

The Expressions of Beauty in Islamic Art and Calligraphy

By Dr. Shahid Athar

Islamic art and calligraphy are without a doubt, the most original contribution of Islam to the visual arts. While Western calligraphy is just an art, the Islamic calligraphy is a religious experience. Allah is beautiful and He loves beauty, according to one saying of the Prophet Mohammed (PBUH). Thus, as we open our eyes and see the beauty of nature intrinsic to our own body (anatomy) and extrinsic in the form of flowers and natural phenomena, we immediately start recognizing and appreciating the Al-Mussavir, the Fashioner, one of the attributes of Allah.

The sacred nature of the Quran as the word of Allah, and proof of Tawhid, gave the initial impetus to the great creative outburst of art and calligraphy which began in the Seventh Century C.E.

Islamic art is an expression of Quran in color, in line, in movement, shape and sound on three levels. The first level defines Tawhid (oneness of Allah), in expressing the word Allah in different Arabic scripts and forms. Repetition in design of the word Allah is no different than the dhikr of Allah on the lips. Then it is further expressed with bismillah and la illaha illa Allah. The aesthetic expression of Tawhid are abstraction, modular structure, successive combination, repetition, dynamism and intricacy, all expressed in the geometry of the spirit.

The Quran is also seen as the artistic model having attained the literary perfection (ijaz). The Quran also provided the Islamic civilization with an ideology to be expressed in art, to be manifested by ornamentation of plates, carpets, swords, pottery, furniture, mihrab, minarets and mosques. All these adapted to the different lands Islam visited and settled down. Decorating every item of use with Quranic verses was a way to remind the humans of the Creator and the Al-Mussavir. Muslim scientists who pioneered algebra and geometry developed nonfigurative or abstract motifs in architecture.

From the simplest writing of the early Quran, when Islam and Muslims traveled in every direction to different lands in time and space, and developed many different Arabic scripts, the kufi (angular), the naskhi (rounded), andalusi, maghribi, taliq, diwani and even sini (in China), all expressing the beauty of the words of Allah in their own way.

Through slides, some of the examples of the glorious art and calligraphy are presented. At the end the calligraphy of Surah ar-Rahman by the Pakistani artist

Sadeqeen, is combined with the recitation of the same by Qari Shakir Qasmi of Pakistan. Indeed, Allah is beautiful, and He loves beauty.

*To be presented at the Third Annual Convention of the International Association of Sufism, March 30, 1996, San Francisco, California. Dr. Athar is a physician and an author, though neither an artist or a calligrapher, but an admirer of Islamic art.