

## ABOUT: ISLAM

1.6 billion people practice Islam — 23% of the world’s population — yet by 2016 I was painfully aware that Islam was the only major philosophic system I had yet to explore visually.

How to proceed in an encounter with such a diverse culture? Sunnis account for about 85% of the faithful compared to 15% for Shia, yet many Muslims choose not to affiliate with a specific sect but volunteer that they are “just a Muslim.”

My investigation led to two visually different sets of paintings, one I call *Purification of the Heart* and the other *Tughra*.

### PURIFICATION OF THE HEART

In October 2016 I gave a speech about my work in New Orleans during an educational conference on creativity and madness attended by medical personnel. I mentioned my interest in studying aspects of Islam. Afterwards, two Muslim doctors talked with me and advocated for my artistic pursuit; one of the doctors provided an introduction to **Hamza Yusuf**.

Subsequently, I visited Dr. Yusuf at Zaytuna College, a Sunni institution, in Berkeley CA where he is the president. (Yusuf is no. 23 in the 2020 list of *The 500 Most Influential Muslims*—also known as *The Muslim 500*—in an annual publication compiled by the Royal Islamic Strategic Studies Centre in Amman, Jordan.)

My talk with Dr. Yusuf led to my reading of his book translating and commenting upon the poem *Maḥarat al-Qulūb* composed in the 19th-century by Imām Mawlūd. The effects of Yusuf’s book, *Purification of the Heart: Signs, Symptoms and Cures of the Spiritual Diseases of the Heart* (2004, 2012), ultimately resulted in the series of paintings entitled *Purification of the Heart*.

## TUGHRA

I was drawn to Sufism, or *tasawwuf*, often described as Islamic mysticism. Sufis utilize prayer, asceticism, music and even dance to achieve a deeper understanding or knowledge of God. Traditional Sufism may be interpreted as a branch of Islam providing a personal and mystical connection to enlightenment or “divine love.”

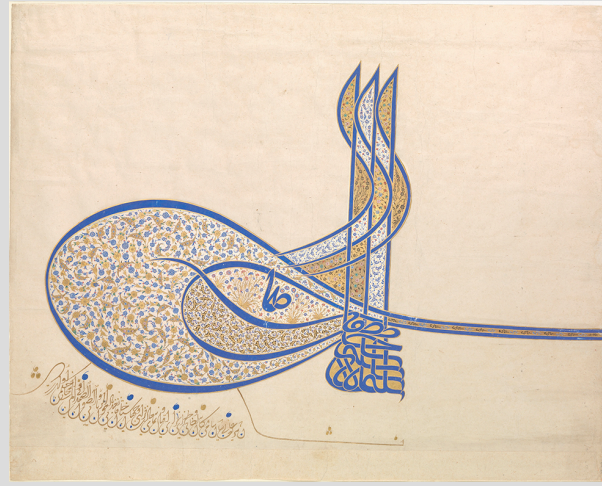
(Sufism stands almost diametrically opposed to the Islamic Fundamentalism school of Wahhabism and Salafism, the Sunni ideology that rejects traditional teachings on Islam in favor of direct, fundamentalist reinterpretation; they usually dismiss Sufis as polytheists and apostates who are to be killed and regard their shrines as idolatrous.)

It has been estimated that 25% of adult Sunni Muslims participate in a Sufi order, a *ṭuruq*. All Sufi orders have their own *silsia* or “chain of transmission” whose representation is a *shajara* (tree) documenting the passing of knowledge from Muhammad to each succeeding master unto the present day.

Perhaps the best-known teacher of Sufism in America and Europe in the 20th century was **Inayat Khan** (1882-1927, India); he created a legacy of Sufi *universalism*. In this uniquely western form of Sufism, there are no barriers of race, creed or religion, it is not a religion, but rather a way of life that enhances and fulfills every religion. As Inayat Khan said, “The Sufi sees the truth in every religion.”

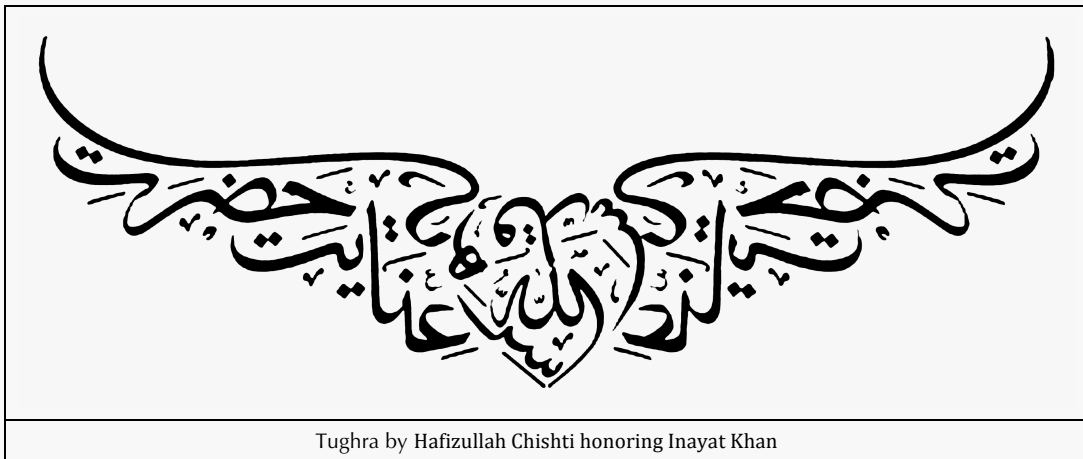
The Sufi order he created today is known as *The Inayati Order*.

Historically, Islamic leaders used a *tughra*. A *tughra* is a calligraphic monogram, seal or signature of a sultan that was affixed to all official documents, correspondence and coins. Elaborate decorated versions were created for important documents such as this *tughra* of Suleiman the Magnificent.



Tughra of Suleiman the Magnificent (1494-1566)

Inayat Khan chose a winged heart, an old Sufi symbol, as a tughra for his order. In 1989, Inayat Khan's successor, **Pir Vilayat Inayat Khan** (1916–2004), received a gift from Hafizullah Chishti of a new tughra honoring Inayat Khan.



Tughra by Hafizullah Chishti honoring Inayat Khan

The Arabic script of the heart reads, *qaddasa Allahu sirrahu*, a traditional phrase used when mentioning the name of a deceased Sufi saint; translated it means “blessed mysterious joy.” Sufis often use the word *sirr* to describe the divine wonder discovered in the depths of the heart. A non-literal translation might be, “May God’s message spread and purify your heart.” It is this tughra and its associated philosophy that helped inspire me to create my *Tughra* series of paintings.