

Islamizing Art: Archaeological Facts and Fictions in Honor of Oleg Grabar

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Received: February 2026, Reviewed: March, Revised: June, Published: August 2026
doi: [10.21111/injas.v4i1.65](https://doi.org/10.21111/injas.v4i1.65)

Abstract

The Islamization of art has often been discussed through normative, theological, or stylistic perspectives, yet its archaeological dimensions remain insufficiently explored. This study examines the Islamization of art through the lens of archaeology by distinguishing between empirically verifiable facts and interpretative constructions that are often shaped by modern assumptions or ideological narratives. By analyzing material culture—such as architectural remains, decorative motifs, inscriptions, and artifacts—from early and medieval Islamic contexts, this paper investigates how artistic forms were transformed, adapted, or re-signified within an Islamic worldview rather than abruptly replaced. Archaeological evidence demonstrates that the Islamization of art was a gradual, context-sensitive process marked by continuity, selective adaptation, and ethical reorientation, rather than iconoclastic rupture alone. At the same time, the paper critically addresses common “fictions,” including oversimplified claims of uniform aniconism, total rejection of pre-Islamic artistic traditions, or the notion of a monolithic Islamic artistic style. By situating archaeological data within historical, social, and religious frameworks, this study argues that the Islamization of art reflects a dynamic interaction between faith, local cultures, and material practices. The findings contribute to a more nuanced understanding of Islamic art as a lived and evolving expression of belief, rooted in both material reality and spiritual meaning.

Keyword: Islamization of Art; Fine Arts in Islam; Art and Theology; Oleg Grabar; Islamic Arts

Introduction

Islamic art has long been interpreted primarily through textual exegesis, stylistic classification, and theological discourse, often privileging normative prescriptions over lived realities. Such approaches have yielded invaluable insights into symbolism, aesthetics, and doctrinal frameworks, yet they have also tended to marginalize the material and archaeological dimensions of Islamic cultural formation. As a result, Islamization has frequently been conceptualized as an intellectual or ideological transition, rather than as a gradual and materially grounded process inscribed in landscapes, urban forms, craft production, and embodied practices.¹

¹ Insoll, Timothy, Nadia Khalaf, Rachel MacLean, Hannah Parsons-Morgan, Nicholas Tait, Jane Gaastra, Alemseged Beldados, Alexander J.E. Pryor, Laura Evis, and Laure Dussubieux. “Material Cosmopolitanism: The Entrepot of Harlaa as an Islamic Gateway to Eastern Ethiopia.” *Antiquity* 95, no. 380 (2021): 487–507. <https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2020.169>.

Archaeology, however, offers a distinct methodological vantage point. By examining architectural strata, spatial organization, burial orientations, inscriptions, ceramics, coinage, and patterns of consumption, archaeology makes visible the incremental ways in which Islamic norms became embedded in everyday life. Islamization, from this perspective, is not a singular moment of doctrinal adoption but a layered transformation detectable in shifts in settlement patterns, mosque construction, domestic design, dietary habits, and funerary customs. These material traces reveal negotiation, adaptation, and coexistence between pre-Islamic traditions and emerging Islamic identities.

Recent scholarship on Islamization in Africa has demonstrated the value of this approach. Archaeological evidence from the Swahili Coast, the Sahel, and East Africa indicates that Islamic practices were selectively integrated into existing social and economic systems. Mosques often incorporated local building techniques; gravestones combined Qur'anic inscriptions with indigenous motifs; and ceramic assemblages reflected continuity alongside change. Such findings challenge earlier diffusionist or homogenizing models that equated Islamization with immediate cultural Arabization. Instead, they reveal plural trajectories in which Islamic symbols were appropriated and localized within diverse ecological and political contexts.

Parallel reconsiderations have reshaped debates over Islamic aniconism and figural representation. Rather than assuming a universal and static prohibition of images, recent studies situate artistic production within specific ethical, social, and political environments. Figural imagery persisted in courtly manuscripts, palace frescoes, metalwork, and textiles, while its restriction in religious architecture reflected contextual negotiations of piety and authority. This shift in perspective underscores that material culture does not merely illustrate theological doctrine; it participates in shaping communal boundaries, moral sensibilities, and political legitimacy.

Within Islamic art history, this archaeological and material turn converges with broader theoretical efforts to reconsider what renders art "Islamic." Rather than defining Islamic art solely through iconographic absence, stylistic motifs, or dynastic chronology, a growing body of scholarship situates it within an integrated civilizational framework in which *dīn*—understood as a comprehensive way of life—structures aesthetic production. From this perspective, architecture, geometric ornament, calligraphy, garden design, textiles, and portable objects function not merely as decorative expressions but as mediating forms that cultivate an awareness of divine order, unity (*tawḥīd*), and ethical comportment. Art becomes a mode of inhabiting a sacred cosmology rather than a visual illustration of theological doctrine.

Simultaneously, scholars and curators have increasingly challenged essentialist constructions of Islamic art as stylistically homogeneous or uniformly aniconic. Historical and archaeological evidence demonstrates wide variation in figural representation, material experimentation, and cross-cultural borrowing across regions stretching from al-Andalus to Central Asia and the Indian Ocean. Courtly manuscript painting, palace frescoes, metalwork, and ceramics often incorporated human and animal forms, complicating narratives of a rigid, timeless "image prohibition." These findings underscore that Islamic artistic production evolved within specific political, social, and intellectual contexts, shaped by patronage systems, trade networks, and interreligious encounters.

This reconceptualization has also extended into museum and curatorial practice. Contemporary exhibitions increasingly foreground questions of identity, mobility, and material exchange, moving beyond static displays of stylistic typology. Medieval artifacts are now interpreted as active participants in constructing communal memory, political authority, and devotional life. Likewise, modern and contemporary artists working within Islamic cultural frames engage tradition critically,

reactivating calligraphy, geometry, and architectural forms to address issues of migration, diaspora, and global modernity.

Against this historiographical backdrop, *Islamizing Art: Archaeological Facts and Fictions in Honor of Oleg Grabar* proposes a critical re-examination of how Islamization in art has been narrated and materially evidenced. Inspired by Grabar's insistence on historical nuance and contextual interpretation, the study turns to archaeological data—architectural remains, decorative programs, inscriptions, urban layouts, portable artifacts, and stratigraphic layers from early and medieval Islamic contexts—to reassess long-standing assumptions about rupture, iconoclasm, and stylistic uniformity. Rather than treating Islamization as an abrupt civilizational break, the investigation approaches it as a process detectable in gradual spatial reorientation, adaptive reuse of monuments, evolving epigraphic practices, and shifting patterns of patronage.

A key aim is to disentangle empirically grounded “facts” from modern “fictions.” Among the latter are narratives that posit an immediate and total rejection of pre-Islamic heritage or a universally enforced aniconism that erased figural traditions overnight. Archaeological evidence frequently complicates such claims. Early Islamic architecture often incorporated spolia from Byzantine, Sasanian, and local pre-Islamic structures, signaling not erasure but recontextualization. Decorative programs reveal experimentation, hybridity, and selective continuity, while inscriptions mark new ideological orientations without necessarily displacing established aesthetic languages. Even in contexts of documented iconoclasm, material traces suggest variability in enforcement and intention.

Building on scholarship that conceptualizes Islamization as gradual and negotiated, the study foregrounds the ethically charged dimension of artistic production. Artistic forms were not neutral; they mediated authority, articulated communal identity, and shaped devotional sensibilities. The transition from figural palace frescoes to increasingly epigraphic mosque interiors, for instance, reflects not a simplistic prohibition but a recalibration of visual ethics in relation to sacred space. In this sense, Islamization in art involves processes of spiritual re-signification: inherited motifs acquire new meanings, spatial arrangements are reoriented toward qibla-centered ritual practice, and inscriptions inscribe theological affirmation into the built environment.

Method

This study employs a qualitative, interdisciplinary methodology that integrates archaeological analysis, art-historical interpretation, and historiographical critique to investigate the Islamization of art in early and medieval Islamic contexts. The primary objective is to distinguish empirically grounded material evidence (“facts”) from later interpretive constructions (“fictions”) concerning rupture, aniconism, and the rejection of pre-Islamic heritage.

First, the research is based on systematic analysis of archaeological data, including architectural remains, stratigraphic reports, decorative programs, inscriptions (epigraphy), portable artifacts (ceramics, metalwork, manuscripts), and patterns of spatial organization. Published excavation reports, site surveys, museum catalogues, and photographic documentation constitute the principal primary sources. Particular attention is paid to material continuity, adaptive reuse (spolia), construction techniques, and chronological layering to assess whether change occurred abruptly or gradually.

Second, the study employs contextual art-historical analysis. Rather than isolating stylistic features, artworks and buildings are examined within their socio-political, theological, and ritual environments. This includes analyzing patronage contexts, intended audiences, spatial functions (e.g., mosque, palace, domestic architecture), and the relationship between figural and non-figural

elements. Epigraphic content is interpreted not only linguistically but also spatially, considering placement, scale, and interaction with ornament.

Third, the research adopts a critical historiographical approach inspired by Oleg Grabar's methodological legacy. Modern scholarly narratives—particularly those emphasizing uniform aniconism or civilizational rupture—are compared with archaeological findings to identify discrepancies between textual generalizations and material realities. This comparative reading allows the study to evaluate how modern theoretical frameworks may have shaped perceptions of Islamic art.

Finally, the study applies a process-oriented analytical framework, viewing Islamization as a historically situated and negotiated transformation. Rather than presuming prohibition or continuity as a starting point, the analysis traces patterns of adaptation, re-signification, and selective appropriation across regions and periods. Through triangulation of archaeological evidence, textual references, and visual analysis, the research aims to construct a materially grounded account of how Islamic artistic identities emerged and evolved over time.

Finding and Discussion

Theoretical Reframing of the Islamization of Art

This study finds that the Islamization of art is best understood not merely as a corrective to historiographical “fictions,” but as a materially grounded and theoretically generative process. While reassessing assumptions of abrupt rupture, uniform aniconism, or total rejection of pre-Islamic heritage remains important, archaeological evidence demonstrates that a clearer conceptual framework is required to explain how Islamic meaning became embedded in material forms. By extending Oleg Grabar's historically nuanced approach through insights from material religion theory, semiotics of space, and practice theory, the study offers a more analytically precise account of artistic transformation in early and medieval Islamic contexts.

First, the findings show that material forms did not simply reflect theological doctrines; they actively mediated religious experience. Architectural orientation toward the qibla, the increasing integration of Qur'anic inscriptions into sacred architecture, and the privileging of calligraphy as a visual form functioned as embodied frameworks through which divine unity (*tawḥīd*) was sensorially and spatially articulated. Islamization, therefore, occurred not only through textual proclamation but through the restructuring of visual and spatial environments that shaped devotional practice.

Second, archaeological data reveal that Islamization frequently operated through processes of semiotic re-signification rather than erasure. The reuse of Byzantine and Sasanian architectural elements in early Islamic monuments illustrates continuity transformed by new symbolic hierarchies. Materials inherited from earlier empires were recontextualized within Islamic spatial programs and inscribed with Qur'anic affirmations, thereby altering their meaning without necessitating destruction. Such evidence challenges narratives of iconoclastic rupture and instead supports a model of adaptive reinterpretation.

Third, the study finds that Islamization unfolded through the gradual formation of new social practices. Changes in mosque design, urban planning, and decorative emphasis corresponded with emerging communal rituals and political structures. Through repeated engagement with these spaces, communities internalized new patterns of bodily orientation and collective identity. Artistic transformation thus participated in shaping an Islamic social habitus rather than serving as a passive aesthetic response to doctrinal shifts.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that the Islamization of art was a historically situated interaction between faith, power, local craftsmanship, and inherited cultural memory. Rather than a linear narrative of prohibition or stylistic homogenization, the archaeological record reveals layered continuities, selective adaptations, and spiritual re-significations. By clarifying the theoretical foundations of this process, the study advances a constructive understanding of Islamic art as an active site of meaning production—where material culture played a central role in forming and expressing Islamic religious and social life.

A central task of this study is to sharpen the concept of the “Islamization of art” analytically so that it functions not as a descriptive label but as a rigorously observable historical process. Rather than treating Islamization as a vague civilizational shift or a theological abstraction, the article defines it as a multidimensional transformation detectable through specific material, spatial, and social indicators. In this framework, Islamization refers to measurable changes in patronage structures, spatial organization, epigraphic programs, visual ethics, and patterns of use that collectively reoriented artistic production toward Islamic cosmology and communal practice.

One primary indicator of Islamization is a transformation in systems of patronage. Archaeological and inscriptional evidence demonstrates that early Islamic rulers increasingly sponsored monuments—mosques, madrasahs, ribats, palaces—that articulated Islamic legitimacy. The presence of dedicatory inscriptions invoking Qur’anic verses, the Prophet, or caliphal authority signals a shift from pre-Islamic imperial symbolism toward explicitly Islamic political theology. Thus, Islamization can be operationalized through changes in funding sources, titlature, and ideological messaging embedded in built environments.

A second indicator is spatial reconfiguration, particularly the alignment of structures toward the qibla and the incorporation of architectural elements such as the mihrab, minbar, and courtyard. Archaeological surveys show that even when pre-Islamic buildings were reused, their orientation and interior organization were frequently modified to accommodate congregational prayer. Islamization in this sense is spatial: it reorganizes movement, visibility, and communal gathering around ritual practice. Stratigraphic phases demonstrating gradual reorientation provide material evidence of incremental transformation rather than abrupt replacement.

A third operational marker lies in the expansion and prominence of epigraphy. Increasing density of Qur’anic inscriptions, shahada formulas, and pious invocations in architectural decoration indicates the growing centrality of textual revelation in visual culture. The transformation of Arabic script into a primary decorative medium—integrated into mosaics, stucco, ceramics, and metalwork—signals a distinctive aesthetic recalibration. Quantifiable changes in inscription placement, scale, and frequency allow researchers to trace Islamization through comparative material analysis across sites and periods.

Islamization is also detectable in shifting regimes of representation. Rather than assuming universal aniconism, the study identifies differential treatment of figural imagery across functional contexts. Sacred spaces (mosques, tombs) display heightened textual and geometric emphasis, while courtly and domestic environments may retain figural motifs. This suggests the emergence of a contextual visual ethic rather than blanket prohibition. The operational indicator here is not mere presence or absence of images, but their spatial distribution and thematic framing.

Finally, Islamization can be identified through patterns of adaptive reuse and symbolic re-signification. The incorporation of spolia, inherited decorative motifs, or established construction techniques does not negate Islamization; rather, it reflects transformation through reinterpretation.

Archaeological comparison between earlier strata and later modifications reveals how older materials were embedded within new Islamic semantic systems. Thus, continuity itself becomes an indicator when coupled with altered function and inscription.

Conceptualizing the “Islamization of Art”: Analytical Clarification and Operational Indicators

Building upon the operational indicators outlined above, the findings of this study demonstrate that the Islamization of art was profoundly shaped by political authority and intellectual-scientific innovation. Far from being an exclusively theological or aesthetic development, Islamizing art functioned as a political project intertwined with state formation, imperial legitimacy, and the cultivation of scholarly knowledge.

1. Political Influence and the Instrumentalization of Islamic Visual Language

Archaeological and epigraphic evidence confirms that political authority played a decisive role in directing artistic transformation across Bilād al-Shām (Greater Syria), with the territorial expanse of modern Jordan serving as a central geopolitical nexus for early caliphal statecraft, territorial integration, and visual ideology. Early Islamic rulers, particularly under the Umayyad (661–750 CE) and early Abbasid (750–1258 CE) dynasties, strategically deployed architecture, spatial planning, and surface ornament to articulate political sovereignty within an emerging Islamic cosmological framework. Monumental constructions—ranging from urban congregational mosques (*ḡawāmiʿ*) and provincial administrative headquarters (*dār al-imārah*) to imperial waystations, agricultural estates, and suburban palatial complexes (*bādiyah* settlements and *quṣūr*) situated across the Jordanian steppe—were far more than functional civic nodes; they operated as high-visibility declarative monuments of a new imperium. The systematic integration of official Qurʾānic epigraphy into prominent architectural programs, frequently emphasizing divine absolute unity (*tawḥīd*), the prophetic mission of Muhammad (*nubuwwah*), and eschatological accountability, visually embedded state authority within the sacred narrative of divine revelation.

Rather than signaling an abrupt, iconoclastic rupture with late antiquity, archaeological data across Transjordan demonstrates that early state-sponsored Islamization functioned through a deliberate, context-sensitive recalibration of established imperial visual codes across a landscape steeped in Nabataean, Roman, Ghassanid, and Byzantine cultural traditions. In tribute to Oleg Grabar’s foundational thesis in *The Formation of Islamic Art*, material culture reveals that early Muslim sovereigns did not invent an artistic vocabulary *ex nihilo*; rather, they appropriated, re-signified, and reoriented the existing visual languages of the Mediterranean and Near Eastern worlds to suit a novel ideological paradigm.

The expansion of early Islamic rule across Transjordan required a visual strategy capable of asserting authority over a complex demographic mosaic composed of settled Christian-Aramaic populations, Hellenized urban elites, indigenous Nabataean-Arab lineages, and powerful semi-nomadic Bedouin tribes (*bādiyah*). To negotiate this intricate sociopolitical environment, caliphal statecraft utilized architectural patronage as a primary medium of diplomacy, tax administration, and ideological projection. The desert palaces (*quṣūr*) constructed throughout the Jordanian steppe—such as Qaṣr al-Hallābāt, Qaṣr al-Mshattā, Qaṣr al-Kharāna, Qaṣr al-Tūbah, and Humayma—were not isolated, romantic retreats for caliphal leisure, as early twentieth-century orientalist scholarship often assumed. Instead, archaeological excavations led by scholars such as Alastair Northedge, Ghazi Bisheh, and Fawzi Zayadine have established that these complexes were dynamic centers of

agricultural development, political assembly (*majlis*), security control, and tribal negotiation. By building monumental complexes along the critical trade and pilgrimage routes (*Darb al-Hajj*) connecting Damascus to the Holy Cities of Mecca and Medina, Umayyad caliphs transformed the Jordanian frontier into an arena of visual statecraft.

Within these palatial and urban environments, political authority instrumentalized a sophisticated visual grammar that balanced explicit theological assertions with inherited imperial iconography. The increasing epigraphic density observed in state-sponsored monuments across Bilād al-Shām reflects far more than personal piety; it signals a formal alignment between earthly governance and divine sanction. This state-directed deployment of text as visual ideology reached its definitive expression under the Marwanid branch of the Umayyad dynasty, inaugurated by Caliph ‘Abd al-Malik ibn Marwan (r. 685–705 CE).

The erection of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem (691/692 CE) stands as an archetypal monument of this ideological shift, where its 240-meter inner octagonal epigraphic frieze in gold-on-blue Kufic script explicitly asserted the absolute unity of God (*tawḥīd*) while contesting Byzantine Trinitarian doctrines at a key geographical intersection of sacred topography. This public epigraphic program was directly mirrored across the provincial mints and administrative centers of Jordan.

Following ‘Abd al-Malik’s radical numismatic reform in 696/697 CE, which systematically eliminated Byzantine imperial imagery and Sasanian fire altars from caliphal coinage, regional mints located at *Aylah* (modern Aqaba), *‘Ammān*, and *Fihl* (Pella) began issuing standardized, strictly epigraphic copper coins (*fulūs*). By replacing human portraiture with Qur’anic declarations such as the *Shahādah*, the state converted daily economic currency into an agent of visual Islamization, embedding caliphal authority into the hands of everyday citizens across the towns and rural markets of Jordan.

The physical expression of this epigraphic statecraft is exceptionally preserved at the Amman Citadel (*Jabal al-Qal‘ah*), which served as the regional seat of the Umayyad governor (‘*āmil*) over the district of the *Balqā’*. The monumental Umayyad Palace complex at *Jabal al-Qal‘ah*—featuring a grand audience hall (*qā‘ah*), an administrative *dār al-imārah*, a congregational mosque, and an engineered circular cistern (*birkah*)—represents one of the most complete urban expressions of early caliphal governance in the region. Epigraphic fragments and plaster molding recovered from the Citadel’s central hall demonstrate how state inscriptions utilized high Kufic script to frame spatial movement, guiding visitors through a hierarchy of rooms toward the throne alcove (*īwān*). The architecture deliberately mirrored the spatial arrangement of the imperial court in Damascus, asserting that the local governor ruled as the direct representative of the *Amīr al-Mu‘minīn* (Commander of the Faithful).

By structuring spatial movement around the person of the ruler and framing that space with sacred script, the early Islamic state naturalized political sovereignty as an earthly extension of divine order. This visual framing was crucial in frontier regions like the *Balqā’*, where local tribal leaders (*shuyūkh*) entering the *dār al-imārah* were confronted with a visual program that explicitly linked taxation, justice, and security to caliphal legitimacy.

Furthermore, critical analysis of material culture across Jordan demonstrates that the Islamization of art mediated historical continuity and political transformation simultaneously. The physical occupation and visual adaptation of pre-Islamic architectural frameworks—such as Nabataean stone-carving sites, Roman fortresses (*castra*), and Ghassanid encampments—did not eradicate earlier traditions of authority, but systematically reframed them through an Islamic lens. A primary mechanism of this visual reframing was the strategic integration of architectural *spolia* (reused Classical columns, capitals, and ashlar masonry) into new Islamic structures.

At the Great Mosque of Jarash (Gerasa), archaeological excavations conducted by the Danish-Jordanian Jarash Northwest Project have revealed how early Islamic builders constructed a monumental congregational mosque directly within the heart of the ancient Roman civic center. By incorporating classical columns and Corinthian capitals into the hypostyle prayer hall, Islamic architects visually demonstrated the physical subordination and ideological absorption of the Classical past into the expanding house of Islam (*Dār al-Islām*).

Similarly, at Qaṣr al-Hallābāt, located northeast of Amman, Umayyad patrons transformed a third-century Roman fort (*castellum*)—which had previously been modified by the Byzantines and utilized by Ghassanid phylarchs—into an elaborate palatial residence complete with a mosque, bathhouse (*hammām*), and sophisticated water storage system. Archaeological analysis reveals that the Umayyad builders retained black basalt masonry from the older Roman fortification while inserting carved stucco panels, complex geometric floor mosaics, and Greek and Arabic inscriptions. The physical transformation of a Roman military stronghold into an Umayyad diplomatic estate visually communicated that the strategic control once exercised by Rome and Byzantium over the Syrian desert frontier had passed permanently to the Islamic Caliphate.

This synthesis of continuity and rupture is equally evident in the decorative programs of the Umayyad desert complexes, where secular courtly imagery existed alongside strict religious aniconism. While sacred spaces such as the mosques at Jabal al-Qal‘ah, Hallābāt, and Mshattā strictly adhered to aniconic decorative schemes—focusing on geometric interlace, vegetal arabesques, and epigraphy—secular palatial spaces retained figurative representations adapted from Late Antique, Sasanian, and Classical artistic traditions. The most famous example of this courtly visual repertoire is preserved at Quṣayr ‘Amrah, an Umayyad bathhouse complex located in the Jordanian eastern desert, constructed under the patronage of Prince al-Walīd ibn Yazīd (later Caliph al-Walīd II, r. 743–744 CE).

The interior walls of Quṣayr ‘Amrah are covered in extensive fresco paintings depicting hunting scenes, athletic contests, naked bathers, mythological personifications, craft occupations, and astronomical representations across its vaulted ceilings. Most significantly, the audience hall features the famous "Fresco of the Six Kings" (*Quṣayr ‘Amrah* panel), depicting the Umayyad ruler enthroned above six defeated world monarchs, identified by Greek and Arabic inscriptions as the Byzantine Emperor (Kaisar), the Sasanian King of Kings (Kisrā), the King of Axum (Najāshī), the Visigothic King of Hispania (Roderic), and unconfirmed rulers of China and Central Asia.

As Oleg Grabar emphasized in his analysis of the site, this painted room served a explicit political purpose: it appropriated the inherited visual language of late antique imperial portraiture to declare that the Umayyad caliph stood at the apex of global political authority, having vanquished or

subjugated the great empires of the known world. The presence of such rich figurative frescoes within a Muslim-ruled complex underscores an essential archaeological reality: early artistic Islamization was not a monolithic or totalizing enforcement of strict iconoclasm, but an environment-specific, functional distinction between sacred devotional spaces and secular political display.

Toward the end of the Umayyad period, this instrumentalization of visual language achieved an unprecedented level of monumental sophistication at Qaṣr al-Mshattā, an unfinished imperial palace situated near modern Queen Alia International Airport south of Amman. Attributed to the patronage of Caliph al-Walīd II (r. 743–744 CE), Qaṣr al-Mshattā features a massive square precinct constructed of fine limestone masonry, brick vaulting, and an elaborate stone facade decorated with deeply carved relief ornament. The famous Mshattā Facade—a significant portion of which was gifted by the Ottoman Sultan Abdülhamid II to Emperor Wilhelm II in 1903 and is now housed in the Museum of Islamic Art in Berlin—displays a continuous zigzag band forming triangular rosettes filled with intricate carved motifs.

Archaeological examination of the Mshattā Facade reveals a precise spatial logic that reflects the functional distinction between secular and sacred visual languages within caliphal statecraft. On the western portion of the facade, which corresponds to the secular residential quarters of the palace, the triangular rosettes are filled with rich figurative reliefs, including lions, mythical beasts, centaurs, birds, and grapevines springing from chalices. However, directly behind the eastern portion of the facade lay the palace mosque. Precisely along the exterior wall corresponding to the mosque, the figurative animals completely disappear from the carved rosettes, leaving only purely vegetal vines, acanthus leaves, and geometric rosettes.

This deliberate stylistic shift on a single stone facade provides concrete material proof that early Islamic statecraft exercised a conscious, highly nuanced control over visual representation. The artisans working at Mshattā—likely brought from Syria, Egypt, and Iraq—were directed to suppress figurative imagery in alignment with sacred space while deploying complex animal imagery on secular walls, demonstrating that the Islamization of art was an intentional, regulated process directed by state authority.

Following the Abbasid Revolution in 750 CE and the transfer of the caliphal capital from Damascus to Baghdad, the political centrality of Bilād al-Shām diminished, yet the material legibility of Islamic visual statecraft across Jordan continued to evolve. During the Middle Islamic period—encompassing the Ayyubid (1171–1260 CE) and Mamluk (1250–1517 CE) eras—Jordan once again became a critical military and administrative zone, serving as the frontline defense against Crusader incursions and a vital land bridge connecting Cairo to Damascus.

Ayyubid and Mamluk rulers re-instrumentalized the Jordanian landscape by constructing monumental military architecture, such as the fortresses at Karak (*Qalʿat al-Karak*), Ajloun (*Qalʿat ʿAjlūn*), and Shobak (*Qalʿat al-Shawbak*). The epigraphic programs of this era shifted from early Umayyad cosmological declarations to intense counter-Crusade epigraphy and Mamluk heraldic blazons (*rank*). Inscriptions carved into the stone ramparts of Ajloun Castle, built under the direction of Saladin’s nephew ʿIzz al-Dīn Usāmah in 1184 CE, explicitly proclaimed the ruler as the defender of the faith (*Mujāhid*), charged with safeguarding the frontiers of Islam and securing pilgrimage routes.

The visual language of art and architecture across Jordan had evolved from early caliphal courtly display into a rigorous, stone-carved monumentalism designed to project military resilience and religious orthodoxy.

Thus, as archaeological, epigraphic, and architectural data across Jordan demonstrates, the Islamization of art functioned as a dynamic visual-political negotiation—an evolving historical process in which artistic production and material culture served as primary instruments of governance, statecraft, and ideological self-definition across the Near Eastern frontier.

While caliphal statecraft, territorial ambition, and royal patronage provided the overarching ideological directives for this visual transformation, the physical realization of these monumental programs depended entirely on the technical synthesis of empirical science, spatial geometry, and practical craft. The grand political visions of Umayyad, Abbasid, Ayyubid, and Mamluk sovereigns could only be translated into stone, stucco, brick, and mosaic through sophisticated structural engineering and refined material expertise. This crucial intersection between ideological demand and technical execution leads directly into the next phase of artistic Islamization: Scientific and Intellectual Contributions: Mathematicians, Architects, and Artisans, where advanced mathematical theory, architectural innovation, and workshop practices coalesced to give concrete, geometric form to the Islamic visual universe.

2. Scientific and Intellectual Contributions: Mathematicians, Architects, and Artisans

A second major finding highlights the indispensable contribution of scientific and scholarly disciplines—particularly practical geometry (*‘ilm al-hisāb*), observational astronomy (*‘ilm al-falak*), optics (*‘ilm al-manāẓir*), and structural engineering—to the Islamization of visual culture. The transformation of aesthetic language in early and medieval Islamic contexts cannot be reduced to religious symbolism or sovereign patronage alone; it was equally forged through the rigorous application of empirical science cultivated within Islamic intellectual circles. Across the urban settlements, desert complexes, and agricultural landscapes of Bilād al-Shām—and specifically within the rich material record of Transjordan—architectural design and surface ornament functioned as physical extensions of theoretical inquiry. As Oleg Grabar argued throughout his scholarship, Islamic art derived its distinct identity not from an innate, static religious dogma, but from a dynamic visual framework capable of expressing complex intellectual concepts through material form. The structural and decorative evolution observed in early Islamic monuments represents the precise point where mathematical theory, astronomical calculation, and workshop craft converged.

The primary driver for scientific precision in early Islamic architectural planning was the sacred imperative of orienting religious structures toward the *qiblah* (the direction of the Ka‘bah in Mecca). As Islamic governance expanded geographically across former Byzantine and Sasanian territories, establishing the correct *qiblah* required increasingly sophisticated mathematical geography and spherical trigonometry. In the regional settlements of Jordan—such as the early Islamic urban quarters of Jarash (Gerasa), the provincial capital at *‘Ammān (Jabal al-Qal‘ah)*, the garrison town of *Fihl* (Pella), and the Red Sea port of *Aylah* (Aqaba)—architects could no longer rely on simple cardinal alignments. Scholars of astronomical timekeeping (*muwaqqitūn*) and religious jurists (*fuqahā’*) collaborated directly with master builders (*muhandisūn*) to calculate azimuths using astrolabes and mathematical tables derived from classical and Indian traditions, which were subsequently refined by Islamic astronomers. The physical results of this interdisciplinary collaboration are evident across

Jordan's archaeological record, where mosques were systematically planned around precise orientation vectors. At Qaṣr al-Hallābāt and Qaṣr al-Mshattā, the alignment of the prayer halls (*ḥaram*) demonstrates a calculated departure from the axes of earlier Roman foundations (*castra*), explicitly re-orienting urban space to conform with sacred geography.

Beyond spatial orientation, the development of modular architectural design, proportional systems, and geometric grid networks transformed structural engineering across the early Islamic world. The construction of complex vaulted spaces, dome transitions, and hydraulic infrastructures across the Jordanian steppe required an advanced understanding of stereotomy (the art of cutting solids) and static equilibrium. In the construction of the monumental audience hall at the Amman Citadel (*Jabal al-Qal'ah*), Umayyad architects designed a sophisticated central cross-in-square plan utilizing stone-carved squinches to transition from a square room to a vaulted wooden dome. This structural technique relied on precise geometric proportions to distribute lateral thrust effectively. Similarly, the massive circular water reservoir (*birkah*) at the Amman Citadel—an engineering feat measuring over 17 meters in diameter and lined with waterproof mortar—demonstrates how practical hydraulics and geometric calculation were combined to secure vital water resources for imperial administration in hyper-arid environments. The master builders operating in Jordan were not merely executing traditional folk practices; they were applying theoretical principles of practical geometry (*al-handasah al-'amaliyyah*) codified in scientific manuals written by mathematicians such as Abu al-Wafā' al-Būzjānī.

The emergence of geometric patterning as a dominant ornamental mode across early Islamic visual culture was far more than a decorative substitution for prohibited figural imagery; it embodied a sophisticated cosmological sensibility rooted in mathematical abstraction, order, and spatial harmony. Rather than viewing non-figural ornament as an aesthetic absence, material evidence confirms that geometric tessellation functioned as a positive visual articulation of *tawḥīd* (the absolute unity and transcendence of God). Through the repetition of modular grids, star polygons, and continuous interlacing lines, artisans created visual representations of infinity, order, and underlying cosmic structure. This mathematical visual culture is exceptionally preserved in the floor mosaics of eighth-century Umayyad complexes across the Jordanian steppe and the lower Jordan Valley. At Qaṣr al-Hallābāt, excavation revealed over twenty distinct mosaic pavements inside the residential rooms. These mosaics feature intricate geometric webs composed of overlapping circles, swastika meanders, interlocking octagons, and tessellated polygons executed with extraordinary mathematical precision. Rather than copying Late Antique motifs verbatim, Umayyad mosaicists (*russāṣūn*) utilized compass-and-straightedge geometry to construct complex self-repeating patterns that guided the viewer's eye across infinite spatial grids. This systematic deployment of geometric proportion provided a visual counterpart to contemporary theological discourse, translating abstract notions of divine unity and cosmic order into tangible material surfaces.

This integration of mathematical theory and artistic craft achieved an extraordinary level of carved stone relief at Qaṣr al-Mshattā, located near modern Amman. The famous Mshattā Facade—carved from fine local limestone—is structured around a massive, mathematically calculated zigzag band that forms twenty-eight equilateral triangular fields, each filled with a large central rosette. Architectural historians have noted that the underlying grid of the facade relies on precise proportional ratios derived from dynamic geometry, specifically the root-two square diagonal system. The master sculptors who carved the Mshattā Facade possessed a deep technical command of three-dimensional depth, relief carving, and light manipulation. By deeply undercutting the limestone surfaces, artisans created sharp contrasts of light and shadow (*chiaroscuro*), causing the

geometric rosettes and vegetal vines to appear suspended in space. This manipulation of architectural surface reflects an awareness of optical principles later formalized by the legendary physicist and mathematician Ibn al-Haytham (Alhazen, 965–1040 CE) in his seminal treatise *Kitāb al-Manāẓir* (De Aspectibus/Book of Optics). Ibn al-Haytham demonstrated that light perception is governed by geometric rays radiating from surfaces to the eye, establishing that visual beauty (*ḥusn*) is fundamentally produced by proportion, symmetry, and the harmonious interplay of light and shade.

In addition to geometry and optics, the elevation of Arabic script into a primary architectural and decorative medium benefited directly from contemporary philological, grammatical, and calligraphic scholarship. The transformation of a pragmatic regional script into a refined visual science required rigorous engagement with linguistic disciplines (*‘ulūm al-lughah*) cultivated in early scholarly centers. Under Marwanid patronage in Bilād al-Shām, calligraphers developed standardized, measured scripts—most notably Monumental Kufic—governed by strict proportional rules. In this calligraphic system, the height and width of every letter were determined in relation to the initial letter *Alif*, which served as the geometric module for the entire inscription. Epigraphic friezes carved into the lintels of Qaṣr al-Kharāna, painted onto the plaster walls of Quṣayr ‘Amrah, and stamped onto official milestones (*mīl*) along the *Darb al-Hajj* road through Jordan demonstrate how text was elevated into a monumental art form. Calligraphy ceased to be mere writing; it became a visual science where textual sacred reverence, grammatical precision, and spatial proportion fused into a single ornamental surface.

As medieval Islamic society progressed into the Ayyubid and Mamluk periods, this synthesis of science and art expanded into increasingly complex architectural technologies, most notably *muqarnas* vaulting (three-dimensional corbeled squinches forming honeycomb cells). In the medieval fortresses and urban structures of Jordan—such as the stone vaulting systems at Ajloun Castle (*Qal‘at ‘Ajlūn*), Karak Castle (*Qal‘at al-Karak*), and the Mamluk caravanserai at Aqaba—artisans deployed advanced stereotomy to construct three-dimensional geometric transitions across stone domes, gateways, and window alcoves. The creation of *muqarnas* required master builders to project complex two-dimensional geometric plans (*tūmān* scrolls) into three-dimensional masonry modules, producing self-supporting stone structures that transformed dead structural load into a visually weightless, cascading geometric canopy. This architectural innovation represents the ultimate physical expression of applied geometry (*‘ilm al-hisāb al-hawā’ī*), demonstrating how theoretical mathematical knowledge was translated directly into stone by organized artisan guilds (*aṣḥāb al-ḥiraf*).

These archaeological and material findings collectively demonstrate that the Islamization of art was neither solely imposed by caliphal political authority nor passively derived from abstract theological mandates. Rather, it emerged from a dynamic, collaborative ecosystem connecting sovereign patrons, scholars, mathematicians, and master artisans. Political rulers provided financial patronage, geopolitical stability, and ideological direction; scholars and mathematicians supplied the empirical, theoretical, and optical frameworks; and workshop artisans translated these complex concepts into concrete material form across the urban centers and desert landscapes of Jordan and the broader Islamic world. This synthesis of political imperative and scientific methodology established a unified aesthetic system that defined the monumental visual culture of Bilād al-Shām. However, the historiographical interpretation of this visual system has frequently been distorted by modern assumptions regarding religious representation and imagery. To fully understand how this artistic paradigm operated, we must turn to Archaeological Evidence versus Historiographical Fictions:

Deconstructing Monolithic Aniconism and Iconoclastic Rupture, where material data from Jordanian sites is used to re-evaluate persistent historical myths surrounding early Islamic visual prohibition.

3. Archaeological Evidence versus Historiographical Fictions: Deconstructing Monolithic Aniconism and Iconoclastic Rupture

A critical re-examination of the material record demonstrates that one of the most persistent historiographical fictions in the study of Islamic visual culture is the notion of a monolithic, absolute aniconism that supposedly triggered an immediate, iconoclastic rupture across the conquered territories of the Near East. Modern academic scholarship, heavily influenced by the groundbreaking theoretical interventions of Oleg Grabar, has dismantled the traditional Orientalist narrative that early Islam instituted an unyielding, totalizing prohibition against all figural representation from its inception. Grabar argued that the absence of human and animal figures in sacred Islamic contexts was not the product of an obsessive, inherent hostility toward visual imagery, but rather a functional and deliberate strategy to distinguish the newly emerging monotheistic community from the heavily icon-centric visual cultures of its Byzantine and Sasanian predecessors. Archaeological data recovered from Bilād al-Shām—and specifically across the diverse sites of Transjordan—provides indisputable empirical proof of this nuanced reality. Far from exhibiting a universal destruction or complete suppression of imagery, early Islamic visual culture functioned through a sophisticated dual framework: strict, reverent aniconism in devotional spaces alongside vibrant, highly developed figural representation in secular, courtly, and domestic spheres.

The material record of Jordan stands as one of the most compelling regional archives for deconstructing the myth of an early Islamic iconoclastic rupture. Nowhere is this clearer than at the Umayyad bathhouse and audience hall of Quṣayr ʿAmrah, situated in the eastern Jordanian desert steppe (*bādiyah*). Built during the first half of the eighth century under the patronage of Prince al-Walīd ibn Yazīd (later Caliph al-Walīd II), the site features interior plaster walls covered in extensive, continuous fresco programs. Rather than demonstrating aniconic restraint, the murals showcase an extraordinary array of figurative imagery, including athletic wrestlers, artisans at work, nude female bathers, hunting expeditions accompanied by dogs, astrological personifications of the heavens across the *caldarium* dome, and the celebrated political portraiture of the "Fresco of the Six Kings." As Grabar emphasized, Quṣayr ʿAmrah is not an anomaly or a rebellious deviation from Islamic practice; it represents an official caliphal commission that actively adapted Classical, Late Antique, and Sasanian visual traditions to project royal prestige, leisure (*majlis*), and political supremacy within a secular, aristocratic environment.

This functional segregation of imagery—separating sacred devotional spaces from secular courtly domains—is equally articulated in stone along the famous facade of Qaṣr al-Mshattā, located near modern Amman. Carved during the reign of al-Walīd II (r. 743–744 CE), the Mshattā Facade features a continuous triangular rosette frieze deeply carved with animal and mythological figures, including lions, peacocks, centaurs, and dragons drinking from vine chalices. Crucially, as archaeological analysis confirms, this rich figural carving appears exclusively along the western portion of the facade, which corresponds to the palace's secular residential quarters. The moment the facade reaches the exterior wall of the palace mosque on the eastern side, all human and animal figures abruptly cease, giving way entirely to delicate, non-figural vegetal arabesques and geometric rosettes. This precise architectural demarcation provides direct material proof that Umayyad patrons and workshop artisans did not operate under a blanket prohibition of figures; rather, they applied a

calculated visual etiquette that reserved strict aniconism for spaces dedicated to Islamic prayer (*ṣalāh*) and divine communion (*tawḥīd*).

Furthermore, archaeological evidence from Jordan actively challenges historiographical assumptions regarding the famous "Edict of Yazīd," issued by the Umayyad Caliph Yazīd II in 721 CE, which directed the removal or alteration of images within Christian places of worship across the empire. Early historiography often interpreted this event as evidence of a systemic, fanatical Islamic iconoclasm sweeping the region. However, detailed archaeological investigations of Byzantine and early Islamic churches across Jordan—most notably at Khirbat al-Mukhayyat (Nebo), Um al-Rasas (*Kastron Mefaa*), and Rihab—reveal a far more complex historical reality. While mosaic pavements in these churches do exhibit instances of deliberate defacement, where human and animal figures were carefully removed from floor tessellations, the damage was executed with surprising physical restraint. In numerous cases, such as the Church of Saint Stephen at Um al-Rasas, the displaced mosaic tesserae were systematically reset to fill the outline of the removed figures with floral motifs or plain background tiles, preserving the overall structural integrity of the floor.

This careful, restorative method of alteration strongly suggests that the modification of images was not the result of violent, anti-Christian rampages by external Muslim forces, but was frequently carried out by the Christian communities themselves in response to internal theological shifts, regional political pressures, or localized imperial directives. Moreover, excavations at sites like Pella (*Fihl*) and Jarash demonstrate that Christian and Muslim populations coexisted side by side for generations following the conquest, with churches remaining active, structurally intact, and ornamentally preserved well into the Abbasid period. The material continuity of these urban centers proves that the transition from Late Antiquity to the Islamic era was characterized by socio-visual negotiation, spatial adaptation, and gradual cultural integration rather than an abrupt, violent iconoclastic wave.

Ultimately, deconstructing these historiographical fictions allows for a far more rigorous understanding of how early Islamic visual culture developed its distinct identity. By synthesizing Oleg Grabar's conceptual framework with the concrete archaeological facts of Jordan—from the royal frescoes of Quṣayr 'Amrah and the spatial logic of Qaṣr al-Mshattā to the nuanced mosaic evidence at Um al-Rasas—it becomes clear that the Islamization of art was neither a totalizing rejection of visual heritage nor an unmediated imposition of religious dogma. Instead, it was an intentional, highly sophisticated process of selective adaptation, functional segregation, and creative synthesis. Early Islamic society successfully absorbed the visual vocabularies of the conquered Near East, deploying figurative art where it served political courtly display and refining a revolutionary, mathematically grounded aniconism to define the sacred aesthetic of the unified Islamic worldview.

This re-evaluation of early Islamic visual policy underscores how material culture actively reframes our understanding of religious identity, statecraft, and artistic production across the medieval Mediterranean. Having examined the political instrumentalization of visual language, the scientific and mathematical foundations of ornament, and the archaeological dismantling of monolithic aniconism, we can now synthesize these insights, reflecting on how material evidence from Jordan continues to reshape the methodology of Islamic art history.

The transformation of visual culture across the Middle East unfolded through three interconnected processes: the elevation of the Arabic language and script into a central aesthetic medium, the transregional diffusion and local adaptation of artistic forms, and the creative re-signification of pre-Islamic traditions. Rather than representing an abrupt rupture, the early Islamic period

witnessed the gradual sacralization of the built environment. epigraphy moved from marginal administrative annotations to structural ornament across facades, domes, and *miḥrābs*, anchoring divine revelation directly within space. Concurrently, as Islamic rule expanded across former Byzantine and Sasanian territories, core architectural typologies like the hypostyle mosque developed alongside highly localized workshop practices—such as brick vaulting in Iraq and Iran or fine ashlar stone carving in Bilād al-Shām. This dynamic process relied heavily on the adaptive reuse of pre-Islamic heritage; architectural *spolia*, Late Antique vegetal arabesques, and even figural imagery in secular courtly spheres were ethically and semantically recalibrated to align with an emerging Islamic visual framework.

Historiographically, early Orientalist scholarship frequently mischaracterized this visual transformation as a monolithic, unilinear process of "Arabization," assuming that expanding caliphal power imposed a rigid, uniform, and inherently aniconic Arab aesthetic over conquered populations. Modern archaeological and art-historical scholarship has systematically dismantled this fiction, reframing the field around the process-oriented concept of *Islamization*. Stratigraphic excavations, spatial analysis, and epigraphic surveys demonstrate that material change was incremental and highly negotiated, preserving local artisanal lineages while embedding Islamic cosmology into physical environments through features such as *qiblah* alignment and geometric abstraction.

Crucially, deconstructing the "Arabization" thesis reveals that Islamic visual and intellectual culture was never the exclusive domain of ethnically Arab patrons or craftsmen. The classical scientific and artistic traditions of the Islamic world were overwhelmingly multiethnic achievements, shaped by Persianate, Central Asian, Turkic, Andalusian, and South Asian scholars, architects, and artisans. Figures such as al-Bīrūnī, Ibn Sīnā, and al-Fārābī utilized Arabic as the universal *lingua franca* of scholarly exchange, much like Latin in medieval Europe, without displacing their distinct regional identities. From the four-*iwān* plans of Seljuk Iran to Ottoman domed structures and Mughal spatial aesthetics, monumental Islamic art evolved through transregional collaboration and contextual adaptation. Ultimately, Islamic art emerged not as an ethnic monolith imposed from a single center, but as a dynamic, pluralistic civilizational language capable of synthesizing sacred revelation with diverse material heritages.

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