

The Arabesque Motif and its Evolution in Iranian Art from Antiquity to the Seljuk Period

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Introduction

Arabesque (Eslimi), as one of the most significant decorative elements in Iranian and Islamic art, is an abstract, interlaced motif characterized by spiraling, rotating patterns that are grounded in a precise geometric order. Known as Eslimi (derived from "Islam") and Arabesque (Arab-like), this motif is typically depicted without a clearly defined beginning or end and often organized around a circular axis, conveying symbolic religious concepts such as eternity and the representation of paradise. The origins of Eslimi can be traced back to ancient Iranian art, with its earliest manifestations appearing on ceramic artifacts as early as the 6th millennium B.C. Initially inspired by animal-based forms such as the curved horns of a wild goat and serpentine shapes, it gradually evolved to incorporate vegetal elements, including stems and leaves. During the first millennium B.C., and under the influence of other civilizations, Eslimi acquired a more defined structure, ultimately reaching its peak of development during the Sasanid era. In the Islamic era, it was revitalized through formal and conceptual transformations, integrated with the Kufic script and religious concepts and subsequently secured a distinguished status in manuscript illumination (*Tazhib*) and ornamental painting (*Tash'ir*).

Research Method

This study employs a historical approach and utilizes a descriptive-analytic methodology, primarily relying on documentary and library-based data. The samples were purposefully selected from ceramic and metal artifacts, prioritizing continuity of motifs and formal affinity, as these categories offer the most substantial information due to their abundance, adequate documentation, and suitability for precise formal analysis. The focus on the period from ancient Iran to the end of the Seljuk era was justified by the importance of this temporal span in the formation and consolidation of the *Eslimi* (Arabesque) motif in Iranian art. The study is structured around two fundamental questions:

1. How can the origins and developmental trajectory of the Eslimi motif, in terms of both form and content, be explained within Iranian art from antiquity to the end of the Seljuk era?
2. What common and distinctive factors characterize the depiction of this motif in both ancient Iranian and Islamic periods?

Given the diversity of decorative motifs in the early Islamic era, the analysis was confined to ceramic and metal works. The data were analyzed qualitatively, with a focus on sample examination of visual elements, compositional structures, and symbolic meanings. The findings remained open to revision in light of future archaeological discoveries or newly documented artifacts.

Research Findings

In Iranian art, the Eslimi motif originated from representational forms but gradually evolved through the processes of abstraction and stylization, ultimately transforming into a fully non-figurative, abstract form. This abstract quality enabled Eslimi to encompass a wide functional range, from a simple ornamentation to complex symbolic expressions, to the underlying geometric framework of entire compositions. In certain instances, it functioned as the foundational geometric structure of pictorial and artistic works. The precise source of the motif’s formative structure could not be determined with certainty. The twisting of the branches and foliage of trees, such as the vine and pine, and plants, including the lotus and the acanthus leaf, constituted a group of vegetal motifs employed in both ancient Iranian and Islamic art, among which the vine appeared to be the most probable source. From another perspective, certain Eslimi patterns could also be interpreted as purely geometric constructs—that is, the products of the artist’s imagination without any direct reference to nature. Furthermore, an animal-based origin for the motif, particularly in relation to the curvature of animal horns, was also a plausible possibility. The spiral form, which revealed the geometric basis of these motifs and was regarded as a sacred configuration in Christian and Islamic art, had a far more ancient lineage in Iranian artistic traditions, predating both religions. This motif, in its altered and developed form, was incorporated into Islamic art, and it was found out that, owing to its association with the word “Islam”, it eventually came to be designated as *Eslimi*. Moreover, the use of the term “*Arabesque*” or “*Arab-like*”, common in foreign sources, is incorrect, as the motif has no inherent connection to Arab art. Table 1 summarizes the formative factors and design principles of this motif across two historical periods under study.

Table 1: Factors Influencing the Depiction of the Eslimi Motif in Iranian Art from Ancient Iran to the Seljuk Period

Factors	Pre-Islamic	Islamic
Mythology	Presence in illustrations related to mythological narratives, particularly in representations of the Tree of Life	The Tree of Life: employed in the illustration of mythological narratives in the the <i>Shāhnāma</i>
Religions	Incorporation into funerary and ritual artifacts, reflecting the motif’s religious significance; its deployment in sacred narratives, such as those associated with Mithraic (Mehr-worship) traditions, and the continuity of these sacred concepts into early Islamic visual representations of the <i>Tūbā</i> Tree	The <i>Tūbā</i> Tree: reflecting influences from neighboring religious traditions and the participation of non-Muslim artists in its artistic representation
Popular beliefs and religious notions	Beliefs in divine blessing (<i>barakah</i>) and fertility, symbolized through animal elements such as the ram and the wild goat as well as vegetal motifs like the wheat stalk, as the symbols of abundance, fertility, and productivity	Continuity of ancient Iranian artistic tradition through the incorporation of pre-Islamic animal and vegetal motifs such as the wild goat (ibex) and wheat stalks, and, in some cases, the direct inclusion of the Kufic inscription “ <i>barakah</i> ” (blessing); vegetal motifs frequently appeared in conjunction with hybrid or fantastical animals, often associated with divination, astrology, and prognostication
Other ethnic groups and civilizations	Egypt, Assyria, and Greece	China

From a historical perspective, the origins of the Eslimi motif in Iranian art could be traced back to the 6th millennium B.C. as used on ceramic and metal artifacts. Initially inspired by animal-based forms such as the horns of the wild goat, the motif gradually evolved during the 5th millennium B.C. to incorporate vegetal elements, including stems and leaves. During the Islamic period, the Eslimi motif underwent significant transformation, particularly through its integration with Kufic epigraphic inscriptions, and symbolized concepts such as divine unity (*tawhīd*), eternity, and spiritual aspects of religion. Throughout its long history, the motif evolved under the influence

of various factors, including mythology, religious traditions, popular beliefs, and intercultural interactions with neighboring civilizations. Consequently, it emerged as a unifying visual element in the Islamic art. The evolutionary trajectory of the Eslimi motif in Iranian art, from antiquity to the early Islamic era, demonstrated that certain decorative forms originating in pre-Islamic Iran persisted, despite the extensive temporal span and religious transformation. This continuity underscored the resilience and the enduring symbolic potency of the motif's form and content. In the art of Islamic era, the Eslimi motif assumed new configurations through processes such as recomposition, integration, and formal repetition, thereby serving as the generative basis for various ornamental systems, particularly in the arts of manuscript illumination (*Tazhib*) and ornamental painting (*Tash'ir*).

Conclusion

The findings indicated that the primary origin of the Eslimi motif lied in natural and animal-based forms dating back to the 6th millennium B.C. By the 5th millennium B.C., it evolved into a more complex configuration through the integration of vegetal motifs. In the first millennium B.C., under the influence of Egypt, Assyria, and Greek civilizations, the motif acquired a more stabilized structure, ultimately reaching its developmental peak during the Sasanid period. The continuation of this motif into the artistic traditions of the early Islamic period, particularly during the Seljuk era, contributed to the development of manuscript illumination (*Tazhib*) and ornamental painting (*Tash'ir*). The integration of Eslimi designs with geometric patterns and circular structures not only generated innovative formal arrangements but also conveyed sacred and metaphysical concepts such as the divine unity of God and the order of creation within Islamic artistic expression. Influential factors such as mythology, religious traditions, popular beliefs, and intercultural interactions with neighboring civilizations, the presence of symbolic elements (e.g., the sacred tree), and theological notions (e.g., eternity and the visualization of paradise), all played a significant role in the emergence and continuity of the motif. Ultimately, the Eslimi motif emerged as a profound symbol of cosmic unity and divine order within Islamic art.

Keywords: Eslimi, Arabesque, spiral motif, ancient Iranian art, Islamic art.