

# Between Ethics and Aesthetics: A Curation Method for Contemporary Islamic Paintings in Indonesia

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Received	Reviewed	Revised	Published
10.10.2023	28.11.2023	28.12.2023	31.12.2023

<https://doi.org/10.61275/ISVSej-2023-10-12-46>

## Abstract

This research explores the curation methods of contemporary Islamic painting in Indonesia, which lies in the midst of ethics and aesthetics. The emergence of this art as a phenomenon is rooted in Indonesia's post-colonial history and the establishment of academic art colleges with diverse cultural structures. The research creates a curation method that combines ethical and aesthetic elements in contemporary Indonesian Islamic painting.

To investigate this, a qualitative descriptive method approach was used. Qualitative data was collected through in-depth interviews with artists and Islamic art curators, focusing on their curatorial philosophies and strategies. At the same time, a descriptive approach was employed through curatorial and content analysis of contemporary Indonesian Islamic painting exhibitions.

The findings show that curators must balance the ethical foundation of creating art by Islamic law and embracing the evolving aesthetic concepts of contemporary painting. Curators use curatorial tools such as thematic arrangement, contextualization, and viewer segmentation to achieve this balance. Moreover, the curators emphasize the importance of curatorial reflexivity, in which the theme, form, and style of an artist's work are critically examined to ensure impartiality.

The paper concludes that each exhibition can be classified into three main themes: calligraphic, representational, and non-representational. These three main themes have been first used in the Fine Arts Exhibition of Istiqlal Festival II in 1995, which then have continued to evolve in terms of theme, form, and style according to the context in which the exhibition was held. This shows that the aesthetic value of a painting is constantly changing while still meeting the ethical boundaries of creation according to Islamic law. Thus, the method of curating contemporary Islamic paintings will continue to adapt to the conditions of the times.

**Keywords:** Ethics, Aesthetics, Curation Methods, Islamic Painting, Contemporary.

## Introduction

When discussing Islamic art, especially about Islamic painting, the first thing often raised related to the prohibition of depicting living beings in Islam (Yusuf, 2016; Mustofa, 2020). This is considered one of the inhibiting factors for the development of Islamic-themed paintings in

Indonesian painting. It is also related to the form in Islamic painting, which seems to have to constantly refer to the forms, symbols, and icons that characterize Islamic art in the classical period, such as arabesques, floral ornaments, geometric shapes, and the most vital feature is Arabic calligraphy (Burckhardt, 2009; Hana'a et al., 2023).

Thus, without these elements in a painting, it is considered not to characterize Islamic art. The slow development of Islamic painting is because artists and religious leaders see that a painting could not be more critical and still assume Islamic law that prohibits painting animate images. Thus, Islamic paintings come into being only because the understanding of art for art is still inherent in people's perceptions (Cahyana et al., 2020). The concept of art for art is considered to separate religion from art, while in Islamic rules, art is part of how people worship God. Indeed in Islam, every Muslim must bring benefits, but the rules of Sharia must still be carried out. Thus, in Islamic paintings, the ethical dimension based on Islamic law must be followed and become part of the aesthetics (Kim, 2018).

In Indonesia, Islamic painting is not well developed, even though the majority of the Indonesian population is Muslim, because many academic artists adhere to the principles of modern art, where they study Western modern art, which is entirely different from the traditional art that existed before. The principles of modern art emphasize novelty, originality, and the concept of autonomous art with the motto of art for sake of art (Comfort, 2011; Kharkhurin, 2014; Phung & Fendler, 2015). However, (Sudrajat et al, 2017) reveal that the concept of art for the sake of art is considered to separate religion from art, while in Islamic rules, art is part of the human way to worship God, making artists dissolve in the great wave of Western modernism. As a result, Muslim artists see the heritage of Islamic art as no longer relevant to the new trends happening today, even called the time of the death of Islamic art (Flood, 2012). Islamic art is finally seen as an artifact of the past, reminiscent of the golden age of Islam in the 13th to 18th centuries, characterized by arabesques, geometrics, miniatures, and calligraphy. In addition, Islamic art, which is always identified with the Arab region, has gained the attention of the historians only in terms of the area. In reality, each Muslim region has unique Islamic artworks and are not always the same as those in Arabia (Fakih & Bakhtiar, 2021).

Indonesian modern art has developed since the early 19th century. However, only in the late 20th century did the phenomenon of Islam become the central theme of several artists, such as Ahmad Sadali and A.D. Pirous (Hamzah, 2009; Cahyana et al., 2020). In developing contemporary Indonesian Islamic painting, Piliang (2022) states that Indonesia represents a unique blend of art, culture, religion, and traditional identity. This artistic expression has gained significant attention in Indonesia and globally recently. The emergence of contemporary Islamic painting in Indonesia is not a coincidence but is deeply rooted in the country's rich history, cultural diversity and religious traditions.

The rise of contemporary Islamic painting in Indonesia can be traced back to the post-colonial era of the late 19th century, marked by the advent of academic universities of fine arts. The birth of academic colleges of fine arts brought about the tendency of formalist abstract style among graduates until the resurgence of interest in Islamic art and culture (Yuliman & Kent, 2022). Indonesia, with its majority Muslim population, has a long history of Islamic art traditions, but these traditions have evolved in response to the changing socio-political and cultural dynamics (Bloembergen & Eickhoff, 2020). This evolution has given rise to a distinct genre of contemporary Islamic paintings that blend Islamic ethics and aesthetics, resulting in a trend toward modern artistic themes, forms, and styles (Hooker, 2022).

In recent decades, this unique form of artistic expression has become increasingly important not only as a means of cultural preservation but also as a means of cultural expression and communication (Blair & Bloom, 2003). Contemporary Islamic painting in Indonesia reflects a complex interplay between ethics and aesthetics, where artists grapple with questions of identity, spirituality, and contemporary issues while adhering to ethical principles embedded in Islamic art sharia (Hooker, 2022). The curation of these artworks becomes important in facilitating different understandings of this dynamic interaction.

This research explores how curators balance maintaining these paintings' ethical and aesthetic dimensions while ensuring that different elements of society accept them. To achieve this,

this research will examine the theoretical underpinnings of the curation of contemporary Islamic painting, highlighting the complexities and challenges curators face in presenting this form of Indonesian contemporary Islamic painting to the public. Thus, it can create a new curatorial method combining ethical elements based on the rules of art creation in Islamic law and aesthetics as a reflection of the tendency of modern artistic themes, forms, and styles in the following exhibition of contemporary Islamic painting in Indonesia.

This research aims to complete the contemporary Islamic paintings curation method, which can be a reference for artists, curators, and appreciators in identifying the content of Islamic values in painting. The objectives of this research are

1. To determine the correlation between ethical and aesthetic aspects of contemporary Islamic painting in Indonesia.
2. To find a curation method to identify Islamic values in contemporary Indonesian paintings.

In this way, we can create a new curation method that is able to connect ethical and aesthetic aspects as the primary identity of contemporary Islamic painting in Indonesia.

## **The Theoretical Basis**

### **Islamic Art**

The term Islamic Art, in the general sense, encompasses the visual arts produced in the Islamic world (Ettinghausen et al., 2003), while the Oxford Reference is art produced in the service of Islam, the monotheistic religion revealed to the Prophet Muhammad (d.632) in early 7th-century Arabia, which quickly spread throughout much of Eurasia and Africa to become one of the major world religions.<sup>1</sup> Concerning this definition, Islamic art products are very diverse because they include all the art products produced by the Muslim communities living under Islamic culture and following Islamic rules which can be called Islamic artworks.

The spread of Islam since the 7th century has reached a vast area. It has cultural diversity, and Islamic teachings have significantly influenced the form of the distinctive Islamic culture and the society (Bakry & Gunawan, 2018). Meanwhile, if we refer to the meaning of the words 'art' and 'Islamic', we will get a similar understanding; the word art in the Oxford Dictionary means the expression or application of human creative skill and imagination, typically in a visual form such as painting or sculpture, producing works to be appreciated primarily for their beauty or emotional power.<sup>2</sup> As the Cambridge Dictionary understands, the term Islamic means connected with the Muslim religion or with people or countries who follow it.<sup>3</sup> Based on the meaning of these two terms, it can be said that Islamic art is the expression or application of creative skills through works of art related to Muslim beliefs or to the people or countries that follow them.

The term art in Islamic art is aimed more at the field of fine arts produced in the golden age of Islam, including architecture, calligraphy, arabesque, illumination, miniature, textiles, glass art, and geometric ornaments that later became the hallmark of Islamic decoration (Dabbour, 2012; Bonner, 2017; Majeed, 2020; Hana'a et al., 2023). All these fields have developed in the Middle East region from the seventh to the end of the ninth century, which explains the geographical scope that includes many countries (Alashari et al., 2019). With a broad scope but not representative of all Islamic art trends in each region, Islamic art is often identified with Arabic art (Canby, 2005; Nurrohm & Setyorini, 2018). This situation cannot be separated from the writing of Islamic history, which is still influenced by the Eurocentric mindset of the Western historians, who divide art into two categories: pure art and applied art (Shalem, 2012). In Islamic societies, this categorization is not known, so a new perspective that is more contextual is needed to see Islamic art from different perspectives and different approaches (Blair & Bloom, 2003).

The issue of Islamic characteristics in modern art has always been debated in Indonesia and most Muslim-majority countries worldwide. The view of Western historians and Orientalists in the

<sup>1</sup><https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/acref/9780195309911.001.0001/acref-9780195309911-e-430;jsessionid=6865626CA4DA32AA7F65120113680B8F>, accessed 17 Mei 2023.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.lexico.com/definition/art>, accessed 19 Mei 2023

<sup>3</sup> <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/islamic>, accessed 19 Mei 2023

past have seen Islamic art as a product of applied art, so it could not be aligned with the works of fine art; in other words, applied products are considered not high value because they have a practical function, while works of fine art have high value because they are intended for aesthetic satisfaction of both the artist and the appreciator. Therefore, treatment of Islamic art by Western Islamic historians often focuses on classifying it in terms of media, technique, function, and the place where it has been produced (Algozaibi, 2019). This different view of the concept of art is a problem in explaining modern Islamic art from the perspective of Western modern art.

This view has begun to change in the last two decades, triggered by the arrival of Islamic art historians from Muslim-majority countries. Trained in the West, but critical of the West's view of Islamic culture, they have brought new ideas about Islamic art. Likewise, Western scholars have begun to change their perspective on Islamic art, primarily through curators who have presented it more contextually (Blair & Bloom, 2003), as seen in several art exhibitions in museums and galleries. The vast territory of Islam indeed produces a variety of works of art so that not all of them can be identified with Arabic art (Burckhardt, 2009); this change in perspective has led to different methods of presenting Islamic art so that viewers can understand and appreciate the context of the work.

The view of Islamic art cannot be separated from the exhibitions that display Islamic art. Art exhibitions introduce Islamic art to a broader public through galleries and museums. The curatorial method of exhibiting Islamic art by referring to the old way, which is considered incapable of providing new knowledge about Islamic art as a whole, is beginning to be abandoned. Islamic culture, which spreads from the Middle East to Southeast Asia, should produce highly diverse Islamic art because each region has its characteristics. In reality, many assumptions still limit Islamic art to works produced by the Muslim communities in the Middle East. Thus, in Islamic art exhibitions, the role of curators in curating Islamic art becomes crucial because it can affect the public perception of Islamic art itself. There are many misconceptions about Islamic art, and one of the reasons is the wrong curatorial process.

### **Ethics and Aesthetics of Islamic Art**

Islamic art expresses visual and conceptual elements. Its concept of beauty is based on philosophical ideas derived from the traditional Islamic philosophy and religious thought that have character and function (AZ, 2015). The history of Islamic culture recognizes aesthetics as 'ilmuljamal,' the science of beauty (Yustiono, 1993; Baslouh, 2020). Many stories in the Qur'an explicitly talk about beauty. Since the 19th century, the concept of beauty in Islamic art has been approached and studied from various perspectives without delving into its philosophical meaning. It is explored mainly through its historical context or examined in terms of its material and decorative qualities (Yustiono, 1993). Meanwhile, Miranda Risang Ayu talks about how the foundation of the aesthetic concept of Islamic art is based on Man's relationship with the Creator (Yustiono, 1993). This has led to a generalized understanding of traditional Islamic art and has influenced the creation of new contemporary Islamic artworks. As a result, contemporary artists distinguish two approaches when working with Islamic art. These concepts have been widely used during the formative period of Islamic art and have been discussed by different schools of philosophy. The three concepts studied are the concept of light, which reflects *NUR* or illumination; the concept of space, which reflects emptiness; and the concept of geometry, which reflects latency. The curation of Islamic painting cannot be separated from how to define Islamic painting as a first limitation in the curation process; the next stage is to identify the grouping of forms, themes, and painting styles.

The breath of Islam with a strong concept of monotheism is what underlies the works of Islamic art. The concept of monotheism in Islam is strictly guarded from the beginning to the end of the world. Tawheed should not be polluted with shirk, as was done in the Jahiliyah era. The concept of monotheism, which is 100% clean from impurities in the form of idols and other images, is emphasized in Islam. In the early days of Islam, it was very vulnerable for people who had just entered Islam to return to idol worship. Thus it was very much emphasized to keep away from any form that had the potential to affect Islamic monotheism negatively. The concept of Islamic aesthetics based on this monotheism has been maintained for 14 centuries until now in such a way that the concrete form of Islamic works of art takes the form of calligraphy, abstraction,

ornamentation, geometry, stylization, and others that stay away from human and animal forms (Hadi, 2000; Leaman, 2005).

Calligraphy is a very effective artwork to avoid depicting animate beings in the aesthetic expression of Islamic art. Calligraphy is considered necessary in studying Islamic aesthetics. Calligraphy is an Islamic art that has existed since the beginning of Islam until now. Many people claim that calligraphy is the highest art in Islam. Yahya (2001) and Al-Faruqi (1999) have said that calligraphy is an aesthetic provision by the ideas and imagination of the maker. Furthermore, calligraphy is an aesthetic expression. Thus neither the distribution nor the process of creation and aesthetic achievement can be imitated or reproduced by anyone (Yahya, 2001; Al-Faruqi, 1999). Jabbar Beg (1980) also argues that calligraphy is a branch of art that occupies a high place in Islamic culture. Nasr (1993) says that calligraphy has a special and unique position in Islam. Qardhawi (1998) shows that calligraphy is one of the works of Islamic art capable of enlightening civilization, unique and different from other civilizations. The Modern Art Catalogue of Istiqlal Festival Jakarta 1991 mentions that calligraphy is often called "the art of Islamic art." Calligraphy that is meant is a decorative textual art with high values in Islam, certainly not the calligraphy that is superficial. The calligraphy that is meant is calligraphy done with seriousness, and the content poured into the calligraphy is an expression of glorification of Allah Swt, not calligraphy that is superficial and empty of Islamic values.

The absence of standard boundaries for Islamic aesthetics provides an opportunity for the development of aesthetic expressions of Islamic art. On the other hand, ethical values in the Qur'an and Hadith must be a reference for Muslim artists in creating art. These ethical values include the rules or laws of Islamic law, which contain noble values, including ethical, moral, social, and other values (Kadhim et al., 2017). In Islam, displaying the aurat as an art object will undoubtedly collide with the rules derived from the Qur'an and Hadith. If the realized work of Islamic art does not contradict the Qur'an, Hadith, and norms, it is unlikely to be problematic from an ethical point of view.

While addressing the issue of Islamic aesthetics in the fine arts, some Islamic thinkers, such as Al Faruqi, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, and Endang Saefudin Anshari, have firmly stated that the primary source is the Qur'an and the Hadith. The influence of these two sources is visible in the works created by the artists. Al Faruqi has specialized in the manifestation of Islamic art in calligraphy, arabesque, geometry, ornamentation, and abstraction. The classification is, of course, with a basis, and the basis is monotheism; even calligraphy is said to be the highest Islamic art. However, Oliver Leaman is more modern; according to him, calligraphy is not the highest Islamic art. Calligraphy is limited to a series of forms with beauty value. For people who do not know the meaning behind the writing, they only see the visual side, so calligraphy is not the highest art.

Based on the above explanation, in defining Islamic art from the perspective of the Shari'ah, all views are almost the same, namely that Islamic art or art based on Islam must be based on ethics: the rules listed in the Qur'an and Hadith. As for form, there are two different views, the first emphasizing abstraction and calligraphy as the highest achievement of Islamic art. The second view is that Islamic art does not have to be fixed on abstraction and calligraphy but that Islamic aesthetic expression can be freely realized while still referring to the rules in Islamic teachings (Koç, 2013). In this research, the author places the first opinion in the context of Islamic art produced during the golden age of Islamic civilization. Meanwhile, the second opinion is more suitable to be applied to Islamic painting in modern times, which is not fixated on the visual idioms of classical Islamic art.

Contemporary Indonesian Islamic painting, which has diverse artistic tendencies, indicates that Islamic interpretations have multiple dimensions, are dynamic, and reflect the local culture (Azad, 2020). Islam and its visual manifestations always take on the qualities of the region where it is practiced, just as it contributes much to modifying indigenous cultures (Asher, 2015). The method of curation in the aesthetic migration of artists in the framework is one of the manifestations of the dynamism of contemporary Indonesian Islamic painting in the face of changing times.

In modern painting, novelty and originality are associated with an artist's ability to display a distinctive identity that is realized in a unique form in their paintings. To display this distinctive identity, artists return to cultural sources closely related to their lives, and Islamic culture is a way for Muslim artists to find their cultural identity (Weber, 2018). Modernism as the basis of their work

eventually promoted modernization in Islamic painting, where Islam was interpreted in various themes and depicted according to the principles of Western modern art (Harold, 2023). This also happens in contemporary Islamic painting in Indonesia, where Islam is interpreted into different themes and realized with different styles, techniques, and forms, resulting in very diverse Islamic paintings. The emergence of these diverse trends in Islamic painting has raised questions about the definition and boundaries of contemporary Islamic painting. The search for Islamic elements in paintings is the main problem to be solved, especially by curators, when curating contemporary paintings with Islamic content. Therefore, an appropriate curation method is needed to identify Islamic elements in paintings and then classify them according to their thematic and aesthetic tendencies.

### **Curating an Exhibition of Islamic Art**

An art exhibition is a node related to aesthetics, art history, and broader cultural issues. An exhibition represents a system that produces meaning through language and the objects on display (Hujatnikajennong, 2015). Thus, exhibitions of Islamic paintings in Indonesia are not only limited to artistic issues but are also related to the socio-cultural issues surrounding them and how the Muslim community views Islamic paintings. Exhibitions play an essential role in changing the view of Islamic art (Shatanawi, 2012). Through exhibitions in museums and galleries that display Islamic art from different parts of the world it is expected to provide new interpretations of Islamic art (Bier, 2017), which overcomes the public perception of Islamic art as monolithic, primitive, and complex to change (Reeve, 2018).

Therefore, there is a need for curatorial practices that can provide clear and complete information about Islamic art (Gonzalez, 2022), both past and present. The curation of contemporary Islamic art in Indonesia refers to a multifaceted theoretical framework that includes art theory, Islamic aesthetics, cultural studies, and curatorial practice. This framework recognizes the need to balance ethics and aesthetics harmoniously. Contemporary Islamic art should be firmly rooted in the Islamic tradition, emphasizing the aesthetic quality of art and the ethical dimension related to Islamic law, morality, and spirituality (Weber, 2018).

In this context, Islamic aesthetic theories, such as the concepts of "ihsan" (excellence) and "adab" (propriety) (Khan, 2019), play an essential role in guiding curatorial decisions. These principles guide curators in selecting artworks that demonstrate artistic excellence and adhere to the ethical and moral guidelines embedded in Islamic art (George, 2016). In addition, curators must consider their audiences' diverse cultural and religious backgrounds, requiring a careful negotiation between universality and specificity in the presentation of the painting.

Diversity is an inherent feature of Islamic art today. Islamic art is a mixture of different cultures and adapted differently without considering a single form of Islamic art formation (Shalem, 2012). Thus, framing Islamic art by limiting it to works of Islamic art from the Middle East is no longer relevant to artists who are bound by global secular practices that provide the freedom to interpret Islamic art in a more contextualized manner (Babaie, 2011), as can be seen in contemporary Islamic art exhibitions today. Islamic art exhibitions that are displayed chronologically and geographically and divided into several subdivisions, such as dynasties, materials, techniques, and themes, cause the narrative built in the exhibition to be very complex and confusing; for this reason, according to Grinner, framing theory is needed paired with Beverly Serrel's perspective on exhibition label so that it can show the "big idea" that wants to be conveyed through the exhibition (Grinnell, 2020).

In Indonesia, the curation of Islamic art began with the exhibition of contemporary Islamic painting at the Istiqlal Festival in 1995. By organizing this exhibition of contemporary Islamic paintings, the public could see firsthand contemporary Islamic paintings that were no longer limited to the framework of Islamic art from the Middle East. The diversity of themes, styles, and forms of Islamic painting, not all of which feature established Islamic art icons such as Arabic calligraphy, Arabesque, and Islamic geometric motifs. This was a new thing for people in Indonesia at the time, which led to confusion about what characterized contemporary Indonesian Islamic painting. As for Muslim curators and artists, the exhibition gave a new direction for future contemporary Islamic painting development. This can be seen in exhibitions with Islamic themes, such as Islam and

Identity 2009, Sign and After of Contemporary Islamic Art 2010, and Bayang 2011. the curatorial method in these exhibitions refers to the Islamic Contemporary Painting Exhibition at the Istiqlal Festival in identifying and curating artworks at the Islamic Painting Exhibition.

In short, this theoretical foundation serves as a reference that guides curators in navigating the complex terrain of contemporary Islamic painting in Indonesia. By understanding these complex theoretical ideas, curators can effectively curate exhibitions that respect the ethical principles of Islamic art and celebrate the aesthetic diversity and creativity of contemporary Islamic painters (Gonzales, 2022) in Indonesia. This interprets Islam in painting very broadly and depends on the social and cultural context surrounding it. Likewise, contemporary Islamic painting in Indonesia is very diverse, requiring a curatorial method to identify the Islamicity in each painting.

## Literature Review

This literature review critically examines previous research conducted by leading scholars in the field of contemporary Islamic painting and exhibition curation processes, with a focus on the specific local context of Indonesia. By discussing the findings of this research, it presents the current state of knowledge, highlights existing differences, and provides a context for the research's contribution to the evolving discourse on contemporary Islamic painting in Indonesia. For example, Rahadi (2021) responds to and defies existing aesthetic conventions by using various representational languages to challenge specific doctrines, authorities, and moral teachings. Rahadi treats the terms "modern" and "Islam" as propositions and challenges rather than as fixed but vague categories. Rahadi's analysis of Islam and Islamic religiosity in the historiography of modern and contemporary art in Indonesia and Southeast Asia challenges secular narratives in modern and contemporary art in Indonesia. Bakhtiar (2021) builds an eclectic aesthetic concept that can bridge the dichotomy between those who avoid figural forms and those who want them and link exotericism and esotericism in visual aesthetics. The concept of gradual beauty, in which natural forms are manifestations of God's limited beauty. Fakhri and Bakhtiar explain the shadow of God's closest beauty and become the primary reference for all artistic imaginations called ecliptic aesthetics. The concept of ecliptic aesthetics offers liberation of visual art creativity and an alternative in efforts to save the environment.

From these two perspectives, the development of contemporary Islamic painting in Indonesia represents a dynamic blend of art, culture, and religion. It manifests the complex interplay between ethics and aesthetics, reflecting the socio-cultural context in which it was created. Curation is essential in presenting and interpreting contemporary Islamic art. However, Cotter (2011), and Eastburn (2020) argue that curators mediate between artists, artworks, and appreciators, shaping narratives and discourses around art. In the context of contemporary Islamic painting in Indonesia, this mediation becomes particularly important due to the multifaceted nature of Islamic art, which often contains religious, cultural, and political dimensions.

Gonzales (2022) has explored the ethics of curating contemporary Islamic art in Indonesia. He emphasizes the responsibility of curators to ensure that artworks do not inadvertently offend religious sensibilities or cultural norms. This aligns with broader discussions about the representation of Islam in art and the need for sensitivity to local values. Ethics based on Islamic law must be respected and become part of the aesthetic. The aesthetic aspect is also essential in curating contemporary Islamic art. Necipoglu (2012) and Gonzalez (2018) argue that the visual language of Islamic art can be a powerful tool to transcend cultural and religious boundaries. In the Indonesian context, where diversity is celebrated, understanding the aesthetic preferences of different communities is crucial to creating an inclusive exhibition that can reach a broad audience.

To address the specific local context of Indonesia, researchers such as Sembodo et al (2021) have delved into the rich history of Islamic art in the archipelago. This research highlights the syncretic nature of Indonesian Islamic art, influenced by indigenous cultures, Hindu-Buddhist heritage, and global Islamic traditions. Understanding this context is crucial for curators who wish to present a comprehensive view of contemporary Islamic painting in Indonesia.

Although existing research has explained various aspects of curating contemporary Islamic painting in Indonesia, there are still some gaps. First, a more comprehensive study is needed to investigate the curation of Islamic art exhibitions that take ethical and aesthetic values as the primary

curatorial reference. Second, the impact of political and socio-economic factors on the curation and reception of Islamic art in Indonesia remains unexplored. Finally, a more in-depth study of curators' challenges navigating Indonesia's diverse cultural landscape is needed.

In conclusion, curating contemporary Islamic art in Indonesia is a complex endeavor that requires a balance between ethics and aesthetics. Previous research has provided valuable insights into the field, highlighting the importance of curatorial responsibility, cultural sensitivity, and a deep understanding of the local context. However, there is a knowledge gap that this research seeks to fill. By contributing to this ongoing discourse, the author hopes to provide a foundation for future research and further enrich the understanding of the complex relationship between ethics and aesthetics in curating contemporary Islamic art in Indonesia.

### Research Methodology

This research uses a qualitative descriptive approach within a case study method. Qualitative methods are used to collect data systematically. Helaluddin (in Ariffin et al., 2023) says that qualitative approaches are used to systematically understand complex phenomena and processes. Qualitative data were collected through in-depth interviews with Islamic art curators, focusing on their curatorial philosophies and strategies. They are Abdul Djalil Pirus (Senior Artist of Indonesian Abstract Painting and Calligraphy), Rizki A. Zaelani (Board of Curators of the National Gallery of Indonesia), and Zaenudin Ramli (Curator of Indonesian Islamic Art). The interviews also involved 5 Islamic artists and five young artists whose work orientation is Islamic painting.

A literature study was also used to uncover published ideas related to Islamic art. Further, the descriptive analysis is conducted on curatorial and content analysis of contemporary Indonesian Islamic painting exhibitions. Fitrah (2018) states that case studies are suitable for studies related to events, cultures, and human groups. Thus, the research involved a case study method.

The case studies of this research involved the exhibition of the Istiqlal Festival II Exhibition in 1995, the Islam and Identity Exhibition in 2009, the Sign and After of Contemporary Islamic Art Exhibition in 2010, and the Bayang Exhibition in 2011. Data analysis is carried out in several stages with the following scheme: data identification, data classification, data selection, and data analysis (Rachmadi et al., 2023).

Data identification, involved collection of verbal and visual data, both obtained through literature studies, observations, and interviews; the second stage is data classification, which is the selection or grouping of research data that have been identified according to the type and nature of the data; the third stage is data selection, which is the setting aside of data that are less relevant and do not contribute to the data needs of the subject. The fourth stage is data analysis by previously established theories, using textual and contextual analysis, which is then expressed as written work (Widyo et al., 2023).

### Findings

Prophet Muhammad SAW urged Muslims to strive to practice the attributes of God as a guide to living a pious life. Qur'an describes God as creating the universe with wonder and beauty to provide joy and pleasure for all the people. It can also inspire artists to express this beauty in their creations. Quran-inspired art testifies to the majesty and power of God, and the creation of such art is an act of worship. Therefore, when a person is affected and moved by the beauty of Islamic-inspired art to reflect the power of God the Creator, he will follow his commandments, apply them in daily life, and thus, in the process of creating works of art will apply and use the concepts of ethics and aesthetics (Muthahhari, 2002; Chirzin, 2020).

Farah & Fitriya, (2018) explains that in Islamic art, the concepts of ethics and aesthetics flow together and form a harmonious unity that reflects religious and moral principles. Thus, in creating works of art, artists must uphold the value of Ihsan, a high level of dedication and commitment to achieve perfection. Moreover, beauty in art refers not only to the visual aspect but also the values of goodness and morality based on Islam. Similarly, Rafles (2021) and Redjeki (2022) point out that artists incorporate visual beauty in creating works of art and convey profound ethical and moral messages. Islamic art emphasizes goodness, beauty, and submission to Islamic



values. Art is considered a spiritual and creative expression that can inspire, teach, and remind people of religious and moral values.

Islamic art is also a platform for spiritual expression, allowing artists to reflect on religious meanings and reverence for God's creation (Wuthnow, 2001; Burckhardt, 2009; Shaw, 2019). However, when developing artwork, artists must adhere to strict ethical guidelines in Islam, avoiding the creation of images of the Prophet Muhammad or elements that contradict the religious teachings. Despite the strict guidelines, artists still have the space to express themselves personally through their art and present works that reflect their vision and understanding of Islam (George, 2010).

In addition, aesthetic concepts in Islamic art make extensive use of the form of light (Nur), which is used to convey spiritual enlightenment, where the form of light often symbolizes the knowledge and presence of God. According to Othman (2018), the concept of space, which reflects emptiness and simplicity, is also used to create works that honor the principles of submission and modesty in Islam. Finally, the use of geometry in Islamic art reflects the potential in the universe and emphasizes order and structure in God's creation. Thus, Islamic art creates works that integrate ethical values, beauty, spiritual expression, and conceptual elements such as light, space, and geometry to create morally meaningful and profound works of art within the framework of Islamic teachings.

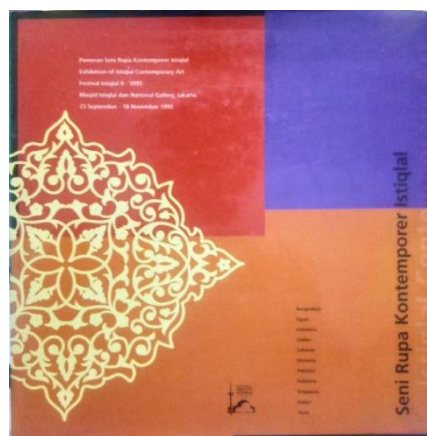
Hooker (2022) explains that the concept of beauty in Islam is familiar in the context of the Prophet Muhammad's saying, "God is beautiful and loves beauty," and its counterpart, "God is good and loves goodness. In Islam, "beauty" and "goodness" are two of the "99 names of God" that Muslims use to describe the attributes and qualities of God. They are qualities that are also "the guiding principles of Islamic work ethic, piety, and good moral behavior."

The concept of beauty in Islam is also consistently associated with goodness. Thus, a beautiful painting contains a message of goodness. Beauty in Islam is reflected in the concept of beauty in Arabic culture called *Al Jamaal*, which, from the perspective of religion and art, can harmonize aspects of Islam's rules with beauty. Through the concept of *Al Jamaal*, spiritual, ethical, and personal aspects of expressions become a unity that must be reflected in Islamic art (Man, 2016). Therefore, when modern art developed among the Muslim artists, they faced the concept of autonomous art unrelated to aspects outside of art itself. The concept of art for art's sake places art only as an expression of aesthetic beauty free from ethical values, such as religion (Daud, 2013).

According to Hujatnikajennong (2015), the function of art in the pre-modern West, which served the church or the palace, after the Enlightenment period broke away from the support of the church and the palace, made art creation free from the values set by the patron in order for it to be autonomous. The concept of modern art has become more dominant among the Muslim artists after the West dominated civilization through the colonization of eastern territories. However, modern art education in non-Western countries have made modernism the only reference for beauty centered on Western modern art. This condition continued from the 19th century until the end of the 20th century (Supangkat, 2022).

Existence of the concept of modern art, which has initially made it difficult for Islamic identity to be represented in modern paintings, has been revealed at the end of the 1970s when modern paintings with Islamic themes began to appear. Modern art has encouraged Muslim artists to show new creativity in depicting Islamic identity. Arabic calligraphy is not only interpreted as an art of beautiful writing but also becomes a formal element that can be used as part of the elements in painting. Indeed, as Naef (2013) shows the tendency for Islamic identity to appear in modern paintings has become stronger in the Muslim countries in the 1990s.

Nevertheless, in Indonesia, the Western modern art education that had taken place since the 1950s has produced Muslim artists who could display Islamic identity through modern paintings in the 1970s. The tendency to display Islamic identity has become stronger, culminating in holding art exhibitions at the Istiqlal Festival in 1991 and 1995. The Islamic Art Exhibition at the Istiqlal Festival is thus essential in the development of contemporary Islamic painting in Indonesia because this exhibition proves that Islamic identity can be present in the context of contemporary art.



**Fig. 1:** Festival Istiqlal II Exhibition Catalog Cover

Source: Authors

## Ethical and Aesthetic Aspects

### Exhibition of Contemporary Indonesian Islamic Painting 1995

According to Quran, the primary duty of a Muslim is to worship Allah in every aspect of his life; there is no single activity of a Muslim that is not in the context of worship. To be considered part of worship, any life activity must comply with every rule (sharia) listed in the Qur'an and Hadith. The two sources of Islamic law are the legal basis for Muslims in their lives (Hooker, 2022). Likewise, a Muslim artist must abide by Islamic law in his or her artistic practice. This ethical concept has been then adopted by the curatorial team of the Istiqlal Festival exhibition, which has limited the ethical aspect of the development of Islamic art. On the other hand, the boundlessness in the development of Islamic art is aimed at its characteristics, which provides the possibility of openness, diversity, innovation, and responsiveness to various changes of the times.

Based on these ethical and aesthetic aspects, the curatorial team provides a limitation that Islamic art is a work of art produced by the Muslim artists who obey the rules of Islam. The form of obedience is reflected in the works: which are Islamic values. In Islam, the source of these values is found in the Quran and Hadith, and many interpretations have the same validity (Hakim et al., 2018; Supriyatno et al., 2021). Thus, a Muslim artist who consistently applies Islamic teachings in his or her life will infuse his or her artwork with Islamic identity.

However, ethical restrictions do not mean that Muslim artists are limited in their work, but rather encourage them to interpret Islamic characteristics and values in unlimited ways in aesthetic contexts (Maulana et al., 2015). The diversity of forms, themes, and styles displayed in the exhibition of contemporary Islamic paintings indicates that Muslim artists can still adhere to Islamic teachings in their artistic activities. As in the work of A.D. Pirous (Figure 2), which displays the verse of the Quran related to the power that belongs only to God, in the context of the painting, it is shown to criticize the Indonesian rulers at that time who abused power for personal gain. Through this painting, A.D. Pirous reminds the ruler through his painting symbolically, so that the message conveyed does not offend the ruler (George, 2012).



**Fig. 2:** Artist A.D. Pirous' calligraphy painting titled "Mandate to the Leader" at the 1995 Istiqlal II Festival Exhibition  
Source: Authors



**Fig. 3:** Artist Barli Sasmitawinata's representational painting titled "Wukuf di Arafah" at the 1995 Istiqlal II Festival Exhibition  
Source: Authors



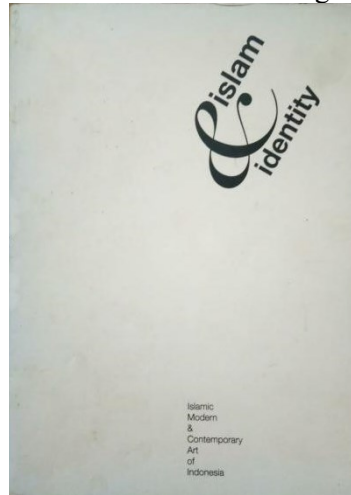
**Fig. 4:** Artist Sunaryo's non-representational painting titled "Wukuf" at the 1995 Istiqlal II Festival Exhibition  
Source: Authors

According to curation method on Islamic painting contemporary exhibition at Festival Istiqlal, curatorial team uses a thematic approach that includes calligraphic themes, representational themes, and non-representational themes. The Arabic Calligraphy theme includes paintings that present Arabic calligraphy as a retelling of verses (the words of Allah from the Qur'an) or hadith, as well as Sufi expressions (Figure 2). The presence of calligraphy is shown independently and combines various possibilities with aesthetic considerations. In representational paintings, natural forms of nature and its animals (anthropomorphic, zoomorphic, and biomorphic), as well as artificial objects, are presented in certain situations, conditions, and events with appearances as a style of expression and various media and techniques (Figure 3). Meanwhile, the non-representational theme includes paintings that do not represent the natural form of Nature and its factors. The forms of non-representational works are generally expressions of manifestations of natural forms that undergo a

deepening process of meaning content (abstraction) and aesthetic disclosure (Figure 4). The presence of abstraction elements can be in the form of symbolic (symbolic), internal expression (expression), and completely mujarad (abstract).

### Islam & Identity Exhibition 2009

In 2009, an exhibition of Islamic paintings titled "Islam and Identity" Islamic Modern & Contemporary Art of Indonesia was held at Bazaar Art I 2009. The curatorial concept of this exhibition is that the exhibited works illustrate the journey of contemporary Islamic painting from the works of Ahmad Sadali in the 70s to the works of young artists. Through this exhibition, the curator, in the introduction to the curation, makes the boundaries of Islamic art not limited to divinity but extend to the values of social good, culture, and others. As further explained by Zaenudin Ramli in the exhibition catalog 'Islam and Identity-Islamic Modern and Contemporary Art of Indonesia,' 2009, Islamic art is not limited to forms that contain only aspects of Islamic religiosity, but how Islamic values are represented in works of art. Here, Islamic values are understood as symbolic religious rituals and as the identity of a way of life in context. Based on the Zaenudin Ramli's explanation in this exhibition, the ethical aspect of obedience to Islamic teachings is placed as an identity and a way of life to represent it in the work according to the era's circumstances.



**Fig. 5:** Islam & Identity Exhibition Catalog Cover

Source: Authors

This exhibition presents a variety of Islamic artworks. Here, Islam is interpreted in a broader sense, associated with the socio-political phenomena surrounding it. The development of Islamic art in Indonesia cannot be separated from this. Hasanah et al (2023) said that the development of modern and contemporary Islamic art in Indonesia cannot be separated from the process of Islamization and the growth of Islamic culture in Indonesia. Commenting on the diversity of the works on display, Zaenudin Ramli as the curator of this exhibition, explained that in looking at Islamic art, we must move away from the Orientalist view that limits Islamic art to calligraphy, miniature painting, ceramics, carpets, and various ornamental and geometric designs. In this way, Muslim artists can free themselves from Western stereotypes and promote the birth of Islamic art in the present context.

This view is the basis for viewing the works in this exhibition, especially regarding the thematic tendencies presented. The terms 'modern' and 'contemporary' attached to the exhibition's title can be a way of understanding the work on display today. The paintings on display can be divided into two categories based on their thematic tendencies: works with calligraphy and non-calligraphy. The non-calligraphic works on display can be divided into two major groups: representative works, which depict objects, and non-representative works, which do not depict objects that imitate those in Nature, so they can be called abstract works. When viewed based on the objects depicted, representative works can be figurative works, which depict figures as objects, or non-figurative works, which are paintings that do not depict figures, either human or other living

things, in their paintings.

### **Sign and After Contemporary Islamic Art Exhibition 2010**

An exciting exhibition in 2010 was the "Sign and After Contemporary Islamic Art" held at Lawangwangi, Bandung. This exhibition had a wide range of participants. It came with various interpretations of "Islam," inseparable from the curator's desire to show the critical relationship between aspects of art creation and consciousness with matters of faith (Islam). The strength of expression of each work in this exhibition is the manifestation of each form of aesthetic awareness of the artists, which then enacts a process of self-development and reflection. The works displayed in this exhibition are plural, sharing the possibility of interpretation presented by the artists with various media; the old characteristics of Islamic art and novelty are in unity in this exhibition.



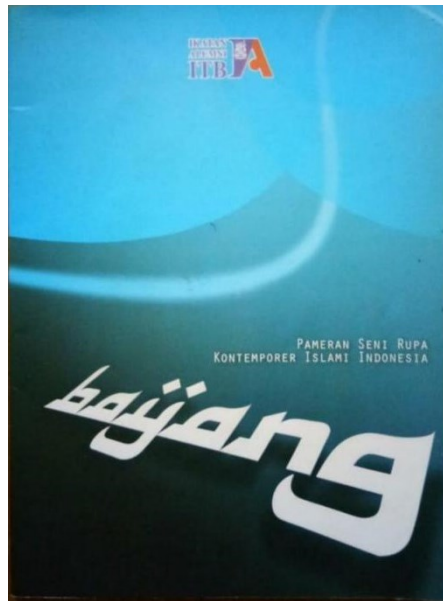
**Fig. 6:** *Sign & After Contemporary Islamic Art* Exhibition Catalog Cover  
Source: Authors

In this exhibition, the exhibited artworks are based on different artistic approaches of the artists, the first of which states the Quran as an iconography and artistic source, the second is artworks that show abstract forms, the third is artworks that use the tendency of form abstraction, and the fourth is artworks that show the tendency of narrative and figurative works. The first group of works visually shows the Quran as an iconography and artistic source through Arabic calligraphy as the main subject of the painting. In calligraphic paintings, each painter uses calligraphy as the central element, which gives an idea of the tendency of calligraphic paintings that are developing today. This is certainly different from the art of calligraphy as a form of beautiful writing, where adherence to rules is the main requirement in judging the beauty of the calligraphy created. Meanwhile, in paintings that use calligraphy as a source of artistic ideas, painters have unlimited freedom to explore calligraphic forms in various ways, and the element of legibility is not the main thing.

In the second group, the breath of Islam is presented through abstract forms that are then composed to create an impression of order, tranquility, and complexity that indirectly gives a spiritual impression. This is similar to modern abstract painters, using various visual elements to express their inner moods. The third group is works depicting abstractions of natural forms, including figurative ones. The fourth group is works that show narrative style and figurative tendencies. For many, figurative and narrative style works are often considered to move away from the Islamic nature of artistic expression. This assumption is related to the pretext of the prohibition of depicting living beings. This exhibition presents works with narrative style and figurative tendencies while adhering to the ethical rules of Islamic teachings so that they do not contradict Islamic law regarding appearance. This narrative style depiction is one of the characteristics of Islamic painting in the classical period, as seen in the miniature paintings of book illustrations.

### Bayang Exhibition

Next was an exhibition of contemporary Indonesian Islamic art titled "Bayang," (Figure 7) organized by ITB Alumni and INISAF Foundation at the National Gallery from July 27 to August 14, 2011, curated by Rizki A. Zaelani and A. Rikrik Kusmara. The exhibition included more than 200 works in the form of two-dimensional and three-dimensional installations or works made through digital technology. They represent the faces of contemporary Islamic art in Indonesia. Islam is a human belief system that maintains a relevant life from the past to the present. The development of Islamic art today can be understood in the context of increasingly visual cultural changes. This exhibition represents various trends in contemporary Indonesian Islamic art after the Istiqlal Festival at 1995.



**Fig. 7:** Bayang Exhibition Catalog Cover  
Source: Authors

The curatorial concept of contemporary Indonesian Islamic art titled “Bayang” exhibition is based on the opinion of a prominent scholar, Muhammad Quthb, who stated that Islamic art is an expression of the beauty of being and the Islamic perspective on nature, life, and human beings that leads to a perfect meeting between truth and beauty. Based on this opinion, the ethical and aesthetic aspects are the basis for the curation of this exhibition. The ethical aspect is reflected in the truth of Islamic law, while the aesthetic aspect is reflected in the context of beauty. The beauty that still prioritizes the element of truth makes the exhibited works have a variety of high aesthetic aspects. However, everything is still presented by the rules of Islamic teachings. Based on Muhammad Quthb's explanation as the basis of curatorial thinking, in order to determine the types of works to be displayed, the curator classifies them into three areas of rules, which is a tribute to the illuminations that give an essential role to the aspects: imagination, intuition, and imitation in the framework of work creation (Blair & Bloom, 2003; Bier, 2017).

With this curatorial concept, the works on display become very diverse and open to new interpretations of Islam represented in works of art. According to Zaenudin Ramli, the artists demonstrated the curatorial concept of "shadow" through a series of artworks. Aesthetic awareness encompasses the beliefs that place the role of artistic expression in the continuity of social and cultural life. In this kind of reflective awareness, the realm of human interests, in which there is an oppositional situation between the issue of "the self," the specific (individual) with the value (together) that applies universally, can be reconciled and lived as one. If examined from the insight of Islamic ideology, such unification is necessary where the highest foundation of aesthetic

manifestation and beauty is worship and belief in surrendering to Allah SWT's greatness, glory, and beauty.

## Discussion

The exhibition of contemporary Islamic painting in Indonesia, which has begun with the Istiqlal Festival exhibition in 1995, provides a basis for the concept of curation in subsequent exhibitions. Problems regarding the boundaries of Islamic painting, which still refer to Western perspectives, has begun to be replaced by a curatorial concept emphasizing ethical, aesthetic, and contextual aspects. The ethical concept, which refers to the rules outlined in Islamic teachings, becomes the basis for determining whether the exhibited works are by Islamic rules. When the ethical aspects are fulfilled, the artists can interpret Islamic values in their works (Hooker, 2022). The concept of limitations and boundlessness in the Istiqlal Festival gives a new perception in the curation of Islamic painting in the future. The restriction that Muslim artists produce Islamic art becomes a reference for curators in determining the artists who will display works in Islamic art exhibitions. Similarly, the ethical aspects related to adherence to Islamic teachings were never clearly written but became one of the bases for curators in curating Islamic artworks to be exhibited.

According to Ramli (2013), in the Istiqlal Festival exhibition, the ethical aspect was not explicitly written but implicitly expressed in the advice about the importance of Islamic values in creating artwork. Similarly, the post-Istiqlal exhibition did not expressly state that Islamic painting must follow Islamic rules (Cahyana, 2020). The understanding that Islamic painting is art that must artistically conform to the ethical values outlined in Islamic teachings seems to have become an "unwritten rule" for curators in curating Islamic painting today. To emphasize that this rule is the basis for determining whether a work has Islamic values, curators in some exhibitions display quotations from the writings of Islamic scholars or thinkers to support this view. This is an interesting phenomenon because the ethical field does not seem to be part of the curator's task in determining the Islamic value of the curated works. This situation affects the layman, who still sees that contemporary Islamic painting does not have a distinctive identity or does not reflect the Islamic worldview of the artist (Pirous, 2003). Thus, it is a challenge for curators to emphasize that ethical aspects are an integral part of the curatorial process of Islamic painting today.

If the ethical aspect refers to limitations, the aesthetic element refers to infinity (Leaman, 2023). In this aesthetic aspect, artists have complete freedom to interpret Islamic values in the visual elements of the painting (Ramli, 2017). According to Cahyana (2020), this freedom resulted in various manifestations, themes, forms, and styles in contemporary Indonesian Islamic painting in the 2000s. Different aesthetic tendencies that emerged in contemporary Indonesian painting in the 2000s became a reference for Muslim artists in creating their Islamic painting works, so that the works presented are relatively the same in appearance, as well as the themes that are given almost the same, this is because the boundaries of Islamic painting formulated by curators in contemporary Islamic painting exhibitions, free artists to interpret Islamic values in various aspects of life (Isnaini & Yustiono, 2012). This certainly makes the Islamic characteristics or identity more fused with contemporary painting, where the idioms used become the same (George, 2012).

The expansion of the interpretation of Islamic values and the freedom to use visual idioms that are not bound to the established expressions of Islamic art has created a new spirit to present Islam in different ways (Hana'a et al., 2023). Consequently, Muslim artists must present artworks representing Islamic identity through unique idioms. The search for a unique Islamic identity in each region encourages Muslim artists to revisit the culture and environment in which they live. The spread of Islam to the different areas of the world did not make the existing culture the same; what happened was that each part developed Islamic culture according to the region's distinctive character. Similarly, Muslim artists, today reflect on their culture and environment to present an Islamic visual language appropriate to their time's conditions. Contextuality is an essential word in addressing the current trend of contemporary Islamic painting in Indonesia (Babaie, 2011).

Contextuality in contemporary Indonesian Islamic painting is not limited to the objects in the picture but emphasizes the thematic aspects. Islamic values are interpreted in themes related to spirituality, religiosity, social issues, environmental issues, and various problems that arise in the present. Thus, today's Islamic art is not only concerned with artistic topics identical to classical

Islamic art but instead raises a new trend, which is how various issues or problems that arise in society are seen from the perspective of Islamic values.

## Conclusions

This paper concludes that the development of contemporary Islamic painting in Indonesia in the 2000s show a shift in Muslim artists' interpretation of Islamic values in their works. As data reveals, Muslim artists observations of the socio-cultural phenomena around them have inspired them to develop themes related to Islam. The establishment of Islamic study centers, Islamic educational institutions, and the emergence of a growing number of young Islamic intellectuals in the 2000s, including young preachers, have given the Muslim artists a new awareness to represent Islam in their works.

Thus, Islamic paintings are no longer limited to calligraphy, arabesques, or geometric shapes but has expanded to include all stylistic, technical, and thematic trends in contemporary Indonesian art. This can be seen in exhibitions entitled Contemporary Islamic Painting in the 2000s. On the one hand, this phenomenon marks the revival of a new style of Islamic art. On the other hand, it marks the end of Islamic art because artistic identity is no longer the basis for creating Islamic paintings today. In this condition, the role of the curator has become more explicit in describing the ethical aspects of contemporary Islamic painting. Meanwhile, the aesthetic element can be freely developed but still subject to the moral part. The concept of goodness and beauty is the basis for the development of Islamic painting today, which will continue to follow the times. However, the value of goodness and beauty will still underlie every work of Islamic artwork.

This paper examined ways to curate Islamic painting contextually by connecting ethical and aesthetic aspects so that it can be used as a reference for understanding contemporary Islamic art in Indonesia today. From the results of the analysis of several Islamic art exhibitions from 1995 to 2016, it is concluded that the ethical aspect has not been declared explicitly in every exhibition held, even though it has played an essential role in determining the Islamic content in paintings. This proves that Islamic values can always be interpreted in contemporary Islamic paintings in Indonesia in accordance with the current developments.

Meanwhile, in the view of ordinary people, Islamic painting is identical to classical Islamic painting from the Middle East; this makes it difficult for people to see Islamic identity in contemporary works of painting today. This perception is also supported by the small number of exhibitions of Islamic art by Indonesian artists, which ultimately impacts the low level of discourse regarding Contemporary Islamic painting in Indonesia.

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