II

IMAGINING MUSLIM NETWORKS

CHAPTER 5

The Problem of Islamic Art

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When we look at Muslims and Muslim cultures in the modern context, we confront the concept of Islamic art. The phrase suggests that the item or artifact in question is Islamic, in origin, in expression and in usage. Yet, how can we sustain such a religious definition of the artifacts and artistic creations that are classified in museums as "Islamic art."? To accommodate an understanding of religion that includes culture, scholars have adapted the term "Islamicate,"[1] suggesting that Islamic may be related to actors or interests but is expressed either by or for a non-Islamic audience, or one where the fine line between Islamic loyalty and other loyalties is shaded. Both *Islamic* and *Islamicate* have served to describe the aesthetic realm, but do they help us understand what is Muslim about Muslim networks? Do such networks become Muslim because of their authors, their audience or their content?

In this essay I will present a few illustrative examples of artists whose work engages on some level with Islam. I will ask how our usual ways of defining their work become problematic in the context of a networked contemporary global culture. When we look at Islam through the lens of art and artists, we bring into sharp focus questions about how interests and identities help to shape and redefine what is Islamic art in the modern context. If art is a vehicle for self-expression, how does the tangential aspect of religion affect

[1] Marshall Hodgson (1974) coined the term "Islamicate".

notions of what constitutes Islamic art? Have advances in communications technology and travel influenced contemporary networks of art and artists identified as Muslim? It is my contention that by framing questions of medium and technique, of style and content, and pursuing issues of patronage and heritage, we can begin to unravel some of the complicated ways in which the Islamic/Islamicate tension plays out in the networked world of the 21st century.

Artists and skilled craftsman, both Muslim and non-Muslim, have always been in demand. Subject to patronage expectations and rewards, they have moved from place to place. At times they were spoils of war; sometimes they were prerogatives of empire; at other times they simply went where the work was. Even when artists stayed in place, the arrival of new patrons, especially new rulers, changed the artistic landscape. In 12th-century India, for example, the artisans responsible for the Qutb Minar outside of Delhi were Hindu workmen from that area, engaged to build monuments reflecting the power and cultural antecedents of their new Muslim rulers. Because of this mobility artists and craftsmen have tended to be at the edges where cultures meet and mix. Yet at the same time, their very mobility and malleability have put them at the very center of new networks—reformulated workshops and schools with new mixes of techniques, styles, and subjects, resulting in new synthesized arts, crafts, and architecture.[2]

The scale of our mobility in the information age has radically changed. Communications technologies have made virtual travel a viable alternative to actually going from place to place. Theoretically we all—or at least those of us with access to modern libraries, the internet, television, telephones, movies, and other accoutrements of modernity—have access to the history and culture of every time and place. Having this access, of course, presumes

[2] For a wonderfully lively, fictional account of the effects of such forces on artists and craftsmen in the 17th-century Ottoman Empire, see Pamuk 2002.

an elite status. In fact, what we think of as contemporary "art," whether it is visual art, music, literature, dance, theater, or movies, presupposes a cosmopolitan elite engaged in creating it. What are the consequences for Muslim networks that artists can now move freely through much of the world, and can in one way or another imaginatively engage with the visual and literary traditions of any of them?

One result of this heightened accessibility and unprecedented mobility is a person like Jay Bonner (one of the world's expert designers of Islamic architectural ornament). Jay Bonner's biography redefines what is meant by Islamic/Islamicate art. From childhood in Menlo Park, California, Bonner doodled complex geometric patterns. In his teenage years he discovered Islamic geometrical design, and then studied at the Royal College of Art in London, where he earned his master's degree in 1982. Specializing in both geometrical design and arabesque, he has collaborated with an architectural calligrapher from Pakistan, wood carvers in Pakistani Kashmir and Morocco, ceramicists in Turkey, marble workers from India, tile makers from Morocco, and modern architects from the Middle East and Europe. Elements of his design work are now installed in the Great Mosque in Mecca, the Prophet's Mosque in Medina, and the Mosque at the Data Darbar Shrine in Lahore, Pakistan. In a forthcoming book he outlines his theories on the practical methods used in the past by skilled craftsmen to derive original ornate and complex Islamic geometric patterns.[3]

Because modern buildings are all designed and built with high-tech procedures and materials, their construction is difficult for those attuned to Islamic(ate) values. As Jay Bonner has noted, it is a constant and delicate challenge to balance the complex technological factors of construction with the traditional techniques still adhered to by the

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[3]Jay Bonner, *Islamic Geometric Patterns: Their Historical Development and Traditional Methods of Derivation* (Ashland, OR: White Cloud Press, forthcoming).

craftsmen essential to Bonner's complex designs. Consider Bonner's account of networked design and construction on the Sliding Domes project for the Prophet's Mosque in Medina:

> "This project was undertaken by the architectural firm Sonderkonstrutionen und Leichbau, headed by Dr. Bodo Rasch, in Stuttgart, Germany. The Sliding Domes project took several years to complete, and the team that worked on this project was made up of many Europeans, several people from England and the United States, a group of highly skilled woodcarvers from Morocco, as well as individuals from Venezuela, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Uzbekistan, China, and India. I have no idea as to the religious makeup of all these people, but I assume the team was mostly Muslim and Christian. I do know that there was at least one Buddhist in the group.
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> The actual fabrication process also balanced traditional craftsmanship with state-of-the-art manufacturing. All of the floral ornament on the interior of the domes was hand carved in Morocco by highly skilled and experienced traditional woodcarvers. Over a hundred carvers were employed for over a year while carving these floral elements. The wood was Atlantic cedar from the Atlas Mountains. The beauty of these domes would not have been possible without the skill of these woodcarvers. Conversely, the use of these traditional craftsmen would never have been possible were it not for the high tech engineering and manufacturing of the other components of these domes.
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> There are very real difficulties in incorporating craft-based production into modern architecture. Concerning design, traditional craftsmen have not generally been trained to work outside their regional style, and often find it difficult to create works that use designs that are unfamiliar to them. Production also poses a problem when involving traditional craftsmen in large modern projects. Without training and experience, it is difficult to scale up to the production requirements needed for a large project, or to incorporate fixing details that are compatible with modern construction standards. Likewise, the lack of computer skills will often make it difficult to transfer information. Until more craft studios in countries like Morocco are experienced with larger projects and production requirements, the answer to these concerns is significant onsite supervision.
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> The modern age has made such diversity among design teams more possible than ever before. However, with the rapid spread in the use of the Internet for sending and receiving digital information, I have found that as a consultant, I travel to the

offices of my clients less, and work more from my own studio. While this is good for my family life, it is not always ideal in facilitating the cross-cultural exchange of ideas that I advocate".[4]

Particularly challenging to Bonner in the context of the Sliding Domes project was the charge given to him to design ornament that was "pan-Islamic," in other words, design ornament that could be universally recognizable as Islamic and not specific to any geographical region or historical period. This was especially difficult since historically there has never been anything that could be called "pan-Islamic" art. Specific styles and forms have always been associated with particular places, empires, and times. Here is how Bonner describes the dilemma facing him:

"By far the most difficult aspect of my own involvement in this project was the initial design of a pan-Islamic floral style. (See Figure 1) The design brief, given to me in 1988, required the creation of a floral ornamental style that would be, at once, recognizably Islamic to Muslims from all parts of the world, but would not be identifiable to any period or region of the Islamic world. Considering the location – the Prophet's Mosque being a place of pilgrimage for millions of Muslims from all quarters of the world – I felt that this design brief was immensely appropriate. The idea from the client was that the ornament should include all Muslims, and exclude none. The completion of the concept for the design was intensely difficult, but very successful.

In designing this motif, I tried first to pinpoint those elements that recur throughout the tradition in the floral idiom, and then to use those common elements in such a way that an essential quality was created. I felt that certain qualities of the overall structure of Mamluk floral ornament fulfill those notions of essentiality, so that was a starting point. But then the floral and leaf forms, and other connecting details had to be added in order to bring the design to life. Scale was also very important, since

[4] From an unpublished paper (in progress) by Jay Bonner.

> the details had to be simple enough to be seen from a great distance—15 meters—yet the overall design had to have enough visual character to be recognizably Islamic. Both residents and pilgrims alike have accepted the completed Medinan domes and their ornamental style. It is said that to copy is the greatest form of flattery. I am told that similar floral motifs created in this pan-Islamic style, by designers other than myself, are being used in various projects in the Medina area."[5]

The journey of Jay Bonner is itself a dramatization of the networked nature of both modern society and Islamic(ate) art. An artist originally from California who studied Islamic ornamentation styles and techniques in London, and who now lives in New Mexico, Bonner designs on a computer in collaboration with architects in Europe and the Middle East (with, of course, help from Fed Ex, telephones, and email). He has developed designs in partnership with Pakistani calligrapher Rasheed Butt, and these designs, some of which are considered "pan-Islamic," are executed in tile, marble, wood and metal by traditional craftsmen from all over the world; included among their clients are contractors whose patrons are the foundations which support the holiest Muslim shrines.[6]

Historically the kind of networking exemplified by Bonner's work has always been possible, though the geographical dissonances were not so dramatic in the past as they are today. There are many other examples of people who have been able to become authentic, complete participants in some part of a "foreign," formerly inaccessible tradition. While Jay Bonner re-discovers the foundations of Islamic geometric design derivation, there are painters from Muslim countries who immerse themselves in the stylistic and formal concerns of modern abstract painting. Consider the sensational ballerina, Altynai Asylmuratova, from Alma Alta in Kazakhstan, who has performed with the Kirov Ballet in Los Angeles in the title role of Juliet. Consider too the America poet

[5] Ibid.

[6] To see more of Bonner's work, go to www.bonner-design.com .

Christopher Lee, writing in Urdu, and participating in poetry readings in India under the pen name of Firang Newyorkavi (Foreigner from New York). Such committed, engaged people turn upside-down our notions of who's an insider and who's an outsider, especially when the movement is between cultures, in both directions.

Not everyone, however, has either the inclination or the vocation to become a complete practitioner of some aspect of a secondary culture. There can be many purposes, and many different intentions. Some of my own artwork has illuminated literature from South Asia.[7] My intention with this work has been to give to a western audience a taste of aspects of these traditions that aren't popularly accessible in the U.S. With my illumination I try to provide a visual translation to people not acquainted with much of the art or literature from this region. While evoking the feel of a particular form of Indian painting appropriate to the subject, for example, the illustration to a Sufi story set in Mughal India (See Figure 2), I nevertheless work with gouache and Italian watercolor paper—media that are different than those used by Mughal and Rajput painters. I avoid identifying a particular style from the outside, and then slavishly reproducing it. Instead, I try to work from the "inside out," focusing on the content of the narrative and using principles adhered to by early Indian miniature painters. (I stress, for example, their emphasis on line and two-dimensional composition instead of on depth and perspective.) The result is a hybrid; it is something neither entirely western, nor like the traditional Indian paintings of similar subjects, though my paintings do clearly acknowledge their historical models. A similar hybridization can be seen in the delicate botanical and bird paintings commissioned by Europeans in India in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and executed by indigenous Indian artists. While

[7] See Judith Ernst, *The Golden Goose King: A Tale Told by the Buddha* (Chapel Hill, NC: Parvardigar Press, 1995).

they meet the scientific requirements of their patrons, these paintings still exhibit a distinctly Indian sensibility in their stylistic refinement.[8]

Whether it is total immersion in a foreign artistic tradition by individual artists, or varying degrees of mixing of content, culture, style, and method, one can detect artistic ferment all over the world. There are Asian painters, including Muslims, who use strictly modern, western modes of abstract painting, as well as Americans and Europeans who utilize forms associated with traditional Asian art, including those associated historically with Islam. There are artists in Asia employing mediums and styles of modern abstract painting to express traditional subjects, and artists using traditional styles and mediums to express modern, more "western" subjects.

While the well-known Iranian artist, Hossein Zenderoudi, uses modern mediums and styles, he incorporates more traditional motifs, for instance, in his strikingly graphic use of Arabic and Persian calligraphy to project what one critic calls " . . .the interplay of modernism and Islam".[9] In the book *Hafiz: Dance of Life,*[10] Zenderoudi has placed Persian calligraphic versions of Hafiz' poetry on colorful backgrounds inspired by modern abstract styles of painting. The visual results are reminiscent of both traditional, formal calligraphic compositions and vibrant, modern graphic pieces. Yet what dramatizes this book is the interplay between the translator's focus and Zenderoudi's art. While Michael Boylan's translations focus mostly on the earthly, more romantic elements in Hafiz's poetry, the artist uses modern graphic forms to highlight and reinvigorate traditional metaphysical principles inherent in the poetry of Hafiz. "For example, his

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[8] For examples, see *Festival of India in the United States 1985-1986* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1985), p. 57; or see Joachim K. Bautze, *Interaction of Cultures: Indian and Western Painting 1780-1910* (Alexandria, VA: Art Services International, 1998), p. 331.

[9] Holland Cotter, *The New York Times*, September 27, 2002.

[10] Hafiz, *Hafiz: Dance of Life,* trans. Michael Boylan (Washington, D.C.: Mage Publishers, Inc. 1988).

illustration for 'Morning Light' (no. 2) spiritualizes a courtly love poem through the repetitive clusters of the written word Allah, together with the superimposed, upward moving triangles on the vertical axis reminiscent of Zenderoudi's Sufi painting called 'Keramat' (1983)."[11]

Perhaps Zenderoudi's most renowned work is an illustrated Koran. It won the international UNESCO prize in 1972 as the most beautiful book of the year, even though it is graphically very different from a traditionally calligraphed and illuminated Koran. As in the example of his *Hafiz: Dance of Life*, he presents the holiest of Islamic books with a modern graphic sensibility that embodies to the modern viewer the sense of gravity and beauty associated with much earlier versions of the Koran.

As a young man, Zenderoudi studied with the Armenian Iranian teacher and gallery owner, Marcos Gregorian, who had studied in Rome. Zenderoudi was encouraged to take seriously the art of local popular culture, including "coffee house painting." At that time this genre, picturing religious and popular literary themes, was considered primitive and marginalized as a sort of outsider art. Yet in 1960 Zenderoudi produced his own linocut version of the martyrdom of Imam Hossein. Featuring the centerpiece of Shiite spirituality, dating back to 680, the work was titled "Who Is This Hossein the World is Crazy About?" (Art critics did not miss the fact that the artist's name is also Hossein.) Gradually, however, Zenderoudi inspired a new artistic movement called "Sagha-Khaneh". It refers to a ceremonial public structure that holds water for travelers passing by, constructed in memory of the Shi'ite martyrs denied water in the midst of the hot desert of Kerbala. As Fereshteh Deftari observes,

> "Exterior and interior decoration of these structures—which are often located in bazaars—may range from a simple brass hand (symbolizing the severed hand of

[11] Michael Craig Hillmann, "Afterword," ibid., p. 104.

> Hazrat Abbas, who attempted to bring back water from the Euphrates) and a drinking bowl, to religious prints and objects such as padlocks or pieces of cloth knotted around the grillwork in acts of private devotion. In addition to functioning as a fountain, the whole complex constitutes a kind of mnemonic installation, a quotidian affirmation of faith, an intermediary between believers and their aspirations."[12]

Using this as a symbol of indigenous cultural and religious iconography, the Sagha-Khaneh movement became the umbrella under which several Iranian artists of Zenderoudi's generation formulated a distinctively modern national art. Since 1961 Zenderoudi has lived in Paris, where he has developed his more calligraphic style. In it "he navigates back and forth through the millennia, from cuneiform to Arabic script, and through cultures, both indigenous and foreign. Divorcing text from meaning, from literature, from religion, from language itself, he turns word into image and function into form."[13] His work continues to be exhibited in museums in Europe, the U. S. and in Iran and other countries in the Middle East.[14]

While Zenderoudi took modern, abstract styles and used them to express traditional subjects and content, the young Pakistani artist Shahzia Sikander,[15] at least in

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[12] Fereshteh Deftari, "Another Modernism: An Iranian Perspective," *Picturing Iran: Art, Society and Revolution*, ed. Shiva Balaghi and Lynn Gumpert (London and New York: I.B. Tauris & Co LTD., 2002), p. 74. Deftari's excellent article gives a full account of Iranian modernism, from its beginnings at the turn of the 20th century through the 1970s, and situates examples of art work in terms of the international influences on various artists (through travel, study, foreign and foreign-trained teachers) as well as the ongoing debate on ". . .How to be Persian and modern? Which direction to take: the West or the past, or both? This other modernism, like many of the culturally specific modernisms that emerged around the globe, was neither synchronous nor synonymous with the one constructed in the West. Its impulse being at the same time nationalistic and internationalist, it looked inward as well as outward. In art, its languages included both realism and abstraction, but formal issues were not its primary problems: the fundamental questions of Iranian modernism addressed the notion of identity" (pp. 81-82).

[13] Ibid, p. 78. This description is of course not quite applicable to the above examples of his Hafiz illustrations, or his Koran, which are both intimately tied to language, meaning, literature, and religion, or in the case of Hafiz, at least metaphysics.

[14] You can see examples of Zenderoudi's work at: http://www.zenderoudi.com/.

[15] You can see examples of Sikander's more recent work at: http://www.bombsite.com/sikander/sikander.html

her early work, used a very rigorous and traditional training in miniature painting to express modern and very personal themes. Sikander studied miniature painting at the National College of Art in Lahore under Bashir Ahmed, whose teachers were the last of a line of traditional painters going back to the wellsprings of Mughal painting. Ahmed taught his students to make fine brushes using baby squirrel fur and to use pigments ground from semi-precious stones. At the time Sikander entered the program, miniature painting was thought of as an anachronism. According to a paper by Vishakha N. Desai, based on interviews with Sikander and others, "Sikander's attraction to the miniature was actually a form of resistance to the prevailing fashion of working with oil on canvas. It was almost as if turning to miniature painting, with its labor-intensive technique and its demand for solitude, was the ultimate subversive or avant-garde act."[16] Interestingly, it was two of her other teachers in Lahore, Zahoor ul Akhlaq and Salima Hashmi, whose influence led to integrating the miniature painting program into the curriculum of the National College in Lahore, even though they themselves favored techniques and styles considered more modern. Yet modern for them was also a catalyst for reengagement with the traditional: once both ul Akhlaq and Hashmi gained fellowships to study abroad, they found that the cultural distance afforded by travel made them intellectually engaged with the tradition of miniature painting and attracted to its possibilities as a modern medium.[17]

In her gouache painting, "The Scroll," finished in 1992 as a final project for her degree in Lahore, Sikander used her finely developed traditional miniature painting technique with its use of continuous narration or multiple images from different times

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[16] Vishakha N. Desai, "Engaging 'Tradition' in the Twentieth Century Arts of India and Pakistan," *Conversations with Traditions: Nalima Sheikh and Shazia Sikander* (New York: Asia Society, 2001), p.14. You can also read this at: http://www.asiasociety.org/arts/convoessay.html

[17] Ibid.

shown in the same frame. Not only did she expand the width of her "miniature" painting to 64 inches, moreover, she also used these traditional stylistic tools to show her various activities as she moved through a day in the life of her family, a subject very modern in its sensibility.

In 1993 Sikander continued her graduate art training at the Rhode Island School of Design. Still a resident of New York, she has expanded far beyond the technical boundaries of miniature painting into installation and much larger digital images. Even in these forms, however, her reference to figures and decorative motifs associated with traditional miniature painting are unmistakable. She has also started to mix in images associated with Hindu India, which was not considered acceptable in Lahore during her undergraduate years, despite the fact that her teacher, Bashir Ahmed, encouraged his students to go beyond the traditional Mughal subjects, and was himself interested in Kangra painting.[18]

Sikander's cultural interests could not be contained in narrowly religious categories. As Dana Shelf, curator of Sikander's exhibit at the Kemper Museum of Modern Art in Kansas City says, "Her mixed Muslim and Hindu iconography and hybrid painting style suggest that in her world experience, all mythologies, geographical borders, and cultural codes can and should be called into question."[19] With this kind of expansive borrowing and mixing taking place in every direction, who can claim any cultural ownership? Whose heritage is genuine, whose spurious? In the interview with Vishakha Desai, Sikander talks about her engagement with subjects of Rajput painting as a Pakistani Muslim: "When you're focusing on miniature painting and you come across a Mewar painting from

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[18] "Vishakha N. Desai Interviews Nilima Sheikh and Shahzia Sikander," *Conversations with Traditions: Nilima Sheikh and Shahzia Sikander* (New York: Asia Society, 2001), p. 70. You can also read the interview at: http://www.asiasociety.org/arts/convointerview.html

[19] Dana Shelf, curator, *Shahzia Sikander: Drawings and Miniatures,* Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, Kansas City, MO, http://www.kemperart.org/large_images/s_sikander_essay.html .

Rajasthan, do you ignore it because it is from a Hindu court or do you embrace it because your family is Rajput?"[20] A Rajput Muslim, she is at the same time a student of modern art, who forthrightly acknowledges the influence on her work of artists like David Hockney, Freida Kahlo, Anselm Keifer, and Eva Hesse.

These are larger issues that go beyond Hindu/Muslim conflict in South Asia and the associated struggles for national identity, or even questions of ethnicity. This is not a new issue; it is only because geographical and cultural distances have collapsed that it seems more dramatic today. A cosmopolitan example from medieval Georgia is instructive. Shota Rustaveli wrote the Georgian national epic, *The Knight in the Panther's Skin,* in the late twelfth or early thirteenth century.[21] He claimed to have written it in the style of the Persian epic, which, while not Islamic in content, by this time was certainly connected to an Islamicate empire. Rustaveli dedicated his work to his Christian queen and perhaps his paramour, Tamar. To this day the models of ideal Georgian manhood and womanhood are the four main heroes and heroines in the story. Two of them are Arab while two are Indian. Since my grandfather was Georgian, I have a claim to this heritage. But does my mere ethnicity allow me to claim a special empathy with the cosmopolitan, Georgian connections exemplified by this great epic? Or does deep engagement with a country and affinity for its culture and language become a valid foundation for a claim on its heritage?

To further our understanding of the complex influences on a modern South Asian Muslim artist such as Shahzia Sikander, we must also consider some of her cultural antecedents, like the famous 20th-century painter, Abdul Rahman Chughtai. Until his death in the 1970s, Chughtai worked in India/Pakistan. While known as an icon of art in

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[20] http://www.asiasociety.org/arts/convointerview.html

[21] Shota Rustaveli, *The Knight in the Panther's Skin*, trans. Venera Urushadze (Tbilisi: Publishing House Sabchota Sakartvelo, 1986; reprint ed., Nova Science Publishers Incorporated, 1999).

Muslim Pakistan, his work elegantly synthesized multiple styles of Indian painting, from the Buddhist images at Ajanta, to the work of the Mughal painters, to the Hindu-themed paintings of the Rajput miniaturists. Some of Chughtai's subjects were associated with culturally Islamic themes, and he seemed to be keenly aware of the need to create a distinctively Mughal-inspired sensibility in his art, yet his synthesis of painting styles from the entire Indian subcontinent is clearly related to his early association in Calcutta with members of the New Bengal Movement, led by Rabindranath Tagore's nephew, Abanindranath Tagore.[22] Tagore was associated with Ananda Coomaraswamy, who in turn had been inspired by the revivalist Arts and Crafts Movement in England of William Morris and colleagues. Tagore, together with other artists of the New Bengal Movement, wished to revitalize Indian art by looking to traditional Indian models and subjects, including Hindu and Buddhist literature, for inspiration. Attracted by this movement, European and Japanese artists came to study in Calcutta, with the unintended consequence that Indian artists started to use a Japanese technique of watercolor, which, by washing off color from the paper surface, resulted in a delicate, suffuse glow.[23] Though he was known to prefer working on his own, and in fact split off from the New Bengal Movement quite early, this Japanese technique remained fundamental to the style that Chughtai developed throughout his career.[24]

The question posed by this imported Japanese technique involves the extent to which cultural mixing of artistic forms is necessarily based on the existential decision of

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[22] For examples of work by this school of painters, see Sister Nivedita and Ananda Coomaraswamy, *Myths of the Hindus & Buddhists* (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1914), with illustrations under the direction of Abanindranath Tagore.

[23] Marjorie Husain, Preface, *A Selection of Contemporary Paintings from Pakistan* (Pasadena: Pacific Asia Museum, 1994), p. 28.

[24] You can see some of his paintings at: http://megaeast.com/default.asp?section=art%20and%20culture&page=chughtai.con.

the artist. What may seem to the outsider as aesthetic revolutions may in fact be incidental effects dictated by the inherent physical qualities of new materials. Think about the very different stylistic parameters that one sees in mosaic, fresco, watercolor, and oil painting on canvas. Work by a western-trained artist using Chinese brushes, paints, and papers can look much like a Chinese painting simply because of the unique characteristics that Chinese brushes and paints produce on rice paper. Think of the stylistic changes in Persian and Indian painting when artists started to use oil paints as they did in Qajar Iran. Did these changes occur because of artistic intention, influenced by western painting, or were they simply brought about by a change in medium?

As a more recent example of the same process, consider the Iranian films, *Gabbeh* and *The Color of Paradise*. Both represent a real departure from American and European filmmaking. Both are composed of dialogic vignettes that dynamically play off of the visuals, creating a subtle poetic structure rather than a narrative one. They are not based so much on the models of John Huston or Ingmar Bergman, as they are visual evocations of traditional poetry like that of Hafiz and Rumi. However, since the medium is so familiar to us, we see them as part of a continuous tradition of modern cinema, even though their informing spirit may be quite different.

But if Bengal was the locus of the New Bengal Movement, which seems to have influenced Chughtai and other artists in Pakistan, contemporary painters in present day Bengal (substantially Bangla Desh) have sometimes departed from those local traditions. Mohammad Kibria, a pioneer of the modernist movement in Dhaka, graduated from the Calcutta Art School in the 1950s, just at the time that several painters were coming back to Bengal after having studied art in Europe. Kibria's work was at first influenced by these painters, but then in the early 1960s, he went to Japan in order to study graphic art. There he radically changed his style. His paintings became purely abstract, using the

interplay of texture and color to create quite beautiful visual harmony. Today he is regarded as one of the most prominent painters in Bangladesh, even though there is nothing visually inherent in his work that suggests the cultural location of the artist. His paintings, while extraordinary, could have been created by an abstract painter residing anywhere in the world. The same could be said of his student, Mohammad Eunus. (See Figure 3) Following the lead of his teacher, Eunus studied in Japan, receiving his MFA from Tama Art University in Tokyo. Another contemporary Bangladeshi artist is Muhammad Fokhrul, who is equally abstract in his painting style. (See Figure 4) Fokhrul, though his work is visually connected to modern, western styles, nevertheless uses mediums not usually associated with modern art (mustard oil, printers ink, and leather working tools to inscribe the paper). He also makes it very clear that he considers himself both a Muslim and an artist, and so he has made a conscious choice to use only abstract forms in his artwork. To the casual viewer this is a surprising twist, since his work would appear to be informed not by Islamic principles, but rather by modern abstract sensibilities.[25]

Until now, implicit in the cases I have discussed has been the notion of the artist as an autonomous agent making individual creative decisions based on his or her own notions of artistic integrity. But one cannot ignore the question of patronage. Jay Bonner, after all, is working in the context of a patronage system not unlike that represented by the builders of the great Islamicate monuments of the past, including the guilds of traditional craftsmen who create his designs in stone, wood, and tile. Working within a particular set of traditional design parameters, he creates original work that he probably would not characterize as self-expressive, even though he considers it to be

[25] You can see a sample of contemporary paintings by artists from Bangladesh at: http://www.chayamachigaro.com/exhibition/bangladesh/bangladesh.htm

individually challenging and artistically fulfilling. His patrons see themselves as the modern preservers of an Islamic aesthetic, which they now conceptualize as "pan-Islamic."

Does use by the patron, or the patron's intentions for the work, determine whether or not a work can be called Islamic? Certainly the patron's wishes and viewer's purposes are significant. Much of the European, especially French, Orientalist painting done in the nineteenth century seems peculiarly voyeuristic and theatrical; it projects colonialist fantasies on subject peoples for an eager European public with a taste for the exotic. But what about the images of the Madonna and the Christ child painted by Mughal artists and collected in folio volumes with other curiosities for the entertainment of the Mughal court? Certainly these "Occidentalist" paintings were not considered sacred, since they weren't used ritually, but does their subject make them religious? What about the intent of these artists and the purposes of their patrons? Christ appears in the Koran, and according to Hadith, the Prophet protected an image of the Madonna and Child while ordering the destruction of the idols in the Ka`ba. Assuming these Mughal artists were Muslim as were their patrons, does that make these paintings Islamic, even though the images seem to have been used for entertainment by the court? What if the painters were Hindu, working for Muslim patrons? Or does it really matter? Perhaps these questions reflect more about our modern preoccupation with religious identity than they do about the thinking of the Mughal painters and the wishes of their royal clients.[26]

When we consider the patronage issue in the context of today's corporate patrons, the picture becomes even murkier. When editors become essentially marketers; when most movies are made for a mass market; when cultural icons of other countries, like the

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[26] For a discussion of Islamic religious identity as a creation of census and population figures, see Carl W. Ernst, *Following Muhammad: Rethinking Islam in the Contemporary World* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), chapter 2.

Taj Mahal, are used to sell Coke and Nikes; then all of our idealistic notions of individual intent, integrity, and cultural engagement become muddled. With corporate sponsorship the bottom line is profit, and the individual artist does not necessarily have much creative control. Even the viewer's engagement comes into question. Should an artwork commissioned by a large American bank to go with the décor in their branch in Riyadh, even if done by an artist native to that country, be considered Islamic(ate)?

So what is Islamic art in this modern, networked context? We began with Jay Bonner, who works in some ways within a very traditional model of style, technique, and patronage, though networked in new ways. Most would probably agree that his work is Islamic, especially since it has been commissioned for monuments central to Islamic loyalty and piety. Some of my work has been with nominally Islamic subjects, though aimed at a western, non-Muslim audience. Is it Islamic? Perhaps Islamicate but not Islamic. With Hossein Zenderoudi, himself originally from a majority Muslim country, we see an artist who uses symbols and texts traditionally associated with Shi'ite Islam, albeit with a very modern and personal graphic style. Shazia Sikander has taken a very traditional style associated culturally with Islam, and used it to connect all of the varied and multi-cultural elements of her personal universe, including some (but not all) associated with Islam. The Pakistani painter, Abdul Rahman Chughtai, synthesized several traditional styles of Indian painting while creating work emblematic of Mughal culture for modern Pakistanis. And then we have to appraise the three Muslim artists from Bangladesh: despite their country of origin and the professed creedal/ritual practice of at least one, all of them paint in abstract styles that could have been used by artists anywhere in the world.

The list of hybrid artists could be extended. What of the work by the Malaysian artist and social activist, Sharifah Zuriah Aljeffri, who did a series to commemorate the

atrocities in Bosnia? (See Figure 5) Using Chinese brush technique, she painted lines suggesting Arabic calligraphy, punctuated by bold brush strokes of red, emblematic of the violence aimed at Bosnian Muslims, especially women. Inspiration for the series came from the highly apocalyptic Surahs 40-46 in the Qur'an, which highlight the letters ha and mim as evocations of Judgment Day and the separation of good from evil. She calligraphs these letters in her Bosnian series, as well as the word rahim, "the Compassionate," which comes from a root meaning womb. Focusing on Yusof Ali's interpretation of this series of surahs, she meditates on the relation of faith to unfaith, revelation to rejection, goodness to evil, and truth to falsehood. Aljeffri says of the Bosnian series, "*Ar-Rahim* is one of the attributes of Allah meaning The Compassionate. There is a connection between *Rahim* and *Ha Mim*. *Rahim* symbolizes the completion and healing of *Ha Mim*. It is with the Compassion of Allah, that we can prevail over the heinous acts and atrocities taking place in Bosnia."[27] The overall visual effect of her work is evocative of Chinese or Japanese freeform calligraphy, but her social commentary, as well as the Arabic letters, adds a drama and immediacy to what is usually a much more rarified medium.

The book, *Manifestation of Feeling: A Selection of Painting by Iranian Female Artists*, was published in 1995 by the Center for Visual Arts, part of the Iranian Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. It includes a tremendous variety of painting from traditional miniature styles to completely abstract works, with every imaginable visual permutation in between those two extremes. One painting, "Palestine," by Badri Alaie, is a bold, obviously political graphic statement showing the Star of David serving as a nailed-on gate over a door behind which, the viewer is led to assume, the Palestinian people are

[27] Sharifah Zuriah Aljeffri, from her "Bosnian Series Art Statement," 1992/93.

held hostage. (See Figure 6) Interestingly, she signs this painting in Roman letters, suggesting perhaps a foreign market.

Another artist featured in the same book is Feeroozeh Golmohammadi, who, in her watercolor, "Ascension," has included details reminiscent of Persian themes—the costumes, headgear, prayer beads, and the phoenix-like bird at the bottom. (See Figure 7) Her imagery and mystical theme is similar in style and content to the work of the twentieth century German artist, Sulamith Wülfing,[28] as well as the contemporary popular New Age artist Susan Seddon Boulet.[29] Another colorful painting is "Tile Pond," by Narges Rasoulzadeh Nameen, a sort of "miniature painter meets Matisse," recalling his famous 1912 painting, "The Goldfish" from the Pushkin Museum in Moscow.[30] (See Figure 8) She combines the flat, one-dimensional composition of miniature painting, the beautiful tile work of the pond, and a traditional use of a painted frame with the loose oil technique and bold imagery of Matisse and his followers to produce this lively painting of goldfish in a pond.

These comparisons are not made to suggest that Golmohammadi's or Mameen's paintings, or any paintings that may have similarities to the work of European or American artists, are necessarily derivative. Instead, this similarity of styles exemplifies how images, as well as ideas, are now globally available and reflect an increasingly shared medium. Hybridity expands rather than contracts the world of art and the human imagination.

Perhaps the liveliest portrait of artistic diversity and hybrid rearticulation of multiple motifs is the artwork (and writing) of Durre Ahmed. A teacher at the National College

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[28] See: http://www.lightworks.com/gallery/wulfing.html

[29] See: http://mystic-caravan.com/boulet.htm

[30] See: http://www.artnet.com/magazine/features/tuchman/tuchman1-16-7.asp

of Art in Lahore, Pakistan, her work attempts "to forge a new episteme for Muslim society's encounter with globalization."[31] In her "Re-construction," *One and a Half*, she uses a simple three-dimentional form based on the Urdu proverb, "*dairh eenth ki masjid*" ("a mosque of one-and-a-half-bricks") to evoke the possibility of the traditional make-shift mosque used by travelers, laborers, and others unable to perform their prayers in a more well-established place of worship. (See Figure 9) This proverb is also used to describe those who are non-conformist, those who go their own way and do not need the formality of the mosque for prayer. This adds a political dimension to her piece: on display in Pakistan, it mirrors that country's checkered history of political freedoms. While using the language of postmodernism in her treatise explaining her work, she also points the way to a post-postmodern art that conceptually is able to assert an Islamic sensibility, even a local Islamic spirituality, while engaging in a many-faceted modern intellectual discourse.[32]

Can we decide or at least articulate how we might use the term "Islamic art" in our globalized world? Is it the artist's faith that makes the difference, even though we have no way of knowing how faithful he or she is? Is it their ethnicity, whether or not their homeland is a majority Muslim country? Does their location of residence make a difference, whether or not they are expatriates? What if the artist is a minority in a majority Muslim community, say a Zoroastrian in Iran? Is the subject matter the defining aspect? Is the style the key, in which case we would presumably only include work done in a style traditionally associated with Islam? Is the patron the defining factor, or is it important to consider what use the work will be put to? Does that mean no commercial

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[31] Suroosh Irfani, "Between Brick and Glass," *The Herald Annual* (Karachi, 1997), p.245.

[32] Durre Ahmed, "Notes Towards the Construction of a Pathology of Interpretation: A Postmodern Postmortem" (unpublished).

work would be allowed, even though we do consider caravansaries, palaces, and many other secular buildings from the past as characteristically Islamic?

Even without considering the vast changes that the world has undergone in the last 50 years—increased immigration, worldwide media penetration, and the spread of global communication systems, including the internet—that have resulted in our present globalized environment, the term "Islamic art" (coined by European art historians barely a century ago) remains slippery and elusive. Part of the problem is the absence of a single, monolithic Islamic culture. As we saw with Jay Bonner, a modern-day Muslim country had to invent "pan-Islamic" art. Even the notion of "pan-Islamic" conceptually leaves out the many non-Muslims who were always part of Islamicate cultures. As Jonathan Bloom and Sheila Blair point out in the introduction to their *Islamic Arts,* "It is easier to say what Islamic art is not than what it is. . . . Islamic art refers neither to art of a specific era nor to that of a particular place or people. . . . Islamic art is neither a style nor a movement, and the people who made it were not necessarily Muslims. . . . Whereas some Islamic art was undoubtedly made by Christians and Jews for Muslim patrons, some ´Islamic´ art made by Muslims was intended for Christians or Jews."[33] The term Islamicate might give us a larger umbrella under which to rethink these issues, yet it too presupposes a cultural and regional cohesiveness that is undermined by the global influences and cross-fertilization of artistic options brought about by our increasingly networked world.

Artists are defined by mobility and malleability. They have always moved and been moved around from place to place. Perhaps because of this mobility they have tended to be on the fringes, at the edges where cultures meet and mix, forming new networks—reformulated workshops, schools, styles, and forms. If our project to study Muslim

[33] Jonathan Bloom and Sheila Blair, *Islamic Arts* (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1997), p. 1, Introduction.

networks means anything, it is that we should not overly define or try to separate this from that, Muslim from Muslim, Muslim from Christian, this region from that region, this ethnic group from that. Instead, we must try to find, in all of its complexity, the points at which people inhabiting Muslim cultures interact, have always interacted, and will always continue to interact, with people elsewhere. Rather than defining or tracing or shoring up identities, we should try to recognize the multiple levels on which Muslims and Muslim cultures have nourished and engaged both insiders and outsiders. This is not only an academic imperative. When we reduce art and artists to a one-dimensional identity, e.g., religion, we dehumanize. It becomes easy to assume that the defining element in "their" art, unlike ours, is only that of religion, without reference to any of the many other dimensions of life and culture that fill us out as people and give us reality as human beings. Perhaps the more nuanced approach afforded by our "network methodology" can help to overcome some of the dehumanizing stereotypes that are so much a part of most Americans' notion of Islam and Muslims.

Figure 1
Sliding Domes: M'tawa Floral Panel: Prophet's Mosque: Medina, Saudi Arabia
Design by Jay Bonner for SL-Rasch GmbH
(Photo courtesy of Jay Bonner; reprinted by permission of Jay Bonner)

Figure 2
Illustration from an unfinished manuscript, "The Awakening"
by
Judith Ernst
Gouache on Paper
10 x 16 in
(Reproduced with permission of the artist)

Figure 3
Untitled (1999)
by
Muhammad Eunus
Oil on Canvas
21 x 21 in
(From the Collection of Tony Stewart)

Figure 4
Untitled (2003)

by
Muhammad Fokhrul
Printer's Ink and Mustard Oil on Paper
14 x 11 in
(From the Collection of Tony Stewart)

Figure 5
"Bosnia 9"
by
Sharifah Zuriah Aljeffri
1992, 48 x 106 cm
(Reproduced with the permission of the artist)

Figure 6
"Palestine"
by
Badri Alaie
Oil on Canvas
100 x 80 cm
(From *Manifestation of Feeling:*
A Selection of Painting by Iranian Female Artists)

Figure 7
"Ascension"
by Feeroozeh Golmohammadi
Watercolor
62 x 42 cm
(From *Manifestation of Feeling:*
A Selection of Painting by Iranian Female Artists)

Figure 8
"Tile Pond"
by
Narges Rasoulzadeh Nameen
Oil on Canvas
67 x 48 cm
(From *Manifestation of Feeling:*
A Selection of Painting by Iranian Female Artists)

Figure 9
One and a Half
a "Reconstruction" in Terra Cotta
by
Durre Ahmed
(Photo courtesy of Durre Ahmed; reproduced with permission of the artist)