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**The Concept of Beauty from the Plotinus
to St. Augustine and Ghazzali and Art of
Abstraction in Medieval Eastern
Mediterranean**

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Introduction

This paper is going to venture the established notion of “Islamic aesthetics” understood as a non-historical and distinct cultural entity. Scholars of Islamic aesthetics occasionally refer to Greek art theory as a precursor but there has been no stimulating attempt to demonstrate the continuity from ancient to medieval art theory in eastern Mediterranean. Scholars from Islamic world insistently emphasize the uniqueness paradigm. For the fundamentalist, Islamic art is in the service of faith and is a mirror of the tenets. For the academician it is the outcome of Islamic culture. Both detach antique traditions from the so-called Islamic approach to art. Quite the opposite, scholars from Western world every so often tend to dismiss the existence of an authentic body of art under Muslim donors and by Muslim artists, particularly in the Early Islamic age. Art historian, Terry Allen, holds the view that there is nothing Islamic in Islamic art. He says that in Late Antique art, vine scrolls in vegetal ornaments became more and more abstracted and geometric borders appeared in floor mosaics. In Islamic arabesque, these two were mingled and vine scrolls welded onto geometrical borders. This last configuration is the end-product of Late Antique art. He asserts that Early Islamic art is in fact Late Roman art.¹

Allen’s view is based on formal evolution of designs. We learn from his paper that an evolutionary process continued under the Muslim patrons; but, Why? This question is not asked by Allen. He does not refer to coeval concepts from the age when these abstract designs were employed in the Islamic domain. His “continuity” paradigm is unsupported with any corresponding conceptual background related to whatever Late Roman (Byzantine) or Early Islamic decorative art despite the fact that such a background inescapably existed since no artistic design ever brought forth without it.

The correlated imperial ethos under Roman, Byzantine and Muslim rulers is a frequently referred source as a common conceptual background for arts. But it is not at all explanatory in respect to the trend for abstraction. In medieval age, abstract designs were highly ever sophisticated and became widespread from Central Asia to the Celtic world. This age corresponds to the spreading of a mainstream mind-set emanated from the idea of a God-centered universe. Monotheistic viewpoint and its understanding of beauty promise an invaluable source to understand the continuity and evolution of abstract decorative designs from Late Roman to Islamic epochs. Likewise the conception of

beauty transformed in a remarkable way in Eastern Mediterranean in the centuries following the spread of Christianity and Islam.

Plotinus (ca. 205-270)

The role of Plotinus, father of Neo-Platonism, is crucial in understanding legacy of the Late Greek aesthetic theory which survived all throughout the medieval era. Mimesis as an aesthetic criterion stimulates a duality: Is imitation an act of copying, or a method of interpretation? Before Plotinus, Plato (ca. 427–347 B.C.) was of the first opinion in indicating that “an image-maker, a representer, understands only appearance, while reality is beyond him.”² Plato thinks that an artist is a copier. Plotinus on the other hand assigns a dynamic role to the artist. He thinks that something is more beautiful the more removed it is from ‘shapeless’ matter. The best artists do not simply imitate the visible, but go beyond, to the principles [and Forms] which produce nature, thereby being in possession of beauty.³ Hence, Plotinus thought that beauty is a divine essence and one of the many manifestations of the absolute. The ultimate criterion of beauty is the intellectual principle. The Intellectual Principle is at once true, good and beautiful.⁴ He consistently characterizes beauty in the world of sense as fake and contaminated by matter. He praises intelligible beauty for being true and pure.⁵ As J. P. Anton summarizes, Plotinus thinks that man is an intermediary between nature and *nous* (first will towards God, [thought, intelligence]). Once the One as the terminus of man’s self-realization is attained, the soul is said to lose itself in a mystical unity with it. The soul is now beyond the realm of *nous*. It has come to the source of all science and all reason. Man must realize what beauty is within him. Then beauty flows from the artist into the sensible world. The more successful the artist as creator is, the closer he comes to the source of beauty, and in the same measure the more he diminishes the initial distance separating him from perfect being.⁶ Those who approach divine with their intellectual faculties can be creative. Hence, the removal from matter and return to divine verify the value of the work.

Plotinus thinks that there can be only one absolute source of creativity: the One. Only the One is absolutely emanative and, consequently, non-imitative. So, it is essential to Plotinus’ doctrine that the artistic act be at once emanative and imitative.⁷ By way of emanation, man’s artistic imagination is the only avenue open to the higher ontological levels of the cosmos for the inflow of more beauty into the structure of the sensible universe. What the artist does is to complete the tasks of nature by bringing to the world of plural materiality more Being and more Reality.⁸ Plotinus maintains that the things in this world are beautiful by participating in form; for every shapeless thing, which is naturally capable of receiving shape and form, is ugly and outside the divine formative power as long as it has no share in formative power and form. This is absolute ugliness. But a thing is also ugly when it is not completely dominated by shape and formative power.⁹ Ugliness is not only a formal essence. An immoral soul is an ugly soul.¹⁰ The soul when it is purified becomes form and formative power. Soul, then, when it is raised to the level of intellect increases in beauty. The soul’s becoming something good and beautiful is its being made like to God, because from Him come beauty and all else which falls to the lot of real beings.¹¹ That which is beyond this we call the nature of the Good, which holds beauty as a screen before it. So in a loose and general way of speaking the Good is the primary beauty.¹²

Rendering shape and form in this world means rendering good and divine, traits of the beauty, through which gratification of the One is achievable. In this theory of emanation and imitation there is a hierarchical order. Ugliness and immorality is at the bottom. It is to be surmounted by man who has capacity to do this. This aesthetic theory elaborated by Plotinus immensely affected medieval theories of beauty.

St. Augustine (354-430)

For the Christian thinker, matter was real and good in essence, and so too were the body and its sense organs. In the Bible it is indicated that "the invisible things of God are understood and seen through the things which are made".¹³ Therefore, cosmos is thought to be a sign of God. This general precept governed the understanding of beauty in the Christian world. For St. Augustine, beauty is creation of God; artists and connoisseurs of external beauty draw their criterion of judgment from a beauty higher than souls.¹⁴ He thought that the more measure, beauty and order shine out in created things, the more are they good, the less the shining out of measure, beauty and order, the less are they good. Measure, beauty and order are the three general goods that we find in all created things whether spiritual or material.¹⁵ Emmanuel Chapman states that unlike Plotinus, for whom that which remains completely foreign to all divine reason is absolute ugliness; Augustine held that there could be no absolute ugliness since wherever there is any being there is some beauty. The ugly differs from the beautiful not in kind but in degree. The ugly is simply the privation of the beauty or form a thing should have, and nothing could be completely deprived of beauty for otherwise it would not be.¹⁶ Though St. Augustine thinks that the created beings take their beauty and goodness from God, he still ascribes absolute beauty to God: "You, Lord, who are beautiful, made them (heaven and earth) for they are beautiful. You are good, for they are good. You are, for they are. Yet they are not beautiful or good or possessed of being in the sense that you their Maker are. In comparison with you they are deficient in beauty and goodness and being."¹⁷

In St. Augustine's understanding, ugliness is not anymore the dominating trait of the earthly beings. They are good and beautiful for being created by God, but in a lesser degree. In his concept of gradation, there is a hierarchy of goodness and beautifulness from individual beings to their totality and to God. The more removed from the single and particular, the mind gets closer to absolute beauty.

As Chapman articulates, St. Augustine holds that like the aesthetic judgment art requires the divine illumination. No work of art could come into existence without the divine illumination which proceeds from the Art of God. The artist cannot create out of nothingness like God, but he continues God's creation by realizing in matter the forms which he brings to completion. The artist does not copy God's creation, but finishes and completes it. Through the illumination of art man can engender works in his own image which resemble God. Beautiful works announce unconsciously the order and invisible beauty of which they are signs. The virtues, which give the soul life and beauty, are drawn from a source higher than the soul. The soul animates the body on which it confers beauty, form and order. Material works of art may be considered as the extension of the artist's body. In this sense it may be said that the artist does for his material work of art what the soul does for its body. Just as the body has form, order, and beauty because it participates in the ideas through the soul, so the work of art participates in the ideas through the artist by the illumination of art which enables him to confer form, order, and beauty on his materials. The shortest definition of the virtue is the order of love. Through

love man orders inferior things which are beautiful in their own genus and species to the superior.¹⁸ As it is clear in St. Augustine's ideas collected by Chapman, the artist's creativity depend on the involvement of 'divine illumination' and the virtues from God. Furnished with them the artist renders the order and beauty immanent in the world apparent. While Plotinus regards the material world as essentially ugly, St. Augustine thinks that God's creation is incomplete and the task to complete it is given to transcendent, God-like man.

Imam Ghazzali (1058-1111)

The concept of beauty encompasses diverse explanations in different Islamic theological schools. These statements can be related to Koranic verses, which guided and monitored them. In Koran, a greater emphasis is put on the concept of beauty. The term 'beautiful' (*husn*) is in the main employed to denote ethical and religious value of the acts, which is used 194 times in this sense. *Husn* is regarded by Islamic theologians as a criterion, an 'eye of the heart'. The term 'ugliness' (*kubh*), on the other hand, is used only once in the Koran.

Here are foremost verses inspired Islamic philosophical schools and sufis:

Who made all things good which He created, and He began the creation of man from clay (32/7, trans. Pickthal)

(We take our) colour from Allah, and who is better than Allah at colouring. We are His worshippers. (2/138, trans. Pickthal)

It is Allah Who has made for you the earth as a resting place, and the sky as a canopy, and has given you shape and made your shapes beautiful, and has provided for you Sustenance, of things pure and good; ... (40/64; trans. Yusufali)

As it is clear in these verses the created world is simply beautiful. That's why the material world is regarded essentially beautiful by the Islamic theologians. According to the advocates of the Prophet and his companions (*ehl-i sunna*) and Ashari School, things and acts are initially neutral. Religious sincerity verifies their goodness and badness. The Prophet once stated that "God is beautiful and He loves beauty."¹⁹ Philosophers approached the question of good (beauty) and bad (ugly) sanguinely. Fârâbî and Ibn Sînâ held that bad (or ugly) is relative and there is no evil in the essence of beings. Less goodness is comparative. İhvân-ı Safâ thinks that goodness is essential in the universe; evil exists only for a goal.²⁰ In general, the beauties in the material world are considered as manifestations of the absolute beauty (*djamâl-i bâ-kamâl*) with different degrees. Through the observation of these one can reach divine beauty and God.²¹

In Sufî understanding, ugliness in things is not tangible, it is subjective and relative. There is no unconditional ugliness in beings, but complete beauty. This means that being is ontologically faultless and complete.²² A statement attributed to the Prophet by sufis gives to man the role of observer of God's beauty in the world: "I was a hidden treasure, and I wished to be known, so I created mankind, and then made Myself known to them, and they recognized Me."

Ghazzali states that "a more beautiful universe than this present one is improbable."²³ According to him the universe, in its entirety, is the art and organization of God. Whoever stares and loves universe as a work of God, stares God, recognizes God, loves God.²⁴ Absolute beauty is God, who is One and beyond comparison.²⁵ The highest love is

the love of God's beauty.²⁶ Every beauty in the universe is perhaps a beauty from the beauties of his face (*djamal*).²⁷ Ghazzali quotes a poem: "You appeared... You hide curtained by whatsoever you become visible with. I wonder whoever veiled with the known, how will be known."²⁸ Beauty of the created world is like a curtain before God. This idea was most probably inspired by the view of Plotinus that God holds beauty as a screen before Him.

Ghazzali distinguishes beauty of the apparent from the beauty of the hidden. He says that heart conceives better than eye. The beauty of the meanings comprehended with intellect is greater than the beauty of the extrinsic forms visible to eye. Ghazzali speaks about a more complete pleasure from the comprehension of the essence of beauty. According to him, beauty is also acclaimed on behalf of its individuality (*zat*).²⁹ Thus Ghazzali distinguishes the beauty admired for it is only beautiful.

According to Ghazzali, beauty is present in objects not comprehensible with senses. Beauties are known only with the light of the heart's eye (*basîra*).³⁰ Senses are incomplete in comprehending them. With the permanency of beautiful qualities, love remains permanent. Qualities turn into sciences and power, which can not be comprehended with sensation. Their centre in the body is an atomic part. As a matter of fact the loved is that part. The form, shape and sensible color of a part which is so small that can not be torn to pieces, can not be envisaged, and can not be claimed to be loved it is because visible.³¹ Intrinsic qualities render a writer's classification, a poet's poem, a miniaturist's painting and a master's building beautiful.³² Ghazzali's introduction of the concept of *basîra* is significant. It is a latent faculty in man. *Basîra* is commonly sealed from birth with the exception of a few; but it can be opened through self effacing and combat with satan (*mudjahada*). Those who manage this can see realities beyond the reach of the senses.³³

Ghazzali thinks that beauty depends on the virtue (*kamalat*) a thing possesses.³⁴ According to him beauty of things depends on the existence of perfection appropriate to them. Ghazzali relates the apex of beauty.³⁵ In this way, he introduces gradation like Plotinus and St. Augustine. Beauty here is a moral criterion and can be less or more in respect to the virtues its owner holds.

Conclusion

From the act of 'self realization' in Plotinus, to the involvement of 'divine illumination' in St. Augustine and opening of 'heart's eye' in Imam Ghazzali, we understand that a mediator role is given to the artist who can realize these and beautify the material world. This role provides us to introduce an 'aesthetics of purity' advocated by these thinkers. Plotinus holds that "Pheidias... did not make Zeus from any model perceived by the senses, but understood what Zeus would look like if he wanted to make himself visible."³⁶ Augustine thinks same way in stating that beautiful works announce unconsciously the order and invisible beauty of which they are signs. For Ghazzali beauty is beyond the veil of the known and the revelation of the hidden beauty renders an artwork beautiful. In these views, beauty in art is understood as a manifestation of the divine and ideal.

The idealistic representation of the gods embodied in human form by the ancients was gradually replaced in medieval age by the representation of a supreme and single deity in abstract forms like geometry symbolizing the Divine Intellect. In Christian art, though

anthropomorphism survived, schematic and one-dimensional representation of the saintly personalities gives a hint of this progress. This has been related by some scholars to a presumed decline in artistic techniques. But the reason of it could be the transcendentalism of the Christian aesthetics, which now disfavored the human body as being made of bone and flesh, the matters at the lowermost level of the gradation this paper talked about. Rendering the intellectual and moral faculties of the perfect man without representing his material side was almost unattainable. One way of giving these was distortion of the body. Hence, abstraction of the contours of the body reined supreme in medieval Christian art. The greater emphasis put on the notion that the created world is essentially beautiful distinguishes Islamic aesthetics from its precursors. This can be regarded as the reason why abstraction was much more favored than figural representation. Re-representation was denigrated by the Islamic artist like Plato does in his *Republic*.

In Islamic geometrical decoration, 'infinite pattern' consists of an interlaced line passing over and under itself forming intricate patterns. Every part is subordinated to the pattern which exhibits unity in multiplicity.³⁷ This atomistic representation well accords with the view that at the center is One, which is everywhere, but also distinct and beyond. Infiniteness is a guise of all-encompassing God and His Intellect, who manifested His beauty through the created world. Geometry was the most appropriate way of representing His infinite existence and Intellect in and out of the created world. It is a curtain or screen which only mind passes through for higher dimensions.

This brief history of aesthetic ideas from Plotinus to St. Augustine and Imam Ghazzali, demonstrates a progress, the limitless patterns of Islamic geometrical decoration can be regarded as the end-product of its manifestations in art. Allen's 'continuity' paradigm referred to in the introduction can now securely be related to a conceptual background and the expression that "there is nothing Islamic in Islamic art" loses ground.

¹ Terry Allen, "The Arabesque, the Beveled Style, and the Mirage of an Early Islamic Art," eds. F.M. Clover and R.S. Humphreys, *Tradition and Innovation in Late Antiquity* (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), p. 221.

² *Aesthetics: The Classic Readings*, ed. D. E. Cooper (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), p.19.

³ *Aesthetics*, p. 56.

⁴ John P. Anton, "Plotinus' Conception of the Functions of the Artist," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 26/1, p. 92, 93.

⁵ Suzanne Stern-Gillet, "Plotinus and his Portrait," *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 37/3 (July, 1997), p. 221.

⁶ Anton, pp. 93-98.

⁷ Anton, p. 94.

⁸ Anton, p. 96.

⁹ *Aesthetics*, p. 58.

¹⁰ Stern-Gillet, p. 221.

¹¹ *Aesthetics*, pp. 61-62.

¹² *Aesthetics*, p. 64.

¹³ *Rom. I:20*, quoted in Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford University, 1992), p. 184.

¹⁴ Saint Augustine, p. 210.

¹⁵ De Natura Boni, *ch. 111*, quoted in Emmanuel Chapman, "Some Aspects of St. Augustine's Philosophy of Beauty," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 1/1 (Spring, 1941), p. 47

¹⁶ Chapman, "Some Aspects of St. Augustine's Philosophy of Beauty," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 1/1 (Spring, 1941), p. 48.

¹⁷ Saint Augustine, p. 224.

¹⁸ Emmanuel Chapman, *Saint Augustine's Philosophy of Beauty* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1939), pp. 73, 75, 76-77, 79-80.

¹⁹ Ramazan Altıntaş, *İslam Düşüncesinde Tevhid ve Estetik İlişkisi* (Ankara: Pınar, 2002), p. 78.

²⁰ İlyas Çelebi, "Hüsün ve Kubuh," *TDV İslâm Ansiklopedisi*, vol. XIX.

²¹ Mustafa Oral, "Estetik ve Tarihçesi," *Köprü*, 71 (2000)

<http://www.koprudergisi.com/index.asp?Bolum=EskiSayilar&Goster=Sayi&SayiNo=71>

²² Altıntaş, pp. 92, 95, 97.

²³ Altıntaş, p. 96.

²⁴ İmâm-ı Gazâlî, *İhyâ Ulûm-id-dîn*, vol. 9: *Münciyat VI, Muhabbet, Şevk, Üns ve Rıza Kitabı*, trans. Ali Arslan (İstanbul: Arslan, not dated), p. 328, 332.

²⁵ Gazâlî, p. 299.

²⁶ Gazâlî, p. 310.

²⁷ Gazâlî, p. 391.

²⁸ Gazâlî, p. 333.

²⁹ Gazâlî, pp. 284, 286-287.

³⁰ Heart (*kalb*) in the Koran and Hadiths (Traditions) is regarded as a tool of comprehension, science, knowledge and thinking. Sufis regard intuitive faculties of kalb as surpassing the human reasoning (Süleyman Uludağ, "Kalb," *TDV İslâm Ansiklopedisi*, vol. XXIV). Heart's eye (*basira*) is a spiritual faculty in the Haidths. It is the talent of seeing and also finding out the truth and true path in the Koran. Sufis think that basira sees the hidden side of the things and events (Süleyman Uludağ, "Basîret," *TDV İslâm Ansiklopedisi*, vol. V).

³¹ Gazâlî, p. 289.

³² Gazâlî, p. 296.

³³ Uludağ, "Basîret."

³⁴ Altıntaş, p. 63.

³⁵ Gazâlî, p. 288.

³⁶ Quoted by Stern-Gillet, p. 211.

³⁷ Edward H. Madden, "Some Characteristics of Islamic Art," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 33/4 (Summer, 1975), p. 426, 427.

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