

Representation, Abstraction and Creativity in Egyptian Dance

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Abstraction in the East and West¹

Egyptian dance is one genre of a large array of dance forms that are attributed to Arabic Dance. This name is the closest and most accurate relating to the phenomena studied in this article, *i.e.* the dance form used in Egypt in the 20th century. In selecting this name, I draw from Saleh, who argues in the *International Encyclopedia of Dance* that Egyptian dance is the original form of Arabic Dance, despite the different variations that existed in other Islamic countries and the various influences this dance form incorporated over the years (Saleh, 1998, 493). In his article 'Dance du Ventre: A Fresh Appraisal', Shay argues that viewers perceive Egyptian dance as the most beautiful. Egypt is considered a cultural center in the Islamic world, and dancers who perform Egyptian dance, even if they are in the West, are considered Egyptian Dancers (Shay, 1976, 19).

In this article I examine how the complex relationship between art, culture and theology led to abstract art in general and improvised dance in particular. I ask how improvised dance is created, taking into consideration the unique motivations of this society and how dance became intertwined in Islamic art so as to become inseparable from it.

The study of dance should be conducted within the cultural-social context and framework which gave rise to it, since dance is not only a physical, stand-alone exhibition, but also a process and the essence of social and cultural behavior (Youngerman, 1975, 118). Even Hanna, in her article 'The Representation and Reality of Religion in Dance', claims that dance as a human behavior, refers to behavioral processes and cultural patterns (Hanna, 1988, 284), and so can be perceived as a gauge measuring ideological and religious ideas, as well as changes in society (Hanna, 1988, 281). Denny, in 'Music and Musicians in the Islamic Art', argues that the relationship between art and society appears uniquely in Islamic tradition (Denny, 1985, 37). How does this uniqueness take form? Is it related to Islam's influence on art and to the complexity in the perception of the representation of God? Could this uniqueness influence how abstract art has developed in the Islamic world? And how is abstraction related to improvised dance?

The starting point of Islamic abstract art is different than that of its Western counterpart. In Islamic art² abstraction is related to the complex perception of God's representation. In the West, however, abstraction appears at the beginning of the 20th century, used to express theoretical terms via visual aids and created free forms that cannot be defined in a concrete manner, in an attempt to express a certain atmosphere or feeling.

Kandinsky wrote that following the abstract came from a dedication to inner beauty and desire so intense that it reached spiritual excitement (Kandinsky, 1972, 13). Nevertheless, both Eastern and Western cultures attribute extreme importance to the way in which the viewer perceives the experience. In the West, as abstraction developed, the observer becomes a part of the artistic discourse (Kandinsky, 1972, 11), while in the East, the Muslim viewer or listener develops a Tarab (excitement, pleasure, uplift) as an inseparable part of the artistic experience³. If we generally examine differences between East and West, we see that each era in the West vilifies its preceding period while praising the current one (the Pendulum of History⁴). There are also historical-cultural perceptions which emphasize the past and observe it with admiration. This type of attitude is usually addressed to the cultures of Classical Greece and Rome, but I do not review these here. The East, on the other hand, is preoccupied with the complexity of the moment, a fact which obligates creativity (taken from the lecture of Dr. Taisir Elias, November 19, 2008).

The complexity of relationship between dance and theology

One reason for the complexity of the relationship between religion and dance in the Islamic world stems from the fact that dance was an expressive tool used by the pre-Islamic religions that existed in the Arabian Peninsula.

It is possible that the source of Islam's ambivalent attitude towards dance derives from attempts to exterminate ignorance and Arabs' paganism in the times before Muhammad, when these habits were perceived as having

negative values (Denny, 1985, 38). In order to shake off anything that preceded Islam or did not sit well with its point of view, religious rituals were separated from dance and music customs. If dance was not true enough for the religious elites, it was not true enough for society as a whole (Faruqi, 1978, 6).

Denny, in his article 'Music and Musicians in Islamic Art', claims that the visual arts that characterized early Islam, such as the Desert Palaces built by the Umayyad Caliphate in the beginning of the eighth century, include murals depicting musicians, singers and dancers as part of the palace service staff. Musicians, singers and dancers were part of the entertainment world and were partners in both religious and mystical rituals, services that set the mood and provided sensual pleasure (Denny, 1985, 38). It is possible that these murals teach how, while religious leaders tried to separate art from religious rituals, they could not detach it entirely from secular life.

Another reason for the complexity of these relations is the union principle – tawhid - as a major and central principle of Islam, which expresses a declaration regarding the unification of existence⁵. All that is said in the Quran was written by God Almighty, He who is responsible for both the knowledge and union residing in the heart of the Believer (Wach, 1948, 268). The union principle speaks of a complete separation between God and the material world, between Godly and human creation. The union of God in Islam also requires that there is a uniformity of life, i.e. the concept that religion exists everywhere: in culture, society and in art. Therefore, creative and aesthetic elements should also comply with religious moral values (Faruqi (B), 1985, 14). Life is a serious matter, which is why one should devote very little time to joy and play and much time to that which is important, such as prayer and family values (Faruqi (B), 1985, 17).

Since this kind of morality cannot be applied to all types of dance, references to dance became suspicious and complicated over the years, especially considering that the medium through which dance is conveyed is the body and the motion of the body in space. Even Shay, in his article 'Orientalism: Exoticism: Self-Exoticism' argued that dance has a legitimate place in Islamic society, but not a highly respectable one. However, throughout their history, Muslims did not stop dancing. Dances were present in Islamic society, which continued to create dance and to express itself through dance, even though religious leaders denounced it (Shay, 2003, 16). There were also theologians who expressed a different attitude in their writings, and who considered art as a pleasant way to spend one's time and even as a tool to strengthen one's faith in God and to purify one's heart (Shiloah, 1999, 41). The instinctive joys that God created within Man were legitimate; they could soothe, refill one with positive energy and help one reach one's spiritual goals (Faruqi (B), 1985, 25). However,

these opinions were mostly marginal in their effect.

The complexity of representation in art

Despite the complex relationship between art and theology as presented above, and despite the objection of religion leaders to visual exhibitions of art, the Quran itself does not contain an explicit prohibition of that kind. However, artists and their creations were condemned throughout the years in an attempt to turn the denunciations into a legal decree (Grabar, 1973, 75). These attempts tried to provide a philosophical, moral and theological approval to the prohibition on human representation, or searched for evidence in holy texts that prohibited the glorification of beauty and art (ibid: 86).

The desire to condemn artistic representation did not stem from historical circumstances, as it remained even when circumstances changed (ibid: 99). Islamic society has enforced iconophobia (the fear of icons and representations) in every culture it has conquered. In addition to those stated above, another reason for condemning artistic representation derives from the struggle against Christianity, in which figurative representations of God do exist. This gave rise to the Islamic approach to resist art as a rule (ibid: 102). Since the materials used in dance is the human body and its motion through space, dance becomes a figure and the Islamic attitude towards it was complicated through the years (Hanna, 1988, 282). It is easier to condemn dance as a whole as an artistic means of expression, than to differentiate between that which is worthy and that which is unworthy, and the attitude towards dance became one of suspicion (Faruqi (B), 1985, 13).

Approaches to this issue were not static, uniform, clear or absolute, but rather differed from each other according to the movements where they developed. Shia Iran was more promiscuous than Arab speaking countries and Sunni countries, and the second half of the 18th century was more limiting than the first half. Some justified the prohibition while others limited it to the religious aspects of Islamic life, but all were preoccupied with the same issue (Grabar, 1973, 75).

This led to the growth of traditions that created different means of expression and various uses of imageries and images. In architecture, for example, it was permitted to present human figures in hallways, floors and in public bathhouses but the practice was prohibited anywhere else (ibid: 86). When designing Arabic calligraphy, icons and decorative signs sometimes appeared (ibid: 207). In Arabic music there were acceptable forms, such as religious music and psalms taken from the Quran, but there was an attempt to condemn secular music, even though it always prevailed in society (Faruqi (B), 1985, 9). In the field of dance, one form, the Sufi dance, was developed and recognized as a sign for the love of God. Through this

dance, in which 'prayers freed their feet from the mundane earth', dancers saw a means to free themselves from materialism and transcend to spiritualism (Shiloah, 1999, 60). Orthodox Muslims tried to condemn Sufi dance as well, but this will be discussed later in the article.

How does theology reconcile the mention of statues in the Quran despite its adherence with Sharī'ah Law (the Islamic set of religious rulings) (Grabar, 1973, 81)? In light of the complexity of the artistic representation question, how did the Islam create an artistic language that prevented figurative representation and which tends toward abstraction?

Attempts to settle the complexity

In the beginning of the Islamic age, the Quran did not actively objectify art, but rather tried to route it toward a specific direction: God is the sole creator and therefore statues should not be idolized (Grabar, 1973, 81). Around the middle of the eighth century, Islamic religious traditions began to develop an objection to representation, a resistance that relied on the prohibition against worshipping statues (ibid: 87). This resistance to figurative representation was systematic, but it does not mean Islamic artists avoided use of symbolic representation. In the beginning of the Islamic age, a symbolic meaning was attributed to new forms and a formal vocabulary was created that was accepted by most Muslims. An example can be found in the mosaic art of the Dome of the Rock⁶ (ibid: 93). This was another means for Islam to differentiate itself from Christianity (ibid: 98).

Can abstract and non-figurative signs have symbolic meaning? Suzanne Langer claims in her book, *Feeling and Form*, that a symbol is a thought or invention according to which abstraction can be made (Langer, 1953, 17). How can one learn to read these symbols? Can an array of abstract symbols be taught by society? Are they clear enough to viewers who observe a work of art (Grabar, 1973, 99), such as dance? A symbol's meaning relies on culture. In Indian culture, every *mudra*⁷ is very clear to Indian observers. But according to Langer, in most dance styles, the main problem of symbolic meaning, as an artistic expression, is a lack of fluency and obscurity, just as with verbal language (Langer, 1953, 183).

Abstraction as an artistic expression

Debates on aesthetics appear in the cultural discourse of Muslim philosophers as early as the Middle Ages, and also in their prospects regarding the social ethos. These philosophers were influenced by Greek ideas (Gonzalez, 2001, 5). In her book *Beauty and Islam, Aesthetics in Islamic Art and Architecture*, Gonzalez speaks of the duality that characterizes the Muslim discourse, which shifts between a preoccupation with physical beauty to an obser-

vation of Divine beauty, and between sensory perception and inner conception.

Does the visual experience of beauty imply spiritual thought and a metaphysical nature? Modern Muslim philosophers have separated the question of aesthetics from the issue of divinity, and instead treat it as a human ontology (ibid: 7). The ambivalence of the scholarly and multifaceted philosophical discourse on art, aesthetics, beauty and representation created a perceptual-conceptual path that often avoids representation and prefers abstract expression.

In the absence of an unequivocal doctrine regarding the prohibition of representation in art, Islam routed culture to certain unique artistic paths (Grabar, 1973, 77). Grabar argues that the abstract is an artistic method of expression created under the influence of the union principle, which has set the social framework and the boundaries of the social and philosophical discourse regarding the relationship between the creation and the creator, and the bond between the creator and its audience. Even Faruqi argues in her article 'Dance as an Expression of Islamic Culture' that Islam has a complete separation between the creator and his creation, between Divine and man-made creations (the union principle considers this separation).

For this reason, Islam chose abstract art as an appropriate way to express the concepts of religion and beauty (Faruqi, 1978, 7); this is how the sinuous, curvy calligraphy was developed in Arabic script and Muslim decorative art, which included leaves, flowers, geometric signs and arabesques⁸. Arabic script is abstract due to its holy essence in Islam, derived from the script as the visual expression of God's words.

In abstract art, as a rule, the mimetic criteria principle does not exist. The colors are the painter's metaphorical words and the shapes are the dancer's way of speaking. The painter chooses colors for his aesthetic needs out of all the available options and not just according to what is seen, as a form of mimicry (Zemach, 1977, 161). In Islamic art, which is abstract and non-figurative, the term "beauty" can be expressed by repeating the same passage from the Quran two or three times in prayer, in a musical rhythmic repetition, by repeating the same motion over and over or by reiterating inscriptions in wall decorations. The Muslim artist has a very rich repertoire of patterns and repetitions that do not exist in reality itself, and which break the resemblance between representation and reality. Even if the art contains objects taken from nature, their repetitive representation negates their natural character. The creation of designs, which contain many details in a very small space, expressed the Islamic message very well. The efforts are not only implemented by representing reality, but also via their complexity, small details, and repetition (Faruqi, 1978, 7). It seems that rhythmic repetition

and symmetric create the rhythm of a guiding principle in this art form. So how is abstraction expressed through dance?

Abstraction in dance

Since dance uses the medium of the body and its motion in space, Islam's attitude towards it was quite complex throughout the years (Hanna, 1988, 282). Shay claims that, even though it was condemned, dance always existed in Muslim society (Shay, 2003, 16). Faruqi argues that dance in Islamic countries shows aesthetic principles that exist in other Islamic arts, including abstraction, and that improvisation is a derivative of abstraction. Improvised dance has neither a obligatory constancy, like the motions' vocabulary of classical ballet dance, nor a dictionary of symbols like the Indian mudras. Egyptian dance has neither image, symbol, and narrative nor has it evidence of any figurative reality (Faruqi, 1978, 7). Its most prominent feature, according to Shiloah, is the development of shape and improvisation in a limited space (Shiloah, 1999, 167).

Even Shay agrees with the claim that Egyptian dance is abstract and lacks narrative, description of situation or feeling; and that there is no evidence to support the existence of meaning behind any particular motion or gesture. For Shay, improvisation is the basis of abstraction (Shay, 2003, 15). According to him, dance is an individual matter, and each dancer has a uniqueness and independence of movement; there is no unified choreography (ibid: 15)⁹. Audiences viewing Egyptian dance are not indifferent; they respond with claps and cheers. Such a spontaneous response, other than encouraging the performer and asking her to repeat her accomplishment, increases the artistic communication between the dancer and the spectators, and affects the development of the style and design¹⁰. This response desires to spark a dancer's inspiration and creativity, and the dancer is permitted and even required to improvise (Shiloah, 1999, 82).

Since the art of music and dance coexisted through the years (ibid: 1) much can be learned about each one through the other. The world of musical creation, much like the world of dance, is mostly individual and based on the skills of a particular artist who expresses his artistic ability through improvised solos (ibid: 82)¹¹. Most improvisation types and styles are based on a scheme or pattern, within which the performer enjoys some degree of freedom, and can perform as he sees fit. However, a musician may not let his imagination completely loose. He must continue and rely on culture-dependant structural perceptions. Even so, within these limitations, the performer has substantial room for maneuvers (ibid: 153). It seems that dancers and musicians do not work according to a preset scheduled plan, but rather their creations grow naturally through their improvisation (ibid: 82).

Improvisation in dance, much like in music, does not arise from nothing. It is a re-creation, broadening and improvement of models pre-existing within a cultural tradition representing a treasure-chest collected by generations of artists who ensured that their knowledge was passed on to their students (ibid: 154). Freedom of performance blurs the boundaries between renewed and new creation. The relevant terms required for the description of this approach are originality and creativity (ibid: 83). The meaning of these terms is not the search for something original and new; rather originality lies in collecting and creating new connections between existing elements, producing something that is unique for that moment and that dancer. Nevertheless, motion and musical freedom are the very essence of improvisation.

Improvisation

The term "improvisation" requires a clarification. This term is common in all performance arts, in both East and West. Separation between performance art and composition art occurred in the West in the 19th century. The East, however, never made this differentiation: very often the act of performance is improvised on the spot.

Improvisation, according to Gertrude Stein (quoted by Naharin), "is the ability to respond in a new fashion at every given moment. To start again over and over, and to be in a state of continuous present" (Naharin, 2000, 51). Ruth Zaporah also argues that improvisation is the art of the moment, a practice of presence and the ability to be present at a given moment and to respond to it (Zaporah, 1996, 25). Janet Mittman adds that the art of the moment requires full attention and awareness of the moment and holds within it the spontaneous and immediate (Mittman, 26).

According to Frost and Yarrow, improvisation requires concentration and clarity, as the improviser must be able to act instantaneously out of choice. The process of choice allows an artist to develop himself, and is the core of expression and of the creation of communication (Frost & Yarrow, 1989, 145)¹². The ability to choose anew from all the options presented to a person at every given moment, helps him avoid from degenerating into habit. The creative chooser takes responsibility and weaves new meaning and context into every moment. In this aspect, improvisation is the ability to create new connections and attribute meaning to them (Nachmanovich, 1990, 6). Creativity is, therefore, the production of something new and original, instead of repeating the familiar and old (Mittman, 26).

There is a close connection between creativity and uncertainty, and that connection is a mandatory condition for creativity. The person who creates must accept a certain amount of uncertainty, vagueness and even risk. To do so, he must have characteristics such as flexibility and courage, which allow him to leave conventional and familiar methods and enter new and "dangerous" territories.

Creativity demands openness to the unexpected and different (Shallcross, 1984, 10). The departure from familiar areas to new territories holds freedom within it. Free improvisation, therefore, is a change-causing element; it is original and independent. In its very nature, improvisation enables the containment of multiple realities, of tension between opposites and creativity (Mittman, 26). According to Storr too, one of a creative individual's most prominent qualities is independence, since they are affected by their own inner standards more greatly than from external impositions (Storr, 1991, 215).

Thus the painter frees his creativity by choosing one of the various options available instead of just mimicking reality. In a Muslim carpet, ornament is also the raw material that makes the entire creation and art itself, and it stands at the center of the moment in the eyes of the beholder. A carpet is made of several arrays of simultaneous patterns, each complete and independent on its own. These arrays are layered one on top of the other, although all of them are laid on the same surface¹³.

In Western music there is separation between basic melody and decoration; in Eastern music the decoration is inseparable from the music, from the art itself (taken from the lecture of Dr. Taisir Elias, January 21, 2009). The Muslim musician must pay full attention to, and have complete awareness of the changes and complexity of the nuances and decorations in order to act spontaneously in response. It is this uncertainty and surprise, and the improvised music to which they lead, that the Egyptian dancer uses to build, with courage and flexibility, a new creation in an ever-changing musical world that lacks a central narrative. She is located in a continuous present and responds to the moment spontaneously. The formation of this world is enabled only through the tension existing between that which is (the changing present) and that which could have been. It is the tension between a state and an idea. The musician, singer or dancer obtains control within lack of all control. One of the main characteristics of Egyptian dance is the transition between release and control (Shiloah, 1999, 167). The dancer reaches full control within the lack of control, and obtains focus in uncertainty. This is also the transition between the loose and control-free shimmy and the accurate motion that corresponds with the beat, synchronized with the various instruments. This method creates transitions between tension and relaxation moments.

Observing the dance, we can follow the process of improvisation and note where there is no complete congruence between music and motion. It is here where the dancer responds to the music only after listening to it and understanding its rhythm. Since music and motion are not set in advance but rather are improvised, the musicians and dancer give nearly invisible sign to one another in order to announce transitions, continuation, the ending of a

dance, or some kind of connection. Just as there is no defined choreography, music is also undetermined in shape, length and content. The improvising musicians can add or remove segments and can double musical sentences. The dancer will continue dancing as long as her strength, inspiration or responsiveness to the audience's reactions allow her to do so (Faruqi (b), 1985, 13).

The Egyptian dancer neither tells a tale nor tries to pass a symbol or an idea through her gestures and movements. She focuses on presenting her personal expression and interpretation of the music. Improvisation is passed from one motion to the other, not necessarily at the end of a bar but always as the dancer sees fit. She chooses movement, timing and number of repetitions from all options available. In this way, she creates a personal world of self expression and of individual, unique interpretation. The collection of movements, e.g. a number of simultaneous patterns of arabesques, is there to maintain the interest in the creation (Faruqi, 1978, 7).

Egyptian dance has its unique motion style, steps and movements, but each dancer chooses to add or subtract a certain motion from her show, and how to organize and combine them in her dance. Every dancer has her own combination of movements and even for a single dancer the combination changes every time she dances. This way, every dancer creates style that characterizes her, and yields her own unique product. Just as the Qari¹⁴ does not read a verse from a surah of the Quran the same way, and each time the same surah sounds different, so too does Egyptian dance seem different every time it is performed (Shiloah, 1999, 11). The style of each dancer envelops both her individual aspect and her cultural-social background (Youngerman, 1975, 120).

Aesthetics, beauty, improvisation and creativity have been inseparable parts of the Islamic culture and discourse over the years. Creativity, as we will soon see, is even rooted in theology, which affects society as a whole. To learn more about the connection between theology and creativity, one must first understand the meaning of the Arabic term *Ijtihad*.

The expression of creativity in theology

Ijtihad (اجتهاد) is the struggle to use judgment in order to try and understand God and his doctrine (Glass, 2002, 209). It is an intellectual process, which is both unique and central to studies of interpretation, and which allows one to develop critical thinking, creativity, and knowledge. *Ijtihad* is a personal effort to search for and discover the truth to solve issues that concerned with changes in reality (Nurullah, 2006, 154). Through this, problems are solved and new meanings can be woven (Erder, 2004, 335). I did not use the word "woven" for nothing: weaving the religious-legal meaning is akin to weaving a Muslim carpet. Just as one

looks for hidden treasures within the Book of God so as to learn and become wise, so a new conception is woven into one's mind, creating a **kaleidoscopic world of Islamic mysticism** in different art forms¹⁵. The connection between Ijtihad and creativity resonates between art and craft, between thought and creation, whereas everything that is created is considered a creation. To understand the wholeness of creation, the whole must be disassembled to its various parts and details, and to the relationships between the whole and its components (Lorand, 1991, 135).

Islam's early approaches, dominant until the fall of the Ottoman Empire, consider Ijtihad an applicable tool to solve problems, one that is based on the Quran and Sharīah Law. Modern attitudes, which arose over the past two centuries, present opinions which do not narrow Ijtihad to the field of law and religious rulings only, but also attribute to it a much wider meaning, which is entwined in society's cultural, social, political and economic life.

According to Alwani, Ijtihad is creation. Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya argues that Ijtihad is that which the heart decides after a lengthy observation in search of proper perspective (Alwani, 1991, 139). This can be compared to a dancer who chooses a specific perspective from a variety of existing options. To understand the Divine script, one must be creative and employ effort, and not just follow the familiar and the known. This path creates development and leaves faith alive and fresh (ibid: 140), just like the path of a creative dancer, who creates something anew and does not become consumed by old habits.

Therefore, critical and creative thought means the projection of an intellectual, human process, which leads to new and innovative ideas, or even to change in existing ideas. Cognitive psychologists Lubart and Sternberg refer to creative thought as a fresh process of creating new, original and useful ideas. They make reference to new, original and unexpected ideas, that are also useful, adequate and appropriate for a particular situation. According to Vernon, creativity is a person's capacity to generate new or original ideas, insights, inventions and works of art which are both accepted by professionals, and which also have an aesthetic, scientific or social value (Nurullah, 2006, 164). These terms, which focus on acquired creativity, are also congruent with terms concerned with creativity and improvisation: the ability to generate and even invent new and original ideas relevant to a situation, the power to suggest a new interpretation and to facilitate a different multidimensional observation (Badi, 2005, 70). The modern meaning of Ijtihad matches the meaning of creativity in general. Creativity in dance does not allow the dancer to remain constant in creation. A dancer's motivation and inner power can render her sufficiently different and innovative to pass beyond the normative and traditional. Why must creativity express itself within theology? Considering the significant influence theology has on Islamic

life, creativity that may present in interpretation of the sacred script is expressed as an aesthetic ideal in Islamic art in general, and dance in particular, much like an innovation that appears in Western art (taken from the lecture of Dr. Taisir Elias, November 19, 2008).

The Sufi as combiners of art and theology

To conclude this article I will review the Sufi conception¹⁶, which concerns itself with elaboration through a combination of theology, art, aesthetics and beauty. Sufi is a movement that arose in the Islamic world during the late eighth century. It is a spiritual movement and more moderate than the orthodox one, which emphasizes love and intent in Divine acts. The first Sufi considered themselves an alternative to the young religion, which they claimed to have already started to wear down. They saw God's embodiment in every human, animal and plant. As time passed by, the movement was divided into different orders, each named after its founder. The Sufi nurture art not because they see it as a goal, but because to walk down the Sufi path, one must be aware of Divine beauty and adhere to the aesthetic and artistic aspects, whose depictions arise from the Holy scripture that quotes the words of God, the "supreme artist". Since following the way of the Sufi necessitates an awareness of Divine beauty (Seyyed, 1972, 20), considerable importance is placed on nurturing the different arts such as poetry, prose, dance and music.

Music and dance give rise to great desire for the creator, and spark an impulse to search for a spiritual existence. Dance is a symbol of enthusiastic and infinite love of God, and it is He who liberates the feet of the praying dancer from the earthly mud, and lifts him upward to free himself from the everyday into spiritualism (Shiloah, 1999, 60). Seyyed, in his book *Sufi Essays*, claims in a very figurative way that Sufi live in the front porch of Heaven, and so they breathe the spiritual air of Glory, whose beauty affects all that is said and done (Seyyed, 1972, 19).

Alongside art, Sufi also provide spiritual answers and religious meaning. They interpret the union principle in a different way from Orthodox Muslims, even though they too consider it the most important principle of the faith (ibid: 47). Orthodox Muslims believe that the meaning of union is a complete separation between the Divine and the earthly. God is the sole Creator, who is able to animate the figures He created (Grabar, 1973, 82). He cannot afford competition, and so the objection to statues is associative. This association was expanded to an objection to all forms of representation (ibid: 84).

If Orthodox Muslims speak of complete separation between Divine and human creation, the Sufi consider the union principle as means of identification, embodiment and attainment between God and his creation. According to them, one must lose desire and ego, as the most su-

preme emotion is the love of God in the moment of union and unification with Him (Hanna, 1988, 297). Sufi see God everywhere, and the Sufi way aims to create a whole human being via a familiarization with God through unification with Him. The purity of the soul leads to wholeness, completeness and unity (Seyyed, 1972, 43). Through artistic practices such as dance and music, one can obtain this unity and the dancer or musician can become one with their God. This different interpretation lies in the formula: to know myself is to know my God; knowing myself can only be accomplished through a long and agonizing path of disintegrating my ego and personal will, eliminating evil and sin. This path gives rise to a state in which there are no longer boundaries between men, or between man and his God, and one obtains complete freedom and love (Wach, 1948, 280). The Sufi conception, much like art, allows collaboration between the outside and inside. In creating, spiritual perfectness and inner uniformity are obtained, thanks to the affinity created between the two (Seyyed, 1972, 48)¹⁷.

It seems that the space designated for interpretation and Islamic art enables a constant creativity, which communicates with the cultural and theological discourse and which has been the case for years. I conclude with Seyyed's words from his work *Art and Islamic Spirituality*, which discusses the spiritual and artistic relations of Islam: "every art in Islamic tradition – calligraphy, drawing, architecture, music, literature, dance or plastic art – is based on the inner reality and dimensions of Islam. The inner reality expresses the means of existence of art in the personal, social and spiritual life spheres, as a means of remembering and observing God. The creative and artistic act has a significant source of support in spiritual life and deep understanding of theology, derived from the creation of an artistic formation such as a crystal" (Denny calls this the "kaleidoscopic world of Islamic mysticism"). "Through this knowledge art forms a ladder for the soul's ascension from the visible to the invisible, as Sufi consider the spiritual meaning of beauty the inspiration source of their art" (Seyyed, 1987, 5).

Endnotes

¹ My reference to East and West relies on Edward Said's book *Orientalism*, which separated the East or Orient – including Middle Eastern countries but also Asia – from the West, or Occident – mainly Europe, but also the United States (Said, 2000 {1978 original}, 285). Said argues that Orientalism began in Athens in fourth century BCE, and still exists today (ibid: 56). Orientalism is the way in which the culture of the East is described by Western eyes. In his book, Said gives the term a new modern aspect, using it to criticize Western attitudes towards the East, especially towards Arab countries. Said argues that the source of Orientalism is in imperialist ambitions and an ethnocentric, arrogant and racist approach. The

West, he claims, has a long historic tradition of erroneous and romantic imageries of Asia and the Middle East, used to justify the colonialist ambitions of the U.S. and Europe (ibid: 285). The differentiation between "them" and "us" produces bias in the West's attitude towards the East, and is expressed in racist and ideological stereotypes in politics, research, literature and art. These perceptions, he claims, contribute to the fixation of the East's imagery in the collective Western mind as inferior, primitive and passive (ibid: 286).

² Muslim art began with the rise of Islam during the seventh century CE. In the beginning, this art was very eclectic in nature, as it absorbed and adopted the artistic motifs, style and techniques of other cultures it encountered while conquering the East, while adapting them to its nature and essence. The main influences were late Classical Christian-Byzantine art, Persian art and Turkish influences. Therefore, Muslim art is not the art of a specific country or nation, but rather the art of a civilization created out of the combination of historic circumstances: the conquest of the Old World by the Arabs, the unification of a large territory under the flag of Islam and the invasion of foreign people to these territories. From the mid ninth century, Muslim art found its own means of expression which was different from the arts in other large cultures, and maintained this character until the Early Modern Period. The Muslims carefully selected the principles that they liked and answered their needs, and reconstructed them in a way that was appropriate to Islam principles and the morality of the Quran. An example can be seen in the abstract style once common in Persian and Sassanid art, in which rhythmic repetition and symmetry are prominent as major principles. This style is accepted into the Islamic art.

³ Tarab – excitement, pleasure, exhilaration aroused by arts (Shiloah, 1999, 18). The term originally refers to the excitement caused by listening to an artistic reciting of a beautiful poem or used to describe the experience of listening to music and, later, watching a dance. It expresses a wide variety of emotional responses, from slight enjoyment to great enthusiasm and even ecstasy. The strength of the art is expressed, for example, in how music can charm and induce excitement or in the way dance captures its viewers and causes sensational joy. According to religious leaders, this uncontrolled eruption of emotion causes the viewer to lose control over wisdom and behavior and he is then controlled entirely by his desires and passions. In this state of daydreaming some see a contradiction with the rulings of the religion and its laws, a deviation from prayer and piety life (ibid: 40).

⁴ An expression used by Peter Kropotkin, the 19th anarchist theorist: "the history of the human mind never sleeps. It always shifts and moves. Its movements resemble those of a pendulum, going up and down. Man presents the doctrines he has been taught by teachers thus far as naked ones, he can point to their flaws and mark them as lacking any ground or as destructive. Compared to

them, his current opinions enrich the human knowledge with new discoveries and sciences".

⁵ "He is the Master of Heaven and Earth and that which is between them, and he is the Master of Sunrises", "your God is the one true God and there is no other god beside Him, who is kind and merciful" (Quran). The unity of God's name is in an order of monotheist religions, just like in Judaism: "I am the Lord thy God..." etc. and "Hear, O Israel: the Lord is our God, the Lord is one".

⁶ There was awareness of avoiding representation, but this was less the result of doctrine or religious prohibition, and more a response to the formal lexicon Muslims agreed upon, which includes abstraction, arabesques and plants ornaments.

⁷ The word "mudra" comes from the word mud – happiness – and ra – to give. Mudra in itself is a hand gesture which guards, stabilizes and channels the body's energy through Yoga and meditation practice. The mudras can also be seen in Indian dance, where every hand gesture has a meaning.

⁸ An arabesque is an abstract decorative motif or ornament that can be expressed as a plant decoration or as text from the Quran which is weaved into an abstract formation.

⁹ Due to colonialism and the influence of the West on dance during the 20th century, choreography took a central role at the expense of motional improvisation (Shay, 2003, 24).

¹⁰ Since this refers to the 20th century, it will mostly be a female performer rather than male. In Egyptian history there was a time where male dancers replaced women dancers. In 1834 Muhammad Ali banished all *Ghawazi* dancers from Cairo. *Ghawazi* were gypsy dancers who came from Egypt. Ali prohibited their public performance; this led to an increase in male dancers wearing women's clothing and triumphing their abilities with their courage (Saleh, 1998, 495). Dance itself did not change and formed a source of reproach and insult to men dancing in public (Shay, 1976, 23).

¹¹ The Muslim band included three or four instruments up until the 20th century, when Muslim music became influenced by the West and its orchestra was expanded to include dozens of instruments.

¹² It is important not to confuse the terms "improvisation" and "spontaneous". Spontaneous is the foundation of improvisation, but the latter contains other components such as awareness to the moment, attention, creating new contexts out of said awareness.

¹³ The carpet was weaved according to a planned design illustrated on a graph paper.

¹⁴ A person who reads the Quran.

¹⁵ In his article "Music and Musicians in Islamic Art", Denny calls the Islamic art **kaleidoscopic world of Islamic mysticism** (Denny, 1985, 38).

¹⁶ Sufi; the Sufi are ascetic people who used to wear woolen clothing (Suf) as a symbol of their repentance and renunciation of worldly pleasures (Shiloach, 1999, 60).

¹⁷ The Sufi believe that the whirling which accompanies recurring psalms creates a vibration of the body's energy centers, and helps elevate it to a higher sphere. This allows a person to detach himself from the world, reach a deeper experience of enlightenment, and become one with God. At the Dhikr (remembrance) ceremony, the act of remembering the Divine oneness is expressed through repeating God's name in prayer (Saleh, 1998, 486).

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