Islamic Principles in Graphic Design

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Abstract This paper discusses the advantage of Islamic Principles namely *Tawheed, Iqtisad, Haya* and *Dhikir* in regard to graphic design. From the results of the visual analysis conducted on selected samples (symbols and logos), it is found that the visual communication aspect of graphic design does not only comply with Gestalt Principles but could also be linked to Islamic Principles. In this sense, we conclude that the application of Islamic principles is relevant thus should be adopted as a standard design vocabulary in the teaching and learning of graphic design in Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM).

Keywords Gestalt principles; graphic design; Islamic principles; visual analysis.

1   Introduction

Graphic design is a visual communication program that is offered in many higher learning institutions in Malaysia. Technically, school leavers who obtained Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) or Malaysian Certificate of Education preferably with a good grade in art related subjects (Visual Art, Technical drawing, Multimedia, etc) are qualified to enrol in the program. Unlike other fields of studies, a graphic design program is concerned about the production of

artworks for commercial purposes such as poster designs, brochures, pamphlets, layout designs, motion graphics and websites. Due to the degree of complexity especially during the production stage, scholars urge that students should master the technical and problem solving skills before embarking on a graphic design project (Bryant, Schoneman & Karpa, 2011).

In order to acquire design skills and knowledge, it is important for the students to understand the fact that graphic design communicates through a universal language which is made of four elements; conceptual, visual, relational and practical (Waijittragum, 2012). The conceptual elements in this case are point, line, plane and volume. The visual elements concern shape, size, colour and texture. The relational elements concern direction, position, space and gravity. Finally the practical elements concern representational issues namely meaning and function. Aside from that, the students will also be exposed to a visual perception theory which governs the organizational aspect of the overall design. One particular concept that is often referred by designers is Gestalt principles (Posett, 2013). According to Soegaard (2007), Gestalt Principles consist of five visual perception rules which include Balance, Proximity, Contrast, Repetition, Harmony, Symmetry and Continuity.

2   Islamic Principles in Art & Design

The application of Islamic Principles is not a new approach in the context of art and design. In fact, some of the ancient relics and buildings around the world were actually constructed by Muslim builders (architects, engineers, artisans and calligraphers). Consider Taj Mahal in Agra, India for example. Built in 1630 AD during the reign of the Emperor Shah Jahan, Taj Mahal is regarded as one of the Seven Wonders of the World and perhaps the most fascinating man-made structure ever constructed. The other evidence can also be seen in Islamic scriptures such as *Khat* (Arabic hand lettering style) and *Mushaf* (Decorative ornament design). All of these examples do not only symbolize the remarkable achievement of Islamic civilization but could be seen as a testimony of how valuable art and designs are appreciated in Islam.

Professor Dr Spahic Omer of the International Islamic University Malaysia states that the prophet Mohammed (pbuh) has said that beauty is one of many attributes of Allah (Omer, 2011).

Based on the prophet's statement, Omer (2011) quotes that "all things that we see in the world have been designed and created based on the highest heavenly standard of splendour and order impossible to be ever emulated by anyone". Alternatively, beauty in the perspective of Islam is not just for the sake of visual pleasure but comes with a purpose. That purpose is none other than to make humans submit to Allah's divinity. According to Warithudeen Umar (2013), by acknowledging and remembering Allah through His creation, one can find the true meaning of beauty. He states that "When we look at this magnificent world, we see everything from grandeur and astounding beauty to death and destruction. We are attracted to or repulsed by what we see or experience. There is a divine link between what we see and ourselves. That divine link is provided by the attributes of Allah". Warithudeen's statement actually can be linked to a verse in the Al Quran (surat Al Baqarah, verse 29) which mentions about Allah's creations.

> "It is He who created for you all of that which is on the earth. Then He directed Himself to the heaven, [His being above all creation], and made them seven heavens, and He is Knowing of all things." (Al Quran, 1: 29)

The verse of the Al Quran (Surat Al Baqarah) declares that Allah is the Almighty and He creates all things in life and hereafter. It also provides a concept that Islam is Monotheism which means Allah is the only one God and as a devotee of Islam, he or she must worship Him only and no one else (Warithudeen Umar, 2013). In *Beauty and Aesthetics in Islam,* Widjan Ali (2007) mentions about the existence of a highest form of knowledge that is cultivated through the relationship between reason and intellect. She claims that only in Islamic art that the Muslim can acquire this 'knowledge' either by "creating it or by contemplating its beauty". From the above statements, it is clear that great emphasis is given on the notion about the relationship between beauty and Allah. Hence, those who admire beauty also acknowledge Allah's divinity.

3   Problem Statement

The relationship between art and Islam has always been an interesting debate topic among Islamic art scholars. Grabar (2006) claims that the western artistic taste has somewhat dictated and influenced the attitude of Muslims and Non-Muslims to the extent

that they become prejudiced toward Islamic art. In conjunction with this, Burckhardt (2009) states that due to the domination of western art in the global scene, Islamic art remains a neglected field of study among art researchers. This issue could also be said about the local art and design scene. According to Ahamad Tarmizi and Zoolcaphly Said (2009), the younger generations of artists in Malaysia are becoming more westernized and that they began to see art as a medium of self-expression. This way of thinking is likely to affect the traditional art in Malaysia. Associate Professor Dr Russlan Abd Rahim, a senior lecturer from the Faculty of Art and Design, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) mentions that the art and design curriculum in UiTM is actually modelled after the western art education (R. Abdul Rahim, personal communication, 2014). The program which started in 1967 was initially handled by three foreign lecturers and two part-time local lecturers. Back then, the students were exposed firsthand to the western visual perception theory called Gestalt Principles. With this basic theory, the students are expected to solve certain design issues, for instance, applying contrast effect for achieving clarity and employing repetitive design elements to create rhythmic composition.

In spite of this, we argue that Gestalt Principles merely emphasize on technical matter and lack spiritual sense. Based on our observation at several degree shows organized by the faculty of art & design, majority of the students' artworks seem to promote western style art. This is not surprising since a lot of sources (books, magazines and the internet) provide visual examples and manuals to the students. We hypothesize that students who are influenced by the western visual perception theory namely Gestalt Principles might develop a secular view that Islam is rigid and has nothing to do with graphic design. Hence, a question is formulated: how can the Islamic Principles be applied in the teaching and learning of graphic design? In this study, we are interested to see whether Islamic Principles can serve as an alternative problem solving approach. This question is based on a popular view that Islam is a universal religion which rules and regulations can be applied to everything.

4   Methodology

Four Islamic Principles: *Tawheed, Iqtisad, Haya,* and *Dhikr* (see Table 1) have been selected for this study. Using a qualitative method (visual analysis) that draws mainly on semiotic, we will attempt to

explain how these four Islamic Principles perform in relation to graphic design.

Table 1: Islamic Principles & Meaning

Islamic Principles	Primary Meaning	Secondary Meaning
Tawheed	Oneness	Unity and Harmony
Iqtisad	State of being even	Balance
Haya	Modesty, Moderate	Simplicity
Dhikir	Remembrance of Allah	Memorable and Affection

5   Findings and Discussion

The following sections discuss the application of Islamic Principles in the context of graphic design. For the purpose of discussion, diagrams and samples are inserted to help explain its function and meaning.

5.1   Tawheed

The word *Tawheed* in the Arabic language literally means "Unification" or "Unity" thus referring to the bond between humans and Allah. In the context of visual perception, *Tawheed* could also be expressed as a design vocabulary to describe the compositional aspect and the construction of meaning. This means the bond of visual elements (text, shapes, image, colour, etc) is the essential process to create harmony.
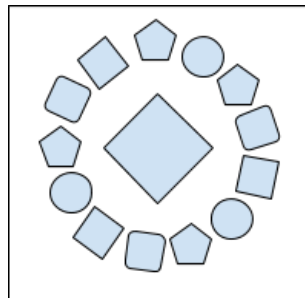
Figure 1: Sense of *Tawheed*

Figure 1 shows a diagram which illustrates the concept of *Tawheed*. The visual elements represented by a variety of geometrical shapes (squares, circle and hexagon) can be organized in a circular formation to form a unified composition.

Figure 2: A Recycled Symbol

Figure 2 shows an example of a logo which provides a sense of *Tawheed*. The unification of the three white arrows set against a black circle background produces a harmonious formation.

5.2   Iqtisad

In the Arabic language, the word *Iqtisad* means "Equilibrium" or "the state of being even". From the design perspective, this concept can also be understood as visual balance. In theory, a well-balanced design can be accomplished when two elements of equal visual weight (shape, size and colour) are juxtaposed either side by side or facing each other. However, designers could also change or modify the visual elements to emphasize the sense of *Iqtisad*.
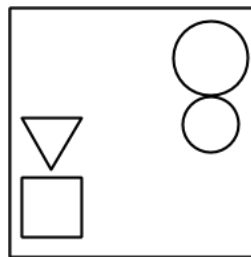

Figure 3: Sense of Iqtisad

Figure 3 illustrates how *Iqtisad* functions in a typical layout. The triangle and the square on the left side seem equal in terms of size compared to the two circles on the right. In this diagram, the sense of *Iqtisad* is emphasized by manipulating the spatial arrangement of the elements. Figure 4 shows a sense of *Iqtisad* in the Yin & Yang symbol.

Figure 4: Yin and Yang Symbol

5.3   Haya

The word *Haya* in Arabic refers to the concept of "modesty" and "self-respect". In Islam, being modest is important because it will prevent oneself from committing a sin or anything that Allah and the prophet of Muhammad (pbuh) forbid. In comparison to Gestalt Principles*, Haya* can be related to a notion called "simplicity" which is an essential organizational concept employed in graphic design. As a matter of fact, the sense of *Haya* can also be related to several conventional design principles such as "Minimalism", "Less is more" and "Whitespace". The sense of *Haya* does not mean that the layout design has to look or feel empty; rather it provides a solution for graphic designers when dealing with a large amount of visual data.
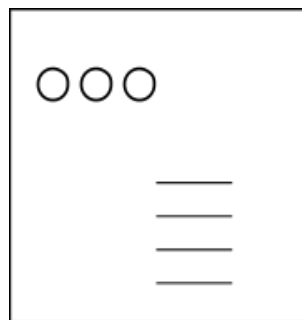

Figure 5: Sense of Haya

Figure 5 demonstrates how the sense of *Haya* functions in a layout design. As depicted in the diagram, there are three circles and four horizontal lines composed in an enclosed space. In this sense, *Haya* is expressed through minimal use of visual element and great emphasis on empty space. As a result, the layout looks and feels uncluttered thus allows the audience to contemplate on the subject more easily and relaxed. Figure 6 shows an example of a logo which expresses the notion of *Haya.*

Figure 6: Sense of *Haya* in a Logo Design

5.4   Dhikir

The word *Dhikir* in Arabic means "reminding oneself" or "mention". Similarly in Islam, *Dhikir* can be described as a devotional act of remembering Allah through the recitation of Al Quran, Al Hadith and names of Allah. This act should be done continuously so that one will keep remembering Allah and always stay blessed.   In regard to graphic design, the sense of *Dhikir* can be applied as design vocabulary. An interesting aspect about *Dhikir* is that several other design principles could also be associated to it. These are Repetition, Motion, Progression, Continuity, Rhythm and Linearity. As shown in Figures 7 and 8, the sense of *Dhikir* is visualized as a pattern design.
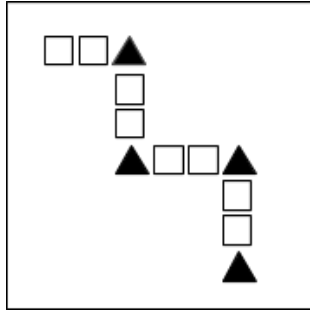
Figure 7: Sense of *Dhikir*
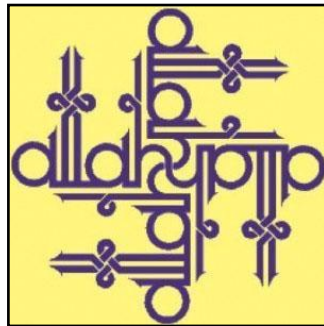
Figure 8: Sense of *Dhikir* in Typography Art

6 Conclusion

The application of the conventional visual perception theory in particular Gestalt Principles is essential in providing graphic designers with the problem solving approach. However, that does not mean that graphic designers should ignore the importance of Islamic Principles. As noted by many art scholars, Islamic Principles are already established in various fields of knowledge, for example in engineering, science, mathematics, astronomy and architecture. In regard to the graphic design program in UiTM, it is discovered that the lack of understanding and awareness of Islamic Principles has made the students to believe that western visual perception theory is ideal whereas Islamic Principles are strictly for religious affair. In this study, four components of Islamic principles (*Tawheed, Iqtisad, Haya* and *Dhikir)* are explored to see whether they can offer a better problem solving approach. The results show that there are many aesthetical and functional attributes (order, unity, balance, and

harmony) embedded in Islamic principles that can be applied in graphic design. The study confirms that Islamic principles are relevant to be used alongside other conventional design principles in the teaching and learning of graphic design in UiTM.

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