

Introduction

This work deals with what is usually called 'aesthetics' in the framework of Islamic civilisation. Aesthetics is 'the branch of philosophy that examines the nature of art and the character of our experience of art and of the natural environment...'¹ Aesthetics can also be 'applied' in the sense that its object of examination can be a specific and concrete work of art, not only an artistic concept or question. More accurately, the book concerns the particular discipline known as 'aesthetic phenomenology', insofar as it means—to borrow a clear statement by Eliane Escoubias—'to understand how the mode of access to art, the mode of access to what the work of art contains in terms of art, is a phenomenological mode, is first of all to understand that art has always been and will always be phenomenological'.² Aesthetics, and particularly aesthetic phenomenology, forms a specific and new field, which is still not taken into account in the realm of Islamic studies, although it is fully integrated into contemporary analytical works on art and art theory.

Two things are at the root of this situation. The first, of an epistemological order, concerns aesthetics itself as a science and mode of thought which seems to emanate from the philosophical tradition of the modern Western world. Thus it is considered as more or less intrinsically linked to the rules, principles and logic of this tradition and, consequently, not truly adaptable to the thinking and the arts of other

civilisations. The second, of a cultural order, deals with the Islamic concept of the practice of the arts, or more accurately, what this is commonly considered to be. On the one hand, this concept carries—as everyone knows—some normative constraints (against the representation of living things in visual forms) and, on the other hand, it has no clearly defined rules or doctrine outlined in texts and treatises, as in the Western world.

One might quickly deduce from such evidence that, as a specialised branch of thought, aesthetics did not properly exist in Islam. Except for a few rare attempts indicating a desire to find aesthetic elements in Islamic written sources, this idea was commonly held until the recent publication of a major book by the Spanish scholar José Miguel Puerta Vilchez.³ In his book Vilchez outlines a history of aesthetics in classical Arabic thought that clearly demonstrates the existence of this branch of philosophy in the Islamic, as well as in the Latin Middle Ages. From this point of view, Puerta Vilchez's work joins the renowned anthology on Christian aesthetics written by Edgar de Bruyne.⁴ But beyond this field of philology and textual analysis, it is still generally thought that the Islamic arts themselves can only really be considered from the historical, sociological and descriptive points of view. Very few scholars take the initiative to use aesthetics as theory and method in order to understand the conceptualisation and the forms of works of art. Nevertheless, as in the abstract sphere of pure thought, there is much to learn about Islamic artistic creation through the aesthetic approach. My aim in this book is to demonstrate this and to thus encourage works of the same kind in the future. What then, does this approach consist of?

The field of aesthetics falls into two interconnected but distinct spheres: primary aesthetics, or 'meta-aesthetics' we should say, which consists of philosophical activity whose object is the beautiful and the experience of beauty; and aesthetics in the modern and specialised sense which is both a practical and a theoretical knowledge of artistic creation. Naturally, by virtue of its purpose and/or its ability to produce beauty, art involves both kinds of cognitive practice since it is basically the tangible result and the expression of a certain concept of the beautiful. Therefore, there are two paths towards an understanding of

aesthetics: the study of texts through which one defines the concept of beauty and the doctrine of the creation of art; and the direct observation of artistic forms as meaningful things and the experience they induce. These paths clearly constitute separate subjects for reflection. However, though it is far from easy to relate texts and arts in the framework of Islam, the former necessarily contain useful material for the grasp of the latter. The next chapter, dealing with sura *al-Naml* (Qur'an 27:44) in the light of aesthetic analysis, shows that there remains a substantial number of unexamined Islamic sources conveying elements of art theory, including the founding book itself, the Qur'an.

In other respects, the question is the method itself on which the aesthetic analysis of both textual and visual matters relies. The original Islamic sources, indeed, shed some light on aesthetics as constituting both a philosophical theory and a concept of artistic practice. In particular aesthetics provides the tools for understanding the intellectual context from which they are generated and wherein the works of art are produced. Nevertheless, these sources alone cannot supply the necessary methodology for dealing with complicated aesthetic problems like the specific question of representation, since, as already mentioned, epistemologically these problems proceed from centuries of Western thought and artistic endeavour. It therefore means that one has to use tools which do not belong *a fortiori* to the cultural area under observation. Taking this necessity into account, part of my work has consisted in gathering new methodological and intellectual material that is used in the study of other arts in other cultural contexts; namely the very rich and diversified body of contemporary material. The latter includes works by artists from recent times, such as Yves Klein or Mark Rothko, writings of theoreticians of art like Arthur Danto or Nelson Goodman, and also the works of philosophers of various schools like the logician Wittgenstein, the phenomenologists Gaston Bachelard and Edmund Husserl, and contemporary thinkers such as Jacques Derrida and Michel Serres, among others. Phenomenological works, in particular, allow a deeper grasp of the primordial meanings of forms and intelligibles that, in the framework of the visual arts, help to reveal the essence of being of an object as it *appears* to the sight, providing an invaluable source of knowledge. All

of these authors have dealt with aesthetics and art and, finding their words illuminating, I have not hesitated to quote them, to rely on them and to incorporate them in my own argument. Similarly it has seemed to me relevant to mention, for the sake of comparison, some contemporary artistic works.

Thus, from the perspective of aesthetic enquiry from both these perspectives, of the five chapters in this book the first two are dedicated to textual studies, forming the purely theoretical part. Preceding the Qur'anic exploration, the text begins with an analysis of four famous philosophers that aims to supply a kind of model vision of the various ways of approaching beauty and the aesthetic experience in the Islamic Middle Ages. The other three chapters, forming the part we may call 'applied aesthetics', deal with selected aspects of artistic production that imply aesthetic conceptualisation highly indicative of the Islamic approach to visual language. It concerns, on the one hand, the geometrical design that, as the two texts on the Alhambra show, raises complex questions related to the aesthetic dialectic between abstraction and representation, and on the other hand, the signifying system of inscriptions, examined in the final chapter. Hopefully these chapters will open new possibilities for the understanding of Islamic artistic creation.