Islam: Aesthetics of a Mystic Religion

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Islam is much more than a formal religion: it is an integral way of life. In many ways it is a more determining factor in the experience of its followers than any other world religion. The Muslim ("One who submits") lives face to face with Allah at all times, and will introduce no separation between his life and religion, his politics and his faith. With its strong emphasis on the brotherhood of men cooperating to fulfill the will of Allah, Islam has become one of the most influential religions in the world today.

Traditional Islamic art conveys the spirituality and quintessential message of Islam through a timeless language which precisely because of its timelessness as well as its direct symbolism, is more effective and less problematic than most of the theological explanations of Islam. A piece of traditional calligraphy or an arabesque can speak much more eloquently of the intelligence and nobility which characterize Islam than many an apologetic work of Islamic modernists or so-called activists. It is the serene, intelligible, structured and highly spiritual character of Islamic art which more than any other element leads to a correct understanding of the culture that is Islam.

Contrary to modern ideas, Islam does not consider art and beauty as a luxury. It considers beauty to be a divine quality (one of god's name being al-Jamil, the beautiful) and says that god loves beauty. The Islamic aesthetic wishes beauty to be all pervasive and hence the art that developed made sure that a Muslim encountered the joy of beauty at all levels of his existence. He experiences deep down in his heart the same sense of peace and joy when sitting on a traditional carpet, viewing a piece of calligraphy, or praying within the confines of one of the masterpieces of Islamic architecture which dot the Islamic world from the Pacific to the Atlantic.

Here we will explore the spiritual dimensions of Islamic art through the following elements:

- Sacred Architecture of the Islamic Mosque
- The Islamic Art of Writing
- Aesthetic Principles and the Building of an Islamic Community

Sacred Architecture of the Islamic Mosque

The sacred architecture of Islam par excellence is the mosque which is but a recreation of the harmony, order and peace inherent in nature. While praying in a traditional mosque, the Muslim in a sense returns to the bosom of nature, not externally but through the inner nexus which relates the mosque to the principles and rhythms of nature.
The word mosque derives from the Arabic masjid, which literally means the place of prostration (sujud). This is the position in Islamic ritual prayers (namaz), in which the forehead of the worshipper touches the ground in the supreme act of submission and surrender before God. Before the prostration however, at the beginning of his prayer, he stands directly as the primordial man, himself his own priest, facing god without an intermediary. This is a unique and significant achievement in the development of mystic thought, where man is viewed not as a fallen being but as god's vicegerent on earth, aware of his theomorphic substance and competent and 'perfect' enough to correspond directly with God.

It is not, however, only the space of the mosque within which the faithful pray that is important. It is also the floor upon which they prostrate themselves that is of crucial significance. But before attempting to grasp the symbolic significance of the floor, it is important to understand the position of man himself in Islamic thought.

Man in Islam is considered the most perfect of god's creations. It is the forehead of this most perfect of god's creations that touches in prayer the floor of the prayer hall, thereby sanctifying the floor of the mosque and returning this floor to its inviolable purity as the original earth at the dawn of creation. The first historical mosque is believed to have been the house of Prophet Muhammad himself. The first 'official' mosque was at Medina, which architecturally was a prototype of the house of the Prophet, and in a sense was an extension of it. The Prophet himself, it is believed, had first prayed before the divine throne (al-'Arsh) before he prayed upon the ground (farsh), thus sanctifying earth as the mirror and reflection of heaven. It is this sanctification of the ground by the Prophet that bestowed a new metaphysical meaning upon the ground and the carpet covering it. The carpet, whether of simple white color or full of geometric and arabesque designs and patterns, is a reflection of heaven and enables one to experience the ground upon which one sits as purifying, and to participate in the sacred character of the ground.

As for the characteristic open space in mosques, its stillness reflects the pacifying presence of the Divine Word, which echoes through it. The rhythmic division of space by means of arches and columns is the counterpart to the rhythms of cosmic existence which punctuate the phases of the life of man. The space of the sacred structures of Islam rests serenely and nobly in a stillness which conforms to the inner nature of things.

Architecture is of course the art par excellence of ordering space, and all sacred architecture achieves its basic goal of placing man in the presence of the divine through the sacralization of the space which it forms. In the case of Islamic architecture this sacralization is achieved by means of polarization of space through the presence of the Ka'ba
which is believed to be the center of the earth, and towards which all Muslims turn in their daily prayers.

The Muslim world is spread out like a gigantic wheel with Mecca as the hub, and with lines drawn from all the mosques in the world forming the spokes. These lines converge on a city and within that city on a point. The city is Mecca, and the point is the Ka’ba at its center. Mecca, the birthplace of Prophet Muhammad, is Islam’s holy city and the goal of all pilgrimage. The Ka’ba, a cube of stone, is the axis mundi of Islamic cosmology. It is diagonally oriented, with its corners facing the cardinal points of a compass. Metaphysically it is the center of the world, because it is the primordial symbol of the intersection between the vertical axis of the spirit and the horizontal plane of phenomenal existence.

During their pilgrimage to Ka’ba, pilgrims circumambulate it seven times, and this gyration of the great crowd round the Ka’ba, with its curious swirling, liquid movement, when seen from an aerial perspective resembles nothing so much as an immense whirlpool. This rite finds its echo in the circumambulation of the sun, or likewise the tomb of a saint, so as to achieve the maximum exposure to the invisible psychic fluid believed to emanate from all such sacred places.

The sacred architecture of Islam is a crystallization of Islamic spirituality and a key for the understanding of this spirituality. The spaces it has created provide a haven in which man can savor, by grace of this very spirituality, the peace and harmony of not only uncorrupted nature but also paradise of which such a nature is a reflection. This paradise man carries at the depth and center of his being where the divine presence reverberates.

**The Islamic Art of Writing**

*Handwriting is jewelry fashioned by the hand from the pure gold of intellect.*

- Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi

Calligraphy is believed to be the visual embodiment of the sacred word. Islamic tradition states that Ali, the son-in-law of Prophet Muhammad, was the first calligrapher. The origins of Islamic calligraphy are traced all the way back to god, who is believed to have written the celestial archetype of the Quran. According to Qadi Ahmed, a sixteenth century author on the art of calligraphy and painting, 'creation itself is the divine calligraphy with which
god covered the pages of changing time with the black and white design of night becoming days and days becoming night.'

A chapter in the Quran is entitled 'The Pen' (surat al-qalam), qalam meaning pen in Arabic. It opens with the letter nun. The letter nun in Arabic resembles the inkpot.

It is believed that god first created the Qalam, then the inkpot or nun. Thus the chapter begins with nun and the Pen. According to another Islamic text, the qalam symbolizes the tongue and nun the mouth.

Islamic calligraphy reflects through the symbolism of its very forms the intertwining between permanence and change that characterize creation itself. Hence the horizontal movement of the script, which is a rippling movement as in weaving, corresponds to change, whereas the vertical movement represents the permanent divine essence. Another point of view views the vertical as the symbol of the unified principle, and the horizontal, the multiplicity of manifestation.

Another important element in the appraisal of Islamic calligraphy is the concept of a tree. A tree is but a manifestation of a seed's potential to derive sustenance from earth and water, and produce one of the most beautiful sights in the world, namely that of a flowering tree complete with branches and leaves.
Man is much the same as a tree. He has been put on earth like a seed. But he can only grow into a tree by virtue of his own efforts. Providence, however, has granted him innumerable sources of nourishment and opportunities exist on earth to partake of them. Keeping these conceptions in mind, it was but inevitable that the unifying art of Islam eventually combined calligraphy with stylized plant forms (arabesques). Many Islamic monuments from Anatolia to Agra display this intertwining of calligraphy and arabesque forms.

In addition to arabesque forms, Islamic art also combines geometric patterns with calligraphy. Here the calligraphy, related directly to the divine word (believed to be the Quran), is said to symbolize the unified principle of creation, while the geometric element with its immutable patterns is said to represent the masculine principle.

In a similar vein, the arabesques, related to life and growth, reveal the maternal aspect of creation. Seen in this light, calligraphy can be contemplated as the principle from which the other two elements of Islamic patterns, the geometric and the arabesque (male and female respectively), originate, and into which they became integrated as all cosmic dualities become integrated into the ultimate unified Principle.

In a further development of metaphysical interpretation, each letter is given a personality of its own, and ultimately linked with Allah, or the supreme god. For example the first letter of the Arabic alphabet, alif, by its verticality symbolizes a divine majesty.

This divinity is why all alphabet is believed to have originated from the alif, and it is also the first letter of word Allah.
The second letter of the alphabet is ba. Its very horizontality symbolizes the receptivity of the maternal and passive principles as well as the dimension of beauty which complements majesty.

The intersection of the two letters alif and ba constitutes the point which is visualized as the supreme, non dual center from which everything issues and to which everything returns.

The esoteric doctrines enveloping the nature of calligraphy, combined with the beauty of its immediate presence, provide the key for understanding its privileged position in the hierarchy of Islamic art as well as its important role in Islamic spirituality itself. For centuries Muslims have practiced calligraphy as a means of disciplining the soul. In contrast to the general pattern in various scripts of the world which move from left to the right, Arabic script (the language of the Quran) moves from right to left. Hereby a Muslim calligrapher believes that in drawing a line from right to the left, man is moving from the periphery to the heart which is also located in the left side of the body, and that by concentrating upon writing words in beautiful forms, man is bringing back the dispersed elements of his soul to their center.

The heart and soul of a Muslim is constantly made aware of the majesty, harmony, rhythm and flow of calligraphic forms, which surround all spheres of his existence, unveiling their beauty upon the pages of the Quran, on walls of mosques and other forms of architecture, on carpets and curtains, and even upon objects of daily use from dress to plates and bowls in which food is taken.

Aesthetic Principles and the Building of an Islamic Community

Islam is pre-eminently the religion of unity on all levels: ontological, social, and political. The term used to describe that unity is 'umma', which is not susceptible of translation by a single word. Socially it denotes the Muslim community, while politically the 'umma Muhammadiya' denotes 'Muhammad's nation', a revolutionary concept whereby, for the first time in history, the criterion of belief replaces the genetic accident of birth as the criterion of nationality.
Islamic art is more than just a spectacle of domes and minarets, dazzling illuminated manuscripts and exotic carpets; it is a true expression of a rich culture that has unified countries as far apart as Spain and Java, Central Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, over some thousand years and more. Islamic art expresses the religious beliefs, social and economic structure, political motivation and visual sensibility of a pervasive and unified tradition. Underlying the variations from century to century and from region to region, a cohesive unity of aesthetic conception testifies to the power and breadth of Islam.

Whether in the great courtyard of the Delhi mosque or the Qarawiyyin in Fez, one feels oneself within the same artistic and spiritual universe despite all the local variations in material, structural techniques, and the like. The creation of this artistic universe with its particular genius, distinct characteristics, and formal homogeneity underlying distinctions of a cultural, geographical or temporal nature requires a cause, for no effect of such immense dimensions can be considered as simply a result of chance or the agglomeration of accidental historical factors.

Community is a delicate but durable bond that grows among people who discover that their core identities intersect with those of others. People find community and support, for example, in groups of individuals who cope with similar problems, who send their children to the same school, or who teach in the same department at a university. Shared experience, ethnic background, social purpose, citizenship, religious faith, and various combinations of these are among the more obvious bases for human community. The formation thus of such a community, unified by an adherence to common spiritual percepts and ideals, is the higher aim of Islamic aesthetics. Islamic art was the means whereby the spirit of Islam penetrated into all types and modes of activity, into all the moments of man's life reminding him wherever he was of his Islamic identity. A whole civilization and culture deeply impregnated by the spiritual values of Islam surrounds the Muslim, and aids him in living Islamically.

Some principles of Islamic Aesthetics that strengthen the development of a communal unity are:

1. Islamic 'Hidden Architecture' and the Principle of Wholeness

One of the most striking features of all Islamic architectural monuments is their focus on the enclosed space, on the inside as opposed to the outside, the façade or exterior articulation of a building.

This disregard for the outside appearance of a structure is often developed to an extreme whereby even a monumental structure, such as congregational mosque, is completely hidden by being totally surrounded by secondary adjacent buildings (for instance a bazaar). This 'hiding' of major monuments goes hand in hand with a total lack of exterior indications of the shape, size, function or meaning of a building. Even if a structure has a visible façade or a portal, these features tell us little, if anything, about the building that lies behind it. In other words, rarely does a façade give any indication of the inner organization or purpose of the building in question, and it is rare that an Islamic building can be understood, or even its principal...
features identified, by its exterior.

To give but one example: a dome looms over the mass of a building, it is generally visible from afar but sinks into the maze of small cupolas and roofs of surrounding structures as we approach.

The dome may indicate a mosque, a palace, a school or a tomb. It may be the principal feature of a structure designed around it; alternatively, it may be only a minor element in a vast structure that surrounds the domed area; it may also be only one of several domes hidden, or half hidden, by other structures - parapets or inner portal frames. Instead of defining a specific kind of architecture, or a special building with a particular function, the dome appears to be a general symbol, signifying power, the royal city, the focal point of assembly; it can therefore serve both religious and secular purposes.

At all times and in all regions of the Muslim world we can find 'hidden architecture' - that is, architecture that truly exists, not when seen as monument or symbol visible to all and from all sides, but only when entered, penetrated and experienced from within.

This indistinguishibility between buildings serving different functions is an important effort in furthering the development of a community. By making the various architecture serving the cause of religion, domesticity, education, funerary etc., indistinguishable, or by making the religious and secular inseparable, the Muslim aesthete was but driving at the unity of these two principles. The final aim of all Islamic aesthetic is thus to create a unified wholeness. The mosque in a traditional Islamic city is not only the center of religious activity but of all community life, embracing the cultural, social and political as well as, to a certain extent, economic activities. It is therefore related organically to the bazaar or center of economic life, the palace or seat of political power, schools where intellectual activity takes place etc. Private homes are always nearby and in the same way that work, leisure, prayer and care of the family are integrated and not totally separate in the traditional Islamic pattern of life, the architectural spaces related to these activities are also intertwined. Even within the home, a single room is often used for several functions including eating, sleeping, socializing and praying, while prayers can take place in shops in the bazaar, transactions in the mosque, and teaching in both the mosque and home.

When one looks at the traditional Islamic city, one observes that this unity and inter-relatedness are reflected directly in the architecture. At the center there is always a mosque or tomb of a saint with the city growing in an organic manner around it. Moreover, the city seems to be covered by a single roof emanating from the sacred center. In a profound sense therefore, the sacred architecture of Islam casts its light and influences the formation of an Islamic city, bestowing upon it the character of reflecting sacred presence. In the same way that the floor of the mosque, sacralized by the Prophet himself, stretches into the floor of every home, every roof of the city emanates from and is an extension of the roof of the sacred structure at its heart. The space of the
whole city is enveloped by the periodic chanting from the minarets of the mosque, calling for a collective prayer, and the regular voicing of Quranic verses from the mosque itself; are all extremely effective and strategical towards building of a deep-rooted Islamic community bound fundamentally at the core.

2. Concept of Unity and Islamic Decorative Arts

The role of decoration is central to any analysis of Islamic art. It is one of the unifying factors that, for thirteen centuries, have linked together buildings and objects across the enormous geographic span that makes up the Islamic world.

There is never any one type of decoration for one type of building or object; on the contrary, there are decorative principles which are pan-Islamic and applicable to all types of buildings and objects at all times (whence comes the intimate relationship in Islam between all the applied arts and architecture). Islamic art must therefore be considered in its entirety because each building and each object embodies identical principles. Though objects and buildings differ in quality of execution and style, the same ideas, forms and designs constantly recur. These patterns clearly demonstrate the fascination of Islamic artists with the visual principles of repetition, symmetry, and continuous generation of pattern. Thus the objects and their decoration seem to reflect only a fleeting impression, being but a portion of a design which seems capable of extending itself beyond the form it decorates and by implication beyond the world of reality. And if a definite spatial limit is reached, such as a terminal wall in a piece of architecture, which stops the progress of anyone moving through the building, it will be decorated with patterns that repeat themselves, leading on visually beyond the given limit of the wall surface. This is symbolic of an endless, infinite extension beyond ordinary, mundane reality into a higher invisible realm.

It is also significant that these infinitely extensible designs are themselves made up of individual, self-replicating units. In the Islamic context these have been interpreted as visual demonstrations of the singleness of god and his presence everywhere. They represent 'unity in multiplicity' and 'multiplicity in unity'.

Tomb of Hafiz at Shiraz, Iran.
The elements of Islamic decoration are mostly limited to calligraphy, geometry and foliation, and their manipulation results in a rich and sumptuous effect. An interesting example is found at the base of Friday Mosque in Herat, Afghanistan. It is covered with areas of pattern, as a wall or floor would be covered with hangings or carpets. Each area has its own logic, and there is a larger logic that relates them all together.

The same logic, the same principles, apply to any medium - textiles, ceramics, woodwork, metalwork, books - and on any scale. In the image, without the figure of the man it would be hard to tell the whether the subject of the photograph was very large or very small. Flexibility of scale is matched by the interchangeability of the designs, which can contract or expand to fill different areas, indicating the all-pervasiveness of the one, unified divine principle.

Sometimes, in the case of floors, the decoration actually reproduce carpets. The tomb of I'timad ad Dawla in Agra, for example, has an inlaid marble floor that exactly reproduces the designs of Mughal carpets. In a similar manner, prayer carpets reproduce, in two dimensions and on a small scale, the sense of the sacred space of the mosque as well as its cosmic orientation towards Mecca. Carpets and mosques alike are places of prostration. This unifying decorative streak thus extends over the whole realm of Islamic art.

Interpreted at a practical level, by confronting the Muslim with similar, parallel, and identifiable images permeating every level of his existence, a definite cohesive feeling of community is slowly but convincingly and continuously imbibed into his heart, which goes a long way in serving the higher spiritual purpose. Also significant here is that Islamic decorative motifs are all characterized by a soothing and calming harmony. Constantly 'in touch' with these images, the 'comfort level' of a Muslim is greatly conditioned by them, nay even habituated to them.

Technically the term for this 'Oneness' is tawhid. Though opinions on how best to interpret the essential Islamic message of visual arts varies widely, from an almost denial of any symbolic content to a penchant for discerning symbols in the slightest curlicue and variation in color, theories at both ends of the spectrum purport to derive their theological aesthetic from this same principle, namely, tawhid - a belief in God's uncompromised unity and transcendence.

The best known expression of this Divine Unity is 'La-ilaha-ill-Allah', (Quran 112:1). It is made up of four words:

La = No
Ilaha = that which is worshipped
Ilha = except
Allah = God

Literally translated, it states 'There is no god but God'. By Oneness of Allah we understand that he is the only Eternal Being, Pure and Simple. The Quran also draws our attention to nature, its
laws and phenomena - the gathering of clouds, the fall of rain, the growth of plants, the existence of animal and human life, the movements of the stars, the rise and fall of nations, the change of seasons, life, death, historical events and mythical wonders. In all these, the same law is believed to prevail. In all apparent diversity there is a unity of purpose and therefore the unity of the originator. It thus expresses a concept which annihilates all multiplicity, all separate entities. It is to see, in a sense, the common denominator in all the multiplicities of forms, to see the 'unity in multiplicity' of flower, tree and bird; to see that all circles have a center, regardless of size. The realization of this concept annihilates multiplicity so that unity subsists.

The unity of Islamic art is related not only to the unity of the cosmos and beyond that to the unity of the Divine Principle itself, but also to the unity of the life of the individual and the community. By refusing to distinguish between the sacred and the profane, by integrating religion into all facets of life and life itself into the rhythms of rites and patterns determined by religion, Islam reflects a wholeness which is abundantly reflected in its aesthetic ideals.

**Conclusion**

Islamic art was the means whereby the spirit of Islam penetrated into all types and modes of activity, into all the moments of a man's life, reminding him wherever he was of the divine presence. Art was, and continues to be, a most precious support for the Islamic ideals of life and living.

Islam, throughout its history and within the depth and breadth of all its authentic manifestations, from architecture to the art of dress, has emphasized beauty and been inseparable from it.

Have those who claim to speak in the name of Islam today created any form of beauty? Can the qualities of serenity, peace, harmony and equilibrium which characterize both the Islamic religion and the artistic and cultural manifestations of Islam be seen in what these present day groups create and produce? The criterion of art remains a powerful one in deciding the real nature of the forces involved in these groups. Nothing authentically Islamic can be devoid of the inner qualities discussed earlier, qualities which have emerged from spirituality and have manifested themselves over the ages in many different climes in the various traditional arts of Islam from pottery to architecture to the fine art of writing.
References and Further Reading

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