

Excerpts from the book *A Young Muslim's Guide to the Modern World* by Seyyed Hossein Nasr

Western art until the Renaissance bore many resemblances to Islamic art although it was iconic, that is, based on the painting of the icon whether it be of Christ or the Virgin in contrast to Islamic art which has always avoided an iconic sacred art. Nevertheless, Western art before the Renaissance, that is, traditional Western art, precisely because it was traditional art, was based on certain religious and divine principles. It not only drew its inspiration from revelation, but its techniques and methods were transmitted from generation to generation going back to an inspiration which issues from the divine and angelic worlds above the purely human. It was only with the Renaissance that Europe broke away from its traditional Christian civilization and this parting of ways manifested itself first of all in art before it appeared in the fields of philosophy, theology or the structure of society.

Western pictorial art is both the most direct indication of the deeper impulses of change within the souls of Western man and an indication of the phases of Occidental culture and in itself it has contributed a great deal to Western man's own self image. There has existed a kind of concordant action between an art which human beings have experienced and with which they have identified and the ever greater humanization of the spiritual or inner reality of human beings which was in turn reflected upon the canvas.

It is important to note that much of modern Western art is based on individualism, subjectivism and psychological impulses of the individual painter rather than the Divine Norm which would transcend the individual artist, whereas, of course, Islamic art as all traditional art, has seen the source of art to be above and beyond the individual. Moreover, in contrast to Western art, especially in the modern period, which is so psychological, Islamic art has always tried to transcend the psychological domain and to relate art to the reflection, in an objective mode, of the spiritual realm which lies beyond the merely psychological and subjective dimensions of human existence.

The art of the Renaissance, which is famous because of the appearance of several great geniuses such as Raphael, Michelangelo and Leonardo Da Vinci, certainly reflects worldly beauty more than the beauty of the spiritual world and opened art to the purely human but at the expense of departure from the sacred and celestial art of the Middle Ages. In fact Renaissance art reflects more directly than any other aspect of Renaissance culture the new humanism which placed man rather than God at the center of the scheme of existence.

Even the Vatican, the center of Catholicism to this day built on the older building which was destroyed during the Renaissance, displays not the heavenly beauty of the medieval cathedrals but the atmosphere of a palace which reflects the power of the world and the humanistic characteristics of the age in which it was built.

In the field of painting, however, which is much more central to Western art than to Islamic art, each age began to have its own style and the permanent immutable archetypes which are reflected in traditional art were lost as far as the mainstream of Western art is concerned.

Despite all these changes which have gone on from one century to another, the older traditional forms of art survive especially in architecture as we see in the continuation here and there of the Gothic, Romanesque and also Nordic styles . . . however, this permanence of the traditional styles of architecture remains secondary in comparison to the ever changing styles which dominate the skyline and streets of most modern Western and to an ever greater degree nonwestern modern cities.

Divorce of arts form crafts

The traditional arts have also survived in the margin of the art scene, for example in the crafts which continue to be produced in such countries as Spain, Ireland and Mexico and even in the more industrialized countries of northern Europe or rural America. The West, however, began to divorce art from the crafts or the making of useful objects in the twelfth/eighteenth and thirteenth/nineteenth centuries when the Industrial Revolution took place bringing about the distinction between industrial products and so-called "fine arts." whereas, as already mentioned, in the Islamic world-as in fact in all traditional civilizations- there has never been a difference between the two, arts and crafts being ultimately the same thing.

All traditional art has for its goal the making of objects which are to be used and not simply the creation of luxury. The reason for art was never what is called art for art's sake . . . The traditional perspective shared by Islam does not mean utilitarianism in the ordinary sense of the term because it takes into consideration man's spiritual needs as well as his physical ones. It is only in modernized circles in the Islamic world that such terms as fine arts or beaux-arts in French have become translated into Arabic, Persian and other Islamic languages and used for painting, sculpture and the like. Muslims who accept such concepts do not always realize that this divorce of art from the crafts represents the divorce of art from life in the modern world and the surrender of the art of making the objects which surround man and affect his soul most deeply to the machine.

Separation of art from life

One of the most striking elements which Muslim students detect when they come to the West is that there are great museums in which objects of art are preserved and which are very impressive in themselves. At a moment when so much of humanity's artistic heritage is being destroyed, museums are of course precious, but at the same time their existence means that what is kept in them is separated from the rest of society and from the daily activity of human beings for whom art is no longer integrated into everyday life. Traditional societies which produced so many beautiful objects of art, that are kept in museums today, never possessed museums themselves because art was never divorced from life. Art was life and life was art . . . in traditional societies the artist was not a special kind of man but every man was a special kind of artist. In fact, the major distinction between the role of art in modern Western society and its role in traditional Islamic or for that matter other traditional societies, is precisely the divorce between life and art or what one makes and what one does in one society and their unity in the other.