

Islamic Calligraphy Script and Ornamentation in the First Floating Mosque in Perak: Al-Bard Mosque

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ABSTRACT

Mosques represent important expressions of Islamic art, where architecture reflects both spiritual and cultural values. Among the key visual elements are calligraphy and ornamentation, which function not only as decoration but also as carriers of meaning and identity. However, detailed studies focusing on mosque ornamentation in Malaysia remain limited. This study examines the calligraphic and ornamental elements of Al-Bard Mosque (Masjid Seribu Selawat), the first floating mosque in Perak. A qualitative visual research approach was employed through site observation, photographic documentation, and interviews with mosque committee members. The analysis was guided by Feldman's art criticism framework and supported by Malay aesthetic principles introduced by Zakaria Ali. The findings reveal that the integration of calligraphy with floral and arabesque motifs reflects Islamic spiritual values alongside local Malay artistic identity, particularly through the adaptation of Awan Larat patterns. The study contributes to the documentation of mosque ornamentation in Malaysia and serves as a reference for art education, visual culture studies, and future Islamic design practices.

1. INTRODUCTION

Islamic art represents a profound integration of spirituality, aesthetics, and cultural expression, with mosques serving as one of its most significant architectural manifestations. Within mosque architecture, elements such as calligraphy and ornamentation are not merely decorative; rather, they function as visual expressions of religious values and theological concepts (Utaberta, 2012). Islamic calligraphy, often derived from Qur'anic verses, Hadith, and the names of Allah, plays a central role in conveying spiritual messages while enhancing the sacred atmosphere of worship spaces (Kamaruddin, 2020).

In addition, Islamic ornamentation, particularly arabesque, floral, and geometric motifs, symbolize the concepts of infinity and divine unity (tawhid), reflecting the transcendental nature of Allah. These motifs avoid figurative representation in accordance with the principle of aniconism, instead emphasizing abstraction and repetition to evoke contemplation and spiritual awareness (Carey, 2010). The integration of these visual

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elements into architectural structures contributes not only to aesthetic refinement but also to the symbolic and cultural identity of Islamic spaces.

Despite the richness of Islamic artistic traditions, studies focusing on specific mosque ornamentation within the Malaysian context remain limited. Existing research has largely emphasized general mosque typologies and architectural design, with less attention given to detailed visual and symbolic analyses of calligraphic and ornamental elements in individual mosques (Utaberta, 2012). This gap highlights the need for in-depth studies that document and interpret local Islamic artistic heritage, particularly within unique architectural settings.

One such example is Al-Bard Mosque, also known as Masjid Seribu Selawat, located in Pulau Pangkor, Perak. Recognized as the first floating mosque in the state, the mosque presents distinctive architectural characteristics influenced by both Middle Eastern and local Malay aesthetics. The extensive application of calligraphy and ornamentation throughout the mosque—including its walls, domes, and structural elements—makes it a significant case study for understanding the relationship between visual art, spirituality, and Islamic architecture.

Therefore, this study aims to examine the forms, functions, and meanings of Islamic calligraphy and ornamentation in Al-Bard Mosque. Specifically, the study seeks to:

1. identify the types of calligraphic scripts and ornamental motifs used in the mosque;
2. analyse their visual and compositional characteristics; and
3. interpret their symbolic and spiritual significance within the mosque context.

This research adopts a qualitative visual research approach involving site observation, photographic documentation, and interviews with mosque authorities and experts. This study contributes to the documentation and preservation of Islamic artistic heritage in Malaysia while also serving as a reference for educators, designers, and researchers in the fields of Islamic art and visual culture.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Islamic calligraphy is widely recognized as one of the highest forms of artistic expression in Islamic culture, functioning as both a visual and spiritual medium (Kamaruddin, 2020). It is commonly integrated into mosque architecture through inscriptions of Qur'anic verses, *Asma'ul Husna*, and prophetic traditions, reinforcing the sacred atmosphere of worship spaces. According to Carey (2010), calligraphy in Islamic architecture serves not only aesthetic purposes but also functions as a medium for conveying theological messages and strengthening religious identity.

In addition to calligraphy, ornamentation such as arabesque, geometric, and floral motifs plays a significant role in Islamic art. These motifs reflect the concepts of infinity and divine unity, often expressed through repetition and abstraction in accordance with the principle of aniconism (Utaberta, 2012). The avoidance of figurative imagery encourages spiritual contemplation through non-representational visual forms.

Within the Malaysian context, mosque ornamentation often demonstrates a synthesis of Islamic and local cultural influences. Traditional Malay motifs such as '*Awan Larat*' characterized by continuous flowing patterns of stems, leaves, and flowers—are frequently incorporated into architectural decoration (Ali, 1989). These motifs symbolize growth, harmony, and continuity, reflecting both Malay aesthetic values and Islamic philosophical concepts of unity and balance.

Previous studies have primarily focused on the typological and architectural aspects of mosques in Malaysia, with limited attention given to detailed visual analyses of calligraphy and ornamentation in specific mosque settings (Utaberta, 2012). As a result, there is a need for focused studies that examine the integration of artistic elements within individual mosque contexts, particularly from visual and symbolic perspectives.

Al-Bard Mosque (Masjid Seribu Selawat), located in Pulau Pangkor, Perak, represents a unique case study due to its identity as the first floating mosque in the state and its extensive application of calligraphy and ornamentation. The mosque incorporates influences from Middle Eastern design alongside local Malay aesthetics, making it a relevant subject for examining the relationship between visual art, spirituality, and cultural identity.

To further clarify the ornamentation discussed in Islamic art, Table 1 summarizes the common categories, their visual characteristics, symbolic meanings, and applications within mosque architecture.

Table 1. Classification of Islamic Ornamentation in Mosque Architecture

Type of Ornamentation	Visual Characteristics	Symbolic Meaning	Application in Mosque
Calligraphy	Arabic script with flowing lines, commonly in Thuluth or Kufi styles	Spiritual messages and divine words	Walls, domes, mihrab
Arabesque	Interwoven vegetal patterns and repetitive curves	Infinity and unity of Allah	Panels, ceilings, borders
Geometric	Repetitive geometric shapes such as stars and polygons	Order, balance, and cosmic harmony	Floors, tiles, domes
Floral (<i>Awan Larat</i>)	Flowing plant forms including leaves, stems, and flowers	Growth, continuity, and harmony	Wall carvings, frames, calligraphic backgrounds

Source: Author's synthesis based on Carey (2010), Utaberta (2012), and Ali (1989).

3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative visual research approach to analyse the calligraphy and ornamentation of Al-Bard Mosque. This approach is appropriate as it allows for in-depth interpretation of visual and symbolic meanings embedded within architectural ornamentation. Data collection methods include site observation, photographic documentation, and semi-structured interviews with mosque committee members and relevant experts.

The analysis is guided by Feldman's art criticism framework, which consists of four stages: description, analysis, interpretation, and evaluation. This framework enables a systematic examination of visual elements and their meanings. In addition, Malay aesthetic principles as proposed by Ali (1989) are applied to interpret the cultural and symbolic aspects of the ornamentation, particularly in relation to traditional motifs such as Awan Larat.

Data were analysed through visual categorization of ornament types, including calligraphy, geometric, arabesque, and floral motifs, to identify their compositional structures and symbolic meanings within the architectural context.

The study focuses on selected areas of the mosque, including the entrance, prayer hall, walls, dome, and mihrab, where calligraphy and ornamentation are prominently displayed. The study is limited to qualitative visual interpretation without quantitative measurement.

4. ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

4.1 Identification of Calligraphic Scripts and Ornamental Motifs

The findings reveal that Al-Bard Mosque incorporates a diverse range of Islamic calligraphic scripts and ornamental systems integrated throughout its architectural surfaces. Based on visual observation and photographic documentation, five main calligraphic styles were identified, namely Thuluth, Naskh, Diwani,

Diwani Jali, and Kufic. These scripts are strategically applied across key architectural elements including domes, walls, arches, pillars, mihrab, and interior panels, indicating a deliberate spatial distribution of visual hierarchy (Kamaruddin, 2020).

Among these, Thuluth script is the most dominant due to its elongated vertical strokes and dynamic curved structure, which contribute to a sense of monumentality and visual emphasis. Naskh script, in contrast, is primarily used for Qur'anic inscriptions due to its clarity and readability, reflecting its communicative function (Carey, 2010). Diwani and Diwani Jali scripts introduce ornamental density through their fluid and interconnected forms, while Kufic script contributes to structural rhythm through its geometric and angular composition, reinforcing architectural stability and visual order (Hermes House, 2010).

Besides calligraphy, floral and vegetal ornamentation dominate the mosque decoration. The motifs consist of stylized leaves, tendrils, flowers, stems, and arabesque forms arranged repetitively around calligraphic compositions. The researcher observed strong similarities between these vegetal patterns and traditional Malay Awan Larat motifs commonly found in Malay woodcarving traditions (Ali, 1989).

Table 2. Types and Characteristics of Calligraphic Scripts in Al-Bard Mosque

No.	Type of Calligraphy	Visual Characteristics	Application
1	Thuluth	Elongated vertical strokes and flowing curves	Domes, walls, arches
2	Naskh	Clear, soft, organized structure	Qur'anic inscriptions
3	Diwani	Intertwined cursive forms	Decorative panels
4	Diwani Jali	Dense ornamental composition	Interior decoration
5	Kufic	Angular geometric form	Structural ornamentation

Source: Author's visual observation and site documentation (2025).



Fig. 1: Example of Thuluth calligraphy applied on the wall surface of Al-Bard Mosque.

Source: Photographs by Muhammad Hidayat Mat Saad, 2024

4.2 Visual and Compositional Analysis

The visual analysis demonstrates that the ornamentation of Al-Bard Mosque is governed by a systematic application of formal artistic principles, including rhythm, repetition, balance, unity, and proportion. Based on Feldman's formal analysis framework, these compositional strategies are not merely decorative but function as a visual system that organizes spatial experience within the mosque interior (Feldman, 1994).

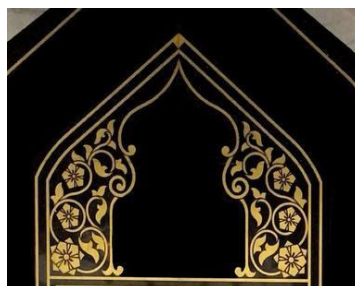
The compositional structure of calligraphy and ornamentation demonstrates a deliberate application of rhythm, repetition, and balance, producing a continuous visual flow across architectural surfaces. This formal arrangement enhances aesthetic harmony while simultaneously establishing a unified visual field that reinforces the mosque's contemplative and spiritual atmosphere.

Curvilinear movements generated by Thuluth and Diwani scripts guide visual perception across surfaces, creating a rhythmic progression that encourages continuous viewing. The repetition of calligraphic forms and vegetal motifs strengthens compositional unity, while symmetrical arrangements across walls, ceilings, and structural elements establish visual stability and order. This reflects the Islamic aesthetic principle of balance (Mizan), where visual harmony is achieved through controlled repetition and spatial equilibrium (Utaberta, 2012).

Floral motifs inspired by Bougainvillea (Bunga Kertas) are transformed into abstract arabesque patterns, demonstrating adherence to the principle of aniconism in Islamic art. Rather than depicting natural forms realistically, these motifs are stylized into continuous vegetal patterns that emphasize abstraction and infinity (Carey, 2010). The use of colour, particularly gold, blue, turquoise, and white, further enhances spatial perception, where gold signifies divine illumination and blue evokes tranquillity and spiritual reflection.

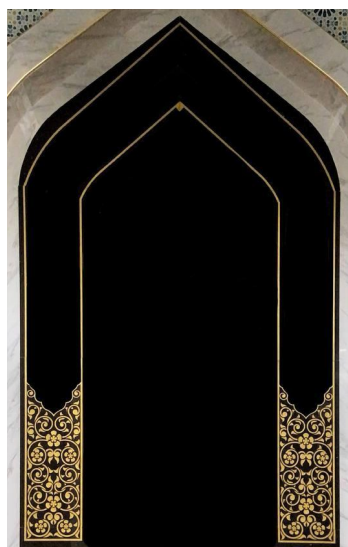
Table 3. Types of Ornamentation Identified in Al-Bard Mosque

No	Type of Ornamentation	Visual Characteristics	Symbolic Meaning
1	Arabesque	Intertwining vegetal curves	Infinity and divine unity



Source: Muhammad Hidayat Mat Saad, 2024

2	Floral Motif	Stylized flowers and leaves	Harmony and growth
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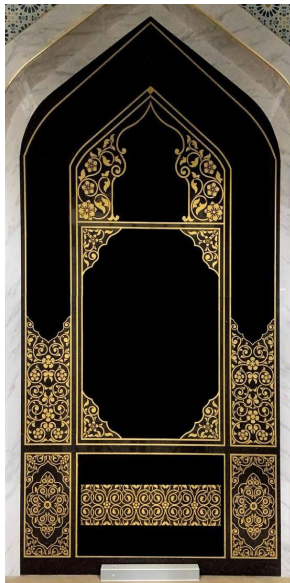
Source: Muhammad Hidayat Mat Saad, 2024

3

Geometric Pattern

Repetitive symmetrical structure

Order and balance



Source: Muhammad Hidayat Mat Saad, 2024

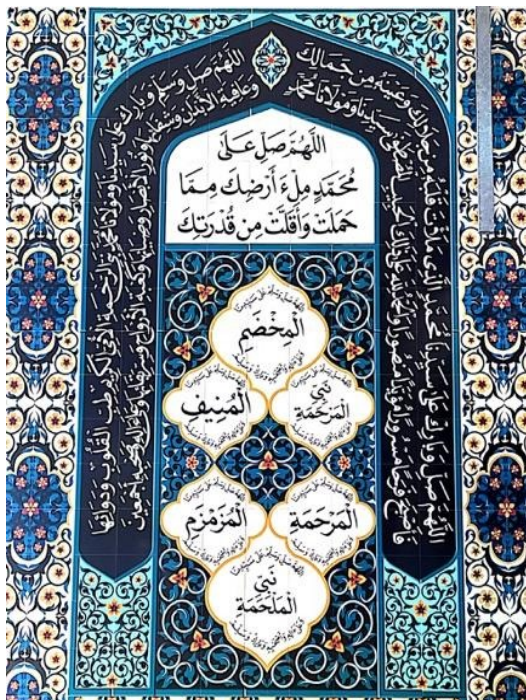


Fig. 2. Integration of floral arabesque ornamentation with Islamic calligraphy in the mosque interior. Source: Photographs by Muhammad Hidayat Mat Saad, 2024

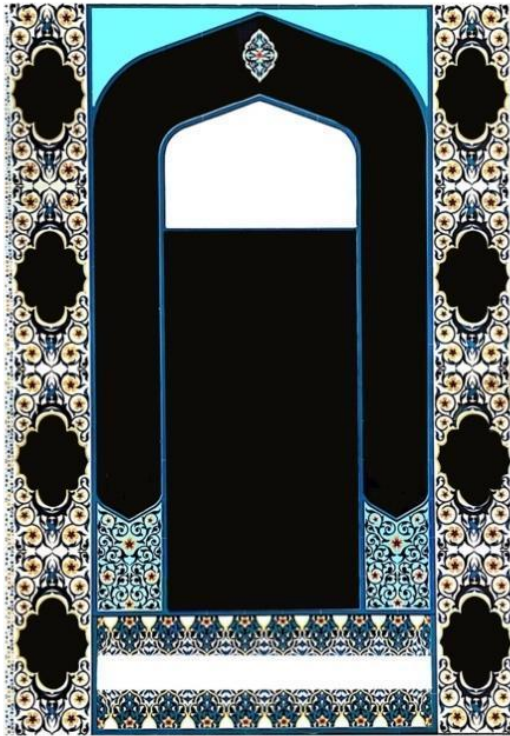


Fig. 3. Repetitive vegetal motif resembling Malay Awan Larat pattern within mosque ornamentation. Source: Muhammad Hidayat Mat Saad, 2024

4.3 Symbolic and Spiritual Interpretation

The ornamentation system of Al-Bard Mosque operates beyond aesthetic function, functioning as a visual representation of Islamic metaphysical concepts. The integration of calligraphy, arabesque, geometric, and floral motifs constructs a unified visual language that reflects the principle of *tawhid* (divine unity) through continuous and interconnected forms (Carey, 2010).

Instead of existing as isolated decorative elements, the repetition and extension of motifs represent infinity and the eternal nature of divine existence. This visual continuity transforms the mosque interior into a contemplative environment where form and meaning are inseparable, aligning with Islamic philosophical aesthetics that emphasize transcendence through abstraction (Utaberta, 2012).

Furthermore, the absence of figurative representation reinforces the principle of aniconism, where abstraction becomes a medium for spiritual reflection rather than literal depiction (Carey, 2010). The visual environment thus functions as a form of silent remembrance (*dhikr*), encouraging emotional calmness and spiritual awareness during worship.

A significant aspect of the mosque's ornamentation is the integration of Awan Larat-inspired motifs, which reflect the localization of Islamic visual culture within the Malay context. These flowing vegetal patterns, derived from traditional Malay woodcarving, symbolize continuity, harmony, and natural growth. Their incorporation demonstrates a hybrid aesthetic identity that merges Islamic metaphysical principles with Malay artistic tradition (Ali, 1989).

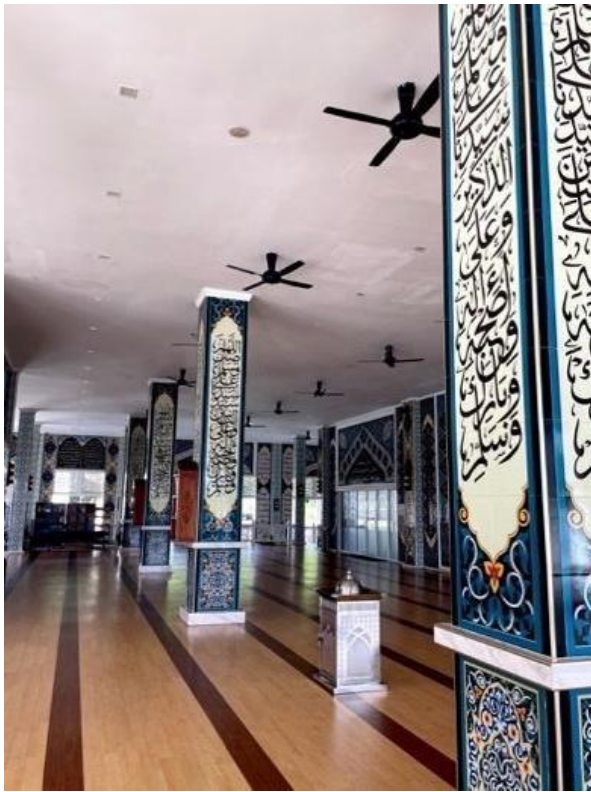


Fig. 4. Interior composition showing integration between calligraphy, floral ornamentation, and architectural structure in the prayer hall. Source: Photographs by Muhammad Hidayat Mat Saad, 2024

4.4 Summary of Findings

Overall, the findings indicate that the calligraphy and ornamentation of Al-Bard Mosque are systematically integrated into a coherent visual framework that combines aesthetic, spatial, and symbolic functions. The mosque's decorative system is not merely ornamental but operates as a structured visual language that expresses Islamic spiritual philosophy while simultaneously reflecting local Malay cultural identity.

5. CONCLUSION

This study examined the Islamic calligraphy and ornamentation in Al-Bard Mosque through a qualitative visual research approach guided by Feldman's art criticism framework and Malay aesthetic principles. The findings revealed that the mosque incorporates multiple Islamic calligraphic scripts, including Thuluth, Naskh, Diwani, Diwani Jali, and Kufic, alongside floral, arabesque, geometric, and Awan Larat-inspired ornamentation.

The analysis demonstrated that these visual elements are carefully composed using formal principles of art such as rhythm, balance, unity, proportion, and repetition. The integration of calligraphy and ornamentation creates a coherent visual system that enhances both aesthetic quality and spiritual atmosphere within the mosque environment.

Furthermore, the study found that the ornamentation carries significant symbolic meanings, representing Islamic concepts of divine unity (tawhid), infinity, and spiritual reflection. At the same time, the incorporation of Malay-inspired Awan Larat motifs reflects the localization of Islamic visual culture within the Malaysian context, resulting in a hybrid aesthetic identity.

Overall, the study contributes to the systematic documentation and understanding of Islamic calligraphy and mosque ornamentation in Malaysia, particularly in demonstrating how visual art functions as a medium of spiritual communication and cultural expression within contemporary Islamic architecture.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

This section is compulsory. The following is an example of a conflict-of-interest statement:

The authors agree that this research was conducted in the absence of any self-benefits, commercial or financial conflicts and declare the absence of conflicting interests with the funders.

Muhammad Hidayat Mat Saad: Conceptualisation, methodology, investigation, data collection, formal analysis, visualization, and writing – original draft preparation.

Mumtaz Mokhtar: Conceptualisation, methodology, supervision, validation, and writing – review and editing.

Mumtaz Mohktar: Formal analysis, visualization, data curation, and validation.

Hidawati Amin: Supervision, project administration, writing – review and editing, and final approval of the manuscript.

All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI IN THE WRITING PROCESS

During the preparation of this work, the authors used ChatGPT (OpenAI) to improve the readability, language quality, grammar, and overall clarity of the manuscript. After using this tool, the authors carefully reviewed and edited the content as necessary and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

DATA AVAILABILITY

All data generated or analysed during this study are included in this published article and its supplementary materials. Additional supporting materials related to the field documentation of Al-Bard Mosque are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The authors declare that this research did not involve human or animal subjects. All field documentation, observation, and analytical procedures were conducted in accordance with the institutional Safety, Health, and Environmental (HSE) guidelines of Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM).

Permission to conduct field documentation and collect visual data was obtained from the relevant authorities where required. No personal or confidential information was collected during this study.

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