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An Examination of the "Unity in Diversity" Perspective within the Traditionalist Approach to Islamic Art

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Abstract

This paper examines and critiques the perspective of "Unity in Diversity" (waḥdat fī'l-kathrah) within the artistic theories of Traditionalists such as Frithjof Schuon, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, and Titus Burckhardt. The manifestation of this perspective in Islamic art presupposes four assumptions: 1) an intrinsic link between Islamic mysticism (Sufism) and Islamic art; 2) the familiarity of both artists and audiences with mystical concepts; 3) the transhistorical nature of these concepts; and 4) the acceptance of authorial intent. This study argues that all four presuppositions are critically debatable and lack sufficient historical evidence. For instance, the concept of "Unity in Diversity" was formally articulated in intellectual circles only from the 9th century AH (15th century CE) onwards. Consequently, its conscious manifestation by artists and audiences in works preceding this era is not reliably demonstrable. The only alternative is to consider "Unity in Diversity" as a transhistorical principle. However, the claim of transhistoricity introduces a paradox: if a concept is transhistorical, its manifestation cannot be exclusive to Islamic art. It would logically appear in every culture and period. Therefore, positing the sense of unity as a foundational characteristic of Islamic art leads to a cognitive dissonance and dissolves the very distinction that separates Islamic from non-Islamic art.

Keywords: Traditionalism, Unity in Diversity, Islamic Art

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To what extent is the concept of "Unity in Diversity" manifested in Islamic art, and what are its epistemological implications?

Extended Abstract

This paper critically evaluates the Traditionalist school's interpretation of Islamic art, which argues that abstract motifs like the arabesque are symbolic manifestations of the metaphysical principle of "Unity in Diversity" (waḥdat fī'l-kathrah), rooted in Sufi thought. The study deconstructs this approach by challenging its four core presuppositions: an intrinsic link between mysticism and artistic form; widespread mystical knowledge among historical artists; the transhistorical nature of the "Unity in Diversity" concept; and the primacy of authorial intent. The central argument is that these assumptions create a critical dilemma. If the claim is historical—that artists consciously embedded these meanings—it lacks substantiating documentary evidence, especially before the ١٥th century CE. Conversely, if the claim is transhistorical—arising from a collective unconscious—it undermines the uniqueness of Islamic art. Such a universal pattern cannot be confined to one civilization and could be identified in any complex structure, thereby collapsing the Traditionalist distinction between sacred and profane art. Furthermore, this interpretive model disregards the objective and conventional nature of artistic language, where the association between a form and its meaning is culturally constructed, not inherent. While the Traditionalist framework offers a coherent explanation for the stylistic unity of Islamic art, its severe epistemological and historical contradictions expose it as a retrospective philosophical hermeneutic projected onto historical artifacts rather than a description of original intent. This highlights the urgent need for a critical reappraisal of the field and the development of alternative theoretical models for understanding Islamic art.

Traditionalists posit that a fundamental characteristic of Islamic art is the manifestation of "Unity in Diversity" in artworks, a feature they claim distinguishes it from other artistic traditions. This assertion, however, faces a dilemma. If the claim is historical, they fail to provide the necessary documentary or material evidence to support it. If, on the other hand, the claim is transhistorical, a contradiction arises, as this quality would likely be present in works outside the sphere of Islamic art as well.