

Design and Decoration in Islamic Sacred Spaces

Background notes

Professor James Allan - 16 May 2018



Plate 1. The Fatiha:

“In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful. Praise be to Allah, Lord of the Worlds. The Beneficent, the Merciful. Owner of the Day of Judgement. Thee alone we worship. Thee alone we ask for help.”

Thulth inscription by Kalahisari in the Suleymaniye Mosque, Istanbul (1569-1575)

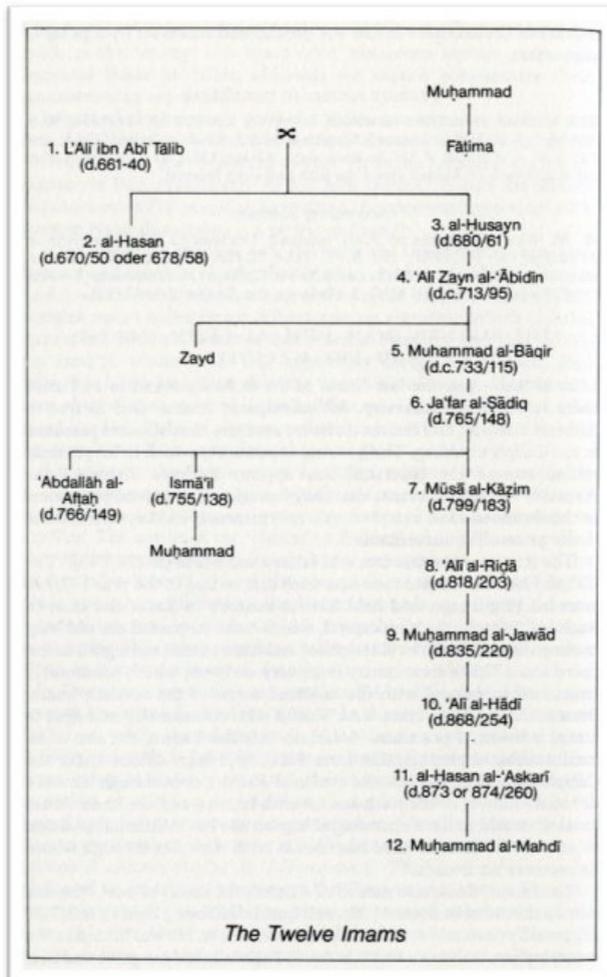


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Fig. 1 The Four Orthodox Caliphs

632-634	Abu Bakr
634-644	'Umar b. al-Khattab
644-656	'Uthman b. 'Affan
656-661	'Ali b. Abi Talib

Fig. 2 The family of the Prophet



Design and Decoration in Islamic Sacred Spaces

The world of Islam is traditionally a world in which religious authority and political authority were held together in, and administered by, the Caliph, God's deputy on earth. The Islamic world is therefore in one, very broad, sense a "sacred space". The seminar will therefore illustrate design and decoration in a broader way than simply in mosques or other religious buildings. It will certainly look at many of those, but it will also explore how Islamic design and decoration permeate Islamic culture in a way which is all-encompassing.

The first half of the seminar focuses on the art of Arabic calligraphy, and on the fundamental religious importance of Arabic for the Islamic world. The Arabic alphabet has 28 letters, often with three forms, depending on their position in a word; dots and vowelling are additional hazards! The epigraphic identity of Islam appears to date from the reform to the coinage under the Caliph 'Abd al-Malik in the late 7th century. 'Abd al-Malik started by removing any crosses from the inherited Byzantine coin types, briefly introduced a standing Caliph, and then adopted a purely epigraphic coinage, which was destined to hold sway over most of the Islamic world up to the present time (though there are exceptions).

There are two main types of Arabic script: angular (*kufic*), and cursive. Within *kufic* there are different styles, e.g. Eastern Kufic and Maghrebi. Within the cursive tradition *naskhi* and *muhaqqaq* were introduced in the 11-12th century and increasingly replaced *kufic* scripts, though these were retained for chapter (*Sura*) headings in the Qur'an. The cursive *muhaqqaq* and *rayhani* were used almost exclusively for the Qur'anic text, while *thulth* is most commonly found in architectural inscriptions. A fine example of the latter is the longest inscription on an Islamic religious building, that on the Taj Mahal (1632-53), which includes no less than 15 chapters from the Qur'an.

A couple of examples of Qur'anic inscriptions will illustrate their widespread use. The opening verses of the Qur'an (the *Fatih*) are to be seen circular form in the Suleymaniye Mosque in Istanbul (1569-75), calligraphed by Karahisari (Plate 1): "In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful. Praise be to Allah, Lord of the Worlds. The Beneficent, the Merciful. Owner of the Day of Judgement. Thee alone we worship. Thee alone we ask for help." Another well-loved Qur'anic text, the Throne Verse (Sura 2:255), is to be seen on a mausoleum in the Shah-e Zindeh in Samarqand: "Allah, there is no god save Him, the alive, the eternal. Neither slumber nor sleep overtaketh Him; unto him belongeth whatsoever is in the heavens and whatsoever is in the earth. Who is he that intercedeth with him save

by his leave. He knoweth that which is in front of them and that which is behind them, while they encompass nothing of his knowledge save what He will. His throne includeth the heavens and the earth, and he is never weary of preserving them. He is the sublime, the tremendous”.

From its religious pre-eminence, Arabic calligraphy permeated other media, e.g. ceramics and metalwork. It was also used in a wide variety of ways. Sometimes calligraphers inverted one inscription on top of another, while on metalwork we find interlaced human-headed *kufic* and other animated inscriptions. Calligraphy was also important for royal titles, for royal monograms, or as royal ciphers (Ottoman *tughras*), and the Nasrids used a shield with the Qur’anic quote, *la ghalib illah allah*, “There is no conqueror but God”, across it. Calligraphy is today an expression of contemporary Arab identity, and examples shown include calligraphic designs by Waqialla, Nassar Mansour, Ahmed Mustafa and Ali Omar Ermes.

We shall then address the use of calligraphy for politico-religious identity in the contemporary Islamic world. Here there is a striking difference in approach between Shii Iran and the Sunni Arab Near East. In Safavid Iran (c.1500-1720), when Shiism became the state religion, Arabic was used not only for the Quran but for *hadiths*, traditions associated with the Prophet as to what he said or did. Here we find long *hadiths* being used to press the claim of the Prophet’s son-in-law, ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib, as the Prophet’s successor. Illustrating this point are the Qur’anic quotations, and *hadiths*, which decorate the entrance portal of the Royal Mosque of Shah ‘Abbas the Great in Isfahan (1612-16). “A place of worship which was founded upon fear of God from the first day is more worthy that thou shouldst stand [to pray] therein, wherein are men who love to purify themselves. Allah loveth the purifiers” [Sura 9:108]. From Ibn ‘Abbas, he said: ‘The Prophet of God said, “ ‘Ali is my legatee and my deputy, and Fatima his wife, chief of the women of the two worlds, is my daughter, and al-Hasan and al-Husain chiefs of the youth of the people of Paradise, and whoever is a friend of them is a friend of mine, and whoever is hostile to them is hostile to me, whoever comes to them, comes to me, whoever tyrannises them tyrannises me, whoever does good to them does good to me, whoever keeps in contact with them keeps in contact with God, whoever rejects them rejects God, whoever takes care of them assists God, and will forsake those who forsake them. Oh God, whoever of your prophets, and your messengers, has valuables and a people of the house, ‘Ali, Fatima, al-Hasan and al-Husain are the people of my house, and my valuables. So take away from them pollution and purify them completely.” The Commander of the Faithful, ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib, says: “Whoever goes repeatedly to the mosque will gain one of eight things: a brother from whom one gains benefit from God, a piece of knowledge which is found to be appealing, a solid [Qur’anic] verse [or divine sign], an expected mercy, a word which turns him back from a bad thing, or he

will hear a word which shows him the way to true guidance, or he will abandon a sin out of fear or shame.” The Prophet said, “I am the city of knowledge and ‘Ali is its gate.” In contemporary Iran, since the Revolution of 1979, Arabic and Persian calligraphy (the Arabic for Qur’anic quotations, and Persian for additional slogans) are combined with figural art to focus on the martyrdom of Husain, the Prophet Muhammad’s grandson, who was killed at the battle of Kerbala in 670 AD. Finally, flags of Arab states, Hizbollah in Lebanon, and ISIS states will be used to demonstrate the contemporary trend to see nation states in terms of their religious allegiance.

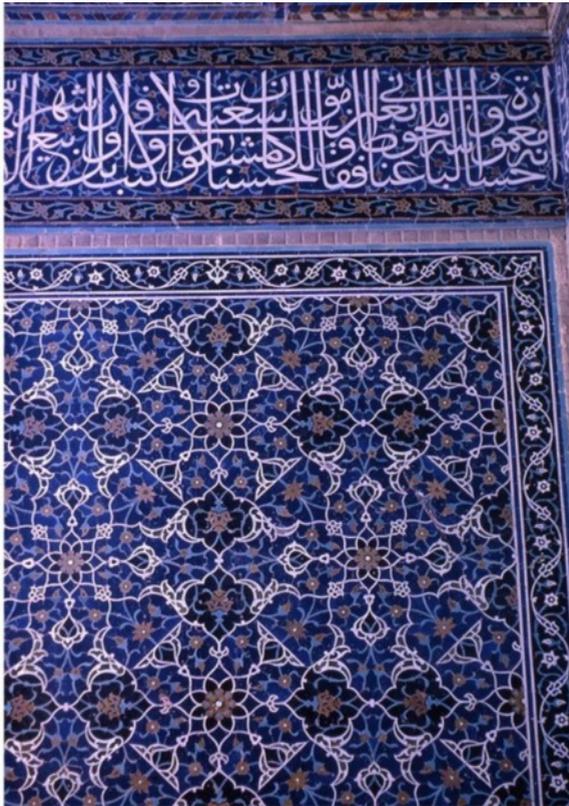


Plate 2. *Thulth* calligraphy, and arabesques on a geometric layout; shrine of Harun-e Velayat, Isfahan, 1513

In the second part of the seminar, we shall look at the arabesque, geometry and figural art, to form a more complete picture of the range and richness of Islamic art and design. A) The arabesque. The first use of the term is in the mid 17th century; it is taken from the French, who derived it from the Italian *arabesco* 'in the Arabic style'. In the Islamic tradition its fundamental unit is a palmette, split down the centre, and the halves placed on alternate sides of an s-shaped stem (Plate 2). B) Geometry. Geometry continued the Roman and late antique tradition and was particularly popular in religious settings, for Qur'anic bindings and illumination, and for woodwork (e.g. the pulpits, or *minbars*, used in Friday Mosques) (Plate 3). C) Figural art. Despite what we are led to believe by the Saudis and ISIS, figural art has always been widespread in the Islamic world. In medieval times it decorated objects made for ordinary people and for rulers, images of enthroned rulers or rulers hunting and hawking being particularly common. It was also used for astrological purposes. Illustrated manuscripts of the Fables of Bidpai were used to educate princes, and three-dimensional sculptural objects survive (e.g. the fountain in the Court of the lions at the Alhambra, and a zebu automaton from Herat, Afghanistan, in the year 603/1206) (Plate 4).

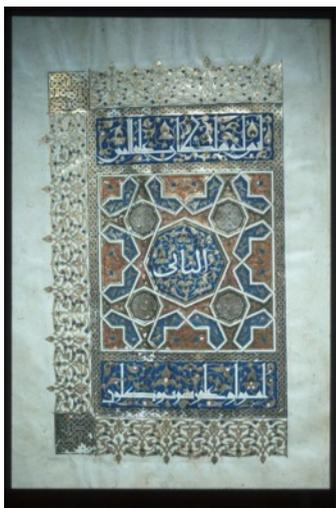


Plate 3. Kufic and cursive calligraphy with geometric design and arabesques; Egyptian Qur'an, 1304

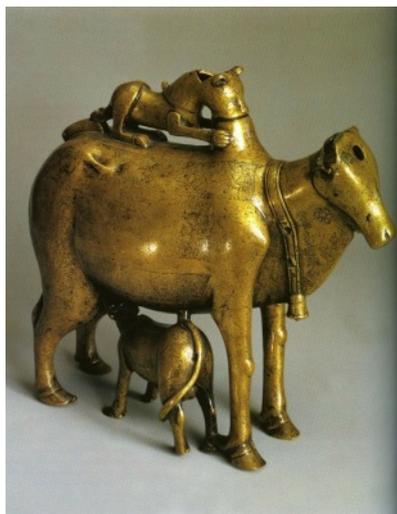


Plate 4. Zebu automaton from Herat, Afghanistan, 603/1206

The seminar will conclude by illustrating the different ways Sunnism, Sufism and Shiism have expressed themselves artistically in the past, and how they do so in the contemporary Islamic world. Special attention will be given to the role of figural art, and we shall find that figural art appears in all three contexts, but especially in Shii art. Here 'Ali's claim to the succession to the Prophet, and the battle of Kerbala, together with 'Ali and Husain themselves, are regularly depicted (Plate 5) in religious buildings, especially in Husainiyyas. More than that, however, the battle of Kerbala is the focus of the only living art form, the only religious drama, of the Islamic world - the *taziya* plays, performed every year in Shii areas (Iran, parts of India, South Lebanon and southern Iraq) to commemorate Husain's martyrdom.

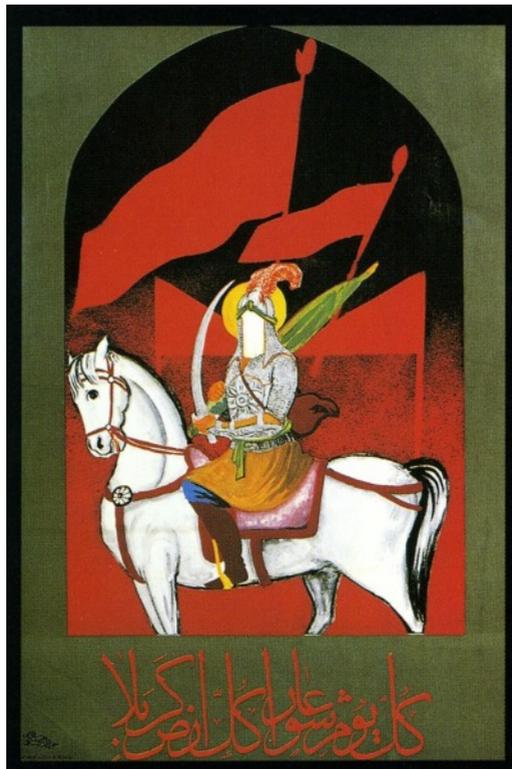


Plate 5. Iranian poster from the Iraq-Iran war: "Everyday is Ashura, and every piece of ground is Kerbala".

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