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About the journal

Hadeeth ad-Dar is a publication of the Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah. Every year, the Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah organises a series of lectures known as the *Cultural Season*. *Hadeeth ad-Dar* was created to share these lectures with academic and cultural institutions and Friends of the Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah around the world. Cultural Season 19 will get underway in September 2013 and, as with previous years, will present scholars in a wide variety of fields related to arts and culture in the Islamic world.

The Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah (DAI) is a government cultural organisation based on a Kuwaiti private art collection. Since its inception in 1983, DAI has grown from a single focus organisation created to manage the loan of the prestigious al-Sabah Collection of art from the Islamic world to the State of Kuwait to become an internationally recognised cultural organisation.

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H: 4.4 cm; D: 14.4 cm; T: 0.24 cm
This object was selected by the Children's Art Workshop participants to be the icon for *Long Ago Zoo: Animals in The al-Sabah Collection*, an exhibition curated by children.

Aesthetics of Islamic Ornament in the Sixteenth Century: Ottoman-Safavid visual conversations

Gülru Necipoğlu-Kafadar
Presented in English
7 January 2013

At the turn of the twentieth century, the fascination with ornament as an abstract language of form and color triggered an enthusiastic appreciation of Islamic art, which became conceptualised as a purely decorative tradition. The nebulous notion of the decorative was, however, scarcely informed by discourses on the arts and crafts generated from within the Islamic lands. Simplistic typological classifications of ornament under the overarching category of the eternal "arabesque" underestimated the diversity and historical specificity of distinctive languages of ornament, like those of the Ottomans and Safavids.

These two rival Islamic empires dialogically developed their own "classical" languages of ornament in conversation with one another, during the reigns of Sultan Süleyman I (r. 1520-66) and Shah Tahmasb I (r. 1524-76). Medieval Islamic theories of visual perception and aesthetics were reformulated in early modern Ottoman and Safavid texts on the visual arts. After briefly discussing relevant concepts in the written sources, I shall concentrate on the aesthetics and cultural politics of sixteenth-century Ottoman ornament, with some comparative remarks on its counterpart in Safavid Iran. By comparing the modalities of decorative design in these two interrelated "regimes of visuality," I hope to elucidate the problematic nature of the modernist notion of pure decoration, generally assumed to be merely aimed at triggering pleasurable delight.

Let me begin by drawing attention to the intimate connection between sight and insight in medieval Islamic texts, a connection that underlines the cognitive potential of abstract visual designs going beyond pleasure. Medieval texts emphasising the combined mental and bodily dimension of sensual perception and artistic creation accorded a high stature to skilled craftsmanship, particularly in arts addressing the highest "external senses" of sight and hearing. Stressing the capacity of the five "internal senses" to penetrate the beauty of the inner world, these texts assimilated the perceptual theories of medieval philosophers into a framework of mystical love, whose highest goal is the intuitive perception of divine beauty. The love of beauty, then, allowed for both the formal autonomy of aesthetic value and its place within a cosmos that opened on to the transcendent and sublime.

Abstract ornamental designs, mediating between viewers and objects, could trigger a combination of sensuous and spiritual/intellectual pleasures. Ibn al-Haytham's (d. 1040) treatise on optics, celebrated for its analysis of the perception of beauty, defines "glancing perception" as an instantaneous recognition of familiar forms firmly embedded in visual memory. By contrast, "contemplative perception" is a longer operation involving the inspection of complex visual forms by the mental faculty of judgment. According to Ibn al-Haytham, the fine details of minute designs such

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as the painted decorations and ornaments *(nuqūsh)* of a wall, the letters of a script, and the difference between closely similar colors– are perceived only after scrutiny and contemplation.

The evocative power of abstract designs, often accompanied by inscriptions providing textual cues, enhanced this type of contemplative vision, which is often referred to in Ottoman sources as the "scrutinizing gaze" *(im'ān-i naẓar)*. Ornamental patterns could potentially induce "contemplative perception" and engage the subjectivity of attentive beholders like seductive visual magnets by inviting a close-up way of viewing. They were partly designed to stimulate the cognitive faculties of aesthetic perception, rather than responding to an allegedly Islamic "horror vacui" (fear of the void), or to an equally pathological "cosmophilia" (love of ornament).

The integration of medieval perceptual theories into discourses on the visual arts is exemplified by the twelfth-century Sufi poet Nizami's well known references to the mental origin of images, painted from memory and from forms stored in the imagination. These theories informed more specialized Safavid and Ottoman writings on the visual arts and architecture that emerged in the sixteenth century. The new genres of writing in Persian and Turkish were rooted in a shared Timurid-Turkmen cultural heritage. They reflect the growing prominence of court scriptoria *(kitābkhāna or naqqāshkhāna)*, which promoted the collaboration of calligraphers and painter-decorators *(naqqāsh)* specializing in the arts of the book, who often prepared designs on paper for multiple media.

The unprecedented prefaces of sixteenth-century Safavid albums –combining specimens of calligraphy, illumination, drawing, and painting– provide precious glimpses into aesthetic concepts. An example is Mir Sayyid-Ahmad's preface to the Amir Ghayb Beg Album, compiled in 1564-65, which defines art as the "key to wisdom" and the pen as the "key to art." The author of the preface praises the imaginative power of painter-decorators whose creations are the "object of contemplation for those possessed of insight". He writes: "The beauty that unveils her face in the mirror-like tablet of the painter-decorator's mind is not reflected in everyone's imagination." The preface legitimizes this profession by referring to the Prophet Muhammad's son-in-law 'Ali, the revered first Imam of the Twelver Shi'i Safavid polity. It claims that Imam 'Ali was not only the inventor of the Kufic script, but also the first to decorate samples of writing with vegetal scrolls. The invention of this prototypical mode of abstract vegetal ornament is attributed to an imaginary contest. In the contest, the painters of Cathay (Northern China) supposedly challenge Imam 'Ali by adorning a page with floral lotus scrolls, which they called "Cathayan" *(khatā'ī)*. The author of the album preface asserts that, in response to this challenge by Chinese painters, Imam 'Ali drew "a charming *islāmī* that astonished the people of Cathay, and when that prototype *(aṣl)* falls into their hands, all other decorative designs *(naqshā)* were lesser in their view".

These two modes of decorative design, already mentioned in fifteenth-century Timurid sources, became fully integrated into the Ottoman and Safavid repertories of ornament. The first mode, called *"islīmī"* in fifteenth-century Timurid and Ottoman sources, is the split palmette vegetal scroll derived from the vine and acanthus. The second mode known as *khatā'ī* is the Chinese floral lotus and peony scroll, sometimes inhabited by dragons and auspicious creatures, which became domesticated in the eastern Islamic lands by the Mongols after the 1250s. The transmutation of the term *islīmī to islāmī* (Islamic) only occurs in Safavid texts. Its appearance in the preface of the Amir Ghayb Beg Album indicates that modes of ornament could carry symbolic and sectarian associations in specific contexts, which were not universally shared throughout the Islamic lands. The construction of a prestigious genealogy traced back to the first Shi'i Imam 'Ali –who is imagined in the preface to be a master calligrapher and illuminator – reveals the mythmaking penchant of Safavid painter-designers anxious to boost the status and legitimacy of their profession. The identification of the split palmette scroll as a quintessentially "Islamic" prototype in some texts –other Safavid sources continue to use the term islīmī –curiously recalls the European concept of the vegetal arabesque. This identification finds no counterpart in former Timurid and contemporary Ottoman sources, characterized by a Sunni slant. For instance, a poem (dated 1493-94) that eulogizes Sultan Mehmed II's mosque in Istanbul, identifies the principal elements of its decorative repertoire as the split palmette scroll *(rūmī, synonymous with islīmī)* and the Chinese floral scroll *(khatā'ī)*, the same motifs that are cited in contemporary Timurid texts. Ottoman sources generally label the vegetal arabesque as islīmī, following Timurid precedent, or alternatively as *rūmī* (pertaining to the lands of Rum). The latter term is a regional, rather than religious, denomination that refers to the formerly eastern Roman territories of the Ottoman Empire. The term *rūmī* may allude to the predominance of abstract vegetal scrolls – often accompanied by geometric interlace patterns– in the ornamental repertoires of the Rum Seljuq sultanate and successor principalities, including the early Ottomans, that initially ruled in Anatolia (Rum). If so, this geographical term assigns a territorial identity to the international *islīmī* motif, thereby indigenizing it.

The early twentieth-century Western classification of Islamic ornament within four genres of the so-called arabesque (vegetal, geometric, epigraphic, and figural) is overly simplistic. By contrast, Safavid and Ottoman texts refer to "seven modes of decorative design" *(haft aṣl-i naqqāshī)*. The earliest reference to these seven modes as a typological repertoire paralleling the six or seven "pens" in calligraphy appears in the prefaces of Safavid albums from the 1550s and 1560s. The seven modes consist of: *islīmī* or *islāmī* (vegetal scroll), *khatā'ī* (Cathayan), *farangī* (Frankish, European), *fassāli* (patched-up), *abr* (cloud pattern, or marbled), *wāq* (vegetal scroll with human and animal heads), and *girih* (knotted, or geometric interlace). The last term is sometimes substituted in Safavid sources with *"band-i rūmī"* (Anatolian knot), a term which assigns a regional affiliation to geometric ornament.

Though not always easy to identify, the seven fundamental modes *(aṣl)* with infinite derivative variants or branches *(far')* formed the backbone of Safavid manuscript illumination and decorative design in multiple media. The Amir Ghayb Beg Album's preface interprets these seven modes and the figural images of painters as mimetic abstractions modeled on the divine artist's wondrous creation: "They follow God's craft from the compass of the spheres to the surface of the earth. / With their gazes fixed on creation, they take an image from every prototype." No clear separation is made here between figural painting and decorative design, in keeping with the preface's agenda to legitimize the depiction of animate beings through a genealogical connection with calligraphy and illumination. This connection was articulated by the theory of the "two pens," formulated in the court of Shah Tahmasb. The theory in question, which linked the scribe's "vegetal" pen with the painter's "animal" pen-brush, found its visual expression in the specimens assembled within Safavid albums.

Sixteenth-century Safavid decorative designs in multiple media often feature courtly and hunting scenes as well as inscriptions, demonstrating their intimate connection with the arts of the book. The frequent amalgamation of figural and non-figural designs in Safavid ornamental compositions in diverse media reflects the fluidity of boundaries between decorative design and figurative painting. As we shall see, these boundaries became more rigidly defined in the Ottoman regime of visuality, which was characterized from the 1550s onwards by predominantly non-figural designs in the decorative arts, with the exception of the arts of the book.

The complementary theories of the "seven modes" and "two pens" also appear in Safavid biographical treatises on calligraphers and painters. However, these theories are notably absent in an Ottoman treatise on calligraphers and painters written in 1587. Its author, the polymath Mustafa 'Āli, marginalizes the prominence given in Safavid texts on the visual arts to the first Shi'i Imam 'Ali, in accordance with the Ottoman court's Sunni orientation. There is no mention of his invention of the so-called *islāmī* motif, and his competition with artists from China is replaced by a different story: the contest between three "miracle-working" Chinese painter-decorators and the legendary artist Mani. The *islāmī* motif is simply identified with the geographical label, *rūmī;* likewise, "Persian" arts are referred to territorially, as pertaining to greater Iran *('acemī)*.

The ideal of mimetic abstraction occupies a central position in Ottoman writings on the arts, in which the divinely bestowed power of artistic invention is a key concept. The chief architect Sinan's autobiographies, existing in different versions, are a prime example. The importance of innovation is also stressed in Mustafa 'Āli's aforementioned biographical treatise, which praises some calligraphers and painters practicing in the "lands of Rum" as the "inventors" *(mūcid)* of new styles differing from the "Iranian manner" *(üslūb-i 'acemī)*. In my view, this heightened self-consciousness of regional artistic identity, closely associated with dynastic court culture, contributed to the emergence of increasingly differentiated visual regimes in the Ottoman and Safavid territorial empires. The interrelated yet easily distinguishable languages of ornament codified in each neighboring dynasty did not evolve in isolation, but rather in conversation with one another, as these court cultures gradually drifted away from their formerly shared Timurid-Turkmen artistic heritage.

Let us now turn to the formation of a new Ottoman aesthetic of ornament in the second half

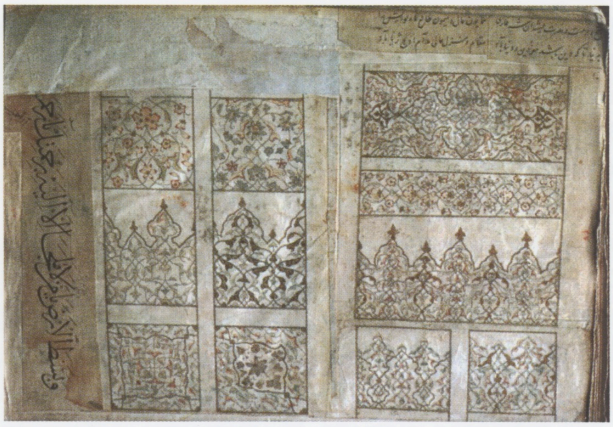

Figure 1

of the sixteenth century, which deliberately departed from previously favored Timurid-Turkmen models. Designs on paper prepared by late fifteenth-century painter-decorators affiliated with the Ottoman court scriptorium had played a decisive role in indigenizing the international Timurid-Turkmen idiom, dominated by abstract *islīmī (or rūmī)* and *khatā'ī* patterns in diverse media. However, this international Persianate aesthetic would fall out of fashion with changing cultural politics in the course of Sultan Süleyman's reign, around the 1550s.

Archival documents I have published confirm that the Ottoman court scriptorium continued to supply designs and loaned painter-decorators to other imperial workshops, including those of tilemakers, tentmakers, and carpetweavers. In a register of royal expenses from the early 1530s, I came across a revealing reference to drawings made for a patterned court carpet by the leading court painter-designer (*naqqāsh)* Shah Quli, who also refurbished and illuminated a *Yusuf and Zulaykha* manuscript at that time. This multitalented Ottoman artist had been deported from Safavid Tabriz after its conquest by Sultan Selim I in 1514. Shah Quli officially joined the "royal corps of painter-decorators" in Istanbul in 1520, after initially being paid from the private royal purse. Becoming the chief of that corps in the 1540s, he held this post until his death in 1557. I have argued elsewhere, on the basis of an archival document, that the unrivaled masterpieces of the "Cathayan" *(khatā'ī)* manner in blue, white, and turquoise ceramic tile panels –later reassembled at the Sünnet Odası in the Topkapı Palace– were based on stencils designed by Shah Quli in 1527-28 for a new kiosk commissioned by Sultan Süleyman.

Shah Quli is now renowned for his ink drawings in the "Cathayan" manner, referred to by modern

Figure 2

scholars as the "saz style". This style evokes an imaginary world of lush vegetation with bold serrated leaves, often inhabited by dragons, phoenixes, birds, qi'lins, and winged fairies. Although he was a specialist of drawing and design, a biographical dictionary of Ottoman poets (composed in 1568–69) testifies to his wider-ranging skills. According to this source, Shah Quli, who composed Persian poetry under the penname Penahi, was nicknamed the "second Mani of the lands of Rum". His unsurpassed talent in "figural painting," rivaling that of Bihzad, was equaled by his expertise in the "seven modes of decorative design" (heft aṣl-i naqqāş) that aroused the jealousy of the "eight paradises." This account accords well with the absence of rigid boundaries between figural and decorative design in Safavid artistic practice, which had shaped Shah Quli's training under the master Aqa Mirak.

Given his expertise in decorative design, it is not surprising that Shah Quli's own pupil and successor, Kara Memi, was a specialist of illumination. Born in Istanbul, the latter would revolutionize the Safavid paradigm of the "seven modes" with manuscript illuminations featuring unprecedentedly naturalistic

Figure 3

Figure 4

bouquets of flowers. The naturalism of this new floral style injected new life into traditional abstract floral sprays in the "Cathayan" manner. The "classical" Ottoman decorative repertoire, distinguished by ubiquitous groupings of identifiable flowers, rose to prominence during Karamemi's tenure as chief court painter-decorator in the 1550s and 1560s.

The new aesthetic that came into full bloom during the third quarter of the sixteenth century found its paradigmatic expression in brocaded silk textiles, Iznik tiles and court carpets. It subordinated the bookish "seven modes" of Safavid decorative design to a selected repertoire of mixed flowers (dominated by tulips, rosebuds, hyacinths, and carnations), often accompanied by eternally blooming plum blossoms. Yet old motifs, such as vegetal scrolls, geometric interlaces, stars, vases, Chinese cloud bands, wavy tiger stripes, triple dots, rosettes and lotus palmettes were not abandoned. The uninhibited fusion of recognizable species of flowers with traditional motifs, excerpted from the "seven modes" of ornament, engendered a remarkably expressive visual language with an unmistakable identity of its own (figure 4). Pushing the ideal of mimetic abstraction to its utmost limits, the selective naturalism of this innovative aesthetic mediated between nature and convention, the real and the imaginary.

The transcultural potential of Ottoman ornament increased with the disappearance of animate forms in the public realm of the decorative arts from the 1550s onward. Thereafter, the restricted use of figural imagery in Ottoman court culture became largely confined to the arts of the book. In my view, this development sharpened the fluid boundaries between "decorative" and "representational" art that

Figure 5

characterized the Safavid regime of visuality. The augmented autonomy of "decorative" design from the arts of the book, and the breakdown of clear-cut ornamental modes encouraged original abstract experiments with form, color, and scale.

The Ottoman preference for legibility and monumentality contrasted with the visual density of Safavid ornament, comprising less naturalistic small-scale patterns rendered with the miniaturist's attention to detail. The dramatically magnified motifs and contrasting radiant colors of the new Ottoman aesthetic moved away from intricate designs to produce a powerful impact from a distance. Compared to the bold patterns of Ottoman textiles, for instance, those of the Safavids are often saturated with inscriptions and narrative figural imagery, consisting of contemporary themes or excerpts from Persian literature (figure 5). Characterized by greater cultural specificity, Safavid ornament was primarily intended for internal consumption, unlike its Ottoman counterpart that more easily crossed intercultural boundaries. Generally lacking inscriptions, Ottoman luxury products were widely consumed by non-Muslims both within the empire and beyond. The taste for inscriptionless, non-figural Ottoman textiles and carpets in the Balkans, Poland, Hungary and Russia was enhanced by the intentional ambiguity of their sensually appealing large-scale patterns. Ottoman export carpets were also a staple in upper class Italian Renaissance households and decorated the whitewashed Protestant churches of Transylvania.

The implicit paradisiacal associations of floral Iznik tiles were in some cases made explicit by accompanying inscriptions. However, such metaphorical interpretations were not readily apparent in Iznik wares, featuring freehand versions of comparable designs invented by potters. These joyful ceramic objects without any inscriptions or intrinsic symbolism appealed to Muslim and non-Muslim customers alike. A set of dishes with coat of arms, commissioned by a European customer, for example, points to the semi-commercial character of the Iznik workshops.

Ottoman ornament not only negotiated intercultural boundaries but also defined the empire's territorial borders with a cohesive system of canonical signs. The new aesthetic canon helped cement the hegemonic collective identity and taste of the empire's multiethnic ruling elite. It made visible the augmented magnificence of an increasingly centralized vast empire extending over three continents. With the seventeenth-century decentralization of the Ottoman regime, its elitist visual order would be gradually be transformed into a premodern mass culture, governed by the market forces of consumerism and international commerce. By the seventeenth century, the increasingly floral and larger scale ornaments of Safavid portable objects followed suit, when Shah 'Abbas I (1587-1629) began to search international markets for them. The so-called Polonnaise carpets, for instance, lack inscriptions and are dominated by nonfigural designs with enlarged floral motifs appealing to Western tastes. Thus coming closer to Ottoman precedents, the luxury products of the Safavid court workshops aesthetically adapted themselves to the international demands of export trade in an ever more globalized early modern world.

Figure 1: *Page from a late fifteenth-century Ottoman album associated with the circle of Sultan Mehmed II's court painter-designer, Baba Naqqaş, comprising designs combining abstract split palmette vegetal scrolls (islīmī) and Catayan (khatā'ī) floral scrolls (Istanbul University Library)*

Figure 2: *A sixteenth-century album page attributed to Shah Quli, with a design in the Cathayan (khatā'ī) manner, currently known as the "saz style"*

Figure 3: *A page with floral illuminations, from a Dīvān of Sultan Süleyman bearing the signature of Kara Memi, 1566*

Figure 4: *Ottoman gold brocade (kemkha) kaftan, third quarter of the sixteenth century (Istanbul, Topkapı Palace Museum)*

Figure 5: *Safavid silk comprising repeat motifs of riders with captives, sixteenth century Iran (New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art)*