Islamic Identity in Contemporary Saudi Decorative Artworks: A Case Study of Mohammad Al-Rubat

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ABSTRACT

Many works of modern Saudi art especially the decorative ones lack the character that indicates the identity. However, some are still having the Islamic identity such as the artworks of Mohammad Al-Rubat.

This study aims to identifying and reviewing the building systems and artistic values drawn from the philosophy of Islamic decoration and utilizing and employing the different flexible structural systems of Islamic decorations to enrich modern artistic products in Saudi Arabia.

This study used an historical approach and a descriptive analytic method. The study also reviewed some artworks of Saudi artist M. Al-Rubat where Islamic decoration was adopted in most of artworks.

Based on the literature and analysing the case study’s artworks, the study concluded that Islamic decorative elements and motifs have an important influence on the diversity of contemporary Saudi artworks. The diversity of colours and techniques are important points to start from for young Saudi artist. Therefore, Islamic identity is still existed in contemporary Saudi artworks despite the invasion of modern technology and the influence of globalization.

Keywords: Identity, Islamic art, Al-Rubat, Artworks, Contemporary, Saudi art
Introduction:

The concept of art in Islamic philosophy is linked to the need to awaken the language of eyes and the concept of Monotheism that God is the One, individual (Samad), in order to be able to read the content of the artwork (Saeed, 2011). And this is what we see in the Islamic artworks prevalent in the Islamic world. As well as a combination of art and religion, and this is what makes Islamic art different from the other arts (Sood and Fitzgerald, 2012). But Islamic art was not for religious service, as has happened in other religions but it took from the religion its vision to understand supernatural and existence (Saeed, 2011). This is what Muslim artist translated into an amazing language of art in terms of controlling calligraphy, color and space and the relationships between them (Hanash, 2012).

Muslim artist did not care about artistic subject, which became something marginal, as happened in the art of post-modernism, it was due to the relationship between Islamic art and religion, and the artistic translation of the principle of disappearing, this absence established an aesthetical and philosophical vision (Grabar, 1987) (Tajelssir, 2005).

Islamic art is known as the art of no place or time, in other words, art in the sense outside of the human actions and the reality of nature, circumstances and conditions. Where supernaturalism of creativity is the Islamic art rules (the absolute in it is invisible) (Hanash, 2012). Thus, the geometrical system controls forms, fonts, colors and circles; to build an artwork, and therefore constitutes a visible world which parallels and meet with the invisible one he believes in.

Theories of vision in the modern era have proved that what we see is not the truth. Truth may differ from reality, or what is seen with the normal eye.

Therefore, artist in postmodern art used some techniques which supported this theory to reach his highest artistic expressions (Grabar, 1987).

In Islamic art, artist used this method because of his belief in the supernatural and the absolute facts associated with the Islamic faith (Burckhardt, 1967).
Both believe in the mind's ability to see the soles of things, and the need of the effort and the ability to access the essence of form to restore his vision (Eisner, 2002).

The Islamic art expresses the Islamic spirit, the spirit that completed its elements of quality and made its symbols charged to exceed the limits of the senses and the mind to hold a close connection with the Absolute (Blair and Bloom, 2003).

The construction of the Islamic decoration depended largely on many techniques that meet the diversity and potential of raw materials used. The variety of Islamic decorations and their integration with forms of Calligraphy, Geometric patterns, and Vegetal ‘Arabesque’ play a great role in enriching and enlivening the visual and aesthetic aspects of Islamic art (Grabar, 1987). It had clearly emerged through architecture as a sign and embodiment of a civilization where art history emphasizes that architecture is the mother of the arts and the axis on which it is anchored (Hanash, 2012).

Thus, the uniqueness of the Muslim artist has come from his deepest understanding of spirit and his work on dragging them to the sacred world. So, his artworks have come as a great manifestation of the spirit for addressing the spirit of the viewers. There is no doubt that Islamic architecture had reached a high degree of sophistication which instigated researchers such as: Abd elsavour Abd Elkader (1998), Afif Bahnassi (2000), Dalia El-Sharkawy (2000), Al Refaey (2002) and Wala Ahmad (2007).

Unfortunately, such study did not tackle Islamic decoration as an input for enriching the contemporary artworks. Therefore, the study I intend to conduct aims to take advantage of the potential diverse Islamic decoration artistic variables, and how they were employed on multiple surfaces, especially nature and variety of spaces and coherent consensus providing solutions to diverse and innovative products as an important art and numerous levels of varied surfaces (Brend, 1991).

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1 Contemporary art is art produced at this present point in time or art produced since World War II. The definition of the word contemporary would support the first view, but museums of contemporary art commonly define their collections as consisting of art produced since World War II. The distinction, ‘contemporary’, in this thesis distinguishes visual art practices that respond to “events and tendencies” current at the time of the artwork’s creation rather than continuing a traditional or established forms of visual art practice, impervious to new developments or consideration of contemporary issues (Desmond, 2011, p.148).
A full decorative artwork can contribute to the consolidation of aesthetic values associated with the ideologies of intellectual community and confirm its identity as one of the fundamental pillars in the construction of Islamic civilization (Danto, 2014). The thought of Modernism has achieved very distinct shifted capabilities affected by advanced manufacturing techniques and modern high-tech. Such modern technical products open new horizons to modern arts in general and more specifically to two-dimensional artwork (Abdullahi, 2013) (Hanash, 2012).

**Problem of Study:**

Many works of modern art lack the character that indicates the identity of the country they are originated in. These artworks are limited to the import of the worldwide trends in contemporary art and technology alike, whereas the different civilizations in the previous eras thrived for the complete distinct character in the aspects of architecture, furniture, clothing and all aspects of public life. Such civilizations reflected their identities in the most accurate forms of artworks including images that confirm the compatibility of the individual with his/her environment which in turn links individuals to their heritage. The present study is an attempt to find links between the present artworks and the Islamic identity and cultural heritage of people in Saudi.

The problem of the present study is limited to the building and analysing systems of Islamic decoration to enrich modern artistic products and maintain cultural identity as well as reviewing the works of some artists, who have made significant contribution within contemporary art utilizing decorative Islamic modernist work.

**The objectives of the study:**

This study aims to:

-Identifying and reviewing the building systems and artistic values drawn from the philosophy of Islamic decoration.

-Utilizing and employing the different flexible structural systems of Islamic decorations to enrich modern artistic products.
The significance of Study:

The significance of this study stems from utilizing the Islamic heritage in the production of contemporary artworks preserving the aesthetics and the stature of the Islamic civilization through the recruitment and synthesis of contemporary artworks in Saudi Arabia.

This study, also, reaffirms the role of arts in linking modernity and previous cultures authenticity in different areas including, inter alia, the following:

- Taking advantage of contemporary technology and materials to enrich Islamic heritage of decoration processes.
- Utilizing and initiating ways of the different flexible structural systems of Islamic decoration in modern artworks.

Questions of the Study:

This study responds to the following questions:

- Do the Islamic decorative elements, processing and their technical, aesthetic and artistic values directly affect the diversity and uniqueness of contemporary Saudi artworks?
- To what extent can we detect the compatibility between decoration processes and the composite engineering construction of the units in a way that emphasizes the aesthetic values of modern artwork production?

Limitation of the Study:

This study is limited to studying models of Islamic decoration (Geometric patterns, calligraphic patterns and Vegetal ‘Arabesque’) and employing them in different artworks. It is also limited to reviewing and analysing some artworks of Saudi artist Mohammad Al-Rubat since he has been employing Islamic decorations in his artworks for more than 20 years in different fields of art like painting, woodworks, metalworks, collage and ceramic.
Methodology:

This study uses an historical approach to study Islamic decoration and its philosophy. It also uses a descriptive analytic method to study the artistic values of Islamic decoration and its aesthetic values and artistic elements. Furthermore, the study will review some artworks of Saudi artist Mohammad Al-Rubat\(^2\) where Islamic decoration was adopted in contemporary period to discuss their implementations and analysis their values.

Previous studies:

There are many studies that reviewed the history of Islamic decoration and its structural system. Most of them focused on the historical part without tackling the role of Islamic decoration in fine arts especially painting. The following studies made some useful information in the field of art and discussed the impact of decoration on contemporary artworks considering the identity.

This study aimed to study Arabic letters and Calligraphy which attended strongly in art and attached to artistic aesthetics. The present study linked to it in the Islamic belief that Arabic letter has special secrets and that is why it is considered a sacred sign.

2- 2000, Dalia El-Sharkawy, Islamic Ornaments as A Source for Modern Decorative Work, MA thesis.
This study aimed to study Islamic decoration in historical method and the relationship between it and European arts introducing some effects of Islamic art in general on the European one. Then it mentioned decoration and its characteristics and several applications of decorative units. These can be helpful during the present experiments.


\(^2\) Ethical considerations were taken into account and the consent of the artist is provided (index 1)
This study focused on revealing the aesthetic philosophical interpretation of Islamic Art, as it represents a unified unit and integrated entity, compressing two aspects, the historical aspect and the philosophical one. This study is very important to take some information about the Islamic philosophy in art and for exploring and revealing beauty concepts in Islam. It is also comprising the contemporary applied aspect of philosophical aesthetic concepts in the Islamic art through reviewing the artworks of contemporary artists.

4- 2007, Wala Ahmad, The Plastic Systems of the Arabesque and Taking Advantages of in Silkscreen and Stencil Printing, MA thesis. This study aimed to detecting the magnificent image of Arabesque which did not be addressed in silkscreen and stencil printing. It also detects the scientific and philosophical bases of Arabesque to link printing techniques to contemporary artworks. The present study can make benefits from such study during the process of the experimental side.

Theoretical Framework:

The decorative artistic trends abounded. The Arabs and Muslims made the decorative groups a field in which their imagination was launched into infinity, repetition, renewal, rotation and intertwining, and there is also an advantage in Islamic art, which is the tendency towards creating abstract and distorted artistic images from the visible world (Burckhardt, 1971.) (Nasr, 1987). The Muslim artist’s ability to achieve high aesthetic values is evident. Through this ability, he was able to depart from the living depiction of human and animal living creatures and creates with other ornaments his own creativity that has no parallel committed to the legal order so as not to fall into religious embarrassment through these images (Arnold, 1982).

Islamic art is not necessarily the art that talks about Islam, nor about the facts of the belief crystallized in a philosophical form, nor is it a collection of judgment, preaching and instructions, but rather something more comprehensive and broader than that (it is a beautiful expression of the facts of existence from the perspective of the Islamic depiction of this existence which deals with the existence and everything that is going on in it from an Islamic angle and with an Islamic sense) (Arnold, 1982) (Burckhardt, 2009).
The distinguished image of the achievements of Islamic civilization embodies a special artistic model, which constitutes a single general framework within which the decorative language varies according to the specificity of the regions (Simalkoff, 1993). This phenomenon determined the dual characteristic of art for Muslims.

Islamic decoration is based on deep-rooted foundations stemming from the inherited religion and traditions, and Muslim builders and artists have aimed in highlighting the specificity of these traditions that Islam has dominated since it came, from here we can see the intimate relationship between Islam and architecture, decoration and city building as it reflects the spirit of religion and the great lines that it drew for the life of the Muslim in general and the Arab in particular (Ettinghausen, 1975) (Nasr, 1987).

Decorative arts that Muslim architects introduced show the love of Muslims to engineering consistency, repetition, and inferring new patterns, or evoking the distant past of Islam (Majed, 2010). They all depend on what some historians of Islamic art call; Nirvana, spiritual and physical comfort, meditation and simplicity, and from here we can see how Islamic decorative art depended on colours, light and the expansion of spaces (Nasr, 1987).

As for the elements of Islamic decoration, it can be summed up in six elements: calligraphy, geometry, natural drawings, animals, light, water. Such elements are known to bring comfort, tranquillity and calmness (Majed, 2010).

Muslims excelled in using geometric lines and formulating them into wonderful artistic forms such as polygons, star shapes, and interlocking circles (Ettinghausen, 1975). Those forms were used to decorate buildings as well as wooden and copper trinkets, and in the manufacture of doors and decorating ceilings. Such decorative elements were evidence of great artistic talent and an advanced knowledge of practical engineering (Majed, 2010).

Geometric decoration is of special importance in Islamic art, and perhaps its importance is because of its conformity with the specifications accepted by the Islamic faith that distances from the initiation of living creatures (Arnold, 1982). In addition, it has managed to impose its supremacy in Islamic art, by its victory over the dominance of shapes (Ettinghausen, 1975).
Titus Burckhardt (1908-1984) confirmed that he could imagine nothing that could strip life from its apparent garment and move us to its hidden content, such as the geometric formations of Islamic motifs (Burckhardt, 1970). These formations are nothing but an outgrowth of thinking based on a careful calculation, which may turn from diagrams of philosophical ideas and spiritual meanings, however, we should not miss that during this abstract framework, a flowing life is started across the lines, forming among them multitudes that multiply and increase, separating and gathering, as if there is a wandering spirit that works for more than one interpretation depending on what it is aimed at the one-look (Nasr, 1987).

The basic principle in architecture is not decorating the building, but building the decoration, and this is what Muslim builders adopted. Jones adds: “We never find an ornament without a target or Excess or unnecessary in Islamic decorative art, it is a natural and realistic decoration (Burckhardt, 1970) (Nasr, 1987).

Decorative art is characterized by the unity in a way that makes it different from the legacies of other nations, their cultures and civilizations, and no matter how many forms, shapes, motifs, techniques and raw materials are numerous, the eye does not mistake the clear and dominant Islamic masterpiece, where the viewer automatically feels his affiliation and origin through the flow of its inner spirit and Richness in external appearance (Simalkoff, 1993).

The Case Study:

Mohammad Ibrahim Mohmmad Al-Rubat was born in 1969³. He is known locally with his artistic name Mohammad Al-Rubat. He is a fine artist and a retired art teacher.

Although Al-Rabat introduced a single solo exhibition (Step 2017), he has been participating in artistic exhibitions for more than 30 years providing different artworks including painting, printmaking, wood and metal works alike.

He started as a realistic artist using watercolours in most of his works then he developed his works employing a rich surrealistic style using oil colours and acrylic before developing his current style employing motifs, traditional and Islamic decorative elements and Arabic letters.

³ Personal communication with the artist in April 2020.
Al-Rubat is known of his constant experimental approach in the use of media and collage.

It is worth mentioning that Al-Rubat started his artistic life as a caricaturist.

**Justification of Choosing the Case Study:**

Mohammad Al-Rubat is chosen since he has been employing Islamic decorations in his artworks for more than 20 years in different fields of art like painting, woodworks, metalworks, collage and ceramic. In addition, his constant experiments in materials and renewing techniques has made his experiments rich and broadly spread. Finally, Al-Rubat is known of his swift solutions when dealing with different materials and tools.

**Reviewing and analysing some artworks of the artists:**

Having a look at Al-Rubat’s artworks, one can see the sequence of the different stages and the process of developing his rich experiments. However, his sketches must be considered especially when mentioning the decorative motifs. His lines are an extension of employing decorative elements in a combination with traditional ornament and daily lifestyle. The artistic vocabularies of Al-Rubat can be summarised in the horse, the
Woman and traditional houses. Such units are always integrated with decorative elements, dots and lines (Artworks no. 1, 2, 3 and 4).

Detecting the decorative elements in Al-Rubat’s artworks emphasises his deep use of them including geometric and vegetal patterns, arabesque and calligraphy. Such process can be considered as an extension of the previous artworks of common Islamic artworks of the previous eras. Some of them shows the use of relief art (mostly using foam material) (Artworks no. 5).

For Al-Rubat, the employing of the golden colour is meaningful. It is a mark of representing the dematerialising of luxurious life and its tools. Likewise, the use of the white colour is existed in most of Al-Rubat’s artworks. The white in Islamic philosophy is the colour of purity and cleaness (Artworks no. 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10).
Other artworks employed some elements such as leaves which known clearly in the previous
Islamic artworks (Artwork no. 11). In a late stage, Al-Rabat presented many artworks based on some stories in the Islamic history like Immigration of Prophet Mohammad Peace be upon him (Hijrah). Although such artworks provided new combination of living creatures, they appear abstracted and merged with the decorative elements as well (Artwork no. 12).

Moving on to different artworks in Al-Rubat artistic journey, embossed surfaces attended in several artworks. He applied different materials like sand, foam and fabrics benefitting from their characteristics in adding some textures whereas he made some textures directly on the surface using the techniques of carving, engraving and cutting. (Artworks no. 13 and 14)

In addition, he presented some artworks expressing the notion of the void in Islamic philosophy using casting technique with fiberglass and materials alike. He used some mixtures of white glue and gypsum to make his own paste which allowed him to create some significant textures on paper (Artworks no. 15 and 16)
As an inclusive artist, Al-Rubat was not far from three-dimensional artworks. He introduced some artworks in sculpture and casting using epoxy resin, wood and stones.

However, his sculptures were not free of the spirit of Islamic faith. Keeping in mind the distribution of Arabic letters, Islamic motifs were also distributed (Artworks no. 17, 18, 19, 20 and 21).
In a later stage, Al-Rubat developed his experiment in casting to limit it to pure cooper as he presented some sculptures showing the soul of abstracting decorative motifs and simple lines (Artworks no. 22 and 23) pursuing the use of epoxy resin but in more abstracted style with more focus on Arabic letters (Artworks no. 24).

Such experiment resulted in amazing jewels (Artworks no. 25). Despite this shift, Al-Rubat did not leave his painting. He pursed to a further philosophy based on abstracting the abstract itself. As a result, he presented a group of artworks including his decorative elements and motifs using Islamic ornament but in more philosophical vision (Artworks no. 26, 27 and 28).
These artworks are a real example of the simplicity of the elements but with deeper meanings that go beyond the unseen universe. Such metaphysical meanings are shown in most of Al-Rubat’s artworks besides the beauty made by the movement of decorative elements.
Reviewing the artworks of Al-Rubat and analysing them cannot exist without mentioning his deep love of horses. The horse is a dominant element in most of his artworks. It is seen combined with the Arabic letters as well as the decorative motifs.

The horse as a symbol of courage is also a symbol of kindness and power for the Arabs. It is indulged with gold leaves in many artworks to show its luxurious position (Artworks 29 and 30)

It came in some artworks embodied and surrounded with vegetal decorations or clear Arabic letters (Artworks no. 31 and 32)
Conclusion and Recommendations:

Based on the literature and having reviewed and analysed some artworks of M. Al-Rubat, it can be concluded that Islamic decorative elements and motifs have directly affected the diversity of contemporary Saudi artworks. This is because of the compatibility between decoration processes and the composite engineering construction of the units which emphasize the aesthetic values of modern artwork production.

The diversity of colours and techniques alike inside both; the two and three-dimensional artworks has an impact on the different solutions and the rapid artistic expression which allow artists to move from style to another without hesitation. This is an important point to start from for young Saudi artist.

The study shows that the emergence of shapes’ details besides colours from the core of the artwork to different directions (radial) is an important point that leads to spontaneous process which in turn convert into a precise composition. Such compositions can easily reflect the hidden meanings beside the masses of materials. Therefore, Islamic identity are still found in contemporary Saudi artworks despite the invasion of modern technology and the influence of globalization.

This study is also an attempt to discover new visions that may enrich modern Saudi artistic products through the symbolic and mystical dimension of decorative art in Islamic culture and its application in the contemporary period. It can open new horizons for artists in Saudi Arabia so as to benefit from the characteristics of Islamic decoration keeping its identity besides merging it with the local one.

It is recommended that further study in the field of decorative arts must be conducted. Additionally, Saudi artists should benefit from the characteristics of Islamic decoration and find ways to employ them in contemporary artworks that reflect its identity.
References

CONSENT

I hereby as Mohammad Ibrahim Al-Rubat give my full consent to allow Dr. Ahmad Saleh A Almontasheri to use the photos of my artworks I sent him for the purpose of his study titled as:

Islamic Identity in Contemporary Saudi Decorative Artworks: A Case Study of Mohammad Al-Rubat

Considering that he informed me in advance about his study, its aims and related information like ethical consideration; I confirm the accuracy of the information I provided and give him my permission to use the information I provided him during the personal communication for the above-mentioned study and for the academic purposes.

Fine artist:
Mohammad Al-Rubat