

Islamic Aesthetics

AHIS3600/HUMN2001 - VIDEO LECTURE
M. Curtis Allen (2021)

Context of the Islamic/Arabic Philosophical Tradition

- The Islamic or Arabic philosophical tradition begins in the late-early Middle Ages and continues to the present day.
- During its early, or classical period, Arabic philosophy experienced one of its historical high points, from approx. the 9th to the 12th centuries (800-1100s), and roughly corresponds with the “Golden Age” of Islam.



Context of the Islamic/Arabic Philosophical Tradition

Impact on Europe

- Arabic philosophy also had a major impact on Christian European Philosophy
- Interest in and integration of Ancient Greek philosophy was partly the product of cross-cultural contact with Arabic philosophers studying, commenting, and translating Greek classics.



Context of the Islamic/Arabic Philosophical Tradition

Impact on Europe

- Indeed, the study of Aristotle would become the hallmark of the mainstream of Medieval Christian scholastic philosophy and theology in figures like Thomas Aquinas due in part to commentaries by Muslim thinkers.
- The thought of Muslim philosophers, such as Avicenna (Ibn Sina) and Averroes (Ibn Rushd) had a deep influence on many philosophical disciplines within the Medieval European tradition, including metaphysics, psychology, and natural philosophy.



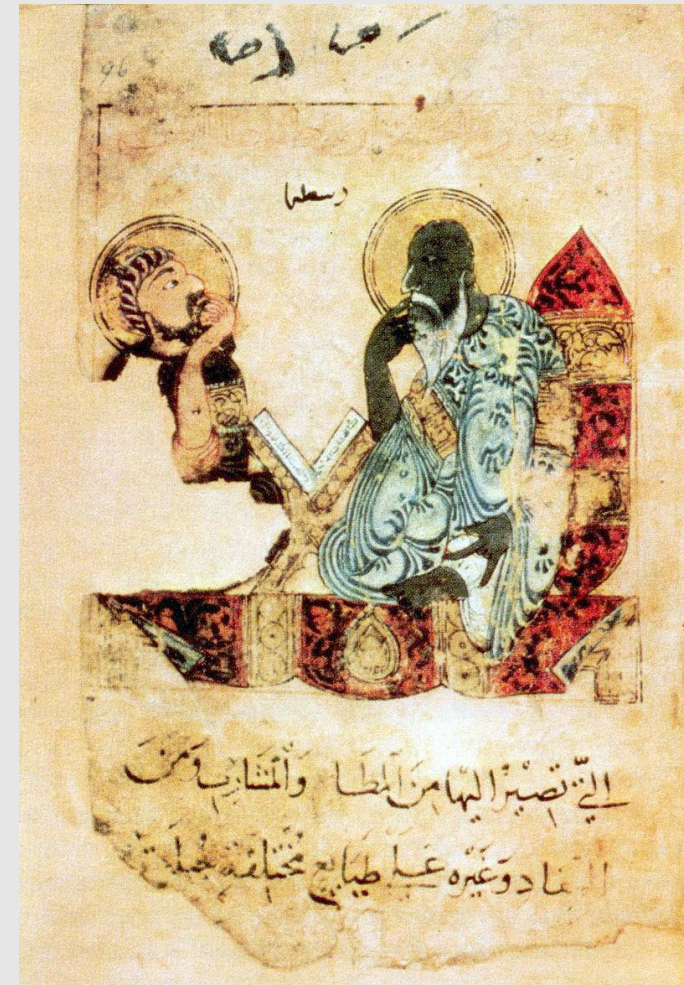
Context of the Islamic/Arabic Philosophic Tradition

- Arabic philosophy has its origins and influence in several diverse traditions:
 - **Islam itself**, e.g. in the Quran (القرآن); **Ilm al-Kalam** (عِلْمُ الْكَلَامِ) hermeneutical/theological tradition;
 - **Ancient Greek** (and Hellenistic, Greco-Roman) philosophy, e.g. Neoplatonism and esp. Aristotle;
 - As well as less encompassing, but still important influences from pre-Islamic **Persian (Iranian)**;
 - and **Indian** philosophical traditions.

Context of Islamic/Arabic Intellectual Traditions

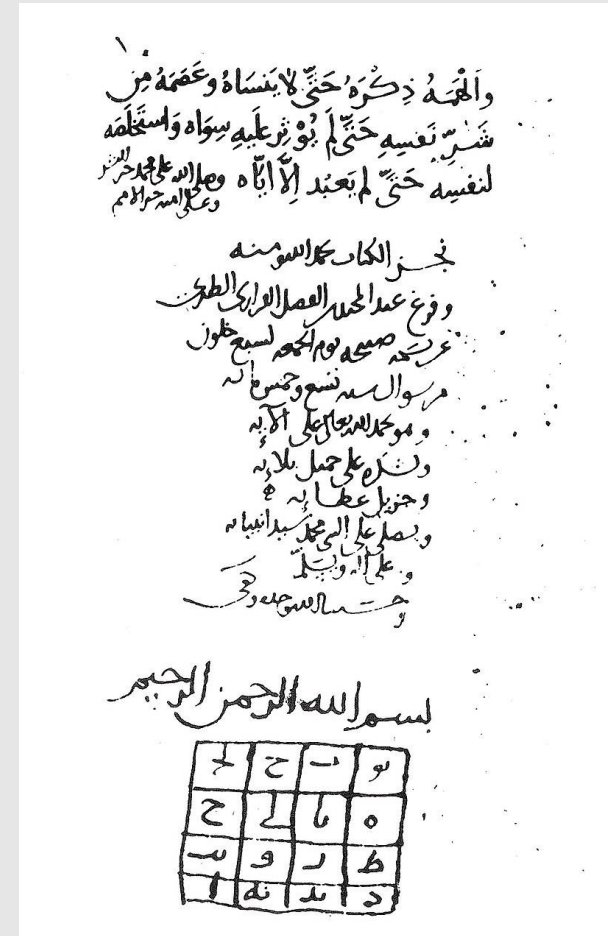
We will focus on **three main sources** of ideas and practices in this period:

- *Kalam*
- *Falsafa*
- Sufism



Ilm al-Kalam (Kalam)

- *Ilm al-Kalām* (عِلْمُ الْكَلَامِ) lit. “the science of discourse” (*Kalam* for short) is thought of as a rational inquiry into the principles and study of Islamic doctrine.
- As a way to frame basic insights and worldview of medieval Islamic aesthetics, we will focus one movement within the teaching of Islam: the thought of the *Mu'tazila* (المعتزلة)



Ilm al-Kalam (Kalam)

- *Mu'tazila*, as it relates to our framing, can be understood through **three major insights**:
 - **God (Allah)** is an **absolute unity**, therefore no attribute is adequate to knowledge of Him
 - Imp.: one cannot anthropomorphize god; images of god can only profane the nature of the Divine. Humans are therefore made in the image of god, in the way this is taken in the Christian theological tradition (i.e. analogy).
 - There is no trinity in Islam, since Jesus and Muhammed are seen as prophet.
 - The **human** has **free will**.
 - Like in the Christian tradition, this affirms that sin is the responsibility of the sinner alone, and cannot follow from god.
 - All necessary knowledge for human **salvation** can be achieved **through reason**.
 - Thus, faith and revelation are not necessarily requisites of religiosity and piety.



Falsafa

- *Falsafa* (loanword from the Greek *philosophia*), also called the Arabic Aristotelians or Peripatetic School.
 - The *falasifa* synthesized the rational and naturalistic outlook of:
 - Neoplatonism;
 - and esp. the works of Aristotle
 - with general dimensions of the Islamic worldview.



Falsafa

- What defines the *Falsafa*?
 - they are separated from the teachings of *Kalam* in that their philosophical and scientific pursuits were not directly concerned with theological matters.
 - Rather many of them thought of philosophy as a subject in its own right—separate from, though not necessarily in conflict with, the tenants of Islamic theology.



Kalam and *Falsafa* cont.

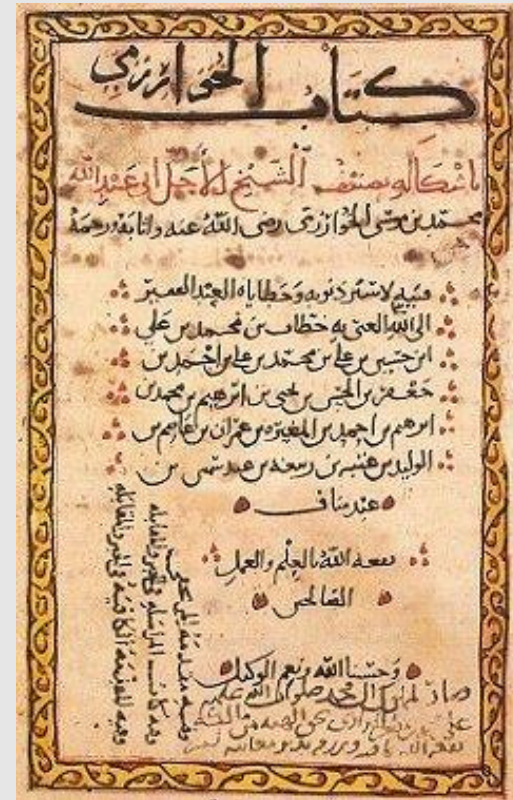
Falsafa and *Kalam* made **important and new contributions to** nearly every existing domain of **human knowledge/activity**, and were important forerunners in many others. These include among others:

- Metaphysics
- Ethics
- Logic
- Theory of knowledge
- Philosophy of mind/psychology
- Music/music theory
- Astronomy/cosmology
- Political philosophy/philosophy of law
- Mathematics
- Linguistics
- Historiography
- Sociology
- Medicine
- Poetry
- Optics
- Pharmacology
- Chemistry (alchemy)
- Cryptography
- Statistics
- Anthropology
- Geodesy
- Comparative religion

Kalam and Falsafa cont.

Of their many accomplishments and specific contributions, some major achievements include:

- The invention of algebra
- Non-periodic geometry/pattern
- Extensions of planar geometry beyond Ancient Greek
- Invention of the concept of the algorithm (named after the Latinization of Al-Khwarizmi)



Kalam and Falsafa cont.

Of their many accomplishments and specific contributions, some major achievements include:



- Many medical procedures and surgeries (including removal of cataracts)
- First methods of statistical inference
- The division of hours into minutes and seconds.

Kalam and *Falsafa* cont.

- Some of the most important thinkers in the Classical period include, among many others:
 - Al-Kindi
 - Al-Farabi
 - Avicenna (Ibn Sina)
 - Averroes (Ibn Rushd)



Sufism

- **Sufism** (الصُّوفِيَّة) also called *Tasawwuf* (التَّصَوُّف) is often described as the **mystical tradition of Islam**.
- The term **mysticism** characterizes various practices within many religious traditions
 - Which seek **connection with**, revelation or understanding of the **absolute or divine**
 - not through rational modes of inquiry but through various activities which produce **extreme or ecstatic states of being** which are purported to give insight.
 - In many cases this involves forms of **asceticism**, or ritual deprivation from worldly comforts and pleasure as a means of “interiorizing and intensifying” (Chittick 2007, 22) spiritual awareness.

Sufism

Sufism is a broad category in Islam, but some its **characteristic practices** include:

- ***Dhikr*** (devotional remembrances of god)
 - This includes recitation of divine names and hadiths (short aphorisms or sayings), among many other things.
- ***Muraqaba*** (meditation)
- **Sufi spinning/whirling**
 - A specific form of ritual dance (such as in the *Sama*) which puts the performers into a trance-like state. This is considered a form of *dhikr*.
- **Singing**
 - Which also takes many forms depending on the specific Sufi order



Sufism

Ideas in Sufism

- Traditional scholars define the **theoretical tenants** of Sufism in **two main directions**
- the **main direction** shared by most Sufi orders works toward the *purification* of the self and inner experience.
 - These obfuscate one's understanding of *the whole of creation as the direct revelation, manifestation, or self-disclosure (theophany) of Allah* (Yusuf 2008).



Sufism

Ideas in Sufism

- In this way the **divine presence is seen as ubiquitous** and one strives to become able to see all worldly events as the, all signs of the senses, under the aspect of its divine creation. This is called moving from “signs to the Signifier or from artist to Artisan”, and is the way promoted by Al-Ghazali.
- Through it, this **divine self-disclosure happens through the individual** alone
 - and thus may not be seen as compatible with modes of rationalism promoted by the philosophers (*falalsifa*).



Visual Arts in the Islamic “Golden Age”

- The art of Islam is varied, with styles and subjects depending heavily on the historical and cultural context.
- Arts in the Islamic world are often broken down into **major geographic/cultural areas**:
 - Arabic, Mughal (Indian), Ottoman (Turkish), and Persian.
- **Major artforms** include:
 - architecture, calligraphy, miniature painting, carpets, alongside many others.

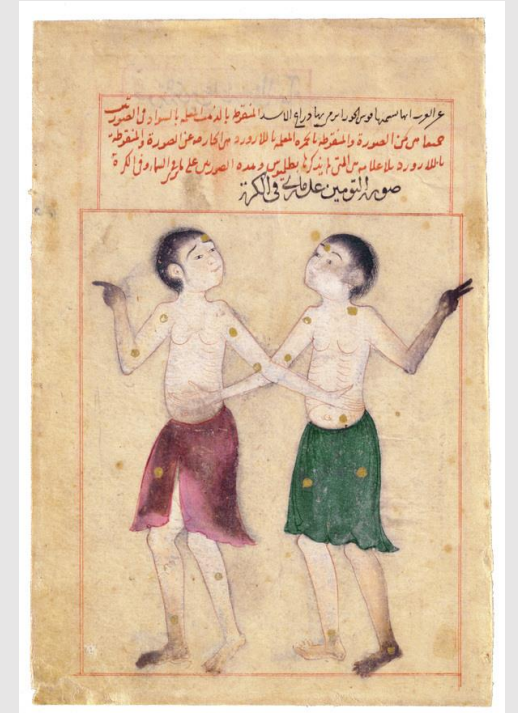
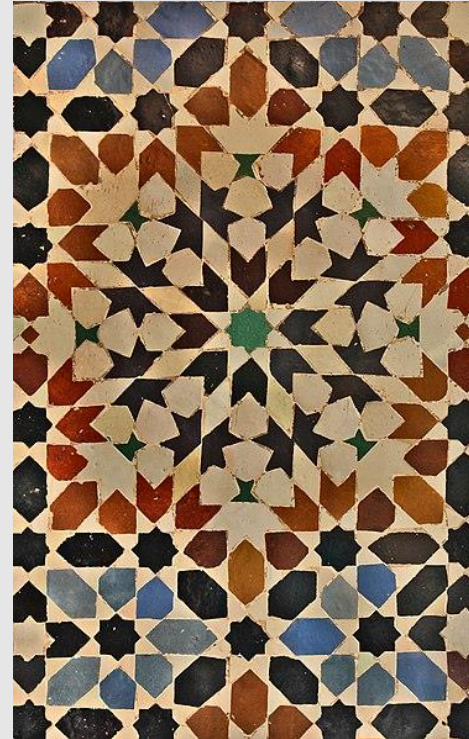


Visual Arts in the Islamic “Golden Age”

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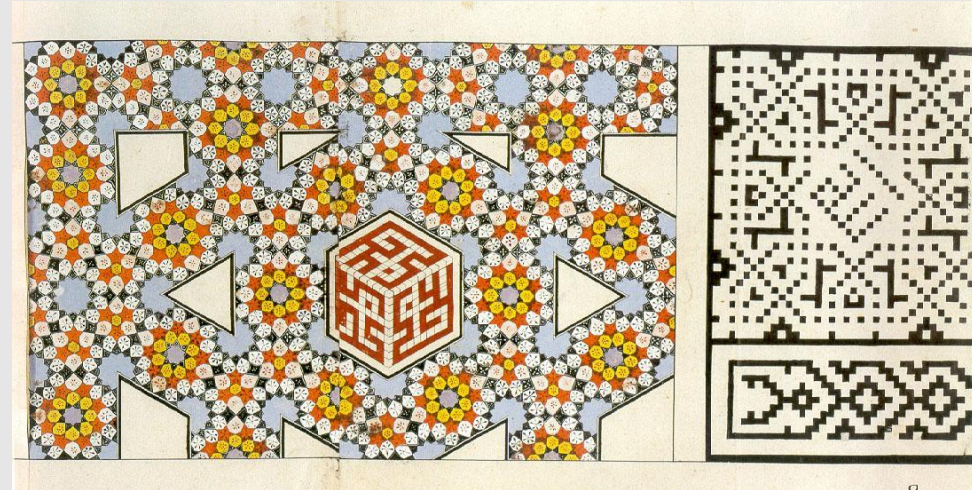
NO (esp. if religious)

- Much of Islamic art is **aniconic** (meaning ‘not imagistic’)
 - many in the Islamic world interpreted scripture to **prohibit the representation of God, prophets, humans, and other animals**
 - because of its association with the **prohibition on idolatry**,
 - and because the sentient beings were thought to be the special purview of **God’s creation**.



Visual Arts in the Islamic “Golden Age”

- This is thought to be one reason why the focus of so much Islamic art revolves around the development of
 - **repeating geometric motives and patterns;**
 - as well as on the **calligraphic arts** which visually exalt the written word (esp. of the Quran).



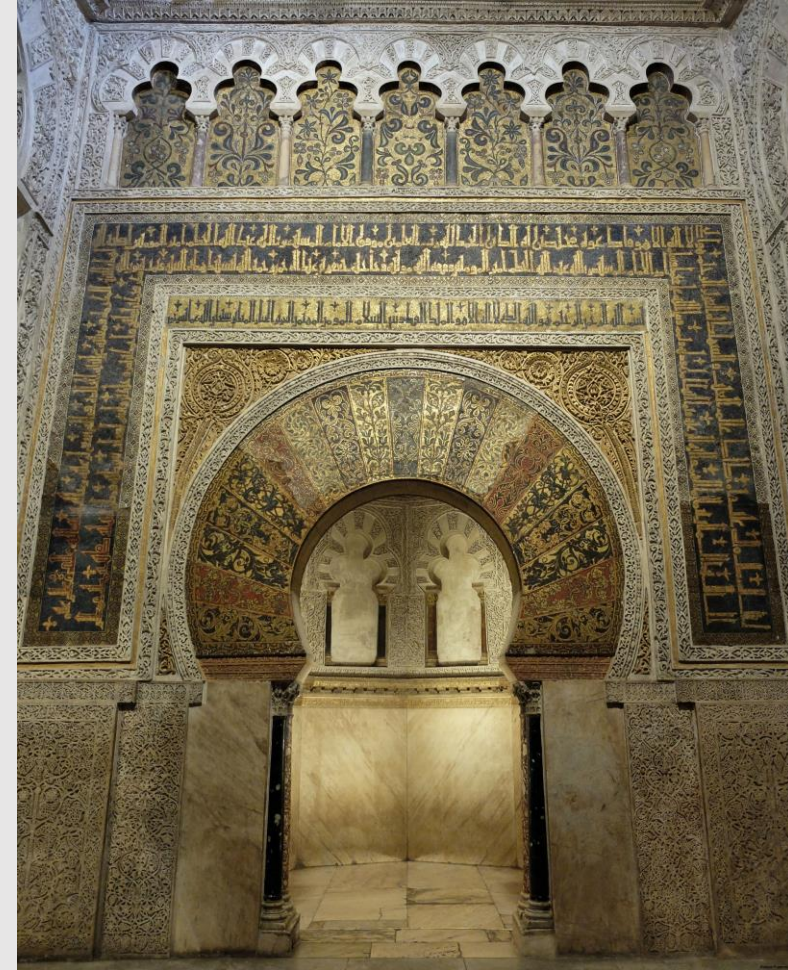
Visual Arts in the Islamic “Golden Age”

Features of Islamic Architecture

- Domed buildings
- Patterns
 - Geometric (*Girih*, etc.)
 - Arabesque (complex curvilinear floral/vegetable motifs)
- Keeled/pointed/multifoil arches
- Open floor plans with pillars for structure, where function is often not predetermined.
- *Muqarnas* (geometric sub-division of a vaulted arch or dome into pointed-arch substructures).
- Courtyard
- Garden



Visual Arts in the Islamic “Golden Age”



Visual Arts in the Islamic “Golden Age”



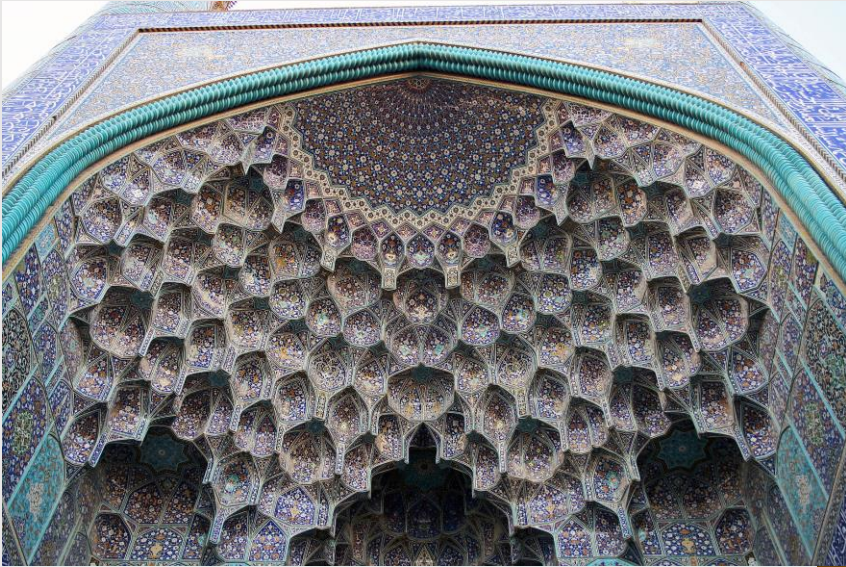
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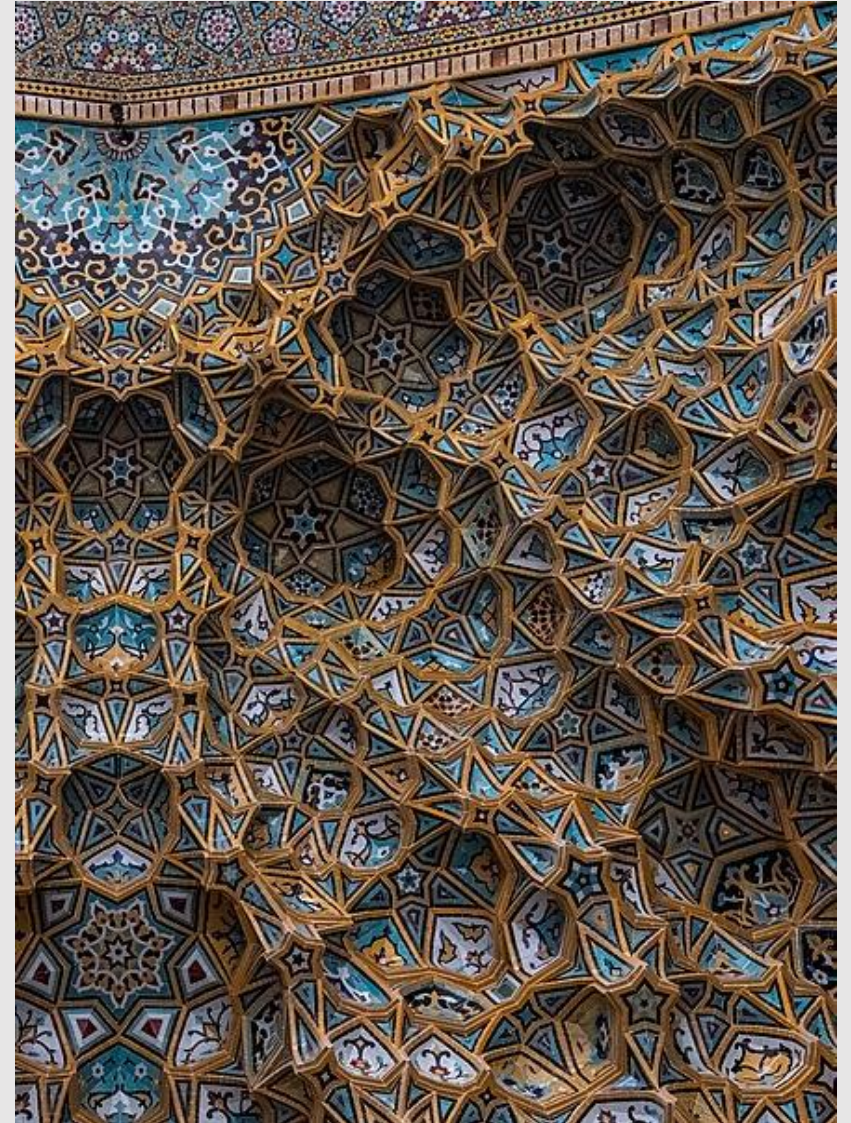
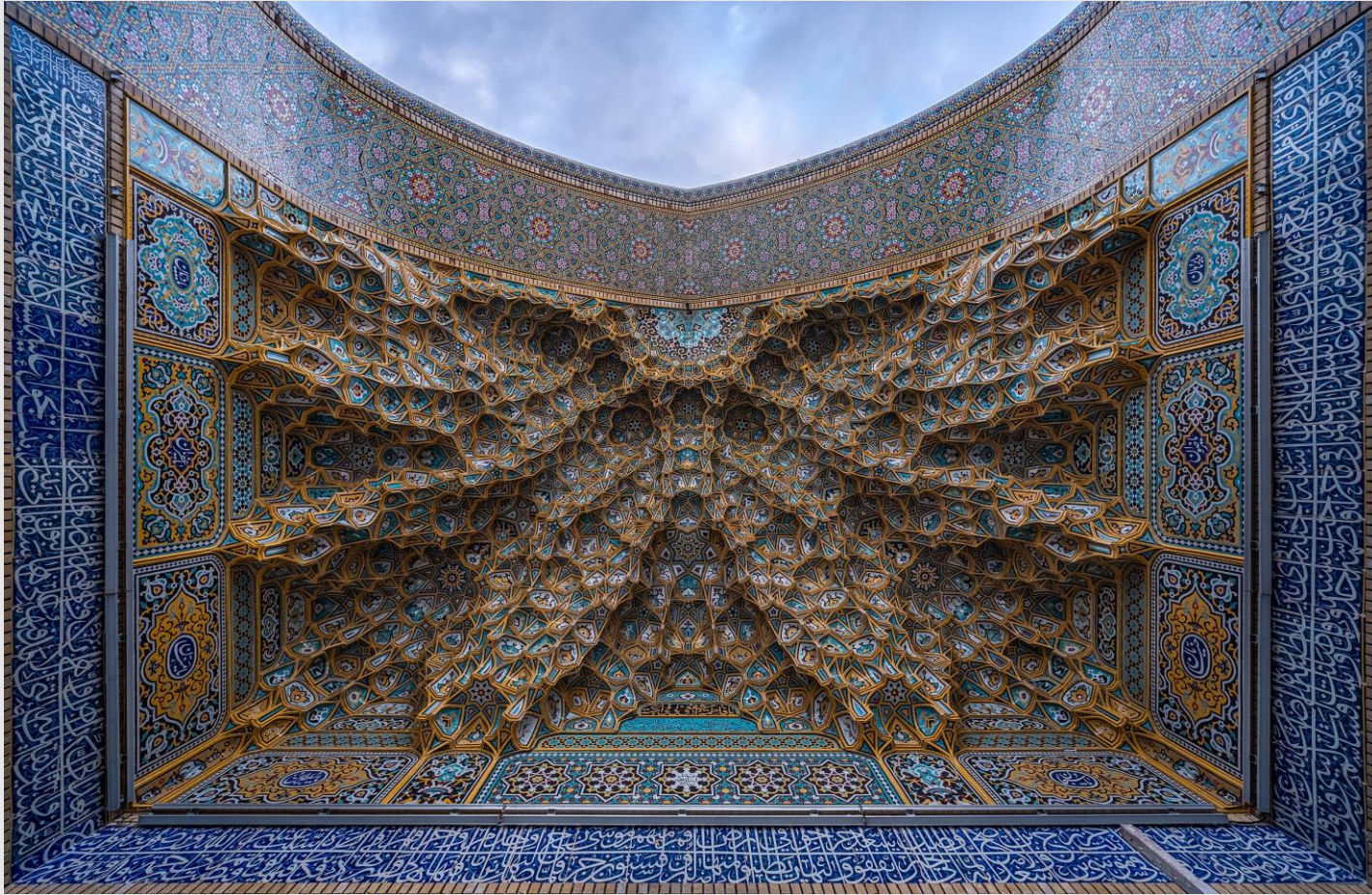
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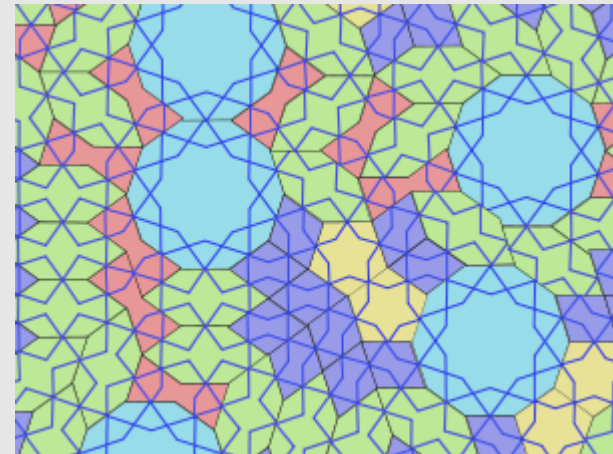
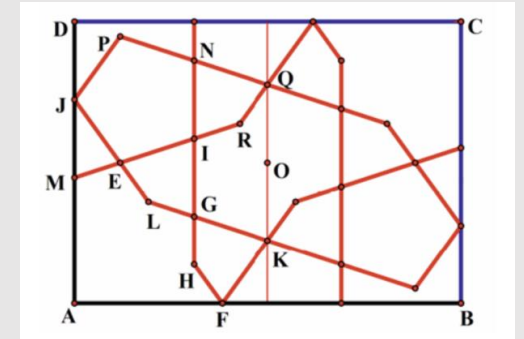
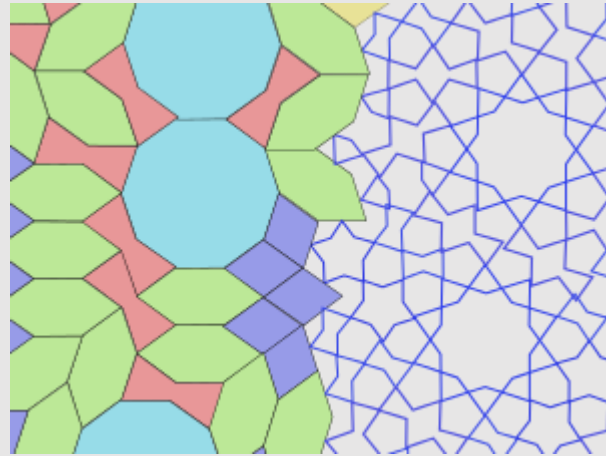
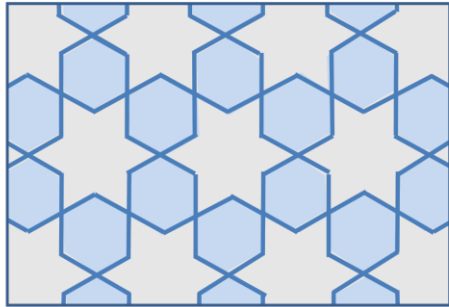
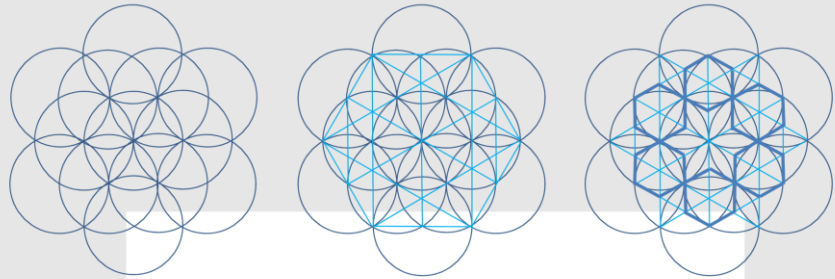
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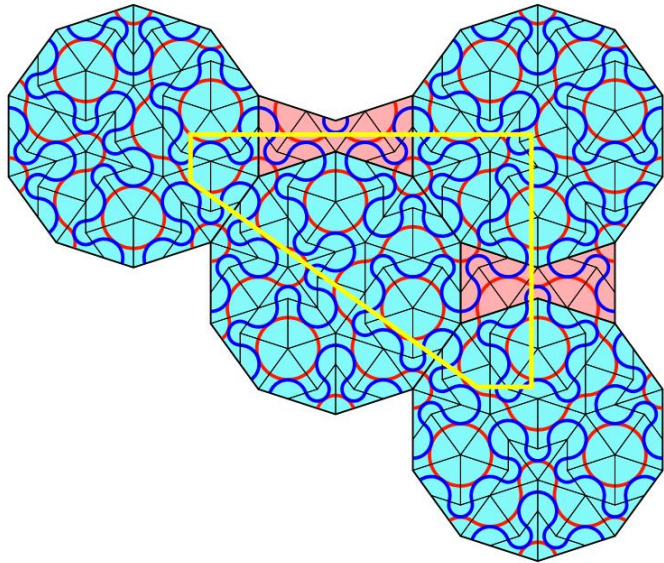
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Peter J. Lu and Paul J. Steinhardt, "Decagonal and Quasicrystalline Tilings in Medieval Islamic Architecture," *Science* (2007).

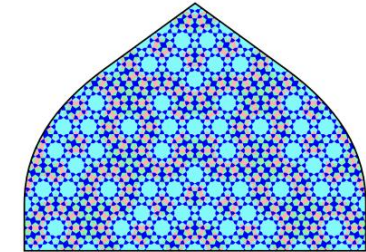
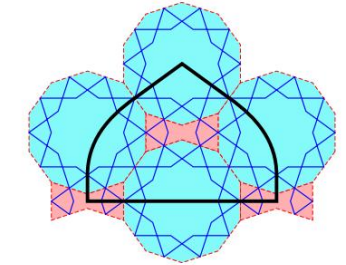
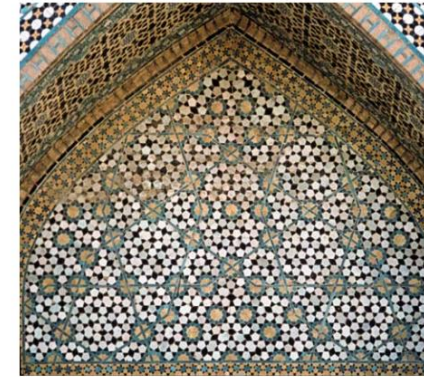
Supporting Online Material



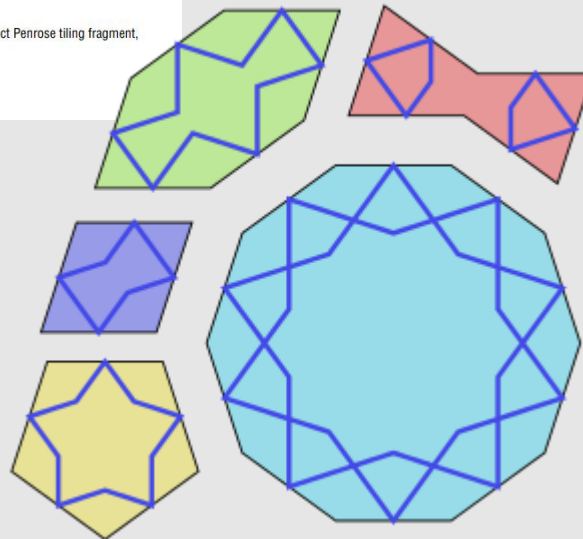
Supplementary Figure S8A Mapping of the large girih-tile pattern from the spandrel at the Darb-i Imam shrine (Fig. 4C) to a defect-free perfect Penrose tiling fragment, using the mapping given in Figs. 4C-4E.

Peter J. Lu and Paul J. Steinhardt, "Decagonal and Quasicrystalline Tilings in Medieval Islamic Architecture," *Science* (2007).

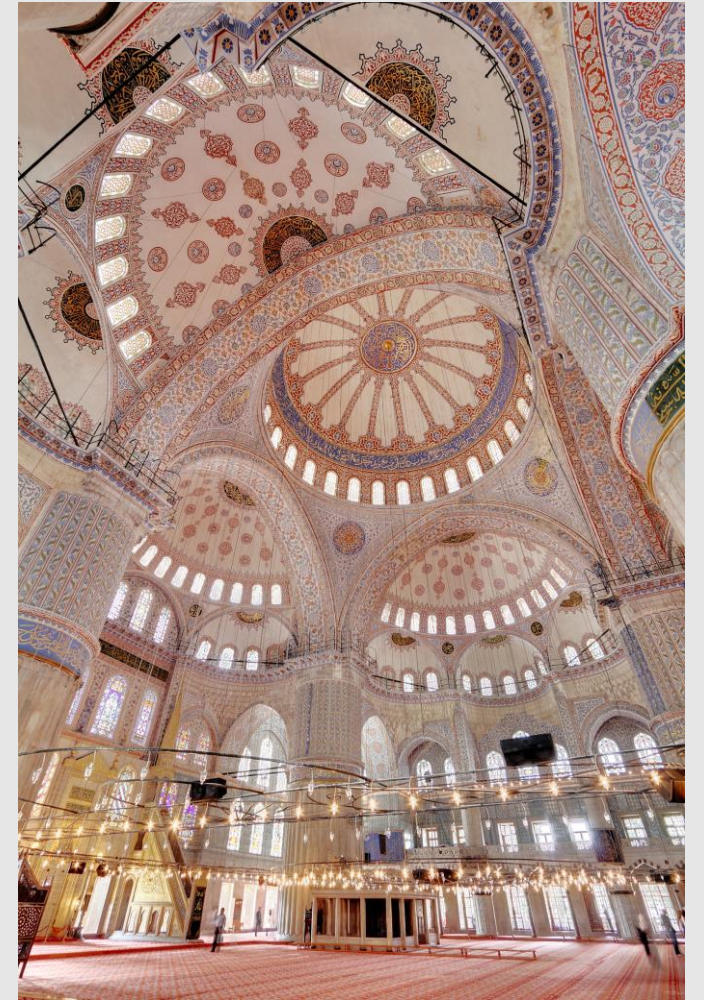
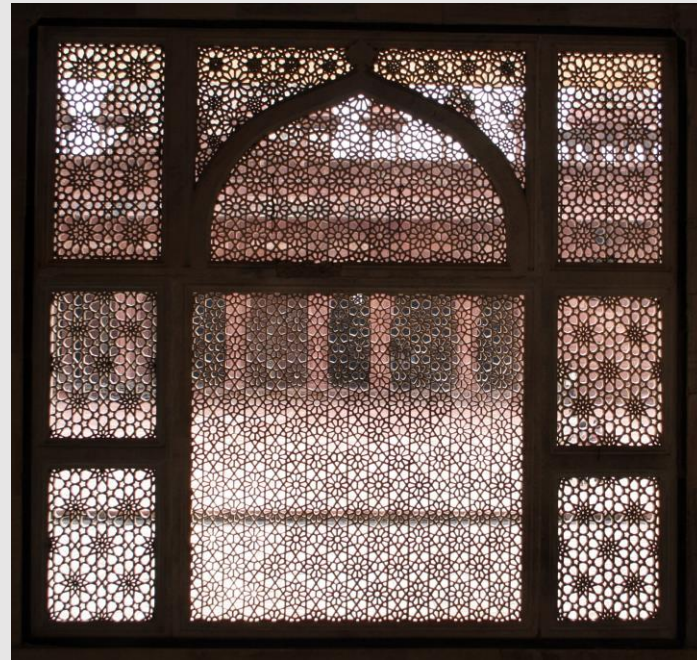
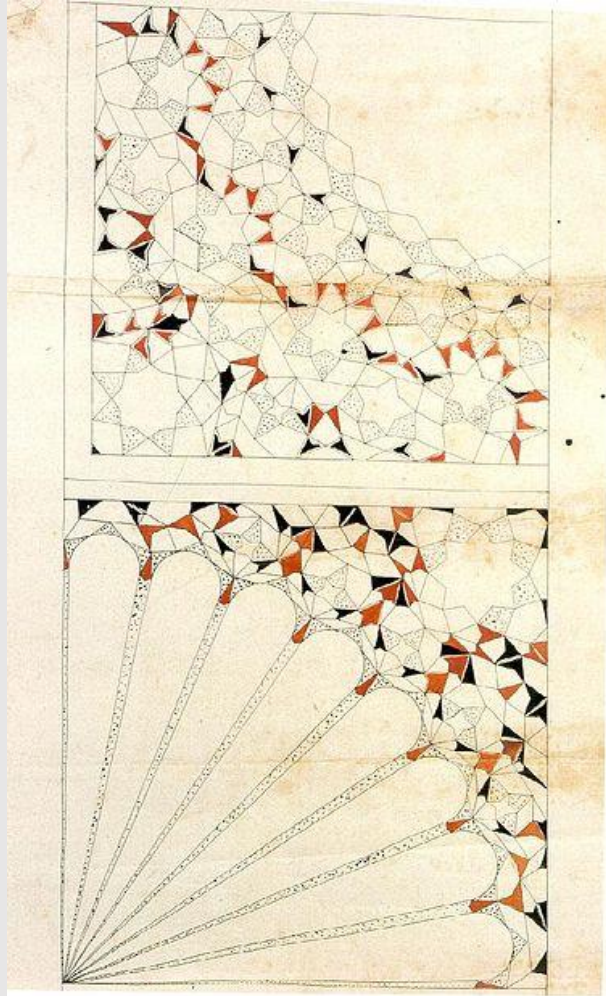
Supporting Online Material



Supplementary Figure S7A Portal from the Darb-i Imam Shrine at Isfahan, Iran (1453 AD). (left) Photograph, and reconstructions of the (upper right) large and (lower right) small girih patterns using the girih tiles of Fig. 1F. The tiling can be subdivided in the same way (Figs. 3D-3E) as the Darb-i Imam pattern in Fig. 3A.



Visual Arts in the Islamic “Golden Age”



Visual Arts in the Islamic “Golden Age”

Calligraphy

- Calligraphic scripts or styles include (among many regional variants):
 - **Kufic**
 - Earliest form of written Arabic.
 - The traditional script used for writing the Quran
 - Thought to originate from the old Nabataean script
 - **Naskh**
 - A cursive script used for its easy readability and relatively easy reproduction
 - Thought to have been invented by Ibn Muqla.
 - **Thuluth**
 - Decorative form of cursive often used on medieval mosques.
 - Eventually refined by the Ottomans

Visual Arts in the Islamic “Golden Age”



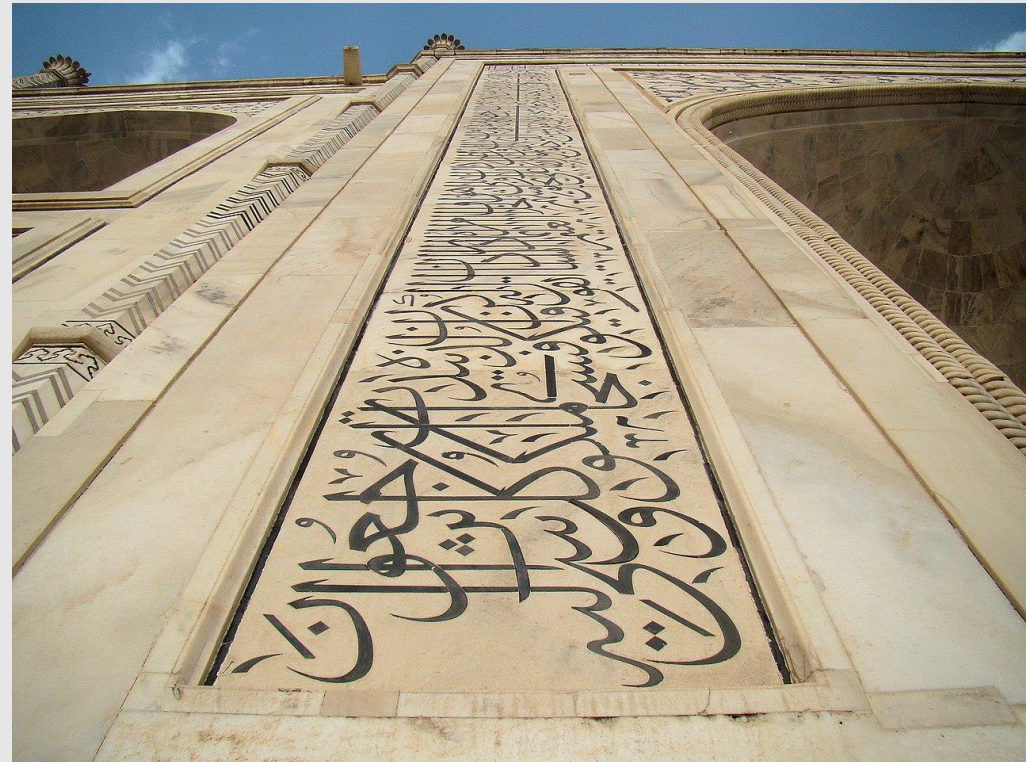
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Visual Arts in the Islamic “Golden Age”

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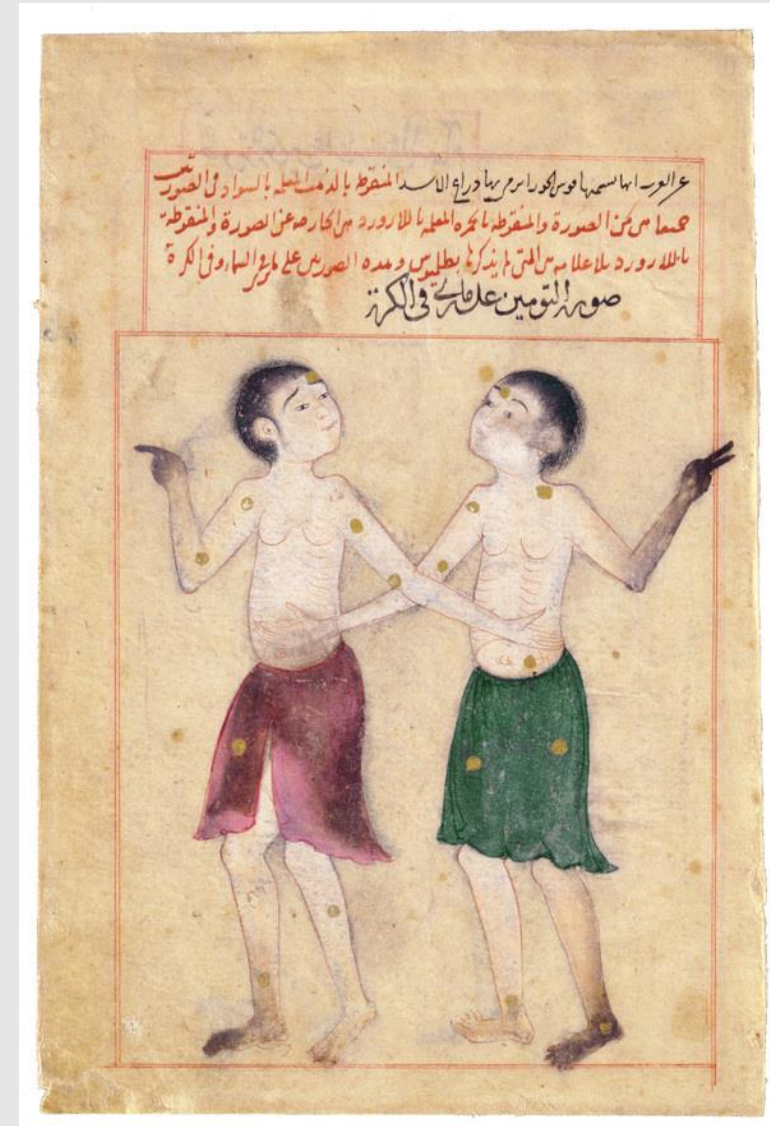
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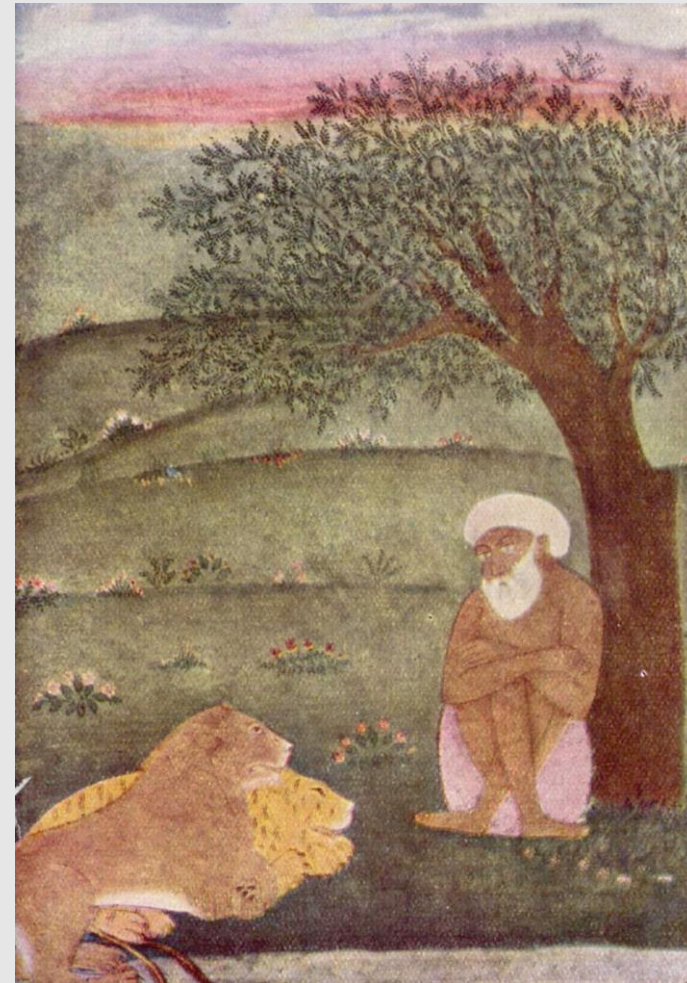
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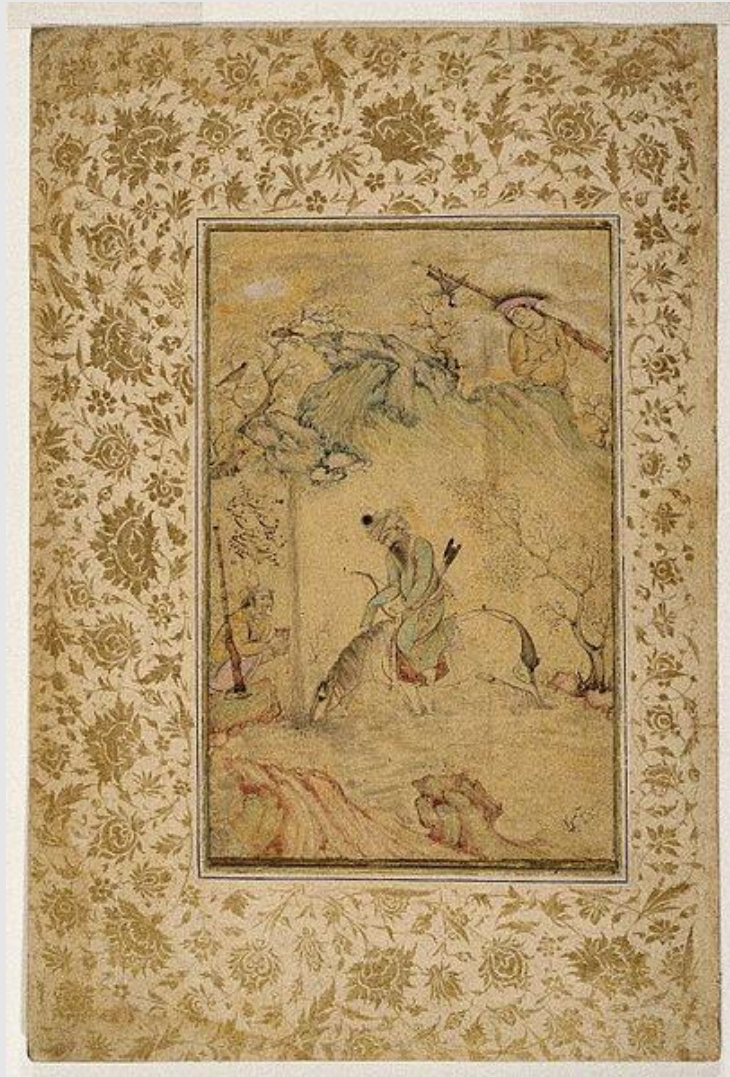
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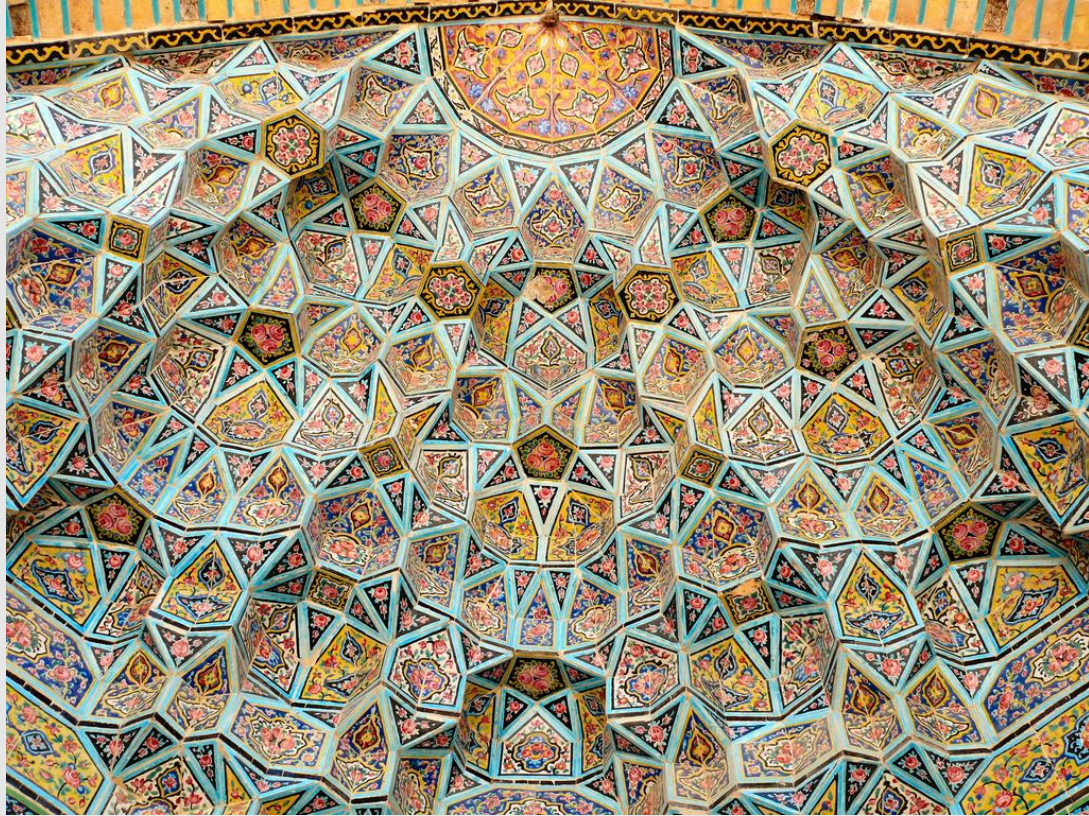
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Reading, Jale Nedjet Erzen's "Islamic Aesthetics: An Alternative Way to Knowledge"

“Insofar as there has been any criticism of the arts in the Islamic world prior to the modern age, it exists in the artwork, in the artistic expression itself. In other words, one thinks or comments about an artwork through another work. There is poetry that responds to other poetry, musical compositions that respond to other music. Indeed, in cultures where tradition is a dominating force, artists compete by producing their own interpretations as a way of commenting on each other's work, rather than by trying to make something totally original or new.” (Erzen, 69)

Reading, Jale Nedjet Erzen's "Islamic Aesthetics: An Alternative Way to Knowledge"

“In Islam, for example, there is a conviction that the relationships of humans to the world and human perceptions of it are not fixed, not codifiable, and cannot be captured using language that expresses generalized concepts. Some Sufi teachings deny that definitions of truths about the world and human relationships to it can be captured in language.⁵ Literal explanations provided by words are considered only superficial, so discussion is conducted in various kinds of riddles, and points of view are best expressed in symbols or in artistic expression” (Erzen, 69-70)

Reading, Jale Nedjet Erzen's "Islamic Aesthetics: An Alternative Way to Knowledge"

“The ways of conceiving and perceiving space and time underlie the most basic symbolic forms of a culture. According to Islam, for example, [the world is perceived from a constantly moving and changing vantage point](#)” (Erzen, 69-70)

Reading, Jale Nedjet Erzen's "Islamic Aesthetics: An Alternative Way to Knowledge"

“When looked at from one angle, one type of form or circle was seen, and when one looked again from another angle, other types of designs and patterns emerged, and other forms appeared. However much the point of view changed, that many times forms were transformed into other shapes.” [Because the world is accepted as constantly changing, freedom of expression is not an important issue for art or for the artist.](#)”(Ibid. 70)

Reading, Jale Nedjet Erzen's "Islamic Aesthetics: An Alternative Way to Knowledge"

“In Islamic aesthetics, no definitive final state of an artwork or of an utterance (as in criticism) is pursued as a value. In domestic architecture, no fixed function is given to a space, and the divisions of the spaces themselves are not fixed.” (Ibid., 70)

Reading, Jale Nedjet Erzen's "Islamic Aesthetics: An Alternative Way to Knowledge"

“Various forms or aesthetic structures for artistic expression in the Islamic world can be traced to certain underlying principles of belief...These principles are: (1) the principle of constant change within permanence, (2) the principle of the uncertainty of human cognition, and (3) the principle of love, or understanding with the heart.” (Ibid., my underlines 70)

Reading, Jale Nedjet Erzen's "Islamic Aesthetics: An Alternative Way to Knowledge"

“What is typically seen as “merely decorative” or as “arabesque” from the Western point of view is actually an expression of the constant flux of the world and of how all creation is interrelated.”(Ibid 70)

Reading, Jale Nedjet Erzen's "Islamic Aesthetics: An Alternative Way to Knowledge"

“In the Sufi tradition, the stimulation of all five senses is crucial to attaining truth. Consider Avicenna, who wrote: ‘Know that access to that by which our soul becomes knowing begins by way of the senses.’”
(Ibid., 71)

“The involvement of all the senses, moreover, is taken to lead to a profound knowledge of the Absolute, a knowledge that is therefore in the most basic or fundamental way aesthetic. Any kind of artistic involvement may be a path to the knowledge of God, who is manifested in the physical, sensible appearance of the world.” (Ibid., 71)

Reading, Jale Nedjet Erzen's "Islamic Aesthetics: An Alternative Way to Knowledge"

"Symbols are the 'place of encounter' between the 'archetypes or the intelligibles and the sensible, phenomenal world.'" (Ibid, 71)

- Compare to Hegel's understanding of the relation between art and Absolute Spirit (*Geist*) in *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*: "[Art] represents the highest ideas in sensuous forms" (Hegel, 9)

Reading, Jale Nedjet Erzen's "Islamic Aesthetics: An Alternative Way to Knowledge"

“In Sufi, as in Islam in general, one can never say that an artist creates a symbol. Symbols are given; they are there to be discovered... Artists may put forward sensible forms almost unconsciously, as if in a trance, or by giving themselves to the act of creativity. In this selflessness, which is a kind of unconsciousness, tradition creates the bond to the spiritual or to God.” (Erzen, 71).

Reading, Jale Nedjet Erzen's "Islamic Aesthetics: An Alternative Way to Knowledge"

“Through this act, this “invocation,” [*du'a*, اَلدُّعَاءُ] as one might translate it, the soul attains peace: ‘the resistance of the restless is gradually worn down’ by artistic expression, such as in dance, music, chanting, or poetry.¹⁸ The Islamic world is known as the world of peace: *Dar el Sulh*—or *Dar el Salam*. Islamic arts, including architecture, strive to attain complete harmony through the synthesis of opposites, such as dark and light, inside and outside, square and circle.” (Erzen, 71).

Reading, Jale Nedjet Erzen's "Islamic Aesthetics: An Alternative Way to Knowledge"

“This uncertainty is expressed in many artistic and architectural forms—such as mirrors, reflections, and screens—which abound in Islamic architecture. They create a visual effect where the real and the illusory are confused, where appearances are seen as though through a veil, where the multiple repetitions of the same confuse the boundaries of the real world.” (Ibid. 72)

“Mirrors and mirror-like reflections, which abound in Islamic architectural works as elements of decoration, are vehicles for displaying the world's many different appearances. Multidimensionality is a way of implying the impossibility of knowing reality as it is. This second principle is reflected in the impossibility of knowledge about the Absolute because the Absolute manifests itself in infinite ways. Except for the ninety-nine names attributed to God, God cannot be known” (Ibid)

Reading, Jale Nedjet Erzen's "Islamic Aesthetics: An Alternative Way to Knowledge"

“To understand the world, one has to become like artists who, drawing or painting, somehow become similar to what they draw or paint, and who approach the world with love. To approach with love one has to see the beauty. Thus art and understanding become intimately related.” (Ibid., 73).