

Lost Histories of a Licit Figural Art

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The idea that theology is either irrelevant to artistic production or “a baleful influence” on its history has recently been critically explored by Jeffrey Hamburger, in relation to medieval Christian art.¹ Engaging the perennial problem of moving between immaterial concepts, normative texts, and material things, Hamburger’s observations resonate with the long shadow cast by the *Bilderverbot*, the prohibition of images often assumed to characterize Islamic and Jewish cultures, on the modern reception of Islamic art.

Attempts to address this pervasive cliché generally take two approaches. One draws attention to the wealth of figural art from many areas of the Islamic world. The other emphasizes the rich variety of nonrepresentational art, sometimes suggesting that its development was encouraged by proscriptive attitudes to figuration. Although fundamentally incommensurate, both approaches reinforce the idea that artists in the Islamic world have had only two substantive choices: to abstain from making figural art and indulge in a compensatory celebration of calligraphy, geometry, and vegetation, or (more frequently) to ignore all proscriptions and produce images of animate beings. However well intentioned, this neat dichotomy within which theological norms were either determining or irrelevant locates artistic practice at extremes of a spectrum, occluding an illuminating middle ground of compromise and negotiation.

Recent studies of devotional art in Islam have helped address this lacuna, but it is striking that the most sustained studies of relevant hadith and fiqh have been undertaken by scholars of law and religion rather than art and material culture.² This reticence is understandable, given the fraught politics of aniconism, iconoclasm, and the “image question” in historical representations of Islam. But simply sidelining the issue leaves many misconceptions unaddressed while marginalizing a range of artifacts and texts that offer rich materials for those interested in the history, theory, and reception of images, even in profane contexts. Among such materials is a manuscript copied in Istanbul in 1160/1747 for the future Ottoman sultan Mustafa III. The text, the *Tercüme-i Cifru l-Câmi*, is a Turkish translation of a 15th-century Arabic text, the *Miftah Jafr al-Jami* (A Key to the Comprehensive *Jafr*), that belongs to an apocalyptic-prognosticative genre attributed to the Shi‘i imam Ja‘far al-Sadiq (d. 765).³ The 1747 manuscript copies a lavishly illustrated version of the Turkish text produced in 1006/1597–98, during the reign of Mehmed III.⁴

The prototype contains more than fifty illustrations, most of them figural compositions. When these were reproduced in the 18th-century copy, however, the figures in heavily populated scenes were simply omitted, leaving eerily empty landscapes. In less populated scenes, the principle of selective exclusion resulted in the omission not of figures but of their heads and limbs. More astoundingly, large roses often substitute for faces. In a series of portraits toward the end of the manuscript, for example, twenty-four Ottoman sultans from Osman I (d. ca. 1326) to Mahmud I (r. 1730–54) are set within an arcade, sporting massive pink roses in place of heads (see Figure 1). The repetition

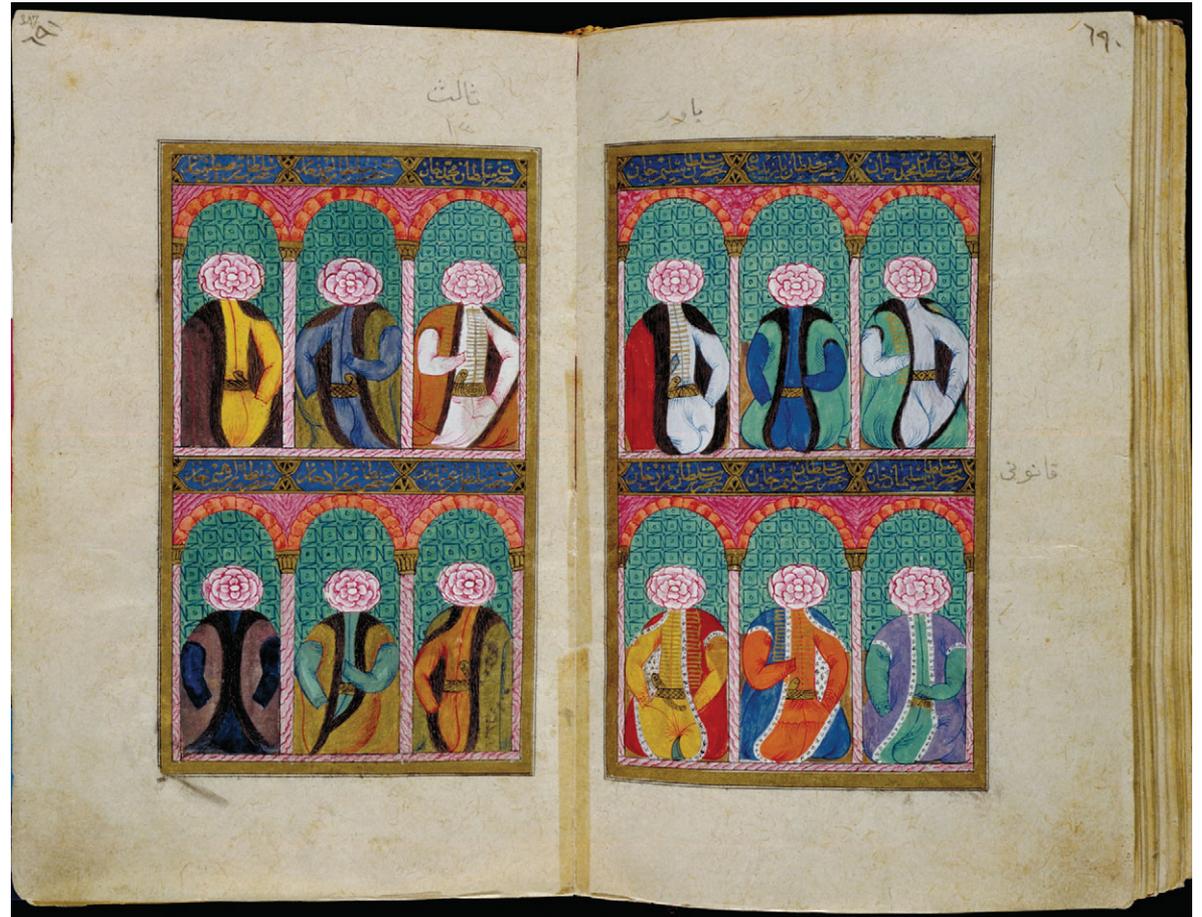


FIGURE 1. The Ottoman sultans from Mehmed II (d. 1481) to Ibrahim I (d. 1648), *Tercüme-i Cifru'l-Câmi'*, CBL T 444, fols. 346b–47a. Copyright The Trustees of the Chester Beatty Library, Dublin. Reprinted with permission.

of the flower as face imposes a physiognomic uniformity; although individuated by means of gesture and dress, ultimately the sultans' specific identities are secured by accompanying inscriptions.⁵

We lack an explicit rationale for the altered iconography of the later copy, but it seems likely to reflect squeamishness about the depiction of animate beings. In other manuscripts, those who objected to such images occasionally erased painted heads and limbs. Although rare, there are also examples of early modern Islamic manuscripts in which flowers have been carefully painted over the faces of animate beings to obscure them. In addition, the substitution of flowers for the human figures found on German clocks imported to Ottoman lands is noted by Salomon Schweigger, chaplain of the Hapsburg embassy to the Sublime Porte between 1578 and 1581.⁶ Unlike such "corrections" to figural artifacts, however, in the 1747 *Tercüme-i Cifru'l-Câmi*' figural images were either omitted or floralized from the start, rendering occlusion, omission, and substitution integral to the very process of production.

The unusual iconography appears to conflate and extend practices promoted in hadith and fiqh. Both commend plants and trees (rather than images of animate beings) as appropriate artistic subjects, or recommend removing the heads of existing anthropomorphic and zoomorphic images, so that they become like plants or trees in their incapacity for a life measured by the potential for breath/spirit (*rūḥ*).⁷ The simile inspired occasional attempts by the pious to floralize or vegetalize the depicted human figure, adumbrating a relationship between prescription, proscription, and artistic practice far removed from notions of destroying the image.

In addition to floralization, strategies of fragmentation and incompleteness played a consistent role in rendering figural imagery acceptable to those who found it objectionable. Many jurists accepted not only images of animate beings if "corrected" by removing the head but also their depiction *de novo* if rendered incomplete, or in a manner insufficient to sustain life in a living creature: typically, without completing the head. This prescription is closely allied to questions of ontology, questions that have little to do with mimesis or verisimilitude in the imitation of God's creation, the standard explanation for qualms about imaging in theological Islam.⁸ The principle of fragmentation or incompleteness highlights normative endeavors to establish the parameters of a licit figural art, and was affirmed by jurists of the Hanafi *madhhab*, the dominant law school in the Ottoman sultanate. It appears, for example, in a highly influential supercommentary, the *Radd al-Muhtar* of the Syrian Hanafi *faqīh* Muhammad Amin ibn 'Abidin (1783–1836 C.E.), which is still invoked in Hanafi *fatāwā* relating to the permissibility of images.⁹

If, however, the jurists' promotion of incompleteness and vegetalization as compromise strategies provides a general context for understanding the remarkable iconography of the *Tercüme-i Cifru'l-Câmi*, it tells us little about the specific historical circumstances of the manuscript's production and the choices that informed this particular experiment with re-facement by floralization. To transhistorical factors such as the precepts of the Hanafi *madhhab*, or regional practices such as the floralization of figural artifacts, one might even add aesthetic considerations, among them long-established poetic tropes describing the human body as flower-like, tropes that appear in contemporary Ottoman poetry. Equally relevant is the personality and piety of the patron, the future sultan Mustafa III, described in the colophon of the manuscript as a scholar of *ilm* and *adab*, and the most righteous (*rashīd*) of the House of Osman; that this quality may have

manifested itself in a reticence about figural art is suggested by aspects of Mustafa's later patronage.¹⁰

However opaque the historical factors that led to their dramatic distinction from the 16th-century model, the images of the 1747 *Tercüme-i Cifru'l-Câmi*⁶ seem to constitute a bold experiment with reconciling traditions of figural art and religious piety often seen as incommensurate. Although statistically marginal within the corpus of Islamic art, and thus easily dismissed as curiosities, these kinds of imaginative visual experiments remind us that the choices available to those concerned by figuration encompassed more than abstention, defacement, or simple negation. In doing so, they help nuance our understanding of the relationship between piety, prescription, and artistic practice, moving us beyond the binaries of proscription and permission that structure so much existing scholarship.

NOTES

¹Jeffrey F. Hamburger, "The Place of Theology in Medieval Art History: Problems, Positions, Possibilities," in *The Mind's Eye: Art and Theological Argument in the Middle Ages*, ed. Hamburger and Anne-Marie Bouché (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006), 12–14, 17, 21.

²Rudi Paret, *Schriften zum Islam. Volksroman - Frauenfrage - Bilderverbot*, ed. Josef van Ess (Stuttgart, Germany: Verlag W. Kohlhammer, 1981), 213–72; Daan van Reenen, "The *Bilderverbot*, a New Survey," *Der Islam* 67 (1990): 27–77; Muhammad ibn Ahmad 'Ali Wasil, *Ahkam al-Taswir fi al-Fiqh al-Islami* (Riyadh: Dar Taybah li-l-Nashr wa-l-Tawzi', 1999).

³V. Minorsky, *The Chester Beatty Library: A Catalogue of the Turkish Manuscripts and Miniatures*, no. 444 (Dublin: Hodges Figgis, 1958), 80–82.

⁴Topkapı Sarayı Müzesi, Bağdat Köşkü 373. For the iconographic relationships between the two manuscripts see Bahattin Yaman, "*Osmanlı Resim Sanatında Kıyamet Alametleri: Tercüme-i Cifru'l-Câmi ve Tasvirli Nüshaları*" (PhD diss., Hacettepe University, Ankara, 2002). My thanks to Nebahat Avcıoğlu and Pınar Gökpınar for assistance with this dissertation.

⁵For the 16th-century model see Gülru Necipoğlu, "The Serial Portraits of Ottoman Sultans in Comparative Perspective," in *The Sultan's Portrait: Picturing the House of Osman*, ed. Ayşe Orbay (Istanbul: İsbank, 2000), 36–37, fig. 9.

⁶Cited in Otto Kurz, *European Clocks and Watches in the Near East* (London: Warburg Institute, 1975), 46.

⁷Van Reenen, "*Bilderverbot*," 46–47, 54.

⁸Finbarr B. Flood, *Islam and Image: Polemics, Theology and Modernity* (London: Reaktion Books, forthcoming).

⁹Muhammad Amin ibn 'Umar ibn al-'Abidin, *Hashiyat Radd al-Muhtar 'ala al-Durr al-Mukhtar*, 5 vols. (Bulaq, 1272/1855), 1:435–38. See also Rudi Paret, "Textbelege zum islamischen Bilderverbot," in *Schriften zum Islam*, 224–25.

¹⁰See suggestions that 2,500 Dutch blue and white tiles on the walls of a *sabîl-kuttâb* built in Cairo in 1758–60 at the behest of Mustafa III were originally intended for Topkapı Palace, or an imperial mosque in Istanbul, but that their populated landscape scenes offended the sensibilities of the sultan or his famously austere predecessor, and so they were shipped off to the provinces. Hans Theunissen, "Dutch Tiles in 18th-Century Ottoman Baroque-Rococo Interiors: The Sabîl-Kuttâb of Sultan Mustafa III in Cairo," *Electronic Journal of Oriental Studies* 9 (2006): 27–28, 34–35.