

Homayoun Hemmati

The Essence of Islamic Art

Introducing Islamic Art

Although the real essence of art is not disclosed to logical thinking, but we can claim that art is the mirror of a culture and its world view. There is no case to which this statement more directly applies than to the art of the Islamic world. Not only does its art reflect its cultural values, but even more importantly, the way in which its adherents, the Muslims, view the spiritual realm, the universe, life, and the relationship of the parts to the whole. Art conveys the outlook and reflects beliefs, values and complete ontology of a groupe, society or nation.

For the Muslim, reality begins with and centers around God ("Allah" in Arabic), the One, the Unique, the Sovereign, the Holy, the Almighty, the All-Knowing, the Loving, the Most Merciful. All existence is subject to His will and His laws. He is the center of conscious Muslims' worship and aspirations, the focus of their lives. God is omnipresent, omniscient and omnipotent and all creatures and universe are only His manifestations.

Since the command and authority are one, all things are bound together under God's Lordship as parts of an all-encompassing divine scheme, which includes all aspects of being and life -- whatever is both inside and outside of time and space, and embracing both the macrocosm in its most awesome and glorious manifestations and the microcosm in its most minute forms. God creates and sustains His creation how and as He wills, and all affairs return to Him for ultimate decision and judgment. Therefore, he is both the origin and final goal of existence. This is the very core of belief in "Tawhid".

With such a belief system, the Muslim is convinced of the balance and harmony of all things in existence, even when there appear to be confusing contradictions

and imbalances, regarding these as the reflection of man's limited understanding and knowledge. Nothing is looked upon as occurring randomly or by chance, for all is part of the Plan of the All-Wise, Most Merciful Planner. One of the vital beliefs of the Muslim is that the totality of things, all good and evil, proceed from the Lord of all being. God is the only creator and real agent who constantly is acting in the universe.

Because of the strict injunctions against such depictions of humans or animals which might result in idol-worship, Islamic art developed a unique character, utilizing a number of primary forms: geometric, arabesque, floral, and calligraphic, which are often interwoven. From early times, Muslim art has reflected this balanced, harmonious world-view, as a very beautiful and artistic work of God. Creation is the real artwork of God.

Cosmos in Islamic view

In the Islamic view, God is the Ultimate Reality. All things in the visible creation emanate from Him and are manifestations of His divine Names or Attributes (Sifat). He created the cosmos, both what is known to man and what is unknown, and He is the Sustainer of all things, with everything turning to Him and centered upon Him. This is evident in the very structure of atoms. God can be seen in all creatures as his very true mirrors.

The early Muslim artists and artisans who derived the intricate systems of interconnected geometric forms which constitute the bases of Islamic geometric art of course had no idea of such realities. Nonetheless, the graphic manner in which they conceived God's supreme central place in the cosmos, and the connection of the parts of creation to Him and to the whole, reflects a very significant approximation of what can now be documented by science. Indeed, artistic view is an inseparable part of Islamic worldview.

The Tradition of Islamic Art

Throughout the history of Islam, its art has taken a great variety of forms in the different parts of the Muslim world, which stretches from North Africa to Southeast Asia, according to local customs and conditions, ranging from unsophisticated folk art to that of the most skilled artist or artisan. In the works of the latter, whether it be a master calligrapher, a renowned ceramists or potter, a skilled embroiderer or miniature-maker, the legacy of fine craftsmanship, involving the mastery of an art or craft along traditional lines complete with meticulous attention to fine detail, is characteristic.

A sense of beauty is essential to Islamic art, a sense of exaltation or going beyond these traditions persist today, and Islamic architecture and decorative arts are still very much alive and valued in many parts of the Muslim world. While Western-style art forms and machine work have to an extent eroded the traditional forms, nonetheless, handwork is respected and loved, an important aspect of the decoration of mosques and Muslim homes. In particular, decoration featuring Qur'anic calligraphy is an important aspect of Islamic art.

The Ageless Legacy of Islamic Art

Arabic is the language of Islam. It is the language of its prophet, Muhammad; the language in which the Holy Qur'an, Islam's sacred scripture, was revealed to him by God; the language of Muslims' worship; and the language which binds Muslims of all times and places together in a single cohesive brotherhood. Although, Qur'an belongs to all Muslims and Islam is beyond all limitations related to race, geography, nationality, border and gender.

Because of Muslims' profound respect and love for the Qur'an, the art of calligraphy was developed among them from early times to a very high degree. Throughout the Muslim world, Qur'anic verses embellish mosques, palaces and homes, businesses, and, in some places, public areas. Often the calligraphy is done in conjunction with decorative motifs, lovingly embellishing what is most sacred and precious. Doubtless, calligraphy has played a very significant role in Islamic civilization.

God and Beauty

God is beautiful and loves beauty, so said the Prophet of Islam some 1400 years ago. He also said, "God likes that when you do anything, you do it excellently." Such prophetic sayings (hadiths) have provided the impetus for Muslims' embellishment and beautification of their places of worship, homes, and even of articles in common use in everyday life. The emphasis in Islamic art is on ornamentation rather than on art for art's sake; while the names of the producers of the finest works of Islamic art may not have survived, their works have become prototypes and models on which other artists and craftsmen patterned their works, or from which they derived the impetus for related work.

Geometry

A common feature of Islamic art is the covering of surfaces covered with geometric patterns.

This use of geometry is thought to reflect the language of the universe and help the believer to reflect on life and the greatness of creation.

So how is geometry seen to be spiritual?

- Because circles have no end they are infinite - and so they remind Muslims that Allah is infinite.
- Complex geometric designs create the impression of unending repetition, and this also helps a person get an idea of the infinite nature of Allah.
- The repeating patterns also demonstrate that in the small you can find the infinite ... a single element of the pattern implies the infinite total.

The use of patterns is part of the way that Islamic art represents nature and objects by their spiritual qualities, not their physical and material qualities.

The repeated geometric patterns often make use of plant motifs, and these are called arabesques. Stylized Arabic lettering is also common.

So, Islamic art focuses on the *spiritual* representation of objects and beings, and not their physical qualities.

The Muslim artist does not attempt to replicate nature as it is, but tries to convey what it represents.

This lets the artist, and those who experience the art, get closer to Allah.

Today, the finest arts, including rugs, are to be found in Turkey, Iran, Syria, Pakistan, India, Egypt and Morocco, where the legacy of Islamic arts remains alive and strong.

Conclusion

Based on what we explained very briefly, one can claim that the very essence of Islamic art is the belief of “Tawhid” or unity of God. The real core of Islamic art is the manifestation of “Tawhid” and monotheistic worldview in its totality and beauty.¹

¹ This short article was presented to the conference “Aus 1001 Nacht” held in Münster Museum (Germany), 21 Jan. to 22 March 2009.

