

## Modern art Styles and Digital Technology in Developing contemporary Islamic Murals

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### **Abstract:**

Islamic architecture is one of the most important features in the Islamic culture as it is the discipline that manifests that heritage in tangible form. It should be, therefore, one of our main concerns as professionals working in the field to bring the sparkle of this unique style back to the contemporary scene.

One of the most significant art approaches that commonly integrate with famous architectural styles is mural painting/design. However, Islamic architecture does not seem to embrace murals as one of its significant features. The Muslim architect rather used the value of Islamic decorative patterns and motives to decorate the surfaces and facades of his buildings.

The author argues that Islamic art including Islamic patterns and Arabic calligraphy has significant visual potentials that merit further implementations in modern Islamic architecture particularly in developing contemporary Islamic murals.

This paper will not, however, argue for an approach based entirely on models from the past. Instead, it addresses the potential that contemporary mural paintings/ designs might add to Islamic traditions; by using both digital technology and contemporary art styles to perform a contemporary Islamic architectural features. For although there is little evidence to suggest that murals have been a significant feature in the Islamic architecture in the past this paper concludes that production of contemporary murals will be important for establishing a flourishing contemporary Islamic architecture.

### **Keywords:**

- *Contemporary Islamic Architecture,*
- *Islamic Style,*
- *Mural Painting,*
- *Installation art,*
- *Site-Specific Art,*
- *Projection Art*
- *Digital Art*

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### **Introduction**

Have you ever heard about Islamic installation piece of work? Or a contemporary Islamic mural, have you ever heard about Islamic sculpture? These terms are very common to be used with other contemporary art styles but not that common when it comes to Islamic art, in spite of the latest has a lot of potentials that allow it to be one of the most significant art styles on the map.

As a practitioner and a teacher in the field of art and design, mural painting represents the author main subject, endeavouring to make an adequate effort in practical- led researches to develop and improve this kind of art as one of the most popular arts in the Arabic regions especially in Egypt.

There is little evidence to suggest that murals have been a significant feature in the Islamic architecture in the past, the well-known samples of Islamic murals are the ones that have been attributed to the Umayyad dynasty, The best of it is the elaborate mosaics on the Dome of the Rock mosque in Jerusalem(691-692 ac), the Great Mosque in Damascus (607-715ac) Khrbet El.Mafjar Palace in Palestine (724-743 AC)(Farghaly 1991). These murals were all made of mosaic tiles and were influenced by some

previous civilizations like Byzantine and Hellenic periods, so they were not purely Islamic murals or have the significant Islamic approaches, some art historians even believe that these murals were probably made by Roman craftsmen.

Although the notion of Islamic mural seems to be overlooked in Islamic art studies, the author however suggests that Islamic patterns and Arabic calligraphy have spectacular visual potentials that could be used to develop original Islamic murals that would enhance contemporary Islamic or non-featured architectural styles.

This paper also investigates and highlights the idea of using modern art styles and digital technology to evidently demonstrate the significant potentials of Islamic decorative patterns and calligraphy.

### **The Significant Potentials of Islamic Art**

As previously said, this paper will not discuss the traditional potentials of Islamic art (Lines, shapes, colours, etc.) as they have been discussed in many books and references, with the acknowledgment of the importance of these elements as the visual characteristic features of the Islamic art, the author would rather discuss other conceptual features that enhanced this art style and gave it its uniqueness and originality. These potentials may be summarised in the following points:

- Islamic design may seem restricted to two dimensions but that the very character of Islamic design implies three-dimensional possibilities. Through the use of reflecting and shining materials and glazes, the repetition of designs, the contrasting of textures and the manipulation of planes, Islamic decoration becomes complex, sumptuous and intricate (Adam 2004). (Fig.1).
- Space is defined by surface and since surface is articulated by decoration, there is an intimate connection in Islamic architecture between space and decoration. It is the variety and richness of the decoration, with its endless permutations, that characterizes the buildings rather than their structural elements, which are often disguised (Komaroff 2012). (Fig.2).
- Islamic artists developed geometric patterns to a degree of complexity and sophistication previously unknown. Nowadays this aspect generates a very high potentiality of reforming Islamic patterns digitally (using digital technology) to produce developed Islamic patterns that retain the same concept of traditional patterns but in a new and modern view. (Fig.3&4)
- Both variety and unity in the patterns that have been used in Islamic art designs enabled Islamic architect/ artist to use several materials sometimes in the same wall, panel or any other applied surface, this particular feature makes many Islamic architecture or architectural detail, seems to be an installation piece of art in terms of our contemporary definitions (Fig 5&6).



Fig 1: Islamic prayer alcoves (mihrabs), The Pergamon museum, Germany

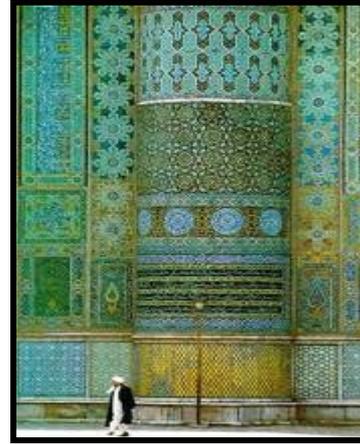


Fig 2: Decorated wall at Masjid Friday Herat , Afghanistan.

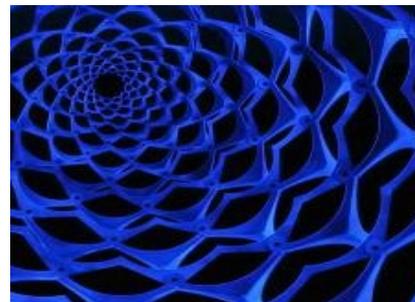


Fig 3: Close-up of Sulook by Sahand Hesamiyan, 2012 Steel, UV Colour, and Black Light



Fig 4: Cube 4 "Architecture by Algorithm", which in large part is inspired by Islamic art, (Presentation at VCU Qatar) By Mario Gagliard, November30- 2006



Fig 5: Saint Petersburg Mosque, (Russia)



Fig 6: Detailed engravings and striking Arabesque tiles in Casablanca, Morocco

**Applications and given samples:**

In this section the author will give some samples of contemporary Islamic art/architecture and works that have been inspired by Islamic art, these samples include architecture, digital art, some

attempts the author made in his PhD research using Islamic patterns.

**Architectural Examples:**

Zaha Haded is one of the most significant contemporary architects; her style implies a great talent that enabled her to win many international prizes in regards of her unique architectural style. The following pictures represent one of her famous designs that she made for the Department of Islamic Art to be housed in the Visconti courtyard of the Louvre. The design was totally inspired from the traditional Islamic art, but what is interesting here is the way Zaha manipulated with the original pattern and gave it this modern style, further the building does not need any additional features or decorative enhancements, as it is already gives the direct Islamic visual impact based on the way patterns were organized not only as decorative features but also as positive and negative elements that formed the whole façade (figures 5&6).

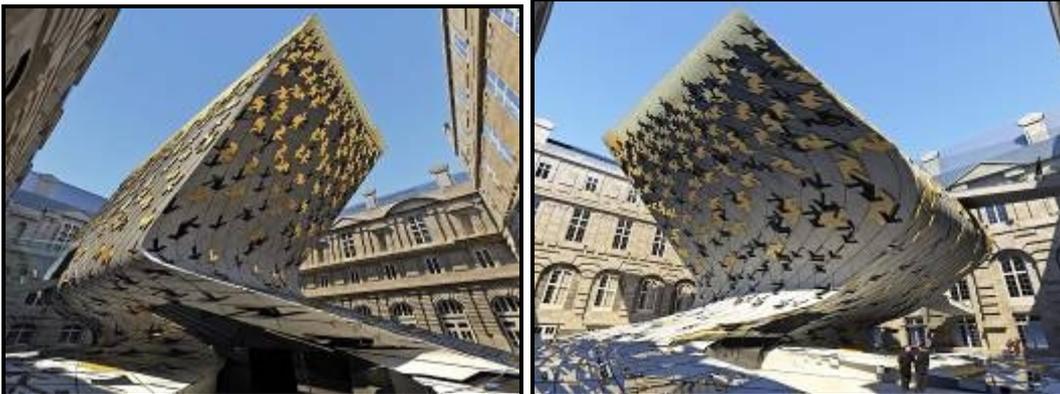


Fig 7 &8: Design for Department of Islamic Art, Visconti courtyard, The Louvre hypothetical design by Zaha Haded

Zaha HAded works demonstrate what the author meant in the introduction by mentioning the idea of using the Islamic art (patterns, motives) with respect to the concept of how these patterns and motives were built (structured) in terms of positive and negative interaction.

One of the most significant points that should be referred to is the high technology that have been used to perform this quality of virtual reality, which made this design looks like a real project placed in its designated space. Using digital potentials available to Artists and designers nowadays to develop and test their designs in relation to the architectural contexts for which they are making their designs could subsequently promote the notion of site-specific art/ design. Therefore, these digital potentials represent useful

devices that the author implemented in developing his own hypothetical designs as discussed in the following pages.

**Contemporary Islamic Art**

Many art historians believe that Arabic Calligraphy is the most important and pervasive element in Islamic art, as it has always been considered the noblest form of art because of its association with the Qur'an (Komaroff 2012). There is no doubt that using digital technology with Arabic calligraphy and the huge diversity of Islamic Patterns and motives would significantly increase the visual potentials these elements might add to the contemporary Islamic approaches. There are countless attempts of digital art samples that adopted Islamic patterns or Arabic calligraphy; by many contemporary artists around

the world, figures 9&10 represent two contemporary murals made by the significant graffiti artist El Seed who developed a very special technique in producing contemporary graffiti murals that are totally formed and inspired by the Islamic art and Arabic calligraphy. El Seed uses Arabic calligraphy (as the main elements of his mural designs) in two approaches, the first one as seen in fig 9 he uses Arabic calligraphy as decorative ornaments to decorate a surface of a building but not in a specific order as seen in Islamic decorative patterns which are usually formed as repetition of a certain motif. El Seed, instead uses Arabic calligraphy in more liberate technique as commonly seen in graffiti art this is why his works are called Calligraffiti.

The second approach as seen in fig 10 represents a different technique where El Seed uses pictorial compositions to form his designs, in this technique



**Fig 9 Calligraffiti on the Arab world Institute, Paris-France By El Seed , date unknown**

#### **Digital Approaches in contemporary Islamic Art**

One of the most promising features of traditional Islamic art is the very fact of using geometrical patterns that were based on mathematical calculations; this particular feature in our daily digital life promotes the Islamic art to be represented in a post modern style with the simplicity that might be achieved by using digital technology.

The following pictures represent some contemporary attempts with digital art to reproduce contemporary Islamic art.

The first one is a spherical shape that was completely covered with the Islamic star using digital approaches (Figures 11, 12, 13, 14).

This unique experimental project was made by Craig S. Kaplan, University of Waterloo, David H. Salesin University of Washington and Microsoft Corporation (Tog 2004). They described the procedures of making this Islamic object by saying We present Najm, a set of tools built on the

the design is not formed as a decorative pattern as the previous one, instead the design is structured according to a specific diagram as a linear composition mixing Arabic Calligraphy with some Islamic Patterns in a free style. The term pictorial composition is commonly used to refer to the way artist and/ or designer organises the design elements in a certain picture format whether this picture format is a piece of paper, a canvas or a wall (Abdelrahman 2009). In the pictorial composition approach the artist/designer could use decorative elements and/or calligraphy the way natural elements or human figures are used in paintings or graphic designs with no restriction to a certain pattern which is more close to the western painting traditions. In El Seed works the use of linear base composition is more common as seen in fig 9&10.



**Fig. 10 Mural painting at Alqayrawan (Tunisia) by El Seed 2013 (Detail)**

axioms of absolute geometry for exploring the design space of Islamic star patterns. Our approach makes use of a novel family of tilings, called inflation tilings, which are particularly well suited as guides for creating star patterns. We describe a method for creating a parameterized set of motifs that can be used to fill the many regular polygons that comprise these tilings, as well as an algorithm to infer geometry for any irregular polygons that remain. Erasing the underlying tiling and joining together the inferred motifs produces the star patterns” (Tog 2004).

They add”

”By choice, Najm is built upon the subset of geometry that makes no assumption about the behaviour of parallel lines. As a consequence, star patterns created by Najm can be designed equally well to fit the Euclidean plane, the hyper bolic plane, or the surface of a sphere” (Tog 2004).

These examples and the previously mentioned ones by El Seed articulate the author argument about the countless potential could be generated in Islamic Art traditions using digital technology.

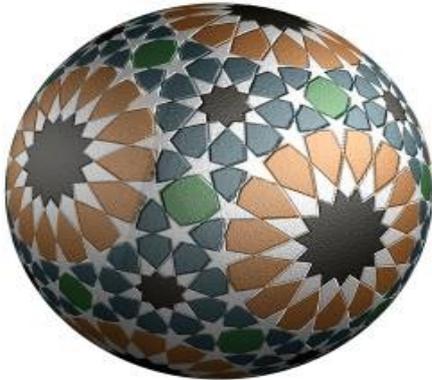


Fig.11

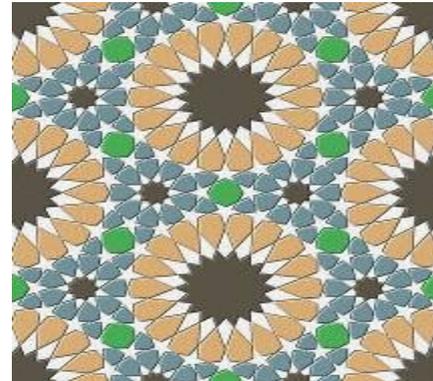


Fig.12

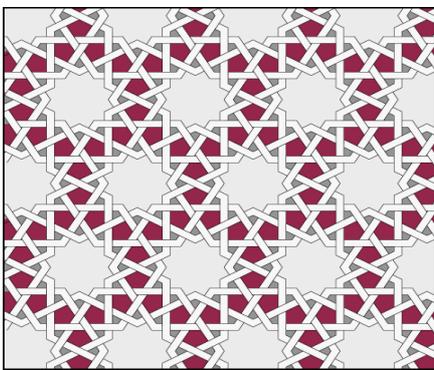


Fig.13

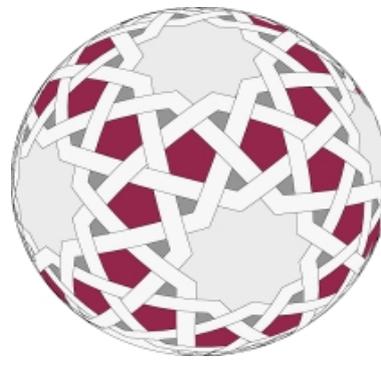


Fig.14

Digital implementation for the traditional Islamic star by Craig S. Kaplan, University of Waterloo, David H. Salesin University of Washington and Microsoft Corporation. 2004

**The Author Attempts in Contemporary Mural Design:**

The following examples represent two of the author experimental projects developed during past practices and academic research. The main idea was to produce contemporary mural designs based on classic structural systems that have been used in the Renaissance period, using modern and post- modern approaches like installation art, conceptual art and projection art. In the following hypothetical samples the author used Islamic patterns to suggest Islamic visual identity as substitute visual identity for the same compositions then decide upon which version of the design would fit to fulfil the site-specificity aspect. With regards to the concept, scale, proportions and the basic traditions of the Islamic patterns, the author did not attempt to manipulate with the original pattern or distort it to fit the space or the medium used to implement the suggested designs.

**The first Design: The Learning Resource Centre at UOB, UK**

The following pages will illustrate the author own attempts in developing contemporary Mural designs using digital technology.

During his PhD study the author was commissioned by the University of Bedfordshire to design 2 site-specific Mural installations to be placed inside the university campus as a way of applying the methods developed in the thesis. One of these projects was commissioned to be placed and installed at the Learning Resource centre - University of Bedfordshire, UK. Fig 15



Fig 15, the designated space for the mural commission in UOB

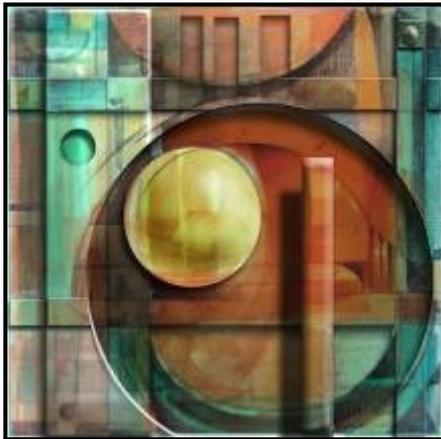


Fig16, the initial sketch for the mural

The initial sketch was based on the main theoretical part of the theses which argues the notion of using classical pictorial composition themes from the Baroque style to be re-presented in contemporary mural design approaches (Abdelrahman 2009). Fig 16

The sketch was developed to fit the wall considering the architectural features that seemed to be insignificant. Such features include: repeating the visual perception of the pillar (that can be seen on the right in fig 15); repeating the visual perception of the handrail by using vertical and horizontal lines as seen in (fig 17). The author suggested that the site-specificity aspect of this mural could be achieved according to the following points:

**Visually**

1. It contained obvious vertical and horizontal lines, which are essential to be used to echo the surroundings.
2. It contained a big circle that gives a dynamic aspect to the design which breaks the overwhelming static rhythm of the space that emerged from the constant relation between verticals and horizontals.
3. Using different types of calligraphy also added another rhythmic order, as well as reflecting part of the human activities being practiced in this area.
4. The layering compositional structure would create real physical depth in such closed area.

**Conceptually**

1. The author used multi-language-calligraphy (English, Chinese, and Arabic) to indicate that this place is a multicultural educational institution. To fulfil the cultural aspect of the space (fig 17).
2. Calligraphy is an essential part of the design

and it was implemented in two different ways: the first instance of this can be seen around the hemi-sphere at the bottom - this indicates that knowledge is generally approachable. The second one is behind the metal pipes on the left hand side of the design to indicate that knowledge sometimes may not be easily reached, and one should break some boundaries to get it.

3. The Red colour inside the circle acts like a gate or a window visually to give some depth to the mural and conceptually to indicate that the more knowledge one can have the deeper one's reactions and behaviour will be. It also indicates that some knowledge is dangerous and should be carefully utilised.
4. The projected parts of the mural installation, the physical presence of the materials used, the written text and the mirror, would cause some of the passing viewers to stop, read, touch and interact with the mural, which may change the normal circulation of the space. This would generate physical interaction between the viewers and the mural.



Fig. 17 The finished and installed mural at the LRC University of Bedfordshire UK 2008

Two versions of the same composition were developed; the first one transformed the whole design into a monochrome, using white colour suggesting that monochrome would visually integrate the mural more effectively with the space.

The second idea was almost the same approach (monochromic) but the written text was replaced with Islamic patterns. This was done to add a significant characteristic façade to the mural, which would emphasize some contemporary issues both visually and conceptually (fig 18 A&B). The visual aspect was about testing the post-modern style and defining the potential of using this architectural approach in contemporary

murals. The conceptual aspect was about the interpretation of some contemporary issues concerning the cross-cultural interaction and the notion of globalization.

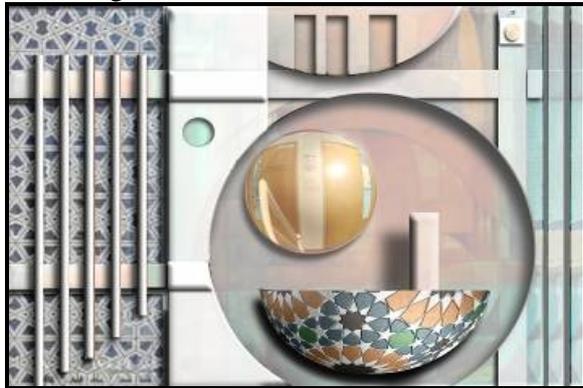


Fig. 18A



Fig. 18B

Fig 18 A&b represent the same composition with the use of Islamic Patterns

The final decision of the University governors was to execute and install the first version of this design (fig 17) for its vivid colours which they presumed would be more integrated and reflects the cultural aspect of the space.

### ***The Second attempt: The National Theatre in London UK (hypothetical)***

A hypothetical design made for the National Theatre building in London, UK, using Islamic patterns. From the first scene, it looks very normal and has no innovative aspiration, but when the viewer knows that it is not only decorative patterns that cover some parts of the building, but also they are not really there, and can be seen as moving object as well, the whole view will be changed.

The main idea here was to use projection art to occupy these particular parts of this purely concrete building (the main staircase and the top of the building) to add an additional rhythm (a moving one) to the one that emerges from the

concrete structure it self. One of the best options suggested to implement this idea was to utilise Islamic patterns for the unlimited potentials Islamic art has which would give the best visual impact.

These potentials as previously mentioned would simplify the mission of using projection art as a digital method to produce several visual solutions to the space, the very fact that Islamic patterns are digitally flexible, extendable, variable and visually enjoyable, makes it easier to obtain such impact. The National Theatre building in London was chosen for the following reasons:

- 1- The structure of the building is quite challenging, its concrete forming emphasises the strength and stability of the building, and also indicates (in the author's opinion) the genuine functional aspect of it.
- 2- The pure concrete structure gives such a wonderful space to implement the idea of using projection art without adding or deducting any features from the building.
- 3- These kinds of concrete buildings are very common to be seen in many different places, and many of them have no particular architectural style, which make them a very good place to adopt this kind of art work (projection art).
- 4- Using projection art to decorate this kind of buildings has the potential of being changeable, so you can see the same building in a different façade every while, especially when it is a public building that houses variable occasions. (Like the theatre).
- 5- There is a very good chance to decide which part of the building would be more appropriate to apply the projection on according to the given features.



Fig.19 A hypothetical design made by the author for the National Theatre building in London, UK 2007- Projection art



**Fig.20 Detailed view for the same design, from a different angle**

Before listing the results and recommendations of this paper, the author would like to quote what architect (Garry Martin 2002) said in his essay "Building in the Middle East Today, where he argues that

"In the 20th century, the Islamic concepts of unity, harmony and continuity often are forgotten in the rush for industrial development".

Martin lists three directions contemporary Islamic architecture has taken: One approach is to completely ignore the past and produce Western-oriented architecture that ignores the Islamic spirit and undermines traditional culture. The opposite approach involves a retreat, at least superficially, to the Islamic architectural past. This can result in hybrid buildings where traditional facades of arches and domes are grafted onto modern high-rises.

A third approach, Martin notes, is to understand the essence of Islamic architecture and to allow modern building technology to be a tool in the expression of this essence. According to (Martin 2002)

"Architects working today can take advantage of opportunities that new materials and mass production techniques offer. They have an opportunity to explore and transform the possibilities of the machine age for the enrichment of architecture in the same way that craftsmen explored the nature of geometrical and arabesque patterns..."

The forms that would evolve from this approach, adds Martin, would have a regional identity, a stylistic evolution and a relevance to the eternal principles of Islam.

The author strongly agrees with Martin's position towards the contemporary thinking of Islamic art, furthermore the author would apply Martin's argument about contemporary Islamic architecture on all other kinds of Islamic art, because that is what really happening nowadays even in our art institutions. The solution is simply like what Martin said about understanding the essence of Islamic art and architecture to allow modern technology to be a tool in the expression of this essence.

### **Results and Recommendation:**

- Using contemporary mural design/painting in contemporary Islamic architecture suggests a positive impact that would enhance and improve the quality of both contemporary Islamic or non- Islamic architecture as explained in El Seed and the author projects.
- Activating modern technology and contemporary art approaches like installation art and projection art to be used in Islamic art/architecture, could help in spreading the Islamic culture over the globe with less expenses (considering the expensive materials Islamic art/architecture commonly utilise) and good quality at the same time. For example, some of El Seeds' works could be digitally implemented on the facades using projection art instead of using traditional painting materials which would enable further visual potentials such as tow different scenes in the daylight and in night scene.
- Islamic art/architecture has its own characteristic of visual and conceptual potentials that could meet with the current technology of the age; these potentials merit further studies and investigations to develop curriculums that could be taught in art and design institutions around the world.
- Commissioning a number of public projects to well-known architects and artists Such as El Seed could promote Islamic architecture and develop further potentials of this significant style that may previously unknown. The literature review indicates that El Seed works already promoted Islamic mural art to spread in different countries such as Franc, Tunisia and the United Arab Emirates.

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