

# *The quest for beauty: aesthetic expression in the world religions*

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A mosque generally *looks* vastly different to a Buddhist stupa. Rembrandt's depictions of Jesus embody themes far removed from, say, a Rajput artist's intent in portraying Durga. Such diversity – which Katie Pye aptly explores in her exhibition – can make artistic expressions of “other” faiths seem remote, puzzling, inferior or even perverse. The core of this misapprehension is usually our unfamiliarity with the central concerns of the artists. We have no idea what they are trying to ‘say!’ Although each religious art tradition carries a multiplicity of cultural and personal approaches, it is possible to extract some recurrent themes. Below such a summary is offered with regard to Islamic, Christian, Buddhist and Hindu arts.

## *Islamic artistic expression*

At the heart of Islamic art lies a paradox: *human art does not exist*. Only God can be an Artist. The created world is His glorious Masterpiece. The *Qu'ran* depicts human art as fragile and passing – merely decorative, at best a poor *reflection* of God's artistic genius (the beautiful seas, mountains, clouds and deserts). Such a belief produced an art that aimed to *decorate* and *reflect* the natural order – *mirroring* the Divine *Light* and the hues of sky and sea (blue and green) through pools of clear water and dazzling glazed tiles (the sky, indeed, was called the “enameled azure dome” – Michaud 1996: 34).

A principal function of Islamic art was thus to highlight the natural immensity, formlessness and ‘invisibility’ of God. Consequently, it had little use for images. Rather, it *veiled* its sacred objects (e.g. the face or form of its Prophets). Even the Ka'aba is clothed with a vesture (*kiswah*) (Burckhardt 1976: 4). Instead of images, Islam sought to hint at God through His Word (hence the immense importance of calligraphy, which decorates so much of Muslim art and architecture) or by creating vast, limitless *space* (*makan*) (Burckhard 1976: 23; Ardatan & Bakhtar 1973: 68). Mosques are great open, spacious plains. Through this space, worshippers are humbled, flattened and equalized in prayer and submission (the meaning of *islam*) before God's vastness. Like God, a mosque has no below or above, and no specific direction (Burckhardt 1976: 19) except for the *mithrab* – a niche pointing to Mecca. The latter provides an abstract ‘gate’ opening onto Divine contemplation.

Islam believes that the world emanated from ideal, God-infused prototypes within this boundless space – emerging as a sort of ordered, mathematical multiplicity of perfect *geometric shapes* (Bakhtier 1976: 14; Canby 2005: 3). Consequently, its artists were keen to craft ornate geometric and calligraphic puzzles whereby the worshipper could ponder the ordered precision of the universe. Even plants and animals are reduced to *abstract, idealized forms*, and the *Light* of the skies becomes a symmetrical pattern of “star mazes” or “sunbursts” enveloping the exteriors of domes and Qu'rans (Abas & Salmen 1995: 9).

Islam enshrined a ‘doctrine of unity’ (*al-twahid*). It viewed God as hidden in all forms: infinitely transcendent, yet *immensely immanent* (Bakhtier 1976: 6). For Islamic art, this meant that natural and human worlds are usually shown as *intricately, richly interwoven patterns* (Stewart 1968: 150, 157). Thus, wherever possible, Islamic art flattens and standardizes people, animals, plants and buildings into coequal, cojoined, two-dimensional wholes. This is especially notable in Persian carpets and Persian miniatures. It means that – unlike Western art - shadowing, perspective and individual differences are generally avoided. Such aspects are viewed as representing the illusory world (*aja'ib* - which is, indeed, called “the world of shadows”) (Grabar 2000: 48). Our “world of shadows” is of limited interest to Islamic artists, being the emanation of God furthest removed from the idealized geometry, Unity and Divine effulgence that begat all form.

## ***Christian artistic expression***

Christian art begins from a rather different premise. It is essentially the art of ***personalizing***, ***personifying*** and ***humanizing*** the Divine Presence. The Mystery of ***incarnation*** (Williamson 2004: 3)– the notion that God could become flesh and blood, could walk amongst us, and empathize with our human condition - gave it a fascination, even in Roman times, with humanism, ***realism and portraiture*** (Temple 1990: 6, 8). Christian art always sought a “true likeness” (*eikon* = icon) of God’s humanity (Williamson 2004: 1), even if (under Protestantism), this was sometimes reduced to a single symbol such as the Cross. In other words, Christ’s ***physicality*** is a central theme. Cathedrals are laid out in the form of His Body, and the centerpiece of their ritual art is the equipment - the table, cup, dish and container - required for ‘drinking’ Jesus’s Blood and ‘eating’ and storing His flesh (the Sacrament).

However, Christian artists did not wish God’s human-ness to be confused with the all-too-human ‘gods’ (ancestors and emperors) generally worshipped by the Romans. Therefore, they physically ***exalted*** their Divine portraits, even though God was “everywhere.” Christian art consequently has an ***upward gaze*** towards a God or a Heaven that are visibly exalted – enthroned, lofty, majestic, kingly, “on High.” Worshippers and saints raise arms and eyes to heaven in even the earliest examples (Borchgane 1999: 27). Rose windows and glittering altars burst like glorious fireworks far ***above*** and at the end of cathedral halls (Oggins 1996: 12).

There is a deeper significance in this progression upwards and onwards within Christian art. It was a celebration of spiritual progress - of ***ascent from darkness*** (sin, the world, our human condition) ***to light*** (redemption, the glory/ Kingdom of God). It served to evoke a sense of ***salvation*** (Abbot 1972: 9). Altars and stained glass windows were positioned like the light at the end of a long, dark tunnel. Christian painting conveys a similar movement towards the Light (Beazley 1976: 18; Camille 1996: 15) – with a subsequent interest in ***contrast*** - shading and perspective. Ascent was also shown through soaring arches and spires, or eagles and doves in flight.

In glorifying this ascent to ***salvation/ emancipation/ resurrection***, Christian art is often characterized by motifs of ***regeneration/ rebirth*** and ***growth***. Christ, the convert, and Christian art: all equally ‘emerge from the tomb.’ Indeed, the earliest Christian rites and art were conducted in secret, funerary catacombs, amidst immense persecution (Williamson 2004: 4). The joy of Christ and convert emerging as ‘the new Man’ from ‘the tomb’ (as the world was called) was a common theme, represented through ***springtime/ bridal imagery***. This usually took the form of blossoming flowers (often the rose or lily – symbolizing Christ and Mary), the return and nesting of birds, or the ripening of fruits – particularly of the Vine or Tree (the abundance of Christ’s ‘fruitful’ sacrifice). In other cases, it was represented simply through prolific vegetative scrolls – often a feature of illuminated Bibles and relief sculptures.

## ***Buddhist artistic expression***

To a far greater degree than the art of other traditions, Buddhist art was designed as a ***meditative aid***. It can only be understood in this manner. It was expressly created to be contemplated on (Meulenbeld 2001: 1-2) - as a means of absorbing, identifying with and transporting one’s self to other realms – particular, sequential psychological/ meditative realms, or even ‘other worlds’ - heavenly realms (Coomaraswamy 1977: 146, 154).

In aiming to evoke ideal worlds of harmony, poise and inner peace (Wilkinson 2003: 42-43), Buddhist art relies heavily on serene, calm images that help open the meditator’s mind to “extraordinary wisdom and compassion” (Thurmann 1991:17). Thus it prefers the meditating or resting figure, the still lake, falling petals and leaves, majestic trees and solid rocks. This gives Buddhist art a ***sublime, graceful*** quality quite distinct from Hindu art. It also explains its ‘simple’, detached nature - what has been called its “smooth classicism” (Rawson 1967: 36; Edwardes 1969: 9).

Buddhist art is characteristically *ethereal and unearthly*. This relates to Buddhist belief in *annica* – impermanence – and the Void-like nature of Buddhist Reality. The world and the self are viewed as fleeting, ever changing and dream-like. Therefore, objects and people are portrayed as a *transparent dream* (Thurmann 1991:19), in contrast to the profound Awakening of Enlightenment (Edwardes 1969: 25). Everything is a manifestation of the Universal Void (*sunyata*), thus it is depicted as “empty” and vaporous.

As meditative devices, Buddhist artworks were designed to gradually link – in several *stages or steps* - the outer (physical) and inner (psychological) world (Snodgrass 2001: 131). To do this, they ‘*unfold*’ *in a hierarchical pattern*, in progression with one’s inner/ cosmic space (Wallis 1999: 34) - much like the petals of a lotus flower or a nest of Russian dolls. Indeed, many Buddhist artworks were rolled up, folded up or enclosed when not in use, and most betray an orderly series of rows of smaller to larger Buddha-images, or concentric rings and squares (as in its famed *mandalas* and *tangkas*). Actual steps or stages are depicted in many works.

Another common feature of Buddhist art is its *repetitive* nature. *Identical or almost-identical images* profusely decorate Buddhist grottoes and temples. Rather than a single sitting Buddha or *stupa* (relic shrine), there are hundreds or thousands. Likewise, a single word or phrase may be repeated everywhere, forming a calligraphic pattern. Again, this is a meditative device (Meulenbeld 2001: 22, 25). It is a visual mantra. It focuses the artist’s or viewer’s mind and heart – again and again – on its cherished objective: Enlightenment. Also, by mass-producing myriads of Buddhas or shrines, one ‘meditates’ on the importance and vastness of Buddha Nature – much like *mirrors mirroring each other into infinity*. Indeed, in Buddhist lore, this is how the cosmos was believed to burst into existence – as a series of mirrored, ‘empty’ images.

### *Hindu artistic expression*

Hindu art can be quickly distinguished from Buddhist art by its *earthiness and naturalism*. Hinduism claims to be “the eternal religion” and its art is certainly grounded in very ancient, *domestic, primordial, rural* cults – especially those of the Divine Earth, the Divine Stone, and the Divine Mother (Devi) (Blurton 1992: 10-11; Coomaraswamy 1977: 5). Devi’s image and myth form the invisible core of most Hindu shrines – mimicking the *domestic hearth* (fire); the reproductive organs (*lingam & yoni*) and utilizing the *intense red* of menstrual blood - the blood of birth and sacrifice (Devi, in many myths and forms, is a type of life-giving Tree, sliced up and planted in the village grove - all natural abundance springs from her sacrificial death) (Waterstone 1995: 20-21).

Hindu art presents a *continual dance or Play (lila)* between this *primordial Centre* and its *manifest profusion*. The outside of a Hindu temple conveys the world in all its folly, conflict, indulgence and clutter, with Divinity manifesting in thousands of forms, unfolding in theatrical “cinemas of sculpture” (Edwardes 1969: 9). This reflects the Hindu belief that *alcasa* – ether – is a radiant, all-pervading substance, and that God is equally *timeless and all pervading*. Consequently, Hindu relief sculptures and paintings often have no spaces between figures and no sequence. They represent a unity in diversity, wherein everything occurs in a jumbled clutter - mythic episodes happening simultaneously in the eternally frozen Moment or Mood/ ‘flavour’ (*bhava, rasa*).

Thus in Hindu art, everything *fragments or proliferates outwardly*, but it does so from a Divine core (Mitter 2001: 45). As one moves inwards in a Hindu temple (or even to the ‘core’ of a Hindu painting) multiplicity and vibrant movement decrease and decrease until one stands alone – private and solitary - before a calm interior, devoid of all distraction (Blurton 1992: 57). In the case of the Hindu temple, this is the central shrine - the *garbha-griha (womb home)*. This stark, dark, small room with its usually crude shrine (just a stone, a phallus or a

rather primitive figure) represents Unmanifest/ Formless (*nishkala*) Deity and the Inner (Divine) Self in all – the Source of the outer profusion (Mitter 2001: 35).

The notion that the **Inner Self** – that the human being – **is actually God** – is the cornerstone of Hindu emphasis on **image** (*murti*). Images of deities are, in Hindu art, the potent reminder of the **physical Presence of God**, particularly the Presence of God in each and every person. Hindu art thus abounds with images, as is fundamentally **'sensuous'** (Rawson 1967: 36), because God is viewed as **concrete** – as something to be actually seen, smelt, touched, tasted, heard and felt (Dallapiccolo 2004: 94). The temple is quite literally God's **physical home** (Owen Cole 1995: 30, 23) and God's image is carted about, fed and clothed as though it were actually alive. Indeed, Hindu worship is rich in sensory experiences – pungent incense and flowers, special festive foods and music etc.

In other words, Hindu art aims at **maximum visual/ tactile impact**. It places immense importance on **seeing God and being seen by God** (*darshan*) –through viewing painted or sculpted images of a Deity, or viewing God in human form (the Guru, the Master), or directly through some spiritual experience in which one 'sees,' 'hears' or 'touches' God. This explains the often **gaudy, flamboyant, extravagant** nature of much Hindu art, and why the God's/ Guru's eyes look directly at the viewer (and are, in some statues, made extra large).

Another major feature of Hindu art is its combination of apparent opposites. More than any other religious art, it depicts the **Divine fusion of duality**. It is, at one and the same time, ascetic and sensual, instinctive and rational, celebratory and denying (Abbot 1972: 7). Once God is attained, Hindus believe that **no dichotomy remains between sacred and profane** (Dehejia 1997: 18). This is graphically depicted in Hindu painting: the celibate Shiva sports an erect penis. His supernatural family (one child with an elephant head, the other with thousands of heads) enjoys a 'normal' picnic in the countryside. A very blue and celestial-looking Krsna idly watches a thunderstorm with his beloved, just like any human king. Even 'erotic,' 'furious' and 'terrible' are considered moods (*bhava*) of God, and are therefore depicted in Hindu art (Dehejia 1997: 21).

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