



The Aesthetics of Arab Art by Afif Bahnasi

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Abstract

Having developed a profound vision of the aesthetics of Arab art, the author's perspective quickly evolved into a philosophy worthy of discussion. He had raised this topic more than twenty years before writing this book, sparking discussions about artistic experimentation and its grounding in tradition within conferences, universities, and seminars, as well as attracting the attention of artists and critics in particular. Despite this, the subject still requires extensive academic study, because authenticity is not merely cultural reform, but rather a return to the self, a cultural revolution that rejects the foreign, the imported, and the imposed, in order to revive the authentic and the unique.

It is no longer strange to speak of Arab civilization and art, after Orientalist art historians preferred the terms "Islamic art" and "Islamic civilization" following the rise and spread of Islam. However, the term "Arab" has come to denote art whose traces remain in Arab lands since the advent of Islam. Despite the valuable studies presented by art historians such as the German Kuhnle, the French Marçais, the American Eitanhausen, and many others, which focus on Islamic art in Arab lands and Arab art in general, few have delved into the secrets of Arab-Islamic art or sought to define its philosophy. While the earlier attempts of art historians like Gayet and Davison provided important insights, many analyses were marred by misunderstandings.

These transformations in the structure of Western art no longer allow any critic or writer to hastily view Arab-Islamic art through the lens of traditional Western art concepts. Instead, it is now viewed through the lens of earlier artistic principles, revealing in it a creative expression that predates all other art forms. The value of this book stems from its being one of the most important books that sought to consolidate the identity of Islamic art and confirm its authenticity and uniqueness with its special and absolute character. The author succeeded in achieving his project, as he worked to deepen this research since the beginning of the sixties, and he believed that his research would continue to remain a guide for the movement to establish art in the Arab countries. Indeed, the subject of the aesthetics of Arab art was of interest to artists, calligraphers and critics, in addition to its study as an independent subject in the Colleges of Fine Arts.

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The Study

The book includes an introduction and ten chapters. In the introduction, the author presents his philosophical vision for advocating artistic and cultural liberation. He describes his book as an introduction for those seeking to understand the philosophy of Arab art. In the first chapter, he examines Arab aesthetics, comprising six main themes. The first theme addresses Arab aesthetics, presenting it as a question, and then moves to a comparative study between the Western concept of art and how it has been adopted in the Arab world, and the concept of Arab art—an art we are ignorant of and distanced from. The second theme explores whether Arab-Islamic art is decorative and distinct from the concept of plastic art, in an attempt to establish the foundations of art in the Arab world.

The author then asks whether Islam prohibited imagery or preserved the national artistic identity. He answers his own question by stating that Islam did not prohibit imagery, but rather rejected foreign forms of representation, seeking to preserve the Arab spirit, exemplified by angels, which rejects alien influences.

The third theme addresses the historical boundaries of Arab art, noting that Arab civilization did not begin in the seventh century, but rather existed from the third millennium BC and continued to bear all the characteristics of the nation. The Arabic language to this day adopts the character of this unified civilization in two factors: the unity of language and the unity of belief. The fourth axis deals with art in the Arabian Peninsula before Islam and describes its climatic conditions and its distinctive geographical location as facilitating contact with India, as it traded its produce of spices, incense and perfumes and imported pearls, textiles, swords, ivory and slaves, and through it these goods were transferred to the West.

While the fifth axis, entitled Arabic calligraphy, includes (five axes), it sees that Arabic calligraphy is not an artistic symbol, but rather takes its motives from sacred values as its basis. Moreover, calligraphy stands at the point of intersection of Arabic calligraphy and photography. The use of the compass in Arabic art opened doors of creativity without limits for the artist. When the decorative fabric comes out, it is not merely a geometric good, but rather becomes areas of color from colored stones, or from wooden, shell and metal inlay, thus raising the artwork to high creative levels supported by the sacred values that motivated the artist to draw inspiration from this system as it originates from the absolute content, since geometric shapes such as the triangle, square and pentagon were not in themselves mathematical formulas, but rather abstract forms of all the shapes on earth. The thing that made Arabic calligraphy meet with abstract art in the field of expressing the absolute is what the Russian artist Kandinsky realized, as he believes that the subjective element in art loses its importance with time and loses its life, and that what remains preserving its value forever is the pure and eternal element of art, to which time constantly gives new energy.

Then comes the sixth axis (the art of Arabic calligraphy), which includes (eleven axes). He sees that the Arabic word is an image that includes sound, meaning, and visual imagination. Thus, when the Arabic word was used as an artistic element in Arabic calligraphy, the intention was not only to benefit from the artistic form of this word itself, but to compose an artistic tableau with spatial and temporal dimensions. The author also addresses the origin and development of Arabic writing, as well as the direct origins of Arabic writing and the significance of the different letters. The letter represents a part of a word that was formed by an action. He also addresses the aesthetics of Arabic calligraphy, the conditions of beautiful calligraphy, the types of pens in Arabic calligraphy, and the technical principles of calligraphy. In this, he relies on Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi as the first to speak about the aesthetics and technique of calligraphy in a treatise entitled (The Science of Writing), which is one of the oldest works written in Arabic on this art. Then he moves on to sayings about the merits of calligraphy, and then he moves on to the standard in calligraphy, as he sees that there are standards that can be extracted to achieve the correctness of the calligraphy. Then he moves on to the

forms of Arabic calligraphy from the Meccan and Medinan script at the beginning of the emergence of Islam to the Persian school.

Next comes the seventh chapter, entitled (Arab Urbanism), which includes (six sub-axes). It deals with urbanism and the formation of the Arab city in terms of the geographical, historical, human, and doctrinal unity that exists among them, as well as the factors of the formation of the Arab city from two main aspects: (the spiritual factor and the cultural factor). The first educational institution was the mosque, and the Qur'an was the first book as the subject of study, research, and interpretation. It even became the source of other sciences such as theology, the science of recitation, the science of readings, and then the sciences of arithmetic and language. It also looks at the characteristics of Arab urbanism and Arab architecture and points out that the standard on which the Arab city was built is the human being, because the human being represents a spirit and history as a social being linked to traditions. It also indicates that the Arab city has been subject in its formation to a set of constants and variables, and then he takes the old city of Damascus as a model as it became a prominent and powerful kingdom during the time of the Arameans, fighting the Assyrians and defeating the Jews, in addition to the fact that it carried the beginning of the characteristics of authentic Arab architecture that are consistent with the social and climatic conditions, up to the conditions of the old city and the modern era, as it is no longer exactly the same in the twentieth century, as new construction materials appeared that are cheap and easy to implement, such as cement or metal, and modern means appeared, such as electricity and its tools.

Chapter Eight was entitled "The Formation of Arab Architecture After Islam and Its Aesthetic Foundations." It consisted of ten sections that revolved around the origins of Arab architecture as being influenced by the existing architecture in Syria, which dates back to two ancient civilizations: The Byzantine civilization and the Sasanian civilization. The author also touches on the Arab structures of early Islamic architecture, with the Holy Kaaba remaining the first of these landmarks. He also touches on Assyrian architecture and the formation of the mosque, as well as the arches and domes that cover Islamic structures as an ancient tradition dating back to the Mesopotamian era, as they were the first to invent this type of covering. The author also touches on the first palaces and the plan of the palaces of the city of Hira and the architectural traditions, as well as the system of residential house architecture and its sections in the Levant. He also talks about the architecture of Islamic baths and then another architectural aspect, which is the first schools and caravanserais.

Then comes the ninth chapter, entitled (Return to Arab Aesthetics), which includes (seven axes). In it, he spoke about authenticity and the return to Arab aesthetics, as well as the position of materialists and speculative thinkers on authenticity as a starting point for creative work. The author also criticized those opinions that call for imitating the effects of the past, because he believes that the present remains better than the past as it represents an addition to the gains of the past, and not a deficiency. According to his opinion, authenticity is not an emergency call, but rather a basic condition for the legitimacy of artistic and literary work. He points out that the definition of authenticity is still unclear, but it has become a sign and a principle as a title for a

nationalist tendency that seeks to clarify the Arab identity in modern art. He also believes that the final step in the method of indigenizing art, after rejecting the foreign, supporting artistic culture, studying heritage and the concept of Arab art, is the artistic practice that sponsors its role and seeks to represent the Arab identity in its works. Finally, the axis concludes with Arab conferences and planning for indigenizing modern art.

Then comes the tenth and final chapter, which includes two main themes: (Pottery and Glass), in which it discusses the oldest cities in which pieces of ancient Islamic pottery were discovered, and then defines the nature of clay and pottery, its basic components, methods of using it, the ancient mosques in which it was found, the names of the cities, the era in which the pottery pieces were found, the tools used by the decorator in his work, the colors, the art of inlaying and assembling. As for the second theme, it is (Carpets), in which it addresses Arab carpets, international carpets, the names of the first cities in which carpets were made, the mechanism used in carpet making, and the basic factors on which carpets are based. It is based on two factors: the color of the carpet and what it symbolizes in terms of meanings and connotations for the Arabs, and the second factor is the decorative elements, and it addresses the connotations of colors for the Arabs and Muslims. Then it addresses the explanation of Andalusian-Moroccan carpets and Damascus carpets, leading up to Arab carpets at the present time.

The book concludes with appendices, followed by the most important Arabic and foreign references, illustrated figures, footnotes, and finally a brief biography of the author.

Conclusion

The importance of the book "The Aesthetics of Arab Art" by its author Afif Bahnasi is evident in the following:

First: The book represents a call for artistic and cultural liberation, encompassing all the foundations of Arab art.

Second: The book serves as a criterion for distinguishing between foreign and authentic art.

Third: The book is a standard for differentiating between a false persona and a genuine artistic personality.

Fourth: The book is an important introduction that seeks to understand the philosophy of ancient art.

Fifth: Thanks to this book, Arab art has come to be viewed as a creative manifestation predating all other arts.

Sixth: The book represents a fundamental starting point for establishing the identity of Islamic art as an emulation of the absolute and eternal.

Seventh: The book serves as an important guide for the movement to indigenize art in the Arab world.

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