

What influence has Islamic art and design had on contemporary architecture and interior design?



Figure 1: The inside of a mosque, Karbala, Iraq

NAIRA AHMED SOLIMAN

INTERIOR DESIGN

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01. Introduction

'Are we ready, in the current climate of Islamophobia, to acknowledge that a style so closely identified with our European Christian identity owes its origins to Islamic architecture?'

(Darke, 2020, p.2). Not only did Islamic architecture inspire the Gothic European style in architecture but it also played an essential role in shaping Europe as it's known today. The current stigma around Islam and Muslims in Europe has led to the lack of acknowledgment of what Islam inspired. In France alone, Islamophobia cases have risen by 52% between 2017- 2018 (Magid, 2020). Modern day Europe has managed to intertwine Islamic art into its culture, that it has no longer become recognisable as its own element.

But what is Islamic art and design? What inspired it and what are the elements and characteristics of it? This report aims to address these questions by looking at Diana Darkes' book *'Stealing from the Saracens'*, alongside multiple journals, books, and website articles. Additionally, it will also address how Islamic art and architecture spread throughout the globe, how it became predominant in Europe, and the role it played in shaping the West.

Through this report, a case study will be identified, and an account of significant buildings will be explored alongside ethical issues regarding the appropriation that has occurred of Islamic art and why. It also aims to identify the cultural washing of Islamic art, acknowledge its importance within our contemporary architecture and interior design, additionally giving the movement the credit that it rightfully owns.

02. What is Islam, Islamic art and architecture and its origins?

Islamic art does not only describe the art created within the services of the Muslim faith, such as mosques, like figure 2, but also art and architecture that has been produced historically in lands ruled by Muslims, created by Muslims, or made for Muslim patrons (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2001). Islamic art also encompasses luxury manuscripts, inlaid metal wares, enamelled glass, and brocaded textiles (Blair & Bloom, 2003). Islamic art is not associated with a region, a movement or a time period but a

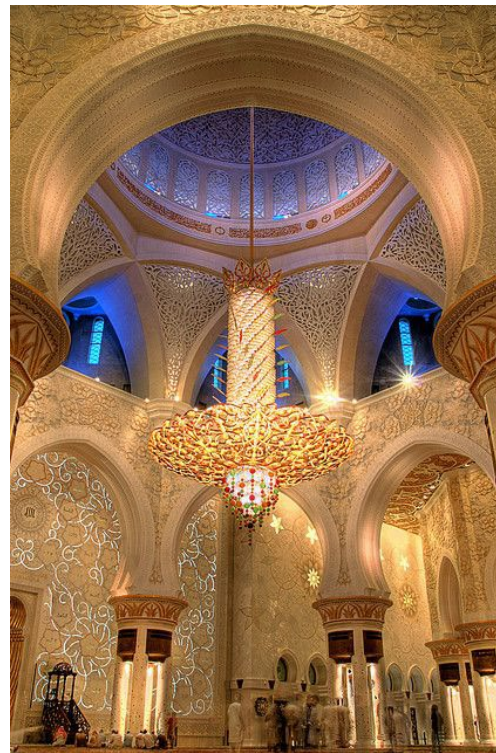


Figure 2: Interior of Sheikh Zayed Mosque

'visual culture of a place and time when the people (or at least their leaders) espoused a particular religion' (Blair & Bloom 2003 pg.153). Since this art is based on the Islamic religion, understanding the basics of this religion becomes key.

Islam, the last of the Abrahamic religions, is a religion that first emerged in the Arab peninsula, known as 'Ard al Hijaz' in Arabic, more specifically in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. The rise of Islam is closely linked with Prophet Mohammed as Muslims believe he was the one that God decided to send his message through. Prophet Muhammed received prophethood at the age of 40 (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2018). As Prophet Muhammed died in 632, at age 63, Islam first emerged in 609 A.D. Islam was not meant as a new faith but as the continuation and final statement of the faith of the people of the book (Grabar, 1959). It is vital to mention that Arabs already inhabited the Middle East before the Islamic conquest.

David Graf, a scholar in epigraphy proved that the Arab presence within the fertile crescent goes back to the seventh and sixth centuries BCE (Darke, 2020).

The first Islamic empire was the Umayyads. Before the passing of the prophet, Mu'awiya, a member of the Umayyad clan, a very powerful tribe in Mecca, was already the governor of Syria. After the prophet passed, Mu'awiya chose Damascus, capital of Syria, to be the capital of the new Islamic empire. This empire covered over 15 million square kilometers, from southern France up to India and frontiers of China as seen in figure 3. Apart from Arabic, languages such as Coptic, Greek, Latin, Persian and Berber were spoken amongst many others (Darke, 2020). This indicates that when Islamic Art and Architecture is spoken of it does not intend to just reflect Arabs, but rather a large sector of cultures that helped inspire the art until it created elements of its own, making this art a significantly diverse style within its origins.

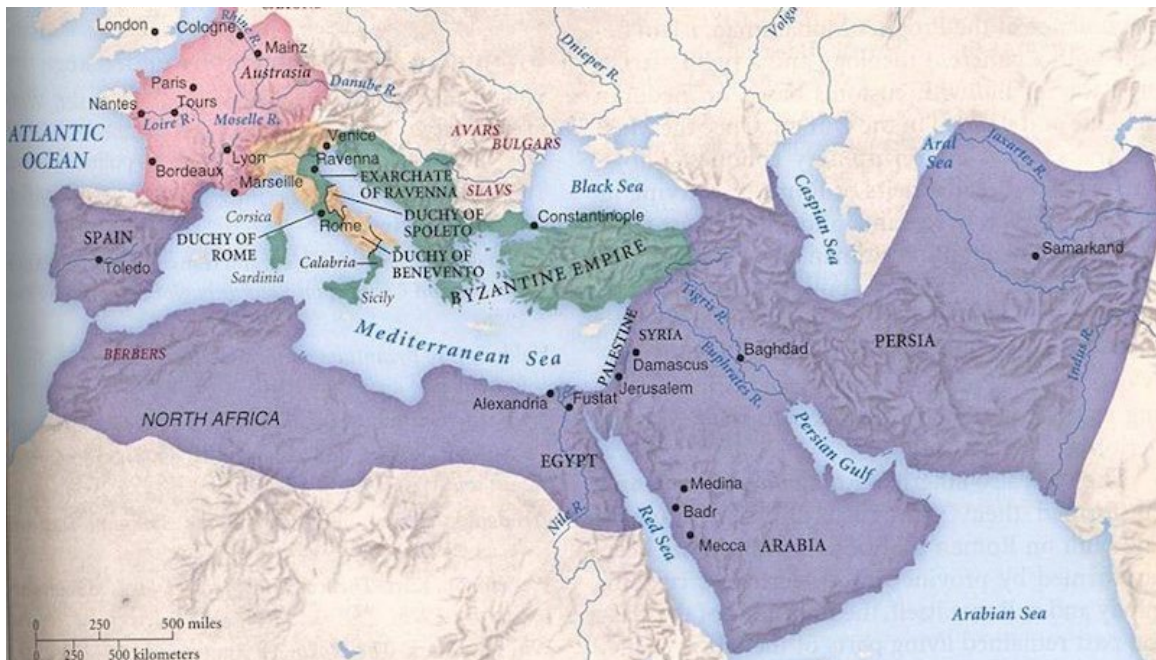


Figure 3: Countries under the Umayyad Dynasty (In purple)

With the expansion of Islam, Arabs interacted with different civilisations including the Greco-Roman, Buddhist, Christian and Chinese. Additionally, they encountered many

indigenous artistic traditions belonging to cultures such as the Slavs, Turks, Goths, Berbers, and Africans. Islamic art also borrowed inspiration from Byzantine, Hellenistic, and Sasanian traditions. From those, Muslim artists chose what suited their beliefs and taste to build their own style, fashion, and motifs that were in line with their religious beliefs, teachings, and own aesthetics. Even after Islamic art matured and created its own styles, the inter-cultural exchange continued without having a detrimental effect on Islamic aesthetics (Princess & Ali, 2006). This suggested that although Islamic Art did use inspiration from other civilizations and cultures it did not appropriate these elements as they created their own aesthetics to be in line with their teachings as well as making it into their own style.

Despite the start of Islam being in Saudi Arabia and the first Islamic empire having Damascus as its capital, western historians consider the Dome of the Rock to be the first Islamic architecture piece (Darke, 2020). Therefore, it can be argued that despite Islam originating in Mecca, Islamic architecture originated in Jerusalem, Palestine.

03. Case study: The Dome of the Rock

The holiness of Jerusalem to Muslims was inherited from Judaism and Christianity. The

Dome of the Rock is a high, colourful, and symmetrical structure that conveys distinct exterior and interior messages (Khoury 1993).

According to Muslims, the dome itself is constructed in the spot which the Prophet Muhammed was taken to



Figure 4: The Dome of the Rock

heaven to have an encounter with God. The structure of the Dome of the Rock was built by Abdul Malik, an Umayyad Caliph. It is positioned near a raised platform that comprises an octagonal base which is topped by a gilded wooden central dome (Zeidan, 2020).

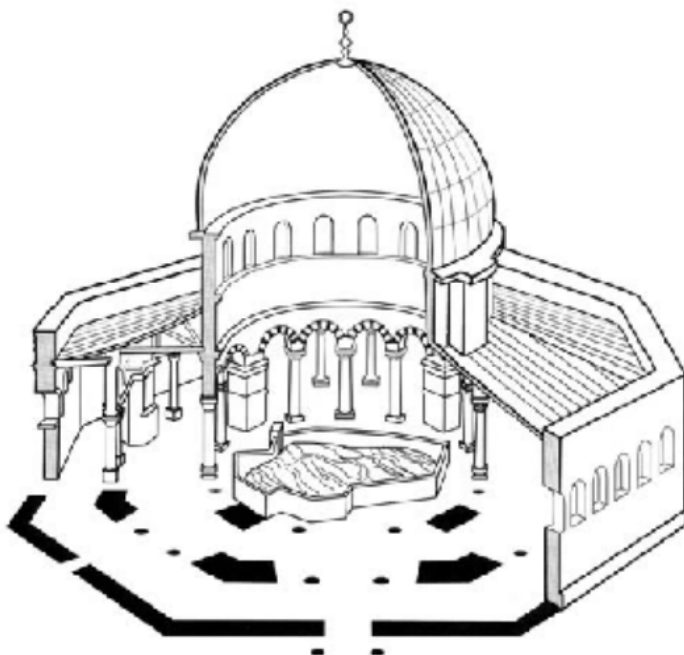


Figure 5: Cut section of the Dome of the Rock

Although the octagonal shape is derived from the Christian Martyria it also has a religious link to Muslims. It resembles the eight gardens with the eight doors in paradise that Muslims believe in (Darke, 2020). This emphasises the

fact that Muslim architects relate their work with their religious beliefs.

The dome is approximately 20 meters in diameter and is mounted on an elevated drum. It rises above 16 pillars and columns in a circular format, which is surrounded by an octagonal arcade of 24 pillars and columns. Under the dome, fragments of the sacred rock are exposed and protected by a railing. The outer walls (also form an octagon shape) are each approximately 11 meters high and 18 meters wide (Zeidan, 2020). The portions and the geometry, including the heights of the central cylinders were made so that the dome was visible from a distance. A shine was also designed within the structure. What the Dome of the rock had, that was never used before, was the pointed arches. Although these arches were not Muslim owned, Muslims were the first people to use them within an architectural design (Darke, 2020).

There were various distinct elements to this design, from mosaics to the use of calligraphy, as shown in figure 6. With the mosaics, most of the decorative themes consist of vegetal motives interspersed with jewels, cornucopias, and vases, (Grabar, 1959). The mosaics used

in the Dome of the Rock exclude any representations of human or animal form (Zeidan, 2020). This identifies that with Islamic Art, figures were not frequently used

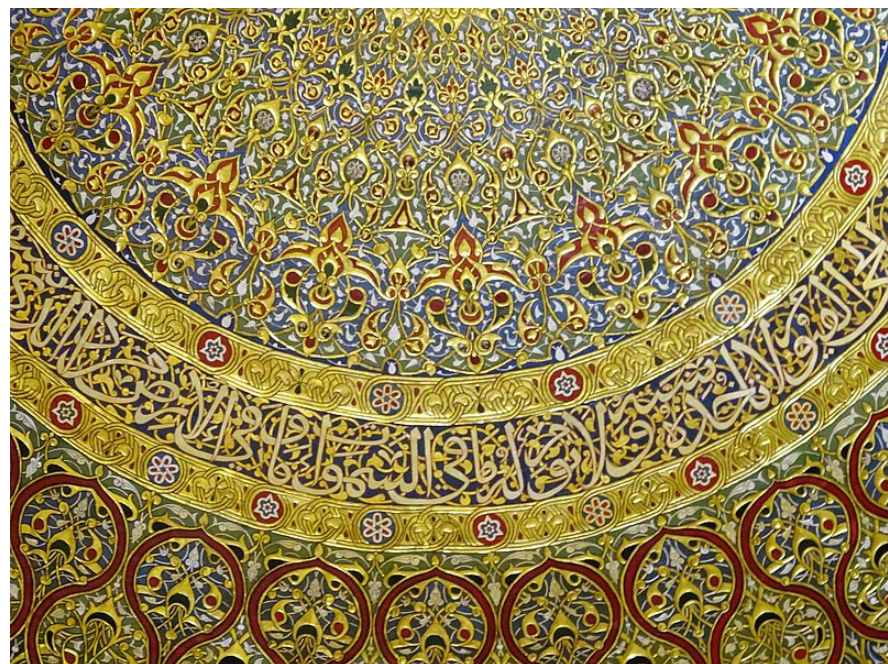


Figure 6: Calligraphy and Mosaics inside the dome

most likely due to religious reasons. The dome is also rich with Arabic calligraphy inscriptions. There are 3 major inscriptions present. The first is above the arches of the octagonal arcade located on both sides. The other 2 are present on copper plaques on the eastern and northern gates. These inscriptions come mainly from the Quran and emphasise 3 basic points: fundamental principles of Islam are forcefully asserted the position Prophet Muhammed upholds and Quranic quotations that define the positions of Jesus and other prophets within the Islamic theology (Grabar, 1959). This does not only highlight the importance of intertwining religious elements in Islamic architecture but also the choice of the inscriptions that were chosen. Right before Islam emerged in Jerusalem, Christianity and Judaism were predominant and therefore the choice of the inscription that speaks about prophets', that other religions have mentioned, can be seen as an act of trying to embed diversity and acceptance.

04. Elements of Islamic architecture

The main elements of Islamic art are calligraphy, vegetal patterns, and geometry.

Calligraphy is one of the core components of Islamic Art. The significance of it comes from the Quran, which is written in the Arabic language. It must be noted that many Muslims that are non- Arabic speakers may not be able to read calligraphy (The Metropolitan Museum of Art 2001). It integrates a cultural language with the language of geometry. It is the fluidity of the Arabic scripture that offers indefinite possibilities for designing various calligraphical forms. Calligraphical compositions don't have true symmetry because of isometric transformations or an expression within a symmetrical organisation but rather that they possess a rotational symmetry with 3, 4, 5, 6 and 8 centres of rotations, or a bilateral symmetry about a vertical reflection axis (Moustapha & Krishnamurti, 1993). This identifies that symmetry was so closely linked with the elements of Islamic art and although Arabic calligraphy as a form would have not been present in the west it can be argued that the symmetrical systems of Arabic calligraphy have been applied as presented in figure 7.

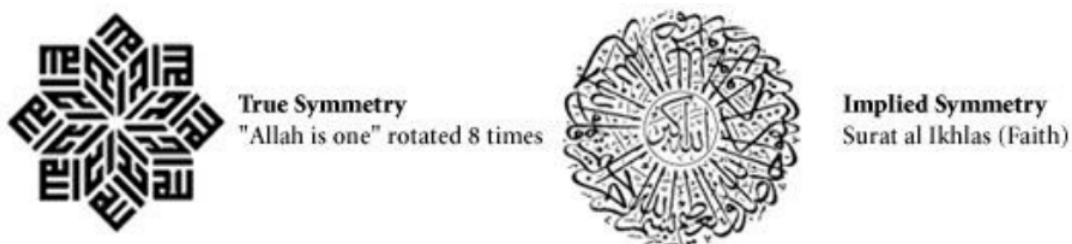


Figure 7: Calligraphic compositions

Alongside calligraphy, vegetal patterns are distinct within Islamic Art. These patterns were drawn from the Byzantian culture present in the Middle East and Sasanian Iran (Kaptan 2013). Despite some sources such as The Metropolitan Museum of Art arguing that it was only from the 16th century that the distinct Islamic- style vegetal patterns emerged, other sources such as the International Journal of Architecture Research argue that they were

always present ever since the Dome of the Rock and the first Umayyad Mosque were built. The main features in the vegetal patterns are classified by the botanical and morphological elements they withhold (Abdullahi and Rashid Embi, 2015). Figure 8 breaks down these features. It can be argued that both points of view within the research are correct. Despite the difference in the time regarding the merge of these patterns, neither of the sources undermined these patterns' presence and both agree on the fact that they were inspired by Byzantine. Therefore, it is an undeniable fact that both sides of the research argue that vegetal patterns are one of the main elements within Islamic art and architecture.

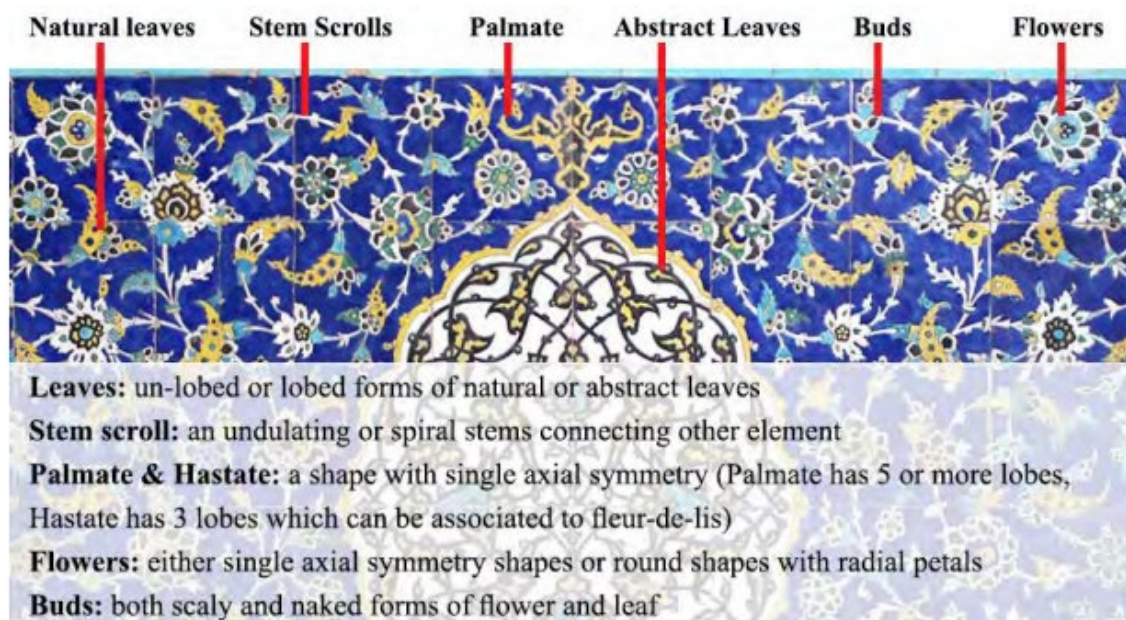


Figure 8: Predominant elements of Islamic floral ornament in Sheikh Lutfallah Mosque

The final main element is geometry. Multiple Islamic designs can be identified via the circular geometric figures as shown in figure 9. The division of the circular form into regular segments is the typical starting point for the endless traditional patterns. This figure does not only represent a symbol of unity but a source of diversity among the creation (Henry, 2017). These geometric patterns do not stand as just patterns but reflect the spiritual world

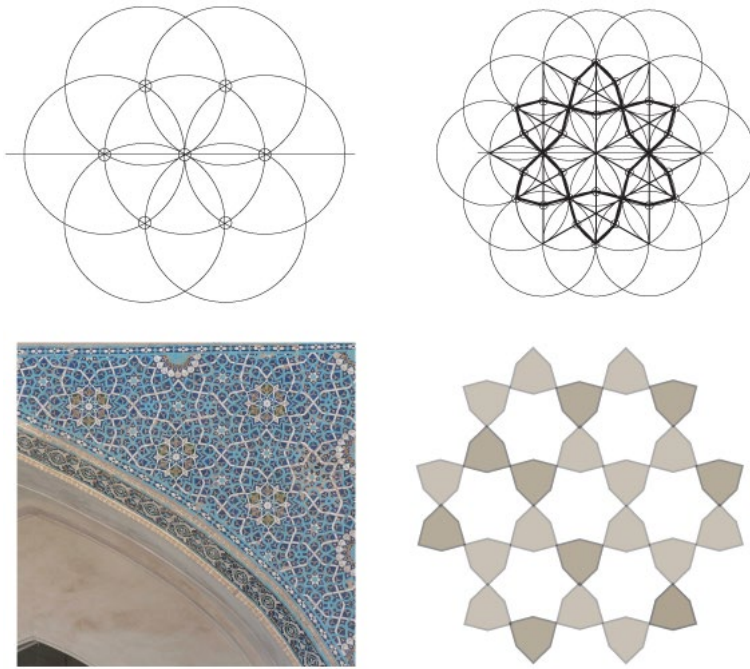


Figure 9: Circular geometric patterns

as well. The structure of these patterns draws attention to a world of poised tensions, equilibrium, and pure form. Just as it is believed that these patterns are intertwined within nature, it is also believed that they reflect principles within mathematics and physics.

Amongst Western Scholars,

Keith Critchlow was one of the firsts to analyse the geometric Islamic patterns from a metaphysical and cosmological perspective and his works have contributed massively to the understanding of Islamic art today (Critchlow and Hossein Nasr, 2017). Through research, it can be suggested that Islamic art is not just a means of drawings and patterns used for decorative elements, but they carry a very in-depth representation and contribution to beliefs that are also supported by academic disciplines including mathematics.

05. Gateway to Europe:

This section explores various buildings that were made or changed by Muslims in Europe.

05.1 Cordoba Mesquita – Spain

By 750 the Umayyads were replaced by the Abbasids. To escape, the last Umayyad prince went from North Africa to Spain in a journey that took 5 years. There he was met by many

Pro-Umayyad Syrian settlers

(Ettingshausen and Grabar 1987).

One of the first architectural pieces created was The Cordoba Mesquita

(Great Mosque of Cordoba). The

initial construction took a year,

from 785 to 786 (Figure 10). This



Figure 10: Cordoba Mesquita

construction was abundantly aided by the Narboone campaign and a massive quantity of

Roman and Visigothic stones. This mosque became a project that was worked on for the

next 500 years. The Cordoba Mesquita was considered to be a political statement

representing power and diversity. The Mosque looked like a fortress due to the crenellated

walls that encompassed it (Darke, 2020). The merging of the original Islamic architectural

elements with the old structures allowed it to create an aesthetically unique and



Figure 11: Arches of the Cordoba Cathedral

morphological structure that has

become of the most distinct western

Islamic architectural pieces (Khoury,

1996). However, the mosque only

lasted until today since it was later

transformed into a Catholic cathedral in the 13th century (Britannica, 1998). In 1593 the mosque's minaret was changed into a bell tower, additionally, Christian saints' paintings now fill the space. Darke (2020) states that '*Cultural appropriation on a colossal, not to say shocking, scale has taken place*' (Darke, 2020, pg163). This shows that despite this building is now being used as a cathedral in modern day Europe, the architectural aesthetics and intelligence credit is owed to the Muslims.

05.2 The court of the Myrtles - Spain

The court is part of a larger complex called Alhambra. Alhambra is located within Granada, Spain and the construction started in 1238 by Muhammad ibn Yusuf ibn Nasr who was the founder of the Nasrid Dynasty (ER service, 2021), which was the last Muslim Dynasty in the



Figure 12: Court of the Myrtles

Iberian Peninsula. This complex was built over three main stages: structural restoration, constructive restoration and finally the painting restoration (World Monuments Fund, 2021).

The court itself which has received different names over the years including the Patio of the pond and Reservoir, consisting of chambers present on both sides of the patio and many porticoes. These porticoes are located on columns that have semi-circular arches which are decorated with inscriptions praising God and fretwork rhombuses. The greatest arch is the one position on the middle of the rest of the arches and has solid scallops which are decorated with vegetal

forms (AlhambraDeGranada.org, 2021). This shows that despite the time gap the same principles within Islamic architecture were still apparent.

05.3 Chiostro del Paradiso – Italy

The cloister of paradise, inspired by the Arabic style, is built by Filippo Augustariccio between 1266 and 1268 in Italy. It consists of vaults supported by 120 double columns (Italian Ways,



Figure 13: Cloister of Paradise

2017). The question that arises is whether the cloister was inspired by the Arabic style or Islamic style in architecture. As stated previously, Arabs existed prior to the emerge of Islam and had their own culture and designs. The use of the word ‘Arab’ instead of ‘Islamic’, questions whether Islamic architecture became unidentifiable that it was discredited, or that people were unable to distinguish between Arabic culture and Islam. Although at the time the Nasrid dynasty did not have control of Italy, Italy remained to be the main destination within Europe where Islamic luxury goods were imported (Victoria, 2016).

05.4 Temple Church – London

Templum Domini, the name given to the round templar churches which can be found across Europe were massively modelled based on the Dome of the Rock the Umayyads



Figure 14: Interior of the Temple Church

made. Within England, there are 4 of these churches with the most known one, the Temple Church, present in London (Darke, 2020). According to the official website of the church, the church has been in use since 1163 when Geoffery de Mandeville was buried. The church was later consecrated in honour by Patriarch

Heraclius of Jerusalem in 1185 (Temple Church, 2021). The ground floor nave of the church is circled with an arcade of pointed arches. These arches are then topped by interlocking arches, round in shape, resembling the Dome of the Rock. The church is still in use today (Darke, 2020). This shows that inspiration from Islamic architecture played a role in what has become identified as the gothic style within Europe.

05.5 Saint Nicholas Cathedral – Cyprus

Cyprus as Darke (2020) states is *'the best way to see how Crusader architecture was influenced by exposure to Islamic styles and techniques'* (Darke, 2020, pg262). Due to Cyprus's geographical position, it has been a hot spot for multiple invasions, from the Arabs, back to the Byzantines and then by the Crusaders. It later fell into the Ottoman empire's hands, and they gave it to Britain in a military exchange in 1878. Saint Nicolas Cathedral, as seen in figure 15 was completed in 1298 (North Cyprus, 2021), then transitioned into what is known as the Lala Mustafa Pasha Mosque (or Saint Sophia mosque of Famagusta) in 1571 (Darke, 2020). The style of the building is referenced to the Rayonnant Gothic style, which was mainly seen in France. This cathedral architecture represents the ties Cyprus had with France at the time due to the parallel representation of the French Notre-Dame de Reims. Darke (2020) argues that the gothic style owes its influence on Islamic inspiration, which will be discussed in the following section (Darke, 2020). Generally, the Ottomans re-used the churches by changing the use of the building rather than the structure itself.



Figure 15: Saint Nicholas Cathedral

Idoltrous images such as animals, humans, or creatures were removed as they are forbidden within the Islamic religion (Alcicioglu, 2014). Altars and stained glass were removed (Darke, 2020) and now a mihrab and a minaret have been added (North Cyprus, 2021).

05.6 Hagia Sophia – Turkey



Figure 16: Hagia Sophia

Hagia Sophia also known as Ayasofya in Turkish, figure 16, had a history of being built multiple times throughout history. First starting off in 325 by Constantine I, then catching fire multiple times until the 6th century where it was

completed by Justinian. What started off as a church, didn't last to be one. In 1453, after the conquest of Constantinople by the Turks, it was turned into a mosque by Mehmed II. A wooden minaret, mihrab, minbar and a great chandelier were added. Regarding the architecture, the dome is supported on pendentives and includes two semi-domes which are located on both sides of the longitudinal axis. These were designed by Byzantine architects which remain till today.

The mosaics within the building are considered by art historians as the main source of knowledge regarding mosaics within the 8th and 9th centuries. In 1934, Ataturk transformed

the mosque into a museum until 2020 when Erdogan was able to convert the building back into a mosque (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2018). This shows that there is a very fine line between Byzantine architecture and the Islamic one as some elements are very closely interlinked, even though the first conversion to the mosque did include the addition of many Islamic elements, the mosque today looks whole due to these very close links.

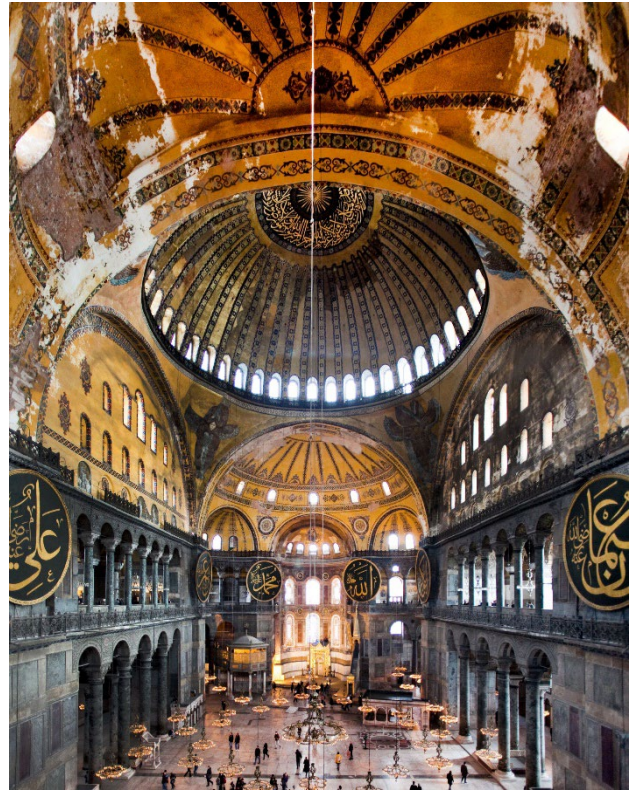


Figure 17: Hagia Sophia Interior

06. European Gothic style

The term ‘gothic’ within this section refers to a cultural and ethnic concept that originated within Europe during the 18th century (Punter, 2012). It is also described as “*the inevitable product of the revolutionary shocks with which the whole of Europe resounded*” (Sade cited from Punter, 2012, pg 64).

The Ottoman Empire ruled from 1299 – 1922 (History. com Editors, 2017). The empire stemmed from Anatolia, Turkey covering land up till Austria, the Persian Gulf, Yemen, and Algeria (Blakemore, 2019) as seen in figure 18. Studies of the Arabic language peaked during the 1650s within Europe and under the Ottomans travelling was safe which allowed people and scholars to travel to the East during the 18th and 19th centuries (Darke, 2020).



Figure 18: Land under the Ottoman Empire

Among the highly respected architects, Jacques- Francois Blondel, a French architect during the 18th century was amongst the people that were able to see the influence of Islamic/Arab architecture on the famous European gothic cathedrals. These thoughts were clearly documented in his book *Cours d'Architecture* (Darke, 2020).

Augustus Pugin, one of the most well-known British architects that played a massive role within the revival of the gothic style, was born in 1812 in London (Hill, 2012). Pugin's love for the style stemmed from his father. He found the gothic style to be representative of the hard, honest work of devoted craftsmen (Darke, 2020). Pugin was 24 years of age when he published his book *Contrasts* (Hill, 2012) which presented his own drawings of classics such as the British Museum alongside Gothic cathedrals within Europe and England. This book was the product of anger he felt towards the industrial revolution as he found it to be the 'destroyer of society' (Darke,2020, pg312). When Pugin investigated history, he linked the ogival, pointed and trefoil arch structures back to the Muslim and Arab world which he called the 'Saracens'. He found that the Muslims were the initial creators of these Gothic details which were very common with the style he loved (Darke, 2020). This was further supported by the statement in his book *An Apology For The Revival Of The Christian Architecture in England* where he stated '*We must turn to the principles from which all styles have originate. The history of architecture the history of the world: as we inspect the edifices of antiquity, its nations, its dynasties, its religions, are all brought before us*' (Pugin 1843 cited from Style Material Theory, 2019). This supports the notion that a style that is very much linked to a European persona owes its origins to Muslims, even though Muslims do not get the credit for that.

07. Islamic architecture influence on contemporary design

As the previous sections have evidenced, Islamic architecture had a large influence not just within the Muslim world and during its reign but also throughout history. Yet majority of the work referenced the influence of the Muslims up until the last Muslim dynasty, which was the Ottoman empire. Today, impact within contemporary designs cannot be distinguished unless evident within a Muslim country.

The dome presented in figure 19 is designed by Vo Trong Nghia, located in Vietnam. The dome is made from bamboo and the appearance is described to be the fusion between traditional folk art and contemporary architecture (Dezeen, 2014). This structure is closely like the Doha tower (Figure 20), which was constructed in 2013 and is made out of aluminium and reflective



Figure 19: Bamboo dome in Vietnam



Figure 20: Dome of the Doha Tower

glass (Dxx, 2016). Domes have been part of the Islamic architecture movement since the start, and the geometric elements have played a massive role within this field. It is unreasonable to say that the dome in Vietnam was inspired by the Islamic movement yet throughout history Islam has reached as far as China and trade has always occurred between the Islamic dynasty and the rest of the world.

There is a lack of research regarding the contemporary effects of Islamic architecture, but it does open a question of whether there has been influence which has been disregarded.

Mosaics have always lived in new dimensions, shapes, and colour. Figure 21 shows white and black geometric mosaic motifs for the flooring of Unico Hotel, located in Madrid (Sicismag, 2021). Looking at figure 22 which is of Moroccan mosaic designs, the similarities between both designs are very apparent. It must be remembered that the Islamic architecture was present in Spain as much as it was in Morocco and North Africa at one point under multiple different Muslim Dynasties which is supported by prior sections within this report.



Figure 21: Flooring of Unico Hotel, Madrid

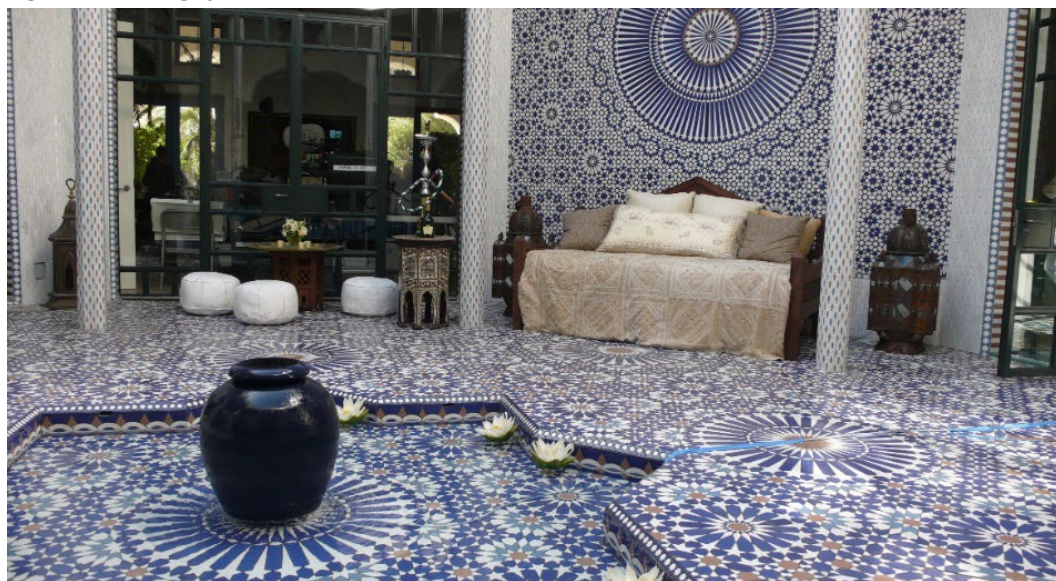


Figure 22: Moroccan Living Room

As previously mentioned, symmetry is one of the main elements within Islamic architecture. High-end luxury retail stores like Yves Saint Laurent (YSL) as shown in figure 23 tend to use symmetrical layout to highlight the value of the brand. Such symmetry has always been used within Islamic buildings such as mosques. For example, the entirety of Sheik Zayed Mosque, figure 24, which can hold up to 55,000 worshipers every day is symmetrical within every element. The design is created to help embody the message of Islam: peace, tolerance, and the welcoming of people from all beliefs (AbuDhabi, 2021).



Figure 23: YSL Store interior



Figure 24: Sheik Zayed Mosque

The lack of research into the influence of Islamic architecture on contemporary designs could be due to the colonisation by Britain, France, Italy, and other European countries of Muslim countries like Egypt, Algeria and Libya. (Editors of Britannica, 2019). For example, Libya was colonised by the Italians during the 1930s. During that time period, local forms were appropriated by Italian architects as they adapted the native architecture of Libya (McLaren, 2002). Since many of these countries were originally under Muslim empires such as the Fatimid and Ottomans it becomes no surprise that colonisation played a role in

discrediting the Muslim architecture as it has been appropriated and used under their own name that now it has become unknown.

One problem that stimulates from trying to understand Islamic art and architecture, as Grabar himself states, is that it stems from western observers trying to understand an art that they have no cultural links to. This does not stem from a Muslim experience. However, that becomes the only way of trying to understand such art due to the Muslims cultures not providing the intellect and framework that would help scholars outside the culture understand the art (Shaw, 2012). Therefore, despite the western art scholars not being able to totally understand and comprehend the importance of certain elements with the Islamic art, they remain to be the main source of knowledge on this topic at the current time.

08. Conclusion

The extent of the influence of Islamic art and architecture in contemporary design is down to subjective interpretation due to the lack of current research in this field. Within Muslim countries, it is easier to identify these influences, whereas in the West there is no solid evidence to give that answer.

Just like any other form of art, Islamic art and architecture took its inspiration from somewhere, and in this case, it was prior civilisations. It worked on using that inspiration alongside its religious scripture and teaching to create its own forms. These forms have been known through their historical presence but totally disregarded within the modern movement. Like any other movement and culture, it can not be denied that there would have been artists that have appropriated other cultures and not given credit, yet at the same time, the style has created distinct features that have been based predominantly on the Islamic teachings.

The appropriation that happened to such an art was due to colonisation and colonisers claiming forms as their own, thus being able to uncover the originality of multiple designs has become difficult.

The lack of people working to raise awareness to this field contributed to the difficulty and inability to realise such features and distinguish between the 'Arab' and 'Islamic' style as they have become closely intertwined. In addition, the information we hold on this art is by western observers therefore there will always be a lacking element of the true understanding of the culture. It can not be denied that now more than ever, with the increasing Islamophobia in the current times, it will be very difficult for such an art to gain its true credit.

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