

“*The Path of Vision* and the Anxiety of Arab Vision in Modern Age”

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Civilization Sequence Program

Talk given on the “Takrim li-Amin al-Rihani”

Published in 1921, Rihani’s *The Path of Vision* is explicitly written from two subject positions. Part One, Rihani writes to and as an American. Part Two as a Syro-Lebanese Arab, written in Lebanon. The duality reflects the many binaries that bind modernity. For Rihani, notions of East/West, modern/tradition, progress/stagnation, spiritual/rational, seeing/blind polarize the essence of modern man-making him alienated from his true being. Rihani believes, however, that these alienating dichotomies can be transcended by a corrective “path of vision”

In the *Path of Vision*, Rihani makes clear that modernity is the champion of enlightenment ideals: intellectual and personal freedom, science and the death of superstition. Yet, in the West, the modern era has reduced the individual to his material circumstances, consequently creating “monominds”.

While modernity has given “civilized man” the tools “to study the underlying strata of his intellectual and spiritual make-up” (*Path*, 24), Rihani states, “[o]ur psychological analysis leads us...to the door of knowledge; and there, we must enter blindly...” (*Path*, 27-28)

Modern man must enter blindly because, for Rihani, ameliorating the disconnect between reality and experience, the soul and the mind is linked to a loss of vision for the West. If their mind is superior, he would say, their ability for progress impairs them to see the sublime.

In modern man, subconscious is driven away from the true “path of vision” by monomindism. This “path of vision...bridges the darkness between the eye and the soul, and without which there can be no vision.” (*Path*, 17)

“The psychology of the Orient is essentially deductive,” on the other hand, “whichdeprives them of the faculty of coordination. ...They live not in this world; they live in the universe. They *can* see what is beyond the mountain, but they *can not* see what is before their eyes... when their vision fails...they become irreconcilable, irrepressible, and absolutely irrational.” (*Path*, 158)

This “failure”—this inherent irrationality of the Arab—for Rihani is however “the triumph of something innate in [The Oriental]... prevents him from becoming a human machine. (*Path*, 162) The Oriental –is a liar, an indigent, crafty con-man but in “the Orient ... a tent-maker...might be a poet; a distiller of perfumes would be an authority on astronomy perhaps or jurisprudence...” (*Path*, 42). Rihani desperately insists on the thickness of the Oriental self, instead of its split nature (self/other) as in the West. The Easterner, despite his backward mind, has a “sweep of vision” the binds the subject to cosmos. (*Path*, 158)

The description of the multiplicity and vision of the Oriental reminds us of his definition of the genius-artist. A possessor of true vision, the artist unites split subject. He successfully “bridges” the gap between reality and soul, mind and body, experience and rationalism. “Michael Angelo and Benvenuto Cellini were archetypes of many lesser luminaries,” Rihani says “The sculptor...was not merely a worker in stone....the poet often became a statesman; the painter could detach himself from his canvas to mathematics.” (*Path*, 42)

The artist, in *The Path of Vision*, is someone who realizes the unity of the image, word, and harmony. (*Path*, 68) He is an idealized Oriental- like the protagonist Khaled in Rihani's *Book of Khaled*. The artist is a visionary, whose art shows the eternal truths "hidden under [Nature's] articulate charm." (*Path*, 60)

Rihani was no stranger to art nor was he ignorant of the prevailing artistic trends. He married Bertha Case in 1916, an American artist of little repute, who is said to have mullered in fauvist and cubist circles. Despite the prominence of the visual arts in his * thought, Rihani claimed not to be an expert. However, meeting with artists such as Matisse, Van Dongen, and Redon in Paris, he wrote several editorials for *The International Studio*—an art journal founded in 1897, with a particular penchant for romantic and fantastic art. Rihani often opens these articles usually stating that "I know little or nothing of the subject." ("Artists-I, 13)

The Lebanese sculpture Yusuf Huwayyik may confirm this portrait. During Rihani's first visit to Paris—a visit where he befriended Jibran Khalil Jibran—Huwayyik and Jibran take Rihani to the Louvre to look at works of antiquity and the Renaissance Masters. Huwayyik explains that Rihani is curious but looks at the works "philosophically" not artistically. Huwayyik quizzes Rihani who offers readings of Sumerian, Egyptian, and Greek statuary, which are impressionistic, calling one statue hard and restless, another "polite" even holy, while a Greek sculpture expresses "beauty, feeling, and Love."¹ Huwayyik's comments do not confirm his guest's lack of formal knowledge as much as suggest how Rihani understood art as **an affective (Bour slide)** experience. Rihani's paradigm resembles Clive Bell's definition of art and the significant form.² In this way, he was a man of his time. Yet, Rihani's self-proclaimed ignorance of

the formal qualities of art serves as a specific ideological statement. That is, the *source* of art's meaning is its content; its value comes from its ability to *affect*; and its role is to bridge the gap between the material subject and the soul.

Rihani rejects ephemeral art movements because they are concerned with formal techniques, which “try to *surprise* [nature] in her negligee.” (“Artists-I”, 14) Cubism, for Rihani as well as Huwayyik and Jubran, was derided precisely because its forms deform nature, their failure to paint in a self-evident language communicates a “fear [that these artists] would betray themselves” to us. (“Artists-I”, 13) Likewise, the skilled draughtsmanship of Degas is brilliantly analytic and formally masterful but hollow, failing to capture the depths and secrets of the human soul. (“Prints”, 83). **Munch's** (**slide**) undeniable talent, on the other hand, is weighed by “the obsession within him”; his art contributes to modern's art's “downward progression of the symbol.”³ (“Prints”, 85)

This concern for the degeneration of the symbol is the most explicit articulation of the anxiety that haunts Rihani's vision—an anxiety within modernity which modernism picks at. Cubism's real danger is that it poisons the eyes and perverts seeing. In fact, after seeing a cubist exhibition in 1918, Rihani states that “everything in the streets seemed blurred...I could scarcely see anything but squares, angles, animate and inanimate...” (Artists I, 12). He is soundly disturbed by the vision of modernism, stating that “..if Art can only thrive on degeneracy and social disease, then I say let us do away with Art.” (Artists I, 17)

All of this said, Rihani analysis of the “modern masters” can be extremely formal at times; focusing on line, light, and color of those like Gauguin. (“Prints,” 85) Unlike

the narrower mind of Huwayyik who rejected modernism in favor of a highly academic style, Rihani admires the “genius”⁴ and “rebellious spirit” of modernists such as Monet (Artists I, 14) but takes issue still with those such as Matisse, whose commitment seems surface. That is, Matisse himself recedes with ease from his painterly barbarism—a barbarism found in the East-- back into his life of civility . (“Artists-II”, 25)

The “path of vision” for Rihani can not be separated from the trope of the Oriental—the barbarism of the East that damns it to backwardness also offers the Oriental access to the transcendental. Curiously, Rihani’s ideal artists are not the marquis names such as Matisse, Van Gogh, and Gauguin, but secondary figures William Oberhardt, Emile Bourdelle , and Kees Van Dongen. Few possess the visionary insight into modern times, for Rihani, as Van Dongen, who is “curiously Oriental” in vision. What distinguishes his work from other fauvists is that Van Dongen “paints the degeneracy that is the fruit of modern civilization with a sympathetic brush, infusing it with fresh barbarous strength...” (“Artist I”, 15)

Kees Van Dongen (1877-1968) painted in Fauvists circles, exhibiting in le Salon des Independents. He painted largely portraits of women—that became fashionable with the bohemian upper-class by the 1920s. Yet, his portraits of wealthy sitters were not like **Sergeant’s (slide)** contemporaneous portraits of wealthy American women which would associate the ruling class women with a sense of beauty, elegance, and exclusivity. Van Dongen’s women are satirical-empty and haunting. Defined by sartorial codes like big hats and distinctive clothes, colorless pallors, their eyes are invariably blank.

Viewing Van Dongen’s Paris studio, Rihani comments “Women, women, women everywhere.” (**Women slide**) Instead of seeing the same coldness that he saw in empty

eyes of Munch's women (say in *Ashes*), he says that Van Dongen's treatment of them is "sympathetic", "eloquent and significant". (Artist I, 16) He continues saying that the women "are essentially Parisian, Baudelairian- powdered, painted, passionate, nervous, lascivious....marvelous eyes made more mysterious with kohl; seductive, destructive mouths made more voluptuous with rouge; lithe limbs made more fascinating in a satanic undulations of limbs and curves...adorable and dangerous women who combine the latest Paris manner, gesture, and social disease with the most primitive elemental instinct...They are melancholy pensive women..." 16)

The women are "rebellious", potentially free, but also licentious. The description chimes with his protestations against the superficialities "modern" women in *The Path of Vision*. "When a woman mundane" he states, "tells you that her hair is a wig, her complexion, paste and cream and rouge and art, might not this show of bankrupt pulchritude be designed to avert your eye from the more pathetic bankruptcy within?" (*Path*, 26)

Rihani was an undaunting supporter of women's emancipation. Yet, his support for women's rights was always undercut by an explicit fear of uncontrolled female sexual license. The anxiety is one that reflects his mixed feelings for the masters of modern art such as Degas and Munch whose vision did not lead to the spiritual but back to the corporal. (**Kiss slide**)

The tension in Van Dongen's painting between the purely libidinal existence of woman and her spiritual potential that *makes* her sublime is displaced by a critical blindness. That is, despite his own admission of the lasciviousness of these images of

women , Rihani writes, "The prurient in [Van Dongen's] work is, to my mind, a spiritual reaction" ("Artists-I", 15)

The spirituality of Van Dongen's paintings is confirmed for Rihani by painter's images of the East, particularly Arab women. Rihani mentions that the portraits of an Egyptian woman carrying a jug and a "modestly dressed" courtesan.⁵ Their eyes "gesture gracefully and discreetly" expressing "a sublime calm, a serene dignity." This is, he continues, "a striking contrast to the poor, painted Parisienne restless, nervous, perverse, lascivious, mysteriously pensive, brooding...perhaps contemplating suicide." ("Artists-I", 17) The Arab woman's "demure charm" communicates a "pious contentment even in the midst of riotous sensual desires"; this is in contradistinction to the "bluish glare of the electric light" that bathes the Parisian model that makes her an object of "libidinal caprices." ("Artists-I", 17).

As we have seen, psychology for Rihani helps modern man understand his condition but to understand the most "inner strata" we must proceed blindly. This critical blindness serves an essential cognitive purpose. Blindness displaces anxiety within modernity (the anxiety of the split subject [ignorant/conscious, alienated/ unified, licentious/liberated, etc.) and makes the vision of modernism productive. If representing the "prurient" can return us the spiritual, surely the Oriental can adopt a pureness a path of vision that will unite rationalism with spirituality, West with East.

This talks seems to be enframed by two time periods: 1911, when the *Book of Khaled* was published and 1921 when *The Path of Vision* was issued. His editorials on art fall neatly in-between the two. In the former, Khaled returns to his country after the CUP revolution. He is unambiguously political; perhaps even a provocateur against the

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quest, but it stays a passionately organic dream. As thus, Khalid's quest is a Romantic one, one geared towards a wild desire to change and engender change. Ameen Rihani's winds of change are thus Romantic in their wildness and softness, in their roar and calm, in their anger and love, and most of all in their disappointments and fulfillments.