

Islamic Art and Creative Expression: A Conceptual Analysis of Aesthetic and Religious Values

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Abstract:

Contemporary discussions on Islamic art often raise questions regarding the relationship between artistic freedom and religious commitment. This study examines how art is conceptualized within Islamic thought and explores the extent to which creative expression may coexist with religious values. Employing a qualitative literature review with an interpretive content analysis approach, this study draws upon primary Islamic sources, including the Qur'an and hadith, as well as classical and contemporary Islamic scholarship and academic literature on Islamic aesthetics. The analysis focuses on three dimensions: theological foundations of art, ethical boundaries of artistic expression, and the socio-spiritual functions of art in Islamic traditions. The findings indicate that Islamic perspectives do not reject artistic creativity; rather, art is understood as a meaningful cultural and spiritual practice guided by the principles of tawhid, morality, and social responsibility. The study argues that Islamic art represents a dynamic space in which aesthetic innovation and religious values are continuously negotiated. This research contributes to broader discussions in Islamic Studies by offering a conceptual framework for understanding the

interaction between creativity, spirituality, and religious ethics in contemporary Islamic contexts.

Keywords: Islamic art, creative expression, religious values, Islamic aesthetics, Islamic thought

A. Introduction

Islam is a religion that regulates the relationship between humans and Allah (*ḥablum minallāh*) as well as the relationship between humans, others, and the natural environment (*ḥablum minannās*). Within this framework, Islam does not only govern aspects of ritual worship but also encompasses social, cultural, and aesthetic dimensions. Art, as part of human culture, receives attention in Islam because it is مرتبط with human nature (*fitrah*), which is inclined toward appreciating beauty.

The Qur'an affirms that beauty is part of Allah's creation, as stated in Surah Al-A'raf (7:32).

قُلْ مَنْ حَرَّمَ زِينَةَ اللَّهِ الَّتِي أَخْرَجَ لِعِبَادِهِ وَالطَّيِّبَاتِ مِنَ الرِّزْقِ قُلْ هِيَ لِلَّذِينَ آمَنُوا فِي الْحَيَاةِ
الدُّنْيَا خَالِصَةً يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ كَذَلِكَ نَفَصِلُ الْآيَاتِ لِقَوْمٍ يَعْلَمُونَ

The translation:

“Say (O Prophet Muhammad), ‘Who has forbidden the adornment of Allah which He has produced for His servants and the good provisions?’ Say, ‘They are for those who believe (and also for those who do not) in the life of this world, but they will be exclusively for them (the believers) on the Day of Resurrection.’ Thus do We explain the verses in detail for a people who have knowledge.¹”

According to the interpretation of M. Quraish Shihab, the verse above shows that Islam is not a religion that opposes beauty. Allah created adornments, beautiful clothing, and good food so that humans may enjoy them in a proper and lawful way. However, these worldly pleasures become more meaningful for believers

¹Kementerian Agama Republik Indonesia. *Al-Qur'an dan Terjemahannya*. Jakarta: Lajnah Pentashihan Mushaf Al-Qur'an, Kemenag RI, edisi terbaru (2020).

because they use them with gratitude, whereas for disbelievers they are only temporary and hold no benefit in the Hereafter.²

According to the tafsir of Al-Qurthubi, this verse emphasizes the principle that everything is originally permissible (*mubah*) unless there is evidence that prohibits it. Clothing and adornments are allowed, but they must observe Islamic etiquette, such as covering the *aurat*, avoiding excess, and not using them for showing off.

In addition, a hadith narrated by Abdullah ibn Mas'ud and recorded by Imam Muslim also emphasizes that:

إِنَّ اللَّهَ جَمِيلٌ يُحِبُّ الْجَمَالَ

The translation:

“Allah is Beautiful and loves beauty.”³

The content of the hadith above explains that beauty is one of Allah’s attributes, reflected in His creations: nature, human beings, and all forms of order in the universe. Through this attribute, Allah teaches that Islam is not a religion that opposes beauty. Allah loves beauty. Beauty in appearance (such as neat, clean, and fragrant clothing) is permitted and even encouraged. Beauty is also manifested in acts of worship (such as a melodious recitation of the Qur’an and performing prayer with devotion) and in Islamic art (such as calligraphy, mosque architecture, and religious music). Beauty is part of human *fitrah*. Humans are naturally inclined to appreciate beauty (in clothing, art, sound, and architecture). Islam directs this inclination so that it becomes an act of worship and brings one closer to Allah. Furthermore, the foundation of Islamic art lies in values of *tawhid* and good character (*akhlaq*), which are part of the beauty loved by Allah. Examples include Qur’anic calligraphy, Islamic vocal art, mosque architecture, and even contemporary Islamic art.

In the classical tradition of Islamic thought, Al-Ghazali viewed art as a divine gift that possesses both aesthetic and moral dimensions. According to him, art is permissible as long as it does not contradict *aqidah*, does not contain prohibited (*haram*) elements, and does not distract from religious obligations. Al-Farabi also

²M. Quraish Shihab, *Tafsir al-Mishbah: Pesan, Kesan, dan Keserasian al-Qur’an*, Jilid 4 (Jakarta: Lentera Hati, 2002), h. 376.

³Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, *Kitab al-Īmān*, Bab Tahrīm al-Kibr (Larangan Sombong). → Nomor hadis: 91.

regarded art as a reflection of cosmic harmony derived from the order of Allah's creation. In the contemporary context, Seyyed Hossein Nasr emphasizes that Islamic art is a visual manifestation of the principle of *tawhid*, while Ismail Raji al-Faruqi highlights the theocentric and non-figurative character of Islamic art as a reflection of the oneness of God.⁴

Based on the explanation above, it can be concluded that the beauty of Allah's creation is lawful and may be enjoyed, with the addition of an ethical condition: beauty must not lead to arrogance or deviation from the truth. Islam embraces art, aesthetics, and creative expression as part of worship and religious expression (*da'wah*). Islamic art may be developed as long as it does not contradict *tawhid*, *sharia*, and moral values (*akhlaq*). Art thus becomes a medium for conveying *da'wah*, strengthening the identity of the Muslim community, and fostering gratitude to Allah.

Nevertheless, many studies on art in Islam remain normative-descriptive, emphasizing aspects of what is lawful (*halal*) and unlawful (*haram*) without deeply examining the epistemological, social, and cultural dimensions of art within Islamic civilization. Therefore, this study aims to examine art from an Islamic perspective by focusing on the balance between creative expression and religious values, as well as analyzing its role in *da'wah*, spirituality, and the formation of the cultural identity of the Muslim community.

B. Research Methods

This study used a qualitative-descriptive method with a library research approach. Data sources were obtained from the Qur'an, hadith, Islamic literature, the works of scholars, as well as academic studies on Islamic art. The data were analyzed by examining concepts, comparing the views of scholars and experts, and drawing conclusions that are relevant to the context of Islamic art.

C. Findings

1. Art as Creative Expression in Islam

The Qur'an affirms that Allah created the universe full of beauty as a sign of His power. Allah states in Surah An-Nahl (16:8) that His creations are not only beneficial but also possess aesthetic value. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) also said, "Indeed, Allah is Beautiful and loves beauty" (reported by Muslim). This indicates that art grounded in beauty has a place in Islam as long as it does not contradict *sharia*.

⁴Budi Alan Kusuma, 'Konsep Keindahan Dalam Seni Islam Menurut Sayyed Hossein Nasr.' (IAIN Bengkulu, 2020).

In Islamic tradition, art is viewed as a manifestation of human creativity, which is a gift from Allah. Calligraphy, mosque architecture, Qur'anic recitation (*tilawah*), literary arts, and religious music are forms of creative expression that serve not only aesthetic purposes but also spiritual ones. Al-Farabi and Al-Ghazali regarded art as a reflection of the order of Allah's creation, bringing harmony into human life (Al-Ghazali, 2004).

Islam views art as part of human *fitrah* in expressing beauty, while also providing guidelines so that art does not deviate from the principles of *tawhid* and *sharia*. These boundaries are necessary to ensure that art holds religious value and is not merely a form of entertainment. Namely:

a. Not Contradicting the Creed (*Aqidah*)

Art must not lead to *shirk* (associating partners with God) or involve the depiction of Allah or the Prophets. This is in line with the concept of aniconism in Islam, which strongly discourages the realistic depiction of living beings that may lead to worship or imitation of Allah's creation.

b. Not Containing Elements of Immorality (*Maksiat*)

All forms of art that promote pornography, violence, or immoral behavior are prohibited in Islam. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said, "Indeed, among the sayings that people have retained from the words of the earlier prophets is: If you feel no shame, then do as you wish" (reported by al-Bukhari). This hadith indicates that art which contradicts moral values is not permitted.

c. Not Distracting from Worship (*Ibadah*)

Art should serve as a means of remembering Allah, not distract people from their religious obligations. Allah says, "And this worldly life is nothing but play and amusement. But indeed, the Hereafter is the true life, if only they knew" (Qur'an, Al-'Ankabut 29:64).⁵

d. Containing Educational and Da'wah Values

Art in Islam should function as a medium of education and *da'wah*. Calligraphy, mosque architecture, Sufi poetry, and religious music are

⁵Departemen Agama RI, *Al-Qur'an dan Terjemahannya* (Jakarta: Lajnah Pentashihan Mushaf al-Qur'an, 2019), QS. Al-'Ankabut: 64.

examples of Islamic art that embody moral and spiritual values, while encouraging people toward goodness.⁶

e. Maintaining Modesty and Ethical Values

Islam teaches balance and moderation in all aspects of life, including art. Artistic works should not be excessive in style, cost, or purpose, so as to avoid falling into *israf* (extravagance).

Based on the explanation above, it can be concluded that art in Islam is part of human *fitrah* to express beauty as a gift from Allah, as emphasized in the Qur'an and the hadith of the Prophet. Islamic art is not only aesthetic in value but also possesses a spiritual dimension that strengthens faith, brings people closer to Allah, and serves as a medium for *da'wah* and education. However, Islam sets boundaries so that art does not deviate from the principles of *tawhid* and *sharia*: it must not contradict *aqidah*, must not contain immoral elements, must not distract from worship, and should embody educational and *da'wah* values while maintaining simplicity and ethical conduct. Thus, art in Islam is not merely a form of entertainment, but a means to strengthen spirituality, morality, and Islamic identity.

2. The Role of Art as a Medium for Da'wah and the Strengthening of Spirituality

Islamic art is art that brings benefit, soothes the heart, and draws people closer to Allah (Madjid, 2000). Islam views art as a form of human creative expression that aligns with the natural inclination (*fitrah*) to love beauty. As long as art is guided by *tawhid* and good character (*akhlaq*), it is not only permissible but also encouraged as a means of *da'wah*, education, and spiritual strengthening. Art in Islam is not merely an aesthetic expression, but also a path toward closeness to Allah.

a. Art as a Medium of Da'wah

Art in Islam holds an important position as a medium of *da'wah*, as it is able to convey religious messages in a beautiful, heartfelt, and easily accepted manner. Forms of *da'wah* through art can include:

- 1) Islamic Calligraphy - the writing of Qur'anic verses combined with aesthetic elements; it serves not only a decorative function but also reminds people of the words of Allah.

⁶M. Quraish Shihab, *Wawasan al-Qur'an: Tafsir Maudhu'i atas Pelbagai Persoalan Umat* (Bandung: Mizan, 2017), h. 225

- 2) Mosque Architecture - mosque designs featuring domes, mihrabs, and Islamic ornaments that create a religious atmosphere and strengthen Islamic identity.
- 3) Islamic Music and Nasheed - lyrical compositions that praise Allah and the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), capable of moving the heart and spreading universal moral values.
- 4) Sufi Literature and Poetry - literary works such as the poems of Jalaluddin Rumi that convey the teachings of divine love through aesthetic metaphors.

Through an artistic approach, *da'wah* can be conveyed in a more subtle and communicative way, reaching a broader audience without appearing didactic.

b. Art as a Means of Strengthening Spirituality

In addition to serving as a medium of *da'wah*, art plays a role in strengthening both individual and collective spirituality among Muslims. This can be seen in:

- 1) Qur'anic Aesthetics - The recitation of the Qur'an (*tilawah*) with beautiful intonation (following *tajwid* and *qira'ah*) fosters devotion, inner peace, and a deep love for the Qur'an.
- 2) Dhikr and Hadrah Arts - Sufi traditions such as *rebana* music and collective *dhikr* strengthen the spiritual dimension and create a sense of togetherness in worship.
- 3) Contemplation through Visual Art - Geometric patterns and arabesque designs in Islamic art guide human awareness toward the order and majesty of Allah's creation, thereby strengthening faith and gratitude.

Based on the explanation above, it can be concluded that Islamic art is not only aesthetic in value but also contains religious significance that soothes the heart, strengthens faith, and brings people closer to Allah. Through its various forms—such as calligraphy, mosque architecture, Islamic music, Sufi literature, Qur'anic recitation (*tilawah*), as well as *dhikr* and Islamic visual arts—art functions as a medium for conveying religious messages in a beautiful and communicative way. Thus, art in Islam is not merely entertainment or aesthetic expression, but also an educational, spiritual, and moral medium that strengthens the Islamic identity of the Muslim community.

3. Islamic Art: Maintaining a Balance between Aesthetics and Sharia

Islamic art is a form of human creative expression rooted in the principle of *tawhid*. The uniqueness of Islamic art lies in its ability to integrate aesthetic values (beauty) with *sharia* (religious guidelines). Aesthetics in Islam is not merely oriented toward sensory satisfaction, but is also directed at strengthening faith and spirituality.

a. Aesthetics in Islamic Art

The Qur'an acknowledges beauty as part of Allah's creation. Allah says, "It is He who created for you all that is on the earth" (Qur'an, Al-Baqarah 2:29), indicating that beauty is a blessing that may rightfully be enjoyed by human beings. In the context of art, beauty is reflected in calligraphy, mosque architecture, Qur'anic recitation (*tilawah*), and geometric patterns that evoke admiration and contemplation of Allah's greatness.⁷

b. Sharia as a Guideline for Art

Islamic *sharia* provides guidelines to ensure that art does not deviate from religious values. For example, art is prohibited from depicting the form of God or the Prophets to avoid *shirk*, and it must not contain immoral elements, pornography, or anything that distracts from worship. With these boundaries, Islamic art remains beautiful while still carrying moral and spiritual values.⁸

Islamic art is able to maintain balance in the following ways:

- 1) Prioritizing symbolism and abstraction: Geometric patterns and arabesque designs replace the representation of living beings, ensuring that aesthetic value is preserved without violating *sharia*.
- 2) Serving as a medium of *da'wah*: The beauty of Islamic art is not only visual but also conveys religious and moral messages.
- 3) Directing toward spirituality: Islamic aesthetics are theocentric in nature, meaning that every work of Islamic art reminds humans of the Creator rather than merely serving worldly pleasure.

Based on the explanation above, it can be concluded that Islamic art is a form of creative expression that combines beauty with *sharia* values, thereby not only presenting aesthetics but also strengthening faith and

⁷Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), h. 5

⁸Muhammad Yusuf Musa, *Falsafah al-Akhlāq fi al-Islām* (Kairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 2010), h. 322

spirituality. With the principle of *tawhid* as its foundation, Islamic art expresses beauty through calligraphy, mosque architecture, Qur'anic recitation (*tilawah*), and geometric patterns that evoke admiration for Allah. At the same time, *sharia* provides boundaries to ensure that art does not deviate into *shirk*, immorality, or negligence of worship. Through this balance, Islamic art functions as a medium for *da'wah*, moral education, and a reminder of Allah's greatness, so that the beauty it produces carries both spiritual and aesthetic value.

4. The Contribution of Art to Cultural Identity and the Religious Values of the Muslim Community

a. Art as a Strengthenener of Islamic Cultural Identity

Art plays an important role in shaping and strengthening the cultural identity of the Muslim community. Through art, Islamic civilization expresses both universal and local values. For example, Arabic calligraphy, which has developed across various Islamic regions, functions not only as decoration but also as a symbol of intellectual and spiritual depth within the Muslim community. In addition, mosque architecture with its distinctive domes, minarets, and mihrabs serves as a visual identity of Islamic civilization in different parts of the world. The *Jurnal Budaya Nusantara* states that Islamic art is not only aesthetic in value but also reflects the identity of Muslims rooted in *tawhid* and spirituality. Thus, art becomes a medium that strengthens both the uniqueness and unity of Islamic cultural identity.⁹

b. Art as a Preserver of Religious Values

Islamic art also contributes to the preservation of religious values. The melodious recitation of the Qur'an (*tilawah*) is a form of vocal art that strengthens spirituality and teaches the values of worship. Similarly, Sufi literature such as the works of Jalaluddin Rumi conveys the teachings of divine love and *tasawwuf* through poetry, thereby internalizing religious values in an aesthetic form.

According to research published in *Syariati: Journal of Qur'anic Studies and Law*, Islamic musical art (*nasheed* and *shalawat*) plays a significant role in conveying moral messages and *da'wah* in a gentle

⁹Jurnal Budaya Nusantara, "Seni Islam dan Identitas Budaya," *Jurnal Budaya Nusantara*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (2022): h. 145

manner, as well as strengthening the sense of faith among Muslim communities.¹⁰

c. Integration of Local and Universal Culture

One important contribution of Islamic art is its ability to integrate local culture with Islamic values. For example, wayang (traditional shadow puppetry) in Java was used as a medium of *da'wah* by the Wali Songo, with adaptations to align it with Islamic values. This demonstrates that art can serve as a means of cultural acculturation while still preserving Islamic principles..¹¹

Based on the explanation above, it can be concluded that art in Islam serves as an important means of strengthening cultural identity, preserving religious values, and integrating local culture with Islamic principles. Through calligraphy, mosque architecture, Qur'anic recitation (*tilawah*), Sufi literature, and Islamic music, Muslims not only express beauty but also reinforce spirituality and *da'wah*. Moreover, the ability of Islamic art to adapt to local cultures without abandoning the principle of *tawhid* makes it a unique medium that preserves the authenticity of Islamic teachings while expanding the influence of Islamic civilization across diverse social contexts.

D. Discussion

1. Synthesis of Research Findings

Based on the research findings, it can be affirmed that art in the Islamic perspective does not stand as an autonomous entity separate from religious values, but is instead integrated within the framework of *tawhid* and *sharia*. Art is understood as a form of creative expression that possesses both aesthetic and spiritual dimensions. Beauty is not positioned as the ultimate goal, but rather as a means to draw closer to Allah and strengthen moral values.

These findings indicate that Islamic art has an integrative character that combines four main dimensions: aesthetics (beauty), *tawhid* (theological orientation), *sharia* (normative boundaries), and social function (*da'wah* and cultural identity). These four dimensions complement one another and form the conceptual structure of Islamic art.

¹⁰Syariati: Jurnal Studi Al-Qur'an dan Hukum, "Peran Seni Islami dalam Dakwah Kontemporer," *Syariati: Jurnal Studi Al-Qur'an dan Hukum*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (2023): 88–90.

¹¹Jurnal Budaya Nusantara, h. 147.

2. Theoretical Analysis: The Islamic Aesthetic Paradigm

Theoretically, Islamic art reveals an aesthetic paradigm that differs from the modern Western aesthetic tradition. In modern thought, the concept of *art for art's sake* has developed, emphasizing the autonomy of art from moral and religious values. Art is viewed as a free expression of the individual without normative constraints. In contrast, in Islam, art cannot be separated from the value of *tawhid*. *Tawhid* is not only a theological doctrine but also an epistemological paradigm that shapes how humans understand beauty. Beauty in Islam is theocentric, meaning it directs human consciousness toward the Creator. Thus, Islamic art can be understood as a symbolic manifestation of *tawhidic* awareness.

This view is in line with the thought of Seyyed Hossein Nasr, who sees Islamic art as the crystallization of the principle of *tawhid* in visual and cultural forms. Similarly, Ismail Raji al-Faruqi emphasizes that the non-figurative and symbolic character of Islamic art is a consequence of the doctrine of divine unity. This study reinforces these views by showing that *tawhid* also functions as an ethical regulator in artistic expression.

3. Comparison with Previous Studies

Most studies on Islamic art tend to focus on normative aspects, particularly discussions on the legal rulings regarding figurative representation, music, or the boundaries of *sharia*. While such studies are important, they often remain limited to classifications of what is *halal* and *haram*.

This research expands that approach by showing that Islamic art is not merely a matter of legal judgment, but also a matter of value structures and social functions. Art is understood as an instrument for shaping the spirituality and cultural identity of the Muslim community. Thus, this article contributes to shifting the focus of study from a purely legal-formal perspective toward a more conceptual and civilizational analysis.

4. Practical Implications

In the context of globalization and the modern creative industry, art is often subjected to commercialization and secularization, which may diminish its spiritual dimension. This challenge is also faced by contemporary Islamic art, which at times becomes trapped in formal symbolism without a deeper theological meaning. With a framework that balances aesthetics and *sharia*, the development of Islamic art in the modern era can be directed to remain culturally relevant while staying theologically consistent. This principle can

serve as a guideline in the development of digital art, Islamic films, modern religious music, as well as architectural design and contemporary visual media.

5. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study is conceptual in nature and uses a library research approach; therefore, it has not examined the empirical implementation of Islamic art in specific social contexts. Future research could be conducted using empirical approaches, such as case studies of Islamic art communities, the Muslim creative industry, or analyses of digital art in social media. In addition, interdisciplinary studies integrating aesthetics, sociology of religion, and cultural studies could enrich the understanding of the dynamics of Islamic art in modern society.

E. Conclusion

Art in Islam is regarded as a gift from Allah that possesses both aesthetic and spiritual value; therefore, its existence is permissible as long as it aligns with the principles of *tawhid* and *sharia*. Art plays an important role not only as a form of creative expression but also as a medium for *da'wah*, education, and the strengthening of spiritual life among Muslims.

The beauty of Islamic art is manifested in various forms such as calligraphy, mosque architecture, Qur'anic recitation (*tilawah*), religious music, and Sufi literature, all of which are able to convey religious messages in an elegant manner, bring tranquillity to the heart, and draw people closer to Allah.

The uniqueness of Islamic art lies in its ability to maintain a balance between aesthetics and *sharia*, as well as to integrate the universal values of Islam with local cultures. Thus, art not only beautifies life and civilization but also strengthens faith, Islamic identity, and the religious values of the Muslim community.

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