

THE ORIGIN OF ISLAMIC ART AND ARCHITECTURE

By

USTAZ ZULKARNAIN YUSOFF

INSTITUT TEKNOLOGI MARA

CAWANGAN PAHANG

ABSTRACT

This paper highlights the early development of Islamic art and Islamic architecture. A particular art is an activity such as drama, poetry, architecture or sculpture in which people try to create something beautiful or to express a particular meaning through their works. However the most important here is a link between art and Islamic doctrine.

INTRODUCTION

It is necessary to understand what is meant by art. To the majority of people a work of art means a picture or a piece of sculpture, painting etc. According to Lamy al-Faruqi, the origin of the word art is derived from the Latin word, art which refers to any kind of craft and skill.¹ In this sense, therefore, art refers to an important aspect of human culture, creative skill, like the creation and production of drawings, paintings, poetry, drama, etc which is considered as a product of art, because they have the elements of creativity. Art is, however, something more universal, which has an aesthetic value and includes the element of beauty wherever it appears in the creativity of mankind.

As the result and production of the creative skill, art is considered to be beautiful and it expresses certain idea or meaning. *Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary*, states that, "A particular art is an activity such as drama, poetry, architecture or sculpture in which people try to create something through their works".²

On the other hand, arts of Islam or Islamic art as the arts of the Muslim people, whether those arts be religious or non religious.³ This definition is very general, even if it refers only to the art which is produced by Muslims. Islamic art also can be referred to the art of Islam which is produced by Muslims and whose existence comes directly from the

practice of Islam. However the term is understood to include all the products of art of Muslims, regardless whether that art be religious or secular.

Islamic art is often connected to the Arab people. Before Islam, they had few arts like poetry, sculpture and painting. For example, there were paintings in the ka'ba and statues of their gods. Like other forms of culture and tradition, the Arabs adopted much artistic heritage from Persia and Byzantium. Whatever traditions they borrowed, however, those arts are properly called Islamic art when they were adopted by Muslims.⁴ The point here is to express the conviction that the art which is produced by the Muslims can be considered as the Islamic art.

To a certain extent, many forms of Islamic teaching are theologically opposed to the representation of living beings. Representation of living beings is prohibited not in the Qur'an, but in the Prophetic tradition. That is the basis for the religious prohibition of figuration and representation of living creatures.⁵ Of course, some individual Muslim artists and some Muslim cultures did not accept that particular prohibition, but its widespread acceptance throughout the Muslim world had an important influence on Islamic art. Like other religions and other civilizations of the world, Islam has produced many kinds of art. There is Islamic architecture, Islamic calligraphy, Islamic painting and Islamic sculpture which are considered as part of the achievements of Islamic Civilization.

THE ORIGIN OF ISLAMIC ART

As we have discussed, the Arabs had few arts of their own. They also adopted many forms of the arts from other countries like Syria, Egypt, Mesopotamia and Iran. Those countries had a cultural heritage which has affected the world of Islam, particularly in respect of early Islamic art in the history of Islamic civilization. In this respect many historians note that Islamic civilization or the Islamic era is counted from the year A.D 622. The date refers to is the Prophet Muhammad's journey to Madinah.⁶

This civilization is considered to have appeared first in the heart of Arabia, but it quickly became more cosmopolitan in nature. For example, the Caliphs of the Umayyad dynasty (661-749 A.D.) needed construction materials, artists, workers and designers to build the new cities, palaces and mosques. Those workers were called from foreign countries like Byzantium, Syria, Egypt and Iran.⁷ For many years the capital was established at Damascus. So, in this area probably be considered to be truly "Islamic".

The Umayyad Dynasty was established at Damascus until 749 A.D. The new successor was the Abbasid Caliph who chose Baghdad as the new capital. A new style gradually developed under the new rulers. However, according to the historian Tabari, the workers who built Baghdad came from Syria, Iran, Mosul, Kufa, Wasit and Basra. That means the new capital was also developed by foreign workers (artist) rather than local artists.⁸

The development of the Islamic style of art was also considered influenced by the arts and crafts of Iranian and Turkish nomads from Eastern Iran and Central Asia. For example, the style of Iranian and Turkish art had been found in ornamental forms. This form like geometrical scrolls with circular leaves were found in the Abbasid stucco decoration of Sammara.⁹ As far as Islamic art is concerned, it could be said that Islamic art was not only enriched by Sasanian, Mesopotamian, Byzantine and East Christian, but also by other cultures and traditions.

Another important factor to be considered is the influence of Islamic doctrine on the development of Islamic art. One aspect of this is that Islam itself is not limited to any ethnic phenomenon. Muslim faith and practice are enhanced by the Qur'an and the *Sunnah* of the Prophet, which influence a wide variety of different people and ethnic groups. The point is clear when we refer to the unifying factor in Islamic art. The unifying factor is Islam itself. Titus Burckhardt notes an impetus to artistic expression in the saying of the Prophet that God has prescribed perfection for all things. The word perfection is translated from Arabic word *ihsan*, which is considered to include the sense of beauty and virtue.¹⁰ For example the sense of beauty and virtue in the spirituality of Islamic art may be seen in the formation of Islamic Architecture, in particular of the mosque itself. In view of this fact, it is easy to understand why there are various adaptations will enrich the Islamic artistic heritage. At the same time the art is usually dominated by Islamic teaching (or Islam itself).

It is important to say word about the link between Islamic art and the doctrine of Islam. In particular, Islamic art should express the nation of tawhid, unity or union with God. It means that art in Islam should give great concern to a certain idea of tawhid, because the concept of tawhid is primarily important in the doctrine of Islamic teaching.

ARCHITECTURE

In the broad sense, we can define architecture as the art and the technique of building. In particular, architecture is one of the applied arts and very important to fulfill the practical needs of human beings. Almost every society has the techniques to build whatever building they need for their purposes. These techniques then will produce an architecture. That means architecture is necessary to any development of human culture.

We could say that architecture is a symbol of the development of civilized institutions. Another definition of architecture is given by Ruskin. He defines, "architecture to be the art which so disposed and adorned the edifices raised by man, for whatsoever uses, that the sight of them contributed to his mental health, power and pleasure".¹¹

Whatever form of definition we may finally accept, architecture relates to the art of planning, designing and constructing buildings. Architecture also relates to the history of human civilization. The history of architecture is part of the history of civilization. Every nation has an architecture according to the cultures and traditions of its own which differs in architectural styles for every nation. Therefore it is important to know the historical background of each country before we can properly understand and appreciate its architecture. This clearly justifies the study of architecture as the art of buildings and the role it plays in any civilization.

Like all the great civilization of the world, Islam also has a kind of architectural tradition. This style of architecture appeared with the development of Islamic civilization. Architecture is considered one of the most important heritages of Islamic art. It applies especially to the architecture of the mosque. We can say that the mosque architecture expressed the diversity of cultures, traditions, and also the idea of tawhid in the Islamic civilization. However, Islamic architecture is considered to have its origin far back in the past. For example, the first Islamic building used as a place of worship during the early centuries of the hijrah is assumed to have evolved from imitation of buildings which had already existed. Therefore we see that the first Muslim architects or craftsmen of Islam had produced nothing new rather, they reproduced and adapted the tradition of art inherited from the Byzantines, Copts, Sassanians and other foreign peoples.¹²

It is necessary to mention here that the first architects, whether Muslims or non-Muslims, who built any building of Islam took from sources which differed according to countries of residence or according to their countries of origin. That means they built mosques or palaces according to their own style of architectural tradition and, this heritage is important because it enriched the Islamic architecture in many aspects like forms, styles, designs and decoration.

On the other hand, pre-Islamic Arabia or Arabian culture had very little monumental architecture. This assumption is based on the following quotation. In this quotation Janson remarks : "fifty years after the death of the Prophet, the Muslim place for prayer could be a church taken over for the purpose, or a Persian columned hall or even a rectangular field surrounded by a fence or a ditch".¹³

THE ORIGIN OF ISLAMIC ARCHITECTURE

Islamic architecture could be defined as the buildings built by Muslim or the followers of Prophet Muhammad between the seventh and the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries or even the twentieth century of our era.¹⁴ It is the first achievement of Islamic art in Muslim Civilization. At the beginning of the Islamic era, we found that Muslim rulers took their architectural creations, whether religious or secular as a symbol of sovereign power. Historians have noted that after the first four caliphs, (Abu Bakr, Umar, Othman, and Ali) the successors of the Muslim rulers began to build large mosques and palaces as visible symbols of their power.¹⁵

However, most of these early buildings of Muslim architecture do not survive in their original form. The survivors examples of early Islamic architecture show by their style of decoration that they were produced by workers (as we have mentioned) from Egypt, Syria, Persia and even Byzantium. These artists continued to use their own styles in which they had been trained.

When we look at the stylistic tendencies of early Islamic architecture, they can be divided into two categories as suggested by John D. Hong. The first of these has been explained by Hong as "the survival of antique architecture principles".¹⁶ Until the eleventh century it was said that there were two major regions from which many techniques of building including form and plan were adapted into Islamic architecture. The first of these regions comprised south-western Anatolia and included the areas around Damascus, Rusafa, Palastine and Amman. This region also extended to Egypt, Libya, Tunisia and Maghrib. In Maghrib there were some ancient centres such as Thamugadi and Volubilis which may have influenced early Islamic builders. All of these regions had been colonized by Rome and Byzantium. In some cases, Hong suggests that these regions would be able to provide the new Islamic rulers with well trained architects, artists and other craftsmen.¹⁷

The second region, which is considered to have influenced early Islamic architecture was Mesopotamia. It was situated between the two rivers (The Tigris and Euphrates). Therefore, we can conclude that there were inherited by Islamic architecture. We find that Muslims, especially artists, craftsmen and architects used many of these traditions from the conquered people of this region.¹⁸

CONCLUSION

In Islamic civilization, architecture is one of the most important heritages of Islamic art. However the origin of Islamic architecture was a by-product of many cultures and traditions. The contributions came, for instance, from Mesopotamia, Byzantium, Persia, Africa and other countries. That means that the Muslims adapted elements from many cultures and traditions and then "islamized" them in terms of the relationship between art and Islamic teaching.

NOTES :

1. Lamy al-Faruqi, "Islamizing the Arts Disciplines" in Toward Islamization of Disciplines, Series No 6, (Herdon, Virginia : International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1989) p. 459.
2. See John Sinclair, Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary, (London : The University of Birmingham and Collins Publishers, 1987) p. 69.
3. The arts of Islam, An exhibition organized by Arts Council of Great Britain in association with the world of Islam Festival Trust, (English : Westerham Press Ltd. 1976) p. 31.
4. See The New Encyclopedia Britannica, Vol. 9, p. 923.
5. Ibid.
6. Encyclopedia of Art, (London : Encyclopedia Britannica International Limited, 1972) (1967) Vol. 3, p. 1003.
7. M.S. Dimand, A Handbook of Muhammadan Art, (New York : American Book-Stratford Press, 1947) (1944), p.7.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid, p. 20.
10. Titus Burckhardt, Art of Islam Language and Meaning, (London : World of Islam Festival publishing Company Ltd. 1976, p. 39.
11. Leopold Didlitz, The Nature and Function of Art : More specially of architecture, (London : Sampson Low, Marston, Searle & Rivington, 1881) p. 53.
12. See James Hasting, Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics. s.v. "Architecture", (Edinburgh : T & T Clark, 1908) Vol. I, p. 746.
13. H.W. Janson and Dora Jane Janson, History of Art : A survey of the major visual arts from the dawn of history to the present day, (New York : Prentice Hall inc. 1963 (1962), p. 185.
14. John D. Hong, Islamic Architecture : History of world architecture, (London ; Faber and Faber/Electa 1979 (1975), p. 7.
15. Ibid
16. Ibid
17. Ibid
18. Ibid