



forms. The presence of this rule is due to a concern that people would go back to the worship of idols & figures, a practice that is strongly condemned by Islam. In the early days of Islam, sculpture & imagery were seen as reminders of the despised idolatrous past of the Muslims. Today, the majority of Muslims, still respect this rule & their attitude extends to dislike the excessive “body worship” practised in the West. The latter can be seen in the revival of the Islamic dress among educated Muslim women & in their avoiding of the excessive use of make-up.

### The Nature & Form of Muslim Art

Muslim art differs from that of other cultures in its form & the materials it uses as well as in its subject & meaning. Muslim art never lacked intellectualism even in its simplest forms. The invitation to observe & learn is found in both revealed & hidden messages in all its forms. Bourgoin (1879), on the other hand, compared between the art forms of the Greeks, the Japanese & the Muslims & classified them into three categories involving animal, vegetal & mineral respectively. In his view, Greek art emphasized proportion & plastic forms, and characteristics of human & animal bodies. Japanese art developed vegetal attributes relating to the principle of growth & the beauty of leaves & branches.

However, Muslim art is characterized by an analogy between geometrical design & crystal forms of certain minerals. The main difference between it & the art of other cultures is that it concentrates on pure abstract forms as opposed to the representation of natural objects. These forms take various shapes & patterns. Prisse (1878) classified them into three types, **floral, geometrical & calligraphic**

### Vegetal & Floral art

Although, Muslim art was not, of course, developed independently of influences from nature & the environment, their representation was abstract rather than realistic, as in Western art. This is seen clearly in vegetal forms where branches, leaves & flowers were woven & interlaced into & often not distinguished, from the geometrical lines around them as seen in the arabesque. The use of vegetal forms is also conditioned to some extent with the Islamic prohibition of the imitation of living creatures.

This interdiction naturally decreases with the descent from human to animal to vegetable forms. Art critics describe Muslim floral depictions and ornaments as conventional; lacking the effects of growth and the creation of life. In their opinion, the reason behind the absence of growth was due to natural environment of the Muslim countries, where the experience of Spring, the season of plant growth is very rare. However, the religious prohibition mentioned above was behind the absence of the life creation effect in much of Muslim floral art.

### Geometrical Art

The second element of Muslim art involves geometrical patterns. The Muslims developed geometrical art for two main reasons: The first reason is that it provided an alternative to prohibited depiction of live creatures. Abstract geometrical forms were particularly favoured in mosques because they encourage spiritual contemplation, in contrast to portrayals of living creatures, which divert attention to the desires of creatures rather than the will of God. Thus geometry became central to the art of the Muslim World, allowing artists to free their imagination & creativity. A new form of art, based wholly on mathematical shapes & forms, such as circles, squares & triangles, emerged.

The second reason for the evolution of geometrical art was the sophistication & popularity of the science of geometry in the Muslim world. The discovered Topkapi Scrolls illustrate the systematic use of geometry by Muslim artists & architects. They also show that early Muslim craftsmen developed theoretical rules for the use of aesthetic geometry. This Muslim geometrical art is very much connected to the famous concept of the arabesque, which is defined as “ornamental work used for flat surfaces

consisting of interlacing geometrical patterns of polygons, circles & interlocked lines & curves”.

The arabesque pattern is composed of many units joined & interlaced together, flowing from the other in all directions. Each unit, although it is independent & complete & can stand alone, forms part of the whole design; a note in the general rhythm of the pattern (Al-Faruqi, 1973). The most common use of arabesque is decorative, consisting mainly of a two dimensional pattern covering surfaces such as ceilings, walls, carpets, furniture & textiles. From his study of 200 examples, Bourgoin (1879) concluded that this style of art required a considerable knowledge of practical geometry, which its practitioners must have had. In his view, the arabesque design is built up on a system of articulation & orbiculation & is ultimately capable of being reduced to one of the nine simple polygonal elements. The pattern may be built up of rectilinear lines, curvilinear lines, or both combined together, producing a cusped or foliated effect. It is reported that Leonardo da Vinci found Arabesque fascinating & used to spend considerable time working out complicated patterns (Briggs, 1924).

### Calligraphy

The third decorative form of art developed by the Muslims was calligraphy, which consists of the use of Artistic lettering, sometimes combined with geometrical & natural forms. The development of calligraphy as a decorative art was due to a number of factors. The first of these is the importance which Muslims attach to the Quran, which promises divine blessings to those who read & write it down. The second factor behind the appearance of calligraphy is attached to the importance of the Arabic language in Islam. The use of Arabic is compulsory in prayers & it is the language of the Quran & of Paradise. The fourth Caliph, Ali said of calligraphy: “*The beautiful writing strengthens the clarity of righteousness.*”



*Beautiful writing strengthens the clarity of righteousness*



*Prophet (p)*

*“God is Beauty & loves that which is beautiful”*

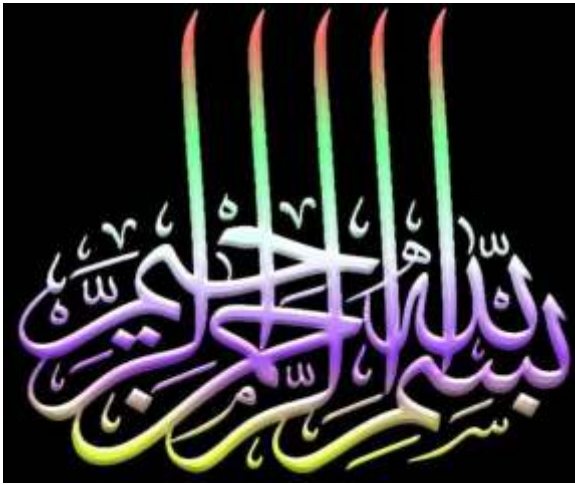
**Islamic art is radiant, it shines & dances with a divine splendour. To make a beautiful work is an act of devotion that sanctifies the maker; equally blessed is the person who gains enjoyment from the created object.**

Calligraphy remains unchallenged as the supreme Islamic art, thanks in large part to the special status of the Quran as the conveyor of God’s word. Muslim art differs from that of other cultures in its form & the materials it uses as well as in its subject & meaning. Muslim art never lacked intellectualism even in its simplest forms. The invitation to observe & learn is found in both revealed & hidden messages in all its forms.

*The Prophet (p) said:*

*“Seek nice writing for it is one of the keys of subsistence”*





One area where Muslim genius has been recognised worldwide is that of art. Muslim artists adapted their creativity to evoke their inner beliefs in a series of abstract forms, producing some amazing works of art. Rejecting the depiction of living forms, these artists progressively established a new style substantially deviating from the Roman & Byzantine art of their time. In the mind of the Muslim artist, art work is very much connected to ways of transmitting the message of Islam rather than the material form used in other cultures. Let's examine the meaning & character of Muslim art & explore its main decorative forms - floral, geometrical & calligraphic. And also the influence of Muslim art on the art of other cultures, particularly that of Europe.

Muslim art has attracted the attention of a number of Western scholars who gained good reputations because of their contributions to the study & publicizing of the field. Despite this positive aspect, their work contained an element of prejudice as they repeatedly applied their Western norms & criteria in their evaluation of Muslim art. In their views, far from contributing to the arts of its society, Islam has restricted, diminished & undervalued artistic creativity. Islam is seen as obstructive & limiting to artistic talent & its art is often judged by its incapacity to produce figures & natural & dramatic scenes. Such arguments illustrate a serious misperception of Islam & its attitude to art. The view that Islam promotes harsh & simple living & rejects sophistication & comfort is an accusation often made by orientalist academics. This false claim is rejected

by both the Quran & the example of Muhammad (p). The Quran (7:32) permits comfortable living if it does not lead the believer astray: "Say, who is there to forbid the beauty which God has brought forth for his servants, the good things from among the means of sustenance".

This message is emphasized again in another verse (5:87): "O you who believe! Do not deprive yourselves of the good things of life which God has permitted you, but do not transgress, for God does not love those who transgress". The authentic saying of the Prophet (p): "Allah is beautiful & loves beauty" is perhaps the clearest translation of the position of Islam towards art. Beauty, in Islam, is a quality of the divine. The scholar Al-Ghazali (1058-1128) considered it to be based on two main criteria involving the perfect proportion & the luminosity, encompassing both outer & inner parts of things, animals & humans.

The other determinant factor influencing the Western scholars' views on Muslim art is connected to the Greek-influenced approach which considers the image of man as the source of artistic creativity. Thus, portraits & sculptures of man were seen as the highest work of art. According to this view, man is nature's most magnificent & most beautiful creature & should be both the start & destination of human artistic endeavour. Successful works of art are those which explore the inner depth & external physical appearance of the human body. Perhaps the highest position given to man, in this art, is when divine beings are represented in his form, or when he is represented as being created in the image of the Deity. Muslim art, however, has a radically different outlook. Here, man is seen as an instrument of divinity created by a supremely powerful Being, Allah.

The fundamental principles of Muslim art are the declared truths that there is "no god but God" and "nothing is like unto Him." His realm is neither space nor time & He is known by ninety nine attributes, including the First & the Last, & the Seen & the Unseen, & the All-Knowing.

*Allah! There is no god but He, the Living, the Self-subsisting, Eternal. No slumber can seize Him nor sleep. His are all things in the heavens & on earth. Who is there that can intercede in His presence except as He permits? He knows what appears to His creatures before or after or behind them. Nor shall they compass*



*ought of His knowledge except as He will. His Throne does extend over the heavens & the earth, and He feels no fatigue in guarding & preserving them for He is the Most High, the Supreme. (Quran 2:255)*

This is perhaps the main division in the philosophy & approach towards art between the Muslims & non-Muslims. With this approach, Muslim art did not need any figurative representation of these concepts. How can he depict God if he believes that He is the Unseen & nothing is like unto Him? Any artistic expression of these, either in natural or human forms, would undermine the meanings and the essence of the Muslim faith. Consequently, Muslim artists engaged in expressing this truth in a sophisticated system of geometric, vegetal & calligraphic patterns. **Islam was the only religion that did not need figurative art & imagery to establish its concepts.**

Like other aspects of Muslim culture, Muslim art was a result of the accumulated knowledge of local environments & societies, incorporating Arabic, Persian, Mesopotamian & African traditions, in addition to Byzantine inspirations. Islam built on this knowledge & developed its own unique style, inspired by three main elements.

The Quran is seen as the first work of art in Islam & its *chef-d'oeuvre* (Al-Faruqi, 1973). The independence of some verses & the interrelation of others form extraordinary meanings as each verse takes the reader into a unique divine experience feeling its joy & happiness, terror & fearfulness, bliss & anger,

and so on. The constant repetition of these experiences in the verses of the Quran "winds up consciousness & generates in it a momentum which launches it on a continuation or repetition ad infinitum" (Al-Faruqi, 1973, p.95). The final outcome of this experience makes the reader feels the presence of God as described in the verse: "When the verses of the Beneficent are recited unto them, they fall down prostrate in adoration & tears" (Quran 19:58).

Muslim artists drew lessons & methods from their experience of the Quran, developing a new approach to art characterised by the independence & interdependence of its formative elements. The emphasis was on the presence & attributes of the divine Creator rather than on His creatures, including man. Islam sees all men equally regardless of colour or form (perfect or imperfect). The only distinction between them is made on the basis of their piety. Consequently, **Islam sees the white-skinned & fair-haired ideal of man promoted by Western art as racial & misleading.**

The second element comes from the Quranic verses which criticizes poets as "As for the poets, the erring follow them. Have you not seen how they wander distracted in every valley? They say what they practice not?" (Quran 26:224-26)

This formula regulates the approach of Muslim artists, writers & professionals. Islam only approves work from "those who believe, do good work & engage much in the remembrance of Allah". (Quran 26:227)

The Muslim artist's work was guided by this criterion & was always connected to the remembrance of God whether it was in ceramics, textile, leather or iron work or wall decoration. The ways this remembrance was expressed was, of course, many. Muslim artists worked with many different materials, from ceramic to iron, and their artistic style took many forms, such as Arabesque designs, geometrical patterns & calligraphy.

The third decisive factor dictating the nature of Muslim art is the religious rule that discourages the depiction of human or animal

**Zamals Software Co.; 6 Dowding St. Kitty**  
 shamalz2007@yahoo.com; Brochures on [zamalsgy.com](http://zamalsgy.com)  
**Please Donate: Call Shamal 225-9031**