Tradition, Innovation, and New Experiments in Islamic Geometric Design

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Earlier this year, a series of lectures was held on the subject of Islamic art in De Nieuwe Kerk in Amsterdam. Lectures were held every week for the duration of the exhibition “Earthly Art, Heavenly Beauty.” The exhibition features some of the finest examples of Islamic art and the number of visitors to the exhibition far exceeded the expectations of the organizers. The lecture series also seemed to be well attended. As an artist of Islamic art, I was curious to see what kind of people would attend these lectures. Would there be many people from, for example, the large Turkish and Moroccan communities in Amsterdam? Would there be many (or any) young people?

As it turned out, predominantly elderly Dutch ladies attended these lectures. Much publicity was given to the exhibition and the lecture series, and it was certainly the first time that Islamic art was so visible and accessible in Amsterdam. Nevertheless, it seemed that Islamic art appealed mostly to people above forty years of age. However, it would be unwise to jump to conclusions from this single observation; there may be many reasons why the exhibition and the lecture series in Amsterdam had this specific appeal.

Interpreted in a positive manner, it certainly shows that there is an opportunity for the development of an appreciation for Islamic art in
Western European countries. Not only for the sake of Islamic art itself (which deserves the widest audience possible, of course) but even more so for the role art can play in furthering the understanding of Islamic culture in non-Islamic countries in general. This essay will attempt to indicate the possible future of contemporary Islamic art, especially where it intersects with non-Islamic art and culture.

Much in the same way that North African musicians like, for instance, Cheb Khaled have become part of the mainstream music scene in Europe and have done much to place Islamic culture in a different light, Islamic art also has this potential, especially geometric design. Even among people who are only superficially familiar with Islamic culture or religion, geometric design is recognized as beautiful and "clever." More importantly, it is recognized as being Islamic! Islamic calligraphy is held in equally high esteem and is also immediately recognized as Islamic by most people. Oddly enough, these art forms are, more often than not, only indirectly associated with the day-to-day expressions of Islamic culture that most people in Amsterdam can see in their midst. Among the autochthonous segment of Dutch society, there seems to be a certain disassociation between the artistic and architectural splendours one sees on holiday in Turkey and North Africa, and the heritage of the people who work in the snack bar Pamukkale or in the Gıl ve Firm grocery store, around the corner.

The long traditions of calligraphy and geometric design enable Islamic art to produce works that lack any ambiguity. This is apparent in the execution of the principles of these art forms, and also applies to the way they state their cultural and religious origins. Western art lacks such continuous assuredness because every new art movement is quickly superseded by a newer one. Western art needs to be new all the time. Art movements come and go, some make an impact, others do not. Innovation and rejection of what has come before are very important motivating factors for artists in the western tradition. The Dutch art movement De Haagse School, for example, set new standards for the painting of coastlines and cloud configurations. Painters such as Weissenbruch and Mesdag had their heyday more than a century ago, but are still admired by many. However, nostalgia has crept into the appreciation of these atmospheric painters, partly because the Dutch landscape depicted in their paintings can hardly be found anywhere nowadays, and partly because

1 Perhaps I am taking liberties by extrapolating from my personal experiences in the Netherlands and a few Western European countries to the whole of Western Europe; I would welcome being proven wrong in the case of the appreciation of Islamic art in Western Europe.

this movement was superseded at the start of the twentieth century by the art of Mondriaan, Van Doesburg, and the like. Thus, the only lasting paradigm to be found in Dutch art (and I think this is true of all contemporary Western art) is that nothing lasts forever. For this reason, reviving traditional techniques is hardly ever successful in Western art; it is in the nature of Western art to want to be new, to discard what has preceded it.

Western art in the twenty-first century seems to have as its most important criterion the ability to be eclectic. This eclecticism is expressed by striving for originality at all costs and by any means. It often has art critics confounded and is quite often described as cynical, partly because it is thought to express a disdain for its viewers. However, aside from its critical appreciation, this eclecticism does have a positive aspect: the freedom to derive inspiration from any and all sources. This development could be seen in music before it became apparent in the visual arts. Nowadays, popular music will just as easily use a rhythm pattern from rai music as an Indian percussion theme.

An artist working in the Western art tradition will seek to "own" a certain style, to conceive a new art movement; this seems to be the highest attainable accolade. As an artist living in Holland, I can create an oil painting and not compare it to the works of Van Gogh or Rembrandt: I would not feel inclined to do so, but more importantly, I do not have to. I can do as I please and feel unencumbered by the weight of tradition. However, making an Islamic geometrical design places me in a different frame of mind; I am indebted to the master builders and artisans of the Alhambra, of the Mosque of Shaykh Lutfallah in Isfahan, of Mshatta, and
so on. It is inconceivable for me to occupy myself with Islamic art without being consciously influenced by those who have explored these art forms in the past.

Islamic art has never discarded anything; development in Islamic art comes from wanting to add to what has already been achieved, to increase its assuredness, so to speak. This has as its consequence the fact that the artist of Islamic art is less significant when compared to the volume of traditions of the art itself. Working within the long and rich traditions of calligraphy and Islamic geometry is a humbling experience; one is always conscious of past masters and masterworks.

This historical and religious consciousness, which of course pervades many aspects of Islamic culture, causes creativity in the Islamic artistic tradition to differ from creativity in the western artistic tradition. The concern here is not creativity in an intellectual or philosophical sense, but creativity in an experiential sense. One characteristic of creativity in the Islamic tradition is the notion of being a conduit; it is an undeniably mystical experience. This is, in part, because the techniques that need to be applied are so proven and tested that they are, in a way, “bigger” than the artist. It is as if one is delving into a rich and ancient source. The traditional techniques force the artist’s hand and dictate the boundaries of what is possible. On the face of it, this might seem undesirable to someone accustomed to the western notion of creativity. The artist who achieves a high degree of mastery of creative techniques in the western tradition can achieve conscious obsolescence of the techniques involved, and can focus his or her mind on the creative process. In the Islamic tradition, such an attribute is irrelevant, that is to say, traditional techniques are not merely the tools of creativity, they are equal partners in creativity. Considering the importance of traditional techniques, it is to be expected that they are not value-free. They are not merely a means to achieve an end, they represent an expression of a spiritual and religious message.

In Islamic art, the artist will try to comment on, and give expression to, the spiritual universe, the finished product will nevertheless have a very “earthly feel,” i.e. it will seem to be a variation or interpretation of something that already has a place in the natural world. Geometric design and architectural ornamentation are two good examples. To illustrate this: in Western art, the artist will try and give expression to the materialistic world, the finished product will, more often than not, have a spiritual or otherworldly “feel” to it. It seems that what has been created has its roots in a separate universe, with recognizable,

yet unfamiliar features, a personified, rarified view of the world. All arts have this interaction between inward-looking and outward-looking qualities. If the source of inspiration or impression, and the mode of expression, are at opposite ends, interesting results may be achieved. Islamic art has the additional quality of balance between creativity and technique. If achieved, it is instantly recognizable; if not, the composition will appear contrived.\(^2\)

\(^2\) Such an imbalance between creativity and technique can be seen when computer programs are used to make geometric repeat patterns. The technique (i.e. the software) completely defines the outcome, and creativity (i.e. human input) is restricted to making choices from among those the technique allows.
As a Dutchman, it is easier for me to identify the stages of development that Dutch art has gone through, say from Pieter Bruegel the Elder to Willem de Kooning. I can recognize from where they might have drawn their inspiration. The landscapes that gave Rembrandt his inspiration are same as those that gave Ruysdael his, and they can still be visited today. Willem de Kooning’s work can express an emotion with which I can identify.

For me, Islamic art is much more difficult to analyze and qualify in this manner. To a large extent, this is because I cannot assess whether the emotional impact that a beautiful geometric design or an expertly executed calligraphic work has on me is the intended spiritual message speaking to me, or just my personal appreciation of a superb work of art, regardless of its heritage. I can only guess at its true function—the conveyance of a spiritual message. Nevertheless, my desire to express myself creatively found a home in the tradition of Islamic geometric design and not in western artistic tradition. Its appeal to me is diverse and manifold, but one characteristic does stand out: the marriage of art and science that is so apparent in Islamic geometric design. The interaction between the application of geometric rules and the desire to create is endlessly fascinating. Not least because they need to develop equally if they are to benefit from each other. As in a real marriage, they need to continually communicate with each other. Sometimes art can take the initiative, other times science does; in the end, when the composition is finished, they both have contributed equally. Too much emphasis on the geometrical principles makes a design into a dispassionate replication; too much freedom makes a design lose its inherent compositional balance and symmetry.

Islamic geometric design has a very simple foundation: one takes a circle and starts by dividing it up into six, eight, nine, or ten “slices.” Considering that its purpose is the conveyance of a timeless message, the necessity for innovation is not so apparent. Regardless of the era in which one lives, geometric design will always be effective in communicating its message. So, some questions that may be asked are these: “Can one see the influence of time, place, and personal inclinations in the various designs? Are we able to see whether the artisan or artist was, for example, a migrant away from home, missing friends and family, forced to deal with an alien environment, having to compete with other artisans?” These are questions that would be asked when assessing Western artists. I pose these questions not for the sake of hypothesizing on the psychological make-up of Islamic artists and artisans in the distant past, but rather to try and answer the question of why certain design innovations surfaced at certain times. Conversely, there have been periods in history that passed without innovations having been made in the field of Islamic geometric design. Has it reached its apogee? Certainly not, no art form (or science, for that matter) ever does. Is it because in certain periods, artisans and artists had to work in an environment that was less conducive to, or supportive of, artistic innovation? Or did those who commissioned the artisans and artists prefer to spend their money on proven modes of expression rather than risk controversy? Perhaps dealing with a spiritual artistic expression, whether it be calligraphy or geometric design, imposes constraints on the artist that he or she would not want to forego.

In any case, innovation in art means creating something unprecedented. Innovation in art is a peculiar process because one cannot set out to achieve a particular result. Especially in a field such as Islamic geometric design, it is easy to think that over the centuries the many artists and artisans would by now have come up with all the patterns that are possible to create. In my personal experience, the ratio of the number of designs I have made to the number of those for which I can tentatively claim success is approximately 100:1. The defining criterion is always the ability to balance creativity with constraints; the desire to express freely with the need to work within an artistic context. Every artist attempts to discover this balance between the emotional and the rational. To do so, artistic boundaries need to be crossed. Not for the greater sake of the art, but for that of the personal development of the artists, so that their vocabulary and artistic experience may be enriched. Artistic boundaries can be emotional or rational—the former are usually intensely personal, the latter quite often more societal. Of course, the primary motivation for wanting to cross a boundary is the expectation of finding something new on the other side. In the context of this article, I would like to focus on the rational boundaries. In the field of Islamic art especially, one deals with notions such as “is this allowed?” or “would this give umbrage?” In short, considerations on the mores of Islamic art. This is a difficult issue to engage, because I do not want to presume to judge these artistic mores. They do not affect me personally, because I have found a personal mores that provides me with optimal freedom when experimenting within Islamic art. Perhaps I benefit from the moral environment of the society in which I live, stressing personal morality over societal morality. This does not mean that societal morality needs to be (or can be) refuted in favor of personal morality; for the artist, the challenge lies in balancing the two. The mores of Islamic art are the product of centuries of consideration and deliberation. For the artist working within Islamic art to develop fully, he or she needs to identify which moral considerations are
beneficial to the quality of the art, and which are unhelpful—in short, to develop a personal set of artistic morals to supplement the mores of Islamic art. In any case, one must assume that any artist working within an Islamic artistic tradition has a great love and respect for this tradition and will have the furtherance of the artistic tradition at heart in everything he or she does. To refute this assumption would be cynical.

The crossing of artistic boundaries can be likened to fact-finding missions: one needs to have gone there in order to decide whether it is worth going back there in the future, or even to stay there. Every artist needs to find the facts out for him- or herself; this is a process, not a definitive artistic mode, and the objective is to enhance the quality of art. In my personal experience with geometric design, I have had to take two steps forward, and then one step back.

Islamic art in non-Islamic countries faces two challenges. Firstly, independently to develop and nourish its own traditional art. Secondly, to decide to what extent it is willing to be influenced by the non-Islamic environment in which it presents itself. Art has the best opportunity to thrive when it can be both inward-looking and outward-looking, when it can build upon its traditions as well as take from the outside world that which it thinks will make a positive contribution.

Preservation of traditions and the conservation of the Islamic artistic heritage are often juxtaposed against artistic license. It can be likened to having a fabulous ancient palace and limiting access to the public in order to avoid wear and tear. Two arguments can be brought against this standpoint. It can be argued that if this palace is indeed so ancient, it is surely not so fragile that it could not withstand all these visitors—after all, it has survived all these centuries under conditions that were sometimes even more trying. Besides, allowing access will no doubt increase the appreciation of those who have never before had the opportunity to visit the palace. Which techniques are appropriate and beneficial to the structure of the building needs to be ascertained. In any case, the caretakers of the palace need not be concerned if a beneficial technique turns out to be unprecedented or initially alien.

The stimulation of (innovative) creativity in the Islamic artistic tradition should go hand-in-hand with the preservation of the artistic heritage. Preservation implies holding on to what “exists” for fear of losing past, present, and future. Preservation is important where it concerns the past and the present, but it will not secure a future for Islamic art. The specifically Islamic tradition of exploring the balance between creativity and technique, between science and art, should be considered strong enough to take care of itself, given the freedom to do so.
Islamic art does not need to defend itself, it is sufficiently strong; it needs to be preserved, but it also needs to be nourished. The important question is, what sort of existence does it want and need to have? Is it going to be on the defensive, protecting itself against too much innovation for fear of losing traditions? Or is it going to thrive on its assuredness and confidence and allow for interpretations of its traditions? The latter choice will surely make it richer and will, in due course, hopefully see it making artistic statements encompassing the old and the new.

Islamic art need not fear losing its traditions; it is nothing but traditions. There is such wealth in these traditions that it would be wasteful, in my opinion, not to allow them to be rediscovered and reinterpreted by new generations.

Hat San’atında Tashih

M. Savaş Çevik


Niçin Tashih Yapılır?