

JOURNEYING THROUGH TRANSPARENCY

Por *Kamal Boullata*

RESUMEN:

Viaje a través de la transparencia

El artículo describe algunas fronteras de la producción de imágenes con el fin de exhibirlas como sitios de intercambio cultural. Estudia el primer encuentro de los pioneros europeos del arte abstracto y el arte islámico, y la inspiración que las estéticas árabe e islámica encontraron en la leyenda coránica de Bilqis (la reina de Saba). El autor, él mismo un artista, se concentra en una serie de pinturas abstractas de su producción para discutir el significado de la palabra “contemporáneo” mediante un viaje a través de las tradiciones europea, bizantina e islámica medieval.

ABSTRACT:

The article describes some frontiers of image-making in order to exhibit them as sites of cultural exchange. It reviews the first encounter between Europe's pioneers of abstract painting and Islamic art, as well as the inspiration of Arab and Islamic aesthetics from the Qur'anic legend of Bilqis (queen of Sheba). The author, an artist himself, focuses on his own series of abstract paintings and discusses the meaning of the word “contem-

Wissenschaftskolleg,
Berlín

RECIBIDO: 15/08/13
ACEPTADO: 28/11/13

porary” via a journey through European, medieval Islamic and byzantine traditions.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *abstracción, arte islámico, arte contemporáneo, Corán.*

KEYWORDS: *abstraction, Islamic art, contemporary art, Qur'an.*

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Image making begins with interrogating appearances and making marks. ... If one thinks of appearances as a frontier, one might say that painters search for messages which cross the frontier: messages which come from the back of the visible. And this, not because all painters are Platonists, but because they look so hard.
John Berger, *Keeping a Rendezvous*, 1992

How does a viewer begin to interrogate the appearance of an image and assume it were a frontier across which a painter's message could 'come from the back of the visible'? John Berger's words do not only invite us to explore new ways of seeing but they provoke us to reconsider our common modes of visual thinking.

In the following text, I shall begin by outlining the traces of some frontiers of image-making to recall in what way they are sites of encounter. From a brief review of the first encounter between Europe's pioneers of abstract painting and Islamic art,

the text will move on to discuss how the Qur'anic legend of Bilqis inspired qualities of beauty that were to become a cornerstone in Arab and Islamic aesthetics.

As for interrogating a contemporary painting, viewers are better placed to frame their interrogation by knowing not where a painting leads to, but where a painting is coming from. What counts in the process is the sum and substance of journeying more than the confirmation of a message. That is why the discussion involving my series of abstract paintings entitled Bilqis, is premised by a definition of what is meant by the word 'contemporary'. Subsequently, the subject of my frontier crossing between the language of contemporary painting and the medieval tradition of Islamic art calls for a retrospection of the earlier encounter between Islamic and Byzantine aesthetics. After all, it is the heritage of that encounter in the Mediterranean world of late antiquity that was incarnated in the Jerusalem where I first saw the light that today drives me to 'look so hard' as I contemplate the Qur'anic legend of Bilqis.

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From the Italian Renaissance to the late nineteenth century, the



Fig. 1. The marble floor of the Hagia Sophia Basilica, Istanbul, 6th Century
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pietorial language of Europe was founded on the attempt to reproduce the illusion of visible reality. During the first decade of the twentieth century, however, several factors combined to expedite the radical questioning of this long-honoured tradition which was gradually overtaken by what became known as relative abstraction and pure abstraction in the visual arts. It was the triumph of abstraction in art that announced the advent of modernism.

One of the most important factors triggering this historic break with the past was the fact that the arts of

non-European cultures were also becoming accessible to wider Western audiences. Upon seeing alternative ways of visual expression, artists throughout Europe were compelled to reconsider the pictorial tradition of figurative painting. Today most modern art historians agree that 1910 marked the birth of pure abstraction, for it was in this year that the Russian-born Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944) created the first abstract painting in the history of European art.

Kandinsky was living in Munich at the time. In celebration of the hundredth anniversary of the Oktoberfest in 1910, between May and October of that year, the city witnessed the largest exhibition of Islamic art that had ever been assembled in Europe. Covering a period of twelve centuries, the exhibition included over 3,600 art works from approximately 250 international museums and private collections which were installed in eighty halls at Munich's Exhibition Park.

The exhibition was titled *Mastepieces of Mohammadan Art*. Though the term 'Mohammadan' was fiercely criticized in a newspaper article of the period on the basis that Muslims do not refer to themselves as followers of Mohammad as Christians do of Christ, the exhibition was the first occasion in which the display of Islamic art was based on artistic quality and contemporary aesthetic



Fig. 2. Exhibition poster of Masterpieces of Muhammedan Art, Munich, 1910
Stadtmuseum Archives, Munich

standards as opposed to cultural, historical or ethnographical criteria. The objective of this spectacular exhibition, which was originally conceived by Prince Rupprecht of Bavaria, was to show art from Islamic countries as being on an equal footing with the masterpieces of European art, a fact which called for the inclusion of the word *Meisterwerke* (Masterwork) in the exhibition's title. The various cultural programmes accompanying the exhibition included the premier of Gustav Mahler's Symphony No. 8 in E-Flat Major, which has since been frequently referred to as the



Fig. 3. Henri Matisse with artist friends at Oktoberfest, Munich, 1910
Stadtarchiv, St. Ingbert

'Symphony of a Thousand' for its having been a choral work with a thousand performers in its first incarnation under the baton of the composer himself.¹

With widespread publicity for this exhibition of Islamic art, artists from all parts of Europe journeyed to Munich to see it. Most prominent among them were Paul Klee (1879-1940), who came from Bern, and Henri Matisse (1869-1954), who travelled from Paris. The exhibition left a deep and lasting impression on

1. Eva-Maria Troelenberg, 'Regarding the exhibition: the Munich exhibition *Masterpieces of Muhammadan Art* (1910) and its scholarly position,' *Journal of Art History*, no.6 (June 2012): 1-34.

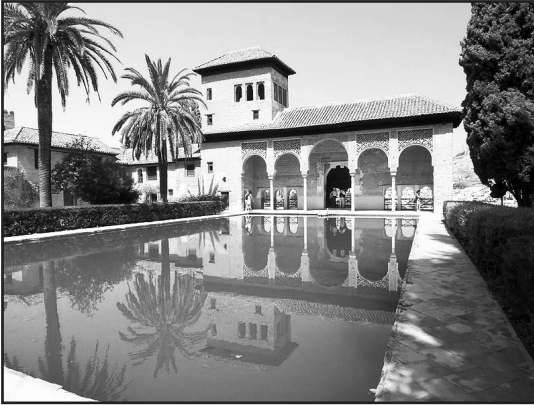


Fig. 4. El Partal Palace,
Alhambra Palace, Granada,
14th Century



Fig. 5. Courtyard of
Umayyad Mosque,
Damascus, Syria,
7th Century

both artists. Within two years, Paul Klee had set out for Tunisia while Matisse had travelled on two occasions to Morocco and then proceeded on to Andalusia in Spain.

As for Kandinsky, he had no need to go anywhere south. Not only was the whole spectrum of the visual arts from the Muslim world at his door-

step in the Munich exhibition, which extended over a period of six months, but he had long imbibed abstraction through the Russian Orthodox icons that he grew up with.

That same year Kandinsky published *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, which has long been considered as laying the first theoretical foundations



Fig. 6. Courtyard of Grand Mosque of Aleppo, 11th Century
© 2010 by Brandt Maxwell

for abstract art in Europe. In summing up his quest for absolute abstraction he wrote in the *Cahier d'art* in 1931, 'the impact of the acute angle of a triangle on a circle produces an effect no less powerful than the finger of God touching the finger of Adam in Michelangelo's *Creation*'.²



After briefly sketching a pivotal moment in the history of abstraction in European painting, and a hundred years following Europe's first wide-scale encounter with Islamic art, I shall now proceed to show in what way certain aesthetic

qualities intrinsic to Islamic art have inspired my own work as a contemporary painter. I use the word 'contemporary' advisedly and with Giorgio Agamben's definition in mind. In his essay 'What Is the Contemporary?' he explained: 'The contemporary is the one whose eyes are struck by the beam of darkness that comes from his own time ... [and] the one who, dividing and interpolating time, is capable of transforming it and putting it in relation with other times.' Agamben concludes by saying that 'to be contemporary means ... to return to a present where we have never been'.³

2. Ian Chilvers & John Graves-Smith (eds.), *Oxford Dictionary of Modern and Contemporary Art*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, p.5.

3. Giorgio Agamben, *What is an Apparatus? And Other Essays* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), pp. 39-54.

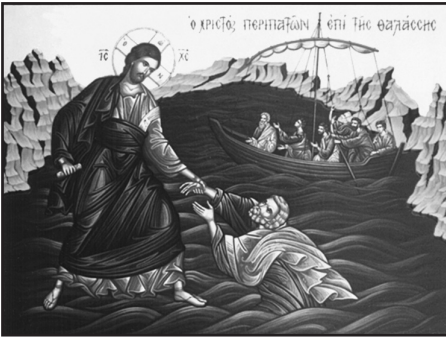


Fig. 7. Byzantine icon of Christ walking on water

Having been banned for over four decades from living in the country of my birth, it was through painting that I sought to find a home in which I could pay tribute to the Jerusalem I have lost. By finding inspiration in art that comes down to us from other times—as in the case of Byzantine iconography and Islamic art, both of which I grew up with—I sought through my painting to transform the reading of the beautiful in these affiliated traditions and render it in relation to our own time. That is how I invite viewers 'to return to a present where [they] have never been'.



For a comprehensive view of where my series of paintings came from, I shall first briefly demonstrate how an Islamic aesthetic evolving after a Byzantine aesthetic tradition came

to life as the direct product of a Qur'anic verse. This demonstration will then be followed by a description of the mathematical formula that I used in composing my paintings.

The legend cited in the Qur'an (27: 15-44) speaks of the first encounter between King Solomon and Bilqis, the Queen of Saba', known in English as the Queen of Sheba. Seeking to convert the pagan queen to his monotheistic belief, we are told that the prophet-king invited Bilqis to a crystal palace that he had built. Its floor was paved with slabs of translucent glass. Mistaking the transparency of the court's floor for a sheet of water, the queen is said to have lifted up her skirts to avoid getting them wet. Solomon corrected this misperception on her part by informing Bilqis that the ground was made of solid glass. Amazed at how her own eyes had betrayed her, she readily



Fig. 8. Hagia Sophia entrance, Istanbul, 6th Century. Courtesy Sonja Grund

announced her 'submission' to Solomon's One and Indivisible God.

Over the centuries, as tomes were being written on the theological interpretations of this Muslim legend, miniature painters depicting the scene of the encounter painted water waves and at times included fish swimming beneath the slabs of glass constituting the courtly floor. In the meantime, Islamic Arab sovereigns from Baghdad to Cordova took the description of Solomon's abode as a model by incorporating glass and water into the construction of their palatial settings. Court poets who were captivated by the beauty of combining glass with

water in their sultan's quarters likened these architectural marvels to Solomon's crystal palace. The interior space of these palaces glowed with transparencies. Seeing through glass floors and observing reflections in the glazed walls of ceramic tiles implied similar experiences of spatial ambiguity. The confluence of 'seeing through' and 'seeing in reverse' were to become an aesthetic hallmark of Islamic art and space. Today, fragments of the glass floors from the eighth-century al-Raqqa Palace in Syria may be viewed at the Museum of Islamic Art in Berlin.⁴

4. The legendary role of King Solomon as the builder of palaces and as the Queen of Sheba's convertor to Islam is rampant throughout Arabic literary and religious writings. In his seminal book *The Alhambra* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1978), Oleg Grabar refers to that legend in context of conceiving Granada's central monument. His reference has been further explored by José Miguel Puerta Vilchez's study of Alhambra in his *Los Codigos de Utopia de la Alhambra de Granada* (Granada: Diputación Provincial de Granada, 1990); this was followed by Vilchez's notable tome on the history of Arab aesthetic thought, *Historia del Pensamiento Estético Árabe*, (Madrid: Ediciones Akal, 1997) and more fully in his Spanish/English book titled, *The Poetics of Water in Islam* (Gijón: Ediciones Trea, 2011). See also Valérie Gonzalez, *La Piège de Solomon: La Pensée de l'art dans le*

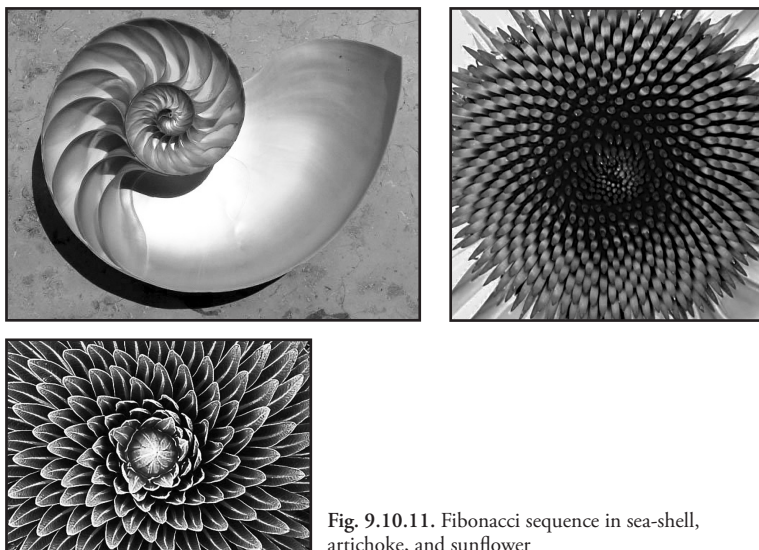


Fig. 9.10.11. Fibonacci sequence in sea-shell, artichoke, and sunflower

Across the Muslim world, transparency and spatial ambiguity found further expression in the outdoors as well. Palatial monuments usually built in front of glassy pools perfectly mirrored the monument on the flat sheet of water. The fourteenth-century Palace of the Alhambra in Granada provides innumerable examples of such sites as observed in the Patio de los Arrayanes or in El Partal Palace. The reflection of palatial monuments in the mirror-like sheets of water is similarly displayed at the

other end of the Muslim world including the seventeenth-century Taj Mahal in Agra, India and the courtyard of the nineteenth century Nasir il-Mulk Mosque in Shiraz, Iran. Interestingly, the symmetry characteristic of these architectural settings in addition to their reflection in water produced the four-fold symmetries one finds at the heart of every arabesque.



Coran (Paris: Albin Michel, 2002) and her *Beauty and Islam: Aesthetics in Islamic Art and Architecture* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2001), pp. 26-41.

In addition to using glass, water and ceramic walls to reflect light in palatial interior and exterior settings, marble floors in mosques and

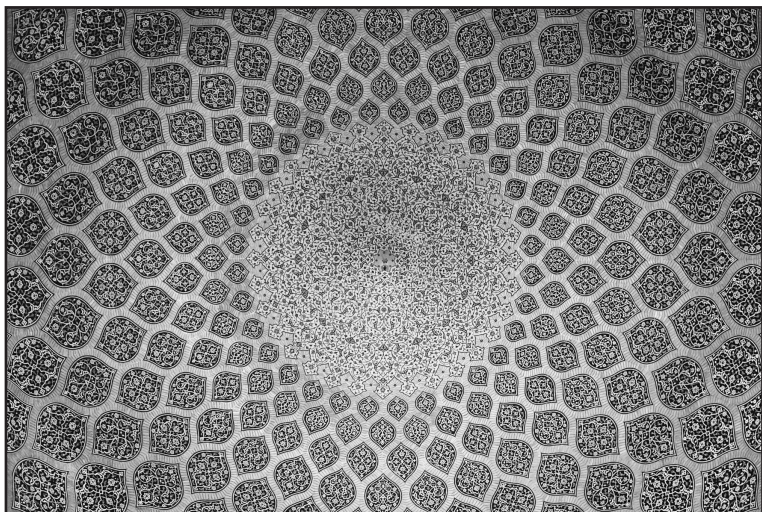


Fig. 12. Dome interior, Lotfollah Mosque, Isfahan, 14th Century
Philip Maiwald

sanctified courtyards have often been smoothed to such a degree that the glistening floor would recall the visual impression of a wet surface. The seventh-century courtyard of the Grand Mosque of Damascus and the eleventh-century courtyard of the Great Mosque of Aleppo offer striking examples. This architectural feature that first emerged in the Levant under the Umayyad Dynasty (661-750 CE) was destined to spread all the way to Southeast Asia as it is vividly illustrated in the nineteenth-century floor of the Baiturrahman Grand Mosque in Banda Aceh, Indonesia.

Suggestively, the shimmering surface of floors in Islamic spaces has

had its aesthetic analogue in Byzantine churches. While the two faiths shared a common aesthetic metaphor, the germinal origins in each case derived from a different scriptural source whereby the referent and the significance of the metaphor indicate contrasting moments in commemorating faith. In the Qur'anic verse, it was the sight of the watery floor surface that lured the pagan queen to announce her *conversion* to Solomon's faith. In contrast, the shimmering marble floors of Byzantine churches alluded to the believers' *confirmation* of their own faith. By merely standing on the glistening floor of the church, the faithful relive, as it were, Christ's miracle of walking on water.

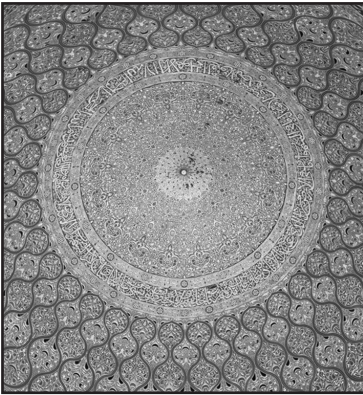


Fig. 13. Dome interior, Dome of the Rock, Jerusalem, 7th Century

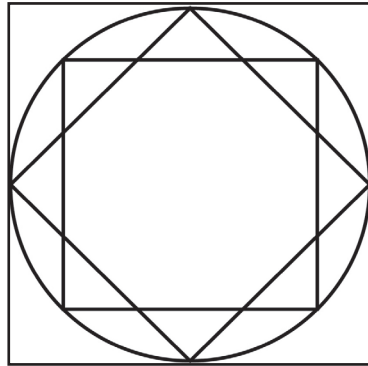


Fig. 14. Two squares within a circle intersecting each other at an angle of 45 degrees form the matrix of all octagonal arabesques

Based on the parable narrated in three of the gospels (Matthew 14: 22-33; Mark 6:45-52 and John 6:16-21), the theme of walking on water was widely portrayed in Byzantine icons. In addition, it was also a subject that was brought up in numerous Islamic sources most notably in *Kitab al-Zuhd* (*The Book of Abstinence*) by the Baghdad scholar Ahmad ibn Hanbal (780-855 CE).

The gospels inform us that Christ invited Peter to leave the fishermen's boat he was in with other disciples and join him in his walk on water. After attempting to do so, Peter sank the moment his faith faltered. In Ibn Hanbal's narration of the miracle, Christ is recorded as having said to his disciple who was sinking in the water, 'Stretch forth your hand, you

man of little faith. If the son of Adam had a grain or atom's weight of faith, he would walk on water'.⁵

The earliest Byzantine monument whose glimmering marble floor invited the faithful to recall Christ's miracle of walking on water is the sixth century Basilica of Hagia Sophia. As the seat of the Orthodox Patriarchate in Constantinople, it was to become a model to subsequent churches built throughout the Christian world. In one of the earliest descriptions of its opulence, the Byzantine Emperor Justinian who ordered its building has been claimed

5. Tarif Khalidi, ed. & trans., *The Muslim Jesus: Sayings and Stories in Islamic Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 2001), pp. 72-3.

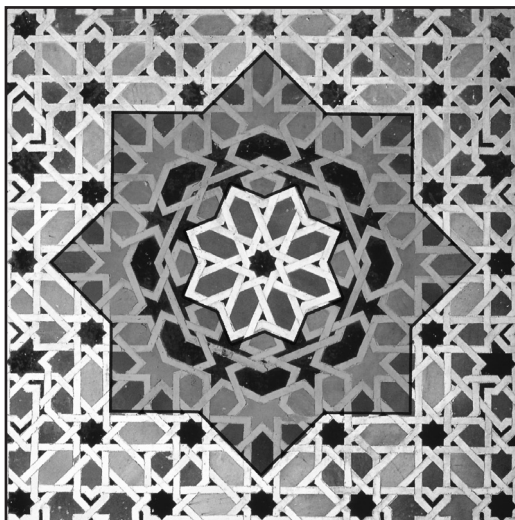


Fig. 15. Arabesque generated by the centrifugal multiplication of the octagon, Hall of the Ambassadors, Alhambra, Granada, 14th Century

to have boasted that he had outdone Solomon. Under the Ottomans (1299-1923) this domed, cross-in-square basilica served as a grand mosque up until 1935 when it was turned into one of the most frequently-visited museums in Istanbul.

It was the combination of massive slabs of finely polished marble and the undulating veining of the Basilica's floor that evoked the site of a boundless ocean with rippling swells and foaming waves. Throughout history that preceded the six centuries during which the Hagia Sophia's floor was covered with Ottoman prayer rugs, numerous observers have described the Basilica's floor as a "frozen sea" and as a "sea in a storm." After his 1498 visit to the Hagia Sophia, the Florentine

traveller Bernardo Bonsignori described the Basilica's floor as 'seta marezzata', meaning 'sea-like silk'. Interestingly, the etymological relation between the words *mare* and *marmor*, meaning 'sea' and 'marble' in Latin, and their origin in the Greek verb *marmairein*, meaning 'to glisten' share common associations with the Arabic word *marmar* meaning 'marble'. More than that, it was the island of Marmara that was the source of the Proconnesian marble with which the Basilica was elevated to crown the Byzantine capital, embayed in the north by the Bosphorus Sea and in the south by the Sea of Marmara.⁶

6. For the etymology of the Greek verb *marmairein* see Erkinger Schwartzenberg, 'Color, Light and Transparency in the Greek World' in Eve Borsock,

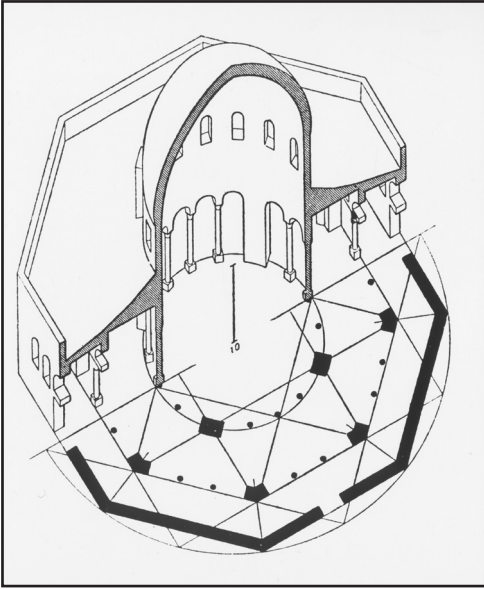


Fig. 16. The octagonal ground plan of the Dome of the Rock based on the meeting of two squares within a circle, Jerusalem, 7th Century



Abstraction in Byzantine iconography and its affiliations with

ed., *Medieval Mosaics: Light Color, Materials*, The Harvard University Center for Italian Renaissance Studies in Villa Tatti (Milano: Sivano Editoriale, 2000), p.22. For the metaphor of the marble floor see Fabio Barry, 'Walking on Water: Cosmic Floors in Antiquity and the Middle Ages', *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 89, no. 4 (Dec., 2007): 627-656. For a more elaborate aesthetic study on Hagia Sophia, see Bissera V. Pentcheva, 'Hagia Sophia and Multisensory Aesthetics,' *Gesta: International Center of Medieval Art*, vol. 50/2 (2011): 93-114.

Islamic art is what induced me in the first place to probe into the question of 'dividing and interpolating time ... and putting it in relation with other times.' By looking back at the artistic inheritance of the Mediterranean world I came from, I could better appreciate abstraction in our own time. Thanks to the pioneers of abstract painting at the turn of the twentieth century, by 1949, the Swiss artist Max Bill (1908-1994), a student of Kandinsky and Paul Klee at the Bauhaus, pointed to the horizon where his own aesthetic sensibility was formulated when he said in an interview: 'it is possible to develop an art large-

Fig. 17. Two overlapping quadrangles circumscribed within a circle symbolizing the meeting of heaven and earth, occupy the central position in this icon of the Transfiguration. Attributed to Theophanes of Crete, 16th Century



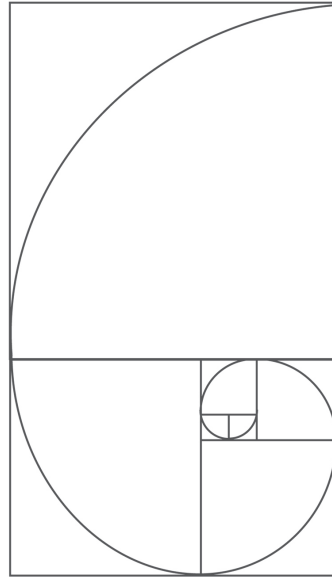
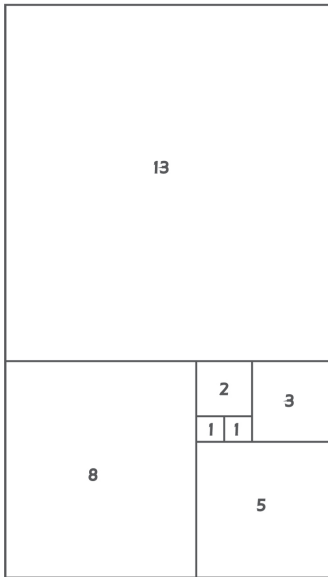
ly on the basis of mathematical thinking'.⁷

In an attempt to create a robust skeletal structure for compositions that embody a sense of transparency and ambiguity of space that were embroidered over time by the Bilqis legend, I borrowed a mathematical formula to serve as a preliminary springboard. Known as the Fibonacci sequence of numbers, this formula which was popularized in Europe during the thirteenth century had its origins in a mathematical

principle that was evolved in tenth-century Baghdad.

The agent of this cultural transfer was an Italian from Pisa known as Leonardo Fibonacci (c. 1170-1245). His father was a merchant running a trading post in the port city of Algiers with routes that reached as far as Constantinople. The young Leonardo used to travel with his father assisting him with his trade, and it was for bookkeeping purposes that the son realized that it was more practical to use the numbering system of his Arab retailers than the abacus he carried around and the Roman numerals he was brought up with. In his book *Liber Abaci* (Book of Cal-

7. Kimberly Elam, *Geometry of Design: Studies in Proportion and Composition* (New York, NY: Princeton Architectural Press, 2001), p.72.



culations), which appeared in 1202, he published what he had learned in his travels in the Mediterranean and thereby popularized the use of what are today known as Arabic numerals. It was in this same book that he introduced the numbering sequence which has come to be associated with his name. In brief, this numbering sequence is based on the generation of numbers in a certain order whereby each number represents the total sum of the previous two numbers as in the following two sets: 0, 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13 etc. and 0, 1, 3, 4, 7, 11, 18, 29 etc.

In the Fibonacci numbering sequence, the ratio of a whole figure to its larger part is the same as the ratio of the larger part to its smaller part. In the following illustration, two rectangles are dissected according to the golden ratio. The figure on the left shows how the proportionate space occupied by each number in the Fibonacci sequence represents a ratio of the whole figure. On the right, the figure shows the logarithmic spiral curvature indicating the progressive sequence in the growth and perpetuation of symmetry.

It has been noted that the so-called Fibonacci numbering sequence may

be traced throughout nature, including the horns of rams and reindeer, the spirals of shells and the arrangement of pinecones, the branching of trees, the distribution of petals on a stem, as well as the order of seeds in a sunflower, a cone flower and in the leaves of an artichoke.

Apparently, the basis of this numbering sequence had been well-known to Indian mathematicians ever since the sixth century. The system was further developed in the tenth century by Arab mathematicians including those who applied it in the sphere of practical geometry. The conclusion of treatises such as those written by Abu Bakr al-Karkhi (c. 953-1029) and Abul-Wafa al-Buzjani (940-998), who composed a practical manual for artisans on geometric constructions, could have been among the original sources for Leonardo Fibonacci.⁸

Having said that, it is interesting to note that long before such treatises

surfaced in tenth-century Baghdad, one of the earliest examples exhibiting the characteristics of the so-called Fibonacci numbering progression was to be found in the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, which was the first monument built in the history of Islamic architecture. Completed in 691, the radial arabesque of its interior dome spins with petal-shaped forms that leave a whirling impression similar to the so-called Fibonacci arrangement of petals. Looking up, the effect of this spinning pattern revealing the largest petal-shape forms closest to our sight and the smallest furthest from it evokes a sense of infinity. Since then, the patterns adorning the interior domes of mosques throughout the Muslim world often represented a similar effect. The dome of the Lutfallah Mosque in Isfahan built seven centuries after Jerusalem's Dome of the Rock demonstrates the same radial pattern whereby the overlapping petal-shapes convey an even more pronounced whirling sensation. In fact, by taking any example of the radial arabesque and measuring the radius from its central point to the borders of its frame, the gradational progression of the pattern unfailingly retains the same proportions described by the Fibonacci sequence of geometric progressions.

What is most interesting is that the very structuring of a radial ara-

8. It is worth noting that Wasma K. Chorbachi conducted pioneering research on Islamic geometric construction based on her study of practical manuals for artisans. See her, 'In the Tower of Babel: Beyond Symmetry in Islamic Design', *Computers & Mathematics with Applications*, vol.17, nos. 4-6 (January 1989):751-789. See also Gülru Necipoglu, *The Topkapi Scroll: Geometry and Ornament in Islamic Architecture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

besque in a dome interior is primarily based on the same principle as that of any other arabesque regardless of how simple or complex it looks. Whether it was created to adorn a delicate personal item like a pendant or an earring, or to embellish a monumental edifice, all arabesques have been traditionally conceived by the subdivision of the circle and the generation of patterns on the basis of four-fold symmetries. The overlapping of two squares within a circle produced the matrix underlying the generation of a wide range of linear arabesques in Islamic art.⁹

Field research conducted in Morocco and Spain during the early nineties awakened me to the fact that the octagonal structure of the two overlapping squares echoed the same eight-pointed figure circumscribed within a circle that has been traditionally included in Byzantine icons depicting the subject of the Ascension and Transfiguration. The same figure of the overlapping squares circumscribed within a circle has also been traced back to the fourth century ground-plan of two major Byzantine architectural sites in Jerusalem; they are the Basilica of the Resurrection in the Old City and the Chapel of the Ascension on the Mount of

Olives. Three centuries later, when the Dome of the Rock was built to commemorate the site from which it is believed that the Arab Prophet ascended into heaven, Jerusalem's earliest Islamic monument was founded on the meeting of two squares within a circle.

What this tells us is that there is more to such affinities than meets the eye. Following their encounter with Byzantine civilization, geometers, artisans and craftsmen working under the Umayyad Dynasty did not simply appropriate Byzantine artistic elements; they recreated them as a novel language of artistic expression through which they celebrated the new world that was being born. Thanks to the Umayyads, the innovative art that first saw the light in Jerusalem and Damascus was to flourish in Andalusian Spain; and from Baghdad under the Abbasids (750-1258 CE) it made its way into Persia and further East, where the Islamic art tradition evolved in response to its encounter with other art traditions long-honoured by different civilizations.

Those accomplishments of Umayyad artisans and craftsmen that were acclaimed by the end of the eighth century cast in a mould what European artists strived for during the first decade of the twentieth century when their encounter with Islamic art drove them towards ab-

9. See Issam El-Said & Ayse Parman, *Geometric Concepts in Islamic Art* (London: World of Islam Festival Publishing Co., 1976).

straction. It is in the wake of such journeying and peregrinations that I would like to think of the abstract art I have been creating, away from the country of my birth, for being as closely affiliated with the arts of the world I live in as with the arts of the world I come from.¹⁰



Straight lines in nature could only be ephemerally traced as in the case of a sea horizon, a torrent of rain, or a ray of sunlight. Yet, despite the unending allure of seeing, it had only been through the interrelationships of straight lines as embodied in the mind's eye that over the last three decades I could forge a geometric language of self-expression. After years of academic training in figurative painting, it was the art of European pioneers of abstraction that led me back to my cultural roots where I rediscovered a wellspring in the visual tradition of Islamic art and Arab aesthetics. What I came to learn from this tradition is analogical to what the Islamic artisans learnt from the Byzantine tradition and that the marked difference observed between

the two traditions may not be unlike that between my art and the principles of those traditions inspiring it.

In the footsteps of those traditional artisans and craftsmen who employed the compass, pencil, and ruler to plot their arabesques on paper, all my initial sketches have been executed using the same tools to establish the skeletal structure of my composition. While the proportions of the Fibonacci numbering sequence has generally been subliminally embedded within the intricate network of the traditional arabesque, in my preliminary sketches pencilled on gridded paper, the numbering sequence is translated into a linear configuration. The gradational progression is clearly marked by means of vertical parallel lines whose distance from one another is aligned in accordance with the proportions of one or the other set of the Fibonacci numbering sequence. The gradational distance between lines begins to echo the movement of some voiceless sea waves. The subsequent addition of alternating diagonal lines that are tilted at variable angles against the vertical lines totter the stability of the upright figures. A structural tension is mounted. With the generation of geometric figures and the absence of shade and colour, all figures surge out of the same plane. The eye cannot differentiate between what is near the surface and what is far from

10. For further elaboration see 'To Measure Jerusalem: Explorations of the Square' in my book *Palestinian Art: From 1850 to the Present* (London: Saqi Books), pp. 325-336.

it. A sense of spatial ambiguity is awakened. By duplication, rotation and the horizontal extension of the linear structure, seeming symmetries reach to the extreme ends of the composition. Reduced to a geometric configuration, it is these very elements combining spatial ambiguity with the resemblance of mirror-like symmetries that are intrinsic to the idea of what Bilqis allegedly experienced once her eyes caught sight of the floor at Solomon's court.

Over a period of three months, a countless number of sketches have been drafted to arrive at a selected few structures that could be considered for a triptych composition. Before embarking on painting the triptychs, some of the preliminary drawings turned into watercolour paintings, others into studies in acrylics on canvas. Just as much as the linear structure represented the skeleton of a composition, colour was to supply its flesh and soul.

The series composed of fifteen geometrically abstract acrylic paintings on canvas, was conceived to be displayed in the form of five triptychs. In each triptych, vertical and diagonal lines intersect at variable angles to create a horizontal composition. The rhythmic sequence of forms is set. The transparent layers of free-flowing brushstrokes are sharply delineated by the precision of hard-edged painting. The contrasting combination

brings to mind the words of Novalis, 'Chaos in a work of art should shimmer through the veil of order.' The issuing contrast of overlapping forms stirs a sense of movement punctuated by intermittent flashes of light. Contrary to a perspectival illusion of space, with the successive layers of colour, foreground and background become interchangeable. Seeming symmetries and refractions are perceived through the interweaving of polygons and triangles whose correspondence recalls ambiguities intrinsic to geometric arabesques.

Unlike pioneers of abstraction such as Klee who played the violin and Kandinsky who played both the piano and cello, I never learnt to play any musical instrument. But painting was the closest medium that made me feel during my work as if I were playing music. Between one brushstroke and another, the process of painting always felt like listening to a musical composition for the first time. In anticipation of hearing an upcoming note, the listener is usually delightfully surprised by the composer's turn just as I am by the accidental turn of a brushstroke amidst solid angular forms. In the meantime, beneath the order of razor-sharp edges of geometric shapes, the chaos of free-flowing brushstrokes freezes the sound I have heard of the brush thumping on the stretched canvas like a muffled drum. Who was it that

once said that Bach's *Passion According to St. Matthew* was composed with ruler and compass?

Having always sensed that the presence of a painting creates an atmosphere in space the way a musical composition fills a concert hall, I was wondering before embarking on the Bilqis painting series to what extent an abstract painting could succeed in turning its transparencies, spatial ambiguities and allusion of movement into metaphors the way Debussy's *La Mer* does, which is not a representation of the sea but a metaphor for sea-ness? Now that the paintings are behind me, I can see how far they are from the *aliquid stat pro aliquo* formula, that is, from being objects standing for something else. As for their viewers, I can only wish that while looking, each viewer could finally see that the name of Bilqis stands for no more more than the invisible colour of this series of works.

Finishing these triptych paintings has been as hard as finishing any other painting preceding them. It has always been the hardest moment to face before a canvas. For me, I sense that that moment approaches only after seeing how the fabric texture of the canvas has begun to disappear under the brushstrokes and the drying of paint on it begins to evoke the feel of human skin. By then, all colours should feel as fresh

as spring water and as clear as glass. That was always the case even before I embarked on the exploration of the Bilqis legend. As soon as I begin to sense that I could almost plunge through the painting's surface as in a pool or a mirror, I realize that the work is finished.

Interestingly, for Bilqis, it was the sight of her own reflection in the mirror-like floor of Solomon's court that she mistook for the surface of a pool that ultimately led to her 'submission' to the faith of the prophesying and henceforth to the launching of an art tradition that was perpetuated over the centuries across the globe. In contrast, I wish to conclude with a comment on a quotation from one of the earliest texts ever written on the history of painting in Europe. In 1435, Leon Battista Alberti wrote: 'I used to tell my friends that the inventor of painting, according to the poets, was Narcissus, who turned into a flower; for, as painting is the flower of all the arts, so the tale of Narcissus fits our purpose perfectly. What is painting but the act of embracing by means of art the surface of the pool?'¹¹

It was in the spring of 1961 when I saw for the first time the painting of Narcissus by Caravaggio. It was

11. Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting*, trans. by Cecil Grayson (London: Penguin Books, 2004), p. 61.

hanging in Palazzo Barberini which was within walking distance from where I lived during the four years I spent at the Academy of Rome. The awe I was struck with upon seeing it has never left me. It was and continues to be the perfect embodiment of Alberti's words. Since then my journeying in art has taken me in as many different directions

as the cities I lived in after Jerusalem. Today, having spent time focusing on transparency, symmetry, water reflection, and spatial ambiguity, when I look back at the most recent paintings, I realize I can see how in the process of what Alberti called 'embracing ... the surface of the pool' I lost sight of my face. All I can see is the work of my own hands.

