

HOW THE ARAB UNDERSTOOD VISUAL ART

SALOUA RAOUDA CHOUCAIR

Having read your book and taken note of your personal opinions, analysis, and interpretation, I am prompted to make a few observations that may be of some benefit, or even much.¹ First, I want to draw your attention to the issue of Orientalists and how they appear from the perspective of us Arabs, or rather from the perspective of you who studied with them and were influenced by their standards. In your various studies of Arabs, their history, and their literature, you compare them to the civilizations that preceded them, whether Indian, Persian, or Greek. I do not believe that such a comparison is fair or tenable, unless we allow comparing Ibn al-Farid with Napoleon, for example.² In your study of the Arabic story, you ventured to note some very strange Arab aesthetics, but the general standards on which you base your study prevented you from declaring them directly, so you gave only a glimpse, and consequently your questions proliferated.

I acknowledge that Arabs borrowed much from the peoples they encountered, among them Indians, Persians, and Greeks. Yet, on the other hand, everything they took, they stamped with their own

1 Choucair originally penned this essay as a response to Musa Sulaiman's study *Al-Adab al-qisasi 'ind al-'arab* [Narrative Fiction among the Arabs], which had appeared the previous year (Juniyah, Lebanon: Dar al-Kitab, 1950).

2 Ibn al-Farid was a mystical poet active in 12th-century Cairo.

personality. You yourself mention that on page 20 of your book, in the course of your study of *A Thousand and One Nights*, saying, “The Arabic coloring in it stands out the strongest.” I will extrapolate from this that Arabs imposed their special character on all they borrowed from other peoples, and that was the source of the strength of their personality, a personality that differed from all others around them. It is this personality that needs to be studied, in its own light and not in the light of other civilizations. It is from this theoretical angle that I will analyze Arab visual art, because it facilitates understanding other forms of Arab art, and because visual art is my specialty.

How did the Arab understand visual art?

The Arab never took much interest in visible, tangible reality, or the truth that every human sees.³ Rather, he took his search for beauty to the essence of the subject, extracting it from all the adulterations that had accumulated in art since the time of the [Ancient] Greeks (*zaman al-ighriq*) until the end of the 19th century. The Arab neither employed the illusion of dimensionality nor distorted a truth in order to bring out an idea. He neither made visual art subservient to literature nor affixed it with an alien spirit.

Arabs are the most sensitively sophisticated of peoples in understanding art, and that is why they broached the subject at its abstract essence.⁴ Visual art has its own impact and value in itself, so there is no need, from the Arab’s perspective, to associate it with other art forms for it to be complete. In literature, there is the word, and in visual art there is color. The Arab never mixed the two together, and this is what has escaped the critics to this day. Rather, they judged Arabs according to the standards I mentioned above, those that affirm the achievements of the Greeks and Romans as the pinnacle of intellect and innovation. As I said, in seeking the essence in visual art, the Arab purifies it of admixtures, *because that is in his spirit (ruh)*. Not because the Qur’an forbade it. This attitude is equally apparent in the sciences, literature, and religious dogma, where the Arab seeks abstraction and the elimination of irregularities.

3 As I explain in my introductory article, I conform to the original text’s alternation between “Arabs” (meaning a people) and “the Arab” (meaning a typical member of that people).

4 Choucair’s verb tense oscillates between the present and the past. I have chosen to honor this and reproduce it in English, despite the occasional awkwardness. I discuss in the introduction why Choucair seems to have intended to intertwine completed, ongoing, and not-yet-undertaken actions.

Do you not see that Jews and some Christians who believe in the Old Testament did not abide by the passage of the commandment that says, “Do not make for yourselves hewn sculptures or images”?⁵

You ask, “What is the relationship of Arabic stories to the sciences and arts of the period?” The answer to this question lies in the Arabs’ quest for the essence and the abstract. Indeed, the Arab shone in mathematics and its related fields, such as astronomy. In the place of a given truth, these sciences substitute a deeper truth, that of numeration.⁶ With chemistry, they distilled alcohol.⁷ This process of distillation is in fact simply the conversion of substances back to their original nature, free of impurities. This is what Arabs are legendary for. The idea of an Elixir of Life long engrossed the Arab.⁸

Is there something in the Arab’s religion that leads him to this outlook? Have you ever considered the Qur’anic description of Heaven? Heaven is not somewhere beyond our imagination, where ages and genders have all faded, where food, drink, and the pleasures of life have disappeared. It is not an illusion or an unrealistic vision (*sura*). Rather, it is reality in its very essence; it is life itself, as we know it on Earth, but distilled to its quintessence. Prophets and all who have been motivated by benevolence have tried to improve life and elevate it to the state of perfection. Heaven in the Qur’an is exactly that promise of perfection in life:

Do we love life? There is eternal life.

We love women? There are the virgins of paradise.

5 The reference is probably to Leviticus 26:1: “Ye shall make you no idols nor graven image, neither rear you up a standing image, neither shall ye set up any image of stone in your land, to bow down unto it: for I am the Lord your God” (King James Version).

6 The Arabic is inimitably eloquent: the first element is *haqiqa waqi’iyya*; its substitute, *haqiqa ashadd waqi’iyyatan*. The word I am translating as *given*, *waqi’iyya*, literally means “befallen.” The implication is that a truth “falls” (occurs) before our eyes, thus becoming a reality, but the ground upon which it falls, the substratum of possibility for its resonance and apprehension, is yet *more real* (literally, “more fallen”) in a structuring, explanatory way, than the particular event.

7 Choucair here makes reference to the Arabic origin of the word *alcohol*, from *al-kuhl*, the name for antimony sulfide, which ancient Arabs would pulverize and then heat to a vapor. The condensed remains consisted of a powder so fine that its grains were indistinguishable and made for smooth application on human skin. By extension, Arabs applied the term *al-kuhl* to substances obtained from this distillation process, particularly liquids. The word retains its Arabic form, complete with definitive article, in all European languages, maintaining its association with Arabic science.

8 Like *alcohol*, *elixir* is an Arabic loanword, from *al-iksir*, that refers to a substance that was held to be incorruptible (often based on gold, which does not tarnish) and able to protect life from all corruptions—that is, to provide immortality.

حزيرانه ١٩٥١

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The Arabic table of contents for *Al-Abhath* 4, no. 1 (June 1951), in which the lengthier version of Saloua Raouda Choucair's letter to Musa Sulaiman appeared. Image courtesy of the American University of Beirut Press.

We love water, in these parched lands? Heaven has gardens with rivers flowing through them.

Everything that we love on Earth exists abundantly in Heaven, with the troubles of hunger, poverty, death, and all other imperfections blotted out. Upon my life, I prefer such a heaven to the illusory paradise of no existence, where pleasure is eternally deprived.

Why wasn't the Arab influenced by Greek philosophy? Why didn't he embrace it as he embraced Greek science? Because Greek philoso-

phy is an illusory one: it takes you from one point to another by means of [speculative] argument, leading you to an imaginary point that actually is inaccessible since it is inexistent.⁹ Dialectical argumentation is the main foundation for this illusion, and it is a foundation built on logic, not experience.¹⁰ The Arab and the Greek differ in spirituality (*ruhiyya*), and for that reason, the Arab ignored this realm [of Greek thought]. The Arab philosophers were Sufis; their knowledge stemmed from experience, not dialectical argumentation. Until recently, they were often accused of not having a philosophy at all, but then various Western philosophers approached Sufism in their own thinking, such as Kierkegaard, Jaspers, Heidegger, and Sartre.

What we see from the foregoing is that Arabs' devotion to the idea of the essence was the result of neither a coincidence nor a Qur'anic interdiction against representing people and things. Rather, it was one of the distinguishing features of Arab arts, religion, philosophy, sciences, and literature. It appears in their storytelling, too, and the story of 'Antara is a prime example.¹¹

The focal point for the Arab, in every artistic and scientific endeavor, is the essence, and thus in the story too. In the Arabic story, we observe the special trait of "distillation" that I mentioned before, or the process of cleansing the essence and ridding it of excesses and "imperfections." A story needs a hero, so he must be the greatest hero that ever lived and ever will. This is just as you described 'Antara in your book:

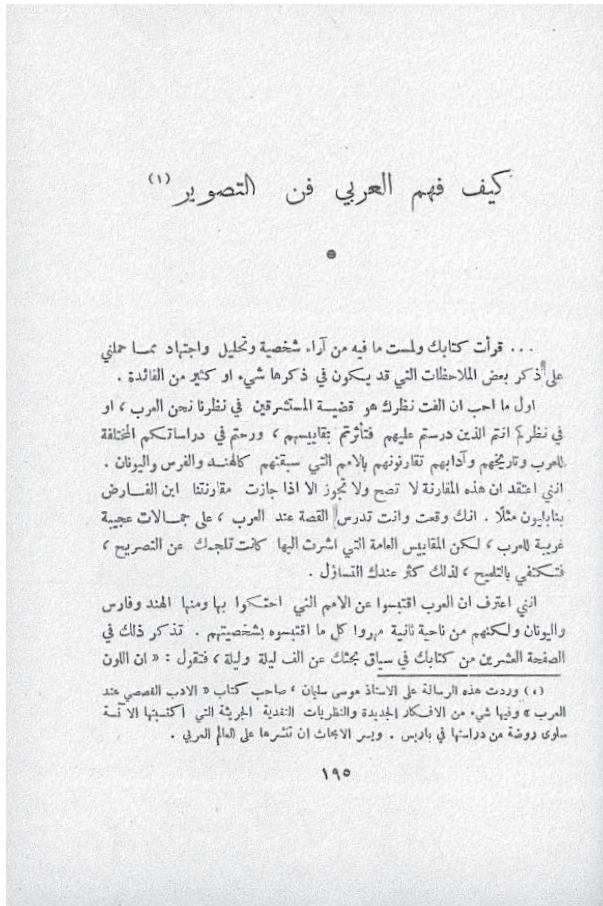
'Antara the myth was lifted to the loftiest heights of heroism and adorned with the best virtues of chivalry, combining courage and the compassion of the powerful. He is the paragon of the perfect

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- 9 Choucair is referring to Aristotelian deductive logic, which uses syllogism to get from point X (the first premise) via point Y (the second premise) to an endpoint (the conclusion) that is, according to Choucair's/"the Arab's" view, nonexistent and thus unknowable.
- 10 The Arabic term is *tajriba*, which also means "experiment." Very likely, a "phenomenalist" scientist like Alhazen (965–1040) inspires the artist's thought here, with his systematic manipulation of light through dark chambers, water submersion, and varying apertures to induce the laws of nature manifested in light's behavior. See the Introduction for an explanation of Choucair's engagement of Alhazen.
- 11 'Antar(a) Ibn Shaddad was a poet in the Arabian peninsula in the 6th century CE credited with authoring a 5,300-page epic autobiography, *Sirat 'Antara*. It tells of the "jet black" poet's childhood in servitude and his quest for respect, freedom, and love, and it relates his miraculous triumphs to his qualities of valor, generosity, and dignity.

paladin, a knight-hero whose heroism knows no end. He fears no army, no matter how large; he fears no perils, no matter how grave. Were thousands to rise against him, one shout from him would disperse them. Were demons to obstruct his path, he would set his sword to work on them and be rid of them one by one.

These traits demonstrate the essence of heroism, distilled, unblended, far from the admixture of reality, approaching the pure principle. To he who does not understand the Arab spirit, they look like hyperboles, exceeding the scope of conception, as you said. They look like lies to whomever cannot release his imagination (*khayal*) from the flaws of reality, [to apprehend] that unadulterated truth which scorns time (*zaman*) and space (*makan*).

The first page of Saloua Raouda Choucair's "How the Arab Understood Visual Art," *Al-Abhath* 4, no. 1 (June 1951). Image courtesy of the American University of Beirut Press.



What use is this chronological sequence (*tasalsul al-tarikhi al-mantiqi*) upon which you all insist?¹² Does essence change when advanced or delayed? Why do you want the Arab to lend more importance to ideational series? Have you [not] read modern literature, by Gide, Proust, Dos Passos, or Woolf? Have you [not] noticed how completely they disregard historical time (*al-ta'rikh*)? Or rather, how perfect their intention to disregard it! See how they mingle various ideational series—the chronologies by which you would impose an artificial separation. Arabs' indifference to those chronologies was deliberate, for the purpose of emphasizing that the hero's main personality trait does not change with time. Whether writers take up 'Antara's feats today or a thousand days from today, what counts is that the truth of these feats can only intensify.

As for the *imaginaire* (*khayal*) of [our] materialist storyteller,¹³ in which you find no “upward thrust,” you say,¹⁴

The narration is built on a peculiar imagination [*khayal*]. It is inhibited, limited. It raises you towards transcendence only to shock you with the concrete and the tangible. It is an imagination that will always and forever lead you to embodied matter.

This imagination is the same one you go on to praise on page 115 in your description of modern civilization:

Do you not see this truth, incarnated in the modern West in the submarine exploding through the belly of the oceans, and in

12 Literally “logico-historical series.” Elsewhere in this paragraph, Choucair substitutes *al-tasalsul al-fikri* (ideational series), *al-tasalsul al-mantiqi* (logical series), or simply *al-tasalsul* (series, sequence). With each, she focuses her attack on the critic's reliance upon sequential ordering to evaluate character traits or plot.

13 The Arabic word is *khayal*, which in common parlance translates as “imagination,” “specter,” “phantasm,” or “fantasy.” This is how Sulaiman used it, too. At the time of his study and Choucair's response, it was not yet in use in literary studies to translate “fiction” as a narrative genre for which human creativity is credited (see Lakhdar Souami, “Fictionnel et non-fictionnel dans l'oeuvre de Gahiz,” in *Story-Telling in the Framework of Non-fictional Arabic Literature*, ed. Stefan Leder [Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1998], 225–57). However, Choucair expands from talking about a way of imagining, or a human capacity for believing in what is not present, to a culturally pre-formed possibility of thinking about what is not present by using a collection of symbols, tropes, and themes. This suggests that her argument may be buttressed by Jean-Paul Sartre's totalizing social imaginary (as first presented in his 1940 work *L'Imaginaire: Psychologie phénoménologique de l'imagination*)—and we know Sartre's work impressed Choucair. For that reason, in such instances, I have translated *khayal* as *imaginaire*.

14 Choucair is quoting Sulaiman's phrasing for “literary dynamism.”

the jet plane cutting through the skies, is nothing other than the offspring of an ancient imagination, that of *One Thousand and One Nights*, Solomon's demons, and the storytellers' genies? The modern mind could not have reached these achievements had it not been nourished by the flying carpet, magic lamp, and genie-servant!¹⁵

What do you think of what you say? I agree with your assertion, because like you I am inclined to think that modern thought is the fulfillment of that venerable Arab mentality with its quest for the essence and its interest in matter's fundamental characteristics. Modern thought has realized the promises of the Arab *imaginaire* (*al-khayal al-'arabi*), and it has expanded upon them simply by utilizing contemporary sciences as embodied in inventions and discoveries unknown to the Ancients.

The Arab did not disregard matter; he approached it through its essence. He will always choose the essence or noblest material to describe a thing. Musk and amber, for example, are the noblest of fragrances, so anything that should be aromatic will be described with them. Genies and demons are the cleverest of creatures. Who but they can build luxurious palaces? Ivory, ebony, and elephant bones are the noblest materials for furniture; hence you will find the prophets and heroes all seated on chairs of these materials. From here we see that the Arab effected the realization of the essence in visions (*suwar*) more real than common reality. These visions were and would indeed have remained imaginary were they not realized in this age: the flying carpet reappears today as the airplane that rips across the skies; those industrious workers, the demons and genies, have come into existence today as robots; and the magic lamp is today's electric switch, a servant at your fingertips. The actualization of these visions in this manner is vindication of that purified thought.

He who disdains matter is either ignorant or prejudiced by the

15 Solomon is the biblical King Solomon, son of David. The 9th-century Persian scholar Al-Tabari reports that Solomon had a ring that gave him control of the demons and enabled his rule until his wife was tricked into giving the ring to a mutinous demon who usurped the throne for forty days, during which Solomon wandered his lands destitute and unrecognized. The temporary usurpation was in fact punishment for Solomon's unwitting facilitation of idolatry. See *The History of al-Tabari, Vol. 3: The Children of Israel*, trans. W. M. Brinner (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1991), 170. I thank Nader El-Bizri for this reference.

Greek standards that froze the world for centuries. He who fears matter is far from grasping the foundations of our age and the civilizations preceding it. Matter, for him, is an airplane that could explode and dispatch the souls of innocents or a car that could mow down humans. Or, it is the search for an atomic bomb that will extinguish the world. Such is the thinking of he who does not understand the spirit of our era. Foremost are the Surrealists who arose between the two world wars, amidst poison gas and the atomic bomb.

Despised in Ancient Greece, the Middle Ages, and the Renaissance, matter in our age has become a road to Heaven-on-Earth, as promised by the Qur'an, or a living Hell, if misused. I do not think that mankind [today] will misuse it, at least not more than did his forefather in the days of religion and spirituality, when he waged the Crusades in the name of that religion. In our era, the matter that was despised by the Greeks and their successors has become an invisible spirit bringing to us the most beautiful theater and the most poignant classical musical compositions. It carries us to the highest spiritual transcendence and the greatest reaches of the imagination (*khayal*). Did not radar beams reach the Moon and other planets?

This matter, into how many different spirits has it metamorphosed? Into how many prophets has it transmuted? How many philanthropists has it reached? Into how many medical cures has it developed? How many miracles did it produce? Matter has resurrected the dead and rehabilitated the crippled. It has opened eyes and transplanted human organs. Is it a means for knowing God? Maybe in this aspect, is there not a way to respect matter rather than despise it?

Lastly, you say on page 175 of your book where you discuss the anonymous Arab narrator that,

He would float hither and thither, seeing a flower here and a rose there, and stumbling as he bumps into a pearl. He would scoop it all up into his arms happily carrying it about like a child carrying his pretty toys, but he was unable to sort and order them or make of them a unity that can satisfy the heart and spirit, and not just the eye.

Did it not once occur to you that perhaps the Arab narrator did that purposefully? Could that have come about as the result of deep, purified thought and clear comprehension? Is that narrator not like his brother the artist, placing an emerald circle next to a ruby-red square

alongside a triangle of ivory in an effort to reveal the eternal essence that is defined neither by time nor space? He who seeks for essences is no child. And he who pays no mind to time is eternalist in his thought. This “child” was fully aware. His goal was pure beauty, not the integrity of historical time. He who does not see a unity in all the flowers, roses, and pearls remains captive to antiquated, transient standards. He who does not thrill in his heart and soul at the essence, will he find happiness anywhere?

I am inclined to believe—knowing that this lacks extensive, scientific research—that ‘Antara’s biography was composed by a single author and that the addition of self-standing stories into the biography was intentional, as I suggested previously, operating according to the same principle as the artist who sets an independent circle next to a self-sufficient triangle to generate a strange beauty that only Arab creativity can understand. Likewise, that anonymous artist who did not sign his name to his artworks is like the anonymous author who, out of humility, did not record his name.

As I said in the opening of my letter, I appreciated your book, and what I write here is primarily directed to the older Orientalists and their students who took up their opinions, and to all those who have studied Arabs by comparing them to [ancient] India, Persia, and Greece. How I would have preferred that you had approached your research in your book from the angle I indicate and which I think is closer to an understanding of the ancient civilizations.

TRANSLATED BY KIRSTEN SCHEID

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