

Catching The Rabbit:

The Rabbit Motif in Islamic Artwork



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The various animal motifs present in Islamic artwork reverberates throughout a handful of mediums such as tilework and textiles. The work of ancient Muslim artists were highly influenced by their surrounding cultures and the native wildlife and fauna, consequently creating a rich and vast collection of works handed down to modern day people. This paper will briefly examine two objects in the Kelsey Museum collection that both share a common motif with an enigmatic meaning: the rabbit. One object, a textile with a band centrally located in the piece containing a row of rabbits will introduce the reader to the origin of the rabbit motif in Islamic artwork. The second piece is a tile featuring a rabbit in the center that appears to be hidden beneath the petals of a large flower. The core of this paper will address the presence of the rabbit motif in closely influential cultures such as Christianity and how often animate beings depicted in Islamic art [human and non-human] are received in the Islamic worship practices.

Firstly, let us consider a small textile fragment with rabbits. This piece was made in the eleventh century during the Fatimid period in Egypt.¹ During this time period this type of textile ornamented with animal figures was prospering and later the rabbit motif would bleed into the Islamic art north in Iran; consequently influencing the artists who later designed our rabbit tile. This textile, however, displays rows of small rabbits each inside their own individual red sphere. Furthermore, they are displayed on the textile in a rushed frolicking fashion, although it cannot be made certain if they are only one of many animate beings displayed within the context of a more elaborate story--one that has been lost with the rest of the textile.

¹ Fatimid Period (909-1171) present day Algeria, Tunisia, Sicily, Egypt, and Syria came under the rule of the Fatimid dynasty, an offshoot of a Shi-i sect from North Africa. The Fatimid rulers traced descent from Muhammad's daughter, Fatima.

The tile is a small polygonal, nearly butterfly shape. It measures six inches tall and with a four and half width in the center. The colors striking and well controlled by the artist who applied them to the top of the tile. There are three colors: dark blue, brown and cream. The glazed luster painted tile is brought to greater life when observed more closely, when one observes more closely finely detailed circles and scribbles, the flower, and the rabbit.

The center contains a cream colored rabbit spotted with brown specks and dark blue fading brush strokes. The edge of the tile is colored with a dark blue rim, traced by a brown line that frames the image inside. This tile appears to present a technique known as *lajvardina* that was adopted in the second half of the thirteenth century and continued well into the fourteenth century, roughly the same time this tile was produced.² The *Lajvardina* technique employed colors such as a creamy white and red could be applied over a dark cobalt blue or turquoise ground.³ This process may have been what allowed the artist to produce the cream white flower and rabbit image over what was initially an entirely dark blue tile.

The larger space atop the tile is filled mostly with a flower. Five stems stretch from the base of the tile upward toward its head. Four small flower buds fill the corners, while a larger, more prominent flower occupies the space below the rabbit. One can merely speculate the significance of its size and placement within the tile but one's eye is simply drawn to it due to its size and fine details.

The rabbit or hare motif⁴ is a common one found in much Islamic art. Most often the rabbit is found to be only one part of a multi-tile image. For instance, the rabbit can often be

² Porter, p 15

³ Porter, p 15

⁴ I will use the terms rabbit and hare interchangeably in this paper.

found being chased by a dog or or bird of prey.⁵ The hare image is poised in a position that has been often been found linked to the position of a dog: alert with its head fixed in such a fashion as to be looking over its shoulder. However, we cannot know for certain if this particular tile was linked to some sort of chase scene or likewise because we do not possess a second tile to fit the rabbit tile. Nevertheless, one could easily speculate that the rabbit was hiding amongst the flowers from a predator such as a dog on a hunt or a bird of prey.

The rabbit motif is found in a number of other pieces of art in places aside from Islamic tilework, thus is it difficult to tack down its origin. However, let us consider a few places of influence. Firstly, the influence of Coptic art on Iranian artwork is found in the tracing the rabbit's trail. One expert, Ernst Grube, notes that the rabbit or hare motif is commonly encountered in Egypt-Islamic artwork. Furthermore, Grube notes that the motif was not unusual among the Copts, and the hare motif can be traced all the way back to the oldest forms of Egyptian art.⁶ The heavy use of the hare motif in Egyptian art could have been easily influenced the artwork of the Fatimid era that would leak into other Islamic artwork in the surrounding areas--Iranian artwork.

The hare motif can also be traced from influences in the north. The hare is also found in antique sarcophagi in the near east, and also on a votive tablet dedicated to Zeus.⁷ Furthermore, the hare is found in early Christian iconography. For instance, the three hares running in a circle that found at Paderborn Cathedral in Germany. This image may have been a representation of the Trinity. The presence of the hare in early Roman-Greco artwork, Christian architecture and early

⁵ Arik, p 304

⁶Gelfer-Jørgensen, p 127

⁷Gelfer-Jørgensen, p 128

Egyptian artwork do lend to modern day art historians that the hare motif was passed down from one culture to another.

Nevertheless, the hare remains somewhat of an enigma, because it does not simply lend itself easily to one idea of concept. The significance of this particular motif is hard to label; however, one expert, Erica Cruickshank Dodd, presents one argument that must be considered. Commonly in Islamic artwork and pre-Islamic artwork the hare is surrounded by some vegetal presence: most commonly a vine of grapes, but in our case a flower. The grapevine motif is so widespread in Islamic art that we could even possibly ignore it. However, it can serve us to understand the presence of the flowers of our dark blue, polygonal tile. In the case of the grapevine motif, the hare is often found eating from the vine, and lends us support from motifs found on a Christian chalice found in Antioch. With the context presented on the chalice, one can interpret this motif to signify man's desire to maintain life.⁸ Furthermore, one might be tempted to consider this transfer from the Christian motif of eternal life or heaven into the Islamic motif of paradise.

Erica Cruickshank Dodd positions her argument in the importance of the vines. There is no question that artists in the Mediterranean had tapped into the artwork of other surrounding cultures; however, the twining vines are found in temples, synagogues and churches, in sculptures, frescoes, mosaics, glass, ivory, textile and wood.⁹ Dodd considers the Fatimid Rabbit: a fountain formed into a rabbit with vine tendrils carved into its sides. What is most interesting about about this particular piece is the adoption of the vine motif by Islam. The vine [and the vase] was found often enough in late antiquity and Christian art that, perhaps, the original

⁸ Gelfer-Jørgensen, p 128

⁹ Dodd, p 69

symbolic significance was potentially lost. But this is not enough evidence to suggest that the original interpretation of the motif was modified to fit the Islamic mold: the vines may be a reference to the future life and Paradise.¹⁰

Dodd's interpretation of the vines may also be catalyzed by other features of the Fatimid rabbit: this object served as a fountain. The Fatimid Rabbit has a small square hole cut out in its belly and its mouth gapes open, and while it cannot be confirmed this suggests the possibility as having served as a fountain head. The rabbit in this context can symbolize the life to come and the water could be a reminder to the believer a way to reach the groves of Paradise.¹¹

One might argue, however, that vegetal patterns served no important symbolic purpose. Instead the vegetal patterns depicted in Islamic art may only have been passed down from previous cultures and had been adapted to fit the aesthetic appeal of the new Muslim patrons.¹² These motifs were more likely drawn from previously existing artistic traditions from the eastern Mediterranean and Sassanian, Iran. Furthermore, the vines and the vase motif was one deeply entrenched in the Christian symbolism for the Eucharist and new life; thus it seems strange that Muslim artists would draw imagery from something so deeply rooted in Christian theology.

However, the Christian symbol for new life persisted through Islamic decoration, first in the Omayyad period, and then in Fatimid artwork. What is fascinating about this symbolic inheritance is the placement of this originally Christian symbol in the mihrab.¹³ The vase and vine motif occurs in the mihrab of Sayyida Rukayya along with geometric patterns and in the

¹⁰ Dodd, p 69

¹¹ pp.128-9

¹² The Met

¹³ a mihrab is a niche or a designated panel that indicates the direction in which Muslims are to pray towards. The mihrab inside a mosque temple directs the worshipper towards the kiblah: the point towards which Muslims turn to pray, toward the house of God, at Mecca.

Fatimid mihrabs in Al-Azhar and in Ibn Tulun. Mihrabs shockingly enough were chosen as a suitable place for the decoration of the vines and the vase, where no other pictorial decoration was permitted except the image of a lamp.¹⁴ Furthermore, the image of figures were prohibited inside the mosque. Consequently, the vines and the vase were later replaced by verses from the Quran.

With the removal of the vine and the vase in the mihrabs of the mosques listed above the question remains: what figures are prohibited inside the mosque? The question easily augments itself into what does the Muslim artist consider to be art and what is its utility; however this paper will only lightly touch upon the Islamic comprehension of aesthetics because the controversial nature is far more vast than the limits of this paper can hold.

Figural representation in Islamic art is widely accepted by many non-Muslims to be fiercely opposed in Islamic text. Although the often cited opposition in Islam to the depiction of human and animal forms holds true for religious art and architecture, the depictions of such animate beings have flourished richly in Islamic culture. Thus it is important to keep in mind that the figural representation in Islamic art is still in heated debate today; however, crux of this debate does not entirely ban all figural representations. Instead the Quran does not explicitly prohibit the depiction of human and animal figures, it merely condemns idolatry.¹⁵

This debate is fixed upon the role aniconism plays in the Islamic art. Aniconism is the absence of material representations of the natural and supernatural world in various cultures, particularly in the monotheistic Abrahamic religions. The definition stretches from the

¹⁴ Dodd, p 70

¹⁵ Quran 21:52 “When he said to his father and his people what are these statues to which you are devoted?”

condemnation of the representation of only God and deities to saint characters, all living beings, and every animate being (human or non-human). For all intents and purposes, this paper will focus only on an Islamic interpretation of this definition. Therefore, where does our rabbit tile fit into this definition?

The prohibition of images in Islam applies only to the image of the Divinity; it stands that as an attempt to avoid mutating the monotheistic nature of Islam into a polytheistic one. In Sunni Arab circles, the depiction of all living creatures is disapproved. This strict interpretation of aniconism is maintained because such circles believe in the respect of the divine secret that is held in every living creature.¹⁶ This interpretation of the Sunni worshipper can be understood through the relationship between creator and created. The sacred art of Islam is not exactly constructed from images of men or living beings, because it doing so would only create an imposter of the image or being that is being depicted. Thus the image of a man or a living being is tainted in comparison to the creator and model.

Moreover, the the words of the Prophet condemning [see footnote 14] those who aspire to imitate the work of the Creator have ring aniconism. It is important to deny idols because it is a physical turning away from the idolatry. Such denial of idols translates into a fundamental testimony of Islam “there is no divinity save God” and this testimony dominates everything. Therefore, the portraits of the divine messengers, prophets and saints laboriously avoided because the images, once they have been created, risk becoming the trinkets of idolatrous worship, but more importantly because they risk the respect inspired by their inimitability.¹⁷ Thus we see that it was Islamic art can be greatly influenced by the animate creatures

¹⁶ Burckhardt, p 29

¹⁷ Burckhardt, p 29

surrounding the artists, but this art must be separated from the artwork that was to be used in display for religious purposes.

Consequently, images of other animals such as birds, fish and dogs are available to ancient Islamic artist for their creative development. A wealth of decorated tiles from the Kubad Abad palace grants art historians a glimpse into to these other commonly depicted creatures.¹⁸ Furthermore, the depiction of great birds, such as eagles were displayed in the great palace of Kubad Abad. In the great palace these birds of prey are sometime displayed as part of a scene. On a luster tile a bird of prey, potentially an eagle, pecks at a rabbit's head, and on another tile the bird of prey is shown grabbing the rabbit by the neck and throttling it.¹⁹ Thus one can draw from this tile the motif that birds of prey represent strength and power.

As mentioned earlier on, the presence of the rabbit in south-western Anatolia can be traced back to its birth in Fatimid period artwork, such as textiles and tiles. The familiar scene of the cautious rabbit either running or peering over its shoulder can be found in the Kubad Abad palace, and serves as a testimony to the spread of islamic motifs throughout the great distance of the region. With that said, time is not only witness to the incorporation of motifs into Islamic artwork: physical distance provides a great indicator of cultures that incorporated themselves into the Islamic artists tradition. Animals and flora native to the east in places such as China and Mongolia brought their fair share of influence on the tile work of the Islamic artwork.

Perhaps, the rabbit motif will remain an enigma for generations of future art historians to come. Maybe the presence of the rabbit will be forever remembered as only a post marker on a

¹⁸ These creatures were not limited to real animals, but often fantastical creatures such as phoenixes were depicted in Islamic tilework.

¹⁹ Arik, p 304

map to examine the distance the little rabbit has traveled over space and time and the influence. Nevertheless, this paper has briefly examined its powerful and mysterious impact on the greater known motifs present in the Islamic artwork. Furthermore the presence of the rabbit, as well as other animals, in a larger religious context has been touched upon in this paper. As a last remark, the rabbit motif in Islamic tile and textile work lends future classicists, art historians, and art admirers something to chase.

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