

Ph.D. Title: Language of Vision: Formulating a perceptual grammar for Islamic visual culture

Faculty: Faculty of Philosophy

Abstract

Art historian Hans Belting argues that seeing means something utterly different in both Western and Eastern visual compositions due to the different definitions of the picture.¹ Western visual culture used the convention of perspective, in which objects are depicted from a single viewpoint. In contrast, the presence of multiple viewpoints in depicting the elements of a composition in Islamic art allows for a continuum between observer and object. Gülru Necipoğlu ascribed this continuity between the subject and object to the kinetic gaze, which allows for the entry of the body, the senses, and desire into the fractured unity of visual spaces in Islamic art and architecture.² She regards the willful complication of the optical field in architecture and the arts as a way of inducing contemplative vision, theorized in Ibn al-Haytham's *Book of Optics*. According to Belting, Ibn al-Haytham's theory of vision became a theory of pictures in Europe around the fifteenth century, and gave rise to a new technique called perspective. Belting attributes Ibn al-Haytham's shift of a visual theory based on a theory of light to the fact that he lived in a culture with no figurative pictures. In opposition to the lack of a conception of pictures, Necipoğlu regards this favoring of abstraction over optical naturalism in the pictorial treatment of space in Islamic art as a matter of aesthetic preference. In Islamic art and thought, diversified modalities of gazing that place internal above the external vision occupy the core of this predilection. Based on classical Islamic theories of the imagination and optics of the time, this research presents one major assumption: the understanding of the mental image is inherent to the conception of image in Islamic art and thought. This assumption requires a new approach for the analysis of Islamic art that is not based on solely the art itself, but rather the experience of it. Similar to how artists such as Gyorgy Kepes and Wassily Kandinsky in early 20th century were inspired by the then-new science of psychology to formulate a "Language of Vision" in art, this research aims to correlate classical Islamic theories of the imagination and the optics of the time to the ideation of Islamic geometric patterns as visual designs. Devising knowledge from the disciplines of Islamic studies, art history, architectural design, digital art, cognitive science and perception, it aims to update the embodied, intersubjective visuality of "Islamic" art with the assistance of advances both in design computation and digital fabrication technologies, and in the neuroscience of mental imagery. A new perceptual grammar for "Islamic" visual culture will be formulated and have practice implications for the production of contemporary architectural ornament, thereby extending aesthetic theory of Islamic art and allowing it to become connected to contemporary global visual culture.

¹ Belting, H. (2011). *Florence and Baghdad: Renaissance art and Arab science*, trans. D. L. Schneider. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

² Necipoglu, G. (2015). The scrutinizing gaze in the aesthetics of Islamic Visual Cultures: Sight, Insight, and Desire. *Muqarnas Online*, 32, 23–61.