



The Institute of Ismaili Studies

## What is Islamic Art

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### Introduction

In the mid-1700s, a new artistic movement began in India. British East India Company officers brought their European notions of art to India. To earn the patronage of these new elite, some Indian artists responded to their tastes. Miniature watercolours depicting 'typically native' scenes became popular. Thus was born the Company School of Art. Experts on Company art can rattle off a list of persons, dates and places instrumental to the movement. Similar highly specific background stories can be traced (and have been extensively documented) about other categories of art such as Impressionist, Surrealist, etc. Art is categorised according to dates of origin, subject matter, influences, key persons or even cities and regions.

Now think of the term 'Islamic art'. Can we identify a person responsible for its development? Can we pin down the place of its origin? Is it local to any city or region? Does it pertain to a single subject? Is Islamic art the art of a particular decade or century? Is it a response to a distinct political or social stimulus? The answer to these questions, as most experts agree, is negative. Yet, Islamic art exists as a category. Do we really have sound bases for making such a category? In other words, does Islamic art exist at all? Let us see what some leading scholars of the field have to say.

### Does Islamic Art Exist?

Some scholars, like George Marçais, think that there is some defining uniformity to art originating in Muslim lands. Although it is difficult to determine precisely what their characteristic features are, one can identify many works of art as clearly 'Islamic'. This approach is problematic. Firstly, one may disagree with the contention. What is so apparent to these scholars may not be readily appreciated by everyone. Also, consider the fact that most scholars would not see India as an 'Islamic' land. Yet all scholars concur that Mughal art is Islamic.

Current scholarship seeks a more nuanced understanding of Islamic art. Professor Robert Hillenbrand opines that unexamined categorisation is problematic. Colonial and early post-colonial scholars applied the art history approach to the arts of Muslim lands without

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much reflection. This approach works well with European art because it has fixed reference points (e.g., we know where Michelangelo lived and when Van Gogh died). But such reference points are not clearly defined in the Muslim world. Furthermore, as an evocative term, the name 'Islamic' may mislead those used to thinking of art as 'Roman' or 'Greek'. Islam is not regional. How may we then justify the category of Islamic art?

### **A Way Out?**

Professor Oleg Grabar offers a possible solution. Cautioning against over-generalisation, he recommends that instead of viewing Islamic art as a body fixed in a particular locality, time, subject or function, we must understand it as a body shaped by a civilisation and culture. Barbara Brend adds that Islamic art means different things to different people. Scholars, students, artists, curators, Muslims, non-Muslims, tourists and enthusiasts could all interpret it differently.

We may settle for the latter approach despite it being too broad for scholarly use. The former approach could, caution notwithstanding, essentialise peoples' behaviour. Not everything Muslim people do is done because they are Muslims. When people pray facing Mecca or fast during Ramadan, this is clearly 'Islamic' behaviour. But can we say that the people of Lucknow are reputedly genteel because Lucknow was a Muslim kingdom? Obviously, such an allusion takes the idea that religion determines people's behaviour a bit too far. We have to be just as careful with our interpretation of Islamic art as art shaped by Islamic culture.

### **The End of Islamic Art?**

Most studies of Islamic art begin with the birth of Islam and end with the Ottomans or the Qajars of Persia in the early 20th century. Thereafter, most scholars forsake the term Islamic art and begin speaking of Muslim artists. Muslim artists continue to produce work of great beauty and complex meaning. But did 'Islamic art' end after 1925? Did Islamic cultural or civilisational influence cease with the fall of 'Islamic' empires? The decline of empires and the rise of the modern state changed patterns of patronage. If art produced by Muslims under modern state or private patronage does not qualify as Islamic art, does it mean that only art produced under the patronage of Muslim royalty or nobility was Islamic? This is a question that has not received much scholarly attention. We would do well to think about it.

### **What is Islamic?**

Our quest for the meaning of Islamic art boils down to the problem of deciding what is 'Islamic'. Marshall Hodgson coins the term 'Islamicate' instead of using Islamic. It acknowledges that Islam is not the sole influence on the actions and attitudes of Muslims. Professor Mohamed Arkoun's characteristically profound recommendation is that societies be viewed as not 'Islamic', but as 'shaped by the Islamic fact'. These distinctions and alternatives are well thought out, balanced and sophisticated. But most of us are not



professors or philosophers. We need a simple, user-friendly approach. We cannot expect experts who devote their lives to this subject to come up with answers that would suit laypersons. We might have to formulate our own approach.

## **Conclusion**

Examining the work of scholars helps us develop a critical approach. But in the everyday world, Islamic art is a convenient term. Indeed, even Professor Hillenbrand acknowledges its convenience. We might have to do the same for lack of viable alternatives. And then, as Barbara Brend reminds us, it can mean different things to different people.

We may not have satisfactorily defined Islamic art, but our exercise is not unproductive. While we may continue to use the term, we have to remember that both 'Islamic' and 'art' are complex ideas that can be varyingly understood and used. To see just how diverse works of Islamic art can be, all we have to do is walk through a museum. For, powerful as they can be, no words can capture the experience of beauty.

*For an approachable and engaging introduction to Islamic art see the following title:  
Robert Hillenbrand Islamic Art and Architecture. London: Thames and Hudson; 1998.*