

# **Beauty and Aesthetics in Islamic Architecture**

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## **Abstract**

Islam is an integral way of life which considers beauty to be a divine quality. In fact, Islam is the religion of beauty and perfection. Islamic architecture refers to any architecture in Islamic culture or in Islamic context. Islamic architecture exhibits the sacred order of Islam and its distinctive feature is religious aspect. Yet, Islamic architecture is not completely varied from all other architectural styles; even, it borrows from some of them such as Persian architecture. The aim of this study is investigating the importance of beauty and aesthetics in Islamic architecture. Results show that Islam does not consider art and beauty as a luxury. It considers beauty to be a divine quality. Unity is one of main aesthetically concepts which has merged in Islamic architecture; It was called as a base for life cycle and was reflected on art and architecture to such an extent that we can count it as the language of Islamic architecture. Based on this language, Paradise is a perfect epitome in all respects of aesthetics.

**Keywords:** Islam, beauty, Islamic architecture, unity, aesthetics.

## Introduction

Architecture is the solemn identity of peoples and civilizations. Architecture is unique structures that become landmarks in an environment; landmarks that exemplify the identity, the shape and the tone of a society, landmarks that collectively represent the image a society has of itself [1]. The architectural nature, which is also called the architectural style or pattern, is only the result of a set of several intermeshed factors that react and melt together in the crucible of total utilization of the building, construction techniques, building materials, the characteristics of the region or area and the prevailing customs and traditions, in addition to social, economic, cultural and spiritual factors and the level of local wealth.

Architecture combines contemporary culture, sciences and needs with the architect's inspiration and shapes them in a mould of beauty, and it has at its disposal a set of complementary aspects of art, such as etching, engraving decoration, colors, lighting, furnishing and a myriad of other arts [2]. Architecture is the art par excellence of ordering space, and all sacred architecture achieves its basic goal of placing man in the presence of the divine [3].

## Aesthetics

Aesthetics is a branch of value theory which studies sensory or sensorial-emotional values, sometimes called judgments of sentiment or taste; what makes something beautiful, sublime, disgusting, fun, cute, silly, entertaining, pretentious, discordant, harmonious, boring, humorous, or tragic. Aesthetics is closely allied with, or perhaps synonymous with, the philosophy of art [4]. In short, aesthetics is considered as artistics, as an explication of art with particular attention to beauty [5]. Wolfgang Iser (1997) maintains that 'the aesthetic' is a polysemy in that there is a wide variety of usages of the term circulating which, although inter-related, do give one quite distinct perspectives on the topic. Some of these are as follows:

\* The appreciation of good design and that which provides good form i.e. cosmetics;

\* The ability to make a harmonious appealing whole from disparate elements;

\* The ability to perceive contrasts between contiguous elements e.g. color;

\* The appreciation of the sensuous - that which appeals to all the senses;

\* The appreciation of that which requires the higher cultivated senses;

\* That which requires perceptiveness rather than sensateness;

\* That which requires time to appreciate and is beyond the immediacy of the moment;

\* That which concerns itself with phenomenological appearance and not substance, and

\* The ability to draw all the above elements into one piece of artistic creation [6].

## Islamic architecture

Islamic Art and Architecture, the art and architecture of those areas of the Middle East, North Africa, northern India, and Spain that fell under the domination of Islam at various times from the 7th century ad [7]. Islamic Art is an illustrated history that takes a broad approach, covering architecture, crafts, and aesthetics as well as "art" in the narrow sense, and placing them within their social and historical context [8].

Islamic architecture extended from the 7th to the 19th century. Muslims intelligently communicated with other cultures by maintaining rather than erasing them. They steered those cultures to serve Islam and cope with the mainstream in the Islamic World. For example, statues and pictures were forbidden in the architecture of mosques, so Muslim engineers alternatively mastered columns, mosaic, foliage and engineering decorations. They also paid special attention to architectural and aesthetic designs which revolutionized Islamic architecture. Today, architecture is considered a reflection to civilization and an open book in which the history of a nation is recorded.

Islamic architecture has innovated special ornamentations, colors and engineering units which

can be adopted anywhere. The triangle, square and circle for instance are facts because they comply with mental concepts. A new concept of unity has merged in Islamic architecture. It calls for unity as a base for life cycle. This was reflected on intellectual aspects, art and architecture [9].

Islamic architecture has encompassed a wide range of both secular and religious styles from the foundation of Islam to the present day, influencing the design and construction of buildings and structures within the sphere of Islamic culture. Islamic architecture borrows heavily from Persian architecture and in many ways can be called an extension and further evolution of Persian architecture [10]. From Isfahan through Samarkand to the Taj Mahal, the luxurious 'Persian style' took Islamic art to new aesthetic heights [11].

It is almost impossible to say that Islamic architecture and Islamic art have a uniform Arab, Persian, Turkish or Indian trend, as the will or the ruler in the Islamic Era played an essential role in that respect. The unity of religious doctrine also had a great influence on the uniformity of development [2]. The architecture of the Muslim world, highly diverse but unified by climate, culture, and a love of geometric and arabesque ornament, as well as by the mobility of ideas, artisans, and architects throughout the region. The central public buildings are mosques, often with a dome and minaret; domestic houses face an inner courtyard and are grouped together, with vaulted streets linking the blocks.

In Islam there is a general dislike of figurative representation. As a consequence, architectural decoration relies on calligraphic script and abstract ornament, often combined with a passion for color, intensified by the desert environment. The domes and courts of such buildings as the 17th-century Masjid-i-Sháh, Esfahan, Iran, are entirely clothed in faience tiles.

In a largely arid region, the Islamic garden represents an image of paradise. The basic plan is a rectangular enclosure walled against the dust of the desert and divided into at least four sections by water channels.

Pavilions are placed at focal points within the gardens. An example is Chehel Sutun, Esfahan, 17th century [12].

Islamic architecture heavily depends on engineering and aesthetic principles. We should make it clear that Islamic architecture had originated and then its features were inferred accordingly. However, the religious aspect is the most distinctive feature to which Islamic architecture is indebted. It is represented in the Islamic aesthetic mentality [9].

### **Sacred architecture of Islam**

The sacred architecture of Islam is a crystallization of Islamic spirituality and a key for the understanding of this spirituality. The spaces it has created provide a haven in which man can savor, by grace of this very spirituality, the peace and harmony of not only uncorrupted nature but also paradise of which such a nature is a reflection. This paradise man carries at the depth and center of his being where the divine presence reverberates.

Islam is pre-eminently the religion of unity on all levels: ontological, social, and political. The unity of Islamic art is related not only to the unity of the cosmos and beyond that to the unity of the Divine Principle itself, but also to the unity of the life of the individual and the community. By integrating religion into all facets of life and life itself into the rhythms of rites and patterns determined by religion, Islam reflects a wholeness which is abundantly reflected in its aesthetic ideals [3]. The incredible design, engineering and language of Islamic architecture and arts are very fascinating.

### **Beauty in Islam**

"God is Beautiful and Loves Beauty" -So said the Prophet of Islam 1400 years ago. He also said, "God likes that when you do anything, you do it excellently." Such prophetic sayings (hadiths) have provided the impetus for Muslims' embellishment and beautification of their places of worship, homes, and even of articles in common use in everyday life [13]. Beauty is considered to be a divine quality and

is articulated as such in Islamic art and architecture. An aesthetic joy of beauty is emphasized in calligraphy and pottery, and directs the serenity of contemplation when sitting on a traditional carpet. Beauty itself, therefore, is believed to emerge from spirituality and to guide the inner qualities of peace, harmony and equilibrium in artistic manifestations of the Islamic religion [14]. Ja'fari Tabrizi presents a comprehensive definition of beauty: "Beauty is a picturesque and crystalline appearance that covers perfection, and perfection is to locate an object in the vessel of necessities and merits" [15].

In general certain colors which can be associated with water and gardens can be quite significant as in Islamic beliefs the paradise is depicted as a beautiful garden, filled with flowers, fruit and fountains. This imagery often appears in carpet design as well as in other objects [16].

### **Islamic aesthetic**

Islam does have an attitude toward art; that attitude is, moreover, strongly emphasized and, what is more important, positive. Accordingly, there exists also an aesthetics of Islam, only it is not systematized but expressed in the form of individual, unconnected views and thus in a form we might call basic foundations of aesthetic [17].

Islamic art is more than just a spectacle of domes and minarets, dazzling illuminated manuscripts and exotic carpets; it is a true expression of a rich culture that has unified countries as far apart as Spain and Java, Central Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, over some thousand years and more. Islamic art expresses the religious beliefs, social and economic structure, political motivation and visual sensibility of a pervasive and unified tradition. Underlying the variations from century to century and from region to region, a cohesive unity of aesthetic conception testifies to the power and breadth of Islam [3]. Islamic art is not, properly speaking, an art pertaining 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 [10]. Islam

is much more than a formal religion; it is an integral way of life. In many ways it is a more determining factor in the experience of its followers than any other world religion.

Contrary to modern ideas, Islam does not consider art and beauty as a luxury. It considers beauty to be a divine quality. The Islamic aesthetic wishes beauty to be all pervasive and hence the art that developed made sure that a Muslim encountered the joy of beauty at all levels of his existence. The final aim of all Islamic aesthetic is to create a unified wholeness [3].

### **Mathematical system in Islamic architecture**

The system of measurement based on a constant awareness of the proportions of the human body and on principles of geometry are the key factors applied in Islamic architecture, in fact in all their creative work. Besides, of no less significance, is beauty (aesthetics) in architecture, which comes essentially from proportioning, and proportioning also results from geometry [18]. "The square and the circle, and their immediately related shapes are the simplest, most perfect and stable geometrical forms found in nature. These symbolize the perfection of God and His Universe" [19].

There is General tendency of using geometric shapes and systematic patterns in Islamic art – It comes from the religious significance found in scientific investigation of the laws and order underlying the universe, which can be applied in design through the choice of geometric shapes; there is also General tendency to symmetry – It is also related with the monotheistic aspect of the religion. It suggests a special attention to symmetry in design [20].

Therefore, in Islamic architecture, the mathematical system, based on geometry, is established by the application of square and an axis, besides the concept of centrality. The application of square as a generic unit brings the relationship between all parts, from the smallest to the biggest dimension. The intellectual mathematical system is complemented by the aesthetic qualities of a sequence of ordered,

but diversified, spaces of extraordinary quality [18]. The history of Muslim art is above all the history of the applied arts. Rulers and royal designers actively interested themselves in these arts. Textiles, ceramics, and metalwork were all collected and displayed for aesthetic reasons [8].

### **Motifs of Islamic art and architecture**

Art is the mirror of a culture and its world view. There is no case to which this statement more directly applies than to the art of the Islamic world. Not only does its art reflect its cultural values, but even more importantly, the way in which its adherents, the Muslims, view the spiritual realm, the universe, life, and the relationship of the parts to the whole. The Muslim is convinced of the balance and harmony of all things in existence, even when there appear to be confusing contradictions and imbalances, regarding these as the reflection of man's limited understanding and knowledge [13].

Islamic art must be considered in its entirety because each building and each object embodies identical principles. Though objects and buildings differ in quality of execution and style, the same ideas, forms and designs constantly recur. These patterns clearly demonstrate the fascination of Islamic artists with the visual principles of repetition, symmetry, and continuous generation of pattern. Thus the objects and their decoration seem to reflect only a fleeting impression, being but a portion of a design which seems capable of extending itself beyond the form it decorates and by implication beyond the world of reality. And if a definite spatial limit is reached, such as a terminal wall in a piece of architecture, which stops the progress of anyone moving through the building, it will be decorated with patterns that repeat themselves, leading on visually beyond the given limit of the wall surface. This is symbolic of an endless, infinite extension beyond ordinary, mundane reality into a higher invisible realm [3].

Islamic Art and Architecture shows not only the range, but also the amazing skill of the Islamic architect. The many extraordinary photographs of Islam's

monuments, ceramics, miniatures and carpets give a revealing insight into Islamic culture [11]. Two dominant features of Islamic art and architecture, the importance of calligraphic ornamentation and the form of the mosque, are intimately related to the Islamic faith and were developed in the early days of the religion [7].

Distinguishing motifs of Islamic architecture have always been ordered repetition, radiating structures, and rhythmic, metric patterns. In this respect, fractal geometry has been a key utility, especially for mosques and palaces. Other significant features employed as motifs include columns, piers and arches, organized and interwoven with alternating sequences of niches and colonnades [10]. The role of structure and ornamentation in Islamic architecture is very much interrelated [21]. Almost half the space in Islamic Art is taken up by illustrations, mostly high quality color photographs of buildings, items, and manuscripts, which provide a splendid accompaniment to the text. The result is attractive, readable, and informative [8].

### **Paradise: a perfect epitome of beauty**

It is possible to establish one more specific perception of Islam related to the phenomenon of aesthetic beauty. Namely, beauty as adornment and blessing from Allah, based on this same perception, is not inherent only to humans in this earthly life and this earthly environment; it is also incorporated into the presentation of lives of believers in an eschatological world, in paradise. In many descriptions of paradise, objects of beauty and beauty itself are stressed in exaggerated dimensions. According to them, beauty is considered to be an integral part of paradise itself and to be a promised blessing for the believers. The Qur'an and hadith state that paradise and paradise enjoyments are eternal, so according to this the notion of beauty is also eternal in paradise. This entails, according to the perception of Islam, that beauty is not just the earthly adornment, but also a godly blessing in paradise, it is there as an integral part of the world of enjoyments, and just like paradise and

all life within it, it is non-passable, eternal. Based on this one can claim that the notion of beauty is also an integral part of the Islamic faith. By these same elements, the phenomenon of beauty in the Islam can be denoted by the degree of exaltation.

Before us is a picturesque, actually masterful presentation of the ideal landscape, even of garden and landscape architecture. Today garden and landscape architecture is also denoted as art, but regardless of this and regardless of the European aesthetic theories, even if it was not for the art in the nature, it is an undoubted fact that the man has always adored natural landscapes, he observed it, saw in it beauty, sensually enjoyed this beauty and took an observant, that is, aesthetic attitude towards it. This is exactly how all of this has been also presented in the Islam, including parts of the Qur'an with descriptions of paradise, and this means with presentations of this world's nature and its landscapes [17].

## Conclusion

Islamic architecture has innovated special ornamentations, colors and engineering units which can be adopted anywhere. Yet, it is not completely varied from all other architectural styles; even, it borrows from some of them such as Persian architecture. Islamic architecture has encompassed a wide range of both secular and religious styles from the foundation of Islam to the present day, influencing the design and construction of buildings and structures. Beauty is considered to be a divine quality and is articulated as such in Islamic art and architecture. The Islamic aesthetic wishes beauty to be all pervasive and the final aim of all Islamic aesthetic is to create a unified wholeness. We can count paradise as a perfect epitome in Islamic architecture in all respects of aesthetics.

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