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ON QUR'ANIC SYMBOLS IN ISLAMIC ART



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The *Qur'ānic* verses which inspired Islamic art are numerous and only one may be cited, in the scope of a short essay:

“God is the light of the heavens and of the earth.
A parable of His light is the arch, in which is a lamp,
A lamp, within a glass, of a glass shining like a resplendent star.
Lit from a blessed olive tree, neither eastern, nor western, the oil
whereof giveth light, though fire toucheth it not.
A light above light.” (Q. XXIV:35)

According to the propagated opinion of exegesis and literature, the parable may refer to the knowledge of God, imparted to the human soul, when yet unborn to the sensory world.

The motifs of the *Qur'ānic* verse, the arch, the lamp, the resplendent star and the olive tree, appear singly, or together, in many compositions of Islamic art. The *mihrāb* archway is known to have been represented, since the second century of the Hijra, both in the Near-East and in Central Asia. The *muşalla* (prayer-carpet) with archway, made in *Bukhārā*, were reputed in the fourth century of the Hijra. The tree and star were elements of the arabesque, since the second century. A *mihrāb*, identifying the *Qur'ānic* symbolism, on which the related *Qur'ānic* verse was inscribed, together with the motifs of the arch and of the lamp, was in use in Nishāpūr (Khorāsān), in the fourth to fifth centuries, when Turkish dynasties, originating from the region of Bukhārā, succeeded to each other (Simjūrids: H. 922-94. Ghaznavid viceroys: 384-429. Seljuqids: 429-597). Together with the Seljuqids, the motif came to Turkey, where it was seen on tombstones of the seventh and eighth centuries of the Hijra. Within the archway, a lamp framed by a pair of candle-sticks, or a single candlestick, was depicted. The Ottoman period Gördes and Kula *sejjādas* (prayer-carpets) further

evolved the motif, with the addition of the tree. The *Kula* prayer-carpets sometimes represented the tree, as central motif.

The symbolism of the composition was constantly repeated in literature, down to the century before ours, when the *Şūfi* poet Sheykh Ghālib evoked the *Mi-rāj* of the believer's soul, in ritual prayer, with these verses:

“The candle of the soul hath at times such a glare,
That the heavenly lamp may no more contain it.”

