Picasso the Muslim

Or, How the Bilderverbot *became modern (Part 2)*

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> Throughout the course of history, there are many periods when men think the same forms at the same time. Influence is then but the medium of affinity; it may, indeed, be said that at such times influence in no way functions beyond affinity.
>
> —Henri Focillon[1]

Abstraction, agency, and the allochronic

In much eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European writing, the perceived abstract values of Islamic and Jewish art were linked to a culturally or racially inflected incapacity for mimesis reified in nineteenth-century Orientalist discourse as a *Bilderverbot* (prohibition of images) and emblematized by the stylized convolutions of the arabesque. Within hierarchical cultural comparisons, abstraction often named a lack, an inability to produce art marked by naturalism or verisimilitude. The rise of abstraction in Euro-American art turned this scenario on its head, leading to a revaluation of the perceived antimimetic qualities of both Islamic and Jewish art, and even attempts to locate the origins of modern avant-garde aesthetics in the proscriptions of the *Bilderverbot*.

In the first part of this article (published in *RES* 67/68 [2016/17]), I attempted to trace the way in which the valorization of abstraction as an aesthetic mode in European avant-garde art of the early twentieth-century was related, both discursively and historically, to the reception and representation of Islamic art. Among the most remarkable examples of this historiographic phenomenon is an essay penned in 1932 by the French Orientalist Eustache de Lorey. De Lorey had overseen the rediscovery of spectacular eighth-century wall mosaics in the Friday Mosque of Damascus (715 CE) in 1928–29, when he was director of the French Institute in Damascus, while also overseeing a newly founded School of Modern Arab Arts.[2] The discovery of the mosaics created an international sensation; after their publication, they featured in evaluations of European avant-garde art and its affinities or resonances with the arts of late antiquity.[3] In his essay, de Lorey considered the affinities between the abstract qualities of medieval Islamic art and the oeuvre of Picasso. Remarkably, he sought to locate the origins of Cubist abstraction in the proscriptions relating to figurative imagery in the hadith, the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad (d. 632 CE), citing a tradition attributed to the Prophet's cousin, Ibn ʻAbbas, which expressed disapproval of figurative art.[4] These proscriptive traditions, he implied, were transmitted through Picasso's Andalusian blood, so that a purported Islamic *Bilderverbot* canonized in late antiquity inspired one of the most radical aesthetic developments of modernism.

The idea that abstract qualities of Picasso's work were somehow related to a distant Arab or Jewish heritage was not new. In 1925, for example, the art dealer Adolphe Basler had written: "Isn't Picasso, this inheritor of the abstract Arab ornament-makers, or the cabalist Jews of Spain, the only one who has created an art that proceeds from speculations of an entirely Talmudic nature?"[5] Harnessing a narrative of racial origins to a proscriptive cultural legacy from Islam, the literalism of de Lorey's theory took the notion of a "Semitic" inheritance much further. Not surprisingly, perhaps, there were few takers for de Lorey's genetic theory regarding the Islamic

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I am grateful to Émilie Goudal, Rémi Labrusse, Anneka Lenssen, Khaled Malas, and Ilhan Ozan for drawing my attention to some of the materials used in this essay, and for various generous and helpful conversations related to its subject.

1. H. Focillon, *The Life of Forms in Art* (1934; New York, 1948), 58.

2. For de Lorey's biography and the circumstances in which the mosaics were discovered, see L. Simonis, *Les relevés des mosaïques de la grande mosquée de Damas* (Paris, 2012). See also A. Lenssen, "Adham Ismaʻil's Arabesque: The Making of Radical Arab Painting in Syria," *Muqarnas* 34 (2017): 243.

3. See, e.g., an essay by Georges Duthuit, the son-in-law of Matisse: "Matisse and Byzantine Space," *Transition Forty-nine* 5 (1949): 20–37, following at p. 40. I am grateful to Rémi Labrusse for this reference.

4. E. de Lorey, "Picasso et l'Orient Musulman," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 8 (1932): 299–314.

5. Cited in C. F. B. Miller, "Interwar Picasso Criticism," in *Picasso Harlequin 1917–1937*, ed. Y.-A. Bois (Milan, 2009), 42. See also Gershom Scholem's comments on Picasso's work, discussed in part 1 of this article: Finbarr Barry Flood, "Picasso the Muslim: Or, How the *Bilderverbot* Became Modern (Part 1)," *Res* 67/68 (2016–17): 60; hereafter cited in footnotes as "Part 1."

roots of modernist abstraction. Nevertheless, the essay had a significant impact and was frequently cited, especially by artists and theorists working in the Arab world, as we will see below.

By the mid-twentieth century, the idea of a resonance between the abstract qualities of premodern Islamic and avant-garde modernist art had been adopted by some pioneering scholars of Islamic art and culture. The relevant texts often begin by noting the existence of "Islamic" aniconism and iconoclasm, proceed to assert their causal relation to the development of the arabesque as an index of antimimetic tendencies, and end by discussing the work of Picasso.[6] Yet, there is often significant equivocation about the nature of relation between these various phenomena, with suggestions oscillating between affinity, analogy, genealogy, and serendipity. In an important and influential essay on ornament published in Cairo in 1952, for example, the Iraqi scholar Bishr Farès juxtaposed a figurative scene on an early thirteenth-century Iranian jug with Picasso's *Femme-Fleur* of 1947 in order to illustrate "the Islamic inspiration, fortuitous or actual" in contemporary European art, especially "the affinity of picassisme with Arab-Muslim conceptual art" (fig. 1).[7] On the one hand, Islamic art is presented here as an inspiration for modernist abstraction through its impact on the work of artists such as Paul Klee or Henri Matisse. On the other, the formal analogies between Islamic and modernist art appear as the serendipitous products of parallel approaches marked by a rejection of naturalism. In the first reading, the relationship is one of causality, in the other, a pseudomorphosis that may or may not be underwritten by similar conceptual structures.[8] This ambiguity continued to characterize many later approaches, which juxtaposed selected works from

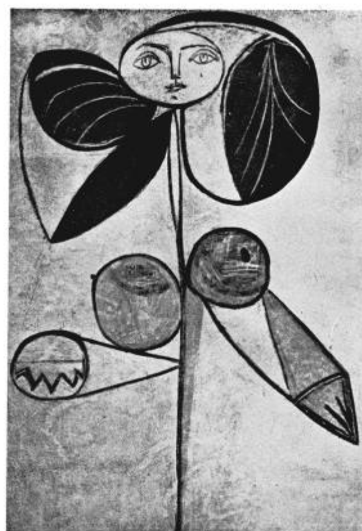


Figure 1. Bishr Farès, *Essai sur l'esprit de la decoration islamique* (Cairo, 1952), plate 5.

Picasso's oeuvre with examples of pre- and early modern painting from the Islamic world.[9]

As the century wore on, many of the works produced by modern artists who had looked to the arts of the Islamic world for inspiration were, in turn, displayed alongside examples of Islamic art, united under the rubric of abstraction in the space of the gallery. In addition, the sort of pseudomorphic comparisons or juxtapositions employed by Bishr Farès in his 1952 essay were institutionalized as museological practice. Abstraction (however conceived) has in fact served consistently in twentieth-century museological practice

6. See the various sources cited in part 1 of this essay and J. Berque, "A propos de l'art Musulman: Remarques sur le non-figuratif," in *Normes et valeurs dans l'Islam contemporain*, ed. J.-P. Charnay (Paris, 1966), 101–13; V. Beyer, "Art moderne et art Islamique," in *Occident-Orient: L'art moderne et l'art Islamique* (Strasbourg, 1972), 21, where de Lorey's 1932 article is cited, but misattributed.

7. B. Farès, *Essai sur l'esprit de la decoration islamique* (Cairo, 1952), 29. See also Flood, "Part 1," 43–44 and fig. 4. Thanks to the Iraqi artist Jamil Hamoudi (d. 2003), then resident in Paris, a precis of this essay appeared in the weekly Parisian journal *Arts: Beaux-Arts, Littérature, Spectacles* on March 30, 1951, under the title "De la figuration en Islam: Un document inédit." I am very grateful to Anneka Lenssen for sharing this product of her extensive archival research with me.

8. On pseudomorphosis, see Flood, "Part 1," 42–43.

9. For a recent example, see M. Shabib, "Tāthīr al-munamanamāt al-Islāmīyyat fī lauḥāt bāblū bīkāsu" [The influence of Islamic miniatures on the paintings of Pablo Picasso], *Majallat jāmi'at Dimashq* 29 (2013): 693–710. See also figs. 5 and 6 below.

to motivate the display of premodern Islamic calligraphic, geometric, and vegetal works alongside twentieth-century Euro-American abstract works. It is often unclear what exactly is being suggested by these kinds of juxtapositions. Even where a common genealogy is asserted or implied, this is often in tension with vaguer notions of affinity. The introduction to the catalogue of an exhibition entitled *Occident-Orient: L'art moderne et l'art Islamique*, held in Strasbourg in 1972, asserts that "to bring together the art of the Islamic Orient and that of the modern Occident in the same exhibition is to emphasize the profound influence which they have had on each other."[10] However, the first essay in the catalogue emphasizes parallel rather than mutually entangled trajectories, explaining that although premodern Islamic and modern Western art have specific histories, the elementary formal and grammatical "concordances" are nonetheless revealing, although of what is left a little vague.[11]

If Eustache de Lorey's insistence on Picasso's Moorish-inflected Spanish blood offers a genetic explanation for the common abstractions of medieval Islamic and modernist art, and histories of reception highlight a genealogical register characterized by a unidirectional relationship of "influence," exhibitions such as *Occident-Orient* embrace a third way of conceptualizing the nature of an (assumed) relation. This replaces genetics and genealogy with vaguer assertions of affinity or resonance between medieval Islamic and modern Euro-American art. In the claim for affinity, "abstraction" functions as both an aesthetic phenomenon and a rhetorical device designed to bring both into constellation, if rarely dialogue.

Among the most impressive examples was the 2001 exhibition at the Fondation Beyeler in Basel, entitled *Ornament and Abstraction: The Dialogue between Non-Western, Modern and Contemporary Art* (fig. 2). The Fondation Beyeler exhibition was paradigmatic in its production of Islamic art as aniconic by the selective omission of figurative works. This reinforced the central message that Islamic art was an art of abstraction in which an unholy trinity of arabesque, calligraphy, and geometry predominated—this despite the fact that in an essay accompanying the exhibition, Oleg Grabar warned about the dangers of juxtapositions that implied causal relations as opposed to the serendipitous selection of different formal solutions to aesthetic problems in widely divergent times and places.[12]

Among the juxtapositions offered in a section of *Ornament and Abstraction* entitled "Prologue Orient-Occident: The Ban on Images between Islam and Abstraction" was a twelfth-century carved marble dado from Ghazni in Afghanistan displayed alongside the work of the New York–based artist Philip Taaffe (b. 1955). This directly engaged Islamic art in its use of geometric idioms and, according to some commentators at least, also in its eschewal of images of the human body.[13] Both works were in their turn framed on either side by large abstract canvases by Mark Rothko, for which no direct relationship to Islamic art was posited. The catalogue explains the juxtaposition as follows: "The underlying connection between the ornate Islamic objects and the spare examples of western abstract painting (the works by Mark Rothko and Brice Marden) is the ban on images or certain types of image encountered in many cultures. It is documented as a feature of Jewish culture in the Old Testament. In Islam it *led to* the cultivation of abstract ornament, while in Christianity it *caused* the iconoclastic controversy in eighth-century Byzantium and the attendant widespread destruction."[14] The rejection of figuration thus provided the nexus between medieval Islamic and modern European art, operating as an internal drive to abstraction, a kind of *Kunstwollen* rooted in cultural proscriptions that determined the trajectory taken by Islamic art and, operating via a more circuitous route, inspired the emergence of abstraction in modernism.

Sometimes the idea of a common relation rooted in proscription coexists with the idea of Islamic art as the paradigmatic art of abstraction. In 2005–6, Espace de l'Art Concret—a French museum dedicated to the history of Concrete Art, an abstract art movement that flourished in Europe between the 1930s and 1950s, and that rejected representational values in favor of an emphasis on the plasticity of art, surface, and color—held an exhibition entitled *Le chant rythmique de l'esprit: Arts de l'islam et abstraction géométrique* (The rhythmic song of the spirit: Arts of Islam and geometric abstraction). The title was taken from the French

10. L. Toncic-Sorinj, "Avant-propos," in *Occident-Orient*, 15.

11. Beyer, "Art moderne et art Islamique," 17.

12. O. Grabar, "Islamic Ornament and Western Abstraction: Some Critical Remarks on an Elective Affinity," in *Ornament and Abstraction: The Dialogue between Non-Western, Modern and Contemporary Art*, ed. M. Brüderlin (Basel, 2001), 70–73.

13. O. Grabar, "The Tensions of Visual Creativity," in *Philip Taaffe*, Jablonka Galerie, Abu Dhabi International Fine Arts and Antiques (Berlin, 2008).

14. Brüderlin, *Ornament and Abstraction*, 81; emphasis mine.

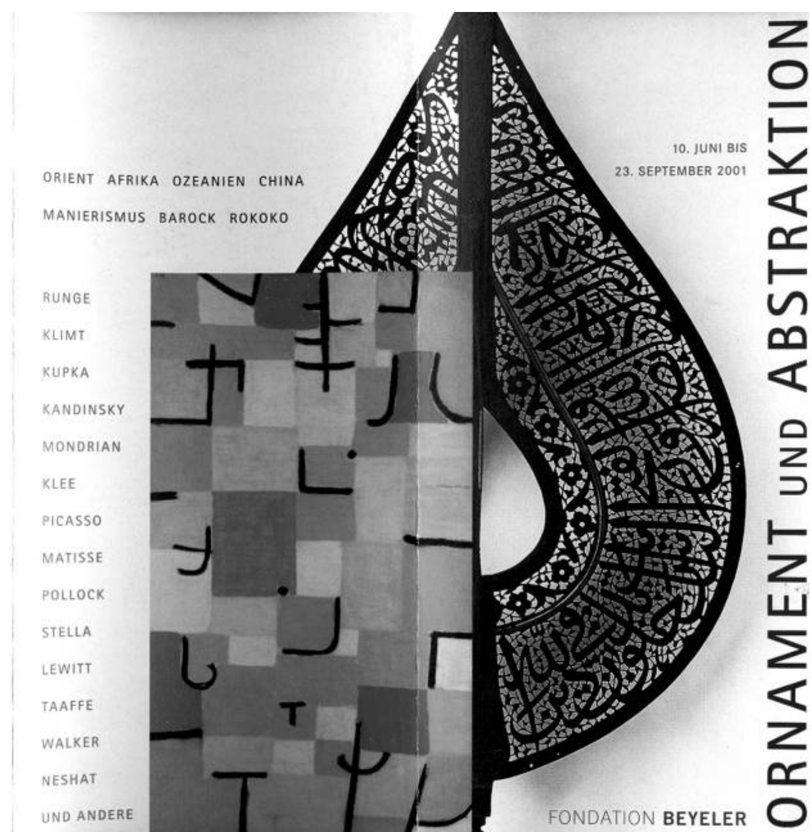


Figure 2. Advertising poster for *Ornament and Abstraction*, Fondation Beyeler, Basel, 2001. Paul Klee's *Zeichen in Gelb (Signs in Yellow)*, 1937, juxtaposed with an eighteenth-century Iranian calligraphic and vegetal standard (*'alam*). Color version available as an online enhancement.

translation of a 1923 text on the plastic arts by the Czech artist František Kupka (d. 1957), who, like Kant before him, saw in the Islamic and Jewish prohibition on the depiction of animate beings a sublime expression: "Arab art, consisting of invented forms—and not copied stupidly, falsely, from nature—manifests to our eyes a harmony that marries plastic purity to a rare nobility. It is a world more elevated than our own, an art that does not stop with the 'arabesque' alone. There is, in the disposition of plastic elements, the rhythmic song of the spirit."[15] As the assumed determinant of the abstract qualities of medieval Islamic art, the ancient *Bilderverbot* is thus constituted as the very condition of affinity in and with modernism. The catalogue explains that: "Before being a possible source of inspiration, the aniconism of Islamic art is, above all, a *model*, a paradigm."[16] Included in the exhibition was work by the French artist François Morellet (d. 2016), whose geometrical abstraction was inspired by the experience of premodern Islamic art, with which it was juxtaposed (fig. 3).

As well as serving as paradigm and artistic model, the arts of Islam were also constituted as a form of Concrete Art avant la lettre. Written in 1998 and republished in the accompanying catalogue, an essay by the Swiss artist Gottfried Honegger (whose computer-generated drawings were displayed alongside fifteenth-century Islamic astrolabes) explained that, with some rare exceptions, the art of Islam had always rejected the image. It thus anticipated the aesthetics of Concrete Art, thanks to the operation of a *Bilderverbot* here referenced

15. English translation based on F. Kupka, *La création dans les arts plastiques*, trans. E. Abrams (Paris, 1989), 56.

16. A. Pierre, "Geometric Arabesques: The Spirit and the Method," in *Le chant rythmique de l'esprit: Arts de l'islam et abstraction géométrique* (Mouans-Sartoux, 2005), 85; emphasis in original.

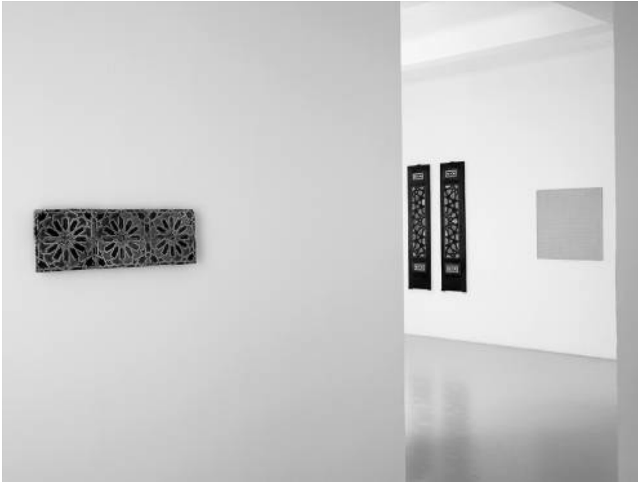


Figure 3. Espace de l'Art Concret, installation shot of *Le chant rythmique de l'esprit: Arts de l'islam et abstraction géométrique*, 2005. Andalusian or Maghrebi tile panel, fifteenth century; door panels, Egypt, late thirteenth or early fourteenth century; François Morellet, *4 doubles trames 0°-22°5-45°-67°5 (rouge et orange)*, 1959. Photo: François Fernandez. Color version available as an online enhancement.

through the fatwas of the Shafi'i jurist Taj al-Din Subki (d. 1369):

> The arts of Islam, which are in many ways a "concrete art" are close to the pioneer spirit of "De Stijl." The doctor Tâg ad-Dîn as-Subkâ [*sic*], who died in 1369 in Damascus, testifies "for the painter, it is forbidden to make an image of any living being, neither on the walls, nor the ceiling, nor on the work tools, not even on the earth." He adds that some believers have images on the floor and on the walls and that it is a sin against the rules of the prophet and he concludes by saying that one day artists will be confronted with the Last Judgement and that they will be punished. This shows how art was integrated, was part of an ideology, of the ideas of Islam.[17]

The mixing of claims about causal relations with vaguer notions of affinity is fairly typical, giving rise to ambiguity regarding whether the juxtaposition implies that the abstraction of Islamic art was among the necessary sources of inspiration for modern Euro-American artists, or whether any formal analogies are contingent and serendipitous, or both.[18] Insofar as the de facto deployment of pseudomorphosis as an exhibition strategy is rationalized, one or more of three distinct claims of relation are generally implied by juxtaposition: first, influence (a causal relationship, demonstrable in the case of artists from Kandinsky to Taaffe);[19] second, a much looser genealogical relationship sometimes mediated by a common relation to a tertiary form (Byzantine art, for example); and third, a more slippery category of affinity or resonance. Where the intention is to highlight aesthetic affinities seen as serendipitous rather than causally related through influence, two quite distinct claims are often made. The first, as we saw in part 1 of the present essay, is that attempts to conform to theological strictures by depicting incomplete, fragmented, or "abstracted" bodies produced effects that anticipated the aesthetic values of modernism. The second claim is that aniconism, or the eschewal of figuration in toto, is a quality that promotes formal values common to premodern Islamic and twentieth-century Euro-American art.

If the desire for a nonclassical modern sent European artists to study non-Western art, abstraction served as the vector through which a variety of non-Western arts were appropriated, consumed, and incorporated into a universal narrative within which they acquired "positive modernist value."[20] The emphasis on formalism in twentieth-century Euro-American art and art history was a kind of reduction that enabled these lateral comparisons based on the common value of abstraction. However, applying the comparative method across time and space within the conceptual economy of the academy and gallery has had a way of flattening or even occluding difference—a tendency reinforced by the careful selection of appropriate comparative pieces.

17. G. Honegger, "One Should Not Make Oneself an Image," in *Le chant rythmique de l'esprit*, 93.

18. For similar ambiguities in the ways in which the relationship between abstract expressionism and Oriental art has been imagined, see S. K. Abe, "To Avoid the Inscrutable: Abstract Expressionism and the 'Oriental Mode,'" in *Discrepant Abstraction*, ed. K. Mercer (Cambridge, MA, 2006), 53–73.

19. J. Soustiel and L. Thornton, "L'influence des miniatures orientales et de l'ornement islamique sur les illustrateurs et les peintres, en France au début du XXe siècle," *Art et curiosité* 50 (1974): 29–34; F. Daftari, *The Influence of Persian Art on Gauguin, Matisse, and Kandinsky* (New York, 1991). The presentation of the important Bliss Collection at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1934 was accompanied by late antique and Islamic textiles from the same collection, since "Near Eastern textiles such as those included in the Collection have interested and influenced many modern artists"; The Museum of Modern Art, *The Lilli P. Bliss Collection* (New York, 1934), 87.

20. J. Masheck, "The Carpet Paradigm: Critical Prolegomena to a Theory of Flatness," *Arts Magazine* 51, no. 1 (1976): 99. See also E. Pasztory, "Still Invisible: The Problem of the Aesthetics of Abstraction for Pre-Columbian Art and Its Implications for Other Cultures," *Res* 19/20 (1990–91): 107–8.

This was a central criticism of the paradigmatic 1984–85 exhibit, *"Primitivism" in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City.[21] The exhibition juxtaposed works of high modernism with "tribal" arts drawn from Africa to the Americas in order to suggest a variety of relationships ranging from influence to affinity. Its conceptual framework was similar to those underlying earlier pioneering exhibitions presenting Islamic art as an art of abstraction and those which followed, although these parallels seem to have gone unremarked. The *"Primitivism"* exhibition attracted criticism for its formalist decontextualization of "non-Western" artifacts in order to produce "affinity-effects."[22] It also came under scrutiny for what one reviewer identified as the elective affinities that it sought to articulate; "selective affinities" might be more appropriate.[23] In the case of Islamic art, the production of affinity through careful selection often mirrors the institutional production of Islamic art as an aniconic art, an art of abstraction, by the exclusion of the figurative. Thus constructing the phenomenon of aniconism that they seek to highlight, such presentations might even be seen as forms of iconoclasm, writing out features that do not conform to the goals and standards of comparison.

Equally significant is the fact that, with the occasional exception of one or two token works by contemporary artists from the traditional Islamic lands working in "traditional" idioms, comparison almost always entails the juxtaposition of *pre*modern Islamic art with the work of modern Euro-American artists. Rarely, if ever, does contemporary art from the Islamic world serve as a comparison, in keeping with the general art-historical orthodoxy that art had died in most regions of the Islamic world around 1800. This assessment is evident in Claude Lévi-Strauss's musings about the decline of Islamic art into an art of ornamental superfluity (a development that he attributes to the impact of the *Bilderverbot*),[24] and is perpetuated until today in survey texts on Islamic art.[25] This being so, the qualifying adjective "medieval" is rarely used, since it is considered self-evident that Islamic art is premodern. Situating Islamic abstraction in a distant premodernity, whatever its affinities with or influences on the art of Euro-American modernity, produces it as a finished story, vital only insofar as it can be staged in relation to the modern in Euro-American galleries and museums. The location of Islamic art in a valorized past from which "living tradition" is excluded amounts to a denial of coevality not just with modernism but with a modernity exemplified by Euro-American abstraction, the term of comparison.[26] While, as we saw in part 1 of this essay, the Jewish contribution to modern abstraction was seen to lie in a living inheritance that found expression through the work of modern secular Jews and in the largely secularized milieu of gallery and museum, perceptions of the eternal medievalism and inherent religiosity of Islamic art precluded such an eventuality.

This staging of the allochronic is directly related to the treatment of agency. In an article on visual abstraction published in 1958, the French critic Marcel Brion explained that the binary opposition between abstraction and empathy, which Wilhelm Worringer had seen as structuring the history of artistic development, was appropriate for premodern societies but no longer offered an adequate account of a world in which abstraction had been internationalized. Brion accepted that Islamic art was the abstract art par excellence, but cautioned against the assertion of easy equivalences and parallels between Islamic art and contemporary Western abstraction, despite aesthetic or morphological parallels. For Brion, what distinguished the arts of Islam from the work of contemporary Euro-American abstract artists was the nature of artistic agency: a marked subjectivity in the case of modern European artists working in an abstract idiom, a marked objectivity in the case of Islamic artists,

21. *"Primitivism" in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, ed. W. Rubin, 2 vols. (New York, 1988); J. Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, MA, 1988), 189–214.

22. H. Foster, "The 'Primitive' Unconscious of Modern Art," *October* 34 (1985): 47. Foster notes that in such comparisons "the artifact is evacuated even as it is elevated" (61).

23. Foster, "The 'Primitive' Unconscious," 53, 59. See also J. Clifford, "Histories of the Tribal and the Modern," *Art in America* 73, no. 4 (April 1985): 165.

24. C. Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes tropiques*, trans. J. Weightman and D. Weightman (New York, 1992), 400–401. For the original French, see C. Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes tropiques* (Paris, 1955), 480–81. For an analysis see Flood, "Part 1," 52–53.

25. F. B. Flood, "From the Prophet to Postmodernism? New World Orders and the End of Islamic Art," in *Making Art History: A Changing Discipline and Its Institutions*, ed. E. C. Mansfield (New York, 2007), 31–53.

26. A rare exception here was the *Taswir: Islamische Bildwelten und Moderne* exhibition held in Berlin in 2009. See also the more geographically circumscribed but also chronologically coherent T. Fellrath and S. Bardaouil, *ItaliaArabia: Convergences between Italy and Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, and Iran*, Chelsea Art Museum (New York, 2008). In the *Ornament and Abstraction* exhibition, the sole exception was art by Ümran Schelling-Tezcan, a Zurich-based Turkish artist working in a calligraphic medium: Brüderlin, *Ornament and Abstraction*, 98, no. 187.

whose work was characterized by the absence of any individual expression and total subservience to predetermined laws of harmony. As Brion put it: “If Muslim geometrism is of a complete objectivity and a total anonymity, the geometrism of Piet Mondrian, on the contrary, always carries the mark of the most individual spirit.”[27] Similar ideas permeated the earlier writings of pioneer scholars of Islamic art: writing on the spirit of Islamic art in 1935, the Swedish Islamicist Carl Johan Lamm insisted that “geometry, rather than geometrical ornament, forms the basis of all Moslem art, just as the human body forms the starting point of the art of Greece. Moslem art proceeds from abstraction to end in ornament, Greek art from static division and accentuation to spiritual individuality.”[28]

Like the various exhibitions on abstraction that were to follow, the distinction highlights a politics of representation in which, explicitly or not, the juxtaposition of different abstract works across a representational power divide assumes a contrast between the unreflexive strictures of tradition (whether cultural, religious, or both) on the one hand, and the self-reflexive play of modernism as modernity on the other. In standard narratives of modernity, the operation of individual agency is of course one of its liberating hallmarks, setting it apart from tradition, in which subjective expression is subordinated to collective cultural reflexes. The idea that premodern artists and patrons lacked any sense of historicity or subjectivity has been frequently criticized by scholars of Western “medieval” art,[29] but an especially germane critique of the denial of agency in the transhistorical invocation of abstraction can be found in an essay by Esther Pasztory on the modern reception of pre-Columbian art. In her analysis, Pasztory notes the widespread perception that “for the modern artist abstraction is a choice, but for the non-Western artist it is a given. Moreover, for the modernist artist abstraction is a great achievement, while for the non-Western artist it is merely an inadequate attempt at representation.”[30] On the one hand, abstraction functions as the deeply intellectualized manifestation of artistic self-reflexivity, and on the other, as the instantiation of an internalized or instinctive reflex.

What this suggests is that, despite its undoubted utility as a heuristic, pseudomorphosis often operates across a differential of power, and always of value, validating or revaluing one of the terms of comparison, sometimes in surprisingly literal ways. A recent auction catalogue presents an unusual, probably Persian, early modern tile exuberantly splashed with colored drips (fig. 4) by noting that “the effect is quite extraordinarily like a Jackson Pollock.”[31] Conversely, a recent article on the collections of the modern art museum in Tehran noted a renewed interest in its extensive holdings, suggesting that Iran’s rulers might be turning to the art of modernity not only in a bid to demonstrate an enlightened or liberal mind-set but because “they might also be starting to notice that modern abstract art has a lot in common with Iran’s older treasures, like the mosques of Isfahan.”[32]

For Pasztory, the juxtaposition of different abstract works across a chronological and geographic divide invariably underwritten by institutional and representational power often reinscribes the hegemony of Euro-American modernism within the institutional apparatus of art history, recouping the non-Western premodern under what Hal Foster calls “the sign of Western universality.”[33] In the story of modernism, affinity conjoins two disparate terms, assuming the role of allegory or metaphor, although it is often unclear what exactly is being allegorized. In the words of James Clifford, as “an allegory of kinship,” affinity necessarily excludes non-Euro-American modernisms while

27. M. Brion, “L’Art abstrait: son origine, sa nature et sa signification,” *Diogène* 24 (1958): 55–56. The comparison was not made at random; similar comparisons were to appear later in the work of artists and art historians writing both in the Arab world and the West (see fig. 5 below).

28. C. J. Lamm, “The Spirit of Moslem Art,” *Bulletin of the Faculty of Arts University of Egypt* 3, no. 1 (1935): 4–5.

29. In 1947, Meyer Schapiro, writing on Romanesque sculpture of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, argued against the view that “mediaeval art was strictly religious and symbolical, submitted to collective aims, and wholly free from the aestheticism and individualism of our age.” M. Schapiro, “On the Aesthetic Attitude in Romanesque Art,” in *Romanesque Art: Selected Papers* (New York, 1977), 1. Similarly, while resisting facile comparisons between medieval and modern art based on common formal values of abstraction, Marvin Trachtenberg has suggested replacing the period styles Romanesque and Gothic with the descriptors “historicist” and “modernist,” acknowledging the operation of a “cultural-historical consciousness” that shaped the formal and structural values of European cathedrals: M. Trachtenberg, “Suger’s Miracles, Branner’s Bourges: Reflections on ‘Gothic Architecture’ as Medieval Modernism,” *Gesta* 39, no. 2 (2000): 190–94.

30. Pasztory, “Still Invisible,” 110.

31. Sotheby’s, *Islamic and Indian Art*, London, Wednesday 24th and Thursday 25th April 1991, lot no. 954. The speckled effect of the tile is comparable to that on an early sixteenth-century Iranian glazed plate held in the Musée du Louvre (MAO 658).

32. J. Jones, “Iran Is Sitting on a Modern-Art Goldmine,” *Guardian*, August 1, 2012.

33. Foster, “The ‘Primitive’ Unconscious,” 53 (see also 59); Clifford, “Histories of the Tribal,” 165.

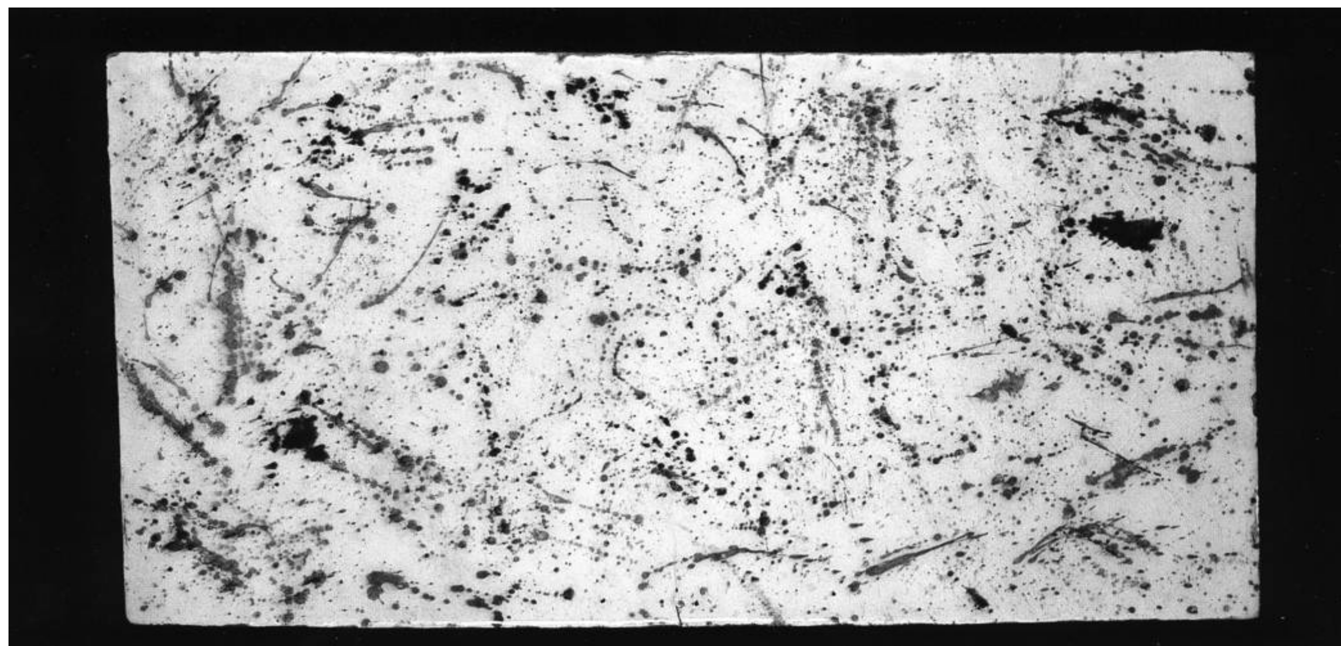


Figure 4. Glazed tile, Iran, seventeenth century (?). Photo: courtesy of Sotheby's, London. Color version available as an online enhancement.

demonstrating modernism's capacity for "appropriating or redeeming otherness, for constituting non-Western arts in its own image, for discovering universal, ahistorical 'human' capacities."[34] With few exceptions, the art of the "non-West," whether Islamic or "Primitive," is integral enough to the narrative of modernism to be included, "yet not central enough to be considered constitutive," hence the distancing mechanisms of affinity, analogy, convergence etc.[35] The construction of affinity in difference thus reminds us that modernism, like modernity itself, always "requires an alterity, a referent outside of itself—a pre- or nonmodern in relation to which the modern takes its full meaning."[36]

34. Clifford, "Histories of the Tribal," 166–67, 176. See also F. Myers, "'Primitivism', Anthropology and the category of 'Primitive Art,'" in *Handbook of Material Culture*, ed. C. Tilley, S. Kuechler, M. Rowlands, W. Keane, and P. Spyer (London, 2006), 269–72.

35. S. Gikandi, "Picasso, Africa, and the Schemata of Difference," *Modernism/modernity* 10, no. 3 (2003): 457. Among notable exceptions see R. Labrusse, "Henri Matisse: Un'estetica orientale?," in *Matisse: "La révélation m'est venue de l'Orient,"* exh. cat., Musei Capitolini (Rome, 1997), 337–42.

36. M.-R. Trouillot, "The Otherwise Modern: Caribbean Lessons from the Savage Slot," in *Critically Modern: Alternatives, Alterities, Anthropologies*, ed. B. M. Knauft (Bloomington, IN, 2002), 224. See also A. Huyssen, "Geographies of Modernism," *New German Critique* 100 (2007): 187–207.

Islamic abstractions as prefigurations

It has been suggested that the "will to connect the Second Commandment to contemporary art is a typical Jewish response to anti-Semitism."[37] However, just as it has been largely forgotten that both Jews and Arabs (often qua Muslims) were equally indicted by the anti-Semitism of the *Bilderverbot*, so attempts of various twentieth-century artists and historians working in the historical Islamic lands to stake a claim to modernism through the perceived abstractions of medieval Islamic art constitute a neglected chapter in the history of global modernisms. These attempts parallel the rehabilitation of the *Bilderverbot* as contributing to a precocious aesthetic modernism in Judaism, transforming the much-vaunted rejection of naturalism in medieval Islamic art from vice to virtue. Once again, whether celebrated or excoriated, the abstract or antimimetic qualities of medieval Islamic art were generally assumed, although the question of whether a penchant for abstraction was fostered by an Islamic prohibition on figurative imagery or by a more positive Arab tendency toward the spiritual was consistently debated in the post–World War II writings of Arab artists and critics from North Africa to Iraq.[38]

37. M. Olin, *The Nation Without Art: Examining Modern Discourses on Jewish Art* (Lincoln, NE, 2001), 194.

38. See S. Naef, *À la recherche d'une modernité Arabe* (Geneva, 1996), 215.

As the Algerian artist Mohamed Khadda noted, the production of Islamic art as a decorative art (in a pejorative sense)—the product of artisans and decorators rather than artists—reflects a deliberate colonial strategy.[39] However, in the decades following World War II, geo-cultural aesthetic shifts often coincident with campaigns for decolonization offered the possibility of mobilizing the perceived abstract and ornamental qualities of Islamic art in service of a new conception of Arab modernism. Although some commentators in the Arab world insisted on the need to distinguish multiple modes and historical traditions of abstraction that had been "lumped together" by a reductive and simplistic application of the term in a search for connections and origins, this was not a standard position.[40] On the contrary, in addition to iterating claims of influence and origins that saw European proponents of abstraction as inspired by their experience of Islamic art, artists and writers from North Africa to Iraq often offered complex and subtle readings of the way in which an idea of abstraction might serve to rethink the imbrications between the art of the past and of the present. Providing an implicit (and sometimes explicit) rejoinder to long-established Orientalist discourses on art in the Islamic world, these writings on abstraction also sought to adumbrate the grounds on which a modern Arab art might be founded and theorized. Equally, they offered a cultural-historical rationalization of abstraction as a phenomenon with deep indigenous roots at a time when artists and patrons in many areas of the Arab world expressed a clear preference for figuration over abstraction.

Some of the relevant writings echo the suggestion made by Eustache de Lorey in his 1932 article that the abstract qualities of Islamic art either anticipate or are causally related to those of European modernism.[41] De Lorey's cultural-genetic explanation for the abstractions of Cubism stand at an extreme end of a spectrum, but neither its invocation of Islamic abstraction nor the attribution of this to a deeply internalized *Bilderverbot* were without parallel; indeed, many Arab writers cited this very essay. The precocious modernity of Islamic art is already implied in Bishr Farès's 1952 article on Islamic ornament, in which he rather slyly indicated an "Islamic inspiration, fortuitous or actual" for twentieth-century European art.[42]

The implications of what Farès (somewhat equivocally) presented as a common eschewal of naturalism for a cultural politics of both modernism and modernity were developed by later Arab artists and scholars. Here, I would like to focus on the work of three individuals, two of whom have the advantage of being both practitioners and theorists of art: the Syrian art historian Afif Bahnassi (1928–2017), the Palestinian artist Kamal Boullata (b. 1942), and the Algerian artist Mohamed Khadda (1930–91). The relationship between the study and publication of premodern Islamic art and the development of modern art and theory in the Arab world is a potentially capacious topic, deserving of more attention than it has received to date,[43] but the work of all three is especially relevant, since it directly addressed questions of abstraction in modernism and its historical antecedents.

Like Eustache de Lorey before him, Bahnassi would later write on historical Islamic art, including the mosaics of the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus and the celebrated 1237 Iraqi illustrated manuscript of al-Hariri's *Maqamat*, whose images had a profound impact on modern artists in the Arab lands.[44] In his doctoral dissertation on modern art in Arab lands, written at the Sorbonne in 1978, and in many later publications stemming from it, Bahnassi invoked a familiar dichotomy between Hellenic naturalism and Semitic transcendentalism.[45] Bahnassi's thought is heavily

39. M. Khadda, *Éléments pour un art nouveau suivi des feuillets épars liés et inédits* (Algiers, 2015), 35.

40. For examples, see N. M. Shabout, *Modern Arab Art: Formation of Arab Aesthetics* (Gainesville, FL, 2007), 45.

41. De Lorey, "Picasso et l'Orient Musulman."

42. Farès, *Essai sur l'esprit*, 29. The conflation of modernism and modernity is a hallmark of much writing on African and Middle Eastern artistic modernism(s), which reflects the complex relations with colonialism: "The unresolved role of modernity is dealt with by eliding a distinction between modernity and modernism." P. Meier, "Authenticity and Its Modernist Discontents: The Colonial Encounter and African and Middle Eastern Art History," *Arab Studies Journal* 18, no. 1 (2010): 20, 22–26. See also A. Shalem, "What Do We Mean When We Say 'Islamic Art'?," *Journal of Art Historiography* 6 (2012): 17–18.

43. See, e.g., C. P. Davies, "Modern Egyptian Art: Site, Commodity, Archive, 1891–1948" (PhD diss., Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, 2014), esp. chap. 1.

44. A. Bahnassi, "Al-Wâsitî d'après les Maqamats d'al-Hariri," *Integral: Revue de creation plastique et littéraire* 3–4 (1973): 37; idem, *Al-Jāmi' al-Umawī al-Kabīr: awwal rawā'i' al-fann al-Islāmī* (Damascus, 1988). For the impact of the 1237 manuscript see Flood, "Part 1," 44–46, and below.

45. A. Bahnassi, "L'Art moderne dans les pays arabes" (PhD diss., Université Panthéon-Sorbonne, 1978). Elements of the dissertation later appeared in several Arabic monographs by Bahnassi, including *Al-Fann al-ḥadīth fī al-bilād al-'arabīyya* (Tunis, 1980), and *Rūwwād al-fann al-ḥadīth fī al-bilād al-'arabīyya* (Beirut, 1985).

inflected by pan-Arab secularism, with the result that the role of religion in his history of premodernity is ambiguous. On the one hand, cultural, environmental, and racial factors predominate over religion, with abstraction an inherent characteristic of the Arab spirit whose particular forms of expression were informed by cultural and environmental conditions (echoing the environmental determinism favored in Orientalist scholarship).[46] On the other, it was religious proscriptions on imaging that excluded the third dimension from the purview of the Muslim artist. A consequent focus on line, color, and nonspatial depth infused Arab art with a spirituality opposed to the sensuality that Western art had inherited from the Hellenic tradition; this, Bahnassi argued, was true even of the figurative book paintings produced in medieval Iraq and Syria, which are marked by a spiritual aesthetic.[47]

Following a line of thought developed earlier by Bishr Farès, Bahnassi contrasted spiritual perspective (a quality of the Arab Orient) with linear perspective (a quality of Occidental art), seizing upon the arabesque as paradigmatic. Its stylization, exploitation of line, and negation of the figure is what unites medieval Islamic and modern abstract art: "the basis of this arabesque is the negation of figuration and [taking] refuge in the symbol, which was not equivalent to a clear and figurative idea, but connected, as Gayet [*L'Art arabe*, 1893] says, to Arab magic. This is why one of the predominant characteristics of Arab art was its abstraction of form as well as content, that which links its conception to that of modern art."[48] As it had in earlier Orientalist discourse, the arabesque is something of an ambivalent figure in the work of Bahnassi, who elsewhere wrote that arabesques and calligraphy "are acceptable provided they are treated creatively and in an innovatory way, but they go badly astray if they are used to justify foreign methods such as abstraction or consist of barely transformed or elaborated imitations of the work of the past."[49]

Despite these ambiguities, Bahnassi used the postwar valorization of abstraction to speak back to those who argued that the canonization and apparent stability of certain abstract modalities in Islamic art (such as calligraphy or geometry) limited artistic expression. He asserted that this was exactly "the disadvantage of all classical art dominated by preestablished anthropomorphic conventions such as those of Greek or Gothic art." Such disadvantages were transcended by Arab artists long before their modern European counterparts: "the Arab artist has, since ancient times, followed rules that are today considered as discoveries and innovations of the West. It is thus that he treats the surface like a two-dimensional area to which the third dimension is added by artifice and a relative foreshortening."[50] Elsewhere, Bahnassi noted that while comparisons might be made with the work of Picasso, his attempts to adopt a similar method lacked the spiritual bases that underpinned the stylizations and multi-perspectival two-dimensionality of Arab art.[51] If comparison always entails questions of value and valorization, here the tables are turned on those who, however well-intentioned, seek to validate the aesthetic qualities of medieval Islamic art by harnessing it to a modern penchant for abstraction. By contrast, when European painters like Matisse and Klee visited Arab countries, they "definitively broke with western and optical perspective and experimented busily with non-rational, but spiritual perspective." In Bahnassi's evaluation, the Arab-inspired work of these Western artists reflected a "renewal," a renaissance that liberated European artists from the constraints and limitations imposed by the optical naturalism fostered by the Renaissance: "Arab art, which reflects the essence of Islamic spiritual values, has brought a new dimension to our vision of the world—it has substituted spatial fluidity for the linear perspective that has prevailed in the west since the Renaissance."[52] In a similar vein, based on the long-established (and deeply problematic) perception of a tension between Hellenic naturalism and Semitic abstraction, other scholars writing on Islamic art and the

46. Citing Wilhelm Worringer, Bahnassi ("L'Art moderne," 94) explains that Arab superstition is reflected in the fear of empty space, which is reflected in the famous horror vacui associated with Islamic art: see R. Ettinghausen, "The Taming of the Horror Vacui in Islamic Art," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 123, no. 1 (1979): 15–28. Bahnassi's idea finds its counterpart in contemporary suggestions that the Arabs viewed the world through moonlight, which flattened a sense of volume and favored a penchant for two-dimensional forms: A. Badawy, "The Contribution of the Arabs to Islamic Art," *Rivista degli Studi Orientali* 39 (1964): 263, 278. The environmental determinism underlying such interpretations permeates earlier twentieth-century germanophone art history, including the influential work of Wilhelm Worringer: for a discussion, see Flood, "Part 1," 50–51.

47. Bahnassi, "L'Art moderne," iii.

48. Bahnassi, "L'Art moderne," 201; see also 32, 49. On the irrelevance of the *Bilderverbot* see Bahnassi's "Authenticity in Art: Exposition, Definition, Methodology," *Cultures* 6, no. 2 (1979): 73–74.

49. Bahnassi, "Authenticity in Art," 75.

50. Bahnassi, "L'Art moderne," 244.

51. A. Bahnassi, "The Spiritual Perspective of the Orient and Western Art," *Cultures* 4, no. 3 (1977): 103.

52. Bahnassi, "L'Art moderne," 100, and "The Spiritual Perspective," 108.

Bilderverbot could present the (uncontested) stylization of Near Eastern art as "a breakthrough against naturalism," whose trajectory was interrupted when "Hellenism was imposed by force upon the people,"[53] or write of "the Greek standards that froze the world for centuries."[54] The emphasis on abstraction as the authentic aesthetic of the Arabs is not only a reflection of the pan-Arabism that held political sway from the 1950s but also likely a response to the legacy of nineteenth-century racialist theories according to which medieval Persian art was presented as the art of an Aryan people, characterized by its embrace of the real and capacity for mimesis, while the art of the Arabs reflected a Semitic incapacity for mimesis.[55] Once again, in the implicit invocation of this racialized dichotomy, an Orientalist trope that had served historically to indict a perceived lack at the heart of Arab culture is inverted and made to attest to the precocious modernity of Arab art.

Bahnassi's attempt to rethink the relation between the art of the past and of the present around the issue of abstraction was by no means unique: between the 1940s and 1970s variants of the same idea proliferated in many areas of the Arab world. It was not by chance that, in many of these works, the arabesque consistently allegorized and emblematized an Arab penchant for abstraction. Not only did this elevation of the arabesque and abstraction invert a hierarchy of value long established in many Orientalist assessments of Islamic art, but during the 1940s and 1950s it featured prominently in the work and writings of artists working within and without the Arab world. The subtitle later given to Jackson Pollock's *Number 13A: Arabesque* (1948), for example, suggests the ways in which the arabesque had come to function as a modern mode and perhaps also an awareness of the frequency with which the artist's work was invoked in relation to premodern Islamic art.[56] As this suggests, the elevation of the arabesque and its abstractions above the derivative masquerades of mimetic art was a transnational phenomenon, already apparent in French scholarship predating World War II.[57] However, the emergence of modern art movements on the very soil where it was believed that the early arabesque had been nurtured enabled Arab artists and writers from Morocco to Iraq to lay claim to a dual genealogy. As Anneka Lenssen puts it, these developments show "how modernisms that have been appropriated (in an Orientalist vein) from Islamic cultures as the Other of brilliant color and flattened spaces can be re-appropriated for self-actuating processes. Here, in other words, the very universalist claims that the French had made for their appropriated modernisms could then be wielded for an equally universalizing Arabism meant to override the nation-state." In the work of the Syrian artist Adham Ismail (d. 1963), who explicitly invoked the arabesque as early as 1951, its qualities of line and color were deployed in the service of forging a modern Arab art, bringing into constellation "the metaphysics of the pan-Arab identity, and the pure pictorial logic of aniconic abstraction."[58]

In many cases, complex claims of origin or prefiguration were not merely an endeavor to stake a claim to modernism but also an attempt to defend abstraction from those who saw it as an alien or foreign import to the Arab lands. Despite its purported range of relations to premodern Islamic art, the antinaturalism perceived in the art of Matisse, Picasso, and others was rejected by some Arab artists, among them the Lebanese artist Mustafa Farrukh (d. 1957), who denounced these artists as "Antichrists of art, who have transformed art and customs and stained the purity of the fine arts by their savage styles."[59] It was only in the second half of the century that abstract art began to be embraced in various parts of the Arab lands, often requiring a robust defense against

53. I. R. al-Faruqi, "Islām and Art," *Studia Islamica* 37 (1973): 85. See also the remarks of the Moroccan artist Mohammed Shaba'a (d. 2013) regarding the turn to Islamic art by modern European artists seeking liberation from the hegemony of "the painting as a window on the world": Shabout, *Modern Arab Art*, 44.

54. From an essay by the Lebanese artist Saloua Raouda Choucair first published in 1951: "How the Arab Understood Visual Art," trans. K. Scheid, *ARTMargins* 4, no. 1 (2015): 126–27.

55. C. Barbier du Meynard, review of H. Lavoix, *Les Peintres arabes*, in *Revue critique d'histoire et de littérature* 1, no. 21 (1876): 333–35; V. Chauvin, "La défense des images chez les Musulmans," *Annales de l'académie d'archéologie de Belgique* 49 (1896): 408. See also R. Labrusse, *Islamophilies: L'Europe moderne et les arts de l'Islam* (Paris, 2011), 180.

56. See Flood, "Part 1," fig. 3. The circumstances in which the subtitle was given are unclear. For an interesting engagement with the historiographic entanglements of the arabesque, Islamic art history, and Jackson Pollock, see the 1997 work *Arabesque, homage à Jackson Pollock* by the Moroccan video artist Mounir Fatmi; http://www.exquise.org/video.php?id=981.

57. See, among many others, A. Gleizes, "Arabesques," *Cahiers du Sud* 22, no. 175 (1935): 101–6.

58. A. Lenssen, "The Shape of the Support: Painting and Politics in Syria's Twentieth Century" (PhD diss., Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2014), 107, 56; see also the discussion at 94–126. The subject is developed in Lenssen's article "Adham Isma'il's Arabesque."

59. Quoted in S. Naef, "*Peindre pour être moderne*? Remarques sur l'adoption de l'art occidental dans l'Orient arabe," in *La multiplication des images en pays d'Islam: De l'estampe à la television (XVIIe–XXIe s.)*, ed. B. Heyberger and S. Naef (Istanbul, 2003), 203. See also Naef, *A la recherche d'une modernité Arabe*, 150–51, 173–75, 271–73, 315–19, 356–58; S. Sheehi, "Modernism, Anxiety and the Ideology of Arab Vision," *Discourse* 28, no. 1 (2006): 82–84.

accusations that it was a nonindigenous artistic mode.[60] As Mohamed Khadda explained of the Algerian scene: "In France, Picasso was accused of being a foreigner, here they accuse us of being Picassos."[61]

The argument for the prefiguration of modernism in a historical Arab or Islamic penchant for abstraction contained an important (if often implicit) answer to those who saw the abstract works produced by contemporary Arab artists as inauthentic and derivative: if abstraction had been born in the medieval Arab world, *even if* the work of contemporary Arab artists was informed by that of modern European artists, this was merely a homecoming of sorts, the closure of a circulatory loop through which the arts of Europe itself had been revivified. This was so despite the paradox that the rise of abstraction in Europe and the United States coincided with projects of aesthetic modernization in the Middle East in which modernity was associated with figuration and mimetic realism rather than abstraction.[62] In Lenssen's words, "Bahnassi's history of modernism in effect turn[ed] the narrative of authenticity on its head, claiming the materials of what would become recognized as modernism as the autochthonous resources of the Arab region, and thereby restoring primacy to Syria while freeing its modern artists from the binds of historical association with European imperialism."[63]

Similarly, it was the dominance of a colonially inflected penchant for figurative art among the postcolonial Algerian bourgeoisie and the related accusation that modern abstract art was a foreign import that led Mohamed Khadda to insist upon the existence of an art of abstraction fostered not by any Islamic *Bilderverbot* but by a specific symbolic and spiritual conception. Khadda acknowledged the impact that the experience of Islamic arabesques, calligraphy, and figurative painting had on the work of European artists such as Klee, Matisse, and Mondrian. In contrast to Bahnassi, however, his claim was not simply that the roots of European styles of modernism were located in the experience of Islamic art. Rather, it was that the arts of Islam fostered an indigenous tendency toward abstraction (exemplified by the arabesque and calligraphy) as a hallmark of spirituality that anticipated the forms and ethos of modern abstract art: "Rejecting figuration in favor of a stylization, an ever-increasing abstraction, contrary to the plastic traditions of antiquity, which rather saw in nature the exterior aspect of things, Islam produced a metaphysical art from which the anecdotal was excluded—an art of mysticism whose claim was to perfect and refine the spirituality of man."[64] To make the point, Khadda juxtaposed a 1919 composition by Mondrian with a thirteenth-century panel of square Kufic calligraphy (fig. 5), anticipating a similar comparison that Oleg Grabar would make in a 1992 book on ornament.[65] Through engagement with this deep history of abstraction, Khadda expressed the hope that artists in the Arab world would found a new school that would henceforth take its place as part of a universal contemporary art. This precocious claim for "multiple modernities" was thus rooted in analogy rather than genealogy. In this, its logic was similar to that which undergirds recent exhibitions that juxtapose premodern Islamic artworks and examples of modern Euro-American abstraction (figs. 1–2). However, whereas in many of these exhibitions formal analogies with modernism valorize the premodern, for Khadda and many other Arab writers, the existence of an indigenous tradition of abstraction valorized the production and reception of modern abstract art in the Arab lands as a variant on the already known rather than a foreign import. By contrast, the art of the "Persian" miniature, which was introduced and flourished under French colonial tutelage, was, for Khadda, something of a nostalgic dead end.[66] However, his stance toward manuscript painting shifted significantly, largely due to an encounter with the thirteenth-century figurative paintings of Yahya al-Wasiti (figs. 7–8), in the structured, rhythmic qualities of which he found an early embrace of abstraction.[67]

60. S. Naef, "L'Expression iconographique de l'authenticité (*asâla*) dans la peinture arabe moderne," in *L'Image dans le monde Arabe*, ed. G. Beaugé and J.-F. Clément (Paris, 1995), 139–49; Shabout, *Modern Arab Art*, 37–38.

61. Khadda, *Éléments pour un art nouveau*, 37.

62. E. Shohat, "Sacred Word, Profane Image: Theologies of Adaptation," in *A Companion to Literature and Film*, ed. R. Stam and A. Raengo (Malden, MA, 2004), 30.

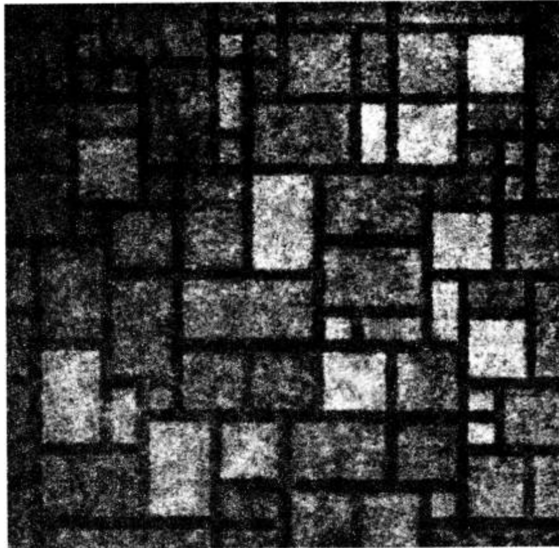
63. Lenssen, "The Shape of the Support," 44.

64. Khadda, *Éléments pour un art nouveau*, 30.

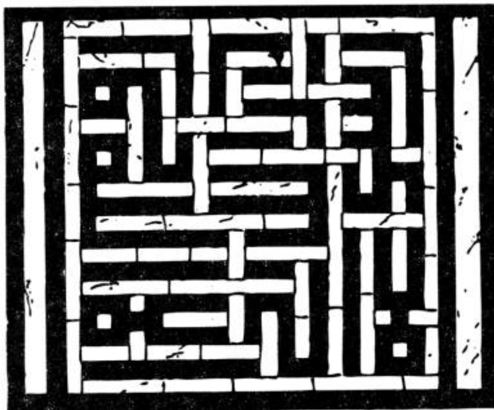
65. Khadda, *Éléments pour un art nouveau*, 31–32, see also 94; O. Grabar, *The Mediation of Ornament* (Washington, DC, 1992), 47, plates 3–4. A similar comparison is made by A. Schimmel, "The Arabesque and the Islamic View of the World," in Brüderlin, *Ornament and Abstraction*, 35.

66. Khadda, *Éléments pour un art nouveau*, 90–94. This "revived" nonindigenous traditional art was exemplified by the work of Mohammed Racim (1896–1975), the best-known exponent of the miniature genre: R. Benjamin, "Colonial Tutelage to Nationalist Affirmation: Mammeri and Racim, Painters of the Maghreb," in *Orientalism's Interlocutors: Painting, Architecture, Photography*, ed. J. Beaulieu and M. Roberts (Durham, NC, 2002), 59–74.

67. See below. One sign of this shift is the fact that Khadda later wrote the preface for *Mohammed Racim: Miniaturiste Algérien* (Algiers, 1990). The ambiguities in Khadda's attitude to the work of Racim are apparent in an earlier essay intended as the preface to a 1978



P. Mondrian, composition (1919).



Calligraphie du XIIIe s. (mosquée d'El-Moyyed).

Figure 5. Mohamed Khadda, *Éléments pour un art nouveau suivi des feuillets épars liés et inédits* (Algiers, 2015), 32. Comparison between the work of Piet Mondrian and a Mamluk panel of square Kufic calligraphy. Courtesy of Najet Khadda.

Although the parallel has not been noted, the homecoming of abstraction in these accounts reads very much like an Arab nationalist version of the transnationalist vision of modernist aesthetics formulated by Le Corbusier (d. 1965) and others in the first decades of the twentieth century. According to this, a true aesthetic of modernity manifest in the traditional whitewashed architecture that Le Corbusier found in North Africa and the Ottoman lands was disappearing due to early twentieth-century campaigns of modernization, which Le Corbusier linked to the proliferation of polychromy and ornament. Paradoxically, it was as a restoration of the morality of an aesthetic tradition not bound by stylistic nationalism that the aesthetics of whitewash promoted by European modernism promised to reinvigorate the authentic and anticipatory aesthetic modernism of the East.[68]

Ironically, given these spirited attempts to defend the art of abstraction as deeply rooted in the traditions of the Arab lands, those few museums with collections of medieval Islamic art that today collect modern and contemporary works from the Islamic world generally eschew international abstraction as discontinuous with the classical arts of Islam, favoring modern calligraphy in their attempt to demonstrate artistic continuities.[69] Yet, in addition to raising questions of transhistorical (dis)continuities, by virtue of their fluidity of line and underlying geometricization, the calligraphic arts have consistently served as an index of abstraction, if not an arabesque sensibility among Arab modernists. It is important to note that, in this sense, the term "arabesque" not only refers to a particular mode of rendering stylized vegetal ornament, but a symbolic form that includes modes of visual expression characterized by underlying structures of doubling and symmetry derived from rigorous geometric (and ultimately mathematical) principles.[70]

The early work of Palestinian artist and art historian Kamal Boullata is paradigmatic.[71] In an article published

publication on the latter, but rejected by the publisher: Khadda, *Éléments pour un art nouveau*, 188–98.

68. Le Corbusier (Charles-Edouard Jeanneret), *Journey to the East*, trans. I. Žaknić (Cambridge, MA, 2007), 94, 102–3, 129; idem, *L'Art décoratif d'aujourdhui* (Paris, 1925), 187–95 (trans. J. Dunnett as *The Decorative Arts of Today* [Cambridge, 1987], 185–92); Z. Çelik, "Le Corbusier, Orientalism, Colonialism," *Assemblage* 17 (1992): 65; F. B. Flood, "Genealogies of Whitewash: 'Muhammedan Churches', Reformation Polemics, and the Aesthetics of Modernism," in *Territories and Trajectories: Cultures in Circulation*, ed. D. Sorensen (Durham, NC, 2018), 137–39.

69. V. Porter, "Collecting 20th Century Middle Eastern Art in the British Museum," *Arts and the Islamic World* 21 (1992): 25; Naef, *A la recherche d'une modernité Arabe*, 356–58.

70. See, e.g., Lenssen, "Adham Isma'il's Arabesque," 244–46.

71. See, e.g., Boullata's fascinating rumination on the relationship between Arabic language, script, and the geometrical structures of Islamic art: "Fī handasat al-lugha wa qawā'id al-raqsh" (On the structure of the language and the grammar of the Arabesque), in *Al-Islām wa-l-ḥadātha* (Islam and Modernity), ed. M. Arkoun et al. (London, 1990), 17–38. A Spanish translation appeared as "Geometría de la lengua y gramática de la geometría," *Cuadernos de La Alhambra* 27 (1991): 11–26.

in 1977, as Bahnassi was finishing his dissertation, Boullata reasserted that a penchant for abstract two-dimensional forms and patterns was emblematized by the arabesque. It was, Boullata suggested, to articulate the productive collision with Hellenism that the Arab artist "wrote color in linear improvisations that reiterated his inborn desert visions. Those very visions were later to inspire the leading exponents of 20th Century painting in Europe. By that time the occidental art of imitating nature whose pinnacle naturalism exemplified had reached a cul-de-sac. The death of naturalism, but a limb of positivism, did not thwart the growth of individualism in the West; it enhanced it."[72]

For Boullata, as Bahnassi, if Arab art anticipated developments in twentieth-century European art, it did so by offering a way out of the impasse of mimetic naturalism that, rather than diminishing the subjectivity of artistic creation, amplified it. In this and other essays, Boullata draws upon Eustache de Lorey's influential 1932 article, which located the ultimate origins of Cubist abstraction in the hadith, transmitted as cultural memory through Picasso's Andalusian blood. Boullata explained that the prohibitions of the hadith prevented the development of mimetic naturalism in Arab art. As a result, "Arab art, in time, developed a strong tradition evolving from this distrust of rivaling God's creativity or distorting His creation; at the same time it developed its own evasive tactics by means of which the artist could still indulge his creative impulse and yet skirt around forbidden practices." In their approach to nature, Arab artists "disguised it through a stylization in form and through a transformation of natural beings into decorative patterns."[73] This is one reason for the "astonishing affinities and many-sided analogies" between the work of Paul Klee, Pablo Picasso, and classical Arab art.[74] As Klee (whose relationship to the Orient included hinting at his own purported Oriental roots) had traveled in Morocco,[75] the "Arabism" that his work shows in form and content (including its "arabesque concept of space"[76]) is the product of direct influence; when it comes to Picasso, the claim for relation is of a more complex order. Quoting Eustache de Lorey's essay, Boullata notes that "in both Arab art and Picasso's Cubist works there is an intellectual consistency 'to betray nature even in imitating it.' To an observer examining Picasso's forms, they might be recognizable initially and then disappear into the abstraction and the unreal."[77]

While Eustache de Lorey had suggested that the origins of the abstract values of Cubism might be sought in Picasso's purported Muslim blood, Boullata offers a more nuanced take on a similar theme. Noting the permeation of Picasso's work by his "refinements of calligraphic arabesque," Boullata invokes Gertrude Stein's comment that "a Spaniard can assimilate the Orient without imitating it," so that Picasso "instinctively expressed the spirit of the East which was contained within him as a Spaniard."[78] Following a comparative method long established in such contexts (fig. 1), Boullata juxtaposed examples of Picasso's paintings with medieval and early modern paintings from the Arab world (fig. 6), comparing Picasso's *Dora Maar as a Bird* (1941) with the harpies depicted in the painting of an enchanted isle from the 1237 *Maqamat* manuscript painted by Yahya al-Wasiti (fig. 7).

Despite this, for Boullata the formal analogies between these different traditions are ultimately presented as no more than serendipitous abstractions of the real, highlighting an ambiguity between affinity and causality that plays across many such comparisons. Picasso's "calligraphic visual expressions" are "close to the spirit of arabesque themes" but without necessarily attesting to a causal relation.[79] While the art of Picasso may partake of Islamic sensibilities, here its abstraction of the real is a pseudomorphosis, an affinity of form rather than content. For Boullata, as for many other artists working in the Arab world in the 1950s through 1970s, the experience of the work of European artists such as Picasso, Klee, and Matisse underlined the increasing irrelevance of the academic figurative art that had flourished since the late nineteenth century. The engagement of these artists with non-European artistic traditions, including Islamic art, was a relevant if

72. K. Boullata, "Modern Arab Art: The Quest and the Ordeal," *Mundus Artium* 10, no. 1 (1977): 115.

73. K. Boullata, "Classical Arab Art and Modern European Painting: A Study in Affinities," *The Muslim World* 63, no. 1 (1973): 9, 10. On the rationale for preferring the term "Arab art" to "Islamic art," see p. 3.

74. Boullata, "Classical Arab Art," 2–3, 6.

75. On Klee's self-Orientalization see R. Labrusse, "Imaginary Logic," in *Paul Klee: The Bauhaus Years; Works from 1918–1931*, ed. O. Beggruen (New York, 2013), 17–19. I am grateful to Rémi Labrusse for providing me with a copy of his essay.

76. Boullata, "Classical Arab Art," 7.

77. Boullata, "Classical Arab Art," 11. On Klee's visit to Tunisia in 1914, see M. Baumgartner, "Le voyage de Paul Klee en Tunisie: Un mythe de l'histoire de l'art," in *Le voyage en Tunisie 1914: Paul Klee, Auguste Macke, Louis Moilliet* (Bern, 2014), 109–89.

78. Boullata, "Classical Arab Art," 13, 11.

79. Boullata, "Classical Arab Art," 8, 11.

Figure 6. Kamal Boullata, "Classical Arab Art and Modern European Painting: A Study in Affinities," *The Muslim World* 63, no. 1 (1973). Comparisons of Picasso's work with examples of medieval Arab manuscript painting.

Figure 7. An enchanted island, *Maqamat* of al-Hariri, illustrated by Yahya al-Wasiti, Baghdad (?), 1237 CE. Bibliothèque nationale de France, arabe 5847, fol. 121r. Photo: Courtesy of the Bibliothèque nationale de France. Color version available as an online enhancement.

not determining factor. But formalism stemming from a slavish imitation of Euro-American experiments with abstraction was as incapable as figuration of reflecting the social and political realities of the Arab lands. Rejecting both academic figuration and slavish imitation, Boullata traced a paradoxical trajectory from the experience of Western modernism through a reawakening of interest in historical Islamic and pre-Islamic art to an Arab modernism: "The pentacle works of Picasso, Klee and Matisse had pointed the way to a new generation of Arab artists who were able to look into the Arabs' inner realms of vision. An old mirror was shattered. The sun has reached high noon. The imitator was caught up by his own shadow and the only way left was to dig down to deeper levels of the ground upon which the Arab stood."[80]

This idea of a parallel inheritance transmuted in the making of an autochthonous modernism was a common theme from the 1950s onward.[81] Moreover, for many artists in the Arab world, the process of excavation to which Boullata refers led to the rediscovery of premodern artistic traditions, typified by renewed familiarity with the paintings of Yahya al-Wasiti, as well as the arabesque and calligraphy, whose formal values, linear qualities, and geometric sensibilities many saw as inherent in the images of the 1237 *Maqamat* manuscript.[82] For many

80. Boullata, "Modern Arab Art," 117. For the critiques of figuration and the imitation of Western artistic trends, see 119–21.

81. See e.g. Shabout, *Modern Arab Art*, 26–27.

82. See Flood, "Part 1," 44–46. The topic has been discussed by Saleem al-Bahloly in his doctoral dissertation and will be developed in a forthcoming article, "Memories of an Origin: Yahya al-Wasiti's Illustrations of the *Maqamat* of Hariri and the Modern Art of Baghdad," to be published in *Muqarnas* 35 (2018). Unfortunately, neither was available at the time of writing.

artists and writings, the paintings in the manuscript hinted at a modernist sensibility already intrinsic to Arab culture but which could be reinvested by a parallel engagement with contemporary transnational aesthetic currents.

Invoking Picasso's progressive engagement with non-European art, the 1951 manifesto of the Baghdad Group for Modern Art announced its intention to draw its sources from contemporary styles and schools of plastic art "and from the unique character of Eastern civilization," thereby honoring the earlier school of Iraqi art exemplified by the work of Yahya al-Wasiti, brought to an end by the Mongol sack of Baghdad in 1258.[83] Similarly, for Mohamed Khadda, while Arab artists might admire and study the work of Matisse, Klee, Mondrian, and Picasso, they also had potential predecessors and models in earlier Islamic paintings such as those in the 1237 *Maqamat* (figs. 7–8). Closing the circle, these European artists had themselves not only drawn on premodern Islamic art for inspiration, but on the very images of the *Maqamat* that proved so inspirational to modern Arab artists.[84] One crucial detail here is that the manuscript was (as Khadda notes) housed in Paris and so not easily accessible to artists in the Arab world, except in reproduction; one of the most important sources was the large-format French glossy magazine *L'Illustration*, in which color images of the 1237 *Maqamat* appeared in 1938, accompanying an article by Eustache de Lorey.[85]

Highlighting the complex intertwining of transnational and ethno-national discourse on abstraction and figuration, what is striking about these perspectives on modernism is their refusal to locate the possibility of a modern Arab art either in a derivative imitation of the arts of the Arab past or in the universalizing claims of a modernist present dominated by European actors, but instead within and beyond the complex imbrications between the two. Perceived as a diachronic formal mode in the arts of the Arab lands, abstraction was complex not only in its genealogy or temporality but also in its ontology. Writing of the role that pre- and early modern Islamic art played in the rise of abstraction among European avant-garde artists of the early twentieth century, Rémi Labrusse

Figure 8. A herd of camels, *Maqamat* of al-Hariri, illustrated by Yahya al-Wasiti, Baghdad (?), 1237 CE. Bibliothèque nationale de France, arabe 5847, fol. 101v. Photo: Courtesy of the Bibliothèque nationale de France. Color version available as an online enhancement.

suggests that its primary function was to contribute to "the blurring of boundaries between figurative and nonfigurative forms."[86] Much the same could be said of the catalyzing role played by historical Islamic art in the work of twentieth-century Arab artists and theorists. Hence, for example, in their work and writings artists as diverse as Kamal Boullata, Jawad Salim, and Mohamed Khadda could see in the figurative paintings of the 1237 *Maqamat* formal qualities verging on the abstract and calligraphic.

Among the paintings in the manuscript, that featuring an undulating rhythmic recession of swan-necked camels (fig. 8) was consistently singled out by Arab modernists due to its formal resemblance to the sinuous lines of Arabic calligraphy. To accompany his discussion of al-Wasiti, for example, Khadda reproduced a schematic

83. *Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents*, ed. A. Lenssen, S. Rogers, and N. Shabout (New York, 2018), 150–51. In 1972 the Iraqi Ministry of Information sponsored an art festival named after Yahya al-Wasiti in Baghdad; D. al-Azzawi, "Graphic Design and the Visual Arts in Iraq," in *Modern Art in the Arab World*, 371. In 1994, Palestinian artists established Al Wasiti Art Center in Jerusalem; V. Tamari, "Along New Paths: The New Visions Art Collective in Occupied Palestine," in *Modern Art in the Arab World*, 448.

84. Khadda, *Éléments pour un art nouveau*, 94.

85. E. de Lorey, "Le Miroir de Bagdad," *L'Illustration: Journal Hebdomadaire Universel*, no. 4996 (Dec. 3, 1938), n.p. See also Lenssen, "Adham Isma'il's Arabesque," 237.

86. R. Labrusse, "Islamic Arts and the Crisis of Representation in Modern Europe," in *A Companion to Islamic Art and Architecture*, ed. F. B. Flood and G. Necipoğlu (Hoboken, NJ, 2017), 2:1213. See also Labrusse, "Imaginary Logic," 27–28.

outline of the painting that emphasizes its calligraphic qualities (fig. 9).[87] In Khadda's painting *Diwan pour El Wassiti* (1973), the figurative forms of al-Wasiti's paintings appear to have transmuted into abstract, quasi-calligraphic forms (fig. 10), recalling Khadda's suggestion that "the exemplary itinerary of Yahya El Wassiti goes from figuration, passing through experiments with rhythm, space, writing, to end up in stylization, in abstraction."[88] Conversely, practitioners of calligraphic abstraction such as the Sudanese artist Ibrahim El-Salahi (b. 1930) could discover "animal and plant forms, sounds, human images" in the spaces between and within the elegant undulations of Arabic script.[89] The search for correspondences between Islamic calligraphy and abstract figurations was not confined to the Arab world: from the late 1940s onward, artists and theorists working in the Turkish Republic noted the "pictographic qualities" of traditional calligraphy, sometimes comparing it to the meandering lines of Picasso's abstract portraits.[90]

Each of the works cited here can be situated within the specificities of local, often national, context, but they also participated in transnational discourses within the Arab world, marked by a strong transhistorical sensibility that nonetheless acknowledged the historical ruptures caused by colonialism and other factors. The phenomenon is, perhaps, to be distinguished from other modernist traditions outside of Europe, in which advocates of abstraction saw the associated forms, materials, and practices as representing a self-conscious rupture with the past.[91] In both the Euro-American and Arab scholarship discussed here, formal resonances taken as expressive of common or comparable values of spirituality and transcendence were seen as either analogous or related, depending on the observer. Despite the difference in emphasis, both approaches produced the aesthetics of premodern Islamic art as peculiarly well situated to allegorize or even authorize the embrace of abstraction in and as modernity, a paradoxical quality emblematized at its most extreme by de Lorey's unlikely figure of Picasso the Muslim.

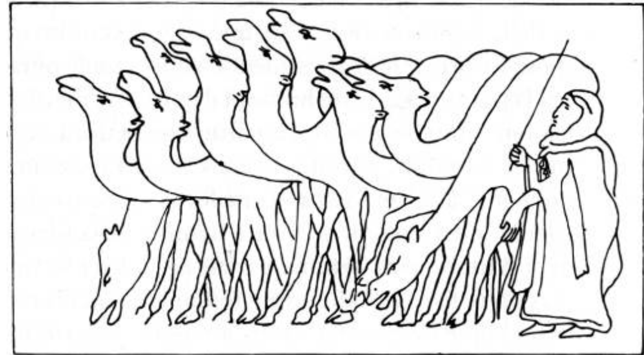


Image 1 : El Wassiti – Le troupeau de chameaux près de Médine.

Figure 9. Schematic drawing of figure 8 by Mohamed Khadda, *Éléments pour un art nouveau suivi des feuillets épars liés et inédits* (Algiers, 2015), 73. Courtesy of Najet Khadda.

However, as the reception of de Lorey's idiosyncratic theory concerning religious proscriptions, race memory, and the origins of Cubism suggests, even the most complex iterations of the relationship between premodern Islamic art and the aesthetics of modernism have been persistently shadowed by the question of the *Bilderverbot*. Just as the invocation of Picasso remains constant, even among those scholars who seek to debunk the totalizing impact of the idea of a *Bilderverbot*,[92] its specter hovered over even the most self-avowedly secular discourses on modernist art produced in the post–World War II Arab world, compelled as they were to engage with the long-established trope of an image prohibition.[93] Occasionally, it continued to be invoked as a causal factor. A lecture given by the Lebanese artist Saliba Douaihy (1915–94) in Beirut in 1948, in which he negotiates both the transnational manifestations and cultural specificities of the arabesque, presents its sinuous abstractions as a local response to the patterns

87. Khadda, *Éléments pour un art nouveau*, 72–73, fig. 1.

88. *Khadda: Peintures, aquarelles, gravures* (Paris, 1996), 30; Khadda, *Éléments pour un art nouveau*, 69–75, quote at 75. I am very grateful to Émilie Goudal and Nejat Khadda for their helpful communications with me relating to this painting.

89. Cited in I. Dadi, "Calligraphic Abstraction," in *A Companion to Islamic Art and Architecture*, 2:1301. Artists working in other parts of the Arab world, such as Algeria and Iraq, were aware of these developments in Sudan (ibid., 1304); Khadda, *Éléments pour un art nouveau*, 94.

90. N. Berk, "L'Apport de la Turquie à l'exposition 'Occident-Orient'," in *Occident-Orient*, 29–31; A. Elderoğlu, "Picasso ve Soyut Sanata Dair," *Fikirler Aylık Kültür ve Sanat Dergisi*, n.s., 5 (1947): 26–33. I am grateful to Ilhan Ozan for the latter reference.

91. See, e.g., S. M. Hassan, "The Modernist Experience in African Art: Visual Expressions of the Self and Cross-Cultural Aesthetics," in *Reading the Contemporary: African Art from Theory to the Marketplace*, ed. O. Oguibe and O. Enwezor (London, 1999), 222–24.

92. A recent essay by Houari Touati, which seeks to explain the nuanced differences between schools of Islamic law on the subject of figurative imagery, explains how, following proscriptions on representing the human face or on verisimilitude, a hard-line believer would have to reject Delacroix's *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* (1834) in favor of the later, more abstracted, 1950s versions of the same painting by Picasso: H. Touati, "Le régime des images figuratives dans la culture islamique médiévale," in *De la figuration humaine au portrait dans l'art islamique*, ed. H. Touati (Leiden, 2015), 21.

93. See, e.g., Choucair, "How the Arab Understood Visual Art."

Figure 10. Mohamed Khadda, *Diwan pour El Wassiti*, 1973. Oil on canvas, 54 x 73 cm. Private collection. Courtesy of Najet Khadda. Color version available as an online enhancement.

on imported Chinese and Indian textiles—a response shaped by the desire of the pious to avoid representing creatures with breath or spirit (*rūḥ*).[94] This was the artistic subject specifically discouraged in the hadith, which recommended instead the depiction of vegetation, a prescription long assumed to have fostered the development of the arabesque.

As I have tried to demonstrate, the perceived relationship between hadith, arabesque, and abstraction is intrinsic to the entangled historiography of Islamic and modern Arab art, not only in Europe and America. The instability that characterized the reception, perhaps even the constitution, of the arabesque as it oscillated between index of degeneration and inspirational paradigm allegorizes the ambivalent reception of abstraction itself across the *longue durée*. As Anneka Lenssen has noted in another context, the tensions between an ethno-cultural explanation for the genesis of the arabesque and one rooted in the *Bilderverbot* or religious transcendentalism defy any ultimate resolution.[95] In this, perhaps, they mirror the dichotomy between affinity and genealogy that underlies attempts to theorize the historical relations between avant-garde art making in Europe and the Arab world, and the relationship of both to premodern Islamic art.[96]

94. S. Douaihy, "Al-Arabīsk fī'l-ṣūra," *Al-Adib* 7, no. 3 (1948): 7, 10; Lenssen, *Shape of the Support*, 100–101. For other cases of the abstract qualities of art produced contemporaneously elsewhere in the Arab world sometimes being attributed to religious qualms about figuration, see Naef, *À la recherche*, 215.

95. Lenssen, "Adham Isma'il's Arabesque," 240.

96. The tensions between continuity and rupture, abstraction and figuration, inherent to the complex ontologies and temporalities of modern Arab art and its relation to the canonization and presentation of premodern Islamic art, are brilliantly engaged by the recent work of the Lebanese artist Walid Raad (b. 1967): F. B. Flood, "Staging Traces of Histories Not Easily Disavowed," in *Walid Raad*, ed. E. Respini (New York, 2015), 161–73; C. Elias, "The Museum Past the Surpassing Disaster: Walid Raad's Projective Futures," in *Dissonant Archives: Contemporary Visual Culture and Contested Narratives in the Middle East*, ed. A. Downey (London, 2015), 215–31. I am grateful to Chad Elias for providing me with a copy of his essay.