

Symbolism of Decorative Elements in Algerian Applied Arts

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Abstract ;(

This study explores the symbolic meanings embedded in decorative elements within Algerian applied arts, with a focus on vegetal, geometric, and animal motifs as visual expressions of cultural, spiritual, and social values. It investigates how these ornaments contribute to cultural identity construction and the preservation of collective memory. Employing a semiotic-analytical approach, the research analyzes selected examples from Algerian architecture, pottery, and textiles. The findings indicate that ornamentation in Algerian art serves not only aesthetic purposes but also functions as a vehicle for symbolic communication, spiritual expression, and social cohesion. This study contributes to the academic discourse by offering an in-depth interpretation of the symbolic functions of decorative motifs, addressing a significant gap in the literature on North African and Islamic applied arts.

Article info

Received

July 07.2024

Accepted

May 30.2025

Keyword:

- ✓ *Algerian decorative art :*
- ✓ *Applied Art in Algeria:*
- ✓ *Geometric motif :*
- ✓ *Vegetal patterns*
- ✓ *Cultural heritage :*
- ✓ *Islamic art in the Magreb:*

1. Introduction:

Decorative elements play a significant role in the field of applied arts, often serving purposes beyond mere aesthetics. In Islamic art, ornamentation is characterized by its symbolic complexity and stylized abstraction. It integrates geometric forms—such as squares, rectangles, polygons, and circles—with vegetal motifs, including diverse floral designs, to express a deeper philosophical and spiritual worldview (Al-Awawda, 2023, p. 30). These artistic expressions are deeply rooted in cultural, historical, and religious traditions that have evolved over centuries.

In the Algerian context, decorative motifs found in architecture, ceramics, textiles, and other applied arts transcend ornamental function. They embody symbolic meanings associated with values, beliefs, and local environments. These elements often represent abstract concepts such as fertility, protection, and spiritual harmony, offering insight into the societal and cultural frameworks of different historical periods.

Despite their importance, the symbolic dimensions of Algerian decorative arts remain underexplored in academic literature. This study addresses this gap by offering a critical and analytical examination of the symbolic meanings embedded within these decorative forms. The research aims to highlight how such elements function both decoratively and communicatively, contributing to the formation of a distinct visual discourse within Algerian applied arts.

The study is guided by the following key questions:

- What are the primary decorative elements used in Algerian applied arts?
- What symbolic meanings do these elements convey, and how have these meanings evolved over time?

Through a chronological and interpretive analysis, this research seeks to deepen understanding of the semiotic roles played by decorative motifs and their significance in shaping cultural identity and artistic expression in Algeria.

1. A Historical Overview of Decorative Arts:

Art serves as a medium to manifest beauty, which is revered as a divine attribute, echoing the teachings of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him): "God is beautiful and loves beauty (Ali Ahmed, 2000, p. 14.)." Islam pioneered a philosophical and aesthetic approach encouraging Muslims to appreciate and create beauty, as reflected in the Quranic verse: "*Do they not look at the sky above them, how We have built it and adorned it, and there are no rifts in it?*". (Quran, Verse 06.)

Decoration is fundamentally about enhancement and adornment, arranging decorative units and motifs in a harmoniously balanced manner that showcases their beauty and elegance through principles such as repetition,

symmetry, balance, and variety. It pertains to the characteristics or themes present on artistic objects and structures, enhancing their surface without being indispensable to their functionality.

This diversity in application has deemed decoration a pivotal art form, tracing back to the dawn of humanity. (Abu Dabsah et al., 2009, p. 11.) Early humans, residing in caves, drew inspiration from their environments, embellishing their tools and essentials with rudimentary drawings and colors. (Ibid, 2009, p. 45.)

With the passage of time and cultural evolution, the zenith of Islamic art emerged, during which Muslim artists excelled, driven by religious and cultural influences. (Rajai, 1998, p. 538.)

These artists crafted themes that aligned with the Islamic perception of the cosmos and life, (Ali Ahmed, 2000, p. 14.) eschewing direct representations of nature and figurative imagery, thereby forging decorative motifs imbued with a distinct Islamic ethos. (Abu Saleh, 1967, p. 111.)

Islamic art was creatively enriched by the arts of the civilizations it encompassed, illustrating the ingenuity of Islamic culture through its capacity to assimilate (Okasha, 1994, p. 32.), enhance, and innovate upon existing artistic traditions (Hassan, n.d., pp. 90-95.). This synthesis fostered the creation of artworks that not only displayed the technical prowess of early Muslim artists but also allowed Islamic art to integrate various artistic influences into its distinctive paradigm. (Okasha, 1994, p. 33.)

As a result, Islamic arts secured a venerable status among the world's artistic traditions, cultivating a unique style that was recognized from the far reaches of the East to the West (Maldonado, 2000, p. 50.). This style was marked by its originality, aesthetic appeal, and sophisticated nature, which notably influenced various forms of European arts, even during periods considered regressive or less innovative in Europe.

One salient characteristic of Islamic art is its profoundly decorative essence. The Muslim artist's deliberate avoidance of direct nature imitation and their aversion to unadorned spaces led to the extensive use of ornamental patterns (Hassan, 1999, p. 144.), which some Western observers have described as an 'infinite repetition'. Muslim artists refined and abstracted elements from all observed sources—be it vegetal, animal, or human—often to the degree that the original inspirations became obscured. (Abu Saleh, 1967, p. 111.)

Consequently, Islamic art developed a distinctive allure, encompassing expansive creativity and a rich decorative lexicon. This phenomenon is rooted in the Islamic tradition of delighting in the contemplation of God's creations and meditating on life's complexities through the lens of Quranic teachings. (Saeed, 2001, p. 11.)

These artistic features rapidly evolved and diversified, giving rise to various schools of art, each with its own set of defining principles. The intrinsic aesthetic sensibility of humans, influenced by social and economic conditions, propelled the decorative arts forward, enhancing their

complexity and beauty. (Arseven, n.d., p. 15.)

2. Islamic Art in Algeria

In the Maghreb, Islamic art began to chart its distinct course, particularly after severing its political affiliations with the eastern Islamic world in the mid-2nd century AH/8th century AD (2H/8AD). This era marked the rise of a cohesive Maghrebi artistic movement that spanned North Africa and Spain, maintaining its artistic independence within the framework of Islamic doctrine. (Kühnel, 1966, p. 12.)

In Algeria, the advent of the Ottomans heralded a confluence of various artistic styles, incorporating the dominant local Maghrebi style. Prior to the French occupation, the decorative repertoire was diverse, mirroring the flourishing of traditional crafts such as jewelry making, embroidery, weaving, and wood carving.

The decorative vocabulary included intricate lines and innovative geometric shapes like squares, triangles, and lozenges, which became integral to the crafts (Abu Al-Kassim, n.d., pp. 360-361.). The influence of Berber art was prominent, characterized by its bold expression and distinctive aesthetics.

This influence allowed Algeria to forge a unique identity in applied arts, reflecting the deep emotional resonance of its artisan creators with their heritage, and capturing the spirit of the era through its rich artistic elements. Consequently, both monumental and minor artistic works were imbued with artistic flourishes and enriched with

decorative embellishments. (Kolthoum, n.d., p. 19.)

3. Geometric Decorative Elements

Geometric decoration, a practice with ancient roots, has seen extensive application across various artistic traditions (Mustafa, n.d., p. 46.) . Originally used as framing devices for other decorative motifs, geometric elements were profoundly transformed within the context of Islamic art, acquiring a central role and an unparalleled aesthetic sophistication. (Maldonado, 2000, p. 11.)

This transformation allowed geometric motifs to cover extensive areas of both artistic and architectural works, achieving a level of refinement previously unseen in other artistic traditions. (Hussein, n.d., p. 61.) Creswell observes that while geometric decorations were utilized during Roman times, they were relatively simplistic and unimaginative. (Hassan, n.d., p. 62.)

However, under Islamic influence, these patterns attained an intricate complexity and precision in their arrangement and interlocking, achieving decorative forms that surpassed those of pre-Islamic civilizations. (Hassan, n.d., p. 96.)

This evolution in geometric decoration was partly propelled by the Islamic prohibition against depicting living forms, combined with Muslim contributions to mathematics, which facilitated the creation of numerous geometric configurations. (Bashir, 1997, p. 54.)

These include the innovative use of intersecting circles, tables, interwoven

lines, and various polygons like triangles, squares, rhombuses, pentagons, hexagons, and octagons. (Ahmed Ali, n.d., pp. 18-19.) Furthermore, artists incorporated motifs resembling trunks and leaves, employing them in repetitive, mirrored, and scattered arrangements that exhibited a distinct geometric rigor, exemplifying principles of abstraction and symbolism.

The variety and versatility of geometric elements are evident; they can function independently or be integrated with other motifs to various extents, playing a crucial role in the adornment of numerous spaces. These include:

3.1. Lines

Lines constitute one of the most fundamental elements employed by Muslim artists, who leveraged their psychological impact to enhance the viewer's experience, reflecting a deep appreciation for beauty derived from nature and religious teachings. Artists predominantly utilized lines to convey movement and extend decorative themes. (Hassan, 1981, p. 29.)

The interpretation of lines varies based on their application, whether straight, broken, curved, wavy, or intersecting, and their forms, which range from thick to thin, rigid to relaxed. Lines are instrumental in defining the contours of decorative themes, separating different motifs, and filling voids within compositions.

Specific types, such as double-broken lines, are used to create jagged patterns or outline geometric decorations, acting as a framing device. Lines can manifest as

zigzagged or wavy and may be oriented vertically or at an angle.

The symbolic significance of lines is profound. Jagged or broken lines, for instance, are often seen as representing mountain peaks, each tip symbolizing an eye and signifying resilience against adversities. In some cultural interpretations, these jagged forms are associated with the serpent, a creature revered since antiquity for its symbolic power to ward off evil. (El Sharkawy, 2000, p. 9.)

Conversely, broken lines may also represent water, while horizontal straight lines evoke a sense of calmness, contemplation, and rest, akin to a sleeping person or a tranquil water surface.

Vertical lines, on the other hand, suggest vitality and growth, reminiscent of a sprouting tree (Abu Saleh, 1995, p. 208.). When straight lines intersect in an "X" shape, they symbolize the confluence of dual spirits within a single entity, one feminine and the other masculine. Parallel lines evoke the perpetual dualism of opposing forces, representing the eternal conflict between good and evil. (Yassin, 2006, p. 111.)

3.2. The Circle

The circle, a fundamental geometric element in Islamic art, represents the motion of a point revolving around a fixed center in a plane, creating a dynamic, unending line. (Hassan, n.d., p. 48.) This characteristic has made the circle integral to the generation of numerous intricate geometric forms, often serving as the structural foundation for star patterns and

complex networks composed of interlinked stars, hexagons, and octagons. (Charifa, n.d., p. 338.)

The circle's versatility allows it to incorporate or be incorporated by a square, exemplifying concepts such as "squaring the circle" and "circling the square," which were particularly prevalent during the Ottoman period. (Sheikh Ahmed, 1997, p. 205.) In Algerian art, circles are employed both as standalone large elements, often centered with vegetal motifs, and as framing components for rosettes and stars typically positioned within squares. (Andre, 1981, p. 24.)

Historically, the circle has been a symbol for the sun and the universe across many cultures, embodying the endless cycle of cosmic events with its center representing a singular divine presence. (Charbel, 1986, p. 51.)

In Islamic philosophy, this shape takes on a metaphysical dimension, where it represents the universe with the Sharia (Islamic law) as its circumference (Aisha, n.d., p. 329.), Tariqa (the spiritual path) as the radius, and Haqiqa (the ultimate truth) as the center. (Aida, n.d., p. 131.) This concept is physically manifested in the ritual circumambulation of Muslims around the Kaaba during Hajj and Umrah, symbolizing the unity of believers around the divine. (Yassin, n.d., p. 224.)

3.3. The Square

The square, a shape defined by points that can follow a straight, circular, or even twisted plan, relies heavily on principles of symmetry and regularity. It is frequently used to create star patterns through the

intersection of two squares, arranged in consecutive, adjacent patterns that maintain proportional and regular dimensions.

These squares often incorporate various geometric shapes, such as intersecting lines with small triangles to fill gaps, as well as rhombuses and semicircles, enhancing the complexity and aesthetic appeal of the design. (Kamal, 1989, p. 65.)

Symbolically, the square represents the four fundamental elements—earth, water, air, and fire—and signifies stability and balance. Within Islamic context, the square is significant for its depiction of sanctity and its portrayal of parallel relationships centered around a central point, as seen in the square base of the Kaaba and the earliest minarets. (Kolthoum, n.d., p. 203.)

Furthermore, networks of squares or rhombuses are sometimes interpreted as the "eye of the partridge," reflecting visual symbolism. (Syringe, n.d., p. 476.) The square also metaphorically illustrates the stages of a woman's life, from maidenhood to marriage, symbolizing unity, stability, loyalty, and affection, and thus is viewed as a symbol of fertility. (Kanso, 1995, p. 94.)

3.4. The Rhombus

The rhombus, a simple yet versatile geometric shape formed by parallel and intersecting lines, is commonly drawn in consecutive and adjacent patterns, maintaining proportional and consistent dimensions. It features prominently in various decorative contexts, symbolizing a multitude of concepts depending on its presentation and cultural context. (Moreau, 1976, p. 68.)

In many ancient cultures, when enclosed by short, closely spaced lines, the rhombus represents a donkey's head, a motif often associated with misfortune due to its connotations of stubbornness, malice, and envy. Conversely, when arranged in a vertical series of three, it symbolizes the scorpion, an emblem of revenge and retribution.

The rhombus also represents the wool comb, highlighting its association with weaving and craftsmanship, and symbolizes the tree, embodying life and growth. Additionally, when depicted as a series, it can signify tattoos, which are often considered to have therapeutic and magical properties, further emphasizing the rhombus's diverse symbolic meanings in various cultural and artistic contexts. (Kolthoum, n.d., p. 208.)

3.5. The Triangle

The triangle, formed by the convergence of three lines, manifests in various forms and sizes. Historically significant, an isosceles triangle resting on its base was emblematic of the concept of the trinity in ancient Egyptian mythology, epitomized by the triad of Isis, Osiris, and Horus. (Aida, n.d., p. 475.)

This symbolism was later embraced by Christianity, which paralleled the trinity concept with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (Syringe, n.d., p. 475.). In Greek and subsequent cultures, the triangle represented a balance and was thus a staple in architectural design, notably above the entrances of Greek and Roman temples and various classical monuments. In the realm of painting, triangles often structured the

composition, with many artists favoring pyramidal arrangements. (Moreau, n.d., pp. 34-35.)

From the 4th century BCE, the triangle in Carthaginian culture symbolized "Tanit." Among many Berber groups, it represented the earth and served as a protective talisman against envy, harm, and evil spirits. Additionally, it symbolized the fetus; inverted, it represented a man, and upright, it symbolized a woman. (Bouruiba, 1981, p. 54.)

In the socio-political contexts of North Africa, the triangle's three sides symbolized the individual, the tribe, and the chief, encapsulating their interconnected societal roles. (Aisha, n.d., p. 361.)

Moreover, the triangle held sacred connotations for male and female reproductive organs, revered since antiquity as symbols of fertility and life, with the earth venerated as the mother goddess. Oriented upwards, the triangle depicted the male reproductive organ and the element of fire, while downwards, it represented the female organ and the element of water. (Hassan, 1994, p. 41.)

In Amazigh culture, which highly values fertility, the triangle is a potent symbol of reproductive force, essential for human continuity. The downward-pointing apex and upward base symbolically represent the mother's womb, encapsulating life. (Hassan, 1994, p. 41.)

3.6. The Strips

Strips, prevalent in ornamentation, are primarily crafted from geometric lines and play a crucial role in vegetal decoration, enhancing the aesthetic and artistic quality while suggesting a sense of freedom and expansion within the decorative theme. (Ahmed, n.d., p. 65.)

These strips are often rendered as double lines, either continuous or segmented and contorted, yet they refrain from forming specific geometric figures. The artist's skill in manipulating these lines into various patterns underscores the principles of artistic unity, balance, and harmony. (Rajai, 2007, p. 175.)

Vegetal decorations are particularly esteemed, symbolizing the purity of nature, the integrity of faith, and the clarity of the soul. These themes have deeply inspired Muslim artists, who have meticulously drawn, arranged, and harmonized them in innovative styles, making them prominent features in artistic works. (Abu Dabsah et al., 2009, p. 23.)

Reflective of gardens, parks, trees, branches, leaves, and flowers, these compositions embody goodness, fertility, and growth as divine gifts, as described in the Quran: *"It is He who sends down water from the sky, and We produce thereby every kind of growing thing. From it, We produce greenery from which We produce grains arranged in layers. And from the date palm, from its sheaths come clusters hanging low. And We produce gardens of grapevines, olives, and pomegranates, similar yet varied. Look at their fruit when it yields*

and ripens. Indeed, in that are signs for people who believe" (Quran 6:99).

Drawing from the botanical world, these artists captured the essence of trees with their branches, stems, flowers, and fruits, as well as triple and quintuple leaves and artistically altered plant leaves. (Hassan, 1981, p. 254.)

Palm trees, either as standalone motifs or interwoven with geometric and scriptural elements, were also prominently featured. Driven by religious motivation, Muslim artists viewed these vegetal elements through a distinct lens compared to previous artistic traditions, aiming to enhance beauty and convey joy to observers, while maintaining the artistic integrity of these natural motifs. (Al-Tuhami, n.d., p. 258.)

One of the most prominent vegetal decorations in Islamic art is the arabesque. This term, derived from French, refers to decorative compositions featuring abstractly drawn branches, stems, and leaves (Rajai, n.d., p. 274.) These elements are geometrically structured, emphasizing repetition and symmetry.

The arabesque first appeared prominently in the 3rd century AH (9th century AD) during the Abbasid period, notably in the stucco decorations that adorned the walls of Samarra in Iraq and in the architectural embellishments of Tulunid buildings. (Hassan, 1981, p. 250.)

This style continued to evolve through the Fatimid era and reached its zenith in the Islamic world by the 7th century AH (13th century AD), where it was extensively

employed in embellishing buildings and adorning gilded manuscript pages.

During the Ottoman period, this style was referred to as "Rumî," a term used by the Turks to describe highly stylized vegetal and animal motifs that deviated from their natural appearances. This era introduced what could be termed Ottoman foliage or Tauri decoration. (Abu Dabsah et al., 2009, pp. 23-24.)

This artistic tradition was later adopted in Algeria, where local artists incorporated it extensively into their works, especially in the decoration of metal, wood, and textile artifacts. Among the favored motifs were palm fans, which were rendered in various forms and held a special place in the hearts of Arab Muslim artists. (Abu Dabsah et al., 2009, pp. 47.)

These artists attributed significant importance to these elements, skillfully crafting them in diverse manners that reflected their mature artistic judgment and creative prowess. Their approach often involved transforming these natural motifs into abstract forms, allowing for an exploration of infinite imaginative possibilities. (Marzouk, n.d., p. 75.)

There are numerous interpretations of palm fans, including complete and partial depictions, as well as innovative abstract variations that have led to the development of a distinct decorative style. The frequent use of these motifs, particularly half-palm fans, in a variety of artifacts underscores the evolutionary trajectory of these decorative elements. (Charifa, n.d., p. 267.)

Thus, vegetal decorations represent some of the most exquisite expressions of the

Muslim artist's capacity to transcend mere replication of nature. Typically, these decorations are reduced to purely abstract elements, consisting of interconnected lines. (Aisha, n.d., pp. 179-180.)

This stylistic approach has persisted throughout various Islamic periods and was enthusiastically embraced by Algerian artists, who adapted it to create intricate decorative themes. (Abu Saleh, 1967, p. 112.)

These themes, composed of intertwined stems, leaves, and assorted flowers, not only align with the Islamic artistic paradigm but also exhibit a level of precision, delicacy, and natural resemblance that enhances their aesthetic appeal and cultural resonance. (Rajai, n.d., p. 273.)

4. Leaves

Leaves are indispensable elements in decorative themes, particularly those of a vegetal nature, as they inherently complement stems and branches. Initially serving primarily to fill spaces, leaves were artistically positioned to facilitate the intertwining and interconnecting of stems and branches, enhancing the surrounding flowers and botanical motifs. (Arseven, n.d., p. 70.)

Leaves often serve as standalone subjects as well, forming leaf-themed strips that feature a variety of leaf types including simple, compound, lobed, cup-shaped, lanceolate, and serrated leaves, with serrated leaves being particularly prevalent. (Maher, 1977, p. 77.)

These are frequently represented in dynamic, wavy patterns and can be designed in diverse forms, such as three-lobed or five-lobed leaves. Serrated and simple leaves are among the common types observed in the artifacts studied. (Karman, n.d., p. 204.)

Stems and branches are also vital to the structure of vegetal decorative themes. They provide support for other vegetal elements like leaves, flowers, and fruits, playing a key role in connecting, organizing, and distributing these decorative components. Their flexible movements and undulations add a dynamic quality to the artwork.

Turkish artists often categorize themes based on the number of stems used; for instance, a design with one stem is termed single-threaded, and one with two stems is called double-threaded. (Laraj, n.d., p. 203.)

Various elements, including simple and double fans, small flowers, and leaves, are connected or adjacent to one another to either fill or cover spaces completely, achieving a harmonious balance. This demonstrates the artistic maturity and precision of Muslim artists, ensuring clarity and coherence in all decorative forms, reflective of their deep-rooted faith. (Latifa, 2009, p. 165.)

During the Ottoman period in Algeria, stems and vegetal branches were often symmetrically arranged, depicted in mirrored and repeated patterns that adhered to the principles of interlocking. Sometimes, artists opted for twisted and coiled vegetal branches as the sole theme,

creating highly abstracted independent motifs that did not conform to any natural order. (Aisha, n.d., p. 273.)

4.1. Flowers

Flowers are fundamental to any comprehensive vegetal decoration, not only due to their inherent diversity and variance but also because of their adaptability and capacity to assume various decorative forms. (Aisha, n.d., p. 292.) This versatility has led artists, particularly during the Ottoman era, a period marked by sultans' profound appreciation for botany, to focus intensively on flowers as key decorative elements.

Gardens proliferated across Turkey during this time, within mosques, cemeteries, and private homes, where efforts were made to hybridize and cultivate numerous types of flowers. (Arseven, n.d., p. 58.) In this context, the flower, with its constituent parts—stem, petiole, leaf, bud, and blossom—becomes a complete decorative motif, organized around a single flower, reflecting the artist's aesthetic preferences and sensitivities. (Maher, n.d., p. 72.)

Algerian artisans continued to integrate these floral motifs into their work, incorporating them prominently in the decoration of various artifacts. (Aisha, n.d., p. 292.) Notable among the flowers used are:

A. *Chrysanthemum*:

Also known as the chamomile flower to Arabs, this bloom has been widely revered and utilized across various forms of decorative arts. (Charifa, n.d., p. 289.)

B. *Carnation:*

While the exact origins of the carnation remain uncertain, it is believed to have originated from China or Iran. Known as "Karaful" in Ottoman times (Charifa, n.d., p. 279.), it was cultivated extensively throughout Turkey and its territories, including Algeria, due to its direct connections with Istanbul. Its popularity extended even to Europe, where it was adopted in various decorative arts. (Arseven, n.d., p. 60.)

The carnation is particularly noted for its serrated petals, which, when stylized, are easily recognizable and can be transformed into various beautiful shapes. (Aisha, n.d., p. 181.) Often, these flowers are depicted in stylized forms or attached to branches, symbolizing purity, innocence, and fertility. (Aisha, n.d., p. 294.)

The aesthetic allure of carnations also metaphorically represents the beauty of women; when their forms are abstracted from nature, their tips evoke the image of stars, positioning them as symbols of the sun. (Kanso, n.d., p. 362.)

5. *Animal Decorative Elements*

The earliest animal drawings appeared on the walls of caves inhabited by primitive humans, and artists continued to draw them throughout various civilizations, often attributing supernatural abilities to them. (Suad, 2011, p. 117.) With the advent of Islam, these artistic depictions were prohibited to purify humanity from idolatry.

Consequently, Muslim artists avoided drawing animal elements to avoid imitating

the Creator. (Wazeri, 1999, p. 61.) However, their influence persisted, often highly stylized to the point of being unrecognizable, serving aesthetic purposes. (Rajai, n.d., p. 288.)

During the Ottoman period, the use of such decorations significantly declined, with Ottoman carpets, for example, typically devoid of these illustrations (Suad, 2011, p. 117.). Exceptions include some pieces featuring mythical creatures and bird motifs, often with a vegetal branch hanging from their beak or around their neck, imitating Sassanian and Byzantine origins transferred to Algeria by the Ottomans. (Khalifa, 2001, p. 281.)

These animals were depicted symmetrically, facing each other or turned away, abstracted from nature. Stylized birds appeared in the decoration of Karakor (Hassan, 1981, p. 255.) carpets in the form of a bird, referred to in Morocco as "Bartal" (meaning sparrow), used as a decorative element in carpets and for corner decorations. This shape may have Anatolian influences, as it also appears on prayer rugs in Kula, Turkey. (Aisha, n.d., p. 186.)

6. *Architectural Decorative Elements*

Architectural decoration refers to ornaments derived from architectural elements executed in applied arts for purely decorative purposes. These differ from architectural elements whose purposes are both structural and aesthetic.

The use of architectural decorations as decorative themes spread throughout Islamic periods and was especially

prevalent in Algerian applied arts, notably in metal and wooden artifacts.

The arch is an architectural element that relies on one or more support points and typically forms openings in buildings or surrounds them. In Islamic architecture, arches come in various forms. (Tayan, n.d., p. 338.)

7. Conclusion

This study has explored the symbolic dimensions of decorative elements in Algerian applied arts, focusing on the rich interplay of geometric, vegetal, animal, and architectural motifs. Through a semiotic-analytical approach, the research has demonstrated that these motifs are far more than ornamental—they convey cultural values, spiritual beliefs, and collective memory.

Geometric motifs such as lines, circles, squares, rhombuses, triangles, and strips form the foundational visual language in many Algerian artifacts. Each shape embodies profound symbolic meanings: the circle signifies unity and spiritual wholeness, the square symbolizes balance and stability, and the triangle represents fertility and gender symbolism, particularly in Amazigh traditions. These shapes reflect a deep Islamic aesthetic, emphasizing abstraction, repetition, and symmetry.

Vegetal motifs—especially arabesques, palm fronds, leaves, and flowers like chrysanthemums and carnations—represent growth, purity, and divine beauty. Inspired by nature but transformed through abstraction, they illustrate the artist's religious devotion and mastery of stylized form. The floral elements, especially during the Ottoman influence, took on significant symbolic and aesthetic roles in Algerian material culture.

Animal motifs, though limited due to religious constraints, persisted in stylized and abstract forms. When present, they were often influenced by pre-Islamic or foreign artistic traditions and used sparingly to retain religious compliance. Architectural motifs such as arches were also integrated into applied arts, illustrating the crossover between structural form and decorative expression.

The study contributes to the field by providing a structured, interpretive reading of Algerian decorative arts, an area that remains underrepresented in academic discourse. It highlights how decorative elements serve as visual narratives that preserve cultural identity and articulate metaphysical beliefs, particularly within the context of Islamic aesthetics.

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