

What is "Islamic" Art?

Revealing what is 'Islamic' in Islamic art, Wendy M. K. Shaw explores the perception of arts, including painting, music, and geometry through the discursive sphere of historical Islam including the Qur'an, Hadith, Sufism, philosophy, and poetry. Emphasis on the experience of reception over the context of production enables a new approach, not only to Islam and its arts, but also as a decolonizing model for global approaches to art history.

Shaw combines a concise introduction to Islamic intellectual history with a critique of the modern, secular, and European premises of disciplinary art history. Her meticulous interpretations of intertextual themes span antique philosophies, core religious and theological texts, and prominent prose and poetry in Arabic, Persian, Turkish, and Urdu that circulated across regions of Islamic hegemony from the eleventh century to the colonial and post-colonial contexts of the modern Middle East.

Wendy M. K. Shaw is Professor of the Art History of Islamic Cultures at the Free University Berlin. Her work explores the historiographic, intellectual, institutional, and physical impact of modernity, colonialism, and identity on the arts in regions of Islamic hegemony, with a particular focus on the Ottoman Empire and modern Turkey. She is the author of *Possessors and Possessed: Museums, Archaeology, and the Visualization of History in the Late Ottoman Empire* (2003), and *Ottoman Painting: Reflections of Western Art from the Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic* (2011).



## What is "Islamic" Art?

Between Religion and Perception

WENDY M. K. SHAW

Freie Universität Berlin





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It is, therefore, the task of history, once the other-world of truth has vanished, to establish the truth of this world. It is the immediate task of philosophy, which is in the service of history, to unmask self-estrangement in its unholy forms once the holy form of human self-estrangement has been unmasked.<sup>1</sup>

- Karl Marx (1818–1883), A Contribution to the *Critique of Hegel's*Philosophy of Right, 1843

My heart can take on any form:

a meadow for gazelles,
a cloister for monks,

For the idols, sacred ground,
Ka'ba for the circling pilgrim,
the tables of the Torah,
the scrolls of the Quran.

I profess the religion of love;
Wherever its caravan turns along the way,
that is the belief,
the faith I keep.<sup>2</sup>

- ibn Arabi (1165-1240), Stations of Desire

... perplexity prevails, certainty is hard to come by, and there is no assurance of attaining the object of inquiry. How strong, in addition to all this, is the excuse for the truth to be confused, and how manifest is the proof that certainty is difficult to achieve! For the truths are obscure, the ends hidden, the doubts manifold, the minds turbid, the reasonings various; the premises are gleaned from the senses, and the senses (which are our tools) are not immune from error.<sup>3</sup>

- ibn al-Haytham (965-1040), Preface to The Optics

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Marx, 1973: 243. <sup>2</sup> Sells, 2000: 72–73. <sup>3</sup> Sabra, 1989: 3.



### Contents

List of Figures List of Color Plates Preface Note on Transcultural Communication	page viii xii xv xvii
Introduction: From Islamic Art to Perceptual Culture	1
1. The Islamic Image	33
2. Seeing with the Ear	57
3. The Insufficient Image	79
4. Seeing with the Heart	104
5. Seeing through the Mirror	131
6. Deceiving Deception	159
7. The Transcendent Image	184
8. The Transgressive Image	223
9. Mimetic Geometries	268
10. Perspectives on Perspective	300
Conclusion: Out of Perspective	326
References Index	336 360
The plate section can be found between pp 172 and 173.	

vii



## **Figures**

1	Anonymous, Muhammad at the Kaaba, from The	
	Compendium of Chronicles by Rashid al-Din Hamadani,	
	c.1306/1315 CE. Edinburgh University Library, Or. MS 20,	
	f. 45r, detail, c. $4 \times 25$ cm (p. $41.5 \times 34.2$ cm) Creative Commons.	~2 E 1
2	<u>.</u>	ge 54
2	Anonymous, Bayad Plays the Oud to the Lady, from the	
	Story of Bayad and Riyad, Vatican Apostolic Library,	
	Vat.ar.368, 10r, 17.5 $\times$ 19 cm. By permission of Biblioteca	
	Apostolica Vaticana, with all rights reserved. ©2019	
	Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana.	62
3	Anonymous, Simurgh, from the Manafi al-Hayawan by	
	Jabril ibn Bakhtishu, Maragheh, Iran, c. 1297–1300. Pierpont	
	Morgan Library. MS M.500, fol. 55r.	101
4	Anonymous, Angels Bowing before Adam, from the Majalis	
	al-Ussaq by Amir Kamil al-Din Gazurgahi, 1580.	
	Bibliothèque National de France, Supplément Persan	
	1150, fol. 8v, p. 29 × 18.5 cm.	121
5	Johann Jacob von Sandrart, Zeuxis and Parrhasius, in	
	Academia nobilissimae artis pictoriae, 1683, v. 2, pl.	
	C. Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, 3011–241.	177
6	Anonymous, Queen Nushaba Recognizes Alexander from	
	His Portrait, from the Khamsa by Nizami of Ganj, 1485.	
	Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, MS. Or. Quart 1665.	186
7	Anonymous, The Seven Sleepers of Ephesus Discovered by	
	Alexander the Great, from a Book of Omens, 1550s,	
	58 × 45 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, 35.64.3.	201
8	Anonymous, The Hanging of Mansur al-Hallaj, from the	
	Divan by Khosrau Dihlavi, Allahabad, India, 1602.	
	The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, W.650.22B.	202
9	Antonin Sevruguin, "Taq-e Bustan, Sasanian Rock Reliefs, Large	
-	Vault with Relief of Khusro II," photographic print, 1880s–1930	
	Myron Bement Smith Collection: Antoin Sevruguin Photograph	

Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery Archives.

viii



List of Figures

ix

	Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC: Gift of Katherine	206
10	Dennis Smith, 1973–1985, FSA A.4 2.I2.GN.39.11.	206
10	Anonymous, Shirin Visits the Sculptor Farhad at Work, from	
	a Khosrau wa Shirin by Nizami of Ganj, c.1400. Freer Gallery	
	of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution,	
	Washington, DC: Purchase – Charles Lang Freer Endowment,	• • • •
	F1931.35.	209
11	Anonymous, Man up a Pear Tree Who Saw His Wife and	
	Her Lover Together, from a Masnavi by Jalal al-Din Rumi,	
	1530. The British Library, Add MS 27263, fol. 270b.	
	© The British Library Board.	247
12	Bihzad, Yusuf and Zuleikha, from a Bustan by Sa'di. Egyptian	
	National Library, Adab Farsi 908, fol. 3v.	251
13	Lucas van Leyden, Joseph and Potiphar's Wife, engraving,	
	1512, $20 \times 16$ cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, 31.31.31.	257
14	Sebald Beham, Joseph and Potiphar's Wife, print, 1544.	
	Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Kupferstichkabinett, Inv. 424-4.	258
15	Marcantonio Raimondi, Joseph and Potiphar's Wife, print,	
	c.1490–1534. Victoria and Albert Museum, DYCE.1001.	
	© Victoria and Albert Museum, London.	260
16	Ludovico Cigoli, Joseph and Potiphar's Wife, 1610. Forbidden	
	to make reproductions with any tool. © Ministero dei beni	
	e delle attività culturali e del turismo – Galleria Borghese.	261
17	Guido Reni, Joseph and Potiphar's Wife, oil on canvas,	
	<i>c</i> .1630. The J. Paul Getty Museum, 93.PA.57.	262
18	Paolo Finoglia, Joseph and Potiphar's Wife, oil on canvas,	
	$232.7 \times 193.7$ cm, $c.1640$ . Harvard Art Museums/Fogg	
	Museum, Gift of Samuel H. Kress Foundation, 1962.163.	
	Imaging Department © President and Fellows of	
	Harvard College.	263
19	Orazio Gentileschi, Joseph and Potiphar's Wife, oil on canvas,	
	1630-1632. Royal Collection Trust, CIN 405477.	
	© Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2018.	264
20	Piet Mondrian, Broadway Boogie Woogie, 1942-1943, oil	
	on canvas, $127 \times 127$ cm. Anonymous donation, Museum	
	of Modern Art, New York, 73.1943. DIGITAL IMAGE	
	© 2019 Museum of Modern Art/Scala, Florence.	271
21	Josephine Powell, "Carved Geometric Decoration (Detail),"	
	photograph, Bust, Afghanistan, 1959-1961. Harvard Fine Arts	
	Library, Powell Number AF45-123. Josephine Powell Photograp	h.



## x List of Figures

	Courtesy of Special Collections, Fine Arts Library, Harvard	
	University.	275
22	Anonymous, wall painting, stucco, Nishapur, Iran,	
	ninth century. Metropolitan Museum of Art, 40.170.177.	276
23	Ibn al-Bawwab, frontispiece, from the Quran, <i>c.</i> 1000.	
	Chester Beatty Library, CBL Is 1431, f.284b. © The	
	Trustees of the Chester Beatty Library, Dublin.	277
24	Anonymous, "Demonstration of how to find the Qibla with	
	a sextant in relation to the stars," from "On Interlocking	
	Similar or Congruent Figures." Bibliothèque Nationale	
	de France, MS Persan 169, p. 42.	279
25	Anonymous, "Example of geometric pattern as constructed	
	with a compass and ruler," from "On Interlocking Similar or	
	Congruent Figures." Bibliothèque Nationale de France,	
	Paris, MS Persan 169, pp. 121–122.	280
26	Anonymous, "Example of geometric pattern as constructed	
	with a compass and ruler," from "On Interlocking Similar or	
	Congruent Figures." Bibliothèque Nationale de France,	
	Paris, MS Persan 169, p. 191.	281
27	Anonymous, "Example of geometric pattern as constructed	
	with a compass and ruler," from "On Interlocking Similar or	
	Congruent Figures." Bibliothèque Nationale de France,	
	Paris, MS Persan 169, p. 192.	282
28	Jean Pèlerin, Diagram, from De artificiali perspectiva, 1521.	
	National Central Library Rome, p. 7.	307
29	Albrecht Dürer, <i>Draughtsman Drawing a Man</i> , from	
	Underweysung der Messung mit dem Zirckel un Richtscheyt,	
	in Linien, Nuremberg, 1525. SLUB Dresden, S. B. 616.	309
30	Albrecht Dürer, Draughtsman Doing Perspectival Drawing	
	of a Lute, print, 1525. Staatliche Museen zu Berlin,	
	Kupferstichkabinett, Inv. 528–2.	310
31	Albrecht Dürer, Draughtsman Executing a Perspective	
	Drawing of a Woman, from De Symmetria partium	
	humanorum corporum, woodcut, c.1600. Metropolitan	
	Museum of Art, 17.37.314.	310
32	Abraham Bosse's Manière Universelle de Mr. Desargues	
	pour pratiquer la Perspective par petit-pied, comme le	
	geometral (Paris, 1648), Plate 1, Bibliothèque d'institut	
	national de l'histoire de l'art, NUM 8 RES 145.	311
	•	



List of Figures xi

33	Abraham Bosse's Manière Universelle de Mr. Desargues pour	
	pratiquer la Perspective par petit-pied, comme le geometral	
	(Paris, 1648), Plate 2, Bibliothèque d'institut national de	
	l'histoire de l'art, NUM 8 RES 145.	312
34	Anonymous, frontispiece, vol. 1, from Description de l'Égypte	
	by M. Jomard, 1809–1828. The New York Public Library	
	Collections b14212718	315



#### Color Plates

- Anonymous, *Temple Idols Fall and the Sea Dries up on the Birth of the Prophet Muhammad*, from the *Hamzanamah*, c.1562-1577, gouache on prepared cotton,  $67 \times 51$  cm. Victoria and Albert Museum, IS. 1509–1883. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.
- 2 Mir Kalan Khan, *Lovers in a Landscape*, 1760–1770, 22 × 15 cm. The David Collection, Copenhagen, 50/1981. Photographer Pernille Klemp.
- 3 Anonymous, double-leaf frontispiece, from *The Epistles of the Brethren of Purity*, Baghdad, *c.* 1287, 20 × 17 cm (each), Istanbul, Suleymaniye Library, MSS Esad Efendi 3638, fols. 3b–4a.
- 4 Sultan Muhammad, *Allegory of Worldly and Otherworldly Drunkenness*, from the *Divan* by Hafez of Shiraz, *c*.1531–33, 21.6 x 15 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1988.430. Jointly owned by the Metropolitan Museum of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Museum, Harvard University.
- 5 Madhu Khazanad, *Plato Puts the Animals to Sleep with the Music of the Spheres*, from the *Khamsa* by Nizami of Ganj, 1593–1595, page 31.8 × 19.6 cm. The British Library, OR 12208, f. 298r. © The British Library Board, Bequeathed by C. W. Dyson-Perrins to the British Museum in 1958.
- 6 Anonymous, double-leaf frontispiece, "The Courts of Bilqis and Solomon," from the *Shahnameh* by Firdausi, sixteenth century, page 41 × 39.5 cm. Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Ms. Or. Fol. 359, fols. 2v–3r.
- Anonymous, *The Byzantine and Chinese Painters Vie in a Trial of Skill*, from the *Khamsa* by Nizami of Ganj, Shiraz, Iran, 1449–50,  $25.4 \times 16$  cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, 13.228.3.
- 8 Sur Gujarati, *Mani Painting a Dead Dog*, from the *Khamsa* by Nizami of Ganj, 1593–1595, page 31.8 × 19.6 cm. The British Library, OR 12208, fol. 262b. © The British Library Board, Bequeathed by C. W. Dyson-Perrins to the British Museum in 1958.
- 9 Anonymous, *The Story of the King with the Arrow*, from *Calligraphers and Painters* by Qadi Ahmad, *c*.1500, Museum of Oriental Art, Moscow.

xii



List of Color Plates

xiii

- 10 Anonymous, *The Night Flight of Muhammad on his Steed Buraq*, from the *Bustan* by Sa'di, *c*.1525–1535, 18 × 13 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1974.294.2, fol. 3v.
- 11 Anonymous, *Shirin Looking at the Portrait of Khusrau*, *Watched by Shapur*, from a *Khamsa* by Nizami of Ganj, 1442. The British Library, MS 25900, fol. 41r. © The British Library Board.
- 12 Anonymous, *Khosrau Sees Shirin Bathing*, from a *Khamsa* by Nizami of Ganj, 1560. Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC: Purchase Smithsonian Unrestricted Trust Funds, Smithsonian Collections Acquisition Program, and Dr. Arthur M. Sackler, S1986.50.
- 13 Anonymous, *Shirin and Khosrau Play Polo*, from a *Khamsa* by Nizami of Ganj, *c*.1450. Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Sprenger 1475, fol. 129r.
- 14 Anonymous, *Bahram Gur and the Seven Icons*, from the Anthology of Sultan Iskandar, Shiraz, Iran, 1410–1411. Calouste Gulbenkian Museum, Inv. LA 161, fol. 66v.
- 15 Yusuf Serves Zuleikha and Her Friends, in Jami, Yusuf and Zuleikha, Eliyahu ben Nisan ben Eliyahu'Gorgi, scribe,
   1853, MS 1524, image 95. Courtesy of the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary.
- 16 Anonymous, calligraphic panel, Album, *c*.1500. Topkapi Palace Museum, Istanbul, Hazine 2152, s. 9b.
- 17 Halil Dikmen, *Ney Players*, 1933. Mimar Sinan Fine Arts University (MSGSÜ) Istanbul Museum of Painting and Sculpture.
- 18 Slavs and Tatars, *Resist Resisting God* (gold), 2009. Mirror, plaster, wood,  $100 \times 150 \times 10$  cm. Courtesy of Sharjah Art Foundation.



#### **Preface**

Research often begins by asking one question and ends up answering another. This book began as an exploration of the image in Islam. It ended up exploring how one might relinquish concepts like the image and art to conceive of perception through an Islam, often overshadowed by politics, essential to a sense of emotive knowledge that emerges through engagement with the arts.<sup>4</sup>

Instead of defining the image, art, or religion, this book asks:

What is art if the primary sensory organ is neither eyes nor ears, but the heart?

Where are the boundaries between the senses as we take in the world?

What is art if dreams and visions are as real as materiality?

How can art make-present, and not just re-present?

Exploration of these questions has led me to diverse texts. For me, the measure of my arguments has been the interconnections between disparate elements that corroborate surprising connections and unravel unforeseen ideas. It has been a hard book to stop researching, because so many sources and scholarly works connect to it. This exploration has fascinated me through the work of scholars in a multitude of disciplines who have delved into archives and painstakingly translated manuscripts to assemble the crumbs of the past discarded on the table of history into satisfying meals of narrative. I contribute to this telling of stories in recognition that it is only by building upon each other's expression and experience, admiring in collaboration and respectful in dissent, that we can build the civil discourse that constitutes a pluralistic, dynamic, and peaceful planet.

I thank colleagues, friends, and students for their support in making this book come to fruition. I have often wished to be able to talk with my doctoral advisor, Renie Bierman, who passed away during its writing. A compassionate teacher, she was a cornerstone for my critical thought. I also write in memory of my late father, Stanford J. Shaw, for being a model of diligent research and writing, and also simply for being a kind

<sup>4</sup> Asani, 2018: xiv.



xvi Preface

and loving person. I also thank my mother, Ayşe Ezel Kural Shaw, for combining erudition, passion, and love of teaching while raising me to take my intellectual independence and authority as a woman as a matter of course. I would like to thank the support of my mentor-colleague-friends Ayşe Batur, Zeynep Çelik, Victoria Holbrook, Ruth Mas, Gülru Necipoğlu, Raphaelle Praesinger, Nasser Rabbat, Nadim Sarrouh, and Margaret Shortle. I am grateful to Birgit Krawetz, Birgit Meyer, Stephennie Mulder, and Terje Stordelen for their thoughtful commentary on earlier drafts and chapters of this work, to Sarah Cresap Johnson for her assistance with the last stages of the manuscript, and my editors Maria Marsh, Ruth Boyes, Mary Starkey, and Atifa Jiwa at Cambridge University Press for their thoughtful, constructive, and diligent support. Finally, I thank the light of my heart, my daughter Z.E.A., who showed patience beyond her years in giving me time to work instead of joining her in play. Her love, curiosity, and expressions of pride in her mother have energized and inspired me.



### Note on Transcultural Communication

This book uses simple Latin script transliterations of names and words originally written in Arabic script in Arabic, Persian, Ottoman Turkish, or Urdu. The philological legacy informing much of Islamic studies has normalized transliteration using extensive diacritical marks specific to standardized renditions of each language. Such standardized transliterations cannot capture the diversity of pronunciation in diverse times, regions, and dialects. While useful for language learners, diacritics can be off-putting for a non-specialist reader. By avoiding diacritics and transliterating into common English, this book does not aim to guide accurate pronunciation so much as to familiarize the unfamiliar in what is, for better or worse, the lingua franca of our era.

Since modern Turkish uses Latin script, I have included its modified lettering in proper names:  $\S = \text{sh}$ ;  $\varsigma = \text{ch}$ ; c = g as in "gym";  $\iota = i$  as in "girl";  $\S$  is silent, eliding flanking vowels.

I have also included (where necessary) the use of 'in proper names and terms, indicating a glottal stop, which can be approximated by stopping rather than eliding successive letters. Thus Sa'di is not read "saadi" but Sa di, with a brief pause in the middle. In full transcription, different apostrophes indicate different letters, but this convention is complex for the reader not versed in Arabic and is not followed in this text.

The letters v and w are indicated by the same letter in Arabic script but pronounced differently in different languages. Where Persian/Turkish is the dominant use, I have used "v"; when the word stems from Arabic, I have used "w."

Many Arabic and Persian words are included in parenthesis to facilitate further investigation of concepts and histories mentioned without extensive analysis in this study.

Similarly enhancing accessibility, dates are not citied through the Islamic (*hijri*) calendar, but through that of the Common Era (CE). All dates are CE, unless indicated as BCE (Before Common Era).

European-style surnames have only become widespread in the regions discussed in this book during the last century. Thus reference by last name, and indexing, is often misleading. To take honorifics or place names as

xvii



#### xviii Note on Transcultural Communication

though they were last names does not fit many cultural norms. To simplify name references, I have not found a satisfying alternative to following established conventions for referring to people in English, but hereby note this as misleading.

For example, in Arabic, people were often described by their given names, modified by the name of the father, son, or daughter, as well as honorifics of allegiance expressed as servitude. Thus the name Abu al-Qasim Muhammad ibn Abdallah ibn 'Abd al-Muttalib ibn Hashim ibn 'Abd Manaf al-Quraishi means Muhammad, father of al-Qasim, son of Abdallah, son of servant-of-al-Muttalib son of Hashim son of servant-of-Manaf of the Quraish tribe. That's a bit long, so this book refers to him as the Prophet Muhammad.

There are no capital letters in Arabic script, so I have used lower case to indicate auxiliary words (the and son of) next to main names (e.g. ibn Arabi), except when capitalization is required by English punctuation.

In Persian, a proper name is often followed by an identifying location. Thus Jalal al-Din Rumi means Splendor of the Faith, of Rum (Anatolia). Thus calling him "Rumi," as is common in the West, only indicates where he was from and is not his name. Most followers call him by the patronymic "Mevlana" (our master). Sometimes, however, an epithet does become shortened to a single word. Thus one can safely call Farid al-Din Attar (savior of the faith, perfumer) simply as Attar.

Honorifics such as *Ağa* (Ottoman), *Agha* (Persian), and *Khan* more or less mean "sir." They are often associated with proper names, but should not be mistaken for surnames except when used as such in the modern era. Similar honorifics in this book include *Amir* (Leader), *Qadi* (Judge), *Shah* (King) and *Sultan* (King).

Early Islamic scholars who gained fame according to Latinized names, like Ibn al-Haytham, known as Alhazen, are referred to in the original variant unless discussed in a European context.

Published translations are gratefully acknowledged in the reference section. Translations from works in French, German, and Turkish are mine. I have chosen to feature literature that is available in Western languages, but often insufficiently analyzed in the plurality of its meanings. The corpus of historical literature that has not been translated, republished in the past century, or critically discussed in any language is vast, leaving us moderns with imperfect access to the thought-worlds of the past.

Spellings quoted from other texts have been left as in the original.

Recognizing that this book will be read by people of multiple intellectual, linguistic, and faith cultures, I have done my best to introduce figures,



Note on Transcultural Communication

xix

dates, and define terms the first time that they occur. Thus terms relating to the history of religion and to critical methodology are generally defined in the earlier portions of the text. When sections are read independently, readers should refer to these definitions.

For ease of viewing, extraneous elements of manuscript pages have been cropped in image reproductions accompanying this text.