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Zakrafah: Ornament in Islamic Style

Amani Alharbi

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Rochester Institute of Technology

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College of Imaging Arts and Sciences
School for American Crafts In
Candidacy for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts In Metals and
Jewelry Design

ZAKRAFAH

Ornament In Islamic style

By: Amani Alharbi

2015
## Thesis Committee Final Approvals:

### Chief Advisor:

Leonard Urso

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### Associate Advisor:

June Carlos Caballero-Perez

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### Associate Advisor:

Liaung Chung Yen

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### Chairperson:

June Carlos Caballero-Perez

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Abstract:

Ornament as an art has existed for many thousands of years. It is considered to be one of the most ancient forms of human visual expression. Ornament is a crucial part of such form of decoration as arabesque that has been widely used in Islamic architecture throughout the ages. However, ornament in Islamic art functions not only as a decoration. Patterns and colors used in ornament often convey symbolical meaning, which could be understood only by people of an Islamic cultural background. Ornament has absorbed many unique and representative features of the outlook of Islamic people such as the prevalence of the divine and admiration for beauty of the universe created by Allah. Ornament has played an important role not only in architecture, book painting, carpet weaving, but also in many other fields of art, particularly in metals work.

The goal of this thesis is to blend the contemporary and classical history of Islamic art in order to create several metal art forms that have Islamic motifs and Arabic calligraphies.

Various current techniques and equipment such as laser cut technology, etching, chasing, and forging were present in my work to create metal pieces. Techniques such as etching, chasing, and forging have a very ancient history; others such as laser cutting are relatively recent inventions. CAD software was used to create a design for my thesis work, which consists of different types of Islamic ornament and Arabic calligraphies that come from different ages of Islamic art.

In summary, ornament in Islamic art is a unique way of visual expression with a long history. Ornament has played an important role in all fields of Islamic art.
**History:**

In order to be informed about ornament in Islamic art, it is important to understand its history and development throughout many Islamic dynasties around the world. As it has already been mentioned, the importance of ornament in Islamic art is indisputable. Ornament in the Islamic culture is extremely varied in terms of form, color and content. The meaning of Arabic ornament is deep since it is based on symbols. Ornament called arabesque is widely spread in Islamic architecture. Due to its importance in architecture, some scholars even call it a horreur vacui (a fear of the empty) although Grabar (2006), for example, is convinced that all forms of ornament “were endowed with visual meaning” (p. 26). The combination of both aesthetic value and symbolical meaning of the ornament could be found in architecture. In external design of mosques, ornaments with geometrical patterns were frequently used because they symbolized majesty and power, while in the internal decoration there prevailed vegetable patterns that were associated with comfort and coziness. This was important because mosques were also madrasas where people spent a lot of time.

Although Islamic ornament has had a very significant effect on both European and the world culture, few names of artists have reached current times. However, in the field of metalwork, two famous metallurgists Ali Kashmiri and Muhammed Salih Thatawi are known who created seamless celestial globes, according to Savage-Smith (1985, p. 35).
Early Period:

During its early stages, Islamic art was considerably influenced by the cultures of Sasanian and Byzantine Empires. In the ornamental patterns, vegetal motifs were the most common. According to Hillenbrand (1999), mosaics started to play an important role in Islamic architecture during the Umayyad dynasty (661-750). Moreover, this was the time when arabesques appeared. At the time of the Abbasid dynasty (750 A.D.- 1258), ceramics, silk décor, book painting, and calligraphy were prominent types of art as shown in figure 1. In interior decoration, such new material as stucco was used. During this period, calligraphy was first used in pottery. In architecture, mosaics, friezes and wall-painting were used as a decoration. Lusterware was becoming more and more common in pottery. Abstract ornamentation in the form of the "infinite pattern" appears in this period.

Figure 1: these images present some examples of the Islamic art in this period

**Capital**, Abbasid period (750-1258), late 8th century
Syria, probably Raqqa
Alabaster, gypsum; carved

**Ewer**, 8th–early 9th century
Probably Syria
Bronze, cast, engraved, and pierced
Medieval Period:

During the Medieval period, ornament was widely used in architecture, textile décor, ivory, and metal works originally in Spain and Maghreb. In Arab Mashriq, architecture and metalwork were the main types of art during this period as shown in figure 2. Ornament also was very important in the Islamic art of Iran and Central Asia. According to Mason and Tite (1994), this was a time when the silicone paste ("fritware") came into use in ceramics (p. 77). In jewelry production, bronze started to be encrusted with gold and silver. Ornament continued to develop in the form of arabesques. Painting, miniatures, and book illumination were among the prominent types of art. Enameled glass and metalwork were also widely spread. The significance of ornament in this period of Islam art is rooted in the tradition of decoration both in architecture and other types of art.

![Pyxis, 13th century Syria](image1.png)

*Pyxis*, 13th century Syria
Ayyubid period (1169–1260)
Brass; hammered, chased, inlaid with silver and black compound.

![Basin of Sultan Qaytbay, Mamluk period](image2.png)

*Basin of Sultan Qaytbay*, Mamluk period (1250–1517)
Egypt or Syria
Brass; inlaid with silver.

*Figure 2:* these images present some examples of the Islamic art in this period
Later Period:

The period of Three Empires acquired its name from the Ottoman and Mughal Empires and the dynasty of Safavids that existed simultaneously. According to Canby (2005), these three dynasties “controlled the lands from Egypt to Northern India” (p. 122). The Ottoman Empire had the longest history and, therefore, its contribution to Islamic art is one of the most significant. In the art of that period, such branches as architecture, ceramics, metalwork, jewelry, production of carpets, and book illumination prevailed. Ornament with prevailing vegetal and floral motifs was crucial in all these arts as shown in figure 3.1. In the Ottoman Empire, a new technique of floral polychrome design appeared in the architecture. Moreover, Ottoman artists discovered the new pigment Iznik red, which had red color and was used in ceramics as shown in figure 3.2. Ottoman calligraphers invented the new Diwani script. One of the representative features of Ottoman art is the abundance of contrasts, which coexisted in the Islamic art of that period. During the Safavids dynasty, ornament was widely used in architecture, which was developing rapidly. Architecture in that period represented the power of shahs and performed not only aesthetic, but also social functions. According to Rizvi: “The architecture of shrines served as a setting for the enactment of social mores and their expression through ritual and ceremony” (p. 7).
Figure 3.1: these images present some examples of the Islamic art in this period

*Mirror with split-leaf palmette design*, early 16th century
Inlaid with gold, Ottoman period (ca. 1299–1923),
Turkey, Istanbul

*Inkpot of Emperor Jahangir*, 16th century.
Mughal, India
This piece is decorated by floral motifs.

Figure 3.2: these images present some examples of the Islamic art in this period

*Mosque–lamp–shaped vessel with Arabic inscriptions*, Ottoman period
Turkey, Iznik
Stone paste; painted in blue under transparent glaze.

*Dragon–handled jug with inscription*, late 15th–16th century
Brass; cast and turned, engraved, and inlaid with silver, gold, and black organic compound
Modern Islamic art has been experiencing a powerful influence of the Western culture. Moreover, Islamic artists of this period draw inspiration in their cultural traditions, using techniques and incorporating imagery and ideas from earlier periods. Some traditional types of art have disappeared due to the replacement of human labor by machines and new techniques.

Ornament and calligraphy remain popular in the contemporary Islamic art. According to Ali (1997), calligraphy is an essential part of the Islamic culture as it expresses national artistic identity.
Jewelry and Metal Works:

Women’s jewelry has also played a significant role in the Islamic culture. Throughout the history of Islamic art, women have worn jewelry to accentuate their clothes as shown in figure 4. Jewelry has performed not only the aesthetic function, but has exhibited social status and the financial security of its owner. According to the book “Masterpieces from the Department of Islamic Art in the Metropolitan Museum of Art”: “gold jewelry stands out for its innovation and complexity” (p. 151).

Figure 4: these images present some examples of jewelry in the Islamic art

*Pendant*, 11th century; Fatimid Egypt
Gold, cloisonné enamel

*Pair of earrings*, 11th century
Greater Syria
Gold: fabricated from wire and sheet, decorated with granulation; originally outlined with strung pearls and/or stones.
Calligraphy has always been a part of jewelry in Islamic art. Pieces of jewelry often comprise verses from the Qur’an, prayers, and talismans. The important meaning of calligraphy in women’s jewelry is not surprising, taking into account the value of calligraphy in the Islamic culture where it is associated with the Qur’an and the Divine message. Nasr wrote: “The points traced by the Divine Pen created at once the celestial archetype of Quranic calligraphy as well as the lines and volumes of which the cosmic order is constituted” (p. 18). Calligraphy appeared not only in jewelry, but also in metalwork. Metalworkers decorated small sections of “empty” space on their works with strips of calligraphy. Calligraphy might perform not only the aesthetic function, but also provide some valuable information as shown in figure 5.1, for example, the name of the artist and place of production. There are many styles of Arabic calligraphy, called scripts as shown in figure 5.2. The main types of scripts are Kufic, Naskh, and other regional scripts such as Nasta’liq, Sini, and Diwani. Kufic is the oldest style, while Naskh is the most widely-spread in the modern world. Kufic was primarily used in architecture; nowadays, it is applied in decoration and advertising. The majority of books in Arabic countries are published in Naskh. Naskh and Riq'ah are considered to be the two styles, which every educated person in Arabic countries has to know. Nashk is most frequently used in metalworking and other fields of art. Inscriptions on metal works often mean blessings, dedications, and signatures of people.
Calligraphic roundel in stone, late 16th–early 17th century, India. This piece was carved with a combination of Arabic script, Arabesques, and geometric motifs in a circular shape.

Architectural Tile, 14th century, Uzbekistan. This ceramic piece is carved with calligraphy that is decorated with vegetal motifs.

Figure 5.1: these images present some examples of Arabic Calligraphy.

Figure 5.2: these image present some examples of Arabic Calligraphy styles.
In metal works, various styles and types of ornament have been used. Baer (1983) distinguishes such types of ornament as geometric, vegetal, and zoomorphic. Geometric style uses numerous geometric figures such as circles, triangles, swastikas, stars, and many others. Vegetal style is often divided into vegetal and floral. Scholars call geometric style girih; it has been used mainly in architecture and book illumination.

As a contemporary artist from the Islamic World, I blend traditional Islamic techniques with the contemporary fashion. A result from this work is creation of metal pieces that represent ornament and calligraphy that have played a crucial role in Islamic art throughout all its history. During my work, I used various techniques that included laser cutting, etching, chasing, and forging. I designed my works with the help of CAD software.
CRITICAL ANALYSIS:

There are several types of materials incorporated in my work. The materials are brass, steel, stainless steel, silver, and nickel silver. My art forms consist of contemporary jewelry and metal art works that capture several types of traditional Islamic motifs from an early age until the 21st century. These metal pieces allude to a long process of making works within Islamic art culture. The meaning of the colors used in my compositions represent my own personal understanding of my culture and traditional.

Panels:

In order to present different periods of Islamic art (Early – Middle – Latter), I select the motifs were extracted from original images and famous frame that shown in most of Islamic architecture as shown in figure 6. These motifs were re-drawn using a computer-aided design (CAD) program known as Rhinoceros. These motifs were cut from steel sheet by the laser cut machine to create the panels. These panels were larger than other pieces that I made in my thesis work. The panel size was about sixty inches in height by forty inches in width, with all of them having 3/16 in depth. Each panel had two sheets. One side of the panel was decorated by motifs and the other side was used as a frame. These two sheets were combined by using rivet screws. The panels were painted by acrylic using gold and green colors. In selecting the color for the panels, I used the gold color to present the environment of the Arabian Peninsula that is covered by desert and seems to have the gold color when the sunlight hits the sand. The green color I selected, represents the national flag of my country Saudi Arabia and can be shown in several Islamic countries flags. The
idea behind this work was to fulfill the requirement of assigning a prayer area, dividing a large room, making a path, decorating a wall and hiding a spot in the Islamic society.

Figure 6 a

This window-grill from the Umayyad Mosque motifs from this period Damascus shows a direct continuation of the Syro-Roman tradition.
Figure 6b

*Tile* from a squinch, Timurid period (1370–1507), second half of 14th century Present-day Uzbekistan, Samarkand
This arabesque motif from latter period it can be shown on Mosque

16th century, Turkey.

Figure 6c
**Necklace:**

The necklace was designed by using Rhinoceros, a computer-aided design (CAD) program. Then, the stainless steel metal was selected to make the necklace due to the color and ability to cut it by the laser cut machine. In order to create a long necklace that can be worn over the Abaya or other long dress, I made three different size pieces that have the same motif. Then, fabricated silver wires were used to connect the three pieces to each other as shown in figure 7. The Abaya is an outer garment worn by Muslim women over clothes when they leave home. Abaya is a long dress covering the body from head to toe and often worn with a headscarf and veil. There are many different styles of Abaya that worn in Saudi Arabia based on family tradition and modesty. Abaya usually are black, but they all vary based on different designs and fabrics. Recently, Abaya have included beautiful colored embroidery, crystals and gems, making them more attractive than before. The purpose behind this work is to create a new jewelry pieces that can be added to the modern Abaya by utilizing ornament of Islamic art to create new-sophisticated style.
**Cuff Bracelet:**

Cuff bracelet is a hand piece that can also be worn in different ways as an arm cuff. It is smaller in size than the other necklace within this segment as shown in figure 8. Jewelry of bracelet was also designed on stainless steel by using Rhinoceros (CAD) to draw it then cut it by laser cut machine to create a contemporary jewelry. The cuff bracelet was not seem as a completed metal piece due to the looks of metal pieces that kept after the process of cutting. This idea was very helpful for the audience to understand the technique and describe the performed work. The cuff bracelet was bent by special tool to be fit as a real metal piece that be worn in hand.

![Figure 8](image_url)
**Broach:**
Brooch was designed by mixing Arabic calligraphy and aroma wood Oud as shown in figure 9. The emphasis is not only on the aesthetic purposes, but also on the message. The message is printed and etching on a circle of silver sheet. Bismillah is the name of Allah (an invocation used by Muslims at the beginning of any undertaking). The purpose of selecting the silver is to reflect purity, innocence, wholeness and completion. This work was decorated by adding eight of CZ stones and one piece of Oud wood. Oud wood is (aroma) fragrant and highly valuable heartwood. It has a very strong and unique scent when it burns. When a Saudi is having a special guest or special occasion during Ramadan and Eid Oud will likely be burned throughout the evening. It comes originally from Cambodia, India, Burma, Vietnam and elsewhere in the South Asia region the Southeast of Asia.

![Figure 9](image-url)
Box:

Brass is the main material in this work, it is a metal alloy made of copper and zinc. I have used the brass in this work to portray the element of gold. The color of gold is the color of luxury and quality, success, achievement, prestige and sophistication, value and elegance. In this work, I decorate the body of box by selecting a famous words that, carries beautiful wisdom, means (A woman’s beauty is not seen it is discovered) then etching on the body of work and colored with liver of silver to obtain dark color. At the top, I etch the name of Allah in Kufi font on the surface then carved to be a dome. A piece of glass was selected to combine with this work to reflect the light on the metal. Glass will shine like water as shown in figure 10. This work influenced by studying how Islamic architecture has evolved in different regions of the Islamic art. Mosques, masjid in Arabic, are considered the most prominent types of architecture in the Islamic Art.
Attention of women's beauty is a part of every woman's life regardless of her age or cultural background. Owning portable mirror is an important thing that could be found in most of women's handbag. This work has been mixing by several types of metals such as brass, silver, nickel of silver. The mirror has sitting on a star shape that etched on the front using Islamic motifs as shown in figure 11. The other side of this mirror caring a beautiful wisdom which is Beauty Inside. Beauty inside is influenced by studying how the beauty plays a significant role in women's life. Also, Islamic art interested in beauty because...
Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said: “Allah is beautiful and He loves beauty.”

The edges of the mirror were decorated by chasing technique and stone to obtain high precision metal pieces.

![Figure 11](image)

**Vase:**

The vase was hammered from a single sheet of copper. Copper is a metal that can easily be shaped into flatware. Also, it is an extremely durable metal and it is frequently used in products designed to last a very long time. Copper has attractive color and good resistance to tarnishing making them last a long a time. The work is forged with a hammer, decorative with a etching process and colored by liver of sulfur to obtain a dark brown metal as shown in figure 12. In addition, using pearls in this work helps the viewer to move from one point to another when observing the piece. The idea behind this work is to create a metal piece that has modern ornament of Islamic art and utilizing vegetal pattern, which is one of the popular types of decoration in Islamic art.
Figure 12
CONCLUSION:
In this thesis, the ornament of Islamic art was utilized to create modern contemporary metal pieces. Panels, vase, box, mirror, broach, necklace and bracelet are current contemporary metal pieces that connect the history and the culture of Islamic art. Several types of materials were used in this work such as steel, stainless steel, silver, copper and bronze. Each material was selected based on the suitability and applicability to make the metal pieces. This work has utilized different kinds of comprehensive techniques that required high accuracy and advance technology. CAD software, laser cutting, chasing tools, acid etching and forging technique were required to create the metal pieces.

This work will support and encourage other artists to use several kinds of ornament in Islamic art that were made in the past in order to create new modern motifs. The metal pieces in this body of work can be made utilizing other types of materials that can provide another point of view for ornament in Islamic art.

I wish I can participate in global and museum exhibitions to present my thesis work. This opportunity will support me to enrich my knowledge and enhance my ability and skills to develop new contemporary metal pieces. In the art education field, this work will help me to discuss that art is an efficient way to document history, traditions, and culture for every period of time.
BIBLIOGRAPHY:
Exhibition room