

International Journal of Art, Culture and Communication

Journal Homepage: <http://ijacc.org/index.php/Journal/>

Volume No. 03 Issue No. 01(2024) <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10997661>

Art in Light of Traditionalism and Modernism

Aqeela Sherazi

Institute of Art and Culture, Main Raiwind Road, Lahore, 54000, Pakistan
Email: aqeelasherazi1@gmail.com

Abstract: *Art is the creative act of being throughout the long centuries of history. One of the major foci of Islamic civilization has been traditional art. To understand the nature of traditional art we must understand the meaning of art in its independent form, which today has been divorced from human life. It is therefore mandatory to comprehend the traditional view of reality within its many confines that has continued to live on through generations. In contrast, modernity is a subject of many different aspects, which is often just upon through superficial means. In this paper, I delve into a deep investigation to uncover what modernity is and to what extent it differs from traditional art. In this era where human knowledge is shouldered by science, technology, progress, and industrialization, there comes a path where it converges with religion and art which unfortunately the human race has failed to identify. As a result, our imperial sense that drives primordial thought has shifted its scale to view society in light of technological developments only and not its linkage with the cosmos. This knowledge included many dimensions of the reality of material objects left out of the world-view of both tradition and modernity, despite being based upon empiricism. 'Traditionalism' and 'Modernism' are living realities that are interwoven into the tapestry of today's age; but are both intended to be viewed from independent lenses. This is why the human mind comprehends them differently. We are in dire need of awareness of this reality even if its metaphysical and cosmological is beyond the ken of the 'ordinary believer' and reserved for the intellectual elite.*

Keywords: *traditionalism, modernism, Divine, aesthetics, wisdom, visual art, God, Quran, spirituality, morality, independence, traditional art, modern art, religion, realms, beliefs, culture, civilization, human, Man, Nature, soul, body, post-colonial, pre-colonial, artist*

Research Questions:

1. Does traditional art provide shelter from the storm of the modern world?
2. Why does the modern world consider art and beauty as a luxury?
3. What do we understand by the traditional and modern worldview of Man, Nature, and Art?

1. Introduction

Culture is a realm of shared beliefs, ideas, and symbols. Like most post-colonial societies, we find two opposing sets of ‘shared beliefs, ideas, and symbols informing contemporary culture in society – namely the ‘Traditional’ and the ‘Modernist’. The ‘Modernist’ faction relates to the set of beliefs and ideas brought by the colonizers which are at base rooted in post-Renaissance Humanism and its concomitant materialistic philosophies. It is these notions that lie at the root of contemporary art, science, and culture, called the ‘Modernist’ worldview. The second set of beliefs and ideas informing our culture is termed the ‘Traditional’ or ‘pre-colonial’ worldview upon which pre-colonial societies and cultures were based. The worldview is at base an idealist, symbolist, and God-centric perspective. It looks at Man and Nature in connection to their common sacred source or Creator.

Therefore, our culture can perhaps best be described as an uneasy intersection between these two currents of modernity and tradition or the colonial and the pre-colonial. The tensions generated between these often-competing currents accompanying the crisis of the identity that we face as a nation is to a great extent a result of our being ill-informed of the deeper philosophical and epistemological underpinnings of both modernism and traditionalism. Consequently, ‘Tradition’ is seen as a matter of faith, identity, and value. On the contrary, ‘Modernity’ which is philosophically based upon quite a different set of ideas and values, is seen simply as the natural and inevitable result of the proceedings of history.

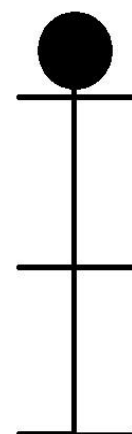
What we need to do is look at these two worldviews and their intricate features to be able to rightly evaluate and understand their respective views of reality, their goals for society, and their views of art and culture.

The ‘Traditional’ worldview and its contemplation of Man, Nature, and Art is significantly different than that of the ‘Modernist’ worldview. The word ‘Tradition’ is not used in the everyday sense of signifying something connected to the past. Here the word ‘Tradition’ is used in a particular sense where it signifies a sacred worldview according to which both Nature and Man are seen as having their roots in and manifestations of a Divine source.

A schematic diagram illustrating the view of the world:

1.1. Traditional view of the world

- 1) Divine Source
Spiritual World
Jabarut/Malaikah



(No form + no matter)
Pure essence.

- 2) Subtle/Psychic World
Malakut/Mithal/Jin
(Form + subtle matter)

- 3) Physical World
Nasut/Iman
(Form/physical matter)

This worldview gives rise to cosmology, which overlooks the cosmos and the created order; Persian (Alam-e-Khalq) is composed of hierarchical degrees in increasing intensity of reality. These can be broadly defined as three primary ranks: the first and lowest being the 'Physical World', (Alam-e-Nasut), which we experience with our senses. The second, above this rank, is called the 'Psychic' or 'Subtle' Realm, (Alam-e-Barzah/Alam-e-Mithal). This 'Psychic Realm' itself is seen as a reflection of the third and highest realm, the 'World of the Spirit', (Alam-e-Jabarut), which exists beyond time and space. That "Spiritual World" in turn, is a reflection of God's qualities (Siffat-e-Ilahi). One can argue that this traditional worldview is the basis of practically all pre-modern cultures in human history.

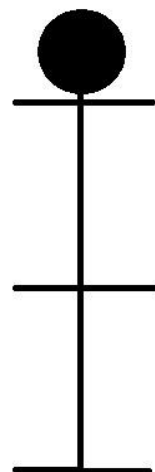
So, according to this worldview, everything in existence is seen as a reflection or manifestation of God's qualities. In the words of the Quran: "Where so ever you turn there is the Face of God." "I was a hidden treasure and I loved to be known, so I created the world to become known."

The human being too, is seen as a reflection of God's qualities - of the angels to Adam, also points to the same reality.

A diagram illustrating the Traditional view of Man including the corresponding faculties of knowledge:

1.2. The traditional view of Man

- 1) Divine Spirit
Ruh-ul-Azam
Spirit
(Intellect/Eye of the heart)
- 2) Soul/Mind
(Reason, Imagination, Sentiments)
- 3) Body
(Sense)



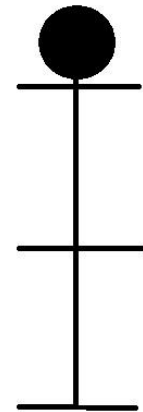
2. Modernist worldview

The word “modern” again is used here in a particular sense and not in the everyday sense of signifying something contemporary. By “Modern”, one implies the dominant worldview of the past few centuries originating in the post-Renaissance Age of Enlightenment in 18th-century Europe and the accompanying scientific revolution that was involved. This view was born during the Renaissance in the 14th century, upon the residues of a dead Gerco-Roman civilization and that too, in its phase of decadence. This worldview then spread through the rest of the globe during the 14th century as a result of colonization, which can be argued was in turn, a result of the Industrial Revolution of the 19th century. This view is ruled by the philosophies of Humanism, Rationalism, and Materialism, from which, emerge notions of Individualism and Democracy on the one hand and Materialistic Science on the other. Post-Renaissance Humanism put Man at the center of the universe and made him the measure of all things, with reason, as his highest faculty. The other faculties, like imagination and sentiments, are seen as purely subjective and relative.

A schematic view of the Modern view of Man and Nature

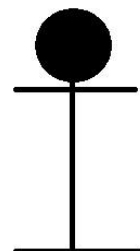
2.1. Modern view of the world

- 1) Spiritual World
(No form/ No matter
Pure essence.)
- 2) Subtle/Psyhic World
(Form + No sensible matter)
- 3) Physical World
(Form + Matter)



2.2. Modern view of Man

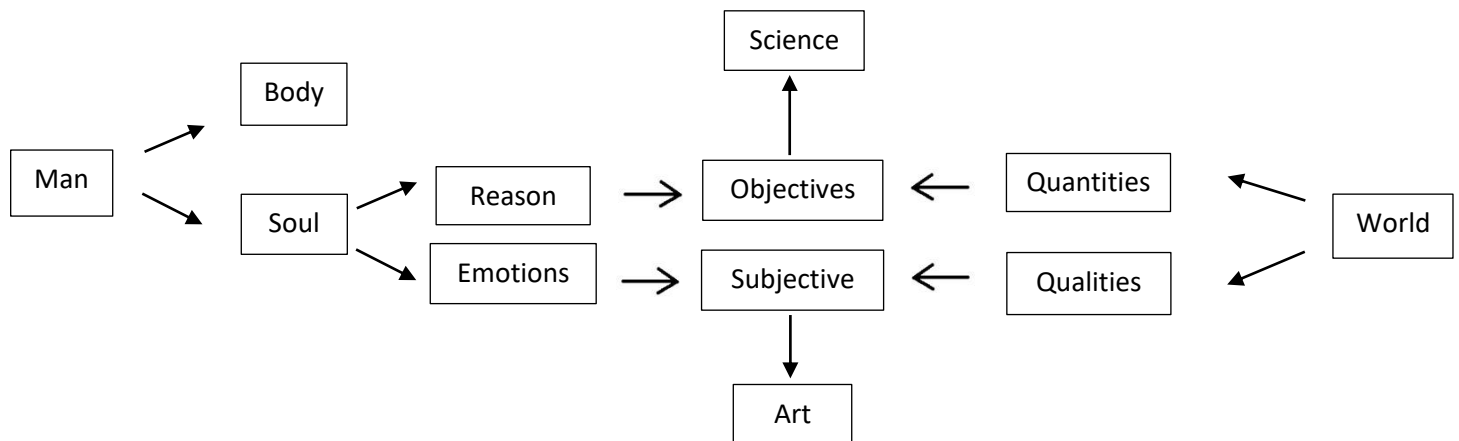
- 1) Soul/Mind
(Reason, Imagination,
Sentiments).
- 2) Body
(Senses)



Because there are only two terms here and the higher immaterial term is missing, it leads to much confusion and misunderstanding in the contemporary language of terms such as that between soul and spirit, or between the psychic and the spiritual.

The stage was now set for the scientific revolution. According to Rene, Descartes played a fundamental role in inaugurating the scientific method which was to become a cornerstone of not only science but also played an important role in the formation of modern thought.

Diagram- Art and Science. Modern view of Science and Art



According to his method, objects have two aspects: on one hand, a material and measurable aspect, and on the other, the object's qualities such as color, form, smell, etc., perceived by the mind through the senses.

Based on his philosophy, the qualities are totally in the mind and are secondary aspects of the objects, and being in the mind, these qualities are subjective and unreliable. Whereas, the material and quantifiable aspect pertains to the object itself and is, therefore, reliable. This bifurcation, called cartesian dualism, splits the world into object and subject. Therefore, the material realm was seen as "The Real", and consequently science became the new arbiter of truth, replacing religion in its capacity.

In contrast, all values and qualities including beauty were deemed to be subjective. As a result of the removal of any higher principle, as the ultimate source of all qualities and values, philosophic relativism set it, going hand-in-hand with subjective individualism. This philosophic relativism and subjective individualism are then reflected in philosophy, art, and culture.

Thus, as reason's concerns became primarily science and national philosophy, the imagination and emotions became more and more the basis of art. Cartesian dualism can be seen at work at the root of many similar spirits in the modern landscape, for example, the parting of ways between Art and Science, loss of the sacred and knowledge-giving quality of non-bifurcated Nature, once it is reduced to a dead and meaningless entity to be exploited endlessly as raw material.

3. Art, Tradition, and Traditional Arts

Comprehending the word 'Art' leads to the pursuit of understanding aesthetics, and choice and raising it to a realm of its own. So, it becomes the way of life and a way to express that life, it becomes a way of praising and endorsing the world affirming one's being and of others alongside it.

"What is Art? It is the response of man's creative soul to the call of the Real." (R.N Tagore)

However, at the same time subduing those appetites that cause us to obliterate the existence of others now in everyday life instrumentally dominates our ends and purpose. But the judgment of beauty brings that domination to a limit as it conveys a sense of the end, a sense of the intrinsic value of certain things that we pursue in art. Today, the way of art presents it as an object of contemplation for its own sake which is full of the individuality of tragedy and unpleasant things and thoughts for presenting. These art forms require the viewer to stand at a reasonable distance from it and then highlight and recognize its intrinsic connection with the rest of our lives so that it's part of the order of the whole tragic art forms, which affirms that death and suffering are a necessary part of the human condition. Art in that way reconciles us to human life and gives us a sense that life itself has meaning.

Tradition as we understand it, embraces the meaning of relation, both origin and Divine relation that comes from God, and God is everywhere.

"There is no divinity but the Divine."

"God is the light of the Heaven and the Earth."

"Verily we belong to God and Him we shall return."

Everything begins with the vertical act of descent of a truth from Heaven. But tradition includes the horizontal expansion that comes from the metaphysical form of the Divine Realm and its expansion into the world of Multiplicity in which we live and every descent from Heaven creates a new civilization. Every civilization we believe is based on tradition when we refer to 'modern civilization'. Nevertheless, tradition means that which spreads to birth a civilization as it coincides with a Divine order alongside art, philosophy, theology, and social structure. But the origin is always in a revelation and this is the perspective which we have when we talk about tradition. Traditional point of view is based on firstly, the authenticity of every manifestation of the Divine, and secondly the Nexus Connection between the origin and the source that has spread over the ages of history. Many people in the world today are influenced by two things, both of which are related to each other but seem antithetical outwardly by modernism emerging from the West and by Fundamentalism which is supposedly modernist. Beyond these bounds both these views refuse to accept the inner dimension of tradition, which is inextricably linked to spirituality.

According to S.H. Nasr, "Tradition is at once truth and presence."

Traditional art is a result of the manifestation of unity upon the plane of multiplicity. It reflects in a blinding manner the unity of the Divine principle, the dependence of all multiplicity upon the One, the ephemerality of the world, and the positive qualities of cosmic existence or creation about which God asserts in the Quran.

“Our Lord! Thou creates not this in vain.”

Traditional art makes manifest in the physical order directly perceivable by the sense, the archetypal realities, and acts therefore, as a ladder for the journey of the soul from the visible and invisible. Traditional art is based upon knowledge referred to by traditional masters of Islamic traditional art as wisdom. It has a particular wisdom form, function, and meaning which is built upon the truth. It has experienced a peak of creativity and perfection of powerful living; intellectual and spiritual significance presentation in various forms. For example, music, poetry, literature, carpet-making and architecture. The book of arts is Indo-Persian miniature painting calligraphy, manuscripts, and illumination. It's all living tradition to different circumstances and conditions.

If we look at all these traditional art forms, it has a certain meaning and reasoning latched to them. I think people remain unaware of it because artists do not paint or create the reason anymore, the philosophy and purpose behind all these forms. The modern artist who communicates through visuals always conveys a personal perspective and makes use of the same symbols in differing patterns. Whereas when one gazes upon the intricacies of traditional miniature paintings, most of them portray mystic poetry in the context of the world which includes the Heavens and the Earth. Indo-Persian miniatures are breathtaking in their vivid imagery and exquisite details. Mughal miniature paintings integrate the tradition of illustrated palm leaf texts with Persian style and aesthetics.



Modern artists only use the technique but lack the same underlying inspiration, philosophy, or purpose. Slowly but surely today, the function and meaning have been completely distorted and thus difficult to communicate to an audience. The traditional way first includes the studying of texts of the scholars who wrote those texts, so the influences of these scholars and poets in terms of physiological emotions and psychics would be easier to comprehend. They read to understand and then express it in the form of illustration. It is also important to note that these paintings were not signed by the artists because the purpose was to eliminate themselves from the conversation, as the motive of their mode of communication through their painting was to owe everything independently to themselves to communicate. A great artist takes years to paint a series of paintings into a book supervised by scholars and the work approved by the emperor himself. When one compares these paintings with other manuscripts of the same subject, one can identify only subtle changes. Today it is easy to announce that this particular painting is just a replica but, if you get down to actually making these paintings, one is blown away by the intricate details and begins to appreciate its various aspects, with all the tools, specific paper, process of extracting the colors for which we now have technology. Additionally, the years of training required, and the understanding of the influences around them as well as how the multi-cross-cultural influences were enhanced

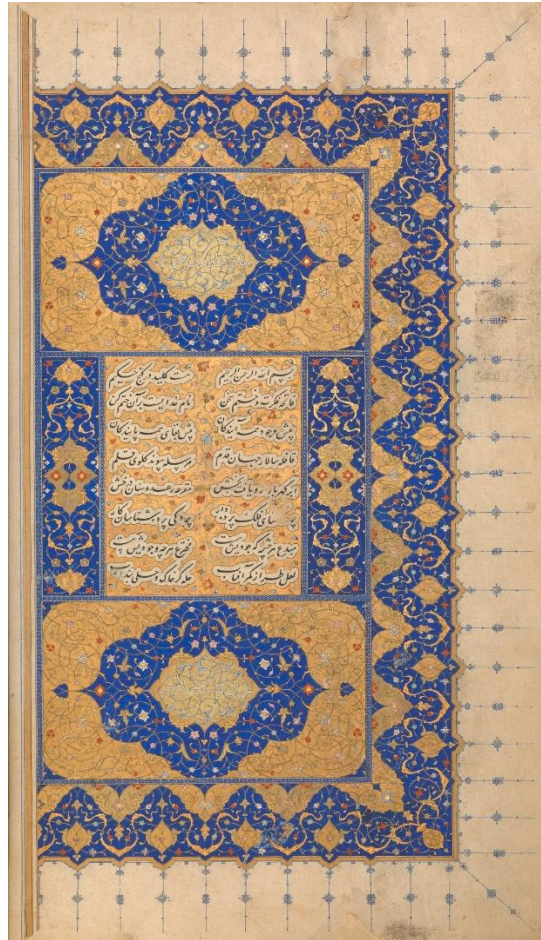
using such imagery. From Herat, Tabriz to Delhi in particular under the reign of the Mughal emperors, numerous Hindu painters were specifically taught these art forms with unique stylizations to develop those illustrations.

Today's art form is only the expression of individualism as a comparison to traditional art forms which has a close context to painting towards the relationship to the Divine reality. That is why it comes under the umbrella of traditional Islamic art. But even then, some do not consider it 'sacred' within Islamic art. Therefore, it gets divided into the branches of either 'Traditional' or 'Sacred' which is calligraphy (Quranic manuscripts on mosque architecture). It is linked to the religious function and is seen directly as the word of God. Both these branches point towards the same universe, but not the direct manifestations.

But when talking about art in general, it is in complete honesty up to the person creating the specific art form. They are just trying to convey something that can only be found after a deep introspection of the painter. Modern art has evolved to not marvel at the beauty of Nature alone, but of the beauty of Man and how this intellectual being is capable of feeling a plethora of emotions that need an outburst, which is provided by various art forms. Therefore, for the painter it is not only a picture that gets hung on a wall, it is a piece of them that is set on public display for everyone to analyze and question. The modern artist communicates the happenings of his surroundings through imagery.

However traditional miniature art has always been considered a courtly art form which gained its inspiration from the libraries of those courts. However, the masses did not have access to those libraries; even in the beginning written scriptures were never opened for everyone to see. Since everyone is not literate and, in most cases, the text or 'Qalam' was passed verbally by word of mouth in societies throughout generations. Thus, art served as the multitude that could be used in place of words that do not require one to be literate. It became a representation of knowledge.

Unfortunately, just as the publications of books became individualized, so did the modes of art. By then the artists were no longer part of an atelier of the king's court, especially after the Mughal dynasty crumbled. The artisans were forced to travel elsewhere and influenced themselves to create masterpieces of their own, and thus came the inevitable birth of individualism and artists began signing their work to prevent plagiarism, in effect changing the function and purpose of art altogether.



“To be modern is to destroy nature” (S.H. Nasr)

“I write for only one sake: to present a human truth or to show a new angle of looking at common things.” (Premchand)

The cosmic map of art is our map, the body and ‘Malaqut’ (Soul) are our soul and the realm above is the spirit's realm. It's basically like looking into the mirror of what remains and who are we. It is portrayed through similar vocabulary in art and architectural decorative elements; it all emerges in geometry and geometric forms. All of them have three fundamentals: the circle the square and the triangle. The circle represents the divinity, where all forms of calligraphy emerge from a singular circle. The Taj Mahal was designed with the compass and square which represents the physical material of this realm and the triangle represents the man with all these aspects. The rotated square is the time and space, and the six-sided star represents the descent of knowledge and the ascend of man through his intellect. So, the combinations of this vocabulary in different ways depends on artists, and how they are presenting or what they are trying to express through visuals. Once the artist developed the artificial perspective on a third dimension the whole focus of the viewer to style, skill, and ability to replicate the physical material.



These traditional artists are not only trying to replicate the material world but are on a journey to find the purpose of the art through the use of various stylizations, symbols, and underlying and hidden meanings. The arrangement of composition is completely different than what they used in geometry to balance the proportion, which is why they get the perfect balance and harmony in their paintings - because of these elements in which every micro inch has a very refined and intricate detail. One can easily identify a similar focus in every painting. The process of painting is also learning, it's the refinement of human beings and it's the refinement of self and is a fine turning of our senses. Spending hours making it, learning to control the tool, and building a diverse color palate to balance it along with tonal variations, slowly developing it. The state of mind of the artist can never truly be known, as he is completely absorbed in his work. Time becomes a medium, which is the quality we can perceive in the universe, that's the gateway. It's an art beyond itself, this is the bridge between the material and the spiritual world.

The traditional miniature which is intimately bound with book illustrations is an extension of calligraphy and again a depiction to aid remembrance of the states of Paradise. Based on the wholeness of life which characterizes traditional culture, all of the different forms of art are interrelated, through the traditional principles which have been introduced into them, something of the sacred as well as the spiritual principles dominating all aspects of the life of the traditional man.

4. Conclusion

Traditional art is more precious than all the materials and social causes and it is being sacrificed and destroyed today. This art provides shelter from the storm of the modern world. It acts as a spring of life to rejuvenate body and soul and is a support for contemplation of the highest realities leading to ultimate reality itself.

Modern artists who are placed in such an exceptional position in general, tell us something about ourselves, our desires, our lusts, and to confront the fact that we, like in the place of our imagined ideals in glided frame, they offer real junk in the preemptive kitsch. The artist pretends to take it individually while the critics pretend to judge his product and the modernist establishment pretends to promote it at the end of all his pretense, someone who cannot perceive the difference between reality and the material world. The artist did not willingly spend hours on their artworks, whether looking at all these art forms or finding these senses the same way. These senses always combine with an intensification of the awareness of the Divine presence which is invariably accompanied by the experience of joy. Traditional art as a whole is one of the major means for bringing about a cure of this ignorance and for providing a center and direction for life. With awareness of traditional art, the work of the true artist is valued, as they are unwittingly expressing a characteristically modern Western idea when they consider art as beauty and luxury.

“Without love, what man attains his goals?

Love is desire; love is the ultimate aim. . .” (Meer Taqi Meer)

Scholars can become like the song of the bird. It can become the means to remind the peace, tranquility, and joy that he was created with and which he seeks at all times, knowingly or unknowingly, but he can find only when he gains awareness.

“An artist is not a special type of man, but every man is a special type of artist.”

The creative power of such an artist far from being stifled is free from the fetters and limitations of his subjective self, gaining a universality and power which would be impossible otherwise. Meanwhile, art stands in its very reality as a witness to the manifestation of the one in the many.

References

The Holy Quran.

Chittick William, "Imaginal World, Ibn-al-Arabi and the problem of Religious Diversity," Sohail Academy, Lahore, 2001.

Introduction to Dr. Martin Lings, Book of Poems.

Martin Lings, 'The Seven Deadly Sins' in the Light of the Symbolism of Number, in Needleman-, "Sword of Gnosis-Metaphysics, cosmology, tradition, symbolism," ARKANA, London, 1989.

Ibn-al-Arabi (d 1240) is arguably the most influential Muslim intellectual of the past seven hundred years,

William C. Chittick "Ibn-al-Arabi on the Benefits of Knowledge", in Sophia – The Journal of Traditional Studies, Vol.8, Number 2, Okaton, 2002.

Alasdair Macintyre, "Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory", 3d ed. (Notre Dame IN, 2007).

See George Hourani, "Reason and Tradition in Islamic Ethics" (Cambridge, 1985); Wael S. Hallaq, "The Origins and Evolution" (Cambridge, 2005). Khuri, Freedom, Modernity, and Islam.

Marshall Hodgson, "The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in the World Civilization", Vol. 2 (Chicago, 1977).

Robert N. Bellah, "Beyond Belief: Essays on the Religion in a Post-Traditional World" (New York, 1970).

Al-Jabri, "The Formation of Arab Reason".

Jeffery C. Alexander, "The Dark Side of Modernity" (Cambridge, 2013).

S.H. Nasr; Science and Civilization in Islam.

Rene Guenon's The Reign of Quantity and The Signs of the Time.

Richard Tarnas; The Passion of The Western Mind; understand the ideas, that have shaped our World-View.

Dr. Martin Lings; Ancient Beliefs and Modern Superstitions.

Titus Burckhart; Universal Man.

Titus Burckhart; Sacred Art in East and West, A Principles and Methods.

S.H.Nasr; "Islamic Art and Spirituality"