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## **Aesthetic Analysis as a Methodology for Interpreting Islamic Art and Architecture: An Ottoman Case Study from Topkapı Palace**

### ***İslam Sanatı ve Mimarisinin Yorumlanması Estetik Analiz: Osmanlı Sarayı Topkapı'dan Bir Örnek İncelemesi***

**Öz:** Bu makale, estetik analizi İslam mimarisini yorumlamak için metodolojik bir çerçeve olarak ele almakta ve bu yaklaşımın analitik potansiyelini Topkapı Sarayı'nda Osmanlı dönemine ait bir örnek üzerinden göstermektedir. İslam mimarisi çoğu zaman üslup, tarihsel gelişim, sembolik okumalar veya tipolojik yaklaşımlar üzerinden incelenmiş olsa da biçimsel betimleme, estetik deneyim ve kavramsal yorum arasındaki metodolojik ilişkinin nasıl kurulacağı yeterince açıklığa kavuşturulmamıştır. Estetik felsefe ve eser-merkezli yorumlama yaklaşımlarından hareketle bu çalışma, üç aşamalı bir analitik çerçeve önermektedir: biçimsel özelliklerin betimlenmesi, estetik niteliklerin belirlenmesi ve kavramsal yorumlama. Bu çerçeve, söz konusu boyutları birbirinden bağımsız aşamalar olarak ele almak yerine, algılanabilir biçimden kavramsal kavrayışa doğru ilerleyen bütüncül bir yorumlama süreci içerisinde ilişkilendirmektedir. Bu çerçeve, Osmanlı saray mimarisinin en dikkat çekici iç mekânlarından biri olan Topkapı Sarayı'ndaki III. Murad Has Odası'na uygulanmaktadır. Mekânın kurgusu, bezeme yüzeyleri ve hat programının ayrıntılı incelenmesi yoluyla birlik, stilizasyon ve tekrar gibi estetik nitelikler ortaya konulmaktadır. İslam estetiğinin kavramsal ufkü içerisinde yorumlanan bu nitelikler, mimari formun Osmanlı saray çevresinde algıyı, estetik deneyimi ve sembolik ile manevi yorumları nasıl şekillendirdiğini göstermektedir. Makale, metodolojik bir tartışmayı Osmanlı mimarisine ait bir iç mekânın estetik analiziyle birleştirerek İslam mimarisinin yorumlanmasına yönelik bütüncül ve sistematik bir çerçeve önermekte, aynı zamanda Osmanlı sarayının en gelişmiş mekânlarından birinin estetik yapısına dair yeni bir perspektif sunmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Estetik Analiz, Biçim ve Anlam, İslam Estetiği, Osmanlı Saray Mimarisi, Kutsal ve Dünyevi, Topkapı Sarayı.

**Abstract:** This article advances aesthetic analysis as a methodological framework for interpreting Islamic architecture and demonstrates its analytical potential through an Ottoman case study from Topkapı Palace. While Islamic architecture has often been examined through stylistic, historical, symbolic, or typological approaches, the methodological relationship between formal description, aesthetic experience, and conceptual interpretation remains insufficiently articulated. Drawing on aesthetic philosophy and artwork-centered approaches to interpretation, the study proposes a three-stage analytical framework consisting of the description of formal features, the identification of aesthetic predicates, and conceptual interpretation. Rather than treating these dimensions as separate domains of inquiry, the framework relates them through a structured analytical process that moves from perceptible form toward conceptual understanding. The framework is applied to the Privy Room of Murad III in Topkapı Palace, one of the most prominent interiors of the Ottoman imperial residence. Through a close examination of the room's spatial organization, ornamental surfaces, and calligraphic program, the study identifies aesthetic qualities such as unity, stylization, and repetition. Interpreted within the conceptual horizon of Islamic aesthetics, these qualities illuminate how architectural form organizes perception, aesthetic experience, and symbolic and spiritual interpretation within the Ottoman palace environment. By combining methodological reflection with the aesthetic analysis of an Ottoman architectural interior, the article proposes an integrative and systematic framework for interpreting Islamic architecture while offering a new perspective on the aesthetic structure of one of the most sophisticated interiors of the Ottoman court.

**Keywords:** Aesthetic Analysis, Form and Meaning, Islamic Aesthetics, Ottoman Palace Architecture, Sacred and Secular, Topkapı Palace.

## 1. Introduction

The study of Islamic art and architecture has long been shaped by analytical tendencies that privilege description over interpretation and form over meaning. Mosques, palaces, domestic spaces, gardens, and the extensive corpus of ornament and calligraphy produced across Islamic civilizations have frequently been examined primarily through their visible surfaces—classified according to stylistic vocabularies, typological variations, or historical periods. Such perspectives often treat these environments as isolated architectural categories rather than as interconnected expressions of a shared intellectual and cultural worldview. While these approaches have generated valuable insights into materials, chronology, and formal organization, they remain insufficient for articulating the intellectual, philosophical, and religious intentionality embedded within Islamic artistic production. When analysis remains confined to surface appearance, meaning is either reduced to decorative effect or displaced onto explanatory frameworks that remain external to the intellectual and cultural horizon from which these works emerged.

This limitation is particularly consequential in the study of Islam, where religious meaning does not operate solely within explicitly devotional forms but informs a broader worldview in which ethical, spatial, and aesthetic orders are interrelated. In Islamic thought, the sacred and the secular are not rigidly separated domains; rather, religious values shape both ritual and worldly practices, including domestic life, governance, and architectural production. This unity is especially evident in everyday spatial experience: the home is routinely inhabited through worship, while gardens are approached as spaces of creation that call for stewardship, moderation, and respect rather than domination or excess. Even public streets and pavements may temporarily become prayer spaces during Friday prayers when mosques cannot accommodate the full congregation.<sup>1</sup> Principles such as humility and the avoidance of waste thus extend across mosque, home, palace, and landscape alike, reflecting a unified ethical and aesthetic orientation grounded in simplicity and restraint.

The same continuity is visible in the functional elements of the built environment. Features such as fountains or water provisions, for instance, are not merely utilitarian amenities but often functioned as charitable endowments (*waqf*), carrying religious intentionality within spaces frequently categorized as “secular.” Constructed as acts of benefaction (*hayrāt*), such elements embedded ethical and devotional purpose within everyday urban life. This continuity does not erase functional or ritual distinctions between different types of spaces; rather, it underscores how religious and aesthetic values may be expressed across them in differentiated yet interconnected ways. Any methodology seeking to interpret Islamic art and architecture must therefore be capable of addressing embedded values and meaning across these interwoven contexts.

Existing scholarship on Islamic art and architecture has generated a rich body of historical, philosophical, symbolic, and interpretive inquiry. Foundational studies by Creswell and Kuban established important architectural and historical frameworks, while scholars such as Grabar, Necipoğlu, Blair and Bloom significantly expanded understanding of Islamic visual culture, patronage, symbolism and intellectual context. At a different level, Nasr, Burckhardt, and Leaman have drawn attention to the philosophical, spiritual, and aesthetic dimensions of Islamic artistic production. Together, these approaches have profoundly enriched the study of Islamic art and architecture. Yet they have generally focused on particular dimensions of the work—historical development, political symbolism, visual culture, patronage, spirituality, or philosophy—rather than on the methodological processes through which formal organization, aesthetic experience,

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<sup>1</sup> For discussions of Islam as an integrated ethical–spiritual worldview shaping both devotional and worldly life, see Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Life and Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1981), and Toshihiko Izutsu, *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qur'an* (Montreal: McGill University Press, 1966). On the spatial implications of Islamic values in domestic and urban environments, see Hisham Mortada, *Traditional Islamic Principles of Built Environment* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), and Besim S. Hakim, *Arabic-Islamic Cities: Building and Planning Principles* (London: Routledge, 1986). For the garden as a meaningful Islamic spatial tradition, see D. Fairchild Ruggles, *Islamic Gardens and Landscapes* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

cultural and religious values, and conceptual interpretation may be brought into a coherent analytical relationship. What remains comparatively underdeveloped is a systematic framework capable of integrating these dimensions within the interpretive analysis of architectural form.<sup>2</sup>

This study addresses these limitations by advancing aesthetic analysis as a methodological framework grounded in aesthetics as sensible cognition. Rather than approaching form as a neutral surface or a preliminary stage of interpretation, aesthetic analysis treats form as the primary medium through which aesthetic qualities, cultural values, and conceptual meanings become perceptible. Within this framework, perception is not opposed to knowledge but constitutes a mode of understanding through which architectural works are experienced, interpreted, and situated within their broader intellectual and cultural horizons. By relating formal description, aesthetic experience, and conceptual interpretation within a structured analytical process, aesthetic analysis provides a pathway for understanding how form, perception, values, and worldview interact in the production and reception of Islamic art and architecture. Meaning is therefore neither subjectively projected nor externally imposed; rather, it emerges through a systematic engagement with the work itself and the cultural horizon within which it was produced.

To explore the methodological potential of this framework, the article turns to an Ottoman case study from Topkapı Palace, the principal imperial residence of the Ottoman dynasty. As the political and ceremonial center of an empire that developed within a deeply Islamic intellectual and cultural milieu, the palace complex provides a particularly revealing context for examining how Islamic aesthetic principles were articulated beyond strictly devotional architecture. It focuses specifically on the Privy Room of Murad III, one of the most prominent interiors of the Ottoman court, examining how spatial configuration, ornamental systems, and calligraphic articulation contribute to the formation of aesthetic qualities within space. Approached through the lens of Islamic aesthetics, the analysis investigates how architectural form, aesthetic experience, and conceptual interpretation interact within the palace environment. In doing so, the study not only develops an integrative methodological framework for interpreting Islamic architecture but also provides a renewed perspective on the aesthetic structure of a key interior within the Ottoman imperial complex.

## 2. Aesthetic Analysis as a Methodological Framework

The methodological basis of aesthetic analysis begins with a reconsideration of the nature of knowledge itself. The term *aesthetics* derives from the Greek *aisthēsis* (*aisthanesthai*), referring to perception through the senses or sensory apprehension. From its linguistic origins, aesthetics concerns forms of understanding grounded in sensory experience rather than in abstract reasoning alone. As Sibley observes, aesthetic inquiry explores how perceptual experience acquires significance and how sensuous engagement contributes to processes of cognition. Rather than opposing perception to reason, aesthetics investigates the intelligibility that emerges within perceptual experience itself.<sup>3</sup>

This conception was first systematically formulated by Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, who established aesthetics as an independent philosophical discipline. Baumgarten defined

<sup>2</sup> For influential contributions to the study of Islamic art and architecture from historical, typological, symbolic, philosophical, spiritual, and design-theoretical perspectives, see, among others, Oleg Grabar, *The Formation of Islamic Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987); K. A. C. Creswell, *Early Muslim Architecture*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932–40); Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, vol. 2 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974); Doğan Kuban, *Muslim Religious Architecture* (Leiden: Brill, 1974); Gülru Necipoğlu, *Architecture, Ceremonial, and Power: The Topkapı Palace in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991); Gülru Necipoğlu, *The Topkapı Scroll: Geometry and Ornament in Islamic Architecture* (Santa Monica, CA: Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1995); Jonathan M. Bloom and Sheila S. Blair, *Islamic Arts* (London: Phaidon, 1997); Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987); Titus Burckhardt, *Art of Islam: Language and Meaning* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2009); and Oliver Leaman, *Islamic Aesthetics: An Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> Frank Sibley, "Approaches to Aesthetics," in *Approaches to Aesthetics: Collected Papers on Philosophical Aesthetics*, ed. John Benson, Betty Redfern, and Jeremy Roxbee Cox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), 33.

aesthetics as *scientia cognitionis sensitivae*—the science of sensible cognition—and described it as “the theory of the liberal arts, inferior gnoseology, the art of thinking beautifully, the art of the analogue of reason”. Through this formulation, sensibility is not treated as subordinate to rational thought but is granted epistemic legitimacy as a distinct mode of knowing. Sensible cognition apprehends aspects of experience that cannot be fully captured by clear and distinct conceptual reasoning alone. Rather than opposing rationality, it complements it by attending to nuances, expressive qualities, and perceptual relations that discursive logic cannot adequately articulate. This understanding provides an essential foundation for a methodological approach attentive to the ways meaning becomes perceptible through form.<sup>4</sup>

Vasily Sesemann provides one of the most illuminating accounts of this process by comparing aesthetic interpretation to translation. Just as translating a text requires fluency in two linguistic systems—their grammar, idiom, and internal logic—so too must aesthetic interpretation operate across two related “languages”: the sensuous language of perception and the conceptual language of reflection. In artistic and architectural contexts, the first language is articulated through form—material presence, spatial configuration, proportion, or chromatic variation—while the second seeks to clarify the values, intentions, and meanings embedded within these formal decisions. The task of the analyst is therefore to translate what is revealed in aesthetic experience into conceptual articulation without flattening or distorting its expressive integrity. Such translation demands both perceptual sensitivity and intellectual clarity. It is this dual capacity, Sesemann argues, that distinguishes aesthetic interpretation from purely descriptive, technical, or iconographic analysis.<sup>5</sup>

If aesthetic interpretation can be understood as a form of translation, then what exactly is being translated? This translational movement presupposes a fundamental distinction between form and content. Dabney Townsend identifies this distinction as one of the most useful conceptual tools for understanding aesthetic perception. Form consists of structural features that can be described without immediate reference to meaning—lines, shapes, colors, spatial divisions, or compositional arrangements—while content refers to what these forms express: values, tensions, cultural codes, or philosophical orientations. Although form and content can be analytically distinguished, they cannot exist independently in practice. Form is the vehicle through which content becomes perceptible.<sup>6</sup> Townsend’s analysis of Gustave Caillebotte’s *Le Pont de l’Europe* illustrates this methodological movement from form to meaning. Rather than beginning with symbolic interpretation, he first attends to formal characteristics such as rigid geometric divisions, restrained chromatic range, and the positioning of figures within the pictorial space. These features, once considered in relation to one another, generate expressive content: a sense of mechanical order, emotional distance, and the ambivalent atmosphere of modern industrial life. Meaning thus emerges from the internal organization of the work rather than being externally imposed upon it.<sup>7</sup>

The necessity of such an approach becomes clearer when considering the distinction between ordinary perception and aesthetic vision. Frank Sibley observes that many aesthetic questions concern appearance—how things look. In everyday perception, attention often remains fixed on objects without examining the conditions through which their appearances become perceptible. Aesthetic vision, by contrast, involves reflective attention to appearance itself. To illustrate this distinction, Sibley notes that when reading a newspaper one rarely notices the particular shape of a letter, that a coin may appear elliptical despite being round, or that a white

<sup>4</sup>Mary J. Gregor, “Baumgarten’s *Aesthetica*,” *The Review of Metaphysics* 37, no. 2 (December 1983): 361–362, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20128010>.

<sup>5</sup>Vasily Sesemann, *Aesthetics (On the Boundary of Two Worlds)*, trans. Mykolas Drunga, ed. Leonidas Donskis (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), 6.

<sup>6</sup>Dabney Townsend, *An Introduction to Aesthetics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 56.

<sup>7</sup>For Townsend’s discussion of the relation between form and content (in reference to Caillebotte), see Townsend, *An Introduction to Aesthetics*, 58–63.

dress may appear bluish under certain lighting conditions. While such variations often pass unnoticed in ordinary perception, aesthetic vision attends to them in order to understand the object as an expressive form.<sup>8</sup>

Sibley reinforces this point by noting that certain qualities—such as gracefulness, delicacy, elegance, warmth, or violence—are recognizable only to a perceiver equipped with an aesthetic eye. These qualities are often expressed through metaphorical language, as when a color is described as “vehement” or a letter as “jolly.” Without such sensitivity, even accurate vision and intellectual capacity may fail to perceive aesthetic qualities.<sup>9</sup> As Bergson<sup>10</sup> and Fry<sup>11</sup> similarly suggest, aesthetic perception requires a cultivated attentiveness to form rather than passive recognition of objects.

This attentiveness also distinguishes aesthetic judgments from ordinary descriptive statements. As J. O. Urmson and David Pole note, identifying that something is large, circular, green, or slow requires no special aesthetic sensitivity; such observations merely register empirical features. Aesthetic judgment begins when one identifies qualities such as harmony, elegance, imbalance, grace, density, or garishness.<sup>12</sup> These qualities presuppose a trained perceptiveness capable of discerning relationships among formal elements. Some aesthetic judgments employ explicitly aesthetic predicates—balanced, harmonious, elegant—while others rely on ordinary language yet still convey aesthetic evaluation. In all cases, aesthetic judgment reflects a distinctive mode of sensuous understanding through which form becomes meaningful.<sup>13</sup>

Fleming adds an ontological dimension to this discussion through his analogy of gold and lead. Although all elements share atomic structure as a general condition, what distinguishes gold from lead is the particular arrangement and internal organization of those atoms.<sup>14</sup> In a similar way, artistic and architectural forms may appear similar across cultures, yet their meanings differ according to the values, intentions, and worldviews that inform their configuration. Aesthetic analysis therefore seeks to understand what gives a form its particular character within the cultural system that produced it—to uncover the internal order, harmony, and value structure that differentiate one expression from another.

These insights converge on an important methodological principle: aesthetic meaning does not arise from casual observation, nor is it added simply by interpretation. It emerges through attentive perception and the recognition of expressive qualities embedded within formal configurations. As Sheppard and others have argued, expressive properties do not reside entirely in objects themselves; perceptions of restlessness, serenity, or tension are shaped by cultural associations, psychological predispositions, and systems of value that guide interpretation.<sup>15</sup> This does not imply that aesthetic judgments are arbitrary. Rather, such judgments remain anchored in observable formal relationships while drawing upon cultural and historical frameworks that render those relationships meaningful. Aesthetic analysis thus requires attention not only to form but also to the cultural contexts that render aesthetic qualities intelligible. It calls for sensitivity

<sup>8</sup> Frank Sibley, “Aesthetics and the Looks of Things,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 56, no. 23 (November 5, 1959): 905, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2022130>.

<sup>9</sup> Frank Sibley, “Aesthetic Concepts,” *The Philosophical Review* 68, no. 4 (1959): 421–22, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2182490>.

<sup>10</sup> Vincent Tomas, “Aesthetic Vision,” *The Philosophical Review* 68, no. 1 (January 1959): 52, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2182546>.

<sup>11</sup> Roger Fry, *Vision and Design* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1920), 25.

<sup>12</sup> J. O. Urmson and David Pole, “What Makes a Situation Aesthetic?” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplementary Volumes 31 (1957): 76, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4106645>.

<sup>13</sup> Frank Sibley, “Aesthetic Concepts: A Rejoinder,” *The Philosophical Review* 72, no. 1 (1965): 79, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2183059>.

<sup>14</sup> Bruce Fleming, *The Aesthetic Sense of Life: A Philosophy of the Everyday* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2008), 51.

<sup>15</sup> Anne Sheppard, *Aesthetics: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 56.

to visual, auditory, and spatial characteristics, together with the ability to recognize the relational patterns through which expression is perceived.<sup>16</sup>

Jale Erzen extends this perspective to the study of art and architecture by emphasizing that aesthetic analysis must interrogate the choices of form and order through which cultures materialize their values and philosophies. To analyze the aesthetics of any artistic tradition is therefore to examine how it perceives the world, how it approaches time and space, and how it articulates these orientations through spatial configuration and representation.<sup>17</sup> In this sense, aesthetic analysis becomes a means of investigating the cultural and intellectual horizons within which artistic forms emerge.

Taken together, these reflections clarify the methodological logic of aesthetic analysis. Interpretation begins with attentive engagement with form, proceeds through the recognition of aesthetic qualities emerging from formal relations, and culminates in the conceptual articulation of the meanings and values they convey. Aesthetic analysis therefore traces a movement from perception toward interpretation in which form remains the primary medium through which meaning is articulated.

The aesthetic analyst must therefore be capable of both analytic dismantling and synthetic re-articulation, distinguishing formal properties from their historical and cultural contexts without fragmenting the unity of aesthetic experience. By clarifying the conditions under which aesthetic meaning becomes perceptible, analysis deepens our understanding of the work itself. Such methodological attentiveness is particularly important in the study of Islamic art and architecture, where unity, proportion, geometry, surface modulation, spatial hierarchy, and rhythm often function as carriers of cultural and spiritual meaning.

### 3. Operational Sequence of Aesthetic Analysis

As developed in this study, aesthetic analysis unfolds through a gradual interpretive movement that proceeds from perceptible form toward conceptual understanding. This movement can be understood through three analytical stages: the description of formal features, the identification of aesthetic qualities emerging from those features, and the conceptual interpretation of the meanings and values they convey.

The process begins with the careful description of the visible features that constitute the work's sensuous presence and are accessible to shared observation. These include the material palette, geometric configurations, proportional relationships, inscriptions, chromatic schemes, and the organization of ornamental vocabularies across surfaces and spatial sequences. This initial stage does not reduce the work to a simple catalogue of motifs; rather, it establishes a descriptive foundation that anchors interpretation in the object's observable structure.

From this descriptive base, the analysis proceeds to identify aesthetic predicates—such as coherence, harmony, balance, unity, order, clarity, density, rhythm, and serenity—through which the internal organization of the work becomes discernible as an expressive order. These predicates are not treated as purely personal impressions but as interpretive indicators that reveal how visible elements are arranged into meaningful form. The aim at this stage is to discern the principles of organization through which the work holds together, guides perception, and generates coherence without relying on explicit narrative or symbolic explanation.

Interpretation then emerges as a movement from perceptual comprehension toward conceptual articulation within a broader cultural horizon. What is apprehended through relations of proportion, spatial sequencing, light, surface articulation, and ornamental organization is translated into an account of cultural meaning and aesthetic intention. Meaning is therefore not

<sup>16</sup> J. O. Urmson, "The Methods of Aesthetics," in *Analytic Aesthetics*, ed. Richard Shusterman (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 27.

<sup>17</sup> Jale Erzen, *Aesthetics of Ottoman Culture* (Utrecht, 1999), 1–2.

treated as something concealed behind form but as something that becomes accessible through formal organization itself. Aesthetic analysis accordingly approaches form and content as inseparable, understanding formal order as the medium through which cultural values and worldviews become aesthetically expressed.

The value of this framework lies in its integrative character. Rather than treating formal description, historical context, aesthetic experience, and conceptual interpretation as separate domains of inquiry, aesthetic analysis brings them into a structured analytical relationship. The first stage attends to the material, spatial, and formal characteristics of the work itself; the second identifies the aesthetic qualities emerging from the relationships among these elements; and the third situates these observations within the broader cultural, intellectual, and religious horizons that informed their production.

This structure also helps reduce the risk of interpreting architectural works solely through the analyst's own assumptions or contemporary perspectives. By moving systematically from form to perception and interpretation, aesthetic analysis seeks to reconstruct the relationship between form, culture, values, and worldview as embodied within the work itself. In this sense, the framework provides a disciplined pathway through which architecture can be understood not only as a historical artifact or formal composition, but also as an expression of the intellectual, cultural and aesthetic horizons that shaped its creation.

This does not imply that aesthetic interpretation is entirely objective or that aesthetic predicates can be identified independently of the observer. Rather, aesthetic analysis assumes that interpretation requires a degree of cultural, historical, and intellectual competence. The recognition of qualities such as unity, rhythm, harmony, or serenity is informed not only by perceptual experience but also by familiarity with the traditions, values, and conceptual frameworks within which a work was produced. For this reason, aesthetic judgments are grounded simultaneously in observable formal relationships and in contextual knowledge. The aim is not to eliminate interpretation, but to discipline it through a systematic engagement with form, perception, and cultural context, thereby reducing the risk of purely subjective or arbitrary readings.

#### **4. Methodological Implications: Aesthetic Analysis as a Framework for Islamic Art and Architecture**

Islamic artistic production emerges within a sacred horizon of meaning that shapes both its conditions of existence and its internal logic of formation. It is therefore not merely accompanied by religion; rather, it arises from a religious understanding of reality. As Erzen underscores, Islamic art remains oriented toward serving faith, and its forms cannot be interpreted as culturally neutral aesthetic constructs detached from the worldview that produced them.<sup>18</sup> Interpretation must therefore begin by tracing how the sacred constitutes the horizons within which form becomes meaningful. In this regard, Nasr argues that the origins of Islamic art—and the principles that generated its distinctive forms—are inseparable from an Islamic worldview grounded in revelation. In his account, Islamic art arises from the inner dimension of Islam: not as decorative embellishment, but as the outward articulation of inward truth.<sup>19</sup>

A comparable emphasis appears in Titus Burckhardt's account, where Islamic art is presented as emerging directly from Islamic spirituality. He argues that although Islamic art is shaped by Qur'anic revelation and the Islamic sacred worldview, its significance cannot be reduced to outward textual reference alone. Rather, its origin lies in Islam's inner content—its spiritual dimension—which becomes perceptible through form.<sup>20</sup> Islamic art thus trains

<sup>18</sup> Jale Erzen, "Islamic Aesthetics: An Alternative Way to Knowledge," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 65, no. 1 (Winter 2007): 73–74, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4622211>.

<sup>19</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 6–16.

<sup>20</sup> Titus Burckhardt, *Art of Islam: Language and Meaning* (Westerham, Kent: World of Islam Festival Publishing Company Ltd., 1976), 43–45.

perception to encounter reality as more than surface appearance, cultivating attentiveness to meanings that exceed the visible without negating the material world. Yet such meaning is not confined to explicitly devotional settings. It reflects the inclusive nature of an Islamic worldview, in which metaphysical orientation extends across both ritual and worldly environments, shaping the built landscape no less than sacred space.

This continuity finds its most concise expression in tawhîd, the principle of divine unity. Within this framing, Islamic art seeks to disclose unity in and through multiplicity: the coherence of meaning and form, the integration of moral and aesthetic orientation, and the wholeness of life under divine order.<sup>21</sup> The formal tendencies often associated with Islamic art—clarity, humility (tawādu'), and the avoidance of representational strategies that risk conflating the Creator and the created—become coherent within this horizon. Stylization, calligraphy, and geometric order do not function merely as recognizable stylistic signatures; they perform an epistemic role by detaching perception from material illusion and transience, thereby enabling meaning to be articulated without reducing the work to naturalistic imitation. Islamic artistic practice is therefore closely connected to contemplation, understood as the search for divine manifestations and the recognition of God's signs in worldly life.

These premises define the methodological stakes of interpretation. If Islamic artistic meaning is oriented toward disclosure rather than representation—and if sacred sensibility extends across both devotional and worldly contexts—then typological, stylistic, and symbolic approaches, while valuable for particular analytical purposes, do not fully explain how sacred meaning is communicated through the organization and stylization of form itself. The methodological question becomes how sacred meaning is conveyed when it is not primarily carried by narrative or representational imagery but articulated through form. This is where aesthetic analysis becomes necessary. It approaches form not as surface decoration or a neutral container, but as an expressive coherence through which worldview becomes legible.

Aesthetic analysis should not be understood as an alternative to historical, material, archaeological, or typological approaches. Rather, it incorporates and builds upon them. The formal description of architectural elements, materials, spatial organization, and decorative programs constitutes an essential first stage of analysis, while historical and cultural knowledge provides the interpretive context through which aesthetic qualities become intelligible. In this sense, aesthetic analysis does not compete with existing methodologies but seeks to integrate their insights within a broader interpretive framework concerned with the relationship between form, perception, values, and meaning.

In Islamic thought, religious meaning is frequently communicated through formal order rather than through representational imagery or narrative symbolism. Unity, balance, intentionality, and continuity are not introduced as external messages; rather, they are articulated through proportion, repetition, calibrated hierarchy, rhythmic sequencing, and variation. Such formal strategies function as expressive structures through which an Islamic worldview is disclosed. To approach these works aesthetically is therefore not to move away from religious meaning, but to encounter it within its proper expressive register. Such an approach is especially significant given the persistence of typological and stylistic approaches in the study of Islamic art. Architectural elements such as domes, *iwāns*, arcades, courtyards, and geometric ornament are often treated as visual markers of an “Islamic style,” catalogued primarily through resemblance, classification, or historical transmission. Yet formal similarity alone cannot account for aesthetic meaning. Aesthetic analysis addresses this limitation by attending not to form in isolation, but to form as an expressive structure through which meaning becomes discernible.

The implications of this approach are especially evident in architectural contexts often labeled “secular,” such as palaces, domestic spaces, and gardens. Within Islamic traditions, these

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<sup>21</sup> Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality*, 7.



environments were not conceived as value-neutral realms detached from religious or spiritual orientation. Aesthetic analysis allows such continuities to be recognized without forcing works into a rigid sacred–secular divide<sup>22</sup>, while also resisting reductionist readings that locate religious meaning only in ritual function or explicit iconography.

In this sense, aesthetic analysis provides a methodological bridge between material culture and religious epistemology. By treating form as a site where meaning becomes perceptible rather than merely visible, it enables Islamic art and architecture to be understood as active participants in the articulation of knowledge. Sacred meaning is neither confined to ritual structures nor diluted within worldly settings; rather, it is expressed through the coherent organization of form across diverse spatial contexts.

The application of this interpretive framework to Ottoman architecture is not incidental. The Ottoman Empire emerged and developed within a deeply Islamic intellectual and cultural milieu in which religious values, legal structures, political authority, and artistic production were closely intertwined.<sup>23</sup> Although the Ottoman polity is not generally described as a theocratic state, it is widely recognized as an Islamic polity<sup>24</sup> whose institutions and social life were shaped by a worldview grounded in Qur'ānic cosmology, juridical traditions, and ethical concepts such as justice (*'adl*), stewardship (*amānah*), and the maintenance of worldly order (*nizām-ı 'ālem*). Architectural production therefore developed within this broader intellectual horizon. Palaces, mosques, charitable complexes, domestic environments, and even smaller architectural interventions—such as fountains, *selsebils*, and the distinctive Ottoman birdhouses—were conceived not merely as functional structures but as spatial environments reflecting the moral and cultural principles of an Islamic civilization. Within this context, Ottoman architecture can be understood as one of the most sophisticated regional articulations of Islamic architectural thought.<sup>25</sup> Examining an Ottoman imperial interior such as the Privy Room of Murad III in Topkapı Palace therefore provides a meaningful opportunity to explore how Islamic aesthetic principles were expressed within the architectural language of the Ottoman court.

### 5. Aesthetic Analysis of the Privy Room of Murad III in Topkapı Palace

Topkapı Palace, constructed following the conquest of Constantinople in the second half of the fifteenth century, served for nearly four centuries as the principal imperial residence and administrative center of the Ottoman dynasty. Initiated under Sultan Mehmed II and expanded by successive rulers, the palace evolved into a complex architectural ensemble reflecting the political authority, ceremonial practices, and cultural worldview of the Ottoman court. Organized through a sequence of courtyards and hierarchical thresholds, the palace integrates administrative,

<sup>22</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr explains the interconnectedness of Islamic artistic production by distinguishing between sacred art, which is directly associated with the central rites and spiritual practices of Islam, and traditional Islamic art, which encompasses a wider range of visual and sonic forms extending from architecture and landscaping to poetry. While traditional Islamic art does not function as sacred art in the strict sense, it nevertheless reflects the principles of Islamic revelation and spirituality in a more indirect yet pervasive manner. In this formulation, sacred art constitutes the inner core of Islamic artistic expression, whose principles radiate across the broader cultural and spatial domains of Islamic civilization. See Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 22.

<sup>23</sup> Ejder Okumuş, *Klasik Dönem Osmanlı Devleti'nde Din-Devlet İlişkisi* (Ankara: Lotus Yayınevi, 2005), 77; Şükrü Karatepe, “Osmanlı'da Din-Devlet İlişkisi,” in *Osmanlı Ansiklopedisi*, 58; Halil İnalcık, *Osmanlı İmparatorluğu, Toplum ve Ekonomi* (İstanbul: Eren Press, 1988) 319; Ahmet Mumcu, *Tarih Açısından Türk Devriminin Temelleri ve Gelişmesi* (İstanbul: İnkılap Kitabevi, 1990), 76.

<sup>24</sup> Hande Seher Demir, “Klasik Dönem Osmanlı Devleti'nde Din-Devlet İlişkilerinin Laiklik, Sekülerizm, Teokrasi ve Din Devleti Sistemi Kapsamında İncelenmesi,” *Ankara Barosu Dergisi* 3, (May 2013): 282, <https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/pub/abd/issue/33812/374426>, Sadri Maksudi Arsal, *Teokratik Devlet ve Laik Devlet Tanzimat I*, (İstanbul: Ministry of National Education Publications, 1999), 155.

<sup>25</sup> For a broader view on Ottoman aesthetics, see among others Jale Erzen, “Aesthetics and Aisthesis in Ottoman Art and Architecture,” *Journal of Islamic Studies* 1 (1991): 12; Jale Nejdert Erzen, “The Aesthetics of Space in Ottoman Architecture,” in *Understanding Islamic Architecture*, ed. Attilio Petruccioli and Khalil K. Pirani (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002), 57–64.

educational, residential, and ceremonial spaces into a coherent spatial system that articulated imperial sovereignty and courtly order.<sup>26</sup> Within the broader history of Islamic architecture, Topkapı Palace occupies a distinctive position as one of the most sophisticated palatial complexes of the Islamic world, embodying the architectural language of the Ottoman imperial court at the height of its power.

Among the numerous structures within the palace complex, the Privy Room (Has Oda) of Sultan Murad III occupies a particularly distinguished place. Built in 1579 by the chief imperial architect Mimar Sinan, the chamber functioned as both the private residence and official working space of the sultan within the Harem complex. It represents the earliest known imperial privy chamber within the palace and constitutes the largest domed room associated with the sultan's private quarters.<sup>27</sup> Architectural historians have consistently emphasized the exceptional status of this space. Reşad Ekrem Koçu describes the room as one of the most magnificent interiors not only of the Harem but of the entire palace complex.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, İlber Ortaylı identifies it as a culmination of sixteenth-century Ottoman architectural and decorative refinement,<sup>29</sup> while İsmail Hakkı Uzunçarşılı considers it among the most splendid architectural spaces of the New Palace.<sup>30</sup> Sedat Hakkı Eldem likewise characterizes the chamber as one of the most remarkable architectural works of Topkapı Palace, distinguished by the harmony of its proportions and the richness of its decorative program.<sup>31</sup>

The exceptional character of the room is also related to the preservation of its original sixteenth-century decorative scheme. Unlike many other spaces within the palace that underwent later modifications, the interior of the Privy Room retains its original İznik tile revetments, calligraphic program, painted dome decoration, and inlaid wooden elements, offering a rare example of the aesthetic environment of the classical Ottoman court.<sup>32</sup> For this reason, the chamber provides an ideal case study through which the methodological framework of aesthetic analysis can be demonstrated.

### 5.1. Formal Description: Spatial Organization and Decorative Program

The Privy Room is organized around a square ground plan surmounted by a large central dome approximately eleven meters in diameter. The spatial structure follows a compositional logic characteristic of classical Ottoman architecture in which geometric clarity and decorative richness operate together. The square base of the room is transformed into a circular dome through pendentives, establishing a vertical transition from terrestrial geometry to a centralized dome space (See Figure 1).

The interior surfaces are dominated by an extensive program of sixteenth-century İznik tiles, widely regarded as the pinnacle of Ottoman ceramic production. These tiles cover the lower walls of the chamber and display intricate floral compositions in cobalt blue, turquoise, white, and coral red. The ornamental program includes stylized motifs of tulips, carnations, hyacinths, and plum blossoms arranged within repeating compositions that extend across the walls. The tiles are framed by architectural elements such as marble niches, window jambs, and wooden cabinet doors decorated with mother-of-pearl inlay, which together articulate the architectural order of the room (See Figure 2).

<sup>26</sup> Mualla Anhegger, *Topkapı Sarayı'nda Padişah Evi (Harem)* (İstanbul: Sandoz Kültür Press, 1986), 2.

<sup>27</sup> İlber Ortaylı, *Osmanlı Sarayında Hayat* (İstanbul: Yitik Hazine Yayınları, 2008), 184; Ahmet Şimşirgil, *Bir Müstakil Dünya: Topkapı* (İstanbul: Timaş Yayınları, 2016), 14–17.

<sup>28</sup> Reşad Ekrem Koçu, *Topkapı Sarayı* (İstanbul: Doğan Kitap, 2004), 206.

<sup>29</sup> Ortaylı, *Osmanlı Sarayında Hayat*, 84.

<sup>30</sup> İsmail Hakkı Uzunçarşılı, *Osmanlı Devleti'nin Saray Teşkilatı* (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Basımevi, 1984), 30.

<sup>31</sup> Sedat Hakkı Eldem, quoted in Önder Küçükerman, *Sanayi ve Teknoloji Yarışında Bir İmparatorluk İki Saray: Topkapı ve Dolmabahçe* (İstanbul: Yapı Kredi Yayınları, 2007), 110.

<sup>32</sup> Gülru Necipoğlu, *Mimari, Tören ve İktidar: 15. ve 16. Yüzyılda Topkapı Sarayı* (İstanbul: Yapı Kredi Yayınları, 2007), 217.

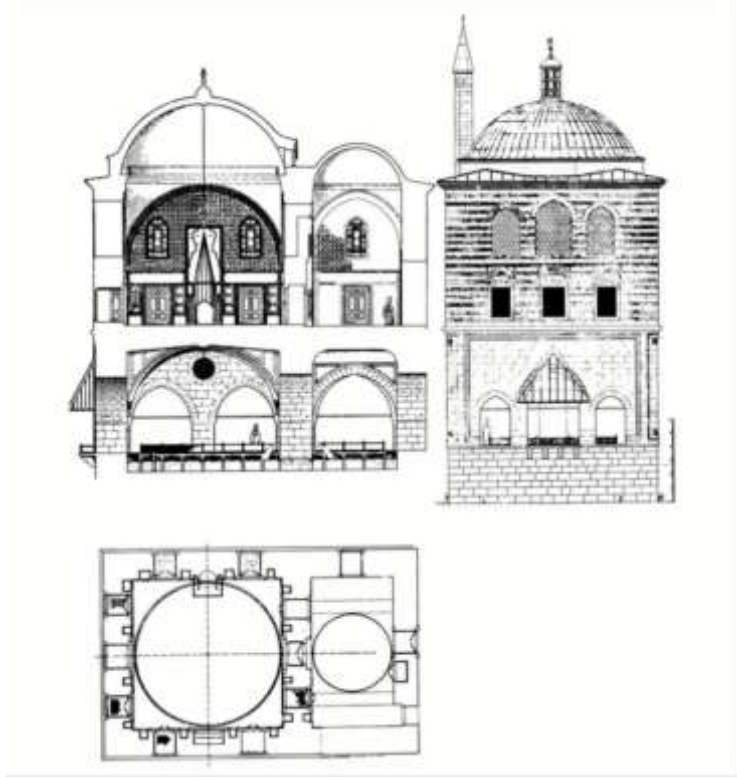


Figure 1. Architectural plan and elevations of the Privy Room of Murad III.

Source: S. Hakkı Eldem and Feridun Akozan, *Topkapı Sarayı: Bir Mimari Araştırma*, drawing titled "Privy Room of Murad III," 184.



Figure 2. Interior view of the Privy Room of Murad III, showing key features of classical Ottoman decoration, including tiled wall panels divided by a calligraphic frieze, mother-of-pearl-inlaid doors, painted pendentives, the decorated dome, and the prominent fireplace.

Source: Photograph by the author, 2024.



Above the tiled zone runs a continuous calligraphic frieze executed in white script against a deep blue background. The inscription contains *Āyāt al-Kursī* (*Qur'ān* 2:255) together with verse 57 of *Sūrat al-Nisā'*, forming a textual band that encircles the entire chamber. *Āyāt al-Kursī* proclaims the absolute sovereignty and transcendence of God, declaring that "His Throne extends over the heavens and the earth, and their preservation does not tire Him." The accompanying verse from *Sūrat al-Nisā'* describes the eternal gardens promised to believers, "beneath which rivers flow," emphasizing the imagery of heaven and divine reward. Within the spatial context of the room, these inscriptions contribute not only semantic meaning but also a visual structure that frames the decorative program and integrates the architectural space into a textual and spiritual horizon.

The dome constitutes the most prominent architectural feature of the chamber. Rising above the square base, it is decorated with dense vegetal ornament executed on a coral-red ground and enriched with gilded motifs, forming a luminous canopy above the interior space. At its center appears a circular medallion bearing the names of God written in gold, from which radiating decorative patterns extend across the surface of the dome and reinforce the vertical axis of the room. Light entering through the windows and the lantern at the crown of the dome catches the gilded surfaces, heightening the visual depth of the ornament and enhancing the sense of spatial elevation (See Figure 3).



Figure 3. Interior view of the dome of the Privy Room of Murad III in Topkapı Palace.  
Source: National Palaces Topkapı Palace (@topkapi\_sarayi), Instagram photograph, December 20, 2021.

Suspended from the center of the dome is a tasseled gilded sphere known as the *tob-ı müzehheb*. The object hangs from a chain descending from the apex of the dome and forms a visual focal point within the vertical axis of the chamber. Its gilded surface catches the light entering from the windows and the lantern above, creating a luminous point beneath the richly ornamented dome (See Figure 4).



Figure 4. Interior view of the dome of the Privy Room of Murad III showing the painted vegetal ornament on a coral-red ground and the suspended gilded sphere (*tob-ı müzehheb*) hanging from the apex of the dome.

Source: Photograph by the author, 2024.

The architectural composition of the room also incorporates several additional elements that structure the interior environment. Opposite the fireplace stands a marble *selsebil* fountain composed of a series of tiered basins from which water descends through small outlets into a lower basin (see Figure 5). The fountain is framed by an arched niche and surrounded by tile panels decorated with floral motifs, while small recessed niches appear symmetrically on either side of the composition. Above this arrangement runs a continuous calligraphic frieze executed on cobalt-blue tiles with white script. The fireplace, positioned on the opposite wall, rises vertically and is framed by richly ornamented tile panels. Its tall chimney accentuates the vertical articulation of the interior and contributes to the spatial hierarchy of the room.

The interior is further articulated by deep rectangular windows placed above human height, allowing light to filter through colored glass and illuminate the tiled surfaces below. Marble niches positioned between the windows create rhythmic intervals across the walls, while built-in cabinets and seating alcoves provide functional elements integrated into the architectural framework. Together, these components form a spatial environment in which geometry, ornament, light, water, and calligraphy operate as interconnected elements.

The floor of the chamber is paved with hexagonal marble slabs that extend across the entire surface of the room. These six-sided stones are arranged in a continuous geometric pattern that structures the pavement and contributes to the ordered appearance of the interior. Through the



repetition of this geometric unit, the floor surface becomes part of the broader ornamental system that organizes the visual composition of the space.



Figure 5. Marble *selsebil* fountain set within an arched niche in the Privy Room of Murad III, framed by floral tile panels and a calligraphic frieze.

Source: Photograph by the author, 2024.

This descriptive stage establishes the formal structure of the chamber. By examining the architectural form, decorative materials, and spatial organization of the Privy Room, it becomes possible to identify the aesthetic qualities through which meaning is articulated. The following section therefore proceeds to analyze the aesthetic predicates that emerge from this formal configuration.

## 5.2. Aesthetic Predicates: Stylization, Repetition, Unity and Spatial Rhythm

Once the formal structure of the Privy Room has been established, aesthetic analysis proceeds by identifying the qualities that emerge from its internal organization. These qualities—stylization, repetition, unity, rhythmic movement, and controlled asymmetry—constitute the expressive logic through which the space takes shape as a coherent aesthetic environment.

One of the most immediately striking features of the room is the predominance of stylized ornamentation. The decorative program is composed almost entirely of floral tile panels, geometric compositions, and calligraphic inscriptions, while figurative imagery is entirely absent. This visual structure reflects the aesthetic orientation widely associated with Islamic artistic traditions in which natural forms are not reproduced mimetically but transformed through stylization. In the Privy Room, floral motifs such as tulips, carnations, and hyacinths appear in highly stylized arrangements across the tile surfaces. Their forms are elongated, rhythmically curved, and arranged in repeating compositions that detach them from direct natural representation. Rather than functioning as botanical illustrations, these motifs operate as ornamental structures that organize the visual field of the interior.

Closely related to this stylization is the pervasive use of repetition and patterned continuity. The İznik tile panels covering the lower walls display repeating compositions that extend horizontally across the surfaces without a clearly defined beginning or end. In many instances the patterns appear to continue beyond the architectural frame, creating the visual impression of an unbounded ornamental field. This quality is reinforced by the arrangement of floral motifs, whose stems and leaves interweave across the tiles in a continuous flow. The absence of strict centering or closed composition contributes to a perception of ongoing expansion, allowing the decorative field to evoke a sense of visual continuity rather than static completion.

A similar principle operates in the calligraphic frieze that encircles the chamber. The band of Qur'ānic inscriptions runs continuously above the tiled surfaces, forming a visual and textual border that unifies the interior. Because the script extends uninterrupted around the room, the viewer's gaze is naturally guided along the perimeter, reinforcing the sense of circular movement generated by the architectural structure. The inscription thus functions simultaneously as text, ornament, and spatial articulation, balancing the strong vertical expansion of the space—accentuated by the high dome—with a horizontal visual rhythm that directs the gaze along the circulating script.

The aesthetic experience of the room is further shaped by a pronounced sense of unity and compositional coherence. Despite the richness of its decorative program, the interior does not produce visual fragmentation. Instead, the various elements—tile revetments, calligraphic bands, marble niches, wooden inlays, and painted dome ornamentation—are integrated into a single ordered composition. The color palette contributes significantly to this unity. Deep blues, turquoise tones, and white backgrounds dominate the tile surfaces, punctuated by accents of coral red and gilded ornament. These chromatic relationships generate visual harmony across the surface while maintaining sufficient variation to sustain visual interest.

The spatial rhythm of the room also plays a crucial role in shaping its aesthetic character. The arrangement of windows, niches, and decorative panels establishes a sequence of repeating vertical intervals along the walls. These intervals guide the viewer's perception across the interior, producing a rhythmic alternation between solid surfaces and openings. The deep windows admit filtered light through colored glass, creating subtle variations of illumination across the tile surfaces. This modulation of light enhances the perception of depth and movement within the decorative program.

Another important aesthetic feature is the dynamic movement of the viewer's gaze within space. The interior surfaces of the room are not organized according to strict bilateral symmetry. Instead, the distribution of architectural elements—such as the fireplace, fountain, niches, and seating areas—creates a composition in which the eye must move across space to grasp the overall configuration. This movement is reinforced by the circular geometry of the dome above, which encourages an upward and rotational visual trajectory. As a result, the experience of the space unfolds through continuous visual exploration rather than a fixed focal point.

The dome itself plays a central role in this aesthetic experience. Rising above the square base of the room, it establishes a vertical axis that organizes the entire interior composition. The painted decoration of the dome, combined with the gilded inscriptions and the central suspended *tob-ı müzehheb*, directs attention toward the center of the vault while simultaneously emphasizing the upward movement of the space. The combination of circular geometry, radiating ornament, and filtered light produces a visual structure that appears both ordered and expansive.

Taken together, these features—stylized ornamentation, patterned repetition, spatial rhythm, and compositional unity—constitute the primary aesthetic predicates through which the Privy Room emerges as an integrated visual environment. They do not merely embellish the architectural structure but shape the way the space is apprehended and experienced. Through these qualities, the room generates a distinctive aesthetic atmosphere in which architectural form,

ornamental design, and textual elements operate together as components of a coherent expressive system.

### 5.3. Conceptual Interpretation: Islamic Aesthetics and the Ottoman Imperial Interior

The aesthetic qualities identified above—unity, stylization, repetition, and rhythmic spatial organization—do not function merely as decorative features. Rather, they articulate a system of meaning that can be understood within the broader conceptual horizon of Islamic aesthetics and the cultural framework of the Ottoman court.

A central aspect of this horizon is the principle of *tanzîh*, the Islamic understanding that the divine transcends all forms of likeness and representation.<sup>33</sup> Within this conceptual framework, artistic expression avoids direct imitation of natural forms and instead seeks modes of visual articulation capable of suggesting meaning without reducing it to literal representation. The predominance of stylized floral ornamentation and geometric organization in the Privy Room reflects this orientation. Natural motifs such as tulips, carnations, and hyacinths appear not as botanical reproductions but as transformed forms whose stylized contours detach them from the immediacy of the natural world. Through this transformation, ornament becomes a medium through which visual beauty is expressed without implying representational equivalence with creation.

Closely related to stylization is the role of repetition and patterned continuity. The ornamental programs of the tile revetments and the calligraphic band generate visual fields that appear capable of extending beyond their architectural boundaries. Such continuity creates the impression of patterns unfolding indefinitely across surfaces, producing a perceptual effect often associated with infinity. Within Islamic aesthetic thought, this visual logic has frequently been interpreted as an allusion to the eternal nature of divine reality. Rather than presenting closed compositions that terminate within the architectural frame, the decorative surfaces evoke an ongoing process of visual expansion. The ornamental field therefore operates not simply as embellishment but as a perceptual structure that directs attention beyond material form.<sup>34</sup>

The calligraphic program of the chamber further reinforces this conceptual framework. The inscription of *Āyāt al-Kursī* around the room introduces a textual articulation of divine sovereignty that complements the visual order of the space. The verse emphasizes God's absolute authority over the heavens and the earth, describing a cosmic dominion that surpasses human comprehension. In the architectural setting of the Privy Room, this proclamation is not confined to textual meaning alone. Encircling the entire chamber, the calligraphic band integrates sacred language into the spatial experience of the interior, effectively transforming the architectural environment into a setting articulated through the *Qur'ānic* word.

The accompanying verse from *Sūrat al-Nisā'*, which describes the gardens promised to the faithful, introduces another dimension of meaning. References to flowing rivers and eternal gardens resonate with the visual presence of floral ornamentation and the marble fountain within the room. Water, a recurring element in *Qur'ānic* descriptions of heaven, is represented here through the *selsebil* fountain whose flowing streams animate the interior environment. The gentle sound of water contributes to a sensory atmosphere that echoes the imagery of paradisiacal landscapes frequently invoked in Islamic artistic traditions.<sup>35</sup>

The geometric structure of the room also participates in this conceptual network. The square ground plan supporting the circular dome reflects a geometric transformation frequently

<sup>33</sup> Qur'ān 6:103 (*al-An'ām*): "No human vision can encompass Him, whereas He encompasses all human vision; for He alone is unfathomable, all-aware."

<sup>34</sup> Isma'il Rājī al-Fārūqī, "Islam and Art," *Studia Islamica* 37 (1973): 90–91.; Turan Koç, *İslam Estetiği* (İstanbul: İSAM Yayınları, 2019), 165.

<sup>35</sup> Qur'ān 4:57 (*Sūrat al-Nisā'*): "Those who believe and do righteous deeds We shall admit into gardens beneath which rivers flow, wherein they will abide forever." See also Qur'ān 47:15; 55:46–50.



encountered in Islamic architecture. In symbolic interpretations of Islamic geometry, the square has often been associated with the terrestrial world and the four cardinal directions, while the circle signifies unity and centrality.<sup>36</sup> The transition from square to dome therefore establishes a spatial metaphor that links the earthly domain with the celestial order above. Within the Privy Room this transformation is reinforced by the vertical axis of the dome, whose lantern allows light to enter from above and illuminate the interior surfaces.

The suspended *tob-ı müzehheb*, previously noted as the tasseled gilded sphere hanging from the center of the dome, acquires a richer significance when interpreted within the conceptual horizon of Ottoman court culture. Similar elements appear in other imperial spaces such as the *Dīvānhāne*, the Privy Room, and various *Hünkâr* pavilions. According to the Ottoman court historian Lokman, this gilded sphere represents the earth, while the chain from which it hangs—described metaphorically as the *rişte-i ‘aql* (“rope of reason”)—symbolizes the faculty of intellect guiding worldly authority. Suspended beneath the apex of the dome and aligned with the central axis of the chamber, the object reinforces the vertical symbolism of the space. Within the spatial context of the sultan’s chamber, it evokes the idea that the ruler’s decisions, grounded in reason, should remain aligned with divine guidance and justice. The suspended sphere thus symbolically situates the sultan within a cosmological hierarchy in which earthly governance is expected to correspond to the divine order.<sup>37</sup>

Another dimension of meaning emerges from the experiential character of the space. It is noteworthy that the interior façades of the chamber, like many other spaces within the palace, do not follow a strict internal symmetry. As a result, the perception of space requires the eye—and the body—to move across the interior through a subtle circular progression. This circulation of vision corresponds to the rhythmic movement already established by the ornamental patterns and the geometry of the dome. At the same time, the absence of a fixed focal center prevents the gaze from settling on a single dominant point. Instead, perception remains active, requiring the viewer to remain attentive to the spatial environment as a whole.

Another factor that supports this condition is the careful preservation of human scale within the otherwise elevated interior. Although the chamber rises to a considerable height beneath the dome, the vertical composition is articulated through multiple horizontal layers—from the tiled walls to the calligraphic frieze and the painted dome structure, allowing the eye to move gradually upward rather than confronting an overwhelming vertical expanse. In this way, architectural composition sustains a balanced relationship between monumentality and human perception. This spatial organization encourages a mode of engagement based on attentiveness rather than visual domination. The viewer is not visually directed toward a single commanding element but is invited to perceive the chamber as an integrated whole. Such cultivated attentiveness resonates with a broader Islamic intellectual and spiritual sensibility in which conscious awareness and reflection are valued states of being.

The hexagonal paving pattern acquires further significance when considered within the broader geometric vocabulary of Islamic and Ottoman architectural traditions. The hexagon has long been associated with proportional balance and geometric harmony, functioning as a generative form within many Islamic ornamental systems. As Peker notes, the hexagonal configuration possesses a distinctive structural capacity: when extended through geometric construction, it produces circular formations and complex star patterns such as twelve- and twenty-four-pointed stars that frequently appear in Islamic decorative design.<sup>38</sup> The six-sided

<sup>36</sup> Jale N. Erzen, “Reading Mosques: Meaning and Architecture in Islam,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 69, no. 1 (Winter 2011): 127, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42635843>.

<sup>37</sup> Lokman, quoted in Gülru Necipoğlu, *15. ve 16. Yüzyılda Topkapı Sarayı: Mimari, Tören ve İktidar* (İstanbul: Yapı Kredi Yayınları, 2007), 120.

<sup>38</sup> Ali Uzay Peker, “Anadolu Selçuklu Mimari Tasarımını Etkileyen Evren ve Estetik Anlayışı,” in *Anadolu Selçuklu Şehirleri ve Uygarlığı Sempozyumu (7–8 Ekim 2008): Bildiriler*, ed. A. Esen, Haşim Karpuz, and O. Eravşar (Konya: Selçuklu Belediyesi, 2009), 93.

structure of the hexagon has also been interpreted in relation to the Qur'ānic account of creation, which describes the formation of the heavens and the earth in six stages. Within this conceptual framework, the hexagon has frequently been associated with notions of completeness and the ordered perfection of creation.<sup>39</sup> Within Ottoman architectural contexts, such geometric forms were therefore not merely ornamental but participated in a visual language through which order, balance, and the structured nature of creation could be suggested. In the Privy Room, the continuous hexagonal pavement contributes to the overall geometric coherence of the interior while subtly reinforcing the conceptual association between spatial order and the harmonious structure of the created world.

Within the Privy Room, architecture, ornament, calligraphy, light, and water interact to shape a carefully structured aesthetic environment. These elements do not function merely as decorative additions but organize the spatial and visual experience of the chamber. Through this integration of form and perception, the interior articulates a network of meanings grounded in the cultural and aesthetic framework of the Ottoman imperial world.

## 6. Conclusion

Understanding Islamic architecture requires more than the identification of stylistic features or historical references; it requires an interpretive approach capable of engaging with the layers of meaning through which architectural form operates. While much scholarship has emphasized classification, typology, or symbolic interpretation, such approaches often remain insufficient for explaining how architectural form itself participates in the articulation of cultural and intellectual significance. The methodological framework advanced in this study—*aesthetic analysis*—offers an interpretive pathway that moves from the careful description of formal structures to the recognition of aesthetic qualities and ultimately to the conceptual interpretation of the meanings embedded within them.

The case of the Privy Room of Murad III in Topkapı Palace illustrates how such an approach can illuminate the internal logic of an Ottoman imperial interior. Considered through the interplay of spatial configuration, ornamental systems, geometry, and calligraphy, the chamber reveals a carefully orchestrated visual environment in which form, surface, and spatial rhythm operate together. What might initially appear as decorative richness emerges instead as a structured aesthetic order through which cultural meanings are articulated.

At a broader level, this study argues that aesthetic analysis provides an indispensable complement to historical, typological, and material approaches when engaging with Islamic architecture. Within the Islamic intellectual tradition, artistic form is rarely conceived as a neutral surface; rather, it participates in a worldview in which visible structures and conceptual meanings are closely intertwined. Architectural space therefore functions as more than a physical environment. It becomes a medium through which cultural memory, symbolic imagination, and philosophical ideas find spatial expression. Without a method capable of moving from the observation of form toward interpretive understanding, these dimensions risk being reduced to stylistic description or ornamental catalogue.

The Ottoman architectural tradition demonstrates this complexity with particular clarity. Emerging from an Islamic intellectual and cultural milieu while developing its own imperial artistic language, Ottoman architecture embodies a sophisticated synthesis of religious worldview, cultural values, and political expression. Interiors such as the Privy Room of Murad III reveal how architecture, ornament, calligraphy, geometry, light, and spatial organization operate together to produce environments in which aesthetic refinement, imperial authority, and symbolic meaning converge.

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<sup>39</sup> Qur'ān 7:54 (“Indeed, your Lord is Allah, who created the heavens and the earth in six days...”); see also Qur'ān 10:3; 11:7; and 57:4.

Beyond the specific case examined here, aesthetic analysis offers a productive framework for further research. Applied more broadly, it can deepen the study of Islamic architecture by clarifying how meaning is articulated through formal structures across different historical and geographical contexts. At the same time, it provides a basis for comparative inquiry that can illuminate both the shared foundations of Islamic architectural traditions and the distinctive characteristics of Ottoman artistic culture. Through such investigations, the intellectual depth of Islamic architecture and the particular legacy of the Ottoman architectural tradition can be approached with greater interpretive clarity and nuance. Such an approach may also encourage renewed methodological dialogue between Islamic art history and Ottoman architectural studies, fields that have often developed in parallel yet rarely intersect at the level of interpretive method.

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