

PICTORIAL SPACE CONCEPT IN ISLAMIC ART

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ABSTRACT:

Since naturalism is not a pictorial priority in these paintings, which are essentially two-dimensional, the representation of space appeared too many as an irrelevant problem. Historians of Islamic art accepted too readily the idea that the prohibition of images in Islamic culture crucially determined the two-dimensionality of pictorial representations. The pictorial treatment of space in Islamic miniature painting is a subject that has largely remained undiscussed. While this observation has a historical base, the conclusions automatically derived from it (that a pictorial representation of space was not feasible and that whatever the Muslim painter did pertained to the surface and remained, therefore, decorative) are not tenable. Moreover, this idea only helps to explain why Muslim painters would stay within a two-dimensional pictorial system, but it is unable to explain how their two-dimensional system was constructed, and how it was developed as an alternative realm of pictorial representation. Although it remains outside the scope of this paper to discuss them, the 'orientalist' underpinnings of this reluctance to study the Islamic miniatures as an alternative pictorial system can be mentioned at this point.

KEYWORDS:

Pictorial Space, Painting, Design, Islamic Art

INTRODUCTION

A close reading of writings on Islamic painting reveals a quasi-unanimous assumption that pictorial coherence can only be achieved with linear perspective. It is necessary to distance ourselves from these assumptions and to examine more critically the question of pictorial space, if we wish to understand the pictorial qualities of Islamic painting.

The way we perceive pictorially represented space today is dominated by the visual logic of linear perspective, or in other words, by the close relation it has established between pictorial space and our visual perception. Space itself being nothing else but a void that surrounds the objects, its illusionistic representation depends on the pictorial replication of the precise geometrical relations of objects in reference to the viewer's eye, so that they can be identified with a direct experience and knowledge of spatial relations. To achieve this effect, linear perspective approximately replicates the human vision through a rigorous geometrical construction comparable to a central projection with the viewer's eye as its center of projection.

The resulting pictorial space is a geometrically continuous and measurable unit of the actual space and the objects contained in it. It is through its absolute dependence on the position of the viewer's eye that the perspectival pictorial space acquires an enclosing character and an illusionistic depth. The geometric vigour, the illusionistic efficiency, and the compositional coherence of representation all rely on the single viewpoint according to which a perspectival painting is conceived. Besides its practical necessity, the single viewpoint has a very important symbolic

implication: It is an absolute point of reference that establishes the vision of a unique viewer as a representational priority.

In Islamic miniatures objects depicted without reference to a single viewpoint cancel out the possibility of representing space as an illusion of depth, yet the intelligibility of pictorial space need not depend on that illusion. As Coomaras - wamy pointed out, Space (...) has to be taken as a primary datum of intelligence, and it is obvious that as soon as it became possible to make intelligible representations of objects, it must have been taken for granted by those who understood them that these were representations of objects existing in space [1].

Pictorial space

The notion of pictorial space as an illusionistic depth is intimately linked to a very particular understanding of the picture surface. In Western painting tradition from Renaissance onward until the revolution of Modern painting, the picture surface was conceived not as a positive entity but as a visually dissolved one, comparable to a 'transparent window'. Albert's definition of the picture surface as the 'intersection of the pyramid of the visual rays' not only explains its geometrical significance and its role in linear perspective construction, but also points out that in order to realize a perspectival pictorial space the picture surface disappears or becomes transparent.

An expression of the planar character of the picture surface, as found in Islamic painting, is obviously incompatible with the illusionistic representation of space, a convention that dominated Western painting until the turn of the century. If this convention of the Post-Renaissance painting is taken



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for granted by someone who studies Islamic art, it is normal that all the features that seem to emphasize or to confirm the flatness of the picture plane should be seen as preventing pictorial space from emerging. Yet pictorial space cannot be held identical with illusionistic space; some of the alternative approaches that can be found in Non-Western painting traditions offered a rich source of inspiration to the avant-gardes who revolutionized the Western painting in the early-twentieth century and defined the pictorial space in a much broader way [2].

Before discussing what kind of a pictorial space was realized in Islamic painting, one last point concerning another aspect of the represented space in the Renaissance painting needs to be noted. The illusion of coherently receding depth on a flat surface was successfully created only at some expense: In Renaissance painting, the infinite character of space is paradoxically confined within the spatial unit of the picture. Infinity, where all parallel lines are imagined to meet, corresponds to a precise point in the picture that is to the vanishing point, which was often dissimulated by the painters. All orthogonal in the picture plane converge toward that point and, hence, define the visual limits of the pictorial space. Since the precise location of the vanishing point on the picture plane is geometrically determined in reference to the viewer's location, this point becomes, so to say, the symmetrical counterpoint to the viewer's eye: The infinite space finds itself unified and contained within the gaze of a single viewer. In contrast to this paradox in Western painting, it can be argued that Islamic and Chinese painting achieve more directly the suggestion of an unlimited space. Because of the absence of a single vanishing point in their conceptions, the non-perspectival paintings of Islamic or Chinese art are capable to suggest more directly the infinite quality of space, even though their representation of space remains much less tangible. As a consequence, the relationship of the pictorial space with the picture surface is also entirely different. Despite the different concepts of space in these two painting traditions, the equivalence between the picture surface and the pictorial space is common to both of them. The representation of space is achieved within the limits of the picture surface, that is, within its two-dimensionality, and the pictorial space depends more on intellectual abstraction than on sensory illusion [3].

Wilfred H. Wells suggested that in Chinese painting, the picture plane did not have an optic existence except where it was appropriated and converted into surface by depicted objects; in other words, despite its solid material existence, the unpainted support (paper, silk, etc.) was not conceived by the Chinese artist in its entirety as a picture plane. Hence, where it was left untouched by paint, the support suggested the negative presence of space, and paint, in contrast, suggested the material existence of the objects.

In Islamic miniatures, in plain opposition to this practice observed in Chinese painting, the entire

support is painted, that is, appropriated and converted into a picture surface. The use of color applied in large patches, sometimes uniformly spread and sometimes interspersed with minute all over patterns, over large sections of the composition is not the consequence of a decorative approach to painting as it is often considered. Indeed, the valorisation of objects, figures, and various surfaces (which may stand for the ground, floor, walls, ceiling, or the sky) as painted surfaces suggests a particular kind of pictorial space in which, flattened and equalized in visual terms, solids and voids become pictorially homogenous. Even where the three-dimensionality of an object is expressed through an axonometric form, the equal treatment of line and colouring throughout the painting establishes a unified order. Neither the representation of solids, nor that of the voids dominates the pictorial composition, something which is masterfully exemplified by a late fifteenth-century miniature from the Herat School [4].

In Islamic miniatures this pictorial equivalence of solids and voids suggested by a common two-dimensionality and stressed through paint is furthermore strengthened by the avoidance of a unified viewpoint for the entire composition. One can always notice the presence of more than one viewpoint adopted to depict the different parts or elements of the composition. Depicted objects that cannot be unified in the sight of a single viewer cancel a unique perception of a depicted space; in other words, space cannot be derived from the order of objects seen at once, but it has to be explored pictorially. This can be achieved by shifting our gaze, to look at the objects depicted with respect to different viewpoints. The pictorially required shift of viewing direction, therefore, not only underlines the significance of the individual parts of the composition, but also suggests that these objects are seen from different angles in space. Thus, by its very structure depending on multiple viewpoints, the two-dimensional miniature painting represents space by implication of movement [5].

The representation of space through movement may sound paradoxical, given the somehow rigid or frozen poses in which figures are often drawn in miniatures. The movement we are speaking of is, however, not related to an illusionistic pictorial structure, but rather to a virtual one, and it is often sustained by the narrative composition. The particular arrangement of figures along a spiral curve, which Alexandre Papadopoulo (1976) discerned in a great number of miniatures and considered as an enhancement of the narrative (as it gradually leads our attention to the central figure of the story) is also a very suitable compositional structure for suggesting space through movement, that is, a space compatible with the two-dimensional character of the representation: The movement suggested by such a spiral arrangement is parallel to the picture plane and does not attempt to pierce it. This seems also to be the opinion of Erzen, who characterizes the pictorial space of miniatures as 'equivalent at all points in



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terms of experiential distance' and notes the two-dimensional conception of miniatures at the same time as their 'radial composition revolving around a center [4].

Some authors have identified a similar suggestion of virtual movement in pictorial space in axonometric views, especially in those representing buildings. Here also the objects invite the viewer's eye to move around the depicted object. However, while axonometric drawings suggest a more easily intelligible movement that follows a continuous path around the object, they still relate to a single, even though impersonal, or virtually non-existing viewpoint, which corresponds to a vanishing point sent back to an infinite distance. The miniatures, on the other hand, suggest a more complex and fragmented movement in pictorial space, as they incorporate multiple viewpoints.

Axonometric forms can also be encountered in Islamic miniatures. Yet this occasional use of axonometric drawing which reveals the three-dimensional aspect of an object, should not be seen as an incomplete attempt to create the illusion of depth. The use of an axonometric form is more likely to relate to a desire of clearly explaining a particular shape, such as the hexagonal pavilion or its three-sided bay window. Moreover, an axonometric form does neither suggest a privileged viewpoint, nor a precise vanishing point for the entire picture, and therefore, it can very well be accommodated within a miniature composition that already incorporates many other viewpoints. Even the isolated perspective views that we find in the early-seventeenth-century miniatures of the Ottoman painter Ahmet Nakşi can be attributed to the principle of multiple viewpoints. Although these perspective views seen through windows and gateways suggest an illusionistic depth and render Nakşi's composition somewhat eclectic and ambiguous, they remain isolated views and do not disturb the pictorial composition based on multiple viewpoints. If we consider the conception of pictorial space as tied to the picture surface in Islamic painting, we must note that this conception is most strikingly expressed by the coincidence of all depicted surfaces such as floors, walls, ceilings, and canopies with the picture plane itself. The spatiality of these surfaces is transformed into a flatness on which all other solids appear to be floating. Hence, the flat picture surface becomes an abstract equivalent of the actual space [5].

On the basis of such a pictorial treatment of space and objects, it might be appropriate to conclude that in Islamic painting, space is primarily conceived as defined by the surfaces that suggest its limits. Unlike the pictorial space of a perspectival picture, the pictorial space suggested in miniatures does not enclose or unite the objects, but rather remains indifferent to them. In other words, here the pictorial expression of space does not depend on the depiction of objects, as it is the case in a perspectival picture where the precise geometry of depicted objects constitutes the illusionistic space [6].

Seyyed H. Nasr's (2007) remarks on a concept of cosmic space, predominant in Islam, seem to offer a further elaboration on this observation. Nasr remarks that: Cosmic space is defined in relation to the inner surface of the outermost sphere rather than by any positive object such as the earth or the planets. Space is, as it were, carved out from the plenum of cosmic creation and is conceived with respect to a surface that surrounds it rather than an object which it surrounds (*Italics mine*). Nasr suggests that this conception of 'negative space', that is, a space determined not by the objects) it encloses but by the surfaces that surround it (them), also characterizes the designs of Islamic buildings, gardens, and cities. The significance of the surrounding surface in the conception of space may also explain why in Islamic miniatures the pictorial space is intimately linked to a picture surface stressed with paint and pattern rather than to a surface left blank, as in Chinese paintings. The conceptual link between space and its surrounding surfaces may then explain why pictorial space realized on a two-dimensional surface remains intelligible [7].

Being conceived as a stressed surface rather than a visually dissolved one, the Islamic pictorial space allows its viewers an intellectual viewing distance. We may gain an insight into how this pictorial space works visually and intellectually by looking at a very special example that brings the actual and the represented space together in an architectural composition. A ceramic tile panel, at the entrance to the bedroom pavilion of Murad III in the Topkapi Palace, bears the image of a garden seen through a two-bay arcade, in a nearly one-to-one scale, and proposes a pictorial space the meaning of which depended on its precise location in the architectural environment [8].

At the time of its construction, the royal pavilion, consisting of a domed hall and its ante-chamber, overlooked the Golden Horn and commanded one of the most attractive panoramas of Istanbul. The tile panel that concerns us must have been moved in mid-seventeenth century to its present location, on the wall of another pavilion that protrudes into the ante-chamber of Murad III's bedroom pavilion. This arcade is only a fragment, yet one can easily imagine that a larger arcade composition once covered either an interior wall of the ante-chamber or the exterior of its entrance facade. In any case, the arcade composition picks up its theme from an actual arcaded gallery that led to the entrance of the pavilion. As the pavilion itself, also this gallery enjoyed the same charming view of the cityscape and the palace gardens lying just below [9].

The depicted arcade segment and the imaginary garden seen through it share the same flatness. Despite the fact that the depicted arcade acts as a frame, the space seen through it is filled with fantastic floral compositions that stress the surface without suggesting any depth. Although this represented view can somehow be expanded by the viewer's imagination, it cannot be visually perceived as an



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expansion of the viewer's own space, as a perspectival view would be. Here the viewer can only be reminded of a spring garden, to which the royal pavilion itself is compared by various inscriptions it bears. The pictorial space in this representation, realized on a ceramic revetment on a magnified scale, is not different in its essence from that realized in miniatures. It is a pictorial space that does not depend on an illusion of depth to be intelligible. The efficiency of this two-dimensional pictorial space lies both in its imaginary and concrete qualities. By not suggesting spatial depth, which would have corresponded to an enclosed finite spatial unit, this representation opts for an infinitely expanding space of an imaginary garden, perhaps that of the Paradise, which nevertheless remains sensible and enjoyable thanks to the concreteness of its surface stressed by a powerful pattern [10].

RESULT

Production is the significant aspect of a socialist society's production technology. The main feature of industrial production, that generally is the subject of study, is its quantitative features despite the qualitative ones. And the most explicit exposition of this attitude is the priority given to the quantitative increase of production in most of the developing countries; probably with the just cause of trying to take the whole of the society to the level of the minimum standards of this age. But in most of the cases it is possible to see the negligence of qualities at this stage which later on becomes the sources of greater problems.

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