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Messages in Cosmophilia: The "Love of Ornament" in Islamic Architecture

Abstract
Islamic architecture is predominantly rich in ornamentation, and therefore, perfectly epitomizes the phenomenon of "cosmophilia" – meaning "love of ornament." Taking this association as a point of departure, this article focuses on broadly identifying notions of cosmophilia in Islamic monuments that offer the finest and most varied examples of architectural ornamentation. In Islamic structures, where singular and unique ornamental devices can be located, the artistic programs of several monuments are concurrently found to be characterized by the "repeat ornament" – decorative elements replicated many times to envelope the façades in entirety. In this article, a variety of structures, erected under different dynastic polities from the medieval and early modern Islamic world, have been examined to understand the connotations and meanings attached to the Islamic ornaments. This will be done by looking at figural imageries, geometric and vegetal motifs, calligrams synthesizing images and texts, as well as structural and non-structural components integrated into the historic structures for aesthetic purposes. The ultimate goal of this study is to attempt an interpretation of the concepts and in some cases philosophical undertones, that were meant to be communicated through the Islamic architectural ornaments.

Keywords:
Islamic architecture, ornamentation, cosmophilia, repeat ornament, figural motifs, architectural inscriptions.

Introduction

Islamic architecture, although is a contradictory term that unlike Buddhist or Christian architecture does not necessarily refer to religious buildings, however, it is frequently used to represent the edificial products of Muslim communities that were spread over the large geographic region where Islam once was or continues to be the primary religion. One of the most significant characteristics of Islamic architecture is its predominant richness in ornamentation, and therefore, its impeccable representation of the phenomenon of "cosmophilia." The term was first coined in connection with Islamic artworks when Boston College's Calderwood University Professors, Sheila S. Blair and Jonathan M. Bloom, curated a travelling exhibition at the McMullen Museum of Art titled, "*Cosmophilia: Islamic Art from the David Collection, Copenhagen*."[1] This exhibition was an opportunity to bring to Boston, USA about 125 fine pieces of art, that were originally created in Muslim cultures before 1800 CE, and which together represent a geographic region stretching from Spain to China, including North Africa and Anatolia. These pieces now belong to the C. L. David Collection, a private museum in Copenhagen, and were borrowed while the museum was closed for renovation in 2006. Blair and Bloom organized the entire exhibition along with the visual aspects of these art pieces, emphasizing upon the phenomenally beautiful and exceptionally variant ornamentation that dominates Islamic art; hence, rightly

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[1] Sheila S. Blair and Jonathan M. Bloom, *Cosmophilia: Islamic Art from the David Collection, Copenhagen* (Boston: Mcmullen Museum Of Art, 2006). Professors Sheila S. Blair and Jonathan M. Bloom share the Hamad bin Khalifa Endowed Chair of Islamic Art at Virginia Commonwealth University and the Norma Jean Calderwood University Chair of Islamic and Asian Art at Boston College.

choosing the theme and title of the exhibition as "cosmophilia" that literally means a "love of ornament."[2] However, this notion of cosmophilia is not limited to Islamic portable objects or artworks. Islamic architecture also provides very useful specimens to examine the cosmophilic appropriations with ornament being the most essential and ubiquitous feature on the facades of Islamic monuments.

Ornament is defined as a visual order, noticeably distinct from decoration. Decoration can be anything applied to an object or building for aesthetics, while ornament is that decorative element that appears only to enhance the object. In other words, decoration could have an individual character and stand alone as an independent entity, for example, a sculpture. Alternatively, ornament cannot survive or make sense of being independent of its carrier. Keeping this definition in mind, Islamic architecture that is generally rich in ornamentation, therefore, appears to perfectly exemplify the phenomenon of cosmophilia. Some monuments present the finest and most diverse examples of ornaments. At times these ornaments are singular entities, though typically the ornaments are found repeated many times on the building surfaces.

The variation in Islamic architectural ornament ranges from the geometric brick revetment employing techniques such as *hazār-bāf*,[3] used for example on the Seljuk tomb towers at Damavand (eleventh century), to the play with the hues of blue and green as it appears in the glazed tile-work of Shah-i-Zinda at Samarqand (eleventh to fifteenth century); from the carved masonry domes of Qarafa-al-Kubra at Cairo (thirteenth to fifteenth century) to the brightly painted glazed tiles of Rüstam Pasha Mosque at Istanbul (1563 CE); from the naturalistic themes in the mosaic-work of the Dome of the Rock at Jerusalem (692 CE) to the pietra dura stone inlay work, called *parchīn-kārī*, used most brilliantly in the architecture of the great Mughals of Hindustan (r. 1526-1857 CE). Also included are the richly ornamented *chīnī-khāna* niches piercing the interior surfaces of the Music Room of Ali Qapu palace at Isfahan (early seventeenth century) that were possibly meant to display precious wares.[4] All such forms of repeat ornament play a central role in the overall artistic program of their respective structure. As imperative as the Islamic ornamentation was for aesthetics, at times it also communicated certain symbolic ideas and messages. However, these messages are not always explicit, and therefore, need meticulous analysis for correct interpretation. Drawing upon these ideas, a variety of structures, erected under different dynastic polities from the medieval and early modern Islamic world, will be examined in this article to identify the notion of cosmophilia in Islamic architecture. The article will also ascertain the characteristics of Islamic ornamentation, and decipher ideas and messages that the patrons, designers, or craftsmen meant to communicate through these ornaments.

The Islamic Ornamentation

Muslims believe Islam to be not just a religion; in its true definition, it is a way of life. The word "*Islām*" is derived from the Arabic root *salām*, meaning peace and submission.[5] Being a Muslim means submission to the will of God, and every aspect of the life of a true Muslim is considered to be administered by God's commands, as described in the holy book. In Qurʾan 3:191 (*surah Āl-i ʿImrān*), it is stated:

> "*Who remember Allāh while standing or sitting or [lying] on their sides and give thought to the creation of the heavens and the earth, [saying], Our Lord, You did not create this aimlessly; exalted are You [above such a thing]; then protect us from the punishment of the Fire*."[6]

It is clearly stated in the above verse that nothing is without purpose. As for the Muslims if the words of Qurʾan are decisive, then the Islamic ornaments, as imperative as they were in artworks and architecture, must also

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[2] Sheila S. Blair and Jonathan M. Bloom, "Cosmophilia and Its Critics: An Overview of Islamic Ornament," in *Beiträge Zur Islamischen Kunst Und Archäologie 3*, ed. Anja Heidenreich and Lorenz Korn (Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag, 2012), 39–54.

[3] The Persian term *hazār-bāf* literally means "thousand weavings." In Islamic architecture it refers to a surface decoration where the wall is patterned in relief with bricks that create a play of light and shadow, see: http://www.islamic-art.org/glossary/Glossary.asp?DisplayedChar=8

[4] Mehreen Chida-Razvi, "From Function to Form: Chini-Khana in Safavid and Mughal Architecture," *South Asian Studies* 35, no. 1 (2019): 82–106.

[5] L. Gardet and J. Jomier, "Islām," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, accessed June 16, 2021, http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_COM_0387.

[6] "The Noble Qurʾan" Accessed June 15, 2018. https://Qurʾan.com/3/191-200?translations=20

carry messages concealed by the makers for the viewers and users to decipher.

The Islamic world, spread over a large geographic region and with a long history, has a wide range of stylistic disparities in regional artistic forms. However, the flexibility in Islamic ornament liberates them from the confines of regionality, timeliness, mediums and techniques. This flexibility comes with the use of four broad themes of motifs in the form of "repeat units" to create similar (though not the same) complicated patterns. These themes include figural motifs, inscriptions, vegetal motifs and geometric patterns, and this study intends to examine them in the following passages. Of all the themes figures were the least favoured form, and to assess the reasons behind this requires an extensive debate, which is outside the scope of this article. However, despite being condemned by theologians and jurists one can find a plethora of figural imagery in Islamic ornament. Mostly, it is found in illustrative manuscripts and paintings, nonetheless, its use in the form of animals, birds and human figures in buildings is also not uncommon. Before moving forward, it should be underlined here that figural ornaments were generally considered threatening to the religious values, and therefore, were strictly avoided in religious buildings, if not in secular ones. Moreover, resistance to figural imagery in Islamic artworks essentially stems from the belief that only God has the power to create living forms, therefore, the act of anyone else attempting to create or depict living beings, in any form, becomes controversial.[7]

Figural Imagery in Context

Figures were mostly produced as a part of Islamic architectural ornament, either under the influence of other cultures or as a persisting indigenous practice. Both these cases will be discussed separately to discover the meaning of figural ornament and what they symbolize after their Islamic appropriation. The first can be seen, for example, in the Seljuk period (1050-1300 CE) Great Mosque of Diyarbakir (Fig. 1) in present-day Turkey and built in the twelfth century. On each side of the portal arch, at the entrance to the courtyard, are found two identical stone-carved figural motifs. In these are shown a lion attacking a bull under the running band of Qurʾanic inscription in floriated *kūfic*. Lion and bull represent the astronomical symbols of two constellations of Taurus and Leo, which have their historic roots in Babylonian astronomy, could have been brought to Anatolia by Turkic clans, who migrated in the eleventh century.[8] The reason this ornament is discussed here despite much more elaborate examples, such as the figural mosaic work in Khirbat al-Mafjar in Jericho (739-44 CE) or the figural frescos of Qusayr ʿAmra in Jordan (eighth century), is due to the fact that the ornamental sculpture of Diyarbakir Mosque is among the rarest examples where figures were used in religious buildings.[9] The ornament shows the lion dominating the weaker bull carefully placed just below the continuous band of Qurʾanic verses. Placing this ornamental arrangement next to contemporary political history could only mean that the ornamental program symbolizes power and dominance, as well as the proclamation of the new faith. The powerful lion represents Muslim Seljuks who overthrew the non-Muslim weaker rulers under the regime of Islam, as represented by the running band.

To present the second case, an analysis of the tomb of Sultan Nizam al-Din Jam Nindo (d. 1508) of the Samma dynasty of Sindh (1351-1522 CE), built in 1509 just outside of Thatta (Pakistan), will be done. This remarkably well-preserved tomb is a conventional square structure in yellow sandstone, with a flamboyant ornamental device on the west façade in the form of a *miḥrāb* projection topped by a balcony. The austere walls have fourteen horizontally placed ornamental bands running all around the exterior facades and using several motifs repeatedly. Among these, two are noteworthy (Fig. 2). First is a linear frieze of birds, fifth from the top, starting from the middle of the west façade and continuing up to the middle of the north façade. The swivel neck and well-shaped head of the birds indicate that the band preserves a flock of *haṁsa*s (auspicious geese), some carved in pairs (*haṁsa-mithuna*) while others appear as part of a procession (Fig. 2). This zoomorphic frieze is particularly striking, for it is the only form of figural ornament existing in the Samma dynastic

[7] Department of Islamic Art, "Figural Representation in Islamic Art," in *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000), http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/figs/hd_figs.htm (October 2001).

[8] Dominique Clévenot, *Ornament and Decoration in Islamic Architecture* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2000), 130.

[9] Great Mosque of Divriği (1228 CE), now in Sivas Province in Turkey, is another Seljuk example in which a two-headed eagle is sculpted on its façade.

monuments.[10] Goose does not hold much significance in Islamic cultural history, but it is an important Buddhist motif, which was later incorporated into Hindu iconography. In Hindu temples, the supreme god Brahmā is often shown mounting on his magnificent male goose, when he became free from the bondage of *saṃsāra*.[11] In the light of the socio-political history of Sindh,[12] here it seems to symbolize the final flight of the soul of the ruler Jam Nizam al-Din to heaven. This indicates that the figural motif in the tomb of Sultan Nizam al-Din was indeed a persisting pre-Islamic practice.

The second frieze of significance is the widest of all – a twenty-five inches thick band carrying Qurʾanic inscriptions, running on all facades. This frieze uses Qurʾanic verses from Chapter 76, *sūrah al-Insān* (the Man), in a reasonably compact *thuluth* script.[13] The frieze is placed in the middle of the facades as in the case of al-Aqmar Mosque (1126 CE) and Qalawum complex (1285 CE), both in Cairo. As scholars have shown, such inscriptional bands (called *tirāz*) were commonly used to embellish the garments since the Abbasid times (750-1258 CE), and later also inspired the architectural ornamentation.[14] However, following the medieval period Sunni revival as the mainstream Islamic sect, these architectural *tirāz* were lowered from their previous elevated locations to make them more legible for the viewers.[15]

Both these ornamental friezes on the Sultan Nizam's tomb facades, besides making the general statements regarding broader religious affiliations, also support the following interpretations:

1. The position, significant height and writing style of inscription indicate that the Qurʾanic verses were meant to be read and understood by the viewers.[16]
2. Qurʾanic verses symbolize that the ruler Sultan Nizam al-Din, being a true believer, had been rewarded with a wonderful afterlife, as promised in the divine words of God.
3. The lower placement of the *tirāz* styled band signifies the Sunni adherence of the ruler. This factor could be important as the earlier Muslim dynasties ruling Sindh were Ismaʿilis as well.
4. The presence of figural motifs suggests that although by the Samma period much of Sindh's population had converted to Islam, there was still a significant non-Muslim population influencing the ornamental vocabulary.

Synthesizing Image and Text

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[10] Lari and Lari have also indicated that the band does represent geese. For details see: Suhail Zaheer Lari and Yasmeen Lari, *The Jewel of Sindh: Samma Monuments on Makli Hill* (Karachi: Oxford University Press & Heritage Foundation, 1997), 186.

[11] *Saṃsāra* is the endless cycle of birth, life and death, that is, reincarnation, which every soul goes through until it is liberated only by following the true Buddhist path. See: "Samsara | Indian Philosophy," in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, April 7, 2016, https://www.britannica.com/topic/samsara.

[12] At the time of the Arab conquest of Sindh a substantial population was Buddhist, Jain or Hindu. For details see: Derryl N. MacLean, *Religion and Society in Arab Sind* (Leiden; Ney York: BRILL, 1989). By the time Samma dynasty took to the throne of Sindh, most of this population had either converted to Islam or had left Sindh. For example, the Buddhist communities migrated by the ninth century but there was still a significant Jain and Hindu population living in Sindh till before the partition of Pakistan and India.

[13] The theme of this *sūrah* is to inform man of his true position in the world and to tell him that when he will understand his true position and adopt the attitude of gratefulness, he will be rewarded with a great afterlife. See: "Sūrah Al-Insān," accessed July 3, 2021, https://quran.com/alinsan?locale=en&font=v1&reading=false&translations=20.

[14] Yasser Tabbaa, *The Transformation of Islamic Art during the Sunni Revival*, Publications on the Near East (Seattle; London: University of Washington Press, 2002), 71.

[15] Tabbaa, 71.

[16] As Sindh remained under the Arab rule for centuries, Arabic was one of the official languages of Sindh and easily read and understood by the educated class up till the late medieval period. The literary atmosphere of Sindh only started becoming Persophonic and Persographic (when Persian is a spoken as well as a written language) towards the end of the Samma dynastic period (in the late fifteenth century). For this see: Munazzah Akhtar, "Interrogating the Dead: Re-Assessing the Cultural Identities of the Samma Dynasty (1351-1522) at the Necropolis of Makli, Sindh (Pakistan)" (Thesis, Victoria BC, University of Victoria, 2020), 187–90.

Of all the themes in Islamic ornamentation, inscriptions hold a spiritual dimension, therefore, they are certainly considered to be the most sacred. However, on many occasions, specifically in secular artworks, Persian was also used. Arabic being the language of divinity was the most favoured in medieval Islamic ornament. The general belief being that Arabic has the ability to provide sanctity to a secular object. When an image and text appear together and on the same scale, they sometimes create a "calligram" in which the words or letters are laid out to create a visual image or figure. Visually, a hierarchy involuntarily develops within the two modes of ornament used in a calligram, where naturally the image is noticed first and the inscription subsequently. This especially happens when the text is not very clear due to its complex style, or the image is much too familiar to the viewer. This point will be elaborated on shortly, but first, a discourse on the *ṭughrā* style in calligraphy should be offered. Patronized by the Ottomans, *ṭughrā* was originally used as signature, cypher or calligraphic emblems placed over the Ottoman imperial *farmān* (decree) and title deeds.[17] In the *ṭughrā* the text, mainly Qurʾanic, was arranged in the zoomorphic form of an animal or a bird and was used mostly as a two-dimensional ornament, therefore, not so frequently in architecture. This style became a significant ornamental form, backed by the calligraphers, probably to compete with the miniature painters and artists. In the orthodox settings, where images were considered to be against Islamic theology (see above), in *ṭughrā* art, as T. H. Hendley has stated with reference to such Islamic calligramic practices, the piety of the inscriptions – the Qurʾanic verses particularly – were used to cover the profanity of the images.[18] Outside these settings, however, one mode seems to compliment the other and might seem unproductive without the other.

Coming back to the hierarchy of the two modes: text and image together in one ornament. This can be explained more clearly with the nineteenth-century Ottoman calligraphic work in which *Bismillāh* was arranged in the shape of a bird.[19] Although, one notices the inscription and the figure together, before reading the inscription one recognizes the bird form. In some cases, not this one though, the inscription has a symbolic relationship to the image, just like the Qurʾanic *sūrah al-Insān* relates to the tombs. In such cases, besides aesthetics, the hidden meaning of the ornament can be uncovered by deciphering the inscription. For a viewer who cannot read inscriptions, the ornament will still remain pleasurable and interesting. In that case, the image will be delivering the message of beauty and the inscription will become an icon. This last statement became all the more practical when Islamic ornament was used as the source of inspiration for medieval European artists. Arabic text was used in paintings exclusively for the sake of aesthetics. *Adoration of the Magi* (1423) by Gentile da Fabriano (d. 1427) is an example, as this painting was made for a western audience, in which the ornamental halo of the Virgin Mary was inscribed with pseudo-*Kufic* script.[20]

Integrating the Structural and Non-structural

In search for meanings in Islamic ornament, it is essential to shift from micro to the macro level and consider the large surface ornamentations. The glazed tile panel of the ornamental composition, on the northwest *iwān* of Masjid-i Jamiʿ at Isfahan (Fig. 3), apparently uses a variety of themes. To a common man, the content of this composition seems to have a cursive script band at the top, with four quadrangular motifs surrounding one square motif, all filled with linear patterns and a repeat geometric pattern running in the background. Only a skilled eye can read that the motifs use squared *kūfic* or *kūfī murabbʿa* script and are not linear patterns but verses from a mystical Persian poem, while the central square motif carries the signature of the artist. If the inscription is identified or read, the viewer can relate the mystical literature to the mosque as a place of mediation. If the viewer is unable to decipher the text, the arrangement of the text, colour combinations of the tile work and various other patterns become more important than the text itself, which then becomes subsidiary. In this way, the text again eludes its message but at the same time becomes iconic in nature, gaining another

[17] For example, the *Tughra (Insignia) of Sultan Süleiman the Magnificent* (r. 1520–66) in the collection at Metropolitan Museum of Art, see: https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/449533

[18] T. H. Hendley, "Illustrations and General Notes: Portraits by Indian Artists," *Journal of Indian Art* 15 (1913): 75–80.

[19] Image of the original Ottoman example can be found in: Oleg Grabar, *The Mediation of Ornament* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992). Many copies of the same forms circulate freely on the web for which one can see: https://www.wikiwand.com/it/Calligrafia_araba

[20] Rosamond E. Mack, *Bazaar to Piazza: Islamic Trade and Italian Art, 1300-1600* (Berkley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 2002), 65.

purpose. Grabar has termed this phenomenon as "monoptic" experience.[21] In addition, as the ornamental panel reveals information about the artist, thus it partakes the role of the foundational inscription as well.

The Masjid-i Jamiʿ panel is a rather humble composition compared to a plethora of other Islamic ornamental surfaces using not only a variety of patterns but also a range of colours, mediums, techniques, and scripts. Such surfaces, for example, those in the courtyard of al-ʿAttarine Madrasa in Fez (Fig. 4 a&b), constructed around 1325, signify a specific ornamental arrangement. In such a complex and congested form of ornament, one can still look for symbols and meanings deeply rooted in Islamic culture and religious philosophies. The faces of the Madrasa are fragmented into multiple panels displaying all kinds of materials, patterns, textures, and colours on the glazed and unglazed surfaces. These ornamental surfaces employ vegetal, geometric and calligraphic motifs. At first, the composition looks overcrowded but with careful observation, it "reveals a progressively strengthening and rigorous order," which shares some common characteristics with many Islamic surface ornaments.[22] The first of these characteristics is to cover every part of the surface, so no area is left unadorned because bare surfaces were considered aesthetically unsatisfactory and negative. Therefore, all negative surfaces were converted into positively engaging ornaments. Ettinghausen calls this phenomenon "taming of the *horror vacui*" by Muslim artists.[23] Correspondingly, in this case, the Islamic ornament is employed to completely hide the structure of the building to blur the distinction between structural and non-structural, making the building appear as one complete entity signifying "unity" in cultural and theological terms.

The achieved unity of Islamic ornament lies in the repetition of its vegetal, geometric and calligraphic motifs as well, which themselves symbolize the repetition in nature – offering the idea of the infinite weave of its forces and infinite movement of its elements. Moreover, the repetitive expanse of the ornament with naturalistic or plant motifs, such as depicted in the bas-relief works over the walls of the Taj Mahal (Fig. 5), works as a device for declaring the tomb to have a paradisaic character on this earth. Building on the ideas taken from the Qurʾanic verses gives a sketch of incomparable rewards for the true believers of faith in the form of paradise. Such repetitive naturalistic motifs provide the whole artefact with symbolic sacredness. In relation to repetitive ornament, art historians present another interesting theory called the "textile mentality" of Islamic ornament.[24] According to this, the congested weave-like ornament surfaces, as in the minaret of the twelfth-century mosque (later replaced by the existing Kalyan mosque), built in Bukhara around 1127 CE, and which employs repetitive patterns using the *hazār-bāf* technique, can be compared to textile that repeats its motifs in weaving as its most basic feature.[25] Therefore, the Islamic ornament hides the structure and can be seen as a cloth draped around the body to hide it, as is the function of *hijāb* (veil) in Islam.

Conclusion: How to establish the meanings?

In one of his verses, Jalal al-Din Rumi (1207-1273 CE) expresses, "The external form is for the sake of an unseen form, and that took shape for the sake of another unseen (form) in proportion to your insight…."[26] These verses and the above discussion clearly show that Islamic ornament almost always carried a meaning, and sometimes multiple meanings, especially in the works that were carefully conceived by the artists. Now to see how these meanings can be established (although, this has been analyzed in between the main body of the article as well) one should go back to the statement with which the present study began: Islam is not just a religion, it is a way of life and every aspect of the life of a true Muslim is administered by the religious teachings, which in other words are also teachings for socio-cultural life. A most important method to discover the meaning of Islamic ornament is placing the ornament within the confines of Islamic culture and religion.

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[21] Grabar, *The Mediation of Ornament*, 103.

[22] Clévenot, *Ornament and Decoration in Islamic Architecture*, 277.

[23] Richard Ettinghausen, "The Taming of the Horror Vacui in Islamic Art," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 123, no. 1 (1979): 15–28.

[24] For details see: Grabar, *The Mediation of Ornament*, 141; Lisa Golombek, "The Draped Universe of Islam," in *Content and Context of Visual Arts in the Islamic World: Papers from a Colloquium in Memory of Richard Ettinghausen*, ed. Priscilla P Soucek (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1988), 25–50.

[25] For the view of this minaret, called Manar-i Kalan, in the Kaylan Mosque at Bukhara (Uzbekistan), see: https://archnet.org/sites/2113/media_contents/1123

[26] Richard Ettinghausen, "Decorative Arts and Paintings," in *The Legacy of Islam*, ed. Joseph Schacht, Thomas W. Arnold, and Clifford E. Bosworth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 288.

Another very important factor is the socio-political history and using its findings in the analysis of objects of historic value. Yasser Tabbaa used this methodology in his seminal work and placed the amazing development and evolution of medieval Islamic ornament in the renaissance of Sunni theology and jurisprudence.[27] Social, political, cultural, religious, and in some cases even economic factors are found to be playing a major role in defining the ornament.

Then comes the process of formally analyzing the ornament in detail. In this case, reading the inscriptions and icons is substantial. The inscriptions, for instance, were the most visible and favoured medium to convey political and pietistic messages. They often inform about the purpose, significance and value of the artefact in contemporary times as the inscriptions, especially the Qurʾanic verses, were selected very carefully keeping in mind the context. For instance, the Madrasa at Zawzan in eastern Iran was thought to be a mosque before the careful analysis of its foundational inscription.[28] Also, *sūrah al-Insān* with its verses regarding the reward in the afterlife for the true believers was on many occasions used on tombs, for example, on the tomb of Sultan Nizam al-Din and the Taj Mahal. In some instances, the analysis of ornament also informs about the important historic events and the socio-religious construct of its society. This was analyzed above in the cases of Diyarbakir Mosque and the tomb of Sultan Nizam. These events can then be verified with the primary textual sources. The ornament could also have philosophical meanings attached to them, for instance, as we saw above in the case of comparing ornament with textiles. This gave a large corpus of meaning to the overcrowded surface ornamentations. The repetition in the ornament, when placed within the realms of faith and laws of nature, instantly brought out multiple meanings as well. Hence, it seems true that although Islamic art visually highlights the centrality of ornament, the messages associated with these ornaments are not always directly communicated. The discovery of meanings of Islamic ornament, thus, requires some degree of effort to comprehend its true legacy, which is exposed in the ingenuity of Islamic art and architecture.

Fig. 1 The Lion-bull combat relief over the entrance portal of the Ulu Camii (the Great Mosque) of Diyarbakir, Turkey. Photo credit: Mehmet Kostumoglu © Museum with No Frontiers (MWNF) | Discover Islamic Art.

[27] Tabbaa, *The Transformation of Islamic Art during the Sunni Revival*.
[28] Sheila Blair, *Islamic Inscriptions* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), 69.

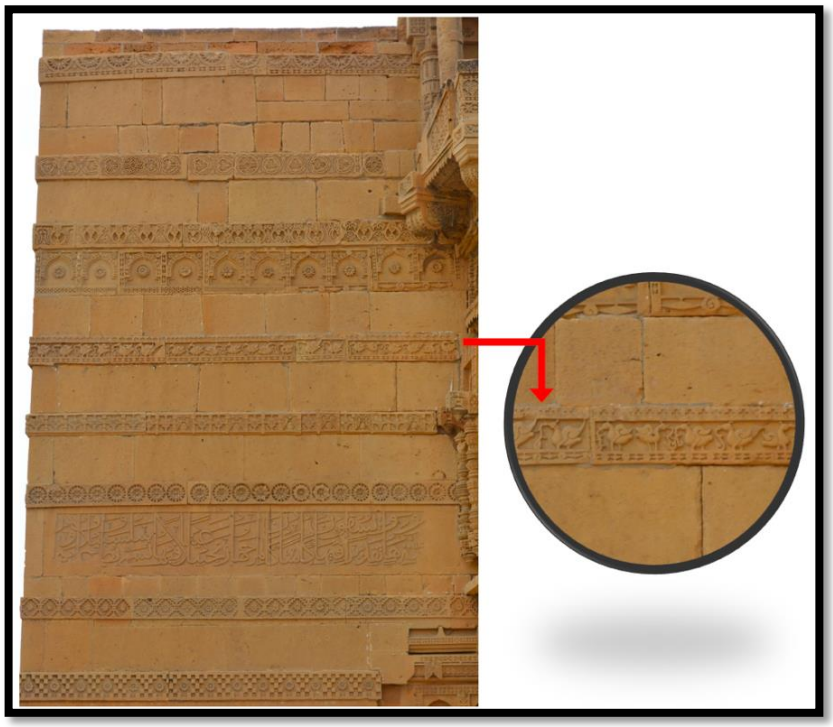

Fig. 2 Ornamental friezes on the west wall and detail of the frieze of *haṁsa*s (auspicious geese) in procession on the Tomb of Sultan Nizam al-Din Jam Nindo at Thatta, Pakistan.

Fig. 3 Glazed tile panel on the interior side wall of Masjid-i Jamiʿ at Isfahan (Iran).

Fig. 4 (a&b) Views of Courtyard of Al-ʿAttarine Madrasa in Fez, Morocco (14th century). Photo credit: Khalil Nemmaoui © Museum with No Frontiers (MWNF) | Discover Islamic Art.

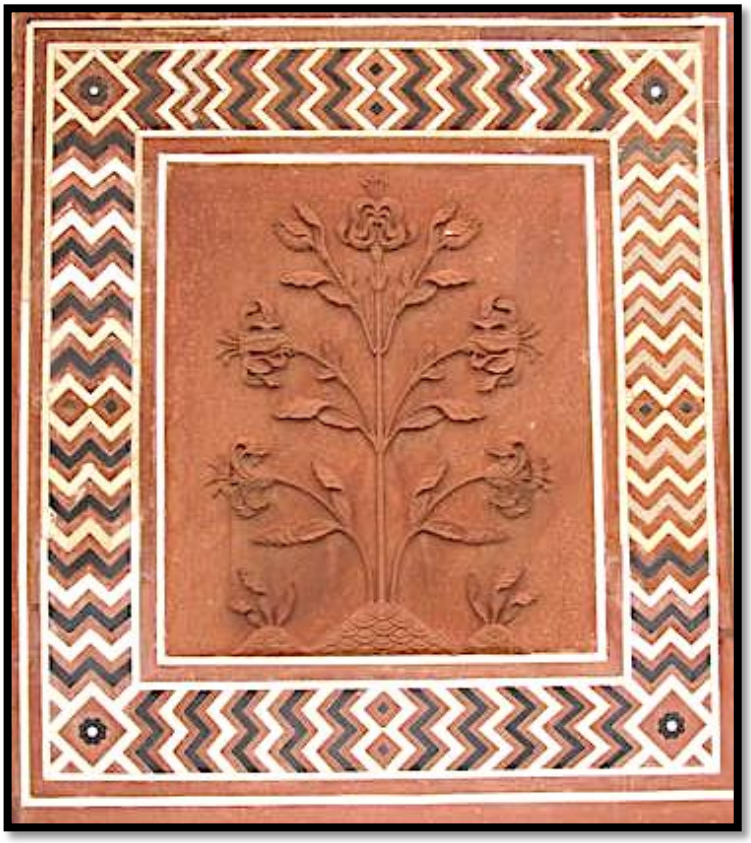

Fig. 5 Bas-relief in red sandstone on the walls of the guesthouse in the Taj Mahal Complex at Agra (India). Photo credit: Dr. Abdul Rehman