Chapter XIII

Symbols and Signs of Islamic Architecture*

Le problème central et le plus ardu reste évidemment celui de l'interprétation. En principe, on peut toujours poser la question de la validité d'une herméneutique. Par des recoupements multiples, au moyen des assertions claires (textes, rites, monuments figurés) et des allusions à demi voilées, on peut démontrer sur pièces ce que "veut dire" tel ou tel symbole. Mais on peut aussi poser le problème d'une autre façon: ceux qui utilisent les symboles se rendent-ils compte de toutes leurs implications théoriques? Lorsque, par exemple, en étudiant le symbolisme de l'Arbre cosmique, nous disons que cet Arbre se trouve au "Centre du Monde", est-ce que tous les individus appartenant à des sociétés qui connaissent de tels Arbres cosmiques sont également conscients du symbolisme intégral du "Centre"? Mais la validité du symbole en tant que forme de connaissance ne dépend pas du degré de compréhension de tel ou tel individu. Des textes et des monuments figurés nous prouvent abondamment que, au moins pour certains individus d'une société archaïque, le symbolisme du "Centre" était transparent dans sa totalité; le reste de la société se contentait de "participer" au symbolisme. Il est d'ailleurs malaisé de préciser les limites d'une telle participation: elle varie en fonction d'un nombre indéterminé de facteurs. Tout ce qu'on peut dire, c'est que l'actualisation d'un symbole n'est pas mécanique: elle est en relation avec les tensions et les alternances de la vie sociale, en dernière instance avec les rythmes cosmiques.[1]

<div style="text-align: right">M. Eliade.</div>

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[1] "Interpretation is still obviously the central and most difficult problem. In principle, we can always bring up the question of the validity of a hermeneutics. Through cross-references, clear assertions (texts, rites, representative monuments) and half-veiled allusions, we can demonstrate precisely what such and such symbol 'means.' But we can also state the problem in another manner: do those who utilize symbols realize all their theoretical implications? For instance, when studying the symbolism of the 'Cosmic Tree,' we say that this tree is located in the 'Center of the World.' Are all individuals belonging to societies that know of such Cosmic Trees equally conscious of the integral symbolism of the 'Center'? But the validity of the symbol as a form of knowledge does not depend on the degree of understanding of such and such an individual. Texts and representative monuments prove extensively that, at least to certain individuals of an archaic society, the symbolism of the 'Center' was transparent in its totality; the rest of society was

Much of what follows consists in rambling views, opinions and interpretations developed over the years by an outsider trying to understand a world which is not his own. They tend, therefore, to seek general and abstract meanings in what has been a concrete and personal experience. This is not wrong by itself, but its danger is that unique cultural experiences can much too easily be transformed into meaningless and obvious generalities. The opposite dangers are either that a unique experience becomes so specific as to be unavailable for sharing and even explaining or that an artificial search for presumably universal values falsifies the truth of any individual's culture or experience. I hope I have avoided these pitfalls, but my main concern is that what follows be construed as a statement of the truth or of a doctrine. They are merely partial and questioning signals toward the formulation of a way to understand symbolism in a specific culture. At the end an "afterword" puts together some implications of my remarks which have worried me as I read and reread them. It seems more and more evident to me that discussions of symbols and signs are far more complicated than, in our managerial aloofness, we imagined them to be.

The Problem

There are two reasons, one general, the other specific, for raising the question of symbols and signs. The general reason is [2] that the act of symbolization and cultural or personal attachment to whatever we call "symbols" are recognized modes of behaving, feeling, thinking, associating and under-standing. There may be now and there may have been in the past more than one "Islamic" symbolic or semiotic system, but whether one or a multitude, they form a discrete group which must by definition be, at least in part, different from comparable groups at other times or in other places. The question derives from nearly two years of deliberations and discussions in the context of the Aga Khan Award seminars about what, if anything, within contemporary architecture in Muslim countries can legitimately be considered Islamic. Furthermore, can this something be defined with sufficient clarity to be used as a criterion for evaluation?

When we dealt in the second seminar with restoration and rehabilitation the problem did not arise, for the criterion of having been part of Muslim history was sufficient to justify the consideration of any old remains. The concerns were or could have been technical (is a given monument or ensemble accurately restored?), social (what should be preserved and why within the

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satisfied with the act of 'participating' in symbolism. Moreover, it is hard to state precisely the limits of such participation; it varies according to an indeterminate number of factors. All we can say is that the actualization of a symbol is not mechanical; it is related to the tensions and alternations of social life and ultimately to cosmic rhythms."

context of contemporary culture?), informational (how should one present and exchange knowledge about monuments?), economic (how does re-habilitation relate to tourism or to urban mobility?), aesthetic (what is a good restoration?), or ideological (what is the purpose of preserving and whom does it profit?), but the value of the activity within the context of enhancing Muslim self-awareness was not questioned. It could have been, for the argument can be made that monuments, like people and cultures, may best be left to die, that antiquarianism in architecture is a peculiarity of a very limited Western elite and that preservation is a form of congealing a meaningless past, at best useful for flag-waving. But the discussion did not go that far.

Housing, the topic of the third seminar, was a much more complicated matter. It seemed clear to me that there were two extreme positions. One maintained that there is a definable Islamic typology of housing, whether its definition should derive from historical forms created in order to make an Islamic way of life possible or from a prescriptive system of religious and social requirements determined by the Qur'an, the Traditions and Law. The other extreme maintained that housing is independent of the prescriptions of the faith, either because contemporary problems require solutions independent of religious and cultural allegiances or because Islam itself is prescriptive in behavior, not in form. These extremes allow for a very extensive range of intermediate possibilities, but what was important about the debate itself was that the pertinence of Islam for housing – the system of belief and ways of life – *could* be questioned, while no one questioned the right of Muslims to a setting for whatever forms their lives may take. It was interesting that the texts quoted consisted either of very general statements (usually from the Hadith) about good behavior and cleanliness or legal sources in which complex local practices and traditions were given a broad sheathing of theoretical jurisprudence. Statements attributed to the seventh and eighth centuries (for which we have few available forms) and contemporary urban requirements are difficult to correlate, unless one tries to delve much more deeply into the evolution of Islamic law over the centuries. But even if unanswered in any way approaching coherence, the correct question was asked: what is the pertinence of Islam to architecture, now or in the past?

While this issue was aired in very broad terms at the first seminar and has reappeared from time to time, this fourth seminar seems to be the proper moment to try to be more specific and more concrete. But, even here, it is impossible to consider in one swoop the impact of Islam on architecture over fourteen centuries and from Spain to the Philippines – hence the choice of a series of questions dealing with [3] only one aspect of the impact. One could have chosen something as concrete as inheritance law and the development of building space in cities, but the information would not be easily available and the subject is hardly exciting. In proposing to deal with signs and symbols, the assumed social and psychological need to symbolize provides a different framework within which to consider Islamic architecture.

The questions can be formulated in the following way:

1. Is there an Islamic system of visually perceptible symbols and signs?
2. How universally Islamic is such a system and what are its variants?
3. What are the sources of the system, the revealed and theologically or pietistically developed statement of the faith, or the evolution of visual forms over fourteen hundred years?
4. In what fashion and how successfully were signs and symbols transformed into building forms?
5. How valid is the experience and memory of the past for the present and the future?

Old Approaches

The need for an approach derives from existing literature. To my knowledge, only two studies deal overtly and formally with symbolism and signs in Islamic culture and claim, at least in theory, some kind of completeness.

One is Rudi Paret, *Symbolik des Islam* (Stuttgart, 1958). Modestly restricted to "observation on the meaning of symbols (*Symbolik*) within the sphere of the Muslim world" (p. 9) and limited to religious matter, it tends to be descriptive rather than interpretative. Paret does, however, make an important distinction between primary and secondary symbols, the former being direct and immediate transformations of whatever is being symbolized (a complete set or system), the latter being more fragmentary or diverse, at times a synecdoche (part used for whole) and at other times in multiple layers (as when a mystic headgear made of two pieces symbolizes *all* binary opposites like Paradise–Hell, Life–Death). It is only when dealing with mysticism that Paret, under the impact of Hellmut Ritter (on whom more below), moves beyond the descriptive to the visual symbolism of the Arabic alphabet. He does not, however, talk about visual architectural implications.

The second study is by Jacques Waardenburg, "Islam Studied as a Symbol and Signification System," *Humaniora Islamica*, vol. II (1974). A theoretical essay on method, it asks appropriate questions (note in particular an interesting query about Islam as an ideology rather than as a religion) but loses itself by being so methodologically abstract that it fails in providing answers and even in indicating how these answers could in fact be found. Not even a nod is extended in the direction of visual forms.

Much more work has been done with the uniquely rich subfield of Islamic and especially Persian mysticism. The grand master of the field is Hellmut Ritter, whose *Das Meer der Seele* (Leiden, 1955) is one of the most elaborate and difficult systems of interpreting mystical thought. His successor, hardly less complicated, is Henri Corbin, some of whose works exist in English. An excellent introduction to all mystical matters is Annemarie

Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill, 1975). An interesting and occasionally quite provocative discussion of related issues around a single theme and with a broader base than Iranian Sufism or Ibn al-'Arabi can be found in M. Arkoun and others, *L'Étrange et le Merveilleux dans l'Islam Mediéval* (Paris, 1978), the proceedings of a lively colloquium. The most interesting aspect of these studies for our purposes is that they extend beyond traditional theological or esoteric interpretations into science and technology (S. H. Nasr, *Islamic Science*, London, 1976) and architecture (N. Ardalan and L. Bakhtiar, *The Sense of Unity*, Chicago, 1973). They owe little to broad symbolic theories except to an implied (Jungian, I guess) assumption that certain kinds of formal transformations (i.e., not only the visible form but its finite or infinite modifications according to one or more logical or paralogical methods) are innate within the psyche and often affected by certain physical or cultural circumstances (e.g., the land of Iran with its ecological properties, Muslims brought up in Sufi traditions).

    In most of these studies, just as in several works by T. Burckhardt (*Sacred Art in East and West*, London, 1967, and *Art of Islam*, London, 1976), which are not as deeply affected by Iranian culture, I see three inherent difficulties:

1.   Nowhere is there an explicit statement of the relationship between data (measurable and quantifiable in time and space) and interpretation; in other words, as opposed to the works of philologists and even philosophers like Ritter or Corbin, there is an absence of scientific precision. Therefore, many of the conclusions seem premature.

2.   The specifically Islamic character of forms is rarely clear or specific enough, except for calligraphy, which is mentioned as unique but never described; in other words the Islamic component is either absent from what are basic human needs conditioned by local limitations (no stone in Iran, colder weather in Anatolia than Egypt, and so on) or else it is simply a sheathing, a removable skin which is an expression of *taste*, not a symbol of the faith or the culture; this last point may be further strengthened by the undeniable fact that buildings (as opposed to objects in metal or paintings) were constantly repaired and refurbished to fit a prevalent taste and by the more debatable theory of earlier decades that visual expression was a sin in Muslim eyes.

3.   The contemporary context is almost always missing; we may not yet have discovered a Suger or a Procopius in traditional Islamic culture, but we do have documents of contemporary witnesses which would prevent the unavoidable impression of modern constructs, perhaps [4] valid to modern man, applied to traditional forms.

    If we turn to media other than architecture, the matching of literary evidence with works of art or the investigation of symbolic themes and ideas have been more thorough and more specific. The most conspicuous examples are various studies by Schuyler Cammann on rugs (in *The Textile Museum*

Journal, 3, 1972, and in P. J. Chelkowski, ed., *Studies … in honor of R. Ettinghausen,* New York, 1974) and much of R. Ettinghausen's work over the last thirty years (best examples in *Ars Orientalis*, 2, 1957, and in J. Schacht and C. E. Bosworth, *The Legacy of Islam*, Oxford, 1974, pp. 274–91). Over the years several other scholars have made specific contributions to this general theme (Hartner, Baer, Dodds).

Ettinghausen's conclusions or (as he would probably have agreed) working hypotheses can be summed up and slightly enlarged in the following manner:

1. There are in Islamic art certain themes such as the whirl, the lion, the bull and the signs of the zodiac which are historically older than Islam and which, with vagaries of no concern to us here, have been maintained in the new culture. Most of the identifiable symbols deal with secular themes or with what may be called "basic" religious symbols (earth, fire, life).

2. The one obvious new theme is writing; it is not merely an ornamental feature but either iconographic (Dodds, "The Word of God," *Berytus*, 18, 1969, with the argument that it replaces images) or vectorial (Grabar, *The Alhambra*, 1978, or the "Dome of the Rock," *Ars Orientalis*, 3, 1957; W. E. Begley, "The Taj Mahal," *The Art Bulletin*, 61, 1979) in the sense that it charges neutral forms with concrete and sometimes very elaborate meanings. But – and this is a key point – the charge was of low voltage. The Dome of the Rock, the mosque of Damascus, the north dome of Isfahan's Friday Mosque, the Alhambra and the Taj Mahal – buildings for which a highly intense meaning can be provided for the time of their creation – all lost their specific meaning soon thereafter. It is indeed as though Islamic culture as a whole consistently rejected any attempt to compel specific symbolic meanings in architecture comparable to those of Christianity and Hinduism (with their symbolic connotation in plan, elevation and decoration).

3. It is precisely this low symbolic charge of Islamic monuments which made it so easy for them to be copied and imitated elsewhere (Ettinghausen's argument). A corollary would be that the same low charge made it possible for an Indonesian pagoda or a Roman temple to become a mosque. In reality there is a somewhat more complicated intellectual and methodological problem involved in this reasoning, as I have tried to suggest in several unsatisfactory essays *(AARP*, 13, 1978; "An Art of the Object," *Artforum*, 1976; "Das Ornament in der Islamischen Kunst," *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft, suppl.* III, 1977). The problem is that a low charge of forms easily leads to ambiguity, and it is doubtful to me whether any culture can operate with an ambiguous visual system. Is it not, perhaps, once again a question of insufficient thinking and insufficient data-gathering?

Let me try to sum up this rapid and probably incomplete survey of the mostly recent literature (there may be much value in surveying the texts and notes of the great scholars of old like Herzfeld, van Berchem, von Kremer). No one has tried to identify an Islamic visual sign–symbol system in any

serious way, with the partial exception of an Iranian and Sufi-oriented system. Part of the reason is the factual and intellectual underdevelopment of a field of study, but a more important reason lies perhaps in two aspects of Islam's historical destiny. First, it inherited [5] many symbolically rich cultural traditions but could only preserve symbols which were not religiously charged and, to avoid the temptations of idolatry, preferred to restrict or even to stifle the growth of its own visual symbolism. Second, secular art was less affected by this restriction, but then secular art is by its very nature definable for the most part in social rather than cultural terms.

The hypotheses stated above are not fully satisfactory, in part for the very reasons I have used to criticize the opinions of others. They are abstract constructs for which archaeological data exist, to my knowledge, only in the seventh to ninth centuries, and I am not certain how far it is legitimate to generalize from a few references and monuments. Mostly, these hypotheses lack contemporary evidence; they have not made Muslims speak. Finally, all these hypotheses lack a clearly stated methodological premise. In what follows, I try to provide the latter by suggesting three methods of approaching the question with which we began.

Approach One: Pure Theory

From Plato to Wittgenstein, philosophers have talked about symbols and signs, and it is difficult not to be fascinated with St Augustine's uses of the word "sign" (T. Todorov, *Théories du symbole*, Paris, 1977) or with E. Cassirer's *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, 3 vols (New Haven, 1953–57) and S. Langer's *Philosophy in a New Key* (Cambridge, Mass., 1953). These are all weighty and difficult works which rarely, if ever, attend to visual forms (music, literature and dance predominate). Less intellectually compact and conceptually abstract are anthropological works which I have consulted: R. Firth's *Symbols* (London, 1973), M. Eliade's *Images and Symbols* (New York, 1961), and a few more concrete studies by C. Geertz or V. Turner (*The Forest of Symbols*, Ithaca, 1967), or semiological ones (for our purposes the most useful ones are the works of U. Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*, Bloomington, 1979, and "Semiotics of Architecture," *Via*, 2, 1973; G. Friedmann, "Une rhétorique des symboles," *Communications*, 7, 1966; R. Barthes, "Eléments de Sémiologie," *Communications*, 4, 1964). A very interesting critical summary of several books is Abdul-Hamid el-Zein, "Beyond Ideology and Theology," *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 6 (1977).

My overwhelming reaction to nearly all of these often brilliant and always fascinating works is one of despair. This despair has two components. The first is the non-commutability of abstraction; by this I mean that, even though specific observations and concrete reasonings about individual subjects led to the theory, I rarely saw an instance which would allow me to move

backward from the theory to some hitherto unstudied subject of Islamic architecture. The second component is that all these works hover between a requirement of nearly infinite and usually not available precision of information (particularly true of semiology; I dread trying to do a semiological analysis of a monument of architecture) and an obviousness of conclusions (the wall of a holy building is a symbol or a sign of the separation between sacred and profane, restricted and public spaces). In many ways the data of the anthropologist are too commonly spread in the segment of culture he studies to explain an accidentally preserved major monument, and questions of taste rarely appear in dealing with architecture as opposed to painting or objects (for a fascinating example see James C. Faris, *Nuba, Personal Art*, London, 1972).

How can these theories be useful even if they do not provide an automatic model or paradigm? First, there are certain semantic distinctions which are consistent enough that they can be used as premises for our purposes. For instance, a *symbol* is different from a *sign*, which indicates something, and an *image*, which represents it; a symbol defines something and connotes it but does not circumscribe it as does a sign or an image; thus a swastika can be anything from an ornament to a potential incitement to hatred and destruction. Then, while a symbol is physically identifiable, it is itself not clearly circumscribed. As a tower for the call to prayer, the minaret is but a sign suggesting a function; it becomes a symbol when it reminds one of Islam, when it appears on stamps identifying a specific country (the spiral minaret of Samarra – its spiral quality is much more an Iraqi national symbol than an Islamic one), or when it serves to design a space (the Kalayan minaret in Bukhara, organizing open space between a mosque and a *madrasa* redone several times). In other words, while the sign attribute is fixed, the symbol attribute is a variable which depends on some "charge" given to it or on the mood or feeling (Langer's terminology) of the viewer ("referent"). Theory, therefore, compels us to identify and isolate the triple component of sign, symbol, referent. Of the three, symbol is the one which depends on predetermined conventions, habits or agreements which are not in the object but in those who share it. Our problem then becomes one of defining the semantic field of a symbol by finding the area in time or space of its contractual agreement with a social group.

Approach Two: Islamic Written Evidence

There are many different ways of imagining how written evidence could be used. Others with a better knowledge of texts than I will be able to provide examples or even answers to the following set of questions accompanied by brief and partial comments.

Is there an indication that visual symbols or signs were, at any time, generally accepted ways of identifying functions, defining one's own as opposed to alien aims, or providing qualitative judgments?

Looking over major classical and very different texts like Muqaddasi's *Geography* (see P. Wheatley, "Levels of Space Awareness," *Ekistics*, Dec. 1976), Ibn Nadim's *Fihrist* (tr. B. Dodge, 2 vols, [6] New York, 1964), and Ibn Khaldun's *Muqaddimah* (tr. F. Rosenthal, 3 vols, New York, 1958, esp. II, pp. 233 ff., 357–67), or Ibn Fadlan's description of the Volga Bulghars, my answer is negative. While alien lands are at times identified by the peculiarities of their visual expression (for instance, nearly all descriptions of India in classical times), I see no evidence of concrete visual symbols which would be considered as uniquely Muslim. The exception of the *minbar* in tenth-century geographical texts indicates a certain kind of administrative status rather than a reference to a concrete object. The only other exception is the Ka'ba, which by definition is a unique monument. This is not to say that there are no Muslim symbols and signs, but they consist less in visually perceptible features than in memories of men and events: the place where something took place or where someone did something. The literary genre of the *kitab al-ziyarat* (guidebooks to holy and memorable places) which began in the twelfth century only strengthens the hypothesis that the Muslim tradition identified what is sacred or holy to it in a *denoting* rather than *connoting* fashion, i.e., in terms of memorable associations and generalized physical shapes (oval, rectangle) rather than of concrete visual forms. In other words, and with occasional exceptions (like the *abwab al-birr,* "gates of piety" in early fourteenth-century Iran), there is no symbolic iconography of Islamic architecture to be derived from texts, as there is, for instance, in Christian architecture.

Is there a qur'anic or early Hadith symbolic system with visual associations?

This is a difficult question to discuss because it is difficult to develop an appropriate method of dealing with it. Should one simply analyze the qur'anic text as such? Or should one seek the frequency of use of certain passages over the centuries? For instance, one of the most consistently used verses both in architectural inscriptions and in depicting Divine Power is the magnificent Throne Verse (II, 256). But it is not the only [7] instance in the Revelation of strikingly effective depiction either of Divine Might or of God's Throne. Some of them were occasionally used on monuments, as, for instance, VII, 52, in the north dome of Isfahan or LXVII, 1–5, found in the Hall of the Ambassadors in the Alhambra. In both instances the use of an unusual verse serves to explain the cupola's meaning, but can one conclude that these architectural meanings are inherent in the qur'anic passage or that the monuments served to represent or otherwise symbolize the Holy Writ?

Another interesting passage is XXIV, 35–8, the "verses of light," which do suggest a symbolic physical setting reflecting Divine Presence. The passage was frequently used in *mihrabs*, but the later traditional Muslim mosque vocabulary hardly ever used the terms of the qur'anic passage. This peculiarity does not preclude the existence of a Qur'an-based symbolic system; it merely questions its consistent validity for architectural history.

We know very little about the frequency and consistency of qur'anic quotations. I propose the hypothesis that the symbolic or iconographic use of the Qur'an in Islamic art nearly always *followed* the development of a symbolic or iconographic need. Symbols, signs or meanings were discovered in the Qur'an but, at least as far as the arts are concerned, do not actively derive from it; in other words, I suggest there is no "iconography" of the Qur'an. Matters are obviously quite different in theology or law.

How culture-bound is the rich Islamic literary tradition of opulent princely dwellings?

A story from the *Thousand and One Nights* such as the "City of Brass" reflects an unbridled imagination about a magnificent palace. It contains, no doubt, the esoteric meaning of a difficult quest for Truth or Reality through secret and mysterious doors (like the ubiquitous *ya miftah al-abwab*, "*O Opener of Doors*," in later Persian miniatures), but its details and its external mood are all of a brilliant secular world. Should one interpret such stories as simply stylistically Islamic, i.e., as universal archetypes which have acquired culture-bound details? Or are they key reflections of a uniquely Muslim vision of sensuous beauty – paradisiac perhaps, but more likely fruits of a unique imagination formed by the confluence of an egalitarian faith and the reality of rich and isolated dynamic centers like Samarra or Topkapı?

How should we interpret technical and especially mathematical treatises applied to architecture or decoration?

Few of these texts have been properly published or translated, but, where available, as in the very recent book of M. S. Bulatov, *Geometricheskaia Garmonizatziia v Arhitektury* (Moscow, 1978), what is striking to me is that the subtle and complicated mathematical formulae are not presented as illustrations, symbols or signs of a faith or even of a cultural identity, but as practical solutions to architectural and ornamental requirements.

Hence, is it legitimate to suggest a culturally accepted symbolism for visual forms as long as, in the highly verbal culture of traditional Islam, written sources give it explicit mention so rarely and require an esoteric approach to literature for demonstration?

The obvious exception lies in the art of writing, where, thanks to the work of A. Schimmel and F. Rosenthal among others, it can clearly be

demonstrated that a whole range of meanings, from direct sign to most elaborate symbol, had been developed, thought out and accepted. I am far less certain whether such matters as theories of color in mystical thought (Corbin), for instance, actually did correspond to the uses of color in artistic creativity. But this, perhaps, is simply a matter of insufficient research.

To sum up these remarks on written sources seems fairly easy within the present state of our knowledge. Except for the Arabic alphabet, there was no coherent, consistent and reasonably pan-Islamic acceptance of visually perceived symbols; there was no clearly identifiable sense, even, of forms considered to be one's own, culturally discrete. It may, therefore, be possible to propose that traditional Islamic culture identified itself through means other than visual: the sounds of the city, the call to prayer, the Word of the Revelation but not its forms, the memories of men and events. If valid (and it is, I am sure, subject to criticism), this conclusion would suggest for the contemporary scene that it is not forms which identify Islamic culture and by extension the Muslim's perception of his architecture, but sounds, history and a mode of life.

To this statement, intended primarily to promote discussion, I should like to attach three codicils. One is that there is some methodological danger in assuming too easily that written sources are the paradigms by which a culture saw itself; written sources reflect in large part the world of the literati, and neither St Augustine nor St Thomas Aquinas provide much information about the formation of early Christian art or of Gothic architecture. The importance of written sources lies in the parallelism they provide for visual phenomena and, to a smaller degree, in showing a time's characteristic concerns which contribute to the taste and will for creating monuments. My second remark is that written sources from the early Hadith onward provide an enormous amount of information in two related areas: the vocabulary of making anything from a textile to a building and hence the basic meaningful units (the morphemes) of visual forms, an area whose study has hardly begun, and judgments on changes of taste. For instance, a comparison between Ibn Jubayr (twelfth century) and Ibn Battuta (fourteenth century) describing the same parts of the Muslim world shows the same monuments and holy places in such different ways. Written sources do help in understanding the vernacular, the common, more easily than the unique in art, probably because the highest literati were often visual illiterates or at best visual vulgarians, a phenomenon which is [8] peculiar neither to the Muslim world nor to the past.

Finally, I have only alluded to written sources as essentially synchronic documents, with the obvious exception of the qur'anic Revelation shown as a constant and consistent inspiration and justification of tastes, moods and function. There could be a diachronic analysis of literary sources seeking to find common and repeated themes and motifs; it is a dangerous kind of analysis, for it can too easily find consistency by comparing features which

are not true parallels (as, for instance, both Persian and Arabic poetry, where I have often wondered whether metric and thematic consistency over the centuries is in fact what was prized at the time of creation of a new work of art). Such diachronic analyses, which may have been attempted without my being aware of them, could be of great importance in identifying consistent cultural threads.

Approach Three: The Monuments

I shall be briefer in discussing monuments, as some of them will be discussed more fully later in the seminar. Keeping in mind the broad questions raised at the beginning of these remarks, I would like to propose four points for discussion.

Proposition I.   The Muslim world did create a number of monuments of art and architecture which are uniquely charged with symbols: the Ka'ba, the Dome of the Rock, the Taj Mahal, Fatehpur Sikri's throne of Akbar, and perhaps a few others (the mausoleum of Oljaytu in Sultaniyah, the shrine of Lutfallah in Isfahan) once someone undertakes to study them properly. But, in all instances known to me so far except the Ka'ba (which is in a way an "uncreated" monument), the depth of meaning with which the monument was created did not survive the time of its creation or was modified, as with the Dome of the Rock, which grew in religious connotations as the centuries went by, or with the Taj Mahal, which lost them. Interesting though they may be to the historian, these monuments are of secondary significance for our purposes, because their uniqueness is more important than their typological set.

Proposition II.   There are several instances of what I would like to call restricted symbolic cultural continuity in architecture. There is, for example, the large hypostyle mosque, a unique creation of the seventh century which solved several functional requirements of Iraqi Muslim communities. This type became a regional one in some areas (Fertile Crescent, Arabia, Muslim West) but it also became symbolic of the introduction of Islam into new areas. Early Iranian mosques (this is a somewhat controversial topic at the moment for complex archaeological reasons not pertinent to this discussion), early Anatolian ones and early Indian ones tend to adopt a form identified with early and pure Islam. Another example is the classical Ottoman mosque, whose large dome flanked by minarets and usually preceded by a courtyard became a symbol [9] of Ottoman cultural and political prestige and power from Algiers and Serbia to Egypt and Iraq.

The reason I used the word "restricted" for these examples is that specific historical and cultural conditions – the Ottoman empire or the Islamization

of new lands – led to the symbolic quality of these forms; it was not a matter of their intrinsic value. The Ottoman mosque can become a national or romantic symbol and the building today of a hypostyle mosque in Tunisia is merely continuing a regional tradition.

Proposition III.   There are very few architectural forms which are consistently indicative of the presence of Islam. The most obvious one is the minaret, whatever actual function it has had over time and whatever reasons led to its creation. I must admit that I am not satisfied with any of the traditional explanations of the minaret and its appearance, not only in the skyline of Cairo or as the elegant framer of Iranian façades or Ottoman volumes, but as a single monument in the Iranian countryside, at Jam in Afghanistan or in Delhi. The study of qur'anic quotations on minarets is very instructive as they vary considerably from building to building or area to area. But in many cases both inscriptions and decoration lend themselves to a range of symbolic meanings which await their investigator. For instance, the use of the whole Sura Mariam (XIX) on the minaret of Jam identifies this extraordinary monument as a proclamation of Islam in its relationship to other religions, while the ornament of the Kalayan minaret in Bukhara can be understood as an expression of the central Muslim tenet of the Unity of God, since its different designs are in reality versions of the same motif.

Are there any other similarly obvious and constant forms? There are the *mihrabs* of sanctuaries, of course, but their symbolism is, with a few exceptions (Cordoba, some Fatimid examples in Cairo), an obvious one, and the object itself became automatically functional rather than emotionally or intellectually symbolic. There are traces of a symbolism of gates in cities or even buildings, especially palaces, but this symbolism expresses itself more frequently in the names of gates than in their form, a few exceptions as in Jerusalem's Haram notwithstanding. And anyway, I am not certain that the symbolic meanings which can be attributed to the gates of Abbasid Baghdad or Fatimid Cairo remained significant symbols much after their creation. I am hesitant in attributing a symbolic rather than a socially functional meaning to traditional physical constructions of the Muslim city like the mosque–market–*maidan* unit.

I have mentioned primarily architectural symbols, because the seminar deals with architecture. Non-architectural visual symbols certainly existed as well, but to my knowledge none have been investigated in sufficient depth to know which ones were simple signs (hand of Fatima) and which ones acquired the kind of range which is required of a symbol (color green, the Crescent).

If the proposition of the previous sections that self-recognition within the Muslim tradition was primarily auditory and so on is acceptable, this difficulty in defining an overall Islamic visual system need not be considered as troubling. In fact, it may simply demonstrate two secondary propositions.

One is that symbolic systems may indeed tend to be most easily perceived in time rather than across time. The other is that in the actual perception of the environment such items as clothing, objects used and spoken accent are more significant than architecture.

Proposition IV.   Symbolic and sign systems are to be sought not in architecture but in decoration, decoration being understood in its widest sense as those parts of a building which are not necessary to its physical utilization or structural stability.

If my earlier suggestion of symbolic systems as richer synchronically than diachronically is acceptable, this proposition is strengthened by the fact that decoration could and did change in kind (continuous additions) or in meaning (for instance, reinterpretation of the mosaics of [10] Damascus by later writers). Furthermore, while nearly all architectonic units or even combinations and developments of units in Islamic architecture are easily relatable to the morphology and growth of other architectural traditions, this is much less so with decoration, whose motifs and combinations are nearly always culturally unique. To dismiss this decoration as "mere" decoration is a Western imperialist reflex from a society which equates meaningful decoration with representation and which for half a century has rejected decoration within its own "progressive" architecture.

But how are we going to find meanings in it? There is something troubling, for instance, in looking at a series of thirteenth-century portals in Anatolia which are formally very difficult to distinguish from each other yet which serve as entrances to mosques, *madrasas*, hospitals and caravanserais. Is this decoration unrelated to the purpose of a monument except in the very general way of beautifying, at best attracting to, an unexpressed function? Within the synchronic scheme proposed earlier, the answer may be positive, as one can easily argue that the contemporary did not have to be told by a façade whether a building was a warehouse or a hospital.

Yet it is unlikely that we will be satisfied with such an answer for three reasons. One is that a series of studies on objects and miniatures, for which similar explanations have been provided, tends to show that a close examination demonstrates in almost every case a complex iconographic and symbolic meaning. A second one is that it is hardly reasonable to expend enormous efforts on meaningless forms. And third, the study of major monuments of architecture almost always demonstrates great depth of meaning. In other words, we have not taken a proper look at these monuments and their decoration. Let me outline two possible approaches for dealing with this problem.

The first approach would be morphological, seeking to find such themes of decoration as have meanings. The most obvious one is writing, as monuments as diverse in quality and importance as the Taj Mahal, the Guyushi mosque in Cairo, and the Qaytbay complex also in Cairo are

explained by the qur'anic quotations on their decoration. One of the most striking "un-Islamicities" of contemporary architecture is its failure to make aesthetically appealing use of calligraphy. I should add that writing exists at several levels of intelligibility: direct quotation probably only available to the very literate in the past but to all in the future; rhythmic punctuation with litanic repetitions known to most, as in the clear *al-mulk lillah* (Power of God) which organizes the lengthy and wordy inscriptions of Persian mosques from the fifteenth century onward; simple statements of God and His Prophet, known to all, which adorn the outside walls of *madrasas* in Khargird or Samarkand. I have elsewhere discussed and, I hope, demonstrated this use of writing as a vector of meaning in architecture (*The Alhambra*, 1978).

Next to writing is geometry. I am less clear about the actual perception of geometry and hesitate to accept in full the *Gestalt* explanation proposed by Ardalan and others for Iran, but I am convinced that the geometry of Isfahan's north dome based on the pentagon or of Bukhara's minaret with several hypostases of the same basic design cannot be simply a designer's whim. But I am not sure how to approach the problem, just as methods should be devised for dealing with vegetal motifs or with a theme like the *muqarnas* which involves nearly all morphemes of decoration.

The second approach would be syntactic and would consist in studying and explaining whole ensembles. To my knowledge, no one has attempted to do so in Islamic architecture. One example may serve as a conclusion to this essay. I have long been puzzled by what seemed to me to be the arbitrary location of tiled panels in classical Iranian mosques of the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries. Yet, in the Masjid-i Shah's main dome, the progression to the burst of light at the apex of the dome seems to me to be an extraordinary attempt at symbolizing the Revelation not as the static and learned order of a Gothic portal or of a Byzantine church but as the dynamic and sensuous illumination of a faithful praying. The symbolism of the decoration is not an inherent property of the design but the result of man's prescribed action in the building.

Could one extend the point to propose that the true uniqueness of the Muslim visual symbolic system lies not in the forms it took but in the relationship it creates, indeed compels, for its users? A celebrated tradition is that wherever a Muslim prays there is a mosque. Symbolic or signifying identity lies in setting and man, not in form. Is this a possible challenge for contemporary architecture? [11]

Afterword

What follows is a series of questions and concerns derived from the preceding pages which may in themselves merit further consideration.

1.   Synchronic versus diachronic. I am suggesting that it is easier to identify a synchronic symbolic and semiotic system than a diachronic one which either becomes obvious and undifferentiated or requires the preliminary investigation of synchronic sets. Too few instances of the latter exist to justify many significant definitions of Islamic symbols. I should also add that the nature of a valid time frame is a very difficult question which has hardly ever been raised by historians of forms. I am not even sure that linguists have discussed the aspect of time in their consistent concern for semantic fields, but I may simply not be aware of some existing work.

2.   Specific forms and archetypes. This is a very delicate issue. If we were dealing with architecture in general, it would be perfectly appropriate to discuss and refine broad and universal human needs, feelings, means of perception and the like as they are adapted to concrete ecological require-ments. But I understand our concern for the architecture of Muslims to mean, as regards symbolism and signs, those aspects of architecture which are not universally meaningful but discretely significant to a certain culture. We *can* come to the conclusions that this discrete significance was minimal or merely cosmetic, that the contemporary world has made cultural discreteness obsolete and that universal modes of judgment are the only valid ones. But, if we do come to these conclusions, we must be sure that we are aware of what they mean.

3.   Architectural symbols and functions. The greatest difficulty I had was in identifying those aspects of architectural creation for which it is justified to seek a symbolic significance. My answer is that the referent alone (user, viewer) decides on the symbolic meaning of an artistic creation. Hence architectural symbolism can only be demonstrated from non-architectural sources – written sources, opinion surveys or whatever else may be developed. Theoretically it is possible to derive symbolic meanings from formal consistencies, i.e., the repetition over the centuries of certain forms (E. B. Smith, *Architectural Symbolism*, Princeton, 1953), but I am not sure whether consistency of form means consistency of symbols or convenience for functions.

4.   Symbols and styles. Can one maintain a distinction between aesthetic and taste impulses (style) and a range of associative reactions (symbols)?

5.   Visual and auditory perception. I may have overstressed the thought that Islamic culture finds its means of self-identification in hearing and acting rather than in seeing. But I am more than ready to be corrected on this point.