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BELTING, H. — Florenz und Bagdad. Eine westöstliche Geschichte des Blicks. Verlag C.H. Beck, München, 2008. (24,5 cm, 319). ISBN 978-3-406-57092-6. € 29,90.

No phenomenon has occupied art historians more than the emergence of linear perspective in early Renaissance paintings, or the technique that aims to represent images as they are seen by means of human vision. The eminent German art historian Hans Belting has written a book that draws scholars of Arabic studies into this discussion or at least sends out a compelling invitation.

Florenz und Bagdad offers a comparative study of vision in which the author argues that among the earliest chapters in the development of linear perspective is one written by the Basran scholar Ibn al-Haytham (also: Alhazen, ca. 965–1039). Belting meticulously traces the trajectory of Ibn al-Haytham's work on optics through Muslim Andalusia to Renaissance Italy. The book's scope is much wider, however. Belting's book is concerned with the question of how people cultivate vision, and employs a comparative-historical

approach focused on how cultures of vision impact their respective arts and vice versa.

One of Belting's premises is that perspective is a so-called symbolic form, a position first argued by Erwin Panofsky in an essay published in 1927. The concept of symbolic form hails from the neo-Kantian philosopher Ernst Cassirer, who believed that man makes sense of the world he perceives by means of symbolic forms. The human being, incapable of knowing reality other than through its subjective mind, has various categories of symbols that mediate between his perception and his understanding, and these categories vary according to time and place. Panofsky proposed to see perspective as a symbolic form that defined Western modernity. Belting agrees and explains further the importance of perspective for Western modernity. He explains how a painting with linear perspective draws the onlooker into the represented scene. Only through a frontal confrontation with the vanishing point of the painting does the artwork make proper sense. The perspective needs the presence of the onlooker and conforms to the onlooker's subjectivity and vice versa. In Belting's words: "Perspective has been a cultural technique and not merely a matter of the arts. For it symbolized the right to a perception (*Wahrnehmung*) that anyone could engage in with one's own vision." (p. 25).

Having established the crucial importance of linear perspective in the first chapter, the second chapter informs on the classical Arab understanding of vision, and the issue of Islamic aniconism. This is the part Belting is least equipped to deal with, and yet there is little to complain about from an Arabist point of view. There are but few issues that weaken this chapter. Firstly, Belting explains the phenomenon of aniconism in the Muslim world by referring to the well-known tradition that foretells the maker of graven images that he will be asked by angels on Judgment Day to breathe life into his images. The artist's inevitable failure would then be followed by eternal hellfire, as punishment for what is perceived as presumptuousness. The making of images is thus understood to be an attempt to create life, which is God's prerogative alone. While this tradition must surely have had its effect, a rather more powerful reason for the prohibition of images is more likely to have been the tendency in the near East around the time of Islam's emergence, to worship images as idols. Only dwelling on the tradition without reference to the cultural context which it produced seems too restrictively textualist. Secondly, while the relative scarcity of images in the Islamic world is beyond dispute, Belting goes too far when he writes that before the Mongol invasions there were only exceptions to the rule of aniconism, and that even illustrations in manuscripts were confined to works of science, where "they were (...) nothing but replica's and cognitive aids, that did not establish a new pictorial genre." It goes too far to dismiss all early Arabic miniature painting in this sweeping manner, when there is still discussion going on concerning the existence of a Bagdad school of miniature painting in the period preceding 1258.

The third chapter offers an exposé of the contributions of Ibn al-Haytham to our knowledge of optics and the importance of his work for the development of the technique of linear perspective. Belting explains once more that Arab science was more than a translation movement which safeguarded classical texts for posterity. Certainly Ibn al-Haytham is a good illustration in this regard, since his optical theories went straight against what the Greek authorities

Ptolemy and Euclid had to say. The importance of Ibn al-Haytham's *Kitāb al-Manāẓir* lies partly in his proof (by means of a camera obscura) that light travels in straight rays from the world into the eye, and not the other way around. Belting argues convincingly that this theory of vision was later transformed into a theory of depiction by scholars and artists of the early Renaissance. The three remaining chapters are further elaborations on the importance and uses of perspective.

Each chapter ends on a so-called 'Exchange of view' (*Blickwechsel*) designed to achieve a better understanding of both the Western and the Arab culture of vision. Some of these exchanges offer precious insights. Belting's use of Orhan Pamuk's recent novel *My name is Red* to illustrate the difference between the Italian ideal of portraiture and the Ottoman ideal of miniature painting is mostly playful, but two other exchanges are promising in that they may lead to new discussions of the meaning of the *muqarnas* and the *mashrabiyya*. Belting devotes an exchange to each of these phenomena and suggests that they be understood as symbolic forms.

The three-dimensional decorative element called *muqarnas* is ubiquitous in Islamic art from the Nasrid palaces of Granada to the Taj Mahal. Its purpose and meaning has therefore been studied to varying extents by Oleg Grabar, Gülru Necipoğlu, and Yasser Tabbaa. No agreement exists concerning the inherent symbolic meaning that the *muqarnas* may have had. Yasser Tabbaa (strangely not referred to by Belting) has argued most forcefully in favour of a symbolic meaning, stating that the *muqarnas* emerged in the eleventh century as an artistic component of the so-called Sunni revival, and notes the 'parallels between occasionalistic cosmology and the *muqarnas* dome' (Tabbaa, p. 133). Also Belting deems the *muqarnas* to be more than a mere decorative technique. Similar to how Panofsky elevated the use of perspectival drawing to the status of symbolic form, Belting considers the *muqarnas* as a phenomenon through which geometry has become a symbolic form. Essentially a geometric division of a three-dimensional surface, the *muqarnas* is the concretization of geometry, or in Belting's words '*ein Schauplatz oder Aushängeschild der geometrischen Phantasie*'. The result is a space with no beginning or end, as with the geometrically designed arabesque, there is no unique centre, no periphery, no beginning or end to the design of the *muqarnas*, as its spatial division is the result of mathematical lining. Belting points out that the science behind the *muqarnas* is identical to the science behind perspectival drawing, namely (Alhazen's) optical theory. This is Belting's point: where early modern Europe created an art in which geometry was an instrument to show images, Islamic civilization in the eleventh century created an art in which geometry itself was imaged.

Even more than the *muqarnas*, it is the *mashrabiyya* that qualifies as a symbolic form. Belting points out how in early modern Europe the window became a cultural artifact of the highest importance. The window came to symbolize man's view upon the world, or the frame through which man searches for images of reality. Of course there were and are also windows in the Arab world, but their purpose and meaning is entirely different. Windows in the architecture of Arab lands are typically wooden latticed screens or so-called *mashrabiyya*'s. Their primary function is not so much to allow for a view inside-out, but rather to allow for light

coming in from the outside. This light however does not enter the inside undisturbed. The *mashrabiyya*'s geometrically designed latticework dictates the conditions under which the rays of the sun may enter. In this fashion, light and screen work together to produce a geometric pattern of rays, that draws the eye as it travels across the room in the course of the day. Light here becomes a geometrical theme, and the window is dedicated to disciplining light and showing pure geometry, rather than an instrument for viewing into the world. The show of light and shadow that it occasions can even be seen as a manifold reproduction of the principle of Alhazen's camera obscura.

Florenz und Bagdad, of which an English translation is forthcoming at Harvard University Press (entitled *Florence and Bagdad. Renaissance Art and Arab Science*), is a book that succeeds in bringing a complex topic before a wide academic audience. It is to be hoped that Arabists and scholars of Islamic history will accept Belting's invitation to engage in this discussion. The book is therefore wholeheartedly recommended.

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