Critical Reviews
No. 3
Oct -Nov 2025
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A Critique of Islamic Art and the Deviant Gaze of the Traditionalists

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Extended Abstract

Traditionalism is a philosophical approach within modern thought that raises fundamental objections against modernity and modernism. Traditionalists advocate for the revival of knowledge in its sacred and spiritual sense. Both Judeo-Christian Traditionalism and Islamic Traditionalism are rooted in a deviant form of Orientalism, which has marred the East, its affairs, and the art and culture of the Islamic world with unilateral, unscientific, and fallacious interpretations. Traditionalists are thinkers who, relying on Sufi orders and mystical paths (ṭarīqah), have explicated topics concerning the theoretical foundations of Islamic art and architecture, as well as global artistic works, in a manner that is emotional and devoid of reason and logical argumentation. This group, having predominantly encountered examples of Islamic art and architecture in North Africa, Egypt, and, on the other hand, in India and the Far East, has engaged in interpretations and exegeses that are frequently inconsistent with reality. They have never undertaken a precise comparative analysis of the art of the Islamic world with its counterparts in Iran. Concerning the mosque and the mihrab, architectural ornamentations, miniatures, and traditional arts such as calligraphy, their discourse is replete with symbolism, allegory, and storytelling, intertwined with a guise of sanctity (taqaddus-ma'ābī) that lacks a rational and logical standing.

DOI: 10.22034/JCR.1.1.4.1.3.1
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[DOI: 10.22034/JCR.1.1.4.1.3.1]

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The very act of addressing the art of Muslims and coining the term "Islamic art" by Western scholars was a baseless invention. The principal deficiency of such studies lies in their failure to provide a clear definition with specific theoretical standpoints .regarding the subject

The majority of Traditionalists are thinkers with an inclination towards Sufi Islam, who, with an emphasis on mystery and symbolism, believe in a common, universal, supernatural truth at the core of all religious traditions. This intellectual current, initiated by René Guénon and continued by figures such as Titus Burckhardt, Frithjof Schuon, Ananda Coomaraswamy, and Martin Lings, has significantly influenced contemporary comparative religion. Within the Islamic world, it has become intertwined with mystical schools (naḥlah) and, simultaneously, with the spiritual traditions of the Far East. This spectrum of theorists has articulated its views within the framework of Islamic art and architecture, creating such doubt and ambiguity through illogical and emotive arguments that it has, for years, plunged the cultural .and artistic community of Iran into a state of confusion and perplexity

Traditionalist thinkers have erred and deviated in their definition and exemplification of "tradition." They believe in an ancient and common tradition shared among all world religions—including Islam, Christianity, Judaism, and Eastern Asian faiths—which they have termed Philosophia Perennis (Perennial Wisdom/Jāvīdān Khirad). This definition, however, is fundamentally at odds with the concept of tradition (Sunnah) in Islam and the Qur'an. For instance, in the Buddhist tradition, the concept of God is anthropomorphic, which is not the case in the Abrahamic religions. While the pursuit of a transcendent unity and a perennial wisdom to bring the beliefs of different religions closer is a commendable and necessary endeavor, this unity is not uniform across non-theistic and monotheistic religions, particularly when compared with Islam and its Qur'anic foundations. There exist profound differences between the belief in God and the concept of religious tradition in Buddhism and Hinduism versus Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, making it impossible to posit a single, unified tradition across these diverse .faiths

The views of Burckhardt, Schuon, and Nasr on various aspects of Islamic art and architecture are so baseless that they yield nothing but deviation and confusion regarding the foundations .and manifestations of Islamic art

The article presents a foundational critique of the "Traditionalist" school's approach to the interpretation of Islamic art. It argues that this intellectual current, rooted in a misguided Orientalism and reliant upon Sufi-mystical, emotive, and ahistorical exegeses, has engendered confusion and diverted the Iranian artistic community from a rational, evidence-based understanding of authentic Perso-Islamic art.

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[DOI: 10.22034/JCR.1.1.4.1.3.1]

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