

Timeless yet changing architecture

Sparkling décor of vines and patterns on ceramic walls of a mosque, magnificent domes, and tall minarets for the muezzin to call for prayers are all too synonymous to what we consider as distinguishing features of Islamic art, or to be more precise — Muslim architecture.

Bowls, pots and pans of burnt clay; the magnificent decorations on the pages of medieval manuscripts, and the unique calligraphy itself, are considered hallmark of a unique form that many term as Islamic art. However, for quite some time art historians are attempting to re-define the terminology which many now consider to be a misnomer.

The very first mosques were simplistic and only served the basic purpose of holding congregational prayers, and as space for official work of the community leader, the Imam. Within a few centuries, Islam became a powerful force that spread beyond Arabia. As Arab Muslims gained affluence and reverts were introduced to a new set of beliefs, life in an Islamic world was changing forever. The confluence of cultures soon began to mirror in the lifestyle of a new society. Art of the Islamic world absorbed local traditions, and combined with the teachings of the religion, developed into new forms.

Did religion come into play?

In all possibility it did. Pottery was promoted in Islam, as the use of metal utensils, particularly of precious nature, was frowned



upon. Thus, both the Islamic world and the Chinese developed exceptional prowess in ceramics, but there are distinguishable features that set works of Muslim artists apart. It is also known that Islam discourages imagery and that Islamic art has only depicted flora, geometric patterns, and a well-developed school of calligraphy over the centuries. While there is enough evidence to support this claim on what we see in public platforms — mosques, palaces and even mausoleums, art of more private nature did depict unambiguous forms of fauna.

The Taj Mahal in its grandiosity is an

iconic form of art/architecture created by Muslims; the famed Blue Mosque of Istanbul may also serve a similar example. Yet, at the same time, the whole gamut of Mughal paintings that quite so often depicts human figures is also considered an example of art by predominantly Muslim artists.

One can still debate whether such portrayals can be termed “Islamic” and hence the debate on the use of the term, but there cannot be any doubt that these are very much a reflection of Muslim societies, whether done by Muslims or even non-Muslims.

Considering the case of mosque architecture in what is now Bangladesh, we see abundant use of terracotta and brickwork. The domes too are made from clay, and the minarets of the earliest architectures, completely absent.

The widespread use of clay as the basic form, as against stones and ceramic, is simply an innovation of this locality. Some of the earliest known religious and non-religious structures of Bengal are indeed all made from terracotta. As time moved on and as materials hitherto unavailable became available, architects of the time simply made use of the new raw materials. Slowly as Bengal lost its prominence, new rulers introduced new ideas and newer forms.

Another aspect that one must always keep in mind is the notion of time itself. None of the structures that we see today retain their original forms. Over centuries, they have undergone a number of renovations and a detailed study will only reveal that the earliest forms were even more simplistic from what we see now.

The remnants of the period showcase that what we perceive as Islamic art or architecture is neither monolithic nor repetitive. The pluralism of Islam was once clearly reflected in the day to day lives of the community, and as we know, lives and lifestyle give rise to craft, art and aesthetics.

By Mannan Mashhur Zarif

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SPOTLIGHT

Mosaic art in mosques

illuminating rays from hanging lamps, glazed tiles sheathing interiors of domes, marble designs and encircling inscriptions- Islamic art is monolithic, especially in its variety.

Through its journey across multiple centuries, this form of art has picked up trademark elements of dynasties and regions it has conquered and lived to tell the tales of its evolution. Such infinite stories can be read in holy mosques all over the world, but you will notice mosaic art particularly stealing the limelight for itself most, if not all the time.

Interestingly, the very first mosque to ever exist has great similarities with modern mosques today. Not in extravagance, but in architecture, and most importantly, in forming a divine connection between Muslims and their God. A mosque is a house of prayer and a place for Muslims to come together as a unified community. It is where Muslims prostrate in worship and a holy sanctuary. But how does art fit into this equation?

This is where the dissimilarity comes in. The first ever mosque was the Prophet Muhammad (SAW)'s home in Medina, Saudi Arabia in the 7th century. With columns of timber and walls of unburnt bricks, the house was simplistic. Calls to prayer were given from the rooftop. And a 'mimbar' or pulpit was required for Friday sermons along with 'mihrab' or a modest niche in the wall

oriented toward Mecca. Decorating mosques was never part of the bargain.

However, challenging the original, Arabian-style house cum mosque came the ruling kings, sultans and caliphs of the Muslim empire, sweeping regions in the east, west and Asia where Islamic art picked up Roman, Persian and Chinese influences. Historic discussions will tell you the 'minaret' or tower was later developed to announce the call for prayer. Like tall spires on gothic buildings, minarets serve as powerful and visible reminders of the presence of Islam. Mosques in Istanbul, Turkey are especially popular for their sky-high, pencil shaped minarets.

Besides the spiral towers, the mihrab and mimbar are the most ornately decorated cornices of the sanctuary. The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York houses the brilliant mihrab from Iran from the 13th century, boasting polychrome-glazed tile work on a crystal-blue, stone-paste body. Cairo, Egypt has seen masterpieces of mimbars constructed out of ebony, limestone or intricately-carved wood from the 14th century mosques to serve as thrones for the caliphs and Imams (preachers).

Yet another medium of expression for art in mosques lies in the 'qubba' or iconic domes. Encompassing wide circles to represent the vault to heaven, intricate geometry

and vegetal motifs adorn the surface area to whisper clear messages of Islam. Repetitive patterns of vines and blossoms signify the greatness of creation and the unending nature of God. Such infinity in designs is called arabesque backgrounds and the motifs are aimed to transcend beyond time and space.

Speaking of transcending time and space, Islamic art is still missing a piece of the jigsaw puzzle. The phenomenal artistic language would not have been what it is if it wasn't for calligraphy and scriptures from the Quran, the main religious text of Islam. Verses from the holy book believed to have been revealed directly to the Prophet paint the walls of mosques like blank canvasses. Arabic scripts and poetry with words flowing in waves are used to inscribe polychrome-glazed tiles and brown glass. A glittery shimmer reveals the quotations upon reflected light. Moreover, ornaments like Persian rugs, arabesque bowls and the architecture as a whole, work intrinsically to tell visitors how Muslims see the spiritual realms and the universe.

Staying grounded to our soil, Bangladesh is not too shy of housing great gems of mosques itself. The famous 60-dome mosque of Bagherhat, constructed in the Sultanate period of the 15th century, strikes

wonder in the hearts of visitors via the many arched doorways, decorative mimbar and grand entrance. Even more awe-inspiring is the Small Golden Mosque of Chapai Nawabganj with its granite stone blocks, terracotta-gilded and glazed tiles. Mosaic roundels and arched hallways add to the spectacle even though the premises are in dilapidated conditions now.

A shiny penny in the stack, however, is the national mosque of the country, Baitul Mukarram in Dhaka. Keeping remnants of Mughal architecture alive and resembling the Kaa'ba of Mecca in its structure, the interiors feature a modern design and allow enough illumination through filtered light from windows. You may also want to note that this is the 10th largest mosque in the world.

At the end of the day, a mosque is an austere house of worship; the most important building in the eyes of Islam. The craftsmanship you see and stories you read are evident of evolution and reflective of the language of Islam. It is not a religion, but a way of life, and through the extraordinary execution of art and mosques themselves, a believer edges closer to God with his connection renewed and faith revived.

By Ramisa Haque