

Philip Taaffe

Al Quasbah, 1991

As an American who has lived in Paris since 1983, I can readily appreciate the joys and pains of assimilation. As a novelist, however, I want to be neither an innocent abroad nor a cultural reporter; my decade in Europe is something I want to make my own, just as I hope to turn "France" into a region of my mind. Philip Taaffe has set a brilliant example of how to accomplish such a transformation.

Taaffe's work reminds me of something I recall Piet Mondrian said: that balance in art is life, but symmetry is death. In *Al Quasbah* there is a vitalizing dissymmetry between foreground and background; they are out of phase with one another, though they suggest one geometrically satisfying series perceived through another (a mosque's marble floor seen through a metal grille, for instance). The tones in the foreground are binary, an unvarying alternation of white and black, whereas the background is all half tints and grisaille and some discontinuous forms and a hint of red blushing across the upper-left-hand segment, like an earth color underlying a faded fresco. It was by placing pattern on pattern like this that Henri Matisse rendered depth in paintings devoid of traditional perspective; the disparity in the patterns suggested superimposition and thickness. Taaffe has intensified this effect by hinting at a dim interior seen through the dramatic chiaroscuro of a strong stencil.

Matisse wrote, "The decorative element is an extremely precious thing for a work of art. It's an essential quality. It's not pejorative to say of an artist's paintings that they are decorative." Yet in Orientalist painting from Delacroix to Matisse, a compromise between ethnographic notation and exotically sensual atmosphere usually undermines the value of the decorative; the painters have projected Western fantasies onto a hashish dream about the Orient, a dream guaranteed precisely by the rich fabrics and sumptuous arabesques they have found there—the decorative par excellence. Taaffe, by contrast, goes to the root and branch of Islamic decorative syntax. Basing his painting on abstract geometrical forms, stylized floral elements, and a highly controlled *mise en page*, he has recuperated for the West a tradition in which, because representation is forbidden, "decoration" is essential. Islam has at least three bastions of secrecy, veiled from the eyes of Westerners—its writing, its mosques, and its domestic life. Taaffe, in a sense, has found a key for these three doors, or at least a way of referencing them: his work cites calligraphy, the tilework and bronze and wood designs of the mosque, and the alternating open and closed spaces of domestic architecture. By devising his own vision of the basic means of the Muslim craftsman, he has found a way of referring to an alien culture without exoticizing it.

In this ongoing series, writers are invited to discuss a contemporary work that has special significance for them.

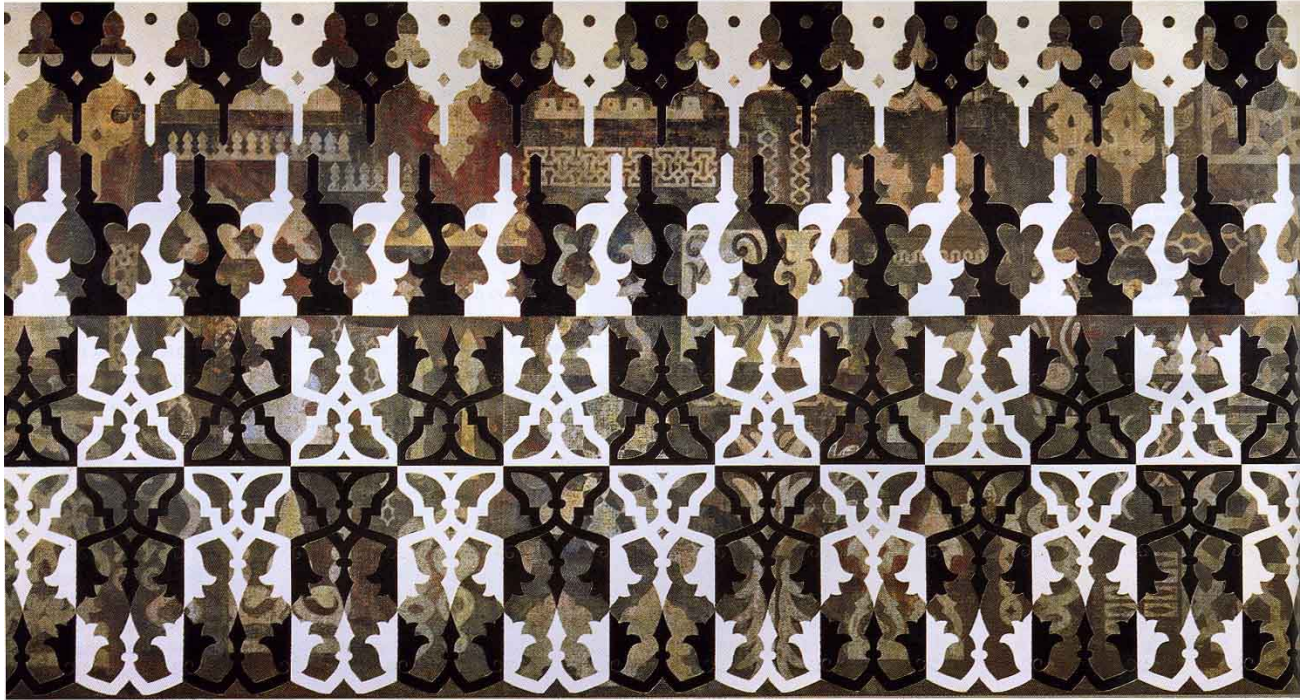
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The question, of course, is linked to the larger one of appropriation, the recycling of earlier imagery in contemporary painting. Taaffe, for instance, like Ross Bleckner, started out by recycling the motifs of a discredited, relatively forgotten recent movement, Op art. Nineteenth-century academic painters painted scenes from history, especially pagan and medieval history; twentieth-century painters, by contrast, have recycled the artistic forms of the past, not its historical scenes. Having begun with Op art, Taaffe long ago moved on to another way of assimilating a tradition, especially that of another culture: he re-presents a traditional abstract syntax through combinational sequences and studio techniques of his own devising. Focusing on the smallest, most basic units of Islamic decorative tradition, he combines them in a new way, and rejects the folkloric or atmospheric associations of Orientalism's conventional treatment of them.

An earmark of Orientalism, as Edward Said has pointed out, is a tendency to blur historical and regional distinctions and to use "the Orient" as a global term, when the culture in question actually encompasses hundreds of years and a geographical reach extending at different times from Spain to India. Though Taaffe resorts to an amalgam of forms in *Al Quasbah*, he distinguishes carefully among them: the background elements are mainly from India and Iraq, the foreground ones from Turkey and Egypt. This is not a vague blur of "orientalist" motifs, then, but a precise juxtaposition of Ottoman images against those of the Islamic diaspora.

The techniques of the painting's making reflect its dual spirit of excavation and imposition. As with other works, Taaffe began by fashioning reliefs, pasting shapes cut from laminated cardboard onto cardboard backgrounds. He placed these templates *behind* the canvas, which he then sanded, until a worn version of the relief shape showed through—was "excavated." Taaffe applied paint directly to this shape on the canvas. Finally he created the black-and-white foreground by hand-inking more cardboard reliefs, making prints from them on paper, then cutting out these prints and collaging them onto the canvas.

Despite the static geometric surface of *Al Quasbah*, the painting communicates a strong feeling of movement. Its name refers to a road in Tangier that leads into the *medina*, and the work is contrived to convey a sensation of passing through, of looking peripherally at an interior, with its flickering lights. Taaffe has made good use of his early optical experiments, just as the intense experience of living in Naples, that most cosmopolitan of all cities, has made him adroit in the cultural assimilation so deftly achieved in this impressive painting. We live in a global village torn by ethnic strife; Taaffe is demonstrating how to embrace another culture without denaturing it. □



Philip Taaffe, *Al Quasbah*, 1991, mixed media on linen, 90" x 15' 1".