

# Islamic art and architecture

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Islamic art and architecture, truly the Mirror of the Invisible world, is a label designated to the creative productions-both religious and secular-born in lands inhabited and ruled by Islamic populations. Spanning over 1400 years and diverse lands, the creators and patrons were both Muslim and otherwise. Unlike Christian, Jewish or Buddhist art, which indelibly refers to the religious arts of these faiths, Islamic art is all encompassing-not just art and architecture meant to inspire faith in the divine, but also secular productions for utilitarian and ornamental purposes. Islamic art is essentially the fusion of creative energy from an array of vents-Roman, Byzantine, Sassanian, Persian, Iranian, Central Asian and Chinese, with the success of artists, craftsmen, and artisans coming from embracing pre-existing artistic styles and adapting them in their own personal settings. Despite such immense diversity, certain elements remain central to Islamic art, and these being calligraphy, arabesques, and geometry, omnipresent in nearly all productions-architecture, arts of the book (bookbinding, manuscript illumination) and arts of the object (metalwork, ceramics, glass, textiles).

The Qur'an is the centre of piety, worship, and devotion in Islam. It is the divine word, the revelation received by the Prophet from Allah during his visions. However, unlike as in Christianity where Christ is considered the incarnation of the divine, in Islam, the Prophet does not share the transcendent's divinity. Instead, the emphasis heavily rests on the words and the language of the revelation, and hence was born, one of the most revered forms of art-calligraphy, to ornament the divine word. From coins to textiles, metalwork, painted miniatures, ceramics, official buildings, palaces and tombs, calligraphic inscriptions of the Quranic verses are ubiquitous. This

omnipresence accentuates the significance of the Arabic language and seems to be the very reason for the higher status of calligraphers over other artists.

Inherited from Byzantine and Sassanian predecessors, repetitive scrolling floral motifs came to be so lavishly used in Islamic art, that in the West they came to be known as “ arabesques”. In the predominantly tropic and arid Islamic world, arabesques depicting enticing, exuberant scenery, prolific with flowers, fruits, and cool streams, were highly valued as being ornamental and seen as symbolic of the Paradise.

Repetitive geometric patterns reveal and epitomize unity in diversity and the harmony that governs the universe. These are meant to symbolize the indivisible, infinite and transcendent nature of the divine. As mentioned in the Qur’an, Allah “ ordered all things...”, and so these geometric patterns align themselves with the Islamic precepts of tawhid (unity) and mizan (balance and order).

It has often been believed, rather inaccurately, that the Qur’an forbids the depiction of human and animal form. The Qur’an suggests musawwir as one of the names of the divine. Translated as the artist, musawwir suggests the creative power of God, and thereby it is strongly believed that no living artist could share this power-God is one and he has no partners. Creation of living beings is understood as being unique to God, and so the figural depiction of life forms by artists was seen as a crime against him and assigning to him creative partners. While a Prophetic hadith suggests distrust of representation, Islamic Sharia unrefutably prohibits idolatry, thus explaining

the absence of figural representation for religious purposes. Nevertheless, Islamic art is opulent in figural decorations for non-religious purposes- metalwork, ceramics, tiling, textiles, manuscript illumination, paintings, inter alia as is evident in the palaces of Qasr Amra and Khirbat Al-Mafjar, profusely rich in mosaics, figurative paintings and sculpture.

Amongst the arts of the object, one of the most admired is that of the textiles. Textile making involved not only the procurement of fibres as wool, cotton, silk and linen but also attainment of dyes, mordants to fix colours and designing. From carpets to rugs, curtains and headdresses, textiles everywhere were adorned with anything from complex patterns of symbolic colours and shapes to floral designs or depictions of scenic landscapes.

Yet another treasured art form pre-dominant in the Islamic world was that of metalwork, tiling, ceramics and glassware. Christened “ arts of the fire”, these techniques magically transformed minerals from the Earth into pieces of exemplary charm. Islamic metalwork comprised essentially of armour, arms, utensils, ewers, caskets, pen-cases, plaques, coins, jewellery and astrolabes crafted of many a metal as iron, copper, gold, silver, brass, bronze and steel. Ceramics utilized for cooking, storing and serving food could range from plain earthenware to glazed lusterware wrapped in iridescent colours to ceramics immersed in opaque metallic lustres. Establishment of grand Islamic buildings undoubtedly led to the development of exquisite tiling techniques for the adornment of the walls, domes and minarets of these buildings of profuse importance. Mosaics in the Dome of the Rock, the Umayyad mosque and the Great Mosque of Cordoba, like a multitude of

others were fabricated by laying down small coloured tiles to create abstract geometric patterns. The Mughals, nonetheless depended less on tiling, preferring a pietra dura decoration created from panels of semi-precious stones and jewels, conspicuous in the well-famed Taj Mahal. Painted, gilded and enamelled glassware was an indispensable constituent of everyday living as they occurred everywhere-from food containers to medicine vials to perfume bottles and mosque lamps, transforming glass casting into an invaluable art. Glass, ceramic and metalwork were embodied in rare and exorbitant substance as gold, ivory, jade, silver and rock-crystal, meant to serve utilitarian and decorative purposes for the royals and the rich, cheaper versions of which were made accessible to the common populace.

Known for its dazzling colours, exuberant patterns and symmetrical silhouettes, Islamic architecture stands as one of the world's most celebrated building traditions. While encompassing a rich array of styles across space and dimension, certain characteristics remain inherent to the mosques, palaces, tombs and madrasahs, making them distinctly Islamic.

From Istanbul to the United Kingdom, the mosque in its every format is the quintessential Muslim building. Deriving from the Arabic word masjid, translated as a place of prostration, mosques are not only a place of worship but also of study, rest and reflection. Undeniably, the style, layout and decoration of mosques are heavily dyed by the regional traditions of the time and place they were constructed in, the specific architectural characteristics appear in almost all mosques across the globe. Prime among these being-the

sahn (courtyard), the mihrab (niche), minbar (elevated platform), minaret (tower), qubba (dome) and furnishings.

An open courtyard, the sahn is not only meant to hold the entire Muslim populace of the town but also provides sites for ablution. A niche in the qibla wall, the mihrab indicates the direction towards the Mecca-the holy site for the Muslims. Minarets-towers adjacent to the mosque-are architectural structures from which prayer is announced. Minarets range from anything as the spiral minarets at Samarra to the pencil minarets of Ottoman Turkey. Symbolic representation of the vault of heaven, the qubba is usually heavily decorated with geometric, stellate and floral motifs. Furnishings as calligraphic friezes, cartouches, lamps, carpets, rugs and curtains, although transient, form a notable aspect of mosque architecture. The minbar, yet another integral component of mosques, is a short series of steps used as an elevated platform by the imam while delivering the khutbah (sermon).

From the blue, green and gold mosaics of the Dome of the Rock, Jerusalem to the stunning blue tiles of the Sultan Ahmed Mosque, Istanbul to the Bedouin-tent inspired layout of the Shah Faisal Mosque, Islamabad to the captivating décor of the Sheikh Zayed Mosque, Abu Dhabi to the pagoda architecture of the Great Mosque of Xian, China to the hypostyle halls of the Great Mosque at Cordoba, there is only echo that resonates-exist to inspire. Inspire belief, beauty and benediction.

Madrasahs-places of the study meant to provide religious training beyond the Qur'an and the Hadith-were established close to mosques. Characterised by colossal halls and open spaces, these could accommodate a large body of

learners with ease. Many a time, tombs of warriors, patrons or rulers were part of a complex of buildings including a mosque and a madrasah. The tomb mosque of Sultan Hassan in Cairo, Gur-e-Amir complex in Samarkand and the Taj Mahal in Agra are spectacular paradigms of which.

Inexpressibly pleasing getaways in the desert, palaces of the rich and the rulers incorporated a multitude of amenities-baths, apartments, mosques, audience halls, courtyards, stables and garden enclosures. True indeed, palaces as the Qasr Amra, Khirbat Al-Mafjar, the Alhambra, Qasr Al-Kharanah, Meshatta and the like are breath-taking archetypes of stunning architectural décor. From the stucco ornament at Jawsaq palace, Samarra to the splendid fountains at the Alhambra, Granada to the mosaic flooring at Al-Mafjar to the rosettes at Meshatta, nothing stops to enchant the beholder.

This infinite continuum of tantalizing creations, spanning a colossal geographic and chronological period, has absorbed spectacular contributions of the many caliphates. For the ease of study of Islamic art and architecture, the time stretch has been divided into three chronological divisions-Early, Medieval and Late. Empires and dynasties controlling diverse lands, had their periods of rule stretching across different chronological divisions.

Following the death of the Prophet in 632, the Rashidun caliphate emerged. The four men, who were early converts, however, could not sustain the caliphate, which crumbled by 661 owing to internal conflicts and civil wars. Soon after, appeared the first Islamic dynasty-the Umayyads. It was under the Umayyads, that the earliest art that may be termed Islamic, was born. Artistic traditions of the two great empires, eventually falling to Islamic

conquests, were embraced. While, stylized vines, floral motifs and scrolls were inherited from the Byzantine West, hunting scenes and repertory of court were gifts of Sassanian Persia. Influence of Byzantine styled domes and Sassanian open-arched entryways are discernible in Umayyad architecture. Architects of the first great monuments in the Islamic world, the Umayyads built the Great Umayyad Mosque, the Dome of the Rock and the desert palaces in Syro-Palestine.

With the decline of the Umayyads in 750, was born another phase in Islamic history-the Abbasids (750-1258). Baghdad, a magnificent round city founded by al-Mansur in 762, became the capital of the Islamic empire under the Abbasid caliphate. The Abbasid period is not arbitrarily termed the “ golden age”. Captured in the fascinating tales of the Arabian Nights, their palace-cities and courts were truly dazzling, unparalleled in extravagance, superiority and culture. The Abbasids redefined surface decoration, with unsurpassed contributions concerning calligraphy, carvings, and arabesques. The fact that ceramics came to be recognized as an art form, undoubtedly owes credit to the Abbasids.

The medieval period was marked by the emergence of rivals to the Abbasids. One of the most powerful of which were the Shi'i' Ismaili Fatimids (909-1171) of Egypt. The Fatimids had a taste for extravagance and this fuelled an efflorescence of art. From ceramics, to glass, metalwork, rock-crystal, ivory, wood-carving and tiraz, there was nothing that the Fatimids did not contribute to. Pioneers of awe-inspiring architecture, the Fatimids were



founders of the Al-Azhar Mosque/madrasah complex, the Dar Al-Hikmah, Mosque of Al-Hakim and Cairo's city walls.

From 900 onward, were born a series of Turkish slave dynasties, founded by migrant Turkic soldiers. Prominent among these were the Seljuks, Mamluks, Mongols, Ottomans, Safavids and Mughals. Seljuk contributions to art were essentially a refinement of existent forms. They introduced four-iwan mosques, borrowing inspiration from open arches of Sassanian palaces. Metalwork, ceramics, textiles-all experienced an explosion in creative production. Mamluk sultans, on the other hand, went on a massive architectural expedition, constructing mosques, mausoleums and schools that featured inscriptions, naming the patron. Glass and metalwork were among other brilliant displays of artistic skills. Mongolian artisans imitated blue-and-white Chinese porcelain and covered buildings with splendidly glazed and colourful tilework. Paintings and textiles also reflected Chinese influence on Mongolian art.

Reigning Europe and central Islamic lands, the Ottomans gave and imparted artistic influences. Ottoman architecture-the Blue Mosque of Istanbul, the Aya Sophia and the Sulemaniye Mosque-faithfully retain Byzantine flavour. Iznik pottery, manuscript illumination, painted miniatures, and calligraphic tughra inscriptions were notable Ottoman artistic productions. The majesty of Safavid art lies in the stunning curves of arched doorways, elegance of pointed domes and sparkle of tiled surfaces. Excelling in arts of the book and arts of the object, the Safavids produced magnificent manuscripts, luxury textiles and enchanting blue-and-white wares. A remarkably ornamental

amalgam of Indian, Persian and Turkish hues, Mughal architecture developed under the patronage of the Mughal rulers in the Indian subcontinent. The art of jewellery, hardstone carving and painted miniatures were the opulence of Mughal creations. Beholding the Taj Mahal, Shalimar Gardens, Jama Masjid, Red Fort, Badshahi Mosque, the only word that springs to the spectator's mind is mesmerizing.

Art and Architecture. It is through these media that humanity leaves behind an immortal legacy. A legacy not viewed purely in retrospect. But a legacy that defines the civilisation. A legacy that justifies our sense of being human. A legacy that transcends eternity.