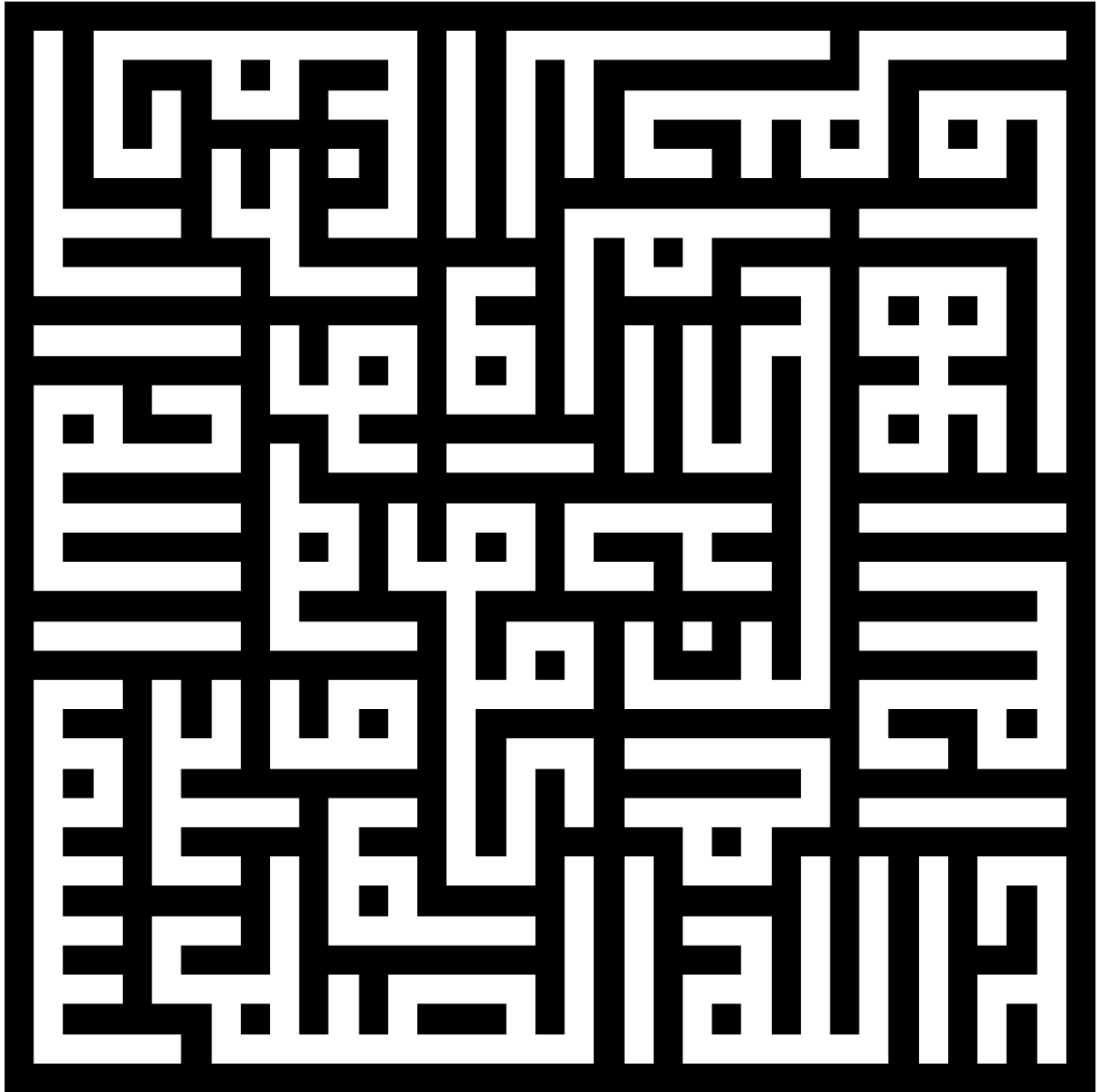


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**A Short Introduction to the Islamic
Prohibition of Figurative Art**



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A Short Introduction to the Islamic Prohibition of Figurative Art

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The widespread assumption that all images are forbidden in Islam is, in fact, a common misconception. The origins of this issue can be traced back to pre-Islamic religious and cultural worldviews, particularly concepts such as animism and dynamism. In this context, the belief in jinn (spirits or supernatural beings) played a decisive role.

Throughout history, the idea that certain objects possess spiritual power and are capable of influencing human life and worldly affairs — comparable to talismans or amulets — has persisted in various forms. At the same time, the revelation of the Qur'an confirmed the existence of jinn, which were often believed to inspire artistic creativity and, in some traditions, even to exert influence over human actions and behavior.

Consequently, the debate surrounding images and artistic representation in Islam cannot be reduced to a simple prohibition of visual art. Rather, it reflects a complex interaction between theological concerns, pre-Islamic beliefs, and fears regarding idolatry, spiritual influence, and the potential power attributed to images and material objects.

Photography as Fixed Space-Time

Within certain traditions of Islamic thought, images and figurative representations were often regarded as unnecessary distractions capable of diverting believers from the true path — namely, the spiritual search for truth and ultimately for God. In this context, the imitation of nature, or *mimesis*, was viewed with suspicion, particularly in relation to figurative art and the depiction of living beings.

Nevertheless, forms of mimetic representation continued to exist throughout the history of Islamic art, despite theological reservations concerning the production of images. Attempts were therefore made to differentiate between permissible and impermissible forms of representation. In many interpretations, depictions of beings believed to possess *rūḥ* (spirit, breath, or soul) were considered forbidden, whereas representations of inanimate objects and non-living forms were generally regarded as acceptable.

Over time, however, the Islamic world gradually accepted photography as a global medium and integrated it into everyday life, artistic practice, and modern communication. Some scholars and theologians argued that photography should not be understood as an act of imitation (*mimesis*) in the traditional artistic sense, but rather as the mechanical capture or “fixing” of a shadow through light within a specific moment of space and time. From this perspective,

photography was perceived less as human artistic creation and more as a technical reproduction of reality itself.

At the same time, photography introduced new questions regarding visibility, representation, and human vulnerability, since the photographic image has the capacity to render personal characteristics, virtues, and identities permanently observable and reproducible. This process intensified further with the emergence of digital photography and the internet, through which images became globally accessible, infinitely reproducible, and detached from their original temporal and spatial context.

Competition with God

The Islamic prohibition of images may be understood primarily as a rejection of all forms of polytheism (*shirk*), and this perspective provides an essential framework for interpreting the theological debates surrounding visual representation in Islam. Within this understanding, the image is regarded not merely as an artistic object, but as a product of human imagination and imitation of nature (*mimesis*). Nature itself, however, is traditionally understood as part of God's creation and therefore ultimately dependent upon divine will and creative power.

In classical Islamic theology, God alone is considered the absolute creator of the universe. Only God possesses the power to create existence itself, to determine the order of space and time, and to sustain reality. Human beings, by contrast, are understood as God's representatives or vicegerents on earth (*khalīfa*). As such, they may participate in creative and cultural activities — including artistic production — but only insofar as these activities do not challenge or imitate divine creation in a manner that could be interpreted as competition with God.

From this perspective, the production of images raises important theological questions. A picture is created by human beings and therefore constitutes a secondary or indirect product within God's all-encompassing unity (*tawhīd*). According to certain theological traditions, such as the Ash'arite theory of acquisition (*kasb*), human beings "appropriate" actions through intention and agency, even though all power ultimately derives from God. Consequently, humans bear moral responsibility for their actions, including the creation and use of images. Questions concerning free will, predestination, and moral accountability are therefore closely connected to the issue of image prohibition, although these debates cannot be fully addressed within the scope of this discussion.

In this sense, the so-called Islamic prohibition of images should not be interpreted as a rejection of art as such. Rather, it may be understood as resistance against idolatry, excessive material attachment, and the attribution of autonomous power to created objects. In the modern world, this concern can also be related to forms of materialism and the manipulation of perception through mass media and visual culture.

This perspective is particularly relevant in the context of digital imagery and the internet, where images circulate globally and exert considerable influence on public consciousness. Some major television networks in the Arab world claim to operate in accordance with Islamic values, yet one may argue that they often misunderstand the deeper theological dimensions of the Islamic critique of images. Visual representations of violence, war, and suffering are not merely neutral forms of information; they also shape perception, emotions, and collective consciousness, in ways comparable to global media networks such as CNN and similar news channels in the rest of the world.

Reading Instead of Looking

Within Islamic tradition, the truly “display-worthy” reality is not God Himself, since God is understood as transcendent and therefore beyond visual representation. This theological position fundamentally distinguishes Islamic aesthetics from many forms of Christian art and iconography, which were historically shaped by the doctrine of the Trinity and the visual representation of Christ. From the perspective of the Qur’an, however, such representations are problematic, since prophets — including both Jesus and Muhammad — are regarded as human beings rather than divine incarnations. The depiction of prophets was therefore often approached with caution because of the perceived danger that personal cults, veneration, or forms of idolatry might emerge.

Instead of human figures, Islamic culture traditionally emphasized the *āyāt* of God. The Arabic term *āyah* (plural: *āyāt*) carries several meanings, including “verse,” “sign,” “symbol,” and “miracle.” The verses of the Qur’an are therefore not merely textual statements but manifestations of divine revelation itself. In this sense, the miracle in Islam is primarily linguistic and spiritual rather than visual.

This orientation toward language and revelation is closely connected to the first words revealed to the Prophet Muhammad through the angel Gabriel: *Iqra*’ (“Read!” or “Recite!”). These words symbolize the central importance of reading, recitation, writing, and knowledge within Islamic civilization. Consequently, Islamic art developed strong traditions of calligraphy, ornamentation, and textual aesthetics, in which writing itself became a sacred artistic form.

From this perspective, an image is not simply meant to be viewed passively, but rather to be “read” and interpreted. The visible world points beyond itself toward deeper meanings that cannot be fully captured through representation alone. The true miracle — divine revelation — cannot be reproduced or imitated, since every copy necessarily remains inferior to its archetype. God’s revelation was transmitted to humanity primarily through words, and the Qur’an therefore became the central medium through which the sacred was experienced and communicated.

For this reason, the expression “Islamic picture prohibition” can be misleading if understood too literally. The term should therefore be used with caution, and perhaps even as a “so-called” prohibition, since it may incorrectly suggest that Islam is fundamentally hostile toward images, art, or artistic creativity in general. In reality, the theological concern is directed primarily against polytheism, idolatry, and the attribution of sacred or autonomous power to created images, rather than against artistic expression as such.

Prohibition of Pictures or Prohibition of Art?

Artistic expression does not necessarily lead to the worship of false idols; rather, it may be understood as an expression of the diversity and creativity inherent in human existence. From a broader religious perspective, artistic creativity is not inherently incompatible with Islam. On the contrary, creativity can itself be interpreted as part of the richness and multiplicity of God’s creation.

In nature, for example, the extraordinary forms, colours, and adaptive capacities of animals are commonly regarded in Islam as signs of divine creativity and wisdom. The beauty and complexity of the natural world are understood as manifestations of God’s miraculous creation. If such diversity within nature is interpreted as evidence of divine artistry, then one may also

ask why the imaginative creativity of a contemporary artist should necessarily be judged differently. A street artist who combines influences from figures such as Pablo Picasso with modern urban materials and visual techniques may likewise be seen as participating in the broader human capacity for creativity and expression.

For this reason, the so-called Islamic prohibition of images cannot simply be interpreted as a prohibition of art itself. Nevertheless, restrictive attitudes toward figurative representation have existed — and in some contexts continue to exist — within parts of Islamic societies. Over time, however, these attitudes have undergone significant transformation, particularly as a result of technological developments and the growing acceptance of modern visual media such as photography, film, and digital imagery. Contemporary artists from Muslim backgrounds, such as Shirin Neshat, demonstrate the extent to which modern Islamic art engages critically with questions of identity, religion, politics, gender, and globalization.

In many contemporary contexts, art is also regarded as a medium of social criticism and reflection. Artistic expression can challenge political and cultural structures and may even contribute to discussions concerning what constitutes a more ethical or “Islamic” social order. At the same time, the historical spirit underlying the Islamic critique of images has not entirely disappeared. This is particularly visible in sacred religious contexts, where figurative depictions often remain limited or absent. Instead, Islamic artistic traditions developed highly sophisticated non-figurative forms of expression, especially calligraphy, arabesque ornamentation, and geometric design.

These aesthetic forms emerged not despite the theological reservations concerning images, but partly because of them. Islamic calligraphy, in particular, transformed writing into a sacred visual art connected directly to the revelation of the Qur’an. Geometric and ornamental structures likewise became central elements of Islamic visual culture and continue to influence many contemporary artists today. Through digital media, the internet, and global communication networks, these artistic traditions are now exchanged, reproduced, and reinterpreted worldwide in new formats and contexts.

The increasing acceptance of modern visual art and digital imagery within many Islamic societies should therefore not simply be understood as a consequence of modernization or technological progress alone. Rather, it may also be interpreted as a sign of a broader and more nuanced understanding of Islamic theological traditions — one that distinguishes between artistic creativity on the one hand and idolatry or polytheism on the other.

Artists and Calligraphists

The Islamic artist should not be regarded as a “prisoner” confined within a world of ornamentation, nor should the calligraphist be understood merely as someone forced to create images out of letters and abstract forms. Rather, these artistic practices demonstrate a remarkable degree of technical mastery and intellectual virtuosity: the ability to create an extraordinarily rich and diverse visual language from a limited number of formal elements.

In this sense, Islamic art reflects not only aesthetic concerns but also the spiritual and philosophical worldview of the believer. Repetition, symmetry, and abstraction often symbolize the hidden order of existence, the continuity of creation, and the relationship between the material world and the eternal reality beyond death. The endlessly repeating patterns found in Islamic ornamentation may therefore be interpreted as visual metaphors for infinity and divine unity.

Within this artistic tradition, the direct representation of the individual self is generally less important than the communication of a deeper spiritual message connected to revelation. The central challenge for many Islamic artists has therefore not been the imitation of external reality alone, but the attempt to express metaphysical truths through form, rhythm, geometry, and script. The abstract visual structures that emerge from this process often evoke contemplative reactions similar to the experience of observing a star-filled sky: the viewer's gaze moves continuously from one point to another, searching for harmony, order, and hidden meaning within the pattern.

Such abstraction can also be understood as an artistic expression of the impossibility of fully comprehending the nature of God. Since God transcends all material dimensions and categories of representation, no finite image can adequately capture divine reality. Islamic art therefore frequently emphasizes suggestion, symbolism, and infinite repetition rather than direct depiction. In this respect, artistic creation in Islam is based not on complete possession or understanding of reality, but on the recognition that ultimate creative power belongs to God alone.

Although figurative painting and manuscript illustration played an important role in certain historical periods of Islamic art — particularly in Persian, Ottoman, and Mughal miniature traditions — these forms were usually limited to specific themes and cultural contexts. Subjects such as the *mi'rāj* (the Prophet Muhammad's ascension to heaven), literary epics, courtly life, or portraits of rulers appeared primarily in manuscript painting rather than in sacred architectural settings. Furthermore, these figurative traditions often changed according to historical styles and dynastic influences.

By contrast, ornamental art, geometric composition, and calligraphy developed as more continuous and universally recognized forms of Islamic artistic expression. For centuries, these artistic traditions have inspired admiration through their precision, complexity, and spiritual depth, just as they continue to do today. Their enduring aesthetic power demonstrates that Islamic art did not suffer a decline in artistic quality because of theological reservations concerning images. On the contrary, these limitations encouraged the development of highly original visual languages that distinguish Islamic art from many other artistic traditions.

A common misconception claims that figurative and illustrative art in Islamic cultures merely reproduced foreign artistic models. It is certainly true that Islamic art maintained strong connections with pre-Islamic, Byzantine, Persian, Central Asian, and other neighboring artistic traditions. Nevertheless, Islamic artistic cultures transformed these influences into distinct and innovative forms of expression with their own historical phases of development. This originality is especially visible in the evolution of ornamentation, geometry, and calligraphy, which became defining characteristics of Islamic visual culture across different regions and historical periods. What we observe here once again is a clear manifestation of transculturality.

Pictures and Imaginations Seen by the “Mental Eye”

The so-called Islamic prohibition of images significantly influenced the historical development of Islamic art, both positively and negatively. However, the essential question is not merely the extent of these influences, but rather the qualitative value of the artistic forms that emerged from them and the broader impact they exerted upon society, culture, and religious consciousness.

The debate surrounding images in Islam raises fundamental philosophical and theological questions concerning representation, perception, and reality itself. Does it truly make sense to attempt to portray nature in visual form? Can any artistic medium fully capture the experience of a sunrise, the movement of light, or the depth of human perception? Within many Islamic intellectual traditions, linguistic expression — especially revealed language — is regarded as more capable of conveying transcendent meaning than visual representation alone.

From this perspective, the word possesses a unique spiritual and symbolic power. Whereas an image may reproduce only the external appearance of an object, language is capable of addressing both the visible and invisible dimensions of existence. This helps explain the privileged role of revelation, recitation, poetry, and calligraphy within Islamic civilization. The “mental eye” — that is, the inner faculty of contemplation and imagination — becomes more important than purely visual perception. Reality is therefore not understood solely through external observation, but also through intellectual reflection and spiritual insight.

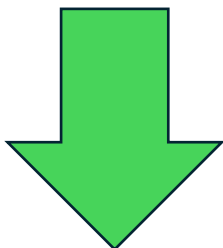
The Qur’an repeatedly directs human attention toward the signs (*āyāt*) of God within both nature and the human self. In this sense, the visible world functions less as an object to be copied than as a symbolic reality to be interpreted and contemplated. As stated in the Qur’an:

“Soon We will show them Our signs in the horizons and within themselves until it becomes clear to them that it is the truth. Is it not sufficient concerning your Lord that He is Witness over all things?” (Qur’an 41:53)

This verse illustrates the Islamic understanding that truth ultimately reveals itself not through representation alone, but through the recognition of divine signs present throughout existence. Consequently, Islamic aesthetics often emphasize contemplation rather than illusionistic imitation. The goal of art is not necessarily to reproduce the world exactly as it appears to the physical eye, but to direct the observer toward deeper metaphysical realities perceived through the “mental eye” of reflection and spiritual awareness.

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Additional Information





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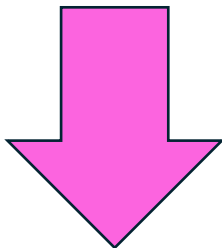


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Additional Information



Prior work:

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