

Art in Islam and the Debate of Convergence and Divergence

Received date:27/12/2024 Accepted date:03/06/2025 Published date:11/06/2025

Rabie Laib ¹

¹University of Ouergla, Algeria, **Email:** Rlaib85@gmail.com

Abstract:

This paper examines the relationship between Islamic thought and artistic expression, focusing on the dialectical tension between religious constraints and aesthetic creativity. It argues that Islamic tradition does not oppose art in essence, but rather guides its form and function in line with spiritual and ethical values. The paper critically explores how Islamic jurisprudence and theology addressed visual arts, music, and symbolic forms, and how philosophical perspectives within Islam conceptualized beauty as a reflection of divine harmony. Furthermore, it highlights how the Islamic aesthetic tradition-through calligraphy, ornamentation, and architecture-developed alternative modes of expression that avoid figural representation while embracing abstraction and spiritual symbolism. The study clarifies how Islamic art negotiates the boundaries between sacred meaning and artistic form, and reconsiders the potential of Islamic aesthetics in contemporary cultural discourse.

Keywords: Islamic art, beauty, Sharia, tawhid, aesthetics.

Corresponding Author: Rabie Laib, **Email:** Rlaib85@gmail.com

1. INTRODUCTION

Art, beauty, and truth have long been intertwined with humanity's religious, ethical, and philosophical expressions. This intersection becomes particularly complex when examined within the context of Islam, where the relationship between artistic creativity and religious doctrine has been shaped by theological, legal, and cultural dynamics. Throughout Islamic history, art has oscillated between acceptance and restriction-between spiritual elevation and legal boundaries-raising a fundamental question: Is art inherently at odds with Islamic principles, or does Islam offer a distinct framework for understanding and appreciating artistic expression?

This article aims to explore the dialectical relationship between Islam and art, addressing the key question: Does Islamic thought-whether in its theological, legal, or philosophical dimensions-support or hinder artistic creativity? We interrogate the extent to which Islamic teachings, particularly Sharia (Islamic law), regulate or inspire artistic practices such as music, painting, sculpture, and architecture. Furthermore, the article examines whether Islamic civilization has developed a unique aesthetic philosophy, and how this has manifested in the visual and spiritual culture of Muslim societies.

Rather than treating Islam and art as inherently antagonistic, this study adopts a critical-analytical approach to uncover the historical, legal, and philosophical foundations of their interaction. It seeks to clarify whether the prevailing restrictions stem from core Islamic teachings or from sociopolitical interpretations over time. The inquiry is structured around the concepts of convergence and divergence-asking to



what extent Islamic values align with or diverge from the principles of artistic freedom and aesthetic expression.

By grounding the discussion in both classical sources and contemporary debates, the article attempts to provide a balanced and comprehensive understanding of how Islam engages with the arts-not only as a legal or moral issue but as a reflection of deeper metaphysical and civilizational values.

2. The Historical Relationship between Art and Religion:

Historically, art has functioned as a medium through which humanity attempts to connect with the sacred, the transcendent, and the unseen. In various civilizations, from ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia to Greece and Rome, religious art played a vital role in rituals and visual storytelling. According to Hegel, art is not merely imitation of nature but rather a mode of accessing higher truth: “Beauty in nature is only a reflection of beauty in the mind” (Hegel, 1978, pp. 34–38). Art, in this sense, becomes a metaphysical language, enabling what science and reason alone cannot articulate.

However, the Islamic approach to art marks a notable departure from this trajectory. Unlike Christianity, which embraced figural representation in churches and iconography, Islam adopted a more cautious stance, particularly toward anthropomorphic images. This stance stems from theological concerns regarding idolatry (*shirk*) and the historical context of pre-Islamic Arabia, where idols were central to religious life. As the hadith states, “The most severely punished people on the Day of Resurrection will be the image-makers” (Bahnassi, 1979, p. 20), reinforcing the perception that representational art could conflict with core Islamic values.

Yet this caution should not be mistaken for outright rejection. As Islamic civilization expanded into Persian, Byzantine, and Indian territories, it absorbed artistic influences and redirected them into new visual forms aligned with its spiritual ethos. This gave rise to intricate patterns, arabesques, geometric motifs, and, most notably, calligraphy—an art form that merged textual devotion with aesthetic excellence.

Ali Izetbegović, in his reflections on religion and creativity, noted that “true artistic creativity is rare among atheists and more common among believers,” arguing that genuine art is more closely aligned with religious sentiment than with scientific or philosophical abstraction (as cited in Schaeffer, 1994, p. 196). Similarly, Friedrich Schleiermacher wrote that “religion and art go hand in hand like two friendly souls who do not yet know how closely they are related” (Schleiermacher, 2004, p. 94).

Thus, in the Islamic context, art was not divorced from religious values but rather transformed by them. The visual vocabulary of Islam sought to reflect the transcendence of God without attempting to depict Him. The unity of form, repetition, and abstraction in Islamic art can be seen as a direct manifestation of the concept of divine oneness (*tawhid*).

This historical trajectory suggests that Islam neither wholly suppresses nor uncritically embraces art. Instead, it negotiates its place based on theological, legal, and cultural imperatives. As Grabar (1996) explains, Islamic art is less about individual genius and more about expressing a collective, spiritual vision—one that merges function, beauty, and meaning within a religious framework (p. 117).

3. Aesthetics in Islamic and Philosophical Thought:

The concept of aesthetics, in both its classical and modern formulations, centers on the study of beauty, taste, and artistic experience. Philosophers have long debated the nature of beauty—whether it lies in the object or in the perception of the beholder—and the extent to which art imitates, transcends, or reinterprets reality. Aesthetics is not merely concerned with decoration or sensory pleasure; it is a philosophical inquiry into the ways in which humans interpret the world through forms, symbols, and expressive acts.

In Islamic thought, however, aesthetics takes on a distinctive dimension. It is not divorced from metaphysics or ethics but is closely tied to a theological vision of the universe. Beauty in Islam is both a sign (*aya*) and a path to understanding divine order. The Qur'an itself invites believers to contemplate beauty in creation: "He who perfected everything He created" (Qur'an 32:7), and "We have adorned the lowest heaven with the beauty of the stars" (Qur'an 37:6). Such verses reflect not only theological assertions but also aesthetic sensibilities rooted in the idea that beauty is an expression of divine intentionality.

The Prophet Muhammad himself is reported to have said, "God is beautiful and loves beauty" (*Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*), a statement that provides a foundational perspective for Islamic aesthetics. This notion indicates that beauty is not only permitted but encouraged—provided it aligns with ethical and spiritual principles. It forms part of a holistic worldview in which material form and spiritual meaning are intertwined.

Western philosophers, such as Immanuel Kant, emphasized that true art arises from freedom and rational intention: "We should only call something art if it is produced by freedom—by a voluntary act in which reason is the foundation of its production" (Kant, 2005, p. 43). Islamic thinkers similarly

emphasized the intentionality of art, but with an added layer: art must reflect divine harmony and avoid excess or distraction from spiritual goals. Beauty becomes a moral and ontological value—not merely an aesthetic one.

In this regard, Islamic philosophers such as **al-Farabi**, **Ibn Sina (Avicenna)**, and **al-Ghazali** offered sophisticated treatments of beauty (*al-jamal*) in relation to the soul, the intellect, and the divine. For example, **Ibn Sina** viewed music as having the power to elevate the soul and induce harmony within the human being. **Al-Ghazala**, in *Ihya' Oulum al-Din*, defended the legitimacy of music and poetry when used for ethical or spiritual refinement, arguing that sensory beauty can lead to inner purification if guided by reason and faith.

Additionally, contemporary scholars such as **Ali Izetbegović** have argued that religious thought is not a barrier to creativity, but rather a source of its deepest inspiration: “True creative art is much rarer among atheists, while most artists are believers, because art is fundamentally religious in spirit” (as cited in Schaeffer, 1994, p. 196). In his view, art and religion both stem from a longing to transcend the limits of material life and access a deeper, symbolic truth.

This approach explains why Islamic art often avoids direct representation and instead develops visual languages of abstraction, repetition, and symbolic geometry. These forms express unity (*tawhid*), order, and infinite extension—reflecting God’s attributes through pattern and harmony rather than through figural imagery. As Gadamer noted, “The artwork is like a myth or a tale: its expression contains its meaning and fulfills it at once. Its form is always ready to speak anew” (Gadamer, 1996, pp. 213–214).



In sum, aesthetics in Islam is not merely a marginal or secondary concern. It is embedded in the broader worldview that sees the universe as a structured, beautiful, and purposeful creation. The artistic experience, therefore, is not detached from religious life but becomes part of a comprehensive vision of existence, where beauty, ethics, and transcendence intersect.

4. Art in Islam: The Boundaries of Convergence and Divergence:

The relationship between Islam and art has long been debated in both academic and religious contexts. At the heart of this debate lies a central tension: between the aesthetic impulses of human creativity and the ethical-spiritual demands of Islamic theology and law. While some interpret Islamic teachings as restrictive of artistic expression, others see in Islam a unique framework that guides and inspires a specific type of art—spiritually infused, ethically grounded, and metaphysically aware.

In Islamic thought, the human being is not merely a rational animal or a physical entity but a spiritual creature with a deep inclination toward transcendence. Artistic expression, therefore, can serve as a bridge between the physical world and the metaphysical realm. As Denis Huisman notes, true art represents a “transition from raw reality to a higher, symbolic world—one that the artist creates through freedom and intention” (Huisman, 1975, pp. 115–116). Likewise, Kant emphasized that genuine art must be the product of autonomous rational will, not mechanical imitation or mere sensory indulgence (Kant, 2005, p. 43).

Islamic teachings affirm that the universe is inherently beautiful and ordered. Numerous Qur'anic verses point to the aesthetic dimensions of creation:



“Who perfected everything He created...” (Qur’an, 32:7),
 “We have adorned the lowest heaven with the beauty of the stars...” (Qur’an, 37:6),
 “And [He created] horses, mules, and donkeys for you to ride and as adornment...” (Qur’an, 16:8).

These verses show that Islam not only acknowledges beauty but also encourages humans to reflect on it as a sign (*aya*) of divine wisdom. The act of perceiving beauty is therefore spiritually significant—it leads to contemplation of the Creator’s majesty.

Despite these affirmations, Islamic legal discourse, particularly in its early formative periods, exhibited caution toward certain forms of art. Sculpture and figural imagery were often viewed with suspicion, largely due to their association with pre-Islamic idolatry. As mentioned in *sahih al-Bukhari*, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) reportedly stated:

“The angels do not enter a house in which there is a dog or a picture” (Bahnassi, 1979, p. 20).

This prophetic tradition reflects a historical context in which images and statues were used as objects of worship, thus representing a potential threat to the principle of Tawhid (divine unity). Accordingly, Islamic jurisprudence sought to limit artistic forms that might reintroduce polytheistic tendencies, not art itself as a human pursuit.

However, as Oleg Grabar (1996) asserts, Islamic art evolved as a powerful vehicle of cultural identity, not through rejection but through redirection. The arts of calligraphy, architecture, ornamentation, and geometric design emerged as forms uniquely capable of expressing the ineffable aspects of faith. Grabar argues that "Islamic art is not the art of a single

religion, but of a culture that includes its own historical, aesthetic, and spiritual logic" (Grabar, 1996, p. 117).

This evolution was not without philosophical reflection. Many Muslim thinkers viewed artistic creation not as a luxury but as a moral responsibility. Art, in this view, must serve the human soul's elevation, avoiding excess and vulgarity. It must reflect the harmony of the cosmos and the beauty of divine order. This perspective also explains the strong symbolic content in Islamic art: the preference for abstraction, repetition, rhythm, and spiritual symbolism over figural depiction.

Nonetheless, divergent interpretations persisted across Islamic history. While some conservative jurists continued to advocate for strict prohibitions, other scholars and cultural practitioners argued for more nuanced views. For instance, al-Ghazālī defended music and poetic arts when directed toward moral refinement and spiritual ecstasy, asserting that what matters is the intention behind the artistic act—not the form itself (al-Ghazali, *Ihya' Oulum al-Dn*).

The convergence and divergence in Islamic views on art are thus not binary opposites, but dialectical poles. Where art aligns with ethical and spiritual values, it is embraced; where it risks idolatry or moral corruption, it is regulated. This tension has led to the formation of a distinctive Islamic aesthetic—one that privileges meaning, abstraction, and harmony over mimesis or self-expression.

Moreover, contemporary debates—such as public controversies over statues or visual representations—often reflect political or cultural anxieties rather than purely theological objections. For example, the media uproar surrounding the statue of "King Sheshonq" in Algeria illustrates

how questions of art, identity, and religious symbolism continue to intersect and provoke discussion in Muslim societies today.

In conclusion, the boundaries of convergence and divergence between Islam and art are neither static nor absolute. They are shaped by historical context, theological reasoning, and cultural evolution. The Islamic tradition offers not a rejection of art, but a recalibration of its purpose—seeking a balance between creativity and responsibility, between beauty and belief.

5. Manifestations of Islamic Art: Arts in Islamic Civilization

Islamic art, in its manifold forms and expressions, represents one of the most refined and spiritually nuanced artistic traditions in world history. Far from being a mere ornamental byproduct of culture, it constitutes a deeply integrated expression of Islamic cosmology, philosophy, and spirituality. As Oleg Grabar (1996) observes, Islamic art “was not created in isolation from faith, but arose from a unified vision of reality, one that connects the visible with the invisible, the earthly with the divine” (pp. 117–118).

Unlike Western traditions that often centered artistic production on the representation of the human figure, Islamic art directed its focus toward the abstract, the calligraphic, the architectural, and the geometric. This preference was not only theological—rooted in concerns about idolatry—but also philosophical, grounded in the Islamic emphasis on unity (*tawhīd*), order, and transcendence. The result was an artistic language that prioritized form, harmony, and symbolism over figurative realism.

One of the most emblematic elements of Islamic art is **Arabic calligraphy**, which transcended its function as a written

script to become a dominant visual form. The artistic transformation of the Arabic alphabet into geometric, floral, and flowing forms reflected both reverence for the Qur’anic text and the creative ingenuity of Muslim artisans. As Grabar notes, the artistic use of letters allowed calligraphy to serve “not just as communication, but as contemplation, where the shape of the word becomes a form of devotion” (Grabar, 1996, p. 118).

Another hallmark of Islamic art is architecture, particularly the mosque. Islamic architecture integrated spatial geometry, ornamentation, and light manipulation to create environments conducive to spiritual reflection. Buildings such as the Alhambra Palace in Granada exemplify the synthesis of architectural form, decorative motifs, and spiritual symbolism. The interplay of calligraphy, muqarnas (stalactite vaulting), and arabesque designs in these spaces elevates the viewer beyond the material toward the metaphysical.

Importantly, Islamic art was often anonymous. Unlike Renaissance art in the West, which valorized the individuality of the artist, Islamic artistic production was largely collective and depersonalized. This reflects a metaphysical worldview in which the creator is God, and human creativity is an act of submission, not self-expression. The humility embedded in the work of Muslim artisans underscores their role as custodians of beauty, rather than its originators.

This notion also influenced the decorative arts in Islamic civilization: textiles, ceramics, metalwork, wood carving, and mosaic tiling were all infused with aesthetic sophistication. Even utilitarian objects—lanterns, doors, tiles—were produced with such artistic care that they embodied the Islamic belief that beauty should permeate all aspects of life. As the saying goes, “Allah is beautiful and loves beauty” (*sahih Muslim*), and this



ethos found expression in both public monuments and private homes.

Islamic art also functioned as a civilizational archive, preserving philosophical, scientific, and poetic knowledge. Illustrated manuscripts—particularly in Persian, Ottoman, and Mughal traditions—combined visual imagery with literary elegance. Despite early reservations about figural representations, Muslim cultures developed miniature painting traditions that balanced artistic delicacy with narrative restraint.

Nevertheless, Islamic art never became a static or dogmatic system. It evolved as Islamic societies encountered new cultures, technologies, and aesthetic trends. The *translation movement* in the 9th century, which preserved and transmitted Greek, Syriac, and Persian knowledge, played a vital role in shaping intellectual and visual forms. Inscriptions from Aristotle were found engraved in tombs, not merely as decoration, but as testaments to the intellectual legacy inherited and reinterpreted by the Muslim world (Grabar, 2016).

This hybridity is visible in the Umayyad palaces of Qasr al-Hayr al-Sharqi, al-Mshatta, and Khirbat al-Mafjar, which combine Arab motifs with Byzantine and Persian influences—blending pre-Islamic aesthetics with Islamic spiritual values (Bahnassi, 1979, p. 19). Rather than viewing this as cultural compromise, it demonstrates how Islamic art assimilated and transformed external elements into new forms of expression.

In essence, Islamic art is not reducible to a set of prohibitions or dogmatic principles. It is a living tradition that reflects the values of beauty, harmony, humility, and transcendence. It expresses the balance between matter and

meaning, form and function, local and universal—manifesting a convergence between art and faith, not a dichotomy.

6. Conclusion:

In conclusion, The relationship between Islam and art is far more intricate and dynamic than often assumed. Rather than a binary opposition between religious doctrine and artistic freedom, Islamic civilization has cultivated a rich and multifaceted aesthetic tradition—one that reflects deep spiritual, legal, and philosophical considerations. This article has argued that the tension between convergence and divergence in Islamic art is not merely a matter of permissibility, but a function of how Islam redefines the purpose, limits, and essence of art itself.

Islamic art emerges not in spite of religious boundaries, but through them. Where other traditions may prioritize the visual representation of the sacred, Islam elevates the symbolic, the abstract, and the calligraphic as vehicles of contemplation. This transformation is rooted in the principle of *tawhid* (divine unity), which discourages anthropomorphic depiction but encourages artistic expressions of harmony, order, and transcendence.

As demonstrated through both historical development and philosophical inquiry, Islamic aesthetics does not negate beauty—it sanctifies it. The Qur’anic emphasis on the beauty of creation (Qur’an 32:7; 16:8; 37:6) and the prophetic affirmation that “God is beautiful and loves beauty” (*sahih Muslim*) support a worldview in which art serves as a bridge to the divine. The works of philosophers such as al-Ghazali, Ibn Sini, and modern thinkers like Ali Izetbegović show that artistic creativity is not opposed to religious life but can be integral to spiritual growth.

The divergence between Islam and certain forms of art—such as figural sculpture or music—stems not from an aesthetic deficiency, but from a theological concern for intention,

function, and ethical impact. Conversely, the convergence is visible in the extraordinary legacy of Islamic art: from architectural marvels like the Alhambra to the fluid beauty of Arabic calligraphy and the rich ornamentation of mosques, palaces, and manuscripts.

In sum, Islamic art is not a marginal aspect of Muslim civilization; it is a mirror of its metaphysical outlook. It embodies the idea that beauty must be meaningful, that form must serve the soul, and that art, far from being a secular indulgence, can be a sacred act. Understanding this dynamic enables us to move beyond reductionist views and appreciate the unique philosophical and spiritual rationality that underlies Islamic artistic expression.

Future research might explore in greater detail the role of contemporary Muslim artists, the reception of Islamic aesthetics in global contexts, and the implications of digital technology for rethinking traditional Islamic forms. What remains clear, however, is that Islamic art—rooted in its own principles—continues to offer a vibrant alternative to dominant paradigms in global aesthetics.

Références

- 1) Bahnassi, A. (1979). *The Aesthetics of Arabic Art*, (éd. 1). Kuwait: National Council for Culture, Arts, and Letters (World of Knowledge.
- 2) Denis Huisman:, t. b.-1. (1975). *Aesthetics*. (D. Al-Hassan, Trad.)
- 3) Gadamer, H. (1996,). *Hermeneutical Philosophy* (éd. 1). France: University Publications,.

- 4) Grabar, O. (1996). *How to Think About Islamic Art*. (A. J. Nazim, & Said Al-Hansali, Trans.) Dar Toubkal.
- 5) Grabar, O. (2016, 01 13). *Islamic Art, the Secret of the World's Richness*. Récupéré sur alittihad.ae:
<https://www.alittihad.ae/article/1740/201>
- 6) Hadith Sharif, n. b.-H. (s.d.).
- 7) Hegel. (1978). *Introduction to Aesthetics*. (G. Tarabichi, Trad.) Beirut: Dar Al-Tali'a for Printing and Publishing.
- 8) Kant, I. (2005). *Critique of Judgment*,. (J.H.Bernard, Trad.) New York: Barnes and Noble books.
- 9) M. Arnold, J. R. (1962). *The study of Poetry*. London: D. J. Enright, E. de Chickera (éd.) English Critical Texts, Oxford UP.
- 10) Marx, K. (1963). *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. Gallimard Edition.
- 11) Reymond, B. (2014, 4). Arts et Religion. p. 439.
- 12) Schaeffer, J.-M. (1994). *La religion de l'art : un paradigme philosophique de la modernité* (éd. 2). OpenEdition Journal.
- 13) Schleiermacher, F. D. (2004). *De la religion. Discours aux personnes cultivées d'entre ses mépriseurs*. (t. B. Reymond, Trad.) Paris: van diereen.