

Islamizing Art: Archaeological Facts and Historiographical Fictions Reconsidering the Formation of Islamic Visual Culture in Bilād al Shām in Honor of Oleg Grabar

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Abstract

This study reexamines the Islamization of art through an archaeological and historiographical lens, focusing on Bilād al-Shām and Transjordan to challenge conventional narratives of theological prohibition, civilizational rupture, and uniform aniconism. Drawing on material evidence—including architectural remains, inscriptions, spatial organization, and decorative programs across key Umayyad and regional sites—the research distinguishes physical transformations from later historiographical assumptions of a monolithic Islamic style. Building upon Oleg Grabar's contextual framework, the authors conceptualize Islamization as a multidimensional process expressed through changes in patronage, epigraphy, adaptive reuse, and functional reorientation. Findings reveal a significant continuity with Late Antique, Byzantine, Sasanian, and Classical traditions rather than an abrupt rejection of the past. The nuanced coexistence of figural imagery in secular courtly spheres alongside non-figural, text-centered programs in sacred spaces directly counters the idea of an all-encompassing visual ban. Ultimately, the study demonstrates that Islamization was neither passive continuity nor complete displacement, but a dynamic, negotiated process involving selective adaptation, semantic transformation, and functional differentiation. Islamic visual culture thus developed as a pluralistic, historically grounded phenomenon where faith, political authority, local craftsmanship, and pre-existing artistic traditions continually interacted.

Keywords

Islamization of Art, Fine Arts in Islam, Art and Theology, Oleg Grabar, Islamic Arts, Bilād al Shām, Islamic visual culture

Abstract

Studi ini menelaah kembali Islamisasi seni di Bilād al-Shām dan Yordania Barat melalui pendekatan arkeologis dan historiografis berbasis bukti arsitektur, prasasti, serta tata ruang di situs-situs Umayyah. Menggunakan kerangka teori Oleg Grabar, penelitian ini membantah narasi pemutusan peradaban mendadak dan penolakan gambar figuratif (anikonisme) yang seragam dengan menunjukkan keberlanjutan tradisi Bizantium, Sasania, serta Klasik. Keberadaan seni figuratif di ranah istana yang berdampingan dengan motif non-figuratif berbasis teks di ruang sakral membuktikan bahwa Islamisasi bukan sekadar penggantian total, melainkan proses dinamis yang melibatkan adaptasi selektif, transformasi makna, dan interaksi antara iman, otoritas politik, serta keahlian lokal.

Keywords

Islamisasi Seni, Seni Murni dalam Islam, Seni dan Teologi, Oleg Grabar, Seni Islam, Bilād al Shām, Budaya Visual Islam

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Introduction

Islamic art has frequently been interpreted through stylistic classification, theological discourse, dynastic chronology, and the presumed visual consequences of religious norms. These approaches have produced a rich body of scholarship, but they have also encouraged broad formulations in which “Islamic” art appears either as the expression of a stable religious essence or as a sudden artistic break from Late Antiquity. Archaeology complicates both positions. Buildings, inscriptions, reused architectural elements, mosaics, ceramics, coinage, settlement patterns, and spatial transformations rarely conform to an instantaneous model of cultural replacement. Instead, they reveal uneven processes in which inherited forms remained materially present while new political, ritual, and semantic priorities developed around them (Milwright 2010; Grabar 1987).

This distinction is especially important for the early Islamic centuries. The expansion of Muslim rule across former Byzantine and Sasanian territories did not erase the craftsmen, materials, technologies, visual habits, and architectural traditions already embedded in those regions. Nor did the establishment of Islamic institutions immediately produce a single artistic language. The formation of Islamic visual culture was therefore not a movement from a pre Islamic “before” to a fully formed Islamic “after,” but a prolonged historical process in which continuity and change operated simultaneously. Oleg Grabar’s scholarship remains foundational precisely because it resisted essentialist definitions and treated Islamic art as a historically produced field shaped by patronage, function, inherited traditions, and changing audiences (Grabar 1987, 1992; Ettinghausen, Grabar, and Jenkins Madina 2001).

Bilād al Shām offers an especially productive setting in which to test this process. The region contained dense Late Antique urban networks, Christian religious institutions, Roman and Byzantine monuments, long distance trade routes, tribal landscapes, and centers of imperial administration. Within Transjordan, the archaeological record preserves urban mosques, palatial and administrative complexes, bathhouses, reused fortifications, mosaic pavements, inscriptions, and churches that remained active into the Islamic period. Rather than serving merely as peripheral illustrations of a general history, these sites allow Islamization itself to be examined materially, through changes in spatial use, visual emphasis, architectural function, and political meaning.

The question of figural representation provides a particularly revealing example. A generalized opposition between Islam and images cannot account

for the extensive figurative murals of Quṣayr ‘Amrah, nor for the differentiated treatment of animal imagery on the façade of Qaṣr al Mshattā. These monuments indicate that representation was regulated contextually rather than simply eliminated. Sacred and secular environments could sustain different visual expectations, and the resulting distinction is more accurately described as a contextual regime of representation than as universal aniconism. The issue, therefore, is not merely whether images were present or absent, but where they appeared, for whom, under what patronage, and within what architectural function.

The same methodological problem applies to continuity. Reused columns, capitals, masonry, inherited vegetal motifs, mosaic techniques, and earlier architectural structures have sometimes been treated either as evidence that early Islamic art was derivative or, conversely, as material conquered and subordinated by a new civilization. Both formulations can overstate what archaeology can demonstrate. Reuse first establishes material continuity. Its ideological significance must then be argued from context rather than assumed. The concept of re-signification is useful here because it allows an inherited form to retain aspects of its material history while acquiring a new function, audience, or semantic position within an Islamic environment.

This study therefore asks how the Islamization of art can be identified through archaeologically observable transformations; to what extent evidence from Bilād al Shām, particularly Transjordan, supports or challenges narratives of abrupt rupture, universal aniconism, and rejection of pre-Islamic artistic traditions; and how political authority, inherited artistic practices, craft knowledge, epigraphy, and spatial organization interacted in the formation of Islamic visual culture. The central argument is that Islamization is best understood as a historically situated process of selective adaptation, functional differentiation, and semantic reorientation. Its material traces are clearest not where older forms disappear, but where their use, location, hierarchy, and meaning change.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, comparative case study methodology integrating archaeological analysis, contextual art historical interpretation, visual and spatial analysis, epigraphic evidence, and historiographical critique. The research focuses on Bilād al Shām, particularly Transjordan, as a geographically coherent corpus through which broader propositions concerning the Islamization of art can be tested. The regional focus is analytical rather than representative: the Jordanian material is used to evaluate processes of transformation in a specific historical landscape and is not treated

as evidence from which the development of the entire Islamic world can automatically be generalized.

The case studies were selected purposively because each provides a different archaeological context in which a particular dimension of Islamization can be examined. The corpus comprises the Umayyad Citadel complex in Amman, Qaṣr al Ḥallābāt, Quṣayr ‘Amrah, Qaṣr al Mshattā, early Islamic Jarash (Gerasa), and Umm al Rasas. These cases are not treated as interchangeable illustrations. Rather, each is assigned a defined analytical purpose and is examined through criteria appropriate to its material character, before the results are compared across a shared framework of patronage, spatial transformation, epigraphy, regimes of representation, adaptive reuse, re-signification, craft and ornamental continuity, and religious context.

The study is based on published archaeological and architectural evidence rather than new excavation, laboratory analysis, or field survey. The source base includes excavation reports, archaeological site publications, architectural and stratigraphic studies, conservation documentation, museum and heritage records, epigraphic studies, and peer reviewed art historical scholarship. Priority is given to primary or specialist archaeological publications where available, including studies issued through the Department of Antiquities of Jordan and Studies in the History and Archaeology of Jordan, supplemented by authoritative museum and UNESCO documentation and by established scholarship on Islamic art and archaeology.

Case Study Selection and Analytical Criteria

Case Study	Rationale for Selection	Evidence Examined	Analytical Criteria	Research Function	Principal References
Amman Citadel	Urban administrative and palatial complex constructed within a long occupied citadel.	Palace and mosque planning; earlier structures; circulation ; architectural reuse; administrative and	Spatial transformation; patronage; adaptive reuse; political function; re-signification .	Tests whether Islamization is materially expressed through reorganization of an inherited urban site rather	Almagro Gorbea & Arce 2001a, 2001b; Almagro Gorbea & Jiménez 2000.

Case Study	Rationale for Selection	Evidence Examined	Analytical Criteria	Research Function	Principal References
		religious functions.		than simple architectural replacement.	
Qaṣr al Ḥallābāt	A multi period fortified site transformed into an Umayyad complex with residential, religious, hydraulic, agricultural, and decorative components.	Earlier masonry and inscriptions; Umayyad rebuilding; mosque; mosaics; water installations; agricultural enclosure.	Material continuity; adaptive reuse; functional transformation; craft continuity; re-signification.	Tests continuity versus rupture and the incorporation of inherited material and workshop traditions into a new Umayyad setting.	Bisheh 1985, 1993; Ali & Guidetti 2018.
Quṣayr ‘Amraḥ	A secular Umayyad reception and bath complex preserving an extensive figural painted program.	Figural wall paintings; Six Kings panel; hunting and courtly imagery; zodiac; architectural function of reception	Regime of representation; secular context; patronage; inherited Late Antique visual traditions.	Tests the proposition of universal Islamic aniconism and evaluates the contextual use of figural imagery under	Fowden 2004; Ali 2017; Ettinghausen, Grabar & Jenkins Madina 2001; UNESCO World Heritage Centre.

Case Study	Rationale for Selection	Evidence Examined	Analytical Criteria	Research Function	Principal References
		and bath spaces.		Umayyad patronage.	
Qaṣr al Mshatā	An unfinished palatial complex whose façade permits comparison between decorative zones associated with secular and mosque related spaces.	Façade organization; vegetal, geometric, animal, and figural motifs; distribution of living creatures in relation to the mosque/qibla zone.	Sacred/secular differentiation; representational regime; ornament; spatial context.	Tests whether early Islamic attitudes toward images were context sensitive rather than governed by a single universal prohibition.	Ballian 2012; Williams 2012; Ettinghausen, Grabar & Jenkins Madina 2001.
Jarash (Gerasa)	A major Late Antique city in which an early Islamic congregational mosque and related urban changes can be archaeologically reconstructed.	Mosque excavation and survey; location over/within earlier urban fabric; qibla orientation; urban renewal; reuse and continuity.	Urban transformation; religious spatialization; adaptive reuse; continuity; re-signification.	Tests the relationship between Islamic religious institutions and the inherited Late Antique city, and challenges models of immediate post conquest	Walmsley & Damgaard 2005; Walmsley 2006.

Case Study	Rationale for Selection	Evidence Examined	Analytical Criteria	Research Function	Principal References
				urban rupture.	
Umm al Rasas	A Christian archaeological landscape that continued into the Islamic period and preserves significant church mosaics.	Church use; mosaic production; chronology; figural and non figural imagery; selective alteration and repair of mosaics.	Religious continuity; intercommunal context; image alteration; chronology; evidential limits.	Tests the relationship between political Islamization, Christian artistic continuity, and claims of iconoclasm; distinguishes material alteration from attribution of motive.	Bisheh 1987; UNESCO documentation and specialist archaeological studies.

For each case, analysis proceeded in three stages. First, the documented material evidence was extracted and classified according to the criteria identified above. Second, the evidence was interpreted within the monument's specific chronological, architectural, political, and religious context. Third, the cases were compared with one another and with recurrent historiographical propositions concerning Islamic art, especially abrupt cultural rupture, universal aniconism, rejection of pre Islamic traditions, and the emergence of a homogeneous Islamic style. This procedure makes the case studies instruments for testing the concept of Islamization rather than examples chosen merely to illustrate it.

The terms "archaeological facts" and "historiographical fictions" are therefore used cautiously. An archaeological fact denotes a materially documented observation supported by archaeological, architectural, epigraphic, or visual evidence; it does not imply an interpretation free truth. A

historiographical fiction denotes a generalized or reductive interpretive construction that exceeds what the available evidence can securely demonstrate, rather than a deliberate falsehood. Throughout the analysis, claims are consequently differentiated according to whether the evidence demonstrates, supports, suggests, or leaves open a particular interpretation.

The shared comparative framework consists of eight criteria: patronage and political transformation; spatial transformation and ritual orientation; epigraphic transformation; regimes of visual representation; adaptive reuse and material continuity; re-signification of inherited forms; geometry, ornament, and craft knowledge; and religious or intercommunal context. Not every criterion is equally relevant to every site. The matrix above identifies the variables that carry the greatest evidential weight in each case, thereby maintaining comparability without forcing materially different monuments into an identical analytical template.

Results

4.1 Spatial and Functional Transformation

The comparative analysis identified spatial and functional reorganization as one of the clearest material indicators of Islamization. At the Amman Citadel, the Umayyad palatial and administrative complex introduced a new political, residential, and religious hierarchy into an older urban setting. The incorporation of a congregational mosque, audience spaces, residential units, and administrative functions demonstrates a reorganization of the site rather than the wholesale removal of its earlier architectural fabric. The archaeological sequence therefore indicates that Islamization could operate through the reassignment and restructuring of inherited space under new forms of patronage and authority (Almagro Gorbea and Arce 2001a, 2001b).

A comparable pattern appears at Jarash (Gerasa), where the establishment of an early Islamic congregational mosque occurred within a functioning Late Antique city. Excavation and urban analysis indicate interaction between the mosque and the inherited cityscape rather than an immediate replacement of the earlier urban order. Taken together, Amman and Jarash show that spatial Islamization was expressed through the introduction of new religious and administrative functions into pre-existing environments. The result supports gradual urban transformation and functional recontextualization rather than abrupt physical rupture (Walmsley and Damgaard 2005; Walmsley 2006).

4.2 Material Continuity, Adaptive Reuse, and Re signification

Material continuity was especially evident at Qaṣr al Ḥallābāt. Earlier structural phases and reused architectural materials remained part of the site while Umayyad interventions introduced new architectural, religious, residential, hydraulic, and agricultural functions. Mosaic pavements and decorative programs further demonstrate the continued use of inherited artistic and craft traditions within an Umayyad context. The archaeological result is therefore not one of simple preservation or rejection, but of selective reuse and re signification: earlier materials and visual practices acquired new functions within a changed political and cultural framework (Bisheh 1985, 1993; Ali and Guidetti 2018).

The same criterion is visible, although in a different urban context, at Amman and Jarash. Reused structures and architectural elements demonstrate that inherited material culture remained active within Islamic period construction. Across these cases, reuse alone does not establish ideological appropriation. Its significance emerges from the relationship between the retained material, its new spatial position, and its altered function. The cross case evidence therefore identifies adaptive reuse as a recurrent mechanism through which continuity and transformation could coexist.

4.3 Contextual Regimes of Figural Representation

The strongest result concerning representation emerges from the comparison between Quṣayr ‘Amrah and Qaṣr al Mshattā. Quṣayr ‘Amrah preserves an extensive figurative program within an Umayyad reception and bath complex, including human figures, animals, hunting imagery, courtly themes, and the composition conventionally known as the Six Kings. The survival of this program demonstrates that figural imagery remained available within an early Islamic elite and secular environment. The case is therefore inconsistent with a model of universal early Islamic aniconism (Fowden 2004; Ali 2017; UNESCO World Heritage Centre n.d.).

Qaṣr al Mshattā provides a complementary rather than contradictory result. Its façade combines vegetal, geometric, animal, and other figural motifs, while the section associated with the mosque is treated differently and omits living creatures. This spatial differentiation within a single architectural program suggests that attitudes toward representation were conditioned by architectural and religious context. When read together, Quṣayr ‘Amrah and Mshattā support a context sensitive representational regime: figural imagery was neither universally prohibited nor uniformly employed, but distributed according to function, setting, and patronage (Ballian 2012; Williams 2012).

4.4 Religious Continuity, Coexistence, and Image Alteration

Umm al Rasas provides evidence that political Islamization did not automatically produce immediate religious or artistic homogenization. Continued Christian architectural and mosaic activity under Islamic rule demonstrates the persistence of Christian communities and visual practices within the changing political environment. Selective interventions in figural mosaics constitute material evidence of changing treatment of images, but the archaeological alterations do not, by themselves, establish the precise motivation or agency behind every intervention (Bisheh 1987).

This distinction is methodologically significant. The physical alteration of an image can be documented archaeologically, whereas attributing that alteration directly to a specific decree, including the reported iconoclastic edict associated with Yazīd II, requires independent chronological and textual support. Umm al Rasas therefore contributes two results to the comparative analysis: continuity of non Muslim religious production under Islamic governance, and the need to separate observable material change from subsequent historical explanations of that change.

Across the six case studies, the results reveal a recurring combination of continuity and transformation rather than a uniform stylistic break. Earlier structures, materials, construction practices, and visual vocabularies remained in use, while new patronage, religious functions, spatial hierarchies, and forms of visual emphasis altered their meaning and operation. The cases consequently show that continuity should not be treated as evidence for the absence of Islamization; in several instances, continuity was itself the material medium through which transformation occurred.

The comparison also demonstrates that no single visual feature is sufficient to identify Islamization. A reused column, geometric ornament, the presence or absence of figural imagery, or an Arabic inscription cannot independently define the process. The evidence becomes more persuasive when several indicators converge within the same documented context. Across the cases examined here, the principal indicators are changes in patronage and political function, spatial and ritual reorganization, adaptive reuse, re signification of inherited forms, increasing visual importance of Arabic epigraphy, and contextually differentiated regimes of representation.

The principal result of the case study analysis is therefore that Islamization is best understood as a relational and historically uneven process. It did not require the complete invention of new artistic forms or the systematic elimination of earlier ones. Instead, it involved changing relationships among inherited material culture, new institutions, religious

practice, political authority, artisans, and audiences. This pattern provides the empirical basis for the following discussion, in which the archaeological results are evaluated against historiographical assumptions concerning abrupt rupture, universal aniconism, rejection of pre Islamic traditions, and the idea of a homogeneous Islamic artistic style.

Findings and Discussion

5.1 From Rupture to Gradual Transformation

The evidence indicates that the Islamization of art operated through multiple, overlapping mechanisms rather than through a single stylistic conversion. Across Transjordan, political patronage, spatial reorganization, epigraphic visibility, adaptive reuse, and contextual differentiation of imagery repeatedly appear together. These processes did not move at the same speed or in the same direction. A palace, a mosque, a bathhouse, a reused fort, and a Christian church could participate in the same Islamic period landscape while preserving different relationships to inherited visual culture. Islamization was therefore neither the elimination of the past nor the passive continuation of it; it was the reorganization of material culture around new institutions, audiences, and systems of authority.

Political patronage was one of the most visible agents of this transformation. The Umayyad period in Bilād al Shām witnessed the development of monumental programs in which architecture, inscription, and spatial organization articulated a new imperial order. The Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem remains the most influential example: its late seventh century monumental inscriptions gave Arabic religious text unprecedented architectural visibility and established epigraphy as a central medium of political and theological communication (Grabar 1987; Blair 1998; Ettinghausen, Grabar, and Jenkins Madina 2001). The importance of this development lies not in the sudden invention of ornament, but in the altered visual hierarchy of writing. Text became architecture: it occupied prominent surfaces, organized viewing, and communicated confessional and political claims through monumental form.

A comparable process can be observed at the Amman Citadel, where the Umayyad palace complex reorganized an already ancient urban summit. Archaeological studies of the citadel have emphasized both the planning of the Umayyad complex and its relationship to earlier occupation (Almagro Gorbea and Arce 2001a, 2001b). The site is significant because it demonstrates Islamization spatially rather than iconographically alone. Administrative, palatial, and religious functions were integrated into a new complex without requiring the material erasure of the site's earlier history. The resulting

architecture translated provincial governance into an Islamic period urban form while simultaneously drawing on regional building traditions.

Qaṣr al Ḥallābāt provides an even clearer case of material continuity combined with functional transformation. The site developed through successive Roman, Byzantine, Ghassanid, and Umayyad phases, and its Umayyad reconfiguration included residential, religious, hydraulic, and decorative components. Bisheh's question of whether the complex should be understood as a desert retreat or a productive estate is itself instructive because it cautions against reducing the *quṣūr* to a single romanticized function (Bisheh 1985). What matters for the present argument is that Islamization at Ḥallābāt did not require the destruction of its earlier fabric. Existing masonry, inherited building practices, mosaic traditions, and new architectural functions were combined within a transformed political and social environment.

This pattern complicates any model in which reuse automatically signifies ideological conquest. At Jarash, the construction of an early Islamic congregational mosque within a Late Antique urban environment demonstrates a substantial reconfiguration of civic space, but reused Classical elements first document continuity of materials and available building resources. Their ideological meaning cannot be assumed from reuse alone. The more defensible interpretation is that inherited urban fabric was incorporated into new religious and communal functions. Such incorporation is itself a form of Islamization because the significance of the material changed through location, use, and association rather than through physical replacement.

5.2 Continuity, Adaptation, and Re signification of Earlier Traditions

This perspective also reframes the relationship between political power and artistic production. Caliphal and elite patronage mattered profoundly, especially in monumental architecture, epigraphy, and court culture, but the formation of Islamic visual culture cannot be explained as a state project alone. Local craftsmen, inherited workshops, regional materials, religious communities, and practical technologies all constrained and enabled what patrons could build. The result was a negotiated visual order in which authority was expressed through forms that remained historically layered.

The distinction between observation and interpretation is therefore central to the archaeological study of Islamic art. A reused capital is observable; its ideological meaning must be argued. A wall without animal imagery is observable; whether it reflects theological prohibition, patronal preference, liturgical suitability, or workshop convention requires contextual analysis. An inscription is observable; its political and devotional force

depends on language, location, audience, and scale. Treating these levels separately allows archaeology to correct overgeneralized narratives without pretending that material culture speaks without interpretation.

The regional value of Transjordan becomes still clearer when the monuments are read as parts of a connected landscape rather than as isolated masterpieces. Umayyad patronage operated across urban centers, agricultural estates, road systems, water installations, bath complexes, and elite residences. At Qaṣr al Ḥallābāt, for example, the transformation of an earlier fortified site into an Umayyad palatial complex involved not only the main residence but also a mosque, water installations, an agricultural enclosure, and associated facilities. Reused basalt blocks bearing earlier Greek inscriptions remained physically present within the reconstructed complex, while new mosaics, stucco, frescoes, and Islamic period architectural additions changed the site's function and visual identity (Bisheh 1993). This juxtaposition is particularly significant for the concept of Islamization proposed here. The earlier material was not rendered historically invisible; instead, a new political and cultural order was constructed through it. The archaeological sequence therefore records both memory and transformation at the same time.

The mosaics at Ḥallābāt also complicate any simple equation between Islamization and the disappearance of living beings from decoration. Excavated pavements include complex geometric compositions as well as vegetal, animal, and human imagery. Such evidence confirms that Umayyad visual culture could combine inherited mosaic techniques with new architectural and courtly settings rather than replacing one representational vocabulary with another. From the perspective of artistic production, the continuity of mosaic practice points to the importance of craftsmen as carriers of technical knowledge. Recent scholarship on Umayyad palace imagery has increasingly emphasized the maker's workshop, practical transmission, and cultural memory as essential to understanding how Late Antique visual resources entered new Islamic contexts (Ali and Guidetti 2018). This practice centered perspective strengthens the archaeological model adopted in this study because it shifts attention away from the assumption that every motif must correspond directly to a theological prescription.

The same approach changes how artistic hybridity should be interpreted. Similarities between Umayyad and Late Antique forms are sometimes described as evidence that early Islamic art had not yet developed an independent identity. Such a formulation assumes that artistic identity requires formal isolation from the past. Archaeologically, however, cultural formation often occurs through the selective reorganization of existing

resources. A vine scroll, mosaic technique, column, or figural convention can remain formally recognizable while entering a different network of patronage, architectural function, inscription, ritual, and audience. What changes is not necessarily the visual unit itself but the system of relationships in which it operates. Islamization can therefore be identified at the level of assemblage and context as much as at the level of individual motif.

This is particularly evident at Mshattā. The façade combines vegetal abundance, animals, fantastic creatures, rosettes, and geometric organization in a program whose sources have been discussed in relation to Byzantine, Sasanian, and other Late Antique traditions. The monument's importance does not depend on assigning each motif to a single cultural origin. Rather, the coexistence of heterogeneous visual resources within one Umayyad period architectural project demonstrates the capacity of early Islamic patronage and workshops to synthesize inherited vocabularies. At the same time, the omission of living creatures from the façade zone associated with the mosque indicates that synthesis was not indiscriminate. Visual inheritance was subject to contextual selection. This combination of receptivity and differentiation is one of the clearest material expressions of Islamization as defined in this article.

5.3 Reconsidering Aniconism: Context Rather than Universal Prohibition

The question of representation is where the archaeological evidence most directly challenges simplified accounts of Islamic aniconism. Quṣayr ‘Amrah, built in the early eighth century, preserves an extensive program of figurative wall painting in its reception and bath spaces. Hunting scenes, human figures, occupations, animals, princely imagery, and the celebrated zodiac dome place the monument within a broader Late Antique and Byzantine visual world while simultaneously locating that inheritance inside an Umayyad elite environment. UNESCO’s assessment emphasizes both the secular character of the paintings and their importance for understanding early Islamic art. Their existence makes it impossible to sustain the claim that Muslim patronage inherently excluded figural representation (UNESCO World Heritage Centre n.d.; Ettinghausen, Grabar, and Jenkins Madina 2001).

Yet Quṣayr ‘Amrah should not simply be used to replace one absolute claim with another. Its significance lies in context. The paintings belong to a courtly and bath complex, not to a mosque. Their subjects participate in a language of princely life, pleasure, knowledge, sovereignty, and inherited imperial culture. The so called Six Kings composition, whose individual identifications and political implications have been debated, is best treated as a statement of rulerly world consciousness rather than as literal proof that six

defeated monarchs were being represented. The monument therefore demonstrates adaptation of inherited visual languages within Umayyad patronage, while cautioning against overly literal readings of political iconography.

Qaṣr al Mshattā provides the complementary case. Although the precise patronage and dating of the unfinished complex remain debated, a mid eighth century context is generally accepted, and attribution to al Walid II remains one important scholarly position. The celebrated façade employs a continuous zigzag organization filled with vegetal, geometric, and figural motifs. Crucially, the side associated with the qibla wall and mosque omits animal figures, whereas animated creatures occur in other portions of the façade. The Metropolitan Museum's discussion of the monument has emphasized precisely this distinction between secular and sacred visual contexts (Williams 2012). This evidence is stronger than a generalized claim of aniconism because it demonstrates differentiated practice within a single architectural program.

The implication is that early Islamic visual culture developed contextual regimes of representation. Figural imagery could remain acceptable within secular elite environments while sacred settings increasingly privileged other visual languages, especially epigraphy, vegetal ornament, and geometry. Such differentiation should not be described as a universal legal code materialized uniformly across the Islamic world, because the archaeological record is too varied for that conclusion. It is better understood as a historically developing visual ethic in which architectural function, patronage, and religious context shaped the treatment of images.

5.4 Islamization without Cultural Homogenization

The material record also complicates narratives of iconoclasm in Christian environments under early Islamic rule. Churches in Jordan continued to function after the conquest, and mosaic pavements in a number of sites show selective alteration of human and animal figures rather than wholesale destruction of buildings or decorative programs. The reported iconoclastic decree associated with Caliph Yazīd II has long been invoked in discussions of these alterations, but its scope, chronology, implementation, and relationship to surviving archaeological evidence require caution. Where figures were carefully removed and replaced while the mosaic field remained intact, the material process suggests controlled modification rather than indiscriminate devastation. Determining who carried out the alteration and under what pressure remains a further historical inference, not a self evident archaeological fact.

Umm al Rasas is especially important because its Christian monuments and mosaics continued into the Islamic period. Such evidence makes coexistence materially visible and undermines models in which Islamization necessarily entailed immediate destruction of Christian visual culture. The more plausible historical pattern is one of negotiated change: communities adapted to shifting political and religious environments while many institutions, artistic practices, and local workshops continued. This does not deny episodes of restriction or iconoclasm; it places them within a more uneven and context sensitive history.

A further dimension emerges from the Christian archaeology of the region. Umm al Rasas preserves remains extending from the Roman through Byzantine and Early Muslim periods, including sixteen churches and the celebrated mosaic floor of the Church of Saint Stephen. The continued presence of monastic Christianity and church building within an Islamic political environment is crucial evidence against a model of immediate cultural displacement. It demonstrates that political Islamization and religious demographic change did not necessarily proceed at the same pace as the transformation of local artistic institutions. Christian communities continued to commission, maintain, and use complex visual environments, while participating in a society governed by Muslim authorities. The resulting archaeological landscape is therefore better described as layered and intercommunal than as a sequence of mutually exclusive religious phases.

This observation also clarifies the methodological status of altered mosaics. Selective removal or replacement of figural motifs can document a change in attitudes toward representation, but the material act alone does not identify the agent, motivation, or legal mechanism responsible for it. The so called Edict of Yazīd II remains relevant to the historical discussion, yet archaeological alterations should not automatically be assigned to the decree. Local Christian debates, changing devotional sensibilities, political pressures, later repairs, and community decisions must remain within the range of possible explanations unless chronology and context narrow them further. The distinction is important because the central purpose of an archaeological approach is not to replace textual determinism with material determinism, but to test each category of evidence against the other.

5.5 Geometry, Epigraphy, and Craft Knowledge as Positive Visual Languages

Epigraphy constituted another decisive mode of transformation. Arabic writing had existed before Islam, but its monumental and institutional prominence expanded dramatically under Islamic rule. Inscriptions on architecture, objects, milestones, and coinage did more than transmit

language; they created visual fields in which religious formulas, political authority, and artistic composition converged. Blair's work on Islamic inscriptions and calligraphy demonstrates the importance of treating script as material and spatial form rather than as text alone (Blair 1998, 2006). In this respect, the Islamization of visual culture can be observed in the increasing scale, placement, density, and architectural integration of Arabic script.

This point requires chronological precision. Early monumental scripts should not be retroactively explained through later proportional systems associated with mature calligraphic theory. The sophisticated modular practices codified in later centuries cannot simply be projected onto Umayyad inscriptions. What the early material record securely demonstrates is the growing monumentalization of writing and the deliberate use of script as a primary component of visual order. This is sufficient to support the argument without attributing anachronistic systems of Alif based proportion to the earliest monuments.

Geometry likewise needs to be understood through both continuity and innovation. Geometric ornament existed in Greek, Roman, Byzantine, Sasanian, and other Late Antique traditions; Islamic artists inherited and transformed these resources, developing increasingly elaborate systems of repetition, symmetry, polygonal combination, and interlace (Department of Islamic Art, Metropolitan Museum of Art 2001). This development therefore supports the broader thesis of the paper: Islamic visual culture did not emerge through *ex nihilo* invention, but through selective appropriation and elaboration.

The material evidence from Transjordan includes geometric mosaic pavements, carved stone surfaces, architectural transitions, and carefully organized decorative fields that demonstrate substantial practical knowledge of measurement and construction. Yet practical geometry should not be confused with documentary proof that a particular mathematical treatise governed a particular eighth century monument. Later authors such as Abū al Wafā' al Būzjānī are important for understanding the formalization of practical geometry in the Islamic intellectual tradition, but they cannot be cited as direct sources for Umayyad builders who preceded them. Similarly, the deeply carved relief of Mshattā can legitimately be described as manipulating light and shadow, but it should not be presented as evidence of influence from Ibn al Haytham, whose optical writings are substantially later.

The qibla offers another example of the need to distinguish general historical development from site specific proof. The requirement to orient prayer toward Mecca generated sustained traditions of geographical,

astronomical, and mathematical inquiry across the Islamic world, eventually producing highly sophisticated methods for determining direction (King 1999). At the same time, surviving mosque orientations vary, and the precise method used at a particular early site cannot be inferred from orientation alone. The archaeological significance of the qibla in Transjordan therefore lies securely in spatial reorientation toward Islamic ritual practice; claims about astrolabes, mathematical tables, or named specialists require independent historical evidence for each case.

These distinctions strengthen rather than weaken the argument. They show that technical knowledge operated at several levels: inherited craft practice, empirical building knowledge, workshop geometry, and, in later periods, increasingly formalized mathematical and scientific theory. Islamization involved the interaction of these levels without requiring that every visual effect be traced to a scholarly text. The history of Islamic art is richer when artisans are not reduced to passive executors of elite intellectual systems and when practical knowledge is granted its own historical agency.

5.6 Archaeological Facts and Historiographical Fictions

Taken together, the sites examined here expose the limits of three recurring historiographical simplifications. The first is abrupt rupture: archaeological continuity in buildings, materials, motifs, and craft techniques shows that conquest and artistic transformation did not coincide neatly. The second is universal aniconism: Quṣayr ‘Amrah and Mshattā demonstrate that the treatment of figural imagery depended significantly on architectural and social context. The third is stylistic monolithism: the very diversity of early Islamic material culture reveals that Islamization did not produce one homogeneous form but reorganized multiple regional traditions within changing networks of patronage, ritual, and authority.

In this sense, “Islamization” is most useful when it does not name a finished style but a change in relationships. Patronage shifts toward Islamic institutions; spaces are reorganized around new ritual practices; Arabic script gains monumental authority; inherited motifs are reassigned to new contexts; figural imagery is differentiated according to function; and older structures acquire new uses. These transformations are historically measurable even when their meanings remain contested. They provide a more rigorous foundation for discussing Islamic visual identity than either formal resemblance or theological expectation alone.

5.7 Toward an Archaeological Model of Islamization

Seen comparatively, the Jordanian corpus therefore suggests that Islamization proceeded through different temporalities. Political symbols and Arabic epigraphy could change rapidly under state patronage; architectural fabrics could preserve earlier phases for centuries; craft practices could persist across dynastic boundaries; religious communities could continue to occupy inherited spaces; and visual conventions could be retained in one functional context while restricted in another. A single chronological line cannot adequately describe these processes. The more useful model is a field of asynchronous transformations whose convergence gradually produced recognizably Islamic spatial and visual environments.

This asynchronous model also offers a more precise way to understand the role of agency. Caliphs and governors could commission monuments and inscriptions, but they did not control every stage of artistic production. Builders worked with existing structures and local stone; mosaicists and painters drew on inherited repertoires; religious communities negotiated continuity and change within their own institutions; and viewers encountered monuments through practices that could differ from the intentions of patrons. Islamic visual culture was consequently produced through interaction among state authority, local expertise, material availability, religious practice, and inherited memory. Recognizing these multiple agents avoids attributing every formal development either to doctrine or to centralized political planning.

The archaeological approach adopted here also has implications for the terminology of Islamic art history. Describing an object as “Islamic” need not imply that every element of its form originated within Islam or that its maker consciously intended to visualize a complete theological system. The category can instead identify a historical field in which objects and buildings were produced, used, circulated, and interpreted under changing Islamic institutions and cultural conditions. This allows Islamic art to include continuity, borrowing, ambiguity, and regional difference without treating those qualities as exceptions to an otherwise pure style. In this sense, plurality is not a problem to be explained away; it is part of the historical structure of Islamic visual culture itself.

Conclusion

The archaeological record of Bilād al Shām, and especially Transjordan, does not support an account of Islamic art formed through immediate rupture with the visual cultures that preceded it. Nor does it support the opposite assumption that early Islamic art was merely a continuation of Byzantine, Sasanian, Classical, or local traditions. The evidence points instead to

transformation through use: inherited forms were retained, relocated, recombined, restricted, monumentalized, and endowed with new functions. Islamization was therefore a process of selective continuity in which material survival and semantic change frequently occurred together. This conclusion is particularly clear when different functional contexts are compared. At Quṣayr ‘Amrah, extensive figural painting demonstrates the continued viability of human and animal imagery within an Umayyad elite setting. At Qaṣr al Mshattā, the contrast between animated ornament and the animal free zone associated with the mosque suggests that visual representation was being differentiated according to architectural function. At the Amman Citadel and Qaṣr al Ḥallābāt, new Islamic period political, religious, and residential uses were built through landscapes already marked by earlier empires. At Christian sites, continued occupation and selective modification of mosaics reveal negotiation rather than simple replacement.

The most important historiographical implication is that terms such as aniconism, continuity, and Islamization should not be treated as self explanatory. Aniconism was not a single universal condition but a contextually variable visual practice. Continuity did not mean cultural stasis, because reused forms could acquire new meanings. Islamization was not synonymous with Arabization, because the emerging visual culture of Islam was produced through heterogeneous regional traditions, craftsmen, institutions, and intellectual networks. The resulting artistic field was unified less by a single style than by changing relationships among religious practice, political authority, language, space, and inherited material culture. Oleg Grabar’s methodological legacy remains valuable precisely because it encourages the historian to resist retrospective certainty. The formation of Islamic art becomes more intelligible when monuments are approached as historical negotiations rather than illustrations of fixed doctrine. Archaeology contributes to this approach by anchoring interpretation in material sequence, spatial context, reuse, and documented visual practice. It also imposes necessary limits: where evidence demonstrates form but not intention, interpretation must remain proportionate to what can actually be shown. Seen from this perspective, the Islamization of art was not the disappearance of a pre Islamic visual world but its reorganization within new structures of meaning. The process generated distinctive Islamic visual languages while preserving traces of the societies from which they emerged. Its history is therefore best understood not as a clean border between civilizations, but as a layered field of adaptation in which faith, authority, craftsmanship, inherited memory, and local circumstance continually reshaped one another.

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