

ENCOUNTERS for FUTURE ECHOES

JANUBI ZAKHRAFA
fortified with
ISLAMIC LINE DESIGN



A SOUTH AFRICAN EXPRESSION

Search, Research, Find – a Personal Journey

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ISLAMIC ART

”Islamic art is a modern concept created by art historians in the 19th century to facilitate categorization and study of the material first produced under the Islamic peoples that emerged from Arabia in the seventh century.”¹

It appears that Muslims have always had a strong inclination to beautify surfaces, e.g. utensils, mats, tents and handles. They are known to practise “an artistry that conspicuously avoids representation in favour of a passionate pursuit of elegant shapes, complex geometric patterns, sumptuous colours and exquisite textures”.² Since the 7th century, Muslims have been decorating surfaces themselves or commissioning artists or artisans for this purpose.

Allah (SWT) created everything in correct measurement and proportion (Quran 54:49). It is therefore not surprising for Muslims to have a natural inclination towards structure, harmony, balance and take to geometry with so much enthusiasm. [The 10th century geometer *ibn* Muqla’s theory of the proportioned script was rooted in the Pythagorean theorem.]³

The Quran was revealed in the 7th century. Soon afterwards it became essential, in order to guide the reader, to insert marginal, punctuation and *surah* heading markings. For example these signal a *sajdah* requirement, the beginning of a *juz*, or the start of a *surah*, the end of an *ayah*, or the end of 5, or 10 *ayaat*. These markings became opportunities that the Noble Quran offers the ‘illuminator’.⁴ They could later be decorated in a most harmonious way.⁵

The main intention of these markings is to facilitate ease for the reader, to mark out correct and appropriate marginal annotations, division markings, and page borders which provide visual coordination from the viewpoint of the reader. The ergonomics between the reader, the text, and facilitating elements becomes important. If the Quran is large and cannot be read held in the hand, it requires different attention compared to a small Quran that can be read held in the hand. The larger format would require support, a stand, (a *rehal*), and would require the text to be placed closer to the reader sitting in front of it, perhaps on a carpeted floor. “A good manuscript design is that in which beauty is complimented by comfort”.⁶

“In the Islamic decorative arts the page occupies a most honoured place”. The first paper factory was established in Samarkand in the 8th century AD, and by the 10th century, paper was being produced in

¹ Grabar, Oleg. 1987. The Formation Of Islamic Art. 2nd ed. New Haven: Yale University

² Bravmann, René A. 1983. African Islam. 1st ed. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press.

³ Abas, S. J, and Amer Shaker Salman. 2007. Symmetries Of Islamic Geometrical Patterns. 2nd ed. Hackensack, NJ: World Scientific.

⁴ Lings, Martin. n.d. Splendours Of Qur'an Calligraphy & Illumination. London: Thames and Hudson.p.21

⁵ Al-Qur'an. 2006. 1st ed. [Kuala Lumpur]: Islamic Art Museum Malaysia.

⁶ Al-Qur'an. 2006. 1st ed. [Kuala Lumpur]: Islamic Art Museum Malaysia.

all major cities from Samarkand to Fes.⁷ During the 11th and 12th century illumination became more systemized, and later perfected in the 13th century. Experiments on frontispieces (Quran first page) occurred during the 11th and 15th century, with a standard design emerging in the 16th century. Into the 17th century, under the “watchful eye” of religious, and community leaders, and artists, this period saw the peak of the art of illumination. “Hence all parts of the Quran came to perfection. In other words, artists were responsible for the religion and society. Islamic arts were activities of faith”.⁸

In regions where the rulers were Muslim, or the artists were Muslim, or those who commissioned art were Muslim irrespective of whether the artist or artisan was Muslim, art work was the natural response to beauty, and to beautify. This was to experience and identify with the Hadith that tells us that Allah (SWT) is beautiful and that (He SWT) loves beauty. There was also the desire to produce, own, or gift a beautifully illuminated Quran.

In order to study this beauty in visual art forms, from past eras and these areas, orientalist needed a name for it, and coined the phrase, Islamic Art. Islamic art exhibitions held to this day, showcase many art pieces from these regions; yet often include pieces from pre-Islamic times. So the question continues to be asked. What is Islamic Art?

ISLAMIC LINE DESIGN AND JANUBI MANUSCRIPT ILLUMINATION

Geometric patterns are my favourite pastime, and I love making Islamic connections with my drawings. Beloved Prophet Muhammad (SAW) used line drawings in combination with explanations whilst teaching (Reported in the Musnad of Imaam Ahmad 2663). Following this method, I am developing Islamic Line Design:

- Islamic, because it is a description attached to a teaching method found in Hadith, making use of line drawings to teach about Islam.
- Line, because according to narrations of Prophet Muhammad (SAW), he (SAW) occasionally drew lines in order to offer an image in support of what he (SAW) was explaining to his (SAW) companions (RA).
- Design, because an intention is required with a specific outcome in mind.

We, South African Muslims, are a minority group, with a significant history. We should offer an expression of our own, a South African Muslim identity in patterns. We are able to follow the example of the longstanding disciplined techniques adopted by Muslim artists before us. We could create pattern compositions called Janubi, in particular for manuscript illumination. Fortified with Islamic Line Design, this will showcase our gratitude for the illumination that the Quran provides. Apart from carrying aesthetic value, these motifs and themes have value as visual aids for teaching about Islam. They provide encounters that create a platform for discussion.

The motifs I am stylizing are primarily an offering towards a uniquely South African (Janubi) expression of manuscript illumination. In Quran 49:2, companions of Beloved Prophet

⁷ Nur Al-Quran. 2000. 1st ed. Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia.

⁸ Nur Al-Quran. 2000. 1st ed. Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia.p.13

Muhammed (SAW) are instructed to not raise their voices above that of Beloved Prophet Muhammed (SAW). Likewise, the illumination will be in the service of Islamic calligraphy, attempting to practise restraint, to not 'raise its voice' over that of the calligraphy.⁹ (ACSA, Arabic Calligraphers South Africa, headed by Fahiem Rhoda Jackson, is currently working towards an individual South African (Janubi) Arabic script.)

The use of the word Architecture¹⁰ to describe the structure and decorative style of the illuminated Quran pages makes one wonder about the architecture that would identify as South African. Natural stylised geographic elements like mountains, waves or clouds infused with Islamic Line Design principles, are used in Janubi patterns for this purpose (for example the view that *Tuan* Guru RA would have had from Robben Island ,viz Table mountain across the sea).

The frontispiece pages of illuminated Qurans serve to remind the reader, with the *shamsah* (sun) motif in the centre, about Nur (light), and when presented as a carpet page, about the Gardens of *Jannah* (paradise).¹¹ Palmette buds, flora and leaves could remind the reader about trees and gardens mentioned in Quran in different *ayaats*.¹² Likewise, we will *inshaAllah* stylize our South African flora and 'elevate' its status to one of servitude in Islamic Line Design. This serves only to follow the higher status of line drawings given by Beloved Prophet Muhammed (SAW), and especially be only reminders, not icons to be revered. Only geometric, geographic element and floral line drawings are utilised, no animal or human figures.

MY JOURNEY

1976 -2001

My introduction to Islamic Art in 1976 was via the drawing of a *masjid* dome by a dear friend, and this guided me to books, which had mainly a cosmological and Sufi approach. I did Arabic calligraphy classes with Dr Sulaiman Nordien in 1987 and attended a 7 session workshop in Islamic Art with Dr M Faadiel Arnold in 1995. Being the author of Muslim Views columns Art for Buds (1997-1998) for children and The Eye of the Soul (2006-2007) for adults provided an anchor for my learning. Running intermittent workshops since 2003 has increased my understanding.

⁹ Lings, Martin. n.d. Splendours Of Qur'an Calligraphy & Illumination. london: Thames and Hudson.p.26

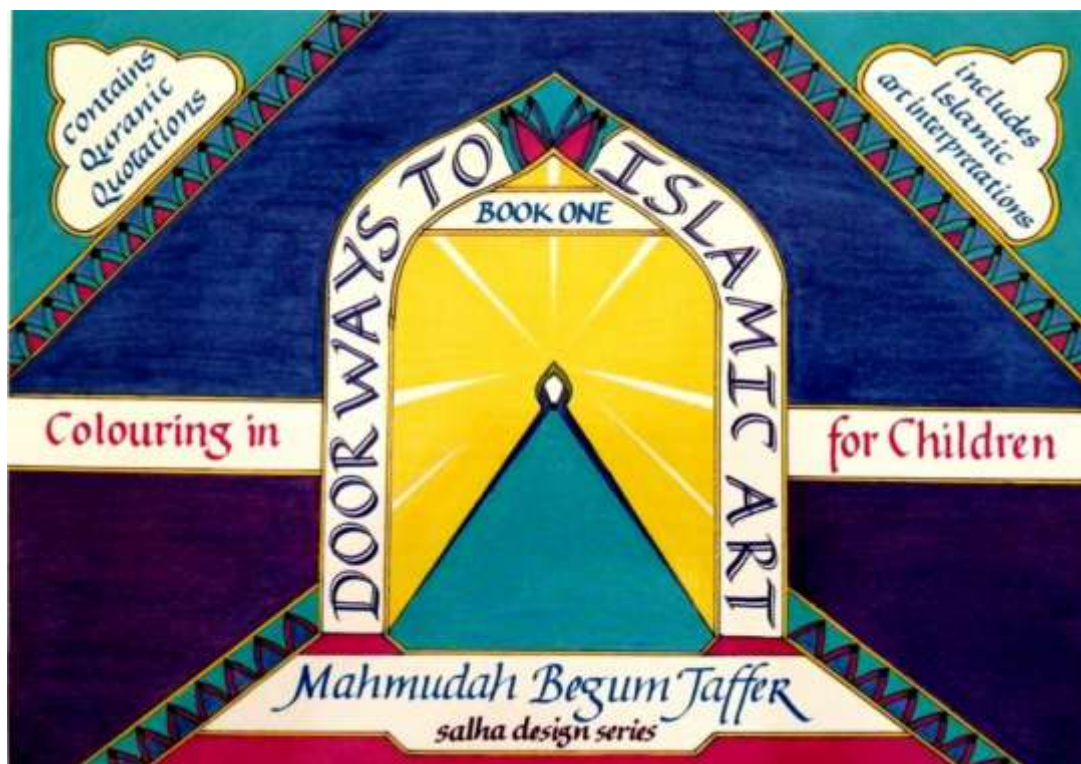
¹⁰ Al-Qur'an. 2006. 1st ed. [Kuala Lumpur]: Islamic Art Museum Malaysia.

¹¹ Nur Al-Quran. 2000. 1st ed. Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia.

¹² Lings, Martin. n.d. Splendours Of Qur'an Calligraphy & Illumination. london: Thames and Hudson.p 23-25

2002

Early in 2002, I published a children's colouring in book called *Doorways to Islamic Art* where I made connections between the drawings and Quran, and Hadith, and offered my thoughts about it.



Later, also in 2002 I had the opportunity to attend a workshop on art creating platforms for dialogue. We had to offer a group activity that would trigger thoughts around justice and reconciliation. The idea of the Straight Path and temperance in regulating attraction to pleasure and avoidance of harm seemed to make some impact.¹³ In my presentation I used up-down patterns to invite reflection on the Straight Path and star patterns to talk about sharing spaces.

¹³ Bakhtiar, Laleh. 1993. *God's Will Be Done*. 1st ed. Chicago, Ill.: Institute of Traditional Psychoethics and Guidance Distributed by KAZI Publications.

2003



South Africa had gained its freedom; we were a democracy, and I had started to taste patriotism for the first time. This started to blossom further especially in 2003 when the world was celebrating 50 years since the discovery of the double helix associated with human DNA. There was a feeling that Africa was not participating in this study. I took part in an art competition and subsequent exhibition organized by the Human Research Council, with the theme ‘What is Life’. Artists should portray via their art practice, what their understanding of life is. This was to create awareness of the human genome and its implication for Africa. I designed the border imitating DNA strands, using black outlines similar to the Ndbele patterns, with alternated ‘Islamic’ Geometric patterns, inserting Names of Allah (SWT) to indicate that we are dependent on Him (SWT) and not on DNA. My painting ‘Pages of Submission’ was exhibited as a triptych for 3 months afterwards at the Iziko Museum in Cape Town. Explanations were offered as the two side frames of the triptych.

2005

I was starting to feel strongly that I would soon need to address a gathering of people, since I believe I had something important to share. I registered to attend a one year part-time course in Didactics with Sheikh H Julies and E Khamisa, as part of the adult outreach program at the International Peace University of South Africa, Cape Town.

2006

2006 was a very busy year with exhibitions and workshops. Attending a weekend Islamic illumination painting workshop offered by the Restu Foundation Malaysia held at the Habibia Sufi Masjid in Cape Town, strengthened my resolve to develop a discipline in illumination for South Africa. Later in the year I facilitated a 5 –day Islamic Art workshop for adults at the Centre for Extra-Mural studies at the University of Cape Summer School. I was particularly encouraged that although 75% of the attendees were non-Muslim, the sessions were well received.

This was also the year I co-curated an Islamic Art Exhibition at Bo-Kaap Iziko Museum, Cape Town, and facilitated 16 x 1hour sessions of an Islamic Art workshop in conjunction with The International Peace University of South Africa. I then facilitated a weekend workshop on Islamic Art for adults at the Al Asr High School in Pretoria, South Africa.

2007



I understand a few of the seventeen wallpaper pattern notations found in the Alhambra palace in Granada, Spain, and I therefore, in 2007, approached our Kirstenbosch Botanical Gardens to create a Paradise Garden featuring a tiled fountain or pond. The tiling would be according to one of these seventeen notations and could open up some curiosity about the remaining

patterns and what they signified in the field of crystallography. It could serve as an extra-mural activity for school children and introduce them to this field of study in a relaxed way, by means of simple geometric constructions. Along with this, I made a comparison between ‘Islamic’ and African art, highlighting similarities and also potential advantages for South Africa. My initial presentation was met with much excitement but was not seen as doable when it reached the committee. After 17 years, I still feel just as strongly that this was a missed opportunity, and that it should be made available to young people. It has the potential to allay some of the fear of geometry, if it was approached differently. Dutch artist M C Escher was transported from the world of art to being highly respected in the world of science after studying the geometric patterns of the Nasrid Palaces in the Alhambra Palace in Granada, Spain. It gives an insight into tessellation and symmetry which M C Escher found fascinating and to be the biggest source of inspiration that he had ever tapped.¹⁴ My proposal for ‘The Firdaus Garden’ at Kirstenbosch Botanical Gardens, was based on the idea of an ‘Islamic Garden’ serving as an outdoor learning centre in the disciplines of Mathematics, Science, Life Orientation, Arts and Culture and Language. ‘The artist and the mathematician in Arab civilization has become one. And I mean quite literally” Jacob Bronowski.¹⁵

2011

I exhibited my 2003 piece, ‘Pages of Submission” at the 6th Science Centre world Congress, held at the Cape Town Convention Centre. This was at the invitation of Professor Mike Bruton who is instrumental in creating the travelling exhibition, “Sultans of Science”.

2016

In 2016, I completed an Oxford University 10-week intensive course on the history of Islamic art and architecture, and this has been the catalyst for me to start Islamic Line Design in 2017. The course was excellent, and it gave structure to my thoughts. I realised though, that I was limiting myself, that I needed more freedom to express my thoughts as a Muslim.

I see that Islamic Line Design is a way that ‘Islam-based art’ could be presented as it is in essence, outcomes based. My formal and practical research includes various face-to-face Arabic calligraphy classes with both South African and international teachers, and online classes in ‘Islamic’ Geometric patterns with Udemy and the Geometric Pattern school. From 2015 to 2018, travelling to Iran, Turkey, Spain and India reinforced my interest in Islamic Art.

2020

During the COVID-19 pandemic, I took online classes in tezhip (illumination patterns) and ‘Islamic’ Geometric patterns offered by various schools internationally. These assisted in

¹⁴ Fortey, S. 2003. MC Escher. 2nd ed. Cobham, Surrey: TAJ Books.

¹⁵ Abas, S. J, and Amer Shaker Salman. 2007. Symmetries Of Islamic Geometrical Patterns. 2nd ed. Hackensack, NJ: World Scientific.p.v

broadening my understanding and have provided me with the practical ability to translate my “book” knowledge to be manifested visually.

2021

I participated in the Mashurah exhibition. This exhibition aimed to create a dialogue about ‘Islamic’ and Muslim art. My submission was an illuminated page for a Surah Fatiha, called “Beauty awaiting Beauty”

I listed 14 different motifs and themes in order to share the stylization process, and the possible connection with Islam.

The page is purposefully left without the calligraphy of Surah Fatiha, to allow space and time to measure my expressions of gratitude for the illumination that the Surah brings; hence, beauty awaiting Beauty.

INTRODUCTION TO JANUBI MOTIFS AND THEMES WITHIN ISLAMIC LINE DESIGN

Islamic Line Design is an attempt to translate patterns into simple lessons on Deen with the intention of leading to reflection and further discussion. The following are some examples of how a Janubi motif is described and introduced on the image of my Mashurah piece on the next page.

1 PROTITEN

Motif inspired by the King Protea (SA flora)

Stylization: a Protea with 10 petals

Islamic Line Design: Q33.35 Ten qualities for men and women to aspire to.

2 OPEN PROTITEN

Motif inspired by the *Protiten* (Islamic Line Design)

Stylization ext: remove inner lines marking petals, into an open space, filled with 10 x water drop *trinis* ILD motif.

Islamic Line Design: inviting discussion around the ten qualities for men and women to aspire to at Q33.35 (one at a time, strive for all ten)

3 PROPIN

Motif inspired by the Pin Cushion Protea (SA flora)

Stylization: 2 thin stalks, one the ‘pin’ and one adjoining with 4 petals

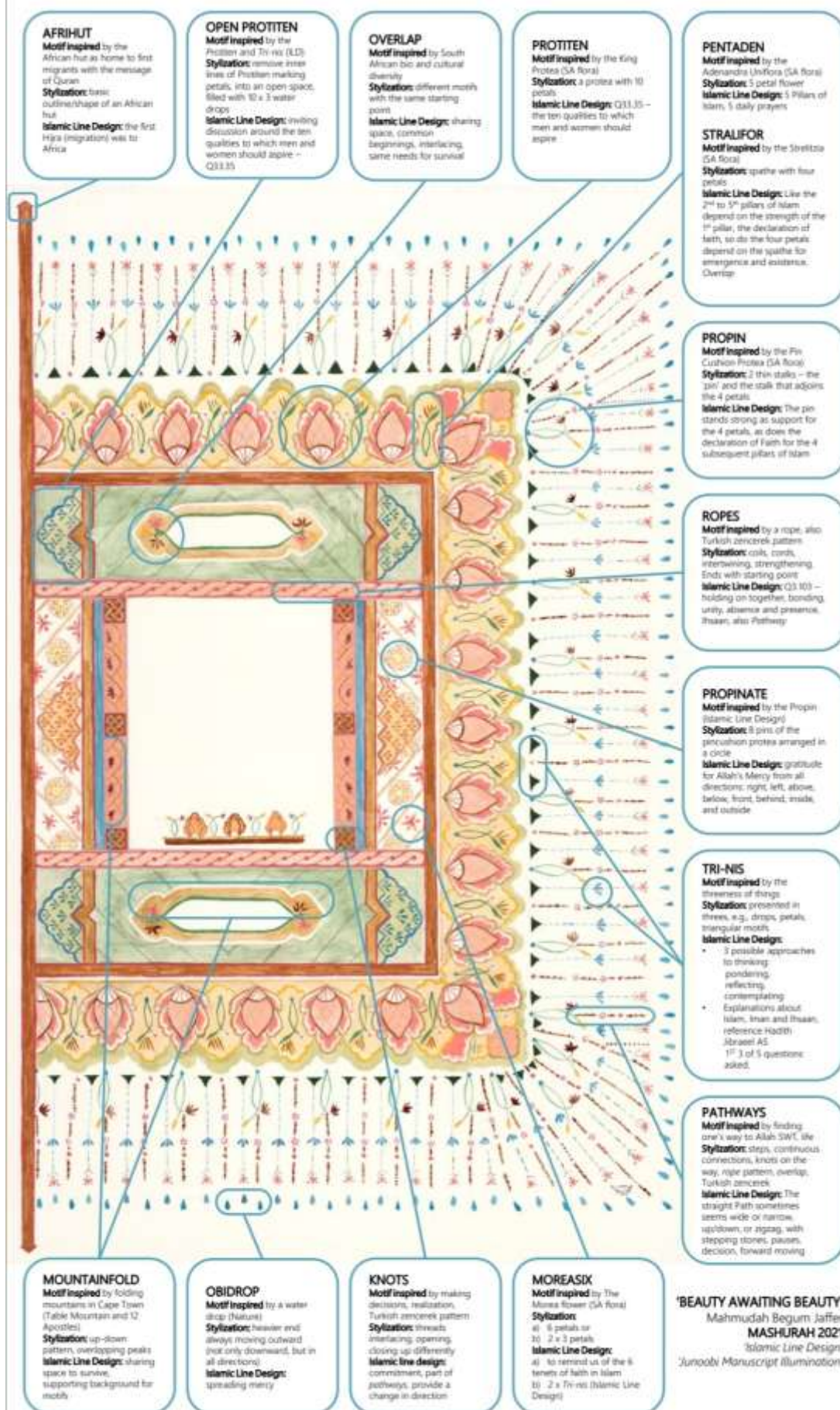
Islamic Line Design: The pin stands strong as support for the 4 petals, as does the declaration of Faith for the 4 subsequent pillars of Islam.

4 MOUNTAINFOLD

Motif inspired by folding mountains in Cape Town (Table Mountain and 12 apostles)

Stylization: up down pattern, *overlapping* peaks

Islamic Line Design: sharing space to survive, supporting background for motifs.



2024

In November 2024 I was honoured with an invitation to attend the festival of Miniatures and Decorative art in Tlemcen in Algeria. My Mashurah piece and two other art pieces were included in the exhibition, and I was allocated a 15-minute slot to do a presentation on Janubi patterns and Islamic Line Design. This proved to be yet another turning point in my life. I left there focused, inspired and enriched.

QUOTES

Special quotes that have shaped my thinking are the following:

- “Islamic sacred art is a most precious gift of God for Muslims as well as for all men and women sensitive to the revivifying power of beauty as it is wedded to truth. This art provides a shelter from the storm of the modern world...”¹⁶
- “Geometry enlightens the intellect and sets one's mind right. All its proofs are very clear and orderly. It is hardly possible for errors to enter into geometrical reasoning, because it is well arranged and orderly. Thus, the mind that constantly applies itself to geometry is not likely to fall into error.” *ibn Khaldun*, 1332-1406. North African historian.¹⁷
- “If you wish to awaken a nation, stir up and develop its sense of beauty... For if you stimulate this sense, [it] will regard virtue as beauty and not veer toward vice.” Khalil Sakakini (1878-1953), one of the pioneers of Palestinian national identity.¹⁸

These have constantly served to narrow down my thought processes and help me stay focused.

MY ARTIST STATEMENT

The generative quality of my pencil markings reminds me of simplicity, reflecting forgiveness and opportunity for realigning, improving, rethinking and changing. Adding colour reminds me that I need to make a decision and allows me to celebrate my decision. My designs start on tracing paper and this has facilitated a window into my transparency with Allah (SWT); my awareness that though I cannot see Him (SWT), I know He (SWT) sees me. So, the layers in my work express differing veils: opaque, translucent, and transparent. I become aware of my dependence on His (SWT) Mercy.

Beloved Prophet Muhammed (SAW), at times, drew lines in the sand while explaining a matter to his (SAW) honourable companions, and then made a connection between his (SAW) words and

¹⁶ Nasr, Seyyed Hossein. 1997. *Islamic Art And Spirituality*. 1st ed. Lahore, Pakistan: Suhail Academy.

¹⁷ Gutierrez, Antonio. 2022. "Ibn Khaldun: Math Quotes. Geometry Enlightens The Intellect. Word Cloud, Elearning". *Gogeometry.Com*. https://gogeometry.com/math_geometry_quotes/ibn_khaldun_math.html.

¹⁸ Abbott, Kerry. 2000. "Saudi Aramco World : Stirring Up Beauty". *Archive.Aramcoworld.Com*. <https://archive.aramcoworld.com/issue/200006/stirring.up.beauty.htm>.

drawings. My form of expression follows this information sharing process and I describe it as 'Islamic Line Design'.

South Africa has a rich biodiversity as well as cultural diversity. Through my drawings I draw in parallels between these two, highlighting common basic needs in order to survive. Folding mountains provide a supporting backdrop for motifs and also a natural architectural element to 'house' my manuscript page.

My Janubi pattern designing is very much still work in progress. 'Beauty awaiting Beauty' is a thematic offering towards a developing Janubi (South African) expression of manuscript illumination using stylised South African flora, geographic elements, some geometry and Islamic Line Design. While the work attempts to showcase beauty as balance and discipline, harmony and stability, I at times leave a blank space. This space awaits Ultimate Beauty, Islamic Calligraphy.

CONCLUSION

Each time I put pencil to tracing paper, I feel as if, though with some knowledge, I am starting anew. This is the excitement that I wish for any and everyone. I am therefore preparing to publish a book later in this year, which inshaAllah will encompass what I have learnt along my journey.

Any error in my work is entirely mine, and I seek forgiveness if I have overstepped in any way.

Mahmudah Begum Jaffer

March 2025

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