The term “Islamic Art” is the broad term describing the visual arts of countries of predominantly Muslim population and culture. Beneath this umbrella the vastly different cultures have developed their own particular characteristics and emphasis on art. The term means different things to different people, and its application engenders heated debate, in which Persians are the most offended opponents, citing indignantly that as the basis of almost all miniature painting, about which there is nothing Islamic, Persian art should be in a category of its own. A more correct term, still not satisfactory to Persians but less offensive is “Arts of the Islamic World” specifically those of Iran, Turkey, Mughal India and Central Asia whose emphasis on the art of miniature painting sets them apart from the Arab world. While Islamic art owes a great deal to Islam as a religion, it predominantly draws upon sophisticated secular cultures, and the term is therefore cultural rather than religious.

Indeed much of the art has little to do with Islam as a religion. Beyond the embellishments of Korans and Mosques, the manuscripts devoted to the lives of the prophets and the Miraj-nama, much of what is termed Islamic art pertains to literary manuscripts of miniature painting. Since the Koran is not a narrative, unlike the bible, there are few stories that lend themselves to illustration. In this way it contrasts “Christian Art” where artists drew on bible stories for much of their inspiration.

Of all the visual arts, calligraphy is the most highly regarded, and most representative of Islamic art. The Arabesque, the complicated, endless flowing of intertwined stylized floral and plant motifs, is together with various scripts of the Arabic alphabet, and geometric designs, the most valued decoration. Architecture, furniture, metalwork, textiles and
pottery are for the most part all decorated with some combination of the two. It is therefore the calligrapher rather than the painter who is the revered artist of Islam.

What the Koran says about art

Islamic religious art, that is art adorning public spaces and Korans, is devoid of figures. Islamic tradition has frowned upon the figurative depiction of living creatures, especially human beings. Islamic art has therefore tended to be abstract or decorative. This has lead to the mistaken belief that the Koran expressly forbids images. In fact the Koran does not mention painting. Specifically in chapter 21, verses 52-57 it says, "We formerly bestowed guidance on Abraham, for we knew him well. He said to his father and to his people: ‘what are these images to which you are so devoted?’ They replied: ‘They are the gods our fathers worshipped.’ He said: ‘then you and your fathers have surely been in evident error.’ The ban on idolatry is a feature of the Old and New Testament as much as it is of the Koran. Indeed the prohibition on idolatry isn’t an outright ban on images, whether of God, the Prophet Muhammad or others. But over the centuries its vagueness has lead to interpretation as prohibition. The interpretation of the Hadith, the reports of the sayings and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad and other early Muslims, is the way through which Islamic tradition has arrived at the ban on painting. There, the question is raised with the notion that any representation that casts a shadow encourages idolatry, and since God is unique without associates, not only can he not be represented but must be worshipped without intercessors, thereby frowning upon the images of saints and religious relics. Actually the Hadith does not explicitly prohibit images of the Prophet anymore than the Koran does, but they do forbid the depiction of any living beings, human or animal. The prohibition again goes back to idolatry. Images of living
things might tempt idolatry, which would be blasphemous. The Hadith carry heavy doctrinal authority, so the implicit ban against depictions of the Prophet Muhammad, is, as far as Moslems are concerned, absolute. Historically Shia Islamic tradition is far less strict on the edict on images, with the 7-9th centuries in Arab countries, as the seats of caliphate, being the most prohibitive.

Over the last thousand years, Muslims in India, Afghanistan, Iran, Central Asia and Turkey have had a rich courtly tradition of miniature painting, depicting the various prophets, including the Prophet Muhammad. These miniatures were patronized by pious Muslim rulers, and were often richly illustrated with verses from the Qur'an. The most important is the "Ascension of the Prophet Muhammad, the Mir'aj. These depict the prophet, usually veiled, engulfed in a halo of gold. Seated on Buraq, his winged human-headed horse, and surrounded by angels, he rises towards the sky in his ascent towards the divine. Others, such as books of divination contain many religious signs and symbols like haloes and other prophets such as Solomon, Adam, the footprint of Ali, and Qisas al-anihia (stories of the prophets) which appeared in Persian and Arabic from the tenth and eleventh centuries respectively. But with these few exceptions, Persian painting remained secular and did not develop a religious subject matter, as did the Christian world.

The spiritual is innate in Islamic art and Persian artists such as Bihzad, (15th century Timurid), and Sultan Muhammad (16th century Safavid) drew inspiration from deep spirituality and mysticism firmly rooted in Islamic tradition.

**Persian mysticism within Islamic Art**

Already in the 15th century the important element of realism was introduced by Bihzad into Persian painting. Illusionistic and perfectionist representation now included more believable representations of ordinary life. Under Shah Ismail, the visionary founder of the Safavid dynasty which traced it roots to a Sufi order called the Safaviyeh, a relationship of an inherent understanding
of the poetry, message and mood develops. The viewer is drawn into a world beyond the visual. Persian painting been called mystical, magical, esoteric...poetic (it) has its origins in a literature heavily imbued in a mysticism which bases itself on the relationship between the external, the ‘Zahir’ and the internal, or the “batin” Metaphors, words and images need to be decoded to reveal the true meaning of the verse. With such a literary counterpart it is natural and correct to look for such hidden meaning in the visual arts. (Grabar) P. 141.16th century Iran's most mystical artist was Sultan Muhammad. Known for his 'rock grotesques' in which benevolent and malevolent spirits play hide and seek with the viewer, his world is one of illusion, nightmare and comedy. Acclaimed by his contemporaries as one in front of whose work other artists “hung their heads in shame” he epitomizes the duality of the Persian miniature. Seemingly devoid of emotion, ghouls who express a vast spectrum of emotions inhabit the perfect world of the miniature. In the story of Khusraw and Shirin by Nizami where Khusraw comes across the naked Shirin bathing, the surprise and embarrassment of Khusraw (who looks on unabashedly with only the finger of surprise in his mouth) is expressed by a spirit in the surrounding rocks that turns away with blushing bashfulness.

Commissioned by the court, Persian art was made for the private discerning eye of princes. Secular in nature, it aimed to please. The taste, opinion and thoughts of the artist are invisible, if they exist or matter at all.
This tradition and the fact that it was not for the public eye or opinion sets it apart from Western art. While Persian miniatures can be analyzed objectively and unemotionally, the often illusive search for the ‘secret’ of the painting makes the analysis more intriguing. “Each manuscript hides its miniatures. Each miniature, in resplendent color, hides its subject in an atmosphere that is physically and humanly repetitive. Each rock, each figure, each gesture may be nothing but a cliché that is repeated once again, or it may conceal an iconographic secret, the illustration of a private event by means of an image type or the irony of a humorous vision of men and things.” Oleg Grabar, “Mostly miniatures” p.146

Dissent in Islamic art

Mystery and duality are essential elements of this culture. But like the culture, the art and the poetry are expressed through layers of hidden meaning. Nothing is as it seems. Similarly any divergence, grievance or commentary was imperceptible. A fallen note, a pair of male and female slippers at the foot of a bed, and a discourse between two owls on the pitiful state of the empire, sufficed to relay a message. In the Seventeenth century for example the jaded and unsure atmosphere of the court is reflected in the miniatures that become increasingly stifling often populated by elongated frowning eavesdroppers.

Dissent in Contemporary Islamic art

Today, more than ever, the term “Islamic” as pertains to art has separated from the religion and culture. While at times adopting its symbols, dissent is directed at its interpreters. Art, whether through words or images – does not exist in isolation. Often used as a loaded cultural and political weapon, it is generally a reflection of and/or a reaction to a cultural context.

As a means of defying power and subverting authority, the arts have been the visual symbols of many struggles, most often for political emancipation and national liberation. Perhaps due to its historical subtlety in conveying grievances, the reactive art of the contemporary Middle East appears particularly defiant. Providing a window into the collective consciousness of a people, inverted icons have become the means to create a new oppositional vision.
Artists are inspired by events around them, and in recent times none has been as charged as Iranian contemporary art. Reacting to a theocracy, many of the political reactionary symbols used by Iranian artists have necessarily adopted religious motifs. Left to the viewer's interpretation is the use of the very symbol of ‘Allah’ which appears on the flag of the Islamic republic of Iran. In a dark room a neon red tulip shaped by the stylized letters forming “Allah”, and a Persian symbol of martyrs, spins around itself. The sheer speed of the revolutions transforms it into a razor sharp blade. Similarly neon green hands or Khamsa are raised in silent protest. The neon picks up on the kitsch of religious celebrations’ use of coloured lights. Satirizing the “key to heaven” used to enlist the youth of Iran during the Iran-Iraq War, is an oversized key of red, white and green lights, the colours of the Iranian flag. Instances of criticism of the Koran and Islam are, however, rare, considered blasphemous and in bad taste. Reaction to tradition, however, is the style of the day

Incongruity continues to be the main focus of today’s contemporary art world. The strict female dress code has made the Hijab the focal point of a wide range of subjects. The veil is today at the centre of much international controversy. The issues range from its meaning and interpretation as intended in the Koran and Hadiths, to its suppression or emancipation of women, religion, secularism, and politics.

Indeed the world “Hijab” which literally means “curtain or cover” in Arabic has taken on the wider meaning of modesty. The word for headscarf used in the Quran is “Khimar” and not hijab, the clearest verse on the requirement of the hijab being surah 24:30-31, which asks women to draw their khimar over their bosoms. Muslim women are asked to draw their “jilbab” (any long and loose-fit garment) over them (when they go out), so as to distinguish themselves from others, and not be harassed.
The dualism which faces Iranian women poses a profound contradiction between the compulsory veil and personal freedom, often leading to exaggerated self expression. The excessive make-up, high-lighted hair which is barely covered by a suggestion of a covering is picked up on and reflected in the arts. Women’s own attitude towards “hijab” and their public perception varies greatly and nowhere is it more addressed in its art than by Iranian artists.

The artist Ghazel draws attention to the incongruity of the cumbersome chador in videos where she prances around in an attempt to dance or do sports or sunbathe in a chador. While not forbidden, even her smoking while wearing a chador somehow seems to step out of the pious behaviour behoving the wearer.

In Shahram Entekhabi work color ads for call girls reverse Western values of privacy and anonymity where the body is exposed but the eyes are blackened out. Here beneath the black covering, the pose and message remain the same, questioning the concepts and meaning of what should be hidden and revealed and the visible and invisible aspects of modesty. Similarly the same contrast with the strict Islamic dress code is used with pinup girls in suggestive poses. In Majeed Beenteha’s work a scantily clad young woman in hijab lounges on an Iranian flag.
presented as a postage stamp in the style of 1960’s American commercials. This strikes at the core of a country’s image of itself, since stamps often represent a country’s treasured events, values, peoples or achievements.

Flags, the most revered symbol of a nation are painted on floors, woven into rugs and shredded into collages as a gesture of defiance and degradation. While some are directed at the West and in particular the United States, Andy Warhol’s paintings of the Shah and his wife are juxtaposed with the many faces of today’s ruling elite, speaking to the taboo on anything Western and therefore corrupt by “westernizing” them. The contradictions are endless. The new “Chador Barbie” introduced in the Middle East as a better model for young girls is corrupted with a play on the words “Bar “bi chador” meaning without chador. The irony of a picture of a plump young girl in full hijab devouring a Macdonald meal plays on the Middle East’s appetite for anything American. Interestingly, even photographs captured in a single moment in time take on a critical tone and a simple portrayal of women in a public place in Iran without their “hijab” takes on a dissenting voice of its own. Seated in an outdoor coffee house a liberally Western dressed girl seems to mock the sign for observance of modesty by her exposed blond hair, ankles and operated nose.

Restriction has led to radical reaction. Western symbols form a new language of dissent. Art is referred to as rising “from the wreckage of Iraq and the religious strictures of Iran”. Recently Saatchi bought several works from the Haerizadeh brothers whose scenes of nudity and sexuality and social life present the defiant subversiveness that has captured the attention of the art world.

While artists will continue to react against the status quo, what has changed in the culture of the arts of Islam is the subtlety in the transmission of the message. There has always been dissent, disagreement and defiance. But it was in “lafafeh” as the Persian saying goes. The art of communication through “the curtain” has all but disappeared. No one “slits throats with cotton wool anymore.” The voice of dissent in the Middle East has taken on a new persona. It is Loud and Bold.

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