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**Abstract**

Islamic arts are often identified by their abstract compositions based on geometric principles and spiritual concepts. Using artworks from different eras, this paper highlights the presence of a particular model of thought in Islamic arts in which the hierarchy of perspectival vision is abolished. The main argument is based on the ability of some artworks to be looked at from any angle while maintaining a unified meaning and value. This work proposes that such arts possess the principle of horizontality, which can be evaluated much like other more familiar principles of Islamic arts.

Through different examples and via simulative research methodology, this paper elaborates how the principle of horizontality is the resultant of an abstract view from above in which the limits of perspectival vision are surpassed in order to communicate meanings of higher order. It is through this distant, parallel vision from above that the artist and his audience re-experience the divine act of creation and their interpretations become components of a sophisticated world of symbols.

**Keywords:** Horizontality, View from Above, Parallel Vision, Islamic Arts, Geometry.**Keywords:** Horizontality, View from Above, Parallel Vision, Islamic Arts, Geometry.





## Introduction

When thinking about Islamic arts and decorations, images of highly intricate colours and patterns come to mind that cover the surfaces of objects and architecture. The bold use of geometry and the absence of realistic or figurative depictions point towards a different perspective on human expression, which makes such art so unique.

For example, Persian carpets are colourful woven surfaces, often with intricate symmetrical patterns that do not have a right side up and can never be the wrong way round. If motifs of animals are used, they are abstracted, twisted and rotated to arrive at a geometrical symmetry that abolishes vertical hierarchy or directionality. In comparison to a painting of a landscape, the carpet offers a very different expression, since unlike the latter it does not need to be hung vertically and correctly, with the right side up.

Such unique characteristics of Islamic arts inspired the authors to contemplate on the perspective that such art offers the artist and the viewer. The question that seemed critical to this research is why in Islamic arts often there is no vertical hierarchy that separates the “up” from the “down” and whether by flattening hierarchies, such arts are pointing towards a reality beyond our familiar world.

The following article is a modified version of another article published by the authors in Farsi in *Honar-ha-ye-Ziba* (*Honar-ha-ye-Tajassomi*).<sup>1</sup> Although this paper develops many of the ideas introduced previously, there is still much need for further writing on

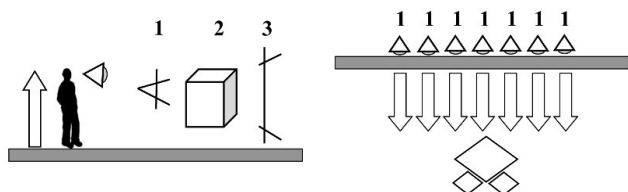
this subject matter in order to elaborate the principles and concepts hidden therein.

## 1. View from Above and the Principle of Horizontality

In this paper, any art that can be read and interpreted in the same way from all directions, and which would express the same meaning and concept to each viewpoint, is defined as horizontal art. Such art is non-hierarchical since it has the same value from all directions and its elements have equal role in any directions. This quality is hereby defined as a horizontal logic.

Horizontal art is contrasted with vertical art, which is generated by the upright view - i.e. a view with a one-directional order, which is perpendicular to the surface of existence. A horizontal image is a result of a view from above that places everything upon the same surface of existence. The upright view however, has farness and closeness, clarity and ambiguity, and different orders of significance in which objects are differentiated from each other. If in a view from above, everything is treated in the same manner, in the upright view, things follow the hierarchies established by the singular point of view. Although Islamic arts are the result of a non-directional, non-hierarchical system of thought, they can nonetheless be presented in an upright manner. In other words, they need not always be displayed on the ground or on surfaces parallel to the ground. Thus, the key characteristic of horizontality in Islamic arts is a view of things from above, not the direction or orientation in which arts are presented.

Diag. 1. Left: upright view that produces a vertical image with all the hierarchies and limitations of the perspectival view and singular perspective. Right: view from above that produces a non-hierarchical, horizontal image in which everything is treated equally and holistically. Source: the authors.



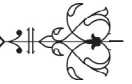


Fig. 1. Vertical art. This painting by Raphael has a definitive vertical hierarchy and a right way up. It cannot be rotated and it is best viewed from the front where the artist would have been when painting it.<sup>2</sup>

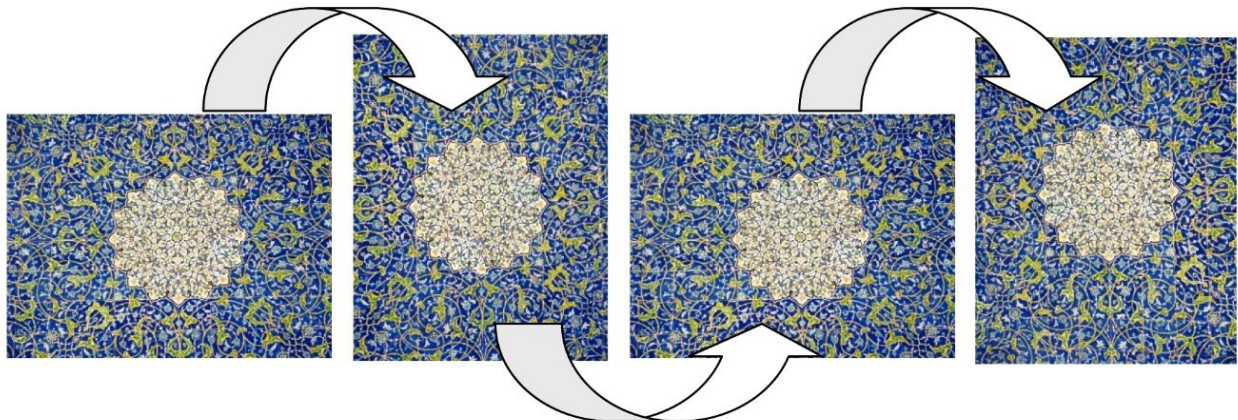


Fig. 2. Horizontal art. This wall decoration in the Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque, (Isfahan, Iran) can be viewed from any direction. Such art is not an indication of the artist's inability to reproduce perspectival vision, but rather, the artist's will to overcome the upright view in order to communicate something of a higher order. In this scenario, the message is bigger than the messenger or the medium. Thus, it is not exactly clear who was the creator of this impressive work of art since, in the eyes of the Muslim artist, that would be irrelevant information. Source: the authors.

Horizontal art is produced by seeing things from above; from an infinitely elevated vantage point, which would remove perspective and all its shortcomings.<sup>3</sup> In a vertical image, the horizon is dependent on the height of the viewer, but a horizontal image is abstract and does not have such a horizon. This is because a horizontal image has no direct relationship with perspectival reality, which would cause it to have an upside, a down side or a hidden side. This directionality in a perspectival point of view restricts the viewer into looking at the

image from a certain orientation or angle.

Islamic horizontal patterns follow geometric and mathematical principles in their composition. However, their conceptual content and meaning goes beyond the surfaces of material appearance towards causes and truths. Such abstract art points towards the symbolic order, the divine origin and a different reality. A creative mind can go past the appearance of the artwork to discover its meaning and its structure (Hojat 2010, 63). A work of art need





not convey meaning through the use of meaningful forms or objects, but instead it can use conceptual expression to communicate meaning to its audience (Ibid, 71).

Horizontal art does not have a specific subject matter. It is rather an intricate symbolic system composed in layers. Therefore, the eye moves in and out through different scales in search of meaning. This process is very similar to reading a map, in which moving through the scales allows access to different layers of information. A vertical art however, has a specific subject matter which is to be viewed from a particular point of view and distance. Thus, moving in through scales rarely produces different meanings.

In horizontal art, one notices the absence of the author whose will is diffused. In vertical art however, the artist is very much present and his will orders both the art and the viewer. The horizontal system is also characterized by the absence of the viewer, since art is not produced for a specific person, but rather for everyone and ultimately for God. When there is no author and no viewer, art disappears too. What remains is the flow of culture, flow of common beliefs and shared conceptions. This art of disappearance is very different to the art of appearance that is produced in the hierarchical system of the upright view, in which the artist, the viewer and art compete for attention in a highly dramatic process.

If we consider the principle of horizontality as the possibility of viewing an artwork from different directions - even if the artwork is presented to us in a particular orientation - the question is whether the concept of horizontality can be considered a fundamental principle of Islamic arts, like other principles such as centrality, or unity within diversity?

The following attempts to elaborate horizon-

ality in two stages. In the first part, different examples of artwork from different historical or geographical backgrounds are examined, in order to elaborate the subject matter and to show the proliferation, the diversity and the quantity of artworks based on the principle of horizontality. Inevitably, there are many issues and discussions in this section, which fall outside the scopes of this paper. Nevertheless, the purpose of this section is not comparison, valuation, confirmation, or repudiation. Instead, the paper aims for exploration in order to find the different instances of the principle of horizontality according to the definition proposed in this article.

The second part of this research, which forms the core of the argument, devotes itself to horizontality in Islamic arts and the belief systems and philosophical reasoning behind them. The purpose of this section is to find an answer to the main question of the research with regards to the possibility of defining horizontality as a principle in Islamic arts.

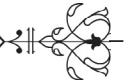
## **2. Few Examples of Horizontal Art**

### **2.1 Abstract Art and Vision from Above in Primitive Tribes**

The surviving artwork from primitive tribes indicates that early humans did not produce life-like naturalistic forms in order to convey particular concepts. Instead they limited themselves to the presentation of essential elements, which were expressed through coded symbols (Pakbaz 2001, 17). For this reason, prehistoric works of art are mostly abstract. Such works were simplified images used for quick communication of meaning and less of a result of a deliberate and theoretical horizontal approach to art. However, in certain cultures, like the Aborigine people of Australia, a certain view from above can clearly be







observed.

Aboriginal art is from Stone Age and even to this day there are artists who continue to produce artworks of this type. "The aborigines believe that, even before there was any life, the earth had always existed as a flat, featureless plain, extending on all sides to the edge of universe (Mountford 1964, 6)." In many instances

interpreting the artist's inspiration for producing the work of art is difficult. This is because the images are very different to the reality they depict and have roots in different religious beliefs. For example, it is difficult to determine whether the depicted entity is a human or some form of mythical creature (Ibid, 5-6).



Fig. 3. The mythical story about sea creatures: a combination of vertical and horizontal systems of depiction (Ibid, pl.22).

Nonetheless, many of such paintings are produced in a horizontal fashion, i.e. using a vision from above. The justification that is often presented for such arrangements is that in the realm of dreams or imagination, creatures go to the heavens and lay down to rest: thus, the closeness of the supernatural or the world of dreams with horizontal imagery. Or it seems that the artist and the viewer would like to get an informed view of all aspects of the subject matter, without the limitations of perspectival or any other rule. The artists and the viewers

are after an expansion of their knowledge, not merely a beautified depiction of existing reality.

In figure 3, "there are a number of sea creatures. There is little doubt that the painting illustrates some mythical story. The two large figures at the upper left are devil-rays, and the bottom is a group of water creatures .... Scattered according to aboriginal myth are the friends of the devil-ray. It is likely that the rectangular designs refer to totemic places belonging to the sea-creatures (Ibid, 20)." In





its general depiction of the scene, the image is from above, but in its depiction of details and people, it is from a human perspective. This difference in points of view has created a particular combination, which seems to indicate the significance and meaning of different subject matters for the artist who painted it.

## 2.2 Symbols and Horizontal Patterns in Religious Art

In religious art, attention to the realm of meaning has transformed images into symbols. Here, natural images become supernatural in order to become a medium between Heaven and Earth (Madadpour 1995, 100). The mandala is a geometric table that has been used in Buddhism and Hinduism (Mandalas 1986, 153).<sup>4</sup> The mandala is a combination of circles and squares with the same centre, which symbolically or allegorically depict the universe (Saunders 1986, 155). The Hindu Mandala is a graphic representation of the spiritual world and the thousands of territories and deities that belong to it. Figure 4 shows that the

Mandala is a result of a view from above – in other words, the heavenly point of view, in which the image can be viewed from all sides. There is no hierarchy and nothing is hidden from view.

Though the Zoroastrian art of Iran cannot be called an example of horizontal art, nevertheless there is evidence of abstraction and references to the symbolic realm. According to Pakbaz: “The humanist artistic thought which concerned itself with the accurate depiction of the human was not attractive to those who created symbols of heavenly power, and on the other hand, the teachings of Zartosht, forbid the worship of many gods or making statues for them (Pakbaz 2001, 20).” In a similar note, Shaygan writes: “Iranian art in this period often assumes a religious character and develops according to the principles of theology, cosmology and anthropology. For example, the usage of four sided shapes with two diagonals that form a central point in Zoroastrian architecture and fire temple design (Shaygan 1976, 195).

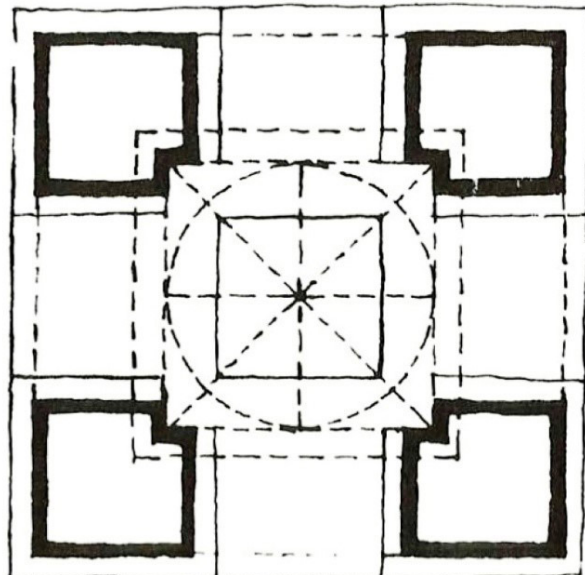
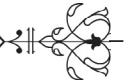


Fig. 4. Left: Mandala of the Six Chakravartins 5& 6 Right: Plan of a Zoroastrian four-sided temple (Ardalan & Bakhtiar, 1973, 75).







### 2.3 Abstract Art and Horizontality in Early Modernism

The modernist artists in early twentieth century, who chose abstraction as their method, dismissed the direct representation of the pictorial world. In many artworks, abstraction is like a mathematical formula that has turned into a pattern. Since these abstract arts do not have a realistic appearance, they can be viewed from different directions without losing their integrity.

In figure 5, a sample of Piet Mondrian's work can be seen. In this artwork, the visual potential of horizontality is present. One can argue that there are deeper concepts in this abstract composition. For example, it may be possible to argue that Mondrian looked at the world from above and from a rational, scientific perspective that saw the world in perfect order and harmony.

### 2.4 Abstract Art and Horizontality after WWII

The opposition between horizontality and verticality as two different concepts poses

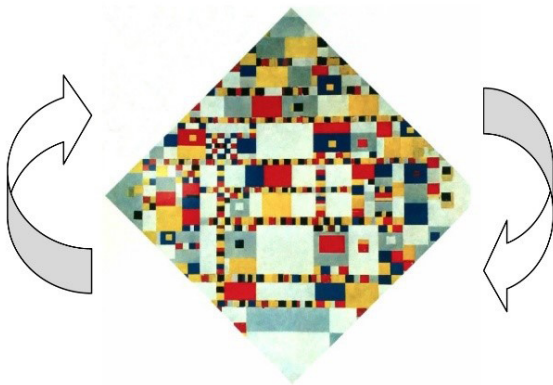


Fig. 5. Horizontality in abstract and rational art of Piet Mondrian (Jaffe, 1985, 127).

questions that can be extended to all artistic realms. In the works of Jackson Pollock, the earth is the place for creation of artworks. Although for better viewing the art works have to be hung vertically, they nonetheless differ fundamentally from art displayed on tripods or the creation of something in a vertical arrangement. Rosalind Krauss believed that a work of art such as "Full Fathom Five" (which was created in 1947 on the ground floor of a studio covered with coins, cigarettes butts and other elements that were arranged in a horizontal way) even after being hung vertically on a wall for display purposes, is still a refusal of verticality, in a both physical/literal and cultural/phenomenal manner.

Krauss argues that the vertical axis is one upon which an image of an upright Man can be hung (Krauss 1997, 93-103; Smith 2008, 5-11). She argues that formlessness (or the absence of a recognizable form) is a technique for rotating the image from the vertical to the horizontal axis (Ibid). Figure 6 shows a composition of white, black, blue and red on white by Jackson Pollock in 1948, which has a lateral manner.



Fig. 6. Horizontality in Jackson Pollock's "Composition" (Davidson, 2005, 98).





## 2.5 Contemporary Abstract Art and Horizontality

Today, horizontality in art has been practiced in different forms, most of which have been in the plastic or visual arts. Here, it would be useful to mention some of the works of Paul Chan and Anthony McCall. In some ways, McCall's projections are based on horizontality. "The Line that Describes a Cone" in 1973 is a hypnotic line of light that slowly rotates around a circle and creates a cone of light in the process. In this installation, space is cut up with these vertical shafts of light and different patterns are created on the exhibition floor. Although light travels vertically in the exhibition space, it nevertheless creates a multi-directional pattern and a flat, horizontal image onto the floor.

In another installation from McCall the lines of light and the cones that they create are relatively randomized, creating a heightened sense of floating in the installation space. According to the concepts discussed above, it is possible to argue that McCall creates a region of general horizontality in which the viewer momentarily feels lost in a directionless (or multidirectional) and abstract environment in which the visuals are peculiar and unfamiliar (Figure 7).

It is questionable whether the use of light in the works of Paul Chan displays the principle of horizontality. In his projections, Chan, shines light at certain objects from above. In these works, light passes through objects like the branches of a tree and a window and the resultant projections are cast onto the floor. In this scenario, a familiar vertical viewpoint changes to a multi-directional horizontal viewpoint, very much the same as light that shines through a window onto a floor. In looking down at the floor and not directly at the

work of art, a deliberate act is taking place (Smith 2008, 5-11). However, in such a different use of horizontality, an important question arises: does displaying an image horizontally create an image based on the principle of horizontality?

## 2.6 Abstract Art and Horizontality in the Far East

In the modernist era, abstract art found its way to Eastern countries too. Wenda Gu (born 1955) is a Chinese artist who currently lives in New York and who after learning the traditional art of China, began working with a somehow obscure re-presentation of Chinese letters (Lucei-Smith 2003, 23-47). In many of his works, one notices horizontal instances of Chinese letters and words. Although these letters and words have not been altered significantly from their vertical arrangement, they are nonetheless rotated and represented in a horizontal manner.

Another example is Ha Chong Hyun (born 1935) who is a Korean artist who also creates abstract art using Chinese calligraphy but in a more traditional manner (Ibid) (Figure 8). Despite the connection of such artwork with traditional methods in Eastern countries, a question arises whether such work that possesses the appearance of a vertical work in terms of concept and world-view, is closer to abstract works in the art of the West, or do they pursue the philosophy or the principle of horizontality relevant to their own world-view?



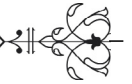


Fig. 7. Anthony McCall's horizontality  
(Ellard & Johnstone, 2006)



Fig. 8. Abstract art using Chinese calligraphy 7

## 2.7 Calligraphy-Painting: Presenting Vertical Elements in a Horizontal Arrangement

Calligraphy is of the first and most important examples of Islamic arts. The great passion and devotion of Muslim artists for the wholehearted and profound expression of the divine lead to a turn towards mysterious, mystical and abstract arts. This led Muslim artists to devote most of their time and effort to inventing and evolving different kinds of calligraphy, which can be considered as the earliest and most abstract form of painting. Calligraphy holds a special position in Islamic arts and its mystical characteristics allows for a connection to the metaphysical world. Amongst the different styles of Persian calligraphy, it seems that Nastaliq appears to occur in three-dimensional and perspectival space. In calligraphic-paintings, one can find many works that have been presented in a horizontal way, even though calligraphy is itself a vertical element in such picture frames.

### 3. Horizontality in Islamic Arts

It is possible to divide Islamic Arts into two parts: first are those works that in themselves

possess a horizontal quality, like ceiling-works or floor-works (figure 9) and second are those that have a vertical presentation but possess a horizontal concept and expression, for example Shamse (Figures 10).

For most Muslim artists, art is a reflection of the world of symbols. For this reason, a ceiling can be a representation of the sky, both as a horizontal concept and a representation of divine unity.

According to Ardalan, "The ceiling is a recapitulation of the heavenly vault, the locus of the Spirit and the point whence the ascending arc of realization reaches its zenith and the descending arc being its course towards the *mulk* (Ardalan 1973, 37)." "The horizontal dimension of floor in architecture symbolizes the earth upon which the microcosm stands (Ibid, 35)."

Whether Asemaneh is a dome or whether an Ahang arch or a conical one, it always has forms, designs and surfaces that extend in infinite patterns, and even though such designs do in fact terminate at the junction with the pillars and the structural supports, nevertheless the effect of movement is so strong that in the eye and imagination of the viewer, an







infinite pattern that culminates in a unity has developed which expresses movement. Of the most important horizontal surfaces, one can mention the courtyard or the garden (bagh) where authority is with the lines and patterns that emphasize the horizontal (Ardalan and Bakhtiar

1973, 35). The horizontality expressed in the courtyard and garden possesses many unique but hidden qualities. The system of waterways and their relationship with the central pool symbolizes the horizontal movement of water and its distribution into the four cardinal directions.

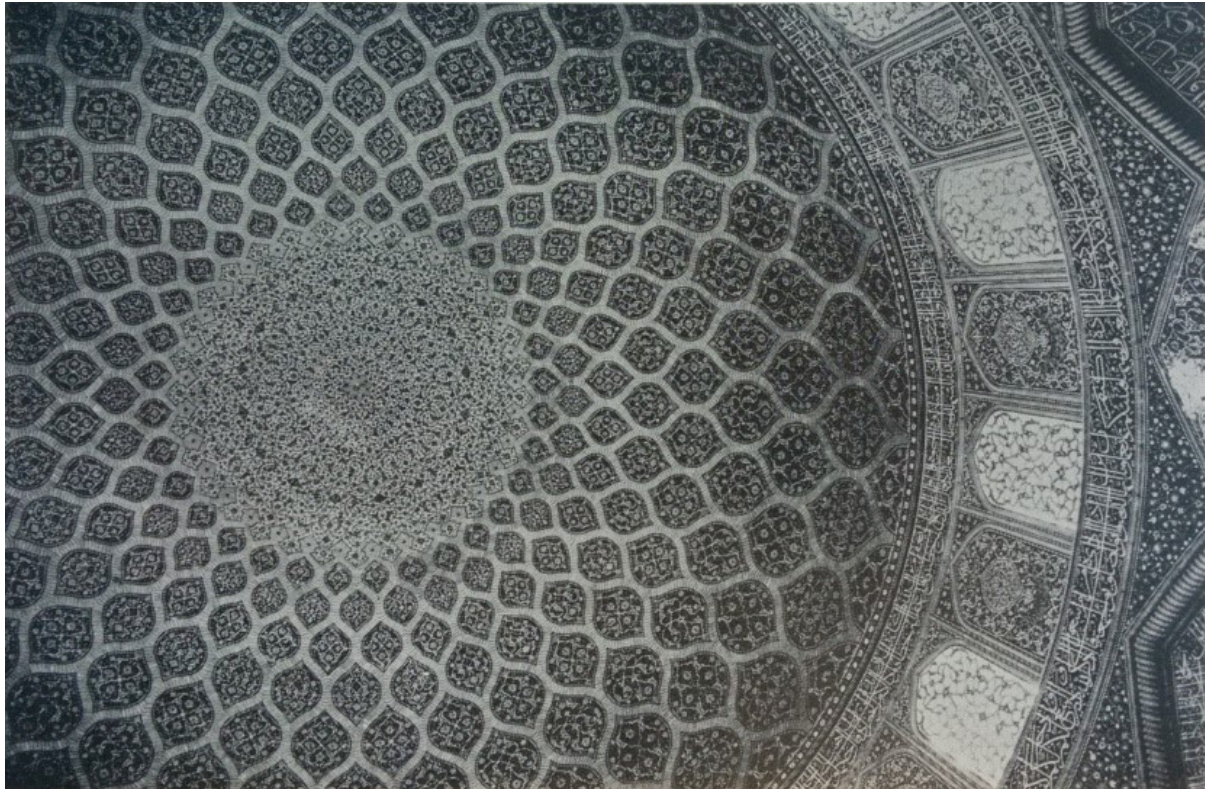


Fig. 9. Isfahan, ceiling work of Sheykh Lotfollah Mosque, image of movement in infinite patterns (Pope, 1976, 97)

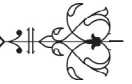
The garden, in the eye of the Muslim artist, is in two ways connected to the symbolic realm. On the one hand, it is a symbol of the divine garden, and on the other hand, its geometric system is used for designing the patterns of carpets, gilding, tiles and textiles. According to Darab Diba “When Iranians are not in the garden, they recreate its symbolic image in the carpet within the house, and the symbolic and abstract image of the tree is represented in the form of ornamentation upon textiles or tiles and the ultimate abstract forms of such motifs has been used in everyday life through

Eslimi patterns (Diba and Ansari 1995, 31).” Since for the Muslim artist, the ceiling and the floor represent the sky and the earth, in their metaphoric re-creation, he feels involved in the divine creation. Since the Muslim artist is not so concerned with the appearances of this world, he creates surfaces that are only a symbolic representation of the surfaces that are created by the one and only creator.

### 3.1 The Symbolic World and the Purity of the Soul

Plato considered the visible world we live in,





which we perceive through our senses, as a secondary, changeable and a finite world. Therefore, real and authentic truths cannot be within this world, and they must reside in a realm above and beyond this realm. The things we sense in this world are therefore appearances and shadows of those real truths. The Muslim artists follow a similar belief. For them images are “for observing and exploring the hidden clues within nature and a medium for getting closer to and expressing the great divine name and becoming intimate with God.” Truth from the divine realm is made manifest for the artists and this causes Islamic arts to be devoid of natural materiality. In this scenario, the artists use other worldly inspirations, not the images given from the senses, in a way that it seems that their imagined imageries become united with the symbolic imageries of the heavenly realm (Madadpour 1995, 134).

According to Ghazali, in the eye of the Muslim artist the celestial world is good and beautiful and the very essence of good and beautiful is proportion, and anything that is proportional is a representation of the beauty of the world, and everything beautiful, good and proportional which can be sensed in the world, is all a result of the beauty and the good of that world. Therefore, a good harmonious song or a beautiful proportional face is similar to the wonders of that world.

Therefore, Ghazali sees the virtual as the medium for truth and the finite as the representation of the eternal. In other words, he pays little attention to the finite world (Ibid) and therefore, he does not see the world from the point of view of a human, but rather from the point of view of the divine creator, from above, in a way in which every part of the world has the same value and no detail is di-

luted or eliminated.

It can perhaps be argued that Christian arts look at God through a human’s eye, while Islamic arts look at humanity from God’s point of view. The denial of any human or natural depictions causes Islamic arts to dissolve the image of the Godly human in the symbolic representation of the Divine. In this way the absence of Man from plastic arts, makes Islamic arts much like the waves of the seas or the glimmering of the stars, i.e. a form of non-personal worship (Burckhardt 1967, 132-141). Thus, the perspective of Muslim artists imitate that of their creator, looking at things from above, through a symbolic and an abstract eye that echoes the all-seeing eye of the creator.

### 3.2 Unity and Diversity

The most important and influential characteristic present in Islamic patterns is unity which has its roots in the most fundamental beliefs of a Muslim artist. According to Burckhardt, Muslim artists give expression to their beliefs in unity by using geometry (which expresses unity in spatial order), harmony/rhythm (which expresses unity in worldly order), and in an indirect manner in space (Ibid). In creating his art, the Muslim artist is so devoted to the concepts and symbols referring to his creator that he allows himself to imitate the act of creation. According to Ardalan, through his art, the Muslim artist participates in a part of divine creation. Therefore, it is possible to argue that his creations possess characteristics that free him from worldly devotions and provide a means for his ascent into the divine realm.

The artist and his creation can be described as residing on a circle, which continuously and repeatedly directs everything towards unity and guides the artist in his path in such a way





that unity is present in all his art. According to Burckhardt sacred architecture is beautiful precisely because it is dependent on the most central of Man's obligations, namely providing connection and proximity between heaven and the earth (Burckhardt 1986, 174). Thus, in order to represent the divine, the Muslim artist passes through diversity in order to reach divine unity. In horizontal patterns, a single meaning and concept is expressed that points towards unity. This single concept would not be possible if not for a view from above, in other words, a non-hierarchical and a non-directional point of view which attempts to get close to the infinitely directional point of view of the one and only creator.

### 3.3 Geometry and the Essence of Abstraction

In order to express his devotion to his creator, the Muslim artist loses himself in patterns and colours that are symbolic of divine creations. Thus, art is no longer concerned with the similitude of its appearance to its original models, but rather it aims to construct a symbolic language through which it can express the principles inherent within the natural world. In this way, art possesses a certain originality that resonates the original act of creation by the divine power (Ardalan and Bakhtiar 1973, 35). By doing away with superficial appearances, or attempts at making appearances resemble their original models, the Muslim artist looks for hidden meanings and structures within the subject and a work of art that can express it in its own language (Hojat 2010, 63).

Thus, the Muslim artist attempts to express the concepts that lie within the creations of God, through the most abstract of forms. He uses the circle and the square, which are of the most simple of geometric shapes, as tools to create representations of both worlds of ex-

istence. In Burckhardt's point of view, the two shapes of circle and square are each symbols of the two elements of this world. The circle and the curves of a dome are expressions of the divine heaven and the square and shapes similar to it are symbols of the earth and the soil on it. "It has rightly been remarked that the architecture of a mosque excludes all tension between Heaven and Earth (Burckhardt 1967, 132-141)."

All Islamic patterns, including Eslimi, Moaghali and others, have the capacity for infinite repetition and it is the artist that determines a set border and limit for them. The infinite is God and it is he who creates the possibility of interpretation and investigation in the mind of the viewer. Forms and patterns in Islamic arts do not create a barrier for the mind, but rather they move to create many layers of understanding.

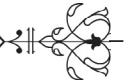
### 4. Summary

In the a priori interpretation of the logic of horizontality, every detail finds an opportunity for growth and evolution in its own place and according to its own potential (Islami 2013, 144). In this context, everything and everyone finds a role. Horizontality does not mean that all efforts reaches a single point, but rather that difference and diversity causes a more rigorous participation and cooperation between the different parts.

This logic of thought in its ultimate form, reaches unity in diversity, which is very different from the concept of uniformity. In this form of unity, each constituting element has a critical role in the makeup of a complete system, so much so that if one removes one of these elements, the entirety of the complex loses its meaning. This version of unity can be best illustrated using the concept of gestalt, which describes the simultaneous existence of







individuality and uniqueness with a resultant form of cooperation and unification.

An intelligent society possesses a horizontal structure full of potential in which people are not placed at the bottom or the top of the system. Instead, much like a family in which everyone has equal value, each member of the society possesses a unique role in the non-hierarchical structure. In such a system, a horizontal logic is dominant and roles are exchanged with responsibility, not with power or authority. Yet, in the workplace, hierarchy exists in a top down system in which the boss holds the greatest power and the employees respond to it. Therefore, in such systems competition for reaching the top is very common among the ranks. In a horizontal system however, there is no top or bottom and every constituent has a unique role in increasing the quality of the whole.

Rules of composition in Islamic arts seem to be inspired by the horizontal model of thought. For example in Iranian painting (miniatures) there is a deconstruction of the laws of perspective and in carpets perspective is deliberately distorted and even put aside altogether. However, recently in modern carpet designs, new patterns have developed that possess direction and follow a vertical model of thought. This has caused modern carpets to be hung up-right like a portrait painting. Perhaps modern carpets are gradually leaving the boundaries of their tradition and becoming something else.

It can be argued that the vertical system of thought entered Iranian culture in the Ghajar and Safavid periods, where life-like depictions began to be used in carpet designs. In these early periods of transformation, there was still sufficient faithfulness to the essence of a traditional carpet and its ability to be

viewed from all sides. Therefore the artists of the time arranged vertical images in a way that they could be viewed from four directions (not just one). In time however, this respect and faithfulness withered and many modern designs have now put aside the principle of horizontality.

Horizontality and view from above are two important principles that affect society and art. The use of realistic patterns and figures in art converts a horizontal system to vertical one. This research, has attempted to highlight this in order to preserve and advance the concept of horizontality in Islamic art with the hope that such concepts continue in modern artistic endeavours. This paper suggests that perhaps the most important characteristic of Islamic arts is their view from above, from a great distance away that abolishes human perspective. In such a view, things become abstract, thus becoming structural concepts that are symbolic of the real world and representatives of the essence of the Divine. A view from above, gives the artist a unified image of a diverse set of parts. This is a holistic view; a divine view without perspective and its many limitations.

In arts that are produced by this holistic view, (for example a Persian Miniature painting) the viewer is present in all corners of the depicted image and looks at the subject matter from every point of view. Precisely because the viewer is present in every point of the painting, his presence is no longer an issue. In other words, the role of the observer is diminished and his individuality deconstructed (Diagram 2). Such a parallel view towards the subject looks at every aspect of the subject with detail, unlike perspectival view in which some aspects of the subject are blurred or blocked. Therefore, such a view gives equal value to



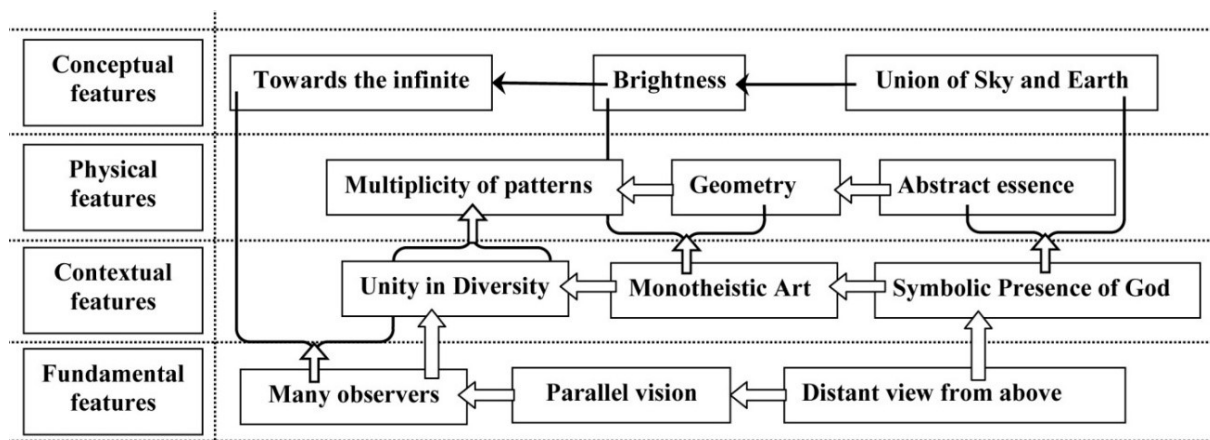


every detail and aspect of the subject, thus being harmonious with the logic of horizontality and the principle of giving significance to everything in their own right. This presence in every detail is the diversity and multiplicity that becomes unified in the artwork. In a similar manner different people looking at the artwork, have their own different interpretations but most arrive at the intended meaning of the artwork – i.e. multiple viewpoints reach unification in one work of art.

The view from above (horizontal, parallel vision) indicates the evolution of the artist. In such work of art the observers join with the artist in authoring the work of art. In the ascent of Man towards the heavens, he gains a view from an infinitely distant vantage point, close to the viewpoint of the divine creator. In such a position, Man feels like a collaborator in original the act of creation.

Islamic artworks are all a result of a devout

worship of the divine creator. This condition results in patterns that extend into infinity. In their geometric structure, Islamic patterns have a great ability for infinite multiplication. In these patterns, geometry is a reflection of order and follows a highly sophisticated symbolic system. The viewer is allowed free interpretation and investigation in the same manner as he would use letters and numbers in order to make sense of a piece of text. Thus, in Islamic arts, a multiplicity of patterns is produced from the same principles and therefore consistency occurs in principles and not in the final art works. The different interpretations in the viewers are an indication of their freedom in choosing their viewpoint and model of thought. This possibility of preferences creates the possibility of choice, which creates a pleasant sense of freedom.



Diag. 2. Features of Islamic horizontal art

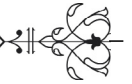
### 5. Conclusion

According to the arguments elaborated in this paper, the principle of horizontality in Islamic arts is achieved by the removal of human perspective and by a parallel view from a distant above, which creates a finite image of the infinite through abstract sym-

bols and patterns that re-present the original act of creation.

Such abstract representation is comparable to dreams, in which symbols of this world go beyond mere representations of the real. In the realm of a dream, the dreamer is both nowhere and everywhere. The dreamer sees





things, but has no allegiance to himself. In a similar manner, in horizontal art, both the artist and spectators view the world from a place beyond themselves; from an infinitely distant place above, where eternal concepts reside.

Islamic arts possess shapes, colours and patterns that are infinitely expandable in every direction. Such horizontality creates a non-hierarchical milieu in which everything and everyone has equal value and nothing

is hidden from view. In other words, no one is placed above or before the other within a hierarchy. In this system of thought, unity is achieved in diversity and everyone and everything has its full value in its own place. The principle of horizontality is not only expandable in art and architecture, but it can also be used to develop an alternative approach towards more inclusive social and political systems within societies.

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### Endnotes

1. Please see Islami, S. Gholamreza, and Niloufar Nikghadam. 2012. Horizontality and Islamic Thought. *Honar-ha-ye-Ziba (Honar-ha-ye-Tajassomi)* 4 (48): 5-17.
2. The School of Athens by Raphael. Source: <http://mv.vatican.va>.
3. This divine vision characterized by the infinitely elevated vantage point produces very different artwork in comparison to the haptic eye and the close-range vision of the surficial model of thought, which also abolishes the hierarchies of the perspectival tradition. For a more detailed explanation of “surficial thought” please see Islami, S. Yahya, 2014, “What is Surficial Thought in Architecture”, *ARQ (Cambridge University Press)* 18 (1): 39-46.
4. “Hindu Mandalas discuss the role of the mandala in Hindu ritual. The Buddhist Mandala treats the forms and associated practices of the mandala in the Tantric traditions of Buddhism.”
5. Chakravarti is an ancient Indian term used to refer to an ideal universal ruler, who rules ethically and benevolently over the entire world.
6. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mandala>
7. <http://hachonghyun.com/frame1.htm>





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