

South Asian Islamic Arts and Architecture

Third International Conference on Islamic Art and Architecture (ICIAA)



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The term Islamic art not only describes the art created specifically in the service of the Muslim faith (for example, a mosque and its furnishings) but also characterizes the art and architecture historically produced in the lands ruled by Muslims, produced for Muslim patrons, or created by Muslim artists. As it is not only a religion but a way of life, Islam fostered the development of a distinctive culture with its own unique artistic language that is reflected in art and architecture throughout the Muslim world. Islamic Art and Architecture is not a stylistic or art historic category but a living tradition that is more than ever relevant to our times, at a time when we are faced with a global crisis that threatens to destroy our humanity



and our environment.

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Among the different cultures that give Islamic architecture its brilliance, South-East Asian culture has been one such essential ingredient adding much flavour to the exquisiteness of our heritage. South-East Asian Muslims constitute almost a quarter of the Muslim population worldwide, thereby being one of the strong pillars in the thriving structure of the ummah. The uniqueness of the architecture of this region is because it blends centuries of indigenous elements with the classic style of Middle-eastern designs, along with a strong essence of traditional Indo/Pak influence. Aesthetically, this style of architecture is among those of utmost importance in World Islamic heritage.

The conference reviewed the theoretical and ideological framework of Islamic Art and Architecture as a living tradition, and formulated a concrete program for the adoption of this tradition as a guiding framework for contemporary practice.

The first conference in this series was initiated by Iran in December 2006 and was held in Isfahan, which was followed by the second in Delhi, India in December 2007. The third International Conference on Islamic Art and Architecture was held in Lahore in November 2008.

The third 'International Conference on Islamic Art and Architecture' (ICIAA) was held at Lahore's National College of Arts, and brought together established scholars and practitioners from across the world.

In addition to the discussion of core themes, the conference touched upon the additional dimension of the relevance of the values and traditions of Islamic art and architecture to today's world.





The conference opened with a series of exhibitions, most notable of which was a rare collection of Islamic calligraphy art put together by renowned calligrapher Irfan Qureshi -- and displayed as a narrative from its birth to its various stages of evolution. Works also included architectural research by Taimur Khan exploring proportion and symbolism in the world's sacred monuments, intricate architectural drawings of Spain's Alhambra from the personal collection of Professor Abdul Rahman, and the works of twelve young miniature artists. In an effort to promote traditional crafts, a parallel exhibition of traditional Pakistani crafts was held at Tollington gallery.

Seminar themes on day-one were devoted to developing a traditional and theoretical background to the conference, where renowned traditionalist Kamil Khan Mumtaz presented the tradition-modernity-innovation paradox, and Indian educationist S M Akhtar questioned the term 'Islamic Architecture', clarifying it as a colonial construction. Day-two of the seminar was characterized by a more fluid discourse on the application of Islamic Art and Architecture in the contemporary world, such as the discussion proportion and harmony by Dr Paul Merchant. Day-three concluded with training workshops aimed at putting knowledge to practical use.

Basing his discussion on the establishment of the city of Madina 1400 years ago, scholar and educationist Abbas Hussain elaborated upon the core values and principles pertaining to Islamic urban life, relating these to today's intensely urbanizing developing world where cities are agglomerations of poverty and discontent. In the context of the present global environmental crisis, architect Ayesha Noorani spoke on the symbolic use of water in Islamic architecture, giving it a new context by relating it to Islamic teachings about water use and conservation, with particular reference to the current global environmental crisis.

While the majority of sessions were accompanied by discussion, among most stimulating themes developing from the conference was the paper 'Framing the Discourse on Islamic Art & Architecture', by Professor Gulzar Haider from Canada. The paper brought to the fore the metaphysical assertion that art and architecture have the power to "provide continuity among what has been and what is", and on the other hand have also been used by the powerful as "expressive instruments of power over the psyche of the ordinary population".

As such, Dr Haider's presentation opened up one of the best-silenced construction projects in the Muslim world today -- Mecca's 'Abraj al Bait'. The 595 metre tall building is a multi-billion dollar high-rise complex which is situated only across the street from one of the entrances to the Masjid-al-Haram -- literally "hovering over" the holy site.



The building complex which has been written about on platforms as distant as the New York Times, is to have a four-storey shopping mall, residential towers, heliports, and a conference centre. And while the building contains all the architectural elements typical of what are accepted as the elements of 'Islamic architecture' -- from the minaret to the arch -- it materializes the critical conflict between the sacred and the profane in architecture, demonstrating two bitter truths. Firstly, that the power of global financial capital is prevalent in its ugliest form in even Islam's most sacred city. And secondly, do ordinary Muslims have any voice at all in the decisions, form, and use given to the one site every Muslim associates with most deeply?



Whether or not events such as the ICAA form the 'fashionable' topics of our time, their role in providing the much needed platform for asking essential questions and broadening our understanding of issues we often take at face value cannot be underestimated. Needless to say, controversy and heated debate are symptoms of healthy forums such as the ICAA, which created a medium for a broad mix of age, inclination to interact in open deliberation over valid controversies. Also, the act of questioning discourse and perception enable the revisiting of the core values of Islam in a world overshadowed by facade and dogma.

Qawwali was one of the highlights of the conference and participants enjoyed it most. Qawwali is a form of Sufi devotional music popular in South Asia, particularly in areas with a historically strong Muslim presence, such as southern Pakistan, and parts of North India. The style is rare, though not entirely absent, in North and West Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Kashmir. It's a vibrant musical tradition that stretches back more than 700 years.

