

# Review

## *A Journey Through Islamic Art* Exhibition: Purification of Form, Ineradicable in Content

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### ABSTRACT

*Throughout the years, the manifestations of Islamic art from east and west have been diverse in the formalistic aspects but united in its spiritual essence. The wide range of ornamental motifs, stylisation, placement, material, and context is constantly changing according to the current trend of the period, reflecting the historical, social-cultural and economic background it was produced. This ensues that change is inevitably bound to happen, where traditional approach in Islamic art might not be suitable to implement in the modern society due to the unavailability of precious materials and patronage as before. Despite the challenge, the “Islamic” identity in their artworks is still being discretely preserved in their expression despite implementing and combining new techniques, styles, forms, and materials with traditional approaches. This creates an asymmetrical balance that embraces change while maintaining the Islamic principle, philosophy, and spiritual allure in their artistic production where the artists design their art to be parallel and in context with modernity. However, the Islamic identity in contemporary artworks is difficult to identify and challenging to decipher as the visual expression differs significantly from traditional art forms that people are accustomed to, making it vaguely recognised and understood. This constant and dynamic flux of tolerance and acculturation is something that is being visually exhibited by the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia (IAMM) in their special curation “A Journey Through Islamic Art” that showcases traditional and contemporary form of Islamic art in the same place. Although the curation is impressive, but the visual tension it creates invokes the mind to think deeply about what makes an Islamic art “Islamic” and what is the suitable approach to appropriately fathom and consider the art piece as a work of “Islamic art” as the physical form of calligraphy alone is not sufficient for it to be considered as “Islamic.”*

**Keywords:** *Islamic art, identity, contemporary Islamic art, exhibition, Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia*

### INTRODUCTION

On certain occasions, the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia (IAMM) located in Jalan Lembah Perdana (opposite of Kuala Lumpur’s National Mosque) would organise and showcase special curations for the general public. These special exhibitions are normally very informative and delightful for individuals who are interested and keen to learn more about Islamic art as their collection varies in themes, visual manifestations and context from time to time that is different from their permanent collection. The curation *A Journey Through Islamic Art* is the current exhibition being showcased in the museum, where the artefacts and artwork that is being displayed combines both historical and contemporary forms of Islamic art throughout the years and across the Islamic world from east to west. The exhibition is open to the public with a small entrance fee from the 13 December 2024 until 30 June 2024 where the collection is exhibited at Special Galleries 1 and 2.

## REFLECTING ON THE EXHIBITION

With the intention of visiting one exhibition, I was surprised to discover that the exhibition was a combination of two curations, *A Journey Through Islamic Art* and *Alif Lam Ra: Contemporary Muslim Calligraphy*. This indirectly answered my inquiry as I was beginning to question the contemporary collection of Islamic art as the curation focuses mainly on calligraphy, while the traditional artefacts were varied in manifesting the artistic visual repertoires. It happens to be that the *Journey Through Islamic Art* is a curation consisting of traditional artefacts collected from different regions across the Islamic world (Syria, Damascus, Egypt, India, Pakistan, Türkiye, Malaysia, Persia [Iran and Iraq], as well as Tunisia) dated roughly from the 8–19th century CE, while the latter highlights the contemporary manifestation of Islamic art that is centred on the modern expression of Islamic calligraphy.

Despite the confusion, the exhibition was interesting and visually insightful as it showcases the different and unique manifestations of Islamic art while illuminating the transition from traditional to modern. By doing this, visitors are presented with a luxurious experience and setting to observe, analyse and compare between the contemporary and tradition, in which the main noticeable differences between the two are the various artistic expression of visual forms, materials as well as the context of the artwork. Nevertheless, the different expressions throughout the years are united in the “Islamic” sense of content and spiritual quintessence. But this notion, however, intrigues the mind to think deeply about what is “Islamic” in the diverse visual manifestation of art and whether it is suitable to be accepted as so. This demands an insightful discussion as the curation shows the dynamism and adaptability of Islamic art throughout the ages and across regions that was embraced, emulated, and enriched spiritually in content, practice and experience by different people and cultures with the intention of manifesting the aesthetic proclamation of *tawhid*, to assert the monotheistic principle for the oneness and utter transcendence of Allah SWT (al-Faruqi 1985). This in essence embodies the verse from the Holy Quran, “The east and the west belong to God (Allah): wherever you turn, there is His Face” (al-Baqarah 2: 115).

With the spirit and determination to develop a new narrative that encourages a more contemporary and global form of understanding (de Guise 2023), one is intrigued to question the identity and “Islamic” aspects of the contemporary artworks (Photos 1 and 2). Is it the form, the image of *Kaaba*, the Arabic calligraphy, the spirit (*ruh*) or spirituality, style, motifs, the message/meaning, colour, material, the artist, expression or, as mentioned before, the content? If so, how and why is the content “Islamic,” and what is the approach to



**Photo 1** Akil Mostafa Ahmad (Syria), *A Poem by the Poet Abu Firas al-Hamdani* (2023). Mix media on metal.

Source: Photographed by author.



**Photo 2** Rachid Koraichi (Algeria), *Ahmed Ezaatar* (1985). Bronze with brown and gold patina.

Source: Photographed by author.

effectively understand this notion? The question arises as the exhibition showcases both forms of Islamic art in the same place, which includes contemporary artworks ranging from painting, mixed media installation and sculpture together with traditional artefacts such as *Kitabs* (books), Quran manuscripts, manuscripts/scrolls, weapons, armour, pottery, jewellery, ivory/metal/silverwork, ornamental casket, jade mirrors, portraits and genealogies of Sultans that are carefully crafted, written or painted on/using precious material that reflect their status.

By doing so, there is a strong visual contrast in terms of the context, experience and elements between the two curations based on the purpose and identity that is vividly noticeable, in which the contemporary Islamic art is distilled in its multiplicity of form to the very core of its essence, thus prioritising calligraphy over other Islamic ornaments. Although this would not become an issue for some, who understands Islamic art and the importance of calligraphy in Islam, but it is problematic for the masses as it is difficult to understand nor decipher its meaning in the contemporary context.

The reason for this is caused by the normalcy of the “usual” visual manifestation of Islamic art, where the general masses (both Muslim and non-Muslim) have been accustomed to a particular set of artistic repertoires that became the standard setting for Islamic visual tradition (Photos 3 and 4).

This understanding is represented by the traditional artefacts exhibited in the curation, where most of them are heavily decorated with a combination of calligraphy—from the “six calligraphy styles” (*al-Aqlam al-Sitta*) canonised by Ibn Bawwab in the 10th century CE (Blair 2006; Porter and Barakat 2004)—and ornaments consisting of various geometric and organic motifs such as *Islīmī* (arabesque), *rūmī* (abstracted animal forms with leaf, buds, flowers, tendrils and spirals), *band-i rūmī* (knot or organic/geometry motifs that are tied/knotted together), *gereh-sāzi/girih* (interlocking and interlaced tied/knotted geometrical band), *zencirek* (continuous intertwining geometrical/abstract bands), *khatā’ī* (flower), *penç/panch* (flower foliation with five or more cusps/points/petals), *goncagul/gonca* (flower bud), *bulut* (cloud), *shukufa* (naturalist flower)—which can also be found in the contemporary work done by Citi Jaleha Yousoff’s from Malaysia titled *Surah Yasin: Quran: 36* (2019)—and the cosmic tree.

These motifs are then placed/used together with several stylisation forms such as *salbek* (teardrop shape), *shamsāh* (sun/sunlight/sun ray), *hilya* (crescent), *kit’a* (small panels) and *toranj* (*islīmī/rūmī* in a teardrop/spade-shape like with a bud in the middle/centre) to name a few, which are applied on various materials ranging from everyday objects, royal regalia and items related to teaching and disseminating the Islamic faith and culture (including marriage) that simultaneously serves as a symbol of power, kinship (genealogy) and rule for Islamic dynasties in specific regions. Thus, when viewed in this context, the motifs and ornaments in traditional Islamic art functions as the “identity” of the Muslims—by synthesising each unique and distinctive culture with the teachings of Islam in daily activities—that gives a subtle invitation (*da’wah*) to the faith through the medium of visual arts that reflects the transcendental in various cultural manifestation.



**Photo 3** Illuminated *mushaf* with signature of Yaqut al-Musta’simi, Ilkhanid Period, 690 AH/1291 AD.  
Source: Photographed by author.



**Photo 4** Royal marriage certificate, Tunisia, 1240 AH/1824 AD.  
Source: Photographed by author.

It is treated so as the faith embraces diverse cultures, but the elements are acculturated following the Islamic creed (*aqidah/akidah*) where it is forbidden to use realistic figures (realism) to represent things, to portray the identity (face) of the Prophets (*Nabi*) and God's messengers (*Rasul*)—preventing idolatry—as well as to represent the essence (*dzat*) of God (Allah SWT) with any of His creation. This is done in accordance with the Holy Quran which clearly states that “There is nothing like Him: He is the All Hearing, the All Seeing” (ash-Shuraa 42: 11) and “He is God: the Creator, the Originator, the Shaper. The best names belong to Him. Everything in the heavens and earth glorifies Him: He is the Almighty, the Wise” (al-Hashr 59: 24).

While the use of various motifs and ornaments in traditional Islamic art (artefacts) reflects the essence of the verse from the Holy Quran where Allah SWT mentions “People, We created you all from a single man and single women, and made you into races and tribes so that you should recognise one another. In God's eyes, the most honoured of you are the ones most mindful to Him: God is all knowing, all aware” (al-Hujarat 49: 13).

Hence, the type and selection of motifs is immensely important as it functions as a visual signature for people to recognise and identify the regions, patrons, artists (on occasion), style as well as the period it was produced. The motifs, in historical context, were also valuable as it functions as a visual language in the form of a symbol/metaphor that is directly or indirectly correlated with verses of the Quran, phrases or words of wisdoms (*hikmah*) to aid appreciation, comprehension as well as a form of visual reminder to inspire imagination for the grandeur and beauty of paradise (*Jannah*) that ultimately leads towards the sublime experience and internalisation of Divine Mercy and Compassion (*al-Rahman* and *al-Rahim*).

This notion is made possible as the content of the Holy Quran highlights several important themes that are/can be metaphorically symbolised using certain symbols, provided in the Holy Quran itself, that indicates (*ishara/isyarat*) towards a certain concept/idea, such as trees and flowers, birds, mountains, the sea, leech/blood clot (*al-Alaq*) which inspires and instils good values, lessons and advice along with knowledge of the world, the role of man (*Khalifa*) and their connection with Allah SWT. This elevates the status of traditional Islamic art as each work is unique and luxurious in visual elements consisting of multiple intricate combinations of different motifs, ornaments, calligraphy, stylisation and placements which connote different meanings/ideas while simultaneously provide evidence of the socio-economic, geographic, cultural influence, dynastic rule and historical context of the work produced. Despite of this, the Islamic artistic repertoires are treated most valuable based on its functionality and usage as most of the traditional artefacts (consisting of personal objects, weapons, armoury and manuscripts to name a few) are often accompanied by certain verses from the Holy Quran.

This becomes a form of visual reminder or prayer (for strength, guidance, humbleness, forgiving and appeal for divine help) both for the user/owner and the eyewitnesses as it empowers or inspire awareness whenever the object/artefact is worn or seen. This point is essential to highlight as objects that are heavily decorated with Islamic art, when viewed in the historical context of an Islamicate society, reminds people visually of the religion, thus becoming a form of remembrance (*zikr*), identity and a subtle invitation (*da'wah*) to the religion as it can be seen/owned by everyone.

Therefore, the visual motifs and ornaments should not be treated insignificant (especially in the context of Islamic art regardless of the quality, intricacy and finesse it was produced) as the signs and symbols have the capability to communicate ideas and meaning that are abstract but universally understood in different cultures (disregarding the language barrier between regions, race and ethnic group) that ultimately leads towards divine contemplation and self-reflection. It is for this reason that all of the artistic repertoires utilised by Muslim artists throughout the years is collectively known as “Islamic art” despite incorporating different cultural influences, not exclusively Arabic, across the Muslim regions.

This abundance of visual information is, however, hidden in contemporary art forms as all of the signs and symbols (motifs and ornaments) are replaced with the abstract play of colours, forms, brush strokes and contemporary art styles that are somewhat alien in the historical context of Islamic art except for calligraphy (Photo 5). Although some might oppose and find the approach incongruous, but by doing so, the Muslim artists had made their purpose/intention clear as their main focus is not towards associating the Islamic visual arts with certain cultural motifs, but to invite subtly in contemporary context (through visual elements and principles) to the source of Islamic faith, the divine revelation (*wahyu/wahy*) where all mankind is united under God's word (*Kalamullah*) in asserting His oneness (*tawhid*), the foundational principle in the Islamic faith.

Hence, the Arabic calligraphy is exclusively chosen for contemporary artworks, as it is regarded as the highest form of art in the context of Islamic art. It is deemed so as it manifests (*tajalli*) the word of God (*Kalamullah*) that is eternal (*Qadim*) and revealed as a divine revelation to Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) with the first primordial message of “Read! In the name of your Lord who created: He created man from a clinging form. Read! Your Lord is the Most Bountiful one who taught by (means of) the pen, who taught man what he



**Photo 5** Nasrollah Afjei (Iran), *Untitled* (2015). Acrylic on canvas.  
Source: Photographed by author.

did not know” (al-Alaq’ 96: 1–4). Thus, the objective/purpose of contemporary Islamic art is to invite people to return/repent (*tawbah/taubat*) to God, the Eternal and Omnipresence *dzat* (essence) where everything comes or created from/by Him and returns to Him in a way that is visually suitable and befitting with the current trend and era.

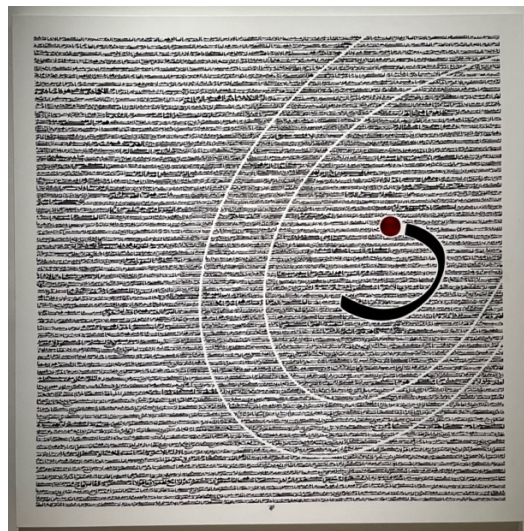
This understanding can be metaphorically visualised in the form of a dot “.” (*noktah*), the source/point of origin for everything that can and has manifest, reflected in the Quran verse “Nun, By the Pen! By all they write!” (al-Qalam 68: 1). This in turn indirectly answers the question as to why several contemporary artworks are constructed in the form/shape of a circle—or repeats/utilises the circular shape, geometry or certain alphabets such as *Nun* (ن) or *Alif Lām Rā* (الر) (Photos 6 and 7)—while others write/draw certain chapters (*surah*’s) from the Holy Quran or combine several letters and word to somewhat create an abstract visual rhythm/form where some are readable while others are not.

This understanding becomes the foundation as to why the content of contemporary Islamic art is considered as “Islamic” and not “Arabic” despite there are several artworks that are using the Arabic calligraphy as a visual medium for the Arabic language—to portray words such as “*Huwa*” (He), “*Hub*” (love) as well as several poems, inspirational saying and words of wisdom (*hikmah*)—as the content prioritises the element of *pathos* (emotion) that invokes the remembrance and immersive feeling of love (*mahabbah*), yearning (*syauq*), fear (*khauf*) and hope (*raja*’) towards God.

This clearly demonstrates (through contemporary artworks) the dynamism of Islamic art throughout the ages where its content/message, beauty, splendour and experience can be manifested and customised in different forms and styles, despite not fully utilising a traditional/historical approach, while preserving its fundamental core, appreciation and spiritual allure that is heavily transcendental in inspiring the divinity of God and His divine realm. Therefore, the only way to truly understand the concept of contemporary artworks is to have a firm understanding of the faith—particularly the monotheistic principle of *tawhid*, knowledge of God (*ma’rifah*) and love (*mahabbah*) towards Him and His Messenger, Prophet Muhammad (PBUH)—together with the technical aspects of Islamic calligraphy in order for one to be fully engulfed in the spiritual experience and appreciation of the visual manifestation that entices the viewers towards the realisation of the divine. To do this, one must have the ability to look beyond the denotation of physical manifestations and diverge into the inner realities of the connotations where the secret can only be comprehended by those who understand the language of divine love (*mahabbah*).



**Photo 6** Serhat Diker (Turkey),  
*Cesm-I Cihan (Pupil of the World)* (2022).  
Acrylic paint on canvas.  
Source: Photographed by author.



**Photo 7** Azra Aghighi Bakhshayeshi (Iran),  
*Untitled* (2016). Ink and oil on canvas.  
Source: Photographed by author.

## CONCLUSION

The dynamism of Islamic art and intelligence of Muslim artist to incorporate, evolve and redesign their visual identity (in art, textile, daily objects, architectures and others) is not something new. It has been in fact practiced throughout centuries, testified by the different artefacts curated in the IAMM, where local cultures and tradition are often refined and improved in accordance with the Islamic creed that upholds the faith's fundamental principle while maintaining their cultural identity through the inescapable passage of time that is intertwined with globalisation.

Therefore, contemporary Islamic artworks should be treated with the same disposition even though one might not be comfortable in the initial phase due to the unfamiliarity with the current practice and understanding of art, making it difficult (particularly in the local art scene in Malaysia) for some to accept and resonate with harmony the artforms with their personalised ideology and understanding of historical and traditional Islamic and Malay visual art. This is caused mainly by their belief, attitude and stance in holding firm to their identity (*jati diri*), principle, philosophy and cultural significance that is more favourable than the western's style or approach to art.

Despite the challenge, the effort done by the IAMM is truly worthy of praise as it encourages a healthy and thought-provoking discussion on the topic of contemporary Islamic art. With this in mind, it is in my best intention and hope to see the curation continues in the near future and to include more local and neighbouring contemporary Islamic art artist that incorporates technology in their art—augmented reality (AR), virtual reality (VR), video mapping/projection, motion sensing, music, graphic, photo-media and many others—as it would be visually enthralling and exciting to see local and current manifestation of Islamic art synthesise with technology and cultures of the Malaysians which shows the beauty of unity and tolerance in diversity.

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