

Short Introduction in Islamic Prohibition of figurative Art

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The popular myth, that all pictures are forbidden in the Islam is actually a wide-spread and a not correct presumption. The problem has a pre-Islamic origin and is connected to certain questions of pre-Islamic worldviews (like Dynamism and Animism), but in particular the belief in Jinn (ghosts, demons) plays a decisive role. In the course of the time the faith in the strength of ambient things on us and also their influence on the world affairs (compared with Talismans and/or Amulettes) has never been given up. At the same time the revelation of the Quran confirmed the existence of the Jinn for which one believed that they have an inspiring (which concerns the art creation) role and that they even play a leading role for human beings.

Photography seen as fixed spacetime

The picture (image, figure) in the Islam was regarded as needless, which departs the believers from the true way, the way in search for the truth (i.e. God). The imitation of nature (the Mimesis) took place however in the Islamic art (especially in the figurative art) also the originally forbidden pictures, are concerned. Certain tries to specify the prohibition were done to differentiate representations of nature containing ruh (odem, ghost, soul) as forbidden and everything else as permitted. Finally but slowly the "Islamic world" accepted the global medium of photography and began to integrate photography (someone regarded photography as "adjustment of the shadow", thus not in the sense of the Mimesis separates as determined spacetime, in particular by light caused shadow, which makes possibly that the virtues of humans become descriptive and vulnerable), even to the point of digital pictures (and the internet).

Competition of God

The Islamic picture prohibition can be described as prohibition of all forms polytheism and this is the view to understand everything connected with it. The picture is a product of imagination and the rendition of nature, while nature is seen as imagination (although seen as a product of the soul) equally to God (neglecting few exceptions within history of these ideas). The God is creator of the world (only he has the power to clench spacetime atoms and to create the world for us the world in a way, that we experience now). Humans however, as its representative on earth (Halifa), may only transfer this creative activity (among other things like artistic activity for example) as long as not to be in competition with God. A picture is a direct product of people, and so a indirect product of God (everything is part of the all-comprehensive God's unity, in the sense of Tauhid). People take over the power of the picture in the moment of the creation (Asharit's theory of appropriation) and carry thus the responsibility for their deeds (the issue of free will and predestination are important within in this connection and cannot not be discussed completely now due to the special topic of this article, but nevertheless there are at least five different facts as far as the prohibition is concerned). This is the reason why humans are responsible for all (mis)deeds, including the modern "Idolatry" which one may call "materialism" today. The so-called Islamic picture prohibition resists itself exactly against these things and not against any practicable art. In this way should also digital pictures (and internet)

be understood. Some big TV-stations of the Arab world believe to act along the Islamic sense, one may ask note, that they do misunderstand the topic of picture prohibition in the Islam far the worst. News about blood and war are not only pure information but can also be seen as "steering the consciousness" completely in the sense of CNN and similar news-channels, like in the „Western World“.

Reading instead of looking

The "display-worthy" things in the Islam is not the transcendental God who is visually not able to be displayed (the doctrine of trinity defines Christian art and iconography; they are rejected, because of the reason, according to Quran, the Crucifixion has never took place) as well as the Prophet Mohammed (according Quran exactly like prophet Jesus, both "only" humans), due to the risk, that personal cults may occur, because the "display-worthy" things remain the miracle, Ayat (i.e. verse, symbol, miracle; words of the Quran are words from God). If one is familiar to the fact that the first revealing words of the Prophet Mohammed (given by angel Gabriel) were "Iqra", which can be translated as "read(speak)", then the importance of writing and learning within the Islam is apparently. A picture is to be "read" then to be seen because the true miracle can not be copied (because the copy is always worse than the archetype): the miracle was referred to the people as words (God's words in Quran concern only matters which have something to do with "display-worthy" things). The Islamic picture prohibition is expressed too strongly as formulation and should always be written including the term "so-called", because of the reason that the misunderstanding may occur that the prohibition is completely hostile towards pictures, arts, and concerning artistic activity; but in fact it remains a prohibition of polytheism.

Prohibition of pictures or prohibition of art?

Artistic expression does not tempt to worship tin gods, but expresses variety of creative unit, especially in the case of religion, generally seen, which does not be in conflict with the Islam. On the contrary it has something to do with the expression of the human variety, which could be compared with the "miracles" within the world of the animals, like the colours and/or form-accommodation of some animals to its environment. According to the Islam, these miracles within the world of animals are described as divine (God's fabulous creation); so why should the imaginativeness of a street artist, who combines Picasso's ideas with asphalt-paint-colours, judged in a different way? The so-called Islamic picture prohibition can not be seen as a kind of prohibition of art, but nevertheless such a tendency exists also within the Islamic society of today. This tendency changed itself in the meantime, mostly because of the technical progress and because of the reason that the modern way to illustrate nature (photography, film) is accepted and converted; today's "Islamic" art scene (e.g. Shirin Neshat) testifies. Art is seen also as a medium, which criticizes the society which can help the society to turn over to a more "Islamic way". Nevertheless the spirit of the picture prohibition idea did not miss its goal, so that's the reason why there, especially within sacral belongings, are no figurative illustrations, while the development of decorative elements (e.g. calligraphy, arabesque) rose due to the prohibition. Geometric and calligraphic elements are often used by many modern artists, who got new possibilities to spread and exchange this through modern media, like Internet and different digital formats throughout the world. The increasing acceptance of these views, mentioned above, within Islamic societies is not a product of the "modernization", which takes place due to time (and technological) development, but rather an index of the increasing understanding of Islamic views.

Artists and calligraphists

The Islamic artist should not be seen as "prisoner" in his ornament world, like a calligraphist, who is forced to create (draw) pictures based on letters. Rather this artistic ability is to be seen as masterful virtuosity to create a large spectrum of art out of few basics. For that it concerns more illustrations of personal philosophy of each Islamic believer, which shows the internal nature and which shows this existence and the other world after death in an apparently eternally repeated pattern.

The symbolism, which shows oneself, is less important than the actual message of revelation, which constitutes the actual challenge in artistic challenge of illustration for each Islamic artist. The abstract forms, which develop thereby, release a reaction, which should remind someone of starlit sky. The viewer's eyes jumps from one point to another and expects the sudden understanding of the pattern. Only this abstraction can express the impossibility to understand God's nature, which differs in each material dimensions and stands above this. Art in Islam is based on reproduction without the complete understanding of the core behind the thing, which represents the actual creative omnipotence. Although book painting had a strong influence on the artists, especially in the late phase of Islamic art, it was limited to few topics (miraj - journey to the sky, Mohammeds or later portraits of rulers, etc.), and even temporally (development of style, which are predetermined for a certain period of time), what cannot be stated similarly for the development of abstract illustrations (ornamental art, calligraphy). A couple of centuries ago, these artistic forms release a positive impulse of admiration as with today's view. This testifies that an art which can be defined as Islamic did not suffer losses as far as quality is concerned due to the picture prohibition. There exists the popular myth that the figurative and illustrative art within the Islam were only reproduction of foreign styles. Yes indeed, there is a special connection between this and pre-Islamic and foreign cultures, but nevertheless they show own phases of development in opposite to historic tendencies within ornamental art and/or Calligraphy.

Pictures/ imaginations seen by a „mental eye“

The so-called Islamic picture prohibition forged crucially the development of Islamic art in a positive and even in a negative way; at that point the intensity of these two tendencies do not matter, but rather how valuable they are as far as quality is concerned and how intense was the influence on the development of society. The topic of picture prohibition of Islam raises many questions: does it make sense to portray nature? Who is able to fix a sunrise? According to Islamic beliefs, the linguistic expression, i.e. the word, is more capable to characterize a sunrise than any kind of art even if this is not prohibited: „Soon We will show them Our Signs in the horizons and in themselves until becomes clear to them, that it (is) the truth. Is (it) not sufficient concerning your Lord, that He (is) over all Things a Witness?“ (Quran 41.53)

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This short Introduction is based on following books:

- Almir, Ibric: For a philosophy of aniconism in the islam, Vienna 2008, Lit-Verlag (ISBN: 978-3-7000-0785-2 , ISBN: 978-3-8258-1051-1)
- Almir, Ibric: Islamisches Bilderverbot vom Mittel- bis ins Digitalzeitalter, Münster 2006, (ISBN: 3-8258-9597-1 , Lit Verlag).
- Almir, Ibric: Das bilderverbot im Islam. Eine Einführung, Marburg 2004, (ISBN: 3-8288-8766-X , Tectum Verlag)

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