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When Is It Possible to Call Something Beautiful?: Some Observations about Aesthetics in Islamic Literature and Art

It often happens that a teacher must occupy himself with topics that are somewhat distant from his own field of research. I have encountered this situation several times in recent years in connection with Islamic art, which I greatly admire, despite not being an expert. In the Czech Republic, this situation results from a growing interest in the art of Islamic countries, the increasing number of collectors, and the need for experts at museums, galleries, and auction houses. The need for a proper presentation and interpretation of traditional Islamic art is made all the more pressing by the fact that even experts in the field of art and artists themselves express their opinion of it with surprising superficiality and ignorance. Many factors have induced me to search for aesthetic points of view and principles valid for understanding Islamic art: the need for insight into traditional Islamic creative arts, my own particular experience with the palaeography of Arabic script (connected closely with calligraphy, as well as with heraldry and other auxiliary historical sciences), some problems that have struck me while studying sources dealing with Islamic material culture, and questions I have been asked by my students. In my search for these aesthetic principles, I have hoped to move beyond the viewpoint of the Western observer or listener steeped in an environment of Christian art, aiming instead to discover those principles which guided the creators and original viewers of Islamic art.

“Western” aesthetic points of view are well-known, but it is possible that they do not always conform to Islamic ones. To find Islamic aesthetic viewpoints, we could turn to the works of Islamic philosophers, literary critics, and other thinkers. But this does not hold true absolutely. Although literary theory, especially in the field of poetry, is worked out in detail, information about music is limited and about creative arts almost non-existent. Even the work of specialists on the Middle East says nothing about how Islamic art has been perceived by its intended audience. There are various philological studies, historical studies of literature and its individual genres, general works on creative arts or treatises on their individual kinds, classifying surveys and catalogues for collectors, as well as some treatises on individual musical forms, instruments, etc. Thus, the three most important branches of Islamic art—literature, creative arts, and music—

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are naturally detached and treated separately. When looking at how the original listeners of musical works, readers of literary works, and observers of artwork and other crafts perceived aspects that were decisive for their relationship to a work of art with which they came into contact, I found that this problem has never been treated by any orientalist. This gap in the comprehension of the mutual relationship of authentic users of “Islamic” art was finally bridged by Doris Behrens-Abouseif in her recent book *Schönheit in der arabischen Kunst*.¹ On the basis of examples collected from various works of classical Arabic authors and interpreted thoroughly, she has given a clear and nuanced answer to this question.

One of the reasons for writing this article was also a question which I encountered several times during the preparation of my edition of *Qahwat al-Inshāʾ*, the book of Ibn Ḥijjah,² the poet and official (*munshīʿ*) of the chancery during the Mamluk period (1366–1434). In it I found not only some metaphors referring to an authentic and not “Western” classification of art, but also the explication of a way of perceiving some of its manifestations. The problem prompted me to skate on the thin ice of art and in a few words point out the questions raised by Ibn Ḥijjah. The facts that I try to deduce from his words could complement and support the conclusions reached by Doris Behrens-Abouseif.

In our “Western” point of view, “art” is usually defined as graphic or plastic. When speaking about the Islamic world, we are used to calling it “Islamic art,” and we perceive it as a material one, starting with buildings and ending with jewels. Such art can be considered visual. Arabs, Persians, and Turks have always considered the arts of the word, i.e., poetry and fine prose, a separate branch named comprehensively “literature.” This, along with music, can be considered an auditory art. Visual and auditory arts are brought together in dance and theatre. As for the latter, traditional Islamic society has never considered it an art.

Muslims have been active within all these vast fields of art, and as for created works, they either accepted or refused them. The question is: what was the reason for their acceptance or refusal? Why did the users of art take up a positive or a negative position towards it? What was “beautiful” and what was not? Many students have asked me what in Islamic art was considered beautiful and according to which aesthetic criteria was a work of art—auditory, visual, material, literary, or musical—evaluated. I have also asked my colleagues which criteria the critics apply or have applied for the evaluation of aesthetic and artistic aspects that make it possible to call any creation “a work of art.” The result was not too satisfactory

¹Doris Behrens-Abouseif, *Schönheit in der arabischen Kunst* (Munich, 1998). Also available in an English translation, *Beauty in Arabic Culture* (Princeton, 1999).

²Taqī al-Dīn Abū Bakr ibn ‘Alī Ibn Ḥijjah al-Ḥamawī, *Das Rauschgetränk der Stilkunst, oder Qahwat al-inšāʾ*, ed. Rudolf Veselý (Beirut, 2005).



and related mostly to literature, especially poetry. I did not learn much about visual art, to say nothing of music.

There is a hadith that refers to the meaning of “the beautiful”: *Inna Allāh jamīl wa-yuḥibb al-jamāl* (or *al-jamīl*) (God is beautiful and he loves the beautiful).³ It could be a matter of principle for the Muslims. But it is known that in spite of this principle’s existence, the Islamic thinkers—philosophers and theologians—have never drawn up any aesthetics, any comprehensive theory of the beautiful for which they could find a clue in the works of the philosophers of the classical and post-classical eras. It could be admitted that a Muslim should look for, find, and admire beauty because the beautiful and beauty-loving God had created the world in accordance with his will. That is why the world must be beautiful, and with respect to this fact it can be assumed that some criterion could be determined for its beauty. As far as I know, this has not happened—and if so, it has been very limited at best. Was it because nobody dared it, or because man had to respect the beauty of the world created by God as an indisputable fact without any clue for its evaluation? He could find the beautiful in his surroundings and use it for his own good. He found it useful and named it “beautiful.” This related above all to material resources that were necessary for life and were therefore useful—either provided by nature or created by man. It is probable that Ibn Sinā had these godsend and human creations in mind when he wanted a “beautiful” thing to be good, useful, and also usable.⁴ To this effect he at least conceded man his right to evaluate the beautiful.

Did a Muslim who created anything multiply the beauty created by God? Was he entitled to do so? Was any human creation merely an act of rivalry with God? On the one hand, man could be charged with trying to imitate the creation of the “jealous” God, which he could consider an audacity or even a blasphemy that could result in his deserved retribution. On the other hand, one could argue that man has a chance to discover the perfect beauty of the creation of God and God himself by means of the imperfection of his own creation. Thus, the work of man can be considered a means to a more perfect comprehension of God, a form of worshiping him, an act of piety, and even—with some exaggeration—a divine

³A. J. Wensinck, *Concordance et Indices de la Tradition Musulmane* (Leiden, 1933–38), 1:373. This hadith is found in Ibn Ḥanbal and Ibn Mājah, not al-Bukhārī or other canonical compendia of hadiths. The fact that this hadith is included in the oldest collection of hadiths, i.e., *Al-Musnad* by Ibn Ḥanbal (which does not belong to the six “canonical” collections), as well as in Ibn Mājah’s work, which was the last hadith collection to be declared “canonical” due to its inclusion of many “weak” hadiths (see Carl Brockleman, *Geschichte der arabischen Litteratur* [Weimar, 1898–1902], 1:163), arouses a suspicion that this particular hadith is also “weak.” Nevertheless, its contingent “weakness” has not influenced its importance as a hadith that supported the necessity to create “the beautiful.”

⁴S. Kahwaji, “ʿIlm al-Djamāl,” *Encyclopédie de l’Islam*, 2nd ed., 3:1162–63.



service. Man should comprehend that when he works, he utilizes both material and spiritual means with which he was provided by God.

It is well-known that this quandary, as well as the fear of idolatry, resulted in the fact that traditional Islamic arts—with the exception of some works from the first century—did not include the three-dimensional representation of human beings or animals, although no explicit prohibition ever existed. Also, the two-dimensional portrayal of human beings and animals was very limited. It was applied at most as a part of the decoration of objects assigned to private life, such as utensils and books. The decoration of public premises, i.e., buildings and their interior, consisted exclusively of a combination of calligraphy, geometry, and floral motifs. These ideological factors and practical considerations laid for creative or visual arts the foundations of a generally accepted tradition that was not defined by any clear rule or norm.

The position of auditory art—the art of the word and music—was different. It was Arabic poetry that followed up fully and continuously on its pre-Islamic ideal pattern. It is not necessary to remind us that on the one hand Arabic poetry influenced the poetries of non-Arabic Islamic countries and on the other was influenced by them. It is important that some innovations (*badā'i*) in the field of form, content, and lexicon have been applied as a reflection of the aesthetic demands of individual eras. As opposed to creative arts, poetry also formulated the aesthetics of physical beauty, especially female beauty.

In contrast to visual art, where the individuality of the creator was almost indistinguishable, every poetic work reflected the personality of its author. Musicians and singers expressed not only their skill, but also their immediate frame of mind and relation to a performed work. The freedom of poets and musicians was incomparably greater than that of graphic or plastic artists because they were not at risk of idolatry. At most, they had to satisfy the expectations of their readers and listeners.

Another important aspect of the different conception of visual and auditory art was the fact that visual art was connected inseparably with matter, while auditory art related to sound. A work made of matter—from a large mosque to a delicate piece of jewelry—can be perceived and admired at any time and is unchangeable because it was created once and for all. On the contrary, every sound of a work made of tones dies away after being heard, so that it was possible to call recitation, singing, or playing an instrument “the art of the moment.” At the same time, it was possible to change any auditory—and especially musical—work as desired. Every presentation depended on a soloist, an instrumentalist or a singer. For example, in *Kitāb al-Aghānī* we find some remarks, headed by the word “*ṣawt*” (“voice, tune”), below the verses of poems, indicating that these verses were assigned for singing; these notes usually represent fingering for playing a lute. A composer determined



only a basic key in which the respective song and its accompaniment were to be performed. A melody depended on the singer. Players who accompanied him on musical instruments had to adapt themselves to him. Thus one song—or even one of its verses—could be presented again and again with a new melody and its corresponding accompaniment. This art necessitated a listener’s concentration and experience, enabling him to identify and appreciate such variations. During the impromptu recitation of his verses, a poet could improvise freely like a musician or a singer. This variability of auditory art was practically unlimited. On the contrary, visual art made it possible to change a theme only within the artistic trends of the respective era. This can be compared to a gem that begins to glow with a new color when it is turned half-circle.

Changing these possibilities into reality required an active approach of a recipient to a given work of art, whether visual or auditory. At the same time, a reaction to a work of art was an individual act. The effect of a “seen” or “heard” work of art upon its recipient has always depended on his readiness to perceive it. The importance of this inward experience during the perception of a work of art was realized by al-Ghazālī, who stressed the close connection between a perceived object and a perceiving subject. The evaluation of an object depends on the sympathy of a subject for it. The spiritual perception of the beauty of an object that need not be perceived necessarily by sight has a much stronger effect than impressions formed during its observation.

Now, let us see which of these theories and assumptions are confirmed by Ibn Ḥijjah. In his *Qahwat al-Inshāʾ* a combination of two words occurs seven times. As usual in Ibn Ḥijjah’s work, it is a metaphor: *al-mathānī wa-al-mathālith*. The first word of this pair is also used in connection with the number “seven.”⁵ There is no doubt that it is a metaphor for the Quran, or the seven verses of the surah *al-Fātiḥah*, or even other surahs. Nevertheless, in connection with the word “*al-mathālith*” this metaphor has no meaning. The dictionaries say that the word “*al-mathnāʾ*” (pl. *al-mathānī*) has inter alia the same meaning as the Persian word “*daw-baytī*” (distich), i.e., something that consists of two parts. With more imagination, which is a precondition for explicating the *tawriyāt*⁶ of Ibn Ḥijjah, “*sabʿat mathānin*” could also mean “the seven Muʿallaqāt.” The meaning of this word will become clear if we solve the problem of the word “*mathālith*.” The dictionary of Biberstein-Kazimirski says that “*mithlath*” (pl. *mathālith*) means “the third string on a lute.”⁷ It can be deduced from this that Ibn Ḥijjah applied the word “*al-mathānī*”—i.e., “distichs”—to a poem or to poetry as such, and the word

⁵“*Unzilāt fī al-sabʿ al-mathānī*” (Ibn Ḥijjah, *Qahwah*, 131, line 6); “*Awwadhatʿhu al-raʿāyā bi-al-sabʿ al-mathānī*” (ibid., 207, line 3); “*Awwadhatʿhu bi-al-sabʿ al-mathānī*” (ibid., 385, lines 4–5).

⁶S. A. Bonebakker, “Tauriya,” *EF*, 10:395.

⁷Albert de Biberstein-Kazimirski, *Dictionnaire Arabe-Français*, s.v. *mithlath*.



“*mathālith*” analogously to music.⁸ It seems as if Ibn Ḥijjah presented music and poetry—i.e., auditory arts—as some special artistic form. The first of these arts, i.e., music, invites dancing (*raqs*) and is therefore *murqis*; the second, i.e., poetry, along with the first brings a man into a state of exultation (*tarab*) and is therefore *muṭrib*. *Tarab* is an exultation that arises from a man’s heart and is experienced by him.⁹ This way of perceiving auditory art accords fully with al-Ghazālī’s calling for individual inward experience with a work of art.

An impressive declaration of the love of poetry and music, as well as a remarkable summary of the objectives of art and how to achieve them, can also be found in the *tahmīd* in the preface to Ibn Ḥijjah’s *Dīwān*¹⁰ which closes his *Qahwat al-Inshāʾ* and, as one should say, crowns it. Here he thanks God, who riveted the attention of admirers of poetry and music (*ahl al-mathālith wa-al-maghānī*) and made accessible to their ears all that invites dancing (*murqis*) and is emotionally moving (*muṭrib*). He points out that the instruments for both arts have a common origin (*nasab*) because they both are made from reed (*qalam*): a pen is “a lute for words” (*mizmār al-maʿānī*) which “inflames hearts” (*yūliʿu bi-al-albāb*), while a musical instrument is a “lute for melody” (*mizmār al-maghānī*) that “entertains ears” (*yalʿabu bi-al-asmāʿ*). Both arouse their listeners’ exultation (*tarab*). Ibn Ḥijjah names both arts “*adab*” that he considers “a godsend” and “a good mediated by angels” (*hibah ilāhīyah wa-malkah malakīyah*). In his view, an art that can be declared “beautiful” is “an art of the moment,” i.e., an art of changeable spoken or recited words and its musical accompaniment that every listener must perceive individually and allow to “penetrate to his heart.” He himself says: “I have not heard yet any valuable work that would not have fascinated my inward mind and stricken my heart.”¹¹ This declaration culminates with an aphorism that summarizes what has been said:

⁸For instance: “*tughni ʿan al-mathānī wa-al-mathālith*” (Ibn Ḥijjah, *Qahwah*, 45, lines 18–19); “*aghmat bishāratuhā ʿan ṭib al-mathānī wa-al-mathālith*” (ibid., 251, line 4); “*yutribu tarjīʿu waṣfihā al-mufrad ʿalā al-mathānī wa-al-mathālith*” (ibid., 280, line 19); “*fa-aghna ʿan al-mathānī wa-al-mathālith*” (ibid., 332, line 13); “*wa-baṭula tashbih hādihā al-yarāʿ ʿalā al-mathālith min sajaʿātihi wa-al-mathānī*” (ibid., 419, lines 8–9); “*awwadhat hā rabāʿiyatan bi-al-mathālith wa-al-mathānī*” (ibid., 487, line 14); “*ahl al-mathānī wa-al-mathālith*” (ibid., 497, line 16).

⁹J. Lambert, “*Tarab*,” *EP*, 10:210; Behrens-Abouseif, *Schönheit*, 81. As Yaseen Nourani proved recently, *tarab* was not always considered positive from the social point of view, because it could be connected with “*jahl*” (violent emotion in opposition to self-control), which could consequently lead to a sin (Yaseen Nourani, “Heterotopia and the Wine Poem,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 36 [2004]: 348).

¹⁰Ibn Ḥijjah, *Qahwah*, 497 ff.

¹¹“*Wallāh uqsimu: mā samiʿtu shayʿan min ṭayyib al-adab illā khalaba lubbi wa-akhadha bi-majāmīʿ qalbi*” (ibid., 498, lines 3–4).



Wa-man ḥaḍara al-samā‘a bi-ghayri qalbin
Wa-lam yaṭrab fa-lā yalumi al-mughannī

(You won't be moved by music if your hearing is deaf,
 This is but your mistake and not that singer's you now blame)

What more could we add to Ibn Ḥijjah's words? Probably only that he gives an intelligible answer to our initial question. He evidently prefers auditory over visual art because it arouses a listener's "ṭarab" resulting from his experience with the beautiful. In his view, this is the only mission of "genuine" art. On the other hand, for those Western observers—either professionals or amateurs—who become familiar with Islamic art and culture, it is material culture (i.e., visual art) that in accordance with their aesthetic criteria deserves to be named "Islamic art." For those whom this material culture served, it was no more than the products of handicrafts, the effect of which has never been comparable with that of the products of *adab*. These different attitudes of domestic and foreign creators and recipients towards auditory and visual art are an example of cultural variability. What some admired, others considered an integral part of everyday life, and it can be said with some sarcasm that what brought some to exultation—i.e., poetry and music—for others was often but a source for philological research or a simple sound track for "oriental" dances.



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