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Thank you to Linda, thank you Thom, & thank you Mr. Kenro Izu for inviting and having me to open tonight. I am happy to be back to SF, the city of my birth; it is an occasion for me to give homage to Ruth Bernhard.

I'd like you, the audience, to take at least two thoughts away from here tonight:

1. geometric patterns are a grand motif in Islamic art & archre. they're also a recurring subject in my own personal photography, not necessarily for the same reasons.

2. I propose that patterns are a metaphor for the good



2

...I grew up in Chattanooga, Tennessee. At the time, there were Race Wars. Riots. Police in the streets. This image was made in 1971, when I was 14

It conveniently foretells the tale of what drives my phygy. I perpetually ask myself, "What's on the other side?" (see the fence's crossed-wires, the "Xs" holding the boy back? It is a motif that I surfaces again later.) Patterns are one variety of the screens or veils between homo perceptus and the world. Some are defensive, some are salutary, some are downright deceptive & misleading. Some just keep us out of harm's way.



3

To get to the far side of my roots, I've had to flee the myopic delusions of American media presentations and go experience culture for myself. 99.3% of what Americans see of Arab cultures through newspapers, magazines, and TV are them scowling, or angry, destitute, terror-able, evil. My hunch years ago was that there were other nuances at work, nuances to which you could hitch a wagon.

Sure enough. At least for the duration of our performance tonight, the image on the screen will be your last scowl this evening! It is my mission to bring an alternate reality to your attention. It is a bit of a wagon load for me to unload, so I appeal in advance for the patience of the non-verbal amongst us here tonight.



...(My father is Palestinian and when I was 18, I began visiting and getting to know my family in Jerusalem, and discovered them quite unlike the stereotypes with which I was raised in this country. In 1980 I received a grant and lived with bedouin for 1.5 years herding camels and developing fluency in Arabic. I met lots of fascinating people. Like Ali Laughy...



I Got really good at animal husbandry.



Lived year-round, close to nature in the open desert, learning the folklore and poetry of tribes.



Eating sparingly, but with mostly natural nearby foods. Here we are celebrating game at the end of the hunt, by the headlights of a 4-wheel drive.

x[Look at Kraim's face. His profile has become synonymous with Hollywood's 'shifty-eyed Arab.' But for the most part, these folk have little guile.]



Here's Eid. I was invited aboard to be a companion, aid and mentor for him. He and I herded the camels.



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Khadhra. She and her sisters herded the goats and sheep. This is just before we sat down to tea with fresh goat's milk, and a freshly peeled orange (on khurj in lower right)



Sheikh Ataig, father and my host; and little sister Hilaleh standing insouciantly. We were at this moment siphoning water from a catchpool for the goats and sheep. It is as much for these wonderful people, for insuring that their cultural heritage survives for their grandchildren that I like to photograph Islamic cultural artifacts, as it is important for me to give access to Americans and gentle audiences like yourselves.



11

Here's yours truly, as an adventurous nomad back in 1981.

I have to laugh at myself when I see this image, a cigarette dangling from my mouth,.



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our front porch. But this environment horrified my family: so much dirt. So little water to bathe. Nomadic culture, to them, meant lo-culture. I continue to fight this perception and provide evidence to the contrary. It's not so different than class-wars in Appalachia. Yet I took their suggestion and, over the years, I went looking for high Arabian culture.



And I found high-culture. If you know what to look for, you can see it too. On a regular basis, Americans see pictures of this shrine, usually surrounded by police, riots, soldiers. To get beyond the violence, you have to turn your attention away from where the pundits are pointing. Over the shoulders of Media-heads you can catch glimpses of another real universe, one door to which can be unlocked with a common visual code and which I will try to give you tonight.



You might see snippets of this code in a forest of columns, a vocabulary of domes, of floral designs, of geometric patterns, of epigraphy. You can even see this code in European tapestries that feature \*oriental\* elements.

Where does this code originate? I first found it in Jerusalem, where the Umayyad culture (named for a dynasty that lasted from 661–750 c.e.)...



is a curious blend of classical, Hellenistic, Byzantine, Arab, Copt, and Sassanian (meaning Persian & Parthian) influences. Because of this mixture of Eastern & Western cultures —spanning the Hellenistic divide— in the visual language which we can recover, the code is simultaneously familiar and alien to most western audiences.



One of my missions is to build on the familiar and give you, dear viewer, the wings to span these cultures too. The Umayyads built houses of worship, like this one in Jerusalem, the Dome of the Rock, made more sacred by the devotion of fine craftsmen that adorns this construction.

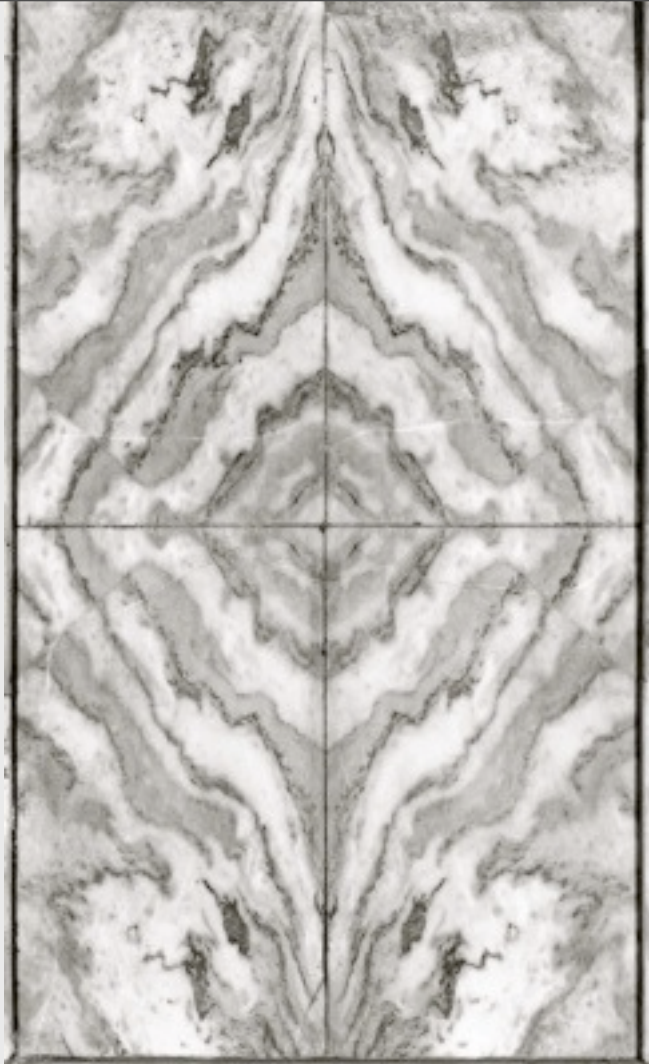
What were the Caliphs and princes doing when away from this mosque away from affairs of state? Some of them were...



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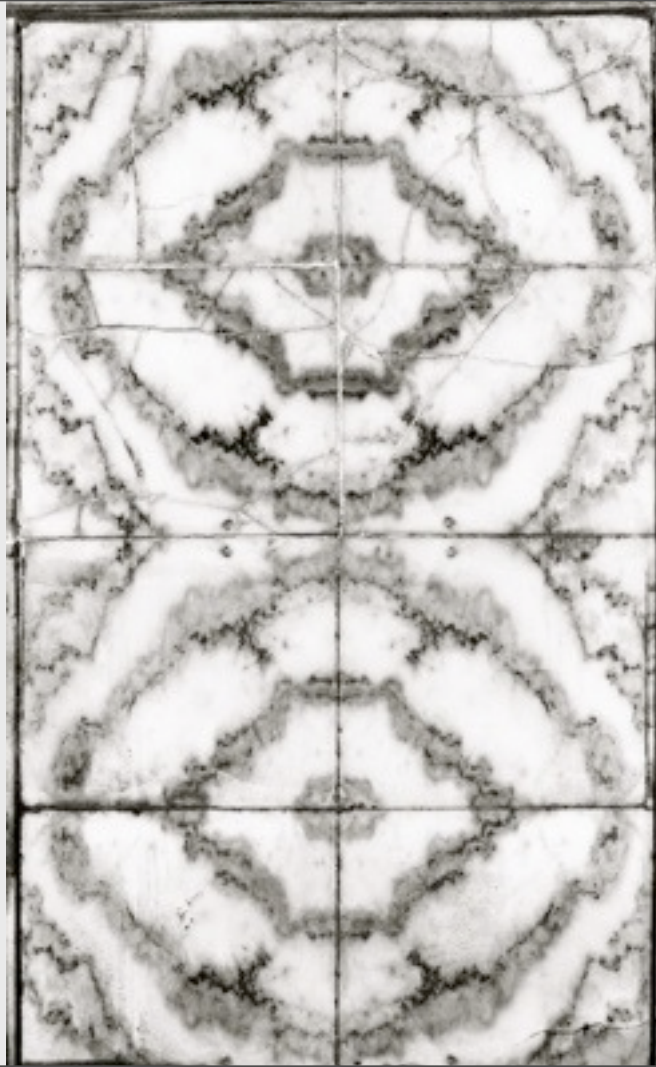
... relaxing and listening to music, reciting poetry, drinking wine, growing herbs, fruits, vegetables, grapes and grains, and beautiful flowers and orchards. This image is a contemporaneous recording —probably sponsored in 724 c.e. by the caliph Hisham— actually a floor fresco from QHG. The Umayyads have left us with an archeological legacy of castles, khans, gardens, dams and artifacts.

Note the encompassing arches, the stylized plant, the Mongol and the Caucasian faces, the musical instruments

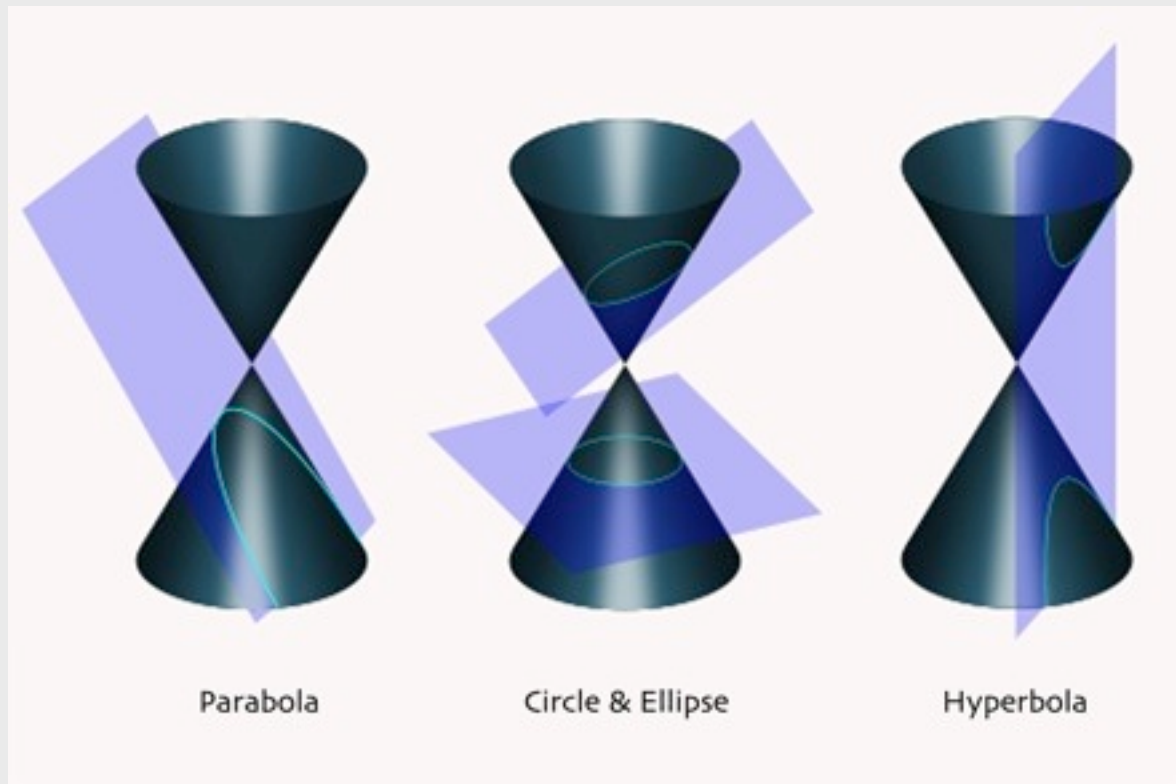


But before I move away from Jerusalem and the DOR, I want to share an even more personalized aesthetic experience from the Umayyad period, photographs of some of my favorite artifacts of the time... Bear with me because I will also try to parse some of their codings.

Here are some of the Umayyad marble panelings, inch-thick slices of veined-marble cladding the walls. The designers teased symmetry and pattern from found natural forms. To my eyes, they presage later artistic developments and parallel various mathematical discoveries that were coming back into vogue with the Umayyad projects to study and translate Classical texts.



Euclidean transformations of the plane  
...the translations, rotations, scalings, reflections, and arbitrary  
compositions of these units.

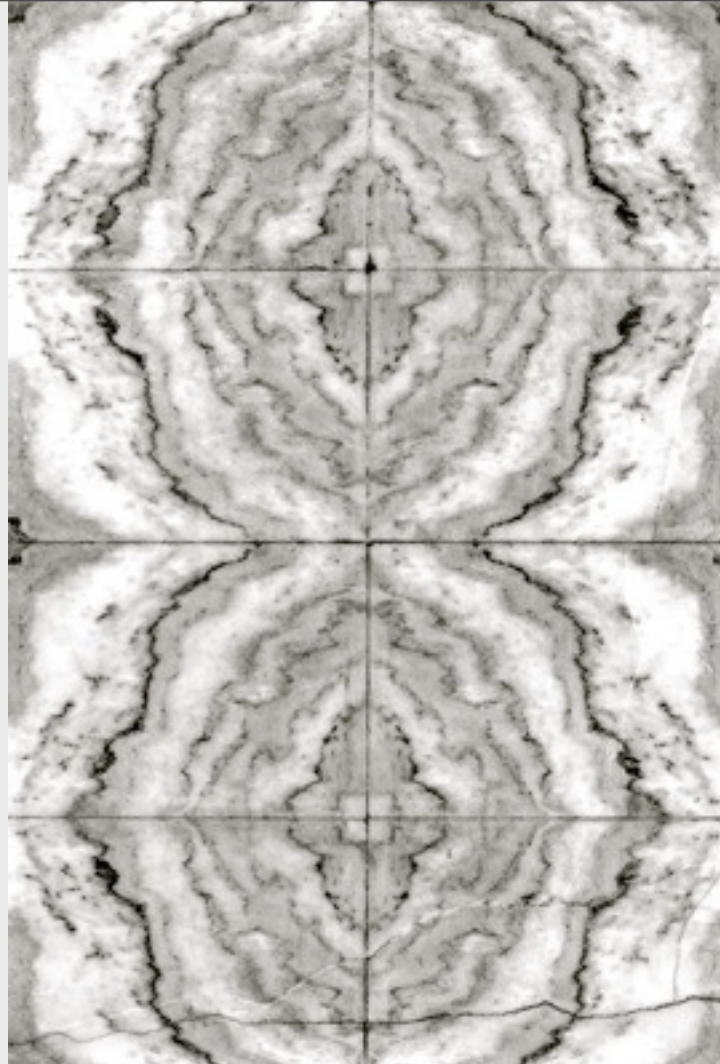


Conic sections  
the circle, ellipse, parabola, and hyperbola.

*Euclid of Alexandria* (about 325 BC-about 265 BC) wrote about geometric transformations

*Apollonius of Perga* (ca. 262 BCE–ca. 190 BCE) which is in what is now S. Turkey, studied conic sections.

Keep in mind that we are talking about 700 years before the Umayyads. It was the philosophical schools, gymnasia, and temples which survived well up to the Crusades in Syria, it was in these institutions that this mathematical knowledge was propagated, and it was into this world that the Caliph Mu'awiya moved the government of the early Islamic civilization. He first became governor there in around 640 c.e.



These designs are 2-dimensional slices through an ultimately \*imagined\* rock of marble veining. The artisan has taken a block of diagonal pattern (if memory serves me correctly: about 20x16 inches) and repeated it eight times to form the number “8” in Arabic numerals. This, lest we forget, is ornament in an octagonal shrine. My theory is that these marble geometric and –coincidentally– Islamic designs both reference and distill thought (ideas, symbols, philosophies, schools, worldviews, [like the philosophical schools of mathematicians who were the diaspora of the Roman and/or Christian purges, the burning of libraries and Museums like that in Alexandria] etc.) i.e. they are not merely decorative but metaphoric and symbolic. Unfortunately I do not have an airtight answer about what these designs meant to their creators. Until I or some other scholar better researches contemporaneous texts, we will not have corroboration.



Here you can see the marble panelling in situ in the octagonal shrine Qubbat al-Sakhra in alQuds/Jerusalem. Symbolically, I long thought these designs suggested water and concentric ripples that, like the waters of Paradise which Muslims believe come together under this mosque, waters which figuratively nourished the extravagant trees and plants of the mosaics in the upper tier of this shrine (you can find more details in my book “The Dome of the Rock” (Rizzoli 1996).



This elaboration of natural geometries as a meditative environment for prayer and reflection is structurally simple, yet quite-a-bit more suggestive when you observe the implicit lateral thrust toward tessellation in their installation.

--PAUSE--