Presentation of Human Form

Nothing in the Holy Quran precludes the use of figurative forms. However, there is hesitancy due to the fact that the pre-Islamic Arabs used images and statues as symbols of worship. Conservative Islam has very strict interpretations of what is and what is not allowable and thus it is always preferable to err on the side of caution.

The Sunna, the tradition of the Prophet (pbuh), clearly does not favor depiction of anything living, either human or animal. This is understandable, given the oral tradition of the culture at the time, the supreme example of which is the miracle of the Quran. Furthermore, the extremely difficult conditions for survival in a desert environment would favor a far more portable verbal tradition over a potentially competitive creative visual culture that would require material difficult to obtain.

Regarding the political situation, the Byzantine Empire that extended throughout the Levant used iconographic depictions of holy figures in both religious and political contexts, something that Islam was careful to avoid and distance itself from.

However, this quickly changed as the spoken word gave way to the written word – a necessity given that the holy Quran existed only in verbal form at the time of the Prophet’s death.

The concurrent conquest of neighboring cultures, Egypt, Byzantine Levant and Sassanian Persia meant that many different types of artistic traditions and craftsmen would be absorbed, resulting in the development of a new, very rich ornamental form and style that would be used extensively to decorate everything from buildings, furniture, tableware, to clothes, books and beyond.

Figural forms started to appear as illustrations in Arabic manuscripts from northern Iraq, which spread through Egypt to al-Andalus and evolved into the beautifully detailed miniatures from Persia and Turkey. In fact, some samples of these miniatures are so bold as to depict the Prophet himself.

My art has evolved into many different genres including applied media, abstract, calligraphy, automobiles, landscapes as well as portraits in which human forms, some of them living, are depicted.

I come to terms with this cultural divergence in my belief that creative art is a reflection of the God-given freedom of the spirit that resides within each individual. This spirit, in turn, is influenced by so many different factors including education, exposure, religion, family, friends, environment, etc. The human form in my art is no different than an artwork that may depict an automobile or a tree or wind at will.

In a modern context, a photographer or a television cameraman also depicts the human form far more vividly than an interpretive artist. Therefore one can logically conclude that this is not a problem.

For me as a Muslim, ever present in my mind are the words of the Prophet (pbuh) that “God is Beautiful and Loves Beauty.” But the influence in my art is mainly Western.

There are several reasons for this. First, art, as a subject, is not taught at public schools in our region. There is a preference for technical/natural sciences or literature (giving students more opportunities for employment).

Furthermore, higher educational opportunities in art are very limited if not absent completely from current university curricula. There are currently no programs for art, or museum studies (curators) in the Arab world that I know of (with maybe the exception of Egypt; the Levant and Iraq).

Second, society has generally frowned upon artists and any type of craftwork as a career. Third, there is a lack of government (i.e. official/legal) protection for creative and intellectual property. Additionally, there are very limited opportunities to become associated with art, because of a lack of art galleries and museums.

Following 9/11 and the many challenges posed to the Arab world politically, economically, militarily and culturally, Arab art in the Arab world has only now started to possess a cultural and financial value. As Arabs, we are finally acknowledging the extreme importance and value of our culture and heritage. We are beginning to learn about Arab artists and their struggles in the past, the problems they now face and their unlimited potential for the future.

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