

Art and Islam

Published in: New Straits Times, Saturday 11 November 2017

By Abdul Karim Abdullah

Source : <https://www.nst.com.my/opinion/columnists/2017/11/301908/art-and-islam>

Art focuses upon the experience of the beautiful. It aims at excellence and perfection. Every work of true art is unique. Art is striking. When a person reads a work of art, he or she feels that this work of art speaks to the heart. It is for this reason that art is “captivating”.

Art relays this experience by different types of representation. Architecture is a well-known Islamic art form, as is calligraphy. Art also encompasses poetry, plays, stories, music, sculpture and painting.

Art becomes useful when words seem insufficient. It has been said that “a picture speaks a thousand words”. Art allows us to transcend the boundaries of perspectives and perceive matters from alternative points of view.

Each community’s art reflects its uniqueness. Qatar has produced a television mini-series on early Muslims, Omar. Turkey has produced a drama on the Ottoman empire known as the Magnificent Century. Both productions were acclaimed.

Much has been written about art in Islam. True art is universal. In his *What Is Art*, Leo Tolstoy expressed a few of the essential features of art. Art provides a vehicle for a variety of expressions, including, for instance, disseminating the message of peace in an unobtrusive way. Art is able to foster compassion for the downtrodden more effectively in some ways perhaps than words.

Art should have an ethical purpose, an educational or didactic function. It should assist people in becoming better persons. It may provide us with examples of honourable characters. Useful art is “enlightening”, in that it also imparts knowledge.

Art plays a vital role in education. It is by means of story-telling that we educate and alert people to the difference between praiseworthy and blameworthy acts. Art offers a non-preachy way of teaching awareness of the difference between good and evil.

The greatest tales express the struggle between the upright and the wicked. Physical beauty is not enough. The Quran warns us against persons, who, with their beautiful words, may cause people to go astray. When it is infused with excellent values, art performs a useful function. Most of us have heard of Shakespeare. His works are among the so-called great classics. They survived the test of time.

In literature, we find a range of characters, both good and evil, and witness how they act. It has been said that actions speak louder than words. In this way, the artist as educator presents the fundamental ethical alternatives to us in an imaginative way.

The fate of the characters demonstrates the effects of their acts. In this way, art may warn the reader about the adverse effects of poor choices. Muslim artists may

generate literature that can help disseminate Islamic values and the message of Quranic revelation.

Rumi is recognised as a great poet. His Mathnavi is acclaimed the world over. The epic Cairo Trilogy by Naguib Mahfouz is also recognised as an excellent work. It shows, by way of story-telling, various tensions between “modernity” and “tradition” in Egypt.

Muhammad Iqbal was a well-known writer in Pakistan. Let us not forget the Thousand and One Nights and the adventures of Sinbad the Sailor, during the rule of Harun ar-Rashid, the renowned Abbasid caliph.

Each work of art presents a “worldview”, which is the author’s articulation of and interaction with reality. Art also has a therapeutic function. It makes the person aware of sublime aspects of existence. Art enables the person appreciating it to “transcend” his or her ego, and see the “bigger picture”, so to speak.

True art invariably addresses issues of the time. In general, these turn out to be more or less the same as in earlier times, although the settings change. The artist is a witness. He or she portrays different types of persons and shows their respective merits or weaknesses. Epic stories often take place against the background of major upheavals.

There is a difference between art and entertainment. While good art is entertaining, not all entertainment is art. The key feature of art is that it helps bring humanity in touch with reality and spirituality. This may be said to be characteristic of Islamic art.

Art also makes hardship bearable. The downtrodden express their feelings by way of art. Art does not appear to be directly useful; however, without art, life would be bland. Art may serve a useful role of projecting a humane view of Islam and Muslims.

It is unfortunate that a few Muslims appear to have a negative view of art. But God has created the world in a variety of colours. Art may be used to convey and propagate Quranic messages on the forging of better relations among nations, and its messages on the appreciation of beauty.

As Professor Hashim Kamali, chief executive officer of the International Institute of Advanced Islamic Studies Malaysia, remarked, “Islam’s view of beauty, rhythm and psychologically penetrating language is an integral part of what is known as inimitability (*i’jaz*) of the Quran”.

Abdul Karim Abdullah is an Assistant Research Fellow at the International Institute of Advanced Islamic Studies (IAIS) Malaysia