

## The Evolution of Decorative Functions in Islamic Art Studies

### Elham Pourafzal

PhD Student in Art Research, Art University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran/ Elham.pourafzal@gmail.com

### Hadi Rabie

Assistant Professor of Faculty of Theories and Art Studies, Art University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran/  
h.rabiei@art.ac.ir

### Iraj Dadashi

Assistant Professor of Faculty of Theories and Art Studies, Art University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran (Corresponding Author)/ dadashi@art.ac.ir

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### Introduction

Over the past three centuries (19<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup>, and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries), the study of Islamic decorative art has gained significant attention from orientalists, archaeologists, historians, and scholars of Islamic art. During this time, various perspectives on decoration have emerged, ranging from universal approaches that view Islamic decoration as a mystical and symbolic phenomenon to formalist considerations emphasizing its role as a national and cultural identity. The purpose of this research is to examine the evolution of the perspectives on decorative functions in the field of Islamic art studies. The research question guiding this study is: what has been the trend in the development of the art history and semantic functions of decorations in the material culture of the Islamic lands?

### Research Method

To address this question, this study employs a four-fold approach to examine decorations: the exploratory-typological approach, the early-historical (historical-stylistic) approach, the universality approach, and the later-historical (cultural-contextual) approach. Each of these approaches is utilized to scrutinize the functions of decorations within the field of Islamic art studies.

### Research Findings

Through an examination of studies conducted during the 19<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup>, and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, it has been observed that Orientalists encountered Islamic decorations as a newly discovered phenomenon in the 19th century. The predominant functions assigned to decoration during this period were associated with Islamic lands, with the Orientalists interpreting these functions as derived from the religion of Islam and the cultures of the East. Additionally, scholars such as Albert Gayet and James Ward made comprehensive efforts to study Islamic decoration. At the beginning of the 20th century, a new generation of historians approached Islamic decoration from historical and stylistic perspectives. This period sought to interpret Islamic decoration in terms of both symbolic and stylistic functions. Researchers such as Ernst Hertzfeld and Richard Ettinghausen introduced cultural and social values into the study of decorations, laying the groundwork for later historical

studies in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Furthermore, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there emerged universal approaches that attributed common characteristics to decorations through trans-historical interpretations or psychological analyses. Traditionalists such as Hossein Nasr or Titus Burekhardt ascribed symbolic meanings and universal characteristics to decoration. Ernst Gombrich, drawing on the theory of perception, proposed that decorations had a similar impact on viewers' reception, with the pleasure derived from discovering rhythm playing a significant role. Ernst Gombrich also suggested that the viewers' inclination towards projection, reification, and animation influenced their responses to decoration and their interpretations.

In the second half of 20<sup>th</sup> and the 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, studies on decoration has placed a greater emphasis on the perspective and interpretation of the audience, seeking to consider the background and context in which artworks have been created. Oleg Grabar can be regarded as the most influential scholar in the recent historical studies as his research delves into historical and cultural sources to establish more precise meanings and historical functions of Islamic decoration. During this period, the role of the audience in determining the function of ornament has become more pronounced.

### **Conclusion**

The research findings has revealed a diversity of perspectives that emerged in the recognition of the functions of decoration. In the exploratory-typological approach, the formal function of decoration is dominant, with decoration serving as a visual expression of new religious features imbued with ethnic, racial, eastern spiritcharacteristics. In the early-historical approach, decoration is often perceived as a symbolic or meaningful element, serving as a starting point for reflections on the discovery of meaning and an examination of the historical and cultural backgrounds of decoration. The universality approach is divided into two distinct areas. In transhistorical studies, the function of decoration is characterized as transcendental, representing the divinity and unity of God. In psychological studies, the function of decoration and its effects on human behavior, choices, and psychological states are emphasized. With the emergence of the later historical approach in the second half of the twentieth century, there was a focus on the perception and interpretation of decorative patterns by the audience with an emphasis on the aesthetic and semantic functions of decoration. Bbased on linguistic studies, decoration is addressed as a cultural sign.

**Keywords:** Islamic art, historiography, Islamic art studies approaches, function and decoration.