CHAPTER 47

Visualizing Encounters on the Road to Paradise

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The mystery of the “other world” created as great a challenge to Muslim artists as to artists in other cultures. In medieval and early modern times, imagination focused on this most important concept, and we may take it for granted that people expected it to be visualized, at least to be hinted at in religious spaces as well as in their everyday environment. The banishment of the figure from crucial spaces of worship, however, deprived the Muslim artists, and their patrons, of an important means of expression. For centuries, it left decorative writing as the only way to make well defined religious statements: A calligraphic inscription quoting relevant passages of the Quran, for instance, could evoke paradise directly. On the other hand, secular art extensively used figures throughout most periods. It did not flinch at all from taking figures and depicted elements out of their pre- and non-Islamic contexts, shaking off former religious connotations. Such happened, for instance, in early Islamic times with animal figures connected to Zoroastrian beliefs, and later with the round halo that became an accentuating device encircling the heads of humans and animals alike. While secular art had the complete range of themes and pictorial means at its disposal (including inscriptions), would inscriptions alone do the work for religious art?

Probably they did, and we have to regard the complicated geometrical framework surrounding inscriptions, and the intrinsic vegetal ornament they are embedded in, as pure ornament that enhanced the beauty of the whole. It is in the nature of ornament to lend its support to an idea expressed more explicitly by other means.¹ The concept of paradise (janna) as a garden, however, makes it equally probable that vegetal decoration is often meant as a metaphor for paradise.² Much depends upon the context. On the wall of a mosque, lavish vegetal decoration invites such an interpretation. As the main motif on

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¹ For a discussion of the functions of ornament, see Grabar, Mediation of ornament.
² For a concise exploration of the subject, see Blair and Bloom, Images of paradise.
a ceramic plate it would be much less convincing. However, even when the function of an object or building, the evidence of inscriptions, or particularities of the vegetal decoration itself justify its interpretation as a depiction of paradise, it could be nothing more than an nonspecific allusion to the promise of paradise and its beauty.

Figurative, especially narrative representation may equally invite multilayered interpretation. Figures, however, evoke a more specific context, often a particular event. Since most pictures of paradise, or from the roads to paradise, have come to us as manuscript illustrations their subjects are easily recognized. Besides, figurative representation allows us to address specific elements of the concept and follow the artist’s imagination in much more detail. Furthermore, subject selection and iconography are open to a partisan approach that reflects sectarian beliefs and political contexts. This only became possible with the development of book illustration from the sixth/twelfth century, and with the subsequent widening of the scope of illustrated texts that eventually led to the inclusion of eschatological subjects. It obviously remained a phenomenon restricted to the Persianate world. Thus, the material dealt with here belongs to the late eighth to eleventh/fourteenth to seventeenth centuries and originates in Iran, Central Asia, and the Ottoman Empire.

Supported by normative Sunni theology which defended a literal understanding of relevant Quranic passages, storytelling elaborated on the relevant Quranic verses in response to the insatiable hunger of the public for details about the other world and the events that already had happened there or would occur with the approach of the end of this world. On the one hand, artists could easily rely on this common knowledge for their depictions. On the other hand, the doctrine of the fundamental difference between the two worlds made the visualization of the other world impossible – or so one should assume. If objects mentioned in Quranic descriptions should not be imagined as being similar to objects known to people in this world – how to depict them? It seems, however, that this never posed a serious problem to artists as long as society (or a part of society) recognized figural representation as a means to visualize imagination. Transferring the imaginative approach developed for the depiction of this world onto the representation of the hereafter probably implied the simultaneous transfer of the perception that the

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3 Gardet, D̲ j̲anna 449.
4 For a detailed account, see Smith and Haddad, Islamic understanding 1–97.
5 Gardet, D̲ j̲anna 449.
6 In Christian discourse, a similar argumentation was turned to work in favor of pictorial representation, see Louth, ‘Truly visible things’ 22–3.