

Full Length Paper

Islam and Life - Islamic Art Inspiring Western Art, Artists Part 1

Prof. Dr. Sahib Mustaqim Bleher, PO Box 844, Oldbrook, Milton Keynes MK6 2YT, UK
info@mustaqim.co.uk

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The influence of Islamic Art on the Western world and the world at large is undeniably exemplified by, but not limited to architecture, where it was purveyed as imitated building structures in the 18th century Brighton Royal Pavilion built between 1787 and 1823 for King George IV of Britain. The two-part series discusses Islamic Art from the standpoint of Muslims in the West, and as a counter-balance to the negative associations with Islam prevalent in today's mainstream media. The focus is on Islamic Art as one of Islam's major contributions to human civilisation using literary compendium in which part one articulates the underpinning issues contextualising Islam's architecture within the theology of Islam. The second part is an interview between two scholars on Islam engaging in what seems like a combative discussion to address the meta-theology of Islam in Islamic identity in the West.

Keywords: Worship; Beauty; Elevation; Islamic Western Identity; Sustainable Architecture.

INTRODUCTION

Western audiences are familiar with Islam's religious calligraphy or the ceramic tiles first used to ornament mosques, but less so with the prose and poetry it inspired. However, looking only at the artefacts without trying to understand their underlying philosophy does not do the subject justice. Art; and sacred art in particular, has to do with making sense of and defining man's place in the universe. (Burckhardt, 1967 and Schuon, 2007) Islamic Art is no different in this respect.



<http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-sussex-21726838>

SCHISM BETWEEN ISLAMIC ART and ITS PHILOSOPHY

It can be argued that it is because of the separation of Islamic Art from its philosophy or *raison d'être*, that outstanding Islamic Art is now a matter of history, merely being imitated in our times, rather than being further developed as a continuation of its original inspiration within a changed environment. When it is examined divorced from its religious and philosophical roots, Islamic Art can easily be viewed as belonging to the past. Yet, it conveys a message which has not lost any of its relevance today and may be even more pertinent in an age of post-modern relativism and nihilism.

Art in Islam is not purely for entertainment but serves a purpose which appeals to the public, and not only to the eccentric or rich art collector. In an application of the prophetic saying (Hadith) that “God is beautiful and loves beauty” (Sahih Muslim no.131), art as an expression of beauty is there to adorn common every-day objects and should be found in every home. Consequently, it also ought to be accessible, which is why the more exquisite and expensive decorative art is not kept by the private collector but displayed in the mosque or other public buildings, such as libraries, which are used for the worship and glory of God and to elevate people above their normal mundane lives to a higher level of experience. (El-Wakil, 1992) Such decorations, for which mosque architecture is so famous, include gardens and water features, and are intended to provide tranquillity, reflect the gardens of paradise, inspire in their intricate wood carvings, plaster work and floral tile patterns to take the eye off the chores and worries of daily life to ponder about and aspire to a spiritual existence to celebrate the beauty of God.

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Since worship without intention and understanding is bereft of much benefit, sacred art in places of worship tries to install such meaning. In churches the iconoclastic art of the Catholics is an attempt to tell the stories found in the Bible, of fall and redemption, to a common audience who were unable to access them in the Latin text. Islamic art does not use images and it does not re-tell the stories found in the Qur'an. Yet, its function is not simply to decorate or impress with lavish gold and silver artefacts; but to invite to meditate. With this humility, Islamic Art in the service of the Creator rather than being creative in itself, is reflecting the Creator's beauty, rather than wanting to be admired for its own beauty, and characterises the attitude of the artist, who does not produce art to be displayed in order to make him famous but as a contribution of his own worship for the greater glory of God. Some of the most accomplished pieces of such art are often found in the least accessible niches of walls and ceilings, rather than being showcased, as they are produced for the praise of God, not the artist's. Some have even argued that producers of Islamic art have introduced deliberate blemishes or mistakes in patterns or carpets to pay homage to the fact that God alone is perfect. (Backhouse)

A very noticeable feature of Islamic decorative art is its geometric nature. Partly this is to do with the prohibition of carved images, however, it serves a purpose of its own: to convey the concept of eternity. The repetitive patterns, however complicated they may be in detail, continue ad infinitum. They defy borders and do not remain neatly within a frame. Looked at from afar, they produce a vast landscape of colour and shapes, yet, studied closely, they are made up of tiny individual, often roughly cut fragments of ceramic tiles with the grout often clearly visible. In this they are a parable of life and society: Perfection, always aspired to, constantly remains without reach, yet everybody's minute contribution, incomplete and unpolished as it may be on its own, combines to blend into something immensely beautiful. Thus, beauty is only one of the numerous attributes of God that man tries to emulate, inevitably falling short of perfection as an individual, but nonetheless achieving greatness through joining efforts with fellow travellers on the path to salvation.

By making bold statements of this kind, Islamic Art is a transcendent concept which represents much more than merely art in Islam. It defines what is important and what is irrelevant, what is focal and what is peripheral. It does not only uplift and inspire, it also teaches. Traditionally, the most luxurious houses and palaces in the Islamic world would be hidden behind a plain and ordinary façade to guard against showing off and ward off jealousy and intrusion. (Grabar, 1978)



Khirbat al-Mafjar, mosaic floor (from Ettinghausen. *Islamic Art and Architecture*)

ISLAMIC ARCHITECTURE

In contrast, when orientalist and other travellers from the West first encountered Islamic art designs, they introduced them at home in order to make a bold statement, to show off as it were. They were thrilled by the brightness of colours in oriental tiles as well as the patterns, which brought an exotic look to their stately homes. The Pavilion in Brighton, for example, is clearly modelled on mosque architecture, and so are many other buildings of the period, but for a very different purpose. Whereas the borrowing from Islamic art and architecture in the 18th century is more apparent, the influence of Islamic architecture upon Europe itself commenced a lot earlier. Gothic architecture, for example, owes much to the design of arches which Muslims had inherited from the Byzantines and subsequently perfected. This allowed buildings with large halls to be constructed without the use of obstructing pillars, and in this way Islam contributed both to the technology of architecture and its use, permitting the gathering of larger crowds of people in a single covered adapted Islamic designs in their decorations.

(<http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/s/style-guide-renaissance-influences-from-beyond-europe/> and <http://www.muslimheritage.com/article/architectural-links-between-east-and-west-early-modern-times>)

Islamic Art itself, on the other hand, did not remain stagnant but constantly adapted to the cultural preferences and customs of the people who joined the fold of Islam. Mosques in Asia, for example Malaysia, are all rounded in shape, whereas in Africa, for example Morocco, they are square. Persian mosques are quite distinct from neighbouring Turkish ones. As long as the purpose was met, as long as the architecture kept to the principles of Islamic theology and philosophy, it welcomed and incorporated such regional variations. This accounts for the creativity of Islamic architectural design.

ISLAMIC ARCHITECTURE in CONTEXT

When adapting to new surroundings, it is important not to lose sight of the context in which a building functions. Here, modern mosque designs, usually built in concrete and adapting to Western construction methods and layouts whilst imitating Eastern decorative features, often miss the point. A mosque is part of a community which it serves. It must not only be beautiful, but also accessible. It should provide a focal point for those who frequent it, as well as being the hub of their social activity. It is not intended as a mere status symbol.

There have been attempts to revive some of these aspects of Islamic architecture, for example by the Egyptian architect Hassan Fathy (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hassan_Fathy) and his disciple and contemporary authority on Islamic architecture Abdel Wahed el-Wakil (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abdel-Wahed_El-Wakil) who viewed Islamic architecture as sustainable architecture. This school of thought promotes the use of affordable local materials instead of concrete with its high carbon footprint or the use of courtyards and airflow ventilation for natural cooling instead of power-hungry air conditioning, a technique pioneered by Muslims, for example, in the Yemen in the old coral stone buildings of Sana'a. (Jeffery, 1989 <https://aq.arizona.edu/OALS/ALN/aln28/jeffery.html>) So far, this approach has not yet become mainstream, because Muslims have been disconnected from their past, their traditions have been disrupted by colonisation and wars, and many Muslims today are trying to learn Islam from books alone, emphasising the rules and forgetting the mannerisms of the religion. The purpose of art remains to beautify, as well as being functional, and in that it is a means of expressing love for the Creator, the prime Artist (al-Musawwir, one of the 99 names or attributes of God in Islamic theology). (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Names_of_God_in_Islam)



Safeguarding project of Hassan Fathy's New Gorna Village. New Gorna Village is located in Luxor on the West Bank of the Nile River, within the World Heritage property of Ancient Thebes in Egypt. The Village was designed and built between 1946 and 1952 by the famous Egyptian architect Hassan Fathy (1900-1989).
<http://whc.unesco.org/en/activities/637/>

PEOPLE'S ART

As with architecture, other branches of Islamic Art also work in context and serve a social purpose. This applies to patterns and designs ornamenting the interiors of houses and artefacts, calligraphy, folk music and poetry. If the artistic expression no longer speaks to the people and for the people, it becomes a relic of the past and gradually dies out. One of the key concepts of Islam, referred to in Surah Ar-Rahman (55) of the Qur'an (verses 6-8), is the balance. The collective duty of Muslims is to uphold the balance, and restore it when it has been upset. Thus it is not sufficient for Muslims today to glorify their past achievements and dwell on them with nostalgia. They need to be the bridge over which the best of the past is transferred into the future, shedding distortions on the way. For today's Muslim architects, painters, calligraphers, designers, the aim must be to reconnect beauty with truth to ensure that their art is a window unto reality. Creative art reaches beyond entertainment; it has a social and political message and shows a way to a better future. To be true to its purpose, Islamic art needs to define relationships between man and God and man and his fellow man. It needs to be inclusive, not alienate. It therefore has to be reflective both of the landscape and the nature of the people amongst whom it originates. True art cannot be imported from afar; it has to grow from within. And at a time of postmodernism and deconstructionism it has to challenge their uniformity. Mankind is one, but people express themselves through their differences. At a time where a puritanical misinterpretation of Islam is promoting fanaticism and endangers the very basis of the Islamic identity, Islamic art has a major contribution to make in demonstrating that the universality of Islam as a religion does not deny individuality nor personal expression, does not force people into a specific mould, but permits, or rather sponsors, plurality of expression and appreciates the unique contribution each and every individual and culture has to make within the overall journey of mankind through temporal life.

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