

A PERSPECTIVE ON ISLAMIC ART

Islamic Art remains an enigma that is able to soften the hearts of the most ardent opponents of a people who, over the last few years, have suffered tremendous bad publicity and reaction due to global developments on all fronts. The Islamic world stretches over all continents with North & Central Africa, the Middle East and most of Southeast Asia, as the main areas. In addition to this, most countries in the world are experiencing a phenomenal growth in the number of Muslims in their populations. In global terms, it is estimated that one person in six is Muslim.

The spread of Islam has contributed greatly to all areas of human development with art and architecture an area of great achievement and significance. Islamic Art contains a variety of styles due to geographic and chronological factors but one can confidently state that it is unified in terms of purpose and form. What then does the term Islamic Art mean? Strictly speaking, Islamic Art refers to art made and practiced by people who are Muslims, who profess the faith of Islam. Works of art, which includes architecture, from the Islamic period, reveal a clear distinction from those of pre-Islamic time. This is evidence of a "new" motivation, which has its roots in the spread of Islam. Islamic art across the territories conquered, used the language of the Qur'an and the Hadith (traditions relating to the deeds and utterances of the Prophet).

Prophet Muhammad (Sallallahu Alayhi Wa Sallam, peace be upon him), poetry from Arabia and Iran as the basis of their calligraphic renditions. Muslims across the globe are united in their total immersion of emotion when confronted by Qur'anic recitations. Sensory and intuitive faculties override the lack of understanding of Arabic meanings. Such was the driving force which united, and still does, the Muslim artists. Islamic Architecture with the combined Arabic calligraphy and decorative geometrical designs, became the main proponent of the global Muslim culture.

Al Tawhid refers to the "oneness of God" or "to declare transcendent nature of God". Beauty, whatever its form, shape or size, must be seen in God. If art is the process of discovery within nature then that discovery must be made within the context of Al Tawhid. The Muslim artist does not use the imagery of nature to represent God but through a process of stylization removes it from nature and it becomes almost unrecognizable. The use of imagery from nature is a controversial debate in Islam. Generally, the ban on images comes from the traditions of the Prophet of Islam. Its main objective was to deter converts to the religion from reverting back to atheism and idolatry, the very things the Word of God set out to eliminate. Figurative works and sculpture are banned from places of worship as it may distract from prayers and meditation. Those elements and practices were and can still be used by the leaders to elevate themselves to saintly positions.

Islamic art thus strives to promote the spiritual representation of objects and beings rather than their material qualities. Abstraction remains the most accepted practice in Islamic Art. Artists stylized the utilization of the figures of humans, animals and plants. Calligraphy became the foremost amongst the fine and decorative arts. The graceful and elegant Arabic script was meant to delight the beholder's eye and absorb the viewer in an endless flow of lines, curves and shapes. All this primarily to glorify Allah through the language of the Qu'ran. Islam's magnificent use of geometric shapes for decoration reveals expression in an abstract concept of Allah. This remarkable effect of geometric ornamentation is enhanced by the use of various materials. Islamic art's use of "sacred geometry" created a window to a vast space. A space where God's majesty and glory is present.

Islamic art has changed considerably since the 19th Century. It most probably started with the phenomenon of "Orientalism" and the mixing of East and West. Islam has never promoted a static way of life and always embraced everything, which was based on truth, progress and tolerance. The sunnah (example) of Prophet Muhammad (Sallallahu Alayhi Wa Sallam) is evidence of assimilation and adoption of healthy practices, which bred unity and diversity. Muslim artists who are educated in the Western tradition of painting have openly combined the traditional Islamic art style with techniques learnt from their western teachers and movements.

In the process, exciting and stimulating creations are flowing from the easels. The fundamental message remains the same however, Allah is the Creator and Master of the universe. All praise is due to Allah!

IN AND AROUND THE HEART

The recently established Aotearoa Islamic Impressions held a second art exhibition from 13th to 18th December 2004 at the Orewa Public Library, Moana Avenue, Orewa. This exhibition was a joint venture with the Aslan Trust and was centred on the theme

of Peace. Sr. Catherine Shrigley, peace activist and convenor of the Aslan Trust, was inspirational in getting this exhibition off the ground in Orewa. As she had just returned from the Inter-religious International Federation of World Peace (IIFWP) conference in Mongolia, she was inspired to initiate an activity promoting peace among the people of Aotearoa.

The Aotearoa Islamic Impressions and the Aslan Trust decided that the main objective of this exhibition was to promote peace through the visual arts. Artists from a broad spectrum of the New Zealand society were invited to submit works of art on this 'Peace Theme'. More than 10 artists responded to this call and were prepared to exhibit their works of art. Artists included, George Taylor, Simon Sheppard, Wisam Ibrahim, Ahmad Esau, Abdul Raouf, Rongomatone Turner and Tina Taitimu, Kohar Esau and Tayyib Esau.

A photographic collage of the IIFWP Conference in Mongolia by Catherine and Suraya Esau was also included in the exhibition. Simon Sheppard and George Taylor are both internationally renowned Kiwi artists. George Taylor owns and operates an art gallery in Silverdale, Rodney District. The art exhibits of Wisam Ibrahim impressed the visitors due to the unusual but impressive techniques and visual impact of his works depicting Islamic calligraphy. He is presently studying art at the Elam School of fine Art in Auckland.

Our gratitude to the Rodney Community Arts Council East for sponsoring this exhibition at the Orewa Public Library.

Some comments made by the viewers:

“A wonderful interwoven mix of New Zealand & its Islamic imagery”

“Beautiful work to bring people together with your beautiful art.”

“Sharing art promotes understanding.”

“Great beginnings and awakening of peace initiatives.”

“Thank goodness for individuals creating much needed seeds of awareness.”

“Thank you, Ahmad & Catherine for bringing this reminder to the community of Orewa & Rodney.”

Report by Ahmad Esau – Exhibit Co-ordinator.