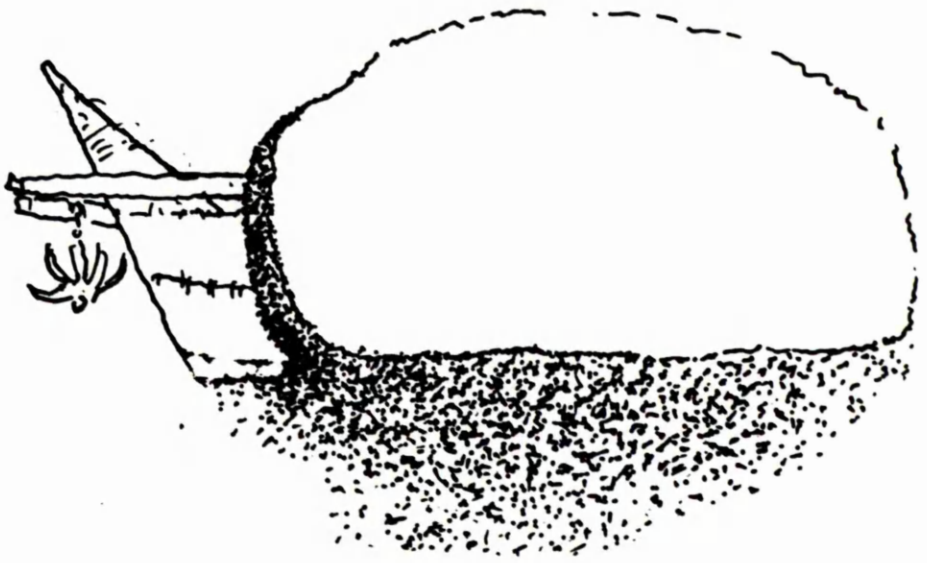


FIGURE 26

Our attention at this point may be directed to the curve next to the boat. This curve, as previously mentioned, indicates the water surrounding the island. Many of our questions concerning this solution would have been readily answered if the boat had been drawn showing its frontal view. This, in any case, would have had its own visual problems. The frontal aspect, assuming that the painter considered such an aspect, would be difficult to read. This painting does not, however, represent a mindless imitation of nature. Borrowed features of life were adapted to the culturally related ways of seeing and interpreting the environment. Thus he demonstrated an ideal inherent in all art. We find the painter's

conception and handling of this visual problem translated into more familiar terms, which in turn give life to a given order of ideas and facts. We may conclude that the process of creating pictorial space is considered not only according to the imitation of nature, but according to the conception of the idea.

The archaic assumptions that have dominated historical thinking in recent decades are that the Muslim painter illustrated books and not life. However, evidence would support the opposite view. The misunderstanding of this subtle point is inherent in the age-old dichotomy of scholarship and artistry. The historian of art need not be too indignant if he is asked to add to his pre-set methodological premise an empirical consideration, however rudimentary that may be. The science of picture-making, as some historians assume, is for the artist and not the historian. But without acquiring at least some general idea of the pictorial discipline, how can they hope to study and appreciate the achievements of the artist? As we said earlier, there are culturally-related ways of seeing and interpreting the environment. Another Eastern painter, some 400 years later, conceives an island in a remarkably similar way to al-Wâsitî's conception of his own enchanted island (Plate 11). The way the island is

perceived, shows a similar learning process in perception. Without going into the traditional problems of vision which questions whether our abilities to perceive the special aspects of our environment are acquired or innate, we can say that in either case the point which is evident from these two paintings is that of expressing and interpreting landscape and natural setting in the manner of a kind of lingua franca recognised by others within a culture. Hence the question, can we determine how an image of one tradition was formed from other traditions?, is quite misleading and meaningless. It is an assumption put in the form of a question which begs to be answered. It flies in the face of all the evidence that behavioural scientists and other careful investigators who study the nature of images have come to realise. These images become a language, unique and recognisable by others within a culture.

It is true that there are some conventional expressions which have a universally accepted meaning. But as we have seen in our discussion of the entombment scene (Chapter Two) and later in this chapter, both language and images within a culture lead to readily-recognisable symbols by others within the particular culture. Unfamiliar expressions and gestures may be totally misinterpreted by an unfamiliar observer, listener, or reader.

> Certain facial expressions and gestures are taught by one's culture as ways of expressing emotion. The following quotations from Chinese novels would surely be misinterpreted by an American reader unfamiliar with the culture (Klineberg, 1938).
>
> 'Her eyes grew round and opened wide'
> (She became angry)
>
> 'They stretched out their tongues'
> (They showed signs of surprise)
>
> 'He clapped his hands'
> (He was worried or disappointed)
>
> 'He scratched his ears and cheeks'
> (He was happy).[3]

In short, traditionally-formed images do not form themselves from other traditions of images any more than 'Symbols carry meaning as trucks carry coal'.[4]

In Plate 12 we find that the painting again follows this familiar pattern of a boat on a river or the sea, which is rendered as if it were a miniature boat floating in a glass container. There are two important reasons for this. First, it follows the traditional way in which rivers are depicted, where the fish and the oars are clearly seen. To achieve this effect there needs to be enough space allotted to show the deep-plunging oars and also the fish. It is equally important that the fish are used mainly to indicate water and also in order to clarify this fact in a similar way as hand gestures are used in

conversation to reinforce the meaning of the spoken word. The role of language, as we shall see in the following pages, has its own unique contribution to representational thought. Second, we find that the depiction of water is seldom left without providing something to prevent it from spilling out from the surface of the paper. This becomes clear even when we think of the river as seen from the shore. What can soon be detected is that the painter, with his visual liberty, has given us a cross-sectional view of the river. Once we perceive this, we find the scene perfectly meaningful and pleasing and appreciate the way of solving the problem. The foreground becomes very important in order to shift our attention to the boat. The profile of the boat is given as seen from the shore, and for this reason the foreground is employed to indicate, at the same time, the two interpretations suggested.

In another painting (Plate 13) we find a ship drawn from a side view. The text tells how Abû Zayd was calling out to the people of the ship to take him aboard. Again the water is depicted as surrounded by land. The way water is rendered is noteworthy. The large waves which may be regarded as indicative of the events that will take place later on in the story. The ship is being emptied of water

which has seeped in, by containers being poured out from the lower deck by two men. The ship was built by the knotting or stitching method. Nails were not used in the thirteenth century, mainly because the stitching method allowed for movement, greater strength and flexibility. The six personages on the upper deck are all looking in one direction, probably indicating that Abû Zayd is calling from the shore and asking to be taken aboard the ship.

In the Thirty-ninth Maqâma (in Leningrad) the scene of men in a boat (Plate 14) is also clear. The boat in this painting extends even beyond the contained shape of the river. It illustrates Abû Zayd on th shore talking to the crew. The Leningrad copy is much more dynamic and expressive then the Paris copy, particularly on the upper deck with the rhythmic movement of the men and their white flowing costumes. The men are attentive to Abû Zayd's words, and the ropes and mast form a remarkable illustration of a thirteenth-century ship.

The ship in both paintings indicates that it was a stitched ship. The carved plank which is sewn into the keel was, and still is, a speciality of the Near Eastern shipbuilders. No nails were used. The X-shaped marks on

the hull of the vessel indicate the tedious stitching process entailed to hold it together. This method allowed greater flexibility and durability on the high seas. The painter gives an almost graphic description of the rounded mainspar, two sections of which are fitted and then tied together before sail-rigging.

Finally, in the Twenty-eighth Maqâma there is another scene of a boat on the Euphrates with a similar treatment. Again, we notice that the boat extends over the space allotted for the contained form of the river. We will say more about this painting at a later stage.

There is a suggestion in the picture that the information and assumptions were drawn from general experience. Islamic culture in many of its images is still obscure for most Western observers. Misconceived assessments of Islamic painting often result from a misunderstanding of the relevant pattern of interpretation and expression. For example, the use of language and the impact of experience has its own unique way of influencing pictorial representation, and together they are a reflection of the times. Baxandall explains this point clearly:

> Our own culture is close enough to the Quattrocento for us to take a lot of the same things for granted and not to have a strong sense of misunderstanding the picture; we are closer to the Quattrocento mind than to the Byzantine, for instance. This can make it difficult to realise how much of our comprehension depends on what we bring to the picture.[5]

What is obviously neglected in the study of the history of Islamic art is the consideration of the structure of language and its relationship to the thought processes, and to the painter's visual development. Admittedly, this subject requires further study. It is important to note at this point, however, that any student of Arab painting must remember that to people who are very conscious of language, like the Arabs, it is of incalculable value to take time and use the language as an instrument with which to view their pictorial development.

A recent brilliant study by Susan Sugarman,[6] vividly explains this phenomenon which modern anthropological studies have only just begun to investigate, that is, the primary question of how language affects the way a people perceive and respond to the environment, and indeed more importantly, language's role in conditioning perception, thought and action.[7] There is a dynamic interrelationship of language and meaning, images and imagination.

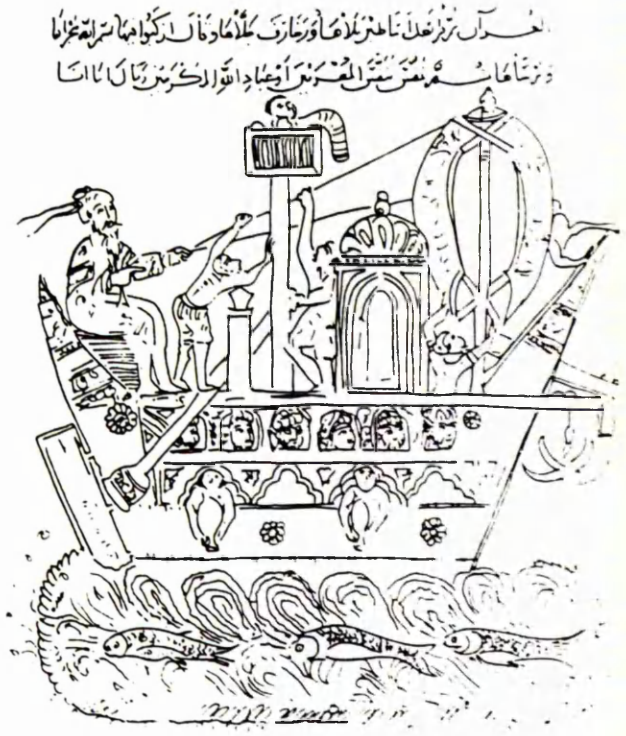
Like all other cases of painting, our study of the pictorial space in Islamic painting brings us seriously to consider that the reading of an image requires great familiarity with, if not "knowledge" of, the milieu in which the painting was conceived. As we have already stated, that mere appearance both in painting and other aspects of life may prove to be irrelevant, to use Gombrich's expression, as the real colour of a river matters to the cartographer.[8] Historians have consistently made the mistake of confusing the container with the content. "Never mistake the colour of the glass with that of the wine", advises Rûmî. We may do well to remember this when we are examining images from the past, for we are doing it with different intentions in mind, different, that is from the intentions of the original artists.[9]

It is interesting at this stage to note that we have already discussed two painting from the same Maqâma, and the next two we are about to discuss are also from the Thirty-ninth Maqâma. Let is look at these four paintings all together, since they all depict the main events of the story.

Reading the Maqâma itself is obviously very important, and brings us nearer to the painter's imagination, or at least, closer to the events that are mentioned in the Maqâma which may have inspired his imagination in the way they did. Without going into too much detail of the language here (Appendix I), let us look at these illustrations in comparison with particularly relevant quotations from the text.

فلما شرعنا في القلعة * ورفعنا الشرع للسرعة *
سمعنا من الشاطيء المرسى * هاتفا يقـــول *
يا أهل ذا الفلك القويم .. * وقال اركبـوا
فيها بسم الله مجراها ومرساها * قال الحارث
بن همـام .. وعجت له أصواتنا بالتـلاوة *

Scarcely had we settled on board, and hoisted the sails for speed, when we heard from the shore, ... a caller who said: "O you people of this strongly-built ship, ... embark ye within, in the name of God be its course and its riding at anchor!' Then our voices were raised to him in recitation. 10

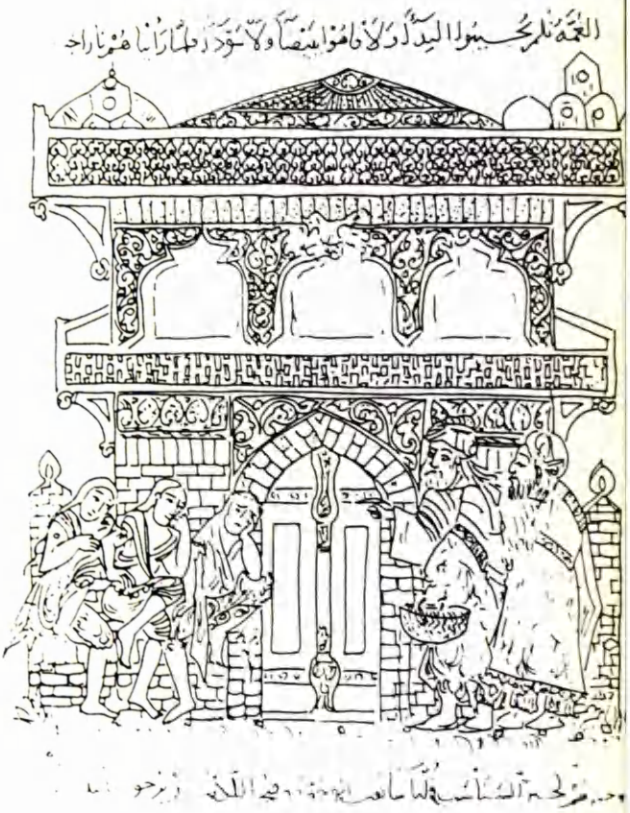


وجـاءهم الموج من كل مكان * فملنا لهـــــذا
الحدث الثائر * الى أحد الجزائر * لنريـح
ونســتريح * ريثمـا توءاتي الريـح *

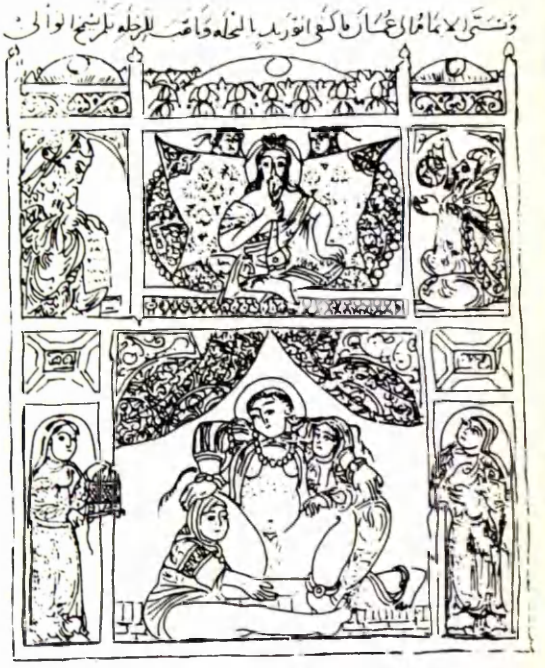
And suddenly the sea was rushing in on us from every quarter. Therefore, we veered, on account of this calamity towards one of the adjacent islands, to give rest to our ship, and to protect ourselves until the wind calmed down.

فنهـدنا الى الجزيرة * وكلانا لا يملك فتيـــلا *
حتى أفضينا الى قصر مشيد * له باب مـــن
حديد * ودونه زمرة من عبيد * فناسمناهـــم *
فلما رأينا نارهـم نار الحباحب * وخبرهـــم
كسراب السباسب * قلنـا شاهـت الوجـــوه *

Accordingly, we two descended from the ship to the island, despite the failing of our strength, ... After walking quite a while we came upon a lofty castle, with an iron gate, and a troop of slaves in front. When we saw that their fire was that of the glow-worm and that their state was as that of the mirage of the desert, we said "Out upon you, and my your faces wax unsightly alas for anyone who hopes anything of you!"



فابتدر خادم عليه كبرة * وقال يا قوم لا توسعونا
سبّا ولا توجعونا عتبا * فقال له اعلم ان رب
هذا القصر هو قطب هذه البقعة * وشاه
هذه الرقعة * الاّ أنه لم يخل من كمد *
لحلوّه من ولد * الى أن بشّر بحمل عقيله *
ولما حان النتاج وصيغ الطوق والتاج * عسر
محاض الوضع * حتى خيف على الأصل والفرع *



Then a servant whom old age had visited, came forth and said: ... "Know you that the lord of this castle ... is the pole-star of this place, and the Governor of this territory. He was not free from grief because he was childless, until he was hailed with the noble tidings of the pregnancy of a shoot. Then when the time of delivery had come, the throes of childbirth were so severe that great fear was felt for both root and branch."

ثم أخذ القلم واسحنفر * وكتب على الزبد بالمزعفر *
أيهذا الجنين انّي نصيح لك والنصح من شروط
الدين * أنت مستعصم كنين * وقرار من السكون
مكين * فاستدم عيشك الرغيد * وحاذر أن تبيع
المحقوق بالمظنون *

Then he took the pen with a mighty extravagant gesture and wrote on the meerschaum with the saffron-solution: "Child to come, listen to one who warns you beforehand, and yes, warning belongs to faith's foremost duties; ... You are safe now within a home closely guarded, an abode from misery well protected; ... So continue your easeful life and beware of changing things proved with things that are all uncertain, ..."

فلم يكن الاّ كذ واق شارب * حتى اندلق شخص الولد *
لخصيص الزبد * بقدرة الواحد الصمد * فامتلأ القصر
حبورا * فاكتفى أبو زيد بالنحلة * وتأهب للرحلة *
فلم يسمح الوالي بحركته *

"Then it took no longer than the
throat tastes of drinking ... before
the body of the child slipped
out, through the specific quality
of the talismatic writing and the
might of the One, the Eternal.
The castle was immediately filled
with delight. The governor would
not let him depart with us ..."

In each of the four examples given, we find that al-Harîrî's use of the Arabic language reflects the Near Eastern culture. It provides valuable clues to understanding and interpreting the age and the place, that is, where, or by whom, and to whom the words were said. But most importantly, it illustrates how the images can be influenced by the structure of the language. For example, the phrase فلما رأينا نارهم نار الحباب evokes innumerable images and conditions in which the implicit symbolic organisation is specific of the Near Eastern experience. Peter B. Hammond clarifies this point by the use of the words for snow in Eskimo and Arabic: "An Eskimo might indicate with a single word snow of a particular colour, depth and intensity, whereas an Egyptian who spoke Arabic, a language that evolved in a largely snowless environment, would be hard pressed to explain the same phenomenon in several words or even several phrases".[11]

Therefore, we must not be too surprised if the artist introduces images which we may not consider to be "faithful to the text", because that depends on how faithful we are in reading and understanding the text itself. With this in mind, let us look at another common scene which illustrates the interior of a room which can be seen in the Thirty-ninth Maqâma, depicting another adventure where Abû Zayd again emerges Victorious (Plate 15).

Professor Ettinghausen has called this scene "the tripartite, two-storey scheme".[12] This term and a quick glance at the painting may show an inaccurate reading of these settings. Although one hopes that Ettinghausen did not actually mean that the room itself had these separate parts, a closer look, in any case, will reveal something different to us.

First, let us see how the Maqâma reads:

> ... til Abu Zayed ... said 'Be still, O such a one, and be of good cheer, and receive news of job and proclaim them, for I possess a spell for speedy childbirth ... Then his slave hurried to inform his noble master, and before the time which it takes to say 'No', sallied out to take us in.[13]

The lower floor seen in this painting indicates two things: that there is only one large room, and that there are two figures of women at each side, one with an incense burner on the left moves out of the indicated frame and into the larger one, while the other stands right in the middle of the frame that surrounds her (Plate 16).

On the upper floor there is no sign that either of the two figures of Abu Zayed or that of (probably) al-Hârith are in a similar position as the two women below, for they are shown entirely within the indicated frames.

How can we best understand this image? Are these indeed tripartite in the sense that each of the two figures on the two sides are meant to be seen as being each in separate rooms, or are these dividing lines meant to represent other functions?

The main event in the painting is taking place on the lower-ground floor, characterised by the two-floor architectural setting. This aspect can be seen not only in this painter's other works, but also in paintings with similar settings, like the Leningrad paintings of the Maqâmât, and that of Rasâ'il Ikwân al-Safâ. We can see in the painting that the lord of the house is seated in the upper floor, with two assistants behind. On either side there are the two personages - Abû Zayd on his right, and probably al-Hârith on his left.

It is here that we can demonstrate how images may be used to explain other images, as words are used to explain other words. A painter from a similar pictorial and cultural background can indeed help us to understand not only his own creations, but also the way his contemporaries thought in images. The Thirtieth Maqâma of the Leningrad manuscript can be of great help. Let us compare the two outlines of the paintings, the lower floor of our painting with that of the Leningrad manuscript.

Comparing the two floors reveals an interesting insight into this problem. We have already become familiar with some of al-Wâsiṭî's methods of painting in, for example, The Wedding Banquet of the Thirtieth Maqâma. This scene takes place in a room with some twenty people enjoying the bridal sweets and a meal at the wedding feast (Plate 17). Let us consider the architectural aspect for a moment. Both of the lower rooms of the Thirty-ninth Maqâma (Paris) and the Thirtieth Maqâma (Leningrad) have a few things in common: the curtains, the two wings and the brick floor. It is interesting to find that the two architectural settings almost overlap in the two paintings (Fig. 27).

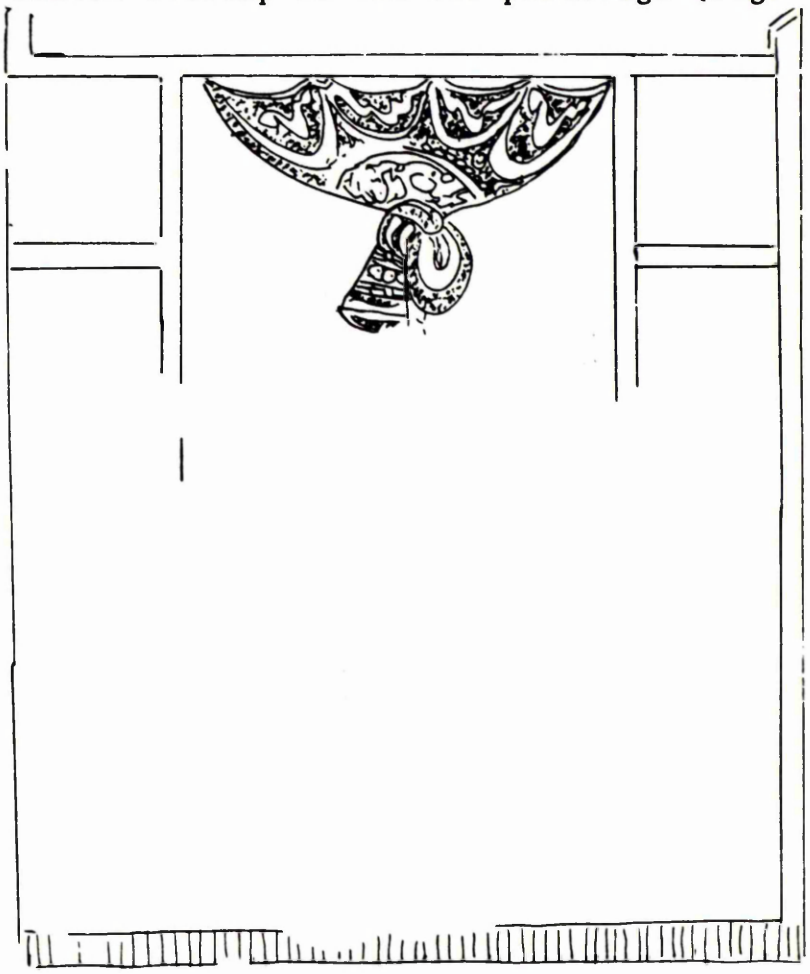


FIGURE 27

The setting in the Thirty-ninth Maqâma (Fig. 28) particularly when we examine the lower ground, discloses two architectural settings that are almost identical. Whereas in the Thirtieth Maqâma, the lines (indicated by arrows) are not seen obviously because they lie behind the personages.

وَنَسَبَ الإِمَامُ أَبُو عُثْمَانَ فَاكْتَفَى أَبُو زَيْدٍ بِالنِّحْلَةِ وَذَهَبَ لِلرَّحْلَةِ فَلَمْ يَسْمَحْ لَوَالِي

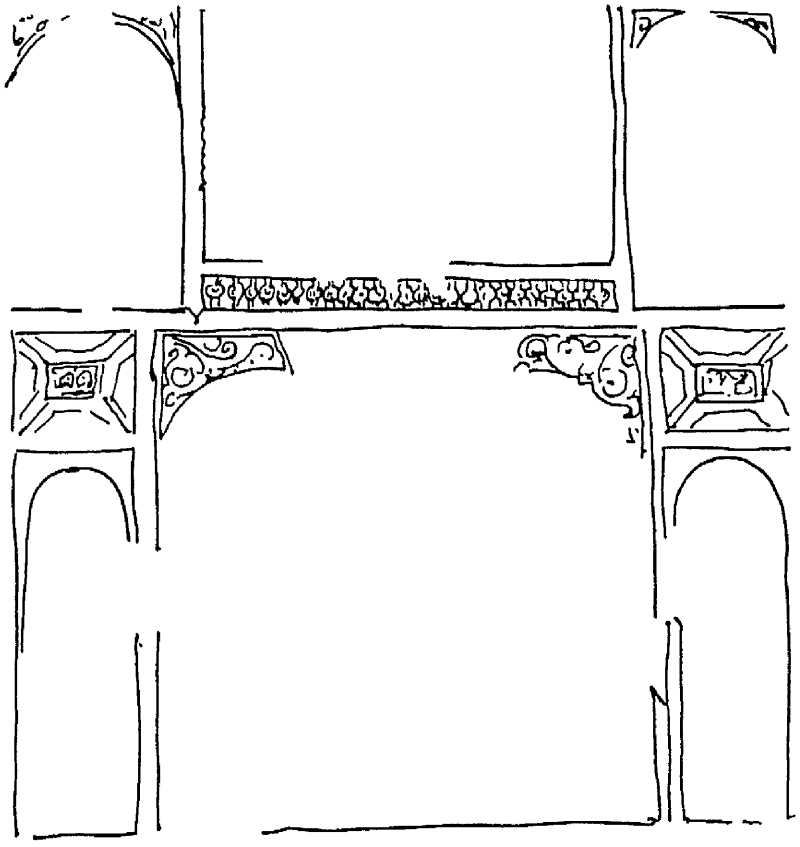
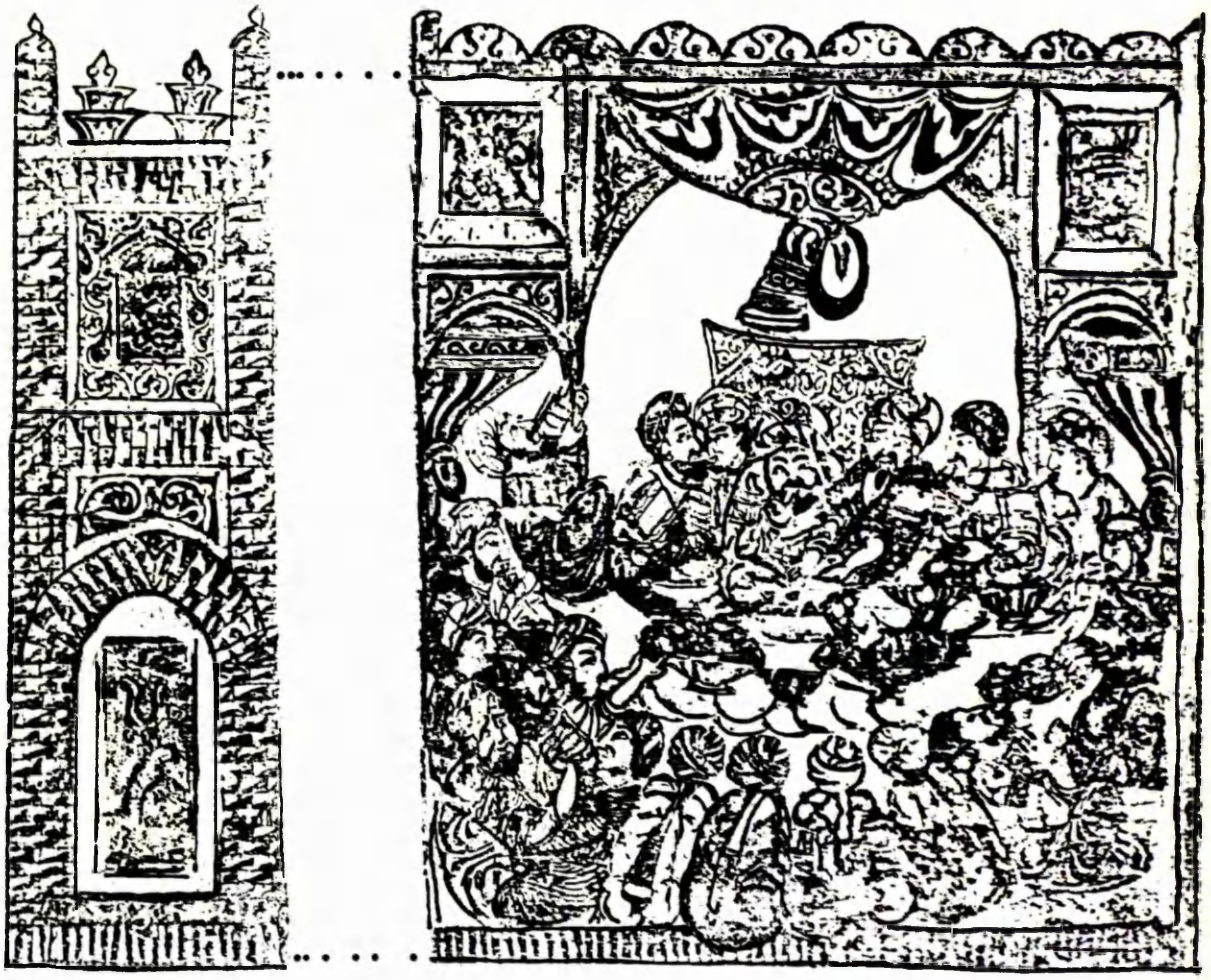


FIGURE 28

If we imagine that "the hour of birth" is taking place in the Leningrad setting, then we can soon understand that the lines in the Thirty-ninth Maqâma (Paris) are indeed meant to be understood as part of one large room, and the so-called tripartite setting (Fig. 29) is meant to be understood to mean one large room.

FIGURE 29

Ettinghausen's publication of it is shown cropped to the left and therefore misleading (Fig. 30). The complete image of the Leningrad Maqâma, however, illustrated the entrance hall on the left which leads to the large banquet room (Fig. 31).



(cropped..)

FIGURE 30

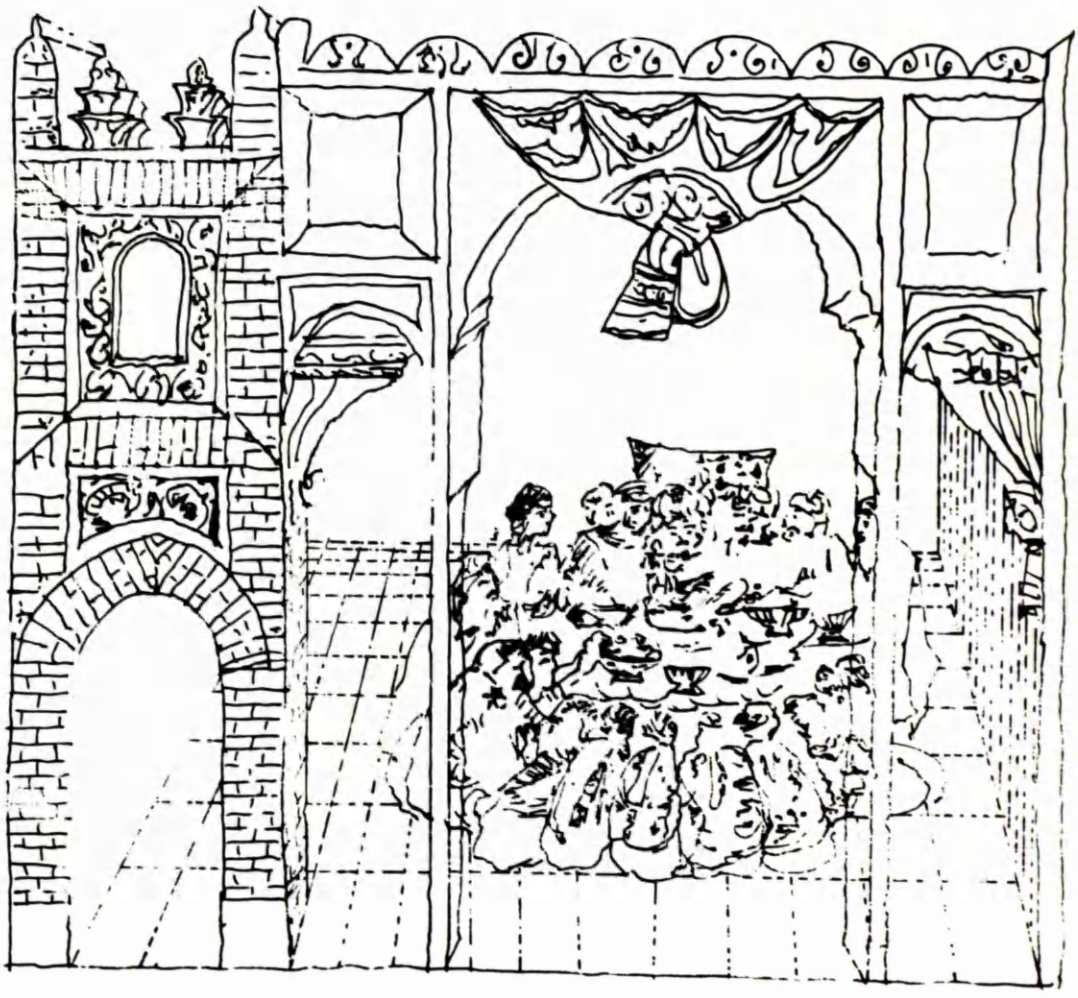


FIGURE 31

Another painting from the Fifth Maqâma of the Leningrad Harîrî is pertinent. It makes deciphering our Thirty-ninth Maqâma much easier (Plate 18). This painting depicts the interior of an Islamic house where we can see that Abû Zayd is knocking on the door which is located at the right of the interior. This painting, in fact, solves our entire problem. Figure 32 shows the setting without the personages. It is clear that the basic format consists of an entrance, large interior, and a galleried upper floor.

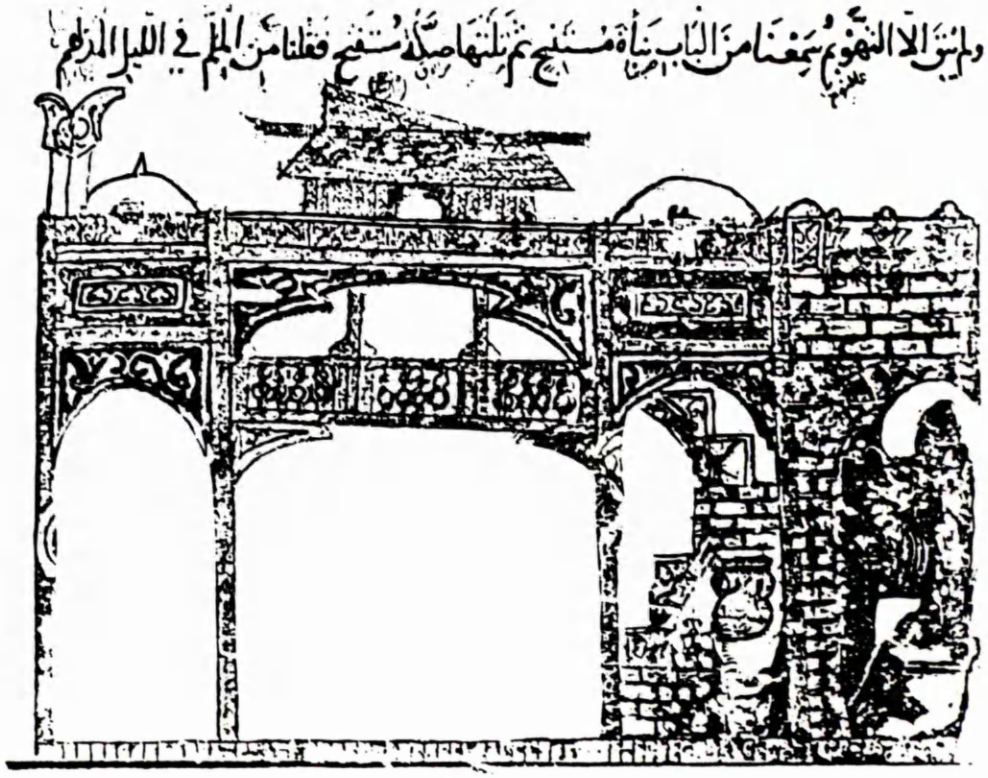


FIGURE 32

The same setting is most likely in the Thirty-ninth Maqâma. One finds that not only illustrating the interior is related in the two manuscripts, but also how a small detail like the left brick wall in the painting of the Thirtieth Maqâma can make all the difference to reading and understanding other similar settings created by two different painters.

Hence, it is safe to say that the lower floor of the painting depicting the event of birth is rendered with almost the same setting as that of the wedding banquet. The door is not indicated there, but it could be on either side, as another painting from the Maqâmât (AD 1323) shows al-Hârith hearing a knock on the door at an unlikely hour of the night (Fig. 33).[14] Again the same is true in the Fifth Maqâma of the Leningrad Harîrî (Plate 18).

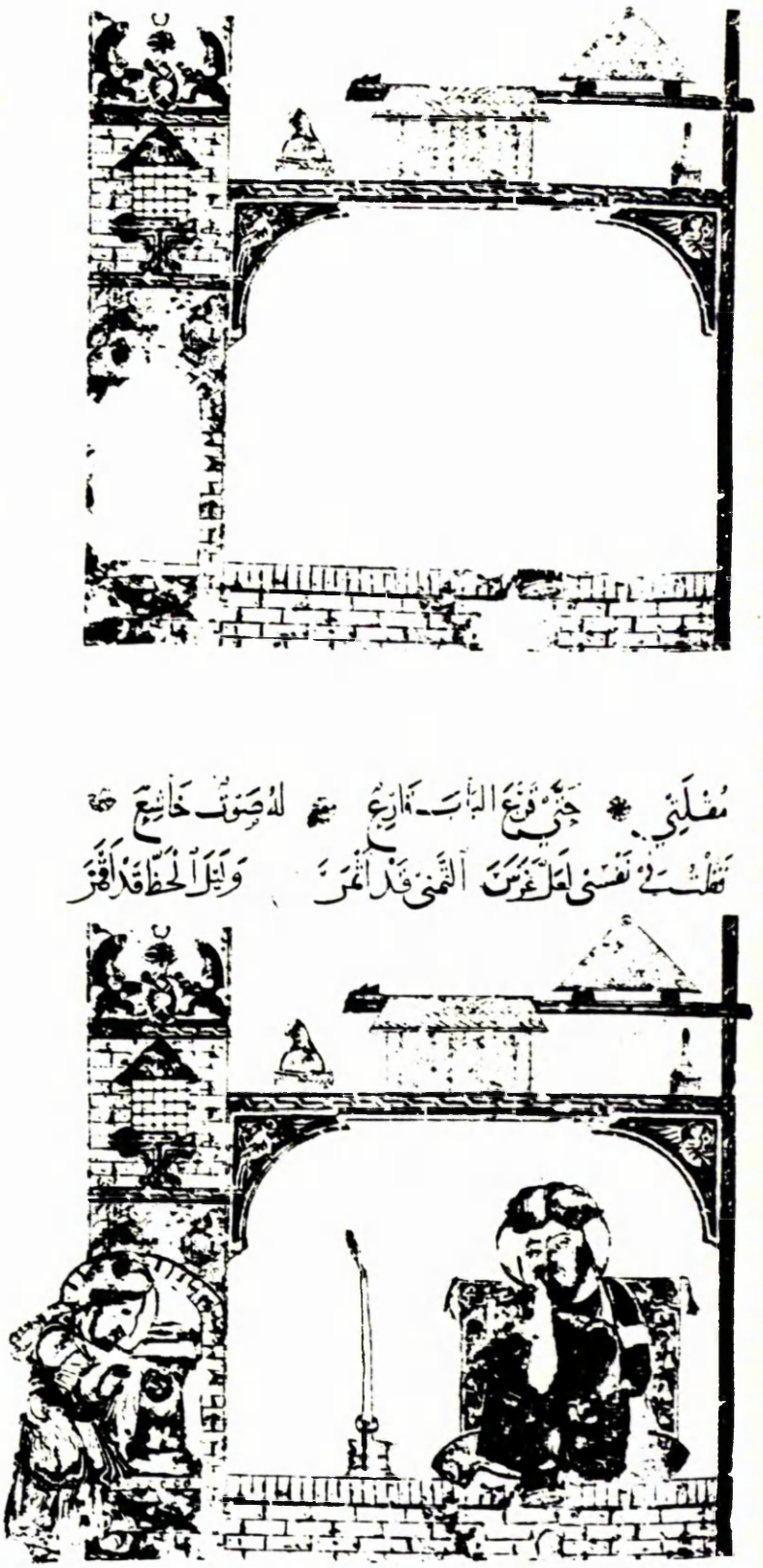


FIGURE 33

Therefore in our Thirty-ninth Maqâma, Abû Zayd and al-Hârith (the most likely person) are flanking the central figure of the governor. They are seated in the galleried upper floor. And since, in this context, things are better illustrated than said, the whole idea behind the architectural setting is, in fact, the same in both instances. We find that "The Hour of Birth" and the whole dramatic scene rendered by al-Wâsiṭî in the Schefer manuscript fit in equally well with that of the Leningrad version.

If we use language to analyse language, we should be able to use vision to analyse vision. Let us see, perhaps in an unorthodox manner, how our Thirty-ninth Maqâma ("The Hour of Birth") would look in the architectural setting of the Fifth Maqâma (Fig. 34). We can conclude from all this that the idea of the interior setting in the Thirty-ninth Maqâma is indeed rendered with the contemporary understanding of how the Islamic house was architecturally organised. The galleried upper floor setting is also found in other paintings of the Maqâmât. For example, "The Evening at the Tavern", (Plate 19) shows a similar setting. In fact this painting illustrates a remarkable sense and awareness of the dimension in architecture. Two persons are shown drinking on the upper floor. To the

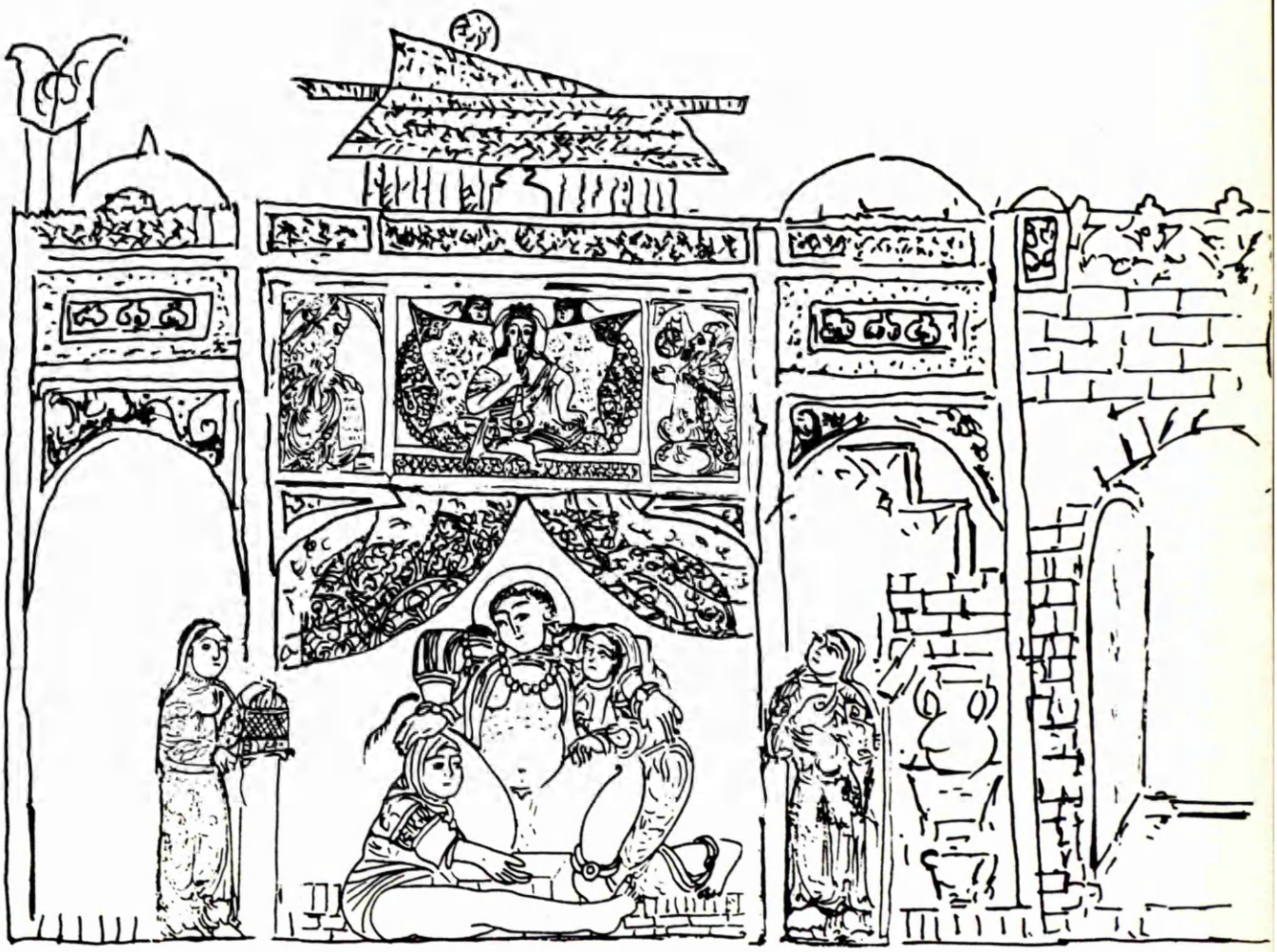


FIGURE 34

right is a man receiving a jar. The contact between these two personages in the painting enhances our understanding of the dimensions of the room. Below an ᶜ-ud player sitting somewhat behind the princely Abû Zayd. Al-Hârith stands to the right. To his right, a man stands with a strainer straining the drink. To the extreme right stands another person (probably a woman), holding onto a rope

tied to the ceiling, while pressing fruit with her feet into small containers.

Again we can easily imagine "The Hour of Birth" taking place in a similar architectural setting, and that Abû Zayd from where he sat handling down his talismanic writing, could ask that it be tied to the thigh of the woman in labour.

These and other pictorial statements of a similar nature clearly illustrate that they were reproduced from images adopted from experience of the real environment involving people. Familiarity with the reproduced pictorial statements showing spatial environments obviously helped the thirteenth-century man to understand them much more readily, and indeed, far better.

Hence, the so-called "tripartite setting" term must be used with the understanding that the painting appears to be divided into three parts by literally following the lines and assuming that they are sections, when in fact they are nothing else but supporting columns, and the interior is one.[15]

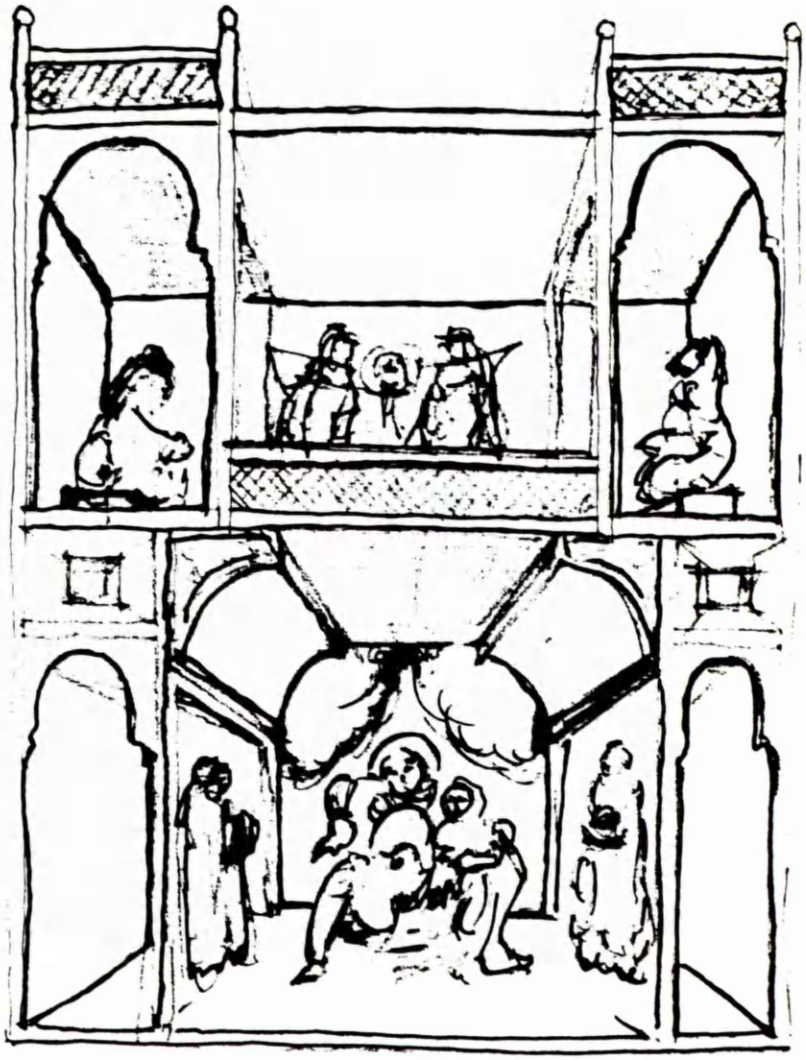


FIGURE 35

A photograph of the interior of an Islamic house can help clarify the problem further (Plate 20). The two figures on each side of the column seen from a front view, can give us an almost similar sensation to that to "The Hour of Birth". They appear to be standing behind the arched forms of windows (Fig. 35), thus the two women on either side - as rendered by the artist - are seen from that point of view (Fig. 36).

One crucial aspect in Islamic painting which must always be kept in mind, therefore, is that lines that bisect lines and images do not always indicate that one image is in front of the other, which is usually the case in contemporary or Western rendering of images. The priority is not so much the representation of reality.

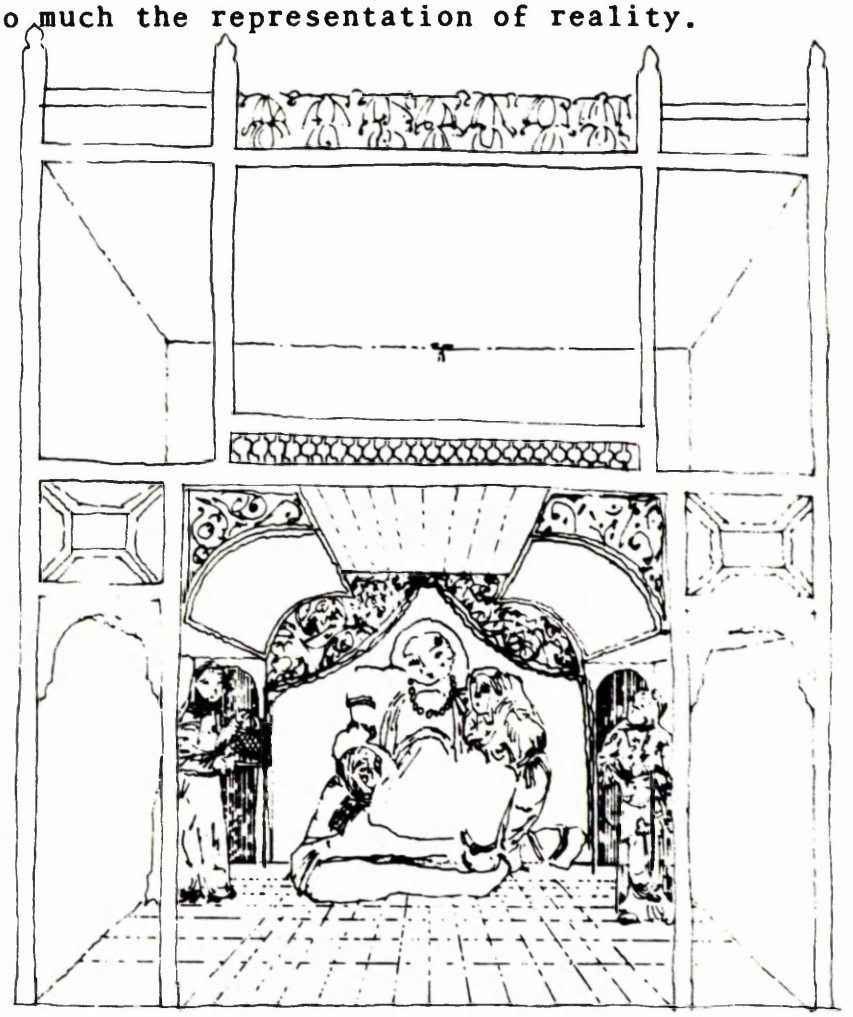


FIGURE 36

FIGURE 37

Another example is from Ibn al-Muqaffa's Bidpai. It shows a man chasing a thief who is seen running out of the door (Fig. 37). Obviously our knowledge of the story helps with identifying the illustration. It shows a doorway and a room. The artist has paid close attention to how the lines that indicate the doorframe are rendered. Particular attention has been given to the hands of the two men. The one on the right meets our conventional expectation as to what can or cannot be seen of his shape from the position he is in. The way the figure on the

left is shown combines "visual reality", as we know it, with the artist's own discretion as to how the image may best be presented. The right hand holds a stick which appears to extend out of the doorway, as if blocking the way. The other hand, as one might expect, should have been indicated behind the frame.

The completeness of one pictorial statement within the overall statement is often subject to the painter's discretion and his understanding of how it ought to look. Questions such as, why the artist did not know better, or represent it differently, for whatever reason, are naive and in addition display a basic ignorance of how artistic creation works. How we see images and understand ideas is at least as unique a process as are poetic inspirations.

What we are limited to doing, as observers, is only to read and attempt to understand as best we may, the creative process. However rhetorical this may sound, criticism of technique and aesthetics are for the critic and the aesthete. Why it is beautiful or not so beautiful are only matters dependent upon exposure and familiarity. Images have much more to do with one's capacity to understand, and one's knowledge of the image. Therefore it would be unrealistic to attempt to place them in one's

subjective world of priorities. The wedding banquet, discussed above, can be meaningful and revealing in many ways for the Easterner who has had the opportunity to experience a similar event. Without this experience it would probably be merely an insignificant scene.

Another example of images adopted from experience of the real environment and which involved people, is the painting of "The Reading Room" (Plate 21). It illustrates in a most remarkable fashion the interior of an Islamic medieval library, which, apart from the archaeological remains, is an almost unknown form of ancient architecture. Most of the knowledge in both East and West is mainly improvised and fragmentary.[16] This painting is unique and most informative. It conforms to "the system of shelving" that was practised until the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, laying books on their sides upon the shelves. The painting shows seven men listening and discussing while one man with a book has their main attention. Behind them are the library shelves with thirty-six compartments, and some 190 books stacked therein. The painting has fortunately escaped the depredations of the clumsy hand that has retouched some forty-eight of the ninety-nine paintings of this precious manuscript.

A nineteenth-century photograph of an Islamic library evokes memories of al-Wâsiṭî's documentary painting of "The Reading Room" (Plate 22). The photograph shows the old custom of laying books on their sides upon the shelves, a method which few libraries in the East have retained. One disadvantage this system presents is in terms of space, which becomes a problem as books increase in number. It was, as James Thompson observes, a most space-wasting method of storage.

Let us look at the personages more closely. The third and fifth men from the right, and to a lesser extent the first man, are rendered in what Professor Ettinghausen has called "the three-quarter view". But the truly remarkable portrait is given to the man with a book. This depiction is a very important one because it provides verification for the argument that these paintings are not mass produced from a standard model. To the average observer, the shape that Arab dress takes may seem arbitrary and to have been drawn, as it were, to avoid the problem of detail involved in portraying a seated person. Almost any student of drawing can appreciate the outline of the cloth as it falls given a strong suggestion of the body beneath. It illustrates that this painter knew shape, having observed real life and events. This takes us to the discussion of the relationship between painting and language.

In Islam, the word and its impact have been the key. The Arabs were, and to a great extent still are, among the most language-conscious people in the world. Their capacity to absorb and recite long poems and historical events with remarkable accuracy long before the appearance of Islam, is well known. Intellectual and spiritual activities when transmitted especially by words rather than pictures or illustrations, have a great impact on the Muslim mind. Spoken literature in the culture of the Middle East plays a prominent role in the formation of its cultural heritage. Stories like "The Arabian Nights" and al-Harîrî's Maqâmât may be, to the Western reader, quite innocent stories. One Islamicist calls al-Harîrî's work frivolous.[18] But in fact it is radically different. There are almost no visually connected spaces in these stories, but they are a collection of the multi-dimensional, multi-sensuous aspects of these stories, something quite different from the vanishing point of view taught by the Renaissance.[19] At this stage, it may be worthwhile to take a moment to discuss why the Western student of Islamic images carries with him a set of concepts and how these concepts have consistently proved to be a handicap rather than an asset to his study.

In the Christian church, images were introduced and indeed regarded with theoretical and practical precision. The role and purpose of images in the church's view, for example, can help to explain my point. In his thirteenth-century standard dictionary of the time, the Catholic John of Genoa, summarises the purpose of images in the following three categories:

> Know that there were three reasons for the institution of images in churches. First, for the instruction of simple people, because they are instructed by them as if by books. Second, so that the mystery of the incarnation and the examples of the saints may be the more active in our memory through being presented daily to our eyes. Third, to excite feeling of devotion, these being aroused more effectively by things seen than things heard.[20]

Also in a sermon published in 1492, the Dominican, Fra Michele da Carcano, presents an orthodox Quattrocento expansion of this definition:

> ... images of the Virgin and the saints were introduced for three reasons. First, on account of the ignorance of simple people, so that those who are not able to read the scriptures can yet learn by seeing the sacraments of our salvation and faith in pictures. It is written: 'I have learned that, inflamed unconsidered zeal, you have been destroying the images of the saints on the grounds that they should not be adored. And we praise you wholeheartedly for not allowing them to be adored, but we blame you for breaking them ... For it

> is one thing to adore a painting, but it is quite another to learn from a painted narrative what to adore. What a book is to those who can read, a picture is to the ignorant people who look at it. Because in a picture even the unlearned may see what example they should follow: in a picture they who know no letters may yet read'... St. Gregory the Great wrote these words to Serenus, Bishop of Marseilles. Second, images were introduced on account of our emotional sluggishness: so that men who are not aroused to devotion when they hear about the histories of the saints may at least be moved when they see them, as if actually present, in pictures. For our feelings are aroused by things seen more than by things heard. Third, they were introduced on account of our unreliable memories ... Images were introduced because many people cannot retain in their memories what they hear, but they do remember if they see images.[21]

The different practices in the two faiths, namely emphasising in the one the word or the language, and in the other the cognitive impact of the images upon followers, is part of their uniqueness, special skills and habits. The first inspiration from God that came to the Prophet Mohammad was, "Read" "اقـرأ" "In the Name of your Lord". A Muslim theologian would have argued Carcano's third point most likely in this way:

> Words ... were introduced because many people cannot retain in their memories what they see, but they do remember if they hear it recited.

What particular things people remember most are, again, culturally specific phenomena. Yet in other cultures, like that of the Senoi of the Malay Peninsula, dreams instead of literature or images are used as the primary vehicle for transmitting knowledge and understanding.[22]

One of the first lessons a Muslim child learns is to regard reading and writing as a holy endeavour:

اقـرأ بسم ربك الذى خلـق ..
اقرأ وربك الأكرم .. الذى علّم بالقلم

23

Islamicists curiously ignore this vital phenomenon, which is specific to the Near Eastern culture. As Professor Gombrich explains, "There have been doubts, one is sorry to say, whether scholarship pursues honest intentions in its professed love for art",[24] and in our case, Islamic art. "What does the Koran have to do with Islamic art?" is a typical remark which illustrates that Gombrich's words must be carefully considered.[25]

Obviously, in every culture the use of language, oral literature, and to a certain extent, the emphasis on dreams, exists in one way or another. However, the emphasis on one particular mode of transmission is a

culture-specific phenomenon. Once we become familiar with each particular phenomenon, this no doubt will enable us to recognise the symbols and the way they were intended to be interpreted.

Sociologists and philosophers are still very much involved in debating the central problem of whether we can really understand people who belong to foreign groups and cultures. The art-historical issue is one of the reading of images. The art historian must, as the sociologists and philosophers have, see that the meaning of images, like that of words, is dependent upon the structure within which this image or language is embedded.[26] One must not, therefore, reinterpret the entire concept of Islamic painting so that it may, at the end, fit our contemporary expectations. For example, looking for things that we expect to find in a painting like "a sense of depth", or "an attempt at depth". This general and modern terminology illustrates part of the analytical approach that does not do justice to the nature of Islamic art.

When we talk about the space and pictorial depth in Islamic painting, we must give due consideration to the fact that our expectations must be well guarded, for they are aroused by influences and motivations of different intentions.

A man born and bred in the so-called
exact sciences will, on the height of
his analytical reason, not easily
comprehend that there is also something
like an exact concrete imagination

(GOETHE)

In the painting of the Maqâmât, particularly, literature and images go hand in hand as an expression of the Near Eastern outlook. Therefore, this section will deal with the practice and skill which is derived from direct observation and interaction with the environment. The first requirement for the reader of Islamic pictures is to register their impression and impact on him and to consider them: (a) in their descriptive forms, or by the images that they evoke through the narrator of the text; and (b) from the artist's point of view and his discretion in creating these images. It is at the meeting of these two factors with each other that understanding is needed. This depends on experience, and for the observer experience is essential. One way to define experience in our context is to be able to deal with discriminative reactions (as a listener, observer, or painter) to the human as well as the traditional concepts and images of his time.

Obviously no one can be certain how it actually felt to live through the experiences of the twelfth, thirteenth and fourteenth centuries in Islam. The best we can do is to study the period, which is, of course, not as good as first-hand experience. Therefore, we must make allowances for some Islamicists who write that the images in the Maqâmât, apart from their artistic merit, are meaningless. This is a prejudiced attitude which causes grave distortions to the very thing they are trying to explain and illuminate.[27] A painting can only tell us what we can see, read, or understand. Each observer will bring a whole set of assumptions of his own. Two observers from a similar environment with similar backgrounds of tradition and local surroundings, will no doubt have a culturally-related understanding. It is from this visual familiarity with images that the painter chooses one of the most important tools and assets of his pictorial terminology. In the same way we understand the painting of the Twenty-second Maqâma (Plate 23), that is, the boat is not resting in a puddle of water with three tropical fish at the bottom and a bird stuck on top. Rather, it illustrates a boat swiftly and speedily moving along the might Euphrates river. The fish indicate the depth of the water, and the highly wavy lines are an indication of movement. The boat is long and thin, brightly decorated, and reminiscent of the Mashhufs' of the marshes of the Euphrates river (Figs. 38 and 39).

FIGURE 38

The personages have piercing and expressive eyes (Plate 24). A white-bearded old man is sitting among a handful of other passengers, and he is possibly more special than the others. A hand clearly appears, as if indicating a conversation.

FIGURE 39

As we have said earlier, we must not be too surprised if the artist introduced images which we may not consider to be "faithful" to the text (Appendix II), for that depends on how faithful we are in reading and understanding the text itself. Also, we said that the painter suggests in the picture information drawn from his general experience. The two photographs capture scenes from southern Iraq. These photographic images support the view that many Muslim painters, not only al-Wâsitî, did indeed illustrate the physical reality of their own contemporary world.

We have carried out many enquiries in Iraq, especially among individuals to whom, in our judgement, the impact of Western civilization, particularly in the fields of image-reading, interpretation and enquiry was still unknown. This is going to be the subject of our study later. However, one example we will mention. This illustration of the Twenty-second Maqâma (Plate 23) was shown to an interesting old "arduhalji", a petition-writer, while waiting for some forms to be signed at a ministry in Baghdad. I asked him to tell me what he thought this picture was all about. He said "Before I can do that, you must tell me the story, there must be a story behind it!" So I read him the Twenty-second Maqâma. He listened attentively to the very end, and then said, "Now, let me see that picture again". This is how the scribe interpreted the illustration.

The Five Personages on the Left: A first look at the painting tells us that these men depicted here may be some of the learned scholars, or they may be connected with the famous four sons (بنـي الفـرات) "Who were more pleasant in their manners than the sweet water of the Euphrates". (وأعذب أخـلاقا من ماء الفرات)

The Hand: (The somewhat idealised hand between the five personages on the left gives a hint of its own symbolic meaning.) They appear to be closely arranged like the fingers of a hand; "They set me above themselves, as the finger tip is above the fingers". (وأحلّوني محل الأنملة من الأصبع) (Thus, the four brothers and Abû Zayd make five.)

The Decorated Black Boat: They chose (literally, an aerodynamically-shaped vehicle) (فاختاروا من الجوارى المنشئات جارية) a boat, which is rendered in the colour of an intensely dark night, with remarkable shapes and forms on it. (حالكة الشيات) The following reason might explain the appearance of the ornaments of the long, black boat: tar is used to seal these boats. The ornaments on the boat are obvious.

The Bird in Flight: The bird evokes feelings of space, wind, clouds and flight. (تحسبها جامدة وهي تمرّ مرّ السحاب)

Experiencing the Maqâma was the result of a more attentive reading of the text and closer observation of the pictures. The reading of images arose from both the author's and the painter's approach, and not from personal feelings. The modern dilemma, if not error, seems to be inherent in these two related aspects. The correct understanding of these images results from an intelligible relationship between the images inspired by the text and the images rendered by the painter.

Remarks about al-Harîrî's use of Arabic language, for example, which at any rate may only be half understood, obscure the meaning of the picture, rather than clarify it. Aesthetic perceptions of remote ages are far removed from our own time, and we must bear this in mind. It is more productive to pay attention to the central and subtle issues which lie hidden between the two relationships, namely of language and vision.[28] In this context they are like units of thoughts - in images, and of seeing, re-enacted in the painting.

This relationship between painting and language is not a new discovery, as it may readily be assumed. It is, in fact, a real problem which has existed throughout history with varying degrees of awareness. Jean Paris goes so far as to provide the first incentive to discover, some day, the Syntax of the visible world.[29]

Obviously, those who have a problem detecting this relationship will reduce painting to mere language, or the other way about. One real clue to understanding this conjunction, for example, is to be mindful of the character of the information given. This has been called the "deceptivity factor" of information: one may think, erroneously, that one can spontaneously get the sense of a text (since one knows how to read), as one glance may reveal facts, and therefore a conclusion. It was mainly for this reason that our dismay at the prospect of reading Islamic images increased.

Two words of caution are necessary. What we are trying to say is that there is a similar link between the flow of an intention expressed in the language and the reader or listener, as there is a flow of intention in rendered images and the observer.

This again brings us to the problem of familiarity and experience. In this respect, studying the work of Sir Thomas Arnold and others are important. With all his keen sense of observation and scholarship, his work suffers from the bias of a Christian point of view. Many of our contemporary writers still carry on with the same method of approach, although their bias is well disguised and more sophisticated in its style.

In fact, Arnold's whole argument, in his controversial book Muslim Religious Art, is that indeed Islam had a religious art, however, it was either a bad imitation of Christian art, or the artists themselves were Christians. Almost every line of his thinking was to prove that Islamic art can ultimately be traced back to Christian art.[30] He challenges great authorities in this field with his "set of facts". What Arnold really means by the term "religious art in the Islamic world" is, in fact, Christian art in the Islamic world. Professor Ernst Kühnel points to this shortcoming, which indeed distorts the understanding of the nature of Islamic art and its basic concepts. Kühnel writes:

> Authors of European training are further handicapped by an inadequate background in oriental religions, history and languages. The lack is specially evident when these writers approach their task with the bias of humanistic or Christian point of view. Few achieve enough comprehension of the nature and basic concepts of Islamic art to allow them to interpret its real meaning.[31]

The relationship between art and religion in Christianity dominated the entire approach to the analysis of art in general. It is the application of this relationship as a criterion to non-Western or non-Christian forms of art, which is restrictive and is indeed a handicap that can be

clearly seen. The word "knowledge", especially among critics, does not necessarily mean the same as we understand it. Words are tools which help us not so much to analyse the invisible, but to help our vision, which is extremely inadequate when we try to understand a conception of painting in earlier civilizations.

One may have heard the interesting Near Eastern teaching story entitled "The Arabic Scholar":

> Nasrudin claimed that he had been to Mecca, and that he had lived a long time in Arabia! In that case, 'Tell us the name of a camel in Arabic', one of his cronies asked in the teahouse.
> 'Why not have a sense of proportion', said the Mulla, 'instead of thinking about such a huge creature?'
> 'What about the Arabic word for "ant", then?'
> 'Far too small.'
> Someone called out, 'What is the Arabic word for "lamb", then?'
> 'I am sure they do have a word for them, but I wasn't there long enough to find out. I left just as the lambs had been born, and they had not the time for the naming ceremony'.[32]

One will understand, thinking of this story, why al-Harîrî wrote, "I can hardly escape from the simpleton who is ignorant, or the spiteful man who feigns ignorance".[33] The student of Islamic art should become aware that in both the language and image lies the key to an as yet untapped potential of reading and understanding of the

basic structure of Islamic painting. The application of certain terms have obscured rather than illuminated this problem.

Words whose etymology and ancestry are legitimately and clearly known, will continue to be applied to subjects which bear no relationship to them, and the written history of art will be burdened by them in consequence. As long as scholars are tempted to view all art forms from a purely Western or Christian point of view, they will continue to miss the essence of all other art. Symbols do not carry meanings as trucks carry coal, explains Gombrich. "Their function is to select from alternatives within a given context."[34] Meaningful utterances in one respect become emptied of meaning when they develop into mannerisms or conventions, i.e., by the tendency to accept the name as if it were an explanation.[35]

We have already mentioned the importance of recognising the relationship between language and vision, and the fact that they are like units of thinking in images, and of seeing re-enacted in the painting. This way of thinking in images and of seeing is unique to Islamic painting. The latest studies of al-Jazari's mechanical devices[36] indeed clarify a major problem in assessing the Near

Eastern method of translating real objects into two-dimentional pictorial schemata. What is becoming clearer every day is that the difficulty in reading Islamic images lies not so much in the artist, who after all interpreted the world in terms of the schemata he made and knew,[37] but rather in the modern-day ignorance of how to go about knowing how this schemata was conceived and transformed.

For the purposes of this study, however, only one "archetypal" word will be reconsidered. This word is "perspective". We have seen in the earlier chapters both the ambiguity of this word when applied to Islamic painting, and in Professor Gombrich's words, its violence to the way we see the world.[38] In the next few paragraphs we will conclude with discussing this term and we will consider an appropriate, more descriptive and correct term that is important to use in the analysis and study of Islamic painting.

One of the most ancient and fascinating questions in the comparative history of art, as it might be called, concerns the failure of scholars to bridge the gulf between theoretical, scholarly thought and technical, human practice of art. For example, authorities on

painting, although they themselves are not painters, have learnt a whole range of specialised categories of pictorial interests, a set of words, and concepts specific to painting.[39] What words they may use on paper are little more than metaphysical poetry, however much they talk of "diversified images", or of "tactile values". There is an interesting story about what took place between the painter Gentile Bellini (c. 1421-1508) and the Emperor Mohammed II. J.T. Boulton tells of this encounter:

> A great painting of a decollated head of St. John the Baptist was shown to this Turkish emperor. He commented and pointed out to the painter one serious defect: he noticed that the skin of the neck did not shrink from the wounded area. The story continues with the Emperor demonstrating his point to the dismayed painter by beheading a convicted prisoner and proving to Bellini that the skin shrank back from the wound.

Boulton continues to say that,

> However horrific this example may be, one must admit that neither the painter nor a thousand connoisseurs would have made the same observation.[40]

On this same point of visual knowledge there have been some references on the impact of the Sufis on Islamic painting. The study of Sufi experience, however, is like the experience of painting - heavy reliance on style as if

it were something intentional has obscured rather than illuminated the problem. We should return to the working artist, the person with the experience of doing, says Gombrich, to learn what happens when somebody makes an image.[41] The same is true with the Sufi experience, since this experience is not within the area of the linear, verbal mode of consciousness. One part of us "may simply be incapable of fully understanding the experience of the other part, and may give it a name which reflects this lack of comprehension".[42] Students of Islamic painting may often fail to recognise this added dimension. In the Islamic culture, writes Binyon, the Sufi mysticism, which had so potent and penetrating an influence on this culture, makes itself felt in painting. The Sufis, continues Binyon, use for symbols the relations of ordinary human life, and to the uninitiated eye what is symbolic is mistaken for the actual.[43]

Some authorities on Islamic art, however, profess their cynicism on that aspect of Islamic painting. The reasons for this cynicism can be summed up in two obvious ways. Firstly, when it comes to going behind the visible world in pictorial art, as explained by Binyon and others,[44] the European is apt to be disconcerted or dismiss these pictorial devices used as childish. The second reason for this cynicism is made patently obvious within Binyon's earlier explanation, "He who tastes knows".

It is generally known that during the European Middle Ages there was a considerable imprint of the Greek distinction between theory and practice, the former being a gentleman and the latter not. But we may at all events be sure that that distinction had greater consequences upon understanding the long history of art than at first seems evident, for painting, among other things, is perceptions and experiences indicated by those who have them and can render them. It may well be a mistake to think that what cannot be defined cannot be discussed.[45] Ironically though, it is just here that we do best to recall Berenson's words describing that "skyscraping pedantry which characterises so much of the automatic pecking of useless knowledge". Were novelty became a value in itself; viewing art in a context which is alien to its spirit and its particular and prevailing social relations. Micrological pursuits, along these lines, explains Berenson, lead no further than the bees in the anecdote of the king who wanted a story without an end. A wayfarer offered such a tale and began by saying, "Once there was a beehive, and one bee went in and then another bee went in, and another, and another ..." He went on until the weary king asked whether the story could not be proceeded with, "Not until all the bees were in." "And when was that to be?" "Never".[46]

It is easy to fit any given artistic achievement of the past intelligibly into the pattern of art history. But like the discovery of the laws of perspective, which seemed to the Florentines a major event in their progress of painting, the East had a different landmark, as as it were, a different kind of truth. We must be aware that Islamic art has its own dimension, its own expressions, dreams and illusions. We stand at this stage of time in history in danger of missing that dimension altogether. Here lies a formidable but challenging responsibility: how to perceive paintings with differences of character which sprang from differences in mental constitution.[47] Muslim painters had the freedom which, for example, the Impressionists struggled so hard to attain. It was this freedom from the bounds of perspective which enabled the painter to convey the idea and the dimension of the supernatural,[48] and in so doing he betrayed no intellectual grasp of the structure of things.[49] It was no surprise for the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century painters to realise that the past in many ways explains the present, as we have discussed earlier. This concept seems to elude the art historian. But what the writer of these lines finds hard to take is the way many contemporary art historians reduce the diversity of Islamic painting to a single model, with comparisons that

shed light only on resemblances to Renaissance and Western concepts of painting, thus markedly reducing the diversity of this unique visual inventory to a single model. Again, references to alien models sketch out an attitude of the art historian rather than an affirmed policy. The pitfalls of existing approaches sooner or later will be comprehended, and their ethnocentric framework will be rejected.

In any event, and without doubt, it is the term "perspective" which most distorts the understanding of Islamic painting. The tendency, furthermore, is to accept the word as if it were an explanation. An explanation, as far as we understand it, involves some knowledge of the object explained - where it came from, when, how and why this term got into the vocabulary of art history. It becomes obvious, when examined closely, that such unobservant use of this term in art was, in many ways, to reduce the bewildering complexity of Eastern art to a comprehensible level. Also, it recalls, of course, the speculations of the art historians in the West, as Robinson wrote, "We, upon whom the tradition of the Italian Renaissance still lies heavily, are not easily able to comprehend these paintings".[50]

Those who have escaped the narrowness of dimension will know that we are moulded, as it were, into a particular way of translating images into two-dimensional forms. From the start, we begin to see according to an earlier interpretation and allow little exercise of our imagination. The ability to see and understand Islamic paintings that are in themselves highly imaginative, thus becomes limited and rigid. Hence, as it has been pointed out, we begin to see and render an image from a long habituation to the convention of interpretation that we have been taught. Therefore, the realistically inclined art historians, as we have seen, cannot but puzzle over the solutions of space in Islamic painting. For example, the compositional advantages of tilting the object instead of distorting and squeezing the object and occasionally the little or no involvement in size differentiation according to distance, is a product of training limited to specific cultural conditioning. But as Arnheim writes, this is structurally complex, and can be conceived by the human mind only after a long process of refinement.[51] Here we are mostly concerned with the primacy of personal observation in Islamic painting, and "perspective" is too narrow a word for our concerns. The error of perception is ours, because there is a great distinction between retinal image and visual experience, which in turn concerns our mis-education on the subject of "perspective". The image created by the lenses of the

eyes shows the projective distortions of a photograph, whereas in vision not much influence of distance on size and shape is observed. Most objects are seen approximately on their objective shape and size: a rectangular carpet looks rectangular, and distant persons in a room look no smaller than those close to the observer.

As Arnheim has pointed out, the discovery of perspective was a dangerous moment in the history of Western thought. This version of reintegrating pictorial space was simply another solution of a problem that had been solved in different ways by other cultures. The difference is only in the particular concept of the world it conveys. Again, this version of reinterpreting pictorial space - perspective - is a product of training, limited to specific cultural conditions. Historians of Islamic art saw the "violation of perspective" which became apparent to them mostly in the works of early Muslim painters. Conditioned to the concept of the vanishing point, it is difficult to realize that this capitulation of the human mind to a standard of mechanical exactness violates the basic concept of objects more strongly than other methods of space representation. Thinking of that glorious period of Western history, the Renaissance, where everything was reborn at one and the same time, it may shock most of our realistically-inclined art historians to hear, for example, that Leonardo's space is, in fact, quite

unnatural. This literally one-eyed theory, with its development of a fixed reference eye, has enslaved the West for a very long time. This accepted taste, which insisted on the primacy of mechanical exactness rather than the primacy of personal human observation, has been condemned as "Mirror's work, not man's". Professor Ernest Mundt, in Looking for Some Light, writes:

> "No one in a normal frame of mind looks at the world with one eye only and with that one rigidly fixed. We use both eyes, producing two views which are somewhat different; also we are hardly ever able to hold or stand still. The image we form in our head therefore is composed of innumerable impressions. What the artist projects is not a mathematical but a human truth".[52]

It is precisely this projection of human truth, explains Mundt, that makes the pre-perspectival paintings so inviting: the warmth which the beholder is invited to share in the intimacy of the painter's vision.

Confusion has arisen both in East and West as a result of careless interpretations of the Islamic images. Art historians follow their accepted pattern of thought: literary clichés have their own visual equivalents. The opinion of this writer therefore, is that the term "perspective" is not justified in the hands of Islamic art historians. We urgently need the development of some entirely new technical terms for we are dealing here with

images which preceded and owe nothing to perspective. Furthermore, these "idealised symbols" and a "fantastic fairyland" were far removed from anything that the West ever knew. In coining these new technical terms, the suggestion here is that we might make use of Arabic terms rather than continuing to insist on using Latin roots to apply to decorative and painting merits which were enormously different. Here the term Manẓûr might come in useful. So when we are discussing this technical term, the intention is twofold. First, the term Manẓûr may be used in reference to Islamic interpretation of spatial concepts; and second, to short-circuit, as it were, the automatic association that links the word perspective to its mechanical vanishing point, because, on the whole, we glide along pre-established rails with so little care that we even fail to notice gaps or errors.[53]

There is a lack of technical vocabulary that is adapted to supply the need for precise and unambiguous terms in Islamic art. The problem is not so much that the most unwholesome food is welcome to the starving, as Bernard Shaw wrote, it is rather the curious hypothesis that men's hats occur in nature like wild strawberries and that man picking them up discard those that do not fit and retain and wear those that do.

The more serious and sophisticated scholars of art know that in writing on Islamic art we use words in both

literal and metaphorical senses that are in great danger of being misunderstood. Equally, they are stumbling blocks in the way of the beginner.

The basic form or root of the word Naẓar has an inherent connection with discernment and distinctiveness, and conveys the idea of "perceiving with the eyes". It is among the words which have their place in what may be called the "active" vocabulary in the Arabic language. According to this, the fundamental idea that this root conveys is found in such words as "manẓar", "panorama", "landscape", "munâẓara", "inspection", al-naẓâr "the turning of the mind in various directions in order to perceive a thing [mentally], also "judging of what is apparent", or "reasoning from analogy".[54] This random selection from a great range of distinct meanings expressed by this root is an example of the mode of expressing an idea which is described as an intrinsic potential of this language. It is from this root that the word al-Manẓûr is derived. Al-Manẓûr is that which is foreseen, detectable, as well as anticipated by and the product of visual imagination.

It incorporates many elements of perceptions, as well as the discernible qualities for which our theoretical knowledge is less than satisfactory when the idea of space is considered.

NOTES

1. O. Grabar, "Architecture and Art", in The Genius of Arab Civilization, Source of Renaissance (London, 1983), p. 95.

2. M. Baxandall, Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-century Italy (Oxford, 1978), p. 32.

3. Ernest R. Hilgard, Richard C. Atkinson, and Rita L. Atkinson, Introduction to Psychology (New York, 1975), p. 356.

4. E.H. Gombrich, Mediation on a Hobby Horse (London, 1978), p. 112.

5. M. Baxandall, op. cit., p. 35.

6. "Language is certainly unique in many respects. Some aspects of language development, however, may reflect general properties of developing representational intelligence, properties of a mind distancing itself further and further from the control of immediate stimulation", S. Sugarman, Children's Early Thought, Development in Classification (Cambridge, 1983), p. 1.

7. P. Hammond, An Introduction to Cultural and Social Anthropology (London, 1978), p. 426.

8. E.H. Gombrich, Art and Illusion (London, 1968), p. 103.

9. Again, let us consider a passage from Professor Gombrich in which he discusses the need for putting an end to the habitual reading which has misled the historian for so long: "We must never forget that we look at Egyptian art with the mental set we have all derived from the Greeks. So long as we assume that images in Egypt mean much the same as they do in the post-Greek world, we are bound to see them as rather childlike and naive", ibid., p. 104.

10. The Assemblies of al-Hariri, retold by Amina Shah (London, 1980), pp. 191-7.

11. Hammond, op. cit., p. 430.

12. R. Ettinghausen, Arab Painting (Geneva, 1962), p. 120.

13. The Assemblies of al-Hariri, op. cit., p. 196.

14. British Library, Add. 7293.

15. "The earliest detailed depictions of the interior of the Islamic house are the miniatures from the Maqâmât of al-Hariri, painted in Iraq about AD 1230. This illustration depicts the visit of Abu Zaya to a house in Kufa. He knocks at the exterior door on the right and is admitted into an interior with a galleried upper floor. The structure on the roof is a ventilating tower enclosed in reed mats which can be opened to the prevailing breeze", Guy T. Petherbridge, "Vernacular Architecture: The House and Society", in Architecture of the Islamic World, Its History and Social Meaning, George Michell (ed.) (London, 1978), p. 185.

16. Had Mr. Thompson seen this painting it would surely have added to his remarkable insights into this problem, and confirmed a great deal of what he called mere fragmentary and improvised knowledge of the medieval library. J. Thompson, The Medieval Library. (Chicago, 1939), p. 623.

17. Ibid.

18. Thomas W. Arnold, Painting in Islam (Oxford, 1928). p.81.

19. Robert E. Ornstein, The Psychology of Consciousness (San Francisco, 1972), pp. 170-1. Ornstein explains: "The logic of these stories is not ordinary. It is

more like that of the dream. In stories, linear time, for instance, has little value. In fairy tales, events occur in, around, before, during and after each other. Indeed 'magic carpets' exist here, which can transcend time. These stories are conveyed primarily by oral tradition. It is quite rare at this moment in our culture for one to sit down and listen to stories. Listening takes the burden off our eyes and our visual system. It allows us to 'picture' the events as they occur in space. Some of these books, especially these fairy tales are illustrated for this very purpose".

20. M. Baxandall, op. cit., p. 39.

21. Ibid., p. 41.

22. "They are reported to work with dream consciousness, taming it, and interweaving it with the fabric of social life. It is practised by the ordinary Senoi citizen as a feature of his daily life. The breakfast in a Senoi house is like a dream clinic", Ornstein, op. cit., p. 165.

23. The Qur'ān, Sūra 96, Verses 1, 3 and 4.

24. E.H. Gombrich, Meditations on a Hobby Horse, op. cit., p. 106.

25. "But if we persist in this pose, the time may not be far off when those in authority will recognise the word scholarship only as what grammarians call a 'plurale tantum', and those, I am afraid, will be neither for art nor arts", ibid., p. 106.

26. Bryen S. Turner, "Accounting for the Orient", in Islam in the Modern World, D. Eoin and A. Shahi (eds.), (London, 1983), p.9.

27. "A meaningful distortion is emptied of meaning when it becomes a mannerism, a convention. It is only because we know the convention, on the other hand, that the artist's distinctive contribution makes sense to use", Gombrich, Meditations on a Hobby Horse, op. cit., p. 111.

28. "Much of the traditional art of many of the smaller non-Western societies was destroyed at or soon after contact with the first Europeans, either as the people themselves were wiped out or absorbed or as their art was literally wrecked by missionaries eager to destroy what they often correctly perceived as the symbolic

representation of ideologies they were determined to eradicate", P. Hammond, op. cit., p. 364.

29. J. Paris, Painting and Linguistics (Carnegie-Mellon University, 1975), p. 26.

30. T.W. Arnold, op. cit., p. 81. "But in spite of the judgment of such great authorities as Strzygowski, Martin Hartmann, and Ernst Kühnel, the fact remains that there has certainly been a great deal of religious art in the Islamic world, and the growth of it can be traced through as many as seven centuries, in fact from the thirteenth century - the earliest period in Muhammadan history from which examples of pictorial art have survived to us".

31. E. Kühnel, "Islam", in Encyclopedia of World Art, Vol. VIII (London, 1963), pp. 325-6.

32. I. Shah, The Subtleties of the Inimitable Mulla Nasrudin (New York, 1973), p. 31.

33. Al-Hariri, The Assemblies of al-Harîrî, translated and notes by T. Chenery, Vol. I (London, 1898), pp. 103-7.

34. Gombrich, Meditations on a Hobby Horse, op. cit., p. 111.

35. In the following rather remarkable choice from The Arabian Nights, Gombrich writes: "You remember the story of Ali Baba and the Forty Theives. The robber marked one door he wanted to remember with chalk. His fair opponent took chalk and repeated the sign of all other doors, thus destroying the meaning of the symbol without touching it", Gombrich, ibid., p. 111.

36. D.R. Hill's talk at the University of Oxford, 17 March 1984 (to be published).

37. Gombrich, Art and Illusion, op cit., p. 246.

38. E.H. Gombrich, Standards of Truth: The Arrested Image and the Moving Eye", in Critical Inquiry, Vol. 7, No. 2 (Winter, 1980), p. 251.

39. Baxandall, op. cit., p. 37.

40. J.T. Boulton, On Edmund Burke: A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful (London, 1958), p. 20.

41. E.H. Gombrich, Meditations on a Hobby Horse, op. cit., p. 117.

42. R. Ornstein, op. cit., p. 136.

43. L. Binyon, "The Qualities of Beauty in Persian Painting", A Survey of Persian Art, Vol. V, p. 1912.

44. "We in Europe", admits an introduction by Binyon, Wilkinson and Gray, "when it comes to going behind the visible world in pictorial art we are apt to be disconcerted or to dismiss the devices used as childish", L. Binyon, J.V.S. Wilkinson and B. Gray, Persian Miniature Painting (London, 1933), p. 5.

45. E.H. Gombrich, The Sense of Order (Oxford, 1979), p. X.

46. B. Berenson, Aesthetics and History (London, 1950), p. 204.

47. L. Binyon, "The Qualities of Beauty ...", op. cit., p. 1912.

48. E.H. Gombrich, The Story of Art (London, 1967), p. 130.

49. L. Binyon, J. Wilkinson, and B. Grey, Persian Miniature Painting, op. cit., p. 5.

50. B.W. Robinson, Persian Painting (London, 1952), p. 3.

51. Rudolf Arnheim, Art and Visual Perception (London, 1974), p. 28.

52. E. Mundt, Looking for Some Light (San Francisco, 1984), p. 59. A personal post-graduate, humanistic, art-historical study, intended to fill in some gaps in the common fabric of higher education (forthcoming).

53. E.H. Gombrich, The Sense of Order (London, 1984), p. 103.

54. Arabic-English Lexicon, E.W. Lane (London, 1863).

APPENDICES

APPENDIX I

THE THIRTY-NINTH MAQAMA: THE ENCOUNTER AT OMAN

Called by some important business to Oman, on the eastern coast of Arabia, I was soon weary of road travel, and (the Prophet Mohammed once said 'travel is a torment'), I decided to cross the sea in a swift sailing ship.

So I removed my chattels from the camels, and took my water-bags and provisions, and embarked rather trustingly as one who would give himself excuses as to why he would go that way. Scarcely had we settled on board, and hoisted the sails for speed, when we heard from the shore, while the night was darkling and waxing gloomy, a caller who said: "O you people of this strongly-built ship, driven on the high sea by the Mercy of the Mighty, the All-Knowing, shall I direct you to a merchandise that will deliver you from sore torment?"

Then we said "Light for us a brand from your fire, O guide, and show us the right path, as the trusted friend shows the right path to the trusted friend?" He replied: "Will you take for companion a son of the road, who

carries his provisions in a basket, and whose shadow is not heavy, wishing for nothing but a sleeping-place?"

So we resolved to lower our wings to him, and not to be stingy in providing for his need. When he had come aboard, he said "I take refuge with Allah from the paths of destruction!" Then he said: "We have been told in the Traditions, handed down by the doctors of divinity, that Allah (be He exalted), has not made it binding on the ignorant to learn, any more than He has made it incumbent on the learned to teach. Now, I possess a charm transmitted from the prophets, and I have sound advice for you, which it is not in my power to conceal, nor in my nature to hide." Then he shouted: "Do you know what it is? It is a good spell for travellers when voyaging on the sea, and the shield against anxiety, when the wave of the deep rages. By it Noah was protected from the flood, together with what was with him of animated beings, as the verses of the Koran record it. I quote: 'Embark ye within, in the name of God be its course, and its riding at anchor!'" Then he sighed, as one who is heavily burdened, saying "Behold, I have stood among you in the stead of a bringer of tidings, and advised you with the advice of the zealous, and have entered you on the path of

those who guide aright, so Thou be my witness, O Allah, who are the Best of witnesses." Then his eloquent discourse, conspicuous by its beauty, made us wonder, and our voices were raised to him in recitation. But my heart had from the sound of his voice a tinkling knowledge of the true nature of his sun. So I said to him: "By Him who holds in bondage the bottomless sea, are you not the Seruji?" He replied: "Yes, for how long could the son of brightness remain hidden?" Then I revealed my own self since he had revealed his, and we sailed on, while the sea was smooth, the sky serene, our life pleasant, and our time a sport; and while I was delighted with meeting him again, as the rich delights in his ingot of gold, rejoicing in his conversation, forgot the elements, and suddenly the sea was rushing in on us from every quarter. Therefore we veered, on account of this calamity, towards one of the adjacent islands, to give rest to our ship, and to protect ourselves until the wind calmed down.

The obstacle to enjoying ourselves, however, was that our provisions dwindled to the merest pittance, and we began to fear that we might starve. Then Abu Zayd said to me: "Listen, the gathering of fruit from the tree is not obtained by sitting still and lamenting. Have you a mind to rouse our luck by going inland?" I replied "Yes, I

will follow you closer than a shadow, and wait on you more obediently than your shoes."

Accordingly, we two descended from the ship to the island, despite the failing of our strength, to search for provender, though neither of us knew what we might find. After walking quite a while we came upon a lofty castle, with an iron gate, and a troop of slaves in front. These we accosted, and asked them to make a ladder or throw a rope that we might be drawn up, but each of them had so miserable a face, mourning deep in grief, that we asked them what was their sorrow.

They would not answer, and made neither fair nor foul reply. When we saw that their fire was that of the glow-worm and that their state was as that of the mirage of the desert, we said "Out upon you, and may your faces wax unsightly, alas for anyone who hopes anything of you!" Then a servant whom old age had visited, came forth and said: "O sirs, do not increase our pain, for we are in sore anguish, and in an evil plight which makes us disinclined to talk."

Said Abu Zayd "Relieve your choking sorrow, and speak out bravely if you have the power, for you will find I am a competent leech and a healing practitioner."

"Know you that the lord of this castle," said the servant, "is the pole-star of this place, and the Governor of this territory. He was not free from grief because he was childless, until by paying honour to the seed-fields and selecting for his couch the most exquisite partner he was hailed with the noble tidings of the pregnancy of that happy lady, and his palm-tree gave promise of a shoot. Then, when the days and months were counted, and the time of delivery had come, and the necklace and crownlet for the child was made, the throes of childbirth were so severe that great fear was felt for both root and branch. Therefore, there is not one of us who dares to sleep except in snatches, till we know what will happen." Then he began to weep, and called repeatedly upon Allah to whom we have to return, till Abu Zayd took him by the sleeve and said "Be still, O such a one, and be of good cheer, and receive news of joy and proclaim them, for I possess a spell for speedy childbirth, the fame of which is spread abroad among mankind."

Then his slave hurried to inform his noble master, and before the time which it takes to say "No" sallied out to take us in.

As soon as we had entered the room of the master, he said to Abu Zayd "Your reward will prosper you if what you say is true."

Abu Zayd asked for a reed pen, some meerschaum, and some saffron macerated in pure rose-water. In a breath's time they had brought what he asked for, then he prostrated himself, rubbing his cheeks in the dust, said praise to Allah, whose forgiveness he craved, bidding those present stand, keeping themselves at a distance. Then he took the pen with a mighty extravagant gesture and wrote on the meerschaum with the saffron-solution:

> "Child to come, listen to one who warns you beforehand, and yes, warning belongs to faith's foremost duties;
> You are safe now within a home closely guarded, and abode from all misery well protected;
> None but you sees anything there to frighten you on the part of false friend or foeman frank in his hatred, But as soon as you come forth from your shelter you alight in a dwelling hurtful and shameful,
> Where the hardship awaiting you will soon bring your tears in fast-flowing downpour.

So continue your easeful life and beware of changing things proved with things that are all uncertain.
Being heedful of one who seeks to beguile you, that you be hurled the surer into sorry torment;
Now I have given you, upon my soul, fair advice, but sound advisors are often suspect, and seldom heeded."

Then he blotted the writing, and tied the meerschaum up in a piece of silk, and having sprinkled it profusely with ambergris, asked that it be tied to the thigh of the labouring woman. Then it took no longer than the throat tastes of drinking, or the interval that the milker makes in drawing the milk, before the body of the child slipped out, through the specific quality of the talismatic writing and the might of the One, the Eternal. The castle was immediately filled with joy, and its lord and slaves were ready to fly with delight. They surrounded Abu Zayd, singing his praises and kissing his hands, deeming themselves blessed by touching his tattered garments. Then his revenue continued to come in, from every direction, from the moment the lamb was born until safety was given back to the sea and we prepared for departure. Abundant gifts were poured upon him, and brightened the face of his every wish, and he was vastly content. The governor would not let him depart with us, however, and

bade him enrol in his household, so that his hand might be made free with his treasures. When I saw that he was inclined to stay where there were so many riches, I took to rebuking him, and taunting him with forsaking his home and companions. Said he: "Listen to me - Do not cling to a native place where people oppress and hold you in scant esteem; but depart from the land that exalts the low above the high in dignity, and take your flight to a safe retreat, though it were in the lowlands of the Mountains of Kaf.

> "Roam about the world at will and where you choose, make there your home, not thinking of your old haunts, nor breathing sighs for distant friends
> "For know full well that a free-born man in his own country meets with but scant regard,
> "As the pearl is slighted within its shell and underrated in preciousness."

And he continued "Enough then, it should be for you to hear those words which I have spoken; so farewell, make my excuses, to the shipmates."

He then provisioned me, stinting nothing which was in his power to give, and escorted me to the bay, as one escorts one's dearest relative, until I had embarked. When I bade him goodbye, I did so with much grief, lamenting our separation, wishing heartily that the babe and its mother had come to grief, so that he would have been driven from that territory instead of being given such power in it.

APPENDIX II

THE TWENTY-SECOND MAQAMA: THE ENCOUNTER OF THE EUPHRATES

During a time of quiet, I betook myself to the waterlands of the Euphrates, and there I met with some scribes, more pleasant in their manners than the sweet waters. I joined myself to them for their culture, not their gold, and I accompanied them because of their scholarship, not their banquets. Among them I sat with equals of Al Ka'ka, son of Showr, (a man of the Arabs famous for his generosity, and reckoned with Hatim Tai and Ka'b ibn Mameh) and with them I attained to plenty after want.

Then they made me sharer in food and dwelling, and set me above themselves, as the finger tip is above the finger. They made me the son of their intimacy and the treasurer of their secrets in time of office and leisure. Now it happened that they were called to visit for official purposes the corn lands of the villages, and they took me with them by boat. When we had settled on our cushions in that black-sailed one, and started to glide through the water, we found there an old man, dressed in a threadbare coat and worn turban, whom several of us were anxious to

turn away. But when we saw that he was so wretched, and praised God after sneezing, we left him alone, and even silenced him when he began to address us. There he sat, speechless, looking at the pass he had reached, and waiting for the help which comes to the wronged.

We roamed conversationally through the by-ways of the serious and the gay, until we got to mention of two kinds of official writing, in which all joined enthusiastically. One said that the scribes of Composition were the finest, while another leaned to the preferring of Accountants; and the arguing grew sharp, and the dispute grew lengthy. Suddenly the old disreputable-looking man said: "My friends, you have made much clamour, and adduced the true and the mistaken, but the clear decision rests with me, so be content with my intervention, and consult no one after me. Know that the art of Composition is the more lofty, though the art of Accounts may be the more useful. The pen of correspondence is the choice orator, but the pen of account-keeping picks up phrases carelessly; and the fablings of eloquence are copied to be studied, but the ledgers of accounts are soon blotted out and razed. The composer is the Postbag of Secrets, the confidant of the mighty, the greatest among guests; his pen is the tongue

of sovereignty, and the knight of the skirmish; it carries good news, and it warns, and it is the intercessor and the envoy. By it fortresses are won, and foes are vanquished, and the rebel is made obedient, and the distant is brought near. Its master is free from suits, secure from the malice of accusers, praised in the assemblies, not exposed to the drawing up of registers."

Now when in his judgement he had arrived at this point, he saw from the glances of the company that he had sowed love and hatred, and that he had pleased a part and angered a part. So he followed up his discourse by saying: "Not but that the Art of Composing is founded on fabrication, for the pen of the Accountant holds firm, but the pen of the Composer stumbles. And between taking tribute by the impost on transactions and the reading of the leaves of volumes, is a difference to which comparison cannot apply, into which doubt cannot enter; for tribute fills purses, but reading empties the head. The tax of the memorandum book enriches the overseer, but the interpretation of rolls wearies the eye. Then also the Accountants are the guardians of wealth, the bearers of the burdens, the truthful relaters, the trustworthy envoys, the guides in doing justice and obtaining it, the sufficing witnesses in breach of contract. Of their number is the Minister of

Finance, who is the Hand of the Prince, the Pivot of the Council, the balance of business, the overseer of the agents. To him is the reference in peace and war, on him is the management in revenue and expenditure; by him hang evil and advantage; in his hand is the rein of giving and denying. Were it not for the pen of Accountants, the fruit of learning would perish, and fraud would endure to the Day of Judgement. The order of transactions would be loosened; the wound of wrongs would be unavenged; the neck of just-dealing would be fettered - the sword of wrong-doing would be drawn. Moreover, the pen of composition fables, but the pen of accounting interprets. The Accountant is a close scrutinizer, the Composer is an abu barakish (the bird of gaudy and changing plumage) yet each, when he rises high, has his venom until he be met and charmed; and in what each produces there is vexing till he can be visited and bribed; save those that work righteously - how few are they!"

When he had this way supplied us with what was pure and good, we asked him of his lineage; but he shrank from telling it, and if he had been able to escape he would have done so. Then I was sad because of his secrecy, but after a while I recollected him, and an instant later I said "Now by Him who controls the rolling heavens and the

voyaging ships, surely I catch the breeze of Abu Zayd, though once I knew him lord of comeliness and vigour." He smiled, laughing at my speech, and said: "Yes, I am he, though with a change in state and strength." Whereupon I said to my companions: "This is he, who can fashion words as no one else can fashion them, who cannot be view with."

Then they courted his friendship, and offered him wealth, but he declined, and would not accept anything, and he said: "Since you have hurt my honour on account of my worn garments, and cast a shadow on my soul for the threadbareness of my coat, I will look upon you with a heated eye, you shall only have from me a shipmate's companionship."

Then he said

> "Hear, my brother, commandment from a counsellor who does not mingle his purity of counsel with deceit;
> Do not hasten with a decisive judgement in the praise of him whom you have not tried, nor in rebuke of him;
> But stay in your judgement on him till you have had a view of his two characters in his two conditions of content and anger;
> And until his deceiving flash be disguised from his truthful one by those who watch it, and his flood from his light rain;

And then if you perceive what dishonours him, hide it generously, but if you see what becomes him, publish it:

And whoso deserves to be exalted, exalt him; and whoso deserves abasement, abase him to the sewer;

Know that the pure gold in the vein of the earth is hidden till it is brought out by digging;

And the worth of the dinar, its secret appears by scratching it, and not from the beauty of the graving.

It is folly that you should magnify the ignorant by reason of the brightness of his dress or the splendour of his adorning;

Or that you should make little of the man who is refined in soul on account of the threadbareness of his garb, or the shabbiness of his furniture,

For how many an owner of two torn mantles is reverenced for his worth, and he that is striped in his garments has ill-fame through his baseness;

For when a man approaches not to infamy, then only are his rags the steps to his throne.

It does not hurt the sword that its sheath is worn,

Nor the hawk that its nest is mean."

Then he asked the sailors to stop, and put him off. Each of us repented that we had been so careless to him, and we vowed that we would never again slight a man for the raggedness of his garments, and that we would not despise the sword that was hidden in the sheath, however ancient it might be.

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Plate 1. Mappa Mundi, a subjective partial vision of the world, thirteenth-century.

Plate 2. A photograph of the world from space.

Plate 3. A Lutanist with a cup, Fatimid drawing, (after Rice).

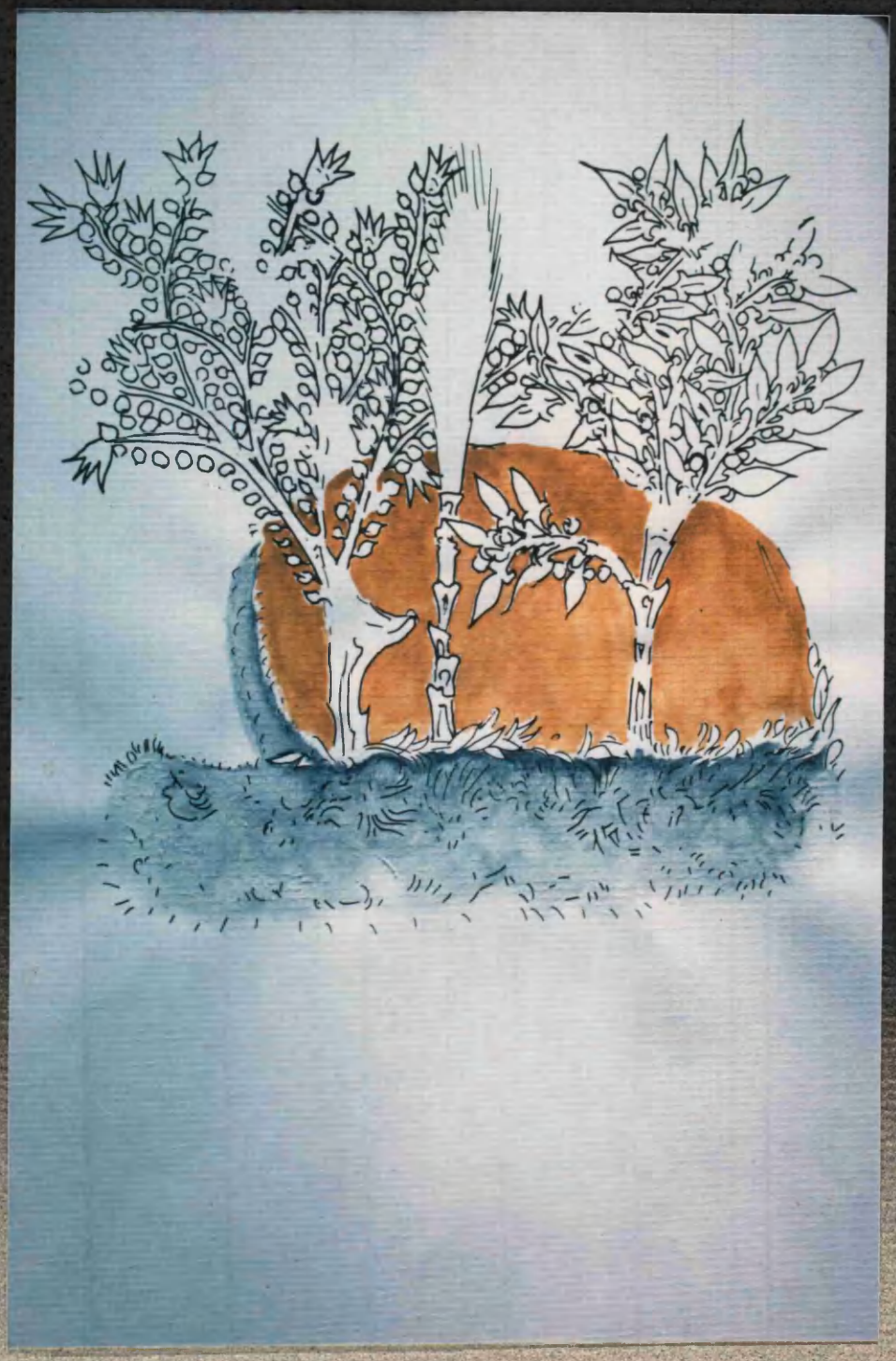

Plate 4. Study, The Eastern Isle (Thirty-ninth Maqāma). By al-Wāsiṭī. Ms. arabe 5847, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.

Plate 5. Study, The Eastern Isle (Thirty-ninth Maqāma). By al-Wāsitī. MS. arabe 5847, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.

Plate 6. Maqāmāt of al-Harīrī: The Entombment (Eleventh Maqāma). Baghdad (Iraq), 1237(634 A.H.). Painted by Yahyā ibn Mahmūd al- Wāsitī. MS.arabe 5847, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.

Plate 7. Maqāmāt of al-Harīrī: Discussion near a Village (Forty-third Maqāma). Baghdad (Iraq), 1237 (634 A.H.). Painted by Yahyā ibn Mahmūd al-Wāsitī. MS. arabe 5847, Bibliotheque National, Paris.

Plate 8. Study of al-Wāsitī's Discussion near a Village (Forty- third Maqāma). Ms. arabe 5847, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.

Plate 9. Maqāmāt of al-Harīrī: The Eastern Isle (Thirty-ninth Maqāma). Painted by Yahyā ibn Mahmūd al-Wāsitī. Baghdad (Iraq), 1237 (634 A.H.). MS. arabe 5847, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.

Plate 10. Maqāmāt of al-Ḥarīrī: The Eastern Isle (Thirty-ninth Maqāma), detail. MS. arabe 5847, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.

Plate 11. Qazwini's 'Aja'ib al-Makhluqat: Scene on the island of Jasasa. Isfahan (Iran), 1632. F71b, The John Rylands Library, Manchester.

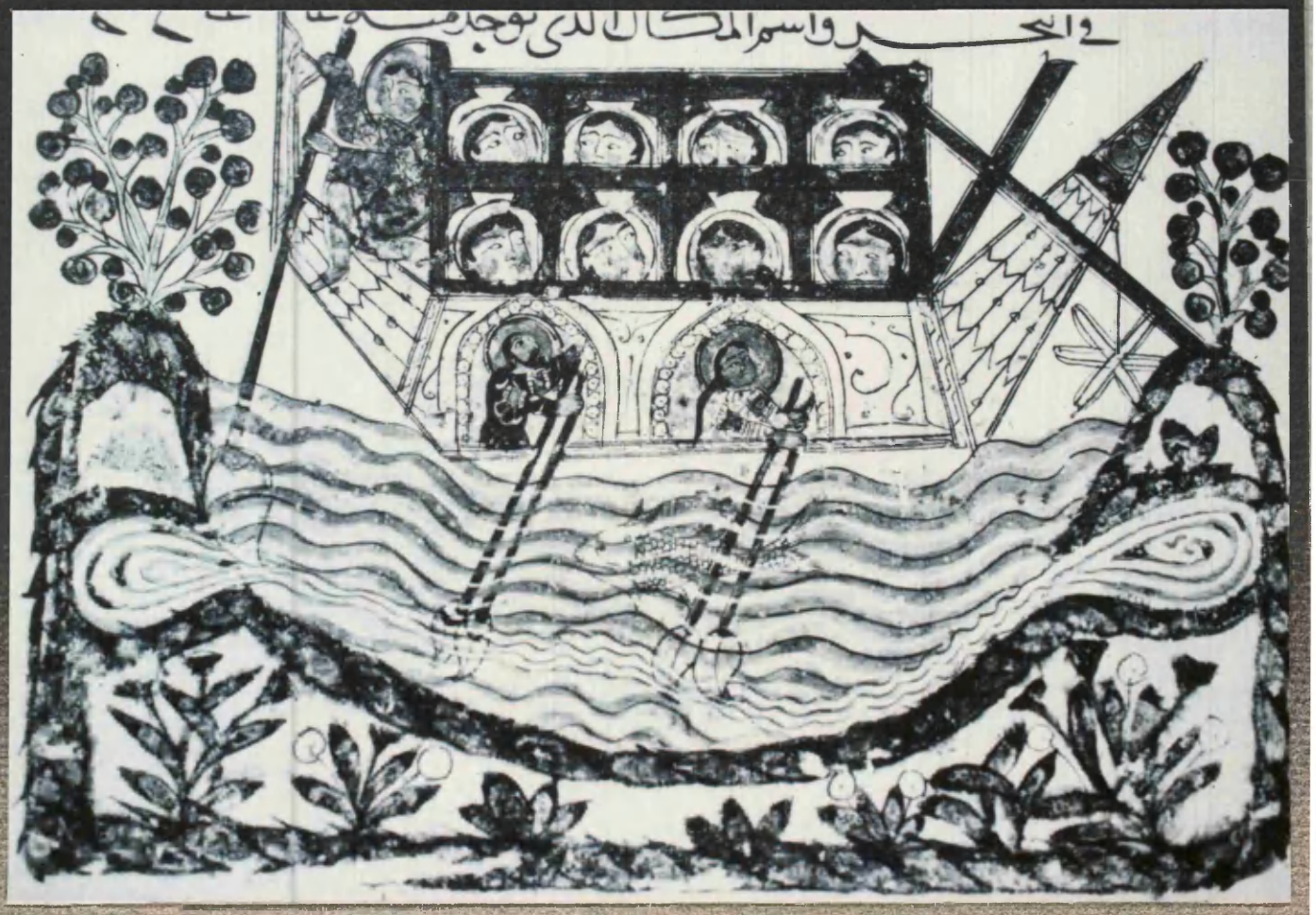

Plate 12. From a Manuscript of Discordies:
A Boat on a River, 1222 (619 A.H.).
Fredrik R. Martin Collection.

Plate 13. Maqāmāt of al-Harīrī: Abū Zayd asks to be taken aboard a ship (Thirty-ninth Maqama). Baghdad (Iraq), 1237 (634 A.H.). Painted by Yahya ibn Mahmūd al-Wāsitī. MS. arabe 5847, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.

Plate 14. Maqāmāt of al-Harīrī: Abū Zayd asks to be taken aboard a ship (Thirty-ninth Maqāma). Baghdad (Iraq), C. 1225-1235. MS. S23, Oriental Institute, Academy of Sciences, Leningrad.

Plate 15. Maqāmāt of al-Harīrī: The Hour of Birth (Thirty-ninth Maqāma). Baghdad (Iraq), 1237 (634 A.H.). Painted by Yahyā ibn Mahmūd al-Wāsitī. MS. arabe 5847, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.

Plate 16. Maqāmāt of al-Harīrī: The Hour of Birth. Detail of the lower floor seen.

Plate 17. Maqāmāt of al-Harīrī: The Wedding Banquet (Thirtieth Maqāma). Baghdad (Iraq). C. 1225-1235. Oriental Institute, Academy of Sciences. (Cropped on the left, after Ettinghausen).

Plate 18. Maqāmāt of al-Harīrī: Abū Zayd Knocking on the Door (Fifth Maqāma). Baghdad (Iraq), C.1225-1235. Oriental Institute, Academy of Sciences, Leningrad.

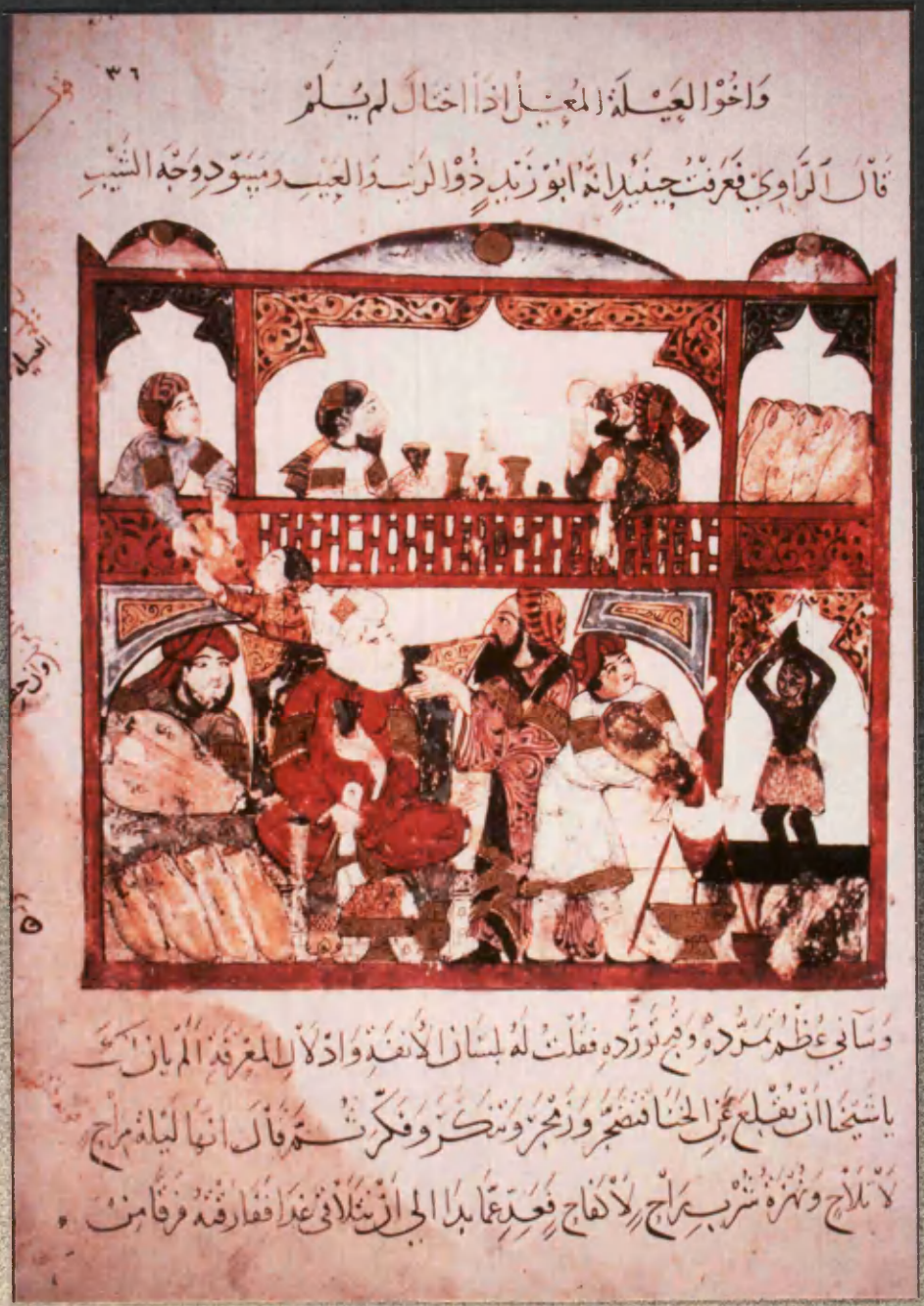

Plate 19. Maqāmāt of al-Harīrī: The Evening at the Tavern (Thirty-fifth Maqāma). Baghdad (Iraq), 1237 (634 A.H.). Painted by Yahyā ibn Mahmūd al-Wāsitī. MS. arabe 5847, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.

Plate 20. Interior of an Islamic house in Marrakesh.

Plate 21. Maqāmāt of al-Harīrī: The Reading Room. Baghda (Iraq), 1237 (634 A.H.). Painted by Yahyā ibn Mahmūd al- Wāsitī. MS. arabe 5847, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.

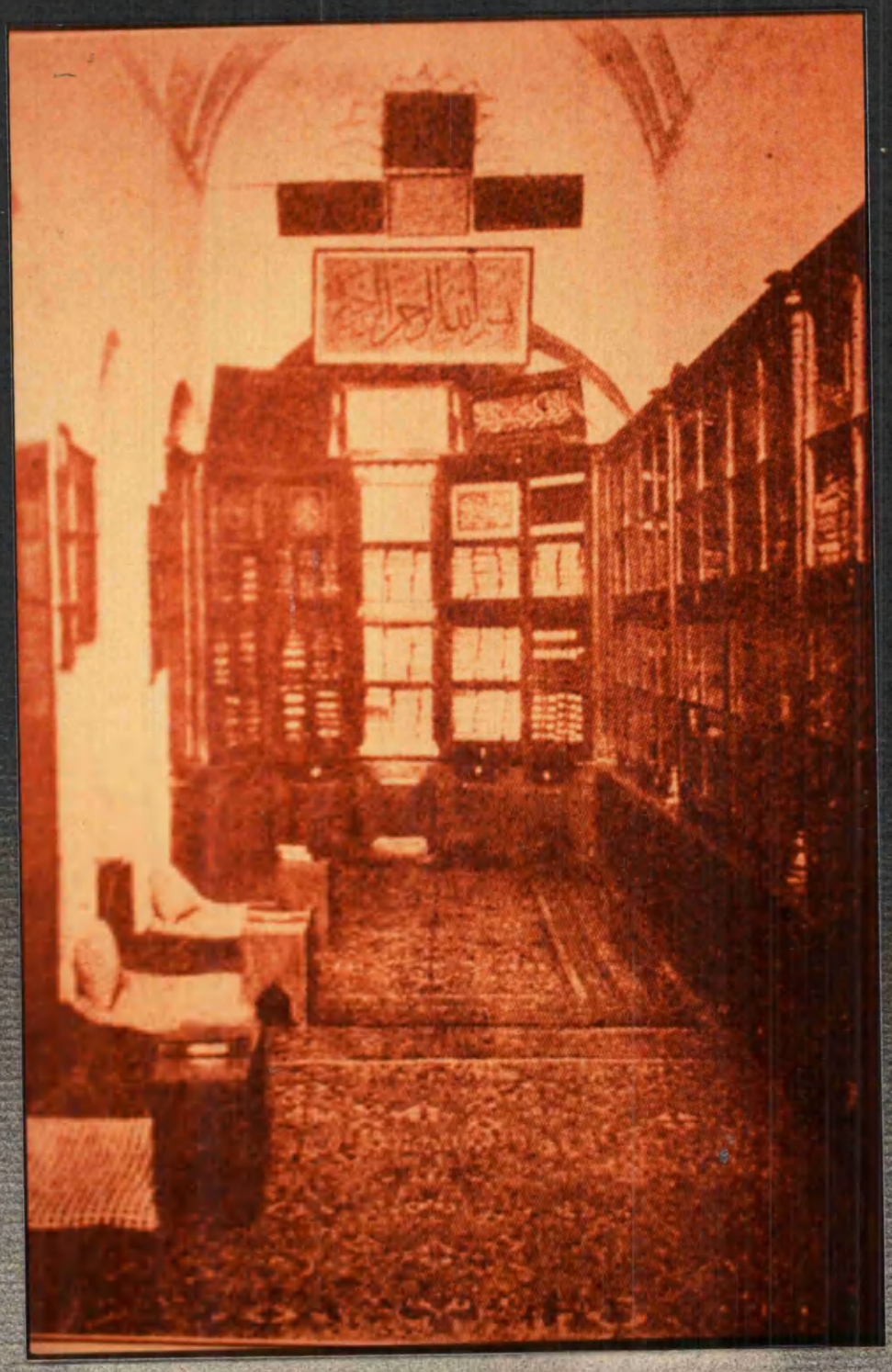

Plate 22. A nineteenth-century photograph of an Islamic library.

Plate 23. Maqāmāt of al-Harīrī: Abū Zayd aboard a Boat on the Euphraties (Twenty-second Maqāma). Baghdad (Iraq), 1237 (634 A.H.). Painted by Yahyā ibn Mahmūd al-Wāsitī. MS. arabe 5847, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.

Plate 24. Maqāmāt of al-Ḥarīrī: Abū Zayd aboard a Boat on the Euphraties (Twenty-second Maqāma). Detail.