

Existence of Arabesque in Islamic Architecture

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ABSTRACT- The Muslim empire has been recognised worldwide due to its genius representation of Art. The artists and craftsmen of Islamic empire put their religious beliefs to induce their creativity in a series of abstract forms and amazing works of art. These art forms were progressive towards establishing a new style substantially deviating from Roman and byzantine art of their time. For these artists, art was the way of transmitting the messages of Islam. This art touched everybody's heart with its ornamentation, detailing and calligraphy.

The main objective of this article is to emphasise the uniqueness of Islamic art, which was defined by religious beliefs and cultural values prohibiting the depiction of living creatures including humans. This article briefly examines the meaning and character of art in Islamic culture, its implication on architecture and explore about its main decorative form i.e. Arabesque (floral and geometrical). Finally, it looks at the influence of the art developed in the world of Islam in India.

INDEX TERMS- Derivation of Islam, Islamic Art, Islamic Architecture, and Arabesque, floral and geometrical patterns.

I. ISLAM: THE DERIVATION

The name of this religion, Islam, is derived from Arabic word "Salam", which is often interpreted as meaning "peace". However, specialists call the meaning of the word as "submission", which indicates towards the eternal submission of oneself to God. The holy book Quran states "*Islam is to testify that there is no god but Allah and Muhammad is the messenger of Allah*", this statement clears the fact that Islam is a monotheistic religion, according to which there is only one God and that is Allah. The Islam religion finds its origin in South Arabia and dates back to 7th Century, which is later to any other major religion existing in the world. Despite its more recent origin, there are around 1.6 billion followers of Islam across the globe, thereby making it the second largest religion in the world after Christians.

"Muslim" is an Arabic word that refers to a person who submits themselves to the will of God. Followers of Islam are called **Muslims**. "Allah" is an Arabic word which means "*The One True God.*" (Source: www.wikipedia.com)

II. HISTORICAL GLIMPSES

By 750 CE, Islam had spread to China, India, along the Southern shore of the Mediterranean and got stepped into Spain. By 1550, they had weighed down Vienna. Wars resulted, expelling Muslims from Spain and Europe. Since they were mostly following land routes for their trade activities, they did not

develop far-reaching sea trade (as for example the English and Spaniards). As a result, the old world occupation of North America was left to Christians.

Believers are currently concentrated from the West coast of Africa to the Philippines. In Africa, in particular, they are increasing in numbers, largely at the expense of Christianity. Many do not look upon Islam as a new religion. They feel that it is in reality the faith taught by the ancient Prophets, Abraham, David, Moses and Jesus (Peace be upon them). Muhammad's role as the last of the Prophets was to formalize and clarify the faith and to purify it by removing foreign ideas that had been added in error.

III. ISLAMIC ART

Art is the medium which reflects the culture and establishment of a society. Similarly in the case of Islamic art, which reflects its cultural values, the belief toward spirituality, this universe, life and the association of human being with the almighty. For a

Muslim, the core reality is "God (Allah)", the supreme ruler, the one who is pure and the most merciful, the almighty, towards whom, Muslim's worship and aspiration revolves. All things are bound together under God's leadership as part of an all-encompassing divine scheme which includes all aspects of being and life -- whatever is both inside and outside of time and space, and embracing both the macrocosm in its most awesome expression and in its most minute forms.

With such a belief system, the Muslim is convinced of the balance and harmony of all things in existence. Because of the strict embargo, Islamic art developed a unique character, utilizing a number of primary forms: geometric, arabesque, floral, and calligraphic, which are often interwoven. From early times, Muslim art has showcased this balance and harmony imbibed into their culture.

The early Muslim artists and artisans who derived the intricate



Figure-1,
Geometric
patterns in
Islamic Art

systems of interconnected geometric forms which constitute the bases of Islamic geometric art of course may have no idea of such realities. Nonetheless, the graphic manner in which they conceived God's supreme central place in the cosmos, and the connection of the parts of creation to him and to the whole, reflects a very significant approximation of what can now be documented by science.

IV. EXPRESSIONS IN ISLAMIC ART & ARCHITECTURE

Islamic architecture includes a large variety of both materialistic and spiritual systems from the foundation of Islam to the present day, influencing the design and construction of buildings and structures in Islamic culture. The vocabulary of Islamic Architecture was derived due to two types of Architectural forms:

1. The principal buildings, such as Mosques, Tombs, Palaces, Forts.
2. The buildings of lesser importance, such as public baths, fountains and domestic architecture.

After Muhammad's time (after 632 AD), a specifically recognizable Islamic architectural style emerged, which was a style evolved with the contribution of Egyptian, Persian/Sassanid, Greek and Byzantine models. The Germanic Visigoths in Spain also made a big contribution to Islamic architecture. They invented the Horseshoe arch in Spain and used them as one of their main architectural features, After the Moorish invasion of Spain in 711 AD the form was taken by Umayyad who later emphasized the curvature of the horseshoe. An early example of Islamic architecture may be identified as early as 691 AD with the completion of the Dome of the Rock (*Qubbat al-Sakrah*) in Jerusalem. It featured interior vaulted spaces, a circular dome, and the use of stylized repeating decorative patterns (arabesque).

V. 'INDO' - ISLAMIC ARCHITECTURE

The 'Indo' character in Islamic architecture comes in existence with the rise of Ghurid occupation at the close of 12th century



Figure-2, Arches, Qutub Complex, Delhi

A.D. The Muslims were inherited with a good sense of varied designs from the Sassanian and Byzantine empires and being naturally rich with taste for buildings, never failed to adapt to their own requirements, due to the reason, glimpses of the original character of almost every foreign country that they conquered, can be seen throughout. The most important factors common to all the mixed forms of architecture in this era were especially with respect to mosques and temples, wherein the ornamental decoration was playing a vital role into aesthetics and these buildings were having an open court in many cases, which was surrounded by colonnades.



Figure-3, Quwwatul-Islam Mosque

prayer in Islam requires a spacious a courtyard with a Hall pointed towards Mecca.

Muslim invaders of India were merely armed horsemen, who had come to the country to loot and plunder and were having no idea in terms of founding towns, cities or empires.

Consequently they were not having architects, masons and craftsmen with them. The building debris was used by those Muslim invaders, for new improvised buildings such as Quwwat-ul-islam (Figure-3) mosque in Delhi and Adhai din-ka-jhonpra (Figure-4) at Ajmer.



Figure-4, Adhai din-ka-Jhonpra

The arrival of the Muslims in India therefore did not immediately make a great impact on Indian architecture and as a result, the physical conquest of India actually took more than a thousand years. It was only with the take-over of India by Emperor Babar in 1526 that the Muslims began to think in terms of settling down in the country and in course of time had the satisfaction that they now belonged to the country and that the country belonged to them. As such from the 7th century to the 16th century Muslim architecture in India reflects the unsettled condition of the conquerors who felt that they were living amidst the conquered inhabitants, many of who were hostile to them. As such the accent thus far was on security which could be had only in walled fortifications. It is, therefore, that early Muslim towns and cities, even when they are tombs were made as fortified places which they could easily defend against hostile forces. But after the proper settlement of their requirements in India and

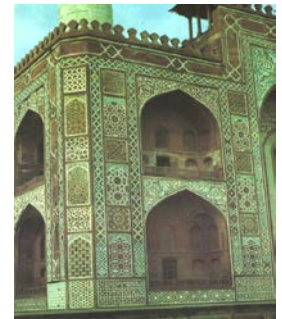


Figure-5, Main gateway, Akbar's tomb (mosaic & inlay work)

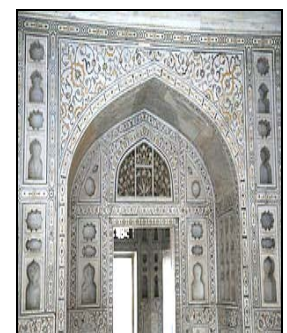


Figure-6, Complex Arabesque inlays at the Agra Fort in the Mughal Empire

after getting bored with the flat and non artistic features of their buildings they thought to decorate their buildings with some decorative elements. Since their rulers were influenced from the rich Indian art and architecture and have also seen the art patterns which were being used in India, they started taking the elements of decorations from the Indian buildings in their form. Firstly they have started writing the inscriptions of Quran over the exterior and interior facades of the buildings (Calligraphy) and later on the addition of geometrical and floral patterns (Arabesque) have been done for the improvement of elevations.

VI. SIGNIFICANCE OF ARABESQUE IN ISLAM

The arabesques and geometric patterns of Islamic art (Figure-7) are often said to arise from the Islamic view of the world. To Muslims, these forms, taken together, constitute an infinite pattern that extends beyond the visible material world. To many in the Islamic world, they concretely symbolize the infinite, and therefore uncentralized, nature of the creation of the one God (Allah). Furthermore, the Islamic Arabesque artist conveys spirituality without the iconography of Christian art.



Figure-7, Geometrical pattern Inlay work on Tajmahal Gateway

Arabesque art consists of a series of repeating geometric forms which are occasionally accompanied by calligraphy. Ettinghausen et al. describe the arabesque as a "vegetal design consisting of full and half palmettes [as] an unending continuous pattern in which each leaf grows out of the tip of another (Figure-8). To the adherents of Islam, the Arabesque is symbolic of their united faith and the way in which traditional Islamic cultures view the world. There are two modes to arabesque art.



Figure-8, Ottoman tughra of Suleiman, 1520, with flowers and saz leaves

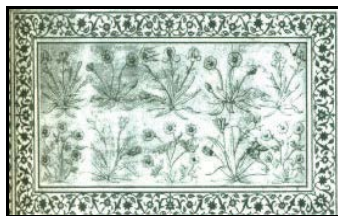


Figure-9.1, Some Floral patterns used for arabesque inlay

There are two modes to arabesque art. The first recalls the principles that govern the order of the world. These principles include the bare basics of what makes objects structurally sound and, by extension, beautiful. In the first mode, each repeating geometric form has a built-in symbolism ascribed to it. For example, the square, with its four equilateral sides, is symbolic of the equally important elements of nature: earth, air, fire and water. Without any



Figure-9.2, Some Floral patterns used for arabesque inlay

one of the four, the physical world, represented by a circle that inscribes the square, would collapse upon it and cease to exist. The second mode is based upon the flowing nature of plant forms. This mode recalls the feminine nature of life giving. The basic geometrical shapes used for inlay of geometrical arabesque are majorly constructed through repetition of lines and arcs. The regular repetition of such elements creates a kind of pattern which is then inlaid with different colors or materials and improves the aesthetic value of the surface. Muslim artisans also perfected the technique of creating decorative motifs of flowers, vines, and other graphics in precise geometric patterns. These "arabesque" motifs often cover walls, pottery, and other decorative objects and are governed by geometric and mathematical principles. The vines curve around and split off at very precise angles.



Figure-10, Floral inlay on marble screen-Taj Mahal

VII. STEPS FOR CONSTRUCTION OF A TYPICAL GEOMETRICAL PATTERN

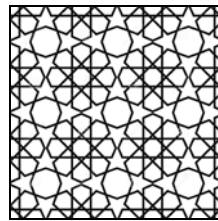


Figure-11, An Islamic Arabesque Pattern

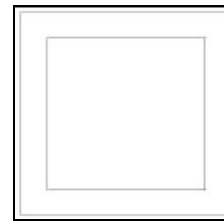


Figure: 11.1, Centered Squares

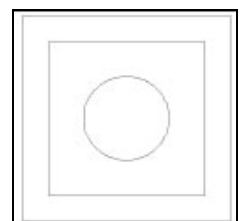


Figure: 11.2, Centered Circle

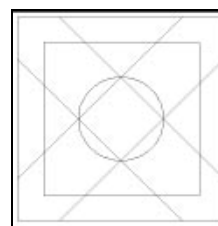


Figure: 11.3, Perpendiculars

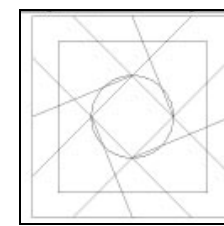


Figure: 11.4, Spokes

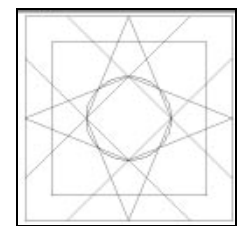


Figure: 11.5, Star Pattern

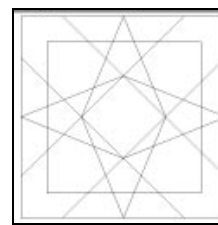


Figure: 11.6, Circle Removed

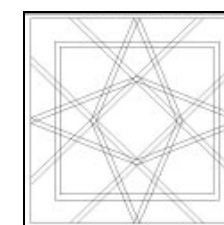


Figure: 11.7, Paths Drawn

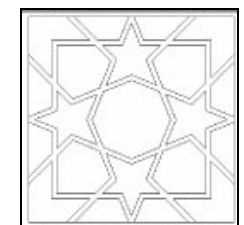


Figure: 11.8, Lattice Refined

VIII. CONCLUSION

Looking at past and talking about the achievements may lead one, both, to the risk of getting trapped into the bereavement

while also romanticizing its bygone charm. This article may be accused of intervening both at the same time, but it also supports the entrenched belief that Islam was enriched with the ways to attain a good and comprehensive living. Of course all can't be implemented blindly in the modern context, but the extract of those deep-rooted beliefs may guide us to follow the correct path. The modern trends and the traditional forms should come together and should share same platform to showcase the beauty and grace of our glorious past.

In addition, these traditional urban forms should behave as per the concerns of today like climate and energy efficiency, along with their visual aesthetics. These viewpoints of past are relevant today, particularly when almost each aspect of life and every form of production has become aware and sensitive towards the resources and the social concerns. Undoubtedly, the Islamic cities and architecture is not going to replicate itself in the contemporary world by adopting the use of domes and minarets, but adoption of their ethos may help us to find humanity in humans.

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