The Arts on the Margins of Knowledge: Ideas and Concepts of Art in Classical Arab Culture

We have analyzed the role played by the arts in sacred texts, and the parameters that established the relationship between artistic production and the message of Revelation. Now we shall turn to the concepts of art that Arab-Islamic thought developed in both the East and al-Andalus to fulfill the new social and historical needs of a rapidly expanding and diversifying Islamic society. This is not to suggest, however, that the concept of the arts or artisanal techniques was central to the concerns of Islamic scholars; on the contrary, ideas that arose around those subjects would be expressed, with a few exceptions, on the margins of knowledge. We can describe the process, very schematically, as follows: after the decline of philosophy in Antiquity, theological interests – first of Christianity and then of Islam – came to the forefront of thought. Islam, from very early on, would open itself to the great current of works, concepts, and sciences of the Ancients, in a profound and problematic process by which the culture of Antiquity was adapted to the new monotheism. In this context Arab-Islamic culture would widen its horizons toward the arts and sciences, as it was forced to confront ideas and theories that arose out of Greek philosophy and to assimilate them into its own view of the world.

2.1 The Arts in the Arab-Islamic Encyclopedia

Classical Arab-Islamic culture did not, in fact, possess a concept of art like the one that Europeans developed from the eighteenth century onward: the so-called Fine Arts, under the common denominator of beauty. Nor did it share in later concepts of art like those that arose from the artistic and philosophical vanguard movements of the twentieth century. Rather it understood what the West called Fine Arts – which is what we normally mean when we speak of “art” – as a group of activities that were independent of each other and were forms of work, not distinguished in any special way from other forms of human endeavor.¹ Some of these activities were not even included

¹ The idea of Fine Arts began to be systematized from the time of Batteux’s The fine arts (first published in Paris in 1746): they were painting, sculpture, music, and dance, together with architecture and eloquence. In the course of the nineteenth century, beauty became the
in the usual classifications of the sciences, nor were there systematic theories
to explain their modes of production, creation, and evaluation; they were
generally understood as artisanal pursuits similar to other kinds of practical
work. All of them were usually described with the term *al-ṣināʿāt* or *al-ṣanāʾiʿ*
(both plurals of *ṣināʿa*), the usual designation in classical Arabic texts for the
innumerable tasks whose common element is production by human hands –
although it might also be applied to intellectual labors like poetry, grammar,
logic, jurisprudence, or philosophy. But in general, when *al-ṣanāʾiʿ* was used
to modify or amplify the concept of *ʿilm* or *ʿulūm*, that is, knowledge or the
sciences, it clearly indicated the various arts and crafts associated with manual
work, as defined in the classical Arabic dictionaries. Therefore in speaking
here of “arts” we are not referring to the much more limited modern concept
of art, which involves ideas like creativity, originality, and aesthetic intention,
but rather to the Latin concept of *ars*, a version of the Greek *technē*, which
implies the technique or skill required to produce an object. The term *ars*, like
*ṣināʿa*, was a much broader concept than our modern one of art, and prevailed
in Antiquity and the Middle Ages as well as in classical Islam. For both the
Ancients and the Scholastics every *ars* – whether painting, tailoring, grammar,
or logic – was subject to specific rules; works produced by inspiration or fan-
tasy were the antithesis of *ars*, whereas today they are essential to it. In Islam,
however, *falsafa* would incorporate imagination into its general idea of artistic
production. In any event, if we understand *ṣināʿa* as being comparable to *ars*,
then in modern times, at least since the Arab Renaissance, Arabic has adopted
the modern Western idea of art with the term *al-fann*. In classical times it did
not possess that meaning, but signified merely the type, species, manner, or
mode of something; this could range from a type of plant to the “kinds of

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2 *Al-ṣināʿa*: “the office of the artisan and his work,” according to al-Fayruzābādī, *Al-Qāmūs* 954; it also means manual work in Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-ʿarab*, s.v. *ṣ-n-ʿ*, and in *Al-Mukhaṣṣaṣ* by Ibn Sīda of Murcia, of whom we shall speak further below. ‘Alī b. Muḥammad al-ʿurjānī (1339–1413) defines *al-ṣināʿa* in his *Kitāb al-Taʿrīfāt* 13 as “the spiritual (*malaka*) ability to produce voluntary actions without intellectual (*rawiyya*) reflection; it is said of knowledge in its category of work.” In these lexicographical works there appears to be a subtle distinction between *ṣināʿa*, applicable also to intellectual work, and *ṣanaʿa*, which is limited to material objects or those perceived by the senses: ‘Uṣfūr, *Naẓariyyat al-fann* 12.

3 Arkoun also notes the translation of *technē* by *ṣināʿa* in the works of the *falāsifa*, in the sense of practical or specialized knowledge as opposed to knowledge in general: *L’humanisme* 227.

4 Among the many studies of these themes in Western thought I recommend Tatarkiewicz, *loc. cit.*, for its clarity and precision.

ings for *al-fann* (the state of something, the type of a thing, package, deception, delay) and