

## Islamization of the Visual Arts

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This paper presents the Islamization of the field of art and design. I will try and identify, albeit briefly, some of the major problems and failings of the current situation and will discuss why this area of human activity urgently needs to be restored to its proper role and status in society. I will then propose a number of measures that could be taken toward achieving this.

### The Status Quo

Looking at the arts around us, in particular that produced by Muslims (which, however, often cannot be distinguished from that of non-Muslims), we become aware that the status quo in this field is far from satisfactory. Hardly any of the art works reflect Islam except in a superficial way, and the roots of contemporary Muslim art are firmly planted in Western art rather than in traditional Islamic art. The values thus promoted by it are Western, and, as such, they are often in conflict with Islam.

It is not difficult to find the main reason for this phenomenon. As the Muslim countries' power and vitality eroded, they became easy prey to Western powers, who proceeded to colonize not only the Muslims' land and natural wealth but also their culture, their philosophy, their values. One of the chief vehicles for this spiritual/intellectual colonization was the institution of the mission school, which pushed Islam and its teachings to the sidelines, and forced it to abdicate its proper role as the central principle of, and complete guide for, all human endeavor. In its place, "modern" knowledge reigned supreme.

Perhaps one of the most damaging results, besides that of implanting a whole set of conflicting values, has been that of relegating Islam, as knowledge, to the status of a mere field of specialization. As with a branch of science, or economics, or literature, only those especially inclined toward religious studies are expected to study Islam in any depth, and anything beyond the

basic principles and practices has to be referred to such a specialist. These specialists are often, as it were, locked into their esoteric world of *fiqh*, *tafsir*, and so on, while the *ummah* as a whole lives a life largely devoid of the vital guiding spirit of Islam. Furthermore, with the presumption that one needs to be “specialized” in this area of knowledge, the right, indeed, the bounden duty, of every Muslim to learn and think for himself about his religion has been automatically surrendered to the specialists. Just as a non-economics-specialist is expected to defer to an economics specialist on matters of economics, a nonspecialist in Islamic knowledge usually now defers to a specialist on any question pertaining to Islam. To compound the problem further, the ordinary Muslim-in-the-street is doubly afraid of making mistakes about religion, since he does at least quite rightly feel that Islam is something “different”—no less than the word of Allah. Unfortunately, this reverence does not provoke him to study and think further but merely to be afraid to express any opinion or to question the meaning of anything to do with Islam. How much more so among artists, whose activities are usually deemed by the specialists to be at least frivolous if not downright sinful (based on present products, this judgment is perhaps understandable).

Overdependence on the *‘ulama* and religious teachers has also led to frequent overemphasis on black-and-white sorts of judgments—people want to know whether a certain action is allowable or not allowable; there is often no attempt, nor even a desire, to think of the whys and the wherefores, or to discuss the implications of the question or act in a broader context. Thus each little problem tends to be seen in isolation, and the overall spirit of Islam is often obscured. Such an attitude also leads toward negativism—avoiding the bad rather than constructing on the basis of the good, a cutting away instead of a building up.

Let us identify some of the basic concepts inherited from the West that are at variance with Islam.

1. Fine art is virtually separate from design. Despite using the same basic vocabulary of line, form, color, etc., they do not share the same aims, creative processes, or status.
2. Art is for art’s sake, divorced from its proper role in society. It has become obscure and is increasingly directed toward the initiated few.
3. Design is often primarily commercial, and involves problem-solving on a purely practical level. It is not usually expected to fulfill any spiritual need of man, except on a very basic level; aesthetic values are often incorporated, but their aim is to give pleasure and rarely go as far as to convey any higher meaning.
4. The fine artist is basically egoistic, creating works to fulfill himself.
5. The fine artist is a revered being superior to others. He is allowed to be totally selfish, even thoroughly antisocial in his behavior and actions,

simply because he is an artist.

6. There is no concept of what constitutes art. The spirit of non-art or anti-art still effectively prevails, since no one apparently ever dares to say, "that is not art." Even when an artist's ideas are so weak or garbled as to need lengthy verbal explanations to elucidate the art work that is supposed to express them, his work is still taken seriously, and he is even sometimes given a monetary award to develop his ideas further. Western art is groping blindly without any specific direction or unity.

7. Human thought or inspiration is supreme as the basis of all art.

8. Serious art must always seek new or different forms. Yesterday's art quickly becomes outdated and irrelevant.

## **The Benefits of Islamization of the Visual Arts**

It is of course not possible to work magic and create and implement a perfectly Islamic field of art and design overnight. Even if we were able to determine its form in so short a time, it would not be feasible in an as yet imperfect Islamic society. Such an attempt would, in fact, create new problems: there would be a lack of adequately knowledgeable personnel to implement it, and teachers who do not themselves yet understand Islamization would surely do a lot of damage trying to teach it to their students. Second, too sudden and too drastic a change would confuse artists and designers and also might pose problems in terms of employment opportunities. It would also probably create feelings of anxiety and doubt among the general public, many of whom are still not fully sympathetic toward Islamization (due to ignorance of its true nature and import). This is an especially sensitive problem in countries whose populations are not 100 percent Muslim.

Having sounded a note of caution, let us go on to note some of the great benefits to be gleaned from Islamization in the visual arts.

Contrary to what some people might fear, it is inconceivable that Islam could ever limit knowledge or creative activity. The only possible limiting factor is the extent of man's own knowledge and understanding of Islam. Following Islamic principles might mean forgoing certain approaches and forms, but this sacrifice is only to make it possible for men to achieve something much higher than would have been possible through these approaches or forms. In other words, far from limiting the artist, the Islamic concept strives to remove limitations.

In terms of what both the artist or designer and the general public who see the art works stand to gain, the promise is indeed great.

Islamic art aims to express the universal concepts of Islam, as understood by the individual artist. The meaning of the art or design work is thus far

broader and more fulfilling than any fruit of purely human inspiration could ever be. Islamic concepts also appeal to the complete human consciousness. They appeal through his visual sense to his intellect as well as to his heart, whereas many Western-type works appeal to only part of man's consciousness—just to the heart (as in Expressionism), or just to the intellect, or just to titillate the senses. In this case neither message nor perception of meaning is completely satisfying; man's true nature is not properly fulfilled.

The artist himself, far from having his right to think and create usurped, would be greatly enriched. He would harness his powers of thinking and his special sensitivities to the interpretation of universal and eternal truths which have been sent to mankind by Allah (SWT). He would offer to his fellow creatures the fruits of this understanding through his unique artistic skills and creativity. Surely this is not a belittling of the individual but a tremendous uplifting. A true Islamic artist rightly considers the God-given gift of artistic talent an extraordinary honor, a privilege.

When other fields of knowledge are also Islamized, all of them, including art, will be directed toward the same goal, namely, knowledge of Allah (SWT). It should thus be much easier for them to interrelate, to communicate as they should do, since they will all, as it were, be on the same wavelength.

Thus, if the art and design field is Islamized, we can expect it to play its proper role in man's life and to have a coherent and unified direction or purpose. It would be far more fulfilling both to the artist and to the general public who are touched by it.

Finally, Islamic art could become the most useful tool for the propagation and enhancement of man's understanding of Islamic concepts, for the benefit of both Muslims and non-Muslims. As a form of presentation or expression that is both enjoyable and readily understood by anyone, it has enormous advantages. First, the basic meaning of works of visual art can be grasped in a moment, whereas musical performances, books, or lectures take some time to be presented and to make their meanings clear. Second, in common with other arts, the meaning is presently in such a pleasing way that even the least intellectual and the least educated people are attracted. Without their realizing it, eternal truths, vital to all mankind, are subtly directed to their hearts and minds through the pleasurable experience of admiring a work of art. And with art there is no problem of illiteracy or difference of language. A work of art can convey its meaning to a person from any part of the world, since its language is a universal one; neither does it require any education nor training to understand it.

Even though it is true, as mentioned earlier, that a totally Islamized art cannot be thrust suddenly onto an as yet imperfectly Islamic society, truly Islamic art can itself be used as an aid in the overall Islamization of society. Through its subtle and pleasing expression of Islamic concepts, it can gradually

influence society to desire a more completely Islamic way of life.

Imagine the man-made world, in harmony with nature (Allah's creation), fulfilling the true needs, both physical and spiritual, of the *ummah* and everywhere reverberating with beautiful expressions of eternal truths: a beautiful vision, and *in shā'a Allah*, not impossible to achieve.

## **Toward the Islamization of Art and Design (Broad Outline of a Five-Year plan)**

### **I. Identification of the Proper Roles of Art (one year)**

Before any other action is taken, it is imperative that the proper roles of art in society—that is, according to Islam—be discussed and identified, not only the general, unchanging roles, which are perhaps easier to define, but more urgently the new roles art must assume in our contemporary world. Islam is suitable for all times, and therefore a reinterpretation, or a more fully developed understanding of it, is called for at each phase in man's history. Precisely because of these changes, the roles of art in the past cannot simply be adopted wholesale.

The roles of art, once identified, will be the basis of all thinking and planning concerning what are the acceptable or desirable forms of art, and also concerning the suitable curriculum for training artists and designers. If the roles are not identified and in principle agreed upon first, the subsequent planning will lack unified direction, and may become very confusing. The two most basic roles of art might be identified as follows:

1. *To worship Allah (SWT)*. Since it is stated in the Qur'ān (51:56) that this is the sole purpose for which Allah created both *jinn* and men, it follows that man's activities should be directed toward this end.
2. *To benefit the ummah*, that is, to contribute toward its real needs, both physical and spiritual.

In terms of physical needs, the fields of architecture and design should aim to improve man's standard of living, to make his environment more comfortable, and more efficient, more convenient. The designer should also give attention to groups who have special needs—children, the elderly, the sick, and the handicapped. With its physical needs taken care of, the *ummah* will have more opportunity to work for its spiritual development. The physical environment should also, of course, be designed and organized in such a way

as to facilitate a truly Islamic way of life.

While the physical needs are catered to especially by the fields of design and architecture, *all* fields of the visual arts should aim to fulfill the spiritual needs of man.

One of the basic spiritual needs of man is the need for beauty, which, in the Islamic view, can be equated with perfection or truth. In the case of art, physical beauty, perceptible by the sense of sight, will be used as a vehicle to afford the viewer an intuition of the divine perfection and truth. It is not, therefore, mere physical beauty, that the artist should aim at, but a reflection of divine beauty.

Another spiritual need of man, which art can help to fulfill, is the need to understand and to grow closer to Allah (SWT). The Qur'an has been sent to all mankind as a complete explanation, guide, and reference, and the artist should use his art as a means to express the truths and principles contained therein. He will try to give his fellow men a deeper understanding of these truths, and in this way help them to love Allah more perfectly. His works will, in addition, be a constant reminder of Allah, and thus also of the viewer's true purpose in this earthy life.

An artist should aim to channel the benefits offered by his art works to the maximum number of his fellow men. Art should not be exclusive. Its expression, for instance, should not be so obscure as to be comprehensible to only a few—the Qur'an is remarkable for its exquisite aesthetic value, yet it is still a clear message for all mankind.

On the physical level, design products meant for the affluent minority, which encourage that minority to take pride in their exclusivity, are clearly un-Islamic. The designer should rather aim to uplift those people who have a lower standard of living in order to support the Islamic ideal of equality.

The roles of art could thus be summed up as being for the good of the *ummah*, for the sake of Allah.

Discussion of the roles of art needs, perhaps, to be complemented by mention of the desirable characteristics of an artist, according to Islam. What sort of person could create works that would fulfill these roles? What personal qualities and what knowledge would he need to possess?

First of all, it is obvious that the artist must possess a reasonably thorough knowledge of Islam. If he is going to express Islamic concepts in his works, he must obviously first understand them himself. He will also have to try and follow an Islamic way of life as perfectly as possible, to be a pious person, otherwise he cannot hope to be blessed with intuitive understanding. As an artist he will also need to equip himself with the skills relevant to his field of specialization. A sufficiently high level of skill is equally crucial here, since without it he will not be able to give adequate expression to his understanding of the universal concepts.

The artist must also be in close touch with the *ummah* in order to understand its true needs, both the general ones and those that are particular to his own community and his own time. He will not succeed as an artist if he makes himself "elite," or, even worse, lives as a recluse.

One might further note three general Islamic principles which, while not exclusive to art, are surely nonetheless relevant and are perhaps in the present day often notable for their absence:

1. To do one's best at all times, according to one's ability and to opportunities available.
2. To be honest and sincere, not only with regard to selling one's works, but also in terms of the actual creation of works—why, what, and how one creates.
3. To practice moderation; in art this concerns not only choice of materials but also the style or character of the works produced.

## II. Reeducation of the Educators (five years)

In taking steps toward the Islamization of the arts, it is obvious that priority must also be given to properly preparing the people who will be responsible for disseminating the Islamized concepts of art, and for guiding the artists and designers in their quest for suitable forms to express these ideas and to fulfill the needs of contemporary man. The most efficient (in terms of numbers of people who can be reached) and least expensive way is through distribution of printed material, although as many ways as possible should be employed in a combined effort. Other means include seminars, workshops, and talks; programs for the exchange of slides and films between different nations and communities; study visits; and interpersonal contacts among Muslim scholars and professionals. There needs to be periodic assessment of progress, in order to adjust the plans where necessary. There is also a need for informal, small-group contact and exchange of ideas, besides the more formally organized projects. Emphasis should be on as wide as possible a sharing of ideas, especially between different professional groups and different countries. Ideally there should also be a single main channel of communication and dissemination for each country or large community, to act as a coordinator of activities. From time to time it would be beneficial to arrange for cross-field interaction (visual arts with literature, music, or the sciences, for instance), in order to keep things in their true perspective and to gain strength from awareness of common goals and ideas.

These should all be part of continuous effort, starting immediately, a constant flow to sustain the momentum. The educators to be trained will be those teaching the prospective professionals, but it is hoped that these people, as consultants to the education ministries in their respective countries, can also help to filter some of the relevant ideas down into the primary and secondary school curricula. Perhaps the first concrete step should be to make an inventory of all the institutions in Muslim countries that offer courses to train professionals in the field of the visual arts, and make efforts to gain their interest in, and commitment to, Islamization.

### III. Revision of Present Art and Design Curriculum (stage 1: two years; stage 2: five years)

Stage 1 refers to changes that can be effected almost immediately without destroying or endangering the integrity of the courses. For example, emphases can be subtly shifted, studies in art/design history and appreciation can be adapted to give more emphasis to Islamic arts. Within reason, new subjects could also be introduced. A great deal could be achieved through a liberal sprinkling of relevant comments and observations during the course of normal teaching.

Stage 2 entails a much more radical rethinking of the whole rationale and objectives of the courses, and the curricula themselves would then have to be constructed anew based on this thinking. The people involved in this second stage especially will have to consist of experts in all the fields of knowledge relevant to Islam and to art—theorists (in Islam and in art), educators, practicing professionals, and so on; but they must also share one thing in common: a total commitment to the broader “cause,” namely, the overall Islamization of the arts.

The main phases of such a rethinking and reconstruction should be:

1. Identification of common goals of present visual arts curricula.
2. Identification of needs of the various visual arts professions as they are now practiced, and their current role in society.
3. Rethinking of the desirable goals of art education (professional training), based on Islamic concepts and in keeping with contemporary needs.
4. Construction of a new basic curriculum to fulfill these goals and needs, which can be adapted to suit the particular needs of individual groups.
5. Production of necessary textbooks.

It should also be emphasized here that the burden of Islamization, especially with relation to the training of educators and new curricula, must be shared

by as many people as possible (ideally by all concerned in art and design education). It should not be presumed that one or two lecturers can be asked to provide the Islamic inputs while all the others carry on their teaching in the same old way. Islamization has to be integrated, not added on top (or at the side). For this reason it is essential that the dissemination of ideas and knowledge concerning Islam and the arts reaches as many people as possible, not just the handful who are keen or lucky enough to attend seminars. Besides feeding information, we must also feed motivation, and build up confidence and a sense of responsibility in each and every lecturer concerned.

#### **IV. Compilation of Qur'an Verses and Ḥadīths Relevant to Art**

This is essential reference material for building up truly Islamic art and design. The compilation would include such "indirect" verses as those expressing the broad principles of Islam that are relevant to all human activities, and therefore also to art—such as the exhortations to be honest, to be moderate, to help one's fellow human beings, and so on. These are equally important, since art is not exclusive or different but is only one of man's myriad activities.

#### **V. Compilation of Existing Important Interpretations and Commentaries on the Relevant Qur'anic Verses and Ḥadīths**

It is important to see how the relevant Qur'anic verses and ḥadīths have been interpreted over the centuries to be suitable to the needs of each period without sacrificing the eternal truths and principles, and also to see the range of interpretations so far put forward.

#### **VI. Reassessment of Existing Interpretations and New Thinking or Interpretation**

Since our age has faced tremendous changes, there is a need to reassess existing interpretations and seek new ones wherever it is deemed expedient. It is also necessary for Islam to remain a vital, active force in the arts, as in other activities.

Besides these, as it were, one-off tasks, which, at least at a basic level, can be achieved within a certain time-frame, other activities should be carried out on a periodic or continuous basis, as a vital back-up to the former.

1. There must be concrete efforts to establish and ensure the

continuation of communication between all parties who can contribute to the healthy development of Islamic art. It is desirable, even essential, to gather and to air as many opinions from as many different viewpoints as possible, so that the overall view is as complete and as balanced as possible. There should be a constant reappraisal of achievements to date and a sharing of new ideas.

2. The general public must also be educated about the true role and value of art in an Islamic society, so that it is not pushed to the sidelines as something unimportant, a mere luxury.
3. The production of good art and design works, which aim to be truly Islamic and relevant to the needs of the modern age, must be vigorously promoted. In the final count, the art works themselves will be the most effective "advertisement" for Islamic art.
4. There is an urgent need to preserve whatever relevant *traditional crafts* still exist in the Islamic world. They are the vital links with the past and as such should constitute a major source of inspiration to our contemporary artists and designers. Efforts must also be made to document the training methods and creative processes employed by these crafts.

## Conclusion

As can be seen from this brief appraisal of the present situation and the equally brief suggestions for a plan of action, the task is complex and somewhat daunting. In terms of manpower, given the growing momentum of the overall Islamic revival, it is fairly possible that enough individuals can be found who are willing to dedicate their time, their knowledge, their powers of thought, their ideas, and their efforts toward the realization of this vision. What is perhaps most important is organization: not to control but to initiate, inspire, coordinate, and to propagate.

We pray that Allah (SWT) will help us, as He has, in His bounty, always helped mankind since the beginning of time.

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