

# **The Relationship between Islamic Art and Spirituality in the Ottoman Period**

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AR 127

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Spring 2010

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## **Preface**

Islamic art is distinct from the Western ideology of art that many in the modern world are familiar with. The Islamic world's approach to art is with the use of organic forms in a technical and precise process which demonstrates the rapport between God and mankind. This paper will discuss facets of Islamic art and its spiritual functions that are unfamiliar to the Western audience; the analysis is reflective of both Islamic and Western perspectives.

The art works discussed are of the Ottoman period in Turkey, ranging between the 13<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. Mediums and materials include Iznik ceramics and calligraphy on parchment and metal. The items selected were found in the *Art of the Islamic World*, a permanent exhibition at The Smithsonian's Freer and Sackler Art Galleries.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank Professor Farr for personally escorting me to the Freer and Sackler Art Galleries to see the *Art of the Islamic World* exhibition which provided the inspiration for this paper. I would like to note that my scholarly sources were located through the network of available MC academic resources. Finally, I am greatly thankful to my parents for always emphasizing and exploring our rich and diverse heritage.

## **Introduction**

Islamic art is restricted to non-representational forms due to Islamic law's prohibition of images depicting living beings. It is believed that the creation of the living form is divinely reserved for God. All manmade art forms thus "reflected religious ideas and values" (Denny 199). The use of abstract forms helped to induce the spiritual contemplation of the devout believer in the Islamic world.

The Ottoman Empire was an Islamic state that primarily occupied modern Turkey. The Ottomans developed decorative schemes that emphasized their Orthodox Islamic beliefs and spirituality. Art was used to remind mankind of his remembrance of God and of Heaven that awaits the soul of the believer. The aesthetics that systematically articulated the adornment of architecture, parchment, and metal arose from the belief that "God is beautiful and loves beauty" (Irwin 52). Islamic art's spiritual function presented a deep sense of peace and "even a kind of psychological assurance" in the hearts of Muslims then and now (Nasr 196).

The goal of Islamic art is to speak to the heart and mind of the believer in remembrance of Islam's message that all beauty "is a gift from Heaven full of *barakah* (blessings)" (Nasr 200). In order to grasp the spirituality induced by the simple elements of Islamic art it must be explored in the context, the religion of Islam, that it was created in. As a result, modern-Western audiences may come to understand the beauty that Islam attributes with the Word of God.

## **Analysis**

The Silk Road trade influenced Turkish potters to combine clays that "produced a very strong white body that resembled Chinese porcelain" (Denny 49). As a result, new

techniques in producing ceramics using underglaze painting became the Iznik style. Early Iznik ware “consisted of one color: cobalt blue.” By the 16<sup>th</sup> century, it expanded to include red, green, turquoise, and black (Denny 49). The Iznik style reflected the influence of the East and West on Turkey: decoration schemes closely resembling both Ming porcelain and European garden flowers, respectively.

Iznik-styled tiles were incorporated in the construction of commissioned *mesjids* (mosques) by the Sultan. The motifs on the tiles are abundant with grapes and flowers representative of that promised to the believer “in the gardens of Paradise” as prescribed in the Qur’an (Denny 113). Iznik tiles enhance the ambiance of the *mesjid* by visually manifesting *hikmah* (wisdom) behind the revelation of God’s Word to mankind.

Islamic art reproduced Qur’anic texts as a metaphor that “equates the Word of God with light and divine illumination” (Denny 199). The art of Arabic calligraphy developed in Turkey as volumes of the Qur’an “were lavishly decorated in gold and silver” for the Ottoman elite (Irwin 182). The 28 letters of the Arabic alphabet are connected in elaborate scripts on architecture, parchment and metal. Qur’anic texts applied to the art of the Ottoman Empire represented the “sacred presence of God” since representational figures would equate to idolatry, which is *haram* (forbidden) in Islam (Nasr 30). Calligraphic forms of Islamic art unveiled the beauty of the Qur’an, Word of God, in the Ottoman Empire.

## **Conclusion**

Islamic art is derived from the spiritual nature of the *hikmah* of God’s Words. The modern world has neglected the spiritual dimensions of Islamic art and thus does not grasp the impression that a simple form can have on the Muslim’s heart. The Western

world's approach to Islamic art is that of a secular and historical nature; however the fact that figurative forms are *haram* in Islam makes such an incompatible with the *raison d'être* of Islamic art. Therefore to truly appreciate Islamic art one must understand and embrace the Islamic traditions that conceived it.

Visuals



Fig 1.0 Iznik style painted dish of the mid- 16th century Ottoman Period, Turkey.



Fig 1.1 Iznik style painted tile of the Ottoman period, 1575, Turkey.



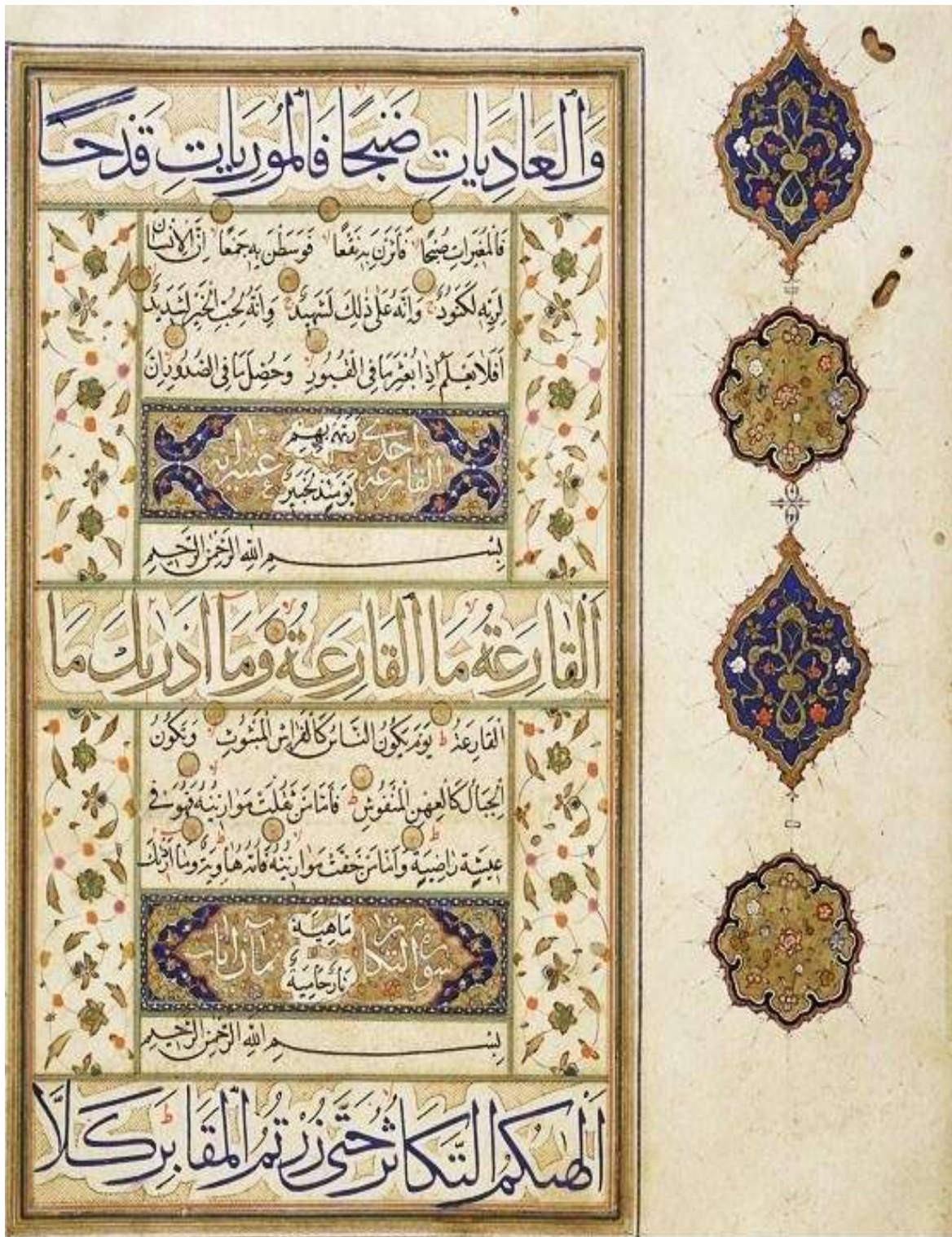


Fig 2.0 Folio from a Qur'an of the late 16th century Ottoman period, Turkey.





Fig 3.1 Inqilab name of Sultan Akshak II, 1494, Turkey.



Fig 3.0 Candlestick decorated with astrological symbols from the 13th century, Turkey.



Fig 3.1 Silver bowl of the late 15th century Ottoman period, Turkey.

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