



10-1-2001

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Finlayson, Cynthia (2001) "Behind the Arabesque: Understanding Islamic Art and Architecture," *BYU Studies Quarterly*. Vol. 40 : Iss. 4 , Article 6.

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Behind the Arabesque

Understanding Islamic Art and Architecture

Cynthia Finlayson

God is the light of the heavens and the earth. A likeness of His light is as a pillar on which is a lamp—the lamp is in a glass, the glass is as it were a brightly shining star—lit from a blessed olive-tree, neither eastern nor western, the oil whereof gives light, though fire touch it not—light upon light. God guides to His light whom He pleases. And God sets forth parables for men, and God is Knower of all things.

—Qur'an 24:35

The deep, spiritual impact that Islam has had on its adherents over the centuries has manifested itself in unique forms of Islamic art and architecture whose ultimate goals include the worship of Allah through the beauty of form and decoration and the lifting of the human soul from the profane to celestial realms. At times, the assumptions and canons of Islamic art and architecture may seem visually foreign to Western viewers. But the messages, when deciphered, proclaim the glories of God and his Universe and the promises of a spiritual and physical renewal for the faithful in an eternal paradise—messages not at all foreign to Latter-day Saint religious communities today.

Given the worldwide dispersion of Islam, it is impossible within this short article to describe all the manifestations of style and composition in Islamic art and architecture, both secular and religious, from 632 C.E. to the present for every geographical and cultural region of the Islamic world. Obviously, Syrian and Iraqi craftsmen of the seventh century C.E. had a different style and context than do Indonesian Muslim artisans of today. However, this article will attempt to present some of the deepest cultural and religious constructs that have shaped Islamic art and architecture over time and that have provided the basis for new interpretations in the ongoing vibrant world of art and architecture influenced by Islamic religious and cultural identities today.

Cultural and Artistic Contexts

Because the beautiful prose of the Qur'an was revealed to Muhammad at a certain time and in a certain place, this sacred text assumes—as a vehicle of spiritual communication—unique levels of commonly understood cultural constructs. Although Arabia and the rest of the Near East hosted great urban centers, their societies in the seventh century were profoundly influenced by the behaviors and social customs of nomadic Bedouin cultures. To travel from place to place in the Near East, even the most sophisticated of urban dwellers had to deal with the physical and psychological constraints that Near Eastern geography and climate have placed on human endeavors and development over the millennia.

In the nomadic Near Eastern setting (or even that of a commercial caravan venture), the benefits of material goods had to be carefully balanced against the relative difficulty of transport. In other words, since all goods had to be carried, often over great distances, to new pasture and water resources (or urban settings) in a challenging climate, excessive materialism could be deadly. The accumulation of extensive libraries of written records was impossible for those peoples living in a nonagrarian or non-urban context. Over time, the ancient nomadic cultures of the Near East thus developed an emphasis on sophisticated language. Traditions, histories, and poetry were all memorized and thus carried easily without excessive weight or danger to the well-being of the clan or tribe. These cultures also depended heavily on the cooperative role of the individual tribal member in the struggle for everyday survival. Additionally, clan members were active in the maintenance of the tribal identity through language, oral histories, and poetry, as well as through personal actions associated with family and tribal honor. More importantly, since many aspects of family identity required the extensive use of memorization that was not necessarily tied to material artifacts or written texts, as in other civilizations, the Semitic/Arab mind was often trained to appreciate and handle multiple levels of events or story lines occurring at the same time.

Freed from the one-dimensional constraints of a cultural emphasis on material objects, many Semitic cultures with strong nomadic heritages experienced profound spiritual events that propelled them beyond the material world to a higher spiritual plane and to a personal relationship with Deity. Significantly, the three great monotheistic religions of the world have their origins in the nomadic Near East, and great religious leaders and innovators such as Abraham, Moses, Christ, and Muhammad spent considerable time in its stark deserts and mountains. Conversely, all of these religious cultures (as also most others in the world) experienced problems with spirituality when faced with the challenges of the material emphasis of settled agrarian or urban life. These are the same spiritual

challenges that Latter-day Saint communities increasingly face in the modern context of material wealth. In the profound words of warning from the Qur'an to all humankind, "Abundance diverts you [from spirituality]" (102:1).¹

Because of this heritage of complex oral traditions, Islamic literature, (both religious and secular) as well as art and architecture, delights in the ability to focus on multiple levels of meaning and decoration often exhibited to the viewer simultaneously. The story within the story within the story, or the motif within the motif within the motif, or the complexity of multiple levels of symbolic meaning reflect the ancient paradigms of the complex thought processes described above (plate 1). These multiple levels are especially evident in the literary constructs of the Qur'an and the art it inspired. Thus, within Islamic religious art and architecture, complex artistic conventions often attempt to reveal to the viewer the incomprehensible nature of the mind of God and the wonders of his creations. They invite the human mind to contemplate through intricate geometric pathways, artistic symbols, and color combinations the greatness of God. They also free the viewer to worship God without the dangers of worshipping pagan images in human or animal form.

Muhammad experienced firsthand paganism's destructive forces and worked to purge Arabia of both idol worship and the sacrifice of children to pagan deities and forces of nature. This struggle greatly influenced Muhammad's perception of the appropriate use of art. Though a great lover of beauty, Muhammad through his actions and sayings provided a basis for determining appropriateness, especially within the confines of the mosque as well as within the privacy of the Muslim home. Thus, according to one story in the hadith, Muhammad forbade one of his wives to hang a tapestry or textile with a motif on the wall of her house but allowed it to be used as a covering for pillows in her home.² Its position on the wall was deemed to be too similar to pagan images and Christian icons, but its use as a pillow was an appropriate form of home decor since it was placed in a more acceptable visual position.

Because of the pervasive historical presence of paganism within tribal Arabia, Islam traditionally has taken a strong stand against any hint of its reemergence in Islamic religious contexts. Human and animal images are thus not usually found in Islamic religious buildings—a strict reaction against the dangers of idol worship or icon worship, especially in houses of prayer. As an artistic alternative, the complexities of intricate vegetal scrolls (arabesques), geometric designs, and calligraphy as well as the repetitive use of architectural decorations such as archways and *muqarnas* (architectural detailing that resembles stalactites or honeycombs) create environments of sacred contemplation and union with God, especially within the

mosque.³ The openness of interior spaces within Islamic mosques and even Muslim homes is also functional in nature. It promotes communal worship and social interaction while also eliminating any barrier between the individual and God.

These architectural conventions have often also been utilized within secular palaces (plate 1). Even there, complex embellishments visually complement and enhance the ability of a Muslim to find God through the complexities of multiple ideas, patterns, and symbolism. Open spaces promote brotherhood and community involvement. Within secular art, however, the traditionally understood religious constraints against human and animal images have not always been observed. Additionally, craftsmen within the world of Islam were greatly influenced by Byzantine, Sassanian, and indigenous pre-Islamic motifs and concepts as well as by the local crafts of cultures absorbed by rapid Islamic expansion. Animal and human motifs have become at various times acceptable in secular crafts such as ceramics, textile weaving, and metal working, where Muslim craftsmen (or non-Muslim craftsmen living within predominantly Muslim societies) have developed their embellishments to the level of fine art (plate 2). Additionally, with the later adoption of manuscript illumination by Muslim artisans, literature other than the Qur'an (and there are even exceptions here) may contain human depictions that enhance the story line (plate 2).

For Islamic painters, realistic perspective with accompanying vanishing points so critical in the development of Western art is deemed less important as an artistic construct. Perspective, while mimicking reality, often limits the visual availability of surface planes both to the brush of the artist and to the enjoyment of the viewer. Thus, great Muslim painters like Bihzad delighted in the beautiful embellishment of miniature paintings that defy perspective but entertain the eye. The "flatness" of the painted surface has also been used at times by Muslim artists to aid the viewer in refraining from worshipping the object rather than the Creator of all Reality.

As Muslim artists have become increasingly influenced by Western art since the era of European colonialism and the two World Wars, Western artistic constructs have become more evident within their works. However, themes of predominantly Islamic influence or those of indigenous cultural identity still often pervade the art of modern Islamic cultures (plate 4). Additionally, many countries with large Muslim populations are currently involved in the revitalization of traditional arts and crafts as well as the conventions of Islamic fine art and architecture. Within the realms of modern design, Islamic and Near Eastern constructs are also offering new and vibrant concepts to the world at large based on reinterpretations of traditional Islamic art and architecture.⁴

The artistic emphasis within Islamic art on surface decoration, or *horror vacui* (the horror of empty spaces and thus their covering with extensive decoration), also reflects another important cultural construct that has helped define the development of Islamic art and architecture over time—the innate and ancient Near Eastern love of embellishment.

Despite the lifestyle example of Muhammad and his warnings against personal ostentation, frivolous uses of material wealth, and excess spending on architectural edifices, powerful cultural and political forces within the geographical regions of the developing Islamic world pulled Islamic art and architecture in other directions. Near Eastern cultures long before the advent of Islam had associated both exterior and interior embellishment with status. Simply from headdress style or the embellishment of clothing, individuals in many real-life situations could ascertain an acquaintance's social and economic status, marital situation, religious affiliation, and clan, tribal, or village origins. Similarly, elaborate visual costuming, hairstyles, and accompanying ritual objects have always been emphasized in Near Eastern art as marks of social status and position both in this life and the next and have long taken precedence over realistic portraiture or realism itself, so important to the West. A primary example of this cultural phenomenon occurred in the art of the ancient, pre-Islamic Arab civilization of Palmyra (in present-day Syria). Though exposed to Greek and Roman styles of realistic portraiture, Palmyrenes placed more emphasis on the embellishment of the costumes and headdresses in their funerary portraits rather than on realistic facial features.

It was thus natural as Islam expanded beyond Arabia that the mosque—a symbol of Islam and an edifice dedicated to the worship of God—should take on embellishments that would represent the Near Eastern concepts of Islam's status in this world and its claims on paradise in the next. Within Islamic mosques, the *qibla* wall with its niche, or *mihrab*, pointing the direction of prayer to Mecca and symbolically the direction of union with God, and the *minbar*, or high-stepped speaker's pulpit for Friday readings of the Qur'an and congregational messages, were the first objects that began to receive special artistic attention (plate 3). Perhaps this was because of their specific association with Muhammad.⁵ Over time they have become focal points of extensive artistic embellishment and often contain a multiplicity of complex, symbolic visual messages to the worshipper.

Beauty of the Word

With the codification of the Qur'an into a written text and with the elaboration of Arabic script into different styles, calligraphy developed into an art form with powerful spiritual and visual authority and became a

medium of Islamic artistic embellishment and avenue of worship (plate 4). Believed to be the literal word of God to humankind, the written phrases of the Qur'an take on an importance that Westerners often do not understand. The language of the Qur'an is deemed so sacred that it must not be changed from the Classical Arabic in order to have full power and efficacy when read, recited, or written. Since this was the language and prose chosen by Allah to communicate his message, it must be memorized in Classical Arabic even if a believer is from Indonesia or China. In Islam, the Qur'an often takes on the role of the medium of salvation for humankind. Just as Christians believe that Christ's life, death, and self-sacrifice provide the sacred pattern and conduit for eternal salvation and are symbolic of God's unlimited love, Muslims believe that obedience to the words of the Qur'an provide the direct spiritual links and pathways to God and the ultimate human attainment of paradise. Consequently, through seeing, hearing, and emotionally feeling God's word in the Qur'an, humankind can come closest to experiencing in this life the presence of God himself. Thus, the Qur'an is meant in Islamic contexts to be a multimedia event of the greatest and deepest possible spiritual experience. By reciting or reading from the Qur'an, the worshipper shares in God's divine power and his message of universal salvation and love for the obedient and faithful. The use of both simple and complex calligraphic passages from the Qur'an as embellishments for mosques, secular buildings, and objects thus connotes the presence and protection of God's sacred word and the power of its message to the viewer and the world.

While the decoration of the exterior of many mosques is quite plain and by contrast their interiors greatly embellished (a common Near Eastern and Mediterranean architectural device), other mosques (especially those with dome structures) literally dress or "drape" their exterior surfaces with dazzling tiles or mosaics proclaiming in beautiful calligraphy the words of God (plate 8). The vibrant colors chosen for such embellishments also often have symbolic associations with paradise or divine protection. Additionally, just as in Islamic painting, where all surfaces are revealed and embellished for the viewer, Islamic architects (in contrast to their counterparts in the West) delighted in refraining from disguising architectural elements but rather exposed and emphasized their surfaces by complex decoration (plate 5). Like the surfaces of a diamond glittering in the sun, Islamic architectural elements play with color, texture, light, and shadow to create celestial environments that attempt to transcend the dimensions of earthly geometry and space. One of the best and earliest examples to illustrate this trend in early Islamic architecture and art is at the same time the oldest significant piece of religious architecture extant from the early Umayyad Islamic world. This edifice is the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem (see plates 1, 8).

The Vault of Heaven

As Islam conquered geographical areas dominated by the Byzantine Christians, the early Umayyad Muslim caliphs felt pressed to erect architectural edifices whose beauty and sanctity would compete with the great edifices of the Eastern Christian Church. Jerusalem is not only sacred to Jews and Christians but, next to Mecca and Medina, is one of the holiest cities of Islam. From the ruins of Temple Mount, the Prophet Muhammad was carried off in a dazzling night vision of the seven degrees of heavenly paradise. This occurred from a spot associated by some Muslims with the site where Abraham prepared to sacrifice his firstborn son to God. For Muslims, this willing victim is assumed to have been Ishmael not Isaac. As a traditional father of many Arab tribes, Ishmael is thus viewed as a great example of spiritual submission (*Muslim* means one who submits to God's will), tying other Semitic groups besides the Jews to the Abrahamic covenant and to Temple Mount.

After the conquest of Jerusalem by Muslim forces, the Umayyad caliph 'Abd al Malik began construction of the Dome of the Rock over this holiest of sites. It was completed 691–692 C.E. but has been repaired and refurbished on numerous occasions since that time. Significantly, for Islamic architects it provided the precedent for the reintroduction of the dome for non-Christian edifices in the Islamic world.

Both domes and barrel vaulting had originated in the ancient Near East and Egypt, where both architectural elements had been utilized within funerary structures and in secular housing. Small domed edifices seem to have been exploited by Hellenistic architects especially in Seleucid Syria and Ptolemaic Egypt. During campaigns and visits to the Near East, both the Roman emperors Trajan and, later, Hadrian realized the aesthetic and psychological potential of these architectural forms when combined with new Roman structural technologies. Rome soon hosted Trajan's markets and then the great Pantheon of Hadrian, whose huge domed ceiling represented the heavenly vault and power of the gods of the Empire. The extended Roman dome succeeded in re-creating the heavenly stratosphere on a human scale while at the same time propelling the human spirit and eye to a divine dimension.

The religious usage of ceiling decoration had also existed in Egyptian and late Hellenistic and Roman temples of the Near East. There astrological paintings were often used to ornament the ceilings of the shrines of the male deities associated with celestial and seasonal powers over rain and drought and thus over the powers of life and death. Later Christian architects simply revitalized this pagan usage, substituting images of Christ and the Apostles and saints for Zeus, Bel, Sol Invictus, and the various deities of the celestial constellations. By the advent of Islam in the Near East, the

interior decorated dome and central church plan had become the special prerogatives of the Eastern Christian Church.

The visual power of dome imagery, which is thus historically so closely tied to celestial power and order, is sometimes lost on modern Western audiences. We rarely look heavenward. If we want to know the time, we check a wall clock or look at our wrist watches. If we want to know the season, month, or day, we check a yearly calendar on the wall. When we want to travel from point A to point B, we follow well-laid-out roads, whose routes are carefully delineated for us on maps stored in the glove compartments of our cars. These conveniences are relatively recent in the history of humankind. Previously, humankind relied on the heavens for all of these critical aspects of information and saw in their order and vastness a power greater than man, worthy of human awe and worship. Thus, the architectural dome was associated, by those who often looked heavenward, with critical aspects of celestial power and divine order. In the ancient Near East, the movements of the heavens and heavenly bodies were literally tied not only to one's daily life but to cosmic and earthly rejuvenation. In some pagan contexts, the planets and constellations of the heavens were even the carriers of human souls to eternity and thus the importance of the use of astrological decorations within domes and ceilings. The adoption of the dome in Islamic contexts thus has profound symbolic meaning given the contexts of the Qur'an and its assertion of the power and mercy of Allah and the promises of paradise.

With the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, Islamic architects (obviously using Byzantine craftsmen and ideas) began developing the dome beyond the constraints of pagan and Christian usage (plate 6). Combining religious fervor with calligraphic designs of Qur'anic passages that specify the oneness of God and the role of Jesus in Islam, the Dome of the Rock stepped into the realm of religious propaganda, emphasizing Islam's role in reestablishing the Abrahamic covenant over those who had fallen short in keeping its demands—Jews and Christians. Devoid of figural art (except for various images of buildings, crowns, and vases in mosaics on the lower coursings), the dome was draped on its exterior with textilelike tile work and embellished within and without by dazzling mosaics and painted surfaces tinted with gold. More importantly, the decoration of the dome itself—over thirty-five meters high and replete with calligraphy and complicated repetitive patterns—began the attempt by Islamic architects to create limitless space through visual complexity (plate 7). This artistic process of attempting to visually break the bounds of hemispherical space was perfected by the later development of *muqarnas* as a common Islamic dome or ceiling embellishment.

These artistic conventions promoted the greatness and incomprehensibility of Allah's personality over the pagan influences of Christian doctrine that accepted Christ as divine. According to the Qur'an, "Say He, God, is One. God is He on Whom all depend. He begets not, nor is He begotten, and none is like Him" (112:1-4). The seemingly limitless interior space of the Islamic dome combined with the beautiful embellishment of the dome's exterior have over time become the premier trademarks of great Islamic architecture. The Dome of the Rock thus provided the architectural and decorative precedent for all later Islamic architecture and, more significantly, proclaimed new uses of architectural space for spiritual and religious awareness that are uniquely Islamic.

The Realms of Paradise

More than any other thing, a righteous Muslim strives to be united with God in paradise. Qur'an 88:1, 8-16 reads:

Has there come to thee the news of the Overwhelming Event? Faces on that day will be happy, glad for their striving, in a lofty Garden, wherein thou wilt hear no vain talk. Therein is a fountain flowing. Therein are thrones raised high, and drinking-cups ready placed, and cushions set in rows, and carpets spread out.

Images such as these of the beauty of paradise are powerful and plenteous in the Qur'an. They become even more poignant when one realizes the scant availability of water within the boundaries of Muhammad's Arabia. The imagery of paradise in the Qur'an and in Islamic art and architecture is thus closely tied to the imagery of water and fertile gardens awaiting the faithful. According to one hadith concerning the life of the prophet, Muhammad refused to take an opportunity to enter Damascus, an oasis city watered by the Barrada River and beautified by its numerous gardens, groves, and fertile fields. A human being, stated Muhammad, should enter paradise only once. He taught, however, that righteous human endeavor, the study of God's creations and gifts to humankind, and the correct dispersal of material goods could help develop a paradise in this life for communities of the faithful.

Because of the powerful imagery of paradise in the Qur'an and the spiritual and physical efforts necessary for its attainment, Islamic art and architecture often utilize water and garden imagery in many contexts. This imagery is particularly prominent in textile motifs, especially in carpets, where irrigated gardens with their multiplicity of floral designs reflect actual irrigated fields and the architecture of Islamic houses and palaces. In Islamic Persia, the irrigated garden became a prominent stylistic convention of paradise but also reflected the Persian love of the rose and its delicate scent as a symbol of the union of the soul with God (the thorns of

earthly life must be endured to obtain the beauty of paradisiacal union with the flower, the Beloved).⁶

The sound, sight, and smell of water with its accompanying psychological benefits as well as its functional uses for air conditioning within buildings was also exploited by Muslim architects, the most famous example of these devices being the Alhambra Palace of Granada, Spain. Palaces, however, were not the only buildings to utilize these concepts. Muslim hospitals were some of the first to develop an environment of healing based not only on the patient's physical needs but also on his or her emotional and psychological potential for healing. Thus, not only were carefully regulated medicines dispensed in Islamic community hospitals, but these complexes also often hosted beautiful gardens and fountains with musicians to entertain the sick with healing refrains.

Despite the traditional Islamic injunctions against ostentatious monuments for the dead, certain cultures that converted to Islam developed the art of the mausoleum to perfection, often incorporating the imagery of the celestial dome within their design but also replicating the gardens of heavenly paradise within their decoration. The Timurid and eventually the Mughal Muslim dynasties, as conquerors of northern India, adopted elements of Hindu architecture for their unique funerary monuments. These artistically mixed societies are but a few examples of this phenomenon throughout the world of Islam. Most famous of the monuments produced by the Mughals is the incredible Taj Mahal, created by Shah Jahan for his deceased wife Mumtaz Mahal, who died in 1631. According to some scholars, the mausoleum as well as its surrounding gardens, fountains, and pools symbolically reflect the actual environs of paradise as envisioned by Sufi Islamic mystical texts; the Taj itself is positioned as the throne of God on Judgment Day (plate 8).⁷ The imagery of paradise in Mughal Islamic contexts was thus closely tied to aspirations of a very personalized eternal rejuvenation.

Conclusions

Only a few of the forms and conventions of Islamic art and architecture have been discussed in this paper. Additionally, only a few possible cultural and religious contexts were presented to help illustrate the probable origins of the development of an Islamic "style" and "message" as seen within the constructs of Islamic art and architecture. The complexity of embellishment counterbalanced by the simplicity of visual space, the use of symbolic geometric forms including that of the hemisphere within structures and art, the proliferation of Qur'anic calligraphy representative of the very presence and nature of God's word to humankind, and the spiritual and physical longing for paradisiacal glory are all manifested in Islamic art and architecture.

Given the beauty and complexity of Islamic artistic endeavors over the centuries, this short discussion seems woefully inadequate. However, above and beyond these meager scholarly endeavors, I hope that these paragraphs and the images themselves will spark within the reader an emotional tie to the spiritual aspirations of their Muslim brothers and sisters and inspire an appreciation for the art and architecture of the Islamic world that transcends the barriers of both cultural and religious differences.

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1. Qur'an 102 reads, "In the name of God, the Beneficent, the Merciful. Abundance diverts you, until you come to the graves. Nay, you will soon know, nay, again, you will soon know. Nay, would that you knew with a certain knowledge! You will certainly see hell; then you will see it with certainty of sight; Then on that day you shall certainly be questioned about the boons [material blessings bestowed upon you]." All Qur'anic quotes taken from *The Holy Qur'an*, trans. Maulana Muhammad Ali (Columbus, Ohio: Abmadiyyab Anjuman Isha'at Islam Lahore, 1994).

2. See Richard Ettinghausen, *Arab Painting* (New York: World Publishing, 1962), 12–13.

3. *Muqarnas* is an Arabic term for the decorative architectural detailing resembling stalactites or honeycombs especially used in Classical Islamic architecture for ceilings and vaults. The word is derived from a Greek term for the scales used as roofing tiles. Islamic muqarnas often function to visually explode the geometric confines of a ceiling or dome to give the illusion of infinite space; thus it often symbolizes the infinite nature of God. See John D. Hoag, *Islamic Architecture* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1975), 190.

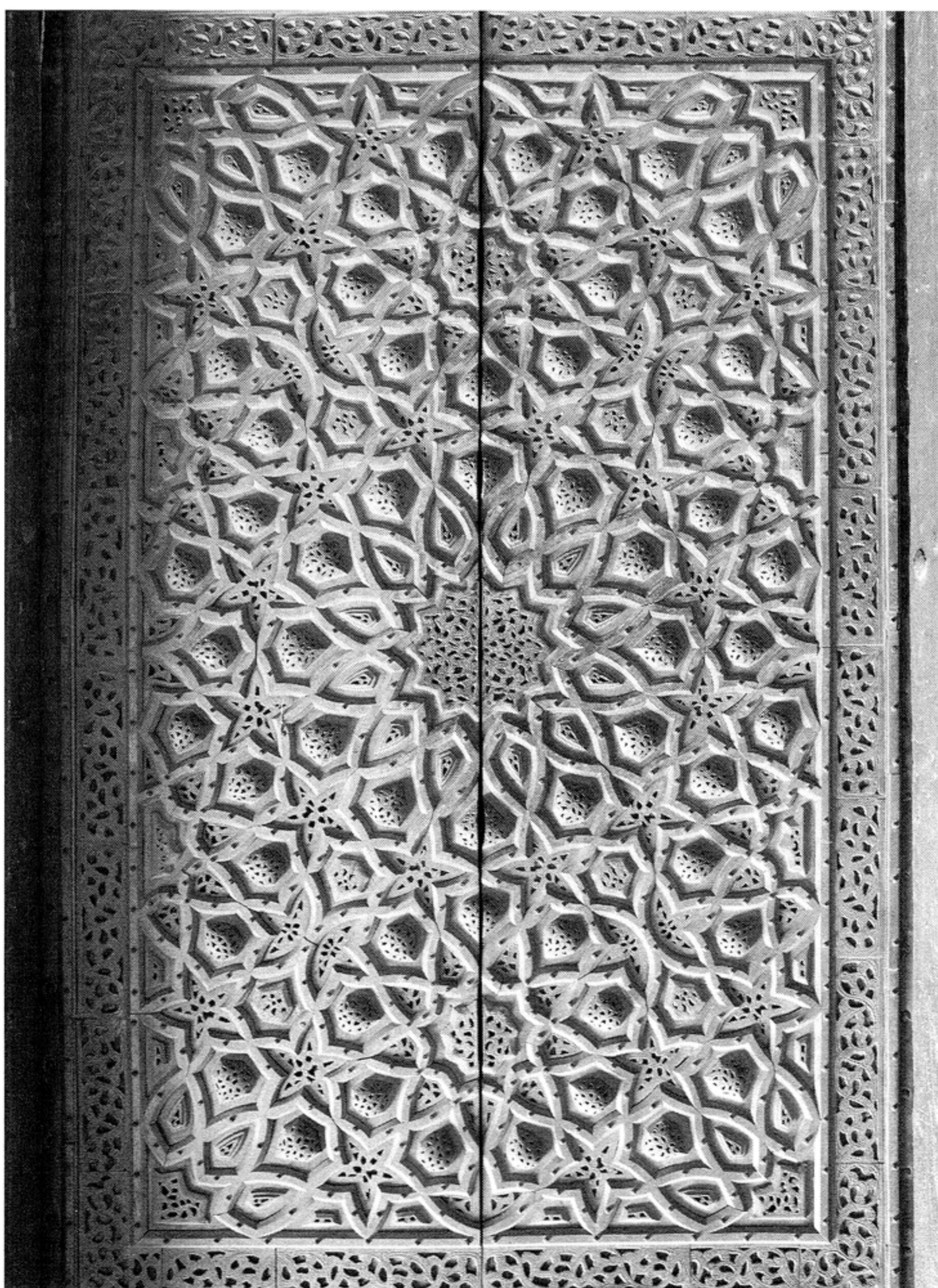
4. The contributions of great architects like Hassan Fathy are but one example. See *AramcoWorld* 50, no. 4 (July/August 1999).

5. According to Muslim tradition, the early followers of Muhammad met within the confines of Muhammad's simple house, which included a typical Near Eastern courtyard, covered porticos, and separate, more private, rooms for his wives and children. Protection and food were always available for the poor, travelers, or those with special needs. Muhammad would often preach in the courtyard by leaning against his staff, which had been pushed into the ground. As the correct direction of prayer was changed from Jerusalem to Mecca, both the staff and the position that Muhammad took for prayer and preaching were eventually associated with the correct direction for congregational prayer. As Muhammad grew older, he began to sit upon a bench or chair raised on a podium to deliver the Friday Qur'anic recitation and message. Thus the development of the qibla, mihrab, and minbar within the later Islamic mosque. Mosques also often retain a large courtyard with fountains for ritual purification before prayer and for large public gatherings; covered porticos for protection of worshippers from the sun or the natural elements; and interior columned spaces whose architecture focused on the development of a sacred space for worship and prayer directed toward

the qibla wall, the mihrab, and Mecca. See Barbara Brend, *Islamic Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 15–17.

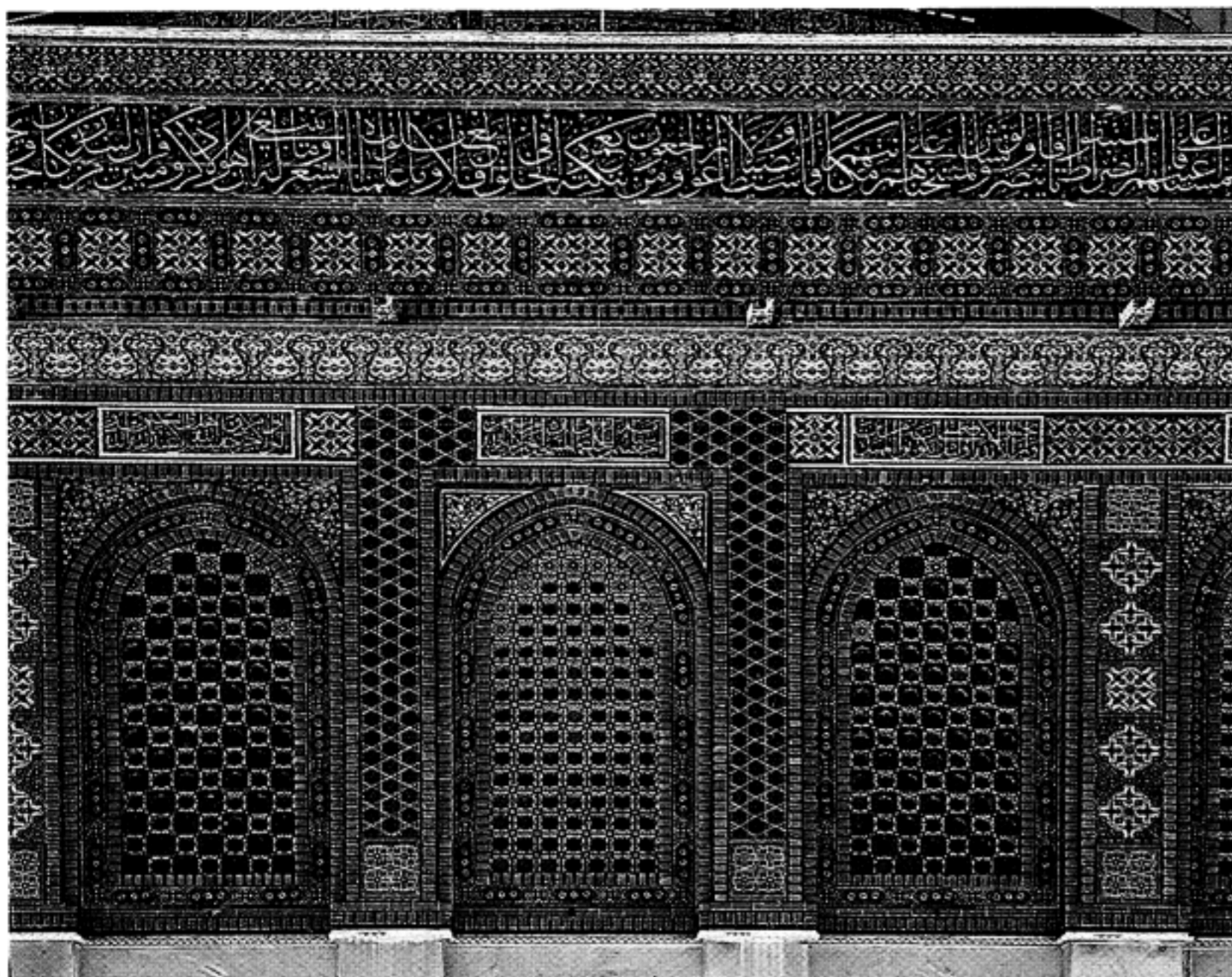
6. This is a typical allegory found within Sufi mystical thought, whose images of the soul's quest for union with Deity are found in Sufi poetry, parables, and philosophical writings. All have greatly influenced the development of Islamic art and architecture as well as literature and thought. See Laleh Bakhtiar, *Sufi: Expressions of the Mystic Quest* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1976).

7. See Wayne Begley and A. Desai, "The Illumined Tomb: Documentary Sources for the Taj Mahal," unpublished manuscript, University of Iowa, 1991.



Courtesy Val Brinkerhoff

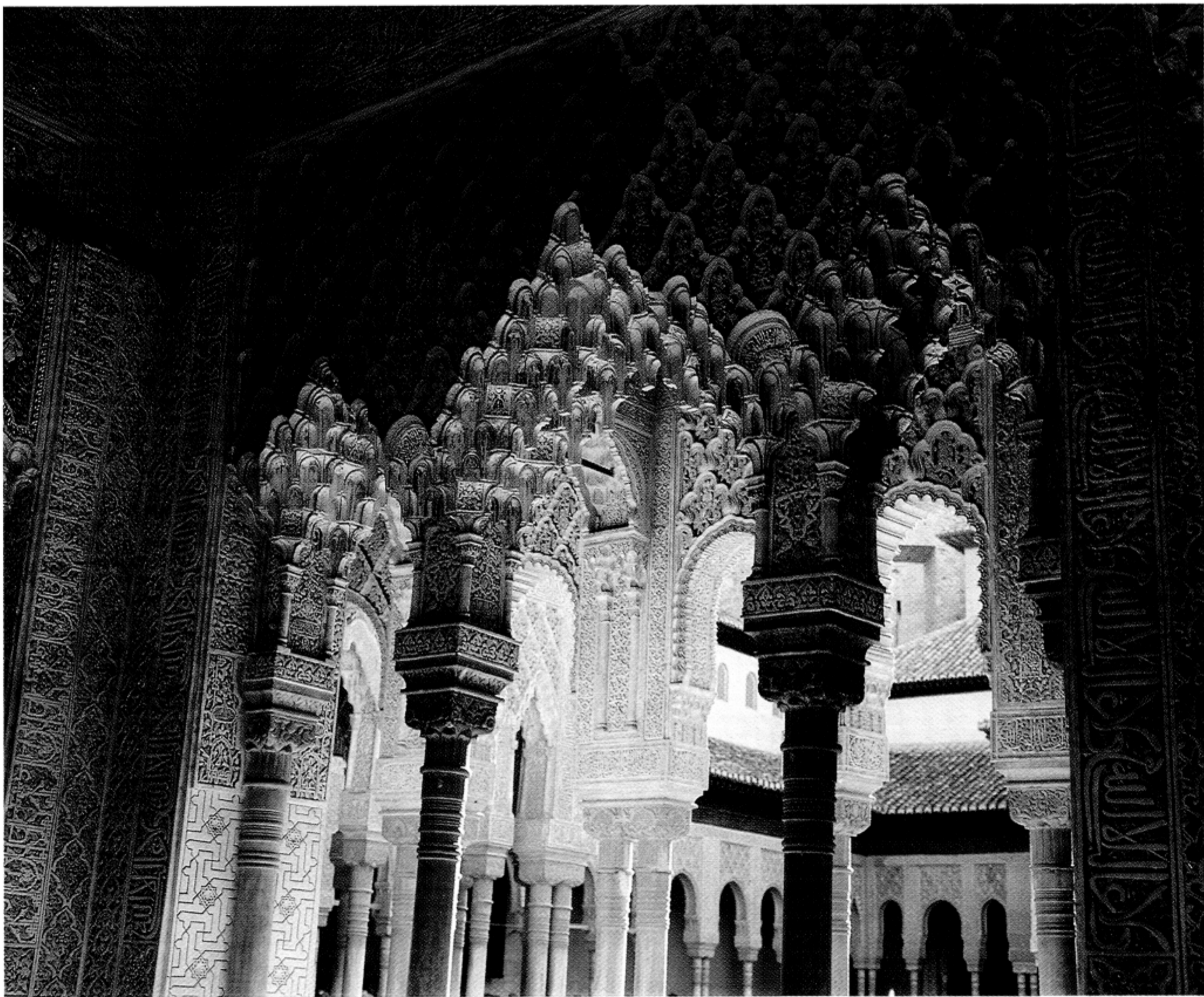
Wooden doors carved in traditional Islamic arabesque and geometric motifs, illustrating the order and unity of God's creation.



John Telford

PLATE 1

Left: Intricate mosaic patterns and calligraphy from the Qur'an decorate the exterior of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem. Both geometric shapes and Qur'anic calligraphy as well as the blue-green color have deep protective and symbolic meanings for Muslims.



Above: Muqarnas decoration of the Court of Lions in the Al-Hambra Palace in Granada, Spain. *Muqarnas* is the Arabic term that evolved from the Greek word for scales utilized in roofing tiles. In Classical Islamic architecture, the term is applied to the honeycomb vaulting that looks like the stalactite deposits of caves. Its effect is both to elaborately decorate a surface while at the same time to extend space into eternity.



British Museum

PLATE 2

Left: As the Angel Gabriel appeared to Muhammad in a cave above Medina, the angel commanded, "Recite!" "Recite in the name of thy Lord who created all things, who created man from clots of blood." From the Arabic word for "recitation" or "reading" (*qur'an*) comes the name of the holy book of revelations revered by all Muslims as the direct word of God (Allah). Here, in a fourteenth-century miniature painting from Egypt or Syria, the Angel Gabriel proclaims the importance of Allah's revelations to the world with the sound of a trumpet.



Copyright Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, NY

Above: An elaborate brass bowl from Egypt or Syria inlaid with silver and gold demonstrates the beauty and refinement of Islamic craftsmanship during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Within such crafts, the depictions of humans and animals were acceptable to some Islamic communities.

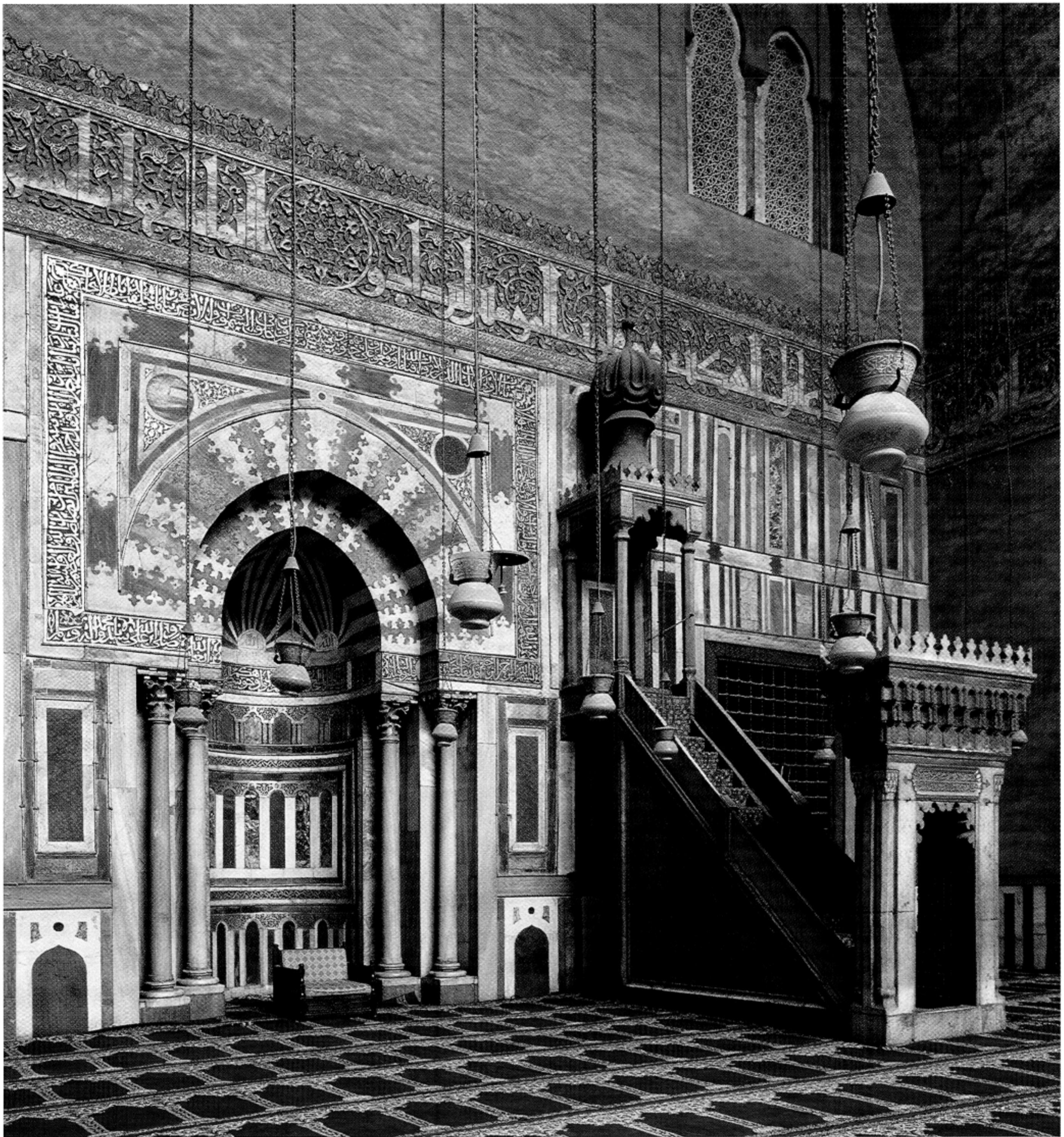


PLATE 3

A mosque's qibla wall with indented mihrab orient the Muslim worshipper in prayer both toward Allah and toward Mecca and the Ka'ba as a symbol of God's covenant with the righteous. The stepped minbar to the right is utilized especially during Friday mosque services for readings from the Qur'an and as a platform for religious sermons. This mosque is in Cairo.

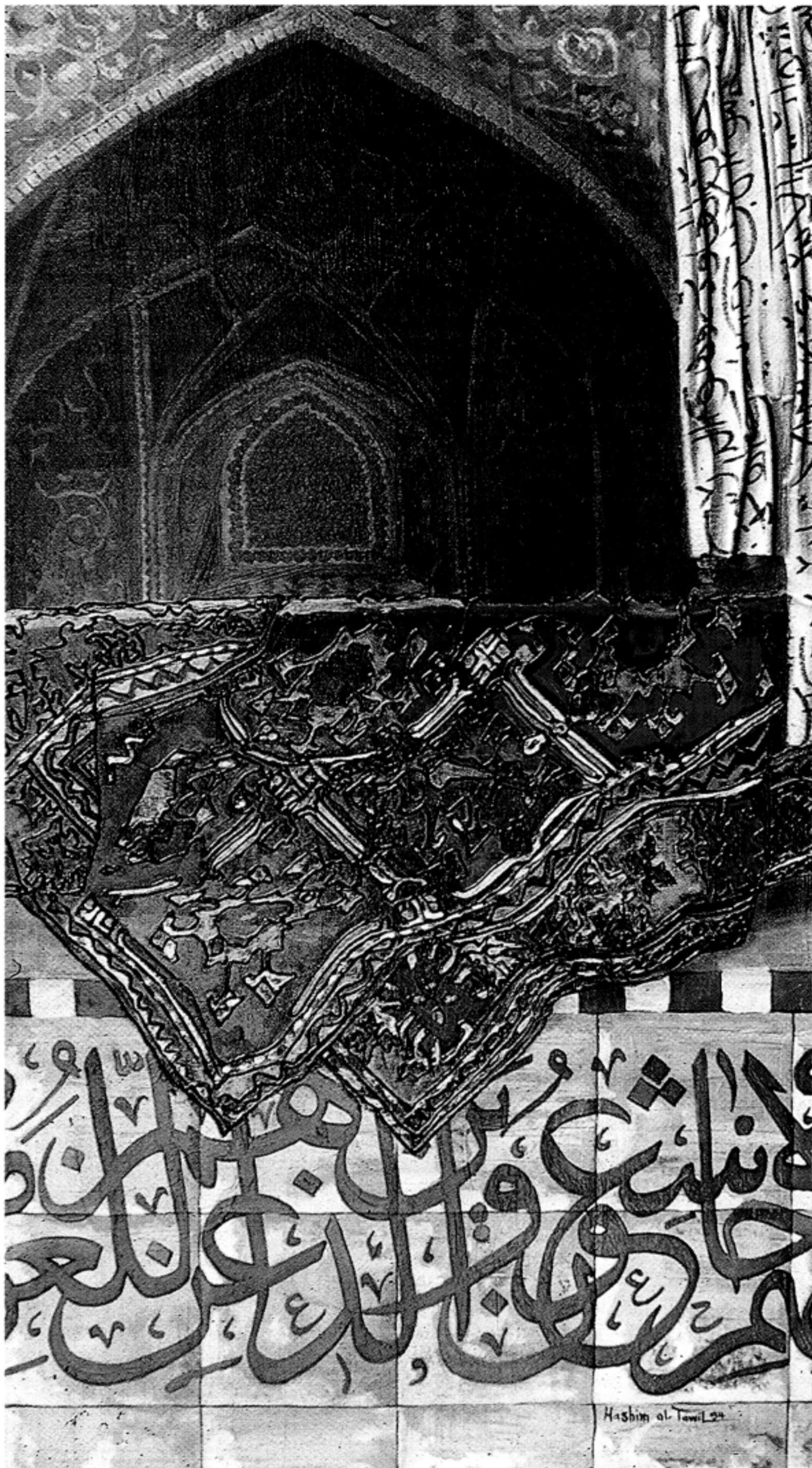
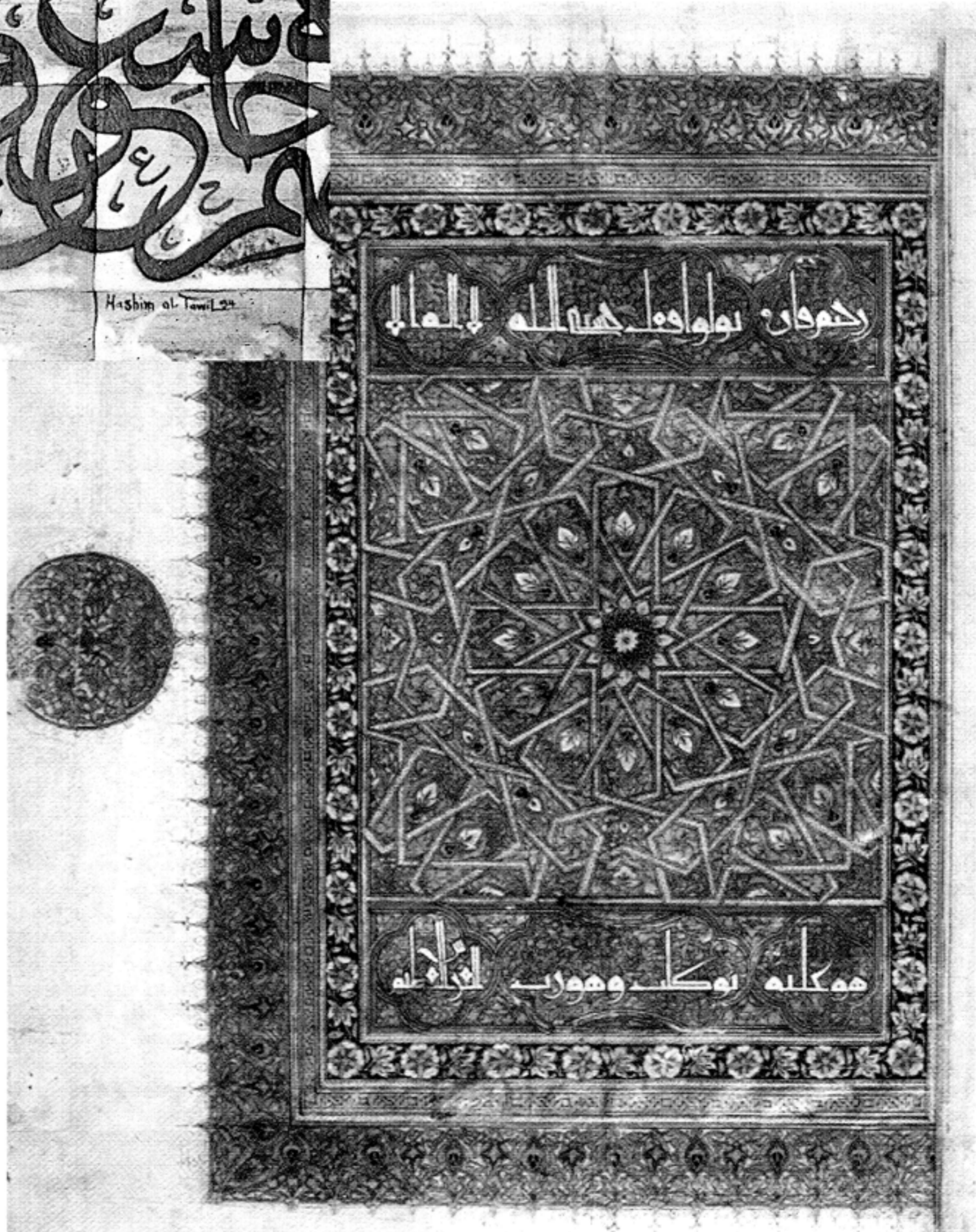


PLATE 4

Left: The contemporary Muslim artist and scholar Hashim al-Tawil demonstrates the rich heritage of Islamic art, architecture, calligraphy, and palette in an untitled work created in 1996.

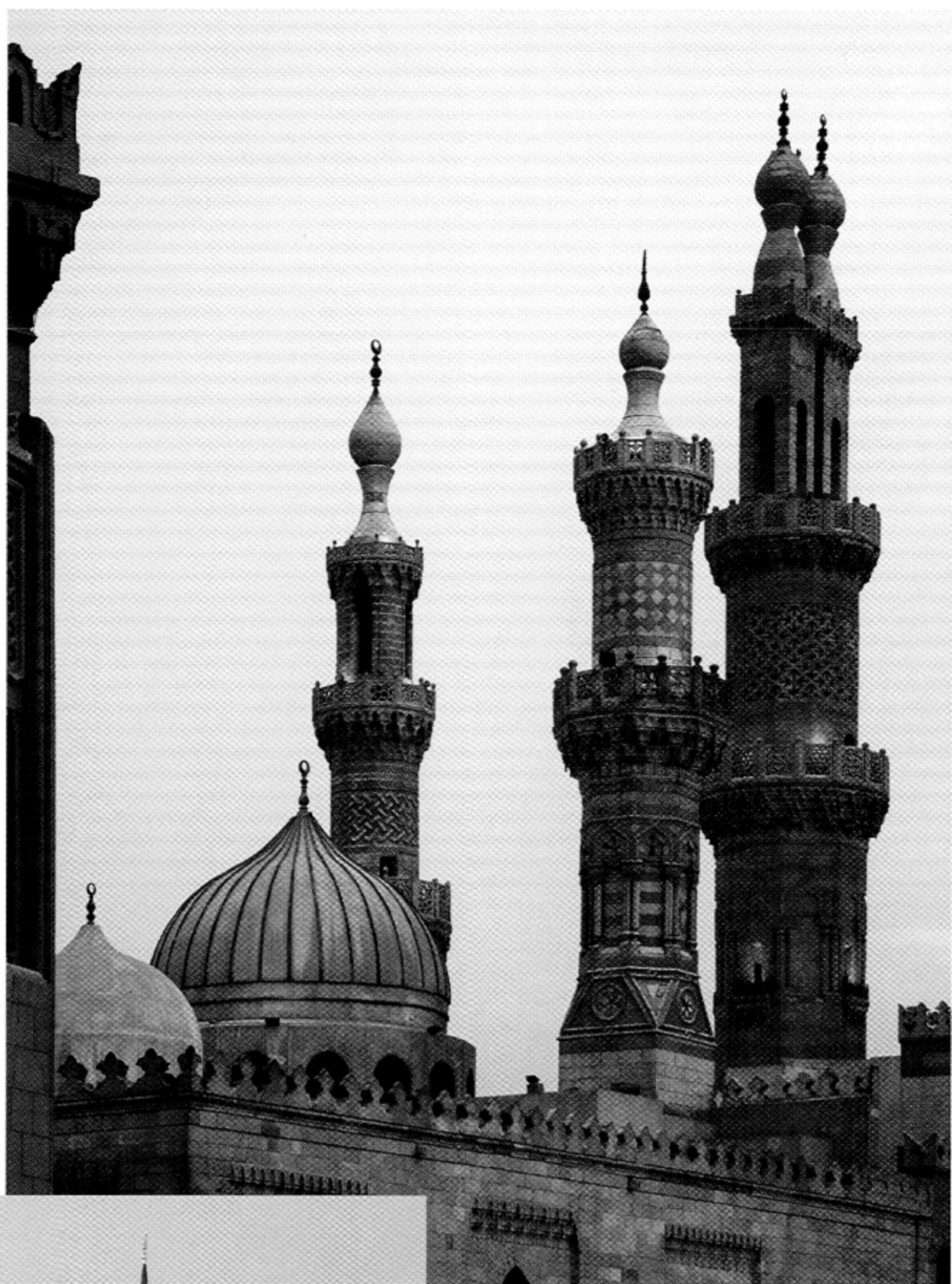
Below: Calligraphic embellishments of the Holy Qur'an visually call faithful Muslims to remember and obey its teachings, which are considered as direct revelations from God and are applicable to all aspects of both secular and spiritual life.



Courtesy Hashim al-Tawil

PLATE 5

Right: The minarets of Azhar (The Splendid) Mosque founded in Cairo, in 969/973 C.E. during the Fatemid dynasty. This mosque grew into one of the greatest centers of religious learning in the Islamic world and today is the center of the al-Azhar University. From such minarets, the call to prayer goes out to the faithful five times per day.



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Left: Mosque of Sultan Ahmed. More commonly known as the “Blue Mosque” (1609–1616, Ottoman Empire), it is located in Istanbul, Turkey. The pencil-shaped minarets and the domes, inspired by the great Eastern church of Hagia Sophia, mimic the style of the great Islamic-Ottoman architect Sinari, who is credited with designing and building over ninety mosques and other buildings during his long lifetime. His architectural imprint influenced all of the Ottoman empire and the entire Islamic world.

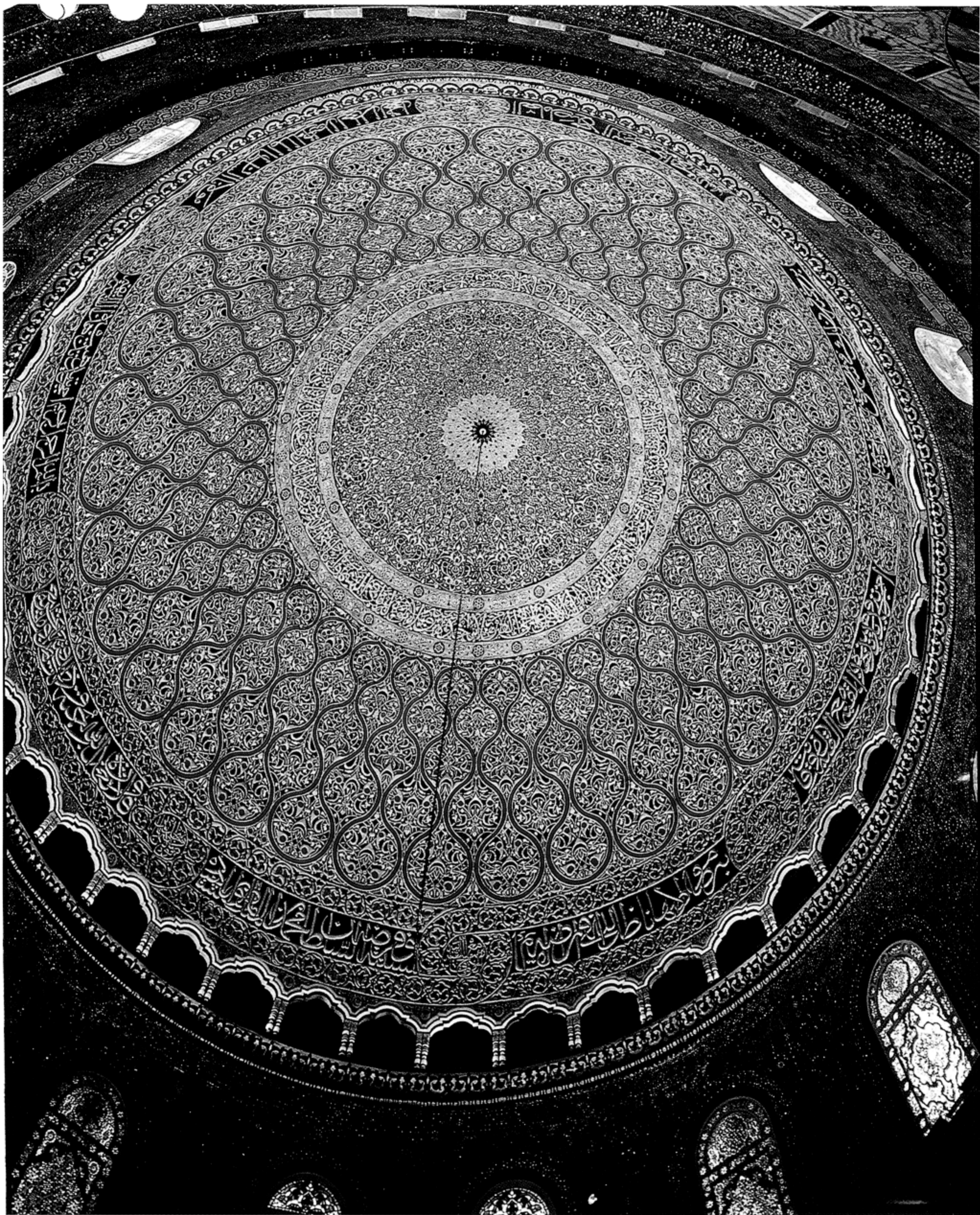


PLATE 6

Interior dome decoration of the Dome of the Rock, Jerusalem. Copyright Scala/Art Resource, N.Y.



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PLATE 7

Interior of a mosque in Istanbul, Turkey, photographed with a wide-angle lens. The play of light and shadow, color, and texture creates an environment that transcends earthly geometry and space.

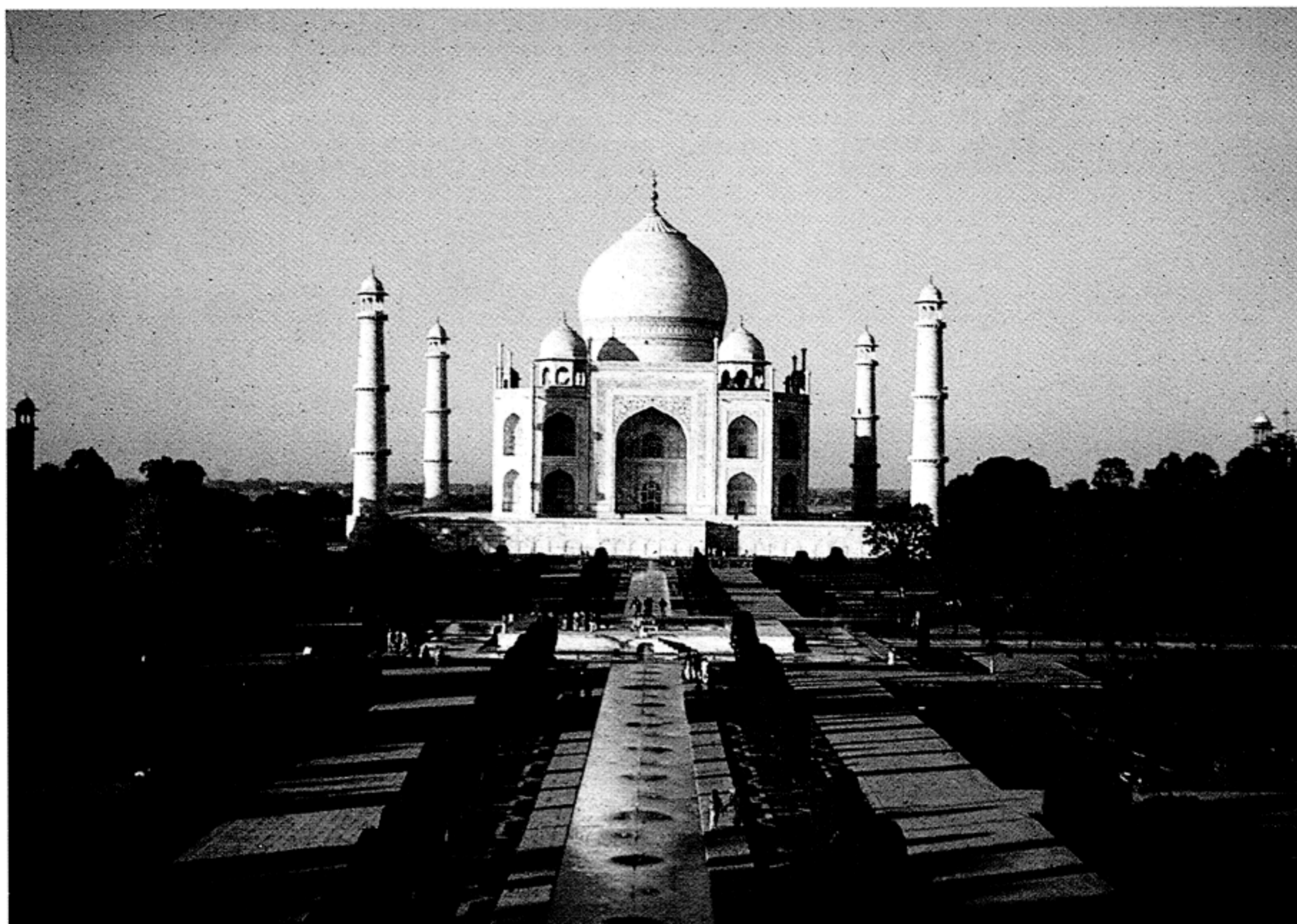
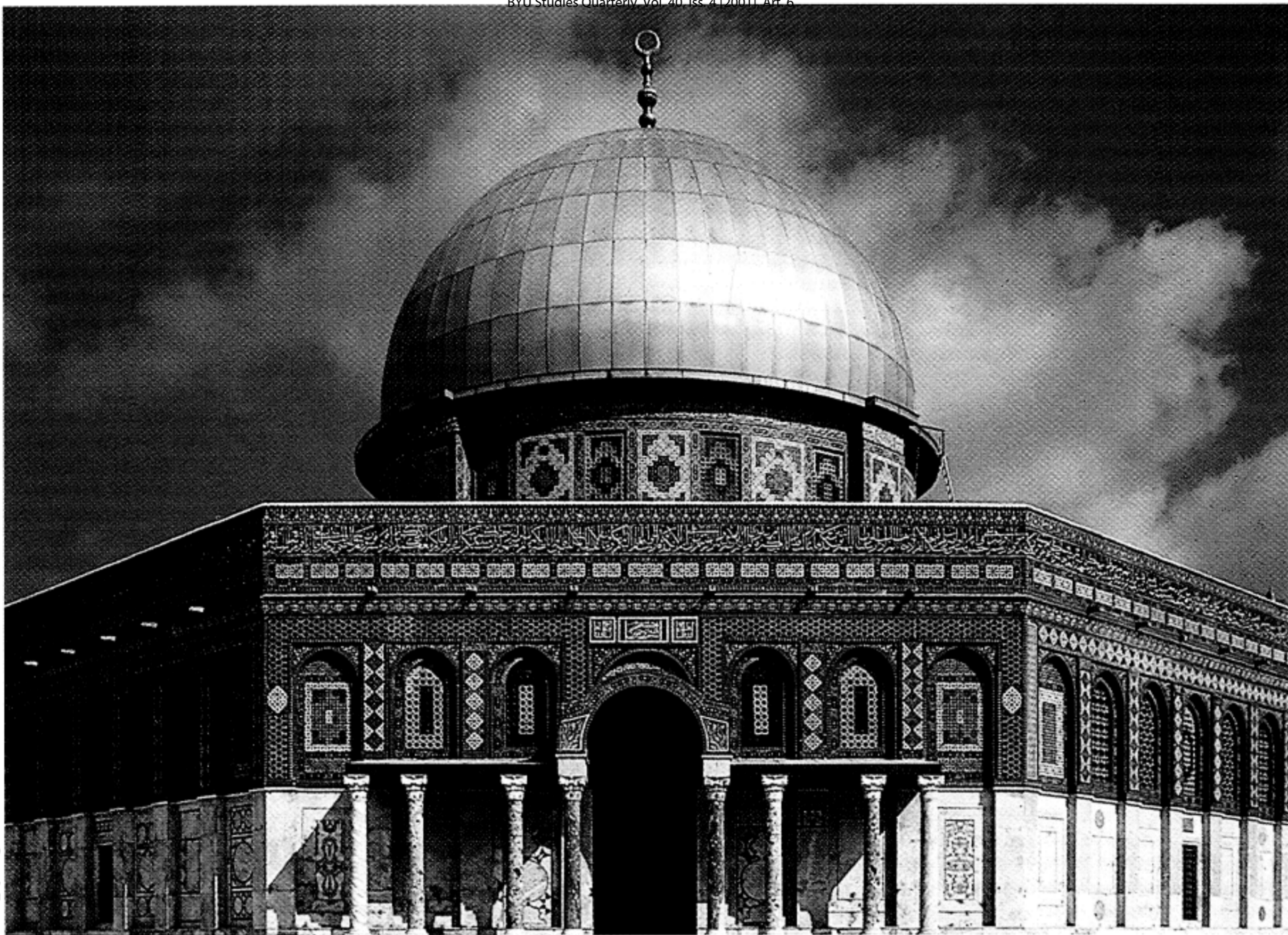


PLATE 8

The domes of Islam symbolize the cosmic and universal power of Allah. *Upper:* The Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem is the oldest major extant Islamic structure in the world and not only sits in the vicinity of the ancient Jewish Temple but covers a traditional site of Abraham's sacrifice. Muslims believe it is the spot from which Muhammad was carried in a vision of paradise. This locale is one of the holiest in Islam and symbolic of the Abrahamic covenant binding God to his human creation. *Lower:* The Taj Mahal looms in the dusk as the crown of a complex of gardens and pools that were possibly laid out to mimic Sufa concepts of paradise.