

Visual Semiotics in Islamic Art: An Analysis of Signs, Meaning and Aesthetic Value

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ABSTRACT

Islamic art does not merely produce visual beauty; it also forms a system of signs that links form, meaning, culture and spirituality. Elements such as geometry, calligraphy, motifs, ornament and colour are often prominent features of Islamic art, yet the meaning produced by these elements is not necessarily fixed or universal. This study aims to analyse the function of visual signs and meaning in Islamic art and to explain the relationship between aesthetic value and cultural and spiritual dimensions. The study adopts a qualitative approach through visual and semiotic analysis of five purposively selected works of Islamic art encompassing architecture, manuscripts and ceramics, namely the Great Mosque of Córdoba, the decoration of the Alhambra, a Section from a Qur'an Manuscript from around 1300, a 15th–16th century Ottoman Qur'an manuscript, and a Tile from an Inscriptional Frieze from the early 14th century. These five works were purposively selected to maximise variation in medium, historical period and cultural-geographical context, so as to examine whether visual signs perform a consistent or context-dependent semiotic function; the corpus is therefore analytical rather than representative, and findings are not generalised beyond it. The analysis employs Peirce's classification of signs like icon, index and symbol, together with Barthes's concepts of denotation and connotation. The findings show that geometry, calligraphy, motifs and ornament function not merely as decorative elements but as signs that shape visual experience and produce meaning based on the function and cultural context of the work. Calligraphy in particular reveals the relationship between linguistic communication and visual expression, while geometry and repetition form the order and rhythm that contribute to aesthetic experience. The study further finds that the spiritual dimension should not be determined absolutely through particular symbols, but must instead be interpreted through the relationship between form, text, function, history and cultural context. The semiotic approach thus helps in understanding Islamic art as a dynamic visual language and provides a more critical basis for understanding the use of elements of Islamic art in contemporary art and design.

Keywords: Islamic art, visual semiotics, signs, calligraphy, geometry, aesthetics, symbol

INTRODUCTION

Islamic art is one of the artistic traditions that developed through a close relationship between religious values, culture, aesthetics and the life of Muslim society. Its output can be seen across a range of media, including architecture, manuscripts, ceramics, textiles and decorative art. Unlike approaches that view art merely as the production of beautiful forms, Islamic art also functions as a visual medium that shapes the experience of space, text, objects and environment. Geometry, calligraphy, vegetal motifs, ornament and colour are among the key elements that form the visual identity of this tradition (Burckhardt, 1976; Nasr, 1987).

One of the prominent characteristics of Islamic art is the repeated, structured and rhythmic use of visual elements. Geometric patterns, for instance, are widely used in architecture and manuscripts, while calligraphy combines linguistic content with visual form. In the context of architecture, elements such as the mihrab, mosaics, arabesques and inscriptions form a relationship between the function of space and visual experience. In Qur'an manuscripts, the arrangement of text, illumination, colour and division markers likewise shows that the sacred text is not only read but also designed and presented as a visual object. Thus, the aesthetic elements of Islamic

art can be seen as part of a communication system that produces meaning through the relationship between form and context.

Nevertheless, the question of the meaning of visual elements in Islamic art cannot be answered merely by identifying the motifs or symbols present in a given work. A form does not necessarily possess a single, fixed meaning. Geometry, for example, can produce an impression of order and symmetry, but its interpretation as a symbol of a particular spiritual concept must take into account historical context, the function of the work and cultural convention. Likewise, calligraphy does not function only as writing that conveys linguistic content, but also becomes a compositional element with aesthetic value and visual identity. Studies of Islamic art and illumination show that the relationship between form, text and meaning is a complex process shaped by the context of a work's production and reception.

In this context, the visual semiotic approach provides a suitable framework for examining how visual elements function as signs and how meaning is formed through the relationship between the sign, its object and the audience. Peirce (1931–1958) divides signs into icon, index and symbol based on the relationship between the sign and its object. This framework allows visual elements to be analysed according to the way they refer to or produce meaning. Barthes (1967), meanwhile, distinguishes between denotative and connotative meaning, thereby allowing the analysis to move from what is directly visible toward the cultural and ideological meanings associated with a given sign.

Although studies of Islamic art have extensively discussed aspects of history, aesthetics, geometry and calligraphy, an approach that combines the analysis of visual elements with a semiotic framework remains important for revealing how such signs function as a whole. Recent studies also show that elements such as geometry and illumination in Islamic manuscripts carry potential meanings that extend beyond decorative function, while the use of elements of Islamic art in contemporary works reveals shifts and adaptations of meaning according to new contexts. This points to the need to understand Islamic art not merely through the question of what is depicted, but also how a given form produces meaning.

Accordingly, this study analyses five purposively selected works of Islamic art chosen for the diversity of their medium and the richness of their visual elements, namely the Great Mosque of Córdoba, the decoration of the Alhambra, a Section from a Qur'an Manuscript from around 1300, a 15th–16th century Ottoman Qur'an manuscript, and a Tile from an Inscriptional Frieze from the early 14th century. The selection of works from architecture, manuscripts and ceramics allows the study to compare the use of geometry, calligraphy, motifs, ornament, colour and space across different contexts. This analysis is then used to understand the relationship between sign, meaning and aesthetic value in Islamic art.

Research Objectives

This study has three main objectives:

1. To identify and analyse visual elements such as geometry, calligraphy, motifs, ornament, colour and space in the selected works of Islamic art.
2. To analyse the semiotic function of visual elements based on Peirce's concept of the sign and Barthes's concepts of denotative and connotative meaning.
3. To explain the relationship between sign, meaning and aesthetic value, and its relevance to understanding Islamic art in a contemporary context.

Research Questions

Based on the above objectives, this study addresses three questions:

1. What visual elements are dominant in the selected works of Islamic art?

2. How do these visual elements function as signs and produce meaning based on the semiotic approaches of Peirce and Barthes?
3. How does the relationship between sign, meaning and aesthetic value contribute to the understanding of Islamic art in a contemporary context?

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Islamic Art and Visual Language

Islamic art is an artistic tradition that developed within the sphere of Islamic civilisation and spans a wide range of societies and regions. The term "Islamic art" therefore does not refer to a single uniform style. Burckhardt (1976) emphasises the relationship between traditional Islamic art forms and the spiritual principles underlying Islamic culture. Nasr (1987), meanwhile, views Islamic art through the relationship between outward form and inner reality, particularly in the context of beauty and consciousness of God. Both perspectives show that aesthetic and spiritual dimensions are not necessarily separate in understanding Islamic art.

In the development of Islamic art, calligraphy, geometry and ornament are among the most prominent visual elements. Grabar (1992) explains that ornament can function as a mediator between the art object and the viewer. This makes ornament important not only in terms of decoration but also in terms of visual experience.

Geometry is a clear example. Repeated patterns, symmetry and mathematical arrangement produce a visual order that is an important characteristic of many Islamic art traditions. Recent studies show that geometry in Islamic art has been interpreted through the relationship between form, mathematics, symbolism and religious belief, although such interpretations must take historical and cultural context into account.

Calligraphy holds a particular position because Arabic script is often used to render the text of the Qur'an, hadith, prayers and religious expressions. Alashari et al. (2019) demonstrate the relationship between the Arabic language, calligraphy and the development of Islamic art, as well as calligraphy's position as a form of visual expression that connects language with spirituality.

The visual elements of Islamic art can therefore be seen as a form of language. However, this language does not necessarily have a single, fixed code of meaning. Meaning is formed through the relationship between form, context, culture and the audience's knowledge. A semiotic approach allows this relationship to be analysed more systematically.

Visual Semiotics

Semiotics is the study of signs and the process of meaning-production. Saussure (1916/2011) viewed the sign as a relationship between signifier and signified. Although this concept is rooted in linguistics, the principle of the relationship between form and concept has had a major influence on the development of sign analysis in culture and visual communication.

In visual analysis, a sign need not take the form of a word. Images, colours, forms, lines, composition and objects can also function as signs when they produce meaning for the viewer. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) show that the visual has its own grammar that allows meaning to be formed through the arrangement, relationship and emphasis of elements within an image.

This approach is relevant to Islamic art because its visual elements have a complex relationship between form and context. For example, calligraphy can carry linguistic meaning at one level, while letterform, spatial arrangement and technique of production form aesthetic meaning at another level. Geometry, in turn, can function as a compositional structure, but in certain contexts is also associated with concepts of order and unity.

Peirce and Barthes as Analytical Frameworks

Peirce divides signs into icon, index and symbol. An icon has a relationship of resemblance with its object, an index has an indicative relationship with its object, while a symbol acquires meaning through convention or habit. In the context of Islamic art, this classification helps explain how a given visual form functions as a sign based on the type of relationship it holds with the object or concept to which it refers.

Barthes (1967), meanwhile, provides a framework for understanding meaning through denotation and connotation. At the denotative level, analysis attends to what is directly visible. At the connotative level, analysis moves toward the cultural meanings and associations formed through the experience of society. Barthes's concept is particularly useful for preventing the analysis of art from stopping at the mere identification of visual elements.

In this article, both theories are used in a complementary manner. Peirce is used to identify the function of the sign, while Barthes is used to examine the layers of meaning. Through this approach, the analysis moves from visual form to sign, and then to cultural and spiritual meaning.

Based on this review, it can be seen that studies of Islamic art have given broad attention to aspects of history, aesthetics, geometry, calligraphy and symbolism. However, research that connects these visual elements with the function of signs and the process of meaning-formation through a semiotic approach still requires more integrated investigation. In this context, the approaches of Peirce and Barthes provide a basis for examining not only the form that is visually present, but also the relationship between sign, function, context and meaning. This study therefore uses both frameworks to analyse five selected works of Islamic art across architecture, manuscripts and ceramics.

Operationalising Key Concepts

Three concepts recur throughout this study and are defined here so that they function as analytical tools rather than loosely applied descriptive labels. Aesthetic value refers to the perceptual and structural qualities that shape the viewer's visual experience consistent with Grabar's (1992) view of ornament as a mediator between the art object and the viewer and is operationalised in this study through six identifiable characteristics: geometric symmetry, repetition and rhythm, proportion, compositional hierarchy, colour contrast, and material treatment (e.g., gold, lustre or glaze). Cultural meaning refers to associations that depend on shared convention within a specific historical and social setting for instance, the association between a dynastic motto and political authority and, following Barthes (1967), is distinguished throughout the analysis from meanings that follow directly from form alone. Spiritual dimension refers to the relationship between a visual element and religious or devotional experience; following Nasr (1987) and Shaw (2022), it is treated strictly as a contextual, interpretive category rather than an intrinsic property of any motif, since geometry and other visual elements acquire spiritual significance only through the specific relationship between form, function and context in which they are read. Accordingly, a spiritual reading is advanced only where it is supported by the function of the space or object (e.g., a mihrab's orientation toward the qibla), by textual content (e.g., a Qur'anic inscription), or by documented ritual use, rather than by visual form in isolation. These operational definitions are applied consistently across the five case analyses that follow.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative approach through visual analysis grounded in semiotics. This approach was chosen because the study focuses on how visual elements form signs and produce meaning within the context of Islamic art. Visual analysis allows a work to be examined not only in terms of formal characteristics such as form, colour, arrangement and composition, but also in terms of the relationship between these elements and their cultural and spiritual context. Kress and van Leeuwen (2021) affirm that the visual has its own grammatical system that allows meaning to be formed through the relationship and arrangement of elements within a visual representation.

Study Corpus

The study corpus consists of five purposively selected works of Islamic art, chosen for the diversity of their medium and the richness of their visual elements. The selected works are:

1. The Great Mosque of Córdoba, particularly the mihrab and maqsura spaces, Spain;
2. The Alhambra, Granada, particularly the geometric decoration, arabesques and epigraphy of the Nasrid palace complex;
3. Section from a Qur'an Manuscript, ca. 1300, attributed to the Maghreb or southern Spain;
4. Qur'an Manuscript, 15th–16th century, attributed to Ottoman Turkey; and
5. Tile from an Inscriptional Frieze, early 14th century, Kashan, Iran.

This selection allows the analysis to cover architecture, architectural decoration, manuscripts and ceramics. The corpus also reflects geographic and historical variation, thereby avoiding an analysis that treats Islamic art as a uniform visual tradition. Records held by The Metropolitan Museum of Art confirm the object details for the manuscript from around 1300, the Ottoman manuscript and the inscribed tile used in this study.

The rationale for selecting these five works follows directly from the research objectives rather than from an attempt to represent Islamic art as a whole. The corpus was purposively assembled to maximise variation across medium (monumental architecture, architectural ornament, manuscript illumination and ceramic epigraphy), historical period (from Umayyad al-Andalus through Nasrid, Ilkhanid and Ottoman production) and cultural-geographical context (al-Andalus, Nasrid Granada, the Maghreb, Ilkhanid Iran and Ottoman Turkey). This deliberate variation is what allows the study to examine whether a given visual element like geometry, calligraphy or ornament performs a stable semiotic function across contexts, or whether its function shifts with medium, period and setting. Because the corpus is purposive rather than representative, the findings are presented as an analytical demonstration of how sign, meaning and aesthetic value interact within Islamic visual culture, and not as a claim generalisable to Islamic art as a whole. A broader generalisation would require a larger, more systematically sampled corpus, ideally extended to comparative cases from regions and periods not covered here, such as Mamluk Egypt, Safavid Iran or Mughal India.

Method of Analysis

The analysis was carried out in three stages. The first stage is formal observation, namely identifying visual elements such as geometry, calligraphy, vegetal motifs, ornament, colour, repetition, symmetry and spatial arrangement. The second stage applies Peirce's classification to examine the function of these elements as icon, index or symbol. Not every work necessarily displays all three sign categories simultaneously; classification is made based on the clearest sign relationship evident in the context of the work being analysed. The third stage applies Barthes's concepts to distinguish between denotative and connotative meaning.

In the process of interpretation, meaning is not determined merely on the basis of symbolic assumption. Rather, interpretation is made by taking into account historical context, the function of the work, the content of inscriptions and curatorial information. This principle is important because a given visual form does not necessarily carry the same meaning across all contexts within Islamic art.

Throughout the analysis, a distinction is maintained between two kinds of claim. The first is descriptive and evidence-based, drawing on documented facts such as museum curatorial records, historical inscriptions, textual content and architectural function (for example, the mihrab's orientation toward Mecca, or the attribution and dating supplied by The Metropolitan Museum of Art). The second is interpretive, reflecting the researcher's semiotic reading of how form and context combine to produce connotative or aesthetic meaning. Where a claim is interpretive rather than directly evidenced, this is signalled explicitly in the analysis through qualifying language such as “can be read as” or “suggests”, so that readers can distinguish analytical inference from documented fact.

The analysis also takes into account the relationships between visual elements. A sign is not read in isolation, but is instead analysed based on its position within the overall composition. In this way, the relationship between geometry, calligraphy, colour, motif and space can be seen as a single visual system that produces meaning.

VISUAL SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS IN ISLAMIC ART

Great Mosque of Córdoba: Geometry, Calligraphy and Sacred Space



Source: https://madainproject.com/mihrab_of_cordoba_mosque

The Great Mosque of Córdoba reveals a complex relationship between space, text and ornament as a visual sign system. At the denotative level, the mihrab and maqsura spaces can be identified through their position, architectural form, mosaic, calligraphy and the vegetal motifs that cover the surfaces. These elements are not mere decoration; they form a visual hierarchy that distinguishes a particular space from the rest of the building.

Within Peirce's framework, indexical function is most clearly seen in the mihrab. Its position and orientation indicate the direction of the qibla and the function of the space within the context of a place of worship. This relationship is indexical because the meaning of the mihrab does not depend solely on its visual form, but on the factual relationship between its position and the function of the prayer space. In other words, the mihrab becomes a sign that points to the function and orientation of the space.

Calligraphy, on the other hand, functions primarily as a symbol, since its linguistic content acquires meaning through the language system and religious convention shared by the reader. The relationship between the written form and its meaning is not formed through physical resemblance between the writing and the object referred to, but through linguistic convention. At the same time, the shape, size, arrangement and placement of the letters within the space make calligraphy part of the visual composition.

Mosaic, geometric pattern and vegetal motif, meanwhile, need not be interpreted as symbols carrying a fixed spiritual meaning. In the context of this work, their primary function can be understood through their role in forming structure, rhythm and visual emphasis. The repeated pattern connects one surface with another and directs attention toward the mihrab area. Their semiotic value is therefore more accurately understood through

the relationship between form and the function of space, rather than through the assumption that every pattern carries a particular symbolism.

At the onnotative level, the use of gold, contrasting colours, mosaic and the complex arrangement of decoration can produce associations of grandeur, reverence and the importance of the space. However, this connotation does not arise from any single element in isolation. It is formed through the combination of the signs of space, text, material and ornament within the overall composition. Calvo Capilla (2018) further shows that the epigraphic programme of the Córdoba Mosque, particularly the Qur'anic inscriptions added under al-Hakam II, played role in shaping the visual and ideological representation of Umayyad rule in al-Andalus.

The Córdoba Mosque thus shows that the function of the sign in Islamic art is not necessarily singular. The mihrab functions indexically through the relationship between the position of the space and the direction of the qibla, calligraphy functions symbolically through linguistic convention, while geometry and ornament form visual relationships through repetition, rhythm and composition. Meaning is then formed through the interaction of all these elements.

Alhambra: Repetition, Arabesque and Visual Order



One example of Islamic artistry at the Alhambra — Patio of the Lions

Source: <https://www.alhambradegranada.org/>

The Alhambra in Granada shows the intensive use of geometry, vegetal motifs and epigraphy. This complex decoration encompasses geometric, vegetal and epigraphic motifs, including lacería, sebka patterns, muqarnas, hexagons, octagons and six- and eight-pointed stars. At the denotative level, these patterns appear as a series of repeated forms, arranged symmetrically and filling the architectural surfaces. From Peirce's perspective, not all of these geometric forms need be regarded as symbols in the sense of each form carrying a specific cultural meaning. Rather, their semiotic function can first be understood through the way the form organises the surface, creates continuity and produces relationships between pattern units.

In this context, repetition is more accurately understood as a formal relationship that creates continuity, rhythm and visual order. Indexical function only becomes clearer when a given sign indicates a particular position or function within the structure of the work. However, when such a form is read according to convention and

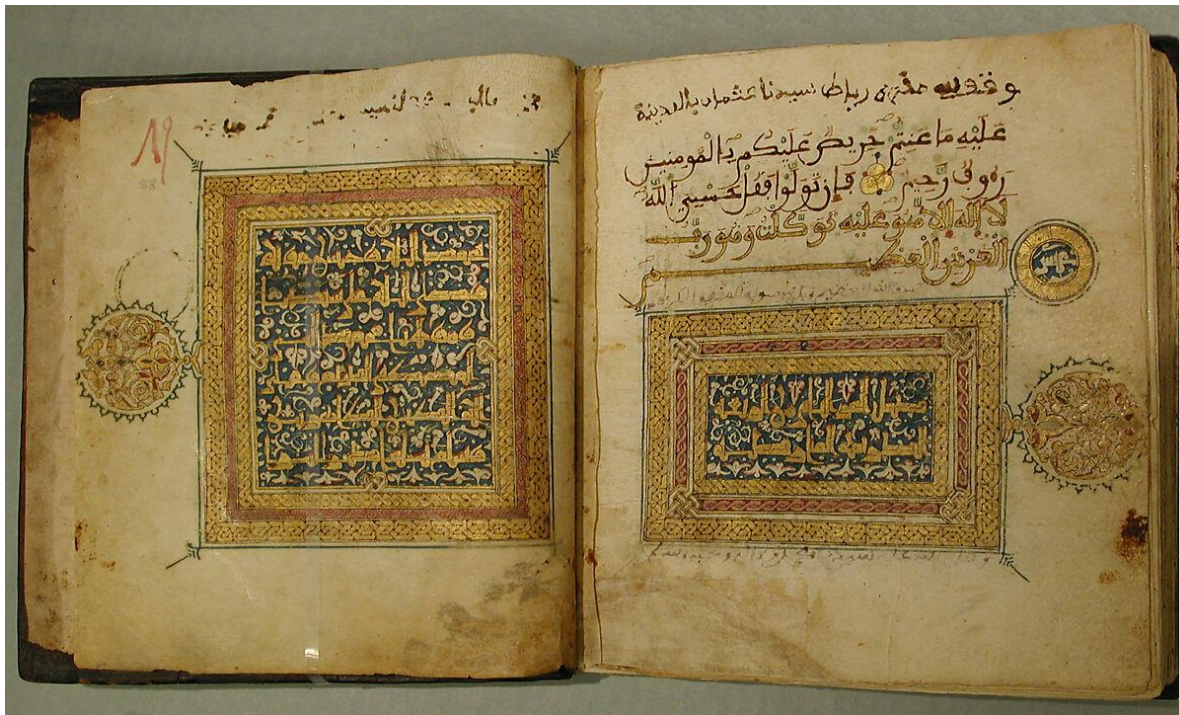
cultural knowledge, it can also acquire a symbolic function. This distinction matters because it shows that a given sign does not necessarily belong to a single category in an absolute sense.

The inscriptions at the Alhambra offer a clearer example of symbolic function. The text acquires meaning through the language system, while its poetic and religious content can be understood through the viewer's cultural knowledge. Bush (2018) shows that the poetic inscriptions at the Alhambra play a role in directing the viewer's aesthetic experience, including through the relationship between text and architectural space.

The Nasrid dynasty's motto, "No hay vencedor sino Dios" ("There is no victor but God"), which appears repeatedly throughout the palace decoration, reveals the relationship between text and identity. At the denotative level, it is simply text repeated across the architectural surface. At the connotative level, its repetition can be linked to dynastic identity, religion and authority. Its symbolic function is formed through linguistic convention and the historical and political context of its use, rather than through the letterforms themselves.

The Alhambra thus shows how a sign system is formed through the combination of visual structure and cultural convention. Geometry and arabesque organise visual experience through repetition and continuity, while the inscriptions carry linguistic and cultural meaning. The relationship between the two produces a visual system more complex than the interpretation that every motif carries a fixed symbolism.

Section from a Qur'an Manuscript, ca. 1300: Calligraphy, Geometry and Illumination



The second volume of a seven-volume Qur'an manuscript with no surviving colophon, dating from around 1300.

Source: <https://www.metmuseum.org>

The Section from a Qur'an Manuscript from around 1300 is an important example of the relationship between sacred text and visual decoration. According to the record of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, the manuscript was produced using ink, gold and opaque paint on parchment. Its opening section has a geometric strapwork design that bears similarities to Andalusian and North African tile design.

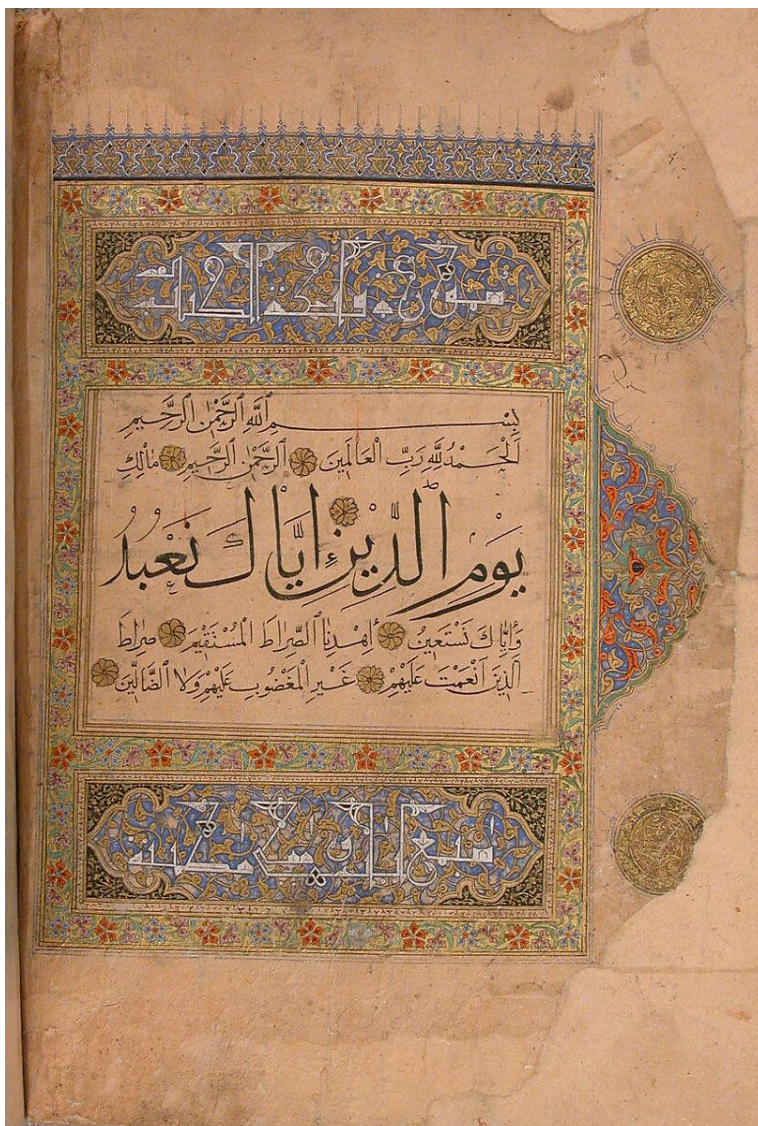
At the denotative level, the reader sees Qur'anic text arranged together with elements of geometry and illumination. From Peirce's perspective, the Qur'anic text functions as a symbol because the relationship between the linguistic sign and its content is formed through the language system. Readers who understand Arabic can identify the content of the text through this linguistic convention. The symbolic function of the calligraphy in this work is therefore clearer than the symbolic function of the geometry.

Geometry, in turn, plays a different function. It frames and organises the textual space and distinguishes particular areas of the page. In this sense, geometry does not necessarily refer directly to a single specific object. Rather, its semiotic function is formed through the relationship between visual structure, position and the function of the page. It helps the viewer identify the hierarchy and organisation of the manuscript's content.

At the same time, the use of gold and illumination produces a connotative relationship with reverence for the text. However, this relationship should not be regarded as an intrinsic meaning of the colour gold or of geometric form. Connotation is formed through the combination of material, text, page arrangement and the function of the manuscript as a religious object.

This work thus shows that the sign in Qur'an manuscripts operates on several levels. Calligraphy functions as a linguistic symbol, the geometric arrangement functions as a structure organising the visual space, while material and illumination contribute to aesthetic and connotative experience. Overall meaning is produced through the relationship between these elements rather than through a single self-contained symbol.

Qur'an Manuscript, 15th–16th Century: Text, Colour and Sign System



Qur'an manuscript, 15th–16th century.

Source: <https://www.metmuseum.org>

The 15th–16th century Ottoman Qur'an manuscript shows a more highly structured visual system through the use of script, colour, medallions and text-division markers. The manuscript displays the use of muhaqqaq and

rihani scripts, as well as geometric Kufic script, to identify the surahs. Gold medallions in the margins are used to mark chapter divisions, while small roundels function as verse markers.

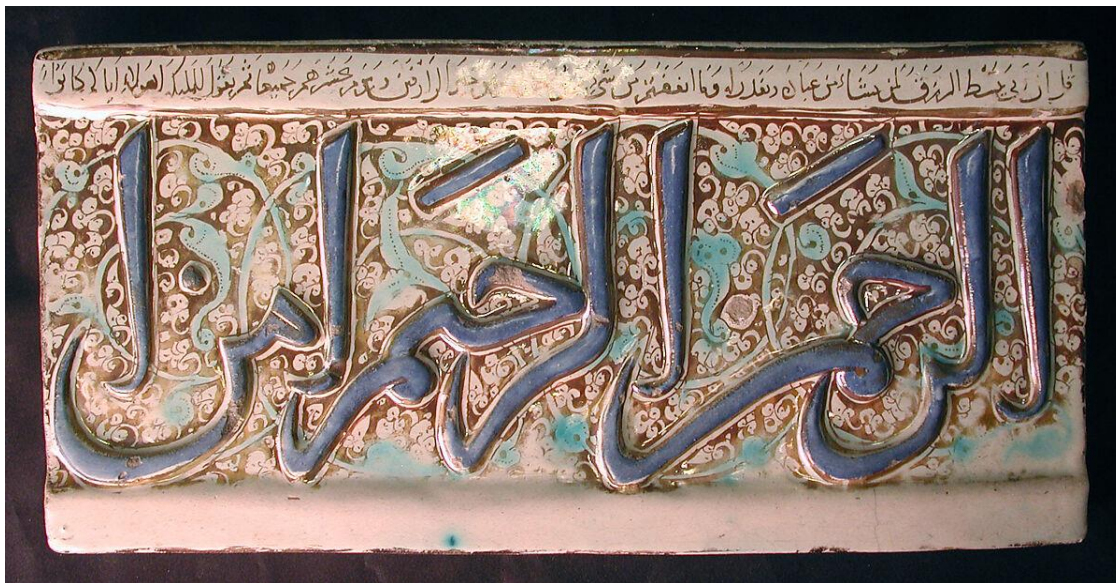
At the denotative level, these elements can be identified as visual signs that distinguish and organise sections of the text. From Peirce's perspective, the roundels and medallions display a clearer indexical function, since their presence indicates a particular location or division within the structure of the text. The relationship between the sign and what it indicates is formed through the position of the sign on the page.

The use of Kufic script to identify surahs, by contrast, displays a symbolic function, since its reading and comprehension depend on scriptural convention and the manuscript's system of organisation. Meaning does not arise from the geometric form of the writing alone, but from the reader's knowledge of the function of that script within the context of the manuscript.

In this regard, colour and gold likewise need not be regarded as universal spiritual symbols. Their primary function in this work can be understood through visual distinction, emphasis and hierarchy. Colour helps differentiate particular elements, while gold heightens the visual presence of a sign on the page. When read within the context of the Qur'an manuscript, the use of such material and decoration can produce connotations of reverence and grandeur toward the text.

A comparison with the manuscript from around 1300 shows that the visual principles of Islamic art can appear in different forms according to era and region. Geometry, calligraphy, colour and division markers continue to be used, but their function and arrangement change according to manuscript tradition. This supports the view that the meaning of signs in Islamic art must be understood through the relationship between form, function and context.

Tile from an Inscriptional Frieze: Calligraphy as Visual Language



Tile from an Inscriptional Frieze, early 14th century, from Kashan, Iran.

Source: <https://www.metmuseum.org>

The Tile from an Inscriptional Frieze is an early 14th-century tile attributed to Kashan, Iran. According to The Metropolitan Museum of Art, this tile once formed part of a calligraphic frieze within a tomb or religious structure. It bears three lines of religious text in thuluth script, including a Qur'anic excerpt, and uses blue, turquoise and lustre on a white surface.

At the denotative level, this work is a ceramic object bearing text in the form of calligraphy. From Peirce's perspective, the religious text functions as a symbol because its meaning depends on the language system and

religious convention. However, when the text is rendered in large thuluth script and arranged as a frieze, the writing also acquires a visual function through its size, direction and continuity across the surface.

The relationship between the tiles that make up the frieze produces compositional continuity and shows that each unit is part of a larger visual sequence. Indexical function is clearer in the relationship between the tile and its original position and function as part of an architectural frieze. Each tile indicates its position as part of a larger sequence. The continuity of text from one tile to the next makes each unit dependent on its neighbouring unit to produce the overall composition. Indexical function thus lies not in the letterforms alone, but in the physical and compositional relationship between the parts of the frieze.

Colour and lustre, meanwhile, are better understood as elements that strengthen the visual presence of the text and build aesthetic value. At the connotative level, the combination of sacred text, calligraphy, material and religious location can produce associations of sanctity and reverence toward revelation. However, this connotation cannot be attributed to any particular colour in isolation. It is formed through the entire sign system that combines the content of the text, the form of the writing, material, location and composition.

This work shows that calligraphy in Islamic art carries a function that goes beyond the transmission of language. As a symbol, the writing carries linguistic content; as a visual form, it builds hierarchy, rhythm and continuity; while its position within the frieze connects it to architectural space. Calligraphy can thus be understood as a sign that operates simultaneously at the linguistic, visual and contextual levels.

Synthesis of the Analysis

Table 1: Comparative analytical matrix of the five works

Work	Dominant Visual Sign(s)	Peircean Category	Denotative Meaning	Connotative Meaning	Cultural/Historical Context	Function	Aesthetic Characteristics
Great Mosque of Córdoba	Mihrab position; calligraphic inscriptions; mosaic/geometric ornament	Index (mihrab); Symbol (calligraphy); relational (ornament)	Sacred space marked by architectural form, script and pattern	Grandeur, reverence, Umayyad political - religious authority	Umayyad al-Andalus; epigraphic programme under al-Hakam II	Orients and frames the prayer space toward the qibla	Symmetry, repetition, colour contrast, hierarchy
Alhambra	Geometric/vegetal ornament (lacería, muqarnas); dynastic inscriptions	Relational/formal (ornament); Symbol (inscriptions, e.g. Nasrid motto)	Repeated, symmetrical patterning; repeated text across surfaces	Dynastic identity, religious and political authority	Nasrid Granada; court poetry and ceremonial context	Structures palatial surfaces and directs aesthetic experience	Repetition, rhythm, proportion, continuity

Qur'an Manuscript, ca. 1300	Qur'anic calligraphy; geometric strapwork framing	Symbol (text); relational/structural (geometry)	Text organised together with illumination and framing devices	Reverence for the sacred text	Maghreb/south Spain, ca. 1300	Hierarchical organisation of the manuscript page	Proportion, gold/colour contrast, compositional hierarchy
Qur'an Manuscript, 15th–16th c. (Ottoman)	Muhaqqaq/rihani/Kufic script; medallions and roundels	Index (medallions/roundels); Symbol (Kufic script)	Marked chapter and verse divisions	Reverence, grandeur	Ottoman Turkey, 15th–16th century	Textual navigation and hierarchy	Colour distinction, repetition, proportion
Tile from an Inscriptional Frieze	Thuluth calligraphy; sequential tile arrangement	Symbol (text); Index (tile position in frieze)	Ceramic object bearing religious text	Sanctity, reverence toward revelation	Kashan, Iran, early 14th century (Ilkhanid)	Part of an architectural frieze within a tomb/religious structure	Continuity, rhythm, colour (blue, turquoise, lustre)

Note. The matrix summarises the semiotic analysis presented in the preceding sub-sections; category labels reflect the sign function that is clearest in each work, as not every work displays all three Peircean categories with equal prominence.

The analysis of the five works shows that the visual elements of Islamic art function through mutually complementary relationships. Geometry provides structure and repetition; calligraphy combines language with form; vegetal motifs build rhythm and continuity; while colour and material reinforce aesthetic experience.

Although these elements appear across various media and periods, their meaning is not necessarily uniform. The analysis shows that a sign becomes meaningful through the relationship between form, function and context. This is consistent with the semiotic approach, which views meaning as something formed through a process of interpretation rather than something permanently fixed within an object.

The comparison between Córdoba, the Alhambra, the Qur'an manuscripts and the Kashan tile also shows that Islamic art functions as a flexible visual language. Principles such as repetition, order, calligraphy and ornamentation can be applied in different contexts without producing identical visual forms. The identity of Islamic art is therefore more accurately understood through the relationship between visual principle, cultural context and system of meaning, rather than through a list of motifs assumed to carry fixed meanings.

DISCUSSION

Sign, Meaning and Aesthetic Dimension

The analysis of the five works shows that visual elements in Islamic art function as a sign system linking form, function and meaning. Geometry, calligraphy, vegetal motifs, ornament, colour and space do not function in isolation; rather, they complement one another in shaping visual experience. Within Peirce's framework, the function of a sign is determined by the relationship between the sign and its object, and a given work does not necessarily display all three categories of icon, index and symbol simultaneously. Barthes's approach,

meanwhile, shows that a given visual element has denotative meaning at the literal level and can produce connotative meaning when interpreted through cultural and religious experience (Barthes, 1967; Peirce, 1931–1958).

The findings also show that the aesthetic value of Islamic art cannot be entirely separated from its cultural and spiritual context. Repetition and symmetry in geometry, for example, produce visual order and rhythm, while calligraphy combines linguistic function with aesthetic function. In Qur'an manuscripts, the relationship between text, geometry, colour and illumination forms a visual experience that reinforces the text's status as an object of reverence. Nevertheless, this spiritual meaning should not be treated as an intrinsic property of every form. Interpretation of a given motif or colour must take into account the function of the work, its history and cultural convention. Shaw (2022) likewise shows that the relationship between geometry and spiritual meaning in Islamic art is a complex question that must be read according to context.

Beauty in Islamic art is thus not merely a matter of visually appealing form. Aesthetic value is formed through the relationship between structure, repetition, material, text and space, which together produce the experience of the work. This supports Nasr's (1987) view that Islamic art embodies a relationship between outward beauty and spiritual dimension, though this relationship must be understood as an experience formed through the work as a whole and its context.

Islamic Art as a Visual Language in the Contemporary Context

Understanding Islamic art as a sign system has implications for the production of contemporary art and design. Traditional geometry, calligraphy and motifs are now used across various fields such as graphic design, digital art, architecture, fashion and visual identity. However, the use of these elements should not be limited to the imitation of motifs merely to produce an "Islamic" appearance. Instead, visual principles such as order, repetition, hierarchy, rhythm and the relationship between text and image can be translated into contemporary forms while taking into account their original context and meaning.

A semiotic approach can help artists and designers understand that every visual element carries a range of possible meanings shaped by the context of its use. This allows the heritage of Islamic art to be developed creatively without severing its connection to cultural and spiritual values. In this sense, Islamic art is not merely a heritage of traditional forms, but a visual language that still holds the potential to produce meaning within the contemporary visual environment.

More concretely, at least three semiotic-aesthetic principles observed across the five cases can inform contemporary practice without reducing Islamic art to a repertoire of motifs to be copied. First, the compositional use of repetition and modular symmetry, demonstrated in the Alhambra's ornament, can generate rhythm and continuity in graphic or architectural design. Second, the treatment of calligraphy as a dual-function sign simultaneously linguistic and compositional, as shown across the Qur'an manuscripts and the Kashan tile can inform typographic and lettering design that carries content without severing it from visual structure. Third, the indexical use of spatial orientation and positioning, as in the Cordoba mihrab, can inform how contemporary spaces signal function and hierarchy through form rather than through explicit ornament alone. These principles are proposed as transferable design logics rather than motifs for direct replication, consistent with the study's broader argument that meaning in Islamic art is relational rather than fixed.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that Islamic art can be understood as a visual communication system that links form, sign, meaning and aesthetic value. Analysis of the five works reveals that geometry, calligraphy, motifs, ornament, colour and space carry a function broader than mere decoration. Their meaning is formed through the relationship between visual characteristics, the function of the work, cultural context and the audience's process of interpretation.

The application of Peirce's and Barthes's theories helps explain this process at two complementary levels. Peirce allows the function of the sign to be identified through the relationship between icon, index and symbol, while

Barthes helps distinguish denotative from connotative meaning. This approach shows that the meaning of Islamic art is not necessarily fixed or universal, but must instead be understood according to historical and cultural context.

Overall, visual semiotics provides a useful framework for understanding Islamic art more critically without neglecting its aesthetic and spiritual dimensions. This approach is also relevant to the production of contemporary art and design, as it encourages the use of traditional elements based on an understanding of visual language and the context of meaning, rather than through mere imitation of form.

ETHICS STATEMENTS

This study is based purely on visual, textual, and document analysis and does not involve human participants or animal subjects. Therefore, ethical approval from an institutional review board was not required. The study strictly adheres to academic integrity and ethical research standards.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no potential conflict of interest in financial, personal, or professional that could inappropriately influence or bias the findings and conclusions presented in this article.

DECLARATION OF AI

The author used AI-assisted language tools only for limited language refinement, grammar checking, and editorial clarity during revision. These tools were not used to generate research data, conduct analyses, create citations, interpret results independently, or make substantive scholarly claims. All conceptual framing, methodological decisions, data interpretation, verification of results, and final conclusions were critically reviewed and approved by the author. The author take full responsibility for the accuracy, integrity, and originality of the manuscript.

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