

Presentation of Human Form

Nothing in the Holy Quran precludes the use of figural 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 any living being, 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 environmental context, 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 Per-

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sia 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 a work of calligraphy, it is simply paint on a canvas.

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 here 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

Celebration of Women's Bodies

Early in life I was exposed to Islamic art in the domain of our daily life, in the architecture of the holy mosques in Mecca and Madinah and the family house, with their colonnades, high arches and decorated walls and ceilings. The prohibition of images exists. Growing up I did not realize it, but gradually I became aware of it. But I believe this prohibition was for that early period of Islam, when Islam was new and people were close to paganism, inclined to worship statues and images, so I believe what is prohibited is worshipping those statues and images.

Because later Islamic artists gave us fabulous works of arts such as you see in al-Wāsitī's work and miniatures, or in the decoration of ornaments of daily life, this is what influenced me the most, thus, in most of my works I celebrate women's bodies by drawing and painting. For me the Prohibition has not been a problem.

I was especially influenced by Islamic art, by the engraved wood of the houses' balconies, windows and great doors and the decorated ornaments or silver objects in every household.

I was influenced by the repetitive motifs, this amazing repetition which resembles a kind of prayer enacted by the artists or craftsmen on silver or wood, copper or textile, the endless whir-

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ling of the engraved plants or calligraphy, the mystic dance of the letters, emerging from each other, entwining and leading to the invisible. It made me dizzy to follow their paths.

(Especially I remember watching my father, who was a calligrapher, skillfully painting with letters and words, and being almost hypnotized by his hands smoothly gliding with graceful letters.)

I was amazed by the flat surface of those works of art, the two dimensions of the tableaux which created a world of the abstract, in which the figures took new dimensional forms, deformed in a abstract, mystic, enchanting way, which I think leads the mind to contemplate the third dimension, the soul. In that abstract world there was an inner whirling movement, plunging to the depths or ascending to unimaginable heights. I felt it in the air all around me in Mecca during prayer times, when all faces and hearts were drawn to the center of the holy mosque, and all our body-parts followed, rhyming their movements to that tempo.

This inner dance is in my every painting, whirling and leading to the invisible, the land of vigor and life, where death has no influence whatsoever on the inhabitants. Since my early work I have used the primary colors and golden glaze ornamenting typical of Islamic art.

Shadia Alem

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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 awakening to 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.

Mohamed Kanoo