

## **Decoration as a “Language” in Explaining the Concept of Islamic Art and Architecture \***

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### **Abstract**

This article attempts to investigate the proposed answers for the three questions about Islamic art and particularly Islamic architecture: first, does Islamic art have an independent identity? Despite the buildings with different applications in Islamic architecture, is there a common space? Can a single yardstick be introduced for investigating different spaces of Islamic art and architecture? In investigating the answers, this article backs up the independent identity of Islamic art and architecture and introduces the calligraphic-vegetative-geometric decorations as a “visual language” of Islamic art and architecture and presents it as the unifying factor of spaces in Islamic art and architecture and tries to provide a new proposition for the issue of meaning in Islamic art and architecture which is formed based on the viewpoint of ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt Hamidānī about the meaning. Imām.

### **Keywords**

Mosque, Islamic art and architecture, Decoration, ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt Hamidānī.

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## **Introduction**

The most important manifestation of Islamic architecture is mosque. What matters most in the mosque is the altar which is located at the south side wall of the mosque and this importance of the south side wall of the mosque caused the formation of the basic structure of the mosque and its plan in a way that the first plan of Islamic mosques that emerged in Arabia – and due to this reason is known as Arabic plan – became the design basis of mosques' plan in other geographical and cultural areas of Islam. However, this basic plan in each one of those areas changed under the influence of their architectural traditions and also their local conditions including the geographical-environmental conditions. This caused mosques in each of the various geographical and cultural areas of Islam to have different plans from each other, as studying mosques' plans of Iran, Turkey, Egypt, and Spain as well as the mosques of Saudi Arabia and Syria implies this point.

On the other hand, of the important features of Islamic architecture is covering the whole structure of the building with different decorations that acts as a curtain full of designs and colors on the body of architectural structures. Although, Islamic lands possess geographical diversity, these decorations are repeated in architectural works throughout the Islamic countries. This has caused some researchers of Islamic art, on the one hand, to consider some symbolically philosophical-mystical meanings for them (Hillenbrand, 2012: 122; Jones, 2009: 170). On the other hand, they emphasize the unity of Islamic art through these semantic and symbolic aspects of decorations. Contrary to these researches who believe in Islamic art or Muḥammadian art, some of recent researchers consider the expression "Islamic art" a meaningless concept and try to provide nationalistic explanations for Islamic art (Graber, 1978: 2-3) and consider perceiving any symbolic meanings from decorative designs in Islamic architecture a reason for the superficial perception of Islamic architecture and hold no roles for them other than decoration.

If we want to study different opinions of Islamic art researchers through the philosophy of art, it can be assessed that the basis of different interpretations of these researchers is their belief in the artist's intention and the existence of meaning in artistic works and the plausibility of its discovery by the audience of artistic work. From the viewpoint of some Islamic art researchers, this intention is the philosophical-mystical meaning present in Islamic philosophy and mysticism; from the viewpoint of others, it is national and regional meanings that should be interpreted variously based on diverse national cultures.

In contrast to this approach towards art philosophy, there are other

approaches in the philosophy of art that not only do they not believe in the discovery of the artist's intention in the artistic work, but rather they hold a different meaning from the artist's intention for the artistic work. Even, in some cases, they do not consider any meaning for the artistic work, and contrary to the first opinion, which considers the audience the agent of discovering the artist's intention in the artistic work, these approaches consider the artistic work the agent of discovering the meaning and the truth of its audience; this latter approach has also existed in our cultural background which has been pointed out by 'Ayn al-Quḍāt Hamidānī - though in a different field and time- (Munzawī, 1998, vol. 1: 216) and we have pointed out this point in this text. Based on the 'Ayn al-Quḍāt's viewpoint, we accept that, depending on the view taken by the audience of Islamic architecture, different meanings are considered for this architecture which, in fact, their adopted meanings and interpretations are the meanings of their own existence and the worldview that they live with and not the meaning of their architecture; moreover, the theory of 'Ayn al-Quḍāt is introduced as a way to end the controversies over the meaning of Islamic architecture.

### **Methodology**

In this article which discusses the Islamic art and the yardstick for its unity, it has been tried to provide the most important proposed viewpoints in this regard and, in addition to a comparative study of this viewpoint, to introduce a new viewpoint for explaining the concept of Islamic art and architecture. Islamic architecture has different genres and is formed in various regions, but on behalf of describing the Islamic architecture based on historical or regional classifications and discussing the application of different buildings, it attempts to investigate the unity or lack of unity of space in these different kinds of Islamic architecture and the status of decorations in this architecture. Through introducing the decorations of Islamic architecture as a visual language, on the one hand, and based on the contradiction of language and meaning, on the other hand, it discusses the issue of meaning in Islamic architecture through the analysis of the determination of this visual language based on the viewpoint of 'Ayn al-Quḍāt Hamidānī.

### **The connection of form and meaning in Islamic architecture**

The first mosques in Islamic culture were formed under the influence of the plan of Prophet's (s) house in Arabia and are known as Arabic mosques due to their plan. Their feature was a composition of an outdoor and empty yard and an indoor space known as nave which was located at the south side of the mosque. As Robert Hillenbrand of Edinburg University says, the first

mosques using this plan are the mosques of Fustāt, Qayrawān, Kufa, and Baghdad (Hillenbrand, 2012: 67). However, in regard to this point, the ensuing mosques which were built by this style in Umayyad and Abbasid times were different from the early mosques with Arabic style. Around their courtyard, some arcades were expanded so that more Muslims could be protected from the heat of the sun. Of course, it should be taken into account that although the formation of the arcades around the yard was under the influence of geographical-environmental necessities, since these arcades over time were considered as one of the important constituting elements of mosque's space, they became a place for artists to display their arts and received exquisite decorations upon their structure. In the first four centuries after hegira, the Arabic plan passed its evolutionary process in language and expression, and through transferring to different lands in the Islamic geography and under the influence of geographical-local traditions of architecture brought about different plans for mosques, of which the most important plans are the ones for the mosques of Iran, Ottoman and west Islamic lands including Spain.

The relationship of Arabic plan with the architectural traditions of the diverse geography of the land which had received revelation can be explained in this way that some compositions are formed from the combination of Arabic plan with the architectural traditions of different cultures that although like any other chemical compounds they were made by definite elements, they had a completely different outcome from the original one.

In other words, the most important civilizations that the Islamic culture was in contact with were the cultures of Iran and Christianity, each of which had achieved its own architecturally particular language and expression, so they could play an important role in the enrichment of Islamic architecture in a way that both the architectural traditions of Iran which had been formed based on a Zoroastrian culture from the time of Achaemenid and were absolutely rich in their architectural language and expression, and also the Christian architecture which had formed the Basilican and concentrated styles in the western and eastern parts of the Roman Empire, respectively, played important roles in the enrichment of the language and expression of Islamic architecture, as from their combination with Arabic plan, totally distinctive plans emerged in the mosques of Iran, Ottoman and west Islamic lands, particularly Spain, based on which the structure of architectural masterpieces of Islamic mosques were formed.

According to the idea of Hillenbrand, the role of west Islamic lands in the reformation of mosque design is through using the form T (Ibid.: 84);

mentioning the use of the form T in the mosques of Islamic west lands is not only particular to Hillenbrand, but rather the authors of the book “Islamic architecture in Andalusia” also have emphasized it (Barrucand, 2007: 197) and investigating the plans of most mosques in the west Islamic lands also emphasizes it; the use of the form T as a symbol of the cross in the plans of mosques in west Islamic lands may be the result of the combination of Arabic plan with the architectural traditions of Basilican churches in the west part of the Roman Empire, as the mosque plans of Turkey and Iran, respectively, also have been the combination of Arabic plan with the architectural traditions in the east part of the Roman Empire and the ancient Iran. However, Muslim architects perhaps considered semantic reasons as well as the use of its aesthetical application in designing the mosques of that area, and they wanted to express artistically the political domination of Muslims over Christians, on the one hand, and also to express visually the necessity of compliance and subordination of Christianity in regard to Islam, especially turning 90 degrees the plan of T form of Basilican churches of Christians and laying it in the direction of Qiblah can precisely imply this point. This is particularly true if we consider that expressing such semantic reasons had been used in different eras and by the artists of different civilizations. Bernini, the Italian architect and the founder of Baroque style in architecture, for the symbolic expression of church’s triumph over Judaism and paganism (faithlessness before Christianity), for constructing canopy columns which were made on the tomb of Peter the Apostle in San Pietro church in Rome used the same bronze that had been used in the building of Pantheon in ancient Rome. Their spiral and twisted form is a reflection of the stone columns of the high altar of San Pietro church which were taken from the Solomon’s Temple (the ancient temple of the People of Israel) (Watkin, 2011: 352).

Iranian mosque also shows its feature more through enriching columned nave with porch and vault (Hillenbrand, 2012: 94); Anatolian architecture, in its evolution process towards the pinnacle of Ottoman architecture, also passed different stages whose most important characteristic was the use of many domes in different sizes, and as Hillenbrand points it out, in fact, from the very beginning the experience of domical forms had deep roots in Anatolian architecture (Ibid.: 108).

Of course, as it was already mentioned, the basis of all these diverse styles in designing the mosques of different Islamic lands was the very Arabic plan. So, if Arabic plan was designed differently, for sure the plan of mosques in diverse Islamic plans would have been different from what it is now. In other words, we can make an analogy between the relation of Arabic

plan with Iranian, western, and Ottoman plans with the relation of matter and form in Islamic philosophy. That is, Arabic plan exactly like Aristotle's matter was a site for different forms which were imposed on it by different civilizations. So, we are faced with different kinds of mosque plans in Islamic culture, each different from the other ones. However, exactly as all kinds of creatures in Islamic philosophy are under the management of a Universal Soul, who is the soul of the world, there is a unique soul which has the control over all four kinds of the plan of Islamic architecture that despite various forms, it includes all of them. In the discourse of the believers in the unity of Islamic art, this unique soul is put forward in the discussion of Islamic art meaning.

### **Semantics in Islamic architecture from the domain of matter to the domain of meaning**

It was mentioned earlier that the emergence of various traditions of design and form in Islamic architecture was due to the enrichment of Arabic plan with the architecturally Iranian and Christian language and expression. Therefore, here it is necessary to explain shortly the architecture styles of Iran and the western and eastern parts of Roman Empire so that it can be made clear how the Islamic architecture could use that legacy of Iranian and Christian architectures. Although Muslim architects got their form from them, they used those very elements of form in a way that the space formed by them was completely different in meaning from the space which was prevalent in Iranian and Christian architecture.

Most researchers of Iranian architecture believe that the use of dome and porch in the composition of Arabic mosques by Iranians for the enrichment of the language and expression of Islamic architecture had roots in the legacy of the ancient Iran which had had its evolutionary process in Sassanid era. As Arthur Pope, the American Iranologist and the author of the important book *the architecture of Iran*, says the most important and influential achievement of the Sassanid in architecture was developing the dome and putting it on the squinch and building huge vaults without mold (Pope, 2003: 75), samples of which can be seen in the Palace of Ardashir, Taq Kasra, the Palace of Bishapur, Sarvestan Palace, and Taq Bostan.

Contrary to this viewpoint, David Watkin, the professor of architecture history in the art department of Cambridge University, holds that the specific form of the mosques of Iran, Turkey, and India has been the result of the use of the legacy of domical and vaulted churches with the concentrated plan which was the feature of Byzantine churches from the Justinian era onward (Watkin, 2011: 124); of course, there is no doubt that Ottoman architecture, because geographically it was located in Byzantine as the material and

spiritual capital of the East Roman Empire during its evolution, was under the influence of Byzantine churches, and it used the domically architectural language of concentrated churches belonging to the Justinian era onward to express its intentions. However, the architecture of Islamic era of Iran which is the heir of the architectural traditions of the Sassanid did not need the architectural traditions of Byzantine to enrich its language and expression; though this point that which one of the Iranian or Christian traditions has enriched the language of traditional architecture of Iran is not very important. What matters is that although different traditions of Islamic architecture throughout the vast geography of Islamic culture have used various architecture legacies to enrich their architectural language, they have used those legacies in a way that borrowed elements in Islamic architecture have carried a meaning completely different from the meaning that those very elements had had in their original cultures. In other words, in addition to having a root in a geographical-local “here”, architectural forms in different civilizations have also a root in a mythological-philosophical-mystical “there”; Islamic architecture is not an exception in regard to this fact. It is due to this that Sayyid Ḥasan Naṣr, after classifying the Islamic architecture as one of the types of sacred art, says the sacred art is quenched from a spiritual origin of a definite religion (Naṣr, 2013: 81). So to know the sacred art, searching to find historical derivations in regard to forms and molds does not suffice at all, but rather it should be considered what meaning the molds and codes have in the traditional world which is under the examination (Ibid.: 82).

### **Expressionism in the architecture of Islamic mosques**

The question that rises here is that how Islamic architecture could offer a visual explanation of philosophical-mystical foundations which had roots in divine revelation, and provide meanings for the forms and shapes that constitute its structure- meanings that are completely different from the meanings of forms and shapes that had constituted the Iranian and Christian architecture.

To answer this question, one of the other important features of Islamic architecture which is the calligraphic-geometric-vegetative decorations and also the application they have in Islamic architecture should be taken into account. This fact should be taken into consideration that different decorations here cover all parts of the building with various materials like mosaic, stone, plaster, brick and different kinds of tiling methods in such a way that one can call the Islamic architecture the architecture of decorations and not the architecture of building and structure; so as Hillenbrand points out decorations in Islamic architecture whether to be architectural (dome,

porch, vault, and groin) or to be practical (calligraphic-geometric-vegetative decorations) seek one aim, and that aim is to refuse bodied masses and to replace them with a fact which is less tangible and noticeable (Hillenbrand, 2012: 122) and that fact as George Michael points it out was “unity in plurality” and “plurality in unity” which had been expressed visually through geometric-vegetative decorations (Jones, 2009: 170).

To this researches, Islamic philosophy and mysticism have provided the ontological foundations of this visual language in Islamic architecture based on which the material world is the manifestation of discrete form world which itself is the manifestation of the world of intellect and the world of intellect also is the manifestation of the names and attributes of God. Analogicity in the hierarchies of the existence is the most important feature of Islamic philosophy and mysticism; however, there are disagreements between them in explaining the worlds of existence. This analogical ontology is explained in the philosophy of Suhriwardī based on the principality of quiddity and in the transcendent philosophy based on the principality of being. Although the transcendent philosophy and the philosophy of Suhriwardī have discrepancy in their emphasis on the principality of existence or quiddity, as Suhriwardī in his philosophy believes in the threefold concomitance of “illumination, existence, and freedom from corporeality” and as a result, holds the threefold concomitance of “material, tenebrosity, and non-existence”, Şadr al-Muti’alīhīn also believes in the concomitance of “existence, illumination, and freedom from corporeality”, the result of which is nothing except the doctrine of the concomitance of “material, tenebrosity, and non-existence” and, hence, the principality of the world of abstractions and the subordination of the world of material.

In other words, since Mullā Şadrā and Suhriwardī consider the spiritual aspect for the reality and the truth of the things, they regard the existence and illumination concomitant with the freedom from corporeality. To researchers as Hillenbrand, George Michael, Sayyid Ḥasan Naşr, and Titus Burckhardt, this subordination of the world of material has visually been expressed in the best way in geometric-vegetative decorations which, in addition to having a direct role in forming the architectural space, acts as a ladder and invites its audience to higher worlds than the world of material so that they can begin their spiritual experience.

Here this question can be asked again that how the Muslim architect could offer meanings to the forms and shapes that constitute its structure-meanings that are completely different from the meanings of forms and shapes that had constituted the Iranian and Christian architecture. Along with



investigating the history of Dāmghān, Arthur Pope proposes this question that how the Tarikhaneh as an architectural work which both in materials and also in style belongs completely to the Sassanid can be a trustworthy speaker of Islam. He emphasizes the importance of the shape versus the materials and holds that the use of mosque as a site for worshipping required a vast space with a singular centerpiece, i.e. Qiblah, in which altar was located in the shape of an arch and, on the other hand, placing most of the true believers at one level- specially at the first line- required the horizontal development of the mosque (Pope, 2003; 80).

Some of the researchers hold that although determining the direction of the Qiblah is inevitable in mosques, this direction never dominates, and only appears to the extent of creating worship functions to unify the mosque in a non-dominant form (Fathī Āzar, 2014, 57); contrary to this view, the importance of altar as the wall of Qiblah should not only be supposed in its functional meaning, but rather this fact should be considered that placing the altar at the south side wall of the mosque causes the mosque to have a location and put it in a circular environment in which the central point is the house of Ka’ba, and this makes the mosque holy and promotes it from a meaningless place to a qualitative and oriented place which contrary to the geometry of Descartes, all its directions do not have the same value , but rather the south side has always particular primacy in mosques. This makes the greatest decorations of the mosque to be in the nave of the south side, and its importance is emphasized in different ways including placing the dome on the nave of the south side and setting minarets next to the porch of the south side. In addition to the points mentioned, the decorations of the altar themselves also imply an importance beyond that of determining the direction of the Qiblah, as this can be understood by a close look at its cornices that have the verse “God is the Light of the heavens and the earth” (Qur’ān 24:35) and imply the importance of the altar as the place of divine revelation.

To Sayyid Ḥasan Naṣr, white or gray mosques give notice to the human about his poverty in front of the divine Unity, and is correspondent with the spiritual poverty of the Honorable Prophet (s) and that aspect of his soul which has consent, peacefulness, pleasantness , and disconsolate bliss. Moreover, colorful mosques also are the code of creation richness and are the other aspect of the soul of the Honorable Prophet (s) which is a manifestation and reflection of the infinite richness of divine treasures that is at work creating in every moment. Therefore, the spaces of Islamic architecture are mingled by the artistic use of the light and reach a unity to go beyond the experience of common and earthly space (Naṣr, 2013: 66).

Hence, the talks of Sayyid Ḥasan Naṣr can be used and the simplicity of the mosques such as Tarikhaneh in Dāmghān can be explained with the qur'ānic concept of “ye men! It is ye that have need of God” (Qur'ān 35:15). However, it should be noted that here poverty does not mean merely financial poverty, but rather poverty mentioned in this verse should be understood as an existential poverty which was pointed out by Imām ‘Alī (a) many times to describe God through expressions like “ Everything is dependent on Him “ and “Oh! Who all creatures are dependent upon”. Also this type of poverty is pointed out by the Prophet (s) when he says, “poverty is my pride”, as the Islamic mysticism also interprets this expression of the Prophet (s) in this sense.

On the other hand, the talks of Sayyid Ḥasan Naṣr can be used to explain the coded meanings of the decorations of the mosques like the Grand Mosque of Nā'in which is full of vegetative stuccos. Contrary to Arthur Pope who thinks of the vegetative decorations of that mosque as an appreciation of fertility issue (Pope, 2003: 86), these decorations can be interpreted as a manifestation and reflection of the infinite richness of divine treasures which is at work creating in every moment so that, as Sayyid Ḥasan Naṣr says, the molds and forms of Islamic architecture would be understood based on the Islamic philosophy and mysticism and not based on the Zoroastrian worldview. Of course, there is no doubt that the Zoroastrian art has much importance and each of its shapes and forms has coded meanings, but the reality of the Islamic architecture cannot be explained through the coded meanings of the Zoroastrian worldview.

This viewpoint, that holds there is a single meaning in the Islamic art and architecture, considers the spiritual soul of Islam in control of the formed artistic legacy in the diverse geography of Islamic civilization and identifies it as the factor of unity in Islamic art. As Sayyid Ḥasan Naṣr says, whether to be in the vast courtyard of Delhi Mosque or to be in the mosque of Qarāwīyyīn in Fes, in spite of the local differences of materials and the building techniques and so on, we find ourselves in a similar artistic and spiritual world.

### **Unity in Islamic art and architecture derived from the monotheistic teachings**

Of course, in contrary to the viewpoint of those who believe in the unity of Islamic art, there is another viewpoint that does not hold the realization of a single issue as Islamic art and is supported by some recent researchers of Islamic art; as in recent centuries more of the researches done about the art of Central Asia , Iran, Turkey, and north Africa had a tendency to emphasize the local and regional identities, whereas the early researchers had insisted

more on the unity of the arts developed under the influence of Islam. To Oleg Graber, accepting such nationalist viewpoints about Islamic art requires a so-called "Islamic" interpretation as a cultural superstructure that through faith or civilization has influenced Muslim countries in a way that none of the lands conquered by Islam from the seventh century to the twelfth century has abandoned its own definite cultural identity. So from this viewpoint, the descriptively adjectival expression "Islamic" in the compound noun "Islamic art" is meaningless unless it becomes modified by other adjectives including "earlier", "latter", "classic", "Iranian", "Arabic", "Turkish", and other expressions like these; therefore, based on these nationalistic viewpoints, the concept of "Islamic art" cannot be defined as the Gothic and Baroque arts are definable (Graber, 1978: 2-3).

In addition to the criticisms quoted above from Olen Graber about the nationalistic interpretations of Islamic art, those nationalistic interpretations can be questioned with reference to the Islamic art and architecture legacy. That is, many masterpieces of Islamic art in areas completely different from each other are developed by one architect, and this has caused a kind of unity among the architectural works of various geographical areas. On the other hand, if the compound noun "Islamic art", as nationalistic interpretations claim, should be modified by adding other adjectival words like "Iranian", "Turkish", "Arabic" and so on, that set of works that now exist in two absolutely different lands and are known as their national art but were under the ruling of the same government in the past should be categorized under which of these different nationalities' art?

In other words, as it was mentioned above many masterpieces of Islamic art and architecture in various areas of Islamic geography are made by a single artist, as Qawāmuddīn Shīrāzī based on the command of Guharshād, the spouse of Shāhrukh Teīmūrī, had been the architect of Guharshād Mosque in Mashhad and also the architect of Guharshād complex in Herat. Or it happened many times that the artistes of different areas worked on a single work, as based on the writings of the Teīmūrī era historian, Sharaf al-dīn 'Alī Yazdī, the architects of Bībī Khānūm Mosque in Samarkand were Iranian and Indian and took the materials to that area on the back of elephants (Blum, 2002: 95); also, there is a cornice in the small wall of the sanctuary of Shaykh Aḥmad Yazdī which is now located in Turkestan in Kazakhstan with the expression "the work of Hājī Ḥasan Shīrāzī" and in the tiles of the dome stem of the mausoleum also the signature of Shams b. 'Abdulwahhāb Shīrāzī, the builder, and this shows that Teīmūr had brought Shīrāzī architects to the Central Asia (Ibid.: 93). This caused the architecture traditions to develop in different areas of the vast geography of Islam, as, for

example, the plan of four-sided porch which was particular to Iranian architecture developed in other areas of the Islamic world, from Egypt and Anatolia in the west to the Central Asia and India in the east.

Now with the points mentioned, should that set of buildings in Central Asia and Kazakhstan which were made in the past by Iranian artists be classified as a part of the artistic legacy of Iran or a part of the legacy of Central Asia? It seems that the emphasis on nationalistic explanations of Islamic art and architecture in the present time is due to this historical fact that the various Islamic lands that are now separate were under the ruling of the same government in the past, and this caused the formation of a single artistic tradition among them as this can be seen clearly in the art of Tēimūrī era; and even if the various areas of Islamic geography – like Iran and Egypt- were not under the ruling of the same government, it happened many times that their architectural works were designed by the same architect, as it is clarified in the book *the Architecture of the World of Islam* that the architect of the minarets of Qaysūn mosque in Egypt was from Tabriz, and he was the same man who had designed the minarets of ‘Alīshāh mosque in Tabriz (Leokak, 2009: 131).

According to what was stated, it becomes clear that the nationalistic explanations cannot truly explain the reality of Islamic art and architecture due to the ignorance towards the historical reality of the unity of the various geographical areas of Islamic world under the ruling of the same government. Also, this explanation can be disaffirmed from this aspect that the language of Islamic architecture in all Islamic diverse geography is the language of decorations. Although decoration has a different meaning in the sense of expression, there is no doubt in it that in Islamic architecture there is a fundamental relation between the space and decoration and what causes the formation of different spaces and is the factor for the transfer of spaces is this very decoration language which is the same throughout the Islamic geography. Of its principles are repetition and constant change of images and designs, and this very single space has been the factor for the realization of the unity of Islamic art.

In addition to the interpretations offered by the proponents and opponents of the unity of the Islamic art, there is another view that has been explained by Oleg Graber, the art professor in Harvard University and one of the most important theoreticians in Islamic art; to his idea, if there is at all anything as Islamic art, it could imply an art which has conquered the local cultures and has changed their legacy of the racial-geographical culture, or it could imply an art that has created a kind of real combination between the local and non-Islamic styles and, hence, is comparable with expressions such as Gothic art

or Baroque art and like them points to the presence of a more or less historical, successful phenomenon in the historical background of different national traditions (Graber, 1978: 2). Of course to Graber, the expression "Islamic" does not imply the art of any particular religion because most of the remained historical works have no connection with the Islamic faith and, moreover, that set of artistic works that are made by non-Muslims or for non-Muslims are classified as the Islamic art; because of this, the word "Islamic" in the expression "Islamic art" cannot be used in the same meaning as the words "Christian" and "Buddhist" are used in the expressions "Christian art" and "Buddhist art", respectively (Ibid.: 1).

Based on the possibility of the comparison between the Islamic art and the Gothic art and Baroque art on the one hand, and the impossibility of its comparison with the Christian art and Buddhist art – because they are made for non-Muslims and by non-Muslims – on the other hand, a lot of challenges are considered for this viewpoint of Oleg Graber and this viewpoint can be undermined from different aspects. The most important problem of Graber's viewpoint is that perhaps because the Islamic art and architecture is made in some cases for non-Muslims and by non-Muslims, so it cannot be compared with the Christian art and Buddhist art. However, it can be compared with the contemporary art of Europe which was made in Europe and America by individuals like Frank Lloyd Wright, Le Corbusier and others. Due to its reliance on a certain visual language, not only for European-American societies but also for the societies in the east, it could create masterpieces in the world of architecture by the Europeans and also by non-Europeans; the design of the parliament palace in Chandigarh in India by Le Corbusier and also the architectural masterpieces that were made by Tadao Ando, the contemporary Japanese architect, can be pointed out. However, does this fact that some of the modern contemporary masterpieces were made by non-Europeans or for non-Europeans imply that a phenomenon called modern architecture cannot be discussed in the same sense as the Christian art and Buddhist art are discussed?

### **Seeking unity based on the realm of instances**

From what was said, this point can be achieved that between the eighth century and the eighteenth century (CE) a single and unique reality called Islamic art and architecture in all various lands was realized. However, although researchers such as Sayyid Ḥasan Naṣr and Titus Burckhardt believe in the realization of a single matter called Islamic art and architecture, because the yardstick for the unity of Islamic art is regarded the presence of a single meaning in all artistic works which are made in various Islamic lands, their viewpoint can be criticized and can be undermined, in

other words, how a single meaning can be regarded for the decorations in Islamic art and architecture throughout the geography of Islam, and all of them can be interpreted with reference to the “world of discrete form” and the concepts of “unity in plurality” and “plurality in unity”, whereas the different societies in which the works of architecture were made had many differences intellectually and their environments were completely different from each other. For example, for the era of the theists who had a definite interpretation of monotheism and opposed the believers of the assimilation and embodiment and regarded ascribing human traits to God blasphemy unless we perceive them metaphorically (Barokand, 2007: 170) and in other words believed in mere purification, can the language of decoration be deemed in the same meaning as it is deemed for the architecture formed in an environment where people, through philosophical-mystical thoughts, believed in the similarity yet dissimilarity and also believed in the dissimilarity yet similarity?

There is no doubt that whether to be in the vast courtyard of Delhi mosque or to be in the mosque of Qarāwīyyīn in Fes, Morocco, or to be in the grand mosque of Isfahan, in spite of local differences in materials and building techniques and so on, we find ourselves in a similar artistic and spiritual world. However, contrary to what Sayyid Ḥasan Naṣr and Titus Burckhardt believe this unity of space is not due to the implication of decoration language for philosophical-mystical meanings, but rather, it is due to the use of a single “visual language” which is made by geometric-vegetative-calligraphic decorations and forms different spaces in Islamic architecture and creates a similar space for buildings with different religious and non-religious uses; therefore, contrary to the viewpoint of Sayyid Ḥasan Naṣr and Titus Burckhardt, hidden meanings derived from the interpretation of the language of decoration do not cause the unity of space in the mosques of the diverse geography of Islam, but rather, the appearance of this language which is the same in all Islamic buildings with different applications brings about a single space in Islamic architecture.

The importance of this point becomes clear when we are faced with different interpretations about the meanings of decorative designs, some of which deny the attribution of any symbolic meaning to the decorations in Islamic architecture, as Herzfeld, the German archeologist and Iranologist, considers indifference to the nature and geometric abstraction present in the Islamic art, which makes all the surfaces covered, a reflection of agoraphobia (Herzfeld, 1987: 366), and Ernest Konel holds that attributing any symbolic meaning to the decorative designs in Islamic art is the result of a mistaken and superficial understanding.

Moreover, in contrast to the views of researchers such as Ernest Konel and Herzfeld who have considered the decorative designs meaningless, if we interpret the space unity of Islamic art and architecture based on the meaning unity of decorative designs, this challenge also can be raised that how could the same meaning be considered for these decorations, for example in the era of theists who believed in the mere purity, as it is considered in an environment which believes “in the similarity yet dissimilarity” and “in the dissimilarity yet similarity”?

What is suggested in this article about the yardstick of Islamic art and architecture unity is the language of Islamic art and architecture which is provided in different forms of geometric-vegetative-calligraphic decorations in all artistic works with different religious and non-religious applications in various Islamic lands and is known as the “language of decoration”; attention should be paid that decoration in the Islamic art and architecture generally and in the Iranian art and architecture particularly is not a principle, but rather as it was mentioned, it is a “visual language” that can be completed over time and can become enriched through the visual language of the art of other civilizations, whereas, as some of Iranian art researchers have assumed that the creation of beauty in the art of Iran is based on the principle of decoration (Jawādī, 2005: 51), considering decoration as a principle in art and architecture deprives it of the option of completion and enrichment because principles cannot ever be changed and should always be used as they are.

In investigating the meaningfulness or meaninglessness of this language, the issue that can be taken into account is this that, in semantic studies about the Islamic art and architecture, it is not necessary to refer to that type of art philosophies that believe in the presence of the artist’s intention in his work, and the researchers of Islamic art, in spite of the disagreements they have, agree in their effort to discover the artist’s intention in the artistic work – here the Islamic art and architecture – for the understanding of the artistic work.

In other words, the acquiescence of Islamic art and architecture researchers in their effort to discover the meaning of the decorations has caused some to emphasize the self-consciousness of the artists of the diverse geography of the Islamic world in creating a single matter called the Islamic art and to seek a hidden and single meaning behind the seeming decorations. In contrast, by denying the possibility of such self-consciousness, some consider impossible the realization of a single reality called the Islamic art and invalidate any semantic interpretation about the Islamic art and remove the symbols from the Islamic art. Here this question can be raised that to

investigate the artistic works, can't we, instead of considering the audience and the interpreter as the discoverer of the meaning of the artistic work, reverse the relation and consider the artistic work as the discoverer of the meaning and the reality of the audience and to overgeneralize the assertion of 'Ayn al-Quḍāt Hamidānī "regard these poems as mirror; because you know that the mirror does not have a face itself; but everybody who looks at it could see his face. Also know that the poem does not have a meaning in itself, but everyone can see a point in it that is related to his life" (Munzawī, 1998, vol. 1: 216) to all types of artistic works and deem them as innately meaningless and consider them the manifestation of the existential meaning of various audiences so that it can become clear that every interpreter and audience of the Islamic art and architecture works has approached the interpretation of the Islamic art with his own presuppositions and has seen in the mirror of the Islamic art and architecture something that, as 'Ayn al-Quḍāt Hamidānī states, has been "related to his life"? This explanation can be somehow introduced as a solution for the long-time discussions about the meaning of the Islamic art and architecture, and consider all of these or none of these as the meaning of the Islamic art and architecture that through the single language of decoration, a single space is in command of it.

### **Conclusion**

The Islamic architecture which has found its most important manifestation in the architecture of mosques is an original architecture which was always built in big bazars. Therefore, entering into the mosque is a code of abandoning this mundane world and its constituents. On the other hand, the empty space of mosque signifies the ever spiritual emptiness of humans that should be filled with spiritual experience and the passing of its stages and stations; so through looking at the calligraphic-geometric-vegetative designs that are a sign and symbol of facts and meanings that can be different depending on the environment of their interpreters, the human soul can be different. However, the application of the mosque and the sacredness it has gained through the Qur'ān "So turn towards the Sacred Mosque" has a quality place that prepares the soul of the audience for the connection with the sacred precinct settlers of the veiling and chastity realm. Hence, the art of architecture is a visual manifestation of the meanings that are mentioned in the form of words and concepts in the Islamic philosophy and mysticism and in the qur'ānic revelation, and, often their understanding is very difficult for the common people, and by this it is an instance of the verse "And We have indeed made the Qur'ān easy to understand and remember: then is there any that will receive admonition?" (Qur'ān 54:32). In other words, the seeming



appearance of the Islamic architecture is a manifestation of different and plural meanings that each of the audiences, through different interpretations that they themselves offer about the “decoration language”, can perceive different meanings. As a result, the unity of space in Islamic mosques cannot ever be explained based on one of these meanings, but rather, what causes the unity of space not only in the architecture of Islamic mosques but also in the totality of the Islamic architecture is the single language of geometric-vegetative-calligraphic decorations that have formed the single space of the Islamic architecture and rejects the suggestions of nationalistic interpretations of Islamic art and architecture with its widespread presence and like the modern architecture of the west has formed its particular language that everybody with any religion could use it.

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