

# The Influence of Islamic Arts on Omani Weaving Motifs

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**Abstract**—The influence of Islam on arts can be found primarily in calligraphy, arabesque designs and architecture. Also, geometric designs were used quite extensively. Muslim craftsmen produced stunning designs based on simple geometric principles and traditional motifs which were used to decorate many surfaces. The idea of interlacing simple rectilinear lines to form the patterns impressed Arabs. Nomads of Persia, Turks and Mongols were equally impressed with the designs so they begin to use them in their homes in carpet weaving. Islamic designs, motifs and colours which were used became common place and served to influence people's tastes. Modern life style and contemporary products have changed the style of people's daily lives, however, people still long for the nomadic way of life. This is clearly reflected in people's homes. In a great many Muslim homes, Islamic decorative motifs can be seen along with traditional 'Bedouin' style furnishing, especially in homes of the Arabian Peninsula.

**Keywords**—Cultural heritage, textile design, Islamic art, motifs.

## I. INTRODUCTION

ISLAMIC instructions in the Qur'an have social as well as spiritual implications. Muslim artists have to abide by these principles, especially the complete ban on representational art. In relation to the opposition to representational art, "The basis of this opposition is that Islam tries to prevent believers from straying from monotheism in its strictest sense. Therefore, Islamic artists looked for other forms of expressing themselves besides realism or naturalism. In Islam, abstract ornamentation and, in particular, calligraphy reached an incomparable peak. In calligraphy, one can see a reflection of the artist's love for the revealed text." [12] Therefore, Muslim artists took a different direction from Byzantine and Sasanian artists and established their own designs and techniques known as geometric patterns, floral designs and calligraphy, which were passed down and diffused through various crafts. The essence of Islamic art is that it is not supposed to imitate or represent the nature of human beings. Artists can never compete with what God has made. However, nothing is considered to be wrong if artists depict humans in the abstract. On the other hand, there are no objections to an artist depicting objects in his natural environment.

Islamic art was developed over the centuries and was influenced by different Islamic rulers. Most Arab Islamic countries were ruled by different empires and each dynasty founded a new capital in different parts of the empire, where their royal courts attracted skilled local craftsmen [7]. They had their own pre-existing artistic traditions as well as those

who worked in the old capital [9]. These craftsmen, under new nascent patronage, and interchanging experiences, produced unique and gradually more developed artistic products which characterized each dynasty. There is no doubt that a succession of empires influenced Islamic art in various ways. The different empires influenced all types of arts. The towns and cities prospered through trade and imported goods which exerted a strong influence on the styles and the patterns of the local art. These impacts created similarities that are found in most of Islamic decorated arts in Islamic lands [13]. The three distinct types will be discussed below:

## II. GEOMETRICAL PATTERNS

Due to the strict religious sanctions, Muslims are forbidden to create representational art. This has meant that Muslim artists had to rely heavily on abstract patterns. Geometry has provided craftsmen with a fertile source of designs. These geometric patterns are not exclusively employed in Islamic art. They have been used by the Romans, Chinese and Celts [1]. Perhaps the major difference is geometric designs have been used to a much greater extent throughout Islamic cultures by Muslim artists [1], [5], [13] states that "The geometric patterns clearly demonstrate the fascination of Islamic artists with the visual principles of repetition, symmetry and continuous generation of patterns. Clearly, the art of geometry is related to the study of mathematics and other sciences, which were keenly pursued by scientists and philosophers of Islam." Muslims were the greatest mathematicians, astronomers, and scientists of the period and their contributions influenced artists and played an essential part in creating this unique style of patterns and in particular the coherent system of lines in designs [10]. Since geometric patterns are based on symmetry only, "An object is symmetric if there are translations, rotations, reflections, or glide reflections which when applied to the object leave the appearance of the object unchanged" [1], a minimal geometrical knowledge is required to create a particular pattern (Fig. 1). This new style with their optical effects of balancing the positive and negative areas became highly important in the Islamic arts; its geometric shapes had symbolic and philosophical significance to the Muslims artists [5]. Geometric designs extended to cover the entire surfaces and usually utilized in combination of floral and calligraphic designs. The infinite patterns and shapes used by Muslim artists to represent the unchanging laws of God. The geometric designs are made up of simple geometric figures such as squares, rectangles, lines, circles and triangles to form a pattern; these were then used to construct complex patterns based upon rules and certain procedures. These designs could

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be reduced and enlarged by repeating these procedures [13]. These simple figures were generally set into symmetrical formations to produce intricate designs of octagons, hexagons, star-like polygons and other geometric shapes interlaced according to a set pattern and usually imbued with sacred meaning [1]. These seemingly endless patterns appealed to Muslims. They believed that all life originates from God and returned to it.

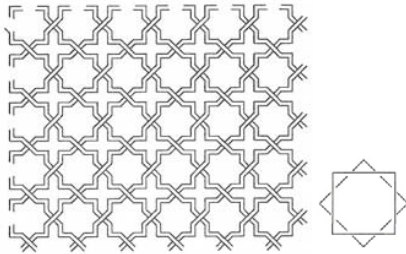


Fig. 1 The basic characteristic shape of Islamic pattern contains 8-pointed star shape which can generate a great bulk of Islamic patterns [1]

Geometric motifs were used extensively in the Islamic world to decorate religious buildings as well as for designing decorative surfaces such as tiles, wood, book covers, papers, glasses, carpets, textiles, plasters, walls, ceilings, floors, doors, windows, pots and lamps. As Islam spread to new areas, artists combined their penchant for geometry with the existing traditional designs in these new areas which helped to create distinctive Islamic motifs [14]. This art symbolizes the natural Islamic vision of the universe and some of the greatest examples of these geometric patterns can be seen in examples of Islamic architecture such as the Dome of the Rock and Alhambra Palaces. A wide range of basic Islamic motifs, drawn from geometry, calligraphy and floral influences make up an endless variety of forms (Figs. 2 and 3). Artists used different bright colours with these geometric patterns such as deep blue or turquoise, red, black, and white with gleaming gold and glitter effect. Though beautiful and harmonious, these include hues not found in nature [5], [14].



Fig. 2 The use of continuous geometric designs interlaced with overlapped floral and calligraphic designs in the Dome of the Rock [11]

The most outstanding characteristic of Islamic geometrical patterns is the prominence of symmetrical stars. Muslim artists utilized star shapes with six, eight, ten, twelve and sixteen rays

in their designs (Fig. 4). This great attraction for star shapes in Islamic art reflects the importance of stars in Arab Muslims daily life. Arab Nomads had a great need to be guided by stars during their movement from one place to another. The Holy Quran abounds with verses which conjure up powerful imageries of stars [14]. Arabs were the first astronomers who named the stars, and they continue to be known by their Arabic names.

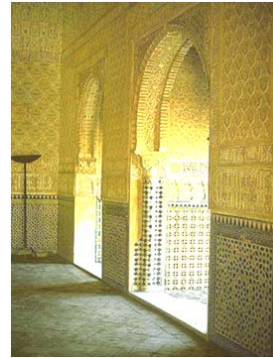


Fig. 3 The geometric designs in Alhambra Palaces which generated by the action of symmetry and the use of optical effects [3]



Fig. 4 The star shapes decorate most of the Islamic building 'the Dome of the Rock' [11]

### III. CALLIGRAPHY

Calligraphy has been one the most important media of artistic expression in Islamic culture. It is a vital part of the mystery which is attached to the religion. So, it is in a real sense a sacred art. The importance of calligraphy lies in the fact that it is the writing system for recording and handing down the teachings of the Qur'an to succeeding generations. It is used to transmit a text and a message from the Holy Qur'an in decorative and ornamental form throughout the Islamic world. It gives Islamic architecture some of its most important characteristic features (Fig. 5). Reference [1] states that "Just as no other civilization has valued pattern and symmetry as deeply as the Islamic civilization, so it is true that no other has revered the sacredness of the word to such an extent. Calligraphy is the jewel in the crown of the Islamic art".

Islamic calligraphy makes us of the Kufic script. Artists "employ simple rectangles and squares to create calligraphic designs in a stylized form" [1]. The Kufic script which takes its name from the Mesopotamian town of Kofah is one of the earliest Islamic learning centres, which was later developed and refined to provide a better visual sacrament [14] (Fig. 6). It is engraved and used in textiles as well as other materials

and objects. It has been used by non-Arabic speaking people such as Persians, Turks and Indians.



Fig. 5 Ornamenting the dome with calligraphic designs in the Dome of the Rock [11]



Fig. 6 Square and rectangular kufic script [1]

Calligraphy inscriptions are usually combined and set against a background of geometric and floral patterns which surround the letters. Also, they provide additional symbolic meaning.

#### IV. FLORAL PATTERNS

Floral patterns can be seen in arabesque designs which are formed by an abstraction of the earlier leaf-scroll motifs [1]. This vegetal ornament is characterized by a continuous abstract stem which splits repeatedly to produce a series of curving counterpoised vegetal patterns flowing in all directions. The sense of periodicity and the rhythm is very noticeable in these patterns (Fig. 7).



Fig. 7 The use of arabesque patterns in Alhambra Palaces [4]

These patterns are used in combination with other major types of Islamic designs such as geometric motifs and those derived from calligraphy to decorate a vast number of buildings, different objects, and textiles throughout the Islamic world.

Muslim artists adopted the floral pattern from existing traditions of Byzantine and Sasanian and adapted them to suit the aesthetic interests and tastes of their Muslim patrons. They were used in the 9<sup>th</sup> century in most of the buildings of Samarra during the Abbasid era and spread to Islamic

countries in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. This development demonstrates a highly abstract and fully developed Islamic style [2].

#### V. THE COLOURS OF ISLAMIC ART

Muslim artists have excelled in using a complex range of colours and shades. They have used green, blue and gold in particular. The colours red, yellow, white, black and brown have been used but to a limited extent [14]. Blue symbolizes the feeling of infinity as it is the colour of the endless seen of the sky and the sea. Gold represents grandeur. It has been used exclusively to decorate royal court fabrics [14]. Moreover, new colours were created for Islamic decoration. Artists exhibited great skills when it came to mixing and producing colours. The dynamic colours served to provoke the imagination.

Many Muslim philosophers have said that these colours have a religious importance and have thus been used extensively in Islamic art. Green is a very important symbol in Islam as it represents paradise [8]. It is usually associated with angels and the garden of paradise. The Holy Qur'an (verse 18:31), states that the inhabitants of paradise will wear green garments of fine silk, and lie on green silk cushions. The Islamic world views green as a very special colour. Green was used as the banner of Prophet Mohammed. Green makes one think of being calm, relaxed and the beginning of a new life. Abbasid painted the domes of their palaces in green. Damascus, which is where there palaces were located, were referred to as the green town [6].

White represents purity, brightness, loyalty and cleanliness. The Holy Qur'an describes the water in heaven as being white [8]. Moreover, prophet Mohammed said that "white is the most favourable colour which God has created, so wear white clothes while you are alive and use them as a shroud" [14]. Hence, this colour has been adopted as the colour for men's traditional clothes in the Arabian Peninsula, which typically consists of a white garment with a white turban. The burial shroud for Muslims is white as well.

Most Islamic scholars believe that black symbolizes justice, dominion and honour, as it was adopted by Prophet Mohammed and by the Abbasid dynasty as a banner during times of war. Some Muslim communities consider black as a powerful protection against evil and it is also used as the colour of mourning. However, Abbasid rulers dressed themselves in a black turban and a black robe. To them, black was symbolic of power.

#### VI. THE IMPACTS OF ISLAMIC DECORATIVE ARTS IN FORMING ARAB AESTHETIC TASTES

Islam arose from a desert environment of nomadic Arabs who lived a primitive, simple desert life. Gradually, Islamic art began to flourish at the end of the 7<sup>th</sup> century. This was at a time after the death of Prophet Mohammed. Muslims renovated the Prophet's mosque in Al-Medina and decorated the columns and the ceiling with classical inscriptions. In the 8<sup>th</sup> century, Islamic designs took a strong hold under the Umayyad dynasty. Arab desert towns were transformed into

cultured towns. Many buildings and mosques were constructed [9]. It was a time that Arabs found themselves surrounded by colourfully decorated buildings that reflected their own new view of life. People adapted these styles to use in their homes. Hence, they considered decorations more important than furnishings. Most Arab homes had little furniture in them because of the impact of the desert's life which was simple and uncluttered. These people walked on floors which were ornamented with mosaics. There were pillows scattered throughout home and they were covered with traditional fabrics. They sat on beautifully coloured woven rugs when they ate their meals. Reference [1] states that "Carpets from the Islamic world continue to be the most sought after today and one is not surprised to see the prominence and the refinement of interlacing in the patterns of Islam".

Ceilings, walls, and book cases had Qur'anic inscriptions on them with beautiful geometric and floral colourful motifs. Furthermore, the monochromatic nature of colours in deserts and in mountainous areas may have encouraged Arabs to use colours which were missing in the environment around them. Figs. 8 and 9 provide examples of the nature of Arab homes and the imported products which swamped the local marketplace.

Bedouin products were appreciated by local people who used them in decorating their houses and they are purchased by the tourists and countries around as a remembrance of their visit and decorative objects as well. However, with the evolution of home furnishing, local people became uninterested in and un-attracted to the Bedouin products as a result of the availability of imported soft fabrics in contemporary colours in the market at the time that Bedouin products remained stable on those respects.



Fig. 8 The nature of the Arab people homes decorated with Turkish rug and imported cushion covers



Fig. 9 Using the imported cushion covers and rug that imitate Bedouin products because of the absence of the traditional in the local marketplace; Photographed in 2007

## VII. CONCLUSION

This paper explains the distinct types of Islamic decorative designs which were inspired by the Islamic instructions' faith and philosophy. These designs were utilized in decorating architectures as well as different surfaces surrounding the Arab in all Islamic lands which in turn highly influenced and formed the Arab people taste. It also illustrates the sacred meaning of some motifs which are extensively preferred in Islamic designs and by Arabs as well.

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