

Distribution: limited

PARIS, 28 March 1978
Original: French

UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL,
SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATION

MEETING OF EXPERTS ON COMPARATIVE ISLAMIC ART

(Unesco, Paris, 6-7 April 1978)

Preliminary note on the establishment of the
Centre for Comparative Studies on Islamic Art

by

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CC-78/WS/11

PRELIMINARY NOTE
on the establishment of the
CENTRE FOR COMPARATIVE STUDIES ON ISLAMIC ART

by

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March 1978

A. FARABI UNIVERSITY

Farabi University aims to contribute to the harmonization and development of the different aspects of the cultural life of the Iranian nation in the context of socio-economic development.

In order to carry out this formidable task in the three main target areas of education, research and dissemination, the planners of Farabi University were careful to avoid the conventional lines of approach currently adopted in many countries and proposed instead to introduce innovations both in teaching methods and in programmes of study.

The main principles upon which the University has been founded are: the widening of programmes to take in other cultures, interdisciplinarity (the keystone of the system), the provision of parallel courses with a practical orientation as well as the traditional courses and, lastly, the organization of extension courses for the public, which involves geographical decentralization.

I. Education

The courses which are now provided in the towns of Karaj, Isfahan and Shiraz are centred around five major themes dealing with man and his environment: man and the cosmos, man and nature, man and technology, man and society, man and the arts. The teaching is not confined to technical skills as in the courses offered by the traditional schools of art, but aims to integrate the artist in his socio-cultural environment, within which he will have a decisive role to play.

The university programmes are divided into three successive stages, preceded by a one-year preparatory course followed by all students, which constitutes the common core.

At the first stage, five main options are offered:

- (a) environmental and architectural design
- (b) plastic arts and visual communication
- (c) applied arts and industrial design
- (d) performing arts and mass communication
- (e) music and related disciplines.

The first stage, which lasts for at least three years, provides students with a basic training in each discipline selected.

The second stage, which has no fixed duration, is devoted to specialization and the aim is to prepare students to cope with professional and social problems -- in other words, they are problem-oriented.

The third stage is devoted mainly to research and normally leads to the presentation of a thesis or a work of art.

II. Research

While this is the main purpose of the third stage, it is not excluded from the activities undertaken at the previous stages. In order to facilitate research, centres for specialized research in the various fields of artistic activity and experimental workshops are being set up. Some of the latter, known as intercultural workshops, will provide the framework for comparative research at both the national and the international levels.

III. Dissemination

This covers the organization of extension courses for the public, which is one of the most original features of the University. Extramural courses enable people interested in particular subjects, even if they are not secondary school graduates, to be trained in special workshops after selection by a jury. The extramural workshop for traditional Iranian instrumental and vocal music at Isfahan, for example, requires applicants for admission to have already undergone intensive training and is therefore more suitable for professional musicians than for students. Arts education for the general public is provided through active collaboration with other university establishments, in particular the Open University of Tehran, and, with the Iranian National Radio and Television Broadcasting Organization. Farabi University participates regularly in activities such as those which concerned Black African art and those which are being prepared on pre-Columbian art. It also undertakes the publication of books and the organization of public lectures, seminars, conferences and entertainment.

It is with reference to the principles and activities described above that the question of establishing a Centre for Comparative Studies on Islamic Art at Isfahan should be considered. Such a centre could be either recognized by Unesco or affiliated to Unesco; in the first case, it would be an Iranian institution, and in the second case, an international one.

B. CENTRE FOR COMPARATIVE STUDIES ON ISLAMIC ART

I. Reason for its establishment

Although a great deal of research work has been done in Muslim countries as well as in Western countries, it has often remained almost unknown among circles interested in the same fields of study, because of the isolation of the researchers and lack of co-operation at international level.

Farabi University proposes to improve this situation by setting up a data bank of its own and establishing links for co-operation among Muslim countries and between the latter and the Western world.

II. Aims

(a) With a view to facilitating research, Farabi University proposes to:

create a documentation centre

establish and encourage dialogue

set up common projects.

(b) In the field of education, the University is considering the possibility of creating a Chair of Comparative Studies on Islamic Art.

III. Programme

Farabi University proposes that the Centre should be established in Iran and more particularly at Isfahan, which is one of the geographical and cultural centres of Islamic Art. Moreover, suitable institutional facilities are already available in that city.

The activities proposed for the first years of the Centre's existence will cover the fields in which Islamic Art displays the same distinctive features from Black Africa to Indonesia and in which a certain amount of experience has already been acquired at Isfahan, namely:

1. architecture
2. the applied arts.

These basic courses will be linked up - in accordance with the principle of interdisciplinarity - with sociology and history courses, as well as with courses on modern Islamic art and relations with the Western world, for Islamic art is a living art which is by no means confined to the artistic heritage of the Muslim countries.

IV. Activities

- (a) Supporting and encouraging bilateral and multilateral research projects and ensuring the co-ordination of national projects
- (b) Publishing books and a journal, making films and producing audio-visual material related to the Centre's fields of interest
- (c) Facilitating the work of researchers or students reading for a doctorate
- (d) Organizing general courses at Farabi University and at other universities in interested countries.

V. Operational stages

- (a) Declaration of the establishment of the Centre of Comparative Studies on Islamic Art, to be made jointly by Farabi University and Unesco
- (b) Invitation to other centres or to specialists to participate in the Centre's activities
- (c) Establishment of a Board of Trustees
- (d) Election of a director by Farabi University
- (e) Convening of a symposium to draw up a short- and medium-term work plan.

VI. Financial resources

Farabi University will undertake to provide the Centre with suitable premises and will cover Secretariat costs and the salary of the Director.

The expenses incurred for common projects will be met jointly by Unesco, Farabi University and the country directly concerned.

Subsistence allowances for experts will be covered by Farabi University and travel expenses by Unesco or other foundations.