

ILLUMINATED BEAUTY: THE ART,  
PHILOSOPHY, AND AESTHETIC VALUE  
OF QUR'ĀN MANUSCRIPT  
EMBELLISHMENT

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## ABSTRACT

The art of embellishment in religious texts, particularly illuminated manuscripts, has a deep-rooted history across cultures. Illuminated Qur'ān manuscripts exemplify this tradition within Islamic culture, with intricate designs applied to highlight and frame the sacred text, emphasizing its exalted status. Unlike figurative designs often found in other illuminated manuscripts, Qur'ān illumination adheres strictly to non-figurative forms, reflecting the Islamic philosophy of *tawhīd* (monotheism) and reinforcing the sanctity of the divine word. The study explores various types and styles of Qur'ān manuscript illumination, including in-text and out-of-text decorations, emphasizing the spiritual and aesthetic dimensions of this sacred art form. The evolution of Qur'ān illumination from simple motifs such as circles and dots to elaborate geometric and floral frames showcases the skill and devotion of Muslim artists. These embellishments served to enhance the physical beauty of the text while complementing its spiritual significance. The study also delves into differing scholarly views on the purpose of illumination, ranging from purely aesthetic beautification to deeper symbolic connections with the text. Furthermore, it explores the interplay between Qur'ān illumination and other Islamic arts, including architecture and calligraphy, emphasizing regional variations and historical influences on design styles. Qur'ān illumination is discussed as a reflection of Islamic values and an example of artistic creativity constrained and shaped by religious and cultural norms. This sacred art form exemplifies devotion, skill, and a deep respect for the divine word, illustrating how artistic expression can elevate spiritual experience and bring beauty to religious practice. The study concludes that the art of Qur'ān illumination, while adhering to strict design principles, remains a dynamic and evolving tradition with regional diversity and profound spiritual meaning.

The art of applying embellishment in religious books is an age old practice. The documents which display a variety of decorative devices used for embellishment of the text are called illuminated manuscripts. The word illumination (Latin; *illuminare*) is used to explain all type of decorations applied for the embellishment of both sacred and secular texts. The use of gold and silver inks to give an effect of light emanating from the text made this a popular term.<sup>1</sup> Though present in different forms earlier, this art flourished particularly in the middle Ages in Europe and afterwards applied by Muslim artists in Qur'ān manuscripts with full vigour. In Arabic *zakhrifa* (ornament) is the word used for the explanation of this art. The word is connected with the noun *zakhraf* (gold, ornamental work) used in Qur'ān.<sup>2</sup> The use of gold and silver inks for the highlighting of motifs and text differentiates the art of illumination from that of miniature painting.

It is indeed a risky job to explain the nature of aesthetic in the sacred art generally and in Qur'ān illumination particularly, for to explain the relationship between the two, aesthetic theories of value judgment like objectivism, subjectivism and relativism need to be studied.<sup>3</sup> In this case the theory of relativism is more applicable. This theory encourages taking into account the viewer's reaction to an art form and leaving behind one's prejudices regarding any cultural customs and beliefs at the same time establishing a relative background for the appreciation of art forms of any culture. In the case of Qur'ān illumination, this art form should be seen as a product of a monotheist culture which believed in one unseen God and which did not employ figurative forms for the decoration of sacred texts and monuments. Appreciation of this art demands an understanding of the mechanics of the religion called Islam. The non-figurative designs around the Qur'ānic verses reflect an adherence to the main philosophy of Islam "*tawhīd*", meaning believing in one God and putting Him above everything else. In the case of illuminated designs in Qur'ān manuscripts, it also means that the word of God is perfect and has an independent status which does not really need any manmade embellishment; in fact the decorations are used only to highlight the exalted nature of the text and not as interpretation of the verses. This attitude is the same as applied to a prized photograph which is placed in a beautiful frame. In the case of photograph, the frame does not act as a competitor

of that photograph; in fact it encloses the image to highlight its beauty or importance. Present day calligraphers and illuminators view this art in the same way and consider them fortunate that they are doing this job. There are two schools of thought regarding the meaning of illumination in Qur'ān manuscripts. The above mentioned view that the designs around the verses are independently constructed belongs to one school of thought. At the same time there are scholars who believe that strong conceptual connections exist between the designs and the verses.<sup>4</sup> The study of Qur'ānic text however reveals that except for the mention of light (translated in gold colour) the rest of the embellishment vocabulary has very abstract links with the verses giving strength to the earlier notion that illumination is applied for the prime purpose of beautification.

There are two kinds of Qur'ān manuscripts found in the library collections; illuminated and non-illuminated. The first thought which comes to mind is about this difference. Why some copies were illuminated and some were not? It is very difficult to answer this question as there is no written evidence about the need of decorating the Holy Book. Moreover there are also types of illumination used in the Qur'ān manuscripts. The earliest designs applied in the text were in the form of circles, line endings, coloured dots and simple geometrical shapes used as *āya* markers.<sup>5</sup> Illumination in the Qur'ān manuscripts can be broadly categorized as in-text decorations and out of text decorations. The in-text decorations are used as *āya* markers and *sūra* headings. The out of text decorations are applied in frontispieces, finispieces, decorative frames around the main text box, linear designs behind the written words and in the margins as indicators of important reading points. Unlike the non-Muslim illuminated manuscripts, in which figurative designs were predominantly used, illumination in the Qur'ān manuscripts followed a strict constructional order from the very beginning. This constructional order dictated adherence to non-figurative designs, and application of designs in preset places.

With the passage of time simple decorations evolved into elaborate frames and borders applied around the text boxes. The out of text decoration in the form of frames and borders are reflective of the regional styles. This category also includes frontispieces and finispieces. It is in this category that the illuminators have expressed their skill to the full extent showing influences of other art forms. Another type of out of text decoration is found in the form of marginal decorations which are

standardized to some extent. They consist of motifs which are used for the indication of reading points in the Qur'an manuscripts.

The in-text decoration includes small roundels or rosette used as verse endings. Geometrical, abstract and floral shapes are used for this purpose. Because they are the most commonly used devices in an illuminated Qur'an manuscript; a rather simple rendition is used for the application of design. Besides out of text and in-text decoration, there is integrated decoration used in illuminated manuscripts. This category can be found in the abstract patterns placed in the interlinear spaces between the verses and illumination applied around the *sūra* headings. Noteworthy is the point that in all illuminated copies, the illumination is used to enhance the space around the text. Sometimes the text itself is decorated by using foliated or floriated calligraphic styles but that type of decoration is a part of writing and should not be confused with illumination. The designs are always based on nonobjective formations. Such standard scheme of design application indicates to a respectful attitude and in this case it is evident in the submissive role of embellishment. There is yet another area where illumination is applied and that is the binding. Binding of the Qur'an manuscripts is a subject of research itself, for this reason it was not focused upon in this study.

Qur'an was revealed to Prophet Muhammad in twenty three years. For every Muslim the verses of Qur'an are above any criticism and they are the basis of their faith. It is generally stated that Islam prohibits the use of living images in art therefore the artistic energies of its artists are directed towards the production of non-objective art. As far as a direct reference regarding any such prohibition is concerned, it is not found in Qur'an. There are references to categories of manufacture and construction in Qur'an making it clear that Islam does permit artistic activity. As far as the Qur'anic verses are concerned it is mentioned in 34:12, 34:13, and 27:44 the engagement of Prophet Solomon with the making of unusual buildings.<sup>6</sup> Such references point to the nature of manufacture and its uses and provide a foundation for the explanation of such constructive and productive activities in Islamic art. If it is acknowledged that Islam permits the manufacture of products then it also brings forward the concept of beauty which is associated with the creative activity. Beauty is a quality which appeals to the human senses and uplifts the spirit. Many terms are used in Qur'an for the description of beauty. The main aim of the illuminator also seems to be for the enhancement

of the beauty of verses through designs. Aesthetic terms used to describe beauty or related response in Qur'ān include *jamāl*, *i'jāb*, *ẓīnah*, *hilya*, *ẓukhruf*, *tayyib*, *alwān*, *qurrat'ain*, *bahij*, *ḥusn*, *itqān*, *fitan*, *karim*. All these words are used to explain the physical, moral and spiritual beauty. God has made things beautiful on purpose, 27:88, 22.6; 95:4.<sup>7</sup> A mind which is sensitive to the concept of beauty can not be destructive and negative. The references to beauty are some times used to describe as temptation, and sometimes to explain the creative nature of Gods production. Based on the direction of Qur'ān it is the duty of every Muslim to try to achieve a sense of beauty in his surroundings whether in physical form or in spiritual form. The illuminated Qur'ān manuscripts indeed provide a beautiful spectacle to the beholder. It can be suggested that the illuminators tried to enhance the physical beauty of the verses as they were unable to match the spiritual beauty of the text. At the same time the immense beauty of the illuminated designs in Qur'ān manuscripts does affect the viewer spiritually and makes the experience of reciting from an illuminated copy an aesthetic one.

It is believed by scholars like Ann Marie Schimmel,<sup>8</sup> Sheila S. Blair<sup>9</sup> and Oleg Grabar<sup>10</sup>, that calligraphy is the prime art of Islam and Muslims expressed their artistic imagery mainly through written words. It would be noteworthy to mention here that although calligraphy can be called the first artistic expression of Muslims, at the same time they were the creators of a large number of architectural monuments like the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, the Great Mosque of Damascus, Al- Hambra in Spain, Taj Mahal in India and Wazir Khan Mosque in Lahore. The metal work, leather work and elaborate textiles produced in the Muslim world refute the notion that only calligraphy can be called the prime art of Islam. The high regard for books and knowledge in the Muslim world from 9<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> centuries proves the importance of the art of the books but does not undermine other art forms. Oliver Leaman has very truly identified the misconceptions about Islamic art and brought into light various dimensions of Muslim art.<sup>11</sup> One of the misconceptions which he highlights is that Islamic art is usually termed religious.<sup>12</sup> While this concept is not wholly true, it can be said that the quality of sacred art in Islam is more sophisticated than in other art forms. The examples of embellished Qur'ān manuscripts are testimony to the fact. The same kind of embellishment is employed to decorate non religious texts also, as can be seen in the illuminated manuscripts of *Khamsa*, or *Hamzanāma*, produced in India under Mughal rule. But at the

same time it is felt that the quality and variety of illumination styles used in Qur'an manuscripts surpass all other secular examples for the illuminators had to rely totally on non-objective designs. It is relatively less complicated to express in figurative form bringing out the narrative qualities of design, but to rely totally on non-figurative sources and yet to make them versatile and unique is definitely an uphill task. In the Subcontinent the tradition of decorating sacred texts goes a long way. In spite of being a tradition of historic standing, the designs in the Buddhist and Jain text feel stereotypical in comparison to the sacred illuminated texts produced by Muslim artists in this region.

The embellished Qur'an manuscripts seldom display the name of the artist. Names of the artists, who painted a number of works of art, are often found written on them as a proof of their efforts. The anonymity may be an indicator of selfless love with which the artists have embellished the Qur'an manuscripts. Qur'an, the word of God, is approached with awe and admiration. For every Muslim it holds an esteemed place in their lives. The reason behind the motives for embellishing the manuscripts of the Holy Book is often questioned. Sheila Blair explains the use of illumination as a substitute of illustrations which could not be used in the Qur'an manuscripts.<sup>13</sup> This opinion is shared by Alexandre Papadopoulo who believes that a restriction on figurative art triggered the art of illumination in Qur'an manuscripts.<sup>14</sup> These statements make the art of illumination appear less skillful than the figurative designs. I would like to suggest here that the illuminators were more skillful in their technique because they had limited design options at their disposal and yet they managed to create variety in their art. There is no written proof, through which the motive for such decorations can be established, but a simpler explanation can also be given; the love and devotion of illuminators and patrons who commissioned such exquisite works can be the motivating factor for the production of illuminated copies of Qur'an. After fourteen centuries, this love and awe is still present in the eyes of devout Muslims who encounter such manuscripts. If the present readers of the Holy Book approach it with such feelings, the emotions of the artists who embellished the text are not hard to imagine. Professionals, who are engaged in the trade of producing printed copies of Qur'an in Lahore Pakistan, hold the same views.<sup>15</sup> People who visit the exhibitions of old Qur'an manuscripts view the illumination around the Qur'anic texts as something above other arts. Martin Lings places this art at a spiritual level. After

interviewing present day calligraphers, and some illuminators in Lahore and Islamabad I can say that the devotion theory is the best which can be given as an explanation for the reasons of embellishment in Qur'ān manuscripts. The devotion is something which absorbs other elements like skill, spirituality, symbolism etc.

We are mainly concerned here with the issue of aesthetics in the art of illumination as it is applied in sacred Islamic texts. The reason is to analyze the art of illumination from the philosophical perspective. The art is explored from multiple angles in this discourse. A term which is generally used for the explanation of Muslim aesthetic is "Horror of the Void". This is particularly used by Papadopoulo<sup>16</sup> meaning that the patterning in Muslim art is crowded to an extent where blank areas are seldom seen. While analyzing the designs of Qur'ān illumination this theory was specially kept in mind. If illumination in Qur'ān manuscripts is studied (from beginning till now) this term does not seem to hold conviction. In Qur'ān manuscripts the role of illumination is to complement the written words not to overpower them. The borders act just like a frame for a painting and the blank page around borders throws the whole composition in sharp relief. The text, the illumination and the blank areas can be called a tripartite composition in which all three elements are synchronized. The spiritual teachings of Islam also preach the synchronization of elements in human life. This way the art of Qur'ān illumination can be called spiritual.

Thus the Horror of the Void term cannot be applied to the illumination in Qur'ān. In fact the illumination itself is not over crowded. Every motif and line is placed very thoughtfully which holds the whole composition in balance which is an important component of the teachings of Islam.

Arabesque is another term which is synonymous with Islamic art. Arabesque is considered an integral part of Islamic art. In comparison to the iconographic representations in non-Muslim cultures, Oleg Grabar elucidates that the use of arabesque in Muslim art is parallel to iconography in other cultures.<sup>17</sup> The term is restrictive and limits the scope of Muslim art and is defined fundamentally as designs based on never ending scrolls which cover a large expanse of surface. While it is true that arabesque is extensively used by Muslim artists it is important at the same time not to generalize. Arabesque is no doubt an essential part of Muslim art but in the case of Qur'ān illumination it is noted that its use is somewhat restricted in the manuscripts produced in the Subcontinent. The Qur'ān manuscripts produced in Arab, Persian



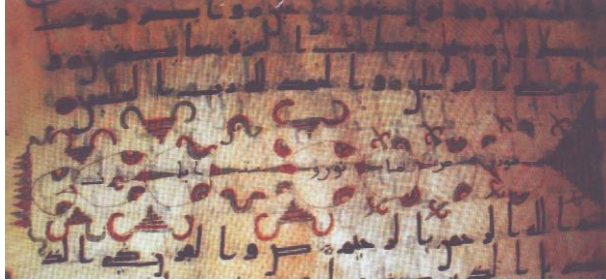
and Ottoman lands show more reliance on arabesque whereas in the manuscripts produced in the Subcontinent it emerges as a minor element of design vocabulary. In the manuscripts produced in African and Southeast Asian lands this element is almost non-existent.<sup>18</sup> Related to this point is the issue of perfection in the imagery used in Islamic painting and design. Oliver Leaman points to this issue by quoting from Islamic theology.<sup>19</sup> The argument presented by the eminent scholar deals with the flat images found in Muslim art and an abundance of non-objective designs. While there is no direct restriction on image making in Qur'an, there is a clear order to avoid idolatry. Without going into details of this argument, I would like to explain that the development of nonobjective designs in Islamic art is related with a ban on image making, and that the earlier is taken as a manifestation of the perfection found in God's creations. It is thus suggested that because of the fear of competing with God in making images the Muslim artist turned towards the non-objective designs. The continuity and consistency in these designs are taken as an abstract manifestation of God's creative powers. A close study of illumination in Qur'an manuscripts suggests that the designs are not always perfect and not always continuous. In fact most of the time they lack symmetry and perfection which could otherwise suggest the incompetency of human beings in comparison to that of God almighty. There are two views in the illuminator circles; one is to complement the beauty of the text and the other is to show one's secondary status in the form of designs. The first view motivates the illuminator to find the guidelines like, balance, beauty, spirituality, rhythm and harmony from the text. The Iranian illuminators thus struggle for a high level of balance in their designs. Among the Pakistani illuminators the *sūfi* philosophy prevails which from the outset makes clear that man is erroneous and bound to make mistakes.



**Fig.1**

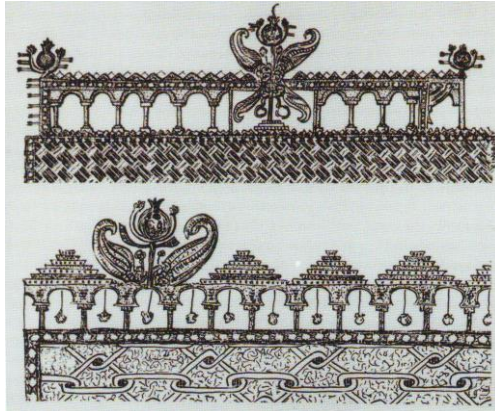
An embellishment used for sūra separation. Qur'an from 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.H. Present location; Topkapi Museum. Istanbul. Turkey ([www.islamic-awareness.org/Quran/Text/Mss/topkapi.html](http://www.islamic-awareness.org/Quran/Text/Mss/topkapi.html). 2008.)

The styles of illumination can be divided in three main categories namely early period, middle period and late period, on the basis of form and layout. Contrary to common belief, the practice of decorating Qur'ān manuscripts started in the 1<sup>st</sup> /7<sup>th</sup> & 8<sup>th</sup> century. It is evidenced in the manuscripts discovered from Sanaa' Yemen. Carbon testing carried on some of the manuscripts has confirmed their dates of production as early and late eighth century A.D.<sup>20</sup> A survey of early manuscript suggests the basic nature of decoration. Despite the archaic style of decoration, the observer is touched by the urge to embellish the manuscripts. Motifs ranging from stellar designs to rosettes, circles and dots comprise the main elements of decoration in the early manuscripts. It is noteworthy that these early designs are devoid of the strict symmetrical character which is considered the basis of later Islamic ornamentation in general and Qur'ān illumination in particular.



**Fig.2**

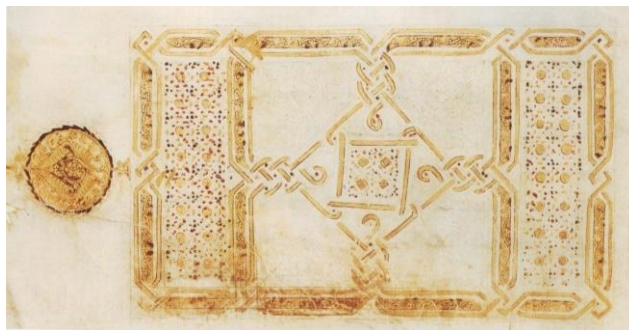
Qur'ān manuscript from 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.H. The style of ornamentation shows stellar designs. Such a panel was used for *sira* separation. ([www.islamic-awareness.org](http://www.islamic-awareness.org) 2009) Web



**Fig.3.**

Decorative patterns in 8<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup> century Qur'ān manuscripts. Cairo. Dar al Kutub National Library. Oleg, Grabar. *The Qur'an as a Source of Artistic Inspiration. Word of God, Art of Man* (London: Oxford UP. 2007) 32. Print.

The practice of producing illuminated religious manuscripts was carried on in the Christian world (mainly in Byzantine and Europe). Some similarities in designs can be identified in the illumination done in the Qur'ān manuscripts. Line ending was one of the most apparent similarities seen in these copies. During the early period i.e. seventh to tenth centuries A.D the use of ornamentation was simple and sparse. Line endings were used in the Christian religious manuscripts. A basic kind of design was applied at the end of the blank space when a verse ended. Application of such a design device could be a foreign influence to which Grabar occasionally points out. The writing of *sūra* headings in middle and late period illumination employed specially designed spaces in the form of cartouches and panels. Whereas in early period no such design device was used for the writing of *sūra* headings. By the end of middle period, a surge in design vocabulary and development of special motifs employed in the illumination is witnessed. In the early period, motifs were used as *aya* markers and asymmetrical panels were used as *sūra* separators. Fig.3 shows the type of embellishment employed in the manuscripts of early period. These decorative bands are made of arcade motif, a wing like structure and basic geometric shapes. Noteworthy is the reliance on asymmetrical balance and a disregard for geometrical precision. Even at this early stage the design is derived from architectural sources, which shows the emergence of an individual Muslim style. Use of marginal decorations and patterns applied as background of text emerged in the late period. Such developments indicate to the gradual refinement of the art of illumination in Qur'ān manuscripts.



**Fig.4.**

M.712 vellum. 230x320 mm. Iraq. Before 911 Barbara, Schmitz. Islamic and Indian Manuscripts and paintings in the Pierpont Morgan Library. (New York: The Pierpont Morgan Library, 1997) 95. Print

Fine specimens of embellished books have been found in Arabia, Persia, Turkey, India, China, Japan, South East Asia, Egypt;

from the classical world and Early Christian and Byzantine eras.<sup>21</sup> The non objective decoration employed in the manuscripts of Qur'an is very common in Muslim art and uses a rich design vocabulary. Such abstract decorations are found not only on architecture but also on a variety of mediums.<sup>22</sup> Illumination done in the religious text in non-Muslim cultures has its own style and form. They included forms like miniatures (full page or smaller, framed or unframed) elaborately decorated initials, borders and the line endings (used to fill the spaces left by the shorter lines).<sup>23</sup>



**Fig.5.**

Qur'an manuscript produced in 391/1000 at Baghdad. Sheila S, Blair. *Islamic Calligraphy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP. 2006) 163. Print

The practice of embellishing the religious texts in the Muslim world had a different form from that of the Western cultures. It did not have miniatures but shows a wealth of borders used to frame the written text. Fig.4 shows front cover of a Qur'an manuscript which shows the emergence of borders and bands constructed of geometric abstract designs.





**Fig.6.**

Qur'an on parchment. Nasser D, Khalili. *Islamic Art and Culture. A Visual History* (New York: The Overlook Press, 2005) 51. Print.

For Muslims Qur'an is the word of God. Since seventh century A.D (when it started to be produced in written form) a standard format has been followed. The application of illumination is found in the early manuscripts written on vellum or parchment. The application format of illumination also changed shapes with the passage of time. Although such variations indicate the wish and skill of the patron and the artist, they also point out the strict parameters within which the decoration had to be applied. The aesthetic analysis of the Qur'an illumination thus demands an understanding of the physical structure of the Holy book as the application of illumination is done according to the written format. It can be said that the text guided the application format of illumination. The Qur'an is divided into 114 chapters called *sūra*. With the exception of *sūra taubā* they all begin with *bism-allāh al-raḥmān al-raḥīm* (in the name of Allah, the most merciful and benevolent). The chapters are arranged in order of decreasing size, the longest in the beginning and shortest at the end. The first chapter is a short prayer and thus placed at the very beginning. In a manuscript of the Qur'an (embellished or not) all chapters are separated by a blank space, a decorated band or an elaborately ornamented area stating the title of the chapter and its place of revelation. In the earliest manuscripts the *sūra* separation was indicated by a decorated band (Fig.1) or crosses placed at the end of a line. Gradually this became elaborate and in late middle period the *sūra* headings started to be written within decorated bands. This space can also indicate the number of verses called *āya*. The verses constitute the main body of the text. The ending of each verse is thus indicated by some kind of decoration simple or elaborate. In the margins the division of the sections is indicated as quarter

(*rubʿ*), half (*nisf*), three quarter (*thulth*), and prostration (*sajdah*). These points were indicated with motifs both simple and elaborate as shown in Fig.5. Gradually the disjointed ornamentation took the shape of regular bands and borders which are placed around the text box (Fig.6). Along with these points the first two pages are some time heavily decorated. In the last pages a colophon is made in which the name of the scribe and the date and place of production is mentioned. In the absence of a colophon it becomes very difficult to prove attribution. In such a situation direct observation is the only tool through which an approximate dating can be established.

There are various styles of ornamentation employed for the illumination of Qurʾān manuscripts including geometric and vegetal. Scholars like Lois Lamyāʿal Fārūqī, has commented on various styles of ornamentation but has focused on arabesque. Her study gives some logical conclusions to the types of arabesque decoration extensively employed by the Muslim artists on different mediums, but there is a generality in her research regarding the type and application of arabesque in Qurʾān illumination. Her discussion of arabesque decoration is valuable in understanding the meaning and function of this style of embellishment, but arabesque is only one component of the art of ornamentation whereas Qurʾān illumination is another.

The aesthetics of any nation is reflected in the ornamentation employed for the embellishment of architecture and objects. Study of *The Grammar of Ornamentation* by Owen Jones provides an opportunity to compare and relate many designs painstakingly recorded in this book. Jones' work mainly consists of a study of designs made on architecture for the purpose of decoration. He believes that ornamentation should never overpower the main object. The art of Qurʾān illumination can be seen in perspective of this proposition. In the context of Islamic sacred art the ornamentation indeed remains a secondary element. The text of the word of God is always thrown in sharp contrast to the embellishment around it. There are other propositions which Jones has suggested regarding the art of ornamentation. They mainly deal with the use of geometry, proportion, harmony, rhythm and balance.<sup>24</sup> The study of illumination in Qurʾān manuscripts reveal that there is indeed an intentional or unintentional use of such principles of designs but a strict adherence to any one of them is not visible. In illumination geometry, for example is not always the prime element of design construction. The application of geometrical designs varied from place to place. Mamluk Qurʾāns for

example, display a rich use of geometrical concepts as is visible in their architecture also. In the Indian Subcontinent on the other hand geometry plays as the underlying framework and is not visibly prominent. In Iranian illumination the reliance is more on floral forms but these forms are constructed according to strict geometrical precision. This is the main difference between the Iranian and Indian style of illumination. Similarly the use of colour also varies from region to region. A set method of colour application cannot be detected.

As far as the aesthetic development of the art of illumination is concerned, the use of ornamentation in architecture has to be studied closely. Many elements of architectural ornamentation have been incorporated in the illumination designs applied in Qur'an manuscripts. Richard Ettinghausen et al. identify some styles of architectural decoration which can be witnessed in the later development of illuminated designs. The book *Islamic Art and Architecture 650-1250*, records the scrolls, *taẓẓa* or vase motifs, arcades, and many variations of floral theme which differ from the earlier Byzantine art. According to his research the art of ornamentation started taking shape from the architectural decoration as was applied in the building of 'Abbassid period. It identifies three styles of architectural ornamentation as style A, B and C. In style A, floral designs are applied within identifiable frames. In style B, the motifs were usually carved freehand, with a greater variety of themes, motifs, and shapes. In this style the design takes over the whole surface. In style C, molded designs were repeated in curved lines, spiral endings, notches, slits, pearl borders. In this style the borders and frames as well as the all over patterns are incorporated.<sup>25</sup> In Qur'an illumination certain features of the overall identified styles of ornamentation can be witnessed. Most prominent are the bands, frames and borders as shown in Fig.3 and 6. One thing in which illumination differs is the individual motif used as *āya* markers or margin decorations. In this regard the art of Qur'an illumination diverge even from the illumination done in secular books which seldom make use of individual motifs in the text. The decoration on early monuments can be termed as prototype of later ornamentation styles used in a variety of mediums. Moreover, the similarity in some of the designs used both in architectural decoration and Qur'an illumination is in contrast to the need to decorate a building and the Qur'anic verses. In buildings the aim was to impress the viewer with the aesthetic of the new faith as a building is for everyone to see. On the other hand the Qur'an is meant for the eyes of Muslim only, thus the objectives of decoration in both mediums differ. Moreover in

Qur'ān manuscripts the reader is aimed to feel the heightened status of God's word. Thus the guiding spirits of the two art forms contrast with each other. In buildings the motive is to impress with the grandeur and skill of the maker, in Qur'ān manuscripts the motive is to show the humility of the maker (the illuminators are rarely mentioned). In Qur'ān illumination the designs take the inspiration from the Book itself as in the case of stellar designs (heavenly bodies mentioned in Qur'ān, 41:11, 42:29, 78:6-16) or vegetation and flowers from which the herbal designs are derived, are mentioned in many verses. In buildings on the other hand the ornamentation depends on the directions of the patrons. The architectural ornamentation often uses calligraphy as part of decoration, whereas in Qur'ān illumination, it is the calligraphy which is decorated.

To sum up the aesthetic value of illumination in Qur'ān manuscripts it seems appropriate to say that this art form differs on many scores of generally described aesthetics in Islamic art. This art is a product of a community for whom the verses of God are above anything else. As one wants to highlight the precious things in one's life, the Qur'ānic verses are highlighted in the same way by putting designs around the verses. While there are standard patterns used for the application of designs, the regional stylistic variations are also evident at the same time.

## Notes and Reference

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- <sup>1</sup> Porcher, Jean. *Miniatures and Illumination. Encyclopedia of World Art*. Vol. X. London: Mc Graw Hill Publishing Company. Limited. 1965., 122
  - <sup>2</sup> *The Encyclopedia of Islam*. Vol.XI. Netherlands: Leiden Brill. 2002., 423
  - <sup>3</sup> Cleaver G. Dale. *Art. An Introduction*. London: 5<sup>th</sup> ed. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers. 1988., 48
  - <sup>4</sup> Martin Lings elucidates this point in his book *The Qur'ānic Art of Calligraphy and Illumination*. The same philosophy is also expressed by Syed Tajammul Hussain (a London based scholar) in his lecture at Lahore Museum on 17.8.11. The topic of his lecture was Language of Qur'ān Illumination.
  - <sup>5</sup> The Qur'ān manuscripts discovered from a mosque in San'a Yemen in 1972 display simple geometrical forms used as āya markers. Carbon testing has proved these manuscripts to have been written in 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries A.D. The visuals of these manuscripts are available on the UNESCO web portal.
  - <sup>6</sup> Grabar, Oleg. *Art and Architecture and the Qur'an. Encyclopedia of Qur'an* vol.1. Leiden:Koninklijke Brill.2001., 162
  - <sup>7</sup> Gwynne, Ward Rosalind. *Beauty. Encyclopedia of Qur'an*. Vol 1. Leiden:Koninklijke Brill. 200.,213
  - <sup>8</sup> Schimmel, Annmarie. *Calligraphy and Islamic Culture*. New York: New York University Press. 1984
  - <sup>9</sup> Blair S.,Sheila. *Islamic Calligraphy*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. 2006



- <sup>10</sup> Grabar, Oleg. *The Formation of Islamic Art*. London: Yale UP. 1987
- <sup>11</sup> Leaman, Oliver. *Islamic Aesthetics. An Introduction*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP. 2004
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid, 15
- <sup>13</sup> Blair, 21
- <sup>14</sup> Papadopoulo, Alexandre. *Islam and Muslim Art*. London: Thames and Hudson.1976., 127
- <sup>15</sup> Interviews conducted at the Qur'an exhibition held at Punjabi Complex, Nishtar Park Lahore in January 2011.
- <sup>16</sup> Papadopoulo, 102
- <sup>17</sup> Grabar, Oleg. *The Formation of Islamic Art*. London: Yale UP. 1987., 178
- <sup>18</sup> See *Word of God, Art of Man: The Qur'an and its Creative Expressions* edited by Fahmida Suleman for a comparison of different styles used in African and Southeast Asian manuscripts.
- <sup>19</sup> Leaman ,45
- <sup>20</sup> [www.islamic-awareness.org/Quran/Text/Mss/hussein.html](http://www.islamic-awareness.org/Quran/Text/Mss/hussein.html) Last updated 2009. Date of access 7.6.11
- <sup>21</sup> MorGan, Nigel J. "Illumination" *The Dictionary of Art*. Ed. Jane Turner. London: Macmillan Publishers Limited, 1996., 336-349
- <sup>22</sup> See *Atlas of Islamic Culture* by Lamya al Fāruqi & Ismail al Fāruqi for detailed description of non-objective style rendered on a variety of mediums.
- <sup>23</sup> MorGan, 336-349
- <sup>24</sup> Jones, Owen. *The Grammar of Ornament*. London: Dorling Kindersley.2001. 17-28
- <sup>25</sup> Ettinghausen, Richard et al. *Islamic Art and Architecture. 650-1250*. Yale: Yale UP.2001., 15-67

