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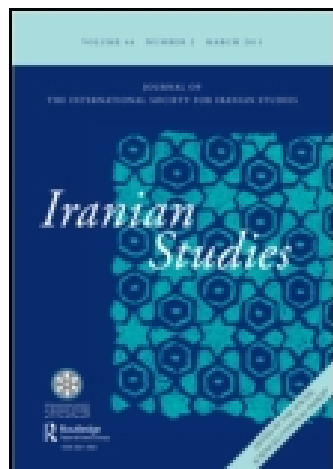
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Nader Ardalan^a

^a Mandala Architectural Associates, Tehran

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COLOR IN SAFAVID ARCHITECTURE: THE POETIC DIFFUSION OF LIGHT

NADER ARDALAN

My aim in this lecture shall be to situate the world of color within the traditional context of the Islamic culture of Persia; to explore the conceptual motivations that provoked its intense crystallization and saturation during the Safavid era; and to ultimately follow this world of color as it is annihilated into nothingness within the presence of Absolute Light. We will therefore witness the conceptual birth, life and death of color as a cyclical yet timeless, metaphysical expression of the Absolute within the world of phenomenal forms.

Tis light makes color visible; at night
 Red, green and russet vanish from thy sight.
 So too the light by their contraries are shown.
 From the dark jungle as a lion bright
 Color from the viewless Spirit leaps to light.
 Rūmī¹

Here Rūmī evokes the primary tenet of traditional esoteric thinking: that the world is born or made known in light; next that color springs from this colorless light and its existence or "life" is fully dependent upon it; and finally that with the absence of light, there results in the ensuing darkness, the death of color. In brief, everything is related to light and yet that light is but one aspect of the "viewless Spirit, " the Absolute Light, God.²

Obviously at the very source of this kind of thinking, there lies an original intuition of reality, the roots of which are firmly planted in the prophetic revelation. From this original intuition there has developed a traditional world view that has influenced creative expressions, be they in music, art, architecture, poetry or metaphysics.³ It is this unique perspective that I shall strive to explore in an attempt to better understand the world of color which is but one of its facets.

The approach here shall not be from the technical point of view of an architectural historian, which I am not; rather I shall try to bring to light some of the pervading traditional ideas underlying the conceptions of color and their unique synthesis in the Safavid era. I shall deal with these as aspects of a peculiar type of consciousness revealing one of the most fundamental principles of the Islamic culture of Persia: that of the Unity of Being, wherein the paradox of light and darkness is resolved as complementary aspects of Unity.

Islamic culture, it should be noted, sustained the unified character of the pre-Islamic traditional societies which had made no distinction between the sacred and the profane, as is usually made today. The Islamic tradition, instead, perpetuated elaborations of the exoteric and esoteric dimensions of life as complementary aspects of totality. The exoteric dimension, related to the divine law (shari^cah) and man's social behavior, will not concern us here;⁴ rather it is in the domain of the esoteric, the Way (tariqah) wherein our interest lies, for it is here that the aesthetic principles which evoke the Islamic use of color in art and architecture may be found.⁵

The "Way" permeated both formal sciences and the crafts and together they were embodied in the traditional craft guilds, which were the organizing bodies that brought traditional art into being. The guilds were invariably directed by masters who inculcated in their very selves both spiritual and temporal knowledge as practicing Sufis and master craftsmen. Thus the created works were, and

still are, like the arts of nature, at once fundamental, cosmic and imbued with a nobility of expression that exhalt the Truth, through the Way.⁶

The central postulate of the Way is that there is a hidden Truth in all things. As expressed in the sacred traditions (ḥadīṣ), "I was a Hidden Treasure, and wishing to be known, I created the world."⁷ Every external form is complemented by an inner reality, which is its hidden, internal essence. The ẓāhir (manifest) is the sensible, quantitative form, such as the shape of a building, the body of man or the colors of glazed faience. The bāṭin (hidden) is the essential or qualitative aspects which all things possess.⁸ In order to know a thing in its completeness, one must not only seek its outward reality, but also its inward reality--that in which the eternal beauty of every object resides. To quote al-Ghazālī, "Know that the visible world is to the world invisible as the husk is to the kernel; as the form or body to the spirit; and darkness to light."⁹

Darkness and light are among the most profound and representative archetypal images of this traditional world view. They have attained this supreme symbolic state as they are natural and immediate self-expressions of a root experience of the Absolute Reality; and for those who have experienced the dazzling, all pervading light that fills the golden basin of the Persian plateau, the association will be most readily understandable. In point of fact, the association is so strong that light is conceived as Absolute Existence, God.

But this light is not to be confused with physical light (such as the sun or fire) as we know it in the phenomenal world, for it is considered too weak and too defined to be "essence." Rather, the Sufi sees through his "eye of spiritual vision" (ʿayn al-baṣīrah)¹⁰ the overwhelming light of the Divine (al-nūr) as the true concept of light and all others are dim analogies within this created world.

Light, in spiritual thought, is considered Absolute

existence while darkness is analogous to the phenomenal world. The master of irfān, Ibn ʿArabī,¹¹ describes the situation in the following manner: "the world is the shadow of the Absolute."¹² This image is directly inspired by the Quranic verse, "Hast thou not seen how thy Lord spreads the shadow? But if He so will, He could make it stand still."¹³ By this, Ibn ʿArabī interprets the world as being only an illusion, having no real existence vis-à-vis the Absolute Reality--just as a shadow has only a transitory existence. This profound metaphor very simply describes one of the central conceptions of the sufi structure of existence, for in order that shadow may exist, three things must be present: light, object and a place wherein the shadow can make its appearance. Were it not for the place, then the shadow would remain in potentia in the essence of the object and the "treasure" forever hidden. The relation of shadow to the object, or person who casts it, is identical with the relation of the world to Absolute Being. Now as there exist several archetypical levels or stations between the world and Absolute Light, each station casts its shadow successively upon the lower, until the final layers of shadows accumulate in the darkness of the phenomenal world. The world is then merely a place of shadows of multiple shapes cast by layers of objects that grow conceptually more concrete as they reach toward the source, or Absolute Light.

In the view of the Safavid mystic, Lahijī, in his Commentary on the Garden of Mystery,¹⁴ this shadowy world has the phenomenon of nothingness while light is everythingness, but because the world of Absolute Light and everythingness cannot be experienced except by only a chosen few, then it is the mandate of creative man to symbolically suggest through his works that brilliant, yet "hidden" world, and thus, the fundamental darkness of this world is turned into apparent light, but only to serve as a symbol for the absolute world of light.

Once this paradox of light and darkness is clearly situated and its parts understood, the empirical world as we know it unfolds to the sufi mind. It follows directly

within this perspective, because man's creations are in inverse analogy with the Absolute, that his realizations attempt to create a temporal world of everythingness or saturation which symbolically issues forth the partial images of Absolute Existence. Thus in the world of darkness and shadow, light appears; and in the world of essential nothingness, there is a motivation towards everythingness and a saturation of the senses: visually through illuminated spaces, shapes and colors; audibly in speech, music and divine incantation; tangibly through silken, polished, incised or textured surfaces; odorously in fragrant rose gardens and musk perfumed bodies; and finally in taste, in the saffroned rice offerings (nazr) where through invocation one symbolically consumes the Divinity into his very being.

Thus, within the phenomenal world, the positive symbols of the concealed reality are exalted. It is this aspect of the world of symbols which plays a dominant role in the saturated use of colors within the creative expressions of the Safavid era. The world of colors is viewed as a manifest symbol of the concept of multiplicity. Just as multiplicity is emanated from Unity, so colors are viewed as emanations from the light of the Absolute. As Suhṛavardī states, "Everything in the world is derived from the light of His Essence."¹⁵ Falling, however, through the colorless prism of the world of archetypes, this light is metaphorically refracted into the spectrum of rainbow colors that ultimately reaches the phenomenal world. Thus for the beholder a dilemma concerning the true essence of light and color occurs, but as al-Ghazālī explains,

The difficulty of knowing God is therefore due to brightness; He is so bright that men's hearts have not the strength to perceive it. There is nothing brighter than the sun, for through it all things become manifest yet if the sun did not go down by night, or if it were not veiled by reason of the shadow, no one would realize that there is such a thing as light on the face of the earth. Seeing nothing but colors, they would say that nothing more

exists. However, they have realized that light is a thing outside colors, the colors becoming manifest through it; they have comprehended light through its opposite. . . He is hidden by His very brightness.¹⁶

In the process of determination from the First to the Last, the world of color is made manifest and only by returning from the Last to the First can man find the Absolute Light. Within this traditional conception which can be viewed through the symbol of a triangle, the world of colors is associated with the expansion of the base, symbolizing multiplicity, and becomes clearly situated between the world of light, which descends from Unity, and that of darkness, through which Unity is once again regained.

Many metaphysical schemes have been developed in Islamic Persia that build upon this view, but one--that of the system of haft rang (seven colors)-- has dominated the world of art and architecture. We shall explore further its particular aspects through the conceptual work of the thirteenth century poet and mystic, Nizāmī, who brilliantly depicted the essence of this system in his epic poem, the Haft Paykar (Seven Portraits).¹⁷ Here Nizāmī depicts the progress of the Sufi through the seven spiritual stages, symbolized by the seven colors which are metaphorically associated to numerous phenomena, such as the seven visible planets, the seven days of the week, the seven metals, the seven climates, the seven levels of traditional education, the seven parts of the body and the seven Prophets (from Abraham to Muḥammad).¹⁸

In the system of seven colors, white, black and sandalwood are viewed as the first group of three colors, complemented by red, yellow, green and blue, viewed as the second grouping of four colors. Together they numerically constitute the super grouping of seven colors. This numerical distinction is critical for understanding the traditional color system. Objects or concepts taken in isolation are adverse to the Islamic view. Each phenomenon is viewed as part of a greater totality to which, for the sake

of intellectual clarity, numerical or geometrical characteristics are assigned. Thus a totality is evoked which is larger and more significant than any of its parts.

In the system of three colors, three as number, and as triangle in geometry, reflects the fundamental conception of spirit, soul and body, which make up all of creation. Viewed alternatively as the three motions of the spirit, it evokes the acts of descent, ascent and horizontal expansion.

White is the integration of all colors, pure and unstained. In its unmanifested state, it is the color of the Absolute before individualization, before the One became the many. Light, symbolically viewed as white, descends from the sun and symbolizes Unity.

As it is through white that color is made manifest, so through black it remains hidden, "hidden by its very brightness." Black is "a bright light in a dark day," as only through this luminous black can one find the hidden aspects of the Divine. Black is the annihilation of self, prerequisite to reintegration. It is the cloak of the Ka'abah, the mystery of Being, the light of Majesty, and the "color of the Divine Essence."

Sandalwood is the color of earth. It is the neutral base upon which nature (the system of four colors) and the polar qualities of black and white act. Symbolically, sandalwood is man in the micro-state, earth in the macro-scale, matter to the artisan, the neutral plane to the geometrician, and the floor to the architect.

In the system of four colors, four as number, and as square in geometry, reflects the conceptual configuration of Universal Soul manifested as the active qualities of nature (hot, cold, wet, dry) and the passive qualities of matter (fire, water, air, and earth).¹⁹ The quadrants of the day, the quarters of the moon, the four seasons and the four division of man's temporal life are secondary reflections of this system. In vision, the primary colors

are red, yellow, green and blue. Red develops an association with fire. It expresses the vital spirit--active and expansive. Cyclically, it is morning, spring, and childhood. The complement of red is green. It characterizes water, the superior soul, passive and contractive. Cyclically, it is evening, fall and maturity. Yellow is air, contemplative, active and expansive. It stands for noon, summer and youth. It complements blue, which represents earth, the inferior soul, passive and contractive while symbolically it represents the end of the cycles, for it is night, winter and old age. Viewed as a movement through the four quadrants of a circle, the descending and ascending motions of these colors describe a full circle; the end of one cycle only signals the beginning of another.

Green is viewed in Islam as the superior of the four colors because it embodies all of the others. Yellow and blue join to form the balanced mixture of green, and its afterimage is red. Green is hope, fertility, and eternity with its two inherent dimension of past (blue) and future (yellow) and its opposite, the present seen as red.

Through the science of alchmey man associates himself with the temporal creative process. Alchemy has a two-fold aspt. On the one hand, it is the science of the transformation of the soul of man; on the other, through the traditional arts and crafts, it is a science concerned with the essences and processes of nature.²⁰

Traditional man participates in the creative process through the process of the transmutation of matter, the taking back of matter to its state as "hidden gold," as it were. The miniaturist or glazer of tiles participates in the alchemical process physically as well as spiritually. His choice of color symbolizes a particular state of consciousness. In the same way the mystic seeks the transformation of his soul. The method is one of reaching a state of purity and then internalizing it. Colors become an orientation for the mystic, the means by which he judges his level of realization.²¹ He is beyond time, only the world of color provides for his direction and orientation.

The traditional use of colors in a purposeful way, therefore, creates order where otherwise chaos might exist in the mind of the beholder.

The preceding sections have discussed the qualitative and alchemical concepts of order in colors, but color realization in the traditional arts and crafts also exhibits a keen awareness of qualitative and quantitative integration. A primary source of inspiration for this sense of integration is to be found in nature. I shall, therefore, briefly explore some of the basic color systems of nature which have had direct analogous interpretations in traditional arts, particularly in the art of glazed faience.²²

The color harmonies of nature are many; they exhibit strong group characteristics that are predominantly of analogous or complementary harmony systems. Simple or multi-level color patterns are observable, in which the eye tends to favor the more precise color forms and to reject anything on the border lines. Thus primary colors in distinctly observable systems are most appreciated, particularly for their visual clarity.

Analogous colors, or colors that are next to each other on the color circle, called the harmony of adjacents, are commonly found in nature, i.e., the spectrum of colors of the rainbow, autumn colors that scale red through orange, yellow, brown and purple. Most colors in highlight and shadow will scale through adjacents. A red rose will have orange highlights and purplish shadows, while a yellow nasturtium will scale toward orange in the center to yellow-green at the stem.

Analogous colors reinforce color emotions, as in all instances the simple primary or secondary is supported and enhanced by two intermediate neighbors that reflects its basic character.

The simultaneous contrast of opposing colors, the harmony of opposites on the color circle, appears in nature

as frequently as those of analogous colors. Violet flowers often have yellow centers; the blue bird has contrasting sparks of yellow-orange in his wings, while the drama of an orange sunset against a deep, liquid blue sky are but a few of the examples of nature's superb use of harmonious contrast. The arrangement of opposites is, of course, not limited to the color circle but perhaps most outstandingly is exhibited in the complements of black and white. The esoteric symbolism of "that which is highest is related to that which is lowest"²³ is profoundly manifested in the phenomenon of color complements and their afterimages. The latter tend to add apparent chroma and saturation to the vividness of the colors and their symbolic meaning.

Nature, then, as a natural symbol has always served as a primary source for the creative lexicon of visionary expressions. It is then no wonder that the vast Safavid synthesis of the arts and sciences relied so much upon nature's mode of operation, its rhythms and its colors for the conceptual models of reintegration.²⁴ In nature were found the basic orders of creation and examples of the perfect harmony that pervades all things. Nature's perennial creations were viewed as eternal springs of light, out of the depths of which all being was constantly emerging resuscitated and fully saturated with the pure light of the Absolute. It is this very conception--the essential harmony and unity of all things (*vaḥdat al-vujūd*) which motivated the intellection and creative expressions of the Safavid era.²⁵ We witness a successful attempt by the Isfahan school of thinkers, notably in the outstanding works of Mīr Damad and Mullā Ṣadra, to synthesize the preceding centuries of intellectual thought into one vast, all encompassing perspective of the Unity of Being. There is an attempt at bringing man back to an expanded sense of the one spiritual reality from which all the different modes of perception and knowledge have emanated.²⁶

There is a dynamism in the perspective that is not directed towards the achievement of a future state of union with the Absolute, but the realization of a higher state of being that exists here and now. The sensible world is

considered a grade of the Absolute Being itself and therefore capable of serving as an immediate guide to the Absolute.

The synthesis is a crystallization of a new, sensual spirituality, each facet reflecting the natural multiplicity of existence within the overall unity of the crystal. In much the same way, the art and architecture of the period exhibits crystallizations of temporal forms that reflect the multiple perceptions of the Safavid era. The new synthesis provokes an art that seeks to saturate the senses and produces the heralded miniatures of Sultān Muhammad, the Ardabil carpet, the gardens of Fin and the Hašt Bihisht, the Masjid-i Shāh and the harmonic synthesis of the Safavid city of Isfahan.²⁷

The traditional language of colors, however, remains unchanged, for the basic intention of the art remains the same as it had always been. It is principally the role that color assumes in the creative expressions of the arts that is expanded and enriched in conformity with the new sensual spirituality of the period.

This carefully structured world of color must, however, be conceptually destroyed and totally transcended if the true purpose of traditional art is to be realized. That purpose and the inner secret of this art is an alchemy of light, for just as true alchemy aims at transforming heavy matter into spirit, so does the art of Isfahan allow light to dissolve the solid matter of the structures into glistening, colored crystals of visionary realizations.²⁸

These realizations are in turn directed by the first testimony of Islam (the first shahadah) that states: "There is no divinity, if it be not the Divinity."²⁹ Thus there is a motion in the sufi mind toward Divine Contemplation, which is only possible if he who seeks the path realizes the hadīs which states, "All men are asleep; only when they die, do they wake up."³⁰ This death, however, is not a biological event; rather it is a spiritual and psychic one, where man throws off the shackles of the very

senses which first caught his imagination in order to soar upwards within the arc of spiritual ascent. To quote Jāmī: "Make the phenomenal world the mirror to reflect the manifestations of Thy Beauty, not a veil to separate us from thee."³¹ This veil metaphor, often used in mystical writings, relates to another of the hadīṣ, "Verily God is hidden behind seventy thousand veils of light and darkness."³² Here each of the intervening stations (maqām, i.e., World of Archetypes, etc.) are seen as veils which hide the Unity of Being from our vision.

In the arc of spiritual ascent, however, these veils of darkeness may be successively removed as the journey into light progresses, as described by a saying of the Sufis: "The soul, in its upward sevenfold way to union with Pure Light, is at every stage stripped of ten thousand of these veils, the dark ones first and then the bright."³³

This spiritual journey spirals through the world of multiplicity of objects and colors toward an ultimate union, the final stage of which is signaled in some metaphysical systems by a luminous black light in which there is a total annihilation or death (fana') of all images, all colors, all sensations, and most important, an annihilation of one's very self.³⁴

Nothing exists of the self; there is not even the awareness of there being nothing. The mystic is fully consumed by the light of the Divine and his soul reunites with the one. There is no separation and thus there are no colors, no objects, no shadows, and no need of a place to receive the shadows. There is simply light. The drop of light that had been hidden in the world of shadows has finally been reintegrated with the vast sea of light.

NOTES

1. Jalāl al-dīn Rūmī, Rumi, Poet and Mystic, trans. R.A. Nicholson (London: 1964), p. 118.

2. Jalāl al-dīn Rūmī, Mathnavī, trans. R.A. Nicholson (London: 1925-40), commentary Book I, p. 89.
3. See N. Ardalan and L. Bakhtiar, The Sense of Unity: The Sufi Tradition in Persian Architecture (Chicago: 1973).
4. See S.H. Nasr, Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines (Cambridge: 1964), p. 5.
5. See. F. Schuon, Transcendent Unity of Religions, trans. Peter Townsend (London: n.d.), p. 84 and S.H. Nasr, Three Muslim Sages (Cambridge: 1964), p. 83.
6. See A. Coomaraswamy, Christian and Oriental Philosophy of Art (New York: 1956).
7. Titus Burckhardt, An Introduction to Sufi Doctrine (Lahore: 1959), p. 66.
8. Henry Corbin, Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn Arabī (London: 1969), p. 304.
9. Margaret Smith, al-Ghazzālī the Mystic (London: 1944) p. 174.
10. Ibid., p. 144.
11. The gnostic (irfānī) writings of the twelfth century thinker, Ibn ^cArabi, have had a profound influence on subsequent esoteric thought and are lucidly explored in the works of T. Izutsu, The Key Philosophical Concepts in Sufism and Taoism--Ibn Arabī and Lao-Tzu, Chuang-Tzu, 2 vols. (Tokyo: 1966) and H. Corbin, op. cit.
12. Ibid., p. 83.
13. Quran 24:45.
14. This commentary has been partially translated by E.H. Whinfield in The Mystic Rose Garden (London: 1880).

15. Margaret Smith, Readings from the Mystics of Islam (London: 1944), p. 79. Suhrawardī is a twelfth century thinker who created the Illuminist school of Sufism. See S.H. Nasr, Three Muslim Sages, *op. cit.* and his article on Shihab al-dīn Suhrawardī in A History of Muslim Philosophy, M.M. Sharif, ed. (Weisbaden: 1944)..
16. A.J. Arberry, Classical Persian Literature (London: 1958), p. 78.
17. See Niẓāmī, Haft Paykar, trans. C.E. Wilson (Tehran: 1924).
18. Ardalan, *op. cit.*, p. 134.
19. See Titus Burckhardt, Alchemy, trans. William Stoddart (London: 1967).
20. *Ibid.*
21. Many different color systems have been used in the multiple spiritual methods employed by the Sufis. Simnānī (thirteenth century), for example, used the same seven colors, but arranged them differently than Niẓāmī with the result that he moves from sandalwood, blue, red to white and then proceeds upwards to yellow, luminous black and finally emerald green. See Henry Corbin, "Physiologie de l'Homme de lumière dans le Soufisme Iranien," Ombre et lumière (Paris: 1961).
22. Ardalan, *op. cit.*
23. This is from the Emerald Tablet of Hermes Trismegistos. See Burckhardt, *op. cit.*
24. The Safavid period is the apogee of a long development which reaches back centuries, and to the introduction of new intellectual perspectives into Islamic civilization. Four schools of thought gradually approach

each other during this period: the Illuminist school of Suhrawardī, the irfānī school of Ibn ʿArabī, the peripetetic school of Ibn Sīnā and the school of theology of al-Ghazālī. See S.H. Nasr, Science and Civilization in Islam (Cambridge: 1968), Three Muslim Sages, op. cit., and his article in A History of Muslim Philosophy, op. cit., pp. 904-960.

25. Nasr, A history of Muslim Philosophy, op. cit., pp. 904-960.
26. Ibid., pp. 932-960.
27. A.U. Pope and Phyllis Ackerman, eds., A Survey of Persian Art, 14 vols (London: 1965), p. 1872-1897.
28. See Burckhardt, Alchemy, op. cit.
29. For a development of this testimony, see S.H. Nasr, Ideals and Realities of Islam (London: 1966).
30. See Izutsu, op. cit., p. 1.
31. ʿAbdal Raḥmān Jāmī, Lawā'ih. A Treatise on Sufism, trans. E.N. Whinfield and M.M. Qazvini (London: 1914) p. 2.
32. al-Ghazālī, Mishkāṭ al-ānwar, trans. W.H.T. Gairdner (London: 1924), p. 88.
33. Abu al-Mawāhib al-Shādhilī, Illumination in Islamic Mysticism, trans. E.J. Jurji (London: 1938).
34. Izutsu, op. cit.