

BOOK REVIEW

ISLAMIC ART (OR THE NEEDLESSNESS OF THE CLASH OF CIVILISATIONS) by David Talbot Rice

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After a recent visit to the Islamic section of the New Louvre and being once again moved by the beauty of its rich collection, in particular by the wonderful luminosity of the İznik tiles—there is a plate there which announces modern painting all by itself, Matisse and other artists. I went to the museum's bookshop and bought a 1994 French translation of David Talbot Rice's *Islamic Art*. This was not a random choice for I knew David T. Rice from his book on Istanbul (1965) which had left a deep impression on me of the author's sensitivity and objectivity in dealing with different cultures. This impression was deepened even further by his work on Islamic art, which is after all a vast subject unfortunately rather underrated in the West, its impact on Christianity and Western art ignored for a long time. I remember even Bernard Pivot, the French television personality, in his programme on Andr  Malraux in his famous series 'Bouillon de Culture', was prompted to point out to his audience that the great Malraux was rather "blind" on Islamic art. It is true that, for instance in Malraux's famous work *Les Voix du Silence*, apart from a few sentences which are negative rather than positive, there is an absolute silence on L'art de l'Islam. Is it because anti-pagan Islam with its abstract patterns, vivid colours and nearly general anonymity of its artists contrasts so much with the expression of human creativity as understood by Malraux?

It is of course impossible to make such a remark to David T. Rice. His approach results in an admirable survey which provides for all a closer acquaintance with Islamic civilisation through an ingenious choice of presentation of the works in almost every medium, "first according to their period and second according to their geography and provenance". Thus, we not only follow the development of this "New art" in Islamic countries in a chronological order starting from the early Arabic Era, but also we are able to discuss the artistic contribution of various peoples with their different sensibilities in the vast Islamic community. David T. Rice guides us through the Umayyads' Syria to the Abbasids' Mesopotamia, to Persia, Egypt, Spain, North Africa and Sicily as well as the Seljuk age in Persia and Anatolia, and the Ottoman Turks. There is also an interesting chapter on fourteenth and fifteenth century Persian art including Tamerlane and Turkistan, for Rice's Persia covers also Central Asia's Turkic peoples as well as the Azeris of the Caucasus. This does not mean that his work is without omissions. The author admits candidly in his introduction that because of lack of time and space he could not deal sufficiently with important fields such as carpets and calligraphy, as well as the era of Turkish Islamic rule in India, which is altogether another important subject crowned by that unique monument of matrimonial love, the Taj Mahal.

For us Turks, of course, the chapters concerning the Seljuks in Persia and Anatolia, the Mameluke builders in Egypt, the Ottomans, as well as those on Turkistan and Central Asia, are of particular importance.

David T. Rice quite rightly starts by saying that the non-figural style which played such a crucial role in the development of Islamic art stemmed mainly from the East, meaning Central Asia and that the Seljuk age in Persia was one of the most glorious in this respect. The Seljuks, who penetrated Persia from approximately 1000 onwards, were great builders and craftsmen. David T. Rice cites in this context Masjid-i Jami in Isfahan and considers it amongst the finest products, not only of Persian, but also of all architecture. For Rice the system of Seljuk buildings "was not only beautiful but was also creative." It represented an ingenious exploitation in brick of an idea first tried out in wood, and the way that brick-vaulted ribs were used as frames on which the masonry of domes and vaults was supported, anticipated developments in the Gothic world by some centuries. The author mentions also the Rabat i Malik in Uzbekistan, which dates from the second half of the eleventh century and considers it "strangely modern" in its lines and proportions.

The author deals extensively with the Seljuk gumbet, "turbe or tomb tower", which is another example of the very individual Seljuk-type building deriving from the conical tents or yurts of

Central Asian nomadic times. These gumbets of striking beauty can still be found throughout Persia and Anatolia.

As for the Seljuks of Anatolia, once again their architectural originality is underlined. But in Anatolia they used stone instead of brick to build, in such centres as Konya, Kayseri, Sivas, Erzurum, the mosques, medreses and the series of caravanserais that stand today as their remarkable legacies. Rice signals also the docks and covered berths constructed by them for ships in Alanya, as proof of the extreme adaptability of this highland people to new conditions. He adds to these observations the quality of the carpets and rugs of the Seljuk period as well as the geometric decorations invariably ornamenting their edifices.

The chapter reserved for Ottoman Turks is also full of such pertinent observations. He speaks of a purely original and distinct Ottoman style in architecture as well as in all mediums, be it İznik tiles, Uşak, Bergama, Gördes, Kula, Ladik or Kırşehir carpets among others, miniatures, paintings, metalwork, calligraphy, etc. Further, he stresses that the Ottomans, while not underestimating the legacies they discovered, were able to make their own contribution through the perfection of the style they created, so much so that the many people which formed their empire tried to appropriate it, but never succeeded. That style was Ottoman only until it faded with them, but leaving to their heirs a rich, inspiring noble heritage.

Prof. Rice likens it to Brahms variations on a theme of Haydn; the variations constituting the works of art rather than the basic theme. He mentions in this respect also the much imitated Ottoman minaret developed from the elegant Seljuk forms and cites as an example, the Mosque of Sultan Ahmet (the Blue Mosque) in Istanbul. He says that, the six tall minarets of this famous mosque give it a lightness and delicacy which is truly outstanding.

The last chapters of the book are reserved for Persian art and in particular for the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, which the author considers as the most significant in Persia. He singles out the role played by Tamerlane in this connection, as a patron of architecture. He deals at length with Tamerlane's activity in his beloved Turkistan in Samarkand, where he was buried, and considers his mausoleum, the Guremir, finished in 1434, to be one of the world's most perfect buildings. In these chapters there are also interesting pages about Persian painting and, in particular, the so-called Tabriz School.

The book ends with several paragraphs on the importance of Turkish and Persian carpets and also of the land in between, the Caucasus, where the carpets are distinguished by the purely non-representational geometric art of Central Asia. Prof. Rice's conclusion is certainly worth quoting, especially in these days where a 'clash of civilisations' is once again under debate: "if, at the end of this survey, the elements that went to form the art of Islam may be enumerated, the non-representational art of Middle Asia must share the glory with the legacy left on the one hand by Hellenism and on the other by the Sassanians. It was the blend of all these influences that produced Islamic art, the patronage of the diverse rulers that nurtured it, and the genius of the individuals, a few of them giants, but all endowed with great sensibility, that made its flowering possible. We know but few of these men by name, and we know still less of their personalities and their lives. Like the Paladins in the Snow they are patient, mute, fatalistic; their fame, their names, rested in the hand of Allah, the all-merciful. There they were in safe keeping. But their works, or some of them, have remained a joy and delight, even a source of inspiration to those of a different age and faith. May the reproductions that appear in this book serve to bring them before a wider circle, and show that the great concern with self and self-expression which so much obsesses the artists of today in the West is not necessarily to be regarded as an essential in the production of good art."

Obviously self appreciation can only be by oneself and through oneself, but contribution by a third party has certainly a particular value. I thank Professor Rice for such a pleasure.