



## Symbolic Ornamentation in Islamic Art

Bellout Omar<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** Islamic art is a product of a religious and social environment that emerged with the advent of Islam. It is distinguished by various characteristics that set it apart from other art forms, such as abstraction, aversion to depicting human and animal figures, diversity, and plurality. Muslim artists utilized Arabic script in its various forms and types to decorate their subjects, incorporating symbolic themes, especially geometric and astronomical ones like stars, crescents, and the palm of the hand, with the addition of colours used symbolically or to mimic the original model, highlighting its nature and size, in addition to depicting reality as it is.

All these elements fall within the realm of Islamic art and its special symbolism in artifacts and relics, whether fixed or movable.

**Keywords:** *Art, ornamentation, symbolism, characteristics, Islamic relics.*

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<sup>1</sup> Abdelhamid Mehri University, Constantine 2, Algeria, [omar.bellout@univ-constantine2.dz](mailto:omar.bellout@univ-constantine2.dz)



## Introduction

Art has been the beating heart of civilizations, ancient and modern, acting as a mirror reflecting their inner composition and emotional sentiments. Throughout history, art has been one of the most truthful means of expressing the life of nations and a measure of their awareness, refinement, and civilization. Islamic arts, in particular, are born from a universal vision of truth and life and are an important aspect of life in Islamic society (Said, H, 2001, p. 07).

Experts have differed on the definition of art, but from our perspective, the simplest definitions are those that enable the artist to transition from the world of imagination to the tangible and real world, depending on various skills and methods that vary with the individual, time, and place (Attiya, M., 1997, p. 09).

Art is an internal expression within the soul that evokes admiration, amazement, and wonder, mixed with emotion and a sense of beauty, when transforming the feeling of something into a beautiful object (Ezzedine, I ., 1974, p. 10).

This article explores issues related to art, its psychological and realistic appropriateness, with the following question: How can Islamic art be expressed? Is symbolism sufficient to express the internal and external art of Muslims? What symbolic themes has Islamic art expressed through its relics?

Analyzing this issue requires revisiting original texts to clearly and accurately frame the general context of Islamic art and its symbolic right to expression.

### 1. General Concept of Islamic Art

Islamic art is considered the longest-lived and most widespread of human arts, given the geographical extent of the Islamic state and the diversity of races and ethnicities embracing Islam.



Islamic art is characterized by several features that make it unique from other art forms, notably abstraction, where Muslim artists attempt to reveal the unseen and sense the invisible laws governing existence, or in other words, striving to free from nature's infinite and eternal imitation (Achour, S., n.d., p. 446).

## **1.1 Characteristics of Islamic Art:**

### **1.1.1 Aversion to Depicting Humans and Animals:**

A prominent feature of Islamic art is the aversion to depicting living beings, driven by religious reasons, most notably the aversion of Islam itself to the portrayal and embodiment of animal and human figures (Hussein, K., n.d., p. 42).

This view, confirmed by Khalid Hussein, necessitates examining the jurisprudential issues leading to the prohibition in embodying figures, affirming that the subject of embodiment in Islamic jurisprudence and religion has been decisively settled, whether through aversion or prohibition.

### **1.1.2 Diversity and Multiplicity:**

Muslim artists drew from nature decorative and artistic plant themes, adding geometry and its elements to the ornamentation. Geometric decorations vary from lines of different types -straight, broken, curved, and looped- to spatial shapes like squares, rectangles, diamonds, triangles, circles, and ovals. Polygonal shapes include hexagons, octagons, and multi-sided figures, as well as star-shaped dishes (Abdul Aziz, L., 1990, p. 255).

Symmetry in Islamic art, a fundamental principle, involves the repetition of a decorative element in opposite directions around a vertical or horizontal axis, where the basis of geometric drawing is the axial half-symmetry of a drawn decorative element, completing the design.



### 1.1.3 Use of Calligraphy and Arabic Script:

Muslim artists employed Arabic calligraphy in various forms to embellish their subjects, introducing symbolic themes and successfully integrating them, either together or individually. Researcher Dalia Ahmed Fouad views Arabic calligraphy, in its diverse forms, as a crucial branch of realistic Islamic art, serving two functions: the functional role of writing for learning and preserving knowledge in texts, and the aesthetic and symbolic role, represented in its artistic, decorative, and ornamental capacity (Fouad, D., 2000, p. 110).

The focus of Muslim artists on calligraphy stems from its strong connection with religion, as it was used in writing the Quran and the noble Hadith. Moreover, Islam's aversion to depicting living beings has enhanced the significance of calligraphy.

Arabic calligraphy flourished and became a beautiful art form, prominent in Islamic arts, where Arabic writing became one of the most harmonious and ornately decorated scripts. Muslim calligraphers established rules, methods, and styles for its formation and the writing of its letters and words, ensuring that the letterforms were aesthetically pleasing to the eye, akin to the pleasantness of eloquent speech to the ear.

Arabic script was used as an important element in Islamic art, noted for the beauty, flexibility, and fluidity of its letters, allowing for intricate interweaving and overlap. Its types are varied, with Kufic, Naskh, Maghribi, Persian, Andalusí, and others being prominent (Zaki, S., 1983, p. 114).

### 1.1.4 Fear of Emptiness:

Due to the prevailing belief that empty spaces are inhabited by the devil, it was essential to fill these voids, leading Muslim artists to rely on the principle of repetition, a fundamental rule in Islamic art. This means repeating an artistic or decorative theme in various ways -horizontally, vertically, diagonally, circularly,



or curvedly- creating a design where the start or end of decorative elements is indiscernible.

The function of repetition is to emphasize a shape or element, as it creates excitement in the viewer, whether visually or verbally, and helps connect shapes to visual perception, achieving a unity in the artwork that often symbolizes permanence, attributed only to God Almighty (Badra, M., 2012, p. 40).

Geometric decorations consist of lines in different forms -straight, broken, curved, looped- and spatial shapes like squares, rectangles, diamonds, triangles, circles, and ovals. Polygonal shapes include hexagons, octagons, and multi-sided figures, as well as star-shaped designs, as discussed by Mahmoud Abdul Aziz Al-Arj when addressing the artistic and decorative themes in geometric shapes found in the Marinid era relics around the city of Tlemcen (Abdul Aziz, L., 1990, p. 255).

### **1.2 Other Characteristics:**

Islamic art, with its inherent unity stemming from the monotheistic belief of Muslims, is no less significant than previously mentioned aspects. The functionality phenomenon aims to make Islamic art achieve the principle of artistic beauty and refined taste, in addition to the function that art performs (Le Bon, G., 1964, p. 500).

### **4.3 General Concept of Ornamentation in Islamic Art:**

Linguistically, the ornamentation of something (with the opening of the letter 'z' and the silence of the letter 'kh') refers to its adornment and embellishment. To ornament speech means to beautify it, while the term 'zukhruf' (with the intensification and vowelizing of the letter 'z')—plural 'zukhruf'—refers to gold, perfection of beauty, anything deceptive or forged, the colors of vegetation from the earth, speech embellished with lies, and from insects, a type belonging to the half-winged that hover over water, and from a house, its furnishings (Assem, R., 2000, p. 130).



In technical terms, ornamentation refers to the drawings that adorn various artistic creations, such as books, permanent relics of buildings and structures, or movable artifacts made from different materials like pottery, porcelain, textiles, wood, ivory, and metals (Abu Saleh, A., 1967, p. 111).

It is a branch of art sciences that explores the philosophy of abstraction, ratios, and proportionality, covering formation, space, mass, color, and line. The elements of Islamic ornamentation generally fall into three main categories: plant decorations, geometric decorations, and calligraphic decorations (Assem, R., 2000, p. 212), each carrying symbolic significance while being geometric, plant-based, or calligraphic in nature.

### **3. The Concept of Symbolism in Islamic Art:**

Talking about symbols refers to indicating something through gestures, hand movements, head nods, or other means, aiming at something not overtly visible, as most Arabic dictionaries, including Al-Qamus Al-Muhit, suggest (The Illustrated Arabic Dictionary, n.d., p. 118). In art, a symbol is an indirect representation of things, not describing them directly, either by concealing or alluding to them (Howers, A., 1968, p. 56).

Through symbolism, the artist reaches the world of dreams, expressing feelings and revealing the background of the work, thus conveying the emotions, sentiments, and sensations in their imagination (Abdel-Moneim, R., 1908, p. 348).

Art in its early stages was utilitarian, serving daily social and life needs, and represented a tool for living and working (Al-Jader, S., 1998, p. 06).

### **3.1 Key Symbolic Elements in Islamic Art:**

#### **3.1.1 The Star:**

Stars, in their various forms, are among the most prominent symbols used in Islamic art throughout its history. The interpretations and meanings of stars vary



according to their number of points and locations, ranging from five-pointed to six, eight, ten, and even twelve-pointed stars.

In artistic terminology, these are multi-shaped geometric configurations assembled into star shapes (Charifa, T., 2008, p. 329), entering into the category of complex geometric decorations, recognized as central radiating figures with sides extending radially from the center to the periphery. Now, let's discuss their significance.

### **3.1.2 Pentagonal Star Ornamentation:**

Used in Islamic ornamentation with five points, the pentagonal star has a geometric character and was employed as a symbol for the five directions: south, north, east, west, and center (Arseven, n.d p. 25). It also symbolizes the elements constituting nature: water, fire, wood, metal, and stone, with the number five coinciding with the horizontal lines in writing the phrase "masha'Allah."

### **3.1.3 Hexagonal Star Ornamentation:**

Formed by the interlacing of two equal-sided triangles facing each other, this shape was a transformation of ancient beliefs where the universe was thought to consist of two halves of an egg, the upper half representing the sky and the lower half the earth. The half-egg shape evolved into a triangle, symbolizing harmony, integration, and balance. From the matching of these cosmic halves, the hexagonal star is formed, representing the intertwining of heaven and earth to create life, thus symbolizing the unity of existence as mentioned by Afif Al-Bahnasi when discussing the Arab ornamentation art, highlighting the importance of star ornamentation (Afif, B., 1989, p. 58).

The hexagonal star was known among Muslims and sometimes used in reference to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). In Jewish perception, the first triangle symbolizes Jewish existence, while the inverted second triangle represents human existence (Jumaa, I., 2011, p. 98).



### 3.1.4 Octagonal Star Ornamentation

The octagonal star is a prominent representation in Islamic geometric ornamentation. Mohammad Iqbal interpreted the art present among Muslims in the manner of this star and gave it an esoteric interpretation. It consists of two interlocking squares:

The first square represents the four forces in nature, where the top side represents air, the bottom side represents earth, the right side represents water, and the left side represents fire (Abdul Nasser, 2006, pp. 108-109).

The second square represents the four directions: east, west, north, and south. The intersection of these two squares signifies that the forces of God are above the forces of nature and are spread throughout existence (Abdul Nasser, 2006, p. 109)

### 3.1.5 Crescent Ornamentation:

The crescent, a celestial element influential in Islamic art across ages, is now a symbol on the flags and emblems of many Islamic countries. Its widespread use in Muslim arts reflects its importance in the Islamic cultural context, symbolizing the lunar calendar, enlightenment, and the revival of life, especially with the emergence of Islam, which led people from the darkness of ignorance to light (Moreau, J., 1976, p. 134).

### 3.1.6 Palm Ornamentation:

The palm or 'khamsa' is a prevalent symbol in Islamic art, representing the hand's five fingers and is one of the most important symbolic elements in Islamic culture. It is commonly found on the entrances of homes and valuable objects, believed to ward off the evil eye and misfortune, and in some Islamic regions, it is used as an amulet for protection. Women in North Africa traditionally tattooed their foreheads with the hand symbol (Arseven, n.d, p. 31).

Some researchers interpret the hand as a symbol of fidelity, strength, and justice, while others see it representing the five people of the Prophet's household or the five pillars of Islam (Gabus, J, n.d, p. 39).



### 3.1.7 Color Symbolism in Art:

What distinguishes Islamic art is also the use of colors in decoration. This is achieved first by treating the surface before coloring it, by coating it with a monochromatic color and then leaving it to dry in the air. After that, the artist paints the decorative themes using desired colors with a brush. To preserve them from natural external influences such as moisture and heat, they are coated with a special substance (Abdel Aziz, M., 1974, p. 165).

Colors are among the things that add beauty to human life. They express human emotions, whether joy or sadness. This art had significant importance among Muslim artists in various regions of the Islamic world, as they embodied it in their various artistic products and architecture. The concept of color is mentioned in many verses of the Quran, as in the verse: "*And He has cast into the earth firmly set mountains, lest it shift with you, and made rivers and roads, that you may be guided,*" (Al-Nahl, 13).

One of the most prominent manifestations of these colors is in geometric ornamentation. They had a considerable presence in their aesthetics, as star-shaped plates, slanting lines, circles, squares, triangles, polygons, and other geometric shapes contained many colors in a single model. There are primary colors from which secondary colors are derived through mixing and composition in different proportions, resulting in an increase or decrease in their intensity. This increase creates contrast, adjacency, and harmony in the color circle (Abdul Kader, D., 2010, p. 720).

Colors are considered one of the most beautiful and fertile aspects of human life, enriching human life and adding exquisite beauty to it. Color exercises its expressive power on humans because it emits visual tones to evoke human emotions either with joy or sadness.

As for obtaining colors or studying color mixing, the basic components can be categorized into blue, red, yellow, and black. Mixing is done as follows:



- A quantity of red color and a quantity of yellow color give us orange.
- Two quantities of red color and a quantity of yellow color give us red-orange.
- A quantity of red color and two quantities of yellow color give us orange-red.
- A quantity of red color and a quantity of blue color give us purple.
- Two quantities of red color and a quantity of blue color give us red-purple.
- Two quantities of blue color and a quantity of red color give us blue-purple.
- A quantity of blue color and a quantity of yellow color give us green.
- Two quantities of blue color and a quantity of yellow color give us blue-green.
- A quantity of blue color and two quantities of yellow color give us yellow-green (Kheira, B., 2008, p. 360).

Color was used for its intrinsic beauty and aesthetic value, used symbolically, or to mimic the model and highlight its nature and size in the space. Often, the use of color is intended to depict reality itself (Abu Saleh, A., 1967, p. 105).

### **3.1.8 Blue Ornamentation:**

Blue, commonly used by Muslim artists, is derived from the indigo plant found in Iran, East India, and Central Asia. It was extensively used in their clothing, especially that of royalty, and in the decoration of their buildings (Arseven, n.d p. 98).

Blue symbolizes friendship, wisdom, and eternity (Mahyeddin, T., 1961, p. 172). Sufis recognize two shades of blue: dark blue, representing benevolence and



goodness, and light blue, symbolizing truth and certainty (Abdul Nasser, Y., 2006, p. 264).

### **3.1.9 Red Ornamentation:**

Red is one of the favorite colors for Muslim artists, and its use is widespread in Islamic arts, becoming a preferred color for Muslim artists. This explains its frequent use in various models of artistic products, whether fixed or movable (Arseven, n.d, p. 98).

It is obtained from the females of the cochineal insect that lives on the leaves of evergreen oak trees. This color is considered warm due to its proximity to the color of fire and blood (Mahyeddin, n.d., p. 173). The symbol of the blazing fire signifies anger, harshness, and danger (Mahyeddin, n.d., p. 173).

### **3.1.10 White Ornamentation:**

The color white has been associated since ancient times with daylight and light, symbolizing the power that dispels darkness, representing purification, purity, and clarity (Ayyad Amin, 2002., p. 18).

In Islamic thought, white is used as a symbol of purity and clarity. Therefore, it is the color of the Ihram garment worn during Hajj and Umrah at the Haram Mosque, and it symbolizes the faces of the believers in paradise, thus considered a symbol for the inhabitants of paradise.

This is reflected in the Quranic verse: "*On the Day some faces will turn white and some faces will turn black. As for those whose faces turn black, to them it will be said, 'Did you disbelieve after your belief? Then taste the punishment for what you used to reject.'* But as for those whose faces turn white, they will be within the mercy of Allah. They will abide therein eternally" (Al-Imran, Verses: 106-107).

The additional verse said "*And they will be served with a cup of pure wine, white and delicious for those who drink it.*" (As-Saffat, verses 45-46)



It's worth mentioning that one of the flags of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was white (Ibrahim, J, 2008, p. 130). As for the Sufis, the color white is in harmony with Islam (Ayyad Amin, A, 2002., p. 120).

### **3.1.11 Black Ornamentation:**

Black is one of the colors with significant symbolic meanings. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) favored this color, as he wore it for his turban, and one of his flags was black. Some scholars suggest that black symbolizes truth, justice, sovereignty, glory, and honor (Abdul Nasser, Y, p. 87). Even the covering of the Kaaba remains black.

### **3.1.12 Green Ornamentation:**

Green is one of the colors extensively used by Muslim artists. It has been utilized in various sacred products, found on the covers of the Qur'ans and in the decoration of doors facing the Qibla direction. Judges and market inspectors were prohibited from using this color in areas frequently trodden upon, like the floor tiles in public baths, latrines, and carpets laid on the ground.

This prohibition is due to its religious symbolism and uniqueness. Green symbolizes paradise, growth, hope, life, and fertility, and is a color that harmonizes with all others.

### **3.1.13 Yellow Ornamentation**

Lastly, Muslim artists also used the color yellow, which is less commonly used compared to other colors. It originates from saffron plants and pomegranate peels. Its symbolism represents light, albeit with less brilliance and splendor, and it symbolizes the sun and gold (Mahyeddin, T. 1961., p. 173).

## **Conclusion**

1. The question we addressed in the article is: How can Islamic art be expressed? Is symbolism sufficient to express the inner and outer art of Muslims? What are



- the symbolic themes expressed in Islamic art through its archaeological findings?
2. The answer is multifaceted:
  3. Art is an internal expression within the soul that evokes admiration, amazement, and awe, mixed with emotion and a sense of beauty, when the feeling about something is transformed into an Islamic aesthetic subject, moving from the world of imagination to the world of sense, tangible and reality, according to different skills and methods that vary with the individual, time, and place. Islamic art is distinguished by multiple characteristics that make it unique among other arts, notably the concept of abstraction, aversion to depiction, along with diversity and variety, where the Muslim artist derived decorative and artistic plant themes from nature, adding geometry and its elements to the decoration. Muslim artists also used calligraphy in their decorative and artistic products, adorning various panels, exploiting the principle of *horror vacui*, a fundamental feature of Islamic art, believing that emptiness is inhabited by the devil, and thus they should fill this void, relying on the phenomenon of repetition, which is a fundamental law in Islamic art. All these features stem from the monotheistic belief prevalent among Muslims.
  4. As for decoration, it explores the philosophy of abstraction, proportions, and harmony, addressing composition, space, mass, color, and line. The elements of Islamic decoration generally fall into three main types: plant motifs, geometric decorations, and calligraphic designs.
  5. Symbolism represents an indirect depiction of things, not describing them directly, whether by concealing or hinting at them.
  6. Among the most important symbolic elements in Islamic art, we find the star, which is one of the most prominent symbols widely used in Islamic art throughout its different periods. The interpretations and meanings of stars vary



depending on their number of points and locations. They can be pentagonal, hexagonal, octagonal, decagonal, or even dodecagonal. The crescent and the decoration with the palm of the hand (Khamsa) are also significant.

7. What distinguishes symbolism in Islamic decoration is the use of colors, as they are among the most beautiful and fertile aspects of human life, enriching human existence and adding to it an extraordinary beauty. Colors exert their expressive power on humans because they emit visual tones that can evoke feelings of joy or sadness. The beauty of colors suggests life, as colors exist only in planted areas with water, symbolizing life itself.
8. Color was used for its own aesthetic value and symbolically, or to mimic the model, highlighting its nature and size in the space, and often, the use of color aimed at depicting reality itself. The most prominently used colors are blue, red, white, black, green, and yellow. The intrinsic beauty that adorns the outward appearance of an artistic or archaeological piece is the essence of beauty. Therefore, it can be said that the highest level of contemplation in art is found among those who view art with an inward, spiritual perspective, especially among the Sufis, where most of the craftsmen, including decorators, architects, painters, calligraphers, and others, were often from Sufi orders.

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