

Book Review

Islam and Art

by Dr. Lois Lamyā āl Fārūqī

Published by the National Hijra Council, Islamabad 1405 A.H., 1985, 236 pp. and 60 plates, \$6.00

I met Dr. Lois Lamyā āl Fārūqī last March, while I was giving a lecture on Arabic calligraphy at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. I had corresponded with her previously and had been impressed by her graciousness and her insight into the complex field of Islamic art. Now, here she and her husband were, and I was pleased to have these bright lights of the Muslim community in my audience. At the end of my remarks, someone asked the inevitable question, "What is the significance, the symbolism of the designs used to highlight a calligraphic piece?" I replied that, while some Islamic designs have their origins in the material world, they become abstracted and stylized but do not take on additional symbolic meaning. In other words, Islamic art, at its best, does not depend on visual symbols as clues to its meaning. A flower drawing remains a flower drawing, no matter how abstract it becomes.

Dr. Fārūqī was interested in my interpretation and, I think somewhat amused. As she left that evening, I saw a definite twinkle in her eye, and I felt I had found a congenial colleague. Two weeks later, I received an autographed copy of *Islam and Art* from her. I never saw her again.

I am pleased to have this opportunity to review this volume, Dr. Fārūqī's last published work. Let me make my own position clear: I am neither an academician nor a genuine scholar of Islamic art. Rather, I approach the subject as a practitioner; therefore, my interest in Islamic art—and in this book—is at once personal, practical, and professional.

Why do the arts of the Muslim peoples—and by arts, I include graphic arts, architecture, crafts, and music—develop with such obvious consistency from people to people, and in such a straight line from their inception to the present? This question has baffled scholars for at least a century. Dr. Fārūqī's insight guides the reader in the direction of a true answer, yet it is an answer each of us must experience for ourselves, through study and contemplation.

In short, Dr. Fārūqī's answer to this central question is that the arts of the Muslim peoples did not develop by chance, but rather, as an attempt to express by various media the Quranic doctrine of *tawhid*, the immense sub-

ject of the total unity and transcendence of Allah. This concept is expounded early in the book, when Dr. Fārūqī states:

The Islamic breakthrough in the arts was the result of the desire to give aesthetic expression to the proclamation, *la ilaha illa-llah* (there is no God but God). Probably the most outstanding and far-reaching feature of the Islamic world view is embodied in this statement and the monotheistic principle of *tawhid* which it proclaims. *Tawhid* is the peculiarly Islamic variety of monotheism which differs in emphasis as well as in essence from the monotheism of any other religion. (p. 16)

This interpretation of the origin of Islamic art is, as far as I know, unique in Western scholarly literature. To be sure, many Orientalists have put forth hypotheses, all of which are interesting at least and of some relevance. Dr. Fārūqī's hypothesis, based on her vast research and knowledge, is a major achievement.

What Dr. Fārūqī calls "the Islamic breakthrough in the arts" —that is, the incorporation of *tawhid* into artistic practices—was momentous indeed, especially as it occurred among peoples who had very different artistic heritages, as well as among peoples who had little or no artistic heritage to speak of at all. And the interesting thing is, the breakthrough probably occurred not as an attempt to create a synthetic intellectual system, as in Buddhism, but as a spontaneous, nonintellectual event arising from the minds and hearts of artists who were imbued with Islamic knowledge and experience. As Dr. Fārūqī explains:

It is not strange that the influence of *tawhid* should also be found in the Islamic arts. For every Muslim, the aesthetic realm, the beautiful, is that which directs attention to Allah. . . It is only through the doctrine of *tawhid* that we can explain the nature of Islamic art in general, or the rejection of figural art in particular. It was that doctrine which determined both the content and form of the Islamic arts. . . It is not a symbolic statement of the truths of nature. Instead, the beautiful, for the Muslim, is that which stimulates in the viewer or listener as intuition of, or an insight into, the nature of transcendence. (p. 103)

For the historian, this concept no doubt would be difficult, if not impossible, to document. But Muslim artists will continue to produce work that is in harmony with the intent of the Islamic concept of *tawhid*. To paraphrase the old cliché, "Which came first—the artist or the art critic?" To me, and no doubt to Dr. Fārūqī, the answer is abundantly clear: The artist came first, and between the covers of *Islam and Art*, the reader will glimpse some of the sheer wonder of the artist's work.

Unfortunately, that glimpse will be impeded by a typeface that is not easy on the eyes and by frequent typographical errors. In fact, the writing is not smooth and the editing is poor, which make the book rather hard going. You have to work to find the kernels of truth here, but they are well worth the work.

Among Dr. Fārūqī's interesting views is her categorization of the major features of Islamic art into three main devices: stylization, repetition, and non-individuation. On the controversial question of pictorial art, she states:

The argument that the rejection of figural art in Islam has been strengthened by the example of the Prophet is . . . valid. Yet can we attribute such an important feature of the art—a feature which was to be the determinant of a whole new art tradition—to a number of negative injunctions in the Hadith literature? The breakthrough in the Islamic arts was too important and too novel, too creative, to have been only the result of conformance to negative injunctions. It was certainly not a convention based on blind legalism. (p. 99)

This view suggests a profitable avenue for further research. And future researchers might bear in mind something else that Dr. Fārūqī clearly knew: geometric and arabesque designs need not be perfectly symmetrical in Islamic art, a point often missed by dogmatic pundits who insist on mechanistic symmetry. In calligraphic design, for example, asymmetry and partial symmetry are as valid a device as true symmetry. What matters is that the elements of the design are harmoniously balanced.

Dr. Fārūqī devotes a long and interesting chapter to calligraphy, which is indeed the essential Islamic visual art. Although I might differ with some of the details in this chapter—especially when it comes to nomenclature for the various scripts—as a general overview, Dr. Fārūqī's treatment of the art is informative and thought provoking.

Another minor quibble is that she doesn't say much about the artists themselves—not as individuals, which can be obtained from other sources, but in general. These people were consummate professionals who trained for years with no promise of success. Many of them were serious religious scholars as well. And all of them weighed their accomplishments on the scale of standards already set, balancing their innovations with tradition.

Today's artist must perform a similar balancing act. In the introduction to *Islam and Art*, Dr. Fārūqī makes it clear one of her purposes is to “stimulate a demand in Muslim audiences for art works in every possible medium that are modern and innovative while at the same time remaining true to, and presenting a development of Islam's artistic legacy.”

Here we get into a tricky area. One faction has it that anything antique is good and anything contemporary, worthless; others believe that modern

work done in the traditional fashion is contemptible and that the only art that is at all worthwhile is that produced by art school students. Between these two extremes are many positions, of course, but all—regardless of position—come up against the question of support for the arts in the contemporary world.

Dr. Fārūqī is outspoken on the need for Muslims to patronize and support contemporary Muslim artists. This valid concern leads her to make the unnecessarily pessimistic observation that “neither artisan nor patron in contemporary Turkey is any longer capable of preserving or furthering the calligraphic art to which his ancestors made such significant contributions.”

Luckily, exactly the opposite is the case: Only in Turkey are the rules and proper teaching of calligraphy preserved today; only in Turkey is there a large body of people who are dedicated to the patronage and preservation of this essential Islamic art. This is due in large part to the creation, a few years ago, of the Research Centre for Islamic History, Art, and Culture in Istanbul. This was established by the Organization of the Islamic Conference as part of a general effort by 46 Muslim countries to reinvigorate and simplify the global Islamic *umma*, once the responsibility of the Caliphate. The Centre's First International Hamid el Amidi Calligraphy Competition, to be judged this year, is an unprecedented event in the world of Islamic art. It will do more to stimulate interest in this art, I predict, than would any number of academic conferences.

I will end this review as Dr. Fārūqī ended her book, with the subject of Islamic music, which she ties into the very fabric of the other arts, to be understood according to the same criteria. The following passage embodies her thesis:

The musical line does not convey the impression of a bud evolving into a full-blown blossom that reaches a peak of perfection and quickly dies. Instead, the melodic lines of this art are analogues to grains of wheat which venture out each year into the soil to produce their fruit. After completing each unit, the melody returns, like the grain, to its seed state as it repeats the characteristic tune, phrase or refrain. Another unit ensues as the musical seed is again fertilized by the performer. Thus these musical arabesques emphasize their continuity in an eternal process and their relation to infinity, to the transcendent. (p. 200)

In *Islam and Art*, Lois Lamyā āl Fārūqī has laid the groundwork for a general theory of Islamic art—an enormous and admirable undertaking. At the same, time, she has lodged a powerful plea to understand and save our precious arts. This is the work of a singular mind; though she is with us no longer, her works will remain.

Mohamed Zakariya, Falls Church, Va.