

## **ODUCE: The Reflecting Heart.**

### **Alternative Versions of the Chinese and Greek Painter Story**

#### **1) From al-Ghazālī *The Revival of the Religious Sciences*<sup>1</sup>**

Thus the heart has two doors. One door opens toward the unseen world of spirits which is the Preserved Tablet and the world of the angelic. The other door opens toward the five external senses which lay hold of the visible material world. This visible world also resembles the unseen world of the spirits to a certain extent...

The story is told that once the Chinese and the Byzantine Greeks vied with one another before a certain king as to the beauty of their workmanship in decorating and painting. So the king decided to give over to them a portico so that the Chinese might decorate one side of it and the Byzantine Greeks the other side, and to let a curtain hang down between them so as to prevent either group from looking at the other. And he did so. The Byzantines gathered together numberless strange colors, but the Chinese entered without any colour at all and began to polish their side and to furbish it. When the Byzantines had finished, the Chinese claimed that they had finished also. The king was astonished at their statement and the way in which they had finished the decorating without any colour at all. So they were asked, 'How have you finished the work without any colour?' They replied, 'You are not responsible for us; lift the veil.' So they lifted it, and behold on their side shone forth the wonders of the Byzantine skill with the added illumination and dazzling brilliance, since that side had become like unto a polished mirror by reason of such furbishing. Thus the beauty of their side was increased by its added clearness.

The care of the saints is cleansing, polishing, purifying and clarifying the heart until the true nature of the Real shines forth clearly therein with utmost illumination is like the work of the Chinese. The care of the learned and the philosophers in acquiring and adorning knowledge, and the representation of this adornment in the heart, is like the work of the Byzantines.

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<sup>1</sup> Ghazali, *Sharh aja'ib al-qalb*, ch. 8 of Book XXI of *Revival of the Religious Sciences (Ihya' 'ulum al-din)* (trans. W. Skillie).

## 2) From Ibn ‘Arabī’s *Meccan Revelations*<sup>2</sup>

Now there is a story about a wise man who wanted to demonstrate this spiritual station to the king: while a master painter occupied himself with painting a picture of the most exceptional composition and the most perfect workmanship, the sage devoted himself to burnishing the [opposite] wall which was facing the paintings. Between the two of them there was a curtain hanging down. When they had both finished their work, and done their very best as far as they were each concerned, the king came and stood in front of what the artist had painted: he saw marvelous pictures, with such beauty of composition and excellence of painting as would dazzle the senses. He looked at the colours in this beautiful composition, and it was just like looking at a wonderful view.

Then he looked at what the other [the sage] had done in burnishing that surface, but he saw nothing. Then the sage said to him: “O king, my work is more full of grace and loveliness than his, and my wisdom more recondite and difficult to comprehend than his. Raise now the curtain between me and him, so that you may see at one glance my work and his.”

So the king lifted the curtain, and upon that burnished surface was displayed all that the other man had painted, in an even more beautiful form than it was in itself. And the king was astonished. Then the king also saw his own form and the form of the sage-polisher in that surface, at which he was [even more] bewildered and astounded.

“How can this be?” he asked, to which the sage replied: “O king, I did this for you as an example of your own self in relation to the forms of the world: if you were to polish the mirror of your soul with spiritual practices and exercises, until you were pure of heart and you had removed the rust of nature from your soul, then you would receive the forms of the world in the mirror of your essence (*dhât*), wherein everything that is in the whole world is portrayed.”

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<sup>2</sup> Ibn ‘Arabi, *Futuhat al-Makkiyya*, ch. 167 (on the true knowledge of the alchemy of happiness, trans. Stephen Hirtenstein), described during the mystic’s passage through the Seventh Heaven of Abraham.