

Understanding Islam

Series Four: Bearers of the Final Message

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Part Nine: The Art of Islam

Can you imagine any human being without a concept of beauty? Something beautiful: words, nature, music, a bird in flight, colour, a building? Surely every one of us has some relationship to something beautiful. What impact does this beauty have on us? We might say: “It stirs my soul.” “It moves me.” “It lifts my spirits.” We could say that the experience of beauty is a spiritual experience. Indeed it seems to touch the depths of our spirit, which in where we are able as human beings to have a relationship with God. There is a Hadith of the Prophet Muhammad that says: “God is beautiful and God loves beauty.” Indeed, the encounter with the beautiful is an encounter with God. We have the saying: “All that glitters is not gold.” This could be taken here to mean that some things that appear to be beautiful in fact are not but they belong to the category of false delusion. The “apparently beautiful” must be examined with a degree of caution to see if it truly lifts the spirits to God or to some other ungodly object.

Back to Makka

Muhammad lived in the idol-worshipping city of Makka for most of his life. The Arabs of that time had made many idols that they worshipped. These were blocks of stone or carved wood, stone or clay. It was into this context that the message of pure monotheism (*tawhid*) came and the criterion of being a Muslim was whether one had turned one’s back on the many idols and worshipped the one God or not. This enables us to see the absolute prohibition of any object (statue, carving, painting) that might be worshipped instead of the worship of God. Such objects represent “false beauty;” they do not lift the spirit to the one God alone and are thus forbidden as “false gods.”

This can give us our first definition of the art of Islam: “the art that expresses submission to the one God.”

Islam, the Qur'an and the Prophet, do not appear on a blank page of history but rather into a world that already had some forms of art. The first gesture of Islam in this regard was one of purification; anything that did not accord with the message of Islam was excluded. We can see this not only in the exclusion of idols but also in various forms of pre-Islamic Arab poetry and satire. That which placed “false gods” before the eyes and hearts of the believers was excluded. As the Muslim empires spread to new territories and cultures, this process of exclusion of that which did not accord with the message of Islam continued but it was joined by a counter-part process of taking in and adapting those cultural and artistic forms that were encountered that fitted with Islamic perspectives. In time, various artistic forms were developed that particularly expressed an Islamic world-view.

This leads us to a second and complementary definition of the art of Islam: “the art that expresses the world-view of Muslims.”

Images of living creatures

The prohibition of any image that might be worshipped instead of God [Q. 5:90] already noted has often been extended in Muslim thinking to all representations of living creatures, although such are not forbidden explicitly by the Qur'an. There are several Hadith and accounts of episodes in the life of Muhammad that point in this direction. The most widely cited Hadith runs: “Angels do not enter a house in which there is a representation of a living creature (*taswir*) or a dog.” With only a minute number of exceptions, e.g., a *mihrab* in Mosul from the 11th century, throughout the Muslim centuries and various cultures, this prohibition has been upheld against any representation of any animate object (humans and animals) in mosques.

When it comes to buildings other than places of worship, there is a wider range of interpretation by Muslim scholars. Some extend the absolute prohibition and so do not allow any representation of living creatures in their homes or public buildings. Other scholars restrict this to a prohibition of Prophets and angels. Other Muslim scholars restrict this to anything that could be worshipped instead of God, i.e., things that could be taken as idols. This opens the way for the depiction of animals and humans in homes and public buildings such as palaces, bath houses, places of rest and recreation, and on pottery, utensils and manuscripts. This interpretation can be seen in many Muslim empires throughout the ages: Umayyads, Abbasids, Fatimids, the Umayyad Caliphate of Spain, Mamluks in Egypt, Safavids in Persia and the Ottomans. Sometimes we find animals represented without their heads as a reminder of the stricter interpretation.

With the coming of photography in the modern period, this has brought a challenge to many Muslims. Is it permissible to have photographs of family members within the home? Opinions vary: some will avoid all such photographs, some will permit them but not in a room in which prayers are offered, some will permit them even in such a room but not in the direction of prayer (*qibla*) and some will turn them face-down at times of prayer. There is an account from the time of the Prophet when he ordered that a decorated wall-hanging should be moved from the direction of prayer in the home of one of his wives so that it would not distract him at prayer. The over-riding concern of avoiding any hint of a return to idol-worship can be seen clearly.

The arrival of television prompted a further discussion amongst the scholars, which was resolved by most through the understanding that television pictures are not permanent representations (they disappear when the television is switched off) and so they were permitted. There are live television streams transmitted on the internet from the Sacred Mosque of Makka and the Prophet's Mosque in Madina.

The decoration of buildings

The original Prophet's Mosque in Madina was a primitive building with a perimeter wall and a roofed portion from which the Prophet led prayers. Over the centuries, this has been rebuilt several times and extended hugely to its present form. The first Muslim decorated building was the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, which was completed in 691. This was decorated inside with verses from the Qur'an executed in artistic writing, which was the beginning of the use of calligraphy in Muslim buildings. An important point may be noted here; the decoration was executed by Christian craftsmen, who had such skills, which were not yet developed amongst Muslims. The art of Islam is thus seen to be inspired by the world-view of Muslims but is not restricted to Muslim artists. Such Byzantine Christian artists were also employed in the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus, which was completed in 715.

This form of decoration was enhanced once Muslims came into contact with Greek geometry from the great age of translation under the Abbasids. The style is generally subsumed under the title of Arabesque, comprising geometrical, vegetative and calligraphic forms. This gives us another critical pointer to the art of Islam; it tends to abstraction and not literal representation. The beautiful forms employed elevated the souls of the beholders to seek the divine and not the imitation of an earthly object. When floral patterns were used, they abstracted the form away from any particular flower, leaf or tree into something that sought geometrical replication and symmetry, thus lifting the spirits of the believers from the mundane particular to the abstract quest for divine intimacy.

There were periods in Muslim history, e.g., in the 13th century, when schools of painting developed that included portraits of men and women, always fully clothed in modest ways, in the Persian, Turkish and Indian Muslim cultures. Even sometimes, we find representations of the Prophets and angels during this period but the principles of respect and abstraction were observed by obliterating the faces of those represented with a white form-less oval.

Architecture as an expression of the art of Islam

Various architectural forms were developed within Muslim culture. In the time of the Prophet, those who called people to prayer merely climbed to the roof of the highest building near the mosque and called from there. A tower to elevate the caller (*minaret*) was first introduced in Basra around the year 666. The *minaret* became a universal architectural form and was developed according to the architectural styles and material of the various cultures where Islam became embedded: square towers, cylinders, polygons, spiral external staircases and pagoda-shaped roofs. The first recorded prayer niche (*mihrab*) in a mosque was built in the Prophet's Mosque around 710. The *mihrab* marked the direction of prayer and thus was a natural visual focus within mosques and so was decorated in elaborate and intricate abstract styles.

The first dome that graced a Muslim building was, of course, the Dome of the Rock but domes soon became a universal theme in Muslim architecture. They took their styles from local culture: pointed, bulbous, hemi-spherical and onion-shaped. The dome had practical advantages: it provided an additional volume of air and dispersed the heat of the congregation, and it acted as a sound-enhancer for the voice of the *imam*. It had also an aesthetic character: it symbolised the vast expanse of the desert and served as a reminder of the infinite magnitude of God. Domes were used not only in mosques but also in other buildings, such as mausoleums.

An element of Islamic architecture was to flood the building with light, remembering the symbolism of God as light [Q. 24:35], thus elevating the spirits of the worshippers. In addition to windows to allow the light to penetrate the building, arches played an important role: from the simple rounded, to the horse-shoe and so to pointed arches, even in double tiers to provide extra height and light. In arching and in all elements of Islamic architecture, symmetry was a crucial factor; it is a combination of the natural and the geometrical worlds. In time we see the symmetry in external as well as internal forms, e.g., the pairing of *minarets* and the balancing of component buildings such as the mosque and *dhikr* hall on either side of the Taj Mahal. The Taj and the Alhambra Palace in Granada must surely rank as world master-pieces in any list of architectural splendours.

Objets d'art

As Islamic influence spread, so further cultural artistic forms were embraced according to Islamic principles. Pottery and ceramics were adopted from Persian, Chinese and Byzantine cultures and used for practical objects as well as works of art. Again the typical motifs were calligraphy, vegetable forms and geometrical patterns with occasional human and animal representations. Finely figured objects were made in metal, from iron amalgams to silver and gold, and in crystal, glass and ivory.

Poetry, Music and dance

Poetry became the high-point of verbal art in Islam, which was executed in all the major Islamic languages. It found particular expression amongst sufi writers, who used the poetic forms to express deeper emotions concerning God and the creation.

Islam has always had a cautious attitude towards music in general because of its association with forbidden practices such as wine-drinking and illicit sexual encounters. The nature of music is to work on the human senses to transport the soul into new experiences; it is something therefore that needed to be kept under control to ensure that such experiences were godly. The harmony of sounds has a beauty to the human ear but it also has an inner dimension. Al-Ghazali drew attention to this and spoke of the outer form being accessible to anyone but the inner dimension needing to be appreciated by the believing heart. The sufis in general speak in similar terms, saying that the inner dimension of music stirs the heart to seek God and thus music has an important part in some sufi schools. The *nay* or end-blown reed flute was

especially favoured in those schools influenced by sufi masters like Rumi, who said that its sound “laid bare the human soul.”

Those schools of Islam that give a more restricted place to music limit it to the unaccompanied human voice and simple rhythm instruments, such as the single-sided Arab drum (*daf*). The human voice is powerfully used in the elongation of sounds in the calling of the *adhan*, which can have a profound impact, especially when the call is taken up from several *minarets* in sequence. The modulation of the voice in recitation of the Qur'an enables the words to have an impact that transcends their meaning and there is a long tradition of songs in praise of the Prophet (*nasheeds*).

Dance is a limited artistic expression in the art of Islam. We have records of the Prophet approving of children's dancing and the performance of African warriors. Some single-sex dancing developed, especially amongst women in private. For some sufi groups, rotating and rhythmic movements formed a vehicle to promote the soul's flight into the divine embrace.

The pinnacle of the art of Islam

Many of the art forms that developed within Muslim societies can be seen as accommodating and refining local cultures according to Islamic principles but perhaps the pinnacle of the art of Islam is seen in the art of calligraphy. It was, above all, the art of writing beautifully the word of God from the Qur'an and thus a vehicle for conveying the sublime nature of the sacred text. The lines, curves and intricacy of calligraphy work on the soul in such a way that it is rightly called “visual *dhikr* – the prayer of the constant remembrance of God.”