

# Picasso the Muslim

## *Or, How the Bilderverbot became modern (Part 1)*

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It is not an exaggeration to assert that modern paintings and sculptures betray a real loathing of living forms or forms of living beings.

—José Ortega y Gasset<sup>1</sup>

I think no one insists more than I on the uniqueness of the Modern experience. . . . Yet I think there were some instructive anticipations of certain aspects of Modernity in Medieval Islâmic society, and that Islâmic iconophobia and its associated phenomena have some relation to those anticipations.

—Marshall Hodgson<sup>2</sup>

### Pseudomorphic Picassismes

Writing of how anachronism can constitute the frisson of reception, Georges Didi-Huberman describes the moment when his attention was first drawn to the painted faux-marble border of the *Madonna of the Shadows*, a fresco by Fra Angelico (d. 1455) in the convent of San Marco in Florence (fig. 1): “If I try today to recall what stopped me in my tracks in the corridor in San Marco, I think I am not mistaken in saying that it was a kind of displaced resemblance between what I discovered there, in a Renaissance convent, and the drippings of the American artist that I had discovered and admired many years before.”<sup>3</sup> An apparent parergon, an ostensible supplement to the figurative scenes above, the painted panels with their mottled veins of depicted stone (fig. 2) were rendered fully visible by their resemblance to the celebrated drip paintings of the American painter Jackson Pollock (d. 1956; fig. 3). This mental montage of quattrocento fresco and 1950s canvas constitutes what Didi-Huberman

identifies as a *pseudomorphosis*, using a term imported into art historical writing from geology. In its original meaning, *pseudomorphosis* referred to secondary crystals generated in the spaces left by the disintegration of earlier forms, whose external morphologies they share even when they differ in nature or internal structure.<sup>4</sup> Adopted by Erwin Panofsky to refer to cases where disparate artifacts or images display morphological similarities (at least to the eye of the art historian) but differ in their function and/or meaning,<sup>5</sup> pseudomorphic comparisons are often criticized for emphasizing superficial formal analogy at the expense of deeper conceptual engagements.<sup>6</sup> For Didi-Huberman, however, they illustrate “the paradoxical fecundity of anachronism,” the ability of formal resemblance operating across a cultural and/or temporal gulf to effect a rupture, a shock, capable of rendering the familiar, the neglected, or even the unknown fully visible.<sup>7</sup>

The heuristic value of visual catachresis or contrapuntal presentation underlies several recent exhibitions and publications, which juxtapose antique or medieval artworks with modern counterparts in order to explore relationships ranging from analogy and serendipity to

4. J. R. Blum, *Die Pseudomorphosen des Mineralreichs* (Stuttgart, 1843). Both the concept and the term had been central to Oswald Spengler’s idiosyncratic *The Decline of the West*, in which he explains that a nascent Islamic culture failed to develop its own forms of artistic expression as a result of the heavy legacy of earlier cultural traditions, so that “all that wells up from the depths of the young soul is cast in the old moulds, young feelings stiffen in senile practices, and instead of expanding its own creative power, it can only hate the distant power with a hate that grows to be monstrous.” O. Spengler, *The Decline of the West* (New York, 1927), 2:186.

5. E. Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance* (1939; repr., New York, 1972), 70–71, and *Tomb Sculpture: Its Changing Aspects From Ancient Egypt to Bernini* (New York, 1964), 26–27. For a useful overview of the historiography of the term, see Amy Knight Powell, “Bread/Head: Morphology of an Encounter,” *postmedieval: a journal of medieval cultural studies* 7 (2016): 17–20.

6. Y.-A. Bois, “La pensée sauvage,” *Art in America* 73 (1985): 186–87, and “On the Uses and Abuses of Look-alikes,” *October* 154 (2015): 127–49.

7. Didi-Huberman, “Before the Image,” 40.

1. J. Ortega y Gasset, *The Dehumanization of Art and Other Essays on Art, Culture, and Literature* (1925; repr., Princeton, 1968), 40.

2. M. G. S. Hodgson, “Islâm and Image,” *History of Religions* 3, no. 2 (1964): 221.

3. G. Didi-Huberman, “Before the Image, before Time: The Sovereignty of Anachronism,” trans. P. Mason, in *Compelling Visuality: The Work of Art in and out of History*, ed. C. Farago and R. Zwijnenberg (Minneapolis, 2003), 41.



Figure 1. Fra Angelico, *Madonna of the Shadows*, 1450. Convent of San Marco, Florence. Photo: Nicolò Orsi Battaglini.

the causal and structural.<sup>8</sup> In addition, over the past half-century, the principle of pseudomorphosis (although rarely identified as such) has underlain a series of exhibitions around the theme of abstraction, which juxtaposed examples of premodern Islamic art with modern Euro-American abstract art. In almost all cases, the assumption is that Islamic art is an art of abstraction, whose assumed eschewal of figuration is variously located

8. A. Nagel, *Medieval Modern: Art Out of Time* (New York, 2012); A. K. Powell, *Depositions: Scenes from the Late Medieval Church and the Modern Museum* (New York, 2012); G. Peers, C. Barber, S. Caffey, H. R. Franses, and R. Shiff, eds., *Byzantine Things in the World* (Houston, 2013); G. Peers, "Transfiguring Materialities: Relational Abstraction in Byzantium and Its Exhibition," *Convivium* 2, no. 2 (2015): 112–33. For a particularly problematic example, in which the analogical or comparative method often blurs into genealogical claims, see L. U. Marks, *Enfoldment and Infinity: An Islamic Genealogy of New Media Art* (Cambridge, MA, 2010).



Figure 2. Fra Angelico, *Madonna of the Shadows*, detail. Photo: Nicolò Orsi Battaglini. Color version available as an online enhancement.

in cultural sensibility or religious taboo. The phenomenon is thus assumed to be transhistorical and transregional, with little attempt to interrogate the formal, practical, or theoretical parameters of "abstraction" or to offer synchronic studies that might complicate or even undermine the underlying assumptions.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, the interest of these kinds of juxtapositions lies in their ability to illuminate the rehabilitation of perceived values of aniconism and antinaturalism in (and even as) modernism, if not modernity tout court.

Although the standard chronologies of modernism make its inception coincident with the perceived demise of Islamic art in the late nineteenth century, the pseudomorphic method was anticipated by several pioneering scholars of premodern Islamic art. Their writings constitute an unacknowledged chapter in the variegated historiography of the *Bilderverbot*, the image prohibition often assumed to be an inherent characteristic of Judaism and Islam. Paradoxically, perhaps, the clichéd idea of a *Bilderverbot* as a determining factor in Islamic art was mobilized by these scholars precisely in order to tackle entrenched preconceptions about Islamic art and the cultures that produced it. Among them was the Egyptian scholar Bishr Farès, who in a lecture on the spirit of Islamic ornament (delivered in Cairo and published in Arabic and French in 1952), juxtaposed a figurative scene on an early thirteenth-century Iranian jug with Picasso's *Femme-*

9. For a rare exception, see J. Jakeman, "Abstract Art and Communication in 'Mamluk' Architecture" (PhD diss., University of Oxford, 1993).



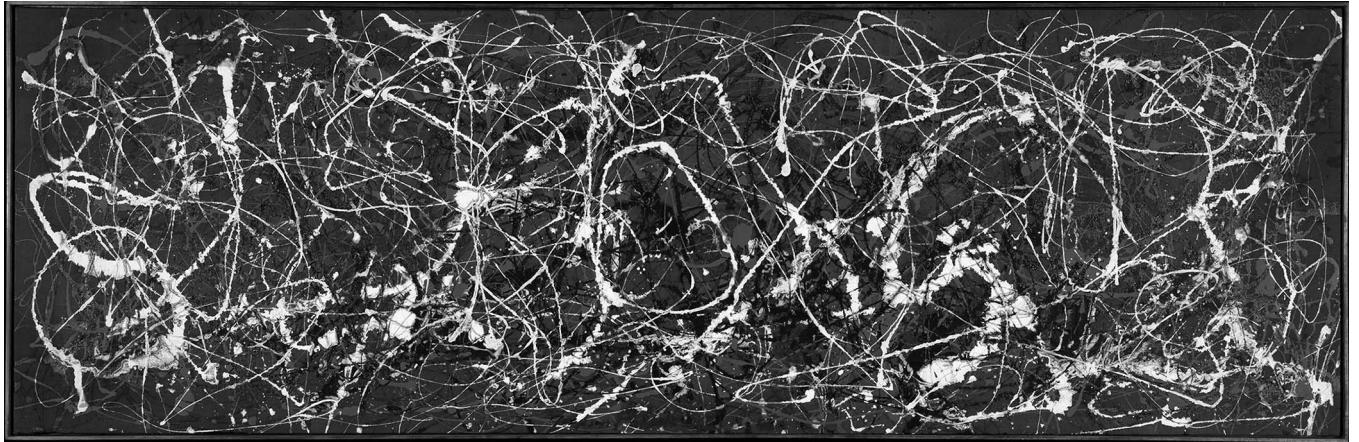


Figure 3. Jackson Pollock, *Number 13A: Arabesque*, 1948. Oil and enamel on canvas, 94 x 297.2 cm. Yale University Art Gallery 1195.32.1, Gift of Richard Brown Baker, B.A. 1935. Photo: Courtesy of the Yale University Art Gallery © 2017 The Pollock-Krasner Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Color version available as an online enhancement.

*Fleur* of 1947 (fig. 4) in order to illustrate “the Islamic inspiration, fortuitous or actual” in contemporary European art, especially “the affinity of picassisme with Arab-Muslim conceptual art.”<sup>10</sup>

Farès’s choice of Picasso as a point of comparison for the abstract figures of medieval Islamic art was to become an established trope in twentieth-century scholarship, as we shall see below. However, what Farès merely hints at in identifying an Islamic inspiration for cubism, “fortuitous or actual,” had in fact found much bolder articulation twenty years earlier in a remarkable essay on Picasso and the Islamic Orient published in the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* in 1932, an article referenced by Farès.<sup>11</sup> Its author was the French polymath and Orientalist Eustache de Lorey. An enigmatic and intriguing figure, de Lorey is well-known to historians of Islamic art for his activities as director of the French Institute of Archaeology and Islamic Art in Damascus between 1922 and 1930. During 1928 and 1929 de Lorey oversaw the sensational discovery of spectacular eighth-century gold-ground wall mosaics in the western courtyard portico of the Friday Mosque of Damascus (705–15), hidden beneath a thick coat of plaster that had obscured their brilliance for several centuries (fig. 5).<sup>12</sup>

At first glance, the subject of Picasso is a surprising one for a pioneering scholar of early Islamic art. However, the interests of de Lorey were diverse, extending to medieval Arab painting, on which he published several articles.<sup>13</sup> One of these articles dealt with the lively figurative tradition of medieval Arab painting, exemplified by the work of Yahya al-Wasiti, the artist who painted the most celebrated example of the genre, an illustrated copy of the *Maqāmāt* (Assemblies) of Abu Muhammad al-Qasim al-Hariri (d. 1122) produced in Iraq (probably Baghdad) in 1237 CE (fig. 6). The work of al-Wasiti proved important for the Baghdad Group for Modern Art, founded in 1951, but was also invoked by modernist artists in other parts of the Arab world, including the Algerian artist Mohamed Khadda (d. 1991), who saw in the medieval figurative paintings formal qualities verging on the abstract and calligraphic.<sup>14</sup> For the celebrated Iraqi artist Jawad Salim (d. 1961) and other members of the Baghdad Group, access to the Iraqi manuscript (which is now in Paris) was provided by the large-scale,

10. B. Farès, *Essai sur l’esprit de la décoration islamique* (Cairo, 1952), 29. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.

11. E. de Lorey, “Picasso et l’Orient musulman,” *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 8 (1932): 299–314.

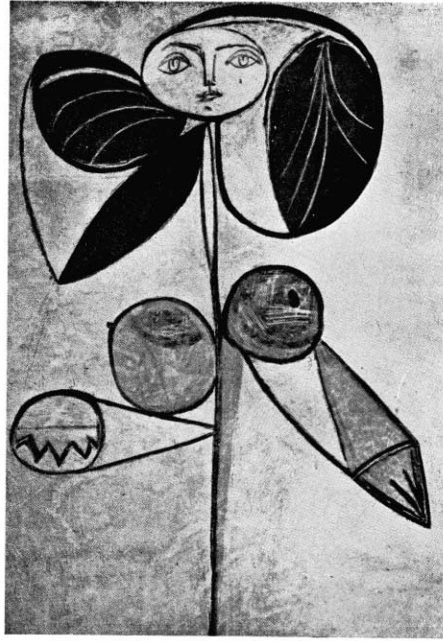
12. E. de Lorey, “Les mosaïques de la mosquée des Omayyades a Damas,” *Syria* 12, no. 4 (1931): 326–49.

13. Born Victor Eustache, de Lorey later adopted an ennobling moniker: S. Makariou, “Eustache de Lorey (XXe siècle) historien d’art,” in *Dictionnaire des orientalistes de langue française*, ed. F. Pouillon (Paris, 2008), 365–66; E. de Lorey, “Peinture musulmane ou peinture iranienne,” *Revue des Arts Asiatiques* 12, no. 1 (1938): 20–31.

14. M. Khadda, *Éléments pour un art nouveau suivi des feuillets épars liés et inédits* (Algiers, 2015), 69–75. For an incisive analysis of Khadda’s writings, see E. Goudal, “Ecrire une histoire de l’art “moderne” en Algérie: Mohamed Khadda, pensées pour un “art nouveau,” forthcoming online publication from the study day, *Avant que la magie n’opère: Modernités artistiques en Afrique* (Paris, 2015). I am grateful to Emilie Goudal for drawing my attention to Khadda’s work and sharing her unpublished essay with me.

Pl. V

اللوحة

a. Picasso, *peinture*, métamorphose, 1947

ا- بيكاسو ، تصويره : « شكل مبدل » ١٩٤٧

b. Faïence, fouilles de Gourgân, XIII<sup>e</sup> s.

ب - خزف ، حفريات جرجان ، القرن ١٣

Figure 4. Bishr Farès, *Essai sur l'esprit de la décoration islamique* (Cairo, 1952), plate 5.

full-color illustrations in an essay on the manuscript published by Eustache de Lorey in 1938.<sup>15</sup> Bringing

15. E. de Lorey, "Le Miroir de Bagdad," *L'illustration: Journal Hebdomadaire Universel*, no. 4996 (December 3, 1938), n.p. For the impact of al-Wasiti's manuscript, see S. Naef, *À la recherche d'une modernité Arabe* (Geneva, 1996), 241, and "Reexploring Islamic Art: Modern and Contemporary Creation in the Arab World and Its Relation to the Artistic Past," *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 43 (2003): 168–70; N. M. Shabout, *Modern Arab Art: Formation of Arab*

the wheel full circle, some of Jawad Salim's *Maqāmāt*-inspired paintings also drew upon techniques associated with the work of Henri Matisse and Picasso, reconciling

*Aesthetics* (Gainesville, FL, 2007), 27. The topic has been discussed by Saleem al-Bahloly in his doctoral dissertation and will be developed in a forthcoming article, "Memories of an Origin: Yahya al-Wasiti's Illustrations and the Modern Art of Baghdad," *Muqarnas* 34 (2017). Unfortunately, neither was available at the time of writing.



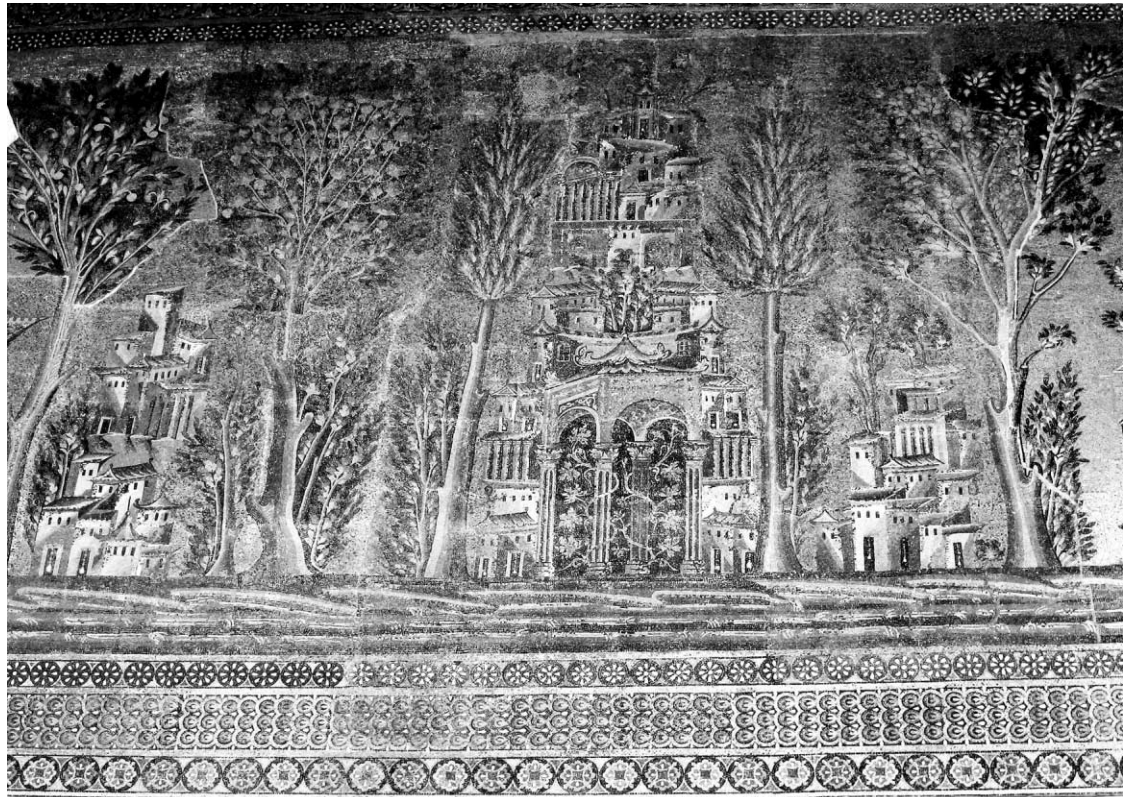


Figure 5. Umayyad Mosque, Damascus, detail of the wall mosaics in the western portico of the courtyard, 705–15 CE. Photo: Manar al-Athar Photo Archive, MAA21841\_066\_IMG\_2213a. Color version available as an online enhancement.

modernist techniques with historical precedents drawn from Islamic, and specifically Arab, artistic traditions.<sup>16</sup>

In his publication of the Damascus mosaics, de Lorey situated them within a dynamic tussle between Hellenic naturalism and Oriental abstraction: although the former dominated in Damascus (despite the aniconic iconography of the mosaics), elements of the latter were not entirely absent. For de Lorey, the naturalism of the mosaics ran counter to the general tendencies of early Islamic art; in his evaluation, “naturalism and humanism represented, for the early Muslims, rather than positive tendencies, the inverse of that which they could accept.”<sup>17</sup> The possible connections between the aniconic imagery of the Damascus mosaics, premodern Islamic painting, and Picasso’s perceived penchant for abstraction become clearer as he develops an extraordinary claim regarding

the genealogy of cubism. Juxtaposing examples of premodern Islamic art with Picasso’s paintings (fig. 7), de Lorey noted the abstract qualities of both, and suggested that “only a Spaniard descended from Moors” could have Picasso’s visual sensibilities, and (quoting Apollinaire) that there must be in his ancestry some distant Muslim given over “to the demon of abstraction.” Hence, the arabesque qualities of Picasso’s work were probably a “hereditary gift” of this purported Islamic heritage.<sup>18</sup>

Even more remarkably, de Lorey went on to quote the hadith, the traditions attributed to the prophet Muhammad (d. 632 CE), some of which express disapproval of anthropomorphic and zoomorphic depiction. Taking this as the impetus for the perceived antinaturalism of Islamic art, de Lorey located the origins of both Islamic abstraction and cubism in an Islamic *Bilderverbot*, transmitted as a kind of race memory through Picasso’s Andalusian blood. Invoking the stylization of the human face in Picasso’s work, de

16. A. Lenssen and S. A. Rogers, “Articulating the Contemporary,” in *A Companion to Islamic Art and Architecture*, ed. F. B. Flood and G. Necipoğlu (Hoboken, NJ, 2017), 2:1328–29, fig. 51.6.

17. E. de Lorey, “L’Hellénisme et l’Orient dans les mosaïques de la mosquée des Omayyades,” *Ars Islamica* 1, no. 1 (1934): 33.

18. de Lorey, “Picasso et l’Orient musulman,” 302, 311.

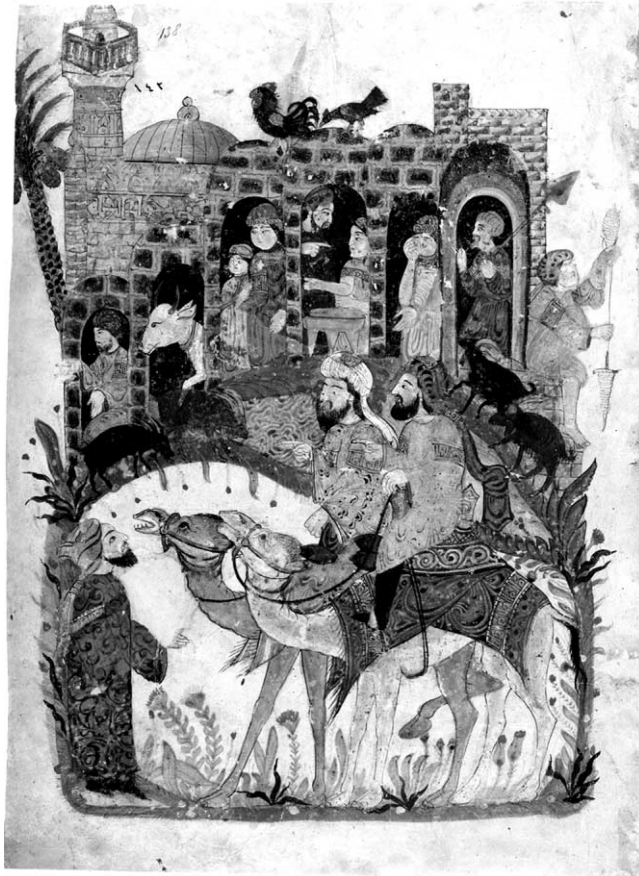


Figure 6. A village scene, *Maqamat* of al-Hariri, illustrated by Yahya al-Wasiti, Baghdad (?), 1237 CE. Bibliothèque nationale de France, arabe 5847, fol. 138r. Photo: Courtesy of the Bibliothèque nationale de France. Color version available as an online enhancement.

Lorey quotes a well-known hadith attributed to the prophet Muhammad's cousin:

These representations, so disconcerting, make one think of Ibn Abbas's response to a Persian painter who said to him: "But, then, can I no longer represent animals? How shall I practice my métier?—Decapitate the animals, was the response, so that they no longer appear living, and try to make them resemble flowers." Thus, Picasso, orthodox Muslim, makes academic figural paintings that look like still lifes; he exerts all his energies so that at the Last Judgment he will not find himself face to face with his phantoms and constrained to animate them.

This Arab legend symbolizes perhaps well enough, in effect, the preoccupations that many of his art forms demonstrate: a two-faced, ambiguous art par excellence. Each one of us, in front of his canvases, is destined to become a sort of Allah whom it is his mission to distract; what we must not

recognize is the world with which we are familiar [i.e., the natural world], of which the false artists [i.e., those who indulge in mimesis] sought to provide a faithful reproduction.<sup>19</sup>

In this way, the traditions of the prophet Muhammad, which are central to Islamic piety and practice, are produced as evidential documents in the history of modern abstraction.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, de Lorey's idiosyncratic evaluation of Picasso's oeuvre as causally related not simply to Islamic art, but an Islamic aniconism canonized in and promoted by a *Bilderverbot* transmitted through his Spanish blood, did not become established art historical orthodoxy. Causal explanations for perceived formal affinities are rare, and this one in particular stands at the end of a spectrum; claims of direct relation are more commonly expressed in genealogical terms, as influence. De Lorey's explanation for the perceived commonalities between premodern Islamic and modernist abstraction was not entirely without issue, however. In his 1952 monograph on Islamic ornament, Bishr Farès (who referenced Lorey's essay) was at pains to emphasize both Picasso's Andalusian origins and the fact that Juan Gris (d. 1927), that other great cubist pioneer, was half-Andalusian.<sup>20</sup> One later follower even went so far as to offer a Maghrebi Arabic etymology for "Picasso," derived from the Arabic name Abu Qasim, through progressive transformations into Bicassem, Abucassem, and then Picasso.<sup>21</sup> As late as 1980, a commentator explained that, "We also know that Picasso was deeply Spanish—'A man belongs to his country forever'—and that Málaga is an Arab town, an inheritance of the 800-year ascendancy of Islam in Andalusia. Islamic art is, of course, abstract, and the city seems to have worked its way deep into Picasso's bones."<sup>22</sup>

### Between abstraction and ornament

In quite different ways, both Farès and de Lorey asserted the precocious modernism (if not modernity) of premodern Islamic art. Two historical and historiographic phenomena facilitated this. First was the long-established perception of Islamic art as an art of abstraction, a

19. Ibid., 308. For a recent study of the hadith relating to images, see D. van Reenen, "The *Bilderverbot*, a New Survey," *Der Islam* 67 (1990): 27–77.

20. Farès, *Essai sur l'esprit*, 14.

21. V. Beyer, "Art moderne et art islamique," in *Occident-Orient: L'art moderne et l'art islamique* (Strasbourg, 1972), 21.

22. P. Hamill, "Picasso the Man," *New York Magazine*, May 12, 1980, 36.



n'ont cependant pas renoncé d'un seul coup à la nature, ils ne se sont même, à certains égards, jamais privés des ressources de l'imitation. Ce qui les préoccupe, c'est de déguiser leur emprunt ; il faut qu'au Jour du Jugement, Allah ne puisse pas reconnaître les images de son œuvre. Ils cherchent donc à dénaturer le plus possible la nature, à la représenter en la masquant ; d'où leur complaisance pour les formes stylisées dont ils poussent la schématisation si loin qu'il est parfois très difficile d'en



FIG. 10. — FRISE DU MARISTAN DE NUR AD-DIN, à Damas. (XI<sup>e</sup> siècle.)

deviner les modèles : ce ne sont plus des lions, des éléphants ou des paons, ce ne sont plus des idoles, mais, par une suite de transmutations idéales, un monde est né qu'inspira la nature, qui ne semble plus se souvenir de son origine et où l'on ne reconnaît que la féerie précise des formes géométriques.

C'est ainsi que l'arbre sacré, le *homa*, symbole de vie et d'immortalité, très souvent représenté dans les décors musulmans des différentes périodes, n'est pas, aux hautes époques, dégagé de tout réalisme. La chaire de Kairouan, à la fin du IX<sup>e</sup> siècle, montre encore un arbre véritable, avec son tronc, ses rameaux, ses feuilles et ses fruits, auquel, cependant, les conceptions décoratives et les nécessités de la symétrie prêtent déjà un aspect irréel. Puis, peu à peu, il se simplifie : il suggère

par quelques-uns de ses contours ce qu'il a été ; il ne le représente plus. On peut dire que, dans le *homa* représenté sur la cuve à ablutions du Musée archéologique de Madrid, au X<sup>e</sup> siècle, l'intérêt décoratif a cessé de correspondre à l'intuition symbolique. Enfin, plus tard, dans le mausolée d'Al-Muqaddam, à



FIG. 11. — PICASSO, NATURE MORTE.

Damas, au XII<sup>e</sup> siècle, la métamorphose est accomplie, ce n'est plus qu'un extraordinaire jeu de lignes, un inextricable lacs que composent les enroulements de rinceaux et de spires, dans un mouvement à la fois libre et conduit.

Il est assez remarquable que, pour des raisons qui ne sont très différentes qu'en apparence, on puisse faire au sujet des cubistes des observations analogues. Dans leur effort pour atteindre à un art conceptuel, c'est comme s'ils avaient passé par les mêmes étapes. Les tableaux où le style abstrait triomphe renoncent rarement à l'attrait des formes imitées : on y reconnaît une guitare, une pipe, un siphon,

Figure 7. Eustache de Lorey, "Picasso et l'Orient musulman," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 8 (1932): 6–7.

quality consistently attributed to cultural, racial, and/or religious prescriptions and proscriptions. Second were developments in early twentieth-century Euro-American art often characterized as a move away from the mimetic and naturalistic and toward abstraction. It need hardly be emphasized that abstraction is always a relative term that denotes a mode of the visual constituted in relation to the "natural," naturalistic, or mimetic, whether conceived as a point of origin or foil.

Since the eighteenth century, European writing on Judaism and Islam had tended to contrast their shared incapacity for naturalism and verisimilitude in the visual arts, and consequent penchant for abstracted versions of the natural world, with the naturalism of Hellenism. This distinction figured a division between the sensuous mimetic heritage of Greece and the more abstract or immaterial proclivities of the Orient—one which would grow increasingly strident in European scholarship as the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries progressed.

Whether this perceived penchant for abstraction was seen as a virtue or a vice very much depended on the

eye of the beholder. In his celebrated *Critique of Judgment* (1790), for example, Immanuel Kant singled out Jewish and Islamic aniconism as typifying an abstraction that manifests rather than impedes or frustrates the experience of the sublime. Kant railed against material images as childish devices that inhibit and limit the imagination (including the religious imagination), writing: "Perhaps the most sublime passage in the Jewish Law is the commandment: Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven or on earth, or under the earth, etc. This commandment alone can explain the enthusiasm that the Jewish people in its civilized era felt for its religion when it compared itself with other peoples, or can explain the pride that Islam inspires."<sup>23</sup>

If Kant could represent Judaism and Islam as potent in the sublimity of their aniconism, the idealist philosopher

23. I. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. W. S. Pluhar (Indianapolis, 1987), 135.

G. W. F. Hegel took a contrary view. In the introduction to his *Lectures on Aesthetics and Fine Art* (delivered in 1821 and first published posthumously in 1835), Hegel twice invoked Islamic attitudes to images in a discussion of the aim of art in general. Explaining that the end of art is in fact “the sensuous presentation of the Absolute itself,” an end achieved through a harmonious conjunction of content (the appropriate artistic idea) and form (the material means of its realization), Hegel explains that to be truthful, the content must be concrete and not consist in an abstraction:

For everything genuine in spirit and nature alike is inherently concrete and, despite its universality, has nevertheless subjectivity and particularity in itself. If we say, for example, of God that he is simply *one*, the supreme being as such, we have thereby only enunciated a dead abstraction of the sub-rational Understanding. Such a God, not apprehended himself in his concrete truth, will provide no content for art, especially not for visual art. Therefore the Jews and the Turks have not been able by art to represent their God, who does not even amount to such an abstraction of the Understanding, in the positive way that the Christians have.<sup>24</sup>

Hegel continues to discuss the concept of divinity in ancient Greece and its materialization in anthropomorphic forms, implicitly placing Greek anthropomorphism at one end of a spectrum whose opposite end is occupied by the unrepresentable God of Jewish and Islamic belief: Christian conceptions of God occupy the comfortable and reasonable middle ground between these extremes.

From the second half of the nineteenth century onward, the tension between Greek anthropomorphism and Oriental abstraction evident here was extended to the realm of cultural production more generally. As the perceived apotheosis of an Oriental tendency toward abstraction and stylization, the arabesque featured frequently, reflecting the importance that ornament had assumed in late nineteenth-century debates about culture as an index of race.<sup>25</sup> Among the key works is the groundbreaking *Stilfragen* (Questions of style) by

Alois Riegl (d. 1905), published in 1893. In it, Riegl, the high priest of European ornament studies, sought to counter the idea that late antique and early Islamic art witnessed a decline of classical Greco-Roman ideals, seeing instead a continuous and vibrant development of both Byzantine and Islamic ornament from that of Greece until some point around the ninth century. After this, Islamic ornament began to branch from its late antique stem, producing the arabesque, “in which the antinaturalistic and abstract quality of all early Islamic art emerges so perfectly.”<sup>26</sup> Following a precedent established in earlier Germanic scholarship, Riegl posited a relationship between the worldviews of various civilizations and their art, adding to the discussion his elusive and idiosyncratic idea of *Kunstwollen* (literally “art-will”), as a locomotive force through which formal transformation was effected in the evolution of ornament across cultures. When it came to the development of the arabesque in Islamic cultures, the operation of *Kunstwollen* was informed by the operation of a *Bilderverbot*, which mitigated the triumph of the ornamental over the figurative: “Naturally, the pace of the development was faster in areas where figurative representation was deliberately inhibited, if not outright suppressed by religious statutes and where art, as a result, was essentially limited to satisfying the decorative urge and to ornament alone. Here, tendrill ornament eventually developed much more quickly than in Byzantine art, where in spite of iconoclastic tendencies, no one was able or willing to abandon the figurative representation of religious subjects.”<sup>27</sup> In Riegl’s scheme, the emergence of the arabesque from the vegetal ornament of late antiquity indexed an Islamic sensibility, a development directly linked to the triumph of the *Bilderverbot*, which accelerated the operation of *Kunstwollen*, amplifying a tendency toward abstraction and a preference for inorganic, inanimate forms that Riegl saw as already present in late antique and Byzantine ornament. Writing in 1899, Riegl claimed that this sensibility was manifest in the rejection of the Trinity, along with any organic relation between spirit and matter:

In contrast to Judaism, Islam opened itself to the contest with the material world, but only its dead, inanimate products—abstract ornament—not a contest with animate nature, which included plants, animals, and human beings. We call this the Islamic prohibition of images. The connection between artistic activity and worldview is

24. G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T. M. Knox, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1975), 1:42.

25. The term “arabesque” itself was coined in sixteenth-century European usage at the moment when Venetian craftsmen were busy appropriating the sinuous forms that adorned leather and metalwork imported from the Mamluk and Ottoman domains. Curiously, it is around the same time that we can identify a specific name, *islīmī*, for this type of scrolling vegetal ornament in the Persianate world: S. Morison, “Venice and the Arabesque Ornament,” in *Selected Essays on the History of Letter-Forms in Manuscript and Print* (Cambridge, 1980), 142–58; B. O’Kane, “Poetry, Geometry and the Arabesque: Notes on Timurid Aesthetics,” *Annales Islamologiques* 26 (1992): 77–78.

26. A. Riegl, *Problems of Style: Foundations for a History of Ornament*, trans. E. Kain (Princeton, 1992), 11.

27. *Ibid.*, 287.



more vivid here than anywhere else in the previous history of mankind, except in the case of the Jews. The reversion to earlier Near Eastern Antiquity is readily apparent here. No right to self-determination; unadulterated fatalism. Here we see the dead end from which ancient Near Eastern people would never escape.<sup>28</sup>

Despite his progressive endeavor to level the playing field by emphasizing common roots and rejecting notions of decline, Riegl failed to transcend the racial binary within which Semitic abstraction was opposed to Hellenic naturalism. Instead, he invoked the *Bilderverbot* to explain the return of an Oriental repressed characterized by lifeless abstractions, exemplified by the arid attempts of Muslim artists to engage with the natural world. In this, Riegl was following a trajectory already established in eighteenth-century European evaluations of the arabesque, the development of which was consistently attributed to the assumption that Islam prohibited the depiction of animals, men, and natural things.<sup>29</sup>

However, evaluations of abstraction and the arabesque were also closely related to debates on form, style, and empathy that flourished in relation to ornament in German art historical discourse of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These moved the touchstone of artistic achievement away from mimetic imitation or representation to affective and formal qualities.<sup>30</sup> Among the most influential was Wilhelm Worringer's *Abstraction and Empathy: A Contribution to the Psychology of Style*, first published in 1908 and subsequently reprinted many times. Worringer drew upon an earlier interest in empathy (*Einfühlung*) in German aesthetic theories in order to map the binaries of Orientalism/Hellenism onto abstraction and empathy, manifestations of psychological predispositions that serve as the determinants of artistic style, and whose mutually antithetical modes define the history of artistic production.<sup>31</sup> In an echo of Hegel's

distinction between aniconism and figuration, Worringer suggested that the perpetual contrast between abstraction and empathy in the domain of art corresponds to a religious distinction between transcendence and immanence, which he relates to the distinction between Oriental/Semitic and Greek/Hellenic civilizations.<sup>32</sup> For Worringer (following Riegl), the political triumph of Islam in the seventh century terminated the dynamic oscillation between Hellenic naturalism and Oriental abstraction that had characterized the art of earlier centuries, resulting in a decisive victory for abstraction, a quality manifest in the rejection of naturalistic imitation in general, and the depiction of animate creatures in particular.

In contrast to Riegl's teleological approach to artistic development, Worringer noted that although abstraction characterized the artistic volition of "savage peoples" and "primitive epochs of art," it was equally characteristic of "certain culturally developed Oriental peoples."<sup>33</sup> In a slightly later work, Worringer explained that "We do not, as a general rule, fully appreciate the great difference between primitive and Oriental art, because our European vision is not trained to detect nuances in abstract art, and because we only see what they have in common, that is to say, only the unlikeliness (*unlebendigkeit*), the remoteness from nature. In reality, there is just as much difference between them as there is between the vague fetishism of primitive man and the profound mysticism of Oriental man."<sup>34</sup> What primitive and Oriental art, including Islamic art, have in common is an impulse toward the transcendental: fetishism on the one hand, mysticism on the other.

Worringer's own sympathies are clear in his insistence upon the abstraction of Nordic art, as opposed to the empathetic qualities of southern European (especially Hellenizing) art. In this, he followed a trail pioneered by Josef Strzygowski (d. 1941) a decade or so earlier, even if Strzygowski had used the "un-Greek leaf ornaments" of the Islamic arabesque to exemplify "Semitic" ornamentation in a 1902 article with strongly racial and sexual overtones.<sup>35</sup>

28. A. Riegl, *Historical Grammar of the Visual Arts*, trans. J. E. Jung (New York, 2004), 329. In a note accompanying the text, Riegl is careful to distinguish between Oriental/Semitic fatalism and predetermination, the doctrine so important to German Protestantism.

29. Among many others, see C. F. Roland le Virloys, *Dictionnaire d'architecture civile, militaire, et navale*, vol. 1 (Paris, 1770), 82.

30. D. Morgan, "The Idea of Abstraction in German Theories of the Ornament from Kant to Kandinsky," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 50, no. 3 (1992): 231–42.

31. W. Worringer, *Abstraction and Empathy: A Contribution to the Psychology of Style*, trans. M. Bullock (Cleveland, 1967), 45. On antecedent discussions of aesthetics and empathy, see Morgan, "The Idea of Abstraction in German Theories", 234–38; R. Vischer, *Empathy, Form, and Space: Problems in German Aesthetics, 1873–1893* (Santa Monica, CA, 1994), 89–123.

32. Worringer, *Abstraction and Empathy*, 101–2.

33. *Ibid.*, 15, 97–98.

34. W. Worringer, *Form in Gothic* (London, 1927), 37, trans. H. Read from *Formprobleme der Gotik* (Munich, 1920), 26.

35. J. Strzygowski, *Hellas in des Orients Umarmung*, reprinted from the *Allgemeine Zeitung* (Munich, 1902). For a discussion, see M. Olin, *The Nation Without Art: Examining Modern Discourses on Jewish Art* (Lincoln, NE, 2001), 21. Among the few modern scholars to recognize the importance of Strzygowski's problematic legacy for the nascent discipline of Islamic art history is J. Elsner, "The Birth of Late Antiquity: Riegl and Strzygowski in 1901," *Art History* 25, no. 3 (2002): 361.



Abb. 15  
Holzschnitzerei mit Tiermotiv vom  
Osebergsschiff.  
Norwegen, 9. Jahrh. (Hist. Mus. Oslo)



Abb. 16  
Holzschnitzerei mit Vogelmotiv  
im Tulunidenstil.  
Ägypten, 9. Jahrh. (Louvre, Paris)



Abb. 17  
Fabeltier vom Holzportal der  
Kirche in Urnes.  
Norwegen 10. Jahrh.



Abb. 18  
Gazellenmotiv von einer Fayencevase  
mit Lüsterdekor.  
Malaga, um 1300 (Alhambra, Granada)

Figure 8. Ernst Kühnel, "Nordische und islamische kunst," *Die Welt als Geschichte* 1 (1935): figs. 15–18.

The Oriental-Nordic thesis of both scholars may have influenced the early work of the German Islamic art historian Ernst Kühnel (d. 1964). Writing in 1935, Kühnel saw in the abstract forms of "Nordic" art analogies with the abstracted vegetal forms and geometric interlaces favored in Islamic art; invoking Riegl's influential if

enigmatic notion of dynamic form, he saw both as parallel manifestations of *Kunstwollen* (fig. 8).<sup>36</sup>

36. E. Kühnel, "Nordische und islamische kunst," *Die Welt als Geschichte* 1 (1935): 203–17, esp. 216–17. See also M. Brion, "L'Art abstrait: son origine, sa nature et sa signification," *Diogenes* 24 (1958): 54.



The ambivalent role assumed by the arabesque in these pioneering discussions of Islam and ornament reflects its ability to function variously as an emblem of incapacity and sublimity. For those who saw the abstractions of the arabesque as indexing racial proclivity, religious proscription, or cultural aridity, it was doubly indicted. On the one hand, it was symptomatic of a Semitic incapacity for mimesis or naturalistic representation, the appropriate goal of all artistic activity for those who claimed the Hellenic tradition as their own. On the other, it exemplified a penchant for the ornamental, for minor forms and surface decoration over the valorized naturalism of Hellenism. Explanations for both phenomena invoked cultural predispositions, racial impulses, and/or religious proscriptions shared by both Jews and Arabs (and often, Muslims more generally). An essay presented at the International Congress of Orientalists in 1905 explains that "The arabesque appears to be essentially Semitic, to reflect the needs of a religion or its prohibitions, the primitive existential conditions of its creators, that is to say an inescapable inheritance."<sup>37</sup>

Similar themes are equally apparent in both germanophone and francophone scholarship of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Writing in 1932, for example, the French Orientalist Georges Marçais represented Arab creativity as a series of lacks that extends well beyond the realm of the visual arts, symptomatic (in Marçais's view) of the Arab inability to create "living fictions," among them narrative (as opposed to lyric) poetry or prose, or theater. Whether depicting animals or plants, instead of copying from nature, Arab artists generally transposed from one technique to another a theme already interpreted. Incapable of verisimilitude, in a telling *mise en abyme* they produced only sterile abstractions whose reproduction was nothing more than the stylization of a stylization, endless copies of unvarying simulacra of nature.<sup>38</sup>

Around the same time, the French Orientalists Gaston Wiet and Louis Hautecoeur emphasized the importance of the religious interdiction on images for understanding the aesthetics of Islamic art. According to both, Islamic art is a rigid, joyless art characterized by an excess of unmajestic decoration, and conducive only to dreams and melancholy, typified by the *horror vacui* (*horreur*

*du vide*).<sup>39</sup> The interdiction on figural representation meant that Islamic artists rarely took their inspiration from nature, favoring the use of drawings over direct observation; even when they did, the form became so stylized as to become geometric ornament, the arabesque being the obvious case in point. This is the reason, they suggest, that Islamic ornament is "as inert and rigid" as the religion of Islam itself.<sup>40</sup>

According to such evaluations, an assumed proscription of figuration had fostered the death of art in the Islamic world, promoting a sterile antimimetic ornamentalism emblemized by the arabesque. In a swinging indictment of the perceived sterility of Islam, published after a lecture delivered to the Royal Anthropological Society in London in 1945 (a not insignificant date), the anthropologist A. L. Kroeber wrote: "Representative art was banned. Purely decorative patterning—the name Arabesque is characteristic—provided only a lower-level substitute."<sup>41</sup> A decade later, the structuralist anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss revisited the apparent "collapse" of Islamic art in the nineteenth century. In his musings, Lévi-Strauss concluded (somewhat paradoxically) that this *historical* phenomenon was due to the *transhistorical* prohibition on images. This had precluded successful mimesis and encouraged a baroque profession of surface ornament, manifest in the proliferation of the minor arts, jeweled encrustation and gilding, which functioned "as a veneer to conceal rustic customs and the bigotry permeating Islamic moral and religious thought." Lévi-Strauss continued, "Why did Moslem art collapse so completely once it had passed its peak? It went from the palace to the bazaar without any transitional phase. This must have been a result of the rejection of images. Being deprived of all contact with reality, the artist perpetuates a convention which is so anaemic that it can be neither rejuvenated nor refertilized. Either it is sustained by gold or it collapses completely."<sup>42</sup> For Lévi-Strauss there was nothing sublime about the *Bilderverbot*. On the contrary, it had engendered a flight from mimesis,

37. J.-H. Probst-Biraben, "Essai de philosophie de l'arabesque," *Actes du XIVe Congrès International des Orientalistes Alger 1905*, part 2 (Paris, 1907), 16.

38. G. Marçais, "La question des images dans l'art musulman," *Byzantion* 7 (1932): 171–73.

39. On the *horror vacui*, see R. Ettinghausen, "The Taming of the Horror Vacui in Islamic Art," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 123, no. 1 (1979): 15–28.

40. L. Hautecoeur and G. Wiet, *Les Mosquées du Caire*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1932), 1:165–66, 170.

41. A. L. Kroeber, "The Ancient Oikoumenê as an Historic Culture Aggregate," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 75 (1945): 11. For a perceptive critique, see Hodgson, "Islâm and Image," 226.

42. C. Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, trans. J. Weightman and D. Weightman (New York, 1992), 400–401. For the original French, see C. Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes tropiques* (Paris, 1955), 480–81.

which initiated the decline of Islamic art, its refuge in ornamental excess, a long-established trope in French Orientalist scholarship.<sup>43</sup> Illustrating the very high stakes that both representation and ornament have assumed in etic discourses on Islam, Lévi-Strauss's comments invoke a familiar opposition between nature and artifice, naturalism and abstraction, in which the excess or supplement figured by the surface application of gold signifies a deficient relation to reality itself.<sup>44</sup>

In many of these accounts, the arabesque was firmly established as the index of a racially or religiously inspired *mentalité* that both eschewed the mimetic and existed outside of history, an idea later taken up by certain Muslim scholars who sought to offer a transcendentalist and transhistorical explanation for the forms of Islamic art.<sup>45</sup> However, equally apparent is an ambiguity or tension between the roles of the arabesque as both the essence of abstraction and the epitome of ornament. If in the nineteenth century it was the ornamental qualities of Islamic art, indeed the idea of Islamic art as an art of ornament, that had often informed its positive reception, at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, the abstract tendencies that had led to this penchant for the ornamental tended to be emphasized. Nevertheless, this pendulum swing toward emphasizing the sublimity of antimimetic Islamic forms was haunted by the charge of ornamentalism.<sup>46</sup>

43. See D. Carnoy, *Représentations de l'Islam dans la France du XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 1998), 245–46, 270–74.

44. Lévi-Strauss's imagery recalls a tale about the fourth-century BCE Greek painter Apelles, who was famous for his naturalistic paintings. When a pupil painted an image of Helen of Troy covered in gold, Apelles denounced him for concealing his lack of painterly skill behind an excess of surface embellishment, depicting the riches of Helen since he was incapable of depicting her beauty. In Christian sources such as the *Paedagogus* of Clement of Alexandria, the tale is presented as a contrast not only between nature and artifice, but between truth and falsity, reality and deception. The idea anticipates Kant's distinction between what is intrinsic to representation and what is merely ornamental excess, like the gilding on a frame, a glittering surplus or supplement that, in its overdetermined materiality, detracts from the intrinsic beauty of form: J. Derrida, "The Parergon," trans. C. Owens, *October* 9 (1979): 18–21, 27.

45. See, e.g., C. Barbier du Meynard, review of H. Lavoix, *Les Peintres arabes* (1876), in *Revue critique d'histoire et de littérature* 1, no. 21 (1876): 333–35. For a formalist history of the arabesque and its reception, see E. Kühnel, *The Arabesque: Meaning and Transformation of an Ornament*, trans. R. Ettinghausen (Graz, 1977). See also G. Necipoğlu, *The Topkapı Scroll: Geometry and Ornament in Islamic Architecture* (Santa Monica, CA, 1995), 75–82.

46. Writing in the 1860s, the comte de Rochechouart noted that the artistic taste of Persians showed them to be "ornamentalists" (*ornemanistes*) and nothing else, in whose hands painting was devoid

In 1910, Wassily Kandinsky praised Persian art for its antinaturalism (in this he was at odds with many of his contemporaries, who saw Persian art as naturalistic, in contrast to the "Semitic" abstractions of "Arab" art) and its subordination of composition to geometrical form, but went on to warn that in the absence of an ability to grasp the inner harmony of both, an emphasis on color and form alone risked producing works of mere decoration "suited to neckties or carpets."<sup>47</sup> His concerns were well placed, for when the expressionist painter Franz Marc (d. 1916) visited the pioneering *Meisterwerke muhammedanischer Kunst* exhibition in Munich in the same year, the intricate polychromy of the carpets displayed there begged comparison with Kandinsky's oeuvre:

It is a shame that it is not possible to hang Kandinsky's wonderful compositions and certain other works of art next to the Muhammadan carpets in the rooms of the exhibition. Comparisons would become inevitable and how instructive that would be for all of us! What is the nature of the astonished admiration with which we behold this Oriental art? Does it not mockingly reveal to us the one-sided limitations of our European concepts of painting? Its mastery of colors and composition, a thousand times more profound than our own, casts shame upon our conventional theories. In Germany there is scarcely any decorative work, let alone a carpet, which we could hang next to this art. Let us attempt this with Kandinsky's compositions—they will hold their own to this risky exercise, not as carpets but as "images."<sup>48</sup>

The comparison reflects the prominence of the carpet (and Oriental carpets in particular) as a trope in writing on the decorative arts and design from the mid-nineteenth century onward,<sup>49</sup> a legacy reflected in the emphasis on Kandinsky's works as images rather than examples of the minor arts. Like the trope of the

of the aesthetic qualities that characterized European art: J. de Rochechouart, *Souvenirs d'un voyage en Perse* (Paris, 1867), 261–65. For useful and nuanced discussions of the European reception of Islamic art as an ornamental art, see Necipoğlu, *The Topkapı Scroll*; R. Labrusse, "Une traverse du malheur occidental," in *Purs decors? Arts de l'Islam, regards du XIXe siècle*, ed. R. Labrusse (Paris, 2007), 32–53; idem., "Islamic Arts and the Crisis of Representation in Modern Europe," in Flood and Necipoğlu, *A Companion to Islamic Art and Architecture*, 2:1196–1218.

47. W. Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* [1910], trans. M. T. H. Sadler (New York, 1977), 46–47.

48. Cited in Labrusse, "Islamic Arts," 1212.

49. Riegl's interest in ornament had been spurred by his studies of the Islamic carpets in the collection of the Museum of Applied Arts in Vienna, where he was curator: A. Riegl, *Altorientalische Teppiche* (1892; repr., Mittenwald, 1979).



arabesque with which it was often entangled, the legacy of the “carpet paradigm” elicited responses ranging from ambivalence to disavowal in an emergent discourse on the aesthetics of modernism, and avant-garde painting in particular.<sup>50</sup> We might point to the futurist manifesto of 1909, which begins with a contrast between the dynamic industrial world of European modernity and the languid Oriental ornamentalism in whose cloyingly claustrophobic embrace the futurists begin their odyssey: “We had stayed up all night, my friends and I, under hanging mosque lamps with domes of filigreed brass, domes starred like our spirits, shining like them with the prisoned radiance of electric hearts. For hours we had trampled our atavistic ennui into rich oriental rugs, arguing up to the last confines of logic and blackening many reams of paper with our frenzied scribbling.”<sup>51</sup>

Writing on cubism in 1913, Albert Gleizes argued the necessity to “avoid reducing the picture merely to the ornamental value of an arabesque on an oriental carpet.”<sup>52</sup> Similarly, eight years after Kandinsky wrote, and just as the First World War ended, Le Corbusier (Charles-Édouard Jeanneret) and the cubist painter Amédée Ozenfant published a manifesto attacking cubism as revalorizing a nonrepresentational ornamental aesthetic, an antique mode of art-making common to “Mycenaeans, Orientals, and Negros,” posing the rhetorical question, “What differentiates the aesthetic of a carpet from that of a Cubist tableau?”<sup>53</sup> Rejecting cubism as inflected by a romantic spirit, the authors describe its products as an art from which one might draw superficial entertainment or decor, like the facile arabesque: all that annuls true beauty.<sup>54</sup> Given the frequency with which the arts of Islam have been invoked in relation to cubism, the image of the arabesque is not chosen at random. Cubism might be an art of modernity, but as an art of ornament it was not, according to these authors, a modern art.<sup>55</sup>

50. J. Masheck, “The Carpet Paradigm: Critical Prolegomena to a Theory of Flatness,” *Arts Magazine* 51, no. 1 (1976): 82–109, and *The Carpet Paradigm: Integral Flatness from Decorative to Fine Art* (New York, 2010), esp. 29–31, 41–43, 71–72, 100.

51. F. T. Marinetti, *Selected Writings*, ed. R. W. Flint (New York, 1971), 39.

52. A. Gleizes, “Opinion,” in *Cubism*, ed. E. F. Fry (New York, 1966), 128.

53. A. Ozenfant and C.-É. Jeanneret, *Après le Cubisme* (Paris, 1918), 15.

54. *Ibid.*, 15, 17, 20, 30.

55. It is worth noting that the link between the Persian carpet and the indictment of certain kinds of cubist art survived well into the twentieth century, even in the writings of artists and critics produced in the Arab lands. Writing in 1951, for example, the Iraqi artist Jawad

## Abstraction ascendant

As the divergent views of Kant and Hegel suggest, the perceived eschewal of representation promoted by a Jewish or Islamic *Bilderverbot* rooted in an anti-anthropomorphic impulse “was both a vice to be condemned and a virtue to be praised.”<sup>56</sup> To some extent, the resulting tensions are reflected in a dichotomy between Islamic art as a source of cloying claustrophobia and liberating purity. The emergence of a modernist penchant for abstraction in the avant-garde art of Europe (and later, America) in the early decades of the twentieth century facilitated a pendulum swing, enabling a recalibration based on new grounds of comparison rather than contrast.<sup>57</sup> The perceived flight from mimesis in Islamic art might still be condemned by some, but for others the abstraction of Islamic art now paved the way for its enthusiastic comparison with the burgeoning products of twentieth-century Euro-American art.

Abstraction had itself often been presented in comparative and historicist terms based on perceived analogies between modern avant-garde art and the art of earlier periods. Especially in the influential school of Viennese art history, the aesthetic values of the art produced in late antiquity (out of which Islamic art emerged) were hotly contested, variously imagined as representing a decline in the classical canons inherited from Hellenism (a decline often ascribed to Semitic influence) or as a period of dynamic change and experimentation. It is in the context of the latter, positive evaluation that comparisons between the art of late antiquity and of the modern avant-garde were first made.<sup>58</sup> It has been suggested, for example, that the shift from so-called representational art to so-called abstract art in the late antique Mediterranean between roughly 100 and 700 CE provides insights into the rise of abstraction in modern Euro-American art, or even that, in its formalist approach and valorization of abstraction in the art of late antiquity just a decade or two before the emergence of cubism, the work of Alois Riegl “developed a

Salim (d. 1961) railed against the tastes of the Iraqi bourgeoisie, whose luxurious Persian carpets he linked to a second-rate style of cubism: Naef, *À la recherche d'une modernité*, 333–34.

56. K. P. Bland, *The Artless Jew: Medieval and Modern Affirmations and Denials of the Visual* (Princeton, 2002), 15; on aniconism, see 15–19, 43.

57. For the latest scholarship on the phenomenon, see *Inventing Abstraction, 1910–1925: How a Radical Idea Changed Modern Art*, exh. cat., Museum of Modern Art (New York, 2012).

58. See, e.g., W. Ritter von Hartel and F. Wickhoff, *Die Wiener Genesis*, 2 vols. (Vienna, 1894–95).

vocabulary which would be suitable for writing about non-representational works of art which did not yet exist.”<sup>59</sup>

Conversely, those who saw the “rise of abstraction” and the transformation of classical aesthetics in late antiquity as a decline drew the same conclusion about the aesthetic values of modernity. For the art historian Bernard Berenson (d. 1959), writing in Italy during World War II, the two phenomena were analogous, with the difference that in modernity the descent from mimesis to abstraction had taken decades, rather than the centuries needed for decline to take hold in antiquity. Considering the widespread perception that the advent of Islam was the culmination of a process of late antique decline, and that Islamic art was an art of ornament, it is worth noting that for Berenson, decline was manifest in a move from artists to artisans, and from the figurative to “primitive geometrical patterns, vertical and frontal designs.”<sup>60</sup> He attributed this transformation to a combination of class (the earliest Christians being ignorant slum dwellers), “the fanatical hatred of the anti-Hellenic Jew against everything that might entice him away from his bleak abstractions,” and stoicism, with its “anti-Hellenic Puritanism” and horror of the nude, which is integral to all figurative art.<sup>61</sup> Predictably, Berenson went on to suggest that “this phenomenon seems to characterize, in our European world at least, all moments of serious disintegration, as has been the case with us from the beginning of art nouveau at the end of the last century to the so-called abstract art of to-day.”<sup>62</sup>

By contrast to this teleology of decline directly related to degrees of abstraction, writing in the wake of World War I, the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset had seen instead a cyclical shift between figuration and geometric abstraction typified by “the Semitic law

forbidding representation of animals,” which he located not only in religious impulses but also in an aesthetic sensibility.<sup>63</sup> The important point is that in neither interpretation was the operation of a racially or religiously inflected image prohibition seriously doubted. On the contrary, the conceptualization of abstraction as antfigurative enabled the discourse on modernism to intersect with a variety of preexisting discourses according to which the abstract qualities of Islamic and Jewish art were encouraged by, or even developed as, a response to religious proscriptions on figuration. Although widely accepted, such a proposition required a sidelining of the material evidence for the historical proliferation of figurative art across a wide range of media. Alternatively, the stylized manner of depicting the human figure might itself be invoked as a sign of abstraction.<sup>64</sup>

Ironically, even as Berenson, a Jew converted to Catholicism, was sitting in war-torn Europe denouncing the return of the primitive and Semitic repressed as heralding the end of humanism, the same wellspring of Semitic transcendentalism and intellectualism was being invoked in significant reevaluations of “Jewish” abstraction and aniconism. The contrast between “primitive” figuration and sublime abstraction invoked by Kant found its place in Freud’s *Moses and Monotheism* (1939), exemplified by a distinction between richly iconic ancient Egyptian religion and proscriptively aniconic Judaism, respectively. For Freud, the ban on figural representation in Judaism “signified subordinating sense perception to an abstract idea; it was a triumph of spirituality over the senses,” a renunciation that offered a model for the workings of the human psyche itself.<sup>65</sup> Similarly, while Berenson insisted that the flight from mimesis was a harbinger of the cultural chaos around him, characterizing “in our European world at least, all moments of serious disintegration,” across the Atlantic, Jewish antinaturalism was being presented as a precursor, if not prefiguration, of twentieth-century abstraction. At the inaugural exhibition of the Jewish Museum in New York in 1944, the work of Jewish artists from antiquity to modernity was being celebrated for its “advance into realms where the consistency of the human figure becomes

59. W. Liebeschuetz, “The Birth of Late Antiquity,” *Antiquité Tardive* 12 (2004): 255. See also J. Onians, “Abstraction and Imagination in Late Antiquity,” *Art History* 3, no. 1 (1980): 1. On the interrelations between aesthetic developments in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European art and the “rediscovery” or valorization of late antique art, see M. A. Holly, “Spirits and Ghosts in the Historiography of Art,” in *The Subjects of Art History: Historical Objects in Contemporary Perspective*, ed. M. Cheetham, M. A. Holly, and K. Moxey (Cambridge, 1998), 52–71, esp. 62–64. See also J. Elsner, “From Empirical Evidence to the Big Picture: Some Reflections on Riegl’s Concept of *Kunstwollen*,” *Critical Inquiry* 32, no. 4 (2006): 746.

60. B. Berenson, *Aesthetics and History in the Visual Arts* (New York, 1948), 169.

61. *Ibid.*, 166.

62. *Ibid.*, 169. See also B. Berenson, *The Arch of Constantine; or, The Decline of Form* (London, 1954); J. Elsner, “Berenson’s Decline, or His ‘Arch of Constantine’ Reconsidered,” *Apollo* 148, no. 437 (1998): 20–22.

63. Ortega y Gasset, *The Dehumanization of Art*, 40–41.

64. M. Olin, “‘Early Christian Synagogues’ and ‘Jewish Art Historians’: The Discovery of the Synagogue of Dura-Europos,” *Marburger Jahrbuch für Kunstwissenschaft* 27 (2000): 17.

65. Although, paradoxically, according to Freud, the roots of Jewish aniconism lie in the radical pharaoh Akhnaten’s heretical (but not aniconic) monotheism: S. Freud, *Moses and Monotheism* [1939], trans. K. Jones (New York, 1967), 19–20, 144, 149 (quote at 144).



questionable in the light of spiritual forces stronger than the quest for bodily perfection."<sup>66</sup> Whereas one presented abstraction as a signifier of barbarism, the other presented abstraction as a way of transcending the barbaric extremes to which the cult of the body had recently been taken. Thus, the perceived transhistorical abstractions of Jewish art were presented as evidence of a transcendental spiritualism opposed to the menace of certain strands of Germanic Hellenism.

In these comparative discourses, "abstraction" denoted two quite different phenomena that were often confused or elided: first, an antimimetic or antinaturalist tendency that informed the stylization of the real; second, an avoidance of figural representation tout court. Viewed as the eschewal of mimesis in favor of the transcendental, abstraction, which had once been used to indict Judaism and Islam in relation to the aesthetics and ethics of classicism, was now valorized as an expression of spiritual transcendentalism even as late antique art, once marginalized for its radical divergence from the canons of classicism, was now emerging as an art of spirituality.<sup>67</sup> In this way, the teleology by which cultures progressed from abstraction to naturalism was reversed, while the representation of a general shift from Hellenic sensualism to Semitic transcendentalism as decline was inverted.

In the case of Islamic art, the recognition of transhistorical abstract values was consolidated in the move from ethnic categorization (Arab, Persian, Saracenic art, etc.) to more unitary terms such as "Muhammedan" in the early decades of the twentieth century. The radical decontextualization of the whitewashed gallery space was itself a further abstraction initiated in *Meisterwerke muhammedanischer Kunst*, the groundbreaking 1910 exhibition of Islamic art in Munich, whose pared down aesthetic attempted to combat the perception of Islamic art as an art of bazaar crafts and decadent ornamentality (fig. 9).<sup>68</sup> The mode of display pioneered in Munich in 1910 represents a shift from a quasi-ethnographic presentation to one which appeals to the formal qualities of the work; it was precisely the eschewal of questions of context and iconography that enabled the selective "elevation" of Islamic artifacts to sit alongside the canonical works of Euro-American modernism on the

leveling ground of formalism. Writing in 1908, the art critic Roger Fry, who also reviewed the Munich exhibition, compared neo-impressionist and Byzantine art on formal grounds, as characterized by a common abstraction rooted in spiritual values.<sup>69</sup> By the 1930s, at the very moment when the aesthetic of whitewash was achieving hegemonic status in the canon of modernism, even the Islamic arabesque could be rehabilitated as the embodiment of spiritual purity rather than cloying ornamentality within a dichotomy between Hellenic sensualism and Oriental transcendentalism inflected by Neoplatonic conceptions of the abstract form as leading toward higher realms of being.<sup>70</sup> Conversely, widespread understandings of the arabesque as a form devoid of both iconographic and representational qualities, being both "the means of signification and the thing signified,"<sup>71</sup> resonated with the perceived nonrepresentational qualities of modernist abstraction, its "radical autonomy and recursiveness, its ability to figure nothing but itself."<sup>72</sup> That such revaluations of the arabesque's nonmimetic qualities were happening even while Claude Lévi-Strauss was citing the ornamental qualities of the arabesque as an index of the aridity of Islamic cultures underlines the deep ambivalence associated with what was seen as both form and mode.

The more standard analogy between modern abstraction and the perceived flatness, two-dimensionality, antisculptural qualities and rejection of naturalism in Byzantine and Islamic art was reiterated in the 1940s and would be famously taken up by Clement Greenberg in 1958, writing of such artists as Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko.<sup>73</sup> By the middle of the twentieth century, the interrelations between premodern and modern art imbued the experience of both with something akin to intertextuality or intervisuality. The valorization of the perceived abstract qualities of Islamic art was part of a

66. S. Kayser, *The Jewish Museum: Inaugural Exhibition* (New York, 1944), 2.

67. See, among others, M. A. Cheetham, *The Rhetoric of Purity: Essentialist Theory and the Advent of Abstract Painting* (Cambridge, 1994).

68. See the essays in A. Lerner and A. Shalem, eds., *After One Hundred Years: The 1910 Exhibition "Meisterwerke muhammedanischer Kunst" Reconsidered* (Leiden, 2010).

69. C. Reed, ed., *A Roger Fry Reader* (Chicago, 1996), 73, 81–85, 99–110. For his review of the Munich exhibition, see R. Fry, "The Munich Exhibition of Muhammedan Art—I," *Burlington Magazine* 17, no. 89 (1910): 283–85 and 288–90, and "The Munich Exhibition of Muhammedan Art—II," *Burlington Magazine* 17, no. 90 (1910): 326–29 and 332–33.

70. A. Gleizes, "Arabesques," *Cahiers du Sud* 22, no. 175 (1935): 101–6.

71. S. Naddaff, *Arabesque: Narrative Structure and the Aesthetics of Repetition in 1001 Nights* (Evanston, 1991), 115. See also Kühnel, *The Arabesque*, 8–9.

72. R. Slifkin, *Out of Time: Philip Guston and the Refiguration of Postwar American Art* (Berkeley, 2013), 13.

73. C. Greenberg, "Byzantine Parallels," in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston, 1965), 167–70. See also Onian, "Abstraction and Imagination."

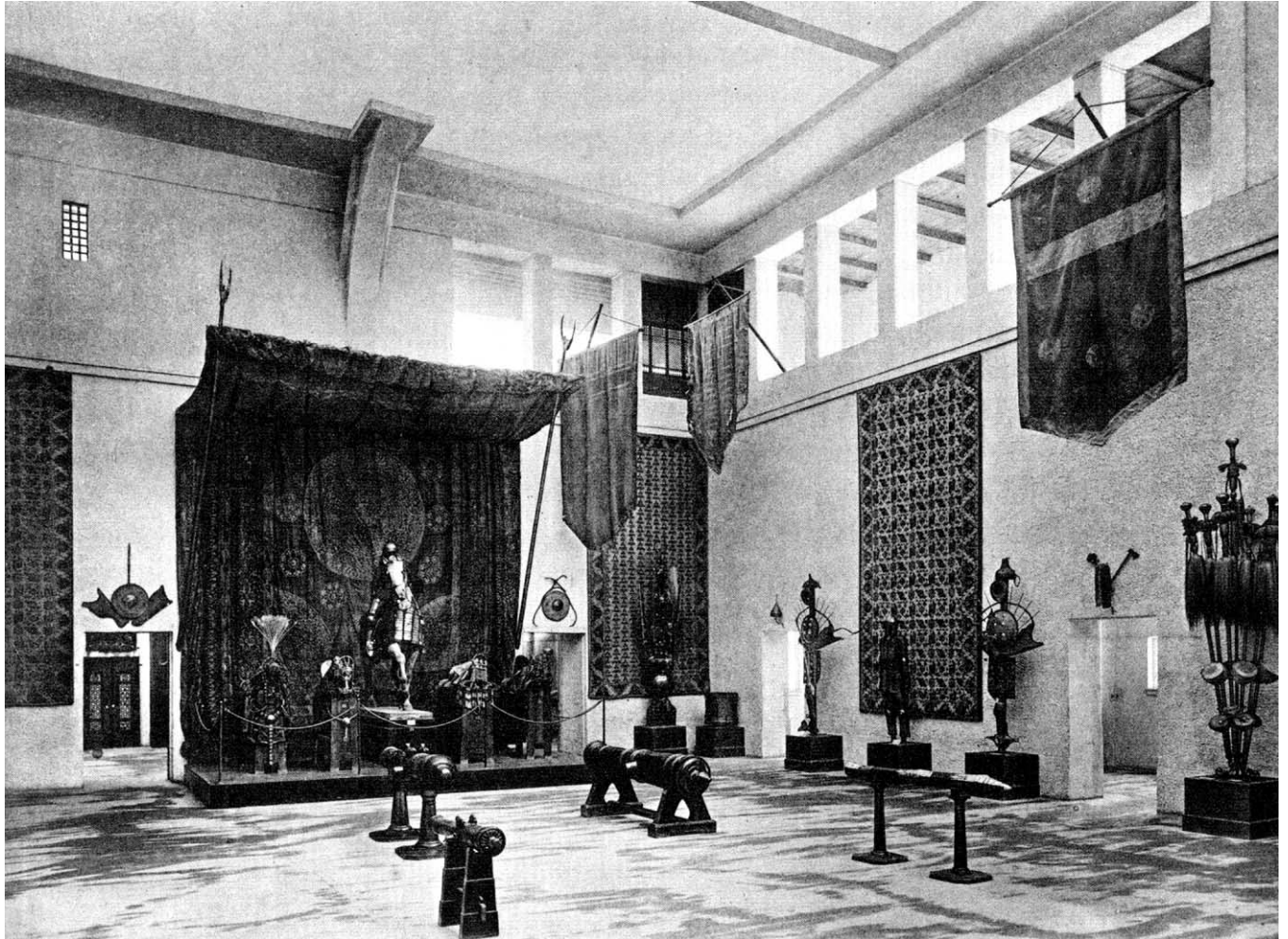


Figure 9. Room 72 in the *Meisterwerke muhammedanischer Kunst* exhibition, Munich, 1910. Published in Friedrich Sarre and Frederik Robert Martin, *Die Ausstellung von Meisterwerken muhammedanischer Kunst in München, 1910* (Munich, 1912), vol. 1, n.p.

broader twentieth-century phenomenon in which the experience of abstraction constituted a period taste characterized by a feedback loop: reception of late antique, medieval, and premodern Islamic art as arts of abstraction was informed by a twentieth-century vogue for abstraction, which was in turn sometimes informed by the experience of premodern art.<sup>74</sup> In some cases,

a complex relationship existed between the experience of premodern Christian or Islamic art by a specific artist, its impact on his or her oeuvre, and the reception of that oeuvre by those who had inculcated the values of abstraction.

74. See G. Duthuit, "Matisse and Byzantine Space," *Transitions* 5 (1949): 20–37; M. H. Caviness, "Broadening the Definitions of 'Art': The Reception of Medieval Works in the Context of Post-Impressionist Movements," in *Hermeneutics and Medieval Culture*, ed. P. J. Gallacher and H. Damico (Albany, NY, 1989), 259–82, and "The Politics of Taste: An Historiography of 'Romanesque' Art in the Twentieth Century," in *Romanesque Art and Thought in the Twelfth Century: Essays in Honor of Walter Cahn*, ed. C. Hourihane (Princeton, NJ, 2008), 57–81; J. B. Bullen, "Byzantinism and Modernism, 1900–1914," *Burlington Magazine* 141 (1999): 665–75; D. Lewis, "Matisse

and Byzantium, or, Mechanization Takes Command," *Modernism/modernity* 16, no. 1 (2009): 51–59; T. Buddensig, "Die karolingischen Maler in Tours und die Bauhausmaler in Weimar: Wilhelm Koehler und Paul Klee," *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 73 (2010): 1–18; B. Schellewald, "Matisse in Moskau: Die Geschichte einer Begegnung," in *Moskau: Metropole zwischen Kultur und Macht*, ed. T. Grob and S. Horber (Cologne, 2015), 97–122. Roland Betancourt, ed., *Byzantium/Modernism: The Byzantine as Method in Modernity* (Boston, 2015). For the recent suggestion of similar causal connections between classical sculpture and the art of modernism, see E. Prettejohn, *The Modernity of Ancient Sculpture* (London, 2012).



Picasso and Pollock were and remain the most common points of comparison for the abstract qualities of medieval Islamic art. Depending on the commentator, the postulated relationship ranges from direct influence (itself often adduced from formal analogies alone) through vaguer assertions of affinity or resonance to a relationship of serendipity. In an idiosyncratic but influential essay on Islam and image published in 1964, for example, Marshall Hodgson invoked both cubism and Picasso in an extended comparison between what he saw as the abstract, antinaturalist, and even antisymbolic qualities of Islamic and modern Euro-American art.<sup>75</sup> Certain artifacts have played a starring role in discussions of abstraction, among them a ninth-century carved wooden panel from Egypt on which the formal aspects of a vegetal design, and the careful positioning of an eyelike drill hole, produces the gestalt of a bird (fig. 10). In the 1930s, the panel featured in Ernst Kühnel's accounts of the abstract affinities between Islamic and Nordic art, inspired by Wilhelm Worringer's *Abstraction and Empathy* (fig. 8). In 1978, Oleg Grabar wrote of this and other works inspired by styles of ornament developed in the 'Abbasid capital of Samarra in Iraq during the ninth century, noting their "modernity": "Their formal and aesthetic characteristics are quite contemporary, and it is possible that Picasso, among others, was occasionally inspired by similar designs on Iraqi pottery."<sup>76</sup> In his comments on the same panel three decades later, Grabar invoked atomism, the *Bilderverbot*, and abstract expressionism as conceived by art critics such as Greenberg who saw "an evolutionary impulse toward abstraction and simplification inherent in artistic creativity."<sup>77</sup>

Comparisons with Picasso remain standard: an account of the opening of an exhibition of Islamic art at the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris in 2009 describes an exchange between the president of the institute and the collector whose objects were on display: "I was standing in front of one of the objects with the President of the IMA, Dominique Baudis, yesterday, and he exclaimed: 'But this is like Picasso!' Yes, only it was painted a thousand years before Picasso."<sup>78</sup> A recent Berlin exhibition, which



Figure 10. Panel with stylized vegetal ornament, Egypt, ninth–tenth century. Pine wood, 73 x 32 cm. Musée du Louvre, OA6023. Photo: Les frères Chuzeville. © RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY. Color version available as an online enhancement.

juxtaposed examples of medieval and early modern Islamic art with contemporary works from Europe and the Islamic world even included a section on "Picasso and Qur'an" in which examples of Picasso's lithographic illuminations for a poetic text were juxtaposed with medieval illuminated Qur'ans.<sup>79</sup>

As this suggests, de Lorey's invocation of Islamic art in his 1932 essay on Picasso was pioneering, if not prophetic, unusual only in its insistence upon a causal relationship between medieval Islamic and Cubist

75. Hodgson, "Islām and Image," 245–51.

76. O. Grabar, "Tulunid Wood Carving," in *The Genius of Arab Civilization: Source of Renaissance*, ed. J. R. Hayes (Cambridge, MA, 1978), 110.

77. O. Grabar, "When Is a Bird a Bird?" *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 153, no. 3 (2009): 248.

78. D. Brown, "Gold-Leafed Qur'ans Gems, Carpets and Calligraphy in Historic Paris Show," <http://www.israinternational.com/latest-news/226-islamic-art-showing-in-paris.html>.

79. A. S. Bruckstein and H. Budde, eds., *Taswir: Islamische Bildwelten und Moderne* (Berlin, 2009), 55–57.

abstraction rooted in historical intermarriage and interbreeding, not in its invocation of the *Bilderverbot* as shaping the formal values that he saw as common to each. More standard was the claim for a relationship rooted in the influence of Islamic art on the work of modern European artists, rather than racially inflected genetics. From the early twentieth century, this “influence” was facilitated by enhanced opportunities for European artists to visit Islamic lands (many then under European colonial rule) and to view examples of Islamic art (many acquired under colonial rule) in European museums or in temporary exhibitions such as the celebrated 1910 Munich exhibition, whose Persian carpets and paintings were rapturously received by Henri Matisse and Wassily Kandinsky among others.<sup>80</sup>

Even here, however, the impact of Islamic abstraction on the aesthetics of modernism was sometimes related to the role of the *Bilderverbot* in fostering premodern abstraction: writing of Kandinsky, whom she accompanied during a visit to Tunisia in 1904–5, Gabriele Münter insisted that “the Moslem interdiction of representational painting seemed to stir his imagination,” fostering an interest in abstraction.<sup>81</sup> In this common scenario, the *Bilderverbot* is seen as causally related to the abstract values of Islamic art and, indirectly, to the modern artistic traditions that it inspired. If de Lorey’s theory of a race memory of proscription transmitted by blood imagines a relation that might best be described as genetic, the relation assumed in assertions that the *Bilderverbot* inspired the abstraction of modern Euro-American art through the personal experience of Islamic art is best described as genealogical.

Rather than seeking to challenge the idea of an Islamic or Jewish *Bilderverbot* as the impetus for abstraction in premodern art (an idea with deep roots in European anti-Semitism), the twentieth-century valorization of abstraction as both stylization and antfiguration facilitated the inversion of earlier indictments of Jews and Arabs for their purported inability to capture the real, to produce mimetic art that was convincing as such. The degree of inversion entailed in this elevation of abstraction might be gauged from Max Weber’s *The Protestant Ethic and the “Spirit” of Capitalism* (1905), in which he refers to the “tremendous influence” exercised by the Second

Commandment on Judaism, which favors rationalism over sensualism. In an accompanying note, he cites one of the leaders of the Educational Alliance, “an organization which undertakes the ‘Americanization’ of Jewish immigrants,” that “the first aim of the ‘civilizing’ process [*Kulturmenschwendung*], which it tries to achieve by means of all kinds of artistic and social instruction, was ‘emancipation from the second commandment.’”<sup>82</sup> If, around 1900, the perceived aniconism of Judaism was incompatible with the assimilation of immigrant Jews to American modernity, by the 1940s the Jewish and Protestant roots of both abstract artists and the drive to abstraction were being championed as causal factors in the emergence of abstraction in modernism.<sup>83</sup> Hence the *Bilderverbot* came to be seen as causally related to the rise of abstraction and the role of Jewish artists (and, more controversially, the unrepresentable catastrophe of the Holocaust) in this process.<sup>84</sup>

In the modern presentation of “Jewish” art, the claim of relation took various forms. On the one hand, formal analogies between premodern Jewish art and the abstract art of modernism were highlighted. On the other, the Jewish origins of some of the most celebrated practitioners and theorists of abstraction were emphasized in ways that suggested that their apparent rejection of figuration was somehow related to the internalized proscriptions of the Second Commandment and its rabbinical mediations.<sup>85</sup> Implicit in both approaches were the assumption of the Jewish roots of modernism and the notion that the Jews were modern *avant la lettre*. Invoking rabbinical rulings regarding the permissibility of incomplete or antinaturalistic human figures, the American-German rabbi Steven Schwarzschild deduced “two of the chief principles of twentieth-century modern art—abstraction and distortion” in the type of visual culture promoted by the rabbis. Writing in 1975, Schwarzschild suggested that the aesthetic vision of rabbinical Judaism was more modern than that promoted by “liberal” Jews who championed naturalistic depiction or verisimilitude. In

80. K. C. Lindsay and P. Vergo, eds., *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*, vol. 1, 1920–1921 (Boston, 1982), 73–76. For an extensive exploration of exposure to Persian (rather than Islamic) art exhibitions, collections, publications, and travel, see F. Daftari, *The Influence of Persian Art on Gauguin, Matisse, and Kandinsky* (New York, 1991).

81. E. Roditi, *Dialogues on Art* (Santa Barbara, 1980), 144.

82. M. Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the “Spirit” of Capitalism and Other Writings*, trans. P. Baehr and G. C. Wells (New York, 2002), 189.

83. D. Gamboni, *The Destruction of Art: Iconoclasm and Vandalism since the French Revolution* (London, 1997), 264.

84. M. Godfrey, *Abstraction and the Holocaust* (New Haven, 2007).

85. D. M. Perlmutter, “Graven Images: Creative Acts of Idolatry; a Hermeneutic Study of the Relevance of Theological Proscription of Image-Making in Judaic Law to Contemporary Jewish Art and Artists,” PhD diss. (New York University, 1993); L. Saltzman, “To Figure or Not: The Iconoclastic Proscription and Its Theoretical Legacy,” in *Jewish Identity and Modern Art History*, ed. C. M. Soussloff (Berkeley, 1999), 68–69; Olin, *The Nation Without Art*, esp. 192–93.

doing so, he invoked, with a certain inevitability, the oeuvre of Picasso and its “one-eyed, three-eyed, or otherwise distorted human faces.”<sup>86</sup> The move was hardly original: in 1917, the great Jewish historian and philosopher Gershom Scholem noted in his diary that “Jewish art is cubism, which has managed to abandon flesh.” He explains that “the Spaniard Picasso’s *Woman with the Violin* seems Jewish. The prohibition against ‘likeness’ in Judaism leads to the division into symbols. Jewish art depends not on likenesses but on rigid, thick lines. Jewish art resists the creation of new forms and seeks mathematical-metaphysical knowledge. The *Jewish* image of a man *must* be cubist.”<sup>87</sup>

The move from the valorization of Hellenic naturalism and sensualism to Hebraic abstraction and intellectualism enabled a challenge to be mounted to the traditional view that the *Bilderverbot* had stymied artistic creativity, even as it left the very idea of a *Bilderverbot* intact. Similarly, it was precisely the perceived abstract qualities of Islamic art, fostered by a racially inflected religious prohibition, that rendered it a suitable and consistent companion to works of twentieth-century Euro-American artists. Ventriloquized by their modern supporters, the long-dead Jews and Muslims of the Near East thus found that, like Molière’s bourgeois *gentilhomme* who discovers that he has always spoken prose without knowing it, the abstract and aniconic visual languages for which they had so often been excoriated were in fact music to the ears of the twentieth-century avant-garde. The racist

underpinnings of this interest in abstraction and aniconism in European scholarship on Judaism have been the subject of much excellent analysis.<sup>88</sup> The way in which the idea of abstraction was similarly transformed from a lack to plenitude in much twentieth-century writing on Islamic art has, however, attracted far less attention. There is, moreover, a significant difference in the function of abstraction in the modern presentation of Jewish versus Islamic art. However implausible or teleological the purported connections or continuities between the art of the Jews in late antiquity and that of artists of Jewish origin practicing abstraction in the twentieth century, the scenario assumed the perpetuation of a living, flourishing tradition. By contrast, although the common ground of abstraction has underwritten a series of recent exhibitions that juxtapose examples of modern Euro-American and Islamic art, the comparison is almost exclusively with *premodern* Islamic art. It therefore precludes the assertions and implications of continuity that have consistently characterized the instrumental use of abstraction in the presentation of Jewish art. The second part of this article will explore the implications of this temporal disjunction as manifest in Euro-American museological practice. Returning to the pioneering Arab artists and theorists discussed above, it will then consider alternative discourses on abstraction developed by those in the Arab lands seeking to negotiate the relationship between historical and modern artistic practice. As we shall see, both endeavors were, in different ways, shadowed by the specter of the *Bilderverbot*.

86. S. S. Schwarzschild, “The Legal Foundation of Jewish Aesthetics,” *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 9, no. 1 (1975): 33, 37.

87. G. Scholem, *Lamentations of Youth: The Diaries of Gershom Scholem, 1913–1919*, ed. and trans. A. D. Skinner (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 179–80. I am grateful to William Diebold for drawing my attention to this reference.

88. See, e.g., Bland, *The Artless Jew*; Olin, *The Nation Without Art*.