

REFLECTIONS OF FAITH (*'AQĪDAH*) ON ARTS: A COMPARATIVE ANALYTICAL STUDY ON ISLAMIC AND WESTERN ARTS

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Abstract

The study attempts to explore the philosophical, intellectual view of Islamic art that is based on monotheism (*tawhīd*), and the reflections of *'aqīdah* on it. The study foundationally examines and compares the structures of art within Western mindsets, which stem from pagan embodiments, such as the Greeks and contemporary Darwinism. The study also comes to respond to those who claim that Islamic art stands at the limits of ornamental decorations, or that Islamic art is nothing but a progression of Hellenistic Roman art. The analytical method was employed to examine intellectual texts and their reflections on art in its applied form. A comparative approach is also used in comparing concepts from the Islamic *'Aqīdah* with other theologies and their reflections on art. This study concluded that Islamic art stems from the spirit of *tawhīd*, consistent with the harmony and oneness of existence. Additionally, Islam was found to be a liberation for art, as it puts artists in the position of choice rather than restricting them in a specific artistic formula as in other ideologies. On the other hand, the study also reveals that the epistemological

theory of Western art emerges from a pagan ground or an atheist thought, since it is unable to comprehend the metaphysical world. As a result, nature has entered the list of 'sanctities' in the perception of some of the Greek artists and philosophers, which in turn reflected on the purpose of art and its aesthetic role in existence.

Keywords: *Tawhīd*; *'Aqīdah*; Western art; Islamic art; paganism; atheism.

Khulasah

Makalah ini mengutarakan pandangan falsafah dan intelektual seni Islam berdasarkan tauhid dan refleksi akidah. Ia secara asasnya mengkaji dan membandingkan struktur seni dalam pemikiran Barat yang berasal dari pemikiran pagan, seperti orang Yunani serta Darwinisme kontemporari. Kajian ini juga sebagai respons kepada mereka yang mendakwa bahawa seni Islam terbatas kepada dekorasi hiasan, dan ia tidak lain adalah hasil kemajuan seni Helenistik Rom. Kaedah analisis digunakan untuk meneliti teks akademik dan refleksi penulis terhadap seni dalam bentuk yang diterapkan. Pendekatan perbandingan juga digunakan dalam membandingkan konsep akidah Islam dengan teologi yang lain dan refleksi mereka terhadap seni. Boleh dirumuskan bahawa seni Islam berasaskan tauhid, selaras dengan keharmonian dan kesatuan wujud. Selain itu, Islam tidak seperti ideologi lain, memberi kebebasan kepada seni, kerana memberi kebebasan kepada seniman untuk memilih dan bukannya menyekat mereka dalam menformulasi seni tertentu. Di samping itu, kajian ini juga menjelaskan bahawa teori epistemologi seni Barat muncul daripada pemikiran pagan dan ateis kerana tidak dapat mencapai aspek metafizik. Natiujahnya, alam (fizikal) telah dianggap suci dalam persepsi seniman dan ahli falsafah Yunani yang akhirnya tercermin dalam tujuan seni dan peranan estetik dalam kewujudan.

Kata kunci: Tauhid; akidah; kesenian Barat; kesenian Islam; paganisme; ateisme.

Introduction

Art, beauty, and creativity are nothing but mirrors that reflect the content of any civilizational bloc, and architecture is a civilizational force and an open book in which people record their history and achievements. Art, beauty, and creativity in Islamic thought were never far from this; rather, Islam has been influential and inspiring to other civilizations, nations and peoples, with its conception of *tawhīd* in its view of existence.¹

Art, beauty, and creativity are nothing but a human characteristic that Allah has bestowed upon mankind distinguishably without any other creatures. Spider webs, ant nests, and beehives emanate from an undeveloped instinctive mind through instantaneous memory, thus, those will remain as they were outside the circle of time. On the other hand, man has a 'creative' mind that is developed based on his responsibility. Ibn 'Āshūr says:

“He [Allah] has commanded [mankind] to walk around in earth because walking brings the viewer to many sightings from different lands with their mountains, rivers and contents, and he passes by the homes of nations, present and past, and sees many things and conditions that he does not see in usual bases”.²

The emergence of Islamic art from the spirit of *tawhīd* did not make it far from existence, of which art is a part, but made harmony and convergence rather than dissonance and divergence. *Tawhīd* did not command

¹ Muḥammad 'Ābid al-Jabrī, *Naḥn wa-al-Turāth Qirā'āt Mu'āṣirah fī Turāthinā al-Falsafī* (Beirut: al-Markaz al-Thaqāfī al-'Arabī, 1993), 11; Muḥsin 'Abd al-Ḥamīd, *Tajdīd al-Fikr al-Islāmī* (United States of America: al-Ma'had al-'Ālī li al-Fikr al-Islāmī, 1994), 42.

² Muḥammad al-Tāhir ibn 'Āshūr, *al-Taḥrīr wa al-Tanwīr* (Tūnis: al-Mū'assasah al-Waṭaniyyah li al-Kitāb, 1984), 231.

people to adopt a specific artistic formula like other beliefs and ideologies. Rather, Islam stopped ideologically and behaviourally depraved arts, and placed art in the circle of choice, liberating art and the artist, that free-will human who was placed in the position of choice, in the circle of (do not) that is wider than the circle of (do).

A Muslim artist works in light of *'aqīdah*, not through doctrinal constraints, thanks to the balance between spirituality and materialism in the Islamic vision of art, thus Islam is liberation of art from pagan shackles and priestly captivity. Therefore, this study comes as a contribution in the scholarly edifices calling for arousing the cosmic sciences to spring from the spirit of *tawhīd*, and for reformulating human sciences, putting them on the correct track for human understanding to establish the succession of man guided by divine revelation.

The Problem of the Study

This study sought to explore the issue of the philosophical intellectual conception of art in Islam, that is, to study the theoretical side of art in Islam. Therefore, this study has sprouted outside the framework of Islamic jurisprudence (*ḥalāl* and *ḥarām*) to the circle of doctrinal, intellectual theorizing and its manifestations and imprints on Islamic art, making it come out in harmony and consistence with the role of art in this existence. The study tries to analyse the problems of art in contradictory philosophies, beliefs, and ideologies to define others' philosophies and perceptions of art.

Methodology

The study followed the analytical approach to analyse intellectual texts and their reflections on applied art. Along with the analytical aspect, the study has also engaged a comparative approach by comparing Islamic *'aqīdah* concepts with concepts from other beliefs and their reflections on art in its applied form.

Previous Studies

There are many studies on art with varying strengths and weaknesses on the one hand and engaging different angles of Islamic art on the other. Some of which shed light on the applied side of art, and others are more concerned with the theoretical aspect of Islam's view of art. Since this study is in the philosophical, theoretical aspect, we will list the important studies related to this specific area.

The study of Bishr Fāris, titled "The Secret of Islamic Decoration",³ deals with Islamic engineering art and its philosophical dimensions, inspired by universal values as an Islamic conception. The study of 'Abd al-Fattāḥ Rawās Qal'ah Jī, titled "Introduction to Islamic Aesthetics"⁴ presents premises and rules from the Qur'an and the Sunnah from which the Islamic vision of beauty has emerged. The study also presents the development of aesthetic thought through the ages, starting with Plato and Aristotle, along with the Sumerian, Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian and Pharaonic eras, as well as the views of Muslim philosophers on aesthetic. Finally, the study of Anṣār Muḥammad 'Awaḍ Allāh al-Rifā'ī, titled "Expressive Content of Islamic Art and its Educational Philosophy"⁵ raises the issue of rooting the cultural and civilizational foundations of Islamic art. The study also discusses the aesthetic philosophy⁶ in Islamic art and its impact on aesthetic values.

³ Bishr Fāris, *Sir al-Zakhrāfah al-Islāmiyyah* (Cairo: Maṭba'at al-Ma'had al-Faransī li al-'Āthār al-Sharqiyyah, 1952).

⁴ 'Abd al-Fattāḥ Rawās Qal'ah Jī, *Madkhal ilá 'Ilm al-Jamāl al-Islāmī* (Damascus: Dār Qutaybah, 1411AH).

⁵ Anṣār Muḥammad 'Awaḍ Allāh al-Rifā'ī, "al-Muḥtawá al-Ta'bīrī li al-Fan al-Islāmī wa-Falsafatuh al-Tarbawīyyah" (Master thesis, Faculty of Education, University of Hilwān, 1996).

⁶ The saying that Islamic philosophy is nothing but a distorted form of Aristotle's doctrine and its interpreters has vanished, or almost vanished, and it has become a given that Islamic philosophy has a special entity that distinguishes it from Aristotle's doctrine and the

The Definition of Art in Islamic Thought

According to *al-Mu'jam al-Wasīṭ*, '*fan*' (art) is the verb and '*fannān*' or '*mifan*' (artist) is the subject, meaning he who strongly mastered things; he is a master.⁷ As for the technical, more specialized definition of art: it is the practical application of scientific theories by the means that achieve them, and it is acquired through study and practice; it is a set of special rules that humans use to arouse feelings and emotions, especially the emotion of beauty, such as photography and poetry; it is a skill governed by taste and talent.⁸ We are, therefore, in front of a primal, positive word, yet it has acquired new meanings, necessitated by the nature of development, so the word 'art' has gone through phases that ended with the modern meaning of art today.

If we are to explore this concept, we find that there are multiple premises in defining 'Islamic art' distinguishing it from others and forming its uniqueness. We find that some definitions of art are based on the doer (i.e., the artist), that is, whenever the doer is Muslim, then the act is Islamic and the product is Islamic as well, regardless of its structural qualities and distinctive characteristics.

Another approach is the definition in relation to the spatial dimension, that is, the connection of Islamic art to a specific geographic area. Of those who adopt a similar approach is the Encyclopaedia Britannica, stating that Islamic art is, "the literary, performing, and visual arts of the vast populations of the Middle East and elsewhere that

doctrines of its interpreters, as it contains elements that are not Greek, but carry an established philosophical pattern. See *Mawsū'at Muṣṭalaḥāt al-Fikr al-'Arabī wa al-Islāmī al-Hadīth wa al-Mu'āṣir* (Beirut: Maktabat Lubnān, 2002).

⁷ Academy of the Arabic Language, *al-Mu'jam al-Wasīṭ* (Beirut: Maktabat al-Sharq al-Dawliyyah, 2004), 703.

⁸ *Ibid.*

adopted the Islamic faith from the 7th century onward."⁹ The encyclopaedia states that this term can be expanded to include all forms of art that are produced by Muslims, whether related to religion or not.

While we agree with the first part of the definition, in that Islamic art adopts the Islamic '*aqīdah*' in its conception and philosophy, we disagree that Islamic art is anything that is produced by a Muslim artist regardless of it being related to religion or not, or the nature of its connection to religion. Accepting such broad definition would open the borders for deviant sects, such as Gnosticism and Esotericism, into the domain of Islamic arts. Thusly, we find that the aforementioned doer dimension is a new characteristic that is yet to gain institutionalization.

Another opinion defines Islamic art as the art that emanates from the Islamic conception of existence, and if we examine our studies for definitions of the concept of 'Islamic art', we find a set of opinions supportive to this approach and emerge from it. For instance, Muḥammad Quṭb states: "Islamic art is not necessarily the art that speaks about Islam, but it is the art that paints the image of existence from the angle of the Islamic conception of said existence"¹⁰.

Moreover, 'Imārah's opinion further supports the same view of art, basing it on what art produces, he states that Islamic art "is that art that achieves its purposes in its nation and in humanity, when it is thoroughly coloured with what colors its '*aqīdah*' and with what distinguishes

⁹ Annemarie Schimmel, et al., "Islamic Arts", Encyclopedia Britannica, 4 Jan. 2019, accessed 26 June 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Islamic-arts>.

¹⁰ Muḥammad Quṭb, *Manhaj al-Fan al-Islāmī* (Beirut: Dār al-Shurūq, 1983), 4.

its ideology".¹¹ This is affirmed by Russian critic and writer Vissarion Belinsky, as he sees art as a sibling to moral, and thus if a work of art is truly artistic, it is then moral in the same sense. Belinsky further indicates that the positive artistic image is the one that reflects people's lives, its nobility and beauty, and imposes respect, love, admiration, and sincerity.¹²

Truthfully, it is not easy to neither find nor formulate a comprehensive and conclusive definition of the concept of 'Islamic art'. This is, perhaps, due to reasons concerning the definition of art itself in general, as it is also considered a matter of hardship for multiple reasons, including the lack of consensus on the content of the word 'art' and the failure to define the task, goals, and motives of art. Nonetheless, we can define Islamic art through what distinguishes it from others, and we can sum up these distinguishing features in two principles:

First: Islamic art is an art that is in harmony with human instinct (*fiṭrah*), it does not injure nor disturb it, but rather it contains the *fiṭrah* and flows with it, since the source of both art and the human soul is one.

Second: Islamic art is based on an ideological basis stemming from *tawḥīd*, and, therefore, it is a comprehensive conception of mankind, the universe, and life. Thus, Islamic art is far from pluralism, paganism, myths, illusions, and legends.¹³

¹¹ Muḥammad 'Imārah, *al-Islām wa-al-Funūn al-Jamīlah* (Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 1411AH), 11.

¹² *Al-Mawsū'ah al-Falsafiyah*, trans. Samīr Karam (Beirut: Dār al-Talī'ah, 1974).

¹³ Unfortunately, this issue is not clear to some of those who write about art in Arabic. This is due to the influence of Western thought on them, because of which they consider pagan and Greek arts the source that every artist must emanate from or otherwise he would not be an artist.

The Western Mind's Structure of Art, from the Greek Embodiment to Darwinism

If we follow the history of ancient art, we find that art correlates with mankind and derives its themes from religion, and religion derives its strength from art, and so on. That is how beliefs were before Islam, and so was art. When we discuss art within the Greek conception, we must know that most of the opinions, knowledge, and arts, the epistemological theory of Greece, all grounded in a paganist or atheist thought, as a result of the inability to comprehend the metaphysical world.¹⁴ Accordingly, we find the Greeks, in their view of nature, deriving from the sanctification of nature as a philosophical doctrine that took its dimensions from the circle of art. As such, nature has entered the list of 'sanctities' in the perception of groups of artists and philosophers.

Moreover, that is why the Greeks turned to make the artist (man) an equal to God. Their argument being: if nature is God's creation, man creates what is like it, man even creates what is better than nature by avoiding mistakes found in it and completing deficiencies that God could not complete. Thus, the artist became a 'creator', and the production of art became 'creating', widely broadening the use of the word 'creation'.

All of this has come about as a result of dividing people into categories of slaves, foreigners and free citizens, in which the Greeks exclusively represented the highest class. This is due to their belief that they alone were whole in humanness, while others' humanity remains incomplete, that they (the Greeks) have been bestowed with all what distinguishes man from animals (i.e., thinking mind and free will), and others, being deprived of

¹⁴ Ṣalāh al-Dīn al-Suljūqī, *Athar al-Islām fī al-'Ulūm wa al-Funūn* (Cairo: Maktab al-Ṣaḥāfah wa al-Isti'lāmāt Bilsafārah al-Malakiyyah al-Afghāniyyah Bimiṣr, n.d.), 20.

those powers, were created to be subjugated slaves to the Greeks.¹⁵

Consequently, the concept of man developed in the ages of the Greeks into a concept of 'the divinity of man'. This explains the conflict between humans and Greek Gods, which was, subsequently, reflected in the products of the conception of art in the Greek mental structure. Gods started to appear embodied in Greek art, and the image of 'God' was associated with local characteristics and impersonating prominent beings. We find their 'Gods' to be people, combining the whims of humans with divine powers. Intermarriage and procreation between Gods and humans were matters of acceptance and familiarity,¹⁶ and from there appeared famous artistic products such as the Capitoline Triad.

Some of the Greek Gods incarnated themselves into a human form to connect with a beautiful woman, and the son of this woman could be a 'demi-god'. In Egypt we find the cats, and the sacred bull (Apis) and the sun-disk¹⁷ ...etc., and the Greek mythology¹⁸ and ancient Egyptian history overflows with many more.¹⁹ Thusly,

¹⁵ 'Umar 'Udah al-Khaṭīb, *Naẓarāt Islāmiyyah fī Mushkilat al-Tamyīz al-'Unṣurī* (Beirut: Mū'assasat Dār al-Risālah, n.d.), 37; 'Abd al-Ḥamīd Jūdah al-Saḥār, *Muḥammad Rasūl Allah wa alladhī Ma'ah* (Cairo: Maktabat Misr, 1965).

¹⁶ Anīhārdt, *al-Ālihah al-Ābṭāl fī al-Yūnān al-Qadīmah*, trans. Hāshim Ḥamdī (Damascus: al-Āhālī li al-Nashr, 1964); Muṣṭafā al-Nashār, *Tārīkh al-Falsafah al-Yūnāniyyah* (Cairo: Dār Qubā', 1998), 36.

¹⁷ Māryūt, *Tārīkh Qudamā' al-Miṣriyyīn al-Musammā Qannāṣat Ahl al-'Aṣr min Khulāṣat Tārīkh Miṣr*, trans. 'Abd Allāh Abū al-Su'ūd (Cairo: al-Maṭba'ah al-Khidīwiyyah Bibūlāq, 1281AH), 27-30.

¹⁸ Mythology or myths are tales born in the early stages of history, their imaginary images of legendary heroes and great events were nothing but attempts to generalize and explain the various phenomena of nature and society. See: Muṣṭafā Ḥasībah, *al-Mu'jam al-Falsafī* (Jordan: Dār Usāmah li al-Nashr wa-al-Tawzī', 2009), 617.

¹⁹ Karīm Mattā, *al-Falsafah al-Yūnāniyyah* (Baghdad: Maṭba'at al-Irshād, 1393AH), 103.

Greek art became an art that expresses and defends its embodiment theology,²⁰ one that is deviant from the natural and true pattern of art. In that way, this type of art was shackled by paganism and priestly captivity since the oldest ages until the emergence of Islam, which freed art from those restrictions.

This pagan-based, atheistic inclination has extended through the ages, dominating art and even ecclesiastical art. Here we find ourselves face to face with the artist of the Church in the European Renaissance, Michelangelo (d. 1475AD), whom after completing sculpturing Moses (PBUH), struck him shouting: "Speak, Moses!"²¹ Undoubtedly, what provoked him to do so was the feeling that he had produced a creation equal to the creations of Allah the Almighty, and that the sculpture only lacks the power of speech to become a normal, actual human being.

Gauguin²² goes even further down this road as to openly and plainly demand that the artist's work to be an imitation of the work of God. Adding to the fact that he is one of those who deny the artist's work to be an imitation of nature, this affirms the atheism underlying the artistic

²⁰ Theology: a science that investigates the existence and essence of God, for Christians it takes the place of the science of Kalām of Muslims. It is also called the science of deism. There are two types of theology: (1) natural theology, which depends on experience and reason alone, without reference to revelation, (2) revealed theology, which depends on the sacred texts. See: Ibrāhīm Madkūr, *al-Mu'jam al-Falsafī* (Cairo: al-Hay'ah al-'Āmmah li al-Shu'ūn al-Maṭābi' al-Amīriyyah, 1983), 160.

²¹ Muṣṭafā Farūkh, *al-Fan wa-al-Ḥayāh* (Beirut: Dār al-'Ilm li al-Malāyīn, 1967), 189.

²² Paul Gauguin (1848-1902), a French artist. He was not one of the social artists who expressed the spirit of their time, but rather he was one of the artists of solitary who witnessed the rupture between art and society. See: Zakariyyā Ibrāhīm, *Mushkilat al-Fann* (Cairo: Maktabat Miṣr, n.d.) 135-136; Jean Barthélemy, *Baḥṭh fī 'Ilm al-Jamāl*, trans. Anwar 'Abd al-'Azīz et. al (Cairo: Dār al-Nahḍah Li al-Nashr, 1970).

process. On another level, art turned into a struggle in all directions. Hegel stresses that the conflict that nature raises against the artist, with its ambiguity, defiance, and concealment, is nothing but a constructive provocation, aiming to reveal the aesthetic facts that nature, or the earth, cover with mystery, hiddenness, and silence.²³

Thus, the relationship between the artist and nature is one of 'extraction', a relationship that requires the use of force, not a harmonious one. Philosophy did not only describe nature as ambiguous and hidden, but also gave it the characteristic of ugliness. Where Baudelaire is the designer of this ugliness stigma, Barthélemy explains that this has happened within the philosophical framework, stating: "And let us remember that if Baudelaire sees nature as ugly, he does not see it as such except within the framework of mystical philosophical views that he applies in advance".²⁴ Baudelaire, then, has built his perception based on philosophical premises that ended up with this opinion.

Art and Darwinism

As soon as the Western mind-set discarded the pagan embodiment of the Greeks and its effects on the Romans and the Church in the field of art, they ended up replacing it with Darwin and his theory of the origin of species. This theory is considered as one of the most momentous theories on which western knowledge and sciences, including art, were founded.²⁵ The summary of this theory

²³ 'Imād al-Dīn Khalīl, *al-Ṭabī'ah fī al-Fan al-Gharbī wa al-Islāmī* (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Risālah, 1977), 33; Walter Stace, *Falsafat Hegel*, trans. Imām 'Abd al-Fattāh Imām (Beirut: Dār al-Tanwīr li al-Ṭibā'ah wa al-Nashr wa al-Tawzī', 2007).

²⁴ Barthélemy, *Baḥth fī 'ilm al-Jamāl*, 423.

²⁵ An example of this is Sartre, who developed in his thought through literature, politics and art until Existentialism became integrated with Marxism, and during that stage a dialogue took place between Sartre and Marxism, until he became an existentialist of a special kind. See: Ramaḍān al-Ṣabbāgh, *Falsafat al-Fan 'ind Sartre wa Ta'athīr al-*

is that all earthly lifeforms arose from one origin, starting from aquatic organisms, from which amphibious lifeforms came to exist, and from the later arose terrestrial creatures, including human beings that are only one evolutionary step away from apes. And thus, the 'animalism' of mankind was determined, repudiating the spiritual aspect.

Therefore, Darwin's theory was a turning point in the theory of science, and that it has affected the direction of human thinking to the point that its effects are traceable in everything that scientists have produced in the last period.²⁶ Freud²⁷ was also influenced by it, stating: "The instincts of humans are the natural extension of the instincts of the animals that preceded them in the ladder of ascent".

Darwin's theory was a sentence of the animality of man through biology, then Freud's theory sentenced him with animality in the field of psychology, thus he became an animal altogether. This has formed a basis for abstract aesthetic and art. One of the advocates of this school has even tried to 'measure the intensity of the feeling of a subjective, qualitative nature by measuring its objective stimuli in a quantitative manner, he developed a method and measured the pleasure of feeling beauty, which is a purely personal, inner pleasure'. Some others took

Mārkisiyyah 'alayhā (Mansoura: Dār al-Wafā' li al-Ṭibā'ah wa al-Nashr wa al-Tawzī', 2004).

²⁶ Muḥammad Qutb, *Manhaj al-Fan al-Islāmī* (Beirut: Dār al-Shurūq, 1983), 31.

²⁷ An Austrian physician of Jewish origin, specialized in studying neurological medicine. He is seen as the founder of psychoanalysis and modern psychology. His real name is Sigismund Shlomo Freud (d. 1939). While many of Freud's ideas has been surpassed or modified by neoconservatives and Freudians at the end of the twentieth century, and with advances in the field of psychology, many flaws began to appear in many of his theories, yet his ideas still influence some of the human and social sciences. See: Sigmund Freud, *al-Ḥayāh al-Jinsiyyah*, trans. George Ṭarābīsh (Beirut: Dār al-Ṭalī'ah, 1999).

advantage of this experimental trend in the field of aesthetic studies to establish tangible foundations, or quantitative measurements, of aesthetic phenomena.

In sum, the artist, in light of this conception, has lost the correct view that is based on a complete, correct, balanced conception of man as body and soul. Man has lost his humanity and proceeded with only his animalism, lost his soul but his body remains, and lost his feelings yet his instincts has lived on.

Liberty of Islamic Art from Pagan Embodiment and Priestly Constraints

From what is presented above, it is notable how art used to aid those ideologies and doctrinarians, and their use of art to affirm slavery and captivation. In light of this, it can be said that the real liberation of art from priestly constraints was in the seventh century, with the emergence of Islam and its prohibition of art used to reinforce deviant beliefs, those that serve paganism and seek permissiveness.

Therefore, it is evident that religion and art are interdependent, whenever the first takes a path, it leads the second along. Reflections of any changes occurring in religion are to be witnessed in art. This interdependency was necessary to develop art so that it has a correct and clear concept. Therefore, art must be liberated from the aforementioned constraints, and connect with the universe, life, and man. This is the art that we are scouting for throughout the vast universe.²⁸ As for Islam, this matter is different, as Islam did not direct art towards nor within certain paths. Islam does not say "do" this type of art, rather, Islam says "do not". Meaning, *'aqīdah* does not order people to adopt a specific artistic formula as is the case in other beliefs, instead, the Islamic law (Sharī'ah) merely prohibits 'ideologically and morally' deviant art,

²⁸ David Talbot Rice, *al-Fan al-Islāmī*, trans. Fakhrī Khalīl (Beirut: al-Mu'assasah al-'Arabiyyah li al-Dirāsāt wa al-Nashr, 2002), 198.

leaving the choices open for people in practicing and producing art.

Therefore, '*aqīdah* stops the ones who are outside the system and leaves the ones inside it to choose freely. Islam confronted paganism and prohibited all its tools, including the art used for that type of worship. This was to put plastic art, and all other forms of art, in their natural path and in the right track of creativity, and to move art out of monasteries, temples, and synagogues to the openness of nature in the spacious universe. This is why we do not find pictures or statues in mosques like those we find in other places of worship, places that embody gods and symbolize them into tangible artifacts. Through '*aqīdah*, the Muslim artist works by means of the abstracts rather than materials (not by abandoning materials entirely, but rather, by stopping them at reasonable limits). Materials, therefore, should not prevail over spirituals, instead, a balance between spirit and matter should and must be found, engaging with all beings, and penetrating through nature to what is beyond.²⁹

***Tawhīd* and Art: Soaring and Harmony, or Restriction and Rigidity?**

Islamic art faces an intellectual problem closely related to '*aqīdah*, that is the inability to express the transcendent divine Self (i.e., Allah the Almighty). This issue of 'perception of the divine Self' was the most vital and major intellectual issue of the Muslim mindset that was put forward on the Muslim intellectual arena. It is the concept of *tawhīd* that came as a general and comprehensive abstraction of every previous monotheism of any other civilization. *Tawhīd* came free of analogies and symbols, greater and inclusive of all other facts, and

²⁹ Muṣṭafā 'Abduh, *al-Dīn wa-al-Ibdā'* (Cairo: Maktabat Madbūlī, 1999), 249; Samīr al-Ṣāyigh, *al-Fan al-Islāmī Qirā'ah Ta'ammulīyah fī Falsafatih wa Khaṣā'irih al-Jamālīyah* (Beirut: Dār al-Ma'rifah, 1988), 106.

the most general of all. Being an intellectual, rational, and abstract fact, it cannot be conceived by any tangible, physical form, nor by the means of any creative, artistic work. Allah the Almighty says in al-Shūrā, 11: "There is nothing like Him, for He 'alone' is the All-Hearing, All-Seeing". Accordingly, how did Muslim art and artists deal with this issue, and to remain in harmony with *'aqīdah* above all, and maintain creative art simultaneously? We have arrived at two understandings of this point that, perhaps, explain the reflection of Islam on art in this regard:

First: Islamic art was able to benefit from the reflection of *tawḥīd* in its productions, which were characterized by abstraction (abstract art).³⁰ Hence immersed the geniality of the Muslim artist, who illustrates this transcendent fact and its qualities, expressing the infinite absolute as an aesthetic, contemplative expression. An appropriate demonstration of this is the dot, as the initial element of any artistic work, that extends to be a line, and the line curves to form a circle or bends into angles of a square. Those are the primary shapes,³¹ the basic alphabet, from which Islamic art is formed.

³⁰ One of the most famous artists in the world who promoted the idea of abstraction was Vassily Kandinsky, a Russian artist (1866-1944) one of the most famous of the twentieth century. His discoveries in the field of abstract art made him one of the most important innovators and renovators in modern art. As both an artist and a theoretical researcher, he played a pivotal role of high importance in the development of abstract art. The Kandinsky Prize for Art is attributed to him. One of his most famous designs is the Kandinsky chair, which characterized the German Bauhaus style.

³¹ The Islamic art gave decoration a new color of art. It transformed the shapes and abstracted them to create a movement that gives the character of continuity and suggests the infinity of repeated forms to achieve fluidity. Due to the prohibition of sculpturing, Islamic art turned to decoration, creating stand-alone decorations and decorations contained in the shapes. Islamic decoration is

In Islam, the simple dot is the beginning, and the infinite forms that emerge from it are a mental, contemplative, and aesthetic expression of the greatest truth in existence, that is the reality of creation, and the emergence of all this infinite diversity from the 'center' origin of existence.³² From there, thought and faith harmonize within the soul of the Muslim artist to express transcendency, not analogy. In this regard, al-Faruqi states:³³

"In al-Hamrā Palace, there is a complete dome of a large number of arches that rest on infinitesimal columns, only a fervent imagination can perceive and follow. Here, the energy imprinted by art becomes capable of quivering the core of any person who has the will to move along with those artistic rhythms. Thus, the essential characteristic of the divine Self, that is being dissimilar to any and all entities (i.e., transcendent), was the foundation that has seized the Islamic sensation to the extent that it seeks to visualize this truth in everything".

Therefore, it can be said that the Islamic art approach is a symbolical one, inspired by symbolic and creative sophistication of the 'absolute' concept, as if the resulted artistic creations were indirect, visual or illustrative symbols that are enclosing absolute values within.

geometrical units, or say mathematical units, intended for mathematical thinking to arrive at a truth that is not related to a specific place nor time. See: Bishr Fāris, *Sir al-Zakhrāfah al-Islāmiyyah*.

³² Anṣār Muḥammad 'Awaḍ Allāh al-Rifā'ī, "al-Uṣūl al-Jamāliyyah wa-al-Falsafiyah li al-Fan al-Islāmī" (Doctoral thesis, Faculty of Art Education, University of Ḥilwān, 1423AH), 201.

³³ Isma'īl al-Faruqī, *Tawhid its Implication for Thought and Life* (Virginia: The International Institute Of Islamic Thought, 1982), 299.

Second: The Muslim artist was able to express his art through solving the difficult aesthetic equation of expressing the God Who nothing is like Him, and cannot be imagined by the human mind, which is incapable of comprehending many natural phenomena, their beauty and how they occur, so how about the Creator of all those phenomena. As it is not possible to the human mind to represent nor express that God, it is the pinnacle of miraculousness, and it is also the same dilemma for any artist in their art, the inability to express a non-analogizable essence that is, at the same time, a foremost truth present in every aspect of life, nature, and the universe. Al-Rāzī clarifies this understanding further in his interpretation of the verse "Indeed, in the creation of the heavens and the earth and the alternation of the day and night there are signs for people of reason" (Āl-'Imrān: 190): "Know that the Almighty Has encouraged the remembrance of Allah, and when the matter came to thought, he did not encourage to think about Allah, but rather to think about the origins of the skies and the earth".³⁴

Consistently, Alexander Papadopoulos states, "The Islamic group did not only harmonize with Islamic jurisprudence and reject the realistic transfer of the world, rather, they went beyond that to 'positively' express the Islamic spirit when they were closely connected to all the creativeness of the Arab-Islamic mentality".³⁵

Hence, we can say that the 'Islamic conception of art' is a concept closely connected to Islam and to *tawhīd* as the first and most important pillar of Islam. This geniality of this expression is manifested in devising an unprecedented aesthetic formula for the aesthetic

³⁴ Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Tafsīr Maḥāṭib al-Ghayb* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'ilmiyyah, 1990), vol. 9-10, 11.

³⁵ Alexander Papadopoulos, *Jamāliyyat al-Rasm al-Islāmī*, trans. 'Alī al-Lūtī (Tunis: Mu'assasāt 'Abd al-Karīm 'Abd Allah, 1979), 7.

expression of *tawhīd*, as this expression is not a direct artistic account through pictures or phrases that express *tawhīd* explicitly, but rather a deep aesthetic translation drawn in the conscience.

Art and Beauty: The Principles of Harmony with the Spirit of the Islamic '*Aqīdah*

Beauty is a distinct feature of this existence, if not its most distinct. Therefore, the harmony between beauty and the nature of man in his thought and sense was a given. This is one of the miraculous wonders of Allah in His creation (i.e., man), to endow him with a unique gift that directly responds to the deep soul of the universe. Whenever the eye flickers to light, or sounds strike the ear, beauty is imprinted in the senses, and the soul moves to receive it with joy and happiness, as if the human soul and the universe's spirit are acquainted siblings thrilled to reconnect. Allah the Almighty says: "[Remember] when your Lord said to the angels, I am going to place a successive [human] authority on earth" (al-Baqarah: 30). Man is the caliph of Allah on earth, whom He has honoured, favoured, taught, and provided with various capabilities, making him the worthiest creation of Allah of comprehending beauty in its essential reality with which Allah has created it.

Therefore, the Islamic theory of art consists of three principles,³⁶ through which we will present the Islamic philosophy of art, one that is in harmony with *tawhīd*. These are principles through which the Muslim artist can rely on with all tools of art: *tawhīd*, oneness, and movement. These are the three pillars that form the true body of Islamic art and on which it stands.

³⁶ Almost all ancient and modern Islamic writings about art and beauty in Islam are based on these pillars. See: 'Alī Shalaq, *al-'Aql fī al-Turāth al-Jamālī 'ind al-'Arab* (Lubnan: Dār al-Madā li al-Ṭibā'ah wa al-Nashr, 1985), 21; 'Abd al-Fattāh Rawās, *Madkhal Ilā 'Ilm al-Jamāl al-Islāmī*, 24.

i. The Principle of *Tawhīd*:

Tawhīd is considered to be aim and purpose of the Islamic philosophy of art. It is an aesthetic relationship on which the aesthetic sense is based through balance, compatibility and harmony between the Creator and the creature. This affirms that this relationship is intellectual and realistic, intellectually abstract through *tawhīd*, and realistically represented in the servitude of worshippers to Allah. 'Abd al-Fattāh Rawās expresses the concept of Islamic beauty through *tawhīd* as "a feeling ascending upward, as when a person sees beauty in a human, a plant, or in the sound of water, he remembers Allah, which is a movement of rise and ascension. The elements of beauty in the universe and the systems of relationships between them are ones that refer to the creator of this beauty. There is no beauty disconnected from its creator. As per the framework of the Islamic concept of beauty, all beauty arises from the one Creator, the maker of beauty, and all beauty in arts and crafts arises from man".

The Qur'ānic ovation for the artistic images of nature extends to make them evidences of the characters of Allah that are used to affirm the absolute transcendence of Allah. In illustration of this, Allah the Almighty says: "Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth. His light is like a niche in which there is a lamp, the lamp is in a crystal, the crystal is like a shining star, lit from [the oil of] a blessed olive tree, [located] neither to the east nor the west, whose oil would almost glow, even without being touched by fire. Light upon light! Allah guides whoever He wills to His light. And Allah sets forth parables for humanity. For Allah has [perfect] knowledge of all things." (al-Nūr: 35). This is a phenomenon that draws attention in Qur'ān, a phenomenon of complete harmony between art and religion as if they were identical, and in

which artistic miraculous works hand in hand with the required religious guidance.³⁷

ii. The Principle of Oneness

Oneness in the system of creation is the perfection of beauty in creatures, and the proof of their emanation from the one. The foundations of beauty in this system are based on balance, attraction, proportionality and spiritual harmony. Oneness is a mutual, total system that regulates the relationships in the atom, in society, and in the universe, bringing all parties together to the centre:

“[He is the One] Who created seven heavens, one above the other. You will never see any imperfection in the creation of the Most Compassionate. So, look again: do you see any flaws?”

Al-Mulk: 3

This oneness is regarded as the most important factor of beauty and its consistency in this universe, and the reason for this unity despite the diversity of creatures is the oneness of their creator. Oneness is, therefore, a general system that coordinates the relationships among all the elements of the universe. Moreover, the relationship of form and content, or matter and form in Islamic thought, is considered to be a relationship of ‘oneness’ and integration, in contrast to the duality that occurs now between form and content in modern philosophy. This is what Ibn al-Qayyim refers to by emphasizing the oneness of the outward and inward in the Islamic view of beauty, he states:³⁸

“Because of Allah’s love for beauty, He sent down clothing and adornments for His servants

³⁷ Sayyid Qutb, *al-Taṣwīr al-Fannī fī al-Qur’ān* (Cairo: Maktabah al-Qur’ān, n.d.), 68.

³⁸ Ibn al-Qayyim, *al-Fawā’id* (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-‘Arabī, 2012), 250.

that beautify their outward appearances, and *taqwā* that beautifies their inward. The Almighty says: "O children of Adam! We have provided for you clothing to cover your nakedness and as an adornment. However, the best clothing is righteousness. This is one of Allah's bounties, so perhaps you will be mindful" (al-A'rāf: 26), and says about the people of paradise "So Allah will deliver them from the horror of that Day, and grant them radiance and joy, and reward them for their perseverance with a Garden [in Paradise] and [garments of] silk." (al-Insān: 11, 12). He beautified their faces with youthfulness, their inwards with happiness, and their bodies with silk. He, Glory be to Him, is just as He loves beauty in words, actions, clothes and appearance, so He hates ugliness and its people, and loves beauty and its people".

iii. The Principle of Movement:

The Islamic vision of the Muslim artist confirms that movement is one of the important factors for integral beauty and considers it as a part of beauty itself. A flower is beautiful in its movement and growth, a river is beautiful in its flowing movement, and the secret of the planets' beauty in their motion through space. This movement is the source of aesthetic pleasure since it stores life, and it is a source of an existential value that has connotations and function in the system of life, "Surely those who believe and do good will have Gardens under which rivers flow. That is the greatest triumph." (al-Burūj: 11).

A follower of the notion of movement throughout the Qur'ān would find a pure art in showing the aesthetics of this movement, its harmony, connotations, and its functions, as if you are hearing the hum of the night, the

movement of the morning breathing, and the sound of rivers flowing.³⁹ Movement is an essential addition to the subject of art. No matter how creative art is, it does not equate to the beauty of living movement, as it is a symbol of renewed, continuous cosmic life. Aḥmad Ḥasan al-Zayyāt says: "The magnificence of beauty in nature comes from the aspect of liberty in it, and liberty of nature is its general law. Thus, the Nile waterfalls are the more beautiful to the sight than organized fountains, for absolute beauty fills your imagination with dreamy contemplation, your mind with elevated thinking, and your feelings with expanded joy".⁴⁰

Al-'Aqād confirms this by saying: "The essence of beauty follows the liberty of function and the movement of life in the body, river, and trees. What is common among all types of beauty is the freedom of movement".⁴¹ Moreover, movement has another dimension that gives the artist a spirit that motivates him to move and go in search of places of beauty. It is the dimension of the universe being an emanant from the will of Allah, and the fact that, in the Islamic conception, this is a beautiful thing. Hence, the universe is alive, moving, sensual, sympathetic to man, responsive to him in a capacity of friendship, fellowship, and affection.

Conclusion

For a long period of time, Islamic art has lived away from the intellectual arena of art in terms of promoting and introducing its features and foundations. This is due to the dominance of modern and ancient Western art over the deliberative field of the concept of art. There have been various breakthroughs in defining Islamic art recently,

³⁹ Abd al-Fattāḥ Rawās, *Madkhal ilā 'Ilm al-Jamāl al-Islāmī*, 30-32.

⁴⁰ Aḥmad Ḥasan al-Zayyāt, *Waḥy al-Risālah* (Beirut: Dār al-Shurūq, n.d.), 1/11.

⁴¹ 'Abbās Muḥammad al-'Aqād, *Murāja'āt fī al-Ādāb wa al-Funūn* (Cairo: al-Maktabah al-'Aṣriyyah, n.d.), 65.

distinguishing it with what makes it a distinct pattern from others. Some has stemmed their definitions from the doer, others from the geographic location, and some definitions are built on the conception of art itself.

Nevertheless, the study has emphasized two issues in the definition of Islamic art. First: The outset of this art from the holistic Islamic conception of existence. Second: The identification of the characteristics and features of Islamic art, in an attempt to set borders that distinguish it from other conceptions of art. Consequently, the study has concluded that Islamic art comes from the spirit of *tawhīd*, and thusly it harmonized with existence based on oneness and consistency first and foremost. Moreover, Islam does not enforce a specific artistic formula upon the artist as other beliefs and ideologies, rather, Islam stops ideologically and behaviourally deviant and abnormal arts, and places art in the circle of choice. This was a liberation for art and a liberation for the artist, that free-will, choosing human who was placed in the place of choice, in the wider circle of 'do not' rather than the narrow circle of 'do'.

The Muslim artist works within the borders of what is reasonable, materials do not prevail over spirituality, but rather by finding a balance between spirit and matter, dealing with all beings, and accessing what is beyond nature. Islamic art was able to solve an intellectual problem closely related to '*aqīdah*', that is the inability to express the transcendent divine Self (the realization of the divine Self), by intensifying the symbolical abstract art that conveys the image without compromising the sound understanding of the Islamic '*Aqīdah*'.

On the other hand, we find that the epistemological theory of Western art had sprouted from a pagan ground or atheist thought, as a result of its inability to comprehend the metaphysical world. Therefore, we find their view of nature to be one of sanctification, as a

philosophical doctrine that took its dimensions from the circle of art. As such, nature has entered the list of 'sanctities' in the perception of some of the Greek artists and philosophers, which in turn reflected on the purpose of art and its aesthetic role in existence. Philosophies went even further when the idea of man developed in Greece until it reached the idea of 'divinity of man'. This explains the conflict between humans and Greek gods, which in turn was reflected on the products of the perception of the Greek's mental structure of art, making art nothing but an embodiment of that conflict, a distorted image that mixes gods and humans in an artistic expression.

The study also revealed a turning point in the general concept of art, starting with Darwin's theory, which has affected the direction of human thinking in the field of art until human instincts became a natural extension of the instincts of animals that preceded humans in the ladder of ascent. This is what the advocates of abstract beauty relied on, some of which has even attempted to measure the intensity of feelings of a subjective, qualitative nature, by measuring their objective, quantitative stimuli. Some others have exploited this experimental approach in the field of aesthetic studies to establish materialistic foundations or quantitative measurements of aesthetic phenomena, which led to defects in the scientific standards and methodology for studying the field of art.

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