

# Islamic aesthetics

Islamic art does not pertain to religion only. The term "Islamic" refers not only to the religion, but to any form of art created in an Islamic culture or in an Islamic context. Not all Muslims are in agreement on the use of art in religious observance, the proper place of art in society, or the relation between secular art and the demands placed on the secular world to conform to religious precepts. Islamic art frequently adopts secular elements and elements that are frowned upon, if not forbidden, by some Islamic theologians.<sup>[9]</sup>

According to Islam, human works of art are inherently flawed compared to the work of God; thus, it is believed by many that attempting to realistically depict the form of an animal or person is insolence to God. This tendency effected the narrowing field of artistic possibility to such forms of art as Arabesque, mosaic, Islamic calligraphy, and Islamic architecture, as well as any form of abstraction that can claim the status of non-representational art.

Limited possibilities have been explored by artists as an outlet to artistic expression, and has been cultivated to become a positive style and tradition, emphasizing the decorative function of art, or its religious functions via non-representational forms such as Geometric patterns, floral patterns, and arabesques.

Human or animal depiction is generally forbidden. Muslims believe these depictions lead to sculptural pieces, which then leads to worship of that sculpture or "idol". Human portrayals can be found in early Islamic cultures with varying degrees of acceptance by religious authorities. Human representation for the purpose of worship is uniformly considered idolatry as forbidden in *Sharia* law.<sup>[10][11]</sup>

The calligraphic arts grew out of an effort to devote oneself to the study of the Quran. By patiently transcribing each word of the text, the writer was made to contemplate the meaning of it. As time passed, these calligraphic works began to be prized as works of art, growing increasingly elaborate in the illumination and stylizing of the text. These illuminations were applied to other works besides the Quran, and it became a respected art form in and of itself.

[I found this information on Wikipedia, but I don't see how this essay is related to Islamic Aesthetics!]

## Arabesque (Islamic art)



Part of a 15th century ceramic panel from [Samarkand](#) with white calligraphy on a blue arabesque background.

Islamic relief panel from [Medina Azahara, Córdoba](#), Spain, c. 940. The central panel pattern springs from a central base and terminates within the space; most later ones do neither.

Complex [Arabesque](#) inlays at the [Agra Fort](#) in the [Mughal Empire](#).

The **arabesque** is a form of artistic decoration consisting of "surface decorations based on rhythmic linear patterns of scrolling and interlacing foliage, tendrils" or plain lines,<sup>[1]</sup> often combined with other elements. Within the very wide range of [Eurasian](#) decorative art that includes [motifs](#) matching this basic definition the term "arabesque" is used consistently as a technical term by art historians to describe only elements of the decoration found in two phases: [Islamic art](#) from about the 9th century onwards, and [European decorative art from the Renaissance](#) onwards. Arabesques are a fundamental element of Islamic art but they develop what was already a long tradition by the coming of Islam. The past and current usage of the term in respect of European art can only be described as confused and inconsistent. [Some Western arabesques derive from Islamic art, but others are closely based on Ancient Roman decorations.](#) In the West they are essentially found in the [decorative arts](#), but because of the generally non-figurative nature of Islamic art arabesque decoration is there often a very prominent element in the most significant works, and [plays a large part in the decoration of architecture.](#)

Reference: [Wikipedia](#)

### A Brief History About Islamic Art:

An understanding of chronology is critical to define the three phases in the development of Islamic art, although we must keep in mind that specific dates are relative between the different provinces. The first phase is the initial period of its formation, when the notion of Islamic art started evolving in Muslim lands. [Generally, the time of the first series of Islamic conquests outside of the Arabian Peninsula between 634 and 751](#) has been accepted as the time of preliminary development of an original system of forms which can be identified as Islamic. This was the time when the core of the land which remains Muslim till today was conquered. While these dates are primarily political or military ones, they became symbolic of the region's new status. The time when an Islamic art was formed in each of the conquered regions is relative, and varied from one province to another.

[The second phase, beginning in the ninth century, marks the period when Islamic aesthetics were formed and became widely accepted and grew to dominate the culture.](#) During this phase, the legalistic aspect of Islam became a concern in view of the newly compiled [collection of hadith, which led to more specific proscriptions against the arts.](#) [For further details, see Papadopoulo, *Islam and Muslim Art.*] Hadith is a body of traditions describing the life of the Prophet, which was not collected and given a legal status until the middle of the ninth century. These traditions are stories and opinions initiated as a response to specific incidents, and are not general statements. [An aesthetic revolution produced genuinely Muslim art by its autonomous essence, it reached its peak between the thirteenth and seventeenth centuries.](#) [The third phase, from the end of the seventeenth century onward, is the period when Islamic aesthetics stopped governing art produced in the Muslim lands; this art ceased to obey true Islamic aesthetics and allowed for an increasing European influence.](#)

### Early Rules of Representation

To understand Islamic aesthetics, we need to debunk the commonly held idea that there was a religious prohibition on representation. Research on this subject has found no definitive evidence of this prohibition in either the Qur'an or the Hadith. In the Qur'an, the only references found in connection with images are in passages relating to idols worshipped by pagans. In fact, the Qur'an neither specifically prohibits the making of idols, nor contains anything as strong as the condemnation of imagery found in Exodus 20:4 in the various texts of the Hebrew Bible: "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven images or any

likenesses of anything that is in heaven or that is in the earth beneath or that is in the water under the earth."

Although there was no restriction on representation during the initial phase of Islam, there was an unwritten ban against the depiction of living beings in mosques. This ban seems to have been generated in connection with the destruction of idols in the Kaaba at Mecca. Within that historical context, the Prophet declared that, "The angels will not enter a temple (*bayt*) where there are images (*tamathil*)," and, according to tradition, ordered all images to be destroyed except for an image of the Virgin Mary and Jesus. [We don't believe in this] Moreover, no representations with any religious values were permitted or tolerated. For example, the Qur'an itself was not illustrated and there are no portraits of the prophets or saints of Islam in religious places, lest they become objects of veneration or prayer, like Christian religious icons, which would be considered both polytheistic and idolatrous. Above all, there was never, nor could there ever be, a representation of God as is found so often in Christian art. For Muslims, only God truly exists, and he eludes conception by the human mind; he is understood only as an abstract force. Therefore, it is not only sacrilegious but also truly illogical to portray him in a form borrowed from his own creation.

From the beginning, Muslims formulated an attitude of indifference rather than opposition toward representational art. This was not due to religious proscription, but rather to historical necessity, brought on by the impact of the arts they encountered in conquered territories like Byzantium, Iran, Egypt, and Mesopotamia. With no art tradition of their own, Muslims of Arabia had a very limited grasp of the possibilities of visually perceptible symbols and of meaning given to form. They understood representations to be identical with what they represented and thus perceived them as deception. To Islam, images were not only a major characteristic of Christianity, but also one of the most dangerous weapons Christianity possessed. [Who said so?!]

### Art as Expression of Religion, Not Culture

A new Islamic culture was formed with identifiable habits and thoughts based on the uncompromising belief in the absoluteness and oneness of God. This was dynamically distinct from the Christian divine view. The Muslim community emphasized the totality of existence and complete integration of the secular and spiritual. They readily accepted all elements in the civilizations, cultures, and traditions of the nations they conquered, as long as they were not in direct opposition to the teachings of Islam. However, in order to preserve its unique qualities and maintain the integrity of its identity, Islamic culture consciously rejected the habits and practices of the traditions it replaced and consequently rejected representations as an expression of culture.

At the same time, this new culture understood the need for a uniquely Muslim art which could translate their identifiable habits and thought into visually perceptible forms. Islamic art, at the beginning, was not the result of a creation of new forms or techniques. Instead, it employed and adapted local forms, styles, and techniques belonging to other civilizations and integrated them, in varying combinations, to express Islamic values and ideas. Most elements in early Islamic artistic vocabulary were a continuation of older traditions, with a few identifiable exceptions, like Arabic writing, that became significant aspects of Islamic art and major iconographic and ornamental devices.

In the ninth century Muslim theologians developed further restrictions on and opposition to the use of images or representations in art. These theologians perceived art as *mimesis* in the Aristotelian sense, the most perfect possible imitation of nature. Hence an interdiction was issued on any representation of animate beings in painting or sculpture, prompting a drastic change in the aesthetics. All tangible appearances of nature had to be abandoned, including perspective, chiaroscuro, and modeling. This

interdiction presented a challenge to Muslim artists, and they had to explore a new domain in order to create within the imposed framework an original universe of form and color. Muslim artists did not abandon figurative painting but instead found a way around the interdiction. They made sure that their work did not appear "real." By forsaking the principle of imitation of nature, the miniature was accordingly treated as a two-dimensional pictorial space with forms and colors assembled in a certain order. A similar aesthetic revolution transformed painting into an autonomous world in the more modern period, as defined for different purposes by nineteenth- and twentieth-century artists like Henri Matisse, Maurice Denis, or Pablo Picasso.

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**Reference:** [http://apcentral.collegeboard.com/apc/members/courses/teachers\\_corner/45763.html](http://apcentral.collegeboard.com/apc/members/courses/teachers_corner/45763.html)