

The Message of Islamic Art¹

by

Jean-Louis Michon

Source: *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Vol. 17, No. 1 & 2 (Winter-Spring, 1985).

© World Wisdom, Inc.

www.studiesincomparativereligion.com

The following lecture was given at the Islamic Institute of Geneva on 22nd April, 1982.

Read: in the Name of thy Lord Who createth,

Createth man from a clot,

Read: And it is thy Lord the Most Bountiful

Who teacheth by the pen,

Teacheth man that which he knew not.

(Koran 96:1-5)

It was with this summons, this command given to the Prophet Muhammad by the archangel Gabriel that the Koranic Revelation opened fourteen centuries ago in 612 AD, ten years before the start of the Hegira. And this same summons which exhorted Muhammad to read aloud, to proclaim the Divine Message is, it seems to me, well suited to introduce an exposition on the subject of which is the art of Islam.

This is so not only because these verses of the Koran were the first to be revealed, thus marking the beginning of the great adventure of Islam, but equally for more precise reasons, because with these first words of the Sacred Book, with what they say and with the form in which they say it, the art of Islam is already present.

These words, as said in Arabic, have a very precise resonance, an intrinsic force which is linked to, among other things, the principal meanings of the following trilateral roots and the alliterations and permutations of letters which they give rise to: Kh-L-Q (to “create”) and ‘-L-Q (the “clot”); Q-R-’ (to “read”) and Q-L-M (the “pen” or “calamus”); ‘-L-M (to “know” or

1. Editor’s note: The version of this lecture that appeared in vol. 17 of *Studies* in 1985 was later expanded and republished as parts of Dr. Michon’s book *Introduction to Traditional Islam* (World Wisdom, 2008). It is from this expanded and revised version that most of the essay above is taken. Certain bridging statements from the original essay have been kept. For those who would benefit from illustrations related to the topics covered in this essay, the aforementioned book is highly recommended.

“recognize”) and again Q-L-M (the “calamus”).

In short the Koran, which as its name in Arabic suggests, is the “reading,” the “recitation” *par excellence*, given to be heard, memorized, and repeated in full, carries within itself the roots of the first art of Islam, namely the recitation of the Koran in Arabic. And because the words of the Revelation are assembled in a Book and are composed of letters we have already in embryo the second major art of Islam, namely calligraphy, an art which man carries within himself, in a certain manner, from the beginning of the Revelation since “God teacheth man by the pen,” the calamus or reed, a symbol of the Prime Intellect, which, having been plunged in the ink of divine Wisdom traces the sacred signs which grant the human being access to knowledge.

Recitation, the art which manifests the sound and modulations in Arabic of the verses of the Koran in time; calligraphy, the art which transcribes visually the vocables and fixes them in space ... with these two modes of expression we find ourselves at the very source of the art of the Muslims, the source from which the artists of Islam have never ceased over the centuries to draw their inspiration.

Specialists in Islamic art usually approach their subject from an angle that is both chronological and geographical; they describe its evolution in time, analyze the borrowings and original contributions, point out the individuality of works created at different periods, in the various parts of the Islamic world and in the various spheres of application: architecture, music, the industrial and decorative arts. Such an approach is evidently inappropriate in the frame of a concise essay, where it would only lead to a tedious enumeration of places, art works, and patrons. Besides, the analytical character of such an approach would hardly allow it to set in relief the characteristics and permanent values of Islamic art which enable the latter, everywhere and at all times, to be true to itself and confer on it an incontestable originality.

That is why I deemed it important to consider Islamic art from another point of view that is neither historical nor descriptive but which is based on what one could call the “spiritual universe” of Islam. Without doubt this universe is not the property of artists alone. Being that of the revealed Message, it belongs to every Muslim. But as soon as the artist intervenes, the ideas which he entertains are transferred to the material objects which become the common property of the community. Hence the necessity of knowing the meaning of these ideas if one wishes to be able the better to read and understand the language into which they are transcribed.

My task of approaching Islamic art through its interpreters has been made easier for me by the recollection of my numerous meetings with traditional artisans, from the far east to the far west of Islam. Everywhere, I have found them similar: humble and honest, intelligent and pious, conscious of the values of which they are the trustees and which they strive to keep alive, and often in unfavorable circumstances. Therefore, we are first going to address their aspirations, then the means of expression which they have used, and finally some of the works which they have created.

(1) Art: An Integral Part of Muslim Life

In the Koran, God says, in speaking of man, “I created him only that he might worship Me” (51: 56). Further, it is said, “Nothing is greater than the remembrance of God!” (29: 45). It follows then that the real *raison d’être* of man is to worship God, which implies that the whole of his existence should be an act of devotion and remembrance vis-a-vis his Maker.

The idea of remembrance, of recollection—*dhikr*, *tadhkīr*—is fundamental to Islam. The Koran is called *dhikr Allāh*, remembrance of God, and *dhikr Allāh* is also one of the names given to the Prophet Muhammad, not only because he was the trustee and transmitter of the Koran, but also because his behavior, his words, and his teachings—in short all that makes up the *Sunnah*, the Prophetic Tradition—show to what extent he remembered his Lord, and as a result of this constant remembrance, was near to Him.

This preoccupation, this obsession one might even say, with the recollection, the remembrance of God is not only a factor in individual perfection. It is also a stimulating ferment to social life and artistic development. In order to remember God often, it is necessary in effect that the members of the Muslim community should contrive to surround themselves at every moment of their lives—and not only during the ritual prayer—with an ambiance favorable to this remembrance. Such an ambiance would need to be beautiful and serene so that the human beings one met as well as all the things, natural or artificial one encountered, could become the occasion for and the support of the *dhikr* (remembrance of God).

With regard to the human and social milieu, such an ambiance is realized through the practice of the *sharī‘ah*, the revealed religious Law which contains the rules to which all are obliged to conform. Thanks to this law, the five essential pillars of Islam, a network of sacralized behavior patterns, as much individual as collective, is woven into the heart of the collectivity, the *ummah*.

As to the imprint given to the material environment so that it too might become a mirror of the spiritual world, it is here, precisely, that one enters the domain of art, of sacred art which, according to the words of the contemporary *Maitre a penser* Frithjof Schuon, “is first of all the visible and audible form of Revelation and then also its indispensable liturgical vesture.”²

The function of the artists consists in translating the principles of Islam into aesthetic language—in other words, transposing them into forms and motifs which will be incorporated into structures and used in the decoration of all things from sanctuaries and palaces to the most humble domestic utensil. “God is beautiful; He loves beauty,” says a *hadīth* (*Allāhu jamīlun, yuhibbu l-jamāl*)³ which could be regarded as the doctrinal foundation of Muslim aesthetics.

2. F. Schuon, *Understanding Islam*, trans. from French by D.M. Matheson (London: Allen & Unwin, 1963, 1976, 1979; Baltimore, Maryland: Penguin Books, 1972), chap. 4.

3. Imām Ahmad, *Musnad*.

According to the Islamic perspective, which underlines the absolute supremacy of the rights of the Creator over those of the creature, artistic creativity is nothing other than a predisposition which God has placed in man to help him follow the path which leads to Him. The artist is therefore only one among others of the servants of God; he does not belong to any exceptional category. He should himself, the better to fulfill his role in the collectivity, become, by means of effacement and disinterested service, an as transparent as possible interpreter of the Tradition to which he subscribes. Whence the relationship that has always existed with Muslim artists between the practice of virtues and the excellence of professional work. The Prophet said: “God loves that when one of you does something, he does it thoroughly.” And one can confirm that this advice has been followed to the letter, in particular by the artisans of the guilds and brotherhoods of the entire classical period for whom the artisanal pact was a unanimously respected professional code of honor.

Another characteristic of artistic creativity in Islam is that it is never exercised “gratuitously,” by which we are to understand that it always answers to well-defined ends. Unlike the art of the modern West, Islamic art has never known the distinction between an art supposedly “pure,” or “art for art’s sake,” and a utilitarian or applied art, the first aiming solely at provoking an aesthetic emotion and the second supposedly responding to some need. In fact, Islamic art is always “functional,” that is to say useful, whether the utility is directly of the spiritual order—like the Koranic verses engraved on the pediment of a mausoleum or embroidered on the veil which covers the Ka‘bah at Mecca—or whether it pertains to many levels at the same time, as with a chandelier or a bronze basin inlaid with arabesques.

It will perhaps be noticed that I use the terms “artist” and “artisan” without distinction to designate those who are responsible for the artistic expression of Islam. This is because in classical Arabic there is only one word to indicate the man who works and fashions with his hands; it is *sāni‘*, the artisan, someone who practices a craft or trade, for which he must serve an apprenticeship in a technique, in an “art”—in the sense in which this term was used in the Middle Ages, and not in the modern world. The Arabic word *fann* (art) carries the same ancient connotation. This meaning is found expressed, notably, in the adage *ars sine scientia nihil*, “technique (or skill) without knowledge (or wisdom) counts for nothing”—an adage Muslim artisans could have made their own and of which, it may be said in passing, our modern technocrats would do well to take note. Therefore, the artist, as we know him today, with his search after individual expression and his rather marginal position in society does not exist in the world of traditional Islam which is what we are now concerned with and that is why the use of either term, “artist” or “artisan,” should not lend itself in this context to any misunderstanding.

There are, no doubt, some crafts which by their nature do not give rise to obvious artistic products. Certain professional specialties, like the tanning of skins, the carding or the dyeing of wool, cannot, however, be detached from the process of production whose final product will be a work of art (e.g. a ceremonial saddle or a carpet). On the other hand, certain artistic elements (such as work songs or the badges and special costumes worn on the feast days of the guilds) are

nearly always associated with the practice of the traditional crafts and constitute a not inconsiderable contribution to the cultural life of Muslim society.

In brief, there are two essential characteristics of Islamic artistic production. Firstly: from the spiritual and ethical point of view, it derives essentially from the Koranic Message, the values of which it aims to translate onto the formal plane. Secondly: from the technical point of view, it rests on the transmission from father to son, or master to apprentice, of unchangeable rules and practices. Such a transmission does not in any way imply stagnation and the automatic repetition of earlier designs. On the contrary, at most times, it has assured a constant source of inspiration to the artists and a stability on the technical level which have favored the creation of numerous masterpieces that are in no way repetitive. If, at other times, the ancient formulae have become somewhat exhausted as a result of being reproduced, it is necessary to look elsewhere than in the formulae themselves for the cause of this decadence.

(2) The Formal Languages

In a way similar to what happened with the birth of the cities, the time required by the art of Islam to fully develop its personality was relatively very short. It extended over the first 150-odd years after the death of the Prophet (in the 10th year of the Hegira or 632 of the Christian era) and coincided with the lightning-like expansion of Islam across the Asiatic and Mediterranean worlds as well as with the first decades of the establishment of the Abbasid Caliphate at Baghdad (750 AD).

This growth was the result of contact with the old cultures which Islam encountered and subjugated. Placed at its disposal were the techniques and artistic forms practiced by various civilizations, the Hellenistic (and Romano-Byzantine) of Syria, the Sassanid of Persia and Mesopotamia, the Coptic of Egypt (with its Pharaonic heritage), without mentioning the numerous local traditions like those of the Berbers of North Africa or of the Visigoths of Spain, which Islam was able to sweep along in its wake.

All these pre-existing elements were placed at the service of the new community. Often their original forms remained intact, at least to begin with, after which a selection was operated as much by the artists themselves, many of whom were converts to Islam and thus obedient to the new ethical and aesthetic criteria, as by reason of new needs to which art would henceforward have to comply. Amongst these needs those of worship played a predominant role and it was in religious architecture that Islamic art first manifested its faculty for integrating pre-existing artistic traditions and adapting them to its own vision and needs. In order to grasp in what sense this evolution took place, let us take the classical example of the Grand Mosque of Damascus which was constructed by the Umayyads at the end of the 7th century AD. At the time of construction, the Byzantine artists summoned to execute the glass mosaics on the facades of the court and the walls of the portico used a style of decor—with thick-leafed trees and architectural elements done in *trompe l'oeil*—which was fashionable in the Eastern part of the Roman Empire

and still reflected the naturalistic tradition of Rome and Greece. The remarkable fact is that naturalistic motifs like these did not appear subsequently in religious monuments, whereas the geometric and vegetal elements of these same mosaics—i.e. double spirals, rosettes, foliage, and garlands—were retained and soon developed in refined compositions (as on the *mihṛāb* of Córdoba, scarcely a century later).

In a similar vein, the frescoes of the “desert palaces,” those country-seats built for the Umayyad Caliphs, contain numerous representations of human beings: musicians, dancers, hunters, executed in the Hellenistic or Sassanid style. This art of the figurative fresco was abandoned fairly quickly and hardly ever re-appeared except in the form, greatly reduced in size, of the miniature.

These examples could be multiplied, but what concerns us above all is to see according to what criteria this selection was operated. The major criterion, which I believe to have already suggested, is the power each work of art should have to recall the Divine Unity, to suggest it in some way, and in all cases not to distract the attention and senses to the extent that the viewer becomes captivated by illusory appearances. Art should help the soul to concentrate on the essential and not turn it towards the accidental and the transitory.

It is moreover in this preoccupation that one should see the deep-rooted reason for the rejection of figurative representation in Islamic art. This refusal is not founded upon a legal prohibition inscribed in the Koran; but it expresses a repugnance at seeing man substitute himself for the Creator in wishing to imitate natural forms. In itself the creative act of the artist is not reprehensible, quite the contrary, since God Himself in the Koran, uses the example of the potter who molds clay to characterize His own creative act:

“He created man of clay like the potter” (Koran 55:14).

But such an act runs the risk of engendering in the human artist the illusion of having himself added something to the creation, whence the temptation to pride, which in Islam is considered to be the worst sin of all, since it tends to place the creature at the level of the Creator, or in other terms, to ascribe to God an equal or an associate. Equally, figurative art may have the effect on the observer of making him admire the human genius who, instead of revealing in his work the infinite richness of Him Who created the prototypes of all things, knows how to reproduce a tree, a flower, or the human body in its physical appearance.

Whence the systematic preference of Islamic art for impersonal, linear forms which have a geometrical or mathematical basis. Such is the case with the two forms of art which, as we have seen before, were “given” by the Revelation: recitation of the Koran in Arabic and calligraphy.

The recitation of the Koran is the sacred art *par excellence*. “God has never sent a prophet without giving him a beautiful voice,” declared the Prophet Muhammad, and the history of the Koranic revelation illustrates the pertinence of this remark. Brought to men “in a clear, Arabic tongue” (according to Koran 26:195), the divine Message had to be proclaimed clearly. “Chant

the Koran very distinctly!” was the command given to Muhammad (Koran 73:4); and he himself, in a *hadīth*, recommended to the faithful, “Embellish your voices with the Koran, and embellish the Koran with your voices,” giving to mean that there exists a veritable consubstantiality between the divine Word and the human voice. To read, to recite the Koran in Arabic, is in effect and in the most direct way, to let oneself be penetrated by the divine Word, to become imbued with its significance and its vibration; it is, for each believer, to approach the Divine, to live in the Presence, to taste the Names and the Qualities before, perhaps, having a presentiment of the Essence.

In the same way that the Koran cannot be compared to any other literary production, likewise psalmody, which constitutes the first sacred art of Islam, is necessarily distinguished from all other musical expression. Its unique character is reflected in its terminology, since the terms by which it is designated borrow nothing from musical vocabulary, terms such as *qirā’a*, reading, *tartīl* or *tilāwa*, psalmody, *tajwīd*, from the root *J-W-D*, embellish; but never *ghinā’*, song, vocal music. It should not include any element of individual creation apt to denature an intangible text, and the only concern of the reciter should be to efface himself before the divine model and to conform himself to it as thoroughly as possible.

It ensues that psalmody obeys precise rules which, if they vary in detail according to different schools, nevertheless rest on common principles.⁴ In the first place, given that the Divine Book contains in itself its own rhythm, its reading never allows for any instrument of accompaniment. It is incumbent upon the reciter to render the rhythmic structure perceptible by giving a correct pronunciation, by respecting the lengthening of vowels and redoubling of consonants, by making the traditional pauses and breaks, these latter having the special function of retaining the attention, of letting the imagination work, and of facilitating the assimilation of the meaning of the verses.

As for the melodic element, it can be totally dismissed, as one of the juridical schools of Sunnism, that of the Imām Malik, wished, without losing any of the vibratory effect. It suffices to listen to the collective reading as it is practiced in the mosques of Morocco to be convinced of

4. There are seven or, according to certain classifications, ten schools of readings of the Koran which all go back to the 2nd century of the Hegira and are drawn from the prophetic tradition. They are as follows: 1) The School of Medina, founded by Nāfi’ (d. 169/785), whose principal disciple was the Imām Malik. Spread into Egypt, Tunisia, Sicily, Algeria, and Spain; 2) The School of Mecca, founded by Ibn Kathīr (d. 120/738); 3) The School of Basrah, founded by Ibn al-‘Alā (d. 154/771); 4) The School of Damascus, founded by Ibn ‘Āmir (d. 118/736) and still widely practiced in Syria; 5) The School of Kufah, which itself is comprised of three branches; they are: a) the School of ‘Asim al-Asadī (d. 128/745) spread throughout the Muslim world and today firmly implanted in Egypt thanks to the recent editions of the Koran; b) the School of Hamza al-Ijlī (d. 156/ 772), propagated in Morocco; and c) the School of Kisā’ī (d. 189/805) of which Ibn Hanbal was a zealous defender and which is still popular in Eastern Arabia and in Iraq (cf. Muhammad Tāhir al-Khattāt, *Ta’rikh al-Qur’ān* [Cairo, 2nd ed. 1372/1953], 108; and Si Hamza Boubakeur, see following note.)

the power of penetration of a recitation done *recto tono*. Most generally however, the systems of reading teach a kind of more or less rapid cantillation, the modulation of which spans a variable but generally narrow register, and which underlines and embellishes the syllables and the words by means of melismas and vocalizations so as to engrave them more easily on the human substance.

“Recite the Koran following the melodies and the intonations of the Arabs,” the Prophet was to advise.⁵ That this injunction was generally followed is demonstrated by the undeniable kinship that exists among all the styles of psalmody in the Muslim world. It is true that in the course of its expansion in space, the art of psalmody has absorbed a number of melodic elements present in the local milieu, and it is that which gives birth to easily recognizable, characteristic styles. All these styles, however, bear the indelible stamp of Islam; they incorporate a unique sonorous substance which itself has served as a vehicle of the Koranic Message.

Psalmody is practiced on all occasions, individually or collectively. It is for each believer the means *par excellence* of remembering God and of meditating on His Qualities and blessings following His injunction: “Surely in the creation of the heavens and earth and in the alternation of night and day there are signs for men possessed of minds who remember God, standing and sitting and on their sides, and reflect upon the creation of the heavens and the earth (and say): ‘Our Lord, Thou hast not created this for vanity. Glory be to Thee! Guard us against the chastisement of the Fire!’” (Koran 3:190-191). Taught to children from the earliest age, it not only impresses upon them the spiritual and moral teachings of Islam, but it acts upon the very fibers of their sensibility and works, through the alchemy of the Word, a transmutation which restores to the human creature something of its primordial sacredness.

From psalmody are derived numerous manifestations of religious life, such as the call to prayer, the liturgical recitation of litanies, and the intoning of *mawladiyyāt* (songs celebrating the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad) and mystical poems. No less important is the influence of psalmody on the whole of Arab music, including instrumental music, whether it concerns religious music—such as that which is played at the meetings of the mystical brotherhoods—or profane music, the demarcation between the two types being moreover often difficult to establish.

As to calligraphy, its role is equally to make perceptible the eternal beauty of the Koran. After having served to establish, some twenty years after the death of the Prophet, a complete and definitive version of the Book, it has never ceased to spread the text, giving birth to forms and styles of writing the aesthetic qualities of which arouse the admiration even of non-Muslims and non-Arabists.

Each script, in playing on the forms, dimensions, and proportions of the letters, brings more

5. *Hadīth* cited by Si Hamza Boubakeur, “La psalmodie coranique,” in *Encyclopédie des Musiques sacrées*, I (Paris), 388.

particularly into relief certain divine Attributes. Thus the divine Majesty, Rigor, and Transcendence are evoked by the vertical strokes, especially that of the *alif*, the symbol of the Unity of the Supreme Principle which stamps its mark on the rhythms of the discourse. Beauty, Gentleness, and Immanence are expressed by the horizontal lines, above and below which are written the diacritic and vowel signs, like the notes of a musical score. Finally Perfection and Plenitude are suggested by the rounded forms, such as the *nun* for example in the style of the Maghrib.⁶

The form of Arabic letters, their hieratic character—above all in the earliest transcriptions of the Koran—and the proportions which regulate all their outlines lead us to another mode of artistic expression to which the Arabs were certainly predisposed and for which Islam provided the occasion of an exceptional flowering. I have in mind the language of geometric figures and forms to which also is linked that of numbers.

By means of geometry, the Muslim artists have succeeded in illustrating visually a notion as sublime as that of *tajallī*, the infinite radiation of the Divine Essence across the multiplicity of levels of existence. The whole philosophy of arabesque and interlacement, whether it be floral or geometric, as of polygonal decoration, rests on the idea of an omnipresent center which manifests itself where and when it will without thereby being in any way, in its nature, affected, augmented, or diminished. The explosion of stars on the vault of a cupola—notably in the mosques of Persia, Turkey, and Central Asia—is an illustration of this thesis. As to the friezes of tracery which frame a door or a prayer niche, or which run under a ceiling, or which border a carpet, they are, like the march of time which regulates our lives, the reminder of the guiding thread which directs and coordinates all the worlds and all the beings and which is none other than the Divine Providence.⁷

6. The way in which calligraphy has been applied to buildings and objects composing the Islamic environment is well illustrated in A. Welch, *Calligraphy in the Arts of the Muslim World*, catalogue of an exhibition held at Asia House Gallery, Asia Society, New York during the winter of 1979, containing a good bibliography on the subject. The variety of calligraphic styles used throughout time and space for the transcription of the Koran is beautifully illustrated in M. Lings, *Splendors of Qur'an Calligraphy and Illumination* (Liechtenstein: Thesaurus Islamicus Foundation, 2005). For an analysis in depth of the role played by calligraphy in the Islamic culture and its relationship with Sufism, see A. Schimmel, *Calligraphy and Islamic Culture* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co., 1990).

7. Besides the place it naturally occupies in every handbook of Islamic art, the “unifying” role of the geometric decor (analogous to the role of rhythm in architecture and music) has been specially studied by Issam el-Said and Ayse Parman in *Geometric Concepts in Islamic Arts* (London: World of Islam Festival Publishing, 1976) and by Keith Critchlow in *Islamic Patterns: An Analytical and Cosmological Approach* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1976). The philosophical basis and the contemplative efficiency of geometric design and of the other components of Islamic art have been set out with remarkable clarity by Titus Burckhardt in *Art of Islam: Language and Meaning* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2009); see in particular chap. IV dealing with “the common language of Islamic art.”

Whilst on this subject, I would like to mention that the linear schema of arabesques and tracery (an ornamental network of interlaced lines—Ed.), with its alternation of complementary motifs and its spatial divisions, is very close to Arabic musical composition where the artist improvises an extensive interplay of calls and responses.

Likewise, there is a conscious and deliberate analogy between the division of space which is effected by the networks of polygonal stars and the division of time which is at the base of psalmody as of Arabic poetry. Each polygonal network is constructed according to a geometric outline which starts with the division of the circle into equal parts. Depending on whether the circle is first divided into three, four, or five segments, the network has for its rhythmical base the equilateral triangle, the square, or the pentagon (the star of five points), as well as the multiples of these figures: the hexagon or two inverted triangles, the octagon or the star of eight points, etc. To all these figures and numbers are attached precise symbolic meanings, and correspondences with the planets and their revolutions, with the phenomena and cycles of nature, with colors, temperaments and humors, knowledge of which make up part of the traditional artistic teaching as is borne out by, among other writings, the letters of the Ikhwān al-Safā', written in the 4th century of the Hegira (10th century AD) which provide us with valuable information concerning the arts and sciences of the time.

Conclusion

An exposition should have a conclusion. And, given that I am intimately involved in the matter, I shall conclude with a warning and an appeal.

Today, in all parts of the Muslim world, many craftsmen are abandoning their trades, for want of patronage, to become employees or workers in industry, or sometimes—if they are lucky—*shawush*, that is to say office boys in government administration; they do this only out of necessity, half-heartedly, because the ancestral crafts are no longer able to support them and their families.

In a world already so impoverished in spiritual values, where the West has long since lost its sacred art, can one stand by with indifference and watch the steady disappearance of an incomparable form of expression? “Incomparable” because the language of Islamic art is, I hope I have been able to show, of supra-human inspiration. It is the reflection, in material shaped by man, of spiritual truths, the *haqā'iq*, of which man has received the imprint. Making these truths perceptible, the artist leaves testimonies of the Divine Solitude exercised with regard to our world.

The whole of Islamic art, in its prestigious monuments as in its more modest creations, bears testimony to the truth of the Message received fourteen centuries ago by the Prophet Muhammad. It also demonstrates the efficacy and vitality of the Message across time and space. Finally, by its persuasive beauty, it attracts those who come into contact with it.

Tamerlane the Destroyer (1336-1405), who without the least pity was able to massacre the

inhabitants of entire cities, nevertheless spared the guardians of religious science—‘*ulamā*’ and *fuqahā*’—and also artists whom he carried away to embellish his capital, Samarkand.

Are we to conclude that modern states, in their pursuit of technological power and economic profit, will be shown to be more destructive of traditional values than the armies of Tamerlane? One would like to answer negatively, particularly as it is wrong to assume that the improvement of living conditions necessarily entails the sacrifice of traditional craftsmen.

Certain Muslim community leaders are still aware of the role that authentic art should continue to play in the Islamic city. Much has been said in recent years about safeguarding and rehabilitating the old Islamic cities, the medinas, and about the conservation of living handicrafts.¹⁰ In fact, this is not only a problem for Muslims; it has to do with the concern for maintenance or restoration of the quality of life everywhere in the world. Thus the attention of many Western architects, town planners, and social scientists is drawn to the Arabo-Islamic model which they use as a reference when looking for solutions to create “a better world,” where there would be a balance between technological constraints and human needs and aspirations.

There is today in the Muslim world a new generation of architects, planners, and human science specialists who are worried by and react against the destruction, due to neglect or speculation, of valuable natural and cultural assets. May their protests and common endeavors lead to carefully planned and implemented policies for conservation and promotion of the national heritage, so that by the fruits which are the works of art we may continue to know the blessed Tree which produced them and brought them to maturity.⁸

8. As regards craftsmanship, recent developments indicate that safeguard and promotion of traditional arts and crafts are now receiving attention from many governments, including Members of the Organization of the Islamic Conference. An International Seminar on Prospects of Development of Traditional Crafts in OIC countries has been held in Rabat in October 1991 and its proceedings published by the Research Center for Islamic History, Art, and Culture (IRCICA) in Istanbul. As a follow-up of that meeting, a First International Islamic Artisans at Work Festival has taken place in Islamabad from 7 to 15 October 1994. Two thousand craftsmen from thirty countries have been able to demonstrate their crafts and eighty awards have been distributed. In connection with the Festival, a joint Unesco/IRCICA/Lok Virsa Seminar on Creativity in Traditional Islamic Crafts has reviewed the problems encountered by craftsmen to adapt to new needs and expectations, and a number of recommendations have been put forward.