

Artistic Practice in Islam: the dynamics of permissibility and prohibition

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Abstract:

Within the Islamic conceptual framework, art constitutes a sensitive domain where the aesthetic dimension intersects with doctrinal and juristic considerations. The texts of the Holy Qur'an and the Prophetic Sunnah range from an affirmation of the beauty of the universe; to the excellence of craftsmanship and to a stringent warning against certain forms of artistic expression, especially those related to depicting animate beings and adopting statues as safeguards against shirk or undue veneration. Through independent reasoning (*the ijtiḥād*) of the four Sunni legal schools, a broad scholarly legacy has emerged regarding the regulations governing artistic practice and delineating its lawful boundaries. This legacy oscillates between strictness in some forms and measured openness in others, reflecting the jurists' endeavour to reconcile the objectives of the *Sharī'ah* in preserving *tawḥīd* with the human need to express beauty. Accordingly, the central research goal of this study is to derive an integrated Islamic position on art, grounded in Qur'anic texts, Prophetic traditions, and the views of the four schools, and to distinguish between prohibited and permissible art clearly. At the same time, it seeks to reveal the vast spaces that Islam affords for aesthetic creativity without compromising the doctrine of *tawḥīd* or the higher objectives of the *Sharī'ah*. This problem invites a renewed analytical and critical and comparative reading of the scriptural evidence and juristic statements, exploring the

boundaries separating prohibition and precaution on the one hand, and permissibility and encouragement of the employment of art in the service of religious and civilisational values on the other hand. After discussing its findings, the paper is wrapped up by a number of implications and recommendations.

Keywords: Islam and art; religion's stance on art; depiction; statues

Introduction

Islamic art represents a civilisational expression that embodies a balance between visual beauty and doctrinal principles, manifested in geometric and vegetal ornamentation and other motifs in Arabic calligraphy associated with the Holy Qur'an, thereby transcending mere form towards a unifying significance grounded in its sanctity while taking care to avoid depicting three-dimensional animate beings to preserve religious principles. Its relationship with Islam is organic, as the Holy Qur'an encourages excellence in craftsmanship alongside the renunciation of polytheism (*shirk*), whereas the Prophetic Sunnah and jurisprudence set out regulations prohibiting statues, which open broad creative spaces for the diversity of ornamentation and architectural construction without compromising the oneness of God (*tawḥīd*). This legal framework renders art an educational and cultural instrument that serves the objectives of the Islamic Law (*Sharī'ah*) and reinforces Islamic identity.

1. Aims of the Study

The major aim of the present study is twofold. Firstly, it seeks to collect and classify the classical Islamic legal texts (Quranic verses, Messenger's Ahadith and Jurists' statements) which put the line that separates what is permitted from what is prohibited in visual arts practices, namely, painting, sculpture, ornamentation, photos and calligraphy. Secondly, the paper aims to analytically present the various rulings stated by the main classical Islamic jurisprudential schools concerning the demarcation of the licit and illicit artistic practices in Islam.

2. Research Question

This study is guided by the following key research question:

What are the boundaries of permissibility and prohibition in practicing visual arts according to the classical Islamic legal texts namely Qur'an, Sunnah, and books of jurisprudence (*Fiqh*)?

3. Significance of the Study

Undoubtedly the current research is of major significance for diverse stakeholders. To start with, it is deemed as a comprehensive resource that groups the scattered and context-dependent Islamic legal rulings regarding art. Moreover, the paper is a reference for Muslim partitioners, helping them grasp the limitations of Islam when it comes to the creative visual expression. Not only does this study inform curricula in Islamic specializations but it also provides recommendations for both cultural and religious ministries to issue regulations that accordingly to Islamic arts should be practiced to avoid any breach of the core tenets of faith. Last but not least, this paper aids in clarifying any misconceptions vis-à-vis the Islamic perspectives and attitudes of arts, highlighting areas of nuanced differences among great Muslim scholars.

4. Research Methodology and Design

This study adopts an interpretive qualitative methodology. It is subscribed within a non-positivist approach because art is placed in the

context of Islam. Furthermore, the paper embraces a comparative design since that it compares the specific contents of various religious texts ranging from primary textual data including the Holy Qur'an and historical books to secondary data in the form of peer-reviewed articles and monographs.

5. The Concept of Islamic Art

In its essence, the Islamic art stands for the a purely abstract art that is far removed from the representational three-dimensional images, which Islam prohibited to avoid emulating the creation of God. It has drawn many of its elements from the civilisations that preceded it and from nations that prevailed before the rise of the Islamic State. Of note, these elements lost their distinct personalities and merged into the framework of the Islamic religion to eventually become Arab and Islamic in form, spirit and mode.¹

As an umbrella term, Islamic art implies the visual arts performed by Muslims and characterized by diversity, emphasis of non-figurative designs like geometric patterns, calligraphy (i.e. Arabic script), ornaments and arabesques (plant-like motifs). While often associated with religious settings like mosques, it can sometimes be used in secular places like the architecture of palaces, ceramics, textiles, and metalwork. Islamic art is grounded on a tradition that discards depicting human figures; rather, it highlights divine beauty, unity and infinity.

Islamic art was not concerned with an artistic style based on the truthful representation of nature; instead, it adopted another path that relied on nature as a source of inspiration in rendering its subjects through a style in which the transformation of forms derived from nature assumes an orderly, refined ornamental character.² In fact, the Muslim artist excelled. Through the use of abstraction, he was able to derive, innovate, and create artistic designs of diverse forms (some geometric and others vegetal) by using coordinated geometric principles that were applied across the various

¹ Afif al-Bahnasī, *The Aesthetics of Arab Art* (Kuwait: The National Council for Culture, Arts and Letters, 1979), 29.

² Alī al-Kharbūṭlī, *Arab-Islamic Civilisation* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Khānjī, 1st ed., 1415/1994), 289.

fields of Islamic art.³ The geometric and vegetal elements were arranged in positions and with qualities that differ from their natural state to produce fascinating aesthetic rhythm and order. The Muslim artist also mastered Arabic calligraphic inscriptions; therefore, we often see a verse from the Holy Qur'an or a line of poetry⁴ written beautifully on the walls of mosques and castles.

Consequently, the art of abstraction became one of the most prominent characteristics of Islamic art and the essential value that led to the formation of its personality. This prompts us to ask why the Muslim artist adopted this abstract tendency so consistently across most of his/her artistic productions throughout history.

Answering this question requires reference to two views: the religious view of the Qur'an and the Sunnah, which both prohibit depicting living beings. This is what drove the Muslim practitioner to move towards the transformation of different artistic forms. However, this contradicts the archaeological reality of Islamic art, as depictions of living beings of various kinds have reached us across different historical periods. The second view that justifies the heavy abstract tendency of Muslim artists holds that abstraction in Islamic art symbolises what lies beyond the artistic form.⁵ The next sections examine the position of the Holy Qur'an, the Prophetic Sunnah and the Muslim scholars and philosophers regarding all of this. To understand these crucial standpoints, we should first delve into elucidating the criteria of Islamic art.

6. Criteria of Islamic Art

Although the Islamic art was delineated above, its definition is not enough for understanding it. It is fundamental to explicate its chief features.

- a. **Connection to tawḥīd and unity:** Islamic art is founded upon the centrality of tawḥīd; its aesthetic construction expresses the unity of the Creator and the harmony of the

cosmos and distances itself from anything resembling embodiment or drawing near to idolatry, which grants it a distinctive originality not borrowed from the artistic systems of other nations.

- b. **Abstraction away from realistic depiction:** Islamic art tends towards abstracting beings and nature, transforming them into patterns and signs rather than a detailed imitation of the bodies of living creatures to preserve the purity of tawḥīd and to distance itself from images that may lead to veneration or worship. This abstraction allows for a greater focus on the element's spiritual meaning.⁶
- c. **Reliance on geometric forms:** Geometric forms (the point, the line, the plane) are considered the foundation of formal construction in Islamic architecture and ornamentation; they are organised within a coherent system on the basis of balance, interlacing, and proportionate rhythmic repetition, reflecting a conception of the regulation and order of the universe.⁷
- d. **Balance, harmony, and rhythmic repetition:** Ornamental compositions rely on a balanced distribution of elements such that rhythmic repetition corresponds to the recipient's sense of harmony and tranquillity, generating a visual rhythm that carries a spiritual dimension transcending immediate sensation. This repeated rhythm is a tool for affirming unity and its extension in the cosmos.⁸
- e. **Distance from Western imitation and unborrowed originality:** Islamic art appears to be an independent aesthetic system that was not formed in the image of Western figurative arts; somewhat, it influenced them across many historical phases. This independence reflects its

³ Rā'id al-Shar', "The Concept of Abstraction in Islamic Art and Its Impact on the Emergence of Foliated Ornament," *Journal of the University of Sharjah for Sharia and Humanities* 4, no. 3 (1428/2007): 266.

⁴ al-Kharbūṭlī, *ibid.*, 311.

⁵ Titus Burckhardt, *Art of Islam: Language and Meaning* (England, 1976), 43, 51.

⁶ Khālidah al-Kīlānī and Hindī Dhiyāb, "Islamic Art: Its Concept and Criteria," *Dirāsāt: Humanities and Social Sciences* 46, no. 2 (2019): 495–496.

⁷ al-Kīlānī and Dhiyāb, *ibid.*, 496–497.

⁸ Khālid Būhalālah, "The Philosophy of Beauty in Arab-Islamic Art," *Studies in Philosophy and Art* 10, no. 1 (2024): 10–12.

connection to its distinctive doctrinal roots and its particular concept of beauty.⁹

- f. **Support for educational objectives and spiritual beauty:** Islamic art aims to evoke measured emotional responses; it refines taste, disciplines conduct, and elevates aesthetic sensibility toward the meanings of faith and devotion, drawing its reference from the Qur'anic text and the Sunnah, which urge reflection upon the signs of creation and the beauty of the universe. Beauty, therefore, is not an end sufficient unto itself but a means of purifying the soul.¹⁰
- g. **Regulated innovation and the controls of blocking the means:** Islamic art does not abolish the spirit of innovation; instead, it permits creativity within a doctrinal and ethical framework that prevents slipping into the glorification of what contravenes tawhīd or the spread of corruption, thereby realising the concept of "regulated innovation" that combines freedom and responsibility. Here, the principle of blocking the means, which prevents specific images or themes if they are likely to lead to doctrinal or moral deviation, falls.¹¹
- h. **Harmony with fiṭrah and moderation without excess:** Islamic art is keen to address sound fiṭrah; it neither submerges into complexity that repels the recipient nor arouses instincts at the expense of the mind and conscience but balances aesthetic pleasure with the virtuous aim of reminding, reforming, and purifying. This moderation is part of a comprehensive vision that makes art an element of righteous civilisation.¹²
- i. **Commitment to maqāsid and artistic comprehensiveness:** Some researchers view Islamic art as a comprehensive system

in which words (the Qur'an and remembrance), movements (architecture and space), and formal configurations (ornamentation and calligraphy) intersect within a single framework that serves the preservation of religion, the human person, and the intellect.¹³

7. Muslim Artist's Embodiment of the Quranic Meanings

Muslim artists grasped the meanings of the Quranic verses and their profound and surface significance and translated them into ornamental arts and depictions. Thus, they enjoyed the freedom to choose the formulas and compositions that they assemble and create. Besides, they were able to devise abstract geometric and vegetal forms to which they gave the name Arabesque within which the art of Arabic calligraphy is intermingled.¹⁴

The designs of its forms were characterised by abstraction and transformation, and distanced themselves from the literal imitation of nature, as Islamic beauty is connected to the causes of things, not to things; to the essence, not to the incidental; and to the absolute, not to the relative. Consequently, the various forms of Islamic art, such as arabesque and calligraphy, are human crafts that express beauty in their content.¹⁵

We also see that Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawhīdī affirms that art is a form that carries content. This beauty lies in the eloquence of expressing content through the formulation of form, since the various forms of Islamic art confirm the extent to which this art is connected to the perspective of *tawhīd* and the constant search for the beauty of essence within things.¹⁶

As such, art became a search for beauty in everything, and ornamentation came to define

⁹ al-Kīlānī and Dhiyāb, *ibid.*, 498.

¹⁰ Idrīs Maqbūl, "The Problematic of the Fine Arts in Relation to the Objectives of the Sharī'ah," *al-Tafāhum* 43 (2014): 201–205.

¹¹ Bayūmī Ghānim, *The Arts in the Light of the Objectives of the Islamic Sharī'ah* (Amman: The International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2014), 90–95.

¹² al-Mukhtār Muḥammad et al., *The Philosophy of Beauty in Arab-Islamic Thought (Beauty in Sufi Thought as a Model)* (Riyadh: Namā' Centre, 2019), 120–125.

¹³ al-Kīlānī and Dhiyāb, *ibid.*, 495.

¹⁴ Ṣiddīq Ḥusayn, *The Philosophy of Beauty and Questions of Art in Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawhīdī* (Beirut: Dār al-Qalam al-'Arabī, 2003), 14.

¹⁵ al-Kharbūṭlī, *ibid.*, 311.

¹⁶ Alfat Yaḥyā Ḥamūdah, *Theories and Values of Architectural Beauty* (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 2nd ed., 1990), 191.

art, enabling contemporaries to understand the actual value of Islamic art.¹⁷

8. The Qur'anic Position

Islam called for abandoning all types of arts associated with pre-Islamic period (*jāhiliyyah*) and its beliefs and behaviours; it forbids the making of statues for worship and the drawing of everything that has a soul.¹⁸

The mention of statues in the Holy Qur'an occurs in two contexts, each with a distinct purpose. In the first context, statues are associated with prohibition, denunciation, and destruction. In this regard, Almighty God says, on the tongue of Prophet Abraham, peace be upon him¹⁹: "When he said to his father and his people: 'What are these statues to which you are devoted?' {52} They said, 'We found our fathers worshiping them {53} He said, 'Truly, you and your fathers are in clear error {54}."

As for the second context, it approves statues if the aim is adornment and beauty without unbelief in God or associating partners with Him. A proof of this is found in Sūrat Saba' regarding the subjection of the jinn to Prophet Solomon. Almighty God says:²⁰ "They made for him what he willed of elevated chambers, statues, bowls like reservoirs, and stationary kettles. 'Work, O family of David, in gratitude'. And few of My servants are grateful {13}."

Thus, the making of statues and the art of sculpture here are considered among God's favours to humankind, so long as the intention of associating partners with God is absent, and for the purpose of displaying the talent for art and sculpture that God has bestowed upon human beings and upon the jinn who work by Solomon's command.²¹ Some exegetes have explained this by stating that the making of statues was permitted under Solomon's law.

However, when people began to use them to associate partners with God, this ruling was abrogated.²²

9. Sunnah's View

With the spread of Islam, the only aim of the manufacture of statues known among the Arabs in the pre-Islamic period was for associating partners with God and for the worship of idols. Among these famous statues were Hubal, al-Lāt, and al-'Uzzā. Under these circumstances, steep in associating partners with God and in the worship of statues and images, the Prophetic hadiths concerning them, and their manufacture and possession, declared their categorical prohibition.²³

Among this is what is reported in Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī from Abū Ṭalḥah, may God be pleased with him, from the Messenger of God, peace and blessings be upon him, who said: "The angels do not enter a house in which there is a dog or an image" (3225). He also said: "Indeed, those who make these images will be punished on the Day of Resurrection; it will be said to them: Bring to life what you have created." It is also related from 'Ā'ishah, may God be pleased with her, that the Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him, would not leave in his house anything containing crosses without demolishing it.²⁴

What indicates prohibition is what 'Ā'ishah, may God be pleased with her, mentioned when she said: The Messenger of God, peace and blessings be upon him, entered upon me while I had covered a recess of mine (Sahwah)²⁵ with a curtain (Qirām)²⁶ containing statues. When he saw it, he tore it down and said, "The people who will be most severely punished on the Day of Resurrection are those who imitate the creation of God." She said, "We then made it into a cushion or two cushions.

¹⁷ Afif al-Bahnasī, *Art and Orientalism* (Beirut: Dār al-Rā'id al-'Arabī, 1983), 227.

¹⁸ Aḥmad Shawqī al-Fanjarī, *Islam and the Arts* (Egypt: Dār al-Amīn, 1st ed., 1418/1998), 42.

¹⁹ The Qur'an, al-Anbiyā' 21:52–54.

²⁰ The Qur'an, Saba' 34:13.

²¹ al-Fanjarī, *ibid.*, 109.

²² Muḥammad al-Shawkānī, *Fath al-Qadīr*, commentary on Sūrat Saba' (Kuwait: Ministry of Awqāf and Islamic Affairs ed.), 564.

²³ Aḥmad Shawqī al-Fanjarī, *ibid.*, 111.

²⁴ Ismā'īl al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, vol. 5 ('Ayn Mallīlah, Algeria: Dār al-Hudā for Printing and Publishing, 1992), 2220–2221.

²⁵ *Sahwah*: a recess in which an object is placed.

²⁶ *Qirām*: a thin curtain.

‘Ā’ishah, may God be pleased with her, also said: “We had a curtain containing the image of a bird, and whenever someone entered, it would face him. The Messenger of God, peace and blessings be upon him, said: “Turn this away from me, for whenever I enter and see it, I am reminded of this world.” This hadith is evidence that the reason for turning its face away was that it reminded him of this world.²⁷

What is meant by the statement that image-makers are among those most severely punished on the Doomsday that the maker of idols and the like, and the effect of his making of an image, is considered an unbeliever in the oneness of Almighty God. The imams and scholars agreed on this.

He said, “As for images, they include every depiction of animate beings, whether they have upright forms, whether they are engraved on a ceiling or a wall, or woven into a garment; for this, falls under the general ruling. Let this be avoided, and it is obligatory to destroy images for whoever is able, or to remove them.”²⁸

The scholars stated, Depicting the image of an animal is prohibited and constitutes a major sin, because it is subject to the severe warning mentioned in the hadiths, whether it is made in something that is treated with contempt or otherwise; making it is prohibited in all cases because it involves imitation of the creation of God, Glorified and Exalted be He, whether on a garment, a carpet, a vessel, a wall, etc.

The depiction of images of trees, camel saddles, etc., in which there is no image of an animal is not prohibited. This is the ruling concerning the act of depiction itself. To use an object bearing an image of an animal, if it is hung on a wall or on a worn garment, such as that which is not regarded as treated with contempt, then it is prohibited. If it is in a carpet that is trodden upon, or in a bolster or cushion and the like of that

²⁷ Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī, *Fiqh al-Sunnah* by Sayyid Sābiq, vol. 2 (Mu’assasat al-Risālah, 1st ed., 1422/2002), 45–46.

²⁸ Shams al-Dīn al-Dhahabī, *al-Kabā’ir* (Beirut: Dār al-Nadwah al-Jadīdah, n.d.), 181.

²⁹ Muḥyī al-Dīn al-Nawawī, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim bi-Sharḥ al-Nawawī*, vol. 2 (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, 2nd ed., 1972), 390–400.

which is held in low regard, then it is not prohibited....”²⁹

10. The Four Schools

Below are the opinions of the four schools of thought in Islam regarding art.

10.1. The Ḥanafī School

The Ḥanafī School announces: the total prohibition of sculptural depictions of animate beings; the permissibility of flat depictions of animate beings in cases of necessity (without the intention of worship), with due regard to prevailing customs and interest; and the permissibility of depicting what has no soul, such as vegetal ornamentation and geometric and architectural forms.³⁰

10.2. The Mālikī School

Like the Ḥanafī School, the Mālikī one declares the categorical prohibition of three-dimensional statues of animate beings. However, it does not permit flat depictions of animate beings; rather, it dislikes that, especially in places of worship—with limited permissibility outside of them—and it recommends taking into consideration customs and needs in mitigating the degree of dislike.³¹ Besides, the Mālikī School permits depicting ornamentation, plants, and what has no soul

10.3. The Shāfi‘ī School

Similar to its preceding counterparts, the Shāfi‘ī School: (1) prohibits the three-dimensional statues and does not permit them, except in cases of extreme necessity; (2) prohibits depicting animate beings, with recognition of the distinction between flat and three-dimensional images; and (3) permits the depiction of what has no soul, such as vegetal, geometric, and calligraphic ornamentation.³²

10.4. The Ḥanbalī School

The Ḥanbalī School joined the other three schools by calling for the: prohibition of statues and human and animal images, with the

³⁰ ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Jazīrī, *al-Fiqh ‘alā al-Madhāhib al-Arba‘ah*, “Bāb al-Taṣwīr,” vol. 3 (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 2nd ed., 2003), 340–345.

³¹ Aḥmad al-Dasūqī, *Hāshiyat al-Dasūqī ‘alā al-Sharḥ al-Kabīr*, vol. 2 (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, n.d., n.p.), 250–260.

³² ‘Abd Allāh ibn Yūsuf al-Juwaynī, *Nihāyat al-Maṭlab fī Dirāyat al-Madhhab*, ed. Maḥmūd al-Dīb, vol. 8 (Saudi Arabia: Dār al-Minhāj, 2007), 250–270.

exception of a specified necessity. It also permits drawing what has no soul in ornamentations, Arabic calligraphy, and scientific demonstrations that all do not compromise the oneness of God.³³

11. Views of Muslim Scholars and Philosophers on Art

11.1. Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī (d. 414 AH/1023 CE)

Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī links art to eloquence and wisdom, saying:³⁴ "Art is composed of form and content, of thought which is wisdom and creativity which is eloquence," considering art a form connected to tawḥīd and not confined to craft. This conception deepens the understanding of Islamic art as an expressive abstraction of the divine essence, distancing itself from literal representation and highlighting the work's spiritual and immaterial dimensions.

11.2. Ibn Sīnā (d. 428 AH/1037 CE)

Ibn Sīnā presents art as an intellectual conception of beauty so that it becomes an expression of the order of the universe, not an imitation of its particulars. The beauty of a thing is realised in perfection, the proportionality of parts, and the harmony of form in a way that necessitates the soul's appreciation, which renders artistic expression closer to an abstract intellectual act than to direct sensory imitation.³⁵

On the basis of this principle, researchers describe Islamic art (with its geometric, vegetal, and calligraphic ornamentation) as an embodiment of cosmic harmony that makes the recipient sense the divine order without any need for embodiment or anthropomorphic likening of the Creator.³⁶

11.3. Abū Ḥāmd al-Ghazālī (d. 505 AH/1111 CE)

Al-Ghazālī distinguishes between permissible adornment and prohibited adornment. Architectural ornamentation is permissible so

long as it does not distract the heart from God and His remembrance or lead to reprehensible vainglory. At the same time, he is stringent regarding images adopted for veneration or devotional imitation of what befits none but Almighty God. From this, abstraction became a means of blocking avenues leading to *shirk*; the repetition of ornamental units and their rhythmic balance contributed to distancing oneself from the act of imitating the Creator.

Al-Ghazālī also relies on hadith texts to warn against images intended to compete with the Creator, and applies this to the use of images in devotional contexts, not to all forms of beautification and ornamentation. This allows the acceptance of disciplined art so that it does not become a distraction from worship or prohibited aims.³⁷

11.4. Ibn Khaldūn (d. 808 AH/1406 CE)

The arts are regarded among the manifestations of urban civilisation in Ibn Khaldūn's thought; they are the product of disciplined luxury and the consolidation of civilisation, reflected in architecture, calligraphy, and other refined crafts that distinguish the community at the height of its strength, where the unity of creed is manifested in authentic ornamental and geometric patterns not transmitted verbatim from other civilisations. From this perspective, Islamic art is understood as a witness to the flourishing of Islamic urban civilisation.

Recent studies observe that Ibn Khaldūn links the advancement and authenticity of the arts with the civilisational independence of the community; art that produces new forms arising from the meanings of tawḥīd and the requirements of urban civilisation is more capable of influencing other communities than imitative art is.³⁸ Thus, in his conception, art is not a superfluous luxury but an indicator of the

³³ Muwaffaq al-Dīn Ibn Qudāmah, *al-Mughnī*, ed. al-Zaynī Ṭāhā Muḥammad, vol. 4 (Cairo: Maktabat al-Qāhirah, 1968), 250–270.

³⁴ Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī, *al-Imtā' wa al-Mu'anasah*, ed. Aḥmad Amīn and 'Abd al-Ḥalīm al-Najjār, vol. 1 (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1939), 190.

³⁵ Ibn Sīnā (al-Ḥusayn ibn 'Abd Allāh), *al-Najāh*, ed. Mājid Fakhri (Beirut: Dār al-Āfāq al-Jadīdah, 1985), 300.

³⁶ Ḥanash, *ibid.*, 120–122.

³⁷ Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*, vol. 2 (Beirut: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1980), 310–315.

³⁸ 'Abd al-Raḥmān Ibn Khaldūn, *al-Muqaddimah* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 2004), 450–455. See also al-Raysūnī, *ibid.*, 40–42.

soundness of the civilizational structure and its harmony with *fiṭrah*.³⁹

The above presentation of the Islamic rulings and opinions derived from diverse classical texts concerning art yield the following findings. First and foremost, the majority of the prohibitions (especially concerning figurative imagery) are caused not by the act itself, but by its possible outcomes such as idolatry, obscenity, or distraction from religiosity, and the like. Besides, the criteria for permissibility is strongly connected to the art's purpose (*maqasid*), content (not promoting *shirk* or obscenity).

12. Discussion

If the four Imam's views are compared and contrasted, it is found out that the four of them shed light on the jurisprudential aspect of art in Islam. They established rulings with reference to Qur'an and Sunnah. Their basic concern was theological in that they insisted on the avoidance of both *Shirk* and imitation of God's creative act. Their stance was majorly restrictive when it comes to figural art. Apparently, the Hanabali School is the most severe while the others are a bit flexible. Interestingly, all of them permit aniconic art i.e., the depiction of inanimate things like calligraphy, arabesque and functional decorated objects.

After reading all the Islamic legal rulings of visual arts in great classical texts, it becomes crystal clear that there is a unanimous agreement upon the prohibition of crafting statues and three-dimensional figures, i.e. sculptures. Yet, the issue does not lie in a mere absolute prohibition; rather, this prohibition is derived from the purpose of the drawing or the statue. To detail this, if the objective of the artist is to worship someone/ something other than God, it is prohibited because this is devotional art. If the artist's aim is aesthetic per se and serves *tawḥīd*, it is permitted.

The Islam's position on art proceeds from a foundational principle that regards art not as an absolute ruling but as an objective-based

qualification grounded in its purpose, nature, and outcomes, thereby determining the extent of its permissibility or prohibition in the *Sharī'ah*. This approach indicates that art may be practised as a form of devotion or as an aesthetic expression, depending on its aims and materials. All arts that contribute to the service of *tawḥīd* and enhance moral and social values are deemed permissible and open to creativity and renewal. In contrast, everything that leads to imitating the creation of Almighty God or results in the dissemination of *shirk*, is rejected. This leads to distinguishing among, and adjudicating between, the various types of art with reference to the objectives of Islamic *Sharī'ah*.⁴⁰

Here, we consider that art is the epistemic field in which we work and *fiqh* is the epistemic source that constitutes the philosophy of art and its epistemological theory within the Islamic paradigm. This epistemological relationship between art and Islam should be expounded to youngsters their by helping them understand their dogma while explaining the place of aesthetics in it. Put otherwise, explanations of 'aqīdah in a manner that incorporates art within it, and a methodology of faith-based conduct, realise this in the lived reality of religiosity; 'aqīdah is inseparable from the forms of its legitimate expression. Thus, religion must be completed by an authentic juristic efforts that delineate for us the features of the accepted art.⁴¹

Regarding the Muslim scholars and philosophers, they all approved the jurists' rulings on figural art. Their primary focus transcends theology to philosophy, ethics and sociology because they tackled beauty, creativity and their roles in development and civilization. They addressed matters like: the effects of art on the soul, the function of art in society, and the link between art and ultimate truth. In short, they discussed the nature, purposes and effects of art.

12. Implications

³⁹ 'Alī al-Kharbūṭlī, *Arab-Islamic Civilisation* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Khānjī, 1st ed., 1994), 295.

⁴⁰ Ḥanash, *ibid.*, 12–15.

⁴¹ Muḥammad Idh'ām Ḥanash, *Fiqh al-Ḥusn: A Maqāṣid-Based Grounding of the Concept of Islamic Art and Its Epistemic Limits* (London: Al-Furqān Foundation for Islamic Heritage, 1st ed., 2024), 215–216.

The results of this study can be implemented successfully in many fields. First, the jurists rulings regarding figural arts should be integrated in the curricula of Islamic art departments. Second, the Ministry of Culture should develop an ethical framework for Muslim artists so that they act accordingly when deciding on their creative choices. Third, once clarified, it has become easier to conduct an interfaith and intercultural dialogue to demonstrate the rich tradition of artistic expression among Muslim artists and justify their decisions.

13. Recommendations

Based on the findings, this study provide the following recommendations.

- a. Future research should address the new artistic expression in the 21st century as the application of ancient rulings will require *Idjtihad* and careful exploration. Digital art or generative AI use in producing two-dimensional and three-dimensional drawings and videos may require a unified *fatwa* by a recognized Islamic legal institution.
- b. Both media and art literacy should be promoted in Islamic schools to explain the boundaries between the permissible use of digital photography and the prohibited practices such as the creation of statues.
- c. State and private patronage should be encouraged in the field of art with the aim of preserving the goals of Shari'a.

Conclusion

Islam does not offer a single absolute ruling on art; rather, it distinguishes, in terms of higher objectives, between devotional art that is prohibited and aesthetic art that is permissible when it serves monotheism and values. The texts of the Qur'an and the Sunnah prohibited images and statues while opening the realm of adornment and beauty when these are detached from the aims of worship and veneration.

The schools of law unanimously affirmed the prohibition of statues of animate beings. Abstraction in geometric and vegetal ornamentation and Arabic calligraphy constitute the primary visual language of Islamic art,

expressing essence and meaning rather than the body and imitation. Islamic art translates the meanings of the Qur'an into arabesque and calligraphy, transforming texts and monotheistic meanings into a visual construction harmonized with creed and natural human disposition.

Islam does not offer a single absolute ruling on art; rather, depending on the objective, it distinguishes between devotional art that is prohibited and aesthetic art that is permissible when it serves monotheism and values.