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The Importance of Islamic Art in Mosque Interior

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Abstract

Mosques, as symbol of Islamic architecture must play an important role in reflecting the superiority of Allah the Almighty. There are many ways in making it successful and one of them is through the high quality of aesthetic value. Aesthetic value in Islamic art and architecture is normally portrayed by the highest degree of motifs and ornamentation. Contemporary mosque designers normally focused on the majestic looks of the exterior part of the mosques and leave the manipulation of the interior space to the users. There are scholars who said that mosques should act as community development centre, some decided on the uniqueness of traditional Malaysian architecture and some believed that mosques must have domes and minarets as symbols of Islamic architecture. This paper realized on the aesthetics and beauty of mosque interior that fulfils the psychological needs of human beings: that is to be inside a beautiful ambience. Ornamentation should be taken as part of mosque components and not as mere decorations done after-thought or filling in the gap. The main objective of the paper is why is it important to focus the ornamentation towards mosque interior so that ornamenting the mosque will not be done uncontrollably and unnecessarily.

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1. Introduction

At some point this time scholars are still wondering on comprehensive study of the history, function and significance of ornamentation in Islamic architecture especially in mosques. The organizations of the ornamentation, which covers vegetal, geometrical, epigraphic and figural or even a combination of two or more of these elements are in need for some evaluation and elaboration. Most of the time, these ornaments will reflect local traditions with a mixture of foreign influences, subject to the geographical area of the particular Islamic world. Islamic ornamentation is the very element that sews architecture and religion resulting serene, intelligible, structured and highly spiritual of Islamic art and architecture.

Ornamentation in Islamic architecture mentioned by Grube (1978), serves several functions. Among the functions are giving the effect of weightlessness to the structure and creating articulation and non limitation to the space. Here, Grube (1978) looks at the physical functions of Islamic ornamentation. Seralgedin (1996) though, sees ornamentation as glue in uniting the Muslims with their architectural forms and decorations. Nevertheless, both of the renowned scholars seemed agreeable that the ornamentations which give sense of being inside a place with the articulation and embellishment of the interior are inspiring and notably assets to Islamic art.

Human is regarded as a reflection of the innate beauty of the Almighty who had created the universe. Beauty in Islamic art and civilisation, to elaborate is a wide scope to be covered and this includes the appreciation of symmetry, balance, and also the expressions of sense of all-pervading life force were compatible with Islamic aesthetic principle [1].

2. Ornamentation of Mosque

The importance of the Islamic medieval period art and architecture rests not only in the fact it was the time when so many of the ethnic, literary, religious, social and artistic features of traditional Islam was created, but also significant to recognize that the period is more or less contemporary with Romanesque and Gothic Europe. Like most of the problems posed by Islamic art and architecture scholars, the question of the growth and character of Islamic architectural design of ornamentation has never been discussed in entirety and deeply. The concept of decoration in Islamic art is flexible in nature, independent of form, material and scale, transforming the whole space ambience. According to Grabar [2], before going deeper into certain ornamentation in Islamic art it is important to classify the transformations in visual forms from the religion understanding and opinion. The classification will be the evidence of civilization with some communal symbolism or motifs in the ornamentation and also the yard stick in measuring the technology level of the Muslim community around the globe. Ornamentation in mosque could be different from one region to another. For example Malaysian way of ornamenting their mosque is different from the Arabs, but there should be a little if not much influence from the origins as they all come from one religion and community that is Islam. This is the main symbolic meaning in Islamic art that explains unity in diversity.

3. Characteristics of Islamic Ornamentation

One of the motives of Islamic traditional buildings is to make the life of believers and users correspond to their built environment, thus inter-relate strongly and harmoniously Mortada [3]. Preserving Islamic faith and enhancing the application of *Syari'ah* in mosques should be the major point. With the mosque roles in religious and education, they should come hand in hand with the needs of the society in the effort to maintain an acceptable level of the basic needs of human well-being; that is beauty with the existence of motifs and ornamentation that will welcome anybody who enters the physical environment concerned. The first characteristic of Islamic ornamentation puts strength in the infinity of patterns. This includes intricate geometric patterns which clearly portray the infinity of Allah the Almighty.

Geometry in Islamic art and architecture creates basic patterns in design. Unique interlacing lines weaved carrying various patterns showing the most amazing imagination and inventiveness [4]. The multiplication of any geometric pattern of architectural element on a different scale in one plane also helps avoid sharp contrast and clear definition of scale and surface.

Fitted on top of the geometrical basic guidelines, comes the motifs of geometrical figures that would come in floral or vegetal figures. The said figures vary throughout the Islamic regions, differentiate by geography and chronology. It can also be said that the whole of Islamic patterns represents a combination

of many different styles. Those styles are sometimes adapted and absorbed from famous classical samples of various cultures (Lee 1987;182-197). Lee's statement is much agreeable as far as this thesis is concerned, in the design and ornamentation of Mihrab and Qibla wall in Malaysian context.

For example countries in the Middle East would apply motifs such as vine scrolls and other vegetal appeared in the Al-Janna as mentioned in the Al-Quran. Countries in the Malaysia would use traditional motifs taken from local vegetal such as rice plant and lotus. But nowadays there are some adaptation of Middle East motifs and geometrical patterns in the contemporary mosques of the Malaysia.

Both geometrical background and the motifs mostly produced as two dimensional patterns on mosque components or in three dimensional non-structural arabesques. One thing for sure in any of the cases is that these geometrical patterns are always subordinated throughout the composition and never emphasized to certain point According to Madden (1975;423-430), this is done to express the fact that Islam is independent of any historical happening or occasion around the universe and exhibits the universal character of Allah the Almighty.

Second in line of the Islamic art characteristics is the presence of Arabic Calligraphy. This is said to be the ultimate art that transformed the words of the Al-Quran into a visual work of art. In this important discovery in Islamic art, the existence is subject to the overall purpose of Islamic consciousness.

Calligraphy is simply joined letters and became the simplest form of Naskh script, then "plasticized" so that they could be angulated: as in the oldest Kufic script, stretched, prolonged, bent, thickened, overlapped, and complicated as in the Thuluth script. They are sometimes made in three dimensional arabesques on carved wood as screen or stucco decoration on wall complementing the geometric composition.

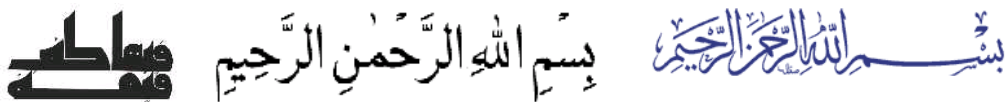


Figure 1: Kufic script, Naskh Script and Thuluth Script^a

There are many more calligraphy styles used in the Arab countries such as *Diwani*, *Riq'a*, *Ta'liq* and *Nasta'liq* but the three above (*Kufic*, *Naskh* and *Thuluth*) are the ones mostly used calligraphy styles in decorating mosque walls of Malaysia.

Mahmood [5] in his scholarly research found out that Islamic calligraphy is not some art pieces that have to be looked at, read and passed. They need to be comprehended and because the most popular wordings taken by Muslim across the centuries for the Arabic calligraphy on mosques walls are the ones taken from the Al-Quran. Calligraphy is filled with aesthetic value as well as being a message conveying precise meanings of Al-Quran and *Hadiths*.

Ornamentation in Islamic art and architecture, apart from testifying diverse artistic influences incorporated in the architectural statement of buildings, also acts as complements to the architectural statement.

Ornamentation in Islamic art and architecture has also been observed by looking at its purpose and affects to the users. According to Haider (1996) faith means to accept all the ideas that attribute Islamic parameter without demanding any strict evidence. The main reason of having ornamentation especially in mosques is to feel the existence of Allah the Almighty. The feelings are derived in striving to be closer to the One (Allah the almighty). There is a need for the believers of Islam to put forth some ideas on how Islamic faith becoming synonyms with the certitude about Islam. This is the reason why as believed by

^a Retrieved from <http://www.caroun.com/Calligraphy/aCalligraphyGeneral/Kufic/KuficScript.html> on the 24th August 2007

Haider (1996) that creation of ornaments and artwork especially in prostration places (mosques) are the true symbols that express faith in the religion's followers. Words from the Al-Quran for example, are known to be the words of Allah the Almighty, become operative in artistic production.

Appreciating the existence of Islamic art when there have been many scholarly journals and books centered their scope of studies on is a global concern.

According to Al-Ghazali, the awareness of beauty as seen by *Sufi* perception is much related to firstly the *Hadith* saying God is beautiful and Loves beauty (a *Hadith* of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ in *Sahih Muslim* 1.93:91.), secondly everything in the universe is created by God and those things will reflect God's majesty and beauty. Therefore men as one of God's creation must lead their life revealing God's way of guiding us (Wijdan Ali 2001).

4. Conclusion

The result of modernist movement always misinterpreted the existence of ornamentation as symbol of luxury. Mosque symbolizes the existence of a beautiful religion that is Islam. Visiting the house of Allah *Al-Jameel* (the beautiful) or a sacred place where we could spend our time getting intimate with Him we should encounter the joy of beauty at all levels of his existence. Unfortunately, in the modern world, we always provide nice decoration with marble banking halls and agree with so utilitarian and aesthetically poor mosques internal. The prayer hall for example, if it is not for the small niche that demarcated the Qibla wall and dome on top, the mosque could be misapprehended as a multipurpose hall.

Mosques should be categorized under socially inspired type and this type is like residential where it should be studied together with its relationship to social factors such as users' needs physically and psychologically [6]. These buildings should give the highest comfort that satisfy the psychological tranquility to the users in different cultural needs. In the Al-Quran, it has been mentioned in about 120 passages describing the paradise (*Al Janna*) being a beautiful place giving serene sense. As in the following verse;

“For them will be Gardens of Eternity; beneath them rivers will flow; they will be adorned therein with bracelets of gold and they will wear green garments of fine silk and heavy brocade; they will recline therein on raised thrones. How good the recompense! How beautiful a couch to recline on?”

This is the starting point where most of the medieval mosque, for example the Great Mosque of Damascus, put forward their aesthetics feature of motifs and ornamentation, which portrayed the Paradise garden symbolically.

On the later erections of medieval mosques for example Mosque of Al-Hakim under Fatimids dynasty, those features from paradise are then simplified to be in structured geometrical designs that are pleasing to the eyes of whomever witnessing them. Everyone in this world would not oppose to be in a beautiful place and this is shown clearly when we opted for beautiful houses for us to live in.

Beauty that emerged through the manifestation of floral and geometrical motifs in arabesques and the beautiful Islamic Calligraphy inspired from the meaningful verses of the Quran. Where else is the most suitable place to instill all those precious artistic and ornamental values other than in mosques, the very place where all believers come at least once a week or five times a day at the most

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