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# THE IMPORTANCE OF THE AESTHETIC EXPRESSION OF THE ISLAMIC DECORATION IN MOSQUE AND ITS APPLICATION

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## Abstract

This research discussed on the aesthetic expression of the Islamic decoration as applied in mosque interior. The true function of decoration in the Islamic Arts will be highlighted to obtain better understanding of its important application to the mosque interiors. By having a better understanding of its functions, designers and users will be able to apply and perceive these decoration in their true essence which relates to enhancing the Feeling of Remembrance of Allah as the tool for 'Zikr', which is the key base for the Islamic doctrine. Furthermore, the true function of decoration will further enhance and accentuate the main function of mosque as an important Islamic building. By highlighting its importance and true functions, better understanding can be obtained to ensure the application of decoration in mosque to be aligned with the main functions of mosque.

**Keywords:** Aesthetic expression; Islamic Arts decoration; the concept of 'Beauty'; true functions of decoration; mosque functions; Application of Decoration in Mosque.

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## 1. Introduction

The importance of decoration as an aesthetic expression in Islamic Arts is explained in this chapter. Thus, the concept of decoration as defined in the Islamic Arts is also described in this chapter. Its importance in relation to the mosque architecture and functions are also highlighted. The concept of 'Ibadah' or worshipping in Islam is explained to highlight the importance of mosque and then relates to the Islamic Arts and its decoration roles principles, characteristics, typologies and elements. The way Islam perceived Arts is explained by referring to Imam Al Ghazzali's (a well known Muslim scholar) perception over the Beauty in Islam. The element of Beauty is translated to the functions of decoration in Islamic Arts. However, the other Muslim scholars' views on the application of decoration in mosque are also highlighted to identify the limitation of excessive usage of decoration.

### 1.1 Importance of mosque – 'Masjid' in Islam

Mosque or *Masjid* is considered an important building in Islamic architecture through its function as the House of Allah. The word 'mosque' is derived from Arabic word – '*Masjid*' which means literally '*sujud*' or prostration that is the third position in the Islamic ritual prayers (Seyyed Hussein Nasr, 1987, p. 38). It also usually means any building or place where God is worshipped.

The word '*Masjid*' or mosque also appears in the Holy Book of Revelation – Al Quran with detail description, the first verse which refers to *masjid* or House of worship is Sura Al Imran, 3:96,

*"The First House (of worship) appointed for man was that in Bakka: full of blessings and of guidance of all the worlds".*

(Translation by Abdullah Yusuf Ali, 1996)

The second example of the Al Quran verse which refers to *Masjid* is Sura Al Taubah, 9:108.

*'Never stand thou forth therein. There is a mosque whose foundation was laid from the first day on piety: it is more worthy standing forth (for prayers) therein. In it are men who love to be purified and God loveth those who make themselves pure.'*

(Translation by Abdullah Yusuf Ali, 1996)

Another verse of the same Sura Al Taubah, 9:17-18, also shows the importance of '*Masjid*' in Islam.

*'He shall only tend God's sanctuaries (Masjid Allah) who believe in God and the Last Day and observeth proper worship and payeth the poor – due and fearth none but God'.*

(Translation by Abdullah Yusuf Ali, 1996)

The mosque is considered one of the most important and sacred domains in Islamic buildings. One of its roles is to symbolize the glory of Islam. However, unlike the church and temple, a mosque is not only a religious established proper place for worship, it has various functions for the Muslim society. The mosque is also considered a congregational place not only for prayers but also as a meeting place of the society either for secular or religious purposes (Procazka, 1986).

Also, as stated by Nader Ardalan and Laleh Bakhtiar (1973), "The mosque is the House of God, the building which man must 'feel' the Divine Presence and be nourished by the effusion of the grace emanating from the spirit." In a more accurate meaning, in Islam the mosque is known as a 'House of Worship'. The word 'worship' translated to Arabic is '*Ibadah*'. '*Ibadah*' connotes a meaning of total humility, humbleness and respect for the Master. It also means all actions done by Muslims are to please Allah the All Mighty (Mohd Tajuddin, 1991).

The first mosque or House of Worship on earth was believed to be the **Masjidil Haram or Baytullah** (the House of God). As highlighted by Spahic Omer (2002, p.54), the very first man on earth, *Adam*, desired to have a house which will resound with prayers and praises of God – *Allah*, as in the heaven. God fulfilled his wish and sent the angel *Jibril* to earth to help *Adam* to lay the foundation of the first mosque i.e the *Masjid al Haram* or *Baytullah*, the House of God or Worship. As elaborated by Spahic Omer, others contend that the Prophet *Ibrahim* and his son, *Ismail*, also a prophet (peace be upon them) built the *Masjid al Haram*. The *Masjid al Haram* is reputed as the **first mosque** on earth with reference to the following Al Quran verse, Sura Al Imram, 3:96, as shown earlier in previous page, p. 18.

And in Sura al Baqarah, 2: 127,

*"And remember Abraham and Ismail raised the foundations of the House with this prayer, "Our Lord accept this service from us, Thou art the all Hearing and, the all Knowing".*

Also in Sura Al Hajj, 22:26,

*"Behold! We appointed the site to Abraham of the (Sacred)House (saying): 'Associate not anything(in worship) with Me, and sanctify House for those who compass it round, or stand up, or bow, or prostrate themselves' (therein prayers)..."*

(Translated by Al Razi Fakhr Din, Mafatib alGhayb, Beirut, Dar al Fikr, 1985, vol. 2, p 52-54)

The above Al Quran verses are reflecting the importance of mosque in the Islamic world and architecture. Thus, the importance of mosques in relation to the act of worshipping in Islam is highlighted. Due to its importance, it is well worth investigating the issues which relate to the mosque institution. Hopefully, through research such as this, improvements on the mosque usages and its designs can also be considered as part of an act of worship to Allah.

One of the prime functions of building a mosque is to encourage recitation of God's praise in the mosque. One should feel in their heart the presence of God pervading in the atmosphere. "Mosque should be a place where one is

in communion with the Creator and this is the place which may be rightly called **Heaven on Earth...**" (Mufti Zafeer Udin Miftahi, 1997).

The mosque is considered God's House where all Muslims are to assemble in their respective mosques and stand together shoulder to shoulder behind one leader (*Imam*) and perform prayers. In the Al Quran, in Sura al Baqarah, 2:125, it says about the *Masjid al Haram*:

*'Remember We made the House a place for assembly for men and a place for safety...'*

(Translation by Abdullah Yusuf Ali)

At the center of the Islamic world, at the *Masjidil Haram* in Makkah, all Muslims from all over the world converge on the occasion of the Hajj pilgrimage. This **world assembly** of all Muslims at this mosque is the culmination of the blissful order of mosques, the congregation of a locality five times a day, the weekly congregation of the whole city at *Jama Masjid*, on Fridays, the annual congregation on the *Eid* days at *Igdah* and the world assembly at the *Masjid al Haram* (*ibid.*, 1997). The important functions of mosques were further explained by Prochazka which are as follows:

- i) a congregational place not only for prayer but all religious and secular meeting of the society
- ii) a religious school
- iii) a place for individual mediation and studies; even for
- iv) rest and shelter for those who are in need in a hot afternoon or have no proper place for the night who are called *Musafir*.

He further explained that the mosque in Islam is more integrated in the everyday life of the Islamic community as compared to the other places of worship in any other civilizations.

Prayer or '*Solat*' is universally accepted as the reason for the existence of mosques. It becomes the most important function that a mosque should cater for. The best justification however would be the congregational prayers, '*Solat*', the act of prayer, is an act that occurs constantly at least five times a day regardless of whatever the Muslim's daily rituals are (Mohammad Tajuddin, 2000, p.32). Through *solat*, the linking between the Muslims and Allah is made in the form of remembering Allah and utterance of '*Zikr*' or words praising Allah and His Power.

Tajuddin also elaborated that one should also consider the implications of congregational and individual prayers in designing a mosque. The mosque is considered more suitable as a place for congregational prayer whereby individual homes are meant for individual prayers and other activities. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him or p.b.u.h) emphasized on the goodness of performing longer individual prayers and other type of meditation at home. However, it is not wrong for any Muslims to perform short individual prayers such as '*Sunnatul Masjid*' or any other additional prayers besides the compulsory prayers in the mosque, as in the following *Hadith*,

*Ka'b b. Ujrah said: The Prophet (peace be upon him) came to the mosque Ban, Abd al-Ashhal. He prayed the Maghrib prayer there. When they finished the prayer, he saw them praying the supererogatory (Sunat Rawatib) prayer after it.*

*He said, this is the prayer to be offered in the home.*

(Abdul Hamid Siddiqi, Vol. 1, *Hadith* no. 1295, p. 342)

*Zaid b. Tsabit narrated that the Prophet (peace be upon him) said: Prayers are better performed at your own houses than at my mosque except the Fard (Friday) Prayer.*

(Syed Sabiq, 1990, Vol. 2, p. 9)

*Jabir reported Allah's Messenger (peace be upon him) as saying When anyone of you observes prayer in the mosque he should reserve a part of his prayer for his house, for Allah would make the prayer as a means of betterment in his house.*

(*opcit.*, Vol. 1, *Hadith* no. 1705, p. 376)

Moreover, all obligatory prayers are best performed in congregation and this is highlighted in one of the prophet's *hadith* as indicated.

*Abu Huraira reported Allah's messenger (peace be upon him) as saying: prayer in congregation is equivalent to twenty five (prayers) as compared with the prayer performed by a single prayer.*

*(opcit., Vol. 1, Hadith no. 1705, 2000 p.376)*

However, the above rewards are totally independent of any building. Before the revelation of the Al Quran, the mosque as understood in Arabic literature referred to any temples, including the *Ka'ba*. The Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h) began his preaching of Islam in houses and in deserts and prayed together with those who had converted to Islam in the early form of Muslim prayer. After that, the Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h) migrated to Medina in the year 622 and established a mosque – place to pray in Quba. There is a verse which refers to the construction of this *Masjid Quba*, in Sura al Taubah 9:108, as indicated earlier. The Prophet used the mosque as a meeting place for Muslims as well as for congregational prayers. Apart from these functions, it was also used as an education center, a courthouse, a military camp, a hospital, a shelter for the homeless and a place for celebrations. The mosque was the center for political, social, educational and cultural activities for the Muslims.

All of the above functions have the same aim and purpose: that is, to relate to the act of '*Ibadah*' – worship towards Allah. The very act of each function is of doing good deeds in avoidance of doing the forbidden acts. The holy Al Quran, in Sura Al Zariyat, 51:56, says the purpose of creating mankind is to pray to Allah.

*"I have only created Jinns and Men, that they may worship Me."*

*(Translation by Abdullah Yusuf Ali, 1996)*

The concept of worship by Islam is very comprehensive; particularly the forms of the five pillars which are the forms of worship. All Islamic compulsory forms of worship are designed as exercises and training to enable people to acquire correct morals and habits, and to live righteously and to adhere to these virtues till the end, whatever the changes in their circumstances. In Islam, prayer prevents individual from all sort of abominations and vices, by providing man the chances of direct communion with *Allah*, the Creator five times daily.

As Garudi says, "In prayer, time returns to its original state. In the 'Prayer in Islam', written by Muhammad Iqbal, Prayer '*is the self's escape from individuality to freedom.*' It is also the moment when Divine Energy flows into us, and turn us away from sin if we give ourselves up to the fertile source of Divine Energy (R. Garudi, Mosque of Islam, p.31).

However, aside from prayers, a Muslim has many social obligations to fulfill. Fulfilling these responsibilities will help to create a more conducive religious environment and to be at peace with oneself and in constant remembrance of Allah. It is important that this environment is being constantly created to achieve the said ultimate goal by all Muslims. Therefore, it is very important to create and enhance this kind of environment especially in mosques – the House of Worship. In Islam, the concept of '*deen*' or religious embrace has three elements: i) *iman* (belief) ii) *ibadah* (religious obligation) and iii) *ihsan* (right doing).

The expression of belief in the Oneness and Uniqueness of God and the Messenger ship of Muhammad control all of the Islam's concepts, attitudes, moral values, guidelines for human behavior and relationship and even also its art and architecture. For the Muslims, one of the important ways to express this belief is through their *Ibadah* or the acts of worshipping.

In the normal usage of English language, the meaning of worship is '*an act specifically set in the religious and ritualistic context.*' As further explained by Mohd Tajuddin, the word 'worship' is contained in the concept of '*Ibadah*'. It is derivative term '*abd*' or slave. A true Muslim is a compliant slave to Allah the Most High Almighty.

It is noted that the main functions of mosque relate to the acts of worshipping or *Ibadah*. These very acts are considered ways of constantly remembering *Allah* and thus reflecting the Muslim's *deen* or *iman* towards serving *Allah*. The basic Islamic principles in portraying faith must be truly understood and carried out in the best manner within our surroundings and environment especially in the House of *Ibadah* that is in mosque as the main building in the Islamic world. With that the basic main functions of mosque can be fully implemented to its fullest capacity.

### *1.2. The function of Mosque decoration as aesthetic expression in Islamic Arts*

The function of mosque decoration also relates to the Islamic Arts concept which will be discussed in detail in the next section. As discussed in Spahic Omer book, 'The Philosophy of Decoration in Islamic Architecture' in 2009, some decoration when it is wrongly applied it can be an instrument of deception. This type of decoration can be wrongly applied in our built environment, outward human appearance, main interactions and even religious

ceremonies. This type of decoration stands between a thing and a beholder revealing to the latter and not the former, but what it is not.

At any rate, in this type of decoration, the real character of a thing is hardly perceptible by a casual observer or one who lacks of desire, a sense of purpose, wisdom, cerebral and spiritual means and moral fiber. To see things in real light by grasping the real meaning of life and its multifaceted realities, to which the Quran often alludes to by applying guidance, wisdom, knowledge and comprehension. But to see things in a different way, blinded by the false “attractiveness” of things and unable to penetrate into the actual substances, knowledge and comprehension is on the other hand, is to succumb to and remain bogged down with the demands of human animal lusts and desires, thus failing to perceive higher order of existence. The Quran often alludes to this situation, by applying deviation, going astray, without understanding, ignorance and negligence. Therefore, it is fairly important to understand the appropriate way of applying these decorations so that it does not **falsely** highlighting the ‘beauty’ of these decorations.

The other type of decoration or beautification brought to light in both the Quran and the statements in *hadith* of the Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h) is the one that plays the role of an instrument that enhance the real and the original qualities of a thing. The Quran says for example:

“We have indeed decked the lower heaven with beauty (in) the stars”

(Al Saffat 6)

“Do they not look at the sky above them? How We have made it and adorned it, and there are no flaws in it” (Qaf 6).

The Prophet (p.b.u.h), he took on many occasions referred to the subject of decoration as an instrument of enhancing the real qualities of a thing. For example, he said “Decorate your reading the Quran with your voices”

(Ahmad b. Hanbal, *Musnad Ahmad b. Hanbal*, *Awwal Musnad al kufiyyin*, hadith no 17784).

One of the Prophet’s supplications was: “O God, endears the faith to us, and makes it beautiful in our hearts.”

(*ibid.*, *Musnad al makiyyin*, hadith no 14945.)

He also prayed, “O God, adorn us with the beauty of belief (*iman*).”

(Al Nasa’iSunan al Nasa’i, *Kitab al Sahw*, hadith No 1289).

The Prophet (p.b.u.h) has said that Allah decorates every day His Paradise (*jannah*) for His true servants.

(Ahmad b. Hanbal, *Musnad Ahmad b. Hanbal*, *Baqi Musnad al Mukhthirin*, hadith no 7576).

The concept of decoration, which functions as an instrument of enhancing the real original qualities of a thing, involves no camouflaging via certain means a media. Nor do the decorative themes and method thus apply stand between a thing and a beholder revealing to the latter nor that what the former actually is, but what it is not. Instead, this brand of decoration and beautification accounts for an extension and enhancement of a thing’s substance by the use of appropriate themes and channels- sometimes more and sometime less. So important is such a brand of decoration in life that it sometimes not only denotes an enhancement of a thing’s actual qualities, but it also becomes an integral part thereof.

The area of decoration and beautification serves to many people as an inducement to pay attention to many events and things, which, intern, causes them to aptly comprehend and duly appreciate the same events and things. Without the supplement of the enhancing decorative designs and features, many from among this category of people would remain short of fully recognizing the true significance of the surrounding things. To another category of people who are more insightful and earnest than the first group, on the other hand, the roles of decoration are rather supplementary and not essential. If they had to, they could easily do without them. Due to a variety of useful functions performed by the systems of decoration that aim at an enhancing the actual qualities of a thing, it stands to reason, the same emerged as an indispensable facet of creation. It features at all levels including the one that belongs solely to the Creator of the heavens and the earth. This type of decoration can be applied only to the positive aspects of existence.

1.3. *The Concept of Beauty, Unity and Transcendence; The Divine Remembrance Towards Allah The Almighty God.*

*“Arts are among the important and direct manifestation of the principles of the tradition, for men live in forms and in order to be drawn towards the Transcendent archetypes, they must be surrounded by forms that echo transcendent archetypes.”*

(Nader Ardalan, 1983)

Islamic Art does reflect the Islamic doctrine “*Tawhid*” whereby this concept of Oneness and Unity is the medium of manifestation of the One God – *Allah*, His Attributes and Names, in the abstract manners whereby the Beauty, Truth and Unity are formed and fused together. As stated in the Al Quran, Sura Al Baqarah, 2:115,

*“To God belong the East and the West: withersoever ye turn, there the presence of God. For God is All pervading, All knowing.”*

(Translation by Abdullah Yusuf Ali, 1996)

From the above verse, the presence of God can be felt within His Creations, the surrounding and cosmos. His Beauty is manifested by seeing all His Creations and these creations are manifested to reflect His Oneness and Unity. All the cosmos and universe are all the signs of His Beauty and the manifestation of His Attributes and Names. The aesthetic expressions of the signs of *Allah*'s Beauty are well translated and manifested in the Islamic Arts decorations, whereby its main function is to promote and enhance this Feeling of Remembering *Allah*.

Beauty is considered as the phenomenon of the experience of pleasure, through the perception of balance and proportion of stimulus. It involves the cognition of a balanced form and structure that elicits attraction and appeal towards a person, animal, inanimate object, scene, music and idea, and others.

Beauty is also said to an assemblage or graces or properties pleasing to the eye, the ear, the intellect, the aesthetic faculty, or the moral sense.

The perceptions of beauty in the Western and in Islam differs, whereby the additional ‘inner’ beauty is emphasized in Islam. The Beauty also constitutes and encompasses The *Tawhid*, Unity and Transcendence in *Allah*. The Concept of Beauty, its meaning and its inner and outer dimensions, plus the sublime beauty of God, Abu Hamid al Ghazzali (405-505 AH/1058-1111 AC) comprehensively wrote, “Know O readers that every which is beautiful is dear to one of the senses. *Allah* is beautiful and loves beauty. Material beauty can be perceived by the eye. The beauty of divine glory can only be appreciated by mind. The word beauty is used to describe the attributes of individuals. It is therefore said that man has a beautiful character. The word applies to his qualities, and not to his physical appearance. He is loved for his beautiful attributes as one loved for his beautiful appearance. If this love is deep, it is called *ishq*.”

The sixth sense, or the spiritual insight, which by true Muslims develop their ways and means for appreciating the real inner beauty, Abu Hamid al Ghazali refers to, obviously on the basis of the Quran and the Prophet's experiences, as souls, also called “spirit”, “heart”, “reason”, and “light” (Richard Ettinghausen, 1981, p.27). He also wrote, “The beauty of the outer form which is seen with the bodily eye can be experienced even by children and animals while the beauty of the inner form can only be perceived by the eye of the ‘heart’ and the light of the inner vision of man alone...”

This realization of stages of Unity can be truly felt by the Muslims through their inner self and deeper understanding of the concept of *deen* – *Tawhid* and **Remembrance of *Allah***. Islamic worship is solely towards this final goal, which is also as the key principle and role of its Art. The origin of Islamic Art is related back to the worldview of Islam itself, the Islamic revelation.

This Art and Islamic worship is strongly related, the contemplation of *Allah* as recommended in the Al Quran and the contemplative nature of this art, between the remembrance of *Allah* (*zikr*) which is the final goal of all Islamic worship and the role played by Islamic art. Before one understands the Islamic art role and principles, he or she has to ponder on the origin of unifying factor which ties this art with Islam. Seyyed Hossein Nasr expresses his opinions of the origin and close relationship between this Art and the Islamic revelation. He elaborated that; “This art could not perform such a spiritual function if it were not related in the most intimate manner to both form and content of the Islamic revelation.” (Seyyed Hossein Nasr, 1987, p.4).

He further elaborates that whatever relationship exists between Islamic art and the Islamic revelation, it cannot be simply on the plane of political changes brought about by Islam. The relation is brought within the religion itself. Without the sources of Al Quran and the Al Hadith (the Prophet's sayings and actions to guide us), there would not be any Islamic Arts. The art of Islam is the Islamic Art not only it is made by Muslims but it also issues the Islamic

Revelation as the Divine Law and the Way. This can be seen in the Islamic Arts decoration, whereby its main role as a media to enhance the Remembrance of *Allah*.

Islamic Art is also a result of the manifestation of Unity upon the plane of Multiplicity. It reflects the Unity of the Divine Principle, the dependence of all multiplicity upon the One (Seyyed Hossein Nasr, 1987, p.7). He further elaborates that Islamic Art makes manifest, in the physical order directly perceivable by the senses, the archetypal realities and acts, therefore as a ladder for the journey of the soul from the visible and the audible to the Invisible which is also silence transcending all sounds (*ibid.*, 1987).

Islamic Art is derived from the Islamic spirituality in a direct manner and mould by the Al Quran Revelation. The origin of Islamic Arts lies in the content and spiritual dimension of Islam. Those Muslim artists and artisans who design the Islamic art products over the decades and regions are able to gain a vision of the archetypal world, through the Al Quran revelation and the Prophet '*barakah*' or good blessings. Only the Universal (*Allah*, the Creator) can produce the Universe. This art is a message from the inner chamber, sent to those who are able and qualified to listen attentively to this liberating message, also to provide peace, an equilibrium and harmony to the society in conformity to Islam and to create an ambience in which God (*Allah*) is always remembered wherever he turns. The Al Quran asserts in the Sura al Baqarah, 2: 115,

*"To God belong the East and the West: Whithsoever ye turn there is the presence of God. For God is All Pervading and all knowing."*

(Translation by Abdullah Yusuf Ali, 1996)

Furthermore, Islamic Art as described by Seyyed Hossein Nasr, is based upon the knowledge of a spiritual nature, a knowledge referred by the traditional masters of Islamic Arts as wisdom or '*hikmah*'. Also, this art is not concerned with the outward appearance of things alone, but also with the inner reality. Moreover, it does not imitate the outward forms of nature but richly reflects their principles (Seyyed Hossein Nasr, 1987, p.8).

Islamic spirituality is related to Islamic Arts in the sense in which the Islamic rites mould the mind and soul of all Muslims including the artists and artisans. This spirituality has influenced the Islamic Arts directly by the inculcation of certain attitudes and elimination of other possibilities with the mind and soul of those who have designed and produced this art. Islamic Art can support the remembrance of Allah (*zikr*), even though made by men, it derives from the supra – individual inspiration and a '*hikmah*' which come from Him (*Allah*). As for the virgin nature, the recollection or remembrance of God is obvious because it was created by *Allah*, the Divine Artisan or Maker.

Moreover, in the Islamic Arts, the origin of this art and the nature of the forces and principles which brought this art together are related to the world view of Islam, its relation to the Islamic belief and embrace, to the Islamic Revelation. As earlier highlighted, the relation of this art and Islamic revelation is borne out by the organic rapport between this art and Islamic worship, between the contemplation of God as recommended in the Al Quran and the contemplative nature of this art, between the remembrance of Allah (*zikr*) which is the final goal of all Islamic worship and the role of both a plastic and oral nature in the life of individual Muslims and the community of *Al ummah* as a whole. This art could not perform such a spiritual function if it were the not related in the most intimate manner to both the form and content of the revelation (Seyyed Hossein Nasr, 1987).

Let us now refer to the concept of Beauty in the Islamic perspective. Beauty in Islam has a deeper and more significant approach towards the Beauty of Allah and as reflected in one of His Attributes which is '*Al Jamal*' which means 'the Utmost Beauty'. The Prophet (pbuh) has said that Allah is beautiful and loves beauty (Muslim, hadith No 164). Also,

"It is Allah Who has made you the earth as a resting place, and the sky as a canopy, and has given you shape- and make your shapes beautiful and hence provide you sustenance" (Gafir 64).

The inner and outer beauty would be one of the important bases in the Islamic Art. Al Ghazzali (a well known and prominent Muslim scholar and theologian) had stressed on the importance of the inner beauty, which is more towards the spiritual nature, which is considered as the '*real*' beauty. This will then lead oneself towards *Allah*'s Beauty and to love Him. Loving *Allah* is the final aim for a true Muslim whereby in doing so it will give pleasure to oneself. *Allah*'s Oneness and Transcendence penetrates everything to its deepest roots in the Islamic environment. *Allah* creates everything to be known by men therefore everything is to remind man of *Allah*. Consequently, all Muslim artifacts are also to remind man of Allah. Every Muslim artisan tries to free things from their 'thingness', to enable us to know *Allah* through them.

Islamic decoration, architecture, city and all the other Muslim artifacts are the very fruit of Allah's Oneness and Transcendence. "Islamic art is thus a direct expression of the Al Quran Revelation. Its essential mission is to make

us ‘Remember God’, to make us live the first and last Truth, that discovery, always new and always wondrous, of the Invisible presence of God in creation, of which He is both the Source and Purpose” (R. Garudi, p.25). Muslim artisans do not create nor design something which is totally ‘new’. He designs in such manner as to manifest the Attributes of *Allah* which are hidden. However, *Allah*’s Attributes can be seen in all of His Creation – in the natural surroundings and in the works of man.

The concept of ‘*Tawhid*’ – Oneness / Unity which is Transcendent is clearly stated in the following Al-Quran verse, Sura Al Shura, 42:11,

*“(He is) the Creator of Heavens and the earth : He has made for your pairs from among yourselves, and pairs among cattle : by this means does he multiply you : there is nothing whatever like unto Him, and He is the One that hears and sees (all things).”*

The phenomenon of Unity in Diversity is an intriguing phenomenon in Islamic Art. Islamic Art embraces a whole range of styles, each of which is distinguishable and corresponds to a specific ethnic environment throughout. Although no specific style can be described ‘less Islamic’ than the other, this phenomenon of Unity in Diversity proves that Islam is not a synthesis created by man, rather it came directly from the One God, Allah Who is the Creator of the universe and all in it. This cannot be seen in any other artwork traditions throughout the whole world except in the Islamic artworks. Therefore, it emphasizes the unique characteristic of the Islamic Arts.

Variety in Islamic Art has usually the attributes of regional ethnic preferences. Even though there is diversity on the regional decoration design elements, there are also strong common visual principles, which tie them together. Despite their existence, the element of **variety within the overall Unity** is not been fully investigated or analyzed for better understanding. Part of this study is to identify these elements through case reference studies of the traditional mosques in Melaka, Malaysia. The ‘traditional’ mosque is chosen due to its significant typology and dominant regional characteristics. The word ‘traditional’ is defined as a custom of belief that the people in a particular group of society have practiced or held for a long time. Its meaning and definition connotes to the belief and attitudes of a society which have existed in a place for a long time and are not expected to change (Harper Collins, 1987).

In Islamic Art, ornamentation of a more precious term that can be used in this context is decoration; it is not something which is added superficially to the completed artwork in order to embellish it in an unessential way. It is also not a means of satisfying the appetites of pleasure seeking people. It should never be regarded as a mere filling of space to escape emptiness (Ismail Faruqi, Lois Lamya, 1921 p. 379). The latter is often regarded and considered by non-Muslim artist whilst this is untrue to the Muslim artist. The important function of *decoration* is also described in the Holy Quran, Sura al Zukhruf, 43:36,

*“if anyone withdraws himself from the remembrance of God Most Gracious, We appoint for him an evil one, to be ultimate companion to him.”*

(Translation by Abdullah Yusuf Ali, 1996)

The Prophet harshly criticized inappropriate decoration, but did not denounce the idea of decoration and beautification as such. It could be said, therefore, that the matter rests within the permissibility (*ibahah*) so long as something does not come about and cause it to infringe some of the divinely prescribed standards, and hence render it abhorrent and even forbidden. This conclusion can be drawn from the way Islam generally treats the subjects of entertainment, beautification and enjoying the legitimate delights of this world. These are all in principle permitted in Islam. However, should they be unduly practiced or utilized, thereby breeding falseness and wrongdoing, they will instantaneously become abhorred and disapproved of.

Pursuing beauty and appreciating beautiful objects is instinctive. Such is conducive to one’s realization of tranquility, joy and happiness in this world, thus helping one to concentrate on the matters that would guarantee happiness in the Hereafter as well. Yusuf al Qardawi stated: “Thus permissible for a Muslim to adorn his house with various kinds of flowers, decorated fabrics, and other permitted ornamental objects.

Decoration acts as a tool to help to accentuate the Remembrance of Allah or *zikr*. By looking at these decorations, which are applied as part of decoration in mosques, one can be encouraged and be reminded of Allah and His Power

through the manifestation of His Beauty, Unity and Transcendence. The *Zikr* or Remembering Allah along with performing the various acts of *Ibadah* or worshipping is the main goal of the Tawhidic approach in Islam. This is the main function of decoration is Islamic Arts.

The decoration found in the Islamic artworks gives additional dimensions that express the adherence of Islam as expressions of Truth and Goodness. These characteristics constitute Unity, which can be found in all Islamic artworks of any medium or technique in every region of the Muslim world and every century of the Islamic period (Ismail Al Faruqi, Lois Lamy, 1921, p. 383). The phenomenon of Unity can be seen in Islamic artworks including those in the interior decoration of mosque. However, there are elements, which are diversified from each artwork of different regions, there are also common elements within these artworks, which tie them together in a unifying manner. This phenomenon can clearly be seen **only** in the **Islamic** artworks.

Oleg Grabar explained the term ‘ornament’ and ‘decoration’ in a more precise manner in his article entitled “Mediation of Ornament”, 1989. In the Encyclopedia of Art, 1989, the general standard statement which is widely accepted is that ‘ornament’ is referred to as, “Motifs and themes used...without being essential to structure and serviceability. (but) for the purpose of embellishment.”

#### 1.4. The importance of decoration in Islamic Arts.

As discussed earlier, Islamic Art is an art based on the ideology of ‘*Tawhid*’ that cannot be aesthetically expressed by real or imagined linkages between man and God. Any linkage would be a major sin in Islam if the linkages were associations of other beings of objects with *Allah*. This belief has generated a symbolic quality in the religion and culture of Islam. It has been noted that the rituals in Islam are more functional rather than symbolic. For example, the call for prayer is more functional rather than symbolic. However, the symbolism in Islamic artwork is viewed in a different manner. The main aim of any Islamic artwork is to accentuate this feeling of ‘*Tawhid*’ or remembrance towards *Allah*. This characteristic and aim of Islamic art is very unique and prominent.

No individual or personal glory should be reflected in these artworks except to generate Allah’s Beauty, Unity and Transcendence. It is considered part of ‘*Ibadah*’ or an act of worshipping. Also, we can consider these artworks to be a tool to generate these feelings and enhancing the atmosphere of contemplating and remembering to Allah or *Zikr*. For example, the Calligraphy works in the form of Al Quran words or verses can help those who read and see them directly, to remember Allah and His Holiness and Grandness. All of the Al Quran verses are considered as the Words of *Allah*, to remind mankind of their actual deeds and responsibilities on earth as *Khalifah*.

The general meaning of decoration was explained earlier. However, it is also important for one to understand the unique function and significance of decoration in the Islamic aesthetic works. Without this understanding, no one can clearly appreciate the positive contributions to Muslims. According to Al Faruqi, there are four specific functions of decoration. Decorations in Islam have wider functions, which define their significance. The concept of decoration in Islamic artwork plays the role of:

- i) Reminder of the Islamic doctrine ‘*Tawhid*’
- ii) Transfiguring of materials where the objects undergone a change in form or appearance but no tin substance.
- iii) Transfiguring structures – by hiding the basic forms or minimizing the impact to the viewer.
- iv) Beautification

**Firstly**, as a reminder of *Tawhid*, the Islamic artwork “would lead the viewer to an intuition of the Divine Transcendence”. Since the need of such a reminder of the Islamic ideology *Tawhid* is important to the environment, at work, home and in the mosque, the infinite pattern of decoration of Islamic Art are to be found everywhere.

**Secondly**, the function of decoration is to transfigure material. This implies that the object has undergone a change in the form or appearance but not in substance. In this transfiguration, the aesthetic goal of Islamic art is to lead the spectator away from concentration on oneself and this world and toward the contemplation of *Tawhid* and God. Therefore, it is important for the artwork of Islamic art to generate the remembrance of Allah rather than portraying or emphasizing the object or the artist.

**Thirdly**, in the Islamic art, the basic framework structure of a particular artwork is disguised. This is done by hiding the basic forms and minimizing impact to the viewer. Emphasis on the basic structure is rejected since it would emphasize the naturalistic.

**Fourthly**, the beautification, the main use of decoration is to beautify and embellish. The patterns created are pleasing to the eye, has symmetry uses pleasing colour composition, is graceful and has varied shapes. These

patterns are also acknowledged by non-Muslims. All the motifs and artworks impart an additional dimension of beauty for the Muslim percipient. The expression of *'Tawhid'*, Truth and Goodness is evident in the works. All of these constitute its unity. They can be found in any medium, technique, in every region of the Muslim world, in every century of Islamic period. Variety is usually attributed to the effect of ethnic, racial or regional preferences. These elements of variety in the overall unity are still lacking in research.

All the above characteristics constitute its Unity. They can be found in all of the Islamic artworks of any medium or technique, in every Muslim region in the world, and in any century of the Islamic period. Thus, from these we can conclude that the uniqueness of the Islamic artworks are proven and acknowledged, even by the non-Muslims / western scholars and artisans throughout the world.

The role of decoration is one of the unifying factors in all buildings or objects from all over the Islamic world. The decorative principles of Islamic art, can be applied to all types of building at all times (when the relationship between all applied arts and architecture). The decoration in the Islamic art especially the surface decoration in the Islamic architecture has a physical reality and visual impact which is independent and as important as their architectural forms. All of these visual effects are applied and enriched in carpet, cushion and also on ceiling or walls.

Jones also highlighted the misconception of the West on the Islamic art; that is Islamic art is only restricted to two dimensional forms. This is not true especially as applied to Islamic sculpture, which is a three dimensional object, for example. The interlacing designs are to create illusion of planes, accompanied by rich colour, texture and depth. The textured patterns and surfaces can also be found in the stucco and tile work where alternative materials exist. Also, the artistic techniques in Islamic art are often focused onto the intricate and shining materials and glazes, repetition of designs, contrasting texture and manipulation of planes. Furthermore, Islamic art is an art of repose, intellectual rather than emotional. It is a conceptual art, which is well balanced. The principle of this art is repetition and continuous permutation of motifs and designs. This design often reflects and multiplies to create a dynamic but unchanging art.

The function of decoration in Islamic architecture or buildings is not only to cover surfaces; it has additional uniqueness. It helps to transform space. The space is defined by surfaces, whereby there is an intimate relation between space and decoration and the decoration is often articulated. A typical example is the *'muqarnas'* which dissolve the barrier between load bearing and structural and also the non-load bearing (ornamentation). See Figure 1.

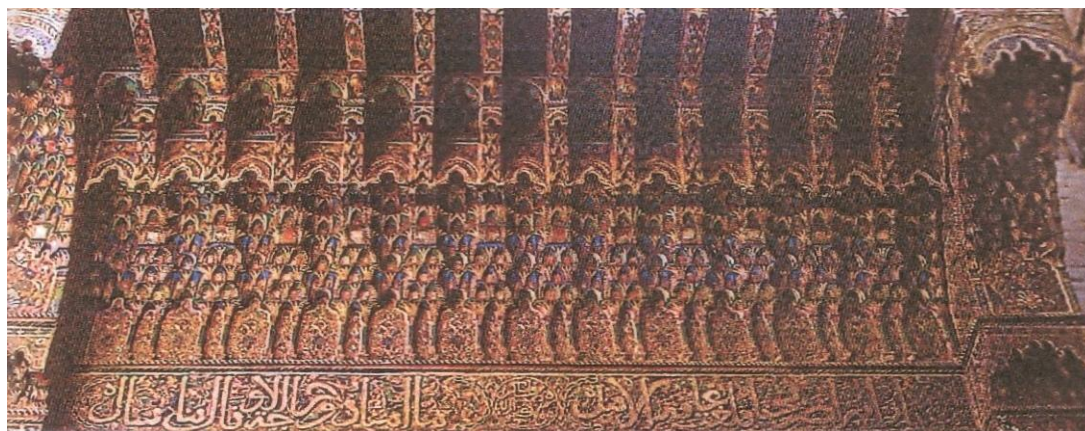


Figure 1: The example of muqarnas composition in Moullay Idris Zaouia, Fes

The general fundamental underlying principles are very apparent. The continuous patterns in time and space, the inter changeability of the same design, which can be applied from one medium to another and repetition of designs at any scale and sizes are often applied in the same building. By doing that, we can see the unity and continuity of these various elements as a whole.

As stressed in the earlier section, Islamic Art has the same purpose whereby the object of the artworks should be viewed and designed in contemplation and as a reminder of the God's bounty. The strong link between the contemplation of Allah as recommended in the Al Quran and the contemplative nature of this art, which is the final goal of all Islamic worship. Therefore, the source and nature of the forces and principles which have brought this art into being, must therefore be related to the world view of Islam itself, to the Islamic Revelation, one of whose direct radiations is the sacred art of Islam and indirectly the whole of Islamic Art (Amjad Bohumil Prochazka, 1986).

Islam consists of the Divine Law (*Al Shariah*), a spiritual path (*al Tariqah*) and the Truth (*al Haqiqah*) which is the origin of both the Law and the Way. The Divine Law plays an important role in creating the background of Islamic Art. But essentially, the Divine Law contains instructions for Muslims on how to act, not how to make things. Therefore, its role in Art can only be viewed from the angle in which the molding of the soul of the artist with certain attitudes and virtues which are derived from the Al Quran and the Prophetic *Hadith* and *Sunnah*.

The Al Quran also provides the doctrine of Unity while the Prophet provides the manifestation of this Unity in Diversity and witness to this Unity in His creation. Without the Al Quran and the Prophetic *barakah* or good blessings, there would be no Islamic Art. Now, we can see clearly that the art of Islam is Islamic Revelation and the inner dimension of Islam which leads man to the Divine revelation as do the Divine Law and the Way.

Islamic art is a fruit of Islamic spirituality from the point of view of its genesis and as an aid, complement and support of the spiritual life. It is also a result of the manifestation of Unity upon the plane of Diversity. The relationship of the Islamic art is seen through the manner in which the Islamic rites mould the mind and the soul of all Muslims including the artist and artisans (Datuk Haji Mohamed Haji Ahmad, 1990).

If the Islamic art can **serve as a support** for the **Remembrance of Allah**, the One God, it is because although made by men, it derives from the inspiration and the good blessing – '*hikmah*', which comes ultimately from Him. To understand and grasp fully the significance of Islamic Art, one has to become aware that an aspect of the Islamic Revelation, a casting of the Divine Realities (*haqiqi*) upon the material manifestation in order to carry man upon the wings of its liberating beauty to his original abode of the Divine Proximity (Ernst J. Grube, 1987).

## Conclusion

The mosque as the House of Worship for Muslims is most significant to the Muslim world. Its functions are diversified and it acts as the Community Center to the Muslims. Due to its importance, it is vital for one to understand its actual functions and create a better 'worshipping' environment in relation to the remembrance of the One God.

In relation to The Islamic Arts, decoration is considered as an important artwork. Decoration in Islamic Art has the same goal and aim as the Islamic doctrine. The purpose of the decoration is to accentuate the feeling of remembrance of Allah. Also in Islamic Arts, the concept of inner and outer beauty is applied in such a manner that it goes beyond the physical appearance of the artwork. Al-Ghazzali considered decorations as 'real' if only applied to Allah's Beauty and Love for Allah. These are abstract decoration whereby the concept of Beauty, Truth, Unity and Allah's Transcendence are richly portrayed in different components and formations. Islamic Art is derived from the Islamic spirituality which is also the backbone of Islamic teachings. It does not imitate the external forms of nature but reflects their principles.

Therefore, it is essential for us to understand the principles of Islamic Arts. Also, the concept of beauty in Islam is also very important in order to relate the principles and functions in its Arts. By understanding the true meaning of the importance of beauty in Islamic Art and its definition of '*Zukhruf*' as ornamentation and decoration, the usage of decoration as the aesthetic expression in Islamic Arts will be more appropriately applied especially in mosque environment. The actual functions of decoration will not be unnecessarily wasted since the emphasis of the inner and the outer beauty of decoration will relate back to the act of '*Ibadah*' or Worshipping in remembrance to Allah. This is much aligned with the actual functions of mosque as an important feature in the Islamic buildings.

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