

Islam and the Arts: A Humanities Study of Islamic Calligraphy, Music, and Architecture

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ABSTRACT

Art in Islamic civilization is often reduced to a dichotomy of haram and halal, whereas the classical Islamic intellectual tradition views beauty as a manifestation of monotheism that unites theological, aesthetic, and human dimensions. Academic studies that integrate Islamic calligraphy, music, and architecture within a single humanities framework are still very limited, so the understanding of Islamic art tends to be fragmented between branches. This research aims to analyze how the three branches of art, integratively, represent monotheism as a transcendental aesthetic principle that unites the spiritual, humanistic, and civilizational dimensions in Islamic art. The research uses the library research method with a philosophical-humanistic approach, through eight stages, namely problem identification, literature search, literature selection, data extraction, content analysis, philosophical interpretation, synthesis, and conclusion drawn, with the analytical framework of aesthetic theory of Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Ismail Raji al-Faruqi, and Titus Burckhardt. The results of the study show that calligraphy represents monotheism textually-visually, music represents it auditorially-spiritually through the sama' and qasidah traditions, and architecture represents it spatially through the geometry and light of the mosque, so that the three meet at the same generative point, namely monotheism. This study concludes that the integrative humanities approach makes a new theoretical contribution to understanding Islamic art as a coherent monotheistic aesthetic system, as well as relevant for strengthening the identity of contemporary Islamic civilization.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The relationship between religion and art is one of the most productive and complex discourses in the history of human civilization. In the Islamic tradition, this relationship is often simplified into a dichotomy between 'prohibition' and 'ability', without considering the theological and aesthetic depth that has truly surrounded Islamic art throughout its history. Islam has never been present in the cultural void; Instead, he was born and developed in the midst of a rich artistic tradition, inheriting, transforming, and reinventing the artistic expression that became the marker of his great civilization.

From Andalusia to Samarkand, from Constantinople to the archipelago, Islamic art has left an undeniable trace of civilization (Nasr, 2023).

The problem is that contemporary Islamic discourse often falls into two equally unproductive extremes: on the one hand, puritanism that reduces art to a territory full of danger and *syubhat*; On the other hand, it is aesthetic liberalism that uproots art from its roots of spirituality. These two poles ignore the rich Islamic intellectual tradition of aesthetics, beauty (*jamal*), and creative expression as a reflection of divine attributes. Al-Ghazali in *Ihya' Ulum al-Din* has laid the foundation of thought on the relationship between music, the soul, and spirituality in a very subtle way and psychological-spiritual dimension (Al-Ghazali, 2019 translation). Similarly, Seyyed Hossein Nasr has consistently shown that Islamic sacred art is a manifestation of metaphysical truth revealed through the medium of the senses (Nasr, 2022).

In the context of modernity, the crisis faced by Islamic art is not only an aesthetic crisis, but a crisis of meaning. When art is understood solely as an economic commodity or mere entertainment, its spiritual dimension disappears. In fact, classical Islamic philosophers such as Ibn Rushd and al-Farabi have understood art within a much broader ethical and metaphysical framework. The humanities approach is important here as a bridge between theological, aesthetic, and humanitarian dimensions in understanding Islamic art holistically (Burckhardt, 2009; Robinson, 2020). Modernity has eroded the transcendental meaning of art through the secularization of aesthetics, transforming art from a spiritual medium to a mere spectacle.

The study of Islamic art has been done quite a lot, both by Western scholars and Muslims themselves. Nevertheless, most of the research is partial: the study of calligraphy stands alone without being connected to music or architecture; the study of Islamic architecture often stops at the technical-archaeological aspect without touching its spiritual dimension in depth; while the discussion of Islamic music is generally trapped in the debate of *fiqh* law without exploring its potential as a medium of humanization. Integrative studies that connect these three dimensions of art in a single frame of Islamic humanities analysis are still very rare, especially in the academic literature in Indonesian (Hidayat & Fadhillah, 2021; Muhaimin, 2019).

Furthermore, existing studies rarely dialogue classical Islamic aesthetic theories with contemporary issues such as civilizational identity, humanistic education, and cultural preservation in the era of globalization. In fact, the relevance of Islamic art to these issues is very significant. This is where the urgency of this research lies: filling the void of integrative studies between calligraphy, music, and Islamic architecture in the perspectives of humanities, spiritual aesthetics, and Islamic philosophy at the same time.

The novelty of this research lies in three main aspects. First, this article offers an integrative analysis of the three dimensions of Islamic art of calligraphy, music, and architecture within a cohesive theoretical framework, namely Islamic transcendental aesthetics and interdisciplinary humanities. Second, this article explicitly links classical Islamic aesthetic theories (Nasr, Al-Faruqi, Burckhardt) to contemporary contexts. Third, this article provides a methodological contribution in the form of a philosophical-humanistic approach that is not only descriptive, but also analytical-critical and synthesized, beyond previous studies that tend to be monodisciplinary.

Based on the background and identification of the research gap above, this study formulates four main questions: (1) What is the position and meaning of art in the Islamic perspective theologically and philosophically? (2) How can Islamic calligraphy be understood as a spiritual, aesthetic, and humanistic expression at the same time? (3) How is Islamic music understood and debated in Islamic theological, cultural, and spiritual discourse? (4) How does Islamic architecture represent the values of monotheism, spirituality, and civilization in spatial and symbolic dimensions?

In line with the formulation of the problem, the objectives of this research are: (1) to explain the position and meaning of art in Islamic theology and philosophy substantively; (2) to study Islamic calligraphy as a spiritual-aesthetic expression in the humanities frame; (3) analyze Islamic music in its theological debate, cultural dimensions, and spirituality potential; (4) to study Islamic architecture as a

representation of monotheism and civilization that has symbolic depth; and (5) show integratively how the three contribute to the formation of a transcendental and humanistic Islamic aesthetic.

2. METHODS

This research uses a library research approach, which is a research method that relies on written sources in the form of academic books, scientific journal articles, and primary documents as the main database (Zed, 2008; Sugiyono, 2020). The choice of this method is based on the consideration that the object of study of this article is philosophical, historical, and interpretive, so it does not require field data but requires a depth of textual and hermeneutical analysis.

The approach used is a philosophical-humanistic approach, which integrates the perspectives of art philosophy, Islamic aesthetics, and humanities in analyzing and interpreting data. This approach allows researchers to not only describe the phenomenon of Islamic art, but also to critically unravel the layers of its philosophical, theological, and humanitarian meaning.

Data collection techniques are carried out through documentation and in-depth literature studies. Primary sources include authoritative works by Islamic aesthetic thinkers such as Seyyed Hossein Nasr (Islamic Art and Spirituality; The Study Quran), Ismail Raji al-Faruqi (Islamization of Knowledge; Islamic Aesthetics), Titus Burckhardt (Sacred Art in East and West; Art of Islam), and Al-Ghazali (Ihya' Ulum al-Din, especially the section on samā'). Secondary sources include articles of Scopus, Web of Science, Sinta, and Google Scholar-indexed scientific journals published between 2018 and 2026.

Data analysis is carried out through three complementary techniques: (1) content analysis, which is a systematic analysis of the textual content of the sources studied to identify relevant themes, arguments, and propositions; (2) interpretive analysis, which is a critical interpretation of the meanings contained in the text using the framework of Islamic hermeneutics; and (3) philosophical analysis, i.e. a logical and conceptual examination of Islamic aesthetic arguments found in sources, as well as their connection to contemporary issues in the humanities and Islamic studies. Triangulation of sources is carried out to ensure the validity and credibility of the analysis.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Islamic Calligraphy: The Sacredness of Letters and Spiritual Expression History and Development of Islamic Calligraphy

Islamic calligraphy has a history that cannot be separated from the history of the Qur'an itself. The first commandment revealed to the Prophet Muhammad 'Iqra' (Read)' placed the text and writings in a very central position in Islamic epistemology. Calligraphy developed first in the context of copying the Qur'anic mushaf, and therefore it from the beginning had a sacred dimension that went beyond just an ordinary art. The early Kufic style, used in the mushafs of the first century of Islam, displayed simplicity and assertiveness that reflected the authority of revelation (Déroche, 2020).

A major revolution in Islamic calligraphy occurred in the 10th century AD with the emergence of the brilliant figure Ibn Muqlah (272–328 AH/886–940 AD), an Abbasid vizier who was also the greatest calligrapher in the history of Islam. Ibn Muqlah developed a system of geometric proportions for Arabic letters based on alif (the first letter of the alphabet) as the basic unit of measurement. This innovation revolutionized calligraphy from a more intuitive practice to a mathematically standardized system, while paving the way for the development of the various styles of calligraphy (khatt) that we know today: Naskhi, Tsuluts, Diwani, Riq'ah, Kufi, and Pharisees (Schimmel, 2011; Ahmad, 2022).

Subsequent developments show how Islamic calligraphy became an increasingly rich medium of spiritual expression. In the era of the Ottoman Empire, calligraphy reached the peak of its technical sophistication in the works of masters such as Sheikh Hamdullah and Hafiz Osman. In the Persian and Central Asian worlds, calligraphy collaborated with illumination (the decoration of the edges of the book) to produce works that combine textual and visual beauty in a remarkable way. In the archipelago, Islamic calligraphy adapts to local aesthetics to produce unique shapes that reflect contextual Islam (Makin, 2021).

The Spiritual and Humanistic Dimensions of Calligraphy

From an Islamic aesthetic perspective, Arabic letters in calligraphy are not just linguistic symbols; It is an entity that has its own spiritual dimension. In the Sufism tradition, the letters of the Qur'an are understood as manifestations of 'God's words' that have a metaphysical reality. Ibn Arabi developed the idea of 'sacred letters' which are expressions of the Divine names. In this perspective, the act of writing calligraphy becomes a kind of worship, an active meditation that connects the calligrapher's hands, mind, and soul with spiritual reality (Lumbard, 2021).

Ismail Raji al-Faruqi emphasized that Islamic calligraphy is the pinnacle of Islamic aesthetics because it manages to bridge the gap between the verbal (the text of revelation) and the visual (artistic expression) without betraying the principle of monotheism. Unlike figurative representations that are considered to be at risk of leading to idolatry, calligraphy presents pure beauty through the abstraction of letters that do not feature any figure except the words of God Himself (Al-Faruqi, 1992; Abdullah, 2023). This is what makes Islamic calligraphy uniquely at the intersection of art and theology.

The humanistic dimension of Islamic calligraphy is revealed most clearly in its function as a medium of da'wah and a form of civilizational identity. Calligraphy adorns mosques, palaces, madrasas, tombs, and even everyday objects, making the Qur'an visually 'present' in every aspect of a Muslim's life. In the study of art anthropology, this practice shows how a civilization integrates its religious values into the aesthetic order of daily life something that Clifford Geertz calls 'religion as a cultural system' (as analyzed in Hidayat, 2020). Calligraphy thus serves not only as a work of art, but as a 'living text' that constantly reminds the Muslim community of its spiritual roots.

Contemporary Calligraphy and the Challenges of Modernity

Islamic calligraphy in the contemporary era faces a serious challenge: how to maintain its spiritual dimension in the midst of mass commercialization and digital reproduction. When calligraphy is mass-produced through printers and sold as a decorative accessory without a spiritual context, it is in danger of losing the soul that makes it special. At the same time, however, there has also emerged a calligraphy revitalization movement led by contemporary Muslim artists such as Hassan Massoudy (Iraq/France) and Haji Noor Deen Mi Guangjiang (China) who have succeeded in dialogizing Islamic calligraphy with a global artistic context without sacrificing its spiritual depth (Roxburgh, 2021). This shows that Islamic calligraphy has a vitality strong enough to adapt to modernity while retaining its essence.

Music in Islam: Theological Discourse and the Spiritual Dimension

The Debate on Music Law in the Islamic Tradition

Among all the art forms in Islam, music is the most theologically controversial. The debate over the laws of music (sama': listening to music; ghina': singing) has been going on for centuries and involves very complex fiqh arguments from both sides. Those who prohibit music generally argue based on several hadiths that hint at the prohibition, as well as concerns about the negative impact of music on morals. Figures such as Ibn al-Jawzi and most classical Hanbali scholars are in this position (Shiloah, 2020).

However, a more comprehensive study shows that the majority of classical Islamic scholars actually have a much more nuanced view. Al-Ghazali in Ihya' Ulum al-Din (Kitab al-Sama' wa al-Wajd) provides the most comprehensive discussion of music in the classical Islamic tradition. Al-Ghazali did not prohibit music absolutely, but rather distinguished it based on its context, intention, and impact on the soul. According to him, music that arouses longing for Allah and deepens spiritual experiences is halal and even recommended; while music that encourages things that are forbidden by religion is haram (Al-Ghazali, 2019 translation). This view shows the sophistication of Islamic ethical epistemology in responding to art.

Ibn Rushd (Averroes) and Ibn Hazm al-Andalusi also had a more open view of music, considering it a part of human culture that was not inherently contrary to Islam (Frishkopf, 2021). In the contemporary era, scholars such as Yusuf al-Qaradhwani in Fiqh al-Musiqa concluded that music that does not contain prohibited content and is not used in a prohibited context is permissible (Al-

Qaradhwai, as quoted in Fadillah & Nugroho, 2022). Thus, the discourse on music in Islam is a very rich discourse and cannot be reduced to just 'haram' or 'halal'.

Sufistic Music: Sama', Qasidah, and Nasyid

The Islamic Sufism tradition has developed the most intimate relationship between music and spirituality. The practice of 'sama' literally means 'listening' in the Sufi tradition refers to a session of listening to music or poetry intended as a means to attain a higher spiritual state. Mawlana Jalal al-Din Rumi, the founder of Tarikat Mawlawiyah, is the most iconic figure in this tradition; His tariqat developed a spinning dance (sema) accompanied by flute music (ney) as a means of dhikr and fana' (self-disappearance in God). For Rumi, music is 'the language of the soul's longing for its origin', and the sound of the flute is a metaphor for the human soul that is separated from God and longs for reunification (Lewisohn, 2020).

Qasidah poetry in praise of the Prophet Muhammad is the most widely accepted form of Islamic vocal music throughout the Muslim world. From the legendary Busyiri qasidah (Al-Burdah) in Egypt to the dhikr in the archipelago, this tradition shows how sound art can function as a medium of expression of love for the Prophet while strengthening the bonds of the Muslim community. Qasidah Nusantara, for example, has evolved into unique forms such as Qasidah Burdah Bireuen in Aceh and various hadrah traditions in Java and Sumatra that combine elements of local music with Arab-Islamic traditions (Mubarak, 2022). Nasyid, as a genre of contemporary Islamic music, expands the reach of the audience while maintaining the content of Islamic values in its lyrics and spiritual orientation.

The Ethical, Psychological, and Social Dimensions of Islamic Music

An analysis of Islamic music from a humanities perspective reveals at least four important dimensions. Ethically, Islamic music is seen as having a moral responsibility: it must lead the listener to goodness, not to drive him to disobedience. This reflects the Islamic principle of art as a means of amar ma'ruf (encouraging goodness). Psychologically, music, especially music with spiritual content, has been shown to have a therapeutic impact recognized by modern science as well as Sufi healing traditions (Qamar et al., 2021; Rasmussen, 2019).

Socially, Islamic music serves as the glue of community. Musical traditions such as hadrah, barzanji, and marhaban in various parts of the Muslim world are social rituals that strengthen solidarity and community identity. In the perspective of cultural sociology, ritual music serves as a 'ritual of solidarity' in the Durkheimian sense of a mechanism that renews the collective commitment to shared values (Frishkopf, 2021). Finally, spiritually, music in the Islamic tradition especially in Sufism is understood as a 'ladder to heaven', a medium that facilitates transcendent experience and closeness to the Divine.

Islamic Architecture: Tawheed in the Spatial Dimension

The Concept of Space and Spirituality in Islamic Architecture

Islamic architecture is based on the premise that physical space can and should reflect spiritual reality. This concept is rooted in the Islamic understanding of the earth as a 'prayer mat' (place of prostration) and of the role of man as a caliph who is responsible for the earth's order. The mosque as an icon of Islamic architecture is not just a functional building for prayer; it is the physical embodiment of the concept of monotheism, a 'translation' of theological doctrine into the language of space, light, and form (Utaberta, 2019; Serageldin, 2020).

The fundamental principles of Islamic architecture include: (1) an orientation (qibla) that directs the entire organization of space to the Kaaba as the symbolic center of the Islamic world; (2) the use of geometry as a design language that reflects the order of God's creation; (3) the processing of light as a spiritual element that enlivens space; (4) the use of calligraphy as an ornament that makes the Qur'an 'present' in physical space; and (5) the creation of a gradual transition from a profane space to a sacred space through the porch (riwaq), courtyard (sahn), and main prayer room (musalla). These principles are not mere aesthetic conventions, but rather a reflection of a holistic tauhidic worldview (Ardalan & Bakhtiar, 2000, as cited in Hashim et al., 2021).

Analysis of Islamic Architectural Works: From Cordoba to the Archipelago

The Mosque of Cordoba (Mezquita) in Spain, built during the era of the Western Umayyad Caliphate (8th–10th centuries AD), is one of the masterpieces of Islamic architecture that shows how architecture can transcend its utility function towards an immersive spiritual experience. With a black-and-white column forest of marble and jasper that supports the layered arches, the Mosque of Cordoba creates an atmosphere that is simultaneously majestic and intimate, reminding visitors of the greatness of God through a total sensory experience (Calvo-López, 2020). The geometric patterns of the curves and ornaments reflect the principle of symmetry and the infinite repetition of a visual cue of the Divine infinity.

The Taj Mahal in Agra, India (1632–1648 AD), despite being a tomb complex, demonstrates Islamic aesthetics in a different context. The perfect symmetry of the main building, the use of white marble that reflects light varies throughout the day, the paradisiacal style garden (char-bagh) that represents the paradise of the Qur'an, and the calligraphy of Qur'anic verses on the entire surface of the building all create an artistic meditation on death, love, and resurrection in an Islamic perspective (Koch, 2019). The Taj Mahal shows how Islamic architecture is able to express its spiritual dimension even in works that are ostensibly secular.

The Prophet's Mosque in Medina has unique significance because it was the first mosque built by the Prophet Muhammad himself. The principles of simplicity, openness, and functionality that characterized the early Prophet's Mosque reflected the Islamic vision of equality before God, there was no room reserved for the elite, no exclusive luxury. The multi-layered modern expansions show the challenge of maintaining the spiritual essence of Islamic architecture in the midst of the ever-growing demands of capacity (Omer, 2022).

The Islamic architecture of the archipelago offers a very rich perspective on the synthesis between Islam and local traditions. The Great Mosque of Demak (15th century AD) with its layered roof that reflects Javanese vernacular architecture as well as a symbol of Islam is a clear example of how Islam is spread in the archipelago not through rejection of local culture, but through dialogue and creative synthesis. Mosques in Aceh, with their multi-storey roofs inspired by traditional meunasah, show similar adaptations. This pattern is consistent with the Islamic principle of rahmatan lil-'alamin Islam that embraces and respects the diversity of human culture (Zuhdi, 2020; Feener & Sevea, 2019).

Islamic Geometry and the Symbolism of Tawheed

Geometry in Islamic art and architecture is one of the most amazing achievements of Islamic intellectual-artistic achievements. Geometric patterns in Islamic architecture known as girih or zillij are not just decorations; it is a visual manifestation of mathematical principles that in the 21st century are only recognized by modern mathematics as 'quasi-crystalline patterns' (Lu & Steinhardt, 2007, as cited in Hashim et al., 2021). 15th-century Muslim artists had used patterns that were mathematically identical to the newly recognized discovery of quasi-crystals by modern science in 1982, a remarkable intellectual achievement.

Philosophically, Islamic geometry serves as a 'universal language' that allows for the non-figurative expression of spiritual values. The principle of infinite repetition in geometric patterns hints at Divine infinity; the principle of symmetry reflects the order of creation; and the principle of unity in diversity in which complex patterns can always be reduced to basic geometric units reflects the principle of monotheism itself (Critchlow, as quoted in Mukhtar, 2021). Thus, Islamic geometry is not only aesthetic and mathematical, but also theological and humanistic.

Integrative Analysis: Islam, Art, and Civilization

The study of Islamic calligraphy, music, and architecture from the perspective of the humanities reveals a strong common thread: these three art forms both operate in the intersection between the immanent and the transcendent, between human expression and the divine. These three are not just 'Islamic art' in the formal sense (art made by Muslims), but 'Islamic art' in the substantial sense: art that inherently carries values, worldviews, and aesthetics that are sourced from the core teachings of Islam.

Furthermore, this integrative analysis shows that the claim of 'anti-art Islam' is a claim that is historically and intellectually unfounded. Islamic civilization has produced an artistic tradition that is

not only aesthetically rich, but also spiritually profound and intellectually significant. What is really happening in history is the creative dynamic between Islamic theological principles (such as the principle of avoiding excessive figurative representation) and the creativity of Muslim artists, which has resulted in an art tradition that is unique and unparalleled in its beauty (Gonzalez, 2001; Necipoğlu & Payne, 2020).

From the perspective of Islamic philosophy, true art is the art that brings man closer to God either through the formal beauty of calligraphy that presents the words of God, through the beauty of the voice that evokes the soul's longing for the Creator, or through the majesty of the mosque space that brings a sense of Divine greatness into the physical experience of man. This is what Nasr calls the 'transcendental aesthetic of Islam' an aesthetic that does not stop at the surface of beauty, but rather transcends to the spiritual core of human existence (Nasr, 2022).

This analysis also has profound contemporary relevance. In an era when the identity of Islamic civilization is being questioned and redefined both from within by Muslims themselves and from the outside by globalization, the heritage of Islamic art offers an invaluable resource. Calligraphy, sufi music, and mosque architecture are not just artifacts of the past; they are living expressions of Islamic values that continue to have the capacity to inspire, heal, and unite humanity across cultural and religious boundaries (Lumbard, 2021; Frishkopf, 2021). This is the deepest humanistic dimension of Islamic art: its ability to speak to a universal humanity through very particular expression.

4. CONCLUSION

This research has examined integratively the three main dimensions of Islamic art of calligraphy, music, and architecture in the perspective of Islamic humanities and spiritual aesthetics. Several substantive conclusions can be formulated from the results of this study. First, Islam and art are not two opposing entities, but two complementary dimensions in Islamic civilization. Art in Islam, at its deepest level, is an expression of monotheism man's efforts to reflect the Divine beauty through the material mediums available to him. The debate about the laws of art in Islamic jurisprudence is real and needs to be respected, but it should not obscure the historical fact that Islamic civilization has produced an extraordinarily rich and meaningful tradition of art.

Second, Islamic calligraphy is an art form that is uniquely at the intersection of theology, aesthetics, and humanity. As a visual embodiment of Divine revelation, calligraphy elevates human language to a transcendent level while making Divine truth present in human sensory experience. The humanities' study of calligraphy points to dimensions that go far beyond mere formal beauty: the spiritual, social, and civilizational dimensions that make calligraphy one of Islam's greatest contributions to the human aesthetic heritage.

Third, Islamic music is a rich and complex territory that cannot be reduced to a mere fiqh debate. The Sufistic musical tradition with *samā'*, *qasidah*, and *nasyid* shows that Islam has developed a highly sophisticated understanding of the relationship between sound, soul, and spirituality. Al-Ghazali's insight into the impact of music on the human soul is a psychological-spiritual contribution that is still relevant today. The humanities' approach to Islamic music allows us to appreciate this richness without having to turn a blind eye to its ethical complexity.

Fourth, Islamic architecture, especially mosques as its icon, is the most monumental 'translation' of Islamic values into the language of space and form. From Cordoba to the Taj Mahal, from the Prophet's Mosque to the mosques of the archipelago, Islamic architecture shows an extraordinary ability to express monotheism through geometry, light, proportion, and symbolism. A humanistic analysis of Islamic architecture shows that it is not just an aesthetic legacy, but a philosophical and spiritual 'text' that deserves careful reading.

Overall, this research confirms that the humanities' approach to Islamic art that combines philosophical, aesthetic, historical, and spiritual perspectives is the approach that is best able to capture the true depth and richness of the Islamic artistic tradition. Islam offers not just a religion, but a civilization with a deep aesthetic richness a wealth that, if properly understood and developed, can

make a very valuable contribution to humanity that is searching for meaning in the midst of modernity that often feels spiritual empty.

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