

The Theory of  
**ISLAMIC ART**

AESTHETIC CONCEPT AND EPISTEMIC STRUCTURE



IDHAM MOHAMMED HANASH

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IDHAM MOHAMMED HANASH

*Translated from the Arabic by*  
Nancy Roberts



THE INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE OF ISLAMIC THOUGHT  
LONDON · WASHINGTON

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1438AH/2017CE

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ISBN 978-1-56564-696-4

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## Foreword

IDHAM MOHAMMED HANASH'S *The Theory of Islamic Art* is an extensive and meticulous exposition of a very specific form of human artistic expression, Islamic art. This is artistic composition less concerned with the simplistic realisation of beauty in physical form, and far more the powerful projection of an utterance, that of an inner belief in God and man's relationship to the Divine.

Thus, its practitioners sought to reflect the Divine unity and Truth, attempting to inform as well as remind humanity of the magnitude of the spiritual message and the beauty of religious experience, imbuing their works in the process with a spiritual purpose directly engaging vision and mind to contemplate the Infinite, whilst the hand of the artist recedes humbly into the background. To understand this is to truly understand the language of this unique art form and what Islamic art signifies.

Divine Oneness as the principle of beauty is perhaps quintessentially Islamic artistic expression and experience and what it celebrates. Why has Islamic art evolved as it has, what forms does it take, what is the logic underlying it? What message is the Muslim artist attempting to convey, what emotion is he seeking to evoke? This work views Islamic art as a subject of archeological study and treats its evolution as part of the historical study of art in the broader sense. At the same time, it paves the way for an epistemological shift from viewing Islamic art as a material concept having to do with beautiful rarities and relics that have grown out of Islamic cultural and artistic creativity, to a theoretical concept associated with a principle, a vision, a theory and a method. This theoretical concept provides the intellectual and cultural foundation for a critical philosophical science of Islamic artistic beauty to which we might refer as 'the science of Islamic art,' or 'the Islamic aesthetic' that evaluates visual artistic creations in terms of both beauty and practical usefulness.



## Foreword

In the process the study also explores orientalist misconceptions, challenging some of the premises with which it has approached Islamic art, with judgement rooted in a cultural framework alien to the spiritual perspective of Islam.

The IIIT has undertaken in recent years to produce abridged versions of its key publications, and this translation is taken from the abridged Arabic edition *Nazariyyah al-Fan al-Islāmī: Al-Mafhūm al-Jamālī wa al-Bunyah al-Maʿrifiyyah*.

We live in an age in which time is at a premium in virtually all spheres of life, including those of writing and production. Copious intellectual, cultural and informational output continues unabated as part of efforts to keep pace with changes in the public and private spheres alike, while publishing houses and websites vie to provide people with the latest, and most up-to-date information in the easiest, most effective manner. The knowledge economy that now dominates the world requires a process of ‘creative adaptation’ of information as one of the building blocks of the world community at large, hence the IIIT’s series of abridged works. The aim is to help readers benefit from available information as easily, effectively, and efficiently as possible and to further develop their critical faculties so they become better able to contribute to the development of humanity.

The abridged texts have been written in a clear, easy to read style, and while the essential contents of the original works have been preserved, readers will note that, in the interests of space, the abridged editions contain far fewer endnotes than do the original works. The only notes retained are those needed for clarification or the proper establishment of an idea, since the principle aim of this endeavor is to facilitate rapid absorption of the content being conveyed. Readers who wish to go more deeply into the topics of concern or to find full documentation of quotes may refer to the original works, which contain all necessary citations.

The work is being published to widen discourse, and increase awareness of the question of Islamic artistic expression and its ultimate aims and objectives. No doubt the subject is a specialized one, but it is hoped that for the most part both general and specialist readers alike will benefit from the perspective offered and the overall issues examined.

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Where dates are cited according to the Islamic calendar (hijrah) they are labelled AH. Otherwise they follow the Gregorian calendar and labelled CE where necessary. Arabic words are italicized except for those which have entered common usage. Diacritical marks have been added only to those Arabic names not considered modern. English translations taken from Arabic references are those of the translator.

Since its establishment in 1981, the IIIT has served as a major center to facilitate serious scholarly efforts. Towards this end it has, over the decades, conducted numerous programs of research, seminars and conferences as well as publishing scholarly works specialising in the social sciences and areas of theology which to date number more than four hundred titles in English and Arabic, many of which have been translated into other major languages.

We would like to thank the author, translator, as well as editorial and production team at the IIIT London Office, and all those who were directly or indirectly involved in the completion of this book. May God reward them for all their efforts.

JANUARY, 2017



# Introduction to the Concept and Theory of Islamic Art

THERE ARE THREE principle trends among modern scholars with regard to the definition of Islamic art. The first trend is to view art with a wide lens that encompasses all forms of creativity, including the linguistic, the artistic, and others. This trend places knowledge, literature and art within the same broad category. The second way of conceptualizing Islamic art, which is somewhat narrower than the first, encompasses everything that bears a direct relation to feeling, sensation, and aesthetic experience, including music, rhythm, architecture, drawing and painting. As for the third trend, which is the most widespread among art historians and contemporary critics, it narrows the definition of Islamic art to include only visual expressions of Islamic creativity in the areas of architecture, writing, and relevant applied arts, as well as creative harmonizations of the aesthetic and the functional in, for example, architectural structures, books, manuscripts, tools, furnishings, and various other practical items.

This concept of Islamic art forms the epistemological nucleus of the study of buildings, paintings, rarities, manuscripts, and other material objects produced over time within the context of Islamic civilization and capable of being described, categorized and displayed as works of art that bear the marks of Islamic identity and culture.

The aforementioned aesthetic concept of Islamic art differs from what we might term the archeological concept of this art in terms of vision, method, and the nature of the knowledge on which it focuses. An archeologist views Islamic architectural structures, manuscripts and other productions merely as intriguing antiquities whose cultural and historical origins are worthy of study. Seen from this perspective, the most suitable location for Islamic artistic artifacts is a museum. The

theoretical study of Islamic art emerged, in fact, in response to archeologists' need for accurate scientific information on Islamic artistic remains from a material, industrial, historical, sociological, economic and cultural perspective.

The present study views Islamic art as a subject of archeological study and treats its evolution as part of the historical study of art in the broader sense. At the same time, it paves the way for an epistemological shift from viewing Islamic art as a material concept having to do with beautiful rarities and relics that have grown out of Islamic cultural and artistic creativity, to a theoretical concept associated with a vision, a principle, a theory and a method. This theoretical concept provides the intellectual and cultural foundation for a critical philosophical science of Islamic artistic beauty to which we might refer as 'the science of Islamic art,' or 'the Islamic aesthetic' that evaluates visual artistic creations in terms of both beauty and practical usefulness.

One of the most notable benefits of this epistemological shift is that the study of Islamic art has come to rest on a philosophical perspective that has generated principles, theories, and critical methodologies that serve as the foundations for the various genres, forms, styles and schools of Islamic artistic production.

This philosophical perspective has given rise to numerous specific and general theories of Islamic art. These varied and interrelated theories of Islamic art incorporate elements from diverse fields of academic study and research relating to social and cultural studies as well as, to some degree, the pure and applied sciences.

More than one theory has been put forward to explain the various aspects of the Islamic artistic phenomenon and their intimate connections with individuals, society, history, culture, or the receptive audience. Each topic of study is associated with specific aims, and for the achievement of these aims, appropriate tools need to be devised. Hence, for example, the tools required to study the link between Islamic art and the prevailing customs and traditions of its producers' society (the culture of Islamic art) will differ from the tools required to study the link between Islamic art as a social activity and the overall social system that governs this art's aesthetic and functional aspects (the sociology of Islamic art). Similarly, these two types of study will

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differ from the study of the link between Islamic art and its inward impact on both artist and recipient (the psychology of Islamic art).

Thus, these topics of study, and possibly others as well, are intimately and organically linked within what we might term ‘the theory of Islamic art.’ A theory of Islamic art functions essentially to construct intellectual frameworks, epistemological categories, methodologies, stylistic formulations, and practical and theoretical approaches to Islamic works of art and to the social, cultural, religious and philosophical phenomenon they represent.

### Can there be Art Without Theory?

My primary aim in writing this book is to examine the epistemological and methodological boundaries that separate archaeological, historical and documentary studies of Islamic art and architecture on one hand, and philosophical, aesthetic, critical studies of these phenomena on the other.

Archaeological, historical and documentary studies of Islamic art and artefacts are important for their ability to demonstrate the cultural value of works of Islamic art and artefacts based on the time periods to which they have been dated; however, such studies devote little if any attention to such works’ aesthetic and artistic value. In fact, historical studies of Islamic art have been detrimental to the development of Islamic art theory by promoting the notion, common among modern students of Islamic art, that such art is nothing but a historical phenomenon whose effects have come down to us in the modern age “without an accompanying philosophy or the biographies of those who produced it, and without explanation of its techniques or styles.”

The statement just quoted mistakenly suggests that the works of Islamic art and architecture that have been bequeathed to us lack an underlying philosophical, aesthetic and artistic theory. If such a statement is taken at face value, it could well lead to another mistaken belief, namely, that no Islamic philosophical, aesthetic and artistic theory existed to begin with. In fact, some modern scholars of Islamic art have argued for this supposed absence of a theory of Islamic art by going so far as to say that “Islamic Arab civilization felt no need to

produce a theoretical, methodological discourse around beauty on which we might draw in discussing the aesthetic foundations of Islamic art.”

## The Theory and Study of Islamic Art

This extended digression into matters epistemological and methodological may make it possible to study the theory of Islamic art as a single, comprehensive theme via three interrelated and somewhat overlapping, approaches:

*First:* An attempt to establish a framework for this theory based on the simplest possible procedural definition of the term ‘theory’. Defined thus, a theory is an idea, perspective or vision ordered around a set of concepts and relationships that provide a thematically organised explanation of the structural, descriptive and functional aspects of a given phenomenon.

Generally speaking, a theory is one of the necessary foundations, defining principles, and logical procedures of a scientific discipline. More specifically, a theory represents the abstract aspect of a discipline. In the case of Islamic art, theory deals with the impact of human knowledge and its creative aspects on the artistic phenomenon. As such, what is termed ‘artistic theory’ provides the knowledge-based substance of aesthetics.

Given the foregoing, the expression ‘theory of Islamic art’ may be said to refer to the interrelated and evolving ideas, concepts, opinions, perspectives and interpretations related to the structural, descriptive and functional nature of the Islamic artistic phenomenon. The theory of Islamic art was developed by aestheticists and early Muslim philosophers of art, and revisited by later scholars within the context of the academic study and analysis of this phenomenon and its roots.

*Second:* General academic research into the components and defining features of this theory in light of the Islamic intellectual, epistemological and cultural heritage, that is, based on ideas, opinions, perspectives and interpretations found in Arabic Islamic writings, or in response to questions about the critical link between tradition and modernity. Such questions relate, for example, to:

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- the general Islamic concept of art
- the definition of Islamic art
- the system of Islamic arts viewed in terms of both how they relate to knowledge overall, and their specific categorization as sources of knowledge
- the aesthetic and practical values of Islamic art
- the comprehensive defining features of Islamic art, including the dialectic between unity and diversity as the epistemological core of any artistic theory.

*Third:* The critical study of art theory as it applies specifically to Islamic art, which branches off epistemologically and methodologically from more general research efforts.

What we are referring to here is the epistemological theory of the Islamic arts, including Islamic architecture or Arabic calligraphy, for example, the historical origins and sources of Islamic art, the sociology of Islamic art, the Islamic position on pictorial representation, on nature and matter and their relationship to Islamic art, or other topics of relevance to Islamic art that might be studied from an academic-aesthetic perspective.

## The Emergence and Development of the Study of Islamic Art

The theory of Islamic art in both its general and specific forms needs to be studied, analysed and critiqued, and its origins identified. Moreover, a clear cultural framework needs to be established for all areas of relevance to Islamic art, including the linguistic sciences, semantics, the study of symbolism and values, sociology, and communication, as well as the discipline that, in relation to the epistemological structure of this art, we might term the science of the elements of Islamic art.

In a break with the past, we now study the theory of Islamic art by focusing on the aesthetic knowledge of relevance to this art rather than on the merely factual knowledge that one gleans from dividing history into political periods as was done in traditional studies of Islamic art, which dated this or that work of art back to a given period, and then



drew conclusions about said art based on this dating process and what was known about the period in question.

The first academic use of the term 'Islamic art' goes back to the early nineteenth century CE/third century AH. As for the study of Islamic art, it can be divided into the following three developmental phases:

*First:* The first of these three phases witnessed the discovery of works of art from various earlier periods. This was followed by attempts to identify the roles these works of art played both culturally and functionally. Islamic artefacts were studied by Orientalists from a variety of cultural backgrounds who approached their research with varying methodologies and brought a variety of aspirations to their work.

*Second:* During the second phase, academic studies progressed in revealing the distinctive nature of Islamic art and the knowledge it had to offer. This period witnessed research efforts on the part of a number of Orientalists who settled in Muslim lands to study Islamic art. A number of Arab and Muslim researchers studied in their own countries, such as Egypt, for example, under these Orientalists, or were sent on academic missions to study Islamic art in Western museums and academic institutions.

This second stage might be viewed as the foundational phase for the fledgling science of Islamic art. However, the discipline was coloured at this stage by Orientalists' notions, opinions, conceptualizations and analyses, which were frequently biased against the recognition of Islamic art's authenticity and richness as a source of new knowledge.

*Third:* The third phase might be described as that of post-Orientalist academic activity. As such, it served as a corrective to inaccurate Orientalist conceptualizations which exerted a negative impact on the manner in which Islamic works of art were being approached. This corrective took the form of an epistemological and methodological shift away from the historically based approach – which tended to be biased in favour of Sassanid, Byzantine, Coptic, Ethiopian and other art forms at the expense of the Islamic – to a more subjective approach that entailed philosophical and aesthetic treatments of the phenomenon of Islamic art.

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During this third phase, which is still ongoing, most of the ideas, opinions, conceptualizations and analyses that emerged from what we might term 'Orientalist aesthetics' have undergone serious re-examination. This re-examination has involved analyses of basic themes and issues raised by Islamic art, such as the concept of Islamic art and its epistemological boundaries; the origin of Islamic art and its subjective and objective sources; the religious, political, epistemological and functional values associated with Islamic art, and questions related to the cultural and aesthetic features of Islamic art, which can serve as the epistemological basis and semantic focus for the theory of Islamic art on both the general and specific levels.





# The Linguistic Structure of the Theory of Islamic Art

## Introduction

ARAB-ISLAMIC CULTURE appears not to have settled yet on a comprehensive, fixed, unambiguous definition of the term 'art.' This fact has hindered the development of an appropriate art-related terminology that can promote the expansion of knowledge in this field. The difficulty involved in formulating such a definition may be due primarily to the plethora of concepts associated with the Arabic term for 'art' (*fann*) and its complex cultural connotations.

This uncertainty over the definition of 'art' has had certain negative effects on the linguistic structure of the theory of Islamic art as an epistemological field comprising a set of interrelated terms, concepts, and topics. Some of the difficulty can be traced to the coining and use of terms by Orientalist scholars engaged in the study of Islamic architecture, crafts and archaeological findings. These newly coined terms, coloured as they were by Western ideas and concepts relating to Islamic art, came to form the epistemological substratum for the language of academic research in the various areas of Islamic art.

Islamic artistic theory is expressed at times in the form of metaphorical language based on interpretative readings of Islamic works of art, which may be perceived as visual signs, cultural symbols, and lofty epistemological discourse that goes beyond mere artistic form to reflect deeper meanings, connotations and values. The phrase "the language of Islamic art" thus refers to a set of concepts and technical terms that embody the semantic focal points for this art's major themes, and which serve as key words for academic research into its various epistemological realms.

The language of Islamic art is thus an epistemological language par excellence which is based on what we might term 'Islamic artistic terminology.' The phrase 'Islamic artistic terminology' is to be distinguished from the term 'Islamic art.' The term 'Islamic art' refers to the entire artistic subject matter, whereas the term 'artistic terminology' is a conceptual element based on the intimate link between the Arabic language and Islamic art.

Arabic is Islamic art's mother tongue, the language that contains all words, technical terms and concepts expressive of the philosophical, aesthetic and creative themes of relevance to Islamic art. As such, Arabic exerts a tremendous influence over Islamic art by ordering the rhythmic variables of shape and by perfecting its ornamental elements, be they plants or geometrical shapes, as well as the images of Arabic calligraphy displaying words from the Qur'an, that depict the abstract, formless notion of divine oneness and truth. As a form of Islamic art, Arabic calligraphy is a visible, linguistic symbol of the divine unity.

## The Origin and Evolution of Islamic Artistic Terminology

The European Renaissance and the movement it fuelled to explore human culture and civilization throughout the world spawned the growth of systematic thinking about philosophical themes relating to human feelings, auditory and visual perceptions, imagination, and the forms of expression to which such perceptions and human experiences give rise. 'Beauty' became the object of study as a new area of human knowledge that was linked at once to religion, philosophy and the scientific approach to learning. The study of art as distinguished from science and literature emerged in the mid-seventeenth century CE under the name 'aesthetics' or 'the philosophy of art.'

Spurred on by the materialist thought of the European Renaissance founded on science, technology, capital, industrial production, cultural creativity, and discovery in the geographical, natural and human realms alike, the study of art became a manifestation of the historical evolution of human culture and identity, a form of cultural advancement, and a hallmark and vital mainstay of the humanistic movement,

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which was marked by heightened awareness of the cosmos and a humanistic vision of history, life, and destiny.

The intellectual trends emerging from Europe presented a tremendous challenge to the intellectual identity and social and cultural traditions of most of the peoples of the world, particularly those of the Islamic Arab East. Consequently, European cultural inputs such as industries, sciences, literature, art and Western traditions influenced the social structures of contemporary Arab-Islamic culture.

Among the most important features of this European scientific and cultural influence on Islamic consciousness overall, and on Arab Islamic consciousness in particular, were shifts in the Arab-Islamic understanding of the terms 'civilization' and 'culture' and, as a consequence, in the understanding of the term 'art.' Similarly, the term 'civilization,' which had once referred simply to a settled existence in one place, such as a city or town as opposed to that of the wandering nomad, took on a broader meaning such that it came to be associated with an overall way of life whose personal, social, behavioural, intellectual, economic and political dimensions signified intellectual modernity, social advancement, and material prosperity.

With the translation of the terms 'civilization' and 'culture' into the Arabic language, the Arab-Islamic world became home to everything semantically associated with these two terms by way of inventions, industries, traditions, relationships, movements, organizations, technologies, theories, and expressions embodying a vast array of material and non-material manifestations of human creativity.

This clear shift in modern, contemporary Arab-Islamic knowledge was accompanied by a modified understanding of the Arabic term *fann*, which went from denoting either a type or species of entity or, by contrast, manifestations of human creativity in a variety of areas, including those of industry, science and literature, to being a technical term of sorts that had specifically to do with the aesthetic realm.

The Arabic term *fann* (art) had at one time been associated with the concepts of science, literature and industry in a broad and inclusive sense; now, however, its meaning narrowed to encompass solely the aesthetic realm. This shift may well have constituted one of the greatest cultural and epistemological challenges faced by Arab-Islamic

consciousness in the nineteenth century CE/thirteenth century AH, which witnessed major interactions between the Islamic world and the European West, as well as profound Westerly shifts in Islamic culture. Profound intellectual, linguistic and conceptual shifts in the structure of modern Islamic culture took place in response to new developments in Arabic and Islamic societies relating to science, education, acculturation and translation, which contributed to a new understanding of the meaning of *fann* and its significance in the realms of beauty, creativity, inner experience, and other areas of psychology and human emotion.

The Arab littérateur Rifā‘ah Rāfi‘ al-Ṭaḥṭāwī (d. 1290 AH/1873 CE) was among the first to translate French literary and cultural works into the Arabic language. Al-Ṭaḥṭāwī observed that “the Europeans have divided human knowledge into two categories: the sciences and the arts. The field of Science encompasses the perceptions we arrive at via rational proofs and evidence, while the field of Art encompasses knowledge relating to how to manufacture things in keeping with set rules.”

However, al-Ṭaḥṭāwī and his colleagues in the translation endeavour at the School of Languages established in 1254 AH/1839 CE under al-Ṭaḥṭāwī’s leadership maintained a fundamental epistemological link between ‘science’ and ‘art’. Al-Ṭaḥṭāwī and his team of translators viewed these two terms as bound by an important semantic link; hence, they maintained the possibility that the term ‘art’ (*fann*) might refer to some aspects of ‘science’ (*ilm*) and, similarly, that the term ‘science’ (*ilm*) might refer to some aspects of ‘art’ (*fann*).

This phenomenon may be observed, for example, in the book translated from French into Arabic by a team at the School of Languages under al-Ṭaḥṭāwī’s personal supervision entitled, *Kashf Rumūz al-Sirr al-Maṣūn fī Taṭbīq al-Handasatih ‘alā al-Funūn* (Unveiling the Symbols of the Well-Kept Secret Concerning Application of Engineering to the Arts). This work was described as “a book on the application of engineering and mechanics to crafts, industries, and the fine arts,” such as architecture, geography, astronomy, ship manufacture and construction, the science of light, shadow and eclipse, carpentry, sculpting, printing, and typography, particularly given the fact that, as we are told in the book’s Introduction, “The School of Languages possesses the best of every art form.”

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The work undertaken by the School of Languages opened the door to conceptual and terminological developments relating to the awareness of beauty and art. These developments were already taking place, to some extent, in Arab and Islamic culture, which had begun circulating new expressions with semi-technical meanings such as *al-funūn al-naḥīyah*, *al-funūn al-rāqīyah*, and *al-funūn al-jamīlah* (which are varied Arabic translations of the English term ‘fine arts’), the last of which was most probably coined by Aḥmad Fāris al-Shidyāq (d. 1304 AH/1887 CE).

The intellectual and cultural shifts taking place in Arab-Islamic societies on the theoretical and practical planes alike began taking root in varying degrees throughout the Arab world. This phenomenon was resisted by the religious, academic and cultural elites of the day through attempts to adapt the incoming elements to the precepts of Islamic law, as well as through the linguistic adaptation of most of the newly introduced Western terms referring to objects, techniques, concepts and the like.

In the area of Islamic law, a discipline known as *fiqh al-nawāzil* (the jurisprudence of unprecedented cases) attempted to address some of the newly introduced cultural phenomena which, in the field of art, included drawing, painting, pictorial representation, singing, acting, and other nascent forms of creative expression making their appearance in Arab-Islamic society. This branch of Islamic jurisprudence sought to dispel people’s confusion over how to respond, in keeping with Islamic law, to these newly introduced phenomena, some of which were judged to be forbidden, and others permissible. Photography is an example of a cultural import from the West which was ruled to be acceptable by the standards of Islamic law.

Through its various legal rulings, this type of aims-based jurisprudence helped create a social niche for the so-called ‘fine arts,’ which Shaykh Muhammad Abduh (d. 1322 AH/1904 CE) was among the first to accept and promote in Arab-Islamic society. Aims-based jurisprudence also helped to establish a linguistic niche in Islamic culture for many terms used to refer to incoming cultural elements and their associated concepts, such as telephone, telegraph, photograph, automobile, phonograph, radio, sabbatical, opera, bank, and others.



Writers and other members of the intelligentsia contributed to creating a home for industries, literary genres, traditions, items of apparel, instruments and the other entities newly entering Arab-Islamic societies from the West as signs of advancement and progress. They accomplished this task through efforts to modernize education, interviews, discussions and public debates, and via books, newspaper and magazine articles and other media. By virtue of such efforts, indirect linguistic, stylistic and terminological approaches were made to these newly introduced elements in both the vernacular and formal Arabic. The pioneering Arab intellectual Salamah Musa (d. 1377 AH/1958 CE) – the first to promote the use of the Arabic term *thaqāfah* as a rendering of the foreign term ‘culture’ – highlighted the knowledge-related aspect of art. For this reason, Musa held that art is more closely linked to culture than it is to civilization, since civilization has to do primarily with a society’s material existence, whereas culture has more to do with a society’s mentality, attitudes and thought life.

The *littérateur* Tawfiq al-Hakim (d. 1407 AH/1987 CE) played a similar role by identifying the epistemological nature of the art of theatre. It was Tawfiq al-Hakim who coined the term *masrah* as the Arabic equivalent of the word ‘theatre,’ and who won theatre a prominent place in modern Arab culture.

A number of direct stylistic and terminological approaches to this topic were pursued by linguists and Arabic language academies, which attempted to adapt numerous words, terms and concepts derived from modern Western culture to the Arabic language. At the same time, earnest efforts were expended to pre-empt further linguistic encroachment by moving promptly to coin Arabic equivalents of foreign terms. Other approaches included Arabization, translation, categorization, and introduction of new terms into Arabic lexicons.

The modern study of terms and concepts of relevance to Islamic art was pioneered by scholar and *littérateur* Ahmad Taymur Pasha (d. 1348 AH/1930 CE). Taymur authored a number of books on this subject, the best known of which is his groundbreaking *al-Taṣwīr ‘ind al-‘Arab* (Pictorial Representation Among the Arabs), which set the tone for future studies in the field of Islamic art and related terminology. This contribution of Taymur’s was of significant academic value given

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the many Arabic terms and concepts it contained of relevance to the art of Islamic pictorial representation, such as *tadhbīb* (gilding or illumination), *takfīt* (inlaying or platerwork), *al-tazmīk* (tazmiq, a style of Islamic illumination associated with the Mamluk era), *khayāl al-ẓill* or *ṭayfal-khayāl* (shadow plays), and others.

Another scholar whose work paved the way for the creation of an Arabic lexicon relating to Islamic art was linguist and author Bishr Faris (d. 1382 AH/1963 CE), who took great pains to trace the roots of Islamic artistic terminology in the Arabic language with a view to constructing the language of Islamic art based on the historical usage of specialized terms. Bishr Faris's numerous linguistic contributions include:

- A brief study published in the journal of Egypt's Royal Academy of the Arabic Language (*Majallat Majma' al-Lughah al-'Arabiyyah al-Malakī*) in 1353 AH/1935 CE entitled, *Fī Iṣṭilāḥat al-Mūsīqā wa al-Falsafah* (On Musical and Philosophical Terminology).
- A book entitled, *Iṣṭilāḥāt 'Arabiyyah li Fann al-Taṣwīr* (Arabic Terminology Relating to the Art of Pictorial Representation).
- An Arabic-French index consisting of more than eighty terms dealing with the art of pictorial representation, which appears at the end of his book entitled, *Sirr al-Zakhrifah al-Islāmiyyah* (Secret of Islamic Ornamental Art).
- A book entitled, *Al-Fann al-Qudsī fī al-Taṣwīr al-Islāmī al-Awwal* (Sacred Art: Early Islamic Pictorial Representation).

Nevertheless, these modern pioneering efforts in the study of Arabic-Islamic artistic terminology under the auspices of the Academy of Arabic Language in Cairo pale in significance before early Muslim scholars' treatment of Islamic artistic terminology in their writings on beauty from an Islamic perspective and on various genres of Islamic art. Al-Fārābī (d. 339 AH/950 CE) provided a large number of technical definitions relating to the fields of both music and pictorial representation. In the field of music, for example, he proposed the following terms and definitions: *al-alḥān al-mulidhdhah* (pleasurable tunes), he defined as tunes whose only function is to bring auditory enjoyment to the listener; *al-alḥān al-mutakhayyalah* (imaginative tunes) are tunes

that benefit the listener by inspiring the formation of mental images much as ornamentation and statues stimulating the visual imagination. To these al-Fārābī added the term *al-alḥān al-infi‘āliyyah* (affective tunes), which bring about affective reactions in the listener, whether by intensifying or calming a person’s emotions; and the term *al-alḥān al-ghinā’iyyah* (vocal tunes). Al-Fārābī proposed that human beings have an instinctual desire to seek pleasure, imagination, and affect, and that different types of tunes address these instinctual desires.

Other ancient Muslim contributors to the study of the musical arts include Ibn Sīnā (d. 370 AH/980 CE), whose terminological studies relating to what he referred to as *jawāmi‘ ‘ilm al-mūsīqā* (musicological compilations) make up a chapter in his book *al-Shifā’* (Healing). These compilations offered explanations of numerous terms and concepts relating to tunes (*alḥān*), notes (*anghām*) and musical instruments. Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī (d. 414 AH/1023 CE) likewise contributed a number of foundational terms to the language of the art of Arabic calligraphy.

Miskawayh (d. 421 AH/1030 CE) was among the first Arab historians to discuss the creative experiments undertaken by Muslim artists in the area of what he termed *‘ilm al-taṣāwīr*, or ‘the science of visual representations,’ and to which Ikhwān al-Ṣafā (third century AH/ninth century CE) referred as *tazwīq* and/or *al-zīwāqah* (from the verb *zawwaqah*, which Hans Wehr defines as meaning to adorn, embellish, ornament, or to picture, visualize (i.e. a story) in one’s imagination).

Al-Ghazālī (d. 505 AH/1111 CE) divided the notion of beauty into the categories of *al-jamāl al-ḥaqīqī* (literal beauty), *al-jamāl al-ṭabī‘ī* (natural beauty), and *al-jamāl al-insānī* (human beauty). He also distinguished between *al-jamāl al-bāṭinī* (inner beauty) and *al-jamāl al-zāhirī* (outward beauty), and identified various levels at which they are perceived by the inner and outer eye. Hence, al-Ghazālī’s thoughts on the topics of beauty and art and their associated terminology contain the nucleus of an epistemological Islamic aesthetic.

These early scholars’ writings on the topics of beauty and art and the distinctive terms associated with them might have served as a valuable basis for the Arabic Language Academy’s decisions concerning the appropriate terms to apply to the concepts associated with

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Islamic art and architecture. Nevertheless, the Academy's humble early attempts in this area lacked seriousness and boldness of vision.

The first refereed Arabic lexicon in the field of Islamic art was entitled *Muʿjam Alfāz al-Ḥadārah wa Muṣṭalahāt al-Funūn* (Dictionary of Terms Relating to Civilization and the Arts). This dictionary was broadly recognized for its inclusion of terms from a variety of artistically related areas – the art of visual representation, modern artistic schools of thought, sculpting, drawing and painting, pottery and ceramics. It also contained decisions made by Cairo's Arabic Language Academy on terminology relating to Islamic architecture. In fact, however, the language used to discuss Islamic art is still dominated by numerous foreign concepts and terms. This fact serves as evidence that along with other academic institutions as well as Arab researchers and linguists both current and past, the Arabic Language Academy has not subjected the language of Islamic art to the thorough and critical examination needed to liberate it from the restraints of Orientalism and Westernization or, at the very least, to infuse it with greater Arabic and Islamic authenticity.

### Translation and Islamic Artistic Terminology

Initial attempts to ground artistic terminology and concepts in the Arabic-Islamic tradition were modest and hesitant, most of them taking place within the context of what one might term 'cultural Westernization,' which was viewed as the symbol of modernity and contemporaneity. Consequently, the Arab linguists and intellectuals engaged in these endeavors devoted approximately equal attention to Arab-Islamic terms and concepts and those that originated in foreign contexts. This trend began to entrench itself in the circles of linguists and other researchers into Islamic antiquities, arts, architecture, and crafts, which constituted a fledgling epistemological field and academic speciality. In the context of this new field, modern Western civilization represented a cultural and linguistic challenge to Arab-Muslim scholars, who were now spurred to think scientifically about how to identify the roots of Islamic art-related terminology and systematize it into an established lexicon.

Bishr Faris's method of rooting foreign terms related to Islamic art in the Arab-Islamic tradition involved going back to Arabic lexicons and literature and taking on the linguistic and cultural challenges of translating these terms into Arabic. The expressive and communicational challenges reflected in the act of translation continue to cast their shadow over endeavours in the areas of research, writing, education and culture, especially as they touch upon art-related terms that appear in Western writings on Islamic antiquities, Islamic architecture and other forms of Islamic art.

Most Western studies divide Islamic art into two major categories. The first of these is termed 'the major arts,' which include architecture, sculpting, mosaics, wall murals, ornamental inscriptions on wood and plaster, and the like. The second is termed 'the minor arts,' referred to at times as 'the applied arts,' which include crafted items made from metal, wood, pottery and glass, as well as ornamentation of copies of the Qur'an, manuscript illumination, mosaics, and ancient writings.

The earliest and best-known Arabic term for this category is *al-funūn al-far'īyyah al-islāmiyyah* (literally, the subsidiary Islamic arts). This term appears to have been coined by Zaki Muhammad Hasan, who wrote, "*Al-funūn al-far'īyyah* is the Arabic phrase we have used thus far to translate the English term 'the minor arts,' the French term *arts mineure*, and the German term *kleinkunst*. We might also translate it as *al-funūn al-ṣinā'īyyah* ('the industrial arts') or *al-funūn al-taṭbīqīyyah* ('the applied arts'). It is also translated sometimes as *al-funūn al-zukhrufīyyah* ('the decorative arts')."

However this term is translated, it refers to art applied to movable objects, be they functional or decorative. At the same time, it must be recognized that the two-way division mentioned here is quite vague. Some art historians include carpets, for example, within the category of 'the minor arts,' while others do not.

In this context, a work deserving of commendation is the study done by archaeological researcher Ahmad Muhammad Isa on terms which appeared in *A Handbook of Muhammadan Art* by Dr. M. S. Dimand, who served for more than thirty years as curator of the Islamic Art collection at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art. Highly accurate and reliable, Dimand's pioneering book succeeds in

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meeting the linguistic challenges that have traditionally faced the process of translating terms relating to Islamic art from English into Arabic.

Isa's approach in this work was to choose Arabic terms that best matched their English counterparts in both meaning and frequency of usage even if they were colloquial in nature. He tells us that the terms he has chosen are "the words used by actual practitioners of the art, my aim being to determine the meanings of the Arabic words as they relate directly to the art or craft itself, and to avoid having more than one Arabic translation for each English term."

This invaluable piece of translation-related research became the basis for the first small English-Arabic dictionary of art-related terms. After taking English words of relevance to Islamic art, Isa provided Arabic equivalents for them and added these to his translation of Dimand's book, his ultimate goal being to produce a comprehensive, accurate and authoritative Arabic-English dictionary of the Islamic arts.

Nearly four decades later, Isa expanded his dictionary with additions taken from his translation of still another book on the topic by Oktay Aslan Aba. The expanded edition, a pioneering work in its field containing more than 1,400 terms in the areas of Islamic architecture, crafts and other arts, was published under the title, *Muṣṭalaḥāt al-Fann al-Islāmī*.

## The Genesis of the Terminology of Islamic Art

The term 'Islamic art' began to emerge explicitly as a subject of Orientalist-Islamic study between the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries AH/nineteenth and twentieth centuries CE, at which time the term came to be used to refer to architectural monuments, illuminated manuscripts, crafted items and rarities which were of cultural interest within the field of museology.

Major Western museums' need to identify Islamic works of art and artistic relics and to 'market' them culturally to museum goers may have led to a major semantic shift in the term 'Islamic art' whereby, instead of referring simply to a museum collection representing a culture or

historical time period, it came to denote an entire epistemological field that could take its place alongside science and literature. Influenced by the West, Muslim societies began to assimilate the concept of art as something related primarily to beauty and creativity, and specifically Islamic art as a basic component of modern and contemporary culture.

Nevertheless, despite its widespread use in modern times, the general appellation 'Islamic art' has yet to be defined in a clear and consistent manner. The roots of this difficulty can be traced back to the thirteenth century AH/nineteenth century CE, from which point we might map the expression's historical and terminological trajectory as follows:

- 1) Between 1289-1294 AH/1873-1878 CE, two separate books were published under the title *L'Art Arabe* (Arab Art), one by Jules Burgoin, and the other by Prisse D'Avennes. It thus appears that the term 'Arab art' was being used commonly to refer to the Islamic rarities, antiquities and works of art that were spreading across Europe at the time. However, scholars and historians held differing views on how to refer to these articles, as evidenced by the varied titles of the relevant studies that were being published in succession at the time.
- 2) The term 'saracenic art' was coined by historian Lane Pooles, whose *Handbook of Saracenic Art* was published in 1303 AH/1886 CE. However, it should be noted that this appellation has rarely been used in the academic study of Islamic art, and is thus of minor significance in the present context.
- 3) From the mid-nineteenth century, the most widely used term for Islamic art was 'Mohammadan art,' which appeared in the titles of a number of works published during this period, among them *Mohammadan Architecture in Egypt and Palestine* by Martin S. Briggs (1299 AH/1882 CE).
- 4) The term 'Muslim Art' made its first appearance with the publication in 1324 AH/1907 CE of the *Manuel de l'Art Musulman* by renowned French Orientalist and artist M. Saladin. This last-named phrase was significant for the academic role it played in preparing the way, albeit gradually, for a shift to the use of the composite term 'Islamic art.'

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- 5) As for the term 'Islamic art,' it made its first explicit appearance in the early fourteenth century AH/twentieth century CE, that is, in the year 1327 AH/1910 CE, at which time several exhibitions of Islamic crafts, rarities and works of art were hosted in Europe under the title 'Islamic art.'

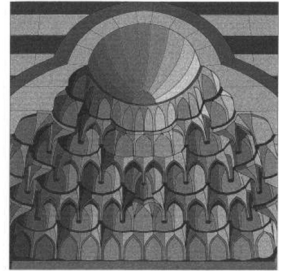
The composite term resulting from the combination of 'Islam' and 'art' became a generic term for everything that could be classified under the rubric of Islamic artistic, aesthetic and creative craftsmanship. As such, 'Islamic art' became the term used most consistently to refer to this craft's genres and specific forms within the context of Islamic visual culture. At the same time, the ongoing import of terms and concepts from abroad hindered the development of an unambiguous nomenclature for the various expressions of Islamic art.

This difficulty is illustrated by the following six phenomena:

- 1) The unfamiliar nature of many of the key terms employed in the Western study of Islamic art, or what we might term 'Orientalist aesthetics,' which was couched in a variety of foreign languages which were responsible for coining nearly all the elements of the relevant academic nomenclature, including the term 'Islamic art' itself.
- 2) The borrowing of many of the concepts and expressions employed to explain the critical and philosophical terms of relevance to 'Islamic art' and its various subtopics, some of which had been heretofore unknown in Arab-Islamic culture. These include, for example, the term 'school' in the sense of a current of thought or an artistic movement. The term 'school' is used broadly in this sense in modern and contemporary studies of Islamic art, which contain lengthy discussions of 'schools of Islamic art' despite the fact that the term 'school' (*madrāsah*) was not used traditionally in the Arabic language or in Islamic culture with reference to anything but a place of learning.
- 3) The introduction of certain Western technical terms into the contemporary language of Islamic art. One such term is 'technique,' which was first translated as *al-ikhrāj al-fannī* in studies dealing with ways of drawing decorative shapes and the like.



- 4) A lack of precision in the translation of foreign terms relating to Islamic art into the Arabic language. An example of such imprecision can be seen in the fact that terms such as illustration, ornamentation, decoration and others were all rendered into Arabic via a single word, that is, *zakhrāfah*.
- 5) The use of Arabized foreign words in relation to Islamic art to such excess that this came to appear foreign to the Qur'an and Arab culture, and was thus difficult to understand. One of the most salient examples of this phenomenon has occurred in relation to terms taken over into Arabic from Turkish, such as *hatay* and *romi*, which refer to styles of Islamic ornamentation that developed during the Ottoman era. The Arabized term *muqarnaş* (a type of ornamented vaulting) continues to be used widely in the field of Islamic art.



*Muqarnaş*

- 6) Few of those concerned with Islamic art devoted significant effort to rooting artistic terminology in the Arabic language by referring back to the Arabic lexicon itself, or by drawing attention to the many terms and concepts of Arabic and Islamic origin that have entered other languages. One such term is *tawriq* (Arabic, *tawriq*), meaning to illustrate with leaves, which made its way from Arabic into Castilian Spanish, where it became an artistic term defined as 'ornamentation in the shapes of small leaves and palm branches,' and which reentered the Arabic-Islamic artistic lexicon as *fann al-tawriq*. The Arabic word *tawriq* has itself been used by Arab historians. Abū al-Ḥasan al-Muqrī, for example, mentioned someone by the name of Muḥammad Ibn Aḥmad who was knowledgeable about the craft of *tawriq*.



*Tawriq*

## Western Manufacture of the Islamic Artistic Lexicon

Both before and after the birth of the term ‘Islamic art,’ work was being done to develop a nomenclature for everything relating to this field by way of artistic productions, antiquities, theories, techniques, styles, shapes, images and symbols. This process took place through the invention of new terms and phrases in the context of the Western artistic culture that grew out of the European Renaissance. The early eleventh century AH/seventeenth century CE witnessed harbingers of the development of an artistic nomenclature with the coining in 1019 AH/1611 CE of the Italian term ‘Arabesco.’ Some early non-Arabic lexicons identify the syllable ‘Arab’ as the morphological and semantic nucleus of this new artistic term referring to ornamental plant designs. The term then made its way into other European languages, including French, German, and English, where it took the form of ‘Arabesque.’

Some Islamic art historians, such as Ernest Kuhnel, hold that the term ‘Arabesque’ was invented in the late thirteenth century AH/nineteenth century CE by the Austrian-born art historian Alois Riegle (1858-1905 CE), who is viewed as one of the founders of the discipline of the history and philosophy of art.

Modern Arab and Muslim researchers have differed over how to translate the term ‘Arabesque’ into Arabic. Some of the possibilities proposed include, for example, *al-tawshīḥ* (literally, adorning or dressing with a *wishāḥ*, an ornamented belt or sash), *al-raqsh* (adornment, embellishment), *al-‘arabasa*, *al-tarqīn al-zakhrāfī* (‘ornamental script’), *al-zakhrāfah al-‘arabiyyah al-muwarraqah* (Arabic leaved ornamentation), *al-zakhrāfah bi al-furū‘ al-nabātiyyah* (ornamental with stems and branches), *al-zakhrāfah al-nabātiyyah* (ornamentation with plant shapes), and possibly others.

## Post-‘Islamic Art’ Terminology

Following the appearance of the phrase ‘Islamic art,’ numerous other terms and concepts originating in the West continued to emerge and become vital elements of the language of Islamic aesthetics. The following are examples:

- 1) The Spanish term *Morisco* (French, *Moresque*, English, *Moorish*) appeared in 1019 AH/1611 CE in reference to anything that possessed the features of Moroccan art and architecture. From 1165 AH/1752 CE onward, these terms came to refer to both Moroccan and Andalusian ornamental styles of Islamic architecture, crafts and arts as exemplified in geometrical ornamental designs and latticework, particularly those found in Moroccan ceramic work known as *zulayj* (faience, ornamental tile and ceramic).
- 2) The word ‘miniature,’ of Italian origin, which appeared for the first time in 994 AH/1586 CE, entered the French and English languages in approximately 1365 AH/1946 CE in reference to small, detailed images, sometimes painted or gilded, used to embellish manuscripts. It is difficult to determine exactly when this term entered the language of Islamic art. What can be said, however, is that the term was often simply transliterated in Arabic as *miniyyātūr*. The word ‘miniature’ is thought to have first been translated from French into Arabic by linguist Bishr Faris, who rendered it as *munammamāt* (meaning, ‘adorned,’ ‘embellished,’ ‘ornamented’).
- 3) Unlike the word *Abstractionism*, which appeared in around 1344 AH/1926 CE, the word ‘abstraction’ (*tajrīd*) first began circulating in European languages in 955 AH/1549 CE in a sense that bore no particular connection to art per se. By 1364 AH/1945 CE the former term was being used consistently in association with a new trend in Western art that was marked by an absence of realistic or concrete details of a painting’s subject matter. Abstract art (Arabic, *al-fann al-tashkīlī*) involved a process of separating form from substance through a particular use of colors, lines, and geometric arrangements to create an artistic form that would point symbolically beyond itself to deeper meanings. This is the process that came to be known as ‘abstract art.’

## Unity and Diversity in the Theory of Islamic Art

THE PRINCIPLE OF unity and diversity is one of the primary philosophical and methodological underpinnings for our understanding of human beings, civilization and art. This principle gives rise to two basic types of theory. The first of these is a general theory that views unity and diversity as phenomena that are intuitively understood. According to this theory, people have an instinctive awareness of existing naturally within a broad, diverse context. Both unity and diversity are seen as entering organically into most, if not all, areas of life, including religious, philosophical and scientific explanations of the movement of history and the evolution of human civilization and knowledge. The second, more specific, type of theory views unity and diversity as a conundrum to be resolved in the realms of philosophy, science, literature, art, and other areas of human knowledge. This theory thus treats unity and diversity as objects of study, discussion, and methodical analysis.

Based on this classification of theories of unity and diversity and their place in the epistemological discourse relating to Islamic art, the principle of unity and diversity may be said to be the semantic focus and epistemological nerve of the theory of Islamic art.

Hegel (d. 1831 CE) was the first philosopher to discuss the divine unity as a theme of Islamic art. The paper presented by Richard Ettinghausen (d. 1979 CE) on interaction and cohesion in Islamic art at the Orientalists' convention held in 1955 on unity and diversity in Islamic civilization may have marked the beginning of serious study of this topic.

Historian Ahmad Fikri may have been the first contemporary Arab researcher to attempt to base a theory of Islamic art on the elements of unity between Arabness and Islam. And the last to do so may have been

Muslim thinker Isma‘il al Faruqi, who discussed the theory of Islamic art in light of the relationship between art and the divine oneness (*tawhīd*), which he viewed as the source and foundation of the conceptualization of beauty and its artistic expression.

## On the Artistic Concept of Unity and Diversity

The duality of unity and diversity is a vital theme of both Islamic cultural jurisprudence and the theory of Islamic art, in that:

- Unity consists in the complementarity of the artistic elements within a homogeneous geometric pattern, just as the members of a single body complement one another in fixed proportions.
- As for diversity – which is inseparable from unity – it consists in the ordering of disparate elements through relationships of similarity, repetition, combination and harmonious composition in a manner that achieves interaction and cohesion in a work of art. These elements together lend the work its aesthetic perfection, thereby setting it apart as belonging to the realm of art in particular, and not to some other realm of civilization such as science or literature, for example, given that this diversity is the essence of art.

Islamic art thus has a subjective-aesthetic dimension, and an objective-civilizational dimension. The subjective-aesthetic dimension may be seen in the fact that Islamic art is made up of numerous parts or units that come together to form a broader design. Each unit represents what might be thought of, on one hand, as a self-contained expressive entity, and on the other hand, as part of a broader structure through which the aesthetic value of Islamic architecture, arts and crafts is made visible.

As for the objective-civilizational dimension, it is observable in the fact that the singularity of Islamic doctrine and culture guides the choice of shapes and symbols in such a way as to convey a unified artistic expression of the essence of Islamic civilization and its message of the divine unity.

## The Unity and Diversity of Islamic Art: Civilizational Background

Since the study of Islamic civilization was officially established as part of the curricula offered in Western educational institutions due to the intimate link between Islamic art and Islamic civilization, the topic of unity and diversity in Islamic art has been a subject of debate among scholars.

Islamic civilization is marked by its comprehensiveness, the unity of its components, as well as richness and originality in the fields of science, culture, and the arts. Additionally, Islamic civilization stands out among the civilizations of the world for its geographical reach and its lengthy period of ascendancy. By the same token, Islamic art is marked by a tremendous variety that is visible in its crafts and ornamentation, the regions it has penetrated, and the individuals whose creativity has contributed to its development. The variety displayed in Islamic art forms is so marked, in fact, that it is difficult to find two pieces of Islamic art that are exactly the same. Art is of central epistemological importance to Islamic civilization. The link between Islamic civilization and Islamic art is, in fact, an exemplary expression of the single spirit that enlivens them both. This 'spirit' might be described as the epistemological system, law, or dialectic which serves as the basis for the overall Islamic cultural system of arts, architecture and crafts.

The epistemological approaches taken to the problem of unity and diversity are as numerous and varied as the facets of Islamic civilization itself, foremost among them the arts, architecture, and crafts. Numerous historical, cultural and archeological studies support the conclusion that Islamic art represents the clearest expression of Islamic civilization's material prosperity and progress. Both in its broader sense as a phenomenon that encompasses all useful material creations, and in its narrower sense as including only works of beauty art may be defined as the manifestation of human creativity as it generates the material and non-material components of a civilization. Art helps a society to achieve greater stability, cultural identity, and the capacity to develop a refined approach to cultural and material exchange with others for the sake of prospering the Earth.

In fact, the aim of prospering the Earth lies at the heart of Islamic discourse in both its spiritual and cultural aspects: The faith-based, religious aspect of this aim rests on the principle of stewardship, that is, human beings' role as God's representatives on Earth. This role is spoken of in *Sūrah al-Baqarah*, 2:30, which reads, "And Lo! Thy Sustainer said unto the angels: 'Behold, I am about to establish upon earth one who shall inherit it.' They said: 'Wilt Thou place on it such as will spread corruption thereon and shed blood whereas it is we who extol Thy limitless glory, and praise Thee, and hallow Thy name?' [God] answered: 'Verily, I know that which you do not know.'" As for the cultural-civilizational aspect of prospering the Earth, it rests on human beings' innate capacity for creativity in the realms of science, literature, art, and other areas of social life, communication and material development.

It may be helpful here to clarify the meaning of the Arabic term *faḍl*, which is rendered variously as favour, grace, generosity, excellence, credit, merit, benefit, and abundance. In the Islamic perspective, the term *faḍl* is an ideal that rests on the notion of increasing an entity's beauty and perfection. In other words, *faḍl* is a value that is added to an object, a person, a place, a time, or an action. From this we derive the term *mufaḍḍalah*, the act of weighing or comparing different entities to determine which is superior to the other, as well as the concept of *tafāḍul*, that is, the existence of varying degrees of excellence among people, lineages, fields of learning, literature and other forms of writing, arts and crafts, as well as other elements, components and manifestations of a civilization. Hence we derive the concept of the virtuous soul (*al-naḥs al-fāḍilah*), superior civilization (*al-ḥaḍārah al-fāḍilah*), meritorious, edifying speech (*al-kalām al-fāḍil*), the *Mufaḍḍaliyāt* (an anthology of choice pre-Islamic poems), and other entities and phenomena that can be described as meritorious, virtuous, excellent and the like.

Islamic art is the most appropriate realm in which to situate the relationship between unity and diversity in Islamic civilization, since this art plays a central role in Islamic civilization's creative formation, its epistemological system, and its cultural identity. The arts, architecture and crafts have a far more intense and ubiquitous

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presence in Islamic civilization than they do in other civilizations. Consequently, Islamic civilization may fairly be deemed a superior civilization by virtue of, on one hand, the unity of its universal values (truth, goodness, and beauty), and, on the other hand, the diverse ways in which these values are manifested in people's individual and social lives.

Given the simultaneous unity and diversity of these universal values in Islamic civilization, this is the civilization that gives fullest expression to the aesthetic meaning of the unity-diversity dialectic manifested in Islamic art.

### A Historical Reading of the Unity and Diversity of Islamic Art

Most theories of Islamic art over the centuries have been based on the notion of unity and diversity as a philosophical foundation for this art's vitality and importance and its impact on aesthetic knowledge, both Islamic and non-Islamic, as well as its respected position and its historical role in human civilization as a whole, both Islamic and non-Islamic.

A number of historians have endeavoured to come up with innovative theories of relevance to the vast field of Islamic art. In so doing, they have adopted either traditional historical and descriptive methods, or modern philosophical approaches (aesthetic, esoteric, expressionistic, symbolic) to explicate the organic connection between Islamic art and its origins. In the various regions that came under the banner of Islam, indigenous art forms were melted down in a single Islamic crucible and integrated into a broader Islamic culture which, though bearing a consistent stamp worldwide, allowed for differences of detail and individual elements. The material unity of Islamic civilization thus served as the vehicle for a spiritual and psychic unity which mirrored the Islamic creed of divine oneness.

The following are examples of historical studies which have concluded that the most significant distinguishing feature of Islamic art is the link between unity and diversity:



- 1) Through his historical studies of various architectural, decorative and applied styles – sometimes known as ‘subsidiary arts’ (*al-funūn al-far‘iyyah*), Ernst Kuhnel (1882-1964) concluded that Islamic art makes no distinction between ‘religious’ and ‘secular’ styles, but rather combines them in a single work.
- 2) According to Georges Marcais (1876-1962), Islamic art has a distinctive character that sets it apart from all other art forms of the ancient world. The Islamic religion and the Arabic language bound the various styles and schools of art into a unity that revealed itself most particularly in religious architecture.
- 3) According to E. J. Grube (1932-2011), the structural unity of the world of Islam manifests itself in the ethnic and geographic unity of the Arabic, Persian, and Turkish cultural elements.

## Unity and Diversity in Islamic Art: Perspectives and Interpretations

The various perspectives and interpretations that have been put forward in relation to the theme of unity and diversity in Islamic art might be divided into four groups: (1) those that view unity as the heart of Islamic life, (2) those that view diversity as the essence of art, (3) those that focus on unity in diversity, and (4) those that focus on diversity in unity.

These perspectives and interpretations have been presented in the context of studies on the following topics:

### *Unified Origin, Diverse Sources*

The issue of the origin and sources of Islamic art has been a subject of ongoing controversy among scholars. According to religious, cultural and scientific theories which draw primarily on the Western epistemological system that grew out of the European Renaissance and its Orientalist extensions, Islamic art is a late phenomenon that developed in response to external or objective factors and influences, such as art forms that preceded or were contemporary with it.

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Some historical studies conclude that immediately prior to and following the dawn of Islam, Arabs “had no art of their own worth mentioning.” Such studies go on to assert that when the Muslims conquered Syria, Iraq, Egypt and Persia (Iran), they adopted the refined art forms found in these lands, thus paving the way for the emergence and gradual evolution of an Islamic artistic style. This fledgling Islamic style was derived in particular from Byzantine and Sassanid art, with Christian art in Egypt, Syria and Iraq being one source of Islamic art, at least in its early beginnings.

This Orientalist hypothesis was met with objections by some scholars, who set out to refute theories that posited an ‘Arab vacuum,’ ‘Islamic borrowing,’ and external sources for Islamic art.

Arab and Muslim researchers have presented alternative theories according to which Islamic art derives from genuine Arab and Islamic sources. Proponents of these alternative theories hold that prior to Islam the Arabs had had numerous artistic monuments on the Arabian Peninsula and elsewhere. After adopting the Islamic religion, the Arabs then put their minds, imaginations and emotions to use in its service. It was on this basis alone, according to this alternative theory, that Islamic art came into being and evolved from the early Islamic ages. As time went on, Muslim theorists made efforts to identify the basic components of Islamic art and to assimilate what they saw as beautiful and useful from other civilizations and their artistic traditions into the framework of a unified Arab-Islamic artistic expression.

### *Unity and Diversity in Cultural and Civilizational Elements*

Some studies on Islamic art have focused on the cultural and civilizational factors of relevance to this art’s Arab-Islamic origin. Rather than relying on particular works of art and their distinctive features, such studies have sought to identify the elements that have unified the Islamic artistic tradition across the boundaries of historical periods and geographical regions.

The common elements that serve to unify Islamic art in its diversity can be classified as either *cultural* or *civilizational*.

The *cultural elements* that played a role in the emergence and development of Islamic art include the Islamic creed, the Arabic language,

and artistic expression. As Islam expanded into other territories, the distinctive intellectual and cultural features of Islamic society and civilization permeated into the countries that had come under Muslim rule, and particularly upon their artistic and architectural traditions. This was made possible by the comprehensiveness of Islam's teachings and by its overall humanitarian and global stamp.

After the Islamic creed, the most powerful unifying factor in this process was the Arabic language, which God had chosen to be the means through which the Prophet (ṢAAS)\* would convey the message of Islam. Given Arabic's importance to Islam, its use became tantamount to a religious act; thus the prominence that came to be attached to the art of Arabic calligraphy, which one scholar has described as "the noblest of all arts," being at once an artistic expression of the Islamic creed, the Arabic language, and Arab-Islamic culture.

As for the *civilizational factors* that have contributed to Islamic art's emergence and evolution, they can be summarized as follows: (1) The religious factor, which has manifested itself in the role played by the mosque and the Qur'an in Islamic life and its aesthetic, practical and applied arts; (2) the political factor, which can be observed in the fact that caliphs, sultans, kings, emirs and other Muslim rulers have patronized various types of Islamic art; (3) the social factor, which reveals itself in a trend among various classes of Islamic society across successive ages to promote, preserve and organize arts and crafts via private social institutions; (4) the intellectual factor, which has helped in its turn to promote the arts through consciousness-raising, education, and other means of spreading Islamic culture and art; and (5) the scientific factor, which has lent major support to Islamic art through the facilitation of printing and written publication.

A number of scholars have explained the phenomenon of Islamic art as an outgrowth of the foregoing cultural and civilizational factors. Others, by contrast, have viewed these and other factors simply as objective conditions and constraints that laid the groundwork for the growth, development and flowering of Islamic art. This perspective acknowledges that "the history of Islamic art is marked by a distinctive

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\* (ṢAAS) – *Ṣallā Allāhu ‘alayhi wa sallam*: May the peace and blessings of God be upon him. Said whenever the name of the Prophet Muhammed is mentioned.

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unity despite its inherent diversity” while, at the same time, giving requisite consideration to the development of this art over a span of 1300 years and its spread from the lands of Andalusia to the borders of China.

Islamic art is characterized by four distinctive features: the decorative use of geometric designs, stylized plant shapes, masterful depiction of people and imagery, and Arabic calligraphy. What contributed to this artistic homogeneity was a regular, repeated succession of a number of processes, namely: adoption, adaptation, invention, imitation, displacement, continuation and revival. Over the course of thirteen centuries and across a vast geographical expanse, this recurring series of processes served to achieve both evolution and continuity in the realm of Islamic art.

### *Unity of Style and Diversity of Artistic Elements*

The notion of unity and diversity is intimately linked to the epistemological nature of Islamic art, particularly in view of the fact that when an art is assessed critically and aesthetically, its structure is found to be based more fully on elements, techniques and styles than on other components, such as theme, content, historical period, and the like.

Hence, most scholars of art, particularly those who study it from a critical-aesthetic point of view, tend to favour the view that stylistic unity is the primary distinguishing feature of the Islamic arts, and this in spite of: (1) the differences among the arts of architecture, calligraphy, drawing and painting, gilding, and so on, (2) the variety exhibited by their formal elements, including dots, lines, circles, cones, and other geometric figures; and (3) the diversity of their abstract values, such as color, texture, light, rhythm, space, and so on.

These formal elements and abstract values produce what we might term artistic unity, including linear unity, ornamental unity, architectural unity, etc. This unity in and of itself constitutes a complete and autonomous artistic element whereby images are complemented by or repeated with similar or contrasting artistic elements or units. This unity exhibits itself in a geometric system or context which gives the work of art the distinctive epistemological form which, in the parlance of art criticism, we refer to as ‘type’ or ‘style.’

There is near unanimity among scholars that the stylistic unity observable in Islamic art “is highly integrated despite the diversity of its sources and influences.” Examples of this phenomenon could be drawn from a number of different types of Islamic art. However, the Islamic art form most frequently drawn upon is that of Islamic ornamentation, which possesses a unique technical and aesthetic stylism based on repetition/similarity and/or variety in the ornamental units employed, be they plant shapes or geometric figures.

This diversified stylistic unity may be said to rest on three fundamental, interconnected foundations: (1) unity of design, which is based on diversity in elements, forms, patterns, and structural layouts in Islamic architecture, arts and crafts; (2) a perception of this unity and of the levels of its geometrical-semantic formation based on a web of relationships and developing concepts; and (3) unity of purpose. Overall, the Islamic arts come together in the symbolic expression of Muslim artists’ experience of the divine oneness in a manner that transcends regional and geographical disparities.

### *Unity of Identity and Diversity of Stylistic Distinctives*

The stylistic unity and aesthetic distinctiveness of Islamic art may well point to a unified cultural and civilizational identity. Style is viewed as the artwork’s inward or subjective aspect, and identity as the outward or objective form that sets it apart from other entities. Art is art, not by virtue of its raw materials, which are, for the most part, a result of geographical happenstance but, rather, by virtue of its style of expression, its aesthetic content, and its manner of suggesting ideas. As for Islamic art, it is an aesthetic expression of Islam from within the Arab experience. The data that make up this Arab experience have given Muslims’ artistic output an identifiable cultural and civilizational stamp which can be seen, for example, in the uniform architectural styles found throughout the Islamic world, whose civilization is colored at once by Arabism and Islam.

The most significant features of Islamic art are its universality and the unity that has come from Arabism (Arab identity) and Islam. Arab identity, embodied in the Arabic language and Arabic calligraphy, became the primary theme of Islamic ornamentation due to the beauty

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with which the Arabic script conveys the visible words of God. This is why European researchers came to refer to Islamic ornamentation as ‘Arabesque’. Given the centrality of Islamic ritual prayer (Salah), the mosque came to be viewed as a symbol of Islam – the religion of divine unity and oneness – which in turn brought about a uniformity of layout and design among Muslim mosques worldwide.

Given the harmony and inseparability of the factors that make up Arab Islamic civilization, from the Arabic language to the spiritual cohesion founded on the monotheistic character of Islam, some researchers in this field have referred to Islamic art as ‘Arabo-Islamic art.’ Despite not having associated itself with the arts in the way that Christianity and Buddhism have, for example, Islam has nevertheless given rise to an attitude and a way of life that have exerted a profound influence on its architecture, its representational art, its style of ornamentation, and the choice of materials used in the various Islamic regions. Despite the apparently homogeneous stamp of Islamic art, one cannot help but marvel at the tremendous diversity that exists from one region to another, and from one time period to another within the same region.

### *The Unity and Diversity of Islamic Art: An Islamic Reading*

Some of the perspectives and interpretations offered in response to Orientalists’ theories on Islamic art have been based more on emotional reactivity than on creative critiques that shed new light on the unity and diversity of Islamic art from a distinctly Islamic point of view. Hence, I will attempt in what follows to ground this theme in the basic Islamic origins and sources of what we might term ‘Islamic aesthetics.’ The origins and sources of Islamic aesthetic knowledge are the Qur’an, the Prophetic Sunnah, the Islamic sciences of relevance to philosophy, language, rhetoric, mathematics, geometry, and optics, as well as the method we might term, ‘Islamic art criticism,’ which entails an objective reading of the unity and diversity of Islamic art.

### *The Islamic Theory of Unity and Diversity*

We can discern the epistemological origin and essence of this theory in the Islamic affirmation that ‘there is no god but God,’ and Islam’s

acknowledgment of the intimate link between the divine unity and the diversity manifest in the creation. The divine unity is expressed in the words, “He is God, the Creator, the Maker who shapes all forms and appearances! His [alone] are the attributes of perfection. All that is in the heavens and on earth extols His limitless glory: for He alone is Almighty, Truly Wise!” (*Sūrah al-Ḥashr*, 59:24), and, “[Know,] then, [that] God is sublimely exalted, the Ultimate Sovereign, the Ultimate Truth: there is no deity save Him, the Sustainer, in bountiful Almighty-ness enthroned!” (*Sūrah al-Mu’minūn*, 23:116). As for the diversity of creation, it is spoken of in *Sūrah al-Baqarah*, 2:164, where we read:

Verily, in the creation of the heavens and of the earth, and the succession of night and day: and in the ships that speed through the sea with what is useful to man: and in the waters which God sends down from the sky, giving life thereby to the earth after it had been lifeless, and causing all manner of living creatures to multiply thereon: and in the change of the winds, and the clouds that run their appointed courses between sky and earth: [in all this] there are messages indeed for people who use their reason.

The discourse found in the Qur’an and the Prophetic Sunnah reveals the broad dimensions of this perspective in the vastness of the cosmos and in the innate human longing to worship, to know, to create, to build civilizations, to communicate, to form community, and to engage in useful production on behalf of self and others. This discourse is addressed generally to humans and invisible beings (the jinn), but primarily to human beings as creatures specially honored by God Almighty with the role of stewards on Earth. The epistemological and methodological perspective reflected in Islamic discourse is informed by a series of dualities which emerge from the most fundamental duality of all, that is, the intimate link between God – the One – and God’s various manifestations in the universe at large, and in people’s inner beings. The classic Qur’anic statement of the divine unity is found in *Sūrah al-Ikhlāṣ*, 112, which reads, “Say: He is the One God: God the Eternal, the Uncaused Cause of All Being. He begets not, and neither is He begotten; and there is nothing that could be compared with Him.” As for the diversity that has been produced out of this unity, it is spoken of in *Sūrah Fuṣṣilat*, 41:53: “In time We shall make them fully under-

stand Our messages [through what they perceive] in the utmost horizons [of the universe] and within themselves, so that it will become clear unto them that this [revelation] is indeed the truth. [Still,] is it not enough [for them to know] that thy Sustainer is witness unto everything?" The cosmic dialectic of unity and diversity is perceived by human beings through worship. God declares, "And [tell them that] I have not created the invisible beings and men to any end other than that they may [know and] worship Me" (*Sūrah al-Dhāriyāt*, 51:56), where the act of worship is understood to include the act of knowing God in God's oneness.

Lastly there are the countless subsidiary dualities which grow out of the fundamental duality of unity and diversity: the seen and the unseen, the hidden and the manifest, majesty and beauty, the giving and receiving of inspiration, creation and imitation, nature and manufacture.

As one Muslim thinker observed, "Perfection inheres in unity...and everything possesses a perfection suited to it." Hence, unity is seen as the origin of everything in existence, while the variety that emanates from this oneness can be perceived in all realms: in the Beautiful Names of God as they point to His sublime attributes, in material reality, and in the mysteries of the soul observed through human civilization and growing knowledge and awareness.

Given the unbreakable bond that exists between unity and diversity, this duality has come to be seen as the essential core of human knowledge in general, and of Islamic knowledge in particular. In this connection, Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī (d. 414 AH/1023 CE) stated:

The True Creator, the One and Only, is the source and wellspring of all things. It is from Him that abundance flows forth, and in Him that it dwindles and diminishes. The preposition 'from' as employed here does not indicate separation, nor does the preposition 'in' denote connection or union. Rather, I am speaking on the level of reason, which makes judgments concerning this or that entity without affirming that such an entity enjoys some independent or separate existence. For the forms and boundaries relating to words and things are negated in the realm of the Divine. Instead, they become reflections of spiritual entities in motion. In the sphere of the Divine, words draw us nearer to the Truth by ushering us into a realm beyond ourselves. The better and more complete the reflections and the clearer the words, the subtler the movement and the more refined



the perception. Consequently, all evidence and words should be deemed essentially equal when seen in the light of the Divine Oneness. This fact is illustrated perfectly in forms, lines, images and inscriptions, all of which are infused with, surrounded by, and encompassed within unity. It is through unity that these things are fashioned and completed, and through multiplicity that they differ from one another in form and quality.

Al-Tawḥīdī concludes his exposition of the Islamic epistemological perspective on unity and diversity with the words, “I seek God’s protection from [every] craft that does not point to the One Divine or invites us to worship Him, acknowledge His unicity and divine rights over us, seek His protection, endure His decrees with patience, and submit to His commands.”

### *The Artistic Theory of Unity and Diversity*

By analyzing the techniques employed in Islamic art – including the repetition of similar and contrasting geometric figures and other ornamental shapes and linear images (as in Arabesque and Arabic calligraphy) – in light of the dialectic of unity and diversity, the aesthetic and civilizational features of Islamic art can be more clearly identified; and this, in turn, can aid in the formulation of an Islamic theory of unity and diversity applicable specifically to Islamic art.

By contrast, Western Orientalist theories have tended to lend undue prominence to just one or two distinctive features or aspects of Islamic art – geometrical figures, for example, or ornamentation. These features have then been interpreted abstractly, symbolically, historically, or descriptively.

Such Orientalist feature-based theories have sometimes been criticized for not being founded on a normative set of criteria or principles suited to the description of Islamic arts, architecture and crafts as a whole. Instead, most of these theories have been formulated based on analyses of only one or two forms of Islamic artistic expression, such as architecture, drawing, or some other form of pictorial representation in light of what scholars had observed in the Western arts, both religious and secular. This may be why some of these theories have contradicted others in terms of how they describe, classify and interpret the art forms with which they deal and/or the features on which they

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focus. Nevertheless, most of these theories do lend special attention to unity and diversity.

Another difficulty with the Orientalist approach to theorizing about Islamic art was that those who formulated the theories concerned did not give sufficient thought to their theories' methodological and philosophical biases. In other words, they rarely made clear efforts to identify the aesthetic and critical roots of the unity-diversity dialectic manifested in Islamic civilization, architecture and art within the Islamic tradition itself.

Unlike the majority of their counterparts, art scholars Louis Massignon (1883-1962) and Alexandre Papadopoulo did seek to link the character of Islamic art forms to their Islamic roots. Massignon attempted to explain Islamic geometrical shapes and their artistic formation via the Ash'arite Atomic Theory, according to which the Divine Will continuously assembles and reassembles the atoms that make up everything in existence in order for things to retain their identities over time. According to this theory, atoms can be brought together in various ways in order to form a variety of shapes and identities. Unlike the Divine Will, which brings the atoms into existence in the first place, the artist takes already existing entities and arranges them in innovative ways.

As for Papadopoulo, he has sought to present a new, distinctive theory to explain Islamic visual representation as a function of Islamic spiritual and intellectual principles. According to Papadopoulo, the Prophetic hadiths that forbade the pictorial representation of living beings were a primary cause behind the development of Islamic visual representation in a direction distinct from that of other religious traditions. Specifically, Muslim artists devised creative styles and protocols that conformed to the Islamic ban on the visual representation of humans and animals, thereby seeking to demonstrate that their intention was not to simulate reality and, in so doing, to vie with the creative act that is unique to God alone.

In formulating their theories, modern scholars of Islamic art have made little use of Islamic methodologies, such as the 'roots and branches' approach (*manhaj al-uṣūl wa al-furūʿ*) that was developed in the field of Islamic jurisprudence, the occasion method (which involves

identifying the circumstances that occasioned the emergence of a given art form), rhetorical methods entailing analysis of the structures of the Qur'anic text, and the study of unity and diversity in Islamic art from a wholistic, comprehensive perspective that views its distinguishing features as reflective of a broader, more inclusive pattern or phenomenon that makes Islamic art what it is.

It has been observed, for example, that Islamic crafts, architecture and arts tend to unite the sacred and the secular, the aesthetic and the practical, and inward and outward spaces. As an integral phenomenon, Islamic art consists in a set of interdependent arrangements of subnetworks. We have geometrical arrangements relating to form and semantic arrangements relating to content (in Arabic calligraphy, for example), which together form a single aesthetic and epistemological structure that embodies unity in diversity. A piece of Islamic art will thus be varied from within while, at the same time, possessing an overall cohesion and a uniform outward appearance.

### *The Oneness of God and Feature-based Unity*

A proper critique of the theory of Islamic art requires a thorough familiarity with the Islamic doctrine of *tawhīd*, or the oneness of God, not simply as one distinguishing feature of this art, but as its epistemological foundation. The doctrine of *tawhīd* has given rise to a set of core concepts of relevance to art within three primary contexts: (1) the Islamic religious context founded upon the knowledge and worship of God as One, (2) the mystical-philosophical context, which highlights the synthesis of oneness and manyness, and (3) the aesthetical-critical context involving the study of Islamic art in light of the principle of unity and diversity.

As the origin and essence of Islamic knowledge and its unifying spirit the doctrine of *tawhīd* provides an overarching framework within which to understand how unity and diversity manifest themselves in the cosmos on all levels. The Islamic view of existence informs the way Muslims perceive the link between unity on one hand, and the various forms and levels at which this unity expresses itself on the other. This relationship might appear to be founded on the 'transcendence-immanence' dialectic so central to monotheism. The objective, abstract

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features of the geometric patterns so prevalent in Islamic art manifest the Divine Unity by exemplifying the way in which finite, yet repeated shapes and patterns open onto Infinity – which can only be One in nature – thereby symbolizing Absolute Truth. The philosophy of *tawḥīd* places the divine unity at the center of the circle of existence, which includes everything without exception, be it a work of art or anything else. The Divine Unity is reflected in all things existent as in a multifaceted mirror.

This ‘symbolic’ theory of Islamic art views the divine unity as possessing an inward dimension relating to the divine majesty in its sublime perfection, which is the origin of Islamic art, and an outward dimension relating to the divine beauty, which gives us the various perceptible forms of Islamic art that serve as relative manifestations of the Divine Majesty.

Islamic art is set apart from other art forms by a set of interrelated, complementary principles, conditions, and features, including: (1) *al-tanzīh*, that is, the exclusion of anthropomorphic elements from the conception of the Deity. (2) Because Islamic art refrains from ascribing human qualities to God, be they physical or spiritual, it tends toward *al-tajrīd*, that is, abstraction, in intellectual content, style and form. (3) Islamic art allows one to experience the Divine as a symbolic presence (*ḥudūr ramzī*) manifested in a multiplicity of creative forms and images, or, in the words of the Qur’an, ‘signs’ (*āyāt*). (4) Wisdom (*al-ḥikmah*) is manifested in Islamic art in the orderly arrangements, sizes and proportions of its geometrical figures. (5) Beneficence and charity (*al-iḥsān*) are visible in Islamic art through the mastery with which its works are executed. (6) Lastly, Islamic art is marked by objectivity (*al-mawḍū‘iyyah*) rather than by selfishness, subjectivity, and personalism. This may be observed in the fact that, in humility before the one and only Creator, Muslim artists frequently absent themselves from their works by refraining from signing them or leaving any other traces of their personal identities.

## Divine Oneness as the Principle of Beauty: Isma‘il R. al Faruqi’s Theory of Islamic Art

ISMA‘IL R. AL FARUQI (1921-1986) commended the seriousness, intelligence and perseverance demonstrated by Western scholars of Islamic art, noting that the bulk of the reference works on Islamic art in the worlds’ libraries were penned by Western researchers. At the same time, however, he lamented what he saw as these same scholars’ inaccurate appraisals of the true nature of Islamic art. Due to their rigid application of Western artistic standards and criteria, these scholars failed miserably “to discern the spirit of this art and, hence, to perceive its authentically Islamic character.”

Al Faruqi thus set out to refute Orientalists’ misconceptions and tendentious, controversial views in the hope of demonstrating the genuine aesthetic and practical features of Islamic art.

Al Faruqi wrote:

It has become apparent to us that virtually all Orientalist scholars of Islamic art have based their theories on a mistaken – indeed, biased – hypothesis according to which Islam not only contributed nothing to the arts in Muslim society over the ages, but actually hindered Muslims’ artistic progress, restricted their creative output, and impoverished their cultural heritage. According to this fallacious hypothesis, the only aesthetic addition attributable to the Muslim community was their mastery of the art of writing verses of the Qur’an in beautiful Arabic script.

What follows is a listing of some of the leading Orientalist scholars of Islamic art whose work al Faruqi critiqued in the areas of ornamentation, drawing, architecture, literature, music, and art theory.

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- *Ernst Herzfeld* (1879-1948): Herzfeld was known for his view of Islamic art as being “anti-naturalist.” The forms of Islamic art which he found to be particularly opposed to nature were those that involved the use of ornamentation consisting of plant designs. Herzfeld noted that as opposed to Hellenistic art, which was marked by realistic depictions of nature, Islamic art tends toward abstraction, as seen in the stylization of the shapes of leaves and the focus on Arabic calligraphy. Herzfeld saw the abstract nature of Islamic art as a reflection of what he perceived as ‘religious fanaticism’ on the part of Muslim artists.

- *M. S. Dimand* (1892-1986) held that “Muhammadan art” was essentially only ornamental in nature, that is, a type of art that concerns itself with abstract forms more than with the depiction of persons, animals and the like. As a result, Dimand saw Islamic art as being largely devoid of content.

- *Sir Thomas Walker Arnold* (1864-1930) was of the view that the prohibition against the visual representation of people in Islamic art came about in response to Jews who had converted to Islam, which resulted in a dearth of visual representation in Islamic art and the spread of *tawriqeh*, that is, ornamentation in the form of stylized leaves.

- *K. A. Creswell* (1879-1965) refused to recognize the existence of ‘Islamic architectural art,’ though he did acknowledge the existence of architectural art among Muslims.

- *Gustav Von Grunbaum* (1909-1972) maintained that Islam had never promoted beauty in any active way and that, as a consequence, there is no such thing as an Islamic theory of beauty, be it artistic or literary.

- *Henry George Farmer* (1882-1965) held the view that Islam is opposed to any form of musical art. According to Farmer, music spread in the Islamic milieu in spite of the Islamic prohibition against it, since music is something so innate to human beings that it is impossible to suppress it.

Al Faruqi’s critique of the views propounded by these and other Orientalists on the subject of Islamic art was based on numerous scientific and methodological observations, of which the most notable were:

*First:* That Orientalists have developed mistaken, biased, and inconsistent views on the aesthetic and practical nature of Islamic art. Al Faruqi lamented the fact that, as he put it, “none of them [the Orientalist scholars] ever realized that he was judging Islamic art by Western standards and norms. By doing so, however, these scholars failed to see Islamic works of art as expressions of Islamic culture and, instead, indulged in wild speculations that would be an embarrassment to any self-respecting intellectual.”

*Second:* That the study and analysis of Western art has its origins in Greek philosophy and modern Western aesthetic concepts. These concepts include, for example: (1) realism, that is, the realistic depiction of observed reality in works of art; (2) the ‘human measure’ as the basis for aesthetic evaluation; (3) catharsis as art’s function and principle aim; (4) Divinity and its link to creation, Nature and human beings from the point of view of Jewish and Christian belief, Greek philosophy, and contemporary modern scientism, as compared to the Islamic view of human beings, Nature, creativity and art, which is based on the all-encompassing relationship between the Creator of the cosmos and His creatures, foremost among which are human beings.

*Third:* That most Western studies of Islamic art have lacked a balanced focus. In al Faruqi’s view, most of these studies focused unduly on one aspect or form of Islamic art at the expense of others, which has in turn yielded inconsistent views among Oriental scholars of Islamic art. Most Western studies have also been historical and taxonomical in nature, while Islamic art theory and aesthetic values, central though they are to the proper understanding of Islamic art, continue to be a largely neglected field.

## Ettinghausen and the Theory of Islamic Art

According to al Faruqi, Ettinghausen was gifted with a distinctive ability to analyze, and theorize about, the features of Islamic art. At the same time, however, al Faruqi saw Ettinghausen as having failed to grasp Islamic art’s essential nature. On this point al Faruqi wrote: “Ettinghausen took personalism, evolutionism, realism, and naturalism as unquestionable ideals against which to measure all art. For this

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reason, he saw Islamic art as falling short of fundamental ideals.” In this connection al Faruqi continued, “Ettinghausen insisted on judging the Islamic aesthetic sensibility based on considerations for which this sensibility has no concern,” including principles and criteria applicable to Western art theory overall, and Christian art in particular. As a consequence, he misunderstood Islamic artistic consciousness, its epistemic, intellectual, and cultural foundations, and its creative potential. Ettinghausen’s misunderstanding of Islamic art is illustrated in his statement that “the pre-Islamic Arabs were a people who had no place for art,” since their religion “required no sculpting of beautiful statues for the purpose of worship, as a result of which it offered them no potential for artistic creativity.”

According to Ettinghausen the pre-Islamic Arabs had no visual representational art forms such as sculpture and drawing. He even went so far as to suggest that “Islam inherited no aesthetic values from Arab life.” In so saying, Ettinghausen was implying that Islamic art has no Arab origins or roots even though it emerged in an Arab environment.

Rather, according to Ettinghausen, Islamic art had arisen “against the background of four principles: fear of the Day of Judgment, the humanity of the Prophet, submission to God Almighty, and the central importance of the Qur’an as the manifestation of the eternally preserved tablet (*al-lawḥ al-mahfūz*).” In Ettinghausen’s view, these four principles yielded the following outcomes:

- 1) Opposition between Islam and art “as a manifestation of a life of luxury.”
- 2) The shattering of “every possibility of developing icons that depict Muhammad in the ways in which Christ is depicted in the West.”
- 3) Muslim belief in what Ettinghausen refers to as “the absolute prohibition of the visual representation of persons.” This, in Ettinghausen’s view, is what underlies what he termed the “lack of vitality and non-naturalism that manifests itself in [Muslim artists’] depiction of everything living.” According to Ettinghausen, this prohibition was responsible for what he saw as the “austere monotony” of Islamic art, its juxtaposition of non-homogeneous colors; its lack of individual self-expression; the use of successions of shapes that lack



a clear beginning or ending and are arranged in an arbitrary manner that allows one to reverse or change the position or orientation of a piece of artwork without causing any essential change; and a lack of organic cohesion among its artistic units.

- 4) The view of the Qur'an as the earthly manifestation of the Heavenly Book, which led to the enduring Islamic art form of Arabic calligraphy. This art form was compared by Ettinghausen and other Orientalists to the "stations of the cross" associated with the life of Christ. Al Faruqi's criticism of Ettinghausen's views on the features of Islamic art formed part of a broader critique of Orientalists' inadequate and distorted conceptualizations of this art. However, al Faruqi's critique went beyond being a direct response to these mistaken views and conceptualizations to include a broader exposition of what he termed, "an Islamic epistemological opening onto the science of beauty" and, as its outgrowth, the Islamic science of art and aesthetic theory.

## Establishing the Origins of the Theory of Islamic Art

Al Faruqi based his endeavour to establish the origins of the theory of Islamic art on a reformist vision and on particular insights into modern Orientalists' approach to Islamic art in Western and Islamic cultures alike. Seen from the Orientalist perspective, Islamic art is sometimes in conflict with Islam and, as such, constitutes a departure from its teachings that has been relegated to a marginal position on the human artistic scene at large. Al Faruqi's aim was to address this situation by exploring the true nature of this art and seeking to demonstrate its authentic rootedness in Islam.

This endeavour on al Faruqi's part touches on a number of areas: (1) the intellectual structure of the theory of Islamic art (founded on the Qur'anic doctrine of *tawhīd*, or the oneness of the Divine), (2) the actual practice of art (founded on the uniquely Islamic stylization of shapes and patterns), and (3) epistemology (based on a distinctive network of art forms associated with Islam and Muslims rather than with the West and Westerners).

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Al Faruqi clarified his approach further by saying:

An acceptable theory of Islamic art is one whose founding assumptions are rooted in elements that emerge from within the [Islamic] religion and [Islamic] culture, not from givens or assumptions imposed on them by an alien [philosophical, aesthetic and artistic] tradition. Similarly, it is one that depends not on weak or marginal elements of this culture, but on its most central and powerful components. In light of requirements such as these, the Qur'an provides aesthetic creativity with an important, logical and ready-made source. Indeed, the Qur'an has had as much of an impact on the arts as it has on other manifestations and expressions of Islamic culture.

Islamic culture is, in essence, a 'Qur'anic culture,' since its definitions, structures, aims, and means of achieving such aims all issue from the revelation that God bestowed on His Prophet Muhammad in the seventh century AH. What the Muslim derives from Islam's holy book is not simply the knowledge of 'Absolute Reality,' but, equally decisively, notions about the world of nature and human beings, as well as the social and political institutions needed for the sound management of society. In short, the Qur'an provides us with input on every known branch of knowledge and activity, including that of beauty and art.

Therefore, "Just as it is valid to see these manifestations of Islamic culture as Qur'anic in nature with respect to their foundation, motivation and aim, so also must the arts that have grown out of Islamic civilization be looked upon as aesthetic expressions that emerge from the same [Qur'anic] source and follow the same [Qur'anic] path. Indeed, the Islamic arts are Qur'anic arts par excellence."

### The Qur'an: The Masterpiece of Islamic Art

Al Faruqi is to be commended for his view of the Qur'an as the first and sublimest expression of Islamic art. As he stated, "the Holy Qur'an is truly art...in fact, there is nothing in existence to which this description could more rightly be applied."

Rhetoricians have drawn attention to the artistic features of the Qur'an as seen, for example, in what has been termed the Qur'an's "rhetorical miraculousness." This being the case, al Faruqi found the

Qur'an to be "the first and most refined example of artistic expression," describing it as "the first work of art in Islam."

It is noteworthy that al Faruqi not only viewed the Qur'an as the primary source of Islamic aesthetic thought. He also viewed it, as we have seen, as the first and foremost Islamic work of art. As such, it has continued to exert a major aesthetic impact on every Muslim. As al Faruqi puts it, "There is not a Muslim in the world who has not been moved to his or her very depths by the Qur'an's rhythm, composition, and eloquence. There is not a Muslim on earth whose inner being has not been stamped with the beauty of the Qur'an, and reshaped after its pattern."



*A page from  
the Qur'an*

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Based on the foregoing, the Qur'an is to be seen as "the exemplar for all manifestations of Islamic art" on the levels of both ideas and aesthetics. In fact, it becomes the foundation for most of the Islamic arts, particularly that of Arabic calligraphy, which, given its powerful bond with the Qur'an, is "a refined art conducive to an awareness of the transcendent" in the form of physical beauty. As such, the Qur'an is the form of Islamic art that gives clearest expression to a "sense of transcendent divine reality."

### On the Concept and Epistemic Theory of Islamic Art

Al Faruqi approaches the definition of Islamic art via two principle disciplines: (1) the science of *maqāṣid*, that is, the study of the higher intents and purposes of Islamic law, and (2) the science of *jamāl*, or aesthetics. Al Faruqi discusses certain scholars' juristic adaptation of *maqāṣid* based on the notion that art is "a form of worldly enjoyment and a means of adornment." He then takes us beyond this conception of art to that of a craft whose productions "inspire aesthetic reflection, provide psychological enjoyment, and support the society's basic structure and way of thinking by serving as a reminder of its founding principles."

In this way, al Faruqi transcends the religious realm in general, and the juristic realm in particular, in the context of which art is only discussed in terms of whether it is permissible or impermissible, without an attempt to discern art's role as a conduit of knowledge and beauty and, as a consequence, people's need for it and its social function. Art functions within a space that is shared in common by aesthetics and religion, each of which occupies an essential place in the realm of human knowledge.

Al Faruqi defines Islamic art as "a structural entity that is consistent with the aesthetic principles of Islamic thought." Foremost among these aesthetic principles is that of *tawḥīd*, which he views as the starting point and origin of beauty. As such, *tawḥīd* lies at the centre of the theory of Islamic art, being the common denominator that unites all artists everywhere whose point of reference is the universal Islamic vision of the world.

A broad and expansive concept, the doctrine of *tawhīd* encompasses all levels of existence, from the Divine Transcendent to the concrete details of a given work of art. Al Faruqi integrates these graded levels of existence into what he terms “transcendence in beauty.” In al Faruqi’s understanding, the universe in which we live is the epistemic realm of what he terms “the aesthetic experience,” which he defines as “the realization, via the data of reason, of the existence of a primary, metaphysical essence that transcends everything in Nature and which functions as the normative principle that determines what any given entity is. The closer a visible entity is to this Essence, the more beautiful it will be.”

This ‘aesthetic experience’ is what causes art to be “a process of exploring the metaphysical essence within Nature...Art is a process of ‘reading’ nature in search of a supernatural essence, and giving this essence a visible form appropriate to it...Art is by necessity an intuitive sense of Nature in search of something that is not a part of Nature – in search, that is, of the Transcendent.” This ‘Transcendent’ is the Exalted Being who cannot be perceived by sight or sense – “No human vision can encompass Him, whereas He encompasses all human vision” (*Sūrah al-An‘ām*, 6:103), and, “there is nothing like unto Him” (*Sūrah al-Shūrā*, 42:11). “This Ultimate cannot be described adequately by any verbal description; nor can it be represented by any image from the world of human beings or any other realm of Nature...This notion of the Divine’s absolute unicity and sublimity is what is known as *tawhīd*.”

A critical examination of the foregoing suggests that *tawhīd* is:

- 1) A principle underlying the Islamic concept of art as opposed to the Western concept, which views art as a kind of “naive, photographic simulation of Nature, or, rather, an attempt to represent a preconceived idea in sensory form; and partial, momentary expressions of ideas of Nature and human beings as Nature’s highest, most complex manifestations. Hence, this [Western] theory of art views human beings as the ‘measure of all things.’”
- 2) A distinguishing feature of Islamic aesthetics and Islamic art as “the art of the infinite.” The endlessly repeated patterns employed in

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Islamic art generate a sense of sublimity, of that which transcends place and time, yet without claiming that the patterns themselves embody what transcends them. By reflecting on these infinitely repeated patterns, the viewer's thoughts are drawn toward God, "A pattern that has no beginning or end (whether perceived or imagined) creates an impression of infinity...and is, therefore, the best way to give artistic expression to the principle of *tawḥīd*." This is the primary message and mission of Islamic art – to be a constant reminder of the unicity of God Almighty.

- 3) "The unassailable truth revealed in the unified aim and purpose of all Islamic art, and this despite the tremendous variety evident in its subject matter, materials, and artistic styles by virtue of differing geography and historical period." Time and place were, in fact, the two variables that left the greatest impact on Orientalists' suppositions regarding the degree to which Islamic art was authentic, or borrowed from Sassanid, Byzantine, Jewish and Christian sources.

### On the Nature of Islamic Art and its Epistemological Foundations

Al Faruqi stressed the distinction between the terms 'reality' (*ḥaqīqah*) and 'nature' (*ṭabīʿah*) with respect to what makes Islamic art 'Islamic.' In this context he contrasted Islamic art with both 'the religious arts' such as Jewish and Christian art, and 'the symbolic arts,' such as Byzantine and Hindu art. 'The religious arts' concern themselves with God, the Creator of all, of Whom all people have some innate conception. This conception is free of all anthropomorphisms and personification, shape or form. In other words, it is an abstract notion of the sacred Reality or Truth which transcends 'Nature' as embodied in created entities that can be grasped via human reason and sensory capacities.

However, al Faruqi distinguishes two types of 'Nature.' One of these he terms 'imprinting Nature' (*al-ṭabīʿah al-ṭābiʿah*), which lends an entity its individual identity, thereby making it what it is, while the second, which he terms 'imprinted Nature' (*al-ṭabīʿah al-maṭbūʿah*), is

the reality of the entity once its nature has been determined. The 'imprinting nature' is perceived via intuition, while the 'imprinted nature' is perceived via the senses. The first is a dynamic entity that cannot be delimited or measured, while the second is static, and can be delimited and measured.

The relationship between these two concepts forms the background for al Faruqi's analysis of religious and symbolic artwork in Judaism and Christianity and in the pre-Islamic Greek and Roman cultures. He concludes on the basis of this analysis that these religions and cultures "tended so to minimize the aesthetic value of art that it became nothing but a logical representation that virtually anyone would be capable of producing," as, for example, in the Christian world, where abstraction in art is viewed not as something abstracted or stripped away from Nature but, rather, simply as an alternative way of depicting Nature, while Formalism is understood simply as a suggestion of the artist's experiential state.

Christian artwork in the form of iconography, for example, is an incarnational, personal, functional work that symbolically combines the natural and the sacred, particularly in religious rites, whereas Jewish artwork of a similar type is nearly absent due to Judaism's resistance to the notion of representing the Divine Reality in any natural form.

There is clearly an extreme contrast between the Jewish and Christian approaches to beauty, with the Jewish perspective rejecting any admixture of the sensory and the spiritual in the form of artwork, and with the Christian approach to artwork involving an exaggerated melding of the natural with sacred truth. A similar admixture of the natural and sacred reality is found in Greek artwork, whose starting point is Greek mythology expressed through the arts of poetry, drama, sculpture, illustration, and others. In the Greeks' view, the love and experience of beauty depend on the symbolic representation of metaphysical realities, as exemplified in what the Greeks termed deification (*al-ta'alluh*), a human being manifested in the form of a deity as a means of presenting an ideal exemplar of that human nature. This is consistent with the belief that the basic function of such symbolic art is to bring about purification from sin and guilt.

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However, the question that arises here is: Was Islamic art influenced by earlier approaches, or did it emerge and take form out of its own unique perspective? The answer to this pivotal question, in al Faruqi's view, can be found in what he termed "stylization," which consists in representing natural entities in a non-naturalistic manner in order to draw viewers' attention to the fact that "what is Natural is not equivalent to what is Real." This, in al Faruqi's view, is a "sublime" manner of artistic expression that strips the subject of its minute details and transmutes it into a form that bears no realistic resemblance to its appearance in Nature. Hence, in contrast to the Western artistic ideal of simulation or imitation, we find that "at the hand of the high-minded artist, shapes become nothing but artistic means of ornamentation rather than expressions of their own nature."

Muslim artists have produced a new art form consistent with their monotheistic vision, which is founded upon the premises that "there is no deity but Allah," and that there is nothing in Nature by means of which we could convey God's essence or depict the Divine "in a symbolic manner that relies on the simulation of Nature." Based on this, al Faruqi identifies the following features of Islamic art:

- 1) *Stylization*. Every image drawn from Nature is presented in a stylized form. In other words, so much distance is placed between the artist's subject and its natural characteristics that it is nearly unrecognizable.
- 2) *Anti-symbolism*. Muslim artists reject symbolism as their point of departure. Al Faruqi viewed this rejection of symbolism as Islamic art's "supreme badge of distinction." Muslims take pride in the fact that their art is devoid of any pagan or idolatrous spirit and that, as a consequence, it avoids all danger of confusing the Creator with the creation.

Given the foregoing, Islamic art has incorporated some art forms but not others based on the world view that serves as its guiding principle. It excludes, for example, sculpture, drama and, to some extent, drawing and painting, while including: (a) auditory arts involving language and literature such as, for example, poetry and Qur'anic



recitation; and (b) visual arts such as geometrical designs and patterns, calligraphy, ornamentation, etc.

## On the Foundations of Islamic Art

Al Faruqi based his theory of Islamic art on two foundations, one spiritual, and the other historical. The spiritual foundation consists in the Islamic principle of monotheism. The affirmation that “there is no deity but Allah” points to the existence of only two realms of reality. The first is that of the Creator, to whom no human or creaturely attributes can properly be ascribed, and the second is that of the creation, including the world of Nature as a whole, and that of human beings in particular. This monotheistic foundation has guided Islamic visual art, which, in a notable contrast to artistic Naturalism, stylizes its subjects in the manner described above based on the notion that there is nothing in the created realm, and particularly in human beings, that might be viewed as a symbol, instrument, suggestion, expression, embodiment, emanation or derivation of the Sacred Essence. For this reason, Islam excludes any form of personal representation in art.

As for Islamic art’s historical foundation, it is seen in what al Faruqi terms ‘the Arab mindset’ that colored the historical environment in which the divine revelation emerged and took form. Similarly, it was the ‘Arab mindset’ as embodied in the person of the Prophet Muhammad that served as the conduit for the divine revelation that was to be delivered to people in all times and places. Al Faruqi viewed the Arabic language, with its clear, logical, geometrically precise structures, as the source of Arabic poetry’s musicality. It was these characteristics of the Arabic language which, in al Faruqi’s view, caused Arabs to perceive in Islamic art a dimension of “infinite” not found in other art forms to which reference has been made.

## The Distinguishing Features of Islamic Art

The principle features of Islamic art to which al Faruqi devoted attention were abstractionism, monotheism, and kineticism. The abstractionism that marks Islamic art can be perceived in the endlessly repeated

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geometric patterns that mark much of Islamic ornamentation; whilst monotheism is visible in the way in which a given work of art will consist of numerous units that function harmoniously to form a larger, unified design or structure. And as for kineticism, it manifests itself in the design of a piece of art in such a way that the work's spatial and temporal dimensions are gathered into a pattern of shapes and sounds that lend the viewer or listener a sense of dynamic progression.

## The Communicative Aspect of Islamic Art: Theory and Application

THIS CHAPTER EXPLORES the features that enable Islamic art to function as a universal language shared by individuals, peoples, cultures and civilizations worldwide.

The discussion will not be based on the currently prevalent theory of communication which, being Western par excellence, has almost entirely to do with media and information, but, rather, on a more general, universal theory of human knowledge that encompasses everything from philosophy to art.

Our aim here is to explore the communicative aspect of Islamic art as it relates to what we might term 'Islamic communicative culture' and its application to images in general, and more specifically, to those employed in the art of Arabic calligraphy.

The importance of this topic emerges in light of the need for knowledge and expertise in the modern world. This need is manifested in the burgeoning communications industry, whether the communications involved are written or spoken, including the field of advertising and the media, graphics design and the like. Islamic art as a whole, and Arabic calligraphy in particular, holds potential for assimilation into communications programs of various types. As a matter of fact, Arabic calligraphy is now one of the fundamental components of communicative design and the visual arts, the typographical arts in particular.

In this context there has arisen a new art form that might be termed 'typographical calligraphy' in response to growing interest in the study of the geometric and typographical features of Arabic script.

Unfortunately, however, we have few systematic, thorough studies of the communicative aspect of Islamic art.

## On the Culture of Communication

### [ONE]: THE CONCEPT OF COMMUNICATION

The Arabic word for ‘communication’ (*tawāṣul*) is derived from the verbal root *waṣala*, meaning to connect or unify one thing with another. Communication is a widely shared and recognized concept on the levels of both culture and civilization, connecting individual members of a single community or society and the diverse peoples of the world. The communication of ideas among individuals, communities, societies, cultures and civilizations takes place through intellectual schools and movements based on interactive, dialogic, revivalist, progressive, and modernist theories whose emergence and development have been triggered by historical contexts and events. The processes of emergence and development grow out of an ongoing dynamic of separation (*faṣl*) and union (*waṣl*), where ‘separation’ refers to what happens when entities and ideas change and break, to whatever degree, with the past, while ‘union’ refers to the value and vitality of entities, ideas, individuals and communities that endure across boundaries of time and place.

The relationship between separation and union on the levels of both theory and application is best understood based on the notions of interaction and complementarity, as Arab culture often makes so little distinction between them that every area of Arab-Islamic life may be said to have its own theory of separation and union with its own set of applications in the realm of human knowledge. Realizing the difficulty of severing the connection between the twin phenomena of separation and union on either the theoretical or the practical level, Arab culture has most often viewed them simply as a duality to which we refer as ‘communication’ (*tawāṣul*).

The term ‘communication’ might thus be understood to refer to an exchange of knowledge that can occur in any and all human cultures and civilizations. The concept of communication is embodied in the dynamic relationship between the two poles of a duality, some of which are similar, and others dissimilar such as, for example, essence and identity, content and form, pattern and style, essence and accident, companionship and dialogue, family ties based on blood and those

based on marriage, pairing and interaction, ideas and conceptions, and other concepts that might fall under the same rubric.

[TWO]: THEORETICAL HORIZONS OF COMMUNICATION

Human beings possess a deeply ingrained, God-given propensity to seek out and impart knowledge which has long been the subject of inquiry, theorization and application in the realms of religion, philosophy and science. Within Islamic contexts, the pursuit of knowledge has been imbued with a sense of worshipful reverence and purpose. It is spoken of obliquely in *Sūrah al-Aʿrāf*, 7:172, where we read that “When thy Lord drew forth from the Children of Adam – from their loins – their descendants, and made them testify concerning themselves, (saying): ‘Am I not your Lord (who cherishes and sustains you)?’ – They said: ‘Yea! We do testify!’ (This), lest ye should say on the Day of Judgment: ‘Of this we were never mindful’.” This same propensity is present on the social plane, where we observe that in order to thrive, people need a network of social relationships governed by shared rules and traditions that serve as the basis for meaningful communication.

Nonetheless, there remains ambiguity relating to whether communication is to be construed from an experiential, intuitive perspective, or in terms of precisely defined phenomena, concepts, and methods. The ambiguity associated with the concept and function of communication has been addressed via a number of theories which lend communication a kind of generalized cultural identity that places no restrictions to speak of on people’s way of thinking and expressing themselves, their relationships, or other aspects of their private and public lives.

The linguistic theory, as its name implies, construes communication as linked to language and its capacity to convey ideas and information. According to this theory, every act of communication must be related to the rules of language, be they fixed or variable, that govern the relationships among the functions of linguistic exchange, identified by Roman Jakobson (1896-1982) as sender, receiver, message, context, channel, and code.

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However, the linguistic theory views human language as only one of a variety of symbolic communication systems, some verbal, others non-verbal. Philosophical developments in this theory, which transformed the concept of language from that of a direct functional tool to that of a sign that points – whether directly or indirectly, with or without words – to intended meanings and intentions, led to the possibility of dividing communication into two main types: linguistic (verbal), and non-linguistic (non-verbal).

This division prepared the way for the process by which general linguistics branched into a number of different linguistic sciences and critical disciplines such as, for example, semiotics and the aesthetics of literature and art, which concern themselves with cultural phenomena on the level of both individuals and societies. As a consequence, the concept of communication shifted from that of a process to that of an epistemological field that could better be described within the framework of culture than it could merely in linguistic terms. The notion of communication now went beyond a neutral exchange between parties to include an effective, dynamic relationship based on elements at once linguistic and cultural, and encompassing a range of communicative concepts and tools, including reading, writing, text, context, sign, and discourse, all of which go to make up the epistemological content of communication.

At the same time, the concept of communication came to be associated with various types of metaphorical and cultural expression, such as clothing, behavior, and other non-verbal cues and signs, specialized terminology or jargon ('shop talk') that developed among members of particular occupations or specializations such as computers, television, or other types of electronics and technology, sign language for the deaf, and other channels of communication. Evolution in fields such as these provided an environment that nurtured the development of the theory of communication and its audiovisual applications. In this way it became possible to bridge the distance between medium and message in keeping with the theory propounded by Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980), and to transform the world into a global communications village whose entire population has a part in everything. This transformation is possible thanks to the tremendous technological and digital

developments that have been witnessed in the field of communications with its ever-diversifying media, from traditional paper publications, both handwritten and printed, to electronic media and the various means used in message manufacturing, including editing, design, production, publication and distribution, to mention a few.

[THREE]: COMMUNICATOLOGY

The epistemic shifts that occurred in relation to communication led to the emergence of linguistic theories, media-related theories, and philosophical theories that affirmed the vital link between communication, on one hand, and on the other hand, cultural evolution and expression on the levels of individuals and societies.

Out of the aforementioned developments in the concept of communication were technical and functional theories that focused on mechanisms, modalities, aims, and purposes of communication as revealed in structures, essences, identities, features, behaviors and the like. Further shifts also led to attempts to reconstruct the entire concept of communication and to classify it epistemologically in terms of the science of communication, or Communicatology.

The field of Communicatology derives its input, both theoretical and practical, from previous communication theories. Its subject matter might be summed up in the answers to a set of pivotal questions: Why do we communicate (functional theory)? About what do we communicate (epistemological theory)? When and where do we communicate (social theory)? How do we communicate (technical theory)? What we have as a result is a network of communicative theories based on the input provided by human exchanges in both the world of ideas, information, meanings, and purely theoretical values, and that of concrete objects, actions, traditions, and forms.

[FOUR]: GENERAL AND SPECIFIC THEORIES  
OF COMMUNICATION

These and other theoretical components which, whether societally or individually, make up the epistemological foundation of the science of communication, or Communicatology, may enable us to conceptualize communication from one of two different perspectives:

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- (a) the general theory of communication, which envisions all types of communication as being, in essence, a compound of inborn human traits and social needs, behaviors that develop in response to encounter, interaction, exchange and acculturation via a shared discourse.
- (b) the specific theory of communication, which views communication based on its type or field, and which concerns itself with academic research into the connections between communication and the sciences, the humanities, and the arts and their various subspecializations.

In its general function, communication is the cultural tie that binds and harmonizes the social and economic aspects of knowledge on one hand, and on the other hand, the aesthetics aspects of knowledge, that is, knowledge as it relates to performance, expression, and the effective conveyance of ideas and emotions via artistic and creative channels.

### [FIVE]: COMMUNICATION DESIGN

When viewed from an artistic technical perspective, Communicatology will be seen to be similar to culture, where ‘culture’ encompasses at once medium, message, relationship, technique, and style. Therefore, Communicatology is based not only on a linguistic system (in the sense of spoken and written words) for the achievement of communication but, in addition, on an integrated epistemological system or network of symbols that are varied in type, meaning, and cultural associations. The specific culture concerned – particularly its creative experiments in literature and art as the two areas that lend the greatest aesthetic attention to forms of expression – thus constitutes the epistemological matrix for Communicatology, also known today as communication design.

## The Islamic Culture of Communication

### [ONE]: THE ISLAMIC CONCEPT OF COMMUNICATION

As the primary source of Islamic knowledge and values, the Qur’an



presents what might be termed an ‘Islamic culture of communication’ based on the principle of mutual acquaintance (*al-ta‘āruf*). In *Sūrah al-Ḥujurāt*, 49:13, God declares, “O men! Behold, We have created you all out of a male and a female, and have made you into nations and tribes, so that you might come to know one another (*li ta‘ārafū*). Verily, the noblest of you in the sight of God is the one who is most deeply conscious of Him. Behold, God is All-Knowing, All-Aware.” The Arabic term *al-ta‘āruf* relates to both knowledge that is acquired through effort and study (*al-ma‘rifah*), and that which is acquired through personal experience (*al-‘irfān*), that is to say, the comprehension or realization of something through reflection on its effects. In the Islamic worldview, people are meant to communicate amongst themselves on the basis of both moral and aesthetic principles. Moral principles are reflected in the responsibility to communicate dictated in the Qur’anic command, “And never concern thyself with anything of which thou hast no knowledge: verily, [thy] hearing and sight and heart - all of them - will be called to account for it [on Judgment Day]!” (*Sūrah al-Isrā’*, 17:36). As for aesthetic principles, they are seen in the description of the ideal style of communication found in *Sūrah al-Naḥl*, 16:125, where God says, “Call thou [all mankind] unto your Sustainer’s path with wisdom and goodly exhortation, and argue with them in the most kindly manner - for, behold, your Sustainer knows best as to who strays from His path, and best knows He as to who are the right-guided.”

## [TWO]: ISLAMIC COMMUNICATOLOGY

The discipline that provides the best epistemological and methodological framework for the Islamic culture of communication is the science of rhetoric (*‘ilm al-bayān*), which deals with every type of sign that conveys meaning and, in this way, enables people to understand each other. The definition of the word *bayān* is derived from the verb *bāna/yabīnu*, meaning to be or become clear.

Of course, the act of clarification referred to as *bayān* goes beyond language in the ordinary sense of the word to encompass a system comprised of both language and all media that provide clarity and

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understanding, whether through speech, text, signals, or the form in which an entity appears. In this connection, al-Jāhiz (d. 255 AH/868 CE) noted that, “the divisions of rhetoric include all entities that communicate meaning, be they verbal or non-verbal. These entities fall under five divisions: (1) spoken language (*al-lafz*), (2) sign (*ishārah*), (3) numerical hand signals (*al-ʿaqd*), (4) script (*khatt*), and (5) body language (*al-niṣbah*).”

The “divisions of rhetoric” (*aqṣām al-bayān*) to which al-Jāhiz referred evolved into a linguistic science based on comparison and contrast involving an artistic critique that concerns itself with beauty of expression, precision of signification, and effective, ongoing communication through the use of artistic styles, both linguistic and non-linguistic, which explain and clarify meaning. These five divisions make it possible to classify the various fields of communication within Islamic culture into: (a) linguistic communication via the spoken word (*al-lafz*), and (b) cultural communication via signs (*ishārāt*), numerical hand signals (*al-ʿaqd*), script (*khatt*), and body language (*al-niṣbah*).

However, the instrument by means of which people convey and receive meaning finds its focal point in mental images.

### [THREE]: THE COMMUNICATIVE CONCEPT OF ‘IMAGE’ (*Ṣūrah*)

The concept of ‘image’ (*ṣūrah*) within the Islamic culture of communication encompasses both accident and essence, form and content. As such, it includes “every form or appearance that would be consistent with the essence.” In keeping with this concept, “the image of a thing is a reflection of its abstract nature and its shadow in the mind.” Every body possesses an image which symbolizes it, points to it, signifies it, or expresses it in the processes of clarification and communication on a variety of levels, from that of knowledge, society, behaviour, and the like.

An image is a measure and representation of what we know in our minds through what we see with our eyes. When we see the differences among individual members of a species or category, these differences exist on the level of image, not on the level of essence or inner nature.

As understood Islamically, the image appears to be message and medium at once with respect to the identification of entities and things,

expression of feelings and ideas, performance of actions and movements, description of forms, and other processes which show the image to be the heart of Islamic communicative culture, a heart pulsating with meaning and intention, understanding and the ability to convey understanding, awareness and clarity, contact and communication, because existing entities are by nature susceptible of being represented or symbolized through images. Meanings do not appear to be of aesthetic or artistic value in and of themselves; rather, their aesthetic or artistic value lies in their transformation into images through the use of imagination, which shifts them from the realm of reason and logic to that of physical sensation in the form of concrete means of communication.

#### [FOUR]: THE ISLAMIC THEORY OF ILLUSTRATION

In the Islamic culture of communication, the image might be likened to the primary material that goes to make up existence, knowledge, and interaction. The universe itself is an image that points to its purpose, its true nature, and its Source, Who is “God, the Creator, the Maker who shapes all forms and appearances! His [alone] are the attributes of perfection. All that is in the heavens and on earth extols His limitless glory: for He alone is Almighty, truly Wise!” (*Sūrah al-Ḥashr*, 59:24). Images might thus be said to be the source of linguistic, philosophical, and religious awareness of everything that exists, since everything in existence has an image by which its nature is known.

It is the image by means of which communication takes place; hence, an image is comparable to a meaning, a concept, a topic, or a means of revealing things’ true nature and significance. The Islamic theory of illustration is based on the tiered nature of epistemic communication, on both the level of abstract conception and that of sensory perception, in relation to everything in existence, from the inner reaches of the human soul to the outer reaches of space beyond. This communication takes place via the multiple and varied images that belong by nature to the tiered levels of creation: the realm of visible entities, mental entities, ideas, and forms. There are four levels of existence: writing, verbal expression, entities of the mind, and the essences of things. Among these four levels, the earlier serves as a means of indicating the

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later. Written words, for example, point to spoken words, which point to entities in the mind, which point in turn to essences. It should be remembered, of course, that essences represent the truest, most authentic level of existence.

The process of signifying these things, communicating with them, and communicating through them in keeping with their various levels of existence takes place via images. Everything in the world of essences possesses existence outside the mind. When such a thing is perceived, a corresponding mental image is formed. If the mental image to which this perception gave rise is expressed verbally, the words used in this act of expression cause the hearers to form a similar image in their own minds. Consequently, the meaning comes to have another existence relating to the signification of the words in the mind of the person who hears them (the world of ideas, meanings, and verbal expression). Letters written on a page form words, whose meanings then take the form of images in the reader's mind. As a result, the written letters also have existence relating to the way in which they signify words, which in turn signify the entity perceived (the world of forms: writing, script).

The Islamic culture of communication appears to have given handwritten script (*al-khatt*) particular importance due to its distinctive capacity to convey meaning. Like spoken words, written words can convey meaning in a present, direct manner; unlike spoken words, however, written speech can also convey meanings in an absent, indirect manner; in other words, it can convey meaning to those who were not present when the words were uttered. Therefore, written script is more beneficial than spoken words.

The fundamental reason for all of this is that handwritten script is 'a body with an image,' its 'body' consisting of geometrical figures, some rounded, some angular. The Islamic culture of communication has developed its own general philosophical theory of the image based on unity and diversity in nature, and function and design in numerous epistemological fields. The image is thus an important topic of inquiry in the science of optics, which concerns itself with the physical processes involved in sight and the functions performed by the eye. Similarly, the image is an important topic of inquiry in the 'science of drawing' (*ilm al-rasm*), which concerns itself with the creation of forms and the

manufacture of images. From an epistemological point of view, *‘ilm al-rasm* is based on the use of geometric shapes in design. This geometry both serves as the origin and the determiner of the design. As for drawing, it involves forming the letters as beautifully as possible by observing the proper proportions between one letter and the next.

Still another area relevant to images is Aesthetics (*‘ilm al-jamāl*), which critically evaluates an artistic image’s creativity and communicative function. The principle of ideal image design termed ‘beautiful formation’ (*ḥusn al-taqwīm*), inspired by God’s declaration, “Verily, We create man in the best conformation (*fī aḥsani taqwīm*)” (*Sūrah al-Tīn*, 95:4), is the epistemological nerve of ‘the science of drawing’ which might also be termed ‘the science of Islamic communication design’ (*‘ilm al-taṣmīm al-tawāṣulī al-islāmī*) and its theory of illustration.

#### [FIVE]: THE UNITY AND DIVERSITY OF THE IMAGE

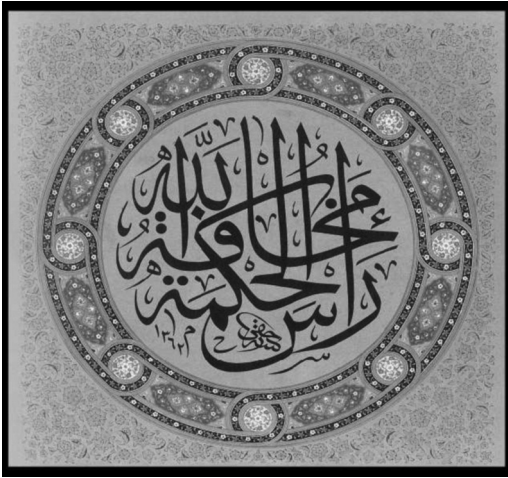
The ‘science of drawing,’ likened above to the ‘science of Islamic communication design,’ works on producing images suited to a variety of epistemological fields. In the field of literature, for example, poetry has been described as a kind of illustration; in the field of Astronomy, we have books containing illustrations of the planets and other heavenly bodies, while Geography has yielded maps of various types.

Based on the foregoing it will be observed that such images, varied as they are in shape, form, meaning and function, belong epistemologically to numerous sciences, fields of study and arts. Hence, an image might be:

- (a) An instrument or tool for clarification and communication, as it is, for example, in language, prose writing, poetry, logic, and other domains.
- (b) An idea, a topic, or a message relating to epistemological clarification or communication, as, for example, in the fields of Physics, Optics and Engineering.
- (c) At once a message and a creative medium, as in Architecture and the arts.

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In the Islamic culture of communication, images and their epistemological types – scientific, literary, artistic – can be divided into a variety of categories, types, and levels. Of note in this context is that Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī (d. 413 AH/1023 CE) mentions more than fifteen types of images, including, for example, ‘the divine image,’ which is manifested in unity, established in perpetuity, and ever-existent. The lowest ranking type of image, in terms of both existence and knowledge, is that of the calligraphic image (*al-ṣūrah al-khaṭṭīyah*).



*The calligraphic image*

### [SIX]: THE GENERAL AND SPECIFIC THEORY OF ILLUSTRATION

The explanatory and communicative concepts of the image and its numerous epistemological varieties make up the ‘stuff’ of a general theory that applies to all areas of Islamic Arabic knowledge, as well as to human knowledge overall. The premise for such a theory is that in both the Islamic and the overall human cultures of communication, the image is not only a tool of clarification, but is at once medium and message.

In light of this general theory of illustration, we can identify numerous special theories in the epistemological fields (the sciences, the humanities, the arts) in which images operate. Among these fields we find a vast array of images of countless types, forms and functions:

some cerebral, abstract and fantastical, others realistic and concrete, and all of them subject to classification based on the functions they perform toward clarification and communication.

The basic images in the Islamic intellectual tradition can be classified into the following four categories: *linguistic*, *calligraphic*, *dynamic* or *figurative*, and *illustrative*. The linguistic image is represented by, for example, forms of writing that employ words and meanings such as poetry, prose and other literary genres. The calligraphic image is represented by the artistic figures created via calligraphic writing. The dynamic or figurative image is represented by drawings of objects, phenomena, actions, events, stories, and other types of drawing such as, for example, al-Wāsiṭī's illustrations of the *Maqāmāt* of al-Ḥarīrī. And



*The illustrative image*

as for illustrative images, they are represented by abstract drawings that convey scientific information or facts in the fields of engineering, medicine, botany, zoology, geology, geography, astronomy, and the like.

Epistemologically speaking, however, all these types of images can be classed into one of two groups: (1) cerebral, rational, and abstract, or (2) realistic, concrete, and visible to the eye. In their capacity as tools for naming and describing things and for identifying whatever entity is capable of

being perceived, imagined, heard or seen, these images provide a basis for classifying communicative knowledge into a number of more precise categories or specializations, whose subject matter, cognitive tradition, or cultural distinguishing feature is determined by the relevant visual, mental, or dynamic/figurative image.

Of these areas or specializations, the most prominent are literary communication and artistic communication.

## The Calligraphic Image as an Example of the Communicative Aspect of Islamic Art

### [ONE]: THE CONCEPT OF THE 'CALLIGRAPHIC IMAGE'

Viewed from the Arabic-Islamic perspective, a distinction is drawn between writing (*kitābah*) and script (*khatt*), where *kitābah* is a comprehensive concept that includes everything that falls within the framework of language, literature and art. *Kitābah* might be compositional in nature, in which case it would take the form of prose works in fields such as literature, history, philosophy and the like; alternatively, it might take the form of handwritten script (*khatt*), in which case it would manifest as images and shapes.

Viewed from the Arabic-Islamic epistemological perspective, *kitābah* is the linguistic origin of *khatt*. As such, *kitābah* is broader and more inclusive than *khatt*.

*Khatt* “might serve as an illustration or inscription” for writing (*kitābah*). Consequently, linguists, prosodists and critics view *khatt* as ‘the image of writing’ (*ṣūrat al-kitābah*), ‘the image of the spoken word’ (*ṣūrat al-lafz*), and ‘the image of meaning’ (*ṣūrat al-ma‘nā*).

At the same time, a distinction can be drawn between two levels of *khatt*. The first level, which has to do with artistic, linguistic and semantic function, is based on *khatt*'s being an act of writing that involves “forming letters, clothing them in the garb of detail, and placing them in the most beautiful of settings.” As for the second level, it is based on the notion of *khatt* as nothing but an image, particularly given the fact that linguists, critics and others tend to classify Arabic letters based on their hierarchical semantic relationships to existing entities into the three categories of: (1) letters of meaning (*ḥurūf ma‘nawiyah*), (2) phonetic letters (*ḥurūf lafẓiyyah*), and (3) scribal letters (*ḥurūf khattīyyah*).

Al-Tawḥīdī interprets the cognitive and communicational evolution of Arabic script and its role as image based on what he terms ‘movement’ (*ḥarakah*). He states, “when letters are formed via the movements of the calligrapher’s hand, they produce a calligraphic



image consisting of letters with a visible and stable ‘identity’ thanks to their being identified with a particular style (Naskh, Kufic, etc.).”

Given the foregoing, the ‘calligraphic image’ is a drawing, form or effect which signifies a material entity perceptible to the eye, or what some Arab Muslim philosophers describe as the ‘bodily’<sup>I</sup> aspect of writing (*kitābah*). This image is what some historians of the art of Arabic calligraphy term “the true nature, or soul, of Arabic script.”

## The Communicative Theory of the Art of Arabic Calligraphy

The cognitive approach that the Islamic culture of communication has adopted toward calligraphy is illustrated in the following statements:

- (a) ‘The best script is script that can be read to derive meaning, and the rest is *naqsh*.’ The word *naqsh* refers to script that has been beautified, embellished, artistically varied, colored, shaped, and the like. Such techniques make up what is known as ‘calligraphic design’ (*al-taṣmīm al-khaṭṭī*), which might imbue the calligraphic image with additional meanings or significations that arise out of an understanding of script as ‘an image with a spirit.’ Script is an image, and its spirit is its ability to communicate and clarify.
- (b) ‘Script is a sign. Hence, the clearer it is, the more beautiful it is,’ since in the realm of communication, ‘the most beautiful script is the clearest, and the clearest script is the most beautiful.’
- (c) When script departs from the functional role it plays in the hands of scribes, editors, and the like and enters the realm of the artistic and aesthetic, its beauty derives from image and form. Hand-written script then becomes ‘an entity in motion even though it is still.’ Script of this nature brings enjoyment even to a foreigner who is unable to read it.

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<sup>I</sup> Aḥmad ibn ‘Alī al-Qalqashandī, *Ṣubḥ al-A‘shā fī Ṣinā‘at al-Insha*, edited by Ḥusayn Shams al-Dīn, (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyah, 1987), Part 3, p. 46.

## The Islamic <sup>ʿ</sup>*Alāmah*: An Application

### [ONE]: CONCEPT AND TERM

The word <sup>ʿ</sup>*alāmah* is being used here to refer to the emblem, seal and official stamp of the Islamic state. The use of the <sup>ʿ</sup>*alāmah* is a long-standing tradition of Muslim caliphs, rulers and states.

The primary motto of Islam has always been “there is no deity but Allah, and Muhammad is His messenger” (*lā ilāha illā Allāh wa Muḥammadun rasūlu Allāh*). It is the fundamental creedal statement to which people have testified, which they have affirmed in their hearts, which has been lifted high on many a banner, and which has appeared on the coins of successive Islamic governments. However, the first Islamic emblem understood in the artistic and communicative sense was the noble prophetic seal.

Biographies of the Prophet and works recounting his praiseworthy deeds and qualities describe this seal’s artistic details, the most prominent of which are as follows: (1) It was made of silver and bore the inscription, “Muhammad, Messenger of Allah,” with ‘Muhammad’ on one line, ‘Messenger’ on a second line, and ‘Allah’ on a third line such that it was read from bottom to top (that is with Allah’s name on top). (2) The prophetic seal was kept by the first three rightly guided caliphs, Abū Bakr, ʿUmar Ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, and ʿUthmān Ibn ʿAffān, who kept it with them as a token of blessing rather than for practical reasons relating to their caliphal duties, since each of them had a special seal of his own. Abū Bakr’s seal bore the inscription, *niʿma al-Qādir Allāh* (“The All Powerful, The All Capable”), ʿUmar’s seal bore the words, *kafā bil-mawti wāʿiẓan yā ʿUmar* (“Death is a sufficient warner, O ʿUmar”), and ʿUthmān’s bore the inscription, *la taṣburanna aw la tandumanna* (“Patiently endure, or hang your head in shame”). As for the fourth caliph, ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib, his seal read, *al-mulku lillāh al-Wāḥid al-Qahhār* (“Sovereignty belongs to God, The One, The Conqueror, The Prevailer”).

During the reign of Umayyad Caliph Muʿāwiyah ibn Abī Sufyān, the caliphal seal came to have a special administrative institution known as *Dīwān al-Khātīm*, that is, the Bureau of the Signet Ring. It

may have been this pioneering step that established the traditions of the emblem, the seal, the stamp, and the signature in the Islamic culture of communication. Interest in such traditions did not stop with caliphs, monarchs, sultans, emirs, governors, judges and other state officials, but extended to Islamic society as a whole, as religious scholars, scientists, mystics, merchants and manufacturers also took to the use of seals in their respective professions. The signet rings used by some individuals had special phrases inscribed on them, while others bore the 'signatures' of prominent teachers, writers, *littérateurs*, calligraphers, and other leading figures as an artistic badge of sorts.

[TWO]: THE COMMUNICATIVE DESIGN OF THE ISLAMIC EMBLEM

The broad interest taken in the Islamic emblem on both official and popular levels played a major role in the evolution it underwent with respect to content, form, the material from which it was made, the names applied to it, the meanings it conveyed, etc. Its structure was based on two primary elements: (1) the textual element, which takes the form of verbal expression, meaning and signification, and (2) the visual element, which manifests itself as shape, image, sign and discourse.

It is difficult to separate the textual and visual elements of the design and artistic formation of the Islamic emblem, since in general, such an emblem is a calligraphic representation of a written or spoken text. The text is the basis of the image in all communicative discourse.

Hence, they exist in an intimate organic unity of structure, and of functional and semantic variety. Based on these two components – the textual and the visual – Islamic emblems can be divided into three categories: (1) those whose structure and communicative function are based equally on the textual and the visual, as is the case with the prophetic seal, (2) those whose structure and communicative function rely more on the textual element than on the visual element, as is the case with the seals of the rightly guided, Umayyad, and Abbasid caliphs, sultans, and others (historical sources contain no descriptions of the forms or shapes taken by these seals, whereas the texts inscribed on them elucidated their owners' religious and political visions), and



An example of a tughra

(3) those whose structure and communicative function rely more on the visual element than on the textual element. The clearest and most familiar examples of this type of emblem is what has come to be known as the tughra (*al-ṭughrā'*), that is, the official stamp used by sultans, particularly those of the Mamluk and Seljuq eras, and ending with the Ottoman state.

[THREE]: COMMUNICATION AS TEXTUAL AND VISUAL –  
THE DIFFICULTY

Academic approaches to the tughra have tended to focus on the historical and political dimensions of relevance to the Islamic state rather than on its communicative dimension, which can be studied semiotically. The semiotic approach looks at the emblem with a view to interpreting its linguistic, cultural, and artistic aspects within the Islamic culture of communication on the written, spoken, textual and visual levels. Historical, linguistic and literary sources contain an abundance of Islamic emblems in which the textual element is prominent. However, these same sources place sufficient emphasis on the visual element to give calligraphic drawing a dual (textual-visual) identity, as it were. On one hand we have the geometric shapes and poetic rhythms manifested in the art of Arabic calligraphy, and on the other hand, we have the language itself. Given their textual-visual duality, the calligraphic elements of Islamic emblems have never faced the recurring question of identity that have been posed traditionally by researchers, historians, critics, artists and calligraphers concerning the tughra, for example. The question is: Is the tughra simply an inscrutable text, or does it convey some enduring wisdom? Is it a symbol of power and authority? Do its structures reflect a lack of freedom to engage in visual creativity due to Islamic sensitivities relating to the practices of drawing and visual representation? Or is it open to a wide range of interpretations even if the viewer is unable to decipher the tughra's text and its calligraphic image?

Questions such as these arise from the fact that scholars have been more preoccupied with the geometric shapes found in this Islamic emblem than they have been with its content, which consists of names of Ottoman sultans. These sultans are sometimes difficult to distinguish from one another, with changes in sultans' names resulting in textual differences from one tughra to the next. As we have noted, the word tughra refers to an Ottoman sultan's signet ring or seal signifying royalty and sovereignty. Every Ottoman sultan had his own tughra, and some were known to have had more than one.

Many researchers, critics, artists, calligraphers, and others have faced the question of how to classify the tughra. Overall, scholars' view of the tughra has shifted from an emphasis on its direct function in the spheres of politics, law, and documentation, to its artistic and calligraphic features, which may not lend themselves to scientific, academic or technical definition from a purely historical perspective. The tughra has been classified sometimes as merely a calligraphic depiction, and at other times as an art form employing geometric shapes whose message was communicated through the relationship between the textual and the visual. Nevertheless, scholars have never agreed on what, precisely, the communicative nature of the tughra is.

A number of scholars view the tughra as a type of Arabic calligraphy unique to the Ottomans in which they adapted some types of script, taking liberties with the recognized rules of the script when forming what are known as 'calligraphic structures.' Some scholars view the tughra as simply an ornamental style of Arabic calligraphy, which may make it more of a 'performing art' than an art form per se. Others, however, have viewed the tughra as nothing but an image, and its writing simply as a form of drawing; in fact, such scholars look upon every form of writing-related or letter-related drawing as a type of tughra.

In contrast to these disparate views of the visual aspect of the tughra, some critics have proposed the more neutral view that the tughra is a distinctive Ottoman art form that falls somewhere between writing and drawing. According to these latter critics, the tughra might be described as writing-based drawing that derives its form from images of certain mythical or symbolic birds found in the cultures of Islamic peoples such as the Arabs (the griffon or the roc, for example),

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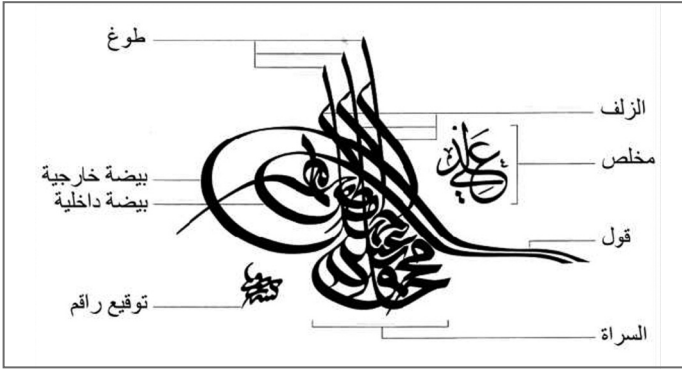
the Turks (the saad bird), and the Persians (the simurgh). This view is given credence by the fact that, in the view of some students of the tughra, this emblem went beyond being simply a monogram symbolizing royal power and authority to enter the worlds of abstract form so characteristic of Islamic art.

### [FOUR]: THE TUGHRA'S COMMUNICATIVE DESIGN

Certain historical references and archaeological remains indicate the phases through which the shapes and images used in the tughra passed in their evolution over time. One reference describes the Seljuq tughra as being in the shape of a bow, the bow shape having been an old Turkish tribal emblem. Apparently an outgrowth of a writing movement whose purpose was to provide the signature for Seljuq Sultan Tughril Beg (d. 455 AH/1063 CE), one particular signet emblem bore the simple shape of the Arabic letter *yā'* as it appears at the end of a word (ﻱ).

However, the clearest of the historical references and shapes relating to the tughra come from what is known as 'writers' literature' (*adab al-kuttāb*), a literary genre specifically concerned with news of the Bureau of Correspondence, Edicts, Signatures and their Replicas in Islamic states. Such references show the Mamluk tughra in the shape of a square or rectangle consisting of the upright letters of the signatory text, and which later took the shape of the Ottoman tughra.

Some modern critics and students of Islamic art view the tughra as "an elliptical figure" and nothing more. In fact, this image or form may have constituted the primary creative element of communication design in Islamic art, whether as drawing or as script. As such, it was the focal point of the artistic 'game' that was being played by a community of painters and calligraphers to whom we might refer as the 'tughra artists.' A prominent representative of this group was Muṣṭafā Rāqim (d. 1234 AH/1826 CE), who is thought to have brought the Ottoman tughra to its final form.



The layout  
of the  
tughra

As illustrated in the figure above, the tughra consisted of a set of specific visual elements. We have the *tuğs* (meaning ‘flagstuffs’ in the Turkish language), represented by the three vertical lines emerging from the top of the tughra and signifying independence. The inner and outer loops (*beyze*) on the left side of the tughra have been said to symbolize the two seas over which the Ottoman Sultan was believed to hold sway: the larger, outer loop being the Mediterranean Sea, and the smaller inner loop representing the Black Sea. As for the sail-like S-shaped lines that intersect with the *tuğs*, referred to as *zülfe*, they signify by their angle that the winds blow from the east (right) to the west (left), the traditional movement of the Ottomans. The lines extending outward toward the right of the tughra are called *hançer* and signify a sword, symbol of power and might. The *qawl* was the statement found at the center of the tughra. At the bottom of the tughra the name of the sultan was written out; this element was referred to as the *sere*. And at the bottom left one found the signature of the calligrapher who had drawn the tughra’s design.

When the tughra entered the realm of abstract form with its subtle interpretive shifts, these artists found broad vistas of communicative design and creative potential opening up before them. The overall artistic structure of their work now came to rely clearly on the shape of the tughra as a highly symbolic visual phenomenon. Given these newly opened horizons, some scholars of Islamic art came to describe the art of tughra forms with as many adjectives as there were texts, functions and communicative aims.

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### [FIVE]: THE MODERNITY OF THE CALLIGRAPHIC IMAGE

The formal nature of the tughra has prompted modern art critics to view its visual element as a sublime melange of geometry, beauty, and creativity. Consequently, the textual element has not been seen as emerging directly from the specific words, names or titles used. Rather, it is seen as emerging from the tughra's stunning visual element. Hence, the overall discourse of the tughra (consisting of the textual and the visual together) is transformed into a kind of metadiscourse that possesses an ever-renewing capacity for creative interpretations and readings. The calligraphic images employed in the tughra are bursting with new meanings via what art critic Shakir Hasan Al Said refers to as "the single dimension," by which he means that the shape or form of the letter itself takes on artistic or aesthetic value without necessarily communicating a given meaning.

This idea served as the basis for the 'letter movement' in modern Arab fine art. The Arab calligraphers' statement released by the First Convention of Arab Plastic Artists held in Baghdad in April, 1973 read: "Things have evolved in such a way that the Arab calligrapher now works to strike a balance between adherence to rules relating to the script itself and the art of ornamentation. We can use a letter as an ornament devoid of content. Similarly, we can use it as a means of writing in numerous fields. In this sense, calligraphy has become a form of academic-artistic inquiry."

The tughra emblem has been employed in symbolic ways in numerous works of art and literature, particularly those relating to Sufism. The effects of the tughra on modern calligraphic art forms can be seen, for example, in the extension and overlap of letters, or in the shading of certain regions of the script. Hence, when we see a beautiful painting consisting of letters of the Arabic alphabet, it serves as a reminder of what was achieved by the Islamic culture of communication in interaction with other peoples and cultures in times of old and, in modern times, through the discourse of art, personal experience, and non-verbal readings of the images of Arabic script.



# Conclusion

## Grounding the Theory of Islamic Art: Vision and Method

ORIENTALIST RESEARCH into Islamic art overall, and aesthetic theory in particular, has left a clear impact on modern and contemporary Arab-Islamic culture. It has, for example, generated greater interest in the historical and civilizational background of Islamic art and attempts to study it from both philosophical and functional perspectives. As a result, the theory of Islamic art has come to be closely associated with the modern Western approach to aesthetics and the philosophy of art.

In fact, it might be said that the theory of Islamic art is largely an outcome of Orientalist research and knowledge in this field. Numerous Western historians of Islamic art have even gone so far as to claim that the Islamic intellectual tradition contains no theory of art or, at the very least, that the Islamic concept of aesthetics and philosophy of art have been marked by a degree of incoherence. Rarely do we find any commendation of the Islamic tradition in modern aesthetic studies; indeed, rarely do we find any suggestion that an Islamic aesthetic ever existed.

In response to denigrating Orientalist attitudes toward the Islamic tradition as it relates to the aesthetic, a number of contemporary Muslim scholars set out to demonstrate the existence of an authentic Islamic aesthetic that could provide the needed foundation for a theory of Islamic art. Such scholars began tracing out the features of this aesthetic based on material drawn from the Arab-Islamic intellectual and philosophical tradition, including relevant texts from the Qur'an and the Prophetic Hadith, and from the fields of linguistics, literature and history. By examining the aesthetic and artistic elements of the Islamic tradition from a non-Orientalist perspective, these Muslim thinkers

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strove to root the theory of Islamic art in a broadly based Islamic aesthetic.

Philosophical aesthetics tends to focus exclusively on what might be termed 'artistic beauty' as manifested in architecture, paintings, drawings, and comparable expressions of human creativity. Islamic aesthetics by contrast defines beauty broadly as a quality that can be perceived anywhere in the universe: in nature, human beings, behavior, creativity, and images. Islamic aesthetics has thus been defined as a branch of the humanities that concerns itself with the study of beauty both as concept and as personal experience.

More broadly speaking, Aesthetics is a discipline that concerns itself with the meaning of beauty, which includes an identification of beauty as a concept, its criteria, and its purposes. Beauty is viewed as a genuine, essential element of an individual entity and its reason for existing.

In its general sense, Aesthetics is the study of beauty in things in the absolute sense of 'thing': be it material or spiritual, natural or manufactured, traditional or innovative, literary or artistic. There is, in addition, an aesthetic that is particular to each individual thing, which means that there are as many aesthetics as there are existent entities, particularly in the realms of art and literature.

In the field of modern literary criticism, the term 'aesthetics' has been used to indicate that beauty is the primary feature that gives a text its value. Hence, in the absence of beauty, no artistic significance attaches to any text, since a literary text's primary function is to be beautiful.

The term 'Islamic aesthetics' has sometimes been perceived as problematic due to the fact that it is used to refer to the study of both literature and art, not to mention the breadth of the concept of 'aesthetics' itself with its varied manifestations on the levels of both theory and application. Matters are further complicated by the use of the adjective 'Islamic' to modify a term that appears to refer to a fundamentally Western cultural category, and which appeared relatively late even in relation to Western culture itself. This difficulty continues to plague attempts by Arab-Muslim thinkers to draw a distinction among various realms of Islamic aesthetics, be they literary, artistic, or otherwise,

especially given the fact that attempts to root aesthetics in the Islamic intellectual tradition appear, for the most part, to be more oriented toward literary aesthetics than they are toward artistic aesthetics.

Despite the complementarity that exists among the Islamic aesthetic terms applicable to the artistic and literary fields, it is important to identify Islamic-Arabic texts that embody the philosophical, artistic and critical theories on which we can build an Islamic, literary-artistic aesthetic vision that is independent of the Western aesthetic perspective. Those involved in such efforts need to construct a precise concept of aesthetics that is suited specifically to the theory of Islamic art, and that is, at the same time, set within the overall framework of aesthetics as a philosophical and critical field applicable to human experience in all times and places. Islamic aesthetics applies to a specific epistemological, social, cultural and religious milieu with its distinctive theoretical and practical aspects.

Vision, subject matter, concepts, terminology and method are the principle focal points of any process of grounding the theory of Islamic art, or 'Islamic aesthetic,' in its own indigenous tradition. The phrase 'Islamic aesthetic' is used in the study of the various art forms that have emerged out of Islamic civilization as phenomena rooted in time and place.

The process of grounding the theory of Islamic art in its home heritage needs to be carried out within distinctly Islamic academic and scientific structures, and with a thorough knowledge of Islamic history and civilization. In addition to generating its own particular artistic applications, such a process should promote greater attentiveness to the creative laws and principles that undergird the framework of Islamic philosophical and cultural awareness.

DIVINE ONENESS as the principle of beauty is perhaps quintessentially Islamic artistic expression and experience and what it celebrates. Why has Islamic art evolved as it has, what forms does it take, what is the logic underlying it? What message is the Muslim artist attempting to convey, what emotion is he seeking to evoke? This work views Islamic art as a subject of archeological study and treats its evolution as part of the historical study of art in the broader sense. At the same time, it paves the way for an epistemological shift from viewing Islamic art as a material concept having to do with beautiful rarities and relics that have grown out of Islamic cultural and artistic creativity, to a theoretical concept associated with a vision, a principle, a theory and a method. This theoretical concept provides the intellectual and cultural foundation for a critical philosophical science of Islamic artistic beauty to which we might refer as ‘the science of Islamic art,’ or ‘the Islamic aesthetic’ that evaluates visual artistic creations in terms of both beauty and practical usefulness. In the process the study also explores orientalist misconceptions, challenging some of the premises with which it has approached Islamic art, with judgement rooted in a cultural framework alien to the spiritual perspective of Islam.

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ISBN 978-1-56564-696-4



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