

Representations of Islamic calligraphy and ornamentation in Western academic discourse: mechanisms of interpretation and semiotics of reception

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Abstract: This study explores the presence of Arabic calligraphy and Islamic ornamentation in the critical and academic discourses of foreign languages, viewing them as visual and semantic elements that go beyond mere decoration to represent a complete visual cultural identity. The study aims to trace how Western academics, Orientalists, and scholars in foreign languages received these Eastern arts, and how their structural and semantic systems were deconstructed through modern semiotic and aesthetic approaches. The research problem lies in assessing the extent to which Western and foreign critical discourse has successfully grasped the spiritual and symbolic dimension of calligraphy and ornamentation without reducing them to surface-level formal or artistic attributes. The paper seeks to reveal the semantic intersections between the verbal rhetoric of texts and the visual rhetoric of decorative and calligraphic structures. The study concludes that the way foreign languages have read Arabic calligraphy has contributed to reshaping Islamic arts within global concepts of visual experimentation and the philosophical dimension of the letter, making it a genuine bridge for civilizational communication and the interpretation of visual signs.

Keywords : Arabic calligraphy; Islamic ornamentation; foreign languages; cultural communication ; semantic intersections.

Representaciones de la caligrafía y la ornamentación islámicas en el discurso académico occidental: mecanismos de interpretación y semiótica de la recepción

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Resumen: Este estudio examina la presencia de la caligrafía árabe y la ornamentación islámica en los discursos críticos y académicos en lenguas extranjeras, considerándolas elementos visuales y semánticos que trascienden la mera decoración para expresar una identidad cultural visual integral. Su objetivo es analizar cómo los círculos académicos occidentales, los orientistas y los investigadores que escriben en lenguas extranjeras han recibido estas artes orientales, así como la manera en que sus sistemas estructurales y semánticos se han deconstruido mediante enfoques semióticos y estéticos modernos. El problema de investigación consiste en evaluar hasta qué punto el discurso crítico occidental y extranjero ha logrado comprender la dimensión espiritual y simbólica de la caligrafía y la ornamentación sin reducirlas a atributos formales o artísticos superficiales.

El artículo busca poner de manifiesto las intersecciones semánticas entre la retórica verbal de los textos y la retórica visual de las estructuras ornamentales y caligráficas. El estudio concluye que las interpretaciones de la caligrafía árabe elaboradas en lenguas extranjeras han contribuido a reconfigurar las artes islámicas en el marco de concepciones globales sobre la experimentación visual y la dimensión filosófica de la letra, convirtiéndolas en un auténtico puente para el diálogo entre civilizaciones y la interpretación de los signos visuales.

Palabras clave: caligrafía árabe; ornamentación islámica; lenguas extranjeras; comunicación cultural; intersecciones semánticas.

Received: 09.02.2026 Accepted: 25.06.2026 Published: 05.09.2026

Introduction:

Arabic calligraphy and Islamic ornamentation represent a unique aesthetic and cultural phenomenon. They are not limited to conveying language or serving as decorative elements in galleries and

architecture, but have evolved into a symbolic system that encapsulates the philosophy of the world and Islamic aesthetics. With the expansion of translation, the rise of Orientalism, and the (semiotic)¹ shifts in modern foreign language studies, Islamic art has garnered significant attention from Western critics and researchers, who have attempted to approach Arabic script and decorative forms using foreign critical tools and methodologies.

It has become an art form that foreigners appreciate firsthand through aesthetic observation, even without understanding the script. This appreciation, however, precedes subjective admiration and is rooted in spiritual appreciation. The importance of this approach stems from its transcendence of a local perspective on calligraphy and ornamentation, extending into the realm of global interpretation. Here, the written text meets the visual image, and the calligraphic sign transforms into a text open to semantic and philosophical interpretation. This study leads us to pose the following questions :

• How have studies and academic institutions in foreign languages approached the art of Arabic calligraphy and Islamic ornamentation? Have Western critical approaches been able to grasp the semantic and spiritual charge of the calligraphic and decorative structure, or have they limited themselves to formal and aesthetic analysis only?

Through this question, we will explore some possible hypotheses:

- Foreign semiotic approaches have contributed to presenting a new deconstructive vision of the Arabic letter as a visual sign with semantic dimensions that transcend traditional reading.
- Arabic calligraphy and Islamic ornamentation have formed a flexible aesthetic medium for building bridges of cultural communication between Western thought and Eastern aesthetics.
- Some foreign studies have fallen into the trap of reducing Islamic art to its decorative aspect (arabesque), neglecting the mystical and spiritual dimensions of the script and decorative symbols.

1. Significance of the Research's Basic Concepts

1.1 Arabic Calligraphy and Islamic Ornamentation: From Visual Structure to Semantic Intersections : The visual structure of Arabic calligraphy and Islamic ornamentation constitutes a semiotic system based on highly precise geometry. Straightness and curves combine with space and repetition to form a text parallel to the written linguistic text. This formal and semantic interplay has attracted the attention of many researchers in foreign linguistic and critical studies, who have found in Islamic art a fertile ground for applying structural, semiotic, and deconstructionist theories.²

"The shift of Arabic calligraphy from its communicative context to a receptive one in foreign discourses raises the issue of semantic intersections.

" The letter transforms into a formative unit that transcends sound and word to reach open-ended meaning, and ornamentation",³ through its ultimate repetition," becomes an embodiment of the concepts of infinity and continuity. Hence, this article seeks to trace the paths of foreign readings of Islamic art through two main axes".⁴

2. Mechanisms for receiving Arabic script as an evidential and semantic element in Western critical studies:

¹ - The term semiotics (Sémiotique / Semiotics) is the science of signs or semiotic semantics, and it deals with the study of signs and symbols and how meaning is produced and circulated within different communication systems, whether linguistic, visual or auditory.

² - Ismail Ezz El-Din, *Art and Beauty in Islamic Thought*, Beirut, 1981, p. 231.

³ - The same reference, p. 214.

⁴ - Pasha Hassan, *Encyclopedia of Archaeological and Cultural Terms*, Egyptian Renaissance Library, 1988, p. 65.

The shift from documentary Orientalist reading to the structural aesthetic approach. For early foreign discourses, Arabic script represented merely historical or stylistic material documenting Islamic manuscripts and artifacts; Where the historical and linguistic (philological)⁵ view prevailed in classical Orientalism, "which focused on classifying scripts (Kufic, Naskh, Thuluth) and determining the ages of texts and tracing the development of letter forms from an archival perspective. However, this reception witnessed a pivotal shift with the emergence of modern critical approaches in the mid-twentieth century; as Western academic interest moved from the communicative function of script as a vehicle for linguistic content, to its structural and aesthetic function as an independent visual entity. This is what we find in some countries such as China, India, Singapore, America, and others in defining programs for learning Arabic arts, including the art of Arabic calligraphy.⁶

The studies of Western critics and philosophers contributed to the rediscovery of the geometric structure of the Arabic letter; as they observed that script is not merely writing, but rather a demonstrative system based on precise mathematical ratios (the system of the point, the circle, and the circumference) that encapsulates the idea of cosmic order and harmony.

"Arabic calligraphy, as a form, has throughout its journey across the centuries been a meeting point for continuous dialogue between science and art. It deepens our understanding of its geometry, refines our senses with its beauty, and compels the eye to follow each letter and how they intertwine, constantly shifting the focus of the artwork. This creates the illusion of movement, even in stillness, a testament to its remarkable artistic quality.

"Among the many Arab arts known to the world's civilizations, Arabic calligraphy stands out for its unwavering authenticity, rooted in the very foundations upon which it was born and nurtured. From this authenticity, its magnificent forms have branched out. The peoples, nations, and regions that embraced Islam have enriched its forms, developed its styles, and strengthened its techniques of execution and application. Therefore, Lenks, an expert in Islamic art, believes that Kufic script, for example, one of the Arabic scripts, can be considered one of the great tools used to spread Islam throughout the ages, especially after the great calligraphers dedicated themselves to this noble task".⁷

⁵ - The philological approach is the approach that studies texts and languages in terms of their origins, historical development, linguistic structure, verification, and comparison, with the aim of understanding their meanings in their original civilizational and cultural context.

⁶ - Bahnasi Afif, *The Aesthetics of Arab Art*, World of Knowledge Series No. 231, National Council for Culture, Arts and Letters in Syria, 1998, p. 112.

⁷ - Hussein Iyad Hussein, *The Formal Composition of Arabic Calligraphy*, Ministry of Culture, Jordan, 2003, p. 34.



The aesthetic philosophy of Arabic calligraphy: An article by the Egyptian artist Mohamed Barakat, published in the Arts Magazine, 2020. **Source** : The Egyptian Artist's Arts Magazine

3. Arabic Calligraphy in Light of Visual Semiotics: From Word to Formative Sign. Contemporary Western critical studies, particularly the French and Italian semiotic schools, have relied on deconstructing the calligraphic structure of the Arabic language according to multiple semiotic levels, including:

A. The Iconic Level: Treating the Arabic letter as a self-contained form with its own visual reference that produces meaning, independent of the sound it expresses.

B. The Symbolic Level: Interpreting the linear movement (the extension, regression, and overlapping of letters) as a symbolization of philosophical and spiritual concepts such as infinity, unity and multiplicity, and elevation and withdrawal.

C. Semiotic flow and formal fluidity: "Western critics have noted the distinctiveness of Arabic script with its unique capacity for extension, contraction, and interlacing (ductus), which grants the calligrapher and the viewer a space of interpretive freedom not afforded by Latin alphabets with their closed and static forms. This deconstruction has led to the embodiment of Arabic script as a complete visual sign that emulates Western abstract arts, and even surpasses them in its ability to combine readable linguistic meaning with contemplative formal meaning".⁸

⁸ - The same reference, p. 35.



From the Louvre Museum in Paris: A painting by a French artist influenced by Arabic calligraphy.

Source: Louvre Museum website: <https://www.google.com/aclk?sa=L&pf=1>

4 .Arabic script as an evidential element in modern art and calligraphic approaches: Western reception of Arabic script did not stop at the limits of theoretical analysis in books and academies, but extended to direct influence on artistic and aesthetic practices; The Eastern calligraphic structure influenced trends in modern Western art (such as abstract art and other movements). Following Western reception, mechanisms of analysis and critique emerged, focusing on the semantic and philosophical impact, the demonstrative/geometric dimension, and the study of formal balances and golden ratios in the distribution of masses and spaces. This demonstrates that Arabic script constructs a demonstrative visual statement based on dots and measurements. "The deconstructive dimension separates the letter from its communicative context, allowing it to be read as a purely abstract line. It liberates the sign from the authority of direct linguistic reference, enabling open-ended meanings. The aesthetic dimension observes the movement of the script and its interaction with the surrounding space, creating a dynamic visual experience based on rhythm and visual frequency. Western art critics have concluded that Arabic script offers vivid, formative proofs of the possibility of formulating highly complex and beautiful geometric forms based on the unity of diversity. Each stroke of the pen or elongation of a letter performs an architectural function within the visual space, making Arabic script a fundamental pillar in cultural communication research and comparative studies between languages and aesthetics".⁹

5. Islamic Ornamentation and its Semiotic Manifestations as a Bridge for Communication Between Cultures.

5.1. The Structure of Islamic Ornamentation (Arabesque) in Foreign Imagination and Critical Discourse: Islamic ornamentation, particularly the foliate and abstract art known in the West as Arabesque, has received exceptional attention in foreign studies of aesthetic criticism and history. These extended decorative units have been the subject of intense research that has attempted to understand the mathematical and visual logic driving them. From mere decoration to contemplative

⁹ - Al-Rawi Nouri, Reflections on Islamic Art and Spiritual Architecture, Dar Al-Shoun General Cultural House, Syria, 1999, p. 48.

geometry: Modern foreign studies have moved beyond the superficial readings of the past that reduced ornamentation to mere "filling of space" (Horror Vacui), viewing it instead as an architectural and visual system possessing its own philosophy connected to a spiritual worldview.¹⁰

5.2. Symmetry and Circular Repetition: Western researchers have focused on studying the repetitive mechanism of vegetal and geometric decorative units, seeing in their interlocking growth a formal formulation of the concept of "multiplicity within unity," a philosophical concept that has been adopted by comparative critical literature.¹¹



Altar statue in the Portuguese church: a fresco depicting the Immaculate Conception. Portuguese, 17th century. Santarém, Portugal

5.3. Semiotic Manifestations of Decorative Unity: Movement, Space, and Infinity. Semiotic analyses of foreign languages have focused on deconstructing the constituent elements of Islamic ornamentation as a semiotic system based on a distinct dialogue between mass and space.

A. Centripetal Centrifugal Dynamics : Western studies analyze decorative composition as a movement originating from a central point, from which geometric and vegetal forms are generated, then return to revolve around the same center. This visual rhythm has been interpreted semiotically as a living symbol of existential movement and eternal return.¹²

B. Semiotics of Positive Void: Foreign critics have paid particular attention to the space enclosed between the foliate and decorative lines. Void is no longer interpreted as a negative or marginal element, but rather as a focal component that contributes to highlighting and creating form. This has

¹⁰ - Hassan Shaker Al Said, *Letterism and Modern Art: An Analytical and Exploratory Study*, House of Cultural Affairs, Baghdad, Iraq, 1983, p. 89.

¹¹ - Al-Rawi Nouri, *Reflections on Islamic Art and Spiritual Architecture*, Dar Al-Shoun General Cultural House, Syria, 1999, p. 49.

¹² - Afif Saeed, *Semiotics and Visual Rhetoric in Islamic Arts*, from the publications of *Differences in Arab Culture*, Jordan, 2012, p. 201.

established a new concept in foreign visual arts criticism concerned with the aesthetics of negation and absence.¹³

C. Embodiment of Infinity : The abrupt cessation of decoration on the edges of manuscripts or walls creates a continuous visual suggestion that the decorative pattern extends beyond the physical frame into infinity. Critical studies have adopted this as a semiotic category expressing transcendence and an open aesthetic assumption.



Ardalan, N., & Bakhtiar, L. (2000). The sense of unity: The Sufi tradition in Persian architecture. Kazi Publications

Source : Rachid Koraïchi, an Algerian artist who syncretized Arab art with Western styles.

Islamic ornamentation as a bridge for cultural communication and semantic intersection . Islamic ornamentation has emerged as one of the arts most capable of transcending cultural and linguistic boundaries. This is due to its abstract visual language, which does not require prior knowledge of a specific language to interpret. This has made it a common ground for aesthetic dialogue between East and West. Its cultural and semantic dimensions, its mechanisms of operation in foreign studies, and its impact on global cultural communication are all key aspects. Abstraction involves the abstraction of nature and the transformation of its plant elements into flexible geometric forms. It constructs a visual language that transcends cultures and is not confined by narrow national or linguistic boundaries. Its influence on modern arts includes inspiring Western abstract movements (such as Art Nouveau and the Bauhaus). Islamic decorative concepts have been employed in the reformulation of Western architectural design and deconstruction. Reciprocal semantic interpretation involves using foreign interpretive methodologies to read the conceptual structure of Islamic art. It has created a shared research environment that utilizes deconstructive and semiotic concepts to frame Islamic aesthetics. The semantic intersection between Islamic ornamentation and foreign critical discourses has proven

¹³ - The same reference, p. 203.

that decorative art represents a parallel visual text, possessing high semantic efficiency capable of creating cultural communication and feeding global critical approaches with new concepts about geometry, abstraction, and symbolism.¹⁴

Conclusion :

Through what has been analyzed in the two axes of this study, it becomes clear that Arabic calligraphy and Islamic ornamentation are no longer just local or closed heritage subjects, but have become aesthetic systems and cross-cultural signs that have attracted exceptional attention in foreign language studies and modern critical discourses. Contemporary Western approaches, by employing structural, semiotic, and deconstructionist methodologies, have successfully shifted the interpretation of Islamic art from a purely documentary and decorative perspective to one of aesthetic and philosophical reception. This new perspective treats calligraphy and ornamentation as "visual, demonstrative signs" grounded in geometry and abstraction, open to interpretation.

The semantic intersection between foreign critical thought and Eastern aesthetics has demonstrated that calligraphic and decorative structures possess a high degree of visual efficiency in building bridges of cultural communication. Here, the linguistic text meets the visual form, and the artistic space transforms into a universal dialogue that encapsulates the philosophy of existence, movement, and infinity.

This has become a visual culture in many countries, where these Islamic arts have been incorporated into their educational and artistic curricula. Among these countries are China, Singapore, and some Western nations.

Results:

- **Conceptual Shift in Foreign Reception:** Critical discourse in foreign languages has shifted from a classical Orientalist reading based on archiving and stylistic classification to a structural and semiotic approach that treats script and ornamentation as self-contained semiotic structures.
- **Semantic Independence of the Calligraphic Sign:** Western critical analyses have demonstrated that Arabic script possesses a demonstrative, formative significance independent of its direct linguistic meaning, thanks to the golden ratio system and the formative flexibility connected to the dynamism of extension, contraction, and interlacing.
- **Semiotic Interpretation of Space and Infinity :** Foreign semiotic studies have successfully redefined decorative space as a positive, meaning-generating component, and interpreted the extension of (foliated units)¹⁵ as a visual embodiment of the concepts of infinity and transcendence.
- **Calligraphy and Ornamentation as Mediators of Cultural Communication :** The abstract universality of Islamic architecture formed a common ground where modern Western approaches met

¹⁴ - Begley, W. E. Monumental Islamic calligraphy from India. Islamic Records Association, 1985, p51.

¹⁵ - Foliate units: A term in Islamic ornamentation and decorative arts, referring to decorative elements inspired by the shape of plant leaves, branches and stems, which are repeated or overlapped to form an integrated ornament.

Eastern aesthetics, contributing to the enrichment of modern art movements (such as the Bauhaus and Modern Art)¹⁶ with new conceptions of space and symbol.

Recommendations:

- **Activating Interdisciplinary Approaches:** Encouraging academic research to combine foreign language studies with modern semiotic approaches to interpret Islamic visual heritage from a renewed global perspective.
- **Developing Comparative Terminological Dictionaries:** Working to create specialized dictionaries that translate and standardize the critical and semiotic terms used in foreign discourses when studying Arabic calligraphy and Islamic ornamentation to facilitate academic dialogue.
- **Integrating Visual Aesthetics into Language Curricula :** Incorporating translated critical texts from foreign languages that discuss calligraphy and ornamentation into university language and translation programs to develop students' skills in art criticism and intercultural communication.
- **Promoting joint research projects:** Establishing joint scientific projects and critical exhibitions between Arab academies and Western institutions interested in visual semiotics to trace the impact of Islamic arts on contemporary aesthetic theories.

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¹⁶ - **Bauhaus decoration or the Bauhaus trend** : named after the German Bauhaus school founded in 1919 by Walter Gropius. There is no "Bauhaus decoration theory" in the strict sense in classical art studies, but rather an aesthetic concept derived from the Bauhaus philosophy.

Appendices:



German Bauhausian decorative theory of geometric ornamentation derived from Islamic art



A painting by the Swiss artist Paul Klee, 1917, inspired by the Arabic decorative movement.