

BOOK REVIEW

Linking art and spirituality

Doorways to Islamic Art by Mahmudah Begum Jaffer, Salha Publications, Cape Town, 2002, 48pp. Local price: approx R30.00. (Available at International Book Services, Rylands, Cape Town)

For the average person, including many Muslim adults and children, Islamic Art is a fairly vague, if not unknown subject matter. For many of those who know of it, Islamic Art is synonymous with calligraphy and identified predominantly with its decorative or ornamental purposes.

The functional and spiritual link between the Holy Qur'an and Islamic Art is rarely made. In *Doorways to Islamic Art* Mahmudah Begum Jaffer applies a traditional definition of Islamic Art, such as that offered by Seyyed Hossein Nasr who defines Islamic Art as "essentially a way of ennobling matter by means of geometric and floral patterns united by calligraphic forms which embody the word of God as revealed in the sacred book, the Holy Qur'an."

Through the use of well-researched and organised geometric designs, floral patterns and calligraphy, as well as Qur'anic quotations and Islamic art interpretations of the pictures, Mahmudah has created an interesting and stimulating activity book for children. The author recommends that the use of the book be super-

vised by parents or educators. As a primer the book helps make Islamic Art accessible to all.

In *Doorways to Islamic Art* Mahmudah has developed a simple and interesting way for children to learn the deen in a multi-faceted learning approach – visually (through the appreciation of the beautiful calligraphy, geometric designs and floral patterns), orally (through the recitation of the Qur'anic quotations and Islamic Art interpretations) and physically (through the use of fine motor-skills and hand-eye co-ordination by colouring in the pictures).

Using a multi-sense, integrated approach to facilitate the learning process, the aim of the book is to nurture Allah consciousness in children who are viewed (according to Islamic prophetic guidelines) as highly receptive to this kind of nurturing since they are regarded to be in a state of natural purity and obedience to the Will of the Creator (M Faadiel

Arnold - Islamic Art workshop).

This book challenges the child (and adult) as a learner instead of engaging the child in a passive piece of colouring in of Islamic Art. It intellectually and spiritually stimulates the learner beyond the mediocre, guiding him or her toward the appreciation of the Creator and His beautiful creation.

At one level *Doorways to Islamic Art* is offered as a simple

and enjoyable art activity in its own right. At another level it offers a deeper spiritual learning opportunity for both adults (who supervise the work) and children.

Seven Islamic art symbols are presented and explored. The book begins with the palmette bud, symbolising the potential to grow, and to receive light/ knowledge/ understanding (Nur) and progress. The palmette bud is reflective of the mind of the beginner, on the threshold of learning.

Other symbols, such as borders, intertwining designs, the tree, etc. follow the same methodology and make the sublime connections between the beauty and spirituality, the artistic and the sacred.

The "doorways" symbol, for example, suggests new beginnings, starting anew or advancing

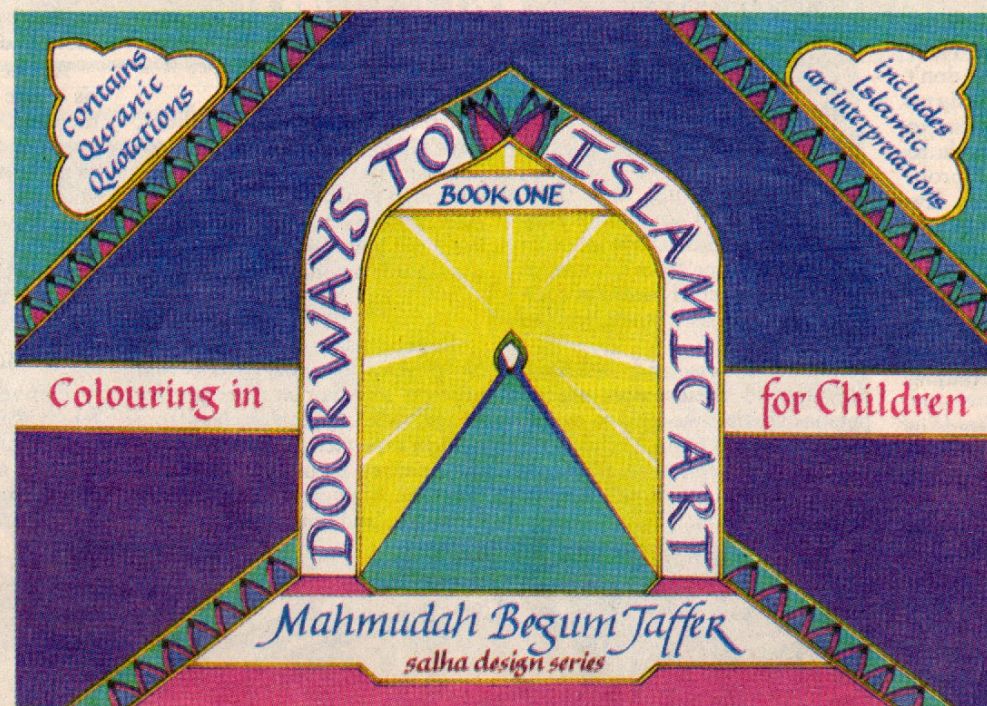
to farther new experiences. The invitation is to do this in the name of the Creator and the Guided Path as exemplified by Nabi Muhammad (SAW).

Finally, the star pattern is symbolic of guidance and represents guided measurement. The Qur'anic Surahs (Qamar: 4:49; Nahl: 16:16; Tawba: 9:36; and Baqara: 2:115) accompanying this symbol indicate that all things created by the Creator are proportionate and measured, with marks and sign posts for the guidance of humankind. This symbol, coupled with the Islamic interpretations and held together by the clarifying Qur'anic quotations, crystallises the message of the Creator, showing that His Creation was not Created in chaos, but with definition, order and beauty, in even measure and proportion.

Islamic Art, presented in the form of an activity book for children, as interpreted by Mahmudah Begum Jaffer attempts to capture some of the beauty in Islamic art symbols, and direct the learner back to the Creator.

This book provides a medium for both adult and child to learn together from the infinite source of Islamic wisdom and teachings, of which Islamic art forms one important component.

Review
SHIREEN
BANOO
NOOR
MAHOMED





Mahmudah unravels Islamic art's wondrous complexity

Chantel Erfort

The desire to share her love of art with her children inspired a Rylands mother to develop an Islamic art book for beginners.

Mahmudah Begum Jaffer first became interested in the intricate designs of Islamic art in the 1970s.

Her initial interest became a passion, and for years she honed her skills, taking on the challenge of increasingly more complicated designs.

She later reached a stage where she wanted to share her passion with her children,

but found that the books on Islamic art in the shops were very involved and complicated.

"This is something that needs to be shared, but I knew that if I wanted to share it with children, I had to simplify it," said Mrs Jaffer.

“The alternating patterns help one understand the rhythms of life”

To make the intricate Islamic designs less overwhelming, Mrs Jaffer dealt separately with the seven main concepts used in Islamic art. Each symbol is accompanied by a simplified explanation of its significance and spiritual meaning.

"Not everyone knows how to interpret Islamic art, so the explanations make the book useful for adults and children. I've dealt with the symbols which are essentially the building blocks of the designs," Mrs Jaffer explained.

Mrs Jaffer also hopes that the book will help teach children about spirituality.

"The alternating patterns help one understand the rhythms of life," she said.

"I want children to find a medium through which they can connect with their Creator. They need to be consciously reminded of him. I see art as a pathway to my Creator. I understand it as a path; it shows me a return to my source."

When the seven symbols are put together to form complex patterns, it's hard to tell where one ends and the other begins. When they're unravelled though, it all starts to make sense.

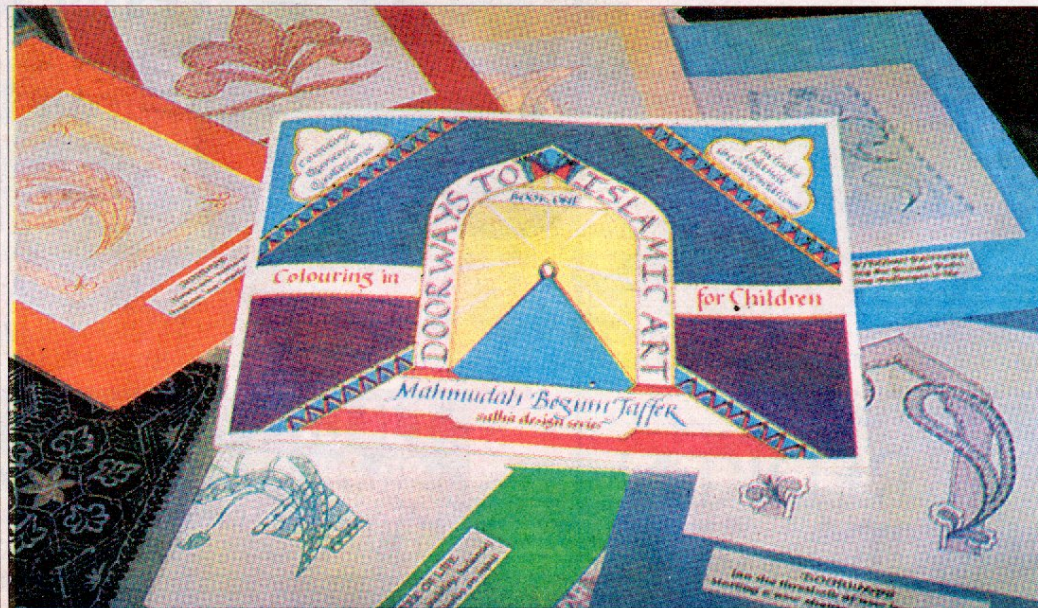
The palmette bud symbolises potential, growth and progress, while borders represent limits and restraint – a "limited freedom" rather than imprisonment.

Intertwining designs represent the fact that Allah's children are always under his watchful eye. The tree of life is a symbol of strength, stability and balance, and doorways are symbolic of new beginnings.

Up-down patterns represent the search for the straight path, and stars symbolise guidance and points of measurement.

It is with this in mind that one should look at these designs and see not only detailed patterns, but a story unfolding, echoing the artist's interpretation of his or her own spirituality.

Mrs Jaffer's book, entitled *Doorways to Islamic Art*, is available at most popular bookstores as well as the International Bookshop in Gatesville.



■ *Doorways to Islamic Art* teaches beginners the symbolism of Islamic artwork.