

Art as War: Ruminations on the Aesthetics of Islamic Decoration

By Kevin Woods

Sitting inside Spain's Alhambra just under a year ago, I first experienced Islamic art firsthand. I was in awe of it then, as I still am now, but I was incapable of describing exactly why it had such a power over me. Why did I find it so beautiful? Walls covered from floor to ceiling with strange shapes and crooked lines, then the ceiling covered as well, the decoration - almost completely geometric designs - was like nothing I had ever seen before. In an art class last fall, I gained a slight knowledge of why a Titian or a Michelangelo masterpiece could be so beautiful, or at least I could say a few words about its color or its detail (not that the aesthetic experience of such a work can be reduced to such few and simple words). The Islamic conception of art was so different, however, that I couldn't even begin to describe its power.

The art of most Islamic cultures is unlike most Western types, because it is non-representational. The religion prohibits the use of manlike or animal images, so artists use flowers and leaves and even simple lines in most of their painting and decoration. Their mosques and other religious buildings (indeed, sometimes all buildings), are covered in patterns and abstract decorations instead of depictions of Mohammed or pictorial stories from the Koran.

The Islamic conception of the artist is also greatly different from the traditional European view. The artist is not seen as the creator of a piece of work; he does not use his creative power to produce something original. Rather he is the upholder of tradition;

any changes he makes are minor, and most of the patterns he draws will be similar, if not identical, to that which his predecessor produced and which he learned while apprenticed. This does not mean that the art is any less creative, merely that its development was much more continuous and slow, with less emphasis on new movements revolutionizing art.

Today, names of individual Islamic artists from just a few hundred years ago all are but lost, but their legacy lives on. Well preserved decorations in wood, stucco, ceramic, and metal endure on mosques, schools, palaces, and all other sorts of buildings. In Morocco and Turkey, I viewed some of these remains, and also saw some contemporary Islamic art that is still thriving with innovations on the traditions of old. I found things of great beauty, and I sought an understanding of why they were so beautiful to me. I look at the world (and, hence, these decorations) with the eyes of a college math major, and the conclusions I drew were very much colored by this fact. Nevertheless, Islamic art is very mathematical, being largely geometrical, so I think these are good eyes with which to view it. And though my conclusions may not be in accordance with other people's views, I believe I definitely have a good handle on what I find pleasing about Islamic art.

I envision my aesthetic experience of Islamic art as a battle within my head. Different states of perception, different ways of seeing a work of art, fight for dominance. When viewed from one perspective, a piece might seem very simple; when viewed from another, it might seem very complex. One perspective might concentrate on the lines of the decoration, and be very interesting; another very

different perspective might focus on the shapes, and also be interesting in its own right. Both points of view are floating in my mind at the same time, however, and they stage an intellectual war over which is "The Way" of looking at the decoration. My aesthetic response is not to the outcome of the war, but to the battle itself. Seeing two points of view simultaneously that are in conflict with each other is the secret to its beauty.

Perhaps some illustrations are the best way to understand this thought. Figure 1 is a wooden screen from Bou Inania medersa (a religious seminary school) in Meknes, Morocco. The geometric design of the wooden lines appears at first very complex. Lines meet at different places creating many different shapes (See Figure 2 for pictures of these, including two types of eight pointed stars, several arrow-like forms, and one that resembles a kite).



Figure 1

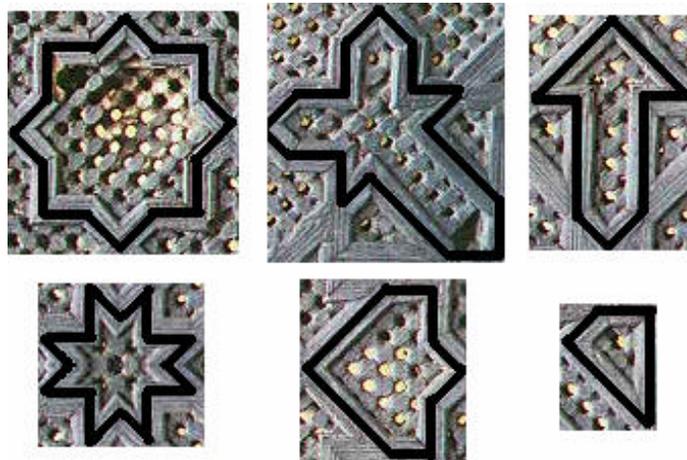


Figure 2

But quickly a second view resolves, one of utmost simplicity. The right half is exactly like the left (something which is perceived almost instantly). Each half (called a translational unit, because pasting copies of it side by side can produce the entire pattern) has a high degree of symmetry: it can be flipped over four different ways and stay the same (as a square can, vertically, horizontally, or diagonally), or it can be rotated by 90° and also not change. The shapes all have at least one line of symmetry, and some have as many as four (the stars, for example).

We must not get ourselves caught up, however, in looking at the shapes only; the lines themselves have a certain appeal. They are all, for example, either vertical, horizontal, or at 45° , and the lengths of many segments are the same. Also, one can trace the crooked lines (the wood weaves under and over the other lines of wood that it crosses) and see two shapes (see Figure 3). In fact, these are the only two shapes in the entire decoration! The whole picture can be viewed as these two shapes placed on top of each other in

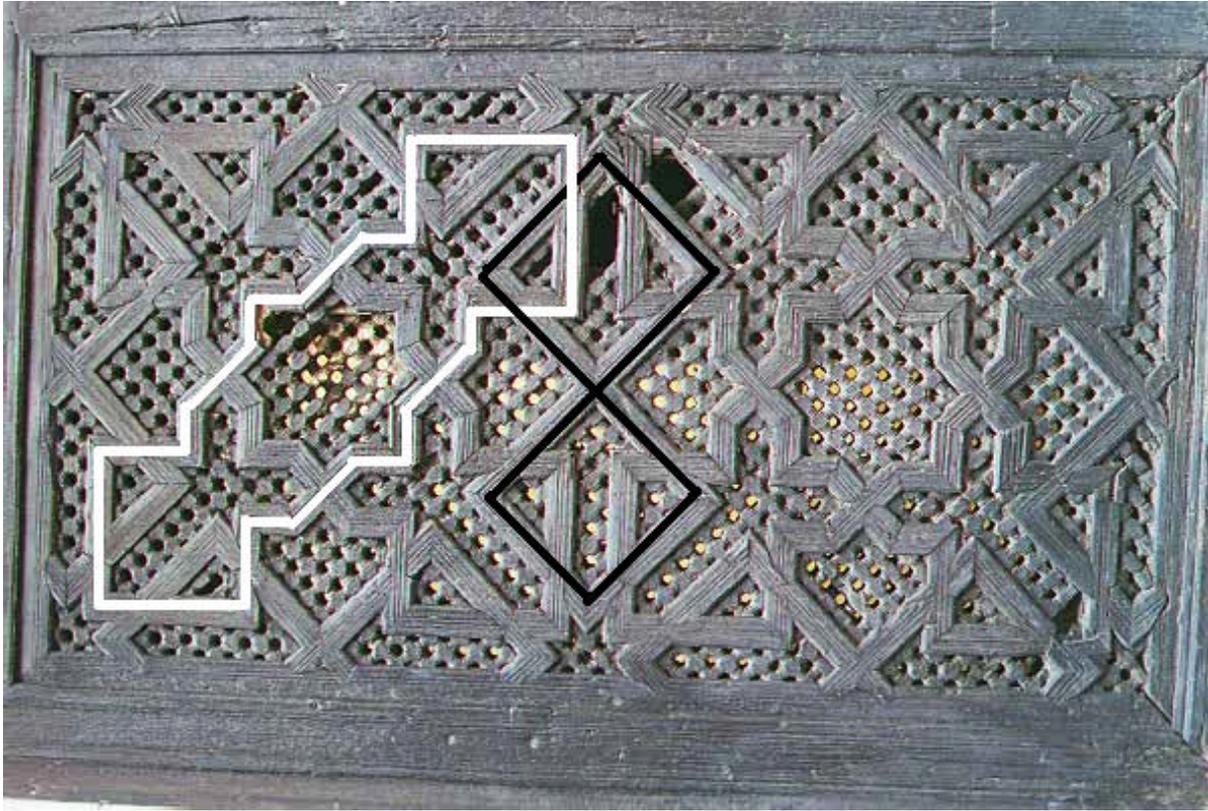


Figure 3

different ways. This is a much simpler perspective than looking at the six varieties of stars and arrows and so forth that seem on first glance to be the basis of the decoration.

We see, then, that there are (at least) two ways of looking at this picture. From one perspective, it appears to be a complicated melange of little shapes (the stars, etc., made from the way the lines overlap). From another it is a highly symmetrical and simple outgrowth of only two shapes placed on top of each other. Of course we don't see either of these views by themselves. Once we know that looking at the little shapes and looking at the lines themselves are valid but very different ways of seeing this picture, they can both co-exist in our minds. I see both the simplicity and the complexity at once, embrace them both, and am pleased.

One of the most beautiful types of decorations that I have seen is where two different wooden screens were placed side by side to complement each other. Figures 4a and 4b are from the Bou Inania medersa (same name as the last one, but in a different city) in Fez, Morocco. Copies of these two were arranged around the courtyard in a symmetrical form. Each is a complicated screen and beautiful in its own right, and both could be analyzed as we did the last one (in fact, look closely at the left of the two, Figure 4a; it is exactly the same design as Figure 1! Compare the top half of Figure 1 and the bottom half of Figure 4a to see this more easily).

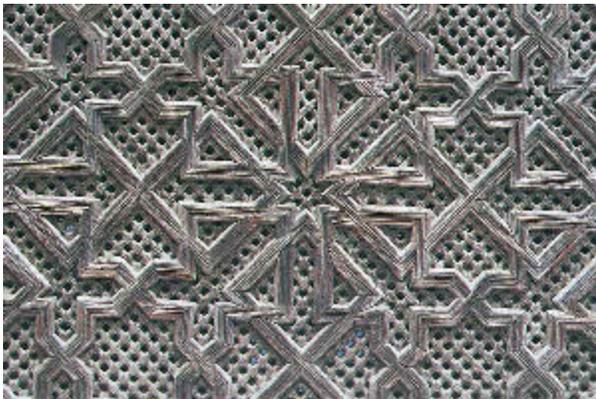


Figure 4a

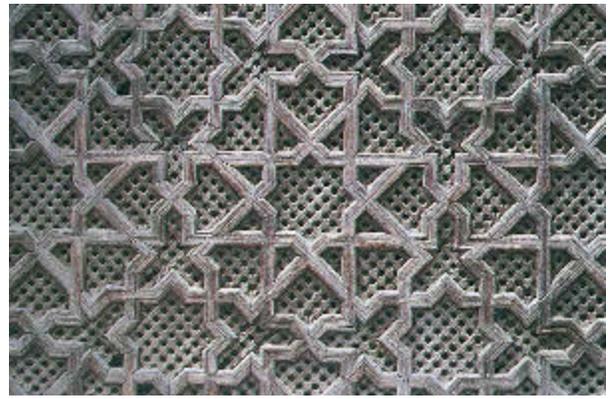


Figure 4b

On first glance Figures 4a and 4b seem very different. A closer look at the two, however, reveals their similarity. The shapes that they are made of are almost exactly the same (all of which are pictured in Figure 2); Figure 4b does not have any of the small stars or one of the types of arrows, but the other four shapes are alike (a big star, two arrow like shapes, and a kite). Two very different pictures have been created by different placements of the same pieces. When looked at from the perspective of the different pieces, these two

are very similar, but when looked at from the perspective of overall appearance, they are very different.

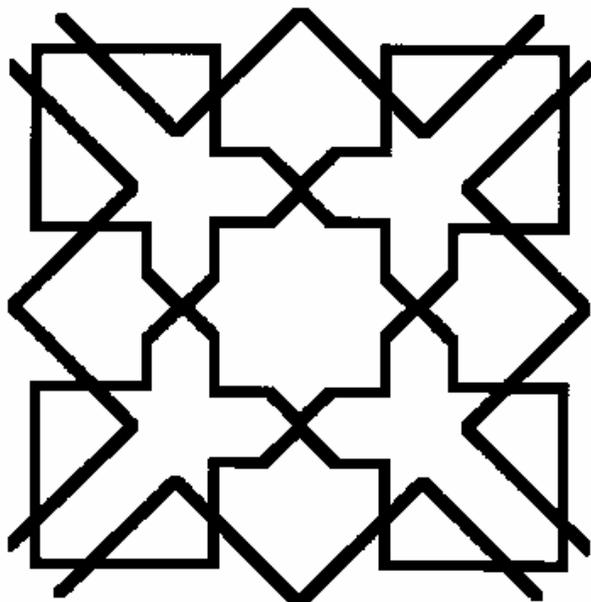


Figure 5a

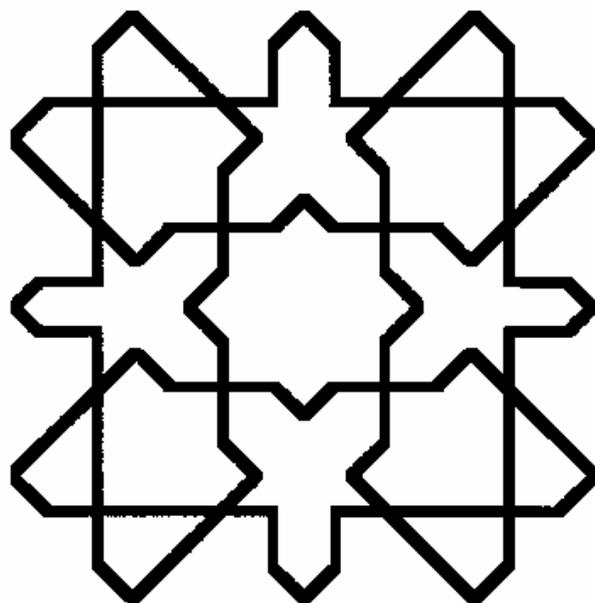


Figure 5b

In addition, look at the translational units for both, shown in Figures 5a and 5b (recall that a translational unit is a piece of the decoration that can be pasted beside itself like bathroom tiles to make up the whole image). These translational units are almost exactly the same! They are practically composed of identical shapes, an eight pointed star surrounded by arrows of two types; one is simply rotated 45° from the other, and then kite-shaped pieces are added. Notice that these translational units were taken from the corners of each picture (see the large stars in the four corners of Figures 4a and 4b); the middle parts of the decorations look very different.

This double view¹ is clearly intentional. The centers of focus (See Figures 4a and 4b) are the small eight pointed star surrounded by arrows and the larger eight pointed star surrounded by diamonds, respectively. When one concentrates on the centers of focus, the decorations barely resemble each other at all. A shift of attention, however, to Figures 5a and 5b shows that they are based on almost exactly the same patterns except for a few simple changes in the translational units. Again, these different points of view are floating in my head at the same time, and their clash and relationship create the aesthetic appeal.

A simpler example should clarify this notion of a double view. Figure 6a is a column of ceramic tiles from the Sokollu Mehmet Pasa Mosque in Istanbul, Turkey. A close up of one of the flowers is Figure 6b. Two ways of looking at this decoration are as a whole (the arrangement of flowers) and as parts (the design of the flowers themselves).

The arrangement of flowers is intriguing in and of itself. It is definitely symmetrical and their positioning is almost in some sort of grid (whose lines go diagonally down-right and down-left). There are many diamond-like shapes, formed from groupings of flowers, that pop out at the eye. Nevertheless, this appearance of simplicity is tempered by the insight that the positioning is not quite a perfect grid. It is complex enough not to be monotonous, yet simple enough to look ordered and not entirely helter-skelter, in short, what I find to be an interesting and pleasant arrangement.

¹ With thanks to Dr. Barefield for the phrase "double view," which was used in connection with irony. Alas, that subject, however interesting it may be, is a topic too far afield for this paper.

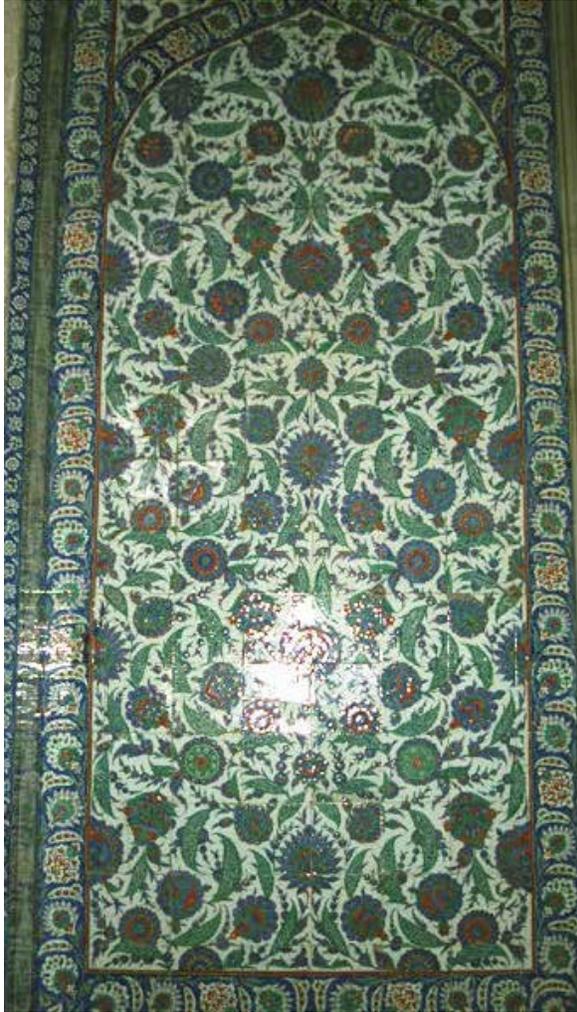


Figure 6 b

Figure 6a

When we take a closer look at the flowers, we see they are also interesting artistically. The color choice is very simple: completely composed of a strong red, green and blue. Just like the decoration as a whole, each flower itself has a vertical symmetry, but each is also a complicated set of leaves and petals. Also, each flower (except symmetrically opposite ones) is different, and has a beauty all its own.

This wall decoration, then, can be looked at in two separate ways. We can either imagine the flowers as basically dots, and look at their arrangement, or look at a flower close up, not caring at all about their relative positions. What makes this wall so aesthetically

pleasing, in my view, is that we can perceive both of these at the same time, though they are completely contradictory (in that one view sees the flowers only as parts, and the other only as wholes unto themselves). A flower painted on the wall would simply be eye-catching, a pattern of dots on the wall might look very odd, but beauty is seeing both of these at once as they battle for my attention.

Perhaps a battle, though, is a bad word for the contest of the two views. The goal of a battle is to destroy the foe, but if one view were to win, and the other cease to exist, the beauty would be lost. Perhaps gaming is a better, less antagonistic, analogy. The two views are an intellectual game, in a sense, and we are the audience. Except that we are not cheering for a victor, but having fun simply watching it played out. In how many interesting ways can I view this decoration at once? In how many creative ways can the artist create his work to be viewed? These questions lay at the heart of my aesthetic response.

Why does this double view cause an aesthetic response? I have answered this incompletely already. On one level, it is beautiful because of its craftsmanship. The artist was able to create something that can be looked at in many different ways; squeezing all of those ways into one decoration is no easy feat, and it deserves to be admired for the ability that it took. But I would contend that it also produces a reaction because of the game it plays in my head. The game is like no other that I've heard of, but it certainly is fun (to me, at least). In that sense it is more of an intellectual beauty than an emotional one (like a sunset or a "pretty" painting might

produce), but it is still beauty nonetheless. It speaks of the unity of opposites, and hence the unity of all things, and this sublime concept is one that beauty often strives for. Art, in this instance, is a game of the intellect, and the only real winners are those who take time to watch and experience its beauty.