Excerpts: The Imamat on art and the arts

"Historically, the arts, including architecture, have taken their principal inspiration from religious faith. But when art is separated from faith-based roots, other influences can dominate -- including soulless technology and empty secularisation."

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 2010 Aga Khan Award For Architecture Prize Ceremony address (Doha, Qatar)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/9616/

"Whatever its vernacular forms, the language of art, more so when it is spiritually inspired, can be a positive barrier-transcending medium of discourse, manifesting the depths of the human spirit....

"Some among the eminent scholars present today have observed that, while the Qur’an may not propound a doctrine of Islamic art or material culture, it does offer imaginative scope in this direction. From early on, its passages have inspired works of art and architecture, and shaped attitudes and norms that have guided the development of Muslim artistic traditions.

"In this context, would it not also be relevant to consider how, above all, it has been the Qur’anic notion of the universe, as an expression of Allah’s will and creation, that has inspired in diverse Muslim communities, generations of artists, scientists and philosophers? Scientific pursuits, philosophic inquiry and artistic endeavour are all seen as the response of the faithful to the recurring call of the Qur’an to ponder the creation as a way to understand Allah’s benevolent
majesty. As Sura al-Baqara proclaims: 'Wherever you turn, there is the face of Allah.'

"Does not the Qur'an challenge the artist, as much as the mystic, to go beyond the physical -- the outward -- so as to seek to unveil that which lies at the centre but gives life to the periphery? Is not a great work of art, like the ecstasy of the mystic, a gesture of the spirit, a stirring of the soul that comes from the attempt to experience a glimpse of, and an intimacy with, that which is ineffable and beyond being?"

His Highness the Aga Khan's 2003 address to the International Colloquium 'Word of God, Art of Man: The Qur'an and its Creative Expressions' organised by The Institute of Ismaili Studies (London, United Kingdom) http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/6815/

"One of the greatest of crimes is to destroy a work of art."

Hazrat Ali
Maxims of Ali

"No art form in the Muslim world has suffered from the insidious influence of alien cultures as much as architecture. Yet it was only a few hundred years ago -- a fragment of time in the great span of human history -- that architecture became the greatest of Islamic cultural art forms...."

"I fear the day when Islam will be our faith, yet its outward manifestation in the buildings we work and live in, the paintings and works of art we behold and the music we listen to, will be dominated by foreign cultures which have their roots neither in our spiritual beliefs nor in our great artistic heritage. In saying this, I am not advocating a narrow or chauvinistic approach to the nation's artistic development, nor is this a question of simply copying the forms of the past. Islamic art has always thrived on a liberal adaptation of
contemporary influences and at its greatest, was neither restrictive nor insular.”

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 1976 address at the luncheon hosted by the National Council of Culture and Arts (Karachi, Pakistan)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/1760/

"At the height of Islamic civilisations came a magnificent flowering of the arts and architecture: the buildings created by the great Islamic dynasties rank among the finest monuments of world culture. To focus one’s attention on material details of these creations and on their representation in the pictorial arts of the time makes one understand better how they reflect the all-encompassing unity of man and nature, central to Muslim belief. The aesthetics of the environment we build and of the arts we create are the reflections of our spiritual life, and there has always been a very definite ethos guiding the best Islamic architecture and artistic creation.

"Buildings can do more than simply house people and programmes. They can also reflect our deepest values; great architecture, like great art, captures esoteric thought in physical form. In Islamic thought, beauty and mystery are not separated from the intellect -- in fact, the reverse is true. As we use our intellect to gain new knowledge about Creation, we come to see even more profoundly the depth and breadth of its mysteries."

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 2012 Preface to ‘Architecture in Islamic Arts’ (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia; Singapore; St. Petersburg, Russia)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/10224/

"Architecture is the only art that is a direct reflector of poverty. Music does not reflect poverty in a tactile way, nor does literature. In architecture there is an inherent and unavoidable demonstration of the quality of life, or its absence.”
"Architects wield a strange and encompassing form of often unrecognised power. I can think of no human art form which exercises such a permanent influence over our lives. The architect can inspire us, overawe us or charm us. He can make us proud or humble. He can play upon nearly all our senses. He can create an impression of movements or immobility. He can encourage us to be gregarious or he can instill in us a deep sense of solitude. This is indeed the exercise of power, a power which has a deep and permanent impact on every aspect of our lives, on our relations with each other and on our attitudes towards this world and the universe around us. In Islam, where the faith demands disciplined integration and unity of all aspects of daily life, the potential and responsibility of the architect is especially significant."

"I do not believe that human relations are of sufficient interest, nor of sufficient permanence to keep a man happy all through his life. He must have something else to turn to. This need may express itself in this form of art, of scientific studies or mysticism, but more often it takes the form of a search for higher life."
"Anwari, Nizami, Mawlana Rumi, Saadi, Qa’ani and a host of others -- names that will be well known to Oriental scholars, but which will perhaps convey little to the general public here -- each in his own way gave a message to mankind. But the fundamental point of each message if carefully studied is that man’s greatest of all treasures, the greatest of all his possessions, was the inherent, ineffaceable, everlasting nobility of his own soul. In it there was forever a spark of true divinity which could conquer all the antagonistic and debasing elements in nature. And let me once more stress that this faith in the soul of man expressed in a great variety of ways -- in prose and verse, in art and architecture -- was not simply a religious or mystic faith but an all-embracing and immediate contact with a fact which, in every human being, is the central fact of existence....

"But is this immense [artistic] wealth of Iran to remain only a treasure of the Islamic East and its fringe in India? Is Europe, is America, is the West so rich in the joys of the spirit, in its immediate satisfaction with life, that it can afford to close its doors to what Iran has to offer in the highest spiritual satisfaction to mankind? In these days of intensive nationalism -- nationalism of a kind that wishes to turn even art, beauty and goodness into national possessions -- is this immense lesson of Iran to be forgotten? Iran in its language, in its culture, in its highest soul expression, has taken to its bosom and freely accepted the contributions of Greece and India, the immense stream from Islam, Arabia and the Turkish race. It has assimilated the best of each in order better to express its yearning after truth and beauty. Is this fundamental influence not to be brought into the service of the highest culture of the West?"

Sir Sultan Mahomed Shah, Aga Khan III's 1936 Iran Society Inaugural Lecture (London, United Kingdom)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/1273/

"[T]he two worlds, Muslim and non-Muslim, Eastern and Western, must, as a matter of urgency, make a real effort to get to know one
another, for I fear that what we have is not a clash of civilisations, but a clash of ignorance on both sides. Insofar as civilisations manifest and express themselves through their art, museums have an essential role to play in teaching the two worlds to understand, respect and appreciate each other and ensuring that whole populations are given fresh opportunities to make contact with each other, using new, modern methods imaginatively and intelligently to bring about truly global communication."

His Highness the Aga Khan's 2007 Address at the 'Musee-Musees' Round Table Conference, Louvre Museum (Paris, France)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/8283/

"There was a period in which Christians, Jews, and Muslims lived in harmony and shared a glorious intellectual and spiritual adventure. In Spain, Toledo was the main centre of this plural and prosperous civilisation, which promoted scientific progress, philosophical knowledge and artistic creativity. But time has eroded the traces of mutual understanding which was the basis of reciprocal respect.

"This is why the works of art which express the values of tolerance and pluralism, specific to the Muslim world and related to its ethnic, linguistic, and social diversity throughout its history, are important witnesses today. I think that the periods and the societies which have considered pluralism as a value can be useful examples to develop a cosmopolitan ethics, a concept which could give birth to a civil society based on the principle of merit and capable of integrating the best values of the different units of which it is composed."

His Highness the Aga Khan's 2009 Introduction to 'The Worlds of Islam in the collection of the Aga Khan Museum' (Madrid and Barcelona, Spain)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/10027/

"I believe strongly that the arts have a special and privileged role in fostering dialogue and knowledge. It is important, today, that the
peoples of the Muslim world, their pluralism, the diversity of their interpretations of the Qur’anic faith, the chronological and geographical extent of their history and culture, as well as their ethnic, linguistic and social diversity be better understood. Without words and without proselytising, art works from ‘other’ cultures bring discovery and understanding of the commonalities of our universal heritage.”

His Highness the Aga Khan's 2008 Introduction to 'Geographies of Islam' (Toledo, Spain)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/10026/

"The remarkable work of Yo-Yo Ma has enthralled audiences from all the countries of the Silk Route and beyond. By his leadership and imagination, he has proved that the force of cultural pluralism to bind people is as necessary, powerful and achievable today as was the Silk Route in history. It is my privilege and honour to be associated with the founder of the modern Silk Route, a cultural journey that inspires people to unity and joy through art.”

His Highness the Aga Khan's 2002 address at the opening of the Smithsonian Folklife Festival (Washington D.C., USA)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/6334/

See also: His Highness the Aga Khan on tradition and modernity in Islamic architecture - Of ‘bogus orientalism’ & ‘alien models’

See also: His Highness the Aga Khan on the ‘deconstruction of the cultural inheritance’
See also: His Highness the Aga Khan on the Aga Khan Music Initiative


Click here for this post in PDF format.