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Illumination!

By Marjorie Welish 7/24/09



Before they became entertainment centers, museums were meant to be encyclopedias of cultural heritage where objects were kept in the public trust.

It is in this spirit that the Brooklyn Museum's reinstatement of its Islamic art collection puts on view an exhibition within an exhibition: the small, pitch-perfect "Light of the Sufis: The Mystical Arts of Islam."

Imagine a display that creates an inviting context for manuscript pages and decorative objects ranging from the 10th to early 21st centuries to indicate how mystical lucidity and fervor is not to be possessed so much as ... well, treasured.

Wouldn't you want to go and see? Reinstalling the Islamic galleries has provided Ladan Akbarnia, the Hagop Kervorkian associate curator at the Brooklyn Museum, who organized this show, with the opportunity to rethink how knowledge of the Islamic world is represented.

Sufism would show that the beauty that is nature is a manifestation of God's presence, to which we are to respond. Going further, ever seeking the beauty that makes ordinary nature extraordinary, we are to be more and more sustained by God's presence in the natural world, whether as found in gardens that render paradise on earth or enjoyed in the light of the nighttime sky. Indeed, Koranic scripture honors the sky and the earth, both, in objects on view.

For instance, light made palpable and analogous with the heavens may be sought in the gold and silver calligraphic verses extolling women in paradise on dyed-blue parchment from the folio of the celebrated "Blue" Koran, circa 10th century, from North Africa or Western Islamic lands. It's intense. You stare at it, it stares back. You are the one that blinks.

Beauty, then, is the hint of the spiritual presence to be sought in all things, with a fervor usually reserved for the beloved. And the more caught up in this fervor, the more we forget ourselves, as the Sufis believe.

The dervish, unattached to food, remains identified by his beggar's bowl as permanent symbol of devotion to otherworldly things—although we in the here and now succumb to the art of the shell's carved sculptural form.

Unlike gratifying desires, seeking beauty through love becomes the goad to love as the universal transformative principle for all existence. In the Sufi version of Neo-Platonism, whether found in nature or cultivated in humans, love will transform poverty into riches, war into peace. For God loves beauty and the making of beauty.

A sample of Persian calligraphy from a Mughal album—a 16th-century Iranian work mounted on 17th-century Indian floral paper—inscribes romantic poetry that compares the flushed face of the beloved to the moon of which cypresses are envious. Innovative here is the album, a form that testifies to the love of the calligraphic treasure and the wish to preserve it, by Indian people of Iranian descent. In a splendid illustrated manuscript, Dervishes Reading, Dervishes Contemplating

Love, from India, circa 1690, the subject of love must inspire interesting debates: Is the spiritual coextensive with life, or behind and beyond it? What relation does the extraordinary have to the ordinary? An aspect? A manifestation? A realization, rejecting corporeal nature, but requiring a person to transform it into embodied spirit? All of the above, yet not so easily settled.

That Sufism is a widespread force throughout Southeast Asia is apparent in the changing styles from object to object, indicating where and when Sufism took root. Given this, I wondered: What is uniquely Sufi in the art here?

Ms. Akbaria answered this question. Apart from “specific Sufi elements, such as recognizable costumes, attributes known to identify various Sufi orders (axe, hat, robe, alms, bowl),” what identifies the Sufi presence are the known texts of “the mystical overtones.”

“Many of the themes that exist in Sufism have parallels in other faiths and cultural and intellectual traditions, and the same goes for their arts,” Ms. Akbaria continues. “What makes them Sufi rather than simply mystical in nature is that they rest on the foundation of Orthodox Islam.”

Most of her attention was put to writing the text that accompanies the pieces to reflect contemporary knowledge of the history and culture there represented. Yet it is an immediate aesthetic privilege to see the restored painting of the martyrdom of Muhammad’s grandson Hyysan and to listen on audio to the chanting of the story, as it would have been sung in passion plays.

[“Light of the Sufis: The Mystical Arts of Islam” on view at the Brooklyn Museum through Sept. 6, 2009]

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