

ESSAY TITLE: “Islamic Art is characterised by variety”. Is this true?

“And of His Signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth and the diversity of your tongues and colours. In that, surely, are Signs for those who have knowledge.”
(Qur’an, al-Rum: 23)

Islam is an entire way of life, with Islamic Art playing an integral part in this. Extending from North Africa to Southeast Asia, it links together “disparate communities through a range of common cultural values.”¹ A range of styles are achieved, all contributing to the vast scope of Islamic Art.; thus, creating a richly diverse, yet unified concept.

This diversity, however, is contained within a somewhat, restricted framework of techniques. Here I use the term ‘restricted’ very loosely, as each individual technique can be applied in such a way as to achieve an almost infinite number of transformations, for any given art form. I will be discussing this in more detail during the course of this essay.

Before moving on to discuss the huge variety we find in Islamic Art and the factors which unite this huge concept, I think it is important to clarify what this concept of ‘Islamic Art’ is.

“The term *Islamic* generally refers to purely religious expressions, such as calligraphy.”²

Is it art created by Muslims? Or alternatively, is it art created by people residing in countries where the dominant religion is Islam? Or should it be confined to the literal meaning of the word ‘Islamic’? The word ‘Islamic’ means, ‘of Islam’. It is an expression used to describe the object in question, as being something which complies with the beliefs and values of the religion, Islam. I will be using the latter description, to describe the term ‘Islamic Art’. As a result, all figural works of art will not be included in this study. The reason for this being evident in the following saying of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) in which he “condemned artists who try to ‘ape’ the creation of God: in their afterlife they will be ordered to give life to their works and will suffer from their incapacity to do so.”³

“God likes that when you do anything, you do it excellently” (Hadith)

Such sayings have impassioned the artists and artisans of the Muslim world to transform everyday objects into things of real beauty. From the ordinary bowl (Monochrome lustre-painted, late 10th century Egyptian),⁴ to a beautiful prayer rug (‘Bellini-style’, early 16th century)⁵ to the striking architecture we see in the Great Mosque of Isfahan.

¹ Occidentalism, *Islamic Art in the 19th Century*, p10

² John Esposito, *The Oxford History of Islam*, p216

³ <http://www.salaam.co.uk.htm>

⁴ Richard Ettinghausen and Oleg Grabar, *The Art and Architecture of Islam 650 - 1250*, p190

⁵ Michael Levey, *The World of Ottoman Art*, p50

“Muslim artists transformed everyday objects into artistic masterpieces.”⁶

Islamic Art is therefore, inexhaustibly diverse, with an almost infinite number of art forms.

Variety is plentiful as it is, but if we break down each art form and analyze the multiplicity we find within the realms of that particular artistic expression, we find the world of Islamic Art expanding even further. As I mentioned earlier, certain restrictions are present, creating a framework within which Islamic Art is applied. The elements used to achieve this include, arabesque, calligraphy and geometry. This may seem like a limited number of styles to work with, reducing the diversity which can be achieved, however, “This restriction, far from impoverishing the expression of Islamic artists, resulted in the raising of abstract design into an art form, not only of enormous wealth...”⁷

Looking at the fascinating field of calligraphy, we find that many different scripts have evolved in various regions of the Muslim world, over a vast expanse of time. These scripts range from Kufic⁸, Naskhi⁹, Thuluth¹⁰ and Diwani.¹¹ It is clear from this that this particular element of Islamic Art is “almost inexhaustible, given the various types of Arabic script and the extension of the Islamic culture.”¹²

Geometrically, “each pattern being generated by a unique and complex system of numbers.”¹³ The unique nature of the patterns produced implies the plurality present. No two patterns are the same, therefore, gaining a diverse attribute. One can delve deeper into the spirituality connected with Islamic Art by allowing oneself to “contemplate a geometric pattern and allow the gaze to become soft and not attempt to fix it, the patterns endlessly mutate into different geometrical arrangements.”¹⁴

The vastness we begin to encounter within Islamic Art becomes quite unimaginable, extending as far as one allows it to extend. One geometric Expression, such as the ceiling of the Comates Hall in Alhambra¹⁵, is quite different to another, such as the detail found on the minbar in the Arslanbane Mosque in Ankara (1289 – 90)¹⁶.

Haven explored the extent to which this diversity reaches, it is important to try and understand the reasons behind this occurrence.

⁶ John Esposito, *The Oxford History of Islam*, p221

⁷ The Cambridge Library of Ornamental Art, *Arabian Ornament 12th – 18th Century*, p1

⁸ Mesopotamian script founded in 638 AD.

⁹ Turkish script refined into a fine art in the 16th century.

¹⁰ Formulated during the Umayyad caliphate between 7th and 9th century.

¹¹ Arabic script developed during the reign of the Ottoman Turks (16th – 17th century).

¹² Annemarie Schimmel, *Calligraphy and Islamic Culture*, pp 1-2.

¹³ Alice Westlake, *emel*, p59.

¹⁴ Ahmed Ainsworth, *emel*, p61.

¹⁵ Valérie Gonzalez, *Beauty and Islam*, VI.

¹⁶ Sheila S. Blair and Jonathan M. Bloom, *The Art and Architecture of Islam 1250 – 800*, p146.

“...extremely varied manifestations of Islamic Art, over vast expanses of space and time”¹⁷

Both contributing factors are mentioned here; *space* and *time*. The various styles evolved over long periods of time, with each generation adding to the diversity in the environment. With the Islamic civilisation gradually expanding to cover a large area of land, enveloping many cultures, a series of local styles were added to Islamic Art. Islamic Art stresses “the unity inherent in diversity, and the diversity that flows from unity.”¹⁸

¹⁷ Sayyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality*, p3.

¹⁸ New Statesman, Jan 29, 1999, by Ziauddin Sardar

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