

# A Trace of Islamic Art in Thai Mosques

Pibool Waijitragum

**Abstract**—The mosques have been appearance in Thailand since Ayutthaya Kingdom (1350 to 1767 A.D.) Until today, more than 400 years later; there are many styles of art form behind their structure. This research intended to identify Islamic Art in Thai mosques. A framework was applied using qualitative research methods; Thai Muslims with dynamic roles in Islamic culture were interviewed. In addition, a field survey of 40 selected mosques from 175 Thai mosques was studied. Data analysis will be according to the pattern of each period. The identification of Islamic Art in Thai Mosques are 1) the image of Thai identity: with Thai traditional art style and Government policy. 2) The image of the Ethnological identity: with the traditional culture of Asian Muslims in Thailand. 3) The image of the Nostalgia identity: with Islamic and Arabian conservative style. 4) The image of the Neo Classic identity: with Neo – Classic and Contemporary art. 5) The image of the new identity: with Post Modern and Deconstruction art.

**Keywords**—Islamic Art, Thai Mosques, Floral Arabesque, Geometric Form, Arabic Calligraphy.

## I. INTRODUCTION

IN 13th century, the Islamic religion was introduced into Thailand during the Sukhothai Kingdom (1257 to 1350 A.D.) and prospered during the following Ayutthaya Kingdom (1350 to 1767 A.D.) Four century later Islam was established as a minority faith with an estimated 6 million believers. [1] Popular opinion seems to hold that a vast Muslim minority is found in the three southern provinces of Yala, Pattani and Narathiwat. However, research from the Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs indicates that only 18% of Thai Muslims live in those three provinces. The rest are scattered throughout Thailand, with the largest concentrations being in Bangkok and throughout most of the Southern provinces. According to the National Statistics Office, Muslims in Southern Thailand in 2005 made up 30.4% of the general population above the age of 15, while less than 3% in other parts of the country.

The Qur'an never directly mentions to the art. But ever refers to the beauty which God created. [2] The essential of Qur'an was related to the way of life and mind in good. The Goodness was symbolized with all beautiful and created things. Muslims were applying it to lead a valuable life with intelligence and faith. Value, function, systematic and reason are priority for Islamic designers to represent the beauty within the mosques, to symbolize their life style. The Muslim character is represented by three main structures of design: Arabesque, Geometric Form and Arabic Calligraphy; as on Fig. 1. [3]

Author: Doctor of Fine and Applied Arts, Lecturer of Department of Graphic and Multimedia Design, Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University, Thailand (cheeze56@gmail.com)

Islamic art developed from many sources; Roman, Early Christian art, and Byzantine styles which were taken over in early Islamic art and architecture. The influence of the Sassanian art of pre-Islamic Persia was of paramount significance. Central Asian styles were brought in through various nomadic incursions. Chinese influences also had an important effect on Islamic painting, pottery and textiles. Islamic art flourished under The Umayyad Dynasty and The Sassanian Dynasty (224 – 651) is the period of rapid expansion of the Islamic art forms.

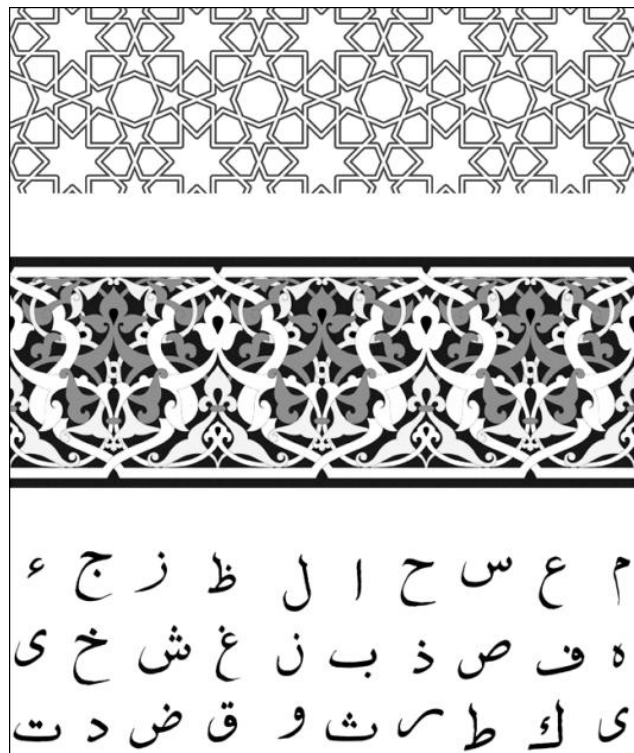


Fig. 1 The elements of Islamic art

The mosque represented the house of God, as community of Muslims and symbol of Islam. [4] Muslims focused on the mosque and use Islamic art as the embodiment of beauty; as on Fig. 2. The octagon pattern floor plan was representative of Islamic Art during the first Islamic era in Damascus. There are a number of poles, fountain on the square that is remembrance of God. The mosque also reflects the lifestyle and culture. It was represented Muslims' characteristic vary by geography and ethnicity.

Many Thai mosques were built with Thai traditional architecture and decorated with Thai traditional art. The main stream of Islamic art in Thailand has been inherited from India / Persian and Java / Malayan. These are two lines of Arabian

civilizations that mixed with local ethnic cultures. [5] Islamic art and Thai art demonstrate a similar pattern. The examples are pattern of Flora fall, pattern of Rice bush and pattern of Western Pudtan: the pattern of the Thai flower mixed with Islamic floral, the flowing line of an ivy plant branching out and the idealized intertwining pattern of leaves and flowers. Then join to the end with Kankhot pattern: Thai vector with curved line and animal head end; as on Fig. 3. That has a bunch of vine winding around the arcs. Other example of Thai art is Krahnok Kankhot: the head of animal join with flame pattern in Thai art. This species is similar to Persian woven rugs and carpets from India. [6]

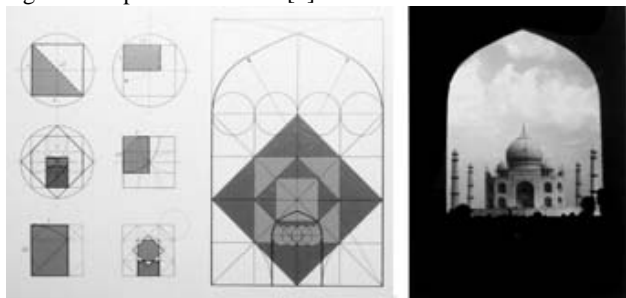


Fig. 3 Thai traditional art in Thai Mosques

The Framework of this research was based on 3 words; as on Fig. 4. First is Islamization: the principles of Islam, the beauty of God. Second is Localization: the life and culture in Thailand, the environmental effect. Third is Globalization [7]: the visual communication and sign recognition of all Muslims.



Fig. 2 Geometric form in the Mosques

II. METHODOLOGY

This research intends to identify the difference of Islamic art in Thai Mosques. Identify the concepts behind their image; what is the factor of their difference image and how are they using the elements of Islamic art? The research methodologies are; 7 Thai Muslims with dynamic roles in Islamic culture were interviewed. In addition, a field survey of 40 selected mosques from 175 mosques in Bangkok. Data analysis was based on the concepts behind their image; local lifestyle, culture, construction material and the characteristics of each period.

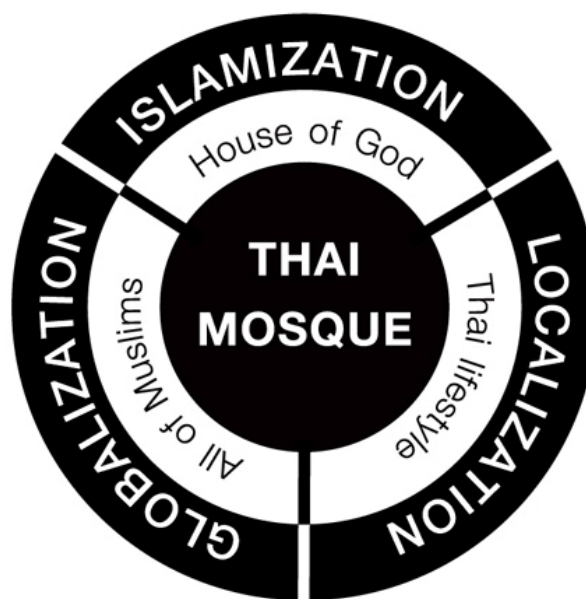


Fig. 4 Conceptual Framework

The elements of Thai mosques consist of 1) the principles of Islam, related to the meaning of Holy Qur'an in the mosques structure: Unity, Respect, Knowledge, Balance, Modesty, and Remembrance. [8] 2) The Muslim life and culture in Thailand, related to local material and the process of traditional art and 3) the sign recognition of all Muslims in the world, related to the rule of Islamic art. The findings of this research reveal as following.

### III. RESULTS

Overall, the findings of this research reveal that Thai Mosques were built under the 5 images according to the circumstance of society. Since the late Ayutthaya period to early Rattanakosin period, the Mosque was under the patronage from the government. Thai traditional art was selected during this period. Then the Muslims from around Thailand immigrated to Bangkok and brought their local art and blended it to Thai style. After the end of Islamic Empire in the Middle East, the Arabian styles have been evident to Thai Mosque. The last is the way that Muslims maintain their identity with the adjustment to the new world. Detail of all concepts as following:

#### 1) The image of Thai identity

Thai art was mainstream art in this image; Most of Thai Mosques in Bangkok were constructed under the patronage from Muslim government officer. Government policy were accepted from all Thai Muslims and shown in Thai traditional structure. There are many of Mosques within Thai traditional architecture inside and outside; as on Fig. 5. High gable roof with full decoration in low-relief embossed Stucco and sculpture. Mimbar and Mihrab: site where the Imam performs Salat formed with Arabian Calligraphy and Geometric pattern. This Islamic art has been applied to wall tile and arch.



Fig. 5 Islamic art with image of Thai identity

#### 2) The image of the Ethnological identity

Asian folk art was mainstream art in this image; Thai Mosques were constructed under the patronage from immigrant Muslim from Malaysia, Indonesia and India. The architecture of Mosque depends on geography and ethnography. The Indonesian Mosque shown on Java style, The Malaysian Mosque has a Malayan style and The Indian Mosque has a Mugal style; as on Fig. 6. Their inside has an Arabian Calligraphy and Geometric pattern especially in Mimbar and Mihrab. There is no Thai art ever seen from this concept. Star and moon sign appeared in Thailand from this period.



Fig. 6 Islamic art with image of Ethnological identity

#### 3) The image of the Nostalgia identity

Arabian art and Persian art were mainstream art in this image; Thai Mosques were constructed under the patronage from trader Muslim from Iran and India. The extravagance of the Mosque depended on the prosperity of patron. Many of Thai Muslims were graduated from Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Iran and Turkish. They received religious education based on an intensive Islamic identity that stood in the Middle East for several centuries and brought this cultural heritage to Thailand; as on Fig. 7. In general, Mosque's structure was similar to an Arabian Mosque with Arabian Calligraphy, Arabesque and Geometric form. Some Mosque intends to emulate the Mosque Esfahan of Iran. Gorgeously decorated may be dazzling in the charm of Arabian art.



Fig. 7: Islamic art with image of Nostalgia identity

#### 4) The image of the Neo Classic identity

Neo – Classic and Contemporary art were mainstream art in this image, Thai Mosques were construct under the image of European art. Several Mosques look like Classic era building, others feel western look; as on Fig. 8. Islamic art still exists inside but more gorgeous with a dazzling golden peel in Arabian Calligraphy, Arabesque and Geometric forms. Mimbar and Mihrab maintain to the original heritage. There is Western Arabesque: Arabian floral mixed with Art Nouveau style reveal in some Mosque and under the patronage of Malayan Muslim.



Fig. 8 Islamic art with image of Neo Classic identity

#### 5) The image of the new identity

Post Modern and Deconstruction art were mainstream art in this image; Thai Mosques were constructing under the image of Post Modern and new art form. Most of Thai Mosques look like sculptures more than building, feel like an umbrella or mushroom. Escape from an original Arabian style; as on Fig. 9. Islamic art still exists inside but more simple than the past. Arabian Calligraphy, Arabesque and Geometric forms remain to functional elements. Mimbar and Mihrab maintain to the original heritage. The New identity Mosques were under the patronage of Middle East Muslim.



Fig. 9 Islamic art with image of Modern identity

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Throughout 400 years of Thai mosques there are Islamic Art appearances within 5 images: 1) the image of Thai identity: with Thai traditional art style and Government policy. 2) The image of the Ethnological identity: with the traditional culture of Asian Muslims in Thailand. 3) The image of the Nostalgia identity: with Islamic and Arabian conservative style. 4) The image of the Neo Classic identity: with Neo – Classic and Contemporary art. 5) The image of the new identity: with Post Modern and Deconstruction art.

All of Thai mosques structure were based on 3 words; Islamization: the principles of Islam and the beauty of God. Localization: the life and culture in Thailand and the environmental effect. Globalization: the visual communication and sign recognition of all Muslims. Each image of Thai mosques were dominated with 3 Axis; Floral Arabesque, Geometric Form and Arabic Calligraphy.

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