The writing that identifies the time of manufacture and the owner of the object is always clearly written, if not always literate. As a result, these ivories are almost the only certainly dated group illustrating the art of the princely object. Their themes of princely pleasure, partly stereotypical, partly unique, suggest that it was through objects of this sort, especially textiles, that themes were transmitted from one court to another. The variety of their stylistic and iconographic sources can be explained if we recall that the art of princes had continuous contacts with a wide range of older and alien traditions.

The second group of objects that can be associated with early Muslim courts consists of silver plates and ewers presumably made in Iran or in Central Asia (figs. 98, 99). The study of these objects, of which several hundreds exist, is very much complicated by considerable methodological problems and by the existence of contemporary forgeries. Without entering into the questions posed by any one of the works, it can be assumed that the techniques of making silver objects that were characteristic in Iran and Central Asia before Islam were continued without interruption. Secular and religious themes are found on these objects, especially hunting scenes and scenes showing partly clad females in a variety of activities; most of them pertain to princely life or can be so interpreted. At drinking bouts described by an early ninth-century poet objects with designs strikingly like those of known silver plates and ewers were used. Errors in details, misunderstandings of traditional Sasanian symbols, a freezing of certain formulas of representations, at times a lowering in quality, occur in some of these implements. These features can best be explained as illustrations of an epigonic artistic tradition, that is, as the continuation by a new culture of an older artistic vocabulary not because any one motif with all of its original implications was still significant but because the manufacture of such objects was important to the new culture. The great unsolved problem is that of separating pre-Islamic from Islamic objects. It is possible that purely art historical criteria are not precise enough to solve the problem and that other means have to be devised. In the meantime it is safer and simpler merely to conclude that one pre-Islamic technique was continued as part of the art of new princes until the tenth and eleventh centuries.

The preceding pages cannot claim to have covered all the monuments, even all the existing aspects of early Islamic courtly art. Too much in it is still problematic, unstudied in detail, all too often unexcavated or unpublished. A number of general conclusions, however, do emerge. For many reasons the patronage of princes was astounding for both its quantity and its variety. A great wealth, a nouveau riche spirit, simply the enormous size of the empire, all played a part. But more importantly, as newcomers who established themselves as different from their predecessors Muslim princes did not simply take over the princely settings of old. This was especially true of buildings, and for this reason so much of the early Islamic art of the court consists of architectural monuments. Furthermore, changes in the respective importance of various regions transformed provincial cities into capitals and olive plantations into royal estates. There were new needs for princely settings in hitherto unimportant areas.

In this art of princes there was almost nothing that could not have been accepted and understood by non-Muslims. Except for those instances in which one can suspect the appearance of a private whim or a private reference (a problem inherent within secular art everywhere), the functions, needs, buildings, and motifs of Islamic courtly art directly imitated or continued pre-Islamic princely traditions and habits. Even entire Islamic buildings or monuments could be, have been, and at times still are, considered as Byzantine or Sassanian, or even Egyptian Coptic. Mshatta, Khirbat al-Mafjar, Khirbat Minyah, Qasr al-Hayr were all thought first to be Roman or Byzantine, and even today with our more precise knowledge much doubt exists as to whether the ruins at Anjar in Lebanon are Umayyad or earlier. The situation regarding silver objects is particularly confused, and regarding late-eleventh-century ivory objects without Arabic inscriptions uncertainty exists as to whether they are of Muslim or Christian manufacture. Scholarship alone is not to be blamed for this state of affairs. For in a much wider sense the art of princes in the early Middle Ages—and perhaps at all times—was not tied to any single culture but belonged to a fraternity of princes and transcended cultural barriers, at least in the vast world from the Atlantic to India and the Pamirs which owed so much to Hellenistic civilization. Borrowings from one political entity or an-
other, or from the past of any one of these entities, were as frequent as they were normal.

Does this mean that there was no Muslim flavor to any of the monuments we have discussed? Not at all. Rather, the kind of flavor or quality that Muslim princes introduced was not structurally different from what a Byzantine emperor would have introduced. At the level of formal and iconographic vocabularies, the circumstances of the Muslim conquest brought together motifs from a far larger set of sources than were available to a Byzantine prince or earlier to a Sassanian emperor, not to speak of a Visigothic king. In fact, this variety was an integral part of a Muslim princely art, a willful piece of showmanship. By having been assimilated into princely art, these motifs became less important for their subjects or for their styles than for their association with a life of wealth. Thus a second level of Muslim courtly art is this level of luxury, which can be explained as the result of a new social and ethnic group coming to tremendous power. A third, cultural, level of a Muslim art of princes can be defined. Its very ambivalence and lack of iconographic precision made it possible for Islamic princely themes to be copied on such diverse monuments as the tenth-century Armenian church at Akhtamar or the twelfth-century Capella Palatina in Sicily. The motifs represented luxury, not Islam, and in this sense the historical and sociological circumstances of early Islamic times transformed one aspect of Islamic art into a sort of luxurious consciousness for a much wider world than Islam itself.

The art of the mosque was far more conservative and tended much more consistently to use local architectural and even decorative forms than did the art of princes, but its impact was limited because its functions were exclusive and culturally restricted. However close to antique and Christian art the mosques of Cordoba and Damascus may be in the forms they used, their underlying structure was totally alien to that of a Christian building, whereas an Iranian or Central Asian decorative design or animal could appear in Spain and in western or Byzantine Christianity because it was structurally a sign of luxury and not necessarily an Iranian motif. It was exotic and not Islamic. In art historical terms what was created was a princely mode, that is a series of forms more important by the associations they evoked than by their visual characteristics.

B. The Art of the City

It is part of the extraordinary wealth of early Islamic secular art that, besides an art of the court, one can identify a wholly different artistic impetus, in many ways a far more original one. As a hypothesis at least, we may call it the art of the city. Much has already been said about the Muslim city. The mosque’s immensely urban character and its strong physical ties with the city were pointed out. The palace and its administrative extension appeared at times within the city’s compounds. In explaining the growth of forms like the minaret, the point was made that two major types of cities occurred in the Muslim world, older cities with a predominantly non-Muslim population and new cities originally limited to Muslims. Finally, in the new Muslim cities like Kufah or Basrah grew what has been called a Muslim moralism, that is, an ethic and at times a metaphysic that made it possible for a culture without clergy to maintain its identity between the princely circle and the large numbers of alien non-Muslims. From this particular world would come the writers, judges, and merchants of the Muslim empire and, whatever internal sectarian or other struggles existed within the cities, it is perhaps legitimate to hypothesize that, during the first centuries of Islam, more characteristic elements united than separated them.

The first question to raise is whether the Muslim urban order as it was created in the early Middle Ages took on an original physical form, and the answer has to be mostly in the negative. In the same sense that there was no purely Islamic palace type, there was no Islamic city form. Each area taken over by Muslims had had its own regional urban development and had created its own formal answers to whatever physical needs the region might have had: fortifications when the area was near nomadic marauders, water storage and distribution when its rainfall was insufficient, a balance between agricultural suburbs and manufacturing or trading city cores depending on the ecological potential of the land. There was little that Islam, especially at the beginning, could do to alter the nature of the land, and it is particularly unfortunate that areas like the Jazirah or Morocco where we know that Islam modified local economies are still archaeologically so badly known. Similarly, it is not
yet possible to describe adequately the physical appearance of the
large urban entities of southern Iraq, even though their social, cul-
tural, and economic histories have recently been studied. In addi-
tion to natural local conditions, each area was affected by its past.
Central Asian cities maintained the balance between a citadel and
a city that had characterized the earlier forms, and in Syria or Pal-
estine Muslims almost automatically built porticoed units for every
function they introduced or developed, as had been the pre-Islamic
practice. It does not seem that the introduction of the mosque as
such altered, at least initially, the forms used in Muslim cities, and
it is not an accident that Qasr al-Hayr East (fig. 102) with its fairly
well preserved mosque was considered for a long time to be a Ro-
man fort or city.

If we can then assume a basic continuity in the technical and
formal structure of the city according to pre-Islamic patterns that
varied from region to region, we may also be able to identify novel-
ties or changes in emphasis that could be considered Islamic. Some
features were the results of an alteration in the ecological balance.
Thus the urbanization of southern Iraq or the creation of the huge
Cairene metropolis introduced new foci in these two regions; but
the present state of our knowledge does not yet make it possible to
identify the formal results of these changes. This is an area in
which the completion and publication of the excavations being car-
rried out at Fustat, at Balis on the Euphrates, and at Qasr al-Hayr
East should bring information of such importance that any hypo-
thesis at this stage is premature. Only two points can be considered
established. One, which seems to be true of the whole Muslim
world, consists in the great development of a monumental archi-
tecture of trade. Caravansaries, bridges, market places, shopping
areas, all became functions for which private and public funds were
spent lavishly. Both Qasr al-Hayrs (fig. 103) were provided with
large khans for travelers and goods and it is interesting to note that,
although their monumentality varies, their form—a square with
halls around a porticoed courtyard—is closely related to the form
we have identified for ribats and for living units in country estates.
In Baghdad (fig. 10) the organization of the town itself took into
consideration the need for shops and we have here one of the earli-
est existing examples of the long saq, or merchants' street, so typi-
cal of medieval Islam. Early examples of an important commercial
architecture are lacking elsewhere, but this may simply be the re-
sult of an insufficient exploration of remaining monuments.

The other point is that the Muslim frontier areas—North Africa,
Cilicia, Central Asia—seem to have been particularly creative in the
formation of new cities. Many of these began as forts, at times as
ribats, and we may have here the formation of a uniquely Islamic
type of urban growth, in the way that a missionary military center
acquires living and trading accretions. Whether such unique con-
ditions led to equally unique forms is a question that will only be
answered by excavations.

Altogether then we are still very inadequately informed about
the architectural forms and monuments of the early Islamic city.
The task of searching for such literary and archaeological docu-
ments as may exist is likely to have important results for the his-
tory of art. For instance, the excavations carried out at Nishapur by
the Metropolitan Museum have brought to light a considerable
number of ninth- and tenth-century stuccoes and paintings, whose
architectural setting is not always very clear but whose quality of
design illustrates that a brilliance of wall coverings was not the
privilege only of courtly art. Among these a unique group consists
of small curved stucco fragments with painted designs (fig. 106).
They appear to have been originally assembled together in order
to decorate the sides or corners of a room. We have here the first
example of a kind of decorative design known as the muqarnas,
consisting of a three-dimensional composition made up of a vari-
able number of smaller units. From the latter part of the tenth cen-
tury onward this sort of composition became tied to architecture,
although its origins are apparently found in an ornamental devel-
opment of a private city architecture in northeastern Iran. At the
opposite end of the Muslim world, a similar kind of motif that led
to the western type of muqarnas was discovered during the excava-
tions of the Qal’ah of the Beni Hammad in Algeria. Thus there was
a major impetus for artistic creativity in many, if not all, early Is-
lamic cities. Whether this was a consistently original creativity or
a derivative one imitating court art is still an unsolved question, at
least for architectural decoration.

Another example of the sort of art historical information that can
be provided by the investigation of city archaeology can be illus-
trated by the excavation of Qasr al-Hayr East (fig. 103), a minor
settlement in a rather forsaken part of the world which has the distinction of having survived from the eighth to the early fourteenth century. Its monuments and material culture can be considered average for their time, the norm against which more important but less often preserved masterpieces can be evaluated. Its stucco fragments, ceramic series, and planning helps to solve problems of far wider import than its own area. Similarly, the excavations carried out in Sedrata, an oasis in southern Algeria, have brought to light documents about the history and spread of early Islamic ornament whose importance could not be guessed from the location of the site.

But these considerations still have to be hypothetical, since so much about the architecture of the city remains to be studied. Let us turn instead to a series of monuments about whose existence and meaning we can feel more secure. One of the most extraordinary, and long recognized, achievements of early Islamic art was the sudden appearance of a new art of ceramics. Pottery, of course, is not new, but until the formation of the Muslim world it mostly served a purely utilitarian function. It was transformed into a work of art through the appearance of one new technique, luster painting, which gives a metallic shine to an object, and through the discovery or rediscovery of many ways to keep different colors on objects. Interesting though the new techniques are, the most important point is that the prosaic and ubiquitous ceramic object suddenly became the vehicle for an elaborate decoration. Of course this development did not affect all ceramic types, many of which continued to have only modest uses and designs. It seems to have been most common on small jugs and especially on plates, thus suggesting that the new techniques were developed on those shapes with the largest flat or slightly curved surfaces. Thus was established one of the most crucial and typical features of almost all Islamic ceramics from then onward, one that distinguishes them from Chinese or Greek ceramics: the overwhelming preeminence of surface decoration over shape.

The area or areas in which these novelties appeared are fairly clear. The main ones were Iraq and northeastern Iran, with lusterware characteristic of Iraq only before the tenth century and in such regions, Egypt for instance, as were under direct Iraqi influence. While the uniqueness of northeastern Iranian ceramics in early Isl-
metal, an awareness of China, a lack of profound knowledge of princely themes, and at times (but more rarely) an apparent misadaptation of the desired themes to the object's shape.

The great importance of writing in the decoration is most characteristic of the eastern Iranian examples (figs. 113, 114). This writing is quite remarkable, for those inscriptions that can be read tend to consist either in a series of good wishes for an anonymous owner or in sayings and proverbs. A sample of the latter includes: "He who is content with his own opinion runs into danger," "Patience in learning is first bitter to the taste but then its end is sweet than honey," "Generosity is one of the qualities of good men." Most of the aphorisms reflect the morality of hard work as a source of success as well as the virtues of learning and patience. Thus we can add to our model, at least for Iran, an idea of the mentality of the makers or users of the objects.

Also more Iranian than Iraqi, although lines here are less clearly drawn, is the existence of a bestiary on the new ceramics. No conclusions about it can be reached until a number of monographic studies test their validity, but it would seem that birds, mythical animals, and horned animals predominate, with the more common animals of the land appearing only occasionally in Iraq and later in Egypt. Many of the animals are derived from traditional Iranian themes for which examples can be gathered from prehistoric times onward. Often they signified good wishes and well-being in a manner similar to the inscriptions. What is important, however, is that these animal themes seem to reflect a local folk culture, a fact that could also be developed for slightly later Egyptian series. They are only rarely the animals of princely hunting scenes or of princely textiles.

The last feature of the ceramics I should like to emphasize is the great variety of their styles. Thus handsomely pure and readable inscriptions (fig. 114) are found together with highly ornamental and baroque ones or with totally illegible imitations of writing. Animals or trees (fig. 110) can be the main and single subject of decoration, clearly drawn against some background, or they can be multiplied into complex compositions and merge with the background in a way that makes main subject and background inseparable. This tendency obviously fits in with the general ambiguity of meaning we have detected so often in very different aspects of Islamic art.

Then there are enormous variations of quality between stunningly impressive and thought-out compositions (fig. 112) and rather haphazardly drawn imitations. It is true that all these differences may simply indicate stylistic evolution, that there is an internal rhythm of change in the various decorative types which could be studied, either arbitrarily as a logical proposition or archaeologically through careful stratigraphy. Yet the few attempts made in these directions have not yet been successful and, without denying the possibility, indeed the likelihood, of an evolution, it is preferable to interpret these variations as contemporary expressions of a number of purposes and tastes. Since almost all of them can be defined as qualitative variations or as modifications of otherwise known types, it seems justifiable to conclude that a wide contemporary market existed for these ceramic objects and that one of the criteria by which they were defined was that of cost.

These four features—derivation, moralizing inscriptions, folk-type animals, great qualitative variations possibly connected with market needs—delineate a patronage which is not that of the court but rather of the city. And I would like to suggest that the growth of ceramics as a major art form is the result of the appearance of a new patronage, the mercantile middle class of the Muslim world. It is indeed in Iraq and eastern Iran that its major centers are found and that the most striking urban development of early Islam took place. It is a primarily Muslim world (although evidence exists that Christians participated in the sponsorship of the new themes), and by rejecting the international themes of princely art and its luxury it did express something of the moralism of early Islam. It was, of course, affected by the art of princes as it did at times seek to imitate those techniques if not those subjects. Aesthetically its most superb creations are the inscribed plates of eastern Iran, and thus once again writing appears as a peculiarly Islamic vehicle, although here without a strictly religious connotation. But the greatest significance of this new class of patron lies in two further facts. One is that the importance of ceramics remained typical of the whole Muslim world for several centuries. It rather made sense for a middle class of merchants and artisans to raise to a fine art the humble work of the potter, as they would do for the glass maker, the bronze maker, and all the workers in techniques not controlled by princes. This development was in fact suggested by one of the Koranic pas-
sages about the arts that was discussed in a previous chapter. The other fact is that the art created by and for the city's bourgeoisie is far more original to Islam than the art of the princes.

One last point about the art of the city is that, while its ceramics are best known and most easily identifiable as new and original, they were probably not the only new technique to have developed "city characteristics" of their own. Certainly there was an art of city textiles, and perhaps enough examples are preserved from Iraq and Egypt to identify various social levels in this most Islamic of crafts. More problematic are the few bronzes remaining from the first centuries of Islam (fig. 117). Are they imitations of royal gold or silver objects made for the court? Are they also middle-class reflections of a higher princely art? Too few have remained to draw any clear conclusions, but the question may just be a matter of more thorough investigation.

Two major conclusions can be drawn from this long chapter on the enormous amount of preserved documents about the secular inspiration of early Islamic art. First, even though too arbitrary a line may have been drawn between the art of the court and the art of the city, and even though there were throughout the first centuries of Islam constant contacts between them, it seems to me that these two entities, the prince and the bourgeoisie, can appropriately be considered the main foci around which early Islamic artistic creativity developed. The functions and forms of the first source of inspiration were not structurally or essentially different from similar ones elsewhere in the Mediterranean and Near East except insofar as the concrete historical circumstances of Islam led to new and different combinations of them. My suggestion is, however, that these combinations did not result in a new art, only a different version of an art which could be and was universally acceptable. The art of the city was different and, especially in the instance of ceramics, it created something quite original. But then the forms it took tended to vary much more from one region to the other and to appear later than the forms created by the court. All of this makes theoretical sense, for the city with its large population became automatically inward-oriented, locally tied to regional sources, even though the rhythm and scale of these differentiations are difficult to determine and probably varied from place to place. Altogether,

early Islam is the first medieval illustration of the phenomenon of an art of the bourgeoisie in contrast to the art of the church or of an aristocracy.

Second, objects were important in both royal art and the art of the city. Next to palaces, they appear in texts as the most frequently mentioned item defining wealth, and a variety of controls existed over their manufacture. Through objects themes and motifs traveled from place to place and, even though least known, textiles played a particularly important part in this process of transmission. The more difficult question is whether this significance of the industrial arts was peculiar to Islam. As far as the secular arts are concerned, it probably was, for quite rapidly—certainly by the tenth century—almost all surrounding cultures became strongly influenced by the forms and the subjects of the new tradition in their midst.
7. Early Islamic Decoration: The Idea of an Arabesque

Throughout the preceding chapters we have encountered a rather unusual problem, which can be defined by a few examples. With the Dome of the Rock and the mosque of Damascus, it was pointed out that a symbolic or iconographic meaning could be given to some of the motifs found on the mosaics covering most of their walls. But these meanings were soon lost, they did not "take" within the active living tradition of Islamic art. Furthermore, without denying an original symbolic significance, the impression can hardly be avoided that the main function of the decoration in both instances was to provide the monument with the glitter of handsome and expensive mosaics. Although the façade of Mshatta carefully avoids the representation of living beings on the side of the building that forms the back of the mosque, still it cannot easily be concluded that the decoration as a whole has an iconographic significance. The absence of animals does not point to the presence of a mosque, it merely reflects its existence. The façade of Qasr al-Hayr West (fig. 65) and the bath hall of Khirbat al-Mafjar contain a large number of motifs for which an iconographic significance has been proposed, yet they are all ineffectually mixed with motifs that do not seem to lend themselves to such definition. One wonders whether the latter had an iconographic significance that is no longer understood or whether it is an error to interpret too precisely the meaning of the former. Then, on a different level, as arches in mosques, squinches, or epigraphic themes on ceramics were discussed, it was noted that almost every one of these elements occurs both in a simple and straightforward way with a totally visible function or meaning, and also in modifications, complicated at times beyond recognition into meaninglessness, at least from the point of view of the element's original definition. It is particularly notable that this development or parallelism of contradictory kinds of meanings occurs even in the instance of writing, which appeared until then as the one iconographically consistent feature of early Islamic art.

These are only a few of the examples seen so far of a phenomenon that is particularly striking when it is compared either to most of medieval Christian art or to traditional imperial art. In the latter, whatever unique formal or aesthetic values any one monument may have, one can usually recognize a precise subject matter, an iconographic language independent of any one work of art. Even if, as in the case of Romanesque capitals, the language is not always well understood, iconographic legibility and meaning are presumed. The historian then searches for possible meanings and, in a larger sense, seeks to explain the ways in which independent meanings are translated into forms and to evaluate the effectiveness of these translations. This procedure is valid, for it is demonstrable that the main function of the work of art was to transmit the message of its iconographic component and, in the case of a building, to make its function or cluster of functions immediately visible. How does the Islamic phenomenon differ? And what does its uniqueness imply? On the visual level the difference can be defined as a modification in the signifying value of forms; this is easiest to observe in architectural decoration, where the majority of themes do not have a meaning independent of the monument itself. Although they have an independent style in the sense that motifs of one time or one area share common characteristics whether in stucco or in metalwork, they do not seem to have an intellectual or cultural content, and their function is simply that of beautification, of endowing the monument on which they are found with visual pleasure.

I should like to call this kind of theme ornamental, reserving the term decorative for all the themes—regardless of iconographic meanings—that are applied to the simple shape of a building or an object. Ornament has always existed. The Ara Pacis in Rome, Hagia Sophia, or any classical capital contain any number of motifs, usually vegetal, which are essentially redundant in the sense given to the word by linguists and communications engineers. Their presence does not affect or modify the sense of the monument on which they are found, but their absence is very much detrimental to its being appreciated and perceived. One could argue that, as Islam imposed upon itself a number of limitations on the iconographically significant, it simply concentrated its energies on the ornamental. The redundant became the main subject of an artistic tradition and, as the tradition grew and developed, its every new motif, even inscriptions, was ornamentalized. The task of the historian, then, is to identify the forms involved, describe their evolution, and explain their origins and aesthetic value on any one monument. This epistemological procedure, which has been followed in a small number
of studies, has one very interesting virtue, that of concentrating on the work of art, for the value of an ornament is far more intimately tied to its placement than to its existence as a schematic design in a manual of ornaments.

The definition of an ornamental theme or an ornamental value in early Islamic art is not the only pertinent problem derived from our previous observations. On a number of occasions another value has come to light, that of ambiguity or ambivalence, whereby a given feature lends itself to two simultaneous and partly contradictory interpretations, a precisely iconographic one and an ornamental one. Such is the case in some of Khirbat al-Mafjar’s sculptures (fig. 85) as well as on Spanish ivories (fig. 94). The question is whether this conclusion results from the original creator’s will or from insufficiently developed criteria of interpretation. If the first, we encounter a very interesting type of artistic creativity in which the primary burden of interpreting and enjoying a monument lies in the mood or need of the beholder. It would be a remarkably contemporary aesthetic procedure, and an explanation ought to be provided for it.

The purpose of this chapter is to investigate in greater detail than has been possible so far some of the questions posed by these observations. First, a survey of a few of the more outstanding monuments can lead to conclusions about the precise character and evolution of ornament. A second objective is to find out whether there are ways of defining an ornamental style, or perhaps an ornamental mode, for, if it is true that the artistic energies of early Islam tended to ornamentalize whatever they touched, the underlying attitude is independent of a given motif and thus may more appropriately be called a mode. Yet there is something troublesome in limiting ourselves to these two objectives. By stating that the Muslim world, for whatever reasons, diverted its energies into ornament, we are actually making a highly debatable assumption that the dichotomy between the iconographically meaningful and the ornamental reflects two entirely independent artistic purposes and visual experiences. In reality, we must ask whether some meaning cannot be given to those forms of early Islamic art that appear ornamental only in contrast to the art of other traditions. Alternately, we may have to conclude that the Muslim world simply rejected visual forms as major expressions of its culture, or that it discovered some totally new ways of contemplating and then of making works of art.

The tremendous accumulation of archaeological information over the past fifty years has made the task of discussing ornament particularly difficult, for the investigator is faced with irreconcilable methodological choices. He can operate chronologically, starting with the Dome of the Rock, and draw up an evolutionary curve until such time and place as seems to satisfy or exhaust him. He can choose one or more motifs and treat their appearance in a variety of monuments. He can emphasize a technique or arbitrarily select a small number of monuments and base his conclusions on these alone. Any one of these choices is legitimate and necessary. All of them, however, require detailed discussions which run the risk of diluting our purpose of establishing hypotheses for further work. Therefore, after three general remarks, a small group of examples will be used to introduce a few conclusions and interpretations.

The first preliminary remark concerns the regions and time spans which are represented and which illustrate an important variable in any consideration of the problem of ornament. Starting with the Dome of the Rock in 691 and ending with Mshatta around 740 or 745, the western half of the Fertile Crescent contains the single largest number of pertinent monuments. Only there can a style of ornament eventually be defined. But almost nothing is known about Syrian ornament between 750 and the twelfth century. Although recent discoveries at Qasr al-Hayr East and Raqqah—when they are published and studied—may provide some answer to the later evolution of Syrian styles, for the time being Syrian Umayyad art stands alone, and it is far more difficult to assume continuity or evolution in ornament than in mosques or palaces, or to relate ornamental forms to actual uses or actual taste, for contemporary judgments about ornament are lacking. Then, a ninth-century style or group of styles can be identified in Iraq, both in architectural ornament and in ceramics, largely through the Samarra finds. This style, or parts of it, has been shown to have had a fairly wide influence, since one of its most original components, the so-called beveled style (to be discussed), occurs from Morocco to Central Asia. Most of the available examples are, however, incidental details except in Egypt where both archaeological and historical sources con-
firm a major Iraqi influence in the late ninth century. Egypt, however, has preserved major series of wood carvings which, in part, reflect local traditions as well. A third early Islamic group comes from Spain, where the mosque of Cordoba and Madinah al-Zahra have preserved large numbers of documents, mostly from the tenth century. For a variety of reasons architectural decoration in Spain has archaizing tendencies and is stylistically closer to Umayyad models in Syria or to early Byzantine art than to Iraqi Abbasid art, whereas the ivories exhibit much more stylistic originality. From eastern Iran we possess mainly large ceramic series; architectural remains like those of Nishapur are fragmentary, although the recently published Abbasid mosque at Balkh, the unclearly dated but extremely wealthy Afrasiyab stuccoes, and especially the Samanid mausoleum at Bukhara are major masterpieces of ornament. The tenth-century mosque at Nayin is the only major monument from western Iran. This rapid enumeration clearly indicates, once again, that the information we possess is very much weighted toward Syria and the eighth century. But a more important point is that any history of ornamental forms has more components than chronological ones. The date of any ornament may be secondary to its actual meaning. For instance, the religious and social setting of Sedrata in southern Algeria makes the conclusions to be derived from its ornament of little importance for Algeria or for the tenth century but of much significance for Syria in the eighth and for Iraq, because the heterodox settlers of Sedrata lived in a closed world that had first been inspired by early Iraqi and Syrian movements.

A second variable in our considerations are the many techniques represented: stuccoes, stone, mosaics, ceramics, woodwork, ivories, and occasionally metalwork (mostly bronze) or glass. Although there is some point in studying each technique’s nature and history separately, two features justify a consideration of ornament as ornament regardless of technique. One is the demonstrably numerous attempts by early Islam to transfer effects from one technique to the other. Some of these attempts are self-conscious, as in mosaics from Khirbat Minyah (fig. 78) and Khirbat al-Mafjar where rugs are indicated by remaining tassels and in one instance by the apparent indication of a weaving technique. Other transfers are less obvious. But it can be argued that a continuous series of Iranian *semnusor* or dog-headed mythical animals among the paintings of

Khirbat al-Mafjar copy a Persian textile, while a group of stucco busts set in interlaced roundels (figs. 85, 86) can be interpreted as the transformation into sculpture of a textile design known in Coptic art and elsewhere. In a general way much of the decoration from the rich palaces of Syria and Palestine seems to have been derived from small objects magnified in a manner reminiscent of later Romanesque art.

Although it has been shown that the conclusions to be derived from Umayyad palaces may be invalidated by the monuments’ private functions and unique locations, the far more abundant but less rich ornament from Samarra confirms the constant existence of such transfers from one technique to the other. Its stylistically most original group—stuccoes, about which more will be said later—is usually considered to have been taken over from a Central Asian tradition of work in metal and wood. It is possible that its sources were even quite precisely a Turkic art known as early as in the Altai finds from the first centuries before our era. This specifically Turkic impact has not been demonstrated convincingly enough and poses too many unsolved chronological, historical, and ethnic questions to be more than a hypothesis, but the assumption of metalwork as an inspiration for the stuccoes of Samarra is acceptable enough. Matters are more complicated when one turns to the industrial arts, but it has been shown that some of the technical innovations of ceramics were influenced by metalwork and luster occurs both on pottery and on glass. The possibility or likelihood of influences from other media on northeastern ceramics is less clearly demonstrated. But this is perhaps because they have not yet been sufficiently studied, for in later Islamic industrial arts such transfers became common.

The second feature of early Islamic art that justifies the study of ornament regardless of technique is the novel and extraordinary importance of stucco. Its utilization as a technique of architectural decoration is not new. From Parthian times onward it was one of the most characteristic techniques of Iranian art, as it was used to cover up the rather unassuming rubble masonry of most of Iran and of Central Asia. Sometimes it was painted but most often it was carved or molded into a variety of designs. Stucco was known in the Mediterranean as well, but its main uses seem to have been the secondary ones of repairs or rapid completions of unfinished
works, and there is in particular very little stucco sculpture of any quality. One of the main consequences of the new balance between regions introduced by Islam was the sudden and rapid spread of stucco from Iran and Iraq all over the Muslim world. Large new building programs required rapid means of construction and decoration; the total conquest of the Iranian world put at the disposal of Muslim princes both an Iranian taste and masses of artisans trained in Iranian techniques. But the primary importance of stucco lay in some of its properties. Its cheapness made it a technique accessible to all, and it offers an interesting parallel to ceramics in that it could provide certain desired effects at any social level. Its flexibility allowed it to be used for a life-size sculpture in the round or for a minor repair to a broken capital. It lent itself to color. There was almost no end to the ways in which it could be used and transformed. The point here is not merely stucco’s versatility, but also that it could be used both to introduce and try out newly imported designs and also to continue local themes and motifs. Thus throughout almost the entire history of Islamic art monuments with stucco decoration appear as museums of forms. A third, more paradoxical, property of stucco is that it was both the freest and the most dependent technique of architectural decoration. On the one hand it was independent of the architectural units on which it was put; it could be used for whatever purpose a patron or an artist may have wanted. But on the other it was therefore also very dependent, for it hardly ever occurred without architectural support. It was a handmaiden of architecture whose forms could be quite free of architecture and could cover up entirely all parts of a building, thus modifying its architectonic qualities and the visible features of its construction.

Stucco, then, was a technique of surface decoration that transformed a building cheaply and flexibly (as opposed to mosaics, for instance). But almost every one of the innovative techniques of early Islamic art were those of surface effects: luster painting, opaque glazes, fixation of colors on pottery. We may be justified in concluding that the new culture, quite consciously and on several different technical levels, sought to emphasize surface over shape and gave itself the means to be as free as possible of an object’s or monument’s physical properties. It was—or at least could become—an art of illusion, which could make things look different from what they were. One may wonder why the culture’s energies were pushed so much in these directions, and I will return to some aspects of this problem further on.

Our third preliminary consideration pertains to the motifs used in early Islamic ornament. A cursory survey of the mass of remains reveals an unbelievable number and variety of motifs for which an iconographic meaning cannot yet be proposed. This impression is particularly strong as one looks at the Umayyad monuments of Syria or at the Spanish ones, where in addition to the new creation of ornaments many older ones were reused and imitated or repaired. The architectural ornament of ninth-century Iraq appears less varied, but then Iraqi ceramics do provide a rather extensive ornamental vocabulary, as do northeastern Iranian ceramics. Architectural ornament in Iran is remarkable for its variety, and almost every discovery brings to light a new group of designs and styles. More than any other series of monuments or themes discussed so far, ornament depends on an almost infinite number of variables, many of which are independent of the motifs themselves, for every new patron or purpose may introduce a new taste or a new idea. Social, psychological, ethnic, religious, economic functions are all involved in the explanation of a given ornamental design.

Despite the overwhelming variety of motifs, it is possible to organize them according to broad categories. Since I shall return in greater detail to the syntax of this ornament, I should first like to limit myself to a consideration of the themes themselves, that is, of such individual units as can be separated from their context and used in a list of designs. With a major exception in Samarra that will be explained later, almost all the available fragments can be divided into three groups. The first and largest consists of vegetal elements. While palmettes, half-palmettes, grape leaves and bunches, and rosettes predominate, almost every motif of vegetal origin found in classical, early Byzantine, Sassanian, Central Asian, and possible Indian ornament can be found at least once in Islamic art as well. Moreover, if we limit ourselves to a fairly narrow typological definition of a motif, it does not seem that a single new design was invented in early Islamic times. What did change enormously was the geographical distribution of ornament. There occurred a massive invasion of vegetal themes of eastern, especially
Sassanian, origin into the Mediterranean, even as far as Spain, but there did not occur a similar movement of Mediterranean themes eastward, except in isolated instances. This phenomenon is more puzzling than it seems, for, even if one grants the importance taken quite rapidly by Iranian leaders and tastes in early Islamic art, architecture for instance does not exhibit the same tendency.

The second group of motifs consists of designs that can only be defined as geometric. These can be merely frames for other kinds of design or they can be the whole design, as commonly found in mosaics or windows. Two very tentative hypotheses can be proposed for these geometric themes. One is that, just as in the case of vegetal ornament, almost all identifiable types of design are found in pre-Islamic art and that the elaborate geometry of the stuccoes of Khirbat al-Mafjar and Qasr al-Hayr West is a translation into a new medium of fairly common mosaic motifs. The other is that in almost all instances the main characteristic of the geometric design is a tension between a complete and a broken unit. In other words, whether he created a pattern based on intersecting straight lines, on circles, or on combinations of circles and straight lines, the most artful creator tended to avoid making the unit or units with which he was working totally visible and explicit. He often broke them off suddenly or combined neighboring motifs in some new fashion. While operating primarily only with a ruler and compass, he sought as much as possible to avoid the rigidity of a purely geometric composition and at times succeeded quite spectacularly, as in some of the mosaics at Khirbat al-Mafjar or in the carved marbles of Cordoba.

The third group of motifs is a miscellaneous category which, after further study, may be defined more exactly or incorporated into either one of the first two. But there are all sorts of motifs such as hatchings or dots in ceramics, or certain border designs on the Khirbat al-Mafjar stuccoes, for which no clear category can be provided for the time being. On manuscript illuminations and on bronzes there appears the motif of an arcade which may be merely ornamental but which may also have a clear iconographic meaning, as it did on the canon tables of Christian art. The same uncertainty of meaning surrounds the animals and occasional human beings which, in whole or in part, appear on some designs.

A proper understanding of Islamic ornament cannot be reached without detailed studies of the regional, social, and temporal variations of techniques of individual motifs. For the purposes of the chapter, the discussion is limited to architectural decoration, for it provides the most examples. A brief description of a few characteristic monuments is followed by a broader interpretation.

Let us consider first two stucco fragments from Qasr al-Hayr West (fig. 118) and from Khirbat al-Mafjar (fig. 119). The former is a single rectangular panel found on one of the towers of the façade. It is part of a series of panels over a band of lively acanthus leaves. A group of diagonally arranged double lines filled with heart-shaped leaves divides the field into regular diamonds that are then filled either with centrally composed rosettes or with artificial floral units arranged around a single vertical axis. It is not known how many different units there were nor how they were arranged, for the panel has been reconstructed from a myriad of small fragments. The Khirbat al-Mafjar example consists of a similar panel divided into rows of quadrilobed units separated by circular ones; the interstices are each filled with a single half-palmette. The circular units contain centrally composed rosettes or combinations of half-palmettes; the quadrilobed ones contain vertical designs of tree-like elements which end in grape bunches, grape leaves, or palmettes, the three motifs seemingly indiscriminately used.

The second example is the celebrated Mshatta façade (figs. 120–23). As it has often been described only a few salient features need be mentioned. A large band (over 4.25 meters high) framed by elaborately decorated moldings is carved on the central part of the palace's façade. The main feature of this long band is a series of twenty-eight equal triangles. In reality it is only because the building was never finished that these elements appear as clear triangles, for what was intended was a long zigzag border that would have divided the area into fifty-six equal triangular areas, alternately on their bases and on their points. Each triangle contains one enormous rosette which is in high relief and which contains a group of concentric designs; the rest of the field contains consistently different compositions in which vine rinceaux are found together with separate circles and occasionally animals. As has been pointed out, animals are absent on the mosque side of the building, and thus a negatively iconographic meaning could be given to them.

A tenth-century piece of carved marble on the side of the mihrab
in Cordoba (fig. 55) can serve as an example from the western Islamic world. The main design is framed by a border of hardly distinguishable leaves and stems creating a sort of undulating pattern around the object. In the center a single, straight, trunklike unit serves as the axis and the generator of a complex pattern of stems, leaves, split and complete calyces, that covers the rest of the field.

Finally, in the third or beveled style at Samarra (fig. 125) the repetition of characteristically slanted cuts has obliterated the originally vegetal nature of the units of decoration. Similar techniques were used in a group of Egyptian wood carvings (figs. 126, 127), in which at regular intervals a deep notch appears. A number of other illustrated fragments, for instance the stuccoes of Nishapur, or certain varieties of ceramics, are also appropriate examples for a study of decoration (figs. 105, 108, 110).

In all these works the visible unit of design—vegetal, geometric, or other—has been totally subordinated to a number of abstract principles. Physical form has been constricted into a vehicle for the expression of something else than itself. First, each object or wall is totally covered; no part is left without ornament. This is the celebrated *horror vacui* by which Islamic decoration has so often been defined. More precisely, the relationship found in classical Roman ornament between a background on or against which ornament stands out has been replaced either by a contrast between light and shade—most remarkably in Mshatta—or, as at Samarra, by an impossibility of distinguishing between the two. Second, the ornament can best be defined as a relationship between forms rather than as a sum of forms. This relationship can most often be expressed in geometric terms, and every one of the selected examples—especially the Qasr al-Hayr sculpture—can be defined through some sort of geometric structure. It is in Samarra that this system of definition is most striking, for there is no way of describing the stucco design except as a relation between lines and shapes, neither of which can be defined separately. It is interesting to note that this procedure was actually not only an end in itself but a device for representation, as can be shown through a celebrated Egyptian wood carving where a bird is attempted by contrasting shapes and lines (fig. 126). But its degree of abstraction ultimately made it unsuitable for representations. One may wonder in fact whether it is even theoretically possible that abstract designs represent concrete subjects.

The impact of geometry is the third principle I should like to suggest. The main geometric units translated into lines are circles and rhombi and, while there are instances (especially in mosaics) of rather extraordinary compositions, they are not comparable in complexity to the motifs of later centuries. In addition, we have quite consistently in this ornament a symmetry around a variable number of axes, which serve as the centers around which a motif develops, often almost mirror-reversed. But most of the axes are not finite, physical entities. Except for the Cordoba example (fig. 55) with its concrete rodlike compositional center with a clear beginning and end, the axes tend to be a form of visual imagination, for they do not exist by themselves but because of the rest of the design. The latter, however, does not make sense and cannot be described without them. Alternately, as in the Qasr al-Hayr and Khirbat al-Mafjar fragments, symmetry is replaced or completed by what may be called an overall pattern: one (rarely) or more units are multiplied so as to fit into the available space. At times, as in the Mafjar example and in a number of ceramics, a sort of tension appears between one motif that is self-contained and static and another that is growing and dynamic. But the most important aspect about symmetry as well as about the overall pattern is that, in the ways in which each is used, neither one contains within itself a logical end to the design. Thus the fourth principle of early Islamic ornament is the possibility of infinite growth, of which Mshatta's façade is the earliest illustration. On the one hand, the design can be extended at will in any direction, as it can also be extended in Samarra; thus it is not the design which is a completed unit with an internally definable beginning and end, but it is the will of the decorator which defines the limits of the design. On the other hand, this type of design endows its observer with considerable freedom. He can choose the point of view from which he wishes to enjoy or appreciate a design like Mshatta's. He can lose himself in the contemplation of details, in a count of thematic units. He can pick a single motif and follow it up in one triangle or examine its variations in a dozen triangles. He can search for compositional patterns or for effects of light and shade. It is as though a richly orchestrated
symphony had been frozen in space. Its themes and motifs and its dozens of instruments are permanently available for inspection and meditation, and yet the finished work of art is still there.

The fifth principle is a comparatively simple, though a bit uncertain, one. It is that a theme from any origin could be and was incorporated in ornament. Although vegetal and geometric themes predominate, animal, human, and epigraphical ones exist as well. In the case of the last three, however, there is a problem of interpretation, for a few investigations dealing mostly with later times have shown that an iconographic meaning can be given to certain animal themes used ornamentally. One may wonder whether writing did not preserve a symbolic value even when it was not used for specific words. Thus we may have to modify our statement to say that ornament became a mode, that is, a way of treating a variety of subjects without destroying their independently definable meaning, instead of saying that any subject can become a pure ornament. In any event, a certain ambiguity remains in the use of representations of living beings and of writing.

The sixth and last principle, which sums up almost all the points made so far, is that of arbitrariness. The most consistent characteristic of most early Islamic ornament is that neither its size nor its internal forms are dictated by anything but itself. Not only is Mshatta a wonderful example of this totally arbitrary band set across a building’s façade but, even more importantly, none of its features are indicative of the building behind the decoration. To a degree, of course, this is true of any ornament, but the peculiarity of the Muslim type of arbitrariness is twofold. On the one hand, it was carried down to the level of the design’s composition. And on the other, it tended to separate a monument’s or object’s surface from its shape. In itself this separation may not be new, for the utilization of stucco in Sassanian art already suggests an aesthetic process of the same nature. It is possible that Islam simply widened, complicated, and spread to many lands and to many techniques what seems to have been limited to a single technique in palaces and private houses of pre-Islamic Iran. By spreading it in this fashion, Islam added to it a peculiar characteristic, impermanence. For an arbitrary ornament that separates the surface from the rest of the monument may be compared to a skin that can be removed and changed as needs or tastes change. In reality, of course, the situation was more complex. For later times it is known that the maker of an object or monument and its decorator were one and the same person and, if this was so in early Islamic times as well (as it was certainly true in the case of ceramicists for instance), one has to assume on the part of the artisan himself a sort of double and partly contradictory vision of the finished monument. Then also, a correlation between certain shapes and certain designs occurred at a fairly early time. For instance, Dome of the Rock spandrels or soffits do not share the same compositions. But, whatever complexities may have been introduced, the general point of an arbitrary design, largely independent of the surface on which it was put, is a valid generalization about early Islamic ornament.

One can only speculate as to the reasons for this particular aspect of Muslim ornament. Possibly Muslim taste was affected by movable rugs and textiles; the nomadic background of the Arabs and later of the Turks may have remained present and utilized or expanded a precise Iranian technique. Yet one must beware of such arguments: even if occasionally present in a romantic fashion among poets and in the social organization of cities, a nomadic mood or nomadic pride was not in the mainstream of a medieval Muslim ethos. But perhaps the reluctance of so much of early urban Islam to use in full the aesthetic forms and ways of the conquered world led to a sort of automatic, almost subconscious appearance of earlier and culturally differentiated ways and forms.

Before returning to other possible interpretations, it is worthwhile to bring up again a curiously unique monument in which almost all the characteristics of ornament are found, but with an important twist: the tenth-century Samanid mausoleum in Bukhara (figs. 128, 129). Architecturally it is a work of secular art that used the pavilion form for funerary purposes, and for our present concern the important point is that brick, its medium of construction, also became its decoration. Its designs and effects are all definable by the principles we have provided, and the monument thus appears as a rich surface as well as a fully developed shape. The significant aspect of this first instance of what will be known as a “brick style” is that an attempt was made to realize in architectonic terms a taste developed first as an arbitrary surface ornament. The
next period of Islamic art, especially in Iran, continued this process, and some of its greatest masterpieces can be explained in this fashion.

Total covering, relationships between forms, geometric motifs, infinite potential growth, freedom in the choice of subjects, arbitrariness—such appear to be some of the salient characteristics of early Islamic ornament. It is paradoxical for three reasons. One is that its abstraction is not like a chemical formula, the simplified symbolization of some reality; like certain mathematical abstractions it is a reality in itself, an artificial invention that acquired its own set of rules. It is quite possible that the ultimate explanation of its character lies far less in art historical exercises than in a comprehension of contemporary mathematical thought, as has been demonstrated for later Central Asian art. The paradox is that, with the exception of the important but ultimately sterile beveled Samarra style, these essentially abstract qualities are made visible through concrete “things,” and some uncertainty remains as to whether the abstract qualities were the willed cause of the ornament or else the result of some hitherto unclear development of traditional decorative forms. Whatever the ultimate explanation, this is the level at which Islamic ornament acquires the intellectual status of a work of art, for it raises fundamental questions about the relationship between the visible and its meaning.

The second paradox, which has been sufficiently elaborated, is that this ornament is both the slave and the master of the space on which it occurs. The third paradox is partly subjective: at its best this ornament is a practical exercise and an intellectual meditation. It is an exercise in the sense that it consists for the most part in isolable formulas; yet it is also a meditation for there always is in it, to use a colloquial expression, more than meets the eye. But, like the beads of the holy man, the meditation it suggests is not in itself but in the mind of the beholder.

With this remark we penetrate another area of investigation, another facet of the possible explanation of the ornament. For we may wonder indeed whether the elaboration of this Muslim ornament could not reflect some attitude of Islamic culture as a whole. A parallel would lie more in the relationship that may have existed between scholasticism and the logic of Gothic construction rather than in the far more explicit translation into visual form of the middle Byzantine microcosm of Incarnation and Salvation.

Two themes of early Islamic thought can appropriately be connected with Islamic ornament, the first of which is symbolized by the common pietistic phrase, *ilaha illa-Ilah*, “the Remaining is to God.” The implication is that the absence of order in the world, the unreality of the visible, are necessary because they prove divine permanence. No creation of man can reflect physical reality because God alone makes anything permanent and the great sin is Pygmalion’s, to fall in love with one’s creation. The late Louis Massion brought to light a beautiful story about Hallaj, the great mystic of the ninth century, which illustrates this thought. A flute was heard somewhere, and a disciple asked Hallaj: “What is this?” Hallaj replied: “It is the voice of Satan crying over the world because he wants to make it outlive destruction; he cries over things that pass; he wants to reanimate them, while God only remains. Satan has been condemned to stick to things that pass and this is why he cries.” The second theme, which originated in Hellenic thought and became one of the central explanations of reality in the Muslim world, is known as atomism. Its central tenet is that all things are made up of and distinguished by various combinations of equal units. According to the faith of Islam, there is no compulsory, natural need that physical reality remain the same, and it is a divine miracle that the same compositions reappear. Since the artist must avoid imitating God or competing with him, he becomes free to recompose the units of nature he knows in any way he sees fit, and the more arbitrary and absurd the better.

These two themes can be utilized to explain the arbitrariness of ornament, its artificiality, its mixture of thematic elements from a variety of different sources, and perhaps also something of its abstraction in the midst of concrete features. Such an explanation is not a causal one; at best it is structural in that the mood of the faith and the mood of the ornament seem to share a number of common assumptions. Yet doubts about the validity of these parallels linger. One may wonder whether, for this moment in Islamic history, it is entirely appropriate to find in mystical thought and imagery an explanation or even a parallel for a comparatively common ornamental tendency. Scientific or pseudo-scientific theory, while more
attractive to explain the actual character of the arts, is equally difficult to imagine as having the necessary impact at a variety of social and economic levels. Furthermore, the main scientific achievement of Islamic culture is later than our period and it coincides better with a later development in ornament. If one searches for contemporary cultural associations, one should probably turn to the madhab, to the legal sects around which Islamic thought and society tended to coalesce from the second half of the eighth century onward. But far less is known about the practical and spiritual physiognomy of a Shafi’ite or of a Hanefite than about a mystic, and it does not seem possible to formulate for early Islamic times any sort of correlation between a common denominator of the arts and what appears to have been the main common denominator of the society.

Such are a few considerations that can be derived from early Islamic ornament. It is a peculiarly original creation of the first centuries of Islam which occurred all over the Muslim world and in all known techniques. Its uniqueness was almost never in the radical invention of new forms, but rather in a way of treating forms which itself may have been the result of a way of seeing man’s creation. It is therefore more of an idea, a “structure,” or a mode than it is a style. For this reason it appears so often to be ambiguous or ambivalent. One may question whether it really was so at the time and whether the ambivalence is not merely the result of our own inability to understand the intellectual and aesthetic motivations affecting the development of this ornament. Be this as it may, it seems appropriate to apply to it the term that the Italian Renaissance invented for its much later successors that were seen by the West as an equally originally phenomenon, the *arabesque*. But instead of understanding the arabesque as a form, we may consider it as an idea.

Finally, while it is appropriate to regard the arabesque as a novelty of early Islamic art, it should be noted that not all early Islamic ornament can be considered as influenced by it. Other ways of ornamenting continued for several centuries. At times, as at Qasr al-Hayr East, we simply see complete classical or other designs taken over, repaired, and imitated. The impressively sturdy stone decoration of the ninth-century cupola in Kairouan (fig. 54), the woodwork of the Aqṣa mosque in Jerusalem (fig. 53), an unidentified
8. The Formation of Islamic Art

The purpose of this book was neither to provide a coherent and complete history of early Islamic art nor to present a monographic study of individual monuments, but rather to propose answers to two questions. One is whether there is a way of defining the nature of the changes, if any, in aesthetic and material creativity brought about by the phenomenon of an Islamic world. A corollary question is whether a time—absolute or relative—can be assigned to the acceptance of these alleged changes by the culture as a whole, that is, whether a “classical” moment occurred in the art of early Islam. The second question is whether a common ground or a common structure justifies the term “Islamic” for those features by which the art of the fledgling Muslim empire can be defined. Or, to put it another way, how different is early Islamic art from the artistic traditions it inherited? And how permanently did early Islamic characteristics remain in the later artistic development of the Muslim world? Then as various problems and monuments were discussed, additional questions were raised whose elaboration or elucidation went beyond the specific concerns of each chapter. Some of them are significant primarily to Near Eastern studies; they concern various aspects of the balance between provinces in the creation and development of Islamic art, the likelihood and nature of an early Islamic style, or the iconographic or formal connections that may have existed among different kinds of monuments. Other questions involve the position of the visual arts in early Islamic culture and the kind of documentary evidence offered to the historian by archaeological or artistic remains. Finally, there are questions pertaining more narrowly to the discipline of the history of art, such as whether an artistic change can be defined in abstract terms, whether the Islamic phenomenon is unique in the history of the arts, and what kind of relationship existed between a monument and its creator or beholder.

Before an attempt to answer at least some of these questions, attention must be drawn to a basic assumption of the preceding investigations because the methodological choice underlying it has affected and colored whatever conclusions and hypotheses have been reached. The assumption is that the definition of a historical process in the arts—that is, of the ways in which changes have taken place—can most easily be made through an analysis of functions. Symbols of possession and occupation, mosques, palaces, ceramics, decorative designs, each one of the sets of monuments we have examined was defined and explained by the functions it served; these functions can be stated abstractly, almost independently of the monuments themselves. There are two intellectual limitations to this procedure. One is its all too easy implication that form follows function; yet, as will be seen presently, one of the peculiarities of early Islamic art is that such was not always the case. The other is that more importance is given to the practical, psychological, or other motives that preceded the creation of a monument than to the monument itself. The latter, a building or a ceramic plate, appears almost as a sort of secondary by-product of more or less correctly defined impulses, needs, and processes. To the extent that the history of art consists in imposing an intellectual pattern over man’s creativity, this approach is justified, and particularly so in the study of an artistic tradition’s “formation,” for the problem is more one of needs in search of forms than of the forms themselves. But it is not the only possible approach, and a very different book could be written which would have found its point of departure in the monuments themselves, in their character and in their physical and aesthetic significance. Such a book should in fact be written, and the conclusions that follow are less a summary of what has preceded than an attempt to use the evidence and hypotheses of the previous chapters as an introduction to another kind of investigation.

If one considers the mass of monuments that have remained from the first three centuries of Islamic history, the first conclusion is that, on the simplest levels of techniques and of “phonetic” forms, there is hardly anything new. Practically every decorative motif considered in isolation, every unit of planning, every detail of construction, and every kind of object has a direct prototype in the earlier artistic traditions of the Near East and the Mediterranean. Even when an occasional feature like the pool in the forecourt of Khirbat al-Mafjar has no known model, the existence of such an earlier model can be assumed, at least hypothetically. Modifications in the shape of arches, as in Cordoba or in the mosque of Ibn Tulun, and even experiments with vaults found in northeastern Iran do not
reflected the size of the new empire but possessed rules and directions.

Concrete meanings can be attributed to some of the forms. Without significant alteration of shape, towers became minarets, niches became mihrabs, and a concentration of aisles on one side of the building indicated the qiblah, whenever these features were found in a mosque. Arabic inscriptions—whether partly invisible as on the upper part of the Dome of the Rock’s mosaic decoration, or immediately accessible as on the façade of the Tim mausoleum, on the mihrab of the Câdoba mosque, or on plates from northeastern Iran—became concrete iconographic elements that defined the specific significance of a monument. Thus a number of formal features acquired a very precise Islamic signifying power, and all of them maintained their meaning over the centuries of growth of Islamic art.

Yet the interesting aspect of early Islamic art is the paucity of such features. As various groups of monuments were described and discussed, a constant of their interpretation was ambiguity or ambivalence of meaning, as though either the visible form had no significance beyond itself, or the significance of the form was provided through some other means. A country estate, a ribat, and a caravanserai shared the same formal arrangement; the same decorative designs and techniques were used for entirely different buildings. In those cases differences in purpose and use were not established by the monuments but by the activities taking place in them. This primacy of human life and social needs also explains why, from the mosque to stuccoes or to ornament, almost all groups of Islamic monuments were flexible, adaptable to a variety of purposes. This characteristic also remained for centuries and, for example, the magnificent façades that came to adorn so many Muslim buildings from the twelfth century on almost never indicated whether the building was a mosque or a caravanserai. Along with ambiguity and flexibility, early Islamic art is characterized by a concerted avoidance of symbols. The contrast with the medieval Christian development is quite striking.

The most important reason for this feature, discussed in the preceding chapters, was the new culture’s conscious rejection of the habits and practices of the tradition it replaced, especially Mediterranean Christianity. It is not that the Muslim world rejected their
artistic forms, it is rather that it refused to utilize them in the same manner. For the type of legal and moral coherence that Islam created could not take over an older or contemporary artistic vocabulary without accepting the complexities of its meanings and thereby losing something of its own individuality. At the same time, it lacked a new vocabulary of its own because of the regions and ways in which it grew. The absence of an ecclesiastical organization and the alienation that occurred between the good life of the Muslim and the beautiful life of the prince further served to restrict, at times even to dessicate, meaningful visual creativity. At the one extreme of Ibn Miskawayh’s ethics, the very notion of a work of art appeared as a sort of evil, or at best an unnecessary distraction from morality, a temptation by the vanities of the world. This reluctance toward concrete symbolism remained characteristic of Islamic art over the centuries, but from the eleventh century on it became tempered by a series of internal upheavals and ideological changes as well as by a lessening fear of alien power and a greater internal self-assurance. In the artistic explosion that followed the early Islamic period Iranian forms played a singularly important part for many reasons, one of which was a direct result of the achievements of the first Muslim centuries. For, whereas the Christian Mediterranean world remained strong and often inimical, ancient Iran slowly disappeared into myth or remained only as a vestige. The forms of Iranian art were therefore, so to speak, “liberated” from their non-Muslim associations and could be re-employed as “free” forms. The process is not without parallel in the utilization of classical forms in western art.

The formation of Islamic art can be seen, then, as an accumulation and novel distribution of forms from all over the conquered world, as a conscious sorting out of the meanings associated with the forms, and as a creation of a limited number of new, characteristic forms. Within this process certain directions can be detected, which provide at the same time a sense of the evolution of early Islamic art and some of the effects it sought to create. One direction is the slow impact of Muslim piety. Certain aspects of the architectural development of the mosque can be attributed to growing ritualization and to a growing sense of the mosque’s holiness. Although it is less clear whether Muslim piety can really explain the complexities of Islamic ornament, such a hypothesis can be ad-

vanced. Another direction consists in the double patronage of early Islamic art. Princely patronage predominated; but even if the many preserved monuments sponsored by it exhibit unique formal combinations and express original functions, they are less Islamic than a Near Eastern-centered version of a princely art with universal values. Next to princely patronage there grew an urban one, particularly original in both the techniques it developed and the themes it used. This patronage, strongly affected by the faith, does not exhibit the exuberant wealth of princely art. Its forms tend to be more clearly localized than those of courtly art, and for the time being it is only in northeastern Iran, Iraq, and Egypt that this bourgeois patronage can be identified.

A third direction of early Islamic art is more difficult to express. From such apparently diverse phenomena as the break-up of arches in Cordoba, the creation of the muqarnas in northeastern Iran, the utilization of expensive and cheap objects to copy and transmit almost all forms, the ubiquity of stucco covering, and the characteristics of ornament, it could be concluded that there occurred a separation between the material medium of a monument and the forms given to it. Formal units were meant to give the illusion of something different from what they were, and technical virtuosity became prized at the expense of other creative virtues. But this development also provided early Islamic art with an extraordinary freedom to adapt itself to local patrons and local needs, inasmuch as it was not fettered by any consensus of taste or patronage. For this reason, above all others, we encounter the at times bewildering variety of early Islamic monuments.

Altogether, it is not possible to consider all these characteristics as creating a period style, for what unifies these monuments are not individual forms and their arrangements, nor even a body of functions, but a series of attitudes toward the very process of artistic creation. These attitudes are contradictory, for at times they deny the validity of visual symbols and major permanent monuments, while at other times they demand a great virtuosity in beautifying an imperial palace or a prosaic ceramic plate. But the greatest achievement of these centuries was the successful creation of a monumental setting for the new culture, that is, a consistent body of forms different from other contemporary ones while utilizing in large part the same elements. The attitudes as well as the setting
were conscious attempts at self-definition, at formulating with the terms of older cultures a language of visual forms that would serve the needs of the new culture and maintain its separate identity. Because they are most easily defined through attitudes than through forms it is appropriate to use the term “Islamic” for the monuments which extend over several centuries from the Atlantic to the steppes of Central Asia. But because the elements used in the creation of this language are for the most part older Mediterranean and Middle Eastern, the art of early Islam is a medieval art, one of the variants of the rich inheritance of classical antiquity.

Even though it extended all over the vast world conquered by Islam, early medieval Islamic art was not created simultaneously in all of its provinces. Chronologically and geographically, it first appeared in the Fertile Crescent during the eighth and ninth centuries. Within the Fertile Crescent Iraq predominated; it was the province of the first purely Muslim cities, and the imperial and urban ideas of Islam first crystallized in Baghdad and Samarra. Except for a few examples from Umayyad Spain, the vast majority of early Islamic monuments can better be explained in relationship to Iraq than to Syria. In Iraq the style of early Islamic decoration was culminated, and from Iraq the builders of the mosques of Ibn Tulun and Kairouan brought their ornament and some of their methods of construction. The imperial life of Baghdad and Samarra, not the numerous estates of the Syrian steppe or the singular remains of Spain or Transoxiana, became the main focus of the princely myth of medieval Islam.

The creation of a physical setting which became ubiquitous, a series of attitudes toward artistic creation which even if contradictory at times were shared from Cordoba to Bukhara, and a formal and mythical focus in ninth-century Iraq—all these features coincide with the definition of a “classical” moment proposed at the beginning of this book. A northeastern Iranian ceramic inscription, the mosque of Ibn Tulun, and the architecture or decoration of the Cordoba mosque all possess the clarity of forms, the understanding of media, and a unique combination of otherwise known units of composition which illustrate a mastery of the vocabulary of early Islamic art. They are superb examples of what can be called the moment of a sunni orthodox supremacy in the taste of the Muslim world; they fully express both its dialectic logic or order and perhaps something of the dryness of its legalism. The monuments of the first decades of Fatimid rule in Egypt—the Hakim mosque, the rock crystals, some of the woodwork—comprise, around the year 1000, the last coherent group of the first classicism of Islamic art, and it is an interesting indication of the differences in rhythms between taste and political or religious history that these monuments were sponsored by a heterodox dynasty.

Like any living organism, however, the world of Islam was not a frozen, completed entity and, even before the year 1000 other, at first glance secondary, themes began to show up. The growth of mausoleums and the appearance of small monumental mosques from Spain to Transoxiana challenged the supremacy of the large congregational masjid al-jami’. At the frontiers of the Muslim world, new ethnic groups and new artistic ideas had appeared. Khorasan and Transoxiana were physically bubbling with the missionary zeal of the ghazi, or warriors for the faith, and with a new architecture of baked brick. In Morocco the first rumblings that created Berber dynasties appeared, and all over central and western North Africa—another frontier area—an ardently pure Islam had grown from the ribats and heterodox groups of old. The daylamite or northern Iranian dynasty of the Buyids had already shifted many of its centers of power from Iraq to the less fully islamized provinces of western Iran. In northeastern Iran, in Iraq, and in Egypt representations of living beings became more common in the urban art of ceramics and even in architectural decoration. Heterodoxies and social mysticism were everywhere. The Iranian renaissance was beginning and its Turkish carriers were already established in Khorasan. Many of these dissonant novelties could be considered simply as minor peculiarities within an established classicism. Yet they foreshadowed and prepared the great changes that characterized Islamic art from the middle of the eleventh century onward. It is only from the knowledge of what happened then that these features can be identified and isolated. For in the arts, in contradiction to life, the nature of unavoidable change can only be discovered and explained after it has happened. The full investigation of these minor but essential themes within the vast composition of early Islamic art belongs therefore to a study of the rich art of the eleventh through thirteenth centuries.