

'THE WORLD OF IMAGINATION' AND THE CONCEPT OF SPACE IN THE PERSIAN MINIATURE

SEYYED HOSSEIN NASR

IT is unfortunate that the field of Persian art, and particularly the Islamic art of Persia, has not been studied to any appreciable extent with a view to understanding its symbolic and metaphysical significance. The same penetration and devotion we observe in studies on the symbolism of Indian, Chinese, and Japanese art by such men as Coomaraswamy, Zimmer, Kramrich, Daniélou, Salmony, and most recently Rowland are for the most part lacking in the case of the art of Islamic Persia. The few studies in depth of Islamic art, especially those by T. Burckhardt¹ and also by Ettinghausen, Pope, and a few others, stand out as exceptions in the field. Today, however, it is becoming generally accepted even in academic circles that the art of a traditional civilization expounds through the language of symbolism the metaphysical and spiritual truths dominant in that civilization and that the significance of this art cannot be exhausted through purely historical or external types of analysis of forms which remain indifferent to the meaning conveyed by these forms. This truth holds as much true in the case of Islamic art as in that of any other traditional civilization. Yet, how many of the most essential features of this art have remained a closed book and attempts have been made to explain them away in terms of historical influences rather than in the light of the inner meaning which they seek to reveal?

In this study we wish to delve briefly into an aspect of this hitherto relatively unexplored field and treat the question of space especially as it pertains to the Persian miniature. The Cartesian surgery of reality left European science and philosophy, and through them the general view of Western men, with but two alternative domains: the world of the mind

¹ Besides his *Sacred Art in East and West*, London, Perennial Books 1967, which contains a masterly chapter on Islamic art, and his 'Perennial Values in Islamic Art', *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Summer 1967, pp. 132-41, the author has devoted a study to Islamic art combined with considerations of a

religious and social order in his *Fes, Stadt des Islam*, Olten, Urs Graf Verlag, 1960. This work is unique in its depth and comprehensiveness and one only wishes such a study could also be made of the art of Islamic Persia.

and the world of extension or space which became identified exclusively with the material world. When we speak of space today, whether it be the linear space of Newtonian physics or the 'curved space' of relativity, we are exclusively concerned with the spatio-temporal domain of reality which we identify with reality as such. We can hardly conceive of a 'non physical' space, which is not the creation of man's whims and fancies but possesses an ontological reality of its own. Yet, it is precisely with such a space that sacred art, and more particularly the Persian art with which we are now concerned, deals.

To conceive of space which is more than physical space and which sacred art seeks to 'make felt' through its techniques and symbolism, there must exist a discontinuity with the physical space in which man lives in his profane life. As long as there is continuity with profane space, there is a lack of the transcendent dimension which leads *beyond* physical space and the physical world. In the sacred art of Islam *par excellence*, namely the mosque, space is not meant to be 'supernatural' as opposed to 'natural'. Rather, it is a space which recreates the peace and harmony of virgin nature by dissolving the tensions and disequilibria of the mundane world. But by this very fact it is in its own way a differentiated and qualitative space which places man in the presence of the Eternal by removing the tensions and stresses that characterize man's terrestrial and temporal life.¹

As for the Persian miniature, it is also based on the heterogeneous division of the two-dimensional space involved, for only in this way can each horizon of the two-dimensional surface come to symbolize a state of being as well as a degree of consciousness. And even in those miniatures where there is an integration of space and creation of a homogeneous space, this whole space is clearly distinguished by its 'non-three-dimensional' character from the natural space around it. It is therefore itself a recapitulation of the space of another world and concerns another mode of consciousness. The law of perspective followed in the Persian miniature, before influences of Renaissance art along with internal factors brought about its decay, is one based on natural perspective, the *perspectiva naturalis*, whose geometric laws were developed by Euclid and later by Muslim geometers and opticians such as Ibn al-Haytham and Kamāl al-Dīn al-Fārsī. The miniature remained faithful to the law of this science, and in conformity with the 'realism' of the Islamic view did not betray the two-dimensional nature of the surface by making it *appear* as three-dimensional, as was to happen through the application of rules of

¹ The notion of qualitative space is one of fundamental significance to both traditional art and to religious rites. See the many works of R. Guénon on this subject, especially his *Symbolism of the Cross*,

translated by A. Macnab, London, Luzac & Co., 1958, and *The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of the Times*, trans. by Lord Northbourne, London, Luzac & Co., 1953.

'artificial perspective' (the *perspectiva artificialis*) during the European Renaissance.¹ By conforming strictly to the non-homogeneous (or heterogeneous) and qualitative conception of space, the Persian miniature succeeded in transforming the plane surface of the miniature to a canvas depicting grades of reality, and was able to guide man from the horizon of material existence, and also profane and mundane consciousness, to a higher state of being and of consciousness, an intermediate world with its own space, time, movement, colours and forms, where events occur in a real but not necessarily physical manner, the world which the Muslim philosophers of Persia have called the 'imaginal world' (*mundus imaginalis*) or the *'ālam al-khayāl*.

Before turning to analyse the features of this world that is so unknown to our modern topography of what we consider to be real, we must pause to answer an objection that is bound to be made to our spiritual and symbolic interpretation of the Persian miniature. It will be said that mosque architecture and Qur'ānic calligraphy are sacred arts connected directly with the religious life, but the Persian miniature is a courtly art that flourished in the worldly environment of Persian court life and made use of romantic and epic themes having no direct religious significance.

To answer this objection it must be recalled that in a traditional civilization, especially one like Islam where religion dominates over all spheres of life, no aspect of human activity is left outside the authority of the spiritual principles and least of all that which deals with what would correspond to temporal authority in Western parlance. In terms of Western language it could be said that the purely sacred art of Islam such as mosque architecture and calligraphy correspond to 'sacerdotal initiation' and the 'Greater Mysteries' while the miniature and other courtly arts to 'knightly and royal initiation' and the 'Lesser Mysteries'. More specifically, in Persia, through the extension of the organization of Ṣūfī orders many functions connected with chivalry were directly integrated into Ṣūfism and many of the courtly arts such as miniature painting and music were cultivated by Ṣūfīs. There are too many examples in the Ṣafavid or even Qājār periods to need elucidation here.

The themes chosen for miniatures bear out this point. For the most part they are either epic scenes, depicting battles of ancient Persian heroes as recorded mostly in the *Shāh-nāmah* or tales of moral and spiritual significance drawn from such works as the *Kalīlah wa Dimnah*, or the writings of Nizāmī and Sa'dī. In the first case the heroic scene is transposed above history to a 'transhistorical world' where it acquires also a gnostic (*'irfānī*)

¹ See H. Corbin, 'La configuration du temple de la Ka'ba comme secret de la vie spirituelle', *Eranos-ahrbuch* xxxiv, 1965, pp. 83 ff.

and mystical significance in the same way that Suhrawardī was to give a gnostic interpretation to the ancient epics of Iran in his theosophical and mystical narratives.¹ In the second case also, the artistic treatment of the themes takes place in a world above ordinary temporality where it gains a non-temporal and permanent significance. Even the plants and animals that are drawn are not simply those of physical nature but of primordial nature, of the paradisaical environment which remains actualized even now in the *'ālam al-khayāl* or *'ālam al-mithāl*. In all these cases the majority of Persian miniatures depict not a profane world but this intermediary world which stands above the physical and which is the gateway to all higher states of being. Like the 'Lesser Mysteries', which prepare the adept for entrance into the abode of the 'Greater Mysteries', the miniature, along with similar so called 'courtly' arts, is a traditional art of the intermediate world and by virtue of this character has for its subject what we might call the earthly paradise, whose joys and beauties it seeks to recreate.

We must now make clear the meaning and ontological status of this 'world of imagination', the *'ālam al-mithāl*, which has its correspondence in other traditional cosmologies, including those of ancient Persia.² The multiple states of being can be summarized in five principal states which the Ṣūfīs call the five 'Divine Presences' (*ḥadarāt al-ilāhīyah*),³ and which Islamic philosophers from Suhrawardī onward have accepted fully as the ground pattern and 'plan' of reality, although they have used other terminology to describe it.⁴ These worlds or presences include the physical world (*mulk*), the intermediate world (*malakūt*), the archangelic world (*jabarūt*), the world of the Divine Names and Qualities (*lāhūt*), and the Divine Essence or Ipseity itself (*dhāt*), which is sometimes called *hāhūt*.

The *jabarūt* and the states beyond it are above forms and formal manifestation, whereas the *malakūt*, which corresponds to the world of imagination (*'ālam al-khayāl* or *mithāl*), possesses form but not matter in the ordinary Peripatetic sense. That is why in fact this world is also called the world of 'hanging forms' (*ṣuwar al-mu'allaqah*), and later Persian philosophers like Mullā Ṣadrā have devoted many pages to its description and proof of its existence. But from another point of view this world possesses its own matter (*jism-i latīf*), which in fact is the 'body of resurrection', for in this world is located both paradise in its formal aspect and the inferno.

¹ See H. Corbin, 'Actualité de la philosophie traditionnelle en Iran', *Acta Iranica* i, Jan.-Mar. 1968, pp. 1-11. This transposition of the epic to the mystical is best seen in the Persian works of Suhrawardī such as *Alwāḥ-i 'imādī* and *'Aql-i surkh*, of all of which we are preparing a complete edition.

² See H. Corbin, *Terre céleste et corps de résurrection, de l'Iran mazdēen à l'Iran shi'ite*, Paris, Corrèa, 1961, which, as the title shows, traces the idea of the inter-

mediate world from Zoroastrian to Islamic Persia.

³ Concerning the five 'Divine Presences' see F. Schuon, 'Les cinq présences divines', *Études traditionnelles*, July-Aug. and Sept.-Oct. 1962, pp. 225-36, Nov.-Dec. 1962, pp. 274-9.

⁴ See S. H. Nasr, 'The School of Ispahan' and 'Ṣadr al-Dīn Shirāzī', in *A History of Muslim Philosophy*, ed. M. M. Sharif, Wiesbaden, O. Harrassowitz, vol. ii, 1966.

This world possesses likewise its own space, time, and movement, its own bodies, shapes, and colours. In its negative aspect this world is the cosmic labyrinth of veils that separate man from the Divine, but in its positive aspect it is the state of paradise wherein are contained the original forms, colours, smells, and tastes of all that gives joy to man upon the earth.

The space of the Persian miniature is a recapitulation of this space and its forms and colours a replica of this world. The colours, especially the gold and lapis lazuli, are not just subjective whims of the imagination of the artist. Rather, they are the fruit of vision of an 'objective' reality based on a particular one plane to another, moving always between the two-dimensional and the three-dimensional. But it never falls into the three-dimensional pure and simple. If it were to do so it would cease to be a depiction of the *malakūt* and would become simply a replica of the *mulk*. By remaining on another plane, and yet possessing a life and movement of its own, the miniature is able to have a contemplative aspect and to create an aspect of joy, so characteristic of the Persian spirit, which is an echo of the joy of Paradise. Like the good Persian rug and the genuine Persian garden, the miniature serves as a reminder of a reality which transcends the mundane surroundings of human life. The space of the miniature is the space of that 'imaginal world' where the forms of nature, the trees, the flowers, and the birds, as well as the events within the human soul, have their origin. This world itself is in fact both beyond this external world and within the soul of man. It is a world that is often depicted and described in Persian Ṣūfī poetry, as in these verses of the *Mathnawī*, where Maulānā Jalāl al-Dīn says:

In the orchard a certain Ṣūfī laid his face in Ṣūfī fashion upon his knee for the sake of (mystical) revelation;

Then he sank deep into himself. An impertinent fellow was annoyed by his semblance of slumber.

'Why', said he, 'dost thou sleep? Nay look at the rivers, behold these trees and marks (of Divine mercy) and green plants.

'Hearken to the command of God, for He hath said, "Look ye": Turn thy face towards these marks of (Divine) mercy.'

He replied, 'O Man of vanity, its marks are (within) the heart: that (which) is without is only the marks of the marks.

'The (real) orchards and verdure are in the very essence of the soul: the reflection thereof upon (that which is) without is as (the reflection) in running water.

'In the water there is (only) the phantom (reflected image) of the orchard, which quivers on account of the subtle quality of the water.

'The (real) orchards and fruits are within the heart: the reflection of their beauty is (falling) upon this water and earth (the external world).

'If it were not the reflection of that delectable cypress, then God would not have called it the abode of deception.'¹

The function of the genuine Persian miniature, as all sacred and traditional art, is to reflect through symbolism something of that delectable garden in a world which without this reflection would be mere deception.

¹ *The Mathnawi of Jalālu'ddīn Rūmī*, translated by R. A. Nicholson, London, Luzac & Co., 1930, vol. iv, p. 347.