Rendering a New Aesthetic: The Development of Islamic Art and Architecture

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This article traces the development of Islamic art and architecture as seen in the early mosques of the seventh and eighth centuries. It concludes with a discussion on the relation between Islam and Europe, and the role of art in this relationship.

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Rendering a New Aesthetic: The Development of Islamic Art and Architecture

Adapted and edited by Al Sabz'ali'an from: Al Wijd'an, "The Role of Islamic Art in the Inter-Cultural Dialogue".

Abstract

Islamic art and architecture developed soon after the advent of Islam and its primary expression was in the sacred design and structure of the mosque. While pre-Islamic art forms influenced the construction of initial mosques, it was not long before Islamic architecture developed a unique aesthetic inspired by its own principles. This article traces the development of Islamic art and architecture as seen in the early mosques of the seventh and eighth centuries. It concludes with a discussion on the relation between Islam and Europe, and the role of art in this relationship.

Keywords: Islamic art and architecture, masjid, Dome of the Rock, Great Mosque of Damascus, Great Mosque of Samarra, Great Mosque of Cordoba, Relations - Islam and Europe.

Introduction

The incredible pace with which Islam spread throughout the Near East and North Africa remains one of the most astonishing phenomena in world history. In two generations, the new faith conquered a larger territory and a greater number of believers than Christianity had in many centuries. How was it possible for a group of "semi-¬civilized" desert tribes to suddenly burst forth from the Arabian Peninsula and to exert their political and religious dominance on populations far superior to them both in numbers and wealth? And how did Islamic art, which had no explicit scriptural foundations, come to possess its own distinctive character in a short span of time?

What began as a “triumph of force” soon turned into a spiritual victory as Islam gained the allegiance of millions of converts. The early Muslims, though few in numbers, were never in danger of being absorbed by the dominant religion or culture of the areas they ruled. Instead, through Divine grace, and the goodwill and benevolence of the Muslims, many of the conquered subjects became the most prominent architects through which the character of the new religion would be sculptured.

Islamic art was born soon after the advent of Islam and concurred with the rapid expansion of Islam into Asia and Africa, which took place within the first 150 years after the death of the Prophet (S). Although pre-Islamic Arabia was exposed to Hellenistic, Byzantine, Sassanid, Mesopotamian, Coptic and even Indian and Chinese forms of art – largely through trade – it was only after the early conquests that Muslims found themselves face to face with the artistic legacies of these civilizations. Moreover, as Islam spread into neighboring territories, Muslims came into contact with other artistic traditions such as those of the Berbers, Africans, Slavs, Turks and Goths.

Pre-Islamic Arabia had no monumental architecture itself, and its sculptured icons of local deities fell under Islam’s ban against idolatry. Since its outset, Islamic art followed a selective process that favored certain motifs and styles over others. The artists undertook this process themselves, many of whom were converts to the new religion. They drew their inspirations from the spiritual and ethical principles of Islam, thus establishing the aesthetic criteria of this new form of art in a practical manner.

From the outset, Islam laid special emphasis on the worship of God, and hence it is not surprising that the mosque or masjid (lit. “place of prostration”) became the focus of Islamic art and architecture. During the first fifty years after the death of the Prophet (S), the Muslim place of prayer could be an abandoned church, a Persian columned hall, or even a rectangular field surrounded by a fence or a ditch. The one element that these improvised “mosques” had in common was the marking of the qibla, the side facing toward Mecca, which had to be emphasized either by a colonnade or by placing the entrance on the opposite side.

At the end of seventh century, however, the Muslim rulers, who were now firmly established in the conquered regions, began to erect mosques on a large scale as visible symbols of their power intending to outdo all pre-Islamic structures both in size and splendor. Therefore, it was within the domain of the sacred that Islamic art first expressed its genius for its ability to take pre-existing artistic traditions and adapt them based on its own criteria. For the most part, these early monuments of Muslim architecture have not survived in their original form.

What we know of their design and decoration shows that they were produced by craftsmen gathered from Egypt, Syria, Persia, and even Byzantium, who continued to practice the styles in which they had been trained. It was only in the course of the eighth century that a distinctive Islamic artistic and architectural tradition crystallized. The best examples of the early type of integration are the Dome of the Rock (688-692) in Jerusalem and the Umayyad Great Mosque in Damascus (706-716).

The Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem

Since the rise of the monotheistic Abrahamic religions, Jerusalem has always been an important religious center for both Jews and Christians, housing monuments such as the venerated Church of the Holy Sepulcher as well as other churches and temples. When the Muslims came to Jerusalem, one of their first tasks was to determine the site for their congregational prayers. More specifically, they wanted a mosque that would display the magnificence of Islam – a monument that would testify to the glory of the new faith and witness the start of a new age. Caliph Abd al-Malik ibn Marwan (685-705) selected a site that had a religious significance for the faithful. A vast congregational mosque, accommodating more than five thousand worshippers, was erected on the noble sanctuary of the Masjid al-Aqsa where the beloved Prophet (S) is believed to have ascended to Heaven as the following verse attests to:

سُبْحَانَ الَّذِي أَسْرَىٰ بِعَبْدِهِ لَيْلًا مِّنَ الْمَسْجِدِ الْحَرَامِ إِلَى الْمَسْجِدِ الْأَقْصَى الَّذِي بَارَكْنَا حَوْلَهُ لِنُرِيَهُ مِنْ آيَاتِنَا ۚ إِنَّهُ هُوَ السَّمِيعُ الْبَصِيرُ

Glory to (Allah) Who did take His servant for a journey by night from the Sacred Mosque to the Farthest Mosque (Masjid al-Aqsa), whose precincts We did bless, in order that We might show him some of Our signs; for He is the One Who heareth and seeth (all things). 17:1

It is upon this historical sight in Jerusalem (al-Quds) that the first monument in Islam, the Dome of the Rock Mosque, was constructed. It was located on the same precincts as Masjid al-Aqsa, which was the first *qiblah* and the third holiest shrine after the ones in Mecca and Medina.

The Dome of the Rock brought together elements of Islam's past and charted a course for its future. The mosque, which was built by a diverse group of Byzantine and Muslim architects, was the amalgamation of the region's classical Greek influence and the rising ingenuity and fervor of Islamic art. The Byzantine style – favored in Palestine, Jordan, and Syria – also drew inspiration from the Persian Sassanid and the Egyptian Coptic styles. The usage of the various artistic traditions in a religious building attests to the tolerance of Islam not only in embracing peoples of diverse cultures within one civilization, but more importantly, in accepting the good within their traditions – whether artistic or otherwise – without diminishing these elements in any way.

The very structure of the Dome of the Rock is a physical manifestation of these noble attributes found within Islam. Moreover, in addition to being a symbol of the forbearance of Islam, the Dome of the Rock indicates the beginning of a new cultural age, representing in a most impressive and grand manner, the dawn of an all-encompassing new civilization.

The Great Mosque of Damascus

In the aftermath of Alexander the Great's conquests, Damascus, which had been a geographically strategic location for the Greeks, soon became an important hub that bridged Europe with Asia. After the spread of Islam, the Umayyad Caliph Mu'awiya ibn Abu Sufyan (661–680) decided to make Damascus the center of his political power, thereby replacing Kufa in Iraq as the political capital of the Islamic world. To demonstrate the power and superiority of Islam, Caliph Waleed ibn 'Abd al–Malik (705–715) built the Great Mosque of Damascus (706–716) on the site of a church that was dedicated to Saint John the Baptist, and whose location was previously a place of worship for Roman and Byzantine pagan gods. To further emphasize the Islamic ingenuity, the Umayyads introduced four new additions to the structure of mosque architecture: the *mihraab* (niche in the wall indicating the direction of Qibla), the *minbar* (pulpit), the *minaara* (minaret) and the *maqsura* (enclosure near the *mihraab*).

Influenced by its predecessors, the Umayyads installed Byzantine styled glass mosaics within the Great Mosque of Damascus. When the Byzantium artists, along with Muslim craftsmen, were hired to execute intricate and beautiful mosaic patterns for the Great Umayyad Mosque, a new concept developed in the decorations of the Mosque, whereby architectural forms and the world of plants became the main subject of the composition. The excellent workmanship quality of these early Islamic glass mosaics surpassed any similar Roman, Hellenistic or Byzantine works and is consider among the greatest mosaics to survive. The appearance of calligraphic inscription in the Great Umayyad Mosque for decorative purposes represented continuity from the Dome of the Rock that was later passed on to all Muslim monuments.

The first two religious monuments – in Jerusalem and Damascus – served as a means of communication intended to propagate the new faith. They were symbols, not only of a willingness to embrace other customs and traditions within the Islamic paradigm, but also of the supremacy of the new faith of Islam. The latter, of course, was also utilized by the ruling elite to exert their authority in their newly acquired territories.

The Great Mosque of Samarra

A striking example of the architectural enterprises of the early caliphs, which were built on an immense scale at incredible speed, is the Great Mosque at Samarra located in Iraq. The mosque was commissioned in 848 and completed within four years by the Abbasid caliph Al–Mutawakkil (847–861), who reigned from the city of Samarra itself. The Great Mosque of Samarra was at its time the largest mosque in the world – its minaret, the Malwiya Tower, was a vast snail–shaped cone, 52 meters high and 33 meters wide, with a spiral ramp to the top.

The basic features of the plan were typical of the mosques of this period: a rectangular courtyard with its main axis pointing south to Mecca; surrounding it were aisles that extended toward the qibla, the center

of which was marked by a small niche, the mihrab; across it lay the minaret, a tower from which the faithful were summoned to prayer. The floor area of the Great Mosque at Samarra was measured to be almost ten acres, of which five and a half were covered by a wooden roof resting on 464 supports. The mosque had 17 aisles and its walls were paneled with mosaics of dark blue glass (which have disappeared now, along with the mosaics that once covered the walls).

The most spectacular aspect of the building was the minaret, linked with the mosque by a ramp. Its bold and unusual design, with a spiral staircase leading to the platform at the top, reflected the ziggurats of ancient Mesopotamia, such as the famed Tower of Babel.

As the influence of Islam spread from Spain to the Philippines, the newly developed modes of artistic expression were adopted in various parts of the world. The new styles provided a basic aesthetic unity within the Muslim world, without suppressing, prohibiting, or undermining regional variations.

The meeting of the Muslim–Islamic mind with classical and local traditions spawned new artistic modes and styles in Islamic art. However, this type of kinship did not last long, and soon Islamic art shed its borrowed norms to create its own – ones based on its inner paradigms and principles. With the passage of time, definite patterns and styles developed and distinctive art forms were created. Eventually, all foreign influences were discarded, and Islamic art emerged with its own individual characteristics.

The Great Mosque of Cordoba

A hundred and fifty years after the coming of Islam, Islamic art operated under its own aesthetics. For example, the Great Mosque of Cordoba (785) in al–Andalus and the Ibn Tulun Mosque (879) in Egypt no longer represented phases in a tentative evolution, but were unsurpassable masterpieces, brandishing their very own rules and aesthetics. The Great Mosque of Cordoba was considered a wonder of the medieval world both by Muslims and Christians. Built on a Visigothic site, which was probably the site of an earlier Roman temple, the Great Mosque of Cordoba was begun around 785 during the reign of ‘Abd al–Rahmaan I.

The mosque’s hypostyle plan (a classical building with a roof resting on a series of columns), which consisted of a rectangular prayer hall and an enclosed courtyard, followed a tradition established in the Umayyad and Abbasid mosques of Syria and Iraq. However, the dramatic articulation of the interior of the prayer hall was unprecedented. The system of columns, used to support the double arcades of piers and arches, was a unique technique to create a striking visual effect, while at the same time, structurally allowing for greater height within the hall. The use of alternating red and white beveled stone arches, which are usually associated with Umayyad monuments such as the Great Mosque of Damascus and the Dome of the Rock, managed to create a stunningly original visual composition.

Despite its diverse cultural expressions, Islam was accepted as a unified religion in Syria, Egypt, Persia and North Africa only within 150 years after its inception. In fact, any nation the Muslims came in contact

with, even briefly such as China and India, recognized the superiority of this civilization. The different cultural encounters that were synthesized within the Muslim consciousness left their mark on Islamic art and created its most distinctive trait. The ease of mobility between most Muslim regions was instrumental in the spread of early artistic modes. Architectural techniques such as the Iranian Ewan (a vaulted hall walled on three sides with one end entirely open) were transported to Syria, Sassanid decorative designs such as the muqarnas (three-dimensional architectural designs composed of niche-like elements arranged in tiers) surfaced in North Africa, while the use of stucco became a universal decorative technique. This mobility was sustained in later periods and can be regarded as a first and lasting step towards the universality of Islamic art.

The mobility of people within and outside of the Islamic Empire made the middle classes often geographically transitory, so that the migration of artists and artisans helped in spreading and circulating artistic ideas and styles. Besides the voluntary movement of people, there was also the involuntary migration of refugees, conscripts, craftsmen and artists, who were taken to foreign capitals by coercion. An example was the Mongol Timur (1370-1405) who, during his invasions, took back to his capital in Samarkand the best artists from Iran and elsewhere in the region. Rulers who went into exile also helped in dispersing artistic propensities and norms through their interest in and patronage of the arts. Among such examples were the Umayyad ʻAbd al-Rahman I (756-788), who took flight from Syria to establish a dynasty in al-Andalus, and the Mughal Emperor Humayun (1530-1556), who was exiled from India to Persia.

Widespread commercial activities within the Islamic Empire and travel to Mecca for the Îajj from all over the Muslim world facilitated the widest artistic interaction. It made possible the exchange and introduction of goods, as well as the spread of ideas, styles and techniques belonging to diverse crafts. The Muslim world, over the ensuing centuries, maintained this symbiotic relationship with the cultures preceding or surrounding it. Until the 18th century, the Islam world remained the only major civilization that was in physical contact with nearly every other center of civilization and life in Asia, Africa and Europe, with the intensity of the contacts varying from place to place and century to century. Islamic civilization in general and Islamic art in particular played an important role in advocating Islam and Muslim rulers.

Islam and Europe

If Islamic art was able to act as a means of communication for the Muslims throughout history, why has it not been able to continue this task with the West? To answer such a polemic, one has to go back into history.

In the 9th and 10th centuries, when the Muslim centers of Baghdad, Cairo and Cordoba were at their apogee, the only intellectual centers in the West were massive bastions, inhabited by semi-barbaric lords who prided themselves on their inability to read. When a few enlightened minds in Europe felt the need to shake off the oppressive mantle of ignorance that weighed down upon them, they referred to the

Muslims who were the only erudite masters of their day.

Knowledge in all its branches penetrated into Europe through al-Andalus and Sicily in southern Italy which were all under Muslim jurisdiction. Outside of the Eastern Islamic world and North Africa, the part of Spain occupied by the Muslims was the only place where study was then possible at all. Until the 15th century, it is hard to quote the name of an author whose work consisted of anything but a reformulation of Islamic thought. Roger Bacon, Leonard of Pisa, Arnaud de Villeneuve, Saint Thomas, Albert the Great, Alfonso of Castile and many others were either disciples or copiers of Muslim and Muslim savants. The influence of various Islamic arts in Europe, including innovations in textiles, ceramics, glass, woodwork, and metalwork, is too well known to be recounted here. The same is true of Islamic architecture. One has only to look at a Gothic cathedral or go to Venice to realize the effect Islamic architecture had on Europe even before the Renaissance. Yet the question persists: If there was so much intellectual borrowing and so many artistic exchanges, why then the animosity between Western culture and its Islamic counterpart? What is the reason that Islamic arts failed in creating a cultural and intellectual dialogue between the two civilizations?

During the Middle Ages, Europeans considered the Islamic Empire as a military, cultural and religious threat that endangered not only Europe but also Christendom. Prophet Muhammad (S) was ridiculed in the most deleterious manner. Gerald of Wales wrote in the 12th century that the Prophet's teachings were focused solely on lust, thus particularly suitable for Orientals who lived in a naturally hot climate. The spread of such ideas, which was transmitted from one generation to the other, was the result of projecting a negative image on an alien culture due to ignorance of and prejudice against that culture, which was a characteristic feature of medieval Europe at the time.

The first face-to-face encounter between Islam and the West on a grand scale was when the Muslim armies crossed into Spain in 711, fought the Goths and conquered the Iberian Peninsula (al-Andalus). The second grand encounter was during the First Crusade, launched in 1095 by Pope Urban II who declared war against Islam. Their "altruistic" aim was to save Eastern Christendom from the Muslims, but when the Mamluks defeated the Crusaders in 1291, all Eastern Christians came under Muslim rule. Ironically many converted to Islam because of the persecutions they had faced at the hand of their fellow Catholic Christians.

In the 14th and 15th centuries, a new phase developed in the relations between the two sides as Islam gradually became more accepted in Europe. The religious wars had ended, trade relations increased between the two sides (in particular between the Venetians and the Genoese), translations of the Quran appeared for the first time in the West, and with the coming of the Reformation, the Pope replaced Prophet Muhammad (S) as Anti-Christ in the eyes of many Protestants. At the same time, the military power of the Ottoman Empire forced the West to review its attitude towards the Muslims. Though the animosity did not diminish between the two sides, a degree of admiration – born out of fear as well as respect for the feats of the Ottomans – developed within Europe. The attitude of Europe towards the

three great empires of the 16th and 17th centuries – that is, the Ottoman (1281–1924), the Safavid (1501–1732) and the Mughal (1526– 1858) empires – was one based on equality where both sides enjoyed peaceful diplomatic and trade relations.

By the 18th century, however, the three empires showed visible signs of decline thus allowing Europe to lose a great deal of its fear and interim respect towards the Muslims and their civilization. The Industrial Revolution in the 19th century marked the rise of Western technological superiority followed by the engulfing wave of colonialism. This superiority brought about the unwavering belief in the supremacy of Western civilization over Islamic civilization. Thus, England took on "the white man's burden" and France the "mission civilisatrice" with the belief that they would confer on the East some of the advantages of their civilization. These included the idea of good government and the superiority of Christianity. It was not long before Western powers directly encroached into the East with their armies, missionaries, civil servants, and mining and trading companies.

Having summarized the relations between Islam and the West from a western point of view, one should understand the same relations from the Muslim position. Because of the superiority of Islamic civilization from the 9th to the 16th centuries, the Muslims generally did not deem it worthwhile to study Europe. In fact, in the eyes of the Muslims all Europeans were lumped together as Franks. Even when the Muslims were relatively close to Europe, such as in al–Andalus, and had contacts with them on different levels, they studied Greek and Roman classical thought but not French or German literature. When the Ottomans occupied countries in the Balkans and Central Europe, they transmitted their architecture and art to them but never carried out an extensive cultural study of their new subjects. This indifference cannot be attributed to ignorance on the part of the Muslims but to the inferiority of Western culture. Muslims simply did not find it useful to study its art and literature.

The scene changed in the 18th and 19th centuries, and Western culture began to be imposed onto the East, especially in countries that came under French rule. In this way, the Islamic world changed places with the West, and instead of being the "producer", ended up on the receiving end. From the point of view of Europe, it was the superior culture, and hence did not deem it worthwhile to get to know better the culture of the peoples under its rule. Hence, when Europe first encroached onto Islamic territory after Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798, it treated the various forms of Islamic art (with the exception of architecture) as indigenous "folk craft", for the simple reason that it could not accept an art that did not conform to its own criteria and aesthetics.

Until today, pieces of Iznik and Nishapur ceramics and other masterpieces are part of the collections of the Folk Art Museum in Frankfurt, the Museum of Arts and Crafts in Hamburg, the Union Centrale des Arts Décoratifs in Paris, the Victoria and Albert Museum in London and the Museum of Applied Art in Belgrade.

However, through further exposure to Islamic culture, Islamic art has come to be better appreciated on its own terms and not simply as "folk craft". In fact, today, special wings are designated for Islamic art in

institutions such as the British Museum in London, the Louvre in Paris and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

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