REMARKS ON THE CONCEPT OF PICTORIAL SPACE IN ISLAMIC PAINTING

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1 The pictorial treatment of space in Islamic miniature painting is a subject that has largely remained undiscussed (2). Since naturalism is not a pictorial priority in these paintings, which are essentially two-dimensional, the representation of space appeared to many as an irrelevant problem. Historians of Islamic art accepted too readily the idea that the prohibition of images in Islamic culture crucially determined the two-dimensionality of pictorial representations (3). While this observation has a historical base, the conclusions automatically derived from it (that a pictorial representation of space was not feasible and that whatever the Muslim painter did pertained to the surface and remained, therefore, decorative) are not tenable. Moreover, this idea only helps to explain why Muslim painters would stay within a two-dimensional pictorial system, but it is unable to explain how their two-dimensional system was constructed, and how it was developed as an alternative realm of pictorial representation. Although it remains outside the scope of this paper to discuss them, the ‘orientalist’ underpinnings of this reluctance to study the Islamic miniatures as an alternative pictorial system can be mentioned at this point (4).
A close reading of writings on Islamic painting reveals a quasi-unanimous assumption that pictorial coherence can only be achieved with linear perspective. It is necessary to distance ourselves from these assumptions and to examine more critically the question of pictorial space, if we wish to understand the pictorial qualities of Islamic painting.

The way we perceive pictorially represented space today is dominated by the visual logic of linear perspective, or in other words, by the close relation it has established between pictorial space and our visual perception. Space itself being nothing else but a void that surrounds the objects, its illusionistic representation depends on the pictorial replication of the precise geometrical relations of objects in reference to the viewer's eye, so that they can be identified with a direct experience and knowledge of spatial relations. To achieve this effect, linear perspective approximately replicates the human vision through a rigorous geometrical construction comparable to a central projection with the viewer's eye as its center of projection.

The resulting pictorial space is a geometrically continuous and measurable unit of the actual space and the objects contained in it. It is through its absolute dependence on the position of the viewer's eye that the perspectival pictorial space acquires an enclosing character and an illusionistic depth (5). The geometric vigor, the illusionistic efficiency, and the compositional coherence of representation all rely on the single viewpoint according to which a perspectival painting is conceived. Besides its practical necessity, the single viewpoint has a very important symbolic implication: It is an absolute point of reference that establishes the vision of a unique viewer as a representational priority (6).

In Islamic miniatures objects depicted without reference to a single viewpoint cancel out the possibility of representing space as an illusion of depth, yet the intelligibility of pictorial space need not depend on that illusion. As Coomaraswamy pointed out,

Space (...) has to be taken as a primary datum of intelligence, and it is obvious that as soon as it became possible to make intelligible representations of objects, it must have been taken for granted by those who understood them that these were representations of objects existing in space (1956, 147).

The notion of pictorial space as an illusionistic depth is intimately linked to a very particular understanding of the picture surface. In Western painting tradition from Renaissance onward until the revolution of Modern painting, the picture surface was conceived not as a positive entity but as a visually dissolved one, comparable to a ‘transparent window’. Alberti’s definition of the picture surface as the ‘intersection of the pyramid of the visual rays’ not only explains its geometrical significance and its role in linear perspective construction, but also points out that in order to realize a perspectival pictorial space the picture surface dissappears or becomes transparent (7).

An expression of the planar character of the picture surface, as found in Islamic painting, is obviously incompatible with the illusionistic representation of space, a convention that dominated Western painting until the turn of the century. If this convention of the Post-Renaissance painting is taken for granted by someone who studies Islamic art, it is normal that all the features that seem to emphasize or to confirm the flatness of the picture plane should be seen as preventing pictorial space from emerging. Yet pictorial space cannot be held identical with illusionistic space; some of the alternative approaches that can be found in
PICTORIAL SPACE IN ISLAMIC PAINTING

Before discussing what kind of a pictorial space was realized in Islamic painting, one last point concerning another aspect of the represented space in the Renaissance painting needs to be noted. The illusion of coherently receding depth on a flat surface was successfully created only at some expense. In Renaissance painting, the infinite character of space is paradoxically confined within the spatial unit of the picture. Infinity, where all parallel lines are imagined to meet, corresponds to a precise point in the picture, that is to the vanishing point, which was often dissimulated by the painters (8). All orthogonals in the picture plane converge toward that point and, hence, define the visual limits of the pictorial space (9). Since the precise location of the vanishing point on the picture plane is geometrically determined in reference to the viewer’s location, this point becomes, so to say, the symmetrical counterpoint to the viewer’s eye: The infinite space finds itself unified and contained within the gaze of a single viewer.

In contrast to this paradox in Western painting, it can be argued that Islamic and Chinese painting achieve more directly the suggestion of an unlimited space. Because of the absence of a single vanishing point in their conceptions, the non-perspectival paintings of Islamic or Chinese art are capable to suggest more directly the infinite quality of space, even though their representation of space remains much less tangible.

As a consequence, the relationship of the pictorial space with the picture surface is also entirely different. Despite the different concepts of space in these two painting traditions, the equivalence between the picture surface and the pictorial space is common to both of them. The representation of space is achieved within the limits of the picture surface, that is, within its two-dimensionality, and the pictorial space depends more on intellectual abstraction than on sensory illusion.

Wilfrid H. Wells suggested that in Chinese painting, the picture plane did not have an optic existence except where it was appropriated and converted into surface by depicted objects; in other words, despite its solid material existence, the unpainted support (paper, silk, etc.) was not perceived by the Chinese artist in its entirety as a picture plane (10). Hence, where it was left untouched by paint, the support suggested the negative presence of space, and paint, in contrast, suggested the material existence of the objects.

In Islamic miniatures, in plain opposition to this practice observed in Chinese painting, the entire support is painted, that is, appropriated and converted into a picture surface. The use of color applied in large patches, sometimes uniformly spread and sometimes interspersed with minute allow patterns, over large sections of the composition is not the consequence of a decorative approach to painting as it is often considered (11).

Indeed, the valorization of objects, figures, and various surfaces (which may stand for the ground, floor, walls, ceiling, or the sky) as painted surfaces suggests a particular kind of pictorial space in which, flattened and equalized in visual terms, solids and voids become pictorially homogenous. Even where the three-dimensionality of an object is expressed through an axonometric form, the equal treatment of line and coloring throughout the painting establishes a unified order. Neither the representation of solids, nor that of the voids dominates the pictorial composition, something which is masterfully exemplified by a late fifteenth-century miniature from the Herat School (Figure 1).
Figure 1. 'A Party at the Court of Sultan Husayn Mirza' (detail); from a copy of Sa'di's 'Bustan', Herat, dated AH 893 / AD 1488; Cairo, General Egyptian Book Organization, MS Adab Farsi 908, fol.2r (Lentz and Lowry, 1989, 260).
In Islamic miniatures this pictorial equivalence of solids and voids suggested by a common two-dimensionality and stressed through paint is furthermore strengthened by the avoidance of a unified viewpoint for the entire composition. One can always notice the presence of more than one viewpoint adopted to depict the different parts or elements of the composition. Depicted objects that cannot be unified in the sight of a single viewer cancel a unique perception of a depicted space; in other words, space cannot be derived from the order of objects seen at once, but it has to be explored pictorially.

This can be achieved by shifting our gaze, to look at the objects depicted with respect to different viewpoints. The pictorially required shift of viewing direction, therefore, not only underlines the significance of the individual parts of the composition, but also suggests that these objects are seen from different angles in space. Thus, by its very structure depending on multiple viewpoints, the two-dimensional miniature painting represents space by implication of movement.

The representation of space through movement may sound paradoxical, given the somehow rigid or frozen poses in which figures are often drawn in miniatures. The movement we are speaking of is, however, not related to an illusionistic pictorial structure, but rather to a virtual one, and it is often sustained by the narrative composition. The particular arrangement of figures along a spiral curve, which Alexandre Papadopoulo (1976) discerned in a great number of miniatures and considered as an enhancement of the narrative (as it gradually leads our attention to the central figure of the story) is also a very suitable compositional structure for suggesting space through movement, that is, a space compatible with the two-dimensional character of the representation: The movement suggested by such a spiral arrangement is parallel to the picture plane and does not attempt to pierce it (12). This seems also to be the opinion of Erzen (1991, 10-12), who characterizes the pictorial space of miniatures as 'equivalent at all points in terms of experiential distance' and notes the two-dimensional conception of miniatures at the same time as their 'radial composition revolving around a center'.

Some authors have identified a similar suggestion of virtual movement in pictorial space in axonometric views, especially in those representing buildings. Here also the objects invite the viewer's eye to move around the depicted object (Bois, 1979, 264; Comar, 1992, 63). However, while axonometric drawings suggest a more easily intelligible movement that follows a continuous path around the object, they still relate to a single, even though impersonal, or virtually non-existing viewpoint, which corresponds to a vanishing point sent back to an infinite distance. The miniatures, on the other hand, suggest a more complex and fragmented movement in pictorial space, as they incorporate multiple viewpoints.

Axonometric forms can also be encountered in Islamic miniatures. Yet this occasional use of axonometric drawing which reveals the three-dimensional aspect of an object, should not be seen as an incomplete attempt to create the illusion of depth. The use of an axonometric form is more likely to related to a desire of clearly explaining a particular shape, such as the hexagonal pavilion or its three-sided bay window in Figure I. Moreover, an axonometric form does neither suggest a privileged viewpoint, nor a precise vanishing point for the entire picture, and therefore, it can very well be accommodated within a miniature composition that already incorporates many other viewpoints. Even the isolated perspective views that we find in the early-seventeenth-century miniatures of the Ottoman painter Ahmet Nakşı can be attributed to the principle of multiple
Figure 2. 'The House of Şeyhülislam Mustafa Efendi at Kasımpaşa' by Ahmed Naki; from 'Divan-ı Nadirî', İstanbul, ca. AD 1620; Istanbul Topkapı Palace Museum Library, MS Hazine 889, fol. 18v. (courtesy of the Topkapı Palace Museum).
viewpoints (Figure 2) (13). Although these perspective views seen through windows and gateways suggest an illusionistic depth and render Nakşı's composition somewhat eclectic and ambiguous, they remain isolated views and do not disturb the pictorial composition based on multiple viewpoints.

If we consider the conception of pictorial space as tied to the picture surface in Islamic painting, we must note that this conception is most strikingly expressed by the coincidence of all depicted surfaces such as floors, walls, ceilings, and canopies with the picture plane itself. The spatiality of these surfaces is transformed into a flatness on which all other solids appear to be floating. Hence, the flat picture surface becomes an abstract equivalent of the actual space.

On the basis of such a pictorial treatment of space and objects, it might be appropriate to conclude that in Islamic painting, space is primarily conceived as defined by the surfaces that suggest its limits. Unlike the pictorial space of a perspectival picture, the pictorial space suggested in miniatures does not enclose or unite the objects, but rather remains indifferent to them. In other words, here the pictorial expression of space does not depend on the depiction of objects, as it is the case in a perspectival picture where the precise geometry of depicted objects constitutes the illusionistic space.

Seyyed H. Nasr's (1972) remarks on a concept of cosmic space, predominant in Islam, seem to offer a further elaboration on this observation. Nasr remarks that:

"Cosmic space is defined in relation to the inner surface of the outermost sphere rather than by any positive object such as the earth or the planets. Space is, as it were, carved out from the plenum of cosmic creation and is conceived with respect to a surface that surrounds it rather than an object which it surrounds (Nasr, 1972, 118-119) (Italics mine)."

Nasr suggests that this conception of 'negative space', that is, a space determined not by the object(s) it encloses but by the surfaces that surround it (them), also characterizes the designs of Islamic buildings, gardens, and cities.

The significance of the surrounding surface in the conception of space may also explain why in Islamic miniatures the pictorial space is intimately linked to a picture surface stressed with paint and pattern rather than to a surface left blank, as in Chinese paintings. The conceptual link between space and its surrounding surfaces may then explain why pictorial space realized on a two-dimensional surface remains intelligible.

Being conceived as a stressed surface rather than a visually dissolved one, the Islamic pictorial space allows its viewers an intellectual viewing distance. We may gain an insight into how this pictorial space works visually and intellectually by looking at a very special example that brings the actual and the represented space together in an architectural composition. A ceramic tile panel, at the entrance to the bedroom pavilion of Murad III in the Topkapi Palace, bears the image of a garden seen through a two-bay arcade, in a nearly one-to-one scale, and proposes a pictorial space the meaning of which depended on its precise location in the architectural environment (Figure 3) (14).

At the time of its construction in 1578-79, the royal pavilion, consisting of a domed hall and its ante-chamber, overlooked the Golden Horn and commanded one of the most attractive panoramas of Istanbul. The tile panel that concerns us must have been moved in mid-seventeenth century to its present location, on the wall of another pavilion that protrudes into the ante-chamber of Murad III's...
Figure 3. Ceramic tile panel (Iznik, ca. 1578) in the ante-chamber of the bedroom pavilion of Murad III in the Topkapı Palace, Istanbul (photograph by author; also printed in F. Edgüed 1983).
15. According to Mualla Anhegger-Eyüboğlu, two pavilions known as Twin Pavilions (Çifte Kasırlar) were built at different times around the middle of the seventeenth century. The first one, which she names the Domed Pavilion (Kubbeli Kasır), covered part of the ante-chamber to bedroom of Murad III and was probably built during the reign of Murad IV (1623-1640). It was entered from this ante-chamber. The second pavilion seems to have been inserted, during the reign of Mehemmed IV (1648-1687), between the Domed Pavilion and the bedroom, taking over about one half of the ante-chamber (Anhegger-Eyüboğlu, 1986, 63-79). For a plan of the Twin Pavilions, see figure L:117, and for the situation of bedroom pavilion of Murad III and that of the Twin Pavilions, see Figures L:21 and 22 in Eldem and Akozan (1982).

16. A likely location for this panel would be inside the ante-chamber, on its northeast wall. Precisely this wall of the ante-chamber was destroyed when Mehemmed IV's pavilion was built. Another example of an arcade represented on tile revetment can be found in the tomb of Mehemmed Mehemmed. There, the arcade composition covers the interior walls all around, yet real windows, located between arches, replace the imaginary view and give direct visual access to the tomb garden outside. See illustrations 8 and 9 in Yençebirlioğlu (1980, 451-452, 456).

The depicted arcade segment and the imaginary garden seen through it share the same flatness. Despite the fact that the depicted arcade acts as a frame, the space seen through it is filled with fantastic floral compositions that stress the surface without suggesting any depth (19). Although this represented view can somehow be expanded by the viewer's imagination, it cannot be visually perceived as an expansion of the viewer's own space, as a perspectival view would be. Here the viewer can only be reminded of a spring garden, to which the royal pavilion itself is compared by various inscriptions it bears (Necipoğlu, 1991, 167, 170). The pictorial space in this representation, realized on a ceramic revetment on a magnified scale, is not different in its essence from that realized in miniatures. It is a pictorial space that does not depend on an illusion of depth to be intelligible. The efficiency of this two-dimensional pictorial space lies both in its imaginary and concrete qualities. By not suggesting spatial depth, which would have corresponded to an enclosed finite spatial unit, this representation opts for an infinitely expanding space of an imaginary garden, perhaps that of the Paradise, which nevertheless remains sensible and enjoyable thanks to the concreteness of its surface stressed by a powerful pattern.
İSLAM RESİM SANATINDA MEKAN TASVİRİ ÜZERİNE DÜŞÜNCELER

ÖZET

İslam minyatürlerinde mekannın nasıl tasvir edildiği genellikle tartışılmamıştır. Ördeki boyutlu olan ve naturalizmi amaçlamayan bu resimlerde, mekan tasvirinin konusu dışında karıştığı yargısı yerleşmiş gözükmektedir. Sanal tarihçileri, İslam resminde görülen iki boyutluğun tasvir yasağının kaynaklandığı görüşünde birelirler. Bu görüş, kısmen de olsa, tarihsel bir geçişe dayanamaz bir bilik, sanatının ancak neden iki boyutlu bir tasvir sistemine içinde çalıştığı aqlaklar; fakat bu sistemın nasıl kurulduğu ve hangi açıdan farklı bir tasvir seçeneği oluşturulduğu sorusunu cevapsız bırakır. İslam resim sanatı hakkındaki yazılarda mekan tasvirine değinilmemesinin asıl nedeni, bunun ancak doğrusal perspektifle tutulmuş bir biçimde sağlanabileceğini varsayılmıştır. Bu yüzden, perspektif yöntemile gerçekleştirdiğimiz mekan tasvirinin özellikleri ve anlam ile İslam minyatürlerinde mekan tasvirinin nasıl ele alındığı konularına değinilmiştir, özellikle her iki resim sisteminde resimsel mekannın nasıl bir resim düzlemi kavrayışına göre gerçekleştiğini incelenmektedir. Resim düzlemi kavramına aklık getirme amacıyla Çin resim sanatında mekan tasvirinin bazı yönlerine de kısaca değinilmektedir.

Perspektifle mekan yanılsaması (illusion), mekandaki yer alan cisimlerin birbirlerine olan geometrik ilişkilerinin kesin olarak tek bir bakış açısıya göre tasvir edilmesiyle gerçekleştirilir. Tasvirin mekan yanılsamasını yaratamadaki etkiliği ve kompozisyon açısından tutarlılığını, hepsin tek başkası noktası üzerinde odaklanmasından ibarettir. Tek başkası noktası, basit bir pratik gereklilikten öte, bir simgesel değer taşır: bir tek kişinin görüş şekli öncelik kazanmış ve mutlak referans noktası haline gelmiştir.

İslam minyatürleri cisimleri tek bir başkası açısından resmetmedikleri için, mekannın bir derinlik yanılsaması biçiminde tasvirine imkan vermezler. Amma, resimsel mekannın anlaşılabilirliği mutlaka bir derinlik yanılsaması olarak tasvir edilmemeye bağlı değildir.

Resimsel mekannın bir derinlik yanılsaması olarak anlaşılması, Rönesans ile Batı resim sanatında yerleşen ve ancak Modern resmin sanatının değiştirdiği, özel bir resim yüzeyi kavramına dayanır. Bu kavrama göre, resim yüzeyi kendisi olarak var olmaz; mekan yanılsamasının gerçekleşebilmesi için adeta bir pencere gibi somut bir nokta haline gelmiştir ve tasvir edilen mekanın sınırını tanımlar. Buna karşın, tek bir kaçış noktasına göre tasarlanmamış İslam ve Çin resimleri, mekannın resimsel olarak daha az tanımlanmakla beraber, sonmsuzluğunu daha net bir biçimde ifade ederler. Bu durum, her iki resim sanatında resim yüzeyinin Batı resminin doğru bir türlü kavrmanışa yakından ilgilidir. Çünkü resiminde resim yüzeyi tümüyle bir resim düzlemi sayılmasa, ancak çeşitli objeleri tasvir etmek üzere boyanmış noktalar resim düzlemi olarak algılanır; boyanmadan bırakılmış alan, cisimleri kuşatan sonsuz mekannın bozulmasına karşılkıdır. Islam resminde ise resim yüzeyinin düzlemiyle
boyanarak bir resim düzlemine dönüştürülür. Bu düzlem içerisinde, tüm cisimler ve yüzeyler esas eder ve oluşturulan resimsel mekan içinde tasvir edilen cisim ve boşluklar aynı biçimde yaşaslar ve görsel olarak eşitlenir.

İslam minyatürlerinde cisim ve boşlukların böyle bir resimsel eşdeğerlilik içinde ifadesi, tüm kompozisyonun birleştiiren tek bir bakış noktasının olmasıyla da güçlenir. Farklı cisimlerin farklı bakış noktalarına göre resmedilmiş olması, hem her bir kompozisyonun elemanları olarak taşıdığı önevi vurgular, hem de bu cisimlere, mekan içinde dolaşarak, değişik yerlerden bakılmış olduğu ifade eder. Dolayısıyla, İslam minyatüründe iki boyutlu resim mekanı hâkim etmiştir.

Aksonometrik bir form olarak tasvir edilmiş cisimleri minyatürlerde de bulmak mümkündür. Bazı cisimlerin böyle resmedilmiş olması, resme bir derinlik verme çabasından çok, üç boyutlu şekillerini açıklama endişesine dayanır ve bu tasvirler özellikle binaların resmedildiği aksonometrik çizimlerde olduğu gibi, gözü cisimlerin etrafında dönüştürülmüş eder.


Mekanın kavranışında, mekan çevresi yuzeylerin öncemi, belki İslam resminde mekan tasvirinin neden (Çin resminin aksine) renk ve desenle vurgulanmış bir resim yüzeyine siyi tırtıklı olduğu da açıklayabilir. Böylece, mekanla iki boyutlu bir yüzeyde gerçekleştirdiği resimsel mekan arasındaki kavramsal bağ da anlaşılabılır hale gelir.

Görsel olarak görülmüş bir resim düzlemini yerine, yüzey oluşturan mekanların bir resim düzlemine bağlı olarak kavranan mekan tasvirini seyredenlere zihinsel bir bakış mesafesi de sunar. Boyle bir mekan tasvirinin görsel ve zihinsel olarak nasıl bir etki amaçladığını, Topkapı Sarayı'ndaki bir çini pano çok iyi örneklemektedir. Resimsel mekanın panonun yer aldığı mimari mekanla olan ilgisi, mekan tasvirinin temeli olarak kavramsal bağ da anlaşılabılır hale gelir.

III. Murat'ın yatak odası köşkü girişinde bulunan bu çini pano, neredeyse birbir öcekte, bir komedenden oluşan bir revak ve arında görülün bir bahçe tasvir edilmişdir. Orjinal konumunda, köşk niteliğindeki binanın muhteşem bir çerşesinde yer almış bulunan bu kompozisyon, o dönemdeki bir yapının kapısına kadar uzanan, revaklı bir galerinin devamı olarak tasarlanmış gözükmektedir. Köşk, İstanbul'un en muhteşem manzaralarından birine yönelik olup revaklı galeri de aynı manzaraya ve aşağıda yer alan saray bahçesine bakmaktadır.

Çini pano üzerindeki revak parçası ve ötesinde yer alan bahçe aynı resim düzlemini paylaşırlar. Revak bir çerçeve oluşturduğu halde, buradan görünen mekan, çini resim yüzeyini vurgulayan ve derinlik ifadesine yer vermeyen, dışişel
çiçek motifleriyle süslenmiştir. Bu biçimde resmedilen mekan zihinde genişletilebilir, fakat içinde bulunan mimari mekanın doğrudan bir uzantısı olarak algılanmak söz konusu değildir. Kompozisyonun bakan kişi ancak bir bahar bahçesini düşleyebilir (ki köşk de, kitabelerinde böyle bir bahçeye benzetilmiştir). İki boyutlu bu resimsel mekanın etkinliği hem somut hem de düşel niteliklerinden kaynaklanmaktadır. Çini üzerindeki kompozisyon bize, sınırlanmış bir mekan birimi anlamına gelecek optik bir yanılsıma önermeden, zihinsel anlamda sonsuzluza uzanan, düşel ama aynı zamanda güçlü bir desenle vurgulanmış somut bir yüzey olarak karşıma durur ve gerçek bina, bahçe ve kent mekâniyla ancak yana olmak sebebiyle bütünlüğün bir mekan tasviri sunar.

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