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Five Essays on Islamic Art

By TERRY ALLEN. Sebastopol, CA: Solipsist Press, 1988. Pp. 131. Price PB $46.00. 0–944940–00–5.

The intention of these essays is to demonstrate the network of artistic relationships via formal analysis. The carefree nature of this starting-point is especially pleasing, since the form—fine art itself—is at last being examined again, albeit in connection with things that constitute problems not only of an artistic nature. Nevertheless, the character of the *Five Essays* is quite varied, in as much as they are laid out with respect to architectural questions, but less plausible as regards discussions in which style is analysed. The use of terms would also appear unorthodox: while Allen interprets their meaning in his own way, this is, regrettably, not always precise. An example of this is the central term 'style'.

The first essay, 'The Arabesque, the Bevelled Style, and the Mirage of an Early Islamic Art', was originally delivered as a paper at a 1984 symposium concerned with the topic of 'Tradition and Innovation in Late Antiquity'. As might therefore be expected, the essay emphatically advances the view that early Islamic art is a branch of the art of late antiquity. This is done with the same passion as that formerly displayed by E. Herzfeld and, if in a more sober fashion, by K. A. C. Creswell. However, by 'Islamic' Allen understands essentially the religious aspect, and he rejects this. But he is in danger here, as in his later essays, of too much abstraction. Art is not fashioned in the workshop by obsessed craftsmen alone; rather, it comes into being through commissions, or even through those awarding the commissions; and the latter are Muslims. The selection of forms is therefore conducted not merely with regard to aesthetic reasons or fashionable trends but also in accordance with those of politics and religion.

Allen defines arabesque as vegetal decoration (restricting himself to the pattern of the vine), which either is identical with the geometrical framework surrounding it or brings about a change in the geometrical framework to produce a vegetal ornament. The *unendliche Rapport*, translated here as 'infinite correspondence', results from the geometric framework, and could basically be characterized as comprising surface patterns.

These arabesques, considered by Allen to represent the first innovation of Islamic art, do not appear before the tenth century. He cites two completely different objects as examples, namely an ornament from the portal of the

mosque of al-Ḥākim and the beautiful marble slab from the *miḥrāb* wall of the Great Mosque of Cordoba. However one may define the arabesque, the ornaments of the al-Ḥākim mosque represent an innovation based upon the reinterpretation of the tendrils as a band. This development may be observed in the Great Mosque of Qayrawān and in Madīnat az-Zahrā. The marble slab in the Great Mosque of Cordoba, however, is definitely a concrete Tree of Life, albeit an abstract one. We are given no explanation as to why this should be included at this point. What is certain, as Allen points out, is that the abstraction of the tendrils represents a precondition for this development; it is debatable, however, whether the acanthus leaves of Justinian's capitals should be seen as a good example along the way to the arabesque. After all, abstraction is but one of many interpretations, and these capitals would appear to be merely a preliminary step towards the caliphal art of Cordoba. There is no doubt that a mixture of western and eastern motifs existed before Islam; however, a form of design such as that of Umayyad art, with its emphasis on outline and rhythm of line, is unknown before this. It is of course correct that the arabesque does not represent the result of a cultural division, but would the arabesque have come into existence at all without the Muslims and their commissions?

It is again made clear, following E. Herzfeld, that the art of Samarra, including the first style, can only be understood as stemming from Hellenism. Similarly, the example from the sixth century, the marble slab from Antioch, represents an important and interesting piece. With the exception of the leaf abstraction, however, it is impossible to identify any common denominator. If the line and the outline define the first style, then it is the surface contour that characterizes the Antioch marble slab. The outline vanishes almost completely through the perforation. The art of the early decades doubtless belongs to the tradition of antiquity; however, doubt arises with regard to the idea that it might have developed in this way without Muslim commissions.

The second essay, 'Aniconism and Figural Representation in Islamic Art', presents the view that Islamic art, while a branch of the art of antiquity, is not concerned with figural representation. It is aniconism, not iconoclasm, that marks Islam. A common feature of the time in question, however, is a strict rejection of divine representation, whereas scenes depicting rulers are quite acceptable. Both ideas are therefore based upon a rigid monotheism, and on a struggle running parallel in all three monotheistic religions about the conception of God and His qualities. The artistic act of creation, mentioned in a *ḥadīth* cited at the beginning of this chapter, would appear suspect for Islam. The artist should breathe life into his creation, yet is incapable of doing so—a passage, incidentally, which is reminiscent of Habakkuk. However, Allen sees the fundamental difference between Islam and antiquity as being that figural representations in Islam are merely signs: they are individual figures without a pictorial context, and therefore possess no narrative function. In antiquity and late antiquity, quotations and details from pictures were possible in addition to narrative portrayal, especially in the iconography of the rulers. It would therefore appear questionable whether it is possible simply to formulate a

contrast between Christian/Byzantine and Islamic art. I also have the impression that the choice of such a word as 'emblem', so loaded with meaning as it is, is hardly appropriate, even in the light of the definition which Allen gives it: 'emblems are just that: they are not scenes' (33). Emblems point beyond that which is immediately apparent to the senses; isolated cases have allegorical significance; they are not simply signs.

The third essay, 'Horizons in Islamic Art', examines the development of art in eight subsections, these being structured not only chronologically (from 'The Arabs before Islam' to 'The Art of Samarra') but also thematically. The first section at last acknowledges the fact that the Arabs had already been integrated into the cultural koine in Roman times, even if Allen—in contrast to U. Monneret de Villard—grants the Yemenites no particular role in the transmission of culture. Once again, the art of the eighth century is passed over as representing the final phase of antiquity, something which one could disprove only by means of finds of pottery and glass. In Allen's view, the shift of the empire's capital from Syria to Iraq signifies a breaking away from the classical heritage of the Mediterranean world. It is not until the bevelled style that a break occurs to demonstrate the new element. The art of Samarra is the model in every respect for every area, something described by E. Herzfeld as *Reichskunst*. Other models, however, such as the mosque of Damascus, are also of relevance. The political reasons and background for this are not discussed. The tenth century then sees the birth of the arabesque, as mentioned above, and the floriated Kufic, his explanation for this being a fundamental interest in geometry. In his opinion, following O. Grabar, scientifically aware circles, those potentially awarding commissions, could be seen as inspirational factors. Even if tracts on geometry have not yet been found or evaluated, the possibility none the less exists that such treatises may one day come to light. Quite apart from this, however, there is also the possibility of explaining the development of the arabesque by means of a specifically aesthetic interest. I would doubt whether a Muslim artist and observer felt a dilemma of complexity and legibility with regard to the ornament. Rather, it is a question of quality. If unity was first determined through 'Abbāsid art, then it is Allen's view that the unity of the eleventh and twelfth centuries was effected as a result of the unity of the Islamic world, one in which none of the linguistic or national groups linked itself to a particular style of art. He compares this koine with that of Alexander the Great. Could it be that the Hellenistic koine was the prerequisite for the later, Islamic one? The cultural unity of the thirteenth century was to break up under the Mongol storm. The statement that unity was created by 'a consensus on what material culture should be' (60) can surely be regarded as holding true for every culture.

The fourth essay examines 'Transformations and Correspondences in 'Abbasid Architecture'. Allen argues that the unity of art in the later period is based not merely on imitation but also on the exchange and spread of new models. In principle, however, he assumes that Baghdad, as the caliphate's seat, continued to be the artistic centre in later centuries, influence radiating out from there into the provincial centres. Accordingly, the interrelationship of the

buildings enables us, at least to a certain extent, to draw conclusions regarding the lost buildings in Baghdad (in the same way as if we wished to understand the baroque style in Rome through a consideration of French and German buildings!). The premiss here is that Mesopotamia was already the artistic leader in the Sassanian era. However, there also exists a period of equally high cultural output in Khurāsān, a land characterized by Hellenism, and even Sīstān, at the very time of the Arabian conquest, something known to us through archaeological and written sources. The famous palace of Abū Muslim would appear to be indigenous in style, while the castle of Ukhaydir is decorated with a form of ornamentation common in Khurāsān. Thus, if highly developed brickwork art was widespread in the east, it need not necessarily have developed from Iraqi art! I find it equally debatable whether the north cupola of the mosque of Iṣfahān should in fact be regarded merely as an echo of Baghdad art, as Allen maintains. Iṣfahān was the residence of 'Aḍud al-Dawla prior to Baghdad, and the ambitious plans for a modern, Saljūq Baghdad were never fulfilled. In no way can this be explained logically with regard to politics, and it is with politics that we are concerned here. In the west, Allen sees the influence of Baghdad as stretching beyond the lustre faiences in the Great Mosque of Qayrawān and the *miḥrāb* (apart from the Ṭūlūnid mosque in al-Qaṭā'i) to the foundation of al-Manṣūrīyah near Qayrawān by the Fāṭimids. He believes that he can see a replica here of Baghdad, although being one of the archetypes the idea of a circular city is much older than Baghdad.

The castle name al-Khwarnaq does not necessarily point to architectural influence, for many castles are so named, particularly since al-Khwarnaq represents a *tertium comparationis*. Allen cites, as examples of the universality of 'Abbāsid architecture, the nine-bay mosques in Balkh, Susah, and Toledo, seeing them as in a line with the mosques of Khān al-Zabīb and Umm al-Walīd, together with those along the *ḥajj* route. Finally, he traces the type back to urban (or tribal?) mosques, the model for which he sees in 'palace architecture', albeit without giving conclusive reasons for so doing. Inexplicably, this comparison does not touch on the question of elevation: even if a mosque possesses a square ground-plan and four supports, a flat roof, and probably a coffered ceiling carried by architraves, it does not necessarily fulfil the requirements of a nine-dome mosque. Moreover, the question is never raised as to whether the central bay might not have been stilted, as is the case in Toledo. Frames bearing an inscription and framing an arch, such as that of the *miḥrāb* in the Great Mosque of Cordoba and the facade of 'Arab-Ata, Tīm, are seen by Allen as equally exemplary. Apart from this, the existence of inscriptions can also be proved for the Friday Mosque in Iṣfahān and Nā'in. There is much to be said, however, for the view that the *muqarnas* dome has its origin in Iraq, possibily spreading from there into the west. But I am less convinced by the thesis that domes with intersecting arches also have their origin here. However, Allen concedes that the connection between the domes of Tilimsān and Iṣfahān is not directly artistic but merely 'conceptual', as he puts it.

The concluding essay is concerned with 'The Concept of Regional Style'. Allen defines sameness of 'style' here as that which occurs when two or more

things 'look more like each other than any of them looks like anything else' (92), while 'regional', for its part, is seen as a criterion dependent upon style. In Allen's opinion, regional style is to be found neither in pottery nor in textiles, nor in calligraphy—not, at least, in the early period. As formulated here, this is of course not the case: sufficient counter-examples may be listed. If, however, we understand by 'style' a stylistic unity embracing every area—as, for example, in the case of art nouveau—then it may well have validity. Certain products, such as lustre faiences, enamelled glass, ivory work, and metalwork, were reserved for particular towns, although they could naturally be imitated. Regional style in architecture is examined and characterized within the context of three towns: Aleppo, Damascus, and Cairo. The art of Aleppo in the eleventh and twelfth centuries stands out on account of the revival of late antique art, fine stone masonry and profiling, etc. The austere facades of the *madrasas*, devoid of ornamentation, living only through their proportions and the structuring of their surfaces, can also be partly explained by means of the buildings' function. In contrast, the portal of a palace is correspondingly richly decorated, as is that of the citadel. It is possible to identify connections between Aleppine architecture and some of the buildings in Damascus, such as the 'Ādilīya, whereas none exists with Egypt. Cairo can offer a multitude of influences, in technical respects as well, all of which meet and blend with the locally traditional architecture (about which we know very little). It is not only an eastern influence which makes itself felt here, but also—and naturally so in Fāṭimid Cairo—that of the west, as may be seen from the mosque of al-Ḥākim. The Madrasa al-Zāhirīya and the Great Mosque of Baybars demonstrate the growing influence of Syrian architecture under the rule of an orthodox dynasty.

However, Allen explains the influences in particular through the contract of architects and artisans, once again, in accordance with his purely formal approach, leaving aside those giving the commissions. In my view, however, it is here at the latest that the limitations of a purely formal analysis are revealed, if the background is not explored. Allen is of the view that 'juxtaposition rather than synthesis was the intended effect' (108), that the choice of form was conscious, and yet they fulfil aesthetic requirements. Various regional traditions develop along parallel aesthetic lines, and are thus in a position to influence one another. But is it not precisely this which is meant by 'style'?

A reading of this book may offer both stimulation and pleasure; but it is lacking in new insights.

Barbara Finster
Otto-Friedrich-Universität, Bamberg