

Persian translation of this paper entitled:

آشنایی با آرای سنت‌گرایان در باب هنر و معماری

اسلامی با نقد نظرات «تیتوس بورکهارت»

is also published in this issue of journal.

Original Research Article

An Introduction to the Views of Traditionalists on Islamic Art and Architecture through the Critique of Titus Burckhardt

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Received; 05/05/2023

accepted; 08/09/2024

available online; 01/10/2024

Abstract

Most traditionalist thinkers, influenced by Sufi Islam and emphasizing the mystical aspects, believe in a shared and universal supernatural truth inherent in religious traditions. This intellectual movement, initiated by René Guénon and carried forward by figures such as Titus Burckhardt, Frithjof Schuon, Ananda Coomaraswamy, and Martin Lings, has significantly influenced contemporary comparative theology. Within the Islamic world, it intertwines with mystical currents and Eastern religious practices. These theorists express their views through Islamic architecture and art, employing illogical and emotional arguments that have led to confusion and disorder in Iran's cultural and artistic community for many years. Critiquing Burckhardt's views on the theoretical foundations of art and the manifestations of Islamic art and architecture reveals a tendency towards sanctification and a retreat from rationality, aiming to offer a realistic and logical assessment of the arts in the Islamic world. Traditionalists, emphasizing perennial wisdom, hold a belief in a fixed, sacred, and esoteric tradition across all human religions, perceiving a common tradition in Islam, Christianity, Judaism, and Eastern Asian religions. Unfortunately, their definition of tradition diverges significantly from the Islamic understanding found in the Holy Quran, leading to gross misinterpretations and unscientific interpretations in various fields, particularly in Islamic art and architecture.

Keywords: *Traditionalists, Critique, Burckhardt, Art, Islamic Architecture.*

Introduction

Following the victory of the Islamic Revolution and the rapid transformations within society that significantly impacted the artistic and cultural landscape of Iran, translations and publications of traditionalist views on Islamic art and architecture emerged in the 1980s and 1990s. This movement spread so quickly that it influenced art circles and universities of art and architecture. (It is worth noting that prior to the Islamic Revolution, this initiative was initiated by Dr. Nasr through his publications on the sacred, perennial wisdom, and so forth.) The emotional and illogical nature of these discussions, merely due to their “novelty” in the realm of art and architecture, along with

Islamic slogans and examples from the Holy Quran and Hadith, created an atmosphere within the Iranian artistic community that has had lasting, detrimental consequences. Traditionalist thinkers have erred in their definitions and applications of tradition, believing in an ancient and shared tradition among all the world's religions— Islam, Christianity, Judaism, and Eastern Asian religions—which they refer to as “perennial wisdom.” This definition, however, is at odds with the Islamic understanding of tradition as found in the Holy Quran. For instance, in the Buddhist tradition, the concept of God is anthropomorphized, whereas this is not the case in Abrahamic religions. The aspiration for a transcendent unity and perennial wisdom aimed at bridging the thoughts and

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beliefs of different religions is commendable and necessary, yet this unity is not the same across non-divine and divine religions, particularly in Islam and its Quranic foundations. There are profound differences among the religions of Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, Judaism, and Islam that warrant further exploration.

The critiques of Burckhardt reveal a striking and regrettable ambiguity in the methodologies and historical judgments present in his works and those of all traditionalists. This vagueness has led subsequent generations into confusion and contradiction. Thinkers like Jalal Satari have translated these unsubstantiated and emotional claims without critique, while on the other hand, Seyyed Hossein Nasr has systematically disseminated and translated these discussions, allowing subsequent generations to thrive in this toxic environment.

Fortunately, in recent years, articles and books critiquing the views of this group of theorists have begun to emerge, signaling the start of a challenge to previous deviations. Moreover, from the 2000s and 2010s onwards, a new movement that brought modernism and conceptual art to Iran, imitating the West, has somewhat isolated traditionalists. This paper aims to provide a logical analysis and clarification of the rich realm of Islamic art and architecture in Iran and the world, based on historical documentation and existing artistic evidence. In this writing, the views of Titus Burckhardt on Islamic art and architecture are introduced, critiqued, and analyzed.

Research Background

The articles and books critiquing the views of traditionalists and the hidden symbols in Islamic art include “Criticism of Traditionalists’ Ideas on Wisdom and Concealed Secrets of Islamic Art” by Olyaei (2021), “A Critical Review and Analysis on the Structure and Content of the Article Entitled: ‘Formation of Space as a Result of Conceptual Alignment of Music-Math and Architecture’ Case study: The entrance and Dome Shaped Roof of Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque Isfahan” by Bakan (2021), and the book “Emkan va zarorat-e honar-e Islami, barresi va naghd-e didgah-e sonatgarayan” by Ghanbari (2016). Additionally, the article “An Introduction to and Examination of Arabesque Motifs

in the Decorations of Islamic Period (A critique of the book “Eslimi and Medallions)” by Khosraviyani and Javadi (2022), which collectively argue for the need to illuminate and critique traditionalist opinions.

Rashidi (2017) has conducted a deep and analytical study critiquing traditionalist views, linking traditionalism to the continuity of colonial Orientalism. Drawing from Edward Said and other thinkers, he introduces a multifaceted critique of the emotional and illogical claims regarding Islamic art and architecture. This study presents novel insights and a unique methodology previously unaddressed, focusing exclusively on critiquing selected works of Burckhardt while critiquing the translators and promoters of these erroneous views, particularly Dr. Nasr. His contributions have polluted the artistic and cultural discourse within the community post-Islamic Revolution, leading to lasting ambiguities and doubts that have severely impacted the foundations of art and architecture in the Islamic world, especially in Iran.

In the 1980s and 1990s, many works of Western traditionalists, particularly Burckhardt, were translated and published, with significant contributions from thinkers like Dr. Nasr and Dr. Jalal Satari. Unfortunately, the continuation of this trend over three decades has resulted in emotional and incorrect interpretations that have plagued Islamic art and architecture, with enduring consequences. The traditionalist school critiques modernity and Western philosophy, advocating for sacred knowledge and valid religious traditions while emphasizing perennial wisdom that reflects a shared and supernatural truth within religious traditions. “Seyyed Hossein Nasr sacred art a remedy for liberation from modernity, yet one should not overlook the potential of modernity, as it can sometimes support traditions” (S. M. Dibaj, 2023, personal review).

This school has significantly impacted contemporary comparative theology and has intertwined with Sufism and mystical movements within the Islamic world. It is also linked to Eastern religions and practices. Prominent figures in this school during the twentieth century include René Guénon (Abdul Wahid Yahya), Ananda Kumaraswamy, Frithjof Schuon (Isa Nuruddin Ahmad), Titus (Ibrahim) Burckhardt, Martin Lings (Abu Bakr Siraj al-Din), and

Seyyed Hossein Nasr. The second and third generations of Iranian traditionalists have built upon the ideas of these thinkers regarding the arts of the Islamic period, including architecture, painting, and music.

“Traditionalism is a contemporary thought and movement fundamentally based on the element of (symbolism), asserting that the universe is a mystical system filled with diverse divine signs, each representing a unique and singular manifestation of the truth of the Divine essence, even amidst the vast multiplicity of existence. Only a select few, claiming a connection to the higher realm, have engaged in profound spiritual journeys, thus becoming the inheritors, transmitters, and interpreters of elevated artistic symbols, disseminating divine knowledge and enlightenment” (Olyaei, 2021, 5). It is evident that monopolizing the understanding of divine truths marks the beginning of deviation, ambiguity, and doubt, especially when these interpreters hold eclectic beliefs and emotional interpretations of Islam and the Holy Quran.

This group, relying on philosophy and mysticism, advocates for perennial wisdom and believes that major world religions, such as Islam, Christianity, Judaism, and Eastern Asian religions—including Buddhism, Jainism, Shinto, and Taoism—share a common truth. Consequently, within the traditionalist framework, they refer to the singular and shared inner reality across all religions as “perennial religion” and the associated wisdom and knowledge as “perennial wisdom.” “One of the important issues in traditionalism is a complex and perceptual cyclical doctrine of time, directly borrowed from Hinduism” (*ibid.*, 6).

The translation of books and articles by various thinkers over the past 30 to 40 years in Iran coincided with the establishment of the Islamic Republic, leading to a surge in discussions about Islamic architecture, Islamic cities, Islamic art, as well as Islamic philosophy and mysticism, and their connections to the arts, including music and various visual arts. The popularity of these topics became so pronounced that they significantly influenced television, cultural and artistic circles, and educational institutions. The teaching and promotion of these subjects created an atmosphere where emotional and illogical discussions overshadowed any form of historical research, documentation, and analytical critique, a trend we still observe today. In Iran, where

everything—including culture and art—follows current trends, even esteemed professors and prominent thinkers are not exempt from this influence. Terms such as “Islamic art and architecture” and “the wisdom of Islamic art” became so alluring and provocative that artists, intellectuals, and unfortunately many students became entangled in these misleading discussions.

Morteza Avini (1993, 10), in the preface of his book “Foundations of Spiritual Art”, writes: “It must be acknowledged that in the realm of religious art, the West has taken the lead, with figures like Burckhardt and Schuon. He asserts: ‘Contemporary art is certainly not religious art.’ What does this absolute judgment imply? ‘Religious art is the historical result of humanity’s approach to absolute truth, while contemporary art is the historical outcome of humanity’s turn away from truth and its fall from the exemplary paradise of its existence.’”

Seyyed Morteza Avini, who himself was educated in the arts, has expressed such admiration and emotion that it seems as if Burckhardt and Schuon are the prophets of Islamic art! Therefore, this study aims to provide a scientific and logical critique, presenting clear and compelling evidence to clarify and engage rationally with the concept of Islamic art and its wisdom.

“Among those who have directly benefited from the perspectives of the traditionalists or have reflected their views are Laleh Bakhtiari, Nader Ardalan, Keith Critchlow, and Louis Massignon, who share a commonality in their reference to the words of Ibn Arabi and his influenced Sufism. However, it appears that Ibn Arabi’s views and his Sufism are not exclusive to traditional art, as such perspectives can be found elsewhere, although he engaged less in artistic interpretation. Historians like Najib Oğlu, despite critiquing traditionalists regarding art, ultimately seem to have conceded to this viewpoint. This issue is discussed in the final chapter of Najib Oğlu’s book analyzing the cosmological themes in Islamic motifs” (Ghanbari, 2016).

“It is regrettable that in the era of the revival of pure Islam, a group has again sought non-guiding characteristics, engaging in dervish antics and mystical practices that abruptly transformed the rightful and justice-seeking

Islam into a graveyard and individualistic one. Time spent responding to these self-justifying claims (which are necessary due to their influence in today's Iranian society) could have been used to elucidate the theoretical foundations of the noble and pure Muhammadan ideals" (S. A. Mansouri, 2019, personal interview).

Titus (Ibrahim) Burckhardt, a German of Swiss descent (1908-1984), was a researcher in Islamic arts, architecture, and civilization. After meeting Schuon, he joined the ranks of traditionalists and adherents of perennial wisdom. This paper critiques Burckhardt's views. For further acquaintance with traditionalist thought and critiques of their views on art and architecture, refer to Olyaei (2021), Bakan (2021), Ghanbari (2016), and Rashidi (2017).

Burckhardt authored numerous books in English, French, and German, some of which have been translated into Persian. His father, Carl Nathanael Burckhardt, was a sculptor, and his grandfather, Carl Jacob Christoph Burckhardt, was a historian. In 1935, after traveling to North Africa, he settled in Fez, Morocco, converted to Islam, and pledged allegiance to the Shadhili order under Ali ibn Tayyib Darqawi in the Qawiya, adopting the name Ibrahim Ez-aldin.

Following this introduction, the study will critique the views of traditionalists with a focus on Burckhardt's perspectives.

Research Hypothesis

Traditionalists, through Sufi thought and a distorted perspective, have presented enigmatic and sanctimonious interpretations regarding the theoretical foundations of art and architecture, which have shrouded the truth and reality of Islamic art and architecture in a haze of doubt and ambiguity. Critiquing the views of these theorists is a movement aimed at clarifying the realm of Islamic art and architecture and presenting logical arguments based on historical and cultural documentation and existing evidence.

General Overview of Islamic Art

Most artistic works concerning the discourse of Islamic art are the result of Orientalist research conducted by Western scholars. The Orientalist discourse, which lays the foundation for post-colonial studies, "demonstrates how these works

construct the East through imaginary images (for example, novels), seemingly realistic descriptions (in journalistic reports and travelogues), and claims of knowledge about history and culture (history books, anthropology, etc.)" (Bartens, 2009, as cited in Rashidi, 2017, 259-260).

The invention of Islamic art by Western researchers is largely unfounded, and the main shortcoming of such studies is the failure to provide a clear definition with specified theoretical positions on the subject (*ibid.*, 19). The esoteric and mystical studies of Islamic art are fundamentally anti-cultural and anti-historical because they do not acknowledge that when we speak of the discourse of Islam, we are referring to a more dynamic and broader cultural context that flows through various nations, initially characterized by distinct cultural and social differences (*ibid.*).

In a writing by Burckhardt (1993d) titled "An Introduction to the Principles and Methods of Religious Art," he presents some insights about the artistic tradition and its continuity that are coincidentally correct and logical, supported by the historical trajectory of art. He states: "It is not only possible but also necessary that an artist or craftsman engaged in a religious art may not be aware of the divine art that exists within the existing forms and structures. In practice, he only knows certain aspects of this law or some applications of it within the confines of his profession, which is governed by specific rules. These professional rules allow him to paint an icon, create a religious cup, or engage in calligraphy in a manner that is ritualistically correct and valid, without necessarily understanding the profound meanings of the institutions he employs. It is a tradition that ensures the spiritual validity of forms and structures by transmitting mystical examples and rules from one generation to another. Tradition possesses a mysterious and hidden power that influences an entire civilization and even determines professions that do not directly have a specific religious purpose. The power of tradition creates the style of traditional civilization, a style that cannot be imitated from the outside and is sustained almost vitally without effort or labor, remaining enduring and persistent (*ibid.*, 82-83). As mentioned, the first part of this definition refers to the artistic tradition, which is intended to denote the perennial and religious tradition. However, the emphasis that the artist is

not necessarily aware of it and merely imitates or benefits from the tradition or artistic style is a valid argument. Yet, this same author and other traditionalists have repeatedly pointed out that Muslim artists, and sometimes Shiites, have consciously engaged in art creation, aware of the philosophy and mysticism of their time, which contradicts the current assertion.

In the introduction to his article “The Perennial Values in Islamic Art,” translated by Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Burckhardt (1993c, 65) states: “Much has been written about the emergence of Islamic art from earlier elements such as Byzantine, Iranian, Hindu, and Mongolian sources. However, very little has been said about the force that united all these disparate elements into a singular composition. No one can deny the unity of Islamic art, both in time and space. Islamic art is merely a method of bestowing spiritual dignity upon matter and, in the most direct way, it manifests unity within diversity”.

“By eliminating any human imagery, at least in the religious realm, Islamic art helps individuals to be completely themselves. Instead of casting their spirit outward, individuals remain at the center of their existence, where they are both the vicegerent and servant of God. In general, Islamic art seeks to create an environment in which individuals can rediscover their innate dignity and gravity; thus, it shuns any form of idol, ensuring that nothing, even in a relative and temporary sense, serves as a veil between the individual and the invisible presence of God” (*ibid.*, 69). “Whether one observes the Mosque of Córdoba or reflects upon the Great School of Samarkand, whether one sees the tomb of a mystic in the Maghreb or in Chinese Turkestan, it seems that a single light manifests in all these works. Therefore, one must ask: What is the nature and character of this unity?” (*ibid.*, 65).

Religious art is merely a notion because its real subject is inexpressible. Religious art has a celestial and ethereal essence, as examples of religious art manifest divine truths. It represents the embodiment and repetition of divine creation in a condensed form through allegories, reflecting the symbolic and mysterious nature of the world, thereby liberating the human spirit from dependence on crude and transient material events. All these expressions are literary

and rhetorical, constituting unprovable claims. It must be acknowledged that what the audience perceives from an artistic work and the impact it has on their spirit, psyche, and thinking determines whether it is religious art. Moreover, has the artist succeeded in conveying a religious message through their creation?

In summary, the mere form of artistic work—whether geometric, floral, or allegorical—does not inherently carry philosophy, mysticism, the truths of Islam, or tradition. Additionally, the aforementioned statement applies to artistic tradition rather than the Islamic and spiritual traditions emphasized by traditionalists. The artistic tradition, characterized by repetition and imitation without awareness, has existed across all arts and among past peoples and nations. This can be observed in the ancient arts of Persia, Egypt, India, China, and even in the cave paintings up to modern and contemporary art. Whether in the narrative arts reflecting religious paths or in Christian and Islamic art, the artistic tradition is evident, as confirmed by the existing works of architecture, decorations, and visual arts, demonstrating the continuity of the arts over time. Thus, many points that Burckhardt derives from the Quran and Islamic tradition are subject to doubt and often rejected. One of these points is the phrase “the wisdom Islamic art,” which has been enthusiastically accepted in Iran. Based on this, Zahra Rahnavard (1999) proudly claims in her book titled “The of Islamic Art Wisdom” that Burckhardt introduced the term. As the saying goes: “The imitation of creation has led to its ruin!” Over time, Iran, despite its rich culture and art, has unfortunately followed trends, and alienation has severely affected the roots of this civilized nation. In this work, Rahnavard combines Burckhardt’s ideas with her own opinions regarding Islamic art, most of which are emotional and lack logical analysis, even in light of the historical context and existing evidence in Iran, rendering them unsubstantiated. (A critique of this book would require a separate discussion.)

Decorations

• Islamic Arabesque

Burckhardt offers the following insights regarding the arabesque: “The arabesque is not employed as an image;

rather, it is the exact opposite of pictorial art and its deficiencies. By transforming a surface into a colorful texture or by using light and darkness in painting, the decoration prevents the viewer's mind from focusing on a specific image that it presents. An arabesque pattern is everywhere and nowhere at once; every stability entails a negation, and every negation entails stability" (Burckhardt, 1993c, 74). What does this definition of the arabesque imply?

Burckhardt, like many Eastern and Western scholars, has a misunderstanding regarding the arabesque, as follows: "What is commonly known as the arabesque design comprises two types of prevalent arabesques: one type consists of intricate patterns formed by numerous geometric stars, whose rays interconnect in delicate and infinite designs. This type of arabesque is an engaging symbol of the human's intuitive state at a level where unity is observed within diversity and diversity within unity. The arabesque, as it is typically known, combines plant forms to such an extent that it has become a specific style of Islamic art, losing any resemblance to nature and strictly adhering to the laws of proportion, where each line undulates in complementary cycles, and each surface encompasses its opposite. The arabesque is simultaneously logical, weighted, mathematical, and musical. From the Islamic perspective, it is of utmost importance that the arabesque represents a balance between the intoxication of love and the sobriety of reason, serving as an engaging symbol of the human experience of observing unity in diversity and diversity in unity. The vegetal forms that have lost all resemblance to nature, and the arabesque design represent a balance between the intoxication of love and the sobriety of reason" (ibid.). Are these expressions not entirely unclear and ambiguous? In his book "Sacred Art," Burckhardt (2011, 147) provides an inaccurate definition of the arabesque: "The spiraling movement or arabesque is not merely for the decoration of various surfaces such as buildings, books, crafts, and objects; it carries significance. Essentially, the rhythm and imagery of the elements of remembrance and the mystical journey convey a religious and sacred meaning in decorative motifs. Decoration can express sacred symbols. According to Matisse, expression and decoration are the same, a notion he derived from the

East, specifically from Islam, where the primary appeal of artistic works and Islamic buildings lies in their decoration". The author, like many others who have addressed Islamic motifs and decorations, does not recognize the arabesque and equates it with the Arabic or "arabesque"²¹ style, a mistake that certainly merits discussion and correction. In his article "The spirit of Islamic art," Burckhardt (1993b, 58) states: "In arabesque or ornamental designs (arabesque), which is a creation specific to Islam". It should be noted that arabesques and other geometric floral motifs are not exclusive to Islam; simple arabesques can be found in Sasanian decorations, but the prevalence, variety, and expansion of these motifs occurred during the Islamic period, particularly under the Safavid dynasty (see Khosraviyani & Javadi, 2022).

"In arabesque or ornamental designs (arabesque), which is a creation specific to Islam, the genius of the nomadic spirit is combined. Ornamentation is a type of decorative discourse where logic is intertwined with the living continuity of proportion, and it is composed of two elements: intricate patterns and vegetal forms. The intricate patterns fundamentally represent geometric thought" (ibid.).

The term "Zakhraf" or "Arabesque," which is said to embody the balance of arabesque designs, represents a completely erroneous translation and definition of the arabesque. Where "Zakhraf" originally refers to gold and is commonly used to denote something valuable, it cannot be equated with the specific meaning of arabesque. Furthermore, "arabesque" is a general Arabic term for all geometric and floral motifs in Islamic decorations, which traditionalists have misinterpreted as Islamic or arabesque without a precise understanding of these motifs as observed in Arab regions. In the arabesque (Arabaneh), which is a type of Islamic creation, geometric creativity is combined with a nomadic spirit (Burckhardt as cited in Ghanbari, 2016, 165). The author also notes the influence of Scythian decorations and motifs, which possess twisting branches and leaves, stating that these shapes and forms implicitly signify a conscious return of Islam to the elevated system of objects and matters, known as "din al-fitrah." Islam absorbs these ancient motifs, transforming them into the most abstract and generalized versions of their kind, extracting their

magical and enchanting qualities, while simultaneously bestowing a new rational insight endowed with spiritual dignity. Konnel considers aesthetics based on arabesque design, believing that “the opposition to naturalism was so deeply ingrained in Muslim artists that it hindered the free advancement of painting and sculpture and the inclination toward realism in artistic works. The more the motifs deviated from their natural forms due to transformations, the closer they aligned with the aesthetic feelings inherent in their Islamic meaning” (*ibid.*, 164). Was there not spirituality and truth in Scythian art and that of other nomadic peoples? It is evident that this heritage has reached Islamic art, as no civilization, culture, or art emerges without a prior context. Islam has taken what existed before, refined certain elements, retained and expanded those that were compatible with the new thought and religion, and eliminated the rest that did not align with its principles. However, the insistence of Burckhardt and other traditionalists on the Islamic and Qur’anic nature of these elements is entirely misleading and devoid of logic and reality. Their narrative and emotional expressions, which may seem spiritual or mystical, only serve to create confusion and misdirection. Philosophers and mystics among translators have also perpetuated these misconceptions. As someone who teaches the history of art and Eastern religions and has studied all the aforementioned aspects of Islamic art from traditionalists, I find it astonishing that Iranian and Muslim translators and educators tolerate such blatant errors from Western Muslim mystics regarding Islam and Islamic art without any subsequent critique or commentary. Is it possible that they themselves are followers of these ideas, accepting these fatal flaws? Generally, traditionalists appear more influenced by misguided mysticism than by true spirituality, and their views are far removed from reality, reason, and logic—enthusiasts emerging from sectarian and distorted mystical backgrounds (Fig. 1).

Burckhardt’s Claims Regarding Islamic Architecture

In a mosque, the believer is not merely a witness; rather, one could say that they are in their own home. However, this

“home” is not in the conventional sense. Once the believer purifies themselves through Wudu (ablution), they are freed from the transient changes of the external world and, in reciting the revealed words of the Quran, symbolically return to the status of Adam, who stands at the center of the universe. Thus, all Islamic criteria aim to create an entirely self-sufficient space, manifesting all qualities and attributes of space in every aspect (Burckhardt, 1993c, 70).

Burckhardt (*ibid.*) notes that the first mosque features a vast hall with columns reminiscent of a nomadic tent. He further adds that Islamic architecture follows a centralized plan, with the dome serving as a symbol of the union between earth and sky, meaning that the rectangular base of the structure corresponds to the earth while the dome reaches toward the heavens. According to this definition, mosques and sacred buildings in Iran that have domes and are built on a Chartaqi (four-arched plan), or those with rectangular prayer halls featuring barrel vaults, would not encompass this sacred unity of earth and sky².

In another passage, he says: “The Iranian arch takes the form of a *tibtarta* or ‘ship’s hull,’ while the Maghrebi arch

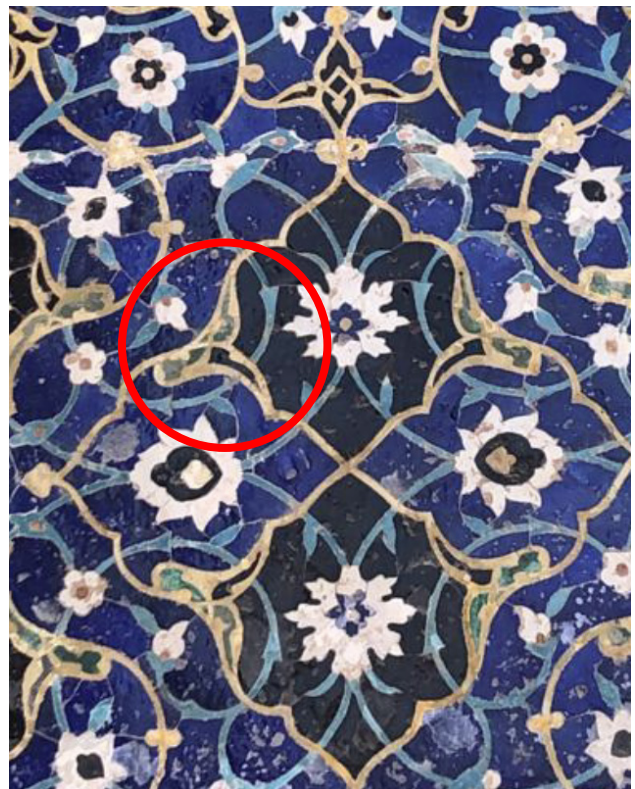


Fig. 1. Arabesque Motifs in Mosaic Tile, Green Dome of Kerman (Qobeh Sabz). Source: Eskandarpour Khorrami, 2018. Source: Author’s archive.

resembles a horseshoe with a slightly elongated point. Both of these arches combine the aforementioned qualities of calm stability and lightness. The Iranian arch is wide and balanced, rising effortlessly, like the flame of an oil lamp protected from the wind. In contrast, the Maghrebi arch, whose extraordinary width is tempered by a rectangular frame, represents a blend of stability and expansiveness; it embodies a kind of stillness in breath and evokes the image of a space expanding inward through the outpouring of divine grace. As expressed in the Quranic verse ‘Did We not lay open your breast?’ (Surah Ash-Sharh, Verse 1), a simple arcade, when constructed according to precise measurements, transforms space from a purely quantitative reality into a qualitative one. Qualitative space is not merely about dimension and extension; it becomes abstracted as a level of existence in a state of ecstasy. Traditional architecture guides one toward contemplation and spiritual insight” (*ibid.*, 71 & 72).

Moreover, Burckhardt claims that the Gothic arch indirectly derives from Islamic art and possesses an upward movement. However, it should be noted that various arches exist in the mosques of the Islamic world, with their shapes related to the architectural and decorative traditions of different regions. Thus, the narratives and emotional, illogical statements—such as the reference to the verse “Did We not lay open your breast?” (Surah Ash-Sharh, Verse 1), —do not hold relevance in this discussion. In a mosque, one does not feel that the sky descends from above as one does in Hagia Sophia, nor is there the upward aspiration found in Gothic churches. The stillness and lack of movement distinguish the mosque environment from all transient objects, offering a state of tranquility and rest, free from all inclinations and desires.

Is there not tranquility and liberation from material constraints in a church, which the author attributes only to the mosque? What relevance do these descriptions and subsequent statements have to Islamic architecture and its principles?

It is further stated that the design of the mosque lacks any tension between the earth and the sky (*ibid.*, 70). One must ask: whose claim is this? What interpretation of mosque

architecture does it represent? Burckhardt’s assertions in this regard are historically flawed.

“The Islamic prayer house, unlike a church or temple, does not have a central point toward which worshippers orient themselves. The congregation of believers around a center, characteristic of Christian gatherings, is only observed in Islam during the pilgrimage to Mecca when congregational prayers are performed around the Kaaba. Wherever believers are, when they perform their prayers, they face this distant center outside the mosque’s walls. However, even the Kaaba does not represent a sacred centrality comparable to the Christian altar; it lacks any symbolism that serves as an immediate support for worship, as it is empty. This fundamental characteristic reflects the spiritual perspective of Islam” (Burckhardt, 2011, 136).

Burckhardt writes about the dome, stating: “If the dome of a sacred building represents the overall spirit, the octagonal stem or bay beneath it symbolizes the eight angels who bear the Throne, corresponding to the eight directions of the compass rose. The cubic section of the building represents the cosmos, with its four corners symbolizing the fundamental principles and dual nature—both spiritual and material—of the elements of the world.” Regarding mosques, he notes that each mosque typically features a courtyard with a fountain or well for ablution, likening the courtyard with its water source to an enclosed garden from which four waterways flow, symbolizing the Quranic paradise and the springs that serve as the abode of the houris (*ibid.*, 148). Burckhardt has erred in his understanding of the mosque’s form.

He mentions Hagia Sophia as both a church and a mosque, asserting that other Ottoman mosques were constructed following the same model. Which mosque is Burckhardt referring to? Mosques in China are entirely derived from temples—what interpretation does he have in this regard? What about the magnificent Mosque-Cathedral of Córdoba in Spain and the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus, both of which were previously churches and temples? Do these emotional and illogical interpretations hold true? A particularly strange point in a footnote of another section of this article raises concerns about how the author and

translator have engaged in storytelling while neglecting reason and understanding.

The model Burckhardt references regarding mosques has historical precedents in ancient Iranian worship spaces and has been transferred to mosques, tombs (garden tombs), houses, gardens, and caravanserais during the Islamic period (see Mansouri & Javadi, 2020).

Regarding the emergence of the dome, Burckhardt displays further misconceptions: “The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), in his account of the Night Journey, describes a great dome made of white pearl, resting on four pillars, inscribed with the first four verses of Surah Al-Fatiha: ‘In the name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful,’ with four streams of water, milk, honey, and wine flowing from it—these being the rivers of eternal bliss in paradise. This example represents the spiritual model of every domed structure. The white shell or pearl symbolizes the soul, whose dome encompasses all of creation.” (Burckhardt, 2011, 147). It is evident that the dome has existed in Christianity as well as in earlier periods in Iran, notably during the Median era, followed by the grand domes of the Parthian and Sasanian periods, and later during the Seljuk period. Thus, attributing the dome and the spirituality of domed structures to the Prophet’s narrative is illogical and historically inaccurate, similar to attributing the mihrab in a mosque to a place of war, while the mihrab existed in Mithraic temples before transitioning to church mihrabs and then to mosque mihrabs. During the time of the Prophet and the early caliphs, the mihrab had not yet appeared and manifested later (see Sajadi, 1997).

Burckhardt and his fellow thinkers have frequently contradicted themselves in their analyses, interpretations, and expressions, attributing ideas to Islamic art and architecture that lack any logical or rational basis. They have resorted to philosophy, mysticism, and various verses and narratives, leading to misleading and divergent conclusions that have long plagued artistic circles, affecting artists, students, and intellectuals alike. Unfortunately, the leaders of this movement often include religious scholars and thinkers who have approached these issues with emotional fervor.

• The Kaaba

Burckhardt states that the inner symbolism of the Kaaba,

both in its shape and in the rituals associated with it, encompasses everything expressed in sacred Islamic art, akin to a seed (Burckhardt, 1993a, 35). This assertion, which claims that the Kaaba “encompasses all that is in sacred Islamic art,” is vague and lacks analysis or examples. Regarding the Kaaba and the sanctity of the number four, he writes: “The number emphasized by traditionalists is four” (ibid., 35–41).

Nasr (as cited in Ghanbari, 2016) states that humans are distinguished from one another by race and ethnicity, identifying four races—yellow, red, black, and white—paralleling the four social classes. In this perspective, the number four symbolizes stability and reflects a form of unity. Likely, the four stages of existence (body, spirit, soul, and life) are also connected to the sanctity of the number four from the viewpoint of traditionalists (Ghanbari, 2016, 171). Nasr (as cited in ibid., 171) further asserts that the Kaaba is the symbol of Islamic civilization and not a fluid river. It represents the unchanging nature of Islam. Burckhardt also links the sanctity of the number four to the four pillars of prayer, fasting, almsgiving, and pilgrimage, which relate to a fifth pillar—the profession of faith. He goes so far as to mention the four Rashidun Caliphs and the allowance for four wives in Islam, as well as the four iwans of Arab houses and the four sides of the Kaaba (ibid., 172). He also interprets the four prayer halls of the Sultan Hassan Mosque in Cairo as corresponding to the four Sunni sects.

Burckhardt (2011, 129) states: “The lotus flower blooms on the surface of the water, which here signifies distinct possibilities that are passive and receptive, as indicated in the Quran, where the divine Throne rests upon the water”.

The author—who presents themselves as a philosopher, mystic, art historian, and Islamic scholar—offers some illogical and peculiar interpretations. Burckhardt (2008), in his article on the foundations of Islamic art, he asserts that art, according to the most nationalistic Islamic view, is merely a means of imparting spiritual dignity to matter. He claims that Islamic mentalities, rooted in spirituality, closely resemble the mentalities of nomadic tribes, emphasizing a heightened awareness of the world’s impermanence and instability, the compression of thought and action, and the characteristics of nomadic life. Signs of this nomadic

mentality can even be seen in architecture, which is otherwise related to sedentary culture. Burckhardt notes that while architectural elements such as columns, arches, and doorways create a unified ensemble, they also possess a degree of independence, suggesting that there is no organic coherence among the components of a building. Indeed, memories of nomadic furnishings, including carpets and tents, linger in the stucco muqarnas that adorn the inner surfaces of arches and vaults, as well as in the arabesques that embellish the walls.

Regarding the dome, Burckhardt writes: “In Islamic architecture, the dome serves as a symbol of the heavens. This spherical dome, resting on a cubic base, symbolizes the union of heaven and earth. This symbolic meaning alludes to a narration from the Prophet during the Night Journey, ..., the octagonal bay beneath it symbolizes the eight angels who bear the Throne, corresponding to the eight directions of the compass rose. The cubic form of the structure represents the cosmos” (Burckhardt, 2011, 147).

Burckhardt (*ibid.*, 156) also states: “The fish and the pearl correspond to the human ear and divine speech.” The shell or ear of the sea, in which the pearl is nestled, is one of the symbols associated with water goddesses, attributed to Anahita in Iran, where all things related to water are linked to this goddess. However, the connection between the ear and the shell seems peculiar; in European languages, the term for “GUSH-MAHI” (ear-fish) does not correspond to “shell,” and this term is specific to Persian. Thus, the attribution of the shell to the ear and divine speech is quite odd. How did the translator not recognize this fallacy? (Fig. 2). Or maybe, such error has happened through translation.

The spiral shell, which adorns some of the oldest mihrabs,



Fig. 2. Right: The pearl inside the shell symbolizes purity and is associated with water, thus linked to the virgin Anahita, the goddess of pure waters, fertility, birth, and nobility. Center and Left: Spiral shell used in the decoration of some mihrabs. Source: Author's Archive.

is indeed an architectural element stemming from Greco-Roman art, seemingly linked to an ancient symbolism that equates the spiral shell with the ear and the pearl with divine speech (*ibid.*). It must be noted that while the spiral shell may resemble an ear, and the pearl may symbolize divine speech, this interpretation is strange and does not substantiate the claimed symbolism. There are mihrabs shaped like shells, as depicted, which appeared in pre-Christian temples and subsequently in churches and later in ancient mihrabs within the Roman Empire.

The ornamentation of some mihrabs with spiral shells has become a common decorative tradition; just as mosaic decoration was prevalent in the Roman Empire and later adopted in Islamic architectural ornamentation, mihrabs adorned with spiral shells are sometimes found in North Africa. This can be seen in the decorative mosaics of the mihrabs in the Mosque of Córdoba and the ceiling of Hagia Sophia. Throughout the Islamic world, what existed before has continued. This is also true for the philosophy and mysticism of Islam. Georges Marcais illustrates the influence of Iranian and Greek traditions on Islamic decorative designs. Demond discusses the decorative motifs of Sasanian and Byzantine styles found together in early Islamic buildings. These influences can be observed in the Qasr al-Mushatta, the Great Mosque of Kairouan, and in the column capitals in Syria. Similarly, Godard considers “the earliest Islamic decorations to be from the Abbasid period, found in the palaces of Mushatta and Al-‘Umrah, influenced by Sasanian, Byzantine, and Hellenistic decorations” (Burckhardt as cited in Ghanbari, 2016, 165).

Islamic architecture has particularly retained its unique genius in the Maghreb regions, such as Algeria, Morocco, and Andalusia, where it has reached a remarkable level of crystalline evolution. This architecture transforms the interiors of mosques and palaces into an oasis of freshness and vitality, giving it a universal quality. In his article “The Spirit of Islamic Art,” Burckhardt (1993b) discusses Islamic architecture in India, the Arab Maghreb, and Andalusia, writing extensively without comparison to the works of the Islamic period in Iran, which are characterized by a clear and bright aesthetic, and one could even say they evoke a sense of eternal bliss as found in a shrine.

In this paper, some Islamic edifices in India are listed among the most complete structures ever built, though buildings that are not mentioned remain unspecified. It is clear that many architectural works, especially decorations from the Islamic period, have traveled from Iran to various regions of the Islamic world, from India to the Arab Maghreb and Spain. The author has observed the muqarnas and the Alhambra with admiration, providing descriptions and interpretations, while the diversity and expertise in architecture and its related decorations—especially brickwork, tile work, types of muqarnas, arching, domes, and minarets—are evident in Iran from the early Islamic period through the Seljuk and Ilkhanid periods and into the Safavid and Qajar eras. This is particularly true of greater Iran, including Khorasan and Transoxiana, which once housed some of the most magnificent and valuable works from the Ilkhanid and Timurid periods, now found in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Yet, none of the traditionalists who engage in storytelling about Islamic art and architecture have mentioned this valuable heritage.

The relationship between Islam and art during the Islamic period in the Islamic world cannot be adequately introduced or interpreted through a few buildings in select locations, especially through interpretations devoid of logic and reality. Misconceptions have long misled art historians and cultural figures, including the assertion that the Safavid period was a golden age of Iranian culture and art. This claim is unfounded, as the glorification of the Safavids had political and religious motivations aimed at opposing the Shiite empire against the Sunni Ottoman empire, rather than being rooted in the realm of art and architecture (see Javadi, 2006).

Burckhardt's Perspective on Calligraphy in Islamic Art

According to Burckhardt, calligraphy serves as a unifying element in Islamic art. The name of God, "Allah," appears at the beginning of every surah of the Quran, and the name of the Prophet Muhammad is a common motif. It is noteworthy that the sacred name of Muhammad (PBUH), depicted revolving around a five-pointed star, symbolizes the connection between the five daily prayers, echoing the significance of sound and key numbers in

space. Such claims are essentially rooted in geometry based on specific numbers attributed to transcendent matters, which is often referenced in various traditional arts (Ghanbari, 2016, 170). These fanciful and misleading assertions promote a sense of sacredness that is unwarranted. Nasr (as cited in *ibid.*, 196 & 197) states: "According to an ancient saying, Islamic calligraphy is the geometry of the spirit. Calligraphy, as the embodiment of the word of Allah, helps Muslims to participate in this presence based on their spiritual capacities... and views calligraphy as a facet that reveals cosmic correspondences. The letter 'a' in the word Allah considers the qualities of meanings that reflect unity". Arabic script is written from right to left, meaning that Arabic writing retreats from the field of action toward the heart. Among the Semitic writing systems, Arabic script is visually distinguished from Hebrew script; Hebrew writing, akin to the stone tablets of the Law, is static, while Arabic script, with its expansive range of strokes, symbolizes unity. The broader the range of its stroke, the clearer its unity becomes. If writing from right to left is considered virtuous as it returns to the heart, then both Persian and Hebrew are also written from right to left. Musings on these matters appear peculiar and illogical.

Burckhardt on Persian Miniature Painting

Burckhardt (1993a, 45) asserts that "miniature art cannot be considered sacred art. However, to the extent that it is intertwined with what could be termed the concept of life and Islamic cosmology, it possesses a certain spiritual quality, either through the manifestation of virtues or by reflecting a mystical insight. What we are concerned with is Iranian miniature painting, not the Mesopotamian miniature under the title of the Baghdad school or Arabic painting" (Burckhardt, 1993, 45). This statement lacks substantial meaning and rationality.

He notes an exaggeration in the movements and an excessive fascination with linear arabesques is depicted (what does linear arabesque in miniature mean?). During the Seljuk period, paintings with allegorical themes, showcasing Turkic-Mongolian characteristics, were somewhat prevalent in the arts of Iran and Iraq. The true essence of miniature painting, which is undoubtedly the

most complete figurative art in the Islamic world, is based on Chinese painting, fully integrating calligraphy and imagery (*ibid.*). Iranian miniature paintings, whether as Burckhardt mentions the paintings of the Baghdad school or those that came afterward, all fall within a general mold that has its own distinctive style and characteristics, with only minor differences. However, the claim that Iranian miniature is based on Chinese painting is completely erroneous. Persian painting has indeed borrowed some elements, such as the Simurgh, dragons, swirling clouds, and rocks, from Chinese art. Burckhardt states, “What gives miniatures an almost unparalleled beauty is not the scene they depict but the grandeur and simplicity of the poetic atmosphere that flows throughout” (*ibid.*, 47).

“In miniature art, the lack of perspective creates a world where everything is crafted from an exceedingly delicate and precious essence. Each tree, or flower is unique, akin to the plants Dante placed in his earthly paradise on the mountain of Purgatory, where their seeds are carried by a perpetual wind that spreads them across the earth. What miniatures indirectly describe are the eternal essences and fixed archetypes of objects; a horse is not merely a specific individual but embodies the concept of the horse itself. The art of miniature seeks to understand and grasp the universal qualities of forms” (*ibid.*). Burckhardt’s storytelling attributes an unreal atmosphere to the miniatures, while the scenes depicted occur in gardens and parks, featuring real elements such as flowers, trees, pools of water, and architectural details like rooms, porticos, and windows—all of which reflect the reality of garden and courtyard architecture.

He continues: “Persian miniatures, due to their standard characteristics, can be utilized to express mystical insights. This specific quality is partly a result of the Shiite milieu, where the distinction between Sharia and inspiration is considerably less than in the Sunni world. Our focus here is on particular miniatures with religious themes, such as those depicting the Prophet’s ascension to heaven, despite traditional constraints” (*ibid.*, 49). The Sunni & Shiite milieu? However, the question arises: how do these Shiite interpretations fit when most patrons and rulers until the Safavid era were Sunni? In the Safavid and Qajar periods, differences in ethnicity among individuals shifted from

Mongolian Turks to Azerbaijani Turks, yet other elements in the miniatures remained grounded in nature and reality. Miniatures, regardless of their subjects, are prominently displayed in Iranian gardens and courtyards, showcasing the beauty of nature (see Javadi, 2004). Burckhardt (*Burckhardt, 1993a*) poetically describes “paradise as an eternal spring garden, ever-blooming and nourished by living waters. Paradise is also an incorruptible and ultimate realm, akin to precious mineral stones of crystal and gold. Iranian art, particularly the decorations of Safavid mosques, blends these two heavenly attributes together”. Pre-Safavid mosques lacked this eternal and vibrant paradise! The crystalline quality is expressed in the smoothness of architectural lines and the perfect geometry of vaulted surfaces, while the heavenly spring blossoms in the rich, fresh colors of the tiles. Such poetic expressions lack a place in the objective analysis of Iranian art and its beauty. In his descriptions of paradise, he mentions pear, apple, pomegranate, grape, and fig trees, yet in miniatures, these fruits are rarely depicted, with the pomegranate appearing only occasionally, characterized by its golden fruit and red blossoms (*Fig. 3*).

“Iranian miniature art during the Safavid period followed a path of decline, as it lacked strong foundations due to its peripheral connection with Islam and its exclusively courtly nature. Upon its first encounter with European art of that era, it succumbed” (*ibid.*, 50). It was previously mentioned that



Fig. 3. Praise of Imam Ali (PBUH) by Gabriel in the presence of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), Shiraz School, 9th century AH. Source: Gray, 1995, 107.

the Shiite art of the Safavid era was prominent, so why did such an event occur during this period of Shiite governance where it became influenced by Europe? The answer is that Shiite and Sunni identities do not directly relate to miniature painting and architecture of the Islamic period. Instead, the connections with the West or East had clear influences on the culture and art of Iran, which were evident even before the Safavid period, during the Ilkhanid era, when similar influences from the East were also present (*ibid.*, 50-45).

Conclusion

Traditionalists are thinkers who, relying on mystical practices and doctrines, have presented discussions on the theoretical foundations of Islamic art and architecture, as well as global artistic works, in an emotional and illogical manner. This group, often found in North Africa and Egypt, as well as in India and the Far East, has encountered examples of Islamic architecture and art, leading to interpretations that frequently lack factual basis. Traditionalists have never engaged in a precise comparison and analysis of Islamic art with its examples in Iran. Regarding mosques, mihrabs, architectural decorations, and miniatures, their discourse often revolves around symbolism, allegory, and a sense of sanctity that lacks rational grounding. The assertion of Islamic art by Western researchers is largely unfounded, and a primary shortcoming of such studies is their failure to provide clear definitions with specific theoretical positions on the subject. A critique of some of Titus Ibrahim Burckhardt's views serves as a means to dispel ambiguities and unveil the sacralization and emotional, poetic interpretations associated with it. Traditionalists have erred and deviated in defining and exemplifying tradition, as they believe in an ancient and shared tradition among all the world's religions, including Islam, Christianity, Judaism, and Eastern Asian religions, referring to it as the "perennial wisdom." However, this definition contradicts the Islamic understanding of tradition. It is surprising and regrettable how a philosopher and Iranian traditionalist, Dr. Nasr, has disseminated these misleading and ambiguous notions, polluting the artistic and cultural circles of Islamic Iran for years. Generations following him continue to navigate this toxic environment. However, scientific and logical critiques have recently begun, and it

is not long before the artistic community and intellectual circles of Islamic Iran are cleansed of this dangerous deviation and ambiguity.

Endnotes

1. The term "Arabesque" does not merely mean "Islamic" but refer to all geometric and abstract vegetal motifs derived from nature, interpreted as Arabesque due to their association with the decorations of Islamic structures relevant to Arab countries.
2. In Jungian symbolism, the square represents the earth and the circle the sky. "The difference between Jung and traditionalists lies in the exclusivity that traditionalists attribute to symbols within their tradition, viewing tradition as the source of collective unconsciousness. In this context, Guénon goes so far as to declare everything in traditional society as inhuman, considering rituals and language to be fundamentally symbolic" (Ghanbari, 2016, 162).

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HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE

Javadi, Sh. (2024). An Introduction to the Views of Traditionalists on Islamic Art and Architecture through the Critique of Titus Burckhardt. *Journal of Art & Civilization of the Orient, 12*(45), 54-67.

DOI: 10.22034/jaco.2024.448039.1407

URL: https://www.jaco-sj.com/article_206345.html?lang=en

