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The Image Debate: Investigating the Rationale Behind Aniconism in Islamic Arab Societies

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Abstract

Over the centuries, there has been plenty written and documented about Muslims' attitudes towards the arts. Many scholars of Islam claim that the faith as a whole is opposed to the visual representation of living things, however, a look at representational art and images created in Muslim societies— past and present— tell a different story. A study of the Holy Qur'an will show that no prohibition exists in Islam that applies to all representational images. This article investigates the origins of how, why, and where ideas about prohibition developed, from a historical perspective, in order to explore what led some contemporary Muslim societies to develop, maintain, and create a generational succession of opposition to images in everyday life and within the visual arts. The sources included in the article will also shed light on how social, cultural, and political situations that contributed to aniconism and iconoclasm in some situations.

Keywords: *Islamic Art, Muslim Societies, Image Prohibition, Aniconism, Iconoclasm*

INTRODUCTION

Muslim Attitudes Towards the Arts and Representation

I grew up in a conservative Muslim Arab society, and was taught from an early age in school that creating, owning, and displaying representational images of living beings was taboo; this is a belief many Muslims hold to be true today. Writings on the history of art and Islam simply state that for many reasons, which are infrequently explored, Islam was and remains opposed to the visual representation of living things from a theological standpoint. A close study of the holy Qur'an will reveal no prohibition of such representations; however, the rejection of artists and the representations they create can be found in the traditions about the life of the Prophet, and they are understood to be, as Oleg Grabar (1987) phrases it in his seminal text *The Formation of Islamic Art*, "genuine expressions of an original Muslim attitude" (p.72).

Scholarly writing since the late nineteenth century has focused on the overarching question of the legality of the representation of living beings. In 1890, Orientalists discovered mural paintings at Qusayr Amrah, in modern day Jordan, and began investigating what they considered to be an irregularity in the customary impression of the nature of Islam and the cultural contexts surrounding it (Williams, 2012). They set out to define the underlying theological causes of the prohibition of images. Simultaneously, the rise of Islam coincided with Byzantine iconoclasm, which led to taking into account the political aspects of a supposed Muslim prohibition (King, 2004). There were other reactions that took place among Muslim scholars, which were focused on the same question; some aimed to justify the prohibition solely on a theological basis, while others were inclined to play it down as simply a feature of Islam; but why these reactions were interpreted as obligatory merits further investigation.

According to Grabar, the many important studies that are centered on representation have developed far-reaching ideas, however none of the studies is wholly relevant to a number of questions; at the time of the formation of Islamic civilization, was there "some element of a doctrine that directly or indirectly affected the arts?" Were these elements, "if they existed," of ample "magnitude and originality to impose a unique direction to Islamic art?" Is it possible to outline an "attitude" of early Muslims toward the artistic creations of cultures

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they interacted with and toward what they created for themselves or "expected created for them?" (Grabar, 1987, p.73)

There is little literary documentation, which is earlier than the ninth century that can be used for the development of artistic theories, and by then, many classical defining features of the new Muslim artistic production had already been created in Arabia and neighboring lands. However, two features consistently appear as one analyzes the various scholarly texts. One feature is the texts that focus on the prohibition of representation are not easy to find, and do not formulate a definite intellectual body of literature in Islamic tradition; instead, they occur somewhat as an afterthought for the purpose of illuminating a particular or minor legal issue. It is important to note that the preoccupation with a theory of the arts or representation was not central to Islam—during its early days— in Arab lands and beyond. This does not come as a surprise if one considers the controversy of Byzantium and the Christian Middle Ages regarding iconoclasm, which did not fully formalize its own stance on the arts (Elsner, 2012).

Much of the knowledge of Christian attitudes towards the arts is derived from official panegyrics such the description Procopius, the official biographer and court historian to Emperor Justinian, gave of Hagia Sophia or from other minor references (Downey, 1947, p.171). This raises a set of other questions: if the Middle Ages in general perceived its arts as a direct consequence of its culture, is it justifiable to discuss, specifically, an Islamic attitude to the arts? Should the import of a theological system be deemphasized or would it be more plausible to concentrate on the way of life it cultivated, which could impact both artistic and material production? Would it not then make sense to arrive at the conclusion that what affected the arts was the existent social culture—social in this case can be understood in a wider sense—rather than intellectual, religious or not to mention aesthetic doctrines? In other words, in order to understand the variables that influenced the arts, one must understand how art formulated in Arab and Muslim societies.

Another characteristic that dominates most of the texts concerning visual expressions is that they are normally provoked by an image, representation of some sort, or a work of art. They hardly ever begin with a theoretical premise or question of the relationship between a created image and the specific circumstance that inspired its creation. The usual intellectual modus operandi of a medieval Islamic text can be encapsulated as follows: "Here is an image, how did it happen to be?" It has never been: "How can one make an image of this subject or visually represent this idea (Grabar, 1987, p.74)?" This approach implies that a world of images always existed, which observers were somehow opposed to or found to be out of the ordinary and conflicting with the Muslim view of the world. Although this is a view that is held in high regard by many Muslims, this reaction is not unique to the Muslim faith; St. Bernard's was opposed to the figural representations created in the Romanesque world.

Later on, militant Protestantism ruined the sculptures in churches as did the French Revolution due to emotional, political, religious or social relationships between the images and an "enemy," which could be the devil, the Catholics, or the ancient regime (Spicer, 2017, p.1012). In present times, we have also witnessed on several occasions the methodical demolition of visual images (Boldrick, 2013). These activities have garnered theoretical and philosophical justifications that took place, almost always, after the fact and not as an intellectual premise. In many of these occurrences, it seems as though representations are created and exist seamlessly until an event takes place in the culture—this could be a historical even or an impulsive instinct that all of a sudden ensues and destroys images only to have the representations return after the storm has passed.

These initial remarks that have been made and the questions they bring forth bring to light that traditional Arab Muslim culture did not possess a canon about the arts; there were no official thought-out rejections of creative activities nor positive accepted wisdom about the processes or beautifying values of various forms of art (Blair and Bloom, 2003). One can assume then that the ways of life and doctrines of early Islam may have steered the culture in pursuing certain artistic activities rather than others; what existed were attitudes rather than doctrines about the arts.

A final observation can be deduced from these introductory questions. Scholarly concentration and fixation on the prohibition of living beings is not accidental or misguided however, it does partly overlook a historical or cultural framework and instead focuses on wider anthropological issues related to representations and their

connection to a particular life or nature they seemingly imitate or influence. For the purpose of this paper, the investigation toward defining the character of early Islam's position on the arts will focus on specific historical documents previously discussed by Oleg Grabar and other scholars, which play a significant role in demystifying contemporary attitudes towards images. The paper will also focus on wider implications of Muslim attitudes towards images and representations.

HISTORICAL DOCUMENTS

According to Grabar, six documents are pertinent to the study of early Muslim attitudes towards images: the art of pre-Islamic Arabia, revelations from the holy Qur'an, traditions about the Prophet's life and thoughts, accounts of the conquest, early monuments, and coinage (Grabar, 1987).

The Art of Pre-Islamic Arabia

Central Arabia, where Islam first emerged, did not house impressive living architecture (King, 1991). This is evident in how religious sanctuaries were roughly planned out and constructed in a manner that was considered poor even for simple ceremonies. The monument that took center stage, however, was the Ka'bah, the holiest of them all, and yet the simplest of them all aesthetically since it did not include any decoration or usual elements found in an architectural structure, such as doors or windows. The custom of draping the Ka'bah with multicolored textiles gave it importance and a facade of visual richness. What seem to be unknown is what the colors symbolized specifically and their interpretation in terms of aesthetic beauty, but matters took on a different character later on in the eighth and ninth centuries; building activities later included more intentional aesthetic features in Makkah and other places. Some sources indicate that several individuals, wealthy and otherwise, took it upon themselves to drape the Ka'bah as a way of honoring its holiness. These individuals used whatever material was available to them to carry out this mission (Grabar, 1987). One can surmise that the pietistic and emotional idealization, however, did not appear in earlier times as fervently as later centuries.

The evidence that is difficult to obtain is for secular architecture. It is highly plausible that the wealthy merchants of Makkah built sophisticated accommodations for themselves, but it cannot be proven, and the developments that took place in the following centuries exemplified the simple nature of aristocratic settings in pre-Islamic Arabia. For example, the Umayyad palace art in Damascus was not derived from pre-Islamic Arabia (Grabar, 1993). The case being made here is that considering the aesthetic qualities of architecture was not archetypal in traditional Arabian society; therefore, concern with the arts was not a point of contention.

Information about the visual arts in Arabia is also sparse, and from the scarcity of originally Arabic terms that refer to artistic production, it can be concluded that there was very little painting, sculpture, or manufacture that focused on outcomes other than purely utilitarian objects. The idols that were made in Makkah were primitive, and the painted image of a Virgin and Child that was found in the Ka'bah was most likely a product of folk art or created by a non-Arab (King, 2004). The documented accounts of paintings and sculptures that are deemed significant aesthetically existed outside of early Arabia—generally in the Christian neighboring areas of Egypt, Ethiopia, and Syria. The textiles and pillows that were owned by the Prophet's youngest wife, Aisha, most likely came from lands on the Arab's trade routes such as Egypt or Syria (Elias, 2012). The craftsmen who worked in Arabia were generally non-Arab, frequently Jews, and the practice crafts were not held in high regard. Even when the Ka'bah was rebuilt in 605 AD, a foreign carpenter supported by a Coptic assistant carried out the project (Glassé, 2001).

Research on Arab kingdoms has shown impressive artistic achievement in places such as Petra and Yemen, however, the information in our possession about the arts of pre-Islamic Arabia or what pre-Islamic Arabs thought or knew of the arts is scarce (Rico, 2018). But for the purpose of identifying attitudes rather than precise facts, the main point is that, regardless of what pre-Islamic art existed to the Arabs, it was later overlooked or shown no regard in Muslim tradition. There are several reasons for this, and one such reason is the organized attempt to eliminate the pre-Islamic *jahiliyyah* past, the time of ignorance, which took place centuries before the revelation to the Prophet Muhammad. It was a process of rejecting what were considered negative values of pagan Arabs (Berkey, 2003).

One can surmise that the educated segment of a particular culture would reject the historical, religious, and at times literary past of another given culture. Contemporary times have taught us about how history is written and rewritten, and how people, events, and places can be annihilated; can these same actions be applied to a world of visual forms? Is it possible that the collective memory of visual forms was completely obliterated even though they were pertinent to the life of the whole collectivity and surrounded them day in and day out? Is it plausible to put forth these questions with the knowledge that the considerable opposition to the Prophet's beliefs and activities existed in the most sophisticated and richest locale of pre-Islamic Arabia, the very locale from which early leaders of Islam emerged?

While it is true that the later Muslim tradition deemphasized the presence of any art in Arabia, it is quite possible that a reason for this was because the art could have been strongly associated with the hated elite (upper class) of Makkah. This leads to the consideration of two hypotheses: one, it is possible Muslims rejected artistic activities in general because it was associated with specific social groups. The other hypothesis is related to the first; is that a work of art may also possess a social significance, perhaps in some circumstances or in relation to certain events, and this may be the principal hypothesis from time to time.

The Holy Qur'an: Passages

The second document that can be examined more closely is the Holy Qur'an. When dealing with this religious text, it is important to separate the passages that were used for "post facto justifications of certain theological and intellectual positions from those which appear to have been affected by actual contemporary needs." (Grabar, 1987, p.78) One passage that relates to representations focuses on Solomon: "And of the jinn, some worked before him by the leave of his lord; and such of them as swerved away from Our commandment, We would let them taste the chastisement of the Blaze; fashioning for him whatsoever he would, places of worship, statues, porringers like water-troughs, and anchored cooking pots (The Qur'an, 34:12-13)." The interpretation of this passage is rather complicated. Outside of the overarching significance—a variety of different works of art were created for Solomon, the prophet king—there are observations worth noting. One is that "statues" are mentioned amid the objects fashioned for Solomon. The original Arabic term used in the passage is *timthal*, although it may not possess the same characteristics of three-dimensional sculpture commonly recognized in contemporary times. However, there is minimal doubt that some kind of resemblance to living things was intended. Another point is that statues in the passage, or whatever was meant by *timthal*, are associated with quotidian objects such as cooking pots; a connection is formed between aesthetic qualities and common everyday items.

The third and most important point crystallizes if one observes the context of the passage as that of signs sent by God, which is a common thread in the sequence of prophets; it is intermingled with the echoes of appeals to present, past, and future nonbelievers. Representations in this case are not designated as humanely artistic creations, but rather as heavenly that point to the exceptionality of Solomon's status.

Both advocates and opponents of images in Islam can give the same context to the Qur'anic passage that has been frequently utilized; it is found in God's words to Mary: "God creates what He will. When He decrees a thing He does but say it to 'Be," and it is. And he will teach him [Jesus] the Book, the Wisdom, the Torah, the Gospel, to be a Messenger to the children of Israel saying, 'I have come to you with a sign from your Lord. I will create for you out of clay as the likeness of a bird; then I will also heal the blind and the leper, and bring to life the dead, by the leave of God (The Qur'an, 3:43).'" The second passage places more emphasis on the fact that God alone creates the significance and value that is given to representations, and that such representations fall into the category of "signs" that God sends to man.

Many traditionalists have surmised that the representation of the bird is only important if life has been given to it; but only God is able to provide anything with life. It unclear how the meaning of the passage was interpreted at the time of its declaration, but what seems to be evident is its symbolic meaning—the Arabic term used for "likeness," *hiy'ah* has an abstract meaning "shape" and is usually not used to refer to visual representations.

Finally, two other passages, which are connected, are also relevant to addressing the topic of representations. The first one is: "O Believers, wine and arrow-shuffling, idols and divining arrows are an abomination, some

of Satan's work; so avoid it; haply so you will prosper (The Qur'an, 5:92)." Then Abraham chastises his father Azar for worshipping idols: "I see thee and thy people in manifest error (The Qur'an, 6:74)." The words for idols in these two Qur'anic passages are correspondingly *al-ansab* and *al-asnam,* both of which mean representations, and could take the form of statues or paintings for the aim of worship (Scagliarini 253). In both passages, the meaning is that of opposing the reverence or worship of idols, and not of rejecting or dismissing representations used for other purposes. Yet interestingly, these same passages were referenced later as evidence to oppose images of living things. The dilemma is to pinpoint when and why justifications for such rejections were searched for in the Qur'an and why the interpretations some times extended beyond the meaning of the highlighted passages.

Before beginning to explain why and when this search took place, there are still observations to be noted about the holy Qur'an as a document that can be used to explain artistic endeavors. Clearly the list of passages used in this article is not comprehensive; there are few passages that can be interpreted in relation to the prohibition of images. The exegesis's application to understanding the arts is nominal, and often takes place as an after effect. Exodus, however, explicitly states: "You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them (NRSV, 20:4–5)".

But since the Qur'an is concerned with all facets of life, it is plausible to deduce that during the beginnings of Islam, at the time of the Prophet Muhammad, issues with images of living things and artistic creativity did not emerge as a pertinent question that required a decree. The Prophet's only documented action regarding the arts was the demolition of the idols surrounding the Ka'bah in Makkah. It is important to note that the Prophet left an image of the Virgin Mary and Jesus, which indicates that not every representation was regarded a peril to the faith (Creswell, 1946).

The Qur'an vividly describes scenes from the past, the future, paradise, hell, and many matters in between; it depends on understanding but also imagination. Phrased differently, it depends on knowledge but also painting pictures through one's imagination. Some of the messages of the Qur'an were used artistically as calligraphic excerpts and appear on objects in the later Islamic artistic production, but the book itself has never been used as a source of figurative illustrations—legal and theological meanings aside, the holy Quran's main function was not the interpretation into man-made visual forms. Although it is very detailed in its verses and passages, it mostly does not contain long narrative sequences; the Qur'an was and still is meant to be recited, and its divine words are where its aesthetic appeal resides.

Although the Qur'an is not illustrated, the life of the Prophet became legendary not long after his passing, and was illustrated on occasion during the thirteenth century and beyond (Grabar, 2003, p.34). Many may wonder if holy books do require illustrations. The visual interpretation of holy books usually take place when a culture or a segment of it demands a visual version that may clarify or make easier the textual difficulties, as demonstrated in biblical illustration. Then it is perhaps appropriate to conclude that even though the Qur'an is meant to be recited rather than visually illustrated, the main reason that such interpretations did not take place is not because of the nature of the Qur'an, but rather because of other conditions that played a role in shaping the Muslim ethos.

Finally, it has been documented that the fundamental theological message of the Qur'an is that of complete singularity, the ineffable power of God. He and no one else is a *musawwir*, a "fashioner" (The Qur'an, 59:24), which is the exact term used for painter or creator of images (Grabar, 1987, p. 81). As the sole creator, there is no acknowledgement of other creators. This understanding leads to the opposition to idols, which could become a rejection of representation by association. However, the opposition to representation was not consciously present at the time of the formation of Islam. Next to the creation of ancient arts, and arts as utilitarian objects, the interpretation of the Qur'an in its own time was not focused on a need for aesthetic man-made creations; it declared the single creator, God. Therefore, translation into visual form was not a necessity.

The Hadith and Accounts of Conquests

The next two types of documents are different from the first two in their relationship to the issue of image prohibition. One document is the *hadith,* which gained a "quasi-canonical character," and is a collection of traditions describing the life of the Prophet (Grabar, 1987, p.81). The other document consists of various stories about Arabs and conquered people's artistic production. While some traditions deal with the life of the Prophet, and his declarations, they were collected and gathered together after his death. Therefore, a possibility exists that the hadith corpus may reflect attitudes, judgments, and issues of a later period of time (Berkey, 2003).

Almost all of the documented traditions originate from conquered territories rather than from the cradle of Islam. Which is why their usefulness as indicators of collective doctrines, thoughts, and feelings can be difficult to ascertain. They are individual opinions, accounts, or stories that are not often components of a coherent system of interpretation. Therefore, they may not form modern and contemporary reconstructions such as précis of the relationship of Arabs to the arts, and what they knew of them. Despite the uncertainty of some texts, they are often cited in literature and used as references to reflect the views of the Muslim world after Islam had began its conquest.

Traditions seem to repeat the same point with small differences. An archetypal text contains a saying credited to the Prophet in the following sequence: "The angels will not enter a house in which there is a picture or a dog." "Those who will be most severely punished on the day of Judgment are the murderer of a Prophet, one who has been put to death by a Prophet, one who leads men astray without knowledge, and a maker of images or pictures." "A head will thrust itself out of the fire and will ask, where are those who invented lies against God, or have been the enemies of God, or have made light of God? Then men will ask, who are these three classes of persons? It will answer, The Sorcerer is he who has invented lies against God; the maker of images of pictures is the enemy of God; and he who acts in order to be seen of men, is he that has made light of God." (Grabar, 1987, p.81)

What is interesting about the previous quotes is that the culpability is placed on the painter instead of the work of art. It is, after all, the painter who is perceived as allegedly attributing divine capabilities to his or herself by creating representations that resemble actual life. In many traditions, the painter is threatened with being forced to breathe life into the creations on the Day of Judgment. There is no certainty as to when these statements were collected as part of official legal texts. Creswell (1946) contends that they do not take place before the second half of the eighth century.

Although it unclear what reasons led to the intensification of this stance, it did not fit with the wealth of genuine information concerning the existence of beautiful artistic objects with figures, such as metalwork and textiles that Prophet Muhammad was surrounded by in his environment. As a means of providing explanations, a whole new body of traditions grew that aimed to show the various ways images could be used. It was peculiar that images were allowed in baths, floors, and hallways, and in some legal texts the figures were headless, which is a practice that still exists in some Muslim societies to this day (Hoffman, 2008). It appears that some time in the middle of the eighth century Islamic religious tradition, partly or wholly, developed an unusual opposition to figurative representations. One of the challenges with this deduction is that the scholarly concern in locating texts about images may have possibly taken for granted other facets of the hadith's position and the arts. For example, are there remarks about objects, buildings or the artists who created them? Are there opinions that may be understood solely aesthetically?

It is not simple to extract and formulate a sound picture of Muslim attitudes toward the arts from the fourth document of evidence, Muslim conquests. Much additional work is needed before a concrete understanding of the attitudes could be constructed, and the collection and comparison of related texts will be an important objective of this type of scholarship. Early Muslims had reactions to the art of the conquered people, and their reactions to the arts is better documented in relation to Christian art (Sadria, 1984). Muslims admired the art of the conquered Christian world and their impressions of church decorations were also noted; they were impressed by the sophisticated technique (Grabar, 1987, p.82).

It was most likely during the first century of Islam that Muslims began to take notice of a Byzantine dominance in artistic creation. It is evident that awe and admiration later led to imitation, especially when coexisting with wealth, which opens up the possibility of systematically hiring experienced technicians. According to Grabar,

the mosaic artists who worked in Madinah and decorated the mosque of Damascus were brought from Byzantium. The recruitment of Byzantine artisans is documented in later accounts, for example the Umayyad caliph in Spain hired mosaic artists from Constantinople. It is most likely that the construction of great mosques, and that many early monuments, including ones in Syria and Palestine, were decorated and even built by artists and workers who were either Christians or trained in pre-Islamic Christian traditions (Sadria, 1984).

However, rejection and disdain can result from admiration. Muslims and Christians had signed a yearlong treaty, and soon after an incident took place where the statue of Emperor Heraclius was set up in a town between Muslim and Christian territories. According to Grabar (1987) a Muslim rider was practicing horsemanship and damaged the statue's eye by accident. The Christians contested the incident and the local Muslim governor who agreed that the damage done to the statue should be fixed. At the Christians' request, the statue of the Muslim equivalent, the caliph Umar, was comparably defaced. The eye was damaged, and all parties agreed that justice had been served (Al Sayyad, 1978).

One conclusion that can be drawn from the story is that on a symbolic level, the Muslim commander agreed that a mistake occurred, and to rectify it agreed to have the representational eye of his caliph damaged because he did not necessarily perceive images to be significant in comparison to his Christian counterpart, but more importantly, a statue of Umar, the caliph, existed and he did not seem to mind; "To him it was merely a gesture and the account, biased though it may be in the favor of the Christian position, portrays his attempt at substituting a representation of himself for that of Heraclius as an expression of amused contempt for use of images he did not understand. " (Grabar, 1987, p.85)

Muslim's contempt of images was some times documented as destructive, as in a number of stories that were found in Christian sources, documented the sacrilege of images in churches or the ill-treatment of Christians. It was contempt of what was perceived as pagan worship of figural representations. The more known instance of this type was the edict of Yazid in 721 AD; it entailed that all images of religious nature must be destroyed (Sahner, 2017). Again, the edict is documented mostly through Christian sources, but it has been acknowledged as an actuality, and perhaps justifiably so since vegetal mosaics replaced a number of earlier figurative mosaics in the Christian churches of Palestine, and in some cases the mosaics were covered, such as the case of Hagia Sophia or removed altogether (See Figures 1 & 2). The question in this case becomes whether the edict of 721 AD was iconoclastic from an ideological standpoint or if it expressed a combative rejection to images—religious and nonreligious.

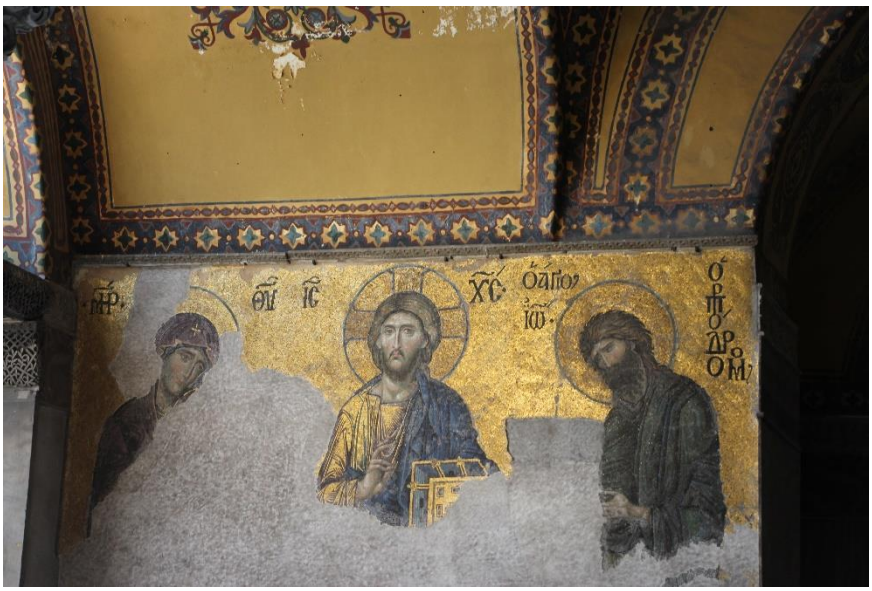

Figure 1. Photograph showing the sophisticated mosaics in Hagia Sophia created with gold leaf, ceramics, glass, stone, and tesserae. They were hidden during Ottoman rule when the building was converted to a mosque, and then uncovered again when Hagia Sophia became a museum, 2017, Source: Author.

A similar minor incident occurred in the later life of the Prophet where he sent his representative to Byzantine-held territories; the intent was to encourage the conversion of rulers and foreign kings to Islam (El-Cheikh, 1999). In this case, the primary target was the Byzantine emperor who, according to various accounts, dismissed the initial invitation to convert. But the causes and legitimacy for his refusal also differ. One account, however, states that the emperor was willing to accept Islam, and was advised not to by the clergy and his entourage.

The reasons these stories are pertinent to images and art is because they establish the psychological state of the connection between Islam as the new and developing faith, and Christianity as the already formed faith; it is a setting that presents an invitation from the new faith that is rejected by the established faith and older empire. Understanding the relationship between the Muslims and Christians is critical because the early seventh and eighth centuries are when images and their meaning became key periods in the development of Christian art.

Figure 2. Photograph showing a view of the Dome in Hagia Sophia, which shows both the representational figures created by Christians, and the calligraphy incorporated into the structure by Muslims, 2017. Source: Author.

Followers of the Christian faith used images to define political and religious positions and to convert others to the religion (Ehrman, 2018). Muslims attended a religious service at Hagia Sophia when visiting Constantinople, and Muslim sources recount how Muslim prisoners resisted the church's advances to convert them. On the other hand, Christian sources relate how the Muslims were in awe of the intricate church images, and accepted the Christian faith. Images became not only a facet of the Christianity according to some Muslims' understanding, but also dangerous weapons in the hands of Christians.

According to Grabar, due to these reasons, "the Muslim attitude toward the arts of the Christian world was a confused one, in which awe and admiration, contempt and jealousy, were uneasily mixed together." (Grabar, 1987, p.86) This side of early stories has been stressed because it is significant in the general interpretation that will be put forward. However, there are many other Muslim responses to the arts and representations that can be uncovered in written proof; for example, the accumulation of treasures and expensive objects by Arab armies and leaders. Territories from Inner Asia to Spain were prime locations to gather silver, ivories, gold, textiles, and various other artistic treasures (Dodds, 1992).

As a consequence, their lifestyles became luxurious to an extent that was previously unfamiliar to the Arabs. This is a life that was not shared by all members of the community, which probably means a divide was created between the people who enjoyed the lavish artistic objects, and those who saw it as a danger to the faith's sacredness. Thus, one can conclude umbrage at expensive and beautiful things was building up, which could be connected to a collective reaction in Arabia to the arts in general and images specifically. People who did not have access to art did not only mean bitterness about possessions they could not acquire, but a lack of exposure to or even awareness about art and its possibilities. All the documents and examples discussed so far are rooted in literary sources and conjecture about the psychological, historical, and social setting of the first Muslim century. Grabar directed our attention to one more influential document, coinage. At this point in the investigation of early Islamic art, it is not so much the aesthetic or stylistic characteristics that are of importance, but whether the bigger picture of these documents seen together provides additional dimension to the inquiry of a Muslim thoughts about representation and the arts.

When looking at the numerous works of Islamic art, the initial impression may be that representations of living things are in short supply. The arrival at this conclusion may be surprising to some when considering the discoveries at Samarra, Qasr al-Hayr West, Khirbat al-Mafjar, and Qusayr Amrah which have changed the perceptions that Islamic art is aniconic (Taragan, 2003). These monuments were private and for limited enjoyment and usage, rather than formal or official art. But they are important to understand the whole culture, however, they only tell one side of how the culture visually communicated itself in a discernable way.

In monuments such as the Mshatta, the façade consists of an intricate geometric themes and vegetal details, yet images of animals are present in abundance (Flood, 2002). The Early Islamic ceramic series from northeastern Iran occasionally contain birds or animals, rarely human beings, but mostly nonrepresentational themes (Ettinghausen, 1973). Houses and palaces in the Abbasid capitals were decorated with animal friezes, while Samarra stuccoes hardly included animal or human images. Carved wooden pieces in Egypt also occasionally contained animal themes, as did the zoomorphic Seljuk metalwork that at times combined representations with calligraphy and ornament. It is evident that a balance was stricken in early Islamic art that did not give a main place to representational images, and this became more obvious partly due to the fact that akin monuments of late antiquity in places such as Iran, India, or Byzantium contained themes which mainly focused on representational visual elements. The question is whether the inclination to mostly exclude representations is deliberate, meaningful, or unintentional. A possible answer to this question could be found in the mosaics of the Great Mosque of Damascus (Grabar, 1964).

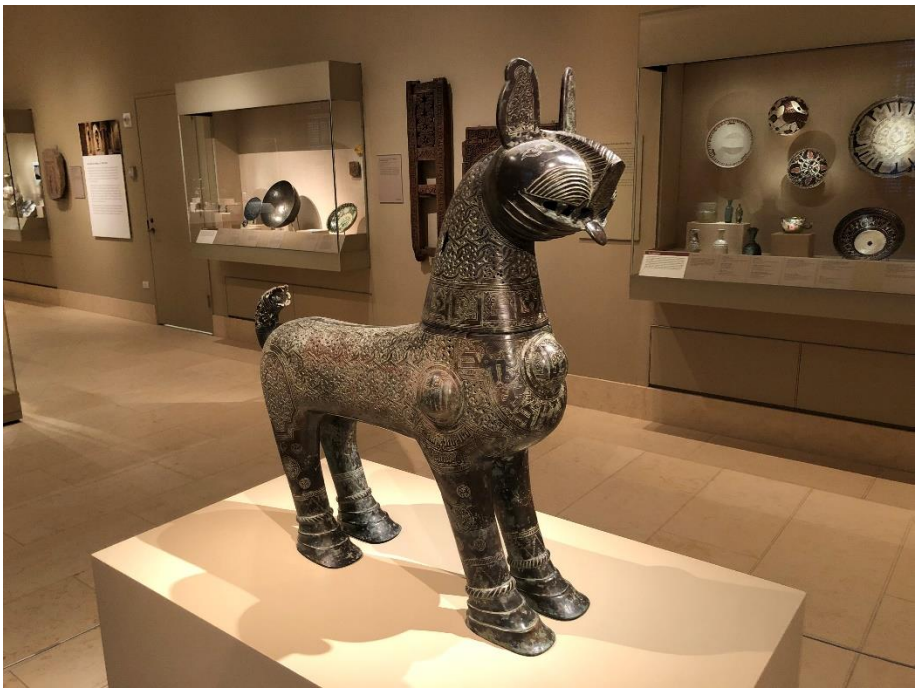

Figure 3. Photograph of Incense Burner of Amir Saif al-Dunya wa'l-Din ibn Muhammad al Mawardi dated A.H. 577/ A.D. 1181–82 Ja`far ibn Muhammad ibn `Ali. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 2019. Source: Author.

Over decades, many scholars have argued that the mosaics that decorate this early masterpiece of Islamic architecture represent a vision of paradise of a serene Muslim world (Erzen, 2011). Other scholars have proclaimed that the compositions were not created to be symbols of a particular vision, but visual interpretations of Qur'anic texts that describe paradise to faithful Muslims—descriptions of gardens with trees and architectural beauty. This is of course speculation and not easy to prove. The point is, beyond their ornamental aesthetic value, the mosaics can possess iconographic meaning just as comparable monuments, such as churches have an iconographic sense. Grabar (1987) also discusses the transfer of formal relationships from one faith to another. In the instance of the Great Mosque of Damascus, the trees were unlikely the main subject of the mosaics, but rather "formal equivalents of personages who form the main subject mater in models used by the Damascus mosaicists." (p.89) Church mosaics such as that of the fifth-century of the church of St. George in Thessaloniki contained trees as background elements, whereas in the Damascus mosque, what occurred was that the background motif was transformed into the main subject, and the foreground motif became a minor theme (Labatt, 2012).

Regardless of what the suitable rationalization is, in some of the official architecture of early Islam, the decorative visual elements were created to have some sort of illuminating or symbolic meaning (Avner, 2010). Such meanings can be found in early Islamic monuments like the Dome of the Rock's mosaics (Grabar, 1959). But the mosaics of Jerusalem or Damascus do not contain representations of people or animals (Rabbat, 1989). The Mshatta façade, however, combines vegetal details with occasional representations of animals, except on the side that connects to the wall of the qiblah—the Muslim direction of prayer facing Makkah (Grabar, 1987). The choice not to include figural representations in early Islamic art appears to be intentional and systematic in relation to religious buildings.

Consequently, Muslim patrons borrowed and modified the image vocabulary. This does not mean that symbolic meaning attached to these images was avoided altogether. The symbolic significance became attached to new forms that were inspired from previous artistic languages. Based on what has been explored so far, the conclusion that may be put forward is as follows: there was a consciousness in how early Islamic art avoided representations, and this consciousness was more of a reaction to Muslims' formal vocabulary and less so a result of an official doctrine.

Representation in Coinage

These deductions can be followed up by one more document, which is coinage. There is not much information about it before the conquest of the Fertile Crescent (Bacharach, 2001). The coins that already existed in the local environment came from Byzantine and Sassanian territories, and continued to be used with Arabic inscriptions that included mainly the profession of faith, the name of a caliph, governor, and a date (Wasserstein, 1993). Some alterations were introduced to the coins, which are more apparent in the Byzantine coins as opposed to the Sassanian ones. Some of these visual changes are minor, such as the removal of the cross. Other changes can be more elaborate, as in the type of coin known as the "Standing Caliph" type, which replaces the usual Byzantine portrayal with a standing grandee wearing Arab headgear rather than a crown, cloaked in a sizeable robe instead of the loros, and holding a sword (Humphreys, 2013). These changes can be explained as efforts to signify iconography that is Islamic and imperial while using visual signs common in Arab life.

The experiments with iconography on coinage came to a halt in 696-97 for gold coins and in 698-99 for silver ones (Treadwell, 2005). The caliph Abd al-Malik set reforms, which are documented in many medieval records, to replace iconic coins with what can be perceived as an purely Islamic and aniconic type with the calligraphic proclamation "There is no God but God, One without associate." There were a number of variants to the standard formulas of early coinage, but what they all share in common is the unique ineffable quality of God. There were other types depending on the provinces, but for centuries, the solely epigraphic coinage remained the standard.

One significant benefit of looking to coinage for evidence is that it shows the official and deliberate use of signs, symbols, and visual forms. Therefore, a series of conscious cultural choices took place—the chain of iconographic approaches, adaptations of earlier formulas, and attempts to create authentic iconography by using already existing symbols and also replacing earlier representational formulas with entirely epigraphic ones. Grabar (1959) explains that the emergence of official aniconic art coinage corresponded to the time of the Dome of the Rock. It replaced previous representational approaches with writing and the change became irreversible, "It obviously was the result of a need or of an attitude that can at least be dated, if not yet explained." (Grabar, 1987, p. 91) Additionally, it can be assumed that the themes in coinage received popularity and involved, or were seen as representative of, collective Muslim culture. But the coins reflected the central part of culture and are not representative of the entire culture's creativity, even when considering formal symbols of a given time period. The very same Caliph, Abd al-Malik requested a seal be made, which portrays the profession of the faith, in addition to birds and lions and a traditional Byzantine *alpha* (Khamis, 2002). The seal is distinctive, and although it could have been created before the coins were reformed, it is more personal and private, which also makes it less representative of general artistic creation with regards to the Muslim faith. But these examples are nevertheless significant because they highlight the array of themes and various levels of utilization and application that simultaneously existed at any one time. The premise of plurality is common throughout the history of forms, however, it is most interesting when it comes to early Islamic times because official art of the Muslim empire were inclined to avoid representations of living things, however, it seems the culture as a whole was unconcerned with the issue.

If we now summarize the historical documents that resulted from the Muslim attitude in relation to representation and the arts, it is possible to suggest a few explanations; the birthplace of Islam, Arabia, did not seem to be preoccupied with artistic endeavors and visual symbols; "it was not creative itself but "consumed" objects of varying quality from elsewhere and knew that other cultures, including neighboring ones, did erect fancy buildings, paint pictures, fashion sculptures, and at times even gave a certain sacredness to these creations." (Grabar, 1987, p.92)

The meanings attributed to forms were sparse or archaic, and aesthetic inclinations besides those of possessing beautiful objects were absent socially, and also from the Qur'an and the Prophet's message. The Qur'an, however, emphasized a divine view different from Christianity that the Muslim faithful should uphold. During the first century after the Muslim conquest, they encountered the artistic richness of Iran and the Mediterranean. According to Grabar, "They were strongly affected by a world in which images, buildings, and objects were active expressions of social standing, religion, political allegiance, and intellectual or theological positions."

(Grabar, 1987, p.92) Many studies have exemplified that the Christian world was extremely proud of its mastery and sophistication of portraying the visually beautiful. With the wealth of religious imagery and luxury objects in mind, it goes without saying that Muslims were impressed by the artistic intricacy and complexity of conquered territories.

Gustav von Grunebaum (1946) described the Muslims as enticed, and perhaps even influenced; this can be substantiated with the search for their own visual forms, including representations of significant figures as well as objects. But at some point the search for new visual forms came to a halt, and the official art of coins and mosques substituted the themes of living things with calligraphy or intentional alterations of formulas used. These changes still contained iconographic elements, just not representations of living beings.

CONCLUSION

The question that can still be asked today is why did the stance toward representational images change from unconcern to resistance? It appears as though the collectively assumed doctrine of objecting to representations happened after the fractional desertion of images that took place. Therefore, it is not necessarily through Muslim thought that a rationalization is presented. Some scholars have argued for a Semitic rejection of images, which likely emerged while the Arab empire was forming. But this explanation is ethnically focused and can be negated by an already existing Semitic sponsored art that existed from the time of Akkadians (Bertin, 1866). Others have asserted that the direct influence of Judaism, and converted Jews impacted the formation of many dimensions of early Islamic thinking. The iconcolasts referred to the Bible to prove images should not be created, more specifically the Second of Ten Commandments in the Hebrew Bible.

Moreover, Jews allegedly inspired several events with iconoclastic connotations, such as the previously discussed edict of Yazid. It is quite probable that the Judaic mode of thinking and points of view about representation played an important role in the construction of a policy in opposition to images because most proclamations about the arts always took place first as a reaction to the existence of a work of art rather than a previously formed intellectual stance. However, there is no concrete evidence for a Jewish influence when it comes to coins, where images were substituted with words.

It is easier to contend that the establishment of a Muslim attitude toward the arts was not the result of a religious or intellectual standing or of a specific set of guidelines, but rather the influence of the prevailing arts on the Arabs. In other words, Islam appeared on the world stage at a time when images were approached relationally. It was a time when groups—political and religious—used images to battle each other. Islam as the new faith attempted to make its presence felt, as exemplified in coins and the development of its own visual system.

There were challenges ahead; the Christian world had already gained experience and erudition in how it utilized forms, and created its own symbolic system that was adopted by the culture. If the Islamic faith were to use these already established visual forms, even with adjustments, Islam would be diminishing its own individual features. Furthermore, formal strength, visual sophistication, and technical skills needed to create images were not a part of Islam's Arabian past due to the nature of its people's nomadic lifestyle, which embraced poetry and the spoken word. Abd al-Malik's reform established an attitude that developed in Muslim territories, which believed that most representations leaned toward idolatry, and the only way to create a visual system that avoided being confused with the world of Christians, and pagans, would be to utilize writing and inanimate objects in visual communication. The political and ideological circumstances of the late seventh century are what led Islam to this point of view. Early Islam's complex relationship to the Muslim empire ignited the careful consideration of iconography. Many accounts interpret Abd al-Malik's coins and importing mosaic artists to Damascus from Constantinople as challenging the Byzantine emperor and subjecting him to the caliph (Greenhalgh, 2008). Grabar (1964) suggests in this case that the mood is more important that historical truth.

Islam searched for official visual symbols under the influence of the Christian world but they did not develop representational images because they would not be their own. Specific conditions, social and political, rather than ideology are what led to the Muslim attitude toward images and the arts. Two main consequences are present in this conclusion; one is that a Muslim attitude toward the arts seems to be limited to the area of images that represent living things. There was no clear attitude about other sides of the arts. The other consequence is

that an attitude that characterizes or outlines the culture usually emerges when the identity of the culture has been impacted; the attitude is a defense mechanism when fears arise that the influence is threatening to the culture's harmony and unity. However, these conclusions lead to another question put forward by Grabar, if the Islamic opposition to images was the result of precise historical conditions, "why did it remain after the removal of the circumstances, during the Iconoclastic crisis in the Christian world and after the Islamic empire had become fully established?" (Grabar, 1987, p. 95)

It is important to consider that historically there have been some attitudes that understood representation as an embodiment of what it represents. Philosophically and anthropologically speaking, this attitude has been present throughout art and world history; for example it exists in ancient Egyptian art and in classical Greek art. The Muslim attitude at times, however, tended to interpret the images as an evil or trickery. The danger with this perception is that the rejection of figurative imagery—due to its inherent evils—brought with it a sense of doubt about the worth of images and visual symbols. On a popular folk level, visual symbols were also related to magic, which may have caused further skepticism toward the trustworthiness of images (Asatrian, 2003). Additionally, many images were sponsored by royalty, which gave them associations of luxury that not everyone could afford.

Marshall Hodgson (1962) describes "morality" or "moralism" a strict code of behavior through which people interpret experiences (p.123). This relates to how early Muslims responded—it was a social code that encompassed the entire social collective and faithful Muslim community, the *ummah*. There was no clergy to attribute meaning to images during the early days of Islam. Princes were more inclined to avoid images in objects, at least in the public sphere. Artistic creations were seen as a replacement for reality, which also gave them evil connotations. They were perceived as coming between a morally good life and people—forms of unwarranted temptation.

The social code was abstract; it was a collection of attitudes that was not based on an organized system of rules. The Islamic laws were still new, even around 800 AD. But by that time many groups, which had freshly converted from other faiths joined the Muslim community. Due to this integration, the social fabric was exposed to multiple pressure points, and two are particularly important. One tension persisted to view images as magic and the other perceived them as part of an aristocratic culture, which caused a major disjuncture. But it also led to the formation of an Islamic middle that rejected the magical aspect as pagan, and the aristocratic side as duplicitous, foreign, and a waste of resources—the social segment of poverty in Arabia during early Islam may have encouraged this rejection. But as Grabar (1987) contends, it was the "literate middle" that provided many of the texts that defined early Islamic culture, and moralistic positions of the early community of Muslims (p. 97).

One can present the following supposition, in early Islamic times; a novel social body opposed multifaceted functions of representations in conquered territories and consequently reintroduced the iconophobia dormant in any culture. It turned into the governing system, and even took its stance a step forward to proclaim moral quality. There are excerpts in historic literature that discuss the many vices associated with art and image making. Such excerpts do not only support the rejection of images, but also imply that art and aesthetic creativity are part of the material world, and therefore are evil, useless, and vain, not to mention a distraction from worship. The Islamic attitudes arrived at a rejection of art altogether as a result of specific historical conditions, which is not an uncommon puritanical reaction.

Two themes that pertain to early Islamic thought can be connected with Islamic ornament, which also replaced figurative images in many examples of art. The first relates to a common phrase "lilah al-baqi", which translates to "the Remaining is to God (Grabar, 1987, p.192)." This means no man made creations can reflect physical reality because God is the only one able to make anything permanent; the great sin is to love what one has created. The second theme is known as "atomism," originated in Hellenic thought and related to the reality in the Muslim world (Tabbaa, 1985, p.74). At its core, atomism entails all things are comprised of equal units in various combinations. In Islam, there is no mandatory necessity that physical reality stays the same, and divine miracle exists in similar compositions that appear repetitively. But since artists must not claim the possession of divine powers or attributes, they are free to use nature in any way they see fit to compose and recompose

arbitrary outcomes. Therefore, these two themes can explain the randomness of ornaments since they can be seen as a mixture of eclectic elements from various abstracted and thematic sources. This explanation illuminates how followers of the Islamic faith frequently utilized visuals in art and architecture.

These conclusions contain challenges that require further elaboration in the investigation of what led the transformations in thought to occur; was it the development of one theory that gave the prohibition of images the quasi-legal standing of an ideology? Or was it that the whole Muslim community arrived at a common consensus, regardless of whether it was explicitly stated, as a response to the arts? The first hypothesis is not likely because, to my knowledge, there are no written documents that point to the existence of a doctrine about the arts before the tenth century.

Hypothetically speaking, even if a debate existed about images on a legal or philosophical level it is difficult to picture the components for spreading a supposed doctrine during the first two or three centuries of Islam regarding the arts. For a very long time, the artists in Muslim territories were non-Muslims, and even in circumstances when the artisans were Muslims, the visual elements and techniques that were used were inherent to civilizations that were not their own. Moreover, there was no clergy or political figures present to support the patronage of art for the public.

It is almost impossible to imagine the connections between aesthetic thought and decisions that audiences or patrons made. Therefore, the probability of a collective consensus is sensible. The psychological description of the Muslim consensus was needed to preserve the Islamic identity's integrity. However, the facets of the visual identity varied within different ethnic and social groups. Thus the Muslim leaders isolated private art and official public works of art. It is important to note that the investigation of the prohibition of representation in Islamic art can provide a way to understand Islam not only as a system of life, but of thought as well. In order to pinpoint the social and psychological circumstances that led to the visual perceptions and transformations of the arts in early and contemporary Islam, one must not only refer to religious texts. It is also essential to outline the relationship between the religious and environmental aspects of life. Representational arts were often rejected, which makes one wonder whether the rejection was connected to historical occurrences of a particular moment? Or has this rejection become the norm in Islamic societies—to this day—because it appeared during the earlier days of Islam?

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