

The Divine Word and Islamic Art*

Seyyed Hossein Nasr

Abstract:

The Word of Allah is the origin and principle of Islamic art *par excellence*. Just as the Word descends from the unseen and unmanifest order to the visible and material realm, so too does the art that is based upon it descend from the 'formless' sonoral level to the formal visual plane. And just as the Word, once having entered the formal plane of calligraphy, 'develops' horizontally by becoming ever more complex, similarly Islamic art unfolds its diverse possibilities through the course of history and in numerous Muslim cultures. By continuously reaffirming the presence of the One in the many and Unity in diversity, Islamic art, through its multifarious forms, allows for all Muslims to gain access to the spiritual journey back to the Origin from which the Divine Word issues.

Keywords: Islamic art, Divine Word, Sacred art, traditional art, development of art, calligraphy, Quranic art, sonoral art, Quran recitation.

In seeking to understand the relation between the Divine Word (*kalimat Allāh*), which for Muslims is of course the revealed text of the Noble Qur'ān, and Islamic art, it is important to turn our attention to an important reality which concerns the outward manifestation of the Islamic revelation. If one studies carefully the way in which Islam grew on the earthly plane, one becomes struck by the fact that the outward signs of the revelation, such as Qur'ānic calligraphy, become more and more apparent in the plastic arts as one draws further away in time from the origin of the revelation. Today one often forgets that according to traditional Islamic sources, which are the only ones to matter for us, the Qur'ānic revelation was first received aurally by the Blessed Prophet (ﷺ) and only later was it written down. Before the revelation became visible in the form of calligraphy, it was an invisible sonoral revelation. In entering this earthly abode, the Qur'ānic revelation followed the metaphysically necessary trajectory from

* This article first appeared in 'SOPHIA: The Journal of Traditional Studies', Summer 2008, Vol. 14, No. 1; It is being reproduced here with the permission of the editor.

the Invisible (or absent) World (*'ālam al-ghayb*) to the Visible World (*'ālam al-shahādah*).

It is important to pause a moment and explain further the nature of a sonoral revelation because of its central importance for the understanding of the Islamic experience of the Divine Word and also for its consequence for Islamic art as a whole. Now, sound cannot be seen and therefore from the point of view of our natural external senses is associated with not only the invisible but also the immaterial, for in our natural experience of things we usually associate the material with the visible and palpable. Being immaterial, the sonoral refuses to become imprisoned in any earthly vessel. Sound in fact penetrates our body rather than being an object out there to be seen or felt. When we hear music or poetry, and, on the highest level, the Revealed Word, all of which are sonoral in nature, they break the barrier between us and the world outside of us and enter into our corporeal reality. While objects of plastic art remain objective to us, the sonoral arts seem to become part of our subjective reality without of course losing their objective reality.

The Qur'anic revelation, once manifested in this world through the agency of the archangel Gabriel, first came as a sonoral revelation which penetrated into the inner being of the Prophet and only later was it written in the form of calligraphy as the Sacred Text.

If for the moment we identify form with its corporeal aspect, we might say that the process of the manifestation of the Qur'ān was from the formless to the world of form. The Noble Qur'ān first descended vertically from the World of Divine Command (*'ālam al-amr*) into the heart of the Prophet, or from the Formless in the metaphysical sense through a series of descents to the world of form, and then manifested itself horizontally from sound to writing, a process which traced on the horizontal plane the transition from the formless to the world of forms, according to established metaphysical principles. This transition from the formless to the world of form has also been interpreted by certain Muslim sages as the transition from colourlessness to colour, here colourlessness referring to the unconditioned and formless truth and colour to the truth conditioned by formal constraints. The famous Sufi poet Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, for example, speaks of the link that relates colourlessness to colour when he compares colour to a cloud and colourlessness to the moon covered temporarily by that cloud.

The flowering of Islamic art itself follows this process and exemplifies this principle. First of all, the sacred art of Qur'ānic psalmody precedes in time the sacred art of Qur'ānic calligraphy, which itself unfolds from the original Kufic into many other distinct forms and styles. Secondly, when

one studies Islamic architecture, one sees that in the earliest mosques, the Divine Word is hardly depicted anywhere while the walls are completely white, a colour that in the domain of colours symbolizes the colourless. In these early mosques one experiences the ubiquitous presence of the Divine Word without its becoming identified with a particular form, like the ever present white colour which stands above any particular and distinct colour. Gradually, calligraphy, and also in many cases colour, make their appearance in the *mibrāb*, which is like the heart of the sacred space of the mosque and into which the Divine Word is uttered during the canonical prayers, symbolizing the process whereby the Qur'ān descended into the heart and the mind of the Blessed Prophet. And in the same way that from the heart and tongue of the Prophet the Qur'ān spread to those around him as sonoral revelation, then was written down and spread all over the Islamic community in both its sonoral and written forms, the calligraphic forms and colours spread from the *mibrāb* to the rest of the mosque, both inside and outside, and then to the rest of the urban setting and objects made by artisans. Gradually, they became an abiding reality of the whole of life of traditional Muslims, surrounding them everywhere.

The depiction of the Word of God in the form of beautiful calligraphy at a later stage of Islamic history is therefore in accordance with the metaphysical laws of manifestation which require the process of externalization to proceed from the invisible to the visible, from the formless to the formed and in this case from the audible to the visible and, on another plane, from the colourless, symbolized by white, to colours. Islamic art displays ever-greater use of the depiction of the Word of God in the form of Qur'ānic calligraphy as one draws further away from the source of the revelation. This should be more easily understood in light of the aforementioned principles and also the principle that manifestation involves a movement from unity to diversity and complexity with continuous reassertions of unity as long as a spiritual tradition is alive.

There is, however, another principle that is also at play here. The less one knows, the more one is in need of explanation and, also, the less aware one becomes of the presence of the Sacred, the more one is in need of external reminders of that presence. One can see this principle in action in many different religious climates. As for Islam, since its whole history lies before us, it is easy to observe how the living traditional community responds to this greater need for palpable reminders as the centuries go by. Gradually the use of Qur'ānic calligraphy, usually combined with symbolic geometric patterns which are also reminders of the presence of the One in the many, becomes ever more common until it becomes an ever present

reality reminding Muslims wherever they go in the city and also wherever they are within their private living spaces of the reality of God and His Word. We can see this process in going from the Mosque of the Prophet in Medina, on the basis of descriptions of it since the original edifice is no longer extant, to such early mosques as those of Khurasan, Yemen, Tunis, and Spain, to those of Ottoman Turkey and Safavid Persia. In the first case there is no mention of the use of calligraphy. In the second category calligraphy is found around the *mibrāb*, a pre-eminent example of it being the celebrated *mibrāb* of the *mezquita* in Cordova. In the third category the use of calligraphy is very extensive both inside and in the case of the many Safavid, or for that matter Seljuq and Mamluk mosques, outside of the mosque.

This unfolding from the state of formlessness to form and principial unity to manifestation in multiplicity is also to be seen on another level in the art of calligraphy itself. The earliest Qur'ānic calligraphy is of course the Kufic which is bound to the depiction of the Word of God more than any other Islamic style of calligraphy. This is a script that is difficult to read even by those whose mother tongue is Arabic. The letters seem to be closed upon themselves, refusing to reveal their inner secrets. And there is discontinuity in the script as if each letter or cluster of letters were a world unto itself. Kufic is like the bud of a flower folded upon itself. Then gradually this bud seems to open up into a full blooming flower in later calligraphic styles where lines become more explicit and the flow more continuous. After the development of the great classical styles such as the *thuluth* and the *naskh*, calligraphy becomes even more ornate and even occasionally somewhat baroque in some parts of the Islamic world, leading to what from the Islamic point of view is nothing but a kind of decadence. Fortunately, however, the classical styles continue in a vibrant way to this day, but to the extent that there is a "development" seen in the change of styles over the centuries, one can detect this movement from an enclosed formal reality to the unfolding of this reality, and in certain areas to the decadence of forms through excessive immersion in externalization and forgetfulness of the original unity. For Islamic calligraphy as a whole, however, in contrast to Western art, the forms that attained perfection over the centuries have remained vibrant and living forms and this includes the Kufic. One can therefore say that the development thus outlined is not essentially temporal but principial, although it does possess a temporal dimension. But since it is not only temporal, the various stages of the "flower" from the bud to the full bloom are also simultaneously alive and none of the traditional styles is of only historical interest.