



## The Institute of Ismaili Studies

**Title:** Ethics and Aesthetics in Islamic Arts

**Author:** [Tazim Kassam](#)

**Source:** *The Ismaili USA*, March 2006, pp. 5-7

**Abstract:**

The arts rise above the limitations of language and texts to offer a window onto other cultures. Artistic beauty and aesthetics can travel across time and place, and transcend cultural and ethnic boundaries. But at the same time, the arts can reflect values and ideals of a particular culture expressed within a particular time and place. Looking particularly at Islamic arts, this article explores the close connection between beauty and the sacred, between a search for beauty and refinement of one's desire and character, between nature and revelation.

---

*Copyright permission has been sought from the aforementioned publisher.*

*The use of materials published on the Institute of Ismaili Studies website indicates an acceptance of the Institute of Ismaili Studies' Conditions of Use. Each copy of the article must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed by each transmission. For all published work, it is best to assume you should ask both the original authors and the publishers for permission to (re)use information and always credit the authors and source of the information.*

© 2010 The Institute of Ismaili Studies

## Ethics and Aesthetics in Islamic Arts



### DR. TAZIM R. KASSAM

*Tazim R. Kassam is a historian of religions and teaches courses on Islamic civilization at Syracuse University. Her specialty includes the musical and devotional traditions of South Asia, particularly the ginans of Ismaili Muslims. She is co-editor with Françoise Mallison, of Ginans: Texts and Contexts (Oxford: forthcoming) and the chief editor of Spotlight on Teaching, a bi-annual published by the American Academy of Religions.*

*What is this tent? Could one say thus:*

*An ocean full of pearls?*

*Candles, ten thousand, in a bowl*

*Of enamel so bright?*

*[Nasir Khusraw - 11th. century]*

In this poem, Nasir Khusraw expresses a deep sense of awe before the beauty of creation. Taking to heart the Qur'anic verse, "And we shall show them our signs in the horizon and in themselves" (41:53), he looks upon the book of nature as replete with symbols intimating the presence of its Creator. Like a paintbrush of words in the poet's hand, Khusraw's moving description of the night sky brings near the loveliness and shine of the stars by comparing them to the smooth sensation of pearls and the warm glow of candles. At the same time, by invoking the image of the starlit sky as an ocean-sized tent, a huge glass bowl shimmering with points of light, Khusraw revels in the awesome magnificence of the universe.

The arts rise above the limitations of language and texts to offer a window into other cultures. Captivating the ear and eye, they draw one more readily into unfamiliar worlds. In many cases, getting to know another culture through its visual and performing arts is more profound and moving than only through its writings and customs. The arts form a bridge between people who are distant from each other and have no connections save for trade. The beauty and aesthetics of arts can travel across time and place, and transcend cultural and ethnic boundaries. It can also create a shared ethos among those who do not have a common religion or race. In Andalusia, for instance, the Mudejar arts were appreciated and cultivated not only by Muslims, but by Jews and Christians alike. In particular, decorative arts found in the ornamentation and design of textiles, ceramics, carpets, tiles, metalware, fountains, arches, and gardens lend themselves to wider use in a society.



At the same time, while the appeal of artistic expression transcends cultures, the arts also reflect the values of a particular culture. Islamic arts mirror the timeless ideals of Islam expressed within a particular place and time. They manifest both perennial spiritual values as well as local notions of aesthetics and craftsmanship. Islamic arts play on the concept of the One and the many: the One as the bounteous Source of the many, and the felicitous return of the many to the One. They direct attention to God's nearness, yet mystery, through aesthetic experiences mediated through the senses, experiences that evoke the wonder of creation. It is often said that art in Islamic cultures exists not just for the sake of art itself, but to act as a constant reminder of the beauty of God's presence. Both nature (God's creation) and the arts (human creations) are understood as intimations of Divine mercy.

In Islamic arts, there is a connection between beauty and the sacred. The Qur'an is filled with verses exhorting human beings to witness the endless marvels of God's creativity. The word "*ayat*" refers not only to the verses of revelation in the Qur'an but also to creation itself. Divine creativity and wisdom are inexhaustible as expressed in the verse, "If all the trees on earth were pens, and if the sea eked out by seven seas more were ink, the Words of God could not be written out unto the end" (31:27). Not only is God's creation continuous and limitless, its very unfolding is purposeful: "Say: O God! Thou hast not created this in vain" (3:191). Islamic arts thus involve the thoughtful contemplation and remembrance (*dhikr*) of Creator, creation, and creativity.

The artist seeks to become like the pen in the Hand of God along with those who pledge allegiance to the prophet and are thus guided by God: "The Hand of God is upon their hands"

(48:10). The calligrapher's prayer is to become an instrument in the Hand of God through perfect surrender, concentration, and devotion. As a symbol of creativity as well as intellect, the pen is mentioned in the first verse revealed to Prophet Muhammad: "Recite! And thy Lord is the Most Bounteous, He who teaches by the pen, teaches humanity what it knew not" (96:3). Calligraphy, the most distinctive and cultivated of Islamic arts, has aptly been described as the geometry of the spirit. Hazrat Ali, known as the founding patron of calligraphy and inventor of the Kufic style, reportedly said: "The whole Qur'an is contained in *al-Fatiha* (Opening surah); the *Fatiha* in the *Basmalah*, the *Basmalah* in the *Ba*, and the *Ba* in the dot below it." Originating with a single point from which are drawn an endless variety of lines, shapes and meanings, calligraphy demands exquisite control, balance, and proportion. The most handsome calligraphy is thus a sign of refinement and signals discipline of hand, mind and soul. Every human life, metaphorically, is also a script or work of art in progress; each person a pen writing and sketching his or her own life. In life as in art, the question is whether the individual, through repeated moments of surrender (*islam*), will write his or her life with God's hand guiding it.

In Islam, there is an intimate relationship between the search for beauty and the refinement of one's nature. The aesthetic pursuit of beauty has an ethical impulse since the artist cultivates a way of being in the world that intuits and senses minutely the inherent complexity and intricacy of the universe. In this respect, the artist shares the temperament of the scientist who pays close attention to things in order to appreciate their intrinsic nature. Both the search for beauty and the response to it is rooted in a disposition that cultivates a



particular mood and discipline, one that is attentive to the signs of divine mysteries in the horizon and in the self. All the senses are enlisted in the search for beauty both during the process of its imaginative creation as well as at the moment of its perception and contemplation. In the Qur'anic verse that describes the soul's companions in the gardens of paradise, beauty and good are identified as one: "Wherein are found (companions) good and beautiful" (55:70). The role of the senses in perceiving beauty is crucial, and they must be made keen through piety and purity. The pursuit of beauty is thus tied to the perfection of desire and character. In Ismaili thought, this constitutes the transformation of the lower soul (*nafs*) into the higher spirit (*ruh*) of the self.

In his Symposium, Plato insists that training in the perception of beauty is indispensable for perfecting human life since it leads the self to a proper orientation within the universe. He argues, in fact, that those who possess the keenest ability to perceive beauty come closest to touching immortality. This perception, however, is not merely the enjoyment of beautiful objects. More importantly, it refers to the discernment of beauty in thoughts, emotions, actions, and society. For Plato, the ultimate purpose of training a person to perceive beauty is to draw out true virtue. Similarly, in Islamic aesthetics the perception of beauty is considered to have moral implications and effects. Since responsiveness to beauty is simultaneously an expression of gratitude to the Source of all beauty, it endows one with a generosity of spirit that is essential to all moral responsibility. This is because, ultimately, all arts are borne out of acts of generosity, for the artist shares insights into reality that are often beyond the ken of the ordinary person. Just as

books widen the reader's intellectual horizons, so too Islamic arts train the viewer's eye to extend its vision of life beyond the visible spectrum.

Artistic endeavor is thus a particular way of attending to the world. Any effort at artistic creation from the most ordinary of objects (a prayer cap) to the most sublime (the Alhambra) requires one to contemplate the nature of a thing, whether it is a flower, brick, rock crystal or snowflake. As we pass a flower, we may see it mindlessly, without really attending to its presence. An artist who passes the flower looks at it differently. Trained to perceive beauty and structure in the most ordinary of things, the artist's eye notices the flower's beautiful shape, the soft texture of its petals, the way they swirl around its center, the saturation and hues of its colors, and its delicious and soothing scent. By paying attention in this way to the flower, the artist has lost herself in it, and in those few moments as she surrenders herself to its exquisite beauty, she gratefully receives its mystery. This generosity that nature yields to the perceptive eye alters the inner world and articulates a relationship to God's creation that governs how one ought to treat all that is in it including the flower. Much is thus taught to us by the pages of nature which are as saturated with meaning as are the divine verses of revelation. Learning to perceive the world with an appreciative eye is thus also a path to profound humility and underscores the ethical imperative enjoined upon Adam and his descendants, (i.e., humanity) to care for God's creation. The central ethic of Islamic arts is to live as if "Whichsoever way you turn is the face of God" (2:115). ▼