

FLOOR TALK
'Breaking the Veils'
Exhibition of Women's Art from the Islamic World
Wednesday 31 October, 2007
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Contemporary Australian Islamic Art.

I would like to begin with a brief description about how Islamic art is seen from the eyes of the Muslim. I will touch on a few concepts before sharing some of the noted influence Islamic art has had on some of the greats of the western art world. I also hope to share with you an understanding of the concept of the Australian Islamic artist.

Islamic art can be broadly defined as art produced by a person of the Muslim faith or that of a person residing within the Islamic culture, usually referring from the time of the *Hijra* (622 A.D.) also known as the start of the Muslim calendar, until present time. It is well known that Muslims throughout history have defined their identity through the arts and poetry, endeavouring to capture the essence of what *Allah* (God) has created. Islamic art also aspires to envelope the spirituality of Islam through what is known as *dhikr* or the praising and remembrance of *Allah* (God). This is for the most part the centre of Islamic art although not necessarily always portrayed purely in the religious realm.

To a Muslim, the basic principle that everything is the creation of God does away with the ideological boundaries of what art should be to also explore the spirituality in science, maths and philosophy. For example, the intention of the structured rhythm of the geometric designs, the arabesque (or vegetation) and the nature of the calligraphy is to express the form and order found in everything that *Allah* has created, including that of the unseen, the gardens and spiritual journey of the afterlife. The circle and its centre are the point at which all Islamic geometric patterns begin. The circle symbolically represents one God, eternity, without beginning, without end. The circle is the most beautiful parent of all polygons, both containing and underlying them. The art, architecture, pottery and metalwork of the Muslim is therefore usually directed by the spirituality of the expression rather than for the sake of the form in itself encompassing all of the worldly sciences and connecting to the movement of what we feel at the deepest instinctual and spiritual level. The repetitive patterns found traditionally in Islamic art intend to acknowledge the essence of the infinite and unique nature of God. It is also a kind of spiritual soothing for the one observing the artwork, gently prompting a sense of serenity, calmness and contemplation.

Traditionally, Islamic art derives the principal of avoiding the depiction of living creatures in the religious texts found in the *Qu'ran* and *aHadith* (the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad PBUH). Therefore the obvious is almost always omitted and the imagination is stretched delicately beyond the pale of what we see and into the

realm of what we think and feel, of what we know and of what we desire to know. Abstraction, colour and pattern are the most recognised aspects of many of the Islamic arts.

From the white sandy deserts of Arabia throughout the Middle East and Asia, Africa, Europe and beyond, Muslim artists of all descriptions find themselves immersed deeply into the richness of their surroundings, identifying both a spiritual connection and understanding of the world but often times may be compelled to express the reality of the world they find themselves in. This need to express the dynamic pull between the two worlds may momentarily go outside the grasp of those yet to experience some of these spiritual understandings of the Islamic culture.

The Islamic culture having embraced a vast portion of the globe also brings us to the need for identifying the Australian Muslim. Perhaps as Australian Muslims we can simply be seen as one who walks this great land and chooses to experience their life within it. *Qadar* (Divine fate) brought us here, this land was meant to meet us. The true Indigenous owners of this land share with us all that is traditionally theirs. To feel the depth of this acknowledgement is to truly understand what being 'Australian' is. The contemporary Australian Islamic artist is therefore naturally influenced by the traditional Aboriginal art, akin to Islamic art where much rhythm and spirituality is found. This Indigenous influence on the artist is also moved by the mood set by the contemporary social and political landscape mixed with shared identities from other cultures that have come along with us through a journey of colour, song, food and traditional dress. Western techniques and art meld effortlessly within the Islamic artist as it does so within any artist, where the exploration and ability to absorb and translate their environment into an art form is both natural and at times urgent.

Many of the greatest known artists of the Western world cite some of their influence from the Islamic cultures and art. As noted by Robert Hughes in his work "The Shock of the New" Henri Matisse in particular loved Islamic Art, he saw a big show of it in Munich in 1910. Islamic pattern offers the illusion of a completely full world, where everything from far to near is pressed with equal urgency against the eye. Matisse admired that and wanted to transpose it into terms of pure colour. One of the results was "The Red Studio" (1911). The all over quality of Matisse's work stemmed from his appreciation of Islamic art. With its decorative appeal, colouristic richness and resistance to a centralised focus, this was as significant an influence for Matisse as African art was for Picasso. Paul Klee was another great artist who found a deeply profound sense of his artistic self through what we would describe today as a cultural exchange of great magnitude. Klee visited Tunisia in 1911. The experience was a turning point in his life and career and it awakened his sense of colour. Klee gradually detached colour from physical description and used it independently. The view of the Mosque in "Hammamet with its Mosque" (1914) demonstrates Klee's path to abstraction. By 1915 he had turned his back completely from painting after the model."

On several visits to North Africa known as the Maghrib which includes the countries of Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Libya, Klee was greatly inspired by the mystical shapes, signs and numbers of the Indigenous peoples known as the

Berber. Klee had also found great inspiration in the rich Islamic heritage that saturated the landscape. He incorporated these into his work and in turn his interpretation would go on to influence several Maghribi Artists. This noted cultural exchange was a mutual desire and respect and natural consequence of the universal liberal complexion of the arts. Klee died in 1940. His work influenced all later 20th century surrealist and non-objective artists and was a prime source for the budding abstract expressionist movement.

Russian born Wassily Kandinski is also considered somewhat as an inventor and theorist of abstract painting in the 20th century. In 1910, Kandinsky had seen an Islamic Art Exhibition in Munich. Art, which displayed a highly decorative style that did not allow the images of human beings, was something uncommon in most European art of the age. This art show in particular has been suggested to be a catalyst in Kandinsky's career giving birth to his abstract work. Kandinsky created his first abstract piece in 1911 after viewing the Islamic Art exhibition at great length.

Needless to say, that one may find within the arts a particular ease and desire to connect with the extraordinary and the different is certainly something at times not found very easily outside the genre. Citing the influences of the Islamic culture on Western art as we know it, is merely a historical statement. The true meaning of such a significant exchange comes in recognising that varying cultures are more inclined towards one another than we may initially be led to accept. There is something in the artist regardless of culture or faith that allows such dissolving of any perceived boundaries. More importantly there is something unique within the understanding of the community of artists that allows this freedom to move uninhibited between cultures. There is a freedom, a kind of unspoken permission for one's autonomy. Traditionally in Islamic societies there is a welcoming of knowledge, the sharing of ideas, philosophies and culture. The idea of Western influences in the arts of Islam are embraced comfortably and expressed within the work of the artist. Islam incorporates many different cultures and there is an appreciation with which this occurs.

The most significant and instinctive recognition of the Muslim artist as an Australian is that of the Indigenous culture. It is acknowledged respectfully from the Islamic identity of the Australian Muslim, that this is a most natural and joyous arising. Modern Australian culture with its rich blend of cultures also inherently holds significant importance.

Certainly the kaleidoscope of cultures that colour the Muslim artist's palette does away with the notion that an exchange between Islam and the west has not yet occurred. This idea of Islam and the west being at odds is possibly just a political notion. Most people of thought and sincerity universally recognise that we are more alike than we are different, we are after all born of mankind and have been sharing and exchanging longer than we could possibly imagine. Perhaps we are now simply yearning to rediscover one another in the richness and fullness of our humanity. As the tides are changing and new challenges are being brought before us, as we sway and spin and at times feel as though we are losing our grip on our very own humanity, there are tiny cracks appearing in the concrete, the trees and

flowers are growing and the small but significant beauty and hope that this brings is worth the patience and effort of the artistic and creative minds from amongst us to work to find and nurture this hope. The arts by its very nature will always find the cracks, the way out, to break free and to provide an open door. This open door will always be a way in which the vast array of religions and cultures of the world are able to stay connected with one another. Traditionally this is a unique and safe place where such human diversity is both celebrated and embraced.