



## Leighton House Museum

### Leighton and the Middle East website: Leighton and Collecting Art

#### Islamic art

##### What is Islamic art?

The term 'Islamic art' came into use in the West in the nineteenth century to describe art produced from the seventh century onwards in regions where Islam was the dominant faith. It is a misleading term, as it does not refer to art that is explicitly religious. In reality, the practice of the faith of Islam requires very little by way of objects to help Muslims worship, partly because of the lack of a large clergy, partly because of a lack of complex ceremonials. Personal prayer and the recitation of the Qur'an are key. So, with the exception of the architecture of mosques and Qur'ans, religious art plays a relatively small part in the art and architecture created in these lands during this period. The majority of art was made for a secular context. Significantly, those making, or commissioning, buildings and artefacts would never have regarded themselves as making 'Islamic art' (although they may have believed they were working in the service of Allah). The shortcomings of the term become obvious if one thinks of referring to all European art as Christian art.

As well as magnificent palaces, mosques, shrines and madrasas (schools), Islamic art is made up of a huge range of artistic achievements that span the arts of glazed pottery (including tiles), metalwork, book painting, textiles, glassware and woodwork. There is huge variety within Islamic art across both geography and time. Despite this, however, many of the buildings and artefacts that were created during this period and in this geographical region share common and defining characteristics that are very different to Western artistic traditions. These can be set out simply as:

- prevalence of pattern in all art forms - both floral ('arabesque') and geometric
- a love of all-over decoration (in most artforms and during most periods)
- high status and prevalence of calligraphy - the art of writing - as an artform (in both religious in religious and non-religious contexts)
- prevalence and sophistication of tile work on inside and outside of buildings
- equal value of all creative forms (apart from Qur'anic calligraphy)
- absence of a tradition of making sculpture
- a huge array of two-dimensional 'figural' representations of humans and animals, particularly in book painting and ceramics
- prohibition of figural representation in religious contexts i.e. in a mosque or Qur'an

The status of calligraphy within Islamic art can be explained directly by the Muslim faith, more particularly the prime importance of Arabic script. This is regarded by Muslims as the earthly manifestation of Allah's word as revealed through The Prophet Muhammad, and transcribed in the Qur'an. The design of mosques can also be explained directly by the faith. However, other characteristics came about for a variety of more complex reasons.



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### An overview of Islam

The Prophet Muhammad, Islam's founder, died in 632 and his successors established a vast empire that transformed the Middle East in the following centuries. The Prophet Muhammad was both a political and religious leader. The first empire, which at its peak reached from the Atlantic to the Indian oceans, was ruled by the Arab 'Caliphs', the first leaders of the community following the death of The Prophet. Subsequent dynasties were led by rulers from different ethnic groups and included the Mughal and Ottoman dynasties. Despite rivalries between dynasties, many ideas on politics and cultures were shared. By the twentieth century most of the region was divided into states that were ruled by colonial powers and local leaders, most of whom had separated the mechanics of governance from religion.

The word Islam itself means *submission*, specifically of oneself to Allah (God). Muslims believe Muhammad was sent by Allah as the last prophet. Islam is a monotheistic faith and shares, with Christianity and Judaism, the Old Testament of the Bible as a holy book. Key to the religion are the five pillars of Islam. Within the Islamic faith there are two main branches, Sunni and Shi'a, the result of a schism in the community in the years of the first empire after Muhammad's death. Sunnis follow one of the four 'orthodox' schools of Islam. Most of the world's Muslims are Sunni. Shi'ites believe that the leadership of the Muslim community passed from Muhammad down through his son in law Ali and his descendants. In addition there is the Sufi form of Islam, which is not strictly a denomination, but a mystical-ascetic form of Islam.

### Origins and developments of Islamic art

The subsequent development of Islamic arts up until the nineteenth century varied from region to region and dynasty to dynasty. The art and architecture of the first Empire was marked by the influence of a variety of other artistic pre- and non-Islamic artistic traditions. This is evident in both the use of materials, choice of subject matter and the form that buildings took. Style inevitably varied. These influences were used quite consciously and deliberately. They included Byzantine manuscripts and mosaic work, for example the two earliest surviving Islamic monuments, the *Dome of the Rock* and the *Great Mosque of Damascus*, are both covered in dazzling mosaic work. Other influences include classical (Roman architectural forms such as column capitals) and Sasanian (ancient Persian empire). In later periods Chinese art – pottery and painting – was also an influence.



*A sixteenth-century tile panel at Leighton House, depicting a hanging mosque lamp.*

By the ninth century the all over stucco decoration of the then rulers' desert palaces had begun to take its own distinct stylised form. These abstract floral motifs were to become a hallmark of much Islamic art. There have been various other enduringly popular themes throughout the course of Islamic art. Representations of courtly pursuits such as hunting and feasting remained popular with rulers.



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There are many representations, both literal and metaphorical, of heaven (which is conceived of as an eternal garden in the Qur'an) and light (due to many references to light in the Qur'an). One of the panels at Leighton House depicts a mosque lamp in an arched setting and surrounded by floral decoration. While not a literal representation of a mosque, such motifs were common in ceramics and also in textiles, for example the huge *Ardabil Carpet* (made in Iran between 1539-40) and now in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.



In Qur'ans, manuscript painting was confined to decorative motifs, sometimes very elaborate. However, manuscripts containing rich illustrations were produced of mythic tales, works of poetry as well as scientific treatises. A high point in manuscript painting was the immensely detailed and jewel-like illustrations created in fifteenth and sixteenth century Iran, recounting tales of lovers and heroic rulers.

*The Ardabil Carpet, 1539-40  
(The Victoria and Albert Museum,  
London)*



*A illustration from a  
copy of Persian epic  
the 'Shahnama' (Book  
of Kings), depicting a  
gathering of poets.  
c.1440-45, Iran. ©  
Royal Asiatic Society,  
London, UK/ The  
Bridgeman Art Library*

The basic characteristics of mosque architecture, still employed today, were established during the early years of the Islamic Empire, and were based closely on the Prophet's own house in Medina (Arabia). This consisted of an enclosed courtyard with a covered sanctuary on one side, the *mihrab* (recessed space in wall that faced Mecca). This developed over the centuries to include a *minaret* (tower from which the faithful are called to prayer), *minbar* (stepped pulpit used by preachers) and *maqsura* (screened area near mihrab usually reserved for the ruler or his representative). The *Great Mosque of Qairawan*, Tunisia, built after 862 is a good early example of this.



*The Great Mosque of Qairawan, Tunisia,  
built after 862*



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The next, and final, development in mosque architecture would not take place until several centuries later in the eastern Islamic world in Persia (now Iran) - the addition of four *iwans*, massive arched recesses soaring above the main courtyard of the *Friday Mosque* in Isfahan, Iran (early seventeenth century). Two of the most famous buildings in the world, the *Alhambra* (mid 14<sup>th</sup> century), in Granada, Spain and the *Taj Mahal* (1631-47) in Agra, India are good examples of the other forms that Islamic architecture excelled in – the palace and the mausoleum. Islamic architecture, with the exception of grand mausoleums, is generally an architecture of interiors.

The most elaborate and lavish works were always made as specific commissions for the courts of rulers, who also commissioned large-scale religious building programmes. However, during times when urban centres thrived, both textiles and ceramics were made by craftsmen for the open market. Craftsmen were highly skilled, and workshops were often attached to courts. Apprenticeships were long and the social status of craftsmen would have been relatively high, especially master calligraphers. There are some examples of signed work, particularly on pottery, and names of important manuscript painters are known, but largely the work of Islamic artists/craftsmen was anonymous.

Calligraphy was, and remains, an artform in itself. It went through a variety of stylistic developments, from the earliest minimal 'Kufic' script to later more elaborate cursive (i.e. fluid) scripts. The form of individual letters became subject to intensely controlled stylistic and expressive whim, and the most majestic surviving Qur'ans have the quality of a musical manuscript. The eleventh-century *Blue Qur'an*, produced on the finest vellum and dyed in indigo, is a stunning example of this.



*A leaf from the Blue Qur'an with Kufic script c.1020*

It is likely that these developments originated in the workshops of the master Qur'anic scribes, but then filtered down to other artforms such as pottery. The wares produced in Samarqand, in Iran, in the ninth and tenth century, are almost contemporary in the minimal aesthetic of blue, black or brown calligraphy on a white background.

### Meaning in Islamic art

There is disagreement in artistic, religious and academic circles about whether or not decorative motifs, in Islamic art have meaning. This is particularly so for the carefully calculated geometric patterns, like those that cover the surface of a minbar made in Cairo between 1468 and 1497 and now in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.



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Some believe that the patterns are either a reflection of, or symbolise, the transcendent and infinite ‘oneness’ of Allah. But for those who do not believe in Allah, or spiritual meaning within geometric patterns, there are no messages hidden within Islamic decoration.

### Figural representation in Islamic art

There is much confusion over the question of whether or not depictions of humans (and animals) is allowed in Islamic art. While idolatry is forbidden in orthodox Islam, there is nothing in the Qur’an that explicitly forbids the depiction of human or animal forms. Orthodox Islam, in common with Orthodox Judaism and some Christian denominations (Calvinism for example), regards the depiction of human form as wrong. This belief stems from two of the Ten Commandments that are laid out in the Old Testament (a common holy text for all three of these faiths), that forbid both making an idol in the form of ‘anything on heaven or earth’, and worshipping these idols, or false gods. This worship is known as idolatry.

Some of the high points in the history of Islamic art, such as medieval Persian miniature painting, are actually a celebration of telling stories through depicting the actions of human figures.

There are even depictions of the Prophet Muhammed. This is an indicator that different rulers adopted different positions on the question of figural representation, or ‘idolatry’, with some

choosing to make an example of their piety by banning it, or defacing older representations. There is a good example of this defacement in one of the Leighton House tiles, where we can see that the faces of human figures have been scrubbed out in order to make the representation more acceptable. This tile is also an example of lustreware, a type of ceramic named after the lustrous, glinting finish that was achieved by a particular kind of glaze. Another way of getting round the question of idolatry is illustrated in the tile panel at Leighton House in which the birds in the panel are



13<sup>th</sup> century star tile from Kashan in central Iran (Leighton House Museum)

depicted with cuts in their necks, reducing possible offence caused by depicting something that is dead rather than alive. It is convention

throughout the Islamic world, however, to avoid completely any figural representation in a religious context i.e. a mosque or a Qu’ran.



Minbar made in Egypt, probably Cairo (1468-96) with complex geometric patterns. (The Victoria and Albert Museum, London)



Tiles showing birds with their necks cut at Leighton House Museum]



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*Please see our Further Reading section for more information on the continuing debate on this topic.*

### **Leighton and Islamic Art**

The lack of an oil painting tradition, combined with the love of ornamentation has sometimes lead to Islamic art being dismissed as primarily ‘decorative’, and therefore less artistically sophisticated or artistically important than Western art. Leighton’s views in this respect are ahead of his time and those of many of his contemporaries: ‘the merit of a work of art did not reside in its category, but in the degree to which it manifested the spirit which alone could ennoble it, the spirit of beauty.’

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*See also other article in this section:*

- ***Leighton and Collecting Art***
- ***Collecting Art in the 19th Century***