

Original Research Article

Analysis and Critique of Unity in Divinity in the Traditionalist Attitude to Islamic Art

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Abstract

Problem statement: The traditionalist movement in the critique of modernity makes interpretations in the field of pre-Renaissance and Eastern arts. Traditionalists in each civilization interpret artworks according to the assumptions and that civilization's concept; they also consider Islamic artworks to have a standard feature, manifesting unity in divinity and divinity in unity.

Research objective: In the first step, this research demonstrates how Islamic art embodies the concept of unity in divinity from a traditionalist perspective. In the next step, it outlines the consequences that interpreting works according to the concept of unity in divinity will have.

Research method: The research is descriptive-analytical, drawing on traditional writings to interpret the concept of unity in divinity through elements such as Islamic motifs, domes, mirror work, and geometry, utilizing numerical patterns. This article extracts the basic assumptions of four traditionalists regarding Islamic art and examines and critiques their consequences.

Conclusion: The manifestation of unity in divinity's view in Islamic art requires four assumptions, which are: a) the inherent connection between Islamic Sufism and Islamic art, b) the artists and audiences' familiarity with Sufism, c) the transhistoricity of the concepts d) the acceptance of the originality of the author's intention. All four assumptions are subject to criticism, and there is no historical evidence for them. For example, the concept of unity in divinity became prevalent from the 14th century onwards; therefore, the conscious manifestation of this concept in works by artists and audiences prior to this period is not very reliable. Unless we consider unity in divinity to be transhistorical, the claim of transhistoricity presents a contradiction because if a concept is transhistorical, its manifestation is beyond the Islamic arts' monopoly. Every culture and period can manifest the concept. The fundamental characteristic and unity sense in Islamic art create cognitive conflict and eliminate the separation factor between Islamic art and non-Islamic art.

Keywords: *Traditionalists, Unity in Divinity, Islamic Art.*

Introduction

The traditionalist movement, with figures such as Ananda Coomaraswamy, Frithjof Schuon, Titus Burckhardt, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, and Martin Lings, does not compromise with modernism and criticizes metaphysics, epistemology, and even the production of artworks in the post-Renaissance era. In describing artworks, traditionalists primarily pay evaluative and positive attention to pre-Renaissance and Eastern civilizations, searching for the manifestation of pre-

modern thought in these artworks and attempting to justify and interpret them through the concepts common to that civilization. For example, they consider the absence of perspective (in the current common sense) in medieval art or Iranian painting as a deliberate choice by the artist to avoid creating an illusion of depth. They also have some claims worth examining regarding Islamic art.. Traditionalists take for granted the existence of an inherent element common to all works of art in Islamic civilization and consider these works to be manifestations of unity in the concept of divinity.

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This claim is the most frequently repeated assertion by traditionalists regarding Islamic art, explaining the symbolism and geometric shapes found in Islamic art (see Burckhardt, 1986, 2011; Schwan et al., 2011). For example, traditionalists and their followers refer to the concept of unity in divinity, as seen in patterns such as Arabesque, Shamsa, mirroring, and numerical symbolism, and consider the fundamental characteristics of this concept to be the most important manifestation of Islamic thought in these works. However, they do not explicitly address the formal relationship between the works and the concept manifestation. Noteworthy is that, from the traditionalists' perspective, the manifestation of unity in the concept of divinity does not simply refer to the subject. The religious subject itself does not necessarily mean the manifestation of a concept, and the concept also changes the form of Islamic artworks.

Research Question and Hypothesis

The primary research question is as follows: How is unity in divinity's concept manifested in artworks? Moreover, what are the consequences of believing in the unity in divinity concept in describing artworks in the Islamic world?

Research Background

There are some criticisms of the traditionalist perspective. One can refer to articles such as "The Relationship between Islamic Art and Islamic Thought from the Perspective of Traditionalists," which point out some conflicts in traditionalism's metaphysical principles (Maziar, 2012). Javadi also discusses the historical conflicts and perceptions of traditionalists regarding Islamic and Islamic architecture in an article titled "Introduction to Traditionalist Opinions on Islamic Art and Architecture with a Critique of Titus Burckhardt's Views" (Javadi, 2014). Rashidi also highlights that the traditionalist view is a continuation of the Orientalist tradition, making serious criticisms of it (Rashidi, 2017). There are other writings in the field of criticism of the traditionalist view. However, they

do not directly criticize the manifestation of unity in divinity in Islamic art and its conflicts.

Research Method

This writing first interprets the main aspects of unity in divinity's manifestation through artistic elements, employing a descriptive-analytical method that cites library sources and traditionalist writings. From the traditionalists' perspective, the main characteristic of artworks in the Islamic world is the concept of unity, a common element in all works of art, which is manifested through numerical symbolism and also in the form of works such as Islamic domes and other architectural elements. Next, this article identifies and critiques four hidden assumptions in traditionalist writing.

Theoretical Framework

• Unity in Divinity's Manifestation in Islamic Art

Unity in divinity's manifestation is evident in various aspects, including Islamic motifs, mirror work in mosques, domes, and numerical proportions.

- Arabesque

Traditionalists believe that Islamic art motifs, such as arabesque or geometric designs, are manifestations of the sacred within the framework of unity in divinity. Titus Burckhardt wrote about Islam in his book *Sacred Art* as follows:

The spiral or Arabesque movement is not simply for decorating the surfaces of buildings, various types of books, handicrafts, and objects, but instead carries sacred symbols. In essence, the rhythm's characteristic and remembrance element, movement, and Sufism are the concepts underlying the religious and sacred decorative motifs. Decoration can be the expression of sacred symbols. According to Henri Matisse, expression and decoration are the same. This statement suggests that he drew inspiration from the East, specifically from Islam, as the main attraction and structures of Islamic artworks lie in their intricate decoration (Burckhardt, 2011, 146). Burckhardt argues that in Islam, individual reminders are integrated into the infinite texture's continuity. The repetition of single motifs characterizes this continuity,

as well as the flowing movement of lines and the equal presence of shapes that are either raised or recessed, which are inversely similar to one another. These elements work together to strengthen and reinforce the overall effect. The soul, as it looks at the shining and glowing waves and the leaves trembling in the wind, is freed from its internal belongings, that is, from the idols of lust and air, and, vibrating within itself, is in a pure state and existence is immersed (see: Burckhardt, 1967). According to followers of the traditionalist movement, geometric motifs in Islamic abstract art have been mistakenly considered, for centuries in the West, as mere decoration and arrangement. The primary message of Islam, namely monotheism, reflected in the manifestation of unity in divinity and vice versa, has never been thoroughly examined (Critchlow, 2011, 9).

- Shamsa

Islamic architecture has widely used the Shamsa motif. Such appearances exist in domes and the highest parts of various geometric structures. The sun, with its light, can be a symbol of unity in the allegory of divinity. Typically, when interpreting the sun as a symbol of God's presence, the verse "Allah is the light of the heavens and the earth" is cited. In this verse, since true light is emitted only from the sun, it is said that the sun is a symbol of God's presence. However, some also attribute the sun motif's presence in Islamic art to the Prophet Muhammad (Khazaei, 2003, 56-63). However, the sun motif's interpretation, i.e., the sun with lights, is unity in divinity's manifestation, according to most commentators. The circle is unity's manifestation because it is centered and not fragmented. Lights are also embodiments of several lights from a single unit, a manifestation of divinity.

- Mirror work

One of the interesting aspects of Islamic architecture is the presence of mirror work in buildings. Many shrines and other religious sites also have this appearance. The mirrors used in these buildings are fragmented and placed at varying angles to one another. This multidimensionality means refusing to represent a whole, but at the same time, these mirrors reveal the aspects of a single thing. In other words, we encounter

aspects or manifestations of truth. However, this refusal to represent a whole is an allegory of the "impossibility of knowing the truth in itself." In other words, mirroring' visual effect mixes the real and the imaginary here. The objects' manifestations appear as if viewed through a curtain or veil; the multiple illusions of a single truth can blur the boundaries of the real world (Khazaei, 2003).

- Numerical symbolism

In traditionalist writing, specific numbers hold special significance. In this sense, numbers are sacred and symbolic, forming the foundation of the entire artwork. These numbers' relationship to the unit, in most cases, evokes unity in divinity. In his book *The Opinion of Islamic Thinkers about Nature*, Seyyed Hussein Nasr quotes a sentence from the Ikhwan Al-Safa that seems to be the basis of his sacred geometry theory: "The Ikhwan Al-Safa compares the world's origin with the unit's relationship to other numbers" (Nasr, 1992, 79). In the preceding interpretations, it is important to mention three categories in numerical cryptography: a) work(s) utilize a specific number or numbers; b) the number carries meaning and is, in fact, qualitative and refers to something beyond itself; c) these numbers are symbolic and can be used to reach the sacred. This numerical application's type coding evokes the Pythagoreans' discussions, which are the basis of Ikhwan al-Safa's theory. The Ikhwan al-Safa stated that "the science of numbers is a language that speaks of monotheism and purification" (see: Asgari, 2003). They consider numerical knowledge to be a science that speaks of monotheism and purification, and number is related to the concept of unity. This perspective on numerical coding is evident in the interpretations of Islamic art historians. That is, they believe that numbers are symbols that exist in various contexts, such as classifications, and are also present in artistic works or interpretations. Interpreters refer to these numbers as sacred numbers, and decoding the work's form is based on these numbers.

For example, in the view of "Keith Critchlow" in the book *Islamic [Geometric] Patterns*, numbers play an effective role. In his book, he emphasizes the importance of the number three and its multiples, such as six and

twelve, in the design of the figures. The number three's sacred aspect is that it represents the three important parts of "Bismillah al-Rahman al-Rahim" (In the name of Allah the most compassionate, ever compassionate), specifically Allah, the Most Gracious, and Allah, the Most Merciful. Six is important because Allah created the universe in six days, and twelve is important because the Shiites have twelve Imams. Geometric shapes are frequently organized in these proportions. Critchlow elsewhere refers to the connection between calligraphy and the number of prayer times:

Calligraphy is considered a unifying element in Islamic art, the prominence and distinction of which derive from its ancient origins and its role in conveying the text of the Holy Quran. The name of God (Allah), which appears at the beginning of each Surah in the Quran, as well as the name of the Prophet Muhammad, are prevalent motifs found in this calligraphy type, primarily in Iran. This country hosts Shiism; the name also appears in this calligraphy type. The holy name of Muhammad, which revolves around a five-pointed star, signifies the connection between the five prayers, the sound repetition, and the significant numbers in space (Critchlow, 2011, 99).

In fact, in such claims, we are faced with two categories: first, that geometry relies on specific numbers, and second, that these numbers refer to transcendental matters. The numerical coding's presence and the attribution of meaning to specific numbers are evident in Titus Burckhardt's traditional arts perspective. For example, in his book *Sacred Art*, he quotes a legend from an Arab 2-tar [a two-string musical instrument] player: When I asked him why the 2-tar, on which he sang and recited stories, had only two strings, he replied, 'Adding a third string is the first step on the path of heresy and atheism.' When God created Adam, that soul did not want to enter a body and fluttered around its cage like a bird. Then God told the angels to sound the 2 tar, one male and the other female, and the soul thought that the melody instrument, which is the body, had a place, and it became a body part and became its slave. Therefore, only two strings, which are always called male and female, are enough to free the soul from the

body. This legend is more meaningful than it seems at first glance because it summarizes the sacred teachings (Burckhardt, 2011, 9). This approach, as seen in the Titus Burckhardt quote, exhibits two key features: a) First, it refers to the materials economy in sacred art. The sufficiency of the two strings indicates that traditional art does not emphasize additions. That is, the message is more important than the complexity and the material's abundance. b) Considering the context, in Burckhardt's view, cryptography relies on specific numbers. We know that the ancients believed the number 2 to be a symbol of duality, production, and multiplication. In the view of the Ikhwan al-Safa, this number also had a symbolic meaning after the number one.

Burckhardt also presents interpretations based on the number four in his book, "The Art of Islam: Language and Meaning." "To emphasize the number four's importance in Islamic art, or in other words, in the religion of Islam, he refers to the four pillars of prayer, fasting, zakat, and hajj, which are related to the fifth obligation, Shahada. In the same book, Titus Burckhardt goes so far as to refer to the four "Khulafae-Rashideen" (The Rightly Guided Caliphs) and the four wives' polygamy in Islam. In Burckhardt's view, this number four is the architectural basis of Islamic art. For example, he refers to the four porches of Arab houses or the four-part architecture. The Sultan Hassan School's Architecture in Cairo (762 AH) has four nave rooms, and it corresponds to Sunnism's main pillars (Hanafi, Hanbali, Maliki, and Shafi'i). The number four importance in the dome's role is evident in another book by Titus Burckhardt, who writes:

The dome in Islamic architecture is a symbol of the sky, and this spherical dome, situated on a cubic base, is considered a representation of the union of heaven and earth. This symbolic meaning refers to a story about the Prophet on the night of his ascension. In his ascension story, he describes a huge dome made of white pearl and placed on four pillars at the four corners, on which were written the first chapter's four words of the Quran: Bismillah al-Rahman al-Rahim and four rivers of water, milk, honey, and wine, which are eternal rivers and eternal bliss (heaven), flowed from them. This

example shows every domed building' spiritual pattern. The white pearl is the symbol of the soul, whose dome encompasses all creatures. The universal soul, created before all other creatures, is also the divine throne, which is the throne of the environment. This throne's symbol is an unseen space that extends beyond the reward and the heavens of the planets. Suppose the sacred building's dome is a symbol of the universal soul; the dome's octagonal "stem" or "grip," located beneath it, represents the eight angels carrying the throne, which correspond to the eight directions of the "wind rose." In that case, the building's cubic section is the universe's diagram (Burckhardt, 2011, 148). In Islamic art, numerical symbolism is prevalent in the motif's geometry, and Nasr also appears to believe that one of the important elements in Islamic architecture is geometry based on numbers, as he mentions in his response to Elliott Deutsch about his meeting with the Bauhaus. The point Nasr makes in this conversation highlights the importance of sacred geometry, as far as he is concerned. He believes that although modern architecture [after the Renaissance] and traditional architecture both rely on geometry, the reason for the failure of modern architecture is that it exploits purely Cartesian geometry.

In contrast, the other is rooted in sacred geometry, which is grounded in the negation of space (Nasr et al., 2011, 183). Schuan, Nasr, and Burckhardt do not explain geometry based on numbers and their connection with the concept of unity in divinity. For this reason, we must interpret the works of traditionalists' followers and their connection to the Pythagorean tradition. Divinity in the unity concept here can be equivalent to creating polygons from a circle in a special way, as seen in sacred geometry. To obtain polygons, such as triangles, squares, pentagons, etc., the ancients used equal-sized circles, with their circumferences centered on a common point (Fig.1). It is another and is obtained by connecting the intersection points of these shapes. In the figure below on the right, by connecting the intersection points, first a unit triangle, then a unit square, then a pentagon, a unit regular hexagon, and finally n/π unit regular polygons

are obtained, which, if it tends to infinity, the same circle is obtained, whose perimeter is n/π times the first circle. From the unit square, we can derive widely used proportions in painting and architecture. Let us consider the unit square. According to the Pythagorean theorem, in triangle ABC, the square's diameter is radical 2. We draw an arc centered at B with a radius of two to obtain point E. Holding E in place, we form the rectangle AEBI. In the new rectangle, according to the Pythagorean theorem, the diameter will be radical 3. We draw an arc to the vertex A and the length radical 3 to obtain point F. The subsequent rectangles are also obtained in the same order.

Traditional architecture, in most cases, bases its geometry on these ratios. Many designs used these ratios. Among all the ratios, radicals 2, 3, and 5 are the most popular and widely used ratios. Interpreters consider each of these ratios to correspond to a specific concept. The figure below, taken from Kitab al-Said, shows a part of the Jameh Mosque of Farumand. This figure shows the geometry based on the radical 2 (Fig. 2).

In fact, in sacred geometry, in addition to the fact that geometry relies on numbers and proportions derived from the unit in every form, there is also a non-archeological and belief aspect to these proportions. Of course, traditionalists have discussed this topic in such a vague manner that it is impossible to obtain a comprehensive theory with certainty. Sacred geometry utilizes proportions that exist in nature, which relate metaphysical beliefs about nature to this category. That is, just as sacred science is the origin of a worldview along with the general principles of modern science, sacred geometry also carries such assumptions. For example, past cosmology is a science that encompasses both a metaphysical aspect, which involves a metaphysical attitude towards the heavens, and an explanation of the world or the heavens. Sacred geometry is also a metaphysical attitude towards mathematical proportions derived from the unit.

According to the aforementioned quotes, there are four assumptions in the traditionalists' writings:

a) There is a profound connection between Islamic Sufism and Islamic art. For example, Islamic and other geometric

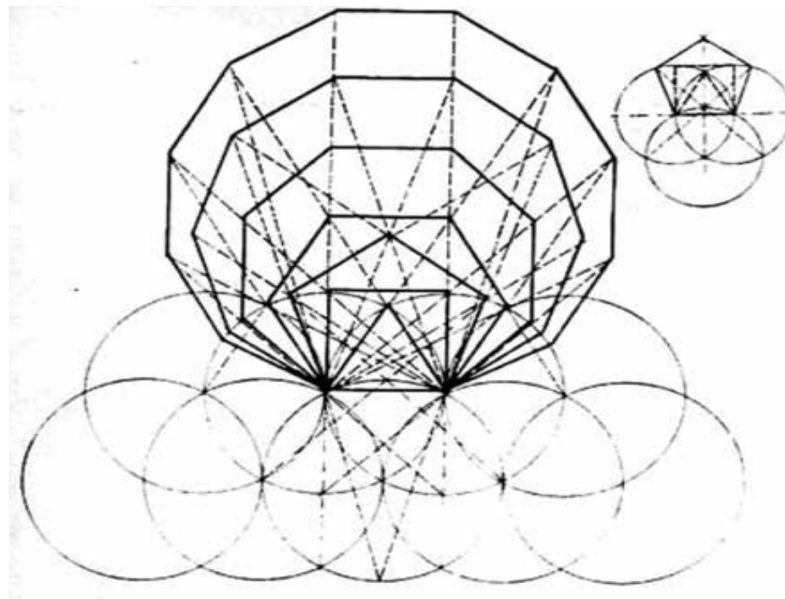


Fig.1. Obtaining polygons from a circle. Source: Robert, 1989, 69.

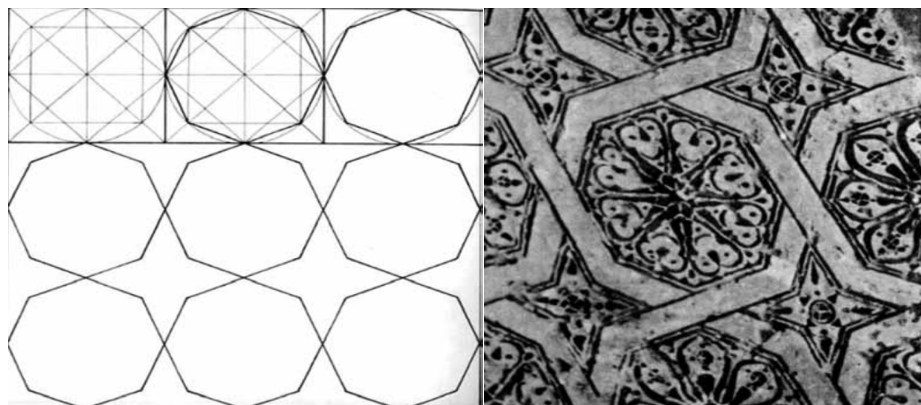


Fig. 2. The worked form based on radical 2. Source. Al-Saied, 1984, 24.

patterns are not merely decorative; they express concepts such as unity in divinity. The proportions derived from nature will yield such a result.

b) Traditional society' people were familiar with the Sufism concept. If the concept of unity in divinity through manifestation is a conscious matter, we can conclude that artists and the audience are familiar with Sufism concepts.

c) What Ibn Arabi and before him, Ghazali, say about unity in divinity are post-historical principles. The concept of unity in divine existence is a topic that Ghazali and Ibn Arabi have explored; however, Ibn Arabi does not refer to this concept by this name. Regarding the possible concepts in the art of centuries past, they are not exclusive to Sufism and philosophers but are, in fact, transhistorical concepts.

d) We must accept the originality of the authors in examining artworks. If we claim that the unity in divinity's station in Islamic art is a conscious matter, we must accept

that the artwork reveals the author. Thus, we cannot claim multiple meanings.

If we accept all these conditions, then we can accept unity in divinity in structures such as sundials, domes, and Islamic altars, even if we acknowledge that the creators did not intend to convey such a message. However, important problems arise. If every Islamic artwork (traditional or sacred) has such a meaning, then what is the difference between a sundial in modern and traditional civilizations? If mirror works in traditional art are a tool for displaying the world's facets, why are the mirrors in a barbershop not like this? If we place two mirrors in opposite directions, the mirrors create countless images, a phenomenon that occurs endlessly in many hairdressing salons and barbershops. If we say that the meaning is in the way we look at the artwork, a modern artwork can also have such a meaning. If we say that in the modern era, tradition is no longer

relevant, and this meaning is no longer associated with it, then nothing remains except our subjective interpretation. With the same four assumptions, we cannot accept the distinction between traditional art and the art of the modern era. Even within tradition (pre-modern societies), assuming transhistoricity, the role of unity in contradiction emerges. Suppose the dome or Shamsa in Islamic civilization serves as a unity in divinity, a concept that transcends history. Why does it have this meaning in Islamic civilization but another meaning in other civilizations, such as Elamite (from the same geographical region)? A question may arise as to whether it is transhistorical; then, what is the difference between them? If the concept of unity in divinity is a product of thinking in Islamic lands, how can it be transhistorical?

In addition, we cannot forget that art has at least one objective aspect. If we want to impose something beyond the represented content (and its psychological function or effect), we can do so with any art or even any object; this is not specific to Islamic or non-Islamic civilizations. For example, we can see the manifestation of truth, as well as the concepts of unity and divinity, in every work of art. In this case, the distinction between Islamic and non-Islamic art (and not non-Islamic art) and Nasuti art, as classified by traditionalists, will be destroyed. Nevertheless, in criticizing those four assumptions, we can say:

A) There is no possible way to prove that there is an intrinsic (and non-conventional) connection between art and Sufi thought. This does not mean that the artwork cannot be, for example, a Sufi painting. The debate revolves around how the work form can be influenced by thought as a mere subject, yet also maintain this intrinsic connection. Seyyed Hossein Nasr believes that الف and dot ب are the name of Allah's manifestation (Nasr, 2011). Can we accept that ۞ is the symbol of Allah and unity, or that the dot below ۞ is also the symbol of Allah, and this is not a conventional issue either? Nevertheless, does the English I have such a meaning? Furthermore, can someone in a traditional civilization perceive it without our explanation, understand it, or feel its impact, and, of course, not experience it in another artwork (outside the Islamic world)?

Of course, artists represented unity in diverse concepts in a specific way. Assuming this is true, it remains a convention

between artists and audiences, which can easily be dismissed. Suppose we want to adopt a position similar to Carl Gustav Jung, like the traditionalists, and consider the circle and the sphere as archetypes of the soul or God in the human institution, and consider the earth as a square or cube. In that case, there is no difference between traditional, Islamic, and neo-classical art (not to mention any other round object). Essentially, we must abandon the central claims of the traditionalists in distinguishing between traditional and neoclassical art. b) From the beginning of Islam, people and artisans (in the traditional sense) were familiar with these concepts.

The unity in divinity and the existence of unity are issues that were widely discussed in pulpits and monasteries in the fifteenth century (see Ibn Arabi, 2006). Assuming that the community was familiar with it, it is not easy to accept that even individuals used it in their art. If we seek to accept the originality of the author, then we cannot say anything about art before the fifteenth century.

C and d) If we do not accept case b and say that these concepts existed within the Islamic world, that everyone was aware of them unconsciously or intuitively, and that they are transhistorical concepts (as if traditionalists have sometimes taken such a position), how can we accept that they did not exist in other civilizations? Furthermore, most importantly, what guarantee do we have for the existence of these concepts? Furthermore, suppose individuals in traditional society did not understand a concept themselves or were unaware of the conscious layer, and did not even write an interpretation on the subject. How can one cite it and write a massive book about these concepts and their application in art?

Conclusion

Traditionalists consider unity in divinity to have led to the emergence of forms, such as the Islamic dome, mirror craft, and Shamsa, in Islamic architectural works, attributing these forms to unity in divinity due to their distinctive shapes. On the other hand, sacred geometry, which is based on numbers and calculations and has its roots in the thought of the Pythagoreans and the Ikhwan al-Safa, has a specific relationship with unity in divinity. The belief in the manifestation of such an idea was

based on four assumptions. First, the inherent connection between Islamic art and Islamic Sufism; second, the artist's artists 'affinity with Islamic Sufism; third, being transcendental; and fourth, the originality of the authority. The first assumption is based solely on some observations and cannot be generalized. The unity in divinity represents a distinct aspect of Sufi Islam and does not encompass all interpretations of Islam. The concept of unity in divinity in art is rationalizing rather than reasoning. It is not of artistic process or art education, the nature of which is expertise that can be acquired through practice. The traditionalists from the Ikhwan al-Safa also fall into the appeal-to-authority fallacy. Second, the artist with Sufism concepts is unacceptable because historical evidence also shows that these concepts existed among the people and in pulpits after the fifteenth century. Third, considering the transhistorical concept, it is evident that such a pattern exists in the artwork of every period and culture, related to the concept of existence in divinity. The originality of the author has been criticized by philosophers (The death of the author theory). Therefore, the claims of traditionalists about unity in divinity are contradictory and ambiguous.

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The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest in conducting this research.

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