

Decoration As an Instrument of Deception

There are two types of decoration: decoration as an instrument of deception, and decoration which enhances the real and original qualities of a thing.

There are many Qur'anic verses and hadiths of the Prophet (sa) that refer to the subject of decoration as an instrument of deception. Such decoration can be found in all aspects of life, including the built environment, outward human appearance, human interactions, and even religious ceremonies. Accordingly, this type of decoration, decorative themes and media stand between an entity and a beholder, revealing to the latter not what the entity actually is, but rather what it is not.

Someone or something targeted by such decoration is either completely disfigured, or its ungodly aspects are made falsely alluring, grossly exaggerating their false 'attractiveness' so that the genuinely positive aspects are overshadowed. In other words, the good aspects of an entity are kept hidden. In trying to beautify and decorate using illusory media, specific evil elements are made up and attributed to the same entity, which in fact, disfigure it and conceal its positive aspects, hence, making the good entity repulsive and unattractive. Moreover, this process obscures the evil entity or the evil aspects of an entity and may even make it appear nice-looking or wholesome. How much decoration is needed to camouflage the original entity and present it in a different light depends on the extent of the entity's inherent goodness or evil.



With this type of decoration and beautification, the real character of an entity is hardly perceptible by a casual observer or by one who lacks the desire, sense of purpose, wisdom or the cerebral and spiritual means and capacity to break through the phony garb of an entity and reveal its true moral fibre. Thus, to see things in their real light is to grasp the real meaning of life and its multifaceted realities to which the Qur'an often alludes to by applying such terms as guidance, wisdom, knowledge and comprehension. On the

contrary, to see things in a different way is to be blinded by their false 'attractiveness' to the extent that one fails to penetrate their actual substance and remains bogged down with the demands of human and animalistic lusts and desires, thus failing to perceive a higher order of existence. The Qur'an refers to such a state as deviation, going astray, ignorance and negligence.

Some of the many verses in the Qur'an that refer to the subject of decoration or embellishment as an instrument of deception are as follows:

{And thus We have made for every prophet an enemy - devils from humankind and jinn, inspiring to one another decorative speech in delusion. But if your Lord had willed, they would not have done it, so leave them and that which they invent.} (Qur'an 6:112)

In the above verse it is mentioned that the devils from humankind and jinn use decoration to make their speech deceptive. In the subsequent verses, the Qur'an talks about decoration being nothing but enjoyment for this life. Even sinful acts and evil deeds are made 'alluring', thus indicating that decoration is used to deceive humankind by hiding an entity's true nature.

{And if it were not that the people would become one community [of disbelievers], We would have made for those who disbelieve in the most Merciful - for their houses - ceilings and stairways of silver upon which to mount  And for their houses - doors and couches [of silver] upon which to recline  And gold ornament. But all that is not but the enjoyment of worldly life. And the hereafter with your Lord is for the righteous.} (Qur'an 43:33-35)

{Then why, when Our punishment came to them, did they not humble themselves? But their hearts became hardened, and Satan made attractive to them that which they were doing.} (Qur'an 6:43)

{And likewise, to many of the polytheists their partners have made [to seem] pleasing the killing of their children in order to bring about their destruction and to cover them with confusion in their

religion. And if Allah had willed, they would not have done so. So leave them and that which they invent.} (Qur'an 6:137)

{[Satan] said: My Lord, because You have put me in error, I will surely make [disobedience] attractive to them on earth, and I will mislead them all Except, among them, Your chosen servants.} (Qur'an 15:39-40)

{Beautiful for those who disbelieve is the life of this world, and they ridicule those who believe. But those who fear Allah are above them on the Day of Resurrection. And Allah gives provision to whom He wills without account.} (Qur'an 2: 212)

{Then is one to whom the evil of his deed has been made attractive so he considers it good [like one rightly guided]? For indeed, Allah sends astray whom He wills and guides whom He wills. So do not let yourself perish over them in regret. Indeed, Allah is Knowing of what they do.} (Qur'an 35: 8)

On many occasions and under varying circumstances, Prophet Muhammad (sa) also censured and warned against those acts of decoration and embellishment which served as means for advancing delusions. There are many hadiths of the Prophet (sa) indicative of the fact that the built environment is a fertile ground for this negative mode of decoration to establish itself and thrive.

The Prophet (sa) said:

"No sooner does the performance of a people deteriorate than they embark upon decorating their mosques."

The hadith means that people start paying more attention to the form that mosques take rather than their function as centres for communities, fervently believing that they are right in what they do. However symbolically, by means of decorating the mosques, the same people succeed in masking the corrosion in their faith, as well as blinding their cognitive senses, thus fortifying and prolonging their appalling state.

On another occasion, the Prophet (sa) divulged:

"One of the signs that the Day of Judgment is imminent would be that people would start vying against one another in mosques."

Certainly, this statement covers planning, constructing and decorating mosques, as well as anything else that can be related thereto, directly or indirectly. Generally, competition among people to erect buildings of any kind is one of the signs of the Day of Judgment's imminence.

'Abdullah ibn 'Abbas (ra) related that the Messenger of Allah (sa) proclaimed that he was not directed to erect monumental mosques. Paraphrasing another statement of the Prophet (sa), Ibn 'Abbas (ra) commented that many Muslims would end up adorning their mosques like both the Jews and Christians had done.

Moreover, the Prophet (sa) once warned:

"O people, put a stop to your women wearing their attractive clothes and behaving in boastful ways inside mosques. Truly, the Children of Israel were not cursed until their women started wearing their attractive clothes and behaved in boastful ways inside mosques."

"The Prophet (sa) also said that he feared for his followers the peril of the splendour of the life of this world and its [false] adornments which they will soon possess and with which they will be tested."

'Abdullah ibn Mas'ood (ra) reported that the Prophet (sa) said:

"Allah curses those ladies who practice tattooing and those who get themselves tattooed, and those ladies who remove the hair from their faces and those who make artificial spaces between their teeth in order to look more beautiful whereby they change Allah's creation."

Indeed, decoration is used as an instrument of deception by changing the tones of Allah's pure creation, or creating the means and channels for one to be led away from the intrinsic purity and beauty of Allah's creation towards false convictions, desires, and

superstitions. Such is but the work of Satan and his devotees. Blinded with fallacies, myths, vain aspirations and fears, it is only Satan's faction that could see such an undertaking as a worthy and beneficial endeavour. However, the men and women of righteousness are well equipped to see the whole thing as both a delusion and a total fraud.

{...They call upon none but a rebellious Satan ﴿٦٠﴾ whom Allah has cursed. For he had said: I will surely take from among Your servants a specific portion. ﴿٦١﴾ And I will mislead them, and I will arouse in them [sinful] desires, and I will command them so they will slit the ears of cattle, and I will command them so they will change the creation of Allah. And whoever takes Satan as an ally instead of Allah has certainly sustained a clear loss.} (Qur'an 4:117-119)

This uncompromising attitude of Islam towards the decoration and beautification practices that do not serve the goals of truth, and which at best could be described as wasteful and unjustifiable efforts, has been encapsulated, so to speak, **in the following words of the Prophet (sa):**

"We have not been commanded to dress [embellish] the stone and clay (bricks)."

Similarly, if one is excessively occupied with embellishing the physical aspects of one's self, without paying any attention whatsoever to embellishing and polishing their spiritual dimensions, such an attitude becomes, in many ways, tantamount to embellishing the stone and clay which the Prophet (sa) warned against because humans are dual creatures made of clay and possessing a soul. No segment of the human character is to be cultivated at the expense of the other. In most cases, however, it is the spiritual side of human beings that is bartered for the unbound enjoyment of the pleasures offered by the corporeal side of humans, that is to say, the clay.

Many humans fancy the decaying clay, that is the body, which grows mouldy as one grows older, over the eternal soul, which conversely grows stronger, more tranquil, pure and complete as one ages,

getting ready for the hereafter. It follows that as the body becomes more decayed, more time and dedication is needed to mask it, improve its quality, and make it appealing, thus, in turn, limiting the time required to cultivate the soul.

Therefore, one can deduce that the concept of decoration functioning as an instrument of deception signifies the partial or total camouflaging of a wholesome thing via different means and media, hence portraying it as objectionable and vice versa. The more wholesome, or conversely, the more objectionable an entity, the more the deceptive agents of decoration and beautification must be used to mask it and thus fulfil their goals.

For example, some people think accumulating enormous wealth to live extravagantly and spending nothing or very little on those tested with poverty, ill health, or insolvency is appropriate, trendy and even gratifying. These same people think that being compassionate to the less fortunate is contemptible and degrading. Similarly, a structure that accommodates and advances immoral acts may be perceived by some as great just like a masterpiece of art and architecture because of its awesome physical appearance. Such a structure is accentuated by ample splendid decorative designs. So blinded are some by its glittering form that little or no thought is given to its hollow and iniquitous purpose. However surely, a thing, structure, or event cannot be described as beautiful and wholesome if it violates the principles of divinity and the ultimate truth, and aids the interests of falsehood and evil.

The same could be asserted about those people who are prone to excessively adorning their bodies. Thus, **the Qur'an cautions human beings:**

{O children of Adam, We have bestowed upon you clothing to conceal your private parts and as adornment. But the clothing of righteousness - that is best. That is from the signs of Allah that perhaps they will remember.} (Qur'an 7: 26)

Although people are permitted to attend to the details related to beautiful and decent living such as wearing clothes that add grace

to the appearance and ensuring cleanliness and good grooming, they are cautioned against excess in beautification.

{O children of Adam, take your adornment at every mosque, and eat and drink, but be not excessive. Indeed, Allah likes not those who commit excess.} (Qur'an 7: 31)

Certainly Satan and his associates, whether humans or jinn, are responsible for deceptive beautification. Hence Satan made his daring vow to Allah after he had rebelled against the divine will and plan.

{[Satan] said: Because You have put me in error, I will surely sit in wait for them on Your straight path. ﴿٦﴾ Then I will come to them from before them and from behind them and on their right and on their left, and You will not find most of them grateful [to You].} (Qur'an 7:16-17)

Consequently, Satan's strategies centre upon making wrong fair-seeming and making fair-seeming - in the spiritual sense of the word - wrong. Satan confirmed his intention in the following verse: *{[Iblees] said: My Lord, because You have put me in error, I will surely make [disobedience] attractive to them on earth, and I will mislead them all ﴿٧﴾ Except, among them, Your chosen servants.}* (Qur'an 15: 39-40)

However, wrongly portraying things to mislead people is all that Satan can do.

{Satan promises them and arouses desire in them. But Satan does not promise them except delusion.} (Qur'an 4:120)

Satan possesses no real authority over people, except for those who, through their regular spiritual failings, have invited him to enslave and take full control over them. However, no matter what Satan does, it is all about deception, trickery and false promises - no more than that. On the Day of Judgment, the day when the real character of all things will be unambiguously perceived by all because the spell of deceptive beautification will be broken, it will be Satan himself who will deal a final and definitely the most painful

blow to his devotees from the earthly life. Surely, it will be most appropriate for Satan to do that and nobody else. Thus, his true colours, and the true colours of all forms of evil, which Satan cunningly sustains and induces so many people to take pleasure in, will be revealed.

{And Satan will say when the matter has been concluded: Indeed, Allah had promised you the promise of truth. And I promised you, but I betrayed you. But I had no authority over you except that I invited you, and you responded to me. So do not blame me; but blame yourselves. I cannot be called to your aid, nor can you be called to my aid. Indeed, I deny your association of me [with Allah] before [by your obedience to me instead of Him during life on earth]. Indeed, for the wrongdoers is a painful punishment.}
(Qur'an 14:22)

Certainly it is because of Satan's treachery that the sinners are unable to catch a glimpse of the light and beauty of truth and things associated with it, despite its clarity, immensity and expediency for humankind. They perceive it, the things related thereto, and the ways leading to it, as dull and unappealing, whilst they see falsehood, the things related thereto and the ways leading to it, as delightful and attractive. Only when they die will the Satan's spell end and the veil over their senses be removed. The sinners will then come to terms with what really transpired on earth and where the truth really rests. At that time, their bitter regrets will be apparent through their agonizing pleas to be returned to earth for just a short while so that they can rectify their deeds.

[[It will be said]: You were certainly in unmindfulness of this, and We have removed from you your cover, so your sight, this Day, is sharp.} (Qur'an 50:22)

Consequently, the believers stand at the diametrically opposed side of the sinners and infidels. The believers easily see where truth and falsehood actually lie. To them, the things that are good and those that are evil are never equal, even though the abundance and phony glitter of the bad tend to dazzle many people. Due to a sixth sense that the believers have developed, thanks to the power of faith

that saturates their lives, nothing can stand between them and their seeing of the most crucial aspects of earthly existence in its truest colors. It goes without saying that one of the most significant supplications that a righteous servant of Allah offers almost on a daily basis is, "O Allah, show us the truth the way it is, and bestow upon us the blessing of following it. And show us the falsehood the way it is, and bestow upon us the blessing of resisting it."

According to the Noble Qur'an, the main trait of those who walk in righteousness is the clear knowledge of what is truly beautiful. *{And know that among you is the Messenger of Allah. If he were to obey you in much of the matter, you would be in difficulty, but Allah has endeared to you the faith and has made it pleasing in your hearts and has made hateful to you disbelief, defiance and disobedience. Those are the [rightly] guided.}* (Qur'an 49:7)

Hence, one of the Prophet's supplications was as follows: *"O Allah, endear faith to us, and make it beautiful in our hearts, and make hateful to us disbelief, wrongdoing, and rebellion..."*

Deceptively beautifying and adorning the outward appearance of a thing, thus disguising its real nature, particularly when deceptive beautification is applied to religious rituals, has the potential to become one of the most detrimental transgressions. Abu Sa'eed (ra) reported that the Prophet (sa) came to a group of his Companions while they were discussing Dajjal (the anti-Christ), and he said:

"Should I not inform you of that which I fear for you even more than the dangers of Dajjal? It is the hidden polytheism. A person stands to pray, and he beautifies his prayer because he sees people looking at him."

Moreover, due to the damaging consequences of adopting deceptive decoration and beautification as a norm, hypocrisy is prohibited. So despicable in the sight of Allah is hypocrisy that the hypocrites will have one of the worst punishments in hellfire:

{Indeed the hypocrites will be in the lowest depths of the fire - and never will you find for them a helper.} (Qur'an 4:145)

{O you who have believed, why do you say what you do not do? Great is hatred in the sight of Allah that you say what you do not do.} (Qur'an 61: 2-3)

Islam loathes hypocrisy because it propagates discrepancies between a person's outer manifestations and expressions, and his real self. A hypocrite is a person who is falsely adorned - one who camouflages his or her speech, actions and appearance.

Similarly, for the same reasons stated above, the acts of cheating, lying and conceit are also strictly prohibited in Islam. They are deemed some of the most damaging forms of vice. Their opposites - honesty, faithfulness and modesty - are the virtues most desired in human beings.

As a final point, performing the acts of decoration and embellishment for the purpose of spreading fallacy and deceit is by no means an easy task because the deceiver must suppress truth, which is at the core of the divine will and plan, alongside establishing falsehood, which is totally alien and never compatible with the spiritual paradigm of existence. Furthermore, Allah made the manifestations of the truth plain, unambiguous, universal and discernible to all. Truth is innately beautiful, charming, beneficial and necessary for the well-being of humankind. Falsehood, however, is a forgery and an irreconcilable entity - an opposing force to truth. Therefore, manipulating truth and falsehood through decorative deception is a daunting task. Surely, more than just some straightforward tactics and strategies are needed for making truth appear vile and repellent and falsehood appear pleasant and delightful.

Moreover, truth is at the core of every person's inherent nature. According to Islam, humans have been created with the primordial disposition to worship Allah, their Creator. Therefore Allah, knowing the character of humankind best, on dispatching Adam (as), the Father of humankind and the first of prophets on earth to

undertake the duty of vicegerency, consoled him by revealing that His guidance and signs would come to him and to all humans.

{We said: Go down from it, all of you. And when guidance comes to you from Me, whoever follows My guidance - there will be no fear concerning them, nor will they grieve.} (Qur'an 2:38)

Nevertheless, many people still succumb to Satan's cheap tricks and become hopelessly confused and disoriented, eventually losing their way. It stands to reason, therefore, that Satan is a very astute and competent creation insofar as his victims are concerned, and that the spell of his mean scams appears to be quite formidable. Resisting Satan's advances requires a great deal of conviction, zeal, determination and perseverance.

This article is an excerpt from the author's book "[The Philosophy of Decoration in Islamic Architecture](#)"