Sacred Landscapes: Visual Theology

by

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ABSTRACT

My practice emerges from a personal and spiritual imperative: a need to bridge the gap between Islamic philosophy of virtues and vices into engaging visual expressions. The project translates textual Islamic teachings on *'ilm al-akhlaq* (علم الأخلاق | knowledge of inner character), drawn from the Qur'an, prophetic narrations, and scholarly classical teachings into illustrative paintings. It draws formal strategies from Islamic biomorphic ornamentation, Medieval painting and illuminated and illustrated manuscripts and Persian miniature painting, while developing a contemporary visual language grounded in Islamic pedagogy.

The work aims to create visual entry points into Islamic moral philosophy and sacred knowledge, with particular attention given to neurodivergent ways of visual learning and perceiving. My practice treats illustration as a site where spiritual and moral knowledge becomes visually legible. It proposes that theological learning is not only rational but also intuitive and affective, investigating how landscape, ornament, pattern, colour logic, symbolism, nature, and composition can function as modes of transcendental comprehension, reflection, and meditation. The studio process operates through iterative cycles moving from classifications and diagrams to digital illustration, drawing, and painting, alongside process documentation and reflective writing.

Key Terms

Visual Theology, Islamic Virtues and Vices, *'ilm al-akhlaq* (علم الأخلاق | knowledge of inner character), *Mithāl* (مِثال | parable) and the Imaginal Realm, Islamic Biomorphic Ornamentation, Persian Miniature, Medieval Painting and Illuminated Manuscripts, Pictorial Language, *Dhikr* (ذِكْر | remembrance) and *Tadabbur* (تَدَبُّر | reflection)

DEVOTION

بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَـٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ
In the Name of Allah—the Most Compassionate, Most Merciful.

ٱلْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ رَبِّ ٱلْعَـٰلَمِينَ
All praise is for Allah—Lord of all worlds,

ٱلرَّحْمَـٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ
the Most Compassionate, Most Merciful,

مَـٰلِكِ يَوْمِ ٱلدِّينِ
Master of the Day of Judgment.

إِيَّاكَ نَعْبُدُ وَإِيَّاكَ نَسْتَعِينُ
You ˹alone˺ we worship and You ˹alone˺ we ask for help.

ٱهْدِنَا ٱلصِّرَ�۟طَ ٱلْمُسْتَقِيمَ
Guide us along the Straight Path,

صِرَٰطَ ٱلَّذِينَ أَنْعَمْتَ عَلَيْهِمْ غَيْرِ ٱلْمَغْضُوبِ عَلَيْهِمْ وَلَا ٱلضَّآلِّينَ
the Path of those You have blessed—not those You are displeased with, or those who are astray.

(Qur'an, 1:1-7)

This project is devoted to God,
lovers of God,
seekers of God,

idealists, dreamers and feelers,
visual thinkers and nature breathers,

slow walkers and stick collectors,
immigrant fathers and eldest daughters,

and to all those with non-visible disabilities and neurodivergent minds,
in my sight, you'll never be left behind.

Love,
Nora Alkeyat

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

This is a story about longing for coherence between inward character and outward personas among observations within various communities and cultures. The question became practical and spiritual: how do virtues become lived dispositions, and how can art participate in that formation? In this way, the act of illustrating becomes both an epistemological method and a devotional one, embodying the Qur'anic call to *tadabbur (*تَدَبُّر | reflection) upon *ayat* (آية | verses as signs), both written and visual. I've experienced firsthand how visual art can offer an alternative pathway to understanding knowledge. As a neurodivergent artist, visual communication offers a sanctuary, a mode of knowing that is nonlinear, layered, and contemplative. This thesis is my way of contributing to Islamic pedagogy by creating visual entry points into its philosophical and spiritual teachings.

Growing up, I always had a strong passion for illustration, painting, and history. My father, a leather craftsman, would take me to the shop with him every day until I started preschool. I sat by the cutting table, watching his hands cut patterns traced onto hide, all while being a joyful shopkeeper, greeting customers with generosity, extroversion, and maintaining dutifulness and love for his clients and neighbours in the village-like community of Kensington Market. His strong sense of duty, community, courage, care, offering a helping hand to any passerbyer, and creative handwork was instilled in my developing and malleable toddler mind.

Figure 01. *He brings forth the living from the dead,* 2026. Artwork by Nora Alkeyat.

Leather holds the presence of my father, who instilled a deep humanitarian and sensory connection to the cycle of life, expressing a hybridity of his character that balances play and duty in harmony. Leather therefore becomes a material used as a homage to my father, a hardworking craftsman, immigrant, and storyteller, who formed my early relationship to craft, patience, and creative making.

I was a peculiar introverted kid and took my red briefcase with me everywhere. I believed there was always an opportunity to draw, imagine and escape wherever I was at that moment. I studied in a specialized art and technology program during middle school and high school, which instilled rigorous traditional art training, conceptual thinking and visual communication technology skills during the pivotal years of my education. Still life drawing and colour theory lived alongside painting and adobe digital workflows. After high school, I went on to study interior design, rationalized as the perfect balance between artistic and practical pursuits. My design degree trained me to be analytical, create three-dimensionally, and assess critically as a designer. Geometry sharpened my eye, and detail became a habit. But perfectionism began to choke my free spirited art roots; what should have been a five-minute drawing stretched into an hour of aligning digital lines that didn't need correction. I began polishing the life out of ideas before they could breathe. I worked as a theme-park designer after graduation, world-building at scale, and worked on LEGOLAND among other international projects. It was all dazzling on the resume and satisfying to reach the pinnacle of stability as a daughter of immigrants. But

the longer I stayed, the more I felt out of alignment with my nature. I could 3D model spectacle but I yearned for true autonomous self-expression and paint. For someone who tends to over strategize my future, the next move was terrifying: I left a predictable path and leapt into an art practice without a plan. That decision, choosing uncertainty and authenticity, marks the true beginning of my illustration career. A detour that unclipped my wings, flying into a studio practice aligned with my faith and heart.

To be an artist within this Islamic tradition, is, for me, a form of devotion, and a gesture of gratitude for the unseen beauty and wisdom that pervades our worldly existence. I believe in the significance of stories, symbols, and knowledge that might otherwise be unfelt or lost. Islamic art traditions do not merely speak to the intellect but to the soul, reminding us that beauty is not a material or an outward appearance…no, rather it is a sacred principle, an expression of Divine order, mercy and harmony.

My illustration work emerged through a sustained, once-a-week art challenge that functioned as a disciplined method of studying the individual names of God through making. Working name by name required careful attention to language, nuance, and theological study, and the weekly cadence pushed me to move beyond surface meanings into a deeper, more accountable process of visual translation. Illustration became a research tool: a way of metabolizing text, reflecting on interpretation, and testing how form, symbol, and composition can communicate meaning.

The *Names of Allah* series became a sustained experiment into how biomorphic patterns can carry knowledge through colour, repetition, and symbols. I developed each composition as an ecology, building meaning through motifs that connect vines, branches, leaves, and various other natural elements. Each name became a material logic: expansion as extending vines, gentleness as intricate micro details of subtle medieval ivy, pomegranate as provisions of abundance, justice as measured balance of neoclassical architectural columns, and forgiveness as olive branches extending peace.

Figure 02. *Name of Allah* Series, 2024–Present. Artwork by Nora Alkeyat.

My process began with selecting a name and moving into *tafseer* (تفسير | Islamic science of interpretation), linguistics, finding Qur'anic evidence and doing close readings, as a way to notice what the attribute truly meant, deeply and individually. As all the 99 names of God are traditionally displayed all together, I wanted to get to know each name intimately, one on one. I studied textile and pattern histories across geographies and periods, starting with *The Grammar of Ornament* by Owen Jones. I collected pattern references from 19th century archived catalogues, assembled a collage of motifs, connected them like a puzzle, and tested how symbols could meet and hold meaning without becoming didactic. With digital limitations, I nonetheless pushed to experiment with collaging and using tactile brushes and textures. The technical training taught me pattern construction methods such as the mirroring tool. By the end of each illustration, I was able to uncover a narrative through composition formulation. Every week and after each illustration, I developed a flow that turned into a practice:

> Select & Study Name → Sketch, Trace & Collage Patterns → Design Final Drawing → Colour → Shade/Texture → Calligraphy & Supplementary text → Reflection Writing → Publish Online & Receive Feedback → Repeat.

This flow became my digital illustration practice that still guides my ongoing work. Each week ended with social media publication, which turned the work outward. Because the artwork and process work was shared publicly, it also developed in dialogue with a wider Muslim community; responses arrived as comments, messages, requests for particular names, and personal reflections that positioned each image as a prompt for collective interpretation rather than a closed artwork. Outwardly, the public life of the series made interpretation visible. The Muslim community responded to the symbols. They recognized particular motifs as familial, regional, or devotional, and their reactions clarified how visual cues can activate learning.

Figure 03. *Name of Allah* Series, 2024–Present. Artwork by Nora Alkeyat.

Some viewers described feeling captured by certain imagery, such as the opening doors in *Al Fattaah* prompting a feeling of relief, or comforted by the dove extending an olive branch signalling forgiveness in *Al Ghafoor*, and the farmers and seamstress workers in *Ar Razzaaq* prompting an admiration of work ethics, or pursuit to God's kingdom through the columns depicting His sovereignty in *Al Malik*. Others requested specific names because the symbolic language offered them a way to channel remembrance of God, ignite divine beauty, or practice gratitude. This feedback loop shaped subsequent decisions: I learned what kinds of symbolism opened space for reflection and what kinds risked being read as overly literal or abstract and intangible. I also found that the mass majority of viewers avoided pieces with figures, animals, and/or faces, and so I revised my work to avoid these elements. I reflected and realized I did not

want to place icons or elements in proximity to the name God and risk receiving misinterpretation of my work, despite my own strong intentions and conviction in *tawheed* (تَوْحِيد | the Oneness of God).

Figure 04. *Name of Allah* Series, 2024–Present. Artwork by Nora Alkeyat.

In that sense, the series became both an introspective study as an artist and extropective dialogue with the community/viewer. That participatory circulation gave the series traction and clarified the public life of the work, eventually informing the founding and growth of my art studio, where I continue to develop illustration-led projects rooted in this relationship between Islam, pedagogy, and contemporary visual culture, including the production and sale of hundreds of fine-art prints within and beyond Muslim audiences in Canada and internationally. I felt a calling to continue to make illustrations that act as visual translations of sacred knowledge.

Thereafter, this thesis evolved to develop a practice I call *Visual Theology*, where illustration becomes a primary vehicle for theological engagement, translating ornament, symbolism, and traditional visual forms into contemporary experiments that invite sensory, storytelling, emotions, and reflective contemplation.

Figure 05. *Name of Allah* Series, 2024–Present. Artwork by Nora Alkeyat.

As I began my Masters of Fine Arts, my practice extended into painting, and moved between design disciplines, technology and traditional arts. The body of artwork consists of mixed media experiments through gouache on aged paper, acrylic on leather, and oil on wood, with gold leaf used to intensify luminosity and spiritual resonance. The surfaces are chosen for their tactile and natural qualities, because texture, grain, and material resistance shape the historic and emotional register of the work. My practice gradually moved into the forests, fields, and riversides and with that shift, painting became less contained within the walls of a studio and more relational with the natural world. The sound of the river, the uneven textures of rocks beneath me, flowing wind, crawling bugs, varied shades of green, and the rich soil all began to inform not only my palette but my emotional and physical responses to the experiments. In this setting, painting became an act of attunement rather than control. I began to experience the landscape as an active sacred presence, which brought me to deeper God consciousness. The outdoor environment invited a slower, more receptive mode of making, where expression was guided by proximity to the natural world, where God felt closer with heightened awareness of His glorious design and all the subtle variations within it. This called my practice into sacred landscapes.

My research and practice is also inseparable from the community, past and present, that shape it: Islamic scholars whose ethical frameworks I inherit, traditional art history and illuminators who encoded theology

into art, educators who made learning visual. I situate myself not as an originator, but as a translator and vessel within a long chain of artists, students, educators, spiritual seekers, and humble servants of God.

Figure 06. *Sacred Landscapes*, 2026. Photography by Makayla Lauren.

This work is accountable to multiple communities at once. I am accountable to Islamic intellectual traditions, particularly moral theology, whose teachings on virtues and vices requires accuracy, humility, and restraint. I am accountable to students, especially neurodivergent learners, who may be excluded by purely textual modes of religious education. I am also accountable to the ethics of knowledge representation: how knowledge is framed, what is emphasized or omitted, and how reverence is maintained without reductionism or spectacle. These responsibilities shape my methodology, intentions and art practice. In its finality, my research does not end at the page or the gallery wall, it circulates within the community, asking to be used, revisited, and lived with.

Ultimately, I am coming with a practice that understands research as participation. I locate myself within a lineage of thinkers, feelers and makers who treated knowledge as an *amaneh* (أمانة | trust), *jamal* (جَمَال | divine beauty) and through a portal, learning becomes a communal responsibility among the *ummah* (أمة | Muslim community). My contribution is not to resolve these traditions, but to carry them forward, visually, playfully, and relationally, into the present moment, filled with love and light within this temporary life and the artistic skills that God all-mighty has graciously granted me.

RESEARCH INQUIRY

Project Objectives and Methodology

This thesis asks how Islamic knowledge can be translated into illustrative painting to support comprehension, spiritual connection, and visual theological pedagogy, particularly for neurodivergent modes of learning shaped by imagery, pattern recognition, and conceptual anchoring. Rooted in the Islamic inseparability of aesthetics and spirituality, it argues that illustration does not simply communicate theology, but opens an unseen layer of contemplative meaning that engages both the heart and intellect.

(1) To **read**, **collect**, and critically **curate Islamic theological teachings** on *'ilm al-akhlaq* (علم الأخلاق | knowledge of inner character) from the Qur'an, ahadith, and classical scholarship, producing a concise classification and thematic map of Islamic virtues and vices that can guide visual translation..

(2) Conduct comparative **visual analysis studies** of Medieval Christian manuscript illuminations and illustrations, Persian miniature paintings, and Islamic biomorphic ornamentation in order to extract transferable formal devices, including composition, motif, colour palette, ornament, and symbolism.

(3) **Iterative studio cycles** that operationalize a research-through-design method:

Reading → Diagrams → Drawings → Paintings and Illustration → Reflection → Repeat.

(4) **Introspective documentation** compiles reflective writing and process work that records work, feelings, discoveries, changes and decisions throughout making.

(5) **Outrospective exhibition** functions as a research site and knowledge mobilization platform. This is done through organic discussion circles and a reflection activity guiding the exhibit experience.

THEORY

Islamic Art Theory and *Visual Theology*

The theoretical foundation of this project depends on a claim: Islamic visual form is a mode of knowledge, remembrance, and reflective formation, rather than mere decoration.

> ‘More than a century ago, Owen Jones isolated ornament as a subject of inquiry removed from cultural origins. His seminal work, *Grammar of Ornament*, promoted decorative schemes in architecture according to thirty-seven propositions he identified as "General Principles in the Arrangement of Form and Color." During the century following publication of Jones' work on ornament, the study of geometric patterns in Islamic monuments from Spain to India has often focused on decoration and ornament through a Western lens. From this perspective, one easily and all too often infers that ornament as decoration is non-representational and, therefore, without meaning.”[1] (Bier, *“Art and Mithāl”* 491)

This critique from Carol Bier’s article “Art and Mithāl: Reading Geometry as Visual Commentary*”* (2008) shows how Islamic ornament has often been misrepresented through a Western formalist lens that isolates pattern from its intellectual and spiritual context, reducing meaningful visual systems to surface decoration for the orientalist gaze to consume. In the article “The Mirage of Islamic Art: Reflections on the Study of an Unwieldy Field” the authors Sheila Blair and Jonathan Bloom offer a historiographic critique of the category of “Islamic Art” arguing that it is a modern invention shaped by Western scholarship, museum practices, and colonial collecting.[2] They trace how Orientalism, European collecting habits, dynastic exhibitions, and museum classifications reinforced misleading generalizations while privileging luxury masterpieces from elite classes over objects from everyday material culture.[3] Most notably, Blair and Bloom argue that truly understanding visual cultures historically associated with Muslim communities requires acknowledging transcultural exchange, hybridity, and the absence of a singular defining essence.[4]

[1] Carol Bier, “Art and Mithāl: Reading Geometry as Visual Commentary,” *Iranian Studies* 41, no. 4 (2008): 491.
[2] Sheila S. Blair and Jonathan M. Bloom, “The Mirage of Islamic Art: Reflections on the Study of an Unwieldy Field,” *The Art Bulletin* 85, no. 1 (2003): 152–53.
[3] Blair, Bloom, “The Mirage of Islamic Art: Reflections on the Study of an Unwieldy Field,” 157–161.
[4] Blair, Bloom, “The Mirage of Islamic Art: Reflections on the Study of an Unwieldy Field,” 158.

In “Reflections on Islamic View of Art and Literature” (1996), Al-Ghazali insists that the defining trait of Islamic art is not its regional influences but its capacity to transform diverse sources into a cohesive and spiritually grounded whole.[5] He critiques general Orientalist scholarship for reducing Islamic art to an appropriation of Roman, Sassanid, or Byzantine motifs and techniques, arguing instead that Muslims created “a distinct universal Islamic identity… a common spirit that transcends all variations of time and space.”[6] Just as Islamic art absorbed and re-formed external influences into a unified metaphysical system, my creative methodology draws on multiple traditions to explore the ways they can layer and manifest theological sacred knowledge into a cohesive visual expression of Islamic principles. This directly resonates with my art practice of creating contemporary Islamic themed art that refuses cultural purity and adhering to the reproductions of traditional arts. Subsequently, I strongly pose that any contemporary attempt drawing on Islamic visual traditions must be aware of the cross-continental and historiographic forces that shape these traditions.

In his book *Islamic Art and Spirituality* (1987)*,* Seyyed Hossein Nasr gives the spiritual-metaphysical grounding of Islamic art. Fundamental to Nasr's argument was the notion that Western art history poses Islamic manuscripts, ornament, textiles, and metalwork as “decorative arts” opposed to intellectual and spiritual forms.[7] “Many of the works studied, “inlaid metalwares, luster ceramics, enameled glass, brocaded textiles, and knotted carpets” were long treated as minor or peripheral in Western art discourse”.[8] However Islamic ornament is inherent to its practical and functional usage from a spiritual one. My experiments embrace illumination, ornament, and pictorial symbols not as worldly embellishments but philosophical tools to serve as sacred remembrance. My thesis introduces the concept of “Visual Theology*”* as a synthesized framework capable of working across styles, categories, and historical divisions, allowing cross-period, cross-regional, and cross-faith dialogue.

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[5] Muhammad al-Ghazali, “Reflections on Islamic View of Art and Literature,” *Islamic Studies* 35, no. 4 (1996): 426.
[6] Al-Ghazali, “Reflections on Islamic View of Art and Literature,” 426–27.
[7] Seyyed Hossein Naser, *Islamic Art and Spirituality* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 195.
[8] Blair, Bloom, “The Mirage of Islamic Art: Reflections on the Study of an Unwieldy Field,” 153.

Nasr articulates this through the idea that Islamic art emerges from the inner dimension of the natural world, and that its formal languages are "crystallizations of metaphysical truths" rather than arbitrary design decisions.[9] In this view, art is organized chaos transcended by man's *fitrah* (فطرة - intrinsic inclination towards God and innate goodness) into harmony and order. Therefore art can orient the soul toward unity. Nasr says, "Islamic art is the result of the manifestation of Unity upon the plane of multiplicity."[10] Through repetition, art transcends into a mode of *dhikr* (ذِكْر | remembrance of God), Unity is expressed through multiplicity. Visual arrangement is therefore not arbitrary, but participates in an Islamic logic of unity and ordered plurality. Pattern and geometry can be interpreted as enacting meaning. In continuation of this idea, Nasr states,

> "The qualities of cosmic existence or creation about which God asserts in the Quran, 'Our Lord! Thou createst not this in vain' derive perceptibly by the world and the position order acts, therefore, as ladder for the journey of the soul to the invisible and the audible to the invisible which is also silence."[11] (Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality*, 7)

These correspondences are not treated as universal symbols detached from tradition, but as rhetorical possibilities grounded in an Islamic aesthetic logic that has historically linked beauty and order to the remembrance and glorification of God.

Taken further, this aesthetic logic opens onto a larger theological framework in which Islamic art is understood as a manifestation of the inner reality of revelation. Nasr consistently rejects sociological or historicist explanations that reduce Islamic art to external circumstances. He maintains that "whatever relation exists between Islamic art and the Islamic revelation…cannot be simply on the plane of socio-political changes" and must instead be located within the inner dimension of the tradition.[12] "The answer must be sought in the Islamic revelation itself," he writes; Islamic art arises from the same spiritual source as the Qur'an and the *tariqah* (طريقة | spiritual path).[13] The unity, proportion, and symbolic

[9] Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality*, 195.
[10] Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality*, 7.
[11] Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality*, 7.
[12] Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality*, 5.
[13] Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality*, 7.

intelligibility of Islamic forms are therefore not cultural conventions but manifestations of the metaphysical order underlying Islamic spirituality.

This emphasis on the inner reality of revelation leads naturally to the question of imagination, not only as a sacred faculty of perception, but also as an artistic method through which spiritual truths may be visually expressed. Central to Nasr's theory is the role of the '*alam al-khayal (*عالم الخيال | intermediate world) as an ontological bridge between material and spiritual realities.[14] Persian miniatures depict not a profane world but the intermediary world above the physical.[15] This realm is not fantasy but an "intermediate world" where symbolic forms gain their intelligibility.[16] In the chapter *The World of Imagination*, Nasr characterizes the miniature painting not as a representational picture plane but as an imaginal field, structured according to the logic of a world that "transcends the mundane surroundings of human life."[17] The spatial treatment in Persian miniature, its non-perspectival layering, simultaneous viewpoints, vibrant colours and intricately detailed patterns is a deliberate articulation of the imaginal world's metaphysical properties portraying the realm of paradise.[18] This world has its own space, time, movement, bodies, shapes, and colours. The miniature must not collapse into pure three-dimensional illusion, otherwise it would become merely a replica of the sensory world. Its colours, especially gold and lapis lazuli, are treated as expressions of an objective imaginal reality. I too position my art as a vessel operating within '*alam al-khayal (*عالم الخيال | intermediate world) where I intentionally avoid one-point and two-point perspectival and hyperrealistic naturalism. Instead, I draw from flatness, vividness and layered symbolic patterns to create a contemporary sacred landscape as reminders of paradise, the spiritual world and the creative design of God on this earth. The World of Imagination is an artistic methodology: a way to visualize spiritual realms by operating in this animated stylistic and symbolic approach. Therefore, for Nasr, the spatial treatment of Persian miniature, with its movement across layered planes, resistance to

[14] Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality*, 181.
[15] Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality*, 181.
[16] Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality*, 181.
[17] Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality*, 181–82.
[18] Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality*, 181.

naturalistic depth, luminous colour and paradisal symbolism, reflects the structure of the intermediary world rather than the merely physical world.[19] David J. Roxburgh's writing in "Micrographia: Toward a Visual Logic of Persianate Painting," (2003) investigates the visual logic and viewing experience of Persianate manuscript painting.[20] Roxburgh describes Persian miniature painting as lending itself to spiritual expression because its visual logic resists empirical naturalism, exceeds ordinary optical space, and creates an interiorized mode of seeing tied to memory, wonder, and contemplative return.[21] Roxburgh argues that Persianate painting should not be approached through the model of the Western easel picture, since it is encountered in the intimate space of the book, where reading and seeing become "an intimate, interiorizing experience that enlists the mind and body in a symbiotic engagement".[22] This interiorized mode of viewing already shifts the image away from mere description of the visible world and toward a deeper imaginative and reflective encounter.[23] Formally, Persianate painting avoids single-point perspective and instead combines "plans and elevations, interiors and exteriors," permitting "a multiplicity of pictorial elements" to create "a dense matrix of information" within one image.[24] Such a system does not imitate ordinary sight so much as surpass it, allowing the painting to hold a Divine point-of-view, showing multiple dimensions, times, and relations at once.[25] This prolonged, contemplative, and non-naturalistic mode of vision makes Persian miniature especially suited to expressing a spiritual world: not by copying physical reality, but by rendering a reality apprehended through memory, imagination, symbolism, and sustained inward reflection.[26]

As my research concerns the translation of spiritual concepts into symbolic form, the chapter on *The World of Imagination* provides the ontological justification for a non-realist visual language. It situates my use of flattened space, diagrammatic geometry, saturated colours and layered symbolic patterning within a

[19] Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality*, 180-82.
[20] David J. Roxburgh, "Micrographia: Toward a Visual Logic of Persianate Painting," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, no. 43, Islamic Arts (Spring 2003): 12–30.
[21] Roxburgh, "Micrographia: Toward a Visual Logic of Persianate Painting," 15–16, 17, 28–30.
[22] Roxburgh, "Micrographia: Toward a Visual Logic of Persianate Painting," 17.
[23] Roxburgh, "Micrographia: Toward a Visual Logic of Persianate Painting," 17.
[24] Roxburgh, "Micrographia: Toward a Visual Logic of Persianate Painting," 25.
[25] Roxburgh, "Micrographia: Toward a Visual Logic of Persianate Painting," 23, 25, 27.
[26] Roxburgh, "Micrographia: Toward a Visual Logic of Persianate Painting," 19, 27–30.

historically informed model of knowledge transmission. The '*alam al-khayal (*عالم الخيال | intermediate world) is the site in which virtues and vices acquire form and manifest the principles of sacred knowledge into visual form. In Islamic eschatology, inward states are made outwardly visible at resurrection: the Qur'an describes people being raised with altered faces and veiled conditions according to their spiritual state, while later Shi'i hadith literature expands this into the idea that one's dominant inner character becomes manifest in visible form.[27]

Carol Bier's also draws from Henry Corbin's concept of the '*alam al-mithāl (*عالم المثال | Imaginal Realm), a space that exists "between the empirical and the purely intelligible".[28] Again, this world is not fictional; rather, it is ontologically real but immaterial, accessible through imagination, vision, symbolism, and spiritual perception. It is the same realm where prophetic dreams occur, where metaphors become perceived images, and where abstract truths wear the garments of form.[29] Carol Bier's articulation of '*alam al-mithāl (*عالم المثال | Imaginal Realm) expands on a space between the empirical and purely intelligible, where visuals can carry truths that are not reducible to literal depiction.[30] As the Qur'an states, ″[i]t is not the eyes that are blind, but the heart.″ (Qur'an, 22:46) This holds the value of sight attributed to character perception. True understanding and awareness come from inner spiritual perception, not just physical sight; people often fail to grasp important truths, not due to lack of seeing, but because their hearts are closed off from a metaphysical vision which is the engine for justice, empathy, reason, or spiritual insight, highlighting spiritual blindness over physical. Virtues and vices are not objects or simple neurological transmissions of behaviour. They are states, tendencies, and dispositions. To paint them requires analogy, symbol and atmosphere. The work aims to create imaginal encounters where a virtue's essence can be felt, intuitive and contemplated.

[27] Qur'an 3:106; 20:102, 124; 99:6; Ibrahim Amini, *Resurrection (Maʿad) in the Quran*, trans. Sayyid Athar Husain S. H. Rizvi (Qum: Ansariyan Publications, 2011), "Gathering of Humans (Hashr)," Al-Islam.org.
[28] Bier, *"*Art and Mithāl,*"* 502.
[29] Moad, "Al-Ghazali's Reflections on the Metaphysics of Metaphor in the *Mishkāt al-Anwār,*" 174.
[30] Bier, *"*Art and Mithāl,*"* 491–92.

If imagination is the faculty that perceives meaning beyond the material world, then form is the vehicle through which that meaning is expressed and symbolized. Throughout his writings, Nasr underscores the spiritual intelligibility of Islamic visual systems. For him, art functions as a mode of *dhikr* (ذِكْر | remembrance of God), an aesthetic remembrance, through which the soul is oriented toward *tawheed* (تَوْحِيد | the Oneness of God). In the chapter, *The Spiritual Message of Islamic Art*, he describes Islamic art as a witness to "the manifestation of the One in the many," where harmony "frees man from the bondage of the many and enables him to experience the infinite joy of proximity to the One".[31] The aesthetic function of form, its ability to disclose metaphysical truths through order, clarity, and proportion, becomes a visual pedagogy curated into the following:

a) Light signifies the metaphysical.
b) Pattern reveals order.
c) Repetition shows habitual devotion.
d) Abstraction becomes protection against idolatry.
e) Beauty is an invitation to God and exemplification of Truth.

By examining virtues and vices through the principles of form, I approach aesthetic structure as storytelling, observation, curiosity and wonder. These correspondences emerge from a metaphysical logic and they are static labels.

Nasr repeatedly associates Islamic art with processes of interior cultivation. Beauty, in this context, is not aesthetic pleasure but an orientation towards metaphysical truth. Islamic art, he writes, "acts as support for attaining the end for which Islam was revealed," guiding the soul toward recollection and interior clarity.[32] Art thus fulfills a spiritual purpose: it forms perception in accordance with the ideal. For al-Ghazali, *jamal* (جَمَال | divine beauty) and *husn* (حُسْن | excellence) is also not decorative or superficial but metaphysical, rooted in the hadith: *"*Indeed Allah is Beautiful and loves beauty.*"*[33] Beauty is an attribute of the Divine and thus becomes synonymous with Truth in Islam. He explains that the highest

[31] Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality*, 202.
[32] Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality*, 202.
[33] Muhammad ibn Yaʿqūb al-Kulayni, *al-Kafi*, vol. 6, 439, hadith no. 5, accessed via Thaqalayn.net.

form of beauty is "the inner harmony of the soul" that connects the artist to the ultimate reality.[34] In illumination and symbolic illustration, beauty becomes a way of guiding attention, cultivating reverence over scriptural text, inviting presence and structuring cognitive and spiritual engagement.

Al-Ghazali frames Islamic art as fundamentally reminiscent, a form that "constantly reminds man of his Lord," shaping the environments of homes, streets, institutions, and cities.[35] Nasr's insistence on "the science of Islamic art" argues for a systemic reading of Islamic aesthetic production: its geometry, repetition and abstracted elements from nature are not accidental but intentional, symbolic, and didactic.[36]

Carol Bier's argument radically reframes the pattern in Islamic art explaining that the geometry of Islamic ornament "is not entirely present at the outset, but rather it becomes emergent through process".[37] The pattern is not born whole but unfolds through repetition, the artisan's hand and the logic of symmetry. Similarly, in *'ilm al-akhlaq* (علم الأخلاق | knowledge of inner character), developing the character, the character is not born whole but rather through repeated habitual actions, words, and thoughts, character is thus planted, rooted, and grown into living, becoming a dispositionally blossomed character. The key connection here is repetition. One of Bier's most compelling contributions is her description of geometric patterns as algorithmic.[38] She draws attention to how Islamic artisans repeatedly generate units according to specific rules, producing complex structures through simple iterative steps.[39] In this view, pattern is a system of knowledge. It visually expresses mathematical and philosophical ideas that circulated during the periods in which these monuments were created. Comparatively, this parallels *'ilm al-akhlaq* (علم الأخلاق | knowledge of inner character) as one has the ability to refine their inner dispositions over a habitual period of conscious devotional practice.[40]

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[34] Al-Ghazali, *Reflections on Islamic View of Art and Literature*, 431.
[35] Al-Ghazali, *Reflections on Islamic View of Art and Literature*, 429.
[36] Sheila S. Blair and Jonathan M. Bloom, "The Mirage of Islamic Art: Reflections on the Study of an Unwieldy Field," *The Art Bulletin* 85, no. 1 (2003): 158.
[37] Bier, "*Art and Mithāl*" 492.
[38] Bier, "*Art and Mithāl,*" 498.
[39] Bier, "*Art and Mithāl,*" 498–500.
[40] Muhammad Mahdi Naraqi, *Jāmiʿ al-Saʿādāt (The Collector of Felicities)*, trans. Shahyar Saʿadat (Tehran: Islamic Propagation Organization, n.d.), 6.

Theology: Islamic Virtues & Vices

In Islamic tradition, *'ilm al-akhlaq* (علم الأخلاق | knowledge of inner character) refers to a person's character, disposition, ethics, values, morality, and manners. It is the goal of ethics to raise and guide man from the lowest instinctual animal state to that exalted position superior to angels who are created in perfect submission to God but do not possess will.[41] Therefore, the key factor to attaining the Islamic code of character, lies in choice and conscious practice.

Among the most complete expositions of Islamic moral theology is Muhammad Mahdi al-Naraqi's *"Jami al-Saadat"*, an eighteenth-century Islamic scholarly work that systematically interprets the soul, its faculties, and its potential for transformation. I draw from his treatise *Jāmiʿ al-Saʿādāt* (*The Collector of Felicities*) to derive and organize teachings on moral balance, virtue, and vice for visual translation. The concept of virtues and vices is a categorization system of the balance and imbalances of moral and immoral character traits.[42] It is dependent upon levels of deviation from behavioural moderation.

Figure 07. *The Four Faculties*, 2026. Graphic by Nora Alkeyat.

Naraqi's classification is useful because it organizes virtues and vices through the faculties of the soul and the principle of behavioural moderation. In this framework, deviation from balance generates moral diseases, and moral healing requires the training of desire, anger, and intellect under the governance of

[41] Al-Naraqi, *Jāmiʿ al-Saʿādāt,* 6.
[42] Al-Naraqi, *Jāmiʿ al-Saʿādāt,* 13.

reason.[43] Working from this philosophical text is vital to visual translation because it shifts the focus from illustrating isolated behaviours to mapping inner states and connections of vices to virtues based on a deficiency or excess. Based on my research, readings, and cross-comparisons from the Qur'an, hadith and reading historical and contemporary texts by Islamic scholars such as Imam al-Ghazali, Muhammad al-Narāqī, and Mohammad Ali Shomali, these diagrams emerged and set the scene as a design exercise of translation, representing an intermediate zone between text and painting.

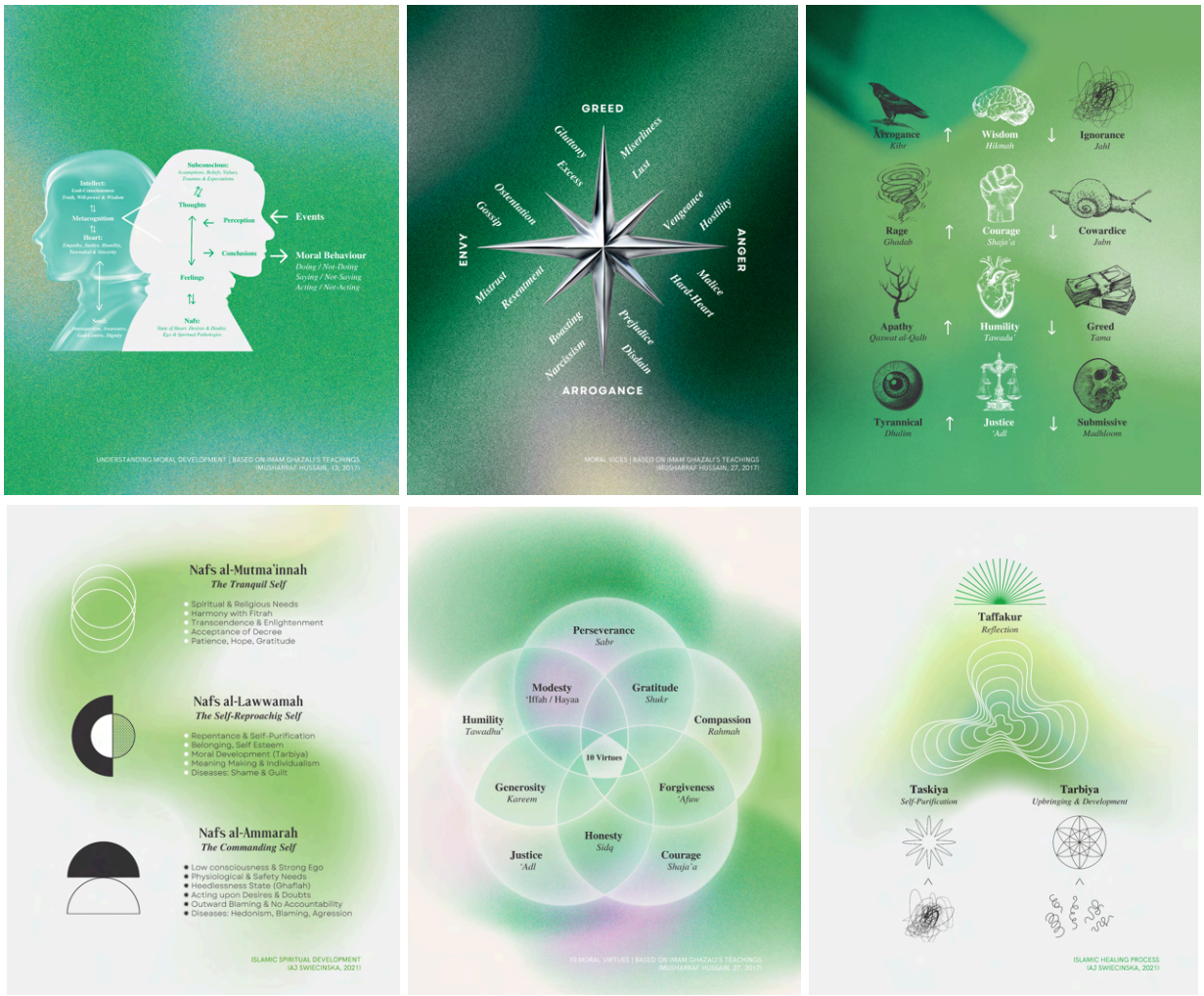

Figure 08. *Psychology of the Soul Diagrams*, 2026. Graphic by Nora Alkeyat.

[43] Al-Naraqi, *Jāmiʿ al-Saʿādāt,* 29–31.

Visual Pedagogy

The scholarship on illustration and visual thinking provides an important foundation for conceiving images into modes of thinking, connecting and prompting reflections.

Ellen Handler Spitz's essay *"*Homage to Illustration: Story Telling in Paint and Marble" (2015) argues against the modernist diminishment of illustration and long-standing assumption that illustration is intellectually inferior to fine art.[44] She positions illustration as an epistemic function by condensing narrative into psychologically and morally resonant images. Handler Spitz also notes that illustration provides a "lucent" mode of understanding, a visual form of illumination that brings meaning "from shadows" into perceptual clarity.[45] Contending that illustration performs a unique epistemic and affective function: "illuminating," not just narrating, images condensate temporality, evoke psychological resonance, and trigger moral and symbolic meanings.[46] Through analysis of classical Western visual traditions, such as vase painting, mythological sculpture, and narrative imagery, Handler Spitz demonstrates that images can carry symbolic weight, emotional depth, and cross-generational memory.[47]

Complementing Handler Spitz, Barton, Sawyer, and Swanson similarly argue in their article "Art to Enhance Comprehension" (2007) that visual representation plays a critical role in facilitating the viewer's understanding, particularly for abstract or layered concepts.[48] Barton, Sawyer, and Swanson treat art-making as a cognitive and pedagogical tool. Their findings suggest that visual representation supports comprehension, retention, and synthesis of abstract or complex material, especially for learners engaging via nonverbal or visual modalities.[49] Art therefore becomes a scaffold for cognition: students externalize

[44] Ellen Handler Spitz, "Homage to Illustration: Story Telling in Paint and Marble," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 49, no. 3 (2015): 66–67.
[45] Handler Spitz, "Homage to Illustration," 66–82.
[46] Handler Spitz, "Homage to Illustration," 67.
[47] Handler Spitz, "Homage to Illustration,"" 67, 72–74.
[48] Jim Barton, Donna Sawyer, and Cindy Swanson, "They Want to Learn How to Think: Using Art to Enhance Comprehension," *Language Arts* 85, no. 2 (2007): 128–32.
[49] Barton, Sawyer, and Swanson, "They Want to Learn How to Think: Using Art to Enhance Comprehension," 132.

thought, map relationships, and visualize conceptual interdependencies. This provides a methodological justification for approaching illustration as a core instrument of knowledge formation.

Finally, Temple Grandin's writing in "How Does Visual Thinking Work in the Mind of a Person with Autism? A Personal Account" (2009) and "Perspectives on Education from a Person on the Autism Spectrum" (2006) describes visual cognition as concept formation through accumulated images, a bottom up assembling of details into conceptual structure.[50] Geometry, motifs and patterns can operate as structured visual reasoning, and a viewer can enter into sequence, memory, and deeper thought through visual algorithms, rhythm, harmony, colour and symbolic comprehension rather than through linear exposition. Grandin describes her mind as an "[i]nternet search engine for photographs," explaining that she forms concepts through stored visual memory rather than through abstract verbal reasoning.[51] For "visual thinkers," abstraction may not stem from linguistic rationality, but from pattern recognition, symbolic association, and visual memory.[52] In the formation of my work, I likewise attend carefully to the construction of visions in my mind that cultivate through an introspective process of imagining, visual layering, making and reflecting.

The scholars present illustration as epistemic and pedagogical, however they do not explicitly address the religious or spiritual dimensions of visual form. They leave open the question of how symbolic visual systems grounded in sacred theology might function as real forms of theological pedagogy rather than serve simply as secular aesthetic exercises. This is where scholarship on Islamic art history can fill the theoretical gap. Applying theories intuitively, through hands-on art practice inquiry, this work seeks to inhabit and extend that intersection through multiple multi-media experiments that aim to orient the soul.

[50] Grandin, "How Does Visual Thinking Work in the Mind of a Person with Autism?," 1437–38.
[51] Grandin, "How Does Visual Thinking Work in the Mind of a Person with Autism?," 1437–1442.
[52] Grandin, "How Does Visual Thinking Work in the Mind of a Person with Autism?," 1437–1438.

ART HISTORY SURVEY: VISUAL ANALYSIS STUDIES

Whether in illuminated Qur'anic manuscripts, medieval Christian liturgical or devotional manuscripts, or illustrated books of Persian poetry, illumination and illustration helped communicate complex ideas through symbolic visuals, supporting the act of worship and preserving cultural and religious knowledge. Through the contemplation of their forms and materials, alone or in tandem with their accompanying text, they turn theological knowledge into visually accessible, memorable, and spiritually engaging forms of spirituality.

In both Islamic and medieval Christian manuscript traditions, artists employed biomorphic ornamentation and painted imagery to beautify, structure, and visually honour sacred or authoritative texts.[53] Biomorphic ornamentation is a design language using stylized plant and organic forms arranged in rhythmic and logical repeating patterns. Visual beauty was seen as a way to inspire reverence, humility, and remembrance of God. This combination of spiritual purpose and metaphysical beauty is what draws me to illuminated manuscripts and persian miniatures and why I'm layering these styles into my art practice. While drawing and painting I reference the detailed, layered techniques, forms, motifs, and palettes seen in Islamic ornamentation, Christian medieval illuminated manuscripts and Persian miniature painting to express Islamic teachings, narratives, and virtues in a way that invites people to slow down, contemplate, and engage with faith visually, emotionally and spiritually.

[53] Department of Islamic Art, "Vegetal Patterns in Islamic Art," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art*; Elizabeth Morrison, "The Decorated Letter," *J. Paul Getty Museum.*

Islamic Biomorphic Ornamentation

I find myself drawn to Islamic biomorphic ornamentation as a visual experience that renders the sacred palpable through pattern, rhythm, and form. Ornamentation appears to draw from vegetal growth and organic references, translating the logic of nature into ordered composition. An example of Islamic biomorphic ornamentation is seen in ceramic tile work within holy mosques, designed to honour and evoke sacrality within spaces of worship and remembrance of God. Islamic biomorphic ornamentation is also used in manuscript illumination traditions where these interlacing forms function as a means of honouring the divine word, encompassing scripture with luminosity and reverence that reflects its sacred status. What signals my attention to Islamic biomorphic ornamentation is the balance it sustains between abstraction and structure, where fluid, living vegetal motifs unfold within disciplined systems of symmetry and proportion. In engaging with this tradition, I am drawn to the way it carries light and expresses paradise, not only visually through colour and ornament, but conceptually as a mode of making the unseen logic and divine qualities of the Qur'an and holy spaces felt and contemplated. In the example below, I reference and reimagine motifs visible in Ottoman Iznik ceramic tiles, specifically the *Tezhip* five-petal flower, distinct tulips and elongated leaves, to construct a border illumination.

Figure 09.[54] Iznik tiles, Rustem Pasha Mosque, Istanbul, Turkey, Bridgeman Images.

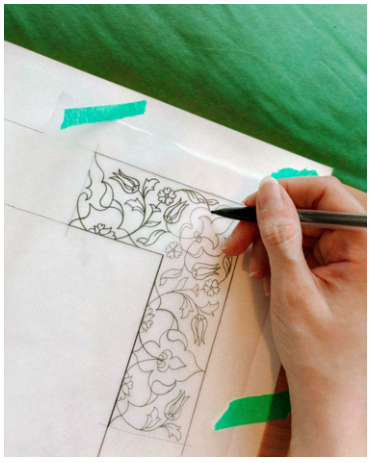

Figure 10. 2025. Drawing by Nora Alkeyat.

[54] Bridgeman Images, "Iznik tiles, Rustem Pasha Mosque, Istanbul, Turkey (photo)," Bridgeman Images, image no. WRP617659.

Persian Miniatures

What draws me to Persian miniatures is their atmospheric resonance, almost as if you could turn a poem into a visual format. A great many Persian miniatures—specifically painted folios from the Persianate painting tradition across three centuries, ca. 1300-1600[55]—depict poetic and literary content with deep messages and meanings, which serve as a visual means of storytelling. In "Micrographia: Toward a Visual Logic of Persianate Painting," David J. Roxburgh treats Persian miniature as a mode of illustrative storytelling by noting that some scholars understood Persianate paintings as "'pictures with a story,'" but he expands that view by showing that they are not merely passive illustrations of text; rather, they are structured visual events in which image, text, and memory interact through the act of book viewing.[56] He compares the Persian manuscript to the comic book because both combine image and word in a book format, where "the act of reading/seeing is an intimate, interiorizing experience that enlists the mind and body in a symbiotic engagement".[57] This comparison also poses Persian miniature as a sophisticated narrative form: even when it uses "monoscenic composition," the image can still be read as "several discrete moments running continuously over the picture's surface," so storytelling unfolds through looking, movement, and density rather than through optical realism or sequential panels.[58] Roxburgh also notes that some scholars like B.W. Robinson historically described Persianate painting as a place of imaginative escape from the "confusion, tension, and cruelty of the world," encouraging viewers to contemplate these works with a sense of wonder, delighting in line, colour, and storytelling, an experience he describes as restorative and childlike in its mode of seeing.[59] This is seen through illustrated figures and characters floating through gardens, naturalistic landscapes, architecture, and interiors, with vivid colours and feature intricate detail with integrated Islamic geometry ornamenting the architecture and tiny brushstrokes bringing the texture of the trees, grass, and rocks to life. Persian miniatures offer a very distinct visual composition divided into asymmetrical blocks that lead and guide the viewer into the

[55] Roxburgh, "Micrographia," 12.
[56] Roxburgh, "Micrographia," 15, 19.
[57] Roxburgh, "Micrographia," 17.
[58] Roxburgh, "Micrographia," 23.
[59] Roxburgh, "Micrographia," 15.

narrative. Compositionally, these paintings reject single-point perspective and instead combine multiple viewpoints, including plans, elevations and axonometric views, interiors and exteriors, which allow a multiplicity of narrative elements to appear poetically and simultaneously, forming a "dense matrix of information" organized across the surface.[60] What draws me most to the Persian miniature are these compositional strategies described, especially when situated within various axonometric angles of view. This accurately-inaccurate viewpoint, in combination with its flatness and rejection of perspective and lighting, floating characters, detailed patterns and saturated colours, brings an animated wonder and spiritual feel. Persianate painting is dependent upon intuition to make sense out of stories and poetic experience into a dense yet cohesive animated two-dimensional space, energetic landscape, and vibrant coloured surface, harmonized into sensory phenomena to reflect the spiritual essence of narrative.[61]

Figure 11.[62] Persian Miniature example.

Royal Hunt Scene
Folio from a manuscript of the *Shāhnāmeh* (Book of Kings)
Iran, Tabriz, Safavid dynasty, ca. 1525–1545
Opaque watercolour, ink, and gold on paper
Collection unknown (dispersed manuscript)

[60] Roxburgh, "Micrographia," 25.
[61] Titus Burckhardt, *Art of Islam: Language and Meaning*, foreword by Seyyed Hossein Nasr and introduction by Jean-Louis Michon (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2009), 37–40.
[62] *Royal Hunt Scene*, folio from a manuscript of the *Shāhnāmeh* (*Book of Kings*), Iran, Tabriz, Safavid dynasty, ca. 1525–1545, opaque watercolour, ink, and gold on paper, image provided by author, collection unknown (dispersed manuscript).

This folio presents a dense courtly hunting or gathering scene unfolding across a luminous, flattened landscape. Figures on horseback encircle a central clearing, their bodies angled in alternating directions that produce a rhythmic circulation of movement rather than a fixed point of focus. The ground is rendered in a saturated blue plane, punctuated by small vegetal motifs that hover rather than root themselves, suggesting a symbolic rather than naturalistic terrain. Along the left margin, rock formations rise in undulating, almost vegetal forms, interwoven with elongated trees whose leaves are stylized into clustered, ornamental masses. These elements spill beyond the central frame into the gold ground, dissolving the boundary between image and page. Above, the text in *nastaʿliq* script likely recounts a royal episode from the *Shahnamah*, where hunting operates as both a literal and allegorical display of kingship, discipline, and order. I find myself drawn to the muted yet luminous palette, where lapis blues and soft violets sit beside punctuations of vermilion and green. The composition feels orchestrated through harmony and repetition, where each figure, tree, and rock participates in a visual rhythm that guides the eye in cycles rather than lines. What holds me is the way nature is not background but an active, living structure of energy that shapes the narrative.

Figure 12. *Village Life*, 2025. Artwork by Nora Alkeyat.

The previous miniature organized narrative through density, where figures, architecture, and landscape accumulate into a unified field, and I carry this forward in my digital illustration, *Village Life*. This was the first illustration I created where I directly applied Persian miniature compositional strategies. This is

most visible in the river that threads through my landscape, guiding movement while allowing multiple moments to unfold simultaneously. The eye travels, echoing the cyclical viewing I experience in the *Shahnamah* folio above. In both, intricate detail, complexity, bold colours, and natural forms are seen. Colour becomes a key point of dialogue. I am drawn to this miniature palette where muted earth tones are activated by precise bursts of colour, and in my work I extend this into a more saturated and controlled system, where greens, ochres, and blues are punctuated by reds and golds that structure rhythm across the surface. There are also characters, birds, and castles extending out of the boundary of the landscape, echoing the way trees and rocks in the miniature extend outward beyond the frame which creates movement and energy. Spatially, both works reject linear perspective, privileging vertical unfolding and graphic clarity over three-dimensionality and depth of view. What remains central in both is the role of nature as a living structure that organizes rhythm, movement, and contemplation.

Persian miniature painting, non-perspectival, simultaneously layered, and unbound by optical realism, embodies this imaginal logic; as Nasr writes, its spatial language belongs to a world that "transcends the mundane surroundings of human life" and translates metaphysical realities into visible form.[63] Graves' discussion of spatial strategies reinforces this distinction: Persian manuscripts privilege multiple viewpoints and interpenetrating architectural planes to articulate a symbolic, metaphysically charged space, whereas Mughal painting under Akbar gradually absorbed elements of European naturalism, producing more volumetric architecture and a heightened sense of physical presence tied to worldly governance and courtly life.[64] In this sense, the shift from Persian to Mughal visuality parallels the movement from an imaginal world to a more empirical one; one oriented not only toward transcendence but toward statecraft, embodied spectatorship, and the visibility of the sovereign.

[63] Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality*, 181–82.
[64] Graves, 295–303.

Mughal Miniatures

Mughal miniature traditions carry forward Persian miniatures' sensitivity to pattern, textile, and landscape that sit together in a balanced blocked vertical composition encompassing poetic sentiments, but with deepening attention to natural observation.[65] I am drawn to Mughal miniatures for their muted, earthy colours and the precision with which colour, detail, and shading is handled. Browns, soft greens, ochres, and faded blues create a grounded palette that feels close to the natural world. The pointed, distinct tree forms are especially whimsical to me. Trees are often shaped rising vertically with sharp, defined tips and clustered outlined leaves. Generally speaking, the naturalism in Mughal painting, especially in botanical elements, gives the landscape a flamboyant rhythm, where the placement of each form guides the entire image. Flowers, leaves, and plants are typically painted with careful attention to detail, texture, and variation. The landscapes and gardens feel slow and deliberate, carrying a sense of order, balance, and spiritual meaning, grounded in sustained looking and display of further realism in continuation to Persian miniatures. With Mughal miniatures in mind, pointed tree forms and botanical elements are built through careful layering and detail.

Figure 13. *He brings forth the living from the dead,* 2026. Process Photography & Artwork by Nora Alkeyat.
Figure 14. *So where are you going?*, 2026. Process Photography & Artwork by Nora Alkeyat.

[65] Milo Cleveland Beach, *Early Mughal Painting* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 36–45.

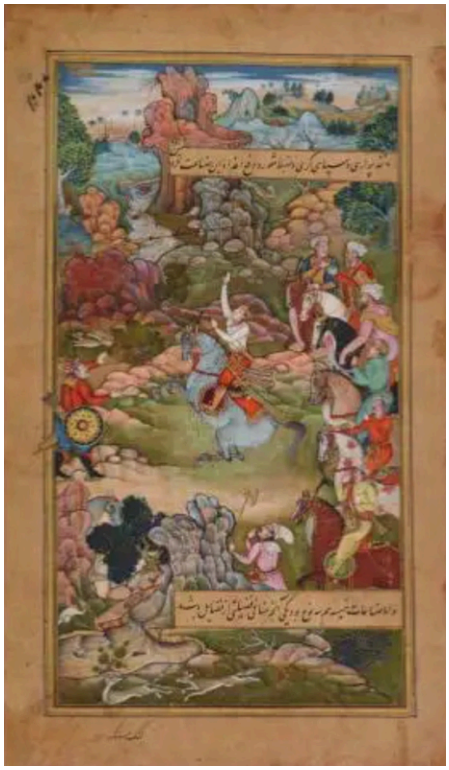

Figure 15.[66] Mughal Miniature example.

The Art of Chivalry
Fol. 138r from a manuscript of *Akhlaq-i Nasiri*
Pakistan, Lahore, ca. 1590–1595
Watercolours, gold, and ink on paper
AKM288.7

This folio from *Akhlaq-i Nasiri* visualizes Nasir al-Din Tusi's 13th-century ethical treaties, a "mirror for princes" that links personal virtue, household order, and just governance. It was produced in Lahore ca. 1590-95 for the Mughal emperor Akbar, whose court commissioned didactic works to train princes in ethics and statecraft.[67] The miniature therefore functioned as both entertainment and an exemplary, embodying chivalry as a princely skill.

> "For Nasir al-Din Tusi, a model life can be achieved by cultivating the mind, spirit, and body in equal measure. The second section of his Ethics deals with skills that one should aspire to attain, such as writing and rhetoric, as well as horsemanship and military prowess. In this illustration, a mounted prince hurls a spear into the air while his companions look on in astonishment. The accompanying text describes chivalric practices as a noble art that provides an income, cultivates physical strength and courage, and imparts the ability to protect and defend territory."[68] ("*The Art of Chivalry*," Aga Khan Museum).

[66] Aga Khan Museum, "The Art of Chivalry," fol. 138r, from a manuscript of *Akhlaq-i Nasiri*, AKM288.7
[67] Aga Khan Museum, "Akhlaq-i Nasiri."
[68] Aga Khan Museum, "Akhlaq-i Nasiri."

Compositionally the folio is organized as a vertical theatre: rocky outcrops and trees at the top, the princely display in the middle, and a group of more vulnerable figures near the bottom. The eye moves in a zig-zag down the central axis of multicoloured boulders, echoing the downward trajectory of the spear and emphasizing the prince's control over both weapon and mount. Overlapping forms, diagonally posed horses, and circular shape create a dynamic, almost spiralling rhythm.

The landscape is characteristically Mughal-Lahori[69]: fantastically coloured rocks in pink, turquoise, and ochre, delicate trees, and a distant blue horizon. The palette, minute brushwork, and fine black contour lines recall imperial atelier practice under Akbar (r. 1556-1605)[70], where Persianate conventions were enriched by close looking at nature. The contrast between the prince's luminous white tunic and the darker, earthier tones below reinforces his exemplary status.

An approximate translation of the *farsi* inscription on the upper panel reads, "Chivalry is an honorable craft, joined to training and spear-play, through which a man gains both income and bodily excellence," while the lower panel states "By means of such arts he acquires courage and the capacity to safeguard his land and its frontiers".[71]

[69] Aga Khan Museum, "Akhlaq-i Nasiri."
[70] Aga Khan Museum, "Akhlaq-i Nasiri."
[71] Aga Khan Museum, "Akhlaq-i Nasiri."

Figure 16. *Courage*, 2026. Artwork by Nora Alkeyat.

In my painting representing the faculty of anger, I re-activate elements from this Mughal precedent to narrate the virtue of courage through the story of the battle of Karbala in 680 CE, within a contemporary visual-theological framework. Like the previous folio, I center the main figure, Imam al-Hussayn (a.s.), as a rider on a rearing horse, framed by an arched field and a dense ornamental border. In place of Akbar's rocky wilderness, I construct the cityscape of the historic city of Kufa, composed of stacked houses and onlooking figures under the guise of cowardice; the central figure, Imam al-Hussayn (a.s.) stands as an emblem of martyrial courage, in the name of God, truth, and justice, grounded in divine remembrance as opposed to courtly sport, surrounded above him by wrathful characters of the Umayyad conquest. Formally, both works rely on vertical hierarchies and nested frames to structure ethical meaning, the hero occupies the compositional focal point, while civilians inhabit the community.

Medieval Illuminated Manuscripts

Medieval illuminated manuscripts provide an enchanting visual narrative that can be perceived as both fine arts and applied arts.

Figure 17.[72] Medieval Illuminated Manuscript example.

The Last Judgment: David in Prayer
Master of Guillebert de Mets
Fols. 127v–128 from illuminated manuscript, book of hours
Ghent, Belgium, ca. 1450 – 1455
Tempera, ink, and gold on parchment
19.4 × 14.0 cm
MS. 2 (84.ML.67)
The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles

Across these two late medieval painted folios, landscape is a prominent feature. It is structured as a theological instrument through which sacred time, inward devotion, and cosmic order become visible. In the opening attributed to the Master of Guillebert de Mets, "The Last Judgment: David in Prayer," on the left the celestial tribunal unfolds within an architectonic blue frame, where Christ appears enthroned above the resurrected dead, his body positioned as the axis between heaven and earth. On the right, David kneels in a rocky wilderness, receiving the vision in solitude. The iris-filled borders show curling stems,

[72] Bryan C. Keene and Alexandra Kaczenski, *Sacred Landscapes: Nature in Renaissance Manuscripts* (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2017), 62.

scrolls, and blossoms that have a very large scale, biomorphic gestural appeal. The page exemplifies a late medieval devotional logic in which beauty accentuates the moral intensity.

Figure 18. *Perseverance*, 2026. Artwork by Nora Alkeyat.
Figure 19. Medieval Illuminated Manuscript example, close-up.

In developing *Perseverance*, I found myself referencing this medieval work through its different but related ways of joining spiritual life to landscape, ornament and sacred order. I was also attentive to the manuscript's use of saturated blue and green set against a pale ground, and to the way large biomorphic floriate forms frame the miniature with a sense of grand sacred harmony. In my painting, I translated that chromatic and ornamental logic into cool mountain blues, layered green hills, and symmetrical vegetal forms that contain the prayer within the centre. The cool mountain range, layered greens, and restrained floral symmetry recall the overall medieval use of colour, shape and landscape.

Figure 20.[73] Medieval Illuminated Manuscript example.

The Adoration of the Magi
Jean Bourdichon
Tours, France, ca. 1480 to 1485
From the *Katherine Hours* Illuminated manuscript
Tempera, ink, and gold on parchment
16.4 × 11.6 cm
MS. 6 (84.ML.746), fol. 59
The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles

Job on the Dung Heap
Jean Bourdichon
Tours, France, ca. 1480 to 1485
From the *Katherine Hours* Illuminated manuscript
Tempera, ink, and gold on parchment
16.4 × 11.6 cm
MS. 6 (84.ML.746), fol. 96
The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles

The two miniatures by Jean Bourdichon, especially the "Adoration of the Magi" and "Job on the Dung Heap" show how richly detailed ornamental frames can dignify and intensify the sacred scene. I focus primarily on the frames, in which the left border paints a trellis within the containment of vegetal life. The right border is echoed by the delicacy of the surrounding vines, berries, tree branches and blossoms. The

[73] Keene and Kaczenski, *Sacred Landscapes*, 65.

medieval page often directs vision through symmetry, enclosure, and vertical ascent, and this informed my use of mirrored vegetal forms, centred text, and the upward elongation.

Figure 21. *Clarity*, 2026. Artwork by Nora Alkeyat.
Figure 22. *Clarity*, 2026. Process Photography & Artwork by Nora Alkeyat.

In both Bourdichon miniatures, the sacred scene is enclosed by an intricate vegetal border of blossoms, berries, and interlacing stems, ensuring that ornament becomes part of the theological experience of the image. I studied this integration closely in developing *Clarity*, where I similarly used symmetrical vines, flowers, and rooted forms to structure the prayer visually and make the supplication of Prophet Moses legible through symbols illustrating the text. I especially studied and recreated the saturated hues of lime and emerald leaves against royal blues and vermillion red blossoms. This historic illumination informed my palette, particularly in the way strong colour contrast can create hierarchy and spiritual intensity against a pale ground. The trees in “Job on the Dung Heap” also informed the colour tones of the roots in clarity. At the same time, my work shifts this medieval language toward a more illustrative approach through contemporary anatomical symbols. Whereas Bourdichon places natural convention within the frame, I use illustrated symbols to map the meanings of the prayer, linking the heart, brain, unravelling

roots, and holy book into a contemplative *tafseer* (تفسير | Islamic science of interpretation) of supplication, understanding, and divinely aided speech. I also play with scale by accentuating larger motifs.

Figure 23. *Clarity*, 2026. Process Photography & Artwork by Nora Alkeyat.
Figure 24. Medieval Illuminated Manuscript example, close-up.

Figure 25.[74] Medieval Biblical Illustration example.

Unnamed Folio from *The Holkham Bible*
London, second quarter of the 14th century
Tempera and ink on parchment
28.5 × 21.0 cm
Add. MS 47682, fol. 7v–8
The British Library, London

This illustration from the fourteenth-century Holkham Bible presents a remarkably restrained yet expressive palette, built from softened blues, muted reds, pale ochres, and parchment toned grounds that allow line and wash to remain visually primary. Rather than pursuing volumetric fullness and solid colours, the image relies on contour, patterned hatching, and thin tonal passages to articulate form. Noah, the ark, the raven and dove, and the gathered figures are arranged in a vertically compressed pictorial field in which episodes seem to unfold almost simultaneously, giving the page a layered narrative logic typical of manuscript illumination. There appears an abstracted characteristic quality to the rendering despite its traditional representational subject matter. Architecture becomes a rhythmic scaffolding of repeated marks, drapery is reduced to angular folds and flowing accents of blue, and the landscape is indicated through sparse vegetal motifs rather than fully described terrain. The result is an image that oscillates between depiction and notation, between storytelling and visual thought.

[74] Scot McKendrick and Kathleen Doyle, *Bible Manuscripts: 1400 Years of Scribes and Scripture* (London: British Library, 2007), 126.

Figure 26. *Agriculture*, 2026. Process Photography & Artwork by Nora Alkeyat.

Upon coming across *The Holkham Bible*, I began an oil pastel experiment which became a crucial turning point in my practice because it allowed me to coin a style of illustration I call *abstracted symbology*. Looking at *The Holkham Bible*, I was drawn to the way meaning emerges layering, and the suggestive incompleteness of drawing and form. In my own pastel work, I began to loosen my illustration practice in response to that inspiration. Rather than preplanning every symbol and drawing and colouring in a rigid sequence, I allowed forms to accumulate through movement, adjacency, colour relation, and shifting orientation. This opened a different kind of contemplative process for me, one in which symbols could surface gradually and remain partially fluid rather than being overdetermined from the start. The oil pastel medium was especially important in this regard because its smudging, pressure, and layering encouraged an embodied and intuitive mode of construction. Through this experiment, I began to uncover meaning and interpretation through artistic workflow itself, by thinking through making rather than imposing a fixed visual system beforehand. That shift was pivotal to the development of my thesis, because it restored a sense of synergy between thought, contemplation, and illustrating, allowing the image to become a site of discovery rather than merely execution.

DOCUMENTATION

Reflective Process Documentation

> "Our English word "illustration" stems from the root of a lovely Latin word: lux, lucis, denoting "light." We may think of "lucent," "lucid," "lustrous," "illustrious," and even "luminous." For, an illustration is an enlightening: the casting of a beam, the shining of a ray; it is the directing of a spot or a beacon, the switching on of a lamp. illustration gives a focused glow to a story, a brightening, a bringing forth from shadows."[75] (Handler Spitz, 67).

Figure 27. Studio Setting, 2025. Photography by Nora Alkeyat.

Temple Grandin's articulation of visual thinking has given me a language to understand what I do in the studio as a process of collecting references, assembling symbols, and fragmenting knowledge into form. She describes thought as image-based, associative, and constructed through the accumulation and sorting of visual details rather than through linear reasoning, where all thinking operates through photo-realistic images that are grouped into categories to form meaning.[76] I recognize this directly in how I move from a scriptural verse into a painting. I begin with a cluster of mental pictures which I describe as a vision in mind that surfaces through deep reflection, often situated in nature, feelings, memory, and symbolic correspondences, which I gradually collage and sketch into a visual composition.

[75] Handler Spitz, "Homage to Illustration," 67.
[76] Grandin, "How Does Visual Thinking Work in the Mind of a Person with Autism?," 1437.

Figure 28. Studio Setting and Reference Books, 2025. Photography by Nora Alkeyat.

This process resembles what Grandin describes as bottom-up thinking, where meaning emerges from assembling references through small visual fragments into a coherent whole rather than being imposed from the outset.[77] As I began to more critically examine and articulate my *Visual Theology* practice, I came to understand it as a journey across different modes of making and thinking. I began in the digital realm, shaped by my background in design and entered into traditional arts with deep reverence for the discipline which involves intricacy, technicality, perfectionism and wisdom. Over time, however, I began to notice that excessive symmetry and digital perfection started to interrupt my thinking rather than support it. The screen created a barrier between my hand, material, heart, and the theological ideas I was trying to explore more deeply. As I shifted into painting through more vernacular, layered, and tactile processes, I found that my thinking and practice evolved.

[77] Grandin, "How Does Visual Thinking Work in the Mind of a Person with Autism?," 1437–38.

Mapping Meaning

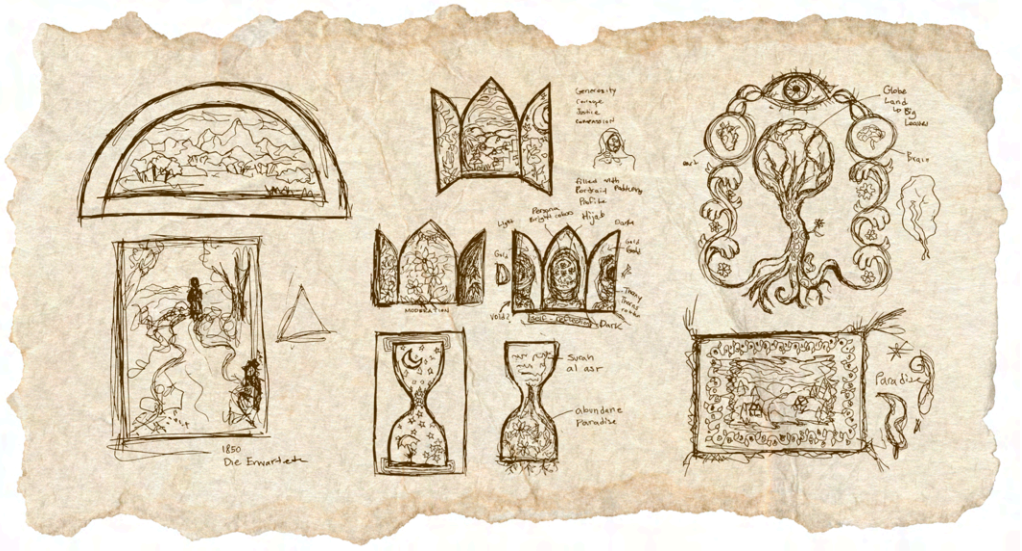

Figure 29. Composition Sketches, 2026. Artwork by Nora Alkeyat.

In the drawing and composition construction phase, I begin to map meaning by treating symbols, virtues, and vices as a visual lexicon that must be carefully arranged, balanced, and narrated. This stage of drawing becomes a form of thinking, where the page operates as a site of reasoning and reflection. I diagram concepts and sketch virtues and vices as visual elements, then study how they harmonize, oppose, or guide one another within the composition, constructing a moral and theological narrative through spatial relationships. This process feels similar to assembling a puzzle, where individual symbols function as pieces that must be arranged until a coherent image and meaning emerges. Temple Grandin describes visual thinking as a process of assembling many small pieces of information until a larger principle becomes visible, much like completing a jigsaw puzzle without first seeing the final picture.[78] This description closely reflects my own compositional process, where meaning is discovered through drawing rather than being predetermined.

[78] Grandin, “How Does Visual Thinking Work in the Mind of a Person with Autism?,” 1439.

Figure 30. *Clarity*, 2026. Artwork by Nora Alkeyat.

> "Moses prayed, "My Lord! Uplift my heart for me, and make my task easy, and remove the impediment from my tongue so people may understand my speech"
>
> (Qur'an, 20:25–28)

To exemplify, this painting visualizes the Qur'anic prayer of Prophet Moses through a symbolic anatomy of knowledge, speech, and inner receptivity. The brains at the upper register signify clarity and understanding, while the hearts below evoke a peaceful and open interior state. At the base, the holy book anchors the composition as the foundation of all *'ilm* (عِلْم | Divine knowledge), the light through which the task is made easeful. Extending downward, the roots suggest the unravelling of knots within both heart, mind and tongue, releasing obstruction.

Faculties of the Soul

I started off my research with *Faculties of the Soul*. I naively thought this was a small experimentation that would lead to larger scale paintings. Little did I know this series would become the anchor and focal point of my work, a visualized philosophy where illustration meets traditional painting. Within Islamic moral thought, the human soul is understood as a balance between multiple faculties, each capable of virtue or vice depending on its moderation and excess or deficiency, and this framework informs how I construct my compositions visually as systems of balance, tension, and hierarchy.[79] Drawing therefore becomes a method of organizing a composition that functions as a map of the soul and its potential paths. In this way, the construction drawings are both preparatory and philosophical, allowing me to think through theology and narrative by arranging symbols into a visual order that can be read, contemplated, and experienced.

Figure 31. Surface Preparation, 2025. Process Photography & Artwork by Nora Alkeyat.

The process of building these panels was slow and physical. Preparing the wood, staining the surface, sanding, transferring drawings, outlining, and then slowly introducing colour required patience and endurance. The surface absorbed pigment differently than paper or canvas, and the stained ground created

[79] Al-Naraqi, *Jāmiʿ al-Saʿādāt,* 12.

a muted, earth based tone that connected the work visually to soil, bark, and clay. The more time I spent with the panels, the more I understood that the material was shaping the image as much as the drawing was. The wood grain, the absorbency of the surface and the tactile resistance of painting on a textured panel all influenced the way I drew and painted the figures, landscapes, and symbols.

Figure 32. Drawings, 2025. Process Photography & Artwork by Nora Alkeyat.

Figure 33. Painting, 2025. Process Photography & Artwork by Nora Alkeyat.

When painting usually felt healing and meditative, allowing me to dive deeper into studying knowledge and entering a visual immersive world of the concept, this series felt fragmented and heavily pre-planned. I felt restricted, as if I was executing a task rather than entering a contemplative space. Perhaps this feeling came from entering new territory and learning how to work large-scale on wood, how to prepare surfaces, and how to build a painting through stages rather than through instinctive flow. I loved the painting process itself, yet the small figures and tight compositions required careful control, which limited the freespirited painting process I longed for. I began to realize that this tension between control and flow was not a problem to solve, but a condition of the work itself that required time to become muscle memory and feel natural, similar to the habitual training process of purifying one's character.

Figure 34. Painting, 2025. Process Photography & Artwork by Nora Alkeyat.

Over time, I began to see that what felt like restriction was actually teaching me discipline. The small scale forced me to think carefully about the meaning behind colour selection and the level of detail and clarity I had to decide. The controlled drawing taught me patience and precision. The painting stage allowed moments of release through colour, texture, and gesture. This series taught me that my practice exists in a space between illustration and painting, between planning and improvisation, between structure

and expression. The *Faculties of the Soul* series therefore became a training ground where I learned how to construct meaning, and how to balance narrative, symbolism, and painterly expression within a single surface. What began as an experiment slowly revealed itself as the foundation of my visual language and the conceptual core of my thesis work.

Figure 35. *Faculties of the Soul*, 2026. Artwork by Nora Alkeyat. Photography by Aritra Das.

My own work aligns consciously with the imaginal mode: I avoid perspectival depth in favor of an animated and flattened two-dimensional characters, setting and patterns. This approach perhaps situates my practice between an Islamic intellectual tradition and a contemporary exploration, grounding my pictorial visuals in the metaphysics of the imaginal, where virtues and vices acquire form. Just as illuminated manuscripts historically served as vehicles for envisioning divine light, *barakah*, stories, and moral exemplarity, alongside scripture, my miniature-inspired compositions use layered two-dimensional scenes of landscapes, architecture and motifs to render theological concepts. My scenes employ abstracted viewpoints, suspended perspectives, and metaphysically charged landscapes that resist the single, empirical vantage point. Through references to art-historical precedents I am able to observe, recognize, and intentionally apply Persian and Mughal miniature compositions, implied lines, and moral lessons that align with my aims to create an imaginal *Visual Theology*.

Figure 36. *Faculty of Desire*, 2026. Artwork by Nora Alkeyat. Photography by Aritra Das.

This idea of multi-scenic abstracted viewpoints is successfully seen in the final painting depicting the **Faculty of Desire, Humility** centred on a heart marked by an eye, a direct metaphor for *taqwa* (تقوى | God-consciousness), where God consciousness is expressed. Around this figure, virtues become legible through everyday scenes: Discipline and Perseverance are embodied by the working man bent into the field, suggesting restraint as labour, repetition, and cultivation rather than mere refusal. Modesty and Humility gather around the central stance through covered forms and lowered gestures, while Contentedness is placed as a quiet counterpoint within the wider landscape, resisting the spectacle of excess. Above, Apathy is industrial and numb: a line of nearly identical, faceless men and a smoking

skyline flatten individuality into sameness, translating Lethargy, Hard-heartedness, Treachery, Prejudice, Envy, Antisocial withdrawal, and Heedlessness into a moral climate of detachment. Below, Greed becomes a vibrantly egocentric terrain where appetite turns theatrical: apple-core earth being eaten out by oversized utensils, feasting figures, accumulating objects and crowds, and self displaying figures visualize Gluttony, Lust, Miserliness, Excess, Self conceit, Hypocrisy, Narcissism, Showing off, Wastefulness, and Sloth as an expanding field of consumption that overwhelms the social and spiritual commons.

Figure 37. *Faculty of Desire*, 2026. Artwork by Nora Alkeyat. Photography by Aritra Das.

Nature Surrealism

Figure 38. *Rahma*, 2025. Process Photography & Artwork by Nora Alkeyat.

Figure 38. *Rahma*, 2025. Process Photography & Artwork by Nora Alkeyat.

With the *Abstracted Symbology* series, an artistic style developed a deeper flow in my practice where painting felt as natural as breathing. This was the point at which making started to feel fully internalized, as though the work was moving through my blood, into my hands, to the brush, and onto the surface,

whether leather, wood, or aged paper. My process began with the selection of a virtue or vice, followed by freehand drawing, where imagined forms, symbols, and parables first appeared as fragments across the wooden panel. I would begin with a single sketch, a tree, a path, a hand, a rose, a horizon, and then allow further symbols to gather around it based on the images and thoughts that would emerge in my mind as I would deeply begin to feel and imagine this virtue or vice. In this phase, thought moved through drawing. Temple Grandin's account of visual thinking as a bottom up process of assembling small pieces until a larger principle becomes visible closely mirrors this method, especially her description of concept formation through categories, images, and accumulated details.[80] I experienced these works in a similar way, as visual constellations that only gradually disclosed their inner order. What emerged was a lexicon of nature forms that could express spiritual meaning through resemblance, energy, and relation rather than literal communication.

Figure 39. *Abstracted Symbology*, 2025. Process Photography & Artwork by Nora Alkeyat.

[80] Grandin, "How Does Visual Thinking Work in the Mind of a Person with Autism?," 1437–38.

Figure 40. *Rahma*, 2026. Artwork by Nora Alkeyat.

This piece specifically, reflects on *rahma* (رحمة | all-encompassing compassion) a core condition of care that sustains both the visible and unseen. The composition unfolds as a living system, where the tree becomes the focal point through which mercy circulates. Its roots extend downward and take on the form of hands, gently nourishing the earth. This gesture draws on the attribute of *Al-Rahman*, suggesting a form of beneficent mercy that gives without measure, reaching into all layers of existence. At the middle right, the image of the womb holds a developing fetus, grounding the work in the linguistic connection between *rahm* (رَحِم | the womb) and *rahma* (رحمة | all-encompassing compassion). The womb becomes a miraculous cradle where sustenance and life is carried, protected, and formed through divine compassion. Above, the branching forms and flowing paths guide the eye upward toward the sun, rendered in gold as a source of warmth and continuity that keeps the earth lit and growing. Surrounding elements, including the heart and vegetal growth, reinforce a sense of interconnected care. The painting expresses beneficent compassion as a continuous, circulating force shaping a world held together through a continuous cycle of balance, love, life and provision.

Figure 41. *Modesty*, 2025. Process Photography & Artwork by Nora Alkeyat.

Figure 42. *Modesty*, 2025. Process Photography & Artwork by Nora Alkeyat.

Finally, this painting reflects on modesty as something lived, sensed, and gradually understood. The hills and trees begin to gather into the form of a head, softly draped, suggesting that the veil is not separate from the natural world but part of it.The greens hold a sense of an emblematic grounded life, while the warmer tones ground the scene in the earth and soil. The figure in the front shares a view with you, the observer, becoming a way of seeing, an alignment between the self, natural world and the form of creation.

Figure 43. Nature Surrealist Triptychs, 2026. Process Photography & Artwork by Nora Alkeyat.

Figure 44. Nature Surrealist Triptychs, 2026. Process Photography & Artwork by Nora Alkeyat.

The triptych series gave rise to what I call *nature surrealism*: a mode of painting in which land, vegetation, sky, root systems, pattern, and anatomy are fused into imaginal parables referencing paradise, '*alam al-mithāl (*عالم المثال | Imaginal Realm) and sometimes but rarely, the *barzakh (*برزخ | portal between death and resurrection). Carol Bier's writing on '*alam al-mithāl (*عالم المثال | Imaginal Realm) and on

pattern as visual commentary has been resonant here, particularly her insistence that meaning is carried through process, repetition, and emergent relationship rather than through isolated motifs alone.[81] Referring to Ghazali's (d. 1111) twelfth-century text titled "The Niche of Lights", Edward Omar Moad's discussion in "Mishkat al-Anwar" (2007) also helped me articulate how concrete imagery can hold and transmit abstract realities, and how meanings are "specified within the frames of the similitudes" through symbolic form.[82] In one of my experiments, there are large hills hugging toward one another suggesting forgiveness, while hypocrisy may take form through a double sided rose bush that mutates into a Venus flytrap. These images are composed to remain open enough for contemplation while still anchored in a spiritual gesture of landscapes. They invite a crossing from the visible into the inward, from landform into perception, from symbol into wonder.

Figure 45. *He brings them out of darkness and into light*, 2026. Artwork by Nora Alkeyat..

This body of work also marked a decisive shift in my understanding of illustration. I began to trust that painting could think, teach, and guide naturally. Barton, Sawyer, and Swanson's writing on observation, contemplation, and symbolic thought affirmed my investment in ambiguity, slow looking, and layered

[81] Bier, *"*Art and Mithāl,*"* 492; 501.
[82] Edward Omar Moad, "Al-Ghazali's Reflections on the Metaphysics of Metaphor in the *Mishkat al-Anwar*," *Sophia* 46 (2007) 163–65.

interpretation, where meaning unfolds through focused attention rather than immediate legibility.[83] This is a central component to the spiritual function of self-actualization. Each landscape carries a sacred message for those willing to enter it with curiosity and openness for guidance. Some works are supported by poetry or text when the image calls for a verbal guidance. Others remain visually ambiguous, allowing viewers to dwell in interpretation and symbolic openness. Across all of them, I came to understand that landscape itself could become a universal theological language. The land speaks, the horizon carries force, vegetal forms embody logic and order while colourful curvilinear flows of the hills express feelings. In this phase of my research, my practice began to feel less like an arrangement of influences and uncovered a living visual language of its own.

Figure 46. *He brings them out of darkness and into light*, 2026. Artwork by Nora Alkeyat.

This triptych visually interprets the verse of the Qur'an "He brings them out of darkness and into light" (2:257) and expresses the guiding light centred away from gloom and darkness, a symbolic landscape of a spiritual path. Across the three panels, the eye is led from a dimmer and unsettled terrain toward an illuminated centre where a golden path opens through dense foliage. The composition suggests that guidance unfolds as a gradual journey through layered states of perception, growth, and awakening. The

[83] Barton, Sawyer, and Swanson, "They Want to Learn How to Think: Using Art to Enhance Comprehension," 126–27.

left panel is marked by cooler tones, drooping clouds, and a heavier atmosphere. Rain falls over a winding landscape, and the dark blue tree in the foreground bends inward, evoking spiritual obscurity, sorrow, or confusion. By contrast, the central panel becomes radiant and rich. Framed by an arch-like form, the landscape opens into a luminous interior world where varied trees and plants gather around a gold path that recedes into the distance. The gilded line acts as both road and light, suggesting divine guidance. The arch intensifies the sense of threshold, as though one is entering a sanctified state of clarity. The right panel retains the landscape language of the first, yet transforms it through moonlight, stars, and brighter vegetation. Darkness is present.

Beginning with a Qur'anic verse, I sit with it, imagine it into a parable, sketch, layer symbols and map out the composition, and then paint, allowing the image to express meaning. Earlier in my process, I worked through tightly planned drawings and miniature-inspired figuration, which extended production over months and disrupted the flow between thought and making. The shift toward a more direct, go-with-the-flow sketching and symbol layering process has condensed this timeline, allowing the final scroll to naturally emerge within a couple days.

Figure 47. *He brings forth the living from the dead,* 2026. Artwork by Nora Alkeyat.

Figure 48. *He brings forth the living from the dead*, 2026. Artwork by Nora Alkeyat.

Figure 49. *He brings forth the living from the dead,* 2026. Process Photography & Artwork by Nora Alkeyat.

Figure 50. *He brings forth the living from the dead,* 2026. Process Photography & Artwork by Nora Alkeyat.

Figure 51. *He brings forth the living from the dead,* 2026. Artwork by Nora Alkeyat.

This leather scroll painting reflects on the Qur'anic verse:

> "Know that Allah revives the earth after its death. We have certainly made the signs clear for you so perhaps you will understand" (Qur'an 57:17)

Thus, the scroll translates the theological idea of resurrection into a visual passage through the parable of seasonal change and revival of the earth. The composition unfolds horizontally like a narrative manuscript, guiding the viewer from an autumnal landscape into winter barrenness and onward toward the return of spring and abundance of summer. In doing so, the work treats the cycles of nature as divine signs through which eschatological knowledge becomes imaginable and appreciated for its miraculous nature. Its scroll format painted on leather, the piece also carries a strong material resonance, joining sacred reflection to tactility, craft, and the intimacy of the handmade object. Where conventionally, scrolls had written text, this painted scroll presents visuals as a form of language to be read. The process of unrolling becomes physically interactive and echoes the reveal of revelation.

Figure 52. *So where are you going?*, 2026. Process Photography & Artwork by Nora Alkeyat.

Figure 53. *So where are you going?*, 2026. Process Photography & Artwork by Nora Alkeyat.

Figure 54. *So where are you going?* 2026. Artwork by Nora Alkeyat. Photography by Aritra Das.

Finally, this leather painting translates the Qur'anic question: "So where are you going?" *(*Qur'an, 81:26). This verse is a rhetorical question turning into a contemplative landscape that stages orientation as both a spiritual and imaginative act. Rather than illustrating the verse literally, the work renders it as a winding path that draws the eye upward through an illuminated guide in the form of the curving road. The road becomes a visual metaphor for moral direction, inviting the viewer to consider not only the destination, but the quality of one's movement through the world. In this sense, the composition operates as a pedagogical image, using visual play to prompt inward reflection. The stylized trees, varied in colour, form, and scale, draw in part from Mughal and broader miniature painting traditions, where vegetal forms often carry ornamental, symbolic, and spatial intelligence. Here, however, those references are loosened and reimagined through a playful visual language that also recalls the exaggerated whimsy of Dr. Seuss. This combination softens the perceived distance between sacred text and viewer, allowing scripture to enter the imaginative field through charm, rhythm, and accessibility without losing its seriousness.

Exhibition

Figure 55. *Sacred Landscapes*, 2026. Photography by Makayla Lauren.

Refer to Link to Exhibition Video for a filmed experience of *Sacred Landscapes*, presented at the Graduate Gallery at OCAD University, in the dense circulation of downtown Toronto, during the final ten nights of Ramadan. Many visitors, residents, friends and family, and students of OCADU, TMU, UofT and YorkU, all described the exhibition as a place of calm, refuge and return. To my surprise, many returned more than once on the following days. Some brought more friends or family. Others lingered in the space to sit, pray, reflect, or simply remain quiet. The soundscape of birds and nature, softly present in the background, contributed to this atmosphere, but it was not only ambience that shaped the experience.

Figure 56. *Sacred Landscapes*, 2026. Photography by Aritra Das.

I was physically present in the exhibition for long hours, during downtimes sitting quietly in the carpeted centre of the gallery, sometimes praying, other times napping, but most times welcoming guests, harmonizing discussions and sharing insights and stories into the artwork. Yet the intensity of feelings that visitors experienced remained, for me, somewhat withheld, as I had to repeat the concepts and message of the work like a broken record. It reminded me that an artwork exceeds the maker's own emotional access to it. Once put out into the world, it enters another perceptual and spiritual gaze. Several Muslim women approached me in tears, describing how particular concepts had met them in states of grief, fatigue, longing, or hope. After a year and a half of largely solitary studio work, this was validating and igniting in the deepest sense. It's what I do this for. The work had left my inner world and entered a communal feeling and healing exchange.

Figure 57. *Sacred Landscapes Exhibit*, 2026. Photography by Aritra Das.

The first way the exhibition was experienced by many visitors was as a contemplative environment that functioned as a form of meditation, spiritual learning, and reflective encounter. The space was intentionally arranged in a circular dynamic, with stools scattered throughout the space, near artworks so that viewers were invited to sit and move slowly, encountering symbols, parables, and sacred landscapes that required contemplation, stillness and return. Many visitors expressed that they felt relaxed, grounded, and emotionally moved, describing the exhibition as calming, art therapeutic, and spiritually elevating.

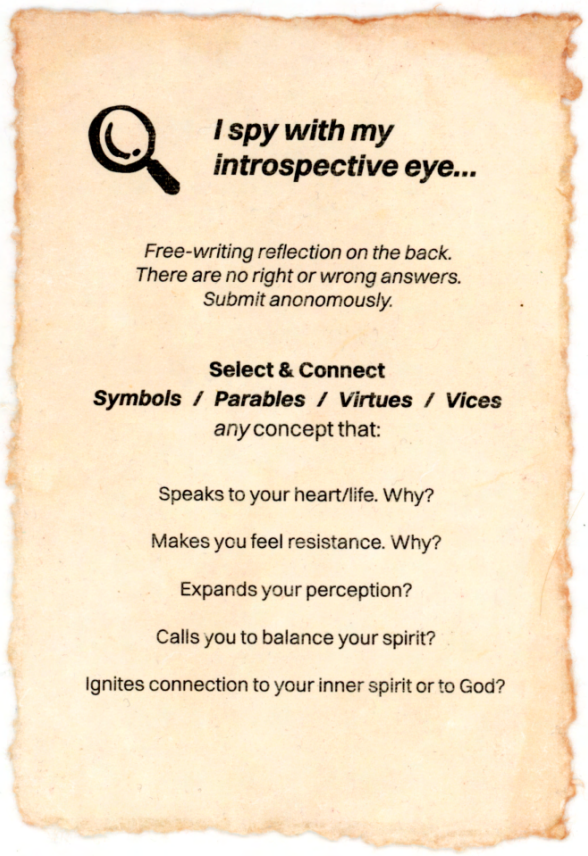

Figure 58. *Sacred Landscapes*, 2026. Photography by Aritra Das. Figure 59. Reflection Prompt, 2026. Scan.

To guide this reflective process, I created an interactive activity titled *I Spy With My Introspective Eye,* in which visitors received a reflection prompt card and walked slowly throughout the exhibition looking for symbols and meanings, then wrote a personal reflection and submitted it anonymously. The prompts asked viewers to connect symbols, virtues, vices, and parables to their own lives and inner spirit, to notice what spoke to their heart, what created resistance, and what expanded their perception or strengthened their connection to God. This activity encouraged the viewer to participate in reflection sharing. Educational theory explains that observation is the necessary precursor to insight, and when viewers slow down and focus on details, they construct deeper symbolic understanding and personal interpretation to truly contemplate and internalize concepts.[84]

[84] Barton, Sawyer, and Swanson, "They Want to Learn How to Think: Using Art to Enhance Comprehension," 126.

Visitor engagement revealed that different viewers were drawn to different visual languages within the exhibition based on their temperaments and individual modes of thinking. In *Perspectives on Education from a Person on the Autism Spectrum,* Grandin expands this idea by distinguishing between visual thinkers, pattern thinkers, and verbal thinkers, arguing that visual cognition often excels at perceiving structure, spatial logic, and categorical relationships.[85] Those who were more analytical were drawn to diagrammatic works, while more emotional viewers were drawn to the *Abstracted Symbology* series. Curious and open minded viewers spent time with the triptychs, while more scripturally traditional and text oriented viewers gravitated toward the *Qur'anic Dua* series, where written prayer and biomorphic illumination synergized. A common denominator of magnetic pull among the majority of viewers is the *Faculties of the Soul* series because of its storytelling structure and detailed painting technique, which invites slow looking and discovery, reading the visual narratives vertically across panels. This variation in viewer engagement reflects the idea that individuals construct meaning based on the details they notice and the emotional and intellectual frameworks they bring and come from.

Figure 60. *Faculty of Desire*, 2026. Artwork by Nora Alkeyat. Photography by Aritra Das.

[85] Temple Grandin, "Perspectives on Education from a Person on the Autism Spectrum," *Educational Horizons* 84, no. 4 (2006): 229–234.

The exhibition demonstrated that art can function as a contemplative tool that transforms the gaze, shifting viewers from passive looking to reflective seeing. Through symbol, story, pattern and nature, the artworks created an environment in which viewers were invited to think, reflect, connect, and spiritually orient themselves. The exhibition aimed to create a condition in which theological ideas could be felt, contemplated, and internalized through visual experience.

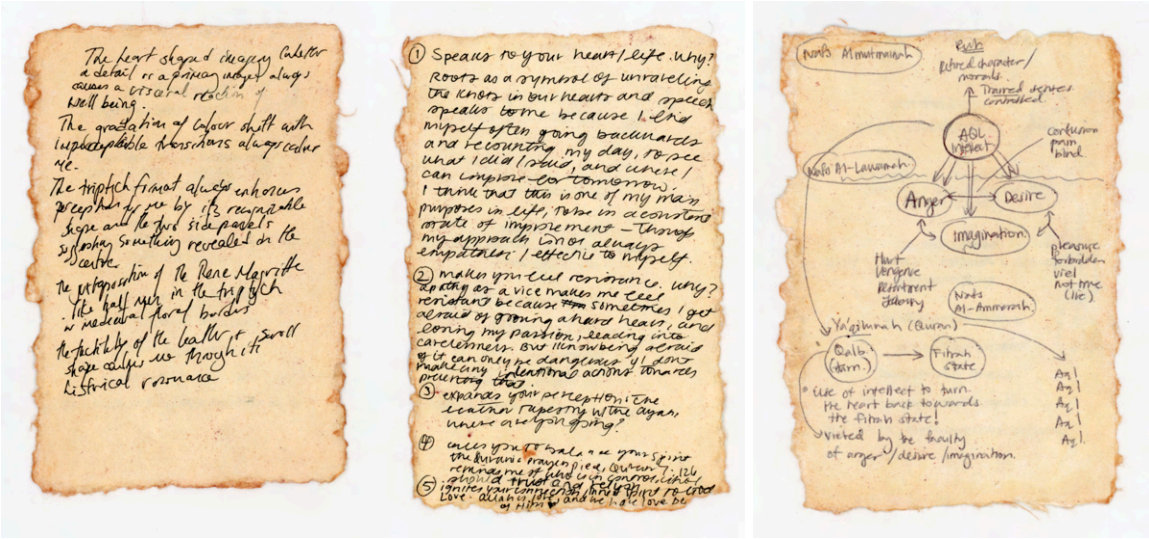

Figure 61. Reflection Prompt, 2026. Scan.

Through the exhibition emerged interfaith dialogue and exchange of knowledge. The artworks invited a gateway into shared spiritual language, especially through the prayer series, which some visitors initially read through their own religious background in Christianity before recognizing its Islamic grounding. These moments of recognition opened discussions about Islam's relation to other Abrahamic traditions. In one exchange, a recent Mexican Christian convert was drawn to the devotional tone of the paintings and prayers and began asking questions about scripture, and the common theological ground between Christianity and Islam. What became clear through these many encounters was that the exhibition did not exclude religious difference, but rather made dialogue possible through visual and affective familiarity. The paintings allowed Islam to be encountered not through tragedy, media distortion, or controversy, but through beauty, devotion, and contemplative openness, the true is Islam. This shifted the terms of encounter and made the gallery a space in which curiosity could unfold with an open heart.

Figure 62. *Sacred Landscapes Exhibit*, 2026. Photography by Aritra Das.

Ultimately, I dream of a reality where art moves beyond the gallery setting, which is often seen as inaccessible, highbrow, sterile, unaffordable and disconnected from communities and the working class. I included an art table because I wanted the artwork to travel into ordinary life. Visitors purchased works as gifts, as reminders, and as companions for particular moments of struggle. One visitor bought the perseverance prayer piece because it serves to comfort a difficult period in her life. That mattered deeply to me. If the work can move beyond exhibition and enter homes, prayer corners, and daily visions, then it continues its task.

CONCLUSION

Visual Theology as an Art Practice

This art practice has shown me that painting and illustration can become a way of inquiring, reflecting, and transmitting knowledge. Making became a mode of thinking, and the image became a way of inviting others into sacred knowledge. I now feel there is this new seed formed, watered, and planted, that is my practice, and it will continue to grow, up high into the sky and horizon to share with others, but also down deep, beneath the surface, tangled and intertwined, evolving as I grow and change.

Visual Theology, as it has emerged through this thesis, feels to me less like a finished framework and more like the beginning of a lifelong path. I feel I have only touched the surface. Through all the experiments, uncertainties, and community responses that shaped this process, I now understand more clearly the direction in which this practice wants to move. It feels deeply flowing from my heart to my hands, something that moves through me with a kind of natural continuity. Without this rigorous and at times scattered process of exploration, I would not have arrived at this clarity. I leave this thesis with a stronger pull toward Qur'anic verses as my primary site of inquiry, and toward landscape parables as a way of entering more deeply into *tafseer* (تفسير | Islamic science of interpretation), understanding, and relationship with revelation.

Figure 63. *He brings forth the living from the dead,* 2026. Artwork by Nora Alkeyat.

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Figure 09:
Bridgeman Images. “Iznik tiles, Rustem Pasha Mosque, Istanbul, Turkey (photo).” Accessed March 31, 2026. Bridgeman Images. Image no. WRP617659.

Figure 11:
Royal Hunt Scene. Folio from a manuscript of the Shāhnāmeh (Book of Kings). Iran, Tabriz, Safavid dynasty, ca. 1525–1545. Opaque watercolour, ink, and gold on paper. Image provided by author. Collection unknown (dispersed manuscript).

Figure 15:
Aga Khan Museum. “The Art of Chivalry.” *Fol. 138r, from a manuscript of* Akhlaq-i Nasiri, AKM288.7. https://remastered.agakhanmuseum.org/agakhan/AKM288.7/QR.html

Figure 17, 19, 20 and 24:
Keene, Bryan C., and Alexandra Kaczenski. *Sacred Landscapes: Nature in Renaissance Manuscripts*. Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2017, 62, 65.

Figure 25:
McKendrick, Scot, and Kathleen Doyle. *Bible Manuscripts: 1400 Years of Scribes and Scripture*. London: British Library, 2007, 126.

LIST OF FIGURES

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APPENDICES

Link to Appendices

Appendix A: Final Artwork Documentation

Appendix B: English Glossary

Appendix C: Arabic Glossary