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## **Illustrating the Sublime (within Aesthetics) through Islamic Geometric Patterns:**

### **Abstract:**

This research paper attempts to investigate one of the fundamental pillars of the Islamic Artistic Tradition, ie Geometric Patterns and attribute it with the philosophical idea of the Sublime. The idea of the Sublime has predominantly been discussed by philosophers of the western world and despite Islamic Geometric Patterns essentially stemming from the same idea at its core, there have been rarely been associations of the two. This study will introduce the philosophies, the core concepts involved and establish how Islamic Geometric Patterns are a visual representation of the Sublime; addressing the gap that western ideas in the field of Aesthetics have always been applied to the Islamic world but never discussed.

### **Introduction to the Sublime:**

Aesthetics is a branch of philosophy that simply explores the appreciation of beauty. An avid description would be that it is a critical reflection on art, culture and nature.<sup>1</sup> The studies of Aesthetics leads to insights about how creative minds think, how they critique, even how the mind functions whilst ideating. The idea of the Sublime falls under this philosophical umbrella of Aesthetics. The Sublime refers to the quality of being great. So great that it is awe-inspiring, so impressive that it is incomprehensible. The Sublime is a beauty that is beyond all calculations or any kind of imitation. This idea has been explored by philosophers

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<sup>1</sup> Riedel, Tom (Fall 1999) *Art Documentation: Journal of the Art Libraries Society of North America* Page 18

as early as the 1st CE. One of the popular people to have explored this idea is Longinus, a Greek Philosopher who elaborated on the idea in his classic manuscript - *On the Sublime*.

He explains in the definition that wherever the Sublime occurs, it has a certain excellence of language, not meant to convince the reason of the reader but it surely takes him out of himself. Belief remains as a choice of the reader, but the impact is made irrespective.<sup>2</sup> Edmund Burke, one of the renowned philosophers that addresses the matter at a later stage, conceives the Sublime of being able to strike a sense of fear in a person, yet able to generate a sense of comfort within the same context perhaps once the idea of the absence of imminent danger is established.<sup>3</sup> The Sublime has had various interpretations from the Western Philosophers, that deliberated and discussed trying to conceive and appropriate meaning to the same, but has hardly ever been spoken of in the context of Islam and the Muslim world.

### **The Sublime in Islam:**

Islamic Philosophers have rarely addressed the Sublime explicitly in a philosophical light or even produced any work that addresses the branch of Aesthetics. Something that has been discussed quite often is simply the importance of beauty in Islam; of how integral beauty is in order to strive in the right path for Islam. These discourse didn't just take place amongst Islamic Theologians, but is directly addressed by the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and from the Holy Qur'an itself. The fact that it has been referred to from the most authentic sources of the faith, strengthens the place that beauty and the love of aesthetic has in Islam. It is narrated from 'Abdullah ibn Mas'ud who said that the Prophet (PBUH) said, "*No one will enter Paradise who has an atom's weight of pride in his heart.*" A man said, "*What if a man likes*

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<sup>2</sup> Longinus, *On the Sublime* - 1. The Work of Caecilius. Definition of the Sublime - Part 4

<sup>3</sup> Burke, Edmund. *On the Sublime and Beautiful*. Vol. XXIV, Part 2 - "Terror". The Harvard Classics. New York: P.F. Collier & Son, 1909-14

*his clothes to look good and his shoes to look good?" He said, "Allah is beautiful and loves beauty. Pride means denying the truth and looking down on people."*<sup>4</sup> The Qur'an further addresses Allah's love of beauty and his creation: "He who created all things in the best way and He began the creation of man from clay"<sup>5</sup> This verse discusses of how all of Allah's creations are good as is and in beautiful proportion, of how Allah's creations are a manifestation of his majesty and hence are beautiful in itself. Any shortcoming is from the the evildoing from man itself.

This notion of Allah's love for beauty has become a core belief for the muslim, that attributes it to a notable aspect of the nature of the Almighty. It is integral for the believer to be the most beautiful, the best version of himself in order to please Allah. This speaks to the idea of attaining *Ihsan*, (excellence, perfection) that is the highest level of faith one can achieve. One of the foremost names in Philosophers, Al Farabi further addresses this notion of beauty and attaining perfection in his work. He argues that beauty is primarily ontological; the more any being attains perfection, the more beautiful they are.<sup>6</sup> Keeping this thought in mind, Allah would be the most perfect as he is the supreme being and as a result, the most beautiful.

Allah (SWT) is to be only referred with titles that are of utmost perfection and possess no shortcomings. The titles of Allah are sourced and mentioned at multiple instances within the text of the Holy Qur'an: *"He is Allah, the Creator, the Inventor, the Fashioner; to Him belong the best names. Whatever is in the heavens and earth is exalting Him. And He is the Exalted in Might, the Wise."*<sup>7</sup> There exist 99 titles of Allah that are collectively known as the

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<sup>4</sup> Sahih Muslim, Book 50 Hadith 131

<sup>5</sup> The Holy Qur'an, Surah As Sajdah (Chapter 32, Verse 7)

<sup>6</sup> Joep Lameer, "Al-Fārābī and Aristotelian syllogistics: Greek theory and Islamic practice", E.J. Brill, 1994.

<sup>7</sup> The Holy Qur'an, Surah Al Hashr (Chapter 59, Verse 24)

*Al Asma al Husna*. The importance of these titles is addressed in the hadith of Imam Bukhari: “*Abu Huraira narrates: Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) said, “Allah has ninety-nine names, i.e. one-hundred minus one, and whoever knows them will go to Paradise.”*”<sup>8</sup> One title amongst which happens to be *Al Aliy* which literally translates to the Sublime. If there wasn’t a more direct connection, when a reader goes through the other 98 names, they get a clear picture of the stature that Allah (SWT) possesses in Islam.

In summary, the traits used by philosophers used to describe the Sublime, falls short in comparison to the numerous references made to Allah (SWT) in both the Qur’an and the Hadith. References that speak to the majesty and the beauty of the Almighty constantly are based around a magnificence so great that it is beyond our perception, a transcendence that expresses feelings of intimacy and romanticism. The concept of the Sublime as a philosophy may not have been addressed by any major Muslim Philosophers, but it’s hard to deny the notion when all the hints point towards Allah (SWT) and his love for the most beautiful.

### **Introduction to Islamic Geometric Patterns:**

Based off the descriptions of the Sublime made by philosophers, trying to visually represent and encapsulate the idea is seemingly sounds hard. How do you take a concept that is so abstract, boundless, limitless and confine it within the boundaries of the human imagination? Philosophers always described the Sublime using abstract, often poetic prose; sometimes even associating them with naturally occurring marvels. For artisans to actually create something these associations from seemingly nothing and then making sure that it lives upto the Sublime sounds like an arduous task.

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<sup>8</sup> Sahih Al Bukhari, Book 50 Hadith 594

The majesty of Allah (SWT) in all his sublime splendour has constantly been attempted by artisans and creative beings to be represented in a manner that is more like an invocation. Rather than take upon the perplexing task of trying to represent the Sublime conceptually at a single instance; a simpler, more efficient way was to tackle the individual characteristics that make up the idea, making it conceivable and visual attribution much easier. One of the better attempts in trying to encapsulate the glory of the sublime and this strategic, conceptual breakdown of individual characteristics is through the use of Geometric Patterns.

The development of the Geometric Patterns as part of the Islamic Artistic Expression can be attributed to the advancement of science and technology in the Middle East, Persia and other regions of the Islamic Empire during the 8th and 9th Centuries.<sup>9</sup> Islam has always had close ties with geometry with one of the most figures in the subject, Al-Khwarizmi having made significant contributions. Stemming from the great influence of such personalities, Islamic Artisans began to adorn the faces of mosques, palaces, minarets with these Geometric Patterns. The use of figurative images has been dismissed by Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) narrated in multiple Hadiths which could perhaps form a big part of the reason as to why abstract patterns started being implemented in the first place. As the Islamic empire expanded over time, the artistic expression developed, and eventually the patterns became even more unique and fruited into something that was truly Islamic.

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<sup>9</sup> H.R. Turner "Science in Medieval Islam: An Illustrated Introduction" - University of Texas (1997)

### **Characteristics of Islamic Geometric Patterns:**

Upon analyzing the Islamic Geometric Patterns visually, they are some common features that are always found irrespective of how they might appear or what period they stemmed from. These features are a reflection and breakdown the representation of the core idea, that of Allah's (SWT) magnificence and majesty:

**Symmetry:** IGP's are always known to be symmetrical. If we draw an imaginary line down the middle of a pattern, the two halves are always mirror reflections of one another. This sense of symmetry is based off the idea of perfection. Allah's (SWT) work is perfect and synced up to the tune that everything that he has created in this world, functions in harmony, just like when you see a precise, symmetrical pattern. This again relates to what we discussed earlier with multiple instances in the Qur'an referring to the attribute of the perfection of Allah (SWT): "Assuredly it is thy Lord Who will gather them together: for He is perfect in Wisdom and Knowledge."<sup>10</sup> Another verse caters again to the how everything that Allah has created is absolute and perfect through his powers - "Nay, We are able to put together in perfect order the very tips of his fingers."<sup>11</sup>

**Complexity:** IGP's can become visually intense containing multiple strokes that eventually lead to the formation of various enclosed shapes. These immense amount of lines intersect or overlap in a manner that only the artisan can imagine, creating (see Fig a) a pattern that just can't help but stimulate the intellect of the person who is witnessing it. The idea of using complexity occurs throughout Islam as a means of exemplifying monotheism and the majesty of Allah. A great occurrence of this idea is the book of Muhammad himself, the Qur'an. The

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<sup>10</sup> The Holy Qur'an - Surah Al Hijr - Chapter 15, Verse 25

<sup>11</sup>The Holy Qur'an - Surah Al Qiyama - Chapter 75, Verse 4

Qur'an is a complex marvel that contains nearly 6236 verses and based on a structure of the that is unique to itself. Ayaat's (verses) that address a topic are not necessarily sequential or present even in the same chapter. This coupled with the complex nature of Quranic arabic where a word might have multiple meanings make it definitely one of it's kind. These symmetric, polycentric structure of overlapping patterns occur throughout Islam and is clearly reflected in the geometric patterns that have adorned structures historically.<sup>12</sup> They not only give a sense of the feat of astonishment but more importantly signify that these are not just coincidences but have been meticulously crafted to perfection by a power greater than us.

**Infinity:** IGP's are based of fundamental units or forms that are derived from mathematical calculations. When these forms are multiplied they construct the final pattern that is displayed altogether at once giving a sense of immenseness. These minute structures tend to tessellate into the extremities of the space, giving the idea of the pattern extending into infinity. Something that transcends boundaries and is beyond the limits of human perception. This characteristic of the IGP directly infers to the infinite nature of Allah. This infinite nature is exemplified when you analyze the range of Allah's creations and the verses in the Qur'an that speak of the might of the creator. The Qur'an mentions "*Nothing in the heavens or on earth can induce weakness or impotence in Allah; indeed, Allah is all-knowing and all-powerful.*"<sup>13</sup> trying to fathom the idea of being the all-knowing and the ever powerful can only induce a sense of wonder in a person that tries to only imagine a scope that is truly endless.

**Unity:** Despite the complexities and multiple modular units, all the spectacular forms and structures boil down to one cohesive geometric pattern that is tied well and dependent on

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<sup>12</sup> Oludamini Ogunnaike - The Silent Theology of Islamic Art: <https://renovatio.zaytuna.edu/article/the-silent-theology-of-islamic-art>

<sup>13</sup> The Holy Qur'an - Surah Al Fatir - Chapter 35, Verse 44

each other to carry out the full aesthetic. Each visual element is woven and blended into the pattern in a way that is not heavy on the eyes, but is rather viewed as a singular overarching, close-knit, united visual. This symbolizes the idea that despite the complex nature of the world, it is still reliant on only one supreme being and creator, that despite the overwhelming scale of this universe along with the various elements that comprise it, they all have been fine tuned in a manner that gives us beings life and an environment where we can live off and thrive. "He it is Who created for you all that is in the earth."<sup>14</sup> The notion of only one God that unites this immense, perplex nature of this world is the foundation stone of Islam. The Tawhid is recited by every muslim and shows them that there is nothing superior than Allah.

### **Experiencing the Sublime through Islamic Geometric Patterns:**

The study of the Sublime as a philosophy was one that always revolved trying to experience that what is not conceivable, something beyond human perception. This idea was rooted within ancient Greek theologians such as Longinus and was an ever-present influence in the subject of Aesthetics thereafter. The idea of achieving perfection or *ihsan* was something that was predominant through the tenets of Islam. When Neoplatonist ideas became quite popular in the Islamic World due to the scriptures being readily available in Arabic, Muslim philosophers were influenced, adapted the teachings and conformed it to the monotheistic principles of the religion.<sup>15</sup> Amongst these teachings, numbers, symbols and geometry were held in high regard, sometimes even referred to as objects of mindful consciousness.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> The Holy Qur'an - Surah Al Fatir - Chapter 35, Verse 44

<sup>15</sup> Netton, I.(1998). Neoplatonism in Islamic philosophy. Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Taylor and Francis.

<sup>16</sup> Neoplatonism - Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy - <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/neoplatonism/>



Islamic Geometric Patterns has always had deep rooted connections with sacred principles of geometry. This sacred geometry has long been associated with the cosmos and the metaphysical world, long before the Islamic Artistic Tradition came to fruition. Keith Critchlow covers the subject in fabulous detail to an extent that could possibly not be re-written. A line from the foreword of the book states, *“Islam’s concentration on geometric patterns draws attention away from the representational world to one of pure forms, poised tensions and dynamic equilibrium, giving structural insight into the workings of the inner self and their reflection in the universe.”*<sup>17</sup>

We could perhaps try and associate the visual attributes of IGP’s with their cosmological properties and search for connections it might have with the western interpretation of the Sublime; but the core of the geometric pattern was always trying to instill self-reflection within the viewer. It is a form that is so intricate and full of detail yet so subtle, a form that accentuates the beauty of what it is placed on and the surrounding environment. By emulating the grandeur of that what is manifested through Allah, the Sublime was always meant to be experienced rather than be just a visual attribution within the Islamic Geometric Pattern.

### **Conclusion:**

The essential facet that brought the artistic expression of the Islamic World to fruition is the creative vision and curiosity of man. The mindset that constantly tries to decipher and associate aspects and lessons of this world through the art that he creates. It is through imagination that these representations of man’s understanding came into existence, and it is through imagination can they be linked back to what their origin was and what they meant.

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<sup>17</sup> K. Critchlow Islamic Patterns: An Analytical and Cosmological Approach Schocken Books (1976) - Foreword

Islamic Geometric Patterns are a form that are so unique and have come to represent the religion in a manner that fascinates anyone and everyone. The oxymoronic qualities that it possesses stumbles a viewer with the amount of possibilities and associations in contains but the end result is always an appreciation of the incredible beauty, which is and has always been an integral part of striving in the right path for Islam.