

# Religious Dimensions of Classical and Contemporary Islamic Art

**Maha A. Al-Senan**

Department of History of Art, Princess Nourah Bint Abdulrahman University, Riyadh, KSA

Email: [maalsenan@pnu.edu.sa](mailto:maalsenan@pnu.edu.sa)

Received 7 March 2015; accepted 21 April 2015; published 23 April 2015

Copyright © 2015 by author and Scientific Research Publishing Inc.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY).

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Open Access

---

## Abstract

This paper focuses on the work of Egyptian Islamic contemporary artist Ehab Mamdouh who grew up in Saudi Arabia, then moved to Cairo, where he was exposed to religious, historical concepts and art forms, then came back to work in Saudi Arabia to observe the societal struggle raging between traditional and emergent concepts, and the influence of Islam and ideology thereon. The artist conveys a fundamental tenet of Islam, embodied by the five daily calls to prayer, replete with attributes borrowed from classical Islamic art but infused with the contemporaneity of modern art—all in the context of contemporary Islamic art. In Moqem, Mamdouh replaces the abstract geometric elements of classical Islamic art with an abstract portrayal of the praying worshipper. Mamdouh's artistic style merges the Islamic milieu of the artist's upbringing in Saudi Arabia and Egypt with his deep knowledge of the region's history and architectural heritage. Moqem is a "veiled" extension of Islamic art, in accordance with the standards by which the latter was classified in the past, yet it is shaped by the cultural development of our society and by the intellectual growth that the artist experienced on an individual level. Through this work, Mamdouh incites us to think and wonder—the true mark of a successful visual artist today.

## Keywords

Islamic Art, Saudi Arabia, Art, Contemporary Art, Religious Art

---

## 1. Introduction

In the West, the term *contemporary Islamic art* is commonly used to describe religiously themed works by artists from Muslim countries; in this sense, it suggests that the genre is an extension of conventional Islamic art. However, the term is also used more broadly to refer to all art produced by artists from Muslim countries, implying here that contemporary Islamic art is the product of the aftermath of September 11, revolutionary political

movements in the Arab and Muslim worlds, economic and cultural growth in the Arabian Gulf countries, and increased attention to Islam across the globe.

Islamic concepts are present, whether intentionally or unintentionally, in the work of many contemporary Saudi artists. These concepts are often interpreted, sometimes gratuitously, as having a religious viewpoint. However, it cannot be denied that religion—and Islam in particular—is a significant influence on contemporary art in Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, Muslim society at large is engaged in an ongoing debate about what is *halal* (permissible) and what is *haram* (not permissible) in the visual arts, despite number of the disputed points now being less pertinent. Some of these points are directly associated with religion: for example, differences in thought or doctrine, the growing number of *fat was* (religious edicts) on a subject, and the reinterpretation of religious texts. Others are linked to art itself, such as the current trend toward conceptual, abstract, and idea-based work that does not rely on representations of living beings.

One such disputed point is the permissibility of representations of living beings. While rare in Islamic art, such depictions do exist. Some researchers consider the prohibition of representations of living beings in Islam to be limited to places of worship (Aga-Oglu, 1954; Al-Faruqi, 1985; Arnold, 1965; Creswell, 1946; Grabar, 1973; Issa, 1996). These findings are evidenced by the position of the Prophet, concerning the imagery of Mary and Christ upon his entry into Mecca. They are further supported by the sermon of Sa'd ibn Abi Waqqas, one of the Prophet's companions, to the crowd when he conquered Al-Mada'inet neither damaged nor objected to the presence of such paintings and embodiments in Kisra's palace. There are other examples of companions who decorated their palaces with the images of people and animals, including coins produced during the reigns of Muawiyah and Abdul Malik that bore their images, as did other widely used currencies of that era, particularly in Hellenic culture (Creswell, 1946). Furthermore, history records no objections from the caliphs of the Umayyad dynasty to such representations, except for Umar bin Abdul Aziz when he entered a bathhouse, although some attribute his protest to the erotic nature of the fresco there (Creswell, 1946).

An examination of Islamic art in its infancy reveals that the objection to representations of living beings came from the idea that the worshipped (Allah) must not be embodied in a physical form. This contradicts the prevailing art forms of the era—Greek, Roman, Coptic Christian, Byzantine, and Renaissance, for example—in which sanctified deities were embodied and worshipped. Muslim artists tended to use architectural geometric decorations and Koranic calligraphy rather than human or animal manifestations to represent that which is perceived. These are subjects of discussion partly because the standard of beauty in Islamic art is related not to representational skills, as was the case in Greek art, but to the beauty of the idea and its content. As Lois Ibsen Al-Faruqi (1985) states, Arab artists relied on abstraction because they were children of an abstract culture or one that relied on abstract artistic thought, particularly considering that art forms predating Islam in the region relied on abstraction at the expense of detail. Al-Faruqi further notes that Arabs did not take up human representative art forms until they came into contact with other cultures through migration and expansion, whereby they spontaneously adopted the forms and copied some techniques, as can be seen in the Umayyad-era Amra Palace.

While representations of human beings are rare in classical Islamic wall frescos, the prevalence of such illustrations in books and pamphlets, particularly in Persia and India, confirms that these were indeed practiced art forms. For this reason, it is important to differentiate between worldly and religious art forms in Islam. The former deal with representations of living beings, while the latter disregard such representations, even in relatively contemporaneous periods such as the Umayyad era, when worldly buildings, such as palaces, were adorned with statues and drawings borrowed from ancient and contemporary art while religious buildings, such as the Al-Aqsa and Dome of the Rock mosques, were devoid of them.

## 2. Ehab Mamdouh

Born in Egypt in 1975, Ehab Mamdouh Ahmad Hilmi, also known as Ehab Mamdouh, grew up in Dammam, Saudi Arabia. An aspiring filmmaker who took to heart the idea that one must be well versed in the past to understand the present and future, Mamdouh studied history, particularly the history of cinema, as part of his liberal arts education. After graduation, he gained experience at local cultural events as well as those organized by foreign cultural centers in Egypt and pursued further study in digital production techniques, graphic design, and advertising, among other disciplines. Over the last 16 years, he has worked as a director and film producer, focusing on subjects such as identity, religion, the Arabian Peninsula, and Islam.

In conjunction with his film work, Mamdouh has long been interested in the visual arts and considers every-

thing he sees from an art history perspective, all within a religious, historical, and cultural framework. Visits to historical mosques for Friday prayers and frequent tours of Islamic art museums, both beginning at an early age, exposed him to religious and historical concepts related to ancient Egyptian art, Fatimid and Mamluk Islamic monuments, and other art forms that have characterized Cairo throughout Muslim history. In addition, his love of reading on a multitude of subjects led him to publish a magazine entitled *Bank of Arts*, for which he served as editor in chief and artistic director.

Mamdouh was greatly influenced by his mother, who specialized in Islamic studies. He went on repeated pilgrimages to Mecca to perform the hajj with his parents and subsequent visits to Egyptian historical mosques in Cairo. He was also inspired by ancient Egyptian art, which disappeared from the Egyptian scene during various periods of colonial occupation but returned with the liberation of Egypt, manifesting itself in the work of such pioneers as painter Mahmoud Said (1897-1964) and sculptor Mahmoud Mokhtar (1891-1934).

Following a period during which he concentrated on filmmaking, Mamdouh's senses became reinvigorated by the Saudi fine arts scene. He became drawn to the visual arts movement that was then thriving in Riyadh's exhibition halls, one that focused on visually depicting ongoing social conflicts. Art spread thanks to an economic boom, the cultural stimuli that accompanied that boom, and an (hypothetical) openness onto the world, where visual arts took their cues from works being exhibited in London, New York, and Venice.

Mamdouh observed the societal struggle raging between traditional and emergent concepts and the influence of Islam and ideology thereon, as well as their effect on Saudi art, which, to some extent, had become ideologized as a result of the influences and temptations engendered by the world stage. Here, then, his old love reemerged, helped along by the technical and digital skills gained through his journey in the filmmaking arena. This gave rise, after three years of work, to the *Muqem* project, through which the artist conveys a fundamental tenet of Islam, embodied by the five daily calls to prayer, replete with attributes borrowed from classical Islamic art but infused with the contemporaneity of modern art, all in the context of contemporary Islamic art.

### 3. Muqem

*Muqem* is derived from the second pillar of Islam, prayer, and takes its name from the Koranic verse “*O my Lord! Make me and my offspring the callers [Muqem(s)] to prayer, and accept my supplication O Lord*”. It also comes from the idea that group prayer, one of the five duties of Islam, which follows the call to prayer and ends with a set of beautiful, rhythmic movements, clears the soul through sacred spiritual practices and reestablish the believers' presence in the material and social world, subsequent to their pure, ritualistic contact with their maker.

Mamdouh recreates this important tenet of Islam as an artistic element in his work via a symbolic representation of Muslim ideology, affirming both its continuity and its significance in the lives of people today. Instead of choosing the act of *prayer* as a title, he chose the act of *calling* to prayer, alluding to the need for a reexamination of contemporary Islamic art, on one hand, and a myriad of social mores, on the other. Through this work, Mamdouh explores the call to prayer as a factual act and prayer as an act that cannot be proven to have occurred, in light of the harsh repercussions associated with religious practices in contemporary society, or the affirmation of the individual's attempt to perform his or her religious duty, regardless of any social, political, economic, revolutionary, or partisan circumstances that may be developing around him or her.

In *Muqem*, Mamdouh uses a repeating pattern of geometric designs that is derived from classical Islamic art—and yet distinct from it—to portray living organisms, nay, more than living organisms: Muslims, in fact, practicing one of the most important rituals of Islam, prayer. Is the artist trying to combine two conflicting elements or is he attempting to merge two related ones? This provocative contradiction excites the viewer's curiosity but can be perceived as less inflammatory because of its abstract portrayal of human elements combined with the hallowed act of prayer.

Traditionally, religious edifices (mosques) have been sacred places not to be adorned with decorative representations of human beings; all representations therein are to be of God alone. Yet here, using modern techniques, Mamdouh merges the worshiper and the act of prayer itself through geometric decoration. He thus depicts, for the viewer's benefit, how Islamic art has changed both qualitatively and intellectually in tune with contemporary art worldwide, while maintaining an intellectual awareness and structure that are real, unadulterated, and unideologized.

Mamdouh replaces the abstract geometric elements of classical Islamic art with an abstract portrayal of the praying worshipper. This produces a similar overall impression but one that is more appropriate for modern

times, when art transcends the concept of serving religion to ultimately express human thought, all the artistic components of which can be discussed, not only those relating to religion. Today, in a Muslim country where religious rites are regularly practiced, prayer is an important influence in people’s daily lives. Mamdouh uses prayer as the symbol to represent himself in his art, though he uses it in a unique manner, employing both modern abstraction and the abstract art of ancient Arabs who endeavored to conceptualize their God, religious arts, and symbols.

Mamdouh’s artistic style merges the Islamic milieu of the artist’s upbringing in Saudi Arabia and Egypt with his deep knowledge of the region’s history and architectural heritage. The element forming method he uses was inherited, as is the case with all Egyptians, from artistic characteristics dating to the second millennium BCE. This was the result of his constant exposure to the ancient Egyptian style of sculpture and portrayal, characterized by an unambiguous technical methodology for depicting living beings, according to beliefs long associated with the region and its ideologies (Figures 1-6).

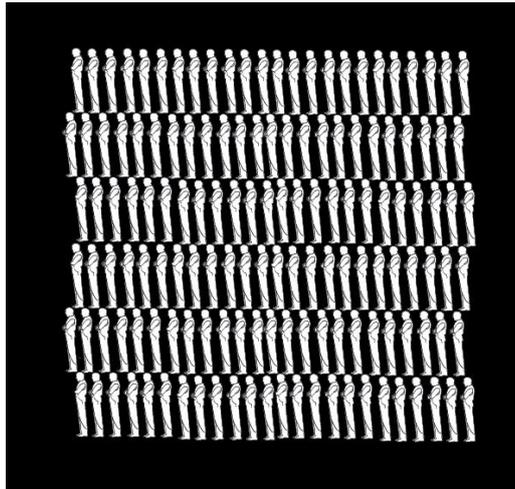


Figure 1. Untitled 2-077-Square-W, curtesy of the artist and Alāan Artspace.

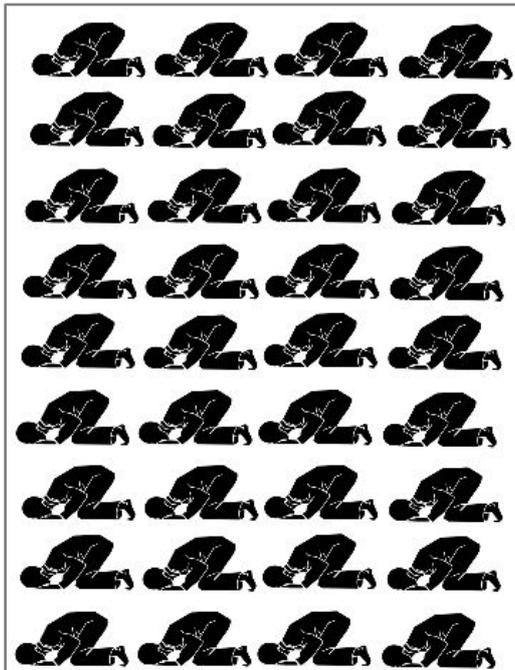


Figure 2. Untitled 5-106, curtesy of the artist and Alāan Artspace.

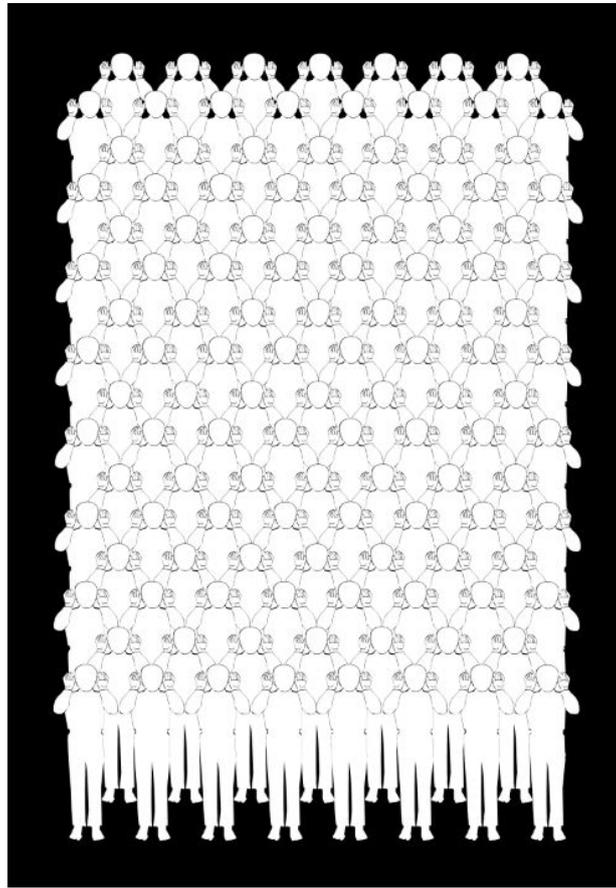


Figure 3. Untitled 6-0141-B, courtesy of the artist and Alāan Artspace.

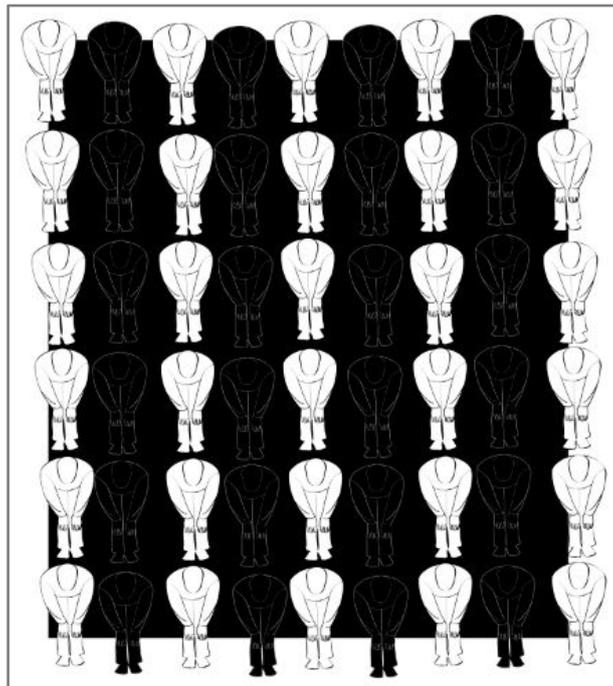


Figure 4. Untitled 10-095, courtesy of the artist and Alāan Artspace.

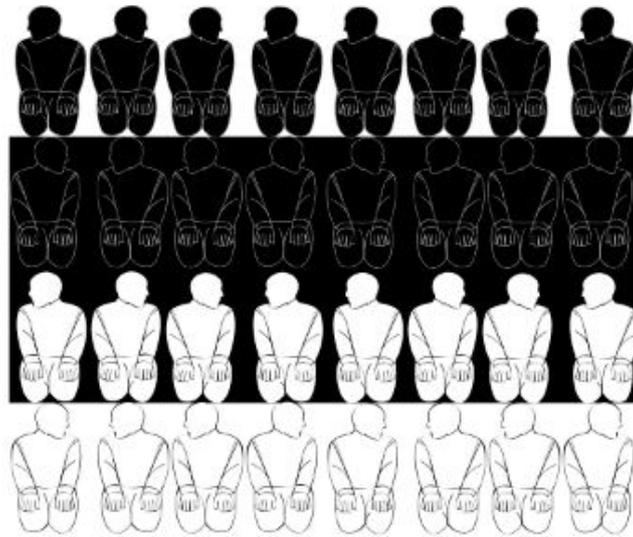


Figure 5. Untitled 10-095, courtesy of the artist and Alāan Artspace.

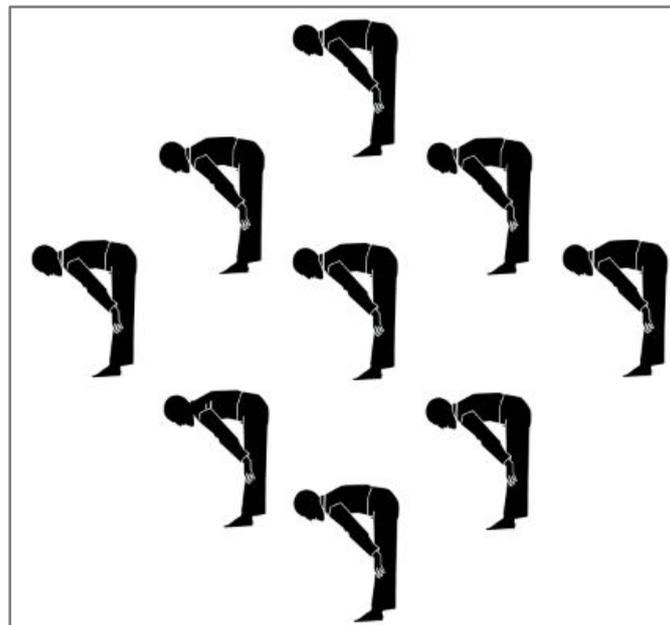


Figure 6. Untitled 20-043, courtesy of the artist and Alāan Artspace.

#### 4. Conclusion

*Muqem* is a “veiled” extension of Islamic art, in accordance with the standards by which the latter was classified in the past, yet it is shaped by the cultural development of our society and by the intellectual growth that the artist experiences on an individual level. Through this work, Mamdouh incites us to think and wonder, the true mark of a successful visual artist today.

#### Acknowledgements

This paper is based on an essay I was approached to do by Alaan art space; Founding Director Naema A. Al-Sudairi and Mary Teeling Head of Curatorial Program, it had their believe, support and enthusiasm, not to mention the essay had the insight of the artist Ehab Mamdouh.

## References

- Aga-Oglu, M. (1954). Remarks on the Character of Islamic Art. *Art Bulletin*, 36, 175-202.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00043079.1954.11408240>
- Al-Faruqi, L. I. (1985). *Islam and Art*. Islamabad: National Hijra Council.
- Arnold, T. W. (1965). *Painting in Islam: A Study of the Place of Pictorial Art in Muslim Culture*. New York: Dover Publications.
- Creswell, K. A. C. (1946). The Lawfulness of Painting in Early Islam. *Ars Islamica*, 11/12, 159-166.
- Grabar, O. (1973). *The Formation of Islamic Art* (rev. ed.). New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Issa, A. M. (1996). *Painting in Islam: Between Prohibition and Aversion*. Istanbul: Waqf for Research on Islamic History, Art, and Culture.