



Symbolic Ornamentation in Islamic Art: Concepts, Motifs, and Meanings

Bellout Omar¹

Abstract: This article examines symbolic ornamentation in Islamic art by linking core concepts of Islamic aesthetics to the visual language of decoration. It argues that ornamentation in Islamic artistic traditions is not merely an element of embellishment, but a structured system of meaning shaped by theology, philosophy, and cultural context. Through an analytical reading of major ornamental forms, geometric patterns, vegetal (arabesque) designs, and calligraphy, the study shows how repetition, balance, abstraction, and rhythm function as visual strategies that point beyond material beauty toward ideas such as unity (*tawhīd*), infinity, and spiritual transcendence. The article also highlights the diversity of Islamic artistic expressions across regions and periods while maintaining shared symbolic principles. By situating ornament within broader scholarly debates on Islamic art and symbolism, the study offers a clearer conceptual framework for understanding how decorative forms carry meaning rather than serving as purely aesthetic motifs.

Keywords: Islamic art; ornamentation; symbolism; geometric patterns; arabesque; calligraphy; *tawhīd*; abstraction; visual culture

¹ Abdelhamid Mehri University, Constantine 2, Algeria,
omar.bellout@univ-constantine2.dz



Introduction

Islamic art constitutes a distinctive visual tradition shaped by faith, intellectual history, and the cultural diversity of Muslim societies across wide geographical and historical settings². Rather than forming a single uniform style, it developed through multiple regions and dynasties while maintaining shared aesthetic priorities, especially the disciplined organization of surface, pattern, and visual rhythm³. Within this tradition, ornamentation is not merely an accessory to form; it often functions as a principal mode through which visual meaning is structured in architecture and the applied arts.

This article examines symbolic ornamentation in Islamic art by focusing on how decorative systems communicate meaning through order, repetition, and inscription. Islamic ornament frequently employs symmetry, rhythm, and continuous extension, formal strategies that can encourage contemplative perception without requiring naturalistic depiction⁴. Scholars have frequently related such formal strategies to broader conceptual themes in Islamic thought, including unity (tawhīd), infinity, and transcendence⁵. At the same time, symbolic interpretation must remain historically and culturally sensitive: motifs and patterns do not carry one fixed meaning in every context, and their significance can shift according to medium, function, patronage, and place.

Accordingly, this study asks three connected questions: How is ornamentation conceptualized within Islamic art? How do major ornamental forms, geometric, vegetal (arabesque), and calligraphic, operate symbolically? And what approach best allows us to analyze symbolism while respecting the diversity of Islamic artistic production? By answering these questions, the article presents an academically structured framework for understanding ornament not as superficial embellishment, but as a meaningful visual language within Islamic visual culture.

Significance of the problem

² Sheila S. Blair and Jonathan M. Bloom, *The Art and Architecture of Islam 1250–1800* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 1.

³ Oleg Grabar, *The Formation of Islamic Art: Revised and Enlarged Edition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 1.

⁴ Titus Burckhardt, *Art of Islam: Language and Meaning* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2009), 43.

⁵ Grabar, *Formation of Islamic Art*, 72



This study matters because Islamic ornamentation is often misunderstood as “just decoration,” when in reality it is one of the main ways Islamic art speaks. Patterns, repetition, balance, geometry, and calligraphy are not random beautification; they are carefully arranged visual choices that shape how a viewer experiences a space or an object. When we treat ornament as meaningful, we start seeing Islamic art as a thoughtful system of ideas, not only a collection of attractive designs.

It also matters because symbolism in Islamic art is not one-dimensional. The same motif can carry different meanings depending on where it appears, what material it is made in, and what purpose it serves. By explaining ornamentation as both a shared artistic language and a flexible cultural expression, this article helps readers understand Islamic art in a deeper way, one that respects its spiritual background, its historical variety, and the intelligence behind its visual forms.

Literature Review

The literature used in this article approaches Islamic art as a civilizational and intellectual expression rather than a purely decorative practice. Hamed Said stresses the authenticity and importance of Islamic arts within Muslim society, framing them as connected to a universal vision of truth and life⁶. From a more general aesthetic angle, Attiya links art to the artist’s ability to move ideas from imagination into tangible form, while Ezzedine defines art as an inner expression that produces admiration through beauty and emotional effect⁷. Together, these works provide the conceptual basis for treating Islamic art as meaningful expression rather than craft alone.

A major theme in the sources is that Islamic art is distinguished by specific characteristics, especially abstraction, disciplined design, and the avoidance of figural depiction in many contexts. Achour highlights abstraction as an artistic attempt to reveal what is unseen and to move beyond direct imitation of nature⁸. Hussein discusses the religious and jurisprudential reasoning that shaped the tendency to avoid depicting humans and animals,

⁶ Hamed Said, *Islamic Arts: Its Authenticity and Importance* (Cairo: Dar al-Shorouk, 2001), 7.

⁷ Mohamed Attiya, *Art and Life* (Cairo: Dar al-Maaref, 1997), 9; Ismail Ezzedine, *Art and Man* (Cairo: Gharib Bookstore, 1974), 10.

⁸ Abdel Fattah Ashour, *Studies in Islamic Civilization History* (Kuwait: Zat al-Silasil Publications, n.d.), 446.



explaining why alternative visual languages became more central⁹. In this framework, ornamentation emerges not as secondary beautification but as a key artistic solution through which Muslim artists achieved richness, harmony, and meaning.

The literature on ornamentation itself defines it both linguistically and technically, then explains its components and symbolic capacity. Assem provides a detailed lexical and terminological account of “ornamentation,” while Abu Saleh defines ornamentation as drawings that decorate artistic products across media (books, buildings, and movable objects)¹⁰. These studies converge on the common classification that Islamic ornament is mainly vegetal, geometric, and calligraphic, and that each can carry symbolic significance¹¹. Supporting this, Abdul Aziz documents geometric vocabulary and variation in Islamic decorative practice, while Fouad explains Arabic calligraphy as both functional writing and a major aesthetic-symbolic element, reinforced by its connection to Qur’anic and religious textuality¹². For symbolism, the sources define the symbol as an indirect mode of representation: the dictionary meaning emphasizes indication and pointing beyond what is openly visible, and Howers discusses symbolism as representation through allusion rather than direct depiction¹³. Abdel-Moneim further connects symbolism to the artist’s ability to express emotions, imagination, and the “background” of the work through indirect expression¹⁴.

Method and Analytical Framework

This article adopts a qualitative, descriptive–analytical method to study symbolism in Islamic ornamentation. The analysis is built on revisiting key texts and definitions in order to frame Islamic art and its “symbolic right to expression” accurately, then applying that conceptual framing to the ornamental evidence discussed in the paper. In doing so, the study

⁹ Khalid Hussein, *Ornamentation in Islamic Arts* (Beirut: Dar al-Bihar for Printing and Publishing, n.d.), 42.

¹⁰ Rizk Mohamed Asem, *Dictionary of Islamic Architecture and Arts Terms* (Cairo: Madbouli Bookstore, 2000), 130; Al-Alfy Abu Saleh, *Islamic Art: Its Origins, Philosophy, and Schools*, 2nd ed. (Beirut: Dar Al-Maarifa, 1967), 111.

¹¹ Asem, *Dictionary of Islamic Architecture and Arts Terms*, 212.

¹² Laaraj Abdul Aziz, *Zellige in Islamic Architecture in Algeria in the Turkish Era* (Algeria: National Book Institution, 1990), 255; Dalia Ahmed Fouad, *Islamic Ornaments and Their Use in Applications* (Helwan University, 2000), 110; Saleh Zaki, *Arabic Calligraphy* (Cairo: Egyptian General Book Authority, 1983), 114.

¹³ *The Illustrated Arabic Dictionary*, s.v. “Symbol” (Beirut: Dar Al-Ratib University, n.d.), 118; Arnold Howers, *Philosophy of Art History*, trans. Ramzy Abduh (Cairo: General Authority for Books, 1968), 56.

¹⁴ Rawya Abdel-Moneim, *Aesthetic Sense and Art History* (Beirut: Dar al-Nahda al-Arabiya, 1968), 348.



treats art as a meaningful human expression that moves ideas from imagination into tangible form, and it uses this understanding as the entry point for interpreting ornamentation as more than surface beautification¹⁵.

Analytically, the framework proceeds in two steps. First, it defines the core concepts, Islamic art, ornamentation, and symbolism, as they appear in the literature used in the manuscript. Symbolism is treated as indirect representation (hinting rather than direct depiction), which is essential for interpreting Islamic decorative language. Second, the study organizes the material according to the three major categories of Islamic decoration commonly identified in the manuscript: plant (vegetal) motifs, geometric decoration, and calligraphic design. Within this structure, the paper reads key symbolic elements (such as stars, the crescent, the khamsa/hand motif, and color symbolism) through their formal features, repetition, symmetry, abstraction, and placement, while keeping attention on cultural and religious context. Calligraphy is analyzed as both a functional carrier of knowledge and an aesthetic-symbolic form, strengthened by its religious association with Qur'anic and devotional writing¹⁶. Color symbolism is treated as part of this ornamental system, including both its technical application in decoration and its expressive meanings¹⁷.

Analysis and Discussion

5.1 Islamic Art as the Setting for Symbolic Ornament

Islamic art, as presented in the manuscript, is strongly connected with abstraction, an artistic choice that shifts attention from copying visible nature to expressing deeper meanings and inner realities¹⁸. This artistic direction becomes clearer when the discussion touches on religious and jurisprudential sensitivity toward depicting humans and animals in many settings¹⁹. In that environment, Muslim artists developed a rich alternative visual language where pattern, rhythm, and structured decoration became major tools of expression.

¹⁵ Hamed Said, *Islamic Arts: Its Authenticity and Importance* (Cairo: Dar al-Shorouk, 2001), 7; Mohamed Attiya, *Art and Life* (Cairo: Dar al-Maaref, 1997), 9; Ismail Ezzedine, *Art and Man* (Cairo: Gharib Bookstore, 1974), 10.

¹⁶ Dalia Ahmed Fouad, *Islamic Ornaments and Their Use in Applications* (Helwan University, 2000), 110; Saleh Zaki, *Arabic Calligraphy* (Cairo: Egyptian General Book Authority, 1983), 114.

¹⁷ Marzouk Abdel Aziz, *Islamic Decorative Arts in the Ottoman Era* (Cairo: Egyptian General Book Authority, 1974), 165.

¹⁸ Abdel Fattah Ashour, *Studies in Islamic Civilization History* (Kuwait: Zat al-Silasil Publications, n.d.), 446.

¹⁹ Khalid Hussein, *Ornamentation in Islamic Arts* (Beirut: Dar al-Bihar for Printing and Publishing, n.d.), 42.



Ornamentation therefore works as more than surface beauty; it becomes a main carrier of visual meaning in architecture and decorative arts.

A key idea highlighted is the tendency often described as “fear of emptiness” (horror vacui), where empty space is avoided and surfaces are filled through repeated units²⁰. In the manuscript’s explanation, repetition is not accidental: it supports unity and strengthens the overall harmony of the design²¹. This prepares the ground for symbolism, because the viewer does not encounter isolated motifs but an organized visual system that encourages contemplation and a sense of continuity.

5.2 Types of Ornamentation and How They Function Visually

The manuscript organizes Islamic ornament into three principal categories: vegetal (plant) motifs, geometric decoration, and calligraphic design²². Each category carries meaning through its own visual logic. Vegetal ornament transforms natural elements into stylized and repeated forms that produce movement, balance, and rhythmic continuity across surfaces. This stylization allows the decoration to remain connected to nature without becoming a literal copy, supporting the abstract character of Islamic design.

Geometric ornament is treated as a disciplined structure built from lines, angles, and repeating shapes (circles, triangles, squares, polygons, and star formations)²³. The text also emphasizes symmetry as one of the strongest design principles: motifs are repeated around vertical or horizontal axes to complete a balanced pattern²⁴. This geometric discipline strengthens the impression of order and harmony and becomes a strong foundation for symbolic readings, especially when geometry is repeated endlessly and appears to “extend beyond” the surface.

Calligraphic ornament carries a unique weight because it combines visual beauty with textual meaning. The manuscript treats Arabic calligraphy as both a decorative art and a

²⁰ Marzouk Abdel Aziz, *Islamic Decorative Arts in the Ottoman Era* (Cairo: Egyptian General Book Authority, 1974), 165

²¹ Mohamed Hamed El-Sayed Badra, *The Tawriq in Islamic Art* (Amman: Publications of the Conference on Art in Islamic Thought, 2012), 40.

²² Rizk Mohamed Asem, *Dictionary of Islamic Architecture and Arts Terms* (Cairo: Madbouli Bookstore, 2000), 212.

²³ Laaraj Abdul Aziz, *Zellige in Islamic Architecture in Algeria in the Turkish Era* (Algeria: National Book Institution, 1990), 255.

²⁴ Laaraj Abdul Aziz, *Zellige in Islamic Architecture*, 255.



meaning-bearing system closely linked to the Qur'an and religious culture²⁵. It can function simultaneously as a beautiful design and as a carrier of knowledge and sacred reference²⁶. This makes calligraphy one of the most direct forms of symbolism in Islamic ornamentation because it conveys meaning through readable words while still operating as artistic form.

5.3 Symbolic Motifs: Star, Crescent, and Khamsa

The manuscript identifies three major symbolic elements: the star, the crescent, and the khamsa (hand/palm)²⁷. Stars are discussed as symbolic forms that change meaning with their structure (pentagonal, hexagonal, octagonal, etc.)²⁸. The hexagonal star (two interlaced triangles) is presented as a sign of harmony and balance and is interpreted as representing the interaction between heaven and earth as the source of life²⁹. The manuscript also notes that this symbol can be perceived differently across cultures, even when it appears within Muslim artistic contexts³⁰.

The octagonal star is explained through two interlocking squares: one representing the four natural elements (air, earth, water, fire) and the other representing the four directions. Their intersection is interpreted as a reminder that divine power surrounds and governs the natural order³¹. In other words, geometry becomes a symbolic map: it reflects a worldview where harmony and direction are tied to higher meaning.

The crescent is discussed as a widely used symbol in Islamic culture, with a close link to the lunar calendar and to ideas of renewal and enlightenment³². The manuscript frames it as a sign of life's return and the movement from darkness to light. The khamsa appears as a protective sign commonly placed on entrances and valuable objects, often connected to protection from the evil eye. It is also presented as open to multiple interpretations, including

²⁵ Saleh Zaki, *Arabic Calligraphy* (Cairo: Egyptian General Book Authority, 1983), 114.

²⁶ Dalia Ahmed Fouad, *Islamic Ornaments and Their Use in Applications* (Helwan University, 2000), 110.

²⁷ Ibrahim Jumaa, *Symbolic Elements on Artistic Products in Algeria During the Ottoman Period* (MA thesis, University of Algiers, 2011), 98.

²⁸ Afif al-Bahnasi, *The Meanings of Stars in Arab Ornamentation* (Damascus: Dar al-Fikr, 1989), 58.

²⁹ Afif al-Bahnasi, *Meanings of Stars*, 58.

³⁰ Ibrahim Jumaa, *Symbolic Elements*, 98.

³¹ Abdul Nasser Yasin, *Religious Symbolism in Islamic Ornamentation* (Cairo: Zahraa al-Sharq, 2006), 108–109

³² Moreau, *Les grands symboles méditerranéens dans la poterie algérienne* (Algiers: SNED, 1976), 134.



links to the Prophet's household or to the five pillars of Islam³³. This shows an important point of the manuscript's approach: symbols do not operate with only one meaning, they can carry layered readings depending on social belief and historical setting.

5.4 Color as a Symbolic Language in Islamic Decoration

The manuscript argues that symbolism in Islamic ornament is also strongly expressed through color³⁴. Color is not used only for beauty; it can communicate emotional and spiritual meaning, and it can strengthen the symbolic effect of motifs and inscriptions. The discussion also includes how colors are technically applied and protected in decorative practice, highlighting that symbolism and craftsmanship work together in Islamic decorative arts³⁵.

The text lists major colors (blue, red, white, black, green, yellow) and links them with symbolic meanings. For example, blue is associated with permanence and depth and receives additional readings in spiritual (Sufi) interpretation³⁶. White is connected with purity and clarity and is linked with religious meanings³⁷. Black is treated as a powerful color connected with dignity and symbolic authority and is associated with the Kaaba covering³⁸. Green is presented as strongly sacred in Muslim culture and linked with paradise, life, and blessing. Yellow, though less prominent, is connected with light and gold³⁹.

Overall, the manuscript's analysis shows that symbolism in Islamic ornamentation emerges through the interaction of form (pattern, repetition, symmetry) and content (motifs, text, color meaning). Ornamentation becomes a system through which Islamic art communicates spiritual and cultural ideas in a disciplined visual language rather than through direct pictorial representation.

Conclusion

This article has shown that ornamentation in Islamic art is not a secondary layer of decoration, but a core visual language through which meaning is organized. The manuscript's

³³ Arseven, *Les arts décoratifs Turcs* (Istanbul: Basimevi, n.d.), 31; Gabus, (n.p., n.d.), 39.

³⁴ Ibrahim Jumaa, *Symbolic Elements*, 98.

³⁵ Marzouk Abdel Aziz, *Islamic Decorative Arts in the Ottoman Era*, 165.

³⁶ Mahyeddin Talo, *Drawing and Color* (Damascus: Al-Talas Library, 1961), 172; Abdul Nasser Yasin, *Religious Symbolism*, 264.

³⁷ Ayyad Amin Abderrahman al-Douri, *The Symbolism of Color in Islamic-Arab Art* (Baghdad: Dar al-Shu'un al-Thaqafiya, 2002), 18.

³⁸ Abdul Nasser Yasin, *Religious Symbolism*, 87.

³⁹ Mahyeddin Talo, *Drawing and Color*, 173.



discussion makes clear that Islamic art's tendency toward abstraction, supported by religious sensitivity toward figural depiction in many contexts, helped strengthen the role of non-figural systems such as vegetal motifs, geometric structure, and calligraphic design. Through repetition, symmetry, and continuous patterning, ornamentation produces unity and harmony on the surface, and this formal unity supports symbolic interpretation by directing the viewer toward ideas that go beyond the material design.

The analysis also demonstrates that symbolism in Islamic ornamentation works through multiple channels. Stars, crescents, and the khamisa are not used only as decorative forms; they carry layered meanings that can shift across time and place while still remaining connected to shared cultural understandings. Likewise, color functions as part of the symbolic system, shaping emotional response and communicating concepts such as purity, sanctity, authority, life, and renewal. In this way, Islamic ornamentation becomes a disciplined artistic solution that combines craftsmanship with conceptual depth: it expresses identity, belief, and aesthetic order without relying on direct imitation of visible reality. The study highlights an important scholarly point: symbolism in Islamic art should not be reduced to a single fixed interpretation. Meanings depend on context, medium, patronage, site, and cultural usage, and symbols can carry more than one message at the same time. By reading ornament through a descriptive–analytical method grounded in definitions and categories used in the manuscript, this article provides a clear academic framework that can support future research, especially comparative studies of symbolic motifs and decorative systems across different Islamic regions and historical periods.



Bibliography

1. Al-Alfy, Abu Saleh. *Islamic Art: Its Origins, Philosophy, and Schools* (2nd edition), Beirut, Lebanon: Dar Al-Maaref, 1967.
2. Al-Douri, Ayyad Amin Abderrahman, *The Symbolism of Color in Islamic-Arab Art*, Baghdad, Iraq: Dar al-Shu'un al-Thaqafiya, 2002.
3. Arnold, Howers, *Philosophy of Art History*, translated by Ramzy Abduh, Cairo, Egypt: General Authority for Books and Scientific Publications, 1968.
4. Arseven, *Les arts décoratifs Turcs*, Istanbul, Basimevi, n.d.
5. Behnsy, Afif, *The Meanings of Stars in Arab Ornamentation from the Book of Arts and Shared Themes*, Damascus, Syria: Dar al-Fikr, 1989.
6. Ben Bella, Kheira, *The Religious Foundations in Algeria During the Ottoman Period*, PhD thesis in Islamic Archaeology, Institute of Archaeology, University of Algiers, 2008.
7. Dalia, Ahmed Fouad, *Islamic Ornaments and Their Use in Applications*, Helwan University, Egypt, 2000.
8. Gustave, Le Bon, *The Civilization of the Arabs* (4th edition), translated by Adel Zaimer, Cairo, Egypt, 1964.
9. Hamed, Said, *Islamic Arts: Its Authenticity and Importance*, Cairo, Egypt: Dar al-Shorouk, 2001.
10. Hamouda, Hassan Ali, *Art of Ornamentation*, Cairo, Egypt: Egyptian General Book Authority, 1972.
11. Ismail, Ezzedine, *Art and Man*, Cairo, Egypt: Gharib Bookstore, 1974.
12. Jumaa, Ibrahim, *Symbolic Elements on Artistic Products in Algeria During the Ottoman*, 2011.
13. Period, *Artistic Archaeological Study*, MA thesis, Institute of Archaeology, University of Algiers.
14. Khalid, Hussein. *Ornamentation in Islamic Arts*, Beirut: Dar al-Bihar for Printing and Publishing, n.d.
15. Laaraj, Abdul Aziz. *Zellige in Islamic Architecture in Algeria in the Turkish Era*, Algeria: National Book Institution, 1990.
16. Marzouk, Abdel Aziz, *Islamic Decorative Arts in the Ottoman Era*, Cairo, Egypt: Egyptian General Book Authority, 1974.
17. Mohamed, Attiya, *Art and Life*, Cairo, Egypt: Dar al-Maaref, 1997.



18. Mohamed, Hamed El-Sayed Badra, *The Tawriq in Islamic Art*, Amman, Jordan: Publications of the Conference on Art in Islamic Thought, 2012.
19. Moreau, *Les grands symboles méditerranéens dans la poterie algérienne*, SNED, Algiers, 1976.
20. Rawya, Abdel-Monem, *Aesthetic Sense and Art History*, Beirut, Lebanon: Dar al-Nahda al-Arabiya, 1968.
21. Rizk, Mohamed Asem, *Dictionary of Islamic Architecture and Arts Terms* (1st edition), Cairo, Egypt: Madbouli Bookstore, 2000.
22. Said, Abdel Fattah Ashour. *Studies in Islamic Civilization History*, Kuwait: Publications of Zat al-Silasil, n.d.
23. Saleh, Zaki, *Arabic Calligraphy*, Cairo, Egypt: Egyptian General Book Authority, 1983.
24. Suad, Mahmoud al-Jader, *Silver Ornamentation and Manuscripts Among Muslims*, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia: King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies and Al-Obaikan Printing and Publishing Company, 1968.
25. Talo, Mahyeddin, *Drawing and Color*, Damascus, Syria: Al-Talas Library, 1961.
26. Tayyan, Charifa, *Algerian Applied Arts in the Ottoman Period*, PhD thesis in Islamic Archaeology, Institute of Archaeology, University of Algiers, 2007.
27. *The Illustrated Arabic Dictionary*, entry: Symbol, Beirut, Lebanon: Dar Al-Ratib University, n.d.
28. Yasin, Abdul Nasser, *Religious Symbolism in Islamic Ornamentation: A Study in the Metaphysics of Islamic Art* (1st edition), Cairo, Egypt: Zahraa al-Sharq, 2006.