

Restriction and Freedom: Reconsidering Figural Representation in Islam

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Restriction and Freedom: Reconsidering Figural Representation in Islam

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ABSTRACT

In general, figural representation is avoided in the Islamic world as instructed by the Quran and Hadith. However, the entire Islamic world does not share a common view on figural representation; in fact, opinions vary in different places. In this study, the author describes different views and their religious sources as regards figural representation and investigate certain paintings by Muslim children according to their different positions and sources.

The arguments on figural presentation are complicated. A number of experts believe that it is not allowed as Quran forbids idol worship, whereas others opine that it should be avoided based on the Hadith, in which the creation of figures is condemned by Prophet Muhammad. Moreover, different views on the meaning of 'figural representation' exist. Even religious experts do not have a conclusive opinion. Many Muslims do not hesitate to accept the representation of human or animal figures.

How do such complicated and diverse circumstances influence the art works of Muslim children? To date, it has been reported that these children also have different views on figural representation. In this study, the author investigates 109 paintings collections of Muslim children from 12 Islamic countries (e.g. Turkey, Egypt, and Iran) and clarify the religious influence in these works.

The author found four works that supposedly avoid the drawing of human figures. In these paintings, the faces do not have parts such as eyes, nose, and mouth. However, the remaining works represent the complete human body. This means that most of the children did not care about figural representation, although many of them were from pious Islamic countries.

Meanwhile, the non-Muslim perspective tends to follow the existing stereotypes set by others. However, each Muslim child is unique in terms of personality and qualities. Therefore, respect and understanding are due them. In addition, respecting and understanding each character of a child is an ordinary way in education. Therefore, teaching Muslim children is the same as teaching any other children. Despite the differences in our religious views and beliefs, people are all the 'same' as they are simply human beings.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the Islamic world, religious faith influence aspects of one's daily lives. The school education is the same as those stated by Islamic scholar Marmaduke Pickthall: 'From proper Muslim standpoint, all education is alike religious. ... In a real Muslim school there would be no separate "religious" education'¹. The author has been studying how those Islamic influences appear in art education.

In this study, as a typical example, the author focuses on and reconsiders a tendency for figural representation to be avoided in the Islamic world. Indeed, avoidance of figural

representation is not the only characteristic of art education in the Islamic world. Treating this topic would be a cause to fix the stereotype of Islam and discussing it based on firm grounds will promote proper understanding of Islam.

2. METHOD

The grounds for avoiding figural representation are clearly laid out by the verses of Holy Quran, Hadith (the saying and teachings of the prophet Muhammad), and certain statement on figural representation. This is followed by an investigation of the drawing of Muslim children from Islamic countries, taking into consideration how those Islamic influences in the children's drawings.

3. RESEARCH

3.1 The grounds for avoiding figural representation

Figural images are often believed to have been prohibited in Islamic art, but this is not the case². Indeed, the following verse is an example that Quran forbids the use of idols for religious worship:

You only worship idols besides Allah and you invent a lie. Surely they whom you serve besides Allah control no sustenance for you; so seek sustenance from Allah and serve him and be grateful to Him. To Him you will be brought back. (Quran29:17)³

However, each verse that forbids the worship of idols does not mean creating images are always prohibited. Therefore, there have been art works that represent the prophet Muhammad since the ancient times. Meanwhile, the Hadith clearly condemns representing living images. The Hadith is systematized in 'Book 24. The book pertaining to cloths and decoration (Kitab Al-Libas wa'l-Zinah)' in *Sahih Muslim*⁴, it is possible to classify them into three categories for interpretation⁵.

The first category is prohibition of creating living forms based on the Hadith that state those who represent living images will be punished on the Day of Resurrection. One of the examples is below:

Ibn 'Umar reported Allah's Messenger having said: Those who paint pictures would be punished on the Day of Resurrection and it would be said to them: Breathe soul into what you have created. (24:5268)⁶

The Day of Resurrection means Judgement Day when all humans will discover their eternal life depend on their deeds in the lifetime. Those humans who are accepted and forgiven by Allah are going to be Heaven (Paradise), on whereas those who are punished are sent to Hell, which is described as a terrible and scorching place of torment, sorrow and remorse⁷. In short, this Hadith warns that those who paint pictures will be sent to Hell as creation of life by humans means imitation of the God.

The second category is the Hadith stating that Angels do not enter the house in which paintings are decorated. An example below:

Abu Talha reported Allah's Apostle having said: Angels do not enter a house in which there is a dog or a picture. (29:5249)⁸

Most versions of Hadith simply mention the word 'picture', whereas the report by Abu Talha Ansari implies that the 'picture' means picture of a living thing.⁹

The third category is the Hadith telling that the prophet Muhammad was said to be disgusted with decoration with paintings. The following is the example:

A'isha reported: Allah's Messenger came back from the journey and I had screened my door with a curtain having portraits of winged horses upon it. He commanded me and I pulled it away. (24:5256)¹⁰

The other Hadith describes the picture of specific animals, such as bird, whereas another Hadith only mentions the word 'picture'.

Another Hadith states as follows that paintings disturb one's prayer:

A'isha reported she had a cloth having pictures upon it and it was hanging upon the shelf and Allah's Messenger said: Take it (away) from me (from my sight), so I removed it and made cushions from that. (24:5262)¹¹

As described above, the Quran that forbids idol worship and Hadith that detests drawing and decorating pictures are the factors of the tendency for figural representation to be avoided in the Islamic world. That is why Islamic art such as arabesque has flourished¹².

However, the interpretation of these religious sources differs from each person and place. For example, certain people worry that painting and drawing would be idols that lead worshipers astray¹³. Others explain that a picture/figure is not permitted for fear of punishment on Judgement Day¹⁴. Still, a great number of Muslims do not concern any representation including figure. Views on figural representation are not uniform across the whole of Islam, and various opinions on figural images in various places exist.

3.2 The paintings by Muslim children

These diverse circumstances in figural representation also influence art education in schools. Accordingly, Muslim children have diverse opinions as well. In a previous research, the author investigated the variation in Muslim students' opinions on figural representation¹⁵. The previous research shows that certain children hesitate to represent a figure; others are willing to draw and paint, whereas a number of them think that it is possible to draw figures if the situation would meet conditions.

How do children's art works reflect their opinion? This study focuses on the collection of 'Paintings of Eid and Weddings' that is kept in National Arts Education Archive (Yorkshire Sculpture Park, UK) and was donated by the Islamic Art Foundation. This rare collection of painting from Islamic countries all over the world formed the 'Festival of Colour Exhibition' in London in 1987. The collection had has 109 paintings drawn by children aged 7 to 16 who were from 12 countries (mainly in the Middle East). Although the theme of the paintings include the concepts 'Eid' and 'Wedding', the children's paintings depict different and diverse scenes that feature their countries.

All the paintings include living figures owing to the theme. Of the 109 paintings, 15 paintings contain a face in which the parts such as eyes, nose, and mouth are not drawn. According to the investigation, certain Muslim children think that they can draw a human figure if it does not include specific parts. The 15 paintings were further analysed in terms of the size of the figure in relation to the entire size of the painting and the surrounding details. As a result, the author concludes that the collection has only four paintings in which human figures were avoided to be drawn. The facts of human figures in there paintings are totally omitted, although the size of the figures is large enough.

Nevertheless, whether these ‘faceless’ humans were drawn for religious reason is unclear and can only be clarified by the painters themselves. However, it could still be considered that these paintings ‘might be’ based on religious reasons. Clearly, all paintings in the collection include the picture of lively humans. This means that almost all children did not intend to avoid drawing human figures, even those from pious Islamic countries such as Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Iran. The factors that determine Muslim children’s representation are their interpretation of representational art, which is based on their own faith and not on the tendency owing to their country’s belief in Islam as a country or region or the entire Muslim religion.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Hickman¹⁶ states that Muslim children must be taught based on their personal quality and not stereotype of Muslim in figural representation. However, respecting and understanding each character of a child is an ordinary way in education. Therefore, teaching Muslim children is basically the same as teaching any other children in any other country and cultural sphere. Hence, respecting Muslim children is not equivalent to providing them a ‘special treatment’ for ‘stranger’. Despite the differences in religious views and beliefs, humans are all the ‘same’.

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