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GRABAR - ISLAMIC ATTITUDES TOWARDS ARTS

4. Islamic Attitudes toward the Arts

Much has been written about Islamic attitudes toward the arts. Encyclopedias or general works on the history of art simply assert that, for a variety of reasons which are rarely explored, Islam was theologically opposed to the representation of living beings. While it is fairly well known by now that the Koran contains no prohibition of such representations, the undeniable denunciations of artists and of representations found in many traditions about the life of the Prophet are taken as genuine expressions of an original Muslim attitude. Scholarly and Muslim apologetic writing since the last decade of the nineteenth century has generally concentrated on this single question of the lawfulness of the representation of living beings. Among orientalists the problem began to appear in the wake of the discovery around 1890 of mural paintings at Qusayr Amrah, and scholars sought to explain what seemed to be an anomaly in the then prevalent impression of the nature of the faith and of the culture issued from it. Or else they sought to define more precisely the philosophical and theological causes and consequences of a presumed prohibition of images. Furthermore, the contemporaneity of the rise of Islam with Byzantine iconoclasm also led to a consideration of the political aspects of a presumed Muslim prohibition. More rarely, attempts have been made to provide secure dates and even specific localizations for the formation of permissive attitudes. Thus Iran was deemed to be more "liberal" than Semitic provinces, the second half of the eighth century more restrictive than the first half or than the twelfth century, and shii'ite heterodoxy more permissive than sunnite orthodoxy. Among Muslim scholars other reactions occurred, but all were centered on the same question. Some sought to justify the prohibition on various theological grounds, whereas others tended to minimize it as only one facet of a living Islam but by no means a canonically compulsory one nor even a predominant one.

Out of all these studies—the most important of which are listed in the bibliographical appendix for this chapter—a large number of extremely important texts have been brought to light, and many far reaching concepts and ideas have been developed. Significant and important though many of these studies may be, none of them

is entirely pertinent to the questions we are trying to answer: whether at the time of the formation of Islamic civilization there occurred some element of doctrine that directly or indirectly affected the arts, and whether these elements, if they existed, were of sufficient magnitude and originality to impose a unique direction to Islamic art. Can one sketch in the abstract an attitude of early Muslims both toward the artistic creation of the cultures they encountered and toward what they themselves expected of monuments made for them?

However interesting and intellectually important it may be for its own time or for the elaboration of artistic theories, a tenth- or twelfth-century text cannot by itself be used as evidence for an earlier time; yet little of the literary documentation we possess is earlier than the ninth century and by then many classical features of the new Muslim artistic tradition had already been created. Furthermore, as one looks over the numerous texts painstakingly assembled by scholars, two features occur consistently. One is that the texts are usually difficult to find; they are not obvious chapters or sections of the religious or philosophical literature of the medieval tradition. They appear rather as a sort of afterthought in order to elucidate a minor exegetic or legal point, as a diversion in discussions of weightier problems. Concern with a theory of the arts or even of representations was not central to Islam. This is not surprising, for, if one excepts the very precise and highly verbal iconoclastic controversy of Byzantium, the Christian Middle Ages rarely formalized its own view of the arts. Suger's account of his work at St.-Denis is particularly valuable because of its rarity, as is St. Bernard's celebrated speech against images in churches. But Thomas Aquinas did not raise problems of representation in his *Summa Theologica*, and much of what we know of Christian attitudes about the arts derives either from formal panegyrics like Procopius's description of Hagia Sophia or from incidental references. But if the Middle Ages in general tended to see its arts as an automatic corollary of any sort of cultural existence, are we in any way justified in talking about a specifically Islamic attitude to the arts? Should we not on the contrary deemphasize the import of a theological system, or concentrate exclusively on those aspects of the specific way of life it fostered which could in some fashion affect material and artistic creation? Should we not conclude that what

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did affect the arts was the existence of a social ethos—social being understood in a very wide sense here—rather than of religious or intellectual doctrines, not to speak of aesthetic ones?

The other characteristic of the majority of the texts concerning the arts is that they are usually triggered by a work of art or a representation. They almost never begin with the theoretical question of the relationship between a man-made image and a reality that inspired the image. The most common intellectual procedure of a medieval Islamic text can be summarized in the following manner: "Here is an image, how did it happen to be?" It is never: "How shall one go about making an image of this subject or representing visually this idea?" It is as though there always existed a world of images and representations which occasionally struck observers as somehow anomalous or wrong, as somehow clashing with the world view of the Muslim. Such a reaction is once again not unique to Islam. We have mentioned St. Bernard's invectives against the figural bestiary of the Romanesque world. Later on, militant Protestantism destroyed the sculptures of churches as did the French Revolution because of a series of religious, political, emotional, or social relationships between these images and some enemy. And in our own day we have witnessed more than once the systematic destruction of visual images, associated for instance with various aspects of the "cult of personality." All of these activities have acquired a more or less fully formulated theoretical justification, but almost always after the fact, not as an intellectual proposition. In most of these instances it seems as though a "natural" life of representations goes on until something in the culture, a precise historically definable event or a sublimated instinct of some sort, suddenly erupts and destroys images, only to have them come back after the storm is over.

These preliminary remarks and the questions they raise indicate that traditional Muslim culture did not possess a doctrine about the arts, neither formal thought-out rejections of certain kinds of creative activities nor positive notions about the possible instructional or beautifying values of the various existing techniques of art. At best one can assume that the doctrines and ways of life characteristic of early Islam may have directed the culture toward channeling its artistic activities in certain directions rather than in others. Attitudes existed, rather than doctrines and clear needs, and our pur-

pose in this chapter will be to determine what all or some of these may have been. The only obvious exception is that of the mosque which will be treated in detail in the following chapter.

Another point derives from these introductory remarks. It is not entirely an accident or a misplaced scholarly fixation that has led most writers to wonder about the kind and degree of prohibition that may have affected the representation of living things. For reasons yet to be elucidated, the attitudes pertinent to the visual world which developed in early Islamic times appear to have centered on this key issue of artistic creativity. By doing so, however, they escape in part a narrow historical or cultural framework and involve wider, anthropological issues about images and about their relationship to a nature and to a life they presumably copy or influence. For all these reasons we shall begin our investigation with an attempt to define the character of the early Islamic position on the arts by limiting the evidence to such documents as are clearly early and by avoiding the opinions of later theologians and lawyers; and we shall end it with some remarks on the wider implications of the Muslim concern with images and representations.

To sketch a sort of profile of early Islamic attitudes six documents can be utilized: the art of pre-Islamic Arabia, Koranic revelation, the traditions concerning the Prophet's life and thoughts, accounts of the conquest, early monuments, and coinage.

The living architecture of Central Arabia was not an impressive one. This is especially true of the religious sanctuaries, which were rarely more than roughly mapped out and poorly constructed holy places used for the simplest of ceremonies, most often processions. The Ka'bah (fig. 12), the holiest of them all, was but a parallelepiped without decoration or formally composed parts like doors or windows. Even more important is that there is no indication known to me in early Muslim writing or in pre-Islamic writing of an aesthetic reaction to the Ka'bah, of an interpretation of its holiness in terms of visual beauty. Matters were different in later mystical thought, but the emotional and pietistic idealization of the holiest place in Islam hardly appears in early times. The evidence is less clear for secular architecture. It is difficult to imagine that the wealthy merchants of Mekkah did not build for themselves fairly elaborate dwellings. But there is no evidence for it, and the developments of later centuries would tend to confirm the simplicity of

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the setting of aristocratic life in pre-Islamic Arabia. For instance, almost none of the visible features of Umayyad palace art—which will be discussed in a later chapter—seems to have been derived from pre-Islamic Arabia, and it is perhaps correct to conclude that architectural ostentatiousness was not and is not a typical feature of traditional Arabian society, contemporary Saudi Arabia or Kuwait notwithstanding.

Yet there existed a myth of a grandiose secular architecture. It was recorded in an early tenth-century text translated as *The Antiquities of South Arabia*, and its best-known example is the fabulous Ghumdan in Yemen. "Twenty stories high the palace stood, flirting with the stars and the clouds. If Paradise lies over the skies, Ghumdan borders on Paradise. Should it the face of the earth inhabit, Ghumdan would be nearby or close by it. If God heaven on earth doth place, Ghumdan would its confines embrace." It was decorated with alabaster, onyx, and sculptures of lions and eagles. On its top there was a dome. Several other palaces share with Ghumdan extraordinary size and abundant decoration. Princely constructions were also associated with northern Arabian dynasties, especially the Lakhmid dynasty on the desert confines of southern Iraq, whose Khawarnaq and Sadir were often mentioned in later literature as superb examples of royal luxury. I know of no reference in texts to similar buildings in Central Arabia.

It would be interesting some time to investigate archaeologically the Iraqi monuments of the Lakhmids whose location seems known. But, whatever later explorations may bring to light, the important point is the existence of an architectural palace mythology in pre-Islamic Arabia. This mythology developed primarily around constructions that, justifiably or not, were associated with rulers of Arab origin in the southern and northern edges of the peninsula and not with foreigners. Curiously, almost no memory seems to have grown around the best known and archaeologically well-documented Nabatean and Palmyrene architecture, whose monumental funerary forms seem to have passed almost unnoticed. Similarly, while the major monuments of Roman and Christian Syria were certainly known to Arab traders and caravans, there is little evidence that they had a major impact, at least not as artistic monuments.

For the other arts our information is also scanty, but it is perhaps

easier to imagine the nature and extent of their presence. From the paucity of originally Arabic terms referring to most artistic activities, it can be surmised that very little sculpture, painting, or manufacture of other than purely utilitarian objects took place in Arabia itself. The idols that had been assembled in Mekkah were most primitive, and the painting of a Virgin and Child found in the Ka'bah was probably the work of a non-Arab or of local folk art. What accounts of aesthetically significant paintings and sculptures do exist refer generally to works found outside of Arabia, mostly in the Christian worlds of Syria, Egypt, and occasionally Ethiopia. Most expensive objects came from elsewhere and the celebrated textiles and pillows with figures which were owned by A'isha, the prophet's youngest wife and about which much was written later on, were probably Syrian or Egyptian. The craftsmen of Arabia itself were generally non-Arab, mostly Jews, and the practice of crafts was not honored. When the Ka'bah was rebuilt in 605 it was done by a foreign carpenter with the help of a Coptic assistant.

In the light of much recent research which has shown the mercantile aristocracy of Mekkah and other Arabian oases to have been a wealthy and economically sophisticated class, and in the light of a rather impressive artistic achievement of Arab kingdoms in Hatra, Palmyra, Petra, and Yemen, there is something slightly incongruous in the minimal information we possess either about the arts of pre-Islamic Arabia or about what pre-Islamic Arabs knew of the arts. Some scholars, in particular Monneret de Villard, have sought to redress the picture by combing literary and archaeological sources about pre-Islamic Arabia. Others have given particular pre-eminence to the Arab kingdoms of Syria and Iraq as possible sponsors of an original pre-Islamic Arab art. But for a definition of attitudes rather than of specific facts, the key point is that, regardless of what pre-Islamic art may have been known to the Arabs, it was largely disregarded in later Muslim tradition. There are many reasons for this, not the least of which is the rather systematic attempt of later times to eradicate the *jahiliyyah* past, the time of Ignorance, or all the centuries which preceded the Revelation to Muhammad. Whatever the pagan Arabs may have had could only be of negative value; it was something to be rejected. But a curious problem then poses itself. One can indeed accept and understand that the literati of a given culture rejected whatever historical, reli-

gious, and even literary past the culture may have had. Our own times have taught us much about rewriting history and sadly enough even about the obliteration of people and events. But can the same process apply to the world of forms? Can one imagine an obliteration of a collective memory of forms when so many of them were the very things that surrounded and accompanied the life of the whole collectivity? Can we assume it when we know of the sizable opposition that existed to the Prophet's activities in the richest and most sophisticated milieu of pre-Islamic Arabia, the very milieu from which many of the leaders of early Islam came? Thus, while it is indeed true that the later Muslim tradition played down the existence of any art in the oases of Arabia, it may be in part because this art was too strongly associated with the hated upper classes of Mekkah. Two hypotheses are thus introduced into our considerations. One is that Muslims may have rejected artistic creativity in general or in some aspects because of its associations with certain social groups. The other hypothesis, a corollary of the first, is that a work of art has, at least in some circumstances, a social significance and that this particular aspect may on occasion be the predominant one.

The second document to be examined is the only incontrovertible early Islamic document we have, the Koran. It is a difficult source to use for our purposes, for we must try to separate those passages which were used for post facto justifications of certain theological and intellectual positions from those which appear to have been affected by actual contemporary needs. Some passages are of course significant both in their original context and in later times. In discussing the main ones, I shall try to separate one type from the other.

The first pertinent passage is 34.12-13 and deals with Solomon: "And of the jinn, some worked before him by the leave of his Lord; and such of them as swerved away from Our commandment, We would let them taste the chastisement of the Blaze; fashioning for him whatsoever he would, places of worship, statues, porringers like water-troughs, and anchored cookingpots." The exegesis is a particularly complicated one. Outside of its general significance in identifying Solomon as the prophet-king for whom extraordinary works of art are created—a theme of considerable importance in later Islamic art—we can make three observations about this pas-

sage. One is obviously that statues are mentioned among the things made for Solomon. The term used here, *timthal*, is a confusing one; it may possibly not have had the precise connotation of three-dimensional sculpture suggested by our own term "statue," but there is little doubt that some sort of likeness to living things was meant. The second point is that statues or whatever they are seem to be associated here with very prosaic, everyday objects like cauldrons and cooking pots. It is possible that some very specific Jewish legend explains this particular passage, but we also have here a first indication of a theme to be developed at some length later on: the provision of aesthetic quality to common daily items. The third and most significant point appears more fully if one recalls that the context of the passage is that of God providing "signs" to the apotropaic succession of prophets; it is interspersed with exhortations to the unbelievers, past, present, and future. The reference to statues or figures then does not identify them as man-made artistic creations but as divinely inspired symbols of the uniqueness of Solomon's position.

The same context can be given to a second Koranic passage, 3.43, which has been particularly often utilized by both opponents and proponents of images in Islam. It is found in the words pronounced by God to Mary: "God creates what He will. When He decrees a thing He does but say to it 'Be,' and it is. And He will teach Him [Jesus] the Book, the Wisdom, the Torah, the Gospel, to be a Messenger to the Children of Israel saying, 'I have come to you with a sign from your Lord. I will create for you out of clay as the likeness of a bird; then I will breathe into it, and it will be a bird, by the leave of God. I will also heal the blind and the leper, and bring to life the dead, by the leave of God.'" Even more than in the first passage, the emphasis here is on the facts that God alone creates the value to be given to a representation and that such representations belong to the "signs" God sends to man. Furthermore, as so many traditionalists have pointed out, the representation of a bird is significant only if life is provided for it; yet only God provides life. Some doubt may be expressed as to whether this particular meaning was already there at the time of the utterance of the Koranic passage. It had probably a much more metaphoric meaning, inasmuch as the term used for "likeness," *hiy'ah*, is a very abstract

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one meaning "shape" and rarely if ever used to refer to representations.

Finally, two closely related passages are pertinent to our purposes. The first one is 5.92: "O Believers, wine and arrowshuffling, idols and divining arrows are an abomination, some of Satan's work; so avoid it; haply so you will prosper." Then in 6.74 Abraham chides his father Azar for taking idols as divinities: "I see thee and thy people in manifest error." The words for idols in these two passages are respectively *al-ansab* and *al-asnam*, both of which imply representations, statues or paintings, used for worship. Here again the Koranic meaning is clearly that of opposing the adoration of physical idols, and not of rejecting art or representations as such. Yet these are the very passages which were later used to oppose images. Our problem is to explain why and when a search for Koranic justifications for such opposition took place, even if it meant an extension of the original meaning of the chosen passages.

Before doing so, however, there are still several remarks to be made about the Koran as a document for the arts. It must be obvious that, even if our list of passages is not complete, there are very few of them and their application to an understanding of the arts is incidental, minimal, and often after the fact. There is nothing similar to the concise strength of Exodus 20.4: "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven images or any likenesses of anything that is in heaven or that is in the earth beneath or that is in the water under the earth." Since the Koran deals otherwise quite concretely with many aspects of life, it may be proper to conclude simply that at the time of the Prophet the problem of artistic creativity and representations simply did not come up as a significant question requiring some sort of pronouncement or legislation. His only clearly documented action involving the arts consisted of the destruction of the idols in the Ka'bah, and the very fact that Muhammad is supposed to have left an image of a Virgin and Child suggests that representations as such did not constitute a threat to his vision of his faith.

Not only was the Koranic message of little significance to the contemporary or later artistic creativity of Islam, but the book itself was never used as a source for illustrations. This is not surprising, for, as has been pointed out, the Koran was something like a

mixture of the books of Psalms, Proverbs, Leviticus, and the Epistles. Although there is a considerable Christian illustration of psalters, it grew mostly out of the liturgical use of psalms, and their images are among the most problematic of the Old Testament. The Epistles, the Proverbs, and Leviticus are hardly illustrated at all. In other words, and regardless of its theological meanings, the Koran does not lend itself to translation into visual form because it does not have major narrative sequences and because its liturgical and other uses lacked the aesthetic complexities of the Christian use of the Gospels or of the Old Testament. The Koran was and still is recited in mosques at prayer time but its aesthetic appeal lies in the sound of its divinely inspired words. As to its immense significance as a legal document, it can hardly be expected to have received a visual transposition.

The life of the Prophet did acquire a legendary aspect fairly soon after his death and was occasionally illustrated from the thirteenth century onward. There is some doubt, however, that it became immediately a significant aspect of the faith—except in legal matters—and it certainly did not have a formal, sacred character. In a general way the lack of a liturgy in Islam prevented the development of the sort of sacramental, ceremonial, or holy setting which in other religious systems grew irrespective of the specific requirements of the church. And in a way one may wonder whether a holy book by itself does require illustrations. It is rather when a milieu—either a whole culture or one of its parts—demands some sort of visually perceptible version that holy books are used for images and the ingenuity of artists can rise above most textual difficulties, as the history of biblical illustrations well demonstrates. It is perhaps therefore more appropriate to conclude that although the Koran does not lend itself easily to illustrations or to visual interpretations, the reason that such interpretations did not take place lies less in the Koran than in other circumstances with which we shall deal later on.

Finally, it has often been noted that the central theological message of the Koran is that of the total uniqueness, the total power, of God. He alone is a "fashioner," a *musawwir* (59.24), the very term used for painter. As the only Creator, he cannot admit of competitors, hence the opposition to idols which by association and by extension could become an opposition to representations. But this last

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step was not consciously taken at the time of the faith's formation.*

Thus the model we are trying to construct of the early Muslim's attitude to the arts has acquired a second component. Next to a rather peculiar and largely mythical memory of ancient arts, and next to a partly critical awareness of contemporary arts mostly as useful objects, we have in the central book of the faith a coherent system which, if we understand correctly what it meant in its own time, was totally unaware of a visually perceptible aesthetic need. It asserted God as the single Creator and did not lend itself to obvious translation into visual form. Only incidentally can certain passages be construed otherwise.

The next two sets of documents we possess differ from the first ones both in kind and in the ways in which they can clarify our problem. They consist of the hadith, or body of Traditions describing the life of the Prophet which acquired a quasi-canonical character, and of a variety of early stories involving Arabs and the arts of conquered people. While some of them deal with the Prophet, his time, and his pronouncements, they were put together later and therefore they reflect in large part judgments, attitudes, and problems of a later time; and almost all of them originate from the conquered territories rather than from the homeland of Islam. Their value as indicators of widespread feelings, thoughts, and doctrines is difficult to determine. They are individual stories, accounts, or opinions, usually not part of any coherent system of interpretation, and they have usually been discovered by scholars more or less haphazardly in the course of readings. They do not form nor do they lend themselves to a modern scientific reconstruction like a summary of what the Arabs knew of the arts. The conclusions to be deduced from these documents are thus always slightly uncertain. Yet not only are they most frequently cited in literature, but they are also most important in that they reflect the views of the Muslim world after Islam had embarked on its conquest.

On the Traditions—as well as on legal literature analyzed so far only by one scholar, Rudi Paret—we can be brief, for they tend to

* It should be added here that in our own times—and to a smaller degree as early as in the twelfth century—artists or philosophers searched for and found in the Koran many passages which can be construed as justifications not only for representations but also for a glorification of the beauty of man and of man's intricate visual inventions. These passages have been particularly eloquently discussed by the Egyptian scholar and poet Bishr Farès but they are not pertinent to our present subject.

repeat the same point with only minor variations. A most typical and thorough text consists in the following succession of sayings attributed to the Prophet:

→ "The angels will not enter a house in which there is a picture or a dog." "Those who will be most severely punished on the Day of Judgment are the murderer of a Prophet, one who has been put to death by a Prophet, one who leads men astray without knowledge, and a maker of images or pictures." "A head will thrust itself out of the fire and will ask, Where are those who invented lies against God, or have been the enemies of God, or have made light of God? Then men will ask, Who are these three classes of persons? It will answer, The Sorcerer is he who has invented lies against God; the maker of images or pictures is the enemy of God; and he who acts in order to be seen of men, is he that has made light of God."

It is interesting that the main thrust of blame is directed toward the painter rather than the work of art. For it is the painter making representations who appears as a sort of competitor of God by creating something that has actual or potential life. And in any number of Traditions the painter is threatened with being compelled to breathe actual life into his creations. We cannot be certain when these types of statements were first invented or gathered in official legal texts, but the argument put forward by Creswell that they do not occur before the second half of the eighth century seems convincing enough within the existing documentation.

Whatever reasons led to the growth of this position, it clearly clashed with a considerable body of authentic information about the presence of beautiful objects with figures—mostly textiles and metalwork—in the Prophet's immediate surroundings. Explanations had to be provided, and thus grew a whole additional body of Traditions that sought to show there were variations in the ways in which images could be used. Permissible in hallways, floors, or baths, they were forbidden elsewhere; in some legal texts headless figures were allowed. We are not to concern ourselves in this work with the casuistic or intellectually valid intricacies introduced in legal and religious thought, nor can we discuss at this stage whether this type of concern affected in any way the forms of Islamic art. What matters is only that at some time around the middle of the

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eight century Islamic religious tradition in part or as a whole developed a hitherto unknown opposition to representations. One of the difficulties with this conclusion is that scholarly interest in ferreting out texts about images may have overlooked other possible aspects of the hadith and the arts. For instance are there in it references to the work of artisans and to objects and buildings? Are there judgments and opinions that may be understood in aesthetic terms? In the search for this kind of information lies an important, if perhaps tedious, scientific task.

It is much more difficult to draw some sort of coherent picture from our fourth type of evidence, historical accounts of early Islamic times that are likely to define something of an attitude toward the arts. Several separate and at times contradictory facets were present, and much additional work is needed before they appear completely or even clearly. In fact, if artistic problems are on one's mind, the reading of almost any early text yields results, but the problem lies in ordering these results into some sort of coherent system. For instance, while the great chronicles provide minimal but fairly secure information in terms of historical veracity, much more important and interesting documents occur in works of *adab* or belles-lettres or in poetry, but their specific validity, their "archaeological index," is not of the same magnitude. A poetical image with a reference to an object or to a monument may indicate something about contemporary taste but may also be a valueless literary cliché. Here again the collection and comparison of appropriate texts should be a major objective of scholarship and should replace the unfortunate tendency of many writers (including this one) to fish out a single text that appears to satisfy some otherwise developed theory or interpretation.

At the risk of continuing a debatable procedure, I shall limit myself to a consideration of only one aspect of the kind of information provided by these early texts: the reaction of early Muslims to an art we otherwise know, the art of the conquered people. I shall leave aside, for lack of sufficiently coherent documentation and because the problem will be considered in part in the next two chapters, such textual information as we do possess about the art made and used by the Muslims themselves. Because the Muslim reaction to the arts is better documented with respect to Christian art, my examples will be primarily concerned with this admittedly partial evi-

dence. In dealing later on with the evidence of the arts themselves, I shall try to make up for this imbalance, but it must be noted that a thorough culling of the sources describing the conquests of Iran and Central Asia should yield important parallel information.

The Muslim reaction to the art of the conquered Christian world was one of awe and admiration. The brilliance of church decoration was duly noted, and we have already quoted a text describing the powerful impact of the churches of Jerusalem and of Edessa as works of art. In part this brilliance was seen as the result of superior technique. It was probably during the first Muslim century that the notion grew up of a Rumi, Christian if not always specifically Byzantine, superiority in the arts. Awe and admiration can lead to imitation and, especially when accompanied by wealth, to systematic efforts at luring technicians to one's side. It has been clearly shown that the mosaicists who decorated the mosque of Damascus and perhaps even those who worked in Madinah were brought from Byzantium. This successful recruitment, which was probably only the result of the greater Muslim wealth, became legend. Thus in some later accounts the Byzantine emperor is portrayed as compelled by his Muslim suzerain to send mosaicists. The event also became a model, and in the tenth century the Umayyad caliph in Spain was still hiring mosaicists from Constantinople. It is probable if not certain that, in addition to the great mosques whose construction is comparatively well documented, the vast majority of early Islamic monuments, at least in Syria and Palestine, were built, made, and decorated by workers and artists either Christian or trained in the tradition of pre-Islamic Christianity. Their presence lasted probably much longer than the presence of financial and administrative officials. Although we are less precisely informed on what happened in Iraq and Iran, it is likely that the same continuity took place in workmanship.

But initial awe and admiration can also lead to rejection and contempt. The preceding chapter related that, as a treaty had been signed between Christians and Muslims providing for a year's time before a certain town was to change hands, a statue of the emperor Heraclius was set up at the frontier between Christian and Muslim territories. There is a sequel to the story. One day a Muslim rider, while practicing horsemanship, accidentally damaged the statue's eye. The Christians protested and the local Muslim governor agreed

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that the damage should be repaired. The Christians requested that the statue of the Muslim equivalent—the caliph Umar and not the local commander as he himself had suggested—be similarly defaced. So it was decided, the eye damaged, and then everyone agreed that justice had been done. The point of the story—probably an apocryphal one and, interestingly enough, of Christian origin—is that the Muslim commander, who agreed that a wrong had been committed on a sort of symbolic level, agreed to have the eye of his caliph put out because he did not believe as deeply as his Christian counterpart in the deep significance of an image. To him it was merely a gesture and the account, biased though it may be in favor of the Christian position, portrays his attempt at substituting a representation of himself for that of Heraclius as an expression of amused contempt for use of images he did not understand.

Other examples exist of contempt for what was imagined to be a pagan worship of images and an opiumlike use of ceremonies by the Christian church or by the Byzantine emperor. At times contempt could become destructive, as in a number of stories (admittedly found mostly in Christian sources) relating either wholesale desecration of images in churches or persecutions of Christians. The best known event of this kind was the edict of Yazid in 721, according to which all religious images were to be destroyed. Although the edict is known almost exclusively through Christian sources, it has been accepted as a reality, probably justifiably so, inasmuch as the figural elements of a number of earlier mosaics in the Christian churches of Palestine were replaced by vegetal ones or entirely removed. The question is whether the edict was an ideologically iconoclastic one and thus whether it expresses as early as 721 a militant opposition to religious or other images. A consideration not only of the many texts about this but also of the precise historical setting of the time suggests that the edict was not so much a manifestation of Islamic iconoclasm as an attempt to persecute Christians, especially the orthodox Christians attached to Constantinople. The more important point is that to a Muslim of the early eighth century images were one of the most characteristic and in part hateful aspects of Christianity. *

It was probably during the very same time that a minor incident in the later life of the Prophet—his sending of an emissary to Byzantine-held territories—was transformed into a highly organized

and highly official mission for the conversion of foreign kings and rulers. The main target was the Byzantine emperor who spurned the invitation to conversion, though accounts vary as to the reasons or genuineness of his refusal. It is interesting to note that in at least one account, the emperor who was ready to accept Islam was dissuaded by the clergy and patricians of his entourage. Although these stories are only remotely concerned with images and art, they do establish one aspect of the psychological setting of the relationship between a budding Islam and an established Christianity, a setting that includes an invitation from the new faith contemptuously spurned by the older empire. It is an attitude of self-conscious superiority mixed with a formal rejection by the world one is trying to woo. It would not even be useful for us were it not for the fact that the seventh and early eighth centuries are the very ones during which images and their meaning became one of the cultural hallmarks of the eastern Christian world. But there is more. It was a world that used its images and its dexterity with images in order to define its religious and political positions, and to persuade and to convert. One of the highlights of a visit to Constantinople was a religious service at Hagia Sophia; the Muslim sources relate how Muslim prisoners withstood the impact of the church's glitter and refused to be converted, whereas Christian sources describe how Muslims accepted Christianity under the same circumstances. In any event images became not merely a characteristic of the Christian world, but one of the most important and dangerous weapons it possessed.

For all these reasons one can describe the Muslim attitude toward the arts of the Christian world as a confused one, in which awe and admiration, contempt and jealousy, were uneasily mixed together. Particular emphasis has been given to this side of the picture provided by early stories because it will be an important one in the general interpretation to be proposed; but it must be repeated that there are many other aspects of the Muslim reaction to the arts that can be detected even from an unsystematic survey of the written evidence. One is the sudden discovery and accumulation of immense treasures of expensive objects by the Arab armies and especially by their leaders. From the frontiers of inner Asia to Spain, Muslim conquerors gathered textiles, gold and silver, ivories, and the like. Some of these were melted but others accumulated in the

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Near Eastern centers of the empire. Muslim armies also saw many new holy places and palaces; they were received at times with high honors or bribed by local rulers. As a result, not only did luxury objects appear to people who had not seen them before, but there also occurred among the Muslims a new awareness of a life of luxury at a level hitherto unknown to the Arabs. Obviously this life was not shared by all; in fact it created a cleavage in the community between those who enjoyed it and those who saw in it a threat to the purity of the faith. Thus, in yet another sense, one can postulate the formation of what may be called a resentment of the beautiful and expensive, which may tie up with a populist reaction to the arts and to images already suggested in Arabia itself.

All the documents examined so far derive from literary sources and from assumptions about the historical setting of the first Muslim century. Before trying to put it all together it is necessary to turn to the arts themselves and to one particularly telling document, coinage. At this stage it is not so much the stylistic, iconographic, or aesthetic characteristics of early Islamic art that are of significance, but rather whether, seen altogether, they provide some further dimension to the question of a Muslim attitude toward the arts.

If one surveys the many works of early Islamic art, the overwhelming impression is that of the absence of representations of living things. This conclusion may seem surprising in the light of the great discoveries at Qusayr Amrah, Khirbat al-Mafjar, Qasr al-Hayr West, and Samarra, which have raised so many questions about the nature of Islamic art and about which we will have much to say later on. Yet, however much we tend to give particular importance to zoomorphic or anthropomorphic themes, because it is from such themes that our own conception of the arts has tended to derive, these monuments are exceptional rather than the norm. Furthermore, all are private monuments for restricted usage and enjoyment; they are not official or formal art. They are essential for an understanding of the culture as a whole, but they form only one aspect of the ways in which it expressed itself in a visually perceptible manner.

By examining a group of specific monuments it is possible to refine the significance of this general impression. The primary impression of the Mshatta facade is that of a highly thought-out com-

position of vegetal and geometric themes, yet animals are present in fairly large numbers (figs. 121, 122). The large early Islamic ceramic series from northeastern Iran (figs. 107ff.) contains mostly nonrepresentational themes, but occasionally a bird or an animal does occur and a small but celebrated group even has human beings. Similarly, while it is far-fetched to see human and animal elements in the Samarra stuccoes (fig. 125), there were animal friezes in the decoration of the Abbasid capital's houses, and the carved woods from Egypt contain a certain number of animal themes. It would thus be probably more correct to say that there occurred a balance of thematic units in early Islamic art that did not give a primary or even major place to representations of men and animals. The observer's impression of a lack of such representations is conditioned by the fact that comparable monuments of late antiquity, Byzantium, India, or the later Christian West had a different balance of themes in which representational elements are predominant. The question is whether this different balance is willful and meaningful, or accidental. An answer is suggested by the mosaics of the Great Mosque in Damascus (figs. 13, 14).

Over the past decade several scholars have shown that the large, partially preserved architectural compositions in the mosaics that decorate this early masterpiece of Islamic art symbolize a paradisiac vision of a peaceful Muslim world. Regardless then of their ornamental value, the mosaics can be legitimately provided with an iconographic meaning just as the decoration of comparable monuments elsewhere, churches for instance, has an iconographic sense. A further curious feature about these mosaics has often been noted. Their main subject matter of buildings is one which in the classical and Byzantine tradition whence it derived usually formed a background—at times meaningful, at other times ornamental—to some other topic. Here the latter is absent; instead, a series of large naturalistic trees is rhythmically set in the forefront. Since it appears unlikely that these trees were the main subject matter of the mosaics, they become the formal equivalents of personages who form the main subject matter in the models used by the Damascus mosaicists, as for instance in the fifth-century mosaics of the church of St. George in Saloniki. A fascinating example of the transfer of formal relationships between the parts of an image occurred here. The desire for a concrete meaning—paradisiac architecture—in an

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understandable iconographic language—the vocabulary of the classical tradition—led to the mutation of a background motif into the main subject and the transformation of the foreground motif—in the tradition the main subject—into a secondary theme.

In one of the most official buildings of early Islam, therefore, a decoration was created that was meant to have symbolic meaning. We have seen that a symbolic meaning can be given to some of the themes of the Dome of the Rock mosaics as well. In neither the Dome of the Rock nor the mosque of Damascus are there any representations of men or animals. But on the Mshatta façade with its vegetal themes interspersed occasionally with animal ones, no animal motif occurs on the right side of the entrance. The side without animals corresponds to the qiblah wall of the mosque, the wall that faced Mekkah.

The avoidance of figural representations in early Islamic art was thus systematic and deliberate whenever a religious building was concerned, and it led to unusual choices and modifications in the type of imagery borrowed and utilized by Muslim patrons. This avoidance did not, however, mean a similar avoidance of symbolic meaning attached to those forms that were in fact used. Rather, symbolic significance was given to new forms or to forms in older artistic languages for which such a symbolism had not been known. The conclusion that emerges, then, is twofold: there was indeed a consciousness in the ways that early Islamic art reached its avoidance of representations, and this consciousness was less the result of some a priori doctrine than of a response to the formal vocabulary available to the Muslims.

These conclusions can be followed up in the last document to be discussed, coinage. The story of early Islamic coinage has been told many times. Nothing is known about it before the conquest of the Fertile Crescent. The local coins, Byzantine ones in formerly Byzantine territories (fig. 17), Sassanian ones in the East (fig. 16), were continued with an Arabic inscription indicating a variety of possible things—a date, the name of a caliph or governor, the profession of faith, a mint. A number of modifications were then introduced, which on the whole appear more clearly in imitations of Byzantine than of Sassanian coins. Some of these consist simply of removing from the prototype some obvious Christian symbol like the cross and replacing it with a knob on a stand set over three steps (fig. 17).

Other modifications are more curious. Thus, a type of coin appears known as the Standing Caliph type (fig. 18). On the reverse of this coin the typical Byzantine group portrait is replaced by a standing personage with a *kufiyah* or Arab headgear instead of a crown, a large robe instead of the *loros*, and a very peculiar and hitherto unexplained cord on the right side (fig. 18). The personage is holding a sword. All these features can be interpreted as attempts at an Islamic imperial iconography using identifying visual signs from Arab life and mores.

This search for an identifying original imagery is further illustrated by an extraordinary coin known through only three examples. It shows on one side a royal representation derived from Sassanian prototypes but with clear modifications in clothes, especially in the headgear. The other side shows a niche around a standing lance (fig. 15). George Miles has suggested that it is the image of a mihrab, the niche in a mosque symbolizing the Prophet's place (which will be discussed in detail in the next chapter), and of the *'anazah*, the lance that was one of the formal symbols of Prophetic and caliphal power. There is little doubt about the correctness of the interpretation given to the lance. It is perhaps less certain that the niche represents an actual mihrab, for, as we shall see, the latter did not appear in architecture until ten years later. It could have been simply a motif of honor without concrete Muslim significance. But this point is not of great importance in the present context.

The third example of the iconographic search is an oddity. A group of Sassanian-derived silver coins has on the reverse a standing figure with outstretched arms, like a Mediterranean *orans* (fig. 19). There is no explanation for this type, which could be considered either as an iconographic confusion or as another attempt at expressing visually some aspect of the new culture. Several other peculiar types exist, especially in the eastern part of the empire, but they still await proper investigation.

These experimental issues came to an end in 696–97 for gold and in 698–99 for silver. At this time Abd al-Malik's reform, so often recounted in medieval chronicles, broke away from types imitating Byzantine and Sassanian themes and replaced them with a purely aniconic, Islamic type (fig. 20) which proclaimed that "There is no God but God, One, Without Associate." The Koranic quotation (9.33) announces that "Muhammad is the Apostle of God whom

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He sent with guidance and the religion of truth (that he may make it victorious over every other religion)." In addition to these standard formulas early coinage contains a number of variants, but all of them emphasize the unique and uncreated quality of God. Except for a number of provincial issues and for occasional peculiar types, Abd al-Malik's purely epigraphic coinage remained the standard Islamic coinage for centuries.

The utilization of coinage, especially gold and silver, by the art historian is both an advantage and a danger. One important advantage of numismatic evidence is that it reflects a highly conscious and official use of visual forms and symbols. Therefore the datable succession of iconographic formulas—minor adaptations of earlier formulas, attempts at an original iconography utilizing representational and other symbols, replacement of such formulas with purely epigraphic ones—can be accepted as a succession of conscious choices by the highest level of the culture and of the empire. At a chronologically clear moment, which corresponds to the time of the Dome of the Rock, the very official art of coinage replaced representational formulas with writing and this change was for practical purposes irreversible. It obviously was the result of a need or of an attitude that can at least be dated, if not yet explained. Furthermore, one can usually assume that numismatic themes received wide currency and, unless otherwise indicated, implicate the culture as a whole. The same index of value cannot so easily be given to a palace or even to a religious building.

But the very fact that gold and silver coins are highly official documents suggests their limitation as such. They reflect only the preoccupations of the center of a culture; they are not necessarily indicative of the total creativity, even at the level of formal symbols, of a given moment. Thus, for instance, the very same Abd al-Malik had a seal made that shows affronted lions and birds and a traditional Byzantine *alpha* together with the profession of faith (fig. 21). The object is a unique one; it may be earlier than the reformed coins, and its possibly more private nature limits its potential significance. Yet it illustrates the crucial points of the multiplicity of themes and their levels of utilization which existed at any one time. This multiplicity is probably true of any one moment in the history of forms, but in our instance of early Islamic times, as in most other times, it appears to possess a quality that made it unique. It is that

the official art of the empire tended to avoid representations of living things, while apparently the culture as a whole seemed indifferent to the problem.

Let us now sum up the historical evidence we have brought out about the Muslim attitude toward the arts and try to suggest an explanation for it. Seen historically, that is in some sort of chronological development, the following scheme can be proposed, without taking into consideration for the moment the limitations attached to the different kinds of information we have. The Arabian cradle of Islam was only dimly aware of the possibilities of man-made visually perceptible symbols; it was not creative itself but "consumed" objects of varying quality from elsewhere and knew that other cultures, including neighboring ones, did erect fancy buildings, paint pictures, fashion sculptures, and at times even gave a certain sacredness to these creations. But these meanings given to forms were either primitive or limited, and more general aesthetic impulses other than those of owning a "pretty" thing were absent. They remained absent from the Koran and from the Prophet's message, with its emphasis on a unique God forcefully distinct from the Christian divine view and on a certain way of life for the Community of the Faithful. During the first century after the conquest the Muslims were brought into immediate contact with the fantastic artistic wealth of the Mediterranean and Iran. They were strongly affected by a world in which images, buildings, and objects were active expressions of social standing, religion, political allegiance, and intellectual or theological positions. As many recent studies have shown, the Christian world was at that time immensely proud of both its sophistication in the use of the visual and its technical mastery of the beautiful. Matters are less clear for Iran, but, in view of the wealth of religious imagery and luxury objects identified in Central Asia, the same or at least a similar development may be suggested east of Byzantium. That the Muslims were impressed by the artistic complexity of the conquered world goes without saying. To use the term introduced recently by Gustav von Grunebaum, they were clearly "tempted" and we can document the accumulation of wealth together with new habits of luxurious living and the search for visual symbols of their own including representations of personages and things. But then the search stopped,

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or rather in the official art of mosques and coins a substitution occurred from older themes with a constant use of living things into writing or into conscious modifications of the models used. These substitutions still had iconographic content, but they lacked one element which tended to be *de rigueur* in earlier or contemporary traditions, that is, representations of living things. Even though notable exceptions exist, this avoidance of or reluctance toward representations spread beyond the realm of official art into private art. By the end of the eighth century Muslim thinkers were asking themselves why they made this shift, and they answered by going back to incidental passages of the Koran and by reinterpreting the life of the Prophet.

Why, historically speaking, did this change from indifference to opposition take place? It has generally been assumed—quite correctly, it seems to me—that the doctrine (or at least the elements thereof) of opposition to representations followed rather than preceded the actual partial abandonment of such representations. It is therefore not through the impact of a specifically Muslim thought that we may provide an explanation. Some have argued for a sort of basic Semitic opposition to images which would have come to the fore with the formation of the Arab empire. Beside being rather unfortunately ethnically focused, this explanation is weakened by the existence of an art sponsored by Semitic entities since Akkadian times. Others have argued for the immediate impact of Judaism, and it is true that converted Jews played a very important part in the formation of many aspects of early Islamic thought. Furthermore, a number of events with iconoclastic overtones, such as the edict of Yazid, were said to have been inspired by Jews. It is indeed very likely that Judaic thought and arguments played an important part in the formation of a doctrine against images, but it seems improbable to me that they would have triggered it, mainly because the doctrine or even most statements about the arts always occur first as a reflection to the presence of a work of art, not as an intellectual position. Then, in the one instance—coins—where images were formally abandoned, and where the process can be followed quite accurately, there is no evidence for a Jewish influence nor is one likely.

It is simpler to argue that the formation of a Muslim attitude toward the arts was the result neither of a doctrine nor of a precise

intellectual or religious influence. It was rather the result of the impact on the Arabs of the prevalent arts. Or, to put it another way, Islam burst onto the stage at the moment when, more than at any time before or after, images became more closely related to their prototypes rather than to their beholder, when religious and political factions fought with each other through images, when Christology of the most complex kind penetrated into the public symbols of coins. In this particular world, the new Islam could choose to compete and it did try, in some coins, to develop a symbolic system of its own. The difficulty was, however, not only that the Christian world in particular had acquired a tremendous sophistication in the use of forms, but also that in order to be meaningful an identifying symbolic system of visual forms has to be known and accepted by all those for whom it is destined. If it used, even with modifications, the terms of the older and more developed culture, Islam would lose its unique quality. On the other hand, the visual weakness of its Arabian past did not provide Arab Islam with visual forms that could be understood by others or with the technical sophistication needed to manipulate existing forms. The reform of Abd al-Malik crystallized and formalized an attitude that had developed in the Muslim community, according to which the prevailing specific use of representations tended to idolatry and no understandable visual system other than that of writing and of inanimate objects could avoid being confused with the alien world of Christians and by later extension of Buddhists or of pagans. It was therefore essentially the ideological and political circumstances of the late seventh-century Christian world that led Islam to this particular point of view. For it is in a complex relationship to the Byzantine empire that early Islam tried to define itself. This point appears clearly in many of the accounts that describe Abd al-Malik's coinage or the bringing of workers from Constantinople to make the mosaics in Damascus. Most of them describe the two events as respectively a challenge to the Byzantine emperor and his subjection to the caliph. Actual historical truth here is less important than the mood which is suggested.

To conclude then we might say that, under the impact of the Christian world of the time, Islam sought official visual symbols of itself but could not develop representational ones because of the particular nature of images in the contemporary world. Precise

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historical circumstances, not ideology or some sort of mystical ethnic character, led to the Muslim attitude. Two corollaries and a question derive from this conclusion. One corollary is that we can define a Muslim attitude toward the arts only in the one limited area of the representation of living things. There was no definable attitude toward other aspects of the arts. With respect to these one can simply assume the maintenance and taking over by Islam of prevalent attitudes in the conquered world, a point which will be discussed at greater length later on. The other corollary is that an attitude which defines the culture appears when the identity of the culture is affected, that is when it fears that the prevalent attitude is dangerous for the culture's unity and cohesion. We shall see in our last chapter how this can explain a number of other features of early Islamic art. As to the question, it is this. If the Islamic reluctance to images was the result of specific historical circumstances, why did it remain after the removal of the circumstances, during the Iconoclastic crisis in the Christian world and after the Islamic empire had become fully established?

For an answer, we must turn to the other, philosophical or anthropological, aspect of our problem. The attitude of early Islam is more than simply the result of concrete historical circumstances; it is a typologically definable attitude that sees and understands any representation as somehow identical with that which it represents. This attitude has been a constant in the history of the arts, at times in the forefront, as in much of ancient Egyptian art, at other times muted under the impact of some other aesthetic or social impulse, as in classical Greek art. But it was always present and reappears at various moments, in the Middle Ages or even today. The peculiarity of the Muslim attitude is that it immediately interpreted this potential magical power of images as a deception, as an evil. This iconophobia has several further aspects. In itself it was not a rejection of symbols as such, for, as we have seen, there is a symbolic content to the Damascus mosaics or to the use of writing on coins. But the later history of the Damascus mosaics is instructive in that they, like the slightly earlier Dome of the Rock mosaics, lost their symbolic meaning very rapidly, at least as far as the mainstream of the culture is concerned. Only through incidental remarks is one able to reconstruct their original meanings, and even then some doubts and uncertainty surround these interpretations. As we shall see

later, matters are different when we turn to writing, which remained as the main vehicle for symbolic signification in early Islamic art. The point at this stage is merely that the rejection of a certain kind of imagery because of its deceptive threat seems to have carried with it considerable uncertainty about the value of visual symbols altogether.

A curious theoretical problem is posed here. One may indeed conclude that some uncertainty exists as to whether the forms of any image can acquire a concrete symbolic meaning unless they use concretely definable imitations of nature. If abstract and nonfigurative signs can indeed acquire symbolic meanings, how can we learn to read them? By what method of investigating visual forms can we discover if they had a sense in their time? But there is more here than a suggestion of modern, epistemological despair. One may in fact wonder whether a purely abstract system of visual symbols can ever be learned even within the culture itself, for, following here Jacques Berque, we may suggest that a nonfigurative art, even if the nonfigurative aspect is not total, contains ipso facto an arbitrary element that somehow escapes the normal rules of communicating a visual message. The historian may be puzzled by the notion of an absurdity in artistic creation, absurdity at least in the sense that, to paraphrase Berque, it refers to richer and much deeper levels than those of quasi-verbal communication. Yet is it not so, that precision of meaning or of signification is automatically missing as a result of a rejection of the representation of otherwise known features? To answer these questions, theoretical and experimental investigations of a completely different order from the ones we are pursuing here are needed, mostly psychological ones about the manner in which man perceives and understands forms. It may be just as well to leave them as questions, noting simply that our problem of the formation of an artistic tradition leads to yet another series of theoretical puzzles than the ones we have raised at the beginning.

Another point, also with interesting theoretical implications, can be derived from our investigations. We may recall that it is at a popular and folk level that visual symbols are most consistently magical in significance, even if these meanings are used and organized at higher levels. On the other hand, most of the images seen by Islam as models had been sponsored by princes or by the clergy,

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even when their interpretation was a popular one. This sponsorship gave to the images a connotation of luxury; they were nonessential substitutes for life. Now, as several writers have shown, one of the peculiarities of early Islamic attitudes was what Marshall Hodgson called "moralism," that is, a way of interpreting any experience or need through a small and strict code of behavior and understanding. This code was largely a social one in the Muslim world and theoretically involved the whole social group, the whole *ummah*, or Muslim community of the faithful, and there was no clergy or liturgy to give it a complex mystical form in early times. In their public life at least, the princes tended (with notable exceptions duly and critically noted by chroniclers), during the formative decades of early Islam to appear as nothing but leaders of equals. The code thus lacked both canonically organized intermediaries and the need for such intermediaries, for it was the result of a small and cohesive social entity. Inasmuch as most artistic creation at that time was seen as a substitute for reality and thus an intermediary between man and that reality, it appeared as evil in a much wider sense than the technically precise one of confrontation between God, the *musawwir* par excellence, and the maker of images, the *musawwir* in stone or in paint. It was evil because it interfered between man and the morally good life, because it was a gratuitous temptation.

To some extent this social code was an abstraction, a body of beliefs and attitudes that did not always find legal and practical expression, inasmuch as there was no ecclesiastical unifying force among the Muslims and the organized system of jurisprudence was only in its infancy, even around 800. Yet by then many very different non-Islamic or very recently converted groups had become part of the Muslim community itself. The original social code was subjected to a variety of tensions, two of which are of particular importance.

At one extreme were a number of folk cultures that continued to see images as magic and that were deeply rooted in every part of the Muslim world. These cultures maintained, however remotely and insecurely, an attachment to the pre-Islamic past of the Near East. At the other extreme there came to be an aristocratic culture—the caliphs, their families, high officials—that saw images as luxury and that consciously borrowed forms from earlier Near Eastern traditions, mostly royal ones. Between these two extremes the dom-

inant Muslim code appeared at its best in the early cities of Iraq or in Fustat, which were entirely new creations, rather than in the largely alien cities of Syria or western Iran, although matters were probably far more complicated in detail. This Islamic middle rejected both extremes, the popular world as pagan and the aristocratic one as alien and hypocritical. This rejection may have been supported by the social side of the poverty of aesthetic thought in early Arabian Islam discussed earlier in the chapter. But it is most important to note that it was this literate middle which provided us with most of the texts by which early Islamic culture is defined and which institutionalized into legal terms the moralistic attitude of the early ummah. We shall see later that a precise material culture can be attributed to it as well.

In the meantime one can put forward the concluding hypothesis that there grew in early Islamic times a new social entity whose ethos rejected the complex uses of representations in conquered areas and thereby revived the iconophobia latent in any culture. It became the dominant tastemaker in a system that included much more than itself. But it also went a step further, for, in legalizing its rejection, it also gave it a moral quality. The following passage from the tenth-century moralist and historian Ibn Miskawayh may serve as a concrete illustration of this point. In listing and discussing various vices, he mentions "the seeking of that which is precious and which is a source of dispute for all. . . . When a king for instance owns in his treasury an object of rare quality or a precious stone, he thereby exposes himself to being afflicted by its loss. For such objects are unfailingly destined to be damaged when we consider the nature of the generated world and the corruption which wills that all things be altered and transformed and that all that is treasured or acquired become corrupted. . . . Unable to replace [a lost object of quality] with an exact equivalent, the king becomes a prisoner of necessity." These excerpts go beyond a rejection of representations. They suggest that all aesthetic creativity that is tied to the material world is a vanity and an evil. In this manner Islamic attitudes, conditioned by precise historical circumstances, reach a rejection of art altogether, as almost every puritanical reaction has done.

It is beyond my task to do more than suggest that the full originality of the early Islamic attitude to the arts can best be understood

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if its reluctance to images and its various attempts at visual symbolism through other means are related to the theoretical problem of the relationships between art and civilization with many intellectual and social connotations. The questions raised in this fashion, however, no longer pertain to Islamic art alone but invoke wider problems of the formal and social natures of visual perception under a variety of circumstances. In the meantime, whatever the attitudes may have been, they did not prevent the creation of monuments, whose survey takes up the next two chapters. The deeper question that remains is whether, in the light of the evidence and hypotheses presented in this chapter, it is entirely appropriate to think of these monuments as works of art.