

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Islamic Values in Islamic Art

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## INTRODUCTION

Religion is a driving force in any culture and affects most, if not all, aspects of a community's life. The same is true for Islam, which has infiltrated numerous cultures and has become a part of their identity. These new identities find their roots both in their regional culture and in the religion of Islam to varying degrees. Unlike other religions, Islam has a whole genre of design named after it. Islamic art and architecture have a rich history in all the lands that have hosted the religion. Although it is not odd for a religion to dictate certain principles of design and give birth to new architectural typologies, for it to have an elaborate scheme that overarches art, architecture, and even urban design is incredible, to say the least. In terms of design, "Islamic" is an aesthetic value and design language that reflects in the culture of a people ranging from the tiniest jewelry boxes to the scale of walled cities. With the formative period of the style being long past, Islamic art and architecture now have an established visual language. We accept a certain set of aesthetic features as belonging to the Islamic style without pondering over their beginning and evolution as a representation of the religion that they are named after.

The natural question that comes to mind is: how did a religion translate into an art form? This paper aims to explore the modifications that took place in the design field of art that find their basis in the theology of Islam. What was the effect of Islamic traditions, be it Quranic verses and hadith narrations, on the physical aspects of art and design? To

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answer this question, it would be helpful to identify the context in which the Islamic style was formalized and became a guideline for future design endeavors.

In recent times, the contemporary aesthetic has found its way into the art and architecture of Muslim societies. There have been attempts to modernize the Islamic style by combining it with the contemporary style, resulting in the amalgamation of art and architecture that receive both praise and critique. The Islamic style is being rebranded in different parts of the world with different features, be it replacement of domes with angular structures or geometric patterns with parametric designs. Time has finally caught up with the Islamic style, for better or for worse. Traditionalists disagree with this change and call for a more culturally sensitive design that stays true to the socio-religious roots of the region and preserves its individual identity. It is relevant in this time to revisit the origin and manifesto of Islamic art to be able to make an informed decision for its future direction. This paper attempts to explore this concern and add to this important debate.

**Keywords:** Figurative imagery, Islamic geometry, Islamic calligraphy, Art evolution, Muslim culture

## LITERATURE REVIEW

In the context of Islamic art, it is important to understand that the evolution of Muslim thought as design, be it art or architecture, is deeply and completely affected by the culture, religion, and social norms of its regions. Design is neither created nor is it understood in isolation. It is a principle of design for its conception to be reflective of its context. To understand why Islamic art is the way it is, we need to examine the roots from which it originated.

The spirit of the time is a theory put forward by prominent architectural philosopher Hegel in his book *Phenomenology of the Spirit* (Hegel 2018). The concept of the Spirit or the Zeitgeist, as termed by earlier German philosophers, states that there is a force that dictates the characteristics of an era owing to the cultural and social background of its people. According to this theory, social ideas translate into the art and architecture, as seen with major stylistic movements, and become a physical manifestation of a community's ideals. It is natural for political, social, economic, and cultural associations to infiltrate the creative process. This theory can be extended to encompass Islamic art and its evolution, affirming the effect of a religion on the art practices of a region.

According to Oleg Grabar, arts were influenced primarily by four forces which affected them in varying degrees (Ettinghausen and Grabar 2001, 35). These four influencers are Muslim thought, Muslim literature, social/ethnic context of the region, and religious diversity within Islam. According to him, the first two factors affected the whole of the Muslim world, while the impact of the last two differed from region to region and cannot be generalized. Therefore, the aim of this research is to identify the pattern of how the practice of art changed from region to region with Muslim invasion. For this purpose, it is important to note the following three contributing factors:

1. The background: pre-Islamic Arabian art and architecture
2. The host: art and aesthetics of the region

### 3. Faith filter: morphing the existing style into a new Islamic language

These factors are introduced briefly for clarity as follows. As the background remained the same in all cases, it shall not be discussed in this research. However, the influence of the region and faith shall be explored in the research of Islamic art forms.

## Background

Pre-Islamic Arabian art and architecture, especially in the region of the birth of Islam, was miniscule at best. This time of the Arab history is known as the period of ignorance (*jahiliya*) by later historians (Hattstein and Delius 2000). Artistic culture and, to a large extent, its absence validate the name of the era. The Arabian lifestyle was nomadic, which eliminated the need for permanent building structures, while art and luxury items were mostly not locally produced but rather were imported from Egypt, the Mediterranean, and India. The larger Arabia, including Yemen, Petra, and Palmyra, did host a rich artistic narrative owing to the history of their rule and a different lifestyle (Hattstein and Delius 2000).

## Host Regions

Islam spread far and wide soon after the death of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). Muslim Arabs who had little to no heritage of their own with regard to developed and formal arts were suddenly exposed to the wonders of the newly conquered lands (Mozatti 2010, 22). Byzantium, Mesopotamia, and Iran are some of these lands which had a rich cultural heritage to boost. To understand the beginnings of Islamic art, it is important to find out the reaction of these peoples who were strangers to such visual aesthetics of art and architecture. Their initial reaction, as is natural to assume, was that of awe and astonishment. Later, these styles were rejected by the conquerors on the basis of their delineation from the Islamic values, especially the depiction of figurative imagery for religious structures and objects (Mozatti 2010, 22). There was, however, a more flexible approach when it came to non-religious art and architecture.

## Faith Filter

While discussing Islamic art, it is important to keep in mind the diversity in the understanding and interpretation of Islamic thought as it translates into arts. Without this disclaimer, seemingly Islamic art of one region would seem to be contradictory to the other. The biggest confusion lies in the depiction of figurative forms and whether they are prohibited or not. This is a concern that is dealt with differently in different schools of thought in Islam. Quran is the major and most authentic source of knowledge in the religion of Islam. Matters that are explicitly mentioned in the Quran are unanimously accepted by all schools of thought. The same is not the case for the books of hadith that store narrations of the Prophet (pbuh). Although guidelines for art are not found in the Quran, they appear in some hadith narrations. Hadith narrations have multiple degrees of authenticity, and differences in the interpretation can be found even for the most authentic ones. These differences become the reasoning behind the intent of any specific artistic outcome.

Mozatti (2010, 22) addresses the problematic nature of the word 'Islamic' in association

with art. He throws light on the basic question of whether art produced in Muslim lands is termed Islamic whether or not it adheres to the teachings of the religion. Similarly, there is difficulty in categorizing an art piece or built structure whose patron is an individual of another faith but resembles the Islamic style in its formal characteristics, e.g. the Mudejar church in Spain (Mozatti 2010). Because of these complex opinions and understandings of Islam with regard to art, we see a diversity of artistic expressions. Although some of the artistic styles owe their variety of conception to the existing style of the context, yet some are a representation of an individual's understanding of what the faith allows.

To understand the basic idea of the setting in which Islamic art was born and bloomed, it is necessary to know about the backdrop and framework in which Islamic art was formalized. Moving forward, the research focuses on the Islamic values that were the major contributing factor of this form of art, the understanding of these values by artists, and their creative expression, i.e. applications of Islamic art.

## RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

To understand the foundation and formation/canonization of Islamic art.

To observe the application of Islamic values in Islamic art.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

What are the guidelines for art in the Islamic tradition?

What are some applications of Islamic values in Islamic art?

## METHODOLOGY

This paper follows the methodology of interpretive historical research since it explores events of the past to fully understand them in their context. The event in this case is the merging of Islamic values into the art of newly conquered regions. In this paper, the aim is to investigate a cultural shift by understanding its origin and evolution. For such an analysis, historical research would be the most beneficial. This is carried out in the literature review where historical facts and scholarly opinions are discussed. Data for this research is published literature pertaining to Islamic art and its conceptualization.

To conduct this research in a coherent manner, the approach starts from Islamic traditions that establish the Islamic standard, followed by the understanding of these traditions and their translation into design. Case studies are discussed to identify the Islamic modifications. The creative perception or intent relating to the art genre is also accounted for. These case studies would be representative of different forms in which Islamic art is practiced. The following is the framework that will be used for studying Islamic art:

### Section 1: Islam's Perspective on Art – Relevant Islamic Traditions (Hadith Narrations)

Islam has two major sources of knowledge from which laws and theology are derived. These two sources are the Quran (word of God) and hadith narrations (quotes of the



Prophet). Some of these traditions are explicit, while others have an indirect relation with the field of art. In this paper, some of these traditions are mentioned to understand the foundations on which Islamic art was established.

**Section 2: Islamic Geometry as a Fundamental Concept**

Islamic geometry is discussed first and in relatively more detail, in order to provide a foundational concept that governs most, if not all, of the fields of Islamic art and architecture.

**Section 3: Islamic Art of Arabesque, Calligraphy, and Miniature Painting**

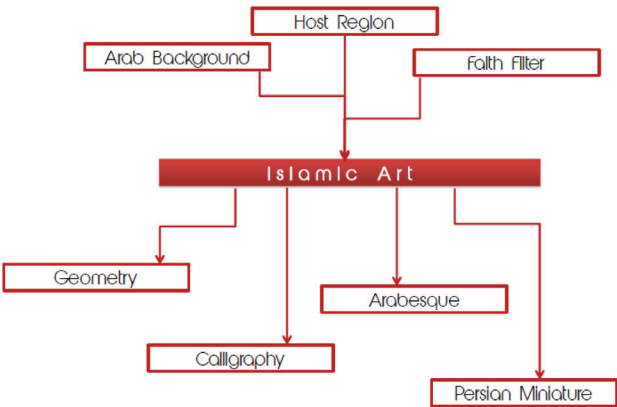
This section throws light on other types of Islamic art and discusses two important aspects in relation to the focus of the research paper. These two aspects are context and Islamic values pertaining to each art form. This two-tiered structure will elaborate the two aspects in reversible sequence depending on the art form and its evolution.

*1. Translation into the physical features*

There is a variety of ways in which Islamic values were artistically expressed in art objects and surfaces. Important techniques used to achieve these values were calligraphy, geometric patterns, floral patterns, vegetative patterns, tessellation, and distortion of perspective. These techniques primarily constitute the language of Islamic art to this day.

*2. Regional base*

Cultural context of the region played a very important role in Islamic art. It was the art forms of these new Muslim lands that went through an Islamic filter and transformed to become the visual language which we call the Islamic style. Variations of each context are reflective in their local Islamic art applications. The context will situate the art form in its natural course in history by providing information about its origin and/or evolution through time. It may also include the growth seen in the art form after its amalgamation into the Islamic art family.



**Figure 1:** Structure of research.

## RESEARCH

### Islamic Architecture as an Example

On face value, many practices in Muslim societies seem to be in contradiction with the teachings of the faith. Islamic art is not alone in this respect. The act of architecture also receives some critique from the Islamic traditions. The following is a hadith narration that discourages construction of buildings:

It is narrated that when the Prophet (pbuh) visited someone who was building a wall, he said: “The Muslim is rewarded for everything on which he spends money except for what he spends on dust” (al-Bukhari, n.d.).

And yet we find Muslim efforts behind many projects from the beginning of Islam, which clearly surpassed the shallow waters of necessity and delved into the depths of extravagance. According to Mozatti, these efforts are not considered corrupt if they are rightly conceived.

Nasr also agrees with this point of view and supports it with another hadith tradition that reflects the importance of the mosque and the environment it creates for the believer. He states:

“The hadith about the man of faith (mu'min) in the mosque being like the reflection of the sun in the water refers to the spiritual significance of the mosque as the reflection of the inner reality of primordial man who is the microcosmic counterpart of cosmic reality. Whether it be the exquisite and elaborate patterns of the Gawharshad mosque of Mashhad in Persia, where this hadith is written on the wall, or the simple white walls of an Ibn Tulun mosque, the traditional mosque reflects the reality of both primordial nature and man. It reflects that ‘sun’ which is none other than that fitrah which Islam came to re-assert both within man and in the cosmic order.” (Nasr 1987)

According to a very popular hadith tradition, actions depend on intentions. This means that although the materiality of the endeavor is worthless as it belongs to the realm of this world, the intent of its conception was for the good of the people and hence praiseworthy. With the clear distinction that it was constructed and not created by man, the idea behind these practices was not to compete with the creative power of God, but rather produce a representation of His creation as a reminder that would direct the mind to remember His glory. This is the reason why such art forms were accepted within the Muslim community and did not receive backlash from a people known to be conservative and insistent on the following of faith. It is therefore necessary to briefly study the traditions related to art firsthand before proceeding to understand the origins of Islamic art techniques.

### HADITH TRADITIONS REGARDING ART

“Allah is beautiful and loves beauty.” (An-Nawawi 1277, Book 1, Hadith 612)

Aishah R.A. said, “I used to play with dolls in the presence of the Prophet salallahualahi

wa sallam, and my girlfriends used to play along with me. Whenever, Allah's Messenger salallahualahi wa sallam would enter, they would hide from him. So he called them to play with me" (al-Bukhari 846, 143, vol. 13).

Aishah R.A. further said, "When Allah's Messenger (pbuh) arrived after the expedition to Tabuk or Khaybar, the wind raised an end of a curtain which hung in front of my closet, revealing some dolls which belonged to me. He asked me, 'What is this?' I replied: My dolls. He saw among them a horse made of wrapped cloth with wings, and asked, 'What is this I am seeing among them?' I replied: A horse. He asked, 'A horse with wings?' I replied: Have you not heard that Solomon had horses with wings? Allah's Messenger (pbuh) laughed so heartily that I could see his molar teeth" (Abu Dawud 888).

Aishah R.A. illustrated that the Prophet (pbuh) said: "The people who will be most severely punished on the Day of Resurrection will be those who aspire to create like Allah" (al-Bukhari 846).

Ibn 'Abbâs R.A. narrated that the Prophet (pbuh) said: "Every image maker is in the Fire. For each image he made, a being will be fashioned to torment him in Hell" (al-Bukhari 846).

Abû Talhah R.A. narrated that the Prophet (pbuh) said: "The angels do not enter a house wherein there is a dog or images representing (people or animals)" (al-Bukhari 846).

Aishah R.A. reported that the Prophet (pbuh) said: "In the day of Judgment the painter will be destined to the pains of hell, and he will be asked to infuse life into the forms he modeled; but he will not be able to infuse them with life" (al-Bukhari 846).

## Understanding Anachronism

"When Mecca was conquered by the Muslims and before the Prophet would enter the sanctuary of the Kaabe, Mohammad first ordered the destruction of all the idols which the pagan Arabs had set on the court of the Kaaba. Only then did he enter the sanctuary. Its walls had been ornamented by a Byzantine painter. Among the figures were one of Abraham throwing divinator arrows and another of the Virgin and Child. The Prophet covered these with the hands and ordered the removal of all the others." (Burckhardt 1986, 5)

Burckhardt's quote is based on al Azraqi's historical work on Mecca. There are three dominant opinions about figurative imagery in Islam:

- a. It is considered an act of rivalry with the creative powers of God to imitate His creation in sculptural or drawing format. This idea is an extension of Tawheed (divine unity), the fundamental doctrine of Islam. It is supported in mainstream Sunni Islam, especially in the Arab region (Burckhardt 2009). This idea of avoiding figurative imagery due to religious reasons is termed anachronism or Bilderverbot, which is common among the Abrahamic religions.
- b. According to Burckhardt, however, Islam does not prohibit all kinds of figurative imagery, but rather the one that intends to represent divinity (Burckhardt 2009). This idea finds its support from the Quranic verses, which, although negate the

visualization of divine beings, do not comment on objective imagery devoid of such idolatry. This interpretation allows for relatively more flexible forms of artistic expression that is reflective in the art and culture of many Muslim societies that find their roots in such a mindset.

- c. Another opinion which can be regarded as a subset of the second opinion but has enough merit to be discussed individually is the prohibition of figurative imagery in places of worship. According to some scholars, the prohibition of imagery is effective only in the cases of mosques and prayer areas to prevent Muslims from praying in front of these visuals that would maim the concept of Tawheed and their understanding of the Absolute. This opinion is historically supported by the Umayyad rulers who practiced this clear distinction in the architecture of mosques and palaces (Ali 2017).

The variety of the arts of Islam is due to the difference in these interpretations on the basis of which art developed and thrived in all the Muslim lands. These limitations provided a challenge to the art of Islam which manifested itself in the form of creative outlets previously unheard of and gave it a unique individual identity.

## LOVE FOR MATHEMATICS – GEOMETRY

### History

The horizons of geometry go far beyond the birth of Islam. The earliest use of geometry is known to be in ancient Egypt where it was used for inland measurement, construction of monuments, and astronomical calculations (Wilson 1988). The philosophical side of geometry was refined by the Greeks who developed this science and documented all known geometry in 300 BC at a mathematical school in Alexandria (Wilson 1988). This knowledge was well preserved and reached Muslim communities at the end of the eighth century (Wilson 1988).

### Conceptual Parallels

The basis of Islamic geometry comes from the Islamic creed. Islam and geometry both have the same starting point: Unity/Absolute/Tawheed. Tawheed (Oneness of God) is the fundamental concept that Islam emphasizes: there is no god other than God, which, in mathematical terms, means that there are no parts other than the whole (Mozatti 2010). The Muslim mind could very well relate to some ideas of geometry such as the center which corresponds to the concept of the Absolute, which exists beyond measure and is the base of all creation for both. Islam finds a deep-rooted symbolism and cosmology in geometry, which serve the purpose of representation for the religion.

### *A Way to Beauty*

Geometry in Islamic art is considered the way to achieve beauty in a systematic and logical way. It is a way to take inspiration from the creation as an example of perfection in beauty, learn from its creative structure, and use it to achieve similar successful results. According to Nasr, geometry and patterns represent the cosmic structures and express the mathematical

harmony of the physical realm (Nasr 1990). Muslim mystics have always seen and preached the manifestation of the divine design in mathematical rules of geometry (Mozatti 2010). In contemporary times, a similar theory has surfaced, which follows the Fibonacci series and especially its proportion, called the golden ratio, as the basis of beauty in natural forms.

## Visual Experience of Islamic Art

### *The Artist*

Geometry is experienced in two distinct ways in an Islamic spiritual context. In both cases, the role and perception of the person are different. The first case is when an artist is working out the base geometry for Islamic art, and the second case is when a person views the finished design. For the artist, each step and shape in the construction of the geometry is associated with an Islamic phenomenon. The interlaced pattern shows that the events in Islamic history are intertwined to give spiritual depth to its meaning.

### *The Viewer*

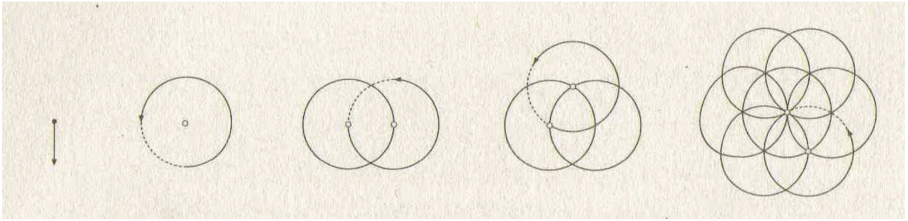
For the viewer, geometric patterns are non-objective (not resembling any physical being) and provide the abstract visuals that reinforce reflection. The same effect of reflection cannot be achieved with a representational image, pattern, or motif (which imitates real objects) as the viewer is compelled to focus on the intent, content, and meaning of the visual. The endlessly tessellated patterns in Islamic art therefore encourage self-reflection rather than focus. This is the main reason for using geometry in Islamic architecture, especially the mosque.

## Symbolism

Islamic geometry is never devoid of symbolism. It is the visual tool for representing Islamic cosmology. From the invisible center of the circle, to the infinite number of patterns, depending on the shapes used in these patterns, they signify multiple events of Islamic history. It is remarkable how the concepts of geometry can be a simple and yet deeply symbolic representation of Islamic ideology.

### *Origin*

As stated previously, symbolism in Islamic geometry starts from the origin of any Islamic geometric pattern, the center of the circle (Figure 2). Although not visible in itself, the center provides the foundation for the rest of the pattern. This center/unity corresponds to the concept of Tawheed in the Islamic tradition. Similarly, it is the foundational concept and the first pillar of faith. In Islam, God is the absolute power from which the universe originated. Although the names may vary (center, unity, or absolute), in both geometry and Islam, it is the unseen reality that is the most obvious.

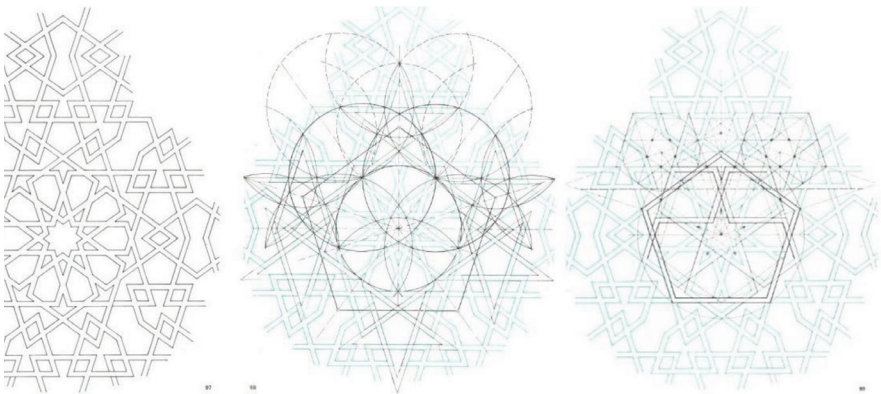


**Figure 2:** Unfolding from unity (Sutton 2007, 2).

### *Pentagon*

In Islamic symbolism, the number five, represented by the five-pointed star pentagon, is associated with a perfect Muslim (Critchlow 1976). This shape is considered as a representation of a person who is fully aware of the divine presence and is “whole” as a being (Critchlow 1976). The shape seems to depict the human form by having one corner for each limb and one on top for the head.

Figure 3 shows the base shows the base geometry of a pentagon in a flower organization, which seems to have been formed by the reflection of the axis of each pair of points of the star pentagon (Critchlow 1976).

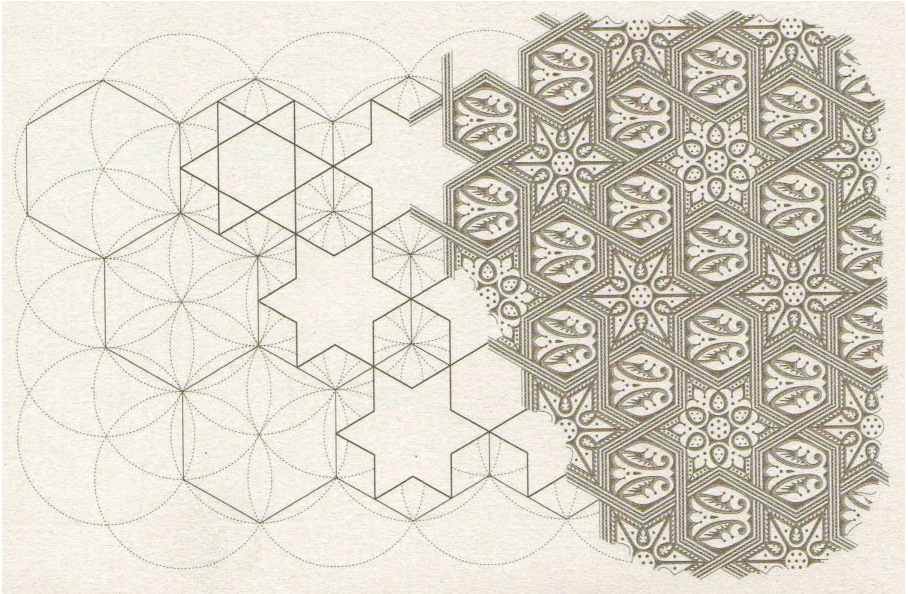


**Figure 3:** Symbolism in pentagon (Critchlow 1976, 97–99).

### *Hexagon*

The six-sided hexagon found in numerous Islamic patterns is symbolic of the six days of creation, as mentioned in the Quran (Sutton 2007). Figure 4 illustrates how such a pattern can start from simple shapes and create intricate and complex designs.





**Figure 4:** Simple to complex (Sutton 2007, 3).

### *Six-Pointed Star*

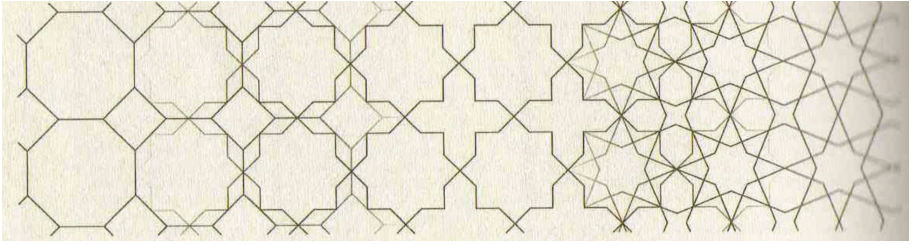
The same pattern as shown in Figure 4 transforms into another shape by joining the mid-points of the hexagons. The double inverted overlapping triangles or the six-pointed star is reminiscent of the ring of Prophet Solomon (AS), which he used to control jinns (Sutton 2007).

The shapes create a mesh together and are completed with arabesque motifs. The pattern is carved in the plaster of the Ibn Tulun Mosque in Cairo (Sutton 2007).

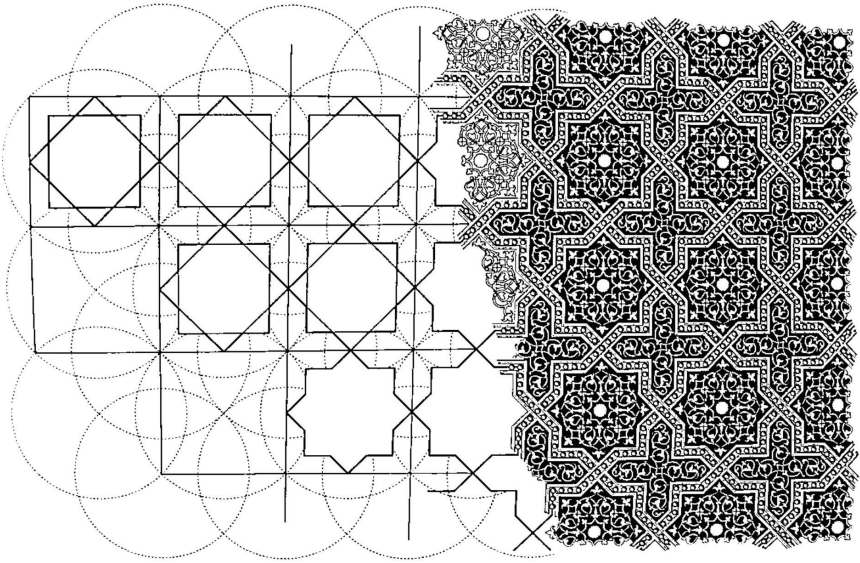
### *Eight-Pointed Star*

The eight-pointed star is referred to as *Khatam* (seal in Arabic) in the Islamic tradition (Figure 5). This shape is constructed by the diagonal overlapping of two squares (Sutton 2007). Because of varying legends, this shape, like the double triangle, is also considered the seal of Prophet Solomon (AS).

A more recent development in the theory and symbolism of this shape is contributed by Ibn al-Arabi. According to him, the origin of creation is the Divine Breath that formed the basic four elements of Air, Water, Fire, and Earth (Sutton 2007). Therefore, because of this idea, the shape has been referred to as the “Breath of the Compassionate” in recent times (Figure 6).



**Figure 5:** Quadrangle and octagonal geometry (Sutton 2007, 26).

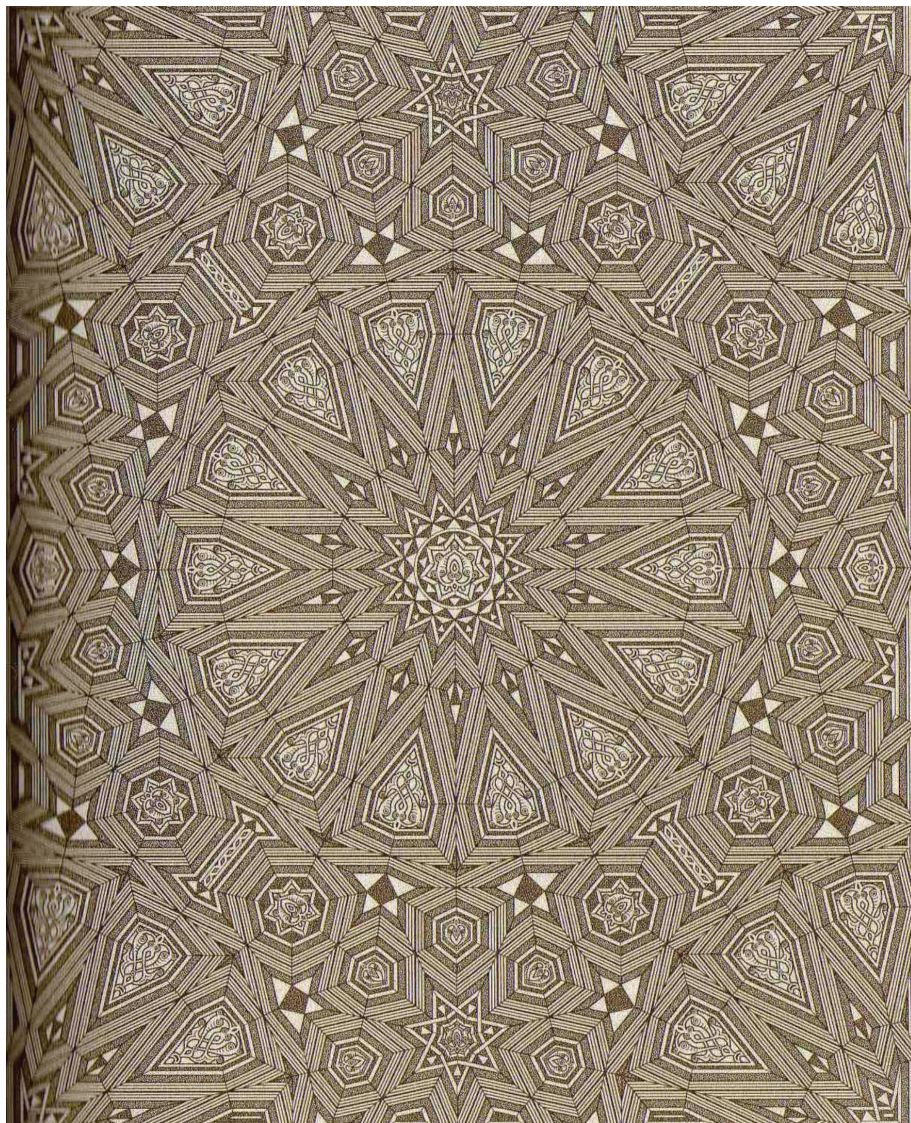


**Figure 6:** Breath of the Compassionate (Sutton 2007, 9).

### *Fourteen*

In the Hijri Calendar, a new month starts with the crescent. This makes the fourteenth night of the month as the night of the full moon. The number fourteen is symbolized as the full moon relating to the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) as he is the reflection of the Divine Light in the same way as the moon reflects the light of the sun (Sutton 2007). This symbolism can also be attributed to the hadiths narrated by Jaabir and Abu Ishaq in which they compare the beauty of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) and that of the full moon (at-Tirmidhi 892).





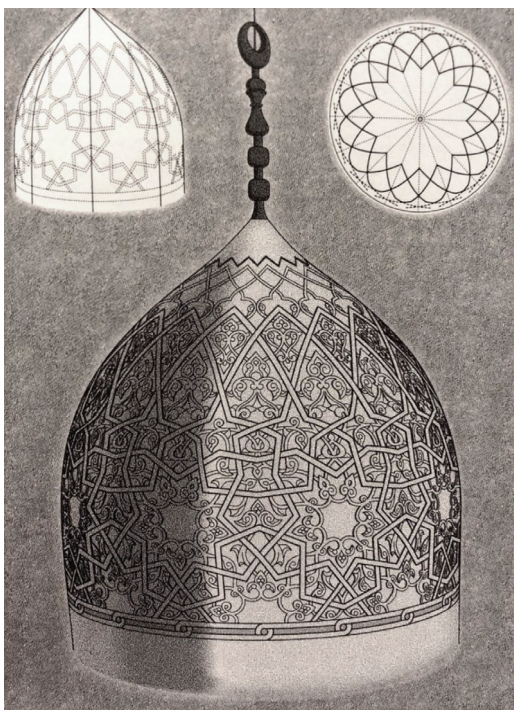
**Figure 7:** Number of the Prophet (pbuh) (Sutton 2007, 41).

We can see that Islamic art has a directness in its intent and meaning when it comes to symbolic representation (Critchlow 1976). However, the direct reference is always towards the idea but not towards its physical imitation. In this way, we can say that the geometry of Islamic art is a codification of the important phenomena of the religion.

## Application

### *Islamic Art*

Islam brought conceptual maturity to the science of geometry, which proved to be a perfect fit for the physical manifestation of this spiritual religion. It soon engulfed the aesthetics of Islamic culture and spread its medium of application to encompass all imaginable outcomes. The use of geometry proved extremely successful in the design of Islamic art and architecture. In addition to being an independent entity in Islamic art, where geometric patterns can be seen in a number of surfaces and structures, geometry also provides the baseline for the Islamic art forms of calligraphy and arabesque. In the case of arabesque, geometry provides the framework on top of which it is designed. While a layperson would see uniformity and symmetry in an arabesque, they might not visualize the base geometry of the motif. Geometry plays a similar role in Islamic calligraphy, especially the Kufic script. The angularity of the alphabets is made to follow lines that amplify the beauty of calligraphy as a pattern. The real complexity is added to geometry when it is used in the third dimension. To achieve uniformity of design on a curved surface such as the dome, which has a pattern designed in two dimensions, stars and interconnecting pieces or shapes are added to fill in the extra spaces, as shown in Figure 8 (Sutton 2007).



**Figure 8:** The third dimension (Sutton 2007, 47).

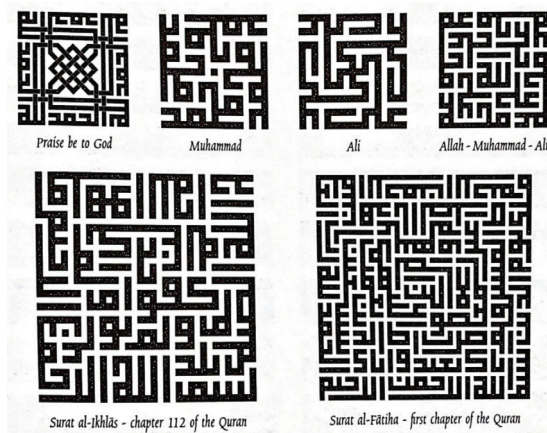


## Islamic Architecture

Islamic architecture is a dominant application of Islamic geometry. Although the geometric base of the architecture is not exclusively an Islamic quality as it was also common in the architecture of previous empires, the degree to which Islamic architecture relies on geometry is far extensive. As with Islamic art, Islamic architecture thrived on the backbone of geometry. Starting from the scale of planning of complexes to the surrounding landscape, including gardens and pools, and ending at the scale of interior decorations, geometry was a consistent theme reflected in Islamic architecture. Geometry was used to explore new avenues in Islamic architecture and interiors, such as muqarnas, stalactites, zillij tilework, and square plan-to-dome roof transition using squinches; while other existing techniques also evolved, e.g. construction of higher and larger domes.

## STYLIZED SCRIPT FOR QURAN – CALLIGRAPHY

In Islam, Quran enjoys an unparalleled importance. According to the Muslim faith, it is the word of God that was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). It is the fundamental document around which the faith revolves. Muslims pride themselves on its preservation and believe that the verses have a blessing attached to them. Naturally, in early Islam, writing of Quranic text received much attention in Muslim communities, which opened the gates to a form of art that was not yet developed in the Arab region. Calligraphy is the art of writing text in a manner to make it visually pleasing. Arabic calligraphy is perhaps one of the biggest artistic revolutions that were brought by the religion of Islam. From its modest beginning of the Hijazi script, it went through a number of stylistic changes and manifested itself into a number of highly elaborate and decorative visual languages. The Kufic script was the first calligraphic style that was fully thought out, canonized, and standardized in all parts of the Muslim world, as well as dominated the art form of calligraphy for the longest period (Figure 9).



**Figure 9:** Square Kufic (Sutton 2007, 57).

## Context

The initiation of the Kufic style is attributed to the construction of the Dome of the Rock (George 2010). As Arabs invaded new territories, they were exposed to the marvels of other past and contemporary empires, namely the Byzantine, Sassanid, and Constantinople, who had a rich heritage of art and architecture. Muslims now had the monetary resources and artistic means to create a legacy of their own. In the construction of the Dome of the Rock, the craft of mosaic was extensively used for interior decoration involving both motifs and calligraphy. The mosaicists were gathered from the newly conquered Muslim lands, who were most probably the same artists who had previously worked on Christian monuments. Together with the Islamic vision of the patron/supervisors as well as the skills of the locals, a new mode of decoration was conceived. Since the mosaics were composed of cubic pieces, they regulated and, for the first time, transformed the Arabic language into a highly angular aesthetic of the Kufic script. The Kufic script very soon became popular and was used for Quran manuscripts, coinage, and milestone signage (George 2010). Although coinage is miniscule in scale, it is seen as a propagator of the Kufic script and its absorption throughout the Muslim lands because of its widespread use. The Kufic script remained dominant for centuries, as it alone has nineteen different styles.

Calligraphy almost became a science with its geometric connotations and extensive use of proportions. It was a custom in the Umayyad period for patriarchs to commission large-scale manuscripts of Quran to be placed inside mosques. For these manuscripts, the dimensions of the text box were derived from those of the parchment, and the unit of the invisible grid that guided the heights and lengths of letters was derived from the thickness of the quill (George 2010). The width of this pen was the measure of a dot and the stacking of the dots became yet another way to base the proportion of the letters (Burckhardt 2009). The following image shows how such a system worked to ensure precision and unity in the letters (Burckhardt 2009). The dot is repeated differently to extract the skeletal base of the vertical, horizontal, and curvilinear alphabets, as shown in Figure 10.



**Figure 10:** Measure of letters in dots (Burckhardt 2009, 50).

While the rigid geometry of the Kufic script was formed and grew in Kufa, Jerusalem, and generally in the area of Bilad al-Sham, the Persians craved to remain loyal to their artistic aesthetic and pioneered more cursive, curvilinear, and fluid versions of the calligraphy. The Iranian Kufic has more artistic variety and is attributed to the comfort the artists had with the script (Karimi-Nia 2006). This paved the way for a wider spectrum of calligraphic styles such as floriated and foliated Kufic in the ninth century (Gharipour and Schick 2013), Naskh, Thulus, and New Cursive. In this way, Arabic calligraphy saw development in other styles as they took place in different areas of the Muslim empire at multiple intervals in history.



**Figure 11:** Two styles of calligraphy together (Burckhardt 2009, 53).

Throughout Islamic history, it has been a common practice to showcase verses of the Quran in architecture, and well as to use Arabic calligraphy in a wide range of media such as ceramics, mosaics, paintings, inscriptions, and textiles. Arabic calligraphy is the carrier of Islamic identity and the art form that took the least input from the existing art of the context. It is almost entirely an Islamic phenomenon that is still in use in modernized ways.

## VEGETATIVE AND FLORAL DESIGNS – ARABESQUE

Arabesque is a stylized way of ornamentation in Islamic art in which natural (vegetative and floral) elements are used on a regulated structure (Figure 12). Although the visuals are natural, an arabesque never intends to imitate nature as the interlacing work is strictly geometric unlike the random fluidity of natural forms. Its aim, however, is to recreate only the essence of rhythm and growth that is associated with plantation (Sutton 2007). One can say that the origin of such imagery comes from the descriptions of paradise within the verses of the Quran itself. The beauty of this idea can truly be appreciated by an Arab from the desert who would desire the succulently dense vegetation that is mentioned in these

verses. By this visual depiction, the Muslim is subtly reminded of the real goal of life, laid in intricate patterns that represent, but do not imitate, the wonders of this world and the hereafter. Arabesque saves itself from the creative copyright of the Creator by establishing a rigid geometric base that keeps undulating repeatedly.

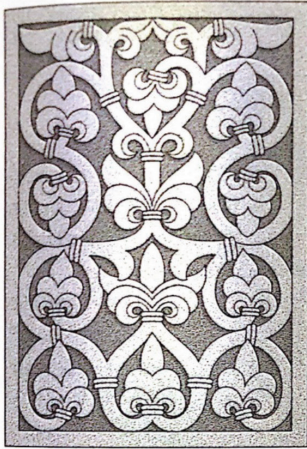


**Figure 12:** Floral arabesque (Burckhardt 2009, 57).

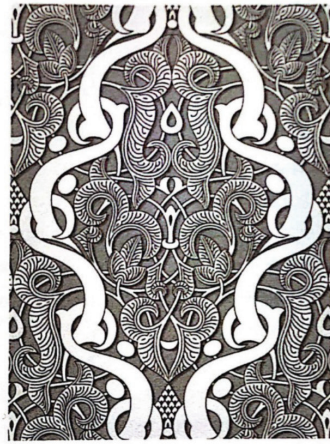
This symbolism may also have come from the Sidra tul Muntaha (Lote tree), which is described in much detail in hadith traditions. In this plant family, Islamic art designs take the visual aesthetic of the vine. The spiral and scrolling quality of a vine gives flexibility and creative freedom to artists to arrange the motif as they like. The use of vines are found in the earliest monuments attributed to the Islamic empire such as the Dome of the Rock, Mshatta, and the Great Mosque of Damascus (Burckhardt 2009). Vine scrolls occur in combination with other plants such as acanthuses, palms, pomegranates, pine cones, and flowers (Burckhardt 2009). As arabesque does not care to be realistically accurate and in no way tries to imitate the natural form of these plants, it is at liberty to make modifications that we normally do not observe in real life.

Interestingly, in Muslim cultures, arabesque changed its style in different regions and eras. These were one of the obvious differences observed in an Islamic art form. Figure 13 shows images representing such examples along with their origins (Sutton 2007).

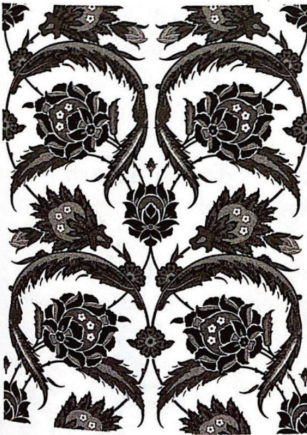




*A 9th century arabesque design in marble relief, from the great mosque in Kairouan, Tunisia.*



*A repeating arabesque design in carved plaster from Alhambra in a typically Maghribi style.*



*Ottoman arabesque from underglaze Iznik tiles in rich dark blue, turquoise, green, and red*



*A highly geometric arabesque design from Cairo, trellised by the pattern on page 36.*

**Figure 13:** Types of arabesque (Sutton 2007, 15).

### Context

Burckhardt traces the lineage of arabesque back to the Central Asians who conquered Europe in the beginning of the Middle Ages (Burckhardt 2009). They had a similar style of using natural forms in an abstract manner for art motifs and patterns. This zoomorphic art was first introduced by the Scythians and Sarmatians, and was later adopted by Central Asians. This art used animals as the natural form for creating designs. It may or may not be based on geometric logic.

Although Islamic art of the arabesque finds its roots in zoomorphic art, it has brought much change to customizing it according to its own religious motivation and values. There are two major differences in the art forms: first, the use of animals and, second, the proportional distortion of natural forms. Islamic art avoided both these aspects in order to be more adherent to the values of Islam.

**DISTORTION OF PERSPECTIVE – PERSIAN MINIATURE**

For Persians and Mongols, the representational image was too deep-rooted in the culture to give away with the tide of Islam (Burckhardt 2009). Persian artists had their own take on the anachronistic values of Islam in the art of painting. They had a creative way to include figurative imagery and yet avoided realistic imitation. In the Persian miniature, which is a whole genre of Islamic art in itself, the perspective is distorted and an anti-natural approach is employed to avoid realistic resemblance to both human features and spatial organization (Figure 14).



**Figure 14:** Persian miniature (Burckhardt 2009, 33).



The Persian miniature brought a revolution to the art of the book, which was already a highlighted area of Islamic art owing to the celebrated nature of the Quranic text as well as the extensive use of calligraphy. Although Persian paintings were not used in Quran manuscripts as a norm, they gained popularity as illustrations for other books. Patronage of such art initiated and remained for the most part within the courts of the elite. With increased demands, however, a commercial system was established to produce higher quantity and lower quality artwork to be distributed on a wider scale (O’Kane 2007).

Context

In the progressive metropolitan of Baghdad, many illustrated scientific books on the topics of zoology, botany, medicine, etc. were translated into Arabic (Burckhardt 2009). The illustrations accompanying the texts also had to be represented. When this task came to Persian artists, they used their newly developed style of the Persian miniature to visualize these narrations. It is for this reason that the Persian miniature developed this narrative style, which later became its distinctive feature. These paintings usually depict a scenario filled with visual information about the characters and the spatial setting. Similar to the hierarchy of characters in a narration, the Persian miniature has a system to represent this hierarchy in which the scale directly corresponds to the importance of the subject. In a typical Persian miniature painting for example, a ruler will be larger in size than a servant. This differentiation in the scale of humans shown to be on the same plane is considered as another way of negating naturalism, for the art form to be more in line with the teachings of Islam as understood by the people.



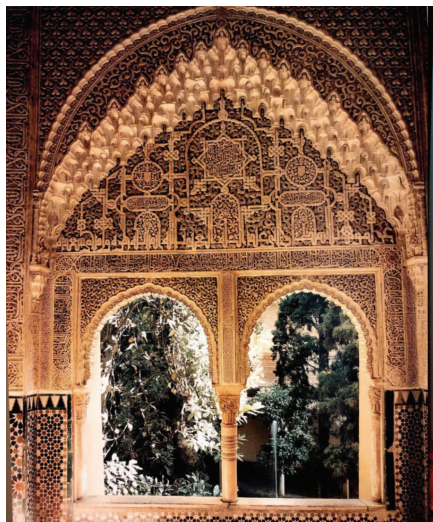
Figure 15: Art of the book (O’Kane 2007).

The art form also underwent changes as it assimilated into itself the Chinese culture. Under the rule of Mongol Ilkhanids, the differences in the frame format, the visuals of tree-studded mountains, and the introduction of mythical animals were seen as new additions to the art genre, which set it aside from its possible Arab roots (O’Kane 2007).

Contrary to the Western style of the vanishing point perspective, Persian art used a higher angle and abandoned the techniques of adding depth and shadows. These techniques, along with the use of bright colors, gave the Persian miniature a distinct visual language. This aesthetic very well suited the requirement of a fairy-tale environment to manifest lyrical scenes from Persian literature.

## CONCLUSION

This research aimed to revisit the origin and conceptual underpinning of Islamic art to understand it once more by studying a few techniques that were born of Islamic values. By doing so, we saw how Islamic values brought a twist to the otherwise linear development of some existing art forms. The versatility of Islamic art is indebted to the regional cultures of the many conquered lands and their ways of expression. In light of the techniques of geometry, calligraphy, arabesque, and Persian miniature, we can say that Islamic art made a remarkable contribution to the art of the world and developed a unique aesthetic that would forever be associated with the religion of Islam and its glorious past. Although times have changed and artistic endeavors have branched out to include many unexplored territories, a Muslim mind cannot help but feel a sense of belonging in a traditionally made mosque. The interplay of these Islamic art techniques appeases the Muslim intellect, which in itself is a spiritual proof of the refinement of the Islamic character in Islamic art.



**Figure 16:** Unity of art forms in architecture (O’Kane 2007).

Contrary to the modern perception of Islam's rigidity regarding figurative imagery, we see that it is not an uncommon theme in the formative years of Islamic art. It would not be incorrect to assert that Islamic art enjoyed a more flexible approach in the past. We find support for this attitude by studying some Islamic traditions (especially Ahadith) and the history of anachronism.

In the system of Islamic geometry, we saw that all intentions are guided by a precise mechanism. Geometry forms the foundation of most, if not all, Islamic art forms. It serves as the code that may or may not be understood immediately but provides a deeper unifying structure. The geometry of Islamic art is a rich treasure that is appreciated by both Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

Since the different forms of art find their roots in the source of Islam, we can see their support of each other. Within calligraphy, a geometrical base is used, while at the background of foliated calligraphy vine scrolls of the arabesque are used to decorate and fill the empty spaces. Similarly, geometry provides the framework for arabesque, as well as for both Islamic architecture and its ornamentation. Their reliance on each other uplifts the whole Islamic stylistic language and creates a soothing visual harmony for the viewer.

Islamic style is seen from a point of distance in contemporary times. Although it now seems static and complete, during the Islamic rule, art and architecture were constantly evolving and new techniques were explored for improvement. Thus, looking to improve Islamic art and architecture and taking advantage of the contemporary development would mean staying true to their ideology. Islamic art calls for continuation of its legacy based on its past and inclusive of its present, in order to be relevant in the future.

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