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THE ORIGINS OF THE VISUAL ARTS IN THE ISLAMIC WORLD

This article examines the origin of visual arts in the ecumene of the Islamic world which, despite the absence of an outright prohibition of depiction of living beings in the Quran, is considered to be "something that is cursed by Islam." The centuries-old practice of Islamic art shows that its non-pictorial, yet reflective character, inherited from the ancient cults of the Western Semites, does not imply an absolute denial of an art form inspired by reality and its representation through visual images. Over the course of 1,500 years of its development, the art in the Islamic world was influenced by former and parallel artistic cultures, including those that existed long before Islam on the territory of its homeland – the Arabian Peninsula, washed by the Indian Ocean, the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf.

The urban population of pre-Islamic southern and northern Arabia, the Sabaean and Nabataean kingdoms came into contact with the ancient artistic cultures of Central Asia and Asia Minor, Mesopotamia, Palestine, Syria, Egypt, and Ethiopia. The Arabians actively mastered the forms and concepts of the Hellenistic, Iranian-Parthian, Ethiopian, and Egyptian visual arts and partially the ancient cultures of Central Asia. It was facilitated by the Hellenization of the East by the Greco-Macedonians; the development of overland and sea routes of the Silk Road at the end of the 2nd century BC; and the subsequent settlement of Arab tribes in various areas of Mesopotamia, Palestine, and Syria; and their contacts with the local population of Late Antiquity and Early Medieval culture of the Eastern Mediterranean region and the Iraqi-Iranian world of the Sasanian era.

The touch of the rich folklore heritage of Muslim Arabs with the literate civilizations of Western and Central Asia, and unwanted monumental sculpture and painting in the Islamized environment determined the elite nature of the visual arts in the medieval Islamic world and contributed to the development of subject miniatures as book illustrations or decoration for expensive goods.

Key words: *fine arts, Islamic World, artistic culture, Eastern Mediterranean, Central and Asia Minor.*
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FOR A LONG time, it was believed that the inhabitants of Arabia, both before and after the origin of Islam, were not familiar with the visual arts. This opinion in European scholarship undoubtedly prevailed due to the fact that the primary type of Islamic artistic culture, along with design, was and still remains Arabic calligraphy. This arose and developed in direct connection and in parallel with the creation and improvement of the handwritten form of the Quran. In addition, Western researchers have long considered the culture of the countries predominated by Islam from the standpoint of their own mentality, upbringing, and education. In 1946, Johannes Pedersen,[1] in his summary monograph *The Arab Book*, emphasized that while calligraphy "was created by Islam itself, inspired by reverence for the Divine Book," the visual arts "was not a Muslim invention; on the contrary, it was something that is cursed by Islam." He explained this obvious contradiction, on the one hand, by the rich artistic traditions of "two powerful cultures – Byzantine and Persian – from which the Islamic culture developed," on the other, by "Islam's incapacity to suppress the human desire to contemplate the phenomena of the surrounding world, conveyed in pictorial form." He also believed that it was only after the culture of Islam had overcome its

[1] Johannes Pedersen (1883–1977) – Danish scientist, theologian and Hebraist, author of the monograph *The Arab Book* (1946; English translation – 1984).

highest stage of development that Islamic visual arts finally "enjoyed flourishing, but always stood aback from the Quran" (*Pedersen* 1984: 89).

Today, this point of view is objectionable. The written sources, the works of modern Muslim scholars of Arabic art before and after Islam's expansion, as well as artistic monuments demonstrate that the visual images in cultures that have developed under the dominance of Islamic ideology is incorrectly explained by "Islam's incapacity to suppress human desire" in using the language of images. It is also wrong to interpret the phenomenon of visualization in Islamic art as a voluntary or involuntary violation of a religious prohibition, which is absent in the Quran – the main and most informative document of Islam. Lebanese researcher Assifa al-Halab emphasizes, "We do not find in the Quran an absolute prohibition on the representation of living beings and the very concept of an image as an artificially created image is explained in different ways. The worship of idols is strongly condemned. The creation of idols is equated with an attempt to create an image of God, which is impossible, because it contradicts the monotheism of Islam. On the other hand, an image can be perceived as a luxury item and the embodiment of beauty intended for delight. In exceptional cases, the ability to create an image can serve as an indirect proof of the power of the Almighty"(*Al-Khallab* 1999: 31–32).

In fact, the visual arts in Muslim society do not need to justify the absence or to prove the presence of images that capture the "phenomena of the surrounding world," since by its very nature it is not a *visual*, but a *reflective* art. The indisputable dominance of calligraphy and design stems from the conscious expression of any idea through an abstract rather than a concrete image. Being shrouded in a visual plastic form that is created by lines, paints, carving, molding, casting, imprinting or embroidery, the artistic image does not need the adequacy of objective reality; but, as a metaphor evoking associations of one kind or another it depends on the idea and skill of the performer as well as individual characteristics and the level of preparedness of the viewer who was brought up in the same cultural environment (*Starodub* 2010: 9–30).

At the same time, the centuries-old practice of Islamic art shows that its fundamentally non-pictorial character, inherited from the ancient cults of the Western Semites, does not mean an absolute denial of an art form inspired by reality and conveying it in recognizable visual images. Over the course of 1,500 years of development the art in the Islamic world was influenced by former and parallel artistic cultures including those that existed long before Islam on the territory of its homeland – the Arabian Peninsula.

Dozens of scientific breakthroughs in the second half of the 20th and early 21st centuries demonstrate that the most ancient cultures of Arabia left artistic monuments that significantly complement the history of world art. For example, in the territories of Oman and Saudi Arabia near the ancient caravan routes, finds of primitive type rock paintings and petroglyphs with graphic, silhouette, scraped, sometimes corrected or wholly painted images have been discovered. Usually these are groups of standing or running people, galloping horsemen, free-growing date palms, walking dromedaries, grazing cows, goats, horses, wild donkeys, dogs, and other domestic and wild animals. Also included are different sized individual pictures with scenes of rituals, hunting, and battles (*Clarke* 1975: 113–22; *Olsen, Bryant* 2013).

Like other ancient peoples of Asia Minor, the Arabians customarily placed royal statues and anthropomorphic memorial steles in public places. Reliefs on the facades of rock tombs, in the ruins of temples or on coins, sculptures of various sizes and shapes (whole or fragmentary), figurines made of stone or bronze, and the remains of floor mosaics show that the culture of southern and northern Arabia in the last centuries BC and the first centuries AD experienced the impact of the essentially different civilizations of Asia and Africa.

The reason for these influences lies not so much in the wars and conquests of one people by another, but in the broad-scale development of interregional trade and the formation of an extensive network of trade routes. The "road of incense" which delivered aromatic substances, spices, precious metals, and wood from southern Arabia to the Transjordan, Palestine, Egypt, Syria, and Mesopotamia already functioned during the period of the Old Testament. The Bible describes the sons of Israel observed "…a caravan of Ishmaelites[2] coming from Gilead,[3] with their camels bearing gum, balm, and myrrh, on their way to carry it down to Egypt" (*Genesis* 37:25, ESV).

The Sabaean kingdom[4] located on the coast of the Indian Ocean connected with the outside world by sea and overland caravan routes played a particularly prominent role in trade and cultural exchange, which is also mentioned in the Bible: "She came[5] to Jerusalem with a very great retinue, camels bearing spices and very much gold and precious stones...Moreover,

[2] In the Bible, Ishmaelites were a people or tribe, presumably Arab, who were considered the descendants of Ishmael (Ismail), the son of Abraham (Ibrahim), and the Egyptian slave Hagar (Arabic Hajar).

[3] Gilead, a hilly region in the Jordan region between northern Arabia and Palestine.

[4] The Sabaean kingdom, or Saba, in southern Arabia, the state of the Sabaeans, creators of one of the most ancient literate civilizations of the Near East; mentioned in the Bible and the Quran.

[5] The Queen of Saba, or Sheba, Arab *Bilkis*.

the fleet of Hiram,[6] which brought gold from Ophir,[7] brought from Ophir a very great amount of almug wood and precious stones.... And King Solomon gave to the queen of Sheba all that she desired, whatever she asked .... So she turned and went back to her own land…."(1 Kings 10: 2,11,13, ESV).

The Arabians actively borrowed their forms and ideas from Hellenistic, Iranian-Parthian, Ethiopian, and to some extent the Egyptian cultures from the later dynasties. They also borrowed from Greco-Romans and partially from the ancient cultures of Central Asia. This was due to the long-term functioning of the land and sea routes of the Silk Road. The Southern Sea Route connected India's trade centers with southern Arabian ports in the Gulf of Aden and the Bab el-Mandeb Strait which was closely guarded by the Arabs (*Tarn* 1949: 221). The main place for unloading ship cargo was Aden (Sabean Adana) located near the Bab el-Mandeb Strait and separating Yemen from Ethiopia. Around 220 AD, Chinese merchants changed their usual routes to Syria via Palmyra or Edessa,[8] and preferred to send their caravans through Iran to Mesopotamia and to the lower reaches of the Tigris and Euphrates which flowed into the Persian Gulf and from there by sea around Arabia.

Thus, the urban population of southern and northern Arabia, long before Islam, engaged in the complex processes of contact and interweaving of the ancient artistic cultures from Central Asia, Anatolia, Mesopotamia, Palestine, Syria, Egypt, and Ethiopia.

The shaping of the extensive network of the Silk Road brought about early resettlement of Arab tribes in various regions of Mesopotamia, Palestine, and Syria. This included their contacts with the local population and, at the same time, their connection with the Middle East during Late Antiquity and the Early Medieval period. Residents in city-states of the Hellenized East such as Hatra in northern Iraq and Palmyra in the Syrian Desert were ethnically close to the Arabs (*Schlumberger* 1985: 71–90, 108–128; *Starodub* 2011: 1-38), not to mention the northern Arabian Nabataean Kingdom and its capital Petra.[9] The literary and artistic culture of the Nabataeans played an important role in the formation of Arabic language and art and in the civilizational ties of Arabia with Syria-Palestine.

The cultures of two early medieval Christian Arab principalities – the Lakhmids[10] and the Ghassanids[11] – served as intermediaries that fostered Arab's acquaintance with the civilizations of Iran and Byzantium in the pre-Islamic and early Islamic period. The Lakhmids are associated with the legends of the fabulously beautiful palaces of al-Havarnak and Sadir. The Islamic art historian Oleg Grabar has briefly stated that they introduced "a significant number of Iranian features into the Semitic world of the Arabs." The Ghassanids are only known for their financial aid in the construction of religious and civil buildings (*Ettinghausen, Grabar, Jenkins-Madina* 2001: 4). It is still impossible to identify any fine or decorative art as well as architectural monuments as specifically Ghassanid and, thus, only possible to assume that the Ghassanids made a certain contribution in the formation of pro-Byzantine trends in the art schools of the Umayyad state ,[12] whose metropolis was located on their territory.

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From the 1st millennium BC until the first centuries AD, long and enduring visual art traditions developed in the ancient states of southern Arabia, predominately in the kingdoms of Saba, Kataban,[13] Hadhramaut and Himyar.[14] During excavations at Marib (the capital of Saba), Timna (the capital of Kataban) and other southern Arabian centers, archaeologists discovered bronze and alabaster statues with various shapes, sizes and purposes, along with reliefs, memorial steles, and gravestones. Additionally, religious objects with sculptural details were discovered. All of these cultural objects demonstrate the high level of various techniques utilized for processing metal and stone. Many of these finds are now exhibited or stored in various museums around the

[6] Hiram, king of Tyre (an island in the Eastern Mediterranean region, now within the borders of Lebanon), ruled during the reign of kings David and Solomon (Josephus Titus Flavius, book 8, ch. 2: 6).

[7] Ophir, a legendary country mentioned in the Bible, a supplier of gold and jewelry; perhaps the name of any locality that in biblical times played the role of a warehouse for Indian goods (*Tarn* 1949: 221).

[8] Edessa, now the city of Sanliurfa in southeastern Turkey.

[9] The Nabataean kingdom (3rd century BC – 106 AD), was an ancient state in northern Arabia, in the historical region of Edom, or Idumea, located in parts of modern Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Israel, and Syria.

[10] The Lakhmids (Arabic Banu Lahm) were rulers of the Arab principality (c. 380-602) in northeastern Arabia, with their capital in Hira (south of Basra; now the city of Al-Hira in Iraq). They served as vassals of the Iranian Sasanian Empire.

[11] The Ghassanids, or Hassanids (Arab. Banu Hassan) were rulers of the Arab principality (c. 463-636) in the territories between the Euphrates and the Gulf of Aqaba with their capital in Jabia (80 km south of Damascus). They were dependent on Byzantium.

[12] The Umayyads (661-750) were the first dynasty of caliphs ("successors" of the prophet Muhammad) and ruled the first Muslim state also called the Arab Caliphate.

[13] Kataban, an ancient state in today's southern Yemen with the capital Timna (9th – 1st centuries BC).

[14] Himyar, or the kingdom of the Himyarites, existed from 110 BC – 599 AD.

Fig. 1. Stele of Iglum, the Camel Driver. 1th-3nd centuries. Alabaster. H. 55 cm. From South Arabia. Louvre, Paris (inv. No. AO1029). Photo: Jastrov. URL: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Stele_Iglum_Louvre_AO1029.jpg

world.[15] They testify not only to the amazing mastery of material and work, but also to a variety of subjects, iconographic types, and artistic styles. Changes in the form, artistic technique, representation of themes, and the methods used for interpreting the figure of a person or animal can be observed in these works from different historical eras or those dating from the same period. These indicate the undoubted perceptiveness of their creators towards the traditions and stylistic features of other cultures such as Ethiopian, Egyptian, and Assyro-Babylonian. Hellenistic influence is noticeable following the campaigns of Alexander the Great. The largest number of cultural materials from the era of the Himyarites, who subjected the lands of Yemen to their rule, have survived to this day.

An alabaster burial stele in the Louvre collection, dated to the 1st – 3rd centuries, is a remarkable example of the synthesis of autochthonous and borrowed traditions. The front side of the vertical slab is crowned with two rows of a southern Arabian inscription.[16] Two bas-reliefs carved in the body of the stone, which serve as ornamentation one below the other, are separated by a border with the recognizable motif of a "running" vine with grape clusters and leaves. In the monuments of eastern Hellenistic art this pattern replaced the classical meander. The artistic concept of the stele as a whole with the composition of each of its bas-reliefs individually can be considered a link between Middle Eastern antiquity and the Arab Middle Ages. The bas-reliefs of the stele convey the typical intricately intertwined features of the past and the distinctive characteristics of the future. The upper bas-relief depicts a funerary feast which differs from the usual representation of this scene in Greco-Roman art or in the sculptures of Palmyra (*Starodub* 2011: 222–225). The frieze's composition, extending from right to left, includes three characters—the deceased, sitting on a folding stool with a ritual bowl in his hand; his servant, carrying cups of wine, and probably, his wife who holds an object that appears to be an *oud*, or an Arab lute. Thus, this scene foresees not only the direction of Arabic writing, but also some iconographic schemes of the Islamic period. The lower scene depicts a rider on a horse, positioned on the right, with a long pole urging a camel walking in front, positioned on the left. It differs from the dynamic compositions of similar themes in Islamic art only by the archaic and rigid figures which are characteristic of the sculptures of pre-Hellenistic Near Asian antiquity (Fig. 1).

In the residential quarter of Qaryat al-Faw,[17] excavations within the buildings revealed a partially preserved bronze statue with an eloquent head with a wig (Fig. 2) which dates to the same period as the Iglum stele. It testifies to the existence of a unique style created by the fusion of ancient Arabian and borrowed

[15] Rich collections of visual art of ancient southern Arabia are kept in the National Museum of Yemen in Sana, in the Louvre in Paris, in the art galleries of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, and the Walters Museum in Baltimore (USA).

[16] The inscription with the name of the deceased – Iglum, son of Saadillat from Kariot – calls on the southern Arabian god Astar of the East to strike anyone who destroys the slab (*Calvet, Robin* 1997: 107–108).

[17] Qaryat al-Faw is a small settlement in Saudi Arabia on the northwestern border of the Rub al-Khali desert (*Al-Ansary* 1982; 2010: 310–364).

Table I (Fig. 2 – 5). Kar'yat al-Fao

Fig. 2. The head of a man. 1st century BC. Bronze, casting. H. 40 cm. Museum of Archeology, King Saud University, Riyadh (inv. No. 119 F 13). Photo: Wolfgang Sauber. URL: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pergamon-Museum_-_Bronzekopf.jpg Fig. 3. "House-tower". Fragment of a wall painting. 3rd century BC – 3rd century. 59x64 cm. Museum of Archeology, King Saud University, Riyadh (inv. No. 29 F 22). Photo: Wolfgang Sauber. URL: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/9/96/Pergamon-Museum_-_Wandmalerei_1.jpg (accessed 05/28/2021). Fig. 4. A fragment of a mural with a Sabean inscription. 1st - 2nd centuries. 53x36 cm. From the residential quarter Karyat al-Fao. National Museum. Riyadh (inv. No. 2182) URL: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pergamon-Museum_-_Wandmalerei_2.jpg (accessed 05/28/2021). Fig. 5. A fragment of a mural with zodiacal motives. 50x29 cm. Museum of Archeology, King Saud University, Riyadh (inv. No. 238 A 9). Photo: Wolfgang Sauber. URL: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/5c/Pergamon-Museum_-_Wandmalerei_4.jpg (all - appeal 05/27/2021)

Greco-Roman traditions. Four fragments from paintings displayed at the exhibition Roads of Arabia[18] are also made with this same technique (in three colors – black, red and yellow on white plaster). They generally compose a single style grouping and differ from each other in aspects of style, dating, and scene whose true meaning can only be speculated. The earliest date for this group (3rd century BC – 3rd century AD) is accepted as a painting of a two-dimensional image of a multi-stored, square tower (Table I: Fig. 3). Like the modern multitiered tower houses in the cities and villages of southern Arabia, the depicted building stands on a high stone base with supporting walls and was probably made of mud bricks. Reinforced with horizontal and vertical beams, it appears to be divided into rows of squares and rectangles, and "wrapped" like a veil by a red diamond grid with black dots in the center of each diamond. In the lower part of the tower, which is not visible due to its partial destruction, was probably something similar to a staircase with a rectangular entrance in a double frame. It is preceded by a protruding triangular arch filled with a silhouette picture of a monumental nude male figure standing in a pose that vaguely resembles an antique statue of a wrestler or athlete. Asymmetrically positioned windows and/or balconies in the middle and two upper tiers include schematic half-figures of people with hairstyles similar to Egyptian wigs. The upper part of the building resembles a three-staged terrace with three towers. On the left and right sides are silhouettes of mountain goats jumping from the lower steps. These goats were considered to be sacred animals in the southern Arabian context endowed with protective power since ancient times (*Al-Ansari* 1982: Fig. 164).[19] This painting's style, with its hazy recollections ambiguously hinting at the shared features from the arsenal of late Egyptian or Greco-Roman visual arts, and like the Iglum stele, has some typical characteristics of medieval Arab miniatures. For example, the combination of a conventional form and specific content with vivid imagery and metaphorical artistic language.

The second painting from Qaryat al-Faw (Table I: Fig. 4) dated to the 1st – 2nd centuries provides the assumption for the existence of a local school of Eastern Hellenistic art which was distinguished by an extremely organic synthesis of borrowed and original features. A surviving section depicts a scene of worshiping the deity (a swarthy face with wide large eyes contoured with thick curly hair) whose head is apparently being crowned with a wreath by two genii (the right figure shows an incomplete figure of a young man in a white chiton and a wreath while the left figure holds only a palm). The image of a rambling vine with fine tendrils, wide curly leaves, and a rich cluster of grapes almost in bas relief resembles the cult of the Greek god of greenery and winemaking – Dionysus. This bold, almost sculptural, drawing attempts to give the object or figure volume and indicates the assimilation of some painting techniques from Late Antiquity; but the traditional frontality of the composition, the fixation of the figures that seem to be out of time, and the hypertrophied size of the image of the main character remain unchanged.

The third sample, also dated to the 1st – 2nd centuries,[20] is composed of several parts and itself could be part of a larger wall mural that included several scenes. Despite its damage, it is possible to reconstruct the feast scene which is basically made in accordance to the tradition of the Eastern Hellenistic style, but with unusual details. The center of the fragment depicts a frontal image of a semi-recumbent swarthy man on a banquet bed with a flower wreath on his black hair. He has "braids" on the sides of his face and almond-shaped black eyes whose gaze is indefinitely directed above the scene's viewer. However, his clothes are not typical for the inhabitants of Arabia. They are a "sleeveless vest" made with a deep V-neck and cuffs with red straps over both shoulders. The lower part of the body is covered with a long-pleated skirt and under are his bare feet hanging from the bed which appear as if they are turned outward. In his left hand, with his arm bent at the elbow, this obvious main character holds a bowl of wine, shaped like a *kilik*.[21] A similar vessel is being handed to him by a person depicted on the right, standing in full length and dressed in clothing of the same type, yet with a wide white "collar" around the neck. His reduced scale with face in profile with has gaze toward the main figure possibly indicates a cupbearer or a servant. On the opposite side, at the edge of the bed, is the profile of the head and neck of an elegantly drawn horse

[18] The "Roads of Arabia" (*Roads of Arabia: Archaeology and History of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia*), is a mobile exhibition of historical and artistic monuments from the collections of the Museum of Archaeology of the King Saud University and the National Museum in Riyadh. This exhibition, held between 2010–2015, traveled in Europe (Paris, Barcelona, St. Petersburg, Berlin, and Rome); the USA (Washington, Pittsburgh, Houston, Kansas City, San Francisco); and in Asia with some changes to the selection and number of exhibits due to replenishment with new finds.

[19] The size of this fragment is 59 × 64 cm and housed in the Museum of the King Saud University, Riyadh.

[20] From the residential quarter of Qaryat al-Faw . Paints on a white background. 58 x 32 cm. Museum of Archaeology, King Saud University, Riyadh (103 F. 12). Il. See: https://kawa-news.com/en/qaryat-al-faw-remarkable-lost-found-arabian-treasure/ (accessed on 05/17/2021).

[21] A *kilik* in Ancient Greece was a shallow drinking bowl with two horizontal loop-shaped handles with a low foot.

looking at its owner. A low, white wall separates him from a larger female figure in the foreground. Judging by the pomegranate in front of her, she is sitting at the table. The gaze of her large almond-shaped eyes is also directed toward the viewer and her hair is hidden by a pearl diadem which is crowned with a cylindrical headdress possessing a scalloped top lined with a grid of red rhombi with black dots (identical to the facade of the tower in the first painting). The woman's neck and chest are lavishly adorned with necklaces and a wall embroidery resides overhead. A shawl is thrown over her rounded shoulders.

The sample's uniqueness lies in the fact that it was found during excavations of the residential quarter of Qaryat al-Faw and not in the ruins of a temple or tomb in the sacred district of the city. The presentation does not exclude a sacred reading of the scene; however, it remains ambiguous since it fits neither into the "funerary" nor "temple" context. The "banquet scenes" of pre-Islamic art from the Middle East often represent a funerary feast. As a rule these scenes are made in the form of a stone relief (as on the Iglum stele) or in the form of statuary or a high-relief group on the cover of a sarcophagus (as in the Yarkhai hypogeum in Palmyra from the 2nd century BC, National Museum of Damascus, *Starodub* 2021: Fig. 10 a). A musical instrument, vessels with wine, a rambling vine with clusters of grapes can also portray attributes of a sacred act performed by a person during his lifetime. The popularity of these festivities in the Romanized area of the Eastern Mediterranean region during the first centuries AD confirm the numerous token pieces discovered in the excavations of the temples of Palmyra. These small terracotta tokens decorated with reliefs gave the right of the holder to participate in rituals of religious feasts which were held on the holidays of certain deities (*Ingholt, Seyrig, Starcky, Caquot* 1972; *Krzyžanowska* 1987: 285). As it pertains to the present topic, this fragment from Qaryat al-Faw is interesting not only as an example of ancient Arabian wall painting, but also as a possible prototype (or one of the prototypes) of the semantic and compositional core of the works of the "princely cycle" which distinguished itself as a special iconographic type in the visual arts of the medieval Islamic world.

More puzzling than the others is the scene of the fourth fragment of the paintings from al-Faw,[22] which is attributed the 1st – 3rd centuries (Tab. I: Fig. 5). The viewer is attracted by the Eye that exists by itself, outside of any physical body. Its shape is similar to the eye of an ostrich and looks to the right. The black pupil with a semi-oval shape seems bottomless against a pale yellowish-white background surrounded by a triple frame of red and orange eyelids in partially-worn black contours and with a triple fringe of small, thin, and scant black eyelashes. The eye appears to be set on a flat red rod (possibly a sword), held vertically thanks to a "stand" of three multi-colored triangles strung one on top of the other which schematically repeats the shape of an eye with a large pupil. At the top, the rod ends with a round wide "loop." Red rays slightly curved at the ends come from the bow-shaped surface of the upper eyelid similar to tongues of fire. The "ray" to the right of the rod, under the lower eyelid, has the shape of a human leg. This type of profile, with minor variations, is later repeated in medieval depictions of characters in miniature scenes made on ceramics, glass, metal, or paper. From all sides, a red fox, a white leopard, a lion, a black scorpion with a belligerently raised stinger, a poorly distinguishable centaur, and a snake coiled into a lasso are marching (from above in a clockwise direction) against the Eye. On the right side above the lion's back, is a horn (presumably of a ram) along with a clearly visible southern Arabian inscription which epigraphists consider unreadable. Scholars of the artistic monuments at Qaryat al-Faw have misinterpreted these images in their attempt to explain its bazaar nature as a set of Zodiac signs which depict a horoscope for the owners of the structure (*Al-Ansari* 1982).

The British Asiatic scholar, Finbar Barry Flood, however, proposed a different interpretation for this fragment from al-Faw seeing an early analogy with the murals of the 9th-10th centuries from Nishapur (Khorasan), In his opinion, it should be interpreted as "amulet, [an] item with apotropaic or talismanic properties." Exploring the nature of ancient and medieval images intended to protect and ward off harm, Flood pointed to the unusual iconography and unclear meaning characteristic of the "interregional ecumene of Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages; [and] the circulation of specific types of apotropaic images." Among these, the researcher singled out the image of the Long-Suffering Eye which is found on amulets, mosaics, wall paintings, and reliefs from the Mediterranean region, Arabia, and Iran. The Nishapur murals portrays "an evil eye attacked by animals and people who seek to pierce it." This description resembles the scene on the mural fragment from al-Faw. Flood found analogies closer to the latter in compositions from pre-Islamic Iranian seals that portray images of an eye attacked by arrows, birds, dogs, scorpions, and snakes. The purpose of these images, in his opinion, was "to show not an organic living eye, but an artificial object representing it" (*Flood* 2016: 34, 47).

This observation is especially important for understanding the reasons for the formation of visual arts long before the rise of Islam in the heart of Arabia. It was inherently non-pictorial, although it ab-

[22] 50 × 29 cm. Museum of the King Saud University, Riyadh.

sorbed recognizable features of late Hellenistic and (indirectly) Roman artistic images and techniques due to the penetration of specific monuments into Mecca and other centers.

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The Muslim Arabs who left the Arabian Peninsula appeared in a cultural environment that was rather familiar to them thanks to centuries of interregional trade and political ties. Thus, no unbridgeable gulf existed between the aesthetic ideas of recent Arabians and the artistic views of the indigenous population of the cities of Syro-Palestine, Iraq, and Iran. This is demonstrated by paintings and sculptures discovered during excavations at abandoned Umayyad residences known as the "castles of the desert." These are sometimes characterized by an unexpected mixture or proximity to pagan and Christian subjects along with techniques and methods adopted from different, sometimes ideologically opposing, cultures.

For example, stylistic similarities are easily noticed on the walls and arches of the palace hall and baths of Qusayr Amra.[23] These murals portray similarities in the images of dancers, artisans, bathers, foreign kings, or allegorical characters as well as in the pictures of regal receptions, tournaments, hunting, and recreation. The same is true with the Fayum portraits from the Roman period of the 3rd century and Coptic painting originating over the successive four centuries. Additionally, floor mosaics of synagogues and churches in Palestine and Syria between the end of the 4th to the early 7th century also provide similar comparisons. Some pictures evoke images of Central Asian and even Indian painting of the 6th and 7th centuries (Table II: Fig. 6-9). Research led by the Spanish Archaeological Mission between 1971-74 revealed that the surviving hall with its adjacent bath complex was part of a villa, apparently built in the 710s (*Almargo, Caballero, Zozaya, Almargo* 1975: 117-121).

The magnificent carved stone frieze from the southern facade of Mshatta, an unfinished construction of a "desert castle" in Jordan[24] quite organically combines the traditions of at times unusual and very remote origins in both time and space. One very peculiar concept of the frieze, which is made in the form of a wide ornamental ribbon and divided along its entire length from top to bottom by a relief carved border, creates a zigzag which portrays huge, pointed triangles with alternating up and down peaks. Images from nature (grape vines, rosettes, flowers, acanthus leaves) are the predominant first impression from the sculptural facade of Mshatta. It clearly demonstrates the artistic language of Late Antiquity which conveys specific forms in a somewhat generalized, decorative way. The symmetrical composition of the pattern and the rhythmic repetitions of vines twisted in a spiral are more characteristic of Eastern Mediterranean art of Late Antiquity and the early Byzantine Middle Ages. The composition of reliefs – which includes heraldic schemes and motifs via a simplified depiction of birds or fantastical winged lions or griffins on the sides of a vase—evokes associations with Iranian art of the Sasanian era (224–651). In this organic interweaving of Late Antiquity and early Byzantine and Sasanian features, the figure of a "gnome" in a cap inscribed in the apex of the extreme left triangle of the facade and surrounded by a vine makes a completely unexpected appearance. These irregular proportions and fabulous features of this strange character resemble a high relief depiction of a "dwarf" on a Sabean stele from the 5th to 1st centuries BC (Table III, Fig. 10–12). Scholars presume that this latter unparalleled image on a stele housed at the Walters Art Museum may be a temple dancer, as "dwarfs" were commonly used as dancers and ritualists in ancient Egypt and may have played a similar role in ancient southern Arabia."[25] The special role of dwarfs in ancient Egyptian ritualistic practice is confirmed by a response from Pepi II[26] to a message from a royal official about the successful acquisition of a "pygmy" in "the country of the inhabitants of the horizon ... where the sun is born and rises." The extremely pleased pharaoh commanded the official to carefully protect and deliver "this dwarf... alive, whole, and healthy for the dancing of god, for amusement, for the entertainment of the king of Upper and Lower Egypt.... My Majesty wishes to see this dwarf, more than the gifts of the mines and Punta" (*Alexandrova* 2019: 181, 177).

In this neighborhood of art monuments, seemingly incompatible in one cultural space, is also found

[23] Qusair Amra (Little Amr Palace) in Jordan, 100 km east of Amman, was first examined in 1898 and 1901 by the Austrian archaeologist A. Musel. He suggested that it was the residence of the Ghassanids (*Musil* 1907).

[24] Mshatta (Arab. Mushatta) are the ruins of the residence of the late Umayyads in the desert 35 km south of Amman. Discovered in 1865 and published by the English traveler Sir Austen Henry Layard (1817-1894) (*Layard* 1887: 114-115). According to various hypotheses, it could have been built by the Sassanids, Byzantines, Lakhmids, Ghassanids, or Umayyads. It is attributed to the latter thanks to a brick found during excavations in 1964 with an Arabic inscription from the second quarter of the 8th century (Islam 2000: 77-78). Reconstruction of the façade with original reliefs are displayed at the Museum of Islamic Art in Berlin (*Kröger* 2003: 117–125).

[25] See museum description: https://art.thewalters.org/detail/76489/figure-of-a-standing-woman/

[26] Pepi II was Pharoah of the 4th dynasty and ruled approximately 2279-2219 BC.

Table II (Fig. 6 – 9). The frescoes of Qusayr Amra' "desert castle" in Jordan. First half of the 8th century

Fig. 6. Female figure. Fragment of painting in the reception hall. Museum für Islamische Kunst, Berlin (inv. No. I 1264). Photo by the author. Fig. 7. "Dancing-girl". Fragment of painting in the reception hall. Photo by H. Brahe, P. Wandel URL: https://www.davidmus.dk/en/collections/islamic/dynasties/umayyads/architecture/qusayr-amra-bath-house-jordan-705-715 (accessed 05/27/2021). Fig. 8. " Gift bearers". Fragment of painting in the reception hall. Photo: D.C. Waugh. https://archnet.org/sites/4772/media_contents/126872 (accessed 05/27/2021). Fig. 9. "Bear playing the zither." Fragment of painting in the baths. Photo by the author

the unfinished late Umayyad "castle of the desert" – Khirbet al-Mafjar[27] near Jericho. The magnificent floor mosaic from the exedra of a small bathhouse, which portrays a fruit-bearing tree with a grazing gazelle and a scene of another gazelle being hunted by a lion, demonstrates a high-level of professional skill and an organic synthesis of features from late Sasanian and early Byzantine painting. Not quite as professional, yet no less attractive, is the ceiling's stucco molding that adheres to the Late Antiquity characteristics, especially the "rosette" of the plafond with the high-relief of a woman's head immersed in a magnificent wreath of acanthus leaves (Table IV, Figs. 13, 14). This sculptural ceiling from Khirbet al-Mafjar[28] closely resembles the famous Aiyrtam frieze.[29] This is a clear example of the vitality of the eastern Hellenistic styles that took shape and developed in the first centuries of our era in the vast territories of Western and Central Asia and, to one degree or another, manifested themselves in the art of the Umayyad Caliphate which coexisted and competed with the influence of the rich artistic heritage of Sasanian Iran.

The free and sporadic use of various traditions is probably explained by the fact that craftsmen from different countries participated in the creation of monumental art from the Umayyad era (661-750) and early Abbasids.[30] Either voluntarily or involuntarily, these styles have found themselves in the same "grouping." For this reason, artwork from the Arab Caliphate's first centuries is extremely individual and stylistically heterogeneous. Their scenes and design mode are not repeated and differ in terms of interpretation and artistic merit even in the design of one building or from the products of one workshop. Some of them are undoubtedly associated with the Iranian tradition. By example is the Prince's Head, a fragment of a painted royal statue in the Berlin Museum of Islamic Art (Fig. 15). The scholarly opinion, reflected in the explication to this exhibit, attributes the statue to an indefinite period between the 7th or 8th centuries spanning the reigns of the Iranian Sasanian Empire and the Arab Umayyad dynasty. "The young prince wears a crown, but not a beard, which was common in the Sasanian era. Experts suggest that this person may be a prince of the Islamic era. Unfortunately, we cannot ask him."

Another vivid example are the two mysterious floor (!) murals from the Umayyad castle of Qasr al-Khair al-Garbi.[31] Excavated in the Syrian desert near ancient Palmyra, they were found on the floors of rooms with stairs leading to the second floor (*Starodub* 2021: 249). They demonstrate the parallel use of images, scenes, and stylistic methods borrowed from Late Antiquity (i.e. Gaia and the Sea Centaurs;[32] Musicians and the Horseman[33]) and Iranian repertoire and style, partially including Arabic stylistic features.

The stylistic diversity of Islamic art expanded during the era of the early Abbasids, when, as R. Ettinghausen noted, "the Iranian component became predominant" (*Ettinghausen* 1962: 67). At the same time, the small fragments of murals from the Iraqi Palace of Caliphs[34] with almost portrait-like images of female and male faces (including the striking expressiveness on the face of a saint (?) with a halo), possess features from Byzantine painting (Table V, Fig. 16-18).

A fresco from the same Samarra palace with a plain image of two women frozen in place during their dance and pouring wine into bowls with a theatrically symbolic gesture,[35] testifies to the inheritance of the techniques and subjects of imperial art from the ancient kingdoms of Mesopotamia and Iran by the artists of the ethnically colorful Abbasid Caliphate (*Starodub* 2010: Fig. 62). In Old and New Babylonia, in Assyria, and in the Iranian state of the Achaemenids, pouring wine into bowls or offering vessels with wine was traditionally part of the temple and court rituals.

The artistic style of Samarra, which for several decades during the 9th century was a hotbed of new ideas, spread and acquired local variations for transforming pictorial forms into features or decorative motifs in centers near and far from both the Islamic state's eastern and western provinces. For example, the reliefs in palaces of Central Asian rulers of the 10th -12th centuries, the very image of living beings underwent a transformation. The interplay of lines and planes transitioned it into a symbolic decorative sign

[27] Built between 739–744, some finds are located in the Rockefeller Archaeological Museum, Jerusalem.

[28] Now in the collection of the Rockefeller Archaeological Museum in East Jerusalem.

[29] This sculptural frieze with alternating figures of musicians and lush acanthus leaves was discovered in 1932-1933 during excavations at Aiyrtam, a Bactrian settlement from the Kushan kingdom era, 1st -3rd centuries, located 18 km east of the city of Termez in Uzbekistan.

[30] The Abbasids (750-1258) were a dynasty of caliphs who overthrew the Umayyads, moved their metropolis to Iraq and in 762-766 and founded a new residence in Madinat al-Salam (City of Peace), which soon grew into Baghdad. In 836-892 the capital of the Abbasids was Samarra on the Tigris (*Starodub* 2010: 78–83).

[31] Both murals are in the collection of the National Museum of Damascus (Department of Islamic Art).

[32] URL: http://www.museumwnf.org/images/zoom/objects/isl/sy/1/1/1.jpg

[33] URL: http://www.museumwnf.org/images/zoom/objects/isl/sy/1/2/1.jpg

[34] Built in 836 for the founder of the Abbasid capital in Samarra, Caliph al-Muh'tasim (833-842).

[35] Prior to the events of 2003, the mural was in the National Museum of Iraq in Baghdad.

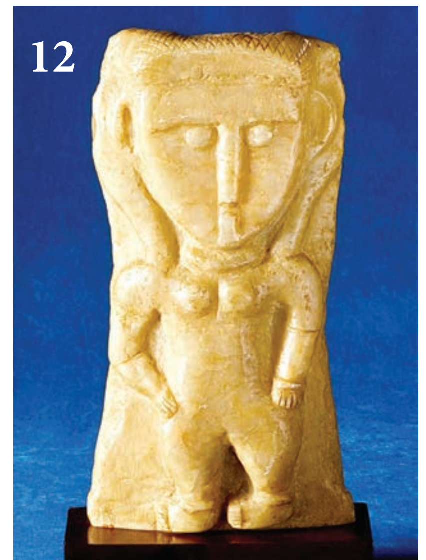

Table III (Fig. 10 – 12). South façade of al-Mshatta's "desert castle" in Jordan. Limestone. H. 5.07 m, length - 33 m. 743-744 (?). Museum für Islamische Kunst, Berlin (inv. No. I. 6163). (Both: photo by the author)

Fig. 10. General view of the frieze. Fig. 11. "Dwarf". Fragment of a frieze. Fig. 12. Figurine of a dwarf dancing-girl (?) Alabaster. H. 31.5 cm. South Arabia. 5th – 1st centuries BC. Walters Art Museum. Baltimore (inv. No. 21.50). URL: https://art.thewalters.org/detail/76489/figure-of-a-standing-woman/ (accessed 05/28/2021)

Table IV. (Fig. 13 – 15). Khirbet al-Mafjar. Jordan. Umayyads. About 739 AD

Fig. 13. Floor mosaic of the exedra of the "Divan" (the Audience Chamber) in the bathhouse. Fig. 14. The sculptural ceiling of the throne room in the bathhouse building. Archaeological Museum. J.D. Rockefeller, Jerusalem (both: source: Islam. Kunst und Architectur. Köln, 2000. S. 87, 82). Fig. 15. Head of a prince wearing a crown and diadem. Stucco with coloring. H. 19.5 cm. Nizamabad. Eastern Iran. 7th-8th centuries. Museum für Islamische Kunst, Berlin (Inventory No. I 4891a). Photo by the author

Table V (Fig. 16 – 18). Fragments of the decor of the Palace of the Caliphs in Samarra on the Tigris. Abbasids. 839-869 years. Museum für Islamische Kunst, Berlin (from the German excavations in Samarra 1911–13)

Fig. 16. Wall painting with paints on stucco (Inventory No. Sam I 458). Fig 17. Wall painting with paints on stucco (Inventory No. Sam I 369). Fig. 18. Fragment of painting "pithos" – the large ovoid vessel for keeping the palace wine. Clay, paints. (Inventory No. Sam I 470)

which became difficult to recognize if the original image is the shape of a fish, a peacock, or a lion.[36] In general, the monumental forms of the images found in the designs of most buildings from the Islamic world of the 10th -12th centuries were condemned by many Islamic theologians (*Bolshakov* 1969: 148, 149; *Starodub* 2010: 10-19). Thus, they gave way to ornamental and epigraphic decor almost everywhere with only a few exceptions.

Nevertheless, visual art did not disappear although it became more and more elite and secluded mainly confining itself to the world of palaces or wealthy houses. It adapted to different needs and conditions and acquired different features and forms. In the era of the Great Seljuks (11th -12th centuries) and Seljuks of Anatolia (12th -13th centuries) images remained recognizable in the monuments of Iran, Iraq, and Asia Minor as seen on stucco reliefs and engravings on ceramics which retained their scenic content, yet, interpreted as part of the overall decor. The artistic transformations in the world of the Islamic Middle Ages are exemplified by Seljuk art represented in the collection of the Berlin Museum. This includes a miniature marble block with a relief of a musician playing the lute; a unique fragment of a painted wall relief with a feast scene; as well as a bowl and fragment of a dish with a *minai* polychrome overglaze scenic painting[37] (Tab. VI; Fig. 19-22).

The process of narrowing the "area of action" of an image was accompanied by an increasing interest in miniature artworks. Popular scenes or individual figures of birds, animals, people, or fantastical creatures moved from the walls of the ceremonial halls onto the surface of expensive ceramics, thin glass, non-ferrous metals, wood, and ivory.

They were weaved into the illustrations of ceremonial embroideries, carpets, and fabrics, and over time, onto the pages of manuscripts. This process became possible and, moreover, inevitable due to the familiarizing of the Arab culture with its rich folklore heritage and given to the literate civilizations of Western Asia and the Mediterranean region in the west and Central Asia in the east. As Islam spread and strengthened, the cultural unification of these geographically distant zones was facilitated by long-standing and ramified common roots and ties created on the edge of the modern era via the sea and overland routes of the Silk Road.

[36] Fragments of ganch carving with stylized motifs from excavations in Khulbuk in southern Tajikistan and in city of Termez in southern Uzbekistan (*Khmelnitsky* 2006: Figs. 30, 59, 60; *Pugachenkova* 1976: Figs. 11, 12).

[37] Minai (Arabic and Persian meaning enamel) is a type of Iranian ceramic from the 12th – 13th centuries with overglaze painting made with fusible enamels.

Table VI (Fig. 19 – 22). The art of the Seljuk era. 12th-13th centuries. Museum für Islamische Kunst, Berlin

Fig. 19. "The Lute Player". Relief, marble. H. 36 cm. Anatoly. Around 1200 (Inventory No. I 7168). Fig. 20. "Scene of the Feast". Fragment of wall relief. Stucco with paint and gilding. Iran. 12th-13th centuries (Inventory No. I 4828) Fig. 21. "The doctor who opens the blood." A bowl with a painting of the minai type (painting with fusible enamels over fired glaze). Anatolia (?). 13th century (Inventory No. I. 4350). Fig. 22. "Bahram Gur and Azadeh". A fragment of the minai dish with an illustration of an episode from the Shahnameh ("Book of Kings") – the hunt of the Sassanian king and his beloved. Diam. 12.5 cm. Iran. (Inventory No. I. 5667) (Fig. 16-22 – author's photo)

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