

# **Pigment to Pixel**

An Investigation into Digital Islamic Art in the UK

A Thesis Submitted to the University of Kent  
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Digital Arts

By Sarah Choudhrey

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بِسْمِ اللَّهِ  
الْكَرِيمِ  
الْكَرِيمِ

In the name of *Allah*  
The most Beneficent  
The most Merciful

## **Abstract**

This practice-based research is centred on an investigation into the use of digital technologies within the Islamic art scene in the UK. The research explores perceptions and attitudes from the public and also stakeholders (including artists, curators and scholars) closely involved in the development and dissemination of Islamic art in educational and public art spaces.

The locality of the Islamic art scene in the UK presents concerns related to not only classification and curation of Islamic art, representation, and authenticity in relation to Islamic art in the contemporary context, and the use of digital technologies for art-making. The impact of local and national media and associations with the faith of Islam were also presented as strong themes both in the literature review and the findings of this research.

Taken into consideration is my own artistic practice involving digital technologies alongside non-digital methods for developing artworks. I discuss the hybridised term 'digital Islamic art' and explore how conceptual themes are addressed through hybridised artistic practice from further artists both in the UK and abroad.

Through studies consisting of a public survey, interviews, and post-exhibition questionnaires, results showed a willingness from the public to find out more about digital Islamic art, and an interest in viewing more of this in the UK. The discussions on these topics may be of interest to artists, practitioners, academics, and also those involved in policy relating to furthering cultural engagement, as these are people in positions of influence, able to provide access and create opportunities for the public to encounter further contemporary Islamic art in the UK.

## Acknowledgements

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## Glossary

**Allah** - Arabic for God, the name by which He is referred to in the Qur'an

**Hijazi** - Relates to the Hijaz region of present-day Saudi Arabia, encompasses the cities of Makkah and Medina

**Ijaazah** – The permission granted by a master to their student upon completion of their apprenticeship

**Islam** - The last of the three main Abrahamic, monotheistic religions revealed to the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ in the year 610 CE.

**Islimi** – (Also known as Arabesque), a floral and curved style of decorative pattern

**Ka'ba** - Islam's most sacred site, a cube shaped building in the centre of the Masjid in Makkah


**Makkah** - The city in which is located the Ka'ba, birthplace of the Prophet Muhammad and direction to which all Muslims pray

**Mashrabiya** - A latticework screen or window, usually carved from wood or plaster

**Masjid** - The Muslim place of worship and congregation

**Medina** - The city to which the Prophet Muhammad and his followers migrated after being persecuted in Makkah

**Muhammad** - The last of the Prophets of Allah

 - Arabic icon of salutation for the Prophet Muhammad. The Arabic translates to: May the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him (The Prophet Muhammad)

**Nuqta** – the slanted dot produced by the calligrapher's reed pen, also used as a measuring unit in their composition

**Shirk** - To associate anything alongside God

**Tawheed** - Oneness or Unity, as relates to the oneness of God

**Ummah** – The Arabic term for community or brotherhood

**Zellij** - mosaic tilework made from individually chiselled geometric tiles usually set into a plaster base for decorating buildings or architectural features

## Chapter One: Introduction

I come to this research as an artist. I am a British born, Pakistani, Muslim. These factors may not immediately seem important, they are certainly not pre-requisites for the fulfilment of conducting this research. Nonetheless, they are influencing factors, form my identity, and provide some context to how I came to be pursuing research in what I have termed a hybridised art – digital Islamic art. The relevance of my own context has led to my approaching this research as practice-based, informed by my own artistic practice in combining traditional Islamic pattern-making with the use of digital technologies.

This research was begun due to my own placement as an artist of Islamic art situated in the UK. In trying to understand the context of my own influences, ideas and development as an artist I was seeking answers to a number of questions. Some of these questions regarded how my own work, or that of other artists like myself, would be classified, work that incorporates visual styles from various parts of the Islamic world, work that is inspired by Islamic culture, or relates to the Islamic faith, but may not necessarily be of a religious subject.

I had been following the Islamic art scene in the UK for some years, as this type of art felt familiar, something I could relate to and I was simply in awe of the skill and implementation of the many historical examples I had viewed in museums and galleries, both in the UK and abroad. Much of this art incorporated intricate patterns of both geometric and floral style, elegant calligraphy in Arabic or Persian script, and yet was always presented in a myriad of media or forms. I was inexplicably drawn to these features. Sometimes these works were on paper, others, of contemporary production, were animated projections, public murals, or

large-scale installations. I often recognised the visual and stylistic elements used in the work as Islamic art but this work was not always labelled or described as such.

I was also unable to locate documentation on the development of this artistic creativity by those artists who had come before me or concurrently, especially those situated in the UK. Many of these artists were second, third or fourth generation Muslims. However, I also witnessed work by non-Muslims exhibited within the same spaces and using the same distinctive and characteristic styles as displayed in museums under the banner of Islamic art.

Many of the artists whose work I had been following had been professionally trained, some even seeking tutelage abroad, in traditional creative skills. These skills included composing Arabic calligraphy with a reed pen and ink, constructing geometric patterns with a compass and straight edge or producing highly intricate compositions of floral patterns with miniature precision. These same artists often returned to the UK to continue and develop their practice. Like myself, they developed a practice that fused traditional methods with the use of digital technology to produce contemporary forms of Islamic art. I felt sure this could be called contemporary Islamic art, however, I soon discovered that not everyone shared this view.

Some claimed that there is no such thing as Islamic art. Others had claimed that Islamic art as it is known has died out in its traditional sense and so should instead be labelled by regional or culturally specific labels as opposed to one that is linked to the faith (Issa 1997, Shabout 2016). I personally felt these were quite controversial statements. It highlighted a possible problem for someone like myself who identifies with the element of Islamic art in their own practice, someone who feels a part of a continuing tradition linked to visual culture related to Islam.



It is not common for modern and contemporary art stemming or relating to the Islamic culture to be termed as Islamic art (Guise 2009). Instead, recent focus has been on regional categorisation as indicated by a number of successful exhibitions, said to have been popularised by interest in events that took place in the Middle East in the aftermath of the 11 September 2001 terrorist attack in New York (Blair and Bloom 2004). The attack on the World Trade Centre towers was said to be instigated by Arab militants in the name of an Islamic cause, bringing focus to the Arab region, as well as the Islamic faith. Titles of the most popular exhibitions related to this region in recent years indicate that focus has indeed been on the Middle Eastern locality and the ethnic heritage of featured artists. Exhibitions in London alone included '*Word into Art: Artists of the Modern Middle East*' at the British Museum in 2006, '*Unveiled: New art from the Middle-East*' shown at the Saatchi Gallery in 2009 and '*Light from the Middle East: New Photography*' held at the V&A in 2013.

Upon viewing the work within these exhibitions, the use of calligraphy, geometry, floral patterns and subject matter relating to Muslim culture appeared as examples of what might possibly be considered contemporary Islamic art. The historical relevance of Islamic visual culture was not lost on the scholars routing this work in the timeline of Islamic art history (Porter 2006). However, there was also a much lesser representation of artists of UK Islamic culture or Muslim diaspora in such exhibitions. This absence could be seen to imply a lack of presence of contemporary Islamic art production in the UK.

This research was therefore developed to resolve this implication, by filling the gap of knowledge on the topic of contemporary Islamic art in the UK. It was designed to find answers through primary sources, forming a stepping stone for future, comprehensive, and hopefully continued, documentation of contemporary Islamic art in the UK. This research also indicates where my own artistic practice sits as an example of continuity in contemporary Islamic art. The practice-based element of

this research was determined to demonstrate where my exploration of geometric and floral patterns were not just a reiteration and replication of what had come before, but an organic and natural development in a contemporary timeline not detached from that of the historical. By exploring history and tradition through contemporary media and techniques, with the incorporation of digital technologies within my practice, my aim has been to relate it to the present and the future – retaining the timelessness and non-regional specific aspects of Islamic culture and faith.

### **1.1 Aims**

In order to address the gap in knowledge regarding the contemporary Islamic art scene in the UK, the research would aim to:

- Clarify definitions of Islamic art and those of contemporary Islamic art as they may relate to the use of digital technologies
- Determine how digital technologies are being used by artists producing Islamic art in the UK
- Gather and understand public opinion of digital Islamic art

### **1.2 Research questions**

The structure and plan for the research was further shaped and structured by the following research questions to be explored firstly through the literature review and further addressed through individual studies designed to find answers to:

- What are the public perceptions of Islamic art in the UK?
- To what extent are artists of Islamic art in the UK using digital technologies in their artistic practice?

- What are the attitudes towards the adoption of digital technologies within contemporary Islamic art in the UK?

These research questions were designed to achieve the aims by understanding the existing knowledge amongst those in the public and those engaging with Islamic art directly (for example in the production or education of Islamic art – therefore those ‘engaging’ with Islamic art could be considered as stake-holders in the Islamic art scene).

The design of these research questions allowed for the incorporation of knowledge from a variety of perspectives and therefore provided the wider context related to the locality of focus - the UK. Also enabled through seeking answers to these questions was the ability to determine if there were influences from academic developments, such as the issues surrounding classification of Islamic art, as is demonstrated through the literature review. The answers to these questions would determine the impact of these aspects on the developments of the Islamic art scene in the UK not just in the recent past and the present but also in the near future.

UK public perspectives were gathered through an online survey open to only UK residents. Understanding the use of digital technologies by artists and practitioners was determined through one-on-one interviews with this group, and understanding attitudes towards the use of digital technologies by both stakeholders and the public was enabled through both the interviews and a public exhibition.

The combination of these studies with participants from the public as well as those more learned in the field and more informed of the arts, allowed for a range of insights, some much more personal and specific to artistic practice and others that could be influential in planning for future events.

### **Audience for research**

Each chapter of this thesis provides findings that may be of benefit to specific and to all stakeholders within the Islamic art scene in the UK and also those engaging with similar art scenes internationally.

The literature review provides a grounding in the subject of Islamic art and understanding the influence of locality and also population and social behaviours. The content of this chapter also gives further details of why a visual language was developed around non-figurative art. Although scholars of Islamic art will be aware of the general religious prohibitions on this topic, the content on this subject is explicitly presented and provides further sources for using the alternative of abstract pattern forms.

Curators and artists might be interested to learn of the perspectives of their peers, but with more insight provided into the motivations, attitudes and concerns on the part of the artist. These insights could be taken into consideration in the planning and selection for future exhibitions, and could also shape the development of the art scene by representing artists from the local, and exhibiting work that is more representative of the people of that locality. The ways in which the work is also classified could be re-considered, such as the validity in using particular terminology such as 'contemporary Islamic art' to describe artworks.

Lastly, policy-makers working closely with staff within the arts sector may find the content from the literature review and the research studies useful to build a more informed understanding of where Islamic art in the UK currently stands. The findings could, for example, be used to consider levels of cultural engagement in UK schools, and how this might be furthered for adults too through initiatives to get more people to visit art spaces by generating familiarity at an earlier age. They might also be able to encourage art spaces to show more work of a wider representation as part of an assigned proportion of their programmes with a provision to support the

organisations to do this. The overall aim through this would be to help develop levels of familiarity amongst the public. Policy makers may also be able to influence the media in its depiction of community groups where large audiences may be exposed to misleading headlines. Instead, contributions and sharing communications on hybrid artistic practice might generate interest amongst new audiences and existing art lovers.

### **1.3 Methodology and Structure**

The approach to this research included a number of methods, mixed in the overall research but not within each study. The research involved a literature review, three specifically designed studies, and documentation presenting the research in thesis form. This documentation provides an indication of the chronology of research progression and development of understanding, and is occasionally interspersed with examples of my own work, anecdotes and reflection based on my personal experience. The inclusion of self-reflection and anecdotes are not intended as stand-alone evidence of findings in the research (although can be effectively used as a more formalised means for collecting data - Enkin and Jadad 1998), rather they act as additional material to support and discuss some of the themes that arise (Patton 2014). The use of reflection and anecdotes also indicates how I relate to the findings in this research myself and through the production of my artworks, a full portfolio of which can be found in Appendix I.

My portfolio provides examples of artworks that were produced during the period of this research, therefore during the years 2014 – 2017. The selected works convey the variety in media, the exploration of themes that sometimes differ yet relate, and the significance of pattern as subject and as a visual element that relates closely to the conceptual themes. The overall appearance of each work is both abstract, yet in line with the elaborate which is often seen in Islamic artistic style. Each artwork or series is accompanied by a description.

Further details regarding the format and methodology for each study as it relates to the research questions is indicated as follows:

**Study One: Attitudes towards Islamic art, a survey of the general public**

A survey designed to understand how the general public perceived Islamic art, their previous experience in viewing this, the connections they made with locality in relation to Islamic art and also associations with material forms. The results were collected through the Qualtrics platform, an online data collection and analysis software solution, providing quantitative data alongside demographics of participants. Results were discussed in summary form with connections made to literature on museum visiting patterns and the representation of, and public exposure to, Islamic art in the UK.

**Study Two: Interviews of stakeholders of Islamic art in the UK**

A selection of stakeholders including artists (identified as producing contemporary Islamic art), curators, and academics were interviewed regarding their perspective on the Islamic art scene in the UK and the adoption - or lack thereof - of digital technologies in artistic practice. The qualitative data was coded in NVivo, an analysis software designed for this very purpose, and then analysed with a thematic analysis approach. The findings were discussed with an expansion of research into the emergent topics.

**Study Three: Group exhibition of digital Islamic art in the UK**

A selection of artists (identified as producing digital Islamic art) including those who took part in the second study interviews were invited to exhibit as part of a group show of digital Islamic art. Visitors to the exhibition were provided with exit-questionnaires which included questions that would generate both qualitative and quantitative data. The results were again coded and analysed, the qualitative data approached with thematic analysis method, and the

emergent findings discussed in relation to the two previous studies as well as further emergent topics.

The research had taken the form of an exploratory investigation of the contemporary Islamic art scene in the UK. In this thesis, I begin with a literature review laying the contextual foundation upon which further studies were designed and conducted. In conveying, what is meant by my use of the hybridised term of digital Islamic art, I provide some context to the historical and general usage of the term hybridity and its relevance in this research, particularly how hybridity in practice might indicate or allude to hybridity in culture and society and possibly even the identity of the artist producing the artwork. I also provide a historical and contemporary understanding of the two conjoined terms: Islamic art and digital art. I delve into the influence from history in the establishment of the Islamic faith, the major stylistic developments in response to this and the rise of what became known in academia as Islamic art.

The literature review informs the first study discussed in Chapter Three, a survey of the general public which shows how Islamic art is understood by those who may and may not be familiar with this art. The results show that people make connections with locality outside of the UK when thinking of Islamic art, and assume that it is closely linked to arts and crafts and traditional art forms but not all participants assumed it is restricted to this.

The results from this study were used to inform the structure and design of the second, main study, to gauge views from those who might be considered more informed on this topic through direct engagement within the Islamic art scene. This study, detailed in Chapter Four, provides the deepest insights into the workings of the Islamic art scene in the UK through a series of interviews with 27 stakeholders - artists, scholars and curators. These stakeholders are members of the art scene who are most engaged in its pedagogy, interpretation, creativity and promotion.

Interviewees included highly experienced curators from some of the most famous galleries and museums in the world including The British Museum and the V&A. Artist interviewees included award winning artists based in the UK whose work had at some point been exhibited as Islamic art, either locally or internationally. Scholars teaching within the field of Islamic art included historians and those who have published extensively on the subject. Using a thematic approach, the findings from this study, provided a picture of the attitudes and concerns stakeholders have regarding not only classification but also the use of digital technologies as part of artistic practice and also the impact of media representation of Islam and their hopes for a more peaceful future. The findings from this study again went on to inform the design and structure of the next cumulative study, which took the form of a group exhibition of digital Islamic art.

The final exhibition study, discussed in Chapter Five, was a method for addressing the attitudes, values and concerns raised by both the general public in the first survey study and also by stakeholders of the Islamic art scene in the second study. This final study involved a group exhibition of digital Islamic artworks, albeit the event did not include the mention of Islamic art. An exit-questionnaire was used to collate feedback from 127 visitors to see how they perceived this work and how they would describe it. Using thematic analysis, the results from the study showed an interesting picture of how visitors judged artworks based on their physical appearance but also seek to fulfil their curiosity with communication of the artists and their ideas or concepts. Many visitors were able to identify the work as relating to other cultures outside of the UK and overwhelmingly gave positive feedback.

The concluding chapters provide self-reflection on my own developments as an artist followed by a summary of the full thesis, limitations of the studies conducted and culminates with where this research could progress in regards to future developments in the practice of digital Islamic art.



## **Chapter Two: Literature Review**

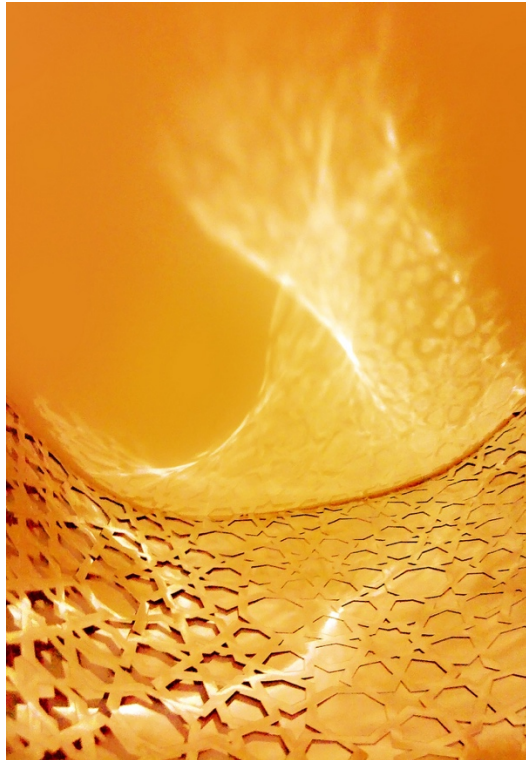
A contextual understanding of Digital Islamic art in the UK

This chapter provides an overview of the Islamic art scene in the UK, how to understand its contemporary context and where my own work as a practice-based researcher sits within this. The intention is to provide the context from which this research has arisen and why I adopt the use of the hybridised term 'digital Islamic art' to describe both my own work and the work of artists with a similar approach to their practice. As a result of exploring these topics, this chapter necessarily spans a number of related fields which, in themselves, form part of whole disciplines including Islamic art history and Islamic studies. However, due to the nature of this research, there is also a need to understand some foundational elements across the two most prominent subjects that combine to form this literature review - Islamic art and digital art.

### **2.1 Digital Islamic art as a hybridised term**

Digital Islamic art is a term I started using to describe my artistic practice in 2010 whilst completing masters research. At this time, I began exploring the context in which I was producing my artwork, reflecting on the process, and allowing this to inform the development of my practice further. In using the term digital Islamic art in conversation, I often found that it was interpreted as artworks in the form of digital prints. Digital prints of Islamic art certainly do exist, and are usually made for a larger commercial audience, and are aimed particularly at the Muslim demographic. Most often these types of prints are based on calligraphic texts quoting phrases from the Qur'an, or the names and attributes of *Allah*. In other instances of using the term it was not quite understood, and so clarification was

sought. I would rather simplistically explain that I was involved in Islamic art made with the use of digital technologies or computers.



*Figure 1 - Wave, 2010, Sara Choudhrey.*

Digital print of photograph documenting prototyping – light projection off hand-cut mirror card.

I have occasionally produced prints of photographs I have taken whilst documenting the developmental stages in my work, such as when prototyping with textures or lights and understanding behaviours or responses in the physical aspects of the work. The digital prints would capture unusual effects, that would be difficult to replicate again. Although they were in essence a form of documentation, they became off-shoot artworks in themselves as soon as they were printed for the purpose of display, an aspect of my practice which I rarely intend from an initial stage and allow to emerge through an open and experimental approach.

I found that Digital Islamic art is a term little used in academia, and I have yet to come across a scholarly use of this term in a similar context as I am proposing – one with a much broader consideration of art forms than the assumed digital prints. The only exception is the near use of this term by Hussein Keshani (2012) who refers to a ‘digital Islamic art history’ in the context of digital humanities, referring to the impact of technology in the development of virtual archives and online databases for use by historians of Islamic art. Another exception is the use of these individual terms to describe a project of digitising Islamic art by a team at The Metropolitan Museum in New York using algorithms in programming (2014).

Perhaps the closest scholarly discussion of Islamic art of a digital nature is presented by Laura Marks in her unique publication *‘Enfoldment and Infinity: An Islamic Genealogy of New Media Art’* (2010). Marks provides compelling material to support her view that new media has been greatly influenced by and is very similar in aesthetic and philosophical concepts to Islamic art, both historically and in present-day developments. My own proposal is that digital Islamic art is a naturally evolving genre and involves artistic practice which makes use of digital technologies, including examples where traditional practice or methods are combined with that of the digital, presenting this as a hybridised approach.

A hybrid is a combination of two distinct types of things, systems or forms. When combined they form a third distinctly identifiable type. In the design of a tool which is both digital and manual, or an instrument which uses a combination of wood and metal, the resultant forms are considered hybrid. Hybridity, although a term originating in biology (Ginty 2014), can also be evident in processes, for example where an object is partly hand-made and partly machine-made. Hybridisation can also be seen in systems where an eco-friendly vehicle can work with both electric and fuel power.

However, hybridity is most often discussed in the context of postcolonial and cultural studies, with a focus on race, identity and movement of peoples. These subjects were brought to the fore by theorists Homi Bhabha, who is considered to have coined the term in this context, and also Stuart Hall who spoke of this concept in the more recent context of British diaspora groups. Due to prevailing relevance, and perhaps the continued effects of many Western nation's colonial past, the subject continues to be discussed by present day scholars. This topic is further expanded later in this chapter.

## **2.2 Islamic art – Historical and Religious Context**

In order to better understand the scope of the term digital Islamic art, it becomes necessary to understand the wider context from which the hybridised term arises, the Islamic and the digital, and therefore what might constitute the third new type. To achieve this the origins and developments within Islamic art and also that of digital art are further discussed.

### **Islam**

The origin and development of Islamic art is inexplicably related to the establishment of the faith of Islam and its flourishing through the course of over 1400 years, now one of the major faiths of the world.

Islam as a religion was established in the year 610 CE (Al-Mubarakpuri 2014), in Makkah (present day Saudi Arabia) when the Prophecy was declared to a well-liked and trusted local man, Muhammad Ibn Abdullah, more commonly known simply as Muhammad ﷺ. The revelations were sent to the Prophet via the archangel Gabriel as instructed by *Allah* (God). These revelations were collated and form the words of the Qur'an in the Arabic language. The key message and foundation of Islam through these revelations, was of *Tawheed*. *Tawheed* is an Arabic term, which, in

the context of the Islamic faith, calls to the belief of One God, the Only One worthy of worship (Al-Uthaymeen 1997).

*Say (O Muhammad (SAW)):*

*"He is Allah, (the) One.*

*Allah the Self-Sufficient Master, Whom all creatures need,*

*(He neither eats nor drinks).*

*He begets not, nor was He begotten;*

*And there is none co-equal or comparable unto Him."*

*Qur'an: Surah Al-Ikhlāas (The Sincerity) Chapter 112 (Translation: Khan 1996)*

In order to adhere to this fundamental monotheistic principle of the religion, a follower of the Islamic faith, a Muslim, must be sure to avoid polytheism (Al-Qaradawi 2013). The act of polytheism in Arabic is termed '*shirk*' and is understood as the setting up of anything or anyone alongside God for worship. To fall into this is considered the worst of all sins (Qur'an: Chapter 4, verse 48). One of the major forms of *shirk* that was strongly advised against by *Allah* in the Qur'an and by the Prophet ﷺ was idolatry, which had become the dominant form of worship amongst the locals of Makkah at the time.

The aim of the follower of the Islamic faith, a Muslim, is to grow closer to God in order to attain His pleasure, His blessings and His rewards, the greatest of which is being granted a place in paradise (Qur'an chapter 15, verses 45-47). As Muslims consider the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ to be the last Messenger and Prophet of God, he is also considered the best example to follow to ensure finding favour with God. Therefore, actions, sayings and prohibitions of the Prophet ﷺ during his lifetime became, and still remain, highly important, alongside the revelations in the Qur'an.

The examples of the Prophet ﷺ were narrated and later collated into many volumes. This collection became known as the Hadith. Therefore, the Qur'an and Hadith, are the two main sources for Islamic guidance on many matter of jurisprudence.

### **What Islam says about art and the use of figurative imagery**

There are neither prohibitions nor encouragements to pursue artistic expression in an explicit sense of the term 'Islamic art' within Islamic sources (Ali 2007). There are also no specific or literal references to the word 'art' as understood in the West. However, further considerations for what could be produced by an artist may be seen from a wider perspective of adherence to principles of the religion.

When considering what type of art, or subject-matter to portray in one's artwork, a Muslim artist might consider references within the *Hadith* regarding the act of image-making. The production of figurative imagery was strongly discouraged by the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, leading to it being classified as a major sin by a number of scholars (Amjad 2012). Prophetic admonishments on this topic included:

*"Those who make images will be punished on the Day of Resurrection, and it will be said to them: 'Bring to life that which you have created'"*  
(Muslim 2007, Vol5. 479)

*"The people who will be most severely punished on the Day of Resurrection will be Al-Musawwirun (the image-makers)"*  
(Muslim 2007, Vol5. 480)

*"Every image maker will be in Hell"*  
(Muslim 2007, Vol5. 481)

It has been reported that the above statements were made by the Prophet ﷺ when he found that the angels would not enter his home due to the presence of figurative images. Upon finding images in his wider family or companions' homes too, he advised they be removed or recycled. Imagery of animals were found upon textiles including a curtain with images of birds. These curtains were subsequently cut and turned into a cushion cover by his wife A'isha (Muslim 2007).

The pre-dominant concern in the action of image-making has been interpreted as competing with the creation of *Allah* (Canby 2005, Al-Munajjid 2012). However, there were also suggestions by the Prophet ﷺ of alternative forms of imagery which included the use of pattern:

*'Did you not hear him when he said: "Except patterns on cloth?"*

(Muslim 2007, 472 -473)

The Prophet was also said to be fond of wearing patterned garments (Muslim 2007). And so, his adorning of this style of imagery would have been understood as a form of approval or permissibility of using patterns as a surface design.

Finally, there is also a narration within the Hadith of a man who came to a companion of the Prophet ﷺ, 'Ibn Abbas, seeking advice regarding his vocation of image-making. He was advised *"If you must do that, then make (images of) trees and inanimate things."* (Muslim 2007, 481). This provides us with a further understanding of why the use of natural floral and plant-based imagery may have become more dominant within Islamic visual culture.

The early avoidance of figurative representation through drawings or sculpting will, therefore, have influenced the early development and stylistic choices made by those involved in creative output within Islamic faith and its consequent visual culture (Brend 2007). For the most part, by abiding to the most orthodox

interpretations for imagery in religious context and environment, the result has been a largely agreed view that Islamic art lacks figurative representation (Canby 2005).

It must, however, be acknowledged that there are also many examples in Islamic art history where patrons in particular eras regions did use figurative representation, some even going as far as to portray the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ himself and members of his household (Gruber 2014). Examples include the Persian and Mughal dynasties in which miniature painting was renowned and continues to flourish in present day Iran (Ekhtiar and Sardar 2004) and Pakistan (Dadi 2006). However, historical miniature paintings, especially those depicting religious subjects were restricted to the libraries of the few wealthy elite. In the present-day context, depictions of Prophets, the earliest Muslim companions of Prophet Muhammad, The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ himself, and images of his family is still considered disrespectful to Muslims (Khan 2014).

### **The concept of Beauty in Islam**

A famous phrase used by the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ which is oft quoted in relation to the arts is:

*“Allah is Beautiful and He likes beauty”*

(Muslim 2007, 178)

There are also many references within the Qur’an conveying that beauty can be manifest in varying material and non-material forms. Examples include descriptions of beautiful carpets, the gardens of paradise, beauty in the appearance of people, the beauty of the natural world, and what it brings fourth in growth and expansion (such as vegetation and natural stones), and also the beauty of good character (Gonzalez 2016). Beauty is even something that can be evoked through action (Saeed 2011). Beauty is, therefore, conveyed in both literal and conceptual terms in



Islamic scripture, something to be sensed, acquired and embodied, whether interpreted with a rational or philosophical approach (Bolkhari 2017). Coupling these references with further advice regarding how a Muslim should perfect their actions, lends itself to a more philosophical approach to pursuing artistic endeavours, even as a possible form of worship (Ali 2007). In other words, a Muslim's actions should be conducted to the best of their ability with the intention to make their work of the highest standard. Therefore, with an appreciation for beauty and workmanship, any pursuit is justified to be fulfilled as artistically beautiful as possible.

### **2.3 The development of an Islamic art**

#### **Calligraphy**

Following the death of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, preservation of the Qur'an became of utmost importance. Up until this point, the revealed verses had been largely memorised and written as they came. Those who had memorised the verse of the Qur'an included elder members of the community and those who had died in battle (Haleem 2008). As a result, it was proposed that the Qur'an be compiled as one single volume in order to keep it from being lost to future generations and also to ease its transmission to others. In the following years the Qur'anic script was standardized, further developed to include diacritical markings aiding correct recitation, and consequently preserving its accuracy (Mansour 2013).



Figure 2 - Fragments from one of the world's oldest Qur'ans, part of the Mingana collection at the Cadbury Research Centre, University of Birmingham

In light of the precedence placed on preservation and authenticity of the holy Qur'an, there was a natural inclination to perfect the presentation of the written words within - preserving the words of *Allah* with integrity. Traditionally, a calligrapher would spend many years, possibly decades, honing their skills under the tutelage of a master calligrapher – leading to a chain of knowledge and practice that could be traced from student to master through generations (Mansour 2013). This practice continues today, most notably in Muslim countries where there is a strong tradition for appreciation of Islamic art, including Turkey, Egypt and Iran. The end of a calligrapher's internship under a master requires an '*Ijaazah*' (permission) before they can venture to produce any work on their own, no longer relying on their master's guidance. This milestone serves as confirmation that their level of skill enables them to continue the tradition by transferring their knowledge to others.

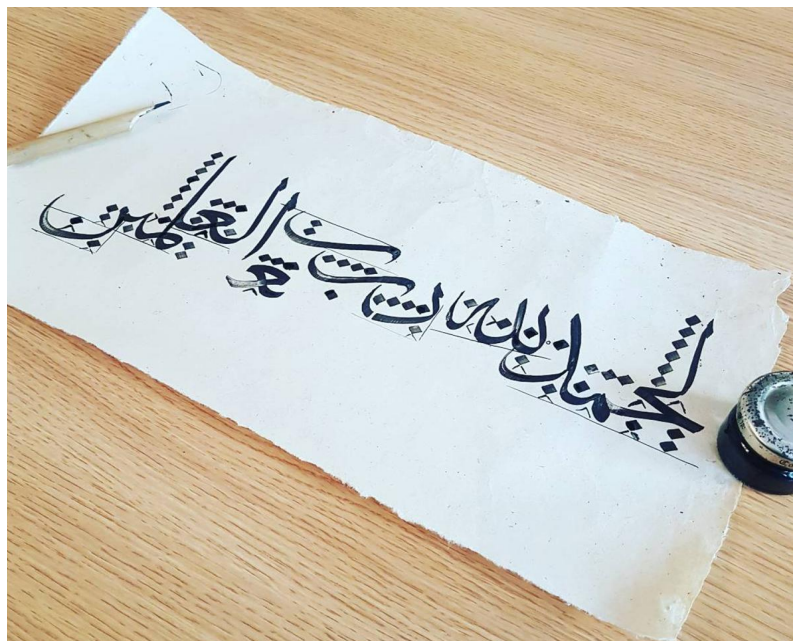


Figure 3 - Calligraphy composition development – the short stroke dot produced by the reed pen is called the *nuqta* and is used to measure the proportions for the size and spacing of each letter. Photo: Samiur Rahman, 2017

Arabic calligraphy contains a somewhat hidden aspect which contributes to its visual appeal and sense of proportion. The calligrapher is taught to ensure all letters in their composition are proportional in order to create visual consistency across the whole work. As demonstrated in Figure 2, the dot formed by the specially cut reed pen used by the calligrapher is also used to determine the size of each letter. By keeping a consistent and proportionate measure of dots, the scribe can work towards a highly accurate piece of calligraphy, therefore contributing to the overall beauty of the composition.

### **The development of Illumination**

Alongside Qur'anic calligraphy came the development of Qur'anic illumination, the art of decorating the borders and sectional divisions within the Qur'an. Although this art pre-dates the Islamic era, it was not immediately applied to the Qur'an as can be seen in the earliest examples (Guise 2006). Over time, with the necessity to make the reading of the Qur'an easier, the script became more standardised (with

the introduction of a number of styles), and markings and decorative borders were added to indicate chapter and verse beginnings.

As the design of the Qur'an developed to accommodate its functional purpose, the markings and marginal indicators became a means to add visual embellishments with painted rosettes, medallions and arabesque/floral patterns. In later years, to enhance the designs further and to especially signify the wealth of the patron commissioning the calligrapher, vibrant colours were added with highlights in extremely valuable, shell gold. In keeping with the resonance of the Qur'an and its status, the design of decorative elements also adapted to complement the increasingly rich style of the calligraphy alongside it.

Unlike divine scripture from other religions at the time, iconography was not to be incorporated in the illumination of the Qur'an in accordance with the rulings regarding image-making, as discussed above. Therefore, the use of abstracted forms and patterns depicting natural forms were most suitable.



Figure 4 - Detail of Qur'an from the Mingana Collection, Cadbury Research Centre, University of Birmingham



### **Geometric and Arabesque pattern-making**

To compliment the stylistic and proportional nature of the Arabic script in calligraphic form, illumination using geometric and arabesque (floral) patterns became the most prominent method for applying visuals to religious material and settings. This type of visual style would have been further encouraged due to the examples discussed above from the Hadith which showed a preference for patterns and inanimate forms. Existing styles of geometric patterns from the local regions were adopted and further developed into a highly honed skill. Over time, the pattern-makers in Islamic lands became the masters of such methods, forming a distinctive style which became synonymous with Islamic visual culture (Canby 2005).

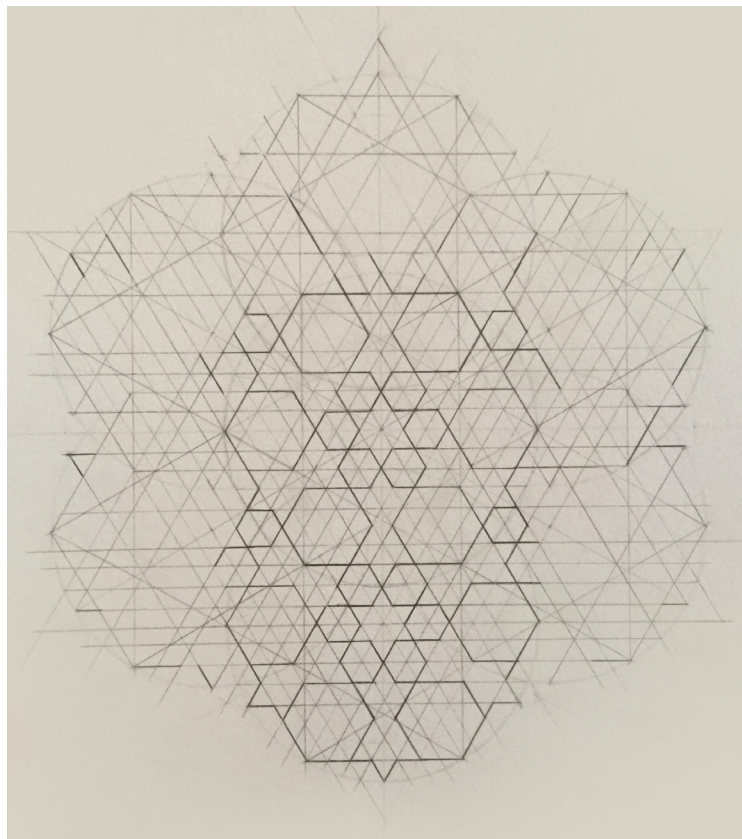


Figure 5 - Construction of a geometric pattern using compass and straight edge.  
Pencil on paper. *Untitled*, Sara Choudhrey, 2017

Geometric patterns are traditionally constructed using a compass and straight edge (ruler), whereby a series of circles drawn from a central point and continued on the compass junctures can form a grid. This grid can then be divided to produce proportional shapes that fit within and around the circles to create patterned compositions. These patterns are used for both macro and micro level detail and can be sectioned, tiled and combined with rotation and tessellation to produce further compositions. These patterns can further be overlaid for multi-level complexity, yet, they retain a sense of harmony due to adherence to the underlying proportional structure. Such patterns also lend themselves to conceptual representation of themes relevant to the Islamic faith. For example, 'The Breath of the Compassionate', the name given to the pattern illustrated in Figure 5 overleaf, is named thus as it provides a symbolic representation of God's mercy. The use of flat and diagonal squares, also indicates a dynamic motion of expansion and contraction (Sutton 2007).

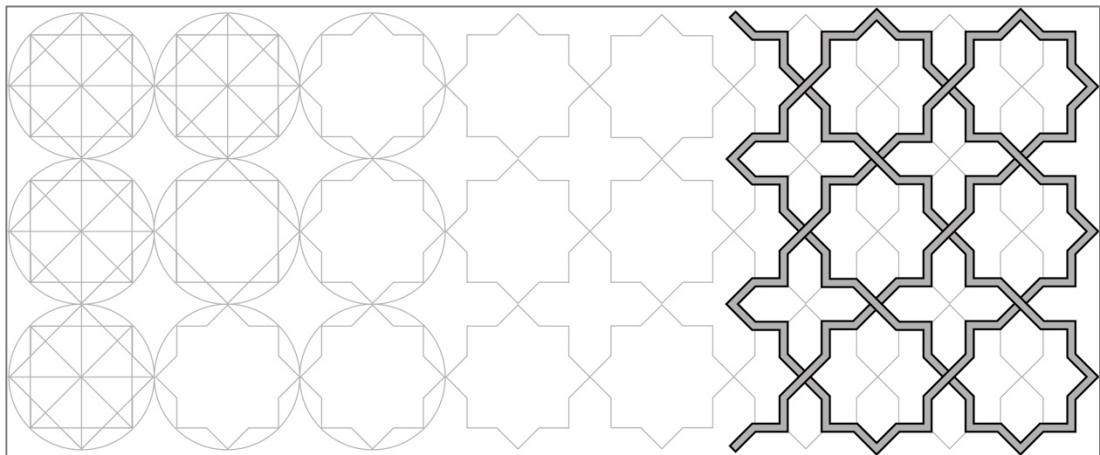


Figure 6 - A digital construction of a geometric pattern (commonly referred to as 'Breath of the Compassionate') based on a grid of circles and squares using interconnected lines to form an 8-pointed star and cross formation that can be infinitely repeated. *Untitled*, Sara Choudhrey, 2017.

The method of underlying structures also accommodates the design of floral and vegetal motif based patterns, known as arabesque or Islimi (Williamson 2013). These types of patterns are generally formed upon a spiral base with notable characteristics including stylised scrolling vines, leaves, rosettes and palmettes.

However, the contrast of smoother and curved shapes against the straight lines of geometry provides a balance in decorative application. Again, theological concepts of the Islamic faith can also be found through symbolism in floral forms, which are said to evoke remembrance of paradise. Paradise is the ultimate goal for all Muslims, often described in the Qur'an as inhabiting flowing rivers, fountains, abundant fruit, shaded trees and profuse beauty in all that it contains - almost beyond human imagining (Wescoat 1995).

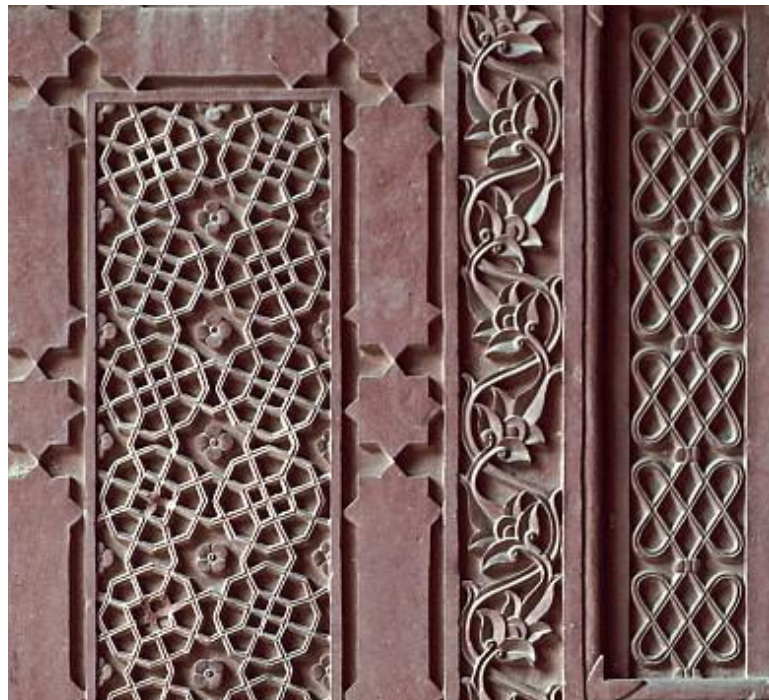


Figure 7 - Detail from Agra Fort showing a combination of geometric and arabesque patterns. India, circa 1520.  
(Photo: David Wade)

The ability to tessellate and tile geometric and arabesque patterns allows for a continuous and scalable composition. The continuity demonstrated through pattern application is said to provide a further analogy for the infinite nature of God and His eternal presence (Sutton 2007). Geometric patterns particularly allow for this representation of the concept of infinity without making any visual indication of Divine appearance. The knowledge of God's appearance was not shared by Himself in the Qur'an or by the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ except by mention of His attributes

and names. The names and attributes of *Allah* are descriptive and provide a means through which He can be known (Morrow 2013). It is also important to note that Muslims believe it is not only a form of great sin, but also simply impossible to convey the true essence and beauty of the Divine, as it is considered beyond our temporal capabilities (El-Bassiouny 2014).

However, not all would agree that symbolism was inherently incorporated into the development of early Islamic art (Chorbachi 1989). David Wade (2014), in his reflections on the topic, has found little evidence of its mention in the few earliest documents used by artisans of Islamic decorative style. He has highlighted an evasion of such an approach by artisans, perhaps in desire of avoiding any form of representation of the Divine (even symbolically) as a means to prevent themselves committing *shirk*.

### **Islamic Architecture**

The use of calligraphy, geometry and arabesque became the most prominent elements used across all manner of materials in Islamic culture. Islamic art could be found across many forms including within codices, upon facades of buildings and also on everyday objects such as ceramics, furniture, lighting and textiles (Canby 2005). The same pattern used in a manuscript could be carved into stone, wood and metal, cut from glass and painted onto ceramics and tiles. These materials and methods were very ideal for both interior and exterior building design.

Islamic architecture is often associated with the Mosque, perhaps the most relevant Islamic building, the Muslim place of worship and congregation. The earliest mosques served the very practical needs of the local community. There were no designs or layout decreed in the Qur'an or *Hadith* for Islamic architecture other than to facilitate the congregation and to accommodate the functional needs related to the purpose of the mosque. One such need included a high vantage point from which the call to prayer could be announced, a series of steps from where the



weekly Friday sermon could be delivered, and also some indication for the direction of prayer (towards the *Ka'ba* in the city of Makkah – the holiest of Islamic sites, place for Muslim pilgrimage, and birthplace of the Prophet ﷺ).

It is also within the mosque where worshippers tend to most strictly adhere to tenets of the Islamic faith, be it in their behaviour (in their respect for the environment, servitude to God, and respect for other worshipers), the ritual actions of the worshipper (as it is a focal place of prayer), and also the appearance of the Muslim (for example there is an adherence to modest apparel by both men and women). It might therefore be appropriate to also consider the aesthetic applied within the mosque as being that which would constitute the most Islamically acceptable.

As with the stylistic developments in pattern-making, mosques too came to incorporate the non-figurative style of décor favoured in Islam. In some cases, material from local disused buildings would be recycled for the construction of new mosques and would therefore adopt a hybrid style of architecture. The skills of craftsmen able to carve fine and intricate detail into walls and cornices were combined with designs developed in calligraphy and illumination which would then be applied as surface design. Therefore, the design of the mosque serves as a strong example of Islamic visual culture as it combines both religious purpose and religious adherence through material form.

### **Continuity in Islamic Art**

Islamic art in the historical context was very much about decorative elements being applied to functional objects. However, it was never discussed in such terms, or suggested as anything but an honourable skill. There was no concept of 'fine art' let alone a differentiation between 'fine art' and 'decorative arts' as was the case in the West (Michon 2008). The skills of the artisans were much revered and promoted, and commissioning of competitive creative output led to rapid

development in craftsmanship. The more elaborate, expensive and ambitious items would have been commissioned by those of higher ranking in the community, the patrons usually being those with power and wealth.

The vast regional expansion of the Islamic empire and Muslim population facilitated the development and spread of an Islamic artistic style across parts of Eastern Europe, the Middle East, North-Africa, and South Asia. Where Islamic art met with new or differing cultural styles, these were incorporated to create regional off-shoots, a form of hybrid Islamic style combining elements, fusing colours or forms from local cultures and certainly utilising local resources. Examples include the distinctive cloud motifs from China and the use of the vibrant shade of blue which were popularised in Ottoman ceramics. The Indian Mughal style domes and arches were also influenced by pre-existing Hindu temple architecture. Buildings such as the wondrous Alhambra complex in Spain also brought focus to the use of geometry and arabesque in mainland Europe, greatly influencing its later application in non-Islamic contexts including synagogues and churches (Barrucand 2007). However, a general consistency in decorative elements prevailed across region and time retaining an intrinsic link to the Islamic visual culture on a global scale.

What became the characteristic styles of Islamic art using decorative elements of calligraphy, geometry and floral patterns, formed a tradition which continues to be practised today, most notably in the many mosques that have been built across the globe to accommodate the increasing population of Muslims both within and without Islamic nations. However, this art was not restricted to Islamic religious context and made its way into lands which have changed hands, changed rule and changed patron from Muslim to non-Muslim. An example of this would be present-day Spain and parts of Portugal, no longer Muslim nations but full of rich visual heritage from the time of Islamic rule to the Christian Reconquista which continued to utilise local Muslim craftsmanship (Robinson 2003). Many items were also exchanged with the increase in travel between Muslim and non-Muslim lands, and

so even those items produced with clear religious context have made their way into public museums and private collections outside of Muslim hands.

The audience for such work has also changed due to the formation of diaspora communities outside of Muslim lands. There are now larger populations of Muslims in the West who have been settled in these regions for some generations; the UK being one such example. Islamic art, as continued in production by diaspora artists, is therefore also being produced in non-Muslim lands and is seen by audiences who may not have previously been familiar with it. Islamic art is also produced by non-Muslims and those who may not profess a religious relation to the practice of making Islamic art (Choudhrey and Bobrowicz 2016).

Despite the changes and developments in the context of Islamic art production, the altering heritage of the artist and the expanding audience for this art has still retained a sense of continuity in the visual style. Yet, these changes have resulted in scholarly debates regarding how best to classify such art in the contemporary context, where subject matter, form and media have expanded to incorporate a wider array of conceptual themes and ever-hybridising identities outside of distinguishable Islamic lands.

#### **2.4 Classification of Islamic Art**

From an academic perspective, and rather surprisingly, there is no singular or absolute definition that applies to all examples of Islamic art, past and present. It might be asked how the effectiveness of a definition is determined. A definition should allow one to be able to identify an example to which it applies. However, some scholars have suggested that the use of terminology such as 'Islamic art' and more specifically 'contemporary Islamic art' presents confusion rather than solutions. In seeking clarification on the subject, there appear to be further hurdles.

In my personal search for clarity and understanding, it soon became apparent that many consider the term 'Islamic art' to require a disclaimer when explaining its meaning. Unlike its religious counterparts, and as has been explored through the historical context, Islamic art is not necessarily a religious art, as it does not directly represent the religion through iconic forms, the only exception being the use of calligraphy for Qur'anic scripture.

As with any field of study, in looking for an answer to this question, we rely on those who have paved the way in the study of the subject previously. In 1973, prolific Islamic art historian Oleg Grabar, in his very popular title 'The Formation of Islamic Art' provided the following definition for Islamic art:

*"A culture or civilisation in which the majority of the population or at least the ruling element profess the faith of Islam. In this fashion, Islamic art is different in kind from Chinese art, Spanish art, or the art of the Steppes, for there is no Islamic land or Islamic people."*  
(Grabar 1973)

Although first published over forty years ago, it could be assumed that this definition would be out-dated. However, Grabar's scholarly legacy was such that this work remains an important contribution to historians of Islamic art today (Hillenbrand 2012). A quick study of the subject indicates that even recent definitions of Islamic art do not significantly differ from Grabar's.

Art Historians Sheila Blair and Jonathan Bloom, have discussed the study of Islamic art to some length in their paper *The Mirage of Islamic Art: Reflections on the study of an Unwieldy Field* (2004). The title is suggestive of the presence of complications, and the inclusion of the phrase "Islamic art – what it may or may not be" on three occasions within the paper does not provide the reader with confidence in finding a solution. Blair and Bloom have also noted the continuous discussions on the subject

of classifying Islamic art by their peers, surveying all the peculiarities of what may or may not be considered Islamic art and how this has been influenced by a Western pedagogy and developments over recent years. Regardless of these sentiments, Blair and Bloom do provide a definition which they produced for the Dictionary of Art, subsequently used for the Grove Encyclopaedia of Islamic Art and Architecture (2009):

*“Islamic art is generally held to be “the art made by artists or artisans whose religion was Islam, for patrons who lived in predominantly Muslim lands, or for purposes that are restricted or peculiar to a Muslim population or a Muslim setting.” It therefore encompasses much, if not most, of the art produced over fourteen centuries in the “Islamic lands”... “*

The phrase ‘generally held to be...’ provides a window of inclusiveness, leaving the definition open to exceptions. However, I find the overall definition implies that Islamic artistic production is related to the past with references such as ‘whose religion *was* Islam’ and ‘patrons who *lived*’ using very clear past tense. This definition implies either an Islamic art being of historical relevance only, or that the understanding of the term is trapped in a historical context with little indication of continuity of Islamic art in contemporary production.

Surveying further academic definitions of Islamic art, few focus on the common visual characteristics and media (Petrovsky 2001, Canby 2005, Sutton 2007, The David Collection 2013). While fewer still, speak of Islamic art as a spiritual, sacred and cosmological art (Critchlow 1983, Nasr 1987). The majority of definitions, as with the previously quoted examples, emphasise a historic timeline and the locality of Islamic artistic production in the context of a Muslim patron and/or population (Grube 1966, Blair and Bloom 1997, Grabar 2001, Musee De Louvre 2017). The

prevalence of these factors appears almost to form a set of criteria in which the production of Islamic art would usually fit (Choudhrey and Bobrowicz 2016).

The time period in which Islamic art is usually discussed might be considered as a first criterion, and is often specific to the historical timeline (beginning with the formation of the Islamic faith in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, and at the very latest ending with the demise of the last of the Islamic dynasties around 1800, despite the Ottoman Empire enduring until 1922) (Flood 2007). Oleg Grabar highlighted a concern for this expulsion of the latter periods of Islamic art production in a later publication *Reflections on the Study of Islamic Art*, (1983) in which he also expressed a need to consider an expanding geography in the ever-widening field of Islamic art.

Localities usually associated with Islamic art are those where Islam is or has been the dominant religion, where the faith is followed by the majority of the local population. These localities are usually constrained to those regions of the world that became Islamic lands during the above timeline and continue to be known as such in present day. The significance of locality is closely related to the third criterion, of there being a presence of a Muslim patron or population. A patron in the historical sense would have been the person commissioning or requesting the production of art and architecture. These would have been the rulers, be they an Imam (religious leader), a King, a Prince or even those in high military rank. These leaders of the local population would wield much power and certainly enough wealth to be able to commission much of the Islamic arts. Thus, an artwork produced within the timeline, region and context of these three aspects would most likely have been classified as Islamic art. However, as will be discussed further, these criterion of land, locality and population may no longer be suitable for classifying contemporary forms of Islamic art, which is now produced around the world, by artists of a wide range of ethnicities and religious inclinations. For example, there are many non-Muslim artists who produce work that they

themselves identify as relating to Islamic art and is curated as such by others (Choudhrey 2016).

A final consideration which expands on the spiritual and cosmological definitions of Islamic art, is the idea of Universality, said to be the common element in Islamic art which binds the work of artists from across the world, transcending time and place (Ali 1998). This aspect therefore falls outside of the majority of definitions for Islamic art and is not restricted to any of the three mentioned criteria of time, place or population, unless the latter can be considered, instead, as a Muslim audience. Universality is certainly a more inclusive criterion, which cannot be measured in a tangible manner but accommodates a spiritual role in the production of Islamic art. Universality or Universalism is said to also accommodate the concept of Tawheed, Unity of God, by way of tying all the acts of Islamic artistic expression together as one, a representation of a oneness in culture (regardless of locality and dispersion) which compliments the notion of a global Muslim '*ummah*', or community (Ali 1987). Unlike those mentioned in traditional academic definitions, this criterion retains its link between the Islamic faith and the act of production instead of depending on its environmental context for classification. It also supports a mystical approach to Islamic spirituality which can manifest through the act of intentional creativity on the part of the artist (Nasr 1987).

As this is more of a theoretical and abstract concept it would be difficult to assign works into this category and is why some scholars appear sceptical of adopting this all-embracing approach (Blair and Bloom 2004). Art historian Avinoam Shalem, too, is openly critical of this type of grouping, hailing the concept a 'myth'. Instead, Shalem provides examples of where the term 'unity' was first introduced within the context of Islamic studies by G.E von Grunebaum in 1955, and also used as a title, '*Unity in Diversity*', for an international congress on History of Art in 1986 (Shalem 2012). The suggestion by Shalem (2012) is that the concept of 'Unity' in Islamic art is not timeless but is rather an invention of the West in-line with its art historical

approach of analysing non-Western culture from an orientalist perspective. Although Shalem is not in favour of explaining similarities in styles and aesthetics of Islamic art across time and region he does inadvertently highlight the lack of stylistic criteria within any of the definitions in the field.

### **Artists of Islamic art**

I had often in the past used the term 'Islamic artist' to describe myself and those artists who produce Islamic art. I had not previously pondered upon the implications of its usage beyond indicating the type of art one might expect to view by that artist. I found that the term, although used in conversation, did not often appear in literature except in isolated cases, and rarely expanded upon to provide explanations of its meaning. In the cases where it was explained, the details were very specific and linked entirely to a spiritual essence related to Islamic character. It may seem a little restrictive to discuss what type of character an 'Islamic artist' might embody, however, Wijdan Ali, describes the traditional Islamic artist as one who is "*humble, honest and pious, conscious of the values entrusted to him which he strives to keep alive, often regardless of his unfavourable circumstances*" (Ali 1998). This character specification implies that art-making for an Islamic artist may be a form of worship. In this case, the Islamic artist's work should be a manifestation of faith, an expression of the beauty that comes through engagement with the source, the Divine. They would be working with the intention to perfect their work as an extension of their belief that every job should be a job well done. There certainly would be no room for ego (Ali 1998).

With this outlook, the hope would be that if God loves that which is produced, then this is in itself a reward for the artist. As for the skill, this should be considered a blessing that God has bestowed upon the artist, therefore the artist has no claim to glory and should not seek it but remain humble (Michon 2008). The favour of God is more rewarding to the Muslim artist than the pleasure and recognition that could be achieved amongst his peers and masters in the real world. It is due to this



supposed approach that anonymity of artisans and craftsmen of historical Islamic artefacts is attributed.

In recent publications, religiousness and spirituality of the artist is discussed with less fervour, or not at all. In the few cases where the term 'Islamic artist' has been used in reference to specific artists, this is done so almost in passing. In her PhD thesis, Hadeel Silsilah (2014) uses the term almost inadvertently by firstly quoting Islamic art historian Richard Ettinghausen's use of the term within a description of implementing Islamic artistic style (1984). She later uses the term in the context of utilising Islamic art in commercial branding with little further explanation of who the artists might be (2014). The term was also used in an article by Roger Denson (2013) chronicling the work of Shirin Nishat, however here it was in reference to the arbitrary 'male Islamic artist', presumably referring to Nishat's male counterparts. Lastly, in Silvia Loeffler's paper '*Glas Journal: Deep Mappings of a Harbour or the Charting of Fragments, Traces and Possibilities*' Emily Jacir is also referred to as a 'contemporary Islamic artist', and more specifically of Palestinian-American origin (2015). It would appear that unspoken assumptions are made as to the use and allocation of the term, leading to ambiguity of who the 'Islamic artist' is or perhaps allowing that the term is wide open for interpretation.

### **Islamic art as a modern Western concept**

As briefly mentioned earlier, there is a growing awareness amongst scholars of Islamic art history that a Western centric approach to classification and study has led to some discontent regarding terminology and also pedagogical developments in the field (Blair and Bloom 2004, Flood 2007, Necipoglu 2012). The term 'Islamic art' has been flagged as a modern Western concept having arisen when archaeologists and scholars introduced studies of this region into their research interests circa 19<sup>th</sup> century. This was a period in which archaeology and travel in the Middle East also surged, coinciding with architectural depictions of Middle Eastern locations in paintings and print. The subject became more popularised through a

number of publications including Owen Jones' *A Grammar of Ornament* (1856) and Jules Bourgoïn's *Les Elements de l'Art Arabe Trait des Entrelacs* (1879).

Many scholars, historians and archaeologists had travelled to the East and brought back beautiful artefacts from Muslim lands. These artefacts and drawings of monumental sites were exhibited to the wider public as examples of 'Muhammadan art and architecture' as well as discussed academically as belonging to the Islamic faith. This exhibiting and discussion of Eastern culture was a means for the Western archaeologists and historians to 'educate' the West about what the Orient had to offer in the form of 'art'. With a lack of definitions being suggested to the West by those engaged in producing the arts (this does not imply a lack of local appreciation, knowledge or documentation of it), the definitions were being produced and assigned by 'outsiders' (Blair and Bloom 1997).

Literary critic Edward Said theorized that Orientalism, a term of his own coinage and also the title of his famous publication (1971), was an approach taken by the West from almost the beginning of literary history following the imperial wave to civilize those outside of the West. Known as the colonial period, starting for the British in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, this period coincided with the so-called chronological demise in Islamic art history. When the British ventured into lands in the East they discovered, what was to them, new people, new languages, and new buildings; a new culture. Instead of portraying the unfamiliar culture as simply different to their own, they interpreted it as inferior, including in their creativity. It was the Western perspective that these 'other' civilisations needed to be assisted to become more like the West, whilst enforcing a sense of hierarchy and class. The advantage was on the side of the powerful West who could study and educate the East whilst seeking trade sources and opportunities to benefit their home economies with disregard to local impact in the East (King 1999).

Local buildings in India and Sri Lanka, for example, were described as 'decadent', and in many cases, it was religious buildings such as temples and mausoleums that were being compared to the likes of cathedrals and paintings in England, France and Italy (Mitter 1999). A similar image of ill-repair and misuse was depicted of the Moors, described as idly luxuriating in the Alhambra in Granada, Spain (di Cortona n.d). In drawing comparisons with Western art and architecture a precedent was set that Western production was the benchmark by which all else was to be compared.

To counteract this influence through Western pedagogy during the colonial period, Indian philosopher, Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy determined to instead educate the West about Indian and south Asian art. Coomaraswamy had been educated in the West and being a child of both Indian and English parents may have facilitated a receptive audience on both sides. He provided a necessary context to better appreciate the skill and decorative talents of local Eastern artisans. He emphasised the need to learn the contextual environment of an artwork or architecture, including its history and social status in its own locality in order to make an unbiased and informed observation of its true value. He wrote extensively on this subject and contributed to the first major collection of Indian art in the United States (Wagoner 1999). Coomaraswamy's refocus on an Eastern-centric view of Indian arts provided a differing yet balanced perspective that would allow Indian art to be seen as a contributory culture in its own right. By embedding the subject within Western pedagogy through curatorship and scholarly publications he was able to use the Western approach as a means to elevate Indian art to a level deserving recognition.

A society to which an art is newly introduced, will not have the same background knowledge as the native who has an equal right to claim and celebrate the unique and positive aspects of their local arts. Therefore, knowledge-sharing and open

communication between societies and their connected histories becomes important in generating familiarity and understanding of the world.

## **2.5 Contemporary Islamic art**

In the preceding pages, some light has been shed on the religious, historical, and scholarly aspects related to the understanding of Islamic art. These subjects have been intended to provide a fuller context to contribute to how one might consider identifying contemporary forms of Islamic art.

We can quite comfortably take 'contemporary' to mean that which is recent, present-day, new, or that which came about at a time fairly relative to the recent past (Tate 2017). By 'art' we mean a creative form of communication which can manifest in a number of ways through any means of practice and media. Through the 'Islamic' in Islamic art there is a connection with the religious faith of Islam, at least in accepting that a visual culture generated in response to the faith. As to whether that link is a spiritual one, a literal one, or a cultural one is the aspect which may be questioned further.

The most common categorical approach adopted in the mainstream art world of today, is that of regional categorisation. Examples of exhibitions and publications where 'Arab' and 'Middle Eastern Art' have been used to name collections and galleries in museums attest to this. In recent years there has also been increased attention and interest in all topics related to the Middle East, soaring particularly after the events of 11 September 2001 (9/11). The world's eyes were directed towards this part of the world with the perspective of trying to understand the people who committed such a crime. The perpetrators however, were portrayed in the media as 'Muslim', 'Arabs', the rhetoric presenting their identities as related to specific regional and race-based, i.e. the 'other'. Unfortunately, Muslims and Arabs (almost spoken of synonymously) were portrayed through the media as being unanimously dangerous, presenting a threat to Western civilisation as per the

perpetrators of the heinous crime (Poole 2002). Although the atrocities of 9/11 were carried out by a group of people with specific political agendas, their Muslim identity was the main aspect that was highlighted. Heightened media focus on the cultural and religious background of the accused meant a negative association with Muslims in general. However, contrary to what the religion might be portrayed as in the local (UK-based) media, Islam is a religion of peace and encourages harmony and kindness with an inclusive show of diverse communities under its global population (Armstrong 2001).

In the 2000s, the cultural and political unrest in the Middle East was increasingly exhibited via art of the region. In 2009, Saatchi Gallery held a large exhibition in London titled *Unveiled: New Art from the Middle East*. Billboard posters and adverts on buses provided a strong marketing presence in the lead up to and during the exhibition. Images of artworks which depicted faceless women in the traditional hijab were eye-catching and immediately recognisable as associating with Muslim culture. Both the posters and the exhibition title implied that there was something new to discover, things, as yet, unseen by the public. It also brought to the viewer's attention the question of a veil. By suggesting that something will be revealed through an unveiling, is akin to implying that something has been previously hidden. In choosing such a title, the public was encouraged to question what the artwork in this exhibition might reveal about the Middle East, and the artists' subject matter.

A few of the featured artworks appeared to be of an Islamic religious subject, such as Kader Attia's *Ghost* (Figure 7), depicting rows of draped women sitting in contemplation and prayer. The installation may well have appealed to a more orthodox view of aniconic depictions, as it cleverly portrayed the human figure without a bodily presence. The installation consisted of moulded tin-foil, shaped to form bodies, with a hollow void in place of where one would expect to see the figure's head. The impact of such a work is not lost by the lack of a human figure

but is heightened by this constructive use of negative space, lending itself well to the ghost-like nature of the work. Although the description of the artwork clearly mentioned the Islamic subject matter, the work was shown in the context of Middle Eastern art.

Using 'Islamic art' to describe some of the other artworks, however, might have caused some controversy. For example, the work in Ramin Haerizadeh's *Men of Allah* series might have been offensive to Muslim audiences due to the depiction of partially naked men being associated through the work's title with the sacred name of God in Arabic – *Allah*. The use of such subjects had previously led to the artist's exile from his home country of Iran where he and his brother, also an artist, were threatened with imprisonment (Jones 2015). Further artworks in the exhibition addressed subjects considered taboo within Islamic cultures, such as prostitution and sexuality, portrayed through figurative and sculptural work and not just conceptually.



Figure 8 - Ghost, Kader Attia, 2009, Saatchi Gallery

In this context, choosing to group the collective work on the Middle Eastern region was based on the artists link to their birth, race or nationality. Surprisingly, most of the artists, although born and originating from countries where Islam is the dominant religion, reside and/or work in the West (Europe and America). A question of origin and belonging is raised where it could be asked on which aspect of their identity should an artist be classified? If region-based, then in the present globalised and transcultural locations many of these artists reside, provide many options, including the birth place, the registered nationality, or simply where they feel at home. Based on the academic definitions presented earlier, the above-mentioned art could very well be classified as 'Islamic' as most of the artists are closely linked to places of majority Muslim communities, either through birth or heritage.

Encountering varied opinions and examples of art related to this field leads to the question of how artists themselves feel about the classification or labelling of their work. All artists who exhibited in the above Saatchi exhibition had some link to what is termed the Islamic world either by birth, nationality, or heritage, and yet, most of these artists reside in or work from the West. Fareshteh Daftari, curator of *Without Boundary: Seventeen Ways of Looking* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, 2006, explored this subject within the exhibition catalogue and brought focus to the modernist art practices prevalent in the artists' work (Daftari 2006). Comparing the exhibiting artists to past and present Western artists, Daftari justified why their work should be likened to Western art instead of being linked to Islamic art and culture.

Pigeon-holing is a fear of any artist, but appears to occur much more in the case of those artists of a minority background in the West. According to Daftari, artists would prefer being considered as simply contemporary artists making contributions to contemporary art in the same way that an artist of Western origin or background

would be seen to do. A similar view is presented by Gulru Necipoglu (2012) who argues that even the Western art canon suffers from questions of regional, practice-based or time period divisions.

### **Contemporary Islamic art in the context of the UK locality**

With the increase of interest in Middle Eastern, and Arab culture, there has been an increase in exhibitions and art spaces catering specifically to the display of art of this region, and this in turn has led to an increase in sales and investments in this art market (McQuillan 2016). A question of locality and relevance to local population thus arises due to the work being mostly by international artists. Artists such as Kader Attia, mentioned from the Saatchi exhibition above, Mona Hatoum, Shirin Nishat, Shirazeh Houshiary, Ghada Amer, Monir Farmanfarmanian, have become some of the most popular contemporary artists associated with the Middle Eastern region. However, there is less representation in these exhibitions, of British artists who more closely represent the locality and communities in the UK, both of Muslim and non-Muslim diaspora. There are few exceptions with artists such as Hassan Hajjaj, and Ali Omar Ermes whose work is of high international recognition, but again their heritage is linked to the MENA region (Middle East and North Africa), both not born or raised in the UK but both have lived and worked in the UK for some time. Perhaps for these artists it is more suitable to categorise or classify their work as Middle Eastern.

Islamic art in the UK is of such a nature that it caters for and arises from a community considered to be, by definition, a minority. As of 2011 there were approximately 2.7 million Muslims in both England and Wales (ONS 2011). This group was largely made up of first, second, third and fourth generation Pakistanis and Bengalis. However, Muslims of further Asian, African and Arab descent contribute to this number making Muslims the most ethnically diverse religious community in England and Wales. It would be hoped that this community and its diversity would be proportionately represented in the arts. However, conversations



with fellow artists in the UK revealed the sentiment of a lack of representation of Muslim artists in the art scene in the UK (MBRN Conference 2017).

If Islamic art or indeed contemporary forms of Islamic art were to be exhibited from those artists, more representative of the local Muslim population, artists of South-Asian background also warrant consideration. However, they do not fit the MENA regional classification. A regional division of South-Asian or British artists might be a more appropriate classification in light of the changing nature of Islamic art in the contemporary context but a move away from identity related to the binding unity of the Islamic may result in a sense of discontinuity from the historical chronology of Islamic art.

### **Contemporary Islamic art in further Western localities**

Making a comparison with further western localities, there are those settings in which Islamic art has been given institutional focus, to the extent where permanent Islamic art museums and galleries have been opened for public access. Australia is one such place where the population of Muslims is comparable to that of the UK's, which according to the 2016 Australian Census stood at 2.6% (Australian Board of Statistics/ABS 2017). In 2014 the first Islamic Museum of Australia opened in Melbourne, where the Muslim population is only slightly proportionately larger than in the rest of Australia, at approx. 3.6% (ABS 2017). The aim of the museum has been to provide an insight into the history and heritage of Australian Muslims, including their contributions to society through arts and science both locally and abroad. Although the museum holds an annual exhibition of established and emerging Australian Muslim artists such as Peter Gould, the museum has also exhibited works by non-Muslim artists such as Philip George.

Peter Gould describes his artistic approach as a "*creative fusion exploring his Western roots*" inspired by his spiritual journey since embracing Islam, the influence of having travelled through Muslims countries and also his engagement with

studying the Arabic language (Gould 2018). His works are often presented in a graphical format or as photographic prints where the subject may be Arabic calligraphy or features of Islamic architecture.

Philip George's works have been featured in a number of exhibitions including in the context of hybridity (Danos et al 2014). Looking specifically at George's *Borderlands* installation, previously exhibited at the Islamic Museum of Australia, a number of surfboards were produced covered with printed photos from mosques around the Islamic world. Like Gould's work, the role of Islamic architecture relating to Islamic visual arts is of importance. The surf boards featured designs made of floral motifs, Arabic calligraphy and geometric patterns, presented on an object related to what some might consider a national sport in Australia. This combination was also described as a fusion, one that could impact the local society in increasing understanding of Arab and Middle Eastern culture, providing a means "bridging the gap", and generating familiarity amongst those of the majority non-Muslim community (AFP 2008).

Both artists' work embodies the Australian aspect of their identities, however, they also share a space when it comes to the adoption of a visual language that speaks of the Islamic culture. Through their work they convey a hybridity that is evident of their lived experience within the Australian locality.

The Islamic Museum of Australia runs an annual call for art showcasing the work of emerging Australian Muslim artists, providing an indication of continuity in artistic expression relating to both people and place. The exhibition being held within a publically accessible venue can therefore convey openness about the Islamic faith and heritage that the Muslim community identify with, a space where members of the general public can also engage and understand more of the Islamic culture beyond what may be communicated in wider media.

The significance of the museum and its exhibiting of contemporary Islamic art also begins to address concerns regarding representation of even minority groups in the local art scene which then has impact on the wider international art scene (Bowker 2015).

Although looking at the context of peoples and localities represented through art spaces, it is useful to understand that another, unfortunate, shared similarity between Australia, the United Kingdom and also the United States of America is the concern for rising Islamophobia. Often, documentation of increasing Islamophobia will highlight the post 9/11 timeline after which a sharp rise is said to have been experienced by Muslims in western localities (Iner 2016, Berglund 2015, Poynting and Mason 2006, Abbas 2004). The context of Islamophobic attitudes in the UK and the response to this through art is further discussed in Chapter Four, as is the role of the media in conflating such attitudes in the public mindset.

Focussing on the presence of contemporary Islamic art in the West, the Institute of Arab and Islamic Art (IAIA), which opened in New York in 2017, intends to respond to negative sentiments by its very presence in the heart of a western cosmopolitan society. America only holds a minority Muslim population of 1.1%, however, in New York State this proportion rises to approx. 3% (Clayman 2016). The local community, who were most affected by the tragic events of 11 September 2001, had made particular associations with Arab regions of the world, Arab culture and the religion of Islam. The IAIA provides insights to Islamic culture in the hopes of challenging stereotypes. The founder, Al-Thani, is said to have particularly wanted to dispel orientalist impressions created through historical artworks where the Middle Eastern region had been misrepresented. He instead presents contemporary work that is more in-tune with the culture for example the long history and tradition of using geometry (Sayej 2017). Exhibition 1, the first to be displayed in the new venue, focussed on the theme of sacred geometry in Islamic art and architecture by local and international female artists.

In considering the relevance of population, it appears that representation of a community need not be bound by a majority presence. The examples of specific spaces in Australia and America catering to the display of Islamic art and culture is one that encourages further engagement with all segments of the local population. The naming of these spaces also implies that the 'Islamic' need not be specific to geography or ethnicity, but rather speaks of and to the larger globalised culture that Islam encompasses.

## **2.6 Digital Art**

### **What is digital art?**

Although 'art' can also be a much-debated and expansive term, having been theorised over for centuries (Gregory 2010), we will accept an inclusive and standardised definition, interpreting the term as an expression or output of production, a manifestation of creative process (Oxford Dictionaries 2012). As a result, the addition of the term 'digital' must assume there is an added element of digital technological engagement in the artwork produced.

The general definition for 'digital' is related to computer technology. The term's origin is from the word 'digit', which brings to mind a singular unit or measure. The binary system, upon which computer systems and devices are based, allows for the representation of data through singular electrical conditions: 1 (true) or 0 (false). In a simplified explanation, these two digits are used to produce a computer language which can then be translated to allow humans to interact with computer hardware and digital devices in order to create a two-way communication of input and output. The presence and use of a computer or digital device therefore becomes key in determining the role of the 'digital' in 'digital art'.

According to Christiane Paul, digital art is inextricably linked to the creation and development of computer technology (2002). The first electrical and digital computers were built and developed in the 1930s and 1940s with a number of concurrent developments in the field. Further development occurred much faster in the post-war period and it was after only three further decades that artists began engaging with computer art. Paul further explains:

*“Art that uses digital technologies as a tool for the creation of traditional art objects – such as photograph, print, sculpture, or music – and art that employs these technologies as its very own medium, being produced, stored, and presented exclusively in the digital format and making use of its interactive and participatory features.”*

It can therefore be assumed that by ‘use of digital technology’ there exists electrical input contributing to a desired visual or physical output at some point of the production or presentation of the artwork.

In some cases, it is accepted that any work of art that uses digital technologies or software in its production or presentation can be considered digital art (Graham 2007). Therefore, a still image, printed and framed would be encompassed within this definition although it takes on a traditional, non-digital form, as a final artwork. Likewise, a 3D-printed sculpture, although possibly completely static as a finished piece, is also considered digital art. Due to the variety in digital art, a digital artwork can fit into any genre or category, as digital technology is used within artistic practice or as a tool and medium, and is not a prerequisite of any particular artistic style, subject or physical form.

### **Features and examples of Digital Art**

Digital artworks also have the ability to capture and process data, making it possible to measure the level of engagement from an audience. This can be done in highly

sophisticated ways, including eye-tracking using webcams, calculating the speed with which a button or switch is activated, filming the participants' movements around the work and also by making interaction an inherent part of the work itself with the use of sensors. Artworks of this nature become more specifically known as interactive art, but also come under the wider umbrella of digital art (Kwastek 2013). Interactive forms of digital art are perhaps the most popular as they allow for an immediate engagement with viewers, who in these cases become users or participants. As audience engagement is the most telling of an artwork's success and popularity, digital art has the best opportunity to attain this.

An example of an interactive installation art work was Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's *Frequency and Volume* shown at the Barbican, London, in 2010. This immersive, installation required audience participation to tune the radio playing over loud speakers. Users were able to map changes in the frequency on the wall where their shadows would be projected. Any movement by the audience would affect the frequency and therefore change the audio being played. A similarly intriguing example of engagement in digital art was demonstrated by rAndom International studio, in *The Rain Room*, also at the Barbican, London, in 2012. As the title implies, this installation consisted of a room in which sprinklers were set above to release water. The captivating visual effect appeared like natural rainfall at night due to the darkened and enclosed space, but the playful nature was an engaging experience for audiences who felt they were covered by an invisible, protective umbrella. Viewing from one end it appeared it would drench visitors, but when walking beneath the rain, the visitor would remain dry. Such engineering was achieved with the use of sensors and cameras, hidden from view to provide a seamless user interaction. In both installations, the user's interaction manipulated the behaviour of the artwork by tracking their presence within a particular perimeter and then changing its functionality as a response.

Digital art projects can also involve larger audiences in various locations all over the world, connected via the internet. With the addition of social media, an event can be broadcast to millions, and can attract vast volumes of audience participation, sometimes without their knowledge. For example, the MIMMI project implemented in Minneapolis in 2013 was effectively a very large inflatable mood ring floating above an outdoor communal space. The large balloon-like structure changed colours according to the mood determined by text analysis of tweets from local residents and passers-by who could use Twitter to communicate with the inflatable. The use of colours and expelling mist was manipulated by whether the tweets were positive or negative, determining if MIMMI, as an extension, an emotional representation of the city of Minneapolis, was in a good or bad mood (Bradley and Holzman 2016).

The popularity of digital art is not just related to engagement, but also that which is familiar. Digital art has increasingly become popular in line with the use of digital technologies in personal usage. As digital technologies have become such a large part of our lives we are easily able to relate to a digital device than would have been the case just several years ago where computers were found in classrooms and offices as opposed to the home. We have actually come to expect digital technologies integrated into most of our devices and even home appliances to help us attain a smoother and more efficient daily routine.

The academic field of digital art has now also been established, with a number of courses dedicated to digital arts, digital media, and multimedia technology & design in institutions locally and globally. The study of the subject relates to computer science and engineering and is also multi-disciplinary. Investment in these subjects is reflective of the necessity to expand knowledge in the area, providing further benefits for the economic, scientific and even political strength and growth of the local region. Bearing these varying and ambitious examples in mind, there appears

to be a large scope for both creativity and impact through the use of integrated digital technologies in the arts.

### **Hybridity in Art**

As has been determined in some of the examples above, hybridity is also evident in the arts. In the art world, hybridity is especially discussed where arts, crafts and science are combined to produce projects that lean towards any of these singular elements. Therefore, the emphasis may still be on artistic, craft-making or scientific but acknowledges the hybrid process in achieving the result. Ars Electronica, an Austrian-based institute focused on the intersections of art, science, education and technology, host's an annual Prix competition which includes a biennial category of Hybrid Art where entries are described as transdisciplinary projects. Their primary emphasis is on the process of fusing different media and genres into new forms of artistic expression. In these cases, the use of the term 'hybrid art' relates specifically to the art form, the artistic practice and the material outcome. The artists who showcase at such events and festivals, who produce digital or new media art, are also seen as embodying a 'hybrid existence' (Rinehart 2016) due to their ability to use skills both for industry and for art.

Looking more specifically at hybridity, as discussed in the context of Islamic art, Jale Nejdert Erzen speaks of the 'integration of opposites', providing the example of Murat Morova, a Turkish artist who combines calligraphic script with figural depictions in a variety of media (2007). Morova describes his work as addressing subjects of East and West, an individual's internal and external nature and also the concept of tradition whilst using 'non-traditional' materials (Morova 2017). The combination of opposing dualities in both themes and processes is again present. The contemporary forms and traditional Islamic aesthetic leading to this identification of Morova's art as being hybrid appears apt. However, both Erzen and Morova suggest a separation between what is traditional and what is contemporary within their practice.



Asheer Akram's *Pakistani Cargo Truck Initiative* is another example selected by Kimberley Masteller for an exhibition of both traditional and contemporary Islamic art in Kansas City, USA, 2015. Masteller (2015) described Akram's work as an example of hybrid art: he applied the visual and structural style of a traditional Pakistani cargo truck to that of an existing 1950s Chevy truck, both of which have distinctive appearances which make connections to their localities. The hybridity in this project was evident in more than just its material form and production process, but also in the influence of Akram's Pakistani ethnicity and American locality.



Figure 9 - *Pakistani Cargo Truck Initiative*  
© Asheer Akram 2013

A further example of hybrid art and practice, a celebration of it in the context of Islamic art, is The Jameel Prize, which is awarded bi-annually (in conjunction with the V&A) to a nominated international artist or designer inspired by Islamic tradition. This prize could also be interpreted as a hybrid space where global cultures meet in order to convey that Islamic art tradition continues through

contemporary practice. The Jameel Prize was founded to not only raise the profile and awareness of contemporary Islamic art and design but also to “widen public appreciation of the role played by Islam’s great cultural heritage as a source for our own times” (Jameel 2016). Again, we see the element of wider impact facilitated through this intersection of art.

One of the first winners of the Jameel Prize in 2009 was Iranian born but New York-based, Afroz Amighi for her hand-cut installation *1001 Pages*. Amighi, raised by Jewish and Zoroastrian parents, incorporated an amalgamation of decorative elements from a wide range of historical Islamic arts including miniature painting, architectural forms and geometric and arabesque patterns. This array of decorative features almost disguised the inclusion of juxtaposing symbols of war and martyrdom. The cutwork material (fabric used by the UN for tents in refugee camps) and how this played with light provided both visceral and conceptual engagement (Amighi 2016). Amighi had considered the material as medium, as well as form, highlighting the conventional context of material and object in situ. The installation and its materiality re-present the concept of place and what it means for the usual inhabitants of the tents. The refugees, confined by the material walls of the tent have a bubble they can call a place while remaining displaced.

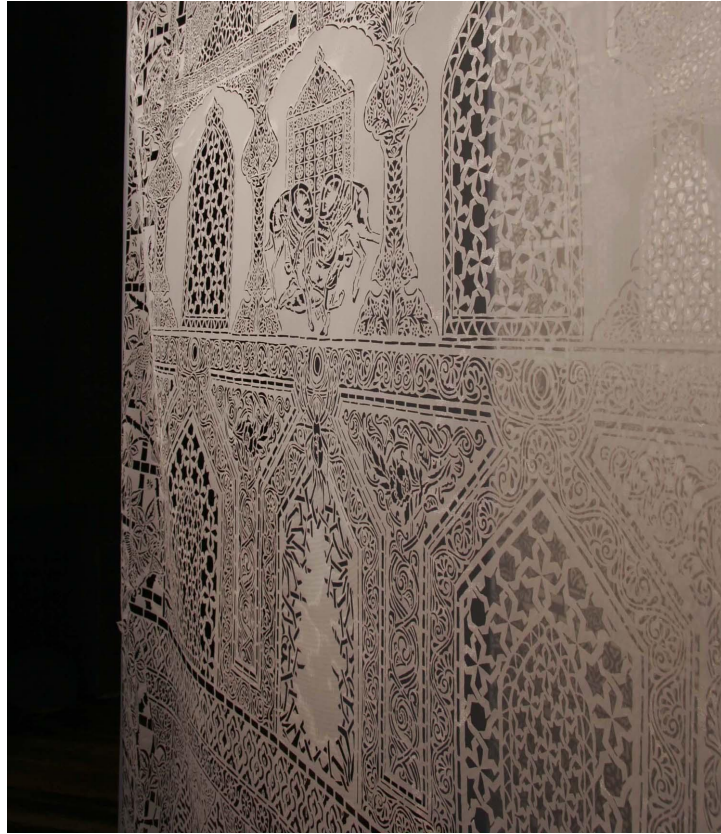


Figure 10 - Detail of 1001 Pages, Jameel Prize winning artwork by Afruz Amighi  
(Photo courtesy of artist)

In subsequent years, the bi-annual Jameel Prize exhibition at the V&A continued to include a breadth of artworks in the exhibition representing artists from across the globe. The artworks were a testament to the intersection of art, design and craft being displayed and celebrated as fine art. It was also unusual to see an exhibition of this nature, at such a scale in such a prominent location. Possibly one of few venues openly exhibiting contemporary Islamic art in the West. Here was an exhibition displaying Islamic tradition manifest in all manner of contemporary creativity including typography and fashion. However, with the V&A's vast history of exhibiting all things art and design, as well as collecting arts from regions associated with Islam, the connection was highly relevant (Stanley 2016).

The 2014 Jameel Prize 3 exhibition appeared to branch out further, by including examples of what could be described as digital art. One of the shortlisted artworks

for the prize was Mounir Fatmi's large-scale projected animation *Modern Times: A History of the Machine*, made up of Arabic calligraphic elements in overlapping cog-like motion. Another animated artwork was Nasser Al Salem's *Guide Us Upon the Straight Path*, mimicking a medical heart monitoring screen but instead displaying an animated Arabic text stylised as the peaks and troughs of a pulsating heart rate.



Figure 11 - *Guide Us Upon the Straight Path* by Nasser Al Salem. Video, 2013  
(Photo courtesy of artist)

In the most recent Jameel Prize 4, Wael Shawky, an Egyptian artist whose film *Cabaret Crusades: The Path to Cairo* (2012) was also included, depicted scenes of historical Arab and Christian battles played out with the use of marionettes. The backdrop designs in the film were reminiscent of those used in miniature paintings, with intricate geometric patterns applied to prop surfaces. The method for creating this work combined the craft of puppetry, filmmaking, pattern-making, costume design, amongst likely a myriad more. The inclusion of this and the above discussed artworks indicated the continuity of Islamic art in any medium and form, highlighting that tradition is not just about practice but also about aesthetic and

visual culture. The varied selection of works conveyed that Islamic art can also be digital art and vice versa, or a hybrid combination of the two.

In looking for use of the term digital Islamic art by existing artists, there are some slight variations. Artist and designer Zohayma Montaner, who is of mixed Philippine and Spanish heritage, lives and works in Sharjah, United Arab Emirates (UAE). Montaner's vast online portfolio of creative work is a means to convey and share knowledge of the Islamic faith through art and graphic design (Montaner 2016). Her website includes a page of what she terms 'Islamic digital artworks', artworks created using image manipulation software such as Adobe Illustrator and Photoshop. The artworks incorporate the three visual styles characteristic of Islamic art: calligraphy, geometry and arabesque and often depicts Qur'anic scripture. Montaner being a Muslim, her location within a majority Muslim population, and her making art of a truly Islamic nature, means her work meets much of the criteria determined within definitions of Islamic art that focus on place and identity.

Another example in which the use of digital technologies has been combined with Islamic artistic style is the work of Miguel Chevalier, who has been focussed on computer and digital art since 1978 (Chevalier 2016). In 2014 Chevalier, who was born in Mexico but lives and works in France, participated in the Islamic Arts Festival in Sharjah, UAE with his interactive installation *Digital Arabesques*. This public installation consisted of projection mapping an evolving display of geometric patterns inspired by architectural decorative arts such as *zellij* (mosaic-like) tilework and *mashrabiya* (latticework) screens from the Islamic world. Visitors could manipulate the projection with their movement, creating waves in the animated patterns. Chevalier's focus is on the universal language of pattern, it does not speak of religious subject or culture but does acknowledge the connection that visual art and architecture has to locality and people. In both examples above, digital technologies are being used as tools and as media to produce artworks of an Islamic visual nature. Both Montaner and Chevalier, regardless of their

backgrounds, beliefs or perceived audiences (Chevalier has exhibited internationally to very large audiences) have expressed the relationship between their practice and stylistic choices in quite literal terms.

## **2.7 Digital Islamic Art – the UK**

In the context of the UK locality, I present myself as an example of an artist who produces contemporary Islamic art. Although my artworks can be related, influenced and inspired by a number of aspects or encounters in life, I would not deny that the most dominant aspect is that of Islamic art and architecture, a significant proportion of which are historical examples from around the world. My artistic practice involves working mostly with pattern design, using geometry and arabesque compositions.

Over the last ten years I have increasingly given more time to developing my artistic productivity, which has led to a correlating increase in my work being exhibited, indicating an understanding that representation of my art requires active process and engagement with the art scene. Alongside my research I have continued to develop skills in both traditional methods of creating patterns (using hand-worked tools such as a compass and ruler) and also non-traditional methods, such as improving my use of Adobe Illustrator in order to produce patterns in vector format.

In the UK, there are further examples of artworks produced by local artists combining the use of digital technologies with at least one of the three most evident Islamic visual elements (calligraphy, geometry or arabesque patterns). This work is occasionally displayed in the context of Islam or in spaces and exhibitions related to the Islamic faith or culture. One of the featured artworks in The British Museum's hugely successful exhibition *Hajj: A Journey to the Heart of Islam* (British Museum 2012) was Idris Khan's installation *Seven Times*. This installation was made up of many black cubes reminiscent of the holy site of the *Ka'ba* in Makkah, with

each cube sandblasted with verses from the Qur'an layered until distorted. Khan was raised in Birmingham by a Pakistani father and his mother, who was a convert to Islam. Khan does not consider himself a Muslim, but he does use religious material and the Qur'anic script in a number of his artworks, his religious upbringing having greatly influenced the repetitive actions within his work (Nicol 2017).

Khan is known for several pieces that involve digital layering of pages from books to the point where the text becomes illegible. He conducted the same process to create a digital print of the Qur'an for *Every...Page of the Holy Quran* in 2004. The purpose of the Qur'an and its name itself in Arabic means to recite. In Khan's work however, a redundancy is applied to the purpose of the Qur'an, taking the action of recitation of the holy scripture away. Khan was aware that such work might have caused controversy but the work was received with praise and was even understood by some as an example of Islamic art (Benedictus 2007).

It is not necessary for calligraphy to always feature Qur'anic scripture. The art of the book that developed through development of Qur'anic script has led to the adoption of calligraphy for all manner of text-based expression (Porter 2006). British artist Soraya Syed works with both Qur'anic and general text in her work and has also combined Arabic calligraphy with digital technology to produce what can be described as hybrid art forms. Syed is a classically trained calligrapher having conducted an internship in Egypt before training under a master calligrapher in Turkey. Syed has used her knowledge of calligraphy to produce a number of digital artworks that bring Arabic text to life. Figure 8 below, depicts a still from the animation *Hurriyah*, which formed the backdrop to a collaborative dance performance as part of the *Nour Festival* in London in 2013 (Syed 2016). A dance performance with calligraphy forming an animated background can be described as components of many different arts including digital art, performance art and live installation art. The combined elements here go towards the creation of a new



hybrid whereby no single element provides enough of a description for the complete artwork.



Figure 12 - *Hurriyah* design in calligraphic formation for the *Hurriyah* animation.  
© Soraya Syed 2013

A similar combined art has been developed by British Bengali artist Mohammed Ali, otherwise known as Aerosol Arabic, who first came to prominence to UK Muslims as a calligraffiti artist. As the name suggests, Ali used the method of graffiti to produce his artworks which also incorporated calligraphy alongside geometry and other icons of Islamic culture such as minarets and domes. However, his art has predominantly been applied to large public spaces such as public streets where he felt most influenced in his early years as a Muslim in the UK. Ali has also ventured into digital installation art using sound and film to create immersive environments and performance art in collaboration with musicians, lyricists and poets. His emphasis has always been on accessibility of art outside of conventional gallery and museum spaces (Ali 2017). Ali uses his art to address and tackle themes that are closest to his own experiences but which he feels the current and younger



generations of Muslims and minorities are still facing – namely the social challenges of faith, identity and ethnicity experienced by minority communities in the UK and abroad (Long 2015).

Social impact and community sentiment are themes British Pakistani artist Zarah Hussain has also addressed through her interactive public art project *Southend Colour*, displayed in Southend in July 2015. Hussain was perhaps one of the earliest artists in the UK to engage with digital technologies in combination with her traditional Islamic art practice. Hussain combines science, technology, mathematics and spirituality; the Islamic faith and culture being a strong influence in her work. Hussain has been trained in the art of Islamic pattern-making and uses geometry to create sculptural and generative animations often combining the two as large-scale installations, as with *Numina*, exhibited at the Barbican in London in 2016/17 for which she won the 2017 Lumen Prize People’s Choice Award.

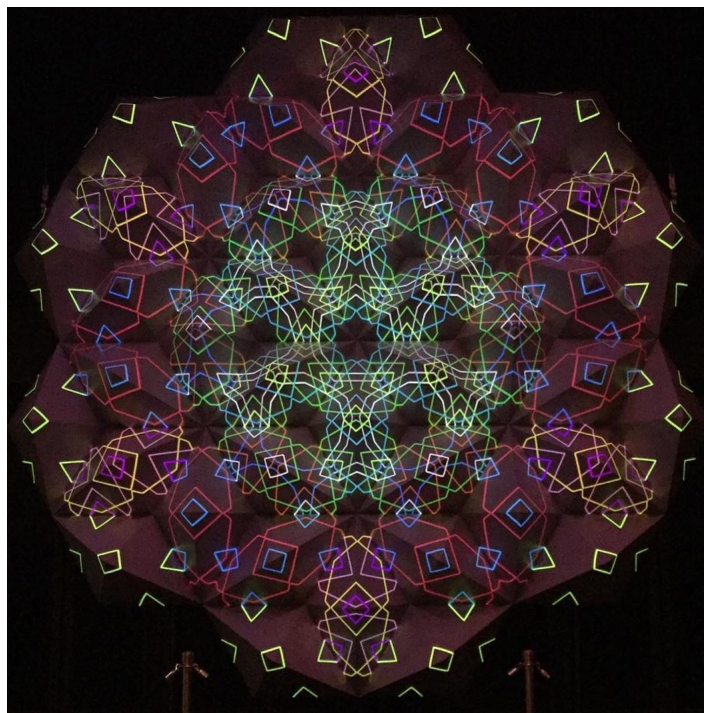


Figure 13 - *Numina*, Zarah Hussain, 2016.

As briefly described on page 23, hybridity has often been discussed in relation to colonial and postcolonial history where varying groups of society were discussed as distinct and divided, classified according to whether they were seen to fit by others, usually a dominant (not necessarily majority) party. Any mixing between the two was considered hybridisation that created a new, third grouping between or outside of the original two. The discipline of cultural studies and discussions of hybridity have ventured strongly to express that classification of people as 'hybrids' is another form of labelling identities based on singular culture or race, leading to a hierarchy and division in society associated with the actions of colonial powers (Kraidy 2009 and Young 1995). This type of people-oriented hybridity is tied to the changing nature of local populations in any given region or land, with the migration of peoples resulting in diaspora communities, changing languages and in recent years, rapid globalisation. Even a person writing in a language outside of their birth or ethnic culture, such as an Arab writing in French, has been described as a hybrid individual (Burke 2009). There is no doubt that hybridity does occur, but theorizing of people through divisions can become dangerous and regressive, fuelling the idea of hierarchies between people (Werbner 2001). It is also worth noting that, in this highly globalised era, it is unlikely that there exist many who would not be considered a hybrid people, no matter how isolated or enclosed their domain (Ginty 2014). Perhaps it is more progressive to view hybridity as bringing people and cultures together through their differences rather than a method to divide (Ang 2003).

What is interesting to note in the previously presented examples of artists and their work, is the hybrid nature of their practice which combines digital techniques with further forms of artistic production. There is also the element of hybrid heritage and identity present in the artists themselves, which provides an analogy through their practice to the material culture they are contributing towards. This form of hybridity, the ways in which artists respond to wider issues in culture, society and changes in political climate is discussed in Nikos Papastergidias' *Cosmopolitanism*

*and Culture* (2013). Papastergidias provides a number of examples (including those of a digital nature) which situate the role of the artist in responding to mobility of peoples, where they may be discussing immigration as a fear amongst a local community which might be infiltrated by 'others' or vindication of minorities, accusing them of 'barbaric' acts that will create danger for the local population (Papastergidias 2013). Papastergidias uses the two major subjects of terrorism in the US (again the events of 9/11 are used here as a marker in time) and immigration in Australia as real-life examples, the catalysts for the production of some of the works he highlights as being exhibited in the context of hybridity, for example through the *ARS 01* exhibition in 2001. The concept of impact through art is further illustrated in the form of activism which is also provided by the example given of *Hybrid Workspace* in the 1997 Documenta X Festival. The significance of the locations of Australia and America mentioned by Papastergidias are convenient in highlighting the need to understand locality in the context of artistic production and external forces within those locales, especially in these ever-globalising Western spaces. The discussion in the text are vital in illustrating the prevailing relevance of hybridity in today's society.

The concept of changing spaces due to movement of peoples is an important one, relating back to the earlier definitions of hybridity. However, there is also the need to understand how these spaces actually form a third space, a further concept theorized by Homi Bhabha. The third space is supposedly one in which hybrid identities can find ways to integrate or generate amongst those on the 'other' side, separate to one or other of a majority group in society. It is the space where cultures and societies may overlap or find a middle ground. Bhabha provided a positive subversion to the topic of hybridity and its connection to space where historically it had been used in a derogatory manner (Werbner 2001). Bhabha instead proposed that identities are in continuous flux. The continuous flux in identity of peoples and therefore the spaces they inhabit, which in today's globalised and extensively connected society, also provides an analogy to the

constantly changing and fast-paced nature of development in digital technologies. This perspective further supports the concept of a natural evolution in Islamic artistic practice and output which incorporates digital and computer technologies, as earlier indicated by Laura Marks (2006).

## **2.8 Conclusion**

The literature reviewed in this chapter included a historical and contemporary understanding of Islamic and digital art and also the hybrid intersection where the two come together to form what can be termed digital Islamic art. Reviewing existing literature has shown that this hybrid term combines not just nomenclature of individual terms but also the understanding of what this term might be applied to.

Based on the understanding formed through this review, the artworks that will be described in this research by the term 'digital Islamic art' include those that combine use of the most common Islamic stylistic elements (calligraphy, geometry and arabesque) in either the production or the appearance of the work, with the use of digital technologies in either the making or presenting of such work. However, the choices and influences made by the artist is not entirely void from this context.

The literature also demonstrated examples of artists who produce this type of work and more specifically, those who do so in the UK locality. In addition to this, the reviewed literature highlights the relevance of hybridity in both culture and artistic practice, relating to both the ethnic or regional backgrounds of artists and the ways in which they engage in art-making influenced by Islamic culture or faith.

Based on the examples provided in this chapter of artists and their works, religious affiliation or non-affiliation through faith is not a pre-requisite for either working with or appreciating influence stemming from a religious culture. Finally, there is

the added locality of the UK, being home to artists who are able to bring together cultural, religious and regional influences from around the globe to a centralised hub of an art scene. This hub is a space which seems ideal for fostering and encouraging works which convey the hybridity of the community from which the artists' own identity stems. Yet, artists need not feel restricted by such links to a heritage, or bound by geographical connections with their identity in ruling the output of their work and how it might be represented to others (Papastergidias 2013).

The examples of artworks discussed in this chapter in relation to combined and hybrid practice also draw attention to the possible social impact they may deliver. Topics addressed by artists of varied ethnic and minority backgrounds highlight an affinity between the themes of identity and belonging with people and locality. This leads to the scenario that perhaps artists of hybrid identities are best-placed to address such themes due to facing a sense of unfamiliarity by the larger, majority population. By such artists engaging with majority communities through arts, they can perhaps generate familiarity towards alternative or evolving globalised cultures, the space in which minority and majority populations intersect.

## **2.9 Reflection**

Themes of belonging and place are some of the topics I have been addressing through my own work too. It is a subject that has slowly emerged over the years in line with my research into how art and people are classified. This has been informed by questioning how certain, minority, communities are represented in the art world, and where artists like myself fit in the general scheme of things in the UK and internationally. Closely related to these topics are those of identity and culture through place and movement. My being a Muslim, British, Pakistani, Female, artist, researcher, designer and teacher, means I carry a string of labels regardless of my intention to do so or not. These labels indicate my identity is not singular, it contains many facets. However, I am not alone in this experience, as there are

many like myself in the UK and globally, who are informed and influenced by multi-faceted cultural input either by birth or by environmental exposure.

I have tended to include the word 'Islamic' in describing aspects of my work, certainly attributing the influences that have led to its development. I also use the term 'Islamic art', 'contemporary Islamic art', 'digital Islamic art' regularly when speaking of my work with others. I have also found in some cases that further descriptions of my work (speaking of the materials, art forms and decorative elements), supported by visuals is better suited to conveying what my work is about rather than depending on words alone. This is due to varying interpretations by the audience of these aforementioned terms.

I was once asked about the subject of my research and in response I used the phrase 'digital Islamic art' to describe it. The response was "Does that even exist"? I was unsure how to respond to this beyond saying 'yes' as it highlighted many more questions, namely why this person thought it did not exist. This exchange occurred in 2016, not in what one might assume was a pre-digital age. The person in question was an artist and teacher, who applies calligraphy, geometry and floral motifs on to various, usually hand-made, media including ceramic tiles, paintings and frescoes. I could only assume that they were unfamiliar with digital forms of Islamic art and so the use of the terminology only added to their sense of unfamiliarity. In a way, I found myself in a middle space, being told from one side that Islamic art does not exist, and being told from another that digital forms of Islamic art do not exist. Perhaps it is in the third space where it does.

## **Chapter Three: Public Attitudes Towards Islamic Art**

Survey of public attitudes towards Islamic art in the UK

### **3.1 Introduction**

In continuing my search for answers beyond the literature review, I developed a study that would determine how much and what the general population in the UK might know about Islamic art, therefore providing answers to the first research question looking to understand existing knowledge the public might have on Islamic art in the UK.

This chapter provides the findings from the survey conducted from December 2014 to January 2015. The method used for this study was an online survey, allowing for a large number of participants from many locations across the UK. Questions within the survey were designed to gauge the perceptions, knowledge and engagement participants may have had with Islamic art, and also the means through which they sought to do this. The findings from the study provided an overview of not just perceptions people held of Islamic art but also the main venues known for displaying Islamic art, and the demand for further viewing of Islamic art in the UK. The data indicated that those who visit museums or galleries more often are more likely to be familiar with Islamic art and also how this relates to their engagement with digital devices for art-viewing.

### **3.2 Methodology**

The online survey was designed with 25 questions, the majority of which were multiple choice and with the option to select all relevant answers from a given

selection. The questions were grouped into three sections which would also provide a visual reference for the participant of their progress through the survey. The three sections therefore formed stages within the questionnaire, which were as follows:

- Tell us a Little About Yourself  
(collection of demographic data)
- Tell us About your Interest in Art  
(art-viewing and familiarity with Islamic art)
- Tell us about your Communication Choices  
(engagement with digital devices)

A list of all the survey questions can be viewed in Appendix II.

Most questions were multiple choice and designed to make the process of completing the survey easier for the participant. This included a range of multiple choice answers and the ability to select more than one answer.

The selection of initial questions and construction of these were intended to understand who the participants were. By asking for their demographic details such as age, ethnicity, religion and gender, it would be possible to look for patterns in responses amongst certain groups. The structure of these questions was based on the National Census in the UK in order to be compliant in covering all options for participants to select, and also to allow for comparable data analysis.

The next section of questions was designed to understand how knowledgeable the participants were in art that might be referred to as Islamic art, whether this was terminology they could define, and also what associations they might make with these terms when asked about physical works, the use of particular forms and



media. They were also asked how often they visited museums to see if this would lead to some correlation with further data at the analysis stage.

The last section of questions was focussed on the engagement of the participant in the arts through digital means, their habits and choices in arts communications and also their interest in viewing art of a digital nature.

### Survey Recruitment

The survey was entitled 'UK attitudes towards Islamic art' and was launched through Qualtrics.com, an online platform allowing for the collection and analysis of survey data. Using Qualtrics enabled the questionnaire to be hosted online with access provided through a publically viewable URL. This URL was shared via emails, social media posts, e-mailing lists, public forums and could also be embedded on websites including my personal blog ([www.islamicdigitalarts.com](http://www.islamicdigitalarts.com)).

The method for recruiting participants was conducted through sharing the survey URL to as many people as possible, and by requesting all recipients to also share the link forward, thereby utilising a snowball effect of viral sharing (Ritchie 2013). The aim of such wide sharing was to enable a high response rate in order to achieve a sample size that would be as closely representative of the then 63.7 million UK population (ONS 2014). Based on calculations provided by Qualtrics.com, such a large population size could be represented by a sample size of 385 participants with a confidence level of 95% and confidence interval of 5% (Qualtrics 2010). However, responses above this number were not capped and were considered to provide a contingency that would further the accuracy in representation and also go towards lessening the margin of error.

A link to the survey was also shared with the Kent Adult Research Unit (KARU), a specialist research group who look to understand how communication and memory can be enhanced for those of all ages, with an emphasis on understanding impact

through the aging process. KARU were able to share the survey with its members and participants, making it accessible to those of an older age range who may not always have access to computers and the internet. They were also able to provide hard copies to those who preferred this method for responding to the questions (KARU 2016).

A further effort to ensure a high number of participants to the survey was encouraged through the inclusion of a financial incentive. All participants were given the opportunity to be opt in to a prize draw after completing the survey. One, randomly selected, participant would win a £25 Amazon voucher. Some care was taken to emphasise that participation was aimed at those within the UK. The survey was left open for participation for a duration of 48 days, from 1 Dec 2014 to 17 Jan 2015. The number of participants who completed the survey came to 512, however, a number of these were not UK residents. Removing these participant responses from the data left a total of 484.

### **3.3 Analysis**

#### Participant demographics

With the exception of one question, the survey provided quantitative data, for which analysis was presented through Qualtrics' online platform with a number of filtering and visualisation tools. It was possible to quickly determine the demographics of the participants and also how particular groups answered singular and collective questions within the survey. A picture began to emerge of not just the overall participant group but also of sub-groups identifiable by ethnicity or religion.

Qualtrics also allowed for a tracking of geographical spread in participants. As can be seen in Figure 13, the survey attracted participants from across the UK, the majority of whom were based in England, with others from Wales, Scotland and

Northern Ireland. Participants represented both male and female and were from a wide range of ethnicities, age groups and religious and non-religious following.



Figure 14 - Distribution of survey participants across the UK

The data revealed that the majority of participants were female (313 or 65%), with the most representation from those between the age of 25 - 34 years (23% of all participants). Males made up a lesser proportion of participants (160 at 33%), the majority of whom were between the age of 16 – 24 years (12.4% of all participants).

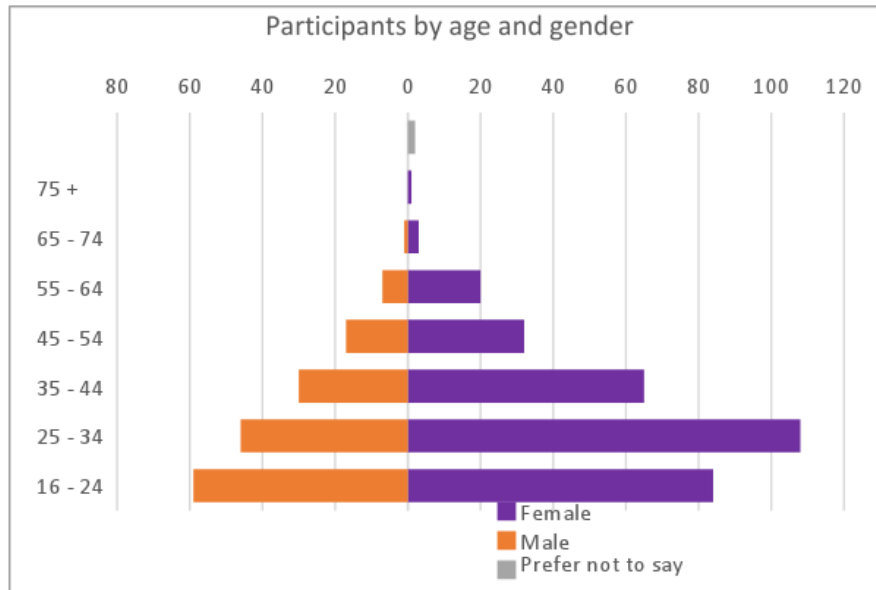


Figure 15 - Distribution of participants in age groups and gender identification

Participants also represented a wide range of religious and non-religious beliefs, with almost half stating that they do not follow any religion (47%). The most represented faith amongst the other half was Christianity (29%) followed by Islam (10%). In regards to ethnicity, the majority of participants were English/White (68%), followed by much smaller numbers from a variety of further ethnic groups, including Pakistanis (10%), Indians and Black. Lesser representation from these ethnicities was consistent with the proportion of 'minority' ethnicities found overall in the UK population according to the last census (ONS 2012). However, a slightly higher representation of Pakistanis was found in this survey, most likely due to the majority of Pakistanis in the UK being Muslim (ONS 2012). Therefore, the subject of Islamic art may have attracted larger numbers of this group to respond.

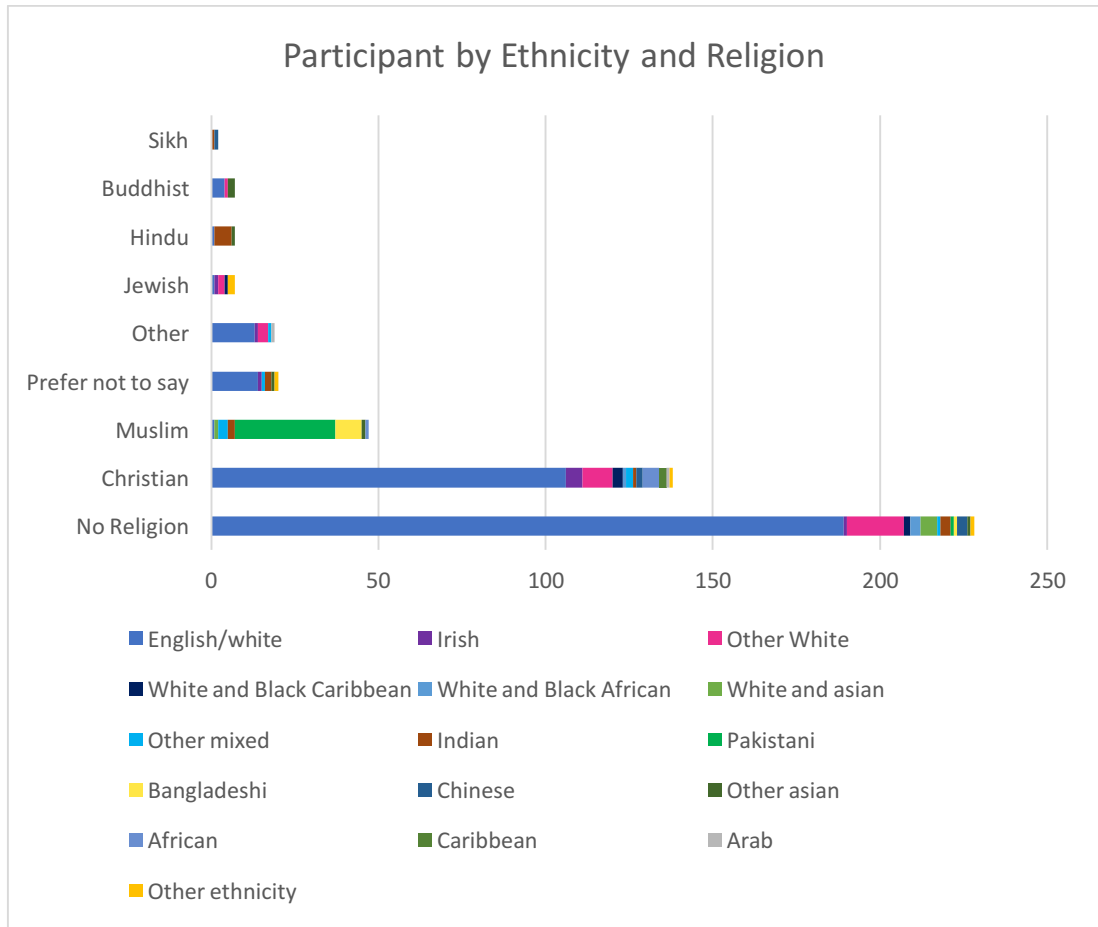


Figure 16 - Distribution of participant ethnicity amongst religious faith

### 3.4 Findings

#### Viewing Islamic art in the UK

A higher level of familiarity with Islamic art was found amongst participants who said they had visited galleries and museums more often. A significantly large proportion of participants (82%, or 399 of 484), indicated that they visit a museum or gallery at least once a year. Within this group, 19% visited monthly and 3% visited weekly. This indicated a much higher level of cultural engagement amongst these participants compared to the average European citizens', which was reported in a special European Commission report as 37% amongst the general EU population (TNS Opinion & Social 2013). These visits to museums and galleries means a higher chance of viewing a range of art, and therefore increasing

familiarity with art. This familiarity would in turn lead to a level of knowledge on the subject, either in being able to describe it or in recalling details of the culture from which the art emerges or that which it represents.

Those participants who answered affirmatively to seeing Islamic art previously, were also asked to describe what they thought Islamic art was. Comparing those who were led to this question (through controlled response flow within the survey) to those who were skipped from this question, it appeared that this group (125 of the full sample) were more likely to have visited a gallery or museum (11% of this group answered 'never' visited, compared to 16% of the overall sample) and were also more likely to have visited art spaces more frequently.

Figure 16 depicts the proportion of participants who responded with a description of Islamic art based on the frequency of their visits to galleries and museums. It shows that the more often or regularly a participant had visited a gallery or museum, the more likely they were to be familiar with Islamic art.

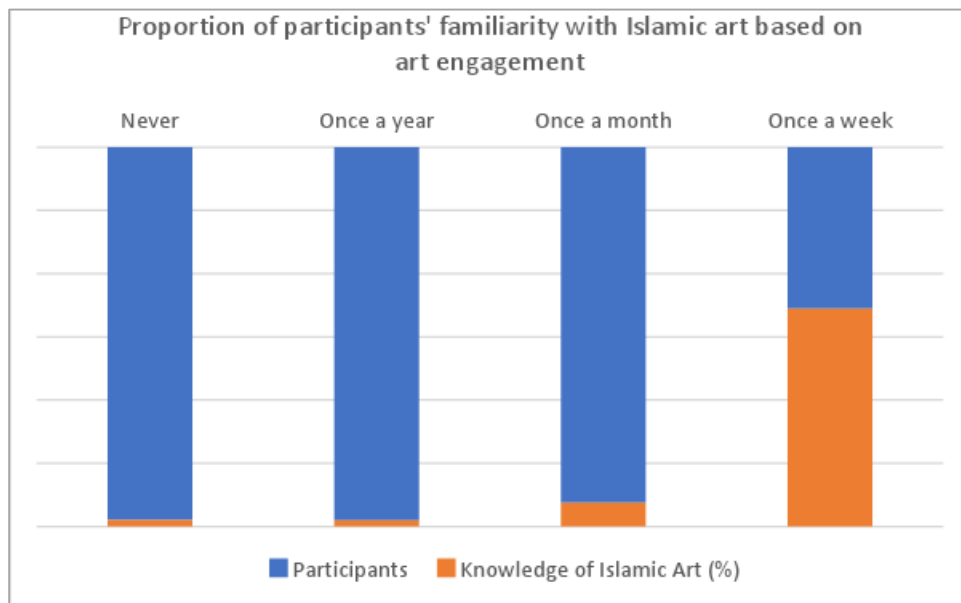


Figure 17 - Proportion of participants with a higher familiarity with Islamic art (based on regularity of visits to galleries and museums)

It was also found that within this group of 125 who provided descriptions of Islamic art, participants were 10% more likely to subscribe to arts related communications (in the form of mailing lists, newsletters, RSS feeds, etc.). This provided an indication that cultural engagement through art-viewing could lead to an increase in knowledge, and that this could be facilitated through familiarity and understanding and could be supplemented through various modes of communication including digital.

### **Islamic art as understood by participants**

The input field in the online survey for entering a description of Islamic art was limited to 150 characters (approx. 30 words) to ensure enough space for descriptiveness yet encouraging concise responses. Although the average response to this question was 10-11 words in length, the mode (most occurring) length of response was just 4 words. This indicated that these responses could, to some extent, be considered as informed responses, as a concise and succinct response requires a deliberate choice of words that can still make the necessary point.

Looking closely at the definitions and descriptions provided by participants on the subject of Islamic art, a number of themes were found to indicate the prevalence of visual characteristics being identified in Islamic art. These characteristics correlate with the styles discussed in the literature review which were found most commonly in examples of Islamic art: calligraphy, geometry and floral patterns. Participants also mentioned architectural examples including mosques, indicating further diversion from the older scholarly definitions discussed in the literature which focused on locality and time-period of the production of Islamic art.

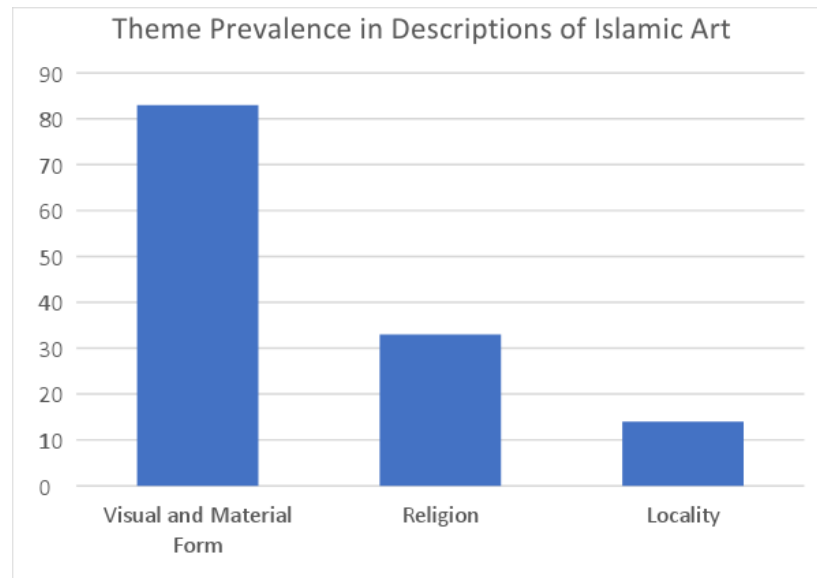


Figure 18 - Bar graph showing the prevalence of the three main themes present across participant descriptions of Islamic art

The most prominently featured words within participant definitions were *'pattern(s)'*, *'calligraphy'*, and *'geometry'*. These are very specific nouns indicating the characteristics of decorative elements that have historically been applied to all manner of media and forms, from decorative objects to architectural features.

A religious connection in Islamic art, although not mentioned by all, was still found amongst a fair number of responses (by 40 participants) with terms such as 'faith', 'beliefs' and 'religion'. However, there were many who demonstrated that the word 'Islamic' is not only a religious connotation. Instead associations were made with terms such as culture, country, origin and influence. The implication is that the understanding of Islamic art is a broad one that is not entirely detached from a notion of 'Islamic' identity through religious culture but that a visual culture can relate and stem from this despite the link. This theme of religious culture ties in with those examples of academic definitions where the presence of an Islamic culture, a Muslim patron or a Muslim population has been stipulated as one of the characteristics of Islamic art, as discussed in the literature review.





of art forms such as photography, film and new media were the least selected options.

Table 1 - Art-types ranked in order of most selected

Ranking	Art Type (top level)	Percentage of participants selected
1	Textiles	62%
2	Buildings/Monuments	58%
3	Paintings	56%
4	Jewellery/Ornaments	48%
5	Calligraphy	46%
6	Ceramics/Glassware	44%
7	Books	27%
8	Sculpture	26%
9	Armoury/Metalware	19%
10	Photography	15%
11	Don't know	12%
12	Film	10%
13	New Media/ Installation	9%
14	Other art types	8%

The top three selected art types were unanimously selected by all religious and non-religious groups. However, the two exceptions to this were the Muslim participants who selected calligraphy the most (83% of this group) and those who preferred not to say what their religious following was, who also chose calligraphy (67% of this group). Calligraphy is used extensively to decorate mosques and cultural centres for Islamic learning. It is also the form in which the scripture in the Qur'an is presented and is regarded as the highest form of Islamic art and also the most Islamic (Flood 2007). Therefore, exposure to calligraphy is much more likely for Muslims than any other group of participants, explaining their dominant selection of this option.

Based on the selected art types, participants were then asked to make further, more specific selections from a sub-list of art types. The most popular sub-selected art-type was 'Religious buildings (places of worship, sacred locations)'. It could be

understood from this that familiarity with Islamic art has been influenced through architectural sites and monuments. There are many famous Islamic religious buildings that have become popular tourist attractions, such as the Taj Mahal in India and the Blue Mosque in Turkey. These types of buildings are usually richly decorated using sacred scripture in calligraphic form from the Qur'an in combination with geometric and floral arabesque patterns. The recognisable prominence of such sites linked to Islamic religious, cultural and regional heritage would certainly aid familiarity between the visual elements and may be identified as Islamic art.

### **Familiarity with Islamic art abroad**

Participants who said they had seen Islamic art both in the UK and/or abroad were asked to name the cities or venues they had seen it. Through these responses it was possible to determine the locations most memorable to participants for viewing Islamic art, which in the UK was London venues such as Victoria and Albert Museum and The British Museum. Both these venues house and display some of the world's largest and extensive collections of Islamic art and are also some of the most visited art museums in the world (a combined figure of over nine million in 2016 alone according to figures released by the Association of Leading Visitor Attractions, ALVA 2017). Three of the world's top ten most-visited art museums and galleries are in London alone, with the British Museum ranking in second place preceded only by The Louvre in Paris, France (Pes 2014). However, The Louvre did also feature prominently in participants' responses. Although, outside of the UK, the most mentioned cities and countries associated with viewing of Islamic art were Istanbul in Turkey, and a number of cities in Spain. The Louvre in Paris was mentioned the most for a country which has no history of Islamic rule. However, France has a vast history of colonising Muslim lands including countries in north Africa, the Middle East and south Asia (Daughton 2008). The prominence of The Louvre in these results may also correlate with popularity of this venue for viewing art as seen

through recent visitor numbers which are said to be the highest of any museum in the world – resulting in its being the most visited art museum in 2013 (DCMS 2017).

Cities in southern Spain ranked highly in the list of destinations mentioned by participants for viewing Islamic art abroad. These mentions would suggest that those locations with a history of Islamic rule or culture, regardless of current presence of the religion or culture, have generated familiarity of Islamic art. However, as the results also show, the prominence of France as third most mentioned country, conveys that current viewing of Islamic art in a venue or location is not restricted to historical, religious or cultural relevance to only the local majority population. France's Muslim population is an estimated 10% of the general population, home to the largest number of Muslims in Western Europe yet this is still a minority group (Laurence 2006). The catering of an audience for Islamic art in locations such as France makes for an enticing example for echoing in other non-Islamic regions if there is demand. This demand is illustrated later in this chapter, where an interest by participants is expressed in staying updated on the subject of Islamic art, as well as expressing a desire to learn more about Islamic art post-survey.

### **Profile of an Islamic artist as perceived by participants**

Participants who had seen Islamic art, in either the UK or abroad, were presented with questions regarding their expectations of an Islamic artist too. Two questions were included in order to gain further understanding of what might be generally understood about the artist who produces Islamic art and whether they are expected to be religiously affiliated to a specific religion and to be particularly 'religious' at all. In the literature review, there were fewer publications found on the views of the artists who produce Islamic art, especially in the UK where they would be of various religious, non-religious and ethnic background. And with the ambiguous context in which the term Islamic artist was used, it was a topic thought to be relevant to briefly include in this study. This was proven to be interesting as

the majority of participants (78%) stated that they expected an Islamic artist to be Muslim. However, half of all participants (50%) expected an Islamic artist to be either religious or non-religious. By dividing these questions in this way, the separation between identity through faith and level of religiousness may well have provided some indication to the participant that there could be both a connection or disconnection between the two.

What may not be immediately clear in this detail is that some may make the distinction between a person who identifies as Muslim due to birth or heritage, and others may express a conscious religiousness through their Muslim identity. The distinction is that a person may identify as a member of a particular faith but may not be actively practising it. Practising a faith can be manifest in a number of ways, through both inward and outward expression – i.e. religiousness may not always be detectable through visible actions and appearance. Participants may therefore be making connections between the artist as being Muslim or religious due to their link to a particular cultural identity and making the assumption that the 'Islamic' in Islamic art is such an identity.

Only 16% of respondents answered that an Islamic artist could be a follower of any religion. This shows an awareness by some that Islamic art can also be produced by artists of varying religious and cultural backgrounds, as illustrated by the examples discussed in the literature review and within the paper *Shifting Boundaries: How to Make Sense of Islamic Art* (Choudhrey and Bobrowicz 2016). This publication emphasised that recognition of Islamic art is based more on the prominence of characteristic styles and forms as opposed to the significance of the artist's background or faith. This is a sentiment that would be shared by modern day curators of Arab and Middle Eastern art, such as Fereshteh Daftari (2006), who calls for contemporary art by artists of Muslim or Islamic cultural heritage to be viewed in a similar vein to western art – judged and understood through the work itself.

### **Those unfamiliar with Islamic art**

Just over one third of participants (36%) were not sure what Islamic art was whilst 24% said they had not seen Islamic art in the UK or abroad. The group unsure of what Islamic art was consisted mostly of those who either follow no religion (53%) or are Christian (35%), the majority being 'English/Welsh/Scottish/Irish/British' ethnicity (84%). Such focus on the profile of participants less familiar with Islamic art leads to the question of whether it is realistic to expect non-religious members of the population to be aware of art that stems from or is influenced by any religion. Likewise, can it be expected that members of a particular ethnicity be familiar with art that stems from another? It could be argued that in consideration of the fact that the Muslim population is at approximately 3% of the general population in the UK, the proportion of participants who are aware of art associated with a minority faith is actually quite large (39.46%). This could suggest that those museums that are most popular in the UK, who have higher visitor numbers and include Islamic art collections are successfully making this art genre accessible to a wider public.

Can we say that more people should be aware of Islamic art? How realistic is it for a population to be aware of, be familiar with or have knowledge of a minority community, faith or culture? Particularly if it is not a culture native to that location? Perhaps those venues in more regional locations, away from the larger cities of London or Birmingham, could be catering to an audience who may be open to engaging with different types of art, art seen as non-native or that of the 'other'.

### **Engagement with digital devices in relation to art**

The final segment of the survey was designed to gauge participant engagement with digital devices in order to establish if a measure of this activity correlated with a higher familiarity with Islamic art. Interestingly, participants who were subscribed to arts-related communication were more likely to have seen Islamic art in the UK (71% formed this combination).

The most popular devices/technology owned by participants were laptops (83%) and smartphones (80%), with many participants owning more than one or multiple digital devices. All device suggestions within the survey question could be connected to the internet, including smart phones, smart TVs, tablets and home computers. Only 3% of participants said they did not own any digital devices that could connect to the internet.

Following the selection of digital devices owned, participants were also asked if they currently use their devices to view art. Of 435 participants questioned, 44% said 'yes', they do view art on their digital devices. The majority of those who answered 'yes' (69%) also indicated they would be interested to view art on their laptops (59% of those who own laptops), with smartphones, desktop computers and tablets in almost joint place as the next popular options for viewing art on (26%, 23%, 22% respectively).

81% of those participants who are subscribed to arts-related communications (email newsletters and print subscriptions) currently seek to view art on their digital devices. We can surmise that viewing of correspondence related to exhibitions and providing links to museum websites would include viewing of images of artefacts held in venue collections. This would therefore correlate with the increased user visits to museum websites. The increase of internet access, online social engagement and all manner of online services means that people are able to view all types of information via digital devices and also source knowledge through these. It is therefore essential for any organisation to ensure their online presence is strong and to also offer a form of service (whether this is simply image based or informational) through those devices that users are most accustomed to and looking to engage with.

Accessibility for viewing art online has greatly increased in line with the surge of internet browsing via mobile devices. Many museums and galleries are now actively displaying artwork online. Visits to museum web sites such as The British Museum's have reached huge numbers (a record 19.5 million visits to their website in 2013) (2014). However, the number of actual in-person visits has not declined alongside this increase in virtual visits, which would indicate that visitors are engaging with museum websites either prior to or after visiting the venue in person. Visitors may be informing themselves of the collections and considering items they would most like to see or could be engaging in further learning about the collections once they have more time at home. This would also imply a more focussed engagement with the artworks and a more informed decision to view the collections in person, contributing to further knowledge and familiarity.

### **Interest in viewing Islamic art in a digital form**

Participants were asked to consider Islamic art in digital forms and whether they would be interested in viewing this type of art within galleries or museums within the UK. The question was supported with an explanation of what this kind of art might be: "artworks which are either made with or are presented using digital technology, for example using computers and electronic devices". This question was not presented to participants who had earlier stated that they were not sure what Islamic art was. Of those who were asked this question, 49% responded positively, 26% were 'Unsure', and 27% of participants declined entirely. However, on closer inspection, these choices varied based on the participant's familiarity with Islamic art. Those who were most familiar with Islamic art, those who had seen Islamic art both in the UK and abroad, and who had provided a definition of what this might be, were much more likely to be in favour of viewing digital forms of Islamic art. Those less familiar, who said they had not seen Islamic art in the UK or abroad, were more likely to respond less favourably to the prospect of viewing it in digital form. These results can be seen in figure 19.



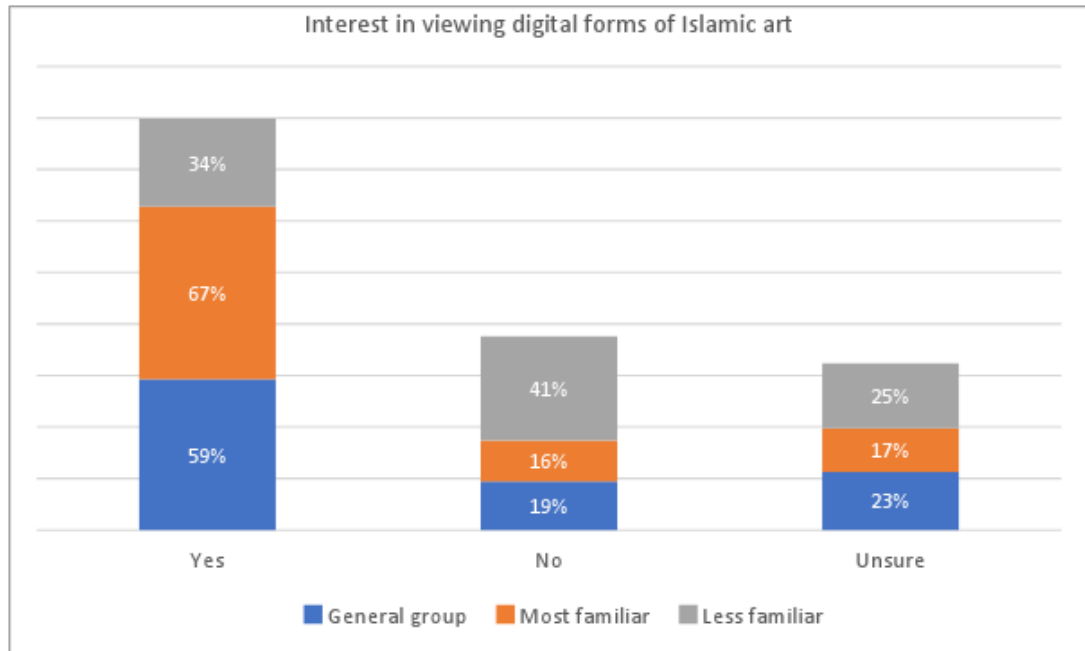


Figure 20 - Chart displaying the proportion of participants who favour the viewing of Islamic art in digital form (based on their previous familiarity with Islamic art)

### Continued Interest in Islamic art

Participants were also asked if they would be interested to see more Islamic art in UK museums and galleries. 77% answered 'yes', indicating a continued and more long-term demand for the display of Islamic art in UK venues. Following on from this, 30.5% of participants expressed that they would also be interested in learning more about Islamic art. If they are able to engage with digital technologies to facilitate this, then museum's use of digital technologies to enhance the visitor experience becomes important. Alongside this, and with the above-mentioned visits to museum websites rising, a practical method to address this would be to make viewing of objects accompanied with information available for online viewing. This is something that has become more common in the last decade, on a collection by collection basis, especially for larger museums who have the funding to action this. Smaller museums are being encouraged to also digitise their collections with the support of grants provided by educational trusts and foundations such as the Penn Library's Council on Library and Information

Resources (Penn Libraries 2018), The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation (2018) and The Barakat Trust (2018) to name just a few.

Positive responses to interest in learning more about Islamic art also came from 64% of those participants who were not sure what Islamic art was. Interest in seeking knowledge can be seen as an indicator of open-mindedness and the willingness to understand that which is different or unknown. As indicated in the literature review it may be that some still view Islamic art as 'other' to western art. It may therefore be possible that visitors consider their engagement with Islamic art as one where they are going beyond the average quest to view and understand the Islamic culture. Their interaction with this art type may feel like looking through a window into another world, especially if they have not had the opportunity to view this art type before. Interest expressed by participants encourages development within the area of curation and representation of non-western art types in general.

Looking at 'Spiritual Journeys' by Stuart Frost (2014) we learn that regarding the summative evaluation conducted for the exhibition *Hajj: Journey to the Heart of Islam* held at the British Museum in London, 2012, it is clear that if exhibitions relating to Islamic art are provided, the audience (with an increased representation from Muslims) will also increase.

### **3.5 Conclusion**

Through this study it was found that a fairly large proportion of participants were aware of Islamic art (one third), and that they had developed some familiarity by having viewed or seen Islamic art either in the UK or abroad. Whilst those who were unsure what Islamic art was were open to learning more on the subject.

The findings of this study also suggested that the physically observed visual elements within Islamic art were much more dominant aspects identified in an

artwork than the regional origin of the work or the background of the artist. This supports and further strengthens the findings from the literature review which indicated that the decorative visual elements of calligraphy, geometry and arabesque patterns are well-known characteristics of Islamic art.

The findings also indicated that although artists producing Islamic art were expected by most participants to be Muslim, they were not expected by the same numbers to necessarily be practising members of the religion too.

Participants in this survey also indicated a receptiveness to further visibility of Islamic art in UK venues and also an interest in the hybridity of combining Islamic art in digital form. There is therefore further scope for exploration and potentially a higher level of engagement to be achieved with participants through Islamic art if digital devices and technologies become more incorporated, in not only the viewing of Islamic art but also the production and presentation of the artwork itself.

Finally, in order to account for some of the participants who stated that they did not know what Islamic art was or were unsure what it was, it may be that some people do recognise the features of Islamic art but do not necessarily know how to describe or define it. They may not have associated it with the terminology of Islamic art even.

The general understanding and familiarity with Islamic art indicated through this survey might be considered higher than would have been expected from a population and region where Islamic art could be said to be non-native.

This chapter illustrated the methods, findings and discussions regarding public attitudes towards Islamic art, familiarity with examples of Islamic art and their engagement with viewing art through digital devices through an online survey. The most beneficial aspect of this was the ability to reach large numbers of the UK

population in the most efficient manner so as to make the data as representative as possible. However, with the use of this method there was also the limitation encountered in geographical distribution, where the majority of participants were based in the South East of the UK, perhaps fuelled by the research being designed and conducted from this location.

To counteract this, the survey link had also been shared through online forums with the voucher incentive to encourage people to share the survey beyond only their close networks. However, a further limitation this presented was the possibility of participants answering the survey questions for the purpose of being entered into the prize draw at the end. Although this was not something that could be measured or detected through the responses, an effort was made to counter-balance the effect by only including those entries in the prize-draw that were fully completed. This was made clear in the introductory section at the beginning of the survey. Any participants who may not have been interested to follow through to completion would have had this opportunity to change their minds at the earliest point. Only fully completed survey data was included in the final analysis.

It must also be noted that representation of Islamic art is much higher in the South East of England, specifically in London as this region is home to the main tourist attractions, largest and most famous museums, as well those venues that house some of the largest collections of Islamic art in the world. London is also home to a large and diverse range of ethnicities and religious groups and as previously mentioned a larger proportion of Muslims than many parts of the UK. Therefore, with the majority of participants (79%) being from this region of the UK, the results and findings from this study has possibly portrayed a higher familiarity with Islamic art than may be the case for the rest of the UK population.

Another regional factor to consider is the average gross disposable household income is also much greater in the South East of the UK, and is specifically the

highest in London. Therefore, although most museum entry in London is free, many of the large and sought-after exhibitions are ticketed. Personal or leisure travel to international locations is also much more likely amongst the population in this region. Therefore, the opportunity for exposure and engagement with the arts (both in the UK and abroad) would be higher amongst the sample population of this study than those that were not represented from other areas of the UK.

The distribution of participants across other characteristics, such as age gender and ethnicity, covered a large spectrum, however, the final sample was not proportionally representative in each characteristic compared to the general UK population. For example, there was higher participation by females compared to males (66% and 33% respectively) where in the general population they stand at almost 50% each. Also, Muslim participants made up 9.8% of the study sample, yet they represent closer to 5% of the general population in England and Wales a (White 2012).

There was also a much larger participation in the survey by those between the ages of 18 – 44 years (80% of the full sample). Again, this is not the same proportion seen in the general population, where persons within this age group make up 35% (Humby 2016).

The large proportion of younger participants could be a result of several factors including those most using social media, those using online forums, and those most connected and using the internet on their personal digital devices generally are of a younger generation (Perrin 2015, Duggan and Brenner 2013).

If a similar survey were to be conducted in future, it would be helpful to be a comparative study to determine if there have been any changes or developments in participant knowledge and familiarity with Islamic art over a particular period of time. However, in the case of participant representation, a stricter method for

recruiting a sample more representative of the UK population could be enabled through inclusion criteria. Participants could be automatically validated for inclusion by requiring an early set of questions requesting their location, gender, ethnicity and age, each of which could be set a quota. Once the quota is full, no further participants fitting the criteria would be put through to complete the rest of the survey.

In conclusion, whilst taking into consideration the limitations in the sample used, the findings from this study suggest that participants who are more engaged with visiting galleries and museums in person and also seek to continue engaging with the arts via subscriptions, are more likely to be familiar with Islamic art. The findings also indicate that there is a high level of digital device ownership amongst the population, that these devices are to some extent being utilised for further engagement with the arts, and finally, that digital devices being utilised within Islamic art would be of interest to those viewing art and more specifically Islamic art in the UK.

### **3.6 Reflection**

The survey study discussed in this chapter provided the opportunity to determine if Islamic art really was as unfamiliar and therefore as 'other' as might have been implied through the literature review. I found some comfort in seeing that there were a sizable number of participants who were not only willing to take part in the survey (I worried that the word 'Islamic' in the title might result in participants assuming it was a subject they would not be able to contribute to), but that they were willing to engage in what turned out to be a longer survey than intended.

In order to obtain answers that were true reflections of public opinion, it was preferred that participants spent an appropriate amount of time to answer their questions without the fear of length and fatigue affecting their responses. The chances of this would be reduced if the questions were kept short, and if the length

of the questionnaire could be completed in a fair amount of time (Cape and Phillips 2015). However, due to the nature of the subjects being covered in this survey there were a higher number of questions which led to a slightly longer progression for the participant. The structure of the questionnaire was therefore split into three sections with questions grouped under headings so as to indicate the topics being covered. This was intended to ease the participant's flow through the questionnaire and provide a sense of progression through each stage. Upon reflection, I would have removed some of the questions regarding art-types in order to resolve this. However, I did not feel this affected the quality of the data gathered.

The level of participation achieved in this survey, the level of knowledge amongst participants, and the willingness that many indicated to learn more about Islamic art, formed a catalyst for further motivation in my pursuing this research. With such a foundation, it would be realistic to also seek further perspectives from those engaged with the Islamic art scene more directly in the UK.

I also felt assured that my pursuit of Islamic art-making may also be of further interest to an equally large proportion of the population, or at least be considered for more than any assumptions that might be placed on it. For example, that it would not be automatically assumed to be just religious art, that it might be understood in a wider context of Islamic art and that those who may not know as much about Islamic art might seek to learn more about it whilst or as a result of having viewed it. The potential presented through these findings encourage a sharing of art with larger audiences which may result in positive experiences related to Islam and Islamic culture. As an artist, this would be a source of great satisfaction, as it would become a means through which I would be able to extend impact of my work into the wider community.

## Chapter Four: Stakeholder Perspectives

Interviewing artists, curators and scholars of Islamic art in the UK

### 4.1 Introduction

This chapter describes a study through interviews in which the intent was much more focussed on understanding in-depth perspectives of those individuals who are most involved in the production and dissemination of both Islamic art and digital Islamic art. These individuals included those who engaged with teaching, promoting, exhibiting or collecting Islamic art in the UK and so were considered stakeholders of the Islamic art scene. Without the input and engagement of these stakeholders in the UK, the art scene could be said to not exist. This study therefore addressed the second research question looking to understand to what extent artists of Islamic art in the UK were using digital technologies in their artistic practice and what factors might influence their choices in this.

Although the term 'stakeholder' is commonly used within a business context, the definition can be applied in a broader sense to include any individual who has an interest to gain or contribution to make towards the success of a particular venture or organisation (Nickols 2005). In the case of the arts sector and in the context of this research, the three crucial stakeholder roles that were considered, and whose views were sought, included curators, artists and scholars. It was hoped that by including participants from these three groups it would provide essential grounding for a better understanding of not only the Islamic art scene in the UK but also wider perspectives on the use of digital technologies as part of artistic practice. This study also built upon the previous study which sought views from the public, and so this addition would enable all views to be covered within the research.



The aim of this study was to understand the perceptions, concerns and potential developments within the Islamic art scene in the UK by speaking to those most closely involved with this field. The art scene referred to here is the network of individuals active in the creation, distribution and education of Islamic art specifically within the UK. This study was therefore conducted through semi-structured interviews containing questions on topics designed to provide a picture of Islamic art in present day UK, an understanding of the artistic practice developed by artists, and any collecting or curatorial views regarding what might be described as digital Islamic art.

The approach through interviews would lead to the accumulation of first-hand accounts providing rich qualitative data ideal for analysis and emergent themes. It would also build on the content of the literature review and help better understand if perceptions of the field had also filtered to the practical side of the art scene.

The findings from this study would help to:

- Understand the views of stakeholders of Islamic art in the UK
- Determine stakeholders' perspectives on the use of digital technologies in contemporary Islamic art
- Understand the potential for future development of Islamic art in the UK

### **4.3 Methodology**

#### **Interview Questions**

The topics covered through the interview questions focussed on the experience and background of interview participants, their existing knowledge and engagement with Islamic art, their existing knowledge and engagement with digital art and digital technologies, and any viewpoints they might venture on these topics in the

context of the UK locality. There was also some flexibility for participants to venture into other, related topics or expand further on those put forward.

The questions were also influenced by the themes of classification in Islamic art, or rather the instability of this, as discussed in the literature review, and also by the varied examples of media and artistic practice presented through my own discussion of both Islamic art and digital art. Finally, I also introduced the hybridised term 'digital Islamic art' within the interview questions to see how participants would respond to this, what they might perceive this to mean and any viewpoints they would offer.

The questions were designed to be open-ended to facilitate the qualitative nature of the study, but standardised across all participants within each group, where all artists were asked similar questions, all researchers were asked similar questions and all curators were asked similar questions.

By keeping the tone conversational during the interview, even basic questions such as 'how did you come to be an artist' led to the participants venturing into further detail.

### **Selection of Participants**

Participants were selected based on criteria specific to their occupation and involvement with Islamic art and digital technologies. The aim in selecting particular participants with a set criteria was to ensure a sample that could provide a representative picture of the Islamic art scene in the UK. This would result in an understanding of what might have influenced their decisions when carrying out their work either as an artist, curator or scholar. However, the study was also designed to accommodate new understanding through emergent themes that may not have been previously identified within this field.

### **Selection of Artists**

The criteria for selecting artist participants were based on findings from the literature review where academic definitions of Islamic art focussed on time period, place and presence of Islamic faith to categorise Islamic artworks. As understood through the literature review, not all artists of Islamic art identify as Muslim but may produce work that is influenced by Islamic culture, faith or even visual material. Therefore, the criteria for inclusion took this aspect into consideration. This information was combined with findings from the survey study discussed in the previous chapter, where definitions of Islamic art provided by members of the UK public focussed heavily on identifiable visual characteristics in Islamic art. Therefore, the following criteria were developed to ensure the least subjectivity in selecting participants in this group.

#### **Criteria for inclusion for artists:**

- Artist must be based/working in the UK
- Artist uses at least one or more of the following visual elements in their art work:
  - Calligraphy (Arabic/Persian/Urdu)
  - Geometry/Geometric patterns
  - Arabesque (floral/vegetative) patterns

The participant would also need to meet at least one of the following criteria:

- Artist's work has been exhibited in the UK under the theme of 'Islamic art' or has been described as an artist producing Islamic art by peers or curators
- Artist describes or identifies themselves as producing Islamic art
- Artist has a religious/spiritual link to Islamic faith

- Artist has heritage linked to Muslim land or culture (for example through ethnicity, or through their own or their parents' place of birth or residence)

Based on these criteria, participants were identified through several channels including social media and subject specialist groups, and through my own network and experience as an artist involved in both local and international art exhibitions and events. An online search was also conducted using terms such as 'British Islamic Art' presenting results from The Muslim Museum website, which provides a timeline of Muslim presence and contributions in the UK and a directory of artists (Muslim Museum Initiative 2017).

The content of UK-based social network groups was considered based on their remit for appreciation of Islamic art. These groups included Art of Islamic Pattern and Broug Ateliers for Islamic Design, both open Facebook groups which started their online networks in 2009. Finally, visiting graduate shows and institutes, such as the Prince's School of Traditional Arts which specialises in the teaching of traditional Islamic artistic practices, were also consulted to form an understanding of who might be the most relevant artists to approach.

### **Selection of Curators**

The selection of curators was partly informed by participant responses from the previous survey study regarding their viewing of Islamic art within specific venues in the UK. Such venues included museums and galleries most visited by participants, generally located in London, including the British Museum and the V&A. This data was used alongside the knowledge that particular curators had experience of exhibiting, collecting and promoting Islamic art within museums, galleries or academic institutes in the UK. Their experience in either fields of Islamic or digital art was relevant to their participation, however, in addition to their expertise, they had also all exhibited works that had been described as Islamic art or having been inspired by Islamic art in some way.

### **Selection of Scholars**

This group of participants included art historians and researchers writing on the subject of Islamic or digital art. Selection was based on their scholarly publications and the subjects they specialised in, as in many cases, they also taught/lectured within these fields. The consideration of these participants was also supported by their publications being amongst those within the literature review.

### **Sample size and representation**

Consideration was given to making the sample of participants as representational of the overall population as possible. In this case the population would be all artists, scholars, and curators across the UK who would fit the selection criteria. Therefore, the selected participants needed to represent not only the overall group of stakeholders but also their individual role groups of artists, curators, and scholars.

As the Islamic art scene in the UK is, thus far, a little documented subject, it is not very clear exactly how large the overall or segmented population of each participant group is within the UK, where the subject of Islamic art history is, understandably, smaller than that of Western or European art history (Keshani 2012). Also, artists, for example, are at various stages of their careers and some may be more popular and established within smaller regions of the UK than others who are known on a national basis. The British based *Muslim Museum's* website currently lists 114 artists from across the arts. The focus of this research is largely on examples of visual Islamic art. The list on the Muslim Museum website however, included musicians, poets and designers (Muslim Museum Initiative 2017). Those who were listed as painters and artists numbered only 54. Based on this example, the inclusion of 10 artists in this study made for a 20.5% representational sample.

It was decided to try and match this number of participants in the groups representing curators and scholars too, however, the group of scholars proved

more difficult to recruit. Academics in the field of Islamic art tend to specialise in Islamic art history. However, even these specialists are limited in number in the UK, with a large number located in America. Added to this was their lack of availability, which produced further difficulty in their inclusion within the study. Therefore, the scope of inclusion was widened to accommodate those who were involved in the promotion or engagement of Islamic art in a wider context, for example in diversity of arts across England or UK, those involved in outreach for younger school age pupils and also those involved in publications and teaching design principles relating to Islamic art.

In some cases, a few participants who were approached expressed a possible lack of suitability for their inclusion in the study based on what they personally felt might not be considered Islamic art. For example, one artist participant, who is not Muslim but acknowledged the inspiration for their work deriving from existing Islamic art and architecture, wanted to ensure that their not following the Islamic faith was known for the purposes of the research. However, as they met the criteria for inclusion for this study through the subject of their work, they were assured that their participation would make for a valuable and very interesting contribution to the study. The same was expressed to those who felt they did not know as much about contemporary Islamic art, but might know more on historical Islamic art. Again, the distinction being made between contemporary and historical, was also relevant and so their contributions were highly welcome.

The recruitment phase continued during the period of the study as some interviews had started commencing before other participants confirmed availability, therefore, the overall length of the study lasted eight months from August 2015 to March 2016. However, by the end of this period, it became clear that certain themes were appearing and a proximity to data saturation was being achieved. This provided confirmation that the sample groups used for the study were therefore of a suitable size and nature.

### **Final Participants**

The final number of participants recruited was 27, which was felt to be relatively representational due to the small number of experts within the field of Islamic art in the UK in general. The largest group of participants was made up of ten artists, the second largest consisted of nine curators from museums and galleries across the UK, and the third group consisted of eight participants involved in the pedagogy of Islamic art at various levels of academic seniority in educational institutions. Where participants were eligible for inclusion in more than one group, e.g. artists who also teach, they were placed in the group they self-identified with most or were most active within.

The range of experience and knowledge amongst participants was significantly high, being not only well known through publications and citations but also due to being active within these fields from approx. 15-40 years. The participants also came highly recommended by peers in their respective fields and therefore would be considered established in their roles. Participants included award-winning artists who had exhibited both nationally and internationally, curators from major national museums such as The British Museum and the V&A, regional museums such as Birmingham Museums Trust, major galleries in London including The Mosaic Rooms and Edge of Arabia, world-class institutions such as The Courtauld Institute of Art and The Princes School of Traditional Arts, and also Arts Council England, to name just a few.

The following tables indicate further details regarding the participants within each group. Where known, the roles have been detailed with their subject specialisms, ethnic backgrounds, gender and religion.

Table 2 - Details of Interview Participants in Artists Group

	Visual/Media	Ethnicity (where known)	Religion (where known)	Location	Gender
Artists	Geometry Installation, Sculpture	Pakistani	Muslim	London	Female
	Calligraphy Public art, Mural	Bengali	Muslim	Birmingham	Male
	Calligraphy Print, Animation	Bengali	Muslim	London	Male
	Geometry Generative art	Jordanian	None	London	Male
	Calligraphy Drawing, Installations	Mixed Turkish/ Pakistani	Muslim	London	Female
	Geometry, Arabesque, Calligraphy. Painting	White	None	London	Male
	Geometry Installation	White/mixed	None	London	Female
	Geometry/Arabesque Sculpture, Drawing	White	Muslim	London	Male
	Calligraphy/Geometry Installation/Print	Pakistani	Muslim	London	Male
	Geometry Painting	Pakistani	Muslim	London	Female

Table 3 - Details of Interview Participants in Curators Group

	Subject specialism/ Institute (if consented)	Ethnicity (where known)	Religion (where known)	Location	Gender
Curators	Middle East (British Museum)	White	-	London	Female
	Contemporary Art (University of Kent)	White	-	Canterbury	Female
	Digital/New Media	White European	Christian	London	Female
	Islamic Art (MICA Gallery)	Pakistani	Muslim	London	Female
	Middle East (Edge of Arabia/ Crossway Foundation)	White	-	London	Male
	Middle East	White	-	Birmingham	Female
	Islamic Art (Muslim Museum)	Pakistani	Muslim	Halifax	Male
	Middle East (Private Gallery)	White	-	London	Female
	Middle East (Private Gallery)	Iranian	-	London	Female



Table 4 - Details of Interview Participants from Academics Group

	Occupation/ Organisation (if consented)	Subject Specialism	Ethnicity (where known)	Religion (where known)	Location	Gender
Academics/Practitioners/Advocates	Teacher/Artist (Art of Islamic Pattern)	Geometry/ Philosophy	Mixed	Spiritualist	London	Male
	Teacher/Artist (Independent)	Geometry	White	-	Calderdale	Male
	Teacher/Artist (Princes School of Traditional Arts - PSTA)	Geometry/ Outreach	White	Christian	London	Female
	Researcher (Independent)	Islamic Art History	White	-	London	Female
	Director/ Architect (PSTA)	Sacred Art	Egyptian	Muslim	London	Male
	Lecturer/ Historian (Independent)	Islamic Art History	Spanish/ Hispanic	Jewish	London	Female
	Lecturer/ Historian	Islamic Art History	Iranian	Muslim	London	Female
	Diversity Officer (Arts Council England)	Contemporary Art (BAME)	Pakistani	Muslim	Birmingham	Male

### Geographical distribution

Although many of the participants in this study had been born or brought up in various locations across the UK and also abroad, many were now based, settled, and working within London. This should perhaps not be surprising as the largest and most active museums, galleries and institutes associated with Islamic art are to be found in London (as was also indicated by the results within the previous survey study). 20 participants were based in London and the South East of England, with the remaining based in the North of England, namely Birmingham and the surrounding areas where 6 participants were from. It felt pertinent to have inclusion from this part of the UK where large populations of Muslims are settled, and as will be seen later, representation of these communities was a relevant topic within this study.

## **Data Collection**

The method and planning for data capture, security and analysis was approved by a specialist ethics team at the University of Kent. Interviews were for the most part conducted face-to-face, with the alternative method of virtual interviews conducted via Skype or telephone for those who were unable to meet in person. All audio was recorded with a dictaphone and stored on the secure server at University of Kent. Recorded, and transcribed audio was only accessible to the research team, with myself being responsible for all data handling and analysis, ensuring privacy and anonymity clauses were not compromised.

## **4.4 Analysis**

The approach in this study was designed to use thematic analysis which would present emergent themes from the data. This process was encouraged through the semi-structured nature of the interview in order to address the desired research questions. Although the questions were based on topics that had been pre-planned, participants were encouraged to open up about their personal impressions and views regarding these topics or any significant new topics that they felt were relevant. They were also given the option to add any further comments at the end of the interview.

In 17 of the 27 interviews, it transpired that the duration of the interview (which was proposed to be 45 minutes) was, by participant choice, extended further, to up to an hour. Participants commented on the positive nature of such research being undertaken and recognised the need for it in the context of documenting activity in the UK. The option for participants to remain anonymous in the interviews also led to participants making comments which they would not otherwise have made in any other context.

Once interviews were completed, recordings were uploaded and transcribed using the Express Scribe software. Transcripts were then saved as MS Word documents and uploaded to qualitative analysis software NVivo in which they were coded as part of the analysis process.

As this research was not based upon a pre-existing framework, a grounded theory approach using thematic analysis was used (Braun and Clarke 2006). Thematic analysis is described as both accessible and flexible, making it ideal especially for qualitative research (Guest, MacQueen and Namey 2012). This method of analysis has been widely adopted by researchers who engage with collection of data through semi-structured interviews (Fereday and Eimear 2003, Margrove, Pope and Mark 2013). It is also acknowledged that researchers using this approach come to the research with some pre-existing knowledge of the field but consider their new data with unformed ideas as to what themes may eventually emerge post-analysis. More specifically a thematic analysis method allows for patterns to be determined amongst the data. As my existing experience as an artist and researcher led to the formation of the study design, the use of thematic analysis on data retrieved through semi-structured interviews was determined to be the most appropriate approach. A similar approach had previously been used by researchers conducting studies using semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis on data related to artistic practice and creativity (Margrove, Pope and Mark 2013, Chamberlain 2012, Mace and Ward 2002).

Analysis began during the process of collecting data, with notes being taken during the interview period where interesting aspects that stood out as possibly significant were noted during transcribing. However, the core analysis was carried out within Nvivo where transcripts were read thoroughly and each passage was coded by topic (Charmaz 2014). The codes gradually built up in number across all transcripts. The next stage was to examine the topics and understand where relationships, connections and significance could be found, leading to a higher-level group – the

emergent theme. Each group had several, varying numbers of codes, but the significance of their occurrence as opposed to just their prevalence was of interest to the research as is characteristic of this method of analysis (Braun and Clarke 2008).

### **Development of coding scheme**

During the process of coding, any sections of transcript that significantly stood out as being strongly representative of a particular topic were highlighted. This would contribute towards the discussion phase of analysis. A hierarchy in coding soon developed leading to groupings that were indicative of themes within the data. The over-arching themes presented in the coding scheme (Table 1) provides an indication of the concerns and areas in which these topics led.

The example snippet quotes from interviews that are shown in the coding scheme table were selected to facilitate analysis, making clear how the coding of the transcript was intended to be as accurate as possible. These examples also served a means for differentiation between codes and themes between researchers as the finalised coding scheme was then used to determine intercoder reliability. To check for this, a 10% sample of the complete transcript data was sent to two independent researchers. This data (amounted to three transcripts, one from each participant group) was coded by the researchers using the coding scheme provided. The recommended minimum match of 0.7 indicating agreement with Cohen's Kappa calculations was achieved (Rovai, Baker and Ponton 2013).

## Coding Scheme

Table 5 - Coding scheme conveying analysis codes within wider emergent themes supported by examples from the data set

Theme	Code	Description	Example
Interpretation of art	Definitions	Descriptions, examples and features of Islamic art, views on definitions, use of terminology	"I don't think you can define modern and contemporary art as Islamic" PC.17
	Collecting and curating	Display, marketing, communication, of art in museums, galleries etc. Acquisition, preservation and conservation.	"The titles are so important in an exhibition, if you get the title wrong it all goes down the pan." PC.17
Identity and representation	Identity/Representation	Culture, heritage, religion, nationality, ethnicity, community, place	"the way they merge that influence maybe from the Middle East or from a Muslim heritage with their kind of sense of Britishness." PC.17
	Self-disclosure and awareness	Self-description, personal concerns, role, duty, perceptions of how others may see them, how they see themselves	"I think Islamic just kind of, I think it just adds an element that I don't feel I'm good enough to have yet." PC.16
	Politics, media and public perception in the context of UK locality	Islam or Muslims in media, public impressions of Islam, associations - positive and negative, exposure	"the bad press frankly is relentless and its jolly difficult to balance it when you have quite so much coming out." PS.24
Attitudes towards the use of digital technologies	Digital art and digital technologies	Opinions, use, concerns, convenience, inconvenience, engagement, resources	"ease of computer graphics and rendering programs allows people to produce a certain work quite easily." PS.25
	Handmade or using hands	Use of the hand in production/practice, comparison to doing things a different, possibly non-digital.	"...it always starts with the pen and ink. So, my hand is still very much part of the process." PA.05

	Creativity and Authorship	Decision-making in the production process, ownership of making the work	"as long as the technology doesn't become more important than the imagination" PS.22
	Resources	Access to digital resources, use of technology for presentation, accessibility	"with technology, you always expect something to go wrong. And it invariably does." PC.16
Artistic practice and process	Philosophy of art-making	Inspiration or motivation, themes/concepts in work, intentions, goals, purpose, outlook	"For me art is a journey of self-discovery and it's also a journey it has to be a journey of complete honesty and lack of compromise" PA.06
	Practice and process	Methods and materials	"I do all the soldering, the hardware, the electronics, and then I'll bring to him... we use the Arduino board and a Raspberry Pi" PA.07
Activity and developments in the art scene	Audience reception/opinion	Engagement, response, perception, preference. UK and abroad.	"...the very wealthy private collectors in the Middle East favour the big names..." PA.05
	Continuity and Development	Contemporary art, tradition, changes over time, in recent or future years. Future aspirations/goals	"I would like to see craft being recognised as being absolutely equal with the so called fine art" PA.06
	People in the arts	Other artists, curators, people involved in any aspect of the arts	"Bridget Riley" PA.01 "Jackson Pollock" PC.13
	Support	Funding, supporting artists, providing opportunities	"I mean it's very difficult in the UK in terms of funding..." PC.19
	Venues and Events	Museums, galleries, festivals, exhibitions, prizes	"V&A... British Museum" PA.07 "Jameel Prize" PA.10
Dissemination and accumulation of knowledge	Education, qualifications or academia	Educational background, on the subject of education, institutions, awards, subjects	"I was an academic write off at school like many people within art school I

			was fairly dyslexic” PC.06
	Art History	Western POV, East vs West	“so-called Islamic art history is very conservative and very much entrenched in traditional methodology of art history” PS.26
	Experiences and past influences	Views and experiences related to art, work experience, career development, growing up, activities	“...it was the first time I saw art as not just an object that you kind of look at from afar.” PA.07
	Training, learning practice or art through a master	Tacit/experiential learning, hands-on and face-to-face training under a master or tutor	“I think there’s something very important about that sort of transmission from person to person...” PS.21
Impact of faith and spirituality on artistic-practice	Faith and spirituality	Personal feelings, symbolism, faith, effect of faith or beliefs, adherence to religious beliefs	“I think for a lot of artists that consider their work to be Islamic then they do find a spiritual release or a spiritual growth” PA.03

#### 4.5 Findings and Discussion

The semi-structured and conversational method of interviewing was well-suited to drawing out stakeholder perceptions on Islamic art and more specifically digital Islamic art. The included focus on the use of digital technologies led to a better understanding of stakeholder sentiments regarding its use in artistic practice, and how it may affect those dealing with the collecting, curating and even conservation of such works. Interestingly, themes outside of these topics also emerged including the knock-on effect of negative representation of Islam in the media, and views regarding education in the UK as a means to create a more informed and inclusive society in future.

The final themed code groups were as follows:

- Interpretation of art
- Identity and representation
- Attitudes towards the use of digital technologies
- Artistic practice and process
- Impact of faith and spirituality on artistic-practice
- Dissemination and accumulation of knowledge
- Activity and developments in the art scene

Some of the final themes were a large and natural result of the field and type of work engaged in by all participants. For example, the theme 'activity and developments in the art scene', although not immediately significant in itself, made up a large proportion of the content and allowed for discussion to expand into other subjects. Interpretation of art was another area that would not be considered an unexpected theme, however, as will be discussed further, the codes within this and further themes, were of more significance due to the context in which they were spoken of and the continued concerns stakeholders face within the Islamic art scene in the UK and perhaps even beyond.

### **Interpretation of art**

Knowledge of differing opinions, vague definitions and long descriptions of the term Islamic art, as identified in the literature review, led to the inclusion of this topic in this study. As has been illustrated within previous chapters of this research, most notably within the literature review, and now is evident through the findings of this study too, the desire to clarify what is meant by 'Islamic art' prevails. The 'problem' appears to be present not just across academia but also within the art world, something that artists have encountered as an extension of their own identity and practice.



The relationship between participants and the use of the term 'Islamic art' is, as was to be expected, a complex one. However, through their responses, it was possible to determine in which cases they were more comfortable to apply this term and in which cases they deemed it inappropriate. These sentiments were however, most notably expressed with more emphasis by curators than either of the other participant groups.

*"Usually we'd only call Islamic something that was historic"*

Curator PC.17

The key distinction made here was that curators were more comfortable using the term 'Islamic art' to denote historical artefacts. This was due to the less transnational and global nature in the past where objects were easier to associate with regional production and design. These were objects produced within the context of the existence of an Islamic empire, therefore within a specified historical timeline and most likely originating from lands where there would have been a dominant Muslim patron and/or population. A distinction between historical and contemporary is also made by the Islamic Art and Material Culture Subject Specialist Network on their website (2014), where scholars and curators are working on encouraging and supporting awareness of smaller collections of Islamic art in museums and galleries across the UK. It is possibly due to the changing nature of contemporary communities being in a more globalised era, with growing diaspora from Muslim heritage across the world, and a wider range of art forms, subjects, styles and geographies. Classification of contemporary art will have inevitable differences to those of historical examples. Therefore, the same markers of time and place of origin used for historical examples, will not be as closely related to contemporary examples.

Participants were asked if they could provide a definition of Islamic art and also what the characteristics of this might be. Many commented on the difficulty in defining Islamic art and provided disclaimers accordingly.

*"The definitions are flawed"*

Artist PA.01

*"Ooh, I mean [laughs], that's a tough one because it comes through so many filters of what that might be."*

Artist PA.09

*"You can't define it, it's a bit like trying to define Marx in a way. It's still an abstract notion so you can't really nail it, and say this is what it is ... generally I suppose people perceive this as the kind of the traditional art forms of calligraphy, geometric design, and you know floral kind of illumination, and geometric patterns..."*

Artist PA.02

As can be seen in the latter example, after an initial hesitance, participants would go on to describe what they felt were generally perceived to be visual characteristics of Islamic art. These tended to include the visual elements and styles identified and discussed in the literature review: calligraphy, geometry, and floral patterns.

Participant artist PA.03 suggested a conditional method of determining if an art work could be called Islamic art: *"Some people would say 'if I can put it in a mosque comfortably without offending anyone' then that should be Islamic art"*. I personally found this to be a highly relevant view - to relate Islamic art back to an essence of its roots in religious context and make it relevant to current religious understanding too. This view of Islamic art being suitable for placement within a religious space

has been one of the key differentiations made by Islamic art historians, stating that figurative art did exist in Islamic art history but was usually produced for secular environments.

When asked of their previous experience of being exhibited under themes related to the term 'Islamic art', artists and curators on their behalf, would state that artists 'don't like labels'. Curators also expressed not liking to 'label artists'. However, curators are required to present their collections with some kind of grouping that allows for ease of interpretation, their main goal to communicate how their items relate to cultures and people (Tate 2003). Examples were provided by some participants of adopting change in classification for purposes of curation both successfully and critically. The renaming of the Islamic art galleries at The Met in New York was seen to be an understandable and welcome change, where groupings were based on individual regions of the world. In contrast, Los Angeles Contemporary Museum of Art's choice to name their two-part exhibition 'Islamic Art Now: Contemporary Art of the Middle East' was not as favoured. The critique of the title was mentioned by two curators in interviews but also widely echoed in reviews at the time of its launch in 2015. UCLA Professor Ali Behdad in an online review of the exhibition on the NPR news site (2015), commented:

*"I think the subtitle of this show is actually a more accurate description — artists from the Middle East...Because many of these artists — I think the overwhelming majority of these artists — are actually not Muslim in the very traditional sense of the word at all. They are incredibly secular. Many of them live in the West. If you called Andy Warhol a Christian artist would that make sense?"*

Interestingly, a connection to the religion of Islam is made through Behdad's claim of it being disconnected from Islamic art, and indicates their assumption that the art relates to Muslims or created only by Muslims.

In regards to classifying of digital arts, participants from all groups were asked what they understood of the term 'digital art'. Some participants, who were perhaps not as familiar with digital art (based on their own comments relaying this), gave the example of digital prints, digital photography or screen based media, such as a film or a video.

The following definition, based on understanding from the literature review, was then provided prior to asking participants further questions regarding their own use or familiarity with digital technology in the artwork they were dealing with:

Any hardware (for example computers, web cameras and projectors), any software used to create or manipulate digital media (for example Photoshop, 3DSM or Flash) and also online based networks (such as social media sites like Facebook and Twitter), to create real-time, time-based or generative art, etc.

This led to the discussion of digital Islamic art, where it became a point of contradiction for some, one curator stating it was an oxymoron. Curator PC.17 advised against using this terminology in naming an exhibition. It would be "like a death knell for the project". Their negative response was not just on the 'Islamic' element within the description but more so due to the possible combination of this with digital art. Another participant, artist PA.10, was very specific to describe digital Islamic art as "not traditional" because the digital aspect was being connected to the contemporary field and so by using contemporary methods, the traditional was lost.

When asked for examples of any art and artists in the UK who produce what might be termed digital Islamic art, participants were able to give only a few names. They generally felt this type of art was being produced widely but were unable to

remember many examples. However, the artist participant group were able to provide more examples than any other group – indicating an awareness of the work of their peers. Zarah Hussain was often mentioned as someone who was producing work that was both Islamic art and digital. Her public projections on to facades of buildings and her algorithmic based animations were the most memorable examples. Another artist whose work was mentioned in this area was Soraya Syed, who had recently produced a hologram installation at Cartwright Hall (Telegraph & Argus 2015).

### **Attitudes towards the use of digital technologies**

When speaking to curators on the topic of digital art and technologies, discussions regarding preservation, conservation and the availability of resources within the museum and gallery workspaces were brought to light. The practicalities of dealing with artworks of a digital nature brought up more concerns than praise. These concerns included the lack of expertise to deal with troubleshooting which was seen by curators as an inevitable occurrence. There was a sense that the lack of knowledge or familiarity with digital technologies as a medium would be more problematic than worth the effort for the curator:

*“I mean it never bloody works and people always send you all this equipment and you're like do I have to do this? It's just, it's problematic”*

Curator PC.16

These concerns come in light of recent articles highlighting the dangers of not being able to curate artworks in the future if they rely on what may become by then obsolete digital technologies. BBC News published an article on *Saving digital art from an early death* (Copestake 2013), and The Library of Congress has sought answers from Jon Ippolito, Professor of New Media at the University of Maine, and Richard Rinehart at Bucknell University, on *Collecting and preserving digital art* (Owens 2014). The solutions being adopted by conservators and restorers of older

digital technologies has been to try to maintain the technology as best they can by cleaning and repairing the machines. They also rely on collecting unwanted machines from waste. A further solution has been to migrate the data or material to newer digital formats allowing it to be played on machines that restorers hope will have a longer lifespan (Copestake 2013).

With the increase in digital media and the evolution of formats being used by artists, the challenge of working with, collecting, archiving, preserving and conserving such material has also increased (FvF Productions 2015). In response to the growing use and collection of digital materials in all sectors, it has become necessary to not only invest in practical solutions for developing archives but also the pedagogy of digital archiving and documenting digital collections. In order to address this growing need, a number of courses, guidance documents, reports and strategies have been developed and published by leading institutes, targeting both professional and academic groups. Included in this offering has been a recent online course *Introduction to Digital Curation* led by University College London (UCLeXtend 2017) and the publication of a white paper on *Preserving and Emulating Digital Art Objects* by Cornell University (Reiger 2015). A Digital Curation Centre was also set up at the University of Edinburgh advising on the preservation concerning the more specific form of research data.

Addressing the ongoing development of digital material and policies as well as the changing physicality of digital data and storage, recommendations have also been made by large archival institutions in the UK including the British Library and the National Archives (Brown 2008). Guidance notes have also been published by Digitising Contemporary Art (DCA) on best practices for long-term preservation of digital files (Henriksen et al 2012), whilst Digital Meets Culture, an online forum for exchanging information regarding digital technologies and its impact on culture, have also advised on preservation of digital art (Ruggiero 2013). These examples are just a snapshot of the growing investment and drive to ensure digital art,

archives, objects and software can travel with us through time, and contribute to future development and knowledge through all things digital and non-digital.

On a more optimistic note, outside of the practical scenario of displaying or conserving digital Islamic art, appreciation of such work was not hindered by the type of medium or form used or produced by artists. Curators stated they were not concerned about mediums or techniques in terms of how the work is artistically valued, as they felt strongly that the artwork needs to say something and be relevant to the story or narrative of the exhibition or display for which it was being considered.

Many of the artist participants commented on the conveniences of utilising digital technologies in their practice, that it allowed them to produce work that was either impossible to create without digital technologies, or would take a very long time to create it doing so manually (by hand). Some examples of the convenience in using digital technology included:

- Ease
- Speed
- Opportunity
- Accessibility
- Innovation
- Efficiency

*“The computer finds the most efficient way to get from yellow to green”*

Artist PA.01

*“I like the fact that I can visualise my design and there's no kind of making up as you go along. It's important, and so the digital process makes it so great to be able to visualize that... the digital process is probably 50% of what I do when it comes to painting.”*

## Artist PA.02

Interestingly, this positive attitude towards using digital technologies as part of the art-making process was then followed by some form of justification, assuring a genuine creative process on their part. Participant PA.02 recalled instances where other artists or audiences had observed what he calls his 'blueprint', a digital mock-up he would produce in advance of painting public murals to a live audience. He compared these mock-ups to architectural plans, where all detail and colours are pre-planned to the 'dot'. Audience members had exclaimed in response to this 'blueprint': *"My God it's already there. Is that it?"*. This was interpreted as expressing doubts over the artist's creative process, with assumptions the computer or software programme was 'doing the work' for the artist.

In the case of artist participant PA.06, preparatory computer drawings also formed part of his creative practice but he stated that he did not wish to exhibit these as standalone pieces. The drawings were experimental and usually led to a final painted art work. He felt the drawings did not convey the part-manual process involved, where he was responsible for making the decisions and choices, not the computer. Both PA.02 and PA.06 artists want to show the human aspect of the art-making, where they are being acknowledged for making choices and decisions, leaving less doubt of their authorship of the work.

A related sentiment regarding authorship was expressed by British artist Ranaaz Shahid in a TV interview for the *Living the Life* show on *Islam Channel* in 2016. Shahid spoke of not wanting to 'cheat' by using digital technology and made choices to paint, cut and etch, sometimes very intricate patterns, into various materials by hand. Another British artist, Siddiqa Juma, captioned the following on an Instagram post of one of her digital artworks in February 2017:

*"Many people dismiss digital art because they don't think much work is required to create an image digitally. Actually it can be*



*very time consuming if not more time consuming than painting a canvas.”*

Further artist participants within the interviews also emphasised their decision-making input, where they were using digital technologies as tools, explaining very clearly that any use of digital technologies was a means to create in a particular way, but that the technology was not the creative force behind the artworks. In almost all cases, a digital process was combined with a manual process and so the artists could be described as adopting a hybrid approach to creating their work. Even in examples where the artist was using a digital medium and format to present their work (for example where generative art was being presented as an animation), they still expressed that the digital technology was used as a tool to present a visual language, such as traditional Islamic geometry.

Creativity was discussed by participants in relation to art-making when speaking of specific works and how it might appear to others if they used particular tools and processes for those pieces. The notion of creativity was being emphasised here as being a contribution from the artist to the work, but was presented as assurance that the creativity was not being governed by the digital technology being adopted.

However, creativity can be generated over a long period of time, over the course of an artist's career even, informing artworks in development, and in response to a conceptual problem that the artist devises to resolve in their work (Mace and Ward 2002).

Creativity should be considered as an internal force that can be manifest through the art-making process, not reliant on just the material and tools that are used. By making a change in conditions within an environment, or in changing the framework in which creativity is directed by use of particular tools, can also enrich the creative output (Tillander 2011). Using digital technologies can provide

stimulation, encourage thinking of the creative process from a differing viewpoint and lead to exploration and questioning of the concepts art, as indicated in artists' responses to working with computers in previous studies (Edmonds and Candy 2002). These comments support those presented by interviewees in this research study, and corroborates with the positive conveniences experienced by them (as listed above). The efficient working process mentioned by some participants, and the opportunity to innovate, was enabled when making artworks with the use of digital technologies, indicating that digital technologies could facilitate creativity and the creative process (Burton 2005).

A further real-life example of creativity in being tested through digital technologies has been demonstrated through the Masterpieces series of exhibitions which took place in Singapore in 2013 and Malaysia in 2014 (Khalil 2014). Curated by Iola Lenzi, who specialises in Asian art, the premise was to select a number of established and emerging artists to exhibit works made using the Samsung Galaxy Note. For many artists, this was a completely new direction, and a deliberate challenge for them. However, with perseverance, the eventual outcome led to exhibited pieces that did allow for a successful display evidencing that creativity need not be hindered by adapting to new digital tools. It also allowed for the work to be shared with wider audiences through an exhibition online, using this larger platform for the work to be viewed across the globe as well as in a physical art space (Lim 2013).

Closely related to the above sentiments of creativity were those of authorship which is said to be one of the issues arising within the field of digital art (Simanowski 2011), most especially in generative art (Paul 2016). The use of technology certainly aids or enables particular processes in art-making without which the piece would not exist. Therefore, the artist becomes almost reliant on that technology if they wish to achieve the particular outcome for which it is being used. Related to this is the action of claiming authorship, or as is sometimes said 'taking credit' for the work. However, acknowledging the role of digital technology

in the process of creativity does not lessen the role, or even the necessity, of the artist in artistic practice or in the process of making. It has in previous studies even been found to facilitate creativity and shown to be a marker of the artists level of knowledge in order to be able to utilise such methods in their practice (Edmonds and Candy 2002). The conceptual ideas and ability to manifest them to reality is an accreditation to the artist (Gosling 2014).

Both artists and curators suggested that digital technology should be used as the best method for making an artwork as opposed to being a method to showcase the technology. Participant artist P.A.03 advised *“what I don’t want to see is sort of you know, poorly done calligraphy mixed in for the sake of making something look Islamic”*. An interesting point regarding implementation, which, if followed, would assure that hierarchy in medium would not supersede appreciation for arts, be it fine art or new media.

My own experimental approach to practice incorporates exploration. Seeking possibilities through emergent technologies provides a sense of excitement. However, it could be all too easy to use a digital technique or technology just for the sake of doing so. And perhaps there is a sense amongst artists of wanting to be the first to work in a particular way or create new work at the height of innovation. It leaves a fine line between intending to create something fresh, new and appreciated by an audience and creating something that is entirely devoted to a singular unchanging practice. The latter would imply a lack in development and change, which, for me is a necessary part of learning and progression. A comment by participant artist and scholar PS.22 touched on all these aspects within the art-making process:

*“I want to have something to show, something to wow the audience.  
So, something, it's just evolving, you work on something and I think*

*ooh maybe I can try this, let's see what happens if I do that... It's just something that you know, sort of developed organically really."*

*Scholar PS.22*

Another interesting aspect of this theme was the topic of a handmade aspect to art-making. Many artist participants specifically mentioned where they were doing something 'by hand' whilst speaking of the integration of technologies alongside this. They might sketch ideas, then digitise these and then use a graphics software such as Adobe Illustrator (used by many of the artists in this study), to then further produce their work. In the case of participant artist PA.06, they had also contemplated the use of 3D printing as a possible avenue and medium to pursue in the near future. But they expressed that they would still like to 'manipulate' it further, either by spray painting or sanding the pieces, both processes done by hand. Participant artist PA.05, also made a comparison between working by hand on paper versus the use of the computer to create and experiment with calligraphic compositions. The ability to undo a decision on the computer, duplicate, replicate and edit one's work was something that cannot be done by hand. Once something has been inked (traditionally calligraphic work was almost always created with ink on paper) it is not possible to make alterations.

I personally agree that there is an experimental nature to creating or making something by hand, at least for a new work, which the artist cannot then 'undo'. You cannot be entirely sure what the action of manipulating and shaping a form by hand will result in, and for some media, some actions become permanent results within the material. Perhaps the unknown outcome is an inherent part of applying the 'human touch'. This would then aid towards making that object more unique. However, there is perhaps more pressure in these circumstances too, knowing that if time and resources are short, then the outcome needs to be correct sooner. Something entirely handmade would need to be redone from start if the artist is

not pleased with the outcome, as it cannot be undone step by step as with a computer made artwork.

### **Identity and representation in the context of UK locality**

The theme of identity and representation in the context of UK locality was possibly the most insightful aspect drawn out through the interviews. Topics within this theme brought relevance of place, society and locality into focus, specifically in relation to the impact of politics and media representation of the Muslim community and the faith of Islam. To add further context to this discussion, almost half of interview participants, across all specialist groups, were from minority ethnic backgrounds. Looking at the break-down of participant ethnicities within each group, 7 of 10 artists, 4 of 9 curators, and 5 of 8 scholars were of non-white background; in total 16 of 27. The question of faith was not directly asked of participants but many divulged this either within the interviews or shared this openly in the public realm. Therefore, at least 12 of the 27 participants were known to be Muslim.

Unfortunately, this theme encompassed one of the more negative aspects of the research, where sentiments indicated a growing awareness of hostility, resentment, dislike and generally just a negative attitude to all things 'Islam' from the outside world and the public. It was implied that the media played some part in this as the media was where the sentiments were said to be most expressed.

*“At the moment, everything is so negative, and everything that people believe about Islam is so awful. I can't even bring myself to read an article in the Guardian, the comments below the line is just like, wow, you know people hate us, really hate us”*

*Artist PA.01*

It has been suggested that the increasing spate of news coverage, that has gone beyond that expected in the aftermath of any newsworthy event, has led to a momentum unprecedented and unseen in other pockets of society. Elizabeth Poole presents the topic of Muslims in the media and their negative representation through the context of orientalism (Poole 2002). This latching-on of any Muslim-related topic is considered as 'other-ing', leading to division of a whole community from the rest of society. An extensive study funded by Channel 4 Dispatches on the representation of Islam and Muslims in Britain between 2001-2008 found the discourse adopted by the press to be heavily weighted towards the negative:

*“The language used about British Muslims reflects the negative or problematic contexts in which they tend to appear. Four of the five most common discourses used about Muslims in the British press associate Islam/Muslims with threats, problems or in opposition to dominant British values. So, for example, the idea that Islam is dangerous, backward or irrational is present in 26% of stories. By contrast, only 2% of stories contained the proposition that Muslims supported dominant moral values.*

*Similarly, we found that the most common nouns used in relation to British Muslims were terrorist, extremist, Islamist, suicide bomber and militant, with very few positive nouns (such as 'scholar') used. The most common adjectives used were radical, fanatical, fundamentalist, extremist and militant. Indeed, references to radical Muslims outnumber references to moderate Muslims by 17 to one.”*

Examples of media articles highlighting an 'otherness' felt by the Muslim community were also noted with the Independent's 'A third of Muslims say they feel under greater suspicion in the last few years' (2015) and The Telegraph's 'One in Three Muslims do not Feel Part of British Culture' (2016).

The situation is described by PA.01, where those people in a more public facing position are asked to speak for and represent the views of a wider Muslim community is not an isolated case. This was also demonstrated in the article *Art gets things out in the Open – Young British Muslim artists tell their stories* (Guardian 2015), in which interviews of four artists of Muslim heritage were asked to speak on the topic of 'Cultural tensions in the UK over the past 15 years' (Adams 2015). They were asked to what degree they felt responsible to use their voices to counter negative stereotypes faced by young British Muslims. Although not officially appointed spokespersons for the Muslim community, the opportunity provided these artists with a space and voice to respond to the negative rhetoric and widespread misunderstanding amongst the general public regarding the Muslim community. It also gave insight into the personal impact of national and international attacks, carried out in the name of Islam and Muslims, had on the artists' work. The work of Mohammed Ali, for example, incorporated the subject of surveillance after the government proposed to increase this as a response to the Charlie Hebdo attacks in Paris in 2015. Playwright and actor Yusra Warsama mentioned the impact of the 11 September attacks, the Iraq war, and how times have changed for Muslim children in Britain between then and now:

*"In the 1990s, I had the opportunity of growing up with freedom of thought and space to think. Now there is such a negative feeling about Islam that young Muslims don't have that opportunity... Why should a 15-year-old have to be asked all the time: how British are you? Or: how Muslim are you?"*

(Adams 2015)

Art critic and contemporary artist Rasheed Araeen, has addressed 'othering' within UK society through his own work for many years in the UK, albeit with a touch of irony. Araeen endeavours to provide differing views of art, referring to himself as a

minimalist influenced by Islamic art. Being of Pakistani origin but having moved and settled in the UK in the 1970s, Araeen's work could be described as an example of East meets West. Although this is not unusual in the current diverse society in the UK, it was still a fairly new and small community of Pakistanis that Araeen joined when he initially migrated to the UK.

Araeen used his work to make controversial statements regarding the lack of acceptance for art by non-white artists in mainstream art venues, including his own (Araeen 1999). In 1990, Araeen installed a large billboard poster in a number of key international locations including London (Araeen 1999). The poster was a printed image of a rug of Eastern style containing writing in Urdu script. The style of script used was very similar to that of Arabic Qur'anic script.



Figure 21 - *The Golden Verses* installation, Rasheed Araeen, London, 1990  
(Photo courtesy of the artist)

The text within the artwork read as follows:



*“WHITE PEOPLE ARE VERY GOOD PEOPLE. THEY HAVE VERY WHITE AND SOFT SKIN. THEIR HAIR IS GOLDEN AND THEIR EYES ARE BLUE. THEIR CIVILISATION IS THE BEST CIVILISATION. IN THEIR COUNTRIES THEY LIVE LIFE WITH LOVE AND AFFECTION. AND THERE IS NO RACIAL DISCRIMINATION WHATSOEVER. WHITE PEOPLE ARE VERY GOOD PEOPLE.”*

Although the work is composed of visual elements characteristic of Islamic art, the translation of the text turns the tables on who is ‘in the know’ by incorporating a stereotypical image of western people (blond with blue eyes) from the perspective of a non-Western. The text is disguised in the calligraphy of the Urdu script, the alphabet of which is very similar to Arabic. At the time, most non-Urdu reading viewers who were familiar with the visual style of Arabic script assumed the text was a sample of verses from the Qur'an. The work caused some controversy and resulted in violent reactions. Members from the Muslim community demanded that the verses be removed as, assuming they were verses from the Qur'an, they felt it was a disrespectful display of divine scripture. Backlash from non-Muslims centred on a concern for the British culture being invaded; their retaliation amounting to graffiti over the work. In presenting the public with this type of art, Araeen highlighted the issues that arise when a society is exposed to that which is unfamiliar.

In recent years, sentiments from far-right groups against the Muslim community have become more vocal (albeit evolving from anti-Asian to anti-Muslim racism) (Poynting and Mason 2007), and have had further reach due to online media and a rise in Muslim-centred headlines. The focus on the Muslim community has increased due to the political climate both in the UK and abroad in light of attacks in Western localities carried out by terrorists who claim to do so in the name of the Islamic faith. Whenever an attack or atrocity is carried out by such perpetrators it brings the topic of Islam and Muslims into the headlines. Since September 11 2001,

there have been eight attacks in the UK which are linked to so-called 'Islamic' terrorists. Regardless of declarations made by local Muslim community leaders that Muslims do not share the views of these terrorists, there has still been backlash towards Muslims who are being attacked for their faith. A growing sentiment of Islamophobia is therefore a concern for Muslims who are increasingly being treated as outsiders in the UK but who actually feel their British identity very strongly and proudly (Ali 2015).

Perhaps due to a rising awareness of negative rhetoric in the media has led to further opportunities to present another perspective. An example of artists trying to come out of the negative rhetoric by using art as a means to encourage a more positive perception was Saba Riffat's series of workshops to engage locals in Dewsbury. Described as a 'Muslim artist' in an article by Huffington Post, Riffat was able to draw in new audiences and start an indirect dialogue of integration in response to recent tensions within the diverse Dewsbury community (Bowden 2017). The format of these workshops involved colouring of geometric patterns that she had published in a colouring book, using this method as a means to bring people from varied backgrounds together through a simple and enjoyable creative activity.

The media has also turned to humour in order to increase dialogue and communication on topics that the public may not be as knowledgeable on; a light-hearted approach intended to perhaps create awareness without increasing tensions. BBC Three produced a series of videos regarding the stereotyping regularly faced by a variety of minority groups in British society. Amongst the topics were included videos on: '7 Questions Muslims are tired of hearing' (2016) and 'Things Not To Say To Someone Who Wears A Burqa' (2017). This gave a platform for Muslims to respond to a number of questions they face from non-Muslims in their everyday lives, with the hope to raise awareness and dispel ignorance through

a larger and more instant audience. The videos have since become available to view on BBC iPlayer and on YouTube.

### **Impact of faith and Spirituality on Artistic Practice**

When artists spoke of faith and spirituality they did so in two differing senses, largely based on whether they were religiously inclined or not. For those who were Muslim, there was a general sentiment that they would not engage in art that contradicted their religious principles. However, this did vary according to each artist's personal interpretation of those principles. And many participants, including non-artists, acknowledged that even within the faith of Islam, differing interpretations naturally led to a varied idea and personal choice of what was acceptable and what was not.

Some artists made very specific choices to not use the human figure, or if they did, the work produced would not be for a predominantly Muslim audience and certainly not for use in a religious context. Artist PA.03 made a deliberate and informed choice to include the figure in some of his more recent work and explained that the audience for this type of work would be different to those who would be drawn to his 'usual' calligraphy work. Interestingly, as some artists, like myself, choose to avoid the human figure, the non-inclusion of the figure was not something expressed only by Muslim artists. Artist PA.06, who is not a Muslim but is very familiar with the Islamic faith and culture, and has also exhibited as part of the Islamic Arts Festival in Sharjah, UAE works with all three types of Islamic visual elements. He also includes Islamic scripture in the subject of his paintings and expressed that he did not feel he was capable of doing the human form 'justice'. This expression echoes the Islamic concept that only God is perfect and therefore only He can create life.

Another concept within Islam is that skills, like blessings, are bestowed upon you by God, and not something you can assume to gain or produce. Artist and scholar

PS.21 expressed a deep connection to his work which he related to the above Islamic concepts. He felt that the practice of art-making, certainly where it relates to mathematics and philosophy could allow one to channel to a better state through a sort of meditation:

*"I'm not a Muslim, but I do feel that when I'm working with these forms, there is something, there's a profound beauty in them which I think does relate to a kind of spiritual being. It's very hard to express but I think when you're working with the designs, working with the patterns, I think they are able to take you to contemplative states, so you can see them as kind of vehicles or tools for contemplation."*

*PS.21*

Artist PA. 10 was possibly the most expressive regarding her Islamic and spiritual connection as channelled through art-making, admitting that she had hoped her pursuit in Islamic art education would bring her closer to God. She described that repetitive strokes in her work were accompanied by repetition of words to praise God. Although she was the most expressive and open about the spiritual and Islamic essence in her work, she was shy to call herself an 'Islamic' artist. She was not opposed to this term in itself but said she was not 'good enough' to be termed as such. It was not clarified if she meant good enough as a Muslim or good as an artist.

Artists preferred for their work to be judged upon its own merit and not have to be seen as role models. This was something highlighted by PA.01 who had previously been sent comments by members of the public calling her up on any perceived shortcomings in her portrayal of a 'Muslim woman', something she had never invited:

*“People have an expectation of you individually, as a human being when you put the word 'Islamic' anywhere near your name. I have people writing me letters from all around the world, I get loads of kind of crackpots emailing me and saying ... 'how do you hold yourself as an authority in Islam?' I never said that. I'm not an authority on Islam”*  
Artist PA.01

In light of this complex portrayal of Muslims in Britain, the ‘British values’ of the ‘moderate’ majority is left to be answered by those who engage with the community and represent them in other spheres of life, artists being one such example.

When discussing the use of the term ‘Islamic art’ to describe their work to the public, participants referred to a fear of putting their audiences off. Terms such as ‘toxic’, ‘dangerous’, and ‘scary’ were used to make the stark point. These sentiments echo a similar view expressed by art historian Annette Hagedorn (2009) who described the recent perceptions of Islamic art and culture as becoming increasingly “volatile”. In the last seven years Muslims and the topic of Islam have featured in the news thousands more times, with continued negative associations (Baker 2013). According to Miqdaad Versi (2016) of the Muslim Council of Britain, the negative portrayal of Muslims in the British press has been a major contributory factor to the recent increase of Islamophobia in the UK, and is something the press should be held responsible for. It is these mounting negative associations that have led to a kind of repulsion to the use of the term ‘Islamic’ by artists in relation to their work and to exhibitions they participate in.

Another form of spirituality spoken of by participants was that of a connection and drive to form connections between their work and a higher purpose. Artist PA.07 spoke of the community spirit in her work, the spirit of connectedness in a celestial sense, the connection between ourselves, art and the wider universe:

*“I don’t follow a religion, with my work I think there is a sort of spiritual side to it but it’s mainly about, so it’s to do with using abstraction as a means to kind of highlight our connection to art, but also to each other and then to the universe... then using interactivity as a way to sort of further highlight our connections to each other”*  
Artist PA.07

This sense of spirituality that connects people, could be described as being community-oriented. The idea of connecting would resolve divisive rhetoric between Muslim and non-Muslims and brings us back to the ability to enable impact through art.

Regardless of their connection or non-connection to the Islamic faith, all artists acknowledged the impact that Islamic culture or Islamic art had had on their own interests and artistic careers. In some cases, it was their admiration of existing historical Islamic art and architecture, their search for a sense of truth and place amongst unanswered questions, and for others a feeling of rightness that they could not fully describe but felt would be fulfilled by following their chosen path of artistic practice.

### **Dissemination and Accumulation of Knowledge**

This theme featured heavily in where participants discussed recollections of their time in education, how this lead to their current careers and interest in the arts and how their experiences shaped their journey to the present. Many had studied subjects to higher education level, all having graduated from subjects related to their profession in some way. However, their experiences with the people they encountered within the arts, artists they had been inspired by or whose work had influenced their own and had admired, were also mentioned. There were influences from well-known established iconic artists such as Bridget Riley, Jackson

Pollock, Greta Marks and Frieda Kahlo. There was also mention of artists Tracey Emin, and Damien Hirst illustrating a level of status and hierarchy of establishment within mainstream art.

For those participants currently working in educational institutes the topic of education and the sharing of knowledge was understandably of importance from a developmental and pedagogical perspective. Some concern related to the teaching of Islamic art history in the wider context of art history in general. Participants across all groups were aware of a 'western' perspective of Islamic art and commented on the historical placement and understanding of Islamic art by general audiences in variance to other, non-western perspectives. Scholars and curators were particularly aware of this in relation to its impact on classification and interpretation of art as discussed earlier in this chapter. However, from a pedagogical perspective they expressed that this had been shaped from a Western approach related to being in a Western locality and counteracting this would require changes in curricula. Scholars suggested that perhaps teaching students about the wider cultures of the world from a younger age would result in the appropriate changes. Participant scholar PS.27 commented on her experience of teaching BA students who had "not heard anything of that part of the world". It was speculated that inclusion of world arts in educational programmes could lead to further interest in Islamic art by a wider public and increase audiences.

Another tenet of the education of art and artistic practice is that of tacit methods for teaching and learning, quite different to theoretical based learning, and certainly not something that applies to self-learning through books or distance learning. A demonstrative, training and master-led form of teaching art was encouraged by some of the scholars and a number of artists in this study. This linked to the discussion in the literature review regarding learning particular art-related skills through a master. The desire on the part of participants in this study

was that this method of teaching not be replaced with only online or text-book based methods.

### **Activity and Developments in the Art Scene**

Regardless of their role in the arts, all participants discussed their awareness of the developments, current trends, popularity and views of the art scene both locally, nationally and internationally. Some participants, were more involved in promoting, and providing opportunities for artists in the locality of the UK, some targeting with specific audiences such as Muslim communities. A number of curators were involved in events that would allow them to negotiate the art scene at a mainstream level, and some were specific to scenes within the general art scene such as the new media and digital arts, British Islamic art and others more focussed on Middle Eastern art or Iranian art. As a result, the topics and perception of artist exposure, opportunities and support through investment or funding also varied.

Curator PC.18 who has worked very closely with artists of Muslim background in the UK, many of whom produce Islamic art, and feels that there should be more focus on these local artists. A number of artists expressed similar concerns, noting that there was a lot of focus on international Middle Eastern artists who were then collected, exhibited and commissioned within prominent museums and galleries in the UK, more so than local British artists. Presenting another perspective, scholar PS.25 also related the relevance of locality and the reflection of this within practice but with an architectural example. He spoke of the design and concept of religious Islamic buildings that had been erected in the UK to emulate those from the East, as opposed to representing the local context and environment. He expressed a desire to see designs and concepts that were innovative in forming a bridge in cultures, what could be described as a hybridised expression of culture in architecture that would suit both the existing British architectural styles and those of more recognisable Islamic features.



Asked about why there may not be as many British artists' artworks featured in exhibitions and collections in the UK, curator PC.17 suggested that there may be a perception that the work was not of a similar standard to that of international artists, but stated that she did not believe this to be the case herself. Curator PC.17 spoke of her desire to see artists in the UK presenting aspects of their identity in their work, where influence from Islamic, Middle Eastern or Muslim heritage may merge with their "sense of Britishness". Artist PA.03 mentioned these influences being the driving force behind his initial venture into the arts and expanding this into commercial products for the British Muslim market some years ago. This was echoed by artist PA.05 who consciously considered her place in the West, how her position in a global and local capacity inspired her to do something more altruistic, something that could be shared to make a difference or provide an input to the here and now, to the people of her present. However, she also mentioned that there seemed to be more attention on international and Middle Eastern artists and perhaps this was a trend.

Most of the responses across all participant groups in this study were followed by a desire for improvement to the way things currently stand, whether it was public interest, the perception of Muslims, the availability of resources, the classification and nomenclature within academia, the seeking, sharing and quality of knowledge, and opportunities and support for artists and arts in general. A number of these concerns were linked to a lack of funding and the recent drop in government funds in the arts in the UK. There was hope that in the near future, in ten years' time, there would be a higher standard of knowledge to address the concerns highlighted and encourage audience engagement through exhibitions too. However, in some cases the funding to further this would be coming from outside the UK. An example of this is the currently in construction new Islamic art gallery being developed at the British Museum. This £2.4m gallery is being funded by the Al Bukhari Foundation in Malaysia. They have also taken interest in the work of students at the Princes School of Traditional Arts in providing scholarships and therefore are playing the

role of the modern-day patron. Their funds are large, and their interest appears sincere. Malaysia is one of the most densely populated Muslim countries in the world and has a thriving Islamic art scene.

#### **4.6 Summary**

The findings from this study presented a number of themes that highlighted the roles and concerns of the various stakeholders within the Islamic art scene in the UK. These concerns, although related to the topics discussed within the literature review, for example in the classification of Islamic art, it was seen here in further depth through these findings. It was possible to determine that although there are concerns regarding use of terminology and nomenclature in the field, and despite the dislike of the term 'Islamic art' by scholars and curators, it was still a term that is substantially used across the field. All participants engaged in discussions using this specific term. Artists certainly seemed much less daunted by the use of this term than the curators and collectors.

The findings of this study also highlighted stakeholder attitudes towards the use of digital technologies. We have seen that artists have developed hybrid practices in combining manual, hand-made methods with digital techniques but feel that creativity and authorship need to be clarified where an audience may incorrectly perceive the part of the computer as more dominant in the process of art-making. Perhaps this is a hybrid space which artists are still coming to understand and evaluate and with time they may be more comfortable with acknowledging the role of digital technology in their practice.

Within this theme we also saw that curators are daunted by the practical engagement they are required to adopt in facilitating digital art works. However, with time, an increase in knowledge in hardware and software solutions and an increase in resources may also provide positive change.

Finally, perhaps the strongest theme to emerge in this study was the impact that negative media has on the artists within the Islamic art scene in the UK. There were many examples found that convey art is linked to society, community and population in the context of specific localities. And regardless of intentions, East and West centric views are still present. However, taking a spiritual perspective (not strictly a religious one), the possibility of addressing negative issues through art provides a method for wider impact. This, combined with changes in educational approaches could provide an optimistic solution for creating familiarity with Islamic art and culture at a younger age as well as reaching out to wider communities through highlighting connections as opposed to divisions in society.

#### **4.7 Reflection**

The statement "*If I can put it in a mosque*" is one I have often repeated to myself and works as a conditional rule, a safe boundary to work within, without compromising on one's Islamic principles. Of course, I also understand that work produced outside of the criteria set out in my research could also pass this rule. Any abstract art, devoid of offensive subject and devoid of human or animal figures could also be safely placed within an Islamic religious space and be deemed suitable. Under this rule, artworks from the minimalist or even abstract expressionist movements could be considered suitable. To ascertain if the work in this case could be called Islamic art would require clarification from the artist, for them to affirm whether the work holds some religious or spiritual element.

The topic of the artist's role in society and being a representative within a community is also one I can relate to. One of the earliest group exhibitions I participated in took place in 2010 at the Watermans arts centre. The premise for this exhibition, titled *Enter10*, was a showcase of digital artworks produced by recent graduates of South Asian background. I was very open in describing how my

work had been inspired by Islamic patterns and had chosen to exhibit a site-specific interactive installation named *Reflect* which was visually referencing such patterns (Figure 21). I chose this particular title for the work as I was visually utilising reflections in its material nature but also because I wanted to evoke reflection on the part of the audience.



Figure 22 - *Reflect*, Sara Choudhrey  
Installation view, Watermans Arts Centre, London, 2010.  
(Photo: Dawn James, 2010)

At the opening night of *Enter10*, I was questioned by a journalist about the piece and one of his questions ventured on to the tensions of Islam, Muslims and terrorism. The question was not relevant to the subject of my work as I was not addressing the religion or politics through it. It was not a political piece and neither were these topics being addressed in a conceptual manner. And yet, being a Muslim I was being placed in a position where my opinion on these topics was being sought, recorded, later disseminated for public hearing. I did not feel qualified to speak on these topics and felt caught unawares. Therefore, the sentiments described to me by participants in my research is something I can not

only relate to but feel is grounded to the reality of being a Muslim in the UK at this moment in time.

In the years that have followed my earliest exhibition experience, and increasingly in the years since starting this research, my relationship with digital technologies has not changed significantly. I still openly enjoy learning new processes and experimenting with a variety of media which include engagement with digital technologies where I feel it fits. However, my understanding of the role that these technologies play in the part of creativity and art-making has certainly developed. Where previously I would have described myself as a digital artist, I now produce work that is not always digital in nature at all. Like some of my research participants, I feel a need to convey my work with honesty and even when speaking of my work I sometimes, perhaps overly, concern myself with describing my work as accurately as possible.

I have also started painting more in the last few years, something which has stemmed from a development in the way I produce my artworks. I tend to approach my works as a project, try out ideas via sketches and sometimes include testing colours. I have also enjoyed participating in short courses to improve my understanding of Islamic art-making through trained professionals, establishing a sort-of master-student relationship. Some of these courses have taught painting techniques that are specific to Persian miniature painting such as those at the Princes School of Traditional Arts. I have increasingly enjoyed the action of painting in this style but, like sketching and drawing, it usually forms part of a journey in my art-making process. I do not always decide at the beginning of the process if I am going to produce a painting as a finished artwork, but it has happened and I have been happy with the results. The response to this work has also been very positive.

As with any of my artworks I have always enjoyed engaging viewers in discussions of their opinions and impressions. In relation to one of my exhibited painting series

*Iznik*, displayed at the Templeman Gallery at University of Kent in 2016, I was told by a visitor that the paintings looked as if they had been produced digitally. I was asked if it was a digital print. I found this quite amusing and ironic in light of the comments made by participants in my research. However, I also found this flattering, that something I had painted entirely by hand came across as neatly depicted. I had become slightly obsessed whilst producing these paintings to convey a particular smoothness to the curves of the floral petals I was depicting and this comment was almost a reassurance that this had been achieved.

However, the process I enjoy the most is where the results are unpredictable and I have the opportunity to explore the process and just allow it to come about. In the development of an ongoing series I developed an interactive artwork *Digital B-Orders*. The process for this involved designing and sketching an illuminated floral border in the style of that which would traditionally have appeared on the margins of pages from a Qur'an or manuscript. I had studied many examples of Persian floral borders and then constructed my own that was in-keeping with the methods and style of the historical examples. The design was then digitised in Adobe Illustrator to create vector files that could be read by CAD machinery. This process is necessary for applying designs with a laser machine. The results were two large Perspex panels both engraved and cut with the border design.

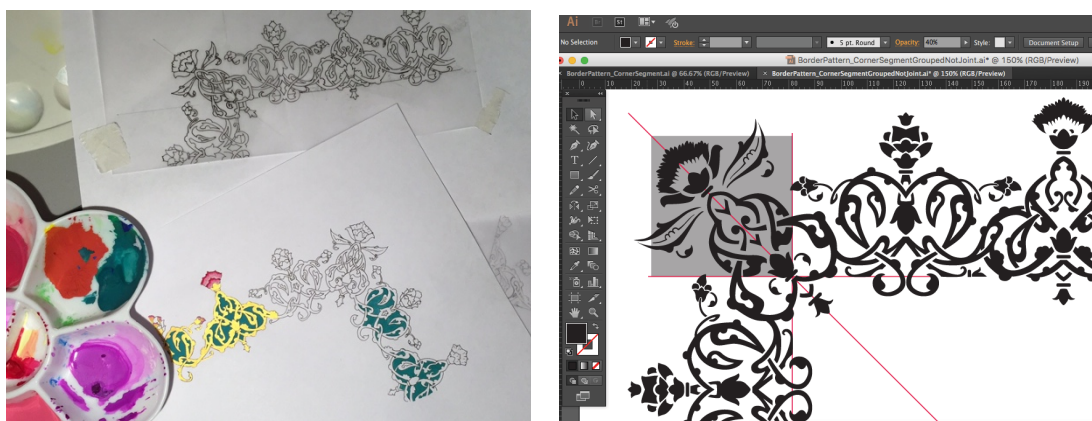


Figure 23 – Development of Persian style floral motif border, including sketches, colour testing with gouache paints and digitisation process within Adobe Illustrator to produce vector file format

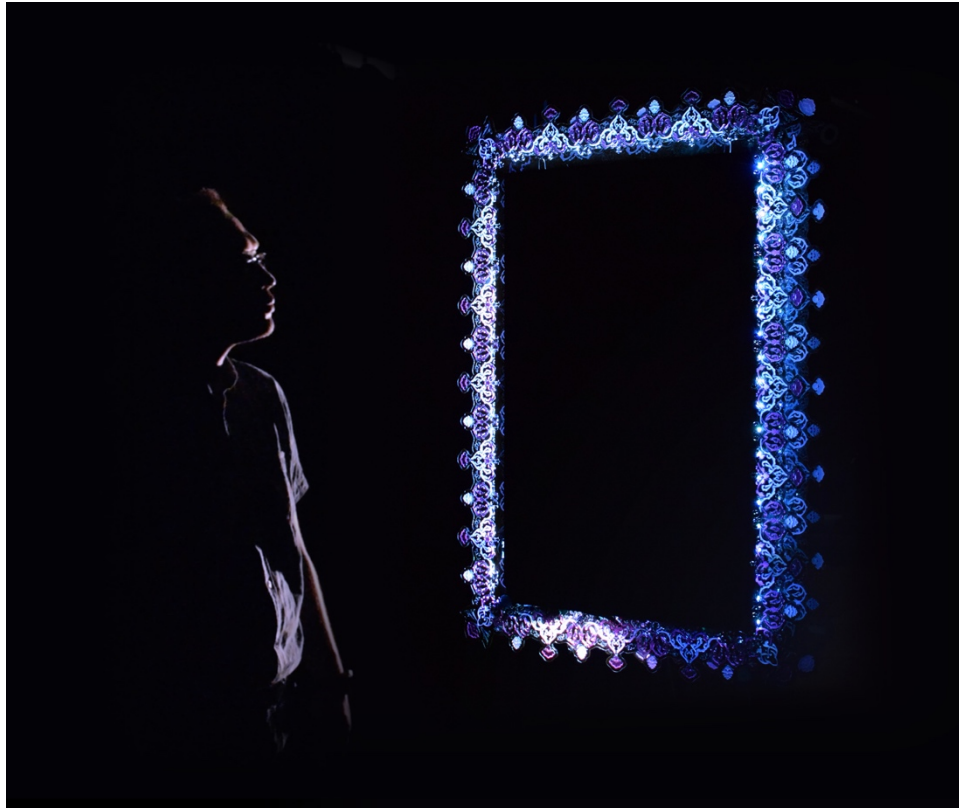


Figure 24 – User interacting with *Digital B-Orders* installation, Sara Choudhrey, 2017

I chose to sandwich these panels around a circuit of LEDs and two sensors that would detect the proximity of the viewer. The project was centred on the concept of illumination, bringing the traditional idea of book illumination into a realm of 3d and literal reality. The pattern cut and engraved would be illuminated by passing viewers and engage their thoughts on their personal impact and participation with the work. The piece was also designed to be hung mid-air in the middle of a given room or space, and was successfully displayed in this manner as part of the Festival of Projections in Canterbury in 2016.

This hanging arrangement moved away from the traditional gallery set-up where framed artworks are the central focus and their frames can go ignored. In this case,

the framing border was the central component of the artwork, highlighted by the user's effect on it. Suspending the work in this nature also produced a frame, allowing for a self-portrait of the viewer to be formed, whilst the semi-transparent, hollow centre created a frame viewable by anyone positioned on the other side. This placement of the work encouraged the viewer to look beyond their 'selfie' of a more traditional nature to contemplate the composition and relevance of a highly decorative border.

In naming Digital B-Orders, there was also an intentional play on words. I intended to draw attention to the digital in the digital age, questioning our interactions through digital devices and interfaces. There was also the significance of the border in a literal and figurative sense – the order of not only nature (evoked by the floral pattern) but order imposed by boundaries affecting the movement, placement and displacement of communities. The work also spoke of hybridity and of globalisation, through its structure, combining many components and materials and visual styles together. I hoped the decorative ornamentation would also draw connections between East and West, alluding to the long history of material interactions that continue today in museum and gallery spaces. By incorporating the engaging elements of interaction, the artwork forced the user to understand their impact in a sensory manner. I hoped to instigate contemplation of interactivity between persons in the wider global community

In a final note of reflection on this chapter, and in regards to addressing oneself as an Islamic artist, I felt the participants in this study raised some interesting points and concerns. I personally consider myself as someone who wears their faith on their sleeve. My appearance in hijab is quite literally a statement of this. However, I do not assume this places me on a pedestal to represent how others feel or practice the Islamic faith. I know through personal experience and interactions with many Muslims and non-Muslims that every individual makes a choice regarding if and how they will practice faith. It is a very personal subject and although I feel I



can relate to Muslims around the world, I also feel that in the art world, it is a subject that must be tentatively raised, something I feel has been evidenced through the sentiments raised by the participants. It would certainly be met with negativity to make any assumptions. I personally have no qualms with being referred to as an Islamic artist as I am a Muslim and my work is closely related to a continuation of Islamic art history and makes use of visual elements that are evident in Islamic artistic culture. However, like all artists I would hope that an audience or viewer of my work would contemplate the concepts within the work itself and look beyond the surface to understand how the work relates to the wider world.

## **Chapter Five: SEEING THE UNSEEN**

### Curating and Exhibiting Digital Islamic Art in the UK

#### **5.1 Introduction**

A recurring approach throughout this research was to question how the findings from each stage could inform the proceeding studies, continue to develop the research and also relate to my own artistic practice. Reflecting on the findings from the first study, a survey of attitudes towards Islamic art, it was found that a large proportion of participants (36%) were not sure what Islamic art was, whilst 24% said they had not seen Islamic art at all. However, optimistically 64% of participants who were not sure what Islamic art was indicated that they would be interested to learn more about it. Combining this knowledge with findings from the second study which involved in-depth interviews of stakeholders, provided an informative basis upon which a third and final study could be conducted. The aim for this last study was not only to build upon the research findings thus far but also to illustrate the original context from which the research arose, namely the presence of digital Islamic art in the UK and the development of hybrid artistic practice by artists following a similar approach to myself. This approach therefore also aimed to provide an answer to the third and final research question regarding attitudes towards the adoption of digital technologies within contemporary Islamic art in the UK.

I felt a study through exhibition would be an appropriate method through which to achieve the above aims, and would also provide an opportunity to address some of the attitudes, perceptions and potential concerns discussed in the previous study's findings that emerged from the perspectives of the stakeholders in the art scene. It would also form an ideal method for further considering the role of the curator and their concerns related to exhibiting digital Islamic art.

Prior to this stage of research my personal experience had extended from artist to researcher, placing me in a position to speak from the perspective of two types of stakeholders. This final study provided experience of the third stakeholder, a curator responsible for not only the development of a theme, the selection and presentation of artworks, but also how to allow for a successful interpretation of these factors within a publically accessible art space. The role of artist-curator would therefore be explored here; hybridity again manifesting itself in the form of this hybridised role.

The role of curator is often described in relation to its root in Latin 'curare', meaning to 'care' for something. Traditionally, in the context of a museum or gallery, this would have meant to take care of a collection of objects within the institute. However, in recent decades, the nature and role of a curator has evolved to include not just care, acquire and research a collection, but to also communicate the relevance of that collection to others in new and more engaging ways (Bergman 2015). A curator is therefore responsible for the selection of items, planning how these items can be shown to the public, conceptualising and implementing exhibitions, and often involves working alongside a team to install, communicate, interpret and display work in the most relevant manner for wide-ranging audiences. The curator is therefore the bridge between the public and the objects, bringing the context of the two as closely together for each to cross in to the other's world, finding ways to engage between the two (Blight 2017). With curatorial studies becoming more popular, with curatorial residencies and the understanding of the role as almost an art in itself becoming more common (Obrist 2014), it is more widely understood that a curator in a contemporary setting has much to shoulder, with the utmost goal to put on a successful exhibition or display that would be of interest to the public (Michaliszyn 2013).

Through interviewing curators as part of the previous study's interviews, the role, duties and responsibilities of the curator became much clearer, with the most significant point raised by all being an emphasis on stories. Telling stories through objects that link communities and cultures to places at particular times and beyond. This aspect of what a museum or gallery can represent and their role in sharing knowledge with the world through the arts stood out to me and I hoped to also foster this in some way through my own actions and work. By adopting the hybrid role of artist-curator for the purpose of this study I aimed to keep the decisions I made relevant to the concept and principles of the exhibition, centring focus on the work and what it says about the world.

### 5.3 Methodology

The method for planning and implementing this exhibition study was informed by developments and knowledge gained largely in the previous study of interviews with stakeholders within the Islamic art scene in the UK. Below is a brief summary of the themes that emerged from the previous studies and how it was intended they would be addressed through this final study:

- **Classification** – naming and marketing an exhibition of contemporary Islamic art with consideration for how this might be received
- **Artistic practice and process** – presenting a seamless selection of artworks providing an insightful presentation of artistic practice relevant to a narrative or theme
- **Perceptions of Islam** – presenting or encouraging a positive representation of Islam whilst still speaking to the local and wider community
- **Attitudes towards the use of digital technologies** – present a successful and seamless deployment of digital technologies in both artworks and resources for presentation
- **Sharing knowledge** – providing opportunities to share knowledge

These themes were used as a starting point to consider, design and plan the exhibition. The study was designed as a group exhibition of artworks that, based on a set criteria, could be described as digital Islamic art. Visitors to the exhibition would be asked to complete an exit-questionnaire which would allow for the collection of data helping to understand how the artworks in the exhibition were perceived and how the exhibition was interpreted as a whole by visitors. The questionnaires would also help determine if the artworks selected for display were of interest to visitors and if there was interest in visiting further exhibitions of this nature in future. Lastly, the collected data would provide an understanding of whether the concerns of stakeholders in regards to the use of terminology in communicating the exhibition, in interpreting it, and in implementing the display of it in light of the use of digital technologies could be successfully addressed.

Most notably the exhibition was unique due to two aspects: it would be a display of Islamic artworks in which digital technologies had played a large or vital role in the production and/or presentation, yet the exhibition would not be overtly marketed as Islamic art. The purpose of this approach was to allow for an open and unbiased response to artworks, allowing visitors to interpret the work on 'face-value'; i.e. based on material, aesthetic, visual or visceral value. This would also determine if the public audience would associate the work with the Islamic culture based only on what they would see in the work itself. It was noted at this stage that some visitors would have prior knowledge of some of the artists' work which would lead to word of mouth and certain visits being planned solely based on familiarity and desire to see more of the type of work they were familiar with.

### **Exhibition theme**

Prior to the run-up to the exhibition and whilst considering the artworks and artists for inclusion in this study I became interested in the notion of hybrid artistic practice presenting an affinity to hybridity in culture (Choudhrey 2016). Within this

exhibition, I wanted to present not just the concept of hybridity through the work, but also represent it through the selected artists, all of whom were of varying ethnicities, gender, religious, and non-religious backgrounds. This theme would combine my own research and artistic interests in locality, identity and representation and how these topics can be conveyed through contemporary Islamic art in the UK.

This concept arose through the literature review, manifested itself in my work without being defined as such, but was much strengthened through the previous study of interviews. I came to realise that there is indeed a gap of representation in both local and international art spaces where British diaspora communities who identify as Muslim and who are engaged with Islamic art, is almost unheard of. And as noted by some of the curators I had spoken to, the significance of British or UK locality combined with south-Asian or Muslim culture is not highlighted, a hybrid culture that we do not see in the art world.

### **Exhibition format**

I felt a physical exhibition would also be the best form of display to present the artworks due to the nature and variety in the media I aimed to present. As indicated in the literature review, the notion of digital art as beyond digital in its final form was indicated through examples of artworks, and through definitions presented by scholars. I wanted to convey the variations found in digital media and in artistic practice through the examples that would be displayed with the aim to expand perceptions of what digital art may constitute, especially when situated in the context of contemporary Islamic art, and vice versa with notions of Islamic art possibly being expanded. The many layers of hybridisation and engagement with material form that could occur by seeing this work in person would be altered if shown, for example, the work curated as only an online or virtual exhibition.

When selecting the artwork to be curated, I was keen to include those pieces that would be interactive, allowing for a further form of engagement for the viewer. Some would consider interactive art as most engaging and can become very immersive. With an online or virtual exhibition, this could also be achieved but is heavily reliant on specific hardware and media output. The selection of such work to fit into an online or virtual exhibition would therefore have become more focussed on the digital technologies being used by the artist and the media, rather than the subject and theme of the work.

### **Selection Criteria**

Having gained a wider understanding through the previous studies of the public and stakeholders' perceptions of classification of contemporary Islamic art and concerns regarding the use of digital technologies in presenting artworks, I was prepared for the need to address some of the raised issues or at least ensure they did not occur in this exhibition. I wanted to convey that digital art is not problematic to curate and display, that there is genuine interest amongst the public for digital Islamic art, and that there is also some existing knowledge of Islamic art both as a genre but also as a visually intriguing art. I felt these could be incorporated in an exhibition based on the success of my own previously exhibited works and also through conversations with other artists in the field.

I also felt sure that audiences need not be of just Muslim background in order to be interested in Islamic art. Having met a number of Muslim, non-Muslim and ethnically or religiously diverse artists alongside whom I was exhibiting at the Sharjah Islamic arts festival in Dec 2015 – Jan 2016, it became clear that impact of Islamic art was not a self-contained nor binary art. It was relevant to all in a number of ways indicated through the varying art forms, mediums, subjects and concepts on display. My ultimate goal for the curated exhibition was to echo some of this variety and encourage an experience which would leave the visitors with a positive

impression and notion of either Islamic art, engagement with digital technologies or even simply an appreciation for the diversity in contemporary arts.



Figure 25 - *Ulterior Motifs*, Sara Choudhrey. Sharjah Museum, 2014-15  
Islamic Arts Festival, Sharjah, UAE  
(Photo: Shanavas Jamaluddin, 2015)

In addition to the above considerations, as a basis for short-listing possible artworks by some of the artists I knew to be involved in the contemporary Islamic art scene in the UK, I also considered the following criteria for inclusion:

- Participants must be based in the UK (living and working)

And must also meet at least two of the following criteria:

- Artist's work has been exhibited in the UK under the theme of Islamic art, within the last 5 years, or artist has been described as someone producing Islamic art by peers and/or curators
- Artist describes or identifies themselves as an artist producing Islamic art
- Artist has a religious/spiritual link to Islamic faith
- Artist has heritage linked to Muslim land/culture



- Artist uses either one or more of the following stylistic elements in their artwork:
  - Arabic calligraphy
  - Geometric patterns
  - Arabesque patterns
  - Islamic (religious) subject

Based on these criteria, participants were additionally identified through online searches for British Islamic art, through social networks for Islamic art groups and also through workshops organised by UK based institutes dealing with the teaching of Islamic art and traditional Islamic art practices.

Artists were approached via email, the concept and theme for the exhibition was explained and the availability of their work was discussed. In some cases, they were already familiar with my research, some had even participated in the previous study, and all were encouraging and optimistic regarding the opportunity to exhibit under this theme. The final selection of artworks was centred on conveying the unity in hybrid artistic practice yet the variety in style and execution that could also be achieved.

### **Selected Artworks**

Some of the selected artworks were therefore completely digital in nature, such as Zarah Hussain's animation *Submission*, which was presented running in real-time on a screen. Other artists worked with electronic circuits and sensors coded for interactivity such as Aphra Shemza's *Composition X*. Artists Sama Mara and Lee Westwood's *A Hidden Order* project involved producing their own software in order to create generative compositions of Islamic geometric patterns which were then produced as fine art prints (Mara 2017). In contrast, Ruh Al Alam's digital prints such as *Kaf Ha Ya Ayn Saad*, were created using a combination of hand-drawn and digital calligraphy. Within this selection was included my own woodwork

installations from the *Uterior Motifs* series and the interactive *Digital B-Orders* installation, all produced with elements of laser cutting and engraving hand-drawn then digitised patterns on either wood or Perspex. The combined techniques in every artwork on display were to me great examples of where hybrid practice had successfully been employed to produce digital Islamic art. The final selection of artworks amounted to 14 pieces from a total of 6 artists, 3 female, 3 male.



Figure 26 - Installation view: *Kaf Ha Ya Ayn Saad* and *Ayn Sin Kaf*, Ruh Al Alam, 2012.  
SEEING THE UNSEEN exhibition, Four Corners Gallery, London, 2016



Figure 27 - Installation view of *SEEING THE UNSEEN* exhibition at Four Corners gallery, London, 2016

### **Exhibition Planning**

During the process of organising this study it became clear that curation of any exhibition requires much planning and responsibility in problem-solving. There are many aspects that require consideration and most importantly the need to ensure the concept and themes would be communicated without ‘giving too much away’, whilst still ‘giving’ enough to attract visitors. I had to ask myself, ‘what is the appeal and unique presentation of this exhibition that makes it different enough from others?’

Upon reflection, I decided upon the title *SEEING THE UNSEEN* for the exhibition, chosen for alluding to several aspects of the type of work that would be on display and also the wider research that the exhibition had been informed by. I felt such a title might compel audiences to visit by implying it was new and innovative, that it included artworks previously unseen in relation to each other and also highlighting that the ‘unseen’ works were unlike those works that are usually exhibited in mainstream art spaces. I hoped such a collection might provide a new perspective

by being shown in such a context and I also wanted to balance allusiveness with intrigue to entice the audience.

## **Venue**

Much consideration was also given to ensuring accessibility and ease of travel to reach the exhibition space. The preference was to obtain exhibition space that was closer to central London, however, it would need to be a large enough exhibiting space for the varied group of works, needed access for all (including those with needs), access for digital artworks, space for workshops, and a means to display Digital B-Orders which would need to be hung from the ceiling. All this at a small budget was proving to be difficult. At last, The Four Corners gallery space in Bethnal Green, East London, was the final space selected due to not only meeting the above criteria but also for its proximity to a very well-connected tube station and nearby bus routes. It was also in close proximity to neighbouring hub arts areas such as Old Street and Shoreditch. Significantly, The Four Corners was already established as an arts space with an in-house film and photography lab so the connection to this creative space would mean passing visitors.

The exhibition took place 20 - 30 July 2016, with opening hours including evenings and Saturdays, allowing attendance for those working during the week.

## **Marketing**

The following slogan was created for use on marketing material both online and on printed flyers which were handed out to passing public in the surrounding Bethnal Green area:

*“A unique exhibition showcasing the hybrid nature of art as a reflection of ever-changing and hybridising local and global communities. Artworks include a combination of digital and traditional techniques”*

A distinctive logo was also designed and used to create a visual brand for marketing the exhibition on all material.



Figure 28 - Promotional flyers for *SEEING THE UNSEEN* exhibition

Marketing for the exhibition was accomplished through the following channels:

- Social Media: Facebook event invite, Twitter and Instagram posts
- Emails sent to mailing lists of all artists
- Virtual invite for exhibition private view
- Listing in online arts magazines and websites including [www.a-n.com](http://www.a-n.com)

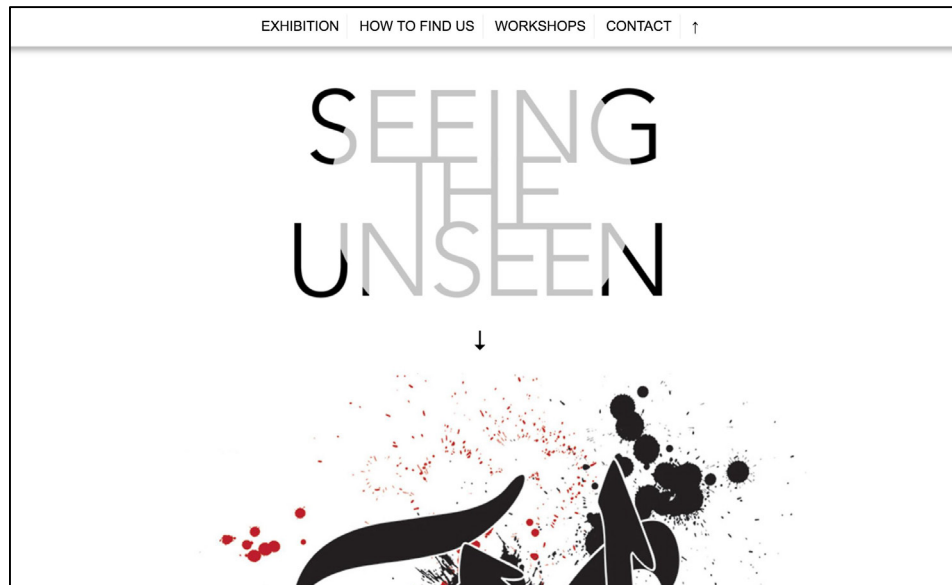


Figure 29 - Bespoke website built for promoting *SEEING THE UNSEEN* exhibition ([www.seeingtheunseen.co.uk](http://www.seeingtheunseen.co.uk))



Figure 30 – *SEEING THE UNSEEN* exhibition booklet

Supporting material was produced using the branding and to help promote the exhibition with the printing of exhibition booklets, a bespoke website with a teaser of artwork by each artist, and a number of specialist workshops for public participation and engagement.

In order to share and encourage knowledge of making and creating digital and Islamic artworks, and to encourage accessibility to knowledge, a number of workshops were also arranged to run alongside the exhibition. These workshops included an introduction to digital technologies for use in interactive projects and was led by researcher Pruet Putjorn from the School of Engineering and Digital Arts, University of Kent. I also arranged a number of drawing workshops on Islamic geometric patterns led by artist and teacher Samira Mian.

The inclusion of these workshops worked as a means to also generate more interest around the artworks, increasing the number of visitors to the exhibition who might not have considered attending otherwise. Reception to these workshops was very positive and informal feedback from participants in these workshops indicated that they learnt a new side to art and technology and were inspired to attempt using these techniques some time in the future.

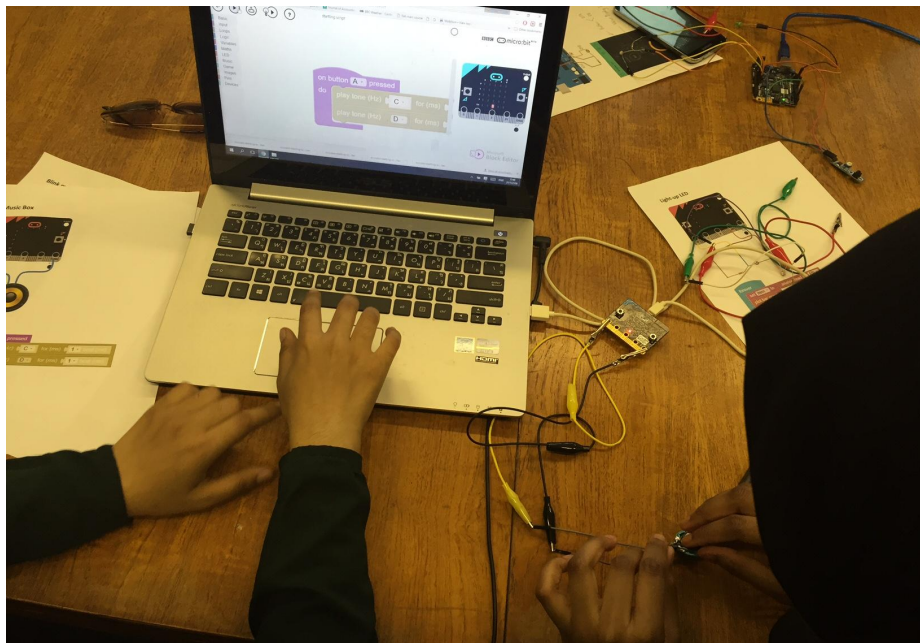


Figure 31 - Participants at the Digital Demo Workshop led by Pruet Putjorn, As part of the *SEEING THE UNSEEN* exhibition, Four Corners Gallery, London, 2016

### **Data Collection and Visitor Feedback**

The gallery space was situated within an arts centre with regular passing traffic to the building for a variety of reasons. Not all visitors were able to give their time to complete a questionnaire due to passing through at busy periods, in many cases in their lunch breaks. The final visitor number to the exhibition was therefore, difficult to determine, however, the questionnaire was completed by 123 visitors. These were filled by hand on paper, which allowed for a larger number to be completed where visits overlapped.

I was able to attend and invigilate the exhibition in person during the majority of its opening hours. As a result, I was able to approach my data collection and expand my analysis of the study to include observations and informal discussions with visitors. I used the questionnaire as a means to open up conversation, requesting visitors to look around, and then asked for their thoughts on the experience. Once they had completed the questionnaire I would provide them with a specially printed exhibition booklet which served as a sort of incentive and reward for their time. I was able to use this opportunity to share the inspiration and connection behind the artworks – almost reveal that they were all inspired or influenced by Islamic visual culture in some form. I felt this was really the most interesting part of the whole exhibition, discussing thoughts, impressions and ideas with those who had visited.

The questionnaire was designed to take no longer than 5 minutes to complete. However, some participants did spend longer, reading all the questions first, then openly contemplating their answers. Although the questions were straightforward, they were asked if they enjoyed the exhibition, what type of work they most enjoyed, how they would describe the collective artworks and whether they would be interested in learning more about this type of exhibition and the featured artworks. Many visitors returned to the exhibition space to consider their answers



more carefully and to note which artworks they wanted to refer to more specifically in their responses.

#### **5.4 Analysis**

Although the questionnaires were paper-based, all responses were electronically entered onto the online Qualtrics platform. Qualtrics, as used in the first study of this research, is an online software solution for data collection. Quantitative results are presented within Qualtrics as visual diagrams and data tables which can be filtered and queried. However, for qualitative responses the software is not advanced enough, and so further analysis was required to understand this better using a manual method for which Microsoft Excel spreadsheets were used. Also, not all questions were completed by all participants, and due to variations in spelling and grammar, a manual approach to analysis was the most efficient. All data, including demographic data, was exported to Microsoft Excel where both quantitative and qualitative results could be analysed side by side.

A thematic approach, as used in the previous study was also used here, with all qualitative data being coded and codes grouped to form higher level themes. As with the previous study, an anonymous 10% sample was shared with independent researchers for the purpose of establishing intercoder reliability. As a result, the following coding scheme was developed and finalised:

Table 6 - Coding scheme conveying the codes used for analysis grouped under emergent themes supported by descriptive notes

Coding Scheme for Study 3 analysis (exhibition exit questionnaires)		
Theme	Codes	Notes
Curation	Variety	Variety of artworks on display
	Cohesion	Mostly noting harmony in the selection, the similarities, work going well alongside and amongst each other
	Discord	Something didn't make sense or needed explanation
	Further interest/development	Desire to see or learn more, request for explanations, descriptions, labelling (communication), suggestions, requests, future, scope
	Access	Venue, location
	Implementation	Planning, selection, choice of display
Material and visual interpretation of artworks	Visual characteristics	Patterns, shapes, geometry
	Format or medium	Reference to the use of materials or medium in the artwork including lights/LEDs
	Technique/Approach	Methods of production, hybrid elements, traditional, Innovation, unique, unusual
	Style	Abstract, scientific, traditional
	Islamic, Religion, Spirituality	Islamic art as a genre, or mention of religion or spirituality in general
	Other/ Non-Western	Culture/regions outside of the UK or minority population: Arab, Middle Eastern, Asian, cultural, ethnic
	Temporality	Contemporary, new-age, modern
Sensory/ emotional engagement with artworks	Interaction	Interactive elements within the work, sensors, movement, responsive
	Impact	Emotional impact, wider impact, scope, raising awareness
	Familiarity/Nostalgia	Reminders, triggers memories, knowledge of artists
	Appeal	Response to the work, approval
	Engagement	Change of perspective/perception, first time
	Concept/ual	Towards understanding subject and theme

The opening question on the questionnaire was 'Did you enjoy the exhibition?'. This received an overwhelming 100% response of 'Yes'. Although the questions were designed to focus on what visitors enjoyed about the exhibition and which artworks they enjoyed most, analysis of the data led to emergent themes that indicated that

both the exhibition arrangements as a whole, and individual features within the artworks, led to enjoyment of the exhibition.

General responses tended to be brief and complimentary, not divulging more than the most basic of comments. These ventured from 'It's nice' to simple one word responses such as, 'Good' and 'Positive'. However, in other areas of the questionnaire most visitors would expand on their reasons for liking an artwork or the exhibition. Therefore, using the data collected in this study, the aspects most enjoyed by visitors could potentially be used for the planning of future exhibitions which would result in equally high or further visitor satisfaction.

### Who were the participants?

The majority of the visitors who completed the exit-questionnaire were aged between 25-34 years of age, with a larger proportion of females forming 66% of the group. However, there was fair representation of almost all age groups and these included visitors from a range of ethnic and religious backgrounds.

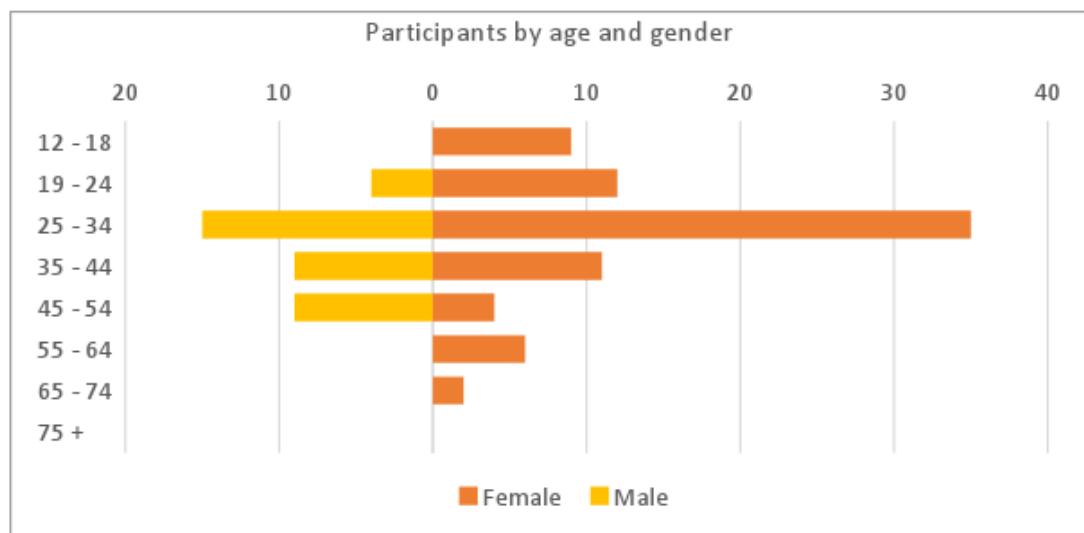


Figure 32 - Bar chart showing participants by age and gender

117 visitors responded to the question regarding their ethnicity, however, due to the format including only those ethnicities most common in the UK census, some

visitors (n=20) made the additional indication of which countries or regions they were from. Entries included European, Kashmiri, American, Thai, South African, Australian, New Zealander and Canadian.

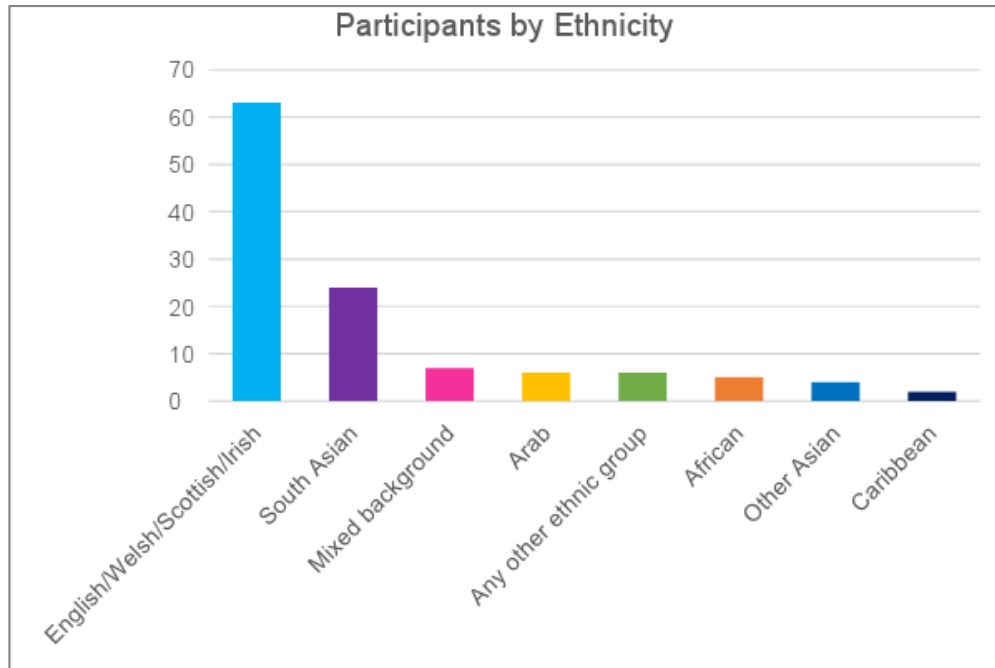


Figure 33 - Bar chart showing participants by ethnicity

Visitors were reflective of the general population with a majority of White/English visitors (%), with the next highest majority ethnicity represented by South Asian. This was also seen represented through the religious groups represented with a majority stating they follow no religion, followed by a high representation of Muslims (32%).

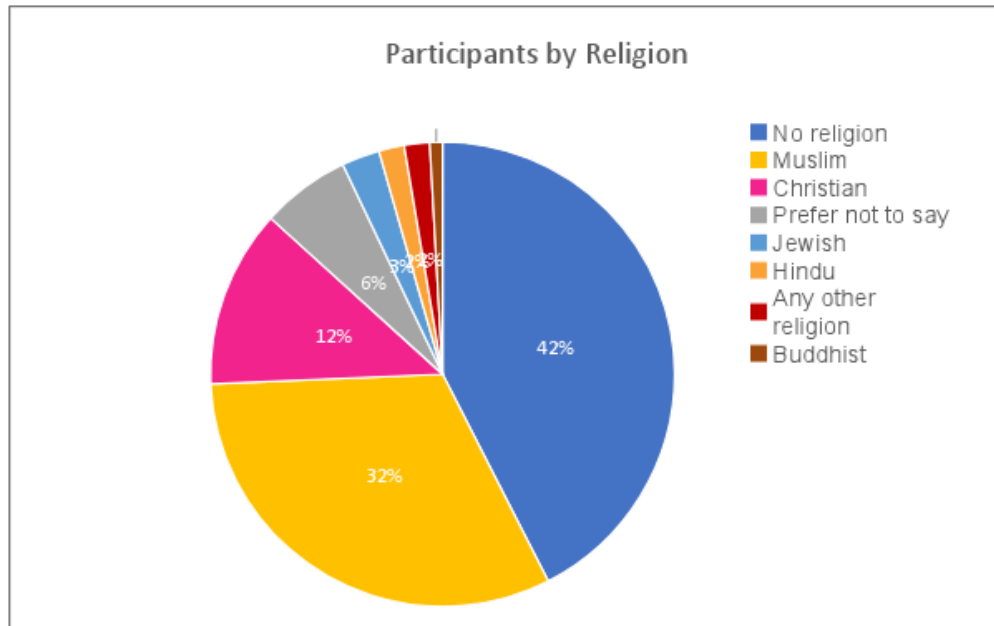


Figure 34 - Pie chart showing participants by religious groups

## 5.5 Discussion of Themes

### Curation

Although curation of the exhibition was not intended to be overtly perceived nor dominate the visitors' thoughts, it was found to be important in visitors' overall impression of the exhibition, and was a strong theme that came through in the thematic-analysis of responses. It became evident that aspects relating to the use of gallery space, the selection and variety of artworks, the way in which works sat alongside each other, and the interpretation of the work, all led to a perceived harmony and cohesion in the exhibition. In the majority of responses, the comments on variety were accompanied with admiration, approval, and the identification of the exhibition as being 'unique' for this reason.

The term 'variety' was used by many participants in association with the range of artworks, the medium, the modes of presentation, and use of artistic techniques. In some cases, variety was even perceived within a single artwork where techniques in the production of the artworks or visual styles were combined. This conveyed that

hybridity in the artistic practice employed by artists in their work was apparent to visitors, and that the visitor was being visually inquisitive in order to determine and understand the work's physicality.

Visitors were content to explain why something was good or worked well within the exhibition. For example, they identified differences between artworks but sensed an underlying theme binding the work together leading to a feeling of cohesion in the collection and curation of the work. These descriptions of cohesion are reminiscent of the unity said to exist in Islamic art as a formative principle. As explained in the literature review, this is a difficult aspect to describe in physical terms but is a notion heavily influenced by those who favour either a spiritual or cosmological essence in Islamic art, an aspect said to manifest itself in Islamic art regardless of place or time (Ali 1991, Burckhardt 1967).

A very small number of participants (n=2) expressed a possible discord in the amount of variety they viewed with some suggestion that the collection of work would benefit from further explanation or more detailed labelling. The desire for communication of ideas and themes in further depth or simply a statement from the artist which is sometimes found in gallery spaces was likely being expected here. This was understandable, in line with a desire for a narrative. It may also have led to a higher level of enjoyment of the artworks if further information had been provided (Tschacher, Wolfgang 2015). However, in this case the narrative was being provided post exhibition viewing. This process created a means for visitors to reflect upon their first impressions. I spoke with many visitors in person and it was interesting to hear their thoughts once I explained the influence of Islamic art that inspired the artists' work. For some it was something they had determined but felt unsure about wording it as such. Others nodded with understanding, satisfied that an answer was provided to appease their curiosity.

### **Material and visual interpretation of artworks**

The presence of this theme incorporates how visitors looked at and understood the visually perceivable aspects of artworks. They tended to take their time to look at each artwork, considering the details within or of it. If it was interactive they seemed to try and understand in which way behaviours were interpreted by the artwork and tried to decipher the way in which their actions would affect it and vice versa. The techniques and practice used in each artwork was of interest to visitors who were curious as to how the artist had made the work.

Regardless of its form or medium, visitors would look to the individual visual elements, any graphical aspects, the colours, the textures, or motif components of the works. They noted the presence of patterns, and abstraction, and some also mentioned the non-figurative nature of the work. The works were widely described as 'beautiful', the geometry and use of patterns generally perceived to be the underlying theme that tied all the works together.

In describing the artworks, the visual appearance took precedence as visitors were limited to what was physically present and not aided by further information. Therefore, visual styles were used to describe the overall exhibition such as 'abstract art' or 'modern' or 'contemporary' art. These were likely terms they were most familiar with but indicates a temporal relation to the understanding of art. These descriptions were contrasted by being paired with further descriptions of the style and decorative elements in the work such as 'Tessellations, abstract, pattern, geometric' and also 'digital' or 'Islamic'. These grouped descriptions indicated that visitors may not usually consider decorative elements as being 'contemporary' or being part of wider art genres to simply base their judgement on the medium alone as they might with a less decorative art which they would then simply name as 'digital'.

Making connections with artworks and understanding the wider context from which they derive seemed to be another strong code in this theme. Although a large number of visitors were Muslim, they were not the only visitors who related the work on display to Islamic art, but also made connections to parts of the world where the styles, aesthetics and motifs were reminders of places they had travelled. Visitors commented on having seen similar work in mosques, or from non-local, i.e. non-UK and even non-Western locations such as South-East Asia, Middle East, and simply 'abroad'. When describing the type of work on display, many visitors were therefore combining terms that perhaps were not usually thought of being encompassed within generally Western styles of art, creating a sense of 'otherness' when they were perceived in the exhibition. These connections to regions and locations outside of the local area is reminiscent of the findings from the first survey study in this research, where participants made connections between Islamic art and particular regions where they perceived these works would be culturally linked to.

Although Arabic script used in these works was not readable by many, (I was asked what it meant by some visitors), it was still a visually arresting work and so visitors were able to make links and connections to the stylistic elements of the work regardless of a lack of knowledge on the subject:

*"Reminded me of art from within a mosque, merged with style of a graphic novel (like Sin City) with some hint of Japanese calligraphy"*

PT22

Others were reminded of locations around the world where they had visited and were therefore able to recognise the text in calligraphy was Arabic, or were reminded of patterns they had seen in Muslim countries and so would identify the work as being 'Islamic art'.



The use of certain media was also interpreted as being associated with specific styles or regions: “Definitely inspired by the Islamic traditions, but using contemporary media” (PT25). Such an analysis implies that the use of contemporary media in conjunction with decorative styles is unexpected or unusual. Therefore, the presence of visuals or techniques associated with non-Western regions were considered when trying to interpret how to classify art: “*It certainly has a lot of Middle Eastern and Arabic motifs in it, but I'd put it in the large box of 'contemporary art'*” (PT52).

### **Sensory/ emotional engagement with artworks**

Based on the responses in the questionnaires there appears to be a process emerging of how visitors viewed and then engaged with the artworks. They appeared to consider its physicality and materiality, looked at how it was made and considered in what ways. At this point their engagement followed a process of making connections to images, visuals, experiences from their past, places they had seen and visited or objects they had come across including books they had read or seen as children. These responses were almost nostalgic.

By far the most commented and observed aspect of engagement by visitors was in relation to the interactive artworks (an example of which can be seen in Aphra Shemza’s *Composition X* installation shown in Figure 31 below). Visitors felt this type of art was fun and playful and allowed them to create a dialogue with the work. They also felt this type of work had scope for further development, and in two cases visitors felt there was possibility of addressing wider subjects on culture and Islam:

*“It's interesting and provides a unique perspective of art within an Islamic paradigm.”* PT62

Visitors also spoke of feeling positive emotions of peace, immersion and awe:

*“Its sense of infinity, provoked awe and wonder”* PT12

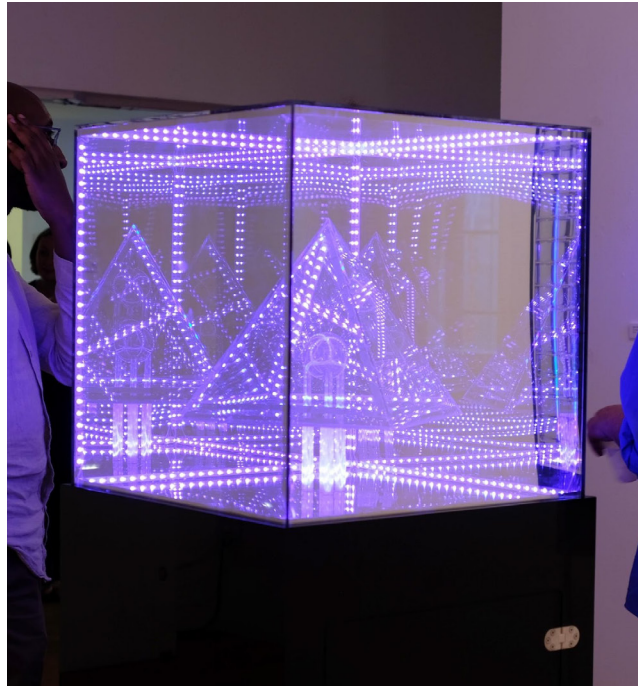


Figure 35 - Installation view: *Composition X*, Aphra Shemza  
*SEEING THE UNSEEN* exhibition, Four Corners gallery, London, 2016  
(Photo: David de Saint Jorre, 2016)

### **Lasting Impressions from the Exhibition**

The final question in the exit-question was the option to provide any further feedback regarding the exhibition. 43/123 participants opted to answer this question, a larger drop-off rate compared to all other stages of the questionnaire. However, it is very likely they felt they had already commented all they needed to. As this was a request for ‘additional’ comments or feedback, it was a question that was less demanding in nature. Those who did opt to answer this question gave positive and encouraging feedback, some with suggestions for further work of this nature to be displayed, indicating that public interest in digital Islamic art had been piqued.

## 5.6 Reflection

There was a fine line between revealing enough in the exhibition and giving away too much that may have then influenced the responses in the exit-questionnaire. This was something that led to continued reflection on not only the planning of the study but also the execution and resultant findings. I came away from the exhibition pleased with the responses but also with a desire for extending this research. I felt a comparative study which would encompass a different approach to marketing the exhibition as overtly digital Islamic art would provide information resulting in different impressions and findings.

In planning and executing the study as I had, I now wonder if perhaps a part of me was attempting to counteract some of the negativity and sceptical concerns expressed by the interview participants in the previous study. And yet I had to question myself as to whether it would be more beneficial to express that it would be an exhibition of contemporary Islamic art or to market it as simply a contemporary art exhibition and hope to instead surprise visitors with the beautiful and provocative work within. In effect, it would have made for an interesting comparative study if two separate exhibitions were held. One openly marketed as a display of Islamic art and one as was conducted in this study. It would be interesting to see if there is a better response from the local Muslim and South Asian community, who although were approached with the printed flyers, did not form a large proportion of the visitors.

In hindsight, I would have added further information about the artists in the exhibition space too, whilst accepting this would have changed the design of the study slightly and would have influenced the visitor responses; it would no longer have been about first impressions.

What I have taken away from this study is the positive optimism it has generated for myself at least - the experience of curating and sharing work with the public. It

is almost unheard of to receive such overwhelming positive response to an exhibition and is very encouraging for someone like myself who is continually either asked or is required to question their place in the context not just of an art scene, but of a wider cultural and intercultural locality. I remain hopeful that these positive responses will continue into the future so that arts of all kinds and types can be openly shared and viewed with open minds with the public.

## **Chapter Six: Conclusion**

The aims of this research were to clarify definitions of Islamic art, which led to a differentiation of contemporary Islamic art, and to also determine how digital technologies were being used by artists producing Islamic art in the UK. Alongside this was the aim to gather and understand public opinion and reception of digital Islamic art. Below is provided further detail of the answers to the research questions which were designed to meet these aims.

### **6.1 Answers to Research Questions**

#### **What are the definitions of 'Islamic art' and more specifically those of 'contemporary Islamic art'?**

Definitions and classifications of Islamic art were found to vary amongst scholars and also the general public and stakeholders involved with the production, pedagogy and promotion of Islamic art. However, the visual elements of calligraphy, geometry and arabesque (floral) patterns were found to be strong elements in the majority examples of Islamic art, both historical, contemporary and also based on the responses collected from those who participated in the studies for this research.

Although very strong views were expressed that discouraged the use of the term Islamic art in relation to contemporary art, it was found that production of Islamic art continues today within global localities including the UK where this research was focussed. This was demonstrated through considering those artworks that have been exhibited and discussed in scholarly terms previously (shown in the literature review), and also those examples given and discussed by participants in the surveys,

interviews and exhibition feedback. Therefore, the validation for using such a term does exist and is attested by the presence of many artists who relate to the influence and inspiration that Islamic culture and faith has had, and continues to have on their work and artistic practice.

However, in order to be considerate of the varying views on how the 'contemporary' is discussed in the large scope of Islamic art history, it may be more appropriate for those in curatorial roles to describe such work as contemporary artworks inspired by Islamic tradition or Islamic visual culture instead of as contemporary Islamic art, whilst considering the artists' views on this terminology. It would be advisable to address such work in consideration of the aims and intent of the artist where possible, as in some cases this terminology is one the artists are comfortable with (such as in the context of the annual Islamic Arts Festival in Sharjah), and in others it is not as explicitly labelled (such as in the example of the Jameel Prize).

In response to the claims highlighted in the literature review that Islamic art no longer exists, or that there is no such thing as contemporary Islamic art, the many examples of artworks, the views of the artists views presented within this thesis, and the examples of my own work, present a basis for at least questioning these views, if not provide evidence to the contrary.

### **To what extent are artists of Islamic art in the UK using digital technologies in their artistic practice?**

Through a thorough literature review, and through the design and implementation of the studies within this research, it was possible to determine that a fair number of artists in the UK produce Islamic art with the use of digital technologies. These artists were representative of both Muslims and non-Muslims and shared an appreciation for the historical and continued influence of Islamic faith and/or culture which they manifest or incorporate in some way through their work.

The research also highlighted the sentiments that artists hold regarding the use of digital technologies in consideration of their creative role and authorship, whilst also appreciating the benefits of working efficiently and innovatively in this manner. Although, there were some concerns that the use of digital technologies might raise questions from art viewers regarding the creative process, questioning how much of that creativity is the work of the artist and how much is that of the digital technology, the artists resolved that this was something that perhaps their audiences did not perceive correctly. However, these concerns were seen more as challenges that continue to be overcome with the increasing use of digital technologies within artistic practice.

Artists are also increasingly engaging with audiences and viewers of their work through social media, which provides them a further opportunity to share the processes of art-making, not just the final artwork. This allows a better understanding of how digital technologies are used by artists in part or in the whole process of creating their work, leading to increased knowledge regarding hybrid and digital practices, and more familiarity with these processes on the part of the wider public.

### **What are the attitudes towards the adoption of digital technologies within contemporary Islamic art in the UK?**

Strongly related to the above research question was the perception of digital technologies by those involved and engaging with Islamic art. These included stakeholders such as curators, artists, and academics, but also the general public attending an exhibition of such work.

The concerns of curators regarding contemporary Islamic art presented the challenges they face in classifying and exhibiting such work in a manner that provides the contextual link it has to historical Islamic faith and culture. However,

this was quite detached from their perceptions and value of digital Islamic art which as a medium was not less appreciated but did pose some concerns in regards to archiving, preserving and even displaying this work. Curators were most worried that the inclusion of digital technologies would result in problems with functionality, that they would be ill-placed to resolve quickly and with the available resources.

However, within the findings of this research, specifically detailed in chapter four, it was suggested that these concerns and challenges may become less concerning with time, as much investment has been made by reputable organisations and institutes who are generating policies, advice and information specifically addressing these issues. Many museums and galleries have had to adapt to the increasing use of digital technologies in all departments, from interpretation, to cataloguing, archiving, and distribution to educational engagement. Therefore, it would be no larger challenge to accommodate artworks of a digital nature too.

## **6.2 Limitations of Research**

Although the research conducted allowed for many answers to be sought and insights to be understood regarding the Islamic art scene in the UK and perceptions surrounding the use of digital technologies within this, there are always improvements or developments that could be built upon further.

### **Online Survey**

Regarding the first study by online survey, there was a successful uptake in participants with over 500 completed surveys. However, the distribution of participants and demographics they represented were not entirely proportional to those present in the whole of the general UK population. Demographic groups in the survey participants weighed more towards those who were of a younger age, who likely had quicker and easier access to the internet (through use of smart



phones and laptops) and the survey also attracted a higher number of females than males. If this survey were to be conducted again, filters and

Conducting this survey as a post research exercise, to understand the impact of the exhibition in the last study or in conjunction with it might also have produced different results.

### **Interviews**

There were fewer limitations found in this study, where the methodology looked for qualitative responses through interviews of carefully selected participants who would represent stakeholder groups of artists, curators and academics. There was an almost equal split of gender with 14 females and 12 males. There was also a fair distribution of ethnicities and faiths represented, which was not deliberately sought but presented a favourable outcome to providing open and varied viewpoints.

The data from this study was therefore the most insightful of the whole research and provided a good overview of the themes and perceptions prevalent within the Islamic art scene from those with much experience in their fields.

### **Exhibition**

As mentioned in Chapter 5, the exhibition held in Bethnal Green was open and accessible to almost all possible audiences. However, there was less engagement by those members of the community who were directly local to the exhibition venue, within the London Borough of Tower Hamlets, who might be more familiar with Islamic art. This was witnessed through my own interaction with locals to whom I spoke on nearby streets, handing out leaflets to encourage them to visit the exhibition but seeing few come through the doors. The Tower Hamlets area has the largest proportion of Muslims within London (Ali 2016). Presenting an exhibition that perhaps felt more representative of that community and also one that was

family-friendly, created an opportunity to draw in diverse audiences, and although diverse audiences did attend, many came from other areas of London.

The Four Corners centre itself is known amongst students, artists and teachers already familiar with art spaces in London and especially those engaging with photographic practice. It has also had a history of political, activist campaigning and has associations with the feminist movement (Four Corners Archive 2018). It may be that these associations have remained amongst the local community, who may not be aware that the space is also available for arts activities and events unrelated to just these themes. Shifting these impressions and associations, and providing an impression that the space is open and welcomes anyone to explore the displays and activities may take more time and outreach.

There is also the need to consider what associations might be made with photography as being a representational art form, often depicting subjects that would be deemed by some Muslims to go against the principles of image-making. Again, it would require further outreach to dispel the notion that photography need only be of people or animals in order to be creative and artistic, and that this practice also still be within the realm of Islamic digital art.

The Four Corners centre does hold workshops specifically targeting disadvantaged and minority groups specifically in the local borough through the Zoom programme. There is also the opportunity to work with community groups further, to demonstrate how photography can be used in creative ways to produce art that still complies with Islamic adherence yet can be a means to produce artistic expression.

### **6.3 Impact of Research**

The underlying thread that has been revealed through this research is that of impact and familiarity, and how these can be generated and facilitated through

engagement with art, which can further be facilitated through the use of digital technology.

Engagement with digital technologies appears to be something that could facilitate the level of engagement in art for the general population but could also further the knowledge amongst all stakeholders and inject a feeling of confidence for those collecting and curating artworks that make use of digital technologies.

If familiarity and understanding can also be achieved through representation (through the presence of local Islamic art in mainstream or public spaces in the UK), then representation through art may well be a solution to resolve animosity between pockets of differing culture within society. As we have seen in the literature review and through the findings of the studies within this thesis, familiarity is a strong component for generating understanding and can also lead to appreciation, or at least knowledge of wider Islamic culture.

The knowledge gained through this research presents a documentation of the contemporary Islamic art scene in the UK and demonstrates its continuation as part of the long history of Islamic art regardless of a Western (non-Islamic) locality. The findings reveal that the Islamic art scene continues to develop with contributions from artists who have adopted the use of digital technologies as part of a hybrid artistic practice and that audiences in the UK are receptive to viewing and learning more about digital Islamic art.

The audience for this research includes artists who may want to better understand how their work is perceived by others, and learn how their own attitudes, motivations and concerns might compare to that of their peers. Academics will be able to better understand how the Islamic art scene in the UK is negotiated by those who contribute towards its development, including artists and teacher outside of higher education. Curators might consider how their role in classification

and dissemination might influence public interest in exhibiting further digital Islamic art. And finally, policy makers and those seeking to encourage engagement in the arts, may be able to consider how cultural engagement can be further facilitated through education at early and later levels which incorporates visits to museums, galleries and spaces where familiarity with varying arts can be instigated. These actions could help generate familiarity with arts relating to minority community groups regardless of proportions represented in the general population.

Considering again the examples of the Islamic Art Museum in Melbourne and the Institute of Arab and Islamic Art in New York, it may also be possible to consider a similar, permanent, and dedicated space for contemporary Islamic art in the UK.

It would not only be an apt fit for the existing audience for Islamic art, but would go some way towards recognising the existence of artistic expression amongst those who are very much a part of the UK population and engaged and contributing to the Islamic art scene. It would also allow for new audiences to engage with Islamic art and better understand the nuances, variations and connections that can be made between themselves and their globalising locality.

The soon to open Aga Khan Centre in London (September 2018), may come close to fulfilling the desire to see and promote Islamic art through a dedicated space in the UK. Along with programmed lectures, tours of the terraced gardens and in-house focus on research, there is also an exhibition space within the newly built offices (Aga Khan Development Network - AKDN 2018). As it currently stands, the centre is an umbrella for their sub-organisations in the UK which are centred on higher education and scholarly studies. Prior to opening they have expressed an aim to build bridges in “*understanding about Muslim cultures and societies*” and a public programme of events (AKDN 2018). If, they are able to match the success of the Aga Khan Museum in Toronto which is also dedicated to providing insights into

Islamic culture, then the London centre may well generate much interest locally and internationally as has their museum in Toronto (Aga Khan Museum 2016).

Such initiatives have the potential to provide a positive lens through which to see the Islamic culture and faith as a counteraction to negative stereotypes presented and conflated through the media.

#### **6.4 Further Research**

To further extend this research, a practical study involving art-making with digital technologies may be of interest to further explore some of the attitudes and concerns expressed by artists and curators in this research. Either through case studies or practical workshops, further information regarding engagement with digital technologies could be gathered. A comparative element could be introduced prior to workshops taking place, where levels of engagement could be measured. In-depth qualitative feedback could also be gathered where participants are responding with their feelings and experiences in using digital technologies either as the only method to create art, or as part of a hybrid process combining manual methods.

A further suggestion would be to compare similar research in various localities in the UK and abroad where the demographics of participants are much different to the diverse nature of the population in the South-East of England. In a Muslim country perhaps the approach to classification would not be found to be as problematic as it appears in the UK. The engagement with digital technologies by locals in a non-Western, Islamic locality, may also throw up differing concerns or perhaps as many as those perceived by stakeholders in the UK.

It would also be an avenue for further research to consider how an online-only or virtual exhibition might be received by a public audience. Their engagement with the displayed artworks could be determined through post-viewing survey or

questionnaires. If a further study for displaying physical versions of the same works could be exhibited, participants could also be called on to indicate their preference for one or the other type of exhibition. The results of such a study could have a large impact on decisions made by artists, curators and technology developers who may want to increase and make art viewing more accessible for a wider public. This could include those who are less likely to step into more formalised art spaces.

### **6.5 Summative Reflection**

In the preceding chapters I provided reflections of my own journey alongside the research and how my past experiences and perceptions tied in with this. This research came about through my personal engagement as an artist and researcher in the Islamic art scene in the UK. I situate myself in this art scene as I identify as someone who produces Islamic art within the locality of the UK. Being a British resident since birth of Pakistani heritage, and also a practising Muslim, it might be considered by some enough of a qualifier for assigning the label of Islamic art to my work. However, with a knowledge of Islamic religious and cultural history and how these have shaped contemporary Islamic art, provides an awareness that these are not the only criteria for assigning such labels.

In addition to the relevance of my identity, I also engage with a practice that combines traditional Islamic pattern-making with the use of digital technologies. I wondered what this art could be defined as, as it was not being considered by some 'traditionalists' as adhering to the concepts of Islamic art. Nor was this type of art visible within the field of digital arts, and it certainly was not being exhibited widely in mainstream art spaces.

My instinct was to employ the term 'digital Islamic art' to describe some of my own artworks and also work by artists following a similar approach to that which I had developed. Having conducted this research, I am aware of varying views and understand the complexities and the intentions behind those who feel such terms

as Islamic art or Islamic artist may not be suitable. However, I feel confident in my own usage of these terms and feel that my artistic production and that of my peers, supports the usage and suitability of this terminology. If an artist chooses not to use these terms then that is their prerogative. Equally, I do not feel that an artist can be told that the field of Islamic art (which clearly has a continuing timeline) and which they are contributing towards, does not exist. As a result of this research it has become clearer that the artist's voice should be sought in discussions of what their work speaks of and how it relates to the wider world.

In October 2018, the British Museum's new Islamic Art gallery is due to open, and will no-doubt receive much media coverage (The British Museum 2017). The patron sponsor for this new gallery is the Malaysian Albukhary Foundation. The investment from one to the other will form a relationship between East and West that provides an interesting perspective of continued appreciation and engagement for Islamic art regardless of locality. The Middle Eastern department at The British Museum, although have been working closely with this project, will likely also incorporate modern and contemporary artworks in this gallery. However, it will be interesting to see if representation of local contemporary artists in the UK will also feature within the displays of the new gallery or within the museum's permanent collections in the near future.

A further exhibition due to take place in the coming year is that of Manifesting the Unseen, in November 2018 at the Guest Projects space in London (Manifesting the Unseen 2018). This exhibition aims to break down barriers, open discussions and challenge pre-conceptions through the use of Islamic art and cultural expression. The exhibition will feature the work of 10 Muslim female artists (myself included) and will also feature spoken word and poetry. The context of this art venue is a significant one as Guest Projects was founded by the award-winning artist Yinka Shonibare. Shonibare, a British Nigerian artist, fuses symbols and scenes of colonialism, post-colonialism, class and cultural identity into his work. In many

cases, Shonibare presents scenes or persons of notable British classics (both in art and literature) in visually striking, sculptural form. He juxtaposes what have been described as 'African' objects alongside those available from British high street stores, and also uses 'African' batik fabrics to dress many of the British, aristocratic, and imperialist characters he presents as a discussion of what identity means and how this can be symbolised or misrepresented through fabric (Hynes 2001).

The Manifesting the Unseen exhibition was selected by Guests Projects as part of a wider residency programme and was conceived by curator Nazia Mirza, to include workshops and recitations. Its successful selection from a competitive open call is a positive indication that there is a desire for viewing and providing access to contemporary Islamic art in popular art spaces in the UK. The exhibition and residency sit well in association with a space founded by Shonibare, who himself manifests hybridity in his experience of living in both Nigeria and Britain, his heritage and his use of symbolic visuals from both British and Nigerian cultures.

The invitation to include my work in this exhibition is one that feels inclusive of digital forms of Islamic art too. To be situated in the same space as work which might be considered of a more traditionalist nature, is indicative of accepting digital Islamic art as part of a narrative that is connected to tradition and a culture that is not bound by geography or ethnicity. The exhibition premise and selection therefore makes an explicit statement of the contributions artists are making to the contemporary Islamic art scene in the UK in all its manifestations.

As a final summary, as has been demonstrated through this research, there are strong contributions being made by artists of various backgrounds using hybrid artistic practice, combining Islamic art with the use of digital technologies in the UK. Their presence and activity provides a marker of continuity in Islamic art from the historical to the contemporary, and hopefully stands as a sign of further continued development of the Islamic art scene in the UK.



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## Appendix I

# Portfolio of Artworks

2014 - 2017

Sara Choudhrey

[www.sarachoudhrey.com](http://www.sarachoudhrey.com)

# Artist Statement

Sara Choudhrey's research-based approach to artistic practice informs an investigative process engaging with themes on space, place, border and order.

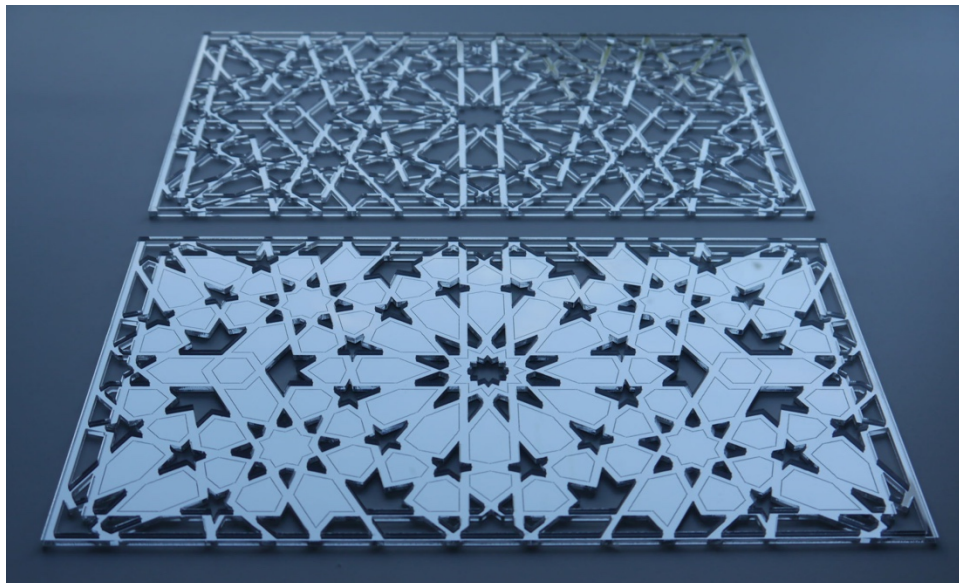
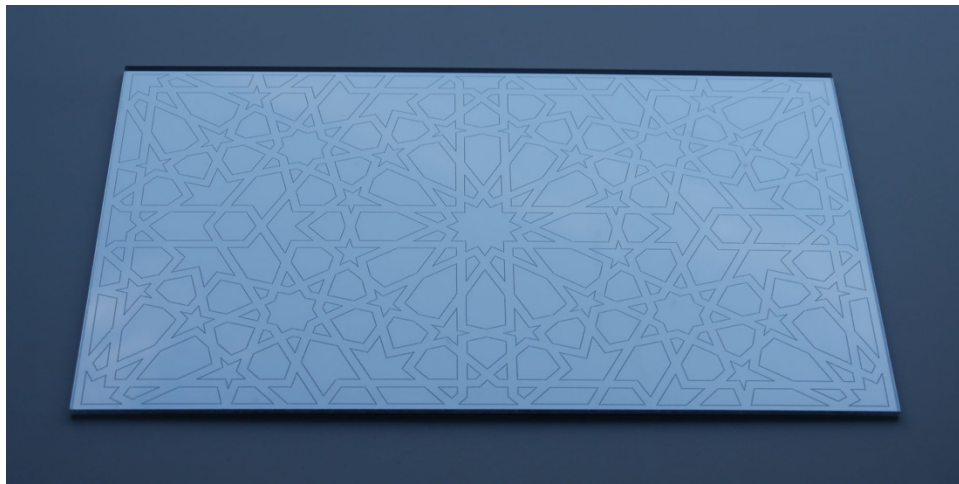
Sara's interests in pattern-making are influenced by historical sites around the world where the construction and application of patterns are based on geometry and stylised botanical forms. Through both her research and artworks, Sara raises the question of whether hybrid art presents an affinity to an ever globalising and hybrid society, seeking inspiration through spaces where cultures intersect. Through her work Sara aims to convey that artistic traditions are continuous, cross-cultural and transnational.

The results are hybrid in both practice and media and include examples of light art, interactive installations, painting, sculpture and etching.

# Mirror Mirror Mirror

2014

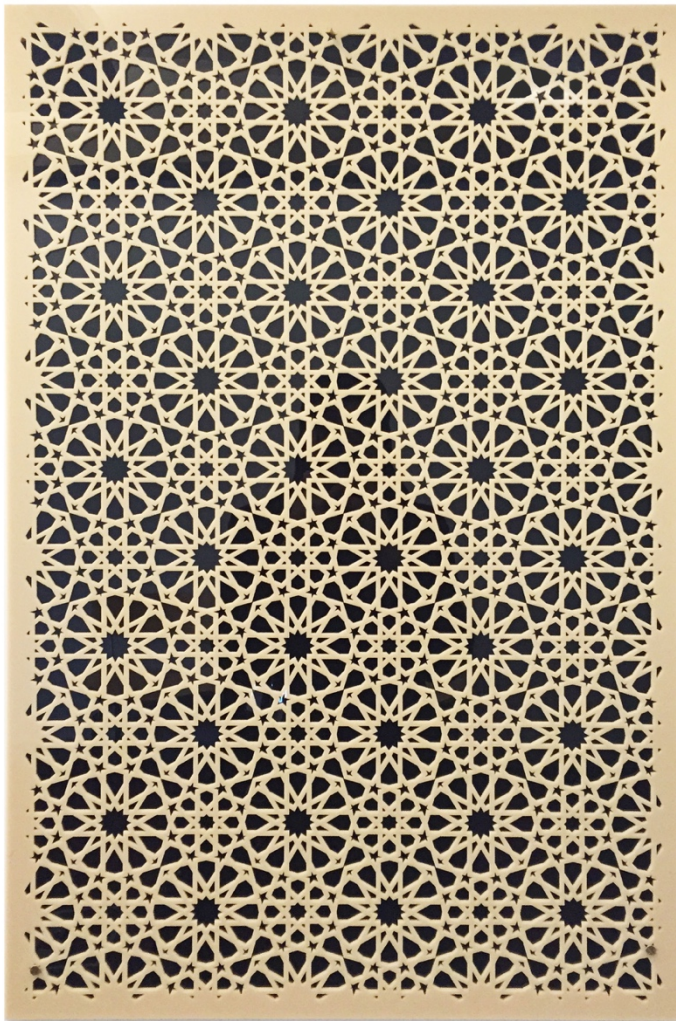
This triptych engraved and cut with laser was commissioned for a client who had learnt of my experimenting with laser on mirror Perspex. The pieces were developed to show how a single pattern could be presented in various ways by highlighting the component shapes through full cuts, partial cuts and just engraving with no cuts. The final effect was one that conveys a unity yet variation in the body of the work, and its individual parts.



# Untitled

2014

A full laser cutwork, *Untitled*, is one of a series of early prototypes looking at scalability in pattern, adding contrast with subtle layering, and exploring impact of colour in combination with density in pattern.



*Untitled*

## Series Title: Ulterior Motifs

2015-2016

The *Ulterior Motifs* series is formed of artworks which convey the distinctive styles, patterns and motifs found on historical artefacts and architectural sites across the Islamic world.

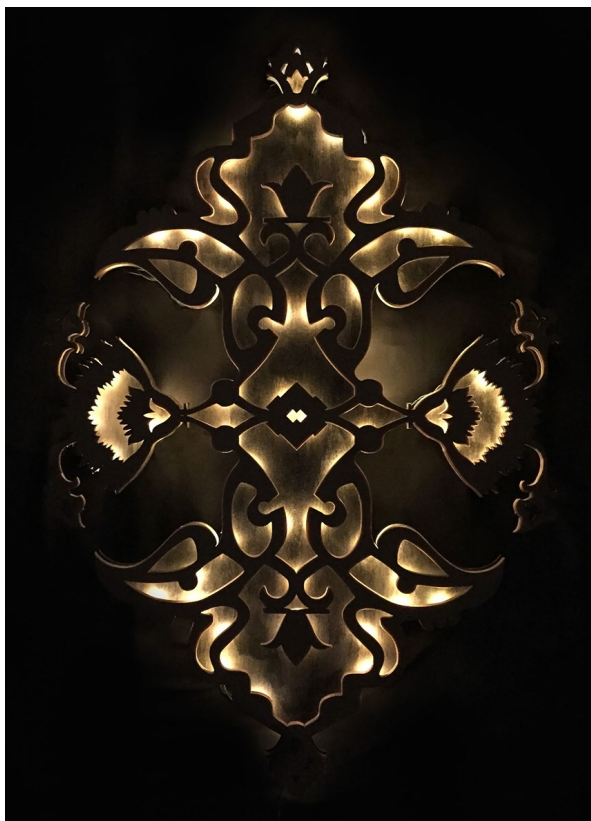
The series brings forth the craft of historical artefacts to a fine art context – asking the viewer to consider their understanding of wider art histories and continuities. The re-positioning and re-presentation of traditional Islamic art forms in contemporary settings and media creates a platform from which one can reflect upon the impact of appropriation of all manner, showing the distinctive style of Islamic art outside of its original context.

Within this series laser-cut and engraved patterns on almost white birch are presented against stark backdrops of black, leading to an exploration of depth. The play of light and shade results in an appreciation of each piece from a distance and also within close proximity, engaging the viewer in dynamic motion amongst analogue objects. The presence of digital process in the production is a key element in the visual outcome, blurring the line between decorative and fine art practice yet emphasizing a continuity in tradition.

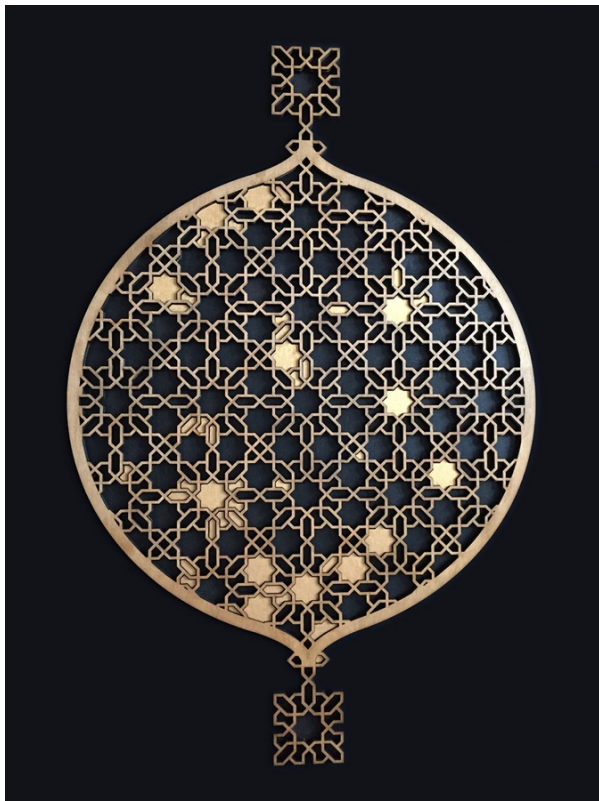




*Arabesque II*



*Khatai*



*Roundel*

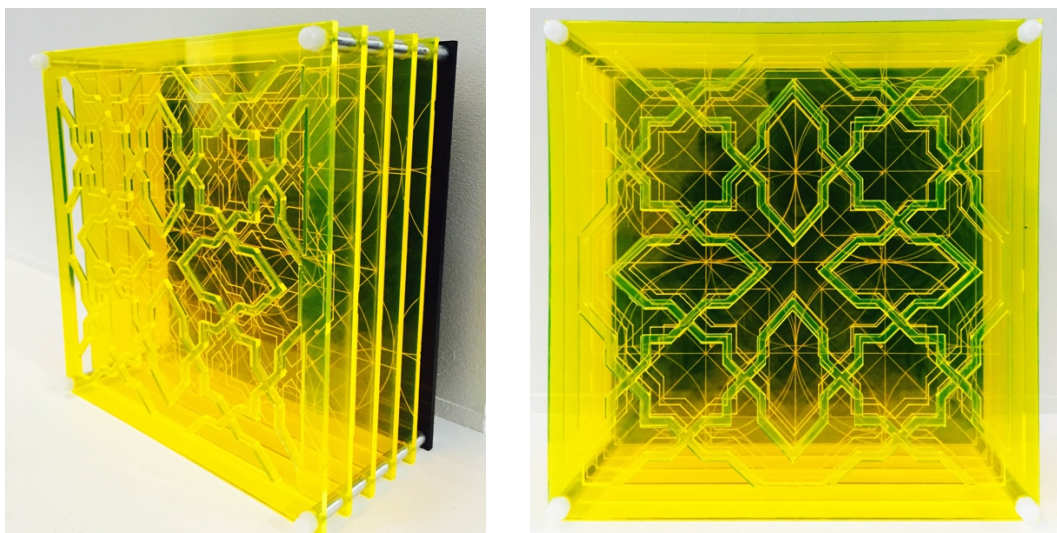
# Layers

2016

Layers can be described as a demonstrative artwork, made of layers of laser etched and cut Perspex. Each layer illustrates the steps that are required to construct a geometrical pattern. This method is traditionally followed using a compass and straight edge. However, layering each piece allows for an appreciation of the complexity of the process needed to create a proportional and therefore harmonious design.

This artwork started as a proto-type but was visually very compelling and demonstrated how an artwork could also be a visual learning aid too. In this case the artwork allows the viewer to better understand how the final pattern result can be achieved using the step by step process of drawing each layer on top of the other, just as a draughtsman might.

There is also a play with light in combination with the fluorescent nature of the Perspex used. The back panel is deliberately black to allow for the contrast to heighten the etching visibility in all light modes.



*Layers*

# Digital B-Orders

2016

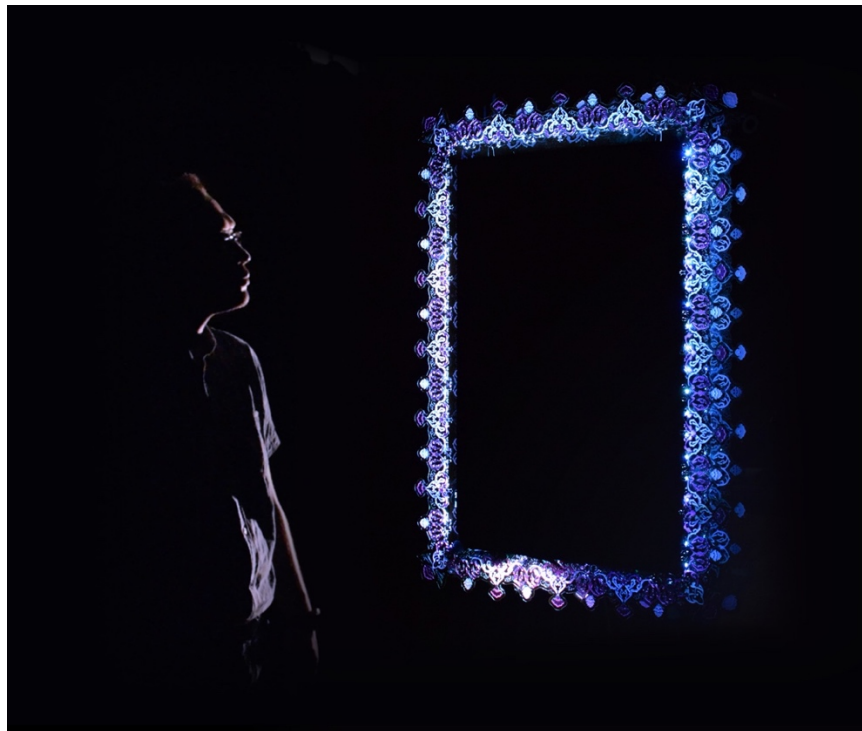
Digital B-Orders is an interactive installation enhanced by motion sensitive lighting. An ornately decorated artwork inspired by traditional Islamic Qur'an and manuscript illumination, *Digital B-Orders*, upon closer inspection reveals that there is more to meet the eye than what is apparent upon the intricate surface. The decorative art of Illumination is made literal through this work with the use of software, circuits and electrical components allowing for interactivity based on the viewer's movement. The almost visible underlying structure alludes to the hidden order beyond the surface, in this case bringing newly interpreted life to a traditionally static art form.

In naming *Digital B-Orders* there is an intentional play on words. For one it is drawing attention to the digital in the digital age, questioning our interactions through digital devices and interfaces. There is also the significance of the border in a literal and figurative sense - the order of not only nature (evoked by the floral pattern) but order imposed by boundaries affecting the movement, placement and displacement of people and communities. The work speaks of hybridity in its physical form, in its craft and also in concept of globalisation. It allows for the decorative ornamentation to draw connections between East and West, alluding to the long history of material interactions that continue from all over the world today. By incorporating the engaging elements of interaction, the artwork forces the user to understand their impact in a sensory manner and hopes to instigate contemplation of interactivity between persons in the wider global community.

Arabesque/islimi patterns in border form are traditionally used for illuminating the pages of Qur'ans, manuscripts and legal documents. The arabesque design is applied here to Perspex® in a semi-transparent dark grey, providing a subtle transparency but highly reflective surface. LEDs are placed around an internal wooden frame which is also used to attach the laser-cut Perspex® panels on both the front and back of the installation. Through the use of a mini Arduino circuit board and a number of infrared proximity sensors, movement within a metres range of either side of the

artwork can be detected, this then activates the LEDS creating a digital conversation between the viewer and the installation.

In this artwork, the act of illuminating the artwork is placed into the users' hands. Unlike in traditional illumination, the decorative aspect is at once visual and literal; the illumination itself is illuminated. This arrangement moves away from the traditional gallery set-up where framed artworks are the central focus and their frames can be ignored. In this case, the framing border is a central component of the artwork, highlighted by the user's effect on it. A further aspect of suspending the work in this nature produces a frame, positioned off the floor, as if suspended in mid-air. The position of the framed space with reflective surface allows for a self-portrait of the viewer, whilst the semi-transparent, hollow centre creates a frame viewable by anyone positioned on the other side. This placement of the work encourages the viewer to look beyond their 'selfie' of a more traditional nature to contemplate the composition and relevance of a highly decorative border.



*Digital B-Orders*

## Series Title: Iznik

2016

The Iznik series is an exploration of colour and form through a study of hyper stylized floral motifs.

Abstract and stylized motifs were commonly found on decorative ceramics produced in the town of Iznik and sent to decorate some of the most famous and historical sites of the Ottoman Empire, most notably within present day Turkey. Providing a contemporary interpretation of traditional Iznik floral motifs, Sara Choudhrey's paintings and laser etched panels unusually bring focus to the individual motifs, highlighting their invaluable part in contributing to larger and complex compositions. In these works, the relationship between colour and shape is heightened by proximity of individual motif components. Where gaps were deliberately left with ceramic glaze, gaps created in these contemporary works provide a new consideration of the effect and dynamism of boundaries, space, change and growth.

Whilst the motif forms are closely linked to the Iznik artistic style, the colour combinations used within these artworks pay homage to a continuity in artistic movement on a global scale. Colour families include those influenced by artefacts of Japanese, Indian and European origin.



Hatayi Gold Set Gouache on black paper (8x8)



*Hatayi Gold I*



*Hatayi Gold II*



*Hatayi Gold III*



*Hatayi Gold IV*

Hyper Hatayi Gouache on paper (6x6, 8x8)



*Hyper Hatayi 01*



*Hyper Hatayi 02*



*Hyper Hatayi 03*



*Hyper Hatayi 04*



# Motif Panels

Illuminated Installation



*Moss*



*Flame*

## Series Title: Tethered

2017

*Tethered* is a series that explores the notion of movement through and in response to encounters in place and space. The artworks in this series portray non-visible entities as controlling forces. Natural elements, physical barriers, and reactive behaviours are implied through the use of redundant objects. For example, in the artwork *Traverse*, a kite formed of a cutwork pattern would not normally be able to fly, yet it is shown in motion, controlled by a distant tethering. The use of shadows and black holes also allude to our understanding of the natural world we inhabit but contradicts what we know of natural forces that would normally prohibit or restrict movement in reality.



*Traverse*

(Triptych – digital print on paper mounted on card)

## Series Title: In Visible Frames

2017

*In Visible Frames* provides a reinterpretation and re-imagining of the traditional picture frame as a means to evaluate our perceptions and engagement with space, borders, and movement. What does place mean after displacement? Providing a redirection of focus, the almost invisible outer decorative frame represents those on the fringes whilst offering a lens for conscious awareness of locality for others. This series represents evolving societies, continuity and change. A juxtaposition of material and form leading to an emergent hybrid in both visual and social domains.



*In Visible Frame 01*  
Mixed media

## **Appendix II – Survey Questions**

UK Survey of Attitudes Towards Islamic Art

### **Introduction**

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this survey. Your answers will be of great help to our research in understanding what the UK public think about Islamic art.

This survey should take only 5 minutes of your time.

At the end of the survey you will be provided with the opportunity to enter a prize draw for a chance to win a £25 Amazon voucher!

Your answers will remain anonymous and your contact details (should you wish to enter the prize draw) will remain confidential and will not be shared with third parties.

### **Tell us a little about yourself**

**Q.1** Are you a permanent UK resident?

- Yes
- No

**Q.2** How would you describe your national identity?

- English
- Welsh
- Scottish

- Northern Irish
- British
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

**Q.2b** What is your nationality? (If not a British resident)

▼ Please select... ... Zimbabwe

**Q.3** What is your gender?

- Male
- Female
- Other gender identity
- Prefer not to say

**Q.4** What is your age?

▼ Please select... ... 75 years or older

**Q.5** What is your ethnic group?

Choose one option that best describes your ethnic group or background

- English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish/British
- Irish
- Gypsy or Irish Traveller
- Any other White background, please state:  
\_\_\_\_\_
- White and Black Caribbean
- White and Black African
- White and Asian
- Any other Mixed/Multiple ethnic background, please describe:  
\_\_\_\_\_
- Indian
- Pakistani
- Bangladeshi
- Chinese
- Any other Asian background, please describe:  
\_\_\_\_\_
- African
- Caribbean
- Any other Black/African/Caribbean background, please describe:  
\_\_\_\_\_

- Arab
- Any other ethnic group, please describe:

---

**Q.6** What is your religion?

- Christian (including Church of England, Catholic, Protestant and all other Christian denominations)
- Muslim
- Jewish
- Buddhist
- Sikh
- Hindu
- No religion
- Other, please describe: \_\_\_\_\_
- Prefer not to say

**Tell us about your interest in art**

**Q.7** How often do you visit an art gallery, exhibition or museum?

- At least once a week
- At least once a month
- At least once a year
- Never

**Q.8** Have you seen Islamic art in the UK?

- Yes
- No
- Not sure what Islamic art is

**Q.9** In which cities or venues (gallery or museum) did you see Islamic art in the UK?

If more than one city or venue, please use a comma to separate answers

---

**Q.9b** Have you seen Islamic art abroad?

- Yes
- No

**Q.9c** In which cities or venues (gallery or museum) did you see Islamic art abroad?

If more than one city or venue, please use a comma to separate answers

---

**Q.10** In your own words, please describe what Islamic art is:

---

**Q.10b** In your own words, please describe what you think Islamic art might be:

---

**Q.11** Which region(s) of the world do you associate Islamic art with? (Please select all that apply)

- |                                      |   |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| <input type="radio"/> United Kingdom | <input type="radio"/> Western Europe            |
| <input type="radio"/> South Asia     | <input type="radio"/> North America             |
| <input type="radio"/> South America  | <input type="radio"/> Africa                    |
| <input type="radio"/> South Africa   | <input type="radio"/> Euro-Asia                 |
| <input type="radio"/> Eastern Europe | <input type="radio"/> Central America           |
| <input type="radio"/> Far East Asia  | <input type="radio"/> No particular region      |
| <input type="radio"/> North Africa   | <input type="radio"/> Other please state: _____ |
| <input type="radio"/> Middle East    |   |

**Q.12** Would you expect an Islamic artist to be:

- Religious
- Non-religious
- Either religious or non-religious
- I don't know

**Q.37** Which religion would you expect an Islamic artist to follow?

- Christian (including Church of England, Catholic, Protestant and all other Christian denominations)
- Muslim
- Jewish
- Buddhist
- Sikh
- Hindu
- Any religion
- No religion
- Other, please describe: \_\_\_\_\_

**Q.14** What types of artworks do you think might be most common in Islamic art?

(Please select all that apply)

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <input type="radio"/> Paintings           | <input type="radio"/> Photography               |
| <input type="radio"/> Textiles            | <input type="radio"/> Ceramic/Glassware         |
| <input type="radio"/> Film                | <input type="radio"/> New Media/Installation    |
| <input type="radio"/> Sculpture           | <input type="radio"/> Buildings/Monuments       |
| <input type="radio"/> Calligraphy         | <input type="radio"/> Armoury/Metalware         |
| <input type="radio"/> Jewellery/Ornaments | <input type="radio"/> I don't know              |
| <input type="radio"/> Books               | <input type="radio"/> Other please state: _____ |

**Q.15** Please provide further details of which types of artworks you think might be most common in Islamic art

Paintings:

- Portrait
- Figurative
- Landscape
- Miniatures
- Abstract
- Other, please specify: \_\_\_\_\_

Ceramic/Glassware:

- Bowls
- Vases
- Plates
- Pitchers/jugs



Other, please specify: \_\_\_\_\_

**Jewellery/Ornaments:**

- Crowns/tiaras/jewels
- Jewellery boxes
- Trinkets
- Lamps
- Other, please specify: \_\_\_\_\_

**Buildings/monuments:**

- Religious buildings (place of worship, sacred locations)
- State buildings/palaces/mansions
- Educational Institutes (e.g. madrasahs)
- Museums/Galleries
- Other, please specify: \_\_\_\_\_

**Books:**

- Manuscripts
- Sacred books/scripture
- Royal/Government/Official documents
- Other, please specify: \_\_\_\_\_

**Textiles:**

- Tapestries/wall hangings
- Carpets and rugs
- Clothing
- Other, please specify: \_\_\_\_\_

**New Media/Installation:**

- Immersive
- Interactive
- Interactive
- Virtual/Augmented reality
- Kinetic
- Generative
- Other, please specify: \_\_\_\_\_

**Q.16** Would you like to see more Islamic art in UK museums and galleries?

- Yes
- No

**Q.17** Would you be interested to learn more about Islamic art in the UK?

- Yes
- No

**Tell us a little about your communication choices**

**Q.18** Are you subscribed to any arts related communications? (These could be in the form of magazines, newsletters, news feeds, mailing lists and event updates)

- Yes
- No

**Q.19** Which of the following devices do you own

(Please tick all that apply):

- Smartphone
- Smart TV
- Laptop
- Tablet
- Desktop Computer
- Games Console (with internet connection)
- None of these

**Q.20** Do you currently seek to view art on any of the devices?

- Yes
- No

**Q.21** Would you be interested in viewing art on any of these devices?

(Please tick all that apply):

- Smartphone
- Smart TV
- Laptop

- Tablet
- Desktop Computer
- Games Console (with internet connection)
- None of these

**Q.22** Please indicate on which of your devices you currently view art? *[If yes to Q.20]*

(Please tick all that apply):

- Smartphone
- Smart TV
- Laptop
- Tablet
- Desktop Computer
- Games Console (with internet connection)
- None of these

**Q.23** Would you be interested in viewing Islamic art in a digital form in a UK gallery or museum? (These are artworks which are either made with or are presented using digital technology, for example using computers and electronic devices?)

- Yes
- No
- Unsure

**Q.24** Please add any other comments on aspects of our survey or the topic of Islamic art in the box below

---

---

Enter Prize Draw for £25 Amazon Voucher

---

**Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire.**

If you would like to be entered into the prize draw for a chance to win a £25 Amazon voucher please enter your name and email address below.

Lastly, if you would like to stay informed about this study, please answer yes in the box below.

Your details will not be shared with any third parties and your answers will remain confidential.

- Name \_\_\_\_\_
- Email \_\_\_\_\_
- To stay informed, please enter 'Yes' in the box:  
\_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix III: Interview Participant Information Sheet**

### **Digital Islamic art in the UK**

**Researcher:** Sara Choudhrey

**Research supervisors:** Ania Bobrowicz and Dr Farzin Deravi

### **Purpose of this study**

You are being invited to take part in this research study in order to help us understand and document the perspectives of stakeholders within the Islamic art scene in the UK. The aim of this research is to understand current artistic practice and the engagement stakeholders may have with digital technologies in the context of Islamic art production and/or presentation. The stakeholders will include artists, curators and researchers in order to determine which factors may influence some of the decisions made in the production and presentation of artworks at varying stages of the process, as well understand whether utilising digital technologies may play a part in these decisions.

Please take the time to read the following information and do not hesitate to ask the researcher for further details or clarification. If you are happy with this information, and the answers provided to any questions you may have, then please let us know if you are happy to participate in this study in the form of an interview.

### **Form of the Study**

You will be asked to sit for an interview, which will last between 45-60 minutes. In this interview you will be asked questions on topics related to your profession and your experience with Islamic art, digital technologies and the wider art scene. Your

responses will be recorded using a dictaphone and during the course of the interview the researcher may take sparse notes.

You have the option to remain anonymous, in which case, any information you provide will be associated with an allocated ID and not your name. Only the researchers named above will have access to this information.

If at any time there is a question you would prefer not to answer, then you have the option to skip the question.

### **Withdrawal**

You also have the option to completely withdraw from the study at any point either before, during or after the interview should you so wish, in which case, any responses you provide will not be added to the data set for interpretation or analysis and will be duly destroyed.

### **What will happen to the responses I provide?**

The responses you provide in the interview will first be saved as an audio recording. These audio recordings will then be transcribed and kept in digital document form. The audio files themselves will be archived until they are no longer needed and then destroyed (no longer than twelve months after the interview takes place). All archival digital files and related research material will be kept on a secure server by the University of Kent; encrypted and password protected. The University of Kent takes security, privacy and confidentiality very seriously and so any data will be accessible only by the researchers of this study. All participants will be allocated an ID number and so will not be identifiable by any persons beyond the research team unless otherwise consented by the participant.

### **What will happen to the responses after they have been analysed?**

The responses from this study will be analysed and interpreted in order to find patterns and significant points of interest. The findings from the analysis may be compared to academic speculations and concerns, or may be used to make new

points regarding the nature and development of the Islamic art scene in the UK. These findings will be made accessible for an academic audience in the form of a journal publication or an international conference. Any quotes from the interviews themselves will not be linked to a name unless permission is explicitly granted by the participant.

Any findings that are published will be made accessible to all participants via email.

### **Going forward**

If you feel comfortable to participate in this study after reading through this sheet you will be asked to sign a consent form prior to the interview commencing. The consent form will allow you to indicate if you have understood and consent to the following aspects of the interview:

- Reading of this information sheet
- Your participation in the study
- Audio recording by dictaphone
- Whether you would like to remain anonymous
- Opportunity to withdraw at any time

### **Support and advice**

If you have any questions about the research, or the response collection process, please feel free to speak to the researcher at the time prior to, during or after the interview using the contact details provided below. If you seek any further advice please do not hesitate to request this as the University of Kent takes its responsibility in collecting data for research very seriously and is happy to advise or counsel if requested.

### **Contacts for further information:**

Researcher: Sara Choudhrey

School of Engineering and Digital Arts, Jennison Building, University of Kent,  
Canterbury, Kent, CT2 7NT

Email: [s.choudhrey@kent.ac.uk](mailto:s.choudhrey@kent.ac.uk) Telephone: +44 (0)1227 823246

## Appendix IV: Interview Questions

Proposed list of questions for semi-structured interviews based on interviewee role

### Questions for Artists

#### Participant background

- How did you come to be an artist?
- Have you had any formal training/qualifications in art or are you self-taught?
- If you were to describe yourself as an artist of a particular type, what would this be?

#### About Islamic art

- What is your understanding of the term 'Islamic art'?
- How did you become involved in Islamic art?
- If you were asked to name some characteristics of Islamic art, what would they be?
- How would you identify an Islamic art work?
- How would you identify an Islamic artist?
- Your work has previously been exhibited under the theme of 'Islamic art', how did you feel about this?
- Is there a spiritual element to your work? Do you follow any particular religion? How much does this influence your artwork, if at all?
- What is the art scene for contemporary Islamic art in Britain?
- Where do you see Islamic art compared to something like mainstream art?
- What are the key venues for exhibiting Islamic art in the UK?
- Do you believe there is a link between the type of art being produced and its acceptance as Islamic art?

#### About digital art

The next question will be about digital technology, by which I mean any hardware (for example computers, web cameras and printers, projectors), any software used to create or manipulate digital media (for example



Photoshop, 3DSM or Flash) and also online based networks (such as social media sites like Facebook and Twitter), etc.

- Have you ever used a computer or any electronic device or software in any of your art work? (This can include hardware and software and can be in any stage of the production as well as in final display of the work)
- Please describe what methods you used to produce this artwork and
- How was this work received by curators and/or the general public
- How likely are you to use digital technology in either producing or presenting your art work? ('again' – if previous answer was yes)
- What do you understand from the term 'digital art'?
- What do you think of the term 'digital Islamic art'?
- How do you feel about learning a new technology or software?
- If you were asked by a curator to produce a digital Islamic artwork for an exhibition, would you consider making something of this nature?

#### General

- Where do you see Islamic art in Britain in say ten years' time?
- Is there anything else you'd like to tell me in regards to any of the topics we've covered today?

### Questions for Curators

#### Experience as a curator

- How did you come to be a curator?
- Have you had any formal training/qualifications in art history or curatorship?
- In your experience which factors add value to an artwork?

#### About Islamic art

- What is your understanding of the term 'Islamic art'?
- How did you become involved in Islamic art?
- If you were asked to name some characteristics of Islamic art, what would they be?
- How would you identify an Islamic artwork?
- How would you identify an Islamic artist?
- What are the key venues for exhibiting Islamic art?
- Which factors add value to an Islamic artwork? Are they any different to those for non-Islamic artwork?
- Where do you see Islamic art compared to something like mainstream art?

- Do you or your department have any long-term goals to extend the collection of contemporary Islamic artworks?
- What are some of the current considerations for exhibiting Islamic art in Britain?
- In what ways might artists influence your collections/exhibitions?
- How might the choices made by an artist to use a particular practice or medium influence the development of the Islamic art scene in Britain?
- How likely is it that the gallery/museum you work for would exhibit artists under the theme of 'contemporary Islamic art' (not necessarily with this title)?

#### About digital art

- How familiar are you with digital art?
- Please describe what you understand this form of art to mean?

The next question will be about digital technology, by which I mean any hardware (for example computers, web cameras and printers, projectors), any software used to create or manipulate digital media (for example Photoshop, 3DSM or Flash) and also online based networks (such as social media sites like Facebook and Twitter), etc.

- Have you ever featured or exhibited artwork that involves digital technology in an exhibition? (This can include hardware and software and can be in any stage of the production as well as in final display of the work)
- How likely are you to feature a digital Islamic artwork in your exhibition?
- What do you think of the term 'digital Islamic art'?
- Would the value of such works be less or more than those made using traditional methods?
- If you were invited to curate an exhibition of works that fit the concept of digital Islamic art, is this something you would consider?
- If you were requested by a curator or an artist to provide feedback on a future exhibition of digital Islamic artworks, is this something you would consider?

#### General

- Where do you see Islamic art in Britain in ten years' time?
- Is there anything else you'd like to tell me in regards to any of the topics we've covered today?

### Questions for Researchers

#### Experience as a researcher

- How did you come to be a researcher in [state participant's specific subject specialisation here]?
- How long have you been researching this subject?

#### About Islamic art

- What is your understanding of the term 'Islamic art'?
- If you were asked to name some characteristics of Islamic art, what would they be?
- How would you identify an Islamic artwork?
- How would you identify an Islamic artist?
- Where do you see Islamic art compared to something like mainstream art?
- How might the choices made by an artist to use a particular practice or medium influence the development of the Islamic art scene in Britain?

#### About digital art

- What do you understand from the term 'digital art'?
- Can you provide any examples?
- How familiar are you with digital art?
- What do you think of the term 'digital Islamic art'?
- If requested by an artist or curator to provide feedback on a future exhibition of digital Islamic artwork, is this something you would consider?

#### General

- Where do you see Islamic art in ten years' time or further in the future?
- Is there anything else you'd like to tell me in regards to any of the topics we've covered today?

## Appendix V: Exhibition Exit-Questionnaire

# SEEING THE UNSEEN

Tell Us What You Think

Did you enjoy the SEEING THE UNSEEN exhibition today?

Yes

No

Why do you feel this way?

---

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---

Was this your first time attending an exhibition like this?

Yes

No

What kind of art would you say this exhibition displays?

---

---

---

---

Which artwork did you most enjoy today?

---

---

Please explain why:

---

---

---

---

What do you think of the combination of different artistic techniques?

---

---

---

---

Would you be interested to learn more about this type of art?

Yes

No

Please add any further comments, feedback or suggestions below:

If you would like to be notified of further activities related to this exhibition, please let us know your email address. This will not be shared with any third parties.

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Please Tell us a Little About Yourself

Sex

- Male                                       Female                                       Prefer not to say

Age

- Under 11                                       25 – 34                                       55 – 64  
 12 – 18                                       35 – 44                                       65 – 74  
 19 – 24                                       45 – 54                                       75 +  
 Prefer not to say

Ethnicity

- English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish/British  
 Irish                                       Gypsy or Irish Traveller  
 Any other White background, please state: \_\_\_\_\_
- White and Black Caribbean                                       White and Black African  
 Any other Mixed/Multiple ethnic background, please describe:  
\_\_\_\_\_
- Indian                                       Pakistani                                       Bangladeshi                                       Chinese  
 Any other Asian background, please describe: \_\_\_\_\_
- African                                       Caribbean  Arab  
 Any other Black/African/Caribbean background, please describe: \_\_\_\_\_
- Any other ethnic group, please describe: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Prefer not to say

Religion

- Christian                                       Muslim                                       Jewish                                       Sikh  
 No religion  Hindu                                       Buddhist                                       Prefer not to say  
 Any other religion, please describe: \_\_\_\_\_

THANK YOU!