Islamic art and architecture

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works of art and architecture created in countries where Islam has been dominant and embodying Muslim precepts in its themes.

Background

In the century after the death (A.D. 632) of the prophet Muhammad, his Arab followers spread his teachings through Egypt and N Africa, as far west as Spain, and as far east as Sassanid Persia. Because of their rapid expansion and the paucity of the earlier artistic heritage of the Arabian Peninsula, the Muslims derived their unique style from synthesizing the arts of the Byzantines, the Copts, the Romans, and the Sassanids. The great strength of Islamic art as a whole lies in its ability to synthesize native design elements with imported ones.

Abstract decoration of the surface is an important factor in every work of Islamic art and architecture, whether large or small. Curving and often interlaced lines, of which the arabesque is a typical example, and the use of brilliant colors characterize almost all of the finest productions, which are of greatly varied styles. Islamic art eschews the realistic representation of human beings and animals, and its floral designs are extremely distant from their original models. While the prohibition against depicting living forms is not contained in the Qur’an, it is widely thought that the non-representational character of Islamic ornament has its source in the traditional theological prohibition against imitating God’s works.

Architecture

The earliest architectural monument of Islam that retains most of its original form is the Dome of the Rock (Qubbat al-Sakhrah) in Jerusalem, constructed in 691–92 on the site of the Jewish Second Temple. Muslims believe it to be the spot from which Muhammad ascended to heaven. It has mosaics depicting scrolling vines and flowers, jewels, and crowns in greens, blues, and gold. Similar in some aspects is the later Great Mosque of Damascus (built c.705–14) which was built by Al Walid over what was originally a Roman temple. The interior walls have stone mosaics that depict crowns, fantastic plants, realistic trees, and even empty towns. This is thought to represent Paradise for the faithful Muslim. Both the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem and the great Mosque of Damascus used the Syrian cut-stone technique of building and popularized the use of the dome (see mosque).

The 8th-century desert palace Khirbat al-Mafjar (in present-day Jordan) reveals a wealth of carved and molded stucco decoration, sculptured stone reliefs, and figural fresco paintings. In 750 the Abbasid dynasty moved the capital east to Baghdad, and from 836 to 892 the Abbasid rulers resided at Samarra. The Great Mosque of Samarra is an important example of the Iraqi hypostyle, noted for its massive size and spectacular minaret. In Iran few Islamic buildings erected before the 10th cent. are still standing. Sassanid building techniques, such as the squinch, were combined with the mosque form (see Persian art and architecture). Sassanid influence is also strong in many Umayyad dynasty residential palaces, built mostly in Syria. The most famous is the 8th-century palace of Mshatta; much of its delicately carved stone facade is now in Berlin.

In the middle of the 8th cent. the last of the Umayyads escaped to Spain and refounded his dynasty
there. The great Mosque of Córdoba was begun in 785 and is famous for its rows of double-tiered arches. The mosque was extended three times. The culture of Islamic Spain reached its apogee in Moorish art and architecture. Faiance and lacy pierced-stone screens are the hallmarks of its decoration. The same style prevails in N Africa and is seen at its best in Fès, Morocco, where much elaborately carved wood is used. The Mudéjar style of Spain, employed throughout the 18th cent. and influential until much later, is based on this architecture.

Late in the 9th cent. the governor of Egypt, Ibn Tulun, initiated the high period of Egypto-Islamic art with the building of his famous mosque in Cairo. In the 10th cent. the Fatimids introduced into Egypt the decorative stalactite ceiling from Iran and placed emphasis on decorative flat moldings. The most important Fatimid buildings are the Cairo mosques of al-Azhar and al-Aqmar. The cruciform Mosque of Hasanin Cairo, built by a Mamluk sultan in 1536, still reflects Persian influence.

In India a distinct style, preserved mainly in architecture, developed after the Delhi Sultanate was established (1192). This art made extensive use of stone and reflected Indian adaptation to Islam rule, until Mughal art replaced it in the 17th cent. (see Mughal art and architecture). The square Char Minar of Hyderbad (1591) with large arches, arcades, and minarets is typical.

In Turkey the mosque form was also derived from Persia, as was most Turkish art. The great Byzantine church of Hagia Sophia, adapted for use as a mosque, greatly influenced Turkish architects. The most famous among these is Sinan, chief architect in the Ottoman court from 1539 until his death in 1588. He constructed or designed most of Sulayman I's buildings, the most noted of which is his mosque (c.1557) in İstanbul, where he is buried. It has four minarets and stained-glass windows flanking the mihrab. The mosque (1614) of Sultan Ahmed I is similarly distinguished by its dome lit by numerous windows, and wall surfaces covered with green and blue tiles. Fine ornate buildings were erected in Turkey until the middle of the 17th cent.

The Decorative Arts

Among the ceramic types are unglazed wares, molded pieces with the lead glaze of Hellenistic tradition, and most famous, the lusterware fragments. In 9th-century Islam the technique of tin-glazed ware was perfected. Lusterware was imported into Egypt and later made there. The Great Mosque of Al Qayrawan (c.862) is decorated with square luster tiles set in a lozenge pattern around the pierced marble prayer niche. The 9th cent. also saw the development of metalwork in a distinctive and powerful style under the Umayyads in Egypt. Skilled craftsmanship can be seen in rock-crystal carving, a continuation of Sassanid art, using floral motifs that became increasingly abstract.

From the 10th to the mid-13th cent. great strides were made in the arts; Egypt became a center of these arts and of calligraphy, which was of prime importance all over the Islamic world. Arabic script represents the expression of the will and strength of Allah, and as such is regarded as sacred by the faithful. One of Islam's most renowned calligraphers was Ibn Muqlah (d. 940) of Baghdad who invented the six most prominent cursive scripts. Certain scripts were favored for specific uses, such as Kufic for copying the Qur'an. The Kufic script, often executed in gold on parchment, was further animated by floral interlaces. Calligraphy was not used exclusively for two-dimensional works but also appears in architectural ornament, ceramics, textiles and metalwork. During this period calligraphy, bookbinding, papermaking, and illumination were developed and were held in highest esteem throughout Islam. The sloping cursive script most commonly used today, Nastaliq, was perfected in the 15th cent.
Before the 13th cent. rugs, silks, linens, and brocades were produced throughout the Islamic world, but only fragments remain; the same is true of delicate and highly refined carvings in wood and ivory. Early in the 13th cent. a school of secular manuscript painting arose in the Baghdad area. The pictures may be divided into two types: those that illustrate scientific works, descending directly from late Hellenistic models, and those that illustrate anecdotal tales and whose miniatures display lively detail.

In the middle of the 13th cent. the Mongol invasions devastated Iran and deeply scarred all Islam as far west as the Mediterranean Sea. However, after a period of acclimatization, the Chinese taste and artifacts imported by the Mongols revitalized the art of Iran, where book illustration reached great heights. With the arrival of the Seljuks in Iran came a new ceramic technique, fritware, similar to certain Chinese porcelains. The unique qualities of this ware enabled artists to create richly colored glazes such as deep blues from cobalt and turquoise from copper. Syria and Iraq continued to manufacture fine black-and-turquoise pottery. Textiles and rugs of great beauty were again manufactured throughout Islam, and in the 15th cent. Mamluk carpets were renowned for their designs of great complexity and their asymmetrical knots. Turkish ceramics reached their peak in the “Iznik” ware of the 16th and 17th cent. Distinctive green tiles are frequently used in the decoration of Turkish architecture.

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