



A miniature illustration depicting a youth (right) with two male suitors (ca 1560).

Islamic Art

by Kieron Devlin

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The term "Islamic Art" is an all-embracing concept somewhat inadequate to describe the range and diversity of work produced across countries as different as Morocco, Turkey, and India. It includes art produced by Muslim peoples, beginning with, but not limited to, the nomadic Arabs who promulgated the religion of *Islam*, which in Arabic means "submission" (to the will of God).

With the migration of Mohammed to Medina in 622 C. E., Islam spread across Mesopotamia, Persia, and North Africa, reaching as far as Spain. Embodying primarily a male ethic, Islam reacted strongly against the proliferation of matriarchal cults and traditions and managed to unify a variety of peoples.

Art under Islam

The apparent invisibility of homosexuality in the visual arts of Islam is no indication of its absence in the culture. Indeed, quite the opposite is true. Homosexuality was common in many areas under Islamic domination, more visible in some societies than in others. It is a major theme in early Arabic poetry, which may explain the highly respected position of calligraphy in Arabic art.

Muslims, however, posited the significance of art in ways distinct from that of Europeans. For early Muslims, the difference between public and private space was so sharply delineated that it allowed many works to go unnoticed and unrecorded. Public decorum was paramount, and many images, including homoerotic ones, may have been destroyed.

Another factor that makes accurate assessment of Islamic art difficult is that there was never a serious attempt among Muslim scholars to define or codify a distinct Islamic aesthetic. Even the great historian and sociologist Ibn Khaldoun (1332-1406) makes only cursory reference to art.

Islamic Architecture

In art, Islam emphasizes the primacy of architecture, especially the dome and the free standing minaret. Key to Islamic architecture is an appreciation of the poised classic lines of repeated arches that come to a halt in the *pishtaq* (Persian for a high arch framed in a rectangular portal), and interiors of stucco or carved wood in intricate geometric patterns. Early Mesopotamian architects achieved the pointed arch at least three centuries before it reached Europe.

Islam's fullest artistic achievement is its mosque architecture, perhaps rivaled only by its miniature painting. Despite the apparent imposed uniformity, mosques vary greatly in style over different eras, from the impressive blue-tiled Shah mosque (1611-1666) of Isfahan with its faience (glazed ceramic) mosaics to the splendor of the mosque of Sultan Suleyman (1550-1557) in Istanbul designed by Sinan, who died a year after it was completed.

Calligraphy and the fine art of the illustrated book are also highly prized, along with textiles and ceramics,

which achieved consummate finesse in the Islamic world.

Homosexuality and Islam

At various times in its history, Muslim culture has been known not only for the flourishing of art, but also for tolerance of homosexual relationships. This is true particularly of such reigns as the Abbasids of Baghdad (750-1258), the Umayyads of Cordoba (756-1031), the Seljuks of Persia (1037-1194), the Mamluks of Egypt (1252-1517), and the Ottomans of Turkey (1300-1924).

The tolerance of homosexuality in these epochs is in stark contrast to the more prudish and prohibitive Judeo-Christian ethic that dominated Europe. (The homophobic trend in fundamentalist Islamic regimes is recent and does not recognize homosexuality as an identity, but associates it with prostitution, transvestism, and "subversive" foreign influence.)

Many European visitors to Constantinople and North Africa during the Renaissance, for example, were often outraged by what they perceived as openly condoned sodomitc relationships in the courts of these Islamic societies, and less obvious Sapphic ones in the harems. However, the homoerotic feeling that flourished in Islam rarely found expression in nudes or portraits as in Hellenistic or later European art.

Islamic attitudes toward sex are complex. Although homosexuality is prohibited (and sometimes severely punished) by Islamic society in general, it is nevertheless widely practiced. Moreover, same-sex intimacy is encouraged, especially in those societies where the segregation of men and women is most strictly enforced.

Some medieval Arab books of counsel advised young men to take boys as lovers during the summer and women in the winter. Homosexuality is called a "great transgression" in the *Qur'an*, but beautiful youths of both sexes are offered among the rewards of paradise.

The conflicts within Islam regarding homosexuality are highlighted by the fact that Abu Bakr, the first Caliph (successor) after Mohammed's death, advocated that homosexuals should be buried under a wall, while philosopher Ibn Sina (Avicenna, 981-1037), on the other hand, said that kissing boys was permissible, provided it did not lead to immorality.

Ibn Sina even wrote love poems to boys, but he never attempted to explicate homosexuality as a phenomenon in his philosophy, perhaps believing that to attempt to define it would violate Muslim decorum. Very often no distinction was made between the value of love for men and that for women in some Medieval Arab treatises on love.

Love Poetry

Islamic poetry, especially Persian, with its incredible stylization of themes, is frequently homoerotic. Homosexuality found a clear but not unequivocal voice in the "ghazal" or love poem of five to fifteen couplets. These poems, which are remarkable for their emphasis on "the amorous gaze," and on longing and unfulfilled desire, often focus on a beautiful boy.

Some claim that the use of the male pronoun in Islamic love dialogues is largely metaphoric or allegorical. However, the poets Abu Nuwas (ca 750-ca 810), al Hallaj (858-922), Ibn Hazm of Cordoba (994-1064), al-Ghazali (1058-1111), Jaladin-al Rumi (1207-1273), among others, all ecstatically praise male adolescent beauty.

Of these, Abu Nuwas, who in the *Tales of One Thousand and One Nights* eulogizes the relative beauty of three boys, is the most famous and most innovative. While editions of the *One Thousand and One Nights*, which were first assembled in late thirteenth-century Syria and Egypt, were rarely published with

illustrations, its homoeroticism is nonetheless apparent.

Wine Poetry

Other instances of the homoerotic turn up in a form called "wine poetry." Intoxication, along with male beauty, was for a number of Sufi mystics and dervishes closely linked to the divine. They saw wine, boys, and dance as emblematic of the relationship to God, and a doorway into paradise from earth.

Another rhetorical form debated the relative merits of the love of girls and the love of boys. Though wit was relished, this conceit, especially in satirical poetry, should not always be taken literally. This genre was extremely popular in Egypt under the Mamluks (the Turkish or Circassian warrior slave class that came to power in the thirteenth century), who produced the beautiful Ibn Tulun and Mohammed Ali mosques in Cairo.

Illustrated books of aphorisms and anecdotes were a standard and much admired genre, perhaps because poetry was judged more on aesthetic criteria than on theological.

Figure Painting

Another conflicted issue in Islamic Art is *mimesis* or representation. Artwork that depicts human figures or animals is often classed as un-Islamic. Most artists, therefore, remained anonymous and figure painting was identified early on as an idolatrous practice.

While there is in fact no prohibition in the *Qur'an* against representing humans, the *Hadith* (the Islamic traditions) take the stance that representation emulates God, and should therefore be forbidden. Paradoxically, this may be why artists were so greatly honored, perhaps even feared.

Despite the religious stigma against figurative art, it never died out. It even flourished under the Timurids of Northern Iraq and during the Mughal dynasty of Babur (1483-1540) in India. Early Islamic figure painting was greatly influenced by Greek and Hellenistic artists and traditions.

Much of the best figure painting in books dates from twelfth-century Tabriz (Iran) or from sixteenth-century India in the Mughal period where miniatures flourished, and during the Ottoman period (the sixteenth century through the nineteenth century) in Turkey.

Some artists began to be celebrated for their individual style, or were both calligraphers and painters of illuminated manuscripts. One of the most famous court schools was in Herat (Khorasan, northwest Afghanistan), which was started by Bihzad (*ca* 1440-*ca* 1514). Along with Shiraz (Iran), the Herat school produced the finest miniatures of the period.

Erotic Miniature Painting

Although there are some frescoes depicting female nudes in private palaces of the Umayyads, there are few surviving works inspired by Eros. Saslow draws attention to "the one significant cluster of homoerotic images" that center around court figures in Persian miniatures of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

These depict overdressed and overrefined cup bearers, usually male, in artificial, lascivious postures. That these lovers locked in ardent embraces are somewhat genderless merely added to the point the artists were making. Some of these miniatures depict lovers sinuously entwined; others portray elegant drinking companions, known as *zarifs*, who were expected to be entertaining conversationalists.

The cult of the dandy reached its zenith in Persia's Safavid dynasty (1502-1736). In *Portrait of Shah Abbas with a Young Page* (1627), Muhammed Qasim presents the handsome Shah and his young lover enfolded in a

tender embrace. Other portraits of Shah Abbas, who was a great connoisseur of art as well as head of the Naqsbandiah Sufi order, show the page boy right behind his master, gazing at him lovingly.

The artist Riza-i Abbas, who worked for Shah Abbas, specialized in scenes of young men inhaling the perfume of flowers or being pursued by older men. His scenes varied from the delicate to the crude. One critic goes so far as to say that they "may well have been . . . 'pin-up' boys for homosexuals." In later life Riza began painting female nudes and was known to consort with wrestlers.

The skill of the painting, combined with the beauty of the calligraphy, would have made these illustrated books treasured items. Topics were often intriguingly titled. In the *Haft Awrang* (Seven Thrones, 1556-1565) commissioned by Sultan Ibrahim Mirza, for example, there are scenes entitled *The Fickle Old Lover is Knocked from the Rooftop*, in which a young man rejects the advances of an older man.

In *The Dervish Picks up His Beloved's Hair from the Hammam Floor*, a Sufi mendicant so adores and abases himself for a beautiful young male that he eventually dies, and the young man who rejected him is moved to become a dervish for his sake. Each highly detailed illustration is seen in full space, a worm's and bird's eye view combined.

A depiction of two female lovers from the *Koka Shastra*, a lesbian allegory from seventeenth-century India with a Hindu influence, shows one figure holding a bow, armed with an arrow, aimed directly into the other's displayed vagina. Attached to the arrow point is a dildo, an image that Pier Paolo Pasolini made startling use of in his film of *The One Thousand and One Nights* (1974).

Patrons may have commissioned artists to make lascivious pictures, often illustrating stories, for their private collections. One illustrated book of nineteenth-century Turkey, the *Khamasa* (Quintet) by Nevi Zade Atai depicts the routine sodomizing of a boy while other men stand around idly masturbating. But this kind of explicit depiction of male sex is rare in Islam.

Arabesque Motifs

Central to the Islamic sense of design was an intricate, both simple and complex, repeated pattern of woven strand. The basis of this design is the Arabesque, a principle of reciprocal repetition. The Arabesque is usually manifested as undulating stalks, split and curled leaves that fill the surface with ornament.

Its precursors were the Greek and Roman acanthus and cornucopia motifs, but Arabesque became a standard design feature that was also paralleled in music and poetry and influenced European designers from the late eighteenth century onwards, including Art Nouveau.

This recurrent motif is perhaps a result of the fact that until the seventeenth century Islamic thinkers led the world in astronomy, algebra, trigonometry, and pharmacy. Even in their geometry they were profoundly un-Hellenic.

Whereas Greeks preferred closed circles and polygons, Islamic artists chose open-ended geometric forms such as the ever interlacing polygon. The emphasis was more algebraic than geometric, showing the immateriality of all forms.

Orientalism

Islamic Art is considered to have declined as a result of modern Western influences. A separate, but allied, strand of art produced by Westerners influenced by Muslim culture is termed Orientalism. The value of this work, which was mainly scene painting, but also influenced architecture and music, is debated. However, in recent years, there has been some reappraisal of the fixed binary view of East versus West as underscored by critic Edward Said.

While not demeaning the importance of geopolitical bias, the reassessment now focuses on the more protean transcultural exchange of ideas expressed by Western Orientalist painters, designers and musicians, many of whom were sincere in their search for new and hybrid forms from Islam that reinvigorated European art.

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Kieron Devlin studied Art & Design at Manchester Art School, England. He holds a Master's degree from Leicester University and an M.F.A. in Creative Writing from New York City's New School. He is working on a novel and a collection of short stories.