



The Institute of Ismaili Studies

Beyond The Exotic: The Pleasures of ‘Islamic’ Art
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Abstract

What is it that makes ‘Islamic’ art ‘Islamic’? In this brief essay, the author explores what links art spanning 14 centuries, several continents, varying political regimes, internecine differences and cultural and ethnic boundaries.

Keywords

Islamic Art, Islam, Muslim, artists, phenomenology, experience, context, civilisation, culture, religious, secular, art, pluralism, artistic civil society.



10th century Fatimid Egyptian Bowl (Private Collection).

The Language of Art

A picture, it is often claimed, can speak a thousand words. By that logic, *objets d’art* should be very talkative indeed. Yet time after time we find ourselves amid paintings, crafts and sculpture that speak a language we don’t quite understand. Their beauty or ambience may delight the eye or spirit, but leave the mind or intellect unsatisfied. A common response is to insist that ‘art’ is all ‘heart’ — and leave it at that.

Yet ultimately, only the fullest engagement of the mind does justice to the wealth of cultural, social and even spiritual resources that are on offer. When it comes to the

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heritage of Islam, what is called for *par excellence* is a response that recognises the merging of secular and sacred. To visit London's Victoria & Albert Museum and see what is perhaps the most beautiful carpet in the world — the legendary Ardabil rug from Safavid Persia — should thrill mind and spirit. It is not enough to lose oneself only in its geometric patterns in silk and wool, or in the glorious verses from Hafiz inscribed on it. One needs it all, including the context in which Maqsur Kashani designed the carpet. for a shrine to honour the Shi'ism of 16th century Persia.

Context is what makes art 'Islamic' and what makes its appreciation exciting. Consider, for example, the celebration of script and geometry that runs through the architecture, ceramics and textiles of the great Muslim dynasties, from Umayyad, Ottoman and Fatimid to Timurid and Mughal. On the one hand, inscriptions from the Qur'an and various poetic sources mark the art as products of Islamic civilisations. Yet the idea of using calligraphy and geometric design is shared by other traditions, most notably Chinese and Japanese. Oriental art had a profound impact in the formative period of Islamic art — as witness the 'borrowings' of blue and white porcelain, dragon motifs and styles of depicting rivers and trees.

This eclectic spirit, of borrowing aesthetic ideas across traditions and adapting them, reflected a cultural pluralism that became a hallmark of Muslim civilisations at their best.

Muslim Cultural Milieus

At its peak in the 16th century, the Ottoman empire's workshops at the Topkapi Palace in Istanbul had nearly 900 artisans from across the Mediterranean world and beyond — from painters, engravers, weavers and tile makers, to bookbinders, goldsmiths, ivory craftsmen, manuscript illuminators and musical instrument makers. The cultural influences ranged from Byzantine (inherited when the Ottomans made Constantinople their capital in 1453), to Italian, French, Central Asian, Persian and Arab.

The resulting style could be described as 'new international', which then became a distinctive Ottoman idiom that in turn influenced Europe and the Middle East. This was evident in an acclaimed exhibition of the Topkapi's treasures — 'Palace of Gold and Light' — that travelled to the United States last year. Among the displays was the luminous silk and velvet bookbinding of a translation of Ibn Sina's 11th century *Qanun fi'l-tibb (Canon of Medicine)*. The binding style came from Renaissance Italy, whose rivalry with the Turks did not come in the way of pluralist art. Fittingly, the book belongs to Islam's finest intellectual age, and was used in Europe's medical schools until the 19th century.

Or consider the boldly assertive Ottoman *kaftans* worn by the sultans and members of his household, also on display at the Topkapi. One recognises the Central Asian aesthetic — such as from Tajik/Uzbek *ikat*, the colourfully woven textiles that have decorated walls and floors for centuries. This should come as no surprise: the Ottomans were of nomadic Central Asian ancestry, and never lost their nostalgia for the 'motherland'.



The same eclecticism was evident half a millennium earlier in North Africa under the Fatimid dynasty. From Roman architectural elements and Spanish mosaic decoration, to Chinese ceramics and Iraqi calligraphic styles, a freewheeling approach in the late 10th to 12th centuries produced in Egypt what experts today regard as among the most creatively brilliant epochs in Islamic cultural history.



18th century Ottoman clock (Hadiye Cangokce/Topkapi Palace Museum).

An especially interesting aspect of the Fatimid cultural milieu was that artisans frequently signed their work. This is a rarity in Muslim art at large, though signatures could occasionally be found on ‘Abbasid pottery or Persian rugs (like in a cartouche in the Ardabil at the Victoria & Albert Museum). We know today the names of some 21 individual potters from that era, which attests to the elevated social and professional status that artisans enjoyed in Fatimid Cairo. Moreover, the ceramics carried not just princely or high society motifs, as was common elsewhere, but also portrayed ordinary street life, often with an earthy, comic wit.

Just as uncommon was the exuberance with which artisans depicted natural forms — animal, human and vegetal — on a whole range of ceramics, rock crystal, glassware, ivories, metalwork, textiles and woodwork. Birds, griffins, horses and palmettos were popular adornments in public as well as private domains. When Fatimid rule in Egypt yielded to the Ayyubid dynasty, among the first acts of the latter was to paint over or destroy artwork with such natural depictions, on the grounds that they violated traditional strictures against figurative decoration. Yet the same passion for natural depiction is also manifest in Safavid (Shi‘i) and Mughal (Sunni) art, reinforcing the point that the ‘Islamic’ dimension is about an ethos rather than any normative form, style or content.

The Ethos of ‘Islamic’ Art

But if the ideas of using calligraphy and specific materials like textiles and porcelain as bearers of artistic expression are shared with other great civilisations, then what is it about ‘context’ that makes the art in question ‘Islamic’? The answer appears to rest — as it would in asking what makes art ‘modern’ — in its ethos. Behind the motifs and designs, mediums and forms, there is the distinctive outlook of Muslim civilisations, at various times in their history.

The art captures and reflects ways of looking at the world and the individual’s place in it, from the perspective not only of the artist but also of society at large. And this imparts to the viewer a picture that we have come to regard as ‘Islamic’. This may not always be self-evident in a specific work of art, especially of a secular nature; but it does eventually emerge in patterns of art, no matter how secular. Some might contend that what we really mean by ‘Islamic’ is merely the art of a particular civilisation that happens to be Muslim. But that begs a question: why can we so readily perceive an artistic continuity across vast expanses of time, space and culture — from, say, 11th century Marrakesh under the Almohads through Mamluk Cairo and Andalusia of the



13th century, to Timurid Bokhara of the 15th century, and down to Delhi under the Mughals at the dawn of modernity?

Clearly, the patterns that we identify in form and substance evoke an ethos that we recognise as Muslim, largely in terms of how faith and intellect intertwine in specific expressions of an artistic sensibility. An example from a particular art form — that of music — will perhaps illuminate the argument. Traditional singing in the millennium-old *qawwali* tradition of South and Central Asia draws on Indian, Persian and Turkic poetic and melodic influences, which are shaped into an esoteric, *sufi* mode of recital that is now seen as uniquely ‘Islamic’. What renders it so is not the poetic or melodic style (including the rhythmic handclap that one also witnesses in gypsy flamenco, for example), but rather its devotional ethos. Hence, *qawwali* becomes parallel to other Muslim musical art renditions, such as the solemn dervish *sama*‘ or devotional assembly.



17th century rock crystal flask
(Hadiye Cangokce/Topkapi
Palace Museum).

Tapping into the ethos is not simply about playing detective and deciphering what makes a given artwork Islamic. Rather, it is about enriching one’s experience and appreciation of that *objet d’art* by entering into its spirit as well as aesthetic content. Often, this requires a conscious effort to cast beyond the obvious and resist the facile appeal of forms — rather like searching beyond the *zahir* for the *batin*, the inner significance that lies beneath the surface.

‘To romanticise so-called “exotic” art,’ Prince Ayn Aga Khan noted in a 1989 speech at London’s Zamana Gallery, ‘is far easier than to present such art with the care and the reference to context that make it intelligible to the viewer and that allow him in time, to absorb it as almost part of his own cultural heritage.’

Knowing the creative context enriches our ‘reading’ of the codes and messages that the objects express. And resisting the ‘exotic temptation’ requires us to reach across time and space for the underlying social ethos.

The Message of ‘Islamic’ Art

In addition, this allows us to link the pluralism of culture with that of society and politics, to understand the civil society in which life was lived. The Fatimid Ismaili state in a Sunni Mediterranean milieu reached across religious and ethnic lines for administrators, senior advisors and military commanders. Just as the Ottomans’ most renowned grand *vizier* was the Bosnian Serb, Sokollu Pasha, who rose under Suleyman the Magnificent in the mid-16th century, so his counterpart under the Fatimids was the Jewish convert, Yaqub b. Killis, who rose under the Caliph-*Imams* al-Mu‘izz and al-Aziz.

Whether princely or plebeian, abstract or figurative, Muslim art is finally about core values and aspirations driven by the energies of creative synthesis and innovation. Its humanistic tenor is also a celebration of the graceful interplay of intellect and faith. And that tenor should be all the more welcome in our age of globalisation, with its mechanistic and homogenising impact on cultures and civilisations.



Which is not to say that globalisation is necessarily the enemy of authentic local traditions. On the contrary, great art is quintessentially about the reinvention of tradition, rather than its reduction to some imagined essentials that make it ‘authentic’. And globalisation can well be seen as a New Silk Road for the diffusion of the local. Indeed, what Robert Hillenbrand observes about Fatimid art — that ‘it was open to ideas and influences from all over the Mediterranean and beyond, and that one should not therefore expect an integrated style’ — could well become the leitmotif of Islamic art as a whole.

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