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Research Alert
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CULTURAL HERITAGE ALERT

Critical Design Approach to Understand the Current Public's Perception of Islamic Art and Design

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Keywords

Critical Design, Islamic Art and Design, Shallow Perception, Design Language and Taste, Mixed Living Styles

Abstract

Despite the strength, beauty and depth found in the Islamic art, people hold limited knowledge towards it, which creates a superficial and limited understanding of the "Islamic" specification in an object or design. Therefore, our aim is to investigate the public's perception of Islamic Art, using critical design as the framework of investigation. A one-year research project investigated this issue from different points of view. Initially, a survey was made reaching the result which states that people keep a superficial understanding of Islamic art limiting it to decorative patterns and calligraphy. In order to overcome this, a historical research was conducted in order to investigate and understand the belonging of certain design aesthetics and forms to specific dynasties in relation to location and time as a potential knowledge container. However, the people's awareness about strength and beauty of Islamic art would stay limited. Therefore, a third approach tried to borrow from the Critical design research strategy, which is aimed at leveraging designs to make consumers think about the everyday objects. It challenged peoples' shallow perceptions about the role of the daily used products, as opposite of affirmative design. A public experiment was conducted in a public park, juxtaposing contradictory design styles through using "unislamic" forms with Islamic decorations and vice versa.

1. Introduction

The term Islamic Art "encompasses the visual arts produced from the 7th century onwards by people who lived within the territory that was inhabited by or ruled by culturally Islamic populations" (Mcquillian & Lucey, 2009).

The Grove Encyclopaedia of Islamic Art and architecture goes deeper into the issue declaring how difficult it is to define or classify this commonly spread term:

> [Islamic Art] is neither fish nor fowl. It is not the art of a religion, like Buddhist art or Christian art, nor is it the art of a single place or of a single time, like ancient Rome or the Renaissance. It is not confined to a single medium or technique, such as painting (Bloom & Blair, 2009).

Furthermore, is it is not confined to a specific territory, as long as Islam is the main state's religion referring to countries from Morocco to India.

Islamic Art is not only relative to the art intended for Islamic rituals and purposes, different from the Christian or the Buddhist art which are intended for religious purposes. However, Islamic Art is pertinent to the art and architecture of the whole Islamic culture. The Islamic purposes in this art are symbolised in a small scale when compared to the variations of designs for different purposes. People who participated in this movement were not only Muslims, a lot of designs were generated and made by Jewish and Christian artisans.

Some of the Islamic art historians have supported the myth of the unity of Islamic art evolving an undesirable conception. As a result, this conception generates a paradigm for understanding and differentiating the artistic products. The conception of the unity of Islamic Art (or alternatively Muslim Art) in terms of the aesthetic language became amorphous leading to a complete misplacement of gene, displacing the idea that these artefacts are a product of a culture that involves a particular range of time and a particular space. Richard Ettinghausen in an article titled "Unity and Diversity in Muslim Civilization" stated:

> The unique character of Muslim art is a commonly known fact, which is experienced even by people who know hardly anything about this civilization ... Yet, in spite of the apparent uniform character of Islamic art, everybody who becomes familiar with its various aspects realizes more and more the tremendous variety in the different regions and even in the changing periods within a single territory. (Shalem, 2012)

Inevitably, Islamic art is not constricted to religion. It embraces a wide variety of artistic traditions in the Muslim's culture that incorporates more than one thousand years of history and covers an area extending from Morocco at the Atlantic to the borders of India and China. Consequently, new distinguished visual cultures have been created with a unique distinctive artistic language for each period and region, linked through a common artistic grammar which is not always obvious at the first glance. The Islamic art has powerful aesthetics that remained remarkable through the centuries.

Having said all this, it shows easily the confusion that has been generated through the simplification of calling anything related to Muslim's culture as Islamic art without distinction of purpose, use and tradition, further historical period and geographical location. This confusion protrudes into the mind-set of all people involved in the subject not only in the Western World, but sadly in the own lines of Muslim citizens, from the public to designers, from scholars to artists.

2. Superficial Understanding of Islamic Art

This leads to the fact that, despite the strength, beauty and depth found in the Islamic art, people hold limited knowledge towards it, which creates a superficial and limited understanding and recognition of the "Islamic" specification in an object or a design. The original focus of the objects created under Islamic art was on the main design elements such as form and material, while pure surface decoration was the least important element as an "Islamic design feature" to a certain historical period. These decorative design elements have been implemented on daily life objects to communicate certain concepts. Following the three levels of Donald Norman regarding the acceptance of beauty in design, visceral, behavioural and reflective[1], people were involved by actively choosing the pictures only the behavioural and partly reflective emotions acknowledging the visual impact of patterns and calligraphy.

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1.   The visceral level is responsible for the ingrained, automatic and almost animalistic qualities of human emotion, which are almost entirely out of our control. The behavioral level refers to the controlled aspects of human action, where we unconsciously analyze a situation so as to develop goal-directed strategies most likely to prove effective in the shortest time, or with the fewest actions, possible. The reflective level is, as Don Norman states, "(...) the home of reflection, of conscious thought, of learning of new concepts and generalizations about the world" (Komninos, n.d.).

Visceral acknowledgment of shapes and other less obvious elements have been neglected, proving the poor understanding and perception of Islamic traditional forms of objects and deeper meaning of design. In addition, there is a need to distinguish between different terms and how they connect to each other. The public's and people's general opinions or perceptions comes into play when they turn into consumers; greatly affecting purchase decisions, which in turn creates certain "trends" where the designers come to fill in for such demands.

Therefore, our aim is to investigate the public's perception of Islamic Art, using critical design as the framework of investigation. A one-year research project at the German University in Cairo was conducted to investigate this lack of understanding from different points of view, the research activities have been divided into three parts. Initially, a survey was made in order to investigate people's knowledge, understanding, perception and interpretation of "Islamic" art. The questions were designed to test which were the most recognisable visual elements by previewing different pictures and asking people to select the most relevant to Islamic art. Analysing first results led to the conclusion that people keep a superficial understanding of Islamic art, defining and limiting it to certain types of decorative patterns and Arabic calligraphy. Other elements, like shapes of objects, specific functions or typically used materials such as copper and glass, have been largely ignored. A hypothesis and design aim was elaborated stating that for the attribution to the Islamic culture there are more significant elements to be considered in design rather than only patterns and calligraphy, and that this must be clearly shown.

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3. The "traditional" way to promote a concept

Following as second part, a historical research was conducted in order to investigate and understand the belonging of certain design aesthetics and forms to specific Islamic dynasties in relation to location and time. The design method and concept development followed an experimental approach that would lead through trial and error of the material properties and craft techniques to acceptable designed products, as long as the designer was able to guarantee the reshaping of the form with "Islamic" characteristic without altering the main function.

Working with a local craftsman for glassblowing and the clay workshop of the university campus, the design proposal was a series of glass water jars with an intern corpus made of clay.

Figure 1. Media Production Centre GUC, 2016. Glass and pottery craft experimentation exhibited at El Maqaad in Qaietbay area.

Perforating the clay walls with Islamic patterns, the design concept followed both aims, aesthetical and functional, at the same time: matching the arabesque form of the glass jar and allowing the filtration of water with herbs and perfumed leaves. The outcome has been presented in an Exhibition called "Meeting with the Sultan" at the Maqaad, Sultan Qaytbey Area of the Eastern Cemetery in Cairo in December 2016 (Fig.1).

Figure 2. A.Sicklinger, 2016. Glass craft experimentation exhibited at El Maqaad in Qaietbay area.

Figure 3. Media Production Centre GUC, 2016. "Meeting with the Sultan exhibition" El Maqaad in Qaietbay area.

In parallel, another design concept was dealing with pure Islamic forms as a combination of single elements. By blowing three little bowls in glass, an "Islamic form family" was evoked and shown in the same exhibition in a series of photos (Fig. 2-3).

However, the public's awareness about strength and beauty of Islamic art stayed limited. The reason could be found in the fact of insufficient quality of manufacturing and detail of the objects themselves. At this point of the research, there were two open paths to foster the initial hypothesis: either improve the quality of the objects themselves and hoping for better feedback from the observers, or by taking for granted that the improvement, however would not have led to breakthrough results, to be more explicit in the statement itself: how to recognise Islamic Art?

Aiming for a clearer result, necessarily, the team was directed towards reaching the core of the problem through understanding Islamic culture. The Oxford dictionary defines culture as "the arts and other manifestations of human intellectual achievement regarded collectively" (The Oxford dictionary, n.d.) and art as "the expression or application of human creative skill and imagination, typically in a visual form such as painting or sculpture, producing works to be appreciated primarily for their beauty or emotional power" (Facchinetti, 2012, p. 180). Hence, Islamic Art does not represent the religion but rather it represents the culture when Islam is and has been the ruling religion in a geographical area. Ahmad Ibrahim discussed in his bachelor thesis the concepts of visual and design cultures and the importance to study them.

He described visual culture as "the visual expression of our collective thoughts, ideas, beliefs and knowledge" (Ibrahim, 2016) and referring to contemporary pop-culture: "This breeds what is commonly known as pop-culture (or popular culture) which is also visual imagery that reflects ideas and thoughts of the mainstream collective culture", stating eventually that "Design Culture is a process. All designers think and work for one purpose, to communicate better. A big part of the process before the phase of creating the design is to 'understand'. Understand the context, the language, the viewer, the viewed, the history, the future...etc." Street observations in Cairo in the figures 4 and 5 show the current products sold successfully in the street, acknowledging the decline of aesthetics in the visual culture.

One clear example of the complete mutation of an "iconic Islamic" product is the evolution of the *fanoos*. Dr Nasif Kayed, the managing director of the Sheikh Mohammed Centre for Cultural Understanding, stated that the concept of the Ramadan lanterns originated in ancient Egypt (Harrison, 2016). It is narrated that Caliph Al-Muizz li-Din from the Fatimid dynasty in 358 AH (969 AD) when he arrived to Egypt in the first day of Ramadan, was greeted by the people of Egypt holding lanterns.
Ever since, these lanterns called *fanoos* have been a cultural symbol for the holy month of Ramadan in the Islamic tradition. Nevertheless, the design is distorted from its origin and still being a symbol of the today's Islamic culture, it has been completely defaced and merged with icons from pop culture and produced with cheap materials in China.

Figure 4. S.A.Helmy, 2016. Street Observation in front of Al-Hussein Mosque.

Figure 5. Elgohary, 2017. Visual Trends in the streets of Egypt.

Figure 6. The Origins of the Ramadan lantern – Fanos- of Egypt and Beyond, n.d. A comparison between the traditional fanoos and an example of the modern day fanoos.

This leads to complete loss of its aesthetical value and disintegration of public taste and culture (Fig.6). Relating such a phenomenon to how pollution is affecting our planet, one could argue that also in natural evolution, mutations into different species have been taking place over time, but one can't deny how nowadays pollution is causing global warming which is ultimately driving human kind, apex of this evolution, towards destruction. This example was inspiration and guide of the drives towards the concept that was developed for the third step of this research.

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4. Critical Design as tool

The third approach tried to borrow from the *Critical Design* strategy, which is aimed at leveraging designs and to make consumers think critically about the value and impact of everyday objects. Critical Design is a term which was first introduced by Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby through Dunne's book "Hertzian Tales" followed by "Design Noir".

Critical Design is closely related to speculative design which aims at challenging perceptions, evoking discussion that emerges from its nature to provoke the audience. Speculative design uses such concept while visualising how our current way of life affect our future. An approach which aims at exploring the problems with current methods and products rather than just offering solutions to existing obvious problems, which is how conventional design or how Dunne and Raby call it "affirmative design" operates. (Dunne & Raby, n.d.; Johannessen,n.d.)

> By presenting alternative visions of what our shared futures might be, and through reflection upon these visions, design can reveal what is important to us in the present. (Helgason et al., 2015)

In short, critical design proposes an approach to provocation, rather than design as rearranging surface features according to the latest fashion while obfuscating the norms and conventions inscribed in the designs and their use. (Bardzell, et al., 2012)

This form of design can be traced back to the Italian Radical Design in the 1970s which aimed at critiquing social values and design ideologies. The movement towards conceptual forms of design started in the 1990s which paved the way for critical design to emerge as a non-commercial type of design that challenges the status quo. (Dunne & Raby, n.d.)

Critical design is a relatively new concept and it is often facing criticism. To use its concept as designers surely might find criticism as long the outcome does not relate to functional design solutions. As a response to that Matt Malpass argues "By embracing a concept of function beyond practical functionality, these critical designers strive for an extended role for the designer beyond being an agent of capitalism." and presents the fact that function is not limited to the physical and essentialist characteristics visualizing so through Ligo's categories of functions a wider view of how functions in a product would be: structural articulation, physical function, physiological function, social function and cultural existential. (Malpass, 2015)

Another argument presents itself regarding the driving forces behind conventional design. Globalisation together with its underlying forces such as capitalism presents itself as a major player behind all aspects of our current life, together Ritzer and Ryan present the concept of "Nothing" where nothing refers to empty forms that are without distinctive content. This creates this scale where everything lies between "Something" and "Nothing". They evaluate such terms based on five criteria: Distinctive Substance-Lacking in Distinctive Substance, Unique-Generic, Local Ties-No Local Ties, Temporally Specific-Time-less and finally Human Relations-Dehumanized. (Ritzer & Ryan, 2007)

To materialize this concept of Critical design and to gain knowledge through a related experiment, in a public park in Cairo has been conducted an exhibition showcasing different but known objects, juxtaposing contradictory design styles through using "unislamic" forms with Islamic decorations and vice versa. It was paid strong attention on the fact, that one element, either form or decoration, should be iconic, highly recognizable for the public. The other element should contrast strongly and, for the instructed observer, should make no sense or better, be an adverse element to the iconic basic element. The aim was to point out the elements people perceive first, which elements are recognizable for them as "Islamic" and which are not. The aim of this approach was, based already on previous observation explained in this paper, to showcase people's shallow perception, understanding and knowledge of Islamic art and styles in general, how their understanding in best cases is limited to geometric decorative patterns. But more over all, through the exaggeration in the mix of forms and visuals, it wanted to manifest the bad taste of people who accepted and sometimes loved the "impossible" combination of form and decoration.

The products used mixing Islamic forms with non-Islamic decoration. There has been designed and produced two lamps and two chairs for the purpose of testing. They have been chosen based on their different origins: one lamp is out of Islamic tradition, the other is a contemporary mass product by Ikea. One chair is a common functional design, the second one has been designed and manufactured specifically for the research purpose.

The first lamp was a traditional *Mishkah* which is used in mosques usually hanging from the ceiling as source of light; it is entirely made out of glass with a typical form dating back to the Mamluk period and is normally covered by an *ayah* (verse) from the Quran in Arabic calligraphy. It is widely used and due to its iconic Islamic form people would easily recognize it. The "altered" *Mishkah* holds the famous 1893's painting of *The scream* by Edvard Munch which is contradictory to the essence of the product itself. The painting is a reflection of the painter's inner feelings, consisting of exaggerated colours with simple painting technique, and considered one of the early expressionism paintings. Looking carefully at the design in order not to generate an offensive feeling towards religious sensitivity, this particular painting seemed matching the idea of the experiment. Hence, people demonstrated clearly that they were attracted to the artistic value of the painting and not for its iconic Islamic form, supporting the initial hypothesis of the people's limited perception of Islamic art.

The second lamp is a product by IKEA; it's a generic white hanging plastic lamp and was covered it with colourful units of recognizable, typical Islamic patterns.
Similarly, the third object which is the "Studio Chair" (found in part in Fig. 9); it is a generic chair found on campus in the German University in Cairo. It has been edited by adding a surface cover with Islamic patterns. Similar to the IKEA lamp, the decoration has been added on a non-modified industrial product, without considering traditional techniques such as inlay, carving, embossing etc. The desired result was to look "cheap" yet with Islamic reference.

The fourth product is a chair using traditional *Mashrabiya* decoration elements; *Mashrabiya* is one of the core elements in Islamic architecture, used mainly as window shading. By being spread over the entire Islamic area in all times until today without particular mutations, Hans Belting in his book "Florence and Baghdad" (Belting, 2011) creates the analogy for the Arabic culture to Erwin Panofsky's understanding of perspective as a cultural symbol representing the entire Western visual culture (Panofsky, 2012). The design is made to look stereotypically Islamic by using the Mashrabiya elements in the backrest and the Moroccan arcs for the legs. It was then coated with random vibrant colours and glitter in order to relate to pop-art (Fig. 7 to 9).

Figure 7. S.A.Helmy, 2016. The First lamp; Mishkah covered with "The Scream" panting.
Figure 8. S.A.Helmy, 2016. The second lamp; Ikea's Lamp covered with Islamic patterns.

Figure 9. S.A.Helmy & A.G.Baligh 2016. Snapshot from the social Experiment video showcasing the Studio Chair and the Mashrabiya Colourful Chair.

Through a qualitative research method, perception was observed, and the data was collected through observations and interviews. The chosen location for interaction with the public was Al-Azhar park. It's a public park located in Cairo which has a wide variety in social standards of the visitors leading to a random sample. We wanted to grab primarily the participants' attention with the previously described products, whether they would understand the part of Islamic Art and what would be their preferences when it comes to their purchasing decisions. In support, a flyer was given out with a brief description about the project and Islamic art.

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5. Outcome of social experiment

During the process of designing and preparing the products, people with design background were shocked to see the incompatible mixes once the team introduced to them. The designs were provocative, posing a challenge to understand the relevance between both. However, during the social experiment the products appealed to people with non-design background. It was obvious that peoples' eyes got used to pop colours and "modern" artefacts where they interpreted our hypothetically Islamic designed products as modern ones, so the designs did not shock them.

When it came to the Mosque lamp *Mishkah* the lack of knowledge towards the Islamic art and design was clear. People started giving it different names relevant to their knowledge and perceptions. People criticized the painting *The Scream* on the *Mishkah* as a frightening one, non-Islamic, scribbled painting and even tried to link it to Islamic design. Furthermore, the pop-art *Mashrabiya* chair had the most surprising responses, people started linking it with chairs in Cafe's and claiming if they own one they would buy such colourful furniture. It is observed that people link colourful products to modern. On the contrary when designers judged it, it created a great visual disturbance to them.

Also, people always relate to the decorations more than the form of the product itself, as most of them were viewing the studio chair with Islamic decorations as an Islamic chair and the Ikea modern lamp with being a modern Islamic-cheerful lighting unit. As a consequence, it shows that people only see the outer surface of products supporting our initial hypothesis of shallow perception (Fig. 10).

Figure 10. S.A.Helmy & A.G.Baligh 2016. Snapshot from the social Experiment.

6. Conclusion

Referring to the scale of "something versus nothing", we argue that the mindless mixing and matching is not going into the favourable direction of creating unique objects. But rather these hybrids are so mindlessly created and mixed that it lacks character to the point it became undefinable, therefore deeming it as devoid of distinctive substance. We see this as a dangerous turn of events as shown through the results of our social experiment. Consumers are no longer aware of important parts of their culture especially Islamic art. Either unable to recognize important products of the Islamic culture or accepting and admiring products that are essentially strange to the local culture mixed together with design elements that are considered stereotypically Islamic.

In addition, the "Mindless Acts" play a critical role into driving integral parts of the culture towards nothing. Both the designer and the consumer act mindlessly in their respective roles, creating a cycle of dangerous mindless acts. It starts by the designer mixing cultural elements i.e. stereotypical Islamic aesthetics together with "trendy" or popular elements typically pop-cultural elements. With this attempt to modernise the products driven by the capitalist urge to maximise profit. Followed by this, the consumer makes mindless purchase decisions, acquiring such items with no cognition of the distinct cultural and design elements involved, thinking that they are purchasing "modern Islamic products".

The research shows that people only see the outer surface of products supporting the initial hypothesis of shallow understanding of Islamic Art. The public was attracted, showed interest and was not rejecting towards the idea of using noisy and unqualified design languages, which can also be found i.e. in local bars, café's and restaurant, showing a low general taste.

As a result, it can be stated that stereotyping and being used to mixed living styles create even more difficulty to maintain alive traditions. Instead of innovation, traditions are altered to unrecognisable forms and materials mixing almost unlimitedly everything. Art and craft works from previous periods are seen as old and outdated, losing their value and not getting valorised.

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IV

BIOGRAPHIES

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Progetto grafico is an international graphic design magazine founded in 2003 and published by Aiap, the Italian association of visual communication design. A point of reference for such design in Italy from its start, it has also been fully translated into English since 2012. • In December 2017, Jonathan Pierini and Gianluca Camillini became the current editors. • The new *Progetto grafico* offers a critical look at graphics and visuals through a narrative broken up into fragments. Its aim is to offer articles connected in different ways so as to foster a series of transdisciplinary, historical and contemporary considerations. This multiple viewpoint, ranging from very distant to very close, seeks to look at the real both in the broadest terms as well as in a more specialist context. Our belief is that observation, whether of artifacts or representations, as well as production of visuals or graphics can add to today's cultural debate. • Contributions can include visual material, essays and interviews. Each issue intends to explore the storytelling opportunities of the journal.

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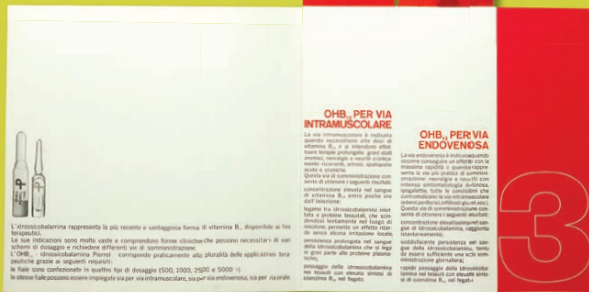
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