

## Religious Symbolism in Islamic Art

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### الرمزية الدينية في الفن الإسلامي

**الملخص:** يتناول هذا البحث الرمزية الدينية في الفن الإسلامي انطلاقاً من القرآن والسنة، إضافة الى اظهار الفكر الصوفي، وتأثيره في هذا الفن، وذلك لإبراز الأثر الديني فيه، ولقد تم اختيار جزء يسير من المواقع الإسلامية التي تمثل قمة الرمزية الدينية، وتمثل في قصور الحمراء في غرناطة، والتي تعج بالرموز الدينية التي ظهرت من خلال العناصر الزخرفية التي تغطي الجدران والحدائق الموجودة فيها. فنشاهد أمثلة عديدة منها باب النبيذ وباب الشريعة وجنة العريف... الخ.

لقد تخيل المسلمون ما في الجنة من مظاهر، وعكسوا هذه التصورات على واقعهم العمراني وزخارفهم التي تمثلت في مخيلتهم.

وهناك الكثير من الشواهد التي لها مدلول ديني في الزخارف الفسيفسائية التي تظهر في العديد من الأبنية الدينية كالجامع الأموي في دمشق حيث تظهر رسومات لنهر بردى والعديد من الأشجار ثم المعمار الذي عكس مخيلة المصممين بما قد يوجد في الجنة.

كما تطرقنا الى قبة الصخرة التي تمثل أحد أهم العناصر الفنية التي ظهرت فيها الرمزية الدينية والتي تمثلت في الزخارف الفنية التي تزين جدرانها الداخلية التي نفذت بالفسيفساء والرخام... الخ. حيث نشاهد الرموز الدينية من خلال أشجار الجنة التي ذكرت في القرآن مثل النخيل، والعنب والرمان والتين، إضافة الى الأحجار الكريمة ذات الألوان المختلفة، ويمكن أن تكون الزخارف الموجودة في قبة الصخرة مستوحاه من رحلة الرسول الى السموات العلى، ومشاهدة الجنة وما فيها من أنهار وحدائق وأحجار كريمة.

ومن خلال الإتحاد بين الإيمان وتجربة الفنان الشخصية فقد تم خلق أعمال مختلفة ذات مغزى رمزي ديني تم تنفيذه في الفن الإسلامي.

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الكلمات المفتاحية: القرآن، الفن الاسلامي، الرمزية الدينية للفن، الجنة، العمارة، العناصر الفنية، اشجار الجنة، الفسيفساء، الالوان.

**Introduction:** An understanding of the religious symbolism in Islamic art requires a prior general knowledge of Sufis' vision of Islam and how they are represented. Sufis are usually Sunnites who simply specialize in spirituality and the affairs of the hearts. Ibn al-'Arabi states that according to the Quran, the origins of Sufism are attributable to a small group of disciples of the Prophet, who were originally poor, (some would argue that they deliberately renounced all worldly luxuries and embraced poverty), as a means to achieving a more intense contemplation of heaven than that sought by common believers. Besides the prophet himself, this group of disciples have throughout the ages provided example and inspiration for many generations of Muslims, leading to the establishment of what is known today as Sufism<sup>2</sup>.

Throughout the ages, Sufism has been reserved in its attitude towards the outside world. Its art is characterised by the use of religious symbolism, making the ideas that the artist wishes to express not easily interpreted without a prior understanding of the underlying philosophical concepts involved. In an attempt to explain the mystical aspect of Sufism, Cerda J. Ferre states: "The act of Sufi artistic creation consists of two stages: the first is "apprehension", in which the artist is receptive to everything around him, and the second is "recovery", in which the artist reaches a mental state, in which observer and the subject being observed merge into a single entity. This second stage of perception involves the elimination of the distance between man and his surroundings, thus suppressing the perception of objects as external forms and altering the perception of space. The individual is neither inside nor outside, but rather between space, and thus immersed into reality. Only after this mental state has been achieved can the artist commence his work of art"<sup>3</sup>.

A Sufi is a profoundly religious person whose role is to indicate the path of Allah. He feels the need to interpret everything that happens around him. In Sufi art, the use of symbolism and signs is prominent, which even when perceived, are not readily comprehensible to the ordinary person. An understanding of Sufi thinking is required before one can begin to decipher the message that the artist wishes to convey. Samîr

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<sup>2</sup>- Bin 'Arabi. ( 1979): Les soufis d'Andalousie. Traduc. Austian, R. W. J. Paris, p. 47.

<sup>3</sup>- Cerde 1 Ferre, J, (1986): *Teoria i Practica de la Trama: Tragats, Harmonics i Reguladors de l'Alhambra de Granada*. Universidad de Barcelona, p.123.

al-Sâyigh explains that the aesthetics of Sufi art originate from the religion itself, in a relationship that encompasses philosophy, logic, mystical Sufism and religious faith<sup>4</sup>.

The idea that it is the underlying philosophy of the religion that provides the generating force behind Sufi art can also, with minor differences, be applied to Sunnism. In a religious context, Sunnism is more of a mainstream movement than Sufism, but shares the belief that God reveals His word through the Quran. Although there are differences in the day to day application of the faith, both share a specific common objective.

In our analysis of the influence that either interpretation of Islam has had on its art, we have chosen the Alhambra of Granada as a representative example of Sufi art, and the Dome of the Rock and the Umayyad Mosque as examples of Sunni art.

The Alhambra abounds with religious symbolism. In fact, the entire complex may even be considered as a religious symbol in itself. Basilio Pavon Maldonado wrote: “the Alhambra, above all, appears before us as an immense triumphal carriage running on the wheels of power along the path of Islamic victory, leaving by the wayside infidels and Christian enemies, who on reflection did not inspire as much fear as the ancient inscriptions may have led the Muslims to believe”<sup>5</sup>.

Various parts of the Alhambra are considered as representative of the victory of Islam and Islamic symbolism, such as the Wine Gate, the Gate of Justice, the Generalife and the Court of the Myrtles etc.. However, to gain a deeper understanding of this art form attention should be focussed on the works of art that appear in the Generalife.

The Generalife is a majestically beautiful palace, situated on a hill overlooking the rest of the Alhambra complex. Perched upon the highest point of the hill, it is considered as one of the most beautiful of all Muslim constructions. Nasri architects successfully combined architecture, nature including water in a unique ensemble with great mastery. Torres Balbas praised its simple, minimalist and intimate style. "Nothing in architecture or natural environments created by the hand of man compares with its magnificence or monumentality". In French and Italian gardens, water is used as a mere decorative element, but in the gardens of the Generalife water arises from a multitude of small

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<sup>4</sup> - AL-Sayigh, Samir. (1984): *Al-Fann al-Islami Qira'a Ta'ammuliyya fi Falsafati-hil-Jamaliyya*. Beirut, p. 55.

<sup>5</sup> - Pavon Maldonado, Basilio. (1985): “Arte, Símbolo Emblemas de la España Musulmana” *Al-Qantara*, VI , pp 397-450, espec. 409.

fountains, extending out in every direction and mingling with the surrounding vegetation and architecture<sup>6</sup>.

This description brings to mind three combined components of the celestial paradise mentioned in the Quran: water, trees, plants and architecture. Water and vegetation are of course inseparable, but with the aim of focussing on an area of the gardens that combined all three elements, we turned our attention to the Patio de la Acequia, sometimes considered a Garden of Eden. The Quran makes ample references to plant life and water, including the following verse:

“of course there are, during the creation of sky and earth, in the rotation of night and day, on the ship which sails in the sea and which people take benefits from, in the water Allah sends from de sky to give a new life to a dead land, in the way all kind of creatures disperse through that land, in the change of winds’ directions and clouds stuck between earth and sky too, signs for those people who can understand” (Qur’an, 2:164).

Torres Balbás also makes reference to the concept of gardens as heavenly paradise: “The Quran describes the Islamic Heaven as a lush garden, of dark greenness, refreshed by running water, with fruits, pomegranate trees and palms, in which the blessed people, on roof-gardens and green brocade cushions, rest in summerhouses...”<sup>7</sup>. El Patio de la Acequia appears to possess all of the elements of the Islamic conceptualization of celestial paradise, including the concept of “rivers” running under chambers as described in Surat Az Zumar, Verse, 20: “but the ones who fear their Lord will be in the high chambers built over other high chambers, at whose feet flow streams. Allah promise! He doesn’t break His promise”. Given the similarities between the Patio de la Acequia and the descriptions of paradise in the Quran, it is plausible to suggest that the main objective in the design of the garden was to create a reflection of the celestial garden on earth (fig. 1).

From the epigraphic decoration within the Generalife palace, it is clear that the Islamic artists of the time wished to express the fact that the Patio de la Acequia was a recreation of a heavenly garden. The inscriptions are a source of valuable information on the palace, the gardens and the philosophy of the time; one of which makes reference to the Sultan: “the majesty of the building is enhanced by his presence”. In another inscription, Sultan Abül-Walīd is commended for the restoration

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<sup>6</sup>- Torres Balbás, Leopoldo. (1949): “Arte almohade. Arte nazari. Arte mudejar” *Ars Hispaniae*, IV, p. 90.

<sup>3</sup>- Torres Balbás, Leopoldo. (1949): “Arte almohade. Arte nazari. Arte mudejar” *Ars Hispaniae*, IV, p.136.

of this building, and another describes the gardens “as beautiful as a bride”. Lafuente Alcantara, known for his translations of these verses, draws our attention to one of the inscriptions in particular: “I am to perpetually walk between the light of the straight path and the shade of faith”. He believes that there is a play of words between light and shade and interprets the straight path as the path of virtue; a brightly illuminated path that leads to righteousness, upon which there also exists shade; interpreted to mean shelter<sup>8</sup>. In our opinion, this Verse is an allusion to the garden of Heaven in which the number of trees is infinite. Consequently, there is always shade in the presence of light at the same time. The hypothesis of an association between the gardens of the Generalife and the divine celestial garden of the Quran is further strengthened by the fact that most of the plants and trees, such as myrtles, roses, fruit trees and palms are common to both.

Parallels with the religious symbolism of gardens of the Generalife can also be found in the Barada panel on the wall of the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus, which depicts the river Barada passing under a bridge, between palms and houses<sup>9</sup>. The depiction of a river is thought to symbolize the presence of a celestial river as described in the Quran, in the [Surat Muhammad], verse 15: “images from the promised garden for those who fear Allah: there will be in the incorruptible water of the streams...” Another quote from the same Surat alaya 12 says: “Allah will introduce people who believed and did good in the gardens under which streams pass”. (Fig. 2, 3).

Both the gardens of the Generalife and the Barada panel are earthly representations of the celestial garden of paradise, originating from the same source of inspiration: the Quran. However, the art work of the Sufi representation is expressed through the physical creation of a garden with plants, trees, streams and buildings, while the Sunni representation of the same ideal appears in graphic form.

The Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, where the Prophet Muhammad is said to have ascended to Heaven, represents a point of union between heaven and earth. Throughout the ages, humanity has intuitively created shapes that are capable of conveying symbolic meaning. The hemispherical shape of the dome is symbolic of the universe, while its original quadrangular supporting structure symbolises the point of union between heaven and earth. The dome is the point

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<sup>8</sup> Lafuente, Alcantara, Emilio. (1859): *Inscripciones árabes de Granada*. Madrid , p. 191.

<sup>9</sup> Cresswell, KAC. (1989): *A short account of early Muslim architecture*, Britain, p. 59.

through which the spirit may connect with the other eternal world, while its interior reflects various dimensions and aspects of life. This religious belief constituted the conceptual basis for construction of the building, with the aim of reflecting heaven in the form of a dome and earth as a square supporting structure.<sup>10</sup>

On the horizontal plane the circular 360° shape of The Dome of the Rock reflects the number of days in a lunar year. From an Islamic point of view, this symbol represents the starting point for a journey from its centre. A dome is the most appropriate example of Creation<sup>11</sup>; it has a centre, a circle and a sphere that as a whole are representative of the concept of soul surrounded by different kinds of life. It's an expression of Heaven<sup>12</sup>.

The Octagonal structure itself, which is unique in the history of Islamic architecture might have been inspired by the Qur'amic reference to the Thrown on the Day of Judgment, which is carried by eight angels (Qur'an, ).

Ayalon goes further by saying that the Dome of the Rock symbolizes life, death, the day of reward and the day of resurrection<sup>13</sup>. It is central to the belief in the Prophet's journey to heaven, in which he is said to have flown from Mecca to Jerusalem, from where he ascended to the seven heavens and reached the "The final Tree". This journey is described in the Quran, in the [Surat an-Najm] Verses 8 to 14, "... and he comes closer and he humbled himself. And he wasn't further than two arches or even closer. And inspired his servant what he inspired. The heart didn't lie about what it saw. Could you deny what he saw? He has already seen that in another revelation, at the Lote Tree of the Utmost Boundry".

What was believed to have been seen by the Prophet in Heaven provided the symbolic basis for its subsequent recreation in Islamic art. The significance of symbols, such as palm trees, grapes, pomegranates, precious stones, etc., could be discussed at length, but for the purposes of this work, we'll provide a brief analysis of their religious meaning.

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<sup>10</sup>- Wālī, Tāriq. (1993): *Nahy al-Wāhid fī'imārit al-masāyid*. Albahren, p. 306.

<sup>11</sup>- Ardalan, Nader and Bakhtlar, Laleh: (2000): *the sense of unity: The Sufi Tradition in Persian Architecture*. Chicago, p. 74.

<sup>12</sup>- Critchlow, Keith. (1976): *Islamic patterns: an analytical cosmological approach*. Themes and Hudson, London, p. 24.

<sup>13</sup>- Rozen-Ayalon, Mariam. (1989): "The Early Islamic Monuments at al-Haram al-Sarif: An Iconographic study", *Quedem*, 28, pp. 55-72.

Firstly the palm tree, believed to represent one of the trees of Paradise, appears in numerous Verses of the Quran, such as the “Cow verse” [Surat al-Baqara] Verse 266: “Would one of you like to have a garden of palm trees and grapevines, underneath which rivers flow, in which he has from every fruit?”.

The use of the palm tree in Islamic art is a clear reference to heaven. Other references to palm trees in the Quran are always idyllic: “...the fronds of the palms of heaven are made of red gold; its stumps are beryllium green, its branches are tunics, its dates are like those described in the poetry of the Song of Hayar...whiter than milk, sweeter than honey, softer than butter and with no stones. The length of the cluster is around twelve elbows from side to side and no sooner than a man has taken one, God replaces it with another, returning the tree to its original state...”<sup>14</sup>. (Fig. 4).

Another symbol that frequently appears together with the palm tree is the pomegranate,: “In both there will be fruit, palm and pomegranates”. The pomegranate is recurrently depicted in the Dome of the Rock. (Qur’an, 55:68).

During his journey to heaven, the Prophet is also said to have seen grapevines, as illustrated by the “Night Journey Surat” [Al-Isra’ Surat], verse 91. “Or you have a garden of date-palms and grapes, and cause rivers to gush forth in their midst abundantly; In its earthly representation, the fruit not only appears in the form of a bunch, but also as a leaf, and is a frequently recurring motif throughout Dome of the Rock. (Fig. 5, 6).

Finally, olive and fig trees complete the list of plant components that are recurrently represented, often appearing together as mentioned in the [Surat at-Tin], Surat 95, verse 1" By the fig, and the Olive".

The symbolic non-plant components of the dome are the precious stones that appear in the pictorial representations of heaven throughout the mosque. The entrance to each garden has a door with its own colour; reds, whites, gold, silvers, greens, browns, blacks and purples, are all thought to have their own specific significance. According to Puerta Vilchez, the Hadith states: that the door to glory (Dar al-Jalal) is of white pearl, the door to peace (Dar al-Salam) is decorated with purple amethysts, the door to the garden of shelter (Jannat al-Ma’wa) is emerald green, the door to the eternal garden [Jannat al-Khuld] is red and yellow,

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<sup>14</sup>- ‘Abd Al-Malik, Ibn Habīb. (1997): *Kitāb wasf al-Firdaws*, Edit. & Transl. Juan Pedro Sala, Granada, p. 82.

and the door to the garden of delights [Jannat an-Na`im] is a collage of red, gold and silver bricks”<sup>15</sup>. Other quotations from the Quran indicate that colours may represent more than one meaning. The [Surat al-Kahf: 18:31] indicates that green and yellow symbolize the suits and dresses used in Heaven: “they will have the gardens of `Adn through which rivers run; in those gardens they’ll adorn themselves with golden bracelets and they will wear green satin-brocade suits, lying on couches.”

The colours of the dome itself are also symbolic; gold and silver are used to cover inclined surfaces that reflect bright light onto its visitors.<sup>16</sup> Gold is the predominant colour, symbolic of the magic power that separates man from his earthly reality, thus giving guidance along the path to heaven. It considered as an additional message, inspiring Muslims to contemplate their final objective.<sup>17</sup>

A final aspect concerning the design of the building is its four doors. It is said that when the Prophet ascended to Heaven, he saw a dome from which four rivers emanated. An account of this is given in a Hadith: “on the night of His journey to Heaven, after visiting all 7 heavens, Muhammad saw four rivers and asked Gabriel about them (...) and I was here close to a tree when I noticed a white pearl dome (...) and saw that the four rivers emanated from under the dome.”<sup>18</sup> The symbolic significance of the four doors is therefore clear and its reflection on earth is likened to the “rivers of believers” who make pilgrimages to the mosque and continue to pray until the day of resurrection.

Shemuel Tamari remarked that the design of the Dome of the Rock with its doors, perpendicularly oriented to the four cardinal points, may be symbolic of other concepts: “the Dome of the Rock is a kind of axis from which numerous symbolic ideas are represented. The point where the projected axes from the four doors meet is where Angel Israfil - peace be upon Him - will blow the trumpet on the day of resurrection”. This in turn leads to other symbolic connections, such as the wings of this angel and the four corners of Earth.<sup>19</sup>

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15- Puerta Vilchez, José Miguel. (1990): Los códigos de utopia de la Alhambra de Granada, Granada, p. 155

16- Qasim, Ahmad. (2009): Al-'anasir al-m'mria wal-fania li Qubbat al-aisajra. Amman, p. 255.

17- Al-Alfi, Abu Salih. (1984): Al-fan al-islami, Uşolah, Falsafatihi, Madaresaho. Dar Al- Ma'arif, Cairo, p. 106.

18- Abu Hasan, al-Aş' arī. (1987): Kitāb Şaýarat al-yaqin. Editor and Translator. De Castillo Castillo, Concepción, Madrid, p. 90.

<sup>19</sup> - Tamari, Semul. (1996): Icontextual studies in Muslim ideology of Umayyad Architecture and Urbanism, Jerusalem, pp. 5-6.



While the Tower of the Comares in Al-Hambra is also believed to represent the Prophet's Ascension to the seven heavens, the Dome of the Rock goes further still by indicating what believers, who are admitted to this celestial after world, may expect to find.

**In conclusion**, given the close relationship between the literary expression of concepts and symbolism in the Quran and its visual representation in Islamic art, it is clear that true Islamic art can only be created by artists that have a full understanding of the faith and a specific sensitivity towards life, creation and reality. The Islamic artist is one that has the capacity to appreciate the beauty of creation and the ability to interact with his surrounding world in accordance with the underlying philosophy and ideals of his religion. The result of this union between faith and the artist's personal experience of the world around him is the creation of the beautiful and inspiring works of art discussed in this article. This inextricable connection between art and religion makes an appreciation of Islamic art an obligation for all its followers.

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Fig. 1: The Garden of the Court of the Generalife.



Fig. 2: Barada panel on the wall of the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus.



Fig. 3: The Palme tree in Damascus Mosque (Dome of treasury).

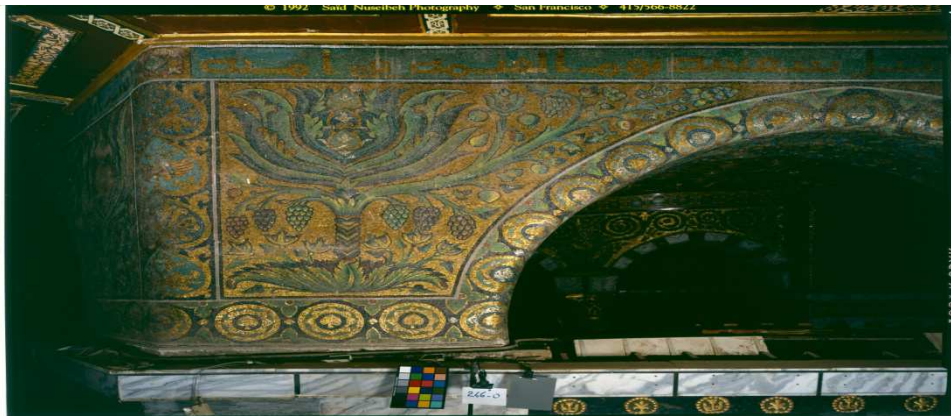


Fig. 4: The Palme tree in the mosaics of the Dome of the Rock from outside octagonal arcade. Islamic Waqf Department - Jerusalem.



Fig. 5: The fruit of grapes, pomegranates and figs in the mosaics in the Dome of the Rock, the inside of the arcade (Intrados). Islamic Waqf Department- Jerusalem.

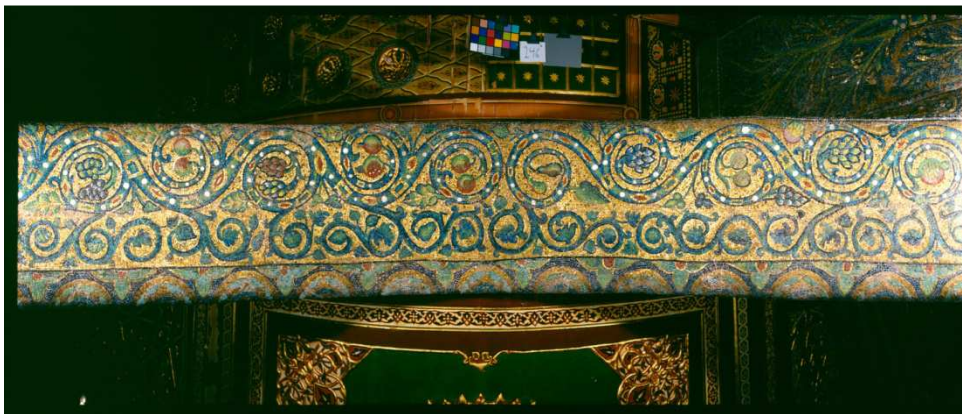


Fig. 6: The fruits of Grapes and Pomegranates in the mosaics of the Dome of the Rock. Islamic Waqf Department- Jerusalem.