

The Theory of ISLAMIC ART

AESTHETIC CONCEPT AND EPISTEMIC STRUCTURE



IDHAM MOHAMMED HANASH

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Translated from the Arabic by

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Foreword

IDHAM MOHAMMED HANASH'S *The Theory of Islamic Art* is an extensive and meticulous exposition of a very specific form of human artistic expression, Islamic art. This is artistic composition less concerned with the simplistic realisation of beauty in physical form, and far more the powerful projection of an utterance, that of an inner belief in God and man's relationship to the Divine.

Thus, its practitioners sought to reflect the Divine unity and Truth, attempting to inform as well as remind humanity of the magnitude of the spiritual message and the beauty of religious experience, imbuing their works in the process with a spiritual purpose directly engaging vision and mind to contemplate the Infinite, whilst the hand of the artist recedes humbly into the background. To understand this is to truly understand the language of this unique art form and what Islamic art signifies.

Divine Oneness as the principle of beauty is perhaps quintessentially Islamic artistic expression and experience and what it celebrates. Why has Islamic art evolved as it has, what forms does it take, what is the logic underlying it? What message is the Muslim artist attempting to convey, what emotion is he seeking to evoke? This work views Islamic art as a subject of archeological study and treats its evolution as part of the historical study of art in the broader sense. At the same time, it paves the way for an epistemological shift from viewing Islamic art as a material concept having to do with beautiful rarities and relics that have grown out of Islamic cultural and artistic creativity, to a theoretical concept associated with a principle, a vision, a theory and a method. This theoretical concept provides the intellectual and cultural foundation for a critical philosophical science of Islamic artistic beauty to which we might refer as 'the science of Islamic art,' or 'the Islamic aesthetic' that evaluates visual artistic creations in terms of both beauty and practical usefulness.

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In the process the study also explores orientalist misconceptions, challenging some of the premises with which it has approached Islamic art, with judgement rooted in a cultural framework alien to the spiritual perspective of Islam.

The IIT has undertaken in recent years to produce abridged versions of its key publications, and this translation is taken from the abridged Arabic edition *Naẓariyyah al-Fan al-Islāmī: Al-Mafhūm al-Jamālī wa al-Bunyah al-Maʿrifiyyah*.

We live in an age in which time is at a premium in virtually all spheres of life, including those of writing and production. Copious intellectual, cultural and informational output continues unabated as part of efforts to keep pace with changes in the public and private spheres alike, while publishing houses and websites vie to provide people with the latest, and most up-to-date information in the easiest, most effective manner. The knowledge economy that now dominates the world requires a process of 'creative adaptation' of information as one of the building blocks of the world community at large, hence the IIT's series of abridged works. The aim is to help readers benefit from available information as easily, effectively, and efficiently as possible and to further develop their critical faculties so they become better able to contribute to the development of humanity.

The abridged texts have been written in a clear, easy to read style, and while the essential contents of the original works have been preserved, readers will note that, in the interests of space, the abridged editions contain far fewer endnotes than do the original works. The only notes retained are those needed for clarification or the proper establishment of an idea, since the principle aim of this endeavor is to facilitate rapid absorption of the content being conveyed. Readers who wish to go more deeply into the topics of concern or to find full documentation of quotes may refer to the original works, which contain all necessary citations.

The work is being published to widen discourse, and increase awareness of the question of Islamic artistic expression and its ultimate aims and objectives. No doubt the subject is a specialized one, but it is hoped that for the most part both general and specialist readers alike will benefit from the perspective offered and the overall issues examined.

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Where dates are cited according to the Islamic calendar (hijrah) they are labelled AH. Otherwise they follow the Gregorian calendar and labelled CE where necessary. Arabic words are italicized except for those which have entered common usage. Diacritical marks have been added only to those Arabic names not considered modern. English translations taken from Arabic references are those of the translator.

Since its establishment in 1981, the IIIT has served as a major center to facilitate serious scholarly efforts. Towards this end it has, over the decades, conducted numerous programs of research, seminars and conferences as well as publishing scholarly works specialising in the social sciences and areas of theology which to date number more than four hundred titles in English and Arabic, many of which have been translated into other major languages.

We would like to thank the author, translator, as well as editorial and production team at the IIIT London Office, and all those who were directly or indirectly involved in the completion of this book. May God reward them for all their efforts.

JANUARY, 2017

Introduction to the Concept and Theory of Islamic Art

THERE ARE THREE principle trends among modern scholars with regard to the definition of Islamic art. The first trend is to view art with a wide lens that encompasses all forms of creativity, including the linguistic, the artistic, and others. This trend places knowledge, literature and art within the same broad category. The second way of conceptualizing Islamic art, which is somewhat narrower than the first, encompasses everything that bears a direct relation to feeling, sensation, and aesthetic experience, including music, rhythm, architecture, drawing and painting. As for the third trend, which is the most widespread among art historians and contemporary critics, it narrows the definition of Islamic art to include only visual expressions of Islamic creativity in the areas of architecture, writing, and relevant applied arts, as well as creative harmonizations of the aesthetic and the functional in, for example, architectural structures, books, manuscripts, tools, furnishings, and various other practical items.

This concept of Islamic art forms the epistemological nucleus of the study of buildings, paintings, rarities, manuscripts, and other material objects produced over time within the context of Islamic civilization and capable of being described, categorized and displayed as works of art that bear the marks of Islamic identity and culture.

The aforementioned aesthetic concept of Islamic art differs from what we might term the archeological concept of this art in terms of vision, method, and the nature of the knowledge on which it focuses. An archeologist views Islamic architectural structures, manuscripts and other productions merely as intriguing antiquities whose cultural and historical origins are worthy of study. Seen from this perspective, the most suitable location for Islamic artistic artifacts is a museum. The

theoretical study of Islamic art emerged, in fact, in response to archeologists' need for accurate scientific information on Islamic artistic remains from a material, industrial, historical, sociological, economic and cultural perspective.

The present study views Islamic art as a subject of archeological study and treats its evolution as part of the historical study of art in the broader sense. At the same time, it paves the way for an epistemological shift from viewing Islamic art as a material concept having to do with beautiful rarities and relics that have grown out of Islamic cultural and artistic creativity, to a theoretical concept associated with a vision, a principle, a theory and a method. This theoretical concept provides the intellectual and cultural foundation for a critical philosophical science of Islamic artistic beauty to which we might refer as 'the science of Islamic art,' or 'the Islamic aesthetic' that evaluates visual artistic creations in terms of both beauty and practical usefulness.

One of the most notable benefits of this epistemological shift is that the study of Islamic art has come to rest on a philosophical perspective that has generated principles, theories, and critical methodologies that serve as the foundations for the various genres, forms, styles and schools of Islamic artistic production.

This philosophical perspective has given rise to numerous specific and general theories of Islamic art. These varied and interrelated theories of Islamic art incorporate elements from diverse fields of academic study and research relating to social and cultural studies as well as, to some degree, the pure and applied sciences.

More than one theory has been put forward to explain the various aspects of the Islamic artistic phenomenon and their intimate connections with individuals, society, history, culture, or the receptive audience. Each topic of study is associated with specific aims, and for the achievement of these aims, appropriate tools need to be devised. Hence, for example, the tools required to study the link between Islamic art and the prevailing customs and traditions of its producers' society (the culture of Islamic art) will differ from the tools required to study the link between Islamic art as a social activity and the overall social system that governs this art's aesthetic and functional aspects (the sociology of Islamic art). Similarly, these two types of study will

differ from the study of the link between Islamic art and its inward impact on both artist and recipient (the psychology of Islamic art).

Thus, these topics of study, and possibly others as well, are intimately and organically linked within what we might term 'the theory of Islamic art.' A theory of Islamic art functions essentially to construct intellectual frameworks, epistemological categories, methodologies, stylistic formulations, and practical and theoretical approaches to Islamic works of art and to the social, cultural, religious and philosophical phenomenon they represent.

Can there be Art Without Theory?

My primary aim in writing this book is to examine the epistemological and methodological boundaries that separate archaeological, historical and documentary studies of Islamic art and architecture on one hand, and philosophical, aesthetic, critical studies of these phenomena on the other.

Archaeological, historical and documentary studies of Islamic art and artefacts are important for their ability to demonstrate the cultural value of works of Islamic art and artefacts based on the time periods to which they have been dated; however, such studies devote little if any attention to such works' aesthetic and artistic value. In fact, historical studies of Islamic art have been detrimental to the development of Islamic art theory by promoting the notion, common among modern students of Islamic art, that such art is nothing but a historical phenomenon whose effects have come down to us in the modern age "without an accompanying philosophy or the biographies of those who produced it, and without explanation of its techniques or styles."

The statement just quoted mistakenly suggests that the works of Islamic art and architecture that have been bequeathed to us lack an underlying philosophical, aesthetic and artistic theory. If such a statement is taken at face value, it could well lead to another mistaken belief, namely, that no Islamic philosophical, aesthetic and artistic theory existed to begin with. In fact, some modern scholars of Islamic art have argued for this supposed absence of a theory of Islamic art by going so far as to say that "Islamic Arab civilization felt no need to

produce a theoretical, methodological discourse around beauty on which we might draw in discussing the aesthetic foundations of Islamic art.”

The Theory and Study of Islamic Art

This extended digression into matters epistemological and methodological may make it possible to study the theory of Islamic art as a single, comprehensive theme via three interrelated and somewhat overlapping, approaches:

First: An attempt to establish a framework for this theory based on the simplest possible procedural definition of the term ‘theory’. Defined thus, a theory is an idea, perspective or vision ordered around a set of concepts and relationships that provide a thematically organised explanation of the structural, descriptive and functional aspects of a given phenomenon.

Generally speaking, a theory is one of the necessary foundations, defining principles, and logical procedures of a scientific discipline. More specifically, a theory represents the abstract aspect of a discipline. In the case of Islamic art, theory deals with the impact of human knowledge and its creative aspects on the artistic phenomenon. As such, what is termed ‘artistic theory’ provides the knowledge-based substance of aesthetics.

Given the foregoing, the expression ‘theory of Islamic art’ may be said to refer to the interrelated and evolving ideas, concepts, opinions, perspectives and interpretations related to the structural, descriptive and functional nature of the Islamic artistic phenomenon. The theory of Islamic art was developed by aestheticists and early Muslim philosophers of art, and revisited by later scholars within the context of the academic study and analysis of this phenomenon and its roots.

Second: General academic research into the components and defining features of this theory in light of the Islamic intellectual, epistemological and cultural heritage, that is, based on ideas, opinions, perspectives and interpretations found in Arabic Islamic writings, or in response to questions about the critical link between tradition and modernity. Such questions relate, for example, to:

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- the general Islamic concept of art
- the definition of Islamic art
- the system of Islamic arts viewed in terms of both how they relate to knowledge overall, and their specific categorization as sources of knowledge
- the aesthetic and practical values of Islamic art
- the comprehensive defining features of Islamic art, including the dialectic between unity and diversity as the epistemological core of any artistic theory.

Third: The critical study of art theory as it applies specifically to Islamic art, which branches off epistemologically and methodologically from more general research efforts.

What we are referring to here is the epistemological theory of the Islamic arts, including Islamic architecture or Arabic calligraphy, for example, the historical origins and sources of Islamic art, the sociology of Islamic art, the Islamic position on pictorial representation, on nature and matter and their relationship to Islamic art, or other topics of relevance to Islamic art that might be studied from an academic-aesthetic perspective.

The Emergence and Development of the Study of Islamic Art

The theory of Islamic art in both its general and specific forms needs to be studied, analysed and critiqued, and its origins identified. Moreover, a clear cultural framework needs to be established for all areas of relevance to Islamic art, including the linguistic sciences, semantics, the study of symbolism and values, sociology, and communication, as well as the discipline that, in relation to the epistemological structure of this art, we might term the science of the elements of Islamic art.

In a break with the past, we now study the theory of Islamic art by focusing on the aesthetic knowledge of relevance to this art rather than on the merely factual knowledge that one gleans from dividing history into political periods as was done in traditional studies of Islamic art, which dated this or that work of art back to a given period, and then

drew conclusions about said art based on this dating process and what was known about the period in question.

The first academic use of the term 'Islamic art' goes back to the early nineteenth century CE/third century AH. As for the study of Islamic art, it can be divided into the following three developmental phases:

First: The first of these three phases witnessed the discovery of works of art from various earlier periods. This was followed by attempts to identify the roles these works of art played both culturally and functionally. Islamic artefacts were studied by Orientalists from a variety of cultural backgrounds who approached their research with varying methodologies and brought a variety of aspirations to their work.

Second: During the second phase, academic studies progressed in revealing the distinctive nature of Islamic art and the knowledge it had to offer. This period witnessed research efforts on the part of a number of Orientalists who settled in Muslim lands to study Islamic art. A number of Arab and Muslim researchers studied in their own countries, such as Egypt, for example, under these Orientalists, or were sent on academic missions to study Islamic art in Western museums and academic institutions.

This second stage might be viewed as the foundational phase for the fledgling science of Islamic art. However, the discipline was coloured at this stage by Orientalists' notions, opinions, conceptualizations and analyses, which were frequently biased against the recognition of Islamic art's authenticity and richness as a source of new knowledge.

Third: The third phase might be described as that of post-Orientalist academic activity. As such, it served as a corrective to inaccurate Orientalist conceptualizations which exerted a negative impact on the manner in which Islamic works of art were being approached. This corrective took the form of an epistemological and methodological shift away from the historically based approach – which tended to be biased in favour of Sassanid, Byzantine, Coptic, Ethiopian and other art forms at the expense of the Islamic – to a more subjective approach that entailed philosophical and aesthetic treatments of the phenomenon of Islamic art.

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During this third phase, which is still ongoing, most of the ideas, opinions, conceptualizations and analyses that emerged from what we might term ‘Orientalist aesthetics’ have undergone serious re-examination. This re-examination has involved analyses of basic themes and issues raised by Islamic art, such as the concept of Islamic art and its epistemological boundaries; the origin of Islamic art and its subjective and objective sources; the religious, political, epistemological and functional values associated with Islamic art, and questions related to the cultural and aesthetic features of Islamic art, which can serve as the epistemological basis and semantic focus for the theory of Islamic art on both the general and specific levels.



DIVINE ONENESS as the principle of beauty is perhaps quintessentially Islamic artistic expression and experience and what it celebrates. Why has Islamic art evolved as it has, what forms does it take, what is the logic underlying it? What message is the Muslim artist attempting to convey, what emotion is he seeking to evoke? This work views Islamic art as a subject of archeological study and treats its evolution as part of the historical study of art in the broader sense. At the same time, it paves the way for an epistemological shift from viewing Islamic art as a material concept having to do with beautiful rarities and relics that have grown out of Islamic cultural and artistic creativity, to a theoretical concept associated with a vision, a principle, a theory and a method. This theoretical concept provides the intellectual and cultural foundation for a critical philosophical science of Islamic artistic beauty to which we might refer as ‘the science of Islamic art,’ or ‘the Islamic aesthetic’ that evaluates visual artistic creations in terms of both beauty and practical usefulness. In the process the study also explores orientalist misconceptions, challenging some of the premises with which it has approached Islamic art, with judgement rooted in a cultural framework alien to the spiritual perspective of Islam.

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