

## Book Review

***Art of Islam, Language and Meaning: Commemorative Edition*, By Titus Burckhardt, Foreword by Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Introduction by Jean-Louis Michon, Translated by J. Peter Hobson, Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2009, PP. 248, \$32.95.**

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*Art of Islam* is a masterpiece and is considered to be the most in-depth study on the subject ever written. It was commissioned by the World of Islam Festival (London) and originally published in 1976;<sup>1</sup> in 2009 it was republished in a revised commemorative edition featuring over three hundred fifty color and black-and-white illustrations (two hundred eighty-five of which are new), and including a new introduction. Titus Burckhardt (1908–1984) was one of the most widely respected authorities on Islamic art as well as having a profound understanding of the Islamic tradition and its mystical dimension, Sufism.

In his foreword, the world-renowned Islamic philosopher, Seyyed Hossein Nasr (b. 1933) has called this classic book “the definitive work on Islamic art as far as the meaning and spiritual significance of this art are concerned” (p. viii). Elsewhere he has written that Burckhardt “had been the first person in the West to expound seriously the inner meaning of Islamic art.”<sup>2</sup>

This work is organized into eight chapters: (1) Prologue: The Ka’ba; (2) The Birth of Islamic Art; (3) The Question of Images; (4) The Common Language of Islamic Art; (5) Art and Liturgy; (6) The Art of Sedentaries and Nomadic Art; (7) Synthesis; and (8) The City.

This volume brings the wide spectrum of art within the Islamic tradition to broader audiences. It also provides the spiritual keys to discern these forms and to

connect them to the metaphysical principles of the Islamic revelation, which is to see that its art forms are the earthly crystallization of Islam itself. To ask the question “What is Islam?” it would suffice to point to one of its remarkable art forms such as the Mosque of Córdoba, Ibn Tulun in Cairo, one of the *madrasahs* in Samarqand or the Taj Mahal. Hence what is considered to be the most outward manifestation of religion or civilization, such as art, correspondingly reflects its most inward dimension of that civilization. In Islam, the outward is known as *az-zahir* and the inward as *al-batin*, a perspective that views God as both transcendent and immanent, both of which are joined in the Divine Unity (*tawhid*). The birth of all sacred art, in fact, is associated with the exteriorization of that which is most inward in every sapiential tradition; therefore, there is an important connection between art and the mystical dimensions of all religions.

The Ka‘ba, as the liturgical center of the Muslim world, is inextricably linked to the origin of the Abrahamic monotheisms—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—and demonstrates Islam’s connection to all the monotheist religions. The notion of *center* and *origin* are presiding ideas, as they are “two aspects of one and the same spiritual reality, or again, one could say, the two fundamental options of every spirituality” (p. 1). The Koran explains that “Abraham was neither Jew nor Christian, but detached (*hanif*) and submitting (*muslim*)...” (3:67). Abraham was the apostle of pure and universal monotheism, which the Islamic tradition purposes to renew. The Ka‘ba, although not a work of art as such, can be regarded as “proto-art” whose metaphysical dimension is linked to myth and revelation, therefore containing the embryo of the whole of Islamic art.

According to Burckhardt “The art of Islam ... is abstract, and its forms are not derived directly from the Koran or from the sayings of the Prophet; they are seemingly without scriptural foundation, while undeniably possessing a profoundly Islamic character” (p. 7). He adds that “Art never creates *ex nihilo*. Its originality lies in the synthesis of pre-existing elements” (p. 18).

The prohibition of images in Islam is specifically associated with images of the Divine. As Islam is the renewal of Abrahamic monotheism, the Prophet Muhammad, as Abraham before him, opposes idolatrous polytheism. To produce images of the Divine is to perpetuate the error that associates the relative with the Absolute or the created with the Uncreated, reducing one level to another. The term *aniconism* is used to depict the art of Islam, which differs from iconoclasm. Burckhardt elaborates,

*As for Islamic aniconism, two aspects in all are involved. On the one hand, it safeguards the primordial dignity of man, whose form, made “in the image of God”, shall be neither imitated nor usurped by a work of art that is necessarily limited and one-sided; on the other hand, nothing capable of becoming an “idol”, if only in a relative and quite provisional manner, must interpose between man and the invisible presence of God. What utterly outweighs everything else is the testimony that there is “no divinity save God”; this melts away every objectivization of the Divine before it is even able to come forth. (p. 32)*

The immutable essences (*al-a'yan ath-thabitah*) of things, their archetypes, are not apprehended, as they are beyond form; however, they are reflected in the contemplative imagination of the believer. Everything that exists in the cosmic order, exists in this hierarchy, which manifests qualitatively and not quantitatively. Burckhardt states,

*[T]he most profound link between Islamic art and the Koran ... lies not in the form of the Koran but in its haqiqah, its formless essence, and more particularly in the notion of tawhid, unity or union, with its contemplative implications; Islamic art ... is essentially the projection into the visual order of certain aspects or dimensions of Divine Unity. (p. 51)*

Calligraphy is a widely used art form among Muslims. In weaving the horizontal and vertical movement of the script, change and becoming are juxtaposed with what is immutable. Burckhardt adds, “The vertical is therefore seen to unite in the sense that it affirms the one and only Essence, and the horizontal divides in the sense that it spreads out into multiplicity” (p. 54).

As human diversity is inexhaustible, so is the cosmic order, all of which is contained in the Divine Unity. It is reflected through harmony, which is expressed as “unity in multiplicity” (*al-wahdah fi'l-kathrah*) and “multiplicity in unity” (*al-kathrah fi'l-wahdah*). This interpenetration is the expression of one abiding in the other, yet all things ultimately return to the Divine Unity. Again, “Islam is the religion of return to the beginning, and ... this return shows itself as a restoration of all things to unity” (p. 66). The central theme of the Islamic tradition is Divine Unity, which exists *a priori* everywhere and always. The decisive task for the human being is to realize the Divine Unity in him or herself and the cosmic order.

Worship is inseparable from beauty, as the *hadith* instructs: “God has inscribed beauty upon all things.” Hence, “Sacred art ... fulfills two mutually complementary functions: it radiates the beauty of the rite and, at the same time, protects it.” (p. 88) From this perspective, a rite itself is sacred art. A pulpit, known in Arabic as a *minbar*, symbolizes the ladder of the worlds—these are the corporeal, the psychic, and the spiritual. There is a liturgical and artistic role of clothing in Islam. Burckhardt clarifies, “To veil the body is not to deny it, but to withdraw it like gold, into the domain of things concealed from the eyes of the crowd” (p. 105).

The significance of the carpet within Islamic spirituality is illuminated here,

*It is the image of a state of existence or simply of existence as such; all forms or happenings are woven into it and appear unified in one and the same continuity. Meanwhile, what really unifies the carpet, namely the warp, appears only on the borders. The threads of the warp are like the Divine Qualities underlying all existence; to pull them out from the carpet would mean the dissolution of all its forms.*  
(p. 119)

Burckhardt maintains that art should be “typified by beauty” and dismisses contemporary discussions of functions by stating that “certain functions owe their existence to man’s decadence” (p. 156). He adds, “The only beautiful work of art is the one which, in some way, reflects integral human nature whatever its incidental function” (p. 156). There is an important awareness of the ephemerality of all things in the cosmic order; for this reason, art always includes something provisional pertaining to it—“We shall surely make all that is upon it [the earth] barren dust” (Koran 18:8).

Burckhardt’s work has stood the test of time and has demonstrated its enduring value to those wanting to understand the art of Islam. Because modern art has no parallels with Islamic art, or any sacred art, for that matter, it challenges the Western mindset and its Eurocentrism—its ability to appreciate art as understood in a theocentric civilization, where nothing stands outside the sacred. Art in this context contains something beyond its artistic form, something timeless and universal, as there is no “art for art’s sake” in Islam or any other sacred art. The important connection between sacred art and contemplation has been forgotten and lost in the modern world. The Prophet defines *ihsan* as “serving [or worshiping] God as if you see Him, because if you do not see Him, He nonetheless sees you.” It is in tracing beauty, whether in a form of art or in the cosmic order, back to the origin that we can realize that the metaphysical dimensions of aesthetics are a

doorway to the Divine. As the Prophet has expressed it, “God is beautiful and He loves beauty” (p. 224).

## Note

1. Titus Burckhardt, *Art of Islam: Language and Meaning*, trans. J. Peter Hobson (London, UK: World of Islam Festival Trust, 1976).
2. Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Ramin Jahanbegloo, *In Search of the Sacred: A Conversation with Seyyed Hossein Nasr on His Life and Thought* (Oxford, UK: Praeger, 2010), p. 236.