

Foundations of Islamic Art

(reference: Titus Burckhardt. *Sacred Art in East and West: Its Principles and Methods*. Perennial Books, London 1967)

What are some of your **initial observations** of the architectural design and features of an Islamic Mosque? (Show images)

Why the general **prohibition** against creating sacred visual art and depicting the images of sacred begins, such as the Prophet Mohammad or of Allah?

Example: When Mecca was conquered by the Muslims and before the Prophet would enter the sanctuary of the Kaabe, Mohammad first ordered the destruction of all the idols which the pagan Arabs had set on the court of the Kaaba. Only then did he enter the sanctuary. Its walls had been ornamented by a Byzantine painter. Among the figures were one of Abraham throwing divinatory arrows and another of the Virgin and Child. The Prophet covered these with the hands and ordered the removal of all the others.

Key: in other monotheistic (Judaism and Christianity) and tribal religions, worship of idols and images, e.g., the crucifix, images of Jesus, etc., can be considered forms of idolatry, and not a true form of worshipping God.

the personal **Goal in Islam** is centered on acknowledging and **seeking** the ultimate, Absolute Divine Unity; it is the goal of each person, as he or she views the world around him or her, or as each person, as an artisan, creates views of the world. The **Five Pillars of Islam all seek and re-iterate**.

This Unity is, of course, the transcendence of the Supreme Unity, the absolute Infinite and Solitude of the Divine God - **Allah**. It is a Unity that presents itself to the human mind as an abstract and transcend, Infinite idea. Unity is not expressible in terms of any manifest, finite, concrete image.

As in other religious traditions, Islam acknowledges the **different planes of reality**, from the manifest, physical and relative reality of landscapes, animals, human beings, to the transcendent, Infinite and Absolute vault of the Supreme Unity - Allah.

In the example of the **Mosque**: The absence of images in mosques thus serves two purposes.

1. One is negative, namely, that of **eliminating a “presence,”** of the **finite, manifest, subjective reality**, which might set itself up against the Presence - albeit invisible - of God, and which might in addition become a source of error because of the imperfection of all human inspired symbols. To present such would be akin to **blasphemy and idolatry**.

Thus, for the human to view in a sacred context, e.g., a mosque, during a prayer or a pilgrimage, while fasting, or the visual artist to focus on representing images of the subjective, finite and relative reality in a sacred context only serves to create **distractions, hindrances, illusions**, away from that which a Muslim should be viewing or creating. Can not project and include one order of reality onto and beside another level of reality.

2. The other purpose of the absence of images in the mosque has a **positive purpose**, that of **affirming the transcendence** of God, since the Divine Essence cannot be compared with anything whatsoever. **Simplicity and Emptiness** is more appropriate. The architectural design of the mosque must manifest the **static equilibrium** and state of perfection of motionless bodies, typified in the regular shape of a crystal. **The beauty of the Absolute must be impersonal, like that of the starry sky.**

Islamic architecture is sometimes **criticized as not approaching the splendor** and heavenly magnificence of Christian Gothic architecture and design, with its towering spires, vaulted arched ceilings, religious icons and figurines, richly detailed gargoyle and stain-glassed montages, all inspirational and representative of the Divine.

The Islamic response: First, the static equilibrium of the Absolute Divine demands immobility and simplicity. Second, an intellectual sincerity prescribes that we do not confuse one level of reality with that of the higher level. And third, the concerns of Muslims of Christians, as they overwhelm their churches with human-derived depictions of the life of Christ, images of the Divine, etc., rendering a corrupted view of the Infinite.

Architectural Significance of the **Dome, Four Corner Pillars, Walls, and Place of Prayer** of Mosque.

Doom: The mausoleum court roofed with a domed copula also symbolizes the **union of heaven and earth**. The rectangular mausoleum, a cubical body, corresponds to the earth, and the dome the heaven.

During his ascent to heaven, the Prophet describes an immense dome made of white mother-of-pearl. This **parable** represents the spiritual model of every building with a dome.

Symbolism: Mother-of-pearl or white pearl is the symbol of the Universal Spirit which encloses the whole creation. This Spirit was created before all other creatures and which comprehends all things. The symbol of this Spirit is the invisible space extending beyond the starry sky, and as the stars move in concentric spheres, with the earth as its center.

and resting on **four corner pillars**, on which are written the four parts of the Koranic formula: “ In the name – of God – the Compassionate – the Merciful,” and from which flow the four rivers of beatitude, one of water, one of milk, one of honey, and one of wine.

Court: Mosques generally comprise a **court with fountain**, where the faithful can make their ablutions before accomplishing their prayers. The fountain is often protected by a small cupola shaped like a baldaquin.

The court with a fountain in the middle, as well as the enclosed garden watered by four runnels rising in its center, are made in the likeness of **Paradise** (jannah), for the Koran speaks of the gardens of Beatitude, where springs of water flow, one or two in each garden, and where celestial virgins dwell.

Paradise is hidden and secret, corresponding to the interior world, the **innermost soul**.

This is the archetype for **any Islamic house**, with its inner court furnished with a well or fountain. It is the house of the family, where women reigns and men is but a guest. Its square shape is in conformity with Islamic law of marriage, which allows a man to marry up to four wives, on the condition that he offers each wife the same advantages. The Islamic house is completely closed to the outside world – family life is completely closed to the outer world. It is only open to the sky, to the dome, the Universal Spirit.

Walls: The **walls** of certain mosques are covered with **glazed earthenware mosaic**, of regular geometrical often abstract figures, or a tissue of delicate arabesques in stucco, representative of the **curtain** (hijab).

According to a saying of the Prophet, God hides himself behind seventy thousand curtains of light and darkness. “If they were taken away, all that His sight reaches would be consumed by the lightnings of His Countenance.” The curtains are made of light in that they hide the Divine “obscurity,” and of darkness in that they veil the Divine Light.

Qibla and Mihrab: Usually opposite the entrance, the *qibla wall* is the visually emphasized area inside the prayer hall. The *qibla* wall should, in a properly oriented mosque, be set perpendicular to a line leading to Mecca, the location of the Ka'bah. The faithful kneel in rows parallel to the *qibla* wall and thus arrange themselves so they face Mecca. In the *qibla* wall, usually at its center, is the *mihrab*, a niche or depression indicating the *qibla* wall. Usually the *mihrab* is not occupied by furniture either, unlike with the altars of Christian churches. Sometimes, especially during Friday prayers, a raised *minbar* or pulpit is located to the side of the *mihrab* for the sermon (khutbah). The *mihrab* serves as the location where the *imam* leads the five daily prayers on a regular basis.

Minaret, erected near or beside the mosque, is the functional tower to call in the faithful for prayer.

Thus, it is this particular architectural atmosphere within which the **act of prayer** is made. The culmination of the act of prayer is the moment when the forehead of the believer is prostrated on the rug touches the floor. Not only does it reflect the submission to God, but its effect is a mirror-like surface which abolishes the contrast of height and depth, of individuality and differentiation, and makes space a **homogenous unity**

The **prohibition of images in Islam is not however absolute; exceptions**. A plane image is tolerated as an element in profane art, on condition that it represents neither God, nor the face of the Prophet.

What are the **exceptions** of the Supreme Unity of the **Infinite shining through** into the finite world of humans?

1. The **Koran**, the words of Allah conveyed through the Prophet. Importantly, as it was Allah speaking through the Prophet, once those words were recorded, there can never be a

re-interpretation, a revised edition, as all such attempts would be to bring human fallibility to the Koran, thus corrupting God's words.

One of the concerns Muslims have of Christians is the constantly interpreting and hence distorting of God's message with human fallibility. Hence all in the original language, Arabic, and no tradition of interpretations and revisions, rendering it relevant to each new generation.

2. The mystical dance experience of the Sufi **Whirling Dervishes**
3. Perhaps, a close shining through would be at the **height of the hajj** to Mecca
4. What can be seen in the carved reliefs in palaces or on jewelry are representation of **plants or stylized, fantastic animals.**

An artist newly converted to Islam, complained to Abbas, uncle of the Prophet, that he no longer knew what to paint or carve. The patriarch advised him to attempt nothing but plants and fantastic animals, such as do not exist in nature.

5. And interesting, the prohibition of depicting the Infinite is not extended to **music**, as in the rich heritage of classical Persian music, and the imagery of the Sacred as conveyed in words, such as **poetry**. Hence, artistic creativity highly developed in the Islamic world through their great poets, like Rumi.

Perhaps the difference between the prohibition against visual images and the sanctioning of verbal images relates to the pervasive and foundational oral tradition of the Arab and Persian peoples. The power of the spoken word. Koran means "recitation," to speak aloud.

After all, the Koran is best accessed not through reading it, but by listening to it as it is spoken aloud.

There is also a tradition of cutting out specific passages of the Koran, dealing with healing, and, after mixing them with water, having a patient drink the words of Allah to affect a cure.

6. The noblest of the visual arts in the Islamic world is **calligraphy**, and it is the writing of the Koran that is sacred art *par excellence*. It represents the visible body of the Divine Word.

Described as most fluid and continuous, like that of the symbolism of **weaving**, with its vertical lines analogous to the “wrap” of the fabric, corresponding to the permanent essence of things — it is by the vertical that the unalterable character of each letter is affirmed, the vertical stroke affirms the transcend Divinity, and with its horizontal lines analogous to the “weft” of the fabric, expressive of becoming that links one thing with another, continuously, the vertical stroke affirms the connecting Divinity.

Arabic is written and read **from right to left**, symbolic of the moving from the field of action, the area out from you, towards the heart, the focal point that can connect the Divine Presence.