

Roads to Paradise: The Art of Illumination of the Quran

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“Paradise lies at the feet of the mothers”¹

I dedicate this chapter to the memory of my late mother

This chapter is concerned with how the roads to paradise were depicted in the illumination of the Quran. It aims at providing information on some of the concepts utilized by artists through the centuries in their visual expressions of paradise and the seven heavens – which are ultimately the goal of all believers. As is the case in Sacred Art, the artist illuminator would approach his subject as entering in prayer, particularly when handling and illuminating a sacred text. Not only was he cleansing his soul but also preparing it for paradise. Through the visual rendering of this sacred text, the artist illuminator is also inviting the viewer to meditate and reflect on his own mortality and the after-life; engaging him with the rituals associated with the opening of the Quran and the reading the text thereafter.

Quran manuscripts played a vital part in the rituals involving the recitation of the holy text. There is considerable evidence that Quran manuscripts were displayed regularly in the mosques or *khānqahs* on special stands known as *kursīs* – particularly, on Thursday evening, the *laylat l-jum‘a*,² and on Friday before and after the congregational prayers. Admired by night under the magical candlelight or during the day under natural light, the richly illuminated frontispieces of the displayed Qurans would shine like jewels, gold and blue, and the effect would collectively lift up the spirits of the congregation and inspire the believers to enter the doorway to paradise – the real purpose of the illumination of the Quran manuscripts.

¹ A famous *ḥadīth* or Saying of the Prophet of Islam, henceforth referred to as ‘the Prophet’.

² Literally the Night of the Friday, as in Islam the day starts at sunset of the previous day. Thursday night is therefore the beginning of Friday, the Muslim holy day of the week.

A language of illumination developed whereby each of the artists would visually render their different concept of paradise, either in the frontispieces or in the opening chapters or in the Sura headings of the Quran manuscripts. This language of illumination had expanded over centuries to include many influences from other cultures and civilizations but all co-opted and absorbed within the framework of this language. However the main source of inspiration clearly derives from specific verses or themes of the Quran. This language, particular to the art of the Quran, was at the time widely understood and thus practiced.

The full language of illumination of the Quran is a vast subject and this chapter deals, as the title suggests, with how paradise was depicted in the Art of Illumination. The only occasions an artist could display his art and inspire his viewer when dealing with Quran illumination is in the frontispiece, the finispiece and the Sura Headings; in this Chapter however, we will be only be discussing frontispieces. Due to editorial and copyright constraints, three frontispieces of Mamluk Quran manuscripts from Egypt in the mid 1300s were selected in order to illustrate the discussion. The choice was based firstly on the quality of the illumination and these works represent the art of illumination at its zenith. Additionally, these art works contain themes and techniques, which best demonstrate how paradise was dealt with by some of these anonymous master artists.

In choosing these examples, a general framework is established as to what is the purpose of the opening pages of the Quran manuscripts. The chapter starts with an analysis of these masterpieces of abstract art from the perspective of a practicing artist specializing in the art of calligraphy and illumination of the Quran (as this is my focus). The comments of Western art historians along with the historical developments are then considered. This article also discusses the general culture of the period including patronage and includes the cross-cultural influences with other civilizations. The techniques and methods of the material culture of the mid-14th century along with the underlying language of symbolism are also addressed.

I Illuminating the Quran: Considerations, Rituals and Comments

A The artist faced with the illumination of the sacred text

As a practicing artist and illuminator of the Quran I am proposing to share some of the thought processes of artists long gone and often anonymous who have illustrated the notion of paradise in some of the most famous Quran manuscripts. I hope to bring, as far as Sacred Art is concerned, the notion of *intentionality* in order to demonstrate that far from

being fortuitous or gratuitous, the illumination of the Quran by these artists is conscious and/or inspired (the contradiction is only superficial – if at all). I speak of intentionality in both cases, however, to indicate that whether the artist is consciously rendering a certain vision or putting himself in a spiritually receptive mode in order to be inspired, he is attempting to visually translate and transmit certain sacred notions.

Additionally, I am defending the view that it is the text of the Quran itself, which influenced and informed the artist. The so-called ornamentation of the Quran manuscript through the ages is not merely a decorative device dependent on the subjective whims of the artist but part and parcel of some of the rituals and themes of verses of the Quran. For instance – and for our specific purpose as to how was paradise depicted in some of the most beautiful frontispieces of the Quran – the Holy Book is rich with the descriptions of the last day, hell for the unbelievers and for the believers the gardens of paradise. The imagery of paradise is scattered throughout the Quran and it is powerful enough that visual images are formed in the mind of anyone who reads or recites the text. Whilst the ordinary reader or ‘reciter’ will move on to the next passage having formed a mental picture of the visual imagery depicted, the artist will want to visually render this powerful imagery.

The gardens of paradise are mentioned in the Quran at least 130 times. They are not systematic descriptions but mostly flashes of a world of joy and comfort lit up by Divine Radiance, enough to provide wonderful imagery for the artist. For example *Sūrat al-Baqara* (Q 2:25) states “(Gardens) with flowing streams”. The gardens of paradise are not only shaded with trees, and fed by “water springs” (*Sūrat al-Ḥijr*, Q 15:45) but *Sūrat Muḥammad* refers to four rivers which water the gardens of paradise. These are “rivers of water forever pure, rivers of milk forever fresh, rivers of wine, a delight for those who drink and rivers of honey clarified and pure” (Q 47:15). *Sūrat al-Taḥābun* (Q 64:9) refers to “gardens graced with flowing stream”. *Sūrat al-Wāqī‘a* (Q 56) refers in verse 8 onwards to the “gardens of Bliss” set amongst thornless lote trees and clustered acacia with constant flowing water. *Sūrat al-Ra‘d* depicts the garden with a flowing stream and “perpetual food and shade” (Q 13:35) whilst *Sūrat al-Mu‘minūn* (Q 23) mentions in verse 19, the date palms and vines with many fruits. *Sūrat al-Raḥmān* (Q 55) refers to fruit trees such as date palms and pomegranate trees along with other delights, which fire the imagination and please the senses. *Sūrat Āl ‘Imrān* (Q 3:133) states that “a garden as wide as the heavens and earth prepared for the believers” delineated by the mysterious lote Tree of *Sūrat al-Najm* “A lote tree beyond which none may pass near the Garden of Restfulness when the tree was covered in nameless splendour” (Q 53:14-7).

The gardens of paradise are inhabited by *ḥūrīs*, of special creation, and youths who serve and are likened to pearls. The inhabitants recline on couches and are adorned with silken garments³ and “with bracelets of gold and pearls” (*Sūrat Fāṭir* Q 35:35), “sitting face to face” (*Sūrat al-Ḥijr*, Q 15:47). References to the Garden of Bliss with streams flowing and inhabitants adorned with silken robes, gold bracelets and pearls under shaded trees with clusters of fruit are found in *Sūrat al-Ḥajj* (Q 22:23) in *Sūrat Insān* (Q 76:13-4) and in *Sūrat al-Wāqīʿa* (Q 56:12). Then *Sūrat al-Ṣāffāt* (Q37:45-6) refers to a “drink will be passed round among them from a flowing spring white to those who taste it” whilst *Sūrat al-Wāqīʿa* (Q 56:19) talks of “cups of pure drink which causes no headache or intoxication”. The believer is also invited to “eat and drink to your hearts content as a reward for your deeds” in *Sūrat al-Mursalāt* (Q 77:43). The pleasures of paradise are alluded to with the air perfumed with “sealed nectar, its seal perfumed with a fragrant herb mixed with waters of Tasnim” (*Sūrat al-Muṭaffifīn*, Q 83:23 onwards) whilst a drink mixed with *kāfūr* (camphor) is served (*Sūrat Insān*, Q 76). *Sūrat al-Ṭūr* (Q 52) mentions in verse 21 “We pair them with beautiful-eyed maidens” while “We provide them with any fruit or meat they desire. They pass around a cup which does not lead to any idle talk or sin. Devoted youths like hidden pearls (that) wait on them” (Q 52:22-4). In *Sūrat al-Nabaʿ* (Q 78) are maidens of matching age and overflowing cups in a garden where there is no idle or vain talk and only good feelings; whilst *Sūrat Yā Sīn* gives the beautiful blessing to those in paradise “Peace from the Lord Most Merciful” (Q 36:58). This Peace is promised to the believers as “they will enter the Gardens along with their righteous ancestors, spouses and descendants, the angels will go into them from every gate. Peace be with you because you have remained steadfast” (in *Sūrat al-Raʿd*, Q 13:23). In *Sūrat al-Ghāshiyā* (Q 88:10-6) the believers are promised that they will rest “in a lofty garden where they will hear no idle talk, with a flowing spring, raised couches, goblets set out, cushions in rows and carpets spread.” In *Sūrat al-Aʿrāf* (Q 7:43) “are the people of the Garden and there will remain” and in *Sūrat Fāṭir* (Q 35:33-4) “They will enter everlasting Gardens where they will be adorned with bracelets of gold and pearls wear they will wear silk garments.” *Sūrat al-Tawba* (Q 9:111-2) “purchased the persons and possessions of the believers in return for the Garden.” *Sūrat Maryam* (Q 19:63) “That is the Garden We shall give to those of our servants who were devout”. *Sūrat al-Zukhruf* (Q 43:71) “Dishes and goblets of gold will be passed around them with all that their souls desire and their eyes delight in. There you will remain. This is the Garden you are given as your own.”⁴

³ Many references such as *Sūrat Yā Sīn* (Q 36) verses 56-8.

⁴ Quoted according to Abdel Haleem (trans.), *The Quran*.

Some of the most powerful imagery of paradise — which powerfully stimulates the imagination — is set out in *Sūrat al-Raḥmān* — the Chapter of the Most Merciful — as follows (Q 55:46-78:

And for him that feareth the High Degree of his Lord there are two gardens.
Which of your Lord's boons will ye twain belie?
Each aboundeth in green branches.
Which of your Lord's boons will ye twain belie?
Therein are two fountains flowing.
Which of your Lord's boons will ye twain belie?
Therein of every fruit there are two kinds.
Which of your Lord's boons will ye twain belie?
Therein shall they rest upon beds lined with brocade of silver, and at hand shall be the fruits of the two gardens.
Which of your Lord's boons will ye twain belie?
Thereon are maidens shy of glance. Never until now were they deflowered by man or jinn.
Which of your Lord's boons will ye twain belie?
Even as the ruby are they, even as the finest pearl.
Which of your Lord's boons will ye twain belie?
What is the meed of excellence if it not be excellence?
Which of your Lord's boons will ye twain belie?
And beyond these are two other gardens.
Which of your Lord's boons will ye twain belie?
Of the deepest green are they.
Which of your Lord's boons will ye twain belie?
Therein are two fountains gushing.
Which of your Lord's boons will ye twain belie?
Therein is fruit and the date palm, and the pomegranate.
Which of your Lord's boons will ye twain belie?
Therein are All excelling lovely ones.
Which of your Lord's boons will ye twain belie?
Huri's secluded in tents.
Which of your Lord's boons will ye twain belie?
Never until now were they deflowered by man or jinn.
Which of your Lord's boons will ye twain belie?
Therein shall they rest upon tissue of green and upon fabric rarest and loveliest.

Which of your Lord's boons will ye twain belie?
Blessed be the Name of thy Lord in His Majesty and Bounty.⁵

Thus, through the ages, this imagery would have fired the imagination of the artist and would have challenged him to transmit it visually to the reader, or *qāri'*. The artists/illuminators would have also been very conscious from the very beginning of two *ḥadīth qudsī*⁶: "I was a Hidden Treasure. I desired to be known so I created the Universe" and "God is Beautiful and loves beauty."

Knowing also that the Quran is chanted or recited in a particular manner called *qirā'a* — at once a haunting and melodic chanting — the artist would have felt challenged to write down and illuminate the Revelation so that it was as powerful an experience for the eye as the "memorised record is for the ear when the verses are spoken or chanted"⁷ and this was attempted as early as the 7th century during the Prophet's life.⁸

However exciting the challenge and considering the sacredness of this text, the artist would also approach his subject with great respect and self-imposed restriction in order not to intrude on it. Additionally, artists had to face the strictures on iconography as were dictated by the (Judeo-Muslim) tradition and therefore had to resort to abstraction from a very early period. An additional challenge faces the artist who is undertaking the illumination of the Quran: while most passages in the Holy Book lead to immediate mental pictures for the reader, they nevertheless have multi-layered and underlying meanings and symbolism. The artist who is aware of, or senses, these undercurrents finds himself in the obligation to reflect those meanings. This is to say that the *great masters* who have undertaken such a task were, and this is my argument, first and foremost mystics or, at the least, very versed in mystical literature. This belief, I put forward as an artist practicing sacred art and as a researcher on the art of Quran illumination.

In order to illustrate this argument I will take as an example some verses from *Sūrat al-Raḥmān* (Q 55) referring to the four gardens of paradise which carry deep symbolism. In mystical terms what is referred to are the *Garden of the Soul*, the *Garden of the Heart*, the

⁵ Quoted according to Lings (trans.), *The Holy Quran*.

⁶ Divine sayings reported by the Prophet which are part of Tradition but not part of the Quran.

⁷ Lings, *Splendours of Qur'an calligraphy* 15.

⁸ This was evidenced with the palimpsest folio whereby the underwritten text contained chevron patterns. The overwritten text, in early Hijāzī group of scripts, had been dated from the period of the third caliph 'Uthmān when the Quran was formally redacted in 650 AD. I have personally studied this folio under ultra violet light to discover the patterns and ornamentation underneath.

Garden of the Spirit and finally the *Garden of the Essence*. The mystic begins the ascent through the Garden of the Soul with the objective of reaching the spiritual Heart, the abode of Intuition. There are perils — of the physical desires — which impede his journey. If he perseveres and steps beyond to the Garden of the Soul proper, he encounters a fountain (symbolizing forms and ideas): “the water symbolises Light: knowledge which gushes from the fountain of spirit and feeds the faculties of intuition. The waters give full flavour to the fruits grown from trees (thoughts) of meditation.”⁹

So from the very beginning the artists were confronted with striking imagery but at the same time with layers of hidden meanings and the challenge to bring out these in visual terms. At times they depicted the main theme of a Sura in a very simple but effective manner. For example, in a mid-Umayyad period Quran manuscript, the artist inscribing the Sura heading uses the background of a banner, which ends with a spear and with arrows falling on this banner. The Sura ends with a verse marker in the shape of an arrow reaching a shield. Here, the Sura in question was *Sūrat Rūm*, which in its opening verses predicts the wars between Byzantium and the Sassanids of Persia. Elsewhere, in other Quran manuscripts, the artists resorted to the usage of a complex *language of symbolism*, which developed over time to illustrate mystical ideas and themes. For instance, the Quran often speaks of itself as being radiant with Light. The symbol of the radiance is the sun, hence from the very earliest period, a circular device, which became known as *shamsa* (sun) came to be used as verse markers or verse endings to symbolize the radiance of the Quranic verses. By the 9th century AD, the *shamsas* visually depicted the sun with rays extending in all directions.

So in summation, from the earliest period the Islamic artists, aware of the above described challenges, resorted to the art of abstraction and developed a language of symbols and illumination to visually depict the written text and its main themes but without intruding on the text itself.

B - Frontispieces and Rituals Concerning the Opening of the Quran

Notwithstanding the mentioned restrictions, it can be argued that the Quran itself holds certain opportunities for the illumination of the text and the expression of the artist. These are the opening pages known as the frontispieces, the opening pages of the first two Suras, then the subsequent Sura headings along with marginal ornaments which indicate verse

⁹ Bakhtiar, *Sufi* 28.

counts or prostration markers and finally, towards the end of the text, the finispieces. The finispieces contain the last two Suras and were as illuminated as the opening Suras.

In order to demonstrate how the artists illuminated the Quran manuscript one needs to start with the art of frontispieces and explain what it represents and what the artists were trying to convey to the reader or reciter of this text. The art of the frontispiece is strictly speaking outside the Quran. So what does it represent? Arguments will be presented that this is the portal or gateway to heaven (used here as a metonym for paradise which it contains without being limited to it) approached through rituals of *ablutions* in the first instance. These rituals need to be performed by every Muslim prior to opening the Quran. Before touching the Book, a Muslim first performs the *niyya* or intention to open the Sacred Book. Then he or she would perform the ablutions.¹⁰ The reason for this ritual purification is not only for the purposes of hygiene – to clean oneself with water – but to spiritually prepare oneself to leave this world as one is entering the Divine Presence. Thus we are reminded by the great mystic Shaykh ‘Alī b. ‘Uthmān al-Hujwīrī (d. between 465/1072 and 469/1077), the author of the first known treatise on Sufism, *Kashf al-mahjūb*, that

Purification is of two kinds – outward and inward. Thus prayer requires purification of the body while gnosis requires purification of the heart. As in the former case, water must be clean, so in the latter case unification must be pure and belief undefiled. The Sufis are always engaged in purification outwardly and unification inwardly. Therefore outward and inward purification must go together; e.g.; when a man washes his hands he must wash his heart clean of worldliness and then when he puts his water in his mouth he must purify his mouth from mention of other than God. When he washes his face, he must turn away from all familiar objects and turn towards God, and when he wipes his head he must resign his affairs to God and when he washes his feet he must not form the intention of taking his stand on anything except according to God’s command. Thus he will be doubly purified. In all religious ordinances the external is combined with the internal.¹¹

Once the Book is opened, the reader is contemplating the highly worked frontispieces – usually in a double page format – and the believer is given a glimpse, through the Eye of the Heart, of the world beyond which awaits him. Not only is the Quran descended from heaven (as divine revelation) nor is it only a warning to the heedless but mainly a promise

¹⁰ Which are normally with water and if this is not available – then this is done with fine sand or dust from the walls.

¹¹ Hujwīrī, *Kashf al-mahjūb* 292.

of a paradise that awaits those who will undertake the journey through this visual portal. Here lies the main purpose of this gateway whose beauty is to allow the believer to experience a moment of internal illumination before he or she opens the first chapter known as the *Sūrat al-Fātiḥa* literally, “The Opener” . . .

From the perspective of the ‘psychic substance’ of the artist illuminator and calligrapher, as Dr. Lings observes, many of the calligraphers and not a few of the illuminators would have known the Quran by heart from beginning to the end. Even if they did not fully know the Quran by heart, this would still be an organic part of their nature as “the experience of reciting the Quran is not the experience of reading or reciting a written text from beginning to end. Rather, the themes, stories, hymns and the laws of the Quran are woven through the life stages of the individual, the key moments of the community, and the sensual world of the town and village.”¹² Another great scholar and mystic, Frithjof Schuon states that “the verses of the Quran are not only utterances which transmit thoughts; they are also in a sense beings, powers and talismans. The soul of a Muslim is as it were woven out of the sacred formulae; in these he works, in these he rests, in these he lives and in these he dies.”¹³ This is still true today for all those who practice this Sacred Art and who are not only familiar with many of the passages of the Holy Quran but are imbued with its Word and Spirit in which they live and rest.

Furthermore, it has been observed in the past that many of the master illuminators and calligraphers followed the esoteric path of Islam known as Sufism — this path or the Way, as it is also called, is concerned with the inner teachings of Islam. In terms of the art and illumination of the Quran, the artists were in fact giving visual expression to verses or themes found in the Quran through the language of symbolism. The themes related either to the Divine Throne (the eight-pointed star — a universal symbol of the Throne), the heavenly origins of the Quran (an image of a tree pointing outwards from the page towards heavens known as palmettes), images of the seven heavens, or promises and indeed images of paradise which is the driving theme of the Quran.

In mysticism, the entire journey to God is a path on which one is constantly aware of higher realities within things. Symbolism was and is the most sacred of the mystical sciences for it is through this language of symbols that one continues to invoke and remember. That is to say that one often forgets but then strives and struggles to remember and then return. This return is facilitated by a language of symbols, vehicles of Divine

¹² Sells, *Approaching the Qur’ān* 12.

¹³ Schuon, *Understanding Islam* 60.

Realities, meant to transform and carry to higher states of being. The knowledge of symbolism is known as *‘ilm al-mithāl* and it is an encounter between the world of archetypes and the sensible phenomenal world. A correspondence which is mentioned in the Lord’s Prayer “*kamā fi l-samā’ ka-dhālika ‘alā l-arḍ: (it is) in heaven as on the earth.*” Thus the artist illuminator, in making these frontispieces, was not only engaged in an act of worship to cleanse his own spirit but is also inviting others to do the same when contemplating the opening pages illustrating a highly developed language of symbols.

Additionally, three main elements confront the illuminators when trying to illustrate the text (in the frontispieces) in an abstract manner. These three aspects are:

a) The Quran as a descending Revelation from the Lord of the Worlds. There is a verse which is always used in frontispieces — and this is the case even today: “Verily this is an all bountiful recitation in a hidden Book which none toucheth save the purified, a revelation from the Lord of worlds” (*Sūrat al-Wāqī‘a*, Q 56:77-80).

b) The Quran as a mysterious Presence of the Infinite in the finite world,

c) Finally the Quran as an ascending power of reintegration (into the original divine state) whereby on being confronted with the lavish frontispieces, the soul is taken to a higher plane away from its normal existentialist issues.

The artists were faced with the question of how to powerfully transmit these elements *as soon as one opened the Quran*. The solution was to construct a formal frame with star-bursts or repeating patterns in such a way as to force the imagination to go beyond the four sides and in effect create a radiation which allows an echo effect thus allowing the mind to transcend its limitations and the soul to expand likewise. Dr. Lings argues that

it is the function of sacred art in general to be a vehicle for the Divine Presence and it follows that from what has been said that the Islamic artist will conceive of this function not as *capturing*¹⁴ of the Presence but rather as a *liberation*¹⁵ of its mysterious Totality from the deceptive prison of appearances. Islam is particularly averse to any idea of circumscribing or localising the Divine or limiting it in any way. Hence the art of the frontispiece and finispiece must be seen in this context.¹⁶

¹⁴ Author’s italics.

¹⁵ Author’s italics.

¹⁶ Lings, *The Quranic art* 22.

Accordingly, the usage of pure gold leaf, which not only reflects light — and is not tarnished with time — but radiates and reverberates outwards. One is reminded of verse 35 of *Sūrat al-Nūr* (Q 24): “Allah is the Light of the heavens and earth, the likeness of His light is as a niche wherein is a lamp, the lamp is in a glass, the glass is as though it is star brilliant lit from a tree blest, an olive neither East nor of West, its very oil will shine forth event though no fire touched it, light upon light.”

The formatting itself is yet another means of expansion as these frontispieces usually are in a double page format. A single page would represent the microcosm whereas, together, the double pages are an image of harmony of the universe and the integration of the microcosm in that harmony. A plurality of microcosms are yet again echoes of the verse 115 of *Sūrat al-Baqara* (Q 2), “where so ever ye turn there is the Face of God”. The multiplicity of the world is an opaque veil whereas these paintings represent multiplicity as a veil through which oneness can be clearly seen.

Another idea conveyed by Dr. Lings is that the art of the frontispiece leaps across three boundaries. The first boundary is crossed from the centerpiece — when the star bursts extend into infinity. The second boundary is the Kufic lettering above and below the second frame with a band of floral motifs around the whole frame which flows outwards where it terminates in finials and, finally, beyond all, in a solar palmette which creates the effect of liberation.

The rights of Perfection momentarily infringed by the extra weight on the side of the outer margin are finally assured by the presence of an inverted counterpart of the whole of the opposite page.

C- Comments on the Art of the Frontispiece by some Western Art Historians

An unfortunate term to describe the art of the frontispiece, which is part and parcel of the rituals of the Opening of the Holy Quran, is what some western scholars have coined *carpet pages*. Art historians like Oleg Graber, Ettinghausen and Marilyn Jenkins-Madina, in their book on *Islamic art and architecture, 650–1250 AD* conjecture that frontispieces were probably “testimonials to religious piety, showpieces of conspicuous wealth”¹⁷ or like the “carpet pages” of the Hiberno-Saxon manuscript “had some religious significance”¹⁸ thereby missing the point of this practice of sacred art. They also subsume the art of frontispiece under the term “arabesque”, a word invented in the Italian Renaissance and adopted by 18th

¹⁷ Ettinghausen, Graber and Jenkins-Medina, *Islamic art* 76.

¹⁸ Ettinghausen, Graber and Jenkins-Medina, *Islamic art* 76.

century German writers to mean a formal arrangement of vegetal ornament into an endless succession of scrolls as well as the concept of an infinitely repeated motif. Again and again they refer this sacred art to ‘carpet pages’ reducing this highly spiritual art to a mere decorative device. This is equivalent to describing the language of hieroglyphs as wall-paintings depicting life in ancient Egypt. Furthermore and besides its reductionist connotation, the term ‘carpet-page’ is also offensive to the believer since a carpet is a floor-covering and it misleads from the true purpose of these opening pages.

Reinforcing the point of view of his colleagues, David James, in his book on the Qurans and bindings in the Chester Beatty library, states that “the most interesting aspect of the illuminators art was found on the double frontispiece or carpet page. These serve no functional purpose whatsoever. They began as pages of pure decoration and always retain the character of a virtuoso performance by the illuminator.”¹⁹ Having thus decreed that these “carpet pages” serve no functional purpose whatsoever and are mere decoration, he goes on to say the opposite in the next few lines: “more important than their demonstration of the painter’s skill is the undoubted metaphysical character of these pages, which by any standard must be reckoned among the great works of religious art produced by mankind.”²⁰ Defending the view that these pages, designed with full illuminations, are sometimes referred to as “carpet pages”, Colin Baker argues that it is because their appearance, simply, resembles oriental carpets! However he recognizes that besides their decorative aspect, frontispieces carry a spiritual dimension as they set “the sacred tone of the volume and the artist is aware of the need to prepare the reader mentally and spiritually for its contents”. He also stresses, as mentioned by other historians above, that frontispieces represented a unique opportunity for the illuminator to display his artistry in a veritable *tour de force*.²¹

The second analogy that appears when referring to the frontispieces is an architectural one: that of the *courtyard of a mosque*. Colin Baker is right to say that the pages act as a portal to the holy text itself – since we have argued that this an intentional aim of the artist – as it offers the viewer/reader glimpses of paradise and of the heavenly origins of the holy text. Baker states that, in architectural terms,

opening a Quran volume might be compared to entering a sacred building with the ‘carpet page’ as the gateway or a portal to the holy text itself. Its role is thus similar to that of the

¹⁹ James, *Qur’ans and Bindings* 11.

²⁰ James, *Qur’ans and Bindings* 11.

²¹ I am using this term.

courtyard of a mosque, which acting as a transitional link between the everyday world and the spiritual, helps the believer to achieve an appropriate state of mind and composure before entering the prayer hall.²²

He could have taken the analogy further since the courtyard of the mosque usually contains the fountain or basin for ablutions – as a physical and spiritual cleansing ritual prior to entering the mosque or handling the Quran. We have seen earlier the correlation between the frontispiece and this purification ritual.

II- Quran Frontispieces in History

Taking the parallel with a mosque courtyard literally, one finds it applies in the case of one frontispiece. This is the second page of the earliest frontispiece dating from the Umayyad period during the reign of the Caliph al-Walīd in 698 AD and now housed in Sanaa, Yemen. This second-page frontispiece depicts a mosque – but not any mosque: this mosque was the great Mosque of Damascus. The frontispiece also depicts the mosaic decoration in the great Mosque clearly inspired by Byzantine art, which was the regional art of the region. Damascus had recently become part of the Islamic Empire after having been one of the main centers of Roman Byzantium.

A- Developments and Influences

The prominent feature in the above-mentioned Umayyad frontispiece (698 AD) is the drawing of the Mosque *lamps* suspended from chains which appears to be inspired from the verse 35 of *Sūrat al-Nūr* (Q 24) – the Chapter of Light. The first opening page contains the eight-pointed star: a “representation of paradise based on a cosmogram”²³, a classical motif combining an octagon and a circle. The *cosmogram motif* was first used in the frontispiece of a Byzantine manuscript produced in 512 AD for the Princess Juliana Anicia. Here, however, this motif has been enhanced by the expansion of the inner octagon to form an eight pointed star. The enrichment of the symbol and the luxuriant growth of the trees were employed as a metaphor, by the Umayyad artist, for transcending earthly experience.²⁴

In the following centuries, in both the Umayyad and Abbasid periods, the inspiration for the frontispieces originated mainly from the ancient art of the Romans,

²² Baker, *Qur'an Manuscripts* 43.

²³ Piotrovsky and Vrieze, *Heavenly Art* 101.

²⁴ Piotrovsky and Vrieze, *Heavenly Art* 101.

particularly from tile mosaics. The reason for this influence is related to the Arab conquest of cities previously under the domination of the Byzantine Empire, or part of it. The artists, used to a certain visual language for hundreds of years transplanted their knowledge to this new religion of Islam, which gradually became the dominant religion of the region.

Cities such as Kairouan in Tunisia and Damascus in Syria – that became major centers of Islam from the very early period – were part of Roman Byzantium (as Christianity became the dominant religion of the West once the Edict of Milan had been issued in 313 AD). The knowledge of the Romans, and –particularly– the Greeks, was revived by the Arabs. They translated most of the written texts such as the teachings of the Pythagoreans as well as the texts of Aristotle, Socrates and Plato. The writings of Empedocles on cosmology and sciences of nature received much attention. The science of proportion and the cosmological approach of the *Timaeus* of Plato were not only translated but had a huge impact, becoming one of the philosopher’s best known works in Islam. The body of this ancient knowledge about proportion and sense perception was being translated in Arabic and discussed at the same time as the art of calligraphy was reaching new summits. According to Alain George the idea that proportion could harmonize the soul was explored by al-Kindī (800–870 AD) in his work on music where he linked proportion and musical scales to heavenly spheres and to the soul.²⁵ Other works related the science of proportions, harmony and calligraphy by people like Ibn al-Haytham (965–1039 AD) and suggested that the principles of proportions applied to calligraphy are also musical.

Other influences and patterns, in terms of the art of illumination of the Quran, were the inspirations on the usage of the knotted ropes, which are also found in the earlier Celtic art of Scotland and Ireland. Prior to becoming one of the largest cultural centers of the Islamic world, the city of Kairouan was one of the major centers for the production of the tile mosaics of the Roman Empire. It seems that the usage of *the knotted and braided patterns* used in the early Quran frontispieces are inspired from the visual language found in the Roman arts, particularly, as mentioned, in the tile mosaics. Possibly, the reference to verse 103 in *Sūrat Āl ‘Imrān* (Q 3) which states: “Hold fast to the Rope of Allah and let it not asunder” might have led the artist to graft the idea on to the visual vocabulary he had been exposed to for a millennium, i.e. from Roman times.²⁶ The designs evoked a rope or a series of ropes descended from heaven to be grasped by the reciter of the Quran so that his soul would be transported to the world beyond.

²⁵ Cf. George, *The Rise of Islamic calligraphy*.

²⁶ From Roman times.

The frontispieces also depict intersecting circles and these are all inspired from the *Vesica* shape or the *Vesica Piscis* shape. The *Vesica* is a shape, which represents two circles meeting in an intersection. The name literally means the “bladder of a fish” in Latin. In the Pythagorean theorems the *Vesica Piscis* is also known as the “measure of the fish” and in the Christian tradition the *Vesica* shape represents *Christ Pantocrator*. Given that the artists in Tunisia and Syria were either converts or exposed to Christian and Roman traditions, it is not inconceivable that they would use a familiar, albeit abstract, language of art. There is also evidence that in the early years of Islam, Christian artists had been employed in all the arts including architecture. In mysticism, the *Vesica* shape is regarded as a place of conjunction between spirit and matter. In other words, this is a transition between the World-to-Come or paradise and the material world. The usage of two circles in these early frontispieces – of both the Umayyad and Abbasid periods – represents paradise and earth. It also is symbolic of the revealed Quran and its archetype in heaven which is known as *al-lawḥ al-mahfūz* or the Guarded Tablet.

The *Vesica* shape was used for several hundred years in the frontispieces of Quran manuscripts and is

an overlying template that intersects with all the points on the Tree of Life. The *Tree of Life* is also referred as the Flower of Life or the Seed of Life and overlaps perfectly, with the *Vesica Piscis* providing all of the elements of the Flower of Life or for the Tree of Life.²⁷

This Tree of Life or of Knowledge is known as the *sidrat al-muntahā* in the Quran and this is the “lote tree of the utmost boundary” mentioned in *Sūrat al-Najm* (Q 53:14-7). This tree stands at the end of the gardens of paradise. The shapes of the *Vesica* with the flowers in the center are part of the frontispieces of the famous Ibn Bawwāb Quran manuscript (1000AD) in the Chester Beatty Library in Dublin. The artist/ illuminator was thus drawing attention to the Garden, which awaits the soul on the recitation of the Quran and the mystical conjunction of the spiritual and physical worlds.

B – The High Period: The Art Reaches its Summit

²⁷ Lawlor, *Sacred Geometry*; and Melchizedek, *The ancient secret*.

The 13th and the 14th century were a period of great spiritual prosperity in all of Islamic world.²⁸

This was the age when some of the greatest mystical masters lived and when the mystical orders were established (such as the Shādhiliyya order). It was the age of Imām Muḥyī l-Dīn Ibn ‘Arabī (Spain and Syria) whose mystical works had a profound and lasting effect for centuries on many a people. It was also the age of Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī the founder of the Mawlawī order in Turkey, of *Shams-i Tabrīz* (Iraq, Syria) and the time when the Qādiriyya order (Iraq) spread in most parts of the Islamic world. This was also the age in the East of Shaykh Sa‘ādī (Iran), Bahā’ al-Dīn Zakarīyā and his grandson, Rukn-i ‘Ālam (Multan, Pakistan), Khawāja Mu‘īn al-Dīn Chishtī (Ajmer, India), Bakhtiyār Kākī (Delhi, India), Farīd al-Dīn ‘Aṭṭār (Iran), Niẓām al-Dīn Awliyā’ (Delhi, India), Bābā Farīd Ganj Shakar (Pak-Pattan, Pakistan) and Shihāb al-Dīn Suhrawardī (Baghdad, Iraq); to name a few of the great mystics of the time who left an indelible footprint on the Islamic world.

With the influence of these great mystics, it is clear that there was a mystical bias in the Islamic community as a whole. This had enormous effect on all arts in terms of architecture, calligraphy and illumination where one sees the arts reaching unparalleled heights, particularly sacred art, due to the spread of mystical ideas: “in order to exist, sacred art presupposes the opening of doors of which mysticism may be said to hold the keys.”²⁹ Many of the greatest calligraphers and illuminators belonged to one or the other of the mystical orders. These are for example Aḥmad Suhrawardī known as Shaykhzāde (son of the *shaykh* and founder of the Suhrawardī order), Pīr Yaḥyā al-Ṣūfī al-Jamālī and Ḥaḍrat Pīr Junda’ Nawīs, who were not only colleagues but students of Yāqūt al-Musta‘īmī, the Sultan of calligraphers. Even three hundred years later all the Ottoman calligraphers belonged to one or the other mystical orders and even today, most of the practitioners of this sacred art, are imbued with mysticism.

A second factor that needs to be considered is the cultural milieu in the life and times of the Mamluks who represented, with the Mongol Ilkhanids, the absolute summit in Quran illumination and art. However, the focus here is on the Mamluks – as they commissioned generally single volumes as opposed to the thirty volumes of the Ilkhanids, many of which are missing.

²⁸ James, *Qur’ans and Bindings* 11.

²⁹ Lings, *Splendours of Qur’an calligraphy* 38.

Originally Kipchak Turks from what is now Southern Russia the Mamluks were recruited into the army by the Ayyubid Sultan Najm al-Dīn Ayyūb in Egypt. Eventually they took over the Ayyubid Empire and started the Mamluk Sultanate headquartered in Egypt. They gained honor and prestige as the defenders of Islam having repelled both the Mongols and the Crusaders. Despite the uneasy relations with Mongols they married Mongol Princesses: the mother of Sultan al-Nāṣir Muḥammad was a Mongol and he himself married Mongol women including an Ilkhanid Princess³⁰ – this fact is crucial as two of the three frontispieces under discussion were commissioned in his time. In the Mamluk army itself a large number of Mongols gained entry when there was peace between Baraka Khān of the Golden Horde and the Sultan Baybars. Additionally, the city of Cairo was not only multi-cultural and multi-ethnic but trade with Central Asia, Iran, India and the Far East was widespread. These factors are important as Far-Eastern influences – inspired from Buddhism and Chinese art – appear in the sacred art of the Mamluk frontispieces discussed below.

As mentioned, the Mamluks considered themselves as guardians of Islam. They established and patronized pious foundations, which in turn had substantial libraries. These foundations encouraged scholarship, book production and stimulated visual arts and thus enriched urban life. Doris Behrens-Abouseif draws attention to the fact that in Mamluk culture, the Quran manuscript being a product of pious endowments, was a common commodity and thus available to a very wide audience. So in addition to royal libraries being attached to the *khanqāhs/madrasas*³¹ by the Sultans, the *amīrs* and scholars also owned substantial libraries:

access to the metropolitan teaching institutions being philanthropic and in principle open to all, offered the opportunity for the local urban and rural population to ascend the social scale as men of the pen. They provided the basis for the education of the ulema³² who bridged the gap between the ruling aristocracy and their subjects.³³

In terms of pious patronage the Mamluk Sultan sponsored both the orthodox religious practices as well as the mystical practices of Sufism. In addition to restoring and

³⁰ Behrens-Abouseif, *Cairo of the Mamluks*.

³¹ Khanqah: a sufi monastery, madrassah- an institution of learning.

³² learned scholars of religion and thus religious authorities.

³³ Behrens-Abouseif, *Cairo of the Mamluks* 5.

refurbishing the mosques of ‘Amr ibn al-‘Āṣ (the first mosque in Egypt) and al-Azhar University, the Sultans sponsored the Sufis who migrated to their territory. They also demonstrated their reverence for the local saints of the realm by constantly embellishing and endowing their shrines in Egypt and Syria. Doris Behrens-Abouseif also mentions the practice, and indeed policy, of providing scholarly hospitality by appointing foreign mystics and scholars to their religious foundations, which were backed by the endowment (*waqf*) deeds. She mentions that a significant outcome of Mamluk pious patronage was the full integration of Sufism in religious and academic life and the ruling elite’s strong inclination towards Sufism. The result of these policies was that *khānqahs* of the Sufis merged with the *madrasas* to form a multifunctional complex which also included a mosque “where the Sufis were scholars and the scholars were Sufis.”³⁴ This factor of Mamluk policy is crucial to our understanding of the art of the frontispiece of the Quran which cannot be divorced from its context and from the esoteric aspects of Islam and the Quran.

The first act of the Sultan on his ascension to the throne, usually by a palace *coup d’etat* or death of his predecessor, was to order the construction of a mosque, *madrasa*, funerary complex and to immediately commission a lavish Quran manuscript which would buy him immortality. This is how the art of the frontispiece started to reach a zenith as each Sultan or *amīr*³⁵ tried to vie with the other – or his predecessor – to commission the most lavish manuscript ever produced. Thus not only ever-larger Quran manuscripts were produced but the illumination became more complex and rich as no expense was spared when it came to the commissioning of these manuscripts. The Mamluks were mindful of the fact that whilst buildings could only last a few hundred years, patronage of books and indeed arts would last much longer and would always be associated with them. This perhaps is not far off the mark as most of the manuscripts produced in that time are still extant even after seven hundred years and in some cases appear as if they were produced yesterday.³⁶

C- The Calligrapher and the Illuminator

As is generally the case with any sacred art, the names of these masters are not known as they did not inscribe their names in the colophons. That said, there are some instances

³⁴ Behrens-Abouseif, *Cairo of the Mamluks* 11.

³⁵ Emir: nobleman.

³⁶ This might be partially due to the dry climate of Egypt, which helped preserve these manuscripts apart from the fact that the finest materials were used.

where both the illuminator and the calligrapher are known simply because they did sign their names while asking for benedictions on the completion of this sacred task. At times, the calligrapher and the illuminator were the same and this is the case with Ibn Bawwāb (1000 AD) whose copy of the Quran manuscript is in Chester Beatty Library. Ibn Bawwāb is considered as one of the fathers of cursive calligraphy apart from being an illuminator. This is also the case with ‘Abdallāh al-Hamadānī, whose thirty-parts Quran manuscript (1313 AD) commissioned by the Ilkhanid Sultan Öljaytū, is housed in the Cairo National Library. The thirty frontispieces and indeed the whole of this manuscript are regarded as one of the finest works of abstract art of mankind. In general, however, the calligrapher would work in tandem with the illuminator and was responsible for planning the pages for the text by using a *miṣṭara* (a device like a modern day ruler but with a string attached) which enabled him to write in straight lines. To become master calligrapher entailed years of training under a master until such time one obtained a diploma (*ijāza*). The apprentices were responsible for trimming and preparing the pens (*qalams*) and the inks. They were in charge of preparing the gold leaf and shell gold (crushed gold leaf) and the other pigments which were ground (like lapis lazuli for the blue, lead white for white, red lead or vermilion for red etc). The task of illuminating was undertaken by the master illuminators, once a certain section had been completed and, in case of multi volumes, once a number of pages had been inscribed. Alternatively at times they prepared the opening pages and frontispieces first for the calligrapher to then inscribe. As Colin Baker sums up: “the penmanship of master calligraphers and the artistry of some of the most talented illuminators combined to place these richly produced Qurans among the world’s most sublime expressions of religious art.”³⁷

III - Mamluk Qurans’ Frontispieces

As mentioned, the art of the frontispiece reached its zenith in 13th and 14th century with the Mamluks and Ilkhanids, declining thereafter and by the 17th century it had almost disappeared from the art of illumination.

In this section I will refer to the three chosen frontispieces in order to illustrate the points I am making. However, Frontispieces A, B and C will be discussed separately further.

A - Shapes and Symbols of Paradise

³⁷ Baker, *Qur’an Manuscripts* 43.

Whilst the double page format of the frontispieces had become universal in the Islamic world and for several centuries, the Mamluk frontispieces of this period differ and acquire some distinct features. Regarding the *patterns* for instance, there is extensive usage of geometry. In the Islamic artistic tradition, suffused by the esoteric elements of the religion, particularly in this period, it is widely said that the usage of *geometry* represents Fear of God, the usage of the *arabesque* – discussed below – represents Love of God, whilst *Calligraphy* represents Knowledge from /of God.

The usage of geometric forms in the frontispieces – which is particular to both the Mamluks and the Ilkhanids – rose from the need to find a solution to the question of how to do justice to Perfection or Wholeness (which are attributes of paradise) without sacrificing infinitude.³⁸ The geometric answer to this problem might be expressed as follows: “if a sufficiently powerful centrifugal movement can be set up in a given space, then it can be circumscribed without fear of limitation.”³⁹ This means that the designs overlap barriers, are not bounded and force the eye to move across the page. This can be clearly seen in frontispieces B and C where, in the four corners of the central frame, the half-stars and polygons force the eye outward in the four directions as stars radiate into infinity.

That said it has to be noted that the geometric forms had also symbolic meanings. The language of geometry was widely understood – as well as the language of numerology whereby even the letters of the Arabic⁴⁰ – and also the Hebrew – script have numerical values. For instance, the numerical value of the word “and” known as *waw* in Arabic and *vav* in Hebrew is six. Numbers have their symbolic meaning and three and nine for example relate to heaven, while four relates to earth (the four cardinal points), five relates to man while the six relates to the Perfect Man (*al-insān al-kāmil*)⁴¹ who is the mediator between heaven and earth and who was created on the sixth day. Geometrically this translates – as we can see it in Quran illumination – into a hexagon or **six pointed star** which stands for the

³⁸ Lings, *Splendours of Qur'an accligraphy*.

³⁹ Lings, *Splendours of Qur'an accligraphy* 42.

⁴⁰ Also applies to Hebrew.

⁴¹ “The Garden of Eden, which for primordial man was a macrocosm, corresponds to the inward paradise of his soul. But since his soul has in its Heart, the Eye of Certainty, which transcends its other elements, it may also be said to consist of two paradises. The higher of these, the Garden of the Heart, will then correspond to Eden's innermost precinct where flows the Fountain of Immortality, while the lower, the Garden of the soul will correspond to the rest of the earthly garden. Together these two inward paradises make up the degree of human perfection.” Lings, *The Book of Certainty* 35.

Perfect Man⁴². **The eight pointed star** represents the Throne of Heaven and although this is a universal and primordial sign, one particular reference in the Quran is in *Sūrat al-Ḥāqqā*, (Q 69:17) wherein it is stated “On the Day of Judgement, His Throne will be carried by eight angels”. The eight-pointed star appears in the shape of a cosmos or clematis flower in the first frontispiece (A) where it binds the lotus flowers on either side in the innermost central frame. In the second frontispiece (B) it surrounds the innermost red core in the central frame.

In Architecture this pattern is visible in the Qubbat al-Ṣakhrah (Dome of the Rock) which is eight-sided. In mystical literature, Shaykh al-Akbar also known as Ibn ‘Arabī, in his landmark treatise on mysticism and metaphysics *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya*,⁴³ drew the diagram of the eight-pointed star as an analogy for the Divine Throne (*al-‘arsh al-‘azīm*). This book had such a major impact that some four hundred years after its publication, it actually inspired the construction of the Taj Mahal. The concept behind the Taj Mahal is that of an esoteric prayer through time or for as long as the building stands and which reads as follows: “please admit the mortal remains of my wife to Your Divine Throne and may her soul be admitted to Your Gardens of paradise.” This is one reason why the building is surrounded by gardens subdivided into four parts known as the *chārbāgh* (the four gardens of paradise) and why the white marble-clad building is in the color of the Muslim burial cloth.

The **twelve-pointed** star represents the rhythm of the day and night and the yearly cycle, divided by twelve hours or months. It appears in frontispiece B in the central frame as a starburst surrounding the eight-pointed lotus and star. The **sixteen-pointed** star or sixteen-armed polygon refers to the *maqāms* or Stations of Enlightenment of man’s soul and appear in frontispiece C as a star-burst in the central frame. It can also be found on objects such as the *kursī* (Quran manuscript stand) of the Sultan Qāyṭbay where Quran manuscripts were put on public display to be read and indeed admired.⁴⁴

Another distinguishing feature of the Mamluk frontispieces is the employment of *several frames* with different patterns and designs which are so diverse on first appearance, yet taken as a whole, they present harmony and are visually breathtaking. These frames which are often seven in number, usually represent the seven heavens explicitly and frequently mentioned in the Quran and can be see in all three frontispieces. Additionally,

⁴² Lings, *Splendours of Quran calligraphy and illumination* 42.

⁴³ *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya*.

⁴⁴ This star pattern can be seen in several halls of the Nāṣirid Palace of Alhambra in Granada, Spain.

the swirling and scrolling pattern of flowers and vines, have been termed as *arabesques* in the West and *islīmī* in the Eastern Islamic world (Turkey, Iran and the Indo-Pak sub-continent). In Arabic, the word is *tawrīq* meaning leaves, foliage or flora and consists of “highly stylised forms that have developed from an abstraction of classical vegetal themes such as acanthus leaf, fruit, flowers and so on.”⁴⁵ Again, they can be found in all three frontispieces (A, B and C) particularly as a background to the inscribed verses of the Quran on the frontispieces. It appears that this swirling pattern of flowers and vines is inspired from a number of sources and events. It has to be remembered that at this period great advances had been made in the sciences – which included the ancient knowledge of the Greeks and Indians – such as astronomy. The Arabs were conscious of the movements and rotation of the heavenly bodies. The earth rotates around the sun and the moon around the earth. Birds make their nests, which are in form of a circle and most fruits are round so the usage of the circular format would have inspired the artists. Also, one must not forget the circum-ambulation around the Ka’ba (the ritual circling around the shrine) which takes place throughout the year, twenty four hours a day. The themes of life, death, resurrection, heaven and hell and belief in the oneness of God and His Prophets, His Books and the angels, are themes which recur time and time again throughout the whole text of the Quran which, it can be argued, is structurally a circular text as well.⁴⁶

In his book, *Approaching the Quran*, Michael Sells refers firstly to students not only memorizing the Quran by rote “but rather interiorising the inner rhythms, sound patterns and textual dynamics – taking it to heart in the deepest manner.”⁴⁷ He draws attention to the rhyming quality of the chapters of the Quran and states that the complex sound-patterns and relation of sound to meaning “what we call sound vision of the Quran – are brought out and cultivated in the Quranic recitation”⁴⁸ which is melodic and hymnic. This is comparable to the rhythm of the arabesque in its repeating swirls seems to follow the sound patterns of the recitation. Furthermore there are verses in the Quran that refer to the heavens being like a scroll which will be “rolled up” on the day of judgment (*Sūrat al-Anbiyā’*, Q 21:104). Laleh Bakhtiar suggests that the different patterns of the arabesque are a reflection of spiritual states, which are to be achieved during Quran reading and

⁴⁵ Fernandez-Puertas, *The Alhambra* 96.

⁴⁶ Alluded to by Sells, *Approaching the Qur’ān*.

⁴⁷ Sells, *Approaching the Qur’ān* 16.

⁴⁸ Sells, *Approaching the Qur’ān* 16

recitation.⁴⁹ Shaykh ‘Alī b. ‘Uthmān al-Hujwīrī in his book *Kashf al-mahjūb*,⁵⁰ mentions several spiritual stages generally known as *aḥwāl* (literally “states”, Sg. *ḥāl*).⁵¹ These stages are *ḥāl al-waqt*, *ḥāl al-tamkīn* and *talwīn al-tamkīn*. All these spiritual stages of enlightenment have one purpose to direct the soul to the Garden beyond. The first stage known as *ḥāl al-waqt* (literally the moment or time of illumination) is a moment of enlightenment which descends on the spirit in a flash. This is not a permanent state, however, but one that the frontispieces, we argued earlier, aim at provoking: “It is the word *waqt*, literally, ‘time,’ which came to designate the ‘present moment,’ the moment in which a certain mystical state is granted to the Sufi”⁵² and to the reader when contemplating these pages. In visual terms of design this moment is the center of the scrolling pattern which actualizes the spirals just as the spirals through their very existence actualize the center.

Between the spiritual state of *ḥāl al-waqt* and the last state, which is the *talwīn al-tamkīn*, lays the intermediate spiritual state known as *ḥāl al-tamkīn*. Here in terms of design the illuminator introduces rhythmic forms of the scrolling patterns, which are stabilized through symmetry. This can be clearly seen in the frames, which house the verses of the Quran in each of the three frontispieces.

Finally, the last stage is *tamkīn* which denotes “the residence of spiritual adepts in the abode of perfection and is the highest grade . . . *tamkīn* is the resting place for adepts and *maqāmāt* (stations) are stages on the way.” The seeker has reached paradise and *tamkīn* is a final “repose within the shrine.”⁵³ In terms of design this shows as passing in perfect harmony from one spiral to the other in perfect calm and repose whilst being stable and also symmetrical. When the scrolling vines, in the form of spirals, move from one spiral to another without breaking the symmetry, then this is the equivalent in the art of illumination of the *talwīn al-tamkīn* stage. In frontispiece A both the upper and lower cartouches contain three complete spirals which represent this stage. In a limited form, the spirals appear in the frontispiece B, and in the frontispiece C, the *talwīn al-tamkīn* is represented in the seven full and semi circles of the upper and lower cartouches.

Thus the artist-illuminator well versed in this esoteric knowledge was visually depicting states of being in Quran illuminations and, in effect, has been issuing markers for the soul to move towards the portal of paradise. If this is taken into consideration then the

⁴⁹ Cf. Bakhtiar, *Sufi*.

⁵⁰ The the earliest known treatise on Sufi mysticism from c. 1036 AD.

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⁵² Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions* 129-30.

⁵³ Hujwīrī, *Kashf al-mahjūb* 371.

so-called arabesques are not mere decorative space fillers but have a symbolic and esoteric meaning which was not only relevant to the artist-illuminator but also generally understood by the reciters.

Another theme found in the frontispieces relating to our subject is the usage of *flowers* whose symbolism is widespread and found in most traditions. According to Rene Guenon, one of the chief meanings of floral symbolism is its relation to a feminine or passive principle of manifestation as it evokes a cup-like receptacle.⁵⁴ Ettinghausen has remarked on the usage of peonies in the art of the Mamluk Quran manuscripts of the 14th century being inspired by Chinese art.⁵⁵ As mentioned earlier, borrowings in the fine arts were bound to happen as a result of the cultural interchanges between the Mamluks and the Far-Eastern empires of the Mongols and the Ilkhanids. In addition, a large numbers of Mongols were settled in Egypt and the Sultans married Mongol princesses all of which resulted in imports of the cultures and religions (Mongols practiced both shamanism and Buddhism) of the East together with their underlying symbolism. The flower symbol used in the Qurans we are referring to is common to both Egypt and Buddhism. However the way the Mamluks drew them is clearly of Hindu and Buddhist influence.

Flowers hold a significant place in Chinese civilization and the *peony* is regarded as the national flower of China. This flower, known as *fuguïhua*, “flower of riches and honor” symbolizes opulence, beauty, and higher social status. Being a spring flower, it represents female poise and fertility. It is also considered a symbol of romance and prosperity and an omen of good fortune. For the Chinese the peony is also an emblem of love and affection. The peonies appear in the 7th frame of Frontispiece B and the 2nd frame of Frontispiece C. The usage of peonies by the artists of this period is not merely a decorative device but a reference to the feminine principle and a metaphor for the *ḥūrīs* – beautiful virgin maidens awaiting the believer in paradise – often mentioned in the Quran.

Another flower used extensively in the Mamluk art of the Quran is the *lotus*, “the flower of flowers.”⁵⁶ The lotus appears in all three frontispieces. In Frontispiece A, several lotuses are depicted in the central frame. In Frontispiece B, the lotus surrounds the eight-pointed star or is in the shape of an eight-pointed star around the red central core and also appears in the 7th frame counting from the center. In the last frontispiece (C), it is depicted

⁵⁴ Cf. Guenon, *Fundamental Symbols*.

⁵⁵ Ettinghausen (1976).

⁵⁶ The lotus is “the flower of flowers since it blooms on the surface of water and this surface represents a certain state of manifestation or the plane of reflection of the Celestial Ray”, Guenon, *Fundamental Symbols* 54.

in all the seven frames in various stages of bloom. Not only was this flower abundantly used in the ancient art of the Pharaohs but is also found in the ancient Buddhist and Hindu culture and religion. In both Hinduism and Buddhism, this flower represents the awakening to spiritual consciousness. In the Indian culture, the lotus flower represents enlightenment, wealth, knowledge and also purity and generosity. As with most flowers, lotuses also represent fertility and beauty. In Hinduism, one sees many Indian gods and goddesses depicted with a lotus or sitting on lotus flowers representing purity and divinity. In the *Baghavad Gītā* chapter 5 paragraph 10 it is stated “One who performs his duty without attachment, surrendering the results unto the Supreme Lord, is unaffected by sinful action, as the lotus is untouched by water.” Similarly, in Buddhism, the flower represents purity of speech, and a mind and body arising above the waters of desire and attachment. The lotus is one of the eight auspicious symbols and each of the four colors has a symbolic significance in Buddhism. For instance, the white lotus symbolizes spiritual perfection and complete mental purity while the blue means wisdom, knowledge and victory over the senses. A common way of understanding the symbolism of the lotus in Buddhist enlightenment is the parable of the lotus which grows in muddy water and yet the muddy water falls off its leaves keeping the flower pure and clean. To quote the Gautama Buddha: “As a lotus flower is born in water, grows in water and rises out of water to stand above it unsoiled, so I, born in the world, raised in the world having overcome the world, live unsoiled by the world.”

The lotus flower was also revered by the ancient Egyptians. According to the Egyptologists the “symbolic role of the lotus is well understood. The white lotus, *Nymphaea lotus*, and the blue lotus *Nymphaea caerulea* represented life itself.”⁵⁷ It is the white lotus, which is the original sacred symbol of ancient Egypt. It symbolized spiritual enlightenment and acceleration of spiritual evolution. Frontispiece C shows white lotuses from tiny buds to various stages of blossom hence representing the various stages of the evolution of spiritual life. Another variety, namely the blue lotus, had also particular significance for the ancient Egyptians. This flower sinks at night in the water and re-emerges in the mornings. This singular trait linked it with creation, renewal and rebirth. The deity Nefertem was closely associated with the lotus flower symbol as it emerged from water; and according to one myth, a giant lotus first arose from the watery chaos at the beginning of time and from this lotus, the sun itself arose the first day. Another legend states that at the time of creation, a lotus flower rose from the water and as the sun rays touched the bloom it slowly opened its petals revealing the sacred scarab inside.

⁵⁷ Tyldesley, *Private Lives* 171.

The blue lotus – which once grew copiously along the banks of the river Nile – is often depicted in temples, hieroglyphics and utensils and is also spoken of in stories. The Egyptians saw the blue lotus open each morning with its intense golden center and, as the sun arose, the flower released its heady perfume. Each afternoon it would close and the cycle would be repeated the next day. Hence, as the flower was visibly dependent on the rhythms of sunrise and sunset, it became associated with creation and its symbolic significance was great. As a symbol of rebirth, most of the mummies of the pharaohs had blue lotus petals scattered around them. The Egyptians looked forward to their souls coming to life like a lotus reopening in the morning and the ancient book of the dead had spells to allow the deceased to transform like these flowers and come back to life.⁵⁸ The blue lotus representing the resurrection of the soul is found in both Frontispiece A and B, where it is fully depicted in the turquoise shade. In Frontispiece C, the artist has chosen to depict a white lotus with blue shade inside the petals (in one of the outer frames).

In summation, the Egyptian artists working on the Mamluk frontispieces of the Quran were firstly exposed to the Far Eastern religions and cultures which, in addition to their own rich cultural history have produced the extraordinary frontispieces under discussion.

B - Celestial Colors in Mamluk Qurans

The predominant colors of the *Mamluk* Quran frontispieces are *blue* and *gold* with the subsidiary usage of *red*. This is also the case with Frontispieces A, B and C where gold and blue are used extensively along with red to provide a rich contrast.

a - Symbolism

As the illumination concerned the Quran, no expense was spared in the production of manuscripts and their illumination, hence the lavish use of gold and lapis-lazuli (for blue). Generally these are the primary colors used in Quran illumination but then there are overarching reasons for the usage of both *gold* and *blue*: blue is the color of heavens and the Quran is brought down by descent (*tanzil*). Here it is necessary to refer to the late Dr Lings

⁵⁸ The lotus flower, particularly the blue lotus, was used to alter mental states as it had hallucinogenic properties. Tests have been carried out for UK's Channel 4 documentary where two men were given wine in which the blue lotus flowers had macerated for a few days. Both the volunteers reported altered states, which they described as "euphoria with tranquilization". Even nowadays the perfume of the blue lotus is widely available in Egypt where it is known as the "Egyptian viagra"!

whose descriptions on usage of color symbolism have not been bettered: “Blue is the colour of the Infinite which is identical with Mercy, for ‘My Mercy embraceth all things’ (*Sūrat al-A‘rāf*, Q 7:156). The great symbol of this Infinitude is the all surrounding sky.” Closely related to one of the attributes of God al-Raḥmān is the name *al-Muḥīṭ*, the all-Embracing, and by extension, the word *muḥīṭ* also means ocean. As a symbol of infinite mercy, the sea is in fact only second to the sky itself whose color it takes and assimilates. If blue liberates by Infinitude, gold liberates because, like the sun, it is a symbol of the Spirit and therefore virtually transcends the whole world of forms. As the color of light, gold is intrinsically a symbol of knowledge. Extrinsically, it means teaching or Manifestation. Blue in the presence of gold is therefore Mercy inclined to reveal itself’ (Lings 1976, p.76 and Lings 2005, p.27).

Gold is also mentioned several times in connection with the objects that are part of the gardens of paradise. These are goblets of gold or bracelets of gold worn by the inhabitants of paradise as in *Sūrat al-Ḥajj* (Q 22), for instance, so it is not surprising that it has been extensively used for Quran illumination.

Blue and gold are opposite enough to enhance each other greatly. However, in the triple domain of primary color “perfect balance cannot come by two but only by three.”⁵⁹ Thus to enhance the blue and gold, there has been usage of *red* like the “rubies and coral” of the maidens in paradise (*Sūrat al-Raḥmān*, Q 55:58). At times, red is applied with a soft brush over gold so that the radiance of gold is rendered ethereal as it shines through the red pigment. Alternatively red is used as a primary color but sparingly or mixed with other colors to give darker tones and thus enhance the effect of both blue and gold. Occasionally, a shiny *white*⁶⁰ has also been used to enhance the frontispieces. Several references to pearls are found in the Quran: as benefits derived by mankind come in shape of pearls and corals “There comes forth from both the two, the pearl and the coral. Which then of the benefits of your Lord will ye twain deny” (*Sūrat al-Raḥmān*, Q 55:22). Another reference is “therein (in paradise) they shall be adorned with bracelets of gold and with pearl” (*Sūrat al-Ḥajj*, Q 22:23). It is highly probable that the pearlescent white used in the manuscripts was obtained by crushing pearls to give it this particular finish. This glowing white paint highlights and enhances the gold leaf and can be seen in all three frontispieces A, B and C .

b – Techniques

⁵⁹ Lings, Splendours of Qur’an calligraphy 29.

⁶⁰ Although strictly speaking white is not regarded as a colour.

Both blue and gold had made their appearance in the early Abbasid period⁶¹ when close links had been established between the Abbasid empire based in Baghdad and the Chinese Tang dynasty as far back as 770 AD. The Chinese influence on Islamic ceramics industry, as a result of the blue-imported Tang ceramics, is well known. Another factor was the immigration of the Chinese artisans and artists who settled in Baghdad since the Abbasid period.⁶² Apart from these influences the major source of inspiration remained the Quran itself.

Gold was used either as gold leaf or crushed gold leaves. This technique required pounding gold leaves with gum arabic and then filtering with water in order to obtain fine gold powder. The water was thereafter drained or steamed-off with the residue (gold powder bound with gum arabic) then placed on a seashell, therefore the name shell-gold (as it came to be known) which was used with water and brush for very fine work. This technique required burnishing with an agate tooth to render its brilliance, which is not necessary for gold leaf as it is applied directly to the surface with gum arabic or glair (egg-white) as a fixative. The blue color was obtained by crushing the lapis lazuli stone imported from modern-day Afghanistan. As the stone was imported and is a very hard stone to crush, there was considerable expense in using it. The crushed lapis stone was used, at times, with black (obtained from soot) and mixed with gum and water to form the deep Egyptian blue (a form of Prussian blue pigment) which the Mamluks favored. All three frontispieces make lavish usage of gold leaf and blue lapis pigment. In the case of Frontispiece A, gold leaf is used predominately with the fine lines of the arabesque painted with shell gold. This means that the shell gold would have been applied first and burnished with either the back of a sea shell or a highly polished agate tooth before gold leaf and blue lapis were applied as they cannot be burnished. In the case of Frontispiece B, shell gold has been applied in the end frame while gold leaf has been restricted to the inner frames with usage of blue lapis as the dominant color. One can see a subsidiary usage of purple, red and orange in the floral patterns only. In Frontispiece C, both lapis blue and gold (gold leaf *and* shell gold for the finer work) are the predominant colors with a secondary usage of orange and white pigments.

As mentioned earlier, in certain manuscripts a shiny white paint is found. It is highly probable that this was obtained by crushing pearls in order to obtain this pearlescent finish. Red pigment was also used and this color is the most vivid of colors “as it produces the

⁶¹ Around 770 AD.

⁶² George, *Calligraphy, Colour and Light*.

maximum vibrations in the eye. It is also a symbol of fire and it is significant that for Moses, the first sign of the Presence of Jehovah was the burning bush.”⁶³ Red is also a color of fertility and marriage in the Eastern traditions as even today, in both the Chinese and Indian cultures, red is the color of the bride’s dress on her marriage. Red has been used sparingly in all the frames of both Frontispieces A and B but in the case of C, it has been mixed with a darker tone – the technical term for which is Indian red – and applied in the polygons of the central frame. By mixing with another color to give the tone of Indian red, the artist has enhanced the effect of both blue and gold in Frontispiece C. As mentioned, at times red is applied with a soft brush over gold. This diffuses the gold, which shines through the red pigment – as can be seen in Frontispiece B where red has been applied in part on gold leaf. In Frontispiece C, the leaves in the interlacing pattern that connect the blue and white lotus, are rendered with a highly diluted red ink and applied with a soft brush on the gold leaf in the penultimate frame. In all three frontispieces the red has been sparingly used to highlight the ‘celestial’ effect of gold and blue.

IV - The Three Frontispieces

Having given the historical background for the language of illumination of the Quran as well as its underlying symbolism, it is necessary to comment on some of these masterpieces of abstract art in order to illustrate and support our argument.

As mentioned, the three following frontispieces were chosen as they best reflect the subject of our discussion: the opening pages of Quran manuscript A illustrate mainly the theme of ‘The Contented Souls in Paradise’; in Quran manuscript (B) the artist has chosen the ‘Roads to Paradise’ through the passage of time (hours and cycles of day and night and, thereafter, the monthly cycle of the year); The last example, Quran manuscript C also depicts the ‘Roads to Paradise’ however through the cycle of life, death and resurrection as well as the stations of enlightenment.

A. The Frontispiece of the Quran Manuscript of Abū Nāṣir Shaykh in the time of Sultan al-Nāṣir Muḥammad⁶⁴

This frontispiece is from a Mamluk Quran manuscript exhibited in 1976 in the World of Islam Festival⁶⁵ and on view at the Hayward Gallery in London (spring 1976). It was the extraordinary beauty of its frontispieces, which led me to change direction in my artistic

⁶³ Lings, *Symbol and Archetype* 32.

⁶⁴ Numbered 17 in the Cairo National Library.

career.⁶⁶ The manuscript is permanently housed in the Cairo National Library and is numbered 17. This single-volume Quran is in a large format, (more than 70 cm in height and 60 cm in width), and when the manuscript is opened the width is doubled. It is not known who commissioned the manuscript nor are the names of the illuminator and calligrapher identified.

With its lavish usage of gold and exquisite attention to detail, it is not inconceivable that this was an imperial commission. From its style, one can trace this manuscript back to the reign of Sultan al-Nāṣir Muḥammad who reigned three times from 1293 to 1294 AD; from 1299 to 1309 and finally from 1310 to 1341 AD. For one year (1309 to 1310). Sultan Baybars Jashankīr ruled. Baybars commissioned a magnificent Quran manuscript in seven volumes which is part of the permanent collection of the British Library. In comparison however, on grounds of style, concepts and techniques, the manuscript under study appears to be more sophisticated and thus from a later period. It could have been commissioned between 1310 and 1341 AD.

The opening of this magnificent Quran is a frontispiece in *several frames*. These frames could be an allusion to the *seven heavens*. It is the *central frame* containing highly stylized lotuses in pale blue, which draws immediate attention. The blue lotus was the symbol of resurrection as described earlier and these stylized lotuses represent the souls of the blessed in paradise. To the reader they immediately evoke the verses from *Sūrat Fajr*: “O thou peaceful soul! Return unto thy Lord well pleased and well pleasing. Enter thou among My righteous bondmen. And enter thou My Garden” (Q 89:27-30). There are 24 complete flowers and 16 half-flowers in each of the frontispieces (as this is a double page) forcing the eye to look outwards beyond the central frame. This frame provides us with a glimpse of the souls that have entered the Garden. The highly stylized lotuses – a symbol for the “peaceful soul” – face each other and are joined by red flowers with eight petals. In Islamic geometry this stylized flower, known for its beauty and symmetry, is called the cosmos flower. The word cosmos is a Greek word translating as orderly, beautiful and ornamental. If one takes the symbolism of eight as that of the Divine Throne, as already mentioned, and that of the cosmos flower then one has greater clarity on what the artist is trying to convey: namely here are the resurrected souls (blue lotus) who have found peace in paradise and are bound with the red symbol of love, the *ḥūrīs* (maidens of special creation likened to rubies and

⁶⁵ The World of Islam Festival was held in London for six months at a number of museums and galleries to celebrate the 1400 years of the *hijra* calendar.

⁶⁶ From Mughal miniature painting to Quran calligraphy and illumination, so mesmerised was I, by its beauty.

coral in *Sūrat al-Raḥmān*, Q 55:58). The *ḥūrīs* are represented by the cosmos or the clematis flower, as both these flowers are red and eight petalled.

The central frame is bounded by a second heavily braided gold leaf frame, edged out with pearl-white on both sides, which we understand as an analogy for the second heaven. Beyond this frame, on each of the frontispieces, is the third frame, which contains an *interlinked floral pattern*. The flowers in this frame – or heaven – point downwards, towards the four cardinal directions. Being illuminated with gold leaf they allude to the Divine Light mentioned in *Sūrat al-Nūr* “Allah is the light of the heavens and earth. The likeness of His light is like a lamp . . .” (Q 24:35). This repetitive scrolling pattern is a form of Divine litany or *dhikr* for the illuminator and ultimately, for the reciter who is about to open the sacred text. The fourth frame is again a gold leaf braid, which is bounded by pearl-white on either side. Above and below are two cartouches in both the frontispieces which carry verses from the Quran. These cartouches could be considered respectively as the fifth and sixth heavens/frames. In the top two cartouches of this double frontispiece and across the two folios are written the verses (77 to 80) from *Sūrat al-Wāqī'a* (Q56): “Verily it is an all bountiful recitation, in a hidden book, touched by none save for the purified, a revelation from the Lord of the worlds.” The lower two cartouches state “Verily it is revelation from the Lord of the Worlds, which the faithful Spirit hath brought down upon thy heart for thee to be a warner” (*Sūrat al-Sh'uarā'*, Q 26:194-5).

By inscribing across the double page the illuminator is forcing the recitor/reader to look at both the frontispieces as one, single whole. The style of writing is in a unique form of floriated Kufic rendered in pure gold leaf. In the background of each of the cartouches are the circular patterns of flowers circum-ambulating around the Divine verses as if in *hayba* or awe. At the edges, the cartouches point in the four cardinal directions sending light to the four corners of the earth with yet another highly stylized pattern which represents the Lamp mentioned in verse 35 of *Sūrat al-Nūr*. All these stylized lamps end in the heart-shaped motifs as the Divine Light permeates the human heart.

The final *seventh frame* contains a series of red and gold scrolling pattern – which alludes to the Light shining from the world beyond – reaching outwards to the rest of the page and ending in very fine finial points. This repeated stylized pattern is not only alluding to the repetition of the themes of the Quran but to the Lamp whose Light is multiplied and spread across the four cardinal directions of the earth and the heavens. This light is a promise of the awaiting Gardens.

Having contemplated each of these frames, the eye of the viewer is yet again drawn to the dominant central pattern of the pale blue lotus flowers alluding to the souls who have reached the Garden. This is an invitation from the artist to the viewer/reader of the Quran to leave the daily life and contemplate the world beyond. Once the glories of this breathtaking frontispiece have been absorbed, the viewer/ reader turns the page to start the first chapter, and here, the illuminator begins to lower his voice: although the *Sūrat al-Fātiḥa*⁶⁷ the first chapter is in seven frames, only the outer six borders are illuminated as now the text, rendered in the majestic Muḥaqqaq script, occupies the central frame. In the background of the central frame – behind the Muḥaqqaq script – the scrolling movement of the flowers (known as arabesques) refers to the seven circum-ambulations around the Ka‘ba but also to the seven verses of *Sūrat al-Fātiḥa* (Q1). When the reader turns to the third set of pages, the text of the Quran completely takes over and, except for verse endings or marginal ornaments indicating verse counts,⁶⁸ the illuminator artist has gone completely silent as only the Quran, through the magnificent script, speaks. There is no further need of illumination which now would distract the reader from the holy text.

B. The frontispiece of the Quran manuscript commissioned by Abū Nāṣir Muḥammad⁶⁹

This manuscript – commissioned by the same person as frontispiece A – also contains the name of ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Ibn Ṣā’igh Khaṭṭāt so in this case the name of the calligrapher is known. The illuminator is anonymous and while the language of illumination is the same, however, the concept of heaven and paradise as illustrated in the double-page frontispiece is very different from the earlier one. To my knowledge, this manuscript has never been displayed in any book nor has it ever been exhibited.

This is again a massive manuscript, which has withstood the test of time and is in a remarkable condition given its age of six hundred and fifty years. The lavish usage of gold and lapis suggests this might have been a royal commission. The double opening frontispiece is spell binding and the impact on the viewer/reader is very powerful. Viewing this frontispiece in real life would transport any viewer out of daily life and immediately set them in a state of contemplation and awe. The double frontispiece contains at least nine frames (nine also being a symbol of heaven⁷⁰) including the braided frames. The central

⁶⁷ The “Opener”.

⁶⁸ It marks each five or ten verses.

⁶⁹ Numbered 16 in the Dār al-Kutub, Cairo.

⁷⁰ Lings, *Splendours of Qur’an calligraphy* 41.

panel contains a twelve-pointed starburst. It is noteworthy that the Mamluks used multi-armed stars in their frontispieces over some other pattern. The answer lies in the choice of the Quranic verses. As stated earlier, verses 77 to 80 of *Sūrat al-Wāqī'a* (Q 56) are always inscribed in the frontispieces.⁷¹ However, although not inscribed here is the Divine Oath as God says: "I swear by the setting of the stars if only ye but knew" (Q 56:76), which every believer, let alone calligrapher and Quran illuminator, knows.

The twelve-pointed star represents the *cycles of time*: the twelve hours of the day and night or even the months of the year. This starburst is radiating outwards from a multi-armed stylized lotus edged with burnished shell gold on a black background. At the very center of this lotus is yet another lotus with eight petals, in black with the center in red. The red core radiates outwards to an eight pointed star – the symbol of the Divine Throne – and reminds one of verse 17 of *Sūrat al-Ḥāqqa* (Q 69) concerning the eight angels bearing the Divine Throne on the day of judgment.

The violent impact of the gold-leafed twelve-armed starburst is softened by the stylized lotuses in pale blue in the shape of lamps reaching outwards to the hearts. The blue lotus – as described earlier – is a symbol of resurrection of the soul, which has reached paradise. The gold-leafed twelve-armed star contains flowers edged with red ink applied with a soft brush so that the gold shines through the red. The arms of the star radiate outwards towards a five-pointed star (normally the symbol of man). One could say this is a metaphor for men with outstretched arms in a state of contemplation and remembrance, forming a *ḥalqa* or circle. Placed next to the five-pointed star are black segments, which contain a pattern of leaves in the shape of a heart extending its branches outwards – as in an open gesture. The pattern continues beyond this frame which is a window into the Universe stretching into infinity. This central panel is surrounded by a heavy gold leafed braided border. On this braided frame is a yet another rope-like pattern which recalls verse 103 from *Sūrat Āl 'Imrān* (Q3) "Hold fast to the rope of Allah and let it not asunder."

On either side of this central frame are narrow rectangles leafed in gold with vines moving upwards and downwards. These narrow panels end in the shape of a *mihṛāb*⁷² in either direction. The green vine leaves point to the heavens (ascent of the soul) and also downwards as the Descent of the Revelation to the heart. In the center of both of these rectangles is a black circular motif, which contains the six-petal flower, the symbol of the

⁷¹ "This is an honoured Recitation which none may touch except for the purified. It is Revelation from the Lord of the Worlds."

⁷² the *Mihrab* is the niche in a mosque which indicates the direction of the *Kaaba*.

Perfect Man or *al-insān al-kāmil*.⁷³ This six-petal flower contains, in series of semi circles red and gold, a three-petal flower.

Thus far we have covered four frames with the central braided frame of gold and then two rectangles on either side described above. Above and below the central frame and two rectangles on either side are yet other gold frames. Two gold frames contain two central cartouches both with floriated and knotted heart-shaped Kufic lettering of the verses 77 to 80 of *Sūrat al-Wāqī'a* (Q 56). The writing is in very fine white Kufic script edged with gold with some of the shapes designed in such a way as to resemble trumpets. This resemblance might have been inspired by the verses relating to the blast of the trumpet on the last day. It appears that the artist wished the verses to be trumpeted aloud. The white Kufic lettering is imposed on a deep blue background evoking the night sky of *Sūrat al-Qadr* (Q 97), which refers to the Night of Destiny when the Quran was first revealed with a scrolling pattern of vines and leaves in fine gold and turquoise blue. The verses run from the top cartouche and bottom cartouche in the right side frontispiece and then carry on to the upper and lower cartouche on the left side frontispiece thus linking both frontispieces as a unified whole.

On either side of these cartouches are polylobed medallions containing the illuminated stylized lamps pointing towards the four cardinal directions. Beyond these upper and lower gold rectangles containing the verses of *Sūrat al-Wāqī'a* is the frame with heavy strap worked gold leaf border. This in turn frames a black background and represents yet another heaven with distinct Chinese influence in terms of color and style of flowers. In this frame, blue lotus (the resurrected soul in paradise) alternate with peonies in three shades to represent the feminine principal possibly an allusion to the *ḥūrīs*. Since peonies represent also wealth and honor, then this is a promise of the Quran to those who attain paradise. This floral heaven is also surrounded by a heavy gold leafed strap-work frame representing yet another heaven and is similar in terms of design to the previous strap-work frames mentioned earlier.

The final heaven – which corresponds to the lowest one of the seven heavens – contains the stylized flowers, hearts and lamps (in red) reaching out in all directions as if they were performing a *dhikr* or remembrance of God. They end in very fine finial pointing in the four directions.

Once the reader of the manuscript has contemplated the blazing splendor of this frontispiece – which shows a different conception of the heavens and paradise than the

⁷³ Lings, *Book of Certainty* 21.

former one – he or she turns the page to the opening Suras and the illumination begins to take a second place. Nevertheless, the artist portrays *Sūrat al-Fātiḥa* and *Sūrat al-Baqara* as being writ across a sky lit up in gold radiance. The floral pattern⁷⁴ is in pearl-white with a playful display of flowers on a tea-stained background. The upper and lower gold leafed rectangles contain Kufic Sura headings, which are in floriated and foliated knotted heart shapes over a gilded pattern. These are surrounded by polylobed medallions with the flower-burst of radiation in the shape of lamps reaching the hearts. The final border contains the stylized hearts, lamps and flowers ending in delicate finials with the solar palmettes pointing to the outer margins.

However it all stops here and from these two opening pages onwards the powerful Muḥaqqaq script, which is used to inscribe the Holy Quran, takes over. Only the verse markers remain represented as a radiant-sun motif and the verse counts are marked with the brilliant radiating gold-leafed sunbursts or palmettes – representing the tree of knowledge or life. In this manuscript we also find oblong cartouches containing inscriptions with a border of stylized hearts expanding outwards.

In summation, the feeling one has in contemplating this frontispiece, is how effectively the artist managed to capture and translate into a visual form a “microcosm of a powerfully radiant celestial phenomenon” which is reinforced and reflected by the composition that “extends beyond the restrictive gold frame” and “cuts the elements at the edges.”⁷⁵ In addition, the rendering of celestial light – stressed by the use of gold and blue as the colors of the heavens – reverberates “the most sophisticated symbol of the omnipotence of the Creator.”⁷⁶

C. The frontispiece of the Quran Manuscript of Arghūn Shāh al-Ashrafī, a Mamluk *amīr* in the Service of Sultan Sha‘bān⁷⁷

This large manuscript is in Dār al-Kutub in Cairo numbered 54 and contains 388 folios with 11 lines to the page; each page measuring 70.5 cm by 55.5 cm. The manuscript was illuminated in the time of Sultan Sha‘bān sometime between 1369 and 1372 AD. The manuscript was exhibited in the British Museum in 1976 at the World of Islam Festival

⁷⁴ With a movement which reminds one of *dhikr*.

⁷⁵ Atil, *Renaissance of Islam* 35. Although the comment was made on another manuscript, it applies beautifully for this one also.

⁷⁶ Atil, *Renaissance of Islam* 35

⁷⁷ Numbered 54 in the Dār al-Kutub, Cairo.

exhibitions. It has been illustrated in a number of books and can be found in the *Qur'āns of the Mamluks* (page 192) by David James. The frontispiece of this manuscript is illustrated in the *Art of the Mamluks* (pages 36 and 37) by Esin Atil and finally in the *Splendours of Qur'an Calligraphy and Illumination* (pages 123 to 125) by Martin Lings, the late Keeper Emeritus of the British Museum and a *shaykh* of a branch of the Shādhiliyya order. I believe that this is perhaps the greatest of the Mamluk frontispieces. These pages are like a symphony with different instruments of the orchestra joining at various times to create the whole masterpiece.

The frontispiece is a visual depiction of paradise and the seven heavens along with the cycle of life, death and resurrection. The opening double-page frontispiece contains two sixteen-pointed stars with blue and gold illumination. David James groups this manuscript, along with other manuscripts of the period, as the 'Star Polygon group' and he suggests that this seems to be the only Mamluk Quran manuscript, which contains the sixteen-pointed star in *each* of its frontispieces. He states that the borders of this frontispiece are notable for their chinoiserie decoration with the usage of peony and lotus flowers. He further states that three types of lotus flowers are found in the manuscript either as the swollen seed pod or the open blossom. These are "painted white, blue and white, green or green and white." He also notes that the Kufic inscriptions are from *Sūrat al-Sh'uarā'* (Q 26:192-7) and are in an "unusual and distinctive form of Kufic."⁷⁸

As an artist and illuminator myself, I think this frontispiece is perhaps one of the greatest conceptual works of art done on the Holy Quran. The manuscript is a demonstration of the art of the Mamluks at its zenith. Not only has it never been surpassed, but there could only be a downfall after the summit had been reached – as can be clearly seen in the paucity of concepts and creativity in the later manuscript production. While the photographs give us access to this masterpiece they cannot do justice to its ethereal and luminous quality when viewed in reality. The calligrapher and illuminator are not known, neither does one know if they were one and the same as was often the case at this period.

On opening the manuscript, there are two striking features, which overwhelm the eye and the senses. The first one is the radiant *sixteen-point star-burst* which is explained below and the second feature is the extensive elaboration on the theme of the *lotus flowers* in each of the seven frames.

⁷⁸ James, *Qur'āns of the Mamluks* 188.

Titus Burckhardt states that “the Lotus represents the immense calm of the spirit awakened to itself.”⁷⁹ We have already referred to Guenon earlier in his description of the Lotus as the “flower of flowers”. Hence the usage of lotuses in various stages of bloom was not a question of just representing a flower for the sake of ornamentation. Neither was this merely a way to circumvent the prohibited use of iconography, but rather a very deliberate, intentional use of symbols, which would move the soul to a higher level. The different lotuses depict also the passage – and indeed growth – of the soul through various stages to reach a state of enlightenment.

The frontispiece illustrates the cycle of life, death and resurrection through the blossoming of the lotus within seven frames representing the seven heavens. The very center of the frontispiece contains a white core with a gold center. The eye is hypnotically drawn to this blinding celestial light (the white core) which, in this context, alludes to the Divine Command at the origin of creation: “*Kun fa-yakūn* – Be and it is.”⁸⁰ This becomes clear as the concept develops: surrounding this white core in the innermost frame, is a circular pattern which is akin to the act of creation commencing with the tiny buds of the lotus slowly opening to a sixteen-pointed full bloom. Then the design “evolves from a white and gold sixteen-pointed star radiating from a diffused gold core, the ultimate visual expression of dazzling and blinding celestial light. As the design bursts forth, the colour becomes more intense, accentuating the ‘white’ radiation generated by the core.”⁸¹

One should keep in mind that the sixteen-pointed star symbolically refers to the sixteen stations of paradise, each station being guarded by an angel.⁸² The sixteen stations towards paradise are extensively mentioned in *Kashf al-mahjūb* of Ḥaḍrat ‘Alī b. ‘Uthmān al-Hujwīrī and by Dr. Anne Marie Schimmel in her book *The Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (1975). The Stations are as follows: 1. Repentance (*tawba*); 2. Complete Trust (*tawwakul*); 3. Poverty (*faqr*); 4. Patience (*ṣabr*); 5. Gratitude (*shukr*); 6. Happiness in poverty and affliction (*riḍā*); 7. Fear (*khawf*); 8. Hope (*rajā*); 9. Collectedness (*jam*); 10. Intoxication (*sukr*); 11. Sobriety (*ṣaḥw*); 12. Love (*maḥabba*); 13. Gnosis (*ma’rifa*); 14. Ecstasy (*wajd*); 15. Annihilation (*fanā*) as “the total nullification of ego consciousness when there remains only the Absolute Unity of Reality;”⁸³ 16. Hearing and nourishment of the soul (*samā*). It is these spiritual states which lead one ultimately to the garden of the Essence, the highest of all the Gardens of paradise.

⁷⁹ Burckhardt, *Art of Islam*.

⁸⁰ Which is mentioned a number of times in the Quran.

⁸¹ Atil, *Renaissance of Islam* 37.

⁸² According to Hujwīrī, *Kashf al-mahjūb*.

From this radiating sixteen-pointed star, three rings, of increasingly wide circumference, radiate outwards “the innermost ring composed of a gold arabesque on a blue ground, terminates with white trefoils. The next zone, a large astral formation has 16 elongated diamonds with gold lotus blossoms on a gold ground; enclosing this is a series of pentagons that have gold cartouches on blue ground with touches of green, white and black”⁸⁴. The three-pointed stars form a *ḥalqa* (a sacred circle) to receive the radiation from the sixteen stations of enlightenment. Beyond these lies the third zone, composed of polygons “in varying shapes which through repetition of colour and design form 2 internal rings.”⁸⁵ Now, the sixteen pentagons of the first ring “are painted in reddish brown with green cartouches. They alternate with units decorated with gold on gold and gold on blue. The pentagons of the second ring and last ring are visible only at the corners: they are identical in design to those in the first ring but have a dark brown ground under the green cartouches.”⁸⁶

This whole central frame is gilded with a thin white braided border separating it from the next frame, which contains the lotus and the peonies. In this frame, the depiction of the lotus is inspired from Buddhist art; the white represents the highest attainment of spiritual perfection and purity while the orange (as a derivative of red mixed with white and some yellow) peonies represents honor and wealth, female poise and fertility. As mentioned previously, this flower is also a symbol of love and affection, and by extension, it represents the beautiful maidens (*ḥūrīs*) in paradise.

This frame – with the full blossoming lotus and peonies – in turn is bounded by heavy strap-worked gold leafed frame representing yet another heaven. Above and below are two oblong panels in each of the two pages of the double frontispiece: Esin Atil says “the oblong panels contain a cartouche of five superimposed circles with additional lobes at the sides. A gold floral band and two white beaded ribbons frame the cartouche. White floral sprays on a black appear at the interstices.”⁸⁷ There are however not five but seven⁸⁸ superimposed circles in these four oblong panels in the double-page frontispiece. These frames contain in floriated Kufic script the verses of *Sūrat al-Sh‘uarā*:

⁸³ According to the Japanese scholar Toshihiko Izutsu as quoted by Anne Marie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions* 143.

⁸⁴ Atil, *Renaissance of Islam* 36.

⁸⁵ Atil, *Renaissance of Islam* 36.

⁸⁶ Atil, *Renaissance of Islam* 37.

⁸⁷ Atil, *Renaissance of Islam* 37.

⁸⁸ Esin Atil has only taken the five complete circles and ignored the half circles, which added make seven.

Verily it is a Revelation of the Lord of the worlds. The trusted Spirit has brought it down upon thy heart that thou mayest be of the warners in plain Arabic speech. And verily it is in the scriptures of the ancients. Is it not an evidence with them that the learned among the Children of Israel know it (Q26:193-5).

Each of the four verses is placed in the four corners of the double-page frontispiece: one is in the top panel of the right-sided frontispiece followed by the second verse in the lower panel. The third verse on the top of the left-sided frontispiece and the final verse ending in the lower cartouche of the left sided frontispiece. The moving circles, which enclose these verses evoke the seven *ṭawāf* (circumambulations) around the Ka‘ba and are reinforced by the circular movement of flowers in the background. In addition, this movement which encloses the verses of the *Sūrat al-Sh‘uarā’* (Q26) reminds one of the descent of the Revelation – brought down by the “trusted Spirit” (the Archangel Gabriel) – and which the trumpet-shaped letters seem to announce.⁸⁹

These four panels are surrounded by another heavy-braided pattern in ink applied on pure gold leaf. A rope-like pattern which reminds the believer of the ropes from heaven which are there to be clasped: “Hold fast to the Rope of Allah and let it not asunder” (*Sūrat Āl ‘Imrān*, Q 3:103). Beyond this gold-braided pattern are fully blooming blue lotuses in shades of blue on white, with alternating peonies in shades of blue and green. As mentioned above, the lotus is not only a Buddhist and Hindu Symbol but a Pharaonic symbol as well. This blue flower was also put on the mummies of the Pharaohs to assist them in their resurrection and afterlife. I believe that the usage of the blue lotus on a gold background in the outer frame of the Sha‘bān Quran is not accidental or merely decorative but it represents the awakening of the resurrected soul. The main themes of the Quran: the creation, life, death and resurrection are alluded to by the lotus flower in its various stages of manifestation. The symbolism of the peonies likening them to the feminine principle as *ḥūrīs* has already been discussed so the lotus together with the peonies, here would represent the souls perfectly contented in paradise.

The background of the last frame is in deep blue with a scrolling pattern of white and gold highlighted with white and green and containing lotus blossoms and buds. Each blossom is enclosed within a white pattern reminiscent of a hanging lamp. The allusion to the verse of Light in *Sūrat al-Nūr* (Q 24:35) is clear:

⁸⁹ Similarly in Frontispiece B, some of the lettering, like the *kāf*, are in the shape of trumpets

Allah is Light of the Heavens and Earth. The similitude of His Light is as a niche wherein is a lamp. The lamp is in a glass. The glass is as it were a shining star. This lamp is kindled from a blessed tree, an olive neither of the east nor of the west, whose oil would almost glow forth though no fire touched it. Light upon Light. Allah guides unto His Light whom He will. And Allah setteth forth for mankind similitudes for Allah is the Knower of all thing.

This frame which covers the three sides of the double frontispiece – unlike the other frames on both sides – ends in finial points alternating in gold and white. On either side are solar palmettes⁹⁰ (placed in the center of the outer margins) in the center of which are white and gold arabesques “enlivened by touches of black and placed on a blue background. Alternating lotus blossoms and buds, highlighted with white and pale green, accentuate the arabesque in the frame, while a large solitary blossom appears in the marginal medallions. Both the frames and the medallions radiate with blue finials, a feature typical of Mamluk illumination.”⁹¹ The placement of the solar palmettes contrasts with the weight of the multiple frames on both the sides and balances the painting in artistic terms.

Apart from the descent of the Revelation through the seven heavens and the cycle of life, death and resurrection, the other concept, which the artist has illustrated is the *Return to paradise* through the enlightenment of the soul (and through the sixteen stations). The seven heavens together make up one of the paradises that *Sūrat al-Raḥmān* (“The Chapter of the All Merciful”) mentions as being four. According to the commentary of the Shaykh al-Akbar, Muḥyī l-Dīn Ibn ‘Arabī, “the first two . . . of these paradises are the Gardens of the Soul and Heart, above which is the celestial paradise, the Garden of the Spirit, which comprises the seven heavens and finally the Garden of the Essence Itself.”⁹² In particular, this frontispiece, with its construction of the sixteen stations in the central frame, is engaging the soul and directing it to the garden of the Heart and that of the Soul as well.

⁹⁰ The theme of the solar palmette is discussed in details below.

⁹¹ Atil, *Renaissance of Islam* 37.

⁹² Lings, *The Book of Certainty* 25.

In the garden are trees symbolized by the palmette⁹³, with upward pointing branches. The Quran uses this symbol and in *Sūrat Ibrāhīm* (Q 14:24-5) it states “Hast thou not seen how God coineth a similitude? A good word is like a good tree, its roots firm, its branches in heaven, giving fruits at every due season by the leave of its Lord. And God coineth a similitude for men that they may remember.” With the Abbasids, the palmettes were gilded. In applying gold leaf or shell gold, the artist was trying to convey the concept of Divine light coming from heavens and also acting as a torch towards the next world by way of guidance. Apart from these two verses, there are several mentions of date palms in paradise in the Quran as well as the powerful mention of the mysterious Lote Tree (the Tree of Knowledge) at the edge of paradise, all of which led to the usage and development of the palmette.

At the same period the palmettes acquired a circular shape and became known as solar palmettes such as in this frontispiece. Within these solar palmettes were either the palm leaves or horn of cornucopia but yet at times they also displayed double wings. A historical reminder is in order to trace the origin of the solar palmette as depicted here: The Abbasid capital was Baghdad – in modern day Iraq – and the influence of the sacred Zoroastrian art of neighboring Persia cannot be underestimated. One of the ancient symbols of this religion is the *faravahar*, a celestial spirit accompanying every human – especially royalty – which has two wings protruding from his hips with a solar disc around the waist. This spirit is also supposed to be a reminder of the soul’s journey to God. It is possible that the concept was utilized by one of the artists, however, reduced to a winged solar disc. Thus the palmette denotes the passage of the soul towards heavens, by pointing outward from the page. The symbol might have appealed to succeeding artists who utilized it in their illumination of Quran manuscripts.

It is also necessary to bring to attention that in the Umayyad period in Syria there were Christian artists or converts. Particularly in Iran, the Persian artists were Zoroastrian converts to Islam. It is easily conceivable that these artists, used to the Zoroastrian traditions, would have used concepts and artistic traditions of their native culture and that gradually it spread to the rest of the Islamic world. The concept of the solar palmette has

⁹³ A symbol mainly used in Sura headings but this is the subject of another paper . . . however it is noteworthy that by drawing the palmette in Sura headings, the artists were reminding the reciters of the celestial fruits awaiting the believers. Secondly, by prolonging the tree-motif to the edge of the page horizontally and pointing it out of the page, they would force the eye outwards and outside the bounds of the page and out of the world. In addition, by pointing this tree-motif in the left or right side of the page, the artist is also reminding one that “Wheresoever ye turn, there is the Face of God” (*Sūrat al-Baqara*, Q 2:115).

been used for several centuries in both North Africa and throughout the Near East to denote the transition from earth to heaven and guide the soul towards paradise.

The examples of the usage of palmettes are so numerous that it would be a near impossible task to list them.⁹⁴ Folios and manuscripts depicting the palmettes are found in all major museums and private collections. They are illustrated in one form or another (either in the form of a stylized olive tree or date palm or even a solar palmette with wings or in the form of a horn of cornucopia) in every major publication on Islamic art.

Once this double page frontispiece has been contemplated, the reader turns the page to find another set of double illuminated pages containing, in magnificent *jalīy* (grand) Muḥaqqaq script, the *Sūrat al-Fātiḥa* (Q1) and the opening of *Sūrat al-Baqara* (Q2). These double pages reverberate the frontispiece in such a manner as to produce overall harmony in the manuscript.

Gradually over the centuries, this knowledge of illumination became lost in the mists of time and decadence set in. Increasingly artists moved away from sacred art and the sacred mission of the artist/illuminator as understood by their predecessors and started producing manuscripts, which were merely decorative. By the 19th century fore example, in the Ottoman world, while the art of calligraphy retained its strength and vigor, the art of illumination, insofar as the concepts were concerned, became debased.

Conclusion

So in conclusion there is the magnificence of these opening frontispieces with their lavish usage of gold and other expensive pigments. The designs and the decorations are uplifting and, if the complex themes and precepts described above are considered, then these works of art are some of the greatest works of a sacred, yet abstract, art of mankind.

All-along I have stressed the point made at the beginning of the chapter that the illuminator-artists of these frontispieces were fully aware of the complex and abstract ideas of gnosis and mysticism as well as the challenge for them to visually depict these concepts in a double page format.⁹⁵

It could be argued that the above analysis is only a subjective interpretation of the writer. I accept that there is no 'evidence' to support the claim that this was indeed the

⁹⁴ Even those published examples.

⁹⁵ I am indebted to my wife Naila, for her invaluable work throughout and for her careful and vigilant proof reading, her painstaking treatment in helping transform some of the major sections, her tireless attention to detail of the entire text and finally her considerable patience.

intention of the artist. This is because firstly they have been anonymous and secondly, given they have been dead for at least several centuries, there is no historical evidence either to support any such intent or claims.

To counter these arguments, I will give the last word to *the* Master on Islamic Art and late Keeper of Oriental Manuscripts at the British Museum:

It would be besides the point and void of interest to say that such and such an artist may well have or not have had some particular intention or the other. At this artistic level, any correspondence that strikes the intelligence of one who contemplates the work in question is the proof of an intention *in divinis*.⁹⁶

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