

Representing the Sacred: Art and Iconography in Religious Traditions

ISLAMIC ICONOGRAPHY

Islam is generally considered an iconoclastic religion in which the representation of living things has been prohibited from its very beginning. However, the Qur'ān nowhere deals with this problem or explicitly speaks against representation. Rather, the prohibition of pictorial activities was derived from certain *ḥadīth*, the traditions attributed to the prophet Muḥammad and his followers.

Islam's attitude toward representation is basically in tune with the stark monotheistic doctrine that there is no creator but God: To produce a likeness of anything might be interpreted as an illicit arrogation of the divine creative power by humans. Furthermore, the Islamic prohibition may have first been concerned primarily with sculpture, for sculptures—as they existed in the Ka'bah in Mecca in pre-Islamic times—could lead humankind again into idolatry, and, indeed, hardly any sculptural art developed in Islam until recently.

Emerging Imagery

The feeling that representation was alien to the original spirit of Islam resulted in the development of abstract ornamental design, both geometric and vegetal, notably the arabesque as the endless continuation of leaves, palmettes, and sometimes animal-like motifs growing out of each other; it also gave calligraphy its central place in Islamic art. Theories about pre-Islamic (Sassanid or Turkic) or astronomical symbolism have been proposed. In the early [Middle Ages](#), certain Arabic books were illustrated either for practical purposes, namely medical and scientific manuscripts, or for entertainment, as in the *Maqāmāt* (Assemblies) of al-Ḥarīrī or the animal fables known as *Kalīlah wa-Dimnah*.

New stylistic features came with the growing Chinese influence during the Mongol occupation of Iran in the late thirteenth century. Henceforward, illustrative painting developed predominantly in Iran, where the great epic poems (an art form unknown to the Arabs) inspired miniaturists through the

centuries to the extent that the iconography of Firdawsī's *Shāh-nāmah* (Book of kings) and Niẓāmī's *Khamsah* (Quintet) became almost standardized. Early historical works, such as the world history of Rashīd al-Dīn (d. 1317), were rather realistically illustrated. Human faces are clearly shown (and later sometimes mutilated by orthodox critics), and even the prophet Muḥammad appears with his face uncovered.

The same originally held true for a branch of painting that has continued from the fourteenth century to the present day, namely, pictures of the Prophet's night journey (*isrā' , mi'rāj*) through the heavens on the mysterious steed Burāq. In the course of time, Muḥammad's face was covered partly, then completely; at present, no representation of the Prophet is permitted at all: In the numerous popular pictures of the Mi'rāj, he is represented by a white rose or a cloud. Burāq, meanwhile, has become a centrepiece of popular iconography: Pictures of this winged, donkey-shaped creature with a woman's head and a peacock's tail not only appear today on cheap prints but are also painted on trucks and buses, especially in Afghanistan and Pakistan, as a kind of protective charm.

Islamic painting reached its zenith in Iran and India in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when, partly under the influence of European prints, naturalistic portraiture was developed to perfection.

Manuscripts of the Qur'ān and *ḥadīth* s were never illustrated but were written in beautiful calligraphy that sometimes assumes an almost "iconic" quality. Qur'anic themes, however, as retold in the stories of the prophets or in poetry such as the *Yūsuf and Zulaykhā* by Jāmī (d. 1492), have developed a pictorial tradition of their own.

Sometimes seemingly simple motifs are interpreted mystically; this author's Turkish Ṣūfī friends explain the frequent use of tulips on the tiles in Turkish mosques with the fact that the word *lālah* ("tulip") has the same letters and thus the same numerical value as the word *Allāh*, that is, sixty-six. This is also true for the word *hilāl*, "crescent," and the *hilāl* has come to be regarded as the typical sign of Islam although its first appearance on early Islamic coins, metalwork, and ceramics had no religious connotations. It seems that in the

eleventh century, when some churches (such as Ani in Armenia) were converted into mosques, their cross-shaped finials were replaced with crescent-shaped ones. A *ḥājj* ("pilgrimage") certificate of 1432 shows drawings of the sacred buildings in Mecca with such crescent finials. The Ottoman sultan [Selim I](#) (r. 1512–1520) used the *hilāl* on his flag, but only in the early nineteenth century was it made the official Turkish emblem, which appeared on postage stamps in 1863. Other Muslim countries followed the Turkish example, and now it is generally seen as the Islamic equivalent of the Christian cross (thus, the Red Crescent parallels the [Red Cross](#)).

There was no inhibition in representing pilgrimage sites in medieval guidebooks for pilgrims. In the late nineteenth century, photographs of the holy cities of Mecca and Medina became prized possessions of pilgrims and of those who were unable to perform the *ḥājj*, just as many Muslim homes now contain prints, posters, or wall hangings with representations of the Ka'bah and/or the Prophet's mausoleum.

While naturalistic representation of the Prophet and his family was increasingly objected to, other ways of presenting him developed. One might put a *ḥadīth* in superb calligraphy on a single page or write his *ḥilyah*, an elaboration of the classical Arabic description of his outward and inward beauty, in a special calligraphic style, as was done in Turkey from about 1600. The Prophet's footprints on stone, or representations of them, along with more or less elaborate drawings of his sandals, still belong to the generally accepted items in the religious tradition. One could also produce "pictures" of saintly persons such as 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib from pious sentences written in minute script (although in Iran quite realistic battle scenes showing the bravery and suffering of Ḥusayn and other members of the Prophet's family are also found in more recent times).

Calligraphic images have become more and more popular: The letters of the word *bismillāh* ("in the name of God") can be shaped into birds and beasts; Qur'anic passages of particular protective importance, such as the "throne verse" (*sūrah* 2:256), appear in animal shape; and whenever a calligraphic lion is found, it usually consists of a formula connected with 'Alī, who is called the "Lion of God" (*Asad Allāh*, Ḥaydar, Shir, and so forth). Most frequently used is

the invocation "Nādi 'Alīyan ..." ("Call 'Alī, who manifests wondrous things ..."), which appears on many objects from Safavid Iran and Shī'ī India, as do the names of the twelve Shī'ī *imāms*. The names of the Panjtan (Muḥammad, 'Alī, Fāṭimah, Ḥasan, and Ḥusayn) combined with the word *Allāh* are used to form human faces, as in the Bektāshī tradition in Turkey. The names of protective saints such as the Seven Sleepers (*sūrah* 18) are also used as a calligraphic design (but their figures appear as well in Persian and Turkish painting, with their faithful dog Qiṭmīr or his name always in the center). Invocations of Ṣūfī saints may be written in the shape of a dervish cap (typical is that of Mawlānā Rūmī); other pious exclamations appear as flowers or are arranged in circular form.

Indeed, the most typical and certainly the most widely used means of conveying the Islamic message was and still is calligraphy. The walls of Persian mosques are covered with radiant tiles on which the names of God, Muḥammad, and 'Alī in the square Kufic script give witness to the Shī'ī form of faith; Turkish mosques are decorated with Qur'anic quotations or with an enormous *Allāh*. In Turkey, various calligrams are based on the letter *w*, and the central statements of the faith are written in mirrored form.