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ISLAMIC ART AS EDUCATIONAL TEXT

Abridged manuscript

In this paper I will present different ways of interpreting Islamic ornamental art. The purpose of this, is mainly to examine the possibilities of using this art as pedagogical text or educational media in school. We usually read religious figurative art as texts, often as one mode in a multimodal text. These texts may be narrative images, or they may have some kind of message that pupils can understand. I will try point out some possible ways to read non-figurative ornaments as meaningful texts.

DISPOSITION

1. Introduction
2. Ornamental art in Islam
3. Different ways of reading Islamic ornaments
4. Can we read Islamic ornaments as meaningful texts in school?

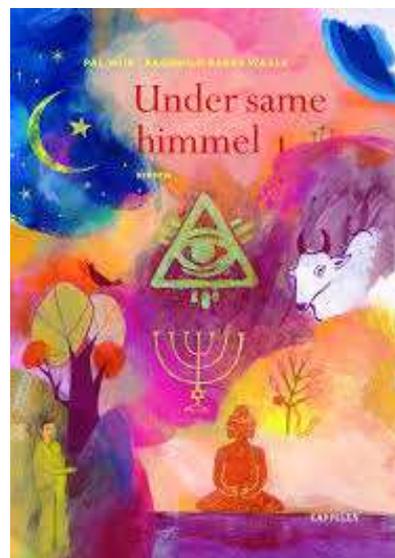
1 Introduction

Prohibition against religious images is, among other places, formulated in *sura*/chapter 6 (The Cattle), *ayat*/verse 74. Here Abraham/Ibrahim speaks with his father Azar about idols.



Quran ca 1300 North Africa, *sura* 6,74: «And [mention, O Muhammad], when Abraham said to his father Azar, ‘Do you take idols as deities? Indeed, I see you and your people to be in manifest error’»

One main basis for the prohibition is the second commandment that God gave to Moses/Musa (Exodus 20). In the Roman-Catholic and protestant churches this commandment is actually understood as a part of the first commandment. In that way it loses some of its weight as an independent commandment. It sounds more like a prohibition against idols than as a general prohibition against figurative art.



Non-muslims often see the prohibition as an artistic limitation, and Islamic art as a compensation for «real art». This is also the case in some Norwegian textbooks, e.g. one of the dominating textbooks for 13 years old pupils in the 8th degree: «The art should honour God, and the prohibition against images have led to an ingenious use of ornaments (repeted beautiful patterns) and calligraphy (beautiful letters)»

The other dominating textbook gets closer to a relevant understanding: «Through, among other things, calligraphy and ornaments, muslim artists have shown the unity of God, as well as the order and rich variations of the created world. Islamic art is symbolic and abstract, it is not a copy of what we can see in nature. Ornamental art means beautifying art.»



Among Islamic aesthetes through history, ornamental art may be understood as a negation, an answer to the prohibition against idolatry. It is, however, more often understood as a positive and relevant response to God’s gifts and his message. (The Quran is both a gift and a message. Among other gifts is life itself, and a main message of the Quran is that God will help and lead those who pray to him).

Because the nature of God and his will is revealed in a text (signs first seen and sounds first heard by Muhammad, then spoken by him, before written down in the Quran), writing and reading this text are the most important practices in islam. So calligraphy and recitation are the most central art forms. The calligrapher and the *imam* (idol, leader – in sunni: the one who leads the prayer) are both necessary functions.

In both art forms the ideal is to combine clarity with beautifying elements. In recitation the ornaments consist of extra notes or sounds, and in calligraphy they consist of extra lines and signs – mostly geometric forms or plant forms based on geometric forms (here referred to as arabesques).

The Islamic Decorative Canon



Calligraphy



Geometric



Arabesque

2 Ornamental art in islam

Ornamental art might be divided into three main types: Letters, pure geometric patterns, and arabesques. These three usually overlap or work together.



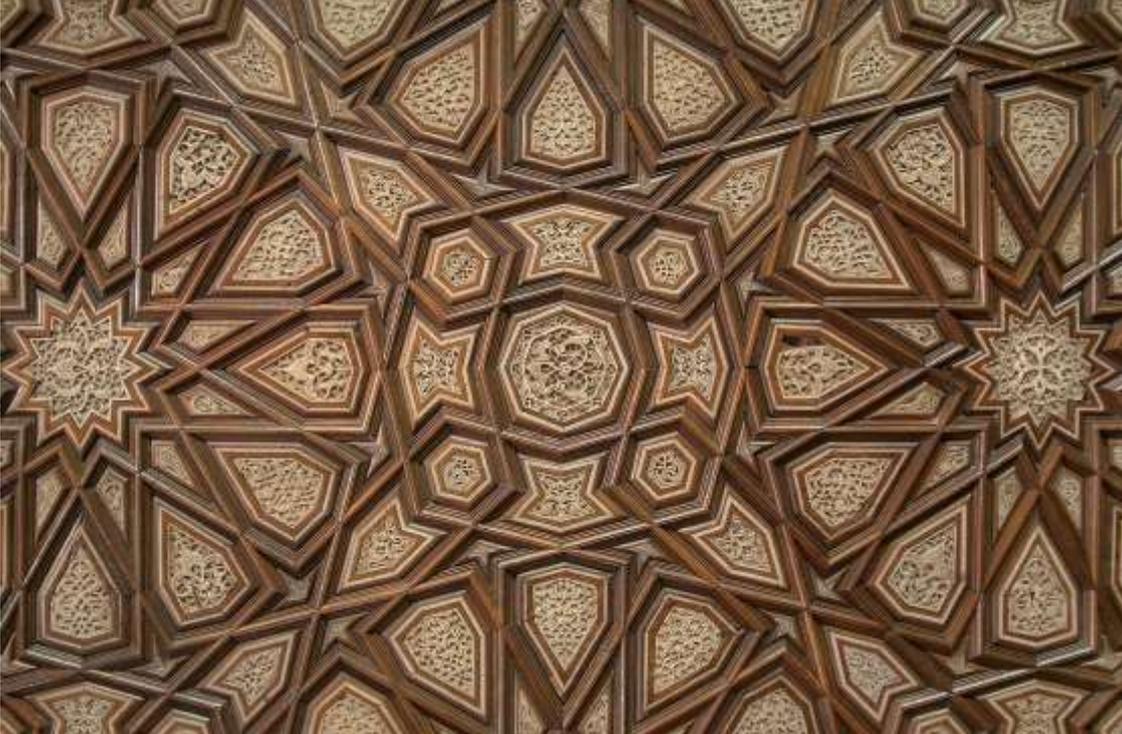
Example from Alhambra: The three main types of ornamental art: letters and arabesque in stucco, geometric forms in ceramic tiles.

Islamic art and the science of mathematics have evolved together, enriched and reflected each others from the first caliphs until (maybe) the 11th century (Blair/Bloom 1997, Faruqi/Faruqi 1984, Hattstein/Delius 2000, Hillenbrand 1999). Because this art actually is a mathematic discipline, it is often described as symbolical, abstract and rational. Furthermore it is objective, in the sense that the artist and his subjectivity or originality is not interesting. It may also be characterized as unified, since it follows the same principles everywhere. And because of all this, it is beautiful.



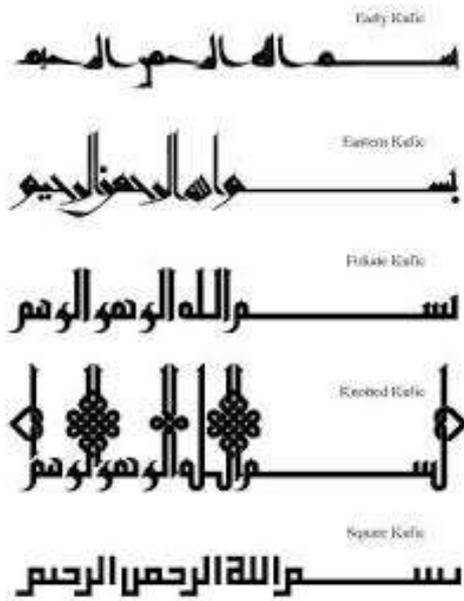
Early examples of ornamental art:
Upper left from Umayyad castle (8th century)
Upper right: calligraphy, 9th-10th century (Abbasid periode)
Left: inspired by Jewish and Roman art, ca 800, (Abbasid periode)

The eldest examples may have more simple patterns, e.g. repeated triangles, often strongly influenced by Roman, Christian or Jewish art. The letters are not elegant in the same way as the later *naskh* (italic letters).

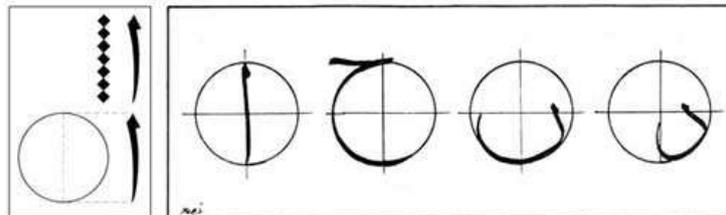


Some later examples of more complex ornamental art. Note the new figures (including pentagons) in the spaces between the main figures, and how the letters and plants work together. This example: wood, next example (below): tiles, last example (below): stucco - note the geometric grid «behind» the plant forms.





Letters: *Kufi*, elder types, above left, *naskh* later types (Persian influence) above right.
Diwani, developed ca 1500-1600 (Ottoman era) below.
 The circle and the vertical line (the letter *alif*) as basic forms or starting points for the letters (below)



How letters and ornaments might work together in a Quran

Ornamental art became more complex as the science of mathematic became more complex, e.g. more often geometric figures based on odd numbers and different forms of symmetry. Ceramic tiles, stucco, paper, pen and paintbrush replaced tools like stone and calf skin.



My main example is the *qibla*-wall in the mosque of World Islamic Mission in Oslo (above)..

The letters are hard to read – the calligraphy is integrated in the ornaments – I will point out ten verbal texts:

1 Around the *mihrab*: *Sura* 24 (An-Nur/The Light) *ayat* 35 (The Light Verse): «Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth. The example of His light is like a niche within which is a lamp, the lamp is within glass, the glass as if it were a pearly [white] star lit from [the oil of] a blessed olive tree, neither of the east nor of the west, whose oil would almost glow even if untouched by fire. Light upon light. Allah guides to His light whom He wills. And Allah presents examples for the people, and Allah is Knowing of all things.»

2 Inside the *mihrab*/niche: Three names or expressions: Allahu Akbar (God is bigger) + Alhamdu Lillah (All praise to God) + Subbhan Allah (God is praised). These correspond to prayer beads with 33 pearls.

3 The creed in two parts, corresponding with the rest of the *qibla*-wall. God, unity, etc on the right side, the Prophet etc on the left side.

4 Seven of the 99 names of God.

5 Main text on the right side > *Sura* 112 (Al-'Ikhlāṣ/Sincerity – Norwegian title: Sentence of unity): «Say, 'He is Allah , [who is] One, Allah , the Eternal Refuge. He neither begets nor is born, nor is there to Him any equivalent.'»

6 Main text on the left side > *Sura* 108 (al-Kawthar/Abundance, about Muhammad): «Indeed, We have granted you, [O Muhammad], al-Kawthar. So pray to your Lord and sacrifice [to Him alone]. Indeed, your enemy is the one cut off.»

7 Right side top text > excerpt from *sura* 3, 103 (about *tawhid*/unity)

8 Left side top text > duties of believers: *salat* (prayer), *zakat* (alms-giving), follow the Prophet.

9 Bottom texts: The names of the first *caliphs* on one side correspond to names of symbolic interior in the mosque on the other side.

10 Farther from the *mihrab* (outside the picture): Excerpts from Persian poems by the Sufi-Poet al-Schirazi: Right side about Paradise, left side about the Prophet.

In other mosques there may be different quotes, even if many (like the Light Verse) are rather common.¹

Some quotes from the Quran that are decorating mosques around the world, corresponds with other parts of the mosque (door, ceiling, etc). Then the whole building may correspond to Paradise (the door to Paradise, ceiling as heaven, etc).

3 Different ways of reading Islamic ornaments

According to some writers, these ornaments can be read as texts. Some readings may be characterized as maximalist, because geometric forms, stylized flowers, colors, etc, are translated rather explicit and detailed into a verbal language. Other readings are more or less minimalist (Sinclair 2012, Renard 1996).

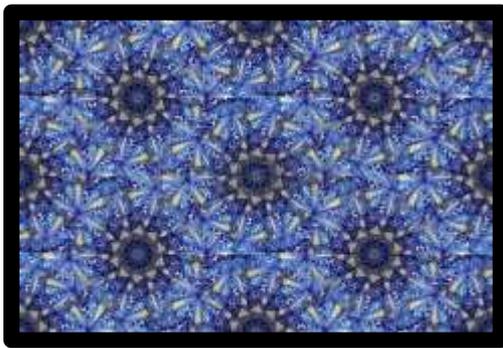


Old & new examples on beautified mihrabs > Kairo & Istanbul

¹ E.g. *Sura* 2 (Al-Baqarah/the Cow) 149: «So from wherever you go out [for prayer, O Muhammad] turn your face toward al- Masjid al-Haram [the Holy Mosque], and indeed, it is the truth from your Lord. And Allah is not unaware of what you do.»

Usually parts or aspects of these ways of reading are combined, so it is actually too formal to present them as seven different ways. Art itself came first, so the different ways of reading it re secondary and suggesting.

1 BEAUTYFING: The meaning of ornaments is nothing more or nothing less than to beautify what is valuable.



Four examples > arabesques on *qibla*-walls – note the colors (mainly blue) and the geometric patterns “behind” the plants and flowers.



2 CAREFUL NON-EXPLICIT READING: A vague, careful and implying reading, e.g. the imam in the mosque in Oslo, who stated that the color blue can be associated with heaven, that heaven can be associated with paradise, and that paradise can be associated with God. The stylized flowers can be associated with life, which is created by God (Winje 2012:215).



Arabesque (Iran)

3 A TEXT ABOUT ORDER AND LIFE: There are also examples of more detailed readings, where the plants are interpreted as expressions of life: Exuberant, filling every open space, winding along invisible geometric lines that lays behind the pattern as a grid. Geometry follows mathematical laws, it is logical, repetitive, symmetric. It is following – but also revealing – the laws of nature. Life is evolving and growing, but within its frames. Life is not chaotic or accidental, but predictable and rythmic (Clévenot/Degeorge 2000, *Islam through Art* and Murata/Chittick 1996).

These three ways of reading ornamental art – at least the last two – can be seen as variations of the same kind of reading, they only differ when it comes to how detailed the interpretation. Contrary to maximalist readings (as in number 7, later), they ascribe no explicit meaning to concrete figures.

The next three readings do not ascribe concrete maning to e.g. geometrical figures, either. However, they are concerned about the effect on the reader:



Letters, geometric forms & plants repeted in a band (Palestine)

4 MORAL EFFECT: Ornamental art may have a moral effect on a viewer/reader who spends time looking at patterns characterized by symmetry, rythmic repetitions, harmonic colors, and no surprises (Ettinghausen 1976, Renard 1996). The predictable pattern affects and influences the viewer: An experience of harmony may entail calmness, and a harmonic and calm person tends to be good to others. After leaving the mosque, he or she will affect others, in this way harmony and goodness will spread in society



Modules repeted (Iran)

5 THEOLOGICAL EFFECT: Ornamental art may also have what we (in lack of a better expression) may call a theological effect on the viewer/reader (Faruqi 1985): If he places himself close to the wall in the first phase of the reading, he will see small, intricate plant forms or geometrical figures. When he takes one step back, he will see that these small forms are combined and repeated in different ways. From a farther distance the reader/viewer sees how the patterns are framed, and how the framed moduls are repeated – even if each of them also differs from the others. The ornamented wall seems to visualize just a small part of the whole world, the patterns can continue endlessly. However, the ornaments do not show the world as it looks like for the eye. The viewer sees no image of God, nor of anything God has created – but in a way he sees the principles of creation. Geometry makes the mathematical regularity that all nature follows visible. According to Lois Faruqi, the reader/viewer then will be overwhelmed, and exclaims: *Allahu akbar* (“God is bigger”). According to Islam, these words are the most relevant words a human being can utter.



A lot of elements working together
(Iran)

6 ANTHROPOLOGICAL EFFECT: I have also seen the following reasoning (Ali 1999, Faruqi and Faruqi 1984, Faruqi 1985): Islamic ornaments are usually not concentrated around a center (that differs from e.g. hinduic *yantras*, where the center, *bindu*, may symbolize the inner nucleus, *atman*, and the possibility of being one with God. Instead we often see that Islamic ornaments (especially band geometry) do not have one center. Instead, each figure has its own center, and new figures with new centers are created when the figures overlap. Instead of a strong focus on *one* centre, the reader/viewer is distracted, his consciousness is not concentrated, but is wandering around, from one center or focus point to another. Islamic art does not support an anthropology where man can identify with God or understood as divine or potential divine. On the contrary, it supports an understanding of man as *not* divine, but as one of God’s creations.²

² This does not mean that God is absent or far from man – *sura* 50 (Qaf / the letter Qaf), 16 : «And We have already created man and know what his soul whispers to him, and We are closer to him than [his] jugular vein.»



Wall/roof in mosque, Kairo (14th century)

From top:

- arabesque
- geometric pattern: symmetry by rotation and reflection – note: many centers, new figures with new centers
- letters (excerpt from *sura* 48; *Al-Fath* / The Victory)
- stalatit (stucco)

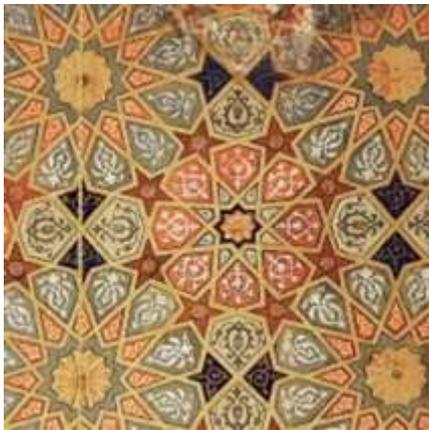
While the first three readings may be characterized as associative, the following three make a point of how the art affects the viewer through the senses. None of these give explicit meaning to concrete forms. However, the last one may be categorized as maximalist:



Geometric forms and letters that may be associated with numbers.

7 EXPLICIT, NUMEROLOGICAL READINGS: A geometrical pattern can be seen as a pattern of numbers: A triangle may be «translated» into the value of 3, etc, and the numbers may correspond with letters (Critchlow 1976, Renard 1996 – see also Clévenot/Degeorge 2000, Moore 1977). Numerological readings are known from esoteric milieus in different religions/cultures, Jewish cabbalistic interpretation of the Bible is maybe the best known example. There are different keys to this, and the sum of the digits may be important. A kind of initiation may be necessary before one is allowed to break the code.

An example: A hexagram or six-pointed star – or a hexagon – may refer to the letter L, the sixth letter in the alphabet. Two hexagrams may be read as LL or «Allah» (vowels are not letters in the arabic alphabet) (Schimmel 1984). Numerological readings are speculative and discussable, but have been accepted in some milieus and some historical epochs.



More examples of explicit reading:

Above and above left: Many traces to follow, many figures to find

Above right: Examples from an old wall chart – note the six point stars in the middle pattern in the right column

Left: Combined elements

4 Can we read Islamic ornaments as meaningful texts in school?

Pupils in Norwegian school learn about Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Islam and Christianity, besides secular views on life, philosophy and ethics. The youngest pupils listen to stories, look at pictures, hear about festivals, and (if possible) visit temples, mosques and churches. Those between ten and twelve learn about the same religions as systems, while the eldest focus more on religion in modern society. The elder pupils are also introduced to some additional religions and religious movements, such as Sikhism, Baha'i, Jehova's Witnesses and postmodern religiosity.

The main reason for this subject in school is to avoid prejudice between members of a new generation, by developing knowledge about each other. In principle it should be pluralistic, but that is difficult to realize, partly because of the value ascribed to the Norwegian cultural heritage (with Christianity as an important element) in the curriculum.

The ability of reading multimodal texts is necessary. That includes all kinds of texts, representing the different cultures that coexist in modern society – also on the religious level. We should therefore avoid teaching methods where pupils only works with figurative images, i.e. non-verbal expressions of Cristianity and Eastern religions, but not of Judaism or Islam. Instead, they should learn to know the artistic expressions of *all* religions. On the one hand, all religions should be treated in the same way in school, on the other, we cannot read geomeric art in exactly the same way as we read figurative art.

I will conclude this paper by proposing that all pupils meet this art. The teachers should help them to understand their possible meanings or functions. The youngest pupils may (regardless of religious background) easily understand how the ornaments are drawing attention to important places by beautifying them. They may also go through a gradually more explicit reading, where geometric patterns signalize order and rationality, the color blue is associated with heaven, and the flowers with life. It should then be stressed that the art can be studied without ascribing meanings like these to it. Geometry is pure mathematic, and it is not necessary to understand it as something more than that.

The next group of pupils are between ten and twelve, and are able to understand and eventually discuss the different effects Islamic aesthetes have ascribed to the geometric patterns. It are no normative readings, so they may disagree, propose other effects, and so on. Some of them may find it interesting to create their own geometrical patterns, eventually developed into arabesques (Melhus and Winje 2009).

It is, however, more discussable to read the ornaments in a numerological or another explicit way. It might be interesting and fun for the eldest pupils (13-15 years), and they may be fascinated by hidden meanings and breaking of codes. For some pupils and their families, however, working with religious art in this way may be regarded as disrespectful. Yet they should learn about esotericism and numerology in a historical context, and related to *all* religions, not only Islam.

It is necessary to see the meaning or meanings in this art, but the more maximalist a reading are, the more controversial it may be.

Here the paper ends, even if I have some more thoughts I would like to share, especially about ascribing meaning to formal elements, such as framing, the relation between centre and periphery, and location along axes (Kress/Leeuwen 2006).

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ABSTRACT

In the first part of this paper at the IARTEM Conference 2015, I will present and discuss different ways of symbolic reading of Islamic ornaments. They are mainly derived from academic writings by Muslim researchers, and may be categorized as more or less minimal or maximal, depending on the degree of ascribing explicit meaning to geometric figures and stylized flowers. For some writers, the meaning of ornaments is first and foremost functional. Their task is to embellish places and artefacts of religious importance, or to affect the viewer in some way. Through history, others have translated geometric forms into numbers, letters and words (i.e. numerological readings).

Despite some exceptions, Islamic, religious art is without figuration, and therefore may be presented as limited and poor, without narrative or beautifying images. On the other hand, when geometry is understood as a religious language, it may open for new understandings of both mathematic and Islam.

The study of ornamental art as text leads to the study of more complex quibla-walls, as well as walls inside churches, temples and synagogues. In reading walls and buildings with or without religious importance, we may take advantage of contemporary views on multimodality and composition.

I will sort the different readings in seven categories, and comment them in regard to the teaching of religions in Norwegian school (i.e. leaning about religions, not learning to accept or follow them).