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### Lifting the veil from the face of depiction

*Middle Eastern miniature painting in light of sufism and phenomenology*

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Lifting the Veil from the Face of Depiction:  
Middle Eastern Miniature Painting in light of Sufism and Phenomenology

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*Resemblances are, after all, of little importance in respect to the innumerable differences and varieties of cultures. The probability, no matter how slight, of a reinvention without guide or model suffices to account for these exceptional recurrences. The true problem is to understand why such different cultures become involved in the same search and have the same task in view (and when the opportunity arises, encounter the same modes of expression). We must understand why what one culture produces has meaning for another culture even if it is not its original meaning. [...] In short, the true problem is to understand why there is one history or one universe of painting.*

- Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence"



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## **Introduction**

The tradition of Middle Eastern miniature painting flourished mainly from the fourteenth to the nineteenth centuries in the Timurid, Safavid, and Ottoman empires. Drawing on Sufi philosophical concepts expressed in the work of thinkers such as Muḥyiddīn Ibn al-‘Arabī (1165-1240) and Jalāladdīn Rūmī (1207-73), miniature painting aimed at mirroring the “innovative” and “life-giving” qualities of divine creation, remaining unconcerned with Western artistic preoccupations such as verisimilitude. As centuries went by, however, miniaturists were faced with the increasing onslaught of Western cultural influence, until ultimately, the art form was superseded by approaches to painting inspired by the West.

Ironically, the obsolescence of the miniature tradition in the Middle East was soon followed by its “discovery” in the West. Miniature paintings, featured in expositions of the early twentieth century, started influencing the work of artists such as Henri Matisse and the Fauves, artists who wished to break with the Western emphasis on verisimilitude in painting. This new Western art, in turn, went on to inspire its own philosophical tradition, formulated by phenomenologists such as Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Often, their ideas bore striking resemblance to the Sufi philosophical bedrock of miniature painting. The Middle Eastern idea of “life-giving” art, for instance, was mirrored in the Heideggerian concept of “art as unconcealment”.

The connection between Sufism, miniature art, and Western abstract painting was first highlighted in the seminal work of Michael Barry. However, no scholarly work to date has systematically traced the line of transference from Sufi philosophy to miniature painting, miniature painting to Western abstract art, and Western abstract art to phenomenology. Further, there has been no ontological assessment of miniature art in light of Sufi philosophy (not even attempted by Sufi thinkers themselves) and no comparative analysis of the two philosophical traditions, Sufi and phenomenological, that stand at the beginning and end of the line of transference. The present study fills these gaps by systematically assessing (1) the historical continuity and (2) the philosophical common ground of the “Eastern” and “Western” traditions in question. Rather than demonstrating some direct or indirect indebtedness of modern Western philosophy to

Sufi thinkers, however, the study ultimately aims to expose the theoretical and practical compatibility of Sufi and phenomenological approaches to art, in the expectation that we can avail ourselves of phenomenology to arrive at readings of Middle Eastern miniature painting that are unprecedentedly nuanced while at the same time true to the original philosophical underpinnings of the art form.

The first chapter, “Sufi Ontology”, lays the philosophical foundation for my reading of miniature art. All major premodern Middle Eastern sources concerned with the art form are part of the discursive framework of Sufi ontology, and an understanding of this ontology is required in order to appreciate these sources’ philosophical take on miniature painting. I will establish the basics of this ontology by turning to Muhyiddin Ibn al-‘Arabī (1165-1240), an Andalusian philosopher widely regarded as one of the most accomplished exponents of Sufi thought.

Through a close analysis of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s work *The Bezels of Wisdom*, I will bring into play fundamental Sufi concepts such as the absolute, the self-concealment and self-disclosure of the absolute, the world of particulars as simultaneously veiling and unveiling the absolute, the human being as a microcosm, an isthmus, and a mirror of the absolute, and the manifest and unmanifest as mutually interdependent. It will emerge that Ibn al-‘Arabī views the world of particulars as the self-manifestation of the absolute to itself, without which the self-knowledge of the absolute would remain incomplete. It follows that Ibn al-‘Arabī ultimately rejects a duality between the absolute (if understood through a concept such as a “creator God”) and the manifest (if understood as such a God’s “creation”). Instead, the philosopher postulates an interdependency between the absolute and the manifest, or the uncreated and the created, in which neither side enjoys an ontological, hierarchical, or temporal primacy over the other.

Human beings, by virtue of possessing both bodily perception and intellectual capabilities, play a privileged role in the absolute’s self-manifestation by acting as mirrors for the absolute, mirrors in which and through which the absolute can perceive itself. However, since the self-manifestation of the absolute always takes the shape of a simultaneous self-disclosure and self-concealment, ordinary perception is incapable of apprehending it fully. Therefore, human beings must “polish” themselves as mirrors, i.e., undertake a metaphorical and/or literal journey of purification from the clichés of their

ordinary perception and an opening to the perception of the absolute. There are worldly vehicles for the contemplation of the absolute, among which Ibn al-‘Arabī lists, for instance, feminine countenances as particularly efficacious. However, even when a perception of the absolute is achieved, the experience remains indescribable by the Sufi, whose outlandish and unorthodox utterances on the topic can easily leave him misunderstood as a madman or a heretic.

From this discussion, I will move on to Middle Eastern miniature painting itself, an art form heavily indebted to the philosophical foundations laid by Sufi ontology. My second chapter, “Art and Patronage in the Premodern Middle East”, will focus on the work of three sixteenth-century Middle Eastern writers who concerned themselves closely with miniature art, namely Dūst Moḥammad, Qāḍī Aḥmad, and Mustafā Âlî. These authors will help me establish the historical and political context in which the art form flourished. It will emerge that miniature painting was inextricably bound to artistic milieus established and enabled by court patronage, that the good will and political fortunes of the royal patron made or broke these milieus, and that patronage was a fickle blessing dependent in large part on a religious zeitgeist that often turned hostile to figurative art, branding it as a blasphemous imitation of divine creative activity.

The close connection between miniature painting and Sufism cannot be explained without considering these historical, political, and religious circumstances. In need of a religious *apologia* for the suspect and endangered art form, Middle Eastern writers availed themselves of Sufism in two major ways. Firstly, they postulated a parallelism between the mystical path of the Sufi and the artistic path of the miniaturist, describing the miniaturist as a seeker of the same truth as the Sufi. The perceptual apprehension of the absolute, which the Sufi pursued through philosophical contemplation and a variety of mystical practices, was said to be pursued by the miniaturist through his art. Secondly, and perhaps more interestingly, the writers in question established a philosophical framework for viewing the miniature painting itself as a privileged locus for the self-manifestation of the absolute.

I will use the third chapter, “Art and Sufism in the Premodern Middle East”, to lay out these two arguments in detail. To the Middle Eastern art historians mentioned above, miniature painting possesses an originative or “life-giving” force that enables

viewers to apprehend the absolute's self-manifestation in ways not possible through the contemplation of mere things. The writers argue that even in cases where painting seems to represent a perceptible object from the world of particulars, such as a rock or a river, the work of art can unlock perceptual dimensions not opened up by the mere thing itself. Thereby, the painting enables viewers to perceive the simultaneous self-disclosure and self-concealment of the absolute as described by Ibn al-ʿArabī in his writings. In other words, premodern sources on miniature art enable us to think of miniature painting as a similarly privileged locus for the self-manifestation of the absolute as the feminine countenance highlighted by Ibn al-ʿArabī.

Miniature painting was assumed to enable this self-manifestation through a variety of artistic techniques, some of which have begun to be addressed in modern scholarship. Among these are techniques employed to portray the Islamic prophet Muḥammad as both embodied and disembodied at the same time, and, on a more abstract level, the non-representational color schemes employed by miniature painters to imbue their art works with a deeper, mystical significance. In the fourth chapter, “Persianate Miniature Painting in the West”, I will demonstrate the appropriation of key miniature techniques by Western artists of the early twentieth century, artists who lacked an understanding of the philosophical context in which the techniques were originally employed but nonetheless viewed these techniques as fruitful opportunities to free themselves from the realistic or verisimilitudinous paradigm that dominated the course of Western painting at the time these artists, and particularly among them Henri Matisse, staged their intervention.

The introduction of Middle Eastern miniature painting to Western audiences and artists in the early twentieth century occurred in the context of Western imperialist expansion, a process that often involved the dissolution of the courtly milieus that kept miniature art alive, the absorption of bound miniature albums into Western collections, and the disassembly of these albums with the goal of marketing individual miniature paintings at auctions and exhibitions. While the result of this historical process was the disintegration of miniature painting as an art form, it was also through this process that the technical vocabulary of the art form found its way into the efforts of twentieth-century Western painters.

It is worth reiterating that the Western artists utilizing miniature techniques were unaware of the Sufi ontology informing these techniques. This makes it all the more remarkable that both in the Middle East and in the West, the techniques in question were employed by artists seeking to enable a form of perception not given by the apprehension of mere things. In the case of miniature painting, the goal was to question, undermine, and disrupt ordinary, everyday perception in order to enable a perception of the absolute as both self-concealing and self-revealing. In the case of Western art, the goal was to distance oneself from techniques of verisimilitudinous representation, such as chiaroscuro and perspective, that had conditioned the Western painterly quest for centuries, techniques which were now being rendered redundant by technological developments such as photography. In both cases, then, the techniques were utilized to develop a decidedly non-verisimilitudinous approach to painting, undergirded by an understanding that painting was not a mere stand-in, or copy, of a thing that readily disclosed itself to ordinary perception, but a locus and device for the unlocking of perceptual possibilities lying beyond the ordinary and quotidian.

Honoré de Balzac's short story, "The Unknown Masterpiece", offers an early example of such artistic concerns as expressed in Western literature. The story introduces the figure of Frenhofer, an artist whose abstract painting demolishes representational principles, seeks to teach its beholders new ways of looking in the process of trying to determine its meaning, but is ultimately rejected by uncomprehending contemporaries as a failure or the work of a madman, similarly to how a Sufi's message could meet with refusal or incomprehension by her milieu or society.

The engagement of Western philosophy with painting as a challenge to ordinary perception conditioned by our everyday presuppositions, and as an enabler of a more primordial form of perception, begins in earnest with Martin Heidegger, particularly his work, "The Origin of the Work of Art". In this work, Heidegger seeks to demonstrate how a painting by Vincent van Gogh manages to reveal its subject—a pair of shoes—in a way that the presence of the actual shoes would be unable to accomplish. The fifth chapter of my study, "Phenomenology and Art: Martin Heidegger", discusses how and why Heidegger views painting as capable of this extraordinary feat. The chapter starts by introducing key concepts developed by Heidegger's mentor, Edmund Husserl, such as

lack, excess, and the phenomenological epoché, concepts which lay the foundation for phenomenological thinking about art. Following this, I explore how Heidegger, with the aid of Husserlian ideas, formulates an approach to painting that defends the art form against claims of merely “copying nature”, viewing it instead as an exceptional venue for what Heidegger calls “the strife between earth and world”, an event that can be fruitfully compared to Ibn al-‘Arabī’s simultaneous self-disclosure and self-concealment of the absolute.

Heidegger’s thoughts on art must be viewed within a broader philosophical context, namely his rejection of the dualistic ontology finding its beginnings with Plato and encompassing most of Western philosophy until it reaches its zenith in the work of Descartes. Simplistically expressed, this ontology performs a division between essence and existence, postulating that a pure, unattainable essence precedes and provides the ontological ground for all that is in existence. Existence, then, is but a secondary consequence of this ultimately unattainable essence. This hierarchical and dualistic way of thinking paves the way for a number of other dichotomies, such as God and creation, body and soul, and subject and object, which, to Heidegger—just as to Ibn al-‘Arabī—cloud an authentic form of perception that would reveal to us an underlying and primordial unity that knows nothing of these artificial categories that separate the human being from his existential envelopment.

However, to both Heidegger and Ibn al-‘Arabī, the matter is not as simple as replacing a Platonic, or Cartesian, duality with some undifferentiated idea of unity. Just as Ibn al-‘Arabī maintains that the self-unveiling of the absolute is also, at the same time, a self-veiling, Heidegger views being as the simultaneous occurrence of what he terms the self-concealing earth and the self-unconcealing world. Rather than an irresolvable dichotomy between essence and existence, it is this intermingling and strife between self-concealment and self-unconcealment that leads to our incomplete perception, an incompleteness which in turn motivates us to falsely assume a dichotomy. By performing an exhaustive phenomenological reading of Van Gogh’s painting, Heidegger argues that the painting acts as a locus in which the processes of self-concealment and self-unconcealment not only occur but are also highlighted for the viewer to experience. Again, Heidegger’s insistence that painting may enable a perceptual awakening in its



viewers can be productively related to the similar role that Middle Eastern art historians ascribe to miniature painting.

Establishing the parallels between Ibn al-‘Arabī’s and Heidegger’s ontological thought opens up intriguing possibilities for a contemporary philosophical evaluation of Middle Eastern miniature art. These possibilities are particularly relevant to explore since, while Sufi and art historical primary sources from the Middle East establish a philosophical foundation for the art form of miniature painting, the sources do not evaluate particular works of art or how these works embody the general philosophical principles that underlie them. Modern scholarship on Middle Eastern art history contains some promising first steps in this regard but, to date, lacks the philosophical depth to even fully grasp miniature art’s grounding in Sufi thought, leave alone the compatibility between this thought and modern philosophical approaches. But if it is true that Sufi thinkers and Heidegger are building reasonably compatible ontologies and assigning similar roles to the work of art within these ontological frameworks, then we should be able to look at post-Heideggerian philosophy of art to provide us with ways of reading miniature paintings that would not have been incompatible with the ideas of Sufi thinkers themselves. In other words, phenomenologists following in Heidegger’s footsteps should be able to provide us with novel ways of reading miniature paintings that are not just interesting from our modern philosophical standpoint, but also valid from the perspective of Sufi philosophy in which these paintings were originally embedded.

The sixth chapter of this study, “Maurice Merleau-Ponty: Cézanne as Artist and Phenomenologist”, will take the step beyond Heidegger to explore the philosophy of art proposed by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, whose phenomenological outlook on painting is deeply informed by Husserl’s and Heidegger’s approaches. However, Merleau-Ponty goes much further than his philosophical predecessor Heidegger in assessing how exactly the work of painting—as both verb and noun—occurs. How does the painter perceive, how does she process this perception, and how is the perception, in turn, translated into a work of art? What is the relation between the work of art and that which was originally perceived by the painter? And how does the work of art go on to engender a new kind of perception on the part of its beholder? In his seminal essays, “Cézanne’s Doubt” and

“Eye and Mind”, Merleau-Ponty develops an elaborate philosophical way to talk about the enigma of perception and how this enigma is manifested in the work of art.

Through concepts such as the “narcissism of perception”, in which a network of perceptual reciprocity covers itself over all things perceiving and perceived to constitute a field of absolute perception, and through concrete examples such as the mirror, which are used to demonstrate the interwovenness of perceiver and perceived, Merleau-Ponty reinforces the philosophical bridge I wish to establish between Sufi and phenomenological thought. Further, Merleau-Ponty’s detailed account of perception as well as his attention to painterly techniques such as the employment of color and perspective equip us, I would argue, with a phenomenological toolkit that complements the understanding of miniature painting we reach through Sufi philosophy. Where Sufi thought gives us the broad ontological outlines of how the art of painting fits in with the self-manifestation of the absolute, Merleau-Ponty, by way of Heidegger, provides us with a series of more particular philosophical concepts and discussions of artistic techniques that help us understand how the miniature painter and the individual miniature painting may act as conduits for this self-manifestation.

I wish to emphasize at this point that I am not arguing for an indirect transmission of Sufi philosophical tenets into phenomenological thinking via the media of miniature painting and modern Western art. In no way do I wish to suggest that phenomenologists were, however indirectly, influenced by Ibn al-‘Arabī. Rather, I wish to highlight a parallelism in two philosophical approaches that share the project of dissolving a static, dualistic understanding of being and replacing it not with a simple monism, but with a complex intermingling of concealment and unconcealment, veiling and unveiling, invisible and visible. Intriguingly, both philosophical approaches view painting as a venue in which this intermingling manifests itself and as a means through which the perceptive capacities of the beholder may be opened up to the apprehension of this intermingling. The “smoking gun”, as it were, namely the direct connection between the two philosophical and painterly traditions respectively, lies in the transmission of certain key painterly techniques from miniature to Western art, techniques which were employed by both sides to undermine, expand, and recondition the beholder’s everyday perception of the world.

Further, I would like to stress that the present study is not intended to provide an internal critique of Sufi or phenomenological approaches to art. My aim is not to analyze whether any one of these approaches is logically consistent, philosophically convincing, or experientially verifiable. My interest lies less in the sustainability of the approaches in question than in their compatibility and complementarity in offering a philosophical take on art in general and painting in particular. Therefore, while the study will devote much attention to laying out the tenets of each approach and demonstrating the ways in which these may be brought into dialogue with each other, it will not concern itself with possible or actual criticisms of these approaches as philosophical systems of thought. I should also point out that when I refer to similarities between Sufi and phenomenological thought, this does not mean I believe the two sides to be maintaining the same thing. Rather, as stated above, my contention is merely that the approaches contain sufficient similarities to enable, on a practical level, their combined application to works of art in general and miniature painting in particular.

In conclusion, this study argues that by applying Heideggerian ontology and Merleau-Pontian phenomenology to miniature paintings, we arrive at an appreciation of these paintings that is not only much more nuanced than anything hitherto attempted in Sufi texts themselves or in Western scholarship on miniature art, but also, at the same time, at an appreciation that is philosophically compatible with the original framework provided for this art by thinkers in the orbit of Sufism. The conclusion demonstrates this argument by applying the Heideggerian concept of the “great work of art” to Middle Eastern illuminated manuscripts containing miniature paintings, and then going on to describe two particular miniature paintings through a combination of insights based on Sufi philosophy and phenomenology. These readings are kept brief and are only intended to showcase that Sufism and phenomenology can, indeed, join forces to bring us within touching distance of an exceptional art form often assumed to be historically, philosophically, and culturally out of reach.

## Chapter 1: Sufi Ontology: The Work of Muḥyiddīn Ibn al-‘Arabī

The Greek art is the Sufi way.

– Rūmī

In his story, “Chinese Art and Greek Art”, the Sufi philosopher Jalāladdīn Rūmī<sup>1</sup> (1207-1273) takes up the connection between Sufism and Ancient Greek philosophy.<sup>2</sup> The story is set in a royal court where Chinese and Greek painters are engaged in a quarrel concerning which side is more skillful. The king decides to solve the problem through a debate. However, when the Chinese painters start to talk, the Greeks remain silent and leave. The Chinese painters then suggest that each party be given a room where it can demonstrate its skills, whereupon a large room is divided into two by a curtain. The Chinese request hundreds of colours from the king, while the Greeks ask for no colours at all. While the Chinese paint, the Greeks clean and polish the walls on their side of the room. Once the Chinese have finished their painting, the king arrives in order to look at both artworks. The Greeks remove the curtain dividing the room, and the Chinese painting reflects on the polished Greek wall. The colours show themselves even more stunningly on the clean wall than on the one where they have been painted. According to Rūmī, “The Greek art is the Sufi way”: it is not simply based on the mastery of knowledge and skill, but on the purification of heart and soul.

For a deeper analysis of Rūmī’s message, we should turn to the writings of another prominent Sufi philosopher, namely Muḥyiddīn Ibn al-‘Arabī (1165-1240).<sup>3</sup> While Ibn al-‘Arabī was a prolific writer,<sup>4</sup> his ontology is succinctly expressed in his *Fuṣūṣ-ul-Ḥikam* (*The Bezels of Wisdom*), composed in 1230. Described as the work in which Ibn

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<sup>1</sup> Mawlānā Jalāladdīn Muhammad Balkhī (or Rūmī) was a Sufi mystic, poet, theologian, and jurist.

<sup>2</sup> Jalāladdīn Rūmī, *The Masnawi: Book One*, trans. Jawid Mojaddedi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 212-214.

<sup>3</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabī and Rūmī are widely regarded as the two pinnacles of Sufi thought, representing its philosophical and poetical expression, respectively. As Henry Corbin puts it, the Sufi tradition “is dominated by two great figures: Ibn ‘Arabi, the incomparable master of mystic theosophy, and Jalaluddin Rūmī, the [...] troubadour of that religion of love whose flame feeds on the theophanic feeling for sensuous beauty”. (Corbin, *Alone With the Alone: Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn ‘Arabi*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969: p. 110.)

<sup>4</sup> He is said to have composed up to 400 works (Toshihiko Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism: A Comparative Study of Key Philosophical Concepts*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004: p. 3).

al-‘Arabī “presents his thought in its maturest form”,<sup>5</sup> *The Bezels of Wisdom* outlines the philosopher’s ontology in twenty-seven chapters, each named after a particular prophet in the Abrahamic-Islamic tradition and illuminating an aspect of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s thought with reference to these prophets’ lives and messages. However, the work’s structure is far from systematic in the philosophical sense, instead relying on a scattering of related concepts that are repeated on hand of various examples throughout the text. The pedagogical goal of this expository style, one might assume, is to trigger unplanned mnemonic responses and elicit spontaneous flashes of mystical insight from the reader. For philosophical purposes, however, the core concepts in the text are in need of a major “reconstruction”, which will be attempted in this chapter.

Apart from its towering influence on Sufism, Ibn al-‘Arabī’s thought has been brought into connection with preceding, non-Islamic mystical traditions such as Kabbalah, Gnostic Christianity, and even Yoga Philosophy.<sup>6</sup> In return, Ibn al-‘Arabī’s work has been posited as an influence (even if indirect) on later strains of Western religious thought and literature, such as Dante’s *Divine Comedy*.<sup>7</sup> While the definite establishment (or disproof) of such connections awaits further scholarship, it is clear that Ibn al-‘Arabī, along with many other Sufi thinkers, was deeply influenced by the Platonic and Neoplatonic traditions.<sup>8</sup> As I trace his thought in this chapter, I will also make reference to these influences as appropriate.

Creating an outline of Sufi ontology as culled from the work of Ibn al-‘Arabī will enable me, in Chapters 2 to 4, to determine the extent to which the art of Middle Eastern miniature was influenced by this ontology. Further on, in Chapters 5 and 6, this survey of Sufi ontology will help me assess whether the philosophy of art formulated by Western

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<sup>5</sup> Izutsu, Toshihiko. *Sufism and Taoism: A Comparative Study of Key Philosophical Concepts*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004) p. 4.

<sup>6</sup> R. W. J. Austin, “Introduction”, in Muḥyiddīn Ibn al-‘Arabī, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, trans. R. W. J. Austin (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1980), p. 23. Austin even mentions that “an Arabic version of a Persian translation of a Sanskrit work on Tantric Yoga has been attributed to Ibn al-‘Arabi” (Austin, “Introduction”, p. 23).

<sup>7</sup> Austin, p. 15.

<sup>8</sup> The connection between Ibn al-‘Arabī and Platonic thought has been pointed out by Titus Burckhardt, who informs us that Ibn al-‘Arabī was also referred to as “Ibn Aflātūn” (Son of Plato) (Burckhardt, “Preface”, in Ibn al-‘Arabī, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. xiii). Various other scholars, such as R. W. J. Austin, Toshihiko Izutsu, and Michael Barry, note Ibn al-‘Arabī’s proximity to the Neoplatonic tradition (Austin, pp. 22-23; Izutsu, p. 154; Michael Barry, *Figurative Art in Medieval Islam and the Riddle of Bihzad of Herat (1465-1535)*, Paris: Flammarion, 2004: p. 299).

thinkers such as Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty in response to Western abstract art, in its own right influenced by Middle Eastern miniature art, offers noteworthy similarities to the thought of Ibn al-‘Arabī. Finally, in conclusion, I will argue that Ibn al-‘Arabī’s step beyond Platonic dualism has much in common with the way in which phenomenology attempts to overcome Cartesian dichotomies, opening the way for a fruitful philosophical cross-pollination roughly a century after the artistic cross-pollination between Middle Eastern miniature art and Western abstract art took place.

### 1.1. The Veiling/Unveiling Cosmos

To Ibn al-‘Arabī, the phenomenal world (the Cosmos) is the self-disclosure of the divine “mystery”, the hidden. The philosopher starts chapter 1 of *The Bezels of Wisdom* with the following statement:

The Reality wanted to see the essences of His Most Beautiful Names or, to put it another way, to see His own Essence, in all-inclusive object encompassing the whole [divine] Command, which, qualified by existence, would reveal to Him His own mystery. For the seeing of a thing, itself by itself, is not the same as its seeing itself in another, as it were in a mirror; for it appears to itself in a form that is invested by the location of the vision by that which would only appear to it given the existence of the location and its [the location’s] self-disclosure to it.<sup>9</sup>

Ibn al-‘Arabī states that the Divine as transcendence is beyond human cognition: he calls it “the Mystery of Mysteries”<sup>10</sup> or the “Absolute Mystery” (*ghayb mutlaq*).<sup>11</sup> This aspect of the Divine is the aspect of stillness; it involves no self-manifestation (*tajalli*) of the Divine. In fact, the Divine cannot manifest itself in its absoluteness; it transcends all relations and escapes all cognition/definition. At this stage, the Divine even transcends the concept of “God” (*Allah*), which only acquires meaning in relation to the concept of creation (*khalq*).<sup>12</sup> But since, as Toshihiko Izutsu puts it, “one cannot talk about anything

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<sup>9</sup> Muḥyiddīn Ibn al-‘Arabī, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, trans. R. W. J. Austin (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1980), p. 50.

<sup>10</sup> Izutsu, p. 11.

<sup>11</sup> Izutsu, p. 31.

<sup>12</sup> Austin, p. 30.

at all without linguistic designation, Ibn al-‘Arabī uses the word *haqq* (which literally means Truth or Reality) in referring to the Absolute”.<sup>13</sup>

To Ibn al-‘Arabī, “Contemplation of the Reality without formal support is not possible, since God, in His Essence, is far beyond all need of the Cosmos. [...] Therefore, some form of support is necessary”.<sup>14</sup> In order to become knowable, the unknowable needs to manifest itself. This manifestation takes place through the phenomena, which serve to make the hidden mystery visible.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, though, the phenomena function as veils (*hijab*) that hide the mystery. As Ibn al-‘Arabī puts it,

The Reality has described Himself as being hidden in veils of darkness, which are the natural forms, and by veils of light, which are the subtle spirits. The Cosmos consists of that which is gross and that which is subtle and is therefore, in both aspects, the veil [covering] its true self. For the Cosmos does not perceive the Reality as He perceives Himself, nor can it ever not be veiled.<sup>16</sup>

The veiling function of the phenomena, however, should not make them appear as obstacles that prevent one from perceiving the reality. Rather, this function should be seen as an acknowledgement that the particulars’ very particularity makes it impossible for them to grasp the reality in its undifferentiated form. Ibn al-‘Arabī takes recourse to the metaphor of the mirror to describe the way in which the reality is perceived by the particulars *by way of* the particulars:

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<sup>13</sup> Izutsu, p. 23. Unfortunately, the subtle distinction between *Haqq* and *Allah* is often lost in translation. Thus, the Arabic word *Haqq* is sometimes inconsistently rendered by Izutsu and Austin as “Reality” and “God” when translating the same passage (see Ibn al-‘Arabī, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 52 [translation by Austin as “Reality”] and Izutsu, p. 32 [translation by Izutsu as “God”]). Since I am drawing on both commentators and translators, my usage of the two words will be somewhat interchangeable. Whether I am referring to the “Absolute Mystery” or the “Creator” should, however, be clear from the context.

<sup>14</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabī, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 275.

<sup>15</sup> At this juncture, Izutsu notes both a similarity and a difference between Ibn al-‘Arabī and Plotinus. As Izutsu puts it, “Ibn ‘Arabi uses the Plotinian term ‘emanation’ (*fayd*) as a synonym of *tajalli*. But ‘emanation’ here does not mean, as it does in the world-view of Plotinus, one thing overflowing from the absolute One, then another from that first thing, etc., in the form of a chain. ‘Emanation’, for Ibn ‘Arabi, simply means that the Absolute itself appears in different, more or less concrete forms, with a different self-determination in each case” (Izutsu, p. 154).

<sup>16</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabī, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 56.

A divine Self-revelation [...] occurs only in a form conforming to the essential predisposition of the recipient of such a revelation. Thus, the recipient sees nothing other than his own form in the mirror of the Reality. He does not see the Reality Itself, which is not possible, although he knows that he may see only his [true] form in It. As in the case of the mirror and the beholder, he sees the form in it, but does not see the mirror itself, despite his knowledge that he sees only his own and other images by means of it.<sup>17</sup>

The mirror, while making us visible to ourselves, becomes invisible itself. According to Ibn al-‘Arabī, a phenomenon is both a mirror and the image reflected onto it; an unveiling veil. In order to *see* the image reflected we need to *not see* the mirror itself.

The relationship between the manifest and the unmanifest is also explored by Ibn al-‘Arabī through the concepts of dream (or imagination, *khayal*) and reality. According to him, the world of phenomena is a dream state, divorced from what he calls reality. As he puts it, “you are an imagination, as is all that you regard as other than yourself an imagination. All existence is an imagination within an imagination, the only Reality being God, as Self and the Essence”.<sup>18</sup> As long as one revels in the world of particulars and severs ties with the hidden reality, the dream is a nightmare that repeats itself over and over again in a vicious circle.

However, as we have seen, the phenomena serve to both veil and unveil. Consequently, Ibn al-‘Arabī sees the dream state as containing important symbols that might lead one to the reality or the origin of the dream. According to him, the phenomenal world needs to be interpreted, just as one would interpret dreams, in order to reveal the truth it conceals. As he puts it, “When Muhammad said, ‘All men are asleep and when they die they will awake’, he meant that everything a man sees in this life is of the same kind as that which one sleeping sees; in other words an apparition that requires

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<sup>17</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabī, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 65.

<sup>18</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabī, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 125. According to Austin, the reference to an “imagination within an imagination” should be taken to mean that Ibn al-‘Arabī regards the Cosmos as a kind of “divine dream”, so that human perception is a dream within this larger, divine dream (Austin, p. 119).



interpretation”.<sup>19</sup> “The interpreter”, Ibn al-‘Arabī adds, “proceeds from the form seen by the dreamer to the form of the thing in itself, if he is successful”.<sup>20</sup> In fact, one can only reach the truth hidden behind the phenomena through such interpretation (*ta’wil*).<sup>21</sup>

As an example of failed interpretation, Ibn al-‘Arabī offers the vision in which the prophet Abraham was urged by God to sacrifice his son. “Had he been true to the vision”, Ibn al-‘Arabī states, “he would have killed his son, for he believed that it was his son he saw although with God it was nothing other than the Great Sacrifice in the form of his son”. This, to the philosopher, constitutes a failure on the prophet’s part: “He did not interpret what he saw, but took it at its face value, although visions require interpretation”.<sup>22</sup>

Ibn al-‘Arabī’s view of the phenomenal world as a ‘dream world’ does not imply a devaluation of the ‘dream world’ as somehow ‘unreal’ or ‘less real’ than the reality.<sup>23</sup> As we shall see further below, the difference between the dream state and reality is that the former consists of individuals and particulars, subjects and objects, things that are distinct from each other, whereas in the latter, everything is united and one. We are not talking about two different worlds here, but rather two different perspectives on the same world: ultimately, to Ibn al-‘Arabī, dream and reality are only two aspects of the same unity. Awakening, then, means to comprehend the reality of existence in its totality, from which perspective particularity and individuality appear like a dream.

In yet another way, the veiling function of phenomena is as important as their function of unveiling or manifestation, since none of the particulars could bear experiencing the overwhelming reality of the hidden mystery in the absence of the phenomenal veil. A *hadith* quoted by Izutsu perfectly illustrates this point: “God hides Himself behind seventy thousand veils of light and darkness. If He took away these veils,

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<sup>19</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabī, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 196-197.

<sup>20</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabī, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 121.

<sup>21</sup> Michael Barry links Ibn al-‘Arabī’s concept of the dream to the Neoplatonic influence on Sufi thought: “Sufism’s well-known Neoplatonic strain, here as elsewhere, dwells on the visionary experience as a mystical rapture that yields, through night and its attendant sleep and dreams, true perception of the realities that lie beyond daylight’s veil of the waking senses” (Barry, p. 299).

<sup>22</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabī, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 99.

<sup>23</sup> As Izutsu puts it, “In Ibn ‘Arabi’s view, if ‘reality’ is an illusion, it is not a subjective illusion, but an ‘objective’ illusion; that is, an unreality standing on a firm ontological basis. And this is tantamount to saying that it is not an illusion at all, at least in the sense in which the word is commonly taken” (Izutsu, p. 11).

the fulgurating lights of His face would at once destroy the sight of any creature who dared to look at it”.<sup>24</sup>

In sum, the Divine is involved in a continuous movement of veiling (self-concealment) and unveiling (self-disclosure). As Ibn al-‘Arabī puts it,

The Absolute [...] is nothing other than what comes out outwardly, whereas in the very moment of coming out outwardly it is what conceals itself inwardly. There is no one who sees the Absolute except the Absolute itself, and yet there is no one to whom the Absolute remains hidden. It is the Outward (i.e., self-manifesting) to itself, and yet it is the Inward (i.e., self-concealing) to itself.<sup>25</sup>

On one level, the immanent, phenomenal world is the self-manifesting aspect of this strife, while the transcendent Absolute is the self-concealing aspect. But as we have seen, there is a strife within the self-manifesting aspect of the Divine as well: it simultaneously unveils and veils the hidden.<sup>26</sup>

## 1.2. The Human Being as Mirror

“The Reality”, Ibn al-‘Arabī states, “gave existence to the whole Cosmos [at first] as an undifferentiated thing without anything of the spirit in it, so that it was like an unpolished mirror”.<sup>27</sup> Spirit enters the Cosmos by way of the human being: “Adam was the very principle of reflection for that mirror and the spirit of that form”<sup>28</sup>. In Ibn al-‘Arabī’s words, “his [man’s] outer form He composed of the cosmic realities and forms, while his

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<sup>24</sup> Izutsu, p. 32. The *hadith* is highly reminiscent of Friedrich Nietzsche’s remarks in *The Birth of Tragedy*, “The Greeks knew the terrors and horrors of existence, but they covered them with a veil in order to be able to live” (Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Ronald Speirs [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014], p.124).

<sup>25</sup> Translation by Izutsu, pp. 75-76.

<sup>26</sup> As we shall see further below, a similar thought is expressed by Martin Heidegger in “The Origin of the Work of Art”: “Truth is present only as the strife between clearing and concealing in the opposition between world and earth” (Martin Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art”, *Off the Beaten Track*, trans. and ed. Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002] p. 37).

<sup>27</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabī, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 50.

<sup>28</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabī, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 51.

inner form He composed to match His Own form”.<sup>29</sup> A key concept Ibn al-‘Arabī uses to describe human beings is that of *barzakh*, or isthmus. The isthmus, as R. W. J. Austin describes, is the “essential link between the Creator and His creation, that all-important medium by which God perceives Himself as manifested in the Cosmos, and by which the Cosmos recognizes its source in God”.<sup>30</sup>

Human beings are also described by Ibn al-‘Arabī as the microcosm of the universe, or of the Divine: “God has put into this noble epitome, the Perfect Man, all the Divine Names and the realities of all things existing outside of him in the Macrocosm which (apparently) subsist independently of him”.<sup>31</sup> Just as the Divine has two faces, namely the light (immanence) and the darkness (transcendence),<sup>32</sup> human beings also have two faces, one visible and one invisible. Their visible body dwells in the realm of perception, while their invisible aspect, the soul or mind, belongs to the realm of reason. It is the addition of reason or consciousness that enshrines human beings’ perfection as microcosm. In Izutsu’s words, “Man [...] not only synthesizes all the forms of the Divine self-manifestation which are scattered over the world of Being, but also is conscious of this whole. This is why a true comprehensive unity is established by Man, corresponding to the Unity of the Absolute. Man is in this sense the *Imago Dei*”.<sup>33</sup> Because they are the perfect microcosm, human beings can mirror the Divine (the universe) as no other phenomenon can.

Ibn al-‘Arabī’s division of the Cosmos into visible and invisible is actually part of a more detailed scheme in which creation is divided into five planes (*hadarat*) of being, which take their cue from Plato’s analogy of the divided line. Ibn al-‘Arabī’s planes are summarized by his disciple, Al-Qāshānī,<sup>34</sup> as follows:

- The plane of the Essence (*dhat*), of absolute non-manifestation (*al-ghayb al-mutlaq*), roughly corresponding to Plato’s “Good”. This is the only one of the planes that stands outside manifestation.

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<sup>29</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabī, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 56.

<sup>30</sup> Austin, p. 206.

<sup>31</sup> Translation by Izutsu, p. 226.

<sup>32</sup> Austin, p. 120; Izutsu, p. 62.

<sup>33</sup> Izutsu, p. 222.

<sup>34</sup> ‘Abd al-Razzāq Qāshānī (d. 1330).

- The plane of the Attributes and the Names or of the Intellects (*'uqul*), roughly corresponding to Plato's "Ideas" or "Forms". The "Names" denote Ibn al-'Arabī's concept of "Permanent Archetypes" (*a'yan thabitah*), in which all phenomenal existence is prefigured in archetypal form.
- The plane of Actions or Spirits (*arwah*), roughly corresponding to Plato's "mathematical truths".
- The plane of Images (*amthal*) and Imagination (*khayal*), roughly corresponding to Plato's "images". This plane is regarded as an intermediate realm between the purely sensible and purely spiritual worlds.
- The plane of Senses and Sensible Experience (*mushahadah*), corresponding to Plato's "objects". This is the only purely material plane in the scheme.<sup>35</sup>

Plato and Ibn al-'Arabī share the conviction that the lower planes are symbols of the higher planes,<sup>36</sup> and while the human being's body is related to the two lowest planes of existence, its invisible component is related to the remaining, higher planes.<sup>37</sup>

Still, Sufism does not advocate a renouncement of the body in favour of the mind/soul, but rather a unification of the two. This is highlighted by the favorable way in which Ibn al-'Arabī compares human beings to animals and angels, the former of which stand for the body without intellect,<sup>38</sup> and the latter for the disembodied intellect.<sup>39</sup> Humans are superior to animals because of their minds and superior to the incorporeal angels because of their bodies. As Austin puts it, "Islam, in keeping with the spirit of all major religious traditions, sees the human state as a special one, being as it is microcosmic, which is to say that it reflects both cosmic and divine realities, part angel,

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<sup>35</sup> Izutsu, p. 11-12.

<sup>36</sup> Izutsu, p. 11-12.

<sup>37</sup> Plato's thoughts on the divided line are expressed in the *Republic*. "Do you understand these two kinds, visible and intelligible?" Socrates asks here. "Represent them, then, by a line divided into two unequal sections. Then divide each section—that of the visible kind and that of the intelligible—in the same proportion as the line". The philosopher then goes on to describe the sections of the line, as outlined in the text above (Plato, *Republic*, trans. C. D. C. Reeve. Indianapolis: Hackett, 2004. p. 205-206).

<sup>38</sup> Ibn al-'Arabī talks of the prophet Elias as having to "descend from the realm of his intellect to that of his lust until he becomes pure animal" in order to grasp the divine not only in its transcendence, but also in its immanence (Ibn al-'Arabī, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 235).

<sup>39</sup> "The angels were only certain faculties of that form which was the form of the Cosmos", Ibn al-'Arabī states. They "do not enjoy the comprehensiveness of Adam and comprehend only those Divine Names peculiar to them" (Ibn al-'Arabī, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 51-52).

part animal”.<sup>40</sup> When humans perceive, they do not perceive like a body without mind or a mind without body, but as a unity of body and mind. This explains Sufism’s theoretical emphasis on the manifestations of the Divine as well as the plethora of applied rituals central to Sufi culture, such as music and dance.<sup>41</sup> Ultimately, then, Sufism holds to a unified rather than divided view of body and soul.<sup>42</sup>

Such unity, however, cannot be taken for granted; it must first be achieved. Otherwise, humans’ bodies will continue to act as “particularizers” in the phenomenal world, while their invisible aspect, their reason, will also particularize them by creating dichotomies in its quest to make the unknowable knowable, to understand the hidden reality. In Ibn al-‘Arabī’s words, “The intellect restricts and seeks to define the truth within a particular qualification, while in fact the Reality does not admit of such a limitation”.<sup>43</sup> Al-Qāshānī elaborates as follows:

The “self-manifester”, the locus of self-manifestation, the act of self-manifestation, the being of the self-manifester a self-manifester and the being of the locus a locus, etc. [...] are all notions conceived by our discriminating Reason, the distinctions existing only in our Reason. [...] There is nothing in Being except God!<sup>44</sup>

The only way for a human being to catch a direct glimpse of reality is through the mystical experience of “self-annihilation” (*fana*), in which the dichotomy of body and

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<sup>40</sup> Austin, p. 206.

<sup>41</sup> As an example of a Sufi prayer ritual (*dhikr*, literally “remembrance” of God) that emphasizes the body, one may list the whirling of the Mawlawi dervishes, which is still practiced by followers of this religious order today. Through their bodies, the dervishes free their minds; through the union of the mind and body, they aim at achieving mystical union with the universe. Once again, one is reminded of Nietzsche and *The Birth of Tragedy*: “In the Dionysiac dithyramb man is stimulated to the highest intensification of his symbolic powers; something that he has never felt before urgently demands to be expressed: the destruction of the veil of maya, one-ness as the genius of humankind, indeed of nature itself” (Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 21).

<sup>42</sup> The absolute necessity of the body to spiritual achievement is pointed out by Ibn al-‘Arabī in the following passage about the prophet Moses: “The learning he acquired through the medium of his body, such as is obtained through the faculty of speculative thought, of sensation and imagination, [...] accrue[s] to the human soul only through the existence of the elemental body” (Ibn al-‘Arabī, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 252).

<sup>43</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabī, p. 150.

<sup>44</sup> Translation by Izutsu, p. 258.

mind is transcended. This experience is followed by the state of “subsistence” (*baqa*’), in which one’s self and appreciation of particulars is reinstated, albeit with the individual ego replaced by Divine Consciousness.<sup>45</sup> Only after such an experience and transformation do human beings come to attain their full potential and deserve the title “Perfect Man” (*al-insan al-kamil*).<sup>46</sup>

To return to the metaphor of the mirror, even if the Divine discloses itself most fully via the human being, if the human being is not willing or able to reflect a perfect image (*surah*) of the Divine, the disclosure cannot take place. The mirror of the human being must be polished to perfection before it can reflect the Divine.<sup>47</sup>

While the mystical experience of self-annihilation can be described as a metaphorical death, Sufism maintains that a permanent unity between the soul and the Divine, the perceiver and the perceived, or, one might say, the subject and the object, is only attainable in actual, physical death.<sup>48</sup> In most Sufi stories, the lasting unity of the soul and the Divine is only achieved after the death of the seeker. The story of Laylî and Majnun, treated at greater length below, is a good example of this. Majnun, the symbol of the soul, is searching for his beloved Laylî, the symbol of the Divine, in order to reunite with her. The unity is only achieved at the very end of the story, with the death of Majnun.<sup>49</sup>

This unity in death is described in one of Sufism’s most famous metaphors, that of the ocean and the drop of water, which explores the relationship between the Divine and the soul, or the Absolute and the particulars. Being is considered to be like an ocean, while its particular manifestations resemble drops of water. The moment one particular comes into existence, it is like a drop of water splitting off from the ocean, and the moment it loses its particularity and dies, it merges again with the ocean from which it

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<sup>45</sup> Izutsu, p. 44, 251, 266.

<sup>46</sup> Izutsu, p. 247.

<sup>47</sup> Austin reminds us that “Ibn al-‘Arabî was not thinking of the specially coated glass mirrors of our day, but rather of the highly polished metal mirror of his own time. [...] To begin with, such mirrors had to be kept polished in order to preserve their reflective qualities and, furthermore, it required great skill by the craftsman to make a perfectly flat surface” (“Introduction”, in Ibn al-‘Arabî, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 48).

<sup>48</sup> In this context, Ibn al-‘Arabî quotes a *hadith* recorded by Bukhari (LXXXI:38): “I do not hesitate in what I do as much as in taking the soul of My faithful servant. He hates death as much as I hate to hurt him; but he must meet Me” (p. 273).

<sup>49</sup> Jamāladdīn Nizāmī, *The Story of Layla and Majnun*, trans. Rudolph Gelpke (London: Bruno Cassirer, 1977).

originates.<sup>50</sup> When you look at their “essence”, a drop of water and the ocean are the same. One cannot claim that a drop of water carries less “truth” or “essence” than the ocean.<sup>51</sup>

### 1.3. The Mystical Journey

The ones who take the path of transcendence, to Ibn al-‘Arabī, are the prophet or the mystic, mirroring Plato’s idea of the philosopher-king.<sup>52</sup> They undertake the “Gnostic ascent”<sup>53</sup> through the planes of being until the final mystical experience occurs through what Al-Qāshānī describes as “unveiling” (*kashf*).<sup>54</sup> This “unveiling” of reality is illustrated by Rūmī through the metaphor of a wedding night. In traditional Islam, a man sees his bride, his beloved, for the first time on their wedding night. Similarly, the mystical experience takes place when the soul (the man) unveils the Divine (the woman/bride):

The state is the unveiling of the bride,  
The station’s being alone with her inside,  
For her unveiling’s seen by every guest  
But with the groom alone the bride will rest—  
The bride unveils for every onlooker  
But afterwards he lies alone with her!  
So many Sufis have enjoyed a state

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<sup>50</sup> As Rūmī puts it, “The drop of knowledge which You gave before / Unite now with your ocean, please, once more!” (Rūmī, *The Masnavi: Book One*, p. 117).

<sup>51</sup> In Izutsu’s words, “Each single thing is in itself a unique existent, and yet it is immersed in the limitless ocean of Life together with all the other existents. In the first aspect, everything is unique and single, but in the second aspect, everything loses its identity in the midst of the ‘water’ that flows through all” (Izutsu, p. 149).

<sup>52</sup> “As for the philosopher”, Plato maintains in the *Republic*, “what do you suppose he thinks of the other pleasures in comparison to that of knowing where the truth lies?” (Plato, p. 282).

<sup>53</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabī also depicts the Gnostic ascent by referring to the heavenly spheres, a scheme developed by Gnostic thinkers and co-opted by Sufism: “The most elevated [cosmic] position is that point round which the spheres revolve, which is the Sphere of the Sun where the spiritual form of Enoch resides. There revolve round it seven higher Spheres and Seven lower Spheres, being fifteen in all” (Ibn al-‘Arabī, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 84).

<sup>54</sup> Izutsu, p. 44.

But few know of the stations that await.<sup>55</sup>

Ibn al-‘Arabī views the Gnostic ascent from the lower planes to the highest as the journey of the soul yearning for its beloved, the Divine, from which it was separated through its birth.<sup>56</sup>

Sufism holds that anyone (with the right training) can achieve mystical knowledge through this journey and confront the primordial existence in “meeting the Divine”. Such mystical knowledge goes beyond the descriptive capacity of human language, limited, as it is, by reason and the phenomenal world. Therefore, it induces in the mystic a state of speechlessness. As Ibn al-‘Arabī puts it, “When God established me in this station, I realized my animality to the full. I saw things and I wanted to express what I saw, but could not do so, being no different from those who cannot speak”.<sup>57</sup> What makes a prophet different from regular mystics who complete the journey and the mystical circle is that the prophet is the only one who comes back with a message, making the invisible visible to the rest of humankind.<sup>58</sup> Prophets differ from regular mystics in that through their respective “messages”, they teach us different ways of perception or thinking. They teach us how to see, viz. how to think.<sup>59</sup>

One Sufi story describes the mystical journey by way of a physical journey undertaken by a Sufi from the East to the West, from home to the foreign, from the higher world in which the sun rises to the lower world in which it sets. The story, told in the *Canticle of the Birds* by Farīduddīn ‘Aṭṭār (ca. 1110-1221), introduces a well-respected sheikh, named San’an, who has many disciples.<sup>60</sup> Whenever a disciple asks him to give an example of the Divine, a glimpse of it at least, San’an tends to say that the Divine is “not this” or “not that”. Instead of giving an affirmative description, he resorts to negations. One day, the sheikh dreams that he should take a journey to the West, to the

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<sup>55</sup> Rūmī, *The Masnavi: Book One*, p. 90.

<sup>56</sup> “He said, ‘and my solace was made to be in prayer’, which means seeing the Beloved, which brings solace to the eye of the lover” (Ibn al-‘Arabī, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 282).

<sup>57</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabī, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 235.

<sup>58</sup> “By prophet I mean the bringer of Sacred Law” (Ibn al-‘Arabī, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 66).

<sup>59</sup> Still, as Izutsu puts it, “Even God cannot describe himself in words without delimiting himself” (p. 56).

<sup>60</sup> Farīduddīn ‘Aṭṭār, *The Canticle of the Birds, Illustrated Through Eastern Islamic Paintings*, ed. Diane de Selliers (Paris: Editions Diane de Selliers, 2014), p. 138-165.



Rome of the East, Constantinople. Following this command, he sets out, accompanied by some of his disciples.

Upon arriving in Constantinople, he catches a glimpse of a Christian princess, immediately falling in love with her. His disciples are in shock on account of seeing their old, wise master in love with such a seemingly unsuitable object of desire. At first, the Christian princess rejects the love of the sheikh. After he stages many attempts to gain her affections, she decides to test his love and has him carry out a variety of tasks, such as drinking wine, herding swine, and even burning a copy of the Koran. Scandalizing his disciples, he performs all these demeaning tasks forbidden in Islam.

In the end, the Christian princess is so impressed by the sheikh that she converts to his religion. She ends up dying in his arms, whereupon the sheikh returns home to the East. Through this journey, he has completed the mystical circle. The story maintains that unless the Sufi makes the journey from home to the foreign, thereby becoming homeless, it is impossible to perform the homecoming through which the mystical circle is completed.

In the story of Sheikh San'an, we encounter a Sufi mystic who starts out by approaching the Divine as unmanifest (transcendence) and later complements this understanding through an experience of the Divine as manifest (immanence). As Michael Barry puts it, “Attar’s parable implies that his Arabian cleric—a walking caricature of the smug orthodox ordinary Muslim—remained far too content in his spiritual arrogance to worship only the invisible or Transcendental God in Mecca. This is why a divine voice urged this very cleric to travel humbly to Christian Byzantium, in order to learn there the secret of the Immanent God made visible through Creations’ lovely forms or manifest ‘icons’”. In the end, Barry concludes, “Attar’s cleric finally attains complete wisdom by perceiving God as both Transcendent and as Immanent, and the Greek princess falls at his feet in turn”.<sup>61</sup>

This tale contains Sufism’s take on the three Abrahamic religions. At first, the sheikh only knows one aspect of God, which is the hidden, the dark, the absolute Other, as exemplified by the Judaic God found in the writings of Moses Maimonides, a God

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<sup>61</sup> Barry, p. 127-128.

who can only be described *via negativa*.<sup>62</sup> A major difference between Judaism and Christianity is the latter's strong emphasis on God as manifested. Christ, as divinity incarnate, is the prime example of this. The emphasis on the manifested is reflected in the significant role that paintings depicting the Divine have played in Christianity (and, specifically, Christian churches) in contrast to the other Abrahamic religions. Via his journey, the sheikh learns from Christianity that God is not only darkness but also light, manifesting itself through creation.<sup>63</sup>

Sufism, I believe, tries to achieve a kind of unity between the Judaic and Christian approaches. Sufis' description of Muḥammad as the "Seal of the Prophets"<sup>64 65</sup> can be read to mean that, by combining the two worldviews of God as manifest and unmanifest, they consider themselves to have "sealed" the philosophical route opened up by the Abrahamic tradition. As Izutsu puts it, "According to Ibn 'Arabī, the ideal combination of *tanzih* [transcendence] and *tashbih* [immanence] was achieved only in Islam".<sup>66</sup>

#### 1.4. Beyond Dichotomies

When we look at the ontology of Ibn al-'Arabī, we see that his highest aim is to attain the ultimate truth, which is the unity of the Divine and the soul, darkness and light, or, one might say, noumena and phenomena. The concept of unity helps Ibn al-'Arabī overcome a dichotomy between the Judaic and Christian traditions, takes him beyond Platonic

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<sup>62</sup> In Maimonides' words, "As everyone is aware that it is not possible, except through negation, to achieve an apprehension of that which is in our power to apprehend and that, on the other hand, negation does not give knowledge in any respect to the true reality of the thing with regard to which the particular matter in question has been negated—all men, those of the past and those of the future, affirm clearly that God, may He be exalted, cannot be apprehended by the intellects, and that none but He Himself can apprehend what he is, and that apprehension of Him consists in the inability to attain the ultimate term in apprehending Him" (Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, vol. 1, trans. Shlomo Pines [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963], p. 139).

<sup>63</sup> Ibn al-'Arabī takes the "blasphemy" promoted in this story even further. To him, if the Divine is truly to be found in every Cosmic phenomenon, all ways of worshiping the Divine must be equally legitimate. Anyone who sees the world like this, the philosopher states, "would allow to every believer his belief and would recognize God in every form and in every belief" (p. 283).

<sup>64</sup> Ibn al-'Arabī, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 272.

<sup>65</sup> According to Izutsu, Ibn al-'Arabī also sees Muhammad as the "Seal of the Prophets" in a more ontological sense that goes back to the thought of Plotinus. As Izutsu puts it, "Muhammad, as the Perfect Man on the cosmic level, is the first of all self-determinations (*ta'ayyunat*) of the Absolute. Theologically, it is the first 'creature' of God". In this sense, Muhammad "corresponds almost exactly to the Plotinian First Intellect" (Izutsu, pp. 236-237).

<sup>66</sup> Izutsu, p. 62.

dualism into the realm of Neoplatonism, and, as will be argued further below, renders his thought incompatible with the dualistic Cartesian worldview.

Throughout *The Bezels of Wisdom*, Ibn al-‘Arabī explicitly draws back from the temptation of dualism in whatever guise it may appear, and the guises are indeed many. About the dichotomy between Creator and created, he has the following to say:

When you consider His saying, “I am his foot with which he walks, his hand with which he strikes, and his tongue with which he speaks”, and all the other faculties and members in which they are situated, why do you make the distinction by saying it is all the Reality, or it is all created? It is all created in a certain sense, but it is also the Reality in another sense.<sup>67</sup>

The dichotomy between transcendence and immanence is rejected in an equally summary fashion:

The intellect, by itself, absorbing knowledge in its own way, knows only according to the transcendental and nothing of the immanent. It is only when God acquaints it with His Self-manifestation that its knowledge of God becomes complete, seeing Him as transcendent when appropriate, and as immanent when appropriate.<sup>68</sup>

Ibn al-‘Arabī has no patience for the dichotomy between the observer and the observed, either:

Positing something other than what is looked on, thus establishing a relation between two things, the observer and the thing observed, nulli[fies] the Unity, although [in reality] only He sees Himself alone

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<sup>67</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabī, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 150. The quoted *hadith* is Bukhari LXXXI:38.

<sup>68</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabī, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 230.

through Himself. Here also there would appear to be observer and observed [but both are He].<sup>69</sup>

Once we have left behind the idea of duality, the idea of multiplicity must naturally be abandoned as well. In Ibn al-‘Arabī’s words,

The perfect gnostic is one who regards every object of worship as a manifestation of God in which He is worshiped. They call it a god, although its proper name might be stone, wood, animal, man, star, or angel. Although that might be its particular name, Divinity presents a level that causes the worshiper to imagine that it is his object of worship. In reality, this level is the Self-manifestation of God to the consciousness of the worshiper in this particular mode of manifestation.<sup>70 71</sup>

One of the most challenging dichotomies addressed in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s work is that between male and female. At first glance, it would appear that a clear hierarchy is involved: woman is created from man just as the Cosmos is created from the Absolute. In Ibn al-‘Arabī’s words, “God drew forth from him a being in his own image, called woman, and because she appears in his own image, the man feels a deep longing for her, as something yearns for itself, while she feels longing for him as one who longs for that place to which one belongs”.<sup>72</sup> Activity, in this scheme, is afforded to the male, while the female is associated with passivity.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabī, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 107.

<sup>70</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabī, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 247.

<sup>71</sup> The idea of oneness in multiplicity finds its classic exploration in Plotinus: “So then, being together with all things, we are those: so then, we are all and one. So therefore when we look outside that on which we depend we do not know that we are one, like faces which are many on the outside but have one head inside. But if someone is able to turn around, either by himself or having his hair pulled by Athene herself, he will see God and himself and the All; at first he will not see as the All but then, when he has nowhere to set himself and limit himself and determine how far himself goes, he will stop marking himself off from all being and will come to all the All without going out anywhere, but remaining there where the All is set firm” (Plotinus, *Enneads VI. 1-5*, Trans. A. H. Armstrong. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988. p. 339-341).

<sup>72</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabī, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 274.

<sup>73</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabī, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 275.

Ultimately, however, Ibn al-‘Arabī turns this dichotomy on its head as well, associating the feminine with the Divine by describing the creation of the Cosmos as an act of giving birth. Creation, to the philosopher, may be likened to a divine exhalation, described as the “Breath of the Merciful” [*nafas al-rahman*]. The remarkable thing about this metaphor is that the word *rahmah* [mercy] is derived from the word *rahim* [womb].<sup>74</sup>

In the final chapter of *The Bezels of Wisdom*, Ibn al-‘Arabī goes to quite some length in emphasizing the feminine nature of the divine creative act. Starting from a *hadith* that quotes the Prophet Muḥammad as saying, “Of all the things of your world, three things have been made particularly dear to me, women, perfumes, and the ritual prayer”,<sup>75</sup> the philosopher stages a linguistic analysis, maintaining that the words for “woman” and “prayer” are feminine in Arabic, and that the common plural for the set of three, which should be masculine according to the rules of grammar, was also rendered feminine by the prophet.<sup>76</sup> Transforming this linguistic assessment into an ontological assertion, Ibn al-‘Arabī goes on to state that,

The man finds himself situated between an essence [i.e., the Divine Essence] which is his [ontological] source and a woman [i.e., his own mother] who is his [physical] source. Thus he is placed between two feminine nouns, that is to say, between the femininity of essence and the real [i.e., physical] femininity.<sup>77</sup>

Bringing the matter back to male-female relations in the human realm, one might say that women are the perfect manifestation of the feminine divine creative principle. Ibn al-‘Arabī concurs. When a man contemplates the beauty of a woman, the philosopher states, “It is none other than He whom he sees in her”.<sup>78</sup> “The Apostle [Muḥammad]”, he

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<sup>74</sup> Austin, pp. 28-29.

<sup>75</sup> Translation by Izutsu, p. 202.

<sup>76</sup> Austin, p. 271.

<sup>77</sup> Translation by Izutsu, p. 203.

<sup>78</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabī, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 274.

goes on, “loved woman by reason of perfect contemplation of the Reality in them”.<sup>79</sup> The Divine is both male and female, and both male and female are active and passive alike.

All these and other dichotomies are resolved by the philosopher in a *coincidentia oppositorum*<sup>80</sup> that is only accessible through the experience of “unveiling” but that, on the level of rational thought and language, only leaves the speaker with a set of contradictory and paradoxical statements:

You may say of Being what you will; either that it is the creation or that it is the Reality, or that it is at once the creation and the Reality. It might also be said that there is neither creation nor the Reality, as one might admit to perplexity in the matter, since by assigning degrees the difficulties appear.<sup>81</sup>

The idea of the oneness of being (*wahdah al-wujud*) is often explained by Sufis with reference to the Muslim confession of faith, “No God, But God” (*lā ’ilāha ’illā-llāh*). According to Sufism, while “No God” refers to the darkness or hidden Divine, “But God” refers to the light or unconcealed Divine. The Divine, however, is neither just the unconcealed nor just the concealed, but both at the same time. Ibn al-‘Arabī does not grant superiority to either aspect of the Divine. As he puts it, “The transcendent Reality is the relative creature, even though the creature be distinct from the Creator. The Reality is at once the created Creator and the creating creature. All this is One Essence, at once Unique and Many”.<sup>82</sup> To him, the reflection, the “image” in the mirror, is the visibility of the invisible; it is not a mere reflection of a thing in itself but the unmanifest itself in manifested form. Sufism, I believe, ultimately denies the distinction between the thing in itself (the essence) and phenomena. Phenomena already carry the very same odor (essence) as noumena.

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<sup>79</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabī, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 275. As Corbin puts it, “A mystic obtains the highest theophanic vision in contemplating the Image of feminine being, because it is in the Image of the Creative Feminine that contemplation can apprehend the highest manifestation of God, namely, creative divinity” (Corbin, p. 159).

<sup>80</sup> A term also employed by Izutsu (Izutsu, p. 153-154).

<sup>81</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabī, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 136.

<sup>82</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabī, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 87.

A Sufi metaphor illustrating this point is that of the candle and the mirror. Picture a chandelier with a mirror attached to it in order to augment the light given off by the candle. The candle, here, is seen as the Divine, and the mirror as the manifestation (specifically, the human soul).<sup>83</sup> Qualitatively, there is no difference between the light produced by the candle and that emanating from the mirror. A perfect reflection and the object reflected are the same; this is also the point of Rūmī's story about Greek and Chinese art.

### 1.5. Interdependence of Reality and Cosmos

Informed by the concept of oneness of being, Ibn al-'Arabī regards the relationship between the Reality and the Cosmos, the transcendent and the immanent, or the concealed and the unconcealed, not as one of a hierarchy with a superior Reality and an inferior Cosmos, but rather one of interdependence. First and foremost, the creator needs creation, and human beings in particular, in order to perfect the Divine Self-knowledge, which remains incomplete without knowledge of the Divine as manifested. In Ibn al-'Arabī's words, "The image of perfection is complete only with knowledge of both the ephemeral and the eternal, the rank of knowledge being perfected only by both aspects".<sup>84</sup>

Addressing the importance of human beings in particular, Ibn al-'Arabī maintains that "It is we who make Him a divinity by being that through which He knows Himself as Divine. Thus, He is not known until we are known".<sup>85</sup> Human consciousness acts as the intermediary through which the Divine perceives the Cosmos: "For the Reality, he is as the pupil is for the eye through which the act of seeing takes place. Thus he is called *insan* [meaning both man and pupil], for it is by him that the Reality looks on His creation".<sup>86</sup> Hence, the creator and human beings act as mirrors and even as nourishment for each other: "You are His nourishment as bestowing the contents of His Self-

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<sup>83</sup> Rūmī, *The Masnavi: Book One*, p. 196; *The Masnavi: Book Two*, trans. Jawid Mojaddedi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 105.

<sup>84</sup> Ibn al-'Arabī, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 257.

<sup>85</sup> Ibn al-'Arabī, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 92.

<sup>86</sup> Ibn al-'Arabī, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 51.

Knowledge, while He is yours as bestowing existence, which is assigned to you being assigned also to Him”.<sup>87</sup>

Ibn al-‘Arabī maintains that the very concept of a God or Lord is meaningless without the complementary concept of a servant, hence rendering the former dependent on the latter. “Divinity [*uluhiyyah*]”, he states, “implies and requires that which depends on it, just as Lordship requires servanthood, since neither would have any existence or meaning otherwise”.<sup>88</sup> And once the Lord-servant relationship has been established, the servants, through their actions, condition the responses of the Lord just as much as vice versa. As the philosopher puts it, “the whole Cosmos subjects, by circumstance, One Who cannot properly be called subjected, as He has said, ‘Every day He is busy with some matter’”.<sup>89</sup> This subjection of the Lord by the servant, or the Creator by the creation, is likened by Ibn al-‘Arabī to the responsibilities inevitably assumed by conscientious rulers on earth vis-à-vis their subjects: “Some kings strive for their own ends, while others realize the truth of the matter and know that by rank they are in subjection to their own subjects, because they recognize their power and right [to their service]”.<sup>90</sup>

The interdependence of essence and existence is also explored by Ibn al-‘Arabī through his concept of a “bipolar triplicity”.<sup>91</sup> According to this concept, creation can only take place in the form of a triplicity consisting of, as Austin puts it, “Essential Oneness, the urge to polarity, and the actual experience of bipolarity, which itself is eternally being resolved back into the Essence”.<sup>92</sup> This triplicity is bipolar in that it cannot simply exist on the part of the Creator, but must be mirrored in the creation as well. Ibn al-‘Arabī explains the creation’s participation in the bipolar triplicity as follows: “Its latent essence in its state of nonexistence corresponds to the Essence of its Creator, its ‘hearing’ [receptivity] to the Will of its Creator, and its compliance with the Creative Command to His saying [Word] *Be*”.<sup>93</sup> Therefore, the created, rather than being the passive recipient of creation is actively involved in bringing about its own creation: “In

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<sup>87</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabī, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 94.

<sup>88</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabī, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 148.

<sup>89</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabī, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 246. Ibn al-‘Arabī is here quoting Qur’an LV:29.

<sup>90</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabī, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p.246.

<sup>91</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabī, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 142.

<sup>92</sup> Austin, p. 140.

<sup>93</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabī, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 141.



truth, it was none other than the thing itself that brought itself into being from nonexistence when the Command was given”.<sup>94</sup>

A final point that demonstrates the issue of interdependence concerns the nature of creation as a process that is perpetual, constantly recurring, and, in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s own description, fundamentally unstable.<sup>95</sup> “Every Self-manifestation”, the philosopher maintains, “at once provides a creation and annihilates another. Its annihilation is extinction at the Self-manifestation, subsistence being what is given by the following Self-manifestation”.<sup>96</sup> This perpetual process of creation and annihilation is tied by Ibn al-‘Arabī to the concept of the “Breath of the Merciful”: “God is manifest in every Breath and [...] no Self-manifestation is repeated”.<sup>97</sup>

However, it would be wrong to view the “Breath of the Merciful” as establishing a temporal sequence. Ibn al-‘Arabī explicitly denies that any temporal priority can be attributed to the creator: “Although He is the First, no temporal priority may be attributed of Him. Thus He is called also the Last. [...] He is called the Last only in the sense that all reality, though reality be attributed to us, is His”.<sup>98</sup> We are talking, then, in Austin’s words, of a Cosmos that at each instant “is and is not, is manifest and latent, created and uncreated, is other and non-other in a timeless divine pulse, at once creative and noncreating”.<sup>99</sup> One of the poems interspersed by Ibn al-‘Arabī among his philosophical deliberations perfectly summarizes the matter of interdependence:

He praises me and I praise Him,

He worships me and I worship Him.

[...]

Where then is His Self-sufficiency,

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<sup>94</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabī, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p.141.

<sup>95</sup> “Evidence of the realities indicates that the act of creation, which occurs with the breaths eternally, constitutes an imbalance in Nature that might be called a deviation or alteration. [...] Harmony and equilibrium are everywhere sought, but never achieved. We are thus denied the rule of equilibrium” (Ibn al-‘Arabī, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 214).

<sup>96</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabī, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 155.

<sup>97</sup> Austin elaborates that “each inhalation represents the resolution of the Cosmos into the Essence, while each exhalation represents the creation of the Cosmos” (Austin, p. 146).

<sup>98</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabī, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 55.

<sup>99</sup> Austin, p. 146.

Since I help Him and grant Him Bliss?  
It is for this that the Reality created me,  
For I give content to His Knowledge and manifest Him.<sup>100</sup>

If the light/unconcealed and the darkness/concealed are not to be viewed as dichotomous and separate, and yet are somehow not the same, how are we to understand the relationship between them? I would propose the following approach: in talking about the inscrutable darkness of the Divine, Ibn al-‘Arabī, I believe, can be taken to view the Divine as potentiality, an infinite potentiality that can give birth to infinite numbers of self-manifestations or particulars. His words about the reality grounding these manifestations would then imply not a kind of independently existing ultimate reality, but rather the potentiality of creation. Therefore, I would argue, Sufism allows for the interpretation that there is no existence beyond existence. Beyond actuality, there is only potentiality.

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<sup>100</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabī, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 95.

## **Chapter 2: Art and Patronage in the Premodern Middle East**

In the following chapters, I will explore the interrelationship between Sufi philosophy as outlined above and art in the premodern Middle East. From the late Middle Ages onwards, a succession of Middle Eastern political rulers created and patronized highly developed artistic and cultural milieus in which practitioners of various arts, literati, and proponents of Sufi thought engaged in a fruitful cross-pollination of ideas and techniques. One of the results was the emergence of Middle Eastern miniature art, which, as we shall see, was deeply indebted to Sufi philosophy as exemplified by the writings of Ibn al-‘Arabi.

Chapter 2 will elucidate the ambiguous relationship between miniature art and court patronage, tracing the formative influence that the waxing and waning political fortunes as well as changing religious predilections of rulers had on miniature art. This overview will establish the necessary context for understanding the relationship between the art form and Sufi philosophy, which provided miniature art not only with its theoretical underpinning, but also with its religious *apologia*. Chapter 3 will demonstrate how, in a politico-religious environment that could easily turn hostile to the depiction of living beings, writers from the Safavid and Ottoman empires justified miniature art by drawing parallels between the lifestyles of Sufis and artists as well as establishing connections between this art and Sufi philosophy.

Once the connection between Sufism and miniature art has been established, I will move on to Chapter 4, which traces the historical transmission of miniature paintings to the West in the modern period and examines which aspects of the tradition were embraced and which parts were lost in translation. The Sufi philosophical thought underpinning and animating miniature paintings remained unknown to Western artists. Nonetheless, I will argue that the latter’s adaptation of certain formal aspects of the miniature tradition, in turn enabled by Sufi philosophy, facilitated the eventual emergence of a phenomenological philosophy of art in response to modern Western art.

The current chapter consists of some introductory sections on the primary sources at my disposal, an assessment of the miniature album as an art form in itself, some thoughts on the relationship between miniature art and patronage, a historical account of

the court milieus in which the most outstanding examples of this art were produced, and an assessment of the opportunities and perils accompanying a miniaturist's career. While not all of this material directly advances the main argument of my study, I found its inclusion necessary firstly because an appreciation of the connection between miniature art and Sufism cannot occur without sufficient knowledge of the social and historical context of the art form, and secondly because I have found the English-language secondary literature on miniature art to be woefully insufficient in providing such context. With a few exceptions,<sup>101</sup> this secondary literature mostly consists of painting catalogues with commentaries devoid of intellectual depth. It is with this caveat and alibi that I, as a scholar of philosophy, reluctantly embark upon this task more suited to a historian of the Middle East.

### 2.1. Middle Eastern Sources on Art

In exploring the interrelationship between court patronage, miniature art, and Sufi thought, I will draw heavily on three primary sources from the sixteenth century, namely Dūst Moḥammad's preface to the Bahram Mirza Album (1544), Qāḍī Aḥmad's *Gulistan-i Hunar* (Rose Garden of Art, 1596-97), and Mustafa Âlî's *Menakib-i Hunerveran* (Epic Deeds of Artists, 1587). These texts, the former two from the Safavid and the latter from the Ottoman Empire, are widely regarded as the most important primary sources on Middle Eastern miniature art available to modern scholars.<sup>102</sup>

The Bahram Mirza Album, a compilation of extraordinary calligraphy and miniature paintings, came into existence upon the request of the eponymous Bahram Mirza (1517-49), younger brother of the Safavid ruler Tahmasp (r. 1524-76). Around 1544, Bahram Mirza charged Dūst Moḥammad of Gawashwan (1531-64), a courtier and calligrapher, with the compilation of the album. In Dūst Moḥammad's words, Bahram

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<sup>101</sup> I have in mind works such as *Figurative Art in Medieval Islam and the Riddle of Bihzad of Herat (1465-1535)* by Michael Barry (Paris: Flammarion, 2004) and *Persian Painting: Five Royal Safavid Manuscripts of the Sixteenth Century* by Stuart Cary Welch (New York: G. Brazillier, 1976).

<sup>102</sup> Wheeler M. Thackston, *Album Prefaces and other Documents on the History of Calligraphers and Painters* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), p. 4; Esra Akin-Kivanç, *Mustafa 'Ali's Epic Deeds of Artists* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), p. 12-13. It should, however, be pointed out that "the number of sources still unpublished, and therefore not readily accessible for study, is greatly in excess of the material available in printed editions" (B. N. Zakhoder, "Introduction", in T. Minorsky (trans.), *Calligraphers and Painters: A Treatise by Qadi Ahmad, Son of Mir-Munshi* [Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Freer Gallery of Art Occasional Papers, 1959], p. 18).

Mirza's "exalted opinion inclined to this, that the scattered folios of past and present masters should be brought out of the region of dispersal into the realm of collectedness. In this regard the exalted command and sublime order was issued to this poor slave, miserable speck of dust, distracted sinner, Dost-Muhammad the Scribe".<sup>103</sup> Dūst Moḥammad's preface to this album, containing a brief but enlightening history of calligraphy and miniature painting as well as various assessments of artists working during the author's own time, is the oldest extant Middle Eastern primary source featuring a systematic account of the miniature tradition.<sup>104</sup>

Our second Safavid author, Qāḍī Aḥmad of Qum (dates unknown; last recorded date 1606), served as vezir to Ibrahim Mirza (1543-77), Safavid prince and son of the abovementioned Bahram Mirza. Qāḍī Aḥmad, whose main task at Ibrahim Mirza's court consisted of preparing and registering official documents,<sup>105</sup> authored various works of historiography and literature and has been characterized as "a man of letters and a scholar, rather than a professional calligrapher or artist".<sup>106</sup> While his occupation thus puts him at a somewhat greater distance to the arts than the calligrapher Dūst Moḥammad, Qāḍī Aḥmad is remarkable for having produced not merely a preface, but an entire volume on the history and practice of calligraphy, miniature painting, and other arts of the book.<sup>107</sup> Qāḍī Aḥmad confidently describes this volume as "a treatise [...] which may find a place in the flourishing *kitab-khana* [library] of the Shah of the World and the Khan of the Time, by the side of masters of writing and artists".<sup>108</sup>

The third primary source consulted here was penned by the bureaucrat and man of letters, Mustafa Âlî of Gallipoli (1541-1600), one of the most prominent historiographers of the Ottoman Empire. *Epic Deeds of Artists* is the first treatise on art by an Ottoman author; it became a very popular text that was copied out numerous times over the centuries, with some manuscripts owned by Ottoman sultans and high officials.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Thackston, *Album Prefaces*, p. 6-7.

<sup>104</sup> The album, including Dūst Moḥammad's preface, is preserved in the Topkapı Museum, Istanbul, Turkey.

<sup>105</sup> Zakhoder, "Introduction", p. 8.

<sup>106</sup> Zakhoder, "Introduction", p. 14.

<sup>107</sup> Qāḍī Aḥmad's work contains eight miniature paintings that have survived in various extant versions of the original manuscript (Zakhoder, "Introduction", p. 34-36).

<sup>108</sup> Minorsky, *Calligraphers and Painters*, p. 44.

<sup>109</sup> Akın-Kıvanç, *Mustafa 'Ali's*, p. 5-10.

Mustafa Âlî had enjoyed training in calligraphy and was an occasional patron of the arts, commissioning six miniature paintings for a copy of his *Nusretname* (Book of Victory), presented to Sultan Murad III ca. 1583. The sultan enjoyed the work enough to order a new, royal edition, for which forty-eight miniatures were to be produced in the royal studio with Mustafa Âlî supervising the whole effort. This project, occupying the better part of a year, provided Mustafa Âlî with much of the expertise underlying his *Epic Deeds of Artists*.<sup>110</sup> In contrast to the works of Düst Moḥammad and Qādî Aḥmad, *Epic Deeds of Artists* is marked by a decidedly worldly slant, frankly discussing matters such as exorbitant prices, forgeries, and frauds in the Ottoman art world. In Esra Akın-Kıvanç's words, "Ali's main motivation in composing the *Epic Deeds* was to enlighten the collectors and to inform the ruler and the powerful statesmen from an insider's perspective of what was really taking place in the art world under their very eyes".<sup>111</sup>

A comparative glance at the three texts quickly reveals the outlines of a literary genre, found in rudimentary form in Düst Moḥammad's Preface and fully fleshed out in Qādî Aḥmad and Mustafa Âlî.<sup>112</sup> This genre is that of the *tadhkira*, or anthology,<sup>113</sup> in which a prose text interspersed with poetry and divided into chapters serves to outline the (partly mythologized) history, careers of the main practitioners, major schools and styles, and contemporary developments in a given art of the book. The loose organizing principle is the mytho-chronological succession of artists ranging from the origins of the art form to the present day, with different arts treated separately. Qādî Aḥmad's and Mustafa Âlî's works, after a preface and an introduction, devote the bulk of their chapters to calligraphy, and use their final chapter to evaluate all other arts of the book, including not only miniature painting but also arts such as decoupage, gilding, and book binding. The following paragraph by Akın-Kıvanç gives a good summary of the established literary techniques employed by *tadhkira* writers:

In order to reinforce an idea, for example, they used poetry, metaphor, and allegory; cited previous authors who wrote on the same subject; told folk

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<sup>110</sup> Akın-Kıvanç, *Mustafa 'Ali's*, p. 24.

<sup>111</sup> Akın-Kıvanç, *Mustafa 'Ali's*, p. 112.

<sup>112</sup> Zakhoder, "Introduction", p. 17-18.

<sup>113</sup> Zakhoder, "Introduction", p. 26.

stories and anecdotes; or quoted Qur'anic excerpts and the Prophet Muhammad's traditions in Arabic as uncontested sources of authority. Writers often sought to establish unbroken and legitimate lines of historical achievement on a given subject by mentioning historical events and prominent figures as a backdrop to contemporary achievements. Finally, references to first-hand observations about people and events under discussion were another means through which *tadhkira* authors strove for increased credibility.<sup>114</sup>

Remarkably, aspects of the genre were so formalized that writers "made use of manuals intended for epistolary compositions containing quotations from Qur'anic verses, *hadith*, and sayings of saints and sages"<sup>115</sup> in order to flesh out their accounts or provide examples reinforcing their points.

It should be clear from the above that we are dealing here not with texts on the philosophy of art, or even the history of art, that would be recognizable as such in a modern Western context. Akın-Kıvanç states as much when maintaining that Mustafa Âlî's interest "centered primarily on artists' biographical profiles, while analyses of individual artistic styles and works remained largely the subject of oral discussions"<sup>116</sup> and further asserting that "a theory of art, for instance, was outside the scope of what he had set out to do".<sup>117</sup> Almost no individual art work is mentioned, leave alone analyzed in detail; techniques such as the usage of color or perspective are not discussed; and no systematic criteria are established for judging artistic quality. Nonetheless, through a careful perusal and organization of the material found in these volumes, it is possible to demonstrate the connection between Sufi thought and miniature art in a surprisingly detailed fashion, whether one is concerned with the practice, form, content, or intended effect of this art form.

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<sup>114</sup> Akın-Kıvanç, *Mustafa 'Ali's*, p. 116.

<sup>115</sup> Akın-Kıvanç, *Mustafa 'Ali's*, p.116.

<sup>116</sup> Akın-Kıvanç, *Mustafa 'Ali's*, p. 91.

<sup>117</sup> Akın-Kıvanç, *Mustafa 'Ali's*, p. 133.

## 2.2. The Album as an Integral Art Form

Any assessment of Middle Eastern miniature painting must start with the recognition that such paintings were rarely intended as stand-alone works of art. Rather, as the origin of the Bahram Mirza Album suggests, they were generally commissioned or compiled as parts of bound manuscripts. Often, such manuscripts were devoted to versified mythological stories, such as ‘Atṭār’s *Canticle of the Birds*, that served as allegorical illustrations of Sufi philosophical and mystical tenets. The miniature paintings, in such contexts, were used to drive home the most salient aspects of the allegory through depiction of crucial plot points.<sup>118</sup> And even when miniature paintings were compiled in order to exhibit the most outstanding exemplars of an era, school, or culture, the overall artistic and philosophical intent of the book was not abandoned. Qāḍī Aḥmad’s versified description of a compilation album commissioned by Ibrahim Mirza demonstrates the complete art work’s unity of intent:

Its beautiful pictures were of such a degree that  
From the point of view of cleanness and distinction  
Nothing but the soul would find a place in it.  
Because of the images of flowers and shapes of birds  
It was a Paradise unspoiled by the autumn wind.  
Thousands of its roses and tulips, stems and petals,  
Were immune from the harm of storms and hail.  
Youths represented with sunlike faces, in shame,  
Had closed their lips in their conversation.  
All of them united in war and peace,  
Not like the dwellers of the world full of hypocrisy and dishonor!  
Day and night companions of the same quarters,  
Men devoid of discord in their communion!<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> As a matter of fact, even the commonly used word for “album” had Sufi connotations. As Thackston puts it, the “Persian word for album is *muraqqa*’, which means ‘patched’ or ‘patchwork’. It is also the word for a dervish’s frock, which was expected to be patched to exhibit the dervish’s bond to poverty” (Thackston, *Album Prefaces*, p. vii).

<sup>119</sup> Minorsky, *Calligraphers and Painters*, p. 183-84.



The production of such albums, especially when commissioned by royal patrons, took the form of multi-faceted, expensive, and time-consuming artistic projects: one need only remember the year it took the Ottoman royal studio to produce a version of Mustafa Âlî's *Book of Victories* for the Sultan's library. Qāḍī Aḥmad devotes the following passage to the creation of the abovementioned Ibrahim Mirza Album:

In Holy Mashhad he [Ibrahim Mirza] put together an album (*muraqqa'*) of the writings of masters and paintings of Maulana Behzad and others. It was completed with the help of rare masters, skillful craftsmen, incomparable experts in writing, and peerless calligraphers. Indeed, such an arrangement was made and such an album showed its face, that every page of it was worthy of a hundred praises, nay every specimen of it merited one hundred thousand lauds.<sup>120</sup>

Reimagining the cooperation of a whole studio in the creation of an exceptional album, Stuart Cary Welch mentions the involvement of craftsmen who measured, colored, and gilded the pages' margins; others who painted colorful ornaments for chapter headings and major passages; experts whose sole occupation was the collection and grinding of pigments to be used as color; specialists in the production of glues; artisans who worked with leather and lacquer to create book bindings; and binders who sewed the manuscripts together.<sup>121</sup> In addition to the artistic effort expended in the studio, one should also bear in mind the complex supply chains that served to provide the various constituent materials of the manuscript, from paper to pigments, which could span a geographical breadth reaching from India to Egypt.

Obviously, the "book" resulting from such a feat of artistic and economic exertion cannot be comprehended in terms of the commodified object of mass production as which the average "book" appears to us today. These extraordinary and unique manuscripts possessed such a high material value that they were often exchanged as gifts between rulers; Akın-Kıvanç maintains that they were the "most valuable gifts following

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<sup>120</sup> Minorsky, *Calligraphers and Painters*, p. 183.

<sup>121</sup> Stuart Cary Welch, *Persian Painting: Five Royal Safavid Manuscripts of the Sixteenth Century* (New York: G. Brazillier, 1976), p. 11.

copies of the Qur'an. In palace inventories of gifts presented to the [Ottoman] Sultan and his princes, for example, illustrated copies of the *Shahnameh* and *Khamsa* [of the Persian Sufi poet Jamāladdīn Nizāmī] were listed before such gifts as precious stones, silk, and various luxury items made of gold and ivory".<sup>122</sup> With such high value placed on the album as a material object, it should come as no surprise that "fake albums" were produced as well, for sale to wealthy dabblers in art who were not knowledgeable enough to recognize the genuine article. Following Mustafa Âli, Akın-Kıvanç is careful to distinguish the album as an integral work of art from such "mix-and-match albums" that "destroyed not only the form but also the meaning of what once was art".<sup>123</sup>

Albums were as fragile as they were precious. As the political fortunes of their commissioners and owners faded, the albums themselves could meet tragic fates such as the one that befalls the Ibrahim Mirza album at the end of Qādī Aḥmad's account. When Ibrahim Mirza was killed by poison in the course of political rivalries, his wife Gauhar Sultan (1540-77) "washed out the album with water, although no one had seen a similar one and its price was tantamount to the *kharaj* (tax income) of a whole clime",<sup>124</sup> rather than see it fall into the hands of Ibrahim Mirza's political enemies. However, the final, lethal blow to the album as an integral work of art was dealt in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when the political, economic, and cultural penetration of Western colonial empires into the Middle East led to the acquisition (sometimes legal, sometimes not) of albums by Western art speculators who maximized their profits by dismembering them and marketing the individual pages as stand-alone works of art "signifying nothing but [their] own color and design".<sup>125</sup> This practice, of which I shall write more in Chapter 4, when discussing the transmission of miniature art to the West, has been described by Michael Barry as a "profitable artistic massacre".<sup>126</sup> To this day, many such pages are exhibited as individual "works of art" in museum collections and catalogues of miniature art.

This circumstance throws up a question that is crucial for my inquiry: must a philosophy of art that concerns itself with miniature painting take as its subject the album

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<sup>122</sup> Akın-Kıvanç, *Mustafa 'Ali's*, p. 97.

<sup>123</sup> Akın-Kıvanç, *Mustafa 'Ali's*, p. 100.

<sup>124</sup> Minorsky, *Calligraphers and Painters*, p. 184.

<sup>125</sup> Barry, *Figurative Art*, p. 38.

<sup>126</sup> Barry, *Figurative Art*, p. 38..

as a whole, or can there a valid philosophical approach to the individual paintings taken out of context? I believe that the answer lies in a combination of both approaches. On the one hand, the album serves an overall purpose that the miniature painting by itself cannot replicate. Often, the album is intended to enable a contemplation of Sufi principles and an opening of the mind that we may describe, to paraphrase Ibn al-‘Arabī, as a lifting of the phenomenal veil. To this purpose, each of the album’s parts plays a specific role: the miniature paintings act as visual guides while the accompanying story provides a textual one. Divorcing the paintings from this context weakens, if not destroys, their ties to the underlying Sufi philosophy and reduces them to examples of decorative art rather than enablers of an illuminative experience. Therefore, I believe that in regarding a miniature painting, one should also take into account, if possible, the album in which it is included. In this sense, the album as a whole, with its allegorical story, the Sufi philosophy behind it, its lines of poetry, and its paintings, is indeed one single, integral work of art.

On the other hand, it is also possible to compare the relationship between albums and miniature paintings to that between Catholic churches and the paintings they contain. While church paintings were commissioned for specific walls and specific purposes such as the depiction of key events from the gospels, many such paintings are now found in museums and other art collections rather than in the specific contexts of their original exhibition. This, however, has not stopped Western philosophers of art from engaging with these paintings in an innovative, fruitful manner and—under due consideration of context—arriving at interpretations that would have surprised or shocked the original creators and beholders of these paintings: one need only recall Gilles Deleuze’s philosophical readings of Christ portraits and assessment of Christian painting as having produced a “properly pictorial atheism”.<sup>127</sup> I believe that the same sort of decontextualization and reinterpretation can be staged with miniature paintings; not, however, without first having acquired an appreciation of their original contexts. Even if regarded as divorced from these contexts, I argue, miniature paintings afford the philosophical depth and possibilities of integral works of art. But just as modern philosophers approach works of art under consideration of cultural context (as Martin

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<sup>127</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, trans. Daniel W. Smith (London: Continuum, 2003), p. 9.

Heidegger does with Vincent van Gogh or Maurice Merleau-Ponty with Paul Cézanne—examples I will return to in Chapters 5 and 6), awareness of the cultural and artistic context of a miniature painting will enable us to “decode” it all the more effectively. If we may hold out hope to eventually step beyond the world of these paintings in our readings of them, we need to dwell in that world first.

### 2.3. The Role of Patronage

In light of the sheer expense incurred and value created in the production of an outstanding album, it is not surprising that the art form of miniature painting was inextricably connected to royal patronage or, at the very least, the munificence of prestigious and wealthy elites. There was no question of miniature art surviving and thriving in the hands of talented and motivated but poor and badly networked individual painters. For reasons I will discuss in detail below, religious patronage was also not an option. As Barry puts it, “In other traditional civilizations, such as medieval Christendom or the Buddhist lands, temples and monasteries commissioned figurative paintings and sculptures [...]. Not so in Islam, however, where figurative painting was produced almost exclusively for the court”.<sup>128</sup> Among the primary texts, it is Mustafa Âlî who makes the most explicit references to the role of court patronage in the development of the arts:

Let it not be hidden that, [among] artists and men of refinement, the pursuit of skill in their arts, the concentrated striving to increase their capabilities, the gradual emergence of perfected talent, and the serious expenditure of fruitful time and full commitment to hard work is facilitated through either the favor of rulers of abundant munificence or the unrestrained support of exalted viziers.<sup>129</sup>

Here, I wish to emphasize a point that is crucial to the assessment of our sources: it was not just painters who were dependent on court patronage for their careers and

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<sup>128</sup> Barry, *Figurative Art*, p. 51.

<sup>129</sup> Akın-Kıvanç, *Mustafa 'Ali's*, p. 194.

artistic output, but writers like Dūst Moḥammad, Qāḏī Aḥmad, and Mustafa Âlî as well. As mentioned above, all three of these authors were courtiers, occupying bureaucratic positions like scribe and vezir. Their literary works on the arts were not composed for the sake of producing knowledge, but to earn or maintain the favor of their courtly sponsors. Again, this is especially clear in the case of Mustafa Âlî, whose biography has been extensively studied by modern scholars.<sup>130</sup> In Akın-Kıvanç’s words, “at the time he composed the *Epic Deeds*, Mustafa Âlî was forty-four years old and had served three successive sultans (Sulayman I, Salim II, and Murad III) at all three levels of the administrative system [...] in various provinces of the [Ottoman] Empire from Bosnia to Erzurum”.<sup>131</sup> Mustafa Âlî, whose often bluntly critical writings made it difficult for him to obtain a reliable source of sponsorship, viewed this lack of sponsorship as a life-long impediment to his ambitions as an official and man of letters. Many of his major works, such as the *Epic Deeds of Artists*, were written to be presented to potential sponsors and help him obtain their favor. As Akın-Kıvanç remarks regarding the book’s gestation process, “still unemployed in his late forties, ‘Ali’s main concern [...] was not to create a series of magnum opuses; it was to attain a stable job”.<sup>132</sup>

In terms of the sources themselves, this means we need to distinguish carefully between a work such as the *Bezels of Wisdom* by Ibn al-‘Arabî and the *Epic Deeds of Artists*. Ibn al-‘Arabî lived the life of an itinerant Sufî mystic, drawing on patronage but equally quick to abandon it and move on if his position in a given locale became precarious for political or economic reasons. His career and travels spanned the breadth of the Islamic world from Andalusia to Anatolia, and his writings emerged not in the context of official commissioning and sponsorship, but as part of a wholly different discourse of divine spiritual inspiration. The content of his treatises was often intentionally provocative and controversial, with his legitimacy as a Sufî—or even Muslim—being debated to this very day. In stark contrast, writers like Dūst Moḥammad, Qāḏī Aḥmad, and Mustafa Âlî were fully beholden to their rulers and sponsors. As courtiers, their situation mirrored that of miniature painters themselves and can be

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<sup>130</sup> The authoritative volume on Mustafa Âlî’s life and work is Cornell H. Fleischer’s *Bureaucrat and Intellectual in the Ottoman Empire: The Historian Mustafa ‘Ali (1541-1600)* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1987).

<sup>131</sup> Akın-Kıvanç, *Mustafa ‘Ali’s*, p. 93.

<sup>132</sup> Akın-Kıvanç, *Mustafa ‘Ali’s*, p. 144.

summarized as an obligation to please and a dread of offending their patrons. Consequently, as we trace them below in their treatment of Sufi themes and concepts also tackled by Ibn al-‘Arabī, we should not be surprised to find them treading much more carefully and remaining much more beholden to an orthodox interpretation of faith and Sufi philosophy, than Ibn al-‘Arabī himself.

#### 2.4. Court Milieus

Welch and Barry trace patronage of the arts of the book in Islamic regions from at least the Mongol Ilkhanate (ca. 1256-1353) to the Indian Mughal Empire (ca. 1526-1857).<sup>133</sup> It is also from this context that the common description of miniature art as “Persian” or “Persianate” (as opposed to, say, “Islamic” or even “Arabic”) derives. As Barry puts it, “from the eleventh century AD and well into the eighteenth century, Persian replaced classical Arabic as the court of language of those Islamic countries stretching to the east of the Bosphorus and the Tigris, and as far as India”. Barry goes on to explain that “in these lands, Persian became the idiom of poetry and also of state archives and administration, even though Arabic remained the language of worship in the mosque”.<sup>134</sup> Miniature art can be seen as an expression of this “Persianized” cultural world that stretched as far as the Ottoman capital Constantinople/Istanbul, which, while engaging in cultural production in its own language of Ottoman Turkish, nevertheless turned to the Persian world as its cultural beacon.

In light of the period from which our primary sources hail and/or with which they are concerned, my observations on miniature painting will draw, for the most part, on courtly milieus established and dispersed from the fifteenth to the sixteenth century, during which the art form arguably experienced a “golden age” at the courts of Timurid, Safavid, and Ottoman rulers. Turning to the Timurids first, Akın-Kıvanç argues that Mustafa Âlî used “frequent references to the idealized Timurid court and to the legendary Timurid patronage of arts and sciences” in order to impress upon his Ottoman patrons the

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<sup>133</sup> Welch, *Persian Painting*, p. 11; Barry, *Figurative Art*, p. 27-28.

<sup>134</sup> Barry, *Figurative Art*, p. 27.

importance of supporting the literary and pictorial arts.<sup>135</sup> The following passage from Mustafa Âlî illustrates this idealized invocation of Timurid artistic milieu:

During the reign of Prince Baysunghur Khan [ca. 1397-1433], it was decided to preserve people from [spiritual] impoverishment by encouraging true poetry, by making calligraphers delight in beautiful writing, and through the consummate benevolence of the ruler, by bestowing the highest ranks and offices upon men of perfection. It is even accounted that, in his prosperous time, forty talented calligraphers in his service gathered in a school and paradise-like workshop, a joyous place famed like heaven, which would make a picture gallery envious.<sup>136</sup>

Mustafa Âlî goes as far as positing Baysunghur's court milieu in the Timurid capital of Herat<sup>137</sup> as the starting point of many arts of the book, including certain forms of miniature art itself: "It is clear that, fittingly, *nasta 'liq* [a style of calligraphy], gold-sprinkling, book repair, illustration, illumination, and decoration emerged from that time onward".<sup>138</sup> The city of Herat played an important role in the transition of political rule over the Persian heartlands from the Timurid (ca. 1370-1507) to the Safavid (ca. 1501-1736) dynasty. The city, which retained significant prestige as a provincial capital under the Safavids, served as a trans-imperially recognized political and cultural center, preserving and transmitting artistic traditions, schools, and individual masters of Timurid origin to the new Safavid rulers. Described by Barry as playing "a role as decisive in the course of Islamic art as, say, Florence, in the same age, in the evolution of Western art",<sup>139</sup> Herat was, among other things, the birthplace of the celebrated miniature artist Kamāluddīn Bihzād (ca. 1450-1535), about whom I will have much more to say below.

It was under the early Safavid rulers that miniature art can be said to have reached its zenith not merely in terms of accomplishment, but also official recognition and prestige. Boris Zakhoder states that "in [Safavid] Persia, as in no other medieval Muslim

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<sup>135</sup> Akın-Kıvanç, *Mustafa 'Ali's*, p. 108.

<sup>136</sup> Akın-Kıvanç, *Mustafa 'Ali's*, p. 206, with translation slightly amended by this author.

<sup>137</sup> Located in present-day Afghanistan.

<sup>138</sup> Akın-Kıvanç, *Mustafa 'Ali's*, p. 206.

<sup>139</sup> Barry, *Figurative Art*, p. 77.

country, the existence of an uninterrupted tradition in depicting living beings is attested both in specimens of this art and in written sources”,<sup>140</sup> with Welch adding that “for an Iranian artist of the sixteenth century, the peak of worldly success was recognition at the Shah’s court and membership in the royal workshop, a virtual magnet to which exceptional artistic talent was drawn”.<sup>141</sup> The outstanding patrons in this regard were the first two Safavid Shahs, Ismail I (r. 1502-24) and Tahmasp I (r. 1524-76) as well as two figures we have already encountered above: Ismail’s son and Tahmasp’s younger brother Bahram Mirza (1517-49) and Bahram’s son Ibrahim Mirza (1543-77). As Qāḍī Aḥmad writes about the latter, who established his milieu in the provincial capital of Mashhad, “No sultan or khaqan possessed a more flourishing *kitab-kana* [library] than that powerful Prince. The majority of excellent calligraphers, painters, artists, gilders, and bookbinders were employed there. [...] Some 3,000 volumes and treatises were collected in the library of that light of every eye”.<sup>142</sup>

It is remarkable that some of the Timurid and Safavid rulers listed so far are mentioned in the sources not merely as patrons, but also practitioners of the arts, including miniature art itself. Baysunghur Khan is described by Mustafa Âlî as having “gained esteem for his fine artistry”,<sup>143</sup> while Zakhoder mentions that Bahram Mirza “was known as a master calligrapher, poet, musician, and artist”.<sup>144</sup> Both Qāḍī Aḥmad and Mustafa Âlî express praise for Ibrahim Mirza’s prowess as a painter, the former describing him as having “golden hands in painting and decorating; he achieved great success because of his refinement of thought and deep meditation”, while the latter views him as “a miracle-working decorator and a painter of distinguished fine designs”.<sup>145</sup> Finally, Tahmasp I is praised by Mustafa Âlî as “a master decorator and portraitist” while Qāḍī Aḥmad mentions him as an “incomparable master rising above all artists in drawing and painting”, going on to state that “the paintings of that incomparable and highborn

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<sup>140</sup> Zakhoder, “Introduction”, p. 22.

<sup>141</sup> Welch, *Persian Painting*, p. 12.

<sup>142</sup> Minorsky, *Calligraphers and Painters*, p. 158.

<sup>143</sup> Akın-Kıvanç, *Mustafa ‘Ali’s*, p. 271.

<sup>144</sup> Zakhoder, “Introduction”, p. 3.

<sup>145</sup> Minorsky, *Calligraphers and Painters*, p. 183; Akın-Kıvanç, *Mustafa ‘Ali’s*, p. 270.



painter are many. One or two scenes by him are found in the pavilion of Forty Columns in Qazvin”.<sup>146</sup>

While the Safavid courtly milieus allowed miniature art to flourish in unprecedented ways, they also offer insight into the fatal drawbacks of the art’s precarious dependence on royal sponsorship. Tahmasp’s and Ibrahim’s stories in particular illustrate what could become of artistic milieus when patronage came to an end due to the disapproval or demise of a ruler. As Akın-Kıvanç informs us, Tahmasp abandoned his interest in the arts around 1544-45, eventually going so far as to “prohibit the secular arts in Iran” altogether.<sup>147</sup> After Tahmasp’s death in 1576, his nephew and protégé Ibrahim Mirza became embroiled in political intrigue and was poisoned the following year, resulting in the dispersal of his studio and, as mentioned above, the destruction of the Ibrahim Mirza Album among, one can only assume, many other priceless works of art.

Turning to the court milieus of the Ottoman Empire (ca. 1299-1923), we can note that these came into being under the strong influence of the Persian/Safavid cultural world. In Akın-Kıvanç’s words, “Despite clashes and political, ideological, and sectarian differences between the Ottoman and the Persian worlds, the Ottoman elite of the sixteenth century had a great appreciation for things Persianate. In the cultural sphere, from language to literature and visual arts, Persianate models were considered a point of reference for excellence, sophistication, and finesse”.<sup>148</sup> Of particular interest are artistic activities under the patronage of Mehmed II (r. 1451-81), Selim I (r. 1494-1511), Suleyman I (r. 1520-66), Murad III (r. 1574-95), and Mehmed III (1595-1603). Akın-Kıvanç asserts that “a royal workshop could have existed in the Ottoman capital as early as the late fifteenth century, confirming that by the time Mustafa Âlî penned the *Epic Deeds* [in 1587, under the rule of Murad III], calligraphers’ and painters’ trade had been institutionalized under courtly patronage for at least a hundred years”.<sup>149</sup> As a particularly outstanding product of this artistic milieu, David Roxburgh lists the *Siyer-i Nebi* (Life of the Prophet) commissioned by Murad III and completed under Mehmed III, containing

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<sup>146</sup> Akın-Kıvanç, *Mustafa ‘Ali’s*, p. 270; Minorsky, *Calligraphers and Painters*, p. 181-182.

<sup>147</sup> Akın-Kıvanç, *Mustafa ‘Ali’s*, p. 224.

<sup>148</sup> Akın-Kıvanç, *Mustafa ‘Ali’s*, p. 145.

<sup>149</sup> Akın-Kıvanç, *Mustafa ‘Ali’s*, p. 91.

“more than eight hundred paintings that enhance the descriptive properties of the text and the many events occurring from before Muhammad’s birth until his death”.<sup>150</sup>

The reign of Mehmed II is also remarkable for showcasing the presence and influence of Western painters at the Ottoman court. Akın-Kıvanç gives a list of eight such artists, including Gentile Bellini, to whom the portrait of Mehmed II now to be found in the National Gallery in London is often ascribed.<sup>151</sup> Mustafa Âlî, while not mentioning any of these names, makes reference to one Ottoman painter influenced by Western masters:

Next, among the figural-painters of Rum, [there was] Musawwir Sinan Beg, who appeared at the paradise-resembling palace of Sultan Mehmed Khan, the conqueror of Constantinople [...]. He was a pupil of a Frankish master named Mastor Paoli, who flourished in Venice and became a most exalted artist in his field. And the said Paoli was an agreeable apprentice of a talented painter named Damian.<sup>152</sup>

This influx of Western artists, however, did not result in a lasting influence of Western artistic techniques on miniature art. This becomes evident in Roxburgh’s discussion of the *Shema’ilname* (Book of Likenesses, completed before 1579), authored by the Ottoman historiographer Seyyid Lokman (active 1569-95) and illustrated by the famed miniature artist Nakkash Osman (active 1560-92). While the book was a compilation of physical descriptions and portraits of past and present Ottoman sultans, the writer and artist faced the challenge of not having any direct evidence of the appearances of sultans who had lived before their times. To make up for this lack, they utilized “a portrait series of the earlier sultans painted by European artists” as reference

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<sup>150</sup> David J. Roxburgh, “Concepts of the Portrait in the Islamic Lands, c. 1300-1600”, *Symposium Papers LI: Dialogues in Art History, from Mesopotamian to Modern: Readings for a New Century*, Studies in the History of Art 74, ed. Elizabeth Cropper (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2009), p. 127.

<sup>151</sup> Akın-Kıvanç, *Mustafa ‘Ali’s*, p. 273. The names listed by Akın-Kıvanç are “Bartolomeo di San Marco, Gentile Bellini, Constanzo da Ferrara, Matteo de Pasti, Paolo da Pistoja, Paolo da Ragusa, Paolo Uccello, and Pinturichio”.

<sup>152</sup> Akın-Kıvanç, *Mustafa ‘Ali’s*, p. 273-74. Akın-Kıvanç ascertains that historians have not been able to ascertain the identities of the two Western masters Mustafa Âlî mentions in this passage.

material.<sup>153</sup> However, this usage did not result in portraits with recognizable Western artistic influence. As Roxburgh maintains, “the Ottoman portraits of the sultans effectively selected what was needed from their European sources”, namely information regarding physiognomy and facial features, but embedded this input in the pre-existing visual language of miniature art, avoiding “the European codes of optical naturalism: the use of modeling, chiaroscuro, a naturalistic palette, and perspective”.<sup>154</sup>

### 2.5. Artists’ Fortunes and Careers

It follows from the above that the fortunes and careers of individual artists were tightly bound to the court milieus in which they established themselves. Often, artistic skill and the resultant proximity to centers of power was used by artists to establish careers as courtiers, bureaucrats, or political figures. Calligraphers had a privileged access to such opportunities since they were often also employed as court scribes. Qāḍī Aḥmad reports of one Qadi Abdullah of Khoy that his duties at the court of Tahmasp included composing “epistles in Turkish and Persian, which were sent to Rum [the Ottoman Empire] and the sultans of India”.<sup>155</sup> Mustafa Âlî makes the following general assessment of calligraphy as a marketable skill: “It is not easy for someone who has [mastered] calligraphy to possibly become so poor and needy. At the present time, there are calligraphers whose daily income is purses and purses of silver and gold”.<sup>156</sup>

While miniature painting did not automatically present the same career opportunities, certain miniaturists were nonetheless able to leverage their art to establish themselves in positions of influence. Qāḍī Aḥmad mentions Maulana Naziri of Qum, Tahmasp’s painting instructor, as being “an intimate of the Shah [with whom] they exercised themselves in painting and calligraphy”.<sup>157</sup> Dūst Moḥammad lists “Amir Ruhullah, known as Mirak Naqqash”, who “was given the post of royal librarian” under the Timurid ruler Husayn Mirza Bayqara (r. 1469-1506).<sup>158</sup> And Mustafa Âlî names Re’is Haydar, who, under the Ottoman sultans Suleyman I and Selim II (r. 1566-75), “was

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<sup>153</sup> Roxburgh, “Concepts of the Portrait”, p. 130.

<sup>154</sup> Roxburgh, “Concepts of the Portrait”, p. 132. The particularities of miniature technique will be discussed further below.

<sup>155</sup> Minorsky, *Calligraphers and Painters*, p. 95.

<sup>156</sup> Akın-Kıvanç, *Mustafa ‘Ali’s*, p. 205.

<sup>157</sup> Minorsky, *Calligraphers and Painters*, p. 184.

<sup>158</sup> Thackston, *Album Prefaces*, p. 15.

privileged with [the post of] chief (*re'is*) of the naval arsenal".<sup>159</sup> However, even if no further posts were forthcoming, the position of court miniaturist was highly prestigious and coveted in itself. Akın-Kıvanç recounts Mustafa Âlî's claim, in a separate work entitled *Nasihâtü's-Selatin* (Counsel for Sultans, 1581), that the number of artists employed by the Ottoman court "exceeded by more than ten times the number actually needed 'for the fulfillment of laudable services'. As a result, artists' salaries amounted to a huge number, which, according to Ali, was nothing but a waste of the treasury".<sup>160</sup>

However, as alluded to above, the close connection to court milieus also meant a constant element of precarity, affecting not only the survival of miniature art as a whole, but also the biographies of individual practitioners. The primary sources describe the dissolution of one artistic milieu after the other, with its members dispersing throughout the Islamic lands in search of new sponsors. Sometimes, conquerors of major cities forcibly took local artists with them upon departure, as in the example of Khwaja Abdul-Hayy, who was working in Baghdad when that city was sacked by Timur in 1401 and spent the rest of his life in the Timurid capital Samarkand.<sup>161</sup> Some artistic centers suffered gradual decline after their political stature was reduced through conquest by neighboring empires, as happened to the cities of Shiraz and Herat under Safavid rule, with artistic schools drying up as practitioners moved to new political centers over the course of one or two generations.<sup>162</sup> Sometimes, artists had to relocate as political rulers moved their capitals from one city to the next, as in the case of the Safavid capital, which moved from Tabriz (1501-55) to Qazvin (1555-98) to Isfahan (1598-1736). Some artists negotiated the boundaries of empires, relocating with the waxing and waning of artistic interest among patrons on each side, as happened in the Ottoman-Safavid borderlands following the war of 1578-90 between the two empires.<sup>163</sup> And some cities, such as Safavid Qum, offered "a haven of refuge", in Zakhoder's words, to "artists and master

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<sup>159</sup> Akın-Kıvanç, *Mustafa 'Ali's*, p. 274. Akın-Kıvanç identifies the latter ruler as "Suleyman III", an impossibility since the Ottoman line only featured two sultans of this name.

<sup>160</sup> Akın-Kıvanç, *Mustafa 'Ali's*, p. 101.

<sup>161</sup> Thackston, Thackston, *Album Prefaces*, p. 13.

<sup>162</sup> Zakhoder, "Introduction", p. 29, 31.

<sup>163</sup> Akın-Kıvanç, *Mustafa 'Ali's*, p. 92.

calligraphers who had been disappointed in life or who had had no success in court workshops and institutions”.<sup>164</sup>

Royal workshops were not the only career opportunities open to miniature artists, many of whom worked on a freelance basis in major or minor imperial centers. However, freelance miniaturists’ working conditions were even more precarious than those of their colleagues at court. They were dependent on one-off commissions from individual sponsors, such as Mustafa Âlî himself, who, as mentioned above, ordered six miniature paintings for the first edition of his *Nusretname* on his own budget.<sup>165</sup> Freelance artists like those employed by Mustafa Âlî operated in a grey zone of legitimacy, with their lack of connection to an official workshop leaving them vulnerable to the charge of being frauds, a charge levelled by Mustafa Âlî himself in a generalized fashion when he talks of “every new enthusiast painter” selling “the sketch that he drew in the pitch-black of the night” to gullible art enthusiasts until he “do[es] not have left in [his] wallet even a rough sketch”.<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>164</sup> Zakhoder, “Introduction”, p. 30.

<sup>165</sup> Akın-Kıvanç, *Mustafa ‘Ali’s*, p. 23.

<sup>166</sup> Akın-Kıvanç, *Mustafa ‘Ali’s*, p. 236.

### **Chapter 3: Art and Sufism in the Premodern Middle East**

This chapter will explore the connection between miniature art and Sufi philosophy in light of the socio-historical context provided above. In so doing, it will also devote some attention to exploring the triangular relation between Sufism, miniature art, and calligraphy, the Islamic art form *par excellence*, which has been employed in primary and secondary sources to establish various comparisons and contrasts to miniature painting. The traditional assumption in scholarship has been that while calligraphy was an officially recognized and endorsed Islamic art form—gaining religious prestige through its integral connection to the written Koran—miniature art existed in the shadows of legitimacy due to an Islamic rejection of, if not outright ban on the depiction of living beings.<sup>167</sup> As a result, mainstream Middle Eastern primary sources are said to have presented calligraphy and calligraphers as virtuous, with miniature art and its practitioners depicted as questionable.

Below, I will question this argument in the light of textual and historical evidence. It is true that the art of painting often found itself in a morally and spiritually ambiguous position in mainstream Islamic contexts, and I will demonstrate how our primary sources grappled with this ambiguity. However, the separation of the two art forms for the purposes of such an argument is historically somewhat artificial, since calligraphy and miniature art were practiced in the same milieus in close collaboration with each other, and the same artist—or even patron—could often be a calligrapher and miniaturist at the same time.

More important for philosophical purposes, however, is that the primary sources in question outline a range of arguments tying miniature art to Sufi philosophy. In so doing, they both justify the art form from a religious standpoint and provide it with a philosophical underpinning. Below, I will divide these arguments into two main strands. Firstly, our authors establish an equivalence between the biography and artistic career of the miniaturist and those of the Sufi seeker of truth. Drawing on miniature artists who either were Sufis themselves or followed a similar path of personal development, the authors posit that artistic perfection is only possible if accompanied by a perfection of

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<sup>167</sup> See, for instance, Akın-Kıvanç, *Mustafa 'Ali's*, p. 136.

insight into divine creation or, in other words, the personal internalization of Sufi philosophical tenets. Secondly, our authors deploy a range of Sufi philosophical concepts and terminology, much of it with direct ties to Ibn al-‘Arabī’s ideas, to draw parallels between the divine act of creation and miniature painting, thereby positing the deity as a painter and painters as instruments or facilitators of divine creativity.

The first strand of argument, namely the development of philosophical insight as a precondition of artistic perfection, seems to be applied by the sources to calligraphers and miniaturists alike. However, I will demonstrate and argue that the parallel drawn between miniature art and divine creation grants to this art a special potential to capture, convey, and enable experiences going beyond the range of established sensory perception, a potential not granted in the same way to the art of calligraphy. It will emerge that miniature art’s posited ability to perpetuate and even augment the divine work of creation was the factor that rendered it both philosophically most fruitful and religiously most dangerous and controversial. One may say that the integral connection between miniature art and Sufi philosophy was a double-edged sword—while the latter added considerable depth to the practice and reception of the former, it did so by bringing into play a highly provocative range of philosophical ideas that could help or hurt the art form depending on the religious predilections of its would-be patrons.

### 3.1. Miniature Painting and Calligraphy

The sword or the pen? Prior to exploring the differentiation between the arts of the pen—calligraphy and miniature painting—we may start with a quick glance at what they had in common, namely in the positioning of the pen as a whole vis-à-vis the sword, its perennial partner and rival not just as a human instrument, but also as a metonymy. As Akın-Kıvanç points out, many Islamic societies established “a distinction between the military and civil employees of the ruler. The former, the military elite, were known as the *erbab-i seyf* (Men of the Sword), while the latter, the administrative bureaucracy, were the *erbab-i qalem* (Men of the Pen)”.<sup>168</sup> Unsurprisingly, our authors give precedence to the latter. Mustafa Âlî makes the clearest argument here, maintaining that the pen’s supremacy is “an obvious conclusion”. As he puts it,

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<sup>168</sup> Akın-Kıvanç, *Mustafa ‘Ali’s*, p. 182.

First, in the [...] highest heaven and the supreme sphere, where the divine ordinance and secrets of faith arose, the Tablet and the Pen were present, while the firm sword was not. Second, it was at all times manifest that, in the hands of those who write, the sword was that which serves the pen. [These,] I argue, brought the auspiciousness of the pen, and its consequent precedence [and] desirability from the darkness of sheer uncertainty out into the daylight of sound choice.<sup>169</sup>

At the outset of this passage, Mustafa Âlî makes a metaphysical reference to a primordially existing Tablet and Pen serving as instruments of divine creation—a reference I shall explore further below. We may also note in passing that the terminology of darkness and light employed towards the end is reminiscent of Ibn al-‘Arabî—another point I will take up later. More important for our present purposes is that while the pen is positively contrasted with the sword, Mustafa Âlî nonetheless makes clear reference to writing—what he has in mind is not the miniaturist’s, but the scribe’s or calligrapher’s pen.

Indeed, even the textual structure of our primary sources leaves no doubt that they privilege calligraphy over miniature painting. Dūst Moḥammad’s preface is subdivided into seven main parts, of which three are devoted to writing and calligraphy, while two, each following a section on calligraphy, concern themselves with painting. When passing to the miniaturists, Dūst Moḥammad even excuses himself with the words, “since the writers have been mentioned in every chapter of this introduction, if I be so bold as to make mention of the artists, it may not be out of place”.<sup>170</sup> Qāḍī Aḥmad divides his treatise into four main chapters, the first three of which are fully devoted to calligraphy. Finally, of the five chapters in Mustafa Âlî’s work, the first four are reserved for calligraphy. Our sources’ structure does not even permit us to talk of an equivalence or dichotomy between calligraphy and painting that could metaphorically posit the latter, say, as the night to the former’s day. Rather, while calligraphy merits its own chapters,

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<sup>169</sup> Akın-Kıvanç, *Mustafa ‘Ali’s*, p. 183.

<sup>170</sup> Thackston, *Album Prefaces*, p. 15.



miniature painting is almost never treated on its own. One of Dūst Moḥammad’s two sections on the art is devoted to “painters and limners”;<sup>171</sup> Qāḍī Aḥmad’s final chapter is entitled “Conclusion: On the biographies of painters, gilders, masters of gold sprinkling and decoupage, dyers of paper, and bookbinders”;<sup>172</sup> and Mustafa Âlî divides his final chapter among “the sundry group of talented masters of decoupage, renowned figural-painters, and illuminators of discerning eye as well as limners of rare works, binders of artistry, gold sprinklers, rulers, and repairers of beautifully embellished works”.<sup>173</sup> Clearly, rather than being seen as the opposite or complementary pole to calligraphy, miniature painting was regarded as one of many auxiliary arts that existed in calligraphy’s orbit.

An unbridgeable bipolarity between painting and calligraphy existed neither on the theoretical level nor, as hinted at further above, on the practical, applied level. Welch points out that the training of a court painter was a multi-faceted affair. Thus, an accomplished painter needed to master skills such as pigment preparation, paint brush manufacture, and courtly arts such as literature, etiquette, and horsemanship.<sup>174</sup> Often, calligraphy was also part of these skills. Amir Ruhullah, whom we encountered earlier as court librarian of Husayn Mirza, was a painter and calligrapher alike.<sup>175</sup> Similarly, we have seen that Maulana Naziri of Qum was Shah Tahmasp’s instructor in both calligraphy and painting.<sup>176</sup> And Matrakci Nasuh (ca. 1480-1564), one of the most famous miniature painters of the Ottoman Empire, is listed by Mustafa Âlî as the “inventor” of the *diwani* style of calligraphy.<sup>177</sup> Artistic workshops harbored multi-talented individuals such as Maulana Sami Nishapuri, whom Qāḍī Aḥmad describes as “a master calligrapher [...] in seven styles of writing, [...] peerless in poetry, inscriptions, and enigmas, and [...] outstanding in his time in blending colors, preparing ink, gold sprinkling, and ornamenting in gold”.<sup>178</sup> And artistic schools or families had members

<sup>171</sup> Thackston, *Album Prefaces*, p. 11.

<sup>172</sup> Minorsky, *Calligraphers and Painters*, p. 48. Translation slightly amended.

<sup>173</sup> Akın-Kıvanç, *Mustafa ‘Ali’s*, p. 261.

<sup>174</sup> Welch, *Persian Painting*, p. 12-13.

<sup>175</sup> Thackston, *Album Prefaces*, p. 15.

<sup>176</sup> Minorsky, *Calligraphers and Painters*, p. 184.

<sup>177</sup> He was, at the very least, the developer of the “Ottomanized” version of the *diwani* style. See Akın-Kıvanç, *Mustafa ‘Ali’s*, p. 260.

<sup>178</sup> Minorsky, *Calligraphers and Painters*, p. 125.

who specialized in the different arts of the book, such as “the family of the great [minature painter] Behzad, whose nephew, Rustam ‘Ali, was a great master of *nasta‘liq* [calligraphy], just as the latter’s son, Muhibb ‘Ali, was a poet”.<sup>179</sup>

### 3.2. The Religious Ambiguity of Painting

All these intersections notwithstanding, a religiously motivated dichotomy between calligraphy and painting, while never quite expressed directly, can be sensed between the lines of our authors’ accounts. Throughout all three treatises, calligraphy is unambiguously praised for its role in the written transmission of the word of God and the traditions of the prophet Muḥammad. Since writing is regarded as an indispensable component of religion, the art of writing is seen as a deeply religious—even pious—art. Such an air of self-evident religious value is not to be found in the passages on miniature art, which often sound apologetic without quite pinpointing what it is that should be apologized for.

It is reasonable to connect this discomfort with the ambiguous attitude of Islamicate cultures towards the depiction of living beings. Az Zakhoder points out, “the main source of Islamic dogmatics, the Qor’an, does not contain a forthright interdiction of making images of living beings. This prohibition, rooted in pre-Muslim conceptions, seems to have developed outside any direct connection with the Qor’an”.<sup>180</sup> Nonetheless, the uncompromising rejection of idol worship in Islam rendered suspect if not offensive any production of images that could become a focus of affection or devotion on the part of the beholder. And while the Koran itself may contain no “image ban”, *hadiths*—anecdotes from Muḥammad’s life considered the second most authoritative source of religious truth in Islam—contain quite explicit statements on the issue such as “every former of an image shall be in hellfire”.<sup>181</sup>

Nonetheless, as we have seen, miniature art was a widely practiced, and lavishly sponsored, part of many Islamicate cultures. The resulting tension between artistic tradition and religious suspicion expressed itself in some fascinating artistic

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<sup>179</sup> Zakhoder, “Introduction”, p. 24.

<sup>180</sup> Zakhoder, “Introduction”, p. 22.

<sup>181</sup> Akın-Kıvanç, *Mustafa ‘Ali’s*, p. 152. Akın-Kıvanç points out that this *hadith* was well-known to Mustafa Âlî, who used it in one of the other works he authored.

achievements, such as miniature paintings depicting the smashing of religious idols. Roxburgh describes two such paintings: “in one, Abraham destroys the idols of the Sabians, who are equated with Buddhists; in the other, ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib, cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad, smites the idol of Hubal after he and Muhammad have entered the sacred precinct of the Ka‘ba in Mecca”.<sup>182</sup> As Roxburgh points out, these paintings “engage in making images of the destruction of images (the images in both paintings are idols). Hence the two paintings appear to risk the very practice that they depict”.<sup>183</sup> As a similarly paradoxical artistic practice, we can list the highly popular art of figurative calligraphy, in which the totality of the written text takes on the shape of a living being, usually a plant or animal. As an example of this art, Qāḍī Aḥmad mentions an inscription that read, “The price of sugar and candy has come down because of the sugar plantations”, and describes it as having been written “in the shape of three or four men standing one under the other, and both the figures and the writing were executed with perfect skill and charm”.<sup>184</sup>

Among our primary sources, the tension between art and religion becomes most explicit in Dūst Moḥammad, who asserts that “by the externality of the religious law, the masters of depiction hang their heads in shame”. However, he is quick to add that “portraiture is not without justification, and the portraitist’s conscience need not be pricked by the thorn of despair”.<sup>185</sup> Thus, he confirms the religious disapproval of painting while also leaving the door open for an “internal”—read Sufi—interpretation of religion that may yet redeem the art.

While Dūst Moḥammad clearly pinpoints the existence of the tension, it is Qāḍī Aḥmad who stages the most systematic theological attempt at its resolution. Earlier, we saw that while Mustafa Âlî regarded the pen as mightier than the sword, he did so with reference to the pen of the writer. Qāḍī Aḥmad divides the pen itself in two, with one—the reed pen—devoted to the writer and the other—the brush with a tip of animal hair—to the painter:

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<sup>182</sup> Roxburgh, “Concepts of the Portrait”, p. 119.

<sup>183</sup> Roxburgh, “Concepts of the Portrait”, p. 119.

<sup>184</sup> Minorsky, *Calligraphers and Painters*, p. 133.

<sup>185</sup> Thackston, *Album Prefaces*, p. 11.

The *qalam* [pen] is an artist and a painter.  
 God created two kinds of *qalam*:  
 The one, ravishing the soul, is from a plant  
 And has become a sugarcane for the scribe;  
 The other kind of *qalam* is from the animal,  
 And it has acquired its scattering of pearl from the fountain of life.  
 O painter of pictures which would have enticed Mani!  
 Thanks to you the days of talent have been adorned.<sup>186</sup>

Again, this poem contains two references we will return to later: the association of the painter's brush with the fountain of life encapsulates the parallel between painting and divine creation already alluded to above, while the reference to Mani, the prophet of the Manichaean religion, points to a complex relation between the art and (ostensibly false) prophethood that I will unpack further below. But for now, the most important point for us to pin down is that Qāḍī Aḥmad uses the idea of the deity creating the pen as both "plant" and "animal" in order to claim the same religious legitimacy for painting that already exists for calligraphy. In Zakhoder's words, "If, in the theological sense, the artist's brush has the same properties as the *qalam*-reed, then religious consecration applies to it as a matter of course".<sup>187</sup>

### 3.3. Calligraphers and Sufism

Zakhoder argues that Qāḍī Aḥmad's theological point could only be made in the context of a politically and culturally ascendant Sufism. As he puts it, "The recognition of equal rights for the brush and the pen was dictated by the background of cultural life in medieval Persia".<sup>188</sup> What he has in mind here is the Shiite school of Islam practiced and proselytized by the Safavid dynasty. Zakhoder reminds us that "the term [i.e., Shia] should be taken not only in its religious and political connotations, but also with that mystical and pantheistic content which was invariably associated with the Shia and which can be designated as 'Sufism'". He describes Khorasan, the province ruled by Qāḍī

<sup>186</sup> Minorsky, *Calligraphers and Painters*, p. 50.

<sup>187</sup> Zakhoder, "Introduction", p. 23.

<sup>188</sup> Zakhoder, "Introduction", p. 24.

Aḥmad's patron Ibrahim Mirza, as "an immense laboratory [in which] the Sufi-Shiite doctrine had been elaborated throughout many centuries, [and which] became the spiritual home of many men of the time".<sup>189</sup> It was this "Sufi-Shiite doctrine", according to Zakhoder, that allowed miniature painting as an art to step out of the shadow of calligraphy and acquire a religious legitimacy of its own.

In milieus that interlaced Sufism and art—a description as valid for Ottoman as for Safavid artistic milieus—neither the person nor the identity of the artist and the Sufi were clearly distinguishable from each other. To establish the template of this interlacing of artist and Sufi, I will turn to calligraphy first, since the vast majority of examples given by the sources are calligraphers rather than miniaturists, and it is therefore calligraphers that offer a fuller picture of the phenomenon. Following this, I will demonstrate that the template established for calligraphers was also applied to miniaturists.

Many calligraphers listed by our sources were also Sufis. Qāḍī Aḥmad talks of a master who was "a calligrapher, a scholar, a darvish following the right path"<sup>190</sup> and another who "became a devotee of Sufism".<sup>191</sup> Mustafa Âlî gives similar examples, demonstrating that the artist-cum-Sufi ideal passed over into Ottoman thinking as well. He mentions a calligrapher who was "a wayfarer on a praiseworthy path, a dervish of good disposition, a slave dedicated to writing, and a saint who bequeathed any and all good prayers and exalted favors that he received upon the poor of that region".<sup>192</sup> In some passages, Mustafa Âlî refers to calligraphers leading ascetic lifestyles. Speaking of the calligrapher Mawlana Qani'i, he maintains that as "a dervish by nature and [a follower of] the commendable path [of mysticism], he was content with dry bread and covetous [only] for a morsel. [And he was] satisfied with the provisions of ascetic abstinence and subsisted on barely enough to prevent the exit of the last spark of life".<sup>193</sup> Finally, some calligraphers were disciples of very prominent Sufis, such as the calligrapher Ali of Qain, who was "intoxicated with a sip from the goblet of Mawlana 'Abd al-Rahman Jami [1414-92], who sat at the heart of the gatherings of the intimates [i.e., Sufis] and who was the distinguished agent of divine truth at the meetings on law and religion". According to

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<sup>189</sup> Zakhoder, "Introduction", p.24.

<sup>190</sup> Minorsky, *Calligraphers and Painters*, p. 144.

<sup>191</sup> Minorsky, *Calligraphers and Painters*, p. 210.

<sup>192</sup> Akın-Kıvanç, *Mustafa 'Ali's*, p. 242.

<sup>193</sup> Akın-Kıvanç, *Mustafa 'Ali's*, p. 245.

Mustafa Âlî, Ali of Qain devoted his time to transcribing and copying Jāmī’s poetic works, thereby rolling the practices of calligraphy and Sufi meditation into one.<sup>194</sup>

Mustafa Âlî also conflates the master-disciple relationships that were key to the transmission of both the Sufi and artistic traditions. In the language he employs, the transmission of artistic skill becomes indistinguishable from that of Sufi insight. Of one calligrapher, Mustafa Âlî writes that “he practiced writing under [...] Mu‘izz al-Din and became enlightened by savoring his teaching”.<sup>195</sup> The calligrapher Abdullah Ashpaz is described as “the kindness-casting benefactor of calligraphers, as well as the shaykh of the copyists of Rum and the foremost spiritual guide of that group”.<sup>196</sup> In fact, Mustafa Âlî views the transmission of calligraphic skill as such a spiritual affair that even the physical presence of a master may not be necessary. Of a certain Mir Khubi, he maintains that “without seeing Sultan ‘Ali of Mashhad in person, [but] acquiring from his tomb a reed pen that had been trimmed by him [and practicing with it] day and night, [Mir Khubi] learned from him”.<sup>197</sup>

The above example of Abdullah Ashpaz demonstrates that the sum total of Ottoman calligraphers was conceptualized by Mustafa Âlî in a guild-like fashion, with the leader of the guild assuming vocational as well as spiritual functions. This understanding of the calligraphic tradition as constituting a spiritually unified whole is reinforced by our Persian sources Dūst Moḥammad and Qāḍī Aḥmad, who portray ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib (601-661), cousin of the prophet Muḥammad and fourth leader of the Muslim religious community after Muḥammad’s death, as the “patron saint” of calligraphy. Both sources position ‘Alī as the inventor and greatest master of the Kufic script, the first calligraphic style in which the Islamic revelation was committed to paper. Thus, ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib emerges as the originary figure of Islamic calligraphy as a whole, with all subsequent branches emanating from him.<sup>198</sup>

The connection between Sufism and calligraphy went deeper than the Sufi identity of some calligraphers and similarities between the two realms in terms of vocational transmission and group identity. A closer look at our sources reveals that they

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<sup>194</sup> Akın-Kıvanç, *Mustafa ‘Ali’s*, p. 216.

<sup>195</sup> Akın-Kıvanç, *Mustafa ‘Ali’s*, p. 247.

<sup>196</sup> Akın-Kıvanç, *Mustafa ‘Ali’s*, p. 283.

<sup>197</sup> Akın-Kıvanç, *Mustafa ‘Ali’s*, p. 227.

<sup>198</sup> Thackston, *Album Prefaces*, p. 7; Minorsky, *Calligraphers and Painters*, p. 44.

postulated calligraphic skill to be inseparable from the artist's spiritual and moral qualities. As Zakhoder puts it, "By maintaining that 'purity of writing is purity of soul' the medieval outlook made on the master calligrapher the same stern demands of asceticism as it did on the members of the religious class".<sup>199</sup> Mustafa Âlî bluntly asserts that "A perfect person is necessary to discover a good calligraphic style",<sup>200</sup> while Qāḍī Aḥmad even calls on Plato to back up the point: "The sage Plato says: 'Writing is the geometry of the soul, and it manifests itself by means of the organs of the body'".<sup>201</sup> The argument is clearly expressed in the following quatrain by a certain Moulana Sultan Ali Mashhadi, cited by Qāḍī Aḥmad:

The aim of Murtada 'Ali in writing  
Was (to reproduce) not merely speech, letters and dots,  
But fundamentals, purity and virtue  
For this reason he deigned to point to good writing.<sup>202</sup>

The further one progressed down the Sufi path, the more one's artistic achievement was bound to increase. This becomes clear in the following two excerpts from the "Epistle of Maulana Sultan Ali", again cited by Qāḍī Aḥmad. In the first excerpt, Maulana Sultan Ali points to spiritual purification as a precondition of artistic success:

Only he who of trickery, intrigues, and hypocrisy  
Has cleansed himself, has become master in writing.  
He who knows the soul, knows that  
Purity of writing proceeds from purity of heart.<sup>203</sup>

The second excerpt describes the path of spiritual purification through the metaphor of calligraphy:

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<sup>199</sup> Zakhoder, "Introduction", p. 22.

<sup>200</sup> Akın-Kıvanç, *Mustafa 'Ali's*, p. 196.

<sup>201</sup> Minorsky, *Calligraphers and Painters*, p. 52.

<sup>202</sup> Minorsky, *Calligraphers and Painters*, p. 51.

<sup>203</sup> Minorsky, *Calligraphers and Painters*, p. 122.

Like unto a *qalam* you will rub your head against the paper.  
Not resting a day or night from labor,  
Discard your desires,  
Turn away from the road of covetousness and greed,  
Wrestle with the cravings of the concupiscent soul.  
Then you will know what a minor religious war is.<sup>204</sup>

It is important to note, however, that progress on the Sufi path and the concomitant artistic accomplishment were ultimately dependent on divine grace. The adept could demonstrate sincere devotion and striving, but the deity decided whether this striving would be rewarded with the hoped-for result. It is this logic that moves Mustafa Âlî to statements such as “One thinks his penmanship is innate and his beautiful writing is purely God given” or “To [the] master, luminosity was handed down from the heavens”.<sup>205</sup> And since it was the deity that bestowed artistic merit, such merit could also be rescinded if the artist was found undeserving. This is best demonstrated in an anecdote Mustafa Âlî relates about a certain Mawlana Mir Ali and his student, Mir Chalama:

Mir Chalama became such a leading figure and a rarity in lands far and wide that Mawlana Mir Ali guarded him and gave him permission to sign [...] in his name. [...] Yet, illbred and proud, [Mir Chalama] did not grasp the meaning [of his master’s compliment]. And facing his master, he said, ‘Who do you think you are that I would prefer your signature?’ [...] Mir Ali cursed Mir Chalama and, following his malediction, [Mir Chalama] was soon after blinded. The arrow of his teacher’s appeal reached the [divine] station of favorable response.<sup>206</sup>

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<sup>204</sup> Minorsky, *Calligraphers and Painters*, p. 122. By “minor religious war”, Moulana Sultan Ali refers to the Sufi’s war against one’s own ego.

<sup>205</sup> Akın-Kıvanç, *Mustafa ‘Ali’s*, p. 243.

<sup>206</sup> Akın-Kıvanç, *Mustafa ‘Ali’s*, p. 241.



### 3.4. Miniaturists and Sufism

Much of modern scholarship has posited that miniature art found itself “in an entirely different position”<sup>207</sup> when it came to the connection between the art, its practitioners, and the Sufi path. According to this thesis, miniature art, because of its implied connection to idolatry, was inherently suspect and miniaturists as practitioners of the art were guilty by association. Many anecdotes from the primary sources seem to back up this assumption, painting individual miniaturists in a less-than-favorable light. In a story related by Dūst Moḥammad, the miniaturist Amir Khalil causes his patron, Baysunghur Khan, bodily harm. “One night, in the company of His Highness, [Amir Khalil] began to joke, but the affair went so far that the heel of his boot unintentionally hit the prince on the forehead. His Highness’s forehead was cut, and blood poured from his august head”. Aghast, the miniaturist flees the scene: “Amir Khalil, wailing and lamenting, took flight to the chamber [...] and locked himself in. Having fled from the valley of boon companionship, he sat down in penitence”.<sup>208</sup> The story ends on a conciliatory note, with forgiveness and generosity on the part of the patron:

The prince, [...] with all clemency and favor, came to the door of the chamber. Amir Khalil opened the door and fell at the feet of His Highness. The prince kissed him, took him back into the palace into the assembly and, showering him with favor and compassion, bestowed upon him all the silver and china vessels that were in use at the assembly, along with robes of honor of which Chosroes and Jamshid would have been proud. By showing him such generosity, [the prince] delivered him of his shame.<sup>209</sup>

This story seems to serve two purposes: on the one hand, it emphasizes the importance of patronage for the arts. On the other, it portrays the miniature artist as a transgressor—albeit once again in an oblique fashion, without tying his transgression directly to his art—while maintaining that his offense is, ultimately, of an unintentional

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<sup>207</sup> Zakhoder, “Introduction”, p. 22.

<sup>208</sup> Thackston, *Album Prefaces*, p. 13.

<sup>209</sup> Thackston, *Album Prefaces*, p. 14.

and forgivable nature. It is the patron's responsibility, the moral seems to assert, to see that the miniaturist is protected in spite of his faults. Another story of transgressive miniaturists, which paints the culprits in an even more negative light, is that of Abd al-Aziz, Ali Ashgar, and Shah Tahmasp. While the anecdote is found both in Qāḍī Aḥmad and Mustafa Âlî, it is the latter who elaborates most fully on the offense in question.<sup>210</sup> The miniaturists are introduced as:

Khwaja 'Abd al-'Aziz of Isfahan, a master of outstanding innovation who, moreover, tutored Shah Tahmasp in the art that is being discussed, and Monla 'Ali-'i Asghar, [the former's] recognized pupil and a legend of the studio of the aforesaid shah. Though it was acknowledged that both of them were world masters, [...] they also had morals of similarly venomous quality.<sup>211</sup>

As with Amir Khalil in the previous story, the two miniaturists' offense does not concern their art *per se*:

It is recounted that the aforesaid Shah Tahmasp had in his palace a handsome slave, Mirza Muhammad, son of Khwaja Qabahat, in whom he took delight and for whom he had affection. He was the shah's favorite and beloved. And during visits to his workshop, [the shah] always sat beside him. Now, the aforesaid Khwaja Abd al-Aziz and Ali Ashgar, conceiving in the valley of ungratefulness a series of stratagems and tricks, deceived the said Mirza Muhammad. United in hypocrisy and adding new distances to the edifice of separation, they left [the palace] behind and headed toward the darkness of India.<sup>212</sup>

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<sup>210</sup> Qāḍī Aḥmad does not name Ali Ashgar, only mentioning Abd al-Aziz, the son of Khwaja Abd al-Vahhab (Minorsky, *Calligraphers and Painters*, p. 186).

<sup>211</sup> Akın-Kıvanç, *Mustafa 'Ali's*, p. 268.

<sup>212</sup> Akın-Kıvanç, *Mustafa 'Ali's*, p. 269.

Eventually, the fugitives are caught by Tahmasp's emissaries and brought back to the palace. The ruler forgives his young favorite, but the miniaturists do not escape so lightly:

At first, in order to take revenge, [the shah] considered sentencing [...] the painters to death. But, since Khwaja Abd al-Aziz was his master and, with outstanding creations, a rarity among the decorative-painters, he refrained from executing him. [Instead the shah] gave [the two painters] a light punishment, severing with his own hands Abd al-Aziz's nose and Ali Ashgar's two ears.<sup>213</sup>

Like Dūst Moḥammad, Mustafa Âlî chooses to emphasize forgiveness as the outcome of the story. He mentions that Tahmasp eventually became “full of regret for having severed his master's nose” even though “the aforesaid painters had been extremely offensive and their deeds were utterly wicked”. He closes his account with an admonition as to the proper conduct befitting a noble patron: “For men of high rank and position, [it is an act of] complete generosity and accomplished goodwill to choose discretion over imprudence at times of reckless fury and resentment”.<sup>214</sup>

Akın-Kıvanç reads this story as an indicator on Mustafa Âlî's part of “ambivalent feelings toward painters and the art of depiction”.<sup>215</sup> It is true that the sources never depict calligraphers in as negative a light as miniaturists come across in these anecdotes. Further, returning to the point I made above concerning the concomitancy between artistic and spiritual advancement in calligraphy, it would seem defensible to argue that such a concomitancy cannot have existed for miniature art if its outstanding practitioners could, at the same time, be men of such intemperance or loose morals. However, we must note that, even if these passages are read to contain an indictment of miniature art, it is a very indirect and oblique indictment. The art itself is never at fault here; quite to the contrary, in Mustafa Âlî's anecdote, the main factor that saves Abd al-Aziz from being executed is his outstanding skill as a painter.

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<sup>213</sup> Akın-Kıvanç, *Mustafa 'Ali's*, p. 269.

<sup>214</sup> Akın-Kıvanç, *Mustafa 'Ali's*, p. 270.

<sup>215</sup> Akın-Kıvanç, *Mustafa 'Ali's*, p. 141.

As a matter of fact, a detailed analysis of the primary sources reveals that, at least in principle, they postulated the link between artistic and spiritual progress and skill to apply just as much to miniature art as to calligraphy. Let us return to Qāḍī Aḥmad's poetic description of the Ibrahim Mirza Album which I cited in the previous chapter, and particularly focus on the following three lines:

Its beautiful pictures were of such a degree that:  
From the point of view of cleanness and distinction  
Nothing but the soul would find a place in it.<sup>216</sup>

These lines make it clear that an outstanding miniature painting, just like such a piece of calligraphy, was expected to manifest not just artistic beauty but also spiritual purity. And such spiritual purity could only be expressed in the painting if it also existed in the painter. Qāḍī Aḥmad describes his patron, Ibrahim Mirza, as possessing “golden hands in painting and decorating; he achieved great success because of his refinement of thought and deep meditation”.<sup>217</sup> Just as with calligraphy, skill in miniature painting could be lost if the practitioner's virtue was compromised. Mustafa Âlî mentions a “Shah Quli Naqqash, who came to the land of Rum during the auspicious reign of the late Sultan Sulayman Khan”, going on to compliment this miniaturist in a rather backhanded way: “Had he possessed morals as [excellent as] his art, Bihzad in his day could not have achieved the fame he did. And had he, in accordance with his conscientious nature, become a wayfarer on the path of divine observance, people would not in his time have talked about the art, reputation, and works of Mani”.<sup>218</sup>

I will return to the roles of Bihzād and Mani as the archetypes of excellence in painting below. What is important to note here is that fundamentally, even in this negative appraisal by Mustafa Âlî, painters are held to the same standards as calligraphers. There is nothing inherently baser about miniature painting than about calligraphy, and perfection in artistry is equally connected to the perfection of the person

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<sup>216</sup> Minorsky, *Calligraphers and Painters*, p. 183.

<sup>217</sup> Minorsky, *Calligraphers and Painters*, p. 183.

<sup>218</sup> Akın-Kıvanç, *Mustafa 'Ali's*, p. 268.

in both arts. The sources' portrayal of many individual miniaturists as falling short of these ideals does not change the fact that the ideals applied to them nonetheless.

Finally, let us return to the sources postulating the historical tradition of calligraphy as a spiritual continuity with its own mechanisms of transmission and patron saint. Our authors do not have much to say when it comes to the transmission of miniaturists' skill: unlike with calligraphy, we do not encounter disciples of miniature art who become "enlightened" upon visiting great masters' graves. However, Dūst Moḥammad and Qāḍī Aḥmad list 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib as the "patron saint" not just of calligraphy, but also of miniature painting. In Dūst Moḥammad's words, "It has been recorded that the first person to adorn with painting and illumination the writing of the Word that is necessarily welcomed was the Prince of the Faithful and Leader of the Pious, the Conquering Lion of God [...] Ali ibn Abi Talib".<sup>219</sup> Here, 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib is positioned as the first writer and illustrator of the Koran alike. And Qāḍī Aḥmad even refers to an active tradition among miniaturists of revering 'Alī as the originator of their art: "The portraitists of the image of this wonderful skill trace this art to the marvelously writing *qalam* of [...] Ali".<sup>220</sup>

### 3.5. A Holistic Understanding of Perfection

What emerges from the above is that in dominant subjectivation narratives of the Safavid and Ottoman high culture during the time under consideration, the quest for spiritual perfection was regarded as the bedrock of all other forms of advancement in an individual's life, and that the abandonment or derailing of this quest was seen as leading to a similar derailment in other parts of one's life. With regards to artistic creation, this idea is succinctly expressed by the eminent Muslim scholar Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali (1059-1111): "The essential beauty of man's creations such as poetry, painting, and architecture reflects the inner qualities of the poet, painter, and builder".<sup>221</sup> But going beyond the realm of art, we can see the same sentiment reflected in Mustafa Âlî's

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<sup>219</sup> Thackston, *Album Prefaces*, p. 11.

<sup>220</sup> Minorsky, *Calligraphers and Painters*, p. 174. As Akın-Kıvanç points out, this emphasis on 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib as "patron saint" of miniature art is lacking from Mustafa Âlî, even though this source does connect 'Alī to the origins of calligraphy (Akın-Kıvanç, *Mustafa 'Ali's*, p. 138).

<sup>221</sup> Quoted by Priscilla Soucek in her article, "The Theory and Practice of Portraiture in the Persian Tradition", *Muqarnas* 17 (2000), p. 102.

thoughts on advancement through the layers of social stratification. The following passage on calligraphy shows the close interrelationship in which the author viewed morality, artistic skill, and social standing:

Fine calligraphy is a virtue which unstintingly confers honor upon those who possess it. And the art of writing is a path toward nobility and fame, which leads those who command it to glory and high station, unless they are reproached by people for bad morals, or are notorious [for their] addiction to opium paste, opium or hashish.<sup>222</sup>

Ultimately, underlying these thoughts, we find a holistic understanding of human perfection, in which all aspects of human endeavor and existence influence and feed back into all others. The possession of extraordinary artistic skill can only be an aspect or manifestation of this overall perfection. Even the physical beauty of an individual was regarded as part of this package, as is evident from Mustafa Âlî's physical assessment of a particular calligrapher: "The beauty of his down, like the beauty of his writing, is a violet-colored [and] crisp legend of the gardens and meadows of his refined [nature]".<sup>223</sup>

Unsurprisingly, this overall perfection once again finds its prototype in the figure of 'Alî ibn Abî Tâlib, who combines all the virtues an individual might hope to possess: "His Excellency Ali, on account of his efforts in calligraphy, his attainments in the Kufic hand that outshined others, his distinguished rank in the various sciences and virtues, and attainments in mysticism, is the chief of the saints and the foremost of the Imams of the Way of the Faith".<sup>224</sup> A warrior as well as a penman, 'Alî even reconciles the original separation between pen and sword we had observed at the outset of this chapter: "He is, in sum, the master of the sword and the pen. With him the saber and the reed pen are exalted".<sup>225</sup>

This holistic understanding of perfection, underpinned by Sufi philosophical ideas, also explains the title given by Mustafa Âlî to his treatise, namely *Menakib-i*

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<sup>222</sup> Akın-Kıvanç, *Mustafa 'Ali's*, p. 204.

<sup>223</sup> Akın-Kıvanç, *Mustafa 'Ali's*, p. 217. The "down" here refers to the first emergence of a youthful mustache and / or beard on the artist's face.

<sup>224</sup> Akın-Kıvanç, *Mustafa 'Ali's*, p. 178.

<sup>225</sup> Akın-Kıvanç, *Mustafa 'Ali's*, p. 182.

*Hunerveran*. As Akın-Kıvanç explains, “in Arabic, *manaqib* refers to ‘deeds, praiseworthy actions’ and ‘traits of character’. Its use in the titles of individual biographies or antologies implies a focus on the subject’s commendable actions as well as his moral qualities and disposition”. Akın-Kıvanç points out that “with the emergence and spread of Sufism, *manaqibnamas* became a genre of hagiographical nature dealing exclusively with the lives and miraculous deeds of saintly figures”.<sup>226</sup> Mustafa Âlî giving this title to his account of the lives and works of artists is the strongest argument that from our sources’ perspective, artistic achievement needs to be viewed in the context of Sufi thought and practice; and that the meaning and effect of art cannot be properly understood without recourse to Sufi philosophy.

### 3.6. Specific Sufi Ideas in the Sources

Let us now turn to the utilization of specific Sufi ideas, with particular reference to the ontology of Ibn al-‘Arabî, by our sources in order to forge the connection between Sufi philosophy and art. One of our authors, Mustafa Âlî, includes a direct reference to Ibn al-‘Arabî in his text. This mention is not a “citation” from one of Ibn al-‘Arabî’s works in order to shore up a Sufi philosophical idea about art—to expect such systematic citations, applying specific ideas from one branch of knowledge to another, would be anachronistic—but rather a mention of Ibn al-‘Arabî’s year of death, indicating Mustafa Âlî’s knowledge of, and reverence for, the Sufi thinker. In the passage, Mustafa Âlî talks about the “appearance” of the prominent calligrapher Khwaja Jamal al-Din Yaqut around the time “when the hegira year passed six hundred [1204-05]”. He then adds, seemingly apropos of nothing, that “the death of His Excellency the great shaykh Ibn al-Arabi and the departure of Ibn al-Farid [also] took place in the first part of the seventh century”.<sup>227</sup>

Apart from his direct naming by Mustafa Âlî, the most obvious sign of a shared Sufi ontology underlying the works of Ibn al-‘Arabî and our authors can be found in Düst Moḥammad, who, just like Ibn al-‘Arabî in *The Bezels of Wisdom*, starts his treatise with

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<sup>226</sup> Akın-Kıvanç, *Mustafa ‘Ali’s*, p. 87.

<sup>227</sup> Akın-Kıvanç, *Mustafa ‘Ali’s*, p. 187. Akın-Kıvanç misinterprets this as a reference to “Ibn al-Arabi, Muhammad b. Ziyad Abu ‘Abdullah (150-231/767-846), a philologist of the school of Kufa”. This attribution makes no sense for two reasons: firstly, the honorific “great shaykh” is routinely applied to Ibn al-‘Arabî the Sufi; and secondly, the dates for Ibn al-‘Arabî the Sufi (1165-1240) fit the time frame that Mustafa Âlî is talking about, while the dates for Ibn al-‘Arabî the philologist are far off.

an account of the primordial, concealed divine that engages in an act of self-unconcealment in order to be known. Here is how Dūst Moḥammad phrases the matter:

The coalesced forms and dispersed shapes of the archetypes were hidden in the recesses of the unseen in accordance with the dictum, “I was a hidden treasure”.

Then, in accordance with the words, “I wanted to be known, so I created creation in order to be known”, he snatched with the fingers of destiny the veil of non-existence from the countenance of being, and with the hand of mercy and the pen, which was “the first thing God created”, he painted masterfully on the canvas of being.<sup>228</sup>

This passage is basically a reformulation of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s opening lines to Chapter 1 of *The Bezels of Wisdom*, which I analyzed above: “The Reality wanted to see the essences of His Most Beautiful Names or, to put it another way, to see His own Essence, in all-inclusive object encompassing the whole [divine] Command, which, qualified by existence, would reveal to Him His own mystery”.<sup>229</sup> Here, Dūst Moḥammad takes up the Sufi ideas of divine transcendence, the prefiguration of phenomenal existence in archetypal form, and the self-manifestation of the divine through the phenomena, all ideas elaborated by Ibn al-‘Arabī.<sup>230</sup> Dūst Moḥammad then combines these ideas with a metaphor of God as painter, whose self-manifestation is compared to an act of artistic—and specifically painterly—expression. Through the utilization of this metaphor, Dūst Moḥammad forges a bridge between Sufi ontological ideas and the practice of painting that will be elaborated very fruitfully both in the remainder of his own text and in our other sources.

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<sup>228</sup> Thackston, *Album Prefaces*, p. 4. The passage, “I was a hidden treasure [...] I wanted to be known, so I created creation in order to be known”, as well as the passage describing the pen as “the first thing God created”, are derived from *hadiths*, orally transmitted sayings of the prophet Muhammad.

<sup>229</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabī, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 50.

<sup>230</sup> The archetypes, as discussed above, are based on Platonic thought, which Sufism takes as one of the departure points in its own ontology. Among our art historical sources, Mustafa Âlî also directly showcases awareness of Plato, whom he quotes as stating, “Writing is the most intelligent [deed] of the mind” (Akin-Kivanç, *Mustafa ‘Ali’s*, p. 177).



The Ibn al-‘Arabī passage continues with the words, “For the seeing of a thing, itself by itself, is not the same as its seeing itself in another, as it were in a mirror”.<sup>231</sup> Here, Ibn al-‘Arabī introduces his central metaphor of the mirror, which, as I have explained above, posits the phenomena—and, among them, the human being in particular—as “mirrors” of the divine that need to be “polished” in order to achieve a perfect reflection. Dūst Moḥammad takes up the mirror metaphor in his treatise, with a passage describing how God “cleansed from the tablet of his being the dust of nonexistence with the polish of favor; and in the heights indicated the words, ‘Assume the characteristics of God’, he made the mirror of creation a locus of manifestation for names and traces”.<sup>232</sup> Towards the end of his treatise, he returns to the metaphor with a short passage in verse:

When the desired form is manifested from the  
invisible world, like a mirror, the surface of a  
pure heart is best.<sup>233</sup>

Dūst Moḥammad is also familiar with Ibn al-‘Arabī’s metaphor of phenomena as veils that both conceal and reveal the divine: this is clear both from his above reference to God lifting “the veil of non-existence from the countenance of being” and from his later reference to the miniaturist Ahmad Musa as a master who “lifted the veil from the face of depiction”.<sup>234</sup>

Finally, Dūst Moḥammad shares Ibn al-‘Arabī’s conception of the prophet Muḥammad not just as the messenger of God, but also the archetypal “perfect man” who pre-exists the creation of the universe and embodies the human perfection for which the followers of the Sufi path strive. As Christiane Gruber puts it, this conception of the prophet was particular to Sufi philosophy: “Philosophical works and Sufi manuals, particularly those composed by famous mystics like Ibn al-‘Arabī [...], reveal a shift in

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<sup>231</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabī, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p.177.

<sup>232</sup> Thackston, *Album Prefaces*, p. 4.

<sup>233</sup> Thackston, *Album Prefaces*, p. 14.

<sup>234</sup> Thackston, *Album Prefaces*, p. 12.

popular practices related to the devotion of the Prophet Muhammad. In these kinds of works, the Prophet is praised as the perfect or complete man (*al-insan al-kamil*)”.<sup>235</sup>

Ibn al-‘Arabī describes Muḥammad’s archetypal primordality by stating that “he was a prophet when Adam was still between the water and the clay”, and points to his perfection in the passage, “He is the most perfect creation of this humankind, for which reason the whole affair [of creation] begins and ends with him”.<sup>236</sup> These ideas are echoed in Dūst Moḥammad, who describes the prophet as “That perfect human, the outline of whose noble-fruited tree was the first form to appear from the pure light of existence on the page of being”<sup>237</sup> and repeats the water-and-clay *hadith* found in Ibn al-‘Arabī by stating that the prophet was the “Seal whose ring of power is decorated with the legend, ‘I was a prophet while Adam was between water and clay’”.<sup>238</sup>

A fascinating parallel between Dūst Moḥammad and Ibn al-‘Arabī emerges when we examine a lengthy story about the art of painting recounted by the former in order to shore up the art’s religious legitimacy. As mentioned above, Dūst Moḥammad mentions that “by the externality of the religious law, the masters of depiction hang their heads in shame”,<sup>239</sup> but maintains that, nonetheless, “portraiture is not without justification, and the portraitist’s conscience need not be pricked by the thorn of despair”.<sup>240</sup> This “justification” is derived by Dūst Moḥammad from the assertion that the art of painting “originated with the prophet Daniel”.<sup>241</sup> How does this prophetic origin of miniature art come about? According to Dūst Moḥammad, “after the prophet’s [Muḥammad’s] death, some of his companions went to Byzantium with the purpose of presenting Islam. In that realm they met an emperor named Hercule”.<sup>242</sup> After a string of events, the emperor shows the prophet’s companions a chest containing a series of wondrous portraits. Starting with the first portrait, the emperor proclaims:

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<sup>235</sup> Christiane Gruber, “Between Logos (*Kalima*) and Light (*Nur*): Representations of the Prophet Muhammad in Islamic Painting”, *Muqarnas* 26 (2009), p. 233.

<sup>236</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabī, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 272.

<sup>237</sup> Thackston, *Album Prefaces*, p. 5.

<sup>238</sup> Thackston, *Album Prefaces*, p. 6.

<sup>239</sup> Thackston, *Album Prefaces*, p. 11.

<sup>240</sup> Thackston, *Album Prefaces*, p. 12.

<sup>241</sup> Thackston, *Album Prefaces*, p. 11.

<sup>242</sup> Thackston, *Album Prefaces*, p.11 “Hercule” has been identified by historians as the Byzantine emperor Heraclius (r. 610-641). See Roxburgh, p. 120.

“This [...] is a portrait of Adam, the Father of Humanity”. And thus he continued to show portraits until he produced one with a miraculous visage as luminous as the sun, whose regal being took Adam from the dust of nonexistence and garbed him with the cloak of purity. The admiration that the former portrait had elicited from the onlookers was nullified by the sight of this blessed face, and the perplexity with which they had been struck by the first portrait’s beauty ceased with the contemplation of the sun-like beauty of the latter.<sup>243</sup>

This final portrait, of course, is that of the prophet Muḥammad. The emperor goes on to explain that the portraits, far from having been painted to represent the physical appearances of the prophets, were created prior to the prophets’ phenomenal existence and reflect them in their archetypal, uncreated aspect:

“Adam besought the Divine Court to see the prophets among his offspring”, said Hercule. “Therefore the Creator of All Things sent a chest containing several thousand compartments, in each of which was a piece of silk on which was a portrait of one of the prophets. Inasmuch as that chest came as a witness, it was called the Chest of Testimony (*sandūq al-shahada*). After attaining his desire Adam placed the chest in his treasure house, which was near the setting place of the sun. Dhu’l-Qarnayn [Alexander the Great] carried it away and gave it to the prophet Daniel, who copied [the portraits] with his miraculous brush”.<sup>244</sup>

As mentioned above, this story can and should be read in the context of claiming religious justification for the art of painting, with Dūst Moḥammad himself making this claim quite explicitly. However, it is also remarkable that the portrait chest of Byzantium, concerning itself with the ontological dimension of the respective prophets rather than with their physical appearances and worldly deeds, seems like a pictorial version of *The*

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<sup>243</sup> Thackston, *Album Prefaces*, p.11.

<sup>244</sup> Thackston, *Album Prefaces*, p. 12.

*Bezels of Wisdom*. As Roxburgh puts it, “The Chest of Witnessing portraits are copies after *acheiropoieta*, ‘unmade’ images fashioned by God, constituted at the beginning of time and encompassing all of God’s creation and its prophetic lineage”.<sup>245</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabī’s masterpiece can be said to perform the exact same exercise in written form, taking its reader beyond the worldly existence of the prophets on the quest for the transcendental meaning underlying these manifestations. In light of all the above considerations, it would not be an exaggeration to describe Dūst Moḥammad as an author whose ontological framework was wholly determined by Sufism in general and Ibn al-‘Arabī in particular.

### 3.7. The Creator as Artist, the Artist as Creator

We have seen that Dūst Moḥammad describes the deity as a painter who uses “being” as a canvas for his self-expression. This metaphorical approach is a common strategy employed by all our sources to elevate the arts by linking them to divine creative activity. Qāḍī Aḥmad initially presents the deity as a scribe:

The pre-eternal scribe of the folio of Thy royalty  
Has written it with the pen of Predestination upon the Tablet of Fate.<sup>246</sup>

Qāḍī Aḥmad also stresses that “The first object created by the Creator, let Him be praised and exalted, was the *qalam* [pen] of marvelous writing”<sup>247</sup> and explains its function by stating that “Through the *qalam*, existence receives God’s orders”.<sup>248</sup> Here again, we encounter the idea of an uncreated, archetypal pen and tablet serving the deity in the work of creation. As Akın-Kıvanç puts it, “God is praised as the supreme Scribe and, as is established in several Qur’anic verses, the Pen is acknowledged and glorified as His first creation”.<sup>249</sup> Mustafa Âlî joins Qāḍī Aḥmad in his praise of the pen as a divine creative instrument:

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<sup>245</sup> Roxburgh, “Concepts of the Portrait”, p. 120.

<sup>246</sup> Minorsky, *Calligraphers and Painters*, p. 41.

<sup>247</sup> Minorsky, *Calligraphers and Painters*, p. 48.

<sup>248</sup> Minorsky, *Calligraphers and Painters*, p. 49.

<sup>249</sup> Akın-Kıvanç, *Mustafa ‘Ali’s*, p. 34.

O Pen! Never has your wisdom executed on the pages of the universe  
A faulty sketch or a faulty line.<sup>250</sup>

While Mustafa Âlî never describes the deity as a painter, Dūst Moḥammad—exclusively—and Qāḍî Aḥmad—at certain points—take this path. Qāḍî Aḥmad talks of the deity adorning “the pages of changing time with the motley black-and-white design of nights becoming days and days becoming nights”,<sup>251</sup> and as arranging “the album of the revolving skies with the multicolored pages of spring and autumn”.<sup>252</sup> And Dūst Moḥammad, besides the quote presented earlier, devotes some quite flowery passages to divine creation viewed through the lens of painting, such as when he states that, “Sometimes he makes black pens from the eyelashes of the houris and draws the tresses of beauties on the face of day from the inkpot of night, and sometimes he makes a pen of sunrays and moonbeams and draws the shapes of beauties with the blood of lovers on the canvas of loveliness”.<sup>253</sup> In the following poem, Dūst Moḥammad goes into astonishing detail describing the deity as a painter of human faces and shapes:

He clothed each one in a color, a color of God’s  
tincture, without hesitation.  
He adorned one beautifully with mole and down:  
a whole worldful fell into error on account of its beauty.  
To another he gave a seditious eye that would  
shed blood with blood-dripping dagger [eyelashes]  
Around the lips of another he drew a novel  
design, by means of which animating down  
souls were pawned.  
For yet another he innovated a fascinating  
stature, casting calamity into the heart from  
the world above....

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<sup>250</sup> Akin-Kıvanç, *Mustafa ‘Ali’s*, p. 159.

<sup>251</sup> Minorsky, *Calligraphers and Painters*, p. 41. This is a quote from the Koran (III, 26).

<sup>252</sup> Minorsky, *Calligraphers and Painters*, p.41.

<sup>253</sup> Thackston, *Album Prefaces*, p. 4-5.

If a form is not worthy of astonishment, it is not  
Worth a touch of the brush.

[...]

The eternal painter who drew that black line, O  
Lord, what marvelous shapes are in his pen!<sup>254</sup>

Finally, Dūst Moḥammad conjoins the metaphors of the deity as writer and painter in the following passage, in which the arts of writing and painting, since they reflect or mirror divine creativity, are contextualized as a method of expressing praise for the deity, i.e., as a form of worship: “The noblest rescript with which the scribes of the workshop of prayer adorn the album of composition and novelty, and the most subtle picture with which the depicators of the gallery of intrinsic meaning decorate the assemblies of creativity and invention, is praise of the Creator, by whose pen are sciven sublime letters and exalted forms”.<sup>255</sup>

The construal of artistic production as praise of divine creation implies that, for all the similarities between the two, a crucial difference remains, and Dūst Moḥammad insists on this difference: “Where the perfect swiftness of creation and destiny is, what room is there for the depiction of the pen or the pen of depiction?”<sup>256</sup> In another poem, Dūst Moḥammad leaves no doubt that his description of the deity as painter does not go beyond a metaphor that fails to adequately grasp the overwhelming awesomeness of divine creation:

Neither is his destining in need of machination  
nor is his depiction dependent upon the pen.  
He quickened thousands of charming forms: nei-  
ther did he use a magic incantation nor did he mix colors.<sup>257</sup>

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<sup>254</sup> Thackston, *Album Prefaces*, p. 5.

<sup>255</sup> Thackston, *Album Prefaces*, p. 4.

<sup>256</sup> Thackston, *Album Prefaces*, p. 5.

<sup>257</sup> Thackston, *Album Prefaces*, p. 5. A similar point emphasizing the humbleness of the art of painting in comparison to divine creation is made by the Mughal emperor Akbar I (r. 1556-1605): “There are many that hate painting; but such men I dislike. It appears to me as if the painter had quite peculiar means of recognizing God; for a painter in sketching anything that has life, and in devising its limbs, one after the

Such disavowals notwithstanding, the comparison of the deity to the artist lets a genie out of the bottle that our sources are never quite able to fully contain again. This genie is the idea of art as a human endeavor that produces more than a mere representation of the perceptible world, the idea that art creates, and constitutes, being in a way in which it would not be unconcealed if it was not for art's intervention. This is even true for calligraphy, the art form often viewed as religiously unassailable. As Barry informs us, "Eastern Islamic mystical speculation in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries [...] came to invest the calligraphic stroke [...] with 'the breath of life': that is, the 'divine breath' or 'holy spirit' of creation, called in Arabic the *ruh*".<sup>258</sup>

However, with calligraphy, it is never quite clear whether the divine inspiration emanates from the art itself or from the meaning of the words which the art is used to convey. In the above examples comparing the deity to a writer, it is noteworthy that he is called a scribe rather than a calligrapher, implying that it is the content of the message, rather than the form of its delivery, that renders the art of writing divinely sanctioned. In the same examples, it is also unclear whether God's calligraphy itself constitutes creation, or whether creation is understood as resulting from the commands that the deity commits to his uncreated tablet via the tool of the pen and the technique of writing. I am inclined to argue for the latter—in the metaphor of the deity as scribe, it is not so much calligraphy that creates; rather, the creative impetus belongs to the words that are expressed through calligraphy.

Many passages in the sources reinforce this argument. Qāḍī Aḥmad quotes Maulana Sultan Ali as stating, "Writing exists in order to be read. Not that (readers) should get stuck in it".<sup>259</sup> And Mustafa Âlî informs us that he will write about "the necessity of writing" and "the nobility of calligraphy".<sup>260</sup> For both writers, calligraphy is inextricably entangled with the meaning of the words it conveys. While acknowledging the beauty of calligraphy in and of itself, the sources also encourage readers not to get hung up on that beauty, but to foreground the meaning of the words that are written—the

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other, must come to feel that he cannot bestow individuality on his work, and is thus forced to think of God, the giver of life, and thus will increase in knowledge" (Soucek, "The Theory and Practice", p. 101).

<sup>258</sup> Barry, *Figurative Art*, p. 102.

<sup>259</sup> Minorsky, *Calligraphers and Painters*, p. 111.

<sup>260</sup> Akın-Kıvanç, *Mustafa 'Ali's*, p. 169.

words they have in mind, of course, being the verses of the Koran. Calligraphy is literal: it cannot transcend words to communicate something beyond them, something words themselves do not already contain and express in an explicit or implicit fashion. This tethering of the art to specific words and their meanings renders calligraphy religiously safe—but it also severely limits the range of what the art can aspire to.

While calligraphy is limited by the written word it depicts, the written word itself also comes under intense scrutiny in Sufi philosophy, which enlists none other than the prophet Muḥammad himself to expose its limitations. As Annemarie Schimmel puts it, Sufis maintained that “letters might be a veil between themselves and the immediate experience of the Divine, for which the mind and the heart have to be like a blank page”.<sup>261</sup> The written word, here, is equated with the “letter of the law” or an unreflective observation of the ritualistic side of religion, while Sufis themselves pursued the “spirit of the law” to be appreciated through unmediated experience. The prophet Muḥammad, whom Islamic tradition depicts as illiterate, is used by all three of our sources to drive home this exact point. Dūst Moḥammad speaks of the prophet as “The unlettered one who has drawn, without aid of the pen, a line of abrogation through a thousand books”.<sup>262</sup> Mustafa Âlî maintains that “his rising above the passion for the black [ink] of reading and writing [indicated] that perpetual sciences and eternal knowledge were inscribed in the black core of his heart”.<sup>263</sup> And Qāḍī Aḥmad uses the following passage from Maulana Sultan Ali to explain the matter:

As Mustafa [Muḥammad] enjoyed the grace of the Lord  
He had no need to read and write.  
To him from Pre-eternity became known  
All that had been traced by the Pen of Creation.<sup>264</sup>

What all these passages have in common is the Sufi understanding of the written word as a mediator and, therefore, strictly speaking, a veil or an obstacle between the

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<sup>261</sup> Quoted in Akin-Kıvanç, *Mustafa 'Ali's*, p. 177.

<sup>262</sup> Thackston, *Album Prefaces*, p. 5.

<sup>263</sup> Akin-Kıvanç, *Mustafa 'Ali's*, p. 177-78.

<sup>264</sup> Minorsky, *Calligraphers and Painters*, p. 106.



human being and her apprehension of the absolute. Immediate perception or experience, as in the case of the prophet, is always to be preferred to the mediated perception enabled by the written word, even if this written word has been traced by the very “Pen of Creation”. In light of his ascribed capacity for immediate perception of the absolute, it is little wonder that many Sufis regarded Muḥammad, in Ladan Akbarnia and Francesca Leoni’s words, as “the model for all Sufis and ‘the first link in the spiritual chain of Sufism’”.<sup>265</sup>

The idea of the insufficiency of words—whether written or, indeed, spoken—takes us back firmly into the territory of major Sufi philosophers such as Ibn al-‘Arabī and Rūmī. While mapping out the thought of Ibn al-‘Arabī, we saw that he regarded direct experience of the absolute as absolutely incommunicable. In his words, “When God established me in this station, I realized my animality to the full. I saw things and I wanted to express what I saw, but could not do so, being no different from those who cannot speak”.<sup>266</sup> In two passages from his *Masnavi*, Rūmī expresses the same idea in poetic form:

While explanation sometimes makes things clear  
 True love through silence only once can hear:  
 The pen would smoothly write the things it knew  
 But when it came to love it split in two.<sup>267</sup>

If I describe this it will be in vain;  
 What lies beyond words how can I explain?  
 This mystery would smash your brain to bits;  
 When writing it the firmest stylus splits.<sup>268</sup>

Here, then, we have identified the fatal flaw of calligraphy from the viewpoint of Sufi philosophy, if calligraphy is understood as a tool for enabling an apprehension of the

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<sup>265</sup> Ladan Akbarnia and Francesca Leoni, *Light of the Sufis: the Mystical Arts of Islam* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2010), p. 27.

<sup>266</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabī, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 235.

<sup>267</sup> Rūmī, *The Masnavi: Book One*, p. 11.

<sup>268</sup> Rūmī, *The Masnavi: Book Two*, p. 104.

divine. This flaw bedevils the art not in spite of, but because of its symbiotic relationship with the letter of Islamic revelation. It was not just that calligraphy could not step beyond the written word; the written word itself could not step beyond descriptive or conceptual thought; and this thought itself was unable to either grasp or communicate absolute reality. To Sufi philosophy, then, calligraphy had to remain but a representation of a representation of the unrepresentable absolute.

### 3.8. Miniature Painting and the Self-Manifestation of the Absolute

This is where both the enticement and the danger of miniature painting become apparent. Throughout the examined primary sources, our authors display an awed if conflicted awareness that painting, as opposed to calligraphy, is indeed able to manifest something that goes beyond words and cannot be explained by them. As Akın-Kıvanç puts it, “According to these authors, most of whom were practicing calligraphers, the wondrous elements of the art of painting were not explicable by words. In his Preface, for example, Dūst Moḥammad writes that Bihzād’s painting is ‘beyond all description’”.<sup>269</sup> This insistence on the inexplicability of the art of painting goes hand in hand with a stress on the art’s capacity of “innovation”—of producing something new, unseen, and unheard of. Above, we saw Dūst Moḥammad use vocabulary like “innovate” and “astonishment” when describing the deity’s—metaphorically understood—painterly work. Similarly, Mustafa Âlî describes the miniaturist Muhammad of Herat as “the master of confounding innovations”.<sup>270</sup>

How can we unpack and analyze this relatively vague nomenclature? What do the authors have in mind when they talk of innovation, inexplicability, and astonishment? Is this simply the expression of a cliché along the lines of “a beauty beyond words”, or is there a further depth of thought and idea to be plumbed beneath these assertions? In order to answer these questions, I will now turn to two historical figures which have been mythologized in the tradition of miniature painting to serve as examples and ideal types for the practitioner of miniature art: the painter Kamāluddīn Bihzād of Herat (ca. 1465-1533) and Mani, the prophet of the Manichaean religion (ca. 216-273).

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<sup>269</sup> Akın-Kıvanç, *Mustafa ‘Ali’s*, p. 143. Akın-Kıvanç makes this argument to try and explain why the authors do not attempt to formulate a theory or even philosophy of art.

<sup>270</sup> Akın-Kıvanç, *Mustafa ‘Ali’s*, p. 265.

In Michael Barry's words, Bihzād was "a master whose prestige became legendary throughout Eastern Islam in his own lifetime".<sup>271</sup> His early career passed at the court of Husayn Bayqara, the last ruler of Herat in the Timurid line, whom Welch describes as "one of the Iran's most imaginative and discerning patrons".<sup>272</sup> At the beginning of the sixteenth century, the city experienced a period of extreme instability in which it was conquered first by the Uzbeks (1507) and subsequently by Ismail I, founder of the Safavid dynasty (1510). Briefly falling to the Uzbeks again after Ismail's death, the city was retaken by the Safavid ruler Tahmasp in 1528. As a result of the city's precarious fortunes and subsequent loss of status as a political center, its artistic milieu started dispersing, with Bihzād finding new employment and patronage under the Safavid rulers. He became a favorite of Ismail I, who proclaimed him, in 1522, "as overseer of all library workshops in the Safavid Empire—in effect, as the recognized master of all artists of the book".<sup>273</sup> Under Ismail's successor Tahmasp, Bihzād maintained his high stature until his death in 1533, when he was buried, so Dūst Moḥammad, "next to the grave of the great poet Shaykh Kamal in Tabriz".<sup>274</sup>

Bihzād's relationship to Ismail I was of such proximity as to inspire legends. In *Epic Deeds of Artists*, Mustafā Âlî recounts such a legend from an Ottoman perspective, i.e., the perspective of the Safavids' enemies. He maintains that before Ismail's forces clashed with those of his nemesis, the Ottoman sultan Selim I, on the Chaldiran plain in 1514, "Shah Ismail first hid the praiseworthy [calligrapher] Shah Mahmud Nijad and then the matchless figural-painter Master Bihzad in a cavern, saying, 'Who knows, should flight or death befall my body, and destruction and chaos the land of Persia, they might fall prey to the God-empowered hand of Sultan Salim Khan of Rum'".<sup>275</sup> Then, after his defeat at the hands of Selim, Ismail "first went to the place where he had lodged them and searched for them. When he found [the two] where he had left [them], he was filled with gratitude to the Lord of Power from the depths of his heart".<sup>276</sup>

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<sup>271</sup> Barry, *Figurative Art*, p. 34.

<sup>272</sup> Welch, *Persian Painting*, p. 16.

<sup>273</sup> Barry, *Figurative Art*, p. 38.

<sup>274</sup> Thackston, *Album Prefaces*, p. 15.

<sup>275</sup> Akın-Kıvanç, *Mustafa 'Ali's*, p. 223.

<sup>276</sup> Akın-Kıvanç, *Mustafa 'Ali's*, p. 223.

In our sources, Bihzād appears as an “archetype of artistic excellence”<sup>277</sup> against which other miniature painters are measured, with “Bihzad-like” artistry ascribed to the best of them. In the treatises of Qāḍī Aḥmad and Mustafā Ālī, he is mentioned in the same breath as Mani, to whom I will turn below. Thus, Qāḍī Aḥmad says of Ibrahim Mirza that “By his sketches and his paintings he called to mind the image of Mani and the master Behzad Harawi”.<sup>278</sup> And Mustafā Ālī mentions a Master Qudrat, who “was a wonder among fine decorators, a master of Mani-like qualities and Bihzad-like artistry”.<sup>279</sup> But what was it that made Bihzād’s paintings so special? In the following couplet, Qāḍī Aḥmad gives us an indication:

His images of birds are heart ravishing,  
Like the birds of Christ they acquire a soul.<sup>280</sup>

Bihzād’s paintings, then, are described as bestowing souls upon their subjects. A further examination of Qāḍī Aḥmad reveals this very life-giving quality as the core of what makes painting innovative, astonishing, and inexplicable.

Well-done, the magic-working masters of the brush  
Whose bewitching tool bestows a new life.  
They come to grips with every creature  
And conjure up to life the likeness of everyone;  
In creating they are followers of the pure godhead,  
From the encompassing circle of the sky to the surface of the earth.  
They cast their glances about creation  
And make copies of every original.  
Their creative art is a guide to the plan of the universe,  
With them the *qalam* is bent in prostration (before God).  
I cannot understand with what art they treat images

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<sup>277</sup> Barry, *Figurative Art*, p. 161.

<sup>278</sup> Minorsky, *Calligraphers and Painters*, p. 159.

<sup>279</sup> Akin-Kıvanç, *Mustafa ‘Ali’s*, p. 273.

<sup>280</sup> Minorsky, *Calligraphers and Painters*, p. 180. As Minorsky explains, “The reference is to the clay birds that flew away when the child Jesus threw them into the air”.

So that they seem to be speaking to men.<sup>281</sup>

Innovation, here, would seem to consist of “bestowing a new life” where there was none before. The process by which miniaturists are able to produce this “life” is that which “cannot be understood”. And astonishment is what results when the effect of such a painting, seemingly “speaking to men”, is witnessed by a beholder. We must add, though, that Qāḍī Aḥmad here clearly speaks of miniaturists as “making copies” of “originals”. They are, in this passage, not originators, but “followers” of divine creation. Are we, then, to conclude that the bestowing of “life” simply consisted of an extremely developed realism, endowing certain paintings with a high degree of verisimilitude? Akın-Kıvanç argues along these lines when discussing the paintings of Mani. She maintains that “Mani’s greatest success was in depicting animate beings: he could render living beings so realistically that even their souls would appear ‘as if in motion’”.<sup>282</sup>

There are two strands of argument that take the issue of “life-giving” in miniature painting as their starting point. The first deals with the tension, as outlined above, between innovation and imitation. How can an artist be an innovator if, ultimately, he is only imitating divine self-manifestation? Priscilla Soucek approaches this issue from a neoplatonic perspective, which she sees as operative in the self-understanding of miniature artists. To elucidate this perspective, she quotes Plotinus as follows:

The arts are not to be slighted on the ground that they create by imitation natural objects, for to begin with, those natural objects are themselves imitations; then, we must recognize that they give us no bare reproduction of the thing seen but go back to the Reason-Principles from which Nature itself derives, furthermore, that much of their work is all their own, they are holders of beauty and add where nature is lacking.<sup>283</sup>

Firstly, then, it is technically wrong to talk of copies and originals, since either everything or nothing in the phenomenal world is an “original”, standing in the same

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<sup>281</sup> Minorsky, *Calligraphers and Painters*, p. 178-79.

<sup>282</sup> Akın-Kıvanç, *Mustafa ‘Ali’s*, p. 129.

<sup>283</sup> Quoted in Soucek, “The Theory and Practice”, p. 101.

relation to the uncreated absolute as everything else. This opens the door to the second observation that a work of art, far from being an “imitation”, can enable a more authentic or direct apprehension of the absolute than something it depicts, even if such a depiction is superficially observed to be the case. Turning to Ibn al-‘Arabī, we might here revisit a passage quoted above in which the Sufi philosopher takes the matter one step further than the Plotinus passage, regarding the entirety of the phenomenal world not as the derivative of Reason-Principles but rather as a direct manifestation of the divine:

The perfect gnostic is one who regards every object of worship as a manifestation of God in which He is worshiped. They call it a god, although its proper name might be stone, wood, animal, man, star, or angel. Although that might be its particular name, Divinity presents a level that causes the worshiper to imagine that it is his object of worship. In reality, this level is the Self-manifestation of God to the consciousness of the worshiper in this particular mode of manifestation.<sup>284</sup>

Perhaps, then, we must reject Akın-Kıvanç’s equation of the miniature painting’s “bestowal of life” with a highly developed representational realism and look elsewhere for the explanation of this key idea. In this pursuit, I will now turn to the figure of Mani as depicted in our sources.

The historical Mani, prophet of Manichaeism, was born in Babylonia around the year 216. He was mainly active under the Sassanian ruler Shapur I (r. 241-272) and was put to death around 273, briefly after this ruler’s death.<sup>285</sup> While the historical Mani is indeed said to have engaged in painting—Akın-Kıvanç describes him as “the composer and illustrator of the Manichaean scripture known as the *Ardahang*”<sup>286</sup>—his main significance was not as an artist but as a prophet who delivered, in Hans Jonas’ words, “a new revelation [...], a new body of Scripture, and [laid] the foundation for a new church that was meant to supersede any existing one”.<sup>287</sup> The syncretistic Mani, whose teachings

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<sup>284</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabī, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 247.

<sup>285</sup> Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001), p. 208.

<sup>286</sup> Akın-Kıvanç, *Mustafa ‘Ali’s*, p. 8.

<sup>287</sup> Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, p. 206.

drew on Buddhist, Christian, and Zoroastrian ideas alike, is unsurprisingly not included in the Islamic line of authentic, monotheistic prophets. And our sources' focus is squarely on Mani as an artist—only one source, Dūst Moḥammad, mentions his claim to prophethood at all. Therefore, it is with the figure of Mani the artist as conceived by our sources, rather than with Mani the prophet of Manichaeism, that I will deal below.

Both Mustafa Âlî and Dūst Moḥammad devote extensive anecdotes to Mani. At first glance, it is easy to understand from Mustafa Âlî's treatise why Akın-Kıvanç essentially understands Mani as a "hyperrealist" painter. Mustafa Âlî—who views Mani exclusively as a painter, not a false or true prophet—recounts a story in which three courtly painters devise a challenge to outperform and humiliate any painter who dares to take it up.

They went out to a royal garden on the outskirts of the city. [There,] they painted [an] image of an abundant stream and a fountain that gushed sweet waters. Playing a trick, they sent forth those who claimed to be artists to the non-existent stream by that fountainhead [from whence they] brought back no water. As a result of that ploy, each of the masters who arrived at that fountain broke his jug while attempting to collect its water, and out of embarrassment, instead of returning to the masters, they chose to flee [that] land.<sup>288</sup>

Clearly, what is at issue here is verisimilitude or realism, with the three masters having produced a *trompe-l'oeil* that no other artist can distinguish from the actual garden surrounding it. Finally, Mani, a young artist "who did not have much of a reputation",<sup>289</sup> decides to take up the challenge.

At the place of trial, [upon seeing] the pieces of jars left by those whose offering cups had been broken and whose dignity and honor had been humiliated, the sweet waters of his nature became disturbed.

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<sup>288</sup> Akın-Kıvanç, *Mustafa 'Ali's*, p. 277.

<sup>289</sup> Akın-Kıvanç, *Mustafa 'Ali's*, p. 277.

[...]

Instantly, he grabbed his wonder-working reed pen [...]. That fine-sketching pen, rendering a dog's carcass with assurance, brought forth an esoteric creation and made manifest a flawless magic painting. So much so that the worms on the corpse were visible, and furthermore, they all [were] moving and quivering. In every respect, it [was] unmistakably a beast's carcass. It was evident that, but for the missing smell, it had no defect. And, it [was] clear as day that each one of the moving and writhing worms completely made up for that shortcoming.<sup>290</sup>

Mani returns to the three masters with his empty jug, telling them he could not retrieve the water since a dog's carcass had fallen into the fountain, poisoning its contents. Upon inspecting the modified painting, the masters are forced to concede Mani's skill.

It may seem that Mani achieves this victory through his ability to match—or perhaps even exceed—the masters' realism. However, the issue is not that simple. Firstly, Mani's victory here is primarily of a moral rather than artistic nature. His main motivation is not the desire to outperform the masters but the outrage he feels upon thinking of the “dignity and honor” of previous competitors who “had been humiliated”. His artistic response is of a similarly moral kind: the worms eating the rotting dog's carcass are meant to symbolize the hubris eating away at the three masters' personalities. In his moral response, then, Mani stands firmly in the tradition of holistic perfection outlined above, according to which an artist's skills could only be a reflection of his moral qualities.

Secondly, what Mani achieves in his painterly intervention goes beyond mere verisimilitude. While it falls short of such verisimilitude on account of the missing smell, it exceeds the limits of pictorial representation in somehow imbuing the worms with motion. Further accounts of Mani's art reinforce the idea that his “life-giving” went beyond realistic representation. Dūst Moḥammad recounts an anecdote that ties Mani's artistry to his—in the author's view, false—claim to prophethood.

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<sup>290</sup> Akın-Kıvanç, *Mustafa 'Ali's*, p. 279. The translation was slightly modified by this author.



Mani began to pretend to prophesy and made this claim acceptable in the eyes of the people by cloaking it in portraiture. Since the people expected a miracle of him, he took a span of silk, went into a cave and ordered the entrance closed. When one year had passed from the time of his withdrawal, he emerged and showed the silk. On it he had painted and portrayed the likenesses of humans, animals, trees, birds and various shapes that occur only in the mirror of the mind through the eye of imagination and that sit on the page of possibility in the visible world only with fantastic shapes.<sup>291</sup>

Dūst Moḥammad dismisses Mani's artistry, stating that "The short-sighted ones whose turbid hearts could not reflect the light of Islam [were] duped by his game".<sup>292</sup> Thus, the author refuses to acknowledge Mani's paintings as an authentic "miracle", dismissing them as a "game" instead. It is unclear here whether the game consists of a depiction so realistic that beholders mistook Mani's paintings for "the real thing". But even if this is part of the matter, it does not end there. After all, Mani also paints things that are not witnessed in the phenomenal world, namely "various shapes that occur only in the mirror of the mind through the eye of imagination and that sit on the page of possibility in the visible world only with fantastic shapes". In so doing, Mani seems to be tapping into the pool of potential presented by the uncreated absolute, enabling the viewers of his paintings to perceive things to which their ordinary sensory interaction with the phenomenal world provides no access. In other words, Mani's paintings, at the very least, expand the range of that which is perceptible to the eye.

Mani's creation of new things to see is expanded in Mustafa Ālī's account into a creation of new ways of seeing. In the following passage, the author presents Mani not as conjuring up fantastic shapes, but rather as granting visibility to phenomena that patently exist but are normally invisible.

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<sup>291</sup> Thackston, *Album Prefaces*, p. 12.

<sup>292</sup> Thackston, *Album Prefaces*, p. 12.

Certain things, such as a blowing wind or a boisterous, rushing storm, that were impossible to represent as matter and give a visible form, [he would render] in different ways so their depiction would be veiled. The said master Mani possessed such artistry and creativity that when he depicted flowing water, he would make it visible in crystal-like form, and when he depicted a blowing wind, he would make it manifest like an abundant stream.<sup>293</sup>

Paradoxically, the painter manages to depict water in “crystal-like form” while enabling the eye to witness its “flow”. Similarly, he manages to paint a visible wind by endowing it with the attributes of a stream. He “veils” the depiction of these phenomena, meaning, in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s parlance, that he conceals and unconceals them at the same time. In sum, the painter as described by Mustafa Âlî is capable of developing and employing techniques that challenge and potentially expand the perceptive range of viewers of his art.

This take on Mani’s art as a manifestation of the divine absolute, unconcealing the absolute in a unique way, is also found in Mustafa Âlî’s next anecdote about Mani. Here, the artist has entered the service of the ruler at the side of the tree masters. In a turn of events reminiscent of Rūmī’s story about Chinese and Greek painters, each of the four artists is commissioned by the sovereign—the “ruler of China”—to decorate one wall of a hall. Just like in Rūmī, the artists work “behind a veil”, with their art invisible to the others. When the veils are lifted, each artist is revealed to have produced such “inventions and [works of] originality that it would be fitting if [their] images were to be displayed as evident signs of the adornments that the perpetual decorator and the Eternal Artist made manifest in the gardens and meadows of the highest paradise which He embellished with miraculous colors”.<sup>294</sup> In other words, the paintings are not imitations or representations of phenomena. Rather, they are described as direct, original “signs” of uncreated divine potentiality. Once again, Mustafa Âlî singles out Mani’s work for particular praise:

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<sup>293</sup> Akın-Kıvanç, *Mustafa ‘Ali’s*, p. 276-77.

<sup>294</sup> Akın-Kıvanç, *Mustafa ‘Ali’s*, p. 278.

He showed that, with various tricks and variegated colors, it was possible to embellish the beauties that the Artist of Imagination did not impart on the Tablet of mind and the arts that the Painter of Perfection did not render on the slate of intellect.<sup>295</sup>

[...]

In other words, that peerless master gave the wall such a burnishing that pure water has never been so transparent. And he gave his every image such a bright appearance that the world-illuminating mirror has never furbished plants and flowers in that tone.

[...]

With their pure, natural quality, Mani's Designs became a mirror for his enemies.

He gave [his] world[-renowned] pictures such a light that  
From end to end they began to manifest God's providence.<sup>296</sup>

These passages quite explicitly posit that art can constitute a manifestation of the divine absolute that is not only different from other phenomena, but actually enables these phenomena to reach a state of unconcealment they cannot attain on their own. “Pure water had never been so transparent”, Mustafa Âlî writes, and “the world-illuminating mirror has never furbished plants and flowers in that tone”. The beholder of actual water, plants, or flowers cannot perceive their “wateriness” or “floweriness”, as it were, to the extent that these qualities become perceptible in art. This process is firmly embedded in Sufi terminology, with Mani's burnishing of the wall an exact replication of Rûmî's Greek artists' polishing of theirs, and the twice-mentioned “mirror” establishing a clear context for art as mirror of the divine absolute. Read in the light of Sufi philosophy, then, Mustafa Âlî presents art—or, at the very least, great art—as a process of unconcealment by which phenomena are retrieved from their habitual invisibility.

It is in this sense of unconcealment that the “life-giving” quality of miniature art needs to be understood. When read in this way, passages like the following couplet by

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<sup>295</sup> Akın-Kıvanç, *Mustafa 'Ali's*, p. 279.

<sup>296</sup> Akın-Kıvanç, *Mustafa 'Ali's*, p. 280.

Qāḍī Aḥmad, in which he describes the artistic prowess of Ibrahim Mirza, make perfect sense:

Thanks to the mastery, the hair of his *qalam*  
Gave life even to images of minerals.<sup>297</sup>

It is not that Ibrahim Mirza paints in such a realistic fashion that he makes even inanimate minerals “come to life”, as it were. Rather, Ibrahim Mirza’s art aids the minerals in their unconcealment by revealing their grounding in the ontological basis of all life.

### 3.9. The Rejection of Miniature Painting and Sufism by Islamic Orthodoxy

In the Sufi understanding, then, miniaturists are not fake “life-givers” in the vulgar sense of competition or rivalry with the deity, illusionists who arrogate to themselves the powers of the deity by using artistic tricks to make the subjects of their paintings seem literally alive. Rather, they act as conduits in the self-manifestation of the absolute, which achieves its unconcealment through their artworks. To miss this latter understanding and accuse miniaturists of the former intent is at best a naïve misapprehension and at worst a malicious misrepresentation. Nonetheless, as we have seen, both miniature art and Sufism, the supplier of its philosophical justification, had to weather criticism from the Islamic orthodoxy. To the literalist, a miniaturist’s depiction of phenomena can smack of idolatry in the same way as Ibn al-‘Arabī’s assertion that “The perfect gnostic is one who regards every object of worship as a manifestation of God in which He is worshiped”.<sup>298</sup>

Painters and Sufis alike were confronted with this threat. Mustafa Âlî gives an account of Mani’s execution that ties his demise directly to his production of images. Cryptically, the author does not outline the allegations against the painter, simply maintaining that “the sages of the time envied his rise and pursued aggressively the rules of the arts of spying and hypocrisy. With their schism, the sages incriminated Mani”.<sup>299</sup> Whatever his alleged crime may have been, Mani refuses to repent and “[does] not consider turning away from his conviction that a wicked picture [should be] discarded”.

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<sup>297</sup> Minorsky, *Calligraphers and Painters*, p. 183.

<sup>298</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabī, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 247.

<sup>299</sup> Akın-Kıvanç, *Mustafa ‘Ali’s*, p. 280.

Fascinatingly, Mustafâ Âlî here paints Mani as the one who believes “a wicked picture should be discarded”,<sup>300</sup> and while it is not made clear what his opponents believe or what a “wicked picture” is supposed to consist of, it is quite evident that the issue, in some way, concerns Mani’s paintings. In light of his lack of repentance, “it [is] decided that he be flayed and his skin be stuffed with straw and displayed”.<sup>301</sup>

The demise of Mani echoes that of perhaps the most famous martyr of Sufism, Abu’l-Moghith al-Hosain ibn Mansur al-Hallaj (ca. 858-913), who was put to death in Baghdad for his proclamation, “I am the Truth”. Read by his literalist detractors as a claim that “he was God”, we now of course understand al-Hallaj’s utterance to mean that the absolute was self-manifesting in his person. The story of al-Hallaj’s execution is recounted by Farīduddīn ‘Aṭṭār in his work, *Memorial of the Saints*. When Jonaid, one of al-Hallaj’s Sufi teachers, is asked for his opinion on the latter’s statement, he claims that “This is not the time for esoteric meanings” and supports the death sentence.<sup>302</sup> Subsequently, al-Hallaj is subjected to beatings with sticks, crucifixion, stoning, the severing of his hands and feet, the gauging of his eyes, the severing of his tongue, ears, and nose; and finally, the severing of his head. At this point, “from each of his members [still comes] the declaration, ‘I am the Truth’”.<sup>303</sup> Thereupon, Al-Hallaj’s limbs are burned.

From his ashes came the cry, “I am the Truth”, even as in the time of his slaying every drop of blood as it trickled formed the word Allah.

Dumbfounded, they cast his ashes into the Tigris. As they floated on the surface of the water, they continued to cry, “I am the Truth”.<sup>304</sup>

This dramatic declaration of divinity by al-Hallaj’s limbs, blood, and even ashes, when read in the context of Sufi philosophy, simply means that the absolute self-

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<sup>300</sup> Akın-Kıvanç, *Mustafa ‘Ali’s*, p.280.

<sup>301</sup> Akın-Kıvanç, *Mustafa ‘Ali’s*, p.280.

<sup>302</sup> Farīduddīn ‘Aṭṭār, *Muslim Saints and Mystics: Episodes from the Tadhkirat al-Auliya* (Memorial of the Saints) by Farid al-Din ‘Aṭṭār, trans. A. J. Arberry (Ames, Iowa: Omphaloskepsis, 2000), p. 360.

<sup>303</sup> ‘Aṭṭār, *Muslim Saints and Mystics*, p. 366.

<sup>304</sup> ‘Aṭṭār, *Muslim Saints and Mystics*, p. 366-67.

manifests in even the smallest particle of phenomenal existence. And as we have seen, this is the very truth that is unconcealed in a Sufi philosophical reading of miniature art.

#### **Chapter 4: Middle Eastern Miniature Painting in the West**

This chapter will focus on the transmission of Middle Eastern miniature painting to the West, a process that entailed the relocation of actual artworks, the engagement with these artworks in the form of a fledgling field of scholarship, and the influence that miniature painting had on Western art in the twentieth century. The process of transmission was problematic in every respect: most importantly, manuscripts were dismembered in order to enable the paintings they contained to be sold one by one.

Beyond the destruction of the integral artwork that was the manuscript, this approach also resulted in the emergence of a very skewed form of scholarship, a scholarship that mostly focused on the formal aspects of individual paintings while largely ignoring the artistic, cultural, and philosophical contexts in which these paintings acquired weight. Western scholarship was reinforced in this skewed approach by what we may call the “iconophobic fallacy”, i.e., the blanket assumption that “Islamic culture” is iconophobic and that depictions of living beings can therefore occupy an inconsequential and marginal place in that culture at best. While some of the newest scholarship on miniature art has begun to transcend these assumptions, I will argue below that such scholarship is still far removed from appreciating and accounting for the ontological significance of miniature art as outlined above.

Turning to the matter of artistic inspiration, I will follow the research of Michael Barry to focus on the case of Henri Matisse. Exposure to miniature art played a crucial role in this artist’s approach to the utilization of color and perspective—the deployment of blocks of primary colors in two-dimensional, abstract fields. Matisse was inspired by miniature painting without any contextualizing knowledge of Middle Eastern art history or Sufi philosophy. Nonetheless, it can be argued that he encountered this art form in a visceral fashion not found in scholarship and was able to both experience, and absorb into his own art, the function of color as a locus of unconcealment as intended by miniature painters.

This means we can locate a “philosophical equivalence” between Matisse’s art and miniature painting, an equivalence that goes beyond the mimicry of formal technique. Closing off the chapter, I will argue with Barry that this philosophical

equivalence can also be found at the origins of miniature art itself, where formal features were adopted from Chinese sources without an intellectual or cultural understanding of their significance. Despite the fortuitous nature of the formal borrowing, miniature painting in its maturity came to constitute a locus of unconcealment explicable in Sufi terms that paralleled Taoist ideas entwined with the same process of unconcealment in Chinese art. As stated in the Introduction of this study, I am not advancing an argument that the philosophical equivalence between Sufi and phenomenological approaches to art is causally related to the formal influence of miniature painting on Western art. Nonetheless, as I will seek to demonstrate in the Conclusion, and as will also become apparent from the case of Taoism and Sufism, these philosophies offer us overlapping and productively complementary approaches to art.

#### 4.1. Miniature Painting and Western Scholarship

Given the firm ties between miniature painting and royal sponsorship, it is hardly surprising that the art form did not survive the destruction of the court milieus that enabled its great flowering. As Barry points out, the collapse first of the Safavid Empire in eighteenth-century Persia and subsequently of the final remnants of the Mughal Empire in nineteenth-century India spelled the end for miniature painting as living art form.<sup>305</sup> Of course, this destruction of court milieus and their concomitant cultural production went hand in hand with Western European cultural and political, if not outright colonial, ascendancy over the geographies in question. As a result, it did not take all too long for the artifacts of this bygone cultural production to be “discovered”, expropriated, and appropriated by persons and institutions from the West.

Barry outlines the process by which the first Western collectors such as Henri Vever, Victor Goloubew and the Barons Edmond and Maurice de Rothschild started acquiring specimens of miniature art at the turn of the twentieth century. The establishment of such collections was swiftly followed by a number of exhibitions that were to prove of fundamental importance to the development of twentieth-century Western art: “three pioneering exhibitions of Persian art held at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris in 1903, 1907, and 1912” and “another major exhibition of Eastern

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<sup>305</sup> Barry, *Figurative Art*, p. 27-28.



Islamic art, drawing on public and private collections throughout Europe, [...] held in Munich in 1910”.<sup>306</sup> Some of the early Western collectors and popularizers of miniature painting were also among the first to produce scholarship, or at least criticism, on it. Such was the case with Henri Vever and the Russian collector Ivan Stchoukine, “who fled to France after 1917 [and] became a leading scholar of Persian manuscript painting”.<sup>307</sup>

However, as mentioned above, the act of transmission to the West was a violent—and violating—process which the acquired works of art did not often survive with unassailed integrity. Barry describes the heartbreaking way in which “Paris dealers [...] cut up these manuscripts to sell their miniatures piecemeal, and each for high prices. [...] Profitable artistic massacres of this type continued to 1959, when US millionaire Arthur Houghton dismembered his own precious manuscript of a *Book of Kings*, which had once belonged to Shah Tahmasp, in order to sell its pictures, one by one, to dealers and collectors throughout North America and Europe”.<sup>308</sup> As to be expected, this process was also one in which the isolated miniature painting found appreciation solely as a visually pleasing and arresting artifact, while considerations regarding artistic context (the manuscript) and cultural context (such as Sufi philosophy) fell by the wayside. In Barry’s words, “Each illustrated Persian page, thus excised from its context, was offered for sheer aesthetic delight to Western amateurs: as an isolated art object, signifying nothing but its own color and design, and with nothing to impart but its charm”.<sup>309</sup>

This superficial and piecemeal approach to the dissemination, preservation, and appreciation of miniature painting was also reflected in Western scholarship on the topic. Even as the lead in collecting and scholarship passed from Europe to the USA after World War II, scholarship on miniature paintings remained, with few exceptions, decidedly formalist and committed to an approach that Barry summarizes as the effort “to map out the main historic lines of development, differentiate workshops and styles, and [...] identify the hand of individual masters”.<sup>310</sup> Rather than leading to works by scholars of Middle Eastern history and culture, leave alone by those of religion or philosophy, the study of miniature painting has by and large remained confined to “art historians in the

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<sup>306</sup> Barry, *Figurative Art*, p. 28.

<sup>307</sup> Barry, *Figurative Art*, p.28.

<sup>308</sup> Barry, *Figurative Art*, p. 37-38.

<sup>309</sup> Barry, *Figurative Art*, p. 38.

<sup>310</sup> Barry, *Figurative Art*, p.38.

narrower sense: that is, to specialists preoccupied with style”.<sup>311</sup> It is only in the outgoing twentieth and early twenty-first century that we can talk of the first Western scholarly efforts to approach an understanding of the cultural and philosophical world which these art works inhabited and manifested. And these efforts, as I will argue in my evaluation of them below, can mostly be regarded as tentative steps in the right direction at best.

One of the biggest obstacles to a deeper scholarly engagement with miniature painting has been the far too easy and convenient assumption of a categorical iconoclasm in Islam, an assumption that, as I have shown above, is in need of serious revision. If Islam is a religion that does not allow the depiction of living beings in general and humans in particular, then miniature painting must, in Barry’s words, be “a sort of pleasant, but minor form of secular decoration—an historically aberrant aesthetic game of no intellectual importance and with no real spiritual role to play in a civilization otherwise sternly perceived as iconophobic”.<sup>312</sup> This assumption imprisons scholarship in a set of vicious circles. The first of these is on the theoretical level: miniature painting is seen as marginal because Islam is regarded as iconophobic, and Islam is regarded as iconophobic because miniature painting is seen as marginal. The second is on the practical level: since miniature painting is assumed not to relate fruitfully to history, religion, or philosophy, it can be studied by scholars with no knowledge in these fields; and since only such scholars study miniature painting, it ends up not relating to these fields.

To see how prevalent such attitudes are even in the twenty-first century, one need look no further than *On Islamic Art*, a 2001 study published by Mikhail Piotrovsky, Director of the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg. In this study, Piotrovsky blithely claims that “The sacred history of the Muslim may only be told in words. Thus it is accurate to state that Islamic art is in essence abstract and not figurative”, and that “representations in Islamic art, both of animals and people, [...] are never used for religious purposes and are generally completely secondary to the ornamentation”.<sup>313</sup> As we shall see below, the “iconophobic fallacy” has not only led to statements as wildly

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<sup>311</sup> Barry, *Figurative Art*, p. 39.

<sup>312</sup> Barry, *Figurative Art*, p. 45.

<sup>313</sup> Mikhail Piotrovsky, *On Islamic Art* (St. Petersburg: Slavia, 2001), p. 48.

inaccurate as these, but has also vexed the investigations of much more careful and nuanced scholars.

#### 4.2. Western Scholarship on Prophet Portraiture

In Chapter 3, I argued that even if a miniature painting does not explicitly relate to religious themes—its focus could be, for instance, on water or rocks—its artistic techniques and visual vocabulary still refer the viewer back to underlying Sufi ideas. Going even further, I outlined how Middle Eastern writers viewed miniature paintings as capable of staging a manifestation of the absolute rather than only being explanatory intermediaries between their beholders and religious or philosophical worldviews. However, the most sophisticated Western scholarship on miniature painting to date has only concerned itself with paintings that have unmistakable religious content.

In many miniature paintings, we find figures or episodes from the Koran, from the life of the prophet Muḥammad or other outstanding personages of Islamic history, or from allegorical Sufi tales such as ‘Aṭṭār’s *Canticle of the Birds*. We also encounter more generically religious paintings, for instance of followers of the Sufi path engaged in a religious activity. Among such religiously connotated paintings, the ones that have received perhaps the most scholarly attention are portraits of prophets. The art historians Christiane Gruber and David Roxburgh have attempted, in various ways, to establish connections between such portraiture and Sufi ideas. Below, I will assess these pioneering efforts, pointing to some of their insights and shortcomings. It will help to bear in mind from the outset that none of these approaches were formulated by scholars of philosophy—whether Sufi or Western—and therefore tend to employ philosophical terminology in a somewhat haphazard way. In order to avoid terminological confusion, I will quote from these sources quite selectively and try to place their nonetheless valuable insights in the context of Sufi ontology as outlined in the chapters above.

An artistic term commonly employed by these sources and worth considering at this point is that of abstraction. When the sources describe miniature paintings as “abstract” or “abstracted”, this should not be understood in the sense that paintings by artists like Mondrian or Rothko are understood to be abstract, i.e., avoiding figurative representation. Miniature paintings indeed represent identifiable human beings, animals,

settings, scenes, and events, and are therefore figurative, as suggested by the title of Michael Barry's monograph, *Figurative Art in Medieval Islam*. Miniature paintings can only be described as "abstract" in the sense that they do not avail themselves of the specific formal techniques of verisimilitude, such as perspectival depth, developed in Western painting. And even then, the term remains problematic since it assumes, just as in Western art, an established standard of verisimilitude that was subsequently "abstracted" or modified in favor of abstraction. This core assumption plagues Roxburgh's approach, to which I will turn now.

In Chapter 3, we already considered the link between prophet portraiture and Sufi ontology when comparing the "Chest of Witnessing" found in an anecdote by Dūst Moḥammad to the *Bezels of Wisdom* by Ibn al-'Arabī. Roxburgh also takes up Dūst Moḥammad's "Chest of Witnessing" to put forward his ideas about abstraction. Roxburgh posits that the prophet portraits assembled in the Chest of Witnessing offer "a complete set of images that were clearly distinct from their referents, both fashioned, conveniently, by God".<sup>314</sup> The prophet portraits are "abstract" in the sense that they do not represent the actual features of the prophets as human beings. Rather, they are "copies after *acheiropoieta*, 'unmade' images fashioned by God, constituted at the beginning of time".<sup>315</sup> How was the distinction between embodied and "unmade" expressed in artistic terms? Roxburgh believes that a refusal to differentiate physical features was a key part of the effort. Referring to an illustrated manuscript of the *Mirajnama* (the Islamic story of the prophet Muḥammad's initiatory journey through paradise and hell) dated 1436 and produced in Herat, Roxburgh points out that its illustrations "eschew physiognomic peculiarities, resorting instead to typologies for angels and prophets".<sup>316</sup> The text of the *Mirajnama* supports this pictorial approach. When Muḥammad meets the inhabitants of paradise, "they are all the same": as tall as Adam, as old as Jesus at his death, as handsome as the prophet Joseph, and so on. Further, "these perfect denizens of paradise have no unwanted body hair or beard".<sup>317</sup>

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<sup>314</sup> Roxburgh, "Concepts of the Portrait", p. 121.

<sup>315</sup> Roxburgh, "Concepts of the Portrait", p. 121.

<sup>316</sup> Roxburgh, "Concepts of the Portrait", p. 126.

<sup>317</sup> Roxburgh, "Concepts of the Portrait", p. 127.

In summing up Roxburgh's claim and rephrasing it in Sufi ontological terms, then, one could say that miniature painting eschewed a detailed differentiation of prophets' physical features in an effort to expose them not simply as human beings, but also as manifestations of the absolute. While this seems like a worthwhile interpretation, Roxburgh does not leave it at that. To him, the above "abstraction" was also miniature art's attempt to distance itself formally from pre-Islamic painters like Mani. Referring solely to Dūst Moḥammad's skeptical appraisal of Mani and unaware of the ontology underlying Sufi narratives of Mani, Roxburgh takes the particularity of Mani's art to consist of simple verisimilitude—in the Western sense, one assumes, though this remains unclear. As a result, Roxburgh claims that "The optical naturalism employed" by painters such as Mani "was a mode of visual trickery that misled viewers into equating what they saw with the real thing" and thus "confused viewers about the ontology of the image in front of them".<sup>318</sup> Without pointing to a tradition or concrete examples of paintings that would have had such an impact, Roxburgh in effect claims that viewers thought paintings in the style of Mani were "real". This confusion, with its concomitant risks of blasphemy and idolatry, was one that miniature art, according to Roxburgh, deliberately avoided.

The specific formal language developed and applied by [miniature] artists distanced the total visual field of the two-dimensional painting from the sensation of actual vision. The abstract properties of paintings, and the habit of always placing limitations on the detail even in portraiture, which would seem to require it, eliminated the risk of reading the painting as real.<sup>319</sup>

In Chapter 3, I argued against this way of reading the "life-giving" properties of Mani's paintings—or the paintings of many other artists described in these terms by the sources. I think it does both the painters and beholders of miniature art a disservice to assume that, at any point in history, viewers may have actually run the risk of confusing a painting with the thing it depicts, and that artists tried to take measures to prevent this

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<sup>318</sup> Roxburgh, "Concepts of the Portrait", p. 121-22.

<sup>319</sup> Roxburgh, "Concepts of the Portrait", p. 120.

from happening. The broken pitchers in Mustafa Âli's story about Mani must be read in an allegorical, not a literal sense. As we have seen above, Muslim rulers like Mehmed II had no issues with having realistic portraits painted by Western artists—something that surely would have been problematic if anyone genuinely believed the portrait could have been mistaken for Mehmed II himself. Therefore, I believe it wiser to avoid interpreting visual strategies developed by miniature artists as ways of distancing themselves from realism, naturalism, or verisimilitude as understood in the terminology of Western art.

Roxburgh's reading of miniaturists' artistic strategies as pointing to Sufi ontological ideas seems more fruitful to me. Christiane Gruber also takes this approach when she argues that "methods of abstracting the prophetic body [...] were not just linked to prohibitory impulses; they could also elevate the viewer's vision beyond the realm of form while simultaneously overcoming the disloyalty of mimetic depiction".<sup>320</sup> Talking of a "realm of form" and its "beyond", Gruber employs a dualistic terminology that risks distorting Sufi ontology. Also, as I have argued, the differentiation between miniature art and "mimetic depiction" remains an unhelpful one. Nonetheless, Gruber's main point that artistic strategies may be employed to disrupt beholders' visual habits and enable a different kind of vision is well worth pursuing. Gruber regards prophet portraiture as a fruitful venue for illustrating this point since the Sufi tradition regarded prophets themselves as "visual epiphanies of being [...] whose outer forms are only fully appreciable through the viewer's inner perception".<sup>321</sup>

While we have already encountered the idea of physical appearance as both a veiling and an unveiling, the idea that a portrait or, in fact, any phenomenon needs to be apprehended through "inner perception" needs some further clarification. As Gruber puts it, Sufi authors "believed that real sight occurs not through ocular perception, but by means of the eye of the heart [...] or the eye of the soul".<sup>322</sup> Unquestionably, this did not mean that visual perception was useless and needed to be abandoned; rather, it needed to be redirected, refocused and possibly reconditioned in order to enable a breaking of visual habits and an enhanced, more penetrating perception of the world. In Gruber's words, "portraits are expected to lead their audiences from the formal image [...] to its

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<sup>320</sup> Gruber, "Between Logos", p. 249.

<sup>321</sup> Gruber, "Between Logos", p. 233.

<sup>322</sup> Gruber, "Between Logos", p. 249.

more elevated meaning of inner reality”. Once again, while the metaphor of “leading” is helpful to understand the function of prophet portraiture, the differentiation between “formal image” and “inner reality” implies a dualism absent from the ontology of thinkers such as Ibn al-‘Arabī. More helpful is Gruber’s formulation that prophet portraiture aimed at leading viewers to “experiential confrontations in pictorial form”, namely confrontations between the beholder and the absolute.<sup>323</sup>

To concretely elucidate the relationship between artistic strategies and ontological thought, Gruber turns to the example of portraits of the prophet Muḥammad. She sees a clear connection between the development of Sufi philosophy and Muḥammad portraiture, maintaining that “the rise of mystical practices and Sufi poetry were guiding factors in elaborating new concepts of the prophetic persona and hence its representation after circa 1400”.<sup>324</sup> To Sufis, Gruber states, “Muhammad’s physical manifestation *in corpore* [was] an ongoing process of theophany, oftentimes beyond the visual reach of the believer’s eyes”.<sup>325</sup> In other words, Muḥammad was seen to be oscillating in a continual process of simultaneous concealment and unconcealment. “In order to convey the antipodes of disclosure and exposure”, Gruber maintains, miniature painters “experimented with various motifs and techniques”.<sup>326</sup>

In her historical appraisal of Muḥammad portraits, Gruber exposes that this genre of miniature painting underwent a number of changes in the course of its development. While the earliest portraits show Muḥammad just like any other human being, later portraits introduce two crucial visual innovations: a nimbus of fire (*nur Muḥammad* or “Light of Muḥammad”) engulfing his face or entire body, and/or a veil obscuring his face. Gruber rejects the assumption that such strategies were developed by painters to avoid drawing criticism for physically depicting the prophet. Instead, she emphasizes the connection between these visual components and the ontological ideas of Sufi philosophy.

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<sup>323</sup> Gruber, “Between Logos”, p. 233.

<sup>324</sup> Gruber, “Between Logos”, p. 234.

<sup>325</sup> Gruber, “Between Logos”, p. 231.

<sup>326</sup> Gruber, “Between Logos”, p. 231.

The concept of the *nur Muhammad* as developed in these many texts and paintings reveals a number of attempts over a vast period of time to describe the Prophet Muhammad as an immaterial substance too brilliant to behold but nonetheless contained in a corporeal vessel perceptible by the human eye. Representations attempt to convey the diametrically opposed forces at work in such procedures of depicting the Prophet—procedures that are caught between the wish to disclose Muhammad’s mortal physical presence and the drive to veil his immortal luminous nature. The visual antipodes of exposing and concealing are negotiated here through the intermediary of the flaming nimbus and the facial veil.<sup>327</sup>

Gruber seems to regard both the nimbus and the veil as attempts to depict the aspect of divine self-manifestation that transcends ordinary perception: the flame is too bright to behold and the veil is impenetrable. However, our analysis of Ibn al-‘Arabī suggests the interpretation that all particulars were viewed by Sufi philosophy as veils engaged in their own unveiling, concealing the absolute while at the same time constituting its self-disclosure. Read in this way, the flame and the veil are one and the same: the veil is the only way in which the flame can show itself. In Ibn al-‘Arabī’s words, “The Cosmos [...] is [...] the veil [covering] its own self”.<sup>328</sup> Overall, in spite of its terminological and conceptual difficulties, I find Gruber’s study of Sufi ideas at work in Muḥammad portraiture to be a step in the right direction. As she states in conclusion, Muḥammad portraits “hover in an intermediary visual zone between mimetic representation and the total abstraction of form in an attempt to define the elusive nature of the prophetic corpus”.<sup>329</sup>

What kind of response were these paintings supposed to elicit from their viewers? The scholarly assumption seems to be that the paintings were intended to induce a religious experience, an “experiential confrontation”, as Gruber puts it, with the absolute. Such an intent becomes especially evident in a particular subgenre of Muḥammad portraits examined by Gruber, namely that of “inscribed portraits” which replaced the

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<sup>327</sup> Gruber, “Between Logos”, p. 251.

<sup>328</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabī, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 56.

<sup>329</sup> Gruber, “Between Logos”, p. 252.



prophet's head with a veil containing "the vocative statement *Ya Muhammad!* (O Muhammad!)"<sup>330</sup> Such portraits, Gruber argues, were "indebted at least to some extent to mystical thought—especially the belief in an oral prayer's ability to conjure up a vision of the prophetic body"<sup>331</sup> This would mean they were intended as meditative devices, enabling a visual contemplation of the prophet while at the same time encouraging the viewer to vocalize his name, thereby combining visual and aural perception and vocal articulation in the totality of one meditative practice. As Gruber puts it, they prompted the beholder "to call forth the Prophet through a combination of verbal prayers and mental picturing"<sup>332</sup> While "inscribed portraits" may be an extreme example of viewer participation, it is hard to argue with Gruber's overall assertion that Muḥammad portraiture, in its desire to depict the paradoxical simultaneity of veiling and unveiling, was "not only changeable but purposefully destabilizing", demanding an "active negotiation" on the part of the beholder.<sup>333</sup>

As Gruber points out, "Pious responses to paintings are unfortunately not recorded in textual sources; thus, it is difficult to determine how a viewer may have reacted to such paintings"<sup>334</sup> However, she refers back to Dūst Moḥammad for an example of what kind of response may have been ideally expected to ensue upon contemplation of an outstanding portrait. We find such a response—or series of responses—in Dūst Moḥammad's anecdote about the "Chest of Witnessing". When the prophet's companions see the portrait of Muḥammad contained in the chest, "teardrops streamed like stars from their eyes, and a longing for the Prophet was reborn in their hearts"<sup>335</sup> In other words, their response combines an element of physical reaction (tears) with an intensification of spiritual yearning.

The story of the "Chest of Witnessing" contains revealing parallels to the story of Sheikh San'an as outlined in my analysis of Ibn al-ʿArabī's ontology. As recounted by Farīduddīn ʿAṭṭār, the story centers on a prominent Muslim sheikh who, just like the prophet's companions in Dūst Moḥammad, undertakes a journey to Constantinople. Once

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<sup>330</sup> Gruber, "Between Logos", p. 240.

<sup>331</sup> Gruber, "Between Logos", p. 253.

<sup>332</sup> Gruber, "Between Logos", p. 230.

<sup>333</sup> Gruber, "Between Logos", p. 254.

<sup>334</sup> Gruber, "Between Logos", p. 251.

<sup>335</sup> Thackston, *Album Prefaces*, p. 11.

there, the Sheikh is similarly affected by the sight of the Christian princess as the prophet's companions are by beholding the portraits of the prophets. Both stories fix Constantinople, the city of the Christian "icon-worshippers", as the locus in which Muslims catch a glimpse of the absolute as manifest or as immanence. This immanence is encountered in the form of icons or potential idols, namely the princess in 'Aṭṭār's and the prophet portraits in Dūst Moḥammad's story. At this point, we may recall that Ibn al-'Arabī holds up the gaze upon feminine beauty, as practiced by Sheikh San'an, as the "perfect contemplation of the Reality"<sup>336</sup> or, in other words, as an efficacious meditative practice enabling an encounter with the absolute. It can be said that Dūst Moḥammad makes the same case for portraiture: the contemplation of portraits emerges as an efficacious way of encountering the absolute as immanence.

All in all, then, we can say that the most perceptive Western scholarship on miniature painting has today reached the point where, while the "iconophobic fallacy" is still not fully transcended, scholars at least recognize the religious context and efficacy of this art form. First steps have been taken to bring the visual vocabulary of miniature painting in connection with Sufi ideas and to question what kind of religious response the art form might have elicited from its viewers. That being said, scholarship is still limited to a focus on aspects of the paintings that are of manifestly religious character, i.e., the portraits of prophets and other religious personages. However, regarded in this way, the paintings remain trapped in the assumption that they merely represent a subject matter that could theoretically be accessed more directly by, say, studying the texts of Ibn al-'Arabī. I have argued above, though, that Sufi ontology regards miniature painting as a locus of divine self-manifestation, one that in and of itself produces an encounter with the absolute rather than being an intermediary between religious doctrine and the individual. A philosophical approach to the art form that builds on this insight has not been attempted prior to the present study.

#### 4.3. Miniature Painting and Western Art

Miniature painting was met by Western artists of the early twentieth century with a fascination similar to that of European collectors, curators, and scholars. The art form

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<sup>336</sup> Ibn al-'Arabī, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 275.

entered the scene at a time that established European techniques of art—and especially painting—were undergoing a profound transformation under the influence of non-Western art forms. Along with miniature art, Barry maintains, “Japanese prints, Russian icons, and also West African sculpture acted as a sort of combined exotic catalyst upon the formation of modern world art”.<sup>337</sup> Perhaps the artist most deeply affected by these new influences was Henri Matisse, who was exposed to Middle Eastern miniature painting during a visit to Moscow and through exhibitions in Munich and Paris.<sup>338</sup> Just as with many Western scholars, Matisse’s engagement with miniature painting occurred in the absence of any contextual knowledge. But unlike these scholars, he perceived the art form on a visceral or even spiritual level rather than an intellectual one. In his own words, “Persian miniatures [...] showed me all the possibilities offered by my sensations. [...] Revelation thus came to me from the East”.<sup>339</sup>

Barry summarizes the miniature techniques that most influenced Matisse as follows: “their surface treatment of all planes alike while minimizing or ignoring attempts at perspective or illusory depth; their resort to non-naturalistic primary colours to heighten while harmonizing vivid contrasts of hues; and their purity of outline”.<sup>340</sup> The issues of depth, color, and line were not isolated but rather related matters in the tradition of Western painting that Matisse was seeking to overcome. In such art, the utilization of “darkening hues”<sup>341</sup> instead of primary colors helped to reinforce the illusion of perspective, an illusion that Matisse also undermined through the “abstract line, undulating in bold rhythms”<sup>342</sup> as employed by calligraphers and miniature painters and known in Europe as “arabesque”. As a direct source of influence, Barry lists the miniature painting *Prince Humay Meets the Princess Humayun of China in a Dream Garden* (ca. 1430), which Matisse saw at the Paris Exhibition of 1903. This painting, to Barry, exemplifies the usage of colors, clear line, and lack of perspective emulated by Matisse: “This painting [...] shows two princely lovers of ideal beauty suspended like

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<sup>337</sup> Barry, *Figurative Art*, p. 28.

<sup>338</sup> Barry, *Figurative Art*, p. 28

<sup>339</sup> Quoted in Barry, *Figurative Art*, p. 29.

<sup>340</sup> Michael Barry, “‘Carver of Light’: Matisse and the Art of Persia and Islam”, in *Global Trends in Modern and Contemporary Islamic Art*, ed. Rui Oliveira Lopes et al. (Lisbon: Universidade de Lisboa, 2015), p. 37.

<sup>341</sup> Barry, *Figurative Art*, p. 29.

<sup>342</sup> Barry, *Figurative Art*, p. 33.

colourful cut-out dolls against the equally flat background of an ‘orchard’”. The characters’ costumes and the orchard’s flowers are “wrought in costly pigments of gold and silver, malachite and cinnabar, orpiment and powdered lapis lazuli rinsed in linseed oil” and “shine as if at brightest noontide, with all shadows banished and no diminishing of perspective, or indeed any illusionistic foreshortening, whatsoever”.<sup>343</sup>

One might state that to Matisse, this miniature painting presented a twofold opportunity, firstly to draw formal inspiration from a well-established and respectable tradition of art, and secondly to use this tradition to break free from the perceived limitations of his own artistic heritage. As the artist put it, “One gives oneself all the more readily when one sees one’s efforts confirmed by a tradition, however ancient that tradition might be. It helps you leap over the moat”.<sup>344</sup> Matisse’s foremost lesson from miniature painting, as well as the main way in which he used it to subvert his own tradition, lay in the realm of color: “I felt a passion for color develop in me. At that moment occurred the great exhibition of Mohammedan art. With what pleasure I discovered Japanese prints. What a lesson in purity and harmony I received here”.<sup>345</sup> In the following passage, the artist elaborates on the way in which miniature painting helped him transcend his Western artistic heritage: “My painting first observed the gamut of the masters whom I studied in the Louvre. But then my palette cleared. This was the influence of the Impressionists, of the Neo-Impressionists, of Cézanne,<sup>346</sup> and of the Orientals. My paintings became established through combinations of large spots, and arabesques”.<sup>347</sup>

In describing the inspiration he derived from miniature painting and his own subsequent work with color, Matisse repeatedly stresses the emotive, intuitive aspect of the process: “I became truly apt to receive colors by reason of their emotive power. If I instinctively admired the Italian primitives in the Louvre, and after that, Oriental art,

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<sup>343</sup> Barry, *Figurative Art*, p. 32.

<sup>344</sup> Quoted in Barry, *Figurative Art*, p. 29.

<sup>345</sup> Barry, *Figurative Art*, p. 28.

<sup>346</sup> Barry stresses the similarity of the influence exerted by Cézanne and miniature painting on Matisse’s approach to color: “Cézanne’s influence truly flowered at last in 1905, when Matisse finally altogether sundered colour from naturalism [...] to seek the pure balance of strong tints, boldly stroked, within the strict aesthetic logic of their own pictorial frame. [...] But fierce colours brushed across their canvases were precisely what Matisse [...] had so violently admired in Japanese and then in Persian Islamic art” (Barry, “Carver of Light”, p. 30).

<sup>347</sup> Quoted in Barry, *Figurative Art*, p. 29.

especially at the extraordinary exhibition in Munich, it is because I found here what was a fresh confirmation”.<sup>348</sup> The artist speaks in similar terms about his own usage of color:

I use color as a means of expressing my emotion, and not as a transcription of nature. I use the most simple colors. I do not transform the colors myself, I allow the relation between the colors to take care of that. At stake for me is only to bring their (juxtaposed) contrasts to the fore, and so to stress them. Nothing prevents one from composing with only a few colors; just as music is built up solely of seven notes.<sup>349</sup>

How do Matisse’s thoughts on color relate to the handling of color in miniature art? Clearly, the artist had no knowledge of how miniature painters may have thought about color or its deployment. Does this mean, though, that he simply registered the appearance of color in miniature paintings and used it as a formal point of departure? Or was there a way in which he might have “understood” something about miniature color that went below the surface?

The importance of color in miniature painting is stressed by both Welch and Barry. In assessing Bihzād’s paintings, Barry finds that his “abstract settings and his supposedly figurative elements” are held together in a coherent whole through “the vivid combinations of their common colors”.<sup>350</sup> This central role of color is also stressed by Welch, who asserts that the “purity and intensity” of color required by miniature painting meant that apprentices “had to discover the properties of each hue both separately and in conjunction with all the rest, for in Iranian miniatures the palette not only forms a visual ‘chord’, like a cluster of musical notes, but also can be enjoyed bit by bit. It is a great pleasure, for instance, to look at a miniature for the pattern of blues, reds, or whites alone”.<sup>351</sup>

The individual colors and patterns as described by Welch were not chosen at random, but were based on schemes derived from Sufi thought. Barry draws our attention

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<sup>348</sup> Barry, *Figurative Art*, p. 29.

<sup>349</sup> Barry, *Figurative Art*, p.29.

<sup>350</sup> Barry, *Figurative Art*, p. 37.

<sup>351</sup> Welch, *Persian Painting*, p. 13.

to the “scheme of Seven Colors” found in the work of the Persian-language Sufi poet Nizāmī (1141-1209): “In his romance of spiritual initiation, the *Haft Paykar*, or ‘Seven Icons’ (‘Seven Beauties’), Nizāmī equated the Seven Colors of the universe with the seven metals, the world’s seven climes, the seven planetary spheres, the seven days of the week, and the seven tinctures of the initiated soul”.<sup>352</sup> In Nizāmī’s work, Barry states, the seven colors correspond to “the seven successively purified stages of the soul”, consisting of “carnal” (black), “self-critical” (yellow), “inspired” (green), “pacified” (red), “satisfied by God” (blue), “satisfying to God” (sandalwood), and “perfected” (white).<sup>353</sup>

In an aside, Barry points out that other Sufi thinkers “assigned variant but essentially analogous color scales to the process of spiritual initiation”.<sup>354</sup> For instance, in different scales, “the tint of black may signify either outer material darkness or the inner ‘black light’ or ‘supreme black’ (*nur-i siyah, as-sawad al-a’zam*) of the unmanifest Divine”.<sup>355</sup> It is crucial that there was no universally agreed upon color scheme in which one color could carry only one meaning. If that had been the case, the utilization of these colors in miniature painting, and their perception by the beholder, would have amounted to little more to an encoding and subsequent decoding of a philosophical/mystical message, a mechanical procedure that anyone familiar with the scheme could have carried out. Instead, the philosophical significance of colors coupled with the absence of a universal code for their deployment suggests that the crucial point was not their individual meaning, but the effect achieved in their interplay. It was up to the individual miniature painter to fashion this interplay in such a way that a manifestation of the absolute could take place in the interaction between painting and beholder.

We can say, then, that Matisse may not have grasped the “letter” of miniature painters’ relationship to color—in the sense that he was not privy to any of the specific

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<sup>352</sup> Barry, *Figurative Art*, p. 33.

<sup>353</sup> Barry, *Figurative Art*, p. 33. Barry reminds us that the idea of a spiritual journey spanning seven spheres is found not only “in the writings of such eminent medieval Muslim mystics as Avicenna and Ibn al-‘Arabī”, but also in the tradition of “gnostic and Jewish mystics of late antiquity” and the work of Dante. He further points out that the scheme of seven colors could also be found in medieval Italy. He quotes from Cennino Cennini: “Know that there are seven natural colors, or, to speak more correctly: there are four colors whose nature is yielded by the earth itself, and these are black, red, yellow, and green; and there are moreover three others which are also natural, but yet must be worked upon, and these are white, ultramarine, and clear yellow” (Barry, *Figurative Art*, p. 34).

<sup>354</sup> Barry, *Figurative Art*, p. 33.

<sup>355</sup> Barry, “Carver of Light”, p. 47.

color schemes known to and employed by these painters—but that he very well grasped the “spirit” of this relationship, in which color was used to achieve an unconcealment which lay not in the formulaic encoding and decoding, but in the intuitive interplay of colors. In this, Matisse’s approach to miniature painting curiously mirrored the approach that the earliest miniature painters themselves took to their primary fount of formal inspiration, namely Chinese art.

#### 4.4. Artistic Transmission and Philosophical Equivalence

In the initial narrative that sets up this study, namely Rūmī’s story of the Greek and Chinese painters, we caught a glimpse of the author’s ambiguous attitude towards the latter, who are presented as both formidably skilled and somehow spiritually deficient. This combination of reverence and suspicion pervades the accounts of Dūst Moḥammad, Qāḍī Aḥmad, and Mustafa Âlî as well. Firstly, all three authors establish a connection between China and the ambiguous figure of Mani. In introducing the “animal *qalam*”, Qāḍī Aḥmad mentions “the works of those gifted like Mani and of the wizards of China”.<sup>356</sup> Mustafa Âlî, in commencing his account of the painter, refers to him as “the Chinese artist Mani”.<sup>357</sup> And finally, in recounting the story of the scroll produced by Mani as proof of his prophethood, Dūst Moḥammad mentions that the artist “held that silk up as an equal to the Picture Gallery of China”.<sup>358</sup>

Qāḍī Aḥmad provides a versified narrative of an encounter between certain Chinese painters and the Caliph ‘Alī which brings to mind both the “life-giving” qualities of Mani’s art as well as the ambiguities associated with it. When the Chinese artists hear about the prophet Muḥammad and his message, they decide to issue a challenge in the form of a painting.

When the cycle of prophetic mission reached Muhammad,  
(And) he drew a line across all other faiths,  
The Chinese wrong-doers  
Traced the first images;

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<sup>356</sup> Minorsky, *Calligraphers and Painters*, p. 48.

<sup>357</sup> Akın-Kıvanç, *Mustafa ‘Ali’s*, p. 275.

<sup>358</sup> Thackston, *Album Prefaces*, p. 12.

Provocatively they embellished a page  
And asked the king of Prophets to produce something similar.  
It was not a page embellished,  
It looked like a tray filled with tulips and roses.  
From the very infidelity of their hearts,  
They carried the painting as a challenge  
To the Shah of Men, Ali.<sup>359</sup>

Contained in these lines is the (mytho-)historical assertion that the Chinese were the initial producers of images and the transmitters of this art to the Islamic world, an allusion to the “life-giving” qualities of painting as investigated above, and an interpretation of Chinese art as a challenge to Islam, which finds itself prompted to “produce something similar”. A careful reading of the passage reveals that it is not the painting itself, or its power of manifestation, that are perceived as unholy or sinister by the author. The impertinence lies not in the art but rather in its employment by the Chinese painters to issue a challenge to Islam. Out of the “infidelity of their hearts”, they aim to “provoke” the prophet Muḥammad and/or ‘Alī. What is at issue is not the painting but the *use* to which it is being put. Accordingly, the Islamic response does not take the form of an outright rejection.

When the King of Holiness saw what they had painted,  
By miraculous power he took the *qalam* from them,  
And made an Islamic soul-ravishing tracing  
Which struck dumb the Chinese people.  
As the original fell into their hands,  
Their other images grew inferior.<sup>360</sup>

Ali does not counter the challenge by repudiating the art of painting, but by appropriating the tools and/or techniques of Chinese painting to produce a specimen that

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<sup>359</sup> Minorsky, *Calligraphers and Painters*, p. 175.

<sup>360</sup> Minorsky, *Calligraphers and Painters*, p. 175.



is both superior and somehow truer—it is described as “the original”—to the authentic significance of the art. All in all, rather than setting up a contrast between, say, the aniconic religion of Islam and the idolatry of the Chinese painters, the poem amounts to an acknowledgement of cultural influence—the art of painting was inherited from the Chinese—with an assertion that the source of influence has been superseded in terms of quality. Similarly, the association of Mani with China, which at first glance only seems to be based on the common denominator of un-Islamic exoticism, becomes more meaningful when regarded as an association of the archetypal painter-figure (Mani) with the cultural realm which provided the initial inspiration for miniature painting (China).

The formal influence of Chinese art on Miniature painting has been outlined by Michael Barry, who traces it to fourteenth century and “the impact of Chinese art on Islamic aesthetics during Mongol rule”,<sup>361</sup> which began after Hulegu Khan’s conquest of Baghdad in 1258 and the establishment of a political-cultural continuity between Beijing as the capital of the Mongol Empire and Tabriz as the center of the Ilkhanate, one of the empire’s subdivisions, later to become an independent political entity. In the process, as Barry puts it, “Chinese aesthetics became the Mongol dynasty’s aesthetics—the emblem of rule and legitimate world sovereignty, even in the eyes of the ‘vassal Khans’ in Tabriz”.<sup>362</sup> This is the reason, according to Barry, that Dūst Moḥammad begins his history of miniature art with “the figurative illuminator Ahmad Musa, who worked for the last Mongol *Îl-Khân* of Tabriz between 1317 and 1335”.<sup>363</sup> Dūst Moḥammad describes Ahmad Musa as the master who “lifted the veil from the face of depiction” and states that “the [style of] depiction that is now current was invented by him”.<sup>364</sup>

Barry maintains that “The style of these Chinese-influenced illustrations was so boldly different from anything painted before in Islam that a whole new kind of art did seem to be taking form in early fourteenth-century Tabriz”.<sup>365</sup> The influence consisted of the adoption of techniques, such as “Chinese linear perspective [...] with no single

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<sup>361</sup> Barry, *Figurative Art*, p. 97.

<sup>362</sup> Barry, *Figurative Art*, p.97.

<sup>363</sup> Barry, *Figurative Art*, p. 99.

<sup>364</sup> Thackston, *Album Prefaces*, p. 12.

<sup>365</sup> Barry, *Figurative Art*, p. 99.

vanishing point”,<sup>366</sup> as well as a vocabulary of images: “Bihzad’s trees, rocks, dragons, and clouds all ultimately derive from Chinese models”.<sup>367</sup> However, Barry also maintains that in the course of the transmission, the original cultural significance of the adopted elements of Chinese art was lost: “Though bold, beautiful and original, the new Islamic art which arose under the impact of Chinese influence was the result of a complete misunderstanding of Chinese civilization by Muslim painters. The artists of Tabriz and Herât borrowed visual details from Chinese paintings—but utterly failed to grasp their spirit”.<sup>368</sup>

Barry does not stage a detailed examination of Chinese art or the “spirit” that he supposes to have been lost in the transmission to miniature painting. But he does maintain that in spite of all that was lost in translation, a “philosophical equivalence”<sup>369</sup> can be located in the works of the greatest miniature painters, such as Bihzād, and their Chinese counterparts such as Shen Chou (1427-1506). This equivalence, to Barry, concerns the notion of the “void”, “the divine matrix of all being”,<sup>370</sup> or, in other words, the absolute as unmanifested potentiality. This notion, shared by Sufi and Taoist philosophy,<sup>371</sup> was expressed in Chinese painting through whiteness—painters “lifted their brush and left their paper blank”. Bihzād, in his quest to enable the same manifestation of the unmanifest in miniature painting, “charged his brush with ink, and painted the heart of his composition in black”.<sup>372</sup> It is this kind of philosophical equivalence that I will be tracing across the thought of Ibn al-‘Arabī, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty, an equivalence of philosophies that are reflected in, and derived from, forms of art the connection between which we can at best describe, in Barry’s words, as “fortuitous”.<sup>373</sup>

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<sup>366</sup> Barry, *Figurative Art*, p. 101.

<sup>367</sup> Barry, *Figurative Art*, p. 97.

<sup>368</sup> Barry, *Figurative Art*, p.97.

<sup>369</sup> Barry, *Figurative Art*, p. 102.

<sup>370</sup> Barry, *Figurative Art*, p. 112.

<sup>371</sup> Barry points to Izutsu’s work on Sufism and Taoism, which I have cited extensively in my chapter on Ibn al-‘Arabī, for a further exploration of this equivalence (Barry, *Figurative Art*, p. 113).

<sup>372</sup> Barry, *Figurative Art*, p. 112.

<sup>373</sup> Barry, *Figurative Art*, p. 102.

## Chapter 5: Phenomenology and Art: Martin Heidegger

I have doubts about my work.

– Frenhofer, in Balzac, *The Unknown Masterpiece*

The reason why painters like Matisse were interested in non-Western traditions of art in the first place was that the turn of the twentieth century marked the end of an era for Western painting. As Gilles Deleuze puts it,

Modern painting has a different relation to figuration or illustration than the painting of the past has. First, photography has taken over the illustrative and documentary role, so that modern painting no longer needs to fulfill this function, which still burdened earlier painters. Second, painting used to be conditioned by certain “religious possibilities” that still gave a pictorial meaning to figuration, whereas modern painting is an atheistic game.<sup>374</sup>

Therefore, it is not surprising to see twentieth-century Western artists’ enthusiasm for traditions of art that were unconcerned with verisimilitude—traditions that did not reject verisimilitude as if it were some universal principle of painting which left one with the sole choice of either adopting or rejecting it, as Roxburgh’s reading of miniature painting seems to suggest, but that never tied artistic practice to the idea of verisimilitude in the first place, instead developing, for various reasons, historically enduring and complex practices of non- (not anti-) verisimilitudinous art.

This departure from verisimilitude served as an inspiration to twentieth-century phenomenologists interested in art, who took it as an occasion to question a definition of the work of art as a copy or representation of something “more real”, apprehending it instead as a manifestation or unconcealment of being in its own right. In so doing, thinkers like Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty found their way to descriptions and concepts that bear fruitful resemblance to the Sufi philosophical ideas

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<sup>374</sup> Deleuze, *Francis Bacon*, p. 8.

nourishing and reflected in miniature painting. I will use the following two chapters to focus on phenomenological approaches to art and painting, specifically those of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty. My aim in so doing is to explore parallels and equivalencies between the Sufi and phenomenological approaches to issues such as perception and its limits, the hidden and the revealed, the tension between totality and particularity, and the connection of such issues to art.

As stated in the Introduction, it is not my aim to assert that phenomenology was influenced by Sufi philosophy or that phenomenological and Sufi concepts are “the same”. Also, I am not staging a critique of phenomenological approaches to art or trying to assess their philosophical validity. Rather, I will explore how Sufi philosophy and phenomenology may be brought into dialogue with each other and assess whether they can be used in a complementary way when approaching works of art, specifically Middle Eastern miniature art. I believe that equipping ourselves with a combined awareness of Sufi philosophy and phenomenological method will enable us to approach miniature painting in a way that both appreciates the world of thought that originally informed it while also rendering it alive and relevant for today. This approach, I claim, will enable a more complex and valid assessment of this art form than possible through the conventional tools of art history and criticism.

### 5.1. Frenhofer and the Unknown Masterpiece

Just as I used Rūmī’s story on “Chinese Art and Greek Art” as a springboard to launch my discussion of Sufi philosophy and miniature art, I would like to lead into my thoughts on phenomenology and modern art with another story, namely Honoré de Balzac’s “The Unknown Masterpiece”.<sup>375</sup> Written in 1845, the text remains, in my assessment, a masterpiece in the philosophy of Western art. Further, it is more than just a textual masterpiece: half a century before the modern painters, Balzac uses this text to have his protagonist, Frenhofer, draw the first modern Western painting, the “unknown masterpiece” of the story’s title. Both the painting described in the story and the philosophy underlying it are based on Frenhofer’s central assertion that “the aim of art is

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<sup>375</sup> Honoré de Balzac, *The Unknown Masterpiece (Le Chef-d’oeuvre Inconnu) and Other Stories*, trans. Ellen Marriage (New York: Macmillan, 1901).

not to copy”.<sup>376</sup> Over the years, some of the most seminal Western painters came to be inspired by Balzac’s text. Paul Cézanne, in one of his letters, flatly states, “I am Frenhofer”. Pablo Picasso painted his masterpiece *Guernica* in a location from the story, namely Porbus’ studio in the Rue des Grands Augustins, Paris. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, in his essay “Cézanne’s Doubt”, highlights the importance of Frenhofer to understanding Cézanne.<sup>377</sup> Who, then, is this Frenhofer who inspired practitioners and key philosophers of modern art alike?

In the story’s first half, Frenhofer, a fictional 17<sup>th</sup>-century painter in Paris, visits two admirers—Nicolas Poussin and Porbus<sup>378</sup>—in Porbus’ studio, lectures them on art and being an artist, and gives a “blood transfusion” to one of Porbus’ paintings through his brush strokes. After Frenhofer lets Poussin and Porbus know he is in search of a new model for his next masterpiece,<sup>379</sup> the two decide to present Poussin’s lover Gillette to the master. In the second half of the story, Frenhofer is the host; the two admirers and Gillette are the visitors. Frenhofer shows them his “unknown masterpiece” in which he has expended all his time and artistic powers. Poussin and Porbus are speechless when they see a painting composed of chaotic lines and hectic colors rather than the classical painting they had been expecting. They conclude that the master painter has finally lost his mind.

“Do you see anything?” Poussin asked of Porbus.

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<sup>376</sup> Balzac, *The Unknown Masterpiece*, p. 7. The assertion that art is not an inferior copy of nature but rather a manifestation of the artist’s inner voice was a central tenet of the Romantic movement that flourished in Europe particularly in the first half of the nineteenth century. As Hans Blumenberg puts it, with the Romantics, “art no longer points to another, exemplary being, but rather it itself is this exemplary being for the possibilities of humanity: The work of art no longer wants to mean something; rather, it wants *to be* something” (Hans Blumenberg, “‘Imitation of Nature’: Toward a Prehistory of the Idea of the Creative Being”, *Qui Parle* 12:1 [Spring/Summer 2000], p. 47). Isaiah Berlin makes a direct comparison between the Romantics’ idealized hero, Ludwig van Beethoven, and Frenhofer: “Even if [the Romantic artist] is not a genius like Beethoven, even if, like the hero of Balzac’s *Le Chef d’oeuvre inconnu*, ‘The Unknown Masterpiece’, he is mad, [...], he is a man who has dedicated himself to an ideal, who has thrown away the world” (Isaiah Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999], p. 15).

<sup>377</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Cézanne’s Doubt”, in *The Merleau-Ponty Reader*, ed. Ted Toadvine and Leonard Lawlor, (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2007), p. 77.

<sup>378</sup> Balzac here utilizes the historical personages of Nicolas Poussin (1594-1665), the leading exponent of the French baroque style, and Dutch portraitist Frans Pourbus the Younger (1569-1622), next to the fictional character of Frenhofer.

<sup>379</sup> One option Frenhofer considers is to seek a model in “Asia”, or more specifically “Turkey” (Balzac, *The Unknown Masterpiece*, p. 23): just like Matisse and his contemporaries, Frenhofer seems to be in search of non-Western inspirations to escape the confines of Western art.

“No...do you?”

“I see nothing”.

The two painters left the old man to his ecstasy, and tried to ascertain whether the light that fell upon the canvas had in some way neutralized all the effect for them. They moved to the right and left of the picture; they came in front, bending down and standing upright by turns.

“Yes, yes, it is really canvas”, said Frenhofer, who mistook the nature of this minute investigation.

“Look! the canvas is on a stretcher, here is the easel; indeed, here are my colors, my brushes”, and he took up a brush and held it out to them, all unsuspecting of their thought.

“The old *lansquenet* is laughing at us”, said Poussin, coming once more toward the supposed picture. “I can see nothing there but confused masses of color and a multitude of fantastical lines that go to make a dead wall of paint”.

“We are mistaken, look!” said Porbus.

In a corner of the canvas, as they came nearer, they distinguished a bare foot emerging from the chaos of colour, half-tints and vague shadows that made up a dim, formless fog. Its living delicate beauty held them spellbound. This fragment that had escaped an incomprehensible, slow, and gradual destruction seemed to them like the Parian marble torso of some Venus emerging from the ashes of a ruined town.

“There is a woman beneath”, exclaimed Porbus, calling Poussin’s attention to the coats of paint with which the old artist had overlaid and concealed his work in the quest of perfection.<sup>380</sup>

What the two friends think of as a failure is in fact Frenhofer’s true masterpiece. After the first shock, their not-yet-trained eyes slowly adjust to the painting. It guides them regarding whether to get closer or to distance themselves. It teaches them how it should be looked at. However, since it is ahead of its time, the two are unable to admire it.

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<sup>380</sup> Balzac, *The Unknown Masterpiece*, pp. 28-29.

Frenhofer himself suspects his painting to have such “life-giving”, in Sufi parlance, qualities, that he half expects his colleagues not to even recognize it as a painting, as with Mani’s prophetic scroll, which contains “various shapes that occur only in the mirror of the mind through the eye of imagination and that sit on the page of possibility in the visible world only with fantastic shapes”.<sup>381</sup> And he is met with a level of incomprehension similar to that visited upon Mani.

Frenhofer has become, unbeknownst even to himself, the first modern painter in history. He has begun to dissolve the idea of “drawing” into its component parts and is on the way to reassemble these parts in non-representational ways. However, he is so far ahead of his time that his project fills him with self-doubt. As Porbus puts it,

Frenhofer is a passionate enthusiast, who sees above and beyond other painters. He has meditated profoundly on color, and the absolute truth of line; but by the way of much research he has come to doubt the very existence of the objects of his search. He says, in moments of despondency, that there is no such thing as drawing, and that by means of lines we can only reproduce geometrical figures.<sup>382</sup>

Through Frenhofer, Balzac constructs a literary scaffolding for future accounts on the philosophy of art. He emancipates painting, and art in general, from being seen as an imitation, and the artist from being seen as an imitator, while at the same time bridging language and painting. As Frenhofer says to his young admirers: “The aim of art is not to copy nature, but to express it. You are not a servile copyist, but a poet!”<sup>383</sup> According to Frenhofer, form has a shifting nature that cannot be captured by imitation. As he puts it, “Form is a Proteus more intangible and more manifold than the Proteus of the legend; compelled, only after long wrestling, to stand forth manifest in his true aspect”.<sup>384</sup>

Frenhofer’s words show an appreciation of painting as something that is *coming into*

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<sup>381</sup> Thackston, *Album Prefaces*, p. 12.

<sup>382</sup> Balzac, *The Unknown Masterpiece*, pp. 18-19.

<sup>383</sup> Balzac, *The Unknown Masterpiece*, p. 7.

<sup>384</sup> Balzac, *The Unknown Masterpiece*, p. 8.

*being*, an appreciation, as we shall see below, that anticipates phenomenology and especially the thought of Merleau-Ponty.

For Balzac, Frenhofer, the ultimate artist, the genius, is somewhat in-human. Poussin, while thinking about Frenhofer, concludes that “Everything combined to set the old man beyond the limits of human nature”.<sup>385</sup> Indeed, Porbus’ description of Frenhofer is a fairly accurate one. Frenhofer travels to artistic destinations that are unknown to humans and tries to express what is unfamiliar to them. The masterpiece is called “unknown” since it has not yet met with the human eye and has not yet acquired the meaning that culture will give to it. Frenhofer’s act is not to create a pleasurable object for the eyes of accustomed beholders; he creates something which is waiting to meet its meaning, a meaning not yet established. Poussin and Porbus’ bewildered reaction to the “unknown masterpiece” demonstrates that when the perceived shows itself to the perceiver, this “showing itself” does not lead to an unambiguous, clear apprehension. But while works of art clearly present “special cases” in challenging perception, a “perfect” or unequivocal perception does not exist even in the case of more mundane things. As Ibn al-‘Arabī puts it, “The perfect gnostic is one who regards every object of worship as a manifestation of God in which He is worshiped. They call it a god, although its proper name might be stone, wood, animal, man, star, or angel”.<sup>386</sup>

## 5.2. Art and the Phenomenological *Epoché*

In phenomenology, the inherent ambiguity of perception and the need to overcome ordinary, conditioned perception to arrive at new ways of apprehending the perceived is a theme forcefully taken up by Edmund Husserl, to whose writings Martin Heidegger’s phenomenology is heavily indebted. Husserl approaches these issues through his concepts of “lack” and “excess”. An interplay of lack and excess is part of every perception, with the result that, in Rudolf Bernet’s words, “perceiver and perceived never perfectly match or mirror one another”.<sup>387</sup> The perceiver cannot ever achieve an unequivocal perception of the perceived.

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<sup>385</sup> Balzac, *The Unknown Masterpiece*, p. 17.

<sup>386</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabī, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 247.

<sup>387</sup> Rudolf Bernet, “Phenomenological and Aesthetic *Epoché*: Painting the Invisible Things Themselves”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Phenomenology*, ed. Dan Zahavi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 565.



Lack and/or excess can be ascribed to both perceiver and perceived in the act of perception. On the one hand, Husserl locates a lack on the part of the perceived and an excess on the part of the perceiver. This excess lies in the perceiver's intention, which goes beyond that which he can actually see. He seeks to see the whole while what he sees are always only partial sketches. Husserl elucidates this idea by giving the example of a house: "I see this house, and it is the house in its sense. I am familiar with it. But then I can so regard the appearing side as if the house were entirely different from the rear—a large, deep structure, whereas it is shallow, and so on. I then have an image-object apprehension. [...] What kind of an apprehension is this? It is a modified apprehension as opposed to the perceptual apprehension that is still there, in conflict".<sup>388</sup> Here, then, the excess on part of the perceiver results in the mental manipulation of the perceived, with the result that the perceived can be apprehended in a variety of ways not necessarily corresponding to its actuality.

The excess on the part of the perceiver is inevitable since, as Husserl states, the perceived never shows itself as a whole, or in its wholeness, but only through its parts, which Husserl calls "perspectival adumbrations".<sup>389</sup> Heidegger uses the example of a chair to illustrate: "When I see a sensibly perceptible object, this familiar chair here, I always see—understood as a particular way of seeing—only of the seat but not the lower surface".<sup>390</sup> I do not actually see a chair but only partial adumbrations of a chair. I cannot attain perception of a chair in its totality, I can only see it from a point of view, and every time I change my point of view, I gain a part of the chair while losing another. Nonetheless, I perform a process of completing the missing parts without actually seeing them, and thereby arrive at the chair as "presumed in its *thing-totality*".<sup>391</sup>

On the other hand, though, the excess can also be located on the side of the perceived, and the lack on that of the perceiver. As Bernet puts it, "The thing shows qualities and meanings the perceiver did not expect and its shining appearance carries a

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<sup>388</sup> Edmund Husserl, *Phantasy, Image Consciousness, and Memory (1898-1925)*, trans. John B. Brough (Dordrecht: Springer, 2005), p. 525.

<sup>389</sup> Husserl, *Phantasy, Image Consciousness*, p. 97.

<sup>390</sup> Martin Heidegger, *History of the Concept of Time: Prolegomena*, trans. Theodore Kisiel (Bloomington, In.: Indiana University Press, 1985), p. 43.

<sup>391</sup> Heidegger, *History of the Concept of Time*, p. 43.

‘comet tail’ of other possible appearances and other things possibly appearing”.<sup>392</sup> Let me initially approach this idea through a mundane example: that of a ladder being used as a bookcase. The ladder’s appearance as a bookcase is not evident to the perceiver until the latter oversteps the boundaries of her ordinary perception, which only presents to her the pre-given function of the ladder. This lack in ordinary perception is mirrored by the excess in the perceived: there are more possibilities in a thing than ordinary perception suggests.

Of course, ordinary perception has its place in our lives, and a very important place at that—in Bernet’s words, it enables “our orientation in a familiar world, and it does so most efficiently when the handling of useful things and tools is not held up by our wondering about their way of appearing”.<sup>393</sup> We need ordinary perception to function in our everyday lives. However, this kind of perception also blinds us to the richness of perceptual possibilities lying in the interplay of lack and excess. If we can manage to suspend ordinary perception, this richness will reveal itself to us. Husserl terms such a suspension—which, I would claim, corresponds to the Sufi idea of activating the “eye of the heart”<sup>394</sup>—a phenomenological *epoché*. The “ordinary perceiver”, Bernet states, is drawn “from one thing to the next by the needs and concerns of practical life”.<sup>395</sup> The phenomenologist, in contrast, aims “to see a web of interrelated appearances where others can only see solid things existing in and of themselves”.<sup>396</sup>

In a longer passage, Bernet gets at the heart of what is meant by the Husserlian phenomenological *epoché*:

A *phenomenological epoché* [...] makes us aware of the fact that the perception of a visible thing necessarily includes an awareness of invisible aspects of the same thing. More precisely, the awareness of visible ‘adumbrations’ of a thing is inseparable from the awareness of the sides of the thing that are merely ‘co-intended’, but not intuitively given. In other words, without the awareness of the invisible sides, there are no

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<sup>392</sup> Bernet, “Phenomenological and Aesthetic”, p. 565.

<sup>393</sup> Bernet, “Phenomenological and Aesthetic”, p. 565.

<sup>394</sup> Gruber, p. 249.

<sup>395</sup> Bernet, “Phenomenological and Aesthetic”, p. 565.

<sup>396</sup> Bernet, “Phenomenological and Aesthetic”, p. 567.

adumbrations at all. The visible and the invisible are so interwoven that it makes perfect sense to speak, with Husserl, of an ‘improper *appearing*’ (*‘uneigentliche Erscheinung’*) of the invisible. Thus, the not yet visible sides of the thing are not just perceived as possibly becoming visible in the further course of experience, they have a visibility of their own from the beginning.<sup>397</sup>

Now, as Bernet puts it, a philosopher may be interested in exploring the lack on the part of the perceiver or that of the perceived. Doing the latter, in effect, amounts to the measuring of the accuracy of one’s sense perceptions. By examining the perceived from many points of view and assembling one’s impressions, the perceiver can “confirm her views and [...] make certain that her perception is correct”.<sup>398</sup> However, and especially in the case of art, the more fruitful approach is to locate the lack on the part of the perceiver. In the perception of a painting, in Heidegger’s words, “What is bodily perceived is the picture-thing itself, but this too is perceived in each instance in an aspect. To some extent, however, the perception of a picture-thing does not come to completion in the normal and natural perception of a picture”.<sup>399</sup> To Heidegger, then, the painting contains a special kind of excess going beyond that which besets our perception of ordinary things.

Why would a painting be special in this regard, offering a unique challenge to perception not found in other things? It may be because both the phenomenologist and the painter, in Bernet’s view, pursue similar aims. They are both in search of “a perception of the world freed from the need of orientation, a non-instrumental relation to things, and a consideration of worldly events and situations for their own sake”. Their goal is a “discovery of the coming forth or ‘birth’ of both things and the world out of a manifold of ever changing appearances”.<sup>400</sup> Just as the phenomenologist aims for the phenomenological *epoché*, the painter aims for a “pictorial epoché”, and to achieve it, she “will have to overcome a schematic seeing of familiar shapes and their distribution in a geometrical space in order to perceive colours just as colours, light and shadows, or

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<sup>397</sup> Bernet, “Phenomenological and Aesthetic”, pp. 569-570.

<sup>398</sup> Bernet, “Phenomenological and Aesthetic”, p. 565.

<sup>399</sup> Heidegger, *History of the Concept of Time*, p. 43-44.

<sup>400</sup> Bernet, “Phenomenological and Aesthetic”, p. 567.

empty spaces”.<sup>401</sup> If the painter achieves this overcoming, this pictorial *epoché*, the result will be paintings that “change our way of perceiving real things, and [...] make us aware of unknown dimensions of our own mind”.<sup>402</sup> The kind of change Bernet envisions here is nothing short of revolutionary:

Forms will dissolve in shapes, shapes will become patches of colour, patches of colour will assemble and separate in a ballet dance to a yet unheard musical rhythm. Thus, transformed in her way of seeing the world by her seeing of art, she [the beholder] also sees painted works of art differently. Sensitive to an overall proximity between the visible and the invisible, when visiting an art museum she will pass from the contemplation of figurative paintings to the contemplation of abstract paintings without noticing the difference.<sup>403</sup>

I would argue for an affinity between this line of thought and Sufi ideas on perception and art. Let us recall Dūst Moḥammad’s description of Mani as a painter who could conjure “various shapes that occur only in the mirror of the mind through the eye of imagination and that sit on the page of possibility in the visible world only with fantastic shapes”.<sup>404</sup> I read Dūst Moḥammad’s “shapes that occur only in the mirror of the mind” as corresponding to Bernet’s “unknown dimensions of our own mind”, while the idea that Mani could summon these shapes corresponds to Bernet’s statement that the artist observes and aims to capture the “coming forth” or “birth” of things. Further, we have seen Bernet talk about the proximity between the visible and the invisible and about a perception that abolishes the difference between figurative and abstract. Here, I would maintain, his ideas connect to Mustafa Âlî, according to whom Mani negotiated figurative and abstract art by, for instance, depicting “flowing water” in “crystal-like

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<sup>401</sup> Bernet, “Phenomenological and Aesthetic”, p.567.

<sup>402</sup> Bernet, “Phenomenological and Aesthetic”, p. 574.

<sup>403</sup> Bernet, “Phenomenological and Aesthetic”, p. 570.

<sup>404</sup> Thackston, *Album Prefaces*, p. 12.

form”, thereby granting visibility to things “that were impossible to represent as matter and give a visible form”.<sup>405</sup>

Let me repeat that I am not arguing for a one-to-one overlap between phenomenological and Sufi thought on art. For instance, the phenomenological approach to perception and art does not contain the emphasis on spiritual/moral development that, in Sufi thought, must accompany any attempt at perception of the absolute. What to phenomenologists consists of a sheer method, or technique, of apprehending and capturing the perceptible world is, to Sufi thinkers, part and parcel of a holistic approach to experience that inextricably intertwines religious, ethical, sensory, and many other dimensions. Nonetheless, I would argue that both forms of thought converge on an understanding of being as a perpetual process of coming-into-being that cannot be apprehended by conceptual means. Further, I would maintain that both sides grant a privileged position to art, and—more specifically, for my purposes here—to painting, as a non-conceptual practice that can capture and convey this coming-into-being.

### 5.3. Peeling Away the Layers

I owe you the truth in painting and I shall give it to you.

- Paul Cézanne<sup>406</sup>

Among phenomenologists who regard works of art as capable of letting their audiences break through the limits of ordinary perception, Martin Heidegger stands out with his discussion, in “The Origin of the Work of Art”, of a painting by Vincent van Gogh. Echoing Husserl’s phenomenological *epoché*, Heidegger talks of an obscured, primordial level of being to be found in a work of art, a level which both traditional and modern Western theories of art, which imprison the work within a conceptual framework, are unable to reach. As we shall see below, one of the main reasons for this inability is the dichotomous way of thinking prevalent in traditional philosophy as well as aesthetics, an approach of which Heidegger is at least as critical as is Ibn al-‘Arabī.

In his work, Heidegger challenges and criticizes all previous philosophy of art as

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<sup>405</sup> Akin-Kıvanç, *Mustafa ‘Ali’s*, p. 277.

<sup>406</sup> Paul Cézanne et al, *Conversations with Cézanne*, trans. Julie Lawrence Cochran, ed. Michael Doran (Berkeley: California University Press, 2001), p. 48.

having emerged under the impetus and conceptuality of a metaphysically invested aesthetics operating within dichotomies such as object-subject, form-matter, or *substantia et accidens*. He argues for a reconsideration of artworks in purely ontological terms and sets the work of art in the context of an understanding of truth as *aletheia* – that is to say, truth as the unconcealment of being. This radical departure notwithstanding, Robert Bernasconi asserts that “there has been relatively little scrutiny of Heidegger’s attempt to free the concept of art from its status as an aesthetic category”.<sup>407</sup>

Heidegger summarizes his approach by stating, “Reflection on what *art* may be is completely and decisively directed solely toward the question of *being*”.<sup>408</sup> Mark Sinclair elaborates on this statement as follows: “Art and being [...] are not two separate terms between which we could establish a relation after the fact, as it were. Heidegger’s reflection on art, the *poetic*, is a reflection on the *poetic* in being”.<sup>409</sup> In “The Origin of the Work of Art”, then, Heidegger attempts to develop an ontological understanding of art, i.e., in Heidegger’s understanding, a phenomenology of the work of art.

Heidegger claims that one never approaches a work of art naïvely. Even before one encounters the work itself, one engages with the preconceptions surrounding it, instigated by anything from philosophy or science to trivial knowledge or common sense. To Heidegger, it is these preconceptions that shape our ordinary perception—in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s words, “The intellect restricts and seeks to define the truth within a particular qualification”. However, Ibn al-‘Arabī goes on to maintain that “in fact the Reality does not admit of such a limitation”,<sup>410</sup> and the same emphasis on the resistance of being to conceptual apprehension is found in Heidegger. According to his phenomenology, every showing is a self-showing, and the moment one imposes certain preconceptions on beings, one stops them from showing themselves. Heidegger’s first step in “The Origin of the Work of Art” is to map such conceptual constructs that surround and conceal the work of art from our sight. Afterwards, he tries to peel these preconceptions off the work

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<sup>407</sup> Robert Bernasconi, “Heidegger’s Displacement of the Concept of Art”, *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, vol. 2, ed. Michael Kelly (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 378.

<sup>408</sup> Heidegger, “The Origin”, p. 55.

<sup>409</sup> Mark Sinclair, *Heidegger, Aristotle and the Work of Art: Poiesis in Being* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p.139.

<sup>410</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabī, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 150.

and thereby approach a more “immediate and complete reality” of the work.<sup>411</sup> To gain access to the work, he states, “it would be necessary to remove the work from all relations to anything other than itself in order to let it stand on its own and for itself alone”.<sup>412</sup> Heidegger’s procedure may be compared to an archaeological excavation of an artifact covered by layers and buried underground. His first step is a preliminary research excursion into the field, investigating and identifying the different geological layers covering the work. The second step is to remove the layers one by one so that the work can reveal itself.

Heidegger states there are three main preconceptions that reduce the work of art to something other than itself or, more precisely, to the conceptual level. The first of these reductive presuppositions is the dichotomy of *substantia* and *accidens*. “It is generally held that the definition of the thingness of the thing in terms of substance and accidents appears to capture our natural view of things”.<sup>413</sup> According to Heidegger, this preconception, which also captures our natural way of approaching an artwork, has its roots in the structure of language itself. “The simple declarative sentence consists of a subject – the Latin translation, and that means transformation,<sup>414</sup> of *hypokeimenon* – and predicate, which expresses the thing’s characteristics. Who would dare to threaten this simple and fundamental relationship between thing and sentence, between the structure of the sentence and the structure of the thing?”<sup>415</sup>

Following Heidegger, Joseph Kockelmans traces the origins of the subject-predicate dichotomy to the Ancient Greeks, in whose thought he locates what he calls a dichotomy between the “core of things” and the “characteristics”. As he puts it, “One often claims that the Greeks called this core the *hypokeimenon*. For them the core of the thing was something lying on the ground, something that is always already present. On the other hand, they called the characteristics the *sumbebekota*, that which always turns up along with the core as soon as the latter appears; it is that which occurs together with

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<sup>411</sup> Heidegger, “The Origin”, p. 3.

<sup>412</sup> Heidegger, “The Origin”, p. 19.

<sup>413</sup> Heidegger, “The Origin”, p. 6.

<sup>414</sup> Heidegger’s hermeneutic approach to the translation of philosophical concepts from Greek into Latin falls outside the scope of this inquiry. As Harries puts it, Heidegger criticized “the translation of Greek terms into Latin” as leading to “the rootlessness of Western thought”. (Karsten Harries, *Art Matters: A Critical Commentary on Heidegger’s “The Origin of the Work of Art”* [Dordrecht: Springer, 2009], p. 99).

<sup>415</sup> Heidegger, “The Origin”, p. 6.

the core”.<sup>416</sup> It follows that the work of art, just like all other things, is constitutive of two parts: substance and properties. The work of art, then, is reduced to a bearer of certain characteristics. Such a framework brings the artwork too close to theoretical thinking or, in Cartesian terms, to the mind. To Heidegger, “the thing is not merely a collection of characteristics, and neither is it the aggregate of those properties through which the collection arises”.<sup>417</sup>

The second preconception that Heidegger attempts to overcome is that which understands the artwork as *aistheton*. Here, the work is considered to be the monolithic unity of its manifold constituents given to the senses. As Heidegger puts it, “In what the senses of sight, hearing, and touch bring to us, in the sensations of color, sound, roughness, and hardness, things move us bodily, in a quite literal sense. The thing is that *aistheton*, that which, in the senses belonging to sensibility, is perceptible by means of sensations”.<sup>418</sup> According to Heidegger, approaching the work of art as *aistheton* reduces it to a unity of its manifold sensory effects, which takes the work of art to the other extreme from the first preconception, where it was reduced to a bearer of multiple characteristics. As Heidegger puts it, “the first interpretation of the thing holds it, as it were, too far away from the body, the second brings it too close”.<sup>419</sup> Both extremes should be avoided: “the thing must be allowed to remain unmolested in its resting-within-itself”.<sup>420</sup>

As Iain Thomson states, Heidegger “consistently insisted that the ‘aesthetic’ approach has led Western humanity to understand and experience the work of art in a way that occludes its true historical significance”.<sup>421</sup> According to Heidegger, aesthetics is “the way of inquiring into art and the beautiful on the basis of the state of feeling in enjoyers and producers”.<sup>422</sup> Heidegger takes issue with this approach because it does not ground its inquiry in the work of art itself, regarding the latter as worthy of investigation

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<sup>416</sup> Joseph J. Kockelmans, *Heidegger on Art and Art Works* (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1985), p. 113.

<sup>417</sup> Heidegger, “The Origin”, p. 5.

<sup>418</sup> Heidegger, “The Origin”, pp. 7-8.

<sup>419</sup> Heidegger, “The Origin”, p. 8.

<sup>420</sup> Heidegger, “The Origin”, p. 8.

<sup>421</sup> Iain D. Thomson, *Heidegger, Art and Postmodernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 41.

<sup>422</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche, Volumes One and Two*, trans. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), p.79.



only “from the point of view of expression and impression”,<sup>423</sup> namely the expression aimed at by the creators and the impressions ensuing in the viewers of the work.<sup>424</sup> As Harries points out, this leads to a limited and one-sided philosophy of art. Drawing on Kant’s “First Introduction” to the *Critique of Judgement*, Harries maintains that aesthetic qualities (“the green of the grass, the smell of the rose”<sup>425</sup>) may well belong to the object under investigation, but that aesthetic inquiry is seen as “not related to the *faculty of knowledge*, but to the *feeling of pleasure and displeasure*”. Ultimately, “what is enjoyed is not so much the work of art, as the occasioned experience or state of mind. Aesthetic enjoyment is fundamentally self-enjoyment”.<sup>426 427</sup>

Heidegger traces the usage of the term “aesthetics” in the modern sense back to the eighteenth century. While this usage, then, is relatively new, the tendency to reduce the inquiry into art to the subjective “is old, just as old as meditation on art and the beautiful in Western thought”.<sup>428</sup> In connecting aesthetics to the origins of Western thought, Heidegger is of course referring to Plato as the intellectual precursor of the Cartesian dualism that makes the aesthetic approach possible.<sup>429</sup> What is at issue here is not primarily aesthetics’ neglect of the “object” (work of art) in favor of the “subject” (artist or viewer) but rather the dichotomy between subject and object itself: “The artwork is posited as the ‘object’ for a ‘subject’, and this subject-object relation, specifically as a relation of feeling, is definitive for aesthetic consideration”.<sup>430</sup> It is this very relation, among other reductive conceptualities imposed on the artwork, that Heidegger hopes to question and dismantle.

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<sup>423</sup> Martin Heidegger, *What Is Called Thinking?*, trans. J. G. Gray (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), p. 128.

<sup>424</sup> Thomson points out that the term *aesthetics* “was coined by Alexander Baumgarten in the 1750s and then critically appropriated by Kant in his *Critique of Judgement* (published in 1790)” (Thomson, p. 47).

<sup>425</sup> One may argue that, from a Kantian perspective, Harries’ examples of color and smell are inappropriate because neither, to Kant, constitutes an aesthetic property. See §§ 3,4 & 5 in *Critique of Judgment*.

<sup>426</sup> Harries, pp. 6-7.

<sup>427</sup> A philosopher similarly dissatisfied with the idea of aesthetics is Friedrich Schlegel: “In the sense in which it has been defined and used in Germany, aesthetics is a word notoriously reveals an equally perfect ignorance of the thing and of the language. Why is it still used?” (Friedrich Schlegel, “From *Critical Fragments*”, *Art in Theory 1648-1815*, ed. Charles Harrison et al. [Oxford: Blackwell, 2000], p. 900).

<sup>428</sup> Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, p. 79.

<sup>429</sup> As Thomson puts it, “Of course, the subject/object dichotomy forms the very basis of the modern worldview, so we would be surprised if modern aesthetics did not presuppose it” (Thomson, p. 48).

<sup>430</sup> Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, p. 78.

The third and, as it were, thickest layer to cover the work of art is its preconception in terms of matter and form. This layer is also the closest to the work of art. According to Heidegger, the concept of matter and form is the most widespread and apparently self-evident of the three preconceptions. He maintains that the traditional way of thinking about the artwork as formed matter reduces the artwork to something it is not; matter is reduced to the irrational/illogical/object and form is reduced to the rational/logical/subject. Again, as we have discussed with regard to the first two preconceptions, Heidegger's goal is to overcome this traditional, metaphysical way of thinking in oppositions.

“According to the general pull of his [Heidegger's] thought”, Andrea Rehberg states, “the fixation of ‘things’ into objects is merely the inevitable corollary of the Cartesian dualistic ontology”.<sup>431</sup> The Cartesian worldview positions human beings as the creators or the rightful inheritors of things or nature, while at the same time pressing things or nature into the service of humans, thereby reducing the former to what can be measured by human rationality. A binary opposition is established between the human as the subject and nature as the object. As Harries puts it, “the Cartesian world-picture assumes an ‘I’ placed before and thus outside it. The Cartesian *res cogitans* has thus no place in the world whose essence Descartes determines as *res extensa*. The subject has fallen, had to fall out of the world so understood”.<sup>432</sup> As we have seen above, the subject-object dichotomy is a major point of irritation not just for Heidegger, but also for Ibn al-‘Arabī, according to whom “Positing something other than what is looked on, thus establishing a relation between two things, the observer and the thing observed, nulli[fies] the Unity”<sup>433</sup> that characterizes the perception aimed at by Sufīs. Heidegger elaborates in his magnum opus *Being and Time* (1927) on how the dichotomous way of thinking distorts our experience of the world. The subject-object dichotomy, which leads to further dichotomies such as matter and form, turns our world into a mere object that is consumed, manipulated, and meaningless.

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<sup>431</sup> Andrea Rehberg, “The World and the Work of Art”, *Epoché* 14:1 (2009): p. 138.

<sup>432</sup> Harries, p. 58.

<sup>433</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabī, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 107.

Just as in the case of the concepts *substantia* and *accidens*, matter and form—*hule* and *morphe* in Greek terminology—were not originally concepts applied to works of art. Rather, as Kockelmans states, the matter-form distinction

has its origin in Plato's conception according to which beings are to be conceived of with respect to their outer appearance (*eidōs*, *idea*). When beings are comprehended as beings and, thus, distinguished from all other beings with regard to their outer appearance, the articulation and demarcation of beings in terms of outer and inner limits becomes important. Now for Plato, what limits is form, and what is limited is matter.<sup>434</sup>

If we follow this preconception, then, an artwork contains two forces competing with each other; one passive, one active. On the one hand, there is the—meaningless—material, an empty receptacle that needs to be filled with meaning. On the other hand there is form, the meaning, the rationality, with which a forming agent fills that empty vessel. But if we assume that both the sculpture of David and the computer I use to write this sentence are formed matter, what is the difference between a work of art and a piece of equipment? In our times, art is usually assumed to contain an aesthetic dimension that mere equipment lacks. In Sinclair's words, art is seen as “not merely formed matter, but formed matter that shows something other than itself, that in some way has an intellectual content or meaning”.<sup>435</sup> However, in my view, this way of regarding an artwork would be unacceptable to Heidegger insofar as it puts too much emphasis on an intellectual or abstract concept that exists prior to and independently of the particular work of art.

#### 5.4. The Shoes

Before I start analyzing Heidegger's attempt to peel away this layer, I will attempt to clarify his method a little further. Heidegger does not engage the question of the

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<sup>434</sup> Kockelmans, pp. 5-6.

<sup>435</sup> Sinclair, *Heidegger, Aristotle*, p. 168.

*correctness* or *demonstrability* of the preconceptions he tries to overcome.<sup>436</sup> As Sinclair puts it, “The long history of traditional approaches to art in terms of matter, form and intellectual content is no mere aberration since it is always possible to locate the truth or correctness of these concepts in the work. Yet, what Heidegger terms the ‘fatality’ of this history would consist in the fact that the self-evidence of such approaches only veils a more original apprehension”.<sup>437</sup> But although Heidegger claims that these preconceptions cover the phenomenon and prevent it from showing itself to us, he also allows, in my opinion, that every preconception carries traces of a more originary apprehension of the phenomenon in its—so to speak—nakedness. Just like Ibn al-‘Arabī, to whom our ordinary perception is like a dream that, when interpreted correctly, can set us on the right path to the absolute, I believe that the Heideggerian approach, rather than advocating a simple removal of the preconceptions, uses them as clues that can lead us to the authentic truth of a being; in this case, of the work of art. As stated above, the matter-form dichotomy presents the thickest layer covering the artwork, and therefore carries more traces of an originary experience than the other layers. Therefore, Heidegger attempts to find a non-reductive experience underlying this third preconception that will help him locate the hidden trace of the work beyond it.

In his attempt at a phenomenological description, Heidegger’s intention is not to produce a new theory of art, in other words, to add another layer that would cover the work.<sup>438</sup> Therefore, one should not expect to obtain either a definition or a general account of the work of art from “The Origin of the Work of Art”. As he states, “What art may be is one of the questions to which this essay offers no answer”.<sup>439</sup> Rather, it is an originary experience of the work that Heidegger attempts to find, an experience that, at

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<sup>436</sup> Heidegger’s disagreement with the traditional understanding of truth as identical with *correctness*, his own notion of truth, and its relation to the work of art will be further analyzed below.

<sup>437</sup> Sinclair, *Heidegger, Aristotle*, p. 169.

<sup>438</sup> In this, Heidegger would seem to echo Schlegel’s statement that “It is thoughtless and immodest presumption to want to learn something about art from philosophy” (Schlegel, p. 903). I strongly disagree with Crowell’s assertion that “Like analytic aestheticians, Heidegger is concerned to tell us what makes something a work of art” (Steven Crowell, “Phenomenology and Aesthetics; or, Why Art Matters”, *Art and Phenomenology*, ed. Joseph D. Parry [London: Routledge, 2011], p. 41). Rather, I think that Thomson is correct when he states that, “From a strictly Heideggerian perspective, [...] any attempt to explain ‘Heidegger’s aesthetics’ (or ‘anti-aesthetics’) will look either malicious or misconceived, like a deliberate flaunting or else an unwitting display of ignorance concerning the basic tenets of his views on art” (Thomson, pp. 41-42).

<sup>439</sup> Heidegger, “The Origin”, p. 55.

the same time, prevents one from falling into generalizations. For such a phenomenological description to be possible, a pre-conceptual engagement with one particular phenomenon is necessary.<sup>440</sup> This phenomenon, in Heidegger's case, is a painting of peasant shoes by Van Gogh.<sup>441</sup> Here is Heidegger's phenomenological description:

From the dark opening of the worn insides of the shoes the toilsome tread of the worker stares forth. In the stiffly rugged heaviness of the shoes there is the accumulated tenacity of her slow trudge through the far-spreading and ever-uniform furrows of the field swept by a raw wind. On the leather lie the dampness and richness of the soil. Under the soles slides the loneliness of the field-path as evening falls. In the shoes vibrates the silent call of the earth, its quiet gift of the ripening grain and its unexplained self-refusal in the fallow desolation of the wintry field. This equipment is pervaded by uncomplaining anxiety as to the certainty of bread, the wordless joy of having once more withstood want, the trembling before the impending childbed and shivering at the surrounding menace of death. The equipment belongs to the *earth* and it is protected in the *world* of the peasant woman. From out of this protected belonging the equipment itself rises to its resting-within-itself.<sup>442</sup>

It is through the notions of earth and world that Heidegger approaches the dichotomy of matter and form, the third layer of preconception that covers the work of art. Here it is important to emphasize that Heidegger's terms of earth and world are to be understood as ontological terms. In Sinclair's words, "We must aim at the thing's

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<sup>440</sup> Heidegger discusses the limitations of the phenomenological method in his *History of the Concept of Time: Prolegomena*.

<sup>441</sup> Schapiro argues that the shoes in the painting belong to Van Gogh himself, a city-dweller rather than to a peasant woman. According to Schapiro, the shoes in the painting should be seen as a self-portrait of Van Gogh, and Heidegger fails to notice this connection. Schapiro interprets Heidegger's stance as self-deception by the philosopher; to him, Heidegger is merely projecting his own imagination onto Van Gogh's painting. However, Heidegger's very aim is to emancipate the painting from a restrictive interpretation, including an art historical perspective as practiced by Schapiro. As we shall see, to Heidegger, the real spirit of Van Gogh's painting lies in its revelation of the truth of the pair of peasant shoes. (Meyer Schapiro, "The Still Life as a Personal Object – A Note on Heidegger and Van Gogh", *The Reach of Mind: Essays in Honor of Kurt Goldstein*, ed. M. L. Simmel [New York: Springer, 1968], pp. 203-209.)

<sup>442</sup> Heidegger, "The Origin", p. 14.

belonging to the earth rather than saying that it is the earth, because the thing appears in a world, and because world and earth are not themselves things, but two ontological differentials, two aspects of the being of beings".<sup>443</sup> In trying to better understand earth and world, a good way to start is with that which unites them: the notion of equipment.

According to Heidegger, we come to realize the equipmentality of the pair of shoes in this painting. As he describes succinctly in *Being and Time*, "Such entities are not [...] objects for knowing the 'world' theoretically; they are simply what gets used, what gets produced, and so forth".<sup>444</sup> In Van Gogh's painting, the equipmentality of the shoes is found to be represented in their having-been-usedness. The peasant woman wears the shoes and thus uses them like any other tool or equipment at her disposal of which she takes advantage for her projects. As Heidegger claims, when they are worn by the peasant woman in the fields, the shoes are what they are.

For the peasant woman, using the shoes also means depending on them. But as she uses the shoes, they undergo an increasing amount of wear and tear, which is clearly apparent in the deformity and damage the shoes in the painting have undergone: "The individual piece of equipment becomes worn out and used up. But also, customary usage itself falls into disuse, becomes ground down and merely habitual. In this way equipmental being withers away, sinks to the level of mere equipment".<sup>445</sup> The peasant continues using the pair of shoes until they become useless. Therefore, according to Heidegger, although the peasant seems to rely on the utility of the shoes, the true equipmental being of equipment is not usefulness, it is reliability itself.

What Heidegger seems to suggest here is that usefulness is merely the manifestation, in a particular piece of equipment, of a deeper notion of reliability which is tied up with the idea of equipment itself, rather than just a particular piece of equipment. This notion of reliability is so deeply ingrained that the peasant woman hardly ever notices or reflects on the role the shoes play in her life, yet she still knows, without noticing, by virtue of merely wearing and using them, that which we only come to realize in the painting. Were the shoes to fall apart, their reliability would become noticeable

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<sup>443</sup> Sinclair, *Heidegger, Aristotle*, 155.

<sup>444</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), p. 95.

<sup>445</sup> Heidegger, "The Origin", p.15.

even to her because of its decay or absence in this particular pair of shoes. As Sinclair puts it, “Heidegger seeks to show that it is by virtue of the reliability of a pair of shoes – if they are in a good state of repair – and only by virtue of this reliability that the peasant can have particular projects to pursue. The reliability of equipment is the prior condition of its utility”.<sup>446</sup>

The peasant woman depends on the shoes. She relies on the usefulness of the equipment that is the pair of shoes. The manner in which she relies on the usefulness of the shoes involves a dependence on the reliability of the shoes. It is not merely by virtue of its usefulness, but by virtue of the continuity of that quality that equipment plays a vital and fundamental role in the peasant woman’s being in the world. As Heidegger puts it, “The equipmental being of equipment, its reliability, keeps all things gathered within itself, each in its own manner and to its own extent. The usefulness of the equipment is, however, only the necessary consequence of reliability. The former vibrates in the latter and would be nothing without it”.<sup>447</sup>

Heidegger claims that the equipment belongs to the earth, which denotes the immediate natural surroundings. Earth, as he puts it, is “that on which man bases his dwelling” and “that in which the arising of everything that arises is brought back—as, indeed, the very thing that is—and sheltered. In the things that arise the earth presences as the protecting one”.<sup>448</sup> In the case of the peasant woman, earth is not simply the materiality of the equipment she uses, but also the field, the land upon which she lives and works. However, the equipment, the pair of shoes, not only relates to the earth, but is also preserved in the world of the peasant woman, the world here implying the whole context of meaningful relations that forms one’s experience as a human being. In Heidegger’s words,

World is not a mere collection of things—countable and uncountable, known and unknown—that are present at hand. Neither is world a merely imaginary framework added by our representation of the sum of things that are present. *World worlds*, and is more fully in being than all those tangible and perceptible things in the midst of which we take ourselves to

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<sup>446</sup> Sinclair, *Heidegger, Aristotle*, p. 153.

<sup>447</sup> Heidegger, “The Origin”, p. 15.

<sup>448</sup> Heidegger, “The Origin”, p. 21.

be at home. World is never an object that stands before us and can be looked at. World is that always-nonobjectual to which we are subject as long as the paths of birth and death, blessing and curse, keep us transported into being.<sup>449</sup>

Earth and world are simultaneously present for the peasant woman only in the equipment, so the way for her to relate to the earth and to rest assured of her world at the same time is through her shoes, a piece of equipment. It is only in the reliability of equipment that the peasant woman finds security and assurance in her life and only in the reliability of the equipment that she comes to secure her world and “assures the earth the freedom of its steady pressure”.<sup>450</sup> As Heidegger puts it, “In virtue of this reliability the peasant woman is admitted into the silent call of the earth; in virtue of the reliability of the equipment she is certain of her world”.<sup>451</sup>

Heidegger also points out that the peasant woman’s livelihood depends on the earth. She has an original experience of earth rather than thinking of it conceptually. She also does not have an abstract understanding of her involvements and expectations, in other words, of her world. It is not that the woman is incapable of such a theoretical understanding of the earth and her world, but rather that she does not need such an understanding. In Harries’ words, “There is, to be sure, a sense in which she knows her shoes, knows them intimately, but knowing here means first of all knowing how to use them. Such knowledge is wordless and very distant from the painter’s understanding and from the philosopher’s reflections”.<sup>452</sup> The peasant woman inhabits the world through lived relations. She is interwoven with the earth. She has an immediate experience of both. According to Heidegger, she has an originary—because practical—rather than theoretical relation to both. It is exactly this kind of experience that Heidegger is after in his investigation of the work of art.

The peasant woman is not conscious of the purpose of the shoes while she is wearing them in the field. As Harries puts it, “Their very proximity brings with it a

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<sup>449</sup> Heidegger, “The Origin”, p. 23.

<sup>450</sup> Heidegger, “The Origin”, p. 15.

<sup>451</sup> Heidegger, “The Origin”, p. 14.

<sup>452</sup> Harries, p. 87.



certain blindness”.<sup>453</sup> This blindness precludes a perception of the kind Heidegger has in mind. “The equipmentality of equipment”, according to Harries, “did not arrive at its appearance in the peasant woman’s wordless knowledge of her shoes. She was too secure and embedded in her world for her shoes to yield such an appearance. Their very reliability precluded it”.<sup>454</sup> To elucidate further, one may also give the example of pen and paper. When we use this equipment to write a letter, what we think of is neither the pen nor the paper. We only notice the importance of the pen when it does not work or when it has run out of ink. As long as it functions the way it should, we are not aware of it. The thing disappears in its use and in its usefulness.

To allow ourselves to perceive a thing’s unconcealment, we need to establish a certain distance from the function of the thing and from the thing itself. Heidegger believes that art provides us with this distance that makes unconcealment possible. A work of art acts like an interruption. It shakes the ground on which we stand and forces us to *think* about what we take for granted, it makes us see the invisible—the shoes to the peasant, the pen to the writer. Through the distance created by the artwork, one does not start to see the world from a different perspective, but starts to see the world as if for the first time, without prejudice, without reducing it to a function, without pre-givens and presuppositions or concepts.

In my interpretation of sources on miniature art, I take certain passages to refer to exactly this kind of process whereby the artwork enables an apprehension of the thing not accessible through the thing itself. Mustafa Âlî writes about Mani’s paintings that “pure water had never been so transparent” or that “the world-illuminating mirror has never furbished plants and flowers in that tone”.<sup>455</sup> Similarly, Qāḍī Aḥmad talks about paintings imbued with life, as in the case of Bihzād’s birds that “acquire a soul”<sup>456</sup> or Ibrahim Mirza’s art that “gave life even to images of minerals”.<sup>457</sup> I do not take Mustafa Âlî to mean that Mani’s paintings somehow exceed water in transparency or plants and flowers in brightness, or Qadi Ahmed to be referring to the verisimilitude of the paintings in question. Rather, I take Mustafa Âlî to be implying that attributes like transparency or

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<sup>453</sup> Harries, p. 87.

<sup>454</sup> Harries, pp. 89-90.

<sup>455</sup> Akın-Kıvanç, *Mustafa ‘Ali’s*, p. 280.

<sup>456</sup> Minorsky, *Calligraphers and Painters*, p. 180.

<sup>457</sup> Minorsky, *Calligraphers and Painters*, p. 183.

brightness escape the casual observer of water or flowers because of their habitual acquaintance with the objects of their perception, while art allows these traits to manifest as if observed for the first time. And I claim that it is this fresh manifestation that accounts for Qadi Ahmed’s ascription of “soul” or “life” to works of art.

### 5.5. Earth, World, and Strife

How do Heidegger’s notions of earth and world feed back into the discussion of the work of art, and how do they help us substitute a more primordial experience of the artwork for its conception in terms of matter and form? According to Heidegger, both earth and world are in a mutual relationship in the artwork. As he puts it, “The work moves the earth into the open of a world and holds it there”.<sup>458</sup> At the same time, “As a work, the work holds open the open of a world”.<sup>459</sup>

Earth, to Heidegger, “is essentially self-secluding. To set forth the earth means: to bring into the open as the self-secluding”.<sup>460</sup> In other words, a work of art cannot simply drag earth out into the open. Earth shows itself if and only if it remains concealed or unexplained. But earth’s self-secluding tendency does not mean that it is the passive component of the work, in contrast to the “active” world. Earth encompasses—without being limited to—the materiality of the work, a dynamic constituent which always already carries the potential of the work within it. As Sinclair puts it, “Far from being a mere matter lacking a form, earth is already the emerging of latent and present figures and shapes”.<sup>461</sup> For instance, the bronze already has the *Thinker* within itself as a potentiality even before the *Thinker* shows itself through it. Michelangelo’s *David* has always already been a possibility within a block of marble; as colors already always have the potential to become miniature paintings, while through miniature paintings, the colors become what they are and are made visible in a specific way for the first time.

One may ask in what ways earth is understood, or misunderstood, in the absence of the work of art as a locus of manifestation. While the work of art lets earth be earth without reducing it to anything other than itself, there are other circumstances in which

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<sup>458</sup> Heidegger, “The Origin”, p. 24.

<sup>459</sup> Heidegger, “The Origin”, p. 23.

<sup>460</sup> Heidegger, “The Origin”, p. 25.

<sup>461</sup> Sinclair, *Heidegger, Aristotle*, p. 142.

earth does not become visible as earth. According to Heidegger, this can happen in two ways. Firstly, the earthly character of a thing can disappear into its usefulness. Thus, a piece of equipment tends to reduce materiality to usefulness, almost covering up its own earthly aspect. In a hammer, for instance, the wood out of which the handle is made becomes subsumed in the serviceability of the hammer.

The second way in which one may not “let earth be earth” is by forcing it into presence in scientific investigation. Heidegger gives the example of how the heaviness of a stone escapes us when we measure it and reduce it to numbers through a calculable understanding of weight.<sup>462</sup> Another example he gives is color, which “shines and wants only to shine. If we try to make it comprehensible by analyzing it into numbers of oscillations it is gone. It shows itself only when it remains undisclosed and unexplained”.<sup>463</sup> Any explanatory attempt would constitute an “act of destruction”.<sup>464</sup> As Heidegger puts it in *Being and Time*, through such explanations, “everything primordial gets glossed over as something long familiar. Everything gained by a struggle becomes just something to be manipulated. Every mystery loses its power”.<sup>465</sup>

Both earth and world are equally blind forces of coming-into-being. Therefore, when we talk about the worldly element of the work, we should not have in mind a force that shapes the earth according to its own pre-given intellectual agenda.<sup>466</sup> As Sinclair puts it, “The idea of world delimits and transcends traditional determinations of the intelligible, for already within the framework of fundamental ontology it was not simply thought as an intelligible form projected on or conditioning matter”.<sup>467</sup>

In “The Origin of the Work of Art”, Heidegger uses world in—at least—two different ways. The first one of these worlds is the world of a particular Dasein. As Heidegger states, “The stone is world-less. [...] The peasant woman, by contrast,

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<sup>462</sup> Heidegger, “The Origin”, p. 25.

<sup>463</sup> Heidegger, “The Origin”, p. 25.

<sup>464</sup> Heidegger, “The Origin”, p. 25.

<sup>465</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 164-5.

<sup>466</sup> My understanding of earth and world contrasts sharply with that of Dreyfus, who states that “Heidegger calls the way the artwork solicits the culture to make the meaning of the artwork explicit, coherent, and all encompassing, the world aspect of the work. He calls the way the artwork and its associated practices resist such explication and totalization the earth aspect” (Hubert L. Dreyfus, “Heidegger’s Ontology of Art”, *A Companion to Heidegger*, ed. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Mark A. Wrathall [Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2005], p. 411).

<sup>467</sup> Sinclair, *Heidegger, Aristotle*, p. 181.

possesses a world, since she stays in the openness of beings”.<sup>468</sup> This world is the world of the peasant woman as *Dasein*. However, according to Heidegger, this world is not constructed by *Dasein*. Rather, *Dasein* finds itself in an already prevailing world. In Sinclair’s words, “World in this sense [...] is not a mere ontic totality of things with which a Cartesian, worldless subject would reckon and to which it would be opposed, but instead an essential aspect of the being of *Dasein* as a being-in-the-world”.<sup>469</sup> The peasant woman is a being-in-the-world that inhabits the world she is thrown into. This leads us to the second Heideggerian usage of world, which goes beyond the particular individual to cover an epoch. According to Sinclair, “There is a ‘worlding’ of the world that is given to the being-in-the-world that we are, and in its different epochal formations world is the web of ‘paths and relations’ within which individuals always and already find themselves”.<sup>470</sup>

One might argue that there is a mutual relationship between earth and world, but for Heidegger one cannot speak about a separation that would allow a *betweenness* or mutuality as such. Earth and world co-exist. As Kockelmans puts it, “The earth cannot be without the open of the world, if it is to appear as earth in the liberated surge of its self-seclusion. On the other hand, the world cannot rise above the earth and freely float away from it, if (as the governing path of all destiny) it is to ground itself on a resolute foundation”.<sup>471</sup> While this sounds as if earth is given the role of providing an ontological ground on which world establishes itself, I would argue that Heidegger sees these two ontological differentials as disallowing a hierarchical relationship that would postulate one as the ground of the other. We are talking about neither a horizontal nor vertical relationship—earth and world are not above and below each other, but they are not running parallel to each other, either. Rather, they are interwoven in a way that makes it impossible to detach earthly aspects of a thing from its worldly aspects in a purified way—they can only be distinguished conceptually. It is perhaps this fraught interwovenness that leads Heidegger to describe the dynamics between earth and world not in terms of harmony, but of strife.

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<sup>468</sup> Heidegger, “The Origin”, p. 23.

<sup>469</sup> Sinclair, *Heidegger, Aristotle*, p. 51.

<sup>470</sup> Sinclair, *Heidegger, Aristotle*, p. 172.

<sup>471</sup> Kockelmans, p. 155.

I see a comparable idea of strife at work in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s notions of veiling and unveiling. As I have outlined above, the Sufi philosopher regards the perceptible world of particulars (the cosmos) as both a veiling and an unveiling of the absolute, which is, then, involved in a perpetual process of simultaneous self-concealment and self-disclosure. In his words, “The Absolute [...] is nothing other than what comes out outwardly, whereas in the very moment of coming out outwardly it is what conceals itself inwardly”.<sup>472</sup> That Ibn al-‘Arabī, similarly to Heidegger, regards the interplay of veiling and unveiling as a strife rather than a harmonious coexistence can be gleaned from his thoughts on the instability of creation. “The act of creation”, the philosopher maintains, “constitutes an imbalance in Nature that might be called a deviation or alteration. [...] Harmony and equilibrium are everywhere sought, but never achieved”.<sup>473</sup>

#### 5.6. Strife in the Work of Art

According to Heidegger, in a work of art, there is an ongoing strife between the two dynamic principles of earth and world. In the artwork, these two mutually constitutive forces are in a dynamic relationship in which each affirms and brings out the other. These two forces with self-concealing and self-unconcealing tendencies come into balance in the artwork, which Heidegger claims is in a state of extreme agitation rather than a state of rest. To exemplify this process, I would refer back to the miniature tradition of prophet portraiture examined by Gruber. As outlined above, miniature artists’ efforts at capturing the simultaneous process of concealment and unconcealment at work in the appearance of the prophet through visual strategies such as the veil and the nimbus of fire resulted in artworks that were, in Gruber’s words, “purposefully destabilizing”.<sup>474</sup> In Kockelmans’ words, “By setting up a world and setting forth the earth, the work is the instigation of the striving. And work never puts an end to the strife, but makes certain that the strife remains strife”.<sup>475</sup>

The twin ideas of earth showing itself in its self-seclusion and world showing itself in its self-unconcealment through a work of art are further illustrated by

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<sup>472</sup> Translation by Izutsu, pp. 75-76.

<sup>473</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabī, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 214.

<sup>474</sup> Gruber, p. 254.

<sup>475</sup> Kockelmans, p. 155.

Heidegger's famous example of the Greek temple. Through the temple, the stone out of which it emerges shows itself. However, it is not only the materiality of the work that becomes present but also the work's environment or milieu, consisting of air, light, the ground beneath the temple, etc. All of these are the earthly elements revealed through the work:

Standing there, the building rests on the rocky ground. This resting of the work draws out of the rock the darkness of its unstructured yet unforced support. Standing there, the building holds its place against the storm tagging above it and so first makes the storm visible in its violence. The gleam and luster of the stone, though apparently there only by the grace of the sun, in fact first brings forth the light of day, the breadth of the sky, the darkness of night. The temple's firm towering makes visible the invisible space of the air.<sup>476</sup>

It is not only the building that becomes visible, but whatever surrounds it as well. In other words, earth, as it shows itself through the work of art, is not the mere materiality of the work but being as a whole. As Harries puts it, "To build a temple is, among other things, to re-present the sky under which it stands, the ground that supports it, the marble of which it is made. Thus re-presented, the sky, ground, and marble are revealed as what they are".<sup>477</sup> This is what Heidegger has in mind when he says, "The work lets the earth be an earth".<sup>478</sup>

What kind of a world, then, does the temple open up? To Heidegger, "It is the temple work that first structures and simultaneously gathers around itself the unity of those paths and relations in which birth and death, disaster and blessing, victory and disgrace, endurance and decline acquire for the human being the shape of its destiny".<sup>479</sup> The temple, then, not only gathers earth and world, letting both reveal themselves, it also gathers within each of these two ontological differentials, which are exposed as not only engaged in an agitative state of strife with the other, but also as experiencing strife within

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<sup>476</sup> Heidegger, "The Origin", p. 21.

<sup>477</sup> Harries, p. 117.

<sup>478</sup> Heidegger, "The Origin", p. 24.

<sup>479</sup> Heidegger, "The Origin", pp.20-21.

themselves. Although earth has a tendency of self-concealing, there is a dynamic of self-concealing and self-unconcealing within it. The same dynamic is also found in the world, even though it has a tendency towards self-unconcealing. In Sinclair's words, "In their agonistic unity both [earth and world] allow for an 'open region (*Offene*)' or 'clearing (*Lichtung*)' of beings, but this clearing does not give over its own secret and is always and already a concealing".<sup>480</sup> This indicates a double movement of concealment and unconcealment happening within both earth and world. The work of art stages a gathering not just of these two, but also within earth and within world. It performs a gathering of that which is ungatherable by other means.

To elucidate this gathering further, we might step inside the temple and examine the statue of the deity found within. This statue, to Heidegger, cannot be reduced to a mere representation of something other than itself. "The work is not a portrait", Heidegger states, "intended to make it easier to recognize what the god looks like. It is, rather, a work which allows the god himself to presence and *is*, therefore, the god himself"<sup>481</sup>—words that take us right back to Ibn al-'Arabī's assertion that "The perfect gnostic is one who regards every object of worship as a manifestation of God in which He is worshiped".<sup>482</sup> For the Greeks entering the temple, there was no clear line separating the idea and the materiality of the deity. Where did the materiality end and the idea begin? Or, in other words, what is earth and what world in a statue of the god? Both are gathered in the statue and cannot be neatly distinguished from each other. The temple is literally the house of god. This idea of the deity's presence is already emphasized by Hegel in the following passage:

Into this temple, [...] the God enters in the lightning-flash of individuality, which strikes and permeates the inert mass, while the infinite [...] form belonging to mind itself concentrates and gives shape to the corresponding bodily existence. This is the task of Sculpture.<sup>483</sup>

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<sup>480</sup> Sinclair, *Heidegger, Aristotle*, p. 182.

<sup>481</sup> Heidegger, "The Origin", pp. 21-22.

<sup>482</sup> Ibn al-'Arabī, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 247.

<sup>483</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*, trans. Bernard Bosanquet, ed. Michael Inwood (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993), p. 91. The passage preceding this quote and concerning architecture contains many seeds of Heidegger's thought on the Greek temple: "It is architecture that

This understanding clearly refutes the idea of art as representation. As Sinclair puts it, “Art is not to be understood as an expression of an age, and the temple does not merely, as might also be said, give form to Greek culture. On the contrary, as an *original* work it achieves, establishes and opens this culture itself”.<sup>484</sup> The whole city gathers around the temple, the whole life is lived around, through, and within it. The work of art is not a representation of the world, but the center of the world. But what happens when the world opened by the work of art comes to an end?

The work and world are in a mutual relationship in which the existence of each forms the basis of the other’s existence. In Heidegger’s words, “To be a work means: to set up a world”.<sup>485</sup> Heidegger’s world, which is the totality of conditions or references that make phenomena show themselves, is not atemporal, but historical. The work of art can be seen as an event in which all beings of a particular historical period reveal themselves. The temple is such a work of art only as long as remains a gathering place for death, birth, victory, etc. The moment the work becomes something other than itself, for instance an object to be sold, visited, or photographed, it is displaced. And as the work is displaced, the world it opens up is also displaced. To Heidegger, “even when we try to cancel or avoid such displacement of the work—by, for example, visiting the temple at its site in Paestum or Bamberg cathedral in its square—the world of the work that stands there has disintegrated”.<sup>486</sup> A similar thought is expressed by the artist Wassily Kandinsky as follows:

Every work of art is the child of its time, often it is the mother of our emotions. Thus, every period of culture produces its own art, which can never be repeated. Any attempt to give new life to the artistic principles of

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pioneers the way for the adequate realization of the order to disentangle it from the jungle of finitude and the abortiveness of chance. By this means it levels a space for the God, gives form to his external surroundings, and build him his temple as a fit place for concentration of spirit, and for its direction to the mind’s absolute objects. It raises an enclosure round the assembly of those gathered together, as a defense against the threatening of the storm, against rain, the hurricane, and wild beasts, and reveals the will to assemble, although externally, yet in conformance with the principle of art” (Hegel, p. 90-91).

<sup>484</sup> Sinclair, *Heidegger, Aristotle*, p. 171.

<sup>485</sup> Heidegger, “The Origin”, p. 22.

<sup>486</sup> Heidegger, “The Origin”, p. 20.



the past can at best only result in a work of art that resembles a stillborn child. For example, it is impossible for our inner lives, our feelings, to be like those of the ancient Greeks.<sup>487</sup>

To Heidegger, there is no timeless world, idea, or phenomenon. Being is (in) time; it is historical being. As Sinclair puts it, “Philosophy is historical in its essence, it thinks from within history and cannot legitimately stake a claim to an eternal truth that would have descended from an otherworldly sphere, because Heidegger argues that the human being, as what he terms *Dasein*, is a being that is in its essence time”.<sup>488</sup> However, in spite of his emphasis on historicity, Heidegger also rejects Hegelian trajectories of progress; he proposes a historicity of being that is not embedded in a teleological narrative. His individual and cultural worlds, intertwined with each other, constitute epochs, and works of art are immersed in these epochs. They do not inhabit a special place outside of space and time in which they can be objectively identified as works of art. The moment the world outside/inside the temple is “worn out” and comes to an end, the statue becomes a statue and is no longer a god.

This means that even the strife between earth and world is not outside time. The moment an epoch is over, its uniquely established strife between earth and world disintegrates as well. The temple, in our modern world, still astonishes us, but it does not institute a worldview, nor does it establish, preserve, or transform a community. Still, when one visits the temple today, one may see a little capsule of the entire Greek culture: literature, art, philosophy, technology, religion, customs, etc. It is in this sense that the Greek temple may be referred to as a work of “great art”. The term is explained by Kockelmans as follows:

“Great art” refers to those works that were produced in Greece, Rome, and the Middle Ages, and which are such that there is today common

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<sup>487</sup> Wassily Kandinsky, “From *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*”, *Art in Theory 1900-1990*, eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), p. 87. I would maintain that while a mere imitation of previous artistic traditions may well have the “stillborn” quality described by Kandinsky, acts of creative appropriation such as Matisse’s usage of color strategies developed in miniature art can result in fortuitous, but nonetheless effective, rejuvenations of artistic principles.

<sup>488</sup> Sinclair, *Heidegger, Aristotle*, p. 6.

agreement on their artistic status. Great art implies the totality of all art works, made before the time in which the fine arts came to the fore as such, before the time in which artists began to claim to have a special “vocation” not to be shared with the mere craftsmen, and before works were preserved, exhibited in museums and exhibitions, dramas and musical works reproduced time and again in special auditoriums, etc.<sup>489</sup>

The temple shows us how, at one point in history, it opened up a world. But divorced from its world and inserted into ours, it becomes an object to be viewed, admired, and photographed. Heidegger ties this development to the idea of aesthetics:

Almost as soon as specialized thinking about art and the artist began, such reflections were referred to as “aesthetic”. Aesthetics treated the artwork as an object, as indeed an object of *aesthesis*, of sensory apprehension in a broad sense. These days, such apprehension is called an “experience”. The way in which man experiences art is supposed to inform us about its essential nature. Experience is the standard-giving source not only for the appreciation and enjoyment of art but also for its creation. Everything is experience. But perhaps experience is the element in which art dies. This dying proceeds so slowly that it takes several centuries.<sup>490</sup>

Artworks are transformed into aesthetic objects through appropriation, preservation, and exhibition by the art industry—for instance in a gallery or museum. To Heidegger, “The whole art industry, even if taken to extreme and with everything carried out for the sake of the works themselves, reaches only as far as the object-being of the works. This, however, does not constitute their work-being”.<sup>491</sup> I would go as far as to assert that when the work of art becomes defined as a work of art, it loses its vitality as a work of art—after all, it was not a “work of art” in the aesthetic sense for the people who originally interacted with it. With its world at an end and its incorporation into the project

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<sup>489</sup> Kockelmans, p. 140.

<sup>490</sup> Heidegger, “The Origin”, p. 50.

<sup>491</sup> Heidegger, “The Origin”, p. 20.

of aesthetics, the “great work of art” perhaps still remains relevant, but is no longer “great” in Heidegger’s sense.

Heidegger’s thoughts about the great work of art as a gathering place of world and earth as well as a temporal entity subject to disintegration—whether material disintegration or the disintegration of its world—can be fruitfully applied to the miniature album and the changing fortunes of this art form across historical epochs. While I will explore this line of thought more extensively in the Conclusion of this study, we may maintain for now that the fate of the miniature album in the hands of Western collectors and scholars was not unlike that of the religious edifices Heidegger describes as having become sites of tourism.

Has this disintegration, then, also been the fate of Van Gogh’s painting of the peasant shoes? In modern times, an artwork does not seem to have the luxury to die slowly. Even before the strife between earth and world established by the painting disintegrates, the art industry already extracts it from its context and reduces it to an aesthetic object. However, one should keep in mind that the world opened up by the work of art also undergoes much more rapid change in modern times than it did, say, in ancient Greece. The short lifespan of a contemporary work of art reflects the lifespan of the world that it opens up and in which it dwells. And finally, matters are complicated even more by the fact that the aesthetic approach was already well in place at the time Van Gogh produced his work. As Rehberg puts it, “when and how did a modern artwork such as Van Gogh’s painting of the pair of shoes *ever* exist outside the compass of the art industry?”<sup>492</sup>

A question that comes to mind is whether an artwork could possibly be recontextualized in a way that does not reduce it to an aesthetic object. The Hagia Irene Church in Istanbul might serve as an example. Originally constructed during the fourth century, the church was converted into an armoury after the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople. At this point, one may perhaps speak of an equipmentalization of the work of art. Subsequently, in the seventeenth century, the church became a weapons museum, thereby arguably becoming aestheticized. Since the early 2000s, however, the church has been employed as a concert hall on account of its excellent acoustics, which

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<sup>492</sup> Rehberg, p.137.

might be interpreted as a recontextualization of the work of art, enabling it to establish a dwelling in the context of a new world.

### 5.7. The Fundamental Question

How do Heidegger's thoughts on earth, world, strife, and art tie into his broader ontology, and does this ontology sustain the parallels to the thought of Ibn al-'Arabī as outlined above? To explore this question, I will now extend my analysis to another work by Heidegger, namely his *Introduction to Metaphysics* (1935). In this work, the philosopher's main concern is to unearth more originary meanings of certain fundamental philosophical concepts which he believes to have become obscured in the course of time. Working with the same method he applies in "The Origin of the Work of Art", he tries to salvage these concepts by peeling away the layers of meaning that have sedimented around them. However, *Introduction to Metaphysics* does not merely provide a view of the philosopher's ontology in general. Since it was prepared around the same time as "The Origin of the Work of Art", it also organically connects to the latter, further exploring its concepts and even referencing the same works of art.

"There is nothing surrounding this pair of peasant shoes"<sup>493</sup>—this statement, I would argue, is the point at which Heidegger hopes to arrive after peeling away all the layers of preconception surrounding the artwork in "The Origin of the Work of Art". At this point, there is "nothing", no object or idea, left to represent; there is "nothing", no preconception, to cover up the painting. "A pair of shoes and nothing more. And yet".<sup>494</sup> Heidegger's "yet", in my reading, points to what might be encountered in the midst of this "nothing". In *Introduction to Metaphysics*, Heidegger returns to this point: "A painting by Van Gogh: a pair of sturdy peasant shoes, nothing else. The picture really represents nothing. Yet you are alone at once with what *is* there, as if you yourself were heading homeward from the field on a late autumn evening, tired, with your hoe, as the last potato fires smolder out".<sup>495</sup>

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<sup>493</sup> Heidegger, "The Origin", p. 14.

<sup>494</sup> Heidegger, "The Origin", p. 14.

<sup>495</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Gregory Fried and Richard Polt (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 37-38.

It is this “nothing” that Heidegger wants us to encounter via the Van Gogh painting. As he argues through his example of the forest paths (*Holzwege*),<sup>496</sup> in order to see the light that enables one to see the trees, one needs a clearing (*Lichtung*) of the trees. In my view, “nothing” here is equivalent to the light that makes it possible for the perceiver to perceive. “Does truth, then, arise out of nothing?” he asks. “It does indeed, if by nothing is meant the mere not of beings, and if we present being as that which is present in the ordinary way—that which later comes to light through the standing there of the work as what is merely presumed to be a true being, that which is brought into question”.<sup>497</sup> I will discuss below what Heidegger has in mind when he talks of “truth” and a “true being”. Suffice it to say for now that Heidegger regards the work of art as an appropriate locus for the encounter with “nothing”.

This encounter leads us to the fundamental question of ontology formulated by Heidegger in *Introduction to Metaphysics*: “why is there something rather than nothing?”<sup>498</sup> The interrogation involved in this question pertains not to this or that being, or to all beings considered as a whole, but to the possibility of beings as such. Therefore, the domain of the question is limited only by what is not and never is, i.e., nothing. Nothing turns out to be an indispensable element of the question since it prevents us from beginning directly with beings as unquestionably given. The inclusion of “rather than nothing” in the fundamental question confronts the possibility of being with the possibility of not being.<sup>499</sup> Accordingly, Heidegger argues that the question about what is and about being and the question about what is not and about nothing have existed side by side since their inception.

The fundamental question also lies at the outset of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s ontological thought, even though it takes the form of an assertion rather than an inquiry: “The Reality

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<sup>496</sup> Martin Heidegger, “The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking”, *Basic Writings from Being and Time (1927) to The Task of Thinking (1964)*, trans. Joan Stambaugh, ed. David Farrell Krell (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1977), p. 384.

<sup>497</sup> Heidegger, “The Origin”, p. 44.

<sup>498</sup> The Fried and Polt translation of Heidegger’s question is actually “Why are there beings at all instead of nothing?” (*Introduction to Metaphysics*, p. 1). However, I think the translation provided above comes closer to the sense of Heidegger’s original, “Warum ist überhaupt Seiendes und nicht vielmehr Nichts? According to Heidegger, this question is particular to philosophy: “Philosophizing means asking: ‘Why are there beings at all instead of nothing?’ Actually asking this means venturing to exhaust, to question thoroughly, the inexhaustible wealth of the question, by unveiling what it demands that we question. Whenever such a venture occurs, there is philosophy” (Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, p. 8).

<sup>499</sup> Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, p.30.

wanted to see [...] His own Essence, in all-inclusive object encompassing the whole [divine] Command, which, qualified by existence, would reveal to Him His own mystery”.<sup>500</sup> Here, Ibn al-‘Arabī is setting up the tension between the absolute (the reality) and the particulars (the cosmos) by positing the latter as a self-manifestation of the former. I have argued above that Ibn al-‘Arabī’s notions of the absolute and the particular, rather than having to be understood in the theistic framework of creator and creation, can be equated to potentiality and actuality. In this way, they can be productively related to Heidegger’s concepts of nothing and being.

In Heidegger, the fundamental question opens up possibilities similar to those engendered by the work of art. In both cases, the solid ground of preconceptions must be abandoned in order to enable a questioning of the ground itself: “From what ground do beings come? On what ground do beings stand? To what ground do beings go?”<sup>501</sup> In the questioning, beings as such are not only opened up as a whole and with respect to their possible grounds; they are also kept opened. But since the question requires the abandonment of ostensibly solid ground, it entails a leap, and it is this concept of the originary leap (*Ur-sprung*) that ties together Heidegger’s thinking on being and art. The title, “The Origin of the Work of Art”, contains the same concept of *Ursprung* (translated as “origin”). As Heidegger puts it,

[T]he leap [*Sprung*] of this questioning attains its own ground by leaping, performs it in leaping [*er-springt, springend erwirkt*]. According to the genuine meaning of the word, we call such a leap that attains itself as ground by leaping an originary leap [*Ur-sprung*]: an attaining-the-ground-by-leaping. Because the question “Why is there something rather than nothing?” attains the ground for all genuine questioning by leaping and is thus an originary leap, we must recognize it as the most originary [*ursprünglich*] of questions.<sup>502</sup>

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<sup>500</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabī, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 50.

<sup>501</sup> Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, p.3.

<sup>502</sup> Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, p.7. Again, I have modified the translation of Heidegger’s question.

What makes us take the leap and ask the question? I think “nothing” itself is the answer, i.e., not-being, hiddenness, concealment. Not the apparent, but the concealed is what prompts us to go beyond the familiar and guides us toward the strange. In order to ask the question in the most originary and effective way, we have to see the ground of the unknown as nothing, so that it can open itself to us in the way it really is without a label, something to which to attach a preconception. The fundamental question of metaphysics, then, entails the continuing and repeated effort to suspend one’s preconceptions, as a result of which willing-to-know first lets the concealed unconceal itself and come out into the open and then allows one to stand in that openness. This effort is exactly what Heidegger outlines in his ontology of painting as presented in “The Origin of the Work of Art”.

#### 5.8. Being as *Phusis*

Finding an answer to the question, i.e., knowing, is not related to the possession of knowledge or information in the sense that once one “knows”, one has finished learning—in this, Heidegger mirrors Ibn al-‘Arabī’s skepticism towards the restrictive and particularizing operations of the intellect. To Heidegger, knowledge is a certain form of disposition towards learning. To know is to be able to learn and one is able to learn because one is able to question. Questioning means letting beings unconceal themselves in the way they are—“the relation to Being is letting”<sup>503</sup>—and facing the openness of being unconcealed and kept open by questioning, thus remaining at a point where one can continually learn.<sup>504</sup>

The learning posture demanded by Heidegger is necessary because of his particular understanding of being as such and as a whole, an understanding he derives from the Greek word *phusis*.<sup>505</sup> By *phusis*, Heidegger understands “what emerges from itself [...], the unfolding that opens itself up, the coming-into-appearance in such unfolding, and holding itself and persisting in appearance – in short, the emerging-abiding sway”.<sup>506</sup> This understanding of *phusis* entails a radical reimagining of the

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<sup>503</sup> Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, p. 23.

<sup>504</sup> Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, p. 23.

<sup>505</sup> Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, p. 17.

<sup>506</sup> Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, p. 15.

concept of being. As Guignon states, Heidegger here offers “a way of replacing the substance ontology that dominates Western thought with an alternative understanding of Being, an understanding that emphasizes the way beings show up in (and as) an unfolding *happening* or *event*”.<sup>507</sup> The emerging—i.e., the coming-into-appearance—and the abiding—i.e., the standing-out-in-itself-from-itself—are not just any ordinary things that beings are observed to do among many other things; in fact, it is primarily on the basis of this very process of emerging-abiding sway that beings become and remain observable in the first place.<sup>508</sup> Accordingly, “being essentially unfolds as *phusis*”<sup>509</sup> and this unfolding is like a “standing forth” or coming about of the event that allows what is at first hidden and concealed “to take its stand for the first time” in the open.<sup>510</sup>

In “The Origin of the Work of Art”, Heidegger connects *phusis* to his notion of earth. “Early on”, he states, “the Greeks called this coming forth and rising up in itself and in all things *phusis*. At the same time *phusis* lights up that on which man bases his dwelling. We call this the *earth*. [...] Earth is that in which the arising of everything that arises is brought back—as, indeed, the very thing that it is—and sheltered. In the things that arise the earth presences as protecting one”.<sup>511</sup> It is not surprising, then, that this unconcealment is experienced everywhere, especially within human subjects’ most immediate surrounding, i.e., *nature*. But due to the process outlined above, *phusis* may not be reduced to or thought as this most immediate envelopment, for nature itself becomes possible due to something more primordial and fundamental, i.e., the emerging-abiding sway. According to Heidegger, the early Greek thinkers absorbed the broader and in a way truer sense of *phusis*, unlike the Romans, for instance, who translated *phusis* as *natura*.<sup>512</sup> To the Greeks, Heidegger maintains, *phusis* first came to disclose itself “on the

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<sup>507</sup> Charles Guignon, “Being as Appearing: Retrieving the Greek Experience of *Phusis*”, *A Companion to Heidegger’s Introduction to Metaphysics*, ed. Richard Polt and Gregory Fried (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), p. 36.

<sup>508</sup> Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, p. 15.

<sup>509</sup> Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, p. 107.

<sup>510</sup> Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, p. 16.

<sup>511</sup> Heidegger, “The Origin”, p. 21.

<sup>512</sup> As Guignon points out, the original meaning of *phusis* is lost even prior to the Romans: “In the thought of Plato and Aristotle, the initial burst of illumination was deformed into the rather constricted understanding of Being as ‘beingness’, *ousia*. The understanding of Being as *ousia*, which appears at the ‘ending’ of Greek philosophy’s inception, was itself transformed in Roman thought and language into the understanding of Being as ‘substance’—that which ‘lies under’—and this conception of Being has been



basis of a fundamental experience of being in poetry and thought”, not in natural processes.<sup>513</sup>

To Heidegger, “*Phusis* means the emerging sway, and the enduring over which it thoroughly holds sway”.<sup>514</sup> *Phusis* involves the event of unconcealment and also the hiddenness that comes into light through the emerging-abiding sway. That which is emerging is becoming present, emerging as a presence, whereas that which is enduring is already present and continues to partake in or be a presence. That which is hidden is where that which no longer endures or is, and where that which has not come to light, abides. *Phusis* is thus something dynamic, it is a constant movement, it is in *flux*. The notion of abiding helps us avoid an understanding of presence that is unchanging presence, or substance, because abiding is established through its link to emerging. What is in presence or in light emerges out of concealment or darkness and wishes to abide, knowing that it does not last forever. As Heidegger puts it,

To be a being – this implies to be made manifest, to step forth in appearing, to set itself forth, to pro-duce something [*sich hin-stellen, etwas her-stellen*]. Not-being, in contrast, means to step away from appearance, from presence. The essence of appearance involves this stepping-forth and stepping-away, this hither and hence in the genuinely demonstrative, indicative sense.<sup>515</sup>

This stepping-forth and stepping-away is necessarily the so-called sway Heidegger identifies as *phusis*, which in one way captures the essence of the ‘and’ pertaining to “being and becoming”. The interplay between stepping forth and stepping away reflects what Ibn al-‘Arabī has to say about the self-manifestation and simultaneous self-concealment of the absolute: “There is no one who sees the Absolute except the Absolute itself, and yet there is no one to whom the Absolute remains hidden. It is the Outward (i.e., self-manifesting) to itself, and yet it is the Inward (i.e., self-concealing) to

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passed down with minor variations on the theme, through the centuries to our own time”. (Guignon, pp. 35-36).

<sup>513</sup> Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, pp. 15-16.

<sup>514</sup> Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, p. 16.

<sup>515</sup> Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, pp. 107-108.

itself”.<sup>516</sup> Heidegger’s understanding of the interplay as a dynamic, fluctuating sway is also found in the work of the Sufi philosopher, who maintains that “Every Self-manifestation at once provides a creation and annihilates another. Its annihilation is extinction at the Self-manifestation, subsistence being what is given by the following Self-manifestation”.<sup>517</sup>

### 5.9. *Phusis* as *Aletheia*

According to Heidegger, like its relation to *becoming*, being also has an essential relation to *appearing*.

The emerging sway is an appearing. As such, it makes manifest. This already implies that being, appearing, is letting-step-forth from concealment. Insofar as a being as such *is*, it places itself into and stands in *unconcealment, aletheia*. [...] For the Greek essence of truth is possible only together with the Greek essence of being as *phusis*. On the grounds of the unique essential relation between *phusis* and *aletheia*, the Greeks could say: beings as beings are true. The true as such is in being. This says that what shows itself in its sway stands in the unconcealed. The unconcealed as such comes to a stand in showing itself. Truth, as unconcealment, is [thus] not an addendum to being.<sup>518</sup>

This is to say that *appearance* or *appearing* truly belongs to being: appearing is the manner in which what is concealed becomes unconcealed. Therefore, “for the Greeks, appearing belongs to Being, or, more sharply stated: that and how Being has its essence together *with* appearing”.<sup>519</sup> It is in such disclosure that a being *is* in truth, for in the emerging-abiding sway, the entity emerges as unconcealment.<sup>520</sup>

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<sup>516</sup> Translation by Izutsu, pp. 75-76.

<sup>517</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabī, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 155.

<sup>518</sup> Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, p. 107.

<sup>519</sup> Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, p. 108.

<sup>520</sup> Heidegger makes a distinction between appearing (*erscheinen*) and semblance (*Anschein*). Appearing is in a sense *lethe* or *lethic*, whereas semblance is *pseudos*. Still, Heidegger argues that semblance essentially belongs to truth as unconcealment. One is alerted by it. Being plays a trick on the observer through an entity that shows itself. This showing involves a hiding, a hiding of the entity’s true being. (I would argue

The Greeks called this unconcealment *aletheia*. *Aletheia* means “truth”, but the precise meaning of the word contains a double negative: “a-” is a prefix that means “not”, “without”, “lack of”, “absence of”, while “-letheia” comes from *lethe*, meaning the state of being hidden or the state of concealment. “A-letheia” thus denotes the movement or occurrence of coming out of concealment, which is to say, the occurrence of becoming evident, unconcealed, or disclosed. In contrast to *mimesis*, for instance, *aletheia* is truth in the sense of the unveiling of that-which-is. I find it useful to think of *aletheia* in parallel to what I stated above regarding questioning or knowing. As unconcealment through the appearing of being as emerging-abiding sway, *aletheia* is the being, happening and, becoming of truth.<sup>521</sup>

The dynamic or strife between concealment and unconcealment takes us back to the notions of earth and world in “The Origin of the Work of Art”, where Heidegger states that “Earth rises up through world and world grounds itself on the earth only insofar as truth happens as the Ur-strife between clearing and concealment”.<sup>522</sup> In *Introduction to Metaphysics*, Heidegger interprets the Heraclitean fragment no. 123, *phusis kruptesthai philei*, to the same effect:

Being means: to appear in emerging, to step forth out of concealment – and for this very reason, concealment and the provenance from concealment essentially belong to Being. Such provenance lies in the essence of Being, of what appears as such. Being remains inclined toward

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that semblance can be the result of *too much presence* as well. As Gilles Deleuze puts it in the case of photography, “it is not a figuration of what one sees, it is what modern man sees. It is dangerous not simply because it is figurative, but because it claims to reign over vision” [*Francis Bacon*, p. 11]). Semblance, then, is a form of appearing and simultaneously a form of hiddenness, both of which are characteristic of unconcealment. Semblance and being are not the same but they belong together in the form of a conflict, struggle, or strife. This strife cannot be settled or eliminated, and there is no unconcealment without the strife with semblance. (Heidegger also uses Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* to illustrate the relationship between truth and semblance. Oedipus receives a third eye, the eye for the truth, after having lost his two eyes that were for semblances [*Introduction to Metaphysics*, p. 112]).

<sup>521</sup> Heidegger further elaborates on the relationship between *aletheia* and truth in “The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking:” “Why is *aletheia* not translated with the usual name, with the word “truth? [...] Insofar as truth is understood in the traditional “natural” sense as the correspondence of knowledge with beings, demonstrated in beings, but also insofar as truth interpreted as the certainty of the knowledge of Being, *aletheia*, unconcealment in the sense of opening, may not be equated with truth. Rather, *aletheia*, unconcealment thought as opening, first grants the possibility of truth” (Heidegger, “The End of Philosophy”, pp. 388-389).

<sup>522</sup> Heidegger, “The Origin”, p. 32.

concealment, whether in great veiling and silence, or in the most superficial distorting and obscuring. The immediate proximity of *phusis* and *kruptesthai* reveals the intimacy of Being and seeming as the strife between them.<sup>523</sup>

The process of unconcealment understood as one of a constant, simultaneous veiling and unveiling takes us back to Ibn al-‘Arabī, according to whom every unveiling is a veiling—“The Cosmos”, he maintains, is “the veil [covering] its true self”.<sup>524</sup> As in Heidegger, veiling and unveiling are inextricably entwined in the Sufi philosopher’s understanding of unconcealment, which is unthinkable in a form unmediated by concealment.

The relation between truth and the work of art becomes more apparent now that we can see both in terms of the strife between concealment and unconcealment. As an interplay between world and earth, and through their self-unconcealing and self-concealing tendencies, the work of art is a happening of truth. Aiming to separate the artwork from a mimetic understanding, and the notion of truth from any correspondence theory of truth, Heidegger maintains that “In the work, the happening of truth is at work. But what is thus at work is at work *in* the work”.<sup>525</sup> According to Heidegger, then, we must look for the origin of the work *in* the work, not in something *other* than itself, not in the artist or art history, not in allegory or in any other conceptual framework imposed on it from the outside. This stands in stark contrast to the Platonic understanding of art, which regards it as a copy of a copy, twice removed from truth.<sup>526</sup> In this framework, there is no use for art in the ultimate aim to gain the truth. Plato’s truth, namely the form of *x*, is self-identical, is being, unchangeable, eternal, and timeless. It is more real than the appearance; the ideal is the only true reality. It is not in this world, cannot be sensed, and can only be seen by the mind. Heidegger’s truth, as we have seen, is a dynamic process that is unimaginable without appearance. Heidegger aims at renewing our relation to the work of art as such an ontological happening. In my discussion of

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<sup>523</sup> Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, p. 121.

<sup>524</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabī, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 56.

<sup>525</sup> Heidegger, “The Origin”, p. 33.

<sup>526</sup> Heidegger, “The Origin”, p. 17.

miniature painting, I have argued that the Sufi framework in which this art form was embedded enables the same understanding of art as a locus of unconcealment—of, in Gruber’s words, “experiential confrontations in pictorial form”.<sup>527</sup>

If we relate Heidegger’s notion of truth back to his discussion of the Van Gogh painting, we find that Heidegger states, “Truth happens in Van Gogh’s painting. That does not mean that something is correctly portrayed; it means, rather that in the manifestation of the equipmental being of the shoe-equipment, that which is as a whole—world and earth in their counterplay—achieves unconcealment”.<sup>528</sup> According to Heidegger, the true sense of equipment, in this instance, of the pair of peasant shoes, is discovered, neither by explaining nor by describing an actual pair of peasant shoes, nor by reporting the production or actual use of a pair of peasant shoes, “but only by bringing ourselves before Van Gogh’s painting”.<sup>529</sup> Through the painting, we see the true being of the equipmentality of the peasant shoes. In exposing this equipmentality, the work of art sets itself apart from the actual equipment.

If art is tied to truth, what is at stake in its evaluation also goes far beyond art. To Heidegger, just as it is with the work of art, our understanding of truth is also concealed under layers of preconceptions. Heidegger’s dismantling of the oppositional preconceptions that surround the work of art ties directly into his critique of oppositional thinking in general, a kind of thinking that manifests itself, for instance, in a correspondence theory of truth—in other words, the reductive way of seeing the truth as the affiliation of knowledge with facts, or as correlation between concept and object. Through science and technology, this thinking construes an active human being vis-à-vis a passive or inactive world, a human (or human mind) that “gives the measure and draw up the guidelines for everything that is”,<sup>530</sup> anointing itself a god in a godless world which it goes on to master and manipulate seemingly at will.<sup>531</sup> Heidegger’s main concern regarding the aesthetic approach, then, is rooted in his critique of the

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<sup>527</sup> Gruber, p. 233.

<sup>528</sup> Heidegger, “The Origin”, p. 32.

<sup>529</sup> Heidegger, “The Origin”, p. 15.

<sup>530</sup> Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), p. 134.

<sup>531</sup> In Guignon’s phrasing, “We tend to see the world as a collection of objects on hand for our knowing and manipulation, and we even begin to see ourselves as ‘human resources’ to be mobilized in the project of mastering the earth” (Guignon, p. 35).

contemporary world, specifically the way in which humans take center stage as all-powerful and all-calculating. The result of this oppositional approach is, in Heidegger's words, *Unfug*, or, as I shall explain below, inauthentic *techne*.

#### 5.10. *Phusis* as *Techne*

*Us*

*The birds are born to fly;  
We understand it from their bones being hollow.  
There is no open and known route of humans,  
We create it.  
Özdemir Asaf<sup>532</sup>*

The notions of *techne* and *dike* are interrelated in Heidegger's thinking. *Dike* represents the overwhelming manifestation of an order that human beings cannot grasp, for instance the cosmos—here, then, *dike* does not mean justice but rather a certain form of fittingness (*Fug*). Through *techne* and the creation of works, the human being may establish an authentic relation to the *dike* of being, resulting in a mirroring of *dike* in *techne*. Inauthentic *techne* or *Unfug*, on the other hand, does not do justice to *dike*, the overwhelming order of things. The notions of inauthentic and authentic *techne* tie in with Heidegger's distinction between inauthentic and authentic violence. Heidegger maintains that all human activity carries a connotation of—authentic or inauthentic—violence. In the case of language, for instance, inauthentic violence consists of platitudes, clichés, gossip, and the like: paths that human beings invent only to later become trapped in traveling them over and over again. Authentic violence, in contrast, is inflicted upon language by the poet or thinker. Here, the violence is a human need through which we clear ourselves new paths.

According to Heidegger, art arises out of *techne*. The artist or *technites* is a conduit or passageway; artists do not apply a form to matter but recognize a possibility of

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<sup>532</sup> Translated by the author of this thesis from Turkish poet Özdemir Asaf's poem "Biz" (in *Çiçek Senfonisi - Toplu Şiirler* [Istanbul: Yapı Kredi Yayınları, 2008]).

unconcealment and facilitate its occurrence. As an example, one may describe Rodin as allowing the bronze to show one of its many possibilities in the form of *The Thinker*. Similar sentiments have been uttered by various artists regarding their work. For instance, Henri Matisse maintains that “My choice of colours does not rest on any scientific theory; it is based on observation, on sensitivity, on felt experiences”.<sup>533</sup> Paul Klee describes the artist’s role as follows: “standing at his appointed place, the trunk of the tree, he does nothing other than gather and pass on what comes to him from depths. He neither serves nor rules—he transmits. His position is humble. And the beauty at the crown is not his own. He is merely a channel”.<sup>534</sup> This understanding of the artist as a conduit or channel ties in both with the Sufi understanding of art as worship and with the tradition whereby miniaturists would not sign their works, thereby assuming a posture of humility about their role in the creative process.<sup>535</sup>

Since the work of art arises out of *techné*, it is an example of human violence. However, it is an authentic form of violence that is directly related to truth as unconcealment. The strife between earth and world that occurs in the artwork, this continuous dissension of concealment and unconcealment, displays the inability of humans to fully master the universe, while at the same time transcending established ways of thinking and being human. The moment we try to approach the work of art without the aid of our preconceptions, whatever we say about it becomes strange. Our words fail to convey meaning, rendering us dumbstruck, which is the exact effect Ibn al-‘Arabī describes as accompanying his own encounter with being in the mystical experience: “I saw things and I wanted to express what I saw, but could not do so, being no different from those who cannot speak”.<sup>536</sup>

Art reminds us that not everything can be intelligible and therefore mastered by human reason. In *Introduction to Metaphysics*, Heidegger makes the same argument about death. To Heidegger, death is the originary source of human violence—authentic or

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<sup>533</sup> Henri Matisse, “Notes of a Painter”, *Art in Theory 1900-1990*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), p. 76.

<sup>534</sup> Paul Klee, “From *On Modern Art*”, *Art in Theory 1900-1990*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), p. 344.

<sup>535</sup> See the story of Mir Chalama in Akın-Kıvanç, *Mustafa ‘Ali’s*, p. 241.

<sup>536</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabī, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 235.

not—because no matter what humans do, they cannot overcome this limit.<sup>537</sup> In his words, “There is only one thing against which all violence-doing directly shatters. That is death. It is an end beyond all completion, a limit beyond all limits”.<sup>538</sup> The violence human beings apply to their surroundings is their attempt to widen the extent of their mastery towards this final, unreachable limit.<sup>539</sup> Death, then, is the ultimate unknown that seduces humans towards *aletheia*.<sup>540</sup> As the impetus that propels humans ever forward and the ultimate limit of their understanding, death also takes pride of place in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s thought. The idea of “self-annihilation”, where the Sufi transcends dichotomies such as body and mind or created and creator, abandoning herself to oneness with being, is a “little death” experienced during one’s lifetime, albeit one from which the Sufi must return to ordinary existence and perception. Still, an interesting contrast between the thought of Heidegger and Ibn al-‘Arabī emerges in the former’s understanding of death as the ultimate individuator,<sup>541</sup> while that Ibn al-‘Arabī regards it as the final reestablishment of unity between the particular and being.

Like death, art reminds us of our own finitude but also gives us hope that there is no *end*—in the work of art, there will always be something that escapes our comprehension, but this also means there will always be the promise that the work will reveal more. The strangeness occasioned by the work of art, then, must be accepted, even embraced. Middle Eastern authors such as Dūst Moḥammad and Mustafa Âlî show an understanding of this attitude when they describe the ideal miniature painting as

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<sup>537</sup> As Polt points out, death is also central to Heidegger’s definition of Dasein in *Being and Time*: “The future is finite in that it forces us to follow one possibility at the expense of others, under the constant threat of death: we are *mortal*. [...] [T]o eliminate [this condition] would be to eliminate Dasein itself” (Richard Polt, “The Question of Nothing”, *A Companion to Heidegger’s Introduction to Metaphysics*, ed. Richard Polt and Gregory Fried [New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001], p. 69).

<sup>538</sup> Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, p. 121.

<sup>539</sup> In this context, the Greek temple could also be seen as a monument to human beings’ struggle against their finitude and death. It is in surviving the humans who built it that the Greek temple becomes such a monument.

<sup>540</sup> Following Sophocles’ *Antigone*, Heidegger describes human beings as *pantoporos-aporos*, indicating that they travel all routes rather than being restricted to a fixed route. Further, humans do not belong to one fixed place either; they move from place to place (*polis*), and therefore are *hypsipolis-apolis*. In transcending all borders and losing its natural home, the human being becomes *deinotaton*, i.e., the uncanny, or, in Heidegger’s German original, “unheimlich” (literally “homeless”). To Heidegger, it is this very homelessness that allows human beings to transcend themselves (*Introduction to Metaphysics*, pp. 155-158).

<sup>541</sup> As Heidegger maintains, “Death is in every case mine” (*Being and Time*, p. 284). In death, there is no such thing as “being with the others”. Therefore, Dasein’s heading for death at every instant means Dasein’s drawing back from everyone by way of choosing itself.



“innovative”, “astonishing”, “confounding”, and “beyond all description”. And it is also this attitude that informs the “purposefully destabilizing”<sup>542</sup> features Gruber locates in certain miniature portraits of the prophet Muḥammad. In contrast, an attitude of connoisseurship towards miniature art as developed in most Western scholarship, solely focused on deciphering the pictorial codes and—at best—allegorical meanings of this art form, reduces the painting to an object of calculation and measurement, constituting, in Heidegger’s words, an “act of destruction”<sup>543</sup> paralleling the actual, physical destruction of miniature albums.

Heidegger maintains that humans, through their role as witnesses of, and conduits for, unconcealment, always remain the bearers of unconcealment, participants in the creation of meaning. In this sense, being as *dike* is in need of human capacity for its unfolding as *techne*. This anthropocentrism is mirrored in Ibn al-‘Arabī, who maintains that “It is we who make Him a divinity by being that through which He knows Himself as Divine. Thus, He is not known until we are known”.<sup>544</sup> However, Heidegger acknowledges that achieving authentic *techne* is too much to ask of a limited and finite being. Ultimately, humans are bound to fail in this attempt—a failure also acknowledged by Ibn al-‘Arabī, who, in spite of the practice of “self-annihilation”, insists that true unity between being and the particular can only occur in death. Still, both Heidegger and Ibn al-‘Arabī give human failure a positive meaning. The most authentic course of action for humans is to take the risk of engaging the overwhelming order of being and to inhabit this order in a kind of work, knowing full well that the task is doomed to failure. This failure is the most proper form of *techne*.

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<sup>542</sup> Gruber, p. 254.

<sup>543</sup> Heidegger, *The Origin*, p. 25.

<sup>544</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabī, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 92.

## **Chapter 6: Maurice Merleau-Ponty: Cézanne as Artist and Phenomenologist**

In the preceding chapter, I staged a comparative appraisal of Heidegger's phenomenology of art and Sufi thought on ontology and art. I used this comparison to argue for the equivalence of certain key ideas and concepts in phenomenology and Sufi ontology. Both philosophical approaches start from the idea of a primordial unity that transcends dichotomies like that between subject and object. However, they argue that this unity presents itself in the form of a strife between veiling and unveiling as the Sufi might call it, or concealment and unconcealment in Heideggerian parlance. Both philosophies argue for the work of art as a privileged locus in which this strife reveals itself, and for the artist as a conduit of this self-revelation. The work of art captures the strife between concealment and unconcealment, making it evident to the beholder in a way it would not be from the contemplation of mere things. In so doing, art enables the beholder to attain an experience which could be described as either a phenomenological *epoché* or the apprehension of the self-manifestation of the absolute.

As I will demonstrate below, Maurice Merleau-Ponty's writings on art are in line with many of these philosophical similarities regarding issues such as unity versus dichotomies, the relationship between being and art, and the role of the artist as conduit. In addition, Merleau-Ponty posits and explores an understanding of the painter as phenomenologist, i.e., as someone trying to do through painting what phenomenology tries to achieve through philosophy. To Merleau-Ponty, then, the painter "does" phenomenology. This approach offers a fruitful parallel to the writings of Middle Eastern thinkers such as Mustafa Âlî, who understand the miniature painter as a Sufi, i.e., as someone employing painting in the same way that a Sufi mystic might employ written instruction or other techniques such as music or dance. Echoing Merleau-Ponty, then, I would argue that miniature painters, rather than simply depicting or representing certain Sufi ideas or tales, must be understood as "doing" Sufism.

How do painters "do" phenomenology? In pursuing this question, Merleau-Ponty devotes attention to specific issues that are addressed neither in Sufi writings nor by Heidegger, particularly regarding issues such as the techniques utilized by painting, the artist's process of perception, the transformation of this perception into art, and the

embeddedness of the artist among the things she perceives. In all of these aspects, I will argue, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological considerations can be read as non-theological companion pieces to Sufi thought, fleshing out in great detail certain matters at which Sufi sources only hint. Since I believe Merleau-Ponty's thought to be in line with the core equivalencies between Sufi thought and phenomenology, I will argue that a phenomenological reading of miniature art which incorporates some of Merleau-Ponty's perspectives is not only compatible with Sufi thought on art, but also deepens and expands this thought in directions not explored by Sufi writers themselves. It is my contention that such a reading of miniature art—some examples of which I will provide in the Conclusion—will offer us a richer understanding of this art than available to date.

### 6.1. Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Paul Cézanne

Merleau-Ponty's writings on painting are situated at the crossroads between the Husserlian phenomenology of perception and the Heideggerian philosophy of art, as well as between Balzac's Frenhofer and the work of Paul Cézanne. In his essays "Cézanne's Doubt" (1945) and "Eye and Mind" (1961),<sup>545</sup> Merleau-Ponty opens up his own path to painting, forging many connections with Husserl and Heidegger along the way. In the epilogue to *The Origin of the Work of Art*, Heidegger states that "The foregoing considerations are concerned with the enigma [*Rätse!*] of art, the enigma that art itself is. They are far from claiming to solve the enigma. The task is to see the enigma".<sup>546</sup> Indeed, if there was an epilogue to Merleau-Ponty's body of work on art, it would not be poles apart from Heidegger's words.

Much like Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty approaches the work of art through the work of a particular artist. For Merleau-Ponty, this artist is Paul Cézanne (1839–1906). "It took him one hundred working sessions for a still life, one hundred fifty sittings for a portrait. What we call his work was, for him, only the attempt, and the approach of his painting".<sup>547</sup> These are the initial sentences of "Cézanne's Doubt". The first connection that Merleau-Ponty sees between Cézanne's work and phenomenology can be found in

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<sup>545</sup> Merleau-Ponty, Maurice (2007). "Eye and Mind". In *The Merleau-Ponty Reader*. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press (Original work published 1961).

<sup>546</sup> Heidegger, "The Origin", p. 50.

<sup>547</sup> Merleau-Ponty, "Cézanne's Doubt", p. 69.

these carefully chosen words: Merleau-Ponty sees Cézanne's work not simply as something complete, but as something that is continually in the mode of a process, in phenomenological words: coming into being.

To Merleau-Ponty, Cézanne's continuous "attempt" at painting is accompanied by another, equally remarkable, feature: the artist's ongoing doubt in his work. Everything in Cézanne's life seemed to be feeding into this well of doubt. The painter was not only disparaged by the intelligentsia of his time, but even went as far as suspecting that he had a disability of the eyes causing him to paint the way he did. Merleau-Ponty is fascinated by this abyss of doubt: "Why so much uncertainty, so much labor, so many failures, and, suddenly, the greatest success?"<sup>548</sup>

Merleau-Ponty's interest in Cézanne's personal life may appear like an attempt at psychoanalyzing the painter. However, his description of Cézanne's personal life—or rather, perhaps, his incompetency at leading a life in the midst of people—is designed to highlight Cézanne's "inhuman character",<sup>549</sup> a point crucial to Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological analysis of the artist's work. What does Merleau-Ponty mean by the word "inhuman"? A first clue can be found in a passage where Merleau-Ponty paraphrases Cézanne: "a face should be painted as an object".<sup>550</sup> In both Cézanne's life and work, Merleau-Ponty detects an "alienation of his humanity" and a retreat from the "human world" to the "visible world".<sup>551</sup> Cézanne, Merleau-Ponty maintains, was committed to painting "from nature".<sup>552</sup> How does one paint "from nature"? What does it mean to flee from the human world, or become alienated from one's humanity? What is the difference between the human world and the visible world? And why and how does Cézanne flee from one to the other?

To Merleau-Ponty, the meaning of Cézanne's work cannot be found in the painter's life. Neither is Cézanne a successor of previous forms of art, to be understood through these. Throughout the text, Merleau-Ponty repeatedly emphasizes his position that Cézanne's achievement was to look at nature in a way only possible for a human being isolated from humans, the human world, even his own life. Adrift in his own

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<sup>548</sup> Merleau-Ponty, "Cézanne's Doubt", p. 69.

<sup>549</sup> Merleau-Ponty, "Cézanne's Doubt", p. 70.

<sup>550</sup> Merleau-Ponty, "Cézanne's Doubt", p. 70.

<sup>551</sup> Merleau-Ponty, "Cézanne's Doubt", p. 70.

<sup>552</sup> Merleau-Ponty, "Cézanne's Doubt", p. 70.

discrete world, Cézanne emancipates himself from art history, while, at the same time, emancipating an object that is hidden behind the atmosphere.<sup>553</sup> What, to Merleau-Ponty, is special about the way that a human being alienated from his humanity perceives the world? Such a perception, the philosopher argues, is unfettered by the cultural, traditional, scientific preconceptions that humans bring to their everyday perceptions. In other words, Merleau-Ponty sees Cézanne as striving for the kind of perception that Husserl and, following him, Heidegger, would have described as a phenomenological *epoché*.

## 6.2. The Homelessness and Homecoming of the Artist

How, then, does Merleau-Ponty view Cézanne's perception of the world, and how does he view the process by which Cézanne transforms this perception into art? As the philosopher states, "fleshly eyes are already much more than receptors for beams of light, colour, lines".<sup>554</sup> Eyes have vision as a "gift" – more than just tools for seeing, "they are computers of the world [*des calculateurs du monde*]"<sup>555</sup> But in order to earn such a gift, one needs to practice. What makes a painter's eye unique is that her receptors are better educated: in order to achieve the full possession of vision the painter has to train her eyes. And so it is with Cézanne: Merleau-Ponty emphasizes that while in Paris, the artist visited the Louvre every day.<sup>556</sup> Further, Cézanne assiduously studied geometry, anatomy, and geology in order to provide himself with the requisite education in both art and science. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, the effort of painting "may require the creation of new materials or new means of expression, but it may well be realized at times by the reexamination and reuse of those already at hand".<sup>557</sup>

However, an acquaintance with science and technique is only the first step. According to Merleau-Ponty, Cézanne's real aspiration is to confront the sciences with the nature from which they emanated. In order to do so, the artist needs to distinguish between "the spontaneous order of perceived things and the human order of ideas and

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<sup>553</sup> Merleau-Ponty, "Cézanne's Doubt", p. 72. Implied here is an argument against the Impressionists, to the effect that their objects lose themselves in the overall atmosphere of the painting.

<sup>554</sup> Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind", p. 356.

<sup>555</sup> Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind", p. 356.

<sup>556</sup> Merleau-Ponty, "Cézanne's Doubt", p. 76.

<sup>557</sup> Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind", p. 371.

sciences”.<sup>558</sup> Reiterating Heidegger’s critique of scientific investigation, Merleau-Ponty claims that Cézanne “wanted to put intelligence, ideas, sciences, perspective and tradition back in touch with the world of nature which they were intended to comprehend”,<sup>559</sup> but eventually forgot en route.

In the opening sentence of “Eye and Mind”, Merleau-Ponty argues that “Science manipulates things and gives up dwelling in them”.<sup>560</sup> To him, science, after its historical divorce from philosophy, loses touch with the primordial world. Instead, it confronts the world from a distance, a distance it creates by giving itself over not to the world, but to the definitions it creates in order to understand the world. In the words of Hugh J. Silverman, “Scientific thought does not want to enter into the visible. It wants to stand back from the visible in order to provide rules, regularities, and models for understanding it”.<sup>561</sup> Once having been the “bold way of thinking”, science positions itself outside the world and posits the idea that every being is an “object” to it.<sup>562</sup> In so doing, science actually distances itself from its own goal of unconcealing the world.

Taking his cues from Husserl and Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty sees the scientist as someone wishing to dwell in a pre-given notion of humanity. As long as he dwells in this humanity instead of reaching out to the primordial existence, he will not be like a peasant, immersing in the earth to enable it to bring forth new fruit. Rather, he will either be a forager, merely picking up whatever food he finds, or an exploiter, forcing the earth to reshape according to his expectations instead of revealing its own potential. This antagonistic, rather than immersive, relationship between humans and their environment is succinctly expressed in Sophocles’ *Antigone*, which Heidegger quotes at length:

He moves across the white-capped ocean seas  
blasted by winter storms, carving his way  
under the surging waves engulfing him.  
With his teams of horses he wears down

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<sup>558</sup> Merleau-Ponty, “Cézanne’s Doubt”, p. 73.

<sup>559</sup> Merleau-Ponty, “Cézanne’s Doubt”, p. 73.

<sup>560</sup> Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind”, p. 351.

<sup>561</sup> Hugh J. Silverman, “Cézanne’s Mirror Stage”, in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, ed. Galen A. Johnson, Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1999, p. 265.

<sup>562</sup> Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind”, p. 351.

the unwearied and immortal earth,  
the oldest of the gods, harassing her,  
as year by year his ploughs move back and forth.<sup>563</sup>

Merleau-Ponty differentiates what he calls “classical science” from science as outlined above. To him, classical science apprehends the “opaqueness” of the world and tries to embrace this opaqueness rather than retreat from it. What is happening today, to Merleau-Ponty, is the opposite. Science, having become “autonomous”, sees its function as transforming and exploiting the world rather than grasping it. As he puts it, “Thinking ‘operationally’ becomes a sort of absolute artificialism, such as we see in the ideology of cybernetics, where human creations are derived from a natural information process, but which is itself conceived on the model of human machines”.<sup>564</sup> Marjorie Grene elaborates on this idea of “operationalism”, defining it as “the belief that all problems can be solved by the experimental manipulation of precisely specified variables”.<sup>565</sup> This conception of science, transforming both humans and their environment into “manipulanda”, is bound to lead humanity into a “nightmare”<sup>566</sup> without the possibility of awakening.

What science lacks is an understanding of itself. The thought of science, Merleau-Ponty claims, should be “placed back in the ‘there is’ which precedes it”.<sup>567</sup> Science needs to acknowledge and reconnect with its base, the base that Merleau-Ponty calls the “brute or existent” world, which the philosopher, echoing the Heideggerian strife between earth and world, describes as “the soil of the sensible world and the soil of the worked-upon world”.<sup>568</sup>

Merleau-Ponty also follows Heidegger’s lead in claiming that, surrounded as we are in our daily lives by artificial objects, we often merely perceive these objects via the human actions which put them to use, not entertaining any doubts as to the necessity or reliability of their existence. According to Merleau-Ponty, Cézanne’s paintings shake our world in such a way that we are no longer able to lose ourselves within the safe borders

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<sup>563</sup> Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, p. 156.

<sup>564</sup> Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind”, p. 352.

<sup>565</sup> Marjorie Grene, “The Aesthetic Dialogue of Sartre and Merleau-Ponty”, in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, p. 227.

<sup>566</sup> Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind”, p. 352.

<sup>567</sup> Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind”, p. 352.

<sup>568</sup> Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind”, p. 352.

of such habitual thoughts, but are thrown at the doors of an inhuman, primordial nature. “Once art is present”, Merleau-Ponty maintains, “it awakens powers that are asleep in ordinary vision, a secret preexistence”.<sup>569</sup> To the philosopher, “Art, and especially painting draw from this pool of brute sense, about which activism wants to know nothing. Art and painting alone do this in full innocence”.<sup>570</sup>

This potential that Merleau-Ponty concedes to art stands in contrast to forms of human expression that occur through writing. “From the writer and the philosopher”, Merleau-Ponty states, “we want opinions and advice. We will not allow them to hold the world suspended”.<sup>571</sup> Here, we are talking about the suspension of “humanity”, i.e., the suspension of all the universals accepted as such, all so-called “stable truths” upon which we construct new “truths”, including even the very sentences we construct. What Merleau-Ponty has in mind is the suspension of everyday values and meanings, and a return, a homecoming to the primordial, to that which is prior to humanity or human-made values. According to Merleau-Ponty, the painter is privileged in his ability to perform such a suspension and let the primordial existence show itself without a veil. As he states, “Only the painter is entitled to gaze upon everything without being obliged to appraise what he sees”.<sup>572</sup>

Nonetheless, Merleau-Ponty draws a parallel between painting and writing. Just as “a picture is not a *trompe l’oeil*”, he claims, “words do not *resemble* what they designate”, either.<sup>573</sup> As a matter of fact, according to Merleau-Ponty, painting and phenomenological writing can serve the same purpose: through painting, Cézanne articulates what phenomenology only endeavors to express indirectly via philosophical language, namely pre-reflexive perception.<sup>574</sup> As Husserl’s phenomenological method

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<sup>569</sup> Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind”, p. 370-371.

<sup>570</sup> Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind”, p. 352.

<sup>571</sup> Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind”, p. 352-353.

<sup>572</sup> Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind”, p. 353. Galen Johnson has pointed out that commentators on Merleau-Ponty’s work have criticized “the privilege he has steadily accorded painting over other arts”, for instance, photography and film. (Galen A. Johnson, “Structures and Painting: ‘Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence’”, in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, p. 21.) However, since my primary objective here is to bring Sufi and Merleau-Pontian approaches to painting into dialogue with the aim of elucidating Middle Eastern miniature painting, I will not examine such critiques of Merleau-Ponty’s bias.

<sup>573</sup> Merleau-Ponty, “Cézanne’s Doubt”, p. 77.

<sup>574</sup> In the final analysis, to Merleau-Ponty, language is indirect: “If we rid our minds of the idea that our language is the translation or cipher of an original text, we shall see that the idea of *complete* expression is



tries to emancipate itself from the presuppositions of both the Galilean and the Cartesian traditions, Merleau-Ponty believed Cézanne and he himself faced the same dilemma: a new way is needed, a way which will emancipate one from a dichotomous way of thinking and enable the split between the self and the world, the subject and the object, to be overcome.

While Merleau-Ponty sees Cézanne's paintings as an ultimate instance of phenomenological work through painting, it remains a tantalizing question to which extent writing itself can serve as a locus of the phenomenological *epoché* or the self-manifestation of the absolute. On the one hand, I argued above that the Sufi tradition regards words as too closely tied to their literal meanings in order to serve as efficacious vehicles for apprehending the absolute. On the other hand, though, it is clear that writers such as Ibn al-'Arabī and Merleau-Ponty take stylistic and structural measures to ensure that their texts go beyond conveying "opinions and advice" and acquire the potential to "purposefully destabilize" their readers.

Returning to Cézanne, we find Merleau-Ponty asserting that the artist is driven by the search for a "motif", namely "the landscape in its totality and in its absolute fullness".<sup>575</sup> The terms of "totality" and "absolute fullness" seem to suggest a monolithic state, but nothing could be further from what Merleau-Ponty has in mind. To him, the painter interrogates his subject "To unveil (*dévoiler*) the means, which are nothing but visible, by which the mountain makes itself into a mountain before our eyes".<sup>576</sup> The mountain is not a mountain in any stable, unchanging sense: rather, it is engaged in a continuous process of becoming or coming into being. Scholars engaging with Merleau-Ponty have described this process of coming into being as one of creation or genesis. In Mikel Dufrenne's words, "Cézanne does not reconstruct, he pre-constructs. He does not shatter the fruit bowl, he shows us its genesis, that is, not its production but its coming into the visible".<sup>577</sup> And Jean-François Lyotard maintains that "Cézanne desired [...] Mount Sainte-Victoire to cease being a visual object and become an event in the visual

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nonsensical, and that all language is indirect or allusive—that it is if you wish silence" (Merleau-Ponty, "Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence", in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, p. 80).

<sup>575</sup> Merleau-Ponty, "Cézanne's Doubt", p. 76.

<sup>576</sup> Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind", p. 357.

<sup>577</sup> Mikel Dufrenne, "Eye and Mind", in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, p. 260.

field”.<sup>578</sup> Cézanne’s goal, then, is to depict things in both their stability and their instability; his intention is to paint “matter as it takes on form”.<sup>579</sup>

Ibn al-‘Arabī’s concept of the “Breath of the Merciful” proceeds from comparable assumptions. Firstly, the process of creation is inherently unstable. As Ibn al-‘Arabī puts it, “The act of creation, which occurs with the breaths eternally, constitutes an imbalance in Nature that might be called a deviation or alteration”.<sup>580</sup> Secondly, creation is not fixed but recurring, with each instant producing and simultaneously destroying the cosmos as a unique manifestation of the absolute: “God is manifest in every Breath and [...] no Self-manifestation is repeated”.<sup>581</sup> A parallel understanding is attributed by Françoise Dastur to Merleau-Ponty, who speaks of becoming as “one sole explosion of Being which is forever”,<sup>582</sup> thereby challenging, according to Dastur, “every question of origin [and] every evolutionary perspective”.<sup>583</sup> “Only one lyricism”, Merleau-Ponty asserts, is possible for a painter seeking to apprehend this unstable process of coming into being: the lyricism of “the continual rebirth of existence”.<sup>584</sup>

Such an apprehension requires an attempt to emancipate oneself from all judgments which continually prearrange appearances according to a pre-formed order, not just on a conceptual, but also on a perceptual level. The kind of perception that Merleau-Ponty has in mind is compared by Mikel Dufrenne to “the Husserlian model of passive synthesis. This vision does not organize the visible, nor does it bestow a meaning upon it or constitute it as readable and expressible in words. It receives the visible, rising from an invisible that still clings to it; one can say at the very most that vision opens itself to the visible which is given to it”.<sup>585</sup> Even the distinction between the senses, to Merleau-Ponty, is a preconception capable of clouding such brute perception. The

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<sup>578</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, “Excerpts from *Discours, figure*”, in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, p. 312.

<sup>579</sup> Merleau-Ponty, “Cézanne’s Doubt”, p. 73.

<sup>580</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabī, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 214

<sup>581</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabī, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 214, Austin elaborates that “each inhalation represents the resolution of the Cosmos into the Essence, while each exhalation represents the creation of the Cosmos” (Austin, p. 146).

<sup>582</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press, 1968, p. 265. Quoted in Françoise Dastur, “World, Flesh, Vision”, in *Chiasms: Merleau-Ponty’s Notion of Flesh*, ed. Fred Evans and Leonard Lawlor, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2000, p. 45.

<sup>583</sup> Dastur, “World, Flesh, Vision”, p. 45.

<sup>584</sup> Merleau-Ponty, “Cézanne’s Doubt”, p. 77.

<sup>585</sup> Dufrenne, “Eye and Mind”, p. 258.

philosopher maintains that this distinction is nothing but a result of science. In unfettered, primordial perception, Merleau-Ponty maintains, there is no distinction between senses such as touch and sight: “We see the depth, the smoothness, softness, the hardness of objects; Cézanne even claimed that we see the odor”.<sup>586</sup>

The dismantling of the distinction between senses leads to synesthesia, i.e., an overlap and blending of different sense perceptions. The not-entirely-visual perception of synesthesia complicates the visual perception of the painter; it emancipates the visual perception from perceiving merely an object, turning the object into something that does not only show itself in a *thingly* way. Merleau-Ponty states that “Cézanne would be handing himself over to the chaos of the sensations”.<sup>587</sup> Perhaps, the painter sees the smell of the coffee I am drinking right now; perhaps the coffee tastes like a colour; the sound of the forks being set on the table is a shade of yellow? Yes, indeed it is a “world almost mad”, “a delirium which is vision”, as Merleau-Ponty puts it.<sup>588</sup>

Still, as Merleau-Ponty maintains, “The painter’s world is a visible world, nothing but visible”.<sup>589</sup> Therefore, the painter is obliged to translate the delirium of synesthesia back into the purely visible form of the painting. This is a paradoxical task: “What was at issue, all science forgotten, was to capture, *through* these sciences, the constitution of the landscape as an emerging organism”.<sup>590</sup> “Cézanne’s suicide”, as Merleau-Ponty paraphrases Emile Bernard, to the former marks Cézanne’s birth: “aiming for reality while denying himself the means to attain it”.<sup>591</sup>

In describing how such a translation can be achieved, Merleau-Ponty gives numerous examples of Cézanne’s painterly technique. Perhaps the most important tool in Cézanne’s arsenal is colour. According to Merleau-Ponty, “the dimension of colour [...] creates—from itself to itself—identities, differences, a texture, a materiality, a something”.<sup>592</sup> Various scholars have drawn attention to the crucial role of color in

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<sup>586</sup> Merleau-Ponty, “Cézanne’s Doubt”, p. 75.

<sup>587</sup> Merleau-Ponty, “Cézanne’s Doubt”, p. 72.

<sup>588</sup> Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind”, p. 357.

<sup>589</sup> Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind”, p. 357.

<sup>590</sup> Merleau-Ponty, “Cézanne’s Doubt”, p. 77. It is in the context of such a forgetting, and an apprehension of the world based on brute experience, that one needs to view Merleau-Ponty’s claim that a Cézanne painting “has nothing to say to the educated person” (p. 70). As he puts it, “Cézanne conceived a work of art which [...] is valid for everyone” (p. 71).

<sup>591</sup> Merleau-Ponty, “Cézanne’s Doubt”, p. 72.

<sup>592</sup> Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind”, p. 370.

Cézanne's efforts to recreate the synesthetic experience on canvas. As Simona Erjavec puts it, Cézanne believed that "a certain thing would not possess a certain color if it didn't possess a certain shape, tactile given, sonority, smell".<sup>593</sup> The goal in painting, then, is to achieve the kind of color that will, at the same time, manifest all other attributes of the thing as well. In Trevor Perri's words, "Cézanne does not just try to suggest the roughness of a piece of fabric or the fuzziness and weight of a peach. Rather, if his paintings are successful, these qualities will be as immediately given as the colors and shapes painted on the canvas".<sup>594</sup>

Merleau-Ponty explains how Cézanne, a master of colour, unfetters the object, painting it with all its relations to its surroundings intact, yet still not lost in these relations.<sup>595</sup> It is through the medium of colour that Cézanne manages to undermine a conventional apprehension of space. In the painter's later watercolours, Merleau-Ponty maintains, "space [...] radiates around planes that cannot be assigned to any place at all: 'a superimposing of transparent surfaces', 'a flowing movement of places of colour which overlap, advance and retreat'".<sup>596</sup> Cézanne achieves the effects noted by Merleau-Ponty by meticulously covering the canvas with tiny strokes of various colors, similar to the pointillist technique (or the composition of a digital image out of distinct pixels). When the painting is approached, each stroke of color is recognized as separate from the others and a complete unit in and of itself; however, when one retreats from the painting, the interaction and combination of these strokes leads to the perception of larger, homogenous blocks of color and shape. Thus, the painting or image literally emerges out of a chaos of perception as the viewer interacts with it.

Another technique highlighted by Merleau-Ponty is Cézanne's approach to perspective. According to the philosopher, Cézanne's insight here is that the way we actually perceive perspective does not bear much resemblance to geometric/photographic perspective—an observation with which miniature painters would surely have agreed. As

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<sup>593</sup> Simona Erjavec, "Maurice Merleau-Ponty: Visual Perception as a Bodily Phenomenon", *AM Journal of Art and Media Studies* 2 (2012), p. 38.

<sup>594</sup> Trevor Perri, "Image and Ontology in Merleau-Ponty", *Continental Philosophy Review* 46:1 (April 2013), p. 86.

<sup>595</sup> Merleau-Ponty, "Cézanne's Doubt", p. 72.

<sup>596</sup> Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind", p. 370.

Merleau-Ponty puts it, “The perspective of the Renaissance is no infallible ‘gimmick’”.<sup>597</sup> Rather, in Françoise Dastur’s words, it is “a cultural fact, a moment of painting that makes the mistake of setting itself up as an infallible technique and a fundamental law”.<sup>598</sup> The discrepancy between lived perspective and geometric perspective leads Cézanne to confounding the traditional usage of perspective in painting. In brief, Cézanne uses a single painting to combine a number of perspectives from which the objects in the painting might be approached. In so doing, Cézanne succeeds in “shattering the viewer’s expectations of a space that would operate according to Cartesian principles”<sup>599</sup> and enables the objects to gradually reveal themselves as they may to a person circling around them and regarding them from a variety of vantage points. As Merleau-Ponty states,

[I]t is Cézanne’s genius that when the overall composition of the picture is seen globally, perspectival distortions are no longer visible in their own right but rather contribute, as they do in natural vision, to the impression of an emerging order, an object in the act of appearing, organizing itself before our eyes.<sup>600</sup>

By the same token, Cézanne refuses to practice the traditional usage of contour. In observing the world, John Sallis maintains, “One sees the line and yet does not see it. One sees the contour of the apple and yet sees nothing other than the apple contoured against the background. One sees the border between the field and the meadow, and yet whatever one sees is either field or meadow, not the border”.<sup>601</sup> Merleau-Ponty argues that the contour of an object considered as a line enclosing it is relevant to geometry more than the visible world: “To outline just one single contour sacrifices depth—that is, the dimension which give us the thing, not as spread out before us, but as full of reserves and as an inexhaustible reality”.<sup>602</sup> For this reason, Cézannian outline is an effect of colours

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<sup>597</sup> Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind”, p. 365.

<sup>598</sup> Dastur, “World, Flesh, Vision”, p. 30.

<sup>599</sup> Jessica Wiskus, *The Rhythm of Thought: Art, Literature, and Music after Merleau-Ponty*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013, p. 19.

<sup>600</sup> Merleau-Ponty, “Cézanne’s Doubt”, p. 74.

<sup>601</sup> John Sallis, “Freeing the Line”, in *Merleau-Ponty at the Limits of Art, Religion, and Perception*, ed. Kascha Semonovitch and Neal DeRoo, London: Continuum, 2011, p. 22.

<sup>602</sup> Merleau-Ponty, “Cézanne’s Doubt”, p. 74.

rather than a single line, making the distinction between contour and colour disappear. Just like the other techniques outlined above, this approach allows the painting to manifest an order of things in the process of emerging rather than perfected and immutable.

As we can see, Cézanne's approach to painting has very little to do with "realism" or "verisimilitude" as typically understood by art criticism. This does not mean, however, that Cézanne rejects the idea of a painting that is faithful to the perceptive experience of the painter or viewer. Similarly in principle to miniature painters, he simply does not view so-called verisimilitude as particularly faithful in this sense. As Merleau-Ponty puts it in "Eye and Mind", "A figure flattened down onto a plane surface scarcely retains the forms of things; it is a deformed figure that *must* be deformed—the square becomes a lozenge, the circle an oval—in order to present the object. It is an image of the object only on the condition of 'not resembling it'".<sup>603</sup> This objection to verisimilitude showcases the limits of art critical approaches—like that of Roxburgh outlined in Chapter 4 of this study—that proceed from the assumption that there is one definite and immutable standard of "realism" in painting and all else is "abstract" in the sense that it deviates from the standard.

It appears, then, that the artistic mission Merleau-Ponty ascribes to Cézanne can only be achieved at the price of an estrangement from conventional ways of thinking and perception, an estrangement enabling the painter's extraordinary vision. This, in Rachel McCann's words, is an "ecstatic process in which, through opening ourselves to the world, we can get beneath the traditional western subject-object division".<sup>604</sup> However, this ekstasis must subsequently be overcome by the painter in an effort at reverting this vision back into a visual language comprehensible to the beholders of the resulting work of art. The idea of a homecoming which can only occur after a prior state of "homelessness" is also found in the work of Heidegger, according to whom homecoming signifies humans' ability to open themselves to others while at the same time preserving their self-identity, namely *Dasein*. *Da*, "there", is where man "ek-sists" in a state of

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<sup>603</sup> Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind", p. 361.

<sup>604</sup> Rachel McCann, "Entwining the Body and the World: Architectural Design and Experience in the Light of 'Eye and Mind'", in *Intertwinings: Interdisciplinary Encounters with Merleau-Ponty*, ed. Gail Weiss, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2008, p. 274.

“nearness to Being”. Heidegger maintains that this return to the homeland, this nearness to Being, has been lacking in Western thought since the Pre-Socratics.<sup>605</sup>

The Sufi, as we have seen, faces a similar task. She needs to depart from the world of the familiar and accepted in order to attain her mystical insight, followed by her return to the familiar and her attempt at conveying her insight in acceptable terms. Above, I listed the Sufi story of Sheikh San’an as a good example of this process: the venerable religious leader leaves the confines of his physical and spiritual home and travels to a foreign land—Constantinople—in order to overcome the limitations of his insight before returning home. However, there is a catch: the homecoming from the “foreign land” finds the traveler transformed and often incomprehensible to his erstwhile companions. The story of Sheikh San’an illustrates this through the bewilderment expressed by the sheikh’s disciples when faced with the outrageous behaviour he displays while wooing the Christian princess, such as herding swine and destroying a copy of the Koran. Ibn al-‘Arabī points to the same dilemma in a passage I quoted above: “I saw things and I wanted to express what I saw, but could not do so, being no different from those who cannot speak”.<sup>606</sup> Just like Cézanne, Ibn al-‘Arabī knows he has something to convey, but not how he might convey it. And perhaps, just like Cézanne, he doubts his very ability to do so.

Even though the artist, or the Sufi, is not a divine creator, he nonetheless has to create out of *nothing*, by which term I here mean that which is yet to be expressed in human terms, that which has yet to acquire a meaning, but that which will bear one as soon as it is revealed through an artist’s work. In Alphonse de Waelhens’ words, “Painting represents and unfolds in universality that which prior to and without it lay unformed, unknown, within the private experience of the lone and largely inattentive consciousness”.<sup>607</sup> However, despite the transformative import of her work, the artist plays a passive rather than active role in the process of creation. “For Cézanne”, Günter Figal argues, painting “is the attempt to be attentive to something, which as such shall become visible in the picture, but which the artist cannot intend”. In this process, Figal

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<sup>605</sup> Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism”, in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell. San Francisco: Harper San Francisco 1977. pp. 241-2.

<sup>606</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabī, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 235.

<sup>607</sup> Alphonse de Waelhens, “Merleau-Ponty: Philosopher of Painting”, in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, p. 175.

maintains, “the painter’s will must come to silence. All voices of prejudice have to become tacit; the painter has to forget, to be silent in order to be nothing but an echo”.<sup>608</sup>

This means that the artist cannot take conscious charge of his process of artistic creation or expression. “Conception”, Merleau-Ponty argues, “cannot precede ‘execution’”.<sup>609</sup> “Art is not skillful construction, skillful artifice, the skillful relation, from the outside, to a space and a world. It is truly the ‘inarticulate cry’, as Hermes Trismegistus said, ‘which seemed to be the voice of the light’”.<sup>610</sup> The artist’s journey is to the very origin that culture has been constructed to take cognizance of, but which it has forgotten in the process. This pre-cognized zone is the artist’s territory; whatever he says about this zone has not *yet* been assigned a meaning in the territory of the everyday/common. Even the artist herself does not know the meaning of the word she exclaims. It is a cry beckoning a meaning. “The artist”, Merleau-Ponty maintains, “launches his work just as a human once launched the first word, not knowing whether it will be anything more than a shout”.<sup>611</sup>

As in Heidegger’s understanding of the artist as a conduit, Merleau-Ponty’s artist is not a creator but an ‘enabler’ who lets things form themselves via his intermediacy. In Taylor Carman’s words, “It is not surprising that painters sometimes say they feel as if things are looking at them. The idea of inspiration, too, implies being invaded and inhabited by the world, as opposed to acting on it. This sense of bodily communion with the world is crucial to the art of painting”.<sup>612</sup> The world, in this view, is acting *through* the artist, including her technical means, rather than bending to her will. As Merleau-Ponty paraphrases Apollinaire, “in a poem there are phrases which do not appear to have been *created*, which seem to have *formed themselves*”.<sup>613</sup> All the artist can do is to create the image and let the image itself reveal to people what it expresses. In Merleau-Ponty’s words,

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<sup>608</sup> Günter Figal, “Merleau-Ponty and Cézanne on Painting”, in *Merleau-Ponty at the Limits*, p. 35.

<sup>609</sup> Merleau-Ponty, “Cézanne’s Doubt”, p. 78.

<sup>610</sup> Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind”, p. 370.

<sup>611</sup> Merleau-Ponty, “Cézanne’s Doubt”, p. 78.

<sup>612</sup> Taylor Carman, *Merleau-Ponty*, London: Routledge, 2018, p. 192.

<sup>613</sup> Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind”, p. 370.



The painter can do no more than construct an image. It is necessary to wait for this image to come to life for others. Then, the work of art will have joined together these separate lives; it will no longer exist in only one of them like a stubborn dream or a persistent delirium, nor will it exist in a space as a colored piece of canvas. It will dwell undivided in several minds, presumably in every possible mind, as an acquisition for always.<sup>614</sup>

This outcome envisioned by Merleau-Ponty, in which the work of art acquires a place, understanding, and recognition in culture, even serving as a unifying force in this culture or even the world at large, harkens back to Qāḍī Aḥmad's description of the famed Ibrahim Mirza album:

Youths represented with sunlike faces, in shame,  
Had closed their lips in their conversation.  
All of them united in war and peace,  
Not like the dwellers of the world full of hypocrisy and dishonor!  
Day and night companions of the same quarters,  
Men devoid of discord in their communion!<sup>615</sup>

While, of course, the description refers to the youths depicted in the album, contrasting their harmony on paper with the discord encountered in the world, I also read it as an exhortation to the world to follow the example of the art. However, the work resulting from the “homecoming”—whether produced by artists, philosophers, or Sufis—is likely to be met with incomprehension, rejection, or even condemnation in its specific social and cultural context. Cézanne's doubt, fuelled by the often negative reception his work received during his lifetime, presents a mild version of this phenomenon, which is much more thoroughly explored by Middle Eastern thinkers via the example of Mani,

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<sup>614</sup> Merleau-Ponty, “Cézanne's Doubt”, p. 79.

<sup>615</sup> Minorsky, *Calligraphers and Painters*, p. 183-84.

who ends up rejected as a false prophet by Dūst Moḥammad while embraced as a genuine artist and conveyor of true insight by Qāḏī Aḥmad and Mustafa Âlî.

Perhaps the work of art cannot help but elicit a negative reaction—it is, after all, in Gruber’s words, “purposefully destabilizing”.<sup>616</sup> Cézanne’s world, too, is a destabilizing one; it inhibits all human ease. “Cézanne’s people are strange”, Merleau-Ponty states, “as if viewed by a creature of another species”.<sup>617</sup> As the philosopher puts it, “Only one emotion is possible for this painter—the feeling of strangeness”.<sup>618</sup> Merleau-Ponty claims that it is in turning to the work of other painters after perceiving Cézanne’s that the beholder once again feels at home.<sup>619</sup> But this kind of reassuring pleasure, to Merleau-Ponty, is derived from culture rather than art. In creating culture, one is re-creating what has already been created and what has already been seen. When exposed to what one was already acquainted with, such as a pleasing object accompanying a long-standing thought, one is on familiar ground. True painting, however, is not tied to civilization, nation, belief, or reason, but rather tries to overcome such givens. “Figurative or not, painting celebrates no other enigma but that of visibility”.<sup>620</sup>

Here, one may ask whether, once a work of art becomes appropriated and assimilated by culture, it loses its disruptive and transformative potential. Merleau-Ponty rejects this possibility. According to him, the “message” of a true work of art cannot be fixed by the beholder. Just as Frenhofer’s masterpiece motivated its beholders to move, advance, and retreat in search of the best vantage point to regard it, we do not so much look “at” a painting as we see “according to it”.<sup>621</sup> As Carman puts it, “We do not merely observe paintings, we visually participate in them; we do not just see them, we see with them”.<sup>622</sup> The richness of the painting, then, depends on the painting itself, rather than on what the spectator brings to bear on it. Exemplary paintings thus always hold a promise of further meanings, yet to be discovered. In Husserlian terms, Merleau-Ponty asserts that there is an excess on the part of the work of art that is open to many interpretations that a

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<sup>616</sup> Gruber, p. 254.

<sup>617</sup> Merleau-Ponty, “Cézanne’s Doubt”, p. 76.

<sup>618</sup> Merleau-Ponty, “Cézanne’s Doubt”, p. 77.

<sup>619</sup> Merleau-Ponty, “Cézanne’s Doubt”, p. 76.

<sup>620</sup> Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind”, p. 357.

<sup>621</sup> Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind”, p. 355; a process summarized by Merleau-Ponty’s employment of the French term *selon*.

<sup>622</sup> Carman, *Merleau-Ponty*, p. 186-187.

single perceiver cannot grasp. To him, the lack is always on the side of the perceiver and the excess on the side of the work:

As for the history of works of art, in any case, if they are great, the sense we give to them after the fact has issued from them. It is the work itself that has opened the field from which it appears in another light. It metamorphoses *itself* and *becomes* what follows; the interminable reinterpretations to which it is *legitimately* susceptible change it only into itself. And if the historian unearths beneath its manifest content a surplus and thickness sense, the texture which was preparing a long future, then this active manner of being, this possibility he unveils in the work, this monograph he finds there—all are grounds for philosophical meditation.<sup>623</sup>

### 6.3. Man Added to Nature

As I already pointed out, the artist's role as conduit points to a certain passivity, at least in terms of the conscious control she has over the meaning of the work of art that will result from her endeavours. Nonetheless, the artist cannot be reduced to this passive role; after all, it is only her own, subjective contribution that can elevate art beyond a mere imitation of nature. Above, I repeatedly stressed that the Sufi reading of miniature art ascribes a "life-giving" quality to this art, an ability to "give a visible form" to things that "were impossible to represent as matter".<sup>624</sup> The process through which the artist may be able to accomplish this task is not further elaborated by the Middle Eastern sources at our disposal. However, I would claim that a reading of Merleau-Ponty brings us closer to an appreciation of how the unique contribution of the artist takes place.

As Merleau-Ponty puts it, "Cézanne was able to revive the classical definition of art: man added to nature".<sup>625</sup> Cézanne's own words, as quoted by Merleau-Ponty, clarify the relationship between "man" and "nature" here: "The landscape thinks itself in me",

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<sup>623</sup> Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind", p. 368.

<sup>624</sup> Akın-Kıvanç, *Mustafa 'Ali's*, p. 276-77.

<sup>625</sup> Merleau-Ponty, "Cézanne's Doubt", p. 76.

the artist states, “and I am its consciousness”.<sup>626</sup> This is the crucial point where Merleau-Ponty makes his move against the mimetic understanding of art. Cézanne, by being the consciousness of landscape, can no longer be called an imitator of the landscape, but must be seen as its spokesperson; what he does is not imitate it but lend a voice. Without the painter, we cannot hear the voice of the landscape. Painting is not the depiction or reproduction of the way things exist in the “outside world”. What makes a painter unique is that he can hear the landscape and let it manifest itself, make the invisible visible, the inaudible audible; in short, let that which has not yet become manifest, manifest itself.

The idea of the painter as the “consciousness of the landscape” mirrors Balzac’s description of Frenhofer: “For Poussin”, Balzac states, “the enthusiast, the old man, was suddenly transfigured, and became Art incarnate, Art with its mysteries, its vehement passion and its dreams”.<sup>627</sup> The artist as lending a voice to the landscape, in turn, ties back into Heidegger’s assessment of Van Gogh’s painting. It is through this painting that Heidegger, the philosopher, is able to meditate on the equipmentality of the equipment, or the “truth of the shoes”. Through the painting, then, Van Gogh lets a world unconceal itself via the peasant shoes.

How does a painter become the consciousness, the voice of the landscape? Merleau-Ponty approaches this question by enlisting a quote from Cézanne himself: “Nature is on the inside”.<sup>628</sup> The idea that “nature” is not simply something located before the painter and observed by him, but rather something to be found within him, subverts any dichotomous understanding of painter and landscape, man and nature, or inside and outside. Ultimately, Cézanne’s ambition is to demolish dichotomies like these; he speaks of wanting to “unite” nature and art.<sup>629</sup> But rather than pointing to a simplistic, undifferentiated unity, what Merleau-Ponty has in mind is a complex interweaving:

Quality, light, color, depth, which are over there before us, are there only because they awaken an echo in our bodies and because the body welcomes them. Why would this internal equivalence, this carnal formula

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<sup>626</sup> Merleau-Ponty, “Cézanne’s Doubt”, p. 77.

<sup>627</sup> Balzac, *The Unknown Masterpiece*, p. 11.

<sup>628</sup> Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind”, p. 355.

<sup>629</sup> Merleau-Ponty, “Cézanne’s Doubt”, p. 73.

of their presence that the things arouse in me not arouse an outline that is again visible, in which every other gaze would find again the motifs that support their inspection of the world?<sup>630</sup>

The painter, to Merleau-Ponty, cultivates an awareness of the factors that enable visual perception while remaining invisible themselves. As Sallis maintains, “Merleau-Ponty mentions light, lighting, shadows, reflections, color—that is, all those moments that are open to vision without being visible things, all that haunts these things like ghosts”.<sup>631</sup> Through factors such as colour, light, and depth, visible things arouse an equivalent of themselves within the perceiver. This equivalent, though, is an invisible one: “rather than seeing it, I see according to, or with it”.<sup>632</sup> It follows that the invisible equivalent of the visible thing is not “a tracing, copy, second thing”<sup>633</sup> that merely follows the visible thing, but complements and completes the visible thing in an indispensable way: “Neither the drawing nor the picture belongs to the in-itself any more than the image does. They are the inside of the outside and the outside of the inside, which duplicity of sensing [*le sentir*] makes possible and without which we would never understand the quasi-presence and imminent visibility which make up the whole problem of the imaginary”.<sup>634</sup>

This “imaginary” and its relation to the actual are crucial to Merleau-Ponty’s thought. For him, the imaginary fulfills a unique function far beyond replacing the absence of an actual thing. “The imaginary is much nearer to and much farther away from the actual”, he maintains.<sup>635</sup> It is much nearer to the actual because it creates the inner equivalent of the actual inside the perceiver. It is much further away since it escapes from the actual by offering the gaze something it cannot re-construct: the “traces of the vision of the inside”,<sup>636</sup> the invisible, or what Merleau-Ponty calls “the imaginary texture of the real”.<sup>637</sup>

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<sup>630</sup> Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind”, p. 355.

<sup>631</sup> Sallis, “Freeing the Line”, p. 22.

<sup>632</sup> Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind”, p. 355.

<sup>633</sup> Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind”, p. 356.

<sup>634</sup> Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind”, p. 356.

<sup>635</sup> Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind”, p. 356.

<sup>636</sup> Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind”, p. 356.

<sup>637</sup> Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind”, p. 356.

The painter's employment of the imaginary allows him to perceive the actual thing in both its visibility and in its invisibility. In concrete terms, this means that the painter cultivates a simultaneous awareness of the invisible factors that condition vision—such as light and depth—and the objects of ordinary vision. The painting into which this perception is translated, in its turn, offers the eye a double visibility: not only the visible but also the invisible dimension of the actual thing, not offered to the gaze by the thing itself. In Grene's words, "It is this act of seeing from the play of aspects to the thing in space that the painter reveals to us".<sup>638</sup> The resulting painting is a work of art in which, as Perri puts it, "presence and absence, reality and unreality, and visibility and invisibility inherently participate with or are implied in one another".<sup>639</sup>

In a way, then, one might say that the painting is more real than the actual thing: it offers the spectator what Ibn al-ʿArabī would describe as a manifestation of "the Absolute", which, "in the very moment of coming out outwardly [...] conceals itself inwardly".<sup>640</sup> As Merleau-Ponty puts it, "The eye sees the world, and it sees what the world lacks in order to be a painting, and what the picture lacks in order to be itself, and, on the palette, the colours for which the picture is waiting; and it sees, once it is done, the picture that responds to all these lacks, and it sees the paintings of others, the other responses to all these lacks".<sup>641</sup> Merleau-Ponty's employment of the concept of lack once again takes us back to Husserl, in whose terms one might state that what the painter is depicting is the excess in the perceived.

The interweaving of the inside and the outside, enabled by the imaginary, points to the privileged role Merleau-Ponty ascribes to human beings as "perceivers" of the world. According to him, "animals cannot *gaze at* [*regarder*] things, cannot penetrate them in expectation of nothing but the truth".<sup>642</sup> Human beings are not solely concerned with survival like the other animal species, but are something more: they are seekers of truth. When a human being gazes upon something, she wants to see more than what the thing offers to the eye. However, mental agency is not the only thing that renders human perception unique; rather, human perception can only come into being as a result of the

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<sup>638</sup> Grene, "The Aesthetic Dialogue", p. 220.

<sup>639</sup> Perri, "Image and Ontology in Merleau-Ponty", p. 77.

<sup>640</sup> Translation by Izutsu, p. 75-76.

<sup>641</sup> Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind", p. 356.

<sup>642</sup> Merleau-Ponty, "Cézanne's Doubt", p. 76.

unity of body and mind. “There is no vision without thought”, Merleau-Ponty states, “but *it is not enough* to think in order to see. Vision is a conditioned thought; it is born ‘as occasioned’ by what happens in the body; it is ‘incited’ to think by the body. It does not *choose* either to be or not to be or to think this thing or that”.<sup>643</sup> Merleau-Ponty’s “vision” is a carnal kind of perception, not judging the world from the outside, but “digesting” it bodily.

This description of human perception offers parallels to the thought of Ibn al-‘Arabī, to whom, as we have seen, only human beings—as opposed to animals on one side and angels on the other—are able to achieve a total perception of the absolute, a perception from which animals are barred on account of their mental insufficiency and angels on account of their lack of a body. Ibn al-‘Arabī can be read as insisting on the importance of the body in that all perception is both localized and enabled through the body: A thing “appears to itself in a form that is invested by the location of the vision by that which would only appear to it given the existence of the location”.<sup>644</sup> But how can the body be an indispensable precondition for the perception of the absolute, when it traps the perceiver in a limited vantage point? Once again, we may turn to Merleau-Ponty for an elaboration of this point.

“The world”, Merleau-Ponty states, “is made of the very stuff of the body”, which “is caught in the fabric of the world, and its cohesion is that of a thing”.<sup>645</sup> Perception, body, and the world are all of the same fabric, or, as Merleau-Ponty calls it, the same “flesh”. By proposing his notion of “flesh”, Merleau-Ponty emphasizes the unconscious ground of conscious experience as a unified thing. He also calls the flesh “brute and wild being”,<sup>646</sup> an ontological basis or a condition of possibility and of all relations, preceding the dichotomy between self and other as well as any identification of individual beings. In Dastur’s words, “The experience of the flesh, therefore, is able to take place only on the terrain of perceptual faith, which is also that of vision in action, the place where

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<sup>643</sup> Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind”, p. 365.

<sup>644</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabī, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 50.

<sup>645</sup> Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind”, p. 354.

<sup>646</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 200.

perceiving and perceived are still undivided and where things are experienced as annexes or extensions of ourselves”.<sup>647</sup>

Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of perception, exploring the connection between the body and the things around it, can be read as a non-theological elaboration of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s dictum that “there would appear to be observer and observed” while in reality, “only He sees Himself alone through Himself”.<sup>648</sup> The idea expressed here is remarkably similar to Merleau-Ponty’s position on perception as clarified by Douglas Low: “Nature perceives itself by the human body (which is a natural body) folding back on itself and thus folding back upon the world”.<sup>649</sup>

To Merleau-Ponty, there is an “anonymous visibility”<sup>650</sup> that consists of the visibility of things by a certain body that is also visible to those things that it perceives. Further, the body does not only perceive the things around it, but also itself as a thing among them: the perceiver “sees himself seeing; he touches himself touching; he is visible and sensitive for himself”.<sup>651</sup> If the body did not have the ability to see itself or touch itself, sense itself, experience itself, it would not be able to see or sense the things around it, either. Now, if the perceiver perceives things from among them rather than “from the outside”, as the Cartesian subject-object dichotomy suggests, we cannot take for granted that there is a difference between the perceiver and the perceived. In Galen A. Johnson’s words, “This extraordinary overlapping or envelopment is one in which seer and seen are capable of reversing their roles as subject and object”.<sup>652</sup> In this process, as McCann maintains, “the self loses all of its Cartesian isolation and exists as a self only through its intertwining as perceiver with the perceived”.<sup>653</sup> As Merleau-Ponty’s concept of “flesh” suggests, even before there is any kind of subject that perceives, the body is inextricably embedded in a network of the perceiving and perceptible.

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<sup>647</sup> Dastur, “World, Flesh, Vision”, p. 35.

<sup>648</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabī, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 107.

<sup>649</sup> Douglas Low, *Merleau-Ponty’s Last Vision*, Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press, 2000, p. 163.

<sup>650</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 142.

<sup>651</sup> Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind”, p. 354.

<sup>652</sup> Galen A. Johnson, “Painting, Nostalgia and Metaphysics: Merleau-Ponty’s Line”, *Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy* 5:1 (1993), p. 62.

<sup>653</sup> McCann, “Entwining the Body and the World”, p. 273.



Merleau-Ponty also approaches this embeddedness through his concept of the “fundamental narcissism of all vision”<sup>654</sup> in which “the seer and the visible reciprocate one another and we no longer know which sees and which is seen”.<sup>655</sup> This vision is universal because in the endless interplay of perceiver and perceived, it resists any kind of subjectivity. Merleau-Ponty calls it narcissistic because whatever I see, and whatever I am seen by, is ultimately made up of the same stuff. The exchange of gazes cannot be ascribed any subjective origin; it is there before I start perceiving, but what is perceived has not started the game, either. Further, the perceiver has a perception of their own perceiving. All in all, this amounts to what Merleau-Ponty describes as “a total or absolute vision, outside of nothing remains, and which closes itself back up upon” both perceiver and perceived.<sup>656</sup>

As Merleau-Ponty states, the human body is a “between”: “A human body is present [...] between seeing and visible, between touching and touched, between one eye and the other, between the hand and the hand”.<sup>657</sup> In Low’s words, the body is “a third kind of thing, neither a thing in itself nor a consciousness for itself (if Western tradition requires that we invoke these notions), but a lived-through blend of the two”.<sup>658</sup> This description mirrors Ibn al-‘Arabī’s understanding of the human being as an isthmus, or, in Austin’s words, “that all-important medium by which God perceives Himself as manifested in the Cosmos, and by which the Cosmos recognizes its source in God”.<sup>659</sup> In Ibn al-‘Arabī’s understanding, human beings contain both the visible and the invisible, both bodily perception and intelligence, both the manifested and the unmanifested absolute. As Merleau-Ponty states, “we see only what we gaze upon”,<sup>660</sup> and to both Merleau-Ponty and Ibn al-‘Arabī, human beings are the only ones equipped with this special kind of gaze. By means of such a gaze, the body unseals the world. In the case of the painter, the body then goes on to complete the circle by giving back to the world.

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<sup>654</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 139.

<sup>655</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The visible and the Invisible*, p. 183, quoted by Johnson, “Painting, Nostalgia and Metaphysics”, p. 62.

<sup>656</sup> Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind”, p. 359.

<sup>657</sup> Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind”, p. 355.

<sup>658</sup> Low, *Merleau-Ponty’s Last Vision*, p. 163.

<sup>659</sup> Austin, p. 206

<sup>660</sup> Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind”, p. 353.

“We cannot see how a Mind could paint”,<sup>661</sup> says Merleau-Ponty. “It is by lending his body to the world that the artist changes the world into painting”.<sup>662</sup>

Just as we saw in Ibn al-‘Arabī, the mirror—both as thing and as metaphor—plays an important role for Merleau-Ponty in illustrating his idea of an absolute vision in which all that perceives is simultaneously perceived and completed in this reciprocal perception.<sup>663</sup> As Merleau-Ponty puts it, “The mirror emerges because I am both seeing and visible, because there is a reflexivity of the sensible; the mirror translates and reproduces that reflexivity. Through it, my outside becomes complete”.<sup>664</sup> A Sufi might phrase her own worldview in similar terms: “The particulars, and especially humans”, she might say, “are manifestations of the absolute, and therefore mirrors through which the absolute makes itself visible to itself. They are both seeing and visible at the same time; through their reflection the absolute becomes complete”. The following passage by Merleau-Ponty about mirrors once again illustrates how fruitful it can be to approach certain phenomenological texts as non-theological companion pieces to Sufi thought:

The mirror’s phantom draws my flesh outside, and at the same time the invisible of my body can invest the other bodies that I see. Hence, my body can include segments drawn from the body of others. Just as my substance passes into them; man is a mirror for man. Mirrors are instruments of a universal magic that changes things into spectacles and spectacles into things, me into another and another into me.<sup>665</sup>

This employment of the mirror in Merleau-Ponty—and in Ibn al-‘Arabī—with all the implications it entails for our understanding of vision, could not stand in starker contrast to the Cartesian approach. “The blind”, Merleau-Ponty quotes Descartes, “see with their hands”.<sup>666</sup> According to Merleau-Ponty, therefore, “The Cartesian model of

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<sup>661</sup> Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind”, p. 353.

<sup>662</sup> Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind”, p. 353.

<sup>663</sup> For the sake of keeping my argument concise, I will not elaborate on the treatment of the mirror in the psychoanalytic tradition, particularly in the work of Jacques Lacan.

<sup>664</sup> Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind”, p. 359.

<sup>665</sup> Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind”, p. 359.

<sup>666</sup> Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind”, p. 360.

vision is modeled after the sense of touch”.<sup>667</sup> If there is no object to touch – as in the case of a reflection in a mirror – there really is *nothing to see*, either. For the Cartesian, a reflection is only a deceiver; “it resembles the thing itself”.<sup>668</sup> “As far as the thing and its mirror image are concerned, their resemblance is only an external denomination; the resemblance belongs to thought”.<sup>669</sup> “A Cartesian”, Merleau-Ponty states,

does not see himself in the mirror; he sees a puppet, an “outside”, which, he has every reason to believe, other people see in the very same way, but which is no more for himself than for others a flesh. His “image” in the mirror is an effect of the mechanics of things. If he recognizes himself in it, if he thinks it “looks like him”, it is thought that weaves this connection. The specular image is in no sense *a part of him*.<sup>670</sup>

Merleau-Ponty finds his criticism of Descartes confirmed by the latter’s views on painting, expressed in his *Optics*. “When [Descartes] speaks of ‘pictures’ [tableaux]”, Merleau-Ponty states, “he takes drawing as typical”.<sup>671</sup> This is because drawings “preserve the form of objects”.<sup>672</sup>

They present the object by its outside, or its envelopment. If he had examined that other, deeper opening upon things given us by the secondary qualities, especially colour, then—since there is no rule governed or projective relationship between them and the true properties of things, and we understand their message all the same—he would have found himself faced with the problem of a conceptless universality and opening upon things.<sup>673</sup>

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<sup>667</sup> Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind”, p. 360.

<sup>668</sup> Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind”, p. 360.

<sup>669</sup> Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind”, p. 360.

<sup>670</sup> Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind”, p. 360-361.

<sup>671</sup> Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind”, p. 362.

<sup>672</sup> Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind”, p. 362.

<sup>673</sup> Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind”, p. 362.

Descartes' reduction of painting to drawing enables him to talk of pictures as mere copies of the real and deny them any further value or contribution to our understanding of the world. This dismissal applies not just to pictures but also to reflections and, more broadly, images in general. Descartes offers us "the breviary of a thought that wants no longer to haunt the visible and decides to reconstruct it according to the model of visible that this thought has provided for itself".<sup>674</sup> This, in Descartes's system, is done to achieve an artificial clarity at the expense of the real complexity of the world. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, "How crystal clear everything would be in our philosophy if only we would exorcise these spectres, make illusions or objectless perceptions out of them, brush them to one side of an unequivocal world!"<sup>675</sup>

The ideal of clarity pursued here ultimately derives from Plato's famous line which divides a higher realm of forms, ideas, and mathematical truths from a lower level of objects and appearances. It is this same line that divides the philosophical approaches of rationalism and empiricism, as well as the realms of art, philosophy, and science, dismissing art as a mere copy, an imitation, secondary to appearances that are already secondary to thoughts, ideas, and forms. Both Sufism and phenomenology seek a new way of seeing the world and a new way of thinking. It is this quest, with its intended demolition of Plato's line, which renders both approaches iconoclastic. From the perspective of Merleau-Ponty, Plato's line appears as an icon of a metaphysics that reaches its zenith with Descartes and its nadir with Nietzsche, an icon that must be destroyed to enable a new metaphysics eschewing the dualism of the Cartesian worldview. From the perspective of Sufism, in turn, it is Plato's line, rather than any figural form of representation, that appears as the true icon the seeker of truth needs to destroy if she hopes to "seal" the division between the manifest and the unmanifest.

While it seems that Merleau-Ponty's philosophical project is aimed at getting rid of dichotomies such as those between subject and object or matter and form, his ultimate project is to crack the duality between noumena and phenomena, i.e., primordial existence and humanity. To Merleau-Ponty, there is no thing-in-itself lurking in the background; being does not have an "invisible existence", but only a visible one. It is

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<sup>674</sup> Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind", p. 360.

<sup>675</sup> Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind", p. 360.

simply that being conceals itself in order to unconceal itself, “dissimulates itself in order to show the thing”. If there is no visible, there is no thing either. The visible is the ground, not the invisible. Ultimately, there is no “pure invisibility”. There is only the visible, only the phenomena. As Johnson puts it,

The lines of visible things are doubled by a lining of invisibility, and this in-visible lining is in the visible. Merleau-Ponty stresses this, and by doing so de-centers the ordinary religious or aesthetic search away from the pursuit of an invisibility that would be a separate reality, a heavenly world apart from this world. [...] Paradoxical as it may sound, therefore, Merleau-Ponty's spirituality is quite consistent with a certain qualified atheism.<sup>676</sup>

As I have argued above, Ibn al-‘Arabī’s philosophy also offers the possibility of viewing the manifestations—or the visible—as the ground for the invisible. In his description of the relationship between the creation and the created, Ibn al-‘Arabī draws on the idea of a triplicity in the act of creation. All the components of the triplicity, such as the creator, creation, and the creative act; or the lover, the beloved, and love; depend on each other. In order to have a creator, one needs a creation. There is a reversibility between the manifest and unmanifest, the soul and the divine, or noumena and phenomena that makes it impossible to talk about the superiority of one to another or, as a matter of fact, any kind of duality.

Still, in both Merleau-Ponty and Ibn al-‘Arabī, this reversibility does not imply that a perfect mirroring between the perceiver and the perceived, the subject and the object, or the manifestation and the absolute, is attainable. To Merleau-Ponty, while we may be made out of the same flesh, things are still not completely familiar to us. The perceiver and the perceived are interwoven rather than completely overlapping. There is no exact coincidence between either me as a perceiver and me as the perceived, or me as the perceiver and the thing that is perceived. In Johnson’s words, “reversibility is an

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<sup>676</sup> Galen A. Johnson, “Desire and Invisibility in ‘Eye and Mind’: Some Remarks on Merleau-Ponty’s Spirituality”, in *Merleau-Ponty in Contemporary Perspective*, ed. Philip Burke and Jan van der Veken, Dordrecht: Springer, 1993, p. 91.

aesthetic rather than a logical phenomenon and does not imply the symmetry of subject and object, their substitutability in meaning, as would be implied by the logical biconditional. In the mirror, the reflection of the right hand is transposed as the left hand. There is asymmetrical reversibility, reflexivity with difference”.<sup>677</sup>

In Sufism, this imperfect interwovenness is expressed through the central metaphor of the veil. Ibn al-‘Arabī views the manifestations of the absolute as veils for the absolute as unmanifest. However, these veils should not be thought of as obstacles that prevent one from seeing the reality. Rather, they function somewhat like the “mask” in Friedrich Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy*, where art is taken to act as a mask that shows the truth while protecting us from being destroyed—like Oedipus—by its overwhelming potency. To Ibn al-‘Arabī, also, we do not see the absolute behind its manifestations despite of these manifestations but through them. As Merleau-Ponty puts it,

When through the water’s thickness I see the tiled bottom of the pool, I do not see it *despite* the water and the reflections; I see it through them and because of them. If there were no distortions, no ripples of sunlight, if I saw, without this flesh, the geometry of the tiles, then I would stop seeing the tiled bottom as it is, where it is, namely, farther away than any identical place.<sup>678</sup>

Finally, Merleau-Ponty approaches the issue of imperfect interwovenness through his concept of *écart* (gap):<sup>679</sup> Since any part of the body can be touched and touch, there is always an *écart* between these two actions. One cannot be sure whether she is touched or also touching at the same time. Still, the human body can shift between two positions,

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<sup>677</sup> Johnson, “Painting, Nostalgia and Metaphysics”, p. 63.

<sup>678</sup> Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind”, p. 371.

<sup>679</sup> At the same time, in “Eye and Mind”, Merleau-Ponty mentions his concept of *manque* (lack) (p. 356). He speaks of a lack inherent in reality, a lack of coherence, a lack in the immediately graspable, rendering our perception incomplete, thereby prompting us to respond to this lack and incompleteness, interrogating us, as it were, to elicit a response from us, an attempt to supply that which is lacking, the lack of which we have uncovered through our own interrogation of that which is in front of us. Thus, a double interrogation takes place, going in both directions between perceiver and perceived. This is as true for the painter and that which she is trying to depict as it is for the spectator who in turn beholds the painting as a completed work of art.

such as touch and be touched; perceive and be perceived. And since the two acts are reversible, the *écart* does not lead us to rationalize a dualism. Rather, the imperfect interwovenness renders the issue of the separation between inner and outer uncertain. In Dastur's words, "If the seer never superimposes himself exactly on the visible and remains for all intents and purposes always 'delayed' in relationship to the latter, it is precisely because there is no experience except of the metamorphosis of an inside into an outside and of an outside into an inside".<sup>680</sup> When inner is outer, and outer inner, what belongs to me, what to the world? This is the kind of uncertainty that both Merleau-Ponty and Ibn al-‘Arabī would like to provoke, since this uncertainty, to them, has the potential of waking us from our preconceptions and reconnecting us with "others who haunt me and whom I haunt; 'others' along with whom I haunt a single, present, and actual Being as no animal has ever haunted the others of his species, territory, or habitat".<sup>681</sup>

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<sup>680</sup> Françoise Dastur, "Merleau-Ponty and Thinking from Within", in *Merleau-Ponty in Contemporary Perspective*, p. 29.

<sup>681</sup> Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind", p. 352.

## **Conclusion: Towards a Phenomenology of Miniature Painting**

### The Illuminated Manuscript as a Great Work of Art

To Michael Barry, the dismemberment of illuminated manuscripts at the hands of Western collectors and vendors led to a tragic loss of meaning, the kind of meaning that could only be conveyed by the entirety of the manuscript and was lost in isolated contemplation of the single manuscript painting. “Only those illustrated Persian volumes”, he writes, “that have survived intact the twentieth-century’s depredations now allow reconstruction of what such pictures were really supposed to mean”.<sup>682</sup> This “meaning” of the miniature painting, to Barry, lies in “the allegorical code underlying its designs”.<sup>683</sup> In other words, if one were to peruse an undamaged manuscript and familiarize oneself with the text it contained—epic tales, Sufi allegories, and the like—this text would provide one with the key to unlock the paintings’ code, with the result that one could read them like the text itself.

Doubtlessly, this assertion is true. However, I would like to proceed beyond it—I believe that artistically, there is much more at stake in the illuminated manuscript than the mutual reinforcement of writing and painting. Rather, I think we can view the illuminated manuscript in its entirety as a great work of art in the Heideggerian sense. Let us recall that to Heidegger, the work of art simultaneously serves to “set forth the earth”<sup>684</sup> and “set up a world”.<sup>685</sup> The example of the Greek temple serves to illustrate both these aspects. With respect to earth, for instance, Heidegger maintains that “the building rests on the rocky ground. This resting of the work draws out of the rock the darkness of its unstructured yet unforced support”.<sup>686</sup> With respect to world, Heidegger states that “the temple work [...] first structures and simultaneously gathers around itself the unity of those paths and relations in which birth and death, disaster and blessing, victory and disgrace, endurance and decline acquire for the human being the shape of its destiny”.<sup>687</sup>

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<sup>682</sup> Barry, *Figurative Art*, p. 38.

<sup>683</sup> Barry, *Figurative Art*, p. 27.

<sup>684</sup> Heidegger, “The Origin”, p. 24.

<sup>685</sup> Heidegger, “The Origin”, p. 22.

<sup>686</sup> Heidegger, “The Origin”, p. 21.

<sup>687</sup> Heidegger, “The Origin”, p. 20-21.



The illuminated manuscript enables this process of setting forth the earth and setting up a world. As a small, portable object, it does not display the constant relationship to the surrounding ground, air, light, and darkness granted by Heidegger to the temple. However, the materiality of the manuscript, consisting of components such as paper, leather, pigments, and ink, performs a gathering of the Sufi world's earthly aspect—in all its geographical breadth—as found in no other context. As Heidegger puts it, “To set forth the earth means: to bring into the open as the self-secluding”.<sup>688</sup> In the illuminated manuscript also, earth is brought into the open while remaining self-secluding: none of the materials is encountered in a raw, unprocessed form, and nonetheless, their gathering in one place sets forth the earth in an unparalleled form.

When it comes to setting up a world, Sinclair reminds us that “Art is not to be understood as an expression of an age, and the temple does not merely [...] give form to Greek culture. On the contrary, as an *original* work it achieves, establishes and opens this culture itself”.<sup>689</sup> This is precisely what is achieved by the illuminated manuscript. Without the manuscript, the interregional networks—such as those of production, trade, and curation—required for the gathering of the manuscript's material components would not come into being. In other words, the creation of an illuminated manuscript does not only make a world reveal itself, it actually brings a world into being.

The manuscript does not only gather people who observe the work of art—a decidedly limited number—but also the people who serve as conduits in the unconcealment of the work of art. These people, from the gatherer of certain color pigments in India to the bookbinder in Persia, will never meet in person but come together in the manuscript. This understanding of artistic work is far removed from the modern cliché of the artist as solitary genius or originator of the work of art. Instead, it posits each participant in the creation of the artwork as a conduit for the work's self-disclosure. This brings us back to Heidegger's notion of *techne*, in which the artist (*technites*) takes on the role of a conduit facilitating the event of unconcealment.

The setting up of a world as performed by the illuminated manuscript goes beyond the gathering of *technites* who serve as conduits—it also involves the gathering

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<sup>688</sup> Heidegger, “The Origin”, p. 25.

<sup>689</sup> Sinclair, *Heidegger, Aristotle*, p. 171.

of the various fields of endeavor that make up the Sufi world. Areas of expertise as disparate and seemingly unconnected as philosophy, literature, calligraphy, painting, and leatherwork come together in the manuscript to reveal the complementarity that makes them into constituent parts of their world, and, in this coming together, perform a setting up of that world.

In the illuminated manuscript, earth and world do not stand next to each other as distinct categories but are inextricably intertwined. We can illustrate this interlacing by returning to the example of color. If we think of colors as mere parts of the materiality—the earthly aspect—of the manuscript, we forget that the possibility of such colors being produced and utilized tells us more about the world of the painting than any textual history could. It is only in being aided by earth, then, that world can reveal itself in any specific way. And the same holds in reverse: through its world, each color manifests itself in a culturally charged meaning, acquiring a particularity that it does not reveal on its own. Rather than confronting each other as two independent, opposing powers, earth and world commingle in the illustrated manuscript in the interlaced, interdependent way that Heidegger describes as strife.

Finally, Heidegger's example of the temple also aids us in rescuing the individual miniature painting from its representational entanglement. As Heidegger states of the deity's statue to be found in the temple, "The work is not a portrait intended to make it easier to recognize what the god looks like. It is, rather, a work which allows the god himself to presence and *is*, therefore, the god himself".<sup>690</sup> One could not ask for a more perfect parallel to the "life-giving" properties of painting in the Sufi context, which I have demonstrated to lie not in verisimilitude but rather in the occasioning of the absolute's self-manifestation. In Ibn al-'Arabī's words, we could say that the individual artwork is "the Self-manifestation of God to the consciousness of the worshiper in this particular mode of manifestation".<sup>691</sup>

I have attempted to demonstrate that the illuminated manuscript cannot be explained as the expression of an epoch. Rather, it is the thing that establishes an epoch—without it, we cannot talk of an epoch. Of course, epochs—and works of art—have a

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<sup>690</sup> Heidegger, "The Origin", p. 21-22.

<sup>691</sup> Ibn al-'Arabī, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 247.

historicity. The fragility of an epoch is experienced in the destruction of individual works of art—one need only remember the example of Gauhar Sultan, who responded to the murder of her husband, the prince Ibrahim Mirza, by washing out the priceless miniature album commissioned by the ruler. Gauhar Sultan’s tragic act of destruction takes on added poignancy when the dissolving effect of water on the manuscript is juxtaposed with the corrosive effect of time on the court milieu that Ibrahim Mirza had managed to build. But it is not just that the end of the work of art serves as a metaphor for the end of Ibrahim Mirza’s rule. It is also that the work of art ceases to be such at the moment its world disintegrates—as long as Ibrahim Mirza’s court was intact, it would have been inconceivable to destroy the exceptional album. But the moment its world ceases to be, the work of art also loses something—the component that makes it “great”, that enables it to act as the key to this particular world. The epoch has ended not because the manuscripts are destroyed, but precisely because they now *can* be destroyed.

This returns us to the historical fact that by the time the Western art industry took it upon itself to destroy or disintegrate specific illuminated manuscripts, the world in which those artworks belonged had already disappeared. The same can be said for the Greek temple: if the Athenian people still believed in the gods of the Acropolis and still used the temple as a gathering place for birth and death, for victory and defeat, the museum or art industry would not have been interested in or capable of turning it into an aesthetic object. We might say that formerly great works of art become mere aesthetic objects at the point their world disintegrates. And their cannibalization by the art industry is a result, rather than the cause, of this disintegration.

#### The Individual Artwork: Yusuf and Zulaykha

While I only describe the complete illustrated manuscript as a great work of art in the Heideggerian sense, I will nonetheless argue that the individual miniature painting lends itself to the kind of phenomenological reading performed by Heidegger with regard to Van Gogh’s painting of peasant shoes, or by Merleau-Ponty with regard to the work of Cézanne. Such a reading, I argue, proceeds from an awareness of the painting’s subject matter—both literal and allegorical—in the same way that Heidegger’s reading does not remain indifferent to the world of which his peasant woman is part. Nonetheless, it also

transcends this subject matter to arrive at the interplay of world and earth as manifested by the artwork as a whole. In what follows, I will attempt such a reading on hand of two well-studied works of miniature art by the master Bihzād. These works have been analyzed as to their allegorical dimensions by Michael Barry, and I will take Barry's analysis as a starting point before proceeding from it to my own phenomenological reading.

The first of these paintings is part of a manuscript devoted to the *Bustan* ("Orchard"), a versified story collection penned by the Persian poet Sa'di (1210-1291/92). The volume, including Bihzād's illustrations, was produced in 1488 at the behest of Bihzād's then-patron, Husayn Mirza Bayqara, Timurid ruler of Herat.<sup>692</sup> Barry points out that this painting, preserved along with its manuscript at the Egyptian National Library, was on loaned display at the 1910 exhibition in Munich that was also visited by Matisse.<sup>693</sup> The painting (see Appendix) depicts Yusuf and Zulaykha, or Joseph and Potiphar's wife in the Jewish and Christian traditions. The story has experienced countless retellings in the Islamic tradition,<sup>694</sup> but in Sa'di's version as illustrated by Bihzād, "the Lady has just ordered a wizard-architect to build for her a fantastic palace with seven closed doors, within which to trap and seduce her handsome page-boy [Yusuf]".<sup>695</sup> The painting shows Yusuf fleeing from Zulaykha within this palace, with Zulaykha trying to stop him by grabbing his cloak from behind. As Yusuf steadfastly refuses the seduction, "all seven doors fly open".<sup>696</sup>

Barry introduces us to the allegorical subtext of the painting. The figures of Zulaykha and Yusuf stand for the soul in search of the divine and the self-manifestation of said divine, respectively. Egypt as the setting represents the phenomenal aspect of the world. And the seven-tiered palace stands for the seven levels of the cosmos that must be

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<sup>692</sup> Barry, "Carver of Light", p. 42-43.

<sup>693</sup> Barry, "Carver of Light", p. 42. In *Figurative Art*, Barry mentions that Western curators were well aware of Bihzād's pre-eminent stature in the history of miniature art, going as far as dubbing him the "Raphael of the East"—"not because of the way Bihzād actually painted, but with respect to the major influence he enjoyed within his own cultural sphere" (Barry, *Figurative Art*, p. 35).

<sup>694</sup> See Gayane K. Merguerian and Afsaneh Najmabadi, "Zulaykha and Yusuf: Whose 'Best Story'?" (*International Journal of Middle East Studies* 29 [1997]: 485–508); and Fedwa Malti-Douglas, *Woman's Body, Woman's Word: Gender and Discourse in Arabo-Islamic Writing* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991).

<sup>695</sup> Barry, "Carver of Light", p. 43.

<sup>696</sup> Barry, "Carver of Light", p. 43.

traversed by the mystic, their doors opening to his heightened perception one by one.<sup>697</sup> In terms of technique, Barry places particular emphasis on the aspects that extend from Bihzād to Matisse, namely color and perspective. He stresses the bright, uniform colors of certain parts of the composition and the layout of Zulaykha's palace as a "carpet-page of flat architectural ornament", a "flat colourful expanse" that the beholder only converts into a "conceptual three-dimensional space" on account of the figures of Yusuf and Zulaykha.<sup>698</sup> Finally, Barry draws attention to the technique of "dual illustration" employed by Bihzād, who integrates into his painting appropriate verses by poets other than Sa'di, establishing multi-layered intertextual relations between Sa'di, his painting, and the other poetry in question.<sup>699</sup>

Barry does not bring the technical aspects of the painting into dialogue with his allegorical reading. But it is precisely in this juxtaposition, I would argue, that a phenomenological reading of the painting can be attempted. Ostensibly, the painting shows Zulaykha in the privacy of her palace. Historical scholarship tells us that the private household held an exceptionally important place in the lives of women in Muslim societies, and especially of wealthy, prestigious women such as Zulaykha. The house was the space from which these women, unencumbered by the oversight of men, built, maintained, and utilized their informal networks of power reaching across many layers of society. To be effective, however, these networks needed to center on the secluded protection of the lady's private home. As Leslie Peirce explains on hand of the Ottoman case, the home was a space of "eligibility and exclusion", representing "status and honor. As one ascends the social/political scale [...], authority is increasingly a phenomenon of the inner, often literally an interior, even residential, space the boundaries of which are guarded".<sup>700</sup>

Therefore, when we observe Zulaykha's house in the painting, we observe her world in its totality, the locus on which her whole life depends and in which it is mostly spent. We observe the locus of her seclusion and the power that stems from it. However,

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<sup>697</sup> Barry, "Carver of Light", p. 43.

<sup>698</sup> Barry, "Carver of Light", p. 43.

<sup>699</sup> Barry, "Carver of Light", p. 43-44.

<sup>700</sup> Leslie P. Peirce, *The Imperial Harem: Women and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 9. Peirce contrasts this Middle Eastern understanding of the interior with "dominant modern Western notions of the politically significant as 'outer' and public, and the politically marginal as 'inner' or private and domestic" (p.9).

the painting turns Zulaykha's dwelling inside out, revealing its most intimate corners and most private moments, all of which Zulaykha needs to conceal in order to maintain her worldly power. While all the doors and windows are shut as per the story, all the walls are open to the beholder. They are not deployed to protect and hide but, to the contrary, to show and reveal. The effect is one of a "total or absolute vision"<sup>701</sup> beyond every point of view, a vision we could call divine in that it breaks right through the overlapping of objects, allowing nothing to be hidden behind anything else. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, "God, who is everywhere [...] could penetrate their hiding place and see them openly deployed".<sup>702</sup> The absence of depth and avoidance of overlap in this painting enables precisely what Merleau-Ponty describes as a "participation in a Being without restriction, first and foremost a participation in the being of space beyond every particular point of view".<sup>703</sup>

The simultaneity of all different points of view applies not only to the dimension of space, but also to that of time. The painting displays the seven chambers through which Zulaykha has chased Yusuf and guides the eye through them by a number of strategically placed diagonals, textual signposts, and colorful focal points. Traversing this seven-layered maze, the eye comes to rest on the figures of Zulaykha and Yusuf as the former tears at the latter's robe. From here, the eye is guided further along the lines of Yusuf's body to his eventual point of escape at the top of the building. Thus, although the moment highlighted through the figures is a specific one, the painting puts the whole story on display in a simultaneous manner. In so doing, the painting manages to give a sense of a monolithic totality of time, the past, present, and future merged into one, the supposed ungatherables of temporal progression gathered in one whole.

#### The Individual Artwork: Layli and Majnun

The second painting I wish to consider also belongs to Bihzād; it accompanies the story of Layli and Majnun I briefly alluded to in my discussion of Ibn al-'Arabī. The version of the story illustrated here (see Appendix) is part of the *Khamseh* ("Quintet"), a versified collection of five epic narratives composed in Persian by Nizāmī of Ganja (1141-1209).

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<sup>701</sup> Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind", p. 359.

<sup>702</sup> Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind", p. 363.

<sup>703</sup> Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind", p. 363.

The painting is part of a manuscript produced in Herat 1494, and is preserved today in the British Library, London.<sup>704</sup> In it, Qays, the future “Majnun” (“mad for love”), sees Layli for the first time. The two, who “already love each other from reputation, as it were by instinct”,<sup>705</sup> are seated in the yard of a mosque, where they are studying among other boys and girls. Barry translates the verses providing the painting’s context as follows:

For a while they both kept the matter well hid,  
Lest the secret be disclosed unto all.  
Yet however tight and dry the string  
Which binds up tight a pouch of musk,  
The scent so sweet betrays the musk within  
And the very breeze sensed that a lover was there:  
And uplifted the veil from her Beauty!<sup>706</sup>

The story, as mentioned above, is an allegory of the love between the soul and the divine. Laylî is the divine in a feminine manifestation. The lifting of the veil, of course, is a moment of *tajalli* (theophany), in which the divine reveals itself to the soul, here Qays. As Barry puts it, “The theophany, or *tajalli* in Islamic languages, means that the Divine becomes visible: by shining, according to Persian poets, as if in a mirror, and in this case, as a glorious light reflected upon a young girl’s face”.<sup>707</sup> The connection between the divine, the feminine, and darkness—the latter expressed in the painting through Layli’s black hair—is one we have already encountered in Ibn al-‘Arabî. I have demonstrated above that, in his *Bezels of Wisdom*, the philosopher uses the concepts of darkness and femininity to illustrate the transcendent aspect of the absolute, concealed and yet fertile in its potential. It is in the strife between this transcendence and immanence, connotated with images of light and masculinity, that the divine self-manifestation takes place. The divine is engaged in a constant process of veiling and unveiling or concealment and

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<sup>704</sup> Barry, *Figurative Art*, p. 14.

<sup>705</sup> Barry, *Figurative Art*, p. 14.

<sup>706</sup> Barry, *Figurative Art*, p. 14.

<sup>707</sup> Barry, *Figurative Art*, p. 14.

unconcealment; hence the strife between darkness and light located here in the interplay between Layli's dark hair and the light shining on her face.

The figures of Layli and Majnun are not the only allegorical components of the painting. The schoolmaster, in whose depiction Barry recognizes the poet Nizāmī himself, serves here as a Sufi sheikh initiating Qays into the mysteries of divine love. The plane tree, "which bows in homage, like a protective canopy", over Qays, stands for the Tree of Life, "an image of the entire visible universe".<sup>708</sup> Its leaves symbolize "the multiplicity of visible creation", while the birds perched upon it stand for "liberated souls".<sup>709</sup> Finally, the tree's protective framing of Qays signals the young lover's incipient sainthood.

The visual strategies employed by the painting bear similarities to those found in the painting of Yusuf and Zulaykha. Once again, interiors serve to reveal rather than expose: Layli, who is seated in front of the prayer niche in the interior of the mosque, is revealed in her seclusion by an absence of walls. The two lovers, one inside and the other outside, are connected through diagonals and vacant spots that lead the eye from him to her, as well as through the monochromatic surface that both figures are seated on, uniting them on the same dimension. The different perspectives from which various fences and walls are depicted seem to mimic the points of view the painting's beholder would assume were she to traverse the scene in person, and thus lead to a commingling of vantage points and the various moments of their assumption. This simultaneity of moments in time also extends into the future. Here, it is not an escape route as in the former painting that indicates future developments, but Qays' dipping of his stylus into an inkwell: "Young Qays is fated to renounce the world and become a wandering dervish, a saintly hermit, an ascetic poet"<sup>710</sup> of divine love. As in the previous painting, the combination of these strategies opens up a total apprehension of the scene that goes far beyond the capabilities of everyday perception.

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<sup>708</sup> Barry, *Figurative Art*, p. 15. As Barry points out, Ibn al-'Arabī devoted his treatise, *Shajarat-ul-Kawn* ("The Tree of Live"), to this image. In the Sufi philosopher's words: "Now I looked at the universe and its genesis, at what was caused to be and how it was set forth, and I saw that the whole universe was a tree, the root of whose light is from the seed, 'Be!'" (Ibn al-'Arabī, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 244).

<sup>709</sup> Barry, *Figurative Art*, p. 15.

<sup>710</sup> Barry, *Figurative Art*, p. 15.



Some specific attributes of this painting invite further comment in the context of phenomenology. One of these is the superimposition of Layli and the prayer niche before which she is seated. As Barry points out, this placement is meant to reinforce the connection between Layli and the divine. By having Qays simultaneously regard Layli and the niche, “towards which every Muslim must turn in prayer”, the painting makes clear that “by beholding Layli, Qays is actually worshipping the divine”.<sup>711</sup> The overlapping of Layli and the niche stands in contrast to the lack of overlap found in the painting of Yusuf and Zulaykha. But the overlap here creates not a sense of depth and distance, but one of merger and identity. By concealing part of the niche behind Layli, the overlap simultaneously unconceals the sameness between Layli and the divine. As Merleau-Ponty states, “the enigma” of overlapping things lies in “their known exteriority in their envelopment and their mutual dependence in their autonomy”.<sup>712</sup> The invisibility of the niche leads to the visibility of Layli as a manifestation of the absolute. In Merleau-Ponty’s words, “I see depth and yet it is not visible”.<sup>713</sup>

Finally, and perhaps most interestingly, this painting is host to a multiplicity of gazes and mirroring effects that can be fruitfully assimilated to Merleau-Ponty’s concept of the “fundamental narcissism of perception”.<sup>714</sup> Above, I argued that this concept postulates perception as universal and narcissistic because it takes perception to consist of a simultaneous and beginningless intersubjectivity of gazes in which everything participates as both observer and observed, thereby denying the atomized, differentiated individuality of any perceiver or perceived. The totality of this universal, narcissistic perception is described by Merleau-Ponty as “a total or absolute vision, outside of which nothing remains and which closes itself back up upon” all participants. In describing this total vision, Merleau-Ponty falls back on the idea of the mirror. “Painters have often dreamed about mirrors”, he states,

because beneath this “mechanical trick” they recognized, as they did in the case of the “trick” of perspective, the metamorphosis of seeing and the

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<sup>711</sup> Barry, *Figurative Art*, p. 14. As Barry explains, this point is further driven home by a Koranic inscription above the niche.

<sup>712</sup> Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind”, p. 369.

<sup>713</sup> Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind”, p. 363.

<sup>714</sup> Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind”, p. 354.

visible that defines both our flesh and the painter's vocation. This also explains why they have so often loved to draw themselves in the act of painting (they still do – witness Matisse's drawings), adding to what *they* could see of things at the moment, what *things* could see of them.<sup>715</sup>

As we have seen, Bihzād's painting of Layli and Majnun contains both a depiction of the author himself—not Bihzād, to be sure, but his literary alter ego Niẓāmī—and the idea of Layli as a mirror of the divine. But this is only one part of the baffling multiplicity and mirroring of gazes taking place in this painting. First off, let me repeat that the “turning inside out” of the mosque to reveal the figure of Layli points us to what Merleau-Ponty might call God's perspective, penetrating the hiding places of all things. If the painting features the scene as perceived by the absolute, of course this also renders the painting's individual beholder a stand-in for the absolute—expressing precisely the idea of identity between human and divine found in Ibn al-‘Arabī. At the same time that the painting offers the perspective of God as perceiver, though, it also presents God as manifested within the perceived via the figure of Laylī. Thereby, the divine emerges as both perceiver and perceived, taking us back to Ibn al-‘Arabī's idea of the Cosmos as a self-disclosure of the divine to the divine. Another layer of mutual, “narcissistic” perception is then introduced in the figures of Layli and Majnun, who are positioned in such a way as to offer virtual mirror images of each other. Here, the divine as manifested in Layli is mirrored in the figure of Majnun, the soul in search of its union with the absolute. And ultimately, Majnun as Layli's mirror and beholder refers back to the beholder of the painting, an individuated soul in her own right, and one in which the divine is seeking to behold its mirrored reflection. One could hardly ask for a more perfect instance of Merleau-Ponty's “total or absolute vision, outside of nothing remains and which closes itself back up upon” itself. In his words, “Essence and existence, imaginary and real, visible and invisible—painting blurs all our categories, spreading out before us its oneiric universe of carnal essences, efficacious resemblances, muted meanings”.<sup>716</sup>

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<sup>715</sup> Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind”, p. 359.

<sup>716</sup> Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind”, p. 360.

“Once art is present”, Merleau-Ponty states, “it awakens powers that are asleep in ordinary vision, a secret preexistence”.<sup>717</sup> It is this preexistence that Sufism can be said to occasion through miniature art. Ultimately, this art, along with its attendant form of perception, was rendered impracticable and illegible by Western influence—artistic and otherwise. Merleau-Ponty would seem to come full circle in trying to regain, through the means of Western painting, the same kind of perception. It is no coincidence that in the twentieth century, the first Western exhibitions of Middle Eastern miniature painting served as inspiration for modern painters like Henri Matisse. After all, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, the effort of modern painting “may require the creation of new materials or new means of expression, but it may well be realized at times by the reexamination and reuse of those already at hand”.<sup>718</sup>

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<sup>717</sup> Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind”, p. 370-371.

<sup>718</sup> Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind”, p. 371.

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Appendix: Miniature Paintings



*Yusuf and Zulaykha* by Kamāluddīn Bihzād, ca. 1488





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*Layli and Majnun* by Kamāluddīn Bihzād, ca. 1494

## Summary

### **“Lifting the Veil from the Face of Depiction”: Middle Eastern Miniature Painting in light of Sufism and Phenomenology**

The tradition of Middle Eastern miniature painting flourished mainly from the fourteenth to the nineteenth centuries in the Timurid, Safavid, and Ottoman empires. Drawing on Sufi philosophical concepts expressed in the work of thinkers such as Muḥyiddīn Ibn al-‘Arabī (1165-1240) and Jalāladdīn Rūmī (1207-73), miniature painting aimed at mirroring the “innovative” and “life-giving” qualities of divine creation, remaining unconcerned with Western artistic preoccupations such as verisimilitude. As centuries went by, however, miniaturists were faced with the increasing onslaught of Western cultural influence, until ultimately, the art form was superseded by approaches to painting inspired by the West. Ironically, the obsolescence of the miniature tradition in the Middle East was soon followed by its “discovery” in the West. Miniature paintings, featured in expositions of the early twentieth century, started influencing the work of artists such as Henri Matisse and the Fauves, artists who wished to break with the Western emphasis on verisimilitude in painting. This new Western art, in turn, went on to inspire its own philosophical tradition, formulated by phenomenologists such as Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Often, their ideas bore striking resemblance to the Sufi philosophical bedrock of miniature painting. The Middle Eastern idea of “life-giving” art, for instance, was mirrored in the Heideggerian concept of “art as unconcealment”.

The connection between Sufism, miniature art, and Western abstract painting was first highlighted in the seminal work of Michael Barry. However, no scholarly work to date has systematically traced the line of transference from Sufi philosophy to miniature painting, miniature painting to Western abstract art, and Western abstract art to phenomenology. Further, there has been no ontological assessment of miniature art in light of Sufi philosophy (not even attempted by Sufi thinkers themselves) and no comparative analysis of the two philosophical traditions, Sufi and phenomenological, that stand at the beginning and end of the line of transference. The present study fills these gaps by systematically assessing (1) the historical continuity and (2) the philosophical common ground of the “Eastern” and “Western” traditions in question. Rather than demonstrating some direct or indirect indebtedness of modern Western philosophy to Sufi thinkers, however, the study ultimately aims to expose the theoretical and practical compatibility of Sufi and phenomenological approaches to art, in the expectation that we can avail ourselves of phenomenology to arrive at readings of Middle Eastern miniature painting that are unprecedentedly nuanced while at the same time true to the original philosophical underpinnings of the art form.

## Samenvatting

### **“Het ontsluiten van het karakter van de afbeelding”:**

#### **De miniatuur schilderkunst uit het Midden-Oosten in het licht van het soefisme en de fenomenologie**

De traditie van de miniatuurkunst in het Midden-Oosten bloeide voornamelijk van de veertiende tot de negentiende eeuw in de Timurid-, Safavid-, en Ottomaanse rijken. Geworteld in de Soefistische filosofische opvattingen, te vinden in het werk van denkers als Muhyiddin Ibn al-Arabi (1165-1240) en Jalāladdīn Rumi (1207-1273), was het miniatuur schilderen gericht op het weerspiegelen van de “innovatieve” en “levengevende” kwaliteiten van de goddelijke schepping. Het miniatuur schilderen was vrij van Westerse artistieke preoccupaties zoals het afbeelden naar waarheid. Echter, gedurende het verstrijken van de eeuwen, werden de miniaturisten geconfronteerd met de toenemende invloed van de westerse cultuur, die hen overspoelde, zodat de kunstvorm, uiteindelijk, werd vervangen door opvattingen over het schilderen geïnspireerd door het Westen. Ironisch genoeg werd het in onbruik raken van de miniatuur traditie in het Midden-Oosten al snel gevolgd door de “ontdekking” ervan in het Westen. Miniatuur schilderijen, te zien in exposities aan het begin van de twintigste eeuw, begonnen het werk van kunstenaars als Henri Matisse en de Fauves te beïnvloeden, kunstenaars die wilden breken met de westerse nadruk op de realiteit in de schilderkunst. Op haar beurt ging deze nieuwe westerse kunst, haar eigen (Westerse) filosofische traditie inspireren, geformuleerd door fenomenologen zoals Martin Heidegger en Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Hun ideeën droegen vaak een opvallende gelijkenis met de soefi filosofische bakermat van de miniatuurkunst. De Midden-Oosterse idee van “levengevende” kunst, bijvoorbeeld, werd weerspiegeld in Heideggers idee van “Kunst als Onverborgenheid”.

De verbinding tussen het soefisme, de miniatuurkunst, en het Westerse-abstracte schilderen werd voor het eerst benadrukt in het baanbrekende werk van Michael Barry. Tot nu toe, echter, is er geen wetenschappelijk werk dat systematisch de lijn volgt van de overdracht van de Soefi filosofie naar het miniatuur schilderen, van het miniatuur schilderen naar de westerse abstracte kunst en van de westerse abstracte kunst naar de fenomenologie. Ook bestaat er geen ontologische beoordeling van de miniatuurkunst in het licht van de Soefi filosofie (zelfs niet door Soefi denkers zelf) en bestaat er geen vergelijkende analyse van de twee filosofische tradities, het Soefisme en de fenomenologie, die staan aan het begin en het einde van de lijn van overdracht. Deze voorliggende studie vult de hiaten door het systematisch beoordelen van (1) de historische continuïteit en (2) de filosofische gemeenschappelijke grond van de “Oosterse” en “Westerse” tradities in kwestie. Echter, deze studie is er niet opgericht om

enig direct of indirect schatplichtig zijn van de moderne westerse filosofische denkers aan de Soefisten aan te tonen, maar de uiteindelijke bedoeling van deze studie is het blootleggen van de theoretische en praktische comptabiliteit van de Soefistische- en fenomenologische benaderingen van kunst, met de verwachting dat wij gebruik kunnen maken van de fenomenologie om te komen tot het begrijpen van de miniatuur schilderkunst uit het Midden-Oosten, die ongekend veelzijdig is, terwijl zij tegelijkertijd trouw is aan de oorspronkelijke filosofische onderbouwing van de kunstvorm.