

# **Methodology of Islamic Art**

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## **Introduction**

The need for a Methodology in Islamic sciences including Islamic art is an inevitable matter, which helps us to judge about the nature of Islamic art and the related theoretical questions about the issue. In this regard, scholars have provided various methods based on their special view point on the subject. Hence, using various methods leads to various understandings of Islamic art. Also, some of the disagreements and distinctions about the nature and essence of Islamic art, which are the result of the right or wrong usage of the methodology, are matters of importance.

In order to explore Islamic art and understand the Muslim artists' viewpoints, we use different methods specially the ones represented in the recent century by philosophers and social thinkers. These methods have been founded by contemporary philosophical and intellectual movements and changed into an independent way in humanities and social science. As such, applying these methods help us to have better judgment about the formation of Islamic art in the history of Islamic culture and civilization.

Analyzing Islamic art in the context of Islamic culture and civilization, we can apply different approaches to interpret Islamic art including analytic, historicism, phenomenology, hermeneutics, inter-textuality, semiotics and the like. Some of these approaches are historic and others are beyond historicism. Most of the researchers especially art historians, have less attention to the art methodology, however, they are loyal to special methods. So we can extract their presupposition

and assumption from their method. Consciously and unconsciously a researcher always chooses especial ways in her research. Therefore, one of the lost issues in analyzing Islamic thought is the issue of methodology; Why the research conclusion of the scholars like Henri Corbin, Toshihiko Izutsu, Annemarie Schimmel, Titus Burckhardt, Henri Stirling and the others in studying about Islamic art or Islamic thought is different from that of James Darmesteter, Ignaz Goldziher, Tomas Arnold, Oleg Gerber, Terry Allen, Andree Godard etc.? It seems that the answer to this question is rooted in the bases of methodology and metaphysical factors which every scholar holds about Islamic thoughts.

### **Methodology of Quran and tradition about Islamic art**

Before knowing about the scholars' views and following their different approaches on Islamic art, it is better to contemplate on the sacred texts and find out God's view on art and beauty as the Omniscient and the real Author of sacred texts. Muslim scholars believe that Quran is His direct words. Although, the process of human's understanding the holy Quran could be considered as passing holy sphere into the human mind, the concept would still be in the realm of religious understanding. However, it is obvious that there are considerable differences between understanding God's words and understanding art philosophers and historians' considerations. Therefore, contemplating on Quran's view about art is more transcendental than human understanding.

Some of the thinkers believe that Islamic art is the one admitted and addressed directly by holy Quran, Islamic tradition and Islamic doctrines. So if the religious texts did not mention the art or artistic phenomenon directly, they would not be considered as legitimate. Such definition of art is consciously or unconsciously laid on utmost religious assumptions. The supporters of this definition believe that in

order to establish self-independent religious doctrines of a particular art, one should judge about all kinds of art basically from the inward aspect of Islamic texts. Their expectation from religion is to speak directly about arts. And their consideration of religious or Islamic matter is depended on direct judgment of religious doctrines about that matter. In contrast, there is another commentary which believes that culture is formed only by human and society during centuries; Religious or nonreligious existence of culture and its factors, including art, can be provided by religious considerations of men and the role of religious doctrines in paying attention to some types of art or avoiding some other. So, instead of basic role, if the religious doctrines have an admitting role in forming culture and civilization, one will call it a religious culture or art. For instance, the Islamic civilization and Christian culture in Mediaeval were influenced extensively by sacred texts and religious characters, the period in which religion existed in all aspects of anthropology, epistemology and ontology of Western and Eastern societies. Thus, being religious or nonreligious in the history of civilization is defined by the faithful's attempts to adjust their manners, ideas, feelings, emotions and imagination with religious doctrine and comparing their action with them.

We can conclude the view of Quran and tradition about art through different ways:

- ١- Terminology and morphology of the words and concepts directly pointing beauty like beauty (*Jamal*) and goodness (*Hosn*) which are the two obvious examples of Aesthetic issues.
- ٢- Reviewing the words in Quran, which are indirectly connected with art and beauty for example analyzing the meaning of the concepts like prettiness (*Helieh*), exclamation (*E'ejab*) dignifying (*Ekbar*), kindness etc.
- ٣- Studying the literal beauties, alliteration and rhetoric in verses of Quran. According to Aesthetics applying sentences, words, situations, sound or

voice, subsequence and recurrence, and harmony and unity in the holy book, we can conclude holy Quran's view about Aesthetics and beauty.

- ξ- Working on the selection of meaning and investigating the intellectual system of Quran in epistemology, ontology and anthropology. Beside studying Quranic words directly or indirectly related to Aesthetics, it is important to extract the Quranic view and approach in evaluating esoteric and exoteric beauty, growth and deviation, guidance and perverting, purity, beauty and pleasure, decoration and prettifying, beauty and ethics etc. Reviewing these religious concepts help us to find out the status of Aesthetics in Islamic intellectual system.
- ο- Understanding the verses through the narratives and speeches of religious leaders interpreting those verses is an approach to have a better understanding of beauty and art.

### **The method of phenomenology**

The term “phenomenology” was used by great philosophers like Immanuel Kant, John Heinrich Lambert and Fredric Hegel. In the early of 20 centuries Edmund Husserl, known as the founder of classical phenomenology, expanded the term as a philosophical method. Hegel adopted the term as a method of Comprehension of real thing and understanding of Self quality of mind via of phenomena. However, Husserl defined it as a way of reflective study of the essence of consciousness as intuitively experiencing phenomena (Aesthetic Encyclopedia, 2004, 158). In fact, his phenomenological investigation of consciousness was the basic principle of descriptive method in psychology against natural attitude. (Crowell, 2006, 23)

Martin Heidegger developed his existential philosophy based on Husserl's phenomenology and so did other philosophers including Paul Ricard and Hans Georg Gadamer expanding Hermeneutic phenomenology. In this regard and beside all philosophical disagreements between them, the method of phenomenology was common in their philosophy. (Lyotard, 2005, 72)

Instead of historical, social, economic or other outward circumstances of phenomena, in phenomenology, one tries to describe the essence of phenomena. In a phenomenological research, the researcher experiences the outward phenomenon in her consciousness and brackets every statement about reality of phenomenon (*Epoche*). And through the intersubjectivity and empathic experience, she reaches a common view with other subjects. (Khatami, 1387, 55-58; Rikhtehgaran, 1382, 98-108). Gradually and through inspiring from philosophical phenomenology the methodological phenomenology was changing into one of the most important methods in 20 century in all humanities branches including religion, literal criticism, art and aesthetics.

Also, in the field of Islamic studies Henry Corbin, Toshihiko Izutsu, Annemarie Schimmel, and in Islamic art, James Dickie, Isma'il al-Faruqi, Henri Stirelin, and Henry Corbin are scholars applying the method in understanding the Islamic humanities and Islamic art.

### **The method of Historicism**

Unlike the phenomenology focusing on the essence of a phenomenon and ignoring the outward cause and effect, historicism determines phenomena within social, economic, political and other historical context.

The followers of this method hold that the whole social and cultural phenomena emerge historically. And they are understood by their local social and cultural

factors of their era. As a result, the artist is always limited in peculiar historical circumstances and cannot even step out of her era (Hauser, 2003, 149). So the formation of each work of art is the result of local conditions and peculiarities. Thoughts of Hegel and Herder had affected this method. Hegel discussed about the spirit of time or the spirit of nation and pointed out that no phenomena can go beyond its time and place. (Hegel, 2001, 95-96). Therefore Method of Historicism that it is based on the philosophy of Hegel differs from discussion of historic method.

According to Hegel history is the sphere and basis of an absolute mind/intellect. So, the work of art and artist's interest, passion, feelings, emotions, and imagination are under the influence of history. And the creation of the work of art is the result of a full-cause named as history or spirit of the time.

Among the historians of Islamic art there are thinkers including Andre Godard, Oleg Grabar, Terry Allen and etc. who have a historical look toward elements, roots and bases of emerging Islamic art and come to the conclusion that all the works of Islamic art are the effect of especial Islamic era. And even more than that, they are trying to find the trace of the style or form of Islamic art in other civilization.

### **Hermeneutic phenomenology**

Hermeneutic phenomenology is a research methodology investigating the main idea of a text or art work. The followers of this method consider meaning in context as something certain. However, some of them focused on interpretation of the text and explanation the understanding process, so they believe meaning is dependent on the interpretation of reader. Also, some believe that the aim of Hermeneutic interpretation is to share the experiences of the author. In contrary,

some other approaches focus on death of the author and exploring the esoteric meaning of text. Whether the author or reader has had the founded meaning in their mind or not, the important thing is what concepts derived from the interaction between the interpreter and the text. What this indicates is that the meaning of the text is revealed by the interpretation and understanding of human, so there is no ultimate meaning, rather there are numerous meanings which are perceived every time by interpreting the text in a new way. This is the reader who derives the meaning of the text and accounts the more possible meaning. In fact, meaning is flowing in the text and would be discovered by different interpretations of readers. What all of this very recent approach guides us to understand is that meaning is consistently more important than the author, in contrast to the first approach in which reaching what really the author meant was significant.

Henry Corbin is one of the scholars remaining loyal to the Hermeneutics in his analyzing of Islamic art or even Shia thoughts. He applied the Hermeneutic to interpret the Islamic works and believed that we need Hermeneutic interpretation because of sacredness of the Holy Book, its central role in religion and in order to revise theology and discovery of the truth. Because truth is such transcendental that would not be grasped by historical methods. This is hermeneutic helping to discover the esoteric meaning of religious texts from the exoteric statements.

Corbin viewed Islam, in general, and Shia, in particular, with the hermeneutic spectacles and in this way, found his studying about Heidegger and Sohrevardy influential (Corban, 1377, 1-73; 1383, 19-27). He considered similarities between his Hermeneutic method called as *revelation of the mystery (kashf Al-Mahjoob)* and the method of esoteric interpretation in which interpreting the

words by their original meaning to understand the ultimate purpose. To prove the similarity between the meaning of interpretation in Islamic culture and hermeneutics, he mentioned some Shia narratives consisting profound meaning with Shia interpreters' esoteric interpretation in his works. Moreover, he applied hermeneutic to understand Islamic architecture and art works and considered this method as a way to decode the mysterious and discover the sacred and spiritual elements in them.

### **Perennial Philosophy Method**

According to perennial philosophers, tradition means eternal truths beyond time and space, which are based on religious doctrines. So a perennial philosopher is a person who believes in one of the religious tradition. According to this view, tradition is a bridge between revelation (divinity) and civilization. In this sense, tradition means a thought which is eternal, general and unchangeable. One of the similarities between perennial philosophers and phenomenologists is that they both believe there are similar eternal truths and wisdom in religions, which no one can reach them through historicism. So, they criticize art historians for their attempts to show Islamic art as dependent and limited to especial historical circumstances and review it with the scale of history. In fact, it is not possible to analyze Islamic art by historicism and reducing religious bases to historical causes and situations, or consider Islamic art as the result of political-social movements after extension Of Islam.

Perennial philosophers' method in analyzing religious art is phenomenological in which focusing on the most fundamental and the most significant factors of forming religious art. The eternal truths of religion is the source of sacred and

traditional art and the symbolic and allegorical language used in art works is accounting spiritual and philosophical truths (Burkhart, 1997, 66)

### **Mystical Method**

In contrast with philosophy using reasoning and dedication, mysticism benefits intellectual experience and immediate witnessing to grasp knowledge. In other words, mysticism is the way of knowing God and His attitudes through spiritual journey on the path and self-mortification or direct knowledge to the real nature of things. According to this method, the traveler on the spiritual path purifies her spirit through self-mortification and discipline of manner and reaches stations on the mystical path. In fact, all the spiritual experiences of mystic is the result of her very self-mortification. Theoretical mysticism consists of subjects forming its structure in a way that without knowing them, one would not understand the bases of mysticism. The subjects are as following: ontological degrees or five Presence, Muhammadan Reality (*Al-Haghighateh al Muhammadiéh*), arch of ascent and descent, Perfect Human, existence of Divine leader as the full reflection of attributes of God, sacred effusion and the most sacred effusion of divinity and Imam, Manifestation existence and all-comprehensive engendered being, Self-disclosure of Divine Names and Attitudes, role of Imam in mystics' journey on the Path and mystical experiences, solar and lunar sainthood and so on.

According to mystical ontology, every lower degree is the manifestation of its higher level. So decoding and esoteric interpreting of the lower degrees to reach the transcendental truths would be one of the main ways of mystical interpretation including interpreting art works in Islamic culture. As the nature is the manifestation of the world of Idea-Images the work of arts, created by the

sage artist and possessors of chivalrousness, are the symbol of imagination and higher world. So in mystical way each representation includes presence, each outward aspect shows inward aspect and each mystery shows reality. The origin of this view leads to the truth of truths and Essence of the Real. Conclusively, the symbolic and mystical language in mysticism and philosophical art is significant and needs to be decoded.

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