

RESEARCH ARTICLE	The Sufi Dimension in the Symbolic Ornamentation of Islamic Art	
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Abstract		
The forms and themes of ornamentation among Muslims have been diverse, as have the methods, surfaces, and tools used in their execution. These decorations have been applied to various architectural structures especially religious ones such as mosques, mausoleums, and zawiya as well as on manuscripts and various artisanal crafts. Certain ornamental themes have been reserved for specific styles or structures, such as epigraphic decorations on certain types of architecture. Other decorative themes have been designated for particular crafts, such as textiles, women's clothing, and adornment tools. However, most Sufi institutions particularly zawiya are distinguished by epigraphic and geometric ornamentation, which is predominantly symbolic in their architecture. These symbols carry philosophical dimensions and spiritual interpretations understood and practiced by Sufis, with some of them remaining esoteric secrets known only to a select few. To what extent is symbolism manifested in artistic ornamentation within Sufi thought?		
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Introduction

Islamic arts are among the most refined forms of art known to humanity. This art is founded upon a set of laws and principles—some derived from religious teachings, and others that have become customary norms to which adherence are required. Due to the widespread expansion of Islam across various regions, Islamic art has been influenced by the peoples and tribes who joined this community. Diverse cultures blended within it, with adaptations and modifications occurring across many areas of artistic expression. The Muslim artist selected what suited his morals and ideals in creating decorative details, especially in architecture, as architecture is the mirror of civilization and the confluence of the arts. This influence extended to artisanal crafts such as textiles, metalworks, woodcrafts, and other forms shaped by the artist's hand.

Islamic art came to possess a unique identity that distinguishes it from other traditions and acquired a set of artistic conventions both in terms of decorative themes and methods of execution and performance.

Over the centuries, it experienced significant and rapid development, as evidenced by the material remains that endure to this day.

This art is characterized by a harmonious blend of spirit and matter. Each ornament bears spiritual aesthetic dimensions and evokes an emotional response that words often cannot achieve. It is a spiritual and philosophical art. Through the study of various ornaments especially those found in religious architecture we can analyze their philosophical, spiritual, and Sufi dimensions.

1. Decorative Themes in Islamic Art:

When discussing the subject of Islamic ornamentation, it is essential to first understand and introduce some key terms that serve as the foundation for this theoretical study, to better clarify the meaning and to attempt to comprehend the philosophical and Sufi dimensions of certain ornaments presented as examples. It is impossible to cover all types of ornamentation, their branches, and interpretations in a single article. In order to grasp a range of concepts, we can

classify them according to the themes found in decorative applications whether on architecture, textiles, wooden crafts, or others—as they generally fall within the following main categories:

• **Vegetal Ornamentation:**

Vegetal ornamentation consists of various natural plants in their different types and forms. Its source lies in plant branches, leaves, and flowers, and it is either stylized or distant from its natural origin as seen in the schools of Egypt and the Levant, North Africa and Spain, and Turkey or it closely resembles its natural shape and color, as in the schools of Persia and India.¹

Vegetal ornamentation was present everywhere in Islamic decorative arts, textiles, book arts, and architectural design. In some instances—such as on mosque or shrine tiles its use may serve as an indirect reference to paradise. However, the inclusion of trees, shrubs, flowers, and creeping vines in drawings in general served to embellish the main subject of the decoration with motifs in the form of leaves, or as a pattern spanning the entire panel with a similar function, like a textile fabric.²

It was also widely used in Sufi lodges (zawiyas), dervish chambers (takayas), and shrines, and holds various and profound interpretive meanings within Sufi thought.

• **Epigraphic Ornamentation:**

Arabic calligraphy flourished and became a beautiful art that held a prominent position among Islamic arts. Arabic script came to be regarded as the most harmonious and the most artistically developed among scripts. Muslim calligraphers established rules, techniques, and methods for shaping and writing its letters and words, taking into account the aesthetic form of the letters to please the eye in a way akin to the delight of hearing eloquent speech.³ With the spread of the Qur'an, calligraphy spread as well, and skilled scribes elevated it to perfection. The early written letters were mostly straight and extended, and they were primarily used in Qur'anic manuscripts, praise scrolls, supplications, and invocations. Letters moved away from the softness of common cursive scripts toward the rigidity that signified the majestic formal script, whether it was inscribed, cast, engraved, or carved.⁴

Epigraphic ornamentation played a pioneering role in Islamic art by affirming faith and reinforcing the divine nature of Qur'anic revelation, which contains verses offering intercession for humankind. Artists extensively used calligraphic ornamentation on

mosque walls and adorned some palaces and homes with calligraphic bands containing Qur'anic verses. These inscriptions also appeared on everyday objects. Sometimes, a single word was written symbolizing good fortune, or a form of faith expression, or a blessing or prayer often embroidered or engraved on garments. They were also found on armor, swords, and drinking cups.⁵

Arabic script had an active role both artistically and functionally, which earned it deep appreciation and inspired its development. This led it to attain the distinguished status it rightly deserves. It is one of the most distinctive hallmarks of Islamic arts and products, thanks to its flexibility and ease of adaptation within designated spaces. It has conveyed clarity and elegance in its various styles since the first century of Hijrah.⁶

• **Geometric Ornamentation:**

Geometric patterns were present in the textiles and mosaics of the Roman and ancient eras. However, they achieved a far more dominant role in Islamic design. Star-shaped figures and polygons appeared across all Islamic arts and became a source of many architectural decorations. Simple arches were adorned with inscriptions and arabesque scrolls. Like Arabic script and arabesque, geometric shapes are highly versatile and can become extremely complex.⁷

The Muslim artist breathed new life into geometric ornamentation, presenting it in an artistic beauty never seen before. He did not invent new geometric forms but took the known ones to new levels of subdivision and creativity, producing a wide range of ornaments that reflected his mastery of geometry.⁸ He excelled in their execution and in generating fascinating variations with perfect symmetry. From geometric shapes, interlacing lines, and star-shaped compositions,⁹ he created ornaments that uniquely characterized his art throughout the ages.

As with many other decorative elements in Islamic art, geometry developed during the 7th and 8th centuries. From the 9th century onward, it became a standard feature of Islamic decoration. The precise reasons why geometry became so firmly established as one of the dominant styles in Islamic ornamentation are not entirely clear. However, the intellectual climate under the Abbasid caliphs—from the 9th to the 11th centuries may have played a role in fostering an interest in mathematics that extended far beyond the confines of the court itself.¹⁰

• **Animal Ornamentation:**

Depictions of animals were initially prohibited during the early Islamic era out of fear of a return to idol worship. However, such representations later appeared extensively in Persia and India, then in Egypt and the Levant during the Fatimid and Ayyubid periods, and though more sparingly in al-Andalus. Star-shaped subdivisions were a prominent feature in organizing large surface areas, creating panels of varied shapes and dimensions that provided suitable spaces for various types of vegetal or animal ornamentation.¹¹

These motifs portrayed scenes from nature and also included imaginative depictions of fantastical creatures conceived in the artist's imagination. These elements were frequently used in the decoration of wood, stucco, copper, textiles, crystal, and ceramics. They also filled many friezes and decorative elements on walls. Additionally, such figures appeared in miniatures of various types, representing stories, scenes, or even serving as illustrations in instructional books.¹²

Some animal motifs were also used in Sufi architecture, particularly symbols such as bees and doves.

2. Symbolic Ornamentation in Sufi Thought and Its Interpretations

Islamic art has unique characteristics that clearly distinguish it from other forms of art, and this is beyond question. One of its defining features is its "family spirit," which unites its elements in a way that is immediately apparent to the observer although it may become less obvious upon deeper analysis. It is not our aim here to examine all Islamic architecture and its various components, since its unity is undeniable, even though its elements are diverse. This is not surprising, for Islamic art has never been uniform; it has always evolved because, like language, art is a living entity whose very nature is to change.¹³

This art gives special attention to the concept of wholeness and integration within the human soul. It does not, for instance, focus solely on the material aspect of humanity in isolation from the spiritual. Nor does it present economic or class conflicts as the total reality of human life, ignoring alongside them the moral and spiritual values and higher human aspirations. Doing so would be a mutilation of human truth and a distortion of its image.¹⁴

The Muslim artist did not aim to imitate nature when drawing humans, animals, or birds; rather, his goal was expression and the beauty of form something that modern art schools later adopted in painting. Many of these ornamental units were drawn in repeated

patterns, from which geometric or leafy vegetal branches extended. Their bodies were adorned with such compositions, further abstracting them from their natural forms into purely decorative elements. Museums around the world hold many such artifacts.¹⁵ The Muslim artist avoided intense or detailed modeling of shapes, contenting himself with suggesting volume without overly emphasizing features.¹⁶

As for vegetal elements, they are the clearest example of the Muslim artist's departure from literal imitation of nature. More often than not, these are abstract ornamental symbols, both in form and color, with spiraling branches and semi-heart-shaped leaves expressed as curved lines that fill surfaces with a remarkable harmony and balance between mass and void. This form of ornamentation spread most prominently in the Egyptian and Levantine schools, followed by North Africa and al-Andalus, and finally in Turkey.¹⁷

Examples of Symbolic Ornamentation Interpretations in Sufi Thought:

Symbolic ornamentation is a prominent feature of art in Sufi thought. It goes beyond external form and appearance, acquiring symbolic and profound dimensions with philosophical and spiritual interpretations connected to rituals of worship and remembrance (dhikr). This symbolism is not limited to architecture or visual arts, but extends to language, letters, poetry, and behaviors. Among the most important decorative elements are:

• The Crescent (Hilāl):

The crescent held sacred meaning in Islamic art due to its association with the timing of certain Islamic rituals. Crescents and stars are mentioned frequently in the Qur'an, which likely contributed to their widespread use as decorative motifs throughout Islamic civilization. One of the earliest Islamic structures adorned with stars and crescents is the Dome of the Rock. Many modern Islamic nations have adopted it as a symbol on their flags and emblems. Its popularity in Muslim art stems from its significance in Islamic life it is used in the Hijri calendar and symbolizes light and renewal.¹⁸ It was used by Muslims because of their reliance on lunar calculations and its connection to two pillars of Islam: fasting and pilgrimage. As stated in the Qur'an: "يسألونك عن الأهلة قل هي مواقيت للناس والحج" It was also historically used on coins, flags, and buildings.¹⁹

• Stars:

Stars of various forms are among the most widespread symbols in Islamic art throughout its history. The meanings and interpretations of stars vary according to the number of their points and their placement: they may have five, six, eight, ten, or even twelve points.²⁰ Muslim artists eagerly embraced the creation of star-patterned geometric designs, producing many intricate forms with precise use of mathematical and geometric rules.²¹ Stars symbolize guidance, and thus they appear frequently in the symbolic ornamentation of Sufi architecture, where they represent enlightenment, direction, and spiritual reform. The five-pointed star, in particular, has been widely associated with popular beliefs; some interpret its five points as representing the Five Pillars of Islam and see it as a protective charm against envy and the evil eye.²²

• The Hand (Khamsa):

This decorative motif is used in many regions, especially above the entrances of old houses and shops. It also appears on wooden chests, textiles, and even in small hand-shaped decorative items hung in various places. Some silver and gold necklaces worn by women also feature it. The "khamsa" or open hand with five fingers symbolizes the Five Pillars of Islam. Among the general public, it is believed to offer protection against the evil eye and ward off harm.

• The Boat:

Frequently found in Sufi architecture, the boat symbolizes salvation and the journey toward spiritual truth.

• Fish:

This ornamental motif carries multiple meanings in ancient cultures. It symbolizes water and is associated with brotherhood and solidarity, often depicted in harmonious groups.²³ Among Muslims, it was used decoratively based on the belief that it symbolizes fertility, abundance, and prosperity.²⁴

Conclusion:

In conclusion, we can say that symbolism in Islamic art especially within Sufi traditions is not merely an aesthetic luxury, but rather a form of indirect expression of a set of profound truths experienced by individuals engaged in asceticism, devotion, and spiritual practice. Each decorative element, including its placement, serves as an expression of spiritual stations, divine manifestations, the concept of the unity of existence, and the relationship between the spiritual guide (shaykh) and the disciple (murid).

Geometric ornamentation in Sufism symbolizes the divine infinitude that transcends existence itself, and repetition represents the order that governs the universe. The repetition in geometric patterns is closely tied to dhikr (remembrance) and wird (spiritual recitation). Vegetal ornamentation symbolizes the renewal of life, growth, and generosity. Epigraphic ornamentation holds a sacred status that elevates it above other forms, for the letter carries spiritual and cosmic secrets that enhance its sanctity and nobility.

Symbolic ornamentation, therefore, is a language of allusion hinting through symbols without directly stating.

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