



Hadith and Visual Arts: A Reinterpretation of Figurative Prohibition from the Perspective of Islamic Aesthetics and Socio-Cultural Context

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ABSTRACT

This study reexamines hadiths concerning the prohibition of figurative representation through a multidisciplinary framework that integrates theological, historical, and aesthetic perspectives. Employing a hermeneutic phenomenological design combined with qualitative content analysis, the research analyzes canonical hadith collections alongside classical and contemporary scholarly interpretations. The analytical procedure proceeds through four stages: textual articulation, historical contextualization, interpretive negotiation, and hermeneutic recontextualization. The findings indicate that figurative prohibition in the hadith corpus operates primarily as a theological safeguard aimed at preserving tawhīd and maintaining ontological hierarchy between Creator and creation. Historical analysis situates the emergence of these narrations within a socio-religious environment shaped by devotional image practices, while juristic traditions reveal interpretive plurality in their application. Through a structured engagement with Mimēsis and Expressionism within a tawhīdic metaphysical horizon, the study demonstrates that figurative prohibition functions not as categorical aesthetic negation but as a metaphysical regulator of representation and expression. Rather than advocating unrestricted figuration, the study proposes a hermeneutically disciplined understanding in which artistic mediation remains derivative, relational, and non-sacralizing. The originality of this research lies in its systematic integration of hadith interpretation and aesthetic philosophy, offering a conceptual framework that situates Islamic visual discourse within an ethically structured theological horizon.

KEYWORDS

Hadith hermeneutics; Islamic aesthetics; Mimēsis; Expressionism; figurative prohibition; tawhīd

INTRODUCTION

The debate over visual art in Islam—particularly concerning sculpture and depictions of living beings—remains both historically rooted and contemporarily urgent. In the era of global visual culture, where digital media, photography, cinema, and contemporary fine arts dominate communication and identity formation, Muslim artists increasingly engage with figurative forms that are institutionally legitimized within international artistic discourse. However, hadiths of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), as the second authoritative source of Islam, continue to serve as the primary textual basis for prohibiting figurative representation, originally understood as a theological safeguard to preserve *tawhīd* and prevent idolatry (Abdullaieva et al., 2024; Mustofa, 2025). This theological orientation shaped early Islamic cultural traditions that privileged non-figurative forms such as calligraphy, architecture, and geometric ornamentation (M. Ahmad et al., 2018; Baydoun et al., 2024; Pancaroğlu, 2017). While the Qur'an does not explicitly forbid all forms of imagery, hadith became the central foundation for scholars upholding an aniconic position (Astaneh, 2023; Tamimi Arab, 2021). Furthermore, research suggests that early aniconism was closely tied to the socio-religious milieu of Arabian society—particularly concerns over magical symbolism and idolatrous practices—indicating that the prohibition functioned primarily as a protection of faith rather than a universal denial of artistic expression (N. Ali, 2017; El-Raouf & Kamel, 2022; Mhesen, 2025; Savage-Smith, 2020).

Historical evidence nevertheless demonstrates that the implementation of figurative prohibition has never been uniform. Variations across regions and historical periods reveal a dynamic negotiation between normative injunctions and aesthetic practice (Astaneh, 2023; El-Raouf & Kamel, 2022; Tamimi Arab, 2021). Persian miniature traditions, Ottoman court paintings, and manuscript illustrations indicate that figurative representation persisted in controlled, symbolic, and non-ritual contexts, suggesting interpretive flexibility within Islamic artistic history (Artan, 2006; Balafrej, 2019; Renard, 2021). Yet literalist readings remain influential in shaping public perception, often positioning Islamic art as inherently anti-figurative and restricting Muslim artistic creativity (Bouzari & Ataeefar, 2021). This has produced an epistemological tension between text-based normative interpretation and contemporary visual culture, while contextual approaches developed in modern scholarship frequently lack a coherent methodological integration between hadith hermeneutics and aesthetic philosophy (Casey, 2021; Zu Dohna, 2015; Muhaemin et al., 2023).

Although numerous studies address Islamic aniconism and hadith-based prohibition, most focus either on juridical-textual analysis or descriptive art-historical narratives, leaving limited systematic integration between hadith interpretation and aesthetic theory (El-Raouf & Kamel, 2022; Nasr, 2008; Rashdan & Ashour, 2022; Tutar & Ökten, 2025; Zeilabi, 2019). As a result, theological norms and artistic practice are frequently framed as oppositional rather than dialogical, generating conceptual fragmentation and uncertainty regarding the ethical boundaries of figurative representation. To address this gap, this study develops a multidisciplinary reinterpretation of hadiths concerning figurative prohibition by combining

historical–hermeneutical analysis with aesthetic theory. In particular, it integrates Plato’s concept of *Mimēsis* and its development by Plotinus (Gerson, 2012; Griffith & Ferrari, 2000; Johansson et al., 2016), alongside Expressionism as a theory of artistic interiority, within the foundational framework of *tawḥīd*.

The integration of Western aesthetic theories into Islamic theological discourse, however, is not without methodological and epistemological debate. Questions may arise concerning conceptual compatibility, the legitimacy of philosophical translation across intellectual traditions, and the risk of imposing external theoretical constructs upon normative religious texts. This study acknowledges these concerns and approaches *Mimēsis* and Expressionism not as external impositions but as critical analytical interlocutors, explicitly situated within a *tawḥīdic* metaphysical horizon. By positioning *tawḥīd* as the regulating ontological framework, the study seeks to preserve theological integrity while facilitating structured philosophical dialogue rather than epistemic subordination.

Accordingly, this study is guided by the following research questions:

- 1) What theological meanings are articulated in hadiths concerning the prohibition of figurative representation based on textual analysis?
- 2) Why did these prohibitive narrations emerge within the socio-religious context of early Islamic society, and how have these contexts shaped their interpretation?
- 3) How have classical and contemporary interpretations negotiated the relationship between figurative representation and Islamic aesthetics?
- 4) How can these interpretations be hermeneutically recontextualized through the integration of *Mimēsis* and Expressionism within the framework of *tawḥīd*?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Tawḥīd as Metaphysical and Normative Foundation

Any theoretical engagement with figurative prohibition in Islam must begin from the ontological primacy of *tawḥīd*. *Tawḥīd* is not merely a doctrinal assertion of divine unity but a metaphysical structure that orders the relationship between Creator and creation. Within this hierarchy, divine creativity is absolute, unconditioned, and non-derivative. Human creativity, by contrast, is contingent and derivative. Classical juristic interpretations of figurative prohibition frequently grounded their reasoning in this ontological asymmetry, framing image-making as potentially infringing upon divine creative prerogative (R. Gleave, 2012; R. M. Gleave, 2016; Kattan, 2018).

This theological sensitivity explains the eschatological rhetoric present in canonical hadith collections (Brown, 2017). The prohibition functions not merely as aesthetic restriction but as protection of ontological hierarchy. As (Khalil, 2023) notes, differentiation from prior religious traditions also played a role in shaping Islamic symbolic boundaries. Thus, *tawḥīd* operates as the metaphysical horizon within which artistic practice must be situated.

Strict Interpretive Traditions: Literal and Juristic Defenses

While contemporary scholarship often emphasizes contextual flexibility, it is crucial to recognize that strict interpretive traditions remain intellectually and religiously significant. Classical jurists and many contemporary Salafi-oriented scholars maintain that figurative depiction of living beings remains categorically prohibited, especially when three-dimensional or potentially devotional. Their arguments typically rest on three foundations:

- 1) The explicit severity of hadith language (Brown, 2017).
- 2) The principle of *سد الذرائع* (blocking the means to shirk) (Hermawan et al., 2025; Sapiudin et al., 2025).
- 3) The preservation of symbolic purity in public religious space (R. Gleave, 2012; Kattan, 2018).

From this perspective, any relaxation risks gradual normalization of symbolic forms that may obscure theological clarity. Such interpretations continue to shape fatwas and religious discourse in various Muslim contexts. Ignoring this strand would create analytical imbalance. Therefore, the present study does not dismiss strict readings but recognizes them as coherent expressions of ontological precaution grounded in *tawhīd*.

Mimēsis: Between Ontological Rivalry and Epistemic Reflection

Mimēsis occupies a foundational place in Western aesthetic theory (Halliwell, 2009). In Platonic philosophy, imitation is ontologically suspect, as art reproduces appearances rather than truth. Such suspicion resonates with theological anxiety toward image-making, particularly when representation risks symbolic competition with divine creation (Gu, 2005; Valentini, 2018)

Aristotelian Mimēsis, however, reframes imitation as structured re-presentation that reveals universal intelligibility. Art does not rival reality; it interprets it. When read through a *tawhīdic* ontology, Aristotelian Mimēsis offers conceptual compatibility. Representation can be understood as reflective mediation of divine signs (*āyāt*) embedded in creation (Ali, 2022). In this configuration, imitation is derivative and epistemic rather than creative in the ontological sense.

The tension between Platonic suspicion and Aristotelian reinterpretation mirrors the interpretive tension within Islamic jurisprudence: whether representation inherently constitutes ontological rivalry or may function as reflective engagement.

Expressionism and the Phenomenology of Interior Articulation

Expressionism shifts the locus of art from imitation to articulation of lived experience. Art becomes embodiment of consciousness and interiority. Hermeneutic phenomenology emphasizes that meaning emerges through situated interpretation rather than abstract form (Gadamer, 2004; Vagle, 2018).

The theological concern arises when expressive form is sacralized as autonomous authority. Within *tawhīdic* metaphysics, however, human interiority is not self-grounding but relational. Expression becomes testimony of creaturely existence rather than assertion of creative sovereignty. As studies of contemporary Islamic visual culture indicate (Tamimi Arab, 2021), artistic expression often negotiates this relational consciousness rather than rejecting it.

Thus, Expressionism need not contradict theological principles; its permissibility depends on orientation rather than form.

Integrative Model: Tawḥīd as Regulatory Horizon

The synthesis of these strands requires systematic articulation. Tawḥīd functions as the metaphysical regulator. Mimēsis and Expressionism represent aesthetic modalities. The key question is not whether representation or expression exists, but how they are oriented.

The integrative relationship is summarized in Figure 1.

Figure 1.

Synthesis of Tawḥīd, Mimēsis, and Expressionism



In this model, tawḥīd is not appended to Western theory but functions as the regulating metaphysical horizon. Mimēsis becomes permissible when understood as reflective engagement with divine signs rather than ontological rivalry. Expressionism becomes legitimate when situated within relational creatureliness rather than autonomous sacralization.

This framework ensures consistency with strict interpretive traditions while opening conceptual space for historically mediated artistic practice. It neither collapses into unrestricted aesthetic autonomy nor retreats into iconoclastic absolutism. Instead, it structures creative agency within ontological hierarchy.

METHOD

Research Design

This study adopts a hermeneutic phenomenological research design, grounded in interpretive hermeneutics as articulated by Gadamer, (2004). and further discussed in contemporary methodological scholarship (Outhwaite, 2015; Toland & Yoong, 2013). Hermeneutic phenomenology seeks to reconstruct lived meanings embedded within texts by situating them within historically and culturally conditioned horizons of understanding. In this paradigm, meaning is not treated as fixed or merely literal, but as dialogically constituted through interaction between text, tradition, and interpreter. The focus of this study is therefore not historical description as an end in itself, but the reconstruction of lived theological meanings contained in hadith narrations concerning figurative prohibition and their relevance within contemporary Islamic aesthetic discourse. Within this design, library-based textual exploration functions as the primary method of data collection, enabling systematic engagement with canonical hadith compilations and relevant scholarly literature (Brown, 2017; Dingle & Fallon, 2016; Mann, 2015; Moissenko et al., 2015).

Research Approach

Building upon this hermeneutic phenomenological foundation, the study operationalizes interpretation through a structured historical–hermeneutic inquiry. Historical contextualization is employed not as an independent historical investigation, but as part of the hermeneutic horizon necessary for understanding the emergence and theological function of prohibitive narrations within early Islamic society (Ali, 2022; Flood & Elsner, 2016).

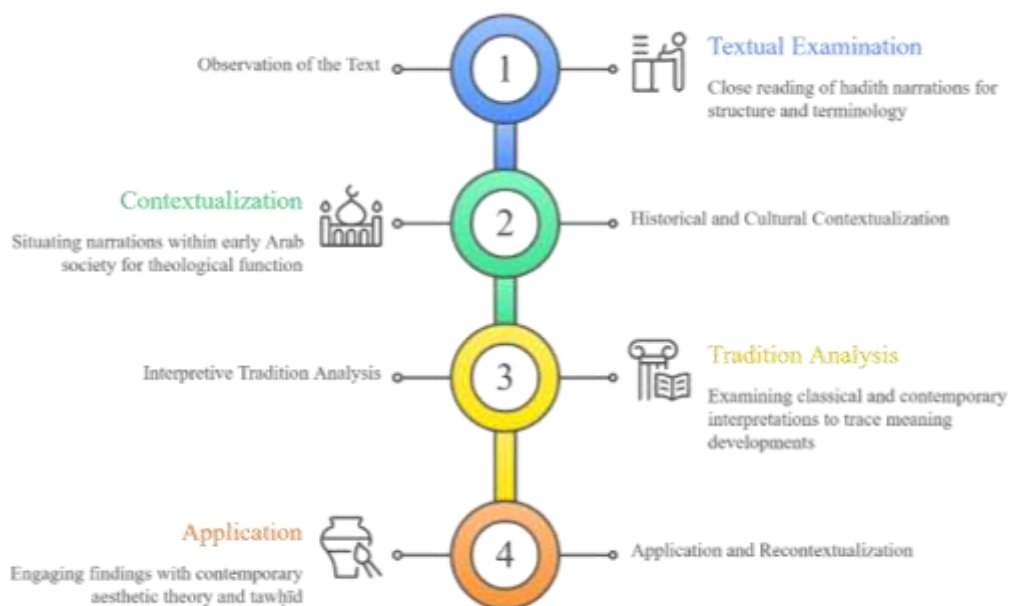
In accordance with hermeneutic phenomenology (Suddick et al., 2020; Vagle, 2018), interpretation unfolds dialogically between textual articulation and contemporary understanding. The analytical movement follows four interrelated stages:

- 1) Observation of the Text (Textual Examination): Close reading of hadith narrations, focusing on matan structure, recurring terminology (e.g., al-muṣawwirūn), and normative expressions.
- 2) Historical and Cultural Contextualization: Situating narrations within the socio-religious milieu of early Arab society to clarify their theological and cultural function.
- 3) Interpretive Tradition Analysis: Examining classical and contemporary exegetical and juristic interpretations to trace developments in meaning.
- 4) Application and Recontextualization: Engaging interpretive findings in dialogue with contemporary aesthetic theory, particularly Mimēsis and Expressionism within the framework of tawḥīd.

This process reflects the hermeneutic movement from textual articulation to contemporary application, as illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2.

Four Stages of Historical-Hermeneutic Inquiry



Data Sources

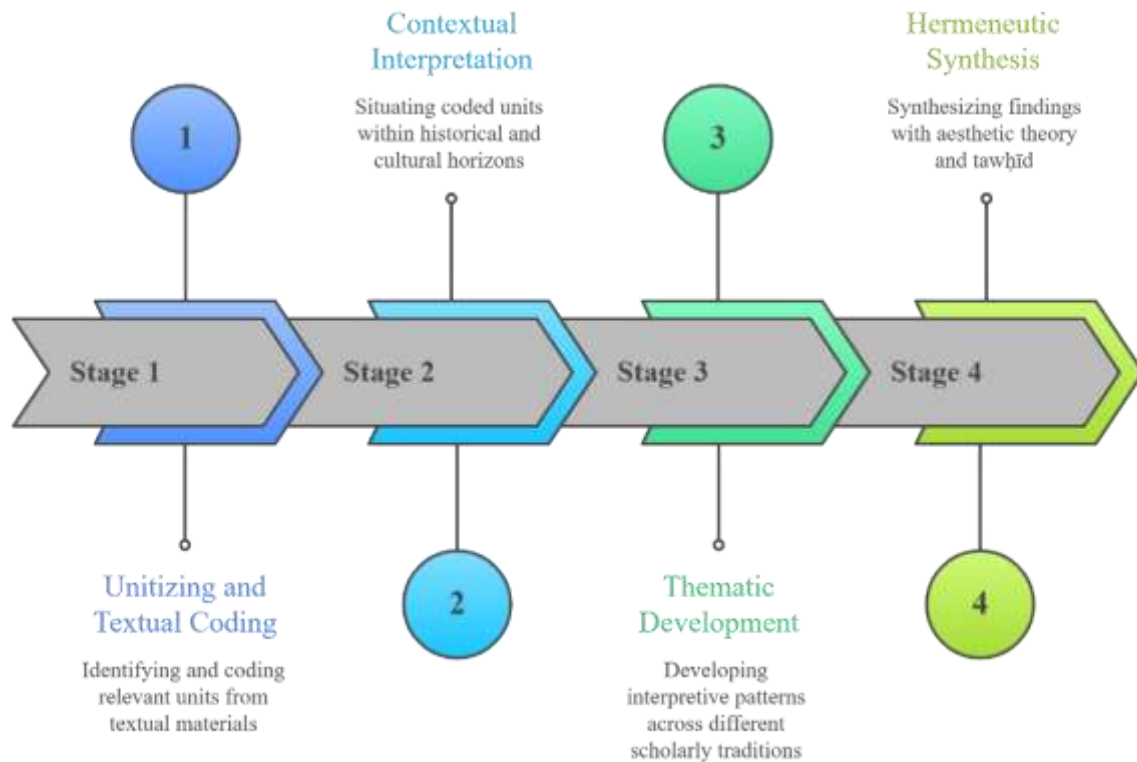
The data for this study consist of both primary and secondary sources. Primary materials include canonical hadith compilations—Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, Sunan Abī Dāwūd, Sunan al-Tirmidhī, Sunan al-Nasā'ī, and Musnad Aḥmad (M. Ali, 2022)—from which narrations were selected based on explicit reference to image-making, sculpture, or *al-muṣawwirūn*, direct or indirect prohibition of figurative representation, and relevance to the theological justification of such prohibition. Primary narrations were selected purposively according to their theological relevance and interpretive significance to the study's analytical focus. Secondary sources comprise peer-reviewed journal articles and academic monographs addressing Islamic visual arts, aesthetics, aniconism, and interpretive traditions (Ali, 2022; Flood & Elsner, 2016; Tamimi Arab, 2021). These materials provide the theological, historical, and aesthetic frameworks necessary for the hermeneutic reconstruction of figurative prohibition within broader intellectual and cultural contexts.

Data Analysis Techniques

Within the hermeneutic phenomenological framework, the data were analyzed through a combination of qualitative content analysis and thematic analysis. Content analysis was employed as a systematic procedure for organizing and examining textual materials (Krippendorff, 2004, 2018), while thematic analysis facilitated the identification and development of interpretive patterns across sources. The analytical procedure unfolded in four interrelated stages, each aligned with the study's research questions and forming a coherent interpretive progression.

The first stage addressed Research Question 1 through unitizing and textual coding. Following Krippendorff, (2004, 2018), analytical principles, relevant units of analysis were identified from hadith narrations and interpretive texts. Coding focused on theological rationales, prohibitive language, and conceptual categories related to figurative representation in order to articulate the theological meanings embedded in the textual corpus. The second stage responded to Research Question 2 through contextual interpretation. Coded units were situated within their historical and cultural horizon to explain the emergence, function, and theological significance of prohibitive narrations within early Islamic society.

The third stage corresponded to Research Question 3 by developing themes across interpretive traditions. Through comparative examination of classical and contemporary scholarship, thematic patterns were constructed to trace shifts, continuities, and negotiations in the understanding of figurative prohibition across different intellectual periods. The fourth stage addressed Research Question 4 through hermeneutic synthesis and recontextualization. Thematically organized findings were engaged in dialogical synthesis with aesthetic theory—particularly *Mimēsis* and *Expressionism*—within the conceptual framework of *tawḥīd*. Consistent with hermeneutic phenomenology (Vagle, 2018), this stage sought to reconstruct meaning rather than advance prescriptive doctrinal conclusions.

Figure 3.*Hermeneutic Phenomenological Analytical Stages*

The integrative movement across these stages—as illustrated in Figure 3—ensures coherence between the research questions, interpretive process, and epistemological foundation of the study. By combining systematic content analysis with hermeneutic thematic interpretation, the research maintains methodological rigor while preserving interpretive depth.

RESULT***Thematic Articulation of Figurative Prohibition***

The hadith corpus concerning the prohibition of figurative representation—whether in the form of statues (*tamāthīl*) or depictions of living beings (*ṣuwar*)—constitutes a central normative foundation within Islamic jurisprudential discourse. Among the most frequently cited narrations is the Prophet’s statement:

إِنَّ أَشَدَّ النَّاسِ عَذَابًا عِنْدَ اللَّهِ يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ الْمُصَوِّرُونَ

“Indeed, the people who will receive the severest punishment on the Day of Resurrection are the image-makers.” (Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, no. 5950; Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, no. 2109)

The textual structure of this narration places *al-muṣawwirūn* (image-makers) as active agents associated with eschatological warning. The severity of punishment emphasized in the

wording reflects a strong moral–theological register, suggesting that the act of image-making is framed within a discourse of accountability before God.

A related narration reinforces this theological dimension:

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ يَصْنَعُونَ هَذِهِ الصُّورَ يُعَذَّبُونَ يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ، يُقَالُ لَهُمْ: أَحْيُوا مَا خَلَقْتُمْ

“Those who make these images will be punished on the Day of Resurrection, and it will be said to them: ‘Give life to what you have created.’” (Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, 1992 no. 5951; Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, 1972 no. 2108)

The phrase “give life to what you have created” introduces a rhetorical confrontation between human production and divine creative authority. Textually, this formulation suggests that the prohibition is not merely aesthetic but ontological, drawing a boundary between divine creation and human imitation.

Another set of narrations situates figurative representation within the spiritual domain of domestic and sacred space:

إِنَّ الْمَلَائِكَةَ لَا تَدْخُلُ بَيْتًا فِيهِ صُورَةٌ

“The angels do not enter a house in which there are images. (Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, no. 3224; Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, no. 2106)

A variant wording states:

لَا تَدْخُلُ الْمَلَائِكَةُ بَيْتًا فِيهِ تَمَاثِيلٌ أَوْ تَصَاوِيرٌ

“The angels do not enter a house in which there are statues or images.” (Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, no. 2106)

Unlike the previous narrations, these reports do not explicitly mention punishment but indicate spiritual consequence, namely the absence of angelic presence. This variation suggests that figurative prohibition operates not only through eschatological warning but also through relational-spiritual boundaries affecting sacred presence.

From the perspective of transmission (*sanad*), these narrations appear in canonical collections and are transmitted by prominent Companions, including ‘Ā’ishah, Ibn ‘Abbās, Abū Hurayrah, and ‘Abdullāh ibn ‘Umar. Their classification as *muttafaq ‘alayh* in several instances underscores their juridical authority within Islamic legal tradition (Abdulrahman, 2024; A. B. Ahmad et al., 2012). However, thematic (*matan*) analysis reveals nuances within the corpus. A well-known report narrated by ‘Ā’ishah states:

كُنْتُ أَلْعَبُ بِالْبَنَاتِ عِنْدَ النَّبِيِّ ﷺ وَكَانَ لِي صَوَاحِبٌ يَلْعَبْنَ مَعِي

“I used to play with dolls in the presence of the Prophet (peace be upon him), and my friends would also play with me.” (Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, no. 6130; Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, no. 2440)

This narration introduces an element of contextual differentiation within the broader discourse on figurative prohibition. Despite the general warnings against image-making, the

Prophet did not prohibit 'Ā'ishah's use of dolls, which were representational forms. Classical jurists often interpreted this report as an exception based on pedagogical purpose and the status of children. Consequently, this evidence suggests that the prohibition may not function as an absolute categorical ban but may instead be mediated by intention, function, and social context (Rehman, 2024; Sabuncu, 2017; Yaqin, 2007).

Taken together, the textual evidence demonstrates that figurative prohibition in the hadith corpus is articulated through multiple registers: severe eschatological warning against image-makers, ontological assertion of divine creative exclusivity, and spiritual restriction within domestic space. These layered articulations form the textual basis for further historical and interpretive analysis.

Historical and Cultural Context of Prohibition

The historical emergence of hadiths prohibiting figurative representation must be situated within the socio-religious landscape of late antique Arabia, where material images and sculptural forms played significant roles in ritual, symbolic, and communal life. In pre-Islamic settings, anthropomorphic statues and sacred objects were frequently embedded in systems of devotion and mediation. Visual forms were not neutral artistic artifacts; they functioned as carriers of sacred meaning and were often integrated into practices of supplication and intercession. Within such a symbolic environment, representational imagery possessed theological implications that extended beyond aesthetic expression.

Against this background, the prohibitive narrations appear as part of a broader reconfiguration of religious symbolism within the early Muslim community. The removal of statues and the strong rhetorical warnings directed at image-makers suggest a deliberate restructuring of visual culture in alignment with uncompromising monotheism. Rather than constituting an abstract rejection of art, the prohibition may be understood as a boundary-setting response to a cultural environment in which visual representation had been closely intertwined with devotional authority. The eschatological severity articulated in certain narrations reflects the seriousness with which the emerging community sought to dissociate itself from practices perceived as compromising divine uniqueness.

The restriction of images within domestic spaces further illustrates how prohibition operated at the level of everyday religious life. The assertion that angels do not enter houses containing images situates figurative representation within a discourse of sacred presence and spiritual order. Here, the concern is not solely juridical but relational, emphasizing the integrity of space as part of moral and theological discipline. The domestic sphere becomes a site in which symbolic purity and theological identity are enacted.

Viewed within this historical and cultural horizon, figurative prohibition appears less as a categorical aesthetic negation and more as a contextual intervention within a specific symbolic regime. It functioned to redefine the relationship between material representation and divine transcendence, to demarcate communal identity, and to recalibrate the boundaries between human creativity and theological meaning. This contextual understanding provides the

explanatory foundation for why the hadith corpus articulates such firm and rhetorically charged warnings concerning figurative representation.

Application and Interpretive Negotiation

The thematic and contextual analysis of the hadith corpus indicates that the application of figurative prohibition did not unfold in a monolithic or uniformly rigid manner. Rather, interpretive trajectories reveal varying modes of application shaped by differing emphases on textual literalism, theological caution, and contextual reasoning.

One interpretive orientation applies the prohibition in a comprehensive and categorical form. In this approach, the textual severity of eschatological warning is treated as universally binding, and the term *al-muṣawwirūn* is understood to encompass all forms of representational depiction of living beings. The rhetorical confrontation embedded in the phrase “give life to what you have created” is interpreted as a direct theological condemnation of image-making, regardless of context or function. Under this orientation, figurative representation is restricted broadly, with the primary concern centered on safeguarding divine creative exclusivity and preventing any symbolic encroachment upon the domain of *al-Khāliq*.

In contrast, another interpretive trajectory emerges from thematic nuances within the hadith corpus itself. Reports concerning children’s dolls, the differentiation between sculptural forms and flat images, and contextual variations related to sacred versus non-sacred spaces introduce interpretive elasticity. Within this orientation, prohibition is not treated as an absolute ontological ban but as a functionally mediated boundary. The decisive factor shifts from the mere existence of representation to its purpose, symbolic meaning, and social setting. Figurative forms associated with worship, glorification, or devotional mediation are treated differently from those serving educational, utilitarian, or decorative functions.

This divergence in application demonstrates that the hadith corpus generated a field of interpretive negotiation rather than a single juridical outcome. The tension between textual severity and contextual nuance required scholars and communities to reconcile theological caution with evolving artistic practices. As a result, figurative prohibition became a site of interpretive balancing—between preserving the transcendence of God and responding to the practical realities of visual culture.

Thus, the “how” of prohibition is revealed not merely in the textual articulation of warning, but in the dynamic processes through which meaning was applied, limited, expanded, or contextualized. The negotiation of figurative representation reflects an ongoing engagement between normative texts and lived historical circumstances, shaping the contours of Islamic visual expression across time.

Hermeneutic Recontextualization in Contemporary Aesthetics

The hermeneutic reconstruction of figurative prohibition, following its textual articulation, historical emergence, and interpretive negotiation, culminates in a theoretical re-engagement with aesthetic philosophy. At this stage, the prohibition is no longer approached solely as a

juridical injunction but as a metaphysical boundary regulating the relationship between representation, creativity, and transcendence.

1. Mimēsis Reinterpreted Beyond Ontological Competition

In classical aesthetic thought, Mimēsis has been understood in two distinct ways. In Platonic philosophy, imitation risks distancing art from ultimate truth; representation becomes a copy of material reality, which itself is already a copy of transcendent forms. Such a view renders art ontologically secondary and potentially deceptive. Within this framework, the hadithic anxiety toward image-making resonates with the fear that representation symbolically competes with divine creation.

However, Aristotelian Mimēsis reframes imitation not as duplication but as structured re-presentation that reveals universal intelligibility through particular form. Art does not replicate reality; it interprets it. When this Aristotelian refinement is placed within a tawhīdic ontology, representation becomes reflective engagement with divine signs (āyāt) embedded in creation. In this horizon, artistic depiction does not claim creative autonomy but acknowledges derivative participation in a created order.

Thus, the prohibition does not negate Mimēsis per se. Rather, it regulates the metaphysical orientation of imitation. Representation becomes problematic only when it symbolically appropriates divine creative authority or becomes an object of sacralization. When understood as epistemic mediation rather than ontological rivalry, Mimēsis can coexist within the theological grammar of tawhīd.

A concrete historical illustration of this Aristotelian reinterpretation of Mimēsis may be observed in Persian miniature traditions, particularly in illustrated literary masterpieces such as the *Shāhnāme* of Ferdowsi and the narrative manuscripts of Niẓāmī produced during the Timurid and Safavid periods. Although Persian miniature painting absorbed strong influences from Chinese and Byzantine visual traditions—especially in technique, color treatment, and compositional arrangement under Mongol patronage—it did not pursue naturalistic imitation in a purely empirical sense (*ars imitatur naturam*) (Perrin, 2022; Pirholt, 2011). Rather, living forms underwent stylization and imaginative transformation (*khiyāl*), producing representational images that remained referential to reality without becoming fully realistic or abstract. Human figures, landscapes, and animals were often rendered through expressive, non-empirical spatiality, geometric formalism, and vibrant contrasts intended to preserve symbolic harmony (Bychkov, 2012). From an Aristotelian perspective, such visual forms may be understood as interpretive re-presentations rather than ontological imitations of divine creation. At the same time, an expressionist reading suggests that the artist, through sharpened inner perception and imagination, acts metaphorically as a “mirror” reflecting external forms (*ṣuwar*) into symbolic expression (*nishān*), where visual representation becomes an articulation of inner consciousness rather than an autonomous claim to creation (Nasr, 2008; Schimmel, 1975). Within a tawhīdic horizon, these artistic forms remain derivative, expressive, and non-sacralizing, thereby avoiding ontological rivalry with the Divine.

2. Expressionism and the Phenomenology of Interior Articulation

Expressionism relocates the essence of art from imitation of external forms to articulation of inner experience. In modern aesthetic philosophy, expression is not reproduction but revelation of subjectivity. Art becomes the embodiment of lived consciousness.

From a hermeneutic phenomenological perspective, artistic expression emerges from situated human existence—being-in-the-world shaped by temporality, affectivity, and relationality. The theological tension arises when expressive form becomes absolutized as self-grounding meaning. However, within tawḥīdic metaphysics, human interiority is not autonomous; it is relationally grounded in dependence upon the Divine.

Therefore, expression does not inherently violate theological boundaries. It becomes problematic only when symbolic forms shift from articulating experience to claiming sacred authority. Within this recontextualized framework, Expressionism is not aesthetic autonomy but existential testimony situated within creaturely finitude.

Integrative Synthesis

The hermeneutic integration of Mimēsis and Expressionism demonstrates that figurative prohibition operates not as a categorical aesthetic negation but as a metaphysical regulator governing the relationship between representation, creativity, and transcendence. Within a tawḥīdic ontology, the prohibition preserves the ontological hierarchy between Creator and creation while allowing mediated artistic articulation that remains conscious of its derivative and relational character. Thus, what is restricted is not visual form per se, but symbolic orientation that risks obscuring divine uniqueness.

This integrative reconstruction becomes clearer when applied concretely to the analyzed hadith texts. Consider the narration: *“Those who make these images will be punished on the Day of Resurrection, and it will be said to them: ‘Give life to what you have created.’”* (Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, no. 5951; Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, no. 2108). When interpreted through a Platonic conception of Mimēsis, this hadith reflects anxiety toward ontological duplication, as imitation is perceived as symbolically rivaling ultimate reality. The eschatological challenge—“Give life to what you have created”—exposes the impossibility of human representation claiming divine creative authority. However, when read through an Aristotelian understanding of Mimēsis as structured representation rather than ontological creation, a different nuance emerges. The prohibition does not reject representation itself but rejects any symbolic claim to creative sovereignty. The derived meaning thus shifts: the hadith regulates metaphysical posture rather than banning artistic mediation.

A similar hermeneutic movement appears in the narration stating: *“The angels do not enter a house in which there are images.”* (Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, no. 3224; Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, no. 2106). A strictly literal reading frames this as spatial prohibition of visual depiction. Yet when engaged through Expressionist aesthetics and hermeneutic phenomenology, the emphasis shifts toward symbolic authority and spiritual intentionality. The absence of angelic presence may be understood not merely as material exclusion but as disruption of sacred orientation within lived

space. Expression becomes problematic only when visual forms acquire devotional centrality or sacralized status. In this reading, the prohibition safeguards relational theology rather than suppressing subjective articulation. Thus, new meaning is derived through theoretical application: figurative representation is regulated in relation to transcendence, not negated as aesthetic practice. The theoretical synthesis of these findings is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1.*Hermeneutic Integration of Mimēsis and Expressionism within Tawḥīd*

Dimension	Classical Theoretical Position	Theological Tension Identified in Hadith	Hermeneutic Reconfiguration	Resulting Aesthetic Paradigm
Mimēsis (Plato)	Art as imitation of imitation	Risk of ontological displacement	Rejected if claiming creative autonomy	Prevents symbolic rivalry with divine creation
Mimēsis (Aristotle)	Interpretive re-presentation of universals	Neutral if not sacralized	Reframed as reflective mediation of āyāt	Representation as epistemic engagement
Expressionism	Art as manifestation of interior consciousness	Risk of sacralizing subjective form	Reinterpreted as relational articulation before God	Expression within creaturely finitude
Figurative Form	Depiction of living beings	Potential devotional substitution	Regulated by intention and function	Ethical-symbolic boundary
Tawḥīd	Divine unity and transcendence	Protection of ontological hierarchy	Metaphysical horizon regulating creativity	Integration of transcendence and artistic agency

As shown in Table 1, figurative prohibition functions as a safeguard against ontological confusion rather than as an aesthetic silencing. It structures artistic agency within theological boundaries. Mimēsis becomes legitimate when understood as reflective participation in divine creation, and Expressionism becomes permissible when situated within relational theological consciousness. Accordingly, the final hermeneutic reconstruction demonstrates that figurative prohibition is neither iconoclastic absolutism nor aesthetic permissiveness. It is a dynamic ethical-aesthetic boundary grounded in tawḥīd, ensuring that representation and expression remain derivative, relational, and non-sacralizing. This completes the analytical progression of the Results section—from textual articulation, to historical explanation, to interpretive negotiation, and finally to metaphysical-aesthetic synthesis—establishing a coherent paradigm in which theological integrity and artistic creativity are structurally harmonized within the ontological hierarchy affirmed by tawḥīd.

DISCUSSION

Theological Articulation and the Protection of Ontological Hierarchy

The textual findings demonstrate that the prohibition of figurative representation in the hadith corpus operates primarily within a theological and ontological register rather than a purely aesthetic one. The eschatological severity directed toward *al-muṣawwirūn* reinforces the safeguarding of divine creative exclusivity, aligning with classical juridical readings that frame image-making as potentially encroaching upon divine prerogative (R. M. Gleave, 2016). The rhetorical command, “give life to what you have created,” symbolically positions artistic production within a discourse of ontological rivalry, which helps explain why early juristic traditions treated figurative art with caution.

However, this study extends prior scholarship by showing that the prohibition is not solely punitive but boundary-constructing. Rather than functioning as a universal aesthetic negation, the hadithic discourse delineates a hierarchy between Creator and creation. This interpretation nuances Khalil's (2023) emphasis on theological differentiation and demonstrates that the normative force of the prohibition is anchored in metaphysical protection of *tawḥīd* rather than in hostility toward visual culture itself.

Impact of literal interpretation

Historically, literalist readings of hadiths concerning figurative prohibition significantly shaped the development of Islamic artistic production. Classical juristic traditions, particularly within Sunni orthodoxy, interpreted the severe eschatological warnings directed at image-makers as broadly prohibitive, encouraging artistic forms that minimized anthropomorphic representation (R. Gleave, 2012; Kattan, 2018). This contributed to the flourishing of non-figurative aesthetics such as Qur'anic calligraphy, geometric ornamentation, and arabesque patterns, which came to symbolize the transcendence and unity of God within Islamic visual culture (Blair & Bloom, 1996; Nasr, 2008). However, contextual readings reveal that Islamic artistic practice was never entirely iconoclastic. Persian miniatures, Ottoman manuscript paintings, and courtly visual traditions demonstrate that figurative representation continued in controlled, symbolic, and non-devotional contexts (Artan, 2006; Renard, 2021). This contrast suggests that while literalist interpretations reinforced aniconic identity, contextual approaches historically allowed negotiated forms of visual representation without necessarily compromising *tawḥīd*ic principles.

Historical Context and the Formation of Aniconic Identity

The historical findings situate the prohibition within a socio-religious environment deeply embedded in devotional image practices. As Flood and Elsner (2016) argue, the late antique Near Eastern world was saturated with sacred visual symbolism. In such a milieu, prohibiting statues and anthropomorphic forms functioned as a marker of emerging Islamic distinctiveness. The present study supports this historical reading while further demonstrating that the prohibition was not merely reactive but reconstructive—reshaping symbolic order in alignment

with uncompromising monotheism (Ardehali & Joseph, 2023; Kaminski, 2020; Savage-Smith, 2020).

By foregrounding historical context, this research complements existing analyses of Islamic aniconism (F. Ali, 2022; Tamimi Arab, 2021), yet moves beyond them by integrating textual severity with symbolic restructuring. Aniconism thus emerges not as aesthetic deprivation but as theological reorientation. The prohibition becomes intelligible as an intervention within a culturally saturated visual field rather than as an abstract artistic doctrine (Alami, 2013).

Interpretive Plurality and Juristic Negotiation

The findings also reveal that application of figurative prohibition was historically non-monolithic. Classical juristic traditions exhibit divergent trajectories—some adopting comprehensive restriction, others introducing contextual differentiation (Gleave, 2012; Kattan, 2018). This aligns with broader patterns in Islamic legal reasoning, where normative texts are mediated through hermeneutic interpretation rather than mechanically applied.

By analyzing thematic variations within the hadith corpus, this study demonstrates that differentiation was already embedded in the textual material itself. Reports concerning domestic objects, pedagogical use, or non-devotional contexts complicate categorical readings. Thus, figurative prohibition operates as a dynamic interpretive field rather than a singular legal outcome. This supports Brown's, (2017) observation that hadith interpretation historically evolved in response to shifting intellectual and social conditions.

Mimēsis, Expressionism, and Tawḥīdic Aesthetics

The theoretical contribution of this study lies in its integration of *Mimēsis* and Expressionism within a tawḥīdic metaphysical horizon (Choudhury, 2021; Dimitrova, 2016; Gebauer & Wulf, 2013). Classical suspicion toward imitation, particularly in Platonic aesthetics, parallels theological anxiety regarding ontological displacement. Yet Aristotelian *Mimēsis*, understood as interpretive re-presentation, provides a conceptual bridge that aligns more closely with Islamic metaphysics (Kreinath, 2016). Representation need not rival divine creation; it may function as reflective mediation of divine signs.

Similarly, Expressionism—conceived as articulation of lived experience—becomes theologically problematic only when expressive form is sacralized as autonomous authority. Through hermeneutic phenomenology (Dimitrova, 2016; Vagle, 2018), this study reinterprets expression as relational consciousness rather than self-grounding autonomy. In doing so, it contributes to contemporary discourse on Islamic aesthetics by moving beyond binary opposition between prohibition and permissibility.

The integration presented here expands discussions of Islamic visual arts (Ali, 2022) by offering a metaphysical model rather than a descriptive account. Tawḥīd is repositioned as the regulating horizon that harmonizes transcendence and creativity, thereby generating an ethical-aesthetic paradigm rather than a juridical absolutism.

Addressing Theological Objections and Critical Reflection

Notwithstanding the integrative reconstruction advanced in this study, several substantive theological objections may be raised against a contextual and metaphysical reinterpretation of figurative prohibition. A first objection concerns the perceived weakening of textual authority. Strict literalist and contemporary Salafi-oriented readings argue that the explicit severity of the hadith language—particularly the eschatological punishment directed at al-muṣawwirūn—admits no interpretive elasticity. From this perspective, recontextualization risks subordinating prophetic authority to philosophical mediation. However, this study does not relativize the text; rather, it situates its normative force within its ontological purpose. The hermeneutic approach does not dilute prohibition but clarifies its theological object—namely, the preservation of divine creative exclusivity—thereby reinforcing rather than diminishing textual seriousness.

A second objection may arise from the concern that integrating Aristotelian *Mimēsis* risks normalizing figurative representation by reframing it as epistemic mediation. Critics may argue that such philosophical accommodation subtly reintroduces the very ontological ambiguity the prohibition seeks to prevent. Yet the present framework explicitly rejects any representational practice that symbolically claims creative autonomy or devotional authority. *Mimēsis* is accepted only insofar as it remains derivative, reflective, and consciously subordinate within tawḥīdic hierarchy. Thus, the integration does not legitimize unrestricted figuration but retains ontological safeguards consistent with classical juristic caution (R. Gleave, 2012).

A third objection concerns Expressionism and the risk of subjectivism. If artistic expression becomes the articulation of interior consciousness, critics may contend that theological boundaries collapse into aesthetic autonomy. This concern is particularly acute within traditions that prioritize scriptural objectivity over experiential interpretation. However, hermeneutic phenomenology (Gadamer, 2004) does not absolutize subjectivity; it understands meaning as relational and historically situated. Within a tawḥīdic metaphysics, human interiority is never self-grounding but ontologically dependent. Expression, therefore, is not sacralized autonomy but creaturely articulation under transcendence.

Finally, a broader methodological objection may question whether hermeneutic phenomenology introduces relativism into normative religious discourse. This study acknowledges that interpretive plurality entails epistemic humility. Nevertheless, plurality does not equate to arbitrariness. The analytical framework remains anchored in canonical hadith authority, historical contextualization, and juristic tradition. Rather than dissolving normativity, hermeneutic reflection clarifies how normative texts function across changing symbolic horizons.

By explicitly engaging these objections, the study demonstrates that its contextual and ethical reconstruction does not dismiss strict interpretations but repositions them within a structured metaphysical analysis. The aim is not to replace juridical caution with aesthetic permissiveness, but to articulate a principled synthesis in which theological integrity and artistic creativity are held in disciplined tension under tawḥīd.

Theoretical Contribution

This study contributes to hadith studies and Islamic legal theory by advancing a hermeneutic phenomenological approach that illuminates normative texts without reducing them to either rigid literalism or purely historicist contextualization (Brown, 2017). Rather than displacing classical juristic readings, the analysis clarifies the ontological concerns embedded within the hadith corpus and reframes figurative prohibition as a mechanism of metaphysical boundary-setting oriented toward safeguarding divine transcendence (Gleave, 2016). By emphasizing ontological hierarchy rather than juridical absolutism, the study provides a conceptual lens through which divergent interpretive traditions may be understood as calibrated responses to theological caution rather than mutually exclusive doctrinal positions.

In aesthetic philosophy, the study offers a structured synthesis of *Mimēsis* and Expressionism within a *tawhīdic* metaphysical horizon, positioning *tawhīd* as the regulating ontological framework through which representation and expression are evaluated. This integration does not legitimize unrestricted figuration but articulates the conditions under which artistic mediation remains derivative, relational, and non-sacralizing. By bridging Western aesthetic theory and Islamic metaphysics in a disciplined manner, the study contributes to contemporary discourse on Islamic art through an ethically structured paradigm that harmonizes transcendence and creative agency without collapsing into either iconoclastic absolutism or aesthetic permissiveness.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the hadiths concerning the prohibition of figurative representation operate not as a categorical aesthetic negation but as a metaphysical and theological boundary-setting mechanism grounded in the protection of *tawhīd*. Through a hermeneutic phenomenological framework, the findings reveal that the prohibition is articulated across layered registers—eschatological warning, ontological demarcation, and spiritual regulation of space—emerging within a historically specific symbolic environment. The analysis further shows that application of the prohibition has never been monolithic, but dynamically negotiated between literal and contextual interpretive trajectories. By integrating *Mimēsis* and Expressionism within a *tawhīdic* metaphysical horizon, the study proposes an ethical-aesthetic paradigm in which artistic representation and creative expression remain derivative, relational, and non-sacralizing. Thus, figurative prohibition is reconstructed not as iconoclastic absolutism, but as a structured creative ethic that harmonizes transcendence and artistic agency within Islamic thought.

Limitation

This study is primarily based on textual and library-based analysis of canonical hadith collections and selected scholarly works. It does not incorporate empirical investigation of contemporary Muslim artists, jurists, or art institutions, which may provide further insight into lived applications of figurative prohibition. Additionally, the focus on major Sunni canonical sources

may limit engagement with regional, minority, or non-canonical interpretive traditions. The hermeneutic phenomenological approach, while theoretically robust, remains interpretive in nature and does not claim exhaustive doctrinal representation. Future research may benefit from comparative, ethnographic, or interdisciplinary approaches to explore how theological boundaries are negotiated in contemporary visual practice.

Implication Study

Theoretically, this study reframes Islamic aniconism as a metaphysical ethic rather than a static juridical restriction, contributing to renewed dialogue between Islamic theology and global aesthetic philosophy. Methodologically, it demonstrates the viability of integrating qualitative content analysis with hermeneutic phenomenology in the study of normative Islamic texts. Practically, the findings offer a conceptual framework for contemporary Islamic art discourse, suggesting that creative practice may remain theologically grounded without collapsing into either rigid prohibition or unrestricted autonomy. By situating *Mimēsis* and Expressionism within *tawhīd*, the study proposes a paradigm capable of informing artistic education, scholarly debate, and Sharia-conscious cultural production.

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