

Islam did not directly forbid representational, figurative art – for example portrayal of human beings – as many people think. But it was discouraged. In religious Islamic art, a mixture of calligraphy, floral and geometric designs are commonly used. Islamic art traditionally uses a mixture of calligraphy, geometric and floral designs

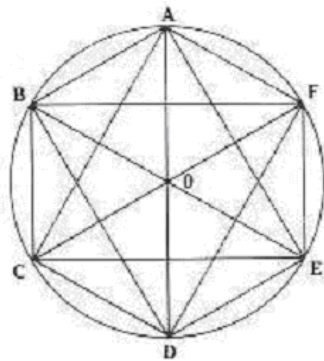
**calligraphy** in various forms of Arabic script (Arabic is the language of the Qur'an). Sometimes the words are made to look like pictures. Often they are illegible.

**arabesques**, scrollwork and other floral or plant-like designs often used on buildings and book covers.

**geometrical designs** using a limited number of geometric shapes in many different ways

## Geometrical designs – repetition and variation...

Complex geometric designs are created by repeating a few elements and simple shapes in different combinations. They create the impression of unending repetition and symmetry and are associated with the infinite nature of God.

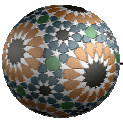


A common motif is the star. The star is drawn as a regular geometric shape that symbolizes equal radiation in all directions from a central point. Whether they have 6, 8, 10, 12, or 16 points, they are created by dividing a circle into equal parts. The circle and its centre are the starting point for all the geometric patterns. The circle one God, eternity, without beginning and without end.

### Mathematical genius....

A study of medieval Islamic art carried out in 2007 found that some of the geometric patterns use principles established centuries later by modern mathematicians. One of the professors involved said "They made tilings that reflect mathematics that were so sophisticated that we didn't figure it out until the last 20 or 30 years."





## Influence

Cultures do not exist in airtight containers without contact with each other. Cultures influence each other.

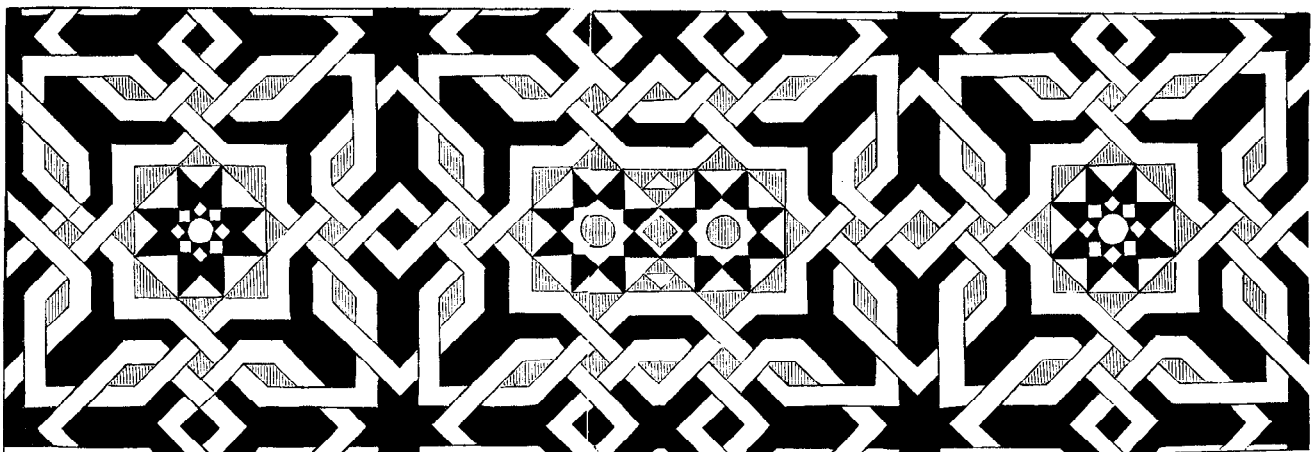
Islamic art has influenced many artists from the Western world. They were some artists who painted the places – what is now Turkey and the Middle East – and they often depicted the people as violent, backward, cruel and exotic. But there were others who had a more respectful approach.

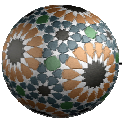


The French painter Henri Matisse (1869-1954) painted women in Morocco as civilised and cultured beings worthy of respect. This went against the trend in Western art where non-Western cultures were seen as backward and less developed.



Matisse is often described as the greatest Western artist whose work was influenced by Islamic art. He did not just add a few elements to give his work an exotic flavour. He actually incorporated what he learned from his appreciation of Islamic art into his paintings. Matisse tried to release paintings from merely describing the external world, and in this he learned many lessons from viewing Islamic art. Many of Matisse's paintings spread all over the canvas and in some sense look as if they continue beyond the frame. This aspect of his work is said to come from his understanding of Islamic art.





**Vanessa Hodgkinson** is an artist in her twenties born in London whose work is influenced by Islamic art. Read her answers to questions about this influence and see some examples of Vanessa's work....

**Q.** What are your inspirations when it comes to your art?

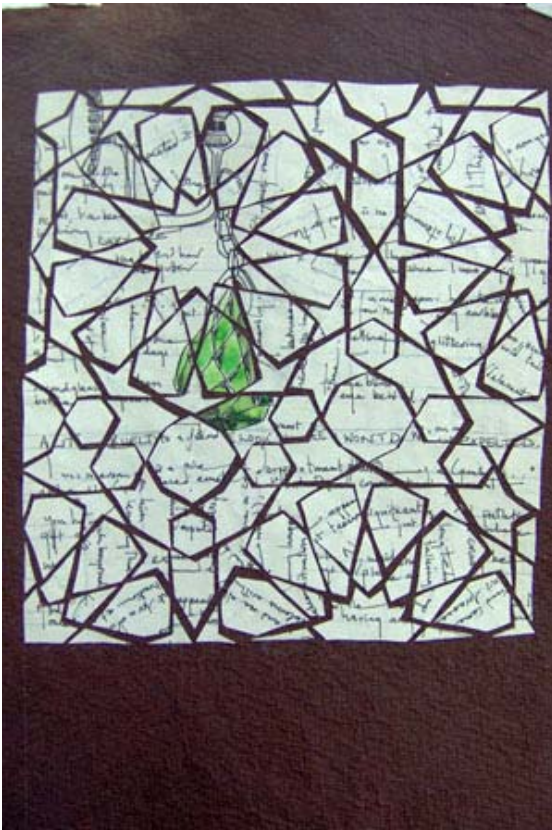
**A.** My greatest inspiration comes from Islamic art, especially the geometric tiles of Persia and Morocco. I find the calmness and beauty in Islamic art to be a model of perfection I would like to capture in my own work, except making it 'contemporary' and not religious.

**Q.** What is it about Islamic art that you find so appealing?

**A.** I really love the way in which the eye never stays in one place but moves around the surface. We contemplate the whole surface and can get lost in it and lost in our own thoughts during that time. I find myself feeling very calm when looking at Islamic art and that feeling appeals to me, inspiring me to make work that shares the same basis of unity and beauty.



*A Portrait of My Hand*

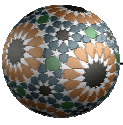


Detail from *I Have Five Things to Say*

**Q.** What would you say are the main features of this art?

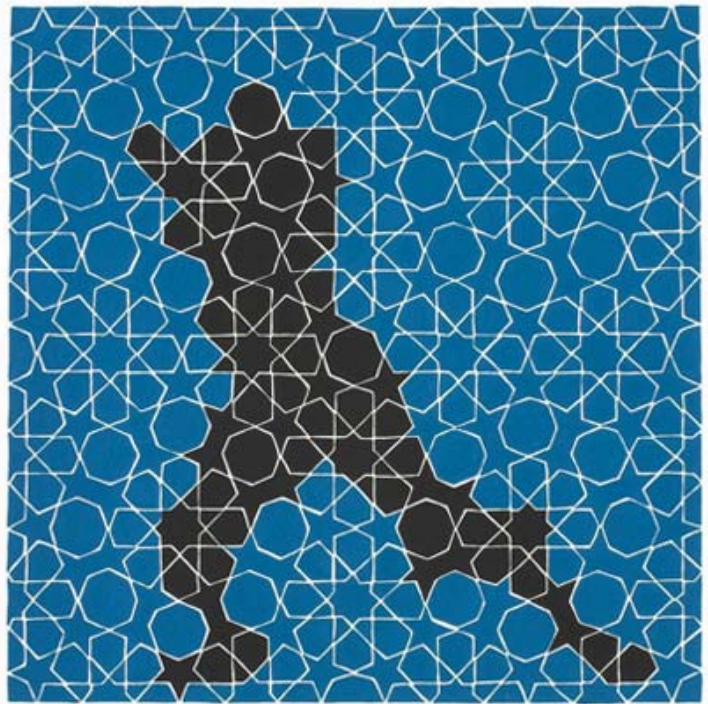
**A.** The main features of Islamic art for me would be:

- Creating works that do not celebrate the artist who makes them nor the society it is made in, but works that seek to find a more archetypal beauty.
- Craftsmanship – Islamic art has for centuries demonstrated the great skill of the craftsmen and women who have made this work and show that great work is often made in groups to achieve far more monumental visions rather than just the individual work of one person alone.
- Unity in surface – Through geometry and patterns Islamic art shows the ways in which we can see and think about nature and our lives being part of a much greater 'whole' and that there is an inherent beauty in all things. Islamic art shows the world not as it is in reality, but translates it into its purest forms that could never exist in reality, and therefore as the viewer looks at it, he or she is transported to a higher level of thought.



**Q.** How creative can geometry really be?

**A.** Very creative! There are two main elements to geometry, the first is creating the pattern using a pair of compasses, a ruler and a pencil. Once you know the main ideas of creating a pattern you realise that there are an infinite number of patterns to create! The second stage is colouring in these patterns, which can be done in a regular way, or as I do, in irregular ways, trying to translate real objects into the geometric grids.



Detail from *The Turn*



*Je Est Un Autre*

**Q.** Was it a conscious decision to use Islamic art as an influence or did it just happen?

**A.** I remember visiting a small mosque in Bursa in Turkey when I was 19. I remember very clearly sitting in the cool green tiled room and feeling very at peace with myself. At that moment I realised that if I was going to be an artist, I wanted to make work that continued this feeling I had at that moment in the Green Mosque. From this time onwards I have looked carefully at the elements of Islamic art that create that feeling in me and how best I can use them to make new works but still hold of to that same sense of serenity that I think is timeless.

