Background article: Expressions, Islamic art

The Art of Islam

Can you imagine any human being who lacks a concept of beauty? Something beautiful: words, nature, music, a bird in flight, colour, an intricate design, 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 is 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. However, 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, rather 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 natural blocks of stone, or carvings of 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 or not one had turned one's back on the many idols and worshipped the one God alone. This enables us to see the context of the absolute prohibition of any object (statue, carving, painting, natural phenomenon) that might be worshipped instead of the worship of God alone. 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 action 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". Throughout the Muslim centuries and various cultures, this prohibition has been upheld against any representation in mosques of any animate object (literally: any object possessing an *anima* or soul, therefore all humans and animals), with only a minute number of exceptions, e.g., a *mihrab* in Mosul from the 11th century. This is also normally extended to trees, as these were sometimes also objects of worship.

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 Muslim scholars restrict this to anything that could be worshipped instead of God, i.e., things that could be taken as idols. Other scholars restrict this only to a prohibition of Prophets and angels. These latter interpretations open the way for the depiction of animals and humans in homes and public buildings such as palaces, bath houses, and places of rest and recreation, and on pottery, utensils and manuscripts (not the Qur'an, of course). This interpretation can be seen in many Muslim empires throughout the ages: Umayyads based in Damascus, Abbasids centred on Baghdad, Fatimids in and around Egypt, the Umayyad Caliphate of Spain, Mamluks in Egypt, Safavids in Persia and the Ottomans from Turkey to the Middle East. Sometimes we find animals represented without their heads as a reminder of the stricter interpretation.

The coming of photography in the modern period 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. One can see a parallel here to the customary practice of never walking in front of someone performing their *salat*, in case the person is between the one at prayer and the *qibla* at the time of prostration; there should be no hint of prostration to anyone or anything other than God. 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 and so they are permitted (they are actually made up of thousands of tiny points of light that change every instant and disappear when the television is switched off). 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 consisting only of 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 competed 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 (9th century onwards). 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 elevate 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 promoted geometrical replication and symmetry, thus lifting the spirits of the believers from the mundane particular to the abstract quest for divine intimacy.

Over the centuries, various forms of calligraphy developed: these often bore the influence of one culture or another. The most common piece of calligraphy was the basic statement of Muslim faith: the *shahada*. The name of Muhammad was also common, as were some of the Beautiful Names of God and verses from the Qur'an. It was common to find calligraphy and Arabesque decoration in ceramic tiles set into the interior and exterior walls of mosques and other buildings. Other media for decoration were mosaics, paint (especially gold-coloured paint), gold-plated lettering to write verses of the Qur'an, carved stonework, and patterns made by bricks, stones and jewels.

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 formless 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 the *adhan* from there. A tower (*minaret*) to elevate the caller (*muezzin*) 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.

One 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 onwards in time 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.

The Qur'an uses the term Garden (*Jannah*) for Paradise. Over time, gardens became associated with architectural features such as walls, arches, pagodas and raised beds. The theme of symmetry was apparent and the use of water was customary: as beautiful fountains, waterfalls, channels and to fill the air with the sound of water trickling from one level to another. Muslim concepts of modesty often meant that the garden was set in an inner quadrangle out of sight of non-family members. To provide a flow of air and a viewing position for women who did not normally leave the house, elaborate balconies were designed for houses with the sides closed in

lattice-work to hide those within whilst allowing for air to flow through and those within to look out.

Objets d'art

As Islamic influence spread, so further cultural artistic forms were embraced according to Islamic principles. Pottery, ceramics, and textiles 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. The range of objects made in this way was extensive: some were used in worship, such as lights and incense-burners, some were for domestic use, such as crockery, carpets, wall-hangings and utensils, various forms of dress were decorated, and it was common to find decoration of prized weapons, such as swords and daggers.

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. Two outstanding examples of sufi poets in Persian were Rumi (1207-1273) and Hafiz (c.1325-1390). Memorising poetry and taking part in poetry recitals are common features of many Muslim cultures.

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 (d. 1111) 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 and is perceived to spread out through a town or city like the ripples in a pond of water. 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. A highly developed form of this can be seen in the 'whirling dervishes' of the Mehlavi Order of sufis originally associated with Jamal al-Din Rumi and the city of Konya in Turkey.

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 words 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".